

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

# **Schlock!**

**WEBZINE**

**VOL. 11, ISSUE 29  
3RD SEPT 2017**

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HAVELOCK—  
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MAN POINTED  
HIS FINGER...**

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**BY ANDREW  
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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!

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

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, 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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ROGUE PLANET PRESS SUBMISSIONS CALL

## EDITORIAL

This week, an ambitious job centre worker regrets her professional obligation when she crosses a Romanian gypsy. The owner of a shop that deals death and disease has a tricky customer. Itsovar sees an opportunity to infiltrate another world with sorcery. An interior decorator promises to transform your home and your life—terminally. And in *Hettford*, Gary's job offer inspires Shelley to seek a way to break his curse.

In *The Battle For Callisto*, Colonel Westland decides to send out the 'mice'. The settlers on Lincoln Island ponder the identity of their mysterious protector. And Olaf encounters the Patriarch of Alexandria.

—Gavin Chappell

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## THE PROMOTION by Steven Havelock

“Jane, I know you want this promotion, but you haven’t sanctioned enough people this week. You need to be more ruthless.”

“Yes, I know.” Jane agreed with a self-depreciating smile.

“Okay, hit those targets and I will let you know at the end of the week who’s getting the promotion.”

Ian Fuller, head manager of this area’s job centre, smiled, stepped in closer and whispered something barely audible.

“There’s only you and Imran in the running for the promotion. So go for it! I know you can do it.” Jane smiled self depreciatively again.

“Okay Jane, get to work.” Ian turned and walked away to his office, leaving Jane to return to her desk.

Her first client of the day was a Romanian gypsy. A large woman dressed in a long Romanian flowing dress. Jane pulled up the woman’s file. Her name was Ericka Kazinsky.

As soon as Jane saw her she knew that here was an easy target to sanction. The more sanctions she carried out the better chance she would have of getting that promotion that had eluded her for the last three years.

“I’m sorry, but you haven’t proved to me that you have searched for enough jobs this week. I am going to sanction you and stop your JSA for four weeks.”

“Please! Please! You can’t sanction me, I have no food in the house to eat!”

“I’m sorry,” said Jane, “but you haven’t proved to me that you are actively looking for work, so I have no choice.”

“If you stop my benefits I will kill myself!”

“That is your choice. Have a good day.”

“I will put on you a curse! You evil woman!”

Jane heard the woman shout something in a foreign language that she couldn’t understand. “Security!” shouted Jane, and two burly security guards walked over. “Please show this lady out.”

### *Later That Night*

Jane dreamt. She was at home, in a house she didn’t recognise.

*My stomach! I have a pain in my stomach that I have never experienced before.*

She walked into the kitchen.

*Food! I need food! Once I've eaten something I will be okay.*

Jane opened the fridge. Nothing! No food. Nothing!

*The pain in my stomach is excruciating!*

Jane buckled over.

Jane awoke later that night.

*What's woken me?*

Just then Jane noticed a dark shadow near the bottom of her bed.

*I am the shadow man and I will come for your soul.*

What the hell?

*You have been cursed.*

*The Next Day At Work.*

*I can't stop thinking of that Romanian gypsy woman.*

Jane spent most of the day seeing JSA clients, and she managed to hit her target of sanctioning six.

Ian would be pleased.

The nightmare was so vivid. The pain so...real...and the shadow man...?

After finishing work, Jane did something that surprised her.

*I've got to see that gypsy woman and reverse the sanction.*

Jane had made a note of the woman's address earlier and now headed over to her house to give her the good news.

She found the house and knocked on the door.



*I can hear people crying.*

The door was opened by another woman.

“Hi, my name is Jane, I am from the local job centre, I come to see Ericka.”

“Come in, come in, you can see her. She’s in the living room.”

Jane entered the house. In the living room she saw a casket.

“Come over here, Ericka is right here!” said the woman, opening the casket.

Jane glanced at the waxen, rigid face.

*She’s dead!*

Jane turned and ran.

“Oh, why don’t you stay and say something to Ericka?”

Jane heard laughter behind her as she ran from the house to her car.

*Later That Night*

Jane dreamt.

*I’m in a house again, just like last night. The pain in my stomach is unbelievable. Food! I need food.*

She headed towards the fridge, knowing that it would be empty again, but hoping beyond hope that it contained some food, even if it was a scrap of bread and cheese. She ran to the kitchen and flung open the fridge and couldn’t believe what confronted her. In the fridge was the head of Ericka, the woman that had cursed her.

Just then Jane woke up but thought she was still dreaming as another nightmarish scene confronted her.

*No, it’s not real, don’t look, it can’t be real.*

Just like last night, at the bottom of her bed was a dark shadow. A voice entered her head and she knew it was the shadow speaking to her.

*I am the shadow man. You have been cursed and in two days I shall take your soul to hell.*

Jane closed her eyes and when she opened them again the shadow was gone.

*Oh my God! A nightmare, just a horrible nightmare!*

Jane pinched her arm and winced in pain. It wasn’t a nightmare, it was real!



She got out of bed, went downstairs, made herself a cup of tea and switched on her computer.

She typed in ‘Romanian gypsy curse’ and ‘shadow man.’

*An Hour Later.*

*I feel as cold as ice, and my heart is beating like crazy. I have never heard of the shadow man before but after reading for the last hour I now know he is real.*

She sat there racking her brains.

Just then—Sammy—her cat woke.

*Sammy can sense something wrong.*

Sammy jumped into her lap and started purring. The sound soothed her slightly and then an idea came to her.

*I will go to the Indian magic shop just on the outskirts of town and see if they can help me.*

The next day was a Saturday so she was off from work. At about 1pm she headed out the shop.

*I pray they can help me.*

She entered the shop and saw lots of beautiful little trinkets, gems and stones, and small eggs made out of a material she didn’t recognise. An hour later in the back room of the shop, she had told her story to the proprietor, who was an Indian woman.

*I hope they just say the shadow man doesn’t exist and it’s all in my imagination.*

But Jane was to have no such luck.

To Jane’s horror, the woman confirmed the shadow man was very real. She told Jane, ‘The only way to stop the shadow man taking your soul is to make a sacrifice.’

The Indian woman told Jane what she needed to do.

Later at 8pm on a December night, the Indian woman knocked on Jane’s door.

*This is truly horrific, I have had Sammy since a kitten, and now I’ve got to sacrifice her to save my soul.*

The Indian woman drew a pentagram in chalk on Jane’s living room; on her hard wood floor.

Jane picked up Sammy. Tears came to her eyes and her vision blurred, which she was thankful for since she didn’t see the knife that cut off the cat’s head.

When her vision cleared a few seconds later, she saw Sammy slumped down dead.

“Am I free?” she asked, “Will the curse be lifted now?”

“There is no way to know for sure, only time will tell.” She looks a little worried, thought Jane. “Tonight I will stay with you, to see if the shadow man shows up and when he does I will offer him the sacrifice instead of your soul.”

So they sat in the large pentagram, which Geeta, the Indian woman, had placed all around each of the five points of the pentagram.

They sat later and later into the night. Jane started drowsing.

*What the...!*

Jane was suddenly awake. She saw the candles flicker.

“He’s here!” said Geeta. “Oh Shadow man accept our offering and disappear and not come back.”

In a second, Jane saw the shadow enter the pentagram and close over the now dead cat.

“It’s gone, the cat has disappeared,” said Jane. “Did it work?” she asked, happy and excited.

“I hope so, but only time will tell.”

“What do you mean? It worked! Look! The cat has disappeared.”

“Yes.”

Jane wrote out a cheque for the sum of £1000 to Geeta and then Geeta left.

The next day was Sunday and an old ex-boyfriend of Jane’s was supposed to be staying. Jane awoke late at 12:30 pm.

*I got to get this place half decent. What will Simon think if he sees all this?*

That night at about 8 pm Simon arrived. They went out for a meal and discussed their lives.

“I’m really hopeful about this promotion. I hit all the targets that my manager set.”

“That’s great!” said Simon enthusiastically.

After the meal at the Chinese restaurant they headed home. They drank wine late into the night and then retired to bed.

Two hours later, Jane thought, *The sex was amazing, Simon never disappoints, and such a release after the last few days.*

Jane was asleep.

“Jane...Jane...” It was Simon’s voice. Jane turned around in bed to face him.

“Simon, what is it?”

“I don’t feel well.”

“What do you mean?”

Simon started retching and Jane saw that he was about to vomit. Then to her utter horror, Jane saw a sight that she would never forget. Simon retched more furiously. Blood burst from his mouth.

*Oh God! No!*

Simon opened his mouth wider and wider and Sammy, Jane’s dead cat, burst out of his mouth.

The dead cat lay on the bed sheets, along with copious amounts of blood.

The room darkened and Jane felt an evil presence like she had the previous two nights. Then to her horror she knew...

*The shadow man is here!*

Simon and Jane looked to the end of the bed.

The shadow man was there.

“What the hell...” exclaimed Simon.

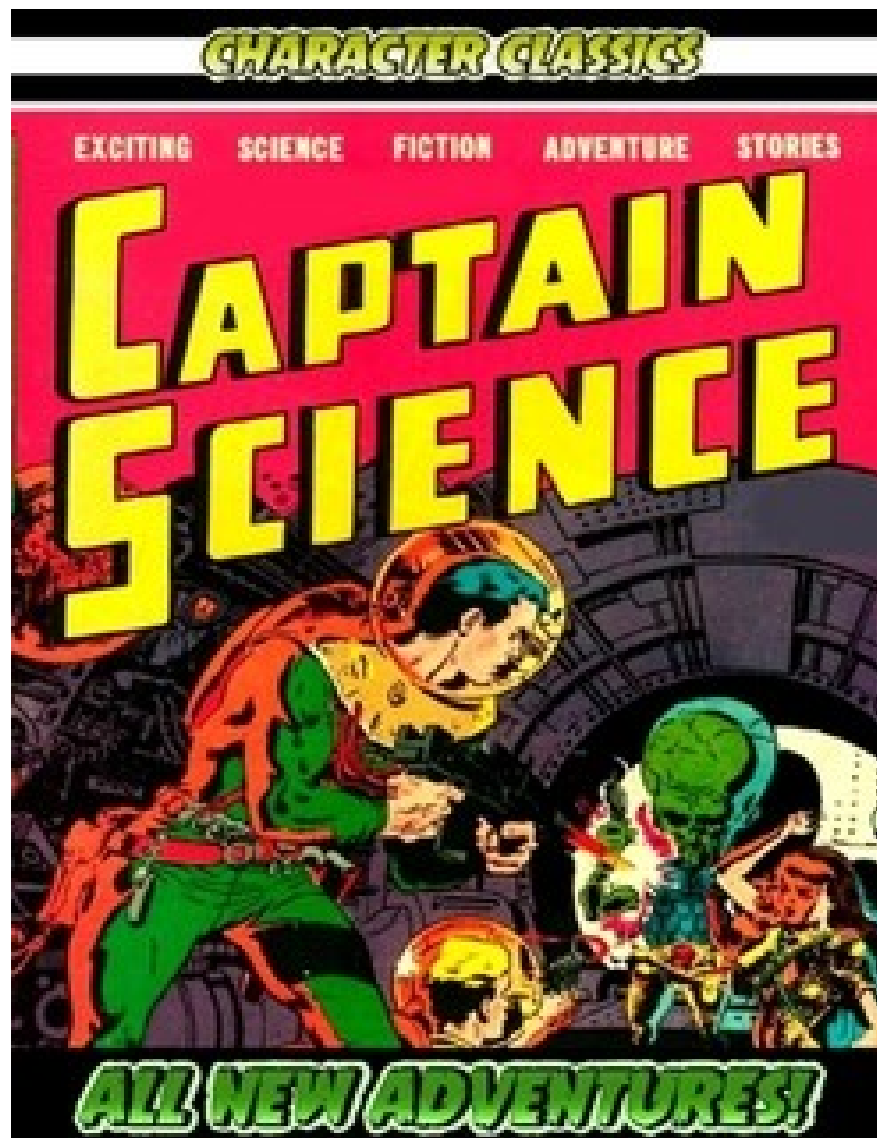
“Simon, he’s come for me...” said Jane in a defeated dead voice.

The shadow man pointed his finger. Jane felt immeasurable pain as her soul started to leave her body.

All for a stupid promotion...

THE END

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## THE SICKNESS MANIFESTO by Gary Murphy

James Excalibur sat behind the counter gently twiddling the corners of his moustache and whistling a rarity by Beethoven, pretending to enjoy this poorest of tunes and have enormous fun as he whiled away the hours until the shop would shut up and close at the usual 5.00 pm.

The shop dealt in death and disease, a new and highly exciting subculture which was sweeping the whole planet right now, providing macabre services, potions and pills, that was growing in popularity by the day.

Today, as Excalibur sipped from a cup of Earl Grey, he raised his eyebrows and smiled at the gentleman entering the shop by the door, betrayed by the gentle tinkle of a bell which chimed on such occasions.

“Good evening, sir...” Excalibur said, “...you catch me as I am about to shut shop for the day. Can I help you with anything?”

He was always this jovial and jaunty, especially coming up to closing time.

James Excalibur was 67, a bachelor his entire life, and he lived alone in a small rural region of West Cumbria called Keswick.

The stranger extended his hand, and the shopkeeper shook it enthusiastically hard. He noted the stranger had an almighty grip, tight and powerful. Almost vicelike, in many respects, somebody that prided themselves on their strength, displaying their strength as often as they could.

“Seymour Smith,” the man said, “and I’m pleased to meet you. You might be able to help my wife and me. You see, we’d both like to die...rather horribly and in much pain.”

“Very good, Mr Smith...you’ve come to the right place certainly. Do you have any specific idea as to which way you and Mrs Smith would like to perish?”

“I was hoping you might recommend something—something affordable. My wife would like to die particularly horribly, you see.”

Excalibur paused to think. Then, clicked his fingers, but said regretfully, “I have a shop full of disease and viruses. Take your pick...please, have a look at what is on display in the glass cabinets.”

The entire shop had an antique feel to it that anyone might call old-fashioned or even quaint.

The stranger tipped his bowler hat and set about scouring the shelves, mainly the ones above the counter where the good stuff was bottled in all sorts of coloured liquid.

It was a fanfare and magical colour and variety. Death never looked so good...

“You’ll have to help me...” Smith said, shaking his head, “...It looks like I’m spoilt for choice. There is so many ways to die.”

The two men chuckled heartily.

Excalibur said, "Perhaps you could start off with a dose of whooping cough that develops into a chest infection, if you don't mind spending your last hours on a hospital ventilator, and in exceptional discomfort."

"Personally, I'd like something snappier and a lot quicker. Something sharp and painful like poison...I noticed in the window you have white knee spiders, those for which no anti-venom has been unearthed yet. I wouldn't mind getting bitten and perishing that way."

Excalibur said, "Are you sure I can't tempt you with lung disease or HIV, or even the Plague...we have a fresh plague, imported from Uganda, which is painful but deadly as hell. You bleed from every orifice once the disease takes grip."

The stranger was unsure and stroked his chin as he considered. "I'm looking to die around Christmas time...just to make a small statement, you know?"

"Yes, in amongst all those frolics and good cheer, Christmas proves a welcome time for many to die. In particular, those who have just had enough of the repetitive, tedious Yuletide spirit, the young children's laughter and joy, the kisses and false festive servitude. Personally, I hate it when they show bloody Wizard of Oz on the telly every year...enough to make you want to slash your wrists if ever there was a single damned reason!"

"Yes," Smith said, "My wife certainly fancied AIDS or HIV. She wants a slow death but I'm trying to convince her to go for something more drastic and immediate, and something that will prove delightfully sore, and where the level of the glorious waves of agonizing suffering is monumental."

Excalibur said, "The White Knee Spider is a fine choice, and cheap at two-hundred pounds. All you need to do is take the creature home with you in its cage, and then you and your wife put your hands in the cage itself and wait for the little devil to notice. The subsequent venomous bite will feel like a hammer-blow, and whenever it chooses to bite, this will first send you dizzy and nauseous, until you fall into a deep sleep from which you will never wake."

Seymour Smith extended his right arm and held his right hand out palm-up, as he cradled what appeared to be another arachnid, a large red one.

Shocked, Mr Excalibur gasped and retreated in bewildered horror.

Smith grinned crookedly and hissed, "For all these years you have harnessed the entity of death and death's victims in the balance, when it transpires nothing has come of you, the perpetrator, the Reaper, the one responsible for pain and many years of disease and suffering..." Gently, Smith placed the hand-sized red spider on Excalibur's right shoulder. The mute shopkeeper was frozen with fear and stock-still.

"Please, don't kill me, let me live..." Excalibur begged. His eyes widened and his face contorted into a terrified mask. He screamed, and yet somehow found it impossible to move. He could neither move his arms or legs.

Smith said, “I will let you live if you burn this warped establishment to the ground and destroy every last morsel of torture it contains.”

“Anything—I will, I promise, I will, just get that damned creeping thing off me!”

“No,” Smith chortled, “My little red friend will remain on your shoulder until you see the job through, and then he will vanish. It is the ultra-rare, deadly Red Widow, whose poison is twenty times stronger than its sister-species and equally deadly, the Black Widow.”

Excalibur turned and ran into the back of the shop and grabbed his lighter. As Smith howled with laughter out the front, he set random ornaments and other things on fire until the whole shop and its contents was ablaze and filling up with smoke.

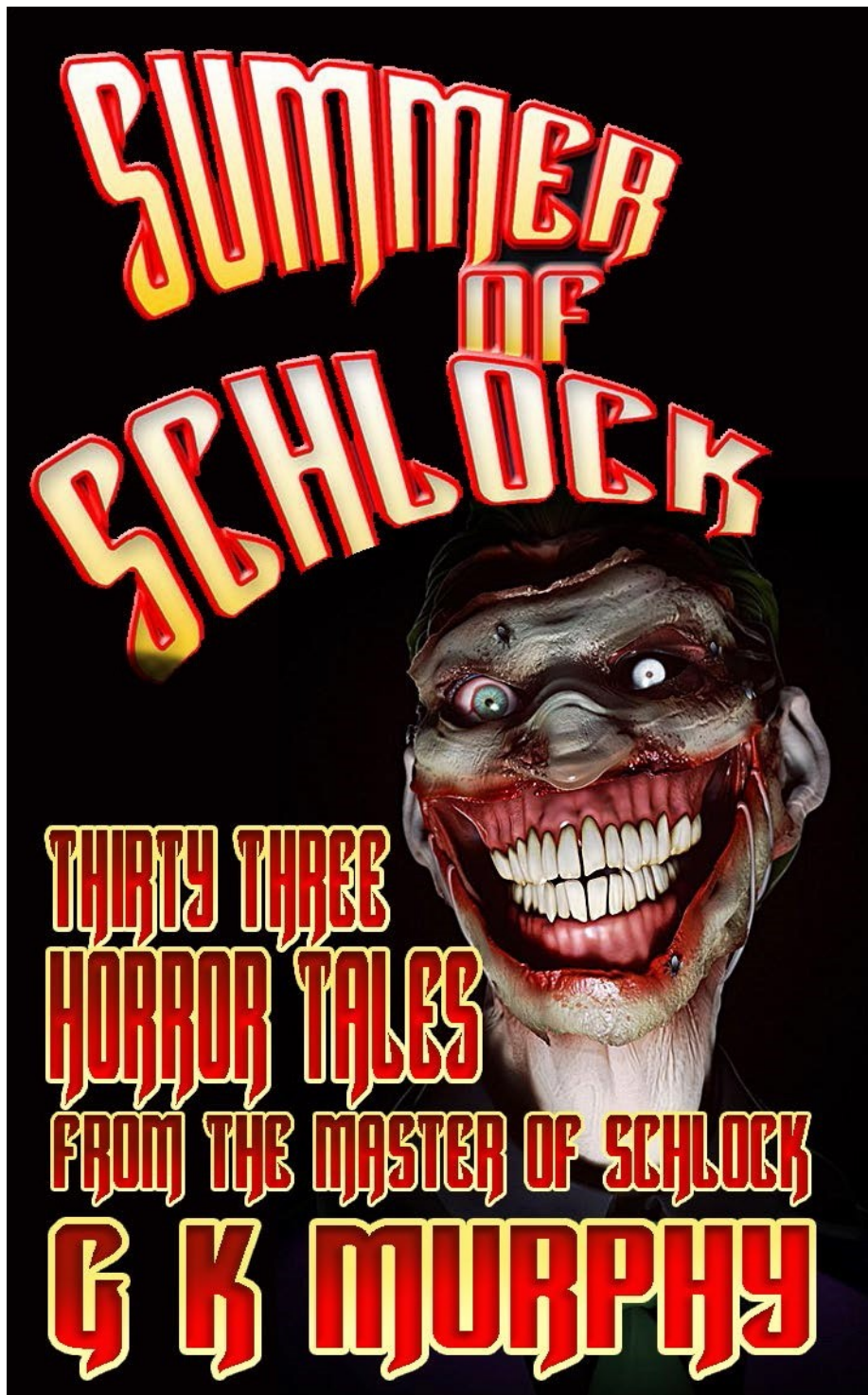
Yet, the terrifying, lurking red spider crawled across and latched onto Excalibur’s face. The shopkeeper felt a distinct burning sensation spread across his flesh, to the cacophony of laughter from somewhere deep from within the room full of mounting smoke. He coughed and choked but the pain intensified. Smith’s voice issued as Excalibur moaned as he buckled and wept. This hellish voice said, “You should never deal with the Reaper, Mr Excalibur! Never in a million years!”

And yet here, amongst many numerous recent deals, one had been struck today.

THE END

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TUMMO! by Andrew Openshaw

Itsovar stepped beneath the towering arches and into the main chamber of the temple, a tapping cane marking his measured strides as he moved cautiously across the marble floor towards his Master's inner sanctum.

The majestic structure soared above him. Huge slabs of stone mounted on top of each other, adorned with countless crystals and supported by granite columns that reached all the way up to a vast ceiling covered in intricate frescos. The view of the seemingly endless interwoven patterns was punctuated by a myriad of hanging walkways connecting the temple's various balconies and seating areas, which jutted out of its magnificent looming walls.

To briefly glance up into this opulent abyss was always a humbling experience for Itsovar. It struck a comforting chord deep inside his very essence, causing a wave of psychophysical forces to course throughout his body, cleansing Itsovar's mind and reassuring him of his role in the great plan.

It was right to be positive today; Itsovar was the bringer of good news and his excitement, together with the cerebral and somatic awakening he experienced upon entering the awesome sanctuary of his Lord, forced him to fight the urge to quicken his pace, lest he should cause a disturbance in the veiled energies that drifted throughout this holiest of places.

To his left, the surface of one of the round birthing pools that ran up and down the edges of the grand walkway was broken by a rearing craniate, as it momentarily emerged from its murky womb, before diving back down into the unseen depths. The resulting sploosh was enough to put a halt to Itsovar's steady march, the last of the cane-taps ringing around the otherworldly silence contained within the walls of the imposing Pantheon.

Itsovar grimaced at the fleeting sight of the creature before continuing along his devoted path. Passing pool after pool, the activity in the waters seemed to intensify with each of Itsovar's considered steps. He was afraid that one of the featureless organisms would suddenly jump into the aisle—it was if they knew about his message and their imminent transformation.

"Ah, Itsovar," croaked Master Dzogchen, as he opened his eyes and emerged from a deep trance, "... a long time since I've seen you."

"Yes, Master Dzogchen," replied Itsovar, as he climbed the steps and slipped through the silk curtain into the heavily perfumed inner sanctum, before kneeling at the foot of the cushioned throne. "It has been many months."

"You have good news, I assume?"

With urgency in his voice, Itsovar conveyed his notice. "I have detected the activation of a channel, Master, a channel to be teased open with your supreme strength." Itsovar then paused before vigorously delivering his well-practised climax. "It's a chance to further infuse our power into their realm!"

"Go-ood, go-ood," replied Dzogchen. "And may I ask what form this channel has taken, Itsovar?"

“It’s a series of openings, Master, inside four of their females who are about to indulge in a fire meditation.”

“Tummo!” exclaimed Dzogchen. “Should we take a look then?”

Dzogchen took a tiny green stone from a mounted bowl to his left and placed it in the pocket of his robe. He then rose up off his padded perch and using his jewelled staff for support, descended the few steps down to Itsovar’s yielding frame. When he was side-by-side with his disciple, he carefully touched Itsovar’s shoulder, before moving through the veil and out onto the ledge of the inner sanctum. Itsovar took this contact as his cue to rise and follow his Master.

Both figures gazed out across the dazzling temple. Dzogchen reached into his pocket and brought out the stone, which he then tossed high into the air. There was a faint crack followed by a subtle hiss as a thick mist began to slowly descend in front of them, eventually forming into a circle of swirling gasses. There within the fumes was the scene which Itsovar had only previously sensed, a vision of the other realm.

Itsovar was mesmerised as the four females, eyes closed and sat in an upright posture, practised Tummo—holding their breaths for several seconds before gently releasing them again—attempting to ignite their inner fires.

Dzogchen let a loud laugh and spoke; “Did you know Itsovar that these strange beings actually believe Tummo is a way to heal their world!” Itsovar acknowledged this with a nod but kept on watching, enraptured by the unfolding sorcery.

He was too engrossed to notice the approach of four slithering forms that had emerged from one of the birthing pools, leaving damp smears on the marble as they snaked down the grand walkway. It wasn’t until his Master raised his hands above his head that Itsovar was released from his reverie. He instinctively jumped at the sight of four dark lines rising off the floor, guided by Dzogchen, towards the billowing cloud. The iridescent colours of the craniate had disappeared completely in the transformation, revealing instead a set of putrid black masses.

The sickening shapes were absorbed into the simulacrum.

Moments later each of the females convulsed and began to retch, as the creatures wormed their way out of their hosts and slid off into the other world.

THE END

*Andrew Openshaw is a copywriter from Newcastle upon Tyne in the UK. An avid reader of fantasy and horror, he is now taking tentative steps into the world of speculative fiction. Married to Josephine, he is also a proud parent to the world's noisiest cats: Maxwell, Molko & Bodhi.*

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[Sword and Planet](#)



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THE DECORATOR by Mathias Jansson

When I ring on your door  
I already have a vision for your interior  
a thoughtful design for your home

What would you like?  
Mesmerizing blood stains on the mirror  
a disturbing reflection from a madman's eye  
the feeling of a perverted  
psychology of evil  
like a Rorschach pattern of brain  
the mixed colour of grey and red  
on the walls?

A shadow from a heavy axe  
resting on the floor  
bullet holes in your wall  
barbed wire attached to the ceiling  
combined with a modern sculpture  
filled with fresh guts?

And of course shattered windows  
with fresh bloody handprints  
and an open fire with heat  
where the flames eat  
a body sprawling with pain  
all for the modest price  
of 666 sterling  
or a mortal soul...

THE END

SUMMER 2017

# Schlock!

## Quarterly

Includes Two  
Episodes of  
Sword and  
Planet epic

### **THE CAVES OF MARS**

### **THOUGHTS DURING THE STORM**

Christopher A Lay

### **THE GOD OF FAMILIAR PASTURES**

BY KONSTANTINE PARADIAS

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

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## THE HETTFORD WITCH HUNT by Oafish J Rhodes

### Episode Two: The Saga of the Lesser Troll

01.

The crispness of the envelope was suspect at best, it looked as if it had been rained on, stamped on by the postman, lost, re-mailed as “not at this address” and finally tossed in to a pile of dusty leaflets advertising double glazing. Which, as it transpired, was the exact course that it had taken in order to work its way to the house of Gary Turlough.

Gary sat with his cup of tea, or more realistically his cold, cracked mug of tea. He was hoping that the appearance of Shelley might give him some courage in opening it.

The envelope was white (or had been originally) and had a school stamp on it for The College of Technology and Media, Shackleford. It was the name of the nearest comprehensive school outside of Hettford and Gary felt fairly sure that it contained a rejection to the letter he had sent them, applying for a paid teacher training position.

Gary picked it up. He considered steaming it open and sneaking out the contents so that if it were a rejection he could seal it back up and pretend that he’d never read it.

He could just go and wake Shelley up he supposed, perhaps the best thing was simply to read it. Gary put his head forward onto the envelope and closed his eyes.

“What’s this?”

The sensation of the paper being rapidly dragged across his forehead made him jolt awake. He looked around in confusion. Shelley was opening the envelope. For a second, Gary felt as if he should protest but the smile on Shelley’s face convinced him not to.

“We are pleased to inform you that you have been selected for an interview for the position of Trainee Teacher,” read Shelley.

Gary felt his stomach turn over in acrobatic defiance of the basic principles of biology.

“I got it,” said Gary.

“With bells or something,” said Shelley.

“Great,” said Gary, “I can’t get there but it’s nice to know that I can get an interview.”

“Why can’t you get there?”

“Because it’s not within the confines of the village and I’m cursed.”

“Sure you can, we just need to find a way to break the curse.”

Shelley’s optimism was too bright and bouncy to listen to reason, or at least the kind of reason that Gary could come up with after working a twelve-hour night shift at the garage.



“I’ll have to put my thinking cap on,” said Shelley, “And I’ll need a thinking cup of tea.”

“I’ve just used the last of the milk,” said Gary.

“OK, I’ll grab my notes on arcane curses and you can get us some milk.”

Gary’s eyes turned to plead with Shelley for mercy, to let him sleep for just a while first but she was already bounding up the stairs and he didn’t have the energy to run after her and debate the case for his own hopelessness. It was less trouble to just go for milk.

02.

The Occultivated bookshop was dark and quiet, there were no customers but that was typical and hardly of concern. A large orange card sign read, “Sale on KMP books.” A further sign, this one star shaped and yellow read, “All Manichean esoteric mysticism 2 for the price of one.”

Milton sat behind the oak counter he was wearing a much heavier jumper than was necessary for the warm time of year. Dan by contrast had chosen to embrace the spirit of June by wearing a t-shirt with a picture of Father Christmas on it. Underneath the picture of jolly old Saint Nick sat the legend, “I’m not fat, it’s seasonal pastiche.”

Dan was re-shelving books from the “unsellable” section. He and Milton had been doing some research.

“Carrie’s bloody puddles,” said Dan, “you know that’s what she’s thinking.”

“She hasn’t explicitly said so to me,” said Milton.

“She doesn’t have to say so,” said Dan, “It’s a plain as plain can be. Puddles mean ghosts, it’s bloody ectoplasm isn’t it.”

“Not necessarily, Carrie might have been concerned with the plumbing.”

Dan stopped and considered the statement.

“You’re trying to wind me up, aren’t you? That’s what you’re doing, you’re deliberately trying to wind me up.”

Milton was trying to wind Dan up, he had been holding back for a few days but it had been a particularly slow morning.

“Nothing of the sort. Carrie is always talking about plumbing. She’s really into Torbeck fast flushing valves.”

“Torbeck valves are terrible,” Dan replied angrily, “You can’t improve on Crapper.”

“Victorian nonsense,” said Milton, “Get with the times.”

Dan raised his finger to aggressively counter the point and then he thought about it a little more. In calm measured tones he said:

“So is Carrie’s theory that ghosts don’t know how to use modern toilets?”

Milton smiled and decided to take a slightly different tack.

“We don’t really know that Carrie was thinking about ghosts at all. We don’t really know for sure that ghosts exist, it might be a touch abstract to apply the notion of thought which is a nebulous concept in of itself, to that of parapsychology. I think that would make it para-psychological psychological analysis and that’s just a step too far.”

“We know witches’ ghosts exist,” said Dan, “It’s not unreasonable to assume that normal ghosts might exist. Carrie might be onto something with that.”

“Yeah,” said Milton, “Witches’ ghosts exist but there’s a rational explanation for them.”

“And what pray tell is that?” Dan asked.

“Magic,” said Milton.

Dan shrugged. He returned the last of the books to his shelf; Tobin’s Further Examination of Spiritual Apparition (with notes).

“I think there is a good argument to say that the witch is more able to bind herself to the material world than the ordinary Joe,” said Dan.

“So you agree with Carrie then? You think the strange behaviour at Julie’s house is down to ghosts?”

“No!” Dan exclaimed, “I will accept it as a possibility though.”

Milton smiled quietly and sat back in his chair.

03.

The book was massive, a thick gloomy looking tome heavy enough to fit both volumes of Don Quixote and still have room to squeeze in both Candide and Heart of Darkness.

Paul’s brow was furrowed in deep concentration. Intense wrinkles cut across his forehead.

“What are you reading?” Tajel asked.

“It’s called The Saga of the Lesser Troll.”

Paul’s voice was as earnest as it was innocent.

“Good?” Tajel asked.

“You’ve read it?”

“No, I’m asking you, is it good?”

Paul nodded emphatically.

“I think so.”

The shop door of Bargain News swung open and at the sound of the bell Paul placed his book face down on the counter and looked over at customer. It was an old lady, replete with blue rinsed hair and a see through plastic shawl. Paul sighed audibly.

Tajel, who was sat to the side of the counter reading a rather heavy book on biology, smiled and pretended to keep reading.

The old lady had a little wheeled shopping basket that she wheeled around the shop collecting sundry items (mostly canned goods). She approached the counter and placed them one after the other onto the white Formica surface.

Paul dutifully counted the prices and punched them into the till.

“And I’d like a draw for the lottery please,” added the woman.

“Wednesday or Saturday?” Paul asked.

“Last Saturday please,” said the woman.

Paul’s gaze shifted to Tajel for help. Tajel kept her eyes fixed on the words in front of her.

“Last week’s lottery is closed,” Paul told her.

“I don’t care, I want a ticket,” said the woman.

“We can’t sell you any more. The machine won’t print them once the lottery has closed,” Paul told her.

“Well, why on earth not?” demanded the woman.

“It’s to stop them, having too many winners,” said Paul, “The whole thing’s a bloody rip-off if you ask me, but I tell you what...”

“What?” said the woman.

Paul reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet.

“I have this ticket from Saturday, it’s a lucky dip and I haven’t checked it but if you like I could sell it to you for ten pounds.”

The old woman considered the offer.

“Can you check if it won first?”

Paul took the folded piece of paper and scanned its barcode on the large red lottery machine.

“It won ten pounds,” he told her.

“I’ll leave it, thanks,” said the woman.

The woman turned, wheeled her cart out of the shop and fought with the door until she was through it. Tajel finally looked up.

“That was pretty well handled,” she said.

Paul’s face flushed at the complement and he stuttered to find a way to respond to it.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Still not as good as Alison, but you’re getting better.”

The shop bell rang again and a very tired looking Gary entered the room. He looked frantically around the shop until his eyes fell upon the milk. Tajel put her book down and stood up.

“Hey you, we were just discussing your ex,” said Tajel.

Gary looked at her blankly for a second, then he connected the events.

“I saw that grim old biddy leaving,” said Gary.

“Yes, Paul’s starting to get close to an Alison level of customer service with her.”

Gary nodded at Paul with a forced sense of congratulation. He thought back to the note that Alison had showed him before she left Hettford.

“How’s it going, Paul?” Gary asked.

“Good,” said Paul, “I’m really into these books...”

“Anything weird been happening to you?”

“Weird? You mean like, weird weird?”

Gary nodded.

“Nothing mate,” said Paul.

“Could you let me know if you do?” Gary asked.

“I will too,” Tajel butted in.

04.

Shelley burst into Occultivated, she was red faced and had obviously been sprinting.

“Are you OK?” Milton asked her.

“Yes, I’ve just sent Gary for milk and I thought I could grab some books before he got back.

“Do you have The Night Doctor’s Vision, Shipton’s Almanac or Machen’s Reference.”

“We have two of them,” said Milton, “without needing to check. I couldn’t get Night Doctor for love nor money.”

“Brilliant. Can I buy them? I need them for a hunt project.”

“Sure,” said Milton, “that will ten thousand six hundred and ninety-eight pounds.”

“What?”

“Yeah, they’re on a discount at the moment.”

“Oh,” said Shelley.

“It’s pretty cheap considering that one of them is handwritten in charcoal and blood. Of course if you just want Machen’s Reference, that would be eight pounds.”

Shelley thought about it for a minute and then agreed to buy the second book.

“Of course, that edition has most of the useful material edited out. I do have a copy of the original but I’m afraid it’s not for sale.”

Dan decided he had held his tongue for long enough.

“I’m sorry, what’s this for?”

Dan spoke with the deep harsh tones of a sergeant major performing an inspection of the troops.

“Gary has a job interview. I’m trying to come up with a plan to break his curse before a week on Thursday.”

“I thought he had a plan,” Dan demanded.

“His plan seems to have been just to find some way to break it,” Shelley’s voice was measured and slightly defensive.

Milton raised both eyebrows and smiled.

“Of course,” he told her, “you’re welcome to borrow my copies; provided they stay in the shop.”

Shelley thanked Milton and against his advice (or perhaps because of it), bought the paperback edition of Machen's Reference. She walked calmly out of the shop and then could be seen through the window, sprinting frantically away.

"What did you do that for?" Dan asked.

"Curiosity," Milton told him.

Dan stroked his long black beard as if wrapped in contemplation.

"So," he said, "about these chuffing ghosts..."

05.

Paul turned the page of his gigantic novel. Suddenly he put it down on the shop counter and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a small LCD device and typed something into it. Then, almost methodically, he continued to read his novel.

"Right," said Tajel, "that's the fifth time you've done that. What are you doing?"

The tips of Paul's ears brightened in response to the question and he let his gaze fall down to his feet.

"Dictionary," he said, "sometimes I don't know what a word means."

Tajel smiled at him.

"Well, you don't have to be embarrassed," she said. "How do you think other people learn long words?"

He managed to lift his head back up enough to return her smile. There was a buzzing sound from Tajel's pocket and she reached into it and pulled out a phone.

"I'll have to take this," she said.

Tajel began to walk up the small flight of stairs to the flat above the shop. Paul craned his head and sharpened his ears to try to get an idea who she was talking to. He thought he heard her say, "Yeah, I missed you too."

Paul kept his ear tuned to the stair way, his hearing acute.

Across the shop, a tin can fell off the shelf and rolled along the floor to the front of the counter. Paul, welcoming a brief respite from the stabbing jealousy he felt, walked to the front of the counter and picked it up. As he walked to shelve it, the whole shelf that it had come from emptied its contents onto the floor with the most tremendous crash. There were tins of condensed milk and peas all over the floor.

Paul examined the shelf to see what had caused the collapse. As he did so he spotted the square of paper.

The paper was a small letter writing size blank white piece of paper that had been folded in half. It had a circle of dirt on it the same size as one of the tins; indicating that it had been there for some time.

Before picking it up, Paul wobbled the shelf with his hand. It was totally solid; he could see no reason for the cans to suddenly fall down. He picked up the note and unfolded it.

In large block capitals the note read, “Kiwi lover.” Paul glanced behind himself, shoved the note into his pocket and began to efficiently restock the shelf.

06.

Gary, having returned home to find Shelley absent from the house had brewed a full pot of tea and placed his copy of Karswell’s History of the Craft on the small coffee table in his living room. He opened it to what he assumed at least looked like a relevant chapter and placed it on his lap. It was not as if he had never read through it before looking for ways to get out of the village. He went again to the runic death curse section and reached to turn on the TV.

He hesitated for a second as he reached for the remote and instead, just the thought that Shelley was willing to keep fighting on his behalf made him feel ashamed of the thought.

He had one passage underlined that read, “When the paper is lost, the man pays the cost.” The paper of the original curse had been given to Saul and Saul was dead. He just hadn’t died because of the curse and so it had passed back to Gary and the demon had come for him.

Then there was the fox, that bright flaming beautiful fox that had leapt to his defence, strong and bright enough to chase away the demonic entity. As far as Gary was concerned, there was only one precedent for that: the familiar spirit. He flicked to the index and then moved to the section on familiars.

The sound of the front door opening caused Gary to look up from his book.

“I’m back,” Shelley’s voice called.

“In the lounge,” Gary replied.

Shelley walked into the lounge, she was wearing tight Lycra shorts and a form fitting running shirt. The sweat on her upper body made the shirt adhere to her skin.

“I might have to have a shower,” said Carrie, “I ran to Occultivated to get some books.”

“Thanks,” said Gary, “I appreciate it.”

“If you like, you can come and scrub my back for me,” Shelley suggested.

Gary gave the matter a few milliseconds of thought and then decided that he would emphatically like to do that.



07.

The smell of furniture polish was nearly overwhelming as Carrie entered the doorway of the Occultivated bookshop. Milton held a dust cloth in one hand and a large spray can in the other.

“Slow day?” Carrie asked him.

Carrie was dressed in her business attire, a pair of black slacks, a blue shirt and a black blazer. She was holding a small paper bag.

“What’s that?” Milton asked.

“It’s a paper bag with one sandwich left in it, I thought Dan might eat it.”

“He’s gone to the shop to get some scotch eggs,” Milton told her.

“Good,” said Carrie, “I wanted to ask you a favour.”

Milton smiled.

“Jesus! If you’re asking it must be serious.”

“It might be and it might not be, I wasn’t entirely happy with Dan’s solution to the Julie situation and I was wondering if you could do a follow up. I am snowed under with accounts.”

“Of course,” said Milton, “I might tell Dan it was my idea though, just to... You know.”

“Cater to his infantile sense of ego?”

“Something like that.”

Carrie shrugged dismissively. She was still in business mode.

“Let him think whatever you want but I could do with having it done today.”

“Now that I’ve kindly agreed to it?”

“Something like that,” said Carrie.

Milton took her by the hand.

“Is it wrong that I find you sexy when you’re all business like?” Milton asked.

“No, it’s just sexist. I thought business was picking up in here. Aren’t you selling the popular stuff still? What was it about the vampire?”

“Vampire sales have died down, we are mostly shifting Zomberella, Grumpy Wizard P.I. And Dirty Sexy Frankenstein.”

“What is selling the most?”

“Thorny Crowns, but that is just because Paul keeps buying instalments. After that it’s Dirty Sexy Frankenstein.”

“Is that about the monster or the creator?” Carrie asked.

“It seems to be about a man who pieces together the corpses of dead glamour models to create his perfect woman which he then humps.”

“Does he bring it back to life first?” Carrie asked.

“Would that make it any less grim?”

“A tiny bit.”

“Why don’t you buy a copy and find out?”

“You can buy me one and read it to me in bed.”

“What? Seriously?”

Carrie shrugged.

“It’s dirty and sexy, right?”

08.

Shelley was sat up in bed, the curtains were open and Gary was lying on his side. He had however assured her that she would have his full and undivided attention.

“I think I’ve found it,” said Shelley.

“What’s that?”

“The solution. You see Karswell’s, though it is informative, was written by a man.”

“Well, Karswell himself was a man.”

“Exactly, and men, particularly at the time Karswell was writing, tend to prefer their own narratives over accuracy.”

The blankets of the bed were unevenly distributed and the situation was exacerbated by Shelley sitting on the outside of the covers. She was entirely nude and despite the excessively low-fat content of her physique seemed not to be feeling the breeze that was creeping through a gap in the blankets and causing Gary to shiver.

“I’m not sure I know what that has to do with killing a witch’s spirit.”

“These other books are all written by woman. They have subtleties that Karswell might have missed.

“For instance, listen to this from Machen; the summer witch is bound by the moon, silver thread on the shortest night of the year. I mean I’ll have to check the original but it sounds promising.”

“Thanks,” said Gary.

Even in the breeze Gary could feel himself nodding off. He suspected that the slight drop in temperature had given him hypothermia.

“What does it mean by silver thread?” he asked, “It’s not like anything I’ve heard before.”

“There is something about the winter witch here too. Does that mean anything to you?”

Gary breathed in through his nose in lieu of emitting a loud yarping yawn that may possibly have sounded impolite.

“Milton’s theory on it was that witches go their power from the season they were born in. I think it’s probably bollocks,” he told her.

“Worth investigating though,” she said.

Gary rolled over to face her.

“Absolutely,” he told her.

09.

The large bulky figure of Dan Proctor burst through the door with an obviously serious level of serious intent. He held a small plastic bag in one hand and newspaper in the other.

“Did you want the rest of Carrie’s sandwich?” Milton asked.

“Let’s not ask stupid questions,” Dan told him, “I think we both know that I do.”

Dan placed the plastic bag on the counter of Occultivated. He took the paper bag off Carrie and consumed the sandwich in three measured bites, chewing a total of seven times. Dan lifted up his newspaper and nodded.

“Right,” he said, “I’m off to the library.”

“We work in a bookshop,” Milton reminded him, “If you want a book.”

“Erm, no,” said Dan, “I was thinking it might be time for me to...”

Carrie and Milton scrutinised Dan’s face as he struggled to find the next few words.

“Look for a job,” Dan finished.

Milton and Carrie both turned their heads to face each other.

“What’s brought this on?” Carrie asked.

Dan coughed. His face reddened violently as his first instinct was to shout at everyone to leave him alone and then stamp off to his bedroom.

“I thought,” said Dan as if the words were causing him physical pain, “that with you two becoming a regular fixture, I might need to find a bit of financial security.”

Milton raised his eyebrows.

“Now, Dan, you always have a job here,” Milton assured him.

Dan shook his head vigorously.

“I need to sort this out,” said Dan. Milton shrugged and opening the bag on the counter, pulled out a Scotch egg. Dan tucked his newspaper under his arm and left the shop.

When she was sure he was out of earshot, Carrie smiled at Milton.

“Well, better late than never, I guess,” she told him.

“It’s a complete lie,” said Milton. “He’s up to something.”

“How do you know?”

Milton shrugged.

“Because we have a computer he could use here and the library is a short walk away.”

Carrie nodded.

“Are you worried?” she asked.

Milton shrugged passively.

“Not yet,” he told her.

10.

Tajel stepped down the stairs and Paul tried his best to arrange himself into an image of intelligent nonchalance.

“Who was that?”

“I was on the phone.”

The tone of Tajel's response should have been a clear enough indicator that she didn't consider the matter any of Paul's business.

"I mean," he continued, "who was on the phone?"

"Never mind that, what was that racket?"

"Some tins fell down, I picked them up."

"Any damages?"

"Nope, just cans. How about you?"

Tajel sighed in resignation.

"His name is Adrian, he's a law student."

"Oh," said Paul.

Paul tried to make the "oh" sound slightly less crestfallen than it felt. However, he failed miserably.

"He's funny, you'd like him."

Paul highly doubted that, Adrian sounded like the name of some effeminate archduke; Paul envisaged him as both limp wristed and flamboyantly dressed. He added a funny walk to his mental image, just for good measure.

The shop bell rang and a girl with blue hair, thick black tights over Doctor Martin boots and a heavy cardigan walked into the shop.

Julie's low-cut t-shirt showed a neck-line that looked a little puffy but was otherwise clear of blemish.

"Good afternoon," said Paul.

"Hi," said Julie, "Listen, you both know Gary Turlough, right?"

Paul and Tajel nodded.

"He's coming over to mine tomorrow morning and I was just wondering if you knew what sort of thing he drinks."

"I think mostly tea," said Paul.

"I meant alcohol."

"Well, then, that's simple," Paul told her, "Just look around and if it looks like a product that is being marketed to men in their late sixties then Gary will probably like it: Whisky, stout, bitter, that other stuff..."

“Mild,” Tajel stepped in, “But I think you might be better off with some basic red wine if you’re going for romance and somebody a bit more reliable.”

Julie’s hand seemed to move without her cognisant beckoning to gentle touch her bare neck.

“I don’t know why I like him so much but I do,” said Julie.

Tajel nodded as if that explained absolutely everything, whereas Paul wore the baffled expression of a man trying to figure out what insight the answer gave to his own feelings. None, in case you are wondering.

“There are some real ales over there, there’s Bishop’s Crook, Kelpie’s Jump, Red Sky and Commando War Stories for Boys.”

“I thought that was a comic,” Julie said.

“They’ve made their own beer now,” Paul informed her, “It tastes like hot Bovril that has been left to go cold.”

“And that’s what Paul drinks?” Julie asked.

“He doesn’t ever buy it,” said Paul, “You’ll sometimes see him in that section mooning over the beers with the same look on his face that my mum used to have when she was browsing through travel brochures and then he buys the cheap stuff that tastes like watery hot Bovril that’s been left to go cold. We do sell hot Bovril.”

Tajel laughed involuntarily, leaving Julie to look both a little bemused and confuddled.

“Red wine,” said Tajel, “I don’t drink it but I know which ones are supposed to be good.”

“OK, I guess I’ll take about two bottles.”

11.

The digital clock at the side of the bed kept moving forward in sharp lurches of a minute at a time and Gary was torn between enjoying the fact there was a naked woman in his room and lamenting that he hadn’t had enough sleep to fully enjoy the situation.

“I’ve got it,” said Shelley.

“What’s that?” Gary asked.

“I’ve got it, at least I think I’ve got it. In Machen there is a section on the power of the menstrual cycle.”

“It is a frightening force.”

“Well, it actually is. In witchcraft it is the main reason women have the innate gift and only certain men can do it.”

“You’re not going to find many seventh sons of seventh sons in this day and age,” Gary observed.

“You haven’t watched enough daytime television.”

“To my eternal shame,” Gary observed, “it is when I normally sleep.”

“You were unemployed for a few months what did you do all day?”

“I mostly just starved,” said Gary.

It was a painful memory and the thought of it reminded him of Julie. He felt a sudden sharp twinge of guilt that he tried not to reveal in his expression.

“So what about the menstrual cycle?” Gary remarked.

“Well, the link is a little vague but it’s in that section. Probably why you’ve overlooked it.”

Gary did not disagree.

“There are four different types of witch who are determined by the time of their birth and they take their power from the moon and the moon has power over them.”

“OK,” Gary said.

“So, if we can just work out what time of year the Bellows’ sisters were born then we should be able to find a way to bind them and at the very least end their curse on you.”

“But they’re spirit witches,” said Gary.

“Yes but taking a chance that they were summer born we are fast approaching the high point of their powers when they become briefly corporeal.”

“If they are summer born?” Gary asked.

“I know, it’s a big if but if we can make it in time we can get you to your job interview.”

“You’re awesome,” said Gary.

“I know,” Julie told him.

12.

The plastic bags that Discount News gave to their customers were bright orange and had the phrase “John’s News and Booze” written on the side of them. Tajel’s father had bought them at a discount rate from another newsagent’s he had purchased somewhere near Leeds.

Julie placed the bag on her counter. A little to its left was the chalk circle that Dan had drawn the day before.

As she put the bag down she reached her hand to her neck, just to check it was still alright. The skin felt smooth enough but she wanted to be sure, she ran upstairs to check the mirror.

Julie stood before the large mirror in her bedroom. One of her t-shirts and hung over the side of it. She leant forward and craned her head backwards to check that her neck was entirely blemish free. There wasn't so much as a spot.

Content that she had indeed started to recover from her illness, Julie went downstairs to put the wine she had bought into the cupboard.

The sideboard was entirely empty, the wine and the plastic it was in had completely disappeared.

13.

Gary ran his hand down Shelley's side. She shivered a little at the feel of his fingertips.

"Stop it, that tickles," she told him.

"I really can't thank you enough of all the help you've given me."

"You deserve a bit of help, plus you never know when I'll ask for something in return."

Gary leant forward in bed and kissed Shelley's bare shoulder. Shelley placed her hand between Gary's shoulder blades and shifted her body down in the bed until the two of them were at eye level. And so they continued.

14.

Julie opened her front door, she had a bucket to hand to place over her head if the bottle of wine decided to throw itself at her newly unblemished upper body.

She held the bucket so that it covered her eyes. She didn't mind getting hit on the body, so long as her face was OK.

She stepped forward, tripping a little on the doormat and stumbling clumsily for a few steps.

Then she stood and waited, nothing happened. Julie counted to 100 in her mind, just to be sure and then, ever so cautiously, she began to lift the bucket from off her head.

As she peeped out of the gap, Julie winced and was very surprised not to be suddenly hit the head by a bottle of reasonably priced Cabinet Sauvignon.

Satisfied that she was safe, Julie turned to walk back into her house. She was suddenly and forcefully hit on the back of the head. A wincing needle of pain stabbing into the back of her head like the sharp mandibles of some gigantic jet-propelled beetle.



If she had time to think Julie would have sprinted inside the house before a second heavier projectile could hit her. As it was, instinct drove her to glance behind herself at the object that had struck her.

It was a neat black mobile phone of the exact sort that Julie could not afford. She picked it up and was surprised to find it turned on.

Holding down the lock key, Julie flicked to the main menu and then onto contacts. There was a long list of names that she didn't recognise, however, right at the top of it sat the name Gary and it didn't take much further investigation to work out that the phone belonged to his ex-girlfriend Alison.

The phone beeped loudly in her hand and an icon at the bottom indicated that there was a new message. The message read, "thx 4 the otha day. Was nice HAVING u over."

Julie had just finished figuring out the unusual spelling of words when a second text came through that read, "I will always love you and nobody else ever."

Julie closed her front door, walked up the stairs and after getting into her bed, lay face down with her head buried in the pillow as she considered which of the three explanations for the text that she could think of would terrify her the least.

15.

Milton heard Dan coming into the house through the back door. He walked to break the news to him that they were going to Julie's house to check whether their "fix" was holding.

As he walked down the hallway, Dan burst past him and bustled up the stairs.

"You OK?" Milton asked him.

"Emergency evacuation."

Dan's voice sounded strained as he spoke. His heavy footsteps pounded on the wooden staircase as he ran towards the toilet.

Dan had left the back-door wide open. Milton went sighing to the kitchen to close it.

There on the table was the newspaper Dan had been reading. It had clearly been thrown there in a moment of panic. Milton picked it up and started to leaf through it. He was looking for the job section, to check if Dan had circled anything there.

Paper has a memory and will often open at the page that it was last open to. It did that now, aided by the fact that Dan had turned one corner of the page down.

At first Milton was a little surprised by what he saw, which is to say that there didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary on it.

The lead story's headline read Dirty Dad Dead in Derby. Milton shook his head in distaste at the use of alliteration and was about to turn the page but there was something oddly familiar

about the face of the Dirty Dad so he stopped and scrutinised it a little further. The caption indicated that the familiar face belonged to Peter Turlough, father of 12 and went on to declare that he was a “benefits rat.”

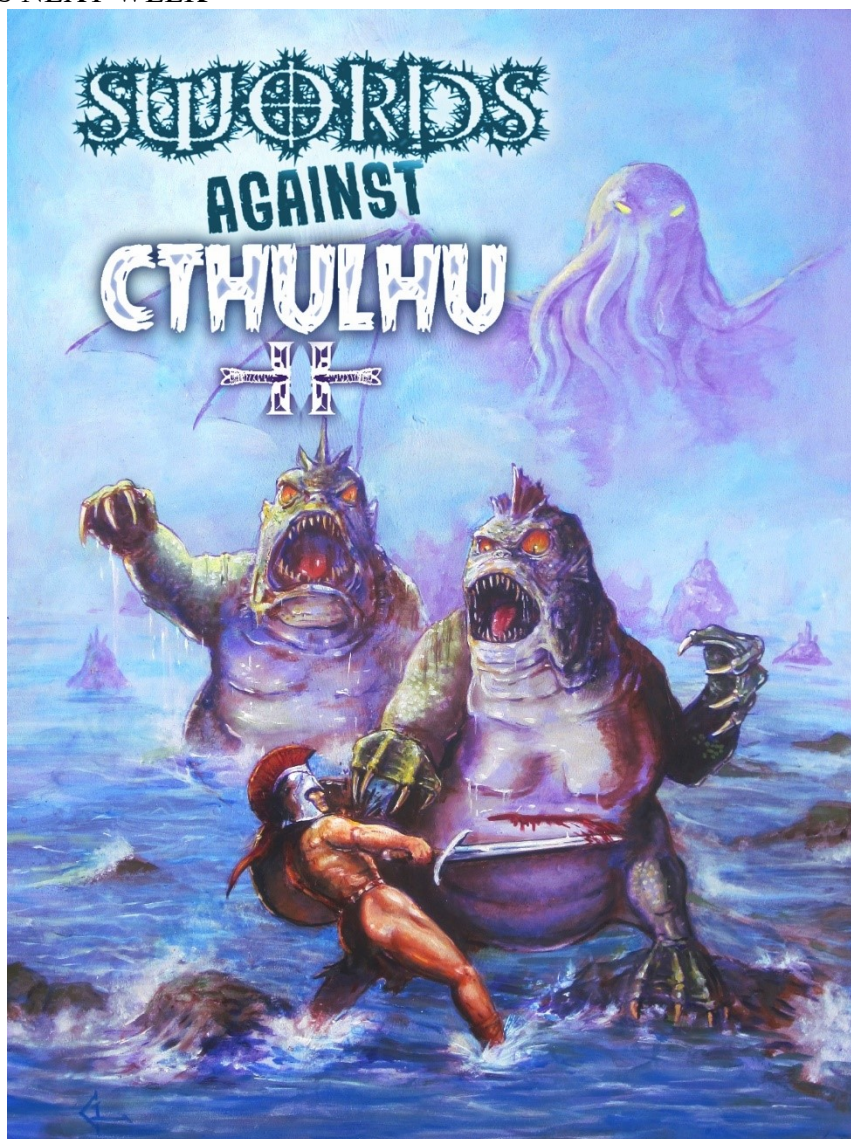
And with that, the story had Milton’s interest.

16.

Shelley’s head was tucked into the hollow of Gary’s shoulder, her bare leg laid across his lap. She was gently snoring.

Gary looked up at the ceiling and began to wonder if there wasn’t something terribly wrong with his approach to women.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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## THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

### Episode Twenty-Two

Lieutenant Danton had been chafing all throughout the long hours of battle. He, along with thirty other volunteers, had been simply cooling their heels, waiting the order to deploy. But the order didn't come.

The battle raged all around them. The "Bellerophon" shook with the endless barrages of pulses cannons hitting them every few minutes. Bulkheads groaned under the onslaught, some of them buckling under the stress. Emergency repair crews were all throughout the ship.

"I should have volunteered for gunner," Danton complained to his crew mates. "They're doing something. We're just sitting here."

"Westland knows what he's doing," one of his crewmates replied. "If he hasn't sent us out yet, he's got his reasons."

Indeed so.

Danton had spent the hours leading up to the battle none of them knew was coming training on a new fighter craft, one developed back on Earth, and one which had never been deployed in combat before.

Small, only but eight feet in length, the ship was highly manoeuvrable—in fact, even more highly manoeuvrable than any other ship ever built, including, even Carter Ward's tricked out O8-111A. The ships were impossible to trace, flying swiftly, moving, when needed, like a hummingbird, or a bee, with completely unpredictable flight patterns. Such ships, Westland hoped, would be deadly against any ship, even something as huge and heavily armoured as the "Grand Marquis".

But the battle had come upon Westland more quickly than he had anticipated. Indeed, he had expected his fleet to be the attackers, not the attacked. So Westland had to change his battle plan—indeed, he had to come up with a wholly new battle plan, all in the first minutes of the first assault.

At last, his crew on the command deck had been able to break into the communications of the Scroungers, only to find that every order coming from the "Grand Marquis" had been coded. Of course it had been.

Breaking those codes was a matter of some hours, even with their fastest computers working on the task. Westland was further handicapped by the communications silence imposed not only upon his fleet, but all of Jovian Security. Until he and Bridgemont could get a good picture of who it was they were fighting, neither commander dared to send any signals that could be intercepted.

That left every pilot and every squadron all on their own. Westland was easily willing to send Lieutenant Hardy and other experienced hands to confront the first wave of the attack. But, without knowing how many waves might yet be coming, nor how large each one might be, Westland's wisest course was to keep some tricks up his sleeve.

And all through the battle, as the “Bellerophon” was battered on every side, Westland’s computers and code experts worked ceaselessly, to break the codes of Turhan Mot’s communications. Lights shuddered in the command deck as heavy bombardments hit. Sparks flew and flames spat out from the bulkheads. Yet still the computers and the code experts worked imperturbably through it all.

At last, long into the battle, they managed to break one set of the codes. And the news that came to Colonel Westland was not encouraging. Not at all.

The domes above Callisto Base 1 had been battle-damaged in a dozen places. Fires had broken out within the colony. The space port had been overrun by Scroungers who were even at that moment engaged in a fierce gun battle with the pitiable small civilian forces of Callisto Base Security.

And word had spread to the invaders on the other moons of Jupiter. Callisto Base 1 was about to fall. And with that, all of Callisto must fall soon after. Scroungers who had attacked the bases on Europa and Ganymede were leaving those battles to join in with the fight for Callisto itself.

At the same time this news came to Bridgemont, the “Grand Marquis”, hard on Bridgemont’s port side, lurched suddenly. The nose turned downward and the bulk of the ship rolled over. The stern of the ships rose high over the “Bellerophon”, then began to come crashing down toward it.

Westland watched on his ship’s visiscreens as the hull of the “Grand Marquis” rose, then begin its slow descent. All those upon the command deck of the “Bellerophon” saw the mounting disaster unfolding. A heavy, a dead silence came upon the crew, even as the bulkheads of the ship rattled from the ceaseless barrages coming from the “Reliant”.

The “Bellerophon” was moving at a nearly interplanetary speed. Yet, even as it was rolling, so also was the “Grand Marquis”, and the “Reliant”, so all three ships were stationary, each relative to the others.

Westland calculated quickly. No, a sudden forward push of the “Bellerophon” would not get it out of the way of the lumbering “Grand Marquis” in time to avoid a crash. Neither would an order to reverse engines, or to change course, or to bring his ship to a halt.

If the “Grand Marquis” was to come crashing down upon his ship, there was no manoeuvre Westland could undertake to avoid the collision.

“Abandon ship, sir?” Westland’s adjutant, standing near the Colonel, asked.

“Hit it,” Westland answered. His jaw was clenched. His voice was level and deadly.

“Hit it hard. Hit it with everything.”

EMPs were useless here. A dead hulk of a ship was as dangerous as a ship fully powered.

“Aim all our pulse cannons amidships the enemy,” Bridgemont commanded. “Break that flight deck.”

Plasmas of every hue and shade pummelled the “Grand Marquis”. Screaming clouds of crimson and purple hit it over and over. The plasmas splattered upon the hull of the ship, some of them eating away at the out bulkheads.

Colonel Westland’s plan, should it work, was to break the “Grand Marquis” into halves, halves that, hopefully, would fall harmlessly on either side of the “Bellerophon”, without striking the ship. Or, hopefully, to strike it with only glancing blows.

But the barrages from his plasma cannons were working too slowly. The hulk of the “Grand Marquis” was coming perilously close.

“Send out the ‘mice’,” Colonel Westland ordered.

“Aye, colonel,” came the reply.

The ‘mice’ (or the XPS-01s, ‘Experimental Pursuit Ship, First Series’) were the tiny ships, the secret weapons developed on Earth, which Westland had been keeping up his sleeve. But, if the “Bellerophon” was to be destroyed—and it looked now as if it would be—then the only way to preserve those tiny ships was to send them out into the battle.

“Have them hit the Scroungers attacking Callisto Base 1. Tear ‘em up, blast ‘em, burn ‘em, kill ‘em all,” Westland said.

“Now we’re cookin’!” Danton said, when the orders came through an instant later. He quickly screwed his helmet into place over his head and leaped into the cockpit of his tiny ship. It had been correctly said of these ships that ‘You don’t ride ‘em. You wear ‘em’. As Danton buckled himself in, the canopy closed down over his head. The top of the canopy was but four feet above the deck, and Danton was crowded into the cockpit, lying backwards with his legs outstretched before him.

His head rose only a half dozen inches above the hull of his tiny craft, while the nose sloped sharply downward, permitting him the fullest visual range possible. The canopy of his ship served also as his ship’s monitor. Constantly presented upon it were readouts of the immediate area, including data on all ships in the region, as well as data about his own ship, its status throughout combat, the location of every hit, and everything else needful for him to know.

His weapons included a single forward-mounted laser cannon, which had a beam sufficiently intense to cut through metal, and a plasma cannon, capable of firing a burst dense enough to blind any scanner, and to cling to any surface. The plasmas it discharged were highly acidic, and could eat through the strongest materials, if fired with sufficient quantities.

The laser cannon, because of its intensity, could only fire very short bursts, each of less than a tenth of a second in duration. Following a barrage of a hundred such bursts, the cannon required nearly half a minute to cool, before it would be safe to fire again. Balancing that limitation, and alternating fire with the plasma cannon—which plasma charges were in small

quantities upon the small ships—a skilled fighter pilot could do great damage to an enemy, while also outmanoeuvring all the enemy’s weapons.

This was the first time these ‘mice’ or their highly charged laser cannons had ever been deployed in combat.

Thirty of these mice scrambled out of the Landing Bay of the “Bellerophon”, all within seconds. Danton, like all the other pilots flying out of the great ship were shocked to see the huge hull of the “Grand Marquis”, nearly vertical, but slowly rolling and crashing down toward the “Bellerophon”.

“Mind your orders!” came the last communication to him and to the others, as their ships flew into the sky above Callisto.

So he and the other pilots of the other mice turned their noses downward, toward the domed colony of Callisto Base 1. Behind them, the “Bellerophon”, still firing furiously, and next to the “Bellerophon”, the “Reliant” returning fire, and attempting to manoeuvre to the “Grand Marquis”, as Yamir, commander of that ship, attempted to render aid.

Yamir was unaware that Turhan Mot had already fled the “Grand Marquis”, bringing with him his second in command, the loathsome Mokem Bet.

Tu Hit, pilot of the “Grand Marquis” was alone on the ship’s bridge, struggling manfully with the wheel, striving, perhaps futilely, to bring the lumbering ship under control.

And as Danton and the other ‘mousers’ flew toward Callisto Base 1, they saw coming from the inner moons of Jupiter a motley collection of ships all converging toward Callisto.

Danton did not know it, but Illara, in her own pursuit ship, was at the head of that mass of ships, in hot flight from them.

Illara, for her part, was astonished at the sight that unfolded before her as she drew nearer the battle. There was the “Bellerophon”, engaged with two very large ships, one of which seemed to be crashing down upon it.

Surrounding the “Bellerophon” and the two other ships was a mass of smaller craft, like angry wasps around a burning hive. All were firing laser beams and plasma charges, filling the Callistoan skies with displays that would have rendered even the grandest fireworks displays of Earth tiny things in comparison. It should have been a beautiful sight, were it not so deadly.

Callisto itself was smouldering from countless collisions. Ruined ships and charred hulks of metal littered the russet, icy deserts, and as she scanned it, Illara saw, horror mounting in her heart, that the domes of Callisto Base 1 were already cracking, bending under the strains of battle.

Crimson beams of laser fire shot past her as she eluded her pursuers. ‘Izzy’ took many hits, but ‘Izzy’ was made of strong stuff. Even so, Illara knew her ship could not stand much more.

“Where now?” she asked herself. She searched her scanners. Engage with the battle surrounding the “Bellerophon”? Back to Callisto Base 1? Where was she most needed? Where could she do the most harm?

Ah! Wait. What was that? There. On her visiscreen. A seemingly familiar shape.

Illara magnified the image on her forward scanner. Blue laser beams hit her canopy slanting bursts.

Yep. That was him. Carter. The O8-111A. And running alongside Carter was his friend Mud’s ship, the “Charon”.

“Where are you boys going?” Illara asked. She threw ‘Izzy’ into a series of quick loops, then pulled out. The ships behind her were closer now, but they, too, seemed more intent on the battle ahead, than in pursuing this single, tiny ship. Several peeled away from their pursuit to fly directly toward Callisto Base 1.

“Can I come too?” she asked again, with a grin.

She pushed ‘Izzy’ as hard and fast as it would go. Ward seemed to be chasing a small vehicle. It looked like one of those escape pods some of the larger transport ships carried.

No, Illara doubted that she’d be able to close up the distance between herself and Ward, not easily, but she’d keep him in sight and on her scanners so she could follow long enough to figure out where he was going.

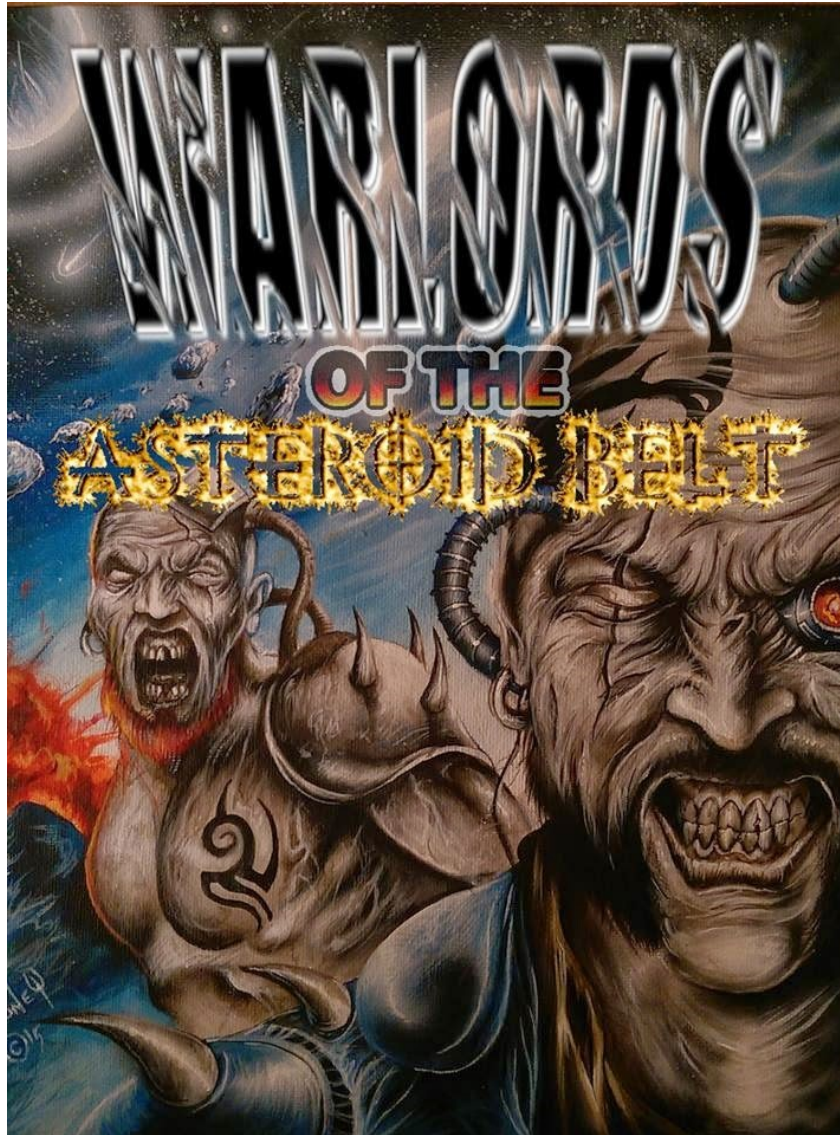
Nor did it take long. Clearly, the escape pod was making its way toward the Space Port of Callisto Base 1. And Ward, firing at it constantly, was also on his way there. The Space Port was already overrun with a dozen ships, all belonging to the Scroungers. And from almost every direction, it seemed, more and more Scroungers were converging.

“So that’s where the party is, huh, guys?” Illara said, smiling. “Well, keep the music playing, cuz Illara is on her way!”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

*Carter Ward’s earlier adventures, along with those of other interplanetary rogues, are chronicled in [Warlords of the Asteroid Belt](#) and [Deep Space Dogfights](#).*





*Out now from [Rogue Planet Press](#).*

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## THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

### Part 3. The Secret of the Island

#### Chapter 8

So the convicts were still there, watching the corral, and determined to kill the settlers one after the other. There was nothing to be done but to treat them as wild beasts. But great precautions must be taken, for just now the wretches had the advantage on their side, seeing, and not being seen, being able to surprise by the suddenness of their attack, yet not to be surprised themselves. Harding made arrangements, therefore, for living in the corral, of which the provisions would last for a tolerable length of time. Ayrton's house had been provided with all that was necessary for existence, and the convicts, scared by the arrival of the settlers, had not had time to pillage it. It was probable, as Gideon Spilett observed, that things had occurred as follows:

The six convicts, disembarking on the island, had followed the southern shore, and after having traversed the double shore of the Serpentine Peninsula, not being inclined to venture into the Far West woods, they had reached the mouth of Falls River. From this point, by following the right bank of the watercourse, they would arrive at the spurs of Mount Franklin, among which they would naturally seek a retreat, and they could not have been long in discovering the corral, then uninhabited. There they had regularly installed themselves, awaiting the moment to put their abominable schemes into execution. Ayrton's arrival had surprised them, but they had managed to overpower the unfortunate man, and—the rest may be easily imagined!

Now, the convicts, —reduced to five, it is true, but well-armed, —were roaming the woods, and to venture there was to expose themselves to their attacks, which could be neither guarded against nor prevented.

“Wait! There is nothing else to be done!” repeated Cyrus Harding. “When Herbert is cured, we can organize a general battle of the island, and have satisfaction of these convicts. That will be the object of our grand expedition at the same time—”

“As the search for our mysterious protector,” added Gideon Spilett, finishing the engineer's sentence. “And it must be acknowledged, my dear Cyrus, that this time his protection was wanting at the very moment when it was most necessary to us!”

“Who knows?” replied the engineer.

“What do you mean?” asked the reporter.

“That we are not at the end of our trouble yet, my dear Spilett, and that his powerful intervention may have another opportunity of exercising itself. But that is not the question now. Herbert's life before everything.”

This was the colonists' saddest thought. Several days passed, and the poor boy's state was happily no worse. Cold water, always kept at a suitable temperature, had completely prevented the inflammation of the wounds. It even seemed to the reporter that this water, being slightly sulphurous, —which was explained by the neighbourhood of the volcano, had

a more direct action on the healing. The suppuration was much less abundant, and thanks to the incessant care by which he was surrounded! —Herbert returned to life, and his fever abated. He was besides subjected to a severe diet, and consequently his weakness was and would be extreme; but there was no want of refreshing drinks, and absolute rest was of the greatest benefit to him. Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, and Pencroft had become very skilful in dressing the lad's wounds. All the linen in the house had been sacrificed. Herbert's wounds, covered with compresses and lint, were pressed neither too much nor too little, so as to cause their cicatrisation without effecting any inflammatory reaction. The reporter used extreme care in the dressing, knowing well the importance of it, and repeating to his companions that which most surgeons willingly admit, that it is perhaps rarer to see a dressing well done than an operation well performed.

In ten days, on the 22nd of November, Herbert was considerably better. He had begun to take some nourishment.

The colour was returning to his cheeks, and his bright eyes smiled at his nurses. He talked a little, notwithstanding Pencroft's efforts, who talked incessantly to prevent him from beginning to speak, and told him the most improbable stories. Herbert had questioned him on the subject of Ayrton, whom he was astonished not to see near him, thinking that he was at the corral. But the sailor, not wishing to distress Herbert, contented himself by replying that Ayrton had rejoined Neb, so as to defend Granite House.

"Humph!" said Pencroft, "these pirates! they are gentlemen who have no right to any consideration! And the captain wanted to win them by kindness! I'll send them some kindness, but in the shape of a good bullet!"

"And have they not been seen again?" asked Herbert.

"No, my boy," answered the sailor, "but we shall find them, and when you are cured we shall see if the cowards who strike us from behind will dare to meet us face to face!"

"I am still very weak, my poor Pencroft!"

"Well! your strength will return gradually! What's a ball through the chest? Nothing but a joke! I've seen many, and I don't think much of them!"

At last things appeared to be going on well, and if no complication occurred, Herbert's recovery might be regarded as certain. But what would have been the condition of the colonists if his state had been aggravated, —if, for example, the ball had remained in his body, if his arm or his leg had had to be amputated?

"No," said Spilett more than once, "I have never thought of such a contingency without shuddering!"

"And yet, if it had been necessary to operate," said Harding one day to him, "you would not have hesitated?"

"No, Cyrus!" said Gideon Spilett, "but thank God that we have been spared this complication!"

As in so many other conjectures, the colonists had appealed to the logic of that simple good sense of which they had made use so often, and once more, thanks to their general knowledge, it had succeeded! But might not a time come when all their science would be at fault? They were alone on the island. Now, men in all states of society are necessary to each other. Cyrus Harding knew this well, and sometimes he asked if some circumstance might not occur which they would be powerless to surmount. It appeared to him besides, that he and his companions, till then so fortunate, had entered into an unlucky period. During the two years and a half which had elapsed since their escape from Richmond, it might be said that they had had everything their own way. The island had abundantly supplied them with minerals, vegetables, animals, and as Nature had constantly loaded them, their science had known how to take advantage of what she offered them.

The wellbeing of the colony was therefore complete. Moreover, in certain occurrences an inexplicable influence had come to their aid!... But all that could only be for a time.

In short, Cyrus Harding believed that fortune had turned against them.

In fact, the convicts' ship had appeared in the waters of the island, and if the pirates had been, so to speak, miraculously destroyed, six of them, at least, had escaped the catastrophe. They had disembarked on the island, and it was almost impossible to get at the five who survived. Ayrton had no doubt been murdered by these wretches, who possessed firearms, and at the first use that they had made of them, Herbert had fallen, wounded almost mortally. Were these the first blows aimed by adverse fortune at the colonists? This was often asked by Harding. This was often repeated by the reporter; and it appeared to him also that the intervention, so strange, yet so efficacious, which till then had served them so well, had now failed them. Had this mysterious being, whatever he was, whose existence could not be denied, abandoned the island? Had he in his turn succumbed?

No reply was possible to these questions. But it must not be imagined that because Harding and his companions spoke of these things, they were men to despair. Far from that. They looked their situation in the face, they analysed the chances, they prepared themselves for any event, they stood firm and straight before the future, and if adversity was at last to strike them, it would find in them men prepared to struggle against it.

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## THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE by H Rider Haggard

### Book III: Egypt

#### Chapter II: The Statues by The Nile

The first thing that I remember of this journey to Egypt is that I was sitting in the warm morning sunshine on the deck of our little trading vessel, that went by the name of the heathen goddess, Diana. We were in the port of Alexandria. Martina, who now went by the name of Hilda, stood by my side describing to me the great city that lay before us.

She told me of the famous Pharos still rising from its rock, although in it the warning light no longer burned, for since the Moslems took Egypt they had let it die, as some said because they feared lest it should guide a Christian fleet to attack them. She described also the splendid palaces that the Greeks had built, many of them now empty or burned out, the Christian churches, the mosques, the broad streets and the grass-grown quays.

As we were thus engaged, she talking and I listening and asking questions, she said,

“The boat is coming with the Saracen officers of the port, who must inspect and pass the ship before she is allowed to discharge her cargo. Now, Olaf, remember that henceforth you are called Hodur.” (I had taken this name after that of the blind god of the northern peoples.)

“Play your part well, and, above all, be humble. If you are reviled, or even struck, show no anger, and be sure to keep that red sword of yours close hidden beneath your robe. If you do these things we shall be safe, for I tell you that we are well disguised.”

The boat came alongside and I heard men climbing the ship's ladder. Then someone kicked me. It was our captain, Menas, who also had his part to play.

“Out of the road, you blind beggar,” he said. “The noble officers of the Caliph board our ship, and you block their path.”

“Touch not one whom God has afflicted,” said a grave voice, speaking in bad Greek. “It is easy for us to walk round the man. But who is he, captain, and why does he come to Egypt? By their looks he and the woman with him might well have seen happier days.”

“I know not, lord,” answered the captain, “who, after they paid their passage money, took no more note of them. Still they play and sing well, and served to keep the sailors in good humour when we were becalmed.”

“Sir,” I broke in, “I am a Northman named Hodur, and this woman is my niece. I was a trader in amber, but thieves robbed me and my companions of all we had as we journeyed to Byzantium. Me, who was the leader of our band, they held to ransom, blinding me lest I should be able to swear to them again, but the others they killed. This is the only child of my sister, who married a Greek, and now we get our living by our skill in music.”

“Truly you Christians love each other well,” said the officer. “Accept the Koran and you will not be treated thus. But why do you come to Egypt?”

“Sir, we heard that it is a rich land where the people love music, and have come hoping to earn some money here that we may put by to live on. Send us not away, sir; we have a little offering to make. Niece Hilda, where is the gold piece I gave you? Offer it to this lord.”

“Nay, nay,” said the officer. “Shall I take bread out of the mouth of the poor? Clerk,” he added in Arabic to a man who was with him, “make out a writing giving leave to these two to land and to ply their business anywhere in Egypt without question or hindrance, and bring it to me to seal. Farewell, musicians. I fear you will find money scarce in Egypt, for the land has been stricken with a famine. Yet go and prosper in the name of God, and may He turn your hearts to the true faith.”

Thus it came about that through the good mind of this Moslem, whose name, as I learned when we met again, was Yusuf, our feet were lifted over many stumbling-blocks. Thus it seems that by virtue of his office he had power to prevent the entry into the land of such folk as we seemed to be, which power, if they were Christians, was almost always put in force. Yet because he had seen the captain appear to illtreat me, or because, being a soldier himself, he guessed that I was of the same trade, whatever tale it might please me to tell, this rule was not enforced. Moreover, the writing which he gave me enabled me to go where we wished in Egypt without let or hindrance. Whenever we were stopped or threatened, which happened to us several times, it was enough if we presented it to the nearest person in authority who could read, after which we were allowed to pass upon our way unhindered.

Before we left the ship I had a last conversation with the captain, Menas, telling him that he was to lie in the harbour, always pretending that he waited for some cargo not yet forthcoming, such as unharvested corn, or whatever was convenient, until we appeared again. If after a certain while we did not appear, then he was to make a trading journey to neighbouring ports and return to Alexandria. These artifices he must continue to practise until orders to the contrary reached him under my own hand, or until he had sure evidence that we were dead. All this the man promised that he would do.

“Yes,” said Martina, who was with me, “you promise, Captain, and we believe you, but the question is, can you answer for the others? For instance, for the sailor Cosmas there, who, I see, is already drunken and talking loudly about many things.”

“Henceforth, lady, Cosmas shall drink water only. When not in his cups he is an honest fellow, and I do answer for him.”

Yet, alas! as the end showed, Cosmas was not to be answered for by anyone.

We went ashore and took up our abode in a certain house, where we were safe. Whether the Christian owners of that house did or did not know who we were, I am not certain. At any rate, through them we were introduced at night into the palace of Politian, the Melchite Patriarch of Alexandria. He was a stern-faced, black-bearded man of honest heart but narrow views, of whom the Bishop Barnabas had often spoken to me as his closest friend. To this Politian I told all under the seal of our Faith, asking his aid in my quest. When I had finished my tale he thought a while. Then he said,

“You are a bold man, General Olaf; so bold that I think God must be leading you to His own ends. Now, you have heard aright. Barnabas, my beloved brother and your father in Christ, has been taken hence. He was murdered by some fanatic Moslems soon after his return from

Byzantium. Also it is true that the Prince Magas was killed in war by the Emir Musa, and that the lady Heliodore escaped out of his clutches. What became of her afterwards no man knows, but for my part I believe that she is dead.”

“And I believe that she is alive,” I answered, “and therefore I go to seek her.”

“Seek and ye shall find,” mused the Patriarch; “at least, I hope so, though my advice to you is to bide here and send others to seek.”

“That I will not do,” I answered again.

“Then go, and God be with you. I’ll warn certain of the faithful of your coming, so that you may not lack a friend at need. When you return, if you should ever return, come to me, for I have more influence with these Moslems than most, and may be able to serve you. I can say no more, and it is not safe that you should tarry here too long. Stay, I forget. There are two things you should know. The first is that the Emir Musa, he who seized the lady Heliodore, is about to be deposed. I have the news from the Caliph Harun himself, for with him I am on friendly terms because of a service I did him through my skill in medicine. The second is that Irene has beguiled Constantine, or bewitched him, I know not which. At least, by his own proclamation once more she rules the Empire jointly with himself, and that I think will be his death warrant, and perhaps yours also.”

“Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,” I said. “Now if I live I shall learn whether any oaths are sacred to Irene, as will Constantine.”

Then we parted.

Leaving Alexandria, we wandered first to the town of Misra, which stood near to the mighty pyramids, beneath whose shadow we slept one night in an empty tomb. Thence by slow marches we made our way up the banks of the Nile, earning our daily bread by the exercise of our art. Once or twice we were stopped as spies, but always released again when I produced the writing that the officer Yusuf had given me upon the ship. For the rest, none molested us in a land where wandering beggars were so common. Of money it is true we earned little, but as we had gold in plenty sewn into our garments this did not matter. Food was all we needed, and that, as I have said, was never lacking.

So we went on our strange journey, day by day learning more of the tongues spoken in Egypt, and especially of Arabic, which the Moslems used. Whither did we journey? We know not for certain. What I sought to find were those two huge statues of which I had dreamed at Aar on the night of the robbing of the Wanderer’s tomb. We heard that there were such figures of stone, which were said to sing at daybreak, and that they sat upon a plain on the western bank of the Nile, near to the ruins of the great city of Thebes, now but a village, called by the Arabs El-Uksor, or “the Palaces.” So far as we could discover, it was in the neighbourhood of this city that Heliodore had escaped from Musa, and there, if anywhere, I hoped to gain tidings of her fate. Also something within my heart drew me to those images of forgotten gods or men.

At length, two months or more after we left Alexandria, from the deck of the boat in which we had hired a passage for the last hundred miles of our journey, Martina saw to the east the

ruins of Thebes. To the west she saw other ruins, and seated in front of them two mighty figures of stone.

“This is the place,” she said, and my heart leapt at her words. “Now let us land and follow our fortune.”

So when the boat was tied up at sunset, to the west bank of the river, as it happened, we bade farewell to the owner and went ashore.

“Whither now?” asked Martina.

“To the figures of stone,” I answered.

So she led me through fields in which the corn was growing, to the edge of the desert, meeting no man all the way. Then for a mile or more we tramped through sand, till at length, late at night, Martina halted.

“We stand beneath the statues,” she said, “and they are awesome to look on; mighty, seated kings, higher than a tall tree.”

“What lies behind them?” I asked.

“The ruins of a great temple.”

“Lead me to that temple.”

So we passed through a gateway into a court, and there we halted.

“Now tell me what you see,” I said.

“We stand in what has been a hall of many columns,” she answered, “but the most of them are broken. At our feet is a pool in which there is a little water. Before us lies the plain on which the statues sit, stretching some miles to the Nile, that is fringed with palms. Across the broad Nile are the ruins of old Thebes. Behind us are more ruins and a line of rugged hills of stone, and in them, a little to the north, the mouth of a valley. The scene is very beautiful beneath the moon, but very sad and desolate.”

“It is the place that I saw in my dream many years ago at Aar,” I said.

“It may be,” she answered, “but if so it must have changed, since, save for a jackal creeping among the columns and a dog that barks in some distant village, I neither see nor hear a living thing. What now, Olaf?”

“Now we will eat and sleep,” I said. “Perhaps light will come to us in our sleep.”

So we ate of the food we had brought with us, and afterwards lay down to rest in a little chamber, painted round with gods, that Martina found in the ruins of the temple.

During that night no dreams came to me, nor did anything happen to disturb us, even in this old temple, of which the very paving-stones were worn through by the feet of the dead.

Before the dawn Martina led me back to the colossal statues, and we waited there, hoping that we should hear them sing, as tradition said they did when the sun rose. Yet the sun came up as it had done from the beginning of the world, and struck upon those giant effigies as it had done for some two thousand years, or so I was told, and they remained quite silent. I do not think that ever I grieved more over my blindness than on this day, when I must depend upon Martina to tell me of the glory of that sunrise over the Egyptian desert and those mighty ruins reared by the hands of forgotten men.

Well, the sun rose, and, since the statues would not speak, I took my harp and played upon it, and Martina sang a wild Eastern song to my playing. It seemed that our music was heard. At any rate, a few folk going out to labour came to see by whom it was caused, and finding only two wandering musicians, presently went away again. Still, one remained, a woman, Coptic by her dress, with whom I heard Martina talk. She asked who we were and why we had come to such a place, whereon Martina repeated to her the story which we had told a hundred times. The woman answered that we should earn little money in those parts, as the famine had been sore there owing to the low Nile of the previous season. Until the crops were ripe again, which in the case of most of them would not be for some weeks, even food, she added, must be scarce, though few were left to eat it, since the Moslems had killed out most of those who dwelt in that district of Upper Egypt.

Martina replied that she knew this was so, and therefore we had proposed either to travel on to Nubia or to return north. Still, as I, her blind uncle, was not well, we had landed from a boat hoping that we might find some place where we could rest for a week or two until I grew stronger.

“Yet,” she continued meaningly, “being poor Christian folk we know not where to look for such a place, since Cross worshippers are not welcome among those who follow the Prophet.”

Now, when the woman heard that we were Christians her voice changed. “I also am a Christian,” she said; “but give me the sign.”

So we made the sign of the Cross on our breasts, which a Moslem will die rather than do.

“My husband and I,” went on the woman, “live yonder at the village of Kurna, which is situated near to the mouth of the valley that is called Biban-el-Meluk, or Gate of the Kings, for there the monarchs of old days, who were the forefathers or rulers of us Copts, lie buried. It is but a very small village, for the Moslems have killed most of us in a war that was raised a while ago between them and our hereditary prince, Magas. Yet my husband and I have a good house there, and, being poor, shall be glad to give you food and shelter if you can pay us something.”

The end of it was that after some chaffering, for we dared not show that we had much money, a bargain was struck between us and this good woman, who was named Palka. Having paid her a week’s charges in advance, she led us to the village of Kurna, which was nearly an hour’s walk away, and here made us known to her husband, a middle-aged man named Marcus, who took little note of anything save his farming.



This he carried on upon a patch of fertile ground that was irrigated by a spring which flowed from the mountains; also he had other lands near to the Nile, where he grew corn and fodder for his beasts. In his house, that once had been part of some great stone building of the ancients, and still remained far larger than he could use, for this pair had no children, we were given two good rooms. Here we dwelt in comfort, since, notwithstanding the scarcity of the times, Marcus was richer than he seemed and lived well. As for the village of Kurna, its people all told did not amount to more than thirty souls, Christians every one of them, who were visited from time to time by a Coptic priest from some distant monastery in the mountains.

By degrees we grew friendly with Palka, a pleasant, bustling woman of good birth, who loved to hear of the outside world. Moreover, she was very shrewd, and soon began to suspect that we were more than mere wandering players.

Pretending to be weak and ill, I did not go out much, but followed her about the house while she was working, talking to her on many matters.

Thus I led up the subject of Prince Magas and his rebellion, and learned that he had been killed at a place about fifty miles south from Kurna. Then I asked if it were true that his daughter had been killed with him.

“What do you know of the lady Heliodore?” she asked sharply.

“Only that my niece, who for a while was a servant in the palace at Byzantium before she was driven away with others after the Empress fell, saw her there. Indeed, it was her business to wait upon her and her father the Prince. Therefore, she is interested in her fate.”

“It seems that you are more interested than your niece, who has never spoken a word to me concerning her,” answered Palka. “Well, since you are a man, I should not have thought this strange, had you not been blind, for they say she was the most beautiful woman in Egypt. As for her fate, you must ask God, since none know it. When the army of Musa was encamped yonder by the Nile my husband, Marcus, who had taken two donkey-loads of forage for sale to the camp and was returning by moonlight, saw her run past him, a red knife in her hand, her face set towards the Gateway of the Kings. After that he saw her no more, nor did anyone else, although they hunted long enough, even in the tombs, which the Moslems, like our people, fear to visit. Doubtless she fell or threw herself into some hole in the rocks; or perhaps the wild beasts ate her. Better so than that a child of the old Pharaohs should become the woman of an infidel.”

“Yes,” I answered, “better so. But why do folk fear to visit those tombs of which you speak, Palka?”

“Why? Because they are haunted, that is all, and even the bravest dread the sight of a ghost. How could they be otherwise than haunted, seeing that yonder valley is sown with the mighty dead like a field with corn?”

“Yet the dead sleep quietly enough, Palka.”

“Aye, the common dead, Hodur; but not these kings and queens and princes, who, being gods of a kind, cannot die. It is said that they hold their revels yonder at night with songs and wild

laughter, and that those who look upon them come to an evil end within a year. Whether this be so I cannot say, since for many years none have dared to visit that place at night. Yet that they eat I know well enough.”

“How do you know, Palka?”

“For a good reason. With the others in this village I supply the offerings of their food. The story runs that once the great building, of which this house is a part, was a college of heathen priests whose duty it was to make offerings to the dead in the royal tombs. When the Christians came, those priests were driven away, but we of Kurna who live in their house still make the offerings. If we did not, misfortune would overtake us, as indeed has always happened if they were forgotten or neglected. It is the rent that we pay to the ghosts of the kings. Twice a week we pay it, setting food and milk and water upon a certain stone near to the mouth of the valley.”

“Then what happens, Palka?”

“Nothing, except that the offering is taken.”

“By beggar folk, or perchance by wild creatures!”

“Would beggar folk dare to enter that place of death?” she answered with contempt. “Or would wild beasts take the food and pile the dishes neatly together and replace the flat stones on the mouths of the jars of milk and water, as a housewife might? Oh! do not laugh. Of late this has always been done, as I who often fetch the vessels know well.”

“Have you ever seen these ghosts, Palka?”

“Yes, once I saw one of them. It was about two months ago that I passed the mouth of the valley after moonrise, for I had been kept out late searching for a kid which was lost. Thinking that it might be in the valley, I peered up it. As I was looking, from round a great rock glided a ghost. She stood still, with the moonlight shining on her, and gazed towards the Nile. I, too, stood still in the shadow, thirty or forty paces away. Then she threw up her arms as though in despair, turned and vanished.”

“She!” I said, then checked myself and asked indifferently: “Well, what was the fashion of this ghost?”

“So far as I could see that of a young and beautiful woman, wearing such clothes as we find upon the ancient dead, only wrapped more loosely about her.”

“Had she aught upon her head, Palka?”

“Yes, a band of gold or a crown set upon her hair, and about her neck what seemed to be a necklace of green and gold, for the moonlight flashed upon it. It was much such a necklace as you wear beneath your robe, Hodur.”

“And pray how do you know what I wear, Palka?” I asked.

“By means of what you lack, poor man, the eyes in my head. One night when you were asleep I had need to pass through your chamber to reach another beyond. You had thrown off your outer garment because of the heat, and I saw the necklace. Also I saw a great red sword lying by your side and noted on your bare breast sundry scars, such as hunters and soldiers come by. All of these things, Hodur, I thought strange, seeing that I know you to be nothing but a poor blind beggar who gains his bread by his skill upon the harp.”

“There are beggars who were not always beggars, Palka,” I said slowly.

“Quite so, Hodur, and there are great men and rich who sometimes appear to be beggars, and—many other things. Still, have no fear that we shall steal your necklace or talk about the red sword or the gold with which your niece Hilda weights her garments. Poor girl, she has all the ways of a fine lady, one who has known Courts, as I think you said was the case. It must be sad for her to have fallen so low. Still, have no fear, Hodur,” and she took my hand and pressed it in a certain secret fashion which was practised among the persecuted Christians in the East when they would reveal themselves to each other. Then she went away laughing.

As for me, I sought Martina, who had been sleeping through the heat, and told her everything.

“Well,” she said when I had finished, “you should give thanks to God, Olaf, since without doubt this ghost is the lady Heliodore. So should Jodd,” I heard her add beneath her breath, for in my blindness my ears had grown very quick.

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