



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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 14, ISSUE 18
7TH MARCH 2019

A SUMMONS FROM THE DIOGENES CLUB

BY STEPHEN
HERNANDEZ
'TRESPASSERS
WILL BE SHOT.
SURVIVORS WILL
BE SHOT AGAIN.'

A FISTFUL OF GONADS

BY GK MURPHY—
IF THE BULLET
DIDN'T KILL YOU,
DYSENTERY
SURE AS HELL
DID...

IXTHUL BY BRUCE DAVIES

CELEBRATING SCHLOCK'S 8TH ANNIVERSARY!

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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Schlock! Webzine

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Davies, Patrick Winters, Gregory KH Bryant, Stephen Hernandez, H Rider Haggard, C. J.
Cutcliffe Hyne*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 14, Issue 18

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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 Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Walhall* by [Emil Doepler](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This anniversary edition begins with an atmospheric Holmes/Cthulhu mashup, courtesy of Stephen Hernandez. Meanwhile Godan escapes Silvia's bats only to find himself in trouble at Lord Ruthven's dance. A police detective discovers that Man is not alone on Earth. A seventeenth century Puritan encounters the terrors of the American forest. And almost three hundred years later, the Mexican border is a scene of dysentery and darker horrors.

In space, Story Talbot visits the ruins of Callisto Base 1. Out at sea, Swanhild summons up the sinister forces of sorcery in her fight against Eric Brighteyes. And on the Canary Islands, two explorers discover an account of the last days of the lost continent of Atlantis, marking the beginning of a long forgotten classic by long forgotten fantasy author, C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



**"SO WHEN THEY TELL YOU SUCK YOU SUCK
THEY'RE CHEERING FOR US RIGHT?"**

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

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

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

<https://www.freelanced.com/vincentdavis>

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A SUMMONS FROM THE DIOGENES CLUB by Stephen Hernandez

It was nearing Christmas but you would never have known it judging from the surroundings of 221b Baker Street—Holmes did not believe in Christmas decorations. Though, to her credit Mrs Hudson, his dour, but ever faithful, landlady had put up a small tree and decorated it with shiny baubles of the kind that could be purchased at five for a shilling along Kentish Road. It was dying, very quickly, not only due to lack of natural light (Holmes rarely opened the curtains) but also because he had decided on making use of it not only as a makeshift ashtray but also as kindling whenever the fire seemed to be dying down. I must admit, though, that the smell of burning pine made a pleasant change from the usual smells that habitually dwelt in the living room owing to Holmes' chemical experiments. A living room, I might add, where Holmes had solved many a case without even moving from his habitual armchair.

He was standing at his long mahogany table in the corner of the living room where he performed the aforementioned chemical experiments, much to Mrs Hudson's chagrin as it was now completely covered in stains and burns (it had evidently been a heirloom but she had long ago decided against reclaiming it). Holmes experiments inevitably ended in either explosions, or the most abominably noxious fumes, forcing the occupants of the house to vacate the premises, even if only temporarily. I was therefore, understandably, in a state of some nervous tension even though I was sitting as far away from the table as I could. That was why when a knock came at our door I nearly jumped out of my seat. It was a telegram for Holmes. Holmes glanced at it and stuffed it into his dressing gown pocket.

"How would you like to meet my brother Watson?" he said. "We are invited to the Diogenes Club."

I should mention here that Holmes had only recently returned to the 'land of the living' as it were. Holmes had gone into one of his deep depressions or his 'Black Dog' as he sometimes referred to it. He had decided he'd had enough of all his do-gooding and wanted to live it up a bit, as he termed it. Holmes idea of living it up a bit were usually, but not quite, the sort of things for which people were usually imprisoned for, and if they weren't, they damn well should have been in my opinion. I will not besmirch this manuscript, or Holmes name, in detailing some of the more disgusting depravities in which Holmes less wholesome appetites descended to. In my opinion, the amount of times Holmes had literally saved his fellow men from fates worse than death more than outweighed his terrible habits. Holmes' morphia habits and his sexual promiscuousness I have mentioned once or twice in passing as they were as much part of the man as his depressing violin playing, if it could be called that, I would call it violin screeching as the instrument almost always sounded as if it were in agony, savaged by the worst sadist. But these were the height of probity compared to what he got up to when he was living it up a bit.

I digress; what I mean to say, is that the things which Holmes gave himself up to in his fits of depression were things I chose to ignore. I knew only that it would take some time, months even, until he fully recovered from one of these benders. It meant that I had to do use quite a bit of poetic licence when it came to covering up these lapses in time in my 'official' semi fictionalised serialisation of the greatest consulting detective of all time. I passed off these lengthy periods of absence as especially secret and sensitive work that could not be revealed for diplomatic reasons

at that moment or if ever. I left the job of keeping Holmes' name out of the world's periodicals to his brother Mycroft whom at that time I had never met in person. But judging from the near choleric telegrams I received occasionally from Mycroft suggesting that if I should perchance upon his brother (sic): "I was to drug him immediately and lock him in a darkened room until further notice." So, I gathered there was not much brotherly love lost.

We arrived punctually at the Diogenes Club (evidently Mycroft was fanatical about time keeping, not to mention, his routine, which he rarely broke). We were escorted to the 'Stranger's Room' by a very dour looking personage who resembled a corpse and had about as much animation. It was the only room where talking was allowed in that most eccentric of clubs. All other forms of communication were carried out between the members and the servants by arcane signals. I had heard that a doorman, of many years standing, had been summarily dismissed for merely wishing one of the members a happy birthday as he was leaving the club.

Mycroft literally waddled into the room. The man was huge in all senses of the word. Immediately, even though the room was large for such a small and exclusive club, he seemed to fill it. He looked at Holmes dishevelled state with obvious distaste. Mycroft given his massive bulk clearly had a good tailor and was immaculately dressed in a smart day suit combined with a beautifully knotted bow tie. His shoes were so extremely shined they reflected every object in the room including his dishevelled brother. He squeezed himself into a leather armchair with some difficulty which involved quite a bit of huffing, puffing, and muffled oaths. He skipped the formalities of introducing himself and addressed his brother.

"I can see you have not given up your total disregard for normal dress code," he said.

I had warned Holmes that visiting a club of such secret but respected renown in his dressing gown and slippers would probably not go down well. The doorman had regarded him with a distaste usually reserved for something you scraped off the soles of your shoes. Holmes casually lit a cigarette, thankfully, not one of his special ones, as if he had brother had not even spoken.

Mycroft coughed pointedly.

"There is a no smoking policy in the Stranger's Room."

Again, Holmes appeared not to have heard him and flicked his ash onto the immaculate Axminster carpet.

"I can see what you have had for breakfast over the past two weeks," Mycroft said. "And when you have vomited, I might add."

Holmes dismissed the comment with a sharp wave of his hand.

"And how long has your usual launderer been absent?" Holmes quickly replied.

It was like watching two master fencers practicing lightning fast moves with rehearsed precision.

“And how have you deduced that, Sherlock, with your narcotized mind?” Mycroft said rather scornfully.

“Your collar is very slightly over starched. I suspect you find it a trifle uncomfortable judging by the slight redness around your neck, although, it does suit your overall splenetic complexion wonderfully.”

Mycroft went from red to scarlet from his perfectly white collar upwards. “He has been sick for several weeks. His wife, sadly, does not meet my exacting standards but he will be well soon.”

“Well that’s a blessing, I’m sure,” Holmes said. “So why have you disturbed your exact daily routine? If I’m not mistaken you are missing your pre luncheon Amontillado. It must be distressing for you.”

If it were possible Mycroft’s face grew even redder and he breathed heavier. I thought the over starched collar would burst. “Yes Sherlock but my usual aperitif can wait. I actually asked you here because you are in danger of your life and reluctantly, I must admit, I felt it a sibling’s duty to warn you.”

Holmes gave his brother a rather strange look and after flicking his cigarette into the unlit fireplace, thankfully not rubbing it out on the Axminster, he produced his pipe instead.

“Do you think you could refrain from smoking that ghastly mixture you seem to have an unaccountable taste for? It will stink the room out for days.” Mycroft glared at his brother.

Sherlock, as was his usual habit when smoking his pipe, completely ignored him and immersed himself in the procedure of preparing his smoke, and through a cloud of blue fumes he said, “My dear brother, I believe this club dissuades as many visitors as possible, so I am doing it a considerable favour. As to threats, my life is in constant danger, why should you suddenly take an interest?”

“Because a member of the aristocracy is involved, and so I have been dragged into this sordid business. You have no doubt heard of the case of Lord Edward Smyth’s suicide?”

“Ah yes, the case of the inexplicable murder,” Holmes said, blowing a huge cloud of blue smoke in his brother’s direction. “I read of it in this morning’s papers.”

Mycroft pretended not to notice the smoke and said through the fug, “No murder was involved as you well know. The young Lord was obviously distraught over gambling debts and decided to do away with himself. It is a sad case.”

“Yes, shot through his head at close range yet no gun was ever found and no one heard the gunshot.”

“It was a thick door, locked from the inside Sherlock, and the window was secured. Obviously, whatever handgun he used has yet to be discovered. It will be in due course. Someone must have

removed it.”

“I doubt it,” Holmes said nonchalantly. “I doubt it very much. But you would like me to find the missing weapon and the person who removed it so the scandal can die down as soon as possible—perish the thought that a Lord should have gambling debts.”

“Yes, Sherlock, if you would not mind. Scotland Yard would rather not have you involved but I persuaded them.”

“I don’t expect Inspector Lestrade will be too happy.” I spoke up just out of a feeling I should add something to the conversation.

Both Mycroft and Holmes looked at me as if I was an oaf, which of course, I was, stating such a glaring fact to two such fellows was sheer idiocy.

“Obviously,” they both said, embarrassingly, in unison.

“I suppose I am doing this ‘favour’ in return for you telling why I am in such imminent danger.”

Mycroft nodded. “A certain one of your less amicable acquaintances, a Colonel Moran, has returned from South Africa and is currently residing in the City. He is supposedly here having a break from his usual occupation as a guide for big game hunters. But his real motive, as you well know, is to eliminate you, Sherlock. As he is one of the most dangerous of your many enemies I thought you should know.”

“I have been aware for some time that he is in London but I cannot see why he would suddenly decide that he would make an attempt on my life. I should think by now that he and his master know that he would be at a distinct disadvantage.”

Mycroft huffed at this. “I can see that the many and varied times that you have been knocking on heaven’s door, as it were, have not served as a warning but have merely increased your arrogance in the face of danger. It will be your undoing Sherlock.”

Holmes shrugged at this, “I think a German fellow named Nietzsche said, ‘That which does not kill us makes us stronger’, or something to that effect.”

“Another one of your babbling friends, no doubt, Sherlock, but we will have none of that Kraut nonsense here, thank you very much. No, this time I am afraid you really are in the most grievous danger, not just from Moran, but from his master Professor Moriarty. Something to do with how you inconvenienced him at the Reichenbach Falls. Ring a bell? He has sworn vengeance and your blood. And he has outside help from those above.”

They both raised an eyebrow at each other, wished each other season’s greetings, of which the only thing it had in common with the season was the iciness with which it was delivered. We duly made our exit.

We hailed a growler upon leaving the club. The coach driver expressed no surprise at my companion's attire and instead said, "Why if it ain't Mister Holmes. Haven't see you for a bit. Baker Street is it?"

Holmes nodded in the affirmative and instructed me to give him an outrageous tip upon our arrival (Holmes rarely carried any cash). "You should not worry about it Watson Old Tom there has an invariable habit of turning up just when you need him. A very useful fellow. I am quite positive you could plot the map of London from the palm of one of his calloused hands."

To my surprise Holmes did not throw himself into his customary armchair but instead went to his bedroom to get changed. He shortly appeared dressed in his rather worn but respectable looking suit. I should mention here that Holmes hardly ever wore a hat and certainly not a deerstalker—an item which positively disgusted him—but, as they, that is an altogether different story.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To the Smyth house, of course. How else will I learn how Moran plans to kill me?"

I had been in the company of Holmes long enough to expect the unexpected. Without even raising his hand a cab hauled up outside 221B and, of course, it was Old Tom. By what means he and the cabbie communicated, I did not have a clue, and even now I still don't know. Somehow without saying a word Old Tom delivered us outside the front door of the Smyth's residence. The door was opened by an extremely morose butler. We were escorted to a comfortable sitting room to meet the late Lord Edward Smyth's mother, who unaccountably was not in the least surprised by our visit. She was dressed in funereal black and her eyes were red from weeping.

"Your brother informed me that you might be dropping by."

Holmes made no reply to this snippet of information. But I could see he was disgruntled by his brother's presumptuousness.

"Also, the cards told me."

"What cards?" Holmes asked.

"Why, my tarot cards, of course."

She pointed to a small table covered in green velvet with a square of silk cloth in the middle upon which lay the major arcana from a deck of Rider Waite Tarot cards. I recognised them immediately as I had once had a Hungarian gypsy lover who used them regularly. But, that, as they say, is another story...

"We will shortly be joined by an Inspector Lestrade. I suggest we await his arrival before you begin your investigation."

Holmes scowled and strode over to the table and pointed to one of the major arcana cards which

had been placed in a central position. It depicted a fool carrying his belongings in a handkerchief tied to a stick.

“I hope that does not depict me,” Holmes said.

“Oh no,” Lady Smyth said. “I believe that is the Inspector.”

As if on cue the butler opened the door and announced the arrival of the aforementioned irascible policeman.

“I believe you are the Hermit.” She said to Holmes and pointed to a card with the familiar figure of an old man in a hooded cloak carrying a lantern. The cards had been laid out in the simple Celtic cross spread and it was the last card. “And the devil follows you wherever you go.” She pointed to the penultimate card which was indeed the devil.

“Really,” Holmes said in a tone I recognised as one of total lack of interest. Holmes’ beliefs in the arcane and the supernatural extended far beyond the limits of what he would consider mere fortune telling. He turned his grey eyed attention instead to Lestrade.

“Good afternoon, Lestrade. I trust you are well.”

Inspector Lestrade made a slight bow to Lady Smyth and formally introduced himself. He nodded to Holmes and I.

“If you don’t mind Lady Smyth I would like to inspect the crime scene right away,” Lestrade said.

“As would I,” Holmes interjected. It was Lestrade’s turn to scowl.

Lady Smyth escorted them to her son’s study but preferred to remain outside. The corpse had been removed but blood stains still remained on the desk. Lestrade started by investigating the chimney. An obvious choice, I thought, for someone to hide a weapon. However, Holmes marched straight to the stained glass window and spent nearly half an hour examining it with his magnifying glass. I knew better than to interrupt him and busied myself taking blood samples. When Holmes had finished he came over to me and asked me if he could borrow a pencil. He placed it through a small hole in the stained glass window, then he took out a small paintbrush and brushed some small crumbs of glass from the window sill into an envelope. After this he went outside the house and inspected the ground beneath the window.

“You notice Watson that there are no footprints despite the ground being very muddy.” All I could do was nod and I had no idea why I was nodding. One of the things I excelled at was being a mute witness for Holmes. When we returned, Holmes bid goodbye to Lady Smyth and Lestrade.

“Aren’t you even going to bother to interview anyone? It’s quite obvious that one of the members of the household removed the weapon with which Lord Smyth committed suicide,”

Lestrade said.

“Yes, it is to you, Lestrade,” Holmes replied. “How do you explain the absence of the sound of a gunshot and the fact that Lord Smyth was shot through the right temple when it is quite obvious he was left handed?” With that we took our leave.

Holmes spent some time examining my blood samples mixed with various chemicals under his microscope. We both agreed that there was no sign of obvious poisoning, not that there was much of a possibility when the corpse had been shot through the head, but Holmes always insisted on eliminating possibilities. Then he turned to the things that really interested him—the fragments of glass.

“I presume, Holmes, that your supposition, as absurd as it may seem, is that someone bored a hole through the window and then proceeded with pin point accuracy to shoot Lord Smyth through the temple. I can tell you as an ex-soldier that it would be an absolutely impossible shot.”

Holmes stopped what he was doing, went to his armchair, filled his pipe and commenced to smoke.

“Well done, Watson! I am glad to see that our time spent together has not been wasted. Remember what I’m always saying to you: once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.”

“But Holmes,” I protested, “what you are proposing is preposterous! It could only be performed as a circus trick, much like someone catching a bullet in their teeth—it would be utterly impossible. I pride myself on my marksmanship but what you’re suggesting would be miracle.”

“Oh yes, my dear Watson, you are right, a miracle. It is magick. Not a trick. You will remember Mycroft mentioning that Moriarty was receiving ‘outside’ help. He meant the Old Ones, of which Mycroft is more of an authority than I. That ‘outside’ help would apply equally to his most trusted lieutenant—Colonel Moran. It would still take a marksman of considerable ability to perform the task because it would not be from a few yards away it would be from several hundred yards away. You would have noticed that there was a house approximately that distance away where the ground floor apartments were equidistant with Smyth’s study. I have sent a telegram to ascertain who rents the property and if I am not mistaken it will be Colonel Moran.”

As if on cue there was a knock on the door. Holmes tipped the boy, glanced at the telegram, and threw it into the fire. “Just as I thought,” he said. “Moran.” He sat back down and lit his pipe. “No doubt Smyth was useful practice for the Colonel. I gather that Moran had ingratiated himself with the young Lord and they had formed a partnership when playing cards at their mutual clubs, the Baldwin, the Cavendish, and the Bagatelle. Moran is as addicted to gambling as I am to cocaine. He is also a very clever cheat. Lord Smyth, an extremely honest young man, must have discovered Moran’s secret. He was not working out his debts when he locked himself in his

study; he was working out the money he owed to his fellow card players. I am sure he intended to repay them in full and expose Moran. Moran could not afford that kind of scandal—it would have ruined him. It gave him a chance to practice with his new weapon and the Old Ones always appreciate the gift of an honest and innocent soul like Lord Smyth.”

I did not like it when Holmes mentioned the involvement of the Old Ones. I am a practical man and I do not like or want to understand the supernatural, but I had fought many a battle alongside Holmes against these so called Old Ones. It was enough to know they existed and enough to know that it was far better not to contemplate their existence—those thoughts led to insanity. Insanity akin to that of the “Mad Arab” Abdul Alhazred who penned that dreaded grimoire, the Necronomicon. I was sure that Holmes kept a copy locked away with his drug paraphernalia. Perhaps only certain humans, like Holmes and Mycroft, had the capacity to contemplate that terrible and evil reality without going mad themselves. I wondered which one of those terrible entities was aiding Moriarty and Moran, perhaps it was Cthulhu itself. I shuddered involuntarily at the thought: I had seen the effigies that Holmes kept of that awful being.

Holmes told me that Moran had not expected Smyth to have realised so soon that he was a cheat. It probably destroyed Moriarty’s plans to blackmail the Lord and use him as a useful ally in the House of Lords. They had also not expected the young man to be so truthful insofar as to risk his own reputation and ruin. It would never have crossed their evil and twisted minds that someone was capable of such honesty and self-sacrifice. I was both mortified and furious that such a terrible crime was likely to go unpunished as they had still not located the murder weapon. Holmes assured me that if I would care to go on an adventure with him three nights hence all would be revealed and justice would be done.

I duly arrived in the late afternoon three days later. Mrs Hudson greeted me with a cursory nod and nothing more. It was unlike her. She pointed mournfully upstairs and disappeared into the unknown depths of her own ground floor rooms. As I neared Holmes door I could just hear a low hiss and splintering of glass. I opened the door cautiously, only to find Holmes kneeling opposite the Christmas tree gaily shooting all of Mrs Hudson’s carefully chosen baubles with what appeared to be a large air pistol. He did not look up.

“Ah, Watson just in time.”

He shot, and blew another of the baubles to bits. “Now watch this.” He cranked the air pistol and shot again. Nothing happened apart from a slight hiss. Holmes disappeared behind the tree and beckoned me to join him. Stuck to the wall was a crude drawing of a man’s head. It had a large hole in its temple. Holmes gave a satisfied grunt and marched to the mantelpiece to fill his clay pipe from the Turkish slipper where he kept his tobacco. It had once been the property of an Arabian belly dancer of Holmes’ intimate acquaintance. I once remarked that I was grateful that he chosen the slipper as a memento and not her knickers. Holmes had replied that was simply because she never wore any. But that is another story...

“Well, what do you think, Watson?”

I was tempted to tell him, that if destroying poor Mrs Hudson's cheery baubles was some kind of joke, it was in very bad taste. But the drawing suggested another purpose. I went to the wall and dug out the embedded bullet with my penknife. It was a .38 calibre bullet which had expanded on impact. It made me nauseous just looking at the thing. I had tended wounds produced by such bullets in Afghanistan which were invariably horrendous. It was the cruel practice of some soldiers to file down the point of the bullet and cut a cross in it. It meant that upon impact the bullet would split and expand in all directions making a terrible mess of the wound. It was an abominable act, cruel and merciless.

I stared at the air pistol resting on Holmes' lap. "How did you manage to shoot this bullet from that small thing?"

"There are many unappreciated craftsmen in the underworld Watson. There is a Swiss gentleman who is capable of producing such a weapon as this. Also, by a strange coincidence, some weeks ago he was commissioned by an unknown source to produce an air rifle with the same capability. It was why there was no sound of a gun shot from Moran's lodgings.

"My god, Holmes! Moran will be after you with it and you are a far easier target than a small hole drilled in a window."

"I am well aware of it, Watson. Moriarty and Moran have been waiting for the most propitious time to serve me up as a sacrifice. The attempt on my life will be made tonight; the longest night of the year: the 21st of December—the winter solstice. It will please the Old Ones immeasurably, and both Moriarty and Moran will hope that they will receive some favours in return. I imagine that Moriarty will be anticipating, with great pleasure, the torments Cthulhu will inflict upon my immortal soul."

I shuddered at the mere mention of that dreaded name. "Surely you have a plan, Holmes?"

"Of course, Watson. And soon we will put it into action. Have you got your revolver with you?"

I nodded, and patted my jacket pocket where I carried my trusty Webley.

Holmes said it would be a long night. We fortified ourselves with one of Mrs Hudson's excellent lamb casseroles, which she served piping hot with potatoes and cabbage and rhubarb and custard to follow. Thus, suitably insulated from the cold weather we ventured into the night. We used one of Holmes' secret exits, known only to him, Mrs Hudson, and I.

Holmes set a fast pace and with my shorter legs I sometimes had to nearly trot to keep up. I asked him about our destination.

"Before we can even start heading for our destination we must shake off the two gentlemen, if that is what they are, who are following us. No, don't look behind yourself Watson. They must not see our features, pull your scarf further up over your face and pull your hat further down."

I did as Holmes said. I must admit I felt slightly peeved that I had not noticed we were being followed. My soldierly instincts were getting rusty. I now saw we were heading towards the river and the cover of a rising 'London Particular'. We had soon all but disappeared in the thick fog. Holmes took my arm because the pea souper was so thick that we could barely see a yard in front of us. Holmes slowed down his pace and whispered in my ear to walk as quietly as possible. He drew me into one of the nooks that line the embankment and from this vantage point we watched the two shadowy figures pass by. I nearly gasped when one of the men turned in our direction and I saw what should have been his eyes—they were red dots, burning like hot coals. And the smell or I should say stench that wafted from their bodies... it was so vile and noisome I nearly vomited on the spot. If it had not been for Holmes strong grip, I am sure, I would have emptied the contents of my stomach into the dark flowing river. Thankfully they moved on. I could not help hearing the equally foul noises they made as they passed. These were not normal men. They sounded like pigs snuffling for food. They had clearly been following our scent like a kind of hideous man hound. The Particular was so thick now that it must have even covered our smell.

"Demons," Holmes hissed in my ear. "Thankfully the fog has muddled their senses. Their report to their master will be muddled as well, and so the first part of our plan has been completed successfully." I wanted to say it was his plan but I knew Holmes was including me out of courtesy. I, however, had no idea what was going on apart from the fact that my nostrils had been subjected to the most abominable effluvium.

We waited a few minutes and then Holmes commenced to march again, this time with added urgency. I held firmly onto his arm because for the life of me I could not tell where we were, also, I did not like the sound of demons. Somehow Holmes seemed to know exactly where we were and where we were going. I tried to start up a conversation regarding the so called demons but Holmes shushed me to silence. It wasn't until we had been walking some few hours that I began to recognise some of the streets, but I said nothing because if we were heading for where I thought we were heading, we had been going around in circles. It was all too strange and very unlike Holmes.

Holmes stopped at the rear of a house that was clothed in darkness. "Do you recognise this place Watson?" he whispered.

"I do believe we are at the rear of Camden House. The empty house directly opposite 221 Baker Street. My god, Holmes! Do you believe Moran is in there with his rifle?" I hissed in his ear.

"We shall see. Have your revolver to hand."

There was a rather unwelcoming sign tacked to the tall, spiked gate which stated: 'Trespassers will be shot. Survivors will be shot again.' Holmes ignored the sign and the gate, instead, he studied the wall.

Holmes hauled himself to the top of the back garden wall with that surprising athleticism he often possessed at such moments. He stretched down his hand and helped me up and over, and I can tell you I am no mean weight! We silently approached the back door. Holmes did not seem the least surprised to find it was open. We crept inside. It smelt of damp and that peculiar, musty,

singularly abandoned smell of a house that has been uninhabited for a long time. Once our eyes had become accustomed to the dark we could make out the vague silhouettes of a variety of furniture covered with white sheets. They stood there like ghostly silent witnesses to our unwelcome intrusion.

Holmes motioned me to accompany him upstairs. I copied his careful movements mounting the stairs—keeping to the outside of the steps where the wood was firmer and thus preventing any creaking noises. We came to the first floor landing. Holmes pointed to an adjacent room which I surmised must be the room which faced directly onto the living room of 221b Baker Street. The door was slightly ajar. Holmes raised his sword cane and I cocked the Webley. Holmes pushed the door open and we entered in a rush. The room was empty.

When I say empty, I mean empty of human beings. But there were other things in that room, unholy, abominable things. And there was that awful stink again. Then I saw where the terrible smell was coming from—in the corner were a pile of men's black clothes and cloaks, it was there that the stink emanated. They must have been the rags the demons had been wearing. Perhaps this was where they lived.

“This is not where the demons live, Watson,” Holmes whispered, as if reading my thoughts. “It is where they were summoned. We must await the return of their master: Moran.”

He kicked at the pile of clothes and underneath I saw the chalked outlines of some kind of queer rune. “And Moran's master has been here as well, no doubt, to revel in my imminent death.”

I instinctively looked towards 221b Baker Street. I gasped. There, plainly outlined behind the curtains of the living room was Holmes' shadow. There was no mistaking it. But what was even more amazing was it occasionally moved, and it moved making one of Holmes' many typical gestures! I have seen, so called magic, or, as Holmes called it ‘magick’, many times in his company so I suppose this should be no exception. Holmes was chanting softly under his breath. I recognised it as R'lyehian; the horrible and terrible eldritch language of the Old Ones.

“Pn'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn,” Holmes recited, over and over again. I knew what those ghastly sounding words meant: “In his house at R'lyeh, dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.” What I couldn't understand is why Holmes was reciting what sounded like a prayer, whilst, making strange movements with his hands which I knew by their complication I would never be able to replicate.

Something caught my eye in the corner of the room: a black fog was rising that blended into the shadows.

“Quick, Watson, into the fog. We must hide—the tiger killer is coming.”

Holmes pulled me into the strange black shadow in the corner of the room. It was a strange sensation like walking into mist but although I could see perfectly well out of the shadow I realised we were somehow completely invisible to anyone outside of it. It was one of Holmes' majick illusions and it was just in time because there were creakings upon the stairs.

I didn't need Holmes to tell me that it was Colonel Moran who entered the room. He was a tall, well-built man, and his military bearing, which I immediately recognised, made him even more imposing. He had a ruddy and scarred face with bristling whiskers. It was a cold hard face. He surveyed the room calmly with calculating eyes. He appeared satisfied that he was alone. He was carrying a small case which he carefully placed by the window which faced 221b Baker Street. He opened the case and began assembling an air rifle. Once the unusual firearm had been assembled to his satisfaction he placed it carefully on the floor by the window and walked over to the pile of discarded clothing. He separated the stinking rags into two piles and then he began chanting in R'lyehian.

Something strange and miraculous began to happen to one of the piles. The same stink we had experienced near the river permeated the room and then the clothes themselves rose from the floor and began filling out as if a body was taking shape within them, which indeed it was. There was no face under the robe's hood just the glittering scarlet eyes of a demon. It breathed out some sort of noxious yellow gas. The sulphurous stink increased. Now I understood what they meant by the 'brimstone of Hell' for surely this must be one of hell's creatures if such a place existed.

Moran seemed immune to the demon's stink. He led the demon to the window and pointed to Holmes' outline behind the curtains of 221b. He said something in R'lyehian that I did not understand. It must have been some sort of command. The demon pointed at the Holmes silhouette and knelt. Moran opened the window and then went down on one knee and placed the rifle on the demon's shoulder. He sighted and pulled the trigger. There was a hiss from the rifle and I watched in horror as the other Holmes fell.

Holmes waited until Moran had dismantled the rifle and placed it back in its case then stepped from out of the conjured shadow. "Hold it right there, Moran," Holmes said in his sternest voice. "The game is up." Moran stared in surprise and cursed us both.

I stood beside Holmes with my revolver aimed squarely at Moran's chest. "Raise your arms above your head very slowly," I said. I crossed the room to check if he was carrying any other weapons. I had made the mistake of ignoring the kneeling demon. It turned its fiery crimson eyes on me and suddenly grew in height, and as it grew, its partner rose from the other pile of clothes filling them out in the same way. Holmes struck out at this fresh demon with his sword cane. It pierced the cloth. Holmes whipped it backwards and forwards trying to withdraw it but it became more and more entangled in the wretched rags. The demon that stood next to Moran was now nearly eight feet tall. It came at me and I saw a huge gaping black hole where the creature's mouth should have been. Out of this 'mouth' a huge cloud of yellow noxious gas billowed towards me. The stink reached me first before the creature did and I was so nauseous it threatened to overwhelm me. I retched and my stomach emptied its contents on the floor. Moran shrieked with mad laughter. The gas stung my eyes and I fired wildly at the thing. The bullets went straight through it as though the clothes contained nothing but air.

I suddenly understood that these demons for all their stink were not corporeal. It was this brief enlightenment which gave me a temporary advantage. I made use of it by running at the demon. I

grabbed hold of the ragged black robe with a flying rugby tackle. It was as I'd half expected: the robe crumpled in my arms and I managed to shoulder barge Moran at the same time. He let out a groan, but I had only temporarily winded him and he managed to run to the door.

He probably thought he could make good his escape but he had not counted on the deadly swordsmanship of Holmes. Holmes spun on the spot and with his sword cane still wrapped in the demon's cloth he stabbed Moran straight through the shoulder. Moran screamed in surprise and agony. He ran down the stairs clutching his shoulder. To my amazement Holmes did not go in pursuit.

With their master gone whatever was left of the demons dissipated along with their stink. Holmes lit a cigarette as we waited for the police. Evidently, Holmes had informed Lestrade that he was to have his men hidden along Baker Street and behind Camden House. Even so, we later learned, the wounded Colonel Moran had still managed to evade capture by Lestrade's men. They had become confused when they saw the shape of Holmes fall and had stormed 221 Baker Street, much to Mrs Hudson's dismay. They had hurried to Camden House only after hearing the gunshots. But Holmes still retained the incriminating case with the modified air rifle inside. He gave Lestrade the colonel's case and told him how Moran had managed to commit the murder from his apartment. Lestrade immediately sent men to the address but as Holmes had supposed: Moran was long gone.

We were sitting in our usual comfy armchairs next to a blazing fire in the living room of 221b. We had just finished burning the remains of the wooden and wax mannequin that Holmes had made of himself and which Mrs Hudson had manipulated by strings—a cunning invention which Holmes had learned from a master puppeteer. We both had snifters of brandy in our hands and Holmes was puffing contentedly on his pipe. It was the night after our adventure, and I was making some notes for the upcoming story I planned to write.

“I trust you will leave out all mention of the demons and anything pertaining to the Old Ones,” Holmes said.

“I could suggest that we had been drugged and were hallucinating.”

“Unnecessary complications, Watson. Stick as much to the facts as possible, but without any supernatural elements.”

“I will, Holmes. I intend to call it ‘The Empty House’. What do you think?”

Holmes merely grunted, which I took to mean some sort of approval. It was always difficult to tell what Holmes really thought about anything.

“That is, of course, if it ever gets published. They have to catch Moran first. At the moment he is a murder suspect and until he is apprehended and found guilty of the murder I cannot publish anything.”

“I fear it will be some time then before you see it in print Watson. Moran is a wily old tiger and there is nothing more vicious and cunning than a wounded tiger. I doubt if he will be back in England for some time. But even now he will be plotting his revenge.”

“Are you not worried, Holmes? If he was your enemy before he must now have doubled his hatred.”

“Not over duly, Watson. It will take some time, as I said. I have my own spies to warn me and I also have my own connections with the Old Ones to help me. Still, the concern expressed by my brother was gratifying as was his unexpected thanks.”

With that he threw the telegram from Mycroft into the fire where it blazed briefly. Holmes let out a contented grunt.

“I don’t think Mycroft’s concern for the young Lord being classed as a suicide was entirely connected to politics... I sometimes wonder about my brother and his... feelings.”

Holmes stood up humming to himself and reached for his violin. I hastily downed my brandy and poured myself a stiff one. To my utter horror I realised that the wax ear stoppers were not in my waistcoat pocket. I frantically searched my other pockets as the screeching from that poor instrument began. Mrs Hudson’s broom banging on the ceiling echoed my sentiments. Holmes was oblivious to all except his dreaded ‘playing’. I swallowed the brandy in one gulp, there was nothing for it, if I were to remain sane I would have to get very, very drunk.

THE END

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GODAN: QUEEN OF THE THIRD COAST by Garret Scheulke

Part Five

Dia punched Silvia in the ear. The vampire's fangs shredded Godan's flesh as they were dislodged from his neck. Godan dropped to his knees as Silvia smashed into the wall. He then fell to the floor, shaking violently.

"I TOLD YOU TO STOP!" Dia screamed, kicking Silvia in the chest and stomach. "AND THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DON'T LIST—"

Silvia grabbed Dia by the foot and whipped her down the hall. "Filthy dog!" she yelled, getting up while holding her ear.

"Dia," Godan muttered as he saw Silvia walk down the halls towards her. Still shaking, he tried pushing himself up. As he did so, the bats bit down harder, causing his arms to give out. He fell hard onto his face. The bats that covered his face turned to mist. "What?"

"I think you're overlooking something here," Silvia said as she deflected the pieces of wood that Dia was throwing at her.

"Yeah?" Dia's hand scrambled around her, looking for any more pieces of wood that may have broken off the wall when Silvia threw her into it.

"Do you really believe that Lord Ruthven would overlook my death if it came from your hand?"

"He's not fucking you," Dia picked up a piece of plaster and whipped it at her, "so yeah, I'm pretty sure he would give me a pass if I told him what you were doing!"

Silvia caught the plaster. "Either you're lying to make yourself look tough, or you're a bigger moron that I thought."

Godan raised just his right arm and brought it down with all the force he could muster. The bats on the side that hit the floor turned into mist as well. Godan, feeling a surge of relief, raised his left arm and slammed it down.

Silvia grabbed Dia by her throat, raised her up, and smashed her against the wall. "You're just a pseudo werewolf that the master got out of his mother's dealings with your freak of a father!" She tightened her grip. "Let's say that you're right though—even if Lord Ruthven approved of your behaviour, do you honestly think my sisters wouldn't want payback for my death?!"

With his arms free entirely of bats, Godan began punching and tearing at the other bats that covered his body.

"They'd probably get better pay for their assignments if you were gone," Dia grunted.

“What a greedy mind you have,” Silvia held her other arm out behind her. Her sword dislodged itself from the wall and flew into her hand. “It’s what brought this fate upon you.”

“But I have him completely under my control!” Dia wheezed, kicking her legs frantically.

Silvia prepared to thrust the sword into Dia’s stomach. “I don’t believe you.”

A bat hit Silvia in the back of the head, stunning her. She let go of Dia, who rolled towards the staircase.

“WE’RE NOT DONE YET!” Godan yelled, ripping off the bats that remained on his chest.

“You can’t be serious,” Silvia muttered. “No being has ever escaped my bats!”

Godan ripped off the final bat. “You shouldn’t underestimate us wolves!” he said, crushing the bat, instantly turning it to mist.

Silvia regained her composure and got into her battle stance. “With how you’re wounded, you won’t last much longer.”

Godan grinned. He clenched his fists, took a deep breath, and growled as he tapped into his healing factor. The tears on his neck, as well as the wounds he sustained from the bats, began to close up. Silvia’s eyes widened

“What overconfidence you have!” Dia said, hands on her throat, breathing heavily as she mimicked what Silvia previously said to her.

Silvia glared at her. “Get him under control—NOW!”

“I thought you didn’t believe that I could do it?”

“Here’s your chance to prove me wrong, then.”

Dia shook her head. “I believe in my pawn.”

Godan yelled, and rushed at Silvia. His speed, she thought. He swiped at her with his claws. She turned into mist and appeared behind him.

“Behind you!” Dia yelled.

Godan spun around just as Silvia thrust her sword at him. The blade cut into his hip. He ignored the pain, and clotheslined the vampire. As she hit the floor, Godan dropped down, his elbow aiming for her face. She turned into mist again. Godan’s arm went through the floor.

Silvia materialized in front of Dia. She grabbed her by her robe and pulled her in close. “DO IT!” she yelled in Dia’s ear.

“FUCK YOU!”

Silvia looked Dia directly in her eyes. “My sisters and I are connected in every way,” she tapped her head, “including mentally. They’ll know the instant I die.”

“So? Gareth will take them out too!”

“LET HER GO!” Godan yelled, standing up.

Silvia put Dia in a headlock. She felt the vampire slightly shaking.

“Wow, you’re really are scared of him, aren’t you?” Dia said, laughing.

Silvia tightened her grip. “You stop him, and I won’t kill you. We’ll cover this all up—Lord Ruthven will never know.”

“You’re so full of shit!”

Godan began walking towards them.

“You’ve seen what I’ve done to him already. My sisters are just as powerful—maybe even more so—than I am. He’s NOT going to survive this—and neither will you!”

“I don’t believe you!” Dia said, mimicking Silvia again.

“Let me show you then,” Silvia said, biting down onto Dia’s neck.

Dia’s mind was instantly flooded with various scenarios—all of which involved her being ruthlessly beaten and killed by either Silvia’s sisters, or by Lord Ruthven himself. Silvia released her, bringing Dia back to reality.

“GET BACK!” Silvia yelled, pointing her sword at Godan. Dia, wide eyed, stood frozen. Silvia looked at her in disgust. “See what I mean?”

Dia, with the same shocked facial expression, nodded.

“Good, now make him stop.”

Dia took a deep breath. “Let me go first.” she mumbled.

“Don’t fuck with me, dog!”

“I can’t do it with you holding me like this.”

“DAMN YOU!” Silvia yelled. She pushed Dia to the side and prepared herself.

Godan charged at her. Silvia leapt towards him, bringing her sword down. Godan sidestepped the sword slash. He punched her in the face, grabbed hold of the sword, and threw it away. He then tackled her, sending them flying through the window.

Silvia unleashed her wings and took off. Godan held onto her waist.

“STOP HIM!” she yelled as Dia appeared at the window.

Godan hoisted himself up onto her shoulders. He grinned at her, and sunk his own fangs into her neck.

Silvia screamed, and flew around the sky erratically. She yanked at Godan’s hair, causing him to bite down harder, and well as sink his claws into her shoulders.

Dia closed her eyes and concentrated. She felt herself become connected with Godan’s spirit. Last time, I just held it tight, she thought. What if I tore at it?

Dia did so. Godan felt a searing pain shoot through his body. His head throbbed worse than ever before. Nausea washed over him.

He slightly released his grip on her neck and shoulders. The vampire saw the pain in Godan’s face. She picked him up from the chin and threw him to the ground, in front of the houses barn.

Godan rolled onto his knees. Before he could attempt to stand up, he held onto his stomach and vomited.

Dia opened an eye, and saw what was happening. “YOU SEE, I TOLD YOU I COULD CONTROL HIM!” she yelled.

Silvia landed, holding onto her neck. I’m so going to kill your ass after this, she thought, watching Godan continue to vomit.

I haven’t been this sick in forever, Godan thought as he closed his eyes and dug his fingers into the dirt. What’s happening to me?

Silvia looked towards the barn. Something within it caught her eye. She walked towards it, cursing both Godan and Dia.

Godan was able to activate his healing factor. He could feel it going through his body, though it did nothing to stop the pain.

Silvia took an axe from the wall. She gave it a swing, causing the puncture wounds on her shoulders and neck to sear with pain. “I’ll make you pay, you trash,” she muttered, walking back outside.

Godan saw her coming towards him. He tried to get up again. The nausea made him drive heave, causing him to fall back to the ground. He raked his claws through the ground again, trying to get his healing factor to fix him. He felt his fingers hit something.

“DIE!” Silvia yelled, bringing the axe down. Godan swung his hand up, which held a giant rock. The axe shattered the rock and bounced off, the shock sending pain through both of their arms. She swore again, dropping the axe

At that moment, Godan’s nausea completely disappeared. He felt the same energy that had flowed through his body after the drunk crashed into him the day before. Soon, he felt no pain whatsoever.

In fact, he felt even stronger than he did then.

As Silvia went to pick up the axe, Godan leapt, tackling her to the ground. They rolled around until Godan came out on top. He began to furiously punch her face.

“Shit!” Dia said. She went back to concentrating. She tore even harder on Godan’s spirit.

Godan felt another surge of energy go through him. He punched the vampire even harder and faster. Silvia tried to get him off of her—she slashed her own claws at him, beat her wings, and kicked her feet.

Godan would not stop.

“GARETH!” Dia yelled, panicking.

Godan stopped, and looked down at the vampire. Her face was mush. She was crying, coughing up teeth and blood.

“STOP, PLEASE!” Dia yelled again.

“Okay, I’m stopping!” Godan turned his head around to face her. “But why though?”

Silvia took the chance to grab Godan’s arm and bite into it. Godan screamed, and punched her in the back of the head as hard as he could. She released her bite, and fell to the ground, unconscious.

Angered, Godan stood up, grabbed her by one of her wings, and dragged her to the barn. Dia freaked, and tried tearing at his spirit again.

Godan felt another surge of energy. He stopped, closed his eyes, allowed it to go through him, and continued dragging Silvia towards the barn.

“Please stop,” Dia muttered as she began to cry.

At the entrance, Godan tossed Silvia inside. Looking around, all he saw were shovels, rakes, and other assorted tools. Next to the entrance was a sledgehammer.

Dia saw Godan pick up the sledgehammer, examine it, and put it over his shoulder. He disappeared into the barn. “No,” Dia said, weakly.

A loud crash came from the farm. Dia disconnected herself from Godan. She put both of her hands on the window frame, even as the broken glass cut into her skin. She began to shake.

Godan emerged from the barn. The sledgehammer, along with his legs, waist, and stomach, were covered in blood. He set the sledgehammer down on its head, casually leaned on it, and flashed Dia the V sign, grinning.

The next morning, in the shower, Dia stared directly into the stream. She did not hold her breath as the water came down on her face. Gareth put his hands into hers as he pressed up against her backside and kissed her neck. She growled as Gareth sucked her earlobe between his teeth.

“Babe?” Gareth asked, looking at her. Dia turned her head around and glared at him. “What’s up?”

Dia remained silent. She grabbed the back of his head and kissed him roughly. Gareth pressed against her, and guided himself in. They both moaned as Gareth returned the kiss with the same force.

“You’re not a college student anymore,” Dia said, tightening her robe, “just get over it.”

“It’s something different though,” Godan said as he finished drying himself off. “We’ve hit up every club and bar around town. Have you never been to a formal dance before?”

Dia stepped in front of her bedroom mirror and started brushing her hair. “Nope.”

Gareth hovered near her. “Then what else do we have to do? Wait around for another assassin?”

Dia glared at him. “I told you, that’s not the problem.”

“You sure? I mean, you’ve been on edge since the attack yesterday.”

Dia walked into the closet. Gareth followed her.

“Is it something I did?” Gareth asked, standing in the doorway.

“Don’t come into my closet,” Dia said, examining the clothes around her while continuing to brush her hair.

Gareth stepped inside. One side had clothes meant for Dia, and the other he imagined were for ‘Lord Ruthven’.

“Oh, I know!” Gareth snapped his fingers. “You don’t have a formal dress! I’d be down for shopping with you for one—I’ll be the boyfriend who awkwardly stands there as his girlfriend piles clothes into his arms.”

Dia whipped her head around. “I’M NOT YOUR GIRLFRIEND!”

Gareth put his hands up. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding.”

“GET OUT!” Dia screamed, coming at him with the brush raised, ready to strike.

Gareth mouthed ‘Shit’, stepped back outside, and slammed the door. Dia shook her head and tried opening the door. It would not budge.

“HEY!” Dia yelled, banging on the door. “LET ME OUT, ASSHOLE!”

“Not if you’re gonna hit me with that comb!”

“Comb? It’s a brush, you dumb motherfucker!” She put the brush in her robe pocket and slammed against the door. “Let me out!”

Gareth stood firm with his back against the door. “What’s your problem?! Come on, talk to me!”

“FUCK OFF!”

“I was just joking about us being boyfriend girlfriend.” Gareth turned around and leaned against the door. “I’m perfectly fine with us just fucking.”

Dia slumped against the door. “That’s not it.”

“Is it me?”

Dia remembered how she was unable to manipulate Gareth’s spirit to stop him from killing Silvia. She suppressed her anger. “No, it’s not you.”

Gareth relaxed. “And it’s seriously not about the assassin?”

Dia rolled her eyes. “It is.”

“Well, I took care of her though.”

“Yeah, barely!”

Gareth groaned. “Very true. You don’t think I can protect you?”

“Kinda.”

Gareth stood up. “I really don’t know what to say then.”

Dia slowly dropped down to the floor. “I did tell you to shut up a couple of times.”

Gareth grinded his teeth. “Dia, please believe me on this: I WON’T let anyone hurt you—not any assassin, this Ruthven guy, nobody. Yeah, I get my ass kicked a lot—I’m not invulnerable.” Gareth looked down at himself and wished at that moment that he would have put on a robe. “But I know how to handle these situations. I’ve faced pretty much every type of freak you can think of.” Gareth tried adopting a more optimistic tone. “And remember this healing factor I have? It hasn’t let me down yet!”

Dia felt a slight sense of relief. When she closed her eyes though, the images that Silvia showed her head went through her mind. She grew anxious and, more so, angry.

Dammit, Gareth thought. “I take it by your silence that I didn’t convince you?”

Dia opened her eyes. “Yes, you did.” Dia sighed. “Let’s go to the dance then.”

“AWESOME!” Gareth said, whipping the door open, a huge smile on his face. He looked around, and then looked down at where Dia was sitting. “So, do you have any formal wear?”

Dia shook her head. “Nope.”

“Okay, let’s go get some.” Gareth scanned Ruthven’s side. “Any suits around here?”

Dia shook her head again. “Nope.”

Gareth bent down beside her. “Got any places in mind that we should shop at?”

Dia rolled her eyes. “Nope. Where do you want to go?”

Gareth grinned. “Have you ever thrifted a dress before?”

“I haven’t worn a suit a years,” Gareth said, showing off his grey suit. “I almost forgot how to tie these things.”

Oliver grabbed Gareth’s tie and yanked on it. “You didn’t have any clip-ons?”

“That’s what I asked her,” Gareth said, nodding towards Dia.

Dia slapped him in the back of the head. “You should have just let me tie it for you,” she said, turning Gareth towards her. She tied the knot properly.

“I really like you’re dress, Dia,” Veronica said, looking over Dia’s ocean blue dress. “Where did you get it from?”

Before Dia could respond, Gareth butted in. “We found these clothes at Goodwill. Pretty sweet, huh?”

“That’s not something we should really be bragging about,” Dia sneered.

Gareth, Oliver, and Veronica all laughed. Dia crossed her arms and glared.

“You look great, babe,” Gareth said. “Seriously.”

Dia turned around and walked away. Gareth shouted ‘LOVE YOU!’ at her. She did not respond.

“It just got pretty chilly in here,” Veronica said.

“She’ll lighten up,” Gareth said, “hopefully”.

Dia went into the bathroom. She turned on a faucet and splashed water on her face. She let the water drip down onto her neck and dress as she looked at herself in the mirror. Her anger rose.

“Asshole!” Dia muttered. She smashed her palm against the mirror, cracking it. She pulled her hands away, and watched the cuts began to bleed.

“So really, what’s eating Dia?” Oliver asked.

“Me,” Gareth said, taking a sip of his drink.

Oliver shook his head, smiling. “I mean, what’s wrong with her.”

“I think she’s still pissed that I locked her in the closet until she agreed to come to this.”

“You probably could have negotiated that better,” Veronica said.

Dia stepped out of the bathroom, her hand wrapped in toilet paper. She saw Gareth, Oliver, and Veronica laughing and conversing. Why can’t I control you, she thought.

“Let’s hit the dance floor,” Veronica said.

“Dia isn’t back yet though,” Gareth replied.

“Give her a sec,” Veronica said, tugging at Gareth’s sleeve. “Join us.”

Dia put her hands together, and closed her eyes. She felt herself connect with Gareth’s spirit.

“Damn, are you guys sure nobody spiked this?” Gareth asked, nodding at his drink as a feeling of euphoria shot through him.

“What is this, a frat party?” Oliver asked.

Dia saw that tearing at Gareth’s spirit did no good. She tried squeezing it this time—she tried crushing it.

“Well, I feel all warm inside!” Gareth said, downing the rest of the drink.

Oliver and Veronica looked at each other. Veronica sniffed her drink, shrugged her shoulders, and continued dancing.

Dia opened her eyes, and saw Gareth dancing and laughing. She cursed, and stomped her foot.

“Not having a good time?” a voice behind her said.

Dia whipped her head around. Leaning against the wall was one of the other vampire assassins, decked out in the same clothing as Silvia, but who was much younger, and had bright red hair. She swirled the punch that was in her hand.

“Josie,” Dia gasped, eyes widening.

“Good to see you again boss,” Josie took a sip of her drink. “Seen my sister lately?”

“IT WAS HIM!” Dia pointed towards Gareth. “I TRIED TO—”

Josie held up her hands. “Chill your tits, wolf lady. We know what happened—we came to avenge her.”

Dia calmed down. “You’re not going to kill me?”

“Later, maybe.” Josie pointed past her. “Incoming.”

“What?”

She took another sip of her drink as she turned into mist.

“Hey babe, how’s it ‘shakin’?” Gareth asked, putting his arm around her shoulders. He then noticed that Dia was violently shaking. “Wow, I didn’t mean it literally. Are you cold?”

Dia glared at him. Gareth rubbed her shoulder and gave her a hearty smile.

“Care for a drink?” he asked, offering her his cup.

Dia swatted the cup out of his hand. Gareth looked down at his now splattered pants. “Good things we thrifted these clothes, huh?”

Dia stormed past him. Gareth grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into him.

“Hey, I’m sorry for bringing you here,” he said into her ear. “I’m cool with leaving if you want to.”

Dia raked her claws over Gareth’s arms. Gareth flinched. Dia broke away and headed up the stairs.

“Goddamn,” Gareth said, looking at his ripped sleeve. He went up the stairs. He got in front of Dia just as she was about to go out the door.

“Before you get any madder than you already are, I just want you to know that this past week have been absolutely great.” The memory of Haruki briefly went through his mind. “I’ve never felt this way for a person in a long ass time.”

Dia folded her arms and glared at Gareth as he continued to babble. Josie materialized behind him, drink still in hand. She mouthed ‘Let’s go’, and pointed to the brick on the ground that was holding the door open.

Dia nodded, knowing what she wanted her to do.

“So I guess tonight might be the perfect time to tell you this.” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He felt his legs shaking. “I was hoping that after Ruthven comes back, and after I take him out, we can continue being together.”

Dia snuck past him, bent down, and picked up the brick. Josie grinned.

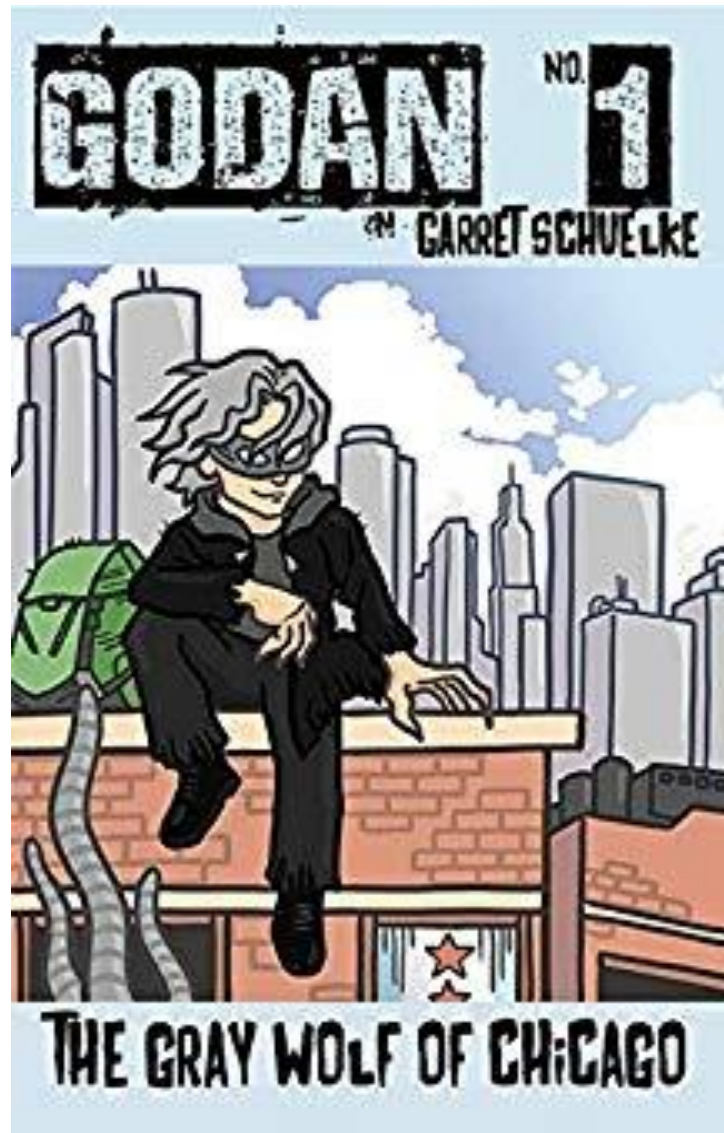
“I love you, Dia.”

Gareth waited for a response. He opened his eyes, and saw that she was gone. “Babe?”

Dia smashed Gareth in the back of the head. Gareth fell to the floor, knocked out cold. Two college girls who were about to head into the building screamed.

“TIME TO GO!” Josie said, finishing her drink. She tossed the cup behind her and took a hold of Dia. They both turned into mist and disappeared.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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IXTHUL by Bruce Davies

My name...My name is unimportant. What is of deadly import is that you listen to my story and, heed my warning. Man is not alone on this cosmic speck of dust that we have named, Earth. We have NEVER been alone. There are things in this world that are not of this world. They are older than man's earliest ancestors and more vile and malign than the darkest dreams of humanity. They are the fear that exists in the soul of every human and, why we watch the shadows, pregnant with dread. Fear them O' man. For thy days upon this world are few and death holds no salvation from the madness of the Elder Gods!

My tale begins in the youngest hours of a cool, August morning in 1954. Unpredicted and undetected, a swell of water, fifty feet in height, engulfed the ocean facing side of Kingsport MA. The swell swept over the city docks and fishing fleet in mere seconds and flowed through the streets and alleys, tearing down buildings and murdering thousands of people in their sleep. It then, receded back into the depths of the mighty Atlantic, pulling with it, much of the evidence of its passing, into the unknown abyss of the coastal shelf.

What remained after the wave's passing was, devastation and death on a scale hereto unheard of. Also left in the wake were; questions, mysteries and, madness. Among the survivors, was a small portion who lost not only their worldly possessions but, their minds as well. Within this group arose a shared delusion, whose narrative was the stuff of perdition's nightmares. In one form or another, all these prophets of doom spoke of some great and terrible shadow that walked the brick and stone streets, the swell's waters lapping at its feet, like some obedient hound. The shadow tore through buildings, searching for something, or so these madmen have claimed. Whether this was in actuality, what occurred or simply the delusions of minds unhinged by the incomprehensible destruction thrust upon them, was unknown THEN.

I was a young police detective, in my position for merely a year, when the devastation occurred. I was assigned to the outskirts of the city, helping to direct the survivors to the shelters further inland. Police and Firefighters were on 16 hour shifts for nearly two weeks. Keeping the peace and safety of the damaged areas was a Herculean effort that stretched our minds and bodies to the breaking point. I was just one of the hundreds of hands, helping to care for survivors and clean up our city. I was assigned to assist with the evacuation and ended up directing traffic. The most unusual thing that occurred while I was at my post was the ambulance that sped through the road blocks, headed for the asylum on the northern edge of the city. The place, named the Lovecraft Institute, was normally used for the criminally insane and those who couldn't be placed in prison proper. The asylum had seen its fair share of new patients, arising from the crisis but, this one seemed different.

I was notified by messenger, that an ambulance would be passing my post and that I was to accompany it to the asylum. An odd order, to be sure but, I followed my instructions to the letter. When we arrived, a stretcher was pulled from the vehicle, strapped to the stretcher was a woman, completely unclothed. I averted my eyes as they carried her inside but, I did notice that she was carrying a rather large and aged looking tome. I asked the ambulance driver about the strange sight, when he returned to his vehicle. The story I got was most unusual.

Apparently, the woman was found by a rescue team, near the shore, sitting on a boulder, holding her book, stark naked. I was informed that the woman was docile and allowed herself to be moved from the boulder with little incident until, one of the rescuers attempted to get her to relinquish her book. The woman became a wildcat, ripping and tearing her rescuers with steel like claws. Once efforts to force the woman to give up the book ceased, the woman became catatonic again and allowed herself to be strapped to the stretcher and taken to the asylum. I was intrigued by the driver's story but, when I attempted to get any more information, the driver paled and hastened to return to his vehicle, for a quick getaway.

Days later, when most of the people had been evacuated from the city and, the assessors came in to gauge the damage and expense of rebuilding, a notice came across my desk. My sergeant had ordered me to go to the asylum and follow up on a report of missing orderlies. Since I was curious as to the condition of the strange woman I had escorted to the asylum as well, this seemed a good excuse to do so.

As I finished up my daily reports, a light autumn rain began. It bothered me little, save for causing a sense of ennui. Once I walked outside, to get into my vehicle, a cold wind kicked up, causing the light rain to become an icy squall. Even without much traffic, the damaged and flooded roads, along with the blustery squall, turned a normal twenty minute drive into a harrowing, hour long journey. When I finally reached the asylum, my nerves were on edge. Pulling into the grounds, the stark contrast between the Lovecraft Institute and any other hospital became apparent in the dim, evening light. Bars, which had been hidden by the daylight, could now be seen against the backdrop of the few lit rooms. The building, which had seemed serene, almost calming, in the daylight, was now intimidating and foreboding.

The last time I had been there, I had not seen the interior. Walking through the front door, I was glad I had not for, I probably would have attempted to pawn the assignment off on someone else. The admitting hall was devoid of life, save for a solitary, sombre, sentinel behind a sterilized and stark counter. The walls were the colour of bleached bone, as if no amount of cleaner could fully remove the blood that had soaked into them. The atmosphere crawled beneath my skin, driving my every instinct to flee and never look back.

As I approached the admitting counter, the ancient figure, barely looked up from the newspaper, to acknowledge my presence.

"Patient or Visitor?" she croaked, without meeting my gaze.

"Police. I'm here..." My sentence lay uncompleted as the crone pushed a large, shabby, office journal at me.

"Sign in please, then go through the door to your right. The security monitor will speak with you. Thank you and have a nice day." She smiled at me, a truly disturbing sight as her dentures slipped down and her left eye wandered towards me while the other continued to read.

The journal erupted in a dusk cloud as it skidded to a halt against my chest, causing me to cough and wheeze. Upon opening it, I noticed that only one name was written down for the last several

months and, it seemed this person had frequently visited the place. I put my moniker down on the faded and worn pages then, slid the book back to the woman before making my way to the security door.

The door, like everything else in that wretched place was a stained, off white colour and looked as if it was older than Methuselah. The dead bolt lock however, seemed clean and well cared for, devoid of rust or corrosion. A buzzer sounded and the bolt released with a sharp “click”. The room beyond the door was gloomy. I could see a desk, a chair and, a massive figure standing behind them. I didn’t want to appear intimidated so I put on my best aura of indifference and strode into the room.

I had taken no more than three steps when the room was suddenly flooded with brilliant light. I shielded my eyes and heard a deep, bass voice speak.

“Well, at least this time they sent a detective,” the figure said, turning to face me.

The man was six foot, almost seven. His shoulders were easily twice mine, a gigantic example of humanity. He practically radiated authority. The dark colour of his skin gave me a bit of a shock but, I didn’t hesitate to shake the offered hand. I felt like a child before this behemoth of a man. His grip was like iron and, I feared he might crush my hand as we greeted each other.

“I’m Blake, head of the security staff and, I know why you’re here officer.” I didn’t miss the fact that he called me “officer” and not detective, a simple tactic to intimidate and remind me that this was his territory, I was only here on request.

“It’s Detective, as you’re already indicated upon my entry.” The twitch in his face told me that he was shocked by my response. His quick recovery told me that he had good control.

“I can only guess that the department has only sent officers so, you’re probably a little ticked off, it’s understandable. I assure you that I’m here to investigate your problem without bias or reservation.” I stared him in the eye, making sure to speak clearly and concisely, to show him that I did indeed mean what I said.

His face did seem to unclench as he gestured for me to be seated on the other side of the desk.

“I stand corrected, Detective. Yes, three officers were here about a week ago. A most unpleasant lot. They seemed to think that my men had wandered off, drunk and gotten themselves “eaten” by one of our patients.” The look on his face clearly communicated his disgust and dissatisfaction with the officer’s conduct. The officers would have to be dealt with at a later date. Right at that point, of primary import was to discover the whereabouts of the missing men.

First, I had to determine the men’s normal duties and where it took them. Mr. Blake was very helpful and very organized. He showed me a map of the facility and where each man was set to patrol. I thanked him and proceeded to follow each man’s nightly path.

The wards were not as quiet as the admitting hall but, I did expect a bit more noise. I had never

been inside an asylum before and wasn't sure what to expect, aside from some old horror movies. The place was immaculate but, past the scent of disinfectant, there was an underlying odour that made my skin crawl. I couldn't tell what it was but, it hung in the air like a veil.

The men's patrols lead me nowhere and, after three hours of walking them, I was no closer to solving the case than when I arrived. I went back to the security office and studied the floor layout again. That is when I noticed that while the men didn't walk any of the same halls, there were three areas that they could have seen and met up with each other. I immediately questioned Mr. Blake about the connecting areas.

"Sure, they could have met here or, here," he said, pointing out two of the adjoining area. He then pointed to the third area.

"Not here though. That area is the connection between the newer areas of the building and the oldest wards. The wave cause a small quake that undermined that area, making it unstable. The chief of staff has petitioned the board of governors for money to fix it but they say, it's not in the budget. Because of the instability of the area, I keep both ends of the joining hallway, locked. The area is too dangerous for anyone to use."

"Did you search that area?" I asked

"I poked my head in there but again, the floor could collapse so, I didn't go far. May I remind you, the hallway is always locked and I have the only key?" This was definitely a sore spot and I needed this man's help so, I didn't want to antagonize him.

"I understand but, I wouldn't be doing my due diligence if I didn't at least look in there. I'd like to, if it's alright with you." Blake was about to shut me down when a look came over his face, as if a light bulb flashed over his head.

"What is it? You remember something?" I asked, hopefully

"Yea. About a week ago, there was a patient transfer. I remember that there was a police escort but, not why we needed one. The patient gave us some trouble but, we managed to get them secured in the ward." He looked at me for a second, seemingly confused.

"You. You were the escort." His face took on a thousand yard stare, as if he was trying to recall some faded memory

"Yea, I was the escort. I got the ambulance through the traffic but, I didn't see what happened after we got here." I could tell that Blake was trying hard to remember but, it seemed if part of him didn't WANT to recall those events.

Suddenly, Blake froze. The colour drained from his face and he began trembling. His eyes widened and without warning, he threw himself beneath his desk and remained there, shaking like a leaf in the wind. He mumbled to himself in a curious and odd manner.

“She Speaks! She Speaks!” Crouching down, I tried to comfort Blake. He turned to me, his eyes wide with a terror that only he could see.

“The voice of Ixthul! It hurts!” He started clawing at his ears, ripping away chunks of flesh. I tried to restrain him but, his physical strength was being augmented by the terror he was experiencing. I never stood a chance. I threw open the security door and shouted for help but, there wasn’t a soul in sight. The halls were empty. By the time I got back to Blake, he was dead. His face and head were a gruesome mess of torn flesh and blood. He’d even managed to tear out his own eyes. It took every ounce of will I had, not to throw up my guts at the sight. I had to leave the room though. Stumbling, I reached the admitting counter and searched it for a phone. This horror had to be reported to my superiors.

After a few minutes, I managed to locate the phone. The receiver looked like it had been broken off in someone’s ass. The top portion of the receiver was missing and the stub was covered in blood and shit.

I didn’t know what was happening but, I knew that I had to get out of there, right away. I rushed to the exit but, just as I took hold of the door, I heard it. Barely a whisper but, clear enough to make out as a voice. The words were nonsensical, no language I’d ever heard before. I tried to focus my hearing on the words but, something dripped off my chin. I reached up to wipe it on my hand and found it covered in blood. My ears were bleeding! Out of instinct, I grabbed the handkerchief in my coat, ripped it in half and stuffed into my ears until the voice could no longer penetrate.

In the silence, my fear and confusion abated. I could think clearly again. Looking around, I saw patients and staff, lying on the ground, their faces frozen in masks of terror. Hopping, I ran back to the security room but, my hopes were dashed as I looked down at the mangled form of Blake.

“So, at least part of it had been real,” I thought to myself

Realizing that something beyond my comprehension was happening, I drew my service revolver and pulled Blake’s keys from his belt. The source of the problem had to be in that damaged section, the one place that Blake had not thoroughly searched. Creeping through the asylum halls, my revolver ready for any surprises, the scene sent a shiver down my spine. How? How had I not seen all those people? There were dozens of patients and staff, lying on the floor throughout the building. They seemed alive but, held frozen in the grip of some abstract horror that only they could see.

Drawing up all the courage I could muster, I continued down to the suspect hall. Upon reaching it, I nearly threw up again. The stink of death and rot filled the air like a miasma. The walls were so covered with gore that, they appeared to be made of rotting flesh. Near the middle of the hall was an open doorway that pulsed and writhed, undulating in disturbing and unnatural ways. I reached for the door handle but, some force stayed my hand. It was not fear, though I was afraid. No, this was something more primal. A dread of the unknown, reached out through the eons, from my earliest ancestors. Monkey men, huddled in caves, unable to venture forth because they KNEW that something worse than death awaited them. My mind reeled that this ancient and

primeval emotion could halt such a modern man. I shook my head with all the force I could, trying to rid myself of this sense of primal terror. Slowly, my hand made progress until at last, I gripped the metal door handle. Adrenaline rushed through me and I forced myself to pull open the door and advance forward.

I do not know what I would have done if I'd found the door locked. I feel sure that my strength would have failed me and I would have fled that building as fast as my legs could've carried me.

Each step towards the doorway was an act of sheer will. Each second, instincts screaming at me to turn and run. When I reached the doorway and pushed myself to look in, I instantly regretted it. In the furthest corner of the room, was a lone hospital bed. Sitting up in the bed was, what I had to assume was the woman I had escorted to the asylum. The only way I could recognize her was by the book that lay open, upon her lap.

Her body was desiccated and unnaturally thin. Her hair was splayed out behind her, plastered to the wall, holding her head immobile. On her arms were dozens of tiny wounds, like miniscule bite marks. I couldn't fathom what might have made the marks until I watched the quill pen, she held in her right hand, elongate and pierce the flesh of her arm. As I stood there watching, the quill's shaft turned crimson and it shrank back to its original form, the unseemly guise of an antique writing utensil. The woman put quill to paper and began scribing. As her hand moved, I noticed that her mouth also moved, in a similar rhythm. I realized, as I watched her, that she was reciting the text as she wrote it. It had been her voice that I had heard, her voice that drove the entirety of this place into the depths of madness!

I decided to end her suffering and moved to enter the room. The woman's eyes went wide with fear and she looked up, towards the ceiling. Something about the gesture made me look up as well. In the shadows, above the bed, something moved. I focused my eyes on the area, straining my vision to overcome the concealing shadows. The thing in the shadows returned my gaze and then threw itself at me. I saw a vaguely human torso and what might have been cephalopoid tentacles, before my instincts and training took over and I emptied my revolver into the form. The thing exploded in slime and putrescence, the likes of which I had never known. I was covered, head to toe in the grisly goop and finally, my beleaguered constitution could hold out no longer. What little food that remained in my guts was violently wretched onto the linoleum.

After several dry heaves later, my stomach stopped trying to evacuate itself and I was able to stand erect. The woman still scribed in the ancient volume as I approached her. I could see that some compulsion forced her to recite the worlds as her hand laid them upon the weathered pages. As I reached for the quill, to pull it from her hand, the thing elongated and snapped at me. Out of ideas, I slapped her hand, forcing it to release the vile pen. I cringed at the sound of her bones cracking, from the impact. The quill fell to the floor and slithered around like some unearthly, blind worm, in search of escape. Quickly, I stamped my foot down on the disgusting thing and was rewarded with a satisfying crunch and a cessation of movement.

Looking back to the woman, I could see tears flowing and a gentle smile, despite the agony she must have been in. Her jaw hung open, due to it either being broken or from her exhaustion. With what must have been a Herculean effort, the woman laid her undamaged hand upon mine.

At that moment, images flashed through my mind and I heard the voice again. This time however, the voice had no unearthly quality and was merely the vessel of the woman's story.

She had been Alexandra Forsythe, a research assist in the Kingsport municipal museum. Cataloguing exhibits when they arrived. She was happy in her position and her life. Several days before the tidal wave hit the city, an exhibit crate was delivered to the museum. The exhibit was called, "The Treasures of Ixthul". In the crate were pots, some ceremonial garb, a few odd bits of clay tablets and, an ancient, shabby, leather bound book.

Having never heard of a person or place named "Ixthul" before, Alexandra decided to do some searching in the museum's extensive library. She found only one reference to the name "Ixthul". Ancient Sumerian lore only mentioned the name in passing as, one of the "Elder Gods", representing a mythology far older than the Sumerians, perhaps older than mankind itself. Her curiosity enflamed, she returned to the storage room and the exhibit crate. She opened the book, hoping to find some clue to the origin of the exhibit. As her hands pulled open the volume, an unearthly dread fell over her and try as she might, she was unable to shut the abominable tome. The crimson text pierced her eyes and mind, embedding itself in her memory, never to be forgotten. Pressure built up behind her eyes until, it was too much to bear and consciousness fled from her and everything faded to black.

Her eyes opened to familiar sights. The plaster ceiling, the brass and glass light overhead told her that, she was in her apartment. The safety of her apartment and twin bed, calmed her nerves but, only momentarily. The second she found herself unable to move, panic overcame everything else. Shouts for help and screams of terror, died unspoken in her powerless throat and unmoving lips.

For unknown hours, she lay on the bed, unable to even prevent her bladder from emptying itself. As the daylight faded and the shadows filled the room, at the edge of her vision, something moved. Sickly wet and slimy ropes of flesh, slithered down her arms until they reached her hands. She felt the flesh ropes unbraid and become as worms upon the backs of her hands. Pain, unlike anything she had ever felt before, filled her senses as the tiny worms burrowed beneath the skin of each hand. The slimy things drove themselves deeply into the flesh and wrapped around the bone and muscle.

As she watched, her body was forced to sit up when the flesh ropes pulled her hands forward. Pillows and cushions were piled up behind her until her sitting position need no longer be forced. She cringed and gagged as she felt more of the flesh ropes force their way into the skin and muscle of her face and throat, opening and closing her mouth. Words and utterances that shouldn't be possible for a human to vocalize, were pulled from her throat, causing a new wave of searing pain.

At the foot of her bed, what appeared to be a feathered quill, slithered up her leg and nestled itself into her open hand. Her hand closed over the obscene thing, clutching it as if to write. The head of the quill elongated and drove itself into the flesh of her opposite arm. Like some disgusting leech, the quill began to fill, the shaft turning a bright crimson as it drew the vital essence from her. More of the flesh ropes slithered into her peripheral vision, carrying something

large. As the object came into view, she recognized the unholy volume that had bound her to the nightmare she was living. The flesh ropes laid the accursed tome upon her lap. The ancient, leather bound tome drew her eyes to it as her hand was forced to open the wrinkled cover. Again, the characters burned themselves into her memory with searing pain and unearthly visions.

The pages flickered and flew, as if turned by some unseen force until an empty page appeared. The hand held the quill, slowly guided itself over the blank page and began scribing. Unable to command her body, words began streaming from her throat. No earthly language were these utterances though. The sounds sat upon the air like a wound in the fabric of reality and imposed their meaning upon it.

Time uncounted passed until, the horizon began to lighten with the oncoming dawn. There became a hurriedness in the scribing which became increased as the sun's rays began to pierce the windows of her apartment. Her voice cracked and she felt the ropes beneath her skin recede and retract from her flesh. Exhausted, she fell into a deep and dreamless sleep. She welcomed the oblivion and prayed that it might never end.

She was roused by the snake like touch of the flesh ropes. Her eyes shot open and found that evening had once again fallen and, her tormentors had returned. She was invaded and controlled once more. The visions again filled her mind and she saw the reason for her torment. A human hand must complete the book, to give it a provenance in this world. Human blood was needed to bring forth the power of the words and summon Ixthul, Broodmother and queen of all that lies unseen beneath the depths of the sea. The stars would be right soon and Ixthul would return.

Throughout the long night, Alexandra fought the visions and terrible pain that came with them. When sunrise came, she knew that her only salvation was escape and somehow destroying the accursed book. When the flesh ropes retreated, she felt their control weaken to nothing. She fought the urge to escape into the sweet oblivion of sleep. Though her body was withered and her strength deprived, she forced herself from the bed, gathering the book and, stumbled her way out, into the city. Determined to hide herself from her tormentors, she went to the loft of a friend. The friend, an artist and photographer. Believing the light to be her protector, she placed herself in a ring of the photographer's brightest illuminators.

Indeed, it worked. For three days, she had no visitations but, on the morning of the fourth day, the shadowy minions became impatient and sent forth, a monstrous servitor of Ixthul, to find the book and her. The tidal wave washed the streets and alleys of Kingsport with death and destruction as the servitor rent building after building, searching for the book and Alexandra. Alexandra was not found however. She had sequestered herself in the developing room, with one oil lamp, to hold the seeking shadows at bay.

When dawn broke across the sky, Alexandra left her sanctum and ventured to the shore. Her eyes were blind to the devastation in her path, her mind set only on her goal. She built a pyre for the dreaded volume and lit it ablaze, intent on bidding the damnable thing farewell. The flames however, could not alight the weathered pages nor the leather binding. Her dreams of freedom crushed, she planned to leap into the fire herself and end her miserable existence. Even that however, was denied her. Some force, whether it was a remnant of her tormentor's control or,

her own animalistic instinct for survival, prohibited her self-immolation. She sat down on a boulder and let herself drift into mental stagnation, neither sensing nor desiring interaction with the world, waiting for the shadows to return her to hell.

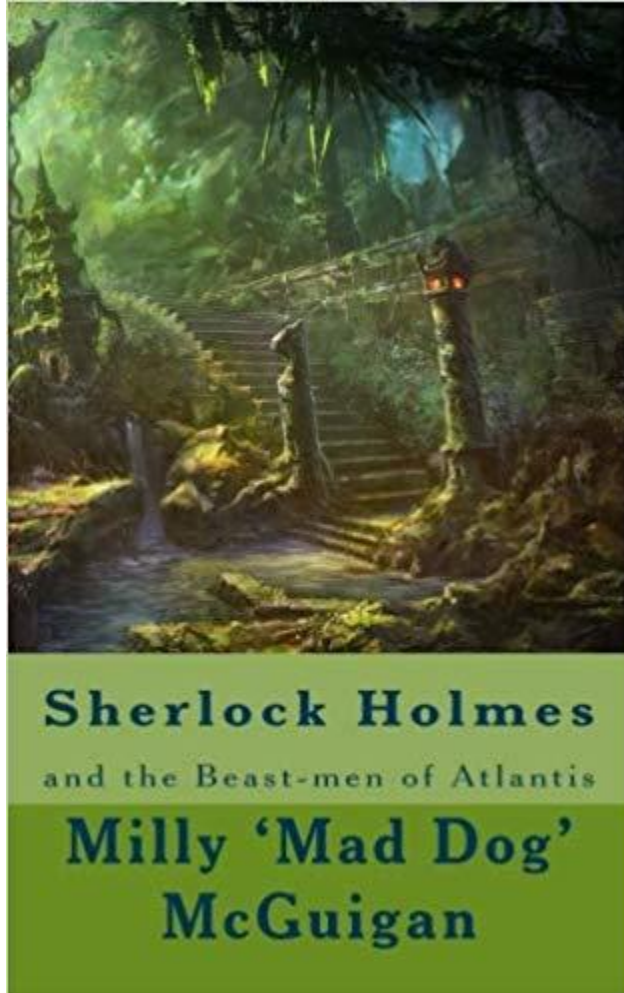
The rescue team found her thusly and took her to the asylum. She was placed in a secure room and left. In the darkness of the room, the shadows returned and her nightmare began again. This time however, the patients and staff of the asylum were drawn into influence of Ixthul as well. They went upon their nightly rituals with no memory of Alexandra or her incarceration. All would have gone smoothly if two of the orderlies had not stumbled onto her room. The thing which held her under its sway, took many hours to dissect the two intruders and rummage through their minds. In the end, their remains were spread around the room and only the vaguest memories of their existence remained within the asylum walls. I began to feel that, if I had not been assigned this case, her presence might never have been discovered.

The images in my mind faded and she looked up at me. I could tell that her strength was fading quickly. From nowhere, I heard her voice once more.

“There are things in this world that are not of this world. They are older than man’s earliest ancestors and more vile and malign than the darkest dreams of humanity. They are the fear that exists in the soul of every human and, why we watch the shadows, pregnant with dread. Fear them O’ man. For thy days upon this world are few and death holds no salvation from the madness of the Elder Gods!”

With the last of her strength, she placed my hand upon the book. My mind was assaulted by images and visions of things I have not words to describe. I believe this was her way of telling me, what would happen if the book returned to its creator or her minions. I took the book from her room and left. Believing that if I removed myself from the bailiwick of the book’s creator, I would be safe, I moved to the middle of a centrist state (where, I shall not reveal), away from any large body of water. I now, guard the book and, shall continue to guard it all my days.

THE END



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The night was growing cold, but the fire—meagre as it was—did its task in keeping the October chill at bay. It was only when a breeze came wafting out from the nearby harbour and through the bared trees of Winter Island that Cuthbert Blake and Thomas Clay felt perturbed enough to scoot their log seats closer to the kindling, hunching their shoulders at the rush of air and shifting their rifles from one shoulder to the other. The seaside gust brought the thick smell of brine and fish into the fort; while the wooden walls of the fortification had long since been permeated and filled with the reek, the men stationed there hardly ever noticed, their nostrils having grown quite accustomed—save for when those harsh breezes came in.

“Guh!” Blake groaned, pulling a hand from the fire and holding its back to his nose. “When God made the sea, he made it wondrous, indeed; but could he not have thought a better smell for it?”

Clay, the younger of the two (with hardly a hair sprouting from his thin chin) and by far the firmer in their faith, turned his eyes from the flames and focused them upon the other private. He held a cautious finger out to his compatriot, as a vicar would before a child approaching the brink of blasphemy. His words held all the certainty of the ancient wise—or just the very young. “The Lord made it as he saw fit, Blake, and your scoundrel’s nose is no apt judge of His makings.”

Blake gave a good laugh at this. “A funny thing; my wife said the same to me of her cooking!” The man gave his knee a proud smack as he chuckled on, and in spite of himself, Clay joined in.

It felt good to have some degree of merriment, if only it were this little joke. While their duty as guards was not in itself a very laborious task, as soldiers, Clay had often prescribed to the stalwart and alert disposition his training had fought to enforce in him and his compatriots. He took to it easily, something he’d likened and attributed to his steadfastness in faith; it was easier, he thought, to be a soldier for country when one was already a soldier for God. And this was indeed what he’d come to fancy himself as, a warrior bearing the teachings of his Lord, side by side with an army of the righteous Puritans, who may yet provide conquest over those faiths that did not tread the one true path.

As though to remind him of the need for constancy, their superior, Captain Joseph Harding, came round the corner in that moment, instantly silencing Clay and Blake as they stood at attention.

“At ease, men,” Harding said with a wave of his gloved hand. “Though be not too eased.”

Taking the captain’s words as a critique, Blake spoke up to save face and give excuse, though in a dutiful tone. “All is well about the fort tonight, Captain. Neither a sight nor sound out of place.”

“Very good,” the captain nodded. Though there was a certain sternness to his face that was not usually there. And the way his sight was drawn to the wall of the fortification was somehow odd; his eyes lingered there, as though he were not looking to the wall itself, but to something beyond

it that only he could see, out in the night about them. As young Clay looked upon him, studying him, he realized it was not, in fact, sternness, but some level of worry on his commander's bearded features. Harding, it seemed, was apprehensive about something.

"Is there something the matter, sir?"

The captain kept his eye upon the wall a moment longer. Then he turned back around, eyes downcast. "No, young Clay. Nothing I can rightly put words to, at the least."

"I'm sorry, sir?" Clay inquired. It was very unlike the captain to be so distracted, and by seemingly nothing.

Harding shook his head. "Just a feeling, lad. A notion that will not leave my head. All I ask is that you keep a keen eye on matters this night."

"For what, sir?" Blake put in. He, too, was curious as to what the captain was on about.

Harding gave a sigh, another shake of his head, and shrugged. "I've worries that may be quite unfounded, but I believe you should be wary of the forests tonight."

Clay clutched his rifle more tightly. "What is it, sir? Do you fear that there may be savages about tonight?"

The captain frowned and shook his head again. "No. Just that strange things may be wonton to occur. It is All Hallows' Eve, this night. It is a time for praying to and recognizing our many saints, but it is also a time when—I fear—the veils between worlds are thin. When things far older than men may tread the land more bravely..."

At this, Clay felt a swell of proud anger rise up in his chest. Here his commander had instilled caution in him, and for nothing more than impossible and superstitious babble.

"Then rest well, Captain," the youth said, easing back onto his log. "For no such things exists. In this land or any other. Man reigns upon earth, and God reigns over earth. He would not see such things to be." That he should even need to say such a thing to a fellow Puritan—and his superior, nonetheless—boggled young Clay's mind.

The captain turned around and focused a steady gaze upon his subordinates—Clay, in particular.

"“There are more things in heaven and earth,” or so it has been said. Steady Puritan foot has not tread upon this land for more than twenty years, Thomas; it is far too short a time for the civilized to learn the extent of its cunning, and for it to reveal its many secrets. Besides, I myself have ... seen things ... since the colonies were founded. Had experiences I cannot rightly stand to reason. Why, it was on this very eve two years ago—on watch, just like you men—that I witnessed some peculiar luminescence hanging about within those trees just beyond our fortification.”

Harding took a step closer towards the wall, a step into the memory of his so called experience, remembering. “It was a cold night then, as well. I was growing weary, but I would not turn my eyes from the woods. It was so very dark then, and it had me quite on edge. Then, out of the chilled air, this wisp of blue grey light appeared amidst the bramble of the trees! It had the form of a torch’s flame, dancing and licking as fire, but it swayed as though it were ... alive!”

The captain turned back around, the truth (or, at least, his believed truth) of the matter in his eyes. “It hovered about for a fair moment. Long enough for me to question my sight and sanity. And then it moved off into the woods, as though carried by the breeze, disappearing and tempting me to follow after it. I knew not what it could be and the knowledge still escapes me. But I swear to the heavens that I did truly see it, and that it was of a nature beyond the natural realm. I’ve not seen its like since, but still, I remember. And I am cautious.”

In spite of his rank, Clay brandished a harsh and judging look upon his captain once the latter had fallen silent.

““When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations.” Captain, you speak of such things as only those savages beyond our walls would; it’s their ilk who believes in ghosts and goblins and those heathen creatures of the night, and of children’s imaginations. It is ours to believe in God and his way of the world.”

Harding regarded the lad with a weary smile. “You’ve the fortitude of faith, my boy. Most admirable. But you’ve little in the ways of experience, and once you’ve gained it, you may well find there are a fair number of things in this world you had never even conceived of.”

The captain turned away from them then, the debate over and his say passed. He trudged off, going back towards the barracks. “Have a good night, gentlemen, and stay alert.”

Clay could not help but shoot a sneer at the captain’s back as he turned a corner. As soon as he was out of sight, Blake gave his comrade a playful tap on the shoulder.

“I always thought our captain was quite the admirer of English manufacture, but it seems he’s been drinking it for a good time, now!”

Blake let loose a hearty laugh, but Clay did not join in this time. He merely sat there, putting his hands back to the fire and stewing over the captain’s Banbury tale.

The hour was late and the moon was out in full now, the evening’s clouds having departed and opened up to the starry firmament. It was a dazzling sight, no doubt, but Thomas Clay would have readily traded it for a cot and a pillow.

He was alone now, walking about his post while Blake sauntered about somewhere on the opposite side of the fort. He’d grown to miss the heat of their fire, the air having grown more

frigid as midnight marched their way. His feet ached ever so slightly, but he would not allow himself to rest a spell. His duty was his duty, and it was as simple as that.

He'd not bothered to think any more on his commander's superstitious assertions in the hours that had since passed. His convictions would not deign to entertain such drivel any longer. Instead, he turned his searching eyes out to the woods, peering through the slats between the beams of oak that made up the fort's wall.

All was still out there. The trees and bushes were covered by a very thin frost, as was the grass. It discoloured their dead and dying limbs with a hint of white, the blades of the grass looking as though they bore a rather pitiful snowfall. He could not see very far into the forest, despite the bright moon overhead; the trees grew too closely over here to glimpse much further than twenty feet away.

Still, that fact did not stop him from seeing a small, darting form that was suddenly making its way along the tree line.

At first, young Clay thought it to be merely a trick of the light, just a thin tree swaying in the breeze and begging his eye. But there was no breeze, and the subtle snapping of twigs—as though breaking under some foot—made the soldier think otherwise. Stopping his pacing, Clay slid up to the wall and angled himself to where he had a good view out at the bordering forest.

He saw it again, the motion of something—no, someone—moving among the trees, slowly walking from the pines just before Clay's eyes and off towards the right. As he narrowed his sight, he thought he could discern ... a leg! Yes—a short, bared leg, without a single garment upon it. Then he saw an arm, a tiny hand at its end grabbing hold of a tree trunk as the wandering figure made its way through the trees. Finally, he thought he spied a wild length of dark hair hanging about a face he simply couldn't make out.

Why, with a leg so short and a hand so small, it must have been a child! Yes, and no more than a babe, judging by the diminutive form which Clay believed he saw.

“Child!” he called out! “What are you doing out there?!”

His surprise, though great, was trumped by his concern. If that was, indeed, a child out there—and a naked one, at that—then it was in danger of freezing to death in the frost of the evening. But what would a child be doing out here? Surely it could not be from the town, and it wasn't likely to belong to the natives, either. And yet...

The figure, seemingly deaf to his comment, kept walking along, and then disappeared into the woods and away from the fort.

“A child!” Clay shouted back to the barracks, to anyone who might hear the report. “There is a child outside the walls!”

Not waiting for an answer to his call, he bolted over to the nearest gates of the fort, unlatching the doors and thrusting one open as he ran outside. Fearing that the child would lose itself to the forest, he gave chase, his rifle still in hand and his feet carrying him swiftly.

He kept calling as he went, looking frantically about for the babe. Though it couldn't have gone very far, it was nowhere in sight.

His fear rising, he dashed along, uncertain of how far he'd gone, though when he'd spared a glance back to see if others were on the hunt, the fort was not in sight. Still, he chased on, going deeper into the woods—until he skidded to a halt.

The child was sitting atop a fallen and rotting pine, its naked back to him. Its shaggy head was hunkered low and its arms bent in, hands up to its face.

Clay heard the tearing and chewing of meat as the babe gave a shake of its head.

“Child?” he prodded, bringing his rifle down.

The babe whirled about—but it was no child, at all.

A big nosed, needle toothed creature faced him, snarling wildly, with blood sleeked across its mouth and tongue. A bit of fur covered flesh hung from its pointed chin. Its hands—much larger than Clay had assumed, nearly bigger than a grown man's—held a crushed squirrel, a red gap torn out of its small chest.

The thing gave a shrill wail, stirring Clay to scream, as well, and to raise his rifle to the beast.

Before he could squeeze off his lone shot, an arrow came whizzing by, its tip driving into the bark of the tree to his left. Another immediately came down into the soil before his foot, this one's tip aflame.

Clay looked ahead again, mouth agape as he saw a half dozen other of the short, nude creatures emerging from the trees, small bows and arrows strung and at the ready. They rushed towards him, their big feet smacking the cold earth as they drew back their bows.

Clay fired in a hurry, the rifle going off with a puff of smoke and a wallop. The shot went wide, missing one of the creatures by a few feet.

Going wild at the blare of the gun, the creatures started hopping up and down in a frenzy, chittering and whooping before loosing their arrows at him. Flaming arches sailed by Clay's head as he stumbled backwards, holding an arm up to try and guard himself from their attack. Each arrow missed him, save for one that went straight into the meat of his calf. Clay screamed in agony as its fiery tip seared his flesh. On instinct, he grabbed the foot and a half long shaft and tore it free from his leg, dropping the smoking arrow to the ground.

The terrified man turned and ran off—or scooted along as best as he could, that was; his wounded leg refused to bend and move properly, each step sending a flare of pain all along the limb. He moaned with each rush of breath, the chilly air fogging up before his numbed face.

More arrows followed, and he could hear the small men giving chase right behind him. He prayed to God for strength and speed, or that He might smite these devilish things with His fury. Above all, he prayed to live, that he might see the light of the morrow.

He hadn't made it more than a dozen yards when he felt the skin of his back cutting open, and then the horrid burn that followed quickly after.

With tears in his eyes, Clay fell to the earth, kicking up dirt and dead leaves as he rolled onto his back. The arrow lodged in his shoulder snapped against the earth as he turned about, delivering another rush of pain. But he had little time to pay it any mind; his gaze went up to the trees, where he saw another of the horrible beasts perched on a branch, its bow pulled back and its flaming arrow aimed right for him.

The creature let it fly with an angry grunt; Clay hadn't even the time to yell in terror before the arrow went through his left eye. The burning of it went unfelt, for he died in that very instant.

Clay's body fell back into the earth, his one remaining eye looking blankly up to the heaven that would accept him.

The soldiers of the fort found their missing comrade nearly an hour later, his skin pale with his death and the state of his eye making the steeliest of them shudder.

A handful had heard Thomas Clay's shout and followed after him, after quickly dressing and grabbing their weapons. Captain Harding had led the charge, Cuthbert Blake right beside him. But by then, the young soldier was too far ahead of them, and they knew not where along the tree line he'd run off to. They'd been searching in all that time, and now that they'd found him, they looked nervously to the woods about them.

"Savages did this!" Blake had spat, his rifle tightly gripped and scanning the darkness. "That blasted arrow proves it!"

Captain Harding would have been inclined to agree, were it not for the strange size of the arrow. It was peculiar, and far too short to belong to any of the tribe's he was aware of. And yet, upon further inspection, they found a few scattered prints of grown men's bare feet pressed into the soil, and there was no other soul or group in this land who would be likely to kill in such a manner.

All Harding had known for sure was that he needed to return his men to the safety of their station, and to gather up the dead lad's body for a Christian burial on the morrow. Giving his

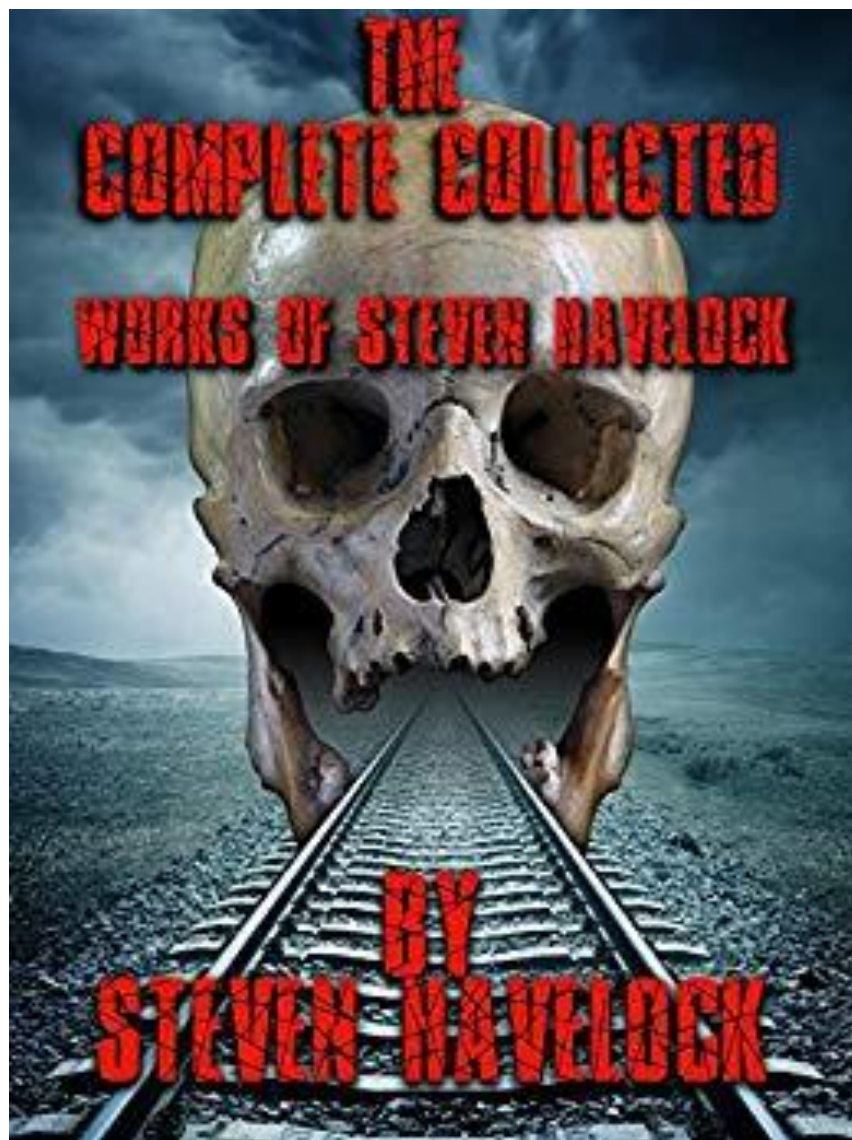
orders, two men carried poor Thomas Clay while the rest kept their sights upon the trees, waiting for another attack.

None came. The forests had grown quiet again, the darkness hiding whoever—or whatever—may have called them home.

THE END

Patrick Winters is a graduate of Illinois College in Jacksonville, IL, where he earned a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. He has been published in the likes of Sanitarium Magazine, Deadman's Tome, Trysts of Fate, and other such titles. A full list of his previous publications may be found at his author's site, if you are so inclined to know:

<http://wintersauthor.azurewebsites.net/Publications/List>



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A FISTFUL OF GONADS by GK Murphy

The Wild West, somewhere on the Mexican border, 1926...

El Juno was the town Cleverly “Squint” Westwood rode into this evening, a bounty hunter working to earn a living in hard times, times that may have improved in years to come yet for now times tinged by the single fired shot from a Colt or Remington, the bullet and sticks of dynamite. Dollars and gold were the currency of choice, doled out in return for criminal’s (bank robbers, rapists, and even the probability of illegal booze operators and murderers) severed gonads, either if still attached to the unfortunate’s bodies or not, whether if the aforementioned brigand were dead or alive, it made no difference in these changing times.

Cleverly was nicknamed Squint due to a minor impairment, in that his right eye was lazy and he was forced to peer through just his left. Yet this disability never altered his shot or made his gun hand waver, but oddly even seemed to improve his aim. No man liked nicknames, especially one so ridiculously hurtful, but in the West some boys were named Sue just to harden their daily lives and make them better men, having to fight to gain respect, just like this gunman was forced to, and had so all his life. However, if he’d had the choice, he’d have opted for Squint over Sue any day.

In this day and age, if the bullet didn’t kill you, dysentery sure as hell did.

As his mule carried him into the deserted town, Squint guessed everybody was wrapped up securely indoors as a biting frost had settled over the plains. Yet, Squint had business here tonight, two criminals that had to be brought in for a sum. A tidy sum...

One was Juan “The Pig” Romero and his partner in killing and other mischief, Jeremiah Atkinson.

Three tumbleweeds blew past in the faint wind, making Squint shiver and raise his shoulders in mediocre protest at the bite of air around him. He paused to lift his jacket collar, just to keep his neck as warm as possible in this uneasy strain of winter.

There was a faint layer of snow on the ground in El Juno, but the chances were in this climate the frost would lift by late tomorrow morning and the usual mixture of heat and sandstorms would appear once more in the vicinity.

Squint fancied a good hard fuck tonight and sought the best whorehouse in El Juno, once he’d dealt accordingly with his quarry.

He got off his horse and tied her reign to the wooden post outside Katie’s Den in the centre of town, a whorehouse he’d frequented perhaps five or six years previously. As he made his way up the steps, he paused to strike a match on the sole of his boot and then tossed it aside once his cigar was alight. He could easily have struck the match somewhere else but on the boot was force of habit.

He actually needed a new supply of cigars and turned to look across the deserted space to eyeball Al's Tobacconist Store, making a mental memo to pop in tomorrow to grab his stock until next time. He could also have gotten a new saddle as well, since the one he used now was worn to fuck. And a new set of size ten boots were on the cards, which he'd be able to afford tomorrow after his trip to the local town Sherriff's Office, once he'd collected his bounty. And then it would be back to Katie's whorehouse for seconds, then thirds...

It was a well-known factor in the West that lawmen were useless at containing criminals and solving criminal cases, or capturing and holding murderers and robbers, hence the introduction of bounty hunters who got paid to do this for them, giving lawmen a relatively soft option.

As he swung the doors wide, he was shocked to just see plenty of whores around but no serious clientele or paying customers at the bar where Mickey the Barman resided, polishing beer glasses with a cloth and a bit of spit. Squint headed over, tipping his hat to those who cared to notice him enter, as he moseyed across the deserted room towards the long Mahogany counter where Mickey knew to pour him a whiskey. Because of Squint's lazy eye, Mickey didn't wish to offend with his confusion, so steered his own eyesight elsewhere when he addressed the hired gun. Caution was the word to abide by at all cost in such tender situations since he never had fancied a bullet between the eyes courtesy of a gunman's Colt or Remington. In the case of Squint, he holstered a Colt Peacekeeper.

The room was deserted, or at least he thought it was.

Until trouble approached the bar, where the one eyed bounty hunter leaned drinking his first glass of malt whiskey.

The tall, lurching gentleman looked middle aged, perhaps 50, yet wizened and his nose long on a thin face. Also, he brandished a hairy, stubbly jaw line and chin, whilst he also possessed the bluest, glinting eyes imaginable. If anything, he looked like a crooked Jesus Christ. His eyes were like crystal ice.

Yes, he was trouble all right.

He parked his butt near to Squint at the bar, and leant forward as he glared and grinned crookedly, displaying yellow teeth, some distinctly black or rotten attached to the bottom row. Squint did not turn to look at him when the man spoke. The cowboy said, "I've never seen you before in these parts, one eye..." Squint pretended not to hear, which annoyed the man feverishly, who continued to add rather brazenly, "...I'm talking to you, Sonny Jim...or rather, fucking CYCLOPS!!"

Enough was enough...

Squint grabbed the whiskey bottle off the bar in front of him and swung it, smashing it into the invader's face, pulverizing his facial features and having him collapse to the floor in a bloody mess. It did not end there, for Squint harboured a temper and spiteful side, which was rather unforgiving in such a situation or whenever he encountered men like this. It would not finish

here, for the end of the broken bottle which he still brandished he lifted high as he squatted down over the wounded man, where he continued to ram again and again into his face, twisting the glass bottle so it severed arteries and cut his features, disfiguring him forever. Desperately, the floored gentleman tried to protest yet it was uselessness, for he flailed his arms and legs in an attempt to perhaps save his hide from certain death. But Squint would never submit, since his notorious unforgiving side prevailed like so many times before as he penetrated the man's jugular and twisted the glass shard, removing his Adam's apple in a sea of scarlet, flowing gristle and bone. The man gargled and groaned and ceased to move. He was a dying man and shortly the man on the floor in a pool of blood was dead all together.

The nearby whores watched in awe and petrified fear.

They knew Squint Westwood well, though. As women of the world, they always knew despite the quiet exterior, deep down the man was a vicious psychopath that ought to be avoided and never spurned, whether it was in El Juno or indeed anywhere in the world. People had too much to lose.

"What room are Juan and Jeremiah in upstairs, Mickey?" Squint asked the barman, leaving the dying man to twitch and convulse on the floor at his feet. "Give me a fucking room number."

"Room 16, Gringo...they are with the whores, but beware, they are armed and loaded up."

Sarcastically, Squint said, "Yep, you wouldn't want me losing another eye, would you?"

Mickey smiled, but nervously. He could have easily have been that dying man in the room. Nobody fucked with Squint Westwood, the bounty hunter, the killer, the psycho.

Tipping his hat again to the ladies, he made his way up the tall wooden staircase that led to the balcony, as well as his potential bounty. Slowly, he walked along this balcony until he finally reached Room 16, where he drew his pistol and kicked the door inwards, causing a lot of noise in the vicinity as he did so.

The outlaws were just how he wanted, exposed and vulnerable.

On the bed, Juan was lying on his back as a whore worked his stiffened cock, sucking it for dear life, whilst Jeremiah was in the bath tub, being scrubbed by one of the ladies. Understandably horrified, the two women screamed in surprised terror as both criminals reached for their guns. Yet, Squint perfectly aimed his Peacekeeper in their directions with deadly precision and opened fire, hitting the men where he preferred—where it hurt—in their gonads and blowing them clean off. Juan got it worst, for when he stood, he somehow managed to grab his pistol (big mistake) and take a good aim at the hired killer, he was the one that would end up stone cold dead, since Squint caught him in the centre of his chest with a bullet.

The force took him off his feet and flew Juan backwards into the wall.

In the meantime, Jeremiah was clutching the burnt hole in his crotch, screaming like a girl, minus his testicles and a chunk of his dick.

It didn't end there for the fool. Squint would be forced to hand both of these two men over to the law as dead corpses, because Jeremiah suddenly managed to grab his pistol and take good aim at this one eyed Grim Reaper, cursing Squint, "You bastard, I'll kill you...I'll make sure you'll rot in Hell!"

Squint had never believed in Hell. How could killers operate like him if his mortal soul ended up in the furnaces of a purely make believe domain such as Hell, governed by a red dude with a forked tail, catering for millions and billions of sinners in turn, and fucking simultaneously...REALLY? This Satan guy must have had a lot on his plate.

The two whores huddled on the bed hiding their faces and weeping profusely as Squint approached them. He said, "Did you know prostitution is illegal in this State?"

In mischief, Squint managed a smile, making the girls more nervous and fearful for their lives.

They didn't answer.

Squint extracted a dime from his pocket and tossed it on the bed next to them, then undid his zipper and unleashed his dick.

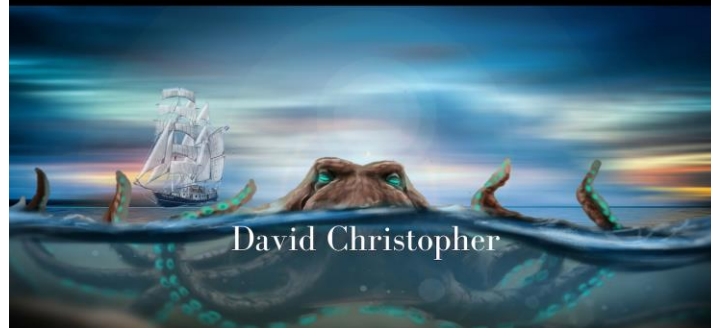
He chuckled and said, "Take that as a down payment, ladies."

Tonight was for partying. Tomorrow was back to work—as well as being five hundred dollars richer.

THE END

GONZO PULP PUBLICATIONS
PRESENT

Long John Silver and the Squid-God of Lemuria



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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Fifty Six

“More coffee, Jerry?”

“Why, yes, I think I will, Story. You’re almost the only man I know who knows how to brew up a decent cup of coffee.”

“Yes, the replicators have spoiled us,” the man called ‘Story’ agreed. “It’s just too easy to ask the machine to give us what we want, while we occupy our minds with more interesting matters. Our talent is as strong as our interest, I have found. Haven’t you noticed that yourself, Jerry?”

Jerry—Colonel Gerald Bridgemont, Chief of Jovian Bases Security—agreed with his friend, Story Talbot. Other than Talbot himself, of the three men in Talbot’s living room, he was the only one who knew that Talbot had recently changed his name from Frederick Jervis Sherman, the Third.

That Colonel Westland, Chief of Security on the “Bellerophon”, was kept in the dark about Story Talbot’s change of name was no reflection on the man or his integrity. It was only done to spare Westland the embarrassment of being caught with knowledge that could cause him or those dear to him some considerable pain at the hands of Secretary Benson or his henchmen. Talbot and Bridgemont had every full intention of letting Westland in on the secret when the time was right.

Which might have been sooner than any of them expected.

“You, Frank?” Story asked. “May I get you a cup?”

“Please, yes,” his friend Franklin Westland replied. “Fortunately for us that, for all your interest in the subject of coffee, your interest is outshone by your wife’s, Joyce.”

“Oh, yes,” Talbot said. “I will not hesitate to admit to that.”

He set the tray upon the appropriately named coffee table that sat at the long gun metal grey couch that gave a view from Talbot’s apartment.

Outside the window was a rolling view of Callisto Base 1, or what was left of it after the Battle for Callisto. Ruined walls, soot stained and shattered windows, sidewalks reduced to gravel.

Sparks flew all throughout the damaged city where construction crews were working hard. All other business at the bases on Callisto stopped. All efforts were devoted to rebuilding Callisto Base 1. Much had been accomplished already, but there remained yet much to be done.

The three men settled on the couch with their coffee. They had much to discuss. Talbot’s apartment was one of the few secure places in Callisto Base 1. Even out here, Benson had his spies.

The other two places of which Colonel Bridgemont was certain were his own suites, and the apartments set aside for Colonel Westland, cleared away for his long stay as the “Bellerophon” was herself being repaired after the exhausting battle.

“How is Emily?” Colonel Bridgemont asked of Story Talbot.

“Yes,” Westland asked. How is your dear daughter? I do hesitate to...”

“Oh, think nothing of it, Frank. I appreciate the concern,” Talbot replied.

“As you know, Story, if there’s anything...”

“And you can be sure I will hold you to that promise, if ever the time for it may arise.”

“So tell us, Story,” Colonel Bridgemont began, “How is Emily? How is she responding?”

“Indeed, we do have some grounds for optimism,” Talbot replied. “She seems to be making some responses to temperature changes. Her eyes follow sounds made in the room, especially of familiar voices in conversation.”

Bridgemont smiled.

“All very hopeful,” he said.

“Very much so,” Talbot answered.

“And Joyce? How is she holding up under all of this?”

“She’s a brave woman,” Talbot answered.

He looked out through the large bay window that gave him a panoramic view of Callisto, Jupiter, and the Galilean moons in their swift orbits. Faint, iridescent rings encircled Jupiter, their dim ruby and ultramarine bands bound together in an endless dance around the gigantic planet which was the centre of their system.

“Joyce spends almost all her time with Emily. I doubt I would try to pull her away, even if I did have the heart for it.”

Bridgemont and Westland nodded their heads judiciously.

“I’m sure it gives her comfort, to be with her daughter now,” Westland remarked.

“Indeed. Indeed, so,” Bridgemont agreed.

“Yes, that it does, my friends,” Talbot added. “She does come back for her naps. The occasional shower, and all the rest of it.”

“Very good,” Bridgemont said.

“And we have a doctor, a rather youngish man in his early sixties, by Earth years. He has taken a strong interest in Emily’s case. His name is Stanley. Alex. Doctor Alexander Stanley. So he is able to keep some company with Joyce when I cannot be there.”

“Has he said anything about Emily’s chances for recovery? It is good that your doctors can keep her alive. But can they bring her back to a fuller life? To a real...” Colonel Bridgemont began to ask.

Seeing Talbot’s discomfort at the question, Bridgemont quickly apologized. “If it’s none of my business, Story, I must apologize...”

“Oh, Jerry, please don’t ever think anything like that. You are one of my oldest and dearest friends. And frankly, if it hadn’t been for you, Emily might very well be gone, disappeared by Benson and his cabal. I can never be done thanking you, Jerry, for what you did to assist my family out of harm’s way.

“If I seem to hesitate, old friend, it is only from an overabundance of emotion, and certainly never because I think of you as anything but one of my own family. Yes, Doctor Stanley has expressed some cautious optimism, using the coy language doctors are so fond of using...”

“Ha!” Bridgemont laughed. He grinned at Talbot. Talbot answered Bridgemont’s grin with a smile of his own. “Let us listen to the career diplomat give us a lecture on the cunning use of language, so favoured by those crafty physicians.”

Westland added his own laughter to Bridgemont’s and Talbot’s.

“It is true,” Talbot said, “That I have learned some fluency in a few dialects of bureaucratese...”

“Or ‘The Art of Rendering the Obvious Obscure’,” Bridgemont laughed again. “You should write the dictionary.”

“You praise me more than I deserve,” Talbot returned, grinning his own. “I am truly not that good at it.”

“Ha!” Bridgemont laughed again. “You have done... anyone who can stop a war before it starts, armed with nothing but his own glib tongue... not just one, but...,” and here Bridgemont interrupted himself.

“Well, gentlemen, we didn’t gather here to pat each other on the backs all evening. We do have some very serious matters to discuss,” he said.

“Yes, that is most certainly true,” Talbot agreed. “I will only take up enough of our time to say that, yes, Doctor Stanley is, as I say, cautiously optimistic. We may have to expect some nerve and brain damage, sadly. But someday, he assures me...”

“The odds?” Westland asked.

“Right now, somewhere around fifty, fifty. Indeed, much better than I could have hoped,” Talbot said.

“Quite agreed,” Bridgemont said. “Given what the girl has been through, those odds are better than we had any right to expect.”

“True,” Westland agreed. “So why don’t we settle down to our discussion.”

“Which involves our friend, General Howe...” Talbot began.

“And my boss,” Westland put in. He reported directly to General Howe.

“Yes. Your boss,” Talbot said.

“I’ve been deeply concerned,” Westland replied. He had been doing well, but in these last few months, his communications have been growing increasingly... fraught.”

“Yes, though he has been able to keep the surface of his communications untroubled and to the point,” Talbot agreed.

“That is true,” Westland agreed. “Though things have been getting rather tight for our friend, especially after the disappearance of Frederick Sherman. I think I can understand some of Benson’s frustration, if not his sympathies. Frederick Sherman is one of the more extensively photographed and documented human beings on four planets, yet he seems to have vanished completely.”

Story Talbot, who but a few thousand hours before had gone by the birth name of Frederick Jervis Sherman, the Third, gave his shoulders a helpless shrug, remarking only, “Perhaps our biometrics are not robust as some would have us believe.”

Colonel Westland shared the helpless shrug.

“If people just knew,” he began.

“How very tentative even our best little plots are?” Colonel Bridgemont put in.

“Exactly,” Westland said. “Though I’ve never met the man, I’m sure that after the countless news images I’ve seen of the man, I should be able to recognize Sherman. But,” he scowled in thought, “I’m just as sure that he could be sitting here with the three of us, and I wouldn’t know him for whom he was.”

“As you gentlemen know, my orders are to assist in rebuilding Callisto Base One, and then to return to Earth, reporting personally to Howe. Howe and I had been in close, daily Earthian contact.

Talbot and Bridgemont nodded their heads in agreement.

“It had also become increasingly clear to us that his communications were being more frequently, and aggressively, monitored. Now, of course, every utterance we make in our duties is faithfully recorded. Every word, every syllable, every cough, laugh and sneeze. We all know that. We assume it in everything we do.

“But there is routine monitoring, and then there are other, more aggressive things. Data mining, burrowing, probes, AI searches... well, as we all know, whole hosts of extremely malicious engines. Howe was forced to ever increasingly narrow his channels and make even terser vocabularies to deny any back channel entries into his files, all of them.

“The long and the short of it, gentlemen,” Westland finished, “Is that Secretary Benson suspects General Howe of whatever he can accuse the man of. He is determined to rid himself of Howe, in any way he can. And we are certain that Benson intends to have Howe killed.

“We must get Howe off Earth, somehow. Talbot, you’ve mentioned Gerry’s assistance in getting you to Callisto. Is there any way we could engage the mechanism you two used, to get Howe here, too?”

Talbot and Bridgemont shared a look, then came to a mutual, unspoken decision.

“I can look into it,” Bridgemont said. “But I can’t be optimistic. These things always rely on very tentative connections.”

Westland nodded his agreement.

“Ye ah...” Westland replied, drawing out the word. “I was worried about that. Rather expected it, of course. That leaves us with the question, ‘How do we spirit Howe off Earth?’”.

Talbot took a long, thoughtful sip from his tea, looking at the disc of Jupiter, balanced on the horizon.

“We’ll have to lay some very detailed schemes, I think,” Talbot said, at last.

“But if we can get Howe off Earth, I can think of a man who can take our friend completely out of harm’s way. “

“Who would that be?” Westland asked.

“You’ve already met him yourself, Frank. I’m thinking of the pilot who brought us here, Carter Ward,” Talbot said.

“Oh, yes. Of course I remember him,” Westland exclaimed. How could I have forgotten? He gave us good escort service on the “Bellerophon’s” first expedition to Callisto. Him and that friend of his. Big bearded fellow, calls himself ‘Mud’. Sure, hell yes, if you can get him, Carter Ward, and that friend of his, too, well, we’ll certainly be able to get Howe the heck out of there.”

“Quite so,” Talbot agreed. “I doubt there’s much that can get past those two.”

“The only question facing us, in that regard, at least,” Bridgemont suggested, “Is finding him. Carter Ward.”

“Oh?” Westland asked.

“He went off somewhere,” Bridgemont said, sparing Talbot the trouble.

“Oh?”

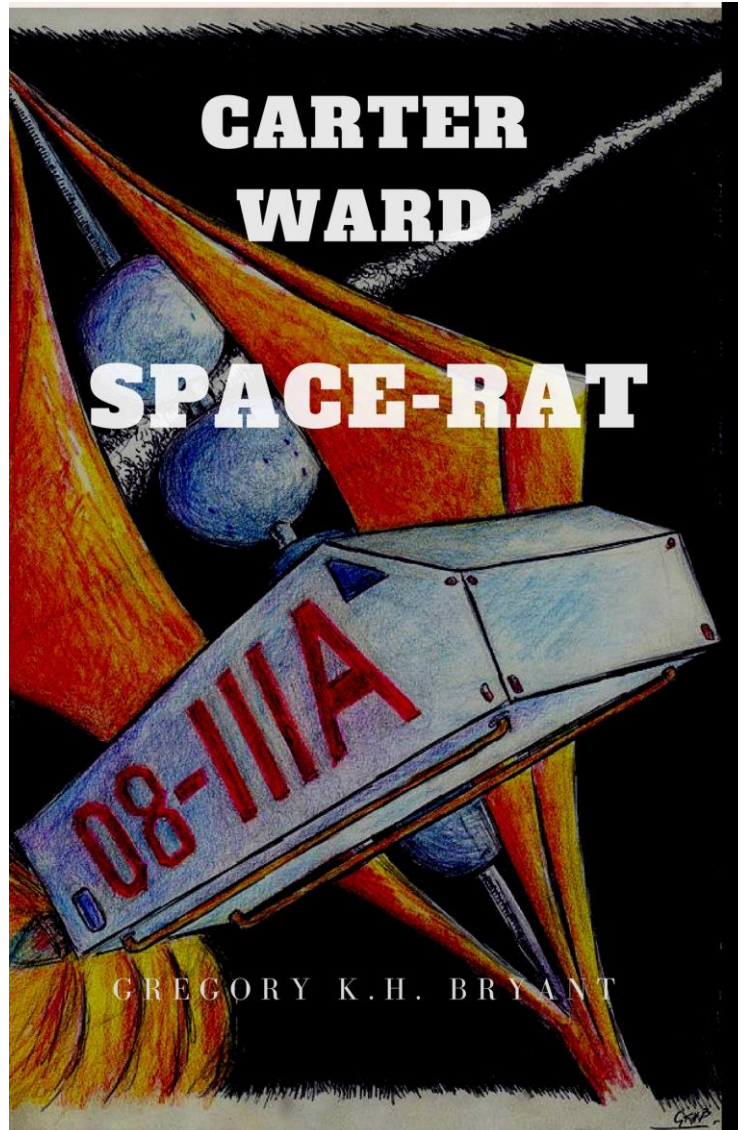
“These space rats...” Bridgemont expanded.

Westland nodded his head knowingly.

“Yeah. I know what you mean... these space rats. So, one of the questions we’re looking at now is, ‘Where is Carter Ward?’”

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Now available from Schlock! Publications: *Carter Ward—Space Rat* by Gregory KH Bryant.



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ERIC BRIGHTYES by H Rider Haggard

XVI: How Swanhild Walked the Seas

Within two days afterwards, the Gudruda being bound for sea, Eric went up to bid farewell to the King. But Edmund was so angry with him because of his going that he would not see him. Thereon Eric took horse and rode down sadly from the Palace to the river bank where the Gudruda lay. But when he was about to give the word to get out the oars, the King himself rode up, and with him men bearing costly gifts. Eric went ashore to speak with him.

“I am angry with thee, Brighteyes,” said Edmund, “yet it is not in my heart to let thee go without words and gifts of farewell. This only I ask of thee now, that, if things go not well with thee there, out in Iceland, thou wilt come back to me.”

“I will—that I promise thee, King,” said Eric, “for I shall never find a better lord.”

“Nor I a braver servant,” said the King. Then he gave him the gifts and kissed him before all men. To Skallagrim also he gave a good byrnie of Welsh steel coloured black.

Then Eric went aboard again and dropped down the river with the tide.

For five days all went well with them, the sea being calm and the winds light and favourable. But on the fifth night, as they sailed slowly along the coasts of East Anglia over against Yarmouth sands, the moon rose red and ringed and the sea fell dead calm.

“Yonder hangs a storm lamp, lord,” said Skallagrim, pointing to the angry moon. “We shall soon be bailing, for the autumn gales draw near.”

“Wait till they come, then speak,” said Eric. “Thou croakest ever like a raven.”

“And ravens croak before foul weather,” answered Skallagrim, and just as he spoke a sudden gust of wind came up from the south east and laid the Gudruda over. After this it came on to blow, and so fiercely that for whole days and nights their clothes were scarcely dry. They ran northwards before the storm and still northward, sighting no land and seeing no stars. And ever as they scudded on the gale grew fiercer, till at length the men were worn out with bailing and starved with wet and cold. Three of their number also were washed away by the seas, and all were in sorry plight.

It was the fourth night of the gale. Eric stood at the helm, and by him Skallagrim. They were alone, for their comrades were spent and lay beneath decks, waiting for death. The ship was half full of water, but they had no more strength to bail. Eric seemed grim and gaunt in the white light of the moon, and his long hair streamed about him wildly. Grimmer yet was Skallagrim as he clung to the shield rail and stared across the deep.

“She rolls heavily, lord,” he shouted, “and the water gains fast.”

“Can the men bail no more?” asked Eric.

“Nay, they are outworn and wait for death.”

“They need not wait long,” said Eric. “What do they say of me?”

“Nothing.”

Then Eric groaned aloud. “It was my stubbornness that brought us to this pass,” he said; “I care little for myself, but it is ill that all should die for one man’s folly.”

“Grieve not, lord,” answered Skallagrim, “that is the world’s way, and there are worse things than to drown. Listen! methinks I hear the roar of breakers yonder,” and he pointed to the left.

“Breakers they surely are,” said Eric. “Now the end is near. But see, is not that land looming up on the right, or is it cloud?”

“It is land,” said Skallagrim, “and I am sure of this, that we run into a firth. Look, the seas boil like a hot spring. Hold on thy course, lord, perchance we may yet steer between rocks and land. Already the wind falls and the current lessens the seas.”

“Ay,” said Eric, “already the fog and rain come up,” and he pointed ahead where dense clouds gathered in the shape of a giant, whose head reached to the skies and moved towards them, hiding the moon.

Skallagrim looked, then spoke: “Now here, it seems, is witchwork. Say, lord, hast thou ever seen mist travel against wind as it travels now?”

“Never before,” said Eric, and as he spoke the light of the moon went out.

Swanhild, Atli’s wife, sat in beauty in her bower on Straumey Isle and looked with wide eyes towards the sea. It was midnight. None stirred in Atli’s hall, but still Swanhild looked out towards the sea.

Now she turned and spoke into the darkness, for there was no light in the bower save the light of her great eyes.

“Art thou there?” she said. “I have summoned thee thrice in the words thou knowest. Say, Toad, art there?”

“Ay, Swanhild the Fatherless! Swanhild, Groa’s daughter! Witch mother’s witch child! I am here. What is thy will with me?” piped a thin voice like the voice of a dying babe.

Swanhild shuddered a little and her eyes grew brighter—as bright as the eyes of a cat.

“This first,” she said: “that thou show thyself. Hideous as thou art, I had rather see thee, than

“speak with thee seeing thee not.”

“Mock not my form, lady,” answered the thin voice, “for it is as thou dost fashion it in thy thought. To the good I am fair as day; to the evil, foul as their heart. Toad thou didst call me: look, now I come as a toad!”

Swanhild looked, and behold! a ring of the darkness grew white with light, and in it crouched a thing hideous to see. It was shaped as a great spotted toad, and on it was set a hag’s face, with white locks hanging down on either side. Its eyes were blood red and sunken, black were its fangs, and its skin was dead yellow. It grinned horribly as Swanhild shrank from it, then spoke again:

“Grey Wolf thou didst call me once, Swanhild, when thou wouldst have thrust Gudruda down Goldfoss gulf, and as a grey wolf I came, and gave thee counsel that thou tookest but ill. Rat didst thou call me once, when thou wouldst save Brighteyes from the carles of Ospakar, and as a rat I came and in thy shape I walked the seas. Toad thou callest me now, and as a toad I creep about thy feet. Name thy will, Swanhild, and I will name my price. But be swift, for there are other fair ladies whose wish I must do ere dawn.”

“Thou art hideous to look on!” said Swanhild, placing her hand before her eyes.

“Say not so, lady; say not so. Look at this face of mine. Knowest thou it not? It is thy mother’s—dead Groa lent it me. I took it from where she lies; and my toad’s skin I drew from thy spotted heart, Swanhild, and more hideous than I am shalt thou be in a day to come, as once I was more fair than thou art to day.”

Swanhild opened her lips to shriek, but no sound came.

“Troll,” she whispered, “mock me not with lies, but hearken to my bidding: where sails Eric now?”

“Look out into the night, lady, and thou shalt see.”

Swanhild looked, and the ways of the darkness opened before her witch sight. There at the mouth of Pentland Firth the Gudruda laboured heavily in the great seas, and by the tiller stood Eric, and with him Skallagrim.

“Seest thou thy love?” asked the Familiar.

“Yea,” she answered, “full clearly; he is worn with wind and sea, but more glorious than aforetime, and his hair is long. Say, what shall befall him if thou aidest not?”

“This, that he shall safely pass the Firth, for the gale falls, and come safely to Fareys, and from Fareys isles to Gudruda’s arms.”

“And what canst thou do, Goblin?”

“This: I can lure Eric’s ship to wreck, and give his comrades, all save Skallagrim, to Ran’s net, and bring him to thy arms, Swanhild, witch mother’s witch child!”

She hearkened. Her breast heaved and her eyes flashed.

“And thy price, Toad?”

“Thou art the price, lady,” piped the goblin. “Thou shalt give thyself to me when thy day is done, and merrily will we sisters dwell in Hela’s halls, and merrily for ever will we fare about the earth o’ nights, doing such tasks as this task of thine, Swanhild, and working wicked woe till the last woe is worked on us. Art thou content?”

Swanhild thought. Twice her breath went from her lips in great sighs. Then she stood, pale and silent.

“Safely shall he sail the Firth,” piped the thin voice. “Safely shall he sit in Fareys. Safely shall he lie in white Gudruda’s arms—hee! hee! Think of it, lady!”

Then Swanhild shook like a birth tree in the gale, and her face grew ashen.

“I am content,” she said.

“Hee! hee! Brave lady! She is content! Ah, we sisters shall be merry. Harken: if I aid thee thus I may do no more. Thrice has the night owl come at thy call—now it must wing away. Yet things will be as I have said; thine own wisdom shall guide the rest. Ere morn Brighteyes shall stand in Atli’s hall, ere spring he will be thy love, and ere autumn Gudruda shall sit on the high seat in the hall of Middalhof the bride of Ospakar. Draw nigh, give me thine arm, sister, that blood may seal our bargain.”

Swanhild drew near the toad, and, shuddering, stretched out her arm, and then and there the red blood ran, and there they sealed their sisterhood. And as the nameless deed was wrought, it seemed to Swanhild as though fire shot through her veins, and fire surged before her eyes, and in the fire a shape passed up weeping.

“It is done, Blood sister,” piped the voice; “now I must away in thy form to be about thy tasks. Seat thee here before me—so. Now lay thy brow upon my brow—fear not, it was thy mother’s—life on death! curling locks on corpse hair! See, so we change—we change. Now thou art the Death toad and I am Swanhild, Atli’s wife, who shall be Eric’s love.”

Then Swanhild knew that her beauty had entered into the foulness of the toad, and the foulness of the toad into her beauty, for there before her stood her own shape and here she crouched a toad upon the floor.

“Away to work, away!” said a soft low voice, her own voice speaking from her own body that stood before her, and lo! it was gone.

But Swanhild crouched, in the shape of a hag headed toad, upon the ground in her bower of Atli's hall, and felt wickedness and evil longings and hate boil and seethe within her heart. She looked out through her sunken horny eyes and she seemed to see strange sights. She saw Atli, her lord, dead upon the grass. She saw a woman asleep, and above her flashed a sword. She saw the hall of Middalhof red with blood. She saw a great gulf in a mountain's heart, and men fell down it. And, last, she saw a war ship sailing fast out on the sea, afire, and vanish there.

Now the witch hag who wore Swanhild's loveliness stood upon the cliffs of Straumey and tossed her white arms towards the north.

"Come, fog! come, sleet!" she cried. "Come, fog! come, sleet! Put out the moon and blind the eyes of Eric!" And as she called, the fog rose up like a giant and stretched his arms from shore to shore.

"Move, fog! beat, rain!" she cried. "Move and beat against the gale, and blind the eyes of Eric!"

And the fog moved on against the wind, and with it sleet and rain.

"Now I am afeared," said Eric to Skallagrim, as they stood in darkness upon the ship: "the gale blows from behind us, and yet the mist drives fast in our faces. What comes now?"

"This is witch work, lord," answered Skallagrim, "and in such things no counsel can avail. Hold the tiller straight and drive on, say I. Methinks the gale lessens more and more."

So they did for a little while, and all around them sounded the roar of breakers. Darker grew the sky and darker yet, till at the last, though they stood side by side, they could not see each other's shapes.

"This is strange sailing," said Eric. "I hear the roar of breakers as it were beneath the prow."

"Lash the helm, lord, and let us go forward. If there are breakers, perhaps we shall see their foam through the blackness," said Skallagrim.

Eric did so, and they crept forward on the starboard board right to the prow of the ship, and there Skallagrim peered into the fog and sleet.

"Lord," he whispered presently, and his voice shook strangely, "what is that yonder on the waters? Seest thou aught?"

Eric stared and said, "By Odin! I see a shape of light like to the shape of a woman; it walks upon the waters towards us and the mist melts before it, and the sea grows calm beneath its feet."

"I see that also!" said Skallagrim.

"She comes nigh!" gasped Eric. "See how swift she comes! By the dead, it is Swanhild's shape!"

Look, Skallagrim! look how her eyes flame!—look how her hair streams upon the wind!”

“It is Swanhild, and we are fey!” quoth Skallagrim, and they ran back to the helm, where Skallagrim sank upon the deck in fear.

“See, Skallagrim, she glides before the Gudruda’s beak! she glides backwards and she points yonder—there to the right! Shall I put the helm down and follow her?”

“Nay, lord, nay; set no faith in witchcraft or evil will befall us.”

As he spoke a great gust of wind shook the ship, the music of the breakers roared in their ears, and the gleaming shape upon the waters tossed its arms wildly and pointed to the right.

“The breakers call ahead,” said Eric. “The shape points yonder, where I hear no sound of sea. Once before, thou mindest, Swanhild walked the waves to warn us and thereby saved us from the men of Ospakar. Ever she swore she loved me; now she is surely come in love to save us and all our comrades. Say, shall I put about? Look: once more she waves her arms and points,” and as he spoke he gripped the helm.

“I have no rede, lord,” said Skallagrim, “and I love not witch work. We can die but once, and death is all around; be it as thou wilt.”

Eric put down the helm with all his might. The good ship answered, and her timbers groaned loudly, as though in woe, when the strain of the sea struck her abeam. Then once more she flew fast across the waters, and fast before her glided the wraith of Swanhild. Now it pointed here and now there, and as it pointed so Eric shaped his course. For a while the noise of breakers lessened, but now again came a thunder, like the thunder of waves smiting on a cliff, and about the sides of the Gudruda the waves hissed like snakes.

Suddenly the Shape threw up its arms and seemed to sink beneath the waves, while a sound like the sound of a great laugh went up from sea to sky.

“Now here is the end,” said Skallagrim, “and we are lured to doom.”

Ere ever the words had passed his lips the ship struck, and so fiercely that they were rolled upon the deck. Suddenly the sky grew clear, the moon shone out, and before them were cliffs and rocks, and behind them a great wave rushed on. From the hold of the ship there came a cry, for now their comrades were awake and they knew that death was here.

Eric gripped Skallagrim round the middle and looked aft. On rushed the wave, no such wave had he ever seen. Now it struck and the Gudruda burst asunder beneath the blow.

But Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail were lifted on its crest and knew no more.

Swanhild, crouching in hideous guise upon the ground in the bower of Atli’s hall, looked upon the visions that passed before her. Suddenly a woman’s shape, her own shape, was there.

“It is done, Blood sister,” said a voice, her own voice. “Merrily I walked the waves, and oh, merry was the cry of Eric’s folk when Ran caught them in her net! Be thyself, again, Blood sister—be fair as thou art foul; then arise, wake Atli thy lord, and go down to the sea’s lip by the southern cliffs and see what thou shalt find. We shall meet no more till all this game is played and another game is set,” and the shape of Swanhild crouched upon the floor before the hag headed toad muttering “Pass! pass!”

Then Swanhild felt her flesh come back to her, and as it grew upon her so the shape of the Death headed toad faded away.

“Farewell, Blood sister!” piped a voice; “make merry as thou mayest, but merrier shall be our nights when thou hast gone a sailing with Eric on the sea. Farewell! farewell! Were wolf thou didst call me once, and as a wolf I came. Rat thou didst call me once, and as a rat I came. Toad didst thou call me once, and as a toad I came. Say, at the last, what wilt thou call me and in what shape shall I come, Blood sister? Till then farewell!”

And all was gone and all was still.

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THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

Prefatory: The Legatees of Deucalion

We were both of us not a little stiff as the result of sleeping out in the open all that night, for even in Grand Canary the dew fall and the comparative chill of darkness are not to be trifled with. For myself on these occasions I like a bit of a run as an early refresher. But here on this rough ground in the middle of the island there were not three yards of level to be found, and so as Coppinger proceeded to go through some sort of dumb bell exercises with a couple of lumps of bristly lava, I followed his example. Coppinger has done a good deal of roughing it in his time, but being a doctor of medicine amongst other things—he takes out a new degree of some sort on an average every other year—he is great on health theories, and practises them like a religion.

There had been rain two days before, and as there was still a bit of stream trickling along at the bottom of the *barranca*, we went down there and had a wash, and brushed our teeth. Greatest luxury imaginable, a toothbrush, on this sort of expedition.

“Now,” said Coppinger when we had emptied our pockets, “there’s precious little grub left, and it’s none the better for being carried in a local Spanish newspaper.”

“Yours is mostly tobacco ashes.”

“It’ll get worse if we leave it. We’ve a lot more bad scrambling ahead of us.”

That was obvious. So we sat down beside the stream there at the bottom of the *barranca*, and ate up all of what was left. It was a ten mile tramp to the *fonda* at Santa Brigida, where we had set down our traps; and as Coppinger wanted to take a lot more photographs and measurements before we left this particular group of caves, it was likely we should be pretty sharp set before we got our next meal, and our next taste of the PATRON’S splendid old country wine. My faith! If only they knew down in the English hotels in Las Palmas what magnificent wines one could get—with diplomacy—up in some of the mountain villages, the old vintage would become a thing of the past in a week.

Now to tell the truth, the two mummies he had gathered already quite satisfied my small ambition. The goatskins in which they were sewn up were as brittle as paper, and the poor old things themselves gave out dust like a puffball whenever they were touched. But you know what Coppinger is. He thought he’d come upon traces of an old Guanche university, or sacred college, or something of that kind, like the one there is on the other side of the island, and he wouldn’t be satisfied till he’d ransacked every cave in the whole face of the cliff. He’d plenty of stuff left for the flashlight thing, and twenty eight more films in his kodak, and said we might as well get through with the job then as make a return journey all on purpose. So he took the crowbar, and I shouldered the rope, and away we went up to the ridge of the cliff, where we had got such a baking from the sun the day before.

Of course these caves were not easy to come at, or else they would have been raided years

before. Coppinger, who on principle makes out he knows all about these things, says that in the old Guanche days they had ladders of goatskin rope which they could pull up when they were at home, and so keep out undesirable callers; and as no other plan occurs to me, perhaps he may be right. Anyway the mouths of the caves were in a more or less level row thirty feet below the ridge of the cliff, and fifty feet above the bottom; and Spanish curiosity doesn't go in much where it cannot walk.

Now laddering such caves from below would have been cumbersome, but a light knotted rope is easily carried, and though it would have been hard to climb up this, our plan was to descend on each cave mouth from above, and then slip down to the foot of the cliffs, and start again AB INITIO for the next.

Coppinger is plucky enough, and he has a good head on a height, but there is no getting over the fact that he is portly and nearer fifty than forty five. So you can see he must have been pretty keen. Of course I went first each time, and got into the cave mouth, and did what I could to help him in; but when you have to walk down a vertical cliff face fly fashion, with only a thin bootlace of a rope for support, it is not much real help the man below can give, except offer you his best wishes.

I wanted to save him as much as I could, and as the first three caves I climbed to were small and empty, seeming to be merely store places, I asked him to take them for granted, and save himself the rest. But he insisted on clambering down to each one in person, and as he decided that one of my granaries was a prison, and another a pot making factory, and another a schoolroom for young priests, he naturally said he hadn't much reliance on my judgment, and would have to go through the whole lot himself. You know what these thorough going archaeologists are for imagination.

But as the day went on, and the sun rose higher, Coppinger began clearly to have had enough of it, though he was very game, and insisted on going on much longer than was safe. I must say I didn't like it. You see the drop was seldom less than eighty feet from the top of the cliffs. However, at last he was forced to give it up. I suggested marching off to Santa Brigida forthwith, but he wouldn't do that. There were three more cave openings to be looked into, and if I wouldn't do them for him, he would have to make another effort to get there himself. He tried to make out he was conferring a very great favour on me by offering to take a report solely from my untrained observation, but I flatly refused to look at it in that light. I was pretty tired also; I was soaked with perspiration from the heat; my head ached from the violence of the sun; and my hands were cut raw with the rope.

Coppinger might be tired, but he was still enthusiastic. He tried to make me enthusiastic also. "Look here," he said, "there's no knowing what you may find up there, and if you do lay hands on anything, remember it's your own. I shall have no claim whatever."

"Very kind of you, but I've got no use for any more mummies done up in goatskin bags."

"Bah! That's not a burial cave up there. Don't you know the difference yet in the openings? Now, be a good fellow. It doesn't follow that because we have drawn all the rest blank, you

won't stumble across a good find for yourself up there."

"Oh, very well," I said, as he seemed so set on it; and away I stumbled over the fallen rocks, and along the ledge, and then scrambled up by that fissure in the cliff which saved us the two mile round which we had had to take at first. I wrenched out the crowbar, and jammed it down in a new place, and then away I went over the side, with hands smarting worse at every new grip of the rope. It was an awkward job swinging into the cave mouth because the rock above overhung, or else (what came to the same thing) it had broken away below; but I managed it somehow, although I landed with an awkward thump on my back, and at the same time I didn't let go the rope. It wouldn't do to have lost the rope then: Coppinger couldn't have flicked it into me from where he was below.

Now from the first glance I could see that this cave was of different structure to the others. They were for the most part mere dens, rounded out anyhow; this had been faced up with cutting tools, so that all the angles were clean, and the sides smooth and flat. The walls inclined inwards to the roof, reminding me of an architecture I had seen before but could not recollect where, and moreover there were several rooms connected up with passages. I was pleased to find that the other cave openings which Coppinger wanted me to explore were merely the windows or the doorways of two of these other rooms.

Of inscriptions or markings on the walls there was not a trace, though I looked carefully, and except for bats the place was entirely bare. I lit a cigarette and smoked it through—Coppinger always thinks one is slurring over work if it is got through too quickly—and then I went to the entrance where the rope was, and leaned out, and shouted down my news.

He turned up a very anxious face. "Have you searched it thoroughly?" he bawled back.

"Of course I have. What do you think I've been doing all this time?"

"No, don't come down yet. Wait a minute. I say, old man, do wait a minute. I'm making fast the kodak and the flashlight apparatus on the end of the rope. Pull them up, and just make me half a dozen exposures, there's a good fellow."

"Oh, all right," I said, and hauled the things up, and got them inside. The photographs would be absolutely dull and uninteresting, but that wouldn't matter to Coppinger. He rather preferred them that way. One has to be careful about halation in photographing these dark interiors, but there was a sort of ledge like a seat by the side of each doorway, and so I lodged the camera on that to get a steady stand, and snapped off the flashlight from behind and above.

I got pictures of four of the chambers this way, and then came to one where the ledge was higher and wider. I put down the camera, wedged it level with scraps of stone, and then sat down myself to recharge the flashlight machine. But the moment my weight got on that ledge, there was a sharp crackle, and down I went half a dozen inches.

Of course I was up again pretty sharply, and snapped up the kodak just as it was going to slide off to the ground. I will confess, too, I was feeling pleased. Here at any rate was a Guanche

cupboard of sorts, and as they had taken the trouble to hermetically seal it with cement, the odds were that it had something inside worth hiding. At first there was nothing to be seen but a lot of dust and rubble, so I lit a bit of candle and cleared this away. Presently, however, I began to find that I was shelling out something that was not cement. It chipped away, in regular layers, and when I took it to the daylight I found that each layer was made up of two parts. One side was shiny stuff that looked like talc, and on this was smeared a coating of dark toffee coloured material, that might have been wax. The toffee coloured surface was worked over with some kind of pattern.

Now I do not profess to any knowledge on these matters, and as a consequence took what Coppinger had told me about Guanche habits and acquirements as more or less true. For instance, he had repeatedly impressed upon me that this old people could not write, and having this in my memory, I did not guess that the patterns scribed through the wax were letters in some obsolete character, which, if left to myself, probably I should have done. But still at the same time I came to the conclusion that the stuff was worth looting, and so set to work quarrying it out with the heel of my boot and a pocket knife.

The sheets were all more or less stuck together, and so I did not go in for separating them farther. They fitted exactly to the cavity in which they were stored, but by smashing down its front I was able to get at the foot of them, and then I hacked away through the bottom layers with the knife till I got the bulk out in one solid piece. It measured some twenty inches by fifteen, by fifteen, but it was not so heavy as it looked, and when I had taken the remaining photographs, I lowered it down to Coppinger on the end of the rope.

There was nothing more to do in the caves then, so I went down myself next. The lump of sheets was on the ground, and Coppinger was on all fours beside it. He was pretty nearly mad with excitement.

“What is it?” I asked him.

“I don’t know yet. But it is the most valuable find ever made in the Canary Islands, and it’s yours, you unappreciative beggar; at least what there is left of it. Oh, man, man, you’ve smashed up the beginning, and you’ve smashed up the end of some history that is probably priceless. It’s my own fault. I ought to have known better than set an untrained man to do important exploring work.”

“I should say it’s your fault if anything’s gone wrong. You said there was no such thing as writing known to these ancient Canarios, and I took your word for it. For anything I knew the stuff might have been something to eat.”

“It isn’t Guanche work at all,” said he testily. “You ought to have known that from the talc. Great heavens, man, have you no eyes? Haven’t you seen the general formation of the island? Don’t you know there’s no talc here?”

“I’m no geologist. Is this imported literature then?”

“Of course. It’s Egyptian: that’s obvious at a glance. Though how it’s got here I can’t tell yet. It isn’t stuff you can read off like a newspaper. The character’s a variant on any of those that have been discovered so far. And as for this waxy stuff spread over the talc, it’s unique. It’s some sort of a mineral, I think: perhaps asphalt. It doesn’t scratch up like animal wax. I’ll analyse that later. Why they once invented it, and then let such a splendid notion drop out of use, is just a marvel. I could stay gloating over this all day.”

“Well,” I said, “if it’s all the same for you, I’d rather gloat over a meal. It’s a good ten miles hard going to the *fonda*, and I’m as hungry as a hawk already. Look here, do you know it is four o’clock already? It takes longer than you think climbing down to each of these caves, and then getting up again for the next.”

Coppinger spread his coat on the ground, and wrapped the lump of sheets with tender care, but would not allow it to be tied with a rope for fear of breaking more of the edges. He insisted on carrying it himself too, and did so for the larger part of the way to Santa Brigida, and it was only when he was within an ace of dropping himself with sheer tiredness that he condescended to let me take my turn. He was tolerably ungracious about it too. “I suppose you may as well carry the stuff,” he snapped, “seeing that after all it’s your own.”

Personally, when we got to the *fonda*, I had as good a dinner as was procurable, and a bottle of that old Canary wine, and turned into bed after a final pipe. Coppinger dined also, but I have reason to believe he did not sleep much. At any rate I found him still poring over the find next morning, and looking very heavy eyed, but brimming with enthusiasm.

“Do you know,” he said, “that you’ve blundered upon the most valuable historical manuscript that the modern world has ever yet seen? Of course, with your clumsy way of getting it out, you’ve done an infinity of damage. For instance, those top sheets you shelled away and spoiled, contained probably an absolutely unique account of the ancient civilisation of Yucatan.”

“Where’s that, anyway?”

“In the middle of the Gulf of Mexico. It’s all ruins today, but once it was a very prosperous colony of the Atlanteans.”

“Never heard of them. Oh yes, I have though. They were the people Herodotus wrote about, didn’t he? But I thought they were mythical.”

“They were very real, and so was Atlantis, the continent where they lived, which lay just north of the Canaries here.”

“What’s that crocodile sort of thing with wings drawn in the margin?”

“Some sort of beast that lived in those bygone days. The pages are full of them. That’s a cave tiger. And that’s some sort of colossal bat. Thank goodness he had the sense to illustrate fully, the man who wrote this, or we should never have been able to reconstruct the tale, or at any rate we could not have understood half of it. Whole species have died out since this was written, just

as a whole continent has been swept away and three civilisations quenched. The worst of it is, it was written by a highly educated man who somewhat naturally writes a very bad fist. I've hammered at it all the night through, and have only managed to make out a few sentences here and there"—he rubbed his hands appreciatively. "It will take me a year's hard work to translate this properly."

"Every man to his taste. I'm afraid my interest in the thing wouldn't last as long as that. But how did it get there? Did your ancient Egyptian come to Grand Canary for the good of his lungs, and write it because he felt dull up in that cave?"

"I made a mistake there. The author was not an Egyptian. It was the similarity of the inscribed character which misled me. The book was written by one Deucalion, who seems to have been a priest or general—or perhaps both—and he was an Atlantean. How it got there, I don't know yet. Probably that was told in the last few pages, which a certain vandal smashed up with his pocketknife, in getting them away from the place where they were stowed."

"That's right, abuse me. Deucalion you say? There was a Deucalion in the Greek mythology. He was one of the two who escaped from the Flood: their Noah, in fact."

"The swamping of the continent of Atlantis might very well correspond to the Flood."

"Is there a Pyrrha then? She was Deucalion's wife."

"I haven't come across her yet. But there's a Phorenice, who may be the same. She seems to have been the reigning Empress, as far as I can make out at present."

I looked with interest at illustrations in the margin. They were quite understandable, although the perspective was all wrong. "Weird beasts they seem to have had knocking about the country in those days. Whacking big size too, if one may judge. By Jove, that'll be a cave tiger trying to puff down a mammoth. I shouldn't care to have lived in those days."

"Probably they had some way of fighting the creatures. However, that will show itself as I get along with the translation." He looked at his watch—"I suppose I ought to be ashamed of myself, but I haven't been to bed. Are you going out?"

"I shall drive back to Las Palmas. I promised a man to have a round at golf this afternoon."

"Very well, see you at dinner. I hope they've sent back my dress shirts from the wash. O, lord! I am sleepy."

I left him going up to bed, and went outside and ordered a carriage to take me down, and there I may say we parted for a considerable time. A cable was waiting for me in the hotel at Las Palmas to go home for business forthwith, and there was a Liverpool boat in the harbour which I just managed to catch as she was steaming out. It was a close thing, and the boatmen made a small fortune out of my hurry.

Now Coppinger was only an hotel acquaintance, and as I was up to the eyes in work when I got back to England, I'm afraid I didn't think very much more about him at the time. One doesn't with people one just meets casually abroad like that. And it must have been at least a year later that I saw by a paragraph in one of the papers, that he had given the lump of sheets to the British Museum, and that the estimated worth of them was ten thousand pounds at the lowest valuation.

Well, this was a bit of revelation, and as he had so repeatedly impressed on me that the things were mine by right of discovery, I wrote rather a pointed note to him mentioning that he seemed to have been making rather free with my property. Promptly came back a stilted letter beginning, "Doctor Coppinger regrets" and so on, and with it the English translation of the wax upon talc MSS. He "quite admitted" my claim, and "trusted that the profits of publication would be a sufficient reimbursement for any damage received."

Now I had no idea that he would take me unpleasantly like this, and wrote back a pretty warm reply to that effect; but the only answer I got to this was through a firm of solicitors, who stated that all further communications with Dr. Coppinger must be made through them.

I will say here publicly that I regret the line he has taken over the matter; but as the affair has gone so far, I am disposed to follow out his proposition. Accordingly the old history is here printed; the credit (and the responsibility) of the translation rests with Dr. Coppinger; and whatever revenue accrues from readers, goes to the finder of the original talc upon wax sheets, myself.

If there is a further alteration in this arrangement, it will be announced publicly at a later date. But at present this appears to be most unlikely.

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