

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

# **Schlock!**

**WEBZINE**

VOL. 13, ISSUE 20  
16TH SEPTEMBER  
2018

## **CUTTING TEETH**

BY CALLUM  
MCSORLEY  
WHO IS L?

## **PALE MEAT ON CRACKED BONES**

BY ROB BLISS  
ITS HEAD HAS  
ALREADY BEEN  
DECAPITATED...

## **NEVERTOWN BY GK MURPHY**

## **ANGELINA 10 BY TIM HEWITT**

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# SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by  
Gavin Chappell

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Schlock! Webzine

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Murphy, Tim Hewitt, Gregory KH Bryant, Gregory Owen, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, A Merritt*

## 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!

For details of previous editions, please go to the [website](#).

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, Angelina 10s and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk). We will also Angelina 10 published and self-published novels. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

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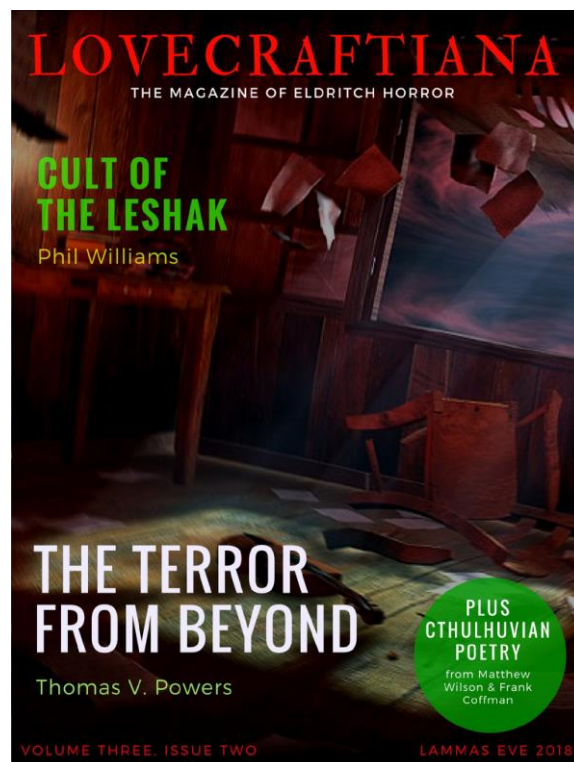
## EDITORIAL

This week, Danny's need for new teeth leads to trouble with the big fish. Elsewhere, a grisly dinner is served. And a family group finds itself in Hell due to the sins of the daughter.

We have news of a sci-fi short film in pre-production, followed by the horrifying conclusion to Gregory Owen's two parter, *The Walker in the Fields*. *The Search for Astra Palace* continues. Malone listens in awe to Professor Challenger's account of his discoveries. And in *The Moon Pool*, we meet the Irishman Larry O'Keefe.

—Gavin Chappell

Available from Rogue Planet Press: [Lovecraftiana: Lammas Eve 2018](#).



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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

## IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

by Vincent Davis



*Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t-shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.*

*In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.*

*He lives in Mamaroneck NY with his wife Jennie and dog Skip.*

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## CUTTING TEETH by Callum McSorley

Danny spent his share of the score on new teeth—he'd come in too fast and run into the back of the switch car, losing his front teeth, his dignity, and his professional pride on the steering wheel. Lucky for him the switch car was still running and they got away clean, though there wasn't much space in the trunk for the money anymore and they had to pile the bags on Alonso in the backseat.

The dental work was expensive. They replaced his two front teeth and capped another five—nothing flashy, no gold or silver. Danny didn't look like a criminal (once his burst lips healed anyway) and didn't want to. He looked like a stock-broker who enjoyed going to the gym in his spare time. There was no hint of prison about him, mostly because he was yet to go.

He thought about the crash, told himself he was a lucky boy again, and smiled with his new teeth. They looked a little square and too white but the dentist said they would wear into a more natural shape and colour as he used them. He tried to whistle as he walked down the street but found he couldn't.

The novocaine hadn't worn off when his new teeth were on the floor again—so at least the punch didn't hurt much. The guy was big and so was his buddy. On his knees, Danny spat blood at their polished black shoes. "You just cost me ten grand," he said. It came out all vowels.

The big guy, the one that had pulled him into the alley and pasted him in broad daylight, crouched down to speak. "Yeah? Well, we'll take it off what you owe us, which is a helluva a lot more." Then he stood and kicked Danny in the face. Blood spurted from his nose. "Take an extra grand for that," the big guy said. The big guy's big buddy sniggered. They both wore suits that were deep green and made of something pricey. Silver buttons flashed.

Danny tried to stand but was pushed back down again. "I dunno what you're talkin' about," he said.

"Maybe it's the whaddyacallit the dentist gives you," the big guy said, "makes you foggy, forgetful. Or maybe it's me hittin' you in the head. Gil, give him somethin' to refresh him."

Gil, the big buddy, took a plastic Coke bottle from his jacket pocket. The liquid inside was clear. He tossed the whole thing over Danny—the cold struck him first, then the smell: white spirit. It stung his nose and his bleeding lips and gums. He spluttered and tasted it. He heard the lighter snap and saw the flame twinkle through his blurry, stinging eyes. "No, no, don't—"

"Ludwig Savings and Loan, two days ago. You remember now?"

"Y-yes. Please, just don't." The big guy crouched down again, coming in close with the Zippo in his hand. Danny shrieked: "Get back! Get back! Don't do this. I've got children, man, I'm a father!"

"No you ain't, Daniel. Don't lie to us—look where it's got you. Try and learn somethin' here."

“What do you want? I—I spent my share but I can get you more!”

“We don’t want your miserable share, Daniel. They paid you pocket money for that job, gifted you good and proper. It’s what happens when you deal with criminals. Look, whether you knew it or not, that wasn’t just anybody’s money you stole. All of it, and I mean all of it, belongs to L. And he wants it back.”

“I can get it for you, I can, God, just please don’t—”

“Good. You get it for us, Daniel. See you soon.”

The big guy stood and walked away. Then he turned and tossed the lighter at Danny.

Danny screamed and curled into a ball on the ground. It took his brain a few seconds to realise he wasn’t burning. In fact, he was shivering in his wet clothes. He sniffed. There was nothing. It was water. Just water. He heard laughter somewhere far off.

When he finished crying he wiped his eyes and cleaned the blood off his face with his shirt sleeve. His head cleared and he thought: Who is L?

He ran all the way uphill to Alonso’s place. Damn hills. Danny blamed them for the accident. He was from flatland Minneapolis; the Ludwig heist was his first job since coming out to San Francisco. He hadn’t realised just how much extra momentum crashing over the crests of those steep hills would give him and didn’t leave enough braking distance. Still, the three of them laughed about it after. Point-man Miller, muscle Alonso, and driver Danny—they laughed as they each counted the fat stack of bills they’d been given as promised. Flat rate. Everything was being kicked up to the guy Miller worked for, Cody Crenshaw, who Danny had yet to meet but had heard of—he was one of California’s major crime bosses but, as Miller said, “He hates being called a ‘boss’, somethin’ about societal hierarchies or whatever.” They laughed when Miller gave Danny a card for the dental practise he went to.

The door to Alonso’s loft was open. Danny called but there was no answer. He didn’t really expect one—it was turning into that kind of day. The kind of day that chased him out of Minneapolis and drove him West till he saw the Pacific.

Alonso’s place always smelled like a gym bag. Weights were stacked up around a bench that took pride of place in the centre of the small open-plan room. The only other decoration was a television that sat on the floor.

Alonso was lying on his back on the bench—the barbell was across his neck, each end supporting a hundred and fifty pounds. His face and fingers were white. His eyes bulged out and his tongue lolled, grey and swollen, from his open mouth.

Danny spotted the faded Adidas sports bag. He dumped out the stinking socks and found the pistol he knew would be in there. He found something else too: ten thousand dollars in cash. Fat



stack; flat rate. They weren't interested in Alonso's share either, then. He double-checked the safety on the gun and tucked it into the back of his jeans. Then he stuffed the sweaty socks back into the sports bag, shouldered it, and got the hell out.

He boosted a car two blocks down the street and roared out of the Mission heading north to the highway. As the Golden Gate Bridge came into view he got the fear and pulled a U-turn. They could trap him on the bridge, cops at one end, green-suited tough guys at the other, Alcatraz at the bottom of a long drop over the edge.

Danny drove back to the city through Sunset—Miller lived in the neighbourhood with his wife and kid. I've got children, man, I'm a father! Shame prickled him, sweat beaded on his forehead, his body burning in the flames of the imaginary fire. He licked blood from his gums and decided to stop and give Miller a heads-up.

Miller's was a gable-ended house, the only one on the street, squeezed sideways among a mishmash of low buildings with varying styles and facades that mirrored the mixing-bowl make-up of the neighbourhood itself. The bottom floor of the house was a French bakery, next door was a Turkish barber. The cable-car stopped right outside. Danny felt he could have been somewhere in the Europe, but the gun pushed against the seat and dug into his back and he knew he was definitely in San Francisco, definitely in America, definitely carrying ten thousand dollars cash and hoping Miller wasn't dead too.

A rickety wooden stairway took him above the bakery to the second floor where he knocked the door. After a few seconds of shuffling his feet, a woman answered the door. She smiled at him. She looked pretty and tired, a young mother. There was lipstick on her teeth.

"Oh, it's Danny, isn't it?" Her voice was loud and musical, the kind that sang over the music in a diner and drew all the other customers' attention towards it, the kind old ladies tutted at.

"Yes, ma'am. Is Mi— uh, I mean, is Rich here?"

"Come in, come in!" She threw the door open and practically pulled him inside. It struck Danny as odd that such a pleasant, straight-looking woman would be so seemingly thrilled to have one of her husband's crook buddies show up at the door—particularly one with a burst lip, burst nose and no teeth. "Go on through to the den." She pointed to a door at the end of the narrow hall. She gently pushed his back.

Danny stepped into the den and knew immediately why it was odd. A little boy, perhaps four years old, was playing on the floor with toy cars. Seated around him on sunken leather couches were an assortment of men who looked exactly like the kind of dangerous criminal that Danny prided himself in not looking like. These thugs didn't wear suits.

"Daniel. You're here." Danny spun around to face the voice behind him. It belonged to a lanky middle-aged man in sandals, bald on top but with a grey ponytail hanging down his back. His eyes were wide apart and his chin was like a cherry tomato. The overall impression was of a sloth. "You prefer 'Danny' though, right?"

Miller's wife stood behind him, her face now wretched with worry.

Danny pulled the gun from his belt and put the barrel to the sloth man's broad forehead. "You must be Mr Crenshaw."

"Cody, please," he replied. "Mr Crenshaw is, well, not my father, but a guy who knew my maw once upon a time who kinda looks like me. Say, where are my manners? Let me introduce you to the guys." He pointed at each grinning thug in turn: "Stevie, The Knuckles, Straightjacket, JJ, Grillface, and—" here he pointed to a mountain of a man who was standing because no chair would fit him—"Total Eclipse." Total Eclipse waved hello.

"Well, Cody, it's been nice meetin' you and all but you're between me and the door, would you care to step outta the way or do I drill a keyhole in your head?"

Cody Crenshaw smiled a placid smile, showing off endless teeth, some of them silver. "Safety's on," he said. The cosh fell on Danny's skull like a thick, black curtain.

The car bumped him awake—the damn San Francisco hills. Inky darkness swam in front of him. The trunk of the car was inlaid with shag carpet which smelled of dogs. If he had a bit more space—and his head wasn't splitting—he'd have been comfortable.

Danny felt the car come to a stop and the engine idled briefly before being killed. The lid of the trunk sprung open and the light hit him as hard as the cudgel that knocked him out. Danny was a fair size himself, but the sun was blotted out by the man that lifted him single-handed from the trunk. "That's why they call you Total Eclipse, huh?" He was hustled from the car and into an alley that smelled of rotten fish.

Miller's wife—who'd at least been given the courtesy of being allowed to travel in a seat, and awake—was ahead of him as he was pushed through a fire door, hidden between a dumpster and stacked crates of Pabst, and into a kitchen where the steam was so thick it had weight. Alien-looking fish swam in grimy tanks along one wall while others lay in snowbanks of crushed ice on a counter opposite.

A fat Japanese man in stained whites and a greasy plastic apron saw them approach and barked an order at his chefs. They all filed out with their eyes to the ground.

At some point during the ride Crenshaw had changed into a garish kimono that looked as if it had been bought in a shop that mainly dealt in Hawaiian shirts. He bowed low to the chef—"Konnichiwa!"—who returned the kow-tow with a curt nod that shook his jowls. He rattled clipped Japanese in a cigarette-whisper which Crenshaw returned in Japanese also, though his was over enunciated and badly affected by his West Coast accent. The chef nodded and hefted a half-filleted tuna from his workstation. Crenshaw said, "Arigatou gozaimasu," and clicked his fingers at his men.

Total Eclipse lifted Danny under the arms while another lackey—Straightjacket?—grabbed his legs. Together they swung him onto the vacated counter. He felt the wetness from the tuna seep into the back of his shirt. They tied ropes to his wrists and ankles and secured them in the hermetically sealed doors of the fridges under the counter. They used duct tape to fix his head to the countertop. (Struggling bought him a punch to the belly which knocked the air from him and stopped him from screaming.)

Pots, pans and rusted utensils dangled above him on a hanging rack. The chef appeared in view on his right and selected a huge cleaver, which prompted Crenshaw to jump in from the left, waving his hands and shouting, “No, no, no, no, no!” He explained something in Japanese to which the chef replied, “Ah,” and disappeared. He returned with a long, thin knife for delicately, deftly slicing sashimi.

Danny was hit with an intense adrenaline jag that pulled his ropes till they cut into him—the same shaking, jumpy, piss-your-pants cocktail of thrill and fear that he experienced parked outside Ludwig Savings and Loan, waiting on Miller and Alonso. It hit him every time.

The chef pulled Danny’s shirt out of his pants and cut it up the front in one long, frictionless slice. He imagined they could see his heart pumping under his skin. “Stop! Don’t!” Even in English the chef could easily understand his pleas, and ignored them completely.

Cody had tucked his ponytail up into a chef’s skull cap. “Now, Danny, what’s going to happen is I’m going to ask you questions and every time you lie to me Chef here is going to slice a strip from your skin. Understand?”

Danny would have been nodding like a dashboard bobblehead rolling down Lombard Street if his head wasn’t stuck down. “Yes.”

Chef leaned forward—a whiff of tobacco and yellowed teeth—and with the blade almost horizontal, made his incision. Before Danny even felt the pain, Chef held up a two-inch long, see-through *hira-zukuri* cut of human skin. Then there was blood and screaming—Danny’s back arched on the countertop, his restraints taut.

“Now you understand. Danny, where is Miller?”

Danny’s eyes watered. He gulped for air, his head reeled, dizzy, as if he was drowning.

“Where is Miller and where is my money? ...Chef...”

Tobacco stink washed over him again and the second slice was made—as thin as if done by a mandolin. Danny screamed again. The fish in the tanks turned to look at him. Dead, round eyes pushed against the glass.

“Where is Miller, Danny?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know, I swear! Please, God, don’t—” He screamed again as Chef made another cut.

Cody shoved the handle of a wooden spoon in Danny’s mouth. He bit down and pain shot through his remaining wobbly teeth. “Shit, he’s gonna hurl. Get the tape off his head!” The tape took his eyebrows with it. When he stopped being sick, Cody slapped at his cheek gently. “You still with us, Danny? Still there? You know, in a way I envy you. This is a real Zen experience, man. The power of the mind over the body, rising above the pain and the suffering of the mundane world. Maybe you don’t wanna tell me where my money is, maybe you wanna keep going, see if you can’t reach Nirvana?” Danny shook his head, groggy with pain and lack of oxygen. He took panic breaths. “Chef, do your thing.”

Chef leaned in but before he could make the slice something heavy and wet hit him on the back the head, knocking him onto Danny’s chest. He turned around but nobody was behind him. Crenshaw watched with his mouth slack. There was ice on the floor, among it a huge, frozen, dead amberjack. It didn’t flop; its eye was cloudy.

“What the—” A squid leapt from its tank and landed on the back of Crenshaw’s head. Its tentacles wrapped around his face, the tendrils going in his mouth and nose. He screeched and tore at its slimy limbs. His lackeys moved forward to help but before they reached him there was a blistering explosion of glass and the air was filled with flying snow crabs and horned shrimp. The scummy green wave took them all to the floor. The men shrieked as pincers snapped and feelers twitched. Massive tuna and salmon came crashing off the side counter on top of them, bringing an avalanche of ice with them. A puffer fish detonated in Chef’s face, its spikes piercing his eyes causing him to lash out with his razor-sharp Ginsu knife and tear through Total Eclipse’s cheek. The floor was covered in pink slush.

During the chaos, the pretty and terrified face of Miller’s wife appeared in Danny’s line of view. She grabbed the cleaver down from the rack and cut him free. He leaned heavily on her shoulder as they skated to the door, slipping and falling as they went. She took a gun from one of the lackeys who was busy wrestling an ugly, many-legged, spiny monstrosity.

A green suit was waiting out back, sitting on the hood of a limousine. Miller’s wife pointed the gun at him. “Throw me the keys then lie down on the ground,” she said. Her voice didn’t shake but her hand did. Even she looked surprised when the gun went off.

Danny ducked and covered his ears. The green suit—the big guy that had knocked out Danny’s teeth—threw up a hand to cover his face. As the smoke cleared he held out a closed fist to them, then he opened it. On his palm was the crushed slug of the bullet. He raised it to his mouth and blew it like a kiss—it became a moth and flew away. Then he strode forward and relieved Miller’s wife of the gun. He tucked it into his belt and opened the car door. “Get in. L wants to speak to you both.”

A brick-red dog shit baked on the late afternoon blacktop. The wheel of a shining clover limousine splatted it flat. The car glided out of Japantown and back towards Sunset. Every light was green.

In the back was an old man. He was a very old man. His hair was so white it was nearly transparent and stuck out in a mane—his hair and beard all one, shaggy piece. He wore a crushed velvet suit, a deep faded maroon like dried blood, which drowned his frame—the visible lining was rich green silk. His rested on a cane. Danny noticed the liver spots, the skin as thin as tissue paper, the knotted bones and ropey, purple veins that held it all together. His eyes were so sunken they were like black marbles at the bottom of a well, only visible when the sun passed straight overhead and reflected off them. Danny felt himself leaning in close as if to peer over the edge. His face was like broken stonework.

As if Danny had spoken these thoughts aloud the old man said, “Hey, I look good for my age, trust me. When you’re a few millennia old you’ll be nothin’ but dust.” He had a Celtic burr that might have made him genuine Irish or Boston Mick.

“Who are you?” Danny asked.

“You can call me L.”

“That’s not a name.”

“It’s a moniker, which is better.”

“What do you want?” Miller’s wife asked. She’d stopped shaking but she shouted from the ringing in her ears.

“It’s Trude, ain’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Old Norwegian name. You look like a Viking. That’s a compliment, trust me.” Trude straightened the hem of her skirt over her knees. “I just want what is mine. Two days ago, Trude, your husband, along with Daniel here, stole a lot of gold from my bank.”

“Gold?”

“Gold.”

“There was no way the bags were heavy enough to have gold in them,” Danny said.

“Nonetheless, that’s what was in them. I know because the gold is no longer in my bank. Trust me, I checked. And these ain’t Fort Knox bricks we’re talkin’ about. This is old, old stuff. Gold that was buried in the ground during war-time. Gold I dug up with my bare hands when I was but a young buck like yourself.”

Danny would have thought the old man was crazy or senile, but after the day he'd had... "What are you?"

"I'm popular with football fans in Boston, I'll say that much." L pulled a gold cigarette case from inside his jacket and licked his lips with a grey tongue before popping it in his mouth. He clicked his fingers and a flame sparked into life at the end of his thumbnail. "Tobias, roll the window down, willya?" The window came down and he inhaled deeply and puffed out a mammoth smoke ring.

"Anyways," he continued, "the point is it's mine and I want it back. So, Trude, you're gonna find your husband for me and Daniel here is gonna help, because up until now he's been as useful as glass hammer."

"My son—"

"Don't worry about your son. You'll see." The limo came to a stop outside the Millers' place. Trude burst from the car and took the steps three at a time. Danny followed, L stayed in the car.

The boy was in the den, scribbling away with his Crayolas. Gil, the other green-suit, was stretched out on the couch with his shoes off, flipping through channels and static on the television. When the boy saw his mom he sprang from the floor, bringing one of his drawings with him. "Mommy, mommy! It came up outta the toilet!" He held up his picture. The crude, colourful sketch showed three stick men being chased by a giant, zig-zagging snake.

"One of the guys made a bit of a mess in the bathroom," Gil said without looking up from the TV. "Don't worry though, I cleaned it up."

They patched Danny up then Trude left the boy with a kiss on his head and Gil with a warning that he better look after him. As she turned to go she said, "There's bread and peanut butter in the cupboard if he's hungry."

As they were getting into Trude's minivan, L called Danny over to the window of the limo. He blew a fat cloud of clove smoke in Danny's face. "Tobias says sorry about your teeth." He handed him the Adidas sports bag with Alonso's ten grand in it and blew another smoke ring. When it hit him, Danny felt a searing pain in his gums where his missing teeth were. He spat blood onto the dusty sidewalk.

Danny climbed into the driver's seat of the minivan and adjusted the rear-view. Catching his reflection he saw he once again had front teeth, though these ones were shining, dark gold.

"Where to?" he asked.

"The wharf. I think I know a way to find Rich, but we're gonna have to spend your money, okay?"



“Might as well, the good it’s done me so far.”

For a while they drove in silence. The streetlights popped on ahead of them as dusk came down. Danny tried the radio but it was broken. “What’s your boy’s name?”

“Jake.”

“How old is he?”

“You’re a wheelman, right, Danny?”

“Yeah—”

“So drive fast.”

They parked up by a drab block of run-down offices by the wharf. Trude smoothed away the worry lines on her face with a compact. Danny checked his teeth again. He tasted something metallic and wasn’t sure if it was blood or gold.

“Want me to pencil in your eyebrows for you?”

“Ha ha. Jesus, I look like one of the Munsters.”

When she finished and flipped the mirror away, Trude fixed Danny with a level stare. The young mother was gone. “I thought he was having an affair,” she said, “so a month ago I hired a sleazebag PI called Sal Palazny to tail him. He took my money up front but then wouldn’t tell me what he’d found until I handed over more, which I didn’t have. Called it ‘danger money’—he must have found out that Rich worked for Cody Crenshaw.”

“Ten grand oughta do it.” Danny pulled the Adidas kit bag from the backseat and handed it over.

Palazny’s office was above a Laundromat and below a publishing house that specialised in girly mags and erotica. The sharp stink of vinegar—recently used to mop the stairs—covered the usual stairwell smells of piss and tobacco. His reception area had a touch of shabby class, dark wood and faded Winchester seats, but his inner office was floor to ceiling file boxes and overflowing ashtrays. Reams of yellowing fax paper stuffed every crevice and a pall of smoke floated on the ceiling.

“Ms Miller, welcome back,” Palazny said. He was short and balding—what was left of his hair was died jet black and oiled over his skull. He wore his gun in a loose-fitting shoulder holster, even as he sat at his paperwork.

“Here’s your money, and some extra.” She threw the bag at him.

Palazny smiled, stubbed out his cigarette and lit a fresh one. "Who's your pal?"

"I'm her butler," Danny said, flashing his gold teeth.

"Nice choppers. Plenty of boys 'round here would be more than happy to pull 'em for you if you the toothache." Palazny unzipped the bag and thumbed through a few of the stacks. He tapped cigarette ash onto his desk. Through some abstruse filing system known only to himself, Palazny immediately located a stack of photographs and handed them over. They contained a 'Painted Lady'—a colourful and decorative three-storey Victorian house in Haight-Ashbury. Rich Miller came and went, up and down the steep steps to the front door of the house. In one shot, through the half-open door, was a hint of a woman. "Masonic Avenue," he said, tapping the pictures. "She never comes out of the house."

As they left Danny turned. He felt a tingling in his mouth, maybe a slight toothache, even. He gestured to the floor-to-ceiling stacks of clandestine information. "One day, all of this will bury you," he said.

The house, postcard cheerful in the picture, had a glowering demeanour up close. The colours, contrasting and bright in daylight, by dark were cast in greys and streetlight orange, creating shadows and false perspective, a reflecting pool of ancient depth that suggested a mirror maze within.

"So what, we walk up and just knock?" Danny asked.

"Where's your gun?" Trude answered.

"Lost it somewhere between flying fish and toilet pythons. Where's yours?"

Trude popped the trunk open and pulled out a tyre-iron which she slid up the sleeve of her coat. "My mom always said, 'Make do and mend.' She was British."

Trude knocked, the door clicked open, nobody was behind it. The uplighters in the hall gave the entrance a moody glow. Shadows hid the ornate cornice work around the ceiling and the hundred-year-old smooth mouldings around the doorways. There was a rich, damp smell and the wooden flooring beneath their feet felt swollen and creaked like the rotting planks at the pier.

"Hello?"

"In here," said a woman's voice. A light cast out from an open door at the end of the hall. Unlike the deep, emergency-light glow of the hall, this light was rich and golden and smelled of honey.

Danny went first. He felt Trude's hand against the small of his back. Her other hand gripped the tyre-iron.

They stepped into a parlour, so bright Danny felt his pupils contract. The floor was flagged like a chessboard, the ceiling was impossibly high and ribbed with gilt and gold leaf. Deafening velvet curtains furled down around stained-glass windows which cast disco-ball patterns on the walls, although it had been night outside. On a chaise-longue, which had clawed feet, sat the woman.

“Not very polite to arrive armed, Mrs Miller,” she said. Her haughty voice matched her slim, angular face and the severe way that her red hair had been tied and teased into a baroque bundle of plaits and ringlets on top of her head—as ornate as the furniture. As if to deliberately offset this, her ebony dress was catwalk modern, cut low and high to reveal skin the colour of the ivory half of the floor. Her feet were bare, toenails painted green.

“Where’s Rich?” Trude asked.

“In the garden, pushing up the roses,” the woman replied. “I didn’t think you’d want him back.”

“He was a father. We have a son.” Her voice was all anger but she hid her eyes by looking at the floor.

“He’ll be a better man without him,” the woman answered with a smile and a nod, certain of her correctness.

“Who are you and where’s the gold?” Danny asked.

She scanned him top to bottom. “Those teeth suit you,” she said, “and the brows are... bold, though it works, but you’re missing some prison ink, or some visible scars, you look a little unfinished. I guess the teeth are a gift from daddy?”

“L is your father?”

“L is a silly made-up name. Names are powerful, Danny. If you knew his real name, well, he certainly wouldn’t have you running errands for him. Quite the opposite.”

“So you won’t tell me yours then?”

“I’ll give you three guesses, if you like?”

“I don’t want to play games. I just want to return the gold and go home.”

“And where’s that? San Francisco? Minneapolis? New York?”

Danny felt a sharp pain in his gums, accompanied by a whiff of the damp he’d smelled in the hall. An image flashed in his head of tattered curtains and moss growing on cushions, an old woman in a stained nightdress. Then it, and the pain, were gone, and he was back on the chequered floor with the light filtering through the stained glass.

“You’re like them? I mean, you have... powers.”

“Them?”

“L and the green suits.”

“The green suits... they’re just magicians, really, shadows of him. But yes, I am like him, and no, I am not. There are very few women of our kind. It makes it a... different sort of life for us—for me, I guess. I’ve never met any others, for all I can tell there aren’t any. ‘Servitude’ is the polite way of putting it.”

“And what’s the impolite way?” Trude asked.

“Slavery, of every kind imaginable.” She smiled vacantly.

“So you ran away and stole the money?” Danny suggested.

“It’s not ‘money’, Danny. It’s gold—war-time gold, blood gold, treasure-crocks dug from the trenches of Normandy, the fields of Culloden, the city walls of Syracuse. It’s ancient. It has power. You must be at least starting to understand, no?”

Danny had another flash of the vision, this time the stench of decay even stronger than before. There was something else too—blood dripping through the cracked plaster of the ceiling and spattering on the floor. “L needs it because his power is failing,” he said.

“Yes, his power is failing. Because he is old, because he smokes too much and drinks too much and doesn’t exercise enough. It’s natural that he should lose his power and die. The gold is rightfully mine, my inheritance, if you will. I’ve earned it.”

“And what if I tell him that it’s here, in the upstairs bedroom?” He saw again, in a candle-flicker, the blood dripping down from above.

“Oh, he knows I have it, certainly. But this place is protected, and he can no longer break my spell. That’s why he needs you to go and get it for him.”

“And what’s stopping us from taking it?” Trude brandished the tyre-iron.

The colour from the windows was changing. A silhouette of creepers was growing up over them, casting a drab green murk over everything. Monstrous red roses bloomed from the vines and pressed up against the glass, which grew veins then shattered inwards under the pressure.

The jungle of thorns and flowers that had grown through the windows disgorged something with a wet slap onto the tiles. It contorted into the shape of a body, a body that was filthy with dirt and white from being two days dead—Rich Miller stood up. He was fleshy and bloated. Green varicose veins stood out from under the puckered skin of his arms and belly. He belched up mud which smelled of rotting garbage and sweet mountain evergreen.

Trude screamed and dropped the tyre-iron.

Danny pulled her behind him. “What is that?”

“Rich, dear,” the woman said, smiling again, “these two friends of yours are trying to take our gold. They want to break up our happy union, tear us apart.”

“Tear... us... apart?” he said. He sounded as if he had worms in his throat. “Tear us apart? I’ll tear them apart!” He lunged forward.

Trude shrieked, Danny screamed.

“Shit, I think I’m having another acid flash back.” Cody Crenshaw was in the doorway. His smiling sloth face was covered in the squid’s love bites. His goon squad flanked him. All were covered in bandages and heavily armed. Crenshaw started to giggle. “It’s been a good day for weird shit!” He raised his gun.

Danny pulled Trude to the floor. With the explosion of the first bullet the room changed—gone were the tiles and the gold, in its place the condemned ruin, the drowned Titanic parlour, of Danny’s vision. Miller caught the bullet in the chest—a powder exploded from him and didn’t slow him one bit. He went for Cody. More guns went off. Danny and Trude crawled. Creepers burst up from the cracks in the floor, through the holes in the walls and boarded up windows. Legs and arms were tangled and twisted and broken. There was screaming. Miller picked up Total Eclipse and tossed him like a rag doll. A figure with white hair flashed past.

Danny grabbed Trude with one hand and the tyre iron with the other. They bolted for the door. Someone got in the way and Danny swung out and cracked him—The Knuckles?—on the nose. He went down and was immediately grown over in a tangle of rose bush, sickly colourful, spiny flowers blooming up which smelled of pollen and sweet summer rot.

Trude went for the front door but Danny pulled her up the stairs instead. Bullets came punching through the plaster of the sagging walls. He followed the vision of blood to the bedroom above the parlour.

The bags from the heist were on a bare bedstead, the only decoration in the room was the graffiti on the walls and the broken bottles on the floor.

“Stop!” The woman was behind them. She was withered and old—no vivid red ringlets on her head, no slinky black dress. Her toenails were gnarled and yellow. “You can’t take them!”

“Wrong,” Danny said. He threw each bag out the window. “You can’t leave here, can you? You can’t risk L finding you again. You’re not just hiding out here, you’re trapped here.”

“Please!”

“Jump,” Danny said to Trude. She jumped out of the first-floor window, landing in the soft mulch of the overgrown garden. Danny followed.

They took a bag each and kept low. Gunfire was still going off sporadically. Around the front, Crenshaw had two cars outside on the street with the engines still running. All along the street people peeped out their windows. They could hear sirens, not far off.

Danny drove fast. Too fast. Three miles from the house on Masonic Avenue he flew down a hill, taking a sharp right at the bottom, the back wheels skidding out. He managed to correct the oversteer then hit a pothole which bounced him nose first into a lamp post. When he woke up drooling on the airbag he was alone. The gold was gone too.

Somewhere, over the rainbow:

The body of private investigator Sal Palazny was found in his office. A lifetime’s worth of paperwork had collapsed on top of him at his desk, trapping him underneath. The medical examiner estimated he’d been there three days before he died of thirst.

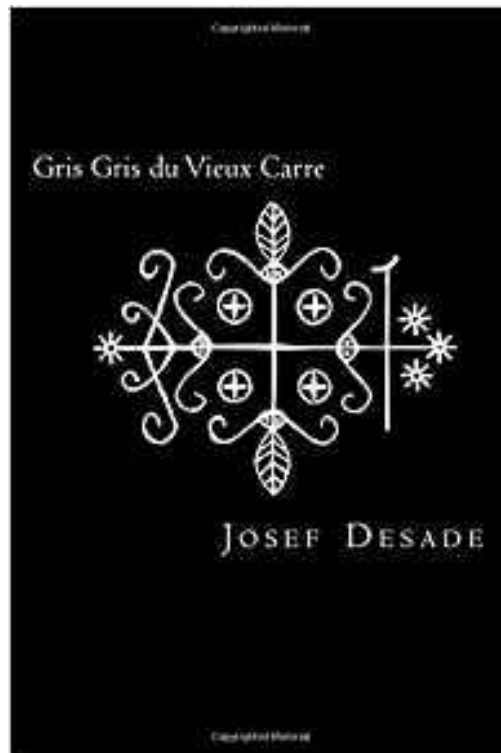
In the Fly-By-Night Motel, just outside of Fresno, a John Doe was found dead in room six by apparent suicide. The burnt flesh around the bullet hole in his right temple indicated the trigger had been pulled at point-blank range. The gun was in his stiff hand but the investigating detective was curious to find no gunpowder on the hand. The man was in bed, under the sheets, naked. There was a rumpled dark green suit slung over the chair by the desk and a pair of black shoes at the foot of the bed that needed a polished. Combing the room turned up no identification and nothing out of place except a broken Crayola under the night-stand. The night manager swore blind the man had arrived alone.

Danny kept on the move and stayed out of prison. His nose healed slightly off-centre and his eyebrows grew back in. He tried to pull out his gold teeth with pliers but found he couldn’t budge them at all. After a while he found himself in the Nevada desert in a nowhere hole called Wilma where he did some handiwork for a couple who lived just out of town and raised vicious dogs. One day the residents of Wilma were surprised to see a clover limousine, bathed in desert sand, parked outside the shack Danny rented. Danny opened the door to the ancient man with the walking stick, who held out a freshly laundered dark green suit—still in its plastic dry-cleaning bag—and said, “I’ve got a vacancy, kid. You lookin’ for work?”

THE END

**Callum McSorley** is a writer based in Aberdeenshire. He graduated from the University of Strathclyde in 2013 with a degree in English, Journalism & Creative Writing, and in 2014 was selected for the Hermann Kesten Writing Scholarship in Nuremberg. His short stories have appeared in several journals and anthologies, including *Gutter Magazine*, and he writes book reviews for *British Fantasy Award-nominated (2018) sci-fi magazine, Shoreline of Infinity*.





Available from [Amazon](#).

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## PALE MEAT ON CRACKED BONES by Rob Bliss

“... pale meat on cracked bones.”

- Agatha Christie, *Hickory Dickory Death*

A stainless steel pot sits on a coil that slowly bleeds from black to orange. Waves of heat pour upward to thicken the air and sere the steel, flows through the walls of the pot to throw molecules of the water in a torrent. A maelstrom forms as the fluid's elements heave against each other and mushrooms of water bloat above the liquid surface, thin to bubbles and burst. Explosions haemorrhage from the churning water, birthing a column of thick, speeding mist.

Its head has already been decapitated and tossed onto a heap of other beast heads. The neck stump is brittle bone and rubbery cartilage glued by a cap of dried, old blood. Yellowed skin like congealed fat studded with miniscule bumps seal tightly to the delicate musculature. Beneath the skin stretched to thinness could be seen the topography of muscle, dark and light. Its feathers plucked, pulled off fistfuls at a time, ripping out dots of blood. Plumage lost to expose the aerodynamic shape of chevron wings. Its feet stubs of rounded white bone.

Innards hollowed out and mulched to slurry, frozen and sealed in plastic. Ribs a hollow cave, dark and smoothly scraped by a steel brush, a fist-sized gap drained out of its anus.

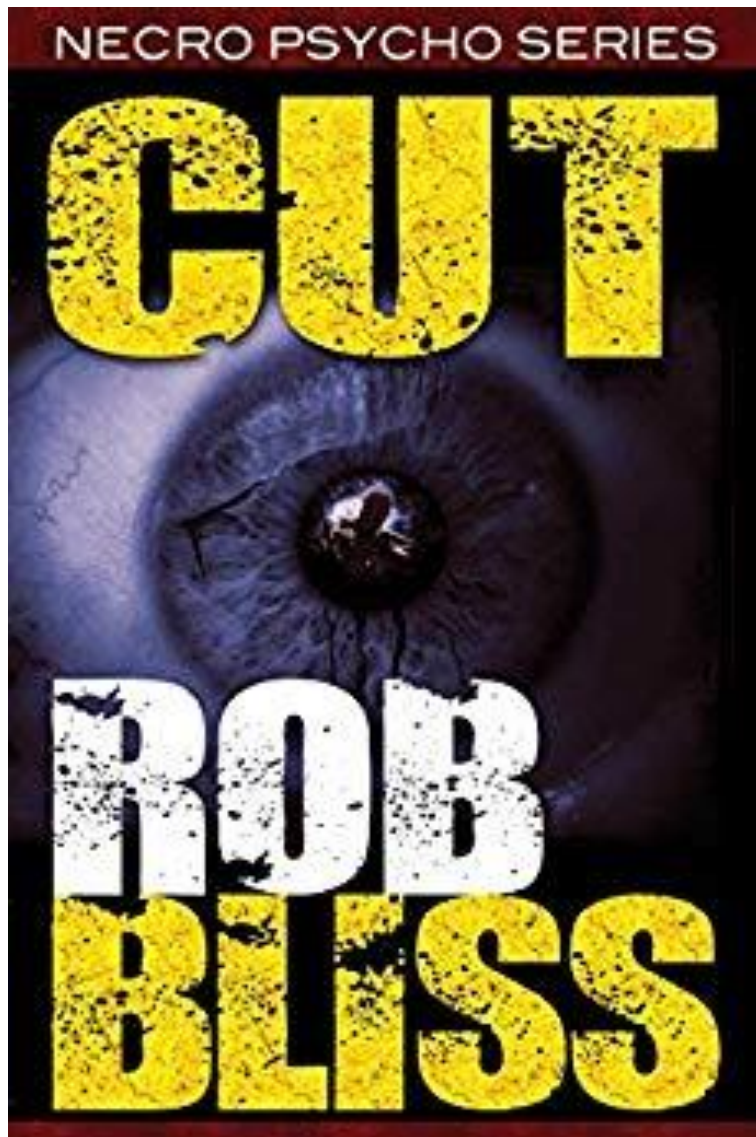
The tube of flesh drops into the roiling water, tumbles with the pneumatic force of liquid burning into vapour. A slab of wet fog rises like a tombstone out of the pot and the meat churns hidden beneath the thick mist.

Water slips between bubbles of meat and anchoring mesh of bone. Skin loosens and trembles with the motion of surging liquid like a breeze blown across a mud-stuck leaf. Water boils over polished bone, salt-white. Blood vaporizes into molecules and blanches away its colour in the steel water and grey steam.

The last traces of life are cooked out of the beast until all that remains is pale meat on cracked bones.

Dinner is soon served.

THE END



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## NEVERTOWN by GK Murphy

The father, mother and daughter morphed through the grey brick wall with ease, as you might expect from mortals suddenly entering this darker district of deepest Hell.

The three humans loitered there for a short time on the never-ending parapet gazing over this concrete precipice into the black abyss beneath, a mixture of musty charcoal and blue cloud. The plumes twisted and turned to form something which sucked and licked, as if it craved the tender young flesh and warm blood of those from Good Earth above. The cloud wailed and groaned as it sensed the humans. These poor bastards were getting nearer to this gaping wide mouth of clouds than anything else before them.

The youngest of the three was the tall, almost-muscular but deeply feminine 18 year old girl, red-haired Jude Bradshaw, who with her yet taller father, Earnest (Ernie), and mother Grace, had trespassed, yet were welcome trespassers, were it not an honour to be here, as far as Hell's hungry minions were concerned.

Like the humans up there on Earth, in Hell resided carnivores, and meat and blood were the order of the day.

Blood and flesh, eaten and enjoyed, meant everything everywhere, above and below.

Ernie was close to tears. His wife and daughter looked on aghast. He gibbered, "I don't understand...I mean, where are we right now and what did we do to get here? What are we doing in this damned place? I mean, what is this fucking place, right? I don't recall taking drugs or serious alcohol but, my God, I mean, where are we? I'm scared, Grace, I'm scared shitless and don't know what we should do...I mean, do you know what to do?"

Grace snapped, "Oh, shut up, Earnest! Sometimes you sound like a damned infant with your whinging and panicking!" The mother appealed to her daughter, "Jade, do you know how we ended up in this mess?"

Jade confirmed, "It's the town, it leads to a place of Never. The town itself is Never. It will never let you escape, just deliver you unto a larger Never, and here we are!"

"What town called Never? Have you lost your marbles, girl?" Ernie retorted. "Jesus, everyone is speaking in riddles and fairy tales. I tell you what I want, and what I want right now...I want the fuck out of here!"

Upon the mention of "Jesus", a loud cackling boomed out from the black pit below.

Grace peered down beyond the parapet. "My God..."

A massive guttural voice spoke. "YOUR GOD WILL NOT ASSIST YOU HERE, LITTLE HEN!"

Grace shivered.

Jade said, “I prayed to the gods of Never to reveal the town secret. It’s my fault we’re here. I told them that if they revealed the secrets of the town, I’d hand over my soul...and the souls of my mother and father. I’m dreadfully sorry. Please, mum and dad...please try to forgive me!”

Grace said, “Oh, I forgive you, Jade.”

This shit was surreal. Was all this really happening or figments of a dream? Fragments of an unflinching, original nightmare, dredged up by shapeless entities playing with the minds of dreaming mortals as they slept soundly in their beds?

“Oh fuck off, Grace...” Ernie interjected, “...the daft little bitch has sold our souls to the Devil. I’m not forgiving her!”

“Please daddy...”

Grace said, “She’s only a teenager, Earnest, be patient with the child. I know you always wanted a boy and since the hospital said we could not have more children...”

Earnest looked saddened, “Plus problems of my own, dearest. You mustn’t put all the blame on yourself. Don’t forget, this bloody twisted colon—and those aggravating piles of mine—which interferes with any erection...we know how that problem down below hinders ejaculation, making the entire thing very painful overall...”

Grace assured, “Earnest, you’re fifty-two and I’m fifty-three...babies no longer matter, do they? We have a good girl in our little sweet Jade to keep us warm at night.”

Jade gasped. She pointed into the void. “The town brought us here. This is Hell and we’re here to stay. This is a City of Never!”

Her parents peered down into the swirling depths. Earnest said, “If there is an earthquake, we’re fucking dead meat.”

Eyes widening at sudden horror, Jade took a step backwards. The beast rose from the fiery plumes of the abyss.

Her parents did the same. There was no choice. Nobody had any choices anymore; from herein their choices were made for them.

The Monster of Never came into closer view.

It had five heads and each one was a similar fleshless skull, punctuated by its five sets of protruding yellow and green snot-layered crooked teeth. Its body and shoulders were draped in an ankle-length black cloak, which showed the bloodthirsty demon’s skin. The faces were coloured a hue of pale duck-egg blue and pallid, gaunt and deathly.

One long tentacle stretched out and caught Earnest in its clutches, as he attempted to scuttle away. However, he could not because the never-ending brick wall behind him stretched farther than The Great Wall of China, showing no signs of exit. Grace shuddered, looking on in abject despair, whilst she hugged and held her beloved daughter Jade to her chest. It was obvious and plain they would be next to suffer.

The huge creature squeezed the life from Earnest; the poor man burst under the pressure. His head popped from his neck and shoulders, and like a football in the back of the net, this mass of blood and gristle entered one of the creature's hungry mouths...

Jade woke with a scream, sweating cobs under her cotton duvet. It was morning and she had to be a college for nine. Looking over at the clock, she sighed; she had another two hours left. What an awful yet darkly wonderful dream she just had. It was like a movie...

Wiping sweat from her face, she looked around the bedroom. Yes, there was always a twist to most tales nowadays, and why should her story be any different? She smiled and then began to laugh...

The calm before the storm...? Didn't they laugh at Judas before he hung himself?

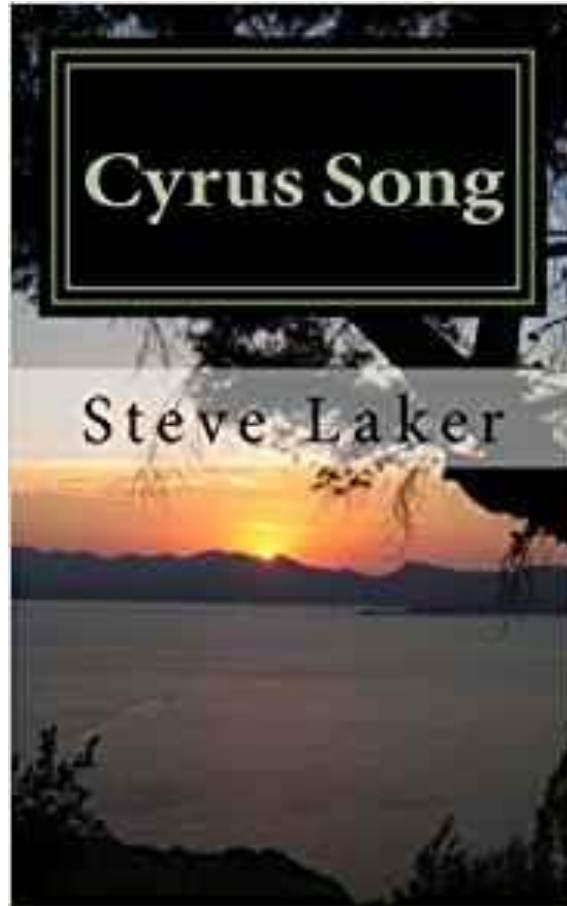
"Thank God it was just a dream..." Jade murmured. She anticipated something horrific and abruptly shocking, about to occur in her little bedroom. She knew not what or of what scale or magnitude this happening would be. Yet, it came, and yes it was huge.

The voice boomed from the rafters and beyond the grave: "YOU EXPECT YOUR GOD TO ASSIST YOU, LITTLE HEN? YOU ARE IN NEVER...AND FROM THERE, YOU NEVER RETURN!"

The tentacles emerged from the mattress and wrapped around her. They squeezed the life from her body until she was completely crushed to a bloody pulp. Nobody returned from Never.

THE END





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ANGELINA 10 by Tim Hewitt

*Pre-Production Has Begun On New Sci-Fi Short Film with a Difference*

Teaser: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lpn1BUORyc#>

London, UK September 2018

## The Film

Angelina: 10 is a science-fiction short film. A new form of Artificial Intelligence has been developed in what is called The Angelina Project. The aim is for this new form of A.I. to be used in both military and espionage activities. There is a problem, however. Within the programming, an emotional component has developed leading Angelina down a road of self-destruction.

The film explores the issues of man's ever-growing journey into the realms of technological power at the expense of the environment. Artificial Intelligence is a hot topic and one that has for years caused debate as to the ethics and moral responsibilities we have. This film enhances these debates by bringing an entirely new approach as to the nature of the AI itself.

## The Team

Tim Hewitt, writer/director/producer, has written and directed two short films. His first was a found footage horror The Devil's Punchbowl revolving around the tale of the Unknown Sailor's murder in 18th Century England. He followed this with A Little Place off the Edgware Road which starred Paul McGann (Alien 3, Withnail and I, Dr Who) and Ronald Pickup (Darkest Hour, The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, The Crown). Angelina: 10 is Tim's third short film, in pre-production. He has also written two feature film scripts, one of them having recently reached the Quarterfinals of the prestigious Academy Nichols Fellowship.

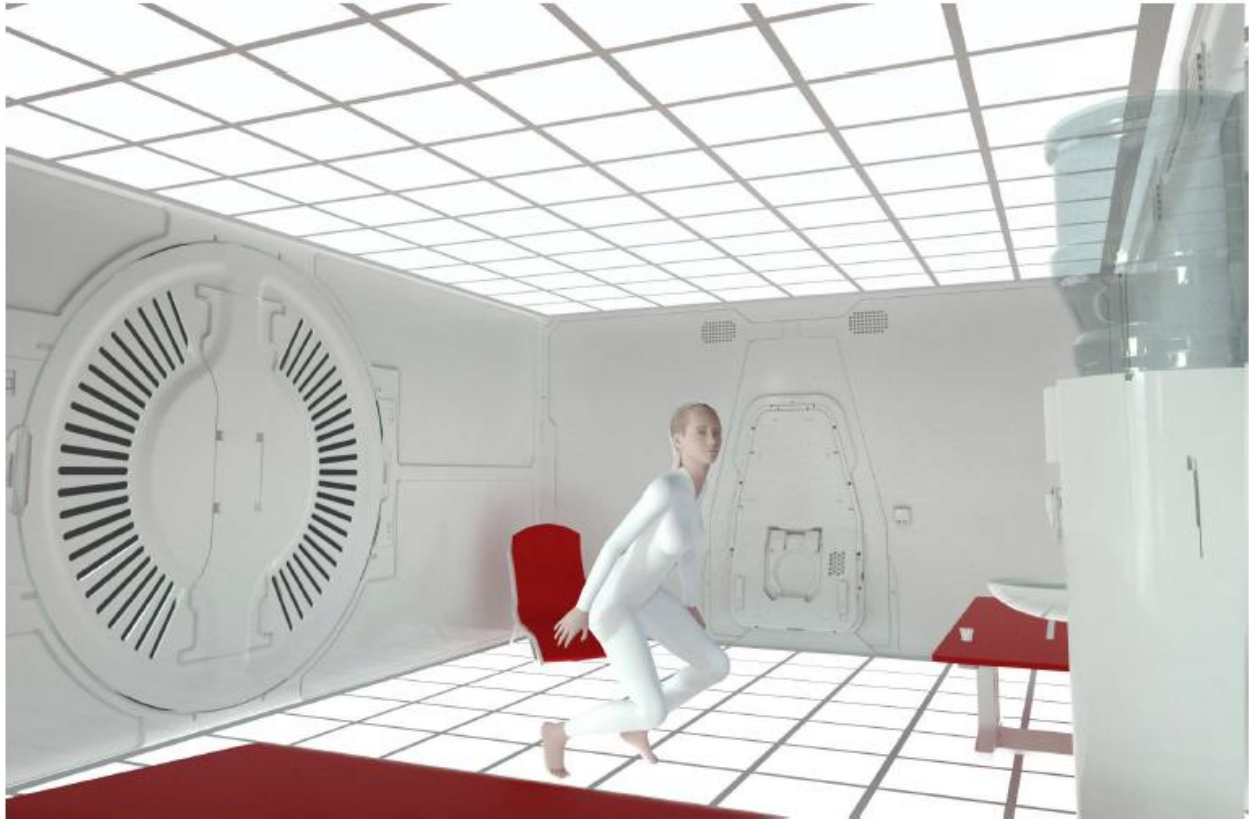
Luke Palmer, Director of Photography, has shot numerous feature films, including Journey to the Moon, directed by Steve Cookson through Dream On Films, The Fold, starring Catherine McCormack for which Luke won a Best Cinematography award at the 2013 Women's Independent Film Festival, the two-part feature The Rise and Fall of the Krays through Torn Pictures, and In A Heartbeat starring Danny Dyer and Zoe Grisedale.

Iain Kitchin, Editor, is a member of the Guild of British Film and Television Editors. In 2014, he worked on Babylon, executive produced by Danny Boyle. In 2012, he edited the feature film My Brother the Devil, which won numerous awards including Best European Film at Berlinale, Best Cinematography at the Sundance Film Festival, Best Newcomer (for director Sally El Hosaini) at the BFI London Film Festival and the Worldview Sundance Impact Award at Sundance London.

Debbie Burton, Production Designer, was production designer on Series 4 and 5 of Misfits (Channel 4), Series 2 of The Good Karma Hospital, and two feature films—the horror Residue directed by Alex Garcia Lopez and Ilkley, directed by Harry Michell and starring Derek Jacobi and Anna Maxwell Martin.

Nick Ainsworth, Concept Art, is a leading conceptual artist in the world of film and television. His credits include The Last Jedi, Game of Thrones, Avengers: Age of Ultron, XMen: First Class, Jack the Giant Killer, Jupiter Ascending and Maleficent.

#### ARTWORK AND CONCEPT ART



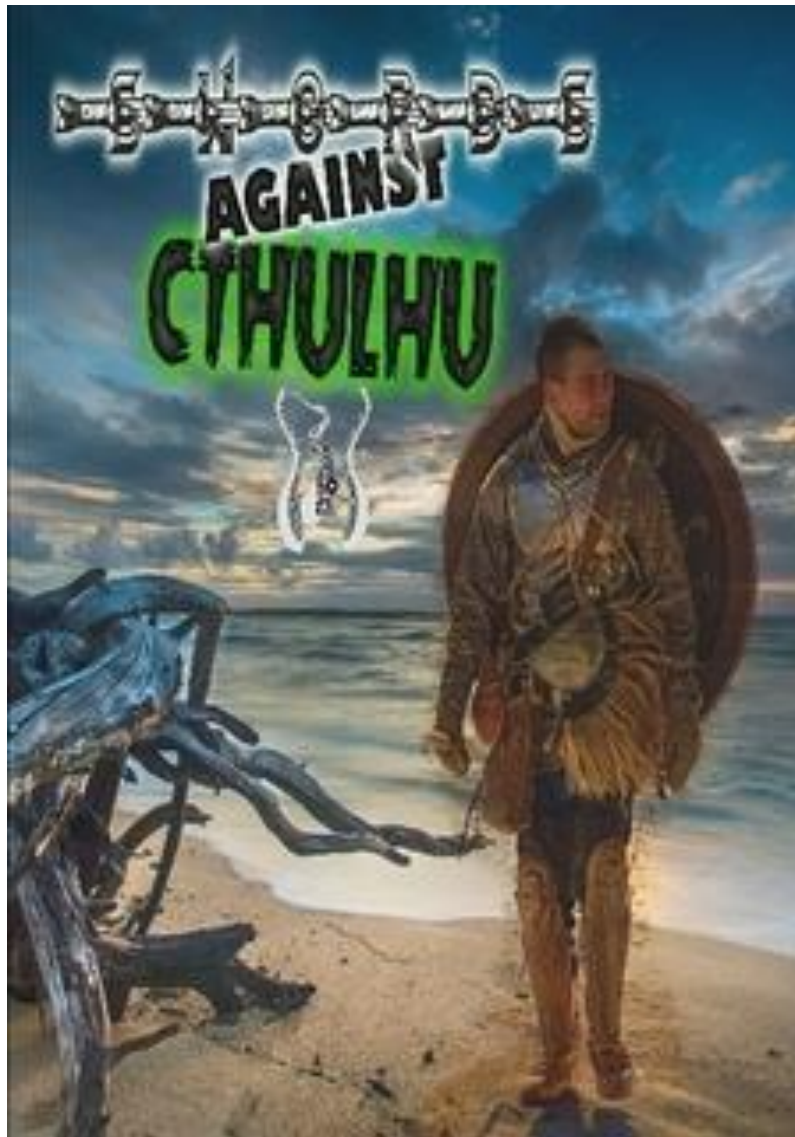
Concept Art by Nick Ainsworth



Teaser poster by Caspian Ievers

THE END

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## THE WALKER IN THE FIELDS by Gregory Owen

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The fat man chuckled as he drove away, turning a corner and vanishing down a nearby street. Before Remy could say anymore, he noticed that he was standing on the business end of a .38 special, which Jonah waved toward his Honda. Social skills are not required by anyone with a gun, Remy realized, and did as was commanded.

It took only a few minutes and two red lights, both of which were brief waits, to arrive at the outskirts of Elias Balfour's enormous property. Stepping out of the cramped Honda, Remy choked somewhat on the intake of fresh, country air and the sweet aroma of fresh corn.

"You bring a flashlight?" Remy asked, and Jonah pointed upward. Above, the moon hung heavy, bright and full, like some magnificent, fluorescent pearl, giving everything around a mysterious glow. Remy recalled Uncle Bart and Aunt Sue calling it a "harvest moon" back during his days of helping them on their farm, an old trick in the Almanac that told them when to gather their summer crops- Remy regretted everything, and missed them, as well as the old times. Those he could remember, anyway.

The night was oddly silent in Amber Hills, Remy registered, as it was almost peaceful in the lack of sound. He hoped that his mission would be that way, too: silent and peaceful. A metallic click returned him to reality, and he felt the snubbed barrel press into his back. "Take it you won't just go in there on your own?" Remy asked, turning to look at his "partner."

Jonah simply smiled his yellow smile.

"You're going to follow me then?"

Jonah nodded, and motioned with gun for Remy to begin moving.

"Fine. But so you know, this little plan is stupid. Harlan obviously gives about as much of a shit about you as he does me. Hope you see that." And with that, Remy could hear Harlan's response in his head: Stupid? Says the prick that robbed his aunt and uncle because he could? Because old habits die hard? You run like a coward when Bart bites it in such a ridiculous way? You ain't worth the shit on my boot heel, boy. No one is.

After pushing through a few rows of the thick, leafy corn stalks, Remy decided that he shouldn't have demanded a gun, but instead a machete, as it was almost as thick as bamboo. This land was fertile, and definitely valuable, indeed. "This damn corn is endless," Remy whispered breathlessly. "Like a damn jungle." He turned back to Jonah. "The house is near the centre, right? Barn past it? House is the target."

The mute nodded.

"Right," Remy muttered. He continued pushing forward, turning back time and again to make



sure that Jonah was behind him, continuously aiming at his back in case he tried anything clever. The moon's glow allowed Remy to see more of the mute's expression than he liked, but at least he could actually see fairly well without a flashlight, though the corn rows all around created an impenetrable blackness.

Passing through a few more rows allowed Remy to see something else: a tall, lengthy shape that penetrated the air above the corn stalks. One of the scarecrow's crosses he'd seen earlier from the diner, he figured. Remy had been unable to see any of the actual things from the restaurant's vantage, but he knew that on Balfour's land, there were a lot of them; most farmers maybe had one, for what little good they actually did aside from decorative purposes, but this land had at least six, maybe more. The drifter thought that maybe these were extensions of the owner's understandable paranoia, and he simply had to see what one of these suckers looked like. Scanning around for any sight of Elias and seeing nothing of the supposed night-time "field walker," Remy moved down the row to satisfy his curiosity, listening to Jonah follow.

As he approached, he could tell in the moonlight that what he was looking for was nowhere to be found. The cross was empty, nothing hanging from it. "Where is it?" Disappointed in his detour, Remy was shown quickly that Jonah was unhappy with it himself when he grabbed him by the shoulder, spinning him around hastily. The steel of the mute's revolver, along with the ruby ring on his hand that held the gun, twinkled with an almost ghostly luminescence. Jonah's yellow grin had changed into an angry sneer as he pressed the barrel into Remy's cheek.

"Yeah, yeah," Remy responded, holding up his hands. "I get it, house isn't this way. I just wanted-"

A nearby rustling caught the attention of both men, prompting Jonah to put a finger up to his lips in order to stop Remy from speaking. The duo looked around in all directions, trying to determine the source of the sound, like someone moving through the nearby stalks. Immediately, Remy believed the noise to be coming from Elias Balfour, and he watched as Jonah released his shoulder and moved ahead, his .38 drawn and ready. This wasn't going to be peaceful or quiet, and Remy hoped silently that Elias was not a bold man. He hoped that he would simply retreat back to his house upon seeing them.

However, a hulking figure burst out of the vegetation, snapping a number of fresh corn stalks and sending them to the ground as it lunged at an unaware Jonah, who had turned when he heard what was likely a nearby small bird taking flight from the field. Before Remy could shout a warning, there was a gruesome crunch and what sounded like a wet slap of meat, and Jonah collapsed, never able to fire off a single shot, landing on top of the .38. Damned good shot.

For a brief moment, Remy saw what remained of Jonah's face turn toward him on the dirt, his right cheek and much of his forehead flopping off of the muscle like a slice of Sunday ham. The moonlight glistened on the black blood that poured out from the wound and the visible yellow molars through his exposed jaw, and his right eye, a grotesque Christmas ornament hanging from a stem of loose nerve tissue, bobbed lazily from the socket. His mouth was frozen in a howl, but there had been no sound, no scream, from the attack, and his one good eye looked on, accusing, just like Uncle Bart. The killer's foot then stomped down in front of the sight, and he turned

toward Remy, provoking the youth to make a hasty retreat.

Beyond his own panicked breaths and frantic footfalls crushing fallen corn husks, Remy could only hear the rustling of stalks moving behind him, the large man in pursuit. Was this Elias Balfour? Christ, no one had told him that Elias Balfour was so damned fast or big! From what Remy could tell, he was easily a head taller than Harlan, who himself was nearly a head taller than Remy, and all of the killer's width was in his shoulders instead of his waist- easily seven feet tall. And what had he used to kill Jonah? The sheer amount of potential farming tools that could be used as a weapon was astounding, and made the drifter feel like he had walked into a bad horror movie with a murderous hillbilly.

Remy was unsure of how long he ran through the field and just where he did so, Jonah's killer chasing him and barely being slowed by the walls of corn, but he tried to constantly change direction, neglecting to run in a straight line; if he survived and had a chance to think in retrospect, he would know that it was only irrational fear dictating his movement, but others might have claimed it to be a smart tactic, as he eventually escaped the murderous figure. He still wasn't safe, however, still able to hear the killer's steps nearby, and it took all of his control to calm his breathing.

Taking cover in an area where the dirt formed a ditch next to one of the nearly infinite rows, Remy crawled cautiously to where he could peek through the foliage and spotted the figure. "No," Remy moaned to himself when he realized that he had circled around during his terrified sprint back to where Jonah's freshly dead corpse remained, over which the killer was now standing. Looking down at his victim, whose face was still half gone (an image that would never leave Remy's mind), the gigantic Balfour turned, and Remy noticed something odd despite the horror of what had just occurred.

Barely visible in the light, there was a glint emanating from whom Remy thought to be Balfour's head that seemed to blink like a luminous star as he moved around. Remy struggled to determine what the source was, moving forward slightly, doing his best to remain hidden in the shadows, until Elias's head turned again, and he saw that the object shining was a button. A small, golden button, one that probably came from a pair of pants or perhaps an old coat, was sewn onto the material of the mask, and it was where the right eye should be. Remy wondered why Balfour was wearing a burlap sack over his head, one with a decorative eye and stitching that resembled a closed mouth.

Did he enjoy dressing like a scarecrow when walking the fields at night, being among the others his family owned? Was it some twisted game that he felt like playing?

Knowing that he needed to run before he was discovered again but frozen with fear, Remy watched in horror as the giant scarecrow lifted Jonah's corpse as though it were a ragdoll. It wasn't a man...it simply couldn't be! There was no way that this could be Elias Balfour, this button-eyed monstrosity, but regardless of his ideas, none of it mattered- he was still in danger. Slowly backing away from the scene, Remy attempted to determine how far into the fields he was and which direction he needed to go. He desperately needed to get off the property and get the hell out of Amber Hills.

Crashing corn stalks sounded and another figure emerged from the rows to join Jonah's killer. Shorter, of more average height, but also bulky, uneven in shape, and dressed in shabby clothes- it was another scarecrow. Remy couldn't help but wonder if this was evidence of some kind of strange cult, possibly headed by Elias Balfour: people by day, masquerading as scarecrows by night, walking the fields and protecting the homestead. It would have been funny if someone hadn't just died so brutally right in front of him.

When four more scarecrows shambled out from the surrounding rows, each more disturbingly statured than the last, to see the largest one's quarry, Remy speculated momentarily on if a trace of last night's powder binge could still be in his system, making him hallucinate what he was seeing. Before any type of weird sacrificial ceremony could begin, and with little thought, the drifter chose this as his opportunity to run like hell in any direction away from them; apparently, one of the scarecrows saw him dash away, provoking others to pursue.

This time, Remy Kehoe ran furiously in as close to a straight line as he could, praying to anything that would hear him that it was toward the outskirts of the field, to a road, anywhere else away from the Balfour land. But between looking over his shoulder at the gaunt, gnarled shapes following, keeping pace despite their inhuman gaits and reaching out with spindly hands, Remy felt that he was running at an incline and could see the pointed, colonial roof of the Balfour mansion that Harlan Masters had pointed out originally. Sanctuary, Remy had wanted to cry in celebration- at least in there, possibly, he could catch his breath and figure out his next move...if only he could escape the freaks in the scarecrow outfits!

Coming to the front of the house, he didn't bother with the likely locked main doors and instead looked to the sides while still running, knowing that he only had seconds to spare. Panicked, his heart pounding in steam hammer pulses, Remy's eyes scanned the outer walls for any opening, hole, anything, that he could use to evade the scarecrows. The broken half-opened window was a glorious doorway to salvation that Remy could only happily climb through, neglecting to take a stealthy approach to entry. After all, Remy believed then he had yet to see the land's owner, a man whom Harlan had claimed threatened to kill him should he or anyone else intrude. It ain't like those scarecrows can protect him, he recalled saying earlier in the diner. With all of these costumed people in the field, namely the one who murdered Jonah, it was a certainty that Harlan's friends were undeniably deceased, and if Remy didn't hurry, he would join them.

With that, Remy climbed into the window, not even concerning himself with the shattered glass. As he went to pull in his free leg after stepping over the window sill, he felt the bristly grip of a straw-covered hand swipe at his neck and, on instinct, Remy retaliated with a blind swipe of his own. Nailing the follower in the head with a deal of force, its cranium was knocked askew with a crackle of straw. "What the hell?" the young drifter managed as he slid inside, watching in astonishment as the scarecrow, wearing a stitched face that seemed to frown, pushed its head back onto its neck. It stared at Remy, studying him for a few seconds, before running off to regroup with the others.

"They're...t-they're...not human..." The revelation tasted disturbingly artificial on Remy's tongue, as though he committed blasphemy by even uttering it. A human's head couldn't come

loose from their own neck like that. It wasn't human. The giant scarecrow with the button on its mask lifting Jonah as though he were a feather, the way they all moved and ran- none of them were human. But what were they? What was going on?

Before he could ponder any further, a sight caught him by surprise. On the floor behind a desk adorned with scattered piles of old books was a man, slender and emaciated, curled into a tightly bound foetal position. Upon stepping closer, Remy discerned that the man appeared older, his hair greyed by time, and his clothes dirty and unkempt. The smell permeating his vicinity was stale with pungent sweat that seemed days old mixed with something rusty, and around his midsection were dark stains. It was blood. Dried, old, and brown, the likely source of the rusty stink, and it had formed a large, deep stain that soaked the floorboards. The dim glow of the desk lamp revealed that the blood had been used to write strange symbols around the body, forming a circle. Jesus, Remy mused, first living scarecrows and now...what, witchcraft?

Glancing around to make sure he was still safe from the scarecrow menace, Remy saw that he was within a study, the walls covered by bookcases packed with hundreds of assorted tomes, another indicator of the Balfour family's wealth. Harlan had said that Elias liked to read- was this Elias on the floor, covered in blood? If so, Harlan's friends had done their jobs, unless something else happened. Despite the old blood, though, the body didn't seem in too bad of a shape. Not decomposed, either, from he could tell. Remy leaned down to examine it.

Suddenly, the man burst to life, gasping with fright as though waking from an awful dream, his eyes darting all around the room and at Remy with terror. The drifter fell back to the floor in fright from the outburst, holding up his hands. "Woah! Hey, calm down! Calm down!"

"Wha-?! Uggh, oh, God..." The man reached down and gripped his abdomen. "I...I'm still me, right?" He stretched out his arms, both like shaking sticks, and registered Remy for the first time. "Who...who the hell are you?"

"...Elias Balfour?" Remy asked, trying to maintain eye contact, hoping to dispel the man's shock.

"T-That's my name, asshole!" Elias shouted. "I wanna know who you are!"

"Remy."

"...Remy. What...what in Christ's name are you doin' here, boy?"

"I-"

Elias tried to lift himself up into a seated position, obviously in agony. "Aaaghh! God...damnit!"

"How...how are you alive?" Remy whispered, thinking aloud, gesturing to the wounds on the man's chest and stomach that he could now see more clearly. They were pronounced and round-bullet holes, Remy figured. Through them, he was certain that he could make out the gleaming white of bone surrounding the slimy wetness of an internal organ, likely one of his lungs. It

swelled and deflated in rhythm.

“I’m not,” Elias replied bluntly, looking down at the same wounds. “Not really, anyway. You...you see this circle,” he said, pointing to the markings drawn around him, “it’s a ward keeping me alive. I stay in it, I live. I...I move out...”

“A ward?”

“One of the few...I know. Barely had time...to draw the damn...thing...before...”

Elias was certainly a lunatic. Wards? Wards drawn in blood? “W-what?” This whole situation had gone completely insane. It was witchcraft, after all. There was simply no rational explanation for how Elias was alive with his wounds. He tried to recall what Harlan had told him that morning: two weeks since his associates came and confronted Elias, and that...thing...had killed them? Had he been sitting here all this time, internal organs exposed, ready to spill out? Remy wanted this all to be a nightmare, to be back with his aunt and uncle. To have never taken the money, everything fine again.

“Look...Remy...I know what you’re here for, and if I knew where my .12 gauge was, you’d be worse off than me...hell, if I had known when they showed up, I wouldn’t be in this situation now. The one time I wasn’t expectin’ it. Harlan, you goddamn coward.” Elias frowned, thinking of his enemy. “Harlan sent ya, didn’t he? Like he sent his friends. They...they all died. Badly. Ol’ Buttoneye saw to it. And now-”

“Buttoneye? That’s its name?”

Elias nodded.

“So whoever...whatever...killed Jonah wasn’t you.”

“No s-shit, kid. Do I look like I’m in any shape to do any harm?” Being essentially dead didn’t rid a man of his sense of humour, Remy ascertained. “God, this hurts...it still hurts. You ever had to deal with bullet wounds for days and days that you can’t fix or heal?”

“Can’t say I have,” Remy said, unsure of whether to smile at such a strange question or remain as serious as possible despite being terrified beyond rationality.

“Jonah, huh? Harlan’s silent fart bit it, huh? Couldn’t have happened to a bigger piece of shit. Ya know he liked kids, and I don’t mean in a Mister Rogers sorta way...that’s what got his throat smashed in prison. Betcha Harlan didn’t share that.”

How could a man with a young daughter keep people like that in his employ? Remy shook his head in revulsion as Elias continued.

“God, I haven’t eaten in so long...this ward won’t let me die, but I can’t get anything to eat without leaving...goddamn Catch .22, ain’t it?”

“Mr. Balfour...”

“You ain’t gettin’ the deed. You ain’t gettin’ out of here.”

“I don’t want the deed. Masters wanted me to get it...and Jonah was gonna kill you. But I don’t want it. I just want out.”

“A hired goon with a conscience, huh?” Elias spat.

“A guilty guy in the wrong place, wrong time.” Remy paused and thought of his Uncle Bart again, feeling the stinging ache pound in his veins. “I’m gonna get out of here. I’ll help you, too. Get you a doctor...”

“Don’t you listen?” Remy could briefly understand possibly another reason that Harlan Masters didn’t like the man- he was hopelessly abrasive and sarcastic, but anyone would be under his unique, and downright strange, circumstances. “I leave this circle, I die. You try to leave this house, you will die. Unless you can get out of the field’s perimeter, but good luck if’n you were seen.”

“If I get out of the perimeter?”

“It...Buttoneye can’t get out of the field. My great-grandfather saw to that. Embedded a ward himself under the ground around the whole property.”

Wards again. “What in the hell is that thing?”

“A scarecrow, obviously.” Elias shook his head as he braced a hand on the floor to hold himself upright. “Harlan never did hire smart fellas.”

“I can count, at least,” Remy said. “The one, Buttoneye, you call it, killed Jonah, but there are others. But you already knew that.”

An unsettled silence took hold of Elias. “I did,” he answered, at last. “That’s the problem now...it’s...it’s makin’ more like it. Because I’m in here...I can’t stop it.”

Remy made a connection that would have sounded like madness in any other situation, but wanted to ask to have clarification. “Is that what happened to Harlan’s friends?”

Elias nodded. “The assholes that came and did...this,” he said, pointing at his wounds, “were made into those other scarecrows after...None of us never figured out...how...back then...”

“And Jonah?”

“He’ll be one soon, I’m sure. Does them fresh. Their bodies are in there, but not sure about their souls.”

One more question, remembering Lemar's words. "What about people who apparently disappeared 'round here?"

Elias said nothing, and that was enough of an answer. "Random people," he finally whispered. "Accidents. But none of them are those things out there, though. Dad and me could stop Buttoneye then."

The drifter was frustrated and confused, the living but dead man babbling on about things that made absolutely no comprehensible sense to him. He listened for any sounds of movement or anything outside, but thankfully heard nothing. Like before his entering the field with Jonah, it was eerily quiet, all except for Elias's maddening talk. Remy raised his hands to stop him, and asked, "Just tell me what caused all of this. Please, Mr. Balfour."

Elias huffed and sneered. "Oh, okay, story time, then."

"But quickly," Remy added, alluding to the things outside.

"My great-great grandmother was Jewish, okay? When she met her husband, she all but abandoned all those old beliefs for him, but when she'd tell stories to Great-Grand-Dad as a kid, he loved them. Especially the one about the Golem."

The word "golem" had a funny ring in Remy's mind, something like that Lord of the Rings creature- he only barely remembered seeing one of the movies years before, back in middle school, and he paid little attention to it. He knew that if he made a comment aloud to Elias, he'd only receive more criticism from the farm owner. Instead, he asked, "What?"

"Clay figure brought to life...a protector, a worker- that's what Buttoneye is...just straw instead of clay. Warded so it's basically indestructible by conventional means; not the others, though. Dad found that out the first time it made one like it. Buttoneye watched over us, took care of the land, namely at night. When Great-Grand-Dad made it originally, Buttoneye was basically nothin' more than an automaton- a robot, for lack of a better word."

"How in God's name is that possible? You're talkin' about things that aren't possible..."

"Look at me sittin' here- I'm basically dead! Things are possible, boy. More n' you'd know. All these books," Elias said, pointing to the nearby bookshelves, "my family's been into this shit for a long time due to Great-Grand-Dad's obsession. A few words, some drawings, a little blood, all your faith; all it takes. But there's somethin' a little extra about Buttoneye."

Remy looked around to Elias's desk and stood, reaching for one of the books as Elias talked. It was large, bound in a leathery cover that felt slick and smooth despite its obvious, faded age.

"It has to have a soul to continue going, like fuel," Elias continued, "and Great-Grand-Dad, the psycho he was, instilled on the family somethin' of a curse to keep the land alive and fertile- no goddamn idea why. After my great-grandmother died, he was beside himself with grief and,

well, maybe he feared death. I do, too.” A slight mania manifested in the tone of Elias’s voice. “He claimed that the Balfour bloodline would live on. Who wouldn’t want immortality, or at least an unnaturally long life, ya know? So, he tweaked the scarecrow with the only spell he could find that fit his needs and destroyed any writings that could be used to stop it from protecting or working the field- even those that might’ve had info to destroy it, I think. He used an incantation that would allow him to live...”

The text on the page was in a strange language, something akin to Latin but much more complex, with odd symbols and scrawling written in a reddish brown. It was all indistinguishable to Remy, but through examination and his listening to Elias, he deciphered enough of the situation to finish the elder man’s sentence. “...through the scarecrow,” the drifter finished.

“For a time, anyway. When each patriarch dies, their soul takes the place of the one before it. And that soul goes into that damned scarecrow, while the other is freeeeeeee,” Elias laughed uneasily. “So Dad always told me growin’ up. Guess Great-Grand-Dad wanted it to be a legacy.”

Lowering the book, Remy looked at Elias, trying to piece together what he was hearing. “You die...”

“...I become...it. Born from the field, return to the field, Dad always said.”

“Jesus, no wonder you’re afraid of death.” A second of thought, and Remy asked, “So, that means...the scarecrow’s your...father?”

“R-right,” Elias winced, clutching his stomach. “Maybe you’re smarter than I thought. It’s him but it ain’t...it’s as though...you’re in there, but you ain’t yourself. Buttoneye’s job was to protect the land and the family. I dunno if I’d be in control or know who I was or what- but the bigger problem is that I have no heirs. No family after me. I might be...trapped. Trapped in it, and trapped here. And if Harlan got the deed like he wanted, took the land, made it his-”

“He’d own you and you’d be trapped for good, right?” Remy was still in disbelief at how he was trying to make sense of all of these things that were nonsense, but he covered it well. “In your books, have you found anything to avoid that?”

“No...no, I never took the time to fully study everything, even when Dad told me years ago all about it. But I know enough, and all I could ever find was how to transfer...ownership. Instead of my bloodline, it’d be another...but I’d...serve and protect ‘em. And the curse would be passed on...”

The drifter understood the implications.

“But what do I know? I don’t even understand how Buttoneye’s makin’ other scarecrows outta dead people, I just know he’s doin’ it! None of us could figure that one out.” Elias chuckled through coughs. “All I really know is that Buttoneye won’t hurt me. I’m blood...but I either sit here in agony, or I die and switch places...if Harlan...aggh, Christ!”



Remy took a moment to weigh his options. If he tried to run, he might get away, but he was only lucky to have survived as long as he had. He'd probably die and be made into one of those things- he was tired, scared, and still shaky from light withdrawal symptoms, so it was all but certain. He had nowhere to go; he ran from something that he should have faced, and this was his payback. It was penance. He couldn't say that Elias was a good man- he'd only just met him- but he didn't deserve what he had been dealt. Not this supposed "curse," and certainly not the violence wrought by the likes of the bastard Harlan Masters.

"Heh, Harlan would like that...to own me. He finds a weakness, squeezes. He thought mine was being alone. 'Cept I was never alone."

Movement around the open window caught Remy's attention, and he realized that one of the scarecrows had returned. More shadowy shapes appeared behind it and ran in different directions, likely in order to find a means to enter the house, but Remy wasn't quite as concerned about them as he was the big one, Buttoneye. The time for talking was finished, though he wished that perhaps maybe he'd had been able to talk to the man under different circumstances. He thought again of Uncle Bart. "Elias, listen," Remy said, his jaw clenching as he processed what he was considering. "Tell me what I need to do to take your place."

In the middle of his rant, Elias finally registered what the drifter said, and was immediately confused. "What?"

A shatter of glass from another room. "Just...just hurry! Tell me!" Before I change my mind. "What do I have to do to transfer?"

Elias wasn't to be immediately swayed. "Why? I...I can't ask ya to do that."

The young drifter had some reasons of his own that he couldn't explain to the man; due to time, due to having to share details about himself that didn't need to be shared with someone he barely knew, due to maybe wanting some twisted form of redemption- he was unsure- but he only drew upon facts that Elias had claimed were undeniable. "You said that if I try to run, I won't make it. You're probably right. What choice do I have if I want to survive?"

Elias Balfour understood desperate measures, looking to the dried, bloody shapes around him, remembering how terrified he was, how close to death he had been. "But...if it works...if it goes to you...your soul..."

"I know!" A number of hands began beating on the study's door, threatening to splinter the frame. One slam was louder than the others and had more force, and Remy was willing to bet that it was the leader.

"And any heirs...if..." He saw that whatever else he had to say to the youth didn't matter and, though he'd much rather continue to question his conviction, which he felt to be sudden and without much introspection, he accepted and went along. "The book you were holding..."

It took only a few moments for Elias to walk Remy through the process. Handing the book to

Elias, he would recite the words and Remy would repeat them, drawing the appropriate symbols on the ground in his own blood (he reached for a large shard of glass from the window to assist), as would Elias with his, and that was all. Once Elias moved out of his circle, he would die and leave his body, fulfilling the curse, and Remy would be safe as the new heir. It wasn't the best plan, necessarily, but few ever were. It was certainly better than Harlan's plan outlined at the diner. Tenuous was better than nothing.

"Just do me one favour," Elias said once he arrived at the proper page. "Destroy this house. Destroy the goddamn books. No one else ever needs to be able to use any of this. Got it? Prove you ain't a little bastard like I thought you was gonna be."

"Okay," Remy answered, hearing the slamming of the door becoming louder, the crackling of wood being forced inward by the blows. Not long now.

"Nice knowin' ya, Remy," Elias stated with a smile. "Guess I get to spend more time on this land than I thought, and I can actually walk on it... Here's hopin' this works."

Over the sounds of the door slowly being smashed inward were two men yelling words of a language unknown to most, and what should be forbidden to all, from a tome that was only privy to those with expensive tastes or unlucky enough to discover them. As Remy took the shard and slit open his palm, the wood surrounding the doorknob splintered. Elias, with shaky hands, turned the book so that Remy could see the symbols as a guide, and he began drawing them on the floor as well as he could, while Elias drew his own by memory, using his own wounds as an inkwell.

"Quickly!" Elias shouted as he drew, pointing to the hands now bursting through, breaking away chunks, desperate to protect their master from the intruder that had eluded them. Remy saw it, too, and drew faster, but was interrupted when the door fell from the frame, and in the doorway stood the giant Buttoneye, its brass button glistening in the harvest moon's glow that engulfed the room.

Feeling the book slide toward him, Remy noticed a loud thump and saw that Elias had made his bid in order to stall the drifter's impending death. Outside of the circle that kept him among the living laid Elias Balfour's truly long-dead corpse alongside his completed symbols. Suddenly, there was a brief moment of silence as Buttoneye and its posse stopped moving, like machines that had lost connection to their power sources, allowing Remy to hear the small night breeze rustling through the cornfield outside. Even though everything on this night was as unreal as he could imagine, Remy knew that, within the "rules" Elias had established, relief would be short and fleeting unless he could complete the drawing.

After some seconds, the scarecrow horde resumed their movement, jerking back to life like devilish marionettes, and Buttoneye's arms reached out for Remy, ready to pulverize his vital parts. It was apparent that Elias's soul had reached its destination and sent his father's spirit to wherever it would go, but it was also apparent that he was not in complete control, adhering to Buttoneye's mystical programming like a passenger rather than a driver.

“Come on!” Remy shouted, trying to push himself faster, glancing at the page and back at his hand. One more symbol...

The clutches of the scarecrow reached Remy’s head, both hands cupped and preparing to grip and likely crush his skull, before the drifter stopped. He understood nothing of what any of the symbols represented, but when Buttoneye and the other scarecrows didn’t slaughter him, Remy knew he had completed what needed to be done. Now the Balfour “legacy” was his, it seemed.

The giant scarecrow paused, withdrew, and stood erect, turning its singular gaze from Remy to the other scarecrows, all of whom began to aimlessly wander back into the hallway, likely to resume typical tasks- possibly to finish harvesting Jonah to add to their number, Remy concluded grimly. Maybe the deceased criminal would actually become useful in his afterlife.

Now that he had time to collect himself and didn’t have to fear for his life, Remy Kehoe set about to fulfilling what Elias Balfour wished; with his own touches, of course. For several hours, he searched the mansion for the deed to ensure that it wouldn’t be left behind for anyone, especially Harlan Masters, who he was confident would attempt to search the property (or at least send someone to do so), even after Remy fulfilled the rest of Elias’s wishes. The deed was in a small lockbox under a bed upstairs, likely Elias’s bed, and likely as close to his person as possible without carrying it around. Returning to the study, not bothering to peruse the rest of the house out of respect for the owner’s recent demise, and looked through the books.

Destroy the goddamn books. The drifter wanted to honour the agreement he had made, but the fact that all of the night’s events could be tied to Elias Balfour’s family books piqued his curiosity- in addition, he thought that maybe he could find a means to possibly destroy Buttoneye and its followers, to free Elias...to free himself, even though he believed that he was deserving of this fate he had chosen. He had to try regardless.

Remy searched through all of the books that were available to him, finding most to be priceless copies of classics, some of which he had been forced to read in high school, but there were a few that interested him, primarily the one from which he and Elias completed the spell that saved and, according to the deceased farm owner, doomed him. He still couldn’t read any of the words, but he was able to discern that the book made frequent mention of something called Azathoth. He found a small satchel near Elias’s desk and stuffed that book along with three others, all seemingly ancient and foreboding in appearance, into it, along with some other items he thought he’d need. He didn’t think Elias would mind.

Destroy the place. As the scarecrows worked outside, likely with Jonah’s body among them, Remy set about finding anything flammable that he could to enact the other portion of Elias’s final request. Paint thinner, motor oil, and kerosene were only a few chemicals that he was able to discover within the home, and after covering as much of the floors, walls, and furniture that he could, Remy Kehoe used a lighter from Elias Balfour’s desk to burn the deed, dropping it in the living room as he calmly exited the front doors and made his way to the nearby barn with a half-empty fuel can.

Watching the mansion erupt into a column of hellfire as he finished dousing the hay within the

barn, Remy decided that though not necessarily a component of what had been asked of him by Elias, he would give the departed something that he would enjoy. Not just Elias, of course, but Lemar, too. Even Edith, the waitress- anyone that had felt the ruthless influence of Harlan Masters. It was the least he could do, and when he told his intentions to Buttoneye, who patrolled the surrounding area as it burned, it paused. As the flames from the house sparked the trail to the barn's interior, Remy couldn't help but notice that the scarecrow seemed to nod in approval.

I'm sorry, Uncle Bart. For what I did to you and Aunt Sue. I'm sorry for what's happened. For what I am, and what I'll become. And I'm sorry, Mrs. Masters...and little Jenny. I'm doing you a favour.

Six hours later at the home of Harlan Masters, the fat man turned on the television to information that he already knew, and it only seemed to anger him further. "Top news this morning: Elias Allan Balfour, aged fifty-six, was killed last night when his Amber Hills mansion caught fire." The news anchor's tone and expression was much too serious for the early morning. "The fire department attempted to put out the raging inferno, but by the time they arrived on the scene, the structure was nothing but cinders and the flames had spread to the barn and much of the cornfield. Law enforcement, in conjunction with the fire department, released a statement saying that arson is suspected and investigations will begin soon. Balfour was part of the wealthiest family in Amber Hills and lived alone on the estate..."

"Damn you, Remy," Harlan muttered, turning off the television. He hoped the boy was smart enough to run and to never stop, to keep going until his feet bled, to never return to Amber Hills. He'd kill him slow if he ever found him. Slower than what Remy did to his uncle. Much, much slower.

And there was the loss of Jonah. Harlan couldn't help but wonder what happened to the man, but in all truth, he really didn't care. He could find others just like him, and to be frank, he didn't much care working alongside cradle robbers, though beggars couldn't always be choosers. Perhaps Remy gave in to his basic instincts and killed him, too; maybe that was what happened to Elias.

Oh, Elias, you dumb sonuvabitch.

If he had given Harlan the deed when they last met, this could all have been avoided. No, Harlan thought, if that little drifter shit had done what he was told. But now, there would have to be so much legal tape, and Harlan didn't enjoy anything legal unless it served him. The land would be auctioned off if there was no outside family to inherit it, which he believed was the likeliest situation, and there was the chance that he would lose either a great deal of money to get the land or the land itself. Both were unacceptable, just like the letter left on his doorstep sometime during the night. He read it again, doing his best to stifle his rage while his daughter ate her cereal and the wife made her typical, vapid small talk:

*Dear Harlan,*

*Sorry about the deed. It's ash along with the rest of the property. But I did find some other pieces that you might like. Come meet me on the Balfour land around noon, and come in person. Prove you're a man. I think you'll like the new decorations.*

*Kindest regards,  
R.K.*

Once the wife took Jenny to school on her way to work, it didn't take long for Harlan to leave for his usual illicit activities, which concluded in another daily visit to the Amber Waves. What time usually spent figuring who owed him what and how much interested accrued, or simply observing through the diner's window any new or interesting "business" prospects today were side-lined by Harlan's boiling anger, his desire for revenge, and his curiosity from Remy's letter.

He'd barely finished his breakfast of fried eggs and ham, delivered without attitude as it was Edith's day off, before he settled on heading across the street to the remnants of the Balfour estate, hoping to meet with his adversary. He'd settle this personally. He had some questions, but he didn't much care if they were answered- he was going to deliver punishment of a most divine and final sense regardless of what Remy Kehoe had to say. Harlan left without leaving a tip and entered his Lincoln only to drive to the edge of the surrounding cornfield. He didn't bother being cautious or sneaky, grabbing his personal gun from the glove box, the same one he tried to threaten Elias with, and started walking through the outer rows to his appointed destination.

Much of the field had been scorched from the fire, forming an oblong, blackened circle around the matchstick memorial of the mansion's and barn's ashes. Little time passed as Harlan Masters managed to strut through what remained of Balfour's cornfield, his .357 brandished and cocked. He was prepared for whatever foolishness the little shit had planned for him. Once he passed through the last row, Harlan immediately saw one of Remy's "pieces," right in front of where the front doors used to be.

"Sonuvabitch," Harlan groaned, rolling his eyes. It was a scarecrow. "Decorations...very funny, you little prick! I came to meet, so where are ya?" He scanned around what was left of the property for any sign of the young drifter, thinking of those seemingly innocent baby blue eyes he had studied the previous day, those eyes that seemed frightened and weak, but apparently hid a certain cleverness. The fat man would put an unhealthy dose of lead right between them, but no matter how much he looked for his prey, all he could see were more scarecrows. There were seven in total: all of them surrounded the front portion of the mansion's destroyed foundation, all of them atop their crosses.

Real cute, Harlan thought spitefully. The vagabond turd took the time to move the crosses and the scarecrows, all for some stupid stunt. At least he could die knowing he'd made Harlan laugh.

"Could you be hidin' in one of these? Huh?" Harlan Masters smirked and paced toward the nearest scarecrow, its face having large, empty eyeholes and an open mouth, as he held a free hand over his eyes to block out the overhead noon sun. In his periphery, he recognized the

nearby scarecrow as the one that he felt was watching him the last time he confronted Elias Balfour personally. The one with the golden button on its “face.” Huge, ugly thing. When he found Remy and dealt with him, maybe he’d burn that damned thing, too.

Despite the brightness of the sunlight above, a small glint from the nearest scarecrow caught Harlan’s eye. Glancing again at its face, the hollow eyeholes almost appeared to stare at him, making him momentarily uneasy, but he dismissed what he felt to be stupidity. “Remmyyyyy, you’d best get your ass out here! I won’t call the police...I’ll just kill you slow! And you don’t want that, do ya?” Harlan’s gaze followed the scarecrow’s arm, which was clothed in what looked to be pieces of assorted velvet shirts of differing colours and styles, down to its gloved hand. “Where’s Jonah, Remy? What’d you do to him? Huh, where-?”

Harlan’s breath slowed and he stepped backward slowly, his vastly over-confident expression giving way to something more distressing.

A ruby ring was on its pinkie finger.

“Jo...Jonah?” Harlan questioned aloud, anxiously reaching for the jewellery.

The scarecrow’s head moved forward with a swish of straw and a crackle of what sounded like powdery, husk-like muscle, its visage appearing as a surprised, silent howl, just like its occupant had at the moment of his death. It remembered its name. With the twitching jerks of a lurching spider, Jonah’s scarecrow began to lift itself from its cross, and in his terror, Harlan could see the other scarecrows around him following suit.

“Shit! What the hell is this? W-what?!” Harlan fired off a shot at Jonah, seeing an explosion of dusty straw and fragments of old flesh that didn’t slow it in the least, before he felt something grab him. He was spun around, held in Buttoneye’s firm grip and lifted high, and attempted to fire another round before the gun was snatched from him by one of the scarecrows. Amidst his mania of self-preservation, Harlan kept trying to think, to understand just what was happening- was this the doing of the boy, or Elias? No matter who it was, just how was this happening? Were these people or...? He’d kill that goddamn drifter if it was the last thing he’d do, and he’d see Elias Balfour in Hell!

Over the monster’s shoulders, Harlan could make out the forms of other scarecrows clambering from their perches to the ground, shambling with malicious intent toward Buttoneye, whose grip tightened. “Aaaghh! Noo...R-Remyyy! Some...one! God, hellllp mee...” No one heard Harlan’s cries, and truth be told, no one would help if they knew it was him- he knew this, and it angered him further. The scarecrow removed one hand from the fat man’s thick throat and lowered him to the dirt, barely wavering from Harlan’s heavy, violent movements. On his knees, Harlan Masters had finally taken the role that he had enjoyed seeing so many others take, but he continued to try opposition with his squeals. “Lemme go, damnit, arrghhh!”

Harlan choked as he felt the bristly straw poking through the scarecrow’s gloved fingers, which were prying into his mouth and clutching his lower jaw by his teeth and chin. The other hand’s digits forced themselves inside too, above the other, both hands primed above Harlan’s tongue

like a closed bear trap, and he could feel the sensation of multiple hands clutching his shoulders, arms, anything to hold him still. Through blazing, frightful tears, Harlan could barely see the burlap face of the largest aggressor, the golden button in full view. The stitching at Buttoneye's mouth seemed to curve upward into a sickle shape. It was almost like a smile.

Almost like the one worn on Remy Kehoe's exhausted face as he watched from a distance through a pair of old binoculars procured from the now non-existent Balfour homestead. Can you see my eyes to tell what I'm thinking now, Harlan? After what happened back in Darrow, which now seemed years ago, Remy had dwelled upon whether or not he would ever be able to live with such an awful thing, even if it was an accident- that was just what he was going to confess to the local police once he finished searching Elias's tomes to end the Balfour family curse, whether he found anything or not. He hoped that Elias would forgive him for taking the books; after all, it would help him, too, if he were successful.

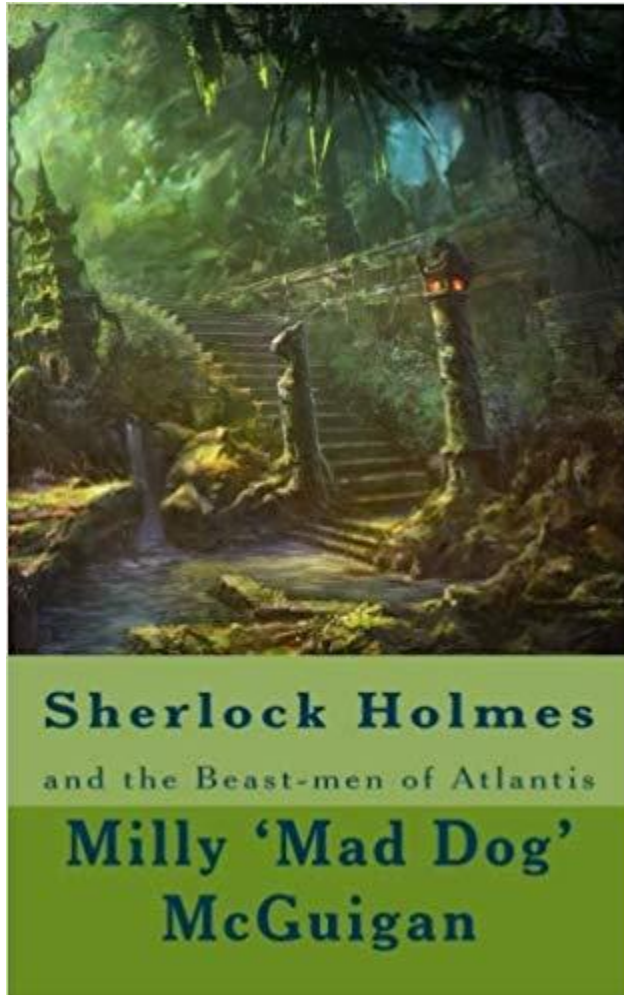
Now that the burning ache in his bones had left him, Remy just wasn't certain that his conscience could allow him to live with his family's blood on his hands, and even so, he wasn't certain that he could live with the qualms of what, unless he could somehow change it, would come at his life's end came when his immortal soul inevitably take the place of four generations-worth of Balfour patriarchs within a body of cloth and straw; but upon hearing the death wails of the soon-to-be late Harlan Masters, he realized that he could take a slight bit of comfort in an epiphany that filled his mind with, dare he think it, satisfaction.

A muffled shriek echoed in the distance, followed by a wet crack of bone and flesh ripping, tearing of cloth and meat.

Lowering the binoculars and placing them in his backpack alongside Balfour's purloined books, Remy Kehoe accepted that he had learned to live with a lot of things.

THE END

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## THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

### Part Twenty-Eight

A loudspeaker blared through the dark. Ward instantly recognized the voice that bellowed out from it. One hardly forgets the voice of the man who cut one's throat.

"Awrite, Ward. Give it up. You and that sweet pie of yours. Give it up. We're going places," Mokem Bet declared.

Ward responded with silence. He gave himself a moment to gauge the distance with care and precision. And then he jumped, bounding through the air and landing down hard on Mokem Bet's canopy.

Mokem Bet was no stranger to Ward's tactics. He did not know what to expect from Carter Ward, but he knew to expect something.

So when Ward leaped, Mokem Bet was not surprised. Startled, perhaps, but not surprised. Mokem Bet fired off two quick charges from his laser pistol. The heat of them singed the hair on his head.

"Damn!" he muttered.

At the same moment, Mokem Bet brought his ship into a hard bank to the left. Ward had nothing to hold onto. He slid along the canopy of Mokem Bet's ship. Mokem Bet stared upward through the canopy, grinning a broad grin punctuated with brown and broken teeth. If anything Mokem Bet presented that much more repulsive visage than Ward remember from before.

Ward already had his own standard issue laser pistol in his hand. He fired twice into the cockpit of Mokem Bet's fighter ship. The first shot unleashed huge quantities of plastic steam that spewed into the air. The second shot sent cracks through the canopy. Nothing serious there. Just enough to keep Mokem Bet on his toes. Mokem Bet laughed.

For Ward, on the other hand, things could not be more hazardous. When Mokem Bet sent his tiny fighter ship into a hard bank, Ward slipped down the width of the ship, and, coming to the end of the ship, he rolled off into the inky blackness surrounding them.

Turhan Mot watched the drama unfold before him with a smile growing large on his thin and purple lips. Then he said to her over the loudspeaker in his ship, "Child, do spare yourself the pain that shall be your inescapable fate, should you choose to flee us." He shined bright searchlights upon her, blinding her. Lacey threw her elbow before her dazzled eyes.

Turhan Mot smirked.

"The young lady shall lower herself to the deck," Turhan Mot said, "And she shall peaceably turn herself over to the crew there. Do we understand each other?"

Lacey, still blinded by the search light hitting her in the face, nodded vigorously. She grabbed the edge of the cage and let herself slide to the deck, the searchlight from Turhan Mot's ship gleaming upon her all the way. As she made her way to the deck, more and then more search lights fixed themselves upon her, until she was finally a gleaming body shining through the darkness.

Think and burly men and women crowded around Lacey, forcing her to the deck and binding her elbows tightly behind her back. Lacey said nothing, but the crowd was loud and boisterous.

"We got her!" "Hey! Doll baby! You're ours now!" they shouted.

"She is nothing of the sort", Turhan Mot warned, most ominously. "She is the property of Horst Dal, and to Horst Dal, she goes.

A low grumbling went rumbling through the darkened decks and halls of the "Derelict". Clearly, the news that they were to be deprived of the prize they had so carefully cultivated for countless hours was not theirs, even in the smallest part.

"Who're you? Who're you to be tellin' us what's ours and what idn't?

"We are Horst Dal's own emissary (away from Horst Dal and Yamir, Turhan Mot felt emboldened once again to refer to himself in the third person). We have come to claim his property, she, whose tongue spills Horst Dal's habits too freely for his liking..."

"We heard nuthin' about that," several voices called out from the crowd.

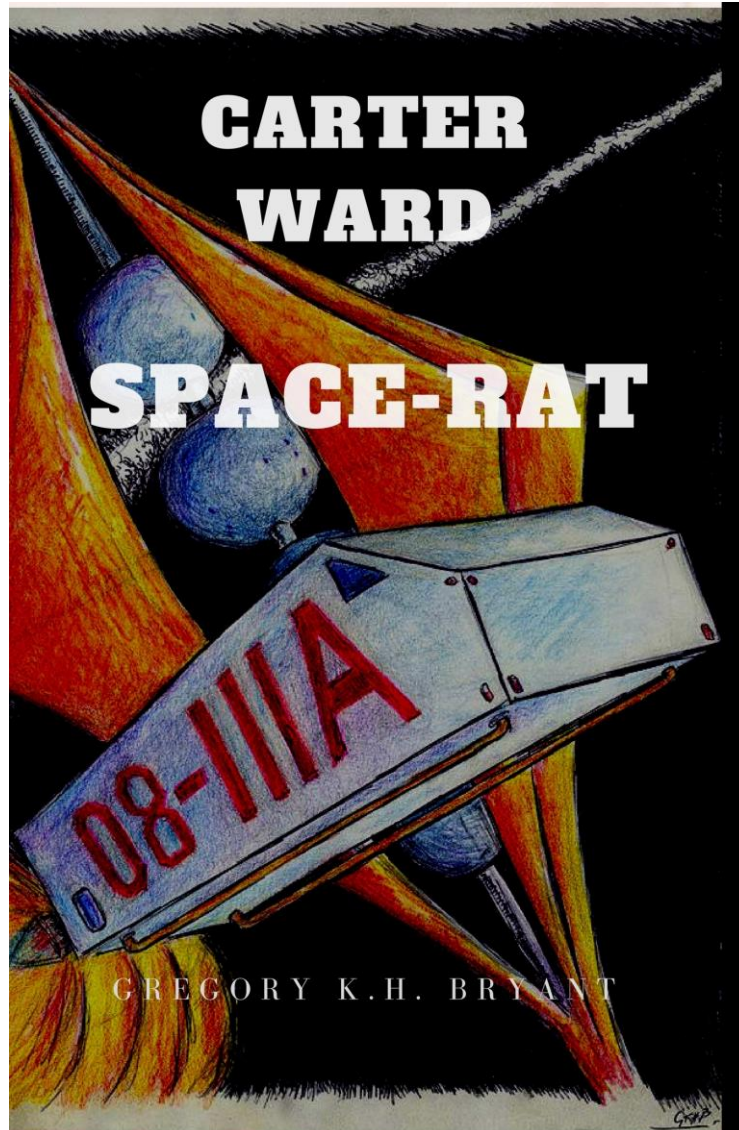
"And there is also the matter of Turhan Mot, and his capture.

"Aye," came a voice that had apparently appointed itself as the spokesperson for the crowd. "That we know of. For half a million Universal Credits, he's yours. He's a dangerous bitch, I tell you whut."

"The crew of the "Derelict" will deliver Carter Ward to us, and we will gladly make all due payments."

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

Now available from Schlock! Publications: [\*Carter Ward—Space Rat\*](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.



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## THE LOST WORLD by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

### Chapter IV: "It's Just the very Biggest Thing in the World".

Hardly was it shut when Mrs. Challenger darted out from the dining-room. The small woman was in a furious temper. She barred her husband's way like an enraged chicken in front of a bulldog. It was evident that she had seen my exit, but had not observed my return.

"You brute, George!" she screamed. "You've hurt that nice young man."

He jerked backwards with his thumb.

"Here he is, safe and sound behind me."

She was confused, but not unduly so.

"I am so sorry, I didn't see you."

"I assure you, madam, that it is all right."

"He has marked your poor face! Oh, George, what a brute you are! Nothing but scandals from one end of the week to the other. Everyone hating and making fun of you. You've finished my patience. This ends it."

"Dirty linen," he rumbled.

"It's not a secret," she cried. "Do you suppose that the whole street—the whole of London, for that matter—Get away, Austin, we don't want you here. Do you suppose they don't all talk about you? Where is your dignity? You, a man who should have been Regius Professor at a great University with a thousand students all revering you. Where is your dignity, George?"

"How about yours, my dear?"

"You try me too much. A ruffian—a common brawling ruffian—that's what you have become."

"Be good, Jessie."

"A roaring, raging bully!"

"That's done it! Stool of penance!" said he.

To my amazement he stooped, picked her up, and placed her sitting upon a high pedestal of black marble in the angle of the hall. It was at least seven feet high, and so thin that she could hardly balance upon it. A more absurd object than she presented cocked up there with her face convulsed with anger, her feet dangling, and her body rigid for fear of an upset, I could not imagine.

“Let me down!” she wailed.

“Say ‘please.’”

“You brute, George! Let me down this instant!”

“Come into the study, Mr. Malone.”

“Really, sir——!” said I, looking at the lady.

“Here’s Mr. Malone pleading for you, Jessie. Say ‘please,’ and down you come.”

“Oh, you brute! Please! please!”

He took her down as if she had been a canary.

“You must behave yourself, dear. Mr. Malone is a Pressman. He will have it all in his rag tomorrow, and sell an extra dozen among our neighbours. ‘Strange story of high life’—you felt fairly high on that pedestal, did you not? Then a sub-title, ‘Glimpse of a singular ménage.’ He’s a foul feeder, is Mr. Malone, a carrion eater, like all of his kind—porcus ex grege diaboli—a swine from the devil’s herd. That’s it, Malone—what?”

“You are really intolerable!” said I, hotly.

He bellowed with laughter.

“We shall have a coalition presently,” he boomed, looking from his wife to me and puffing out his enormous chest. Then, suddenly altering his tone, “Excuse this frivolous family badinage, Mr. Malone. I called you back for some more serious purpose than to mix you up with our little domestic pleasantries. Run away, little woman, and don’t fret.” He placed a huge hand upon each of her shoulders. “All that you say is perfectly true. I should be a better man if I did what you advise, but I shouldn’t be quite George Edward Challenger. There are plenty of better men, my dear, but only one G. E. C. So make the best of him.” He suddenly gave her a resounding kiss, which embarrassed me even more than his violence had done. “Now, Mr. Malone,” he continued, with a great accession of dignity, “this way, if YOU please.”

We re-entered the room which we had left so tumultuously ten minutes before. The Professor closed the door carefully behind us, motioned me into an arm-chair, and pushed a cigar-box under my nose.

“Real San Juan Colorado,” he said. “Excitable people like you are the better for narcotics. Heavens! don’t bite it! Cut—and cut with reverence! Now lean back, and listen attentively to whatever I may care to say to you. If any remark should occur to you, you can reserve it for some more opportune time.

“First of all, as to your return to my house after your most justifiable expulsion”—he protruded his beard, and stared at me as one who challenges and invites contradiction—”after, as I say, your well-merited expulsion. The reason lay in your answer to that most officious policeman, in which I seemed to discern some glimmering of good feeling upon your part—more, at any rate, than I am accustomed to associate with your profession. In admitting that the fault of the incident lay with you, you gave some evidence of a certain mental detachment and breadth of view which attracted my favourable notice. The sub-species of the human race to which you unfortunately belong has always been below my mental horizon. Your words brought you suddenly above it. You swam up into my serious notice. For this reason I asked you to return with me, as I was minded to make your further acquaintance. You will kindly deposit your ash in the small Japanese tray on the bamboo table which stands at your left elbow.”

All this he boomed forth like a professor addressing his class. He had swung round his revolving chair so as to face me, and he sat all puffed out like an enormous bull-frog, his head laid back and his eyes half-covered by supercilious lids. Now he suddenly turned himself sideways, and all I could see of him was tangled hair with a red, protruding ear. He was scratching about among the litter of papers upon his desk. He faced me presently with what looked like a very tattered sketch-book in his hand.

“I am going to talk to you about South America,” said he. “No comments if you please. First of all, I wish you to understand that nothing I tell you now is to be repeated in any public way unless you have my express permission. That permission will, in all human probability, never be given. Is that clear?”

“It is very hard,” said I. “Surely a judicious account——”

He replaced the notebook upon the table.

“That ends it,” said he. “I wish you a very good morning.”

“No, no!” I cried. “I submit to any conditions. So far as I can see, I have no choice.”

“None in the world,” said he.

“Well, then, I promise.”

“Word of honour?”

“Word of honour.”

He looked at me with doubt in his insolent eyes.

“After all, what do I know about your honour?” said he.

“Upon my word, sir,” I cried, angrily, “you take very great liberties! I have never been so insulted in my life.”

He seemed more interested than annoyed at my outbreak.

“Round-headed,” he muttered. “Brachycephalic, grey-eyed, black-haired, with suggestion of the negroid. Celtic, I presume?”

“I am an Irishman, sir.”

“Irish Irish?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That, of course, explains it. Let me see; you have given me your promise that my confidence will be respected? That confidence, I may say, will be far from complete. But I am prepared to give you a few indications which will be of interest. In the first place, you are probably aware that two years ago I made a journey to South America—one which will be classical in the scientific history of the world? The object of my journey was to verify some conclusions of Wallace and of Bates, which could only be done by observing their reported facts under the same conditions in which they had themselves noted them. If my expedition had no other results it would still have been noteworthy, but a curious incident occurred to me while there which opened up an entirely fresh line of inquiry.

“You are aware—or probably, in this half-educated age, you are not aware—that the country round some parts of the Amazon is still only partially explored, and that a great number of tributaries, some of them entirely uncharted, run into the main river. It was my business to visit this little-known back-country and to examine its fauna, which furnished me with the materials for several chapters for that great and monumental work upon zoology which will be my life’s justification. I was returning, my work accomplished, when I had occasion to spend a night at a small Indian village at a point where a certain tributary—the name and position of which I withhold—opens into the main river. The natives were Cucama Indians, an amiable but degraded race, with mental powers hardly superior to the average Londoner. I had effected some cures among them upon my way up the river, and had impressed them considerably with my personality, so that I was not surprised to find myself eagerly awaited upon my return. I gathered from their signs that someone had urgent need of my medical services, and I followed the chief to one of his huts. When I entered I found that the sufferer to whose aid I had been summoned had that instant expired. He was, to my surprise, no Indian, but a white man; indeed, I may say a very white man, for he was flaxen-haired and had some characteristics of an albino. He was clad in rags, was very emaciated, and bore every trace of prolonged hardship. So far as I could understand the account of the natives, he was a complete stranger to them, and had come upon their village through the woods alone and in the last stage of exhaustion.

“The man’s knapsack lay beside the couch, and I examined the contents. His name was written upon a tab within it—Maple White, Lake Avenue, Detroit, Michigan. It is a name to which I am prepared always to lift my hat. It is not too much to say that it will rank level with my own when the final credit of this business comes to be apportioned.

“From the contents of the knapsack it was evident that this man had been an artist and poet in search of effects. There were scraps of verse. I do not profess to be a judge of such things, but they appeared to me to be singularly wanting in merit. There were also some rather commonplace pictures of river scenery, a paint-box, a box of coloured chalks, some brushes, that curved bone which lies upon my inkstand, a volume of Baxter’s ‘Moths and Butterflies,’ a cheap revolver, and a few cartridges. Of personal equipment he either had none or he had lost it in his journey. Such were the total effects of this strange American Bohemian.

“I was turning away from him when I observed that something projected from the front of his ragged jacket. It was this sketch-book, which was as dilapidated then as you see it now. Indeed, I can assure you that a first folio of Shakespeare could not be treated with greater reverence than this relic has been since it came into my possession. I hand it to you now, and I ask you to take it page by page and to examine the contents.”

He helped himself to a cigar and leaned back with a fiercely critical pair of eyes, taking note of the effect which this document would produce.

I had opened the volume with some expectation of a revelation, though of what nature I could not imagine. The first page was disappointing, however, as it contained nothing but the picture of a very fat man in a pea-jacket, with the legend, “Jimmy Colver on the Mail-boat,” written beneath it. There followed several pages which were filled with small sketches of Indians and their ways. Then came a picture of a cheerful and corpulent ecclesiastic in a shovel hat, sitting opposite a very thin European, and the inscription: “Lunch with Fra Cristoforo at Rosario.” Studies of women and babies accounted for several more pages, and then there was an unbroken series of animal drawings with such explanations as “Manatee upon Sandbank,” “Turtles and Their Eggs,” “Black Ajouti under a Miriti Palm”—the matter disclosing some sort of pig-like animal; and finally came a double page of studies of long-snouted and very unpleasant saurians. I could make nothing of it, and said so to the Professor.

“Surely these are only crocodiles?”

“Alligators! Alligators! There is hardly such a thing as a true crocodile in South America. The distinction between them——”

“I meant that I could see nothing unusual—nothing to justify what you have said.”

He smiled serenely.

“Try the next page,” said he.

I was still unable to sympathize. It was a full-page sketch of a landscape roughly tinted in colour—the kind of painting which an open-air artist takes as a guide to a future more elaborate effort. There was a pale-green foreground of feathery vegetation, which sloped upwards and ended in a line of cliffs dark red in colour, and curiously ribbed like some basaltic formations which I have seen. They extended in an unbroken wall right across the background. At one point was an isolated pyramidal rock, crowned by a great tree, which appeared to be separated by a



cleft from the main crag. Behind it all, a blue tropical sky. A thin green line of vegetation fringed the summit of the ruddy cliff.

“Well?” he asked.

“It is no doubt a curious formation,” said I “but I am not geologist enough to say that it is wonderful.”

“Wonderful!” he repeated. “It is unique. It is incredible. No one on earth has ever dreamed of such a possibility. Now the next.”

I turned it over, and gave an exclamation of surprise. There was a full-page picture of the most extraordinary creature that I had ever seen. It was the wild dream of an opium smoker, a vision of delirium. The head was like that of a fowl, the body that of a bloated lizard, the trailing tail was furnished with upward-turned spikes, and the curved back was edged with a high serrated fringe, which looked like a dozen cocks’ wattles placed behind each other. In front of this creature was an absurd manikin, or dwarf, in human form, who stood staring at it.

“Well, what do you think of that?” cried the Professor, rubbing his hands with an air of triumph.

“It is monstrous—grotesque.”

“But what made him draw such an animal?”

“Trade gin, I should think.”

“Oh, that’s the best explanation you can give, is it?”

“Well, sir, what is yours?”

“The obvious one that the creature exists. That is actually sketched from the life.”

I should have laughed only that I had a vision of our doing another Catharine-wheel down the passage.

“No doubt,” said I, “no doubt,” as one humours an imbecile. “I confess, however,” I added, “that this tiny human figure puzzles me. If it were an Indian we could set it down as evidence of some pigmy race in America, but it appears to be a European in a sun-hat.”

The Professor snorted like an angry buffalo. “You really touch the limit,” said he. “You enlarge my view of the possible. Cerebral paresis! Mental inertia! Wonderful!”

He was too absurd to make me angry. Indeed, it was a waste of energy, for if you were going to be angry with this man you would be angry all the time. I contented myself with smiling wearily. “It struck me that the man was small,” said I.

“Look here!” he cried, leaning forward and dabbing a great hairy sausage of a finger on to the picture. “You see that plant behind the animal; I suppose you thought it was a dandelion or a Brussels sprout—what? Well, it is a vegetable ivory palm, and they run to about fifty or sixty feet. Don’t you see that the man is put in for a purpose? He couldn’t really have stood in front of that brute and lived to draw it. He sketched himself in to give a scale of heights. He was, we will say, over five feet high. The tree is ten times bigger, which is what one would expect.”

“Good heavens!” I cried. “Then you think the beast was——Why, Charing Cross station would hardly make a kennel for such a brute!”

“Apart from exaggeration, he is certainly a well-grown specimen,” said the Professor, complacently.

“But,” I cried, “surely the whole experience of the human race is not to be set aside on account of a single sketch”—I had turned over the leaves and ascertained that there was nothing more in the book—“a single sketch by a wandering American artist who may have done it under hashish, or in the delirium of fever, or simply in order to gratify a freakish imagination. You can’t, as a man of science, defend such a position as that.”

For answer the Professor took a book down from a shelf.

“This is an excellent monograph by my gifted friend, Ray Lankester!” said he. “There is an illustration here which would interest you. Ah, yes, here it is! The inscription beneath it runs: ‘Probable appearance in life of the Jurassic Dinosaur Stegosaurus. The hind leg alone is twice as tall as a full-grown man.’ Well, what do you make of that?”

He handed me the open book. I started as I looked at the picture. In this reconstructed animal of a dead world there was certainly a very great resemblance to the sketch of the unknown artist.

“That is certainly remarkable,” said I.

“But you won’t admit that it is final?”

“Surely it might be a coincidence, or this American may have seen a picture of the kind and carried it in his memory. It would be likely to recur to a man in a delirium.”

“Very good,” said the Professor, indulgently; “we leave it at that. I will now ask you to look at this bone.” He handed over the one which he had already described as part of the dead man’s possessions. It was about six inches long, and thicker than my thumb, with some indications of dried cartilage at one end of it.

“To what known creature does that bone belong?” asked the Professor.

I examined it with care and tried to recall some half-forgotten knowledge.

“It might be a very thick human collar-bone,” I said.

My companion waved his hand in contemptuous deprecation.

“The human collar-bone is curved. This is straight. There is a groove upon its surface showing that a great tendon played across it, which could not be the case with a clavicle.”

“Then I must confess that I don’t know what it is.”

“You need not be ashamed to expose your ignorance, for I don’t suppose the whole South Kensington staff could give a name to it.” He took a little bone the size of a bean out of a pill-box. “So far as I am a judge this human bone is the analogue of the one which you hold in your hand. That will give you some idea of the size of the creature. You will observe from the cartilage that this is no fossil specimen, but recent. What do you say to that?”

“Surely in an elephant——”

He winced as if in pain.

“Don’t! Don’t talk of elephants in South America. Even in these days of Board schools——”

“Well,” I interrupted, “any large South American animal—a tapir, for example.”

“You may take it, young man, that I am versed in the elements of my business. This is not a conceivable bone either of a tapir or of any other creature known to zoology. It belongs to a very large, a very strong, and, by all analogy, a very fierce animal which exists upon the face of the earth, but has not yet come under the notice of science. You are still unconvinced?”

“I am at least deeply interested.”

“Then your case is not hopeless. I feel that there is reason lurking in you somewhere, so we will patiently grope round for it. We will now leave the dead American and proceed with my narrative. You can imagine that I could hardly come away from the Amazon without probing deeper into the matter. There were indications as to the direction from which the dead traveller had come. Indian legends would alone have been my guide, for I found that rumours of a strange land were common among all the riverine tribes. You have heard, no doubt, of Curupuri?”

“Never.”

“Curupuri is the spirit of the woods, something terrible, something malevolent, something to be avoided. None can describe its shape or nature, but it is a word of terror along the Amazon. Now all tribes agree as to the direction in which Curupuri lives. It was the same direction from which the American had come. Something terrible lay that way. It was my business to find out what it was.”

“What did you do?” My flippancy was all gone. This massive man compelled one’s attention and respect.

“I overcame the extreme reluctance of the natives—a reluctance which extends even to talk upon the subject—and by judicious persuasion and gifts, aided, I will admit, by some threats of coercion, I got two of them to act as guides. After many adventures which I need not describe, and after traveling a distance which I will not mention, in a direction which I withhold, we came at last to a tract of country which has never been described, nor, indeed, visited save by my unfortunate predecessor. Would you kindly look at this?”

He handed me a photograph—half-plate size.

“The unsatisfactory appearance of it is due to the fact,” said he, “that on descending the river the boat was upset and the case which contained the undeveloped films was broken, with disastrous results. Nearly all of them were totally ruined—an irreparable loss. This is one of the few which partially escaped. This explanation of deficiencies or abnormalities you will kindly accept. There was talk of faking. I am not in a mood to argue such a point.”

The photograph was certainly very off-coloured. An unkind critic might easily have misinterpreted that dim surface. It was a dull grey landscape, and as I gradually deciphered the details of it I realized that it represented a long and enormously high line of cliffs exactly like an immense cataract seen in the distance, with a sloping, tree-clad plain in the foreground.

“I believe it is the same place as the painted picture,” said I.

“It is the same place,” the Professor answered. “I found traces of the fellow’s camp. Now look at this.”

It was a nearer view of the same scene, though the photograph was extremely defective. I could distinctly see the isolated, tree-crowned pinnacle of rock which was detached from the crag.

“I have no doubt of it at all,” said I.

“Well, that is something gained,” said he. “We progress, do we not? Now, will you please look at the top of that rocky pinnacle? Do you observe something there?”

“An enormous tree.”

“But on the tree?”

“A large bird,” said I.

He handed me a lens.

“Yes,” I said, peering through it, “a large bird stands on the tree. It appears to have a considerable beak. I should say it was a pelican.”

“I cannot congratulate you upon your eyesight,” said the Professor. “It is not a pelican, nor,

indeed, is it a bird. It may interest you to know that I succeeded in shooting that particular specimen. It was the only absolute proof of my experiences which I was able to bring away with me.”

“You have it, then?” Here at last was tangible corroboration.

“I had it. It was unfortunately lost with so much else in the same boat accident which ruined my photographs. I clutched at it as it disappeared in the swirl of the rapids, and part of its wing was left in my hand. I was insensible when washed ashore, but the miserable remnant of my superb specimen was still intact; I now lay it before you.”

From a drawer he produced what seemed to me to be the upper portion of the wing of a large bat. It was at least two feet in length, a curved bone, with a membranous veil beneath it.

“A monstrous bat!” I suggested.

“Nothing of the sort,” said the Professor, severely. “Living, as I do, in an educated and scientific atmosphere, I could not have conceived that the first principles of zoology were so little known. Is it possible that you do not know the elementary fact in comparative anatomy, that the wing of a bird is really the forearm, while the wing of a bat consists of three elongated fingers with membranes between? Now, in this case, the bone is certainly not the forearm, and you can see for yourself that this is a single membrane hanging upon a single bone, and therefore that it cannot belong to a bat. But if it is neither bird nor bat, what is it?”

My small stock of knowledge was exhausted.

“I really do not know,” said I.

He opened the standard work to which he had already referred me.

“Here,” said he, pointing to the picture of an extraordinary flying monster, “is an excellent reproduction of the *dimorphodon*, or *pterodactyl*, a flying reptile of the Jurassic period. On the next page is a diagram of the mechanism of its wing. Kindly compare it with the specimen in your hand.”

A wave of amazement passed over me as I looked. I was convinced. There could be no getting away from it. The cumulative proof was overwhelming. The sketch, the photographs, the narrative, and now the actual specimen—the evidence was complete. I said so—I said so warmly, for I felt that the Professor was an ill-used man. He leaned back in his chair with drooping eyelids and a tolerant smile, basking in this sudden gleam of sunshine.

“It’s just the very biggest thing that I ever heard of!” said I, though it was my journalistic rather than my scientific enthusiasm that was roused. “It is colossal. You are a Columbus of science who has discovered a lost world. I’m awfully sorry if I seemed to doubt you. It was all so unthinkable. But I understand evidence when I see it, and this should be good enough for anyone.”

The Professor purred with satisfaction.

“And then, sir, what did you do next?”

“It was the wet season, Mr. Malone, and my stores were exhausted. I explored some portion of this huge cliff, but I was unable to find any way to scale it. The pyramidal rock upon which I saw and shot the pterodactyl was more accessible. Being something of a cragsman, I did manage to get half way to the top of that. From that height I had a better idea of the plateau upon the top of the crags. It appeared to be very large; neither to east nor to west could I see any end to the vista of green-capped cliffs. Below, it is a swampy, jungly region, full of snakes, insects, and fever. It is a natural protection to this singular country.”

“Did you see any other trace of life?”

“No, sir, I did not; but during the week that we lay encamped at the base of the cliff we heard some very strange noises from above.”

“But the creature that the American drew? How do you account for that?”

“We can only suppose that he must have made his way to the summit and seen it there. We know, therefore, that there is a way up. We know equally that it must be a very difficult one, otherwise the creatures would have come down and overrun the surrounding country. Surely that is clear?”

“But how did they come to be there?”

“I do not think that the problem is a very obscure one,” said the Professor; “there can only be one explanation. South America is, as you may have heard, a granite continent. At this single point in the interior there has been, in some far distant age, a great, sudden volcanic upheaval. These cliffs, I may remark, are basaltic, and therefore plutonic. An area, as large perhaps as Sussex, has been lifted up en bloc with all its living contents, and cut off by perpendicular precipices of a hardness which defies erosion from all the rest of the continent. What is the result? Why, the ordinary laws of Nature are suspended. The various checks which influence the struggle for existence in the world at large are all neutralized or altered. Creatures survive which would otherwise disappear. You will observe that both the pterodactyl and the stegosaurus are Jurassic, and therefore of a great age in the order of life. They have been artificially conserved by those strange accidental conditions.”

“But surely your evidence is conclusive. You have only to lay it before the proper authorities.”

“So in my simplicity, I had imagined,” said the Professor, bitterly. “I can only tell you that it was not so, that I was met at every turn by incredulity, born partly of stupidity and partly of jealousy. It is not my nature, sir, to cringe to any man, or to seek to prove a fact if my word has been doubted. After the first I have not condescended to show such corroborative proofs as I possess. The subject became hateful to me—I would not speak of it. When men like yourself, who

represent the foolish curiosity of the public, came to disturb my privacy I was unable to meet them with dignified reserve. By nature I am, I admit, somewhat fiery, and under provocation I am inclined to be violent. I fear you may have remarked it.”

I nursed my eye and was silent.

“My wife has frequently remonstrated with me upon the subject, and yet I fancy that any man of honour would feel the same. To-night, however, I propose to give an extreme example of the control of the will over the emotions. I invite you to be present at the exhibition.” He handed me a card from his desk. “You will perceive that Mr. Percival Waldron, a naturalist of some popular repute, is announced to lecture at eight-thirty at the Zoological Institute’s Hall upon ‘The Record of the Ages.’ I have been specially invited to be present upon the platform, and to move a vote of thanks to the lecturer. While doing so, I shall make it my business, with infinite tact and delicacy, to throw out a few remarks which may arouse the interest of the audience and cause some of them to desire to go more deeply into the matter. Nothing contentious, you understand, but only an indication that there are greater deeps beyond. I shall hold myself strongly in leash, and see whether by this self-restraint I attain a more favourable result.”

“And I may come?” I asked eagerly.

“Why, surely,” he answered, cordially. He had an enormously massive genial manner, which was almost as overpowering as his violence. His smile of benevolence was a wonderful thing, when his cheeks would suddenly bunch into two red apples, between his half-closed eyes and his great black beard. “By all means, come. It will be a comfort to me to know that I have one ally in the hall, however inefficient and ignorant of the subject he may be. I fancy there will be a large audience, for Waldron, though an absolute charlatan, has a considerable popular following. Now, Mr. Malone, I have given you rather more of my time than I had intended. The individual must not monopolize what is meant for the world. I shall be pleased to see you at the lecture to-night. In the meantime, you will understand that no public use is to be made of any of the material that I have given you.”

“But Mr. McArdle—my news editor, you know—will want to know what I have done.”

“Tell him what you like. You can say, among other things, that if he sends anyone else to intrude upon me I shall call upon him with a riding-whip. But I leave it to you that nothing of all this appears in print. Very good. Then the Zoological Institute’s Hall at eight-thirty to-night.” I had a last impression of red cheeks, blue rippling beard, and intolerant eyes, as he waved me out of the room.

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## THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

### Chapter VII: Larry O'Keefe

Pressing back the questions I longed to ask, I introduced myself. Oddly enough, I found that he knew me, or rather my work. He had bought, it appeared, my volume upon the peculiar vegetation whose habitat is disintegrating lava rock and volcanic ash, that I had entitled, somewhat loosely, I could now perceive, *Flora of the Craters*. For he explained naively that he had picked it up, thinking it an entirely different sort of a book, a novel in fact—something like Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways*, which he liked greatly.

He had hardly finished this explanation when we touched the side of the *Suwarna*, and I was forced to curb my curiosity until we reached the deck.

"That thing you saw me sitting on," he said, after he had thanked the bowing little skipper for his rescue, "was all that was left of one of his Majesty's best little hydroairplanes after that cyclone threw it off as excess baggage. And by the way, about where are we?"

Da Costa gave him our approximate position from the noon reckoning.

O'Keefe whistled. "A good three hundred miles from where I left the H.M.S. *Dolphin* about four hours ago," he said. "That squall I rode in on was some whizzer!"

"The *Dolphin*," he went on, calmly divesting himself of his soaked uniform, "was on her way to Melbourne. I'd been yearning for a joy ride and went up for an alleged scouting trip. Then that blow shot out of nowhere, picked me up, and insisted that I go with it.

"About an hour ago I thought I saw a chance to zoom up and out of it, I turned, and blick went my right wing, and down I dropped."

"I don't know how we can notify your ship, Lieutenant O'Keefe," I said. "We have no wireless."

"Doctair Goodwin," said Da Costa, "we could change our course, sair—perhaps—"

"Thanks—but not a bit of it," broke in O'Keefe. "Lord alone knows where the *Dolphin* is now. Fancy she'll be nosing around looking for me. Anyway, she's just as apt to run into you as you into her. Maybe we'll strike something with a wireless, and I'll trouble you to put me aboard." He hesitated. "Where are you bound, by the way?" he asked.

"For Ponape," I answered.

"No wireless there," mused O'Keefe. "Beastly hole. Stopped a week ago for fruit. Natives seemed scared to death at us—or something. What are you going there for?"

Da Costa darted a furtive glance at me. It troubled me.



O'Keefe noted my hesitation.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," he said. "Maybe I oughn't to have asked that?"

"It's no secret, Lieutenant," I replied. "I'm about to undertake some exploration work—a little digging among the ruins on the Nan-Matal."

I looked at the Portuguese sharply as I named the place. A pallor crept beneath his skin and again he made swiftly the sign of the cross, glancing as he did so fearfully to the north. I made up my mind then to question him when opportunity came. He turned from his quick scrutiny of the sea and addressed O'Keefe.

"There's nothing on board to fit you, Lieutenant."

"Oh, just give me a sheet to throw around me, Captain," said O'Keefe and followed him. Darkness had fallen, and as the two disappeared into Da Costa's cabin I softly opened the door of my own and listened. Huldricksson was breathing deeply and regularly.

I drew my electric-flash, and shielding its rays from my face, looked at him. His sleep was changing from the heavy stupor of the drug into one that was at least on the borderland of the normal. The tongue had lost its arid blackness and the mouth secretions had resumed action. Satisfied as to his condition I returned to deck.

O'Keefe was there, looking like a spectre in the cotton sheet he had wrapped about him. A deck table had been cleated down and one of the Tonga boys was setting it for our dinner. Soon the very creditable larder of the Suwarna dressed the board, and O'Keefe, Da Costa, and I attacked it. The night had grown close and oppressive. Behind us the forward light of the Brunhilda glided and the binnacle lamp threw up a faint glow in which her black helmsman's face stood out mistily. O'Keefe had looked curiously a number of times at our tow, but had asked no questions.

"You're not the only passenger we picked up today," I told him. "We found the captain of that sloop, lashed to his wheel, nearly dead with exhaustion, and his boat deserted by everyone except himself."

"What was the matter?" asked O'Keefe in astonishment.

"We don't know," I answered. "He fought us, and I had to drug him before we could get him loose from his lashings. He's sleeping down in my berth now. His wife and little girl ought to have been on board, the captain here says, but—they weren't."

"Wife and child gone!" exclaimed O'Keefe.

"From the condition of his mouth he must have been alone at the wheel and without water at least two days and nights before we found him," I replied. "And as for looking for anyone on these waters after such a time—it's hopeless."

“That’s true,” said O’Keefe. “But his wife and baby! Poor, poor devil!”

He was silent for a time, and then, at my solicitation, began to tell us more of himself. He had been little more than twenty when he had won his wings and entered the war. He had been seriously wounded at Ypres during the third year of the struggle, and when he recovered the war was over. Shortly after that his mother had died. Lonely and restless, he had re-entered the Air Service, and had remained in it ever since.

“And though the war’s long over, I get homesick for the lark’s land with the German planes playing tunes on their machine guns and their Archies tickling the soles of my feet,” he sighed. “If you’re in love, love to the limit; and if you hate, why hate like the devil and if it’s a fight you’re in, get where it’s hottest and fight like hell—if you don’t life’s not worth the living,” sighed he.

I watched him as he talked, feeling my liking for him steadily increasing. If I could but have a man like this beside me on the path of unknown peril upon which I had set my feet I thought, wistfully. We sat and smoked a bit, sipping the strong coffee the Portuguese made so well.

Da Costa at last relieved the Cantonese at the wheel. O’Keefe and I drew chairs up to the rail. The brighter stars shone out dimly through a hazy sky; gleams of phosphorescence tipped the crests of the waves and sparkled with an almost angry brilliance as the bow of the Suwarna tossed them aside. O’Keefe pulled contentedly at a cigarette. The glowing spark lighted the keen, boyish face and the blue eyes, now black and brooding under the spell of the tropic night.

“Are you American or Irish, O’Keefe?” I asked suddenly.

“Why?” he laughed.

“Because,” I answered, “from your name and your service I would suppose you Irish—but your command of pure Americanese makes me doubtful.”

He grinned amiably.

“I’ll tell you how that is,” he said. “My mother was an American—a Grace, of Virginia. My father was the O’Keefe, of Coleraine. And these two loved each other so well that the heart they gave me is half Irish and half American. My father died when I was sixteen. I used to go to the States with my mother every other year for a month or two. But after my father died we used to go to Ireland every other year. And there you are—I’m as much American as I am Irish.

“When I’m in love, or excited, or dreaming, or mad I have the brogue. But for the everyday purpose of life I like the United States talk, and I know Broadway as well as I do Binevenagh Lane, and the Sound as well as St. Patrick’s Channel; educated a bit at Eton, a bit at Harvard; always too much money to have to make any; in love lots of times, and never a heartache after that wasn’t a pleasant one, and never a real purpose in life until I took the king’s shilling and earned my wings; something over thirty—and that’s me—Larry O’Keefe.”

“But it was the Irish O’Keefe who sat out there waiting for the banshee,” I laughed.

“It was that,” he said sombrely, and I heard the brogue creep over his voice like velvet and his eyes grew brooding again. “There’s never an O’Keefe for these thousand years that has passed without his warning. An’ twice have I heard the banshee calling—once it was when my younger brother died an’ once when my father lay waiting to be carried out on the ebb tide.”

He mused a moment, then went on: “An’ once I saw an Annir Choille, a girl of the green people, flit like a shade of green fire through Carntogher woods, an’ once at Dunchraig I slept where the ashes of the Dun of Cormac MacConcobar are mixed with those of Cormac an’ Eilidh the Fair, all burned in the nine flames that sprang from the harping of Cravetheen, an’ I heard the echo of his dead harpings—”

He paused again and then, softly, with that curiously sweet, high voice that only the Irish seem to have, he sang:

*Woman of the white breasts, Eilidh;  
Woman of the gold-brown hair, and lips of the red, red rowan,  
Where is the swan that is whiter, with breast more soft,  
Or the wave on the sea that moves as thou movest, Eilidh.*

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