

THE BEST WEBZINE FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY, AND HORROR!

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 6
27TH MAY 2018

OCTOPUS

BY CLAIRE
FITZPATRICK
NO OTHER
SPECIES CAN
ALTER THEIR
DNA...

ENVIE

BY JOSEF
DESADE—
INTO THE
STRANGE
OBSIDIAN
NIGHT...

STARBEAM DIRECT
BY HAWKELSON RAINIER

ICY DEATH
BY JULIE
DOLLAR

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Schlock! Webzine

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McGuigan, Percy Greg, HG Wells*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Welcome to Schlock! the webzine for science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

Vol. 13, Issue 6

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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Science Fiction Sci Fi Futuristic* by tombud. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week, we learn of the aliens already living among us in a story from Australia's queen of body horror. The horror deepens down in New Orleans in Josef Desade's latest sadistic offering. A teleport journey to the Red Planet has an unexpected destination for Klingingsmith in an SF tale from Hawkelson Rainier. And Julie Dollar shares with us a serving of *Icy Death* in a new sword and sorcery saga.

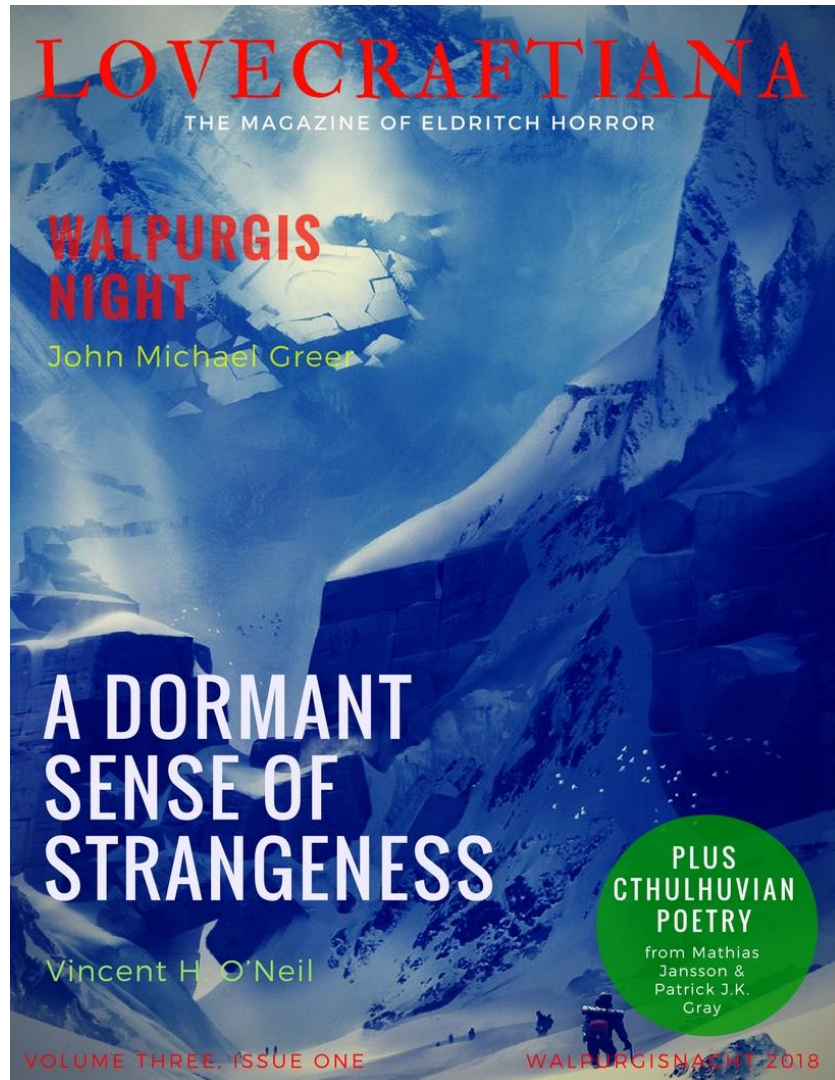
Holmes, Watson and Miss Marency battle the Atlantean priests. Out in space, the hunter becomes the hunted. Down on Mars we experience social life on the Red Planet. And back on Earth, a survivor of alien invasion wanders through a dead city.

—Gavin Chappell

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And the Walpurgisnacht edition of [*Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror*](#).



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OCTOPUS by Claire Fitzpatrick

They talked about Harlan Stevenson, an author nobody else had heard of, for three hours straight. When she'd first approached Tina, the woman had been sitting by herself at the bar nursing a scotch on the rocks, her face impassive. Then Andy sat down, and Tina smiled. She thought there was alien life, but not in our solar system.

"There couldn't be," Andy insisted. "We're all alone here."

Tina was a surgeon and had studied for more years she could count. At 29, she was impressive and beautiful, and Andy, while enamoured by the woman, was slightly jealous. What did she have to show for herself? 26, unemployed, and sharing a unit with her sister. Hardly admirable for someone with three university degrees. Perpetually unemployed, her mother called her. But Andy liked to think of herself as a scholar. One day she'd find herself.

"But what about octopuses?" Tina asked. "There's talk that octopus eggs were a new form of life introduced after extra-terrestrials seeded Earth billions of years ago when viruses, microbes, and even tiny life forms arrived on our planet from outer space."

Andy smirked. "Octopuses, hey? Is that why you're so clever? Because they're clever?"

Tina rolled her eyes and gently slapped Andy's arm. "I know you're making fun of me, but yes, that's exactly right. And octopuses are incredibly clever. Just ask them."

Andy laughed and gently nudged Tina with her shoulder. The woman ordered another round of drinks, gazing around at the other convention attendees. Authors, fans, conspiracy theorists...they were all here, gathered together. Most of them wore black, as though they had just come from a funeral. But a select few wore garish 80s garb that looked straight from their parent's wardrobe.

"Harlan Stevenson wrote a paper on it, though a lot of scientists say it's garbage. I say he should keep on investigating. It's super interesting, don't you think?"

"Uh huh."

They chatted for another two hours before checking out a few other panels, sitting together in the back row. The two women listened attentively, Andy snorting when Tina asked bizarre questions about aquatic alien life. As the author's squabbled amongst themselves, some debunking theories, others insisting their claims were true, Andy watched Tina from the corner of her eye, amused by the woman's fascination. While Andy loved science fiction, she thought the discussion was tedious, and found herself watching Tina, smiling as her eyes lit up at the mention of octopus eggs.

"Isn't this interesting?" Tina whispered, excitedly squeezing Andy's arm. "Kepler 62e and Kepler 62f could have aquatic lifeforms! I mean, it's just speculation, as the planet is too far away to properly study, but what if we evolved from the creatures from Kepler 62e? What if

that's where we come from?"

Andy smiled. "That's pretty cool."

She was more interested in science fiction stories on Earth and didn't believe in aliens. She was more interested in predictions that had actually come true. The electronic tablet from '2001: A Space Odyssey'; smart home devices like Google Home featured in the 1999 Disney film 'Smart House'; autonomous cars like the ones featured in 'Total Recall'; androids like Sophia depicted in the 1927 film 'Metropolis'; smartphones from 'Star Trek.' Countless imagined technological creations had come true. Andy was fascinated by the continued growth of technology and had tried out the Ocular Rift VR system, eerily similar to the one featured in 'Back to the Future Part II.' And now, sitting at the convention, she wondered if aliens had superior technology, just like Harlan predicted in his books.

Afterwards, Andy and Tina went back to the bar. Thought it was growing late in the afternoon, the convention was still in full swing. Two well-known Australian horror writers slow danced in the lounge. A group of 'Buffy' fans discussed the new generation of vampires. Andy led Tina over to a vacant table and handed the woman her drink. They clinked their glasses together, peering over the edges of their rum as they drank.

"Let's say there really are aliens," Andy said. "What do you reckon they'd look like?"

Tina hummed and took a sip of her drink. "I reckon they'd look like us. They'd have to if they wanted to blend in."

Andy nodded. "What makes you so sure they'd want to blend in?"

"Wouldn't you, if you were an alien?" Tina asked. "I mean, how else would you observe society? How else would you know it was safe to reveal yourself? I think all of us were crafted by the same hands, despite what solar system we come from. It'll make it easier when we finally find each other."

"So, you believe in God?" Andy asked, taking a sip of her drink.

Tina shrugged. "I don't think so, but I don't think you should rule out anything. If I were God, I'd make everyone look the same. Except for the octopuses, of course. Well, maybe the octopuses could be part human part Cephalopoda. I'd like to think life on Earth comes from alien DNA. Maybe that's why they don't look like us. They're disturbingly smart. If they did, they'd raise suspicion. No other species can alter their DNA," Tina continued. "And we don't know how they do it. Yep. Octopuses are certainly aliens."

"Maybe Cthulhu is God?" Andy asked, laughing. "That'd be wicked."

"Totally. And the giant squid from Harry Potter is Jesus."

After a few more hours of drinking, Tina and Andy left the convention together. Tina was

unaccustomed to the dark. Living in the city, she had grown used to the warm glow of streetlights, flickers of orange piercing the lounge room curtains. She looked up at the millions of silvery dots peppered across the haze of black clouds stretched thinly over the sky. Tina's eyes lingered on the yellow glow of the moon. What if it were really made of cheese? What if the silicate rocks within the crust of the Earth weren't really silicate rocks but cheese? Perhaps one day the intense heat would cook the cheese so much it'd drip from the moon, hanging over it like yellowed curtains.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Oh!" Tina looked at Andy. "Sorry. I was just thinking how weird it would be if the moon actually were made of cheese."

Andy smirked. "Perhaps it is. Scientists can be wrong, you know." She winked and laced her arm around Tina's, directing her to a park bench around the side of the convention centre. Tina felt a little lightheaded, and gratefully accepted Andy's invitation to sit down. She hadn't realised how much she'd had to drink. She leaned against the back of the bench and crossed her arms. The scent of Andy's lavender perfume lingered in the air.

"Let's say aliens came down from space and asked you to come with them back to their planet," Andy asked. "Would you go with them?"

Tina shrugged. "Depends. I wouldn't want to be coerced to come with them. I think if I knew their planet was equally as prosperous as Earth I'd go. I don't have a lot of relatives. Both of my parents are dead. My dad used to write horoscopes, you know? Mum was a chef. I don't have any siblings, and a lot of my friends have moved on, gotten married, had kids." She looked at Andy and laughed. "I'm not saying I'm lonely!" she said, poking the woman in the arm. "I don't mind being by myself, actually."

"So, no one would miss you?"

Tina wriggled her eyebrows. "What are suggesting? We run away together, huh?"

"Of course. That was my plan all along."

Andy wrapped her arm around Tina's waist, her hand on the woman's hip, fingers twisted around Tina's jumper. She drew circles with her finger over Tina's knee, then traced a six pointed star. Tina's heart skipped a beat as she felt the flush on her cheeks run down the side of her neck. She bit down on her bottom lip and inhaled sharply, feeling Andy's lips on the back of her neck.

"Is this OK?" the woman asked.

Tina nodded, trying to ignore the butterflies in her stomach twisting like intestines like spaghetti. The woman kissed under her ear, then blew gently on the cold spot she'd left behind. A cold shiver ran down her spine as she closed her eyes, focusing on the scent of Andy's perfume, on

the feeling on the woman's lips against her flushed skin.

"I think you try to blend in," Andy whispered. "But you stick out like a sore thumb. As soon as I saw you on that panel I knew I had to have you for myself."

"Thank God for Harlan Stevenson, right?"

Andy hummed against her neck, nibbling below her hairline. Tina let out a sigh and opened her eyes, staring up at the stars. The sequin silver specks scattered like moondust across the sky, like someone had grabbed a handful and threw it up in the air, where it hung like rain filled clouds about to burst. Tina smiled as Andy flicked her tongue along her earlobe, as the sky blushed purple and blue. She wondered if alien creatures were thinking the same thing as her. That the galaxy was indeed a wonder to behold. She pondered if Harlan Stevenson could ever describe a night sky so perfectly dark.

A shooting star shot across the sky. Andy's teeth dug into Tina's neck. Her fingernails elongated to become sharpened pincers, dripping with sticky flesh. A cephalopod arm broke through Andy's neck, clustered suckers latching onto Tina's eyes. Tina screamed as the arm dug itself into the tissue over her eye socket, the sucker pulling out her eyeball from the socket with the bloody retina still attached to the superior rectus and optic nerve.

Tina fell from the bench and rolled onto the ground, screaming as she pressed her hands to her bloodied eyes. She kicked her legs, hands slapping her remaining eye and empty socket, fingers coated in thick, dark blood. And stood over her, her feet on both sides of Tina's body. Smiling, she stuck out her impossibly long tongue, wrapped it around the eye, then sucked it into her mouth as quickly as a lizard. She grinned as she pressed her fingers to her neck, gently coaxing the eyeball down her throat and into her stomach. She dropped to her haunches and winked.

"Do you still believe in God?"

THE END

Claire Fitzpatrick is an author of speculative fiction and nonfiction. Called 'Australia's body horror specialist' by Breach magazine editor Bartholomew Ford, she enjoys writing about the human body and the darker side of humanity. Her short story 'Madeline' first published in Midnight Echo 11 was republished in Dead of Night: The Best of Midnight Echo. 'The Body Horror Book,' which she co-wrote and edited, was shortlisted for the 2017 Australian Shadows Awards for The Rocky Wood Award for Non Fiction and Criticism. She lives in Brisbane.

[Cyrus Song](#)



Cyrus Song

Steve Laker

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ENVIE by Josef Desade

Ruby waters glistened like gemstones beneath the spectre of an ominous full moon that prowled behind blood red clouds, lending some of their strange palette which gave it a queer pinkish hue. Black and silver silty sands lay below, rolling between corridors of dark clay as the tide washed in and out. He was being led along a steep pathway by a shadowy figure that hid its face within folds of cloth from a cloak it wore. Dark openings gaped all along the rock wall across from them that reminded him of documentaries he had seen of Anasazi dwellings, the ancient ones. A chill ran down his spine as he noticed odd statues that stood guard at random intervals, carved into impossible heights; their visage slightly human but not quite.

They went for as far as the eye could see into the strange obsidian night and appeared far more ancient than could be possible. They kept sentry over the waves that crashed below, pounding incessantly at an unnatural pace as they gave little glimpses of caves further down that peered back like dark eyes; that watched him before they were consumed by the water and darkness. The sand glimmered like stars in the sky as each tide rolled back. Uneasiness overtook him as he followed his silent guide up higher into the sky and the waves took on a strange rhythm and song; a haunting chorus that seemed to reign over everything as it intertwined with the scent of salt...curry...distant smoke.

Up higher and higher they went, spiralling to dangerous heights and the whole time he strained to see the face of the silent one in front of him, to no avail. In fact, it was as if their footfalls made no sound, although he could hear his own echoing off into the abyss. The pathway under foot grew thinner the higher they went and finally they came upon a dead end, or so it seemed; where a thin crevice opened up like a sly smile in the clay. His guide came to a stop and began to turn towards him as fear froze him where he stood.

He awoke with a start and fell out of bed; the hard floor hitting him with a shock as the scent of salt and curry lingered in his memory. Cold sweat was pouring down his face; his clothing stuck fast to his skin in the seemingly tropical heat in the small flat he was renting as he tried to gain his bearings. He blinked his eyes as they adjusted to the bright light that came through the balcony window, his vision falling upon a little doll that sat on a coffee table smiling back at him. He had been given the doll as a gift from the owner of a small shop he had stumbled upon the day before. Exu...the trickster god...god of the crossroads. Well, you sure got me with that dream he thought to himself.

He pulled himself to his feet and stumbled to the shutters that were partially open and stepped out into the morning; gazing down from a balcony with an ornate iron rail upon the awaking Quarter. A multitude of sounds and scents hit his senses and for a moment the dream faded into the background. He was supposed to have started the long haul home to Connecticut and his mundane every day routine already, but something had held him here, wandering the Vieux Carré as if in another world. He had come here in search of ghosts; doorways...but it seemed that he had found something else, as the strange dream flickered within his head like an old film.

He stretched and looked down the rue St. Ann and noticed a door down the street which he had

not noticed the past few days in the chaos that was New Orleans. It looked almost like a prison cell door as it swung upon its hinges and above it hung a simple sign shaped like a shield, graced with the words *Boutique du Vampyre*. Weird, he thought to himself, that he hadn't noticed that before. He felt his stomach rumble as he looked towards the digital clock on the nightstand, a glass of whiskey spilled next to it from when he had startled awake.

9:37am... time for breakfast. He fumbled around the flat looking for his clothes while he tried to remember the name of a restaurant on Royal that had been suggested to him the day before. He pulled a t shirt on and ran his fingertips over his shaved head as he scanned the room for his keys. Cafe Amelie, that was its name. He spotted his keys hanging next to the door on a hook and pulled the laces on his boots tight before he pushed himself up and grabbed them, the metal jingling quietly in the silent room. He put his hand on the doorknob when a detail of the dream popped back into his mind. For some reason it stuck in his memory that all of the strange carved statues had detailed fangs carved into them, which stood out with ghastly detail against the other faded features in the stone. He unintentionally shivered as he turned the knob and slowly walked down the old creaking staircase, blinking his eyes as they adjusted while he stepped out into the day.

He ambled slowly through the streets, taking in the history that was in every step along the way. The scent of some unknown flower flirted with his senses as a breeze blew in from the canal. He walked the old roads as if he had known them his entire life, passing tourists and locals unnoticed. An old man sat in an alcove playing a sorrowful song on a violin, the torn and bruised leather case open in front of him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out what he had and watched as the silver coins bounced against the faded red velvet inside. He continued on his way, glancing down alleyways into hidden gardens as he went. The day seemed almost surreally perfect he thought to himself as he ran his fingertips across a brick wall, glancing up to see a small sign that read Cafe Amelie.

Absentmindedly he flipped through a newspaper as his mind wandered back to the strange dream from the night before. It had been incredibly lucid and he pondered what could have triggered such horrible sights in his subconscious, when he was startled by a waitress placing a plate of french toast upon the table. Inadvertently, he bumped the table with his knee and the coffee he had been sipping spilled into his lap. He jumped up to the amusement of the waitress and patted his pants dry with a napkin as she held back a chuckle. For a moment it seemed as if the room had gone silent and he quickly sat back down. Embarrassed, he quietly ate and asked for a check before slipping out the door and into the noisy street.

Feeling more at ease in the crowd outside, he headed back towards the flat to change his pants. His imagination wandered as he strolled through the corridors of streets, finding himself back on the pathway heading up into the unknown. He lost track of the world around him as he tripped over a young couple sleeping beneath the dusty window of a shop that looked like it had been vacant for years. He muttered an apology and looked around as he realized that he had passed his flat and was standing a few feet away from the strange door he had noticed earlier in the morning. He squinted his eyes, trying to see into the gloom that lay beyond the doorway but with no luck.

He was about to turn and head back to his flat when the door opened up with the jingling of a bell and a voice called out asking if he was coming in. He hesitated for a minute and then took a step into the shop as the door shut behind him. He glanced around and saw the usual mixture of touristy gift shop mixed with a dark undertone of the occult. A multitude of hand crafted items caught his eye as he looked along the walls. The cold eyes of dolls and dark splashes of paintings watched him as he looked curiously at strange effigies that sat on a shelf in the corner. An old carnival fortune teller game gave him a bad vibe, as he studied its waxen looking face. In front of a small counter stood a woman with startlingly green hair that framed a shy looking face, with a grin that drew a gasp from him as little fangs peeked out. She looked at him with a look of inquiry as he shook off the thoughts of the dream in his head and remembered that he was in a shop that was vampire themed.

You were standing outside the door for a while. I wasn't sure if you knew we were open. Have you been here before?

No, honestly, I just noticed this shop this morning, even though I'm staying just down the road.

Well, enjoy your visit...my name is April. If you need help with anything, I will be right over here.

The uneasiness he felt when he first entered the shop left him as he smiled at her and began to take a closer look around. A cabinet in the corner was adorned with various candles for various purposes. He looked at artwork hung on the walls from local artists as he scanned along, his eyes resting on a shelf of books. Vampiric history, tales and novels; some holding the autographs of the authors, a blend of the old and new. He flipped through a bin of posters and strolled slowly around the room until his eyes came to rest on the fortune teller next to the counter. Adorned in regal blue as if a soldier, the words *St. Germaine* marquee'd across the front of the glass that kept him from being able to reach out and touch it. One hand rested above a white orb and it vacantly stared back at him.

He shuffled slowly and looked at little knickknacks around the counter area and a basket full of locally made vampire toys that you could "adopt". He turned towards the door and started the brisk walk of someone who accidentally ended up in a store they never intended to go into, when suddenly he felt an unnaturally strong grip upon his wrist. His mind flashed back to the dream and the hooded figure as he blinked it away and looked up to see April off to his side, fangs glistening in the lights from above. He tried to pull his arm back but she held it firm and slipped a thin card into his palm before she released it. He fumbled towards the door and out into the bright light as her voice called after him, hope to see you there.

He rushed across the street, away from the strange shop and the feeling that the girl had known something about his dreams, as impossible as that was. He came to his door and fumbled around in his pocket for the key, which fell to the ground and bounced as he scrambled to grab it. He slid it into the door and looked over his shoulder to see April standing in the doorway watching.

Ominous vibes overtook him as he pulled open the door and slammed it shut behind him. He slumped to the ground, sweat dripping from his brow as he wondered what had come over him. A sharp pain spiked through the palm of his hand and he realized he had been tightly gripping the card she had slipped him as blood soaked into it from a paper cut it had caused.

He took a deep breath and tried to calm his nerves as his eyes came to rest on the card. Beneath a smear of blood, a fanged mouth smiled back at him. He let it fall from his hand, fluttering to the floor as the vision of the statues flashed again. It landed on the opposite side and he stared at the words that were written across it.

*Fritzel's Jazz Club
8 p.m. Til
Get there before Fritzel's closes
Password: The Vampire Sent Me*

He pulled himself to his feet, wiping the sweat from his face, and climbed the stairs. He realized he was shaking and poured himself a shot of warm whiskey as he stood with his hand against the wall. Between the dream and the experience in the boutique, the day had left him with a strange uneasiness. He sat down on the edge of the bed, fanning himself against the heat. Maybe a little nap would help, he thought to himself as his head hit the pillow and he drifted off to sleep.

He found himself alone in a desert of ashen sand, his back against a clay wall that rose as far as the eye could see behind him. An empty black robe lay beneath the drifting sand, quickly disappearing as he watched. He cautiously took a step forward, staring in awe at the dunes that ascended into walls on either side of him. He looked ahead and the awe turned to fear as a harvest moon illuminated the nightmarish landscape before him. A pathway wove into the distance between the dunes as contorted faces leered out from thick black twisted trunks that lined the pathway; silent screams frozen in time, as tears of blood dripped down to crimson blades of grass below. A chilling vision as a slow rolling fog began to creep like snow drifts, spectral tendrils swaying like ocean waves in the obsidian night. The road stretched on seemingly without end and although he couldn't see anything in the distance, he had a strange yearning for what lay at the end...eternity.

Leathery wings beat overhead and the wind howled as it bombarded him with stinging grains of sand; as if some unknown force was trying to wipe his visage from existence. He slowly journeyed down the strange artery he had happened upon, the sound of his heart beating in his head his only companion. The blood dripping from the trees had an overpowering scent that began to drive him mad and he quickened his pace. Around every twist and bend...silent dunes witness to the endless cries of the trees...his heart pounding in his ears...he fell to his knees and screamed as everything around him began to spiral...

He woke up covered in a cold sweat, his heart racing. The room was dark as he rolled to his side and saw the time. 10:56 pm... he had slept nearly half the day. He sat up and swung his feet to

the floor as he stretched and looked towards the balcony. The sounds of the night greeted him as he heard the clink of glasses, murmured words intermingling with the sounds of jazz as it worked its way through each corridor. He straightened out his clothes and yawned as he found himself walking down the stairs as if pulled by some unseen strings. He got to the bottom and a glimpse of white caught his eye. He leaned down and found the strange card he had been given in the shop. He picked it up and read it again.

The Vampire Sent Me...

The words brought the scent of the blood in his dream racing back into his thoughts and he quickly crumpled it up and put it in his pocket. He turned the doorknob and stepped out onto the sidewalk. A full moon hung beneath a queer haze over the Quarter, the kind that seemed unique to only New Orleans he thought to himself. He navigated clumsily through the maze of streets, allowing his feet to take him wherever they were headed. He walked along under the dim light of gas lamps in doorways, the shadows playing eerie tricks upon his eyes as if some strange presence was inspecting his every move. He felt as if he was in a different world as he walked along, hardly noticing the passing people. He continued for a few blocks and then turned onto Bourbon as he was bombarded with a barrage of stimulations to all of his senses and suddenly became aware of his surroundings. A haunting tune caught his ear and he followed it like a siren song, walking as if intoxicated through the people around him until it was all he could hear. He looked up and a swaying back and forth above him was a sign that said *Fritzels*.

He walked inside, unsure of what to expect as he glanced at the bar and then to a band playing next to a piano in the corner of the room. The smell of alcohol and sweat greeted his nostrils as he walked towards the bar in the dim lighting. He put his hands on the counter and leaned in to catch the bartender's attention as they looked over at him with a smile. They approached the counter and leaned in so he could speak into their ear over the din. He hesitated momentarily and then in a voice barely above a whisper he said the vampire sent me. The man leaned back, nodding at him and motioned for him to follow. He came around the bar and led him to a door behind which an eerily lit staircase led up to the floor above. A strange scent of incense and something familiar wafted down from above, giving a ceremonial feel to the air.

He looked over his shoulder and realized he was standing alone as he turned back to the strange staircase. Wearily, he watched the flames flicker on tapers that lined the staircase and slowly crept towards the door. With each step he felt an uneasiness as the old wood creaked beneath his heavy step. A queer purple light seeped out from the little space between the bottom of the door and the floor in front of him he realized and he hesitated as he stared at the old iron handle in front of him. A quiet murmuring reached his ears, a mixture of different languages in a hushed tone that blended into an unnerving whisper while it intertwined and carried through the air with almost a musical tone to it. He reached forward and put his hand upon the handle, slowly tightening his grip as he got up the nerve to turn it.

He stepped through the doorway, finding himself in an old room, draped shut from the outside

world and lit by candles and a strange lilac light that emanated from an unknown source as if manifesting from nowhere. The walls were painted the same purple hue with white trimming and had intermittent breaks where bricks from the original building still stuck through, gaping rectangular sections that seemed as if they could be gateways, were it not for the stone that walled them up. The room was furnished with what looked like ancient chairs and couches, upholstered in a dark violet velvet velour. A baby grand piano played a mournful song that one could find himself lost in, tears of past memories silently falling from eyes that looked upon the past and not the present. He shook his head and looked closer to the dark corner and realized that it appeared to be playing on its own, no visible composer in sight. The door swung shut behind him with a crash and he jumped as he realized that everyone had stopped talking and were all looking upon him; the candlelight glinting on porcelain fangs that peeked out from every smile.

What is this? he thought to himself as he took a step back and bumped into the doorframe as he suddenly felt very alone. The room suddenly erupted back into the quiet murmuring and he was taken aback as he realized that everyone had moved to different positions in the room in the blink of an eye. It was as if the quiet crowd staring at him had all been a mirage and disoriented, he turned to reach for the door when he felt a hand upon his shoulder. Glancing, he was startled to see the girl from the shop a step behind him.

Well, you can't leave yet, you have only just returned.

Returned? What do you mean returned?

Oh, it hasn't come back to you yet? Come with me, have a drink.

She turned and began to walk to an adjacent room where a bar was set up with various crystal glasses that reflected the candlelight and strange purple hues of the mystery lights in an ominous way. He followed her cautiously, weaving between small groups of pale strangers who spoke in unfamiliar languages, making his way to the bar that offered various wines and an odd green liquid that seemed to glow in the light. He shuddered inadvertently and took a seat that was offered to him. He watched as she picked up two glasses and placing them next to each other, poured a small amount of the strange glowing liquid into them. She reached across the bar and picked up what appeared to be a strange almost ritualistic spoon with perforations in it that looked like a medieval crest, placing it upon one glass and placing a sugar cube in the centre of the spoon. She picked up a crystal pitcher of what appeared to be ice water and he watched as the glowing liquid took on a milky opaqueness as she poured the water onto the sugar slowly and filled the glass. She carried out the same slow, precise ritual with the second glass and then handed him one.

Relax. Let the fairy guide your thoughts.

He took a deep breath as she lightly touched her glass to his and not so sure of himself, he took a

swig. The liquorice like flavour overwhelmed his senses and he closed his eyes as he drank down the rest. He felt eyes upon him and slowly turned as he realized the room had fallen silent again except for the piano playing itself in the corner. Turning back to the girl from the shop he couldn't help but look again at the sharp fangs she flashed every time she smiled, wondering why she would still have them in outside of work. He squinted a little in the dim lighting, trying to discern if they were capped or implants, thoughts of the statues from his dream flashing in his memory. He was startled out of his thoughts by her voice breaking the strange silence in the room.

Haven't you gotten used to your own yet?

Wh... what do you mean, my own?

Your teeth, you really shouldn't stare it isn't very polite. You look famished, we should get you something to eat.

As he puzzled over what she meant, she stood and motioning that she would be right back she headed towards a passage in the corner of the room. It appeared almost as if she floated across the room in the black dress she wore as her feet disappeared in the gloom that hugged it. His eyes followed her as she passed paintings and mirrors and disappeared into the passage. He was wondering where she went when it dawned on him that the mirrors in the room were all completely void of reflections. A cold sweat broke upon his brow as he desperately looked around the room for other mirrors; all of which remained empty in the room full of strangers. Fear gripped him as he turned and looked across the bar at his own reflection.

He saw himself looking back but something wasn't right. There was something quite off about the reflection and he leaned forward to get a closer look. He analysed his features and in terror realized that he could see through it as if a transparent ghost gazed back at him. He opened his mouth to let out a scream when he found himself frozen in place, stuck looking in terror at the fangs that protruded in his reflection from the open mouth. He fell backwards and the chair he had been occupying clattered to the floor with a crash. The odd residents of the room began to slowly move towards him as he heard a door open off the side. His guide to this strange world had returned and had a frightened looking girl at her side who seemed hesitant to come near him.

A strange odour filled the room as he felt his heartbeat quicken and it seemed as if the vampiric guests who filled the room spiralled around him as if performing some weird ritual dance. Round and round, jeering faces looming from the candlelit shadows. They began to laugh as the girl was led his way, shrieking laughter that filled his head with nightmarish scenes and the sound of shrill jazz music echoing through the streets of the Quarter. The girl was led closer and he heard a tear explode upon the floor from her cheek as her heartbeat pounded in his ears and then everything went dark.

He lay upon his back, the sand cool upon his skin as he looked upon the heavens. The stars above shone so much brighter now, as if they were smiling down upon him with the hidden knowledge of the change that had taken grip of him. The waves lightly crashed near him as he heard every single grain of sand licked, slide towards the ocean that threatened to consume them, an eternal entity that was always hungry. He longed to see the old cities that lay beneath, where the statues of those who had come before watched from eternity, but they were long consumed. In astral wanderings he could talk to them, walk their ancient corridors and see what had been before. The knowledge of each generation had come with the gift he had been given two weeks before, when he had stumbled upon the strange speakeasy and its hidden whispers, now that the amnesia of becoming had dissipated. He ran his tongue along his teeth as he felt the girl who lay beside him stir. He lightly rubbed her shoulder and smiled as he felt her awakening.

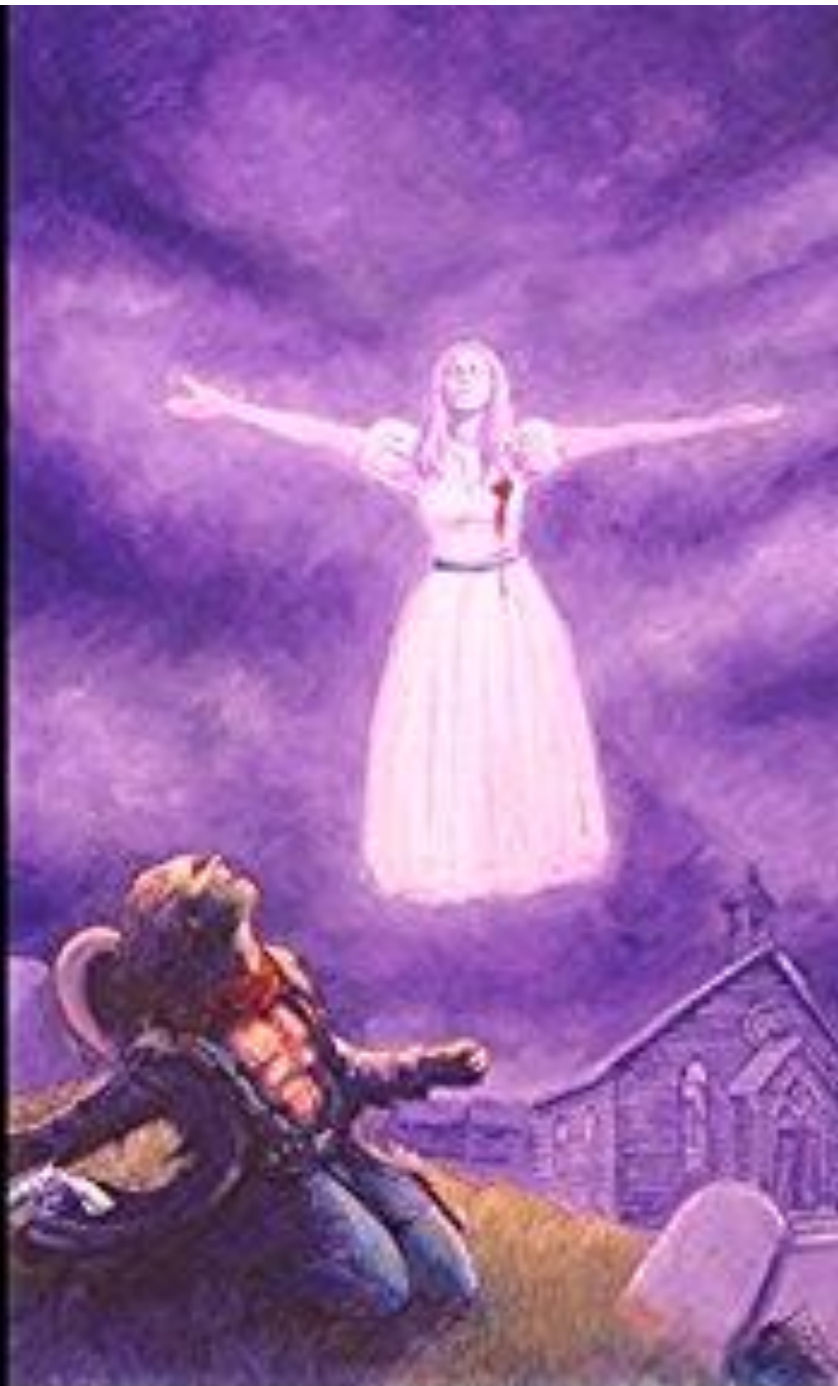
Where am I?

The beach, my dear...and now that you are awake, why not a drink?

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

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STARBEAM DIRECT by Hawkelson Rainier

Starbeam Direct Teleportation Hub, 11:35 Astronomical Time

“A drink for the gentleman?” the cocktail waitress asked.

“I could use one, actually,” Jeff Klingingsmith said. “Just a little bit of the jitters today. First teleportation, after all.”

“Oh, what’s your destination?”

“Mars.”

“Well, you’ve nothing to fret about. Starbeam Direct has an exemplary safety record.”

“I’m sure this whole process is fool proof. But perhaps you could recommend a little something to take the edge off.”

“Our bartender makes a very good Enceladus Sling.”

“Ah, that should do nicely.”

Klingingsmith sipped his drink in a dim corner of the lounge and considered cancelling the trip. The idea of teleportation didn’t sit well with him. But, the big bosses wanted him on Mars in the flesh and blood. There were rumours about a merger in the works between Red Sand Industries and The Ganymede Corporation. Cancelling was simply out of the question.

By the time Klingingsmith was halfway through his Enceladus Sling, he felt better about everything. Relax, old sport, he thought to himself. The company is picking up the tab at the very exclusive Olympus Mons Resort. It’s about time they brought old Jeff Klingingsmith along on one of their famous working holidays. You just might be a junior partner before it’s all said and done. You’re definitely in the running—top five, anyway.

Klingingsmith finished his drink, squared up his tab, and made his way over to telepod 355B, which was right outside the lounge.

“Is it business or pleasure that takes you to the Red Planet?” the telepod attendant asked cheerfully as a host of wall mounted scanners took a multitude of readings on Klingingsmith.

“A little of both, actually. What’s all this about, then?” he asked, gesturing toward the whirring scanners that ogled over him.

“I’m not the expert in such matters, Mister Klingingsmith. But, I do know the machines are taking your biometric readings all the way down to the atomic level. Soon enough, it will all be beamed to the destination telepod at the luxurious Olympus Mons. And that, Mister Klingingsmith, is the extent of my knowledge on the subject.”

“Well, it all seems scientific enough, I suppose. But what about my luggage?”

“You’ll be happy to know the luggage you checked earlier has already arrived at your hotel room.”

“Ah, everything seems in good order, then.”

“Indeed it is, Mister Klingingsmith. And now that the scans are complete, I’ll just have you take a seat inside the telepod, and we will begin the transmission.”

“Will I feel myself being transmitted?” Klingingsmith asked the attendant in a hushed tone.

“Not at all. You won’t even realize it’s happening. Just sit back, relax, and you’ll arrive at Mars in thirteen minutes and forty eight seconds.”

“Easy enough,” Klingingsmith said as he entered the telepod. There was a vintage leather Chesterfield armchair and a number of old magazines laid out on a mahogany end table. “Would you look at that,” Klingingsmith remarked, “real ink and paper periodicals. Time, People, National Geographic ... very retro chic.”

Klingingsmith found the Chesterfield to be quite comfortable, and there was a rather compelling article in National Geographic about the Moai of Rapa Nui. The article went on to present a few theories as to how the natives of Rapa Nui might have went about moving the immense monolithic statues from the stone quarries using only the most primitive of tools. It seemed like an impossible feat, considering the statues weighed, on average, fourteen tons. Some of the largest ones were in excess of eighty tons.

As daunting as the task might have been, the people of Rapa Nui were up to the challenge, as evidenced by the hundreds of Moai located miles from where they were initially carved.

A clever bunch, indeed, Klingingsmith thought, but today we’d save a lot of bother and just have the things teleported. Easy as pie.

He looked up at a wall mounted monitor that displayed his transmission progress—it stood at 98% complete. Any second now, old chap. The progress bar made the final jump to the 100% mark. A smooth landing, Klingingsmith said out loud. Good show.

A pleasant, feminine voice piped through the sound system, “Transmission successful. Thank you for using Starbeam Direct.”

The wall in front of Klingingsmith retracted, and the Chesterfield suddenly pitched forward, launching him into the void. He reflexively tried to grab at anything that might slow his fall. There was a physical structure around him—some sort of tube—but its walls were nearly frictionless. He couldn’t stop his momentum, and the harrowing descent into darkness was sufficient in duration to consider how he might begin his letter of complaint:

*To whom it may concern,
As a Passenger at Starbeam Direct, I cannot begin to express how entirely dissatisfied ...*

And that's as far as he got before he was unceremoniously delivered into a dank machine room located several stories beneath the trendy shops and restaurants of the teleportation hub.

Klingingsmith managed to stand up and dust himself off before he noticed a roughly three meter tall humanoid robot standing at the other end of the room. The menacing contraption levelled its right index finger at him, as if it were going to accuse him of some heinous crime, and then a blue bolt of electricity arced from its fingertip to Klingingsmith.

Klingingsmith's hair stood on end—his eyelids twitched a bit, and then the stream of electricity fizzled out. The robot made some garbled sounds, and its arms flailed as it walked about in a circle a few times before falling face first onto the dirty cement floor with a metallic report.

Two men entered the room from a side door and walked over to the fallen heap. They were dressed in blue coveralls, and Klingingsmith gathered they were maintenance workers employed by Starbeam Direct.

"You two," Klingingsmith called out, "I demand to speak to your supervisor at once."

"You'll keep those gums from flappin' if you ken what's good fir ya," one of the men shot back with a decidedly Edinburgh accent. He took a bite of his sandwich and kicked the prostrate robot in the side the way a prospective buyer might kick the tires on automobile at a used car lot.

"Posh English cunt," the other scoffed at Klingingsmith. He opened a bag of crisps and stuffed a handful into his gob.

"Did I no fuckin' tell the bastards the robut's capacitor wis well fucked?" the man with sandwich inquired of the man with the crisps.

"Aye. That you did, Mikey, that you did."

"And what did those cunts do about it?"

"Sweet fuck all. That's what."

"And that's our lunchbreak fucked because some lazy bastard couldn't be bothered orderin' a new fuckin' capacitor per my request."

"The company's gaunny be payin' out the arse for workin' us through our break, I shite you not."

"Right enough, Ronnie, right enough. And if they give any guff, we'll sick the union rep on 'em straight away."

“Aye. Big Arlie Robertson will sort those company bastards oot.”

“So, the way I figure it, this posh cunt has got to be a manual termination job,” Mikey said as he gestured with his thumb in the general direction of the slack jawed Klingingsmith.

“Aye. It’s the only caird left to play,” Ronnie concurred. He turned to Klingingsmith and yelled, “You there. Posh cunt. You’re comin’ with us.”

“I’ll do no such thing,” Klingingsmith protested.

“We’re no gauny ask twice,” Mikey chimed in. “We could make it nice and quick, or if you wanna be a wide cunt, we could draw it out like the Pope bletherin’ away on Easter Sunday.”

“Now listen here,” Klingingsmith said with as much defiance as he could muster. “I’m a very valuable employee at a very powerful galactic company. Red Sand Industries no less. The executive board is expecting me at an important meeting any minute now. When they discover I’ve been shangaied by you two hooligans, there’ll be hell to pay.”

The bloke called Mikey seemed exasperated as he took a half dozen purposeful strides over to Klingingsmith. He seized Klingingsmith by the ear and pulled him along with him as he lectured, “I’ll have no more back talk from a wide cunt like you. Nobody’s gauny be frettin’ about you, seein’ how you’ve already arrived safe and sound at your posh fuckin’ luxury resort.”

“This hardly seems like a posh luxury resort,” Klingingsmith argued as he was led into a back office that was littered with greasy fish and chips wrappers, boxes of Chinese takeaway cartons, overflowing ashtrays, and cans of Tennent’s Super Lager. Klingingsmith also noticed his suitcase was wide open on the grubby linoleum floor, his personal belongings strewn about haphazardly. “And I’ll have you both brought in on charges of larceny to boot. Pilfering a customer’s luggage—just despicable.”

“Our boy here seems to be wide of the mark on this matter,” Mikey said. “How about you gives him a quick lesson, Ronnie.”

“It’s like this,” Ronnie began. “Maybe you’ve noticed how Starbeam Direct likes to mince words. Likesay, the words teleportation and transmission in particular.”

“I suppose,” Klingingsmith said. “Seems like a trivial detail.”

“Maybe so, but like they say, the Devil is in the detail. Isn’t that right, Mikey?”

“Aye, fraid so, Ronnie. Fraid so.”

“What are you two getting at? What’s this have to do with me?” Klingingsmith demanded.

“It turns out that Starbeam Direct doesnae actually teleport its passengers,” Ronnie said. “It’s more like they send your biological blueprint up ahead to the arrival point. Then, the information is fed into an organic printer, and the posh cunt is recreated atom by atom.”

“Really no much to it,” Mikey said. “Turns out, there’s nothin’ special about us—not even posh cunts like you. Just a bit of hydrocarbons, really. Right, Ronnie?”

“Aye, some protein strands clumped thegither, walkin’ aboot with our chests puffed up like we ken what’s what.”

“So you see, even as we speak right now, your poofy fuckin’ facsimile is prancing aboot Mars with all your posh mates, while Ronnie and I are down here slavein’ away, not even havin’ a proper lunch break.”

“But that’s impossible,” Klingingsmith said. “I’m right here, right now.”

“Aye, that you are,” Ronnie said. “And that makes problems. Big fuckin’ problems.”

“You see,” Mikey said, “You’re what we call ... redundant.”

“Redundant?” Klingingsmith needed clarification.

“Aye, ya cunt. We can nae have two of the same cunt muckin’ aboot the solar system, can we Ronnie?”

“We cannae, Mikey, we cannae. Too many legal problems, ken. Not to mention all the ethical shite that would go with it.”

“Gentlemen, surely we can reach some sort of compromise,” Klingingsmith said. “Some kind of mutually advantageous agreement.”

“Well, we’d like to hear your spiel then,” Ronnie said, sounding quite sincere.

“I could tell right off you were both reasonable men,” Klingingsmith went on. “Intelligent men who were on the lookout for a lucrative opportunity ...” As Klingingsmith made his desperate pitch, Ronnie scratched his scruffy chin as if he were seriously contemplating the merit of the proposal. Mikey, ever so subtly, picked up a ballpeen hammer from his desk and moved into range.

The Olympus Mons Executive Conference Hall, 12:15 Astronomical Time

Klingingsmith arrived at the meeting fifteen minutes early so he might have a chance to go over some of his notes. He was surprised to see the CEO of Red Sand Industries, Roger Addington, was already present.

“Ah, Klingingsmith. Just the man I wanted to see,” Addington said cordially. “How do you like Olympus Mons so far?”

“It is spectacular, Mister Addington. Better than advertised.”

“Well get used to it, Klingingsmith, because we’ve got big things in store for you. No doubt, you’ve heard rumours about a merger?”

“Indeed I have, Mister Addington.”

“There’s nothing official yet, but I can assure you this is going to go through,” he said in a hushed tone. “I’ll need a good man to oversee the iridium operations. Can I count on you?”

“Of course, sir,” Klingingsmith said. “It would be an honour.”

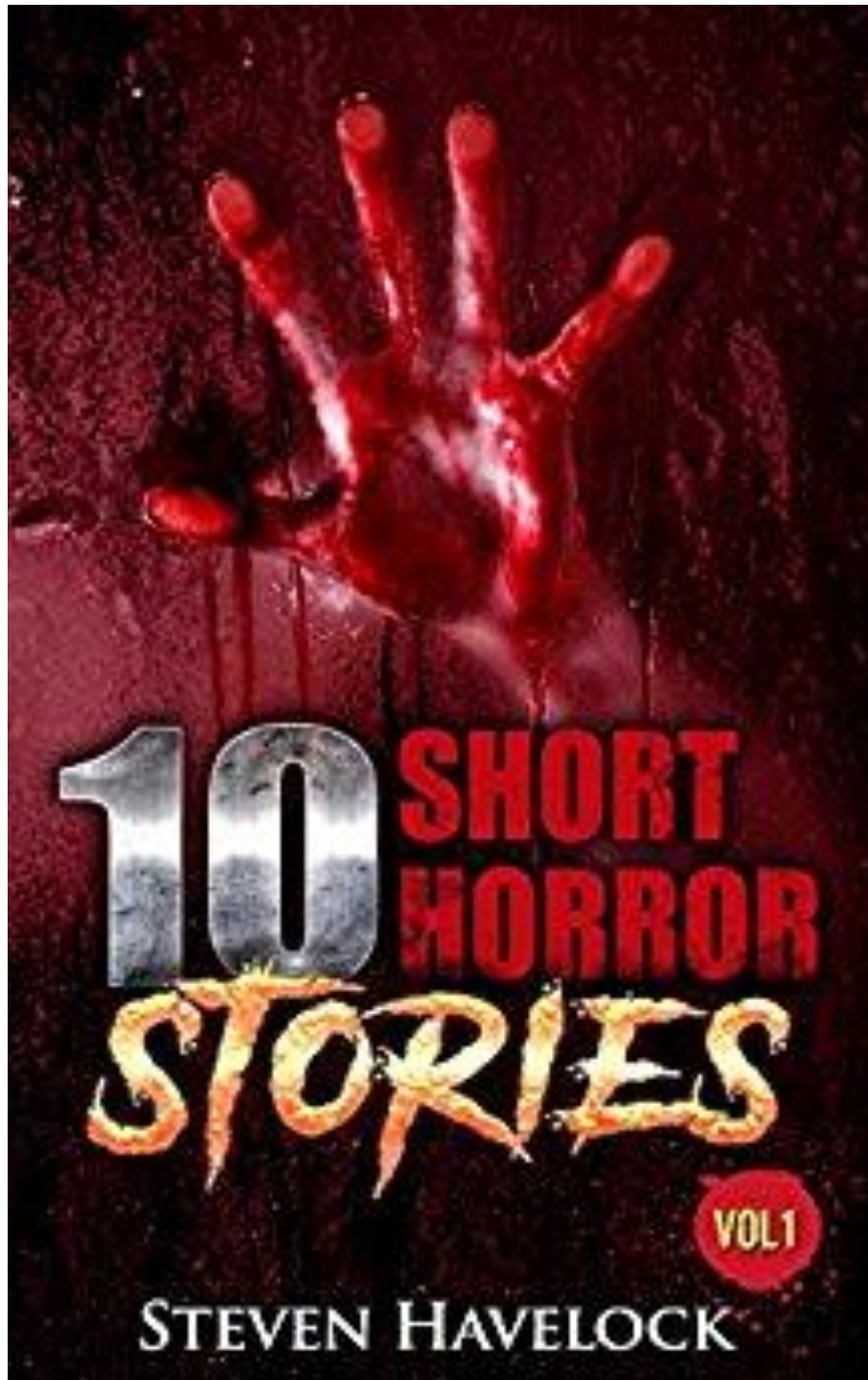
“Now, your compensation will come in the form of stock options, which we believe you will find quite to your liking. You’ll have an expense account, three weeks paid holiday, and a company star cruiser. There will, however, be a considerable amount of travel involved. Mostly teleporting to various locales throughout the solar system.”

“No trouble at all, sir. I find teleportation to be a most agreeable method of travel.”

“Yes, it is exceedingly convenient. Almost like magic, wouldn’t you say?”

“That’s a good way to put it, sir. Almost like magic.”

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

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ICY DEATH by Julie Dollar

The icy wind blew across the snow white battlefield. The blackened skeletons towered over the men, as they swung large hammers and smashed the human's fragile bodies. Magnor stood with his battle axe in hand and slashed at the blackened giants. But the edged weapons did little damage to the skeletons. In the distance, over the snow banks he could hear the chants of the Hellion priests as they enhanced their undead army's battle prowess, with spells.

A giant skeleton—*Gramush*, they were called—crashed his hammer into Magnor's side and sent him sprawling into a snow bank. He lay unconscious, in the bank for several hours dreaming of his beloved Ryana as the battle raged on.

Magnor awoke to find himself lying in a pile of hay in a small cavernous room. In the distance he could hear the sound of metal clanging against stone. Remembering the battle with a sudden urgency he struggled to lift his torso. His body ached all over as he fell back into the bed.

A small humanoid man came into the room. His grey beard was so long it almost dragged on the floor.

"So you're awake," said the dwarf.

"How long have I been here?" asked Magnor.

"A few days," said the dwarf.

"My village was under attack, there was a battle. What happened?"

"You lost," said the dwarf as he laid a tray of food on a small table in the corner of the room.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean your people are dead. The village is gone."

"That can't be, my people are the best warriors in all of Farina."

"Not anymore," said the dwarf.

Magnor struggled to his feet. "I'll need a sword or a battle axe. I need to get to my village."

"You need to rest and to eat. Gather your strength, and then you can go out and die."

"Who are you exactly?"

"I'm Barin. I guess you can say I'm the leader of my people. At least of what is left of them, anyway."

“I’ve heard of your kind. You’re the small men of the mines.”

“We prefer to be called dwarves.”

“Well, Barin, I need my clothes and a weapon of some quality, if you please.”

“Fine. How you choose your own death is none of my concern. I just wished I hadn’t wasted my good ale and bone broth on a soon-to-be corpse.”

Magnor rose to his feet and found his clothes lying on the floor. He struggled to put on his tunic and trousers. His body still ached from the battle. Barin watched him struggle, then threw up his arms in disgust and walked out of the room.

The food in the corner sat on the table. The aroma of the ale and bread was tempting. Magnor walked over to the small table, grabbed the tankard and downed the ale in a quick gulp. He was hungrier than he thought. He finished off the bread and bone broth, then began to search the room for a weapon.

He wandered out of the cavernous room and out into an open area. A dwarven woman sat in a chair, breast feeding her baby under her beard, while the other dwarf women played with their children in the room.

Magnor continued on down the stone corridor. He found a room full of dwarven men playing a dice game of chance. He stood and watched for a while and noticed one of them had a battle axe hanging from his side.

“Say, can I borrow your axe, sir?” asked Magnor.

“Now what kind of dwarf would I be if I let a perfect stranger borrow my axe?” replied the dwarf.

“A very kind and generous one,” said Magnor.

“No, I’d be a stupid dwarf, to say the least.”

“I really do need your axe. My village was attacked and I need to get back and help my people.”

“You mean that village that was destroyed?” said the dwarf.

“You don’t know that,” said Magnor.

“I do,” said the dwarf. “I’ve seen it myself. The place is nothing but carnage.”

“Please, sir, I need your axe.”

“The name is Dunken, and seeing you seem to be desperate. I’ll give you this axe for a month’s worth of mining labour.”

Magnor weighed his options. He was in no position to bargain. He agreed and headed off back to the village, axe in hand.

Frozen bodies lay in the snow. Burnt skeletal remains of women and children were scattered about where the longhouse once stood. Upon seeing the gruesome sight, Magnor dropped to his knees and wept. Memories of his kin folk and Ryana flooded his mind. The grief was overwhelming and he sat in the snow crying, until his thoughts were taken over by plans of vengeance and feelings of hate and anger.

As promised, Magnor went back to the dwarven caverns and began his mining work for Dunken.

“No one is safe,” claimed Magnor.

“Bah, not this again,” said Dunken.

“One day they will come for your people, Dunken.”

“That day will never come. We are safe here deep in the Mountain. Nothing can get to us”

“The priestess can breach the defences of this underground keep they have powerful magic. They can transform into dark mist. If they wiped out my people they can certainly wipe out yours.”

“Bah, even if they could, why would they want to? We have nothing they want.”

“They are a cult of death. They worship death and they will not rest till all are dead.”

“You are too fearful, my friend,” said Dunken with a smile as he handed Magnor a tall tankard of ale.

“You are not being wise,” as he drank the ale. Then he stood from the table and walked to his small alcove where his cot lay and went to bed for the evening.

Magnor spent months in the mines, trying to rally support for his cause, making his case to the dwarves that the Hellion priests needed to be driven from the lands. But the dwarves were content with the way of things and saw no reason for war.

One night after a gruelling day of swinging a mining pick, Magnor woke. He heard a loud clatter and screams coming from the northern entrance of the underground keep. He quickly rose to his feet, grabbed his axe and went to where he heard the screams.

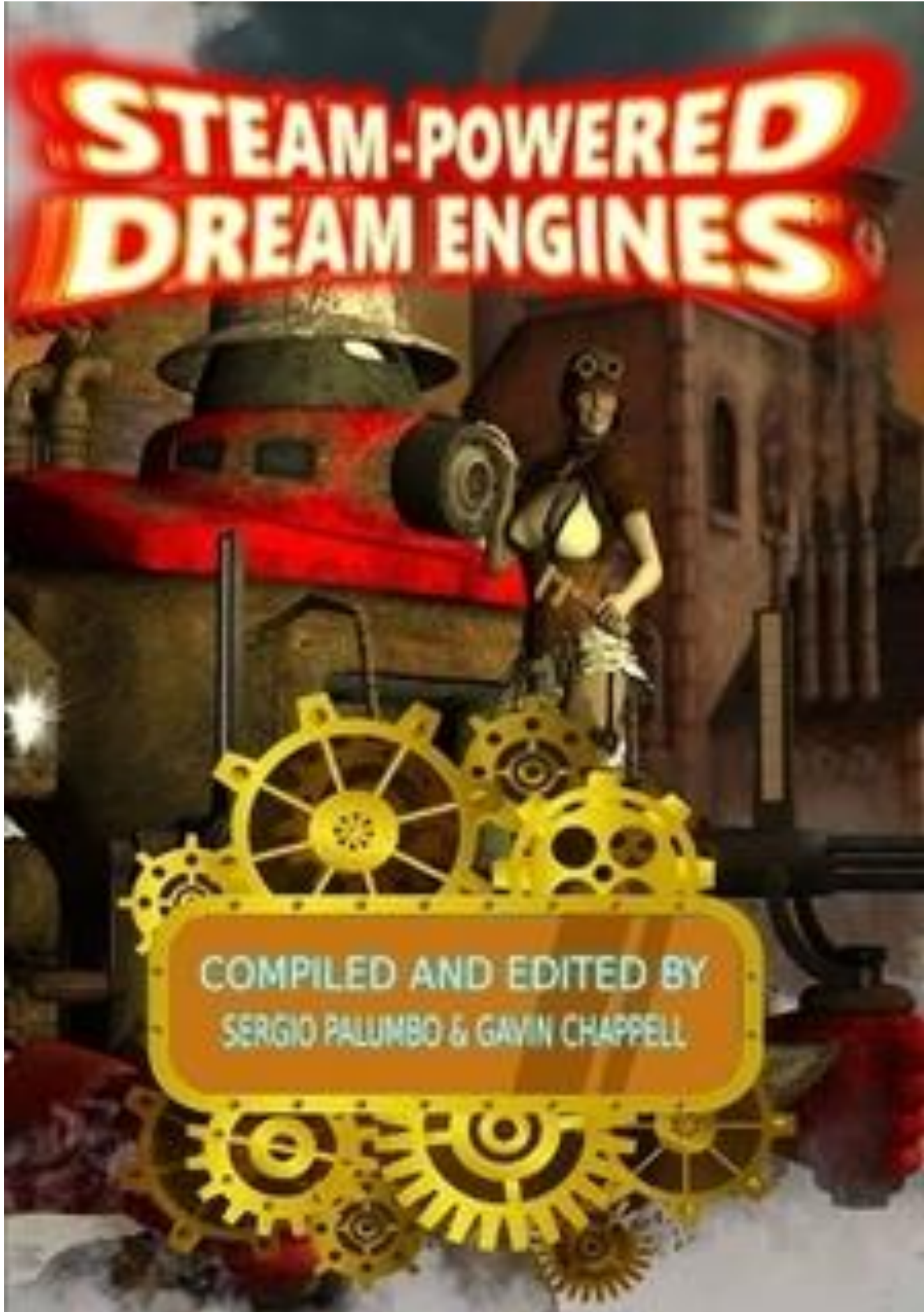
When he got to the Northern entrance he saw several dwarves lying dead on the stone ground floor, with their throats slit. He looked around the hall. A dark mist swirled in the room, but he saw no movement nor heard any noise. The dark mist surrounded Magnor and from the darkness a cold hand grasped his shoulder. He could not move. As he stood paralyzed, the hand left his shoulder and standing before him stood a naked woman. Half her body was pitch black darkness and the other half cold and pale.

The Hellion priestess smiled, touched his face, and the world went black as Magnor fell dead to the floor.

THE END

[Available from Rogue Planet Press](#)

STEAM-POWERED DREAM ENGINES

A detailed steampunk illustration. In the center, a woman with a determined expression wears a dark, form-fitting outfit with a white corset and a leather skirt. She has goggles on her forehead and a small mechanical device on her chest. She stands next to a large, complex steam engine with a prominent red horizontal band. The background shows a dark, industrial cityscape with tall buildings and smoke in the air. The overall color palette is dominated by browns, greys, and the bright red of the engine's band.

COMPILED AND EDITED BY
SERGIO PALUMBO & GAVIN CHAPPELL

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SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE BEAST MEN OF ATLANTIS by Milly “Mad Dog”
McGuigan

Chapter Fifteen

‘Doctor Watson was always a little slow on the uptake,’ Holmes observed drily in the silence that followed. ‘It is precisely this quality that transforms his accounts of my investigations from scientific reports into melodramatic mysteries worthy of Edgar Allan Poe.’ He turned to me. ‘It should be clear to you that her majesty and Miss Marency are half-sisters. What is more important is the impending sacrifice of the white prisoners to appease the hunger of the volcano god. Justice shall not be served so, rather in an English court of law!’

I barely heard the latter. ‘Sisters?’ I asked.

‘Half-sisters,’ Holmes said patiently. ‘They share a father. A father we have met. Who has been murdered, and whose murderer we intend to bring to justice.’ He turned to the queen. ‘May we be restored to our liberty? You must wish your father’s killer to receive justice just as much as your sister does.’

Miss Marency looked up. ‘Of course,’ she said. ‘That’s why we’re here.’

‘I understand this,’ said the queen. ‘But I cannot restore your freedom, Mr Holmes, or any of you. It is too dangerous.’

‘You say that two white men came here,’ Holmes said. ‘That they are prisoners of the priests.’

She inclined her head. ‘And so they will remain until the sign is given, and interpreted by the Archpriest, that the god of the volcano must be fed.’

Holmes shook his head. ‘That will not be satisfactory,’ he said. ‘Miss Marency retained my services to see that her father’s killer be brought to justice in an English court. Not murdered by savages in an unholy ritual of human sacrifice. We must go to the priests and speak with them.’

He turned as if to go. Keobula clapped his hands and men entered through the doors, carrying muskets primed and ready to fire. Holmes looked back at the queen.

‘This is absurd,’ he said. ‘We came here for one purpose and one purpose only. Once that purpose is prosecuted we shall leave your land and return to our own, never to trouble you again.’

She shook her head. ‘If you go to the priests,’ she said sadly, ‘you will be killed. Even if you attempt the return journey, the likelihood is that the priests or their creatures will hunt you down. Safety lies in remaining with us in Nkume. I will not see any of you sacrificed to He Beneath The Fire Mountain.’ Her gaze flickered over to Miss Marency. ‘Particularly not my long lost sister.’

The queen rose to her feet gracefully. 'You will remain with me as honoured guests,' she said. 'I will ensure that no word of your presence here reaches the priests. You will be my guests, but you can never leave.' As Miss Marency opened her mouth to speak, her half-sister raised a hand for quiet. 'It was foolish of you to enter this land. White men have done so in the past, but only one ever escaped; my father. And now he is dead, I will not see you killed.'

She gestured to the guards, and uttered a harsh phrase in her own tongue. The guards marched us away.

Sitting in our own hut with sunlight filtering in through the walls, we held a council of war.

'This sister of mine has us well guarded,' Miss Marency said bitterly, peering out of the doorway at the two guards on duty outside. 'Considering we are honoured guests.'

'She's in a difficult political situation,' Holmes said wryly. 'I should think that she has trouble trusting her people. Informers amongst them may pass on news of our arrival to the priests. As long as she keeps us hidden, she can be sure that we will not fall into the wrong hands. But it makes completing our task here problematic, to say the least.'

'Can't we make a break for it?' I said. 'Is that the correct phrase amongst the criminal fraternity? Make an escape attempt, I mean?'

Holmes rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He glanced out at the two guards. 'Working together we might be able to overpower them,' he said. 'But then we would have the rest of the settlement to get through. And then what?'

'Go to the temple,' Miss Marency said.

'The temple?' I asked.

She looked pityingly at me. 'That's where McAllister will be.'

'Yes,' said Sherlock Holmes, 'and this mysterious other white man will be imprisoned there too, no doubt. But we know so little about the situation. The entire temple area will be dangerous. There will be priests, perhaps temple guards. We have no firearms, no weapons at all, unless we can obtain some during our escape from this hut. And then we have no clear idea of where the prisoners are kept. This, my friends, is a three pipe problem.'

He reached in his tobacco pouch to fill the bowl of his meerschaum only to find that it was empty. Miss Marency laughed bitterly.

'Is the finest criminological mind in Europe baffled?' she asked. she folded her arms and sat back against the wall. 'Well, at least we can count ourselves safe for now. We will be sheltered and fed at my sister's expense, until we can find some way to escape.'

'But in the meanwhile,' I said shrewdly, 'McAllister is a prisoner of these savage priests,

destined for sacrifice to their unholy god. We cannot allow it, in all conscience, even if the hangman's noose awaits the fellow on return to England. It is our duty to ensure he is rescued from the priests, and taken back Home to face trial for murder.'

Miss Marency turned her face away. Holmes was staring abstractedly at the empty bowl of his pipe. Both seemed nonplussed. I glanced out of the door and saw the two blacks on guard, and wished I had at the very least my old service revolver. The only way out of this situation, I told myself sternly, would entail fighting.

However, the remainder of that day was spent in idleness and futility. Holmes was sunk in a black mood, or one of contemplation— at times the two seemed indistinguishable. Miss Marency was also silent and scowling. After a while, I lay down in one corner and sought sleep.

On that hard packed earth floor, slumber evaded me for a long time, but just as I was thinking of giving up the effort I must have fallen asleep, since the next thing I knew my eyes snapped open to reveal total blackness. For a moment I had no notion of where I was. Only a distant lowing sound from far off, and the iron hard ground beneath me, gave me any sense that I was still in the hut. It must be night.

I lay there for some time, trying to discern what had awoken me. I was hungry. Perhaps that was it. The queen had said she would feed us as well as keep us sheltered. Had food been brought while I was insensible?

I rolled over onto my side. Dim shafts of moonlight filtered in through the walls, and I saw on the ground before me a large banana leaf on which were heaped mealies, boiled yams, and beef preserved in honey, all of which I had encountered since coming to Africa. A jug of the sour sweet native beer lay beside it. Some of the food was untouched, but I could see much of it had already been eaten. No doubt my fellow prisoners had left it beside my sleeping form for me to eat when I awoke. But where were they? I could see no sign of them. But it was dark, pitch black except the moonlight.

Just as I reached out toward the food, the moonlight cut out briefly, and I heard a rustle of movement. In the utter darkness, I felt a cold hand of irrational fear. Who or what was it, moving in the gloom? All those long forgotten childish fears of the dark returned to me then.

The moonlight flooded in again, and I heard more movement, receding towards the doorway. Was Holmes making a breakout without me? Aggrieved, I got to my knees, aching in every limb, then to my feet. Clutching to a roof pillar for support, I tiptoed after.

The figure passed out of the doorway—I saw it momentarily silhouetted against the stars as it pushed back the hide curtain that covered the door—then vanished outside. There was a grunt, a sound of scuffling, then silence. My heart in my mouth, I crossed to the doorway. Just as I was reaching out to twitch back the curtain, which had fallen back into place after being disturbed, a hand shot out of the darkness and closed on my wrist.

'Are you sure you want to go out there, Watson?' Holmes' voice was the merest whisper.

‘Holmes!’ I said. ‘It wasn’t you who went outside. Then...’

‘It was Miss Kate Marency,’ Holmes completed my sentence for me. ‘Grown weary of durance vile.’

‘Where has she gone?’ I hissed, peering blindly at the darkness from whence came his voice. ‘The guards... surely...’

‘I think she has dealt with that little difficulty,’ Holmes said. His hand appeared again in the moonlight and twitched back the hide curtain.

I peered out. All around us the conical roofs of the African huts stood against the stars of the night sky. The moon sailed high overhead, casting a silvery light on our surroundings, limning the two motionless black hulks that lay beside the doorway. I slipped out into the cold night air and crouched beside one. It was one of the guards, his head at a strange angle. My cursory examination proved that he was dead from a broken neck. Scrambling over to his companion I saw that it was the same here.

Holmes joined me. I looked up. ‘Both dead,’ I hissed. ‘Their necks broken.’

‘Miss Marency moves swiftly,’ he murmured. ‘But she may still be in the area.’

I stared at him. ‘Miss Marency did this?’

He nodded. ‘Of course. Did you not see her slip out only moments ago, and hear the sounds of a brief scuffle? This is her doing.’

I had seen Miss Marency—Leopard Lady—at work in the jungle. I knew that she was something other than the respectable nineteenth century miss she seemed on first encounter. I knew she had grown up in the bush, learnt to fend for herself in a hostile environment. She could kill without compunction. But to think that she had broken the necks of two stalwart Negro warriors before vanishing into the darkness was simply too much.

‘And if we move as swiftly,’ Holmes added, ‘we may find out where she is going.’

‘Where she is going?’ I echoed, still unable to comprehend what was happening.

Holmes examined the ground. After a few seconds, he rose again and beckoned. ‘Follow me,’ he murmured. ‘And keep quiet. Miss Marency has solved the problem of the guards. But there may be other Nkume about, and they will be sure to raise the alarm.’

Bewildered by the astonishing turn of events, I followed Holmes through the shadows of the settlement. Rank smells hung in the air, smoke, stale cooking, of cattle and goats and unwashed bodies, but it was chill with night, and the very stars as they peered down at our fugitive forms were cold. As we crept through the gloom, my stomach rumbled, and I wished that I had had the

foresight to snatch up a mealie or two before departing the hut.

At last we came to the gap in the *boma* where we had entered. Holmes had followed Miss Marency's trail this far across the broken ground of the settlement. I wondered where she was heading. Did she intend to escape by going down the river again? Surely the great apes would still be on the prowl. Keobula's man had led them away from our trail, but it would only be a matter of time before the murderous beasts picked it up again. And fearful as they might be of entering a settlement like Nkume, they might well be lurking in the jungle.

But to my surprise, the trail of Miss Marency's bare feet led not towards the walls, but instead the other way, towards the volcano slopes, and the temple buildings amid the trees beyond the *boma* of Nkume. As I followed my friend I wondered darkly what spirit of self-destruction could have possessed Miss Marency.

But as we made our way towards the jungle, I saw lights far off. Not moonlight or starlight but the ruddy glow of torches. It was coming from the direction of the temple, or the chasm that lay before it. And drifting towards us on the night breeze came a susurrus of guttural chanting.

A longer incantation drifted through the night, in no tongue of my understanding. I tried to quiz Holmes on it, but he held up a hand for silence and motioned for us to make haste. In darkness without so much as a glimmer of starlight we forced our way through that jungle where the scent of tropic blooms overlay the stink of decay. Up ahead, through the trees, the torchlight grew stronger. But that journey was like Satan's ascent from the Abyss. Tree branches whipped at our faces, unseen slithering hinted at dangerous reptilian life, monkeys shrieked their mockery from the jungle canopy. It was one of the most arduous journeys of my life.

At last we came out into the open. On every hand the jungle stretched away, and rising from that wall of vegetation were the stone walls of the Atlantean temples. Torches and fires blazed amidst the blackness, bringing more images of Pandemonium to my mind, of Chaos and Old Night. Before us was a large clearing where nothing grew—for the simple reason that most of it was taken up by a deep abyss, half spanned by a spur of rock upon which stood a throng, dominated by one tall, robed, masked figure, arms lifted in invocation, beside a rock pillar from which depended a brassy gong. It was from this figure that the unrelenting catechism came.

Behind it, ranked along the edges of the chasm, was a capering multitude of robed and masked forms, and it was they who were chanting. Behind them rose the megalithic edifice of the main temple building, with a high gateway leading into the blackness inside.

As Holmes and I crouched on the edge of the jungle, watching this diabolical scene, a clot of deeper darkness detached itself from the shadows at our side, and I heard a familiar voice speak my name.

'Watson? Holmes? You fools, did you follow me? You have no idea of how you are risking your lives!'

But before either Holmes or I could reply to Miss Marency, there was a roar of noise from the

priests, then silence. We turned as one to see a small, shuffling procession leading a bound, struggling man up the spur towards the tall figure of the Archpriest. A hood was whipped away from the prisoner's head. Even at that distance I recognised the auburn hair of Mr McAllister.

Chapter Sixteen

Miss Marency gasped. I too was horrified, though it was not entirely unexpected. After all, we knew that McAllister must have reached the plateau ahead of us, that white men had been taken prisoner by the priests, and that they were to be sacrificed. I could only see one white man—it seemed that a single sacrifice was enough to appease their god.

‘What will they do?’ I murmured uneasily. ‘Fling him into the chasm?’

No one answered. One of the lesser priests on the spur of rock picked up a beater and began to bang the gong. Dull iron peals rang out across the clearing. The Archpriest had ceased his incantation now, and everything was silent except the incessant clang of the gong.

McAllister began to struggle again in his captors' hands, but their grips must have been like iron, and eventually he relented hopelessly, and stood there in their grasp, peering in numb horror into the chasm. Still the gong rang out into the night. Clang. Clang. Clang.

From where we were crouching, the chasm itself was out of sight. Only the very lip was visible, thronged with silent priests. I received a sense of substantial depth. The priests' robes were being wafted in some kind of breeze that came from the chasm. What was down there?

Still the gong rang, and rang, and rang.

‘What are they waiting for?’ Miss Marency muttered.

‘The god,’ Holmes whispered. ‘They are waiting for their god.’

I turned to look at him. He seemed as calm as ever, and showed no physical signs that the remorseless, logical brain was suffering some kind of fever.

‘Do you truly expect some kind of deity to manifest itself?’ I asked. When he did not reply, I looked back at the sinister assembly. There was no idol, I noted, no kind of fetish as might be expected in such a heathen gathering. Only the priests. And the chasm.

I was beginning to develop cramp. I shifted a little to ease myself.

‘These ceremonies are chiefly designed to instil fear into the audience,’ Holmes murmured. ‘Fear, and awe. Awe for the Archpriest and the hierarchy he represents. The sense of fear is built up by repetition of chanting and by anticipation.’

‘Anticipation of what?’ Miss Marency muttered. ‘Of the appearance of their god? Can we expect something to... materialise? A devil in a magic circle?’

‘I wish I had a gun,’ I muttered, glaring at the Archpriest, who stood by the edge of the rocky spur, peering down expectantly into those sinister depths, that abyss that was out of my own sight. ‘If I had that Express rifle I left behind, I’d shoot him dead, the filthy heathen.’

Mockingly, Miss Marency began whistling *The Girl I Left Behind Me* between her teeth. I gave her a hurt look. I remembered the dead guards. Just who was this Leopard Lady?

‘Hist!’ said Holmes suddenly, raising a hand for silence. ‘Something... something comes!’

‘Mr Holmes is right,’ said Miss Marency, placing her ear to the hard earth. ‘Something is moving...underground.’

I strained my own ears. I could hear nothing. From out of the chasm echoed a distant thudding boom, growing in volume, a pounding as of titanic feet. My eyes widened in horror, although still I could see nothing. Was this the god? Was it truly coming?

‘I thought they were going to fling him to his doom,’ I said. ‘They will, unless we do something. But...’

The gong rang out into the night. The ground pounded with the fall of titan feet beneath the earth. Slowly the two sounds—the only ones audible, even the beast cries of the jungle had stilled—the two sounds seemed to merge into one discordant symphony, the clang of metal and the pounding of the ground. Clang. Boom. Clang. Boom. Boom. Boom.

‘We must do something,’ said Miss Marency, rising. I craned my neck to stare at her magnificent figure, limned by the distant torchlight. I was frozen to the spot, but Leopard Lady showed no signs of fear.

Holmes also rose. ‘I agree. We cannot leave McAllister to be sacrificed to this god, whatever it is,’ he said. ‘We must find some way to snatch him from the priests.’

‘And then take him back to England?’ I asked. The courage of my two companions emboldened me, and the paralysis that had gripped my limbs like lockjaw loosened.

‘Take him back to face justice,’ Holmes said, ‘if he is the murderer. Even if he is not, we cannot stand idly by as a fellow Englishman is sacrificed to a heathen god.’

He strode away, and Miss Marency slipped after him.

I rose and stood looking after them, astounded. This was the first time Holmes had expressed any doubt that McAllister was the murderer. If he wasn’t, then who was? Had we come to Africa on the wildest of goose chases? The thought that we had endured so much horror on the journey upcountry, seen so many faithful companions murdered, and yet were following the wrong

man... I could not believe it. If not McAllister, who?

Still the ground pounded. still the gong rang out harshly across the chasm. The eyes of the masked priests were intent on the depths below them, which were still hidden from me by perspective. I hurried after my two companions.

I caught up with them closer to the chasm, crouching behind a boulder. We were out in the open now, and only the darkness saved us from being seen. The light of the torches was not enough to betray our presence. Now we could see more of the chasm. It vanished into the depths, seemingly bottomless even now. I could see at least forty feet down. The spur of rock on which the Archpriest and his fellows stood, on which McAllister also stood, arched out above it.

McAllister's expression was clear. His eyes were wide with horror and despair. He showed no sign of struggling; he had accepted his horrible fate. But I had not. And neither had Sherlock Holmes.

'What do we do?' I asked Holmes. His eyes were fixed on the horrific scene, but he did not answer. Again I wished for a gun, a repeating rifle. Better still, a Maxim. My thoughts were as bloodthirsty as any pagan priest's.

To reach McAllister, unless we were able to grow wings, would be impossible without fighting our way through the priests that lined the far side of the chasm, then up onto the spur where more priests stood, the Archpriest among them. And even if we, in our weaponless state, were to chance it—after all, Miss Leopard Lady had already killed twice tonight without any weapons other than her slim, well-manicured young hands—if we were to attempt it, the Archpriest and his guards would fling McAllister into the chasm long before we reached them.

From here, the priests were better discernible, having been little more than a wall of swaying bodies clad in voluminous robes and hideous devil masks. I could see them fully, and smell them too—cleanliness was not close to Godliness in the Atlantean religion, that much was clear. The long robes were dyed in bright, vivid colours as gaudy as anything aniline dye might produce; purples and indigos and mauves and scarlets and pinks and many other hues offended the eye. Their robes glittered with uncut diamonds. Many also carried spears or double headed axes. All wore masks or masked helmets.

Nothing could be seen of their bodies or faces, but from their postures many were deformed in some way, seeming to shamle or hop rather than walk in any conventional manner. It seemed that this isolated, inward-looking lost colony of High Atlantis—for even I was coming around to Sir Digory's theory by now—had degenerated over the aeons, descending from the highest pinnacle of evolution, comparable even to the finest products of nineteenth century England, into bestiality and barbarism.

Still the gong clanged monotonously. But the booming of the ground beneath our feet had grown ever louder, and now it almost drowned out the clanging. At once, the priest at the gong ceased his peals, to my immense relief, and the last clang echoed back from the dark jungle wall. The thunder from below did not end immediately, however.

The rank smell from the unwashed bodies of the priests was almost overpowering, but now something else reached my nostrils. A musky odour that reminded me a little of snakes and crocodiles that I had encountered on the journey. But it was far stronger than the odour of any reptile I had smelt before. This smell wafted up from the dark chasm, drowning out the scent of jungle blooms, the stench of rot, the stink of the unwashed priests. At last, something in the chasm moved into sight.

I caught a glimpse of a vast, reptilian back, its emerald scales glimmering in the ruddy torchlight. Then the priest at the gong struck a final time, and two other priests shambled forward, hauling McAllister with them. Before the Scot could do more than cry out in unmanned terror, they flung him over the side.

He cartwheeled in the air, limbs flailing, in a parabola of shrieking terror. The huge scaly back vanished abruptly from sight even as he passed from view. The screaming was cut off. I heard a series of grisly chewing noises, then silence.

A pounding of feet receded back into the earth below us.

‘Justice has been served,’ Miss Marency observed.

‘We’ve failed,’ I said bleakly. ‘This must be the first instance in my time with my friend that Sherlock Holmes has failed to bring a murderer to justice.’

‘Balderdash, Watson,’ said Holmes without rancour. ‘I have had my failures. However, I am not at all certain that in this case I have yet failed to bring the murderer to justice.’

I was about to ask what my friend meant when another smell made me gag, now that the reptilian odour had returned into the earth from which it had come. Miss Marency turned her head sharply.

‘Gentlemen!’ she said loudly.

I turned. We were surrounded by priests, or perhaps temple guards. They wore face covering Grecian helmets and clutched spears, cutlasses and axes and were bearing down on us. Holmes looked about on all sides. The guards had sneaked up on us while we were watching the ritual. Now they cut off our every escape route except the chasm.

‘No way out that way,’ Holmes muttered. He raised his fists as if ready to go down fighting, and I copied him though it seemed futile. Then he lowered his arms. ‘No,’ he said. ‘We will achieve nothing by flinging away our lives. Besides, this way we may find what we truly seek.’

Miss Marency paid him no heed. She sprang like the leopard for which the natives named her and seized the spear shaft of the closest temple guard. He roared like a beast as she flung him round, knocking several off their feet in her eagerness, then she let go of the spear. He went flying—straight over the lip of the chasm.

His wail receded into the depths.

But now more temple guards and priests, all robed and masked, were pouring down either side of the chasm. Miss Marency fought, and we had no option to stand at her side. Her spear was bloody a dozen times before the battle ended. Holmes seized a cutlass from a temple guard who he had despatched with a savage kick and wielded it to superb effect. I preferred to use my fists.

But it was indeed futile, whatever weapon we adopted. Miss Marency was seized and pinioned by sheer weight of numbers. I saw Holmes go down, clubbed from behind by a temple guard. Then I was surrounded. Two priests seized Miss Marency by her arms and legs and began to swing her back and forth on the brink of the chasm.

‘No!’ I shouted, and I lowered my fists.

At a snarl from another of their kind, the priests stopped, and held Miss Marency struggling in their iron grasp. I saw the Archpriest approach. He bent over Holmes’ prone figure and sniffed blindly at him. Then he did the same to Miss Marency. At last he came over to me and I distinctly heard him sniffing behind his mask as he seemed to examine me. Then he gestured with one gloved paw, in the direction of the temple complex on the far side of the chasm.

Two priests picked up Holmes. Two more jabbed at me with spears, urging me forwards. The two carrying Miss Marency started shambling towards the temple, followed by those with Holmes. Then I was forced to march after them.

The remainder of the priests, the Archpriest among them, followed us in a torchlit procession, hooting and wailing. Round the chasm we went, close enough for me to see down into it, and a great yawning cave wall leading to a tunnel that must be directly beneath our original position. I saw then that the chasm was not so deep that McAllister’s fall would have killed him. He must have died when the creature devoured him.

Then we were ascending the great broken stairs of the main temple building, a wide flight of steps so high I almost had to climb from one to the next. At last we stood in a broad plaza on the far side of which stood the crumbling, vine festooned temple itself. Moss grown pyramids of skulls dotted the wide pavement. Snakes slithered underfoot. But it was the temple itself that drew my horrified gaze.

In many ways it was reminiscent of the religious buildings of Greece and Rome, but there was a massiveness more like the edifices of the early Egyptians, and yet a strange crudeness about those roughhewn blocks that spoke of Stonehenge, or those mysterious stone forts I had once seen on the Aran Islands. Great, lofty pillars stretched up higher than the tallest trees of the jungle that enclosed us on all sides and almost swamped the surrounding buildings.

The priests and temple guards were dwarfed, as were we, their captives, as we crossed that plaza littered with fallen stones and carpeted with jungle moss. The arch gaped over us, revealing nothing within but impenetrable blackness. But we were not to be taken into the mysteries of the

inner sanctum.

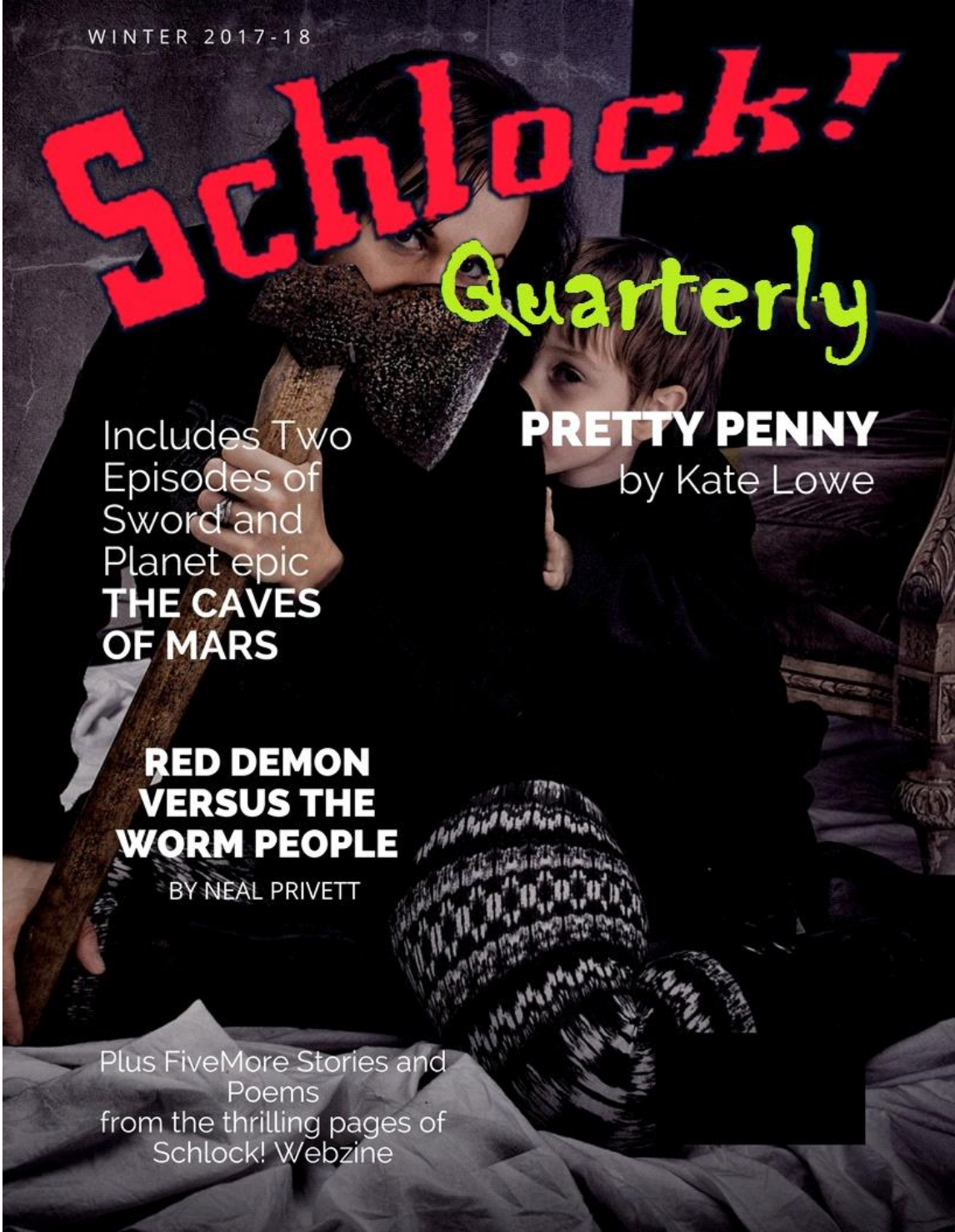
Instead the procession entered the temple through a less lofty side door, itself tall and as cyclopean as any Egyptian temple. Down a winding set of steps we were taken and along a stone passageway ornamented with a faded, peeling fresco that depicted an island kingdom vanishing beneath tidal waves. At last we were cast into a dark side room, where I lay panting on the floor. A stripe of light fell from the doorway. Then a grinding noise reached my ears.

I whirled round to see the temple guards were pushing closed a stone door. Miss Marency and I both leapt to our feet and ran to stop them.

But it was too late. The stone slab rumbled into place like the slab of a vertical tomb. Darkness fell, complete and absolute.

We were prisoners in the temple of the Atlanteans.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

The background of the cover is a photograph of a woman and a young child. The woman is holding a large, dark, textured axe over her face, partially obscuring it. The child is looking over the woman's shoulder. The overall tone is dark and mysterious.

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Fourteen

Ward danced and ducked between the searchlights, a deadly ballet, he pirouetted in the shadows, leaping over the yellow beams that hunted him through the maze of cages. The beacons of the searchlights crossed and crisscrossed each other, cutting through the darkest shadows.

Only by the narrowest chances did Ward manage to avoid the search beacons and the shadowy figures of the derelict's crew. He crept with swift moving shadows, barely leaping away from a bright yellow beacon, into a narrow alley between two cages. Each cage, it seemed, held at least one captive, and many held two or three, but none of the cages was empty. Shadowy forms of humbled human figures huddled in the darkest corners of the cages, wrapping themselves in a protective embrace.

The hunt for Ward was conducted almost entirely in silence. No sirens, no shouted orders. No scrambling of the auditory footprints Ward might happen to leave. But Ward, trained by the Martian Rangers, knew all about Muffling and Auditory Camouflage. He would not be caught by the primitive scanners these guys carried on board the derelict.

It was a dance, a deadly dance, one conducted almost entirely in silence. Insane beacons, yellow and silver, slashed the umber shadows. Ward's intricate ballet between searchlights and searchers carried him on a widely ranging path through the labyrinth of cages in the darkened hull of the derelict. Eventually, he made a complete circle among the cages, and came back to the very one Kharl Stoff had insisted Ward enter.

The cage that Carter Ward had refused to enter. The gate to it was open, even yet. Ward sniffed. In every hunt, the quarry must come to roost, sooner or later. No one can stay awake forever. Ward was going to have to find a place where he could lie down and close his eyes.

He examined the lock on the barred gate. Jamming it was the effort of a minute. That gate wouldn't keep anyone locked in, not any more. Stepping inside, Ward swung the useless gate closed.

To anyone moving past, it would seem the cell held its captives securely. Should those who did move by give the cell a passing glance, Ward would have a place to unwind in for an hour, maybe. It was only now that Ward troubled to examine the interior. The shadowed figure he saw there hours earlier still huddled against a far corner. Well... a shadowed figure. There was no guarantee it was the same as the one he saw there a few hours earlier. But it was the form of a huddled human being, one who, with an opened gate offering a chance at freedom, chose to cower in a corner rather than take it. Such a figure was hardly one to raise a pulse in the cold blooded Ward.

He dropped to a knee, slipping his quantum pistol from its holster in his boot. The shadowy figure stiffened, then pushed away from Ward, huddling against the far corner. Ward grunted. Either a terrified prisoner or a hardened Scrounger playing a little masquerade. Whichever it may

be, Ward despised ambiguity. He'd go find out who or what this person was...

At his first movement toward that huddling shadow, a high pitch 'huh!' came to Ward's ears. It was a very feminine squeak of fear, one that Ward since had come to recognize. He crawled quickly toward the form, and then when he was close enough to whisper effectively, he cupped his hand around his mouth and said, "Take it easy, babe. I'm not going to hurt you."

The huddled figure turned slowly about, her face yet in shadow, but with Ward's own face nearly showing in the half light. Ward did not recognize her, but she studied Ward closely.

"Look, I said I wasn't gonna hurtcha..."

"It's you!" a feminine cry whispered through the darkness. "It's... it's you! How?"

"Me? Who's me?" Ward hissed.

"You... that man... at Ed's Place. You shot those guys. Right there... three of them..."

"Whud about it?" Ward demanded.

"I was there. We were talking...? You and me...? You paid me, and we talked... well, only I talked, but you listened... you were real nice...d'ya remember?"

Ward puzzled over her. No... he was drawing a blank. Didn't remember her at all.

"And I think you were right to shoot those guys. After all they said they were gonna do, they said they were going to have you killed..."

"Three guys?"

"Yeah... yeah, three. One guy came to the table and shooshed me away while you and me were talking, and there were two more by the door..."

"Oh... yeah, that's right. There was that chick. That's you?"

"Yeah... yeah. Me. You paid me, but you just wanted to listen while I talked. That was really rude of that guy, cutting in on us like he did. It's kind of a rule there at Ed's that you never interrupt a hostess when she's working a guest, so I'm kinda glad you shot them. They kinda deserved it."

"Deserve it or not, they were asking for it," Ward muttered.

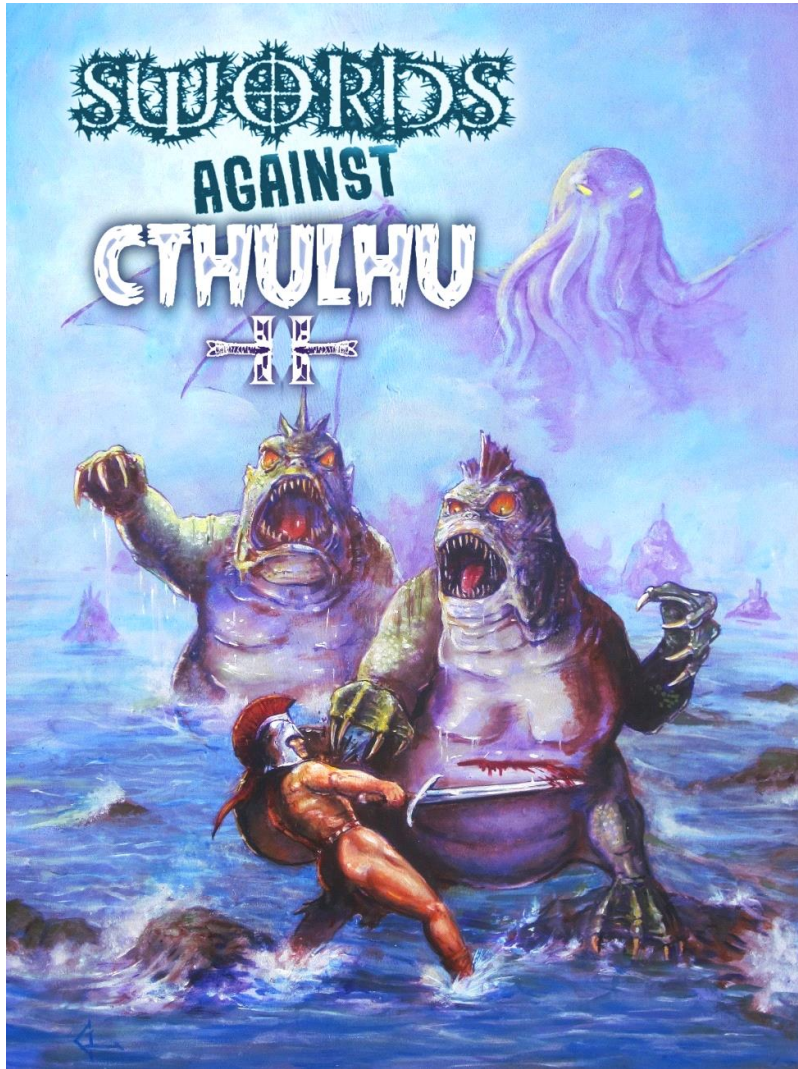
A silvery searchlight burned past the bars of the cage, sweeping past Carter Ward and the girl, just missing them. In the swiftly passing light, Ward saw that the girl was wearing a burlap bag.

The light passed, darkness fell again.

“Look, ahh...” she began. Silence always made her uncomfortable, silence in the presence of another most acutely so. “I was about to say it before, but I didn’t get the chance. I was gonna tell you my name is Lacey.”

She held out her hand and gave Ward a coquettish smile in the dim light. Ward touched her fingers with his, then said, “Nice to meetcha, Lacey. Now keep it quiet.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter XX—Life, Social And Domestic.

As we approached the house I caught sight of Eveena's figure among the party gathered on the roof. She had witnessed the interview, but her habitual and conscientious deference forbade her to ask a confidence not volunteered; and she seemed fully satisfied when, on the first occasion on which we were alone, I told her simply that the stranger belonged to the Zinta and had been recommended by her father himself to the charge of my estate. Though reluctant to disturb her mind with fears she could not shake off as I could, and which would make my every absence at least a season of terror, the sense of insecurity doubtless rendered me more anxious to enjoy whenever possible the only society in which it was permissible to be frank and off my guard. No man in his senses would voluntarily have accepted the position which had been forced upon me. The Zveltau never introduce aliens into their households. Their leading ideas and fundamental principles so deeply affect the conduct of existence, the motives of action, the bases of all moral reasoning—so completely do the inferences drawn from them and the habits of thought to which they lead pervade and tinge the mind, conscience, and even language—that though it may be easy to “live in the light at home and walk with the blind abroad,” yet in the familiar intercourse of household life even a cautious and reserved man (and I was neither) must betray to the keen instinctive perceptions of women whether he thought and felt like those around him, or was translating different thoughts into an alien language. This difficulty is little felt between unbelievers and Christians. The simple creed of the Zinta, however, like that of the Prophet, affects the thought and life as the complicated and subtle mysteries of more elaborate theologies, more refined philosophic systems rarely do.

One of Eveena's favourite quotations bore the unmistakable stamp of Zveltic mysticism: —

*“Symbols that invert the sense
Form the Seal of Providence;
Contradiction gives the key,
Time unlocks the mystery.”*

The danger in which my relation to the Zinta and its chief involved me, and the presence of half a dozen rivals to Eveena—rivals also to that regard for the Star which at first I felt chiefly for her sake—likely as they seemed to impair the strength and sweetness of the tie between us, actually worked to consolidate and endear it. To enjoy, except on set occasions, without constant liability to interruption, Eveena's sole society was no easy matter. To conceal our real secret, and the fact that there was a secret, was imperative. Avowedly exclusive confidence, conferences from which the rest of the household were directly shut out, would have suggested to their envious tempers that Eveena played the spy on them, or influenced and advised the exercise of my authority. To be alone with her, therefore, as naturally and necessarily I must often wish to be, required manoeuvres and arrangements as delicate and difficult, though as innocent, as those employed by engaged couples under the strict conventions of European household usage; and the comparative rarity of such interviews, and the manner in which they had often to be contrived beforehand, kept alive in its earliest freshness the love which, if not really diminished, generally loses somewhat of its first bloom and delicacy in the unrestrained intercourse of marriage. Absolutely and solely trusted, assured that her company was eagerly sought, and at least as deeply valued as

ever—compelled by the ideas of her race to accept the situation as natural and right, and wholly incapable of the pettier and meaner forms of jealousy—Eveena was fully content and happy in her relations with me. That, on the whole, she was not comfortable, or at least much less so than during our suddenly abbreviated honeymoon, was apparent; but her loss of brightness and cheerfulness was visible chiefly in her weary and downcast looks on any occasion when, after being absent for some hours from the house, I came upon her unawares. In my presence she was always calm and peaceful, kind, and seemingly at ease; and if she saw or heard me on my return, though she carefully avoided any appearance of eagerness to greet me sooner than others, or to claim especial attention, she ever met me with a smile of welcome as frank and bright as a young bride on Earth could give to a husband returning to her sole society from a long day of labour for her sake.

In so far as compliance was possible I was compelled to admit the wisdom of Eveena's plea that no open distinction should be made in her favour. Except in the simple fact of our affection, there was no assignable reason for making her my companion more frequently than Eunané or Eivé. Except that I could trust her completely, there was no distinction of age, social rank, or domestic relation to afford a pretext for exempting her from restraints which, if at first I thought them senseless and severe, were soon justified by experience of the kind of domestic control which just emancipated school girls expected and required. Nor would she accept the immunity tacitly allowed her. It was not that any established custom or right bounded the arbitrary power of domestic autocracy. The right of all but unbounded wrong, the liberty of limitless caprice, is unquestionably vested in the head of the household. But the very completeness of the despotism rendered its exercise impossible. Force cannot act where there is no resistance. The sword of the Plantagenet could cleave the helmet but not the quilt of down. I could do as I pleased without infringing any understanding or giving any right to complain.

“But,” said Eveena, “you have a sense of justice which has nothing to do with law or usage. Even your language is not ours. You think of right and wrong, where we should speak only of what is or is not punishable. You can make a favourite if you will pay the price. Could you endure to be hated in your own home, or I to know that you deserved it? Or, if you could, could you bear to see me hated and my life made miserable?”

“They dare not!” I returned angrily fearing that they had dared, and that she had already felt the spite she was so careful not to provoke.

“Do you think that feminine malice cannot contrive to envenom a dozen stings that I could not explain if I would, and you could not deal with if I did?”

“But,” I replied, “it seems admitted that there is no such thing as right or custom. As Enva said, I have bought and paid for them, and may do what I please within the contract; and you agree that is just what any other man in this world would do.”

“Yes,” returned Eveena, “and I watched your face while Enva spoke. How did you like her doctrine? Of course you may do as you please—if you can please. You may silence discontent, you may suppress spiteful innuendos and even sulky looks, you may put down mutiny, by sheer terror. Can you? You may command me to go with you whenever you go out; you may take the

same means to make me complain of unkindness as to make them conceal it; you may act like one of our own people, if you can stoop to the level of their minds. But we both know that you can do nothing of the kind. How could you bear to be driven into unsparing and undeserved severity, who can hardly bring yourself to enforce the discipline necessary to peace and comfort on those who will only be ruled by fear and would like you better if they feared you more? Did you hear the proverb Leenoo muttered, very unjustly, when she left your room yesterday, 'A favourite wears out many sandals'? No! You see the very phrase wounds and disgusts you. But you would find it a true one. Can you take vengeance for a fault you have yourself provoked? Can you decide without inquiry, condemn without evidence, punish without hearing? Men do these things, of course, and women expect them. But you—I do not say you would be ashamed so to act—you cannot do it, any more than you can breathe the air of our snow mountains."

"At all events, Eveena, I no more dare do it in your presence than I dare forswear the Faith we hold in common."

But whatever Eveena might exact or I concede, the distinction between the wife who commanded as much respect as affection, and the girls who could at best be pets or playthings, was apparent against our will in every detail of daily life and domestic intercourse. It was alike impossible to treat Eveena as a child and to rule Enva or Eiralé as other than children. It was as unnatural to use the tone of command or rebuke to one for whom my unexpressed wishes were absolute law, as to observe the form of request or advice in directing or reproving those whose obedience depended on the consequences of rebellion. It only made matters worse that the distinction corresponded but too accurately to their several deserts. No faults could have been so irritating to Eveena's companions as her undeniable faultlessness.

The ludicrous aspect of my relation to the rest of the household was even more striking than I had expected. That I should find myself in the absurd position of a man entrusted with the direct personal government of half a dozen young ladies was even "more truly spoke than meant." One at least among them might singly have made in time a not unlovable wife, and all, perhaps, might severally and separately have been reduced to conjugal complaisance. Collectively, they were, as Eveena had said, a set of school girls, and school girls used to stricter restraint and much sharper discipline than those of a French or Italian convent. They would have made life a burden to a vigorous English schoolmistress, and imperilled the soul of any Lady Abbess whose list of permissible penances excluded the dark cell and the scourge. Fortunately for both parties, I had the advantage of governess and Superior in the natural awe which girls feel for the authority of manhood—till they have found out of what soft fibre men are made—and in the artificial fear inspired by domestic usage and tradition. For I was soon aware that even on its ridiculous side the relation was not to be trifled with. The simple indifference a man feels towards the escapades of girlhood was not applicable to women and wives, who yet lacked womanly sense and the feeling of conjugal duty. This serious aspect of their position soon contracted the indulgence naturally conceded to youth's heedlessness and animal spirits. These, displayed at first only in the energy and eagerness of their every movement within the narrow limits of conventional usage, broke all bounds when, after one or two half timid, half venturous experiments on my patience, they felt that they had, at least for the moment, exchanged the monotony, the mechanical routine, the stern repression of their life in the great Nurseries, not for the harsh household discipline to which they naturally looked forward, but for the "loosened zone" which

to them seemed to promise absolute liberty. When not immediately in my presence or Eveena's, their keen enjoyment of a life so new, the sudden development of the brighter side of their nature under circumstances that gave play to the vigorous vitality of youth, gave as much pleasure to me as to themselves. But in contact with myself or Eveena they were women, and showed only the wrong side of the varied texture of womanhood. To the master they were slaves, each anxious to attract his notice, win his preference; before the favourite, spiteful, envious of her and of each other, bitter, malicious, and false. For Eveena's sake, it was impossible to look on with indolent indifference on freaks of temper which, childish in the form they assumed, were envenomed by the deliberate dislike and unscrupulous cunning of jealous women.

But even on the childish side of their character and conduct, they soon displayed a determination to test by actual experiment the utmost extent of the liberty allowed, and the nature and sufficiency of its limits. Eunané was always the most audacious trespasser and representative rebel. Fortunately for her, the daring which had bewildered and exasperated feminine guardians rather amused and interested me, giving some variety and relief to the monotonous absurdity of the situation. Nothing in her conduct was more remarkable or more characteristic than the simplicity and good temper with which she generally accepted as of course the less agreeable consequences of her outbreaks; unless it were the sort of natural dignity with which, when she so pleased, the game played out and its forfeit paid, the naughty child subsided into the lively but rational companion, and the woman simply ignored the scrapes of the school girl.

As her character seemed to unfold, Eivé's individuality became as distinctly parted from the rest as Eunané's, though in an opposite direction. Comparatively timid and indolent, without their fulness of life, she seemed to me little more than a child; and she fell with apparent willingness into that position, accepting naturally its privileges and exemptions. She alone was never in the way, never vexatious or exacting. Content with the notice that naturally fell to her share, she obtained the more. Never intruding between Eveena and myself, she alone was not wholly unwelcome to share our accidental privacy when, in the peristyle or the grounds, the others left us temporarily alone. On such occasions she would often draw near and crouch at my feet or by Eveena's side, curling herself like a kitten upon the turf or among the cushions, often resting her little head upon Eveena's knee or mine; generally silent, but never so silent as to seem to be a spy upon our conversation, rather as a favourite child privileged, in consideration of her quietude and her supposed harmlessness and inattention, to remain when others are excluded, and to hear much to which she is supposed not to listen. Having no special duties of her own in the household, she would wait upon and assist Eveena whenever the latter would accept her attendance. When the whole party were assembled, it was her wont to choose her place not in the circle, still less at my side—Eveena's title to the post of honour on the left being uncontested, and Eunané generally occupying the cushions on my right. But Eivé, lying at our feet, would support herself on her arm between my knee and Eunané's, content to attract my hand to play with her curls or stroke her head. Under such encouragement she would creep on to my lap and rest there, but seldom took any part in conversation, satisfied with the attention one pays half consciously to a child. A word that dropped from Enva, however, on one occasion, obliged me to observe that it was in Eveena's absence that Eivé always seemed most fully aware of her privileges and most lavish of her childlike caresses. The kind of notice and affection she obtained did not provoke the envy even of Leenoo or Eiralé. She no more affected to imitate Eveena's absolute devotion than she ventured on Eunané's reckless petulance. She kept my interest alive

by the faults of a spoiled child. Her freaks were always such as to demand immediate repression without provoking serious displeasure, so that the temporary disgrace cost her little, and the subsequent reconciliation strengthened her hold on my heart. But with Eveena, or in her presence, Eivé's waywardness was so suppressed or controlled that Eveena's perceptible coolness towards her—it was never coldness or unkindness—somewhat surprised me.

Few Martialists, when wealthy enough to hand over the management of their property to others, care to interfere, or even to watch its cultivation. This, however, to me was a subject of as much interest as any other of the many peculiarities of Martial society, commerce, and industry, which it concerned me to investigate and understand; and when not otherwise employed, I spent great part of my day in watching, and now and then directing, the work that went on during the whole of the sunlight, and not unfrequently during the night, upon my farm. Davilo, the superintendent, had engaged no fewer than eight subordinates, who, with the assistance of the ambau, the carvee, and the electric machines, kept every portion of the ground in the most perfect state of culture. The most valuable part of the produce consisted of those farinaceous fruits, growing on trees from twenty to eighty feet in height, which form the principal element of Martial food. Between the tropics these trees yield ripe fruit twice a year, during a total period of about three of our months—perhaps for a hundred days. Various gourds, growing chiefly on canes, hanging from long flexile stalks that spring from the top of the stem at a height of from three to eight feet, yield juice which is employed partly in flavouring the various loaves and cakes into which the flour is made, partly in the numerous beverages (never allowed to ferment, and consequently requiring to be made fresh every day), of which the smallest Martial household has a greater variety than the most luxurious palace of the East. The best are made from hard skinned fruits, whose whole pulp is liquified by piercing the rind before the fruit is fully ripe, and closing the orifice with a wax like substance, almost exactly according to a practice common in different parts of Asia. The drinks are made, of course, at home. The farinaceous fruits are sold to the confectioners, who take also a portion of the milk and all the meat supplied by the pastures. Many choice fruits grow on shrubs, ranging from the size of a large black currant tree to that of the smallest gooseberry bush. Vines growing along the ground bear clustering nuts, whose kernels are sometimes as hard as that of a cocoa nut, sometimes almost as soft as butter. The latter with the juicy fruits, are preserved if necessary for a whole year in storehouses dug in the ground and lined with concrete, in which, by chemical means, a temperature a little above the freezing point is steadily maintained at very trivial cost. The number of dishes producible by the mixture of these various materials, with the occasional addition of meat, fish, and eggs, is enormous; and it is only when some particular compound is in special favour with the master of the house that it makes its appearance more than perhaps once in ten days upon the same table. The invention of the confectioners is exquisite and inexhaustible; and every table is supplied with a variety of dainties sufficient for a feast in the most hospitable and wealthy household of Europe. Many of the smaller fruit trees and shrubs yield two crops in the year. The vegetables, crisper, and of much more varied taste than the best Terrestrial salads, sometimes possessing a flavour as piquant as that of cinnamon or nutmeg, are gathered continuously from one end of the year to the other.

The vines, tough and fibrous, supply the best and strongest cordage used in Mars. For this purpose they are dried, stripped, combed, and put through an elaborate process of manufacture, which, without weakening the fibres, renders them smooth, and removes the knots in which they naturally abound. The twisted cord of the nut vine is almost as strong as a metallic wire rope of

half its measurement. There is another purpose for which these fibres in their natural state are employed. Simply dried and twisted, they form a scourge as terrible as the Russian knout or African cowhide, though of a different character—a scourge which, even in its lightest form, reduces the wildest herd to instant order; and which, as employed on criminals, is hardly less dreaded than that electric rack whereby Martial science inflicts on every nerve a graduated torture such as even ecclesiastical malignity has not invented on Earth—such as I certainly will not place in the hands of Terrestrial rulers.

All these crops are raised with marvellously little human labour, the whole work of ploughing and sowing being done by machinery, that of weeding and harvesting chiefly by the carvee. The ambau climb the trees and pick the fruit from the ends of the branches, which they are also taught to pinch in, so that none grow so long as to break with the weight of these creatures, as clever and agile as the smaller monkeys, but almost as large as an ordinary baboon. It must always be remembered that, size for size, and *cæteris paribus*, all bodies, animate and inanimate, on Mars weigh less than half as much as they would on Earth. Eunané's blunder about the carcarâ was not explained by any subsequent errors of the ambau or carvee, which always selected the ripe fruit with faultless skill, leaving the immature untouched, and throwing aside in small heaps to manure the ground the few that had been allowed to grow too ripe for use. The sums paid from time to time into my hands, received from the sales of produce, were far greater than I could possibly spend in gratifying any taste of my own; and, as I presently found, the idea that the surplus might indulge those of the ladies never entered their minds.

Before we had been settled in our home for three days Eveena had made two requests which I was well pleased to grant. First, she entreated that I would teach her one at least of the languages with which I was familiar—a task of whose extreme difficulty she had little idea. Compared with her native tongue, the complication and irregularities of the simplest language spoken on Earth are far more arbitrary and provoking than seems the most difficult of ancient or Oriental tongues to a Frenchman or Italian. In order to fulfil my promise that she should assist me in recording my observations and writing out my notes, I chose Latin. Unhappily for her, I found myself as impatient and unsuccessful as I was inexperienced in teaching; and nothing but her exquisite gentleness and forbearance could have made the lessons otherwise than painful to us both. Well for me that the “right to govern wrong” was to her a simple truth—an inalienable marital privilege, to be met with that unqualified submission which must have shamed the worst temper into self-control. Eivé on one occasion made a similar request; but besides that I realised the convenience of a medium of communication understood by ourselves alone, I had no inclination to expose either my own temper or Eivé's to the trial. Eveena's second request came naturally from one whose favourite amusement had been the raising and modification of flowers. She asked to be entrusted with the charge of the seeds I had brought from Earth, and to be permitted to form a bed in the peristyle for the purpose of the experiment. Though this disfigured the perfect arrangement of the garden, I was delighted to have so important and interesting a problem worked out by hands so skilful and so careful. I should probably have failed to rear a single plant, even had I been familiar with those applications of electricity to the purpose which are so extensively employed in Mars. Eveena managed to produce specimens strangely altered, sometimes stunted, sometimes greatly improved, from about one fourth of the seeds entrusted to her; and among those with which she was most brilliantly successful were some specimens of Turkish roses, the roses of the attar, which I had obtained at Stamboul. My admiration of her

patience and pleasure in her success deeply gratified her; and it was a full reward for all her trouble when I suggested that she should send to her sister Zevle a small packet of each of the seeds with which she had succeeded. It happened, however, that the few rose seeds had all been planted; and the flowers, though apparently perfect, produced no seed of their own, probably because they were not suited to the taste of the flower birds, and Eveena somehow forgot or failed to employ the process of artificial fertilisation.

If anything could have fully reconciled my conscience to the household relations in which I was rather by weakness than by will inextricably entangled, it would have been the certainty that by the sacrifice Eveena had herself enforced on me, and which she persistently refused to recognise as such, she alone had suffered. True that I could not give, and could hardly affect for the wives bestowed on me by another's choice, even such love as the head of a Moslem household may distribute among as many inmates. But to what I could call love they had never looked forward. But for the example daily presented before their own eyes they would no more have missed than they comprehended it. That they were happier than they had expected, far happier than they would have been in an ordinary home, happier certainly than in the schools they had quitted, I could not doubt, and they did not affect to deny. If my patience were not proof against vexations the more exasperating from their pettiness, and the sense of ridicule which constantly attached to them, I could read in the manner of most and understand from the words of Eunané, who seldom hesitated to speak her mind, whether its utterances, were flattering or wounding, that she and her companions found me not only far more indulgent, but incomparably more just than they had been taught to hope a man could be. Of justice, indeed, as consisting in restraint on one's own temper and consideration for the temper of others, Martial manhood is incapable, or, at any rate, Martial womanhood never suspects its masters.

Moreover, though no longer blest with the spirits of youth, and finding little pleasure in what youth calls pleasure, I had escaped the kind of satiety that seems to attend lives more softly spent than mine had been; and found a very real and unfading enjoyment in witnessing the keen enjoyment of these youthful natures in such liberty as could be accorded and such amusements as the life of this dull and practical world affords.

Among these, two at least are closely similar to the two favourite pleasures of European society. Music appears to have been carried, like most arts and sciences, to a point of mechanical perfection which, I should suppose, like much of the artificial accuracy and ease which civilisation has introduced, mars rather than enhances the natural gratification enjoyed by simpler ages and races. Almost deaf to music as distinguished from noise, I did not attempt to comprehend the construction of Martial instruments or the nature of the concords they emitted. One only struck me with especial surprise by a peculiarity which, if I could not understand, I could not mistake. A number of variously coloured flames are made to synchronise with or actually emit a number of corresponding notes, dancing to, or, more properly, weaving a series of strangely combined movements in accord with the music, whose vibrations were directly and inseparably connected with their motion. But all music is the work of professional musicians, never the occupation of woman's leisure, never made more charming to the ear by its association with the movement of beloved hands or the tones of a cherished voice. Electric wires, connected with the vast buildings wherein instruments produce what sounds like fine choral singing as well as musical notes, enable the householder to turn on at pleasure music equal, I suppose, to the

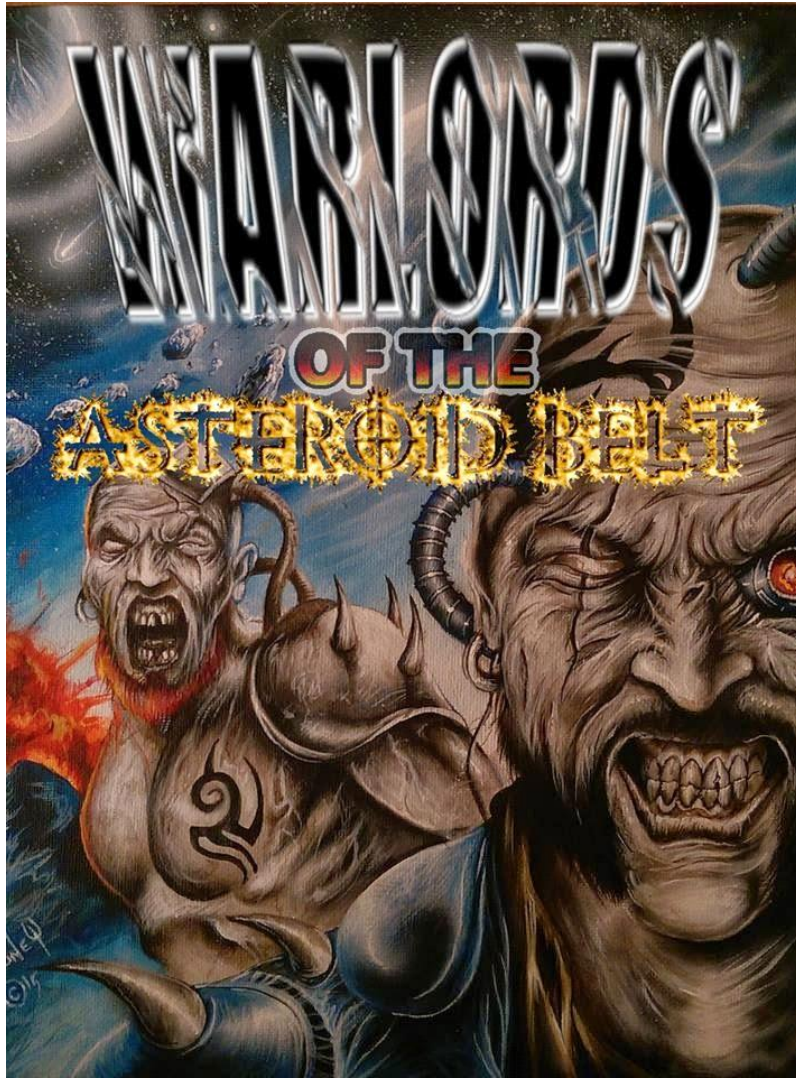
finest operatic performances or the grandest oratorio, and listen to it at leisure from the cushions of his own peristyle. This was a great though not wholly new delight to Eunané and most of her companions. For their sake only would Eveena ever have resorted to it, for though herself appreciating music not less highly, and educated to understand it much more thoroughly, than they, she could derive little gratification from that which was clearly incomprehensible if not disagreeable to me—could hardly enjoy a pleasure I could not share.

The theatre was a more prized and less common indulgence. It is little frequented by the elder Martialists; and not enjoying it themselves, they seldom sacrifice their hours to the enjoyment of their women. But it forms so important an aid to education, and tends so much to keep alive in the public memory impressions which policy will not permit to fade, that both from the State and from the younger portion of the community it receives an encouragement quite sufficient to reward the few who bestow their time and talent upon it. Great buildings, square or oblong in form, the stage placed at one end, the arched boxes or galleries from which the spectators look down thereon rising tier above and behind tier to the further extremity, are constantly filled. There are no actors, and Martial feeling would hardly allow the appearance of women as actresses. But an art, somewhat analogous to, but infinitely surpassing, that displayed in the manipulation of the most skilfully constructed and most complicated magic lanterns, enables the conductors of the theatre to present upon the stage a truly living and moving picture of any scene they desire to exhibit. The figures appear perfectly real, move with perfect freedom, and seem to speak the sounds which, in fact, are given out by a gigantic hidden phonograph, into which the several parts have long ago been carefully spoken by male and female voices, the best suited to each character; and which, by the reversal of its motion, can repeat the original words almost for ever, with the original tone, accent, and expression. The illusion is far more perfect than that obtained by all the resources of stage management and all the skill of the actor's art in the best theatres of France. After the first novelty, the first surprise and wonder were exhausted, I must confess that these representations simply bored me, the more from their length and character. But even Eveena enjoyed them thoroughly, and my other companions prized an evening or afternoon thus spent above all other indulgences. A passage running along at the back of each tier admits the spectator to boxes so completely private as to satisfy the strictest requirements of Martial seclusion.

The favourite scenes represent the most striking incidents of Martial history, or realise the life, usages, and manners of ages long gone by, before science and invention had created the perfect but monotonous civilisation that now prevails. One of the most interesting performances I witnessed commenced with the exhibition of a striking scene, in which the union of all the various States that had up to that time divided the planet's surface, and occasionally waged war on one another, in the first Congress of the World, was realised in the exact reproduction of every detail which historic records have preserved. Afterwards was depicted the confusion, declining into barbarism and rapid degradation, of the Communistic revolution, the secession of the Zveltai and their merely political adherents, the construction of their cities, fleets, and artillery, the terrible battles, in which the numbers of the Communists were hurled back or annihilated by the asphyxiator and the lightning gun; and finally, the most remarkable scene in all Martial history, when the last representatives of the great Anarchy, squalid, miserable, degraded, and debased in form and features, as well as indicating by their dress and appearance the utter ruin of art and industry under their rule, came into the presence of the chief ruler of the

rising State—surrounded by all the splendour which the “magic of property,” stimulating invention and fostering science, had created—to entreat admission into the realm of restored civilisation, and a share in the blessings they had so deliberately forfeited and so long striven to deny to others.

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THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

Book Two: The Earth Under the Martians

Chapter Eight: Dead London

After I had parted from the artilleryman, I went down the hill, and by the High Street across the bridge to Fulham. The red weed was tumultuous at that time, and nearly choked the bridge roadway; but its fronds were already whitened in patches by the spreading disease that presently removed it so swiftly.

At the corner of the lane that runs to Putney Bridge station I found a man lying. He was as black as a sweep with the black dust, alive, but helplessly and speechlessly drunk. I could get nothing from him but curses and furious lunges at my head. I think I should have stayed by him but for the brutal expression of his face.

There was black dust along the roadway from the bridge onwards, and it grew thicker in Fulham. The streets were horribly quiet. I got food—sour, hard, and mouldy, but quite eatable—in a baker's shop here. Some way towards Walham Green the streets became clear of powder, and I passed a white terrace of houses on fire; the noise of the burning was an absolute relief. Going on towards Brompton, the streets were quiet again.

Here I came once more upon the black powder in the streets and upon dead bodies. I saw altogether about a dozen in the length of the Fulham Road. They had been dead many days, so that I hurried quickly past them. The black powder covered them over, and softened their outlines. One or two had been disturbed by dogs.

Where there was no black powder, it was curiously like a Sunday in the City, with the closed shops, the houses locked up and the blinds drawn, the desertion, and the stillness. In some places plunderers had been at work, but rarely at other than the provision and wine shops. A jeweller's window had been broken open in one place, but apparently the thief had been disturbed, and a number of gold chains and a watch lay scattered on the pavement. I did not trouble to touch them. Farther on was a tattered woman in a heap on a doorstep; the hand that hung over her knee was gashed and bled down her rusty brown dress, and a smashed magnum of champagne formed a pool across the pavement. She seemed asleep, but she was dead.

The farther I penetrated into London, the profounder grew the stillness. But it was not so much the stillness of death—it was the stillness of suspense, of expectation. At any time the destruction that had already singed the north western borders of the metropolis, and had annihilated Ealing and Kilburn, might strike among these houses and leave them smoking ruins. It was a city condemned and derelict....

In South Kensington the streets were clear of dead and of black powder. It was near South Kensington that I first heard the howling. It crept almost imperceptibly upon my senses. It was a sobbing alternation of two notes, "Ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla," keeping on perpetually. When I passed streets that ran northward it grew in volume, and houses and buildings seemed to deaden and cut

it off again. It came in a full tide down Exhibition Road. I stopped, staring towards Kensington Gardens, wondering at this strange, remote wailing. It was as if that mighty desert of houses had found a voice for its fear and solitude.

“Ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla,” wailed that superhuman note—great waves of sound sweeping down the broad, sunlit roadway, between the tall buildings on each side. I turned northwards, marvelling, towards the iron gates of Hyde Park. I had half a mind to break into the Natural History Museum and find my way up to the summits of the towers, in order to see across the park. But I decided to keep to the ground, where quick hiding was possible, and so went on up the Exhibition Road. All the large mansions on each side of the road were empty and still, and my footsteps echoed against the sides of the houses. At the top, near the park gate, I came upon a strange sight—a bus overturned, and the skeleton of a horse picked clean. I puzzled over this for a time, and then went on to the bridge over the Serpentine. The voice grew stronger and stronger, though I could see nothing above the housetops on the north side of the park, save a haze of smoke to the northwest.

“Ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla,” cried the voice, coming, as it seemed to me, from the district about Regent’s Park. The desolating cry worked upon my mind. The mood that had sustained me passed. The wailing took possession of me. I found I was intensely weary, footsore, and now again hungry and thirsty.

It was already past noon. Why was I wandering alone in this city of the dead? Why was I alone when all London was lying in state, and in its black shroud? I felt intolerably lonely. My mind ran on old friends that I had forgotten for years. I thought of the poisons in the chemists’ shops, of the liquors the wine merchants stored; I recalled the two sodden creatures of despair, who so far as I knew, shared the city with myself....

I came into Oxford Street by the Marble Arch, and here again were black powder and several bodies, and an evil, ominous smell from the gratings of the cellars of some of the houses. I grew very thirsty after the heat of my long walk. With infinite trouble I managed to break into a public house and get food and drink. I was weary after eating, and went into the parlour behind the bar, and slept on a black horsehair sofa I found there.

I awoke to find that dismal howling still in my ears, “Ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla.” It was now dusk, and after I had routed out some biscuits and a cheese in the bar—there was a meat safe, but it contained nothing but maggots—I wandered on through the silent residential squares to Baker Street—Portman Square is the only one I can name—and so came out at last upon Regent’s Park. And as I emerged from the top of Baker Street, I saw far away over the trees in the clearness of the sunset the hood of the Martian giant from which this howling proceeded. I was not terrified. I came upon him as if it were a matter of course. I watched him for some time, but he did not move. He appeared to be standing and yelling, for no reason that I could discover.

I tried to formulate a plan of action. That perpetual sound of “Ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla,” confused my mind. Perhaps I was too tired to be very fearful. Certainly I was more curious to know the reason of this monotonous crying than afraid. I turned back away from the park and struck into Park Road, intending to skirt the park, went along under the shelter of the terraces, and got a view of this stationary, howling Martian from the direction of St. John’s Wood. A couple of hundred

yards out of Baker Street I heard a yelping chorus, and saw, first a dog with a piece of putrescent red meat in his jaws coming headlong towards me, and then a pack of starving mongrels in pursuit of him. He made a wide curve to avoid me, as though he feared I might prove a fresh competitor. As the yelping died away down the silent road, the wailing sound of “Ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla,” reasserted itself.

I came upon the wrecked handling machine halfway to St. John’s Wood station. At first I thought a house had fallen across the road. It was only as I clambered among the ruins that I saw, with a start, this mechanical Samson lying, with its tentacles bent and smashed and twisted, among the ruins it had made. The forepart was shattered. It seemed as if it had driven blindly straight at the house, and had been overwhelmed in its overthrow. It seemed to me then that this might have happened by a handling machine escaping from the guidance of its Martian. I could not clamber among the ruins to see it, and the twilight was now so far advanced that the blood with which its seat was smeared, and the gnawed gristle of the Martian that the dogs had left, were invisible to me.

Wondering still more at all that I had seen, I pushed on towards Primrose Hill. Far away, through a gap in the trees, I saw a second Martian, as motionless as the first, standing in the park towards the Zoological Gardens, and silent. A little beyond the ruins about the smashed handling machine I came upon the red weed again, and found the Regent’s Canal, a spongy mass of dark red vegetation.

As I crossed the bridge, the sound of “Ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla,” ceased. It was, as it were, cut off. The silence came like a thunderclap.

The dusky houses about me stood faint and tall and dim; the trees towards the park were growing black. All about me the red weed clambered among the ruins, writhing to get above me in the dimness. Night, the mother of fear and mystery, was coming upon me. But while that voice sounded the solitude, the desolation, had been endurable; by virtue of it London had still seemed alive, and the sense of life about me had upheld me. Then suddenly a change, the passing of something—I knew not what—and then a stillness that could be felt. Nothing but this gaunt quiet.

London about me gazed at me spectrally. The windows in the white houses were like the eye sockets of skulls. About me my imagination found a thousand noiseless enemies moving. Terror seized me, a horror of my temerity. In front of me the road became pitchy black as though it was tarred, and I saw a contorted shape lying across the pathway. I could not bring myself to go on. I turned down St. John’s Wood Road, and ran headlong from this unendurable stillness towards Kilburn. I hid from the night and the silence, until long after midnight, in a cabmen’s shelter in Harrow Road. But before the dawn my courage returned, and while the stars were still in the sky I turned once more towards Regent’s Park. I missed my way among the streets, and presently saw down a long avenue, in the half light of the early dawn, the curve of Primrose Hill. On the summit, towering up to the fading stars, was a third Martian, erect and motionless like the others.

An insane resolve possessed me. I would die and end it. And I would save myself even the trouble of killing myself. I marched on recklessly towards this Titan, and then, as I drew nearer

and the light grew, I saw that a multitude of black birds was circling and clustering about the hood. At that my heart gave a bound, and I began running along the road.

I hurried through the red weed that choked St. Edmund's Terrace (I waded breast high across a torrent of water that was rushing down from the waterworks towards the Albert Road), and emerged upon the grass before the rising of the sun. Great mounds had been heaped about the crest of the hill, making a huge redoubt of it—it was the final and largest place the Martians had made—and from behind these heaps there rose a thin smoke against the sky. Against the sky line an eager dog ran and disappeared. The thought that had flashed into my mind grew real, grew credible. I felt no fear, only a wild, trembling exultation, as I ran up the hill towards the motionless monster. Out of the hood hung lank shreds of brown, at which the hungry birds pecked and tore.

In another moment I had scrambled up the earthen rampart and stood upon its crest, and the interior of the redoubt was below me. A mighty space it was, with gigantic machines here and there within it, huge mounds of material and strange shelter places. And scattered about it, some in their overturned war machines, some in the now rigid handling machines, and a dozen of them stark and silent and laid in a row, were the Martians—dead! —slain by the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared; slain as the red weed was being slain; slain, after all man's devices had failed, by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth.

For so it had come about, as indeed I and many men might have foreseen had not terror and disaster blinded our minds. These germs of disease have taken toll of humanity since the beginning of things—taken toll of our prehuman ancestors since life began here. But by virtue of this natural selection of our kind we have developed resisting power; to no germs do we succumb without a struggle, and to many—those that cause putrefaction in dead matter, for instance—our living frames are altogether immune. But there are no bacteria in Mars, and directly these invaders arrived, directly they drank and fed, our microscopic allies began to work their overthrow. Already when I watched them they were irrevocably doomed, dying and rotting even as they went to and fro. It was inevitable. By the toll of a billion deaths man has bought his birthright of the earth, and it is his against all comers; it would still be his were the Martians ten times as mighty as they are. For neither do men live nor die in vain.

Here and there they were scattered, nearly fifty altogether, in that great gulf they had made, overtaken by a death that must have seemed to them as incomprehensible as any death could be. To me also at that time this death was incomprehensible. All I knew was that these things that had been alive and so terrible to men were dead. For a moment I believed that the destruction of Sennacherib had been repeated, that God had repented, that the Angel of Death had slain them in the night.

I stood staring into the pit, and my heart lightened gloriously, even as the rising sun struck the world to fire about me with his rays. The pit was still in darkness; the mighty engines, so great and wonderful in their power and complexity, so unearthly in their tortuous forms, rose weird and vague and strange out of the shadows towards the light. A multitude of dogs, I could hear, fought over the bodies that lay darkly in the depth of the pit, far below me. Across the pit on its

farther lip, flat and vast and strange, lay the great flying machine with which they had been experimenting upon our denser atmosphere when decay and death arrested them. Death had come not a day too soon. At the sound of a cawing overhead I looked up at the huge fighting machine that would fight no more for ever, at the tattered red shreds of flesh that dripped down upon the overturned seats on the summit of Primrose Hill.

I turned and looked down the slope of the hill to where, enhaloed now in birds, stood those other two Martians that I had seen overnight, just as death had overtaken them. The one had died, even as it had been crying to its companions; perhaps it was the last to die, and its voice had gone on perpetually until the force of its machinery was exhausted. They glittered now, harmless tripod towers of shining metal, in the brightness of the rising sun.

All about the pit, and saved as by a miracle from everlasting destruction, stretched the great Mother of Cities. Those who have only seen London veiled in her sombre robes of smoke can scarcely imagine the naked clearness and beauty of the silent wilderness of houses.

Eastward, over the blackened ruins of the Albert Terrace and the splintered spire of the church, the sun blazed dazzling in a clear sky, and here and there some facet in the great wilderness of roofs caught the light and glared with a white intensity.

Northward were Kilburn and Hampstead, blue and crowded with houses; westward the great city was dimmed; and southward, beyond the Martians, the green waves of Regent's Park, the Langham Hotel, the dome of the Albert Hall, the Imperial Institute, and the giant mansions of the Brompton Road came out clear and little in the sunrise, the jagged ruins of Westminster rising hazily beyond. Far away and blue were the Surrey hills, and the towers of the Crystal Palace glittered like two silver rods. The dome of St. Paul's was dark against the sunrise, and injured, I saw for the first time, by a huge gaping cavity on its western side.

And as I looked at this wide expanse of houses and factories and churches, silent and abandoned; as I thought of the multitudinous hopes and efforts, the innumerable hosts of lives that had gone to build this human reef, and of the swift and ruthless destruction that had hung over it all; when I realised that the shadow had been rolled back, and that men might still live in the streets, and this dear vast dead city of mine be once more alive and powerful, I felt a wave of emotion that was near akin to tears.

The torment was over. Even that day the healing would begin. The survivors of the people scattered over the country—leaderless, lawless, foodless, like sheep without a shepherd—the thousands who had fled by sea, would begin to return; the pulse of life, growing stronger and stronger, would beat again in the empty streets and pour across the vacant squares. Whatever destruction was done, the hand of the destroyer was stayed. All the gaunt wrecks, the blackened skeletons of houses that stared so dismally at the sunlit grass of the hill, would presently be echoing with the hammers of the restorers and ringing with the tapping of their trowels. At the thought I extended my hands towards the sky and began thanking God. In a year, thought I—in a year...

With overwhelming force came the thought of myself, of my wife, and the old life of hope and

tender helpfulness that had ceased for ever.

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