

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 14, ISSUE 27

9TH JUNE 2019

THE CAMERA PHONE

BY RUAIRI
MCINNES
*YOU'LL SEE
THE DEVIL...*

FATLAND

BY
CHRISTOPHER
T. DABROWSKI
*DURING THE
NIGHT, I FIGHT
MYSELF...*

THE IMMORTAL BY STEVEN HAVELOCK

THE CHALLENGER IN THE VALE OF DRAGOS

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Schlock! Webzine

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Steven Havelock, GK Murphy, Jesse Zimmerman, H Rider Haggard, C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Tale of the Dragon* by lhotsky. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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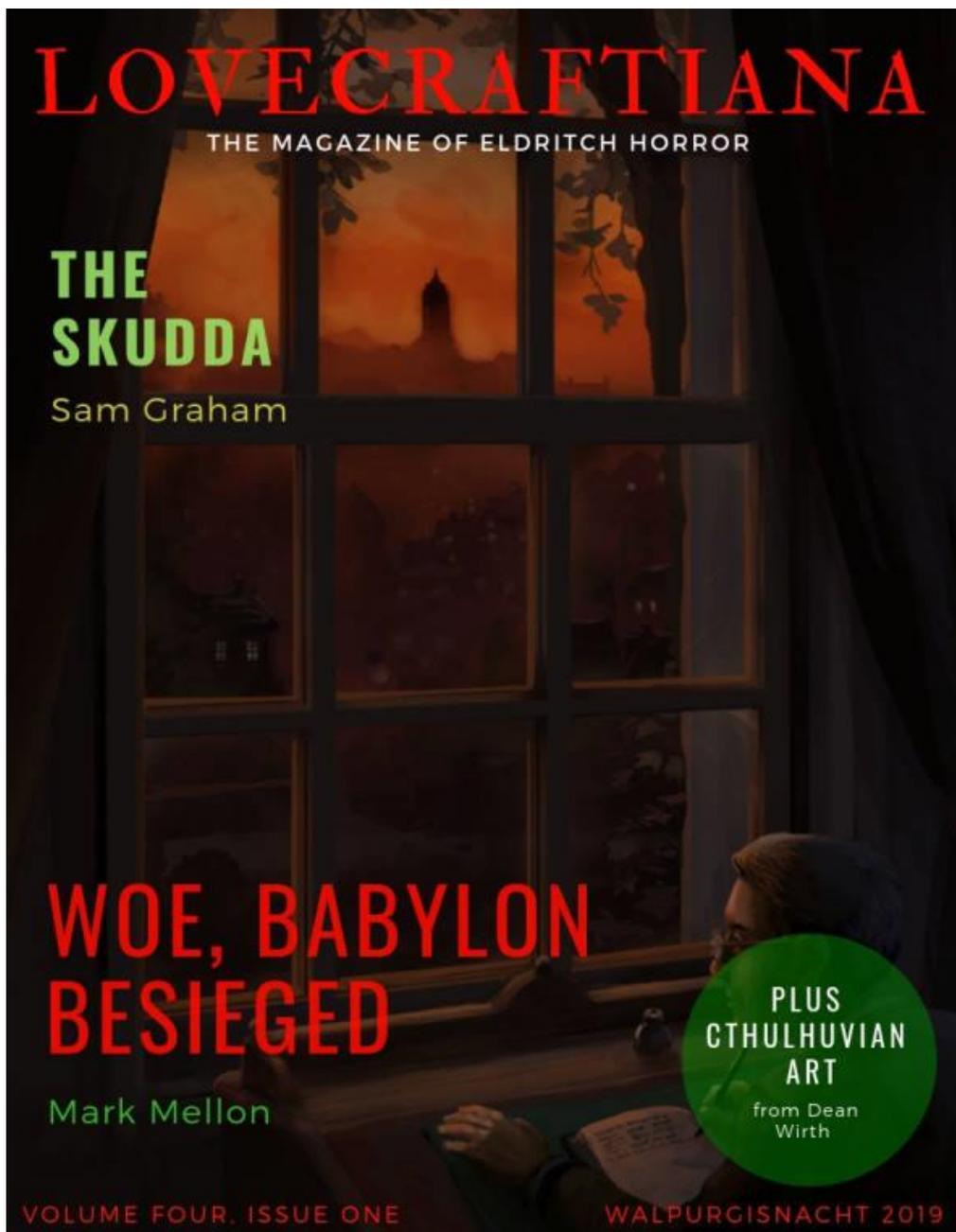
EDITORIAL

This week, dating proves dangerous for Ron. Friedrich Heine doubts his own sanity. A woman struggles with herself. Love is not what it seems to Jaks. And Mickey buys a jinxed guitar.

The Challenger is back, flying over the Adar Mountains with Flora and Fauna. Back in the Dark Ages, Gudruda welcomes Eric to Iceland. And on the isle of Atlantis, Queen Phorenice is acknowledged as a goddess.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



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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THE CAMERA PHONE by Ruairi McInnes

They had met online via a website called Solvent Singles. Ron had told her that he was a widower of independent means and that people called him 'Ron, not Ronald.' Eris explained that she was single and collected antiques as a hobby. She wrote that she had been working 'outside the UK' and had recently returned to London. She was rebuilding her social life.

The First Date

Ron slouched at the bar in a fashionable North London brasserie, nursing a deconstructed martini. At his elbow lay a biography of Alfred Hitchcock to help Eris recognize him. He wondered why she was late. His head throbbed and he hoped she wouldn't notice he had a hangover. Maybe he would get the chance to sneak away for a line of coke during the...

'Hey, Ron?'

He looked up. A woman he assumed was Eris was beaming down at him.

'Sorry I'm late, matey!'

She wore a leopard skin coat, blue jeans and gleaming Doctor Marten shoes. Her face had subtle wrinkles but Ron sensed she was a few years younger than him. She was very attractive. His pulse speeded up slightly. On her wrist was a tattoo of a flower. He complimented the design and asked what kind of flower it was. She explained it was a cherry blossom then changed the subject.

'I was shopping and lost all track of time.'

'Easily done, doll. Hope you treated yourself to something nice.'

'Yeah, I did actually. I went a bit crazy and bought myself an Art Deco fireplace clock by George Lavrov. It's from the 1930s.'

Ron said,

'Well, I know next to nada about vintage timepieces. I'm a film buff myself. That's how I like to kill a rainy afternoon. Vintage horror films are what I'm into.'

'Oh, that's cool. What would you recommend?'

'Quite a few, to be fair. I like Peeping Tom, Frenzy, Psycho. Classics, all of them.'

Eris nodded thoughtfully. Then she said,

'And when you're not watching films, what do you do?'

Ron paused. Looked serious.

'Got a stack of stocks and shares to cast an eye over from time to time.'

She smiled and said,

‘Wow, really?’

‘Yup, escaped the nine to five mucho time ago. I spend six months of the year in this rainy isle, six months in a tidy little gaff I’ve got in northern Spain, up in the Basque country. Top notch tapas in that neck of the woods. Sometime you should come along with me for a cosy winter break.’

‘Gosh, I can tell we’re going to get along just swimmingly.’

Ron stood up, planted one hand on each hip, and said,

‘So, tell me, what’s your poison, shweetheart?’

Eris grinned.

After the date, Ron texted his new driver. He had asked Eris if she wanted to go on somewhere but she had declined. She called a cab and left, assuring him she’d ‘had a super time.’

Ten minutes later, Ron was standing outside the pub when he heard the brakes of the Porsche screech. Richie stopped the car flush with the kerb.

When Ron got in the vehicle he thought of asking the meaning of the salamander tattoo on Richie’s forearm. But he didn’t. There was something quietly intimidating about the man. His driver said,

‘Where to?’

‘How about we grab a late one at the Wetherspoons at the Angel?’

‘No thanks.’

‘I’ve got a bump of charlie, if that’ll twist your arm?’

Richie wrinkled his nose, shook his head. Ron asked himself if he could put up with such aloofness. He felt like telling the lad he was lucky to get the work. Many ex-soldiers ended up jobless and even homeless. However, Richie had provided his own vehicle and, Ron did have to admit, the Porsche created a good impression.

Back home, after he’d opened all three locks on the door, he entered the basement. He surveyed the collection of antique clocks that filled the shelves. Online he looked up the price of the Lavrov that Eris had mentioned. It was estimated at £6,000 to £8,000. He whistled

quietly in appreciation. Ronald shuffled to the other side of the room and took his latest reel of film from its tin container. He had a connoisseur's devotion to celluloid Super 8 gauge and he, Ronald Foster-Smythe, simply wouldn't go near digital video. No siree. He planned to work for an hour on two on editing. After that he would replace the footage in its container and add it to the stack of similar receptacles.

A Second Date

When Ron arrived, Eris was busy texting on her phone. There was a bottle of wine and two glasses on the table beside her. She looked up and grimaced. Ron said,

'Everything okay, sweetheart? You're looking a bit stressed, to be fair.'

'Yes, uh, it's just a... um... technical problem. Sorry, it's nothing really. Very rude of me even to bring it up. I don't want to spoil the evening. I've been looking forward so much to seeing you again. Maybe I shouldn't really tell you this, but since we last met I haven't been able to think about anything else but you.'

Ron felt a rush of delight at her compliment then told himself to snap out of it. It was good to see Eris again but he had to stay focused on his real objective. He said,

'Okay, I hope your problemo gets sorted pronto. So, if I may be so bold as to ask, do you work in tech or some other decent paid graft?'

Eris laughed as she poured wine into both glasses and handed one to him.

'Oh no! I'm absolutely useless with machinery. Can hardly tell a nut from a bolt. No, I worked in Saudi Arabia for ten years as an English language teacher, got some good investment advice for my savings. These days I'm more or less free to do what I want with my time. We're birds of a feather, you and me, Ron. And you know what birds of a feather are meant to do?'

Ron raised his glass in tribute to their flourishing relationship.

They went out to the beer garden of the pub so that Eris could have a cigarette. Overtime workers trudged by on Upper Street and pleasure seekers sauntered alongside them on this mild October evening. He asked where she lived and she told him she was renting a flat directly above a bar called The Mascara in Stamford Hill. He knew it as a renowned gathering place for late drinkers. She explained that it was never too noisy as the flat below her separated her from the bar. Eris stopped talking for a moment and stared hard at Ron's face.

'You know something, Ron? You're very charismatic. I could see you being in movies, although maybe not a leading man, more a character actor.'

He felt a surge of adrenalin. Had she seen through his act? He forced a smile.

Eris chuckled and said to him, holding out her mobile phone,

‘I could film you with my phone for a screen test. If you look in this phone after midnight you won’t see your own face. Instead you’ll see the devil. Why don’t you have a glance?’

‘I’m not superstitious. Anyway, it’s too early.’

Ron felt irritated. Eris had seemed reassuringly straightforward. Suddenly she was behaving strangely, reminding him of one of those weird chicks who pierced their faces and queued to see bands with menacing names at The Garage at Highbury Corner. But he thought of the Lavrov clock and that gave him the resolve to appear unfazed. He said,

‘Shall we go on somewhere else after this?’

Her eyes twinkled and she shook her head. As she left the beer garden, Eris looked over her shoulder and winked and said,

‘Call me soon.’

Third Date

On the evening of Ron’s third date Richie could not park nearby so Ron arrived late at a chic but overpriced Islington eatery. He was pleased that Eris was unruffled by his delay but worried he would not have enough money to pay his half of the bill. Fifteen minutes later they were enjoying paella and house wine. Eris asked him more about his interest in films, his house in Spain and his portfolio of shares. And she gently broached the subject of his deceased wife. He was beginning to think her questions were becoming too intrusive when she received a text. Eris looked up from her phone and told Ron she needed ‘to be somewhere urgently.’ When he looked disappointed she said a friend of hers had split up with her boyfriend. She had to console her friend as she was ‘capable of doing something stupid when under stress.’ Hoping to impress her, he said,

‘My chauffeur will give you a lift. Don’t want you to be late, do we?’

They walked along a back street and he said

‘I’ve got a Merc garaged at home but tonight my driver’s in the Porsche.’

She frowned and asked

‘Is it far?’

‘We’re almost there.’

When they turned a corner and saw the car, Ron raised one hand in a regal greeting. Richie stared back. His arm rested on the lowered window of the car, holding a lit cigarette in his hand. The salamander on his forearm was half-covered by his blue denim shirt. Ron was perplexed to notice Eris’s frown convert into a wide-eyed smile. Ron strode forwards to hold open the car door, feeling like a true gentleman. Eris said

‘I’d rather sit in the front. The view’s better.’

Ron was baffled by her comment but sat down in the back. Richie started the engine and put his foot down on the accelerator.

They dropped off Ron outside his flat. Ron shouted goodnight but they both ignored him. Eris was showing her cherry blossom tattoo to Richie as the car shot off in a cloud of exhaust fumes. Ron felt somewhat anxious but could not work out why. He called Eris to say he had enjoyed a wonderful evening but got the answerphone.

Ron was tense after the interrupted meeting. A visit to a late bar was in order. He hailed a passing taxi and asked the driver to take him to The Marathon in Camden. The taxi driver took an indirect route, either by error or duplicity, and Ron became aware they were approaching The Mascara Bar. He looked for Eris’s flat, separated from the venue by one other apartment in between. He knew Eris was visiting her friend so he expected her place to be in darkness. But a crimson glow was shining from her home. Ron guessed she had left a light on by mistake or to deter burglars. As the taxi passed the building he noticed something moving near one of the windows. A large, spherical object was swaying between the half-opened curtains. It was some kind of hairless animal. Its sluggish movements suggested it was old or frail or both. In the centre of the sightless, fleshy globe was a human mouth. The lips were fluttering, as if attempting to communicate an urgent message.

The taxi sped on. Ron was rattled but told himself he was tired and was imagining things. He decided too much coke was ruining his sleep and causing paranoia. He would not mention the apparition to Eris. And tomorrow he would quit the nose candy.

The Cancellation

Unexpectedly and at the last moment, Eris cancelled their fourth date by text. She mentioned having to ‘look after a sick uncle.’

Ronald paced round his basement full of clocks and tins of cine film. He sipped strong lager. He snorted some cocaine, promising himself that he would pack in the habit the next day. He urgently needed that Lavrov clock in order to bring in some revenue. But he was also upset by the fact that Eris seemed to be losing interest in him. Ronald realized that he, Ronald Foster-Smythe, the Super 8 film connoisseur, was falling under the spell of a woman he barely knew. Maybe it had been a mistake to pretend he was a widower. That had been part of his backstory when deception was the only thing on his mind.

His musings stopped as he remembered the chauffeur would be expecting details of the shift tonight. He sent a text but got no reply. That needed him. He decided he would dispense with the services of that young upstart, forthwith.

The Final Date

When Ron approached the Porsche through icy rain, he spied Richie hunched up, concentrating on his phone. Ron crept up to the vehicle to see what was captivating the driver. Despite the weather, the window was open. On the mobile's screen was video footage of a creature whose form broke the laws of biology. A row of human eyes protruded from a thick, green tentacle. The limb was slowly flexing and the eyes were blinking. Ron craned forwards to observe better and the streetlight cast his shadow over Richie's lap. With intimidating speed, the driver flipped the phone over and spun in his seat. He glowered. Recognizing Ron, Richie's face unclenched and he said,

'Ready?'

Ron got in, intending to ask about the bizarre footage. But he thought he might have misinterpreted it so he pointed to himself and said,

'Guess what, tonight this lucky chap has been invited to dinner by the lovely Eris.'

A sneer appeared on Richie's face and lingered as if it was comfortable there.

Fifteen minutes later, Ron was walking up the stairwell steps to Eris's flat. He was carrying a bunch of flowers. It was out of character for him and he hoped he wasn't losing his head over her. When Eris opened the door he handed her the bouquet and said,

'Missed me did you, doll?'

Eris smiled tightly and placed the flowers on a table beside her. Seeing her expression, Ron felt uncomfortable. It was as if his presence was paining her. In an emotionless voice she said

'Is it raining?'

He tried to sound jaunty.

'All I'm saying is... it's not bad weather for ducks.'

Eris winced and beckoned him in. She shut the door behind him.

Outside Eris's flat, Richie waited in the car, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. He pressed the keypad on his phone and opened the photo of his costume for the Halloween rave. Richie's boyfriend Pete was a special effects designer and he'd done a professional job on the mask. All those motorized eyes really made it look like some bizarre alien animal. Richie wanted to finish the shift, shed his tough guy role and enjoy himself. He started up the engine, speculating if Ron was getting romantically involved. Perhaps, just this once, Richie thought he might drive off without explicit permission from his employer. It might annoy his boss but Richie was considering handing in his notice anyway. He really didn't like Ron. The

man was feeble but also egocentric. And all that cocaine was such a desperate grasp at some kind of rebel pose. In reality, his boss was about as threatening as custard.

Eris asked Ron if she could take his jacket. He told her he was still a bit cold and he would take it off in a moment. He did not tell her that within the additional pockets of the customized garment there were various weapons and his super-8 cine camera.

A police car drove slowly past the parked Porsche but Richie ignored it. He texted then called his employer but there was no reply.

Ronald sat by himself in an armchair in the living room. He imagined he was Alfred Hitchcock, waiting for an actor to arrive 'on set.' His mobile had beeped then briefly rang but he ignored it. Eris was fixing drinks in the kitchen. He could hear her whistling. Ronald ran his hands around the reel of fishing line in his pocket. The cocaine he had sniffed in the stairwell of the building had made him eager to get started. First he would deploy the Mace spray, then the fishing line, after that the knife. Soon he would be shouting 'Action!' To document the event he would use Super 8. Never digital. That was a given. One day the critics would recognize his artistry. And as an added extra he would acquire a valuable Lavrov timepiece. These days, arts funding was a nightmare and one had to use initiative. But where was that goddamn drink?

Richie decided to be proactive. Time to go. Then his phone beeped as a text arrived. It was not a message from the guvnor but from Richie's mother:

'Love the monster costume, dear. Have a great evening and how did you ever manage to pull Pete?'

'Hey Ron! Cheese!'

Ron turned. Eris caught him by surprise. Her camera phone flashed in his face. He was dazzled and dropped the can of Mace. A suffocating darkness replaced the burning light. He felt as if the ceiling and walls and floor were crushing him.

A few minutes later Eris went into the bathroom. She studied the thin scar, concealed by makeup and undetectable in dimly lit bars and restaurants. It ran from her mouth to her ear. She would never forgive her ex-husband for causing that. But, then again, what would be the use in forgiving a corpse?

Back in the living room, Eris flicked on the screen of her phone and selected Ron's holding cell. Ron had joined her other prisoners inside the device. His petrified face neared the observation camera positioned on a wall of his dungeon. One of his eyes appeared in close-up as he studied the camera lens. The pupil of that eye was dilated in terror and wet with tears. She switched off the phone again.

She checked that the phone was securely sealed. A few days ago, an inmate had escaped without her noticing and had hidden in the flat. Luckily the escapee was severely weakened from decades of incarceration and she had recaptured him before he got out onto the street.

Eris surreptitiously moved a curtain to look outside. The rain had stopped but the driver was still sitting in the car. She had to avoid him. She went into the bathroom and opened a window that faced onto the backyard. She clambered out and slithered down three storeys. She leapt over a wall topped with glass shards and landed in an alleyway. Music and conversation drifted from the Mascara Bar's ventilation grille as she lit a cigarette and congratulated herself on the successful completion of her work. She finished the cigarette and crushed it with her Doctor Marten shoe. Eris shrugged to loosen her shoulder muscles, inhaled cold night air and rose off the ground, spiralling upwards towards the clouds.

Mingled with the music from the bar, Richie heard a buzzing sound and pondered what it was. He had messaged Ron again but got no reply and decided that the sad chap might even have scored. Richie texted a reply to his Mum:

'LOL XX.'

He started up the engine of the Porsche and put his foot down on the accelerator as a meteor ascended in the night sky.

THE END

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THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

Chapter 8

I awoke somehow back in my bed. A cool piece of cloth stretched across my forehead as dizziness swam before my eyes. I blinked repeatedly for my vision to clear; many lit candles bringing light to the room. A figure stood at my bedside.

“It seems as though the medical professional is in need of medical attention himself,” Kasimir said with a smile on his lips.

I tried to smile in return, but a wave of pain slashed my brow. My head sunk back into the pillow and stayed there.

Kasimir continued, “Perhaps when you feel able we should attend to my sister’s dementia.”

“What time is it?” I queried in a hushed voice.

“Almost nine.”

“At night? I thought I had retired before then.”

“Nine in the morning. You slept well. Perhaps too well.”

I pressed my eyes shut, feeling somewhat embarrassed to be on my back when I should have been on my feet. “I’m sure I’ll be right as rain soon. How has your sister’s condition been?”

His eyes rolled over me from head to foot. “Clearly not well. She attacked you.”

Despite the pulse of pain in my temples, I sat propped up on my elbows. “She what?”

“I found you in her bedroom, my good man.” There was a smirk on his lips and a glint in his eye. “Possibly thinking you were a prowler. We have yet to have a proper introduction between the two of you.”

As I absorbed this revelation, recalling the tunnel and the room onto which the metal plate opened, Kasimir rose an eyebrow as he peered into the depths of my eyes. My memory was returning slowly.

“I was going to ask you what you were doing in her room. I found you on the floor at the foot of her bed. To what degree does your Herr Freud scientifically analyse somnambulism?”

He hadn’t mentioned the metal plate, and thus, I assumed, did not know of my trek through the tunnel. His presumption was that I was sleep-walking—so be it. I felt a slight blush burn my cheeks knowing that I had little excuse for being in Cybele’s private chamber.

Kasimir was not pleased. He was a good friend, an hospitable host, so I felt inclined to tell him the truth. The bookcase, the tiny window with the Ouroboros medallion on it, the doorway into the stone tunnel. Only the truth could set me free from his horrific assumptions that I may have attempted an onslaught on his sister’s virtue.

He chuckled from the depths of his chest after I had confessed, motioning to the bookcase as he stood and strolled towards it.

“And you tell me you had stacks of books piled around this room in order to gain entry to a hidden doorway behind the bookcase?”

I scanned the area that had begun the previous night’s adventure. Not a book sat on the floor, nor was out of alignment along the shelves. Even, it appeared, the missing volume was back in place, yet I could not read what it was from my vantage point.

With terrible pain, I slid off the bed, pressed thumb and forefinger into my temples as I walked bent over like an aged man toward the bookcase. I propped myself up by clutching a shelf as I scanned the book spines.

There was an absence of dust, but otherwise, no book appeared as though it had been shifted from its spot. The missing book that had plugged the gap—squeezing beside the philosopher’s thin tome—was the masterwork of Helena P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*.

I had only heard of this book once before, and never much about it. I had yet to retrieve a copy long enough to read even a few pages. This edition seemed to be as large, if not larger, than Tolstoy’s masterpiece.

“I tell you,” I said, turning to Kasimir, who returned to sit at the foot of my bed, hands folded on a thigh, “there’s a doorway behind here. Please, Kasimir, you must look—you must believe me!”

I pulled the volume of Madame Blavatsky’s work from the shelf to see the wooden back of the bookcase. Kasimir stepped to my side, a candle in hand, and peered into the gap on the shelf. Then he removed his gaze and directed it at me. Disbelieving. In a panic, I pulled more and more volumes from shelves above and below, waiting until the cut of the tiny window or of the greater doorway were clearly exposed. Kasimir ran the light over the emptied shelves—books lying like birds struck down by a hunter around our feet.

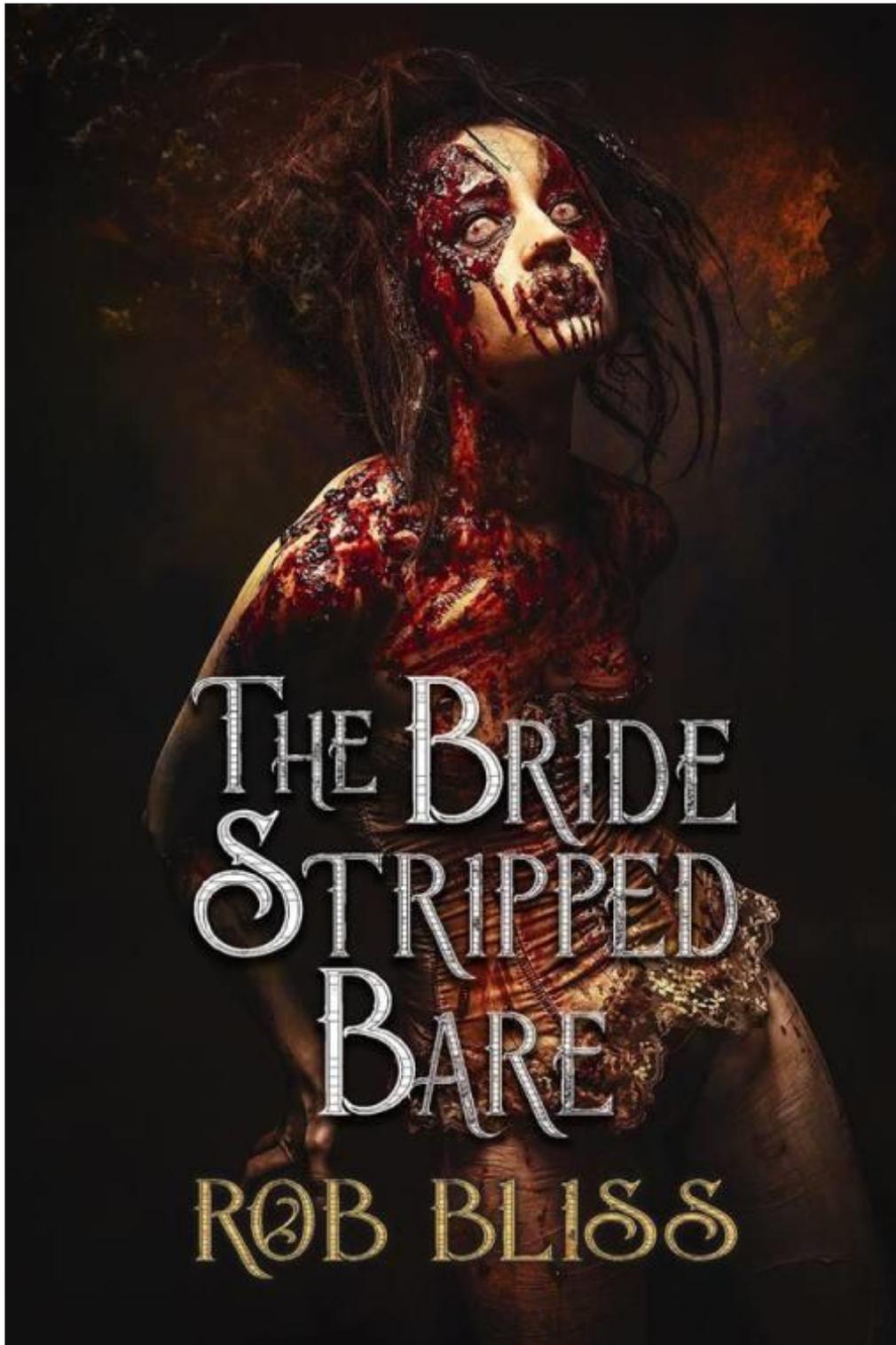
Behind the book, however, was a wall of stone.

“You have suffered from a concussion, I fear,” Kasimir spoke as though to a child. “Perhaps more bed rest would be in order before attending to my sister.” He took my arm and assisted my return to bed, like a father seeing to the needs of his invalid son. “I asked you to make a long, perhaps too exhausting, journey. I do apologize. Somnambulism is a fascinating phenomenon, I find—you really should propose it as a topic of study to Herr Freud, if he hasn’t already put it beneath his microscope. Do you use microscopes in psychological endeavours? No need to answer: we’ll discuss such topics another time. Rest is the thing, I would say. My apologies, but I feel it prudent to lock your door as you sleep. I wouldn’t want you to have any more accidents or encounters with my sister. We need you bright and chipper and ready to analyse your patient—not become one yourself. I’ll check in on you later.”

And with that he departed my room, turning a key in the lock. I lay my head back against the pillows and pulled the bedspread high to my neck, gazing at the stone wall still exposed behind the emptied shelves.

I tried to sleep, yet I was terrified that Kasimir was correct—that I had temporarily lost my mind.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



Available from Necro Publications.

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FATLAND by Christopher T. Dabrowski
Translation: Monika Olasek

DAY 1

*Our sweet which art in the cafe
Sweetened be thy cake
Thy sweetness come
Thy icing sugar come in my fridge, as it is in the cafe
Give us a shot of our daily insulin
and forgive us our greed
as we forgive our confectioners
and lead us not into hyperglycaemia
but deliver us from excessive weight
Yum!*

Yes, that is just what the prayer of all sweetmaniacs should sound like.

And although my heart (or maybe rather my stomach) aches, I must admit I am one of eager worshipers, who practice gluttony every night. I belong to the church of the Giant Hunger. At night, I feed and during the day I externalize myself, bending my neck over the bogs.

During the night, I fight myself.

I look into the fridge and see the emptiness—no sweets. So, I put on any clothes I have at hand and I go on a pilgrimage to my Mecca: the only nearby cafe open at nights.

It is a temple for people like me; and as every other temple, this one also squeezes the last of its sheep endurance. Open at night—no problem, but the prices are also a lot higher (the night fee, just as in a cab, ha, ha! Not to mention the fact, that you won't find the best delicacies at this hour—they are now safe in the stomachs of the more civilized daily sweeteaters.)

Yesterday, I weighed fifty kilos, now it is fifty one!

After my morning pooh! On empty stomach!

To quote the South Parke dudes: "Fuck fuckety fuck fuck!"

I went down my handy—or rather footy—torturer, or, to be more precise, from the fucking scales.

And then a puke! And another! And one more!

(I'll surely have an oesophagus cancer for).

And once more I put my finger into my throat as deep as it goes, I almost tickle the remnants of the tonsils that were removed when I was a child.

‘Yyyyghueee!’ that was the so-called non-puke, my stomach tightened, the throat did the same but nothing more went out.

The weight is still fifty one... “Fuck fuckety fuck fuck!”

I’ll hang myself!

Easy to say, harder to do. Before I would make my mind, it will be a week or even more, and until then—if the things would go the same as now—I would weight so much, that the best rope would not endure the load.

Okay, no more jokes. But really, you may actually get mad when you suddenly gain a few pounds out of the blue.

I didn’t eat a lot yesterday—just a meringue, a puff and a donut, AMEN!

Oh, right, there was also the dinner at my friends’ ... a mortal sin: I ate after 6 p.m.!

A whale! A pig! A three-door wardrobe! A cachalot! A pumpkin! A donut! A jelly! An elephant! ‘That’s the way the eternal gluttons end up, do you want the same?’ my internal nagger was nagging me.

Onto my knees. The toilet. The finger. The tonsil phantoms.

‘Yyyyghueee!’

And again nothing, but at least I know I would be a perfect choice for the role of a zombie.

Okay, this day must begin somehow. I must survive it, live through it, right?

DAY 2

I woke up, got up and had a pooh. Of course, I didn’t eat my breakfast yet.

The scales and again the sentence—fifty two kilos this time!

‘Fuck fuckety fuck fuck!’ I screamed as loud as the voice chords allowed. I even didn’t give a fuck that it was 7 a.m. and my sensitive-eared neighbour was probably still sleeping like a baby.

He has a good time, though, he must be dreaming one of those pinkie little dreams of his, with a thin nymphet who is hakuna matating with him in all the possible and impossible ways—I thought with jealousy. Of course, he wouldn’t have to bother with two kilos overweight. Men, in us it is always visible, they have lux, just some intelligence and “the thing” would do just fine.

Fifty two kilos!

How come? How? Where from?

Yesterday, I was wiggling on my bed in evening tortures watching some cheap, dirty romance (starred in by all skeletons—at least when it comes to actresses). I was almost peeing onto the bed in order not to go on a sweet pilgrimage. I even avoided the fridge! And now what, fifty two kilos?!

I was lying with my rumbling, empty stomach, and I thought I was going mad because of that sucking inside. And what?

A big nothing!

How is it possible that something may be created of nothing? That's against the rules of physics!

A mirror. Squeezing of the sides.

A fatty fold is forming...

Lovehandles, some people say that some men like to grab and to squeeze those sides during the sex thing.

But I didn't want any fucking lovehandles, no handles!

But if nothing changes, I would have ones like wow!

God, why? Why?

No, that's not like this—it must have gathered somehow from the whole of yesterday plus the sweets from the day before yesterday, and it all got summed up. I've read somewhere that if you eat late at night it goes straight into the sides.

Remember that! Remember that! And do not be lured by your weaknesses!

Today, it is the beginning of a healthy starvation diet—my mind is made up.

Only hectolitres of water and nothing else. An immediate ban of mandible-chewing is implemented, i.e. ban of moving the jaw and an abso-fucking-lute blockade on the oesophagus-stomach-bowels route.

Return vermicular movement is of course allowed.

And today, it is just activity, activity and once again activity—but of the normal type: gym, racecourse...

Yes, even if it would take crapping with nails, vomiting with razor blades or singing a North Korean national hymn, I will lose the fucking overweight! There is no other option!

Oh, Jesus, oh mother, oh, help me! I thought this would be just like in the movies or the commercials: me smiling, full of energy and will and my legs are moving by themselves. And the fat is burning, burning, burning.

And nothing; after a mere five minutes, I was breathing like an asthmatic during an attack of asthma. My legs were mixing up as if I were drunk. I got such a pain in the side that I thought I was in labour—although I cannot remember when it was the last time that someone was trying to fertilize me.

My bed fights are a separate subject—for quite a long time now, I prefer to make love with my imagination and my skilled fingers. Then, no one is watching my unfit body, which makes me the only one person who knows about this unpleasant secret.

Breathing with difficulty, I stepped down from the torture machine.

Maybe I'll try something else, easier for a change?

A lot of strange machines with switches, ropes and so on—no, it must be too difficult, too complicated for me.

I just cannot let anyone know I have no idea what's going on. Surely, a lover boy would show up who would try to 'help me'. A man's pity with a sexual attraction in the background.

Looking into the mirror, emptying a bottle of water, yes—that's a good idea. I'll just catch my breath and get back to the running machine.

There was a group of girls next to me.

At first, I didn't listen to them; even if I wanted to, I wouldn't be able, because my tireless heart was pumping the blood like mad, babum, babum, babum was pulsing in my ears.

When the pounding heart cooled down, I started eavesdropping and I understood that the girls were having the same problem as I was. They were all in deep regret that for the last two days they've been just putting on weight, although they were exercising, exercising! Just like me...

(Fuck me too! And fucking fuck me!)

...well, maybe with the exception of all that exercising.

DAY 3

No, this cannot be happening. This scales is mad! It must be, no other way.

Fucking electronics, it gets broken so easily—of course it is better to assume that the scales is broken than to accept the fact that despite starvation diet and intensive (well, Okay, I exaggerated a bit) exercise, despite all this, I gained 2 kilos.

Fifty four kilos!

Fu.... no, I will not curse anymore; I'll take it with dignity, and besides, the damn scales is mad for sure.

DAY 4

I want to bite, scratch, scream.

No, I'm not having an orgasm!

I want to curse like a taxi driver, take out somebody's eyes, pull somebody's tongue away, hit the dirty head against the wall.

I want to die—I gained seven kilos during the last four days.

I weigh fifty seven kilos and...

... and I really want to die, but....

... but I'll turn the TV on instead.

My royal comforter hereby informs me that beginning on today, I can stop blaming, nagging and teasing myself; it is not my fault and not the fault of some fucking family genes or a bad metabolism, and maybe even (o, sweet fate) it is not the fault of sweetymania attacks...

The telemelevision said that for the last few days EVERYBODY, regardless of their race, sex, age, education, height, penis length or lack of it, regardless of the manner of tying a tie, shoelaces (rope on the neck) and regardless of the confession, elimination, fighting... generally ABSOLUTELY EVERYBODY on Earth are gaining weight.

Even those who are hungry...

The whole humankind is gaining weight and no one knows why.

Maybe...

... TEEET, TEEET the green men shot the Blue Planet with some kind of a cosmic radiation to take over our motherland—the Earth—without going into a conflict or shedding blood.

TEEET TEEET, ha ha ha! I must be going mad...

Click, the telemelevision is off.

Click, the telemelevision is on.

And what?

And nothing. The same again, with just this difference that now there is some brainy scientist on the screen, shitting something non-understandable in a language-of-all-the-scientists-on-the-world about the weight gaining.

And as for my thoughts and observations: if this continues, sumo will become the most popular sport on Earth, ha, ha, ha!

DAY 5

The newest news: a wave of suicides among the supermodels.

Naomi Campbell, Gisele Bundchen, Heidi Klum, Kate Moss, all the most famous ones, who would have thought...

Why did those women pay so much attention to the weight that its increase became an act of a personal insult for them? Why didn't they pay so much attention to life? Well, sure, those few additional kilos did tear away their world, but it was the same with mine!

Should I kill myself now?

Okay, I was talking that I will commit a suicide, but I would never do it in reality, it was just talking! Just talking! I admit, this weight gaining is depressing, it's very fucking depressing, but I still want to live, against all odds, against everything.

What else is there in the telemelevision?

Today, the president made his proclamation.

Mister President has become an unhappy owner of the second chin—he hadn't have one when I saw him in the telly a few days ago.

Generally, he got round all over and started to be similar to a used teddy bear.

Actually, all the faces on the screen got wider—if I didn't know what was going on, I would think that my TV is broken and widens the picture.

Right, and getting back to the president's chin, I must admit that this time it is finally justice—big or small, we all suffer equally, we are all annoyed and it is finally not that just the richest can afford the therapy. This time, the money is of no value, as no one knows how to treat this shit.

Hmmm, maybe that's why they are talking about it all the time? Maybe if it was just about the poor people or the social margin, they would pour warm urine on it and focus on the incoming elections. That's possible.

DAY 6

I'm going to Africa!

No, I'm not. I'm just kidding, just a kind of a black humour.

Or... maybe I should go there—for men in some African tribes, fat women are an ideal of beauty, and the more folds they have, the greater is their belly, the more sexy they are.

And I do have a belly, quite a big one.

I promised myself not to get on the scales again, my picture in the mirror should suffice.

My skin on the face is hanging, I look like a pumpkin and a hamster—I get fatty cheeks and a belly, a tummy-pillow, horror, fat, jellyfatus pospolitus.

I was supposed to stay out of scales, but if you're drowning, do it correctly; when you're getting depressed, go the whole way down with a dig. I hopped on the electronic killer of hope who just squeaked and announced I gained another five kilos since yesterday.

Sixty five kilos!

Fuck me, shit, shit, shit!

Everyone has it, so what! Let them have it but I cannot accept it! No, no, no, no way!

DAY 7

Gluttony.

Everyone is trying not to eat, they start all those miracle diets with immediate effects, jump into the deep water by starving, but I don't give a shit, I've been there, I've done that.

Ha, ha, it feels good that I can eat that I want and don't have to give a damn!

What should I care about if I will gain weight, anyway?

I could even eat negative calories if there were any, and I would still put on weight.

I am beginning to TEEET! TEEET! believe in that theory of aliens and conquest of Earth I invented TEEET! TEEET! ha ha ha!

Or maybe it is some kind of an Indian curse with a delayed effect, thrown of pale faces by one of the shamans ages ago? Uhh, uhh, who knows?

Gluttony.

I pig out on pizza with a delicious cheese, I eat Nutella, spoonful after spoonful—slowly, without hurry, taking delight, I glut myself on ice-cream—vanilla, raspberry, pistachio; I eat fries, donuts, mud cake. Chomp! Chomp! Chomp! Champ! Champ! Champ! This is life!

I love gluttony!

And I feel heavier and heavier, and I have less and less energy, and I am under the force of an enormous sluggishness.

But what the heck, whether I eat or not, this is a normal way to feel when you weight as much as I do so...

Hip hip hurray for gluttony!

Chomp! Chomp!

Champ! Champ!

DAY 8

The designers appeal to the models to accept what is going on, and to quit committing suicides—they guaranteed to design clothes in new sizes, of course only until every gets back to normal.

‘Until it gets back to normal, good one!’ I was really disgusted. ‘As far as I know, nothing seems to be getting back to normal’

I walk around the house naked.

Naked, because even the widest, the biggest of my clothes do not fit me anymore.

I do not have to go outside—I did a great shopping and my fridge is full of tasty food.

My little private apocalypse, ha, ha, ha

And what if the situation would make me go outside? What would I wear?

I had a solution ready at hand: I would wear a bed sheet!

I would look like the 21st century version of the Statue of Liberty!

Hiick! Hi, hi, hi! Hiick! I am stoned like a March rabbit and I just got a drunkard's hiccups. Again...

I got some alcohol, too—a big shopping—one alcohol addict would not empty it within a month, not to mention myself.

If this doesn't end, I do not want to be too conscious. If this is supposed to continued, I want it to be fun! If this is supposed to carry on, I will do something crazy—I'll go vomiting onto the balcony and...

Hiick!

... I will aim at loaded, slow passers-by.

By the way, what's the situation behind the window?

The number of moving vehicles got desperately lower, most people cannot get into their cars any more. The pedestrian movement is also minor with decreasing tendency; probably everybody—just like me—stayed at their homes and try to assimilate the hard truth everyone his/her way (again, just like me).

The wind is rather moderate, from the west, low rain, gain, pain and drain is also not dry, HIICK!

By the way, I wonder what are they wearing? How do they cope with this issue?

Are most families naturists? Do parents with their cheeks flushing red explain their kids that's the way it must be or maybe they try to wind something about them?

And what about families with many kids? There is nothing to put on all those fat children.

The world of the naked = The world of the fat!

Hi, hi, hi! Hiick!

Should I turn the TV on or not?

I'm trying not to watch TV and not to surf the Internet. Why should I worry? It is better to hiick take this all less seriously. But on the other side, it is a bit tempting... well, maybe tomorrow.

Hiick!

DAY 9

Hiick, totally awesome, simply awesome, I have a hangover of the century!

I'm all coated with a fatty sweat—oily droplets full of toxins that the body did not cope with flew down the triple chin. Paleness, not to say whiteness of my poorly-looking face was contrasting against the shadows surrounding my bloody eyes—shadows deeper than the depths of the Hades. My mouth is dry as the Gobi desert, my tongue is so harsh that I would be able to use it instead of the pumice stone soon. Misery and despair, simply speaking!

I decided that in this situation... it would be wisest to get drunk again.

The end is near—I can feel, without even getting up from the bed, that my fat is flowing to the sides. Which can mean only one thing—I got horrifyingly fat since yesterday.

I don't even want to know how much I weigh.

If I stood on a scales right now, I would most probably sentence it to crushing.

Should I get up or lay? Sleep the hangover over or treat it, water it with percentages?

Or maybe I should do myself good?

Well, if a miracle happens and this would end, stop, I would have to do myself good on my own for the rest of my life—after all who would like to have such an elephant?

Ugh...

...now, now, wait a minute! Maybe it won't be so bad?

Accounting for the fact that there will be just “the elephants” like me in the world, and considering that every man is just a man and sooner or later needs to get laid... yesss, it can still be quite nice!

Probably new ideal of beauty will be set, the men will have to adapt quite soon, they will like the fat, folds, big thighs and... it is just one way or the other!

But there's one problem...

they'll be really fat too.

Well, Okay, it will be easier to adapt for us, as for many women, the most sexy male organ is the BRAIN.

Uuuugh! I sat.

It took a lot of effort. I'm not only very fat, I also have a fucking hangover.

Plans for today: Water the hangover, then gluttony, excessive drinking and watching telemelevision with a strong percentage anaesthesia.

Watered, drunk, eaten full and lazy.

Not caring about anything, lying on the couch with a remote control in a hand and a cigarette between my teeth (what the hell, since the end is near, no cancers are dangerous for me anymore, dear Minister of Health). Hiick!

Click, and the TV is on.

On the screen, there is a fat face of my favourite reporter. Well, he used to be quite hot, but now he's just a tower of fat shaking like a jelly.

Puffing and sweating like a pig, he's reading the news with difficulty.

'The government took over the factories of liposuction machines. Increased production was ordered. Other factories are being taken over in order to transform them into liposuction machine production plants. After liposuction of the excessive fat in their bodies, special emergency teams move around the cities and offer first aid to the fattest citizens.'

Change of the channel:

The president has an appeal to the citizens:

'If anywhere anyone of you cannot leave the home and has an empty fridge or has run out of water, he should hang a flag out of his window. We will know that he needs help right away! Fellow countrymen, do not panic! Our regularly liposuctioned special scientific team working really hard on how to deal with the mysterious epidemic. Soon, everything should get back to normal.'

Normal, good one!

The planes do not fly. The trains do not run. The buses, trams and subway are out. The traffic is dead. The stores are closed and no one even tries to steal from them as everyone is too fat

to perform such an extreme sporting act. The factories do not manufacture anything anymore. And people will soon start dying of hunger, thirst or lack of space in their own homes.

And this dumb head, the president, believes that a small group of people with their fat sucked away for a moment can reach all those in need on time and suck their fat away... of course only for just a few minutes. An idiot!

No need to fool ourselves—most of us will die!

I can merely move and my giant belly starts to cover my pussy!

And what next? It will reach my knees and make it difficult to walk, I would have to keep it up like an organic dress or something. And what then? I'll end up like Jabba from the Star Wars—a large fold of fat hardly moving around the flat. And what is he fucking here?

DAY 10

I heard that liposuction machines cannot suck fat on time, they choke with the mucous, yellowish fat viciously torn away from still more and more puffy bodies—somebody wrote it on the Internet that gets less and less updated.

God, I get fat so horribly fast—so fast that I can almost see it.

I used the last of my energy to get to the window and hang out a flag. And when I did it, it felt like a marathon.

When I was entering the kitchen, I could fit into the door frame, when I was going out, I had to squeeze myself into it.

I was growing, puffening and fattening at a horrifying rate.

I tried to get to the living room, puffing like an engine.

There's the drink cabinet and my alcohol and cigarette stock in it!

Get drunk, get stoned, be unconscious at the moment of this cruel death—this is all that matters now.

“The liposuction machines cannot suck fat on time”—I doubted that anyone with such a machine will come to me and if he did, I wondered if he would make it on time. I'm getting fat so fast that I would have to use a vacuum cleaner to suck the fat away—along with the bowels—to make it work somehow.

I got stuck in the door to the living room.

For a moment I was engulfed by a freezing panic—such a panic that I got sober at once.

No, I won't die this way!

And certainly not the sober way!

I clench my teeth and use all the muscles hidden under the mountains of fat.

All my effort is aimed at forcing my body into the living room somehow.

I made it! With a loud splash, I land with my huge paunch on the floor.

I crawl to the drink cabinet.

And here my story ends. What interesting can I tell you? That I am drunker with every gulp? That besides the fact that I am getting more and more drunk I also get more and more fat? There's nothing to tell—you know how this ends:

No happy end, the help won't make it on time. And probably soon I'll drop out!

Fine! And thank you, oh Lord, for the vodka. Thank you, oh Lord, for the liquor. Thank you for the wine! Thank you for the cigarettes!

At least I'll get totally stoned before I die.

Half an hour later:

It is time to go in a blaze of gloryyyy! Hiick!

Time to show the world who's in charge! Hiick!

Fuuuuuuuck everyphing! Can ya eeeeeear meee? Hiick!

... and the darkness fell down.

—

TEN DAYS EARLIER:

The time has come—he has promised them to come again before the end of the world.

And the moment has come to keep the promise.

It is time to perform judgment, but before judgment, he must experience.

And to experience, he must become a man, experience his fate.

The choice was completely random—just some woman, Sandra.

Sandra weighed one hundred and twenty kilos.

Being Sandra, God experienced all her suffering—all the humiliations and shame she went through all those years.

And God didn't like it!

All those kids calling her fat pig, pumpkin, fat-ass.

Those few-year-old monsters pushing little Sandra, spitting on her—and knowing she would not do the same, she would never catch them.

And when she was growing older, all those handsome boys looking at her with scorn...

And the sadness in her soul, loneliness, feeling of being separated, bitterness...

In the college, no one wanted to sit with her, no one invited her to the parties.

And around her, there were tones of films, videos, advertisements full of slim girls...

She was surrounded by advertisements of agents that would make her slim—none of them worked and she was only getting depressed by looking at all those photos of women who lost weight thanks to a miracle effect—of women “before the therapy” and “after the therapy”.

All that despair and hopelessness. That unwillingness to live and temptation to die.

And still the fear of death, feeling that it would be wrong, that life must be suffered, lived till the end, enforced.

And God pitied her.

Dancing—not for you, fat pig.

Sport—not for you, non-mobile jelly.

Sex—are you mad, who would want you?

Maybe a short hug—are you kidding, no one would touch you even with a stick! Laughing
stock. Rejection. Laughter. Nagging.

And God got pissed!

And God thought that humankind does not deserve to exist any longer.

And He believed that this world was not a good experiment.

He decided it was high time to end this.

And leaving Sandra's body, God knew how the humankind would die.

Let them all experience obesity!

Let them swell and grow with fat.

Let it be!

And God left...

He left Earth and people.

And He knew what He did was right.

He punished the recreants.

THE END

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THE IMMORTAL by Steven Havelock

Jaks saw the silver palace in the distance, shining in the two bright suns of this planet.

I have travelled through space for a millennia for this! Through space and through time.

He gritted his teeth and set forth for the final part of his journey.

Only a couple of miles.

He looked at the two bright suns shining down on him harshly and incessantly.

I feel like I'm in an oven!

He trudged forward for several hours.

Nearer, I'm getting nearer! She will be there, my one and only true love!

The thought spurred him onwards, gave him new found strength.

A noise! What the hell was that?

Two giant spiders exploded out of the nearby sand.

They're heading straight for me!

He pulled out his laser pistol and opened fire. The one to the right went down in an explosion of greenish blood.

The other is too fast!

The second spider leaped for him. He held out his right hand and a silvery glasslike shield flashed out blocking the spiders attack but sending him flying backwards with the blow of the spider.

The spider leaped at him again. He managed to get to his knees and he let rip with the laser pistol, again and again. The second spider exploded into a greenish mush.

He dragged himself to his feet.

It's not how we fall down that counts, but how we get up.

He looked at the two dead spiders, one of whose leg was writhing mechanically. He took a closer look.

Mechanoids! Who could build such a thing and why? Whoever it is their skill in robotics is far in advance of mine.

He started on his journey again to the silvery palace. This time an uneasy feeling of fear and apprehension in his gut.

Wish I could have landed my spaceship nearer, but that was the best spot, the only hard ground in this God forsaken sandy wilderness!

Eventually, when the sun was lowering, he made it to the palace.

At last, I am nearly there; I will see my true love once more!

He entered the palace and saw a clockwork spiral staircase which went up and up. He wiped a bead of sweat of his brow and felt stultified in his body suit that was dripping with sweat on the inside.

I'm nearly there! My love, my one and only true love awaits. I didn't cross millions of miles through space and time for nothing.

Eventually totally exhausted and on the verge of collapsing he made it to the top of the spiral staircase.

I'm there! I'm there!

He saw a large silver door in front of him. He pushed it open.

“My love! My true love, you are here!”

He saw his bride who had been snatched away from him on his wedding day now sitting on a golden throne.

It has been worth it, it has all been worth it.

Tears of joy came to his eyes but he held them back not wanting his love to see his weak side.

I never learnt who snatched her. All I saw was a portal open up and an old man with a white beard and long red cloak drag her into the portal with him.

He looked at his beloved.

“I have travelled through space and time to rescue you, my love!”

He saw her face wet with tears.

“I know,” she said. She looked up wiping away the tears and continued, “They all say that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wished you hadn't come, but somehow I knew you would.”

“My love! My one and only true love, we are destined to be together forever and ever.”

She looked away. He saw a trail of tears streaming down her beautiful face.

“My love, why do you cry? I am here at last to save you!”

“Do it!” she said.

Just then he heard a noise behind him.

There’s someone standing behind the door!

He saw an old man in a dark red cloak who had a long white beard. He was holding a laser pistol.

“You! You’re the thief that stole my wife on my wedding day!” His blood turned cold as he saw the gun gleam in the fading sunlight. “Why? Why would you do such a thing?”

“Tell him,” the man said with finality in his voice.

He looked towards his wife.

“I’m sorry, I’m so so sorry,” she said.

“What do you mean?” he asked, “Don’t you love me?”

“I do love you, I love all of the ‘yous’, that’s what makes this so hard,” she wiped her tears away. “I have lived here with the love of my life, my husband for millennia, and not a week has gone by when you or one of you has not come to save me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I love you and always will.”

“Then why trap me and try to kill me?”

The man behind cleared his throat. “Because I am you!”

“What?”

“I am the future you.”

His love spoke. “I tried to spend time with you, but you are too immature and impulsive, believe me, I have tried and finally I have found true love in you, but the old wiser you.”

“When where?”

“Not in this time dimension but in another. You have not realized yet that when you time jump you create an alternate dimension with another you. There are thousands of ‘yous’ as you have time jumped thousands of times.”

“I thought who could make those mechanoid spiders, and now I know.” He took a deep breath readying himself.

“He’s going to do it,” she said.

“Me! Only someone as ingenious as I could make mechanoids like that and this slivery palace!”

Jaks dived sideways and pulled out his pistol. In a millisecond he took aim and fired. The laser went straight through the old man as if he wasn’t there.

“They all try that,” she said.

A hologram!

The old man appeared next to his true love. He opened fire. Jaks saw the laser flash towards him and blackness assailed him. Jaks’ body crumbled to the floor and did not move again.

“I am sorry, my love,” said the old man.

“It is not your fault.” Tears streamed down her face.

Just then a beeping noise sounded from the old man’s watch.

“Another interstellar space ship has just entered our solar system. There will be another one here by the end of the week.” His face was pained, “If only I’d known that every time I time jumped I created a new version of myself.”

His bride and only true love got up from the golden throne. She held his hand and they walked towards the door on the right to their living quarters.

THE END

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THE ELECTRIC TRICKSTER by GK Murphy

It was always Mickey's dream to convert one of the upstairs bedrooms into a music studio. He shared the house with his partner Sophia, currently a 32 year old trainee nurse, three years Mickey's junior.

Presently, Sophia Beeston was at work. Because she'd suffered a minor accident in the home, where she tore some tendons in her left arm, she had been advised by her superiors to toil in Administration at the hospital before taking up ward duties again, perhaps in a couple of months' time, sometime in September, once she was all healed up. She agreed to these terms, despite having to stay at home more with Mickey, and being unable to drive around in her beloved yellow BMW.

The accident had been peculiar and especially bloody. She'd dropped a glass sweet jar in the kitchen, and as she swept the mess up, she slipped and fell forwards, the glass shards penetrating her left palm as she tried to steady herself, causing immense bloodshed and pain all along her arm. Most probably the most painful experience of her life...

Mickey Hutchinson was in all sense of the word a die-hard hippie who loved nothing more than to smoke weed, get drunk most nights on malt whiskey, as well as indulge in his main two lifelong passions, which were to play electric guitar and tinkle his beloved Roland synthesizer in one of the upstairs bedrooms—the one he now wished to now convert, once he arranged with a local charity shop to come and collect all the junk from the room like the bags of books, old clothes, CDs and DVDs, comic books...crap like that.

He was unemployed and had toiled on Government PIP (Personal Independence Payment) and ESLA (Employment Support Living Allowance) benefit payments for the last twelve years. To his favour (perhaps), he suffered from a troublesome (sometimes) schizophrenic disorder and manic depression, so was quickly deemed unfit as well as incapable of surviving in the workplace. For Mickey, full-time or even voluntary work would likely have caused much stress and harm to his overall mental wellbeing and bouts of depression and severe mood swings which—quite often—spurred many unwelcome notions and ideas regards to submitting to mental pressure and taking his own life, ideas which were becoming more frequent of late...something Mickey could not control, despite the gamut of medication he digested daily in pill form and the depot injection he received every Tuesday at the hospital on the borders of town, incidentally where Sophia worked as a nurse. How ironic—a schizophrenic dating a registered nurse—and that fucking sharp needle in the buttock once a week was truly a massive pain in the arse!

Yes, this was often his very own joke—the one he said to people, those who listened to Mickey. It could be hard being schizophrenic. Nobody listened sometimes. Nobody cared about nut-jobs in the community, as well he knew, if only judged by the rotten tomatoes and eggs tossed at the front windows, the local kids battering on the front door some nights before running away in the dark, the looks and stares off punters on the street. It all added up to make a great ball-ache for Mickey, making that weekly stabbing pain in the arse seem minute.

Sophia was good for him. He needed Sophia Beeston. Yet, as ever in his mind, how long would blond 32 year old Sophia put up with him and his 'weird' ways?

He wasn't fucking weird, though.

He was just a fucking schizophrenic at the end of the day and weren't communities in England and throughout the world becoming less bothered about folks like him, as they achieved a greater tolerance and attitude towards dealing with mental health issues?

That was complete and utter bollocks.

It was just like racism. There would never be a cure. People loved to gossip in corners, on the street, in pubs and clubs, and they loved to naysay everybody, whether it involved the colour of their skin or their disabilities, and for these cunts there would always be that line in the sand they loved to cross, like it made them better people to do so—fuck niggers, queers and nut-jobs. It had continued for hundreds of years and would for many years to come. You would have to have been a fool to imagine change and equality would rise to the surface. Simply put, no, no...never.

Mickey and many like Mickey were not that dumb they didn't see this.

Today was a special day for him, though. For the last two month, he'd saved some cash. Whilst in Wilkinson's shop a little time ago, he'd spotted a note on the advertisement board near the entrance, where somebody was selling a Gibson Trickster electric guitar for £700, giving only a telephone number to call if interested. Mickey had rang, since he'd seen these guitars and understood they were revered, so asked the guy over the phone to keep hold of it for him for a short while until he found the money to buy it. The guy, who must have been ninety year old, agreed to these terms, and it was about an hour ago, the guitar was delivered to the house by the old dude, the correct money was paid, and this outstanding guitar was Mickey's to love and keep. A work of art, yes indeed—a cherry red six-string electric Gibson Trickster...simply beautiful!

Immediately, Mickey took it upstairs to the wannabe man cave and plugged it into a trustworthy Marshall amp, since the old boy that delivered it stated the guitar was tested and tuned, so all ready to set up and just plug in and play. The entire guitar utterly amazed, since the Trickster had no marks or blemishes on the body, the fret-board was straighter than a virgin's erection and the silver chrome lovely and spotless. Mickey named the beast in his possession Tricky—Tricky the Gibson, only the fucking best!

But Mickey wouldn't play it. No—he'd wait. He'd save the experience to share with the other love of his life, Sophia, who—talking about tolerance—tolerated Mickey to the hilt and loved the man dearly, so Sophia was worth it, his love, his muse. Mickey wanted to share Tricky with her and make it a kind of event. But no, wait...

He wanted to share it with Bruno just as much.

He was the house chocolate Labrador, and just as special as his girlfriend, and Mickey had been best mates with Bruno longer than he had the delightful Sophia Beeston.

Bruno was downstairs sleeping on the settee. The fat lump, it was all he ever done!

In the bedroom upstairs, however, something stirred in Mickey, an emotive experience whose call had to be answered, however weird and perverse his response might have been. The

cherry red Trickster sat on its stand in the corner of the room, its sole presence and look filling Mickey with a deep sense of love, or rather, an unquenchable desire to act on his feral instinct.

Extracting his erect cock from his jeans, one hand masturbated as the other fondled and caressed the guitar's slick body, from its pick-ups to its bridge, from body to neck. Leaning forward, he teased the strings with the bulbous head of his hard-on, making sure the pink eye felt every coarse edge of the guitar. It was before his entire shaft began to rapidly rage and become explosive in a matter of a few short seconds. Suddenly then, it was over and he shot his tremendous milky load of come over its body, just as an exhausted yet satisfied Mickey stood there to catch his breath as he sobbed tears of relief and great joy whilst he grinned from ear to ear.

He grabbed a nearby cloth and began to remove the spunk from the guitar. The stuff seemed to have gotten every fucking where. So much in his ball sack, so much to give, to offer, to sacrifice it seemed...

But indeed, had he made a sacrifice and what had it entailed? If anything, the act had seemed to have spoken for itself. If there had been such some kind of a sacrifice, Mickey knew nothing of it and neither did anybody else, since he was in his own home and whilst in his own home he did what he damned well pleased so fuck everybody else. Probably half of the male population living on his street jerked off over their wives' faces and shot their loads into their mouths, so if someone like him chose to enjoy his brand new guitar, whose business was that but solely his, since when did he ever interfere with anybody else's behaviour, or delve or look any deeper into their bedroom habits?

Suddenly, Bruno appeared from nowhere, his tongue lolling from the left hand corner of his chops. As always, there was no doubt in Mickey's mind the fat sod wanted a good feed. Bruno cost a frigging fortune—but worth every penny, despite his constant farting and stinking out the house, and the fact his arse sometimes leaked and left smudges of shit here and there on the carpet. Yes, he wasn't young. Bruno, by many standards, must have been an OAP at this point in time, getting older by the day. Sadly, his health had suffered lately according to two or three expensive visits to the vet in town. He wasn't a happy dog at the best of times, yet, like them all, he had more love to give than hate and this made everybody happy for the huge pooch. All his fifteen years, Bruno had never bothered a single soul. It would have been immensely sad whenever doomsday arrived for the cuddly bear-like Labrador.

“Do you want me to play some of my new guitar for you, Bruno? It's the hottest sound on the block...do you, boy?” Mickey enthused.

Bruno actually appeared alert and interested as he watched intently as Mickey plugged the appropriate lead into the Marshall amplifier and put the guitar strap around his shoulders.

“All right, here goes...” the man said to his sitting dog in the middle of the reasonably sized bedroom, when his right hand descended and began to actually strum the exotic guitar for the very first time.

What the fuck...?

Oddly, it did not sound like a guitar, especially a Gibson Trickster, as seen on the internet channels and TV, not in the slightest—it sounded intensely elaborate and decidedly harmonious and electronic, much like a Polyphonic synthesizer, which was hugely strange and bewildering for keen enthusiast Mickey.

And something else happened...something stranger. Upon hearing the electronic blare, Bruno whimpered and collapsed, having Mickey revert to full-blown panic-mode and drop the fabled instrument to attend to his seemingly dead dog. He placed his hand on its body and realized rather quickly the dog was not breathing. No pulse, no breathing, no heartbeat...Bruno was fucking DEAD!

That fucking guitar! It was jinxed from the start! As much as Mickey loved the Trickster, he loved Bruno more.

He ran downstairs as fast as he could to phone the vet. But once he reached the living room, he knew and realized, what the fuck could the vet do if the dog had died? It would literally take two hours for them to drive here. The police and hospital would not be any good either. It wasn't a human being. It was a dead dog, not an emergency. It was a real fact of life that suffering or dying dogs were hardly important...even if, when the little buggers passed, they broke your heart.

But, it was here Mickey heard a noise from upstairs. With great joy, he ran into the lobby and stared up the staircase—in blind horror.

Standing at the top of the stairs was a mutation of a dog, its fur shredded to reveal a darker, pastier skin underneath, and a body which no longer so much as even slightly resembled a domestic pet, but a winged monster that looked like a ridiculously mutated dragon staring back at Mickey through bright blood-red eyes. Gone was Bruno, replaced by a vicious, ravenous looking beast dredged up from the pits of Hell. And Mickey knew, God how he knew...that moment of lust he shared with the Trickster upstairs, when he ejaculated over its body, HAD been a SACRIFICE...he knew and recognized this now, and also knew the act and what it spurned was irreversible, whilst this obscene hungry beast looking down at him was after his blood.

All at once, Mickey turned and ran outside onto the street...

Only to discover something wildly different to his local neighbourhood!

The Trickster had nothing to do with Bruno's transformation. On this sunny day in July, the skies were crowded with ravenous winged beasts, not just originated or developed from dogs or other animals hereabouts (although, there were others in the mix), yet humans, since these apocalyptic flying creatures of Hell were everywhere to be seen.

He noticed something at his feet on the pavement as the beasts circled above, making caws and shrills in the upper atmosphere. Mickey noticed a slumped human body, one that had suffered great wounding and ripped limbs, which just lay there half-devoured and severely mutilated, almost a one-of-many sure-fire feast for these transformed terrors traversing the skies above in vast crowds. It was Sophia, just lying there, dead...

In tears, Mickey lifted his arms in supplication to the heavens and loudly groaned as—all around—the entire neighbourhood, it seemed, erupted and came alive with this new plague, a certain doomsday scenario if ever there was to witness. Mickey didn't have much time, he knew. What got this lot would surely get him.

Turning around slowly, he quietly headed back indoors with the sole intention of handing his body over to a severely warped and deformed Bruno. Perhaps though, just perhaps, this abomination would allow him a little respite and let him play a few riffs on the new Trickster first—if the monster had anything by way of a heart in its body. He might even have enough time to write a song. Mickey had always wanted to write a song one day. Now was his chance...even if the eventuality was vastly becoming highly unlikely!

THE END

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THE CHALLENGER IN THE VALE OF DRAGOS by Jesse Zimmerman

Part One

Our next adventure begins the day right after we defeated the Straw Man.

If you recall, reader, we, the three of us, had commandeered a small flying ship, a magical and mechanical vessel, and we flew east and south. We moved away from the city of Northsphere, the place our friend the Challenger once called home, away from the Northern Sea, flying high above the immense fields of Killer Grass that had swallowed our last foe.

Eventually, as we the night aged, we saw in the light of the moon and the stars that the world below us had taken on a mountainous tone, and I tell my two companions: “These are the Adar Mountains.”

The Challenger nods, scratching the stubble on his chin with the end of his sword. “I’ve ranged here before, treacherous place.”

Fauna, my sister, who is driving the wooden wheel at the stern, says to us: “I am going to fall asleep and crash this thing!”

We decide to land and sleep for what’s left of the night, the fight with the Straw Man having been brutal on our bodies, as we all have scratches and pulled muscles, and our adrenaline high has finally ended. Sis manages to lower the little ship slowly, finding a large levelled area on the side of one of the shorter mountains near the edge of the range. A sheer drop to the side reveals a dark forested valley.

“Pssh-soooo!” says the Challenger, mimicking the sounds the ship makes as it lands.

We sisters sleep side by side on the ship, while the Challenger takes the rocky ground beside us.

If you also remember, I have this blue slug in my head, placed by the villain I already made mention of, but this slimy thing is no curse, for with it lodged against my brain (or so I think it is) I can recall everything that I ever learned, and I too have noticed that I am beginning to develop a flawless recollection of new memories formed. I also have gained in the last adventure two helpful items; the Mighty Magnet with which I can grasp metallic objects with its unseen force, and Delipha’s Rod, a magical device named for the Sea Goddess that shoots forth seawater. For once I have decent things with which to defend myself. Before this, I had only a dagger, while my sister and the ranger have been consistently well armed during this quest.

I sleep well, so well, so deep. I see the library back home, flying through rows and rows of bookshelves in soft afternoon light. I wonder, even as I dream, if the slug influences my dream-self.

When I wake there are drops hitting my face.

“Fauna! Stop!” I yelled out my sister’s name, thinking she’s pouring water on me.

“Stop what? Making breakfast?” she asks. I can hear burning and popping and I smell something nice. Suddenly hungry, I look over and see she is sitting beside a fire with the Challenger close to the wall of rock that rises up from the ledge. I rub my eyes as I smell meat sizzling.

“When you were sleeping your sis went out and got us a mountain fowl,” says the Challenger to me. “Smells good? I made a fire with my inherent woodsman-like skills!”

“Oh,” I say, realizing I haven’t eaten in a day. I get up, making a few stretches, my back to my sister and the ranger. I look out over the far side of the ledge, over the forested valley to the North from where I stand. It is beautiful in the daylight. There are clouds though, forming and moving in from the way we came. We eat the bird quickly. There isn’t much meat on it, but it fills us up enough. By the time we are done the clouds in the distance have gone grey, some nearly black. Not just rain, but a storm is coming. Just as I volunteer to put out the fire by pointing Delipha’s rod at it some raindrops pound down from above and promptly put it out.

Fauna laughs annoyingly at me. “Shall we go then?” she asks with a last giggle.

We get back into the little boat and my sister attends to the wheel once more, flipping the switch to get the vessel moving. It floats upward, giving the three of us a good look at the rest of the mountain in front of us, and once we hover over a rocky summit, we see a whole system of peaks. Some of these enormous mountains rise still higher, and as we move forward at a cautious pace, I take in the various formations below, above, and all around us.

“These are some of the biggest mountains in this continent!” I tell the others over a sharp wind that howls as it passes through the maze-like mountains. I’m exhilarated! It’s fun watching the world pass about you as the wooden floor hums underneath your feet and you feel the dual calming and exciting sensation of movement. I hang on to the rail at the side, looking at the sights as the Challenger stands behind me, the ranger inspecting the view on the other side.

I see a rare sight, a big child-like smile on his face!

“Shooooooooobbbppppp!” he mimics the sounds of the passing air.

“Stop that!” I yell and laugh.

Fauna takes us around a great pair of mountains—or rather just two divergent peaks of one gigantic mountain—and soon we are travelling through the air between two great cliff walls. There are formations in the walls, shapes that I can discern, some spiral-like, others like shells.

“Fossils!” I exclaim in amazement. “Imprints of ancient life from when this continent was mostly underwater. These peaks were once a series of islands!”

As cooling shade envelopes the ship I can hear the rain behind us. I look back and see the dwarf mountain we had just parted from is now covered up in black storm clouds.

“We’ll be underwater if we don’t hurry,” says Fauna, and then tells me: “So we really should get that slug thing removed, aye?”

“I wish I knew how to do that,” says the Challenger. “Maybe stick a rope in her ear and pull it out the other side?”

Fauna chuckles, steering us slightly to the right as a big rock projection comes into view from the left side. She raises the ship next, bringing us a little higher and then out of the space between the two cliffs. We see shorter mountains below and I can spot river valleys spiralling about the rising and falling land far beneath.

“Why should I get it removed?” I ask. “I feel more clear and lucid than ever before! You know that feeling when your mind is so sharp? Multiply that by a few hundred. I can remember almost everything I’ve ever learned!”

“You should have it removed,” reasons the Challenger, looking back at me from his side of the ship. “Particularly as it was something implanted in your head without your permission.”

The best response to him comes into my mind instantly and I say: “You were given your superhuman strength, speed, and agility without your consent, does that mean that you should give it up?”

In the one eye that is not covered up by an eyepatch I can see a look of pain. I realize immediately that I shouldn’t have said that.

“I wish none of it happened,” he simply says.

“I’m sorry!” I call to him. “But, do you guys understand that the circumstances in which I came to have this gift do not undo the fact that I like having it!”

“A gift?” Fauna says, sounding annoyed. “You consider a slug writhing into your brain a gift?”

“What does your perfect recollection tell you about blue slugs that help you recall all knowledge?” the Challenger then asks.

Before I can reply—as I pause because I don’t recall ever reading about this slug—I hear a roar of thunder from behind us; distant, but still very loud.

“Maybe we can land somewhere for the storm?” I tell my sister, walking over a few small steps to the ship’s stern.

“There’s Flora, always playing it safe!” she laughs, shaking her head, her red hair waving in the wind. “We’ve faced monsters and villains; Slug-Lord, Lobster Man, Frog Boy, the Straw Man!”

The Challenger laughs too. “I keep thinking our next foe is going to be called Snail Lady or Mucus Guy!”

And then the rains come down hard, almost at once flooding the whole deck. I feel my blue socks get drenched (thankful that I have another pair in the pack on my back). Water is falling speedily from the sky and although it falls off of the sides underneath the rails of our little flying vessel, it does so at a slow pace.

“Hang on!” Fauna yells. “Left side, guys!”

We do as she tells us, dashing to the left side (her left) and hang on tight to the rail. All our items are in the packs on me and my sister’s back and the weapons are at belts or strapped up, so everything important is secured. I know my sis and I know what she’s going to do.

She turns the wheel sharply to her right, sending the ship partly sideways, the water splashing over the side of the rail into the deep valleys below. I wrap my arms around the rail, locking them in place, my feet sliding over the turned deck, and then Fauna turns it back to normal. Within seconds the water is filling the deck again.

Lightning flashes and before the thunder can sound she yells to us: “Maybe we should land!”

“If you took my advice we would already be finding a safe place!” I snap at her.

“Okay then,” she says, lowering the ship a little. “Look for a place guys and—”

Thunder erupts in the air above us. Because of this we don’t hear the initial scrapping of the ship’s hull against something hard and sharp. When the thunder fades we hear the very end of the discomforting sound and we look behind us and see a particularly tall and pointy mountain peak.

“Did that just?” I ask, standing straight.

The Challenger groans and says over the rain: “Yes!”

Fauna steers the wheel, and the ship moves only slightly.

“Get us down!” I yell, grabbing the rail again.

The Challenger runs to the front of the ship, leaning over the converging rail at the bow. “There! I see something! Land, open land! A green plateau surrounded by walls of mountain!”

Not letting go of the rail, I slide my way over to him. Up ahead I see the only darkness, but when another lightning bolt flashes I can see it clearly, exactly what he described. There is a big grassy space, huge really, a vale of sorts and like the ranger said it is surrounded by walls of mountain peaks that appear to be conjoined all together like turrets on the walls of a castle. On the exterior sides of the mountain walls, as we rapidly

approach, I see sheer drops down the mountain sides, with land far, far below. It is some kind of elevated vale, a raised oasis of among the sharp and rocky landscape.

“Ugh!” Fauna shrieks. “I barely have control! Hang on!”

We are falling; the ship partly turned sideways as it falls, glides, and shoots down towards the place, my sister presumably doing what she can to aim us there. All goes dark and then everything lights up once again for a split second, and in that moment I can see something on the exterior side of the mountain wall we are coming towards—something is there on the outside of the green vale, right above a very sharp descent down into the land below. I see here a form of some kind and with the slug in my brain I manage to figure out exactly what it is, or what it seems to be.

It’s a massive skeleton, its bones white like the snowy mountainside, and it is in the shape of a long necked beast with immense jaws, a pair of horns sprouting backwards from its skull, four powerful leg bones that strike down from a big rib-cage, and stretched out behind the main bony body is a pair of great skeletal wings.

“A dragon?” I ask myself, but the sight is gone, replaced by the peaks of the mountain wall, and then the green grass below. We have passed over the mountain walls.

Sister gives one last warning for us to hang on tight. I hear terrible panic in her voice as I grip the rails as hard as I can, harder even than I did when she was twisting the ship over sideways.

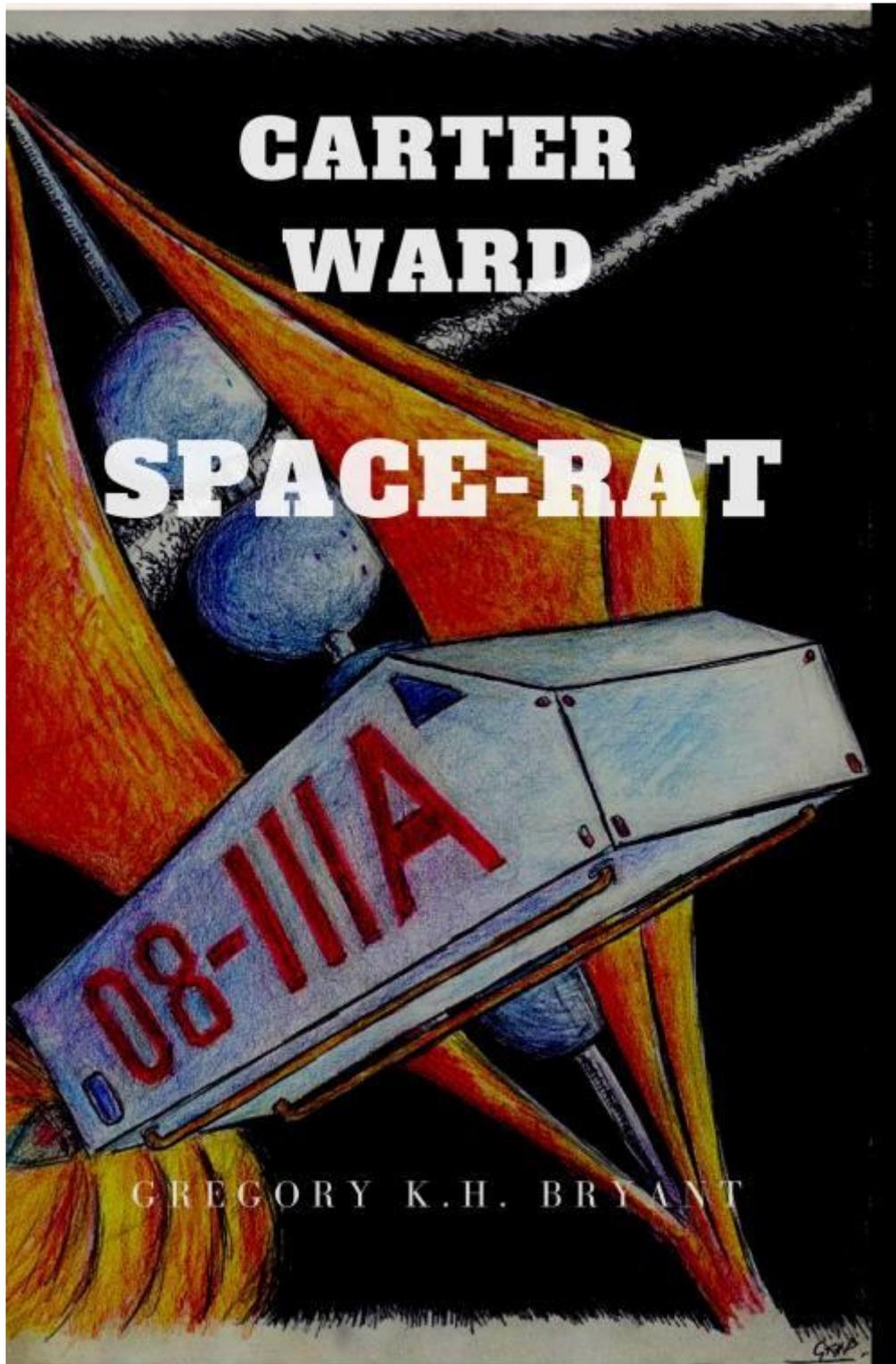
The little ship swoops sharply downward, the green rushing up to us, and we half land, half crash.

Losing my grip, I fly through the air as the ground meets us, my body skidding away. The ship turns over sideways and I don’t know if this is thunder or the sound of wood splintering that I hear, but I see the vessel burst apart behind me.

The next I know I am on my back from my side, looking up at all the rain falling straight down from a sky that is totally black. I feel pain all over, but I know that I will be okay. All the pains emanate from superficial wounds. I know the feel, the symptoms; I remember everything I ever read about the body. I am going to be okay. I can only hope the others are the same, but that little blue slug makes it so I know immediately that their chances are not good, not probable that they survived if they were on the ship when it crashed.

Before I know it I am being dragged by unseen hands. I cannot move for now. “Please,” I plead in my mind. “Let me rest. Please do not be something malevolent!”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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ERIC BRIGHTEYES by H Rider Haggard

XXV: How the Feast Ended

For a moment there was silence in the hall, for men had known no such fight as this.

“Why, then, do ye gape?” laughed Skallagrim, pointing with the spear. “Dead is Ospakar!—slain by the swordless man! Eric Brighteyes hath slain Ospakar Blacktooth!”

Then there went up such a shout as never was heard in the hall of Middalhof.

Now when Gudruda knew that Ospakar was sped, she looked at Eric as he rested, leaning on his sword, and her heart was filled with awe and love. She sprang from her seat, and, coming to where Brighteyes stood, she greeted him.

“Welcome to Iceland, Eric!” she said. “Welcome, thou glory of the south!”

Now Swanhild grew wild, for she saw that Eric was about to take Gudruda in his arms and kiss her before all men.

“Say, Björn,” she cried; “wilt thou suffer that this outlaw, having slain Ospakar, should lead Gudruda hence as wife?”

“He shall never do so while I live,” cried Björn, nearly mad with rage. “This is my command, sister: that thou dost see Eric no more.”

“Say, Björn,” answered Gudruda, “did I dream, or did I indeed see thee thrust the broken buckler before Eric’s feet, so that he stumbled on it and fell?”

“That thou sawest, lady,” said Skallagrim; “for I saw it also.”

Now Björn grew white in his anger. He did not answer Gudruda, but called aloud to his men to slay Eric and Skallagrim. Gizur called also to the folk of Ospakar, and Swanhild to those who came with her.

Then Gudruda fled back to her seat.

But Eric cried aloud also: “Ye who love me, cleave to me. Suffer it not that Brighteyes be cut down of northerners and outland men. Hear me, Atli’s folk; hear me, carles of Coldback and of Middalhof!”

And so greatly did many love Eric that half of the thralls of Björn, and almost all of the company of Swanhild who had been Atli’s shield-men and Brighteyes’ comrades, drew swords, shouting “Eric! Eric!” But the carles of Ospakar came on to make an end of him.

Björn saw, and, drawing sword, smote at Brighteyes, taking him unawares. But Skallagrim caught the blow upon his axe, and before Björn could smite again Whitefire was aloft and down fell Björn, dead!

That was the end of Björn, Asmund’s son.

“Thou hast squeaked thy last, rat! What did I tell thee?” cried Skallagrim. “Take Björn’s shield and back to back, lord, for here come foes.”

“There goes one,” answered Eric, pointing to the door.

Now Hall of Lithdale slunk through the doorway—Hall, the liar, who cut the grapnel-chain—for he wished to see the last of Skallagrim. But the Baresark still held Eric’s spear in his hand. He whirled it aloft, and it hissed through the air. The aim was good, for, as he crept away, the spear struck Hall between neck and shoulder, pinning him to the doorpost, and there the liar died.

“Now the weasel is nailed to the beam,” said Skallagrim. “Hall of Lithdale, what did I promise thee?”

“Guard thy head and my back,” quoth Eric; “blows fall!”

Now men smote at Eric and Skallagrim, nor did they spare to smite in turn. And as foes fell before him, Eric stepped one pace forward towards the door, and Skallagrim, who, back to back with him, held off those who pressed behind, took one step rearwards. Thus, a foe for every step, they won their way down the long hall. Fierce raged the fray around them, for, made with hate and drink and the lust of fight, Swanhild’s folk—Eric’s friends—remembering the words of Atli, fell on Ospakar’s; and the people of Björn fell on each other, brother on brother, and father on son—nor might the fray be stayed. The boards were overthrown, dead men lay among the meats and mead, and the blood of freeman, lord and thrall ran adown the floor. Everywhere through the dusky hall glittered the sheen of flashing swords and rose the clang of war. Darts clove the air like tongues of flame, and the clamour of battle beat against the roof.

Blinded of the Norns who brought these things to pass, men sought no mercy and they gave none, but smote and slew till few were left to slay.

And still Gudruda sat in her bride-seat, and, with eyes fixed in horror, watched the waxing of the war. Near to her stood Swanhild, marking all things with a fierce-set face, and calling down curses on her folk, who one and all cried “Eric! Eric!” and swept the thralls of Ospakar as corn is swept of the sickle.

And there, nigh to the door, pale of face and beautiful to see, golden Eric clove his way, and with him went black Skallagrim. Terrible was the flare of Whitefire as he flicked aloft like the levin in the cloud. Terrible was the flare of Whitefire; but more terrible was the light of Eric’s eyes, for they seemed to flame in his head, and wherever that fire fell it lighted men the way to death. Whitefire sung and flickered, and crashed the axe of Skallagrim, and still through the press of war they won their way. Now Gizur stands before them, spear aloft, and Whitefire leaps up to meet him. Lo! he turns and flies. The coward son of Ospakar does not seek the fate of Ospakar!

The door is won. They stand without but little harmed, while women wail aloud.

“To horse!” cried Skallagrim; “to horse, ere our luck fail us!”

“There is no luck in this,” gasped Eric; “for I have slain many men, and among them is Björn, the brother of her whom I would make my bride.”

“Better one such fight than many brides,” said Skallagrim, shaking his red axe. “We have won great glory this day, Brighteyes, and Ospakar is dead—slain by a swordless man!”

Now Eric and Skallagrim ran to their horses, none hindering them, and, mounting, rode towards Mosfell.

All that evening and all the night they rode, and at morning they came across the black sand to Mosfell slopes that are by the Hecla. Here they rested, and, taking off their armour, washed themselves in the stream: for they were very weary and foul with blood and wounds. When they had finished washing and had buckled on their harness again, Skallagrim, peering across the plain with his hawk’s eyes, saw men riding fast towards them.

“Foes are soon afoot, lord,” he said. “I thought we had stayed their hunger for a while.”

“Would that I might stay mine,” quoth Eric. “I am weary, and unfit for fight.”

“I have still strength for one or two,” said Skallagrim, “and then good-night! But these are no foes. They are of the Coldback folk. The carline has kept her word.”

Then Eric was glad, and presently six men, headed by Jon his thrall, the same man who had watched on Mosfell when Eric went up to slay the Baresark, rode to them and greeted them. “Beggar women,” said Jon, “whom they met at Ran River, had told them of the death of Ospakar, and of the great slaying at Middalhof, and they would know if the tidings were true.”

“It is true, Jon,” said Eric; “but first give us food, if ye have it, for we are hungered and spent. When we have eaten we will speak.”

So they led up a pack-horse and from it took stockfish and smoked meat, of which Eric and Skallagrim ate heartily, till their strength came back to them.

Then Eric spoke. “Comrades,” he said, “I am an outlawed man, and, though I have not sought it, much blood is on my head. Atli is dead at my hand; Ospakar is dead at my hand; Björn the Priest, Asmund’s son, is dead at my hand, and with them many another man. Nor may the matter stay here, for Gizur, Blacktooth’s son, yet lives, and Björn has kin in the south, and Swanhild will buy friends with gold, and all of these will set on me to slay me, so that at the last I die by the sword.”

“No need for that,” said Skallagrim. “Our vengeance is wrought, and now, as before, the sea is open, and I think that a welcome awaits us in London.”

“Now Gudruda is widowed before she was fully wed,” said Eric, “therefore I bide an outlawed man here in Iceland. I go hence no more, though it be death to stay, unless indeed Gudruda the Fair goes with me.”

“It will be death, then,” said Skallagrim, “and the swords are forged that we shall feel. The odds are too heavy, lord.”

“Mayhap,” answered Eric. “No man may flee his fate, and I shall not altogether grieve when mine finds me. Hearken, comrades: I go up to Mosfell height, and there I stay, till those be found who can drag me from my hole. But this is my counsel to you: that ye leave me to my doom, for I am an unlucky man who always chooses the wrong road.”

“That will not I,” said Skallagrim.

“Nor we,” said Eric’s folk; “Swanhild holds Coldback, and we are driven to the fells. To the fells then we will go with thee, Eric Brighteyes, and become cave-dwellers and outlaws for thy sake. Fear not, thou shalt still find many friends.”

“I did not look for such a thing at your hands,” said Eric; “but stormy waters show how the boat is built. May no bad luck come to you from your good fellowship. And now let us to our nest.”

Then they caught the horses, and rode with Brighteyes up the steep side of Mosfell, till at length they came to that secret dell which Skallagrim had once shown to Eric. Here they turned the horses loose to feed, and, going forward on foot, reached the dark and narrow pass that Brighteyes had trod when he sought for the Baresark foe. Skallagrim led the way along it, then came Eric and the rest. One by one they stepped on to the giddy point of rock, and, catching at the birch-bush, entered the hole. So they gained the platform and the great cave beyond; and they found that no man had set foot there since the day when Eric had striven with Skallagrim. For there on the rock, rotten with the weather, lay that haft of wood which Brighteyes had hewed from the axe of Skallagrim, and in the cave were many things beside as the Baresark had left them.

So they took up their dwelling in the cave, Eric, Skallagrim, and the six Coldback men, and there they dwelt many months. But Eric sent out his men, one at a time, and got together food and a store of sheepskins, and other needful things. For he knew this well: that Gizur and Swanhild would before long come up against them, and, if they could not take them by force, would set themselves to watch the mountain-path and starve them out.

When Eric and Skallagrim rode away from Middalhof the fight still raged fiercely in the hall, and nothing but death might stay it. The minds of men were mad, and they smote one another, and slew each other, till at length of all that marriage company few were left unharmed, except Gizur, Swanhild, and Gudruda. For the serving thralls and womenfolk had fled the hall, and with them some peaceful men.

Then Gudruda spoke as one in a dream.

“Saevuna’s prophecy was true,” she said, “red was the marriage-feast of Asmund my father, redder has been the marriage-feast of Ospakar! She saw the hall of Middalhof one gore of blood, and lo! it is so; look upon thy work, Swanhild,” and she pointed to the piled-up dead—”look upon thy work, witch-sister, and grow fearful: for all this death is on thy head!”

Swanhild laughed aloud. “I think it a merry sight,” she cried. “The marriage-feast of Asmund our father was red, and thy marriage-feast, Gudruda, has been redder. Would that thy blood and the blood of Eric ran with the blood of Björn and Ospakar! That tale must yet be told, Gudruda. There shall be binding on of Hell-shoes at Middalhof, but I bind them not. My task

is still to come: for I will live to fasten the Hell-shoes on the feet of Eric, and on thy feet, Gudruda! At the least, I have brought about this much, that thou canst scarcely wed Eric the outlaw: for with his own hand he slew Björn our brother, and because of this I count all that death as nothing. Thou canst not mate with Brighteyes, lest the wide wounds of Björn thy brother should take tongues and cry thy shame from sea to sea!”

Gudruda made no answer, but sat as one carved in stone. Then Swanhild spoke again:

“Let us away to the north, Gizur; there to gather strength to make an end of Eric. Say, wilt thou help us, Gudruda? The blood-feud for the death of Björn is thine.”

“Ye are enough to bring about the fall of one unfriended man,” Gudruda said. “Go, and leave me with my sorrow and the dead. Nay! before thou goest, listen, Swanhild, for there is that in my heart which tells me I shall never look again upon thy face. From evil to evil thou hast ever gone, Swanhild, and from evil to evil thou wilt go. It may well chance that thy wickedness will win. It may well chance that thou wilt crown thy crimes with my slaying and the slaying of the man who loves me. But I tell thee this, traitress—murderess, as thou art—that here the tale ends not. Not by death, Swanhild, shalt thou escape the deeds of life! There they shall rise up against thee, and there every shame that thou hast worked, every sin that thou hast sinned, and every soul that thou hast brought to Hela’s halls, shall come to haunt thee and to drive thee on from age to age! That witchcraft which thou lovest shall mesh thee. Shadows shall bewilder thee; from the bowl of empty longings thou shalt drink and drink, and not be satisfied. Yea! lusts shall mock and madden thee. Thou shalt ride the winds, thou shalt sail the seas, but thou shalt find no harbour, and never shalt thou set foot upon a shore of peace.

“Go on, Swanhild—dye those hands in blood—wade through the river of shame! Seek thy desire, and finding, lose! Work thy evil, and winning, fail! I yet shall triumph—I yet shall trample thee; and, in a place to come, with Eric at my side, I shall make a mock of Swanhild the murderess! Swanhild the liar, and the wanton, and the witch! Now get thee gone!”

Swanhild heard. She looked up at Gudruda’s face and it was alight as with a fire. She strove to answer, but no words came. Then Groa’s daughter turned and went, and with her went Gizur.

Now women and thralls came in and drew out the wounded and those who still breathed from among the dead, taking them to the temple. They bore away the body of Ospakar also, but they left the rest.

All night long Gudruda sat in the bride’s seat. There she sat in the silver summer midnight, looking on the slain who were strewn about the great hall. All night she sat alone in the bride’s seat thinking—ever thinking.

How, then, would it end? There her brother Björn lay a-cold—Björn the justly slain of Brighteyes; yet how could she wed the man who slew her brother? From Ospakar she was divorced by death; from Eric she was divorced by the blood of Björn her brother! How might she unravel this tangled skein and float to weal upon this sea of death? All things went amiss! The doom was on her! She had lived to an ill purpose—her love had wrought evil! What availed it to have been born to be fair among women and to have desired that which might

not be? And she herself had brought these things to pass—she had loosed the rock which crushed her! Why had she hearkened to that false tale?

Gudruda sat on high in the bride's seat, asking wisdom of the piled-up dead, while the cold blue shadows of the nightless night gathered over her and them—gathered, and waned, and grew at last to the glare of day.

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THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

9. Phorenice, Goddess

Now the passage, though its entrance had been cunningly hidden by man's artifice, was one of those veins in which the fiery blood of our mother, the Earth, had aforesaid coursed. Long years had passed since it carried lava streams, but the air in it was still warm and sulphurous, and there was no inducement to linger in transit. I lit me a lamp which I found in an appointed niche, and walked briskly along my ways, coughing, and wishing heartily I had some of those simples which ease a throat that has a tendency to catarrh. But, alas! all that packet of drugs which were my sole spoil from the vice-royalty of Yucatan were lost in the sea-fight with Dason's navy, and since landing in Atlantis there had been little enough time to think for the refinements of medicine.

The network of earth-veins branched prodigiously, and if any but one of us Seven Priests had found a way into its recesses by chance, he would have perished hopelessly in the windings, or have fallen into one of those pits which lead to the boil below. But I carried the chart of the true course clearly in my head, remembering it from that old initiation of twenty years back, when, as an appointed viceroy, I was raised to the highest degree but one known to our Clan, and was given its secrets and working implements.

The way was long, the floor was monstrous uneven, and the air, as I have said, bad; and I knew that day would be far advanced before the signs told me that I had passed beneath the walls, and was well within the precincts of the city. And here the vow of the Seven hampered my progress; for it is ordained that under no circumstances, whatever the stress, shall egress be made from this passage before mortal eye. One branch after another did I try, but always found loiterers near the exits. I had hoped to make my emergence by that path which came inside the royal pyramid. But there was no chance of coming up unobserved here; the place was humming like a hive. And so, too, with each of the five next outlets that I visited. The city was agog with some strange excitement.

But I came at last to a temple of one of the lesser Gods, and stood behind the image for a while making observation. The place was empty; nay, from the dust which robed all the floors and the seats of the worshippers, it had been empty long enough; so I moved all that was needful, stepped out, and closed all entry behind me. A broom lay unnoticed on one of the pews, and with this I soon disguised all route of footmark, and took my way to the temple door. It was shut, and priest though I was, the secret of its opening was beyond me.

Here was a pretty pass. No one but the attendant priests of the temple could move the mechanism which closed and opened the massive stone which filled the doorway; and if all had gone out to attend this spectacle, whatever it might be, that was stirring the city, why there I should be no nearer enlargement than before.

There was no sound of life within the temple precincts; there were evidences of decay and disuse spread broadcast on every hand; but according to the ancient law there should be eternally one at least on watch in the priests' dwellings, so down the passages which led to them I made my way. It would have surprised me little to have found even these deserted. That the old order was changed I knew, but I was only then beginning to realise the ruthlessness with which it had been swept away, and how much it had given place to the new.

However, there can be some faithful men remaining even in an age of general apostasy, and on making my way to the door of the dwelling (which lay in the roof of the temple) I gave the call, and presently it was opened to me. The man who stood before me, peering dully through the gloom, had at least remained constant to his vows, and I made the salutation before him with a feeling of respect.

His name was Ro, and I remembered him well. We had passed through the sacred college together, and always he had been known as the dullard. He had capacity for learning little of the cult of the Gods, less of the arts of ruling, less still of the handling of arms; and he had been appointed to some lowly office in this obscure temple, and had risen to being its second priest and one of its two custodians merely through the desertion of all his colleagues. But it was not pleasant to think that a fool should remain true where cleverer men abandoned the old beliefs.

Ro did before me the greater obeisance. He wore his beard curled in the prevailing fashion, but it was badly done. His clothing was ill-fitting and unbrushed. He always had been a slovenly fellow. "The temple door is shut," he said, "and I only have the secret of its opening. My lord comes here, therefore, by the secret way, and as one of the Seven. I am my lord's servant."

"Then I ask this small service of you. Tell me, what stirs the city?"

"That impious Phorenice has declared herself Goddess, and declares that she will light the sacrifice with her own divine fire. She will do it, too. She does everything. But I wish the flames may burn her when she calls them down. This new Empress is the bane of our Clan, Deucalion, these latter days. The people neglect us; they bring no offerings; and now, since these rebels have been hammering at the walls, I might have gone hungry if I had not some small store of my own. Oh, I tell you, the cult of the true Gods is well-nigh oozed quite out of the land."

"My brother, it comes to my mind that the Priests of our Clan have been limp in their service to let these things come to pass."

"I suppose we have done our best. At least, we did as we were taught. But if the people will not come to hear your exhortations, and neglect to adore the God, what hold have you over their religion? But I tell you, Deucalion, that the High Gods try our own faith hard. Come into the dwelling here. Look there on my bed."

I saw the shape of a man, untidily swathed in reddened bandages.

"This is all that is left of the poor priest that was my immediate superior in this cure. It was his turn yesterday to celebrate the weekly sacrifice to our Lord the Sun with the circle of His great stones. Faugh! Deucalion, you should have seen how he was mangled when they brought him back to me here."

"Did the people rise on him? Has it come to that?"

"The people stayed passive," said Ro bitterly, "what few of them had interest to attend; but our Lord the Sun saw fit to try His minister somewhat harshly. The wood was laid; the sacrifice was disposed upon it according to the prescribed rites; the procession had been

formed round the altar, and the drums and the trumpets were speaking forth, to let all men know that presently the smoke of their prayer would be wafted up towards Those that sit in the great places in the heavens. But then, above the noise of the ceremonial, there came the rushing sound of wings, and from out of the sky there flew one of those great featherless man-eating birds, of a bigness such as seldom before has been seen.”

“An arrow shot in the eye, or a long-shafted spear receives them best.”

“Oh, all men know what they were taught as children, Deucalion; but these priests were unarmed, according to the rubric, which ordains that they shall intrust themselves completely to the guardianship of the High Gods during the hours of sacrifice. The great bird swooped down, settling on the wood pyre, and attacked the sacrifice with beak and talon. My poor superior here, still strong in his faith, called loudly on our Lord the Sun to lend power to his arm, and sprang up on the altar with naught but his teeth and his bare arms for weapons. It may be that he expected a miracle—he has not spoke since, poor soul, in explanation—but all he met were blows from leathery wings, and rakings from talons which went near to disembowelling him. The bird brushed him away as easily as we could sweep aside a fly, and there he lay bleeding on the pavement beside the altar, whilst the sacrifice was torn and eaten in the presence of all the people. And then, when the bird was glutted, it flew away again to the mountains.”

“And the people gave no help?”

“They cried out that the thing was a portent, that our Lord the Sun was a God no longer if He had not power or thought to guard His own sacrifice; and some cried that there was no God remaining now, and others would have it that there was a new God come to weigh on the country, which had chosen to take the form of a common man-eating bird. But a few began to shout that Phorenice stood for all the Gods now in Atlantis, and that cry was taken up till the stones of the great circle rang with it. Some may have made proclamations because they were convinced; many because the cry was new, and pleased them; but I am sure there were not a few who joined in because it was dangerous to leave such an outburst unwelcomed. The Empress can be hard enough to those who neglect to give her adulation.”

“The Empress is Empress,” I said formally, “and her name carries respect. It is not for us to question her doings.”

“I am a priest,” said Ro, “and I speak as I have been taught, and defend the Faith as I have been commanded. Whether there is a Faith any longer, I am beginning to doubt. But, anyway, it yields a poor enough livelihood nowadays. There have been no offerings at this temple this five months past, and if I had not a few jars of corn put by, I might have starved for anything the pious of this city cared. And I do not think that the affair of that sacrifice is likely to put new enthusiasm into our cold votaries.”

“When did it happen?”

“Twenty hours ago. To-day Phorenice conducts the sacrifice herself. That has caused the stir you spoke about. The city is in the throes of getting ready one of her pageants.”

“Then I must ask you to open the temple doors and give me passage. I must go and see this thing for myself.”

“It is not for me to offer advice to one of the Seven,” said Ro doubtfully.

“It is not.”

“But they say that the Empress is not overpleased at your absence,” he mumbled. “I should not like harm to come in your way, Deucalion,” he said aloud.

“The future is in the hands of the most High Gods, Ro, and I at least believe that They will deal out our fates to each of us as They in Their infinite wisdom see best, though you seem to have lost your faith. And now I must be your debtor for a passage out through the doors. Plagues! man, it is no use your holding out your hand to me. I do not own a coin in all the world.”

He mumbled something about “force of habit” as he led the way down towards the door, and I responded tartly enough about the unpleasantness of his begging customs. “If it were not for your sort and your customs, the Priests’ Clan would not be facing this crisis to-day.”

“One must live,” he grumbled, as he pressed his levers, and the massive stone in the doorway swung ajar.

“If you had been a more capable man, I might have seen the necessity,” said I, and passed into the open and left him. I could never bring myself to like Ro.

A motley crowd filled the street which ran past the front of this obscure temple, and all were hurrying one way. With what I had been told, it did not take much art to guess that the great stone circle of our Lord the Sun was their mark, and it grieved me to think of how many venerable centuries that great fane had upreared before the weather and the earth tremors, without such profanation as it would witness to-day. And also the thought occurred to me, “Was our Great Lord above drawing this woman on to her destruction? Would He take some vast and final act of vengeance when she consummated her final sacrilege?”

But the crowd pressed on, thrilled and excited, and thinking little (as is a crowd’s wont) on the deeper matters which lay beneath the bare spectacle. From one quarter of the city walls the din of an attack from the besiegers made itself clearly heard from over the house, and the temples and the palaces intervening, but no one heeded it. They had grown callous, these townfolk, to the battering of rams, and the flight of fire-darts, and the other emotions of a bombardment. Their nerves, their hunger, their desperation, were strung to such a pitch that little short of an actual storm could stir them into new excitement over the siege.

All were weaponed. The naked carried arms in the hopes of meeting someone whom they could overcome and rob; those that had a possession walked ready to do a battle for its ownership. There was no security, no trust; the lesson of civilisation had dropped away from these common people as mud is washed from the feet by rain, and in their new habits and their thoughts they had gone back to the grade from which savages like those of Europe have never yet emerged. It was a grim commentary on the success of Phorenice’s rule.

The crowd merged me into their ranks without question, and with them I pressed forward down the winding streets, once so clean and trim, now so foul and mud-strewn. Men and women had died of hunger in these streets these latter years, and rotted where they lay, and

we trod their bones underfoot as we walked. Yet rising out of this squalor and this misery were great pyramids and palaces, the like of which for splendour and magnificence had never been seen before. It was a jarring admixture.

In time we came to the open space in the centre of the city, which even Phorenice had not dared to encroach upon with her ambitious building schemes, and stood on the secular ground which surrounds the most ancient, the most grand, and the breast of all this world's temples.

Since the beginning of time, when man first emerged amongst the beasts, our Lord the Sun has always been his chiefest God, and legend says that He raised this circle of stones Himself to be a place where votaries should offer Him worship. It is the fashion amongst us moderns not to take these old tales in a too literal sense, but for myself, this one satisfies me. By our wits we can lift blocks weighing six hundred men, and set them as the capstones of our pyramids. But to uprear the stones of that great circle would be beyond all our art, and much more would it be impossible to-day, to transport them from their distant quarries across the rugged mountains.

There were nine-and-forty of the stones, alternating with spaces, and set in an accurate circle, and across the tops of them other stones were set, equally huge. The stones were undressed and rugged; but the huge massiveness of them impressed the eye more than all the temples and daintily tooled pyramids of our wondrous city. And in the centre of the circle was that still greater stone which formed the altar, and round which was carved, in the rude chiselling of the ancients, the snake and the outstretched hand.

The crowd which bore me on came to a standstill before the circle of stones. To trespass beyond this is death for the common people; and for myself, although I had the right of entrance, I chose to stay where I was for the present, unnoticed amongst the mob, and wait upon events.

For long enough we stood there, our Lord the Sun burning high and fiercely from the clear blue sky above our heads. The din of the rebels' attack upon the walls came to us clearly, even above the gabble of the multitude, but no one gave attention to it. Excitement about what was to befall in the circle mastered every other emotion.

I learned afterways that so pressing was the rebels' attack, and so destructive the battering of their new war engines, that Phorenice had gone off to the walls first to lend awhile her brilliant skill for its repulse, and to put heart into the defenders. But as it was, the day had burned out to its middle and scorched us intolerably, before the noise of the drums and horns gave advertisement that the pageant had formed in procession; and of those who waited in the crowd, many had fainted with exhaustion and the heat, and not a few had died. But life was cheap in the city of Atlantis now, and no one heeded the fallen.

Nearer and nearer drew the drums and the braying of the other music, and presently the head of a glittering procession began to arrive and dispose itself in the space which had been set apart. Many a thousand poor starving wretches sighed when they saw the wanton splendour of it. But these lords and these courtiers of this new Atlantis had no concern beyond their own bellies and their own backs, except for their one alien regard—their simpering affection for Phorenice.

I think, though, their loyalty for the Empress was real enough, and it was not to be wondered at, since everything they had came from her lavish hands. Indeed, the woman had a charm that cannot be denied, for when she appeared, riding in the golden castle (where I also had ridden) on the back of her monstrous shaggy mammoth, the starved sullen faces of the crowd brightened as though a meal and sudden prosperity had been bestowed upon them; and without a word of command, without a trace of compulsion, they burst into spontaneous shouts of welcome.

She acknowledged it with a smile of thanks. Her cheeks were a little flushed, her movements quick, her manner high-strung, as all well might be, seeing the horrible sacrilege she had in mind. But she was undeniably lovely; yes, more adorably beautiful than ever with her present thrill of excitement; and when the stair was brought, and she walked down from the mammoth's back to the ground, those near fell to their knees and gave her worship, out of sheer fascination for her beauty and charm.

Ylga, the fan-girl, alone of all that vast multitude round the Sun temple contained herself with her formal paces and duties. She looked pained and troubled. It was plain to see, even from the distance where I stood, that she carried a heavy heart under the jewels of her robe. It was fitting, too, that this should be so. Though she had been long enough divorced from his care and fostered by the Empress, Ylga was a daughter of Zaemon, and he was the chiefest of our Lord the Sun's ministers here on earth. She could not forget her upbringing now at this supreme moment when the highest of the old Gods was to be formally defied. And perhaps also (having a kindness for Phorenice) she was not a little dreadful of the consequences.

But the Empress had no eye for one sad look amongst all that sea of glowing faces. Boldly and proudly she strode out into the circle, as though she had been the duly appointed priest for the sacrifice. And after her came a knot of men, dressed as priests, and bearing the victim. Some of these were creatures of her own, and it was easy to forgive mere ignorant laymen, won over by the glamour of Phorenice's presence. But some, to their shame, were men born in the Priests' Clan, and brought up in the groves and colleges of the Sacred Mountain, and for their apostasy there could be no palliation.

The wood had already been stacked on the altar-stone in the due form required by the ancient symbolism, and the Empress stood aside whilst those who followed did what was needful. As they opened out, I saw that the victim was one of the small, cloven-hoofed horses that roam the plains—a most acceptable sacrifice. They bound its feet with metal gyves, and put it on the pyre, where, for a while, it lay neighing. Then they stepped aside, and left it living. Here was an innovation.

The false priests went back to the farther side of the circle, and Phorenice stood alone before the altar. She lifted up her voice, sweet, tuneful, and carrying, and though the din of the siege still came from over the city, no ear there lost a word of what was spoken.

She raised her glance aloft, and all other eyes followed it. The heaven was clear as the deep sea, a gorgeous blue. But as the words came from her, so a small mist was born in the sky, wheeling and circling like a ball, although the day was windless, and rapidly growing darker and more compact. So dense had it become, that presently it threw a shadow on part of the sacred circle and soothed it into twilight, though all without where the people stood was still garish day. And in the ball of mist were little quick stabs and splashes of noiseless flame.

She spoke, not in the priests' sacred tongue—though such was her wicked cleverness, that she may very well have learned it—but in the common speech of the people, so that all who heard might understand; and she told of her wondrous birth (as she chose to name it), and of the direct aid of the most High Gods, which had enabled her to work so many marvels. And in the end she lifted both of her fair white arms towards the blackness above, and with her lovely face set with the strain of will, she uttered her final cry:

“O my high Father, the Sun, I pray You now to acknowledge me as Your very daughter. Give this people a sign that I am indeed a child of the Gods and no frail mortal. Here is sacrifice unlit, where mortal priests with their puny fires had weekly, since the foundation of this land, sent savoury smoke towards the sky. I pray You send down the heavenly fire to burn this beast here offered, in token that though You still rule on high, You have given me Atlantis to be my kingdom, and the people of the Earth to be my worshippers.”

She broke off and strained towards the sky. Her face was contorted. Her limbs shook. “O mighty Father,” she cried, “who hast made me a God and an equal, hear me! Hear me!”

Out of the black cloud overhead there came a blinding flash of light, which spat downwards on to the altar. The cloven-hoofed horse gave one shrill neigh, and one convulsion, and fell back dead. Flames crackled out from the wood pile, and the air became rich with the smell of burning flesh. And lo! in another moment the cloud above had melted into nothingness, and the flames burnt pale, and the smoke went up in a thin blue spiral towards the deeper blueness of the sky.

Phorenice, the Empress, stood there before the great stone, and before the snake and the outstretched hand of life which were inscribed upon it, flushed, exultant, and once more radiantly lovely; and the knot of priests within the circle, and the great mob of people without, fell to the ground adoring.

“Phorenice, Goddess!” they cried. “Phorenice, Goddess of all Atlantis!”

But for myself I did not kneel. I would have no part in this apostasy, so I stood there awaiting fate.

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