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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 3
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THE FAVOURITE

PART ONE
BY GREGORY
OWEN
"LAURIE...
WHAT...HAVE
YOU DONE?"

RENT-A-CAR

BY MARKUS
ECKSTEIN
AND THEN IT ALL
STOPPED...

CIRCUMSTANCES
BY GK MURPHY

THE
LEAVERS
BY STEVEN
HAVELOCK

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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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 *Night Castle Crow* by [PeterPang252](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

EDITORIAL

THE FAVOURITE Part One of Two by Gregory Owen— *"Laurie...what...have you done?"*

CTHULHU MYTHOS

RENT-A-CAR by Markus Eckstein— *And then it all stopped...* HORROR

CIRCUMSTANCES by GK Murphy— *If only he had ONE friend—just ONE!* HORROR

THE LEAVERS by Steven Havelock— *"Yay!" Martii screamed exultantly...* HORROR

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE BEAST MEN OF ATLANTIS Chapters Eleven and Twelve by Milly "Mad Dog" McGuigan—*The Lost City...* JUNGLE ADVENTURE

THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE Part Twelve by Gregory KH Bryant—*Keep to the plan...* SPACE OPERA

ACROSS THE ZODIAC Chapter Eighteen by Percy Greg—*A Prince's Present...* PLANETARY ROMANCE

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS Book Two: The Earth under the Martians: Chapter Six by HG Wells—*The Work of Fifteen Days...* SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

EDITORIAL

This week, Laurie's resentment against her favoured sister reaches a climax, but worse is yet to come. Meanwhile, Hank Jones has a bad day at Rent-A-Car. Karl Mullins learns the identity of his only friend. And Martii feels like he's in hell.

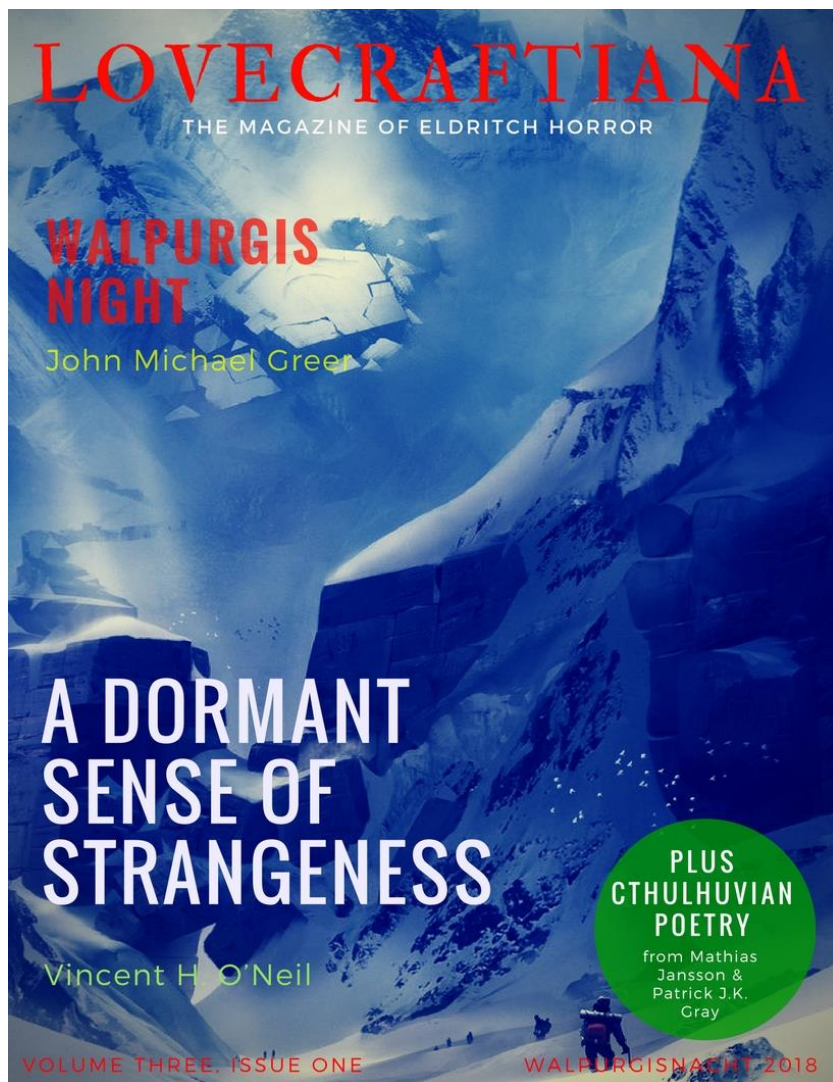
Watson and Miss Marency reach the Lost City of Nkume. Carter Ward and Kharl Stoff enter the derelict. The Camptâ assigns a residence to the visitor from Earth. Meanwhile, the Red Weed thrives in the ruins of London.

—Gavin Chappell

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



[Return to Contents](#)

THE FAVOURITE by Gregory Owen

Part 1

For as long as Laurie could remember, Brooke was always Mom and Dad's favourite. Brooke was the older of the two, and as such, came along first, making her the first to earn their parents' cherished love. She had planted her flag into the fertile soil of their adoration two years before Laurie was even a passing thought, and even after all this time, it was still quite apparent. Of course, when the two girls were together, they were treated in a fairly similar fashion. But there was always that feeling, that undeniable notion, that Brooke was the most preferred. And Laurie could understand why...to an extent.

After all, Brooke was better than Laurie on all fronts. She was prettier, as evidenced by her flawless, creamy complexion, her lithe figure akin to that of a ballerina, and flowing, auburn hair—all the boys at school pined over her and were constantly presenting her with gifts, poetry, and phone numbers scribbled on scraps of paper. She was smarter, certain to be valedictorian due to her impeccable grades and extracurricular pursuits. Brooke was even more talented than Laurie, serving as the head cheerleader, a skilled softball player, and she even had a knack for the piano; her deft renditions of classics by Beethoven and Bach could bring tears to the eyes, and they had.

But what about Laurie? She wasn't horrid to look at, with her dark hair and eyes, though she wasn't a stunning beauty, either. Not like Brooke. In all fairness, she was almost abnormally plain, and did little to draw either attention or disgust. No one would willingly give her gifts of adoration, much less phone numbers or a sappy poem. Not even a dirty limerick.

Not at their high school. Not when there was a girl like Brooke roaming the halls.

Laurie's grades were also decent at best and she didn't really have a talent that she could speak of. Well, perhaps she did when it came to being so monotonously average that she could avoid detection; when it came to stealthily hiding among her peers without trying, she was an obvious master of the craft. Many a night, she'd spend her time in her room secluded from civilization, passing the minutes by reading a schlocky teen romance novel or perusing social media websites on the internet. She never had many friends, either, online or otherwise.

Laurie could completely understand at the age of one day from sixteen just why her older sister was the favourite sibling of everyone who knew her. The evidence was staggering. Laurie was the complete antithesis of Brooke, and Brooke was beloved by all. Laurie understood...but that didn't mean she liked it. Especially not with her birthday coming up so soon. Aside from her vehement jealousy of Brooke, which had steadily grown throughout the years, Laurie's upcoming Sweet Sixteen was all that she could think about. It took precedence above everything else.

This year, the most special and spectacular of birthdays of any girl's adolescent years, had the makings of something grand. At least, Laurie thought it should. That much was expected, for both Laurie and Brooke were the children of wealthy parents—so wealthy, in fact, that they lived

in a gated community affectionately called Dunwich Heights, located on the outskirts of the nearby town of Arkham. It was a place where every house was a three-story, eight bedroom, six bathroom portrait of splendour, though nothing excessive or overly opulent. They weren't a close-knit family by any stretch of the imagination, but they were happy in a sense. Mom and Dad each had a current model Mercedes in the garage while Brooke had a small, red Hybrid vehicle, perhaps in a bid to seem environmentally "green" to her friends. Laurie had her eyes set on a lemon-yellow Ferrari, just to outdo her older sister, the favourite.

Maybe that Ferrari will be my big surprise, Laurie kept telling herself. She had done so for nearly a month since she had seen it at the local dealership. It barely generated any comfort, though, despite the fact that her parents definitely had the means. To Laurie, their considerable affluence wasn't necessarily earned. Not through hard work, anyway.

All Laurie ever knew was that their fortune was provided by inheritance and that the money itself had been flowing through the last six generations or so on her father's side; Mom simply married into it. Lucky her. Even more puzzling, however, was that Laurie wasn't quite sure that either of her parents really worked or had any source of extra income. They both simply left each morning at the same time just as Brooke and Laurie left for school and came home, usually Mom first, and that was it. She had no idea where they went, but honestly, it never meant much to her. She would be sixteen tomorrow, and that was all that mattered.

Regardless of all of her hopes, Laurie couldn't quite shake the feeling that Brooke would somehow, in some skilfully aggravating way, eclipse her on her special day, as she had done all of her life. There had been no mention of nor was there any evidence that she would have any kind of a birthday celebration as it was, so her optimism was lacking. And lying in bed at midnight, twisting in the sheets in a poor attempt to sleep before another unimportant school day of her sophomore year, was proving to be more of a hindrance than anything else. All she could hear in her mind was the repetition of his words.

"You're the favourite," Dad had said after dinner a few hours earlier. Not to Laurie. To Brooke. "Remember that, always."

He said it in what he believed to be confidence. They believed they were outside of Laurie's earshot while she was in the kitchen washing dishes. It was as though it were some military secret that, when leaked, could jeopardize the freedom of the world. As always, though, he underestimated Laurie's exceptional hearing ability. Perhaps that was her talent. Exceptional hearing combined with her aptitude at being unnoticed, and she was a force to be reckoned with. As she peaked over her shoulder, she saw the exchange and felt sick. What was worse than her father's proclamation was the smile and nod coming from Mom, reassuring and proud, easily proving Brooke to be her crowning achievement.

"Yes, Brooke...the favourite," Mom stated, placing her hand on Brooke's perfect shoulder as she sat perfectly at the grand dining room table.

And worse than that? It was by no means the first time Laurie had overheard that damned little remark uttered by one or both of her parents. But never to her—no, never to Laurie. Only to the

eldest sister.

But what about their baby? What about Laurie? It always seemed that it was common knowledge—no, it was law—that the baby, the youngest child, was always the most important one. The darling, wondrous, beloved baby. The favourite. Not in this family.

“I know, Daddy...thank you,” the favourite daughter answered with sickening gratitude. Yet again, Brooke proved to be an anomaly to every rule or law in common society, snatching away Laurie’s right with her perfection. Even her use of the term Daddy made Laurie cringe with disgust.

“As the favourite, you have a responsibility. A duty,” Dad continued.

A responsibility? Duty? What, was her position of being the most loved family member some kind of enlistment? She wasn’t marching off overseas to protect God and Country. There’s no sense of duty in being the favourite child—it’s a title and a privilege with nothing but benefits. Just hearing Brooke being called “the favourite” sent chills of loathing all through Laurie’s veins, a feeling that had only grown with age since the very first time those specific words were spoken years before. But to call it a “duty?” That made Laurie want to explode with vicious rage...perhaps of the murderous variety. She was unsure.

“I know, Daddy,” Brooke had said again. “And I am thankful for it. I’m honoured.”

Honoured? Why didn’t they roll out the freaking red carpet, give her a Nobel Prize and ordain her as the Leader of the planet Earth? Make her wear a crown, too? Queen Bitch of Asshole-vania.

Overwhelmed with anger, Laurie took the washed dishes, still wet, and tossed them carelessly into the cupboard above the sink with loud clangs. Her mother, who always seemed to care so much about the welfare of her possessions, didn’t even acknowledge her possibly broken fine china. It didn’t involve precious Brooke.

“We all are, sweetheart—” Mom began.

“I’m finished,” Laurie interrupted. There was no response, as expected. “I’m going to my room.”

“Okay, dear,” both Mom and Dad answered in unison. Brooke didn’t even take her eyes off of Daddy to look at her sister, like she was too intently, too perfectly, focused. It was fine, since the scorching expression on Laurie’s face might have set her older sister ablaze if she had looked. After a brief moment of silence, Laurie stormed out of the dining room and up the stunning grand staircase, made of the finest mahogany, down the hallway to the right and to her room. It was the last room on the left, past Brooke’s bedroom and Daddy’s private study. Slamming the door behind her, she dove headfirst onto her bed, burying her face in her pillow to muffle her screams.

Hours later, at midnight, she still dwelt there, having hatefully changed into her silk pyjamas,

alone with her thoughts.

Why do I keep doing this to myself? Why do I think they'll really give me a Sweet Sixteen? They can't even tell me I'm special...they're always preoccupied with Brooke!

Brooke, the favourite, of course.

Laurie gave up on her hopeless attempts to sleep with a gruff sigh, hurling a pillow across the room in frustration. She was too irritated to be tired, anyway. She was sure that her perfect, wonderful sister was asleep, getting her beauty rest—as though she needed it—and Mom had likely already left on overnight holiday with Prince Valium. She would be in whatever was closest to a coma without being brain-dead.

Dad could still be awake, though. He usually was at this time of night.

Laurie decided to go see what her father was up to, if anything at all. If he was awake, she just might give him a few select, harsh words—even if it resulted in her getting grounded. It didn't matter to her. At least he would be showing her some form of attention.

Jumping out of bed, Laurie slid on her five-hundred dollar mink slippers and softly opened her door, cautiously moving into the hallway and towards Daddy's private study. It was where he kept his collection of books, artwork, antiquities, and other strange trinkets. He purchased most of them during his travels after his brief college tenure at Miskatonic, and the rest on the occasional vacations he'd take with Mom.

In truth, his "study" was nothing more than a small library where he'd usually sit at his desk and read, almost always late at night. And while Laurie was a bit of a reader, she didn't care for her father's literary tastes. Many of his books weren't in English, anyway. She had once tried to read one of the books in his collection to no avail. It was kept in a glass case in the back corner.

Necro-someshit.

Another volume, one he had left on his desk one afternoon a year or so ago, was also difficult to pronounce.

De Vermin Mysterious? Something like that? Laurie couldn't remember the titles. She wasn't an expert in Latin, and anyway, the contents of the tomes were much weirder than the titles. Nothing but scribbles in languages she couldn't read and ugly drawings of strange symbols and monstrous, deformed things. Must've been horror books, but in another language. The few words written with English letters were things she couldn't pronounce, likely Latin, too. Laurie wondered why he wasted his money on garbage like that.

At least it wasn't money spent on Brooke.

Once she neared the door, Laurie realized it was cracked open. She could hear her father's voice, and noticed that there was a light coming from within, confirming her earlier suspicion that he

wasn't sleeping. Her original plan, to storm inside and berate Dad for negligence, was quickly set aside as she settled on eavesdropping instead. She would put that superb hearing to good use. Just who would Daddy be talking to at this time of night anyway?

"It'll be ready tomorrow," he said softly. "She knows it'll be a special day, but I'm sure a great deal of it will still be a surprise."

Had Laurie heard him right? Special day? A surprise? She felt her face rush with excited fire and her cheeks tightened into a gigantic grin, almost giving her lockjaw from the infrequent times she ever cracked anything resembling a smile. Maybe she was important to her parents after all. Maybe more than Brooke. Laurie relished the notion. They were going to make up for all the neglect tomorrow on her sixteenth birthday, the greatest birthday in her life...she just knew it!

She peeked briefly through the opening to try and see her father, to see if he was on the phone, but all she could make out was the glowing light from that strange lamp he had bought. Like many of the items he had procured, it was probably from one of his many treks in the Middle East.

Laurie had never gotten a good look at the lamp, though. She guessed it was a lamp—she'd never really seen it, after all. Surely it was one of the stranger pieces Dad had collected, though everything he had was strange, at least to Laurie. The curiosity, at a brief glance, which was all she could muster, almost resembled disembodied orbs of light. They were collected together in a disorganized, ominous cluster of near otherworldly luminescence. Laurie couldn't look long... the light made her head swim. She figured she was more tired than she thought. She stepped back, rubbing her eyes, and noticed that her father's lamp, or at least the light's source, was off.

"Oh shit," Laurie whispered. She didn't want Dad to know she was listening in on him. She also didn't want him to change his mind about her surprise, which he could do if he caught her eavesdropping. It was a risk she was unwilling to take. Hearing him push his chair away from his desk, she backed away hastily. She scuttled as quickly as she could down the hall and back into her bedroom, barely hearing his approaching footsteps.

Laurie jumped back into bed, curling under the sheets, and lay there in the dark as she listened to her father walk to the bathroom at the other end of the hallway and close the door. He'd be joining Mom soon in sleep, she assumed. He didn't even approach Laurie's door afterward—her brief foray into midnight espionage went without a hitch. She sighed and relaxed, folding her arms behind her head, and looked at the ceiling.

Only minutes earlier, Laurie couldn't sleep due to her wealth of disdain for her elder sister. The favourite sibling.

Queen Brooke.

But now, Brooke was the farthest thing from her mind, floating in the air with other lost feelings and dreams like dust. Now, Laurie's insomnia had a new cause, and for the first time in many years, she was ecstatic. Dad had a surprise planned for her tomorrow on her birthday. Her Sweet

Sixteen would hopefully see her finally usurping Brooke. It would be glorious.

Would she get the car? Would she have a party? The possibilities were endless in her imagination. When she finally did fall asleep, Laurie rested better than she had ever remembered, and she dreamed herself as Queen while a pathetic, menial Brooke grovelled at her royal feet. Laurie stirred with satisfaction, and she smiled in her deep slumber.

The next morning was business as usual at Laurie's household. Brooke and Laurie took rushed turns showering, primping, and dressing for school, though Brooke could easily see that something was different about her sister. Her usual fuming scowl was gone, and in its place was a more pleasant expression.

"Laurie, you okay? You seem...happy."

"Oh, I am, Brooke," Laurie taunted.

Like Brooke didn't know...or maybe she didn't. No, perfect Brooke had to know something. She was too perfect not to. It would be wrong otherwise.

"Well, okay...I'm glad for you," Brooke added, applying one last layer of gloss to her lips.

"Me too."

Both girls finished with their morning routines and made their ways downstairs for breakfast. Nothing too special or out of the ordinary, really—just Eggs Benedict immaculately prepared from the finest ingredients money could buy. It was what they were accustomed to. Everyone seemed pleasant, or as pleasant as they could be for a family that didn't seem all that close.

Laurie kept sneaking looks around the dining room to try and find evidence of her upcoming surprise without arousing suspicion. There was nothing to be found. She huffed and furrowed her brow, chewing her food aggressively as she looked to her parents. Dad was casually reading stock information in his morning paper while Mom softly hummed a tune, eying Brooke with a smile that almost seemed as though she were leaving on some long, difficult journey. It was an expression that seemed slightly sorrowful, like she may not return, and Brooke strangely returned it, albeit briefly.

Laurie knew she could only be so lucky if that were to be true. Briefly, she wished that it were her birthday present: Brooke leaving and never coming back, gone for good. If there were any candles, she would have blown them out in a heartbeat and bid her sister a brisk adieu.

But her thoughts drifted back to that Ferrari and her party, and she was content; it would be so much more satisfying for Brooke to witness her baby sister's shining moment.

Dad put down the paper and looked at his watch. The shiny silver it was made of easily amounted to eight-thousand dollars, mere pocket change for anyone in Dunwich Heights.

“Alright girls, time for you to go...you don’t want to be late for school.”

“Okay, Daddy,” Brooke eagerly replied.

“Yeah,” Laurie said. “Can’t have that.”

The two stood from the table as Mom reached for their plates and made her way to the kitchen. Laurie began walking to the door and, as usual, she heard Dad mutter in hushed tones to Brooke. It gave Laurie an excuse to put her listening skills to work yet again while she waited on her sister, since she was her ride anyway.

“Remember Brooke...take this note and use it to leave early, okay?” He handed her a small slip of paper. “You need to prepare.”

Prepare for what? My party? You can’t be serious. Could Brooke really be involved in Laurie’s birthday party? She wasn’t too perfect to lift a finger? Maybe it wasn’t just Mom and Dad, and maybe Brooke cared about her sister, too.

It almost caused her heart to flutter a bit, but Laurie paused at the notion and wasn’t too quick to get overly jovial. The same paranoid thought from the previous day seized her brain—Brooke could just usurp the birthday girl with her beauty and charm, just like any other day. And with that came another consideration, one that didn’t involve nervous fantasy and actually had some practicality to it. Without thinking, Laurie turned and said what was on her mind aloud.

“If Brooke is leaving early, how am I supposed to get home?”

“Hm... can you get a ride? How about the bus?” Dad inquired, not even looking away from Brooke.

“I don’t think so, Dad.”

“What about that lovely girl next door?” Mom piped in as she left the kitchen. “What’s her name? June?”

Thanks, Mom...it’s my birthday and you’re leaving it up to someone else to bring me home. “Mom, I barely know her.”

It was true. June was a fellow sophomore like Laurie, but of Danish descent with an athletic build and a round face. Like Brooke, she too was popular, and like everyone else in Dunwich Heights, she came from a wealthy family. June wasn’t part of Laurie’s social circle, of course. There weren’t enough people in Laurie’s life to make a circle...not even a curve, really. June was nice enough, but that was all Laurie knew.

She might come to my party, though, Laurie contemplated. She imagined a great deal of people coming to her surprise party. It would all be about her. June and many others from the gated community, and even school, would be there. I could get to know her then. If I can get past all

the other people there, all there for me. She smiled for a few seconds as she envisioned her home filled to the brim with other human beings—all of them there for her, and her alone.

Feeling the desire to pry a bit, Laurie continued. “Why does Brooke have to leave early, anyway?”

“Um,” Mom began, staring at her husband. “Well—”

“Nothing for you to worry about, Laurie,” Dad deflected as he observed his watch again. “Okay, wow, you both need to get going or you’ll be late!”

Laurie watched through rolling eyes as her parents each took turns giving Brooke tight hugs that could squeeze the life from an eight-hundred pound grizzly. Mom’s embrace was especially strong, and Brooke buried her face into Mom’s shoulder. Something about it didn’t sit well with Laurie, but she chose not to dwell on the idea at that moment.

Dad walked over to Laurie and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. He gave her a smile and a wink, one that seemed assuring more than anything else, and turned his attention back to Mom and Brooke. Laurie nearly smiled back when her father winked at her, but her surprise wouldn’t allow it.

He thinks I don’t know! she mused, but her grimace returned when he focused yet again on the magnificent Queen Brooke. It seemed to Laurie that her parents were definitely trying to keep the surprise a guarded secret, laying the favouritism on absurdly thick. She decided that she’d go along with it. It had better be worth her while. The party had better be a damned spectacle, especially since no one had even wished her a simple Happy Birthday.

Mom, meanwhile, finally released her favourite daughter, who was now beside Laurie. Laurie didn’t remain there long and turned and walked to the front door.

“Have a good day, girls,” Dad said. He grabbed Brooke one last time. “Don’t forget, Brooke.”

“Yes, Daddy, I won’t. I—...I love you.”

Ugghh, for the love of—!

Laurie slipped outside. She slammed the door behind her before she could hear either of her parents tell Brooke she was the favourite again. She wanted to keep the Eggs Benedict down. Obviously, she knew that they wanted to keep this day a surprise, but this was a bit ridiculous. They would win a Daytime Emmy at this rate for such ham-fisted overacting of soap opera calibre.

“As The Stomach Churns,” Laurie chuckled to herself, amused at her clever wordplay.

The door opened, and Brooke emerged wiping her eyes, and as expected, none of her perfect make-up had smudged. Not a shock in the least. Laurie couldn’t fathom why she was even teary-

eyed anyway. It made no logical sense, but as with the hug shared by Mom and Brooke moments before, Laurie ignored it as much as she could manage. Her sister had fully composed herself and was flawless yet again. "Okay, Laurie, let's get going," she stated warmly.

"Yeah...let's..."

And for a fleeting moment as Brooke closed the door, Laurie swore that she could hear her mother inside, crying.

During the entire school day, Laurie found her eyes glued to the clock in every class, watching impatiently as the minutes ticked by at the pace of a snail in molasses. British Literature crawled, Algebra's standstill nearly brought her to tears, and sitting in gym, staring at the floor, made her ready to rip her hair out, the daydreams of her "secret" birthday party dancing all around her subconscious. There was room for little else.

"Hey Laurie," a voice said.

"Huh?" Dad was unveiling the Ferrari, pulling a satin sheet off of the car's body. Everyone was there, all smiles, all holding gifts.

"Is your sister okay?"

"What?" Mom wheeled in a giant cake. Layered chocolate. The icing sparkled and shimmered, as though made of gold. And Brooke...

"Brooke...is she okay?"

The utterance of her sister's name pulled Laurie back into reality. She looked up to see her next door neighbour June, tall and sleek, towelling sweat from her forehead with a cloth. She was taking a break from playing volleyball with the other athletic girls in the class, all of whom were members of the various sports teams. Laurie, not athletic in the least and lacking a healthy amount of enthusiasm, spent many gym classes on the bleachers in solitude, and she liked it that way.

The teacher, Ms. Armitage, an old and bitter local of Arkham, pretty much allowed Laurie to refrain from physical activity, even ignoring the fact she didn't change into her gym outfit. Seeing as how she was from one of the rich Dunwich Heights families like a decent number of the students at the school, Armitage felt it was okay to pay it no attention and let Laurie slide all she wanted. Every one of those families had a great deal of influence...and funds. And she needed the best equipment money could buy.

"What are you talking about?" Laurie asked.

"I heard Brooke left last period."

“Oh, really?” Laurie feigned surprise at the revelation, allowing a tiny glint to fill her eyes.

“Yeah, she went home early...something about her feeling sick, I think.” June gently blotted sweat from her lips.

Yeah, right...It’s for my birthday!

“Is everything alright with her?”

“Uh, I don’t know...probably. I mean, she may have quite a lot of lips attached to her ass that she needs amputated,” sneered Laurie, “but that’s about all I’m aware of.”

“I hope she’s okay...I like her a lot.” June didn’t hear Laurie’s jab at Brooke, apparently. Maybe she didn’t want to. Maybe her lips would have been among those to go under the figurative knife.

“Yeah. Everybody does,” Laurie trailed off sarcastically.

“Everybody just thinks she’s a wonderful person, you know?”

“Mmhm.” Great. Everything revolves around Brooke and her celestial body. Such a wonderful person...give me a break.

One of the girls still playing volleyball called over to June. “Hey June, you wanna get back in this thing or what? We need you to serve!”

June motioned to the others and tossed the cloth on the floor. “Well, guess I better get back to it.”

“Guess so.” Laurie decided to try something she knew probably wouldn’t work. It was possible that someone at school knew what day it was. “Isn’t there anything you want to say to me?” Happy birthday, Laurie?

“Oh right, I almost forgot—I hope Brooke feels better!” June said with a flash of her gleaming whites as she ran back to the net to join her teammates.

Of. Course. You. Bitch. You’re not coming to my party, not by a long fucking shot...not unless you bring me a great present. Or you can just mail it. Save yourself the trouble of appearing.

With that, a sulking Laurie decided that she would sneak out of class, go home, and catch Brooke in the act, whatever act that may be. She would see what exactly her perfect sister was up to and what it had to do with her birthday, and above all, she wanted to see how her party would look. Maybe she could even give some pointers on things to add, things to do differently. It would be exactly like she dreamed. She could always act surprised later.

Before making her move, she looked around the gym for the usually hawk-eyed Ms. Armitage and spotted the crone sitting in her office, her door ajar. Laurie knew she was able to get away

with a decent amount of indiscretions, but she was unsure if she'd be allowed to simply waltz out of class.

What she didn't know wouldn't hurt her, though. Laurie nonchalantly stood from the bleachers, not even thinking to run to the locker room to get her backpack, and moved to the metal door to the commons area. Surveying the gymnasium one last time to make sure no one was paying attention, she opened the door and jogged as fast as her legs could carry her to the nearest exit. Armitage noticed, exhaled, and returned to her romance novel.

It took Laurie nearly thirty minutes to run home. She contemplated asking for a ride from someone, anyone, or even hitch-hiking to avoid the two mile trek. But her adrenaline was high, and she had built up energy from her aversion to actually exercising during gym class that could afford to be spent. The rush back to Dunwich Heights was the most exercise she had experienced in months. However, Laurie knew it would be worth the effort. It had to be.

The front door was unlocked and Laurie burst in, wheezing, to see what kind of a surprise party awaited her. Her knees began to buckle and she nearly threw up, and not just from her body's response from pushing herself too hard.

No banners. No signs. No people. No presents.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Not a fucking thing!

Laurie's stomach turned to knots and sank to her feet as her blood reached its boiling point. "What the hell?" she hissed to herself. They had all forgotten her birthday after all. They never cared. Laurie was a fool, like she always was, clinging to her false hopes—a complete fool, and she deserved it all. Just above the maddened pounding in her ears, she heard movement upstairs.

Brooke. The favourite was home. Laurie hadn't even checked for her sister's Hybrid in the garage when she arrived. Her only concern was her party, which didn't seem to exist. Brooke had done nothing in preparation for Laurie's birthday. She was the reason for things never going right in Laurie's life, so why should today be any different?

Maybe she just hadn't gotten properly started with decorations or anything. There was still a sliver of hope. Laurie could salvage her special day and help her sister, especially if it was all about her Sweet Sixteen in the end. It could still be a good birthday. It could even be a great one. It could.

If not, well...

She squeezed her fists into lumps of iron. Moving like a shark through bloodstained water, Laurie sped up the stairs with hateful purpose and to her sister's door, not even pausing to knock as she pushed it open. "Brooke? It's Laurie, I—" She froze, unable to complete her sentence, and that familiar feeling in her bowels quickly returned.

Brooke stood shocked, mouth agape and left hand behind her back, dressed from head to toe in the strangest outfit Laurie had ever seen her wear. It was a gown of some kind reaching down to her bare feet, bejewelled with the likes of rubies and emeralds, and the dark fabric from which it was made was impeccably stitched. But despite the craftsmanship of the outfit, Laurie had never seen Brooke in such garb, and it was likely nothing that anyone in a fashion magazine would wear. In fact, something about it seemed arcane to the modern world.

“Laurie, what are you doing home?”

“What—...what are you wearing?” God, I hope this isn’t my birthday present. Please tell me this isn’t something she’s trying on for me or anything! “What kind of clothing is that?”

Her sister was steadfast in not replying to her questions. “Answer me, Laurie! Why are you home? You’re not supposed to be here...you’re too early!”

“Is this supposed to be for my...birthday?”

“...What are you talking about?” Brooke asked, her perfect face contorted with confusion.

“It’s my sixteenth birthday, Brooke! You mean to tell me you didn’t know?” Laurie moved toward her, her voice growing louder. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Brooke paused, eying the floor as realization washed over her. “Oh...” She held out her free hand. “I... I’m sorry...I...”

Laurie nodded and she stepped back. “You forgot...”

“It is your birthday...I’m sorry...I can’t...”

“Of course you did...you forgot. Why am I even surprised?”

“Laurie...”

Laurie inhaled a breath full of smoky ash and prepared to unleash seething brimstone. “The fucking favourite forgets my sixteenth birthday! Queen Bitch can’t remember any important day unless it centres around her. What—am I too menial a being to act as even a tiny dot on your social radar? Huh? I guess so...same goes for Mom and Dad! They’d go apeshit if something happened to you, but me? To Hell with Laurie!”

“Laurie, you don’t get it! You—”

“None of you were planning a surprise for my birthday or anything! Not a damned thing!”

“No...no, you don’t understand, Laurie,” Brooke pleaded. “You need to leave...just for a while, please...”

“What in the hell are you holding, anyway?” Laurie posed, acknowledging Brooke’s hand that was still hidden behind her back.

Brooke exhaled, giving up the ruse, and slowly brandished a dagger of some kind. It was old, definitely ancient, with a handle in the form of a skull atop a cluster of bones carved into a curved, spine-like shape. At the end was a shiny, slender blade, ten inches in length, made of tempered steel, its edge sharpened enough to cut through even the toughest of muscle tissue. It looked like one of the many oddities Dad kept in the study—just another worthless piece of garbage he bought.

“Is that a knife?”

“A ceremonial dagger,” Brooke answered bluntly.

“What’s it for? Why-?”

“Something you don’t need to know...just get out, Laurie. Wait for Mom and Dad.” Brooke’s voice adopted an authoritative tone.

“Why, because you’re too good to tell me? Why the secrecy?” Laurie released an annoyed chuckle. “Jesus, you’re such a fucking asshole sometimes! So arrogant and so full of yourself—it makes me want to puke!”

“I know why you think that, Laurie, but you’ll soon understand. I’m sorry,” Brooke replied with shrivelling patience. She stepped past Laurie and into the hallway, walking toward Dad’s study. “I don’t have time to discuss this. Just know that I love you no matter how you feel right now. I do. You need to leave, now.”

Laurie growled, frustrated beyond belief. “God, you’re always so perfect! I can’t even call you an asshole without you shrugging it off!” She stomped after her sister, unwilling to let her leave the heated argument. Laurie wouldn’t, not until she’d had her fill. “Don’t walk away from me, Brooke...don’t you dare!”

“Leave, Laurie! Please!”

“No! You never do anything for me, Brooke! None of you do! You don’t give a shit about me!”

That was enough for Brooke. “I promise, Laurie...this is for you! This is for the family, but especially you...you damned little brat!” Brooke shouted angrily, pausing as she neared the banister. “It’s for you!” She held up the dagger in her shaky hand and turned away from Laurie. “Now leave me...I have to do this alone!”

Something in those words caused a silent click inside of Brooke’s little sister. Hearing that last sentence, Laurie’s volatility finally went nuclear, filling her brain with blazing cinders. And this is for you, you spoiled bitch! ALL FOR YOU.

Laurie wasn't exactly sure why she did what came next. Maybe it was all of the bottled hatred within her finally getting release, her subconscious desires making themselves known, or perhaps it was some reflex she couldn't fully control. Ever so briefly, she knew she wanted it to happen either way a number of times over the years, but she never meant to act on impulse. Laurie immediately regretted with horror what she had done once it happened in mere, brutal moments.

As her sister stepped in front of the top of the stairs, Laurie lunged at Brooke from behind, knocking her off balance, and the favourite child fell, coming to rest in a heap at the bottom of the long staircase. Her arms and legs were gnarled and twisted in coiled lumps of muscle, and her head...

"Oh my God..." Laurie gasped.

During the tumble, there were numerous, gruesome cracks of bone and sinew, the loudest of which emanated from Brooke's neck. When her battered form landed flat on her stomach, her head slumped onto her right shoulder and her chin pressed lazily onto the centre of her own back, between her shoulder blades. A pool of dark liquid flowed from her mouth, and her accusing eyes bulged with shock, staring at the culprit. In death, she made her murderer known. If she were able to speak, she would have screamed her sister's name for all to hear.

Laurie had killed Brooke. She had killed her only sister. I killed her.

It was an accident, to be sure, an act borne solely from unbridled anger. That's what Laurie kept telling herself in the scattered hysteria of her mind: it was an accident.

A crime of passion, right? That's what they called it. An act of impulse.

But it didn't matter—it was still murder. A murder she had actually considered a few times in her life. Shit, now it was pre-meditated.

It wasn't an accident. Yes, yes it was. It had to be, for Laurie's sake. She was a killer now, and only she knew it. No one else knew what she had done. At least, no one else until Mom and Dad came home.

Brooke's eyes rolled upward until they were egg whites. Her bruised, lumpy head shivered in a death spasm and sputtered a tiny cloud of blood.

It was an accident. No, it wasn't. You killed her.

But if Mom and Dad had only been better to Laurie. They could have treated her with more adoration. They could have told her she was special. It wasn't that difficult, was it?

It only took a couple of minutes, but Laurie had already shifted blame from herself to her parents. They were indirectly responsible for Brooke's death. Sure, they were. Laurie's actions could be justified. All they ever had to do was tell their younger daughter that she meant something. That was all it would've taken. It was too late now, though. Hindsight can't reverse

the past.

They could have told Laurie...but no, they told Brooke. She was the favourite.

Was. Laurie almost snickered at her use of the past tense. Brooke was the favourite.

Look at it this way, Laurie thought to herself. Remember that wish you considered this morning? You got it, girl, and didn't even need candles! "Happy birthday to me," Laurie whispered.

Laurie looked at the dagger still clutched in Brooke's hand. Perhaps, if she had to, she could sell it as self-defence. Brooke tried to stab her with it in a rage...yeah, that's it. That's a good story...

Who was she kidding, though? No one in their right mind would believe that. Brooke was too perfect to be a would-be killer. Laurie could only pray that the jury at her inevitable murder trial consisted of escaped mental patients—that should have been her birthday wish, but it was too late now. No amount of wishing was going to save her from what she had done.

Suddenly, Laurie heard the mechanical whir of the garage door opening, and she knew it was time for judgment. There was the sound of two separate engines and two sounds of squeaking rubber. Mom and Dad both had arrived home at the same time. Laurie remained at the top of the stairs and clenched her fists in anticipation. She accepted whatever was going to come, but not before she'd provide her defence and justification.

Footsteps, and then the garage door closed. More footsteps. Laurie felt sweat trickle down her forehead once the front door opened.

The brightness of the afternoon sun made Mom and Dad into black silhouettes, one no more discernible than the other. Only when Mom screamed could Laurie totally tell them apart. Mom's wailing shape rushed to the misshapen remains of her eldest daughter—still somewhat eying her murderer—while Dad only looked on in despair, covering his mouth. He was the first to notice Laurie standing above them.

"Laurie," he said softly. "Wha—...what...happened?"

She decided to skip on negotiation and dive straight into the heart of the issue. "I killed Brooke." There was little regret in her words, and her expression was like stone. "I'm...sorry." Only a bit.

Mom, mascara flowing down her cheeks, looked up at her, and then to Dad, who only frowned. "What have you done?" he asked, gazing down at his dead firstborn, crumpled on the floor as though she were a cigarette crushed under someone's boot. He lowered to his knees and put a gentle hand on Brooke's cool forehead, closing her eyelids. Laurie was just thankful she wasn't being watched anymore by the empty ivories.

"Br-Brooooooke..." Mom shook her head, sadly denying what was before her.

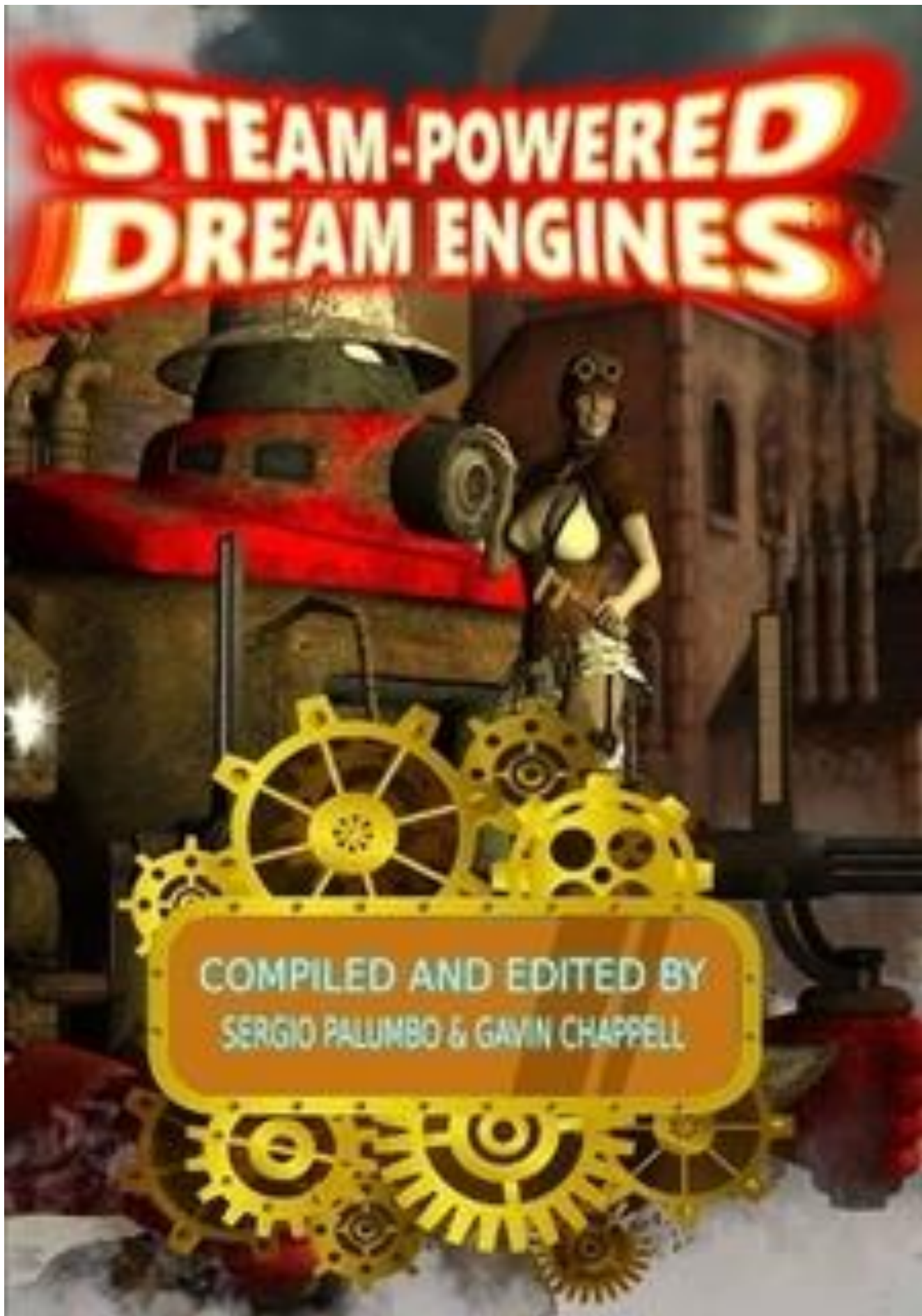
"Laurie...what...have you done?"

Laurie didn't answer.

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK

[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 propeller on her chest. She stands next to a large, complex mechanical 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

[Return to Contents](#)

Hank Johnson was having a bad day. It was his twelfth bad day in a row, and he still had six more to go before his next day off. While hordes of undergraduates across the country had flocked to the coasts to enjoy their summer vacations, Hank was working at the airport Rent-A-Car in Phoenix. The city had been stuck in an oven of heat, with daily temperatures well over a hundred for the last two weeks. Weather like that may be nice if you are lying by the ocean and rubbing sunscreen over a chick who must have accidentally bought a bikini two sizes too small, but Hank hated the heat.

He hated it more than ever as he crawled into the back of the minivan. Hank felt the air catch in his lungs, burning his chest. A fresh wave of sweat trickled down his sides. Hank resisted the urge to gag as the stench of something sour attacked his nostrils. A large splotch of vomit was crusted into the fabric of the backseat, a patch of green flecked with orange. Hank figured the van was returned by a lovely family of four, back from a trip to Disneyland. Hank hoped they had a terrible time, but the feeling only lasted for a second—then he thought of his little Wendy, and how he wished he could take her to Disneyland. He smiled as he pictured her face, beaming as they whirled round and round on the teacup ride. It would be enough to make him throw up, too.

Hank scrubbed at the stain with a wet towel for several minutes before giving up. All he had managed was to break up the vomit pie baked by the Arizona sun into little crumbs that scattered all across the floor. He cursed and got out of the van. The outside air felt almost cool against his skin compared to the stale heat in the car. As he stood back upright, a waterfall of sweat ran down his back and was trapped in the well of his tucked-in shirt.

He removed his suit jacket and hung it over the side view mirror. Ms. Cartwell could bitch if she wanted. It was a hundred fifteen today, and Hank thought about how great it would be if he were fired as he pulled the tie out from his collar.

He didn't mean that, of course. Hank needed the job. He needed the money. Come August he would be entering his final year of college, and though he was not certain what he was going to do with his liberal arts degree—he figured that was broad enough to keep his options open—after graduation, he hoped it would pay a hell of a lot more than \$8.75 an hour plus 10% off auto rentals (economy cars only). Hank also needed the cash for Wendy. Her mom was always quick to jump on his ass if she had any inkling that he would be late in coughing up his share of child support.

Hank wiped his brow with his sleeve, turning the light blue fabric three shades darker. He walked to the garage and returned with a hand vacuum. It sucked the chunks up nicely. A tree-shaped air freshener around the rear-view took care of the smell.

Hank put his suit jacket back on and slipped the tie around his neck. Fire me for being out of code. He shook his head. Like I need to wear a suit to clean cars. The suit was far too big on him

anyway. It was his Uncle Pete's, who had lent it to Hank under the condition that he use his first few paycheques to buy a suit of his own.

He went back inside the rental office. The air conditioner blasting overhead greeted him with a chilly welcome, drying his sweat and giving him gooseflesh. The difference between Arizona and the rest of the country was simply where you needed a coat—during the summer months, the AC brought the indoor temp so low that anyone from out of state would crank the heater if it was that cold outside.

A voice called from behind the counter. "There you are. How long's it take to clean a goddamn car?"

Ms. Cartwell. She was a short, plump woman. Her hair was dark and stringy and smeared grease across her forehead. And despite her insistence that employees adhere to the dress code, her black leggings weren't fooling anybody for slacks.

"Sorry, Ma'am," replied Hank. "Someone left a mess." He gave her a crooked, hopeful grin.

She frowned. "Don't give me your excuses. You think I give a damn about your excuses?" Ms. Cartwell gave the customer waiting at the desk a cloyingly sweet smile that made Hank feel sick, and said, "So sorry about this. Trainees, you know?" She rolled her eyes to further communicate her point.

The customer nodded and said, "I know the type." His voice was deep and booming. It reminded Hank of the big black guy in *The Green Mile*. "You can give some employees all the training you can afford, and they'll still find something to screw up."

Hank felt his ears burn as Ms. Cartwell cackled her agreement. A moment later, she waddled off, leaving sweaty Hank in his baggy suit to help the cologne-scented customer in his precisely-tailored Armani. Hank apologized to the man as he pulled up his information. He clicked around on the computer for a moment. Oh, shit.

"Mr.—uh—Greenberg, I'm so sorry, but the car we had reserved for you—the, uh, Ford Shelby—well, it's not here."

There were two possible reactions, in Hank's experience, to being told that the car you reserved was no longer available—graciously accepting a different vehicle was not one of them. The first was making *Seinfeld* jokes about the definition of the word reservation, and how holding it is really more important than just taking it. The second was exploding into an expletive-ridden fit of rage.

Mr. Greenberg glared at Hank. "The fuck you mean, 'it's not here'?" The man grunted and tugged at his collar. Hank took it as Mr. Greenberg's attempt to compose himself. The attempt failed. "You retarded?" Mr. Greenberg continued. "Tell me you're retarded. That's the only acceptable explanation for this bullshit."

Hank felt his ears get hot again. He was sure they were bright enough to beacon an aircraft to safe landing. “I’m sorry, sir. The customer who checked it out before you is running late on the return. It’s not here yet, so unfortunately I’m not able to rent it to you.”

Mr. Greenberg’s face had taken on a dusky purple colour. Hank wondered if the man had stopped breathing.

Hank said, “Give me a moment to check, Mr. Greenberg, I may have another vehicle I can rent to you. Let’s see...” He clicked the mouse and scrolled down the page on the computer screen. “We had a Nissan Versa due back this morning, I can see if—”

The customer interrupted. Flecks of spit sprinkled Hank’s face as he spoke. “A Nissan Versa? Really?” The man tugged at his collar again. “Christ, do I look like a mom to you, kid? Do I look like a fucking mom?”

Hank’s bad day continued.

2

Tim Greenberg was having a good day. He had strung together a decent stretch of good days, and he didn’t except his luck to change anytime soon. But like a pitcher on a hot streak, he tried not to pay it too much attention.

Greenberg was in the real estate game. Hell, in at least three cities in America, he was the real estate game. When he first started out, Greenberg considered himself an ordinary kid capable of extraordinary things...but his years of unprecedented success and a sky-rocketing bank account lead him to believe that maybe he was something special after all.

At seventeen years old, he was homeless. He had never known his father, who had split before Tim was born, and his mother rarely came around the shithole apartment complex she listed as her home address, too busy chasing after her next hit. It wasn’t long until the property manager noticed that apartment 209 missed rent two months in a row and tossed the tenants to the curb.

Greenberg lived out of an old station wagon that barely ran, but there was enough room in the back for him to iron a suit he bought for forty bucks at Saver’s. After working a few odd jobs for cash, he landed an interview with Maxwell Realty. Greenberg didn’t know the first thing about real estate, but he was likeable, hardworking, and had a knack for getting people to say yes. He got the job and got to work.

Twenty years later, Maxwell Realty was now called MG Real Estate—the G stood for Greenberg—and Tim was calling the shots. He was on a flight to Phoenix, another city ripe for a real estate boom, with hopes of transforming some worn-out neighbourhood into a luxury retirement village. He figured Phoenix was basically Florida sans ocean—hot with plenty of sunshine for some retired old surgeon to play golf and pay him a five-digit monthly rent.

Greenberg was trying to sleep, his head leaned against the curved wall of the plane. His sleeping mask kept the light out of his eyes, but the kid screaming in economy wasn't helping. What kind of asshole brings a baby on a plane? He thought about getting out of his seat, tearing open the curtain between first class and the loser seating, and telling the mom to shut the squealer up. He had an important meeting that afternoon, and if it went well he would secure a dozen big-time investors en route to MG Real Estate's Arizonan take over. He had considered sending one of his subordinates to make the deal, but he didn't want to risk anyone screwing it up. He needed to rest and refresh. He unclipped his seatbelt, but before he stood to tell the brat to pipe down, the flight attendant came by.

"Can I get you anything for you, Mr. Greenberg?" She was everything a stewardess should be: young, beautiful, and careless in fastening up her buttons—there was an area of skin between the top of her blouse and the kerchief around her neck that Greenberg found pleasant to look at.

"It was Anna, wasn't it?" Greenberg asked, but if he would have turned his head two inches to the left of where he was staring, he would have seen the gold name plate and not have needed to ask.

"Yes, sir," said Anna, giving him a polite smile. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Another scotch would be nice...and any chance you can get that kid to be quiet?" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the coach.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Greenberg," Anna said as she poured the drink. "I know it can be hard to be on a flight with a baby, but he's not having any fun either. And the mom is extremely apologetic...she looks like she could use a good night's sleep."

Greenberg took the drink, took a sip, and set it on the plastic tray before him. He was somewhat disappointed by Anna's lack of empathy. What about everyone else on the plane...don't you think we could use some sleep?

"I have a meeting today...real estate. Maybe you've heard of me? Tim Greenberg. There was a piece in last week's *Time*."

Greenberg saw the recognition flick across Anna's face.

"Ah, yes, I think so," she said. "Rags to Realty: Greenberg's Billion Dollar Empire."

Greenberg was pleased. "That's the one." She smiled, and he noticed her perfect teeth. He thought about how nice it would be to take her back to his hotel room for an hour or two. "Anna, how would you like to spend some time with a man who makes more in a week than your last boyfriend made in his entire life?" He chuckled, trying to sound playful and nonchalant. "I'll take you shopping."

The smile stayed at Anna's mouth, but it left her eyes. "Thank you, Mr. Greenberg, but I can't.

Soon as we land, I'm back in the air to Chicago."

Greenberg frowned. Stupid bitch doesn't understand what she's turning down. "How about I write you a check, and you meet me in the bathroom in five minutes?"

Anna gaped, clearly appalled. Greenberg smiled. Then she turned and walked down the plane without another word. Greenberg felt good. Apparently pretty girls read Time...that had to be good for some tail over the weekend.

An hour later, they were back on the ground and Greenberg was walking down the jet bridge, his suitcase click-clacking along behind him. His Cartier aviators were hanging by one bow tucked into his breast pocket. He reviewed the script for the day in his head. Pick up the car, kick ass at the meeting, then a little fun.

He crossed the airport and found the Rent-A-Car near the exit. A hefty, unattractive woman stood behind the counter.

"Good afternoon. I'm here to pick up," Greenberg said.

"Hello," said the woman. She glanced left and right, didn't see what she was looking for, and grunted a sigh. "So sorry. We're short staffed today, and my new hire is a bit incompetent."

Greenberg gave her an understanding smile. "I know how frustrating it can be to deal with incompetence. I do so regularly at my job—real estate."

The two chatted for a moment before a gangly kid in his early twenties came in from the backdoor. Greenberg thought he looked ridiculous in his shapeless thrift-shop suit.

"Sorry, Ms. Cartwell," the kid said. "Someone left a mess."

"Don't give me your excuses," said the woman. "You think I give a damn about your excuses?"

She scolded the kid for another minute, and then left him to assist the customer.

The kid gave Greenberg a crooked, hopeful smile. "Sorry about that, sir. How can I help you?"

"I'm here for a pick up," Greenberg said. "And I'm in a hurry."

The kid clicked around at the computer for a moment. Greenberg noticed the kid's stupid grin turn into a frown. Ah, come on. Don't give me any shit.

"Mr.—uh—Greenberg, I'm so sorry, but the car we had reserved for you—the, uh, Ford Shelby—well, it's not here."

Greenberg felt his blood pressure rising. He did not have the time today to deal with any bullshit—he was beginning to see what that fat woman had meant when she said incompetent.

“The fuck you mean, ‘it’s not here?’” Greenberg thought for a second, then continued. “You retarded? Tell me you’re retarded. That’s the only acceptable explanation for this bullshit.”

The kid fed him some line about the car he had reserved not being returned. Greenberg didn’t want to hear it. He was starting to worry that his recent streak of good days might be coming to an end.

“I have a very important meeting today, kid. Give me something that will get me there.”

The kid frowned. He looked pale, like he was afraid, and Greenberg noticed the kid’s hands were trembling. A plastic name plate pinned to the kid’s suit (if you could call it that) read “HANK.” Greenberg leaned over the counter and flicked the plastic tag.

“Listen, Hank. When I was your age, I was working my ass off, too, and I didn’t always have a good time doing it. But if you don’t get your shit together, you’re never going to be anybody. You’re going to work at a goddamn Rent-A-Car the rest of your life, drive some Toyota beater, and think sirloin is the best steak out there.”

Hank nodded. He seemed uncertain as to how to respond. “I’m...I am sorry, Mr. Greenberg, but we don’t have any available cars just at the moment. If you want to wait, I could give you a call as soon as something—”

“You stupid fuck!” Greenberg spat. “Do you know who I am? Christ, I can’t believe the stupidity I have to deal with.”

Hank mumbled another apology, but Greenberg continued to tear him apart. “Dumb shit. Do me a favour...never reproduce, okay? Jesus.”

Greenberg wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His hair—which had been neatly slicked to the side—had become a mess on his forehead. Greenberg swept his hair back to the side and closed his eyes. They felt hot under his eyelids. He remembered what the doctor had said at his last physical—something about blood pressure and heart attack risk—and took a deep breath to calm himself.

Greenberg opened his eyes and found Hank’s. They stared at each other wordlessly. Hank’s cheeks were bright pink. Greenberg swore the kid was on the verge of tears.

“Listen, kid. I have to go. Just get me a car. Fuck, it can be a mom car, I don’t care anymore. Just get me some wheels.”

Hank continued to stare at Greenberg without speaking. He was chewing on his lower lip, eyes glazed over, and Greenberg wondered what was going on in that jellyfish brain. He gave the counter a sharp rap with his knuckles. “Hank?”

Hank blinked a few times, like he’d awoken from a dream. He smiled. “Mr. Greenberg, I think

I've thought of a solution. We do have one more car on the lot, but I'm really not supposed to rent it out. But you seem trustworthy, and I know you have an important meeting today, so I think I can make an exception."

Greenberg considered, wondering if the kid was being sarcastic, but he didn't think so. Kids like that didn't mess with guys like him. Finally, some service. I do have an important meeting today, why shouldn't he make an exception for me? I'm Tim fucking Greenberg.

"What do you got, kid?"

"Right this way, sir."

Greenberg's good day continued.

3

Hank Johnson excused himself, leaving Tim Greenberg waiting at the counter. Hank approached the door to Ms. Cartwell's office and knocked. There was no response. Hank slowly turned the knob, half expecting it to be locked, half expecting Ms. Cartwell to come from around the corner and fire him on the spot for entering her office without permission. But the door opened, and Ms. Cartwell was nowhere to be found.

Hank entered the small office. In the centre of the room stood a metal desk, on which there was a computer that looked like it still had the capability to run Windows 95 and a stack of rental agreement forms. There were no photos of loved ones, framed diplomas on the wall, or other decorations in the room...then again, Ms. Cartwell never struck Hank as the sentimental type. A set of car keys lie on top of the pile of documents. Hank inspected them. There was a little keychain depicting a silver three-pointed star. Ms. Cartwell's Mercedes. How the hell Ms. Cartwell convinced someone to pay her enough to afford such a nice ride in exchange for so little work, Hank couldn't figure out. But he'd see her zipping through the parking lot enough times to know the car was hers. He stuffed the keys into his pocket and dashed from the room.

Hank led Greenberg out into the parking lot. A wave of heat blasted over them, and the shimmering in the distance made Hank think the world was melting. He squinted his eyes against the brightness. Greenberg slipped on his sunglasses.

They walked through the lot, nearly vacant except for a sports car parked in the corner under a carport. They stepped up to the car, both relieved to be in the shade. Greenberg inspected the vehicle as Hank wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Daaamn, kid! You were holding out!"

The car was a honey. It was a Mercedes-Benz roadster, painted a gorgeous midnight blue. For the first time since the idea popped into his head, Hank considered the consequences of what he

was doing. Ms. Cartwell would flip her lid if Hank rented out her car...she'd freak if she knew Hank was even this close to her car. But Hank decided he hated Tim Greenberg—he was a self-entitled asshole, he didn't give a shit about anyone because he thought he was better than everyone else—and Ms. Cartwell was very much the same.

“This will do, Hanky, this will do!” Greenberg was smiling greedily, taking in the car. He turned his attention to Hank. “Keys?”

Hank took them out of his pocket. He looked at the keys for a moment, shimmering in his sweaty palm. Then he tossed them to Greenberg. Greenberg threw his luggage in the trunk and climbed in. Hank was relieved to see that Ms. Cartwell kept her car much like the desk in her office—free from mementos or personal affects that would suggest the car belonged to someone. The interior was as bare as any vehicle Hank had ever rented.

Greenberg started up the car and laughed in delight as the engine revved. “Thanks, kid! I'll have it back by noon tomorrow.”

Hank smiled. “Don't worry about that, Mr. Greenberg. I can tell you're very reliable. You'll treat the car exactly like she deserves.”

Having a successful career in real estate—a business that requires well-timed charm and a lot of confidence—Tim Greenberg was used to feeling comfortable. He rarely found himself in a situation that didn't play out the way he wanted. But something about the moment he now found himself in made him uncomfortable. Disturbed, even. It was Hank's smile. It wasn't a smile of happiness, or even a smile forced in the name of good customer service. It was one that Greenberg imagined would go well on a disgruntled employee who, fed up with being mistreated and realizing life wasn't about to change anytime soon, straps something explosive under his shirt before going to work, just to shake things up. Greenberg didn't like the feeling. He didn't like it at all.

“See you, kid.” Greenberg shifted the car in gear and drove off the lot.

Hank watched Ms. Cartwell's Benz melt into the shimmering horizon.

There was no going back now.

4

Hank was so absorbed in his own thoughts that he didn't even notice the gooseflesh prickle up as he walked back inside the Rent-A-Car. Ms. Cartwell was back in her office. A 32-ounce soda sat on her desk, next to the crumpled yellow wrapper of what used to be a quarter pounder with cheese.

“Hi, Ms. Cartwell. I finished helping that customer. Would you mind if I took my ten now?”

Ms. Cartwell slurped from her Big Gulp, buying herself time to think of a task to assign Hank. Nothing came to mind, it seemed, because she set the drink back down and told him that yes, he could go on his break, but the clock was ticking.

Hank left the office and walked down the hall towards the restrooms. He stopped at the janitor's closet between the Men's and the Ladies'. He entered, closing the door behind him. It was a tight squeeze. A water heater took up most of the room, but there was space for a mop bucket and a crate of plastic bottles full of windshield fluid and Pennzoil. Hank took a seat on the crate and closed his eyes, trying to concentrate on what he was about to do.

The first time he did it he had been thirteen years old, and he didn't even know how he did it. He had been walking home from Lincoln Middle School, one of the worst places he had ever known. Fred Collins had been exceptionally cruel that day, and he had plenty of ammo—Hank's voice was cracking at inopportune times and his face was studded with inflamed pustules. As Hank strolled along, consumed by his own misery, he was distracted by a low growling. He looked up and was startled by a Pitbull, hunched and snarling. Hank frantically looked around for the dog's owner, for a commanding voice to call "Here, Killer!" but there was no one.

The dog barked, and Hank felt a warm trickle roll down his leg as he pissed himself. The dog took a step towards him. Hank screamed and ran. The Pitbull pursued him, snapping at his heels. Hank sprinted as fast as he could, turned a corner, and slipped. He tumbled over the sidewalk into the street. The asphalt tore the skin from his knees and palms. Hank screamed again, certain he was about to be torn to pieces. He glanced over his shoulder, saw the beast bounding towards him, frothy saliva dripping from its teeth...but then it stopped. The dog whimpered, fell to the ground, and lie still.

Hank sat in the road crying for a moment, waiting for the dog to get back up. But it didn't. When he finally found the courage to stand, his legs felt as strong as boiled noodles. He wobbled up to the dog. It looked like it was sleeping, but different somehow...it was too still, Hank realized, not even breathing. Hank mustered his nerve, reached out a trembling finger, and poked the animal. Its fur was hot, but it was definitely dead. Hank never mentioned the incident to anyone.

The second time was during his freshman year of college. He had met the love of his life, Tracy, and he had even gotten her pregnant with his daughter...his little Wendy. About a year or so later, he was working whatever job offered the most per hour, saving up for a diamond engagement ring and a down-payment on a house. He came home after a twelve-hour shift at Dunkin Donuts, opened the door of their shithole apartment on the eighth floor of the elevator-less complex, and found Tracy in bed with another man. She shrieked in surprise when Hank opened the door and covered herself with the bedsheets.

The man Tracy was with stood up. Hank couldn't help wondering how anyone could be so confident when naked.

"Hey, dude," the man said. "Be cool. I'm outta here."

Hank was heartbroken, and he wanted very much to let out his rage on the naked man who had

been lying in his bed. Hank felt the heat rise up his neck, the blood pounding in his head. He took a few quick steps towards the guy, ready to pummel him to death.

Tracy screamed. “Hank, don’t hurt him, please, don’t hurt Roger, please, Hank!”

But Hank wanted to hurt Roger very much. Roger lifted his fists in defence. Before Hank could lash out with his first strike, Roger groaned and took a few steps back. Hank stopped, watching Roger’s face go blank, his eyes staring off into infinity.

“Roger?” Tracy said in a voice so small it was barely audible.

Roger lifted his arms in front of himself and took a long stride forward. There was something about the way he was moving...it was like a puppet moving on its strings. The naked man took a few more clumsy steps, passed Hank and around the bed. Hank was stunned—his confusion regarding Roger’s bizarre behaviour was washed out by the anger burning through Hank’s chest. Hank wanted Roger to die more than he had ever wanted anything before. But he felt frozen in place.

The naked puppet danced onward and opened the window.

“Roger?” Tracy’s eyes were wide with terror. “Hank, please, stop him!”

But Hank didn’t want to stop him. In fact, Hank had the idea that he was somehow controlling him.

Roger leaned through the window and fell out of view. Tracy screamed again. There was a sickening crunch, a car alarm began howling, and Hank felt himself snap back into his body. He felt like someone had whacked him over the head with a mallet.

The police were as confused as Tracy. They chalked it up to suicide—although the motive remained unclear. And being as Hank didn’t land a single punch on the man, and Tracy swore Hank didn’t push him out of the window, the police let Hank walk.

The third time hadn’t happened yet, but it would be the first time Hank attempted the deed—whatever it was—intentionally. The victim in this case would be one Mr. Tim Greenberg—realtor, asshole, and scapegoat for all of Hank’s frustration and disappointment.

Hank rested his hands on his knees. He breathed through his nose, gently, as if he were meditating. He thought of Tim Greenberg. He thought of Ms. Cartwell’s car, zipping along the freeway, weaving through traffic. And he thought of his little Wendy. He wished he could give her a better life, but he didn’t think things were going to change any time soon. Maybe Greenberg was right: Hank would always be the nine-to-five guy, the entry-level employee never worth more than \$8.75 an hour...but so long as he could afford a present for Wendy every Christmas, he’d be alright. Maybe someday he would even have enough saved to take her to Disneyland.

In the tiny janitor's closet, sitting on a crate next to the water heater humming in the corner, Hank's thoughts returned to Tim Greenberg and Ms. Cartwell's car.

And he smiled.

5

The meeting was a huge success. Greenberg locked up the investors. He had their commitment in writing, and even more importantly, he had it in money. In ten years, he would be making close to two million dollars a year on income from the Phoenix project alone. Greenberg cruised along in the Mercedes, top down, his sunglasses painting the world a cool shade of blue.

Tim Greenberg, crushing it again! I'm the fucking man!

The engine purred as Greenberg shifted gears as the car ascended a hill. Greenberg liked that sound. He liked the feeling it gave him in his chest.

Time to drop my shit off at the hotel, find a bar, drink some drinks, and find some ass. The meeting was high stakes, and Greenberg nailed it. He figured he deserved a little fun.

He drove up the hill and around a corner along a ledge, which gave him a fantastic view of the city. The sun was starting to drop in the west, making the city sparkle like shattered glass. The horizon was a smear of orange and red, the perfect desert sunset.

The radio suddenly blasted on, taking Greenberg by surprise. The hell? He fumbled with the dial, but the volume wouldn't go down. An old rock song blared from the speakers: "—DO YOU LOVE? WHO DO YOU LOVE? I'VE GOT A TOMBSTONE HAND AND A GRAVEYARD MIND, I'M—"

"Shut up!" Greenberg yelled at the radio and gave it a good smack with his palm. The song stopped, but the noise didn't. A woman's voice came through the speakers, crackling through the fuzz of static: "—on Thursday. The President has further stated that—static—striking selected targets of military importance—"

The wheel jerked out of Greenberg's hands. Greenberg screamed, grabbed the wheel, and turned it back to the road an instant before the car collided with the hillside. The engine was kicking now, making Greenberg feel as if he were driving over a row of speed bumps. His suitcase was thumping in the trunk, thrashing, pounding like someone trying to get out.

Jesus Christ! Greenberg was shaking in terror as the car seemed to take on a mind of its own, swerving in wide swoops across the road as if an invisible hand had gripped the steering wheel. The radio was an ear-splitting hum of screeching static.

And then it all stopped.

The Mercedes-Benz drove smoothly in its lane, and the static cut out. The only sounds were the soft purr of the engine and the wind in Greenberg's ears. He was still trembling, his mind struggling to process. Then a voice came in through the radio. "Tim Greenberg, CEO of MG Real Estate, died earlier today in an automobile accident in north Phoenix. Details of the crash are unclear at this time, but investigators—"

The car jerked hard to the left, bursting through the guardrail and launching into space. For a second the car was suspended in open air. Greenberg felt disconnected from his body, like he was watching himself from above. Two thoughts flitted through his mind as he hung there. The first was how beautiful the city looked, sparkling like shattered glass in the shimmering blood-red sunset. The second was that kid at the Rent-A-Car, and that smile...the smile of a man so dissatisfied with his life he would self-destruct, just to break the mould.

The car began to fall.

Tim Greenberg began to scream.

6

Hank Johnson stood up from the crate in the janitor's closet. He was very thirsty, and his head was pounding. He walked down the hall, passed the restrooms, passed the Rent-A-Car desk.

"Hey," Ms. Cartwell called from her office. "Hey, shithead! Where do you think you're going? Break ended twenty minutes ago!"

Hank kept on walking without acknowledging her. He walked out of the airport doors and into the Arizona evening. The sunset had splashed the world with a marvellous shade of red. Sirens wailed in the distance.

Hank took out his cell phone and dialled a number.

"Hank?"

"Hi, Tracy," Hank said. "I got off earlier than I expected. Would you mind if I picked up Wendy now?"

Tracy said she didn't mind and passed the phone to Wendy, so she could say hello.

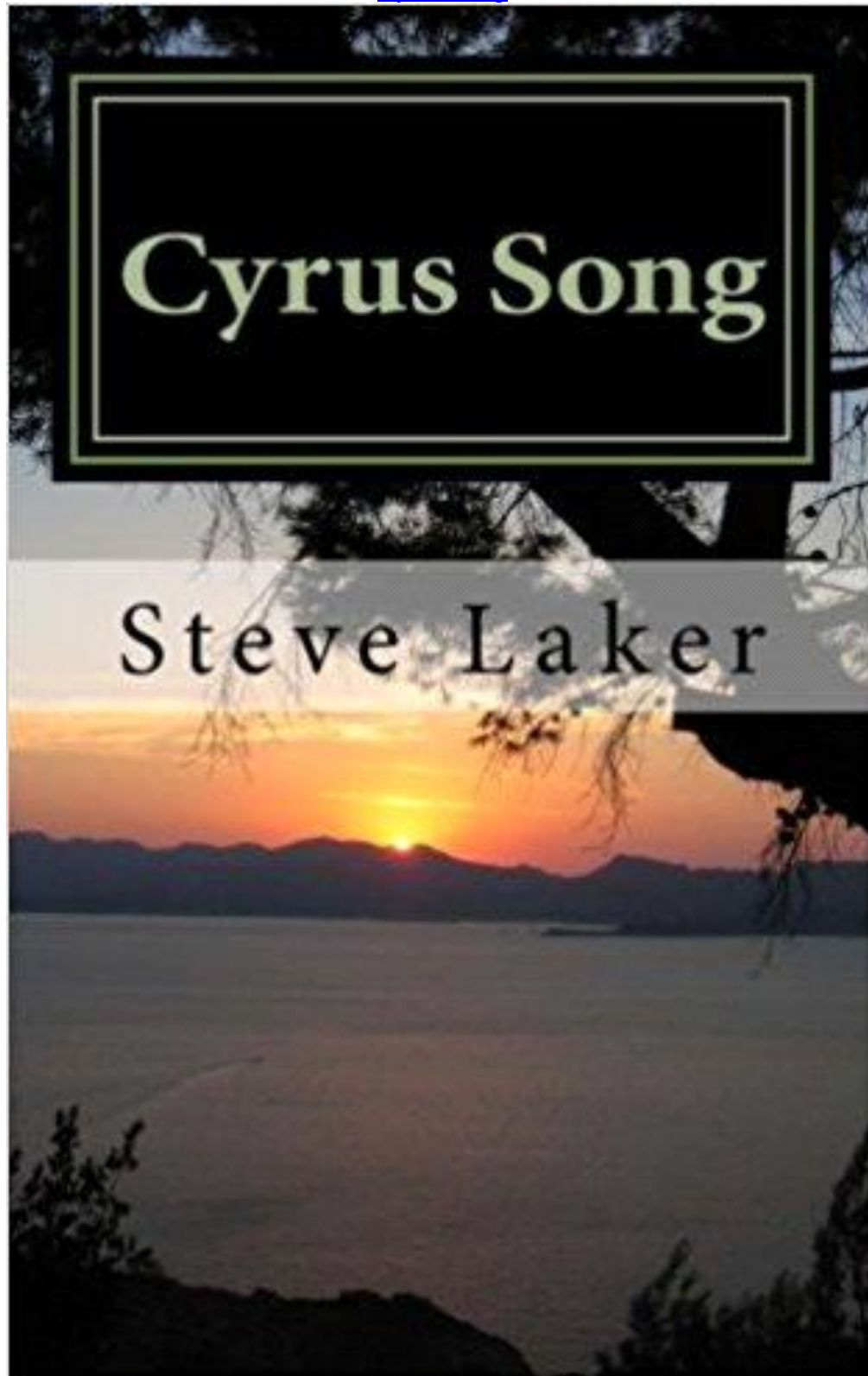
"Hey, baby," Hank said. "What do you think about going out for ice cream tonight? There's a new Baskin-Robbins that opened up near the ballpark. What do you say?"

THE END

Markus Eckstein is a new writer but a seasoned reader. He enjoys drinking coffee and playing board games with his wife in Albuquerque, NM. His previous work has appeared in Liquid

Imagination.

[Cyrus Song](#)



[Return to Contents](#)

CIRCUMSTANCES by GK Murphy

It paid off in the long run, having the school's coolest kids as friends and a productive relationship with the teachers, as those involved in teaching rattled on about near-on shit most days. Since, because of Government cuts, meaning lower wages, and meaning little or no contribution towards minor problems, all were forced to coexist like grumpy bedfellows in this town's school.

And this was the North of England. If you got the gist of which viciousness the youthful action taken, you would surely be sickened to the stomach.

One kid with problems was 14 year old Karl Mullins. He was bullied and persecuted beyond reasonable belief.

What made it worse was that Karl was classed a foreign kid since he had a slightly tanned skin and his mother was Chinese, having moved to England a few years before the birth of her only son. She met and married her British husband in Hong Kong where she worked as a waitress and small-time crack dealer in the suburbs. His name was Seymour Mullins, and he was stationed there as a corporal in the Royal Marines. So, sadly, there was no mistaking that distinctive yellow skin for an Asian folk's kid, which only could have meant two things, conjuring a whole lot of heartache and sorrow for anybody caught amidst a sea of predominantly white faces, like a vast moving painting of a thousand snowy spiders which shifted across the landscape.

On a typical day, like today, the agony started with the burning stool, wrapped in ignited newspaper and deposited via his parent's letterbox. The stink pervaded the entire house, burning shit.

His mother hugged him and told him to be strong. In the kitchen, Seymour supped his whiskey from the bottle and wept at the table.

Nobody wanted Karl Mullins—not even his mum and dad—and love was but a whisper from the silver screen, or in the erotica he scoured through every night as the world slept, ensconced in his Star Wars duvet.

Karl cowered in the caretaker cupboard in one of the school corridors and listened to the voices outside. Desperately, he longed for a weapon, something that might blow everybody away, something beautiful that might start something new for him, be it prison, be it death... But he'd seen it on TV, those folks that shot places up were either taken out by a sniper, or committed suicide...

Jesus, why was he even considering this crap? He didn't want to kill anyone. But what other way out was the option here?

If only he was clever enough to make people understand him. If only he had ONE FRIEND—just one, was that too much to ask?

Listening to the teenage voices outside the door, he realized that he could stay here all day until home-time bell sounded. Usually, he hung around the school for perhaps fifteen minutes or so after home-time bell, just to let the other kids get home. Otherwise he might bump into one the gangs that pulled his hair, kicked and punched him, called him names...

Karl Mullins cried a lot. He wept like a child and ripped chunks of hair from his scalp. He bit his lips and tongue and cursed this cruel world for the deck it had served him.

If only he had ONE friend—just ONE!

“I’ll be your friend, Karl...” the sweetest voice said, with angelic purity in the darkness, serene and laced with calm, he felt no fear. “What would you be prepared to give me in return for one good friend?”

“Anything! Literally I’d give anything!”

There was a silent lull.

“Anything...?”

“Yes, damn it, are you stupid?”

“...Anything, you say? Good. Well, here I am, I’m your friend, the deal is struck, so now you must pay if the deal should be honoured? Let me introduce you to some of my best friends...”

Karl heard their breathing first of all. There were lots of them, and they scurried and crawled over his body in liquid droves. Karl reached out in the dark claustrophobic space to put the cupboard light on, shrugging some of the weighty lumps of his arm and hand as he did.

The light was not quite the light he recognized. It illuminated the space with a solemn yet unnerving deeply scarlet hue.

“Oh, please, no...” he choked. When he tried to scream, one of the white spiders entered his mouth and forced its bullish route down into his throat. Karl Mullins could no longer breathe. Another creature, and then another, forced passed his lips, clawing into his gullet.

The entire cupboard was layered with white tarantulas.

Some were big, some were tiny, some had teeth, some were deformed and sported ten or twelve legs. Some had huge human eyes attached to their heads and bodies. Some spoke incomprehensibly, spoke nonsense, some laughed and mocked.

As he collapsed, completely covered by now, Karl caught sight of his brand new friend—his ONE friend. There was no such luck as a pardon from his new friend. The crooked old face leered over his lame carcass. Its grin was wide and toothless beneath the sharp nose.

Just like every friend Karl had ever known, with these friends he was about to have a rough ride.

As he lay on the floor, his right ear smudged the door as his head touched the wood. The final sounds he heard were of those he loathed and despised in the world as they passed by on their way to classes. Never was he good enough to be part of this crowd, not ever did he wish he wasn't a part of it. He had always longed to live a normal life and be a normal kid with normal friends—or one good friend. But it had come to this...the end of friends, and also, the way everything ended.

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

[Return to Contents](#)

THE LEAVERS by Steven Havelock

Martii had laid the bait and now he waited...Soon the unfortunate victim-to-be appeared. He sighted the gun and drew in a long breath. He was in his upstairs bathroom, the butt of the air rifle hard against his shoulder.

Come on...Just a little more...

The target was in the middle of his scope. He pressed the trigger. There was a loud popping sound as the bullet left the rifle. In the distance a tom cat gave a yelp of pain and collapsed motionless to the floor.

“Yay!” Martii screamed exultantly.

He pulled out a pad and pen from his pocket and marked down another one.

Fourteen now altogether. God, I'm getting good at this now.

His mobile rang. He answered it on the third ring.

“Hi, Martii, it's Scott,” said his brother.

“Hi Scott, how you doing?” asked Martii.

“I'm good, bro.” Scott's voice turned sad. “I been gone two months and I was hoping I would see you sooner rather than later, but I think it's going to be a while longer before we finally meet again.”

Martii felt a tinge of sadness.

I love my bro and it hurts not being near him.

They talked for a few minutes then said their goodbyes. As he placed the mobile down he screamed. Pain, unbelievable pain, hot and burning ran up from the tips of his fingers all the way up to his elbows.

Blasted arthritis! It's being getting worse and worse over the last few weeks. The fact that last night I slept in the freezing cold again doesn't help matters. Flipping stupid boiler!

“Martii!” came a shout from downstairs, “Your dinner's ready!”

“Thank you, mum!” he replied, steeling himself against the last of the pain throbbing in his hands and forearm.

He ran downstairs, feeling the hunger in his stomach. The food was jacket potatoes with cheese and beans. Martii, picked up a fork and stuck it into the potato. It made a soft 'squish' noise, and stuck a few centimetres in.

"Sorry son," said his mum, who sat next to his father at the dining table, "The gas still hasn't been reconnected."

They couldn't afford their gas bill, and the microwave went bust four weeks ago. Martii dug into the cold beans, cheese and the hard-as-rock potato. Good job I got good teeth, he thought. He scoffed the food down as fast as he could. A poor man isn't afraid to eat, a poor man knows how to eat.

After finishing his meal, he ran up to his bedroom without even a thank-you to his parents and bolted the door. He hadn't noticed the tears in his parents' eyes, or the pain in their voices when they spoke to him.

Now it's fun time!

He switched on his computer. It came alive with a low whine.

Soon he was masturbating to his favourite porn videos, but as he reached his climax, burning hot pain shot through him, this time both his hands.

He cried out.

"Martii!" It was his father. 'Are you alright up there?' he shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

"Yes, fine, dad!" he shouted back "It's just my arthritis again!"

"Well, come down and take your painkillers!" his father shouted back.

"Yes, will do, dad. Just give me a minute." Martii lay back on his bed until the pain passed. The unbelievable pain must have only lasted a minute but felt more like hours.

Once the pain had passed, he lay unmoving on his bed.

I miss Scott so much, he thought. Scott who was always the conscientious one, always doing his best trying to please others. And he was the one who didn't give a crap about anyone or anything.

He thought about his life. Tears slow and burning sprang up on his cheeks. He didn't wipe them knowing if he did, only new ones would take their place.

I feel like I'm in hell.

Martii waited...The cat came into his sights and he let rip.

Another stupid cat bites the dust.

Unbelievable hot burning pain shot from the tips of his fingers to his elbow again.

Blasted arthritis! The fact that our boiler went bust several weeks ago doesn't help...I wish we had the money to repair it.

Tears came to his cheeks. He wiped them away with his left hand.

Just then his phone rang. He knew who it was before he even answered it.

It's going to be Scott again. No one else calls me; I have no friends, only my family...

They spoke for a few minutes and then Martii put ended the call. He stood staring through his bedroom window at the dead cat.

Stupid thing!

"Martii!" came his mum's voice from downstairs. "Your dinner's ready!"

Aww great! Hard potatoes and cold cheese and beans...Martii dug into his food, but today he noticed something.

My parents look distraught; they look like they been crying!

"Dad, mum, what's wrong?"

"We done our best for you son," his mother seemed to be on the verge of tears, "We really have."

"Yes?" asked Martii, "What's wrong?"

"We leaving, son, we got to go." Martii saw a tear slide down his father's cheek, "We stayed as long as we could bear to, for you, Martii."

"But we can't stay any more. Our time has come," continued his mother, "Martii, we hope and pray that we see you again, and sooner rather than later."

Martii was at his bathroom window again.

Another stupid cat!

His parents had gone to stay with his brother.

Just me on my lonesome now, he thought dejectedly.

He waited patiently for another cat; he had set the bait again earlier that morning.

Come on... Come on...

After a few minutes a cat appeared. He squeezed down on the trigger.

Unbelievable pain hot pain shot up his hand to his elbow. He screamed as he doubled over.

Soon, but like always not soon enough, the pain eventually left him.

This house is freezing and I'm starving! I know I should go downstairs and like usual have a cold miserable meal. I can't do it...I just can't do it.

Martii went to his bedroom and lay down. Tears came to his cheeks as the cold and hunger bit into him. He curled up into a foetal position.

I want to die.

What a relief from his miserable life death would be. He stumbled downstairs and opened the medicine cupboard in the kitchen. He got a glass of water and a plastic tub of paracetamol.

He opened the tub and slipped the entire tub of tablets into the palm of his hand.

Dare I do it?

He stood, unsure how long. It felt like hours and hours but must have only being a few short seconds.

Dare I do it...?

Scott, his brother, had once remarked, when they were discussing the death penalty, that only God should give and take life.

I love Scott so much.

Tears came to his cheeks and his eyes blurred. He walked over to the bin and emptied the tablets in his hand into it.

Please God, no more.

He stumbled upstairs to his bed and collapsed, wishing for the bliss for sleep to take him. But for him there was no bliss, only pain, and when eventually sleep took him there were only nightmares...

Martii sighted the gun. The cat stepped into the target of the scope.

Martii held his breath, but he didn't shoot, he couldn't shoot.

Only God can give and take life, he thought.

He went to his bed and lay down, suffering from hunger and exhaustion. He thought about the porn videos on his computer.

Then he remembered something that he had tried to forget for years and years. Six years old and on his way to school, he saw a cat near some bushes on a low wall. He walked over to stroke the cat. Just then an arm flashed out of the nearby bushes.

Tears sprang up on his cheeks again...

I have tried to forget the memory for years and years. Nobody...Nobody but me and my attacker knows what happened to me that day...

The pain...The pain had being more than his young mind could bear at the time, and so...so he had forgotten the memory...

Martii crawled into a ball.

Please God...Please God no more...

Eventually...Eventually the pain lessened and the tears stopped.

And then he remembered...He remembered how, when he was fifteen years old he had killed himself.

The electricity generator was in the cellar. One night he had quietly steeled himself and gone into the cellar. More tears came to his cheeks.

Oh God, no!

Now he remembered...

He had slammed his hand into the wires of the electricity generator and pulled.

Oh God no... Please somebody help me!

Just then his phone rang.

He answered it.

“Hello, Martii. It’s your brother Scott, and mum and dad are here too.” Martii gave a weak grunt, his voice choking up in his throat, “Come downstairs to the front door,” Scott added.

Martii stumbled downstairs. He opened the front door. A massive smile spread across his face.

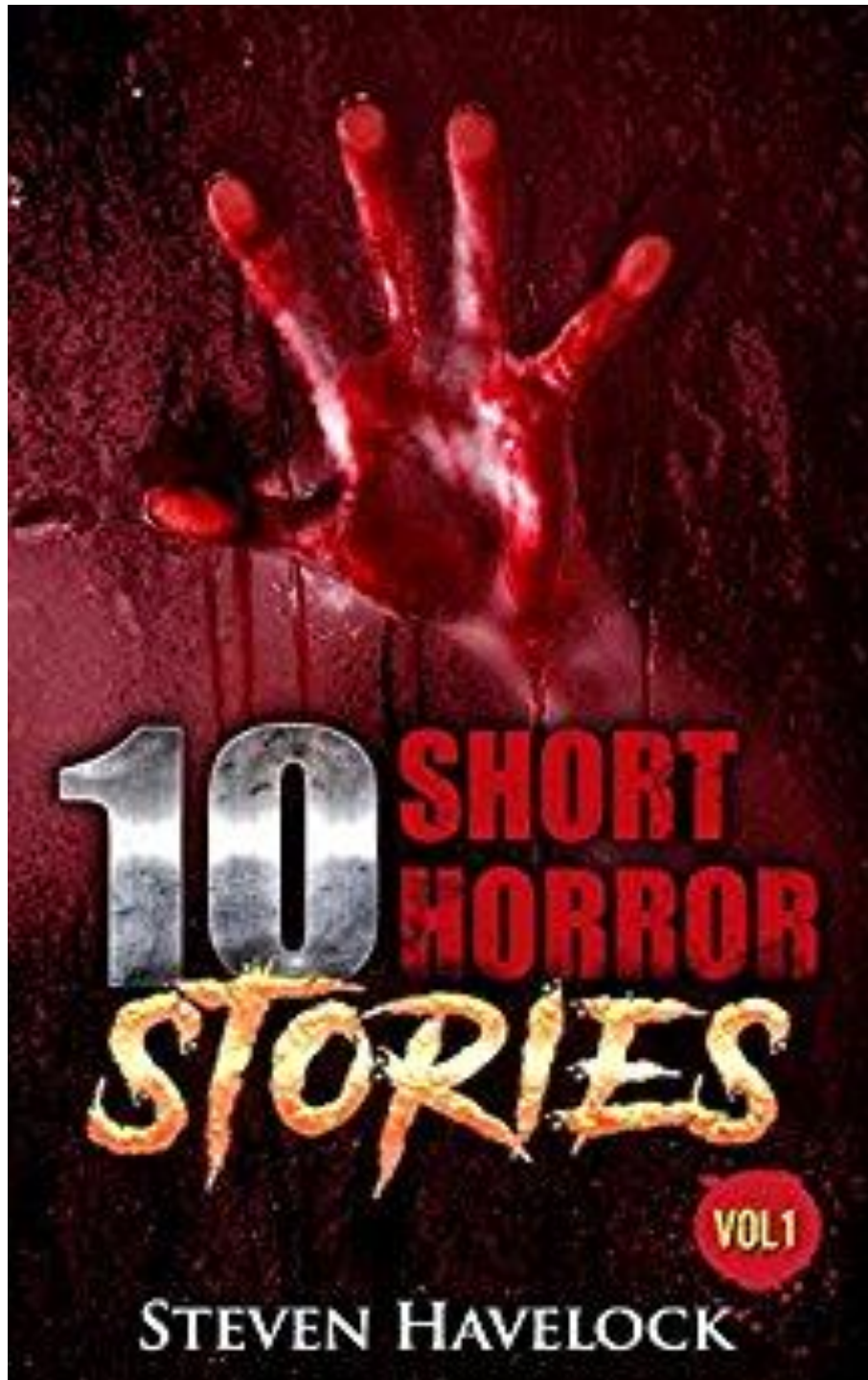
“We got a better house to live in now. It’s warm and there’s plenty to eat and drink,” said his father. “And the food is deliciously hot.”

Tears came down Martii’s cheeks.

“Don’t cry,” Scott said, “We all happy now.”

They turned around and a white light appeared in front of them. They stepped through and Martii followed.

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

[Return to Contents](#)

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

Chapter Eleven

We left the pigmy encampment the following day, after many fond farewells from the small tribe. With Miss Marency in the lead, our much reduced expedition set off through the dark forest that grew between the mangrove swamps and the foothills of the mountains. It was dark in the forest, and I felt vulnerable armed with nothing more than a feather-bedecked stone-tipped assegai bestowed upon me by the chief of the pigmies, dressed in only the rags of my tropical gear. Miss Marency carried only a native bow and had a sheaf of arrows in the rawhide belt of her brief costume, but she seemed much more at ease as we crept through the gloom.

There was no path worth the name in that jungle, only occasional animal trails that would lead for a while in the correct direction before going off at a tangent, at which we were forced to make our way as best we could through the undergrowth. Snakes abounded in certain parts of the jungle, and their musty stench hung heavy in the still forest air.

Other creatures were seldom encountered, but often we were forced to lie in hiding in the darkest thickets as stentorian things unseen crashed past or blundered down the trail. Two civilised modern people had been reduced to cowering beasts. At least I was modern and civilised. Miss Marency had taken to this life with too much gusto for me any longer to consider her entirely a product of nineteenth century civilisation. But her early sojourn in the bush made her an excellent companion on such a wild journey.

At times my thoughts turned to Holmes. Did he still live? If so, where was he? Had he turned back, or had he remained doggedly on the murderer’s trail? Somehow, I felt that the latter must be the case, assuming he had successfully escaped those creatures that attacked us earlier.

And would we survive? Here we were, armed with stone age weapons, heading for a place the pigmies and Arabs viewed with fear, a lost city of savages who by all accounts practised human sacrifice, on the trail of a murderer who by now might already have come to grief. As we crouched quaking in the underbrush, hiding from another unseen titan, I touched my Leopard Lady companion on the arm.

‘How can we hope to prevail,’ I asked her, ‘when we have to hide from the beasts of the forest?’

She glanced at me, and I saw a wild gleam in her eye. ‘In a funk, eh, Watson?’ she whispered, and only the colloquialism persuaded me that she was anything other than another savage of the bush. ‘We’ll find my father’s killer, don’t worry. And then we’ll bring him to justice. Maybe we’ll find your friend Holmes, too.’

‘Maybe we will,’ I said hoarsely. ‘But alive or dead?’

She said nothing. Once the jungle had fallen silent again, we rose and continued on our way.

I had no idea of where we were. Now that the map had been lost, it was almost impossible to calculate how long it would take us to reach the highlands where Nkume would be found. But the following morning, as we set out from a makeshift bivouac in the jungle, we found ourselves looking out across a broad valley. On the far side, the jungle trees rose in rank upon rank, but beyond them I could see snowclad peaks. And on the very furthest horizon, the sky was stained by the belching grey clouds of a volcano.

I turned in triumph to Leopard Lady. 'That must be our goal,' I said, the sense of achievement drowning out all other considerations. I felt refreshed from my sleep and my triumph over illness, and the morning was still cool and fresh. Miss Marency's eyes danced with amusement at my sudden enthusiasm.

'We still have a long way to go yet,' she said. 'But it's heartening to see our goal is within reach.'

'That is, assuming McAllister has survived the journey,' I said. 'For all we know, he is lying dead or incapacitated somewhere between here and the coast.'

'Oh, I think we'll find him in the city,' she said mysteriously. 'All that remains is for us to make our way up into the peaks.'

I also saw from our vantage point that the valley led to our right down to the Nago, which was now a narrower river, faster flowing than the sluggish, crocodile infested stream we had seen downriver. But we would soon be reaching the falls, where the Nago leapt down the sheer side of a mountain, from which point onwards it would be unnavigable. So there was nothing to be gained from returning to the water, even if we had the means to construct another pirogue or even a raft. We concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

After a rest at midday, we continued. The going became easier as the jungle fell away on either side, breaking up into sere, yellow grass and thorn bushes of the sort we had seen earlier in the journey. In places, gallery forests shadowed the lines of streams, ice melt from the peaks that grew clearer on the horizon the further we went. Then we found the land ahead growing steeper and steeper, until it was impassable. High crags and barren cliffs blocked our path. We had to make our south and downwards into the Nago Valley, back into the trees.

Here in the foothills, the jungle vegetation gave way to pines, beneath whose branches was a complicated maze floored with needles that muffled all sound of our progress. Miss Marency was leading us towards the rocky bank of the river, where a narrow path led up the side of the falls that now grew audible through the trees, although we had yet to see any sign of them other than occasional rainbows overhead in the spray filled air. Otherwise the pine forest was silent. What creatures dwelt here trod quietly through the gloomy arcades, and neither saw nor smelt any snakes, to my considerable relief.

Night fell, that sudden night of the tropics, like the sudden descent of a black shroud, and the forest came alive with animal noises. We had made a camp in a clearing overlooking the river and Miss Marency was cooking some small reptile she had caught during that day's trek. I went

out down the dark path towards the river, groping around for more firewood. As I was searching, the must filled air became rank with an odour I recognised. Dropping the kindling I had gathered in my horror, I hurried back to the fire.

‘Those things,’ I cried. ‘The creatures that attacked us at the *boma*. They’re here, I’d swear it!’

She leapt up, seizing her bow and fitting an arrow to it. Even as she did so, a wave of stinking blackness burst up from the trees. Her arrow winged into the mass of them, and I heard a horrifyingly human cry. Then they were upon me and I was striking out on either hand with my assegai. The fire went up in a shower of sparks, which rained down as the only illumination in the clearing. My nostrils were filled with the stink of them, my assegai plunged into furry bodies. Clawed hands sank into my hair and my feet were knocked from under me. As I plummeted down into the press, I heard Miss Marency crying out over a yammering of the things.

I feared for my life then as I never did in Afghanistan or even on the foggy London streets during my time with Holmes. Clawed hands and taloned feet tore at me. I was dragged by my hair across stony ground, while dark things ran at my side. The roots of my hair tugged at my scalp, my body was bruised and cut.

Then she was among them like a meteor, swinging a flaming branch. The pressure on my scalp eased as the creature dragging me let go and went to attack. I glimpsed its eyes, glaring yellow with hatred, caught in the glow of the fire, and saw the black fur of its comrades as they circled Miss Marency. I forced myself to my feet, flinging desperate kicks and punches at my erstwhile captors. They gave way between me and Miss Marency’s torch, then began to rally as we stood back to back.

I raised my fists like a beleaguered prize-fighter. ‘Time to sell our lives dearly, Miss Marency.’

‘I cannot throw away my life fighting monkeys,’ she said determinedly, glaring at the yellow eyes that watched us defiantly as the torch flamed in her slim fist. ‘We have a job to complete. We must find my father’s murderer and bring him back to justice.’

‘What do you suggest?’ I asked tensely. ‘They surround us. We’ve no option than to fight.’ And by G-d, my fighting temper was up.

Her torch roared as she feinted at a black clot of them that were edging closer, and they snarled at bay, while one big brute slashed at her with its wicked talons. I had no weapon now, having lost my assegai in the attack, but I scooped up a smooth rock from the forest floor and flung it at the creature. It struck him in the fanged mouth, knocking him backwards into his fellows.

‘Now!’ Miss Marency cried, seizing my arm and dragging me after her as she ran.

We raced from the clearing and the creatures surged after us. A frightened glance over my shoulder showed them as a cloud of glowing yellow fireflies; only their eyes showed in the darkness of the night. But the needle-strewn ground pounded to their clawed feet. Miss Marency’s torch blazed and roared beside us as we ran, and in its streaming light I saw some of

our pursuers drawing closer, some trotting on all fours like true beasts, some running on their back legs as if they were men.

We turned a corner and found ourselves running down a path towards the water's edge. I remembered that last time we had escaped the creatures by crossing the river, although some had swum after us. But the waters, lit dimly by the stars, were still wide and deep and dark as they flowed past the cliffs on the far side.

Miss Marency halted on the bank, looking back over her shoulder. There was no sign of our pursuers yet, but they must be on our trail. I assumed that, being animals, they could follow our scent.

'There's no way across the water,' I observed, strangely calm. 'No further shore; it's solid rock.'

'Then we must keep going,' said Miss Marency, and I heard the sound of movement from the way we had come. It was accompanied by a growing rank odour.

'Keep going?' I tried to conceal the panic in my voice. 'Going where?'

She gestured along the bank, to where a path was dimly visible, winding among the rocks. 'This way,' she said. 'Upriver. We must keep going towards the city.' As she spoke, the moon rose over the canyon wall and its light silvered the trail.

We sped in that direction, and soon the spot where we had halted was out of view around a bend in the river. A wall of spray was visible in the distance, and moonbows shone through it. We had to raise our voices over a roar of water, and the going was difficult across slimy rocks. At last we turned another corner and saw ahead of us a great spreading pool of frothing water into which plunged the high, broad waterfall that was the source of the spray.

Miss Marency hurried to the foot of the overgrown cliff beside the falls. 'Up here,' she shouted, gesturing to a winding path that led from rocky overgrown outcrop to rocky overgrown outcrop. It was wet with spray, and I would not have liked to chance it in daylight, let alone in the hazy light of the new risen moon.

'We can't climb up there!' I protested, as she hauled herself up by clinging onto the wet vegetation. 'All you'd need to do is slip once and you'd fall into...that!' I gestured at the spreading pool of water below the falls, a maelstrom of white foam. I looked back to see that she had not heard me, and was already ascending. About twenty feet above, she paused and looked back at me. I waved at her to come down again. In response, she gestured wildly behind me.

I wheeled round to see, flooding round the moonlit bend in the river, a black mass that could only be our pursuers.

Under this spur, I began my ascent. The wet rocks made precarious footholds, the dripping vegetation was equally untrustworthy. The cliffs rose high up into the cold night air, and the more I climbed, the higher they seemed to grow. All I could see of Miss Marency was a moving

darkness black against the stars. Every time I looked back, I could see the creatures coming after us. They seemed to ascend the wet rocks with a nimbleness I was entirely lacking.

At last I came level with Miss Marency. 'There's no stopping them,' I gasped, looking back down into the dizzying, spray filled abyss where dark things moved. 'Are we ever going to escape them?'

She looked at me and I saw that fire blazing in her moonlit eyes. 'We must,' she said. 'Beyond the falls lies the road to the city. It is there that I will find what I am looking for.'

Somehow, I knew that she did not mean McAllister.

She kept climbing. I was flagging, weary to the bone. This ascent was insane: without ropes, without equipment, no Alpinist would have considered it. The path I had seen at the foot of the cliff had vanished in the darkness and now we were leaping from rock to wet rock, clambering higher and higher. I was obsessed by the idea that one slip would precipitate me into the pool far below. After a while I stopped looking down, stopped looking up, focused wholly on the climb. But my arms and legs were on fire with pain, and despite the roar of the falls I knew that I could hear the creatures drawing closer and ever closer. It was only a matter of time before they reached us. Perhaps if we had climbed to the top by then we could hope to fight them off, but as soon as one reached us on this cliff, they could just pluck us off and cast us into the abyss.

The climb seemed never-ending. But at last, my groping hand found only empty air, and I looked up to see Miss Marency crouching, bow in hand, on the lip of rock beyond which was...nothing. We had reached the top. The great apes were far behind us. Now perhaps we could run and hide. But why was Miss Marency reaching for an arrow from her belt?

I hauled myself up to join her then halted, and gave a despairing cry.

Ringed around us in a semi-circle on the edge of a wide, moonlit plain of sand and thorn bushes was a group of painted Negro warriors. They were clad in skins. In their hands they held flintlock muskets.

The muskets were trained on us.

Chapter Twelve

Through the plain wound the River Nago like a ribbon of silver. Beyond towered the smoking peak of a volcano. And on the mountain slopes, I saw silhouetted against the stars a city of spires and columns. It must be Nkume! And this land must be the place the Arabs called Balad 'Abu Al'Akadhib. But between us and the city stood the Negroes. And behind us yawned the abyss, and up it were climbing the great apes.

The bearded man at the head of the war party barked something in a guttural tongue, gesturing for us to follow him. Miss Marency and I exchanged puzzled glances. Two more warriors came

forwards and hustled us away. Another went to the head of the cliff and peered down. He turned and spoke urgently to the bearded man, who was clearly the chief, his face creased with worry.

The bearded chief gave instructions. One of the warriors produced a stinking bundle from a bag, a rotting lump of flesh, perhaps hippopotamus meat, which he dragged along the ground behind him as he scuttled towards the banks of the river. As he vanished in that direction, the bearded man and his other warriors led us over the stony ground in the other direction. We took a strange and circuitous route that avoided any areas of soft earth or sand.

We reached the thorns that crowned the northern ridge and vanished into the withered, dry forest, where the air hung thick with dust.

Looking back, I caught a glimpse of the black furry great apes swarming over the cliff. As I watched they charged down the river banks in pursuit of the man who had split off from the main party. One of the warriors struck me and forced me onwards,

Miss Marency spoke with the chief, trying several native lingos by the sound of it, until she provoked a response from him, which was curt and to the point. He and his musketeers hustled us onwards, leading us so deep into the thorn forests that we lost all sight of the moonlit river and our pursuers.

‘You can speak to them?’ I gasped as we were forced along at a pace that sent shooting pains through my already aching thighs.

She nodded quickly. ‘They speak a very old, pure form of Nago,’ she told me. ‘From the little I have heard, it compares with the tongue spoken down in the veldt much as Chaucerian English does to our modern form.’

‘Where are they taking us?’ I asked. ‘Are they in league with the great apes?’

But before I could receive an answer, a musket butt across my shoulders dissuaded me from any further inquiries.

At last the thorn forest petered out and we halted at the edge of a fertile valley. On the far side loomed a line of broken down cliffs. Our bearded leader’s painted face was creased in uncertainty. The whole area was seemingly deserted, but from his manner I could tell that he distrusted appearances. He pointed to two men. They hastened down the path and into the open fields, throwing questioning looks about them as they went. But nothing came to meet them.

The scouts returned, the chief spoke with them in an undertone. Then he gestured to the rest of us to advance at once, and we came out into the fields, which sloped down to the river. As we began to cross, a dark figure came running up from the direction of the riverbank.

Warriors lifted their muskets in automatic reflex. But the bearded man hissed something and waved an arm, and the muskets lowered.

The figure reached us, and I saw that it was the warrior who had left when we were still at the head of the falls. The bearded man spoke curtly with him and he replied in staccato fashion. The bearded man nodded, then gestured for us to move.

We crossed the moon-washed fields at a jog trot. The cliffs were curiously regular, moss-grown, hung with vines and lianas, fringed with ferns. Through a ravine in the cliffs the bearded man led us, scrambling over a sea of mossy rocks. Beyond the wall we found a jungle where trees and bushes grew on great hummocks and banks, where a ripe odour of rot competed with the sweet scent of jungle blooms. Again, I could see how travellers could have mistaken this place for a city. But where then were the warriors leading us? All I could see was a jungle fit only for the habitation of apes.

And yet people did live there. It was not uninhabited, I learnt, as we followed a path through the jungle into a broad clearing. The trees had been felled and here stood a native settlement.

‘Is this the city of Nkume then?’ I asked Miss Marency. ‘Your father’s famous discovery; an African kraal?’

She gave me an impatient look. ‘The city is all around us,’ she said, pointing. I followed her gaze and saw that amid the trees on one side stood the pillars of a moss grown, liana hung colonnade.

Eyes wide, I looked about. It resolved itself until it was crystal clear. It was uncannily like viewing a Monet painting. What had seemed like virgin jungle was a green carpet covering a city.

A city of ruins, villas and temples and palaces all in ruins, broken walls standing proud amidst jungle trees and overgrown rubble. On the far side of the clearing, several huge buildings stood among the trees still unbowed by Time, arranged round some kind of depression in the ground, perhaps a chasm from the volcano that loomed blackly beyond the city walls. Otherwise the city was a fallen one, like Babylon or Nineveh.

Across this moonlit, endless, tree infested wasteland of broken dreams and forgotten memories the musket bearing African warriors led us towards the town of Nkume. Little more than a village, really, the settlement was built in traditional African fashion, round, beehive like huts of wattle and daub thatched with reeds or grasses; like the homes of our own Anglo-Saxon ancestors, centuries ago.

And like those Early English dwellings, they were built in the ruins of an older, and far greater civilisation. A civilisation that had fallen long ago.

Past recumbent cyclopean statues we marched, whose mossy eyes gazed out unseeingly at their fallen empire, heroes of a time before time, before history was dreamed of. An atmosphere of antiquity hung over those jungle ruins. I could not understand how any man could live there without every day feeling bowed down by the crushing weight of that oppressive sensation of aeons lost before time began.

A *boma* of unshaped trunks surrounded the settlement, and large gates of mammoth ivory stood closed, their posts topped by the gleaming skulls of men. But our captors did not take us directly to the gates, but rather round by the side out of sight of the main huts, where a gap in the palisade allowed us to enter one by one, at a crouch. Half the war party entered ahead of us, then I followed Miss Marency, and the rest, with the bearded man amongst them, brought up the rear.

We passed by an enclosure where lowing forms wafted the warm, sweet, sickly smell of cattle, then crossed a dusty lane and entered the purlieu of what by its size and the height of its reed thatched roof must be a paramount chieftain's hut. The moonlit lanes of the town were deserted, but in the primitive colonnade before the great wicker gates of this great hut stood two silent black figures, holding muskets at the rest, and looking ostentatiously away.

Our captors urged us past them and the bearded man threw open the gates to reveal a firelit interior, where ruddy gleams glinted from black skin and white eyes rolled as many Negroes squatted in the shadows, silently observing our entrance. Before us, in an open space by the fire, stood a stool of ivory, spread with the skins of lion and leopard. Sitting in silence upon the stool in the midst of this barbaric splendour was a young girl, clad in green brocade and an African pillbox hat that glittered with diamonds.

As I stood with Miss Marency at my side, I began to see more glitterings amidst the gloom. On the clothes of the musket bearing guards, on the roughhewn wooden pillars of the hut, on jewels and trinkets. And on Miss Marency's earrings.

At the girl's side stood a tall, emaciated old black who wore a plumed headdress. Seeing Miss Marency, he took a long stride to stand in front of her, and before I could react, ripped the diamonds from my fair companion's ears.

As Miss Marency clutched in sudden pain at her torn flesh I shouted something and flung myself at the man. Before I could strike the boulder, more Negroes with sinews of steel seized me and hauled me back.

Silence fell on the hut again as the girl rose to her feet. She carried a feather bedecked staff in her left hand and with this she pointed at the man who had attacked Miss Marency. She spoke in a soft but commanding voice. The man stammered an excuse, but the girl was unrelenting. She spoke again, pointing at Miss Marency and myself, and the man flung the diamonds down at her feet. Then the bearded man and the others who had brought us here hustled us once more from the hut.

Outside, in the cattle stench and drifting dust of the dark village, stood a small hut on the edge of the *boma*. Here more guards stood watch, clutching flintlocks. On our approach, they challenged us. The bearded man replied in a low voice, and one guard unlocked and flung open the hut doors, while the other kept his musket trained on the yawning maw of darkness revealed. Miss Marency and I were pushed inside, and the door slammed behind us.

I heard the jingle of keys as the guard locked it behind us, then the tramp of feet as the warriors marched off into the night.

The hut stank. At first, I couldn't place the smell, although it seemed oddly familiar. Our cell's peculiar ambience was not my priority, however.

'Miss Marency,' I hissed. 'Are you alright?'

'I've had my ears ripped to shreds,' she said, 'and now I'm a prisoner. My only condolence is knowing that I have so gallant a gentleman as my companion.'

I gulped, startled by her frankness. Or was Miss Marency being sardonic? This young woman was difficult to understand at times.

Sighing, I sat back against the wattle and daub wall of the hut and wondered what our next move should be. Even as I did so, I heard something stir in the darkness. I peered into the shadows but saw nothing.

Then I saw the flare of a match before me. A flame flickered into life, illuminating the hut, its highlights tracing out a face. A familiar face. And it was a familiar voice that murmured, as its owner put the match to the bowl of its pipe, 'How very touching. Really, Watson, what kept you? And what the Devil are the pair of you wearing?'

It was Sherlock Holmes.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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[Return to Contents](#)

THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Twelve

Ward found himself in the shadowed walkway between his ship and Karl Stoff's. He gave one quick glance to his left as he stepped out of his ship, then another to the right.

Nothing moved.

Ward had stepped down onto a grated deck, one punctuated with triangle-shaped holes. Those who walked upon these decks inserted the triangle-shaped rising at the toe of their boots into those holes. This expedient was common on many of the older ships, a relatively inexpensive way to counter the inconveniences of weightlessness, especially on the longer trips through space.

Learning to walk on these grated floors took some practice. Ward was quite skilled at it and, having been advised beforehand by Kharl Stoff to expect these grated floors, Ward outfitted himself with the proper boots. Ward followed the walkway to the nose of his ship.

There, he saw a dim light shining from behind the dark hulk of Kharl Stoff's craft. The light moved about uncertainly, as if the source of the light was being held in an unsteady hand.

Without speaking, Ward hurried toward the light. He came to the head of Stoff's ship and stopped. Listening intently, Ward caught the sounds of whispered orders.

"Uh-huh," Ward grunted.

He stepped directly out of the shadow.

"Where's Stoff?" he asked of the dim figures standing in the uncertain light.

"Right here," he answered.

He pulled away from the group, and strode up to Ward.

"You do best to keep yer yap shut here," he said to Ward in harsh whisper.

"Thanks for the advice," Ward sneered

"Thanks for nuthin'," Stoff spat. "Jus' keep it to what we planned, and we'll be alright."

The 'plan' to which Kharl Stoff referred had it that he and his fellows would march to the cell that Stoff claimed was holding Turhan Mott. Ward was to follow along with Stoff, and to have his pistol ready.

The 'plan', if it could rightly be called that, was vague in its details, and quite intentionally so, as

Kharl Stoff had no intention of carrying it out. Ward himself had noted the lack of specifics in Stoff's plan, which only further confirmed his suspicions.

So now Ward was striding beside Kharl Stoff through darkened, rusted halls. They marched past cages holding shadowy figures, passing under yellow electric lights that flickered. Soft and lightly uttered murmurs of misery came from the cages.

Ward kept himself alert. The tiniest sounds registered with him. Stoff's plan, as Ward had puzzled it out, was to bring him to some especially remote corner of the derelict, and then to swarm him. Blunt, brutal, and exactly the kind of plan Ward should have expected from a man like Stoff.

Ward kept a sharp ear out for any motion coming at him from behind. Only but the soft 'thwop, thwop, thwop' as feet stepped into the triangular holes in the deck. Stoff was taking Ward on a very circuitous path. He might have saved himself the trouble. Ward was not one easily confounded. Through training and long habit, in situations such as this, Carter Ward always counted every step he took. Likewise, he counted every turning he took, either to the left or the right. As he trod the walkway next to Kharl Stoff, he memorized local odours, ambient sounds, and put all these together into so that he had a map firmly and clearly imprinted in his mind.

Stoff took Ward deep into the darkened bowels of the derelict. They came at last to a cage, one of several stacked on each other.

"He's in there," Stoff declared, jerking his thumb at the cage.

Ward didn't flinch.

"So?"

"So go in and bring him outta there,"

"I don't remember that in your plan," Ward said.

"Don't give me any shit. Go get him outta there."

Ward examined the shadow that lay on the floor.

Then he very pointedly looked at the cage itself.

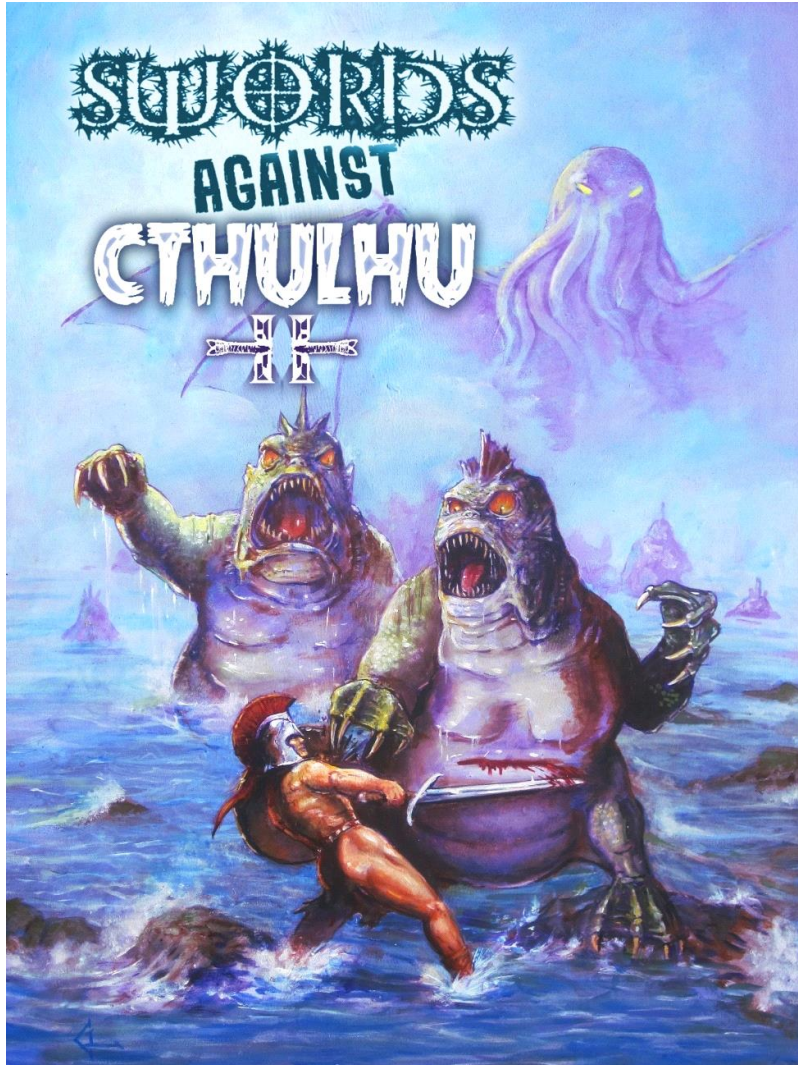
"I don't remember that bein' part of the bargain."

Stoff's hand touched his laser pistol in its holster.

"Just get in the cage, bitch."

The two men who travelled with Kharl Stoff stepped around Ward. They grinned.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



[Return to Contents](#)

ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter XVIII—A Prince's Present.

"This," said my escort, as we dismounted, "is the residence assigned to you by the Camptâ. Besides the grounds here enclosed, he has awarded you, by a deed which will presently be placed in your hands, an estate of some tenstoltau, which you can inspect at your leisure, and which will afford you a revenue as large as is enjoyed by any save by the twelve Regents. He has endeavoured to add to this testimony of his regard by rendering your household as complete as wealth and forethought could make it. What may be wanting to your own tastes and habits you will find no difficulty in adding."

We now entered that first and principal chamber of the mansion wherein it is customary to receive all visitors and transact all business. The hall was one of unusual size and magnificence. Here, at a table not far from the entrance, stood another official, not wearing the uniform of the Court, with several documents in his hand. As he turned to salute me, his face wore an expression of annoyance and discomfiture which not a little surprised me, till, by following his sidelong, uncomfortable glances, I perceived a veiled feminine figure, which could be no other than Eveena's. Misreading my surprise, the official said—

"It is no fault of mine, and I have not spoken except to remonstrate, as far as might be allowed, against so unusual a proceeding."

He must have been astonished and annoyed indeed to take such notice of a stranger's wife; and, above all, to take upon himself to comment on her conduct for good or ill. I thought it best to make no reply, and simply saluted him in form as I received the first paper handed to me, to which, by the absence of any blank space, I perceived that my signature was not required. This was indeed the document which bestowed on me the house and estate presented by the Sovereign. The next paper handed to me appeared to resemble the marriage-contract I had already signed, save that but one blank was left therein. Unable to decipher it, I was about to ask the official to read it aloud, when Eveena, who had stolen up to me unperceived, caught my arm and drew me a little way aside, indifferent to the wondering glances of the officials; who had probably never seen a woman venture uncalled into the public apartments of her husband's house, still less interpose in any matter of business, and no doubt thought that she was taking outrageous advantage of my ignorance and inexperience.

"I will scold you presently, child," I said quickly and low. "What is it?"

"Sign at once," she whispered, "and ask no questions. Deal with me as you will afterwards. You must take what is given you now, without comment or objection, simply expressing your thanks."

"Must! Eveena?"

"It is not safe to refuse or slight gifts from such a quarter," she answered, in the same low tone. "Trust me so far; please do what I entreat of you now. I must bear your displeasure if I fail to

satisfy you when we are alone.”

Her manner was so agitated and so anxious that it recalled to me at once the advice of Esmo upon the same point, though the fears which had prompted so strange an intervention were wholly incomprehensible to me. I knew her, however, by this time too well to refuse the trust she now for the first time claimed, and taking the documents one by one as if I had perfectly understood them, I wrote my name in the space left blank for it, and allowed the official to stamp the slips without a word. I then expressed briefly but earnestly my thanks both to the Autocrat and to the officials who had been the agents of his kindness. They retired, and I looked round for Eveena; but as soon as she saw that I was about to comply with her request, she had quitted the room. Alone in my own house, knowing nothing of its geography, having no notion how to summon the brute domestics—if, indeed, the dwelling were furnished with those useful creatures, without whom a Martial household would be signally incomplete—I could only look for the spring that opened the principal door. This should lead into the gallery which, as I judged, must divide the hall and the front apartments from those looking into the peristyle. Having found and pressed this spring, the door opened on a gallery longer, wider, and more elaborately ornamented than that of the only Martial mansions into which I had been hitherto admitted. Looking round in no little perplexity, I observed a niche in which stood a statue of white relieved by a scarlet background; and beside this statue, crouching and half hidden, a slight pink object, looking at first like a bundle of drapery, but which in a moment sprang up, and, catching my hand, made me aware that Eveena had been waiting for me.

“I beg you,” she said with an earnestness I could not understand, “I beg you to come this way,” leading me to the right, for I had turned instinctively to the left in entering the gallery, perhaps because my room in Esmo’s house had lain in that direction. Reaching the end of the gallery, she turned into one of the inner apartments; and as the door closed behind us, I felt that she was sinking to the ground, as if the agitation she had manifested in the hall, controlled till her object was accomplished, had now overpowered her. I caught and carried her to the usual pile of cushions in the corner. The room, according to universal custom in Martial houses after sunset, was brilliantly lighted by the electric lamp in the peristyle, and throwing back her veil, I saw that she was pale to ghastliness and almost fainting. In my ignorance of my own house, I could call for no help, and employ no other restoratives than fond words and caresses. Under this treatment, nevertheless, she recovered perhaps as quickly as under any which the faculty might have prescribed. She was, still, however, much more distressed than mere consciousness of the grave solecism she had committed could explain. But I had no other clue to her trouble, and could only hope that in repudiating this she would explain its real cause.

“Come, bambina!” I expostulated, “we understand one another too well by this time for you to wrong me by all this alarm. I know that you would not have broken through the customs of your people without good reason; and you know that, even if your reason were not sufficient, I should not be hard upon the error.”

“I am sure you would not,” she said. “But this time you have to consider others, and you cannot let it be supposed that you do not know a wife’s duty, or will allow your authority to be set at naught in your own household.”

“What matter? Do you suppose I listen in the roads?” [care for gossip], I rejoined. “Household rule is a matter of the veil, and no one—not even your autocratic Prince—will venture to lift it.”

“You have not lifted it yourself yet,” she answered. “You will understand me, when you have looked at the slips you were about to make them read aloud, had I not interrupted you.”

“Read them yourself,” I said, handing to her the papers I still held, and which, after her interposition, I had not attempted to decipher. She took them, but with a visible shudder of reluctance—not stronger than came over me before she had read three lines aloud. Had I known their purport, I doubt whether even Eveena’s persuasion and the Autocrat’s power together could have induced me to sign them. They were in very truth contracts of marriage—if marriage it can be called. The Sovereign had done me the unusual, but not wholly unprecedented, favour of selecting half a dozen of the fairest maidens of those waiting their fate in the Nurseries of his empire; had proffered on my behalf terms which satisfied their ambition, gratified their vanity, and would have induced them to accept any suitor so recommended, without the insignificant formality of a personal courtship. It had seemed to him only a gracious attention to complete my household; and he had furnished me with a bevy of wives, as I presently found he had selected a complete set of the most intelligent amlau, carvee, and tyree which he could procure. Without either the one or the other, the dwelling he had given me would have seemed equally empty or incomplete.

This mark of royal favour astounded and dismayed me more than Eveena herself. If she had entertained the wish, she would hardly have acknowledged to herself the hope, that she might remain permanently the sole partner of my home. But so sudden, speedy, and wholesale an intrusion thereon she certainly had not expected. Even in Mars, a first bride generally enjoys for some time a monopoly of her husband’s society, if she cannot be said to enchain his affection. It was hard, indeed, before the thirtieth day after her marriage, to find herself but one in a numerous family—the harder that our union had from the first been close, intimate, unrestrainedly confidential, as it can hardly be where neither expects that the tie can remain exclusive; and because she had learned to realise and rest upon such love as belongs to a life in which woman, never affecting the independence of coequal partnership, has never yet sunk by reaction into a mere slave and toy. It was hard, cruelly hard, on one who had given in the first hour of marriage, and never failed to give, a love whose devotion had no limit, no reserve or qualification; a submission that was less self-sacrifice or self-suppression than the absolute surrender of self—of will, feeling, and self-interest—to the judgment and pleasure of him she loved: hard on her who had neither thought nor care for herself as apart from me.

When I understood to what I had actually committed myself, I snatched the papers from her, and might have torn them to pieces but for the gentle restraining hand she laid upon mine.

“You cannot help it,” she said, the tears falling from her eyes, but with a self-command of which I could not have supposed her capable. “It seems hard on me; but it is better so. It is not that you are not content with me, not that you love me less. I can bear it better when it comes from a stranger, and is forced upon you without, and even, I think, against your will.”

The pressure of the arm that clasped her waist, and the hand that held her own, was a sufficient

answer to any doubt that might be implied in her last words; and, lifting her eyes to mine, she said—

“I shall always remember this. I shall always think that you were sorry not to have at least a little while longer alone with me. It is selfish to feel glad that you are pained; but your sympathy, your sharing my own feeling, comforts me as I never could have been comforted when, as must have happened sooner or later, you had found for yourself another companion.”

“Child, do you mean to say there is ‘no portal to this passage;’ and that, however much against my will, I am bound to women I have never seen, and never wish to see?”

“You have signed,” replied Eveena gently. “The contracts are stamped, and are in the official’s hands; and you could not attempt to break them without giving mortal offence to the Prince, who has intended you a signal favour. Besides, these girls themselves have done no wrong, and deserve no affront or unkindness from you.”

I was silent for some minutes; at first simply astounded at the calm magnanimity which was mingled with her perfect simplicity, then, pondering the possibilities of the situation—

“Can we not escape?” I said at last, rather to myself than to her.

“Escape!” she repeated with surprise. “And from what? The favour shown you by our Sovereign, the wealth he has bestowed, the personal interest he has taken in perfecting every detail of one of the most splendid homes ever given save to a prince—every incident of your position—make you the most envied man in this world; and you would escape from them?”

Gazing for a few moments in my face, she added—

“These maidens were chosen as the loveliest in all the Nurseries of two continents; every one of them far more beautiful than I can be, even in your eyes. Pray do not, for my sake, be unkind to them or try to dislike them. What is it you would escape?”

“Being false to you,” I answered, “if nothing else.”

“False!” she echoed, in unaffected wonder. “What did you promise me?”

Again I was silenced by the loyal simplicity with which she followed out ideas so strange to me that their consequences, however logical, I could never anticipate; and could hardly admit to be sound, even when so directly and distinctly deduced as now from the intolerable consistency of the premises.

“But,” I answered at last, “how much did you promise, Eveena? and how much more have you given?”

“Nothing,” she replied, “that I did not owe. You won your right to all the love I could give before you asked for it, and since.”

“We ‘drive along opposite lines,’ Madonna; but we would both give and risk much to avoid what is before us. Let me ask your father whether it be not yet possible to return to my vessel, and leave a world so uncongenial to both of us.”

“You cannot!” she answered. “Try to escape—you insult the Prince; you put yourself and me, for whom you fear more, in the power of a malignant enemy. You cannot guide a balloon or a vessel, if you could get possession of one; and within a few hours after your departure was known, every road and every port would be closed to you.”

“Can I not send to your father?” I said.

“Probably,” she replied. “I think we shall find a telegraph in your office, if you will allow me to enter there, now there is no one to see; and it must be morning in Ecasfe.”

Familiar with the construction and arrangement of a Martial house, Eveena immediately crossed the gallery to what she called the office—the front room on the right, where the head of the house carries on his work or study. Here, above a desk attached to the wall, was one of those instruments whose manipulation was simple enough for a novice like myself.

“But,” I said, “I cannot write your stylic characters; and if I used the phonic letters, a message from me would be very likely to excite the curiosity of officials who would care about no other.”

“May I,” she suggested, “write your message for you, and put your purport in words that will be understood by my father alone?”

“Do,” I rejoined, “but do it in my name, and I will sign it.”

Under her direction, I took the stylus or pencil and the slip of tafroo she offered me, and wrote my name at the head. After eliciting the exact purport of the message I desired to send, and meditating for some moments, she wrote and read out to me words literally translated as follows:
—

“The rich aviary my flower-bird thought over full. I would breathe home [air]. Health-speak.”
The sense of which, as I could already understand, was—

“A splendid mansion has been given us, but my flower-bird has found it too full. I wish for my native air. Prescribe.”

The brevity of the message was very characteristic of the language. Equally characteristic of the stylography was the fact that the words occupied about an inch beyond the address. Following her pencil as she pointed to the ciphers, I said—

“Is not asny caré a false concord? And why have you used the past tense?”

This ill-timed pedantry, applying to Martial grammar the rules of that with which my boyhood

had been painfully familiarised, provoked, amid all our trouble, Eveena's low silver-toned laugh.

"I meant it," she answered. "My father will look at his pupil's writing with both eyes."

"Well, you are out of reach even of the leveloo."

She laughed again.

"Asnyca-re," she said; the changed accentuation turning the former words into the well-remembered name of my landing-place, with the interrogative syllable annexed.

This message despatched, we could only await the reply. Nestling among the cushions at my knee, her head resting on my breast, Eveena said—

"And now, forgive my presumption in counselling you, and my reminding you of what is painful to both. But what to us is as the course of the clock, is strange as the stars to you. You must see—they, and must order all household arrangements; and" (glancing at a dial fixed in the wall) "the black is driving down the green."

"So much the better," I said. "I shall have less time to speak to them, and less chance of speaking or looking my mind. And as to arrangements, those, of course, you must make."

"I! forgive me," she answered, "that is impossible. It is for you to assign to each of us her part in the household, her chamber, her rank and duties. You forget that I hold exactly the same position with the youngest among them, and cannot presume even to suggest, much less to direct."

I was silent, and after a pause she went on—

"It is not for me to advise you; but"—

"Speak your thought, now and always, Eveena. Even if I did not stand in so much need of your guidance in a new world, I never yet refused to hear counsel; and it is a wife's right to offer it."

"Is it? We are not so taught," she answered. "I am afraid you have rougher ground to steer over than you are aware. Alone with you, I hope I should have done my best, remembering the lesson of the leveloo, never to give you the pain of teaching a different one. But we shall no longer be alone; and you cannot hope to manage seven as you might manage one. Moreover, these girls have neither had that first experience of your nature which made that lesson so impressive to me, nor the kindly and gentle training, under a mother's care and a father's mild authority, that I had enjoyed. They would not understand the control that is not enforced. They will obey when they must; and will feel that they must obey when they cannot deceive, and dare not rebel. Do not think hardly of them for this. They have known no life but that of the strict clockwork routine of a great Nursery, where no personal affection and no rule but that of force is possible."

"I understand, Madonna. Your Prince's gift puts a man in charge of young ladies, hitherto brought up among women only, and, of course, petty, petulant, frivolous, as women left to

themselves ever are! I wish you could see the ridiculous side of the matter which occurs to me, as I see the painful aspect which alone is plain to you. I can scarcely help laughing at the chance which has assigned to me the daily personal management of half-a-dozen school-girls; and school-girls who must also be wives! I don't think you need fear that I shall deal with them as with you: as a man of sense and feeling must deal with a woman whose own instincts, affection, and judgment are sufficient for her guidance. I never saw much of girls or children. I remember no home but the Western school and the Oriental camp. I never, as soldier or envoy, was acquainted with other men's homes. While still beardless, I have ruled bearded soldiers by a discipline whose sanctions were the death-shot and the bastinado; and when I left the camp and court, it was for colleges where a beardless face is never seen. I must look to you to teach me how discipline may be softened to suit feminine softness, and what milder sanction may replace the noose and the stick of the ferash" (Persian executioner).

"I cannot believe," Eveena answered, taking me, as usual, to the letter, "that you will ever draw the zone too tight. We say that 'anarchy is the worst tyranny.' Laxity which leaves us to quarrel and torment each other, tenderness which encourages disorder and disobedience till they must be put down perforce, is ultimate unkindness. I will not tell you that such indulgence will give you endless trouble, win you neither love nor respect, and probably teach its objects to laugh at you under the veil. You will care more for this—that you would find yourself forced at last to change 'velvet hand for leathern band.' Believe me, my—our comfort and happiness must depend on your grasping the helm at once and firmly; ruling us, and ruling with a strong hand. Otherwise your home will resemble the most miserable of all scenes of discomfort—an ungoverned school; and the most severe and arbitrary household rule is better by far than that. And—forgive me once more—but do not speak as if you would deal one measure with the left hand and another with the right. Surely you do not so misunderstand me as to think I counselled you to treat myself differently from others? 'Just rule only can be gentle.' If you show favouritism at first, you will find yourself driven step by step to do what you will feel to be cruel; what will pain yourself perhaps more than anyone else. You may make envy and dislike bite (hold) their tongues, but you cannot prevent their stinging under the veil. Therefore, once more, you cannot let my interference pass as if none but you knew of it."

"Madonna, if I am to rule such a household, I will rule as absolutely as your autocratic Prince. I will tolerate no criticism and no questions."

"You surely forget," she urged, "that they know my offence, and do not know—must not know—what in your judgment excuses it. Let them once learn that it is possible so to force the springs [bolts] without a sting, it will take a salt-fountain [of tears] to blot the lesson from their memory."

"What would you have, Eveena? Am I to deal unjustly that I may seem just? That course steers straight to disaster. And, had you been in fault, could, I humble you in other eyes?"

"If I feel hurt by any mark of your displeasure, or humbled that it should be known to my equals in your own household," she replied, "it is time I were deprived of the privileges that have rendered me so overweening."

My answer was intercepted by the sound of an electric bell or miniature gong, and a slip of tafroo fell upon the desk. The first words were in that vocal character which I had mastered, and came from Esmo.

“Hysterical folly,” he had said. “Mountain air might be fatal; and clear nights are dangerously cold for more than yourselves.”

“What does he mean?” I asked, as I read out a formula more studiously occult than those of the Pharmacopoeia.

“That I am unpardonably silly, and that you must not dream of going back to your vessel. The last words, I suppose, warn you how carefully in such a household you need to guard the secrets of the Starlight.”

“Well, and what is this in the stylic writing?”

Eveena glanced over it and coloured painfully, the tears gathering in her eyes.

“That,” she said, pointing to the first cipher, “is my mother’s signature.”

“Then,” I said, “it is meant for you, not for me.”

“Nay,” she answered. “Do you think I could take advantage of your not knowing the character?”—and she read words quite as incomprehensible to me as the writing itself.

“Can a star mislead the blind? I should veil myself in crimson if I have trained a bird to snatch sugar from full hands. Must even your womanhood reverse the clasps of your childhood?”

“It chimes midnight twice,” I said—a Martial phrase meaning, ‘I am as much in the dark as ever.’ “Do not translate it, carissima. I can read in your face that it is unjust—reproachful where you deserve no reproach.”

“Nay, when you so wrong my mother I must tell you exactly what she means: —‘Can a child of the Star take advantage of one who relies on her to explain the customs of a world unknown to him? I blush to think that my child can abuse the tenderness of one who is too eager to indulge her fancies.’

“You see she is quite right. You do trust me so absolutely, you are so strangely over-kind to me, it is shameful I should vex you by fretting because you are forced to do what you might well have done at your own pleasure.”

“My own, I was more than vexed; chiefly perhaps for your sake, but not by you. Where any other woman would have stung the sore by sending fresh sparks along the wire, you thought only to spare me the pain of seeing you pained. But what do the last words mean? No”—for I saw the colour deepen on her half-averted face— “better leave unread what we know to be written in error.”

But the less agreeable a supposed duty, the more resolute was Eveena to fulfil it.

“They were meant to recall a saying familiar in every school and household,” she said: —

“Sandal loosed and well-clasped zone—
Childhood spares the woman grown.
Change the clasps, and woman yet
Pays with interest childhood’s debt.”

“This”—tightening and relaxing the clasp of her zone— “is the symbol of stricter or more indulgent household rule.” Then bending so as to avert her face, she unclasped her embroidered sandal and gave it into my hand; — “and this is what, I suppose, you would call its sanction.”

“There is more to be said for the sandal than I supposed, bambina, if it have helped to make you what you are. But you may tell Zulve that its work and hers are done.”

Kneeling before her, I kissed, with more studied reverence than the sacred stone of the Caaba, the tiny foot on which I replaced its covering.

“Baby as she thinks and I call you, Eveena, you are fast unteaching me the lesson which, before you were born and ever since, the women of the Earth have done their utmost to impress indelibly upon my mind—the lesson that woman is but a less lovable, more petulant, more deeply and incurably spoilt child. Your mother’s reproach is an exact inversion of the truth. No one could have acted with more utter unselfishness, more devoted kindness, more exquisite delicacy than you have shown in this miserable matter. I could not have believed that even you could have put aside your own feelings so completely, could have recognised so promptly that I was not in fault, have thought so exclusively of what was best and safe for me in the first place, and next of what was kind and just and generous to your rivals. I never thought such reasonableness and justice possible to feminine nature; and if I cannot love you more dearly, you have taught me how deeply to admire and honour you. I accept the situation, since you will have it so; be as just and considerate henceforward as you have been to-night, and trust me that it shall bring no shadow between us—shall never make you less to me than you are now.”

“But it must,” she insisted. “I cannot now be other than one wife among many; and what place I hold among them is, remember, for you and you alone to fix. No rule, no custom, obliges you to give any preference in form or fact to one, merely because you chanced to marry her first.”

“Such, nevertheless, did not seem to be the practice in your father’s house. Your mother was as distinctly wife and mistress as if his sole companion.”

“My father,” she replied, “did not marry a second time till within my own memory; and it was natural and usual to give the first place to one so much older and more experienced. I have no such claim, and when you see my companions you may find good reason to think that I am the least fit of all to take the first place. Nor,” she added, drawing me from the room, “do I wish it. If only you will keep in your mind one little place for the memory of our visit to your vessel and

your promise respecting it, I shall be more than content.”

Eveena’s humble, unconscious self-abnegation was rendering the conversation intolerably painful, and even the embarrassing situation now at hand was a welcome interruption. Eveena paused before a door opening from the gallery into one of the rooms looking on the peristyle.

“You will find them there,” she said, drawing back.

“Come with me, then,” I answered; and as she shrank away, I tightened my clasp of her waist and drew her forward. The door opened, and we found ourselves in presence of six veiled ladies in pink and silver, all of them, with one exception, a little taller and less slight than my bride. Eveena, with the kindness which never failed under the most painful trial or the most powerful impulses of natural feeling, extricated herself gently from my hold, took the hand of the first, and brought her up to me. The girl was evidently startled at the first sight of her new possessor, and alarmed by a figure so much larger and more powerful than any she had ever seen, exceeding probably the picture drawn by her imagination.

“This,” said Eveena gently and gravely, “is Eunané, the prettiest and most accomplished scholar in her Nursery.”

As I was about to acknowledge the introduction with the same cold politeness with which I should have bowed to a strange guest on Earth, Eveena took my left hand in her own and laid it on the maiden’s veil, recalling to me at once the proprieties of the occasion and the justice she had claimed for her unoffending and unintentional rivals; but at the same time bringing back in full force a remembrance she could not have forgotten, but whose effect upon myself the ideas to which she was habituated rendered her unable to anticipate. To accept in her presence a second bride, by the same ceremonial act which had so lately asserted my claim to herself, was intensely repugnant to my feelings, and only her own self-sacrificing influence could have overcome my reluctance. My hesitation was, I fear, perceptible to Eunané; for, as I removed her veil and head-dress, her expression and a colour somewhat brighter than that of mere maiden shyness indicated disappointment or mortified pride. She was certainly very beautiful, and perhaps, had I now seen them both for the first time, I might have acquiesced in the truth of Eveena’s self-depreciation. As it was, nothing could associate with the bright intelligent face, the clear grey eyes and light brown hair, the lithe active form instinct with nervous energy, that charm which from our first acquaintance their expression of gentle kindness, and, later, the devoted affection visible in every look, had given to Eveena’s features.

It is, I suppose, hardly natural to man to feel actual unkindness towards a young and beautiful girl who has given no personal offence. Having once admitted, the justice of Eveena’s plea, and feeling that she would be more pained by the omission than by the fulfilment of the forms which courtesy and common kindness imperatively demanded, I kissed Eunané’s brow and spoke a few words to her, with as much of tenderness as I could feel or affect for Eveena’s rival, after what had passed to endear Eveena more than ever. The latter waited a little, to allow me spontaneously to perform the same ceremony with the other girls; but seeing my hesitation, she came forward again and presented severally four others—Enva (“Snow” = Blanche), Leenoo (“Rose”), Eiralé, Elfé, all more or less of the usual type of female beauty in Mars, with long full tresses varying in

tinge from flax to deep gold or the lightest brown; each with features almost faultless, and with all the attraction (to me unfailing) possessed for men who have passed their youth by *la beauté du Diable*—the bloom of pure graceful girlhood. Eivé, the sixth of the party, standing on the right of the others, and therefore last in place according to Martial usage, was smaller and slighter than Eveena herself, and made an individual impression on my attention by a manifest timidity and agitation greater than any of the rest had evinced. As I removed her veil I was struck by the total unlikeness which her face and form presented to those I had just saluted. Her hair was so dark as by contrast to seem black; her complexion less fair than those of her companions, though as fair as that of an average Greek beauty; her eyes of deepest brown; her limbs, and especially the hands and feet, marvellously perfect in shape and colour, but in the delicacy and minuteness of their form suggesting, as did all the proportions of her tiny figure, the peculiar grace of childhood; an image in miniature of faultless physical beauty. In Eivé alone of the bevy I felt a real interest; but the interest called forth by a singularly pretty child, in whose expression the first glance discerns a character it will take long to read, rather than that commanded by the charms of earliest womanhood.

When I had completed the ceremonial round, there was a somewhat awkward silence, which Eveena at last broke by suggesting that Eunané should show us through the house, with which she had made the earliest acquaintance. This young girl readily took the lead thus assigned to her, and by some delicate manoeuvre, whose authorship I could not doubt, I found her hand in mine as we made our tour. The number of chambers was much greater than in Esmo's dwelling, the garden of the peristyle larger and more elaborately arranged, if not more beautiful. The ambau were more numerous than even the domestic service of so large a mansion appeared to require. The birds, whose duties lay outside, were by this time asleep on their perches, and we forbore to disturb them. The central chamber of the seraglio, if I may so call it, the largest and midmost of those in the rear of the garden, devoted as of course to the ladies of the household, was especially magnificent.

When we stood in its midst, shy looks askance from all the six betrayed their secret ambition; though Eivé's was but momentary, and so slight that I felt I might have unfairly suspected her of presumption. I left this room, however, in silence, and assigned to each, of my maiden brides, in order as they had been presented to me, the rooms on the left; and then, as we stood once more in the peristyle, having postponed all further arrangements, all distribution of household duties, to the morrow (assigning, however, to Eunané, whose native energy and forwardness had made early acquaintance with the dwelling and its dumb inhabitants, the charge of providing and preparing with their assistance our morning meal), I said, "I have let the business of the evening zyda actually encroach on midnight, and must detain you from your rest no longer. Eveena, you know, I still have need of you."

She was standing at a little distance, next to Eunané; and the latter, with a smile half malicious, half triumphant, whispered something in her ear. There was a suppressed annoyance in Eveena's look which provoked me to interpose. On Earth I should never have been fool enough to meddle in a woman's quarrel. The weakest can take her own part in the warfare of taunt and innuendo, better and more venomously than could dervish, priest, or politician. But Eveena could no more lower herself to the ordinary level of feminine malice than I could have borne to hear her do so; and it was intolerable that one whose sweet humility commanded respect from myself should

submit to slight or sneer from the lips and eyes of petulant girls. Eunané started as I spoke, using that accent which gives its most peremptory force to the Martial imperative. “Repeat aloud what you have chosen to say to Eveena in my presence.”

If the first to express the ill-will excited by Eveena’s evident influence, though exerted in their own behalf, it was less that Eunané surpassed her companions in malice than that they fell short of her in audacity. Her school-mates had found her their most daring leader in mischief, the least reluctant scapegoat when mischief was to be atoned. But she was cowed, partly perhaps by her first collision with masculine authority, partly, I fear, by sheer dread of physical force visibly greater than she had ever known by repute. Perhaps she was too much frightened to obey. At any rate, it was from Eveena, despite her pleading looks, that I extorted an answer. She yielded at last only to that formal imperative which her conscience would not permit her to disobey, and which for the first time I now employed in addressing her.

“Eunané only repeated,” Eveena said, with a reluctance so manifest that one might have supposed her to be the offender, “a school-girl’s proverb: —

“‘Ware the wrath that stands to cool:
Then the sandal shows the rule.’”

The smile that had accompanied the whisper—though not so much suggestive of a woman’s malignity as of a child’s exultation in a companion’s disgrace—gave point and sting to the taunt. It is on chance, I suppose, that the effect of such things depends. Had the saying been thrown at any of Eunané’s equals, I should probably have been inclined to laugh, even if I felt it necessary to reprimand. But, angered at a hint which placed Eveena on their own level, I forgot how far the speaker’s experience and inexperience alike palliated the impertinence. That the insinuation shocked none of those around me was evident. Theirs were not the looks of women, however young and thoughtless, startled by an affront to their sex; but of children amazed at a child’s folly in provoking capricious and irresponsible power. The angry quickness with which I turned to Eunané received a double, though doubly unintentional, rebuke, equally illustrative of Martial ideas and usages. The culprit cowered like a child expecting a brutal blow. A gentle pressure on my left arm evinced the same fear in a quarter from which its expression wounded me deeply. That pressure arrested not, as was intended, my hand, but my voice; and when I spoke the frightened girl looked up in surprise at its measured tones.

“Wrong, and wrong thrice over, Eunané. It is for me to teach you the bad taste of bringing into your new home the ideas and language of school. Meanwhile, in no case would you learn more of my rule than concerned your own fault. Take in exchange for your proverb the kindest I have learned in your language: —

“‘Whispered warnings reach the heart;
Veil the blush and spare the smart.’

“But, happily for you, your taunt had not truth enough to sting; and I can tell the story about which you are unduly curious as frankly as you please. —Let me speak now, Eveena, that I may spare the need to speak again and in another tone. —That Eveena seemed to have put us both in a

false position only convinced me that she had a motive she knew would satisfy me as fully as herself. When I learned what that motive was, I was greatly surprised at her unselfishness and courage. If you threw me your veil to save me from drowning, how would you feel if my first words to you were: —'No one must think I could not swim, therefore even the household must believe you, in unveiling, guilty of an unpardonable fault'? ... Answer me, Eunané."

"I should let you sink next time," she replied, with a pretty half-dubious sauciness, showing that her worst fears at least were relieved.

"Quite right; but you are less generous than Eveena. To hide how I had acted on her advice, she would have had you suppose her guilty. That you might not laugh at my authority, and 'find a dragon in the esve's nest,' she would have had me treat her as guilty."

"But I deserved it. A girl has no right to break the seal in the master's absence," interposed Eveena, much more distressed than gratified by the vindication to which she was so well entitled.

"Let your tongue sleep, Eveena. So [with a kiss] I blot your first miscalculation, Eunané. Earth [the Evening Star of Mars] light your dreams."

It was with visible reluctance that Eveena followed me into the chamber we had last left; and she expostulated as earnestly as her obedience would permit against the fiat that assigned it to her.

"Choose what room you please, then," I said; "but understand that, so far as my will and my trust can make you, you are the mistress here."

"Well, then," she answered, "give me the little octagon beside your own:"—the smallest and simplest, but to my taste the prettiest, room in the house. "I should like to be near you still, if I may; but, believe me, I shall not be frozen (hurt) because you think another hand better able to steer the carriage, if mine may sometimes rest in yours."

Leading her into the room she had chosen, and having installed her among the cushions that were to form her couch, I silenced decisively her renewed protest.

"Let me answer you on this point, once and for ever, Eveena. To me this seems matter of right, not of favour or fitness. But favour and fitness here go with right. I could no more endure to place another before or beside you than I could break the special bond between us, and deny the hope of which the Serpent" (laying my hand on her shoulder-clasp, which, by mere accident, was shaped into a faint resemblance to the mystic coil) "is the emblem; the hope that alone can make such love as ours enduring, or even possible, to creatures that must die. She who knelt with me before the Emerald Throne, who took with me the vows so awfully sanctioned, shall hold the first place in my home as in my heart till the Serpent's promise be fulfilled."

Both were silent for some time, for never could we refer to that Vision—whether an objective fact, or an impression communicated from one spirit to the other by the occult force of intense sympathy—save by such allusion; and the remembrance never failed to affect us both with a feeling too deep for words. Eveena spoke again—

“I am sorry you have so bound yourself; perhaps only because you knew me first. And it shames me to receive fresh proof of your kindness to-night.”

“And why, my own?”

“Do not make me feel,” she said, “that—though the measured sentences you have taught me to call scolding seemed the sharpest of all penances—there is a heavier yet in the silence which withholds forgiveness.”

“What have I yet to forgive, Madonna?”

But Eveena could read my feelings in spite of my words, and knew that the pain she had given was too recent to allow me to misconceive her penitence.

“I ought to say, my interference. It was your right to rule as you chose, and my meddling was a far worse offence than Eunané’s malice. But it was not that you felt too deeply to reprove.”

“True! Eunané hurt me a little; but I expected no such misjudgement from you. By the touch that proved your alarm I know that I gave no cause for it.”

“How so?” she asked in surprise.

“You laid your hand instinctively on my left arm, the one your people use. Had I made the slightest angry gesture, you would have held back my right. Had I deserved that Eveena should think so ill of me—think me capable of doing such dishonour to her presence and to my own roof, which should have protected an equal enemy from that which you feared for a helpless girl? For what you would have checked was such a blow as men deal to men who can strike back; and the hand that had given it would have been unfit to clasp man’s in friendship or woman’s in love. You yourself must have shrunk from its touch.”

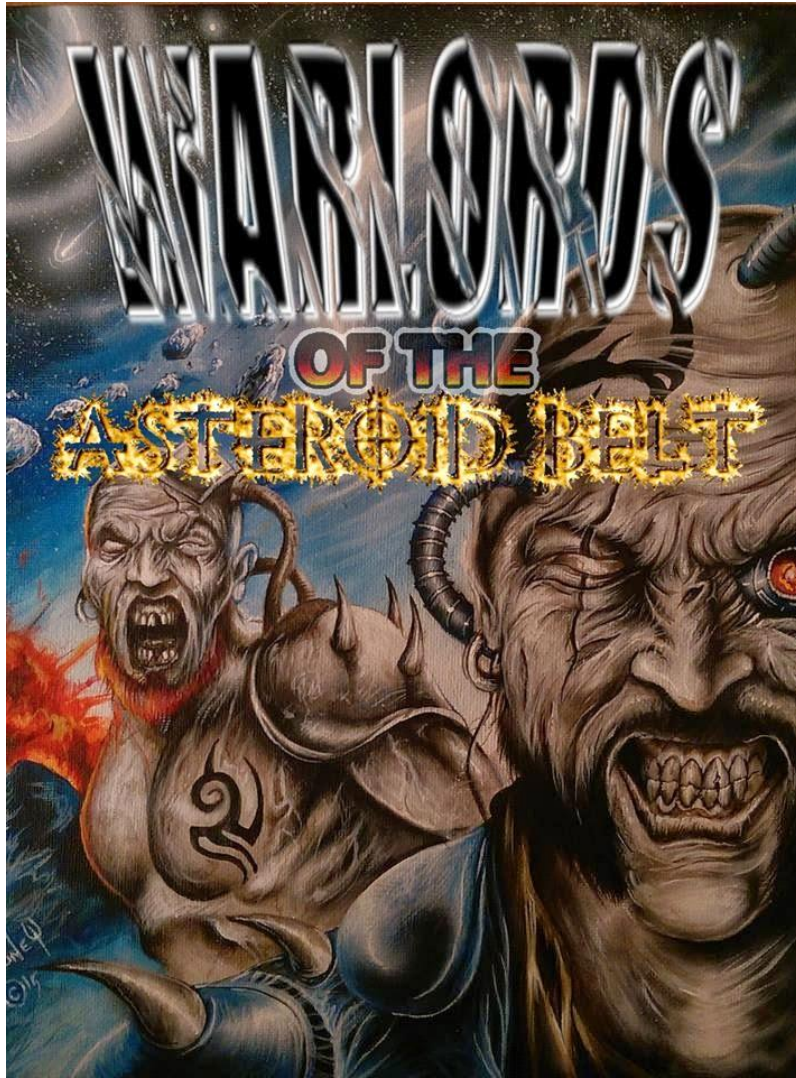
She caught and held it fast to her lips.

“Can I forget that it saved my life? I don’t understand you at all, but I see that I have frozen your heart. I did fancy for one moment you would strike, as passionate men and women often do strike provoking girls, perhaps forgetting your own strength; and I knew you would be miserable if you did hurt her—in that way. The next moment I was ashamed, more than you will believe, to have wronged you so. Like every man, from the head of a household to the Arch-Judge or the Campât, you must rule by fear. But your wrath will ‘stand to cool;’ and you will hate to make a girl cry as you would hate to send a criminal to the electric-rack, the lightning-stroke, or the vivisection-table. And, whatever you had done, do you fancy that I could shrink from you? I said, ‘If you weary of your flower-bird you must strike with the hammer;’ and if you could do so, do you think I should not feel for your hand to hold it to the last?”

“Hush, Eveena! how can I bear such words? You might forgive me for any outrage to you: I doubt your easily forgetting cruelty to another. I have not a heart like yours. As I never failed a

friend, so I never yet forgave a foe. Yet even I might pardon one of those girls an attempt to poison myself, and in some circumstances I might even learn to like her better afterwards. But I doubt if I could ever touch again the hand that had mixed the poison for another, though that other were my mortal enemy.”

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Book Two: The Earth Under the Martians

Chapter Six: The Work of Fifteen Days

For some time I stood tottering on the mound regardless of my safety. Within that noisome den from which I had emerged I had thought with a narrow intensity only of our immediate security. I had not realised what had been happening to the world, had not anticipated this startling vision of unfamiliar things. I had expected to see Sheen in ruins—I found about me the landscape, weird and lurid, of another planet.

For that moment I touched an emotion beyond the common range of men, yet one that the poor brutes we dominate know only too well. I felt as a rabbit might feel returning to his burrow and suddenly confronted by the work of a dozen busy navvies digging the foundations of a house. I felt the first inkling of a thing that presently grew quite clear in my mind, that oppressed me for many days, a sense of dethronement, a persuasion that I was no longer a master, but an animal among the animals, under the Martian heel. With us it would be as with them, to lurk and watch, to run and hide; the fear and empire of man had passed away.

But so soon as this strangeness had been realised it passed, and my dominant motive became the hunger of my long and dismal fast. In the direction away from the pit I saw, beyond a red-covered wall, a patch of garden ground unburied. This gave me a hint, and I went knee-deep, and sometimes neck-deep, in the red weed. The density of the weed gave me a reassuring sense of hiding. The wall was some six feet high, and when I attempted to clamber it I found I could not lift my feet to the crest. So I went along by the side of it, and came to a corner and a rockwork that enabled me to get to the top, and tumble into the garden I coveted. Here I found some young onions, a couple of gladiolus bulbs, and a quantity of immature carrots, all of which I secured, and, scrambling over a ruined wall, went on my way through scarlet and crimson trees towards Kew—it was like walking through an avenue of gigantic blood drops—possessed with two ideas: to get more food, and to limp, as soon and as far as my strength permitted, out of this accursed unearthly region of the pit.

Some way farther, in a grassy place, was a group of mushrooms which also I devoured, and then I came upon a brown sheet of flowing shallow water, where meadows used to be. These fragments of nourishment served only to whet my hunger. At first I was surprised at this flood in a hot, dry summer, but afterwards I discovered that it was caused by the tropical exuberance of the red weed. Directly this extraordinary growth encountered water it straightway became gigantic and of unparalleled fecundity. Its seeds were simply poured down into the water of the Wey and Thames, and its swiftly growing and Titanic water fronds speedily choked both those rivers.

At Putney, as I afterwards saw, the bridge was almost lost in a tangle of this weed, and at Richmond, too, the Thames water poured in a broad and shallow stream across the meadows of Hampton and Twickenham. As the water spread the weed followed them, until the ruined villas of the Thames valley were for a time lost in this red swamp, whose margin I explored, and much

of the desolation the Martians had caused was concealed.

In the end the red weed succumbed almost as quickly as it had spread. A cankering disease, due, it is believed, to the action of certain bacteria, presently seized upon it. Now by the action of natural selection, all terrestrial plants have acquired a resisting power against bacterial diseases—they never succumb without a severe struggle, but the red weed rotted like a thing already dead. The fronds became bleached, and then shrivelled and brittle. They broke off at the least touch, and the waters that had stimulated their early growth carried their last vestiges out to sea.

My first act on coming to this water was, of course, to slake my thirst. I drank a great deal of it and, moved by an impulse, gnawed some fronds of red weed; but they were watery, and had a sickly, metallic taste. I found the water was sufficiently shallow for me to wade securely, although the red weed impeded my feet a little; but the flood evidently got deeper towards the river, and I turned back to Mortlake. I managed to make out the road by means of occasional ruins of its villas and fences and lamps, and so presently I got out of this spate and made my way to the hill going up towards Roehampton and came out on Putney Common.

Here the scenery changed from the strange and unfamiliar to the wreckage of the familiar: patches of ground exhibited the devastation of a cyclone, and in a few score yards I would come upon perfectly undisturbed spaces, houses with their blinds trimly drawn and doors closed, as if they had been left for a day by the owners, or as if their inhabitants slept within. The red weed was less abundant; the tall trees along the lane were free from the red creeper. I hunted for food among the trees, finding nothing, and I also raided a couple of silent houses, but they had already been broken into and ransacked. I rested for the remainder of the daylight in a shrubbery, being, in my enfeebled condition, too fatigued to push on.

All this time I saw no human beings, and no signs of the Martians. I encountered a couple of hungry-looking dogs, but both hurried circuitously away from the advances I made them. Near Roehampton I had seen two human skeletons—not bodies, but skeletons, picked clean—and in the wood by me I found the crushed and scattered bones of several cats and rabbits and the skull of a sheep. But though I gnawed parts of these in my mouth, there was nothing to be got from them.

After sunset I struggled on along the road towards Putney, where I think the Heat-Ray must have been used for some reason. And in the garden beyond Roehampton I got a quantity of immature potatoes, sufficient to stay my hunger. From this garden one looked down upon Putney and the river. The aspect of the place in the dusk was singularly desolate: blackened trees, blackened, desolate ruins, and down the hill the sheets of the flooded river, red-tinged with the weed. And over all—silence. It filled me with indescribable terror to think how swiftly that desolating change had come.

For a time I believed that mankind had been swept out of existence, and that I stood there alone, the last man left alive. Hard by the top of Putney Hill I came upon another skeleton, with the arms dislocated and removed several yards from the rest of the body. As I proceeded I became more and more convinced that the extermination of mankind was, save for such stragglers as

myself, already accomplished in this part of the world. The Martians, I thought, had gone on and left the country desolated, seeking food elsewhere. Perhaps even now they were destroying Berlin or Paris, or it might be they had gone northward.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)