

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

Schlock! **WEBZINE**

VOL. 12, ISSUE 25
11TH MARCH 2018

STUDENT ANTIBODY

**BY GREGORY
OWEN—
NO PROMISES,
SUB-MAN...**

PREDATOR

**BY GERALD E
SHEAGREN—
IN THE MIDDLE OF
THE AMAZON
RAINFOREST...**

I WILL COUNT YOUR RICE BY MICHAEL MALLOY

THE SIGHT

**BY STEVEN
HAVELOCK**

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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E Sheagren, Michael Malloy, Gregory KH Bryant, Percy Greg, HG Wells, Steven Havelock*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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This week's cover illustration is *Mystery* by *Kellepics*. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

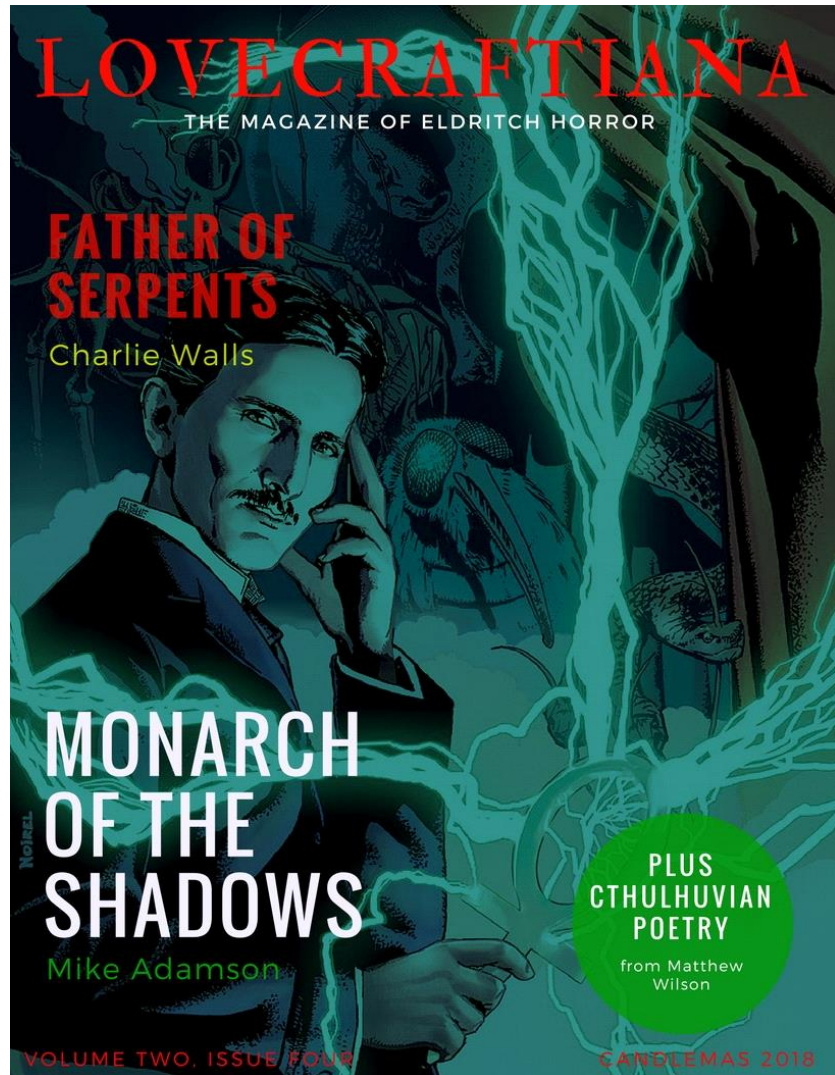
EDITORIAL

This week, a substitute teacher clashes with his students, an Amazon expedition encounters a predator, a revenant counts rice, and Phil's glorious holiday is spoiled by the sight of a monster.

John C Adams reviews David B Harrington's book of mystical visions. Mud continues to search for the errant Carter Ward. The traveller to Mars learns a few of the new planet's manners and customs. And the brother of our gallant narrator tells us what has been happening in London during this first campaign of the War of the Worlds.

—Gavin Chappell

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



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STUDENT ANTIBODY by Gregory Owen

“Welcome to Hell Cuervo,” one of the teachers joked to Mr. Oswald as he entered the main building that morning. He was unshaken by the remark unlike most new substitutes at Del Cuervo High School. Several had allegedly suffered from nervous breakdowns, and many of the regular staff had quit or transferred. It was a typical problem school in low-class America, and it’s a known fact that schools are directly affected by the class of people in the area.

Poor class of people, poorer classes of kids, Oswald would say. Like goddamn parasites sucking the place dry, he’d also say.

It was more than a mere temptation to blame the parents of the students—it was as easy as it was for everyone else in the country to blame the teachers with any and all issues. In the case of Del Cuervo, he felt it was something of a healthy combination of the two, and maybe a hint of the lethargy of the generation, with more weight focused on the school’s staff itself. It was what he had been told, but he’d see for himself shortly.

What could be honestly said was that he was a little disgusted by the humour emanating from the teacher’s remark. How is it funny to refer to a school as being even remotely like Hell? Apathy was something Oswald had come to despise in his short time as a resident in town, and especially as a substitute teacher. The fact that people accepted how things were with no desire to change, but they still retained the desire to complain, was totally unacceptable. Nowhere near as unacceptable as the job ahead of him, though.

For however long was required, Mr. Oswald would be teaching English for Mr. Hogan, two classes of seniors and one with juniors. The two senior classes would be fine—he’d been told that those students wanted to be there, that they desired success—but he was brimming with loathing at the prospect of the class of juniors. Not even loathing, really. Rage, more like.

He’d been warned about over the phone by the office secretary when he had finally been approved to work at Del Cuervo and was requested due to the employee shortage. “They’re, uh, pretty t-tough to handle, Mr. Oswald,” she’d stammered. But he didn’t worry. He had more than enough knowledge from an approved source that the students, who salivate at the prospect of tearing an ignorant, weak-minded substitute teacher’s fortitude apart, were completely unaware of.

“Mr. Hogan’s a close friend of mine,” he had said. “So I know.”

“Oh, o-of course, sir. You were h-highly recommended by him. I just-”

“Thank you. I’ll be there tomorrow morning.” And he hung up.

Mr. Oswald stopped inside the main office to pick up the room keys from the secretary—her shaky voice didn’t befit her wide, bloated frame—and he was stopped by the principal on the way out. The principal was lean and sporting a nervous smile, wearing a suit that was a bit too big for him and a tie that was ridiculously coloured. He had the goofy makings of the host of a

bad children's afterschool show, and was definitely one of those who claimed that his job was to put the "PAL!" in principal. Oswald didn't like him already, and potentially saw one of the problems with the school and its population.

"Good morning this morning, Mister, uh," he said as he looked at the clipboard in his hand, "Ah, Mr. Oswald!" He laughed once he saw that Oswald was wearing his school-issued identification tag with his name in plain sight. The face in the photo was as stony as the real thing. "Ha, I'm not as observant sometimes as I should be. How are you doing today?"

"Great," Oswald muttered, trying to walk past the principal—his name tag, which held a face with the grin of someone forced to smile at gunpoint, read Mr. Eugene Kelly. Oswald drew the connection of his name to the legendary dancer and actor thanks to what was told to him by Mr. Hogan, and he was fairly certain that Mr. Kelly knew it, too. He'd never call him "Gene," though, especially if he asked him to.

"Great, great! I'm Mr. Kelly, but you can call me Gene."

No, I won't.

"Welcome to Del Cuervo High," Kelly continued. "Would you like the tour before first period begins? I can—"

"No."

Frowning disappointedly, Mr. Kelly stumbled in his welcome speech. No one had ever really interrupted it before, and he had only rehearsed it when he someone didn't interrupt him. "Er, well..."

Oswald held up the keys. "Could you just direct me to Mr. Hogan's room? I'd appreciate it."

"Oh, yes...um, yes, absolutely." Mr. Kelly wasn't quite sure he liked the straight-to-business attitude of this new substitute, but he came highly recommended by Mr. Hogan, who was one of the best English teachers he'd ever seen, and that was more than enough for him...well, at least until recently. Illness, he'd figured. Still, he couldn't shake the notion that this Mr. Oswald's abrasive attitude would merely antagonize the student body, and that junior English class was something of a powder-keg waiting for a spark. More like a nuclear bomb, and that was saying something in a school like his.

"The room, Mr. Kelly?"

"Room 203," Kelly said, hearing the adamancy in Oswald's tone. "Second door on the right after the stairs. Uh, you need anything, give me a ring!" He knew that by the end of the day, he'd more than likely be getting a call from Room 203. But, as he watched the stern new substitute stalk down the hall with a muted ferocity, something much like a purpose that no one knew but him, Mr. Kelly felt that perhaps the only phone call he'd be receiving would be from complaining parents. Or the school board.

Wait! “Mr. Oswald!”

He turned to the principal, clearly annoyed at being stopped again. “Yes?”

The “Pal” in principal trotted with loud clops across the dusty floor, assuredly in need of a waxing, and his smile melted. “Look, I know you’ve probably heard things—negative things—about this school. Even your first class, English III, has a pretty nasty reputation, but trust me, it’s really not so bad...”

“Mr. Hogan has informed me. I already know. No need to sugar-coat anything. It is bad, though, and it needs to be fixed. I plan to do so,” Oswald stated matter-of-factly.

“Oh...right, right. I—Just...well, be careful. Okay? And tell Mr. Hogan we wish him well! I’m sorry that he’s been under the weather recently.”

There was no answer as Oswald stepped away and walked briskly down the hallway toward the stairs, leaving Kelly to his gumdrop fantasies as to what this school was. Looking into classrooms as he walked, Oswald could see the truth. Students yelling, blaring music on cell phones, throwing paper and food—in one room, which seemed to contain a math class taught by a scrawny female teacher who looked as though puberty had passed her by, there were two students nose to nose, about to brawl. She shouted at them to stop, but her pleas were drowned by the chants of, “Fight, fight, fight!” Barely slowing in his trek, Oswald saw her run to the wall phone near her desk. Likely Mr. Kelly would have to come down there and sing campfire songs with them. That would solve the problem, of course, he thought sarcastically.

Goddamn parasites.

Oswald had something different in mind for his classes. It was no wonder that Mr. Hogan had become ill and entrusted him with re-establishing order in his English III class. He didn’t mind. Dealing with problems was what he was made to do, he told Hogan. And that’s just what he planned to do, reaching the top of the stairs and already able to hear raucous voices. He knew the source was his destination: Room 203.

Del Cuervo High’s newest substitute teacher opened the door to a roar of howls and laughter, and was immediately overwhelmed with disgust. His brow furrowed and his jaw clenched, and hatred almost overtook him as he slammed the door. He half-expected silence to fill the room at his entrance, but he knew all about the class from Mr. Hogan. He also knew the school’s reputation and, just moments ago, had witnessed it himself. It was a mistake to expect anything civilized. Goddamn parasites, his brain growled again.

Instead of silence, all he had gained from his slamming of the door was the ire from the students, the majority of whom were in the middle of important conversations about getting to home plate the previous Saturday with “Spread Eagle” Monahan or who was selling what narcotic in which bathroom during lunch, and Oswald had dared to interrupt them. How dare this suited asshole come in and even speak to them? To them, he just needed to stuff himself into his suitcase and

get the fuck out—these were only a couple of the remarks made about Oswald that he could hear.

He didn't care, though. "Sit down, class, and be quiet, please." There was little friendliness in his voice, and even less anger, a mark of powerful restraint on his part. He was firm but not hateful, though his brain pulsed with an unquestionable fury. It was showing on his face, ever so slightly and hidden to the casual observer, but it was there under the skin. Already, Oswald was losing his stiff, uptight composure, but the truth of it all was that he liked it. He enjoyed this. He wanted them to continue to deride his authority. It was what he needed to reveal the class's true problem. They would merely play into his hands like rodents. "Very well." He fed on conflict, now overly satiated, and began to boil over. "SIT DOWN AND SHUT UP!" he yelled, slamming a fist on Hogan's desk, rattling the cup of pencils.

"Whoa, man, calm your shit," a lone voice called from among the mass, followed by a plethora of "oos" and "uh-ohs" from the other students. Bait taken.

"Excuse me?" the teacher asked, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

There was more chatter, but that voice came again over the sea of low murmurs. "Calm down, man—no need to get your panties in a wad, bitch." More laughter. The voice obviously belonged to a leader. A big fish.

Oswald swallowed hard and calmly placed his suitcase down on the floor, peeling off his jacket as he began chuckling to himself over the blatant disrespect. He enjoyed this. Tossing his jacket on the chair and rolling up the sleeves on his dress shirt, Oswald casually walked to the front row of desks and immediately set his sights to the source of the voice. "Stand up," Oswald commanded.

The students all looked around at each other, and then their focuses drifted to one student in the back centre of the room. The closed blinds at the side of the large classroom spilled only a minute amount of golden light, the majority of which flashed upon the eyes and teeth of the voice's owner, both features of which belonged to only a predator in nature, and the pinpoint pupils were gazing at Oswald, who was neither amused nor intimidated by this particular individual. "Who, me?" The class laughed again, as though they were watching a sitcom filmed live.

"Yeah, you. Stand up. Now."

The eyes never blinked, looking at the other students and demanding their admiration. This one considered himself a king. With arrogant swagger, the unnamed student finally complied. He wiped his hands in loud pats along his jeans. Beneath a thick mop of black hair, his glassy eyes shined with appeasement, but only for the attention he attained from his subjects. "Yesh sir, Mister Sub, sir," he mocked, putting his hands in the pockets of his hoody. "Do I get an A for that, Mister Sub, sir?"

Oswald ignored the remark. "What's your name?"

His face gleamed in the light. It was brown and round, with the smallest hint of black facial hair resting on his chin. Scanning him, Oswald could see from the student's broad shoulders and barrel chest that he was likely an athlete or a weightlifter.

"Heh. Luther Kreese, but you'll call me Lucky." He scanned Mr. Oswald as well, seeing that he was the same height and had a larger build, much like himself, but he was still smaller. He knew this man probably couldn't lift his own body weight like he could, and he snickered to himself. Just another weak pussy like all the other teachers. Just like Mr. Hogan.

"Very well. Sit down, Lucky. And shut your mouth." I know you now, he thought. Hogan told me all about you and your friends. You're my marks.

"No promises, Sub-Man," he said, still smiling, and plopped down next to three other students, all grouped at the back of the room like the lumps of a festering tumour.

Now that he knew Lucky affirmatively, Oswald could easily deduce the names of his cohorts. The two boys seated directly behind him, their heads visible and nearly resting on his shoulders like pock-marked parrots, were a pair of delinquents named Quill and Tolan. Oswald was unsure of which one was which, but that didn't matter. The one on Lucky's left had a pencil-thin moustache and a messy pompadour hairstyle, both of which lent to his casually cocky, half-lidded stare; the one on the right had a head shaped like a mushroom cloud, his hair a wide field of tangled curls, and thick lips permanently fixed in a half-grin. Both were noticeably lanky and smaller than their leader's broad frame. No matter who was who, Oswald was sure of two things: they were Lucky's lackeys and they were assholes.

Next to Lucky was the lone female in the crew and most assuredly his girlfriend: Ashe McCall. She smacked some gum as though chewing cud and, scoffing at Oswald, continued her endeavours at cycling through her cell phone's pictures, proudly caressing her man's shoulder with a free hand. After a moment of observation and quelling the upstart of bile in his throat, Mr. Oswald began class.

"My name is Mr. Oswald, in case none of you can read a nametag." He pointed to his identification tag and reached for the class list on Hogan's desk, seeing the students' names next to their grade levels. "With much of this class consisting of seniors in a junior level English class, I can ascertain that most of you cannot." He looked around the room, focusing on the four at the back. Much of the room was quiet now, except for some mumbles and snickers. "I'm subbing for Mr. Hogan, who's a close friend of mine. He's decided to take some time off."

"That's 'cuz Hogan's a pussy," Lucky said loudly.

"Ha-ha, pussy, pussy!" one of the two male lackeys cackled.

No one said things like that in Oswald's presence—certainly not within earshot. He would have to return with a salvo of his own. "Hey! Didn't anyone ever teach you to respect your superiors?"

"Dunno, Sub-Man! Tolan, you ever hear that?"

The faced mushroom chuckled. “Nah, Lucky. Never. They don’t need no respect. This faggot don’t neither.”

“Need no respect,” repeated Oswald. “Proving to me one of the many reasons why you imbeciles are in this class again. Thank you, Tolan.”

Tolan’s face contorted with confusion, but Lucky and Quill understood, the former nodding cheekily. “We got ourselves a funny mother-fucker right here.” From behind, Quill whispered into Lucky’s ear.

The substitute teacher caught it. “Say again, Quill? Have something brilliant to add?”

The pompadour-sporting youth giggled, looking at Lucky, and he started to speak before he was interrupted with zeal by Oswald. “No, Quill? I didn’t think so. Logic comes to your brain briefly only to die, correct?” Quill was dumbfounded, and a few students giggled, the tide starting to shift.

“Hey, fuck you, Sub-Man,” roared an irritated Lucky.

Upon the substitute’s entry only minutes earlier, the other students in the class were enraptured in their own discussions and Lucky Kreese’s comedy routine, but now they bore witness to a growing conflict that was not only tense, but spellbinding. A teacher (a substitute, no less) was engaging in a war of words with the toughest group in Del Cuervo...and he was winning. Mr. Hogan hadn’t had the spirit to do that; in fact, he’d seemed to wither like a dying tulip in recent weeks. A few of the students thought he had contracted some debilitating illness or was possibly a drug addict at the end of a long spiral, but there was no confirmation and only hearsay. All they knew was that he had lost his educational lustre, his strength. Maybe teaching these students had drained him beyond repair. And yet, this new man, this Mr. Oswald, was very formidable, as he confirmed again and again.

They were playing right into his hands. He loved this. “No,” he countered, pointing at his target, coldly observing Lucky. “Fuck you, sub-human.”

Lowering her cell phone, Ashe finally felt compelled to participate in the verbal debate, seeing that her man was losing power. “What the hell did he just say?” She looked about the room at the other students as if expecting a reply—it was her poor attempt at the similar rhetoric used by the Ancient Greeks, though her question did little to rally a rage that would have sent Oswald the way of Caesar. All it earned was their awe of Oswald, who was clear in his insult.

“Sub-human?” Lucky said, jumping from his desk. “Sub-human?”

“Did I stutter?” Mr. Oswald continued. “Do you need me to repeat it? Maybe write it on the board?” He rubbed his hands and jumped to the nearby whiteboard, grabbing a marker and writing in bold black letters LUCKY KREESE IS SUB-HUMAN. He turned and pointed at the words. “Perhaps this can be our lesson today. Does anyone care to discern the meaning of this

written statement?”

“Means you gonna get your ass kicked,” Quill said while both Ashe and Tolan hummed agreement. Lucky, however, was deathly silent, steadily eyeing Mr. Oswald’s every single movement.

Undaunted, Mr. Oswald continued his questioning. “Sub-human, class. It basically means less than human. Beneath. Under. Sub-par, you ever hear that?” No response. “Under par. Less than satisfactory. I’m a substitute teacher, and while that typically dictates that I am a replacement—a placeholder—some might say that it means I’m less than a teacher.”

“I’d say so,” Ashe said.

“And teachers are less than dog shit,” Tolan followed.

“Now Tolan, are you saying that I, and other teachers and the like, are lesser than you? It’s rude to call yourself something like that. How about canine excrement? So much nicer, wouldn’t you say, class?” He placed the lid back on the marker and dropped it on the whiteboard tray. “And honestly, we teachers...even the substitutes...are not any lower than you. After all, it doesn’t get much lower than that.” Can’t get lower than a goddamn parasite. Gone was the dreadfully quiet, threatening Mr. Oswald from before. He had taken the sardonically wisecracking mantle from Lucky and his gang, though Lucky was finished being belittled.

“That’s it, asshole,” the large delinquent said, lunging from his seat and flipping the desk onto the floor with a deafening rattle, silencing the prattle of the room in mere seconds. “You done fucked up good now.”

While Tolan and Quill were laughing, Ashe provoked her boyfriend. “That’s it, baby. Get this son of a bitch...”

Lumbering like a silverback gorilla with wide steps, Lucky stopped only inches from Oswald, who only crossed his arms. “Yes, Lucky?”

The eyes of every student in the class were transfixed on them, unblinking. The air of the room felt thick with the prospect of a battle, and most of the students were salivating at the idea. Others quivered in fear. All were unquestionably focused.

The knuckles in Lucky’s large fists crackled. “I’m sick a’ you, Sub-man.”

Oswald, sensing a bluff, held up an admonishing hand, wagging his finger. Lucky noticed the slender finesse of his hands and knew that Oswald couldn’t do any real damage to him. All talk, no balls. Just a pussy. “Don’t mess with me, you little bastard,” Oswald said.

“Little? We the same size, man.” He backed up and held his hand over his head and then moved it toward Oswald, who never wavered.

“Not here,” Oswald said, pointing to the subordinate’s skull, the centre of his forehead. “You’re lacking in that particular department.”

“You can’t talk to me that way, you fuck,” Lucky hissed, leaning in close. His breath surrounded Oswald’s face with piercing, rancid heat. “I’ll cut you wide open, tear your goddamn head off. I run this place, fucker. I’m better than you, than Hogan...all of ‘em. Can’t you see that?”

“Not anymore,” Oswald replied, never missing a beat. “Put your hands on me and find out just what happens.”

“What’s gonna happen? Huh?” Quill’s voice echoed.

“He ain’t gonna do a fuckin’ thing,” Tolan sneered. “All talk.”

“No balls,” Lucky concluded. “How ‘bout I show you what a real man is?” The teenager smirked and swaggered back, holding out his arms, daring the substitute to make good on his previous threat.

“Let me know when you find one other than me. I’d love to meet him.” Oswald’s demeanour had become dismissive and much calmer now, for the gauntlet had been thrown down.

“Okay, how ‘bout I just stomp your fuckin’ head in?”

The trap had been laid out. He’d show them. He’d show all of them. Oswald looked at Lucky, then to his cohorts. He saw the desire in their eyes, the need for retribution. His blatant disrespect—his bullying—had enticed them. He’d intruded on their territory. It was what they loved and enjoyed, as Hogan had told him. Something they had learned, but not been taught. He’d also stolen their disciples, taking away their audience that fed their egos. All that was needed now was the invitation. “Tell you what, kids,” he said as he walked to Mr. Hogan’s desk. “Come see me after school. We’ll have a conference.”

The imposing Lucky Kreese looked to his group and chuckled, nodding as they nodded at him. They were all in agreement, though they planned to make an example of this substitute teacher. Lucky had to especially in order to reassert his dominance. “Sure thing, Sub-Man. What time?”

“Later. Maybe six or six-thirty? I’m afraid I’ll be pretty busy this afternoon.” Mr. Oswald was not being completely truthful—he had his reasons for the later time, but they were only his to know, of course. He didn’t owe anyone explanations, especially the students. He wouldn’t owe Mr. Kelly any, either, for his behaviour that had occurred in the classroom. It was needed and, more importantly, justified.

“Six-thirty, then.” Lucky confirmed the date by drawing an invisible line across his throat. “You’ll be gone by seven.” His eyes sparkled in excitement, and he backed slowly to his overturned desk, picking it up and placing it back on the floor. “You’ll be dead, fucker,” he mumbled, and his lackeys all chanted “Dead, dead, dead” softly to themselves.

Oswald's pulse never increased, and as though the entire confrontation that spanned nearly fifteen minutes had never even happened, he began to conduct class. "Take out your books and turn to page 108..."

The remainder of the school day was passable at best. Compared to first period, some teachers at Del Cuervo would have seen the rest of Oswald's scheduled day as a godsend. He never left the classroom, merely sitting at Mr. Hogan's desk and covering the remaining two classes of Senior English by holding open discussion, and those students, most of whom were there for an education, did their work as diligently as possible. He remained in 203 even during his free period, neglecting to eat lunch or move about. He just waited.

Once Del Cuervo dismissed at three o' clock that afternoon, Mr. Oswald was still waiting coolly at the desk. When his best Princi-Pal, Mr. Kelly, came by to ask how things went, he sat and stated, "Fine." When asked if any students had made any threats or had upset him in anyway, he only said, "No." Mr. Kelly was obviously concerned by the apparent lack of validity in Oswald's words—Lord, he knew better with these kids! —but what was even more disturbing was the hint of pride on Oswald's lips and the tiny, nearly invisible glimmers of glee behind his glasses. Much like when they first met earlier that morning, Mr. Kelly suspected some ulterior motive known only to Oswald, but he couldn't discern it. That hadn't changed, even if his demeanour had slightly.

"Well, you have a good evening, Mr. Oswald. I'm glad (thankful!) that you had a great day."

"Right," Oswald said.

"Oh...well, we'll be seeing you bright and early tomorrow!" Mr. Kelly's attempts at maintaining his sunny, sickening disposition were failing, though his efforts weren't faltering in the least. "Okay. Tell Mr. Hogan I said hello!" Oswald never answered. Eugene Kelly did his sweep of the building and was out the door by five.

At six, the sun was setting and night-time was encroaching upon Del Cuervo High. The custodians were finishing their cleaning duties and, on his way out, the ironically nicknamed janitor, "Slim" Junkins, stopped by room 203. A rather thick, rotund man, Slim was wiping sweat from his ivory-haired scalp with a dampened rag. "Anyone-?" He saw that a suited figure was sitting at Mr. Hogan's desk. There were no lights on. "Uh, workin' late?"

"Yes," Oswald answered.

"Welp, I'm done here. 'Bout to head out."

"Okay. Please...do you mind leaving the main door open?"

Confounded, Slim coughed and stared at the man. "Uh...what for?"

Expecting company. “I may need to run to my car and come back. I don’t have a key to the building. Just the room.”

It was against policy, sure—Mr. Kelly would probably have his ass on a platter if he did anything against school protocol. Hell, the school board would probably carve it up and serve it at the next PTA meeting afterward, but he didn’t care. He was tired, and two bottles of ice cold beer were sitting in his refrigerator at home just waiting to be savoured. Who would know? “Lemme do this.” Slim removed a large key from his jingling keyring attached to his belt. “Here’s a key to the main door. I’ll leave it with ya.” He offered it to Oswald, who took it and placed it on the desk. “I have a couple I keep on me, and I can make more...don’t tell nobody. Against the rules. Lock up when you finally leave, okay? Hold on to it and give it back when you can.”

“Of course.”

“Say, Mr. Oswald, right? You subbin’ for Mr. Hogan?” Oswald nodded and Slim smiled. “He’s a nice fella. Great teacher. Tell him I hope he gets to feelin’ better. Heard he’s been sick. Oh, want a light on?”

“No,” Oswald said.

“Okay. Take care now.” The old janitor saw his way out and down the stairs, and as he unlocked the main doors, he thought to himself morosely: There’s somethin’ on that guy’s mind. Not sure what, but somethin’ bad. Briefly, he lamented leaving the key with Mr. Oswald, but he knew the beer he’d have soon would wash away all trepidation.

At six-thirty, the moon was fat and glowing and, right on schedule, Oswald could hear a metallic creak followed by a slam. Then there was chatter. Laughing, squeals, curses. He smiled.

They played right into his hands. Hook, line, and sinker, as Hogan would say.

“Sub-Maaaaa-aaaaan! We’re here for our conference!”

“Yeah, mother-fucker! Let’s see how well you talk shit without teeth!”

“Dead bodies don’t talk! Ha-ha!”

Oswald neglected to move from his seat, choosing only to wait until the voices and footsteps became louder. Lucky and his gang were seeking a fight, but they wouldn’t find one. Something else waited.

“Sup, asshole?” Lucky’s broad silhouette filled the doorway. “I’m ready to talk, but I can’t stay long. This gotta be quick!” He walked in, followed in tandem by Ashe, Quill, and Tolan, the latter closing the door behind them all, making sure there was no room for escape. “I ain’t gonna kick your ass, Sub-Man...I’m gonna just fuckin’ kill ya!”

“Yeah!” Ashe cried.

“Gotta come in here, talk shit, like you’re some big, bad fucker. You ain’t like me, man.” Lucky stopped right at the front of the desk, patting a fist in an open palm as he taunted Oswald. “Ya know, here’s the funny part of all this—we was gonna do the same to Mr. Hogan, too, before he got sick. Maybe we’ll make you a message for him.”

“Ha, it’ll say, ‘You’re next!’” Quill was more than pleased with his remark, grinning and running his fingers through his pompadour hair.

“Hogan thought he ran the show, too, but he was weak!”

“Yeah, thought we couldn’t take care of ourselves, so when we push him around, he pussies out and gets you to come in,” Tolan said.

“We’re better than him. Stronger! Smarter! And we’re better than you, sub. You ain’t nothin’ but a pussy helpin’ out a bitch!”

“Yeah, always too busy talkin’ about respect!”

Ashe leaned down to Oswald’s face. “Hogan didn’t respect us!”

“Thinks ‘cuz he made us, he’s better than us! When we figured it out, he wanted us to come back, and we said fuck that! The four of us stuck together—power in numbers—but there used to be five-” Lucky paused, quickly returning to his rant. “But that doesn’t matter. Bastard couldn’t respect the power we have together, and you don’t, either! We have a right to be who we want, when we want, and whatever in the hell we want!”

“Have to give respect to earn it,” Oswald finally muttered, removing his glasses and placing them on the desk. He stood and walked around to the front of the desk to face the four students.

“You always sayin’, ‘Respect your superiors.’ That what you think you are, Sub? Superior?” Lucky looked to his gang and laughed, clenching a fist to prepare his first blow. He knew this would be sweet. Oswald wouldn’t be the first person he beat to a bloody pulp, but by God, due to his unwillingness to back down, he’d certainly be the most fun. “You ain’t superior, mother-fucker! Not to us! We like being like the others...soon, we’ll be better. Better than them, Hogan, you...you sub-human piece of shit!” Lucky was almost hysterical in his rage-fuelled madness. “Tell ya what! How ‘bout we go to good ol’ Mr. Hogan’s house and do the same to him when we’re done with his bitch!”

Oswald slowly moved toward them. His expression was stoic, unafraid, and expressed something akin to victory. “...I’m his sentinel.”

“The hell’s he talkin’ about?” Ashe asked. “Sentinel? Teacher usin’ big words...”

“Screw this...hit ‘em, Lucky!” Quill squealed, patting his leader on the shoulder.

“Yeah, make the fuckin’ prick bleed!” Tolan chimed.

Nodding and raising his prepared fist, Lucky swung. The others gleefully anticipated the punch to result in a bone-splintering crack, and briefly cheered when the impact was made. Only, the hit sounded like a tiny, dampened slap and not a crack, and the short-lived jubilation was met with confusion.

“What the fuck?” Lucky managed with a grunt. Before, the substitute teacher’s hands had never appeared all that large to him—in all fairness, they were a bit smaller and much sleeker than his own chubby meat slabs, but at that moment, Lucky’s broad fist was lost in Oswald’s grip.

Played right into my hands. Hook.

“What’s going on?” Quill was nervous then, backing away from the others. He may not have been the smartest of his crew, but his instincts weren’t betraying him.

Line.

Luther “Lucky” Kreese, the toughest, cruellest student in Mr. Hogan’s English III class and likely all of Del Cuervo, was afraid. He tried to pull away so that he could strike once more, but Oswald’s hold became tighter. “Get ‘im offa me!” Lucky’s usually low, masculine voice broke into a squeak. His tugging increased in desperation and tenacity, but the more he pulled, the more bones he could hear cracking. It wasn’t until he stared into Oswald’s knowing, stern gaze that Lucky quickly realized, though he couldn’t explain due to his increasing agony, what Oswald meant by his proclaimed title. The teacher’s fingers began extending across his arm like veins. “Ahh, shit! He’s-!” Seeing what was happening, Lucky’s friends quickly knew why he called himself a sentinel, too.

Sinker.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret in case you don’t know yet,” Oswald hissed. “Mr. Hogan made you, sure...but he made me, too!”

“My God, Lucky! Jesus, no!” Ashe tried to reach for him, though she didn’t know what she could do, looking to her cohorts for support. “Help me, you assholes!” Quill and Tolan both looked at each other and then at her, shaking their heads in disagreement.

Seeing her motion, Oswald jerked his most despised pupil closer and their arms conjoined in twisting sinew. “He’s mine... You all are.” Oswald reached out with his free hand, now a swelling, meaty paw and pushed it through Lucky’s cheek, his digits squeezing under the skin and through his skull like putty. The teenager tried to scream, but a hunk of bulging flesh from Oswald’s pulsating arm forced its way into his mouth and down his throat. All that could be heard above the other students’ yells were muffled groans as Lucky engulfed the mass with dwindling resistance. “And we’re Hogan’s!” Blood flowed heavily from his open wounds and pulverized muscle, running out in streams, but it flowed into Oswald, like his body was sucking

it in—draining it, absorbing it all. They were merging, but Oswald was obviously the dominant shape of the two.

Ascertaining that her efforts were fruitless, Ashe's flight instincts took over. If she wanted to live, she needed to run, but she truly didn't want to leave Lucky—or what was left of him. If she survived, she would kill Quill and Tolan, those disloyal cunts, for not helping save her Lucky. She owed it to him.

But what she didn't know was that she was next in line. As more and more of Lucky dissipated into Oswald, he set his sights on Ashe and lunged. He smashed his head into her shoulder as she released her grip on her boyfriend's diminishing form and the process began again. The flesh of Oswald's temple ripped through her shirt sleeve and adhered to her shoulder like industrial glue, and when she tried to take another step, his arm elongated and, with a reformed hand, reached down and grabbed her knee, pulverizing the bone and absorbing it as though milkshake through a straw. Her squeals were diluted by Oswald's appeased chortling.

Lucky himself was now part of Oswald except for a forearm and one of his eyes, both of which were still visible upon the tree trunk of tissue that was still the substitute teacher's right arm. Ashe, meanwhile, still writhing and moaning inhuman wails, was being absorbed into the mass of tissue, allowed to face Quill and Tolan as they watched in horror, almost as though she were being placed on display. Her teary eyes stared at her friends pleadingly as the fused shape that was Oswald's cranium swelled on her shoulder and started overtaking her face. "Help me!" she cried as it bloated larger. "Help me, please! Ple-!" Her jaw split open and filled with growing flesh, and saliva bubbled pink down her lips.

In seconds, Oswald's face emerged from the bulbous mass swallowing Ashe's head, and their faces melded together into a howling, oblong mask of four eyes, two noses, and a stretched mouth, slowly becoming one until the girl's features were no longer apparent. Quill and Tolan, now the last of their group, tried to make it to the classroom door, but were blocked by a hammer-like mound of matter from Oswald's form. Taken aback by the sight, both teenagers were then dispatched by tendrils of skin that had slithered along the floor. The flesh pierced their own, climbing up their legs like time-lapsed vines, and proceeded to pull them toward the hideous sculpture of meat crafted only by the blackest of dreams: an undulating spider of twitching, wriggling limbs and parts slowly assimilating into a singular being. At the top of the form was Oswald's reforming head, swallowing what tiny bit was left of Ashe, and he was smiling devilishly as his prey clawed at the floor for escape.

"Sorry, gentlemen...just us now..." Oswald said.

The legs of the two students were squirming globs tethered by strands of Oswald's skin that continued to move slowly up beyond their torsos. Upon the encompassment of their shoulders, they lost control of their arms, and Quill and Tolan found that they could no longer combat what was happening. With weak cries, both accepted their fates as they were engulfed by the waiting amorphous mass and dissolved into nothingness.

"It'll be just me momentarily."

Within the course of a minute, the entire billowing form of appendages and monstrous shapes began to recede, the expansion lessening and vanishing. Seven arms became two, three heads became one, until finally only one human-shaped thing remained amidst the screams that had ceased and the cacophony of muted moans that were now dead air.

Oswald was all that was left, alone in the dark of the classroom. He stood there, his remaining clothing now tattered shreds on the floor at his feet with what remained of the others' clothing, and smiled to himself. Looking to his abdomen, he could feel movements—pathetic and pitiable—and could swear that he saw his skin stretching over the outline of what was left of his students' profiles, chief among them Lucky's round, insubordinate smirk. He knew the dumb bastard was staring up at him, perhaps out of hatred or arrogance, but also out of fear. He'd never forget that expression of fear. Oswald was victorious. "Fucking punks," he muttered, satisfied that they were being digested. "You should always respect your superiors..."

Sometime before midnight, the front door to Mr. Hogan's small, economic home opened and in stepped Oswald, clothed in a simple shirt and slacks. He looked around with no anxiety, for he was expected. He turned his attention to the fireplace, which was crackling in a blaze that soaked the room in a bloody glow. Next to it was a tall chair, and its occupant was concealed.

"I have them," Oswald said.

In the light, a darkened figure shuddered. "You do?" asked a hissing voice. A thin arm lifted from the chair. "They didn't go willingly?" The question needed no answer—he already knew.

Oswald shook his head, shutting the door gently. "Of course not. Not at all. You knew they wouldn't, and that's why you needed me."

The frail Hogan chuckled weakly. "Yes, you're right. My sentinel among the masses."

"I attacked the egos. It worked, like you said it would."

"Good."

Reaching into his pocket, Oswald plucked the Del Cuervo High School building and room keys out and placed them on table next to the door. "Here."

"Ah...another building key from Slim? He'll get into trouble one day..."

"Is my mission finished?" Oswald asked.

"Yes. The mission's complete."

"By the way...what kind of name was Lucky?"

“They picked their own names. Their own appearances, too. They moulded and changed over time.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Right,” Hogan muttered. “Thank you, Mr. Oswald.”

Mr. Oswald looked to his closest friend and confidante and nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

With great effort, Hogan lifted himself from his seat as if to embrace Oswald in a brotherly hug goodbye, but Oswald never lifted his arms, only stepping forward as Hogan’s hands gripped his and fused to the skin.

I was the sentinel, Oswald mused to himself while he could, recalling all that Hogan had taught him in his brief existence. The Trojan Horse...heh, maybe I was meant to be a teacher. I went there to provoke, to lure. Hogan knew he had become too weak to handle them on his own anymore. He clung to the hope once that the divided parts of him were stronger than just one, singular whole, and they were until they evolved individual personalities of their own...from their peers, he said. They rebelled and left his tutelage, tried to hide. He no longer recognized them once he found them. They became dangerous, and once they realized it, knew that he was not as powerful as they had believed, they became liabilities, especially when they united into a group, all except the one that went off alone. The children wanted to kill the father, as it were. The parent couldn’t be completely blamed for the behaviours...the world is as great of a teacher as anything or anyone else. He was weak from all of his searching, his attempts to reason. He loved them, but knew something had to be done.

So he made me with the last of his strength. I’d lure them out, lure them to me. Get them all alone in one shot. That was the plan, my purpose. They wouldn’t know who I really was. He needed me to gather them all in one shot. The best way to get them was to attack their egos: “A wounded ego is the deadliest animal in nature,” he’d tell me, “but also one of the most foolish.” Take away their feelings of superiority—bully them, as they bullied him and me. They’ll come then for blood, but without thought or reason—he had never taught them those things. Had to wait until no one else would be there. So he cultivated me, taught me, and set me loose. Like a white blood cell hunting germs. He gave me strength, resolve, and rage. Made me as powerful as he was when whole. Nearly killed him to make me, but I’ve done him proud. I did my duty.

Oswald moved willingly into Hogan and sank like quicksand, the meat of the latter’s chest becoming a goopy mouth that chewed and began swallowing Oswald’s entire form. There was no screaming, no pain in his eyes. Unlike the others, Oswald went of his own accord. He knew that he was merely a piece—that he was not complete—and needed to be part of something else, to not rebel. Back in Hogan’s body, he could be a worthwhile contribution. The sentinel would become part of the host once more.

I was the sentinel, his mind chanted as his shoulders were pulled inward. I was the sentinel. His head moved below Hogan’s collar bone, pushing deep beneath his breast. He closed his eyes and

smiled, knowing he was triumphant. I was the sentinel. I was-

He was the sentinel, Hogan thought.

Oswald was gone, his clothes having fallen to the floor in rags. Hogan's structure reconstituted itself and he became more human-shaped as he closed his shirt. He appeared fuller, no longer scrawny and desiccated. He was more of a man than he was previously, though he was aware that he was still not complete. He was still a puzzle missing a vital portion. He knew that there was still one out there, the one that had left the group. Oswald's task was only the four—they had strength as a unit, so Hogan needed an ace in the hole.

This entire nuisance due to an arrogant mistake—to think he could create life to spread his influence in the world, to learn like he had and experience what he had. To give them consciousness, emotion, cunning...to create eager students with a desire to be better than the whole. To grant them individual personalities. Such a fool, Hogan lamented. To play God...never again would he ever even consider such an error in judgment. Oswald, named after a favourite student from years before when Hogan was not employed at Del Cuervo, had been his only true success, but that took doing. It took weeks of preparation. Granted, like the others, he carried with him many of Hogan's darker traits, but there was something more. Perhaps the success was due to his being given a singular mission; maybe that was why-

Hogan angrily dismissed any further thought. Never again. There was only one mission left and it would have to be his. It would be so much easier now though, thanks to Mr. Oswald. The greatest obstacles had been removed, and now Hogan could rely on his patience to concentrate on his final hunt with no distractions. Sure, he would have to explain that Oswald had transferred so soon into his budding substitute teaching career, and others would question the disappearances of four students, all from his class. They were dregs, of course, all eighteen years old and no longer living at home, at least according to how they appeared. It was all a matter of time, he'd tell any detractors. Hogan knew they didn't have actual parents, none but himself, really, but no one else had to. There would also be a select few who might recall the open confrontation between Oswald and Lucky's group in class, thinking it had to do with the sudden disappearance of all involved.

But all of the questions were ultimately meaningless, for the end was in sight for Mr. Hogan.

There's only one left in the student body, he thought, staring at the darkened Del Cuervo High School mere blocks away from his living room window. Starting tomorrow, he'd begin combing the hallways and the classes, leaving no desk unturned or locker unsearched. There would be no more concealment. He would find the last of himself, even if they had remained concealed for so long. They would do so now more than ever once they learned of Oswald's deed, and Hogan's return. He hadn't recognized the others originally when he determined they were his parts—and still, he found them.

I will do this. His, or her-its—fellow parts are gone. Just one more piece. One more part of me. They can't hide. I'll be whole soon enough. Yes. I'll be whole.

In the diminishing glow of the dying fire, the remaining embers cast a crimson glint in Hogan's pitiless pupils, and he flashed a predator's smile, just like Lucky always did—something the child had likely inherited from the father. "I'll be whole," he whispered joyfully.

THE END

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PREDATOR by Gerald E Sheagren

2:17 AM:

The small eight-legged spider dropped from the top of the tent, landing on John Hurley's cot. It scampered around for a few moments then set a straight course for the man's head, making its way through a mop of bushy brown hair until it reached his right ear.

This was the tricky part. One swat of the hand and it would be mush, ending its long journey in failure. It tentatively placed two legs on the earlobe and waited. There was nothing—no reaction. After hesitating for a few moments, it mustered its confidence and moved with great speed, scurrying down the ear canal like a caver commencing an exploration.

However, there was no exploration required. The spider, a species unto its own, knew its destination and was well-aware of what it had to do.

The day-long process was just beginning.

Hurley came half-awake, blinking and grumbling. He stuck his forefinger in his ear and gave it a few wiggles. Then he turned from his left side onto his right and drifted back into a deep sleep.

6:23 AM:

Marty Schwartzman stuck his head into the tent, beating on the back of a frying pan with a spatula. "It's rise and shine time, Johnny boy! Are you planning on sleeping the day away?"

Hurley jerked, his eyes popping open. "For fuck-sake, you might have given me a heart attack."

"We're in the middle of the Amazon rainforest, just to jog your memory. Here, you don't die from anything as mundane as a heart attack. It'll more likely be from a tree boa or a jaguar or a black caiman. Or maybe be devoured by a swarm of piranha fish, or smothered to death by an anaconda." Schwartzman snorted a laugh. "If you've got to go, you've got to go in style."

Hurley groaned, sitting up and scrubbing his face with his hands. "Thanks for reminding an old explorer about all of the hazards."

"You're welcome." Then Schwartzman tilted his head and frowned. "Christ, you didn't set your netting up before going to sleep? That's pretty dumb. You don't know what'll land on you in the middle of the night. As far as me, I'm using triple netting."

"I just plain forgot, being so damn tired."

"Well hurry it up. We're preparing breakfast."

“Okay, okay, I’ll be out shortly.”

Hurley sighed and began to massage his temples. He had a whopper of a headache, a weird sort of one, with pain throbbing along his lower forehead and behind his eyes, its tentacles shooting down to his cheekbones and even as far as his jawline. Then, for three or four seconds, white stars began to dance before his vision.

What the fuck is this shit? I’ve been sort of tense lately but this is far beyond the norm.

1:47 PM:

The four of them walked through the jungle, the moist heat thick and cloying. Birds were screeching and trilling, many darting from tree to tree at their approach. Legions of giant cicadas kept up a steady symphony, their bodies blending in perfectly with the emerald-green vegetation.

In the lead was Gilberto Reyes, the group’s guide and security guard. He was a tall, solid Brazilian, cocoa-skinned and dark-eyed, wearing a camouflage Boonie hat and a multi-pocketed vest. Besides carrying a semi-automatic rifle with a 30-round clip, he had a Sig Sauer holstered at his right hip and a large knife sheathed at his left.

Next in line was Marty Schwartzman, the professional photographer and nature writer, who was sweating profusely and swatting away insects, his attention nearly riveted to the ground, for fear of treading on a poisonous snake.

He was far more at home in the states, in relative safety and comfort, using his zoom lens to take pictures of grizzly bears, bighorn sheep and bald eagles. He was currently on assignment for National Geographic and loathing every second of it.

Following behind was Jennifer Burke, a pretty, well-built blonde, a Brit, who was a biologist and environmental activist. On this particular mission she was intent on discovering how the rapid expansion of civilization was affecting the rainforest and its ecosystem. She thoroughly detested the cattle ranchers, loggers and mineral companies who were speedily clearing away the Amazon for their own greed and profit.

Bringing up the rear—the far rear—was John Hurley, stumbling along, his headache having reached monumental proportions. It felt as though his noggin was a restless volcano, on the very brink of eruption. And if that wasn’t enough—the dancing white stars he’d had before his vision had been replaced by colourful flashes of zig-zagging light. He was really starting to worry he’d been bitten by something crazy-ass insect and would eventually die from its effects. At one point he’d been so disorientated, he walked off-course and straight into a tree.

2:35 PM:

Gilberto Reyes held up his hand to halt Schwartzman then pointed to a frog poised atop a rock about a foot off the trail. It was perhaps two inches in length, bright blue in colour, with black spots on its head and back.

“Dart frog. Mucho poisonous.”

Schwartzman raised his .35mm camera and adjusted its zoom lens for a perfect shot. Then he stepped ahead and took another photo from a different angle.

“Colourful little bugger. Are they always blue?”

“They come in different colours—red, green, blue, yellow, orange. Always bright, sometimes spotted or striped. One of their species, called the golden poison frog, has enough venom to kill ten grown men.”

Jessica Burke hustled up. “I have a dozen dart frogs at home. I keep them in a big aquarium that’s set up to look like their natural habitat. When they’re born and raised in captivity, they’re non-poisonous.”

Reyes looked back along the trail and frowned. “Why is Senor Hurley lagging so badly?”

Jessica shrugged. “I don’t know. He doesn’t look too good. I kept calling out and motioning for him to hurry up, but he just waved me off. I’ll go and check on him.”

When Jessica drew up to Hurley, she couldn’t help sucking in a startled breath. The man appeared to be in really bad shape. His eyes were glazed, his complexion was pale, and he was sweating buckets while shivering from head-to-foot.

“Jesus, what’s wrong with you?”

“Fuck if I know. I’ve got a raging headache that won’t go away. And despite the extreme heat, I’m cold and I have goosebumps. Not to mention a kaleidoscope of colours flashing before my eyes.”

“Have you ever had malaria?”

Hurley snorted. “Trust me—this isn’t malaria.”

Jessica placed a hand on the man’s forehead. “Bloody hell, you’re burning up with fever.” Then she turned and cupped a hand around her mouth, shouting “Gilberto, we have to get him back to camp! He’s in really tough shape!”

5:10 PM:

Hurley lay on his cot, shivering violently, his shirt and trousers so soggy with sweat they felt like wet tissue paper, clinging to his body. And now, to top off his agonies, his innards seemed to be moving—squirming, quivering and shifting about. But there was one consolation—his nagging headache had subsided.

Jessica entered the tent to check on him, kneeling at his side. “Would you like a little bit to eat?”

“You...you...you’ve got to be kidding me. Just the thought of food makes me want to puke.”

“I just thought I’d ask. We’re going to get you out of here first thing in the morning. We’ll take you to the nearest hospital, wherever the hell that is.”

Hurley managed a laugh. “That’s if I last till morning. Shit, my insides feel like they’re moving all around. It’s fuckin crazy.”

“Let me get you some water.”

“Jesus no. Even the thought of water makes me want to puke. Can...can you believe that shit? With this fever, you’d think my body would be craving it.”

Jessica patted his shoulder. “You know—you’re a hell of a good-looking guy. When this is over and you feel better, I’m going to let you screw the shit out of me. And that’s a promise you can take to the bank.”

Hurley reached out with a trembling hand and gave her breast a squeeze. “I can’t wait. I’ll suck on these melons of yours until your nipples stand up and salute.”

Jessica leaned over and cooed into his ear. “I feel like stripping down and jumping onto this cot with you, right now.”

“I...I hope what I’ve got isn’t contagious.”

“So what if it is. We’ll bloody well suffer together.”

8:23 PM:

The spider emerged from Hurley’s ear and dropped onto the cot. The man was in such a state of delirium he didn’t even feel it.

Then the spider scurried down the leg of the cot, along the canvas flooring and through the open door flap of the tent.

Its very first mission was completed and with all hopes it would be a success.

Pausing for a few moments to look at the other three people sitting around the campfire, the spider couldn't help feeling a little bit of remorse. It was geared for it. It had emotions and thoughts and personality traits, just like any human had. And when it came to intelligence, it was far superior.

9:24 PM:

Hurley snapped from delirium, rapidly blinking his eyes. He felt surprisingly good, robust and clear-headed, a warm, tingling strength surging through his body. It didn't take him long to realize he was different—very different.

When he touched his arm he felt something he could only describe as scales—wet and somewhat slimy. And his vision was now a moving patchwork of colours—blues and greens and yellows. By his newly-acquired knowledge, he knew that when he saw a red colour, it would stem from the body heat of humans. He would see a pink colour for animals and birds. Only their shapes would tell them apart.

With a hiss escaping his mouth, he sat up, flexing his fingers, which were now long and coarse, their ends curled and as sharp as scalpels.

By the time he got onto his long, webbed-toed feet he no longer knew he was John Hurley.

9:27 PM:

When Jessica entered the tent to nurse her possible future lover, she didn't even have time to scream. Feeling an agonizing pain, she looked down to see her intestines coiling out of her gaping stomach. Then she looked back up, open-mouthed with shock, her brain trying to comprehend what she was seeing.

“John? Wha...wha...what have you turned into?”

The second vicious swipe cut open her throat from ear-to-ear, her carotid artery spewing blood. With a gurgling sound, she dropped to the ground, her body jerking in its death throes.

Before Marty Schwartzman had a chance to run, he was lying in bloody ribbons, his severed head resting a few yards away. Bye, bye, National Geographic.

Emptying the entire seventeen-shot clip of his Sig Sauer, to no effect, Gilberto Reyes, screaming at the top of his lungs, was lifted high into the air, where his backbone was snapped lie a dried twig.

With that, the creature flung Reyes's broken body aside and unleashed a long guttural cry of triumphant.

Then catching movement off to its right, it whirled its reptilian head to see a pink form loping fearfully through the underbrush. It was a jaguar. With another guttural cry, it struck out in pursuit, moving at an unbelievable rate of speed. Less than thirty seconds later, the big cat was history.

Oh yes, as Marty Schwartzman had stated earlier, there were many things in the Amazon that could kill you—tree boas, black caimans, anacondas, jaguars.

However, there was now a new predator on the hunt—faster, more vicious, and way above the top of the food chain.

Just to think—all that from just a little spider.

THE END

[Cyrus Song](#)



Cyrus Song

Steve Laker

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I WILL COUNT YOUR RICE by Michael Malloy

You love not how I love. Must I beseech admittance? Did I consent to love you? My mouth an open grave. Consummation is death, obliteration, release, and slavery. Won't you let me in? Open your door. Put away your dog roses. Let me count your rice. Don't toss too many grains. Enough to signify your resistance, for form's sake. Let there be enough that I can count each one before the crowing of the cock.

Let me in. Open the door. Cross not running water. Stay on the nearer bank with me. The blood is the life, so let me thee debilitate. Become consumed and waste away like a newspaper in the rain. Wilt. I will take it slow. You will suffer. Source of my obsession, cause of sleepless nights. I turn beneath the earth for want of you. Draw not the windowshade. Quit yourself of garlands. Leave your neck bare. Let the form of the anointed one grace not the curves of your clavicle. Remain raw for me, like Nipponese repast. Let you produce the slow and shallow respiration of contented sleep, entombed in melancholy dreams of drifting arabesques in planetary dark. Sleep is the cousin of death. Consent to my encroaching pallor. Chill your rosy hue. Drift off with me, miasmatically, as I envelope you. Spill not too much rice. Enough that I can count the grains. Resist me some, but not too much. Enough that I can count the grains.

You love not how I love. I come like rustling of rats behind the walls. I come like howling wind on a lonely fen. I come like plague ships from the east. I come to count the grains.

I count fast.

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

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THE SIGHT by Steven Havelock

Phil stepped out on the balcony of his luxurious hotel.

Wow! This is literally the best time of my life. The sun is shining and I've got my beautiful girlfriend with me.

Just then his blood ran cold, and the colour drained from his face.

A monster!

There's a monster staring at me! He started to back up from the monster. He walked further and further backwards until he was up against the edge of the balcony...

Then he remembered...Something that he had made his mind forget for years and years...

It was a Monday morning and Phil was on his computer in the front room, when he heard the familiar steps of the postman. The postman rang the bell. Phil looked through the front room window.

Oh my God!

Then he heard his mother, open the door.

"Mum, don't open the door!"

The colour drained from Phil's face and he went rigid with fright.

I got to protect my mum!

Phil's mum said 'Hello' and took a parcel from the postman and thanked him. Phil ran towards the door and slammed it shut.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" asked his mum, "It's just the post man."

"Mum, didn't you see his face?" said Phil as his heart beating wildly in his chest, "He's a monster!"

Just then the post man rang the bell again.

"Sorry! forgot to give you one parcel;" he said from outside the door. Phil's mother gave Phil a strange look and opened the door.

He beats his wife and children.

The thought came to Phil's mind unbidden.

The postman handed Phil's mum another parcel. He gave Phil a strange look and then turned and walked away.

Just then Phil's father came from the living room.

Oh my god! He's a monster too!

Phil turned and fled upstairs to his bedroom.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Phil's father.

"I don't know, he's acting strangely. Just said the postman looked like a monster."

Upstairs in his bedroom Phil was in total shock.

He's having an affair.

The thought came to Phil's mind unbidden like the one a few seconds earlier.

Shit! I can't be having a nervous breakdown or thinking funny now, I haven't got time; I got my exams tomorrow!

Phil locked his room and pulled his course textbooks out of his school bag.

He sat at his study desk and started to read his books.

A short while later his mum came and knocked on his door.

"Phil, are you okay...?"

"Yes, mum, I'm fine. Just studying for my exam tomorrow."

Phil sat at his desk and the hours ticked by; soon he had almost forgotten about seeing the *monsters* and the strange thoughts that had entered his head.

Just exam stress, I will be okay, just got to concentrate on my studies.

After a few hours his mother brought his meal to his room and he ate.

“Best of luck with your maths exam tomorrow.” His mother stood there for a few seconds as if she was searching for the right words, “I know you can do it, we are so proud of you.”

“Thanks mum.” He looked up from his desk feeling a hundred times better, “I will do my best, and sorry about earlier, I just freaked out a little.” He saw the concern in his mother’s face that she was trying to hide, “I’m okay now mum, honest I am.”

His mother smiled and turned and walked away.

The next day Phil was sitting his maths exam.

God! I can’t believe I’m seeing monsters everywhere! And all these strange thoughts that keep entering my head! Don’t think about; just concentrate on passing the exam.

Phil spent the whole day studying and taking exams. Not thinking about the monsters that he saw all around him.

If I tell anyone about these monsters I’m seeing they will lock me up in a nut house. Got to keep quiet about it.

A few hours later, in the evening, he was lying in bed.

What the hell is going on with my mind?

Just then his phone rang.

It’s Jenny.

“Hello.”

“Hi Phil. You never called me today?” He could sense the hurt in Jenny’s voice.

“Sorry, Jenny. I’ve been studying for these exams so hard that I completely forgot.”

Jenny’s hurt tone softened.

“You wanna hook up later tonight?”

“Jenny I would love to but I got another two exams tomorrow, I need to get in all the studying I can. I will see you on Thursday, once my exams are out the way, and I’m feeling better.”

Jenny seemed satisfied with his reply, they talked for a few more minutes, and then Phil put the phone down and lay back in bed.

What the hell is going on in my mind? I'm seeing monsters everywhere.

On Thursday evening Jenny came round to the house. He knew it was Jenny at the door as she always knocked three times in quick succession.

I've never really fancied Jenny that much, she's plump and round, not like Rachel, but Rachel's out of my league.

Phil went downstairs to open the door.

Wow!

"You look absolutely stunning!"

Jenny's face lit up with a bright wide smile.

"Thank you..." she said, blushing a bright red.

They went and sat in the front room and Phil's mum brought in tea and biscuits.

Then Phil had one of the biggest surprises of his life.

"We got something for you two," said his mum walking into the room followed by his father.

Don't look at dad, thought Phil.

His parents smiled brightly then handed over a white envelope to Phil.

Phil ripped open the envelope.

"Wow!"

"What is it?" asked Jenny curious.

"A trip to Ibiza for me and you!" Phil jumped with joy. "Thank you!" he said getting up and hugging his parents.

"Son, we know you been working overtime on your studies, so we wanted to do something to help you relax," said Phil's dad.

Phil had backed as far away from the monster as he possibly could.

I'm leaning so far backwards, that if I'm close to falling over the edge!

Then the voice entered his head again.

Murder! You murdered me!

Oh god, no!

Phil remembered the day trip, several years ago when Phil was just eight years old.

I kept this memory secret for years... Why is it coming to haunt me now? I was in love with Sarah but she liked Daniel more than me...

Phil remembered...

No one had been looking and I had taken my chance and pushed Daniel over the edge of the river bank and into the dirty black water below.

Murderer!

Phil moved further and further back trying to get away from the monster.

Jenny stepped onto the balcony.

“Phil! look out!” she screamed, but it was too late.

A short while later after Phil’s body slammed into the concrete below from the fourth story balcony. Jenny was distraught but related to the police officers through her stream of tears what had happened.

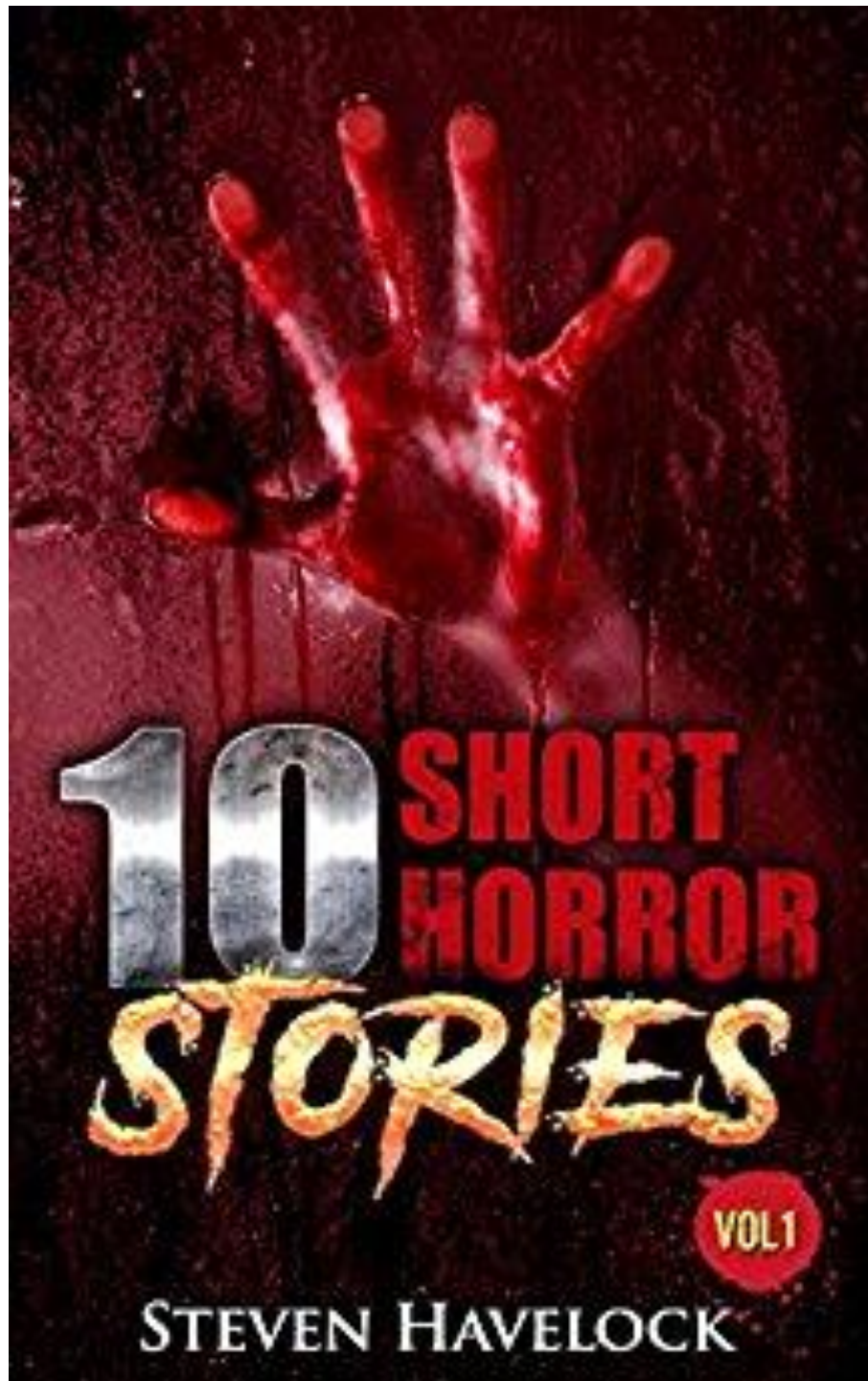
“He was okay, and then he stepped onto the balcony and looked into the mirror on the balcony.” She paused thinking, trying to work out why? *Why he had done it?*

“Had he taken any drugs?” asked the police officer.

“No, none.”

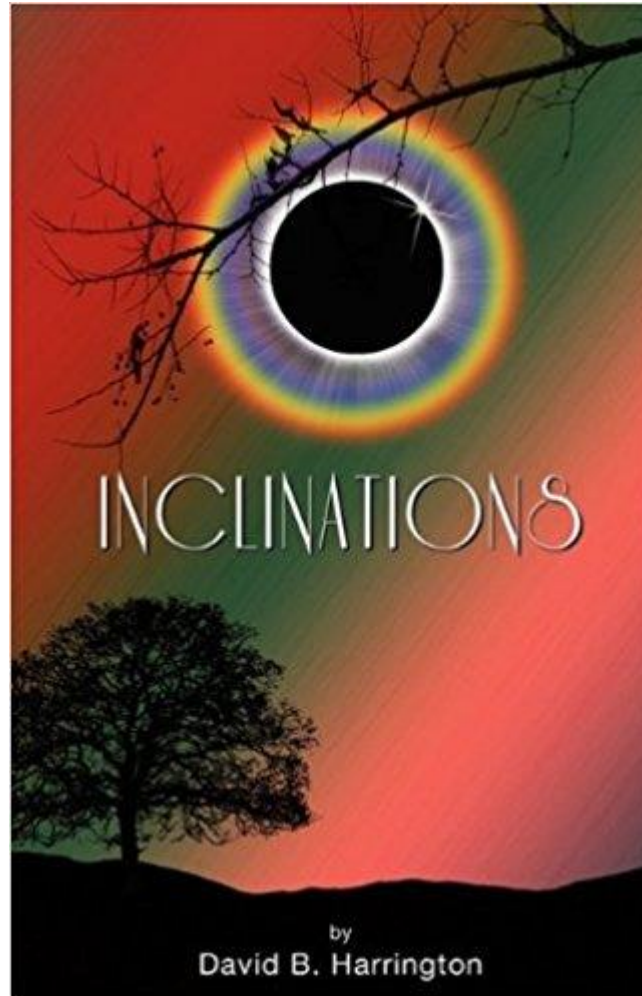
“I don’t know what he saw but he kept backing up further and further. He was fixated on the mirror then he shouted ‘monster!’ and he kept backing up, even further and then there was nowhere else to back up to and he was falling...”

THE END



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REVIEW by John C Adams



[Inclinations—Mystical Visions by David B Harrington](#)

Leafing through the pages of the New Testament, I've often felt that the Book of Revelations just isn't weird enough. Thankfully, David B Harrington's *Inclinations—Mystical Visions* is on hand to supply what's lacking.

Each short section has its own chapter title. My favourite was *Living Butterflies*, which read like something of a creation myth.

In the season of wither when all that is living falls to the earth and dies, the Almighty Word of God went out to Tixen in the wilderness countryside, and was spoken by his angel saying, "Breathe in with a deep breath."

The butterflies cavort freely, enjoying their bright colours. It's a charming scene but their simple pleasures are cut short and they end up losing their vitality and being buried alive with their brown wings.

And I heard the angel again say to me, "Breathe in with a deep breath." And immediately the winds ceased and the leaves were no more shaken from the trees. And those that had turned into Living Butterflies fell to the ground and choked in the burning heat of the sun.

And I saw the ungodly of the earth who were buried up to their necks. And many therefore starved to death because they could not find a place to prepare their meats.

Given its religious feel, it would be easy to read this story as a simple moral text, especially with the inclusion of the word 'gay' to describe the abandon of the figures who get their moral deserts for 'ungodly acts'. But I feel that would miss the depth of what it has to offer. Like all good writing, there is the potential for multiple levels of interpretation.

Since I'm non-binary for gender and pro same-sex relationships, I chose to interpret Living Butterflies in the light of the passing frivolity of everyday existence: superficial pleasures are soon gone and replaced with a deeper imperative to consult our place in the universe. It could also be seen as a parable of the fragile natural world, with the butterfly a good choice of metaphor: in danger of being destroyed by our industrialised society with its delicate beauty sacrificed for the economic benefit of mankind.

I was also intrigued by the inclusion of a reference to people starving because they could not find a place to prepare their meats. This could be read as a plea for religious tolerance, to allow different religions such as Islam and Judaism the space to prepare their foods in accordance with their own rules. Or it could be viewed in the light of a parable against meat consumption, with an eye to the beneficial effects on the Earth of the human race farming less meat.

I enjoyed reading this book very much indeed because of the quality of writing. My sole disappointment was that it was only 42 pages long. As David B Harrington is a Schlock! Webzine and Horrified Press regular, we won't have to go far to find more of his work.

Enjoy!

THE END

The background image is a dark, moody photograph of a woman and a young child. The woman is holding a large, rustic axe over her face, and the child is peeking out from behind her. The overall tone is mysterious and slightly ominous.

WINTER 2017-18

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Three

Mud gave the bar two quick slaps to get Ed's attention.

Ed, a middle-aged man with a paunch and a balding head, pushed himself toward the end of the bar where Mud and Lacie were sitting.

"Yah?" he drawled.

"Whatcha got ta eat here?" Mud asked.

"Replicator stuff," Ed answered.

"In that case, whyncha bring me some meatballs and half a loaf a' bread? And give the lady what she wants."

"Oh, I'll just have my usual salad, Ed," Lacie said.

"Okay," Ed replied with a grunt and a nod. "I'll bring `em right back."

Which he did. Lacie and Mud passed the moment by quietly and quickly sizing each other up. Lacie decided that she liked Mud. His eyes were honest, which was rare in this place. Mud, for his part, came to a similar conclusion about Lacey. How a young woman like her managed to find herself in a place like this was a puzzle, but Mud was much too mannerly, for all his gruff ways, to raise the question with her.

Ed returned with the meatballs, bread and salad in three covered plastic bowls, setting them down before Mud and Lacey.

"Mebbe ya'd be better in one `a the booths?" he suggested. "Have a little quiet to yerselves."

Ed gestured with his chin toward a darkened area nearby, a booth built into one of the sloping walls.

Mud instantly appreciated Ed's suggestion.

"Yeah, thanks, friend." He raised his wrist, revealing his wristband from under the sleeve of his jumpsuit, tapping it against Ed's wristband, paying for his meal and Lacey's, while also giving Ed a very substantial tip.

"No, not at all. Thank you, buddy!" Ed said, on seeing the size of the tip. Like his friend, Carter Ward, Mud was a generous tipper.

"Ya need anything else, just gimme a wave."

“That I’ll do,” Mud said.

He picked up his bowl and Lacy’s, huddling them under his armpit, while holding Lacey’s hot chocolate and his drinks by their handles in his right hand. Then he pushed himself from the bar, and swam through the air, finally settling into the shaded booth dug into the wall of Ed’s place. Lacey, profoundly surprised at that show of chivalry, followed behind with a gentle protest of ‘Oh, but you don’t have to...’ which Mud ignored.

Settled in, Mud began eating, plucking meatballs from the bowl with his fingers and pushing them into his mouth. Lacey, for her part, lifted the lid of her salad bowl, and gingerly impaled leaves of lettuce and romaine on the tines of the plastic fork provided by the table at her spoken request.

“So what else can ya tell me about my friend?” Mud asked, after a few bites.

“Well, I don’t think he chooses his friends very good,” Lacey answered.

“Whatcha mean?”

“After he left here, three guys followed him out.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh-Huh. Scroungers.”

Mud’s face darkened.

“Oh?” he asked, ominously. “Z’at so?”

“Uh-Huh,” Lacey answered. Her eyes were dubious. She searched Mud’s scowling face.

“Nuh, hunnybunny. Don’t try to be cute or nuthin’. Just tell it straight up.”

“Well, they come back later, lookin’ pretty smug on themselves.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh... they wuz braggin on him. Talkin’ like they hooked him good, and they wus gonna...”

“‘Hooked’ him?”

A trace of fear came over Lacey’s face. Mud was quick to reassure her.

“Doncha worry about it, hunnybunny. You ain’t in trouble. No way. Just tell me whatcha heard, whatcha saw. My friend is always jumpin’ headfirst into the shit pool. I just wanna pull ‘im out

before he gets himself kilt.”

“Okay... uh-huh... it’s just... these are scary guys and...”

“They’re not gonna get back at you through me, babydoll. Doncha worry there.”

There was that in Mud’s tome that gave Lacey much comfort. She opened up further.

“Well, they said there’s this guy, that hates your friend, wants your friend dead. And they tricked your friend, `cuz your friend hates that guy, too. And they told your friend they knew where this other guy was, and there’s a bounty on that guy, and if your friend helped them, they’d catch that guy and split the bounty with him.

Mud popped the last of the meatballs into his mouth and leaned back in his booth, looking upward.

“Uh-huh,” he said, softly.

“Is there...?” Lacey began.

Mud raised his thick and muscular hand to stop her.

“Nuh, nuthin’ more. Not down that road, anyway. I heard enough,” he said, thinking belatedly of the possibility of hidden microphones.

“No names. I don’t need to know them. I got all I need to know.”

“What do we hear from our friend, Mud?” Captain Hardy asked.

“He’s still tracking Ward,” Captain Illara Fain, his second in command, answered.

They stood on the bridge of the “Endeavor”, a medium-sized armed transport ship and reconnaissance ship capable of carrying three small cruisers, in addition to Illara’s two-seater patrol ship, and a crew of forty, not counting themselves.

Hardy wore the blue and red uniform of Earth Space Forces, a uniform he kept always in the cleanest and tightest shape, with knife-edge creases and buttons that gleamed. Illara wore the black and purple uniform of Jovian Security.

She had been detailed to Hardy’s command, at her own request, by her commander, Colonel Bridgemont, who remained at Callisto Base 1 after the battle, supervising the reconstruction of the badly damaged bases on Callisto and the other Jovian moons, Io, Europa and Ganymede.

The bridge of the “Endeavor” was an unpretentious affair, allowing enough room for the ship’s

pilot, its navigator and two others, in this case Hardy and Illara.

Three large windows arrayed in a broad semicircle, opened up to the huge expanse of space before them, an almost unnecessary extravagance, as it was from the visiscreens that scanned the space surrounding the ship in all wavelengths in addition to visible, that most information of the environment outside the “Endeavor” was collected.

But there was something in the appeal of looking directly through a window to the great expanse of boundless space itself, with as little between the eye and what the eye was seeing, that made the extravagance worth the expense to Hardy, born on Earth.

Illara, also born on Earth, agreed. Though these windows were absurdly expensive, she still had enough of the Earth-born romanticist in her to appreciate being able to see with her own eyes, as much as it was possible, the unblinking stars in their primal colours, and the almost impossibly huge expanses of the Milky Way spreading out before her.

They stood, side by side, in the tiny bridge of the “Vesta”, their shoes locked into the grate that was the deck of the ship to keep them from drifting, looking out those windows as the navigator and the pilot directed the ship according to Hardy’s commands.

“Is he getting any closer to our old friend, Carter?” Hardy asked.

“Dunno,” Illara answered. “It looks like he got into a little dust-up on AT-4442-ST.”

“Oh? Do we know the details?”

“Mud gets his information from a hooker, who saw it happen. She was right there when the shooting started.”

“Yeah?” Hardy prompted.

“Bounty hunters. They came after Ward, but made the mistake of leaving their guns in their holsters when they introduced themselves to him, it seems.”

“I see,” Hardy smiled. “I think I can imagine what happened next.”

“Three dead bounty hunters.”

“Ha!” Hardy laughed. “They obviously did not appreciate their quarry.”

“They got what they deserved,” Illara said. “Going after a man like Ward, well...” she shrugged her shoulders.

“Well’, indeed,” Hardy laughed again. “They should have brought no less than a platoon with them.”

“Funny. That’s almost exactly what Mud said. Almost word for word.”

“Do we hear any more about Carter? Any closer to catching up with him?”

“The man doesn’t want to be caught up with,” Illara said. “So that’s pretty hopeless. But he did leave quite an impression at AT-4442-ST.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s a dangerous piece of rock. Space rats and Scroungers and every kind of human drek you can think of all mingling together and hatching up all kinds of little plots. But, even so, it’s not often you see any gun play happening there.”

“No? That seems odd, doesn’t it? Given the crowd?”

“Not really. Seems that in places like that, people tend to mind their manners, unless they’re out looking for trouble. Which those three bounty hunters were, but they didn’t realize the size of the trouble they were looking for.”

Illara stared out the window before them as she spoke. Her voice, and her eyes, were wistful. Hardy understood. She was peering out the window, hopelessly, as if she could find Ward with but the strength of her eyes.

Her profile was strong. She wore her hair straight, and pulled back from her head, tied in a tight knot at the back, just above the nape of her neck. The line of her forehead and her nose was smooth, both delicate and firm. Her lips, which she sometimes touched up with lipstick, were firm, but rich. ‘Very kissable’ Hardy had thought of them, as many men had, including Ward.

She loved Ward. Hardy knew that. So did Mud. Whether the cold-hearted man that was Ward loved her back, or was even capable of the emotion, or any other aside from anger, was a question. A question, it seemed, without an answer. But there on Callisto, Ward and Illara were often seen together, and many had leaped to the assumption that the two were a couple.

Then Ward had up and left. And Illara gave no hint to anyone of the pain she suffered at Ward’s abrupt departure.

“And there is still a lot of chatter there on AT-4442-ST about Ward,” Illara was saying, her eyes still searching the vault of the heavens before them.

“It seems our friend makes an impression everywhere he goes,” Hardy remarked.

“Yeah, that he surely does,” Illara agreed.

A momentary silence fell between them. The asteroid AT-4442-ST appeared on one of the visiscreens, highlighted in ruby.

The navigator turned in her seat, and spoke to Hardy.

“Thought you might like to get a look at it, sir,” she said.

“Sure thing,” Hardy said. “Thanks. Can you zoom in on her?”

“Can do, sir.”

The asteroid grew large on the screen, its latitudes and longitudes marked in ruby. Its poles were marked in amber. It rotated very slowly, on an axis parallel to the plane of the Solar System.

“Very nice,” Hardy said.

“Thank you, sir,” the navigator said. “About a hundred miles from north pole to south. Eighty miles wide at its equator. Right now, it’s about fifteen million miles out from us.”

“Will we be heading there, sir?” the pilot asked.

“Oh, no. No,” Hardy answered. Just wanted to get a look at it for our own info. that’s all.”

“Very good, sir,” the pilot said.

“And where’s our friend, Mud, in relation to asteroid AT-4442-ST?” Hardy asked.

“He left there about eighty hours ago,” Illara said. “Going further, toward the Trojans.”

“After Ward?”

“I hope so,” Illara said.

Hardy turned toward Illara.

“Oh? Something?”

“I dunno,” Illara said. “Mud was concerned himself.”

“About what?”

“According to this hooker Mud was talking to, Ward has apparently signed up with some Scroungers.”

“Scroungers?” Hardy asked, his voice and his eyebrows both raised.

“Yeah. Not like him at all, is it?

“No. Not the Carter Ward I know. Why? Any idea why he’d do a thing like that?”

“Not sure, but it seems they hooked him on a lie. According to the hooker, from what Mud tells me, they told him they knew where Turhan Mot was hiding out. And they were on their way to capture him.”

“Oh. And how does Mud’s hooker know all this?”

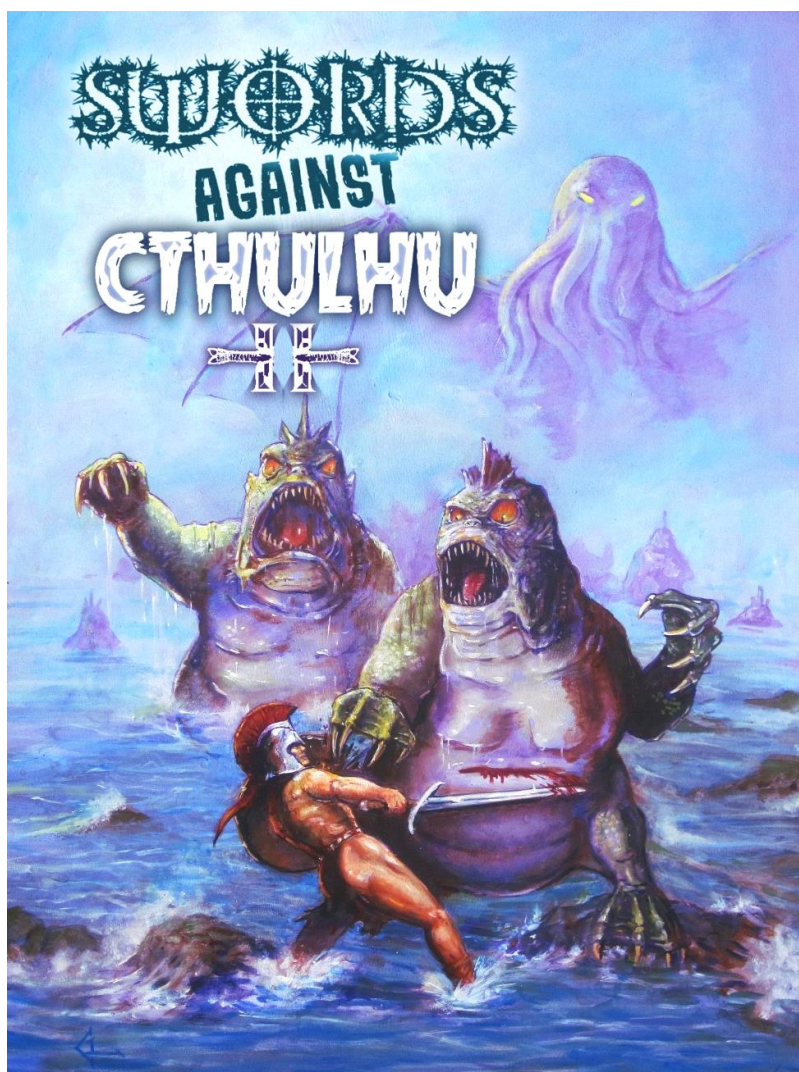
“She heard them. She heard them gloating about it, after they’d suckered him in. And then they were going to take Ward to Turhan Mot.”

Hardy’s face clouded. A very clean-cut man in his early thirties, with crew-cut blonde hair and a boyish smile that shined, his features had grown battle-hardened since Callisto. And now, when his face clouded with worry, the darkness came with a depth and a heaviness that those on Earth who remembered him would not recognize.

“Actually,” he said to the pilot. “Change that. Take us toward asteroid AT-4442-ST. We’re not going to go there. But bring us up close. I want to do a recon. Switch us to stealth now. And let’s see if we can catch up with Mud. And have Communications send a subspace back to Colonel Westland. Let him know what we’re up to. Update him on everything. And have them tell Mud we’re coming to give him some backup.”

“Yes sir,” the pilot answered.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter IX—Manners and Customs.

Next morning Esmo asked me to accompany him on a visit to the seaport I have mentioned. In the course of this journey I had opportunities of learning many things respecting the social and practical conditions of human life and industry on Mars that had hitherto been unknown to me, and to appreciate the enormous advance in material civilisation which has accompanied what seems to me, as it would probably seem to any other Earth-dweller, a terrible moral degeneration. Most of these things I learned partly from my own observation, partly from the explanations of my companion; some exclusively from what he told me. We passed a house in process of building, and here I learned the manner in which the wonders of domestic architecture, which had so surprised me by their perfection and beauty, are accomplished. The material employed in all buildings is originally liquid, or rather viscous. In the first place, the foundation is excavated to a depth of two or three feet, the ground beaten hard, and the liquid concrete poured into the level tank thus formed. When this has hardened sufficiently to admit of their erection, thin frames of metal are erected, enclosing the spaces to be occupied by the several outer and interior walls.

These spaces are filled with the concrete at a temperature of about 80° C. The tracery and the bas-reliefs impressed on the walls are obtained by means of patterns embossed or marked upon thinner sheets placed inside the metallic frames. The hardening is effected partly by sudden cooling, partly by the application of electricity under great hydraulic pressure. The flat roof is constructed in the same manner, the whole mass, when the fluid concrete is solidified, being simply one continuous stone, as hard and cohesive as granite. Where a flat roof would be liable to give way or break from its own weight, the arch or dome is employed to give the required strength, and consequently all the largest Martial buildings are constructed in the form of vaults or domes. As regards the form of the building, individual or public taste is absolutely free, it being just as easy to construct a circular or octagonal as a rectangular house or chamber; but the latter form is almost exclusively employed for private dwellings. The jewel-like lustre and brilliancy I have described are given to the surfaces of the walls by the simultaneous action of cold, electricity, and pressure, the principle of which Esmo could not so explain as to render it intelligible to me. Almost the whole physical labour is done by machinery, from the digging and mixing of the materials to their conveyance and delivery into the place prepared for them by the erection of the metallic frames, and from the erection to the removal of the latter. The translucent material for the windows I have described is prepared by a separate process, and in distinct factories, and, ready hardened and cut into sheets of the required size, is brought to the building and fixed in its place by machinery. It can be tinted to the taste of the purchaser; but, as a rule, a tintless crystal is preferred. The entire work of building a large house, from the foundation to the finishing and removal of the metallic frames, occupies from half-a-dozen to eighteen workmen from four to eight days. This, like most other labour in Mars, goes on continuously; the electric lamps, raised to a great height on hollow metallic poles, affording by night a very sufficient substitute for the light of the sun. All work is done by three relays of artisans; the first set working from noon till evening, the next from evening till morning, and the third from morning to noon. The Martial day, which consists of about twenty-four hours forty minutes of our time, is divided in a somewhat peculiar manner. The two-hour periods, of which “mean” sunrise and

sunset are severally the middle points, are respectively called the morning and evening *zydau*. Two periods of the same length before and after noon and midnight are distinguished as the first and second dark, the first and second mid-day *zyda*. There remain four intervals of three hours each, popularly described as the sleeping, waking, after-sunrise, and fore-sunset *zyda* respectively. This is the popular reckoning, and that marked upon the instruments which record time for ordinary purposes, and by these the meals and other industrial and domestic epochs are fixed. But for purposes of exact calculation, the day, beginning an hour before mean sunrise, is distributed into twelve periods, or *antoi*, of a little more than two terrestrial hours each. These again are subdivided by twelve into periods of a little more than 10m., 50s., 2-1/2s., and 5/24s respectively; but of these the second and last are alone employed in common speech. The uniform employment of twelve as the divisor and multiplier in tables of weight, distance, time, and space, as well as in arithmetical notation, has all the conveniences of the decimal system of France, and some others besides due to the greater convenience of twelve as a base. But as regards the larger divisions of time, the Martials are placed at a great disadvantage by the absence of any such intermediate divisions as the Moon has suggested to Terrestrials. The revolutions of the satellites are too rapid and their periods too brief to be of service in dividing their year of 668-2/3 solar days. Martial civilisation having taken its rise within the tropics—indeed the equatorial continents, which only here and there extend far into the temperate zone, and two minor continents in the southern ocean, are the only well-peopled portions of the planet—the demarcation of the seasons afforded by the solstices have been comparatively disregarded. The year is divided into winter and summer, each beginning with the Equinox, and distinguished as the North and South summer respectively. But these being exceedingly different in duration—the Northern half of the planet having a summer exceeding by seventy-six days that of the Southern hemisphere—are of no use as accurate divisions of time. Time is reckoned, accordingly, from the first day of the year; the 669th day being incomplete, and the new year beginning at the moment of the Equinox with the 0th day. In remote ages the lapse of time was marked by festivals and holidays occurring at fixed periods; but the principle of utility has long since abolished all anniversaries, except those fixed by Nature, and these pass without public observance and almost without notice.

The climate is comparatively equable in the Northern hemisphere, the summer of the South being hotter and the winter colder, as the planet is much nearer the Sun during the former. On an average, the solar disc seems about half as large as to eyes on Earth; but the continents lying in a belt around the middle of the planet, nearly the whole of its population enjoy the advantages of tropical regularity. There are two brief rainy seasons on the Equator and in its neighbourhood, and one at each of the tropics. Outside these the cold of winter is aggravated by cloud and mist. The barometer records from 20 inches to 21 inches at the sea-level. Storms are slight, brief, and infrequent; the tides are insignificant; and sea-voyages were safe and easy even before Martial ingenuity devised vessels which are almost independent of weather. During the greater part of the year a clear sky from the morning to the evening *zyda* may be reckoned upon with almost absolute confidence. A heavy dew, thoroughly watering the whole surface, rendering the rarity of rain no inconvenience to agriculture, falls during the earlier hours of the night, which nevertheless remains cloudy; while the periods of sunset and sunrise are, as I have already said, marked almost invariably by dense mist, extending from one to four thousand feet above the sea-level, according to latitude and season. From the dissipation of the morning to the fall of the evening mist, the tropical temperature ranges, according to the time of the day and year, from

24° to 35° C. A very sudden change takes place at sunset. Except within 28° of the Equator, night frosts prevail during no small part of the year. Fine nights are at all times chilly, and men employed out of doors from the fall of the evening to the dispersal of the morning mists rely on an unusually warm under-dress of soft leather, as flexible as kid, but thicker, which is said to keep in the warmth of the body far better than any woven material. Women who, from whatever reason, venture out at night, wear the warmest cloaks they can procure. Those of limited means wear a loosely woven hair or woollen over-robe in lieu of their usual outdoor garment, resembling tufted cotton. Those who can afford them substitute for the envelope of down, described a while back, warm skin or fur overgarments, obtained from the sub-arctic lands and seas, and furnished sometimes by a creature not very unlike our Polar bear, but passing half his time in the water and living on fish; sometimes by a mammal more resembling something intermediate between the mammoth and the walrus, with the habits of the hippopotamus and a fur not unlike the sealskin so much affected in Europe.

Outside the city, at a distance protecting it from any unpleasant vapours, which besides were carried up metallic tubes of enormous height, were several factories of great extent, some chemical, some textile, others reducing from their ores, purifying, forging, and producing in bulk and forms convenient for their various uses, the numerous metals employed in Mars. The most important of these—*zorinta*—is obtained from a tenacious soil much resembling our own clay. [12] It is far lighter than tin, has the colour and lustre of silver, and never tarnishes, the only rust produced by oxidation of its surface being a white loose powder, which can be brushed or shaken off without difficulty. Of this nearly all Martial utensils and furniture are constructed; and its susceptibility to the electric current renders it especially useful for mechanical purposes, electricity supplying the chief if not the sole motive-power employed in Martial industry. The largest factories, however, employ but a few hands, the machinery being so perfect as to perform, with very little interposition from human hands, the whole work, from the first purification to the final arrangement. I saw a mass of ore as dug out from the ground put into one end of a long series of machines, which came out, without the slightest manual assistance, at the close of a course of operations so directed as to bring it back to our feet, in the form of a thin sheet of lustrous metal. In another factory a mass of dry vegetable fibre was similarly transformed by machinery alone into a bale of wonderfully light woven drapery resembling satin in lustre, muslin or gauze in texture.

The streets were what, even in the finest and latest-built American cities, would be thought magnificent in size and admirable in construction. The roadway was formed of that concrete, harder than granite, which is the sole material employed in Martial building, and which, as I have shown, can take every form and texture, from that of jewels or of the finest marble to that of plain polished slate. Along each side ran avenues of magnificent trees, whose branches met at a height of thirty feet over the centre. Between these and the houses was a space reserved for the passage of light carriages exclusively. The houses, unlike those in the country, were from two to four stories in height.

All private dwellings, however, were built, as in the country, around a square interior garden, and the windows, except those of the front rooms employed for business purposes, looked out upon this. The space occupied, however, was of course much smaller than where ground was less precious, few dwellings having four chambers on the same floor and front. The footway ran on the level of what we call the first story, over a part of the roof of the ground floor; and the

business apartments were always the front chambers of the former, while the stores of the merchants were collected in a single warehouse occupying the whole of the ground front. No attempt was made to exhibit them as on Earth. I entered with my host a number of what we should call shops. In every case he named exactly the article he wanted, and it was either produced at once or he was told that it was not to be had there, a thing which, however, seldom happened. The traders are few in number. One or two firms engaged in a single branch of commerce do the whole business of an extensive province. For instance, all the textile fabrics on sale in the province were to be seen in one or other of two warehouses; all metals in sheets, blocks, and wires in another; in a third all finished metal-work, except writing materials; all writing, phonographic, and telegraphic conveniences in a fourth; all furs, feathers, and fabrics made from these in a fifth. The tradesman sells on commission, as we say, receiving the goods from the manufacturer, the farmer, or the State, and paying only for what are sold at the end of each year, reserving to himself one-twenty-fourth of the price. Prices, however, do not vary from year to year, save when, on rare occasions, an adverse season or a special accident affects the supply and consequently the price of any natural product—choice fruit, skins, silver, for instance—obtained only from some peculiarly favoured locality.

The monetary system, like so many other Martial institutions, is purely artificial and severely logical. It is held that the exchange value of any article of manufacture or agricultural produce tends steadily downwards, while any article obtained by mining labour, or supplied by nature alone, tends to become more and more costly. The use of any one article of either class as a measure of value tends in the long-run to injustice either towards creditors or debtors. Labour may be considered as the most constant in intrinsic value of all things capable of sale or barter; but the utmost ingenuity of Martial philosophers has failed to devise a fixed standard by which one kind of labour can be measured against another, and their respective productive force, and consequently their value in exchange, ascertained. One thing alone retains in their opinion an intrinsic value always the same, and if it increase in value, increases only in proportion as all produce is obtained in greater quantities or with greater facility. Land, therefore, is in their estimation theoretically the best available measure of value—a dogma which has more practical truth in a planet where population is evenly diffused and increases very slowly, if at all, than it might have in the densely but unevenly peopled countries of Europe or Asia. A *staltâ*, or square of about fifty yards (rather more than half an acre), is the primary standard unit of value. For purposes of currency this is represented by a small engraved document bearing the Government stamp, which can always at pleasure be exchanged for so much land in a particular situation. The region whose soil is chosen as the standard lies under the Equator, and the State possesses there some hundreds of square miles, let out on terms thought to ensure its excellent cultivation and the permanence of its condition. The immediate convertibility of each such document, engraved on a small piece of metal about two inches long by one in breadth, and the fortieth part of an inch in thickness, is the ultimate cause and permanent guarantee of its value. Large payments, moreover, have to be made to the State by those who rent its lands or purchase the various articles of which it possesses a monopoly; or, again, in return for the services it undertakes, as lighting roads and supplying water to districts dependent on a distant source. Great care is taken to keep the issue of these notes within safe limits; and as a matter of fact they are rather more valuable than the land they represent, and are in consequence seldom presented for redemption therein. To provide against the possibility of such an over-issue as might exhaust the area of standard land at command of the State, it is enacted that, failing this, the holder may select his portion of State domain wherever he pleases, at twelve years' purchase of the rental; but in point

of fact these provisions are theoretically rather than practically important, since not one note in a hundred is ever redeemed or paid off. The "square measure," upon which the coinage, if I may so call it is based, following exactly the measure of length, each larger area in the ascending scale represents 144 times that below it. Thus the *styly* being a little more than a foot, the steely is about 13 feet, or one-twelfth of the *stâly*; but the *steeltâ* (or square steely) is 1/144th part of the *stâltâ*. The *stoltâ*, again, is about 600 yards square, or 360,000 square yards, 144 times the *stâltâ*. The highest note, so to speak, in circulation represents this last area; but all calculations are made in *staltau*, or twelfths thereof. The *stâltâ* will purchase about six ounces of gold. Notes are issued for the third, fourth, and twelfth parts of this: values smaller than the latter are represented by a token coinage of square medals composed of an alloy in which gold and silver respectively are the principal elements. The lowest coin is worth about threepence of English money.

Stopping at the largest public building in the city, a central hexagon with a number of smaller hexagons rising around it, we entered one of the latter, each side of which might be some 30 feet in length and 15 in height. Here were ranged a large number of instruments on the principle of the voice-writer, but conveying the sound to a vast distance along electric wires into one which reverses the voice-recording process, and repeats the vocal sound itself. Through one of these, after exchanging a few words with one of the officials in charge of them, Esmo carried on a conversation of some length, the instrument being so arranged that while the mouth is applied to one tube another may be held to the ear to receive the reply. In the meantime I fell in with one of the officers, apparently very young, who was strongly interested at the sight of the much-canvassed stranger, and, perhaps on this account, far more obliging than is common among his countrymen. From him I learnt that this, with another method I will presently describe, is the sole means of distant communication employed in Mars. Those who have not leisure or do not care to visit one of the offices, never more than twelve-miles distant from one another, in which the public instruments are kept, can have a wire conveyed to their own house. Almost every house of any pretension possesses such a wire. Leading me into the next apartment, my friend pointed out an immense number of instruments of a box-like shape, with a slit in which a leaf of about four inches by two was placed. These were constantly ejected and, on the instant, mechanically replaced. The fallen leaves were collected and sorted by the officers present, and at once placed in one or other of another set of exactly similar instruments. Any one possessing a private wire can write at his own desk in the manual character a letter or message on one of these slips. Placing it in his own instrument, it at once reproduces itself exactly in his autograph, and with every peculiarity, blot, or erasure, at the nearest office. Here the copy is placed in the proper box, and at once reproduced in the office nearest the residence of the person to whom it is addressed, and forwarded in the same manner to him. A letter, therefore, covering one of these slips, and saying as much as we could write in an average hand upon a large sheet of letter-paper, is delivered within five minutes at most from the time of despatch, no matter how great the distance.

I remarked that this method of communication made privacy impossible.

"But," replied the official, "how could we possibly have time to indulge in curiosity? We have to sort hundreds of these papers in an hour. We have just time to look at the address, place them in the proper box, and touch the spring which sets the electric current at work. If secrecy were needed a cipher would easily secure it, for you will observe that by this telegraph whatever is

inscribed on the sheet is mechanically reproduced; and it would be as easy to send a picture as a message.”

I learnt that a post of marvellous perfection had, some thousand years ago, delivered letters all over Mars, but it was now employed only for the delivery of parcels. Perhaps half the commerce of Mars, except that in metals and agricultural produce, depends on this post. Purchasers of standard articles describe by the telegraph-letter to a tradesman the exact amount and pattern of the goods required, and these are despatched at once; a system of banking, very completely organised, enabling the buyer to pay at once by a telegraphic order.

When Esmo had finished his business, we walked down, at my request, to the port. Around three sides of the dock formed by walls, said to be fifty feet in depth and twenty in thickness, ran a road close to the water's edge, beyond which was again a vast continuous warehouse. The inner side was reserved for passenger vessels, and everywhere the largest ships could come up close, landing either passengers or cargo without even the intervention of a plank. The appearance of the ships is very unlike that of Terrestrial vessels. They have no masts or rigging, are constructed of the *zorinta*, which in Mars serves much more effectively all the uses of iron, and differ entirely in construction as they are intended for cargo or for travel. Mercantile ships are in shape much like the finest American clippers, but with broad, flat keel and deck, and with a hold from fifteen to twenty feet in depth. Like Malayan vessels, they have attached by strong bars an external beam about fifty feet from the side, which renders overturning almost impossible. Passenger ships more resemble the form of a fish, but are alike at both ends. Six men working in pairs four hours at a time compose the entire crew of the largest ship, and half this number are required for the smallest that undertakes a voyage of more than twelve hours.

I may here mention that the system of sewage is far superior to any yet devised on Earth. No particle of waste is allowed to pollute the waters. The whole is deodorised by an exceedingly simple process, and, whether in town or country, carried away daily and applied to its natural use in fertilising the soil. Our practice of throwing away, where it is an obvious and often dangerous nuisance, material so valuable in its proper place, seemed to my Martian friends an inexplicable and almost incredible absurdity.

As we returned, Esmo told me that he had been in communication with the Camptâ, who had desired that I should visit him with the least possible delay.

“This,” he said, “will hurry us in matters where I at any rate should have preferred a little delay. The seat of Government is by a direct route nearly six thousand miles distant, and you will have opportunity of travelling in all the different ways practised on this planet. A long land-journey in our electric carriages, with which you are not familiar, is, I think, to be avoided. The Camptâ would wish to see your vessel as well as yourself; but, on the whole, I think it is safer to leave it where it is. Kevimâ, and I propose to accompany you during the first part of your journey. At our first halt, we will stay one night with a friend, that you may be admitted a brother of our Order.”

“And,” said I, “what sort of a reception may I expect at the end of my journey?”

“I think,” he answered, “that you are more likely to be embarrassed by the goodwill of the

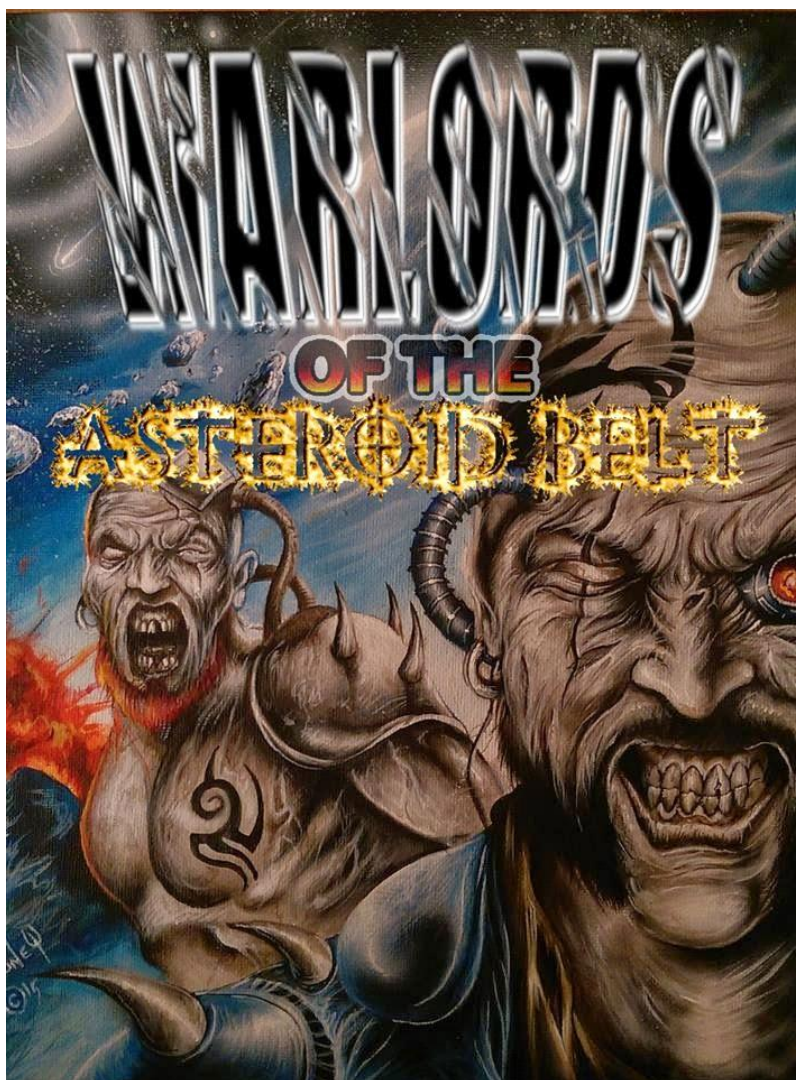
Camptâ than by the hostility of some of those about him. His character is very peculiar, and it is difficult to reckon upon his action in any given case. But he differs from nearly all his subjects in having a strong taste for adventure, none the less if it be perilous; and since his position prevents him from indulging this taste in person, he is the more disposed to take extreme interest in the adventures of others. He has, moreover, a great value for what you call courage, a virtue rarely needed and still more rarely shown among us; and I fancy that your venture through space has impressed him with a very high estimate of your daring. Assuredly none of us, however great his scientific curiosity, would have dreamed of incurring such a peril, and incurring it alone. But I must give you one warning. It is not common among us to make valuable gifts: we do not care enough for any but ourselves to give except with the idea of getting something valuable in return. Our princes are, however, so wealthy that they can give without sacrifice, and it is considered a grave affront to refuse any present from a superior. Whatever, then, our Suzerain may offer you—and he is almost sure, unless he should take offence, to give you whatever he thinks will induce you to settle permanently in the neighbourhood of his Court—you must accept graciously, and on no account, either then or afterwards, lead him to think that you slight his present.”

“I must say,” I replied, “that while I wish to remain in your world till I have learnt, if not all that is to be learnt, yet very much more than I at present know about it, the whole purpose of my voyage would be sacrificed if I could not effect my return to Earth.”

“I suppose so,” he answered, “and for that reason I wish to keep your vessel safe and within your reach; for to get away at all you may have to depart suddenly. But you will not do wisely to make the Prince suspect that such is your intention. Tell him of what you wish to see and to explore in this world; tell him freely of your own, for he will not readily fancy that you prefer it to this; but say as little as possible of your hopes of an ultimate return, and, if you are forced to acknowledge them, let them seem as indefinite as possible.”

By this time, returning by another road, Esmo stopped the carriage at the gate of an enclosed garden of moderate size, about two miles from Ecasfe. Entering alone, he presently returned with another gentleman, wearing a dress of grey and silver, with a white ribbon over the shoulder; a badge, I found, of official rank or duties. Mounting his own carriage, this person accompanied us home.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

Book One: The Coming of The Martians

Chapter Fourteen: In London

My younger brother was in London when the Martians fell at Woking. He was a medical student working for an imminent examination, and he heard nothing of the arrival until Saturday morning. The morning papers on Saturday contained, in addition to lengthy special articles on the planet Mars, on life in the planets, and so forth, a brief and vaguely worded telegram, all the more striking for its brevity.

The Martians, alarmed by the approach of a crowd, had killed a number of people with a quick-firing gun, so the story ran. The telegram concluded with the words: "Formidable as they seem to be, the Martians have not moved from the pit into which they have fallen, and, indeed, seem incapable of doing so. Probably this is due to the relative strength of the earth's gravitational energy." On that last text their leader-writer expanded very comfortably.

Of course all the students in the crammer's biology class, to which my brother went that day, were intensely interested, but there were no signs of any unusual excitement in the streets. The afternoon papers puffed scraps of news under big headlines. They had nothing to tell beyond the movements of troops about the common, and the burning of the pine woods between Woking and Weybridge, until eight. Then the St. James's Gazette, in an extra-special edition, announced the bare fact of the interruption of telegraphic communication. This was thought to be due to the falling of burning pine trees across the line. Nothing more of the fighting was known that night, the night of my drive to Leatherhead and back.

My brother felt no anxiety about us, as he knew from the description in the papers that the cylinder was a good two miles from my house. He made up his mind to run down that night to me, in order, as he says, to see the Things before they were killed. He dispatched a telegram, which never reached me, about four o'clock, and spent the evening at a music hall.

In London, also, on Saturday night there was a thunderstorm, and my brother reached Waterloo in a cab. On the platform from which the midnight train usually starts he learned, after some waiting, that an accident prevented trains from reaching Woking that night. The nature of the accident he could not ascertain; indeed, the railway authorities did not clearly know at that time. There was very little excitement in the station, as the officials, failing to realise that anything further than a breakdown between Byfleet and Woking junction had occurred, were running the theatre trains which usually passed through Woking round by Virginia Water or Guildford. They were busy making the necessary arrangements to alter the route of the Southampton and Portsmouth Sunday League excursions. A nocturnal newspaper reporter, mistaking my brother for the traffic manager, to whom he bears a slight resemblance, waylaid and tried to interview him. Few people, excepting the railway officials, connected the breakdown with the Martians.

I have read, in another account of these events, that on Sunday morning "all London was electrified by the news from Woking." As a matter of fact, there was nothing to justify that very

extravagant phrase. Plenty of Londoners did not hear of the Martians until the panic of Monday morning. Those who did took some time to realise all that the hastily worded telegrams in the Sunday papers conveyed. The majority of people in London do not read Sunday papers.

The habit of personal security, moreover, is so deeply fixed in the Londoner's mind, and startling intelligence so much a matter of course in the papers, that they could read without any personal tremors: "About seven o'clock last night the Martians came out of the cylinder, and, moving about under an armour of metallic shields, have completely wrecked Woking station with the adjacent houses, and massacred an entire battalion of the Cardigan Regiment. No details are known. Maxims have been absolutely useless against their armour; the field guns have been disabled by them. Flying hussars have been galloping into Chertsey. The Martians appear to be moving slowly towards Chertsey or Windsor. Great anxiety prevails in West Surrey, and earthworks are being thrown up to check the advance Londonward." That was how the Sunday Sun put it, and a clever and remarkably prompt "handbook" article in the Referee compared the affair to a menagerie suddenly let loose in a village.

No one in London knew positively of the nature of the armoured Martians, and there was still a fixed idea that these monsters must be sluggish: "crawling," "creeping painfully"—such expressions occurred in almost all the earlier reports. None of the telegrams could have been written by an eyewitness of their advance. The Sunday papers printed separate editions as further news came to hand, some even in default of it. But there was practically nothing more to tell people until late in the afternoon, when the authorities gave the press agencies the news in their possession. It was stated that the people of Walton and Weybridge, and all the district were pouring along the roads Londonward, and that was all.

My brother went to church at the Foundling Hospital in the morning, still in ignorance of what had happened on the previous night. There he heard allusions made to the invasion, and a special prayer for peace. Coming out, he bought a Referee. He became alarmed at the news in this, and went again to Waterloo station to find out if communication were restored. The omnibuses, carriages, cyclists, and innumerable people walking in their best clothes seemed scarcely affected by the strange intelligence that the news venders were disseminating. People were interested, or, if alarmed, alarmed only on account of the local residents. At the station he heard for the first time that the Windsor and Chertsey lines were now interrupted. The porters told him that several remarkable telegrams had been received in the morning from Byfleet and Chertsey stations, but that these had abruptly ceased. My brother could get very little precise detail out of them.

"There's fighting going on about Weybridge" was the extent of their information.

The train service was now very much disorganised. Quite a number of people who had been expecting friends from places on the South-Western network were standing about the station. One grey-headed old gentleman came and abused the South-Western Company bitterly to my brother. "It wants showing up," he said.

One or two trains came in from Richmond, Putney, and Kingston, containing people who had gone out for a day's boating and found the locks closed and a feeling of panic in the air. A man in a blue and white blazer addressed my brother, full of strange tidings.

“There’s hosts of people driving into Kingston in traps and carts and things, with boxes of valuables and all that,” he said. “They come from Molesey and Weybridge and Walton, and they say there’s been guns heard at Chertsey, heavy firing, and that mounted soldiers have told them to get off at once because the Martians are coming. We heard guns firing at Hampton Court station, but we thought it was thunder. What the dickens does it all mean? The Martians can’t get out of their pit, can they?”

My brother could not tell him.

Afterwards he found that the vague feeling of alarm had spread to the clients of the underground railway, and that the Sunday excursionists began to return from all over the South-Western “lung”—Barnes, Wimbledon, Richmond Park, Kew, and so forth—at unnaturally early hours; but not a soul had anything more than vague hearsay to tell of. Everyone connected with the terminus seemed ill-tempered.

About five o’clock the gathering crowd in the station was immensely excited by the opening of the line of communication, which is almost invariably closed, between the South-Eastern and the South-Western stations, and the passage of carriage trucks bearing huge guns and carriages crammed with soldiers. These were the guns that were brought up from Woolwich and Chatham to cover Kingston. There was an exchange of pleasantries: “You’ll get eaten!” “We’re the beast-tamers!” and so forth. A little while after that a squad of police came into the station and began to clear the public off the platforms, and my brother went out into the street again.

The church bells were ringing for evensong, and a squad of Salvation Army lassies came singing down Waterloo Road. On the bridge a number of loafers were watching a curious brown scum that came drifting down the stream in patches. The sun was just setting, and the Clock Tower and the Houses of Parliament rose against one of the most peaceful skies it is possible to imagine, a sky of gold, barred with long transverse stripes of reddish-purple cloud. There was talk of a floating body. One of the men there, a reservist he said he was, told my brother he had seen the heliograph flickering in the west.

In Wellington Street my brother met a couple of sturdy roughs who had just been rushed out of Fleet Street with still-wet newspapers and staring placards. “Dreadful catastrophe!” they bawled one to the other down Wellington Street. “Fighting at Weybridge! Full description! Repulse of the Martians! London in Danger!” He had to give threepence for a copy of that paper.

Then it was, and then only, that he realised something of the full power and terror of these monsters. He learned that they were not merely a handful of small sluggish creatures, but that they were minds swaying vast mechanical bodies; and that they could move swiftly and smite with such power that even the mightiest guns could not stand against them.

They were described as “vast spiderlike machines, nearly a hundred feet high, capable of the speed of an express train, and able to shoot out a beam of intense heat.” Masked batteries, chiefly of field guns, had been planted in the country about Horsell Common, and especially between the Woking district and London. Five of the machines had been seen moving towards the

Thames, and one, by a happy chance, had been destroyed. In the other cases the shells had missed, and the batteries had been at once annihilated by the Heat-Rays. Heavy losses of soldiers were mentioned, but the tone of the dispatch was optimistic.

The Martians had been repulsed; they were not invulnerable. They had retreated to their triangle of cylinders again, in the circle about Woking. Signallers with heliographs were pushing forward upon them from all sides. Guns were in rapid transit from Windsor, Portsmouth, Aldershot, Woolwich—even from the north; among others, long wire-guns of ninety-five tons from Woolwich. Altogether one hundred and sixteen were in position or being hastily placed, chiefly covering London. Never before in England had there been such a vast or rapid concentration of military material.

Any further cylinders that fell, it was hoped, could be destroyed at once by high explosives, which were being rapidly manufactured and distributed. No doubt, ran the report, the situation was of the strangest and gravest description, but the public was exhorted to avoid and discourage panic. No doubt the Martians were strange and terrible in the extreme, but at the outside there could not be more than twenty of them against our millions.

The authorities had reason to suppose, from the size of the cylinders, that at the outside there could not be more than five in each cylinder—fifteen altogether. And one at least was disposed of—perhaps more. The public would be fairly warned of the approach of danger, and elaborate measures were being taken for the protection of the people in the threatened southwestern suburbs. And so, with reiterated assurances of the safety of London and the ability of the authorities to cope with the difficulty, this quasi-proclamation closed.

This was printed in enormous type on paper so fresh that it was still wet, and there had been no time to add a word of comment. It was curious, my brother said, to see how ruthlessly the usual contents of the paper had been hacked and taken out to give this place.

All down Wellington Street people could be seen fluttering out the pink sheets and reading, and the Strand was suddenly noisy with the voices of an army of hawkers following these pioneers. Men came scrambling off buses to secure copies. Certainly this news excited people intensely, whatever their previous apathy. The shutters of a map shop in the Strand were being taken down, my brother said, and a man in his Sunday raiment, lemon-yellow gloves even, was visible inside the window hastily fastening maps of Surrey to the glass.

Going on along the Strand to Trafalgar Square, the paper in his hand, my brother saw some of the fugitives from West Surrey. There was a man with his wife and two boys and some articles of furniture in a cart such as greengrocers use. He was driving from the direction of Westminster Bridge; and close behind him came a hay waggon with five or six respectable-looking people in it, and some boxes and bundles. The faces of these people were haggard, and their entire appearance contrasted conspicuously with the Sabbath-best appearance of the people on the omnibuses. People in fashionable clothing peeped at them out of cabs. They stopped at the Square as if undecided which way to take, and finally turned eastward along the Strand. Some way behind these came a man in workday clothes, riding one of those old-fashioned tricycles with a small front wheel. He was dirty and white in the face.

My brother turned down towards Victoria, and met a number of such people. He had a vague idea that he might see something of me. He noticed an unusual number of police regulating the traffic. Some of the refugees were exchanging news with the people on the omnibuses. One was professing to have seen the Martians. "Boilers on stilts, I tell you, striding along like men." Most of them were excited and animated by their strange experience.

Beyond Victoria the public-houses were doing a lively trade with these arrivals. At all the street corners groups of people were reading papers, talking excitedly, or staring at these unusual Sunday visitors. They seemed to increase as night drew on, until at last the roads, my brother said, were like Epsom High Street on a Derby Day. My brother addressed several of these fugitives and got unsatisfactory answers from most.

None of them could tell him any news of Woking except one man, who assured him that Woking had been entirely destroyed on the previous night.

"I come from Byfleet," he said; "man on a bicycle came through the place in the early morning, and ran from door to door warning us to come away. Then came soldiers. We went out to look, and there were clouds of smoke to the south—nothing but smoke, and not a soul coming that way. Then we heard the guns at Chertsey, and folks coming from Weybridge. So I've locked up my house and come on."

At the time there was a strong feeling in the streets that the authorities were to blame for their incapacity to dispose of the invaders without all this inconvenience.

About eight o'clock a noise of heavy firing was distinctly audible all over the south of London. My brother could not hear it for the traffic in the main thoroughfares, but by striking through the quiet back streets to the river he was able to distinguish it quite plainly.

He walked from Westminster to his apartments near Regent's Park, about two. He was now very anxious on my account, and disturbed at the evident magnitude of the trouble. His mind was inclined to run, even as mine had run on Saturday, on military details. He thought of all those silent, expectant guns, of the suddenly nomadic countryside; he tried to imagine "boilers on stilts" a hundred feet high.

There were one or two cartloads of refugees passing along Oxford Street, and several in the Marylebone Road, but so slowly was the news spreading that Regent Street and Portland Place were full of their usual Sunday-night promenaders, albeit they talked in groups, and along the edge of Regent's Park there were as many silent couples "walking out" together under the scattered gas lamps as ever there had been. The night was warm and still, and a little oppressive; the sound of guns continued intermittently, and after midnight there seemed to be sheet lightning in the south.

He read and re-read the paper, fearing the worst had happened to me. He was restless, and after supper prowled out again aimlessly. He returned and tried in vain to divert his attention to his examination notes. He went to bed a little after midnight, and was awakened from lurid dreams

in the small hours of Monday by the sound of door knockers, feet running in the street, distant drumming, and a clamour of bells. Red reflections danced on the ceiling. For a moment he lay astonished, wondering whether day had come or the world gone mad. Then he jumped out of bed and ran to the window.

His room was an attic and as he thrust his head out, up and down the street there were a dozen echoes to the noise of his window sash, and heads in every kind of night disarray appeared. Enquiries were being shouted. "They are coming!" bawled a policeman, hammering at the door; "the Martians are coming!" and hurried to the next door.

The sound of drumming and trumpeting came from the Albany Street Barracks, and every church within earshot was hard at work killing sleep with a vehement disorderly tocsin. There was a noise of doors opening, and window after window in the houses opposite flashed from darkness into yellow illumination.

Up the street came galloping a closed carriage, bursting abruptly into noise at the corner, rising to a clattering climax under the window, and dying away slowly in the distance. Close on the rear of this came a couple of cabs, the forerunners of a long procession of flying vehicles, going for the most part to Chalk Farm station, where the North-Western special trains were loading up, instead of coming down the gradient into Euston.

For a long time my brother stared out of the window in blank astonishment, watching the policemen hammering at door after door, and delivering their incomprehensible message. Then the door behind him opened, and the man who lodged across the landing came in, dressed only in shirt, trousers, and slippers, his braces loose about his waist, his hair disordered from his pillow.

"What the devil is it?" he asked. "A fire? What a devil of a row!"

They both craned their heads out of the window, straining to hear what the policemen were shouting. People were coming out of the side streets, and standing in groups at the corners talking.

"What the devil is it all about?" said my brother's fellow lodger.

My brother answered him vaguely and began to dress, running with each garment to the window in order to miss nothing of the growing excitement. And presently men selling unnaturally early newspapers came bawling into the street:

"London in danger of suffocation! The Kingston and Richmond defences forced! Fearful massacres in the Thames Valley!"

And all about him—in the rooms below, in the houses on each side and across the road, and behind in the Park Terraces and in the hundred other streets of that part of Marylebone, and the Westbourne Park district and St. Pancras, and westward and northward in Kilburn and St. John's Wood and Hampstead, and eastward in Shoreditch and Highbury and Haggerston and Hoxton, and, indeed, through all the vastness of London from Ealing to East Ham—people were rubbing

their eyes, and opening windows to stare out and ask aimless questions, dressing hastily as the first breath of the coming storm of Fear blew through the streets. It was the dawn of the great panic. London, which had gone to bed on Sunday night oblivious and inert, was awakened, in the small hours of Monday morning, to a vivid sense of danger.

Unable from his window to learn what was happening, my brother went down and out into the street, just as the sky between the parapets of the houses grew pink with the early dawn. The flying people on foot and in vehicles grew more numerous every moment. “Black Smoke!” he heard people crying, and again “Black Smoke!” The contagion of such a unanimous fear was inevitable. As my brother hesitated on the door-step, he saw another news vender approaching, and got a paper forthwith. The man was running away with the rest, and selling his papers for a shilling each as he ran—a grotesque mingling of profit and panic.

And from this paper my brother read that catastrophic dispatch of the Commander-in-Chief:

“The Martians are able to discharge enormous clouds of a black and poisonous vapour by means of rockets. They have smothered our batteries, destroyed Richmond, Kingston, and Wimbledon, and are advancing slowly towards London, destroying everything on the way. It is impossible to stop them. There is no safety from the Black Smoke but in instant flight.”

That was all, but it was enough. The whole population of the great six-million city was stirring, slipping, running; presently it would be pouring en masse northward.

“Black Smoke!” the voices cried. “Fire!”

The bells of the neighbouring church made a jangling tumult, a cart carelessly driven smashed, amid shrieks and curses, against the water trough up the street. Sickly yellow lights went to and fro in the houses, and some of the passing cabs flaunted unextinguished lamps. And overhead the dawn was growing brighter, clear and steady and calm.

He heard footsteps running to and fro in the rooms, and up and down stairs behind him. His landlady came to the door, loosely wrapped in dressing gown and shawl; her husband followed ejaculating.

As my brother began to realise the import of all these things, he turned hastily to his own room, put all his available money—some ten pounds altogether—into his pockets, and went out again into the streets.

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