

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

# **Schlock!**

## **WEBZINE**

VOL. 13, ISSUE 9  
1ST JULY 2018

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"BE-BOP-A-  
LULA,  
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# SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by  
Gavin Chappell

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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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*This Edition*

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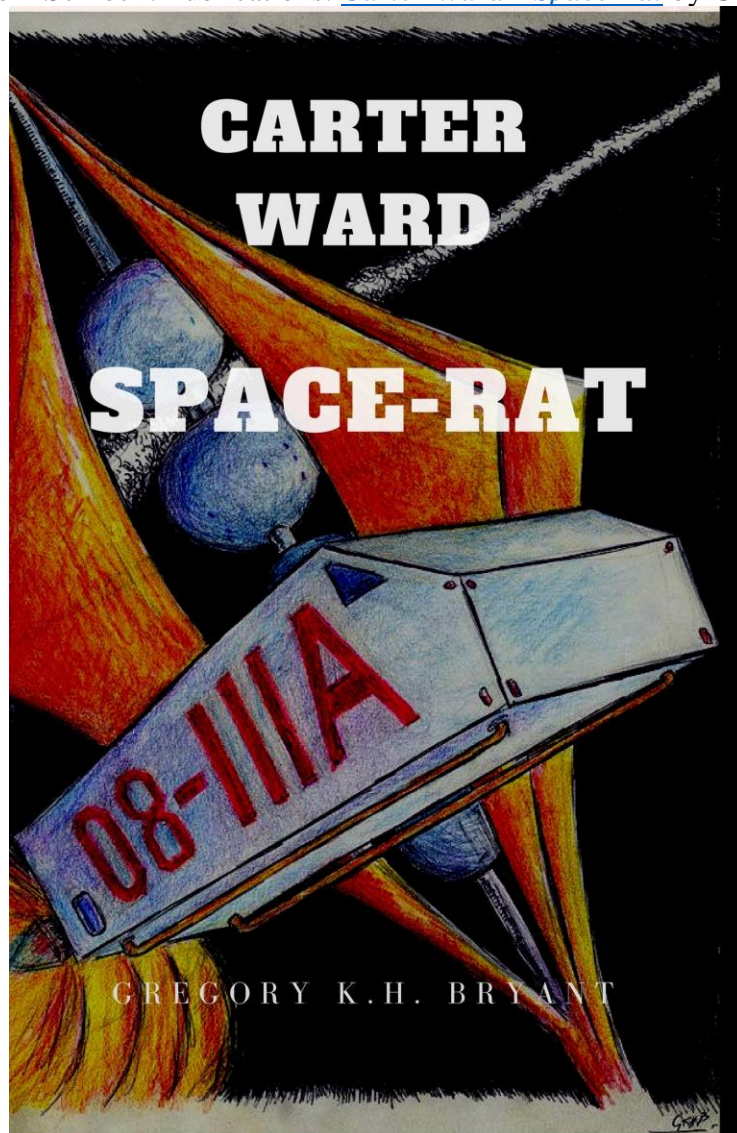
## EDITORIAL

This week a greaser gang suffers the curse of a long dead Pharaoh. An employee has trouble processing his new work role. Two struggling rock musicians penetrate a deadly mystery. And our fantasy adventurers learn just who is the game's master in the concluding second part of *Hair-Neck Valley*.

Holmes and Watson lead the Nkume into battle against the Atlantean beast men. Mud meets Hardy and Illara. The visitor to Mars procures a balloon. And the volunteers learn the truth of war.

—Gavin Chappell

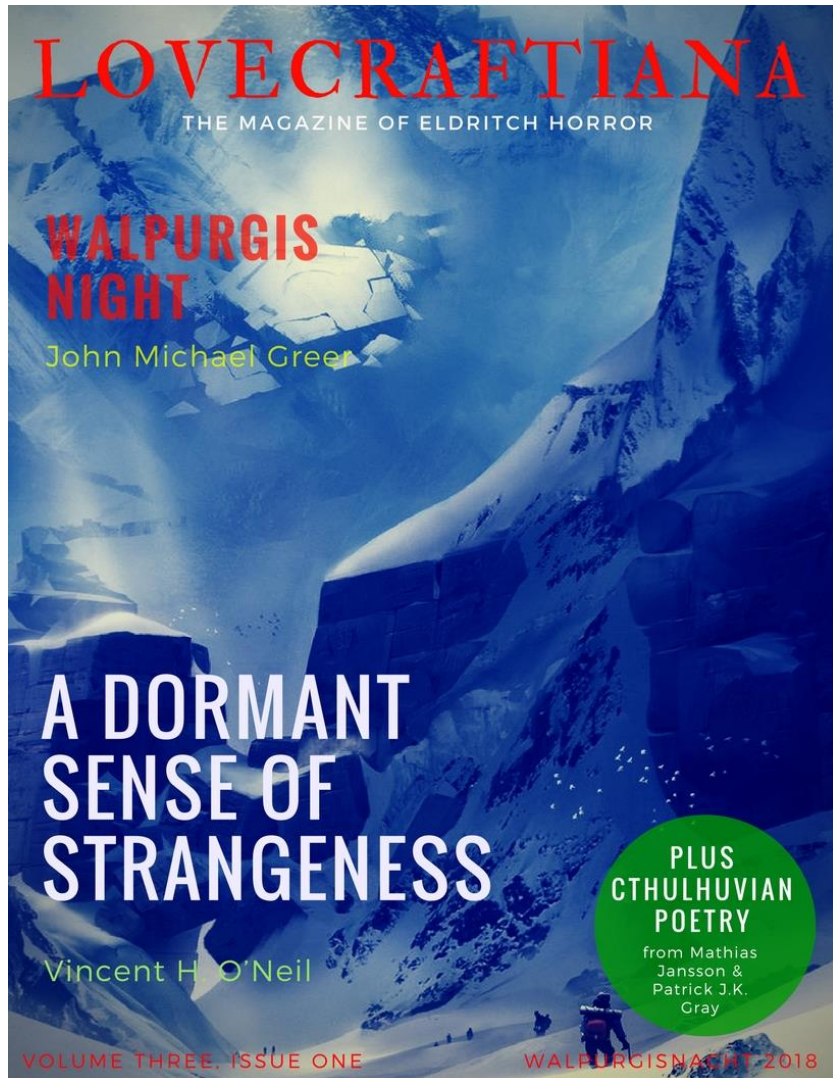
Now available from Schlock! Publications: [Carter Ward—Space Rat](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.



Available from Rogue Planet Press: the Spring 2018 edition of [Schlock Quarterly](#):



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



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## THE PHARAOH'S JUKEBOX by Neal Privett

*June 9, 1958, Los Gatos, California.....3:19 AM—*

Johnny leaned against the jukebox with the blood rolling down his neck and saturating the front of his white t-shirt. He took the oil stained rag from his back pocket and pressed it against the wound. The thing had nearly severed his artery. It had sharp teeth.

His pulse beat wildly like a set of bongo drums on Saturday night. The blood racing through his veins felt as if it would explode from his body and shower Gino's bar with red. He could feel the strength fading as he propped himself up. It would not be long now.

He took another drink of Gino's godawful whiskey and grimaced as the putrid liquid burned his throat. You could clean rust off nails with Gino's foul, toxic, and extremely flammable brew. But it was a fitting last drink.

He glanced over at his leather jacket hanging on the back of a chair. It was ripped to shreds by the thing's claws. The emblem of his club was in tatters, which was kind of fitting because everybody in the gang was now dead, except for ole Johnny...their fearless leader.

The bar was deserted but for him. Everyone else was dead. He reached into his pocket and fished for a dime. The coin dropped in the slot and like magic, Gene Vincent emanated from the glowing front of the jukebox. The twang of Cliff Gallup's guitar filled the room as the lights swirled blue and danced upon the worn wooden floor. Johnny snapped his fingers and lit up another cigarette. This would be his last smoke. It tasted good. That was the perfect way to go out, he thought. A Gene Vincent song played on a lonesome jukebox and one last decent smoke.

The thing stepped out of the night, through the busted door and into the bar. Its face was wrinkled and grey as campfire ashes. The decay had progressed in just a few hours. It gnashed its rotted teeth and lumbered across the floor. Johnny exhaled and closed his eyes as the wispy smoke trailed upwards towards the ceiling like a departing angel.

He had no fear.

The scene had not been so grim for Johnny and his gang earlier that evening.

After some beers and a few dimes in the jukebox, the Gremlins had wandered out into the streets to hover around their motorcycles, whistle at some babes, and soak up some moonlight. They didn't have to wait long. Two girls strolled by wearing tight sweaters and hip hugging skirts. Johnny leaned across his bike and whistled. He smiled to recall the brunette as she stopped and turned to face him, the glow of the forbidden beaming in her dark eyes. Nice girls didn't talk to greasers on the street, which made it all the cooler to do it. Soon her friend had let down her guard and the two of them reclined on the bikes as Johnny and his gang sweet-talked them.

The girls were en route to the museum to see a new exhibit on a recently discovered Pharaoh, King Ra-ak-tmun. "Brainy chicks," Johnny exclaimed excitedly. "Well, let's make that scene...at the museum!"

The other guys had guffawed and jeered...the great Johnny Kessler, baddest cat alive and leader of a greaser biker gang, going to a museum...on Saturday night no less. What was the goddamned world coming to?

Mooch and Charlie were the only guys willing to come along. The others wouldn't be caught dead in a museum under any circumstances, no matter how cool the chicks. Too academic...too square, they said. They laughed and roared off into the night, leaving Johnny and the other two Gremlins to navigate this new experience alone.

Johnny sprang for the tickets and they all moved inside, past the banner exclaiming the sensational new find all the way from Egypt and the Valley of the Kings. Mooch strolled up to a glass case and peered in amazement at the ancient gold-plated cat statue that gazed back at him through the eons with green eyes that still burned like fire. "Hey, dig this...an Egyptian hep cat!"

A museum guard cleared his throat and gestured for silence. Mooch nodded shyly and kept moving. He had learned the hard way not to rile the authorities if there was no fun in it. And right now, being with these females was more fun than getting hauled into jail. They stuck out among the staid, educated crowd that milled around them. The sight of some long-haired greasers with black leather jackets and ducktails must have shook up the place, but nobody had kicked them out or frisked them for chains and switchblades. Yet.

That didn't keep the guard, a stern-faced elderly gentleman who looked like he could rip a gorilla's spine apart with his bare hands, from giving them the "evil eye." Johnny grinned back at him and moved around the glass case that housed the remains of the newest Pharaoh to step out of ancient history and enter the ranks of museum attraction.

Johnny slipped his arm around the brunette's waist and pulled her close. "Protect me from the mummy, huh?"

The girl laughed, which was a good sign in Johnny's book. "The mummy can't hurt you, silly."

Mooch draped his arm across his chest, closed one eye, and lurched forward with one leg dragging behind. "Yeah, girls...ain't you ever seen a Lon Chaney mummy picture?"

The guard whispered harshly, "Cool it, kid!" They had wandered across his radar and now the old bastard watched their every move like a hawk scoping out some rabbits.

They moved slowly past a long glass case where some of the grave artefacts were displayed. There were several examples of Eighteenth Dynasty jewellery...gold ear rings, ivory pins, three hand-painted scrolls, canopic jars, and some carved animal effigies. All priceless. Charlie, who never said much, stopped and stared at a solid gold bracelet that glimmered in the light. Mooch leaned in and punched Charlie in the ribs. "Ain't that somethin', kid?"

They passed a clay statue of the jackal-headed funerary god, Anubis. Mooch stared at the statue in awe. He lifted his head, pursed his lips, as if he were going to howl, but one hard look from the guard made him slink away and lose himself in the crowd.

The Pharaoh's mummy rested in its sarcophagus in the corner. Johnny and his boys followed the girls over and they all stood around the mummified king in silence. The girls gasped.

The mummy was ashen-grey and tall. Its slender frame touched both ends of the sarcophagus. The king's arms were folded across his chest. The wrappings had been cut away from the face to reveal shrivelled brown skin stretched tight over sharp bone. There was still a degree of moisture in the face, however. Strands of sandy-reddish hair hung from the forehead. The blackish lips looked as if they could part and speak. It was uncanny. Despite the mummy's age, the body was still powerful...the muscles appeared defined. The long arms looked as if they would reach up and grab a patron at any second. In fact, the Egyptian king was so well preserved that it could almost be mistaken for someone sleeping. It actually gave Johnny the creeps.

The royal burial mask, made in the king's likeness, from an extinct Egyptian wood, rested in a glass case a few feet over. Even Johnny had to admit he was impressed. He glanced from the mask to the mummy's face, then back again. "I don't see the resemblance," he said. Mooch laughed and slapped him on the back.

The brunette frowned and elbowed Johnny in the side. "That's because this mummy is over three thousand years old. You won't look so hot when you get to be that age, either."

"He don't look so hot now," Mooch laughed.

Johnny couldn't take his eyes from the dead Pharaoh's face. "What did you say this cat's name was?"

"Ra-ak-tmun. When he died, the priests removed all his organs and put them in those clay jars over there. Then they salted him, covered him in incense, and wrapped him in linen bandages...preserving his body for all time," the girl said. "They hid his grave in the Valley of the Kings and about a year ago, the archaeologists discovered the tomb."

"Just like that? And the Pharaoh's still here after three thousand years," Johnny said. "That's real cool."

Mooch slapped Johnny on the back again. "And look at all the loot they buried him with!"

A wave of sudden anger washed over Johnny. "If you slap me again, Moochie, I'm gonna shove my blade between your ribs, get me?"

Mooch lost his grin and threw his hands up in defeat. "Whatever you say, boss."

Johnny glanced around. "Where's Charlie Boy?" The quiet biker remained frozen in place, a human statue with sideburns...lost in the wonder of the ancient world. He lingered before the golden bracelet as if it held some magnetic pull over him. He never took his eyes off it until the others grabbed him by the arm and led him back out into the night.

Johnny never thought twice about Charlie's absence later that evening. He never really thought much about Charlie at all. The big lummoX was kind of dead weight in the club. He could fight alright, but he was so quiet that you would never really know he was there unless you were looking right at him.

Everybody always ended up at the Gremlins' clubhouse on Saturday night, which was really just an old run-down garage outside of town. Room for the gang...for kicks...for a beat-up refrigerator and a record player. The boys lounged around on old couches found at a rummage sale and played some Buddy Holly records. Johnny leaned against the bar, which he personally installed. He dragged on his cigarette and nursed a beer. The brunette was long gone. Girls like that never stayed long anyway. Too sophisticated. He raised his beer high and shouted over the chatter and music, "To the Pharaoh!"

Mooch rolled off the couch, where he was keeping time with a big nosed girl they called Pearl. He stumbled over to Johnny and saluted him. "To the Pharaoh!" Another member of the gang slid onto the couch with Pearl and picked up where Mooch had ended. Mooch turned around, grabbed the guy, and tossed him physically out into the weed strewn yard amid a torrent of laughter and jeers from the others.

Sometime after midnight, when the party was just becoming wild, Charlie busted through the door and collapsed onto the nearest couch. His face was white as a sheet and he babbled incoherently until Johnny tossed cold beer into his face. "Charlie Boy! What the hell's buggin' you?" Everybody gathered around the couch. Charlie shivered and sobbed, occasionally crying out in fits of fear that caused the entire clubhouse to tremble uneasily. He wasn't there really. The bear-like kid glanced off into space at something unseen and terrible...something mysterious that the other gang members could only guess at. Johnny slapped the hysterical Charlie across the face and shook him violently. "I said calm down! What's wrong?"

Charlie's eyes grew wide suddenly and he turned his glance to Johnny, seeing him for the first time. "He walked, man...he walked..."

The others looked at each other in confusion. Johnny shook him again. "Who walked? What the hell are you babblin' about?"

"He...he got up outta his coffin and walked...I seen him!"

Johnny leaned closer. "What're you talkin' about, man? Where did you go?"

“The...the museum...I went back for this.” The Gremlins gasped in unison as Charlie reached into his leather jacket and produced the golden bracelet from the case.

Johnny’s jaw dropped. “You have got to be the dumbest son of a bitch I have ever seen!” The gang leader flew into a rage and began punching the burly kid in the face mercilessly. Mooch rushed over and pulled him off. Johnny kicked and screamed as he was dragged away. “If you brought the cops here...!”

Charlie blubbered some more as he wiped the blood from his nose. “I didn’t bring the cops, Johnny...it was the mummy! He got up out of the coffin and followed me out. I ran, man...I was so scared! I stole from him and he’s comin’ for me, Johnny...he’s comin’...”

The other Gremlins stood in shocked silence for a moment, then, one by one, they peeled off and raced for the door. Mooch threw his hands up and groaned as he headed for his waiting motorcycle, “That’s it, man...I’m outta here!”

But the gang never made it outside. They came to a screeching halt at the door when they saw the tall shadow emerging from the darkness beyond the row of motorcycles. One of the girls screamed as it lumbered closer, knocking over several bikes on its way to the front door. Mooch slammed the door and the gang scattered in all directions.

The mummy threw itself against the door. The wood shattered instantly and collapsed to the ground. The Gremlins were infamous for their ferocity and guts, but in that instant, not a one of the black leather jacketed crowd made a single move. They stood there in complete shock, for in their presence was the living dead...seven feet of horror from the tomb. The mummy towered over them like the god it once was. Its eyes burned with a supernatural fire and its muscles, though creaking and dried by the ages, emanated a raw power that could crush bone and break wood as if both were made of tissue paper. It gnashed its teeth and glared at them with a defiant face carved by time and the desert.

Two of the gang’s best brawlers, Spike and Tim, acted first. They came at the mummy, with switchblades and chains. The mummy moved like desert lightning and grabbed their heads. In the instant before the angered Egyptian king wrenched their necks, Spike drove his blade through the thing with no effect. His jaw dropped in shock as his hand sank into the mummy’s powdery chest. It was the last thing the greaser saw in this world. Then came the gut wrenching sound of bone snapping and the two bikers fell limp to the concrete floor.

Mooch grabbed a baseball bat from the corner and rushed the mummy. The leather jacketed punk swung as hard as he could, but the creature caught the bat and sent the fearless biker crashing into the wall. He did not get back up.

The mummy stormed across the club house, hurling a couch out of its way. Someone tossed the coffee pot from across the room. It shattered across the thing’s head but did not slow it. The monster lumbered over to the helpless Charlie, lying paralyzed with fear on the couch. The mummy leaned down and grabbed him by the face. The room came alive with a frenzied buzz. A girl screamed. Someone else shouted, “Charlie!”

The terrified youth peered between the bony fingers into the Pharaoh's cold eyes and in that instant, he knew the secrets and terrors of the millennia. He travelled through the endless centuries in his mind's eye and he saw the riverbanks of the Nile...the sunset melting into brown gold over the desert.... the silent stony face of the sphynx guarding the king's rest...the sound of Pharaoh's armies clashing on the plain...the majesty of pyramids scraping the heavens...chariot wheels grinding flesh in the dust...the falcon's mighty cry...the fearsome roar of the gods...birth and death and rebirth....

Charlie's eyes became milky grey orbs and his skin began to turn pale. He shook violently, never breaking the mummy's steel grip. Something was happening to him. Some unknown power had enveloped him, and the gang screamed in horror as their compatriot shivered and shook, trapped by some ancient evil that would not let go. His hair slowly turned white and his flesh greyed and shrivelled, as if he were aging at an incredible rate in mere seconds. His eyes retreated back into his skull and his nose vanished, giving his visage a skeletal aura. One of the guys removed his jacket and ran up behind the beast and pummelled the back of its head with thick fists. But the mummy lashed out and sent the man reeling and crashing into a broken pile of bone and blood.

Johnny overcame the icy terror that froze him to the spot and rushed outside, much to the astonishment of the others. But he returned just as quick with a length of rope. He made a lasso and tossed it around the mummy's shoulders, then took the other end and raced back outside, where he secured it to his motorcycle. In an instant the bike roared to life and Johnny spun out. When the rope pulled tight, the mummy was dragged from the club house and out into the yard. Johnny pulled the stunned Pharaoh behind him as he headed for the highway. When he reached the blacktop, he opened up his Indian and ripped through the night at top speed with the mummy bouncing and bobbing behind him in a cloud of dust.

When the determined gang leader reached the lake he stopped. He hopped off the bike and walked back to survey the mummy and found only a limp rope. A trail of grey dust glowed spectrally in the moonlight on the highway behind him. The bloodthirsty Pharaoh was no more.

Johnny knew something was wrong when he pulled back up to the club house.

Light still burned in the open doorway, but there were no sounds...no life stirring. Johnny parked his bike and walked slowly to the door with his switchblade out. All the bikes were parked in front, as usual. But a record was perpetually skipping, and nobody was stopping it. No voices emanated through the open doorway. Nobody appeared to greet him.

Johnny moved closer. His insides were screaming. A sizzling blue cloud of dizziness overtook him when he saw what awaited him. Bodies lay haphazardly tossed across the floor with their entrails ripped out and splattered against the walls. The couches and chairs were torn to pieces. White, snow-like stuffing was scattered everywhere. Johnny gasped when he brushed up against a decapitated head covered in blood. He wheeled around when he heard the groan and found Mooch propped against the back wall with two gory holes where his eyes sockets used to be. His

leg was broken; it branched off at an odd angle. He had only been knocked unconscious earlier, but something with inhuman strength had torn the eyes from his face and smashed him against the floor.

Johnny leaned down. "Mooch...what the hell happened?"

Mooch coughed blood and tried to focus on his words. "You won't believe it, man. It was Charlie. He lay there on the couch after you split...shiverin' and shrivelin' up. He turned into a mummy, man!" Mooch cried out in pain as he grew more frantic. Johnny tried to calm him. "That Pharaoh did somethin' to him. Charlie lays there for a while with us watchin' him change...then he got up off the couch and attacked one of the girls. Bit clean through her throat with his teeth. Everything was red. But the crazy goddamned thing is that he...drank her blood!"

"What happened then?"

"He killed everybody, man...busted 'em up and drank their blood, too! Ripped off their heads and sucked 'em dry!" Charlie started to fade. He was dying. Johnny cradled his head and tried to comfort him. The last thing he said was, "Be careful, boss...don't let it get you, too..."

Johnny stared into the depthless bloody holes in Mooch's face for a second, then rose and walked back outside. He lit a cigarette and tried to wade through the raging flood of panicked thoughts assaulting his brain. He took another drag and glanced back at the clubhouse, piled high with corpses. Dead...every member of his gang...dead! It was impossible, yet it had happened.

The sound of gravel crunching made Johnny wheel around. The cigarette fell from his lips as he stared headlong into a tall shadow rounding the corner of the clubhouse. Something lumbered into the moonlight and Johnny saw that it wasn't Charlie any longer. It was something ancient and horrible...something that lived for only one thing...to destroy anybody connected with the insult dealt the Pharaoh by the theft of his bracelet.

The thing had a mummy's wrinkled face and a body accustomed to fast living and violent rumbles. The monster that was once Charlie staggered forward...its yellow eyes wide and burning. It gnashed with its rotted teeth and cut the air with its black claws. Somehow the Pharaoh had infused Charlie with his spirit when he touched him. That spirit now possessed him and drove him to finish the job of killing the remaining desecrators. The Gremlins patch on Johnny's leather jacket marked him for the honour. It was a far-fetched idea, but he couldn't think of a better explanation for this bloody insanity.

Johnny spoke to the thing in the darkness. It lifted its head and growled like a beast at the sound of his voice. "I feel bad for you, Charlie-Boy...but you brought this on yourself...and all of us, too." Johnny continued, pointing his blade at the thing's face. "I don't know what you are exactly...but Charlie's got that bracelet in the club house somewhere. You go in and look for it and I'm leavin'. I don't want no trouble...so don't try to stop me!"

The beast lunged for Johnny, but the greaser faked him off, causing the thing to fall, sprawling to the ground. Johnny took the opportunity to race for his bike. He jumped on, kick-started it while

the beast was confused and on the ground. He tore off down the highway in a wild spray of dust and gravel. Beneath the cold rays of the moon Johnny pushed his motorcycle as fast and hard as it would go. Mexico came to mind...he decided right then and there that he was leaving for good. He would put a thousand miles between himself and the horror of the mummy and never look back. He would live beside the ocean, love life, and forget what had happened.

His thoughts came crashing to a fiery halt, however, when something big came up behind him and ripped into his neck. He screamed. Unseen claws raked his jacket and the flesh underneath. The impact caused him to swerve, and before Johnny could do anything he went careening out of control. The motorcycle went down and skidded sideways into the ditch and Johnny went airborne. He hit the road and rolled several times before coming to a stop in the grass.

He lay there, with the universe spinning out of control in his brain. Great lightning strikes of pain shot through his body and he slowly opened his eyes. The monster had literally chased him down. Its speed was inhuman. He squinted and tried to peer through the fog and caught the outline of Charlie lumbering up the road after him. The jolting sound of Charlie's motorcycle boots scuffing the asphalt as it ran towards him energized Johnny and he picked himself up. The moonlight made the thing's grey features glow and Johnny could have sworn that it was grinning as it shuffled through the darkness after his blood.

Johnny took a step and collapsed to the ground. The pain was immense, but he couldn't die out here on the road like this. He picked himself up again and limped towards a roadside bar straight ahead: Gino's Place.

The neon lights flashed and painted Johnny blue as he pushed his way through the door. Gino stood behind the bar with a bottle in his hand. Two other patrons, old men wearing cowboy hats, sat in the corner and tapped their fingers on the old tables to the beat of a country song on the jukebox.

Gino grinned when he saw Johnny. "You look like hell, son."

"You have no idea," Johnny said as the door came crashing off its hinges and exploded into the room. He leaped over a table and rolled against the far wall. The monster rushed the bar and before Gino could get his shotgun from its hiding place underneath, the mummified vampire reached over and ripped the head from his shoulders. The beast lapped the spraying blood, bathing in it and growling like an animal. One of the old men rose and pulled a pistol from his boot. He fired repeatedly at the monster, but to no avail. The creature lunged across the floor and caught the old man, lifting him high and hurling him crashing through a sea of breaking glass. The wind blew through the gaping hole in the front window, saturating the bar with an ominous and clammy cool. The neon beat a weird and silent percussion, painting the nearby tables in a savage blue hue.

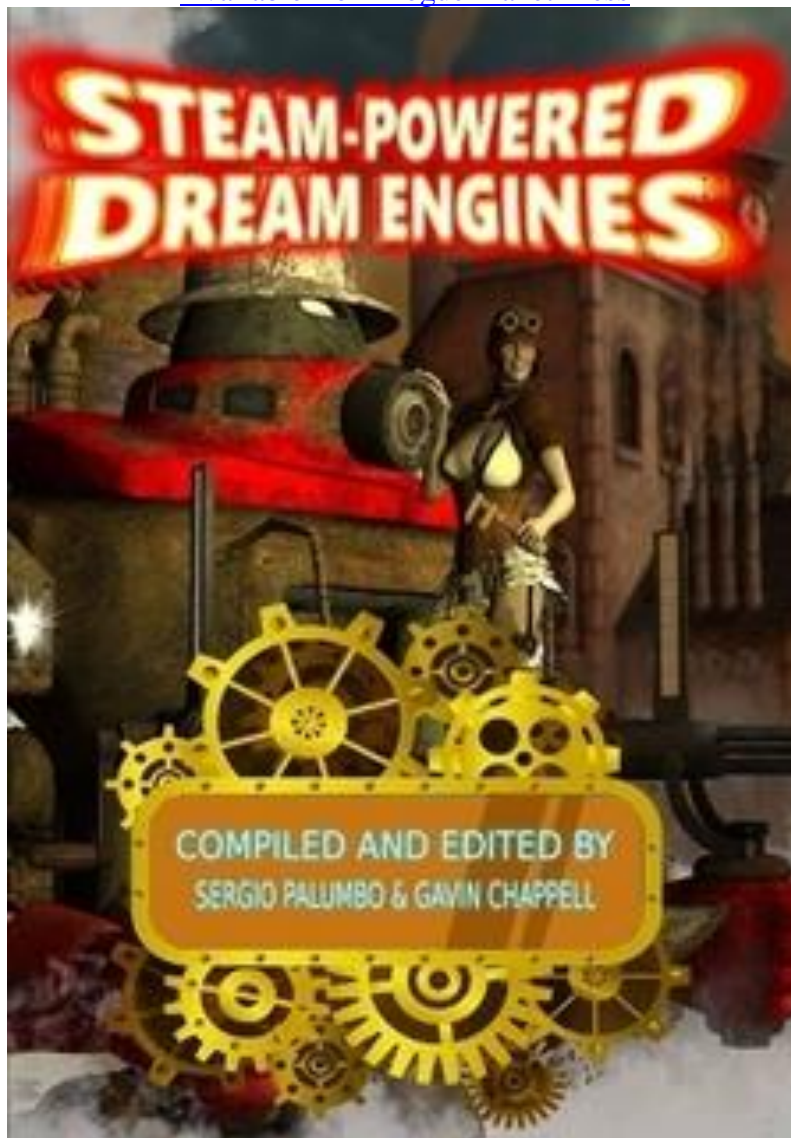
The other man at the table bolted out the door with the mummy in pursuit. They turned the corner and Johnny grit his bloody teeth as the old man's howls of pain wafted in through the broken window.

Johnny rose and shuffled over to the jukebox. He draped his shredded jacket over a chair, dropped a dime in the slot and chose “Be-Bop-a-Lula.” Then he lit a cigarette and took a shot of Gino’s finest liver killer. The mummy lurched towards him with the blood dripping from its lips.

Johnny smiled. “Be-Bop-a-Lula, Charlie...”

THE END

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## TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS by Rick McQuiston

Al couldn't help himself. He leaned back and craned his head to take a peek at the man standing next to him at the urinals.

Just as he thought, the man wasn't urinating. In fact, he wasn't doing anything. He was just standing there.

Al finished his business and zipped up his pants. He then flushed the toilet and stepped over to the sink to wash his hands.

He glanced back at the man. He had been hired a few weeks earlier and worked in the Accounting Department. His name was Benson something-or-other, and he rarely talked to anyone.

Al decided to be polite.

"Things busy down there in accounting?"

The man ignored him.

"Okay, did you catch the Tigers game yesterday? Mosen pitched a beauty. Had a no-hitter going into the sixth."

Still no reply.

*What a weird guy.*

Satisfied that he had at least tried to be friendly, Al finished washing his hands and straightened his tie in the mirror.

*Weird, weird guy.*

Then the man zipped up his pants and turned his head toward where Al was standing. Seeing that he wasn't being watched anymore, he quickly shuffled out of the room.

Al stood there, unsure how to react. Part of him wanted to mind his own business and get back to his cubicle. But another part, the part ruled by curiosity, wanted to take a peek in the urinal where the man had been.

Against his better judgment he stepped over to the toilet and looked inside.

The porcelain fixture gleamed in the fluorescent light. Not a trace of urine coloured the bowl, nor were there any signs that it had been used recently. A dark blue deodorizer tablet sat on top of the strainer; it was dry on the surface.

“I knew it,” Al mumbled under his breath. “I knew there was something weird about that guy.”

He stepped back to the sink and looked at himself in the mirror.

He leaned forward.

He opened his mouth.

He watched as a cluster of worms squirmed in the back of his throat.

*Good. I see they're almost ready.*

He then walked back to the urinal where he had finished his business and looked inside.

There, just below the surface of the standing water was a single worm, writhing in the liquid like a blind snake groping for prey.

And then the creature slipped down into the drain and out of sight.

Al smiled. The latest batch was on its way. They would work their way down into the sewer system where they would quickly mature in the waste. They needed excrement to thrive, which is why they chose Earth to colonize: the abundance of human waste. Then in only a few weeks they would be ready, joining with the millions of others of their kind, hungry and anxious to start the invasion.

Al thought about Benson. He was still learning how to pass the larvae. Apparently he was having trouble.

“Rookie,” Al mumbled to himself.

Another man stepped into the restroom.

Al quickly shuffled back to the sink.

“Morning Al,” the man said as he stepped up to a urinal.

“Morning Paul,” Al replied with a smile. Paul wasn’t one of them, so it was important to maintain a friendly relationship, just to be on the safe side. “Mosen pitched a beauty, huh?”

Paul laughed as he unzipped his fly. “Yeah, great game. That punk Beaumont sure can hit though. He tagged Mosen for two doubles.”

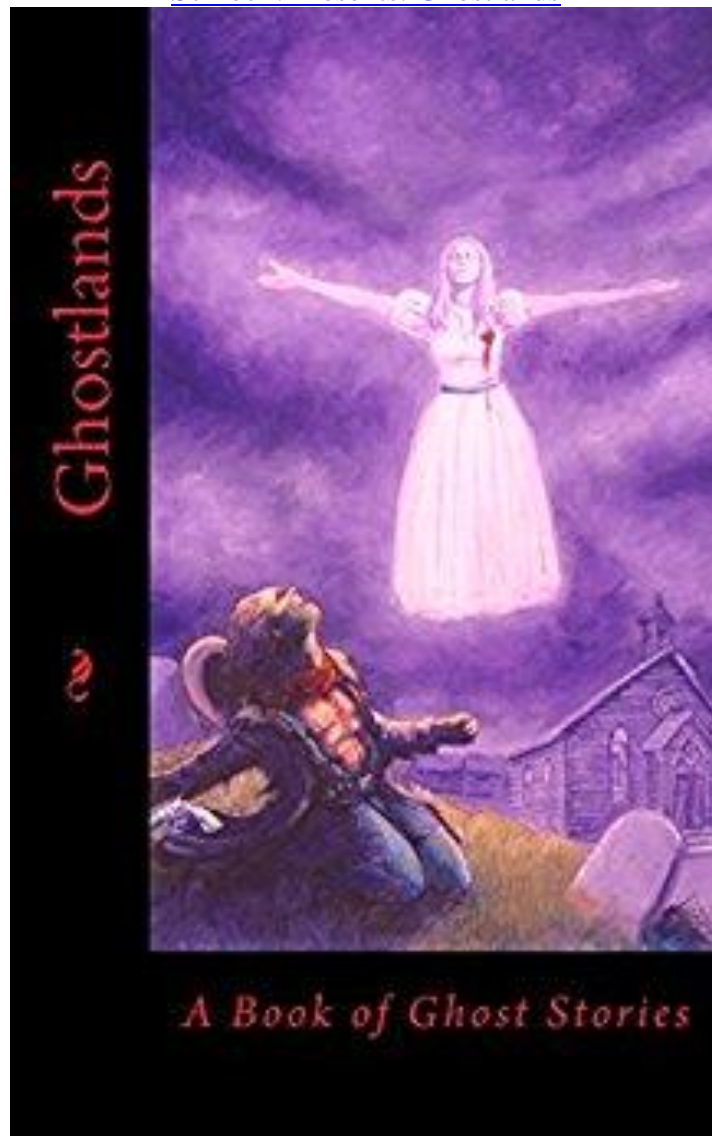
Al stepped up to a neighbouring urinal. “Yeah, he’s a good hitter all right.” He unzipped his slacks and began his business. He could feel the worms in his stream, spiralling down to their destiny.

Paul glanced over. "I know it's none of my business, Al, but are you having prostate trouble? I thought you had already finished when I came in. You know, I've got a great vitamin supplement for that if you want it. It'll clear you right up."

"Thanks," Al replied, "but I'm not having problems. Just taking care of business."

THE END

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## AREA 51—GHOST ZONE X by GK Murphy

For Frankie and Millie, it had been a rough ride across this rugged sector of the Arizona desert. They were cramped in the luggage deck, hidden and silent. The huge Greyhound bus contained the soldiers and certain other individuals on a long and stifling journey towards their secret destination, a place crowded in mystery, known as Area 51. In the darkness, the humidity stifled breathing. Now and then dust and sand got into their eyes. The kids were thirsty, and Millie had already urinated twice in the corner.

They were members of a punk/metal band called Choking Jennifer. Nobody had heard of them, but soon the world would, when they premiered song lyrics chronicling their experience of Area 51. They hoped to shed light on the situation—in humorous fashion for their legions of fans.

Frankie was lead guitarist and singer, while Millie played drums and a little sax.

There were five members of Choking Jennifer, all of them from San Francisco. They had recently relocated to South Texas, for a change and fresh horizons. Texas to them seemed romantic, like in the movies, worthy of a punt. How Frankie and Millie ended up in the covert operation would baffle anybody, if they were ever seen again by anyone who knew the pair and their undying curiosity ...

But they were aware. They could die out here in the middle of the desert—or turn this experience around in their favour and become millionaires.

That was the American Dream, folks! Sometimes taking big risks got you everywhere...

They had been onboard at least two hours when the bus ground to a halt and the officials got off to go about their business. Listening intently to the boots heading across concrete towards their ultimate destinations, the two musicians realized they had to get out while the going was good.

Blue-haired Millie whispered, “We need to get out of here before they come to collect their luggage. Jesus, Frankie...wasn’t this the dumbest idea ever? I knew I shouldn’t have let you talk me into this.”

Frankie shook his head. “Ha, don’t blame me. It was when we started talking about money. If you remember, this was our big inspired plan to become millionaires overnight and media superstars. Imagine our band taking off...Choking Jennifer at Madison Square Garden and Wembley Arena in London...Milan, Paris and Tokyo!”

“Yeah, I guess so...”

They pushed the panel wide and stepped out into the deserted, silent hangar. They were in the shade yet the temperature had risen massively.

Millie looked around in wonder. “Wow, spooky, isn’t it?” She focused on Frankie and said, perhaps a little too cutely, “What are we supposed to be looking for?”

“Have you forgotten already?” Frankie was obviously taking the piss.

“...Aliens, perhaps?”

“Of course, dummy! We’re looking for aliens. We’re looking for secrets...controversy, perversion, miscarriage of justice, underhand deals orchestrated by the US Military, something to write about in our lyrics. See us as explorers, inquisitors, those that pave the way, to serve and protect in the USA, to reveal the truth, and most of all to uncover the secret of Area 51...Hey, what does the sign say on that door over there?”

Millie tensed her eyes, and read, “*No admittance...Ghost Zone...*” She looked at Frankie in stunned bewilderment. “Shit, Frankie...that’s almost as creepy as you getting your foreskin pierced!”

Frankie sighed. “Leave my dick out of this, Millie.”

After approaching the door with the Ghost Zone sign they stood there in silence. They knew exactly what to do—because, after all, were secrets not everywhere to be unearthed here in Area 51?

This was two kids chance to shame the Government.

Frankie reached out his right hand to push the door wide. “It’s ajar, Millie...” he said, adding as he breathed heavily, “...what do you think? Should we go inside? It’s what we came here for...right?”

Suddenly, to the far left of the hangar, boots could be heard on the concrete floor. “Quick,” Millie ushered, “Go inside, somebody is coming. Hurry, I’m right behind you!”

They stepped inside the next hangar. The metal door slammed shut behind them. The vision before them was fantastical—and the world’s greatest secret unravelled.

In the centre of the hangar was a huge silver dome-shaped spaceship—an alien craft, for sure—as in and around it, bodies moved, some chattering to each other, perhaps carrying out repairs.

Two of the green creatures focused on them. One pointed a long finger. Strange, very strange... Millie began to vibrate and convulse. She suddenly collapsed to the floor, clutching her head as if she was suffering, in deep pain, as if her skull was about to implode.

Frankie gasped as her head crumbled and her skull turned to mush.

Angrily, Frankie strode towards the mass of green shifting aliens milling around the spacecraft.

So—all the world’s suspicions were based on fact. These things existed, after all!

“...you absolute nasty, evil, murdering bastards...” Frankie screamed, “...she did nothing! She was innocent...you are nothing but MURDERERS!”

An evil chatter issued, like demonic laughter.

It stopped Frankie in his tracks. He drew to a halt as one alien directed him to the view outside the hangar. He saw the endless beige desert, a void that seemed never-ending.

Frankie wept—in fear, or perhaps in joy, as everything was answered—while he stood there, swaying on his feet in the heat. He saw the ocean of shifting green, body after body, thousands upon thousands of alien life-forms. They had gathered, line after line, congregated in the blistering vastness of the desert. The spectacle was a never-ending sea of extra-terrestrial life like nothing the world had ever imagined in its wildest dreams!

Frankie lifted his right hand to examine it.

It was green, lumpy, even reptilian, and leaking thick yellow pus from between each finger. Yes—finally, for Frankie, this secret was out. The Ghost Zone of Area 51—now, he knew he was one with them, just another trespassing ghost.

THE END

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## HAIR-NECK VALLEY by Jesse Zimmerman

### Part Two

There must be a hundred on each team. They swarm in, sight one another, squeal a battle-cry, and then charge. In the middle, all around our big platform, they fight. Green pushes into blue, and blue into red and green, while red brushes against green first, much of the red cluster moving sideways to take on the front of green's vanguard forces. Knife, spear, and axe all thrust, while black blood spews everywhere, the frontline fighters covered in it while little furry bodies fall over and are promptly stepped upon by the next line of forces.

"Kobolds?" I stammer, feeling sick as the little monsters slay one another.

"Yes, kobolds!" our hired friend repeats as the chamber fills with the diminutive fighters, not a single bit of floor visible beneath and around us.

"I read that kobolds were little reptilian things? Like, tiny dragon-kin that stands on two legs?"

The Challenger shakes his head, giving me a strange look. "No, I don't know what you're reading. Kobolds are little furry rat-men! Thankfully they're super weak. Watch!"

The ranger grabs a large pebble from the floor of the platform, points out one particular kobold near the far wall, a grey one, hunched over, carrying a long dagger, a lit candle set upon its head. The Challenger throws the pebble at its face.

It shrieks and falls over, tongue lolling out at its side before the clump of kobolds behind step over the body.

"So they die easily," says Fauna. "But if I get stabbed enough times with those weapons I'll still die."

"Yeah," I say, looking at her. "Let's wait until their numbers are thinned."

Fauna gazes around the room, looking impatient before she points to the ceiling. All of our eyes look up with her to see the roof is covered with the light blue mushrooms. "Trippy," I hear her say, but this is no time for experimentation.

"I bet arrows would stick to those," I say, scratching my chin.

We stand there for the moment, watching the armies of kobolds kill one another. The reds seem to be winning at first, pushing back on both the blues and greens, but after some time, when both green and blue temporarily cease fighting each other, the reds are pushed back by both teams, eventually leading to the annihilation of the remaining reds. Now there are two bunches, maybe a few dozen of each, more blues than greens. The blue kobolds move swiftly upon the greens and in short time the entire floor is littered with dead kobolds with about thirty or so blue-clad ones still standing.

The victorious kobolds begin cheering, some hoisting their weapons above their little heads in celebration before they gather near the middle of the room. A voice speaks: "I won the underground fight! Yeah! Slug-Lord number one!"

The big blue face appears smiling above us.

"You again!" Fauna shouts.

The face turns about. "Oh, you still here? Why are you not fighting each other?"

He looks at me. I pull my dagger out.

"You! Fight them! I command it!" the face yells, causing the walls to shake.

"No!" I declare, angered by his rudeness. I feel too enraged to be afraid now. My sister and I, both of us, even bookish me, have always been rebels and we never take kindly to being ordered around, especially by a giant floating face.

"We aren't fighters in your game!" Fauna cries, backing me up. "We're real people!"

"Yeah!" the Challenger echoes.

"Look, bud," I say, trying to calm down, trying to explain ourselves to whatever we're speaking with. "We got lost and wound up here by mistake! We're not part of the game! So, can you just let us out through this valley and we'll be on our way?"

The blue face goes wild, its dots for eyes growing three times in size. "What?" it roars. "You mean to say you're actual girls? Actual girls in our game space?"

"Uh," I say. "Yeah, we're women, sisters actually. Can we go?"

"No! No girls! No women! This is our space!"

"What's wrong with him?" the Challenger asks the two of us.

"No women!" it cries again. "I have kobolds left! And other things! You will die here!"

The blue face vanishes.

"What a wiener," mutters Fauna, pulling out her bow. The blue-clad kobolds turn and start scampering towards us.

"Good thing for this big rock!" says the Challenger before the kobolds start pairing up and standing on one another's heads in order to make it to our level. "Ah, crap!" the ranger curses, rushing forward to kick the face of the nearest kobold. The kobold flies off the shoulders of the

other, screeching in terror.

A kobold head emerges in front of me. I slam my knee into its rat-face, causing it to fall over. Fauna loads an arrow and aims it at the next kobold that appears, causing the kobold to scream and turn tail and run out the tunnel it came in from. The Challenger jumps down onto the flat ground, facing the remaining ten of them. The group of furred adversaries move forward in a makeshift phalanx, shoving their spears and knives at him, but the ranger swings his sword once, managing to off every one of them with ease.

We all smile at each other, feeling relieved. I wonder if all the monsters are as weak as the kobolds, but somehow I doubt it. I am considering staying down here until the competition, or whatever it is, is ended. This is when we hear it, the returning sounds of frantic scurrying. Fauna looks sickened.

The Challenger loads an arrow and points his bow upward. "Pass me the rope!" he calls to Fauna. My sister throws him the whole thing, the long and thin rope Mother gave us. Our companion takes a fairly long bit, cutting it from the rest with his sword. He ties it tight to the middle part of his arrow, and then reloads it on the bow, shooting it upward at the mushrooms on the ceiling.

"Genius!" I cry.

"You gave me the idea," he says, pulling on the rope. The arrow is firmly attached. The Challenger then climbs onto the next nearest rock platform. "Now, when they get here, take your bombs, your firewood, everything you have!"

I begin rummaging through the knapsack as the sound of tiny footfalls loudens. The kobolds are approaching. I glance up and see three swarms of them, all blue, all funnelling in through the entrances. I count around fifty in all, more than enough to kill us if they get close enough.

The Challenger moves first, using the rope attached to the ceiling to swing back to us, taking out the first line of kobolds that make it to the centre of the chamber. He then swings back as more kobolds take up the space, sending them flying with kicks from his boots. I see one kobold splat against the wall. Another shoots upward and falls upon a raised spear.

I'm in the middle of the central platform, still searching the knapsack, having taken out half of the small bombs and two pieces of flame-wood, briskly shoving the rest of the rope inside the bag again and closing it up. My sister is shooting arrows, picking off kobolds one by one as they close around our platform. After kicking a few more faces from the lip of our rock, I hastily smash my two pieces of wood together, causing both to ignite at once.

In one hand I hold the two flaming pieces, in the other I take one of the bombs that I had placed in my pocket and light its fuse. I toss it towards the middle of the far part of the room, away from where the Challenger is swinging. The bomb explodes after five seconds, tossing up in the flames little bits of kobold; heads, arms, legs, tails.

Fauna grabs a bomb from my pocket and lights it on the flames. She chucks it upward, letting it fall towards the tunnel entrance furthest from us. It blows up in the midst of the kobold army, creating a huge blackened hole. The Challenger swings by again, grabbing a bomb from me, flinging himself towards one of the torches, lighting and tossing the bomb in one move, taking out more kobolds underneath his feet.

The flames quickly make their way down the pieces of wood in my hands and I feel the heat on my fingers as I throw one at the nearest group of kobolds. The Challenger suddenly appears at my side.

“Good idea!” he says, letting go of the rope, pulling something from his tunic pocket, a copper flask. He takes a big swig, tilting his head, and then rips off part of his sleeve, shoving it into the open flask before lighting the fabric on fire.

“You had that the whole time?” I ask.

“How do you think I got through Dick Bumpedop’s stories?” he asks and winks (I think). He yells, throwing the burning flask. It hits a large cluster of the tiny beasts in front of the platform, embroiling them in flames instantly, the fire spreading madly as the kobolds cry and run.

Their numbers have thinned, but there are still more flowing into the chamber. I feel fear again as I see something coming in from behind them, a big blue blob squeezing through the tunnel like an octopus fitting through a hole smaller than itself.

“We should get out of here!” I shout as I notice a second blob coming in through another entrance, edging its way forward, tendrils flailing about the wall of the cave. We leave the bag behind, but I quickly take out four small bombs and two pieces of the flame-wood and stuff them into my deep pockets. Fauna quickly grabs a few items as well, including my scope.

“Nice quest,” I tell her dryly. She ignores me.

The Challenger begins climbing the rope attached to the mushrooms along the edges of the well, making it up to the top of the well quickly. Fauna grabs the rope next, beginning to climb. I kick a wandering kobold off of the platform. Fauna makes it to the top and I can see the ranger’s hands pulling her up.

I go up next, making it halfway when something tugs on my leg.

I cry out for a second, looking down to see a blob, the creature far larger than it appeared when it was slinking through the tunnel. Its tendril pulls down and I barely keep my grip on the rope. Without thinking, I grab a piece of flame-wood in my pocket, rub it three times downward against the other piece inside, pulling them both out as they erupt in flames.

The blob tugs harder, causing me to lose one of the wood pieces. It falls onto the ground below.

An enormous mouth appears underneath me, the blob is reaching, trying to swallow me. I feel

my hand against the rope sweating and burning before feeling the sensation of moving upward.

The Challenger and my sister are pulling me up!

I place the fiery piece of flame-wood in my mouth, biting down to keep it steady as I pull out a single bomb from my other pocket with my free hand. The rope raises again, bringing me nearly to the ceiling, the sunlight from above pouring onto my face.

The blob beneath shifts shape, making itself taller, its mouth wider and bigger, and I look down and see an immense hole leading to its insides. I bring the little bomb up in my hand, bring its wick against the burning flame that singes my cheek and, letting go of both the wood and the bomb, I watch as both fall into the gaping maw of the blue blob below.

The slimy abomination bursts apart, balls of fire flying outward in every direction, killing kobolds in its wake, and I feel a strong tug of the rope as I am lifted out of the dark chamber and emerge into sunlight once more, my tunic getting caught on the sticky mushroom clusters for a moment.

I fall over once they manage to squeeze me through, gasping, staggering into the arms of my sister.

“Flora, are you okay?” she asks, tenderness in her voice, something I haven’t heard from her in ages, not since we were little.

I look up at her and smile, bringing myself back to my feet. Once more we are atop the summit of the green mound, only now a colossal battle rages all around us.

The valley is alive with combating creatures. I see kobolds and blobs fighting between the feet of great warriors made of rock, and what appear to be wagons without horses full of the weird logs with arms and legs, all swinging axes as they move through the battlefield, taking off heads and limbs as they speed through crowds.

Here upon this hill there are creatures fighting as well, some making their way to the summit. The Challenger tears across the space as a walking log with a green stripe fends off a dozen red-clad kobolds. Our ranger friend has a piece of flame-wood with him that he has just lit up and, as soon as the fighting log smacks the last of the kobold antagonists off of the hill, the Challenger sets the log ablaze, causing it to drop its axe and flee down the side of the mound, a smoky tail following it.

“This has got to end,” Fauna says as we take in the sight of a giant eyeball bursting apart at the bottom of the mound, a titanic man of stone having felled it with a great axe. Through the explosion of puss and blood many smaller eyeballs emerge, all leaping onto the stone man, causing it to fall over and crash into the ground.

I gaze toward the sky, seeing a multitude of flying things, among them the winged barrels. Some fly randomly, others in formations, all of them occasionally bobbing forward like geese,

dropping flaming debris upon enemy units below. Frantically, I suggest that we use the rope we climbed up the well with, shoot and attach it to one of the flying barrels whilst tying ourselves to the other end of the rope.

“You mean, maybe if we are attached we can try to steer it away from the battlefield?” the ranger asks me.

“How about steering it up one of those mountains to confront one of these losers?” Fauna suggests, pointing. “That’s where they got to be, the ones controlling this.”

Just as she finishes saying this we all notice a chevron of six winged barrels shoot forth, whizzing above our heads, the winds from their flapping wings hitting us as they pass by. They rise slightly in the air, speeding up when they approach a tall rival walking statue armed with a sword made of stone. The living statue slices the air and hits two of the incoming barrels, causing them to fall onto the battle scene beneath, as the remaining four winged barrels ram directly into the walking statue’s torso, exploding on impact.

At my side, Fauna gasps.

The statue’s upper body cracks apart before crumbling over its still standing lower body.

“Okay, we’re not riding those then,” the Challenger mutters, turning around, placing a hand over his forehead to scan the field. “Those,” he says, pointing in the distance, halfway to one of the mountains. We both follow his finger, noticing that he is referring to the horseless wagons that zip through the battle. Fauna pulls two pieces of flame-wood from her pockets.

From our spot we wait until one comes close enough, which takes some time. The battle, from where we stand, looks like a three way tie so far. Colours shift and change before us. Sometimes the reds have certain fields and hills, but are quickly supplanted by swarms of greens, while the blues display a strategy of backing off temporarily and then striking the victor of a scuffle in coordinated clusters, overwhelming the enemy bit by bit. There are parts of the valley where it looks like a three way contest, armies fighting, pushing back and forth against one another.

Near the base of our hill we see one of the wagons zoom by, its axe-wielding logs with red stripes hacking at the greenish kobolds at their sides. A green blob emerges before them from the throngs of fighters, leaping before the wagon, the log driver unable to stop in time. The wagon jolts, sending half of the logs flinging off the sides.

“Our opportunity!” states Fauna and the Challenger nods eagerly. All three of us tear down the side of the mound toward the stopped wagon.

When we reach it we all jump in the back, the logs not facing us, too busy stabbing at the blob beneath them. A tentacle-like appendage reaches up, snatching the log driver, pulling it down.

Fauna lights two of the flame-wood pieces, waving it at the logs from behind. The woody warriors turn about quickly, letting out terrified screeches from unseen sources before they

vacate the wagon. My sister moves to the front swiftly, finding a set of wooden levers, and pulls one backwards, sending the cart back from the blob's gaping maw just as a larger red blob appears from behind to grab the green one, swallowing it whole.

I nearly fall over when Fauna pushes a second lever and our wooden wagon shoots forward, running over the red blob, hitting a group of kobolds, smacking their furry little bodies out of the way. She veers rightward sharply, seemingly unsure of what she's doing. I fall forward onto the side, watching the wheels crush a small eyeball monster, sending green goo splattering everywhere.

"Yuck!" I exclaim, stepping over the Challenger, who is now laying on the floor of the wagon.

"Which mountain should we go to?" Fauna calls back to me.

"Wherever!"

"Fine! Hang on!" she yells, sending the cart zooming through the battle.

Kobolds shriek. Blobs splat underneath us. We pass by one giant eyeball, its huge blue pupil looking straight at me as we pass, following our movement. I peer forward, ducking in time to dodge a low-flying barrel bomber. Fauna runs the speeding wagon through a long space between opposite lines of combatants. She yells at me to stay down, so I kneel aside the Challenger, grateful for her warning when arrows begin flying overhead, causing our driver to hunch down at the front.

We soon come upon a pair of fighting statues, the biggest we've seen yet; the one on the left green, the right one red. Fauna nearly drives right into the left one's shin, turning quickly to emerge underneath the two legs of the same living statue. The red stone fighter suddenly slams its shoulder against the one we're manoeuvring under. I turn to my right to see a huge foot rushing toward us. We all scream at once.

Fauna, through some miracle, or through her quick hands, reverses the wagon hard, while we back off at full pace to see the two colossal rock-men crash into one another, both falling and crushing a company of kobolds beneath, dust and earth flying up along with weapons and body parts. My sister steers us away from them.

I get up, scan the scene, finding a pathway to the nearest mountain between two approaching columns of strange creatures. They are blue slimy things shaped like men, but with no faces, long spears clutched in their hands. They are nearing the commotion, all walking stoic-like towards the battle. Above them I see the blue face floating, a big grin on its face. Behind the face the mountain looms. We are very close.

The Challenger appears at my side, looking sick from the rapid motion. He stands with his blade at his side, urging Fauna to make for the mountain. My sister takes no time in speeding the wagon through the legions of blue slime-men.

“What?” a familiar voice calls from above. “Still alive?”

“Just let us leave in peace!” I shout up to the face.

“Lobster-Man!” the face cries out instead. “Frog-Boy! We have intruders! Stop fighting!”

The Challenger roars at my sister to go as fast as she can. She zips past the blue slime-men to where the ground is gradually sloping upward toward the mountainside. The wagon surprisingly remains steady as it climbs, the wind splashing us all hard in the faces. I turn about, watching the mountain base expand beneath me, the valley and the mound now small in the distance.

The armies, what’s left of them, have stopped fighting, I notice. I see specks of red, green, and blue stopping in place. The blue slime-men, partway between us and the rest of the units, seem to be turning about.

“Look!” the ranger says, bringing my attention to what’s ahead of us. We are turning upward toward a great alcove near the top of the mountain. It is an open space, nearly as wide as the mountain’s peak, the roof a good twenty or so feet above. Our wagon arrives at the curve into this, bouncing a bit as it returns to flat ground. Fauna stops the wagon.

The sight before us causes all three of us to gasp. The huge place runs back to a far wall shrouded in shadow. From the left to right, starting about fifteen paces inward, there are immense iron cages, empty now, likely where the kobolds and other creatures had been released from. We step out of the wagon, our boots meeting bits of blue goo and slime. And then I see him, the one I assume to be Slug-Lord.

He is hunched over, ten feet away from the edge of this massive indentation in the mountainside, this bulky figure clad in a bright blue robe that covers most of his body, facing the battlefield, leaning over a small pond encircled with stones. Waving his hands over it, I gather that he controls his army through this pond, this device that is likely magical.

My sister and the Challenger move forward slowly, sheathing their blades, opting to pull out their bows and prepare arrows. I follow, dagger in hand, unsure of our game-plan here. I notice, down towards the opposite side of the edge of the alcove, there sits a small shiny blue vessel, and I realize that this must be a flying ship. I had heard of these before. It makes sense since there is no body of water nearby.

“Slug-Lord!” Fauna calls mockingly.

He looks up and scowls at us. On his head he wears a brown, short brimmed hat with a black band around the base of it. He tilts this as he sees us, and now I notice, as he leans upward, that his name suits his appearance, for he actually has the body of a slug. I see no legs, only a big blue body that ends in a flat tail at the end of his robes. His face looks not unlike the round blue one we saw in the battlefield, just with thick tufts of coarse, brownish-black hair running down his gullet underneath his chin all the way down towards his lower neck.

“Ooh,” he says in a voice that sounds like he speaks more through his nose than his mouth. “How dare you come here to my sanctuary! This is my space!”

“Let us leave here, Slug-Lord!” my sister barks. We move in on him, now only a few feet in front of him and the little gaming pond.

“Yeah!” I shout, gazing into the pond from where I stand. I can see, beneath the rippling waters, a mini-map of the valley. He must coordinate everything through here, as well as through the sight over the edge of the cliff of this alcove.

“No, milady!” he yells back, placing one of his short, stubby arms over the pond, waving his fingers over it. “You will die here, all three of you!”

“We don’t want to be here!” I protest, trying to see if he can be reasoned with. “We stumbled in by mistake! You said yourself you don’t want women here, so let us leave!”

He shakes his thick head, looking as if he is trying to straighten himself before us.

I decide to try again, making my tone more sympathetic: “Look, what is this all about? What are these games and why are women not allowed here?”

“This is the championship game!” he states, curling his lips a little at the mention. “We have been playing for years, so long I cannot remember! We’ve been cursed by witches, though we are warlocks ourselves, warlocks who have been spurned by females too long! It may surprise you to know that I and my compatriots have never had any luck with women.”

“No,” says Fauna, obvious sarcasm in her voice. “You don’t say.”

“I do say,” the slug-man insists. “And that is why we are cursed. It’s not fair! Did you know that in ancient times men ran everything?”

“Did they?” I ask, looking at my sister and the Challenger.

“The point is,” declares Slug-Lord, with more than a bit of spitting. “We have this place, this one valley where we can play our games and win our championships without women interfering with us!”

“Fine!” shouted Fauna, stamping her foot hard on the ground, bringing her bow up to point at our captor. “Then show us the way out!”

“The ship!” shouts the Challenger. “Hey loser, we’re taking your flying ship, alright? We don’t have time for your butt-hurt whining!”

Slug-Lord chuckles, his laugh as annoying as expected. “Excuse me, Mr. Hangs-out-with-women? My flying ship only works when I’m on it, you idiotic fool!”

The Challenger takes no time to raise his bow, step directly to the slug and bring the arrow inches from the side of his face.

“You’re coming with us,” Fauna then orders. “Get the lonely slug onto the ship.”

“Lobster-Man! Frog-Boy!” Slug-Lord shouts, leaning over the small pond. “The intruding females and their man-servant have invaded my space! Bring all your units here to slay them!”

“Move!” barks the ranger, but the slug-man stays in his place.

“You won’t get out of here alive!”

“Then neither will you.”

“I think not! Look behind you!” Slug-Lord giggles, pointing to the battlefield behind us.

We all turn to see them, the blue slime-men, a whole line of them at the edge of the alcove, spears ready for combat, all aimed at us. They step forward as another line of blue fighters emerges behind them.

“Crappy,” says the Challenger before propelling an arrow at the first line. It hits one of them, but the arrow flies through its body, streaking out the other side. Fauna shoots some arrows at the other ones too, with the same result.

They both reveal their swords, charging at the blue slime soldiers. I am unsurprised when their blades do nothing but cut harmlessly through them, their bodies completely undisrupted. I reach into my pocket, remembering that I have no more bombs or flame-wood pieces in them. I had fumbled the last few bombs on the wagon. Panic overtakes me, and I can see Fauna too is fearful as she and the ranger begin backing away from the impending rows of slimy spearmen.

Anger then takes me. I decide to kill this slug. I leap behind him, placing my short blade at his hairy throat. “Call them off!” I whisper harshly in his tiny ear. “Or you die!”

One of the slimed ones seems to see me, turning a faceless head before its free arm shoots forth like a tentacle, slapping my fingers, causing me to cry out and drop my dagger. Slug-Lord laughs. Both my sister and the Challenger are now near me, the slime-men, some green and red, now overwhelming us, a whole cluster of them blocking our way as more arrive behind them.

The slug guy slinks away, leaving a blue trail behind him.

“This isn’t looking good!” Fauna cries as I near her side.

“Our quest to find a quest looks like it’s going to be cut short,” agrees the Challenger. “Girls, my friends even for a short time, it’s been nice questing with you.”

“And you too, Challenger!” Fauna says and I see a renegade tear moving down her soft cheek.

She turns to me. "I'm sorry, Flora. I'm sorry I brought us into this!"

I place an arm around her. "We're sisters!" I tell her, trying to sound brave though my voice is shaking along with the rest of my body. "Where you go, I go, in life and in death! We'll make a brave end worthy of all the great heroes!"

"Good-bye!" Slug-Lord says mockingly, crawling away from us on his belly. "No matter who wins, you three lose!"

"Shut up! No matter what, nothing changes the fact that you are a loser!" Fauna yells.

"Let's fight until we die!" declares the Challenger before dashing into the midst of the slime-men. He spins about, his blade whirling like a top, but instead of taking all their slimy heads off, the blade merely cuts through and does nothing as was expected.

Fauna charges. I follow. There is no escape. This is it.

"I love you!" I yell, assuming they are my last words as the slime-men have now formed a shrinking circle around us, their spears pointed to us, inching closer and closer.

"Ditto!" my sister shouts sweetly.

We grab one another. I press my forehead against her face. I feel the strong arms of the Challenger around both of us and await our death.

A forceful wind beats down upon us from above. It stirs us.

I pry my eyes open.

I see a great shape, the sun blocked, making it all a shadow from where I stand. The winds keep hitting me, and I notice that this huge thing above me has wings; big, big wings. Two giant claws appear above me, and then lunge for the spears around us. Whatever it is, it grabs hold of some of the spears, three in each claw, and then crunches them up before us. The slime soldiers all jump back at once as the wind from the wings beats strong, causing some of them to fly apart.

A piercing screech follows.

Fauna sees a hole in the circle of slime-men. We all run through it, turning around in time to see a colossal owl, about the size of the biggest bull or bigger, land atop half of them, crushing them beneath its weight.

The remaining slime-men begin striking their spears at the owl, causing it to back up, shrieking at them, its huge eyes looking maddened, and its tufts of feathers upon its head raised like a menacing hunter-beast. This is when I notice someone riding atop the giant bird's back. It looks like a huge man, larger than most, with broad muscular shoulders covered with brown hair. He is shirtless and his chest and back look like thick carpet.

“Ahoy there! Be you friends of Dick Bumpdop?” greets a thunderous voice.

“We love Bumpdop!” exclaims the Challenger.

Streams of relief flow through me. Fauna laughs hysterically. “An owl!” she shouts.

The hairy friend begins throwing something from a sack strapped upon his shoulder, little pebbles, yet as he throws them they grow large, multiplying in size so fast that by the time they hit the nearest row of slime-men they are big rocks! The slime-men on the level ground are dispatched quickly, streaking down the side of the mountain as the visitor continues to throw growing stones at them.

“No!” shouts Slug-Lord as he rushes toward his magical ship. “Not Barpar!”

“Yes, Barpar!” says our new friend before he turns his attention back to us. “Dick Bumpdop cannot enter this valley, yet he heard your flute calls and told me and here I am! Any friend of Dick is a friend of mine! Now, come, get upon Screech and let us make haste!”

“Hooray for Dick Bumpdop!” the three of us cry out at once. We run fast to the owl named Screech, mounting its immense back that thankfully fits us all, clasping our hands onto its feathers.

“We love Dick Bumpdop!” repeats the Challenger merrily to our furry rescuer.

“Yo, he’s my boy!” Barpar replies, smiling with big perfectly white teeth.

As the owl flaps and ascends from the alcove’s edge, we introduce ourselves. Barpar tells us he is another old one who has lived in the realms for ages. He explains to us that it’s best to avoid these type of lonely game-playing cursed warlocks, which is something we have already learned.

I look down at the battlefield below as it shrinks from view. The mound sits in the middle, while the open fields between the mountains are still filled with the three armies. And then I see that we are being pursued. Slug-Lord has boarded his flying ship and has risen from the alcove. Slime-men have grown wings. They all follow Slug-Lord’s ascent while flying barrels rise to join them. From the other mountains I see more shapes moving, red and green flying ships at the lead.

The other game-players are chasing us!

We are far above them, yet they are all moving fast, and it looks like they will take us in quick time.

“Barpar!” I shout over the high winds of this extreme height and the frantic flapping of giant wings to our sides. The Challenger is seated behind us, towards the owl’s tail-feathers, while my sister and I are seated beside one another comfortably upon the big bird’s shoulder blades.

Barpar is seated near the nape.

I ask him to remind us of his powers. He shouts over the winds: "I gained my powers in times ancient! Everything I throw becomes bigger! And the longer it flies the bigger it becomes! That's how old Screech here got so big. I gave her a great toss one day!"

"Ah!" I reply, finding his explanation strange but interesting. "Fauna, what items do you have left from the bag?"

She suddenly winks, grinning. "Two pieces of flame-wood and one mini-powder bomb."

"Ah," I say. She hands me the bomb while proceeding to take out the two wood pieces next.

"They're going to catch us if we don't think of something fast!" the Challenger says to us. "Look, the owl cannot beat its wings fast enough to outrun those ships!"

As Barpar steers Screech steeply, going higher and higher while we all hang onto her feathers tightly, I tap him on the shoulder. He turns his head and I ask him if he can toss the thing I hand to him. It's the bomb.

"Wait," Fauna tells him as he takes it, keeping one of his powerful arms on the owl. "Okay, now," my sister says dryly after she lights the fuse.

Barpar does so. As the bomb falls it enlarges, to us almost looking as if it is staying the same size and not falling at all, although we know it is. It passes by the blue boat, the closest one to us, and Slug-Lord gazes as it becomes nearly the size of his ship. He peers over the side as it continues to fall and grow. It passes by the flying blue slime-men and then the green and red ships with their winged legions chasing after us.

I see Slug-Lord turn his head towards us and scream when the bomb finally lands on the fields below.

"Hang on!" I yell. Screech flies faster and higher than ever, while my sister, the ranger, and I peer down at the dots below that make up the armies.

This is when the blinding white flash overtakes my vision completely, a sound of thunderous eruption following.

When the flash is gone I see a titanic ball of fire. It spreads, red and orange, from the point of impact to the sides of all three mountains, huge cracks appearing in the mountainsides. Flames engulf the entire open space, covering everything. And then a black cloud emerges, mushroom-shaped, rising outward and upward. I see it overwhelm the flying creatures, and then the red and green flying ships further below. The blue ship speeds up, but doesn't escape the fire and the cloud.

I can hear Slug-Lord's high-pitched screams as the explosion overtakes the entire ship in the

blink of an eye.

As Barpar brings us higher and the air becomes thin, my eardrums pound with pain. Screech swerves sideways, and then hovers for a short time. Below, the smoke and fire clears, blown away by prevailing winds, and the sight below becomes visible again.

“Chaotic,” mumbles the Challenger as the sight unfolds beneath us.

The ground is black, the grass scorched. The mountains have had much of their previous mass blown apart, huge rocks and pieces crumbling down the sides towards the valley. There is no sign of any of the players or their fighters.

“Well, didn’t see that coming!” laughs Barpar. “I guess they won’t be bothering anyone anymore and creeping anyone out!”

We look back to see a huge grin on the Challenger’s face, the widest smile I’ve yet seen him make. “Well, my friends, you’ve had a quest!”

“Yes, we have!” Fauna agrees, nodding eagerly, a smile rivalling his forming on her face.

“Oh!” cries Barpar, bringing Screech slowly downward, immense forests sprawling out beneath us. “I am sure you’ll have many quests yet! But first, let me give you some hospitality! They say that no one tells greater, longer stories and songs than Dick Bumpedop, save I! I own a great brewery in the lands just to the east of here. I shall have you all over for beer and good scrumptious food and I shall tell you all manner of tales!”

The three of us give one another concerned looks. We owe him. He saved us. And yet I shudder slightly.

“At least there’s beer this time,” says the Challenger.

As the great owl takes us down we all share a lengthy laugh. We have one quest down, but the adventure carries on!

THE END

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

Chapter Twenty-One

Grunting, the guard shuffled round. I peered in the same direction. A bearded black man was standing in the middle of the half flooded, sunlit pit, holding up high a tiny chunk of fallen starlight.

‘A diamond,’ I breathed. ‘An uncut diamond!’

Holmes stilled into immobility as the guard stomped off down into the pit. Other guards shambled towards the successful miner. As they all converged on him, he bared his teeth in a snarl, eyes rolling. The guard who had been sniffing for Holmes and I thrust out a paw, gesturing to the miner to hand over the diamond. The miner snatched it away. I recognised him in that moment as the War Chief, Keobula.

Holmes tapped me on the shoulder. ‘While our friend is unwittingly staging a distraction,’ he breathed, ‘we can continue on our mission to warn the queen.’

He rose. I stayed where I was, watching Keobula fight off the guards while his fellow miners also watched in dull horror. A beast man produced a *sjambok*.

‘Hurry,’ Holmes said impatiently. ‘Our mission is of the utmost urgency. Those other guards could have already reached the settlement.’

Unwilling, I got to my feet and followed Holmes round the side of the hillock. It went against the grain to leave Keobula fighting for his life, but Holmes was right. Our mission was even more important. We could not allow the queen to be sacrificed.

But as we crested the rise outside the settlement, Holmes stiffened like a hunting dog, then gestured hastily to me to seek cover. I flung myself behind a boulder and peered out.

Down in the settlement, the guards we had been following were visible, grouped around the entrance to the queen’s hut. Two of them appeared in the doorway, holding between them Queen Ayaba’s frail young form. She glared around her in anger, and though at this distance I could not hear her words, I knew she was cursing them.

I cursed too. ‘Too late,’ I muttered, hammering the ground beside me with my fist. ‘We were too late.’

If only I had had a gun. Then I would have taught these beast men a thing or two.

Holmes watched as the temple guards marched the queen out of the settlement. A few natives appeared in hut doors, old people or children, unhappily watching her being dragged away. Otherwise the settlement was deserted. No doubt the rest of the Nkume were working in the pits.

‘What can we do, Holmes?’ I appealed to him. The temple guards were now out in the open, leaving the *boma* behind them. ‘We can’t let her be sacrificed. We can’t let them fling her to that... that thing in the chasm.’

‘You said something about guns, Watson,’ said Holmes. ‘You’re right. We definitely need an edge on our enemies. We have a readymade army of liberation, if we can only free them and arm them.’

Light dawned. ‘The Nkume have muskets,’ I said. ‘But why don’t they use them against the priests? The temple guards have nothing more advanced than swords and spears.’

Holmes’ face was bleak. ‘The fear of magic,’ he mused. ‘Ingrained superstitions of the centuries. The Nkume believe the priests have sorcerous powers. But I have seen no sign of anything uncanny. And yet it would be true, I think, to say that the Archpriest and his people have woven a mesmeric spell over their subjects. The trade muskets, I think, are a new development. The queen has been firming her position of power for a while, waiting for the right moment to fight back. She has had to fight against the superstitions of her own people as well as the priests.’

He rose and watched the distant temple guards as they marched the queen towards the distant temple complex. ‘It is time Queen Ayaba’s people awoke.’

We entered the settlement. The people watched us fearfully but made no move to resist us. We entered the queen’s hut, which was empty but for a scatter of fallen possessions on the ground.

‘What are we looking for?’ I asked.

Holmes gazed around. ‘There must be an armoury,’ he said, ‘a secret place where they keep their muskets. I should think it is somewhere in here, but it will be hidden. As soon as we can find it, we can begin to arm the Nkume.’

‘The old people outside?’ I said. ‘They will make a meagre fighting force.’

‘All the strong men are working in the diamond mines,’ Holmes replied. ‘But if we can assemble a spearhead of these elderly warriors, we may make an attack on the pits and free the slaves. Then our army will grow.’

I gazed admiringly. My friend had hidden depths. As I was about to congratulate him on his Napoleonic schemes, I noticed a dark figure crouching silently in the shadows behind the throne.

‘Holmes,’ I said warningly. ‘We have company.’

Holmes whirled round, adopting a *savate* pose.

The figure shuffled from the shadows. I reached for a spear that hung on the wall, then saw that it was Ulu-Oru. The elderly chamberlain was limping as if he had been badly beaten.

Holmes and I helped him to a stool. With a mix of signs, broken English and Arabic, we learnt from him that he had tried to resist the temple guards when they came for the queen, but it had been futile, and he had suffered at their hands. When he recovered, he found the queen gone. Hearing others entering the hut, he had hidden.

‘Priests give queen to djinn,’ he said. ‘To volcano god.’

Holmes nodded. ‘Such is their intention,’ he said. ‘But we shall stop them.’

‘How?’ said Ulu-Oru simply.

‘We will fight!’ Holmes told him. ‘Fight the priests, and free the queen. Free your people from the bonds of superstition!’

At first the chamberlain seemed reluctant, despondent. I saw from his frightened eyes that there was some truth in Holmes’ notion of a mesmeric spell. ‘Priests have much juju,’ he objected. ‘Spirits are with them. We must serve them.’

I shook my head. ‘Your queen knew that this was not true,’ I said. ‘She had plans. You must know what she planned, you’re her chamberlain.’

He nodded. ‘She had plans. She young girl. We try to stop her. She want to fight Archpriest, free us.’

‘Her majesty had you buy muskets, didn’t she?’ said Holmes. ‘She sent men out to trade with the Arabs.’

Ulu-Oru nodded. ‘Said it was better juju than the priests had,’ he said.

‘Her majesty was right,’ said Holmes. ‘With those muskets, you can fight for your freedom. This must be what she was planning. The Archpriest has forced your hand. Where are the muskets?’

He led us to a trapdoor concealed beneath rugs in one corner of the hut. Opening it revealed a pit in the earth where lay boxes that proved to contain trade muskets and ball ammunition wrapped in oilcloth. Ulu-Oru explained that the queen had insisted that the gunpowder be concealed safely in the jungle, away from habitation. A short trip into what remained of the forest took us to the spot.

At last we had muskets, powder and ball enough to equip a small army. Arming the nimblest of the elderly Nkume, we showed them how to use the muskets and marched from the settlement to the closest of the diamond mines.

On reaching its vicinity, we saw a terrible sight. On the hillock overlooking the pit, the very place where Holmes and I had lain concealed, a figure hung from an x-shaped cross. I recognised it as Keobula. They had crucified him.

Holmes shouted out orders, and Ulu-Oru relayed them to the elderly Nkume, who primed and loaded their muskets, as did I. We advanced with them at the ready to the edge of the pit. Down below, the Nkume miners were toiling hopelessly under the watchful eye of three of the guards. Holmes levelled his musket. Even as he did so, the leader of the temple guards turned his helmeted head in our direction. Seeing the musketeers lining the top of the pit, he leapt back, snatching at his cutlass and grunting orders at his two companions, but it was futile. Even as they began readying their resistance, Holmes fired. A black cloud of smoke drifted away on the breeze, as in the middle of the pit the lead guard flung up his apish limbs then fell face first in the muddy water.

I followed Holmes' shot by firing at the nearest guard, but missed. Luckily, I hit none of the Nkume. As I reloaded, the guard began clambering up the side towards us, spear at the ready. Then Ulu-Oru fired and the guard fell back clutching at the bullet hole in his helmet.

Seeing this, the third guard scrambled up the further bank, shambling in the direction of the temple. I levelled my musket and shot him down.

The miners raised a cheer and came scrambling up out of the mud of the pit towards us, clasping our hands and crying out in jubilation. Ulu-Oru sent a group up the hillock. Finding that Keobula was still alive, though bound to the cross, they took him down. He thanked us in broken English, while a healer of his people tended to his hurts, and Holmes had him and Ulu-Oru organise the liberation of the other miners.

'We must advance with the most of our strength,' he declared. 'Who knows when the Archpriest intends to call the volcano god?'

Even as I looked towards the peak and the temple beneath it, I heard a distant clanging. The vicinity of the chasm crowded with figures. Holmes turned, his face pale, and followed my gaze.

Keobula limped up, leaning on Ulu-Oru's shoulder. 'The queen!' he cried. 'The queen!'

Holmes looked bitterly towards the men he had sent to liberate the other miners. 'Too early,' he muttered. 'We are not yet at full strength.'

I drew myself up. 'Nevertheless,' I said, 'we must attack at once, or the queen will be given to that creature.'

Holmes nodded. 'We advance,' he confirmed.

Across that muddy wasteland of pits we marched, muskets at the ready, towards the ancient temple buildings at the far end of the plateau. The closer we grew the louder became the clanging of the gong. The far side of the chasm was thick with priests and temple guards. All the Atlanteans on the plateau except those guarding the pits must be assembled there.

No, not all. As we advanced in plain sight, it became clear that the Archpriest had guessed the

danger of uprising. Temple guards appeared from behind cover. The sunlight winked on their spears and cutlasses as they flooded towards us.

‘We’re outnumbered, Holmes,’ I cried.

Holmes shouted out orders which Ulu-Oru relayed to his people. The Nkume formed two lines. One fired a ragged volley. The air cracked like thunder and filled thick with smoke, but when the smoke cleared I saw that many of the charging beast men had fallen. The second line stepped forward and fired another volley while the first reloaded, and the story was the same. The surviving temple guards split and ran back helter-skelter towards the chasm.

Still the gong tolled out across the plateau. Our army advanced, spurning the fallen with unshod feet. Now more temple guards approached, these armed with javelins and slings. A hail of death fell upon our ranks, and I saw Nkume fall before the lines formed up again and fire spat from musket muzzles to bring the beast men down in windrows. Remorselessly, we advanced until I saw the chasm clearly, and the spur on which stood several figures. One beast man brought his beater down on the gong and out pealed the note. Keobula shot him down and he fell sprawling on the edge of the spur.

The Archpriest stood there, and with him was Miss Marency. Nearby, the queen struggled in the hands of two temple guards. The priests and guards on the edges of the pit were now advancing.

The gong began to ring out again, and I saw a ragged priest beating it with the recovered beater. I loaded my musket to shoot him, but as I looked up from ramming down the shot I realised that the temple guards were swarming around us.

‘Every man for himself, Watson,’ shouted Holmes, seizing a cutlass from somewhere and hacking about him. A guard flung himself at me and I knocked him flying with the butt of my musket. The temple guards were all around us. The Nkume fought hand to hand, some with swords or spears, others with tooth and nail. I lashed about me with the clubbed musket.

‘This way,’ said Holmes, pointing to the path round the chasm. As I followed him I felt that the rock was beginning to shake.

Holmes was a savage sight, brandishing a crimson cutlass, his skin cut and bloody. All around us Nkume and beast men were fighting. We cut our way round to the end of the rock spur. At the far end the Archpriest stood, Queen Ayaba struggling nearby. I lifted my musket and shot down one of the guards who held her, and she broke free from her other guard, and sprinted towards us. But before she could get a yard, the guard flung himself at her and brought her down struggling.

The Archpriest and Miss Marency turned to see what had happened. The Archpriest lifted his rifle and levelled it at us.

‘Drop your weapons,’ Miss Marency shouted. ‘He-Beneath-The-Fire-Mountain comes; the sacrifice will be made! Your pitiful uprising has failed!’

I looked at Holmes. We were too far away, at the far end of the rock spur. All around us everything was in chaos, and now that the Nkume were fighting hand to hand they had lost the advantage muskets had provided. I had an unloaded musket, Holmes a cutlass only.

The rock was shaking. I could feel it where I stood. Somewhere far away in the depths of the earth, the volcano god was coming.

I let my useless weapon fall with a clatter to the rock.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Beast men surrounded us, one snatching the cutlass from Holmes' hand and flinging it away. They hustled us down the spur, gathering up Queen Ayaba as they did so. We came to a halt where the spur widened out into a flat space overlooking the chasm. Here hung the now silent gong. Here stood the Archpriest, still training his Express rifle on us, and Miss Marency was at his side.

'Miss Marency,' Holmes said. 'You've not introduced your companion.'

'This, gentlemen,' she said, 'is the Archpriest of Nkume, a chap of the lineage of Atlantis. An aristocratic line that rather puts the Marencies in the shade.'

'Do you have any idea what face is behind that mask?' I inquired.

'Do you?' Holmes asked me unexpectedly.

The Archpriest laughed brutishly but said nothing, continuing to cover us with his rifle. I turned back to Miss Marency. 'What are you getting out of this evil alliance?' I asked. 'Wealth, I suppose. The revenue from the diamond mines will pay off your family debts and leave you richer than any of your peers.'

'Wealth,' she said with a shrug. 'I've inherited debts since my father's death. But I wonder if I truly want to go home. I might prefer to live here in Africa. Where I belong. Where I grew up. My home.'

'You call this your home, Miss Marency,' I said, remembering how she had grown up in the bush after her parents' abduction. 'But look how you prey upon the poor people who live here, enrich yourself at their own expense! How can you consider this place as your home?'

She smiled. 'The natives call me Leopard Lady,' she said. 'Besides, I have here an opportunity to make this land great. Able to stand up to Britain and the other powers. With the wealth of the Nkume mine, we will be able to make a place for ourselves in the world. Otherwise this land will fall under colonial control, and the natives will be exploited.'

‘You claim that you are doing this for the natives,’ I said, ‘and yet you are exploiting them as badly as any Great Power.’

‘Enough out of you,’ said the Archpriest suddenly. ‘I don’t wish to hear the prattle of jackanapes. And Mr Sherlock Holmes, he is surprisingly quiet! Yet that is of no moment. Bring the queen here. She shall furnish a sacrifice for the volcano god.’

Still the ground was shaking. At the beckoning of the Archpriest, two of the guards brought the queen forwards. The Archpriest turned to face the pit, arms akimbo, speaking the words of the rite. The rifle he gave into the safekeeping of Miss Marency, who covered us with it.

I peered into the darkness of the chasm. I remembered the scaled back I had seen on the last occasion. What antediluvian terror was coming?

The queen’s face was composed as if she had resolved to meet death with dignity. Holmes seemed thoughtful, withdrawn. I looked out across the chasm to the fighting figures. The priests and temple guards had the upper hand, that the Nkume were falling back under their assault.

Then Holmes spoke.

‘I wonder, Miss Marency,’ he said thoughtfully, ‘how eager you would be to work hand in glove with your friend the Archpriest if you knew what lay beneath that mask.’

Miss Marency stared uncomprehending at Holmes. The Archpriest turned haltingly in her direction. All around us the plateau reverberated with the clamour of war and the thunder of impending doom, but here on the rocky spur was a quiet little party, speaking in reasonable, conversational tones. I thought that I knew what Holmes was getting at, but I was wrong. Very wrong.

‘What is this nonsense?’ Miss Marency asked. ‘I intend to modernise this country and make it powerful, with the aid of my good friend the Archpriest. If tradition demands he wear a mask, then that is no business of mine.’

‘Aren’t you a little rash,’ I chipped in, ‘to enter a business deal with a man when you’ve not even seen his face? You don’t even know if he’s a man or some beast.’

‘All men are beasts beneath the masks they show to the world,’ Holmes said sententiously. ‘But I wonder if you, Watson, have any better idea than Miss Marency. Do you think they know the truth, Archpriest?’ he added, raising his voice.

Still the ground shook. Still the battle boiled about us. Still the Archpriest stood in silence. Holmes took a nimble, dancing step forward. Miss Marency raised her gun hastily, but I blundered forward and seized the muzzle. As I forced it downwards it discharged, deafening me. The bullet sank into the rock at my feet. I natched the gun from Miss Marency’s hands, but it slid from my own grasp and hit the ground, then bounced off the side and landed on a ledge a short

way down.

Unperturbed by this sudden violent action, Holmes snatched at the mask that covered the Archpriest's face.

Too late, the Archpriest stumbled backwards, almost falling from the rocky spur. He did indeed fall, but only to his knees, grasping the rock for support with his gloved hands. The hood fell back from his robe.

Miss Marency gasped, her hands clutching as if at the rifle that now lay several feet beneath us. The beast men guarding the queen grunted in dismay, appalled by what Holmes had revealed. Equally bewildered, I stared at the man with his bluff country face and spade beard.

'Inspector Newbold,' I said. 'How in Heaven's name did you come to be here?'

With a laugh, Newbold produced from beneath the folds of his robe a sheaf of paper I recognised as Sir Digory's map, which had vanished so mysteriously from his house in England.

'You!' Miss Marency cried out in sudden realisation. 'It wasn't McAllister who killed my father, it was you!' She faltered. 'But how did you come to be here, masquerading as the Archpriest?'

There was a commotion from behind us. I turned. Queen Ayaba had broken free of her astounded captors and was streaking away down the rock spur. The beast men lurched after her.

'They'll catch her,' said Newbold confidently. 'They must do; the volcano god is coming. They'll catch her and bring her back.'

'Do you really think that you can cling on to this empire of yours,' Holmes said, 'now that your true identity has been revealed?'

'How did you masquerade as their leader?' Miss Marency said, wonderingly. 'Surely they could smell that you were not the Archpriest.'

'It was really very simple,' said Newbold, with a laugh. 'After I took your father's map and made my way to this godforsaken land, I was taken prisoner by the beast men and brought before the real Archpriest, who at first wished to sacrifice me to the volcano god. By means of signs, and a smattering of the native tongue picked up during my journey, I managed to communicate to him my desire to enrich him and his kind, to work with him in this endeavour.'

He went on to explain that, alone of his degenerate kind, the Archpriest had been able to speak if at a crude level, and between them they could discuss the future. He accepted Newbold's offer at first, and the inspector ruled from behind the throne, his existence a secret to all but the Archpriest, while they set the blacks to work in some of the diggings. Then McAllister turned up, his greed evident. How he followed Newbold across sea and land the inspector would never

know, but of course as district commissioner he was more familiar with the interior than a former sailor. He made a better offer.

Newbold quarrelled with the Archpriest, in his private chambers. It was just the two of them. They fought. The Archpriest was strong, Newbold admitted, like a wild animal, but the inspector broke his neck in the end. Only then did he glimpse the brutish face that had been hidden behind the mask. He knew that there was no escape from that chamber in his own guise. So he took the Archpriest's robes, and disposed of the body down a shaft leading into the catacombs of the temple. When he stepped out into the sunlight, the priests and temple guards bowed before him, as if he was their leader. Wearing his mask and robes Newbold had his scent upon him, and so they believed that the inspector was the Archpriest. He had McAllister imprisoned, and the Scot was sacrificed to the volcano god.

'And when we appeared on the scene,' said Miss Marency, 'you agreed to make a deal with me?'

'You were very persuasive,' Newbold admitted, 'and besides, I detected a kinship with you. I thought we could work together. You, despite your age, had the contacts I needed to put my plan into effect.'

'But you killed my father!' Miss Marency cried. 'You killed my father and took the map. We all thought that it was McAllister...'

'I didn't,' said Holmes quietly.

'It was clear from the boot prints I found in the garden,' he went on, 'that someone else was involved. Someone killed Sir Digory and stole the map. Krueger found him and tried to stop him, and paid the price. McAllister went after both, wanting the map for his own reasons. He followed the killer across the sea and through the veldt and jungle until he reached the city—and met his end.'

'But why did the inspector here kill my father?' Miss Marency demanded.

'Something we'd all like to know,' I said. 'I suppose it was for the map!'

'For the map?' said Newbold. 'That was no more than a reward. I killed Sir Digory because he deserved death.'

His words echoed into a sudden silence, broken only by the distant rumbling of the ground. Looking round, I saw that the battle was apparently over; the Nkume were defeated, the beast men victorious, trailing back towards the temple and the chasm. I felt despondent. What of Queen Ayaba? What of Keobula and Ulu-Oru? I could see no sign of them.

'What in Heaven's name did my father do that deserved death?' Miss Marency demanded. 'He was a missionary. A man of the Church—until he had to take up his family responsibilities.'

'He had much to make up for,' said Newbold, 'sins to expiate. Why else would he have become

a missionary?’

‘My father quarrelled with my grandfather when he refused to permit his marriage with my mother,’ said Miss Marency coldly.

All was silent but for the distant thundering from the tunnel, and the whistle of the wind as we stood there on that spur of rock. The surviving beast men were assembling along the side of the chasm and especially at the far end of the spur.

Newbold said, ‘Your grandfather was reviled throughout the county for his drunkenness, his lechery—and among us common folk, for his unfair rents and his unjust judgements as a magistrate. That a man of his criminality should also be a justice of the peace! My family was starving in their little cottage, my father was sick in bed and there was no one to care for my mother and sisters except I, a youth, almost a boy. I did what I could to feed my family. One night I was caught by the squire’s son in the park, thrashed, and dragged before the magistrate accused of poaching.

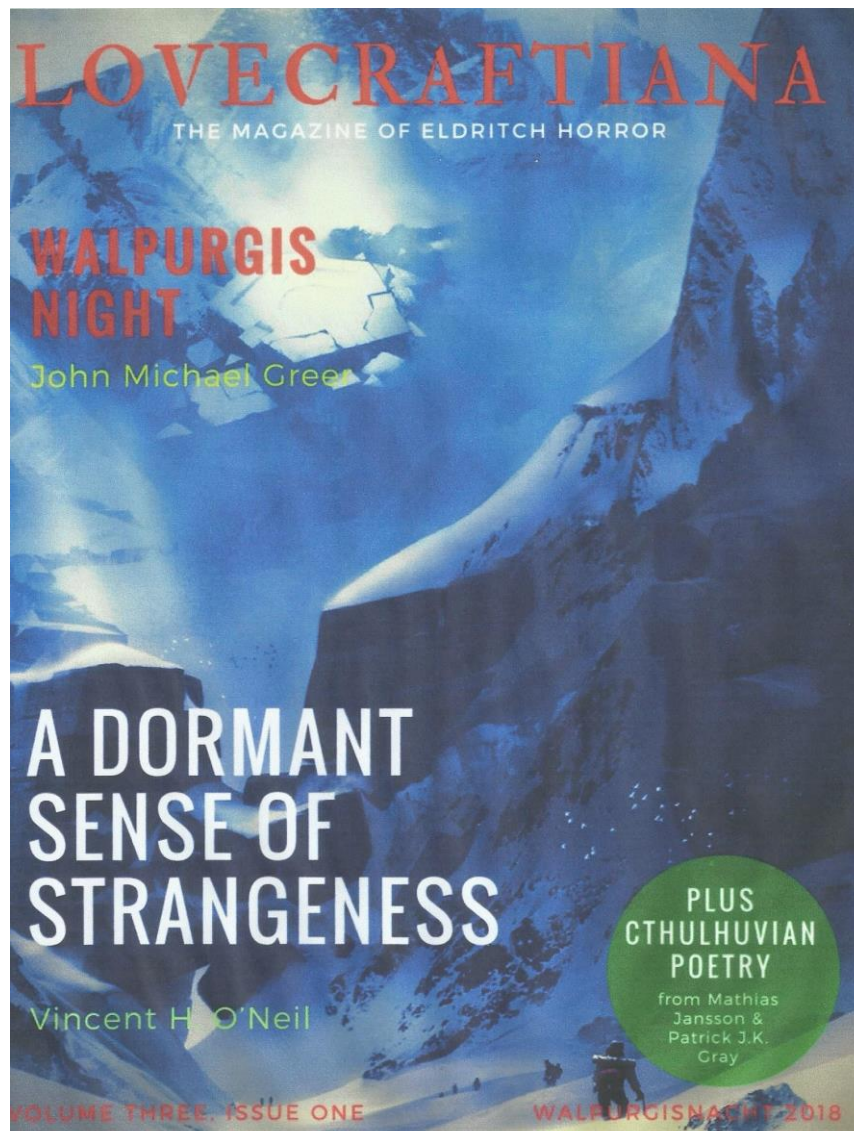
‘Your grandfather must have won at the cards the night before, because he was in a benign mood for once. He gave me the option to join the navy rather than go to gaol. I took it, leaving my family with one less mouth to feed. I saw nothing of them in many years as I worked my way up through the ranks. When at last I returned and took up my new post in the police, I found only one sister still living, and she was in the parish workhouse. I took her to my lodgings and cared for her, but she died not long after. I learnt that the old squire was no more, that his son had returned from Africa. I heard all about Sir Digory’s famous adventures. By then I had risen to the rank of inspector, and when the murder attempt occurred, I soon saw my chance to gain a kind of revenge.’

‘By murdering him yourself and putting the blame on his old friend?’ I asked darkly. During the man’s monologue, the priests had begun to move down the spur towards us.

‘Why shouldn’t McAllister be suspected,’ said Newbold, ‘since it was surely he who made the first murder attempt?’ Swiftly he snatched up the mask that Holmes had let fall to the ground and clamped it back on his face. He turned towards the approaching priests. ‘I will reign over this empire,’ he said, ‘as the Archpriest. And to regain my place amongst the Atlanteans, I shall offer up a sacrifice of Atlantean blood.’

Something unimaginably vast and terrible burst from the cavern mouth.

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## THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

### Part Seventeen

“Hardy here. That you, Mud? Over.”

“Yeah, that’s me, buddy. Ya catchin’ up with me? Over.”

“We’re trying to,” Hardy answered. “You’re a hard man to catch up with. Over.”

“Gotta keep it bouncy,” Mud laughed. “So you guys ready to head out for the asteroid, AT-4442-ST?”

“Yes, we sure are,” Captain Hardy answered. “That’s why I’m calling. Can we hitch a ride?”

“Sure. Whatcha flyin’?”

“I’ve got a patrol ship of my own, and Illara has ‘Izzie’.”

“That’s a two-seater, idn’t it? Whyncha fly with her?”

“No good, buddy,” Hardy explained. “Illara won’t let anybody take that second seat of hers. Says it’s strictly for Carter and no one else.”

“Yeah,” Mud agreed. “OK. No point tryin’ to talk her out of it. Once she gets her mind set... And she can’t ride with you?”

“Says she’s attached to ‘Izzie’.”

“Okay. Well, ‘Izzie’ don’t take much room,” Mud admitted. “She’ll fold up smaller’n a... well, hell... a deck chair, maybe?”

“Yeah,” Captain Hardy agreed. “I’ve seen her do it.”

“Then there’s no problem, is there?” Mud said. “You guys come on over, and I’ll load ya on the “Charon” till we can get ourselves to AT-4442-ST.”

“Thanks a bunch,” Captain Hardy said, smiling. “We’ll be seein’ ya in about twelve hours.”

“See ya then,” Mud answered.

Illara stepped into view on the visiscreen.

“Lookin’ forward to see you,” she said, grinning.

“Hey, howya doin’, Illara? You just get here?”

“Yeah. Just checking in,” she said. “Hardy took care of business already, I see. So we’ll see you in twelve.”

She backstepped out of view. Mud could hear the sound of her light laughter as she walked away.

“Oh, she’s a smooth one, idn’t she?” Mud said. “Smooth as butter.”

“Must be that spy school<sup>1</sup> training of hers,” Captain Hardy said.

Mud simply laughed again and said, “Yeah, ha, ha. See ya in twelve.”

Twelve hours later, Captain Hardy and Illara were in close approach to Mud’s ship, the “Charon”.

The “Charon” was twice as large as Ward’s ship, the O-8111A, and carried twice as much cargo. Like Ward’s ship, the “Charon” was shaped rather unimaginatively like a brick, but unlike Ward’s ship, the “Charon” sported some purely decorative markings on its bow. Gold, purple and black, with silver highlights, naked cherubs, a dragon and a saint crowded the bow of the “Charon” in a heavenscape of clouds and stars.

These markings surrounded the forward windows built into the bow of the “Charon”, an unimaginable indulgence, as the windows were expensive in themselves, and expensive to maintain, while the visiscreens, which gave much better imagery, including telescopic, and extra-visible wavelengths of light, were much cheaper, both to purchase and to maintain.

But Mud didn’t care about the expense. And he had a set of the best visiscreens manufactured anywhere on Mars or Earth. The transparent windows of transparent steel gave a simple ‘purity’, Mud insisted, that the visiscreens, for all their sophistication and artificial clarity, or perhaps because of it, did not.

It was only as the eye progressed toward the stern, did the lurid images give way to the obligatory white that was the required colour of all spacecraft. His call numbers were painted in twelve foot alphanumerics—red letters and numbers outlined in black—on every external surface of his ship.

Also unlike Ward’s ship, the “Charon” sported short wings and four stabilizing fins at the stern, one each for top, bottom, port and starboard, to assist in guiding the much larger ship through the atmosphere of Mars.

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<sup>1</sup> Captain Illara Fain had been Chief of Pink Security Systems on Eros Base 1 before she met Mud, or Captain Hardy, or Carter Ward.

And Mud had no difficulty boarding Hardy's and Illara's patrol ships. They made their near approach, some ten thousand miles distant from asteroid AT-4442-ST where Mud had met Lacey, and Miriam, the waitress at Ed's place.

He watched Illara and Hardy as they approached his ship, slowing nearly to a stop outside his bay doors at the stern of his ship. The doors took up almost the entirety of the stern, and were surrounded with a series of diagonal stripes painted red and black.

"Knock, knock," Hardy said to Mud through the ships' communications.

Mud said nothing, but simply opened his bay door. Illara and Hardy watched as the panels opened outwardly from the centre, orange warning lights screaming silently. Hardy gave a hand signal to Illara through the canopy of his ship. Illara touched her gloved hands to the visor of her helmet in a salute to acknowledge Hardy's signal, which told her, 'Go ahead'.

Which she did. Nosing 'Izzie' toward the gaping bay door, she cut almost all the power off in her ship. 'Izzie' glided silently through the doors, and Illara touched the forward thrusters, slowing her ship even further, until it settled to the deck.

Hardy followed shortly afterwards. Illara had already folded 'Izzie' to her smallest configuration, locking it to the deck and giving Hardy plenty of room to manoeuvre. Mud slid down the ladder as Hardy was locking his ship down to the deck.

"Good ta see ya," he said.

"It's good to see you, too, Mud," Illara said, pulling off her helmet.

"I'll make that unanimous," Hardy said with a bright smile and holding his hand out to Mud.

The two men shook hands, then Mud and Illara.

"I'm gonna punch this ship," Mud said, slapping a nearby support beam, indicating the "Charon". "So we should be getting to our asteroid in sixteen hours."

"That's making good speed," Hardy said.

"Real good," Mud agreed. "And before we get to where we're goin', it'll maybe be best to getcha guys outta these uniforms."

"Oh," Hardy replied. "Yes, of course you're right. These uniforms..."

"Doncha worry about it," Mud said. "My replicator can wardrobe watcha need. Something plain, I'm guessin'. Plain and stained."

"I suppose we could do worse," Illara said, "than the same kind of jumpsuit you're wearing."

Mud glanced down at himself, grinning.

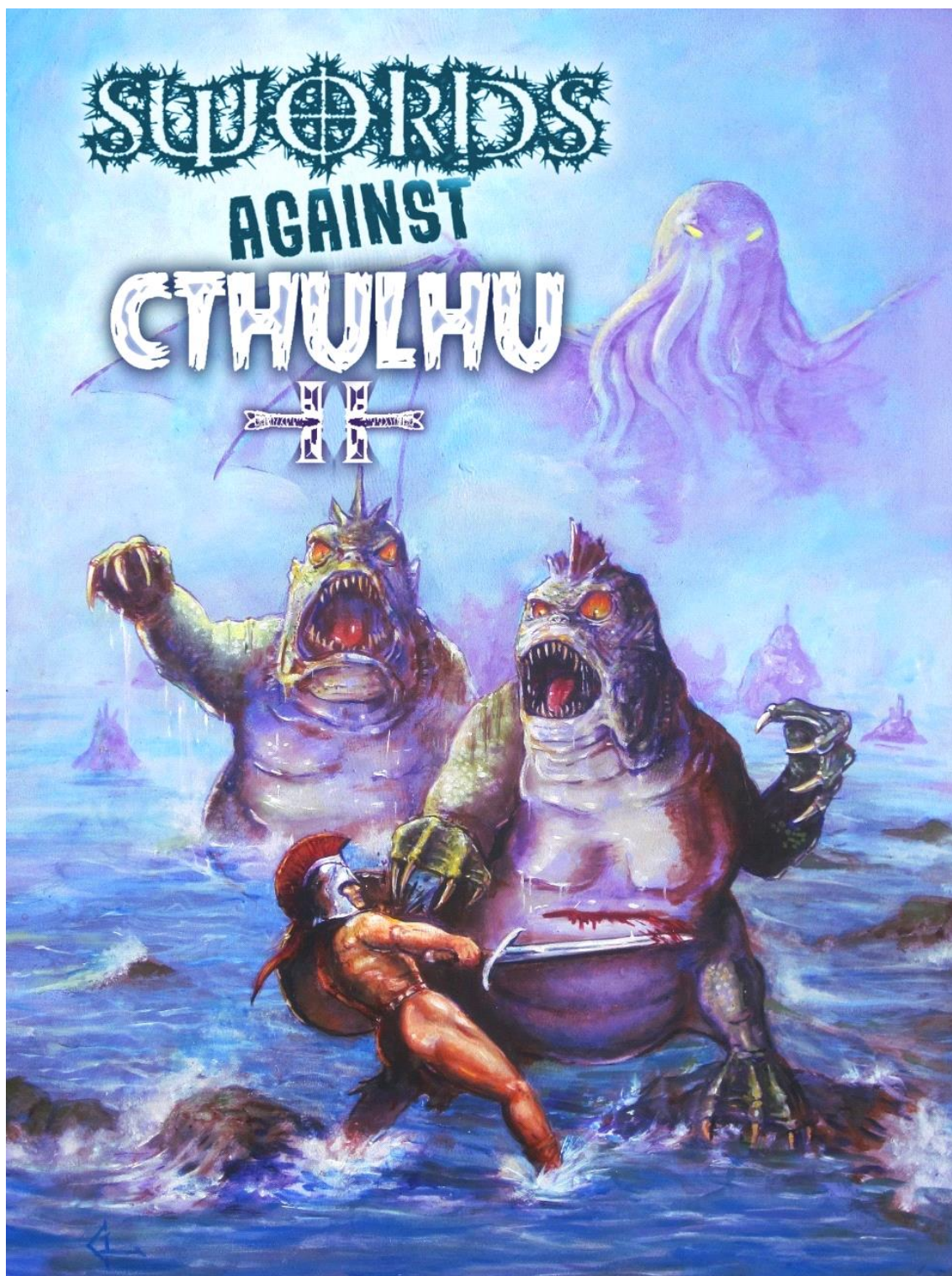
“Yeah, plain is purty much the best ya can do, where we’re goin’.”

“Real rough place, huh?”

“Well, Captain,” Mud said, a huge smile spreading over his thickly bearded face, “Think about it. Our friend Carter gunned down three men in front of a buncha maybe a hunnert witnesses. And they just let `im go.

“So, yeah, I’d say it’s a blunt kinda place. Brutal. Real brutal.”

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## ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

### Chapter XXIII—Characteristics.

Time passed on, marked by no very important incident, while I made acquaintance with manners and with men around me, neither one nor the other worth further description. Nothing occurred to confirm the alarms Davilo constantly repeated.

I called the ladies one day into the outer grounds to see a new carriage, capable, according to its arrangement, of containing from two to eight persons, and a balloon of great size and new construction which Davilo had urgently counselled me to procure, as capable of sudden use in some of those daily thickening perils, of which I could see no other sign than occasional evidence that my steps were watched and dogged. Both vehicles enlisted the interest and curiosity of Eunané and her companions. Eveena, after examining with as much attention as was due to the trouble I took to explain it, the construction of the carriage, concentrated her interest and observation upon the balloon, the sight of which evidently impressed her. When we had returned to the peristyle, and the rest had dispersed, I said—

“I see you apprehend some part of my reasons for purchasing the balloon. The carriage will take us to-morrow to Altasfe (a town some ten miles distant). ‘Shopping’ is an amusement so gratifying to all women on Earth, from the veiled favourites of an Eastern seraglio to the very unveiled dames of Western ballrooms, that I suppose the instinct must be native to the sex wherever women and trade co-exist. If you have a single feminine folly, you will enjoy this more than you will own. If you are, as they complain, absolutely faultless, you will enjoy with me the pleasure of the girls in plaguing one after another all the traders of Altasfe:” and with these words I placed in her hands a packet of the thin metallic plates constituting their currency. Her extreme and unaffected surprise was amusing to witness.

“What am I to do with this?” she inquired, counting carefully the uncounted pile, in a manner which at once dispelled my impression that her surprise was due to childish ignorance of its value.

“Whatever you please, Madonna; whatever can please you and the others.”

“But,” she remonstrated, “this is more than all our dowries for another year to come; and—forgive me for repeating what you seem purposely to forget—I cannot cast the shadow between my equals and the master. Would you so mortify me as to make me take from Eunané’s hand, for example, what should come from yours?”

“You are right, Madonna, now as always,” I owned; wincing at the name she used, invariably employed by the others, but one I never endured from her. Her looks entreated pardon for the form of the implied reproof, as I resumed the larger part of the money she held out to me, forcing back the smaller into her reluctant hands. “But what has the amount of your dowries to do with the matter? The contracts are meant, I suppose, to secure the least to which a wife has a right, not to fix her natural share in her husband’s wealth. You need not fear, Eveena; the Prince has made us rich enough to spend more than we shall care for.”

"I don't understand you," she replied with her usual gentle frankness and simple logical consistency. "It pleases you to say 'we' and 'ours' whenever you can so seem to make me part of yourself; and I love to hear you, for it assures me each time that you still hold me tightly as I cling to you. But you know those are only words of kindness. Since you returned my father's gift, the dowry you then doubled is my only share of what is yours, and it is more than enough."

"Do you mean that women expect and receive no more: that they do not naturally share in a man's surplus wealth?"

While I spoke Enva had joined us, and, resting on the cushions at my feet, looked curiously at the metallic notes in Eveena's hand.

"You do not," returned the latter, "pay more for what you have purchased because you have grown richer. You do not share your wealth even with those on whose care it chiefly depends."

"Yes, I do, Eveena. But I know what you mean. Their share is settled and is not increased. But you will not tell me that this affords any standard for household dealings; that a wife's share in her husband's fortune is really bounded by the terms of the marriage contract?"

"Will you let Enva answer you?" asked Eveena. "She looks more ready than I feel to reply."

This little incident was characteristic in more ways than one. Eveena's feelings, growing out of the realities of our relation, were at issue with and perplexed her convictions founded on the theory and practice of her world. Not yet doubting the justice of the latter, she instinctively shrank from their application to ourselves. She was glad, therefore, to let Enva state plainly and directly a doctrine which, from her own lips, would have pained as well as startled me. On her side, Enva, though encouraged to bear her part in conversation, was too thoroughly imbued with the same ideas to interpose unbidden. As she would have said, a wife deserved the scandal for speaking without leave; nor—experience notwithstanding—would she think it safe to interrupt in my presence a favourite so pointedly honoured as Eveena. 'She waited, therefore, till my eyes gave the permission which hers had asked.

"Why should you buy anything twice over, Clasfempta, whether it be a wife or an ambâ? A girl sells her society for the best price her attractions will command. These attractions seldom increase. You cannot give her less because you care less for them; but how can she expect more?"

"I know, Enva, that the marriage contract here is an open bargain and sale, as among my race it is generally a veiled one. But, the bargain made, does it really govern the after relation? Do men really spend their wealth wholly on themselves, and take no pleasure in the pleasure of women?"

"Generally, I believe," Enva replied, "they fancy they have paid too much for their toy before they have possessed it long, and had rather buy a new one than make much of those they have. Wives seldom look on the increase of a man's wealth as a gain to themselves. Of course you like to see us prettily dressed, while you think us worth looking at in ourselves. But as a rule our own

income provides for that; and we at any rate are better off than almost any women outside the Palace. The Prince did not care, and knew it would not matter to you, what he gave to make his gift worthy of him and agreeable to you. Perhaps," she added, "he wished to make it secure by offering terms too good to be thrown away by any foolish rebellion against a heavier hand or a worse temper than usual. You hardly understand yet half the advantages you possess."

The latent sarcasm of the last remark did not need the look of pretended fear that pointed it. If Enva professed to resent my inadequate appreciation of the splendid beauty bestowed on me by the royal favour more than any possible ill-usage for which she supposed herself compensated in advance, it was not for me to put her sincerity to proof.

"Once bought, then, wives are not worth pleasing? It is not worthwhile to purchase happy faces, bright smiles, and willing kisses now and then at a cost the giver can scarcely feel?"

Enva's look now was half malicious, half kindly, and wholly comical; but she answered gravely, with a slight imitation of my own tone—

"Can you not imagine, or make Eveena tell you, Clafempta, why women once purchased think it best to give smiles and kisses freely to one who can command their tears? Or do you fancy that their smiles are more loyal and sincere when won by kindness than..."

"By fear? Sweeter, Enva, at any rate. Well, if I do not offend your feelings, I need not hesitate to disregard another of your customs."

She received her share willingly and gratefully enough, but her smile and kiss were so evidently given to order, that they only testified to the thorough literality of her statement. Leenoo, Eiralé, and Elfé followed her example with characteristic exactness. Equally characteristic was the conduct of the others. Eunané kept aloof till called, and then approached with an air of sullen reluctance, as if summoned to receive a reprimand rather than a favour. Not a little amused, I affected displeasure in my turn, till the window of her chamber closed behind us, and her ill-humour was forgotten in wondering alarm. Offered in private, the kiss and smile given and not demanded, the present was accepted with frank affectionate gratitude. Eivé took her share in pettish shyness, waiting the moment when she might mingle unobserved with her childlike caresses the childish reproach—

"If you can buy kisses, Clafempta, you don't want mine. And if you fancy I sell them, you shall have no more."

I saw Davilo in the morning before we started. After some conversation on business, he said—

"And pardon a suggestion which I make, not as in charge of your affairs, but as responsible to our supreme authority for your safety. No correspondence should pass from your household unscrutinised; and if there be such correspondence, I must ask you to place in my hand, for the purpose of our quest, not any message, but some of the slips on which messages have been written. This may probably furnish precisely that tangible means of relation with someone acquainted with the conspiracy for which we have sought in vain."

My unwillingness to meddle with feminine correspondence was the less intelligible to him that, as the master alone commands the household telegraph, he knew that it must have passed through my hands. I yielded at last to his repeated urgency that a life more precious than mine was involved in any danger to myself, so far as to promise the slips required, to furnish a possible means of rapport between the clairvoyante and the enemy.

I returned to the house in grave thought. Eunané. corresponded by the telegraph with some schoolmates; Eivé, I fancied, with three or four of those ladies with whom, accompanying me on my visits, she had made acquaintance. But I hated the very thought of domestic suspicion, and, adhering to my original resolve, refused to entertain a distrust that seemed ill-founded and far-fetched. If there had been treachery, it would be impossible to obtain any letters that might have been preserved without resorting to a compulsion which, since both Eunané and Eivé had written in the knowledge that their letters passed unread, would seem like a breach of faith. I asked, however, simply, and giving no reason, for the production of any papers received and preserved by either. Eivé, with her usual air of simplicity, brought me the two or three which, she said, were all she had kept. Eunané replied with a petulance almost amounting to refusal, which to some might have suggested suspicion; but which to me seemed the very last course that a culprit would have pursued. To give needless offence while conscious of guilt would have been the very wantonness of reckless temper.

“Bite your tongue, and keep your letters,” I said sharply.

Turning to Eivé and looking at the addresses of hers, none of which bore the name of any one who could be suspected of the remotest connection with a political plot—

“Give me which of these you please,” I said, taking from her hand that which she selected and marking it. “Now erase the writing yourself and give me the paper.”

This incident gave Eunané leisure to recover her temper. She stood for a few moments ashamed perhaps, but, as usual, resolute to abide by the consequences of a fault. When she found that my last word was spoken, her mood changed at once.

“I did not quite like to give you Velna’s letters. They are foolish, like mine; and besides——But I never supposed you would let me refuse. What you won’t make me do, I must do of my own accord.”

Womanly reasoning, most unlike “woman’s reasons!” She brought, with unaffected alacrity, a collection of tafroo-slips whose addresses bore out her account of their character. Taking the last from the bundle, I bade her erase its contents.

“No,” she said, “that is the one I least liked to show. If you will not read it, please follow my hand as I read, and see for yourself how far I have misused your trust.”

“I never doubted your good faith, Eunané”—But she had begun to read, pointing with her finger as she went on. At one sentence hand and voice wavered a little without apparent reason. “I

shall,” wrote her school-friend, some half year her junior, “make my appearance at the next inspection. I wish the Camptâ, had left you here till now; we might perhaps have contrived to pass into the same household.”

“A very innocent wish, and very natural,” I said, in answer to the look, half inquiring, half shy, with which Eunané watched the effect of her words. I could not now use the precaution in her case, which it had somehow seemed natural to adopt with Eivé, of marking the paper returned for erasure. On her part, Eunané thrust into my hand the whole bundle as they were, and I was forced myself to erase, by an electro-chemical process which leaves no trace of writing, the words of that selected. The absence of any mark on the second paper served sufficiently to distinguish the two when, of course without stating from whom I received them, I placed, them in Davilo’s hands.

When we were ready to leave the peristyle for the carriage, I observed that Eunané alone was still unveiled, while the others wore their cloaks of down and the thick veils, without which no lady may present herself to the public eye.

“Thieving time is woman’s crime,” I said, quoting a domestic proverb. “In another household you would; be left behind.”

“Of course,” she replied, such summary discipline seeming to her as appropriate as to an European child. “I don’t like always to deserve the vine and receive the nuts.”

“You must take which I like,” I retorted, laughing. Satisfied or silenced, she hastened to dress, and enjoyed with unalloyed delight the unusual pleasure of inspecting dresses and jewellery, and making more purchases in a day than she had expected to be able to do in two years. But she and her companions acted with more consideration than ladies permitted to visit the shops of Europe show for their masculine escort. Eivé alone, on this as on other occasions, availed herself thoroughly of those privileges of childhood which I had always extended to her.

So quick are the proceedings and so excellent the arrangements of Martial commerce, even where ladies are concerned, that a couple of hours saw us on our way homeward, after having passed through the apartments of half the merchants in Altasfe. Purposely for my own pleasure, as well as for that of my companions, I took a circuitous route homeward, and in so doing came within sight of a principal feminine Nursery or girls’ school. Recognising it, Eunané spoke with some eagerness—

“Ah! I spent nine years there, and not always unhappily.”

Eveena, who sat beside me, pressed my hand, with an intention easily understood.

“And you would like to see it again?” I inquired in compliance with her silent hint.

“Not to go back,” said Eunané. “But I should like to pay it a visit, if it were possible.”

“Can we?” I asked Eveena.

“I think so,” she answered. “I observe half a dozen people have gone in since we came in sight, and I fancy it is inspection day there.”

“Inspection?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied in a tone of some little annoyance and discomfort. “The girls who have completed their tenth year, and who are thought to have as good a chance now as they would have later, are dressed for the first time in the white robe and veil of maidenhood, and presented in the public chamber to attract the choice of those who are looking for brides.”

“Not a pleasant spectacle,” I said, “to you or to myself; but it will hardly annoy the others, and Eunané shall have her wish.”

We descended from our carriage at the gate, and entered the grounds of the Nursery. Studiously as the health, the diet, and the exercise of the inmates are cared for, nothing is done to render the appearance of the home where they pass so large and critical a portion of their lives cheerful or attractive in appearance. Utility alone is studied; how much beauty conduces to utility where the happiness and health of children are concerned, Martial science has yet to learn. The grounds contained no flowers and but few trees; the latter ruined in point of form and natural grace to render them convenient supports for gymnastic apparatus. A number of the younger girls, unveiled, but dressed in a dark plain garment reaching from the throat to the knees, with trousers giving free play to the limbs, were exercising on the different swings and bars, flinging the light weights and balls, or handling the substitutes for dumb-bells, the use of which forms an important branch of their education. Others, relieved from this essential part of their tasks, were engaged in various sports. One of these I noticed especially. Perhaps a hundred young ladies on either side formed a sort of battalion, contending for the ground they occupied with light shields of closely woven wire and masks of the same material, and with spears consisting of a reed or grass about five feet in length, and exceedingly light. When perfectly ripened, these spears are exceeding formidable, their points being sharp enough to pierce the skin of any but a pachydermatous animal. Those employed in these games, however, are gathered while yet covered by a sheath, which, as they ripen, bursts and leaves the keen, hard point exposed. Considerable care is taken in their selection, since, if nearly ripe, or if they should ripen prematurely under the heat of the sun when severed from the stem, the sheath bursting in the middle of a game, very grave accidents might occur. The movements of the girls were so ordered that the game appeared almost as much a dance as a conflict; but though there was nothing of unseemly violence, the victory was evidently contested with real earnestness, and with a skill superior to that displayed in the movements of the actual soldiers who have long since exchanged the tasks of warfare for the duties of policemen, escorts, and sentries. I held Eveena's hand, the others followed us closely, venturing neither to break from our party without leave nor to ask permission, till, at Eveena's suggestion, it was spontaneously given. They then quitted us, hastening, Eunané to seek out her favourite companions of a former season, the others to mingle with the younger girls and share in their play. We walked on slowly, stopping from time to time to watch the exercises and sports of the younger portion of a community numbering some fifteen hundred girls. When we entered the hall we were rejoined by Eunané, with one of her friends who still wore the ordinary school costume. Conversation with or notice of a young lady so

dressed was not only not expected but disallowed, and the pair seated themselves behind us and studiously out of hearing of any conversation conducted in a low tone.

The spectacle, as I had anticipated, was to me anything but pleasant. It reminded me of a slave-market of the East, however, rather than of the more revolting features of a slave auction in the United States. The maidens, most of them very graceful and more than pretty, their robes arranged and ornamented with an evident care to set off their persons to the best advantage, and with a skill much greater than they themselves could yet have acquired, were seated alone or by twos and threes in different parts of the hall, grouped so as to produce the most attractive general as well as individual effect. The picture, therefore, was a pretty one; and since the intending purchasers addressed the objects of their curiosity or admiration with courtesy and fairly decorous reserve, it was the known character rather than any visible incident of the scene that rendered it repugnant or revolting in my eyes. I need not say that, except Eveena, there was no one of either sex in the hall who shared my feeling. After all, the purpose was but frankly avowed, and certainly carried out more safely and decorously than in the ball-rooms and drawing-rooms of London or Paris. Of the maidens, some seemed shy and backward, and most were silent save when addressed. But the majority received their suitors with a thoroughly business-like air, and listened to the terms offered them, or endeavoured to exact a higher price or a briefer period of assured slavery, with a self-possession more reasonable than agreeable to witness. One maiden seated in our immediate vicinity was, I perceived, the object of Eveena's especial interest, and, at first on this account alone, attracted my observation. Dressed with somewhat less ostentatious care and elegance than her companions, her veil and the skirt of her robe were so arranged as to show less of her personal attractions than they generally displayed. A first glance hardly did justice to a countenance which, if not signally pretty, and certainly marked by a beauty less striking than that of most of the others, was modest and pleasing; a figure slight and graceful, with hands and feet yet smaller than usual, even among a race the shape of whose limbs is, with few exceptions, admirable. Very few had addressed her, or even looked at her; and a certain resigned mortification was visible in her countenance.

"You are sorry for that child?" I said to Eveena.

"Yes," she answered. "It must be distressing to feel herself the least attractive, the least noticed among her companions, and on such an occasion. I cannot conceive how I could bear to form part of such a spectacle; but if I were in her place, I suppose I should be hurt and humbled at finding that nobody cared to look at me in the presence of others prettier and better dressed than myself."

"Well," I said, "of all the faces I see I like that the best. I suppose I must not speak to her?"

"Why not?" said Eveena in surprise. "You are not bound to purchase her, any more than we bought all we looked at to-day."

"It did not occur to me," I replied, "that I could be regarded as a possible suitor, nor do I think I could find courage to present myself to that young lady in a manner which must cause her to look upon me in that light. Ask Eunané if she knows her."

Here Eivé and the others joined us and took their places on my right.

Eveena, leaving her seat for a moment, spoke apart with Eunané.

“Will you speak to her?” she said, returning. “She is Eunané’s friend and correspondent, Velna; and I think they are really fond of each other. It is a pity that if she is to undergo the mortification of remaining unchosen and going back to her tasks, at least till the next inspection, she will also be separated finally from the only person for whom she seems to have had anything like home affection.”

“Well, if I am to talk to her,” I replied, “you must be good enough to accompany me. I do not feel that I could venture on such an enterprise by myself.”

Eveena’s eyes, even through her veil, expressed at once amusement and surprise; but as she rose to accompany me this expression faded and a look of graver interest replaced it. Many turned to observe us as we crossed the short space that separated us from the isolated and neglected maiden. I had seen, if I had not noticed, that in no case were the men, as they made the tour of the room or went up to any lady who might have attracted their special notice, accompanied by the women of their households. A few of these, however, sat watching the scene, their mortification, curiosity, jealousy, or whatever feeling it might excite, being of course concealed by the veils that hid every feature but the eyes, which now and then followed very closely the footsteps of their lords. The object of our attention showed marked surprise as we approached her, and yet more when, seeing that I was at a loss for words, Eveena herself spoke a kindly and gracious sentence. The girl’s voice was soft and low, and her tone and words, as we gradually fell into a hesitating and broken conversation, confirmed the impression made by her appearance. When, after a few minutes, I moved to depart, there was in Eveena’s reluctant steps and expressive upturned eyes a meaning I could not understand. As soon as we were out of hearing, moving so as partly to hide my countenance and entirely to conceal her own gesture from the object of her compassion, she checked my steps by a gentle pressure on my arm and looked up earnestly into my face.

“What is it?” I asked. “You seem to have some wish that I cannot conjecture; and you can trust by this time my anxiety to gratify every desire of yours, reasonable or not—if indeed you ever were unreasonable.”

“She is so sad, so lonely,” Eveena answered, “and she is so fond of Eunané.”

“You don’t mean that you want me to make her an offer!” I exclaimed in extreme amazement.

“Do not be angry,” pleaded Eveena. “She would be glad to accept any offer you would be likely to make; and the money you gave me yesterday would have paid all she would cost you for many years. Besides, it would please Eunané, and it would make Velna so happy.”

“You must know far better than I can what is likely to make her happy,” I replied. “Strange to the ideas and customs of your world, I cannot conceive that a woman can wish to take the last place in a household like ours rather than the first or only one with the poorest of her people.”

“She will hardly have the choice,” Eveena answered. “Those whom you can call poor mostly wait till they can have their choice before they marry; and if taken by someone who could not afford a more expensive choice, she would only be neglected, or dismissed ill provided for, as soon as he could purchase one more to his taste.”

“If,” I rejoined at last, “you think it a kindness to her, and are sure she will so think it; if you wish it, and will avouch her contentment with a place in the household of one who does not desire her, I will comply with this as with any wish of yours. But it is not to my mind to take a wife out of mere compassion, as I might readily adopt a child.”

Once more, with all our mutual affection and appreciation of each other’s character, Eveena and I were far as the Poles apart in thought if not in feeling. It was as impossible for her to emancipate herself utterly from the ideas and habits of her own world, as for me to reconcile myself to them. I led her back at last to her seat, and beckoned Eunané to my side.

“Eveena,” I said, “has been urging me to offer your friend yonder a place in our household.”

Though I could not see her face, the instant change in her attitude, the eager movement of her hands, and the elastic spring that suddenly braced her form, expressed her feeling plainly enough.

“It must be done, I suppose,” I murmured rather to myself than to them, as Eunané timidly put out her hand and gratefully clasped Eveena’s. “Well, it is to be done for you, and you must do it.”

“How can I?” exclaimed Eunané in astonishment; and Eveena added, “It is for you; you only can name your terms, and it would be a strange slight to her to do so through us.”

“I cannot help that. I will not ‘act the lie’ by affecting any personal desire to win her, and I could not tell her the truth. Offer her the same terms that contented the rest; nay, if she enters my household, she shall not feel herself in a secondary or inferior position.”

This condition surprised even Eveena as much as my resolve to make her the bearer of the proposal that was in truth her own. But, however reluctant, she would as soon have refused obedience to my request as have withheld a kindness because it cost her an unexpected trial. Taking Eunané with her, she approached and addressed the girl. Whatever my own doubt as to her probable reception, however absurd in my own estimation the thing I was induced to do, there was no corresponding consciousness, no feeling but one of surprise and gratification, in the face on which I turned my eyes. There was a short and earnest debate; but, as I afterwards learned, it arose simply from the girl’s astonishment at terms which, extravagant even for the beauties of the day, were thrice as liberal as she had ventured to dream of. Eveena and Eunané were as well aware of this as herself; the right of beauty to a special price seemed to them as obvious as in Western Europe seems the right of rank to exorbitant settlements; but they felt it was impossible to argue the point as a solicitor would find it unsafe to expound to a gentleman the different cost of honouring Mademoiselle with his hand and being honoured with that of

Milady. Velna's remonstrances were suppressed; she rose, and, accompanied by Eveena and Eunané, approached a desk in one corner of the room, occupied by a lady past middle life. The latter, like all those of her sex who have adopted masculine independence and a professional career, wore no veil over her face, and in lieu of the feminine head-dress a band of metal around the head, depending from which a short fall of silken texture drawn back behind the ears covered the neck and upper edge of the dark robe. This lady took from a heap by her side a slip containing the usual form of marriage contract, and filled in the blanks. At a sign from Eveena, I had by this time approached close enough to hear the language of half-envious, half-supercilious wonder in which the schoolmistress congratulated her pupil on her signal conquest, and the terms she had obtained, as well as the maiden's unaffected acknowledgment of her own surprise and conscious unworthiness. I could feel, despite the concealment of her form and face, Eveena's silent expression of pained disgust with the one, and earnest womanly sympathy with the other. The document was executed in the usual triplicate.

The girl retired for a few minutes, and reappeared in a cloak and veil like those of her new companions, but of comparatively cheap materials. As we passed the threshold, Eveena gently and tacitly but decisively assigned to her protégée her own place beside me, and put her right hand in my left. The agitation with which it manifestly trembled, though neither strange nor unpleasing, added to the extreme embarrassment I felt; and I had placed her next to Eunané in the carriage and taken my seat beside Eveena, whom I never permitted to resign her own, before a single spoken word had passed in this extraordinary courtship, or sanctioned the brief and practical ceremony of marriage.

I was alone in my own room that evening when a gentle scratching on the window-crystal entreated admission. I answered without looking up, assuming that Eveena alone would seek me there. But hers were not the lips that were earnestly pressed on my hand, nor hers the voice that spoke, trembling and hesitating with stronger feeling than it could utter in words—

"I do thank you from my heart. I little thought you would wish to make me so happy. I shrank from showing you the letter lest you should think I dared to hope.... It is not only Velna; it is such strange joy and comfort to be held fast by one who cares—to feel safe in hands as kind as they are strong. You said you could love none save Eveena; but, Clafempta, your way of not loving is something better, gentler, more considerate than any love I ever hoped or heard of."

I could read only profound sincerity and passionate gratitude in the clear bright eyes, softened by half-suppressed tears, that looked up from where she knelt beside me. But the exaggeration was painfully suggestive, confirming the ugly view Enva had given yesterday of the life that seemed natural and reasonable to her race, and made ordinary human kindness appear something strange and romantic by contrast.

"Surely, Eunané, every man wishes those around him happy, if it do not cost too much to make them so?"

"No, indeed! Oftener the master finds pleasure in punishing and humiliating, the favourite in witnessing her companions' tears and terror. They like to see the household grateful for an hour's amusement, crouching to caprice, incredulously thankful for barest justice. One book much read

in our schools says that ‘cruelty is a stronger, earlier, and more tenacious human instinct than sympathy;’ and another that ‘half the pleasure of power lies in giving pain, and half the remainder in being praised for sparing it.’ ... But that was not all: Eveena was as eager to be kind as you were.”

“Much more so, Eunané.”

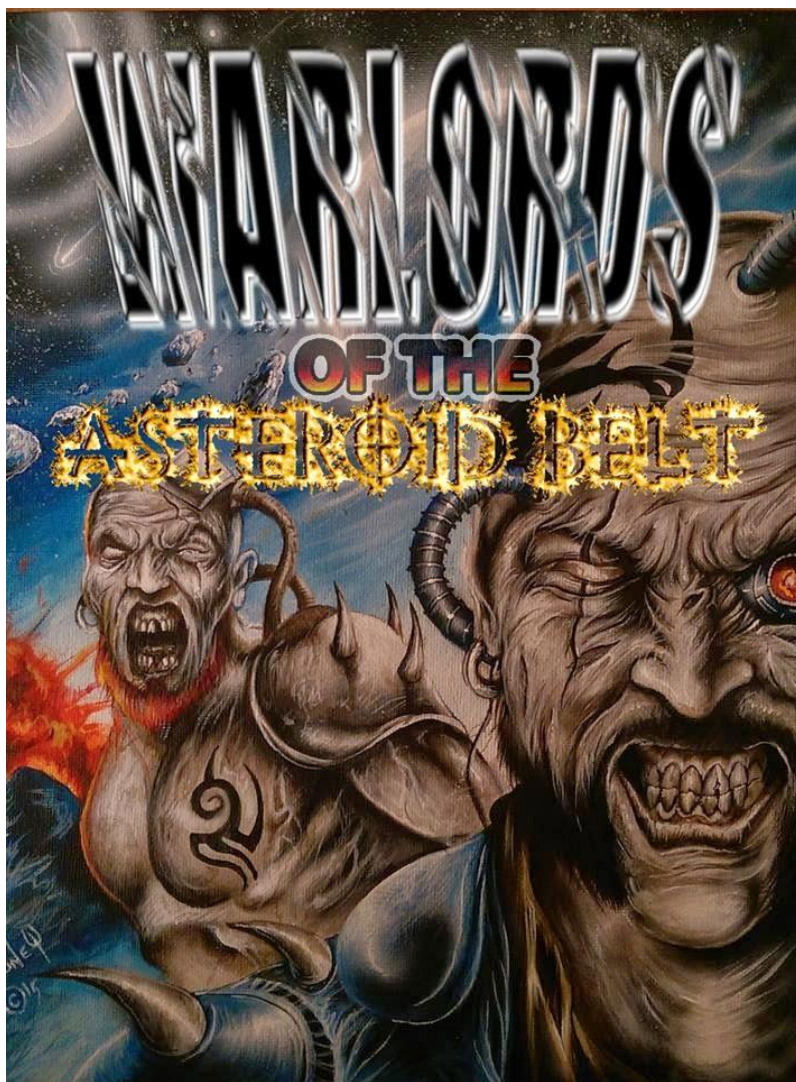
“Perhaps. What seemed natural to her was strange to you. But it was your thought to put Velna on equal terms with us; taking her out of mere kindness, to give her the dowry of a Prince’s favourite. That surprised Eveena, and it puzzled me. But I think I half understand you now, and if I do.... When Eveena told us how you saved her and defied the Regent, and Eivé asked you about it, you said so quietly, ‘There are some things a man cannot do.’ Is buying a girl cheap, because she is not a beauty, one of those things?”

“To take any advantage of her misfortune—to make her feel it in my conduct—to give her a place in my household on other terms than her equals—to show her less consideration or courtesy than one would give to a girl as beautiful as yourself—yes, Eunané! To my eyes, your friend is pleasant and pretty; but if not, would you have liked to feel that she was of less account here than yourself, because she has not such splendid beauty as yours?”

Eunané was too frank to conceal her gratification in this first acknowledgment of her charms, as she had shown her mortification while it was withheld—not, certainly, because undeserved. Her eyes brightened and her colour deepened in manifest pleasure. But she was equally frank in her answer to the implied compliment to her generosity, of whose justice she was not so well assured.

“I am afraid I should half have liked it, a year ago. Now, after I have lived so long with you and Eveena, I should be shamed by it! But, Clafempta, the things ‘a man cannot do’ are the things men do every day; —and women every hour!”

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## THE BATTLE OF DORKING by GT Chesney

### Part Two

We did not reach Waterloo till nearly midnight, and there was some delay in starting again. Several volunteer and militia regiments had arrived from the north; the station and all its approaches were jammed up with men, and trains were being despatched away as fast as they could be made up. All this time no news had reached us since the first announcement; but the excitement then aroused had now passed away under the influence of fatigue and want of sleep, and most of us dozed off as soon as we got under way. I did, at any rate, and was awake by the train stopping at Leatherhead. There was an up-train returning to town, and some persons in it were bringing up news from the coast. We could not, from our part of the train, hear what they said, but the rumour was passed up from one carriage to another. The enemy had landed in force at Worthing. Their position had been attacked by the troops from the camp near Brighton, and the action would be renewed in the morning. The volunteers had behaved very well. This was all the information we could get. So, then, the invasion had come at last. It was clear, at any rate, from what was said, that the enemy had not been driven back yet, and we should be in time most likely to take a share in the defence. It was sunrise when the train crawled into Dorking, for there had been numerous stoppages on the way; and here it was pulled up for a long time, and we were told to get out and stretch ourselves—an order gladly responded to, for we had been very closely packed all night. Most of us, too, took the opportunity to make an early breakfast off the food we had brought from Shoreditch. I had the remains of Mrs Travers's fowl and some bread wrapped up in my waterproof, which I shared with one or two less provident comrades. We could see from our halting-place that the line was blocked with trains beyond and behind. It must have been about eight o'clock when we got orders to take our seats again, and the train began to move slowly on towards Horsham. Horsham Junction was the point to be occupied—so the rumour went; but about ten o'clock, when halting at a small station a few miles short of it, the order came to leave the train, and our brigade formed in column on the highroad. Beyond us was some field- artillery; and further on, so we were told by a staff-officer, another brigade, which was to make up a division with ours. After more delays the line began to move, but not forwards; our route was towards the north-west, and a sort of suspicion of the state of affairs flashed across my mind. Horsham was already occupied by the enemy's advanced- guard, and we were to fall back on Leith Common, and take up a position threatening his flank, should he advance either to Guildford or Dorking. This was soon confirmed by what the colonel was told by the brigadier and passed down the ranks; and just now, for the first time, the boom of artillery came up on the light south breeze. In about an hour the firing ceased. What did it mean? We could not tell. Meanwhile our march continued. The day was very close and sultry, and the clouds of dust stirred up by our feet almost suffocated us. I had saved a soda-water-bottleful of yesterday's claret; but this went only a short way, for there were many mouths to share it with, and the thirst soon became as bad as ever. Several of the regiment fell out from faintness, and we made frequent halts to rest and let the stragglers come up. At last we reached the top of Leith Hill. It is a striking spot, being the highest point in the south of England. The view from it is splendid, and most lovely did the country look this summer day, although the grass was brown from the long drought. It was a great relief to get from the dusty road on to the common, and at the top of the hill there was a refreshing breeze. We could see now, for the first time, the whole of our division. Our own regiment did not muster more than 500, for it contained a large number of Government

office men who had been detained, like Danvers, for duty in town, and others were not much larger; but the militia regiment was very strong, and the whole division, I was told, mustered nearly 5000 rank and file. We could see other troops also in extension of our division, and could count a couple of field-batteries of Royal Artillery, besides some heavy guns, belonging to the volunteers apparently, drawn by carthorses. The cooler air, the sense of numbers, and the evident strength of the position we held, raised our spirits, which, I am not ashamed to say, had all the morning been depressed. It was not that we were not eager to close with the enemy, but that the counter-marching and halting ominously betokened a vacillation of purpose in those who had the guidance of affairs. Here in two days the invaders had got more than twenty miles inland, and nothing effectual had been done to stop them. And the ignorance in which we volunteers, from the colonel downwards, were kept of their movements, filled us with uneasiness. We could not but depict to ourselves the enemy as carrying out all the while firmly his well-considered scheme of attack, and contrasting it with our own uncertainty of purpose. The very silence with which his advance appeared to be conducted filled us with mysterious awe. Meanwhile the day wore on, and we became faint with hunger, for we had eaten nothing since daybreak. No provisions came up, and there were no signs of any commissariat officers. It seems that when we were at the Waterloo station a whole trainful of provisions was drawn up there, and our colonel proposed that one of the trucks should be taken off and attached to our train, so that we might have some food at hand; but the officer in charge, an assistant-controller I think they called him—this control department was a new-fangled affair which did us almost as much harm as the enemy in the long-run—said his orders were to keep all the stores together, and that he couldn't issue any without authority from the head of his department. So we had to go without. Those who had tobacco smoked—indeed there is no solace like a pipe under such circumstances. The militia regiment, I heard afterwards, had two days' provisions in their haversacks; it was we volunteers who had no haversacks, and nothing to put in them. All this time, I should tell you, while we were lying on the grass with our arms piled, the General, with the brigadiers and staff, was riding about slowly from point to point of the edge of the common, looking out with his glass towards the south valley. Orderlies and staff-officers were constantly coming, and about three o'clock there arrived up a road that led towards Horsham a small body of lancers and a regiment of yeomanry, who had, it appears, been out in advance, and now drew up a short way in front of us in column facing to the south. Whether they could see anything in their front I could not tell, for we were behind the crest of the hill ourselves, and so could not look into the valley below; but shortly afterwards the assembly sounded. Commanding officers were called out by the General, and received some brief instructions; and the column began to march again towards London, the militia this time coming last in our brigade. A rumour regarding the object of this counter-march soon spread through the ranks. The enemy was not going to attack us here, but was trying to turn the position on both sides, one column pointing to Reigate, the other to Aldershot; and so we must fall back and take up a position at Dorking. The line of the great chalk-range was to be defended. A large force was concentrating at Guildford, another at Reigate, and we should find supports at Dorking. The enemy would be awaited in these positions. Such, so far as we privates could get at the facts, was to be the plan of operations. Down the hill, therefore, we marched. From one or two points we could catch a brief sight of the railway in the valley below running from Dorking to Horsham. Men in red were working upon it here and there. They were the Royal Engineers, someone said, breaking up the line. On we marched. The dust seemed worse than ever. In one village through which we passed—I forget the name now—there was a pump on the green. Here we stopped and had a good drink; and passing by a large farm, the farmer's wife and

two or three of her maids stood at the gate and handed us hunches of bread and cheese out of some baskets. I got the share of a bit, but the bottom of the good woman's baskets must soon have been reached. Not a thing else was to be had till we got to Dorking about six o'clock; indeed most of the farm-houses appeared deserted already. On arriving there we were drawn up in the street, and just opposite was a baker's shop. Our fellows asked leave at first by twos and threes to go in and buy some loaves, but soon others began to break off and crowd into the shop, and at last a regular scramble took place. If there had been any order preserved, and a regular distribution arranged, they would no doubt have been steady enough, but hunger makes men selfish; each man felt that his stopping behind would do no good—he would simply lose his share; so it ended by almost the whole regiment joining in the scrimmage, and the shop was cleared out in a couple of minutes; while as for paying, you could not get your hand into your pocket for the crush. The colonel tried in vain to stop the row; some of the officers were as bad as the men. Just then a staff-officer rode by; he could scarcely make way for the crowd, and was pushed against rather rudely, and in a passion he called out to us to behave properly, like soldiers, and not like a parcel of roughs. "Oh, blow it, governor," said Dick Wake, "you aren't agoing to come between a poor cove and his grub." Wake was an articulated attorney, and, as we used to say in those days, a cheeky young chap, although a good-natured fellow enough. At this speech, which was followed by some more remarks of the sort from those about him, the staff-officer became angrier still. "Orderly," cried he to the lancer riding behind him, "take that man to the provost marshal. As for you, sir," he said, turning to our colonel, who sat on his horse silent with astonishment, "if you don't want some of your men shot before their time, you and your precious officers had better keep this rabble in a little better order;" and poor Dick, who looked crestfallen enough, would certainly have been led off at the tail of the sergeant's horse, if the brigadier had not come up and arranged matters, and marched us off to the hill beyond the town. This incident made us both angry and crestfallen. We were annoyed at being so roughly spoken to: at the same time we felt we had deserved it, and were ashamed of the misconduct. Then, too, we had lost confidence in our colonel, after the poor figure he cut in the affair. He was a good fellow, the colonel, and showed himself a brave one next day; but he aimed too much at being popular, and didn't understand a bit how to command.

To resume: —We had scarcely reached the hill above the town, which we were told was to be our bivouac for the night, when the welcome news came that a food-train had arrived at the station; but there were no carts to bring the things up, so a fatigue-party went down and carried back a supply to us in their arms, —loaves, a barrel of rum, packets of tea, and joints of meat—abundance for all; but there was not a kettle or a cooking-pot in the regiment, and we could not eat the meat raw. The colonel and officers were no better off. They had arranged to have a regular mess, with crockery, steward, and all complete, but the establishment never turned up, and what had become of it no one knew. Some of us were sent back into the town to see what we could procure in the way of cooking utensils. We found the street full of artillery, baggage-waggons, and mounted officers, and volunteers shopping like ourselves; and all the houses appeared to be occupied by troops. We succeeded in getting a few kettles and saucepans, and I obtained for myself a leather bag, with a strap to go over the shoulder, which proved very handy afterwards; and thus laden, we trudged back to our camp on the hill, filling the kettles with dirty water from a little stream which runs between the hill and the town, for there was none to be had above. It was nearly a couple of miles each way; and, exhausted as we were with marching and want of rest, we were almost too tired to eat. The cooking was of the roughest, as you may

suppose; all we could do was to cut off slices of the meat and boil them in the saucepans, using our fingers for forks. The tea, however, was very refreshing; and, thirsty as we were, we drank it by the gallon. Just before it grew dark, the brigade-major came round, and, with the adjutant, showed our colonel how to set a picket in advance of our line a little way down the face of the hill. It was not necessary to place one, I suppose, because the town in our front was still occupied with troops; but no doubt the practice would be useful. We had also a quarter-guard, and a line of sentries in front and rear of our line, communicating with those of the regiments on our flanks. Firewood was plentiful, for the hill was covered with beautiful wood; but it took some time to collect it, for we had nothing but our pocket-knives to cut down the branches with.

So we lay down to sleep. My company had no duty, and we had the night undisturbed to ourselves; but, tired though I was, the excitement and the novelty of the situation made sleep difficult. And although the night was still and warm, and we were sheltered by the woods, I soon found it chilly with no better covering than my thin dust-coat, the more so as my clothes, saturated with perspiration during the day, had never dried; and before daylight I woke from a short nap, shivering with cold, and was glad to get warm with others by a fire. I then noticed that the opposite hills on the south were dotted with fires; and we thought at first they must belong to the enemy, but we were told that the ground up there was still held by a strong rear-guard of regulars, and that there need be no fear of a surprise.

At the first sign of dawn the bugles of the regiments sounded the reveillé, and we were ordered to fall in, and the roll was called. About twenty men were absent, who had fallen out sick the day before; they had been sent up to London by train during the night, I believe. After standing in column for about half an hour, the brigade major came down with orders to pile arms and stand easy; and perhaps half an hour afterwards we were told to get breakfast as quickly as possible, and to cook a day's food at the same time. This operation was managed pretty much in the same way as the evening before, except that we had our cooking pots and kettles ready. Meantime there was leisure to look around, and from where we stood there was a commanding view of one of the most beautiful scenes in England. Our regiment was drawn up on the extremity of the ridge which runs from Guildford to Dorking. This is indeed merely a part of the great chalk-range which extends from beyond Aldershot east to the Medway; but there is a gap in the ridge just here where the little stream that runs past Dorking turns suddenly to the north, to find its way to the Thames. We stood on the slope of the hill, as it trends down eastward towards this gap, and had passed our bivouac in what appeared to be a gentleman's park. A little way above us, and to our right, was a very fine country-seat to which the part was attached, now occupied by the headquarters of our division. From this house the hill sloped steeply down southward to the valley below, which runs nearly east and west parallel to the ridge, and carries the railway and the road from Guildford to Reigate; and in which valley, immediately in front of the chateau, and perhaps a mile and a half distant from it, was the little town of Dorking, nestled in the trees, and rising up the foot of the slopes on the other side of the valley which stretched away to Leith Common, the scene of yesterday's march. Thus the main part of the town of Dorking was on our right front, but the suburbs stretched away eastward nearly to our proper front, culminating in a small railway station, from which the grassy slopes of the park rose up dotted with shrubs and trees to where we were standing. Round this railway station was a cluster of villas and one or two mills, of whose gardens we thus had a bird's-eye view, their little ornamental ponds glistening like looking-glasses in the morning sun. Immediately on our left the park sloped

steeply down to the gap before mentioned, through which ran the little stream, as well as the railway from Epsom to Brighton, nearly due north and south, meeting the Guildford and Reigate line at right angles. Close to the point of intersection and the little station already mentioned, was the station of the former line where we had stopped the day before. Beyond the gap on the east (our left), and in continuation of our ridge, rose the chalk-hill again. The shoulder of this ridge overlooking the gap is called Box Hill, from the shrubbery of boxwood with which it was covered. Its sides were very steep, and the top of the ridge was covered with troops. The natural strength of our position was manifested at a glance; a high grassy ridge steep to the south, with a stream in front, and but little cover up the sides. It seemed made for a battle-field. The weak point was the gap; the ground at the junction of the railways and the roads immediately at the entrance of the gap formed a little valley, dotted, as I have said, with buildings and gardens. This, in one sense, was the key of the position; for although it would not be tenable while we held the ridge commanding it, the enemy by carrying this point and advancing through the gap would cut our line in two. But you must not suppose I scanned the ground thus critically at the time. Anybody, indeed, might have been struck with the natural advantages of our position; but what, as I remember, most impressed me, was the peaceful beauty of the scene—the little town with the outline of the houses obscured by a blue mist, the massive crispness of the foliage, the outlines of the great trees, lighted up by the sun, and relieved by deep-blue shade. So thick was the timber here, rising up the southern slopes of the valley, that it looked almost as if it might have been a primeval forest. The quiet of the scene was the more impressive because contrasted in the mind with the scenes we expected to follow; and I can remember, as if it were yesterday, the sensation of bitter regret that it should now be too late to avert this coming desecration of our country, which might so easily have been prevented. A little firmness, a little prevision on the part of our rulers, even a little common-sense, and this great calamity would have been rendered utterly impossible. Too late, alas! We were like the foolish virgins in the parable.

But you must not suppose the scene immediately around was gloomy: the camp was brisk and bustling enough. We had got over the stress of weariness; our stomachs were full; we felt a natural enthusiasm at the prospect of having so soon to take a part as the real defenders of the country, and we were inspirited at the sight of the large force that was now assembled. Along the slopes which trended off to the rear of our ridge, troops came marching up—volunteers, militia, cavalry, and guns; these, I heard, had come down from the north as far as Leatherhead the night before, and had marched over at daybreak. Long trains, too, began to arrive by the rail through the gap, one after the other, containing militia and volunteers, who moved up to the ridge to the right and left, and took up their position, massed for the most part on the slopes which ran up from, and in rear of, where we stood. We now formed part of an army corps, we were told, consisting of three divisions, but what regiments composed the other two divisions I never heard. All this movement we could distinctly see from our position, for we had hurried over our breakfast, expecting every minute that the battle would begin, and now stood or sat about on the ground near our piled arms. Early in the morning, too, we saw a very long train come along the valley from the direction of Guildford, full of redcoats. It halted at the little station at our feet, and the troops alighted. We could soon make out their bear-skins. They were the Guards, coming to reinforce this part of the line. Leaving a detachment of skirmishers to hold the line of the railway embankment, the main body marched up with a springy step and with the band playing, and drew up across the gap on our left, in prolongation of our line. There appeared to be three battalions of them, for they formed up in that number of columns at short intervals.

Shortly after this I was sent over to Box Hill with a message from our colonel to the colonel of a volunteer regiment stationed there, to know whether an ambulance-cart was obtainable, as it was reported this regiment was well supplied with carriage, whereas we were without any: my mission, however, was futile. Crossing the valley, I found a scene of great confusion at the railway station. Trains were still coming in with stores, ammunition, guns, and appliances of all sorts, which were being unloaded as fast as possible; but there were scarcely any means of getting the things off. There were plenty of waggons of all sorts, but hardly any horses to draw them, and the whole place was blocked up; while, to add to the confusion, a regular exodus had taken place of the people from the town, who had been warned that it was likely to be the scene of fighting. Ladies and women of all sorts and ages, and children, some with bundles, some empty-handed, were seeking places in the train, but there appeared no one on the spot authorised to grant them, and these poor creatures were pushing their way up and down, vainly asking for information and permission to get away. In the crowd I observed our surgeon, who likewise was in search of an ambulance of some sort: his whole professional apparatus, he said, consisted of a case of instruments. Also in the crowd I stumbled upon Wood, Travers's old coachman. He had been sent down by his mistress to Guildford, because it was supposed our regiment had gone there, riding the horse, and laden with a supply of things—food, blankets, and, of course, a letter. He had also brought my knapsack; but at Guildford the horse was pressed for artillery work, and a receipt for it given him in exchange, so he had been obliged to leave all the heavy packages there, including my knapsack; but the faithful old man had brought on as many things as he could carry, and hearing that we should be found in this part, had walked over thus laden from Guildford. He said that place was crowded with troops, and that the heights were lined with them the whole way between the two towns; also, that some trains with wounded had passed up from the coast in the night, through Guildford. I led him off to where our regiment was, relieving the old man from part of the load he was staggering under. The food sent was not now so much needed, but the plates, knives, and drinking-vessels, promised to be handy—and Travers, you may be sure, was delighted to get his letter; while a couple of newspapers the old man had brought were eagerly competed for by all, even at this critical moment, for we had heard no authentic news since we left London on Sunday. And even at this distance of time, although I only glanced down the paper, I can remember almost the very words I read there. They were both copies of the same paper: the first, published on Sunday evening, when the news had arrived of the successful landing at three points, was written in a tone of despair. The country must confess that it had been taken by surprise. The conqueror would be satisfied with the humiliation inflicted by a peace dictated on our own shores; it was the clear duty of the Government to accept the best terms obtainable, and to avoid further bloodshed and disaster, and avert the fall of our tottering mercantile credit. The next morning's issue was in quite a different tone. Apparently the enemy had received a check, for we were here exhorted to resistance. An impregnable position was to be taken up along the Downs, a force was concentrating there far outnumbering the rash invaders, who, with an invincible line before them, and the sea behind, had no choice between destruction or surrender. Let there be no pusillanimous talk of negotiation, the fight must be fought out; and there could be but one issue. England, expectant but calm, awaited with confidence the result of the attack on its unconquerable volunteers. The writing appeared to me eloquent, but rather inconsistent. The same paper said the Government had sent off 500 workmen from Woolwich, to open a branch arsenal at Birmingham.

All this time we had nothing to do, except to change our position, which we did every few minutes, now moving up the hill farther to our right, now taking ground lower down to our left, as one order after another was brought down the line; but the staff-officers were galloping about perpetually with orders, while the rumble of the artillery as they moved about from one part of the field to another went on almost incessantly. At last the whole line stood to arms, the bands struck up, and the general commanding our army corps came riding down with his staff. We had seen him several times before, as we had been moving frequently about the position during the morning; but he now made a sort of formal inspection. He was a tall thin man, with long light hair, very well mounted, and as he sat his horse with an erect seat, and came prancing down the line, at a little distance he looked as if he might be five-and-twenty; but I believe he had served more than fifty years, and had been made a peer for services performed when quite an old man. I remember that he had more decorations than there was room for on the breast of his coat, and wore them suspended like a necklace round his neck. Like all the other generals, he was dressed in blue, with a cocked-hat and feathers—a bad plan, I thought, for it made them very conspicuous. The general halted before our battalion, and after looking at us a while, made a short address: We had a post of honour next her Majesty's Guards, and would show ourselves worthy of it, and of the name of Englishmen. It did not need, he said, to be a general to see the strength of our position; it was impregnable, if properly held. Let us wait till the enemy was well pounded, and then the word would be given to go at him. Above everything, we must be steady. He then shook hands with our colonel, we gave him a cheer, and he rode on to where the Guards were drawn up.

Now then, we thought, the battle will begin. But still there were no signs of the enemy; and the air, though hot and sultry, began to be very hazy, so that you could scarcely see the town below, and the hills opposite were merely a confused blur, in which no features could be distinctly made out. After a while, the tension of feeling which followed the general's address relaxed, and we began to feel less as if everything depended on keeping our rifles firmly grasped: we were told to pile arms again, and got leave to go down by tens and twenties to the stream below to drink. This stream, and all the hedges and banks on our side of it, were held by our skirmishers, but the town had been abandoned. The position appeared an excellent one, except that the enemy, when they came, would have almost better cover than our men. While I was down at the brook, a column emerged from the town, making for our position. We thought for a moment it was the enemy, and you could not make out the colour of the uniforms for the dust; but it turned out to be our rear-guard, falling back from the opposite hills which they had occupied the previous night. One battalion, of rifles, halted for a few minutes at the stream to let the men drink, and I had a minute's talk with a couple of the officers. They had formed part of the force which had attacked the enemy on their first landing. They had it all their own way, they said, at first, and could have beaten the enemy back easily if they had been properly supported; but the whole thing was mismanaged. The volunteers came on very pluckily, they said, but they got into confusion, and so did the militia, and the attack failed with serious loss. It was the wounded of this force which had passed through Guildford in the night. The officers asked us eagerly about the arrangements for the battle, and when we said that the Guards were the only regular troops in this part of the field, shook their heads ominously.

While we were talking, a third officer came up; he was a dark man with a smooth face and a curious excited manner. "You are volunteers, I suppose," he said, quickly, his eye flashing the

while. "Well, now, look here; mind I don't want to hurt your feelings, or to say anything unpleasant, but I'll tell you what; if all you gentlemen were just to go back, and leave us to fight it out alone, it would be a devilish good thing. We could do it a precious deal better without you, I assure you. We don't want your help, I can tell you. We would much rather be left alone, I assure you. Mind I don't want to say anything rude, but that's a fact." Having blurted out this passionately, he strode away before anyone could reply, or the other officers could stop him. They apologised for his rudeness, saying that his brother, also in the regiment, had been killed on Sunday, and that this, and the sun, and marching, had affected his head. The officers told us that the enemy's advanced-guard was close behind, but that he had apparently been waiting for reinforcements, and would probably not attack in force until noon. It was, however, nearly three o'clock before the battle began. We had almost worn out the feeling of expectancy. For twelve hours had we been waiting for the coming struggle, till at last it seemed almost as if the invasion were but a bad dream, and the enemy, as yet unseen by us, had no real existence. So far things had not been very different, but for the numbers and for what we had been told, from a Volunteer review on Brighton Downs. I remember that these thoughts were passing through my mind as we lay down in groups on the grass, some smoking, some nibbling at their bread, some even asleep, when the listless state we had fallen into was suddenly disturbed by a gunshot fired from the top of the hill on our right, close by the big house. It was the first time I had ever heard a shot fired, and although it is fifty years ago, the angry whistle of the shot as it left the gun is in my ears now. The sound was soon to become common enough. We all jumped up at the report, and fell in almost without the word being given, grasping our rifles tightly, and the leading files peering forward to look for the approaching enemy. This gun was apparently the signal to begin, for now our batteries opened fire all along the line. What they were firing at I could not see, and I am sure the gunners could not see much themselves. I have told you what a haze had come over the air since the morning, and now the smoke from the guns settled like a pall over the hill, and soon we could see little but the men in our ranks, and the outline of some gunners in the battery drawn up next us on the slope on our right. This firing went on, I should think, for nearly a couple of hours, and still there was no reply. We could see the gunners—it was a troop of horse-artillery—working away like fury, ramming, loading, and running up with cartridges, the officer in command riding slowly up and down just behind his guns, and peering out with his field-glass into the mist. Once or twice they ceased firing to let their smoke clear away, but this did not do much good. For nearly two hours did this go on, and not a shot came in reply. If a battle is like this, said Dick Wake, who was my next-hand file, it's mild work, to say the least. The words were hardly uttered when a rattle of musketry was heard in front; our skirmishers were at it, and very soon the bullets began to sing over our heads, and some struck the ground at our feet. Up to this time we had been in column; we were now deployed into line on the ground assigned to us. From the valley or gap on our left there ran a lane right up the hill almost due west, or along our front. This lane had a thick bank about four feet high, and the greater part of the regiment was drawn up behind it; but a little way up the hill the lane trended back out of the line, so the right of the regiment here left it and occupied the open grass-land of the park. The bank had been cut away at this point to admit of our going in and out. We had been told in the morning to cut down the bushes on the top of the bank, so as to make the space clear for firing over, but we had no tools to work with; however, a party of sappers had come down and finished the job. My company was on the right, and was thus beyond the shelter of the friendly bank. On our right again was the battery of artillery already mentioned; then came a battalion of the line, then more guns, then a great mass of militia and volunteers and a few line up to the big house. At least this

was the order before the firing began; after that I do not know what changes took place.

And now the enemy's artillery began to open; where their guns were posted we could not see, but we began to hear the rush of the shells over our heads, and the bang as they burst just beyond. And now what took place I can really hardly tell you. Sometimes when I try and recall the scene, it seems as if it lasted for only a few minutes; yet I know, as we lay on the ground, I thought the hours would never pass away, as we watched the gunners still plying their task, firing at the invisible enemy, never stopping for a moment except when now and again a dull blow would be heard and a man fall down, then three or four of his comrades would carry him to the rear. The captain no longer rode up and down; what had become of him I do not know. Two of the guns ceased firing for a time; they had got injured in some way, and up rode an artillery general. I think I see him now, a very handsome man, with straight features and a dark moustache, his breast covered with medals. He appeared in a great rage at the guns stopping fire.

"Who commands this battery?" he cried.

"I do, Sir Henry," said an officer, riding forward, whom I had not noticed before.

The group is before me at this moment, standing out clear against the background of smoke, Sir Henry erect on his splendid charger, his flashing eye, his left arm pointing towards the enemy to enforce something he was going to say, the young officer reining in his horse just beside him, and saluting with his right hand raised to his busby. This for a moment, then a dull thud, and both horses and riders are prostrate on the ground. A round-shot had struck all four at the saddle-line. Some of the gunners ran up to help, but neither officer could have lived many minutes. This was not the first I saw killed. Sometime before this, almost immediately on the enemy's artillery opening, as we were lying, I heard something like the sound of metal striking metal, and at the same moment Dick Wake, who was next me in the ranks, leaning on his elbows, sank forward on his face. I looked round and saw what had happened; a shot fired at a high elevation, passing over his head, had struck the ground behind, nearly cutting his thigh off. It must have been the ball striking his sheathed bayonet which made the noise. Three of us carried the poor fellow to the rear, with difficulty for the shattered limb; but he was nearly dead from loss of blood when we got to the doctor, who was waiting in a sheltered hollow about two hundred yards in rear, with two other doctors in plain clothes, who had come up to help. We deposited our burden and returned to the front. Poor Wake was sensible when we left him, but apparently too shaken by the shock to be able to speak. Wood was there helping the doctors. I paid more visits to the rear of the same sort before the evening was over.

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK

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