

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

# **Schlock!**

**WEBZINE**

**VOL. 12, ISSUE 24  
4TH MARCH 2018**

## **VENGEANCE IS MINE**

**BY DAVE  
LUDFORD—  
BULGING EYED  
TERROR...**

## **NIP AND TUCK**

**BY GERALD E  
SHEAGREN—  
OH MY GOD! WHAT  
HAVE I DONE?**

## **HEART OF A SOLDIER BY RALPH BENTON**

## **THE BOT BY STEVEN HAVELOCK**

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews 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 review published and self published novels. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

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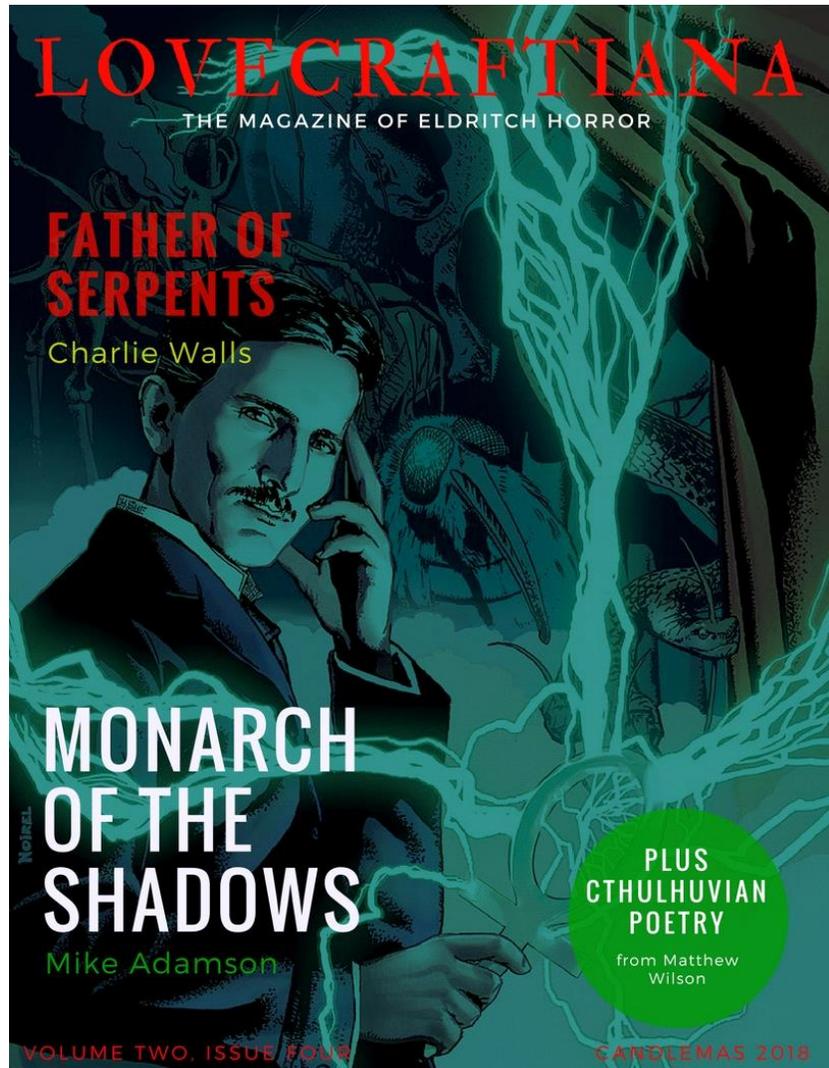
## EDITORIAL

This week, Sergeant Finn investigates a horrifying murder. Plastic surgery goes very wrong for a superannuated starlet. Surgery of a different kind has unforeseen consequences. And a prisoner on an asteroid finds love.

The prettiest girl in the village visits a witch. Mud follows Carter Ward through the asteroids. Our traveller to Mars encounters a Martial faith. And the narrator of the War of the Worlds meets a man of religion who has his own explanation of the invasion.

—Gavin Chappell

Available from Rogue Planet Press: the Candlemas 2018 edition of [\*Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror\*](#).



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## VENGEANCE IS MINE by Dave Ludford

He was found hanging upside down from one of the rafters of his barn, a sharp knife sticking out of one side of his neck. The huge pool of blood puddled on the hay strewn floor was the colour of red wine, but it was the look of bulging eyed terror on his face that made Drummond, the head dairyman, crumple to his knees and vomit copiously. After several minutes of violent retching he slowly began to recover. Who could have done this to the master? Mr Randall was a well-respected pillar of the community, a gentleman farmer and Judge. Only a madman could have acted so brutally and ruthlessly, surely? Drummond managed to stand up on quivering legs and walked slowly toward the barn's entrance. He knew what he must do next: summon Sergeant Finn and The Watch, the local law enforcement officers. It was only as he looked to his left that he saw the words 'Vengeance Is Mine' scrawled in large letters on the brick wall in the victim's blood. He ran stumbled from the barn feeling fresh waves of nausea rising from his stomach.

Sergeant Finn had a major issue of his own, however. Glancing up from his position behind the enquiry desk of The Watch's station, a small converted cottage on the edge of the village, he regarded the clock on the opposite wall. Nine thirty, he noted. His boss and senior officer of The Watch, Inspector Briars, was exactly half an hour late. Most unlike him; the Inspector was never late for anything, being a stickler for punctuality both in himself and his subordinates. The situation caused Finn to experience feelings of unease and vague disquiet that were slowly increasing. He lifted the telephone on the desk and dialled his boss's home number. Let it ring for a full two minutes. No reply. He placed the receiver back in its cradle. Perhaps Briars was on his way, had been delayed or detained somehow? But those feelings wouldn't go away... something was definitely amiss. At that moment Constable Leach, a slow but capable and methodical officer, entered the reception area on his way out to making his first patrol of the village. Leach noted the look of concern on his superior's face.

"Everything OK, Sarge?" he tentatively enquired.

"No, Leach, everything isn't OK. Inspector Briars is late, and I can't reach him by telephone. You must come with me urgently; we'll go round to his house and find out what's happened."

Before leaving the station, Finn called through to Constable Browning, another of his subordinates, to replace him on the enquiry desk. Browning had been engaged in writing up the reports on the previous night's patrols by The Watch, a job he hated, so he relished the opportunity of the change of duty. Being behind the enquiry desk made him feel important, higher in stature than his humble rank entailed.

So it was to Constable Browning that Drummond made his initial, breathless report. Browning listened in mounting disbelief, shaking his head slowly, agog with shock. When Drummond had finished speaking, Browning rang through to Constables Archer and Freeman, the only other Watch officers on duty that morning, to accompany himself and Drummond to Holgate Farm. The four men climbed into The Watch's second and only other patrol vehicle (Finn had taken the other), an ancient car rapidly acquiring the status of 'classic' or 'vintage', and set off as fast as the rusting wreck allowed.

Inspector Briars lived—unmarried and alone (his misogynistic views were well known to all at the station)—in a small cottage on the main road leading out of the village towards Netherton, the nearest town. The cottage had a neatly mown rectangle of front lawn and flower borders that were a riot of colour at this time of year. It was a hot summer's day and the sun beat down relentlessly as Finn pulled the patrol vehicle to a halt before the Inspector's immaculately white painted gate. Both officers climbed out and Finn led the way up the short path to the front door.

Finn beat heavily several times using the heavy brass knocker and they could hear the report echo through the cottage. No reply. Finn tried again, knocking even louder this time. Nothing. Finn turned to Leach and jerked his head a couple of times in rapid succession. Although inclined to be slow witted at the best of times, Leach understood the signal: make a tour of the sides and rear of the property looking for signs of life. Leach obeyed his superior without demur.

Once Leach had departed Finn took a few steps back from the front door and craned his head upwards to peer at the cottage's upper windows, shielding his eyes against the bright sunlight as he did so. He wasn't exactly sure what he expected to see; surely if his boss had been at one of the windows he would have seen the patrol car pull up and his two officers alight, and would have subsequently therefore come downstairs to answer the door? It was whilst having these thoughts that he heard Leach's piercing, high pitched scream coming from the rear of the cottage; a noise like that of a trapped animal that made his blood run cold.

Browning, Drummond and the other two officers of The Watch swung into the main yard of Holgate Farm, scattering several startled, madly clucking hens as they did so. Drummond was the first to exit the vehicle and lost no time in beckoning the others to follow him, setting off at a brisk canter towards one of two large barns at the rear of the property that housed Squire Archibald Randall's dairy herd. Archer and Freeman, being fit young men, had no difficulty in keeping up with Drummond; Browning, however, in his early sixties, obese and out of condition, struggled to negotiate his way over the sun baked rutted mud even at an ordinary walking pace. Becoming out of breath even after covering only a very short distance, he stopped, bent forward and clasped his knees with both hands, inhaling air then exhaling in rapid, ragged breaths. Sensing that something was wrong, the others halted their progression and turned, as one, to where Browning stood. Browning looked up and waved them on with a forward motion of one arm; he would catch them up when he had recovered.

Upon reaching the barn, Drummond seemed naturally reluctant to re-enter; he looked pleadingly first at Archer and then at Freeman. The two Watch officers understood; it was Archer who walked through the open doors first, followed by Freeman, then the hesitant Drummond.

Inside, all was as Drummond remembered: the hanging body of his master with the knife protruding from his neck, the pool of blood now dried to a treacly consistency, the words painted in the Squire's blood on the wall. Drummond felt a fresh wave of nausea begin to rise and scurried as quickly as possible back out of the barn, leaned against one of the heavy wood doors and began a series of gagging, dry retching. Inside, the two hardened Watch officers made circuits of the hanging man, shaking their heads in disbelief, whilst calmly assessing the situation and searching the scene for clues with eyes flickering hither and yon.

“We need to get him cut down,” Browning said in a low, matter of fact voice from the doorway when he’d eventually caught up with the others. Freeman nodded in agreement, and scouring the inside of the barn, where the cows had begun lowing restlessly in their stalls, as if sensitive to the evil act that had been perpetrated there, his eyes alighted on a milking stool. He strode briskly across the hay strewn floor of the barn to retrieve it; set it down a few feet away from the body, and climbed on to it. Taking the knife from his belt, he sawed away at the rope until it gave way and the body of Archibald Randall fell to the floor with a heavy, dull thud, into the pool of his own blood. Archer walked out of the barn, a grim set to his expression, and found Drummond, somewhat recovered now but still leaning against the door for support.

“Is there a telephone in the house?” Archer asked simply.

Drummond nodded. “Yes, I’ll take you inside,” he replied, and led officers Browning and Archer away on shaky, unsteady legs.

A short while later Freeman joined Drummond and his colleagues. Archer lost no time in relating the details of the calls he’d made.

“I’ve called through to Moriarty at the mortuary,” he said. “He’s sending his assistant out in his van to collect the body. And I’ve also phoned through to the station to report our findings, but there’s no reply. Sergeant Finn and Constable Leach can’t have returned yet.”

Recovering his senses, Sergeant Finn dashed around the side of the cottage to the rear of the property. At first couldn’t see his subordinate; he took in the scene with a practiced eye. The lawn was a larger version of the one at the front, also neatly mowed (and recently, Finn guessed.) More flowering borders surrounded it on three sides; Finn recognized peonies, marigolds, allium and masterwort. A darkly purple clematis climbed luxuriantly around a wooden post near to several rose plants, their leaves the deep crimson of blood. Then he heard a low groaning sound coming from behind a brick outhouse painted in a brilliant titanium white (also recently, by the look of it.) Finn rushed forward and found Constable Leach squatting down on the ground, in obvious distress by the noise he was making, which had now become a low, soft keening. Leach looked up at his superior and pointed to the back of the outhouse. Finn would remember the nightmare scene he encountered for the rest of his life.

The body lying on the ground was headless; Finn saw a ragged stump of neck where it appeared to have been sawn off, the skin roughly chewed as by the blade of a hacksaw or similar tool. And the blood; Finn had never seen so much of it, surely too much for one body? It saturated the grass in a vast pool of hideous gore. The head itself had been mounted on a thin bamboo garden cane stuck into the ground approximately six feet away from the body. Bulbous, disbelieving eyes, slack, open mouth, the skin around the jaws sunk into heavy jowls. The odd droplet of blood still dripped from the gaping neck wound onto a smaller pool on the grass. But despite its horrific appearance Finn had no trouble recognizing the face of his superior, Inspector Rufus Briars. He sank his head into his hands and dropped to his knees, closing his eyes and murmuring “no, no, no...” repeatedly. After several moments he reopened his eyes and sensed Leach standing over him. Leach helped his sergeant to his feet, and both men embraced in

mutual support. At last the men pulled away from each other.

“Come on, lad,” Finn mumbled in a barely audible voice. “I need to report this to Chief Inspector Dean up at Netherton station straight away.”

Leach nodded his understanding. “Sarge,” he said in a cracked whisper. “There’s something I think you may not have noticed.” And pointing once more, this time to the rear wall of the outhouse, Finn read the words ‘Vengeance Is Mine’ scrawled in large letters on the virginal white paint in Briars’ blood.

Seated around the oak conference table in what passed as the Incident Room of the village Watch station were Sergeant Finn along with constables Leach, Browning, Archer and Freeman. Chief Inspector Dean of the Netherton Watch paced around the room relentlessly, only occasionally glancing out of the window at the view of the main street outside. His movements caused the others to feel nervous unease. Eventually he stopped and addressed the gathered officers. It had been three hours since Leach’s discovery.

“Gentlemen,” he began. “We have here what can only be described as two major incidents, not the least of which being the brutal slaying of a senior officer of The Watch, your very own Inspector Briars, his body discovered by Leach here at the rear of his cottage.”

“When I couldn’t see any signs of life through the back windows I searched the garden. We all know that the Inspector is...was...a very keen gardener. I thought that perhaps he was out working in his garden hence the reason for him not hearing us when we called.” Leach said.

“Quite so,” Dean replied, appreciative of the clarification of the officer’s evidence but resentful of the interruption to his flow. Chief Inspector Dean was well known within the force for his high handed, rather pompous manner.

“The first victim, Squire Archibald Randall, was discovered by Mr Adrian Drummond, the Squire’s head dairyman. He was found hanging by his feet from one of the barn’s rafters, a knife plunged into his neck. In both cases, the words ‘vengeance is mine’ were scrawled on nearby walls in the victims’ own blood.”

Oh, just damn well get on with it you windbag, Finn wanted to shout at his superior. We know all this.

“So, we have the murders of two prominent and well-respected members of the local community,” Dean continued. “Inspector Briars was the Senior Prosecuting Officer of the local Watch. Squire Randall was the local Judge. They have worked together on a number of cases over many, many years, since before my time at Netherton, in fact. Now, Sergeant Finn, can you tell me the most recent case that the gentlemen were working on? We’ll use that as a starting point and go from there.”

Finn cleared his throat with a series of small coughs, then replied: “Well the most recent case was the trial and execution of the old witch, Aunty Martha Downing. Several of the villagers had

brought complaints against her: stillborn children, crop failures, mysterious sudden illnesses of family members resulting in death. Even the Squire himself made a complaint against her; that she'd made at least a half dozen of his beasts infertile. So her fate was pretty much sealed. At her trial she denied everything, of course. These haggard old bitches always do." Here, he gave a small laugh, which the constables joined in with quite heartily.

"Inspector Briars compiled the list of charges against her and read them out at the trial," Finn continued when the laughter had died down. "He was the Prosecuting Council. Witches, of course, don't have recourse to a Defence Council as you are well aware of, sir. Why bother with all that rigmarole? It was obvious she was guilty, so we cut to the chase, as it were. My fellow officers here comprised the jury, although the verdict was never in doubt; but procedure has to be followed in matters of law. Squire Randall was the presiding Judge and duly passed the death sentence."

Chief Inspector Dean had remained quietly impassive throughout Finn's narrative, merely nodding his head in acknowledgement of the facts. Once Finn had finished speaking, he said:

"And what form did this death sentence take, Sergeant Finn?"

Finn looked bewildered. "Well...the usual, sir...she was burned alive. You should have heard her squeal! It was a most entertaining show, sir, I wish you could have been there!"

This was the cue for more laughter from the constables; this time in the form of uproarious belly laughs and vigorous nods of agreement. Dean once more waited for silence to descend before proceeding.

"Sergeant Finn, can you tell me why old Martha Downing was always referred to as 'Aunty'?"

"Well, sir, rumour has it that she has some distant relative living around these parts, although nobody knows who it is or could possibly be. The old bitch would never say. Probably was just a rumour after all."

"Oh, it was no rumour, Sergeant Finn," Dean replied in a low, menacing voice. "Aunty Martha Downing, God rest her soul, has a very real relative living around here."

At these words, Dean pulled a pistol from his jacket pocket. His first shot hit Finn straight between the eyes; the startled officer slumped forward on the table in front of him. Disbelief, panic and confusion rippled through the others; chairs were thrown backwards to the floor as they stood, each wearing a shocked expression. But they were easy targets for Dean, who rapidly shot each of the constables expertly, dispatching them all with well-aimed head shots. When the last of them had fallen, Dean replaced the pistol within its holster inside his jacket. He then reached down to his briefcase and pulled out a large hacksaw.

"Vengeance is mine, gentleman," he roared as he strode across the room towards Finn, who would be the first to have his head removed.

THE END

[Available from Rogue Planet Press](#)

WINTER 2017-18

# Schlock!

## Quarterly

Includes Two Episodes of Sword and Planet epic  
**THE CAVES OF MARS**

**PRETTY PENNY**  
by Kate Lowe

**RED DEMON VERSUS THE WORM PEOPLE**  
BY NEAL PRIVETT

Plus Five More Stories and Poems  
from the thrilling pages of Schlock! Webzine

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NIP AND TUCK by Gerald E Sheagren

*Clarissa Starling. Age—47, ten days short of 48; strawberry blonde, blue eyes; measurements—36 24 34. Marital status—three times divorced. Profession—actress. Last movie—Dangerous Liaisons, 2017. Awards—Oscar, best actress, 2010. Future prospects—not good.*

Doctor Yoshi Hashimoto put on a pair of latex gloves then picked up a pair of surgical scissors. “Well, Clarissa, are you ready for the unveiling?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be. You know—I never thought I’d go for cosmetic surgery. I have a natural beauty. No woman in Hollywood even comes close to me. And I’m talking all the way back—to the very beginning of Hollywood.” Clarissa gave a derisive snort. “Marilyn Monroe could have only wished to have my looks.”

Behind Clarissa’s back Hashimoto rolled his eyes at the woman’s arrogance. “Well I have to admit—you do have the best bone structure I’ve ever come across.”

“You’re damn right.”

“But every actress, no matter how beautiful and ravishing, needs a bit of touching up occasionally, especially as time goes on.”

Clarissa glowered. “Are you calling me old?”

“Heavens no—perish the thought. Look at it this way. Even a da Vinci or Rembrandt masterpiece requires a little cleaning now and then.”

“That’s true. But don’t you dare call me a Mona Lisa. That woman was as a ‘Plain Jane’ to put it mercifully. Okay, enough of this chitter chatter. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Hashimoto began to carefully cut away the bandages, holding his breath in anticipation. These unveilings were just as nerve wracking for him as they were for his patients. Would everything wind up a success? Would his work get a thumbs up or a thumbs down?

He wasn’t exactly ranked at the top of his profession. In fact, other cosmetic surgeons regarded him as mediocre, if even that. And as far as plastic surgeons were concerned—they looked upon him as nothing short of a joke. What actually drew his patients were his cut rate prices.

To tell the truth—when Clarissa Starling had walked through the door, asking for an extensive nip and tuck, you could have knocked him over with a feather. You would have thought she would want the best and only the best. I guess, when you came right down to it, as well as being rich and famous, she was also a penny pincher.

When the last bandage was cut away, Hashimoto drew in a horrified breath, his heart doing

somersaults and his hands starting to tremble.

*Oh my God! What have I done?*

Besides all of the swelling and bruising, which should have alleviated by now, the woman's nose was lopsided, and her cheekbone was seriously deformed, causing her right eye to droop.

No, no, no, this can't be! This cannot be! I've performed this procedure countless times with excellent results.

"What's the matter? You look a bit shocked." Clarissa sat up straighter in the chair, her brow knitted with concern. "I sincerely hope it's because the procedure turned out a lot better than you expected; that you far and away exceeded your capabilities. That's it, right?"

Hashimoto's mouth flapped without words.

Clarissa frowned. "Hand me that mirror over there."

"Uh."

"Hand me the mirror."

"Per...per...perhaps..."

"Don't give me 'perhaps'. Hand me the mirror, now!"

Hashimoto did as ordered, his hand shaking so badly that Clarissa had a hard time taking hold of the mirror. When she looked into it, her left eye grew wide with horror. Not her right eye, however. It was now incapable of growing wide. She sat there, stunned, lips quivering, her lopsided nose flinching with anger. Then, with a strange gurgling growl idling in her throat, she launched herself out of the chair and beat Hashimoto over the head with the mirror, until its glass shattered.

"You miserable fuckin cocksucker—what did you do to me! I look like some kind of monster! I'm going to sue you! I'm going to sue you for every penny you have! I'm going to take your house and cars! I'm going to take the food out of your kids' mouths! I'll strip you down to your fuckin underwear!"

Clarissa stormed around the room, screaming, wailing, pounding the wall with her fists and sweeping a tray of surgical instruments onto the floor. When Hashimoto's secretary hurried in, she shoved the woman, sending her flying back onto her butt.

Panicked, Hashimoto held up his hands in a calming fashion. "I...I...I'll fix the damage. I'll fix it without charge."

"You fuckin moron!" Clarissa bent over and snatched a scalpel off the floor, waving it

threateningly in the air. “I wouldn’t let you touch me again if my life depended on it!”

“Please, we’ll find a solution. Everything will work out just fine.”

Screaming like a banshee on steroids, Clarissa charged at the man.

Detective Danny McMahon pulled a cigarette from his pack and handed it to Clarissa, firing it up for her with his lighter. He watched as she took a deep inhale, letting the smoke wander from her nostrils.

God, her face is a mess. If I didn’t have her name already, I might not have recognized her.

“Despite the circumstances, it’s quite an honour to meet you. I’ve seen all of your movies. I especially loved Vegas Nights. Your portrayal of that hooker, Debbie Desire, was pure genius. You certainly deserved that Oscar.”

“Thank you. Right now, I needed a compliment.”

McMahon sighed, shaking his head. “That cosmetic surgeon, Hirohito, sure did you one terrible disservice. He must have been all thumbs and half blind.”

“His name is Hashimoto, not Hirohito.”

Detective Tony Santucci, who was leaning against the wall, couldn’t help but chuckle. “You know who you were thinking of, Danny—that Hirohito dude, who was emperor of Japan during World War Two.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s who I was thinking of.” McMahon leaned closer to Clarissa. “So, you figured after what this Hashimoto did to you, you’d give him a taste of his own medicine. And boy did you ever. The guy’s going to need multiple surgeries. And even after that, he’ll probably never look the same.”

Clarissa bristled. “Well, look at my fuckin face. Will I ever look the same again?” She took another puff on her cigarette. “I was so enraged, I couldn’t hold myself back. I was just gripped with...I don’t know...I guess you would call it an ‘overwhelming need for vengeance’.”

“So it was an eye for an eye thing.”

“Yeah, that’s it—an eye for an eye.” Clarissa pointed at her face. “And speaking about eyes, just look at mine. Look what he did to it. I look like Quasimodo. How am I going to get a part in a movie with this fucked up face?”

McMahon sighed. “Well, after what you did to him, plus beating his secretary senseless, you won’t have to worry about auditioning for any parts. Not unless they have a theatrical club in

prison.”

“Fuck you, asshole!”

“Whoa, whoa, relax. I’m just telling you the way it is.”

“Well, watch how you say it. I’ve been through enough shit already.”

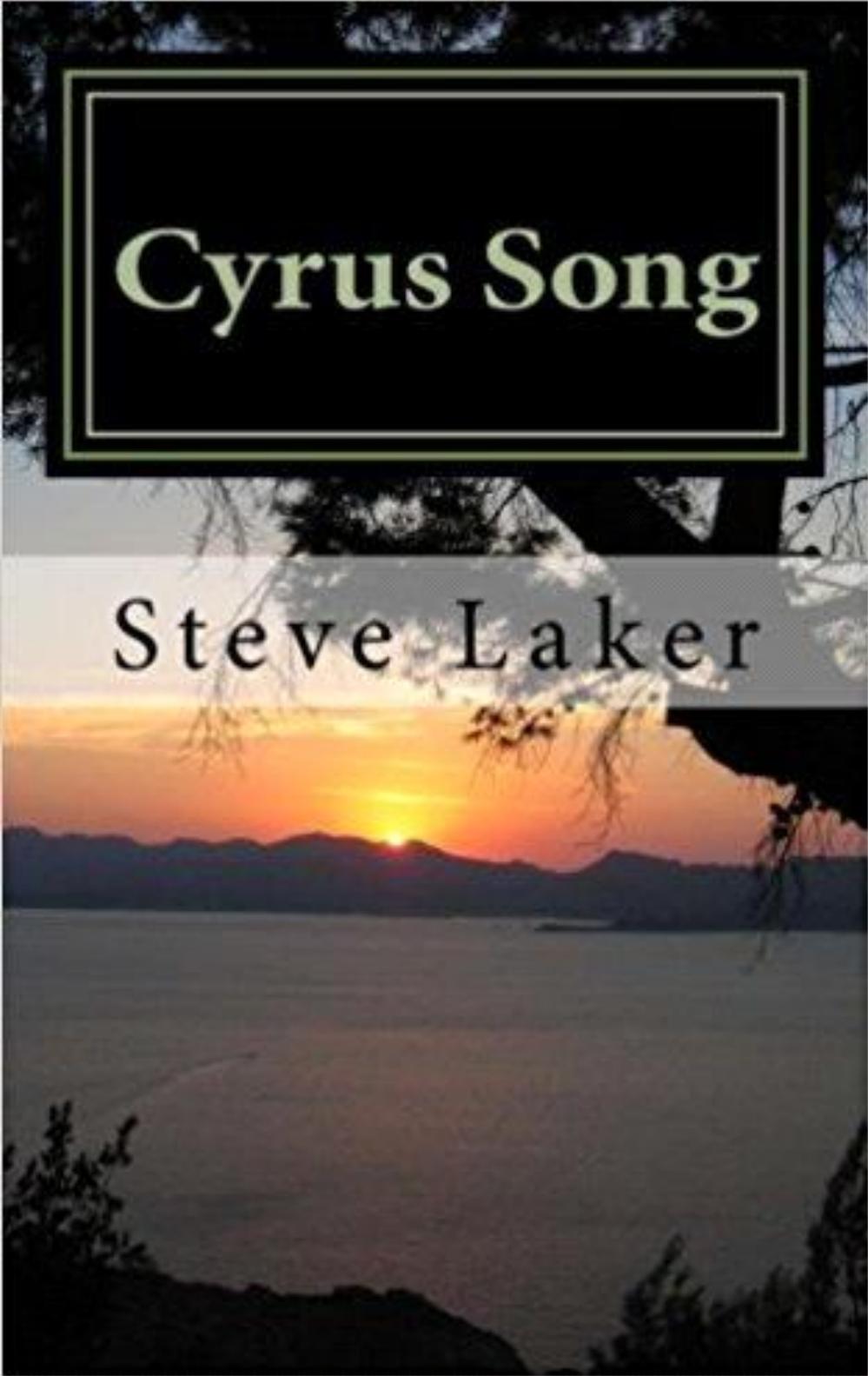
Santucci—never one to reconsider an ill-timed remark—couldn’t help but smile. “You know, with that facial damage—you’d be perfect for a zombie role in ‘The Walking Dead’. No makeup necessary.”

Clarissa flung her cigarette at him. Then heaving out of her chair, she screeched at the top of her lungs and attacked with tooth and nail.

Her prison time had just gotten a lot longer.

THE END

[Cyrus Song](#)



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## HEART OF A SOLDIER by Ralph Benton

“How does it feel, son?” Colonel Shepardson, Director of the VA Division of Rehabilitation and Prosthetic Services, beamed as he shook Moreno’s hand. His right hand. Somewhere cameras clicked.

“Good, sir, real good,” enthused Moreno. “In fact, I’m ready to go back! The arm is—well, sir, I swear it’s better than my real arm, not that I wouldn’t mind having my old arm back, if you know what I mean.”

The Director chuckled. “Well, I don’t think you’ll be going back to the desert, son. We need to keep you here, keep testing, keep observing. Yours is the first ActivePositronic, TruSkin® prosthetic we’ve ever fully reintegrated with a person. Hell, we couldn’t take it off even if we wanted to! Your nerves, your muscle fibres, your bone structure, all are completely meshed with the new arm.”

Moreno held up his arm, watching it in wonder. The skin was completely lifelike, and the hairs even matched Moreno’s own colour, length, and pattern. He touched each fingertip to the thumb, forwards and backwards, faster than he ever could have before.

“It’s amazing, sir. I don’t know how I can ever repay you. All of you.”

“You don’t have to repay us, soldier, we’re repaying you! For your service. Now, go on home and restart your life. Just let us know if anything comes up, and let’s see how many other wounded warriors we can help.”

They shook hands again, and Vinny Moreno went home.

As the months went by Vinny became accustomed to his new arm, the way time makes the miraculous mundane. He could open any jar, and he liked to go to bars and challenge guys to arm wrestling contests. His disability pension meant he didn’t have to get a job, so he worked a lot on his car, a sweet ass 1969 emerald green El Camino that had been his dad’s.

He liked how it felt when he drove, as he steered and shifted, as he and the car became one through the action and spirit of his new arm.

Sometimes, when he was on the sofa, watching the MMA, he would admire his fingers on the remote, their strength and subtlety. A couple of times he noticed the fingers drumming, as if impatient for something, and that made Vinny laugh. Sometimes he felt like seeing how hard he could crush something with the hand. The arm was very strong, and that made Vinny feel strong.

One day Vinny was in the kitchen, making a protein shake. The arm had inspired Vinny to get in better shape. He had been feeling great.

A mouse darted across the floor.

Vinny didn't know what he was doing, barely knew what was happening, but he was on the linoleum while the arm frantically searched the back corner of the pantry closet. As he lay there, scrabbling amid the cans and bottles, he heard the nails scratching little gouges in the drywall.

The mouse skittered by his face, and under the fridge.

Vinny was on his feet and threw the refrigerator over without a thought, smashing it into the counters. The mouse crouched by the baseboard, black eyes gleaming, frozen in fear.

Vinny snatched up the mouse with snake speed, and felt the little furry body under the TruSkin. The nerve fibres were so good he could feel the tiny heart beating, a thousand beats a minute, just before he utterly and completely destroyed the animal with a spasmodic clench of his new fist.

Vinny felt a rush surge through his body. He gasped at the sensation, staggered, and sat down on the floor, panting with relief, with exhilaration, with joy. He looked at the blood and gore covered hand, which spasmed once or twice, as if re living the moment. His heart slowed, and he caught his breath.

He stood up and washed off his hand. The little cuts from the mouse bones were healing rapidly under the nanobots' eager ministrations. As he moved the refrigerator back into place and cleaned the beer and egg and milk slurry from the floor Vinny wondered what the hell might have come over him. He shrugged it off. PTSD. That covered a lot. His sleep that night was deep and primal.

A month later Vinny was coming home from the VFW (prime rib dinner) when a raccoon scampered across the road under the El Camino's headlights and disappeared into a storm drain. Vinny didn't even stop the car before rolling out the front door and sprinting to the concrete pad. He hooked one new finger into the manhole crowbar slot and yanked the cover spinning into the air. He dove into the blackness and squirmed into the pipe until he found the raccoon. It hissed and clawed and bit, but was dead in seconds.

Vinny sat in the dank darkness of the little concrete box, a stream of water running under his jeans, the blood on his hand slowly cooling. He could barely keep his eyes open, the rush had been so intense, so draining, like a goddamn lightning bolt of pure pleasure socketed straight into his brain. He sat there, drifting in and out of awareness, a sweet somnolent haze thickening his conscious, until he heard a car stop.

"Who would leave their car running, jacked up over the curb like this?"

This roused Vinny, and he sloshed water over his hand, then shambled out of the manhole, startling the nice suburban couple who had stopped to help. He needed both hands to drag the heavy steel cover closed.

"Sorry," he muttered, "lost the keys in the sewer." He stumbled to his car.

“But the keys are in the car!”

He drove home, taking the long way so they wouldn't see where he lived. He slept until the following evening.

In the days that followed he thought about getting in touch with Colonel Shepardson, but never could quite get his fingers to dial the number. He knew something wasn't exactly right, but it was the PTSD, right? His arm gave him a thumbs up.

That Friday he needed beer money, so he went down to Moe's to make a few bucks arm wrestling. There was always a frat boy or an oil worker who hadn't been in in a while that he could challenge. Maybe even lose the first one, and double the bet. Sure enough soon it was Vinny and a college kid on either side of the table.

Vinny let the kid win the first one, but it felt strange, not right, and his arm was twitching, twitching bad.

They lined up for the second go, adjusted their grip, and Vinny stood up and ripped the kid's shoulder out of the socket, the muscles tearing and the tendons snapping. The kid sat back in his chair, his arm flopping, and let out a keening wail, so high pitched as to be almost inaudible. Vinny grabbed him by the head, fingers digging into the skull, and dragged him outside. The kid was dead after the first punch to the chest, but Vinny beat him until every bone in the kid's body was broken. He was still punching when the cops showed up and hit him with three Tasers.

Vinny came to in the squad car. His eyes could barely focus, and he was drooling onto his chest. Vinny had been with his share of women, some of them pros, but they had never made him feel like this. This was God's own love potion coursing through his veins. He was drained beyond anything he could imagine anyone ever experiencing.

His arms were handcuffed behind him.

“Don't even try to move, you sick motherfucker,” one of the cops yelled at him through the open front door.

He wasn't going to move. His right arm wasn't working. It was numb, useless, like raw meat. It still felt warm, so Vinny supposed the autonomous systems were functioning, but there was no response to anything Vinny tried. His grand new arm was broke.

Days later, in his cell, the arm continued to hang like a fat pale sausage. Vinny had to use his left arm to move his right arm out of the way when he dressed or got into the cot. He considered telling the police about Rehabilitation and Prosthetic Services, but he really didn't want the hassle. He remembered some of what had happened, and the cops had shown him the pics, so Vinny figured he was gonna get what was coming to him, TruSkin or not.

After a week, after Vinny's court appointed lawyer had told him to take any deal they offered, and after he had learned the afternoon path the thin shaft of sunlight took around his cell, Vinny

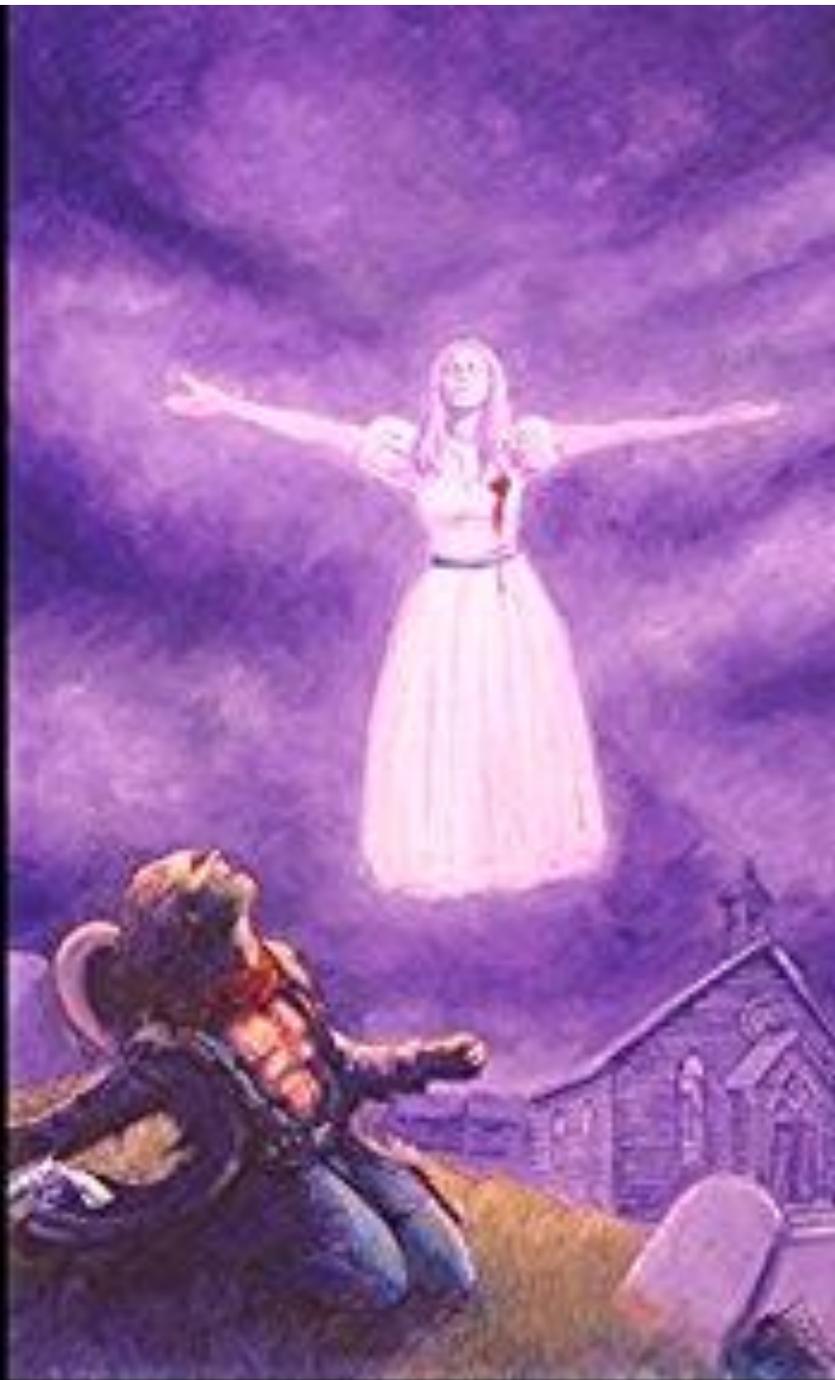
saw a spider dropping from the ceiling on its glistening lifeline.

Vinny's arm twitched.

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

# Ghostlands



*A Book of Ghost Stories*

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THE BOT by Steven Havelock

“Jackson, we’ve had no reply,” said Smith.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Jackson. “We will be there in a few hours now.”

“Why the hell make us come out all this way for one lousy prisoner?”

“It was an order from the senator,” replied Smith. He rescanned all the controls and continued. “You know, the one that just won a landslide victory back home on New Earth.”

“But for one lousy prisoner?” said Jackson.

“There was some talk about the prisoner, that it wasn’t his fault, that he was provoked.”

“The senator must have rocks in his head the size of the one we’re heading to, making us come out here for one lousy prisoner, provoked or not.”

“I agree. Even though there’s been no bot activity in this area for decades, it still gives me the creeps coming out so far from New Earth.”

“Well, the sooner we land and get this jerk’s supplies dropped off, the sooner we can fly back home.”

### Six Months Earlier

“For the murder of Jim Tansley, you are sentenced to twenty years in solitary on one of the outer rim asteroids.”

Matt lowered his head. He knew his wife and daughter were just yards away from him.

*I won't let them see me break.*

Two weeks later, he had been dropped off to the asteroid which was to be his home for the next twenty years. His place of residence was a small, four mile square patch of land, covered with a dome which recreated the atmosphere of his home planet.

*I can leave my residence if I want, but only if I have enough oxygen for the journey. The resupply ships come every six months and drop off all my needed supplies. So I have enough food and water...*

Matt awoke from his reverie; he glanced at the wall calendar and marked another day on it.

Marking the calendar gives me something to do and some hope of seeing another human being.

Just another three weeks and the next supply ship should be landing.

*When they handed down this sentence I would never have believed that serving time in isolation would be such a problem. I been begging the supply ship crew, Jackson and Smith we know each other by our names now as it seems they are the ones with the unfortunate task of coming so far out to the outer rim.*

Three weeks later, on schedule, the supply ship arrived.

*I've been begging the guys for oxygen tanks for years. Maybe they will have brought one for me?*

The supply ship landed within the artificial dome.

“Hey guys, am I glad to see you?”

“Hi Matt, how you doing?” asked Smith.

“About as well as can be expected for someone whose only company is the supply ship that comes every six months.”

“Well, we got all your essentials, such as food and water,” said Jackson.

“What about the oxygen?” Hope gleamed in Matt’s face. “You know I want to go exploring this blasted rock of a prison, to pass the time. Especially the Bot City; that is so close but feels so far.”

“We bought you some oxygen,” said Jackson. “I paid for it out of my own salary.”

“Thank you!”

“Don’t thank me. You asked us for it so many times, by God!”

Thirty minutes later the two visitors were blasting off on their way back to New Earth. Matt stood staring at the spaceship as it disappeared into the distance.

*See you guys in another six months.*

Then he looked at the two large oxygen cylinders the men had left.

*Great! Now I can go about exploring this rock. I heard talk that the bots were once stationed here before the war started to go against them.*

After a meal of the same gruel that he’d had for the past few years, he decided to sleep until morning and then explore Bot City.

*I've seen the Bot City for years but never had the opportunity to go to it.... Until now.*

The next morning, after a restful sleep, Matt headed out to explore the Bot City. Soon he had exited the safety and artificial atmosphere of the dome.

*God, these oxygen cylinders weigh a ton.*

After a few hours of walking he felt physically drained.

*I can feel the sweat pouring off my brow under the weight of this space suit. I've got to keep going, nearly there...*

Eventually Matt made it to Bot City. There was destruction everywhere.

*The bots on the outer rim planets never really stood a chance, outnumbered and unsupplied.*

Then he heard it.

“Please mister...Please mister...Help me.”

He'd been walking past a derelict house. He heard it again.

“Please mister...Please mister, help me.”

He looked through the alcove and saw a bot.

*She's a female. What do I do?*

In a split second Matt made his decision. He walked over to the bot.

*She seems intact, apart from the heavy block of masonry trapping her underneath. How the hell am I going to free the bot from the masonry?*

Then he saw it, a long metal bar lying in the dirt a few metres away. He picked it up and wedged it under the masonry and pushed down on the bar. His muscles strained, and the colour drained from his face.

The masonry started to move. Just one more push! And then the bot was free.

“I'm free! I'm free!” screamed the bot with joy.

Then the dust settled and with it came the realization that here were two beings whose races had been at war with each other for centuries. They stared at each other long and hard.

Matt felt like reaching for his gun and suddenly blasting the bot. A long silence stretched out...

Then the bot burst into a smile. Matt started laughing and then they embraced.

## Six Months Later

*The bot, Stella, is now my best friend and companion. Because I freed her she believes she owes me a debt of gratitude and without anyone else for company the two of us have grown very close.*

That morning Stella had made Matt's breakfast like she did every morning. Stella also knew a large variety of both bot and human folklore and used to read to Matt during the late evening's as the sun was setting.

*Stella is the best thing to happen to me in years on this blasted rock so far from New Earth. Before that I missed my family every day, and the pain was unbearable, but now...but now...I have Stella, my best friend and companion, and the pain is a little more bearable.*

He smiled to himself.

*Who would have thought that a bot would save my sanity?*

The supply ship was landing just near Matt and Stella's makeshift house. It was made of metal sheeting that was in plentiful supply as the place at one time had been a forward base.

"Stella! Hide in the back of the house and don't come out."

The supply ship landed.

"Boy, have we got some good news for you!" exclaimed Smith.

"What is it?"

"The senator's had a change of heart. He's rescinded your sentence after an appeal by your family."

"What?"

"Yes, you are free to go. We are here to take you back."

The colour drained from Matt's face.

*But...But...I can't go...I've spent every minute of the last six months with Stella. I can't just leave her...Can I?... She's my companion and best friend...Can't just leave her...*

*My wife and children...I will be able to see them again.*

In an instant Matt had made up his mind.

“Okay, guys, I’m ready. There’s just something I need to get from my house and then I will be right back.”

“Well, hurry, we’re burning fuel, waiting like—”.

Smith never got to finish his sentence. Stella walked out of the shadows of the makeshift house.

“You can’t leave me, Matt.”

Matt saw the gun in her hands.

*My gun...*

“I wasn’t planning on leaving you, hun. I was just about to tell these people that I can’t go.”

“Really?” Both love and fear showed in Stella’s face.

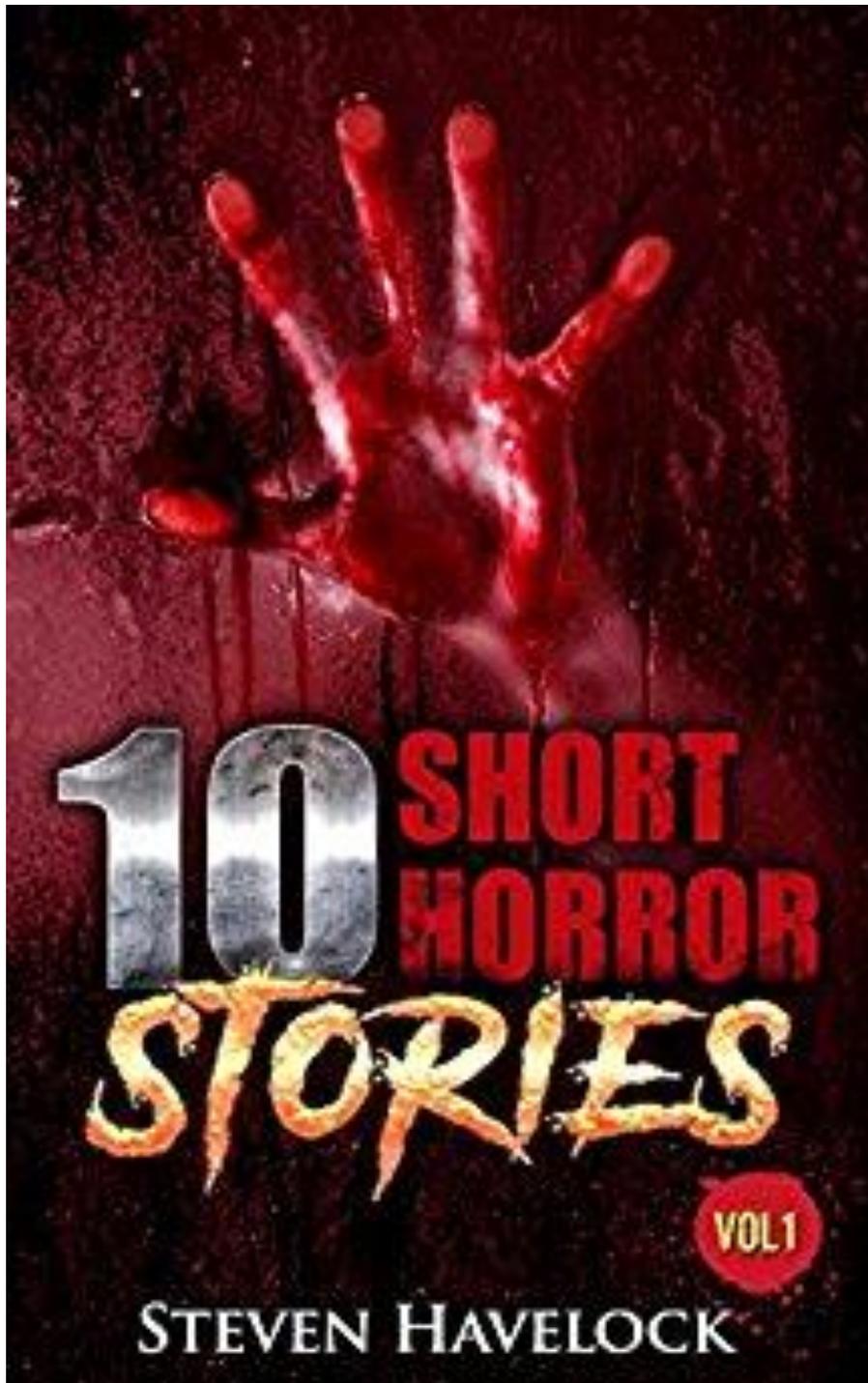
The next instant Stella exploded. Jackson had opened fire.

“No!” screamed Matt. He ran up to the bot who was now a smouldering piece of metal. He looked into Stella’s eyes and saw...saw the same look that his wife used to give him.

Stella was trying to say something. He put his ear nearer her mouth.

“I love...you...”

THE END



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## THE BOOK OF GHOSTS by Sabine Baring Gould

### *The Mother of Pansies*

Anna Voss, of Siebenstein, was the prettiest girl in her village. Never was she absent from a fair or a dance. No one ever saw her abroad anything but merry. If she had her fits of bad temper, she kept them for her mother, in the secrecy of the house. Her voice was like that of the lark, and her smile like the May morning. She had plenty of suitors, for she was possessed of what a young peasant desires more in a wife than beauty, and that is money.

But of all the young men who hovered about her, and sought her favour, none was destined to win it save Joseph Arler, the ranger, a man in a government position, whose duty was to watch the frontier against smugglers, and to keep an eye on the game against poachers.

The eve of the marriage had come.

One thing weighed on the pleasure loving mind of Anna. She dreaded becoming a mother of a family which would keep her at home, and occupy her from morn to eve in attendance on her children, and break the sweetness of her sleep at night.

So she visited an old hag named Schändelwein, who was a reputed witch, and to whom she confided her trouble.

The old woman said that she had looked into the mirror of destiny, before Anna arrived, and she had seen that Providence had ordained that Anna should have seven children, three girls and four boys, and that one of the latter was destined to be a priest.

But Mother Schändelwein had great powers; she could set at naught the determinations of Providence; and she gave to Anna seven pips, very much like apple pips, which she placed in a cornet of paper; and she bade her cast these one by one into the mill race, and as each went over the mill wheel, it ceased to have a future, and in each pip was a child's soul.

So Anna put money into Mother Schändelwein's hand and departed, and when it was growing dusk she stole to the wooden bridge over the mill stream, and dropped in one pip after another. As each fell into the water she heard a little sigh.

But when it came to casting in the last of the seven she felt a sudden qualm, and a battle in her soul.

However, she threw it in, and then, overcome by an impulse of remorse, threw herself into the stream to recover it, and as she did so she uttered a cry.

But the water was dark, the floating pip was small, she could not see it, and the current was rapidly carrying her to the mill wheel, when the miller ran out and rescued her.

On the following morning she had completely recovered her spirits, and laughingly told her bridesmaids how that in the dusk, in crossing the wooden bridge, her foot had slipped, she had fallen into the stream, and had been nearly drowned. "And then," added she, "if I really had been drowned, what would Joseph have done?"

The married life of Anna was not unhappy. It could hardly be that in association with so genial, kind, and simple a man as Joseph. But it was not altogether the ideal happiness anticipated by both. Joseph had to be much away from home, sometimes for days and nights together, and Anna found it very tedious to be alone. And Joseph might have calculated on a more considerate wife. After a hard day of climbing and chasing in the mountains, he might have expected that she would have a good hot supper ready for him. But Anna set before him whatever came to hand and cost least trouble. A healthy appetite is the best of sauces, she remarked.

Moreover, the nature of his avocation, scrambling up rocks and breaking through an undergrowth of brambles and thorns, produced rents and fraying of stockings and cloth garments. Instead of cheerfully undertaking the repairs, Anna grumbled over each rent, and put out his garments to be mended by others. It was only when repair was urgent that she consented to undertake it herself, and then it was done with sulky looks, muttered reproaches, and was executed so badly that it had to be done over again, and by a hired workwoman.

But Joseph's nature was so amiable, and he was so fond of his pretty wife, that he bore with those defects, and turned off her murmurs with a joke, or sealed her pouting lips with a kiss.

There was one thing about Joseph that Anna could not relish. Whenever he came into the village, he was surrounded, besieged by the children. Hardly had he turned the corner into the square, before it was known that he was there, and the little ones burst out of their parents' houses, broke from their sister nurse's arms, to scamper up to Joseph and to jump about him. For Joseph somehow always had nuts or almonds or sweets in his pockets, and for these he made the children leap, or catch, or scramble, or sometimes beg, by putting a sweet on a boy's nose and bidding him hold it there, till he said "Catch!"

Joseph had one particular favourite among all this crew, and that was a little lame boy with a white, pinched face, who hobbled about on crutches.

Him Joseph would single out, take him on his knee, seat himself on the steps of the village cross or of the churchyard, and tell him stories of his adventures, of the habits of the beasts of the forest.

Anna, looking out of her window, could see all this; and see how before Joseph set the poor cripple down, the child would throw its arms round his neck and kiss him.

Then Joseph would come home with his swinging step and joyous face.

Anna resented that his first attention should be given to the children, regarding it as her due, and she often showed her displeasure by the chill of her reception of her husband. She did not

reproach him in set words, but she did not run to meet him, jump into his arms, and respond to his warm kisses.

Once he did venture on a mild expostulation. “Annerl, why do you not knit my socks or stocking legs? Home made is heart made. It is a pity to spend money on buying what is poor stuff, when those made by you would not only last on my calves and feet, but warm the cockles of my heart.”

To which she replied testily: “It is you who set the example of throwing money away on sweet things for those pestilent little village brats.”

One evening Anna heard an unusual hubbub in the square, shouts and laughter, not of children alone, but of women and men as well, and next moment into the house burst Joseph very red, carrying a cradle on his head.

“What is this fooling for?” asked Anna, turning crimson.

“An experiment, Annerl, dearest,” answered Joseph, setting down the cradle. “I have heard it said that a wife who rocks an empty cradle soon rocks a baby into it. So I have bought this and brought it to you. Rock, rock, rock, and when I see a little rosebud in it among the snowy linen, I shall cry for joy.”

Never before had Anna known how dull and dead life could be in an empty house. When she had lived with her mother, that mother had made her do much of the necessary work of the house; now there was not much to be done, and there was no one to exercise compulsion.

If Anna ran out and visited her neighbours, they proved to be disinclined for a gossip. During the day they had to scrub and bake and cook, and in the evening they had their husbands and children with them, and did not relish the intrusion of a neighbour.

The days were weary days, and Anna had not the energy or the love of work to prompt her to occupy herself more than was absolutely necessary. Consequently, the house was not kept scrupulously clean. The glass and the pewter and the saucepans did not shine. The window panes were dull. The house linen was unhemmed.

One evening Joseph sat in a meditative mood over the fire, looking into the red embers, and what was unusual with him, he did not speak.

Anna was inclined to take umbrage at this, when all at once he looked round at her with his bright pleasant smile and said, “Annerl! I have been thinking. One thing is wanted to make us supremely happy—a baby in the house. It has not pleased God to send us one, so I propose that we both go on pilgrimage to Mariahilf to ask for one.”

“Go yourself—I want no baby here,” retorted Anna.

A few days after this, like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, came the great affliction on Anna of her husband's death.

Joseph had been found shot in the mountains. He was quite dead. The bullet had pierced his heart. He was brought home borne on green fir boughs interlaced, by four fellow jägers, and they carried him into his house. He had, in all probability, met his death at the hand of smugglers.

With a cry of horror and grief Anna threw herself on Joseph's body and kissed his pale lips. Now only did she realise how deeply all along she had loved him—now that she had lost him.

Joseph was laid in his coffin preparatory to the interment on the morrow. A crucifix and two candles stood at his head on a little table covered with a white cloth. On a stool at his feet was a bowl containing holy water and a sprig of rue.

A neighbour had volunteered to keep company with Anna during the night, but she had impatiently, without speaking, repelled the offer. She would spend the last night that he was above ground alone with her dead—alone with her thoughts.

And what were those thoughts?

Now she remembered how indifferent she had been to his wishes, how careless of his comforts; how little she had valued his love, had appreciated his cheerfulness, his kindness, his forbearance, his equable temper.

Now she recalled studied coldness on her part, sharp words, mortifying gestures, outbursts of unreasoning and unreasonable petulance.

Now she recalled Joseph scattering nuts among the children, addressing kind words to old crones, giving wholesome advice to giddy youths.

She remembered now little endearments shown to her, the presents brought her from the fair, the efforts made to cheer her with his pleasant stories and quaint jokes. She heard again his cheerful voice as he strove to interest her in his adventures of the chase.

As she thus sat silent, numbed by her sorrow, in the faint light cast by the two candles, with the shadow of the coffin lying black on the floor at her feet, she heard a stumping without; then a hand was laid on the latch, the door was timidly opened, and in upon his crutches came the crippled boy. He looked wistfully at her, but she made no sign, and then he hobbled to the coffin and burst into tears, and stooped and kissed the brow of his dead friend.

Leaning on his crutches, he took his rosary and said the prayers for the rest of her and his Joseph's soul; then shuffled awkwardly to the foot, dipped the spray of rue, and sprinkled the dead with the blessed water.

Next moment the ungainly creature was stumping forth, but after he had passed through the door, he turned, looked once more towards the dead, put his hand to his lips, and wafted to it his final farewell.

Anna now took her beads and tried to pray, but her prayers would not leave her lips; they were choked and driven back by the thoughts which crowded up and bewildered her. The chain fell from her fingers upon her lap, lay there neglected, and then slipped to the floor. How the time passed she knew not, neither did she care. The clock ticked, and she heard it not; the hours sounded, and she regarded them not till in at her ear and through her brain came clear the call of the wooden cuckoo announcing midnight.

Her eyes had been closed. Now suddenly she was roused, and they opened and saw that all was changed.

The coffin was gone, but by her instead was the cradle that years ago Joseph had brought home, and which she had chopped up for firewood. And now in that cradle lay a babe asleep, and with her foot she rocked it, and found a strange comfort in so doing.

She was conscious of no sense of surprise, only a great welling up of joy in her heart. Presently she heard a feeble whimper and saw a stirring in the cradle; little hands were put forth gropingly. Then she stooped and lifted the child to her lap, and clasped it to her heart. Oh, how lovely was that tiny creature! Oh, how sweet in her ears its appealing cry! As she held it to her bosom the warm hands touched her throat, and the little lips were pressed to her bosom. She pressed it to her. She had entered into a new world, a world of love and light and beauty and happiness unspeakable. Oh! the babe—the babe—the babe! She laughed and cried, and cried and laughed and sobbed for very exuberance of joy. It brought warmth to her heart, it made every vein tingle, it ingrained her brain with pride. It was hers! —her own! —her very own! She could have been content to spend an eternity thus, with that little one close, close to her heart.

Then as suddenly all faded away—the child in her arms was gone as a shadow; her tears congealed, her heart was cramped, and a voice spoke within her: “It is not, because you would not. You cast the soul away, and it went over the mill wheel.”

Wild with terror, uttering a despairing cry, she started up, straining her arms after the lost child, and grasping nothing. She looked about her. The light of the candles flickered over the face of her dead Joseph. And tick, tick, tick went the clock.

She could endure this no more. She opened the door to leave the room, and stepped into the outer chamber and cast herself into a chair. And lo! it was no more night. The sun, the red evening sun, shone in at the window, and on the sill were pots of pinks and mignonette that filled the air with fragrance.

And there at her side stood a little girl with shining fair hair, and the evening sun was on it like the glory about a saint. The child raised its large blue eyes to her, pure innocent eyes, and said: “Mother, may I say my Catechism and prayers before I go to bed?”

Then Anna answered and said: “Oh, my darling! My dearest Bärchen! All the Catechism is comprehended in this: Love God, fear God, always do what is your duty. Do His will, and do not seek only your own pleasure and ease. And this will give you peace—peace—peace.”

The little girl knelt and laid her golden head on her folded hands upon Anna’s knee and began: “God bless dear father, and mother, and all my dear brothers and sisters.”

Instantly a sharp pang as a knife went through the heart of Anna, and she cried: “Thou hast no father and no mother and no brothers and no sisters, for thou art not, because I would not have thee. I cast away thy soul, and it went over the mill wheel.”

The cuckoo called one. The child had vanished. But the door was thrown open, and in the doorway stood a young couple—one a youth with fair hair and the down of a moustache on his lip, and oh, in face so like to the dead Joseph. He held by the hand a girl, in black bodice and with white sleeves, looking modestly on the ground. At once Anna knew what this signified. It was her son Florian come to announce that he was engaged, and to ask his mother’s sanction.

Then said the young man, as he came forward leading the girl: “Mother, sweetest mother, this is Susie, the baker’s daughter, and child of your old and dear friend Vronie. We love one another; we have loved since we were little children together at school, and did our lessons out of one book, sitting on one bench. And, mother, the bakehouse is to be passed on to me and to Susie, and I shall bake for all the parish. The good Jesus fed the multitude, distributing the loaves through the hands of His apostles. And I shall be His minister feeding His people here. Mother, give us your blessing.”

Then Florian and the girl knelt to Anna, and with tears of happiness in her eyes she raised her hands over them. But ere she could touch them all had vanished. The room was dark, and a voice spake within her: “There is no Florian; there would have been, but you would not. You cast his soul into the water, and it passed away for ever over the mill wheel.”

In an agony of terror Anna sprang from her seat. She could not endure the room, the air stifled her; her brain was on fire. She rushed to the back door that opened on a kitchen garden, where grew the pot herbs and cabbages for use, tended by Joseph when he returned from his work in the mountains.

But she came forth on a strange scene. She was on a battlefield. The air was charged with smoke and the smell of gunpowder. The roar of cannon and the rattle of musketry, the cries of the wounded, and shouts of encouragement rang in her ears in a confused din.

As she stood, panting, her hands to her breast, staring with wondering eyes, before her charged past a battalion of soldiers, and she knew by their uniforms that they were Bavarians. One of them, as he passed, turned his face towards her; it was the face of an Arler, fired with enthusiasm, she knew it; it was that of her son Fritz.

Then came a withering volley, and many of the gallant fellows fell, among them he who carried the standard. Instantly, Fritz snatched it from his hand, waved it over his head, shouted, "Charge, brothers, fill up the ranks! Charge, and the day is ours!"

Then the remnant closed up and went forward with bayonets fixed, tramp, tramp. Again an explosion of firearms and a dense cloud of smoke rolled before her and she could not see the result.

She waited, quivering in every limb, holding her breath—hoping, fearing, waiting. And as the smoke cleared she saw men carrying to the rear one who had been wounded, and in his hand he grasped the flag. They laid him at Anna's feet, and she recognised that it was her Fritz. She fell on her knees, and snatching the kerchief from her throat and breast, strove to stanch the blood that welled from his heart. He looked up into her eyes, with such love in them as made her choke with emotion, and he said faintly: "Mütterchen, do not grieve for me; we have stormed the redoubt, the day is ours. Be of good cheer. They fly, they fly, those French rascals! Mother, remember me—I die for the dear Fatherland."

And a comrade standing by said: "Do not give way to your grief, Anna Arler; your son has died the death of a hero."

Then she stooped over him, and saw the glaze of death in his eyes, and his lips moved. She bent her ear to them and caught the words: "I am not, because you would not. There is no Fritz; you cast my soul into the brook and I was carried over the mill wheel."

All passed away, the smell of the powder, the roar of the cannon, the volumes of smoke, the cry of the battle, all—to a dead hush. Anna staggered to her feet, and turned to go back to her cottage, and as she opened the door, heard the cuckoo call two.

But, as she entered, she found herself to be, not in her own room and house—she had strayed into another, and she found herself not in a lone chamber, not in her desolate home, but in the midst of a strange family scene.

A woman, a mother, was dying. Her head reposed on her husband's breast as he sat on the bed and held her in his arms.

The man had grey hair, his face was overflowed with tears, and his eyes rested with an expression of devouring love on her whom he supported, and whose brow he now and again bent over to kiss.

About the bed were gathered her children, ay, and also her grandchildren, quite young, looking on with solemn, wondering eyes on the last throes of her whom they had learned to cling to and love with all the fervour of their simple hearts. One mite held her doll, dangling by the arm, and the forefinger of her other hand was in her mouth. Her eyes were brimming, and sobs came from her infant breast. She did not understand what was being taken from her, but she wept in sympathy with the rest.

Kneeling by the bed was the eldest daughter of the expiring woman, reciting the Litany of the Dying, and the sons and another daughter and a daughter in law repeated the responses in voices broken with tears.

When the recitation of the prayers ceased, there ensued for a while a great stillness, and all eyes rested on the dying woman. Her lips moved, and she poured forth her last petitions, that left her as rising flakes of fire, kindled by her pure and ardent soul. "O God, comfort and bless my dear husband, and ever keep Thy watchful guard over my children and my children's children, that they may walk in the way that leads to Thee, and that in Thine own good time we may all—all be gathered in Thy Paradise together, united for evermore. Amen."

A spasm contracted Anna's heart. This woman with ecstatic, upturned gaze, this woman breathing forth her peaceful soul on her husband's breast, was her own daughter Elizabeth, and in the fine outline of her features was Joseph's profile.

All again was hushed. The father slowly rose and quitted his position on the bed, gently laid the head on the pillow, put one hand over the eyes that still looked up to heaven, and with the fingers of the other tenderly arranged the straggling hair on each side of the brow. Then standing and turning to the rest, with a subdued voice he said: "My children, it has pleased the Lord to take to Himself your dear mother and my faithful companion. The Lord's will be done."

Then ensued a great burst of weeping, and Anna's eyes brimmed till she could see no more. The church bell began to toll for a departing spirit. And following each stroke there came to her, as the after clang of the boom: "There is not, there has not been, an Elizabeth. There would have been all this—but thou wouldest it not. For the soul of thy Elizabeth thou didst send down the mill stream and over the wheel."

Frantic with shame, with sorrow, not knowing what she did, or whither she went, Anna made for the front door of the house, ran forth and stood in the village square.

To her unutterable amazement it was vastly changed. Moreover, the sun was shining brightly, and it gleamed over a new parish church, of cut white stone, very stately, with a gilded spire, with windows of wondrous lacework. Flags were flying, festoons of flowers hung everywhere. A triumphal arch of leaves and young birch trees was at the graveyard gate. The square was crowded with the peasants, all in their holiday attire.

Silent, Anna stood and looked around. And as she stood she heard the talk of the people about her.

One said: "It is a great thing that Johann von Arler has done for his native village. But see, he is a good man, and he is a great architect."

"But why," asked another, "do you call him Von Arler? He was the son of that Joseph the Jäger who was killed by the smugglers in the mountains."

“That is true. But do you not know that the king has ennobled him? He has done such great things in the Residenz. He built the new Town Hall, which is thought to be the finest thing in Bavaria. He added a new wing to the Palace, and he has rebuilt very many churches, and designed mansions for the rich citizens and the nobles. But although he is such a famous man his heart is in the right place. He never forgets that he was born in Siebenstein. Look what a beautiful house he has built for himself and his family on the mountain side. He is there in summer, and it is furnished magnificently. But he will not suffer the old, humble Arler cottage here to be meddled with. They say that he values it above gold. And this is the new church he has erected in his native village—that is good.”

“Oh! he is a good man is Johann; he was always a good and serious boy, and never happy without a pencil in his hand. You mark what I say. Some day hence, when he is dead, there will be a statue erected in his honour here in this market place, to commemorate the one famous man that has been produced by Siebenstein. But see—see! Here he comes to the dedication of the new church.”

Then, through the throng advanced a blonde, middle aged man, with broad forehead, clear, bright blue eyes, and a flowing light beard. All the men present plucked off their hats to him, and made way for him as he advanced. But, full of smiles, he had a hand and a warm pressure, and a kindly word and a question as to family concerns, for each who was near.

All at once his eye encountered that of Anna. A flash of recognition and joy kindled it up, and, extending his arms, he thrust his way towards her, crying: “My mother! my own mother!”

Then—just as she was about to be folded to his heart, all faded away, and a voice said in her soul: “He is no son of thine, Anna Arler. He is not, because thou wouldest not. He might have been, God had so purposed; but thou madest His purpose of none effect. Thou didst send his soul over the mill wheel.”

And then faintly, as from a far distance, sounded in her ear the call of the cuckoo—three.

The magnificent new church had shrivelled up to the original mean little edifice Anna had known all her life. The square was deserted, the cold faint glimmer of coming dawn was visible over the eastern mountain tops, but stars still shone in the sky.

With a cry of pain, like a wounded beast, Anna ran hither and thither seeking a refuge, and then fled to the one home and resting place of the troubled soul—the church. She thrust open the swing door, pushed in, sped over the uneven floor, and flung herself on her knees before the altar.

But see! before that altar stood a priest in a vestment of black and silver; and a serving boy knelt on his right hand on a lower stage. The candles were lighted, for the priest was about to say Mass. There was a rustling of feet, a sound as of people entering, and many were kneeling, shortly after, on each side of Anna, and still they came on; she turned about and looked and saw a great crowd pressing in, and strange did it seem to her eyes that all—men, women, and children, young and old—seemed to bear in their faces something, a trace only in many, of the

Arler or the Voss features. And the little serving boy, as he shifted his position, showed her his profile—it was like her little brother who had died when he was sixteen.

Then the priest turned himself about, and said, “Oremus.” And she knew him—he was her own son—her Joseph, named after his dear father.

The Mass began, and proceeded to the “Sursum corda”—“Lift up your hearts!”—when the celebrant stood facing the congregation with extended arms, and all responded: “We lift them up unto the Lord.”

But then, instead of proceeding with the accustomed invocation, he raised his hands high above his head, with the palms towards the congregation, and in a loud, stern voice exclaimed—

“Cursed is the unfruitful field!”

“Amen.”

“Cursed is the barren tree!”

“Amen.”

“Cursed is the empty house!”

“Amen.”

“Cursed is the fishless lake!”

“Amen.”

“Forasmuch as Anna Arler, born Voss, might have been the mother of countless generations, as the sand of the seashore for number, as the stars of heaven for brightness, of generations unto the end of time, even of all of us now gathered together here, but she would not—therefore shall she be alone, with none to comfort her; sick, with none to minister to her; broken in heart, with none to bind up her wounds; feeble, and none to stay her up; dead, and none to pray for her, for she would not—she shall have an unforgotten and unforgettable past, and have no future; remorse, but no hope; she shall have tears, but no laughter—for she would not. Woe! woe! woe!”

He lowered his hands, and the tapers were extinguished, the celebrant faded as a vision of the night, the server vanished as an incense cloud, the congregation disappeared, melting into shadows, and then from shadows to nothingness, without stirring from their places, and without a sound.

And Anna, with a scream of despair, flung herself forward with her face on the pavement, and her hands extended.

Two years ago, during the first week in June, an English traveller arrived at Siebenstein and put up at the “Krone,” where, as he was tired and hungry, he ordered an early supper. When that was discussed, he strolled forth into the village square, and leaned against the wall of the churchyard. The sun had set in the valley, but the mountain peaks were still in the glory of its rays, surrounding the place as a golden crown. He lighted a cigar, and, looking into the cemetery, observed there an old woman, bowed over a grave, above which stood a cross, inscribed “Joseph Arler,” and she was tending the flowers on it, and laying over the arms of the cross a little wreath of heart’s ease or pansy. She had in her hand a small basket. Presently she rose and walked towards the gate, by which stood the traveller.

As she passed, he said kindly to her: “Grüss Gott, Mütterchen.”

She looked steadily at him and replied: “Honoured sir! that which is past may be repented of, but can never be undone!” and went on her way.

He was struck with her face. He had never before seen one so full of boundless sorrow—almost of despair.

His eyes followed her as she walked towards the mill stream, and there she took her place on the wooden bridge that crossed it, leaning over the handrail, and looking down into the water. An impulse of curiosity and of interest led him to follow her at a distance, and he saw her pick a flower, a pansy, out of her basket, and drop it into the current, which caught and carried it forward. Then she took a second, and allowed it to fall into the water. Then, after an interval, a third—a fourth; and he counted seven in all. After that she bowed her head on her hands; her grey hair fell over them, and she broke into a paroxysm of weeping.

The traveller, standing by the stream, saw the seven pansies swept down, and one by one pass over the revolving wheel and vanish.

He turned himself about to return to his inn, when, seeing a grave peasant near, he asked: “Who is that poor old woman who seems so broken down with sorrow?”

“That,” replied the man, “is the Mother of Pansies.”

“The Mother of Pansies!” he repeated.

“Well—it is the name she has acquired in the place. Actually, she is called Anna Arler, and is a widow. She was the wife of one Joseph Arler, a jäger, who was shot by smugglers. But that is many, many years ago. She is not right in her head, but she is harmless. When her husband was brought home dead, she insisted on being left alone in the night by him, before he was buried alone, —with his coffin. And what happened in that night no one knows. Some affirm that she saw ghosts. I do not know—she may have had Thoughts. The French word for these flowers is pensées—thoughts—and she will have none others. When they are in her garden she collects them, and does as she has done now. When she has none, she goes about to her neighbours and begs them. She comes here every evening and throws in seven—just seven, no more and no less—and then weeps as one whose heart would split. My wife on one occasion offered her

forget me nots. ‘No,’ she said; ‘I cannot send forget me nots after those who never were, I can send only Pansies.’”

THE END

WINTER 2017-18

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## THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

### Part Two

He called himself `Mud', though that wasn't the name he was born with, of course. It pleased him to call himself Mud because he smuggled large quantities of it, a popular and very illegal synthetic opiate, to many of the colonies throughout the asteroids.

Mud, as he called himself, was Carter Ward's closest friend. He smuggled for kicks. He liked the adventure of it. He hardly needed the money, because he had been very careful with it, and had squirreled away an impressive amount of savings, even before he reached the age of forty, as measured by Earth years.

He could have retired from smuggling anytime, but Mud bored easily. He needed the excitement. He needed the thrill of danger. Otherwise, he stagnated. Like a dead river overcome by scum.

So Mud was always out looking for the next kick, the next thrill.

Mud stood a good six foot three inches tall, or shorter, or an inch or two taller, depending on where he was. He spent most his time travelling through deep space, in his ship, the "Charon", where the weightless environment allowed his body to stretch out a bit. When he came to Mars, where he, like Ward, was born, and spent a few weeks there, to get some gravity under his feet, as the itinerant space travellers called it, his height dropped an inch or two. When he shipped to Earth, with its extremely heavy gravity compared to Mars or any of the asteroids, he shrank even another inch or two, down to a very reasonable six feet.

Mud had even travelled into the inner Solar System peddling his opiates among the cloud cities of Venus and the mining camps of Mercury. Not because business there was particularly profitable. It wasn't. In fact, every time Mud shipped to the inner Solar System, he lost money in the venture. But he wanted to see the Sun up close, and he'd heard so much about the cloud cities of Venus, he just had to get his eyes on them, and walk their streets for himself.

Clocking in at one hundred and twenty feet in length, Mud's ship, the "Charon" was twice as large as Carter Ward's blandly named 08 111A. But, like Ward's ship, the "Charon" was always tricked out with the latest gadgets manufactured at Deimos Labs.

So Mud flew solo, alone through the void of space, and he was content.

Perhaps it was because they were so completely different men that Mud had taken so strong a liking to Ward, when they met and served together with the Martian Rangers, twenty Earth years before.

Mud had a huge zest for living. He loved his drink—in fact, if he weren't both a little drunk and a little hung over, he felt something was wrong with him. He loved his food, he loved his women and he loved his adventures. Unlike most space travellers, he let his brown and unkempt beard grow long, and the hair on his head was thick and ratty, a mass of hair that he rarely bothered to

brush.

But where Mud was loud, boisterous and boisterously happy, his friend, Carter Ward, was quiet, sullen and of a sour disposition. Rarely did Ward speak, and on the rare occasions where he could be goaded into speaking, what little he did have to say was short, abrupt, and never more than was absolutely necessary to get the point made.

Ward did not like being alive, and that fascinated Mud. Try as he might, he could not understand a man like Ward, who lived only to avoid the responsibilities of life as much as he possibly could.

But, for his dour nature and his grudging silences, Ward had proven himself damn good in a firefight. The man never lost his cool, nor missed his shot. And those were two virtues that Mud had come to appreciate early on in the game, when they had first run up against the Scroungers in the northern wastelands of Mars, in the region called Vastitas Borealis, or as Ward had once quipped, 'Vast and Boring' (for all his sullen ways Carter Ward did have a sense of humour that peeked out occasionally, a dry sense of humour sometimes so subtle that his quips often passed by unnoticed).

Bands of Scroungers had been making quick 'hit and run' raids against some of the remote scientific bases in the northern regions, grabbing what they could, killing any who gave them any trouble, then disappearing into space again. Ward and Mud had been assigned to one of the bases, with the rest of their platoon, to hit back, and hard, should the Scroungers strike that base.

Which they did. And the hit completed, they made ready to run, after killing the rest of the Rangers stationed there, leaving only Mud and Ward to tell the tale. The two of them, only nine Martian years old, or eighteen years, counted in Earth time, had managed to kill off a dozen of the band of Scroungers before the rest managed to climb into their ships and fly off into the thin Martian sky. Ward had pulled Mud's chestnuts out of the fire that time, as close a call as the young Mud had ever been through. And Mud had never forgotten it.

He was profoundly grateful to Ward ever since, and never once forgot the debt he felt he owed to Ward. So it was the two became friends, a bond of friendship that only deepened over the years though they rarely saw each other as the years grew longer.

So Mud followed Ward after the Battle for Callisto. Knowing his friend as no one else did, he knew that Ward would plunge headlong into whatever danger it was he was pursuing. ("That boy's gonna get himself kilt," Mud said to himself, and not for the first time.) He also happened to know that the danger he was chasing was no one other than Turhan Mot himself.

Mud had watched his old friend closely after that battle, in which both he and Ward had play key roles together. Mud had seen how Ward had softened in the days before that battle. At first, he had ascribed that softening to Illara, the sleek babe that Ward had picked up on one of his travels. She had proven herself to be one helluva combat pilot, something which Ward could only appreciate. But Mud soon came to see that it was not Illara, a shapely six foot tall woman, with a dark coffee and cream complexion, smooth as polished porcelain, and who looked damned fine

in the taut purple and black uniform of Jovian Security—which was what she was wearing when Mud first met her—who had softened that hard killer’s eye in Ward’s face.

No, it was another, a little girl by the name of Emily, maybe five Martian years old, or eleven Earth years, who had made of Ward a little bit less of a killing machine and a little bit more of a human being.

Mud had learned from Illara, during their time on Callisto, that Ward had shipped Emily, and her family, from Mars, where they were hiding from the pursuit of Secretary Benson. Ward had taken them all, including Illara, to Callisto where, after affecting a change of name, the Sherman family, now going by the name of the Talbots, seemed finally to have made their escape from the ruthless Benson, CEO and COO of the Alliance of Western States on Earth.

During that perilous trip, Emily had come to love Ward in much the same way that Mud himself had, in that Ward was completely unlike any other grown up she had ever met. He was a mystery to her, one she was determined to crack open. Somehow, she did. She had managed to make the cold blooded Carter Ward tolerate her, and she was delighted to succeed in making him talk to her.

And Mud was amused to see it when, visiting the Talbot family there on Callisto, Emily snuggled into Ward’s lap, peppering him with all a little girl’s earnest concerns, while Ward himself merely listened, allowing his hard features to soften a bit, as he nodded at everything she told him. (“Yuh... uh huh... purty much, I s’pose,” Ward had many times said, responding to Emily’s endless queries. It amused Mud and Illara both to see it, but they kept their smiles to themselves.)

Emily had come to believe that she had a special understanding of Ward, and a special friendship with him. And, to a degree, she did.

But when she was so grievously wounded during the Battle for Callisto, left in a coma after the collapse of the dome that sheltered Callisto Base 1, that light that she had brought to Carter Ward’s otherwise flat and lustreless eyes went dead.

And Mud saw that cold homicidal rage growing once again in the eyes of his old friend. This time, though, it was a rage that was more profound than anything like it he had ever seen there before.

“He’s gonna bolt,” Mud warned himself. “He’s gonna kill this one alone. And he dun’t want anyone else crowdin’ him.”

So Mud kept a very tight watch on his old friend. Day by day, and day and night he lurked by the O8 111A, awaiting the moment that Ward would leap into the dark of space, pursuing Turhan Mot, and that other pimple, Mokem Bet.

That day came, and Mud only had sufficient time to slap a tracker on the stern of Ward’s ship, before Ward climbed into the cockpit and sailed off into the inky Callisto sky.

After that, it was a matter of following the tracker's signal before Ward, alerted by Dimara, found the tracker, and removed it from his ship.

Mud followed the tracker's signal through a twisted route that took Ward and Mud through many bases on the remotest of asteroids outside the orbit of Jupiter.

Here, there was no law. It was here that the most misanthropic of the space rats fled to avoid all contact with their human fellows. Here lived the outlaws of deep space, criminals avoiding a warrant, or those with principles of only the most negligible kind, who were not unwilling to pick up a job with a band of Scroungers, if the job paid right.

It wasn't surprising that Ward's hunt for Turhan Mot would take him to these regions. Sometimes he came quite close to catching up with Ward, missing him by only but a few hours at one remote base, again, by a hundred or more hours at another.

Secretary Benson had ordered a search of the outer asteroids, for the elusive 'Astra Palace', rumours of which had dropped in the mayhem of the battle for Callisto. He also demanded the capture of the ringleaders of that attack.

So General Howe, Commander of Earth Space Forces, ordered Colonel Westland, Chief of Security of the "Bellerophon", and Colonel Bridgemont, Head of Jovian Bases Security, to launch an expedition against the Scroungers, first to find the parties responsible for the attack against Callisto and the other bases of the Jovian system, and, second, to track down this rumoured 'Astra Palace'.

"Capture them!" the rage filled Benson had demanded, "Every god damned one of them! Bring them all back to Earth! Every one of those damned pirates you can capture! I will kill them myself! I will hang every one of them by their necks with piano wire! And this so called 'Astra Palace'! Destroy it! Destroy it! Bomb it to oblivion! Until there is not even a bit of gravel left of it, whatever it is! Wherever it may be!"

Secretary Benson, never a very patient man, even at the best of times, was most put out by this attack on Callisto. Having usurped power over the Alliance of Western States on Earth by declaring himself both CEO and COO of that Alliance, he had already set his sights on Mars, had already made detailed plans for recapturing Mars and the Martian colonies.

Fifty years before, in the brief, and brutal, War for Martian Independence, the colonies on Mars had broken all formal ties to Earth, No longer would the people of Mars be mere colonists, existing only to serve Earth interests. Now, after several generations, the Martian colonies were finally self sufficient, and the people of Mars would live for their own reasons, not merely to send three quarters of their production back to Earth. Years were to pass before any relations between the two planets were finally re established. Decades, before the hostilities had begun to thaw.

In losing that war, the business interests of Earth that had built up the Martian colonies over the course of several centuries had also lost several trillions of dollars of investments. Earth was plunged into a planet wide economic depression immediately following the loss of that war, and the income that arose from the investments of those trillions of dollars. Because of that economic depression, Earth was in no position to reclaim those lost investments. Half a century was to pass before Earth was prepared to mount a campaign against Mars. That hour had come, at last, and Secretary Benson was the man for that hour, he believed.

Frederick Sherman, Emily's father, was one of many who opposed Benson's plans, and who had managed to stand in his way. Benson had managed to arrest, and execute the others. Sherman and his family, were the last. And they had managed to disappear, somehow, from Benson's coils on Earth.

No matter, Benson finally counselled himself. Sherman was gone. That was sufficient. And Benson was ready to launch his campaign against the Martian colonies, indeed, he was on the very eve of giving the command to attack Mars when word came to him of this outrageous assault on Callisto.

"Bring them back to me!" Benson had demanded of Colonel Westland and Colonel Bridgemont, his mouth literally spittled with froth as he shouted his commands to General Howe and the other members of his cabinet. Behind his back, they called him 'Mr. Spittle' for the spittle that frothed from his mouth during his frequent rages.

So it was that Colonel Westland assigned the recently promoted Captain Hardy to take command of the flotilla of ships sent out to hunt down Turhan Mot, and to seek out this rumoured "Astra Palace". Captain Illara accompanied Hardy as his second in command. She brought her patrol ship, which she had appropriated from her late employers, Pink Security Systems, and which she had lovingly named 'Izzie'.

Mud, though flying his own solitary route through the wastelands that were the asteroids past Jupiter, stayed in constant contact with Captain Hardy.

As it was between Mud and his old friend, Carter Ward, the two, Mud and Captain Hardy, could not have been more opposite in their personalities—Mud the half drunken and half wild reprobate, while Hardy was as straight laced and 'by the book' as any man could be. But the two had learned a powerful respect for each other through battles and skirmishes. Both were good fighters, and both had a sense of humour that carried them through some very unpleasant moments.

Of course, leading a flotilla of the size that Hardy was, he could not hope to move through the asteroids unnoticed. So Mud, his ship equipped with the stealth capabilities that could only be provided by Deimos Labs, gave Hardy a huge advantage which Hardy hugely appreciated. While Mud forged on, Hardy kept his flotilla of three transport ships and a dozen one and two seat

fighter craft carried aboard those ships.

For many hundreds of hours Mud stalked after Ward, leaping from asteroid to asteroid. He waded through many filthy dens, bars, trading posts and brothels. He stopped at each post that Ward had, picking up much the same gossip and rumours. As Ward had done, Mud picked up the occasional whispered word of this `Astra Palace`, word which, unlike Ward, he carefully sent back to Captain Hardy through their subspace communications.

Mud found that the opiate he smuggled, `mud` as it was called, opened many doors for him in those wild places. Though he didn't make much money from selling it—it was very cheap out here—he did make a lot of friends, especially since he always kept himself well stocked with the stuff.

And his newfound friends were happy to share what gossip they had to offer, in their attempts to impress the man who carried so much of their favourite narcotic. Many were happy to do business with him, and Mud found himself rich in new acquaintances here, in the regions beyond Jupiter.

So it was that when he came to asteroid AT 4442 ST, he had a reputation that preceded him, a reputation that opened doors, wallets and mouths. Mud came to the asteroid just two hundred and forty hours after Carter Ward had left. And though a goodly span of time had passed—ten days, reckoned by Earth calendars, but the space rats measured time not in days or weeks, but in increments of hours—still Ward's display of gunplay at Ed's bar was fresh enough in everyone's memory that Mud was quickly apprised of all that had gone down.

"I'm tellin' ya, man, I ain't never seen anything like the way that man played his guns. All the shootin' was done afore anyone knew it even begun," a new acquaintance, a man who pleased to call himself `Rat` was thrilled to tell the story.

"Z'at so?" Mud asked with a huge grin shining through his thick beard as he pushed the pipe to his new friend one more time.

Rat picked the pipe up, a piece of jointed metal, with a metal bowl, and out it to his mouth with an appreciative smile.

"No one else even got a single shot off," Rat told Mud, after he had sucked the pipe dry. "Never had the chance. That man took all three down in a wink! Day am!"

Rat shook his head with a grin and handed the pipe back to Mud. Mud scraped the bowl with a small knife he always carried with him, filled it again, then took a small, quick toke himself. He smiled, and handed the pipe over to Rat.

Rat, a small, nervous and narrow man with a thin, sallow face took the pipe eagerly for another hit.

"Thanks, man," he said to Mud. "This is some good shit you got here. Ya wanna unload any of

it, I can putcha in touch with a bud `o mine.”

“Yeah, I’ll think about it,” Mud said, slowly and expansively. “I’m in no hurry at the moment. But we’ll talk. Mebbe get you set up on a good deal.”

“Sure, yeah,” Rat answered. He put the pipe to his mouth again and dragged on it deeply. His eyelids grew heavy.

“So yuh saw it all, didja?” Mud asked, prompting Rat toward the subject he was more interested in.

“Huh?” Rat asked, nearly choking on his smoke.

“You saw it, the gunplay back at... where wuz it you called it? Ed’s Place?”

“That bar that Ed runs. Usually s’posed to be purty quiet. That’s the way Ed likes it. He sits on the bar. That way he can keep his peepers on the place.”

“Uh huh,” Mud said.

“So, why you care, ennyway?” Rat demanded, suddenly suspicious.

“Nothin’ about it,” Mud assured him. “Just don’t hear stories about that kinda gunplay ver’ often. Seems like everybody’s talkin’ about it. You’re just the first one I know, who was actually there.”

Rat took a moment to digest that comment, while Mud pulled his pipe from Rat’s numb fingers, jamming yet another small pinch of `mud;’ into it. Rat’s greedy eyes watched Mud’s fingers working with precision. Mud handed the pipe back to Rat. Rat grinned. He took the pipe in his hand.

“Whyncha let me innerduce you to my bud? He can unload a helluva lot of this shit. Make some good money.”

“I’ll be around,” Mud said, rising. This Rat fellow was just a tad too anxious to get Mud off someplace alone. Mud didn’t like the smell of the deal.

“Go ahead, keep the pipe. I got others,” Mud finished.

He rose from the table where the two had been sitting, at another run down rat’s nest of a bar, and trading post, this one tossed together in a makeshift manner, in a corner of a tunnel, with bunkbeds forming two walls of the rat’s nest.

He made his way through the crudely fashioned tunnels of the asteroid. Rails and handgrips were built into the walls, ceilings and floors to help those within pull their way along in the nearly weightless environment.

All along the way, traders of many sorts plied their wares. These were, for the most part, temporary affairs, transient space travellers with no real destination but a need for credits, selling whatever it was they had to sell in small corners of these tunnels—food, real food, and not that stale replicator crap, was always a rare delicacy out in these regions. A potato could be worth as much as five hundred Universal Credits out here, a tomato, not nearly as hardy as a potato, could command a thousand.

Brothels were found at almost every turn, open air brothels that served every taste, no matter how exotic. Mud found that he did have competition with other smugglers, but what he was shipping was the best that had come by here in many long and tedious hours, so he did not worry that he might be outsold or undercut.

What he did have to worry about though, was the possible throat cutting. Rat had suggested this by his manner and his interrogation of Mud, both making clear that the threat of having his throat opened for him, and his shipment slipped out from under his dying nose was both very real and very immediate.

But Mud was not the sort of person to worry. He kept his eyes open and—yes, indeed—he did see that a number of his new acquaintances were paying very close attention to him, while being very coy about it.

Oh well. Nothing to do about it, but take care of his business as quickly as he could, then take off to the next destination in his pursuit of his friend, Carter Ward.

Not everyone had a business as flourishing as Ed's, with its own walls, and doors. In fact, Ed's bar was so lavish among the traders, space rats and the Scroungers of asteroid AT 4442 ST that Mud found it with ease. The next question might not be so easy.

“So where's this Lacey chick that Rat dude was talking about?” Mud wondered as he made his way through the cheap plastic doors. The interior was brightly lit. The stench of stale beer and vomit was heavy. The furniture was unpretentious. Booths and benches, and mats nailed here and there upon walls, ceiling and floor for those who wanted to sprawl out while they drank and fucked.

Rat's description was not very detailed. “Big honkers and gold hair. She usually wears a purple thong, but I seen her in red or green, too. Man, that chick does like to talk.”

“Which describes about a lotta them,” Mud thought to himself.

So Mud did the logical thing. We pushed his way through Ed's Place, from one hand grip to the next, until he finally came up to the bar. Behind it was a tall, beefy man, one with thick arms, who was working the replicator and the stills with silent efficiency. Three drunk men sat at stools, while two more at the end of the bar tied off their arms, jacking long needles into each other's veins.

Mud smirked. He didn't use any of the narcotics he sold, himself. He preferred his beer, his whiskey, and any form of alcohol that he could find to pour down his throat. Nor was he above an occasional few hours spent with cannabis or a bit of hash oil. He was also fond of whack, a synthetic stimulant and, aside from coffee, Carter Ward's only vice.

But Mud was scrupulous in keeping control of himself. Even in the midst of a raging, howling drunk, one of historic proportions, Mud could always keep his feet under him. So, though he made it a principle never to look down on anyone. But junkies? "Nah, I'd never hire them boys," he said.

"Whatcha want?" the bartender who had sidled up the end of the bar where Mud had settled himself in. The bar was a semi circular affair, following the curve of the floor/ceiling. Mud had found an empty stool at several removes from his nearest neighbour. Mud was happily alone, and the mirror at the bar made it easy for him to watch for anyone who might think of coming up on him from behind.

"Gimme a bourbon," Mud said, "And a beer to wash it down with."

"Sure, buddy. Got enny preferences?"

"Make `em wet, that's all," Mus grinned."

The bartender turned away and pulled himself along the bar with a series of handgrips mounted under it. He put Mud's order into the replicator and after a moment, he pulled out two sippy cups, jammed them into the pockets of the jumpsuit he wore, then slid his way back to Mud's darkened corner.

After sliding the two cups into the notches cut into the bar to keep them from floating off, Mud raised his wrist and tapped his wristband into the bartender's.

The bartender saw the size of the juicy tip that Mud had given him. He smiled.

"Thanks, man," he said.

"You Ed?" Mud asked.

"That's the name. Don't wear it out."

"Nah. I'm good," Mud answered with a grin. "Lacey in tonight?"

"Lacey? Oh yeah, she's workin' the door."

Mud turned, and saw a very good looking woman who would have been in her middle twenties, had she been born on Earth. But she was born on Earth. No one knew where she had been born, nor how long ago she had found her way to asteroid AT 4442 ST. She could have been anywhere between eighteen Earth years, or thirty.

She wore only a thin strap that crossed between her breasts and met at a thin diamond shaped piece of crimson fabric covered with sequins while a pair of feathered tassels depended from her nipples. From her neck there hung a most elaborate necklace—a present given her by one of her more appreciative, and drunken, customers. The necklace fit almost perfectly in the crevasse between her breasts and her navel was pierced with a very well cut blue diamond.

Lacey sat at a tiny table near the door, watching, and quickly evaluating, everyone who stepped into Ed's place. Mud took her in quickly, and appreciated the very swift and professional way Lacey sized up everyone she saw.

“Chick knows her stuff,” Mud observed.

The bartender raised his wristband to his mouth.

“Lacey,” he said into it. “Got a job here for ya.”

Lacey turned her head and searched out Ed through the crowd. She saw Mud sitting at the bar next to him. Though Mud was a huge, intimidating bear of a man, with thick and unkempt hair growing all over his head and face, to say nothing of his huge hands, hands that could easily grip a basketball, she did not bat an eye.

She let a bright and very professional smile play over her face, pushed herself up from the tiny table mounted near the plastic door. She half swam through the air as she pulled herself along by the handgrips mounted on the tables toward the bar where Mud sat.

“This guy asked about'cha.” Ed said to Lacey as she came up, at last.

“Hiya!” Lacey said brightly to Mud.

“Whatcha drinkin'?” Mud asked her.

“Oh, thanks,” Lacey smiled. “I gotta keep my head, doncha know. Just a hot chocolate, Ed,” she said.

“Sounds good,” Mud answered. “Maybe I'll have me one of them, too.”

Lacey let an instant of puzzlement show on her face. This guy wasn't going to be any quick customer. What did he want?

She settled into the stool next to Mud's and nuzzled her mouth close to his ear.

“What can I do ya for, hunnybunny?” she whispered.

Mud grinned, half turned, then picked up the small glass that held his bourbon. He downed it quickly, and caught Ed's eye. Ed had discreetly moved down the bar. With a gesture, Mud

indicated that he wanted another shot. Ed nodded, and a few moments later, came back with two cups of hot chocolate and a small plastic cup of bourbon.

“Just keep pouring them,” Mud said.

“Awright,” Ed answered.

Ed moved off and Mud turned to Lacey.

“Now, for whatcha can do for me, hunnybunny,” he said, raising his hand to expose his wristband from under the sleeve of his jumpsuit.

Lacey tapped her wristband to Mud’s, looked at it, and her eyes opened in appreciation for Mud’s very ample generosity.

“Is tell me everything you know about a friend `a mine you might `a met. A gun man. I hear he gunned down three men, right here, in Ed’s place, couple hundred hours ago.

(Space rats, the itinerant space travellers who rarely set down on planets, do not measure time in days, weeks, months or years. Going for months at a time without ever once seeing a sunrise or a sunset, such measurements meant nothing to them. For them, parcelling time out in hours made more senses than endlessly struggling to keep up with weeks or years.)

Lacey’s eyes widened.

“Ohh...” she said, drawing out the word. “Yeah... him. I hope he’s okay. He was nice. Real nice, until those guys came gunning for him.”

“Yeah? Know what it was about?”

Lacey shook her head and sipped on her hot chocolate, looking over the lid at Mud.

Mud looked back at her as he worked on his beer.

“They got enny food in this place?” Mud asked.

Lacey nodded her head.

“Good. Lemme buy you lunch,” Mud said.

“It’s din din for me,” Lacey answered.

“Sure hunnybunny.

“Oh. Okay. My name’s Lacey.”

“Yeah, I figured that when Ed called ya over. So I figured it’s only polite, lettin’ ya know my name.”

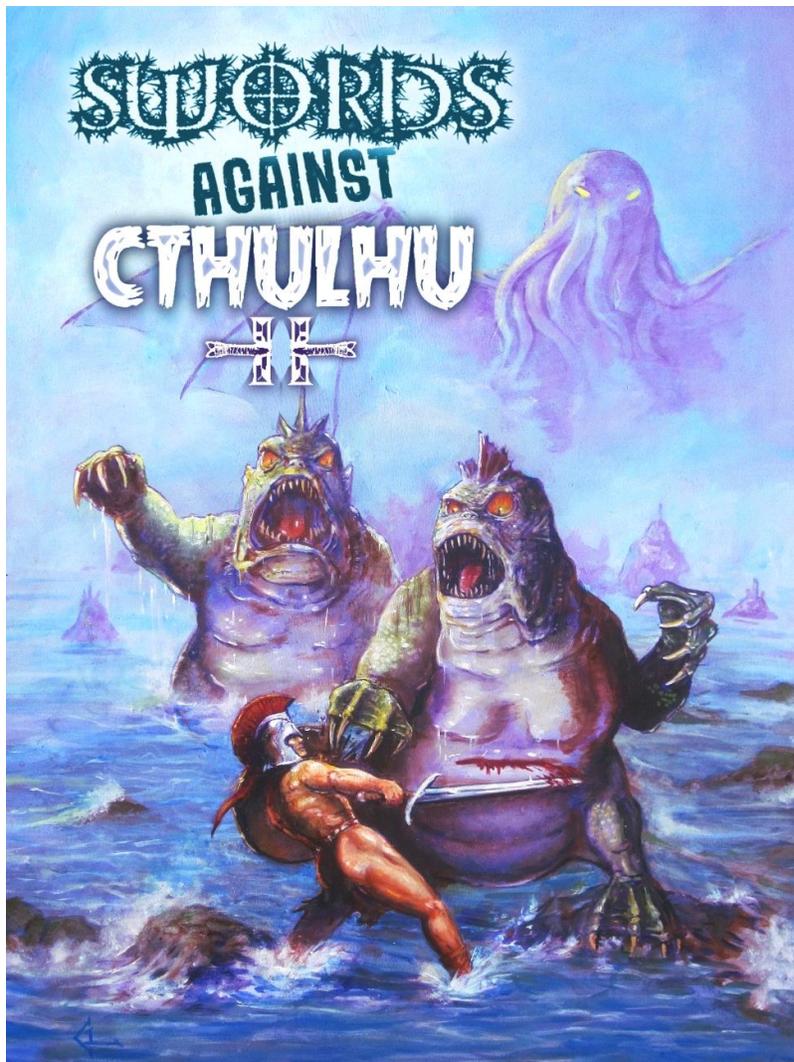
“That’s nice a’ you,” Lacey answered. “I never did learn your friend’s name.”

“We’ll let that go,” Mud answered. “I don’t think he’d like it, me blabbin’ all over hell and back.”

“Sure.”

“Now,” Mud said. “Gettin’ down to business. Mebbe you can tell me ever’thing you know about my friend.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter VIII—A Faith and Its Founder.

On the return of the family, my host was met at the door with such accounts of what had happened as led him at once to see and question his daughter. It was not, therefore, till he had heard her story that I saw him. More agitated than I should have expected from one under ordinary circumstances so calm and self possessed, he entered my room with a face whose paleness and compressed lips indicated intense emotion; and, laying his hand on my shoulder, expressed his feeling rather in look and tone than in his few broken and not very significant words. After a few moments, however, he recovered his coolness, and asked me to supply the deficiencies of Eveena's story. I told him briefly but exactly what had passed from the moment when I missed her to that of her rescue. He listened without the slightest symptom of surprise or anger to the tale of the Regent's indifference, and seemed hardly to understand the disgust and indignation with which I dwelt upon it. When I had finished—

“You have made,” he said, “an enemy, and a dangerous one; but you have also secured friends against whose support even the anger of a greater than the Zamptâ might break as harmlessly as waves upon a rock. He behaved only as anyone else would have done; and it is useless to be angry with men for being what they habitually and universally are. What you did for Eveena, one of ourselves, perhaps, but no other, might have risked for a first bride on the first day of her marriage. Indeed, though I am most thankful to you, I should, perhaps, have withheld my consent to my daughter's request had I supposed that you felt so strongly for her.”

“I think,” I replied with some displeasure, “that I may positively affirm that I have spoken no word to your daughter which I should not have spoken in your presence. I am too unfamiliar with your ideas to know whether your remark has the same force and meaning it would have borne among my own people; but to me it conveys a grave reproach. When I accepted the charge of your daughter during this day's excursion, I thought of her only as every man thinks of a young, pretty, and gentle girl of whom he has seen and knows scarcely anything. To avail myself of what has since happened to make a deeper impression on her feelings than you might approve would have seemed to me unpardonable treachery.”

“You do utterly misunderstand me,” he answered. “It may be that Eveena has received an impression which will not be effaced from her mind. It may be that this morning, could I have foreseen it, I should have decidedly wished to avoid anything that would so impress her. But that feeling, if it exist, has been caused by your acts and not by your words. That you should do your utmost, at any risk to yourself, to save her, is consistent with what I know of your habit of mind, and ought not much to surprise me. But, from your own account of what you said to the Zamptâ, you were not merely willing to risk life for life. When you deemed it impossible to return without her, you spoke as few among us would seriously speak of a favourite bride.”

“I spoke and felt,” I replied, “as any man trained in the hereditary thought of my race and rank would have spoken of any woman committed to his care. All that I said and did for Eveena, I should have said and done, I hope, for the least attractive or least amiable maiden in this planet who had been similarly entrusted to my charge. How could any but the vilest coward return and

say to a father, ‘You trusted your daughter to me, and she has perished by my fault or neglect?’”

“Not so,” he answered, “Eveena alone was to blame—and much to blame. She says herself that you had told her to remain where you left her till your return; and if she had not disobeyed, neither her life nor yours would have been imperilled.”

“One hardly expects a young lady to comply exactly with such requests,” I said. “At any rate, Terrestrial feelings of honour and even of manhood would have made it easier to leap the precipice than to face you and the world if, no matter by whose fault, my charge had died in such a manner under my eyes and within my reach.”

Esmo’s eyes brightened and his cheek flushed a little as I spoke, with more of earnestness or passion than any incident, however exciting, is wont to provoke among his impassive race.

“Of one thing,” he said, “you have assured me—that the proposal I was about to make rather invites honour than confers it. I have been obliged, in speaking of the manners and ideas of my countrymen, to let you perceive not only that I differ from them, but that there are others who think and act as I do. We have for ages formed a society bound together by our peculiar tenets. That we individually differ in conduct, and, therefore, probably in ideas, from our countrymen, they necessarily know; that we form a body apart with laws and tenets of our own, is at least suspected. But our organisation, its powers, its methods, its rules of membership, and its doctrines are, and have always been, a secret, and no man’s connection with it is avowed or provable. Our chief distinctive and essential doctrines you hold as strongly as we do—the All perfect Existence, the immortal human soul. From these necessarily follow conceptions of life and principles of conduct alien to those that have as necessarily grown up among a race which repudiates, ignores, and hates our two fundamental premises. After what has happened, I can promise you immediate and eager acceptance among those invested with the fullest privileges of our order. They will all admire your action and applaud your motives, though, frankly speaking, I doubt whether any of us would carry your views so far as you have done. The best among us would have flinched, unless under the influence of the very strongest personal affection, from the double peril of which you seemed to think so lightly. They might indeed have defied the Regent but it would have been in reliance on the protection of, a power superior to his of which you knew nothing.”

“Then,” I said, “I suppose your engagement of to day was a meeting of this society?”

“Yes,” he answered, “a meeting of the Chamber to which I and the elder members of my household, including my son and his wife, belong.” “But,” I said, “if you are more powerful than the rulers of your people, what need of such careful secrecy?”

“You will understand the reason,” he answered, “when you learn the nature of our powers. Hundreds among millions, we are no match for the fighting force of our unbelieving countrymen. Our safety lies in the terror inspired by a tradition, verified by repeated and invariable experience, that no one who injures one of us but has reason to rue it, that no mortal enemy of the Star has ever escaped signal punishment, more terrible for the mystery attending it. Were we known, were our organisation avowed, we might be hunted down and exterminated, and should

certainly suffer frightful havoc, even if in the end we were able to frighten or overcome our enemies. But if you are disposed to accept my offer—and enrolment among us gives you at once your natural place in this planet and your best security against the enmity you have incurred and will incur here—I should prefer to make the rest of the explanation that must precede your admission in presence of my family. The first step, the preliminary instruction in our creed and our simpler mysteries, which is the work of the Novitiate, is a solemn epoch in the lives of our children. They are not trusted with our secret till we can rely on the maturity of their intelligence and loyalty of their nature. Eveena would in any case have been received as a novice within some dozen days. It will now be easy for me, considering her education and intelligence and my own position in the Order, to obtain, for her as for you, exemption from the usual probation on proof that you both know all that is usually taught therein, and admission on the same occasion; and it will add solemnity and interest to her first initiation, that this chief lesson of her life should be shared this evening with him to whom she owes it that she lives to enter the society, to which her ancestors have belonged since its institution.”

We passed into the peristyle, where the ladies were as usual assembled; but the children had been dismissed, and of the maidens Eveena only was present. Fatigue and agitation had left her very pale, and she was resting at full length on the cushions with her head pillowed on her mother’s knee. As we approached, however, they all rose, the other ladies greeting me eagerly and warmly, Eveena rising with difficulty and faltering the welcome which the rest had spoken with enthusiastic earnestness. Forgetting for the moment the prudence which ignorance of Martial customs had hitherto dictated, I lifted to my lips the hand that she, following the example of the rest, but shyly and half reluctantly, laid on my shoulder—a form very different to the distant greeting I had heretofore received, and marking that I was no longer to be treated as a stranger to the family. My unusual salute brought the colour back to her cheeks, but no one else took notice of it. I observed, however, that on this occasion, instead of interposing himself between me and the ladies as usual, her father left vacant the place next to her; and I seated myself at her feet. She would have exchanged her reclining posture for that of the others, but her mother gently drew her down to her former position.

“Eveena,” said my host, “I have told our friend, what you know, that there is in this world a society, of which I am a member, whose principles are not those of our countrymen, but resemble rather those which supplied the impulses on which he acted to day. This much you know. What you would have learned a few days hence, I mean that you and he shall now hear at the same time.”

“Before you enter on that subject,” interposed Zulve timidly—for it is most unusual for a lady to interfere in her husband’s conversation, much more to offer a suggestion or correction—but yet earnestly, “let me say, on my own part, what I am sure you must have said already on yours. If there be now, or ever shall be, anything we can do for our guest, anything we can give that he would value, not in requital, but in memory of what he has done for us—whatever it should cost us, though he should ask the most precious thing we possess, it will be our pride and pleasure—the greatest pleasure he can afford us—to grant it.”

The time and the surroundings were not perhaps exactly suitable to the utterance of the wish suggested by these words; but I knew so little what might be in store for me, and understood so

well the difficulty and uncertainty of finding future opportunities of intercourse with the ladies at least of the family, that I dared not lose the present. I spoke at once upon the impulse of the moment, with a sense of reckless desperation not unlike that with which an artillerist fires the train whose explosion may win for him the obsidional wreath or blow him into atoms. "You and my host," I said, "have one treasure that I have learned to covet, but it is exactly the most precious thing you possess, and one which it would be presumptuous to ask as reward; even had I not owed to Esmo the life I perilled for Eveena, and if I had acted from choice and freely, instead of doing only what only the vilest of cowards could have failed to attempt. In asking it indeed, I feel that I cancel whatever claim your extravagant estimate of that act can possibly ascribe to me."

"We don't waste words," answered Esmo, "in saying what we don't mean, and I confirm fully what my wife has said. There is nothing we possess that we shall not delight to give as token of regard and in remembrance of this day to the saviour of our child."

"If," I said, "I find a neighbour's purse containing half his fortune, and return it to him, he may offer me what reward I ask, but would hardly think it reasonable if I asked for the purse and its contents. But you have only one thing I care to possess—that which I have, by God's help, been enabled to save to day. If I must ask a gift, give me Eveena herself."

Utilitarianism has extinguished in Mars the use of compliment and circumlocution; and until I concluded, their looks of mild perplexity showed that neither Zulve nor her husband caught my purpose. I fancied—for, not daring to look them in the face, I had turned my downcast glance on Eveena—that she had perhaps somewhat sooner divined the object of my thoughts. However, a silence of surprise—was it of reluctance?—followed, and then Zulve bent over her daughter and looked into her half averted face, while Esmo answered—

"What you should ask I promised to give; what you have asked I give, in so far as it is mine to give, in willing fulfilment of my pledge. But, of course, what I can give is but my free permission to my daughter to answer for herself. You will be, I hope, within a few days at furthest, one of those in whose possession alone a woman of my house could be safe or content; and, free by the law of the land to follow her own wish, she is freed by her father's voice from the rule which the usage of ten thousand years imposes on the daughters of our brotherhood."

Zulve then looked up, for Eveena had hidden her face in her mother's robe, and said—

"If my child will not speak for herself I must speak for her, and in my own name and in hers I fulfil her father's promise. And now let my husband tell his story, for nothing can solemnise more appropriately the betrothal of a daughter of the Star, than her admission to the knowledge of the Order whose privileges are her heritage."

"At the time," Esmo began, "when material science had gained a decided ascendant, and enforced the recognition of its methods as the only ones whereby certain knowledge and legitimate belief could be attained, those who clung most earnestly to convictions not acquired or favoured by scientific logic were sorely dismayed. They were confounded, not so much by the yet informal but irrevocable majority vote against them, as by an instinctive misgiving that

Science was right; and by irrepressible doubts whether that which would not bear the application of scientific method could in any sense be true or trustworthy knowledge. At the same time, to apply a scientific method to the cherished beliefs threatened only to dissolve them. Fortunately for them and their successors, there was living at that time one of the most remarkable and original thinkers whom our race has produced. From him came the suggestions that gave impulse to our learning and birth to our Order. 'The reasonings, the processes of Science,' he affirmed, 'are beyond challenge. Their trustworthiness depends not on their subject matter, but on their own character; not on their relation to outward Nature, but on their conformity to the laws of thought. Their upholders are right in affirming that what will not ultimately bear the test of their application cannot be knowledge, and probably—for the practical purposes of human life we may say certainly—cannot be truth. They are wrong in alleging that the ideas for which they can find no foundation in the subjects to which scientific method has hitherto been applied, are therefore unscientific, or sure to disappear under scientific investigation. I hold that the existence of a Creator and Ruler of the Universe can be logically deduced from first principles, as well as justly inferred from cumulative evidences of overwhelming weight. The existence of something in Man that is not merely corporeal, of powers that can act beyond the reach of any corporeal instruments at his command, or without the range of their application, is not proven; it may be, only because the facts that indicate without proving it have never yet been subject to systematic verification or scientific analysis. But of such facts there exists a vast accumulation; unsifted, untested, and therefore as yet ineffective for proof, but capable, I can scarcely doubt, of reduction to methodical order and scientific treatment. There are records and traditions of every degree of value, from utter worthlessness to the worth of the most authentic history, preserving the evidences of powers which may be generally described as spiritual. Through all ages, among all races, the living have alleged themselves from time to time to have seen the forms and even heard the voices of the dead. Scientific men have been forced by the actual and public exercise of the power under the most crucial tests—for instance, to produce insensibility in surgical operations—to admit that the will of one man can control the brain, the senses, the physical frame of another without material contact, perhaps at a distance. There are narratives of marvels wrought by human will, chiefly in remote, but occasionally in recent times, transcending and even contradicting or overruling the known laws of Nature. All these evidences point to one conclusion; all corroborate and confirm one another. The men of science ridicule them because in so many cases the facts are imperfectly authenticated, and because in others the action of the powers is uncertain, dependent on conditions imperfectly ascertained, and not of that material kind to which material science willingly submits. But if they be facts, if they relate to any element of human nature, all these things can be systematically investigated, the true separated from the false, the proven from the unproven. The powers can be investigated, their conditions of action laid down. Probably they may be so developed as to be exercised with comparative certainty, whether by everyone or only by those special constitutions in which they may inhere. Such investigations will at present only enlist the attention and care of a few qualified persons, and, that they may be carried on in peace and safety, should be carried on in secrecy. But upon them may, I hope, be founded a certainty as regards the higher side of man's nature not less complete than that which science, by similar methods, has gradually acquired in regard to its purely physical aspects.'

“For this end he instituted a secret society, which has subsisted in constantly increasing strength and cohesion to the present hour. It has collected evidence, conducted experiments, investigated

records, studied methodically the abnormal phenomena you call occult or spiritual, and reduced them to something like the certainty of science. Discoveries from the first curious and interesting have become more and more complete, practical, and effective. Our results have surpassed the hopes of our Founder, and transcend in importance, while they equal in certainty, the contemporary achievements of physical science, —some of the chief of which belong to us. All that profound knowledge of human nature could suggest to bring its weakness to the support of its strength, and enlist both in the work, was done by our Founder, and by those who have carried out his scheme. The corporate character of the society, its rites and formularies, its grades and ranks, are matter of deep interest to all its members, have linked them together by an inviolable bond, and given them a strength infinitely greater than numbers without such cohesion could possibly have afforded. The Founder left us no moral code, imposed on us none of his own most cherished ethical convictions, as he pledged us to none of the conclusions which his own occult studies had led him to anticipate, nearly all of which have been verified by later investigation. Such rules as he imposed were directed only to the cohesion and efficiency of the Order. Our creed still consists only of the two fundamental doctrines; two settled principles only are laid down by our aboriginal law. We are taught to cultivate the closest personal affection, the most intimate and binding ties among ourselves; to defend the Order and one another, whether by strenuous resistance or severe reprisals, against all who injure us individually or collectively, and especially against persecutors of the Order. But the few laws our Founder has left are given in the form of striking precepts, brief, and often even paradoxical. For example, the law of defence or reprisal is concentrated in one antithetic phrase: —*Gavart dax Zveltâ, gavart gedex Zinta* [Never let the member strike, never let the Order spare]. As it is a rule with us to embody none of our symbols, forms, or laws in writing, this manner of statement served to impress them on the memory, as well as to leave the utmost freedom in their application, by the gathered experience of ages, and the prudence of those who had to deal with the circumstances of each successive period. Another maxim says, ‘Who kisses a brother’s hand may kick the Camptâ,’ thus enforcing at once the value of ceremonial courtesy, and the power conferred by union. We observe more ceremony in family life than others in the most formal public relations. Their theory of life being utterly utilitarian, no form is observed that serves no distinct practical purpose. We wish to make life graceful and elegant, as well as easy. Principles originally inculcated upon us by the necessity of self protection have been enforced and graven on our very nature, by the reaction of our experience against the rough and harsh relations, the jarring and often unfriendly intercourse, of external society. Aliens to our Order—that is, ninety nine hundredths of our race—take delight in the infliction of petty personal annoyance, at least never take care not to ‘jar each other’s elbow nerves,’ or set on edge the teeth that never bit them. We are careful not to wound the feelings or even the weaknesses of a brother. Punctilious courtesy, frank apology for unintentional wrong, is with us a point of honour. Disputes, when by any chance they arise, are referred to the arbitration of our chiefs, who never consider their work done till the disputants are cordially reconciled. Envy, the most dangerous source of ill will among men, can hardly exist among us. Rank has been well earned by its holder, or in a few cases by his ancestors; and authority is a trust never to be used for its holder’s benefit. Wealth never provokes covetousness, since no member is ever allowed to be poor. Not only the Order but each member is bound to take every opportunity of assisting every other by every method within his power. We employ them, we promote them, we give them the preference in every kind of patronage at our command. But these obligations are points of honour rather than of law. Only apostasy or treason to the Order involve compulsory penalties; and the latter, if it ever occurred in these days, would

be visited with instant death, —inflicted, as it is inflicted upon irreconcilable enemies, in such a manner that none could know who passed the sentence, or by whom it was executed.”

“And have you,” I asked, “no apostates, as you have no traitors?”

“No,” he said. “In the first place, none who has lived among us could endure to fall into the ordinary Martial life. Secondly, the foundations of our simple creed are so clear, so capable of being made apparent to everyone, that none once familiar with the evidences can well cease to believe them.”

Here he paused, and I asked, “How is it possible that the means you employ to punish those who have wronged you should not, in some cases at least, indicate the person who has employed them?”

“Because,” he said, “the means of vengeance are not corporeal; the agency does not in the least resemble any with which our countrymen, or apparently your race on Earth, are acquainted. A traitor would be found dead with no sign of suffering or injury, and the physician would pronounce that he had died of apoplexy or heart disease. A persecutor, or one who had unpardonably wronged any of the Children of the Star, might go mad, might fling himself from a precipice, might be visited with the most terrible series of calamities, all natural in their character, all distinctly traceable to natural causes, but astonishing and even apparently supernatural in their accumulation, and often in their immediate appropriateness to the character of his offence. Our neighbours would, of course, destroy the avenger, if they could find him out—would attempt to exterminate our society, could they prove its agency.”

“But surely your countrymen must either disbelieve in such agency, in which case they can hardly fear your vengeance, or they must believe it, and then would deem it just and necessary to retaliate.”

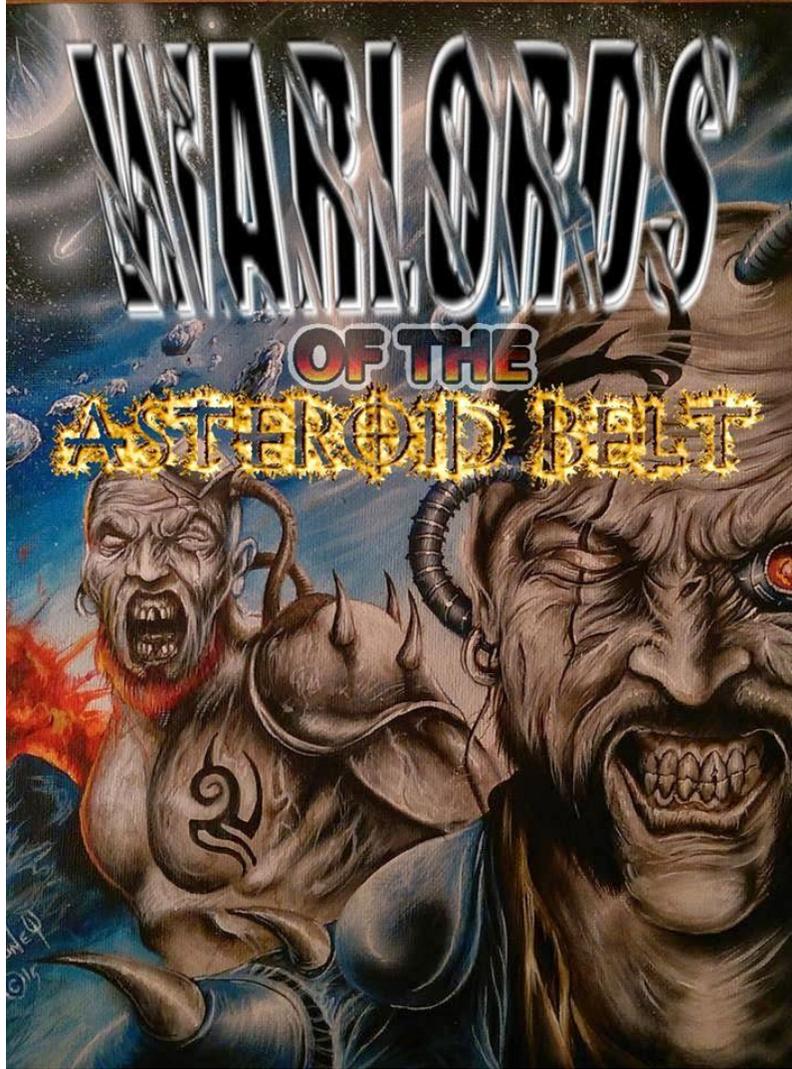
“No,” he said. “They disbelieve in the possibility while they are forced to see the fact. It is impossible, they would say, that a man should be injured in mind or body, reputation or estate, that the forces of Nature or the feelings of men should be directed against him, without the intervention of any material agent, by the mere will of those who take no traceable means to give that will effect. At the same time, tradition and even authentic history record, what experience confirms, that everyone who has wronged us deeply has come to some terrible, awe striking end. Each man would ridicule heartily a neighbour who should allege such a ground for fearing to injure one of us; but there is none who is so true to his own unbelief as to do that which, in every instance, has been followed by signal and awful disaster. Moreover, we do by visible symbols suggest a relation between the vengeance and the crime. Over the heart of criminals who have paid with their lives, no matter by what immediate agency, for wrong to us, is found after death the image of a small blood red star; the only case in which any of our sacred symbols are exposed to profane eyes.”

“Surely,” I said, “in the course of generations, and with your numbers, you must be often watched and traced; and some one spy, on one out of a million occasions, must have found access to your meetings and heard and seen all that passed.”

“Our meetings,” he said, “are held where no human eye can possibly see, no human ear hear what passes. The Chambers meet in apartments concealed within the dwellings of individual members. When we meet the doors are guarded, and can be passed only by those who give a token and a password. And if these could become known to an enemy, the appearance of a stranger would lead to questions that would at once expose his ignorance of our simplest secrets. He would learn nothing, and would never tell his story to the outer world.” ...

Opening the door, or rather window, of his private chamber, Esmo directed our eyes to a portrait sunk in the wall, and usually concealed by a screen which fitted exactly the level and the patterns of the general surface. It displayed, in a green vesture not unlike his own, but with a gold ribbon and emerald symbol like the cross of an European knighthood over the right shoulder, a spare soldierly form, with the most striking countenance I have ever seen; one which, once seen, none could forget. The white long hair and beard, the former reaching the shoulders, the latter falling to the belt, were not only unlike the fashion of this generation, but gave tokens of age never discerned in Mars for the last three or four thousand years. The form, though erect and even stately, was that of one who had felt the long since abolished infirmity of advancing years. The countenance alone bore no marks of old age. It was full, un wrinkled, firm in physical as in moral character; calm in the unresisted power of intellect and will over the passions, serene in a dignity too absolute and self contained for pride, but expressing a consciousness of command over others as evident as the unconscious, effortless command of self to which it owed its supreme and sublime quietude. The lips were not set as with a habit of reserve or self restraint, but close and even as in the repose to which restraint had never been necessary. The features were large, clearly defined, and perfect in shape, proportion, and outline. The brow was massive and broad, but strangely smooth and even; the head had no single marked development or deficiency that could have enlightened a phrenologist, as the face told no tale that a physiognomist could read. The dark deep eyes were unescapable; while in presence of the portrait you could not for a moment avoid or forget their living, fixed, direct look into your own. Even in the painted representation of that gaze, almost too calm in its absolute mastery to be called searching or scrutinising, yet seeming to look through the eyes into the soul, there was an almost mesmeric influence; as if, across the abyss of ten thousand years, the Master could still control the wills and draw forth the inner thoughts of the living, as he had dominated the spirits of their remotest ancestors.

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## THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

### Book One: The Coming of The Martians

#### Chapter Thirteen: How I Fell In With The Curate

After getting this sudden lesson in the power of terrestrial weapons, the Martians retreated to their original position upon Horsell Common; and in their haste, and encumbered with the debris of their smashed companion, they no doubt overlooked many such a stray and negligible victim as myself. Had they left their comrade and pushed on forthwith, there was nothing at that time between them and London but batteries of twelve pounder guns, and they would certainly have reached the capital in advance of the tidings of their approach; as sudden, dreadful, and destructive their advent would have been as the earthquake that destroyed Lisbon a century ago.

But they were in no hurry. Cylinder followed cylinder on its interplanetary flight; every twenty four hours brought them reinforcement. And meanwhile the military and naval authorities, now fully alive to the tremendous power of their antagonists, worked with furious energy. Every minute a fresh gun came into position until, before twilight, every copse, every row of suburban villas on the hilly slopes about Kingston and Richmond, masked an expectant black muzzle. And through the charred and desolated area—perhaps twenty square miles altogether—that encircled the Martian encampment on Horsell Common, through charred and ruined villages among the green trees, through the blackened and smoking arcades that had been but a day ago pine spinneys, crawled the devoted scouts with the heliographs that were presently to warn the gunners of the Martian approach. But the Martians now understood our command of artillery and the danger of human proximity, and not a man ventured within a mile of either cylinder, save at the price of his life.

It would seem that these giants spent the earlier part of the afternoon in going to and fro, transferring everything from the second and third cylinders—the second in Addlestone Golf Links and the third at Pyrford—to their original pit on Horsell Common. Over that, above the blackened heather and ruined buildings that stretched far and wide, stood one as sentinel, while the rest abandoned their vast fighting machines and descended into the pit. They were hard at work there far into the night, and the towering pillar of dense green smoke that rose therefrom could be seen from the hills about Merrow, and even, it is said, from Banstead and Epsom Downs.

And while the Martians behind me were thus preparing for their next sally, and in front of me Humanity gathered for the battle, I made my way with infinite pains and labour from the fire and smoke of burning Weybridge towards London.

I saw an abandoned boat, very small and remote, drifting down stream; and throwing off the most of my sodden clothes, I went after it, gained it, and so escaped out of that destruction. There were no oars in the boat, but I contrived to paddle, as well as my parboiled hands would allow, down the river towards Halliford and Walton, going very tediously and continually looking behind me, as you may well understand. I followed the river, because I considered that the water gave me my best chance of escape should these giants return.

The hot water from the Martian's overthrow drifted downstream with me, so that for the best part of a mile I could see little of either bank. Once, however, I made out a string of black figures hurrying across the meadows from the direction of Weybridge. Halliford, it seemed, was deserted, and several of the houses facing the river were on fire. It was strange to see the place quite tranquil, quite desolate under the hot blue sky, with the smoke and little threads of flame going straight up into the heat of the afternoon. Never before had I seen houses burning without the accompaniment of an obstructive crowd. A little farther on the dry reeds up the bank were smoking and glowing, and a line of fire inland was marching steadily across a late field of hay.

For a long time I drifted, so painful and weary was I after the violence I had been through, and so intense the heat upon the water. Then my fears got the better of me again, and I resumed my paddling. The sun scorched my bare back. At last, as the bridge at Walton was coming into sight round the bend, my fever and faintness overcame my fears, and I landed on the Middlesex bank and lay down, deadly sick, amid the long grass. I suppose the time was then about four or five o'clock. I got up presently, walked perhaps half a mile without meeting a soul, and then lay down again in the shadow of a hedge. I seem to remember talking, wanderingly, to myself during that last spurt. I was also very thirsty, and bitterly regretful I had drunk no more water. It is a curious thing that I felt angry with my wife; I cannot account for it, but my impotent desire to reach Leatherhead worried me excessively.

I do not clearly remember the arrival of the curate, so that probably I dozed. I became aware of him as a seated figure in soot smudged shirt sleeves, and with his upturned, clean shaven face staring at a faint flickering that danced over the sky. The sky was what is called a mackerel sky—rows and rows of faint down plumes of cloud, just tinted with the midsummer sunset.

I sat up, and at the rustle of my motion he looked at me quickly.

“Have you any water?” I asked abruptly.

He shook his head.

“You have been asking for water for the last hour,” he said.

For a moment we were silent, taking stock of each other. I dare say he found me a strange enough figure, naked, save for my water soaked trousers and socks, scalded, and my face and shoulders blackened by the smoke. His face was a fair weakness, his chin retreated, and his hair lay in crisp, almost flaxen curls on his low forehead; his eyes were rather large, pale blue, and blankly staring. He spoke abruptly, looking vacantly away from me.

“What does it mean?” he said. “What do these things mean?”

I stared at him and made no answer.

He extended a thin white hand and spoke in almost a complaining tone.

“Why are these things permitted? What sins have we done? The morning service was over, I was walking through the roads to clear my brain for the afternoon, and then—fire, earthquake, death! As if it were Sodom and Gomorrah! All our work undone, all the work——What are these Martians?”

“What are we?” I answered, clearing my throat.

He gripped his knees and turned to look at me again. For half a minute, perhaps, he stared silently.

“I was walking through the roads to clear my brain,” he said. “And suddenly—fire, earthquake, death!”

He relapsed into silence, with his chin now sunken almost to his knees.

Presently he began waving his hand.

“All the work—all the Sunday schools—What have we done—what has Weybridge done? Everything gone—everything destroyed. The church! We rebuilt it only three years ago. Gone! Swept out of existence! Why?”

Another pause, and he broke out again like one demented.

“The smoke of her burning goeth up for ever and ever!” he shouted.

His eyes flamed, and he pointed a lean finger in the direction of Weybridge.

By this time I was beginning to take his measure. The tremendous tragedy in which he had been involved—it was evident he was a fugitive from Weybridge—had driven him to the very verge of his reason.

“Are we far from Sunbury?” I said, in a matter of fact tone.

“What are we to do?” he asked. “Are these creatures everywhere? Has the earth been given over to them?”

“Are we far from Sunbury?”

“Only this morning I officiated at early celebration——”

“Things have changed,” I said, quietly. “You must keep your head. There is still hope.”

“Hope!”

“Yes. Plentiful hope—for all this destruction!”

I began to explain my view of our position. He listened at first, but as I went on the interest dawning in his eyes gave place to their former stare, and his regard wandered from me.

“This must be the beginning of the end,” he said, interrupting me. “The end! The great and terrible day of the Lord! When men shall call upon the mountains and the rocks to fall upon them and hide them—hide them from the face of Him that sitteth upon the throne!”

I began to understand the position. I ceased my laboured reasoning, struggled to my feet, and, standing over him, laid my hand on his shoulder.

“Be a man!” said I. “You are scared out of your wits! What good is religion if it collapses under calamity? Think of what earthquakes and floods, wars and volcanoes, have done before to men! Did you think God had exempted Weybridge? He is not an insurance agent.”

For a time he sat in blank silence.

“But how can we escape?” he asked, suddenly. “They are invulnerable, they are pitiless.”

“Neither the one nor, perhaps, the other,” I answered. “And the mightier they are the more sane and wary should we be. One of them was killed yonder not three hours ago.”

“Killed!” he said, staring about him. “How can God’s ministers be killed?”

“I saw it happen.” I proceeded to tell him. “We have chanced to come in for the thick of it,” said I, “and that is all.”

“What is that flicker in the sky?” he asked abruptly.

I told him it was the heliograph signalling—that it was the sign of human help and effort in the sky.

“We are in the midst of it,” I said, “quiet as it is. That flicker in the sky tells of the gathering storm. Yonder, I take it are the Martians, and Londonward, where those hills rise about Richmond and Kingston and the trees give cover, earthworks are being thrown up and guns are being placed. Presently the Martians will be coming this way again.”

And even as I spoke he sprang to his feet and stopped me by a gesture.

“Listen!” he said.

From beyond the low hills across the water came the dull resonance of distant guns and a remote weird crying. Then everything was still. A cockchafer came droning over the hedge and past us. High in the west the crescent moon hung faint and pale above the smoke of Weybridge and Shepperton and the hot, still splendour of the sunset.

“We had better follow this path,” I said, “northward.”

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