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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 4

28TH JULY 2019

**HOLDING HER
HAND, ALL
DISSOLVED**

BY MS SWIFT—
A HORN, AN
EYE AND AN
EVIL GRIN...

**KASSI AND
THE WORLD'S
GREATEST
SWORDSMAN**

BY STE
WHITEHOUSE
BRINGER OF
DEATH...

**STIGMA
CHRISTOPHER T
DABROWSKI**

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**MISSION
RICK MCQUISTON**

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

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Schlock! Webzine

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 15, Issue 4
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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This Edition

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EDITORIAL

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL! *Horror Comics and Comic Horror* from Vincent Davis

HOLDING HER HAND, ALL DISSOLVED by MS Swift—*A horn, an eye and an evil grin...* HORROR

THE CASTLE OUROBOROS Part Fifteen by Rob Bliss—*Jekyll and Hyde...* GOTHIC HORROR

KASSI AND THE WORLD'S GREATEST SWORDSMAN by Ste Whitehouse—*Bringer of Death...* SWORD AND SORCERY

STIGMA by Christopher T Dabrowski—*But there was no miracle...* HORROR

MISSION by Rick McQuiston—*Something outside his bedroom window...* HORROR

DOMESTIKA Part Three by GK Murphy—*Yellow Eyes...* HORROR

ERIC BRIGHTYES Chapter Thirty-One by H Rider Haggard—*How Eric and Skallagrim Grew Fey...* SWORD AND SORCERY

THE LOST CONTINENT Chapter Sixteen by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne—*Siege of the Sacred Mountain...* SCIENCE FANTASY CLASSIC

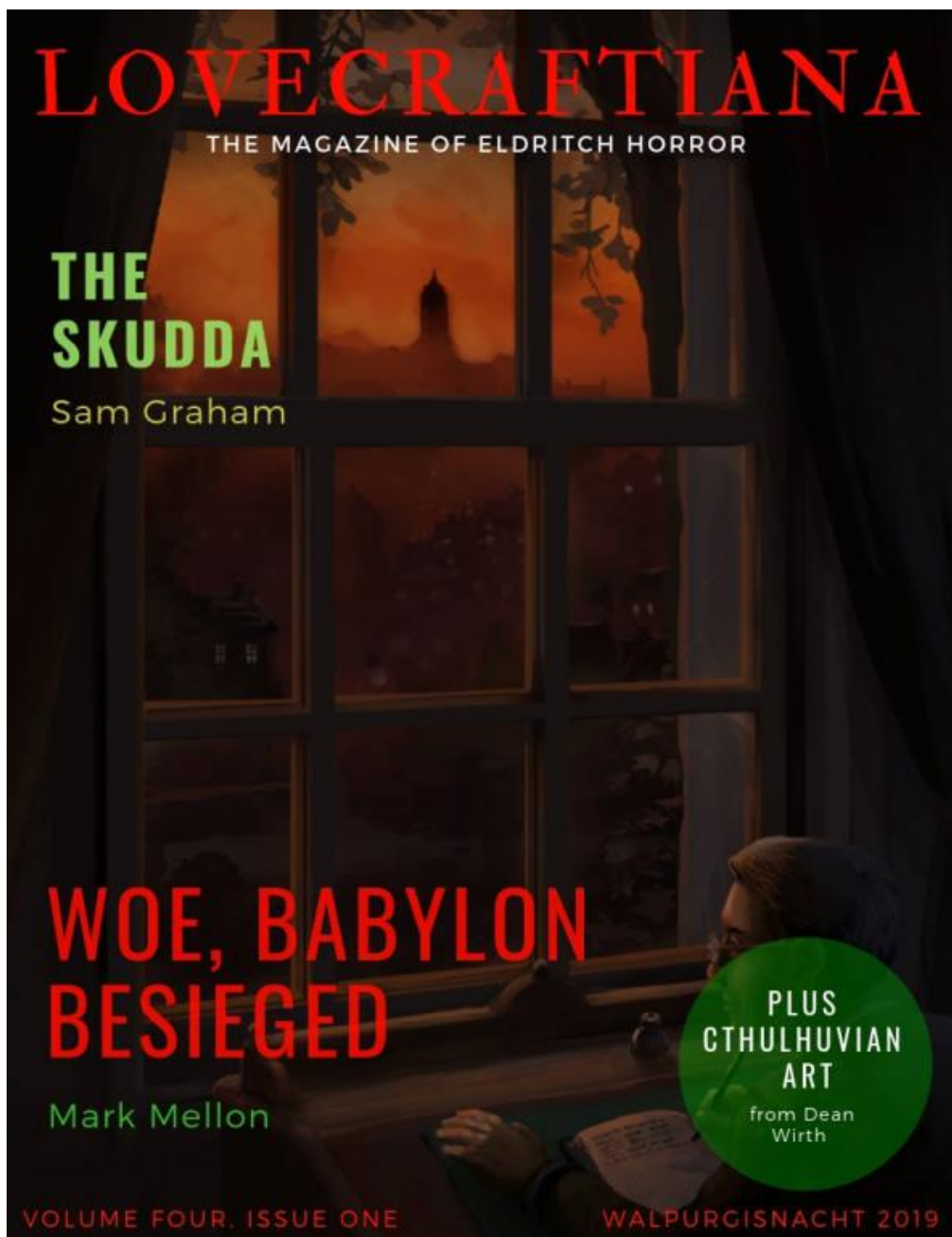
EDITORIAL

This week, Sylvie meets a strange lady while playing hide and seek. Friedrich Heine plays Dr Jekyll to conceal his true intentions. Kassi encounters the finest swordsman in the Pipe-world. Angelina falls to her death. And something returns to pay Larry a visit.

In Cumbria, a pensioner hears strange noises downstairs. Back in the Dark Ages, Eric and Skallagrim see deathlights. And in ancient Atlantis, Deucalion encounters a nymph of the forest and learns of Phorenice's tyranny.

—Gavin Chappell

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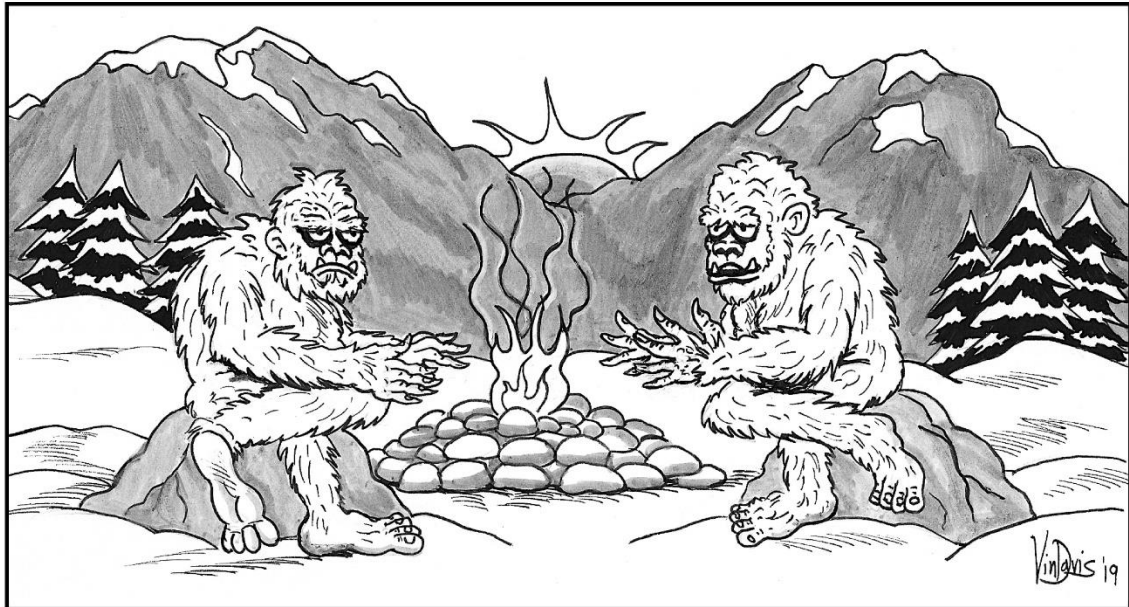


[Return to Contents](#)

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"NO TOP HAT! NO CARROT NOSE! NO STICKS FOR ARMS!
DO I HAVE TO GO ON MAX? ABOMINABLE I GET, BUT SNOWMAN?"

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>

[Return to Contents](#)

HOLDING HER HAND, ALL DISSOLVED by MS Swift

Kevin Jackson's grandchildren were playing hide and seek by the time he arrived at the hilltop castle. Since Marge had died he looked forward more intently to the days when he would mind the kids over the school holidays, despite the hectic pace with which they approached activities.

As their voices rang from the rearing walls, he welcomed the chance to regain his breath and survey the expansive view after the steep climb up. The medieval structure didn't dominate the crag so much as cling to the place allotted to it by the land. Beneath its walls, sheer, rock sides plummeted down to the tree-lined base. The fields beyond were faint under a rising mist and the sinuous forms of the neighbouring hills were beginning to blur.

'Come on,' he called, 'we need to be quick or we'll be locked in!'

His two eldest appeared and he shouted again for the youngest, 'Sylvie! Come on, love, you've won, do you want to be stuck here over night?'

There was no sign of the six year old and he called again as Shannon and Kyle searched the roofless site.

'Can't find her?' he said anxiously. 'Okay, head down to the ticket office, call her as you go and wait there even if you don't find her.'

He walked along the walls seeking any crannies she may have slipped into when an imperceptible sigh, the faintest of exhalations, gently lifted the hair on the back of his neck. He glanced behind and there was a smothered giggle.

'Sylvie?'

Seemingly sprung from thin air, the child stood smiling beside the wall.

'Have I won?'

He nodded and took her hand. It was cold and damp. She chattered away as he phoned Shannon and agreed they would meet by the caves at the foot of the crag.

'It was the smiley lady who helped me. She called me over when she saw us play—she hid me in her long dress. It was soft and smelt like flowers.'

'What lady?' he asked.

'The one who was walking along the castle walls. She was watching us and smiling the whole time.'

They were returning downhill over the green sward toward the outer walls when Sylvie turned, 'There she is.'

Kevin looked back. The mist had thickened until the sun was a pallid disc and the higher ground had broken into vague shapes folded into the sky.

‘Look, Granddad, there’s a horn, an eye and an evil grin.’

They were stood at the base of the crag where a cave mouth was barred by a locked gate. The attendant in the ticket office had directed them there when they had entered the site. ‘There’s faces carved into the rock all over the site but especially down at the caves,’ he had said, ‘Wherever you are on site, there are always eyes watching you.’

Shannon pointed through the bars at the watching devil carved into the wall of the top cave. He shook his head, ‘No, can’t see it love.’

‘Were they devil worshippers here?’ Shannon asked. ‘why did they carve it?’

‘According to the guide book, people used to live in these caves a few hundred years ago,’ Kevin said. ‘They were superstitious back then. Maybe it was a sign to frighten outsiders, or a sign to show who owned this place.’

The second face was easier to spot—a crude carving jutting from an outcrop of rock that peered through the autumnal trees. He touched the angular features hammered from the rock.

‘I wanted to see you again.’

Kevin turned as Sylvie spoke. She was vanishing under a low-hanging beech tree. He followed, ducking under the leaves and reached out to where she was chattering away. Something cold and sharp scratched his hand and he flinched before pushing the leaves back. The child was creeping into a dark recess beyond the foliage, he reached after her, brushing aside the layers of bracken and cold, dank air closed around his hand. For a moment she disappeared and he suddenly felt that something in the darkness had its attention fixed upon him.

‘Thank you,’ the child said before his hand caught her. She briefly resisted whining, ‘I want to stay with her! She said I could stay and see the faces come to life, that I could see them all dance for her.’

Reaching into the damp gloom, he imagined that his arm and hand were inside an expectant, gaping mouth rather than a rocky overhang.

‘No, now!’ he snapped and he pulled the girl out from under the leaves. She emerged cold and damp to the touch, smelling of vegetation and with eyes shining.

‘Grandy, Sylvie’s got a dirty old stone, she says it can make me disappear,’ Shannon moaned as she came downstairs. He had agreed to have the kids overnight so that Samantha and Dan could have a rare night out.

‘It’s not dirty and it’s not a stone,’ Sylvie said, following, ‘It’s the lady’s finger! She said when I held it I was holding her hand and that I would be able to go to her and hide and never be found.’

Kevin took it from the child; it was an inch of cylindrical bone smeared with fresh earth. It could well have been a finger bone, possibly a relic from the bloody history of the castle. Promising to keep it safe, he deposited it behind the curtains on the window sill of his room, intending to take it back to the castle staff.

Sylvie was placated by promises that she could see it the next day and as she was readied for bed, she insisted again that she wanted to go to the crag and see the carvings come to life.

‘Marge.’

He half rose in bed. Fabric shifted nearby. He could hear Sylvie whispering and giggling. For a moment he was back at that terrible day when he had found his wife’s body on the rockery, her face stretched taut amongst the lavender, her hands grasping at air whilst the toddler Sylvie chattered nearby.

The dream melted away and his awareness returned to the bedroom. Something huge loomed close to the ceiling—there was a moment of panic before the light was on—and he found that the curtains were pushed out near the top. Sylvie was disappearing behind them and whatever lifted them dropped away. He slipped out of bed, calling softly. The fabric was chill and damp. He sensed the night air—had she opened the window? The curtains fell around him. The child sounded far away. His hands reached into cold—it was as if the window were not there and he reached into a cave. He pushed through layers of fabric, grabbing onto something slick and thin. He could smell mist and foliage. He shook himself free from the curtains to see the child’s pale form slip from his grip, her outstretched hand was raised offering something—the fragment of bone he realised—to the night.

‘You said you’d come back,’ the child said, ‘I can see you now, sitting and the people and animals are dancing around you; there’s Grandma, she’s been hiding...’

She was moving away from him through a place of darkness where the wall should have been. He pushed himself after her, through thick mist and grabbing the girl, snatched at the bone and heaved her away. Dank moisture alighted on his face, vegetation closed around his shoulders and he pushed his hand out.

‘If this is what you want, take it from me,’ he whispered. ‘take my hand, not hers.’

He sensed something immense before him, like he stood at the foot of the crag. The mist danced around him as his free hand made contact with rough stone. He could feel patterns hammered into it and he imagined that he traced a carved face, the rock shifted beneath his fingers as if the face now grinned. The faintest of exhalations played around him, the scent of flowers embraced him and the bone was lifted from his fingers. All dissolved. He felt himself stumble and twist whilst his face stretched and his body seized and shook until all was gathered into the density of the night.

Shannon came into the room to see Sylvie scurry free from the curtains before her granddad fell back through them, ripping them from their hooks, when she lifted them, his face was contorted—his shining eyes stretched wide, his mouth twisted into a vacant grin, limbs juddered in a wild dance against the carpet—and the skin of his upraised, empty hand was moist and cold to the touch.

THE END

Author's note: this story is set in Cheshire's Beeston Castle (UK). The legend of a lady walking the walls in medieval dress who can only be seen by children is reputedly true. The faces carved onto the rock—including that of a devil in one of the cave mouths—are also real. The suggestion that these carvings animate at night was created by this author.

M. S. Swift's latest ghost story is available from: <https://www.irbstore.co/product-page/paranormal-june-2019>

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[Return to Contents](#)

THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

Chapter 15

My mind roiled like a tumultuous storm as I returned to my chamber. I had a letter to compose—two in fact—perfecting the lie and then exposing it. I would tell Kasimir in the morning that I could not sign the document, that I felt Doctor Freud could cure his sister, and that as a physician, I had to try all I could to bring Cybele back into a perfect state of psychological health.

The first letter I composed was addressed as such, urging the good doctor in Vienna to take on Cybele's case as a priority. I did not seal it because I knew Kasimir would burn with curiosity to read it. I would insist that he did, to maintain the façade I wished to present to him. To buttress the lie, I would hold to the persona within me of the normal and respectable 'Dr. Jekyll'.

The second letter, which Kasimir would not see, would be indicative of my 'Mr. Hyde'. Not an evil self, but a hidden aspect of a single persona. (As we all have, too often from necessity.) That letter would negate the first, telling Doctor Freud that Cybele was of sound mind, but that it was her brother who was mad.

I would then send the second letter myself to a post office. Or if Kasimir had a member of the townsfolk see to the transportation of all the castle's communications, I would slip the letter to the carrier unbeknownst to my host, with a generous gratuity in the courier's palm.

But how Kasimir would bear the news I was to tell him on the morrow, I could not predict. Would he rage? Would he see through Jekyll to expose Hyde, and fell me into the grave at a stroke? (My memory flashed to the implements of medieval weaponry hanging on the castle walls.) Would he entrap Cybele and I and call on his Brotherhood cabal to not only take us from Kohl Castle (the Castle Ouroboros, its real name, as Cybele had informed me), but also from the face of the earth? Would he risk the suspicious death of the heir of the family fortune in order to exact his revenge? And then perhaps find some other way to gain the wealth he needed, the demonic power he intended to foist upon the world?

I could only assume that a dangerous man would be inclined to enact more danger on those around him. Family was by no means sanctified to him, nor was an old university chum.

Cybele would see to her role. A single bag would she pack with her bare necessities, dressed for travel beneath her night clothes. Kasimir would surely check on her, but she would again feign sleep to slip from his inspection and potential interrogation.

I would distract Kasimir, though I knew not how. I would wait for an opportunity to present itself. If I could find no other way to escape the castle with Cybele as my charge, I would force myself to ignore my Hippocratic Oath and let the Hyde within belie my true nature. I would strike Kasimir with a weapon as Cybele had struck me. Hers, she confessed, was a brass candlestick.

The afternoon, when Kasimir seemed the most preoccupied with his business affairs, would be the likeliest time for escape. We would take the horses and race down the mountain path to safety and freedom. Get on the first locomotive toward the capital and hope it hurried faster

than Kasimir could call on his cabal to hunt us down. A brotherhood within the Brotherhood which stretched forth its tendrils through all of Austria, and beyond.

Kasimir's chances to construct a hellish future would be lost. Cybele would confess all to the attorney of the will. She would have her own will written up, barring Kasimir from any fortune and, if she was able, she would have him analysed by competent doctors of her own choosing. Possibly having him locked in an asylum for the remainder of his days.

To that medical assessment, I confessed I would gladly lend my signature.

I finished the twin letters to Doctor Freud, sealing only the second, hiding it in my medical bag, then settled in for a slumber that took too long in arriving. I replayed in my mind the scheme Cybele and I had devised for the morrow.

I almost missed breakfast with my host.

I brought the parchment with me to the table. Gustav had, again, provided a sumptuous feast. (I wondered when Cybele ate, assuming her meals were brought to her, Kasimir's ever watchful eye maintaining her bedroom prison.)

As Kasimir and I ate, I detailed to him why I didn't think his sister's mental trauma was incurable. That she had been shocked by the sudden and violent manner of her parent's and sister's deaths, that she had been depressed, but that the right doctor could return her to normal. I again reinforced that for Cybele to be interred in an asylum would exacerbate her tenuous psychological state—that the cure would be worse than the disease.

Kasimir listened patiently. I presented to him the letter I had written to Doctor Freud to prove to him that I was a man of my word. I only wanted the best for Cybele, which surely would be a disposition with which Kasimir could not argue.

He didn't.

He read over the letter carefully as he cracked a hardboiled egg, and into which he carefully dipped wedges of toast. I ate and watched his eyes as they scanned my careful calligraphy.

A silk napkin wiped his mouth as he looked at me with beneficent understanding in his eye. "You are a great physician," he complimented. "I knew I was doing the right thing in calling you to my family estate and to my sister's bedside. I could see the intelligence—nay, wisdom—in you when we were students." He put the letter back into its envelope and tucked it into his vest pocket. "After breakfast, I will summon a townsman to come immediately to retrieve this communique. I have a telegraph connected directly to my man in the village, but, alas, no farther, so you wouldn't be able to consult Herr Freud in such a modern manner, I'm afraid. Your letter will be on its way to Vienna by this afternoon, I assure you." He patted his breast pocket and gave me a beaming smile. I feared him even more, though I couldn't surmise why. He returned to his egg. "You are perhaps correct. I have been too hasty, thinking to send my dear sister to an asylum so readily. But I did not know what else to do. You were my final hope before closing the door on her dementia forever. You have arrived at the eleventh hour, and with your training from the illustrious Herr Freud, you have saved my family. I shall follow doctor's orders."

I was somewhat taken aback. His smile still did not reassure me. I tried not to let my manner or bearing betray the trepidation I still held within. He seemed to be playing an intricate game of chess. I smiled and bowed my head slightly, told Kasimir it was not only my duty as a medical man, but an honour and privilege to assist an old friend. I needed to hold my own in the game.

He took back his document that lay on the table beside my cutlery and excused himself, saying he had much business to attend to, not the least being to summon the letter carrier from the village.

We exchanged our pleasantries as he left the table. I assured him that I would happily entertain myself (again) touring his castle. As he was about to exit the dining hall, he halted his steps at the door, turning to me as I was lifting a slice of melon to my mouth.

“Just curious, Friedrich,” he began, one hand on the door frame, the rolled parchment tapping against his thigh. Gustav was clearing his master’s plate from the table. “Were you able to attend to my sister? To question her—perform your, as you called it, ‘talking cure’? Without her attempting to attack you again, that is?”

I swallowed the melon, felt its corners slide down my trachea. My voice cracked as I took too long to find words, to paste closed a gap in my lie, to play chess without losing a man too early. The truth was, unfortunately, the only thing I could think of to say.

“No, as a matter of fact. Not at present. I was merely assessing her state by ... well, by what you have informed me of it ... her moods, her night terrors ... and, of course, from her attack upon me.”

He nodded with eyes closed, a slight smile playing across his lips.

“I would have thought a doctor would need more observation to make an accurate diagnosis. So be it ... Doctor Freud’s methods may be different from the average physician. Perhaps this afternoon will give you the opportunity to measure the madness—or lack thereof—of your future patient.” He tugged down his vest, tightened the roll of the parchment, and left his gaze on me far too long for comfort. There is much to be said for the language of the body.

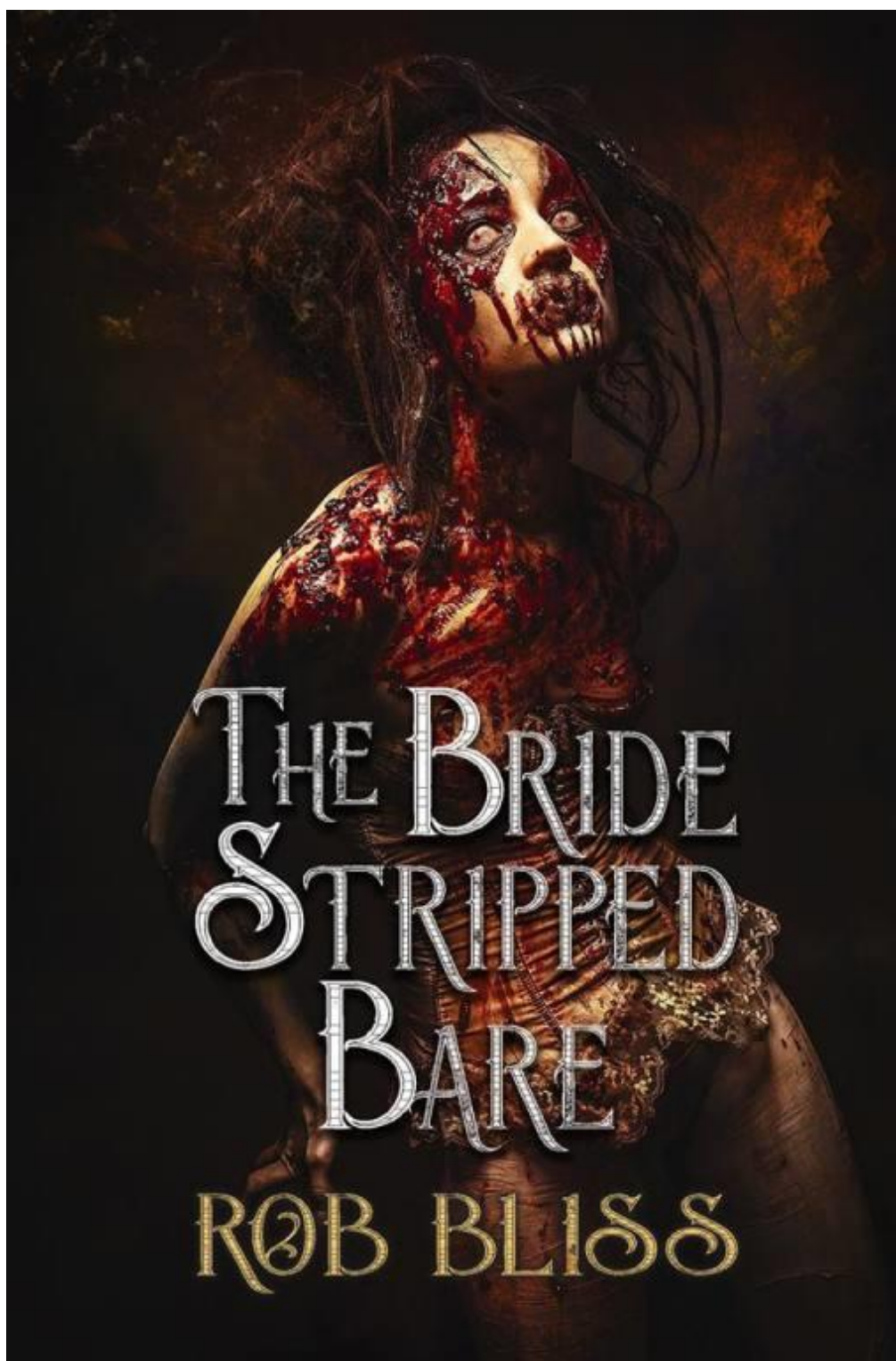
I agreed, and promised to visit his sister shortly after breakfast. This appeased him, or seemed to. He patted the oak of the door frame and bowed from the room.

I could eat no more, and communicated the same to Gustav, who then removed my place setting as I slowly shuffled from the dining room.

My mind was awlirl. Did Kasimir suspect my ruse about the letter?

My deceptive tale had forgotten the most basic need for a doctor: to visit his patient!

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



Available from Necro Publications.

[Return to Contents](#)

KASSI AND THE WORLD'S GREATEST SWORDSMAN by Ste Whitehouse

The Pipe-world, Ah'kis, is five thousand miles long and just over ten miles in diameter. Kassi seeks her brother who has been kidnapped by 'demons' and now travel north to the end of the world. She is accompanied by Sebastian, a sentient bot of dubious origins with whom she can communicate telepathically. That ability seems to set her apart from the rest of the world's population.'

His old side wound ached in spite of the summer heat. It ached and itched which was always a bad omen, and he believed in omens. They had saved his life too many times not to be real. He was a little over five foot nine and dressed from head to foot in ancient armour as black and as fresh looking as the day it had been forged. The Builders certainly understood how to make things last. Under a smooth helmet of slick ebony that reflected the world around him the man's hair was long and as black as his armour. Only a speckling of grey belied his age.

He moved through the streets with an easy gait relaxed as only an expert in death could be. He was the World's Greatest Swordsman, the Dark Knight, The Black Knight, The Bringer of Death. He had a dozen names and enjoyed each and every one. He had trained from an early age honed his skill over the years and even though he was older Ah'kis had not found any with as much skill as he had.

Oh, there had been challengers. Once a pack of twelve descended upon his camp and demanded Tournament. Each had fought him one on one and each had died, some within seconds. Older men, versed in warfare and the craft of death, had challenged him, younger men wishing to make a name for themselves had accosted him. Groups hoping that numbers would be his undoing had fallen before his sword.

Men had faced him with rapiers and katanas, broadswords and large two-handed beasts. Hammers and pikes. Magical swords and wands that spewed metal slugs. Upon horseback and—once—upon a mechanoid much like the one at the woman's side. All had faced him and all had fallen to the wayside.

He had faced Trolls of such magnitude that the sunline itself was blotted out. Sea monsters out on the Circle Sea. Found islands of creatures never seen the length of Ah'kis and travelled deeper underground than any man. He had seen the birthing chambers of the dwarfs where they grew as pale white flowers under a black sky before becoming creatures of some intelligence. He had climbed the Spike and conversed with the Elves atop and then flew up to the sunline and caught a portion of its power to cage his heart—or so it was sung. He was indestructible. Impervious to pain and even death, or so the stories went. He was The World's Greatest Swordsman, and he was amused.

Amused at the girl standing before him. He had heard stories of a golden skinned wench travelling steadily northward sword in hand and creature at side. He believed such tales about as much as he believed those told of him. Still the girl stood before him now the metal creature at her side, and her stance disclosed knowledge of the fighting arts. She held the Shield of Ornn, a mythical shield imbued with the power of the Builders. Rumours were that the shield had gone missing after a visit by the golden skinned shieldmaiden. He was impressed—his own dealings with the merchants of Ornn had never amounted to much and his own attempt to 'acquire' the shield had led to nothing. He told her so but she just glared at

him. He waited. After a lifetime of battle he knew some fighters attacked first with their tongues and others were as dumb as a sack of sheep. He could wait. He considered the upcoming fight to be short and swift. After all she was a woman.

Finally the shieldmaiden spoke. “You are the World’s Greatest Swordsman?” She almost spat out the three words in contempt but it had been decades since he had used any other sort of name, and as his fame had spread the need for any other form of identification had faded away. He thought of himself as the World’s Greatest Swordsman and that was that.

He bowed gracefully but affecting an air of amusement. “I am, my dear,” he replied patronisingly.

“You visited Rundell, a village twenty miles south?”

“I may have.”

“There you killed a family.” Her voice was cold and hard, her features frozen in anger.

“Ah. . . . Perhaps.”

“You kill many families, thus your inability to remember?”

“I was hired by some Landbaron to free the land. It was merely business,” he added.

“By slaughtering a complete family.” She sounded incredulous and he knew that he would have to explain just HOW the world worked to the little girl.

“They hired the World’s Greatest Swordsman. How else was I to achieve their aims?”

She struggled, her sword arm flexed and he was sure she was about to leap at him but somehow she calmed. A look between her and the machine seemed to placate her even though nothing was said.

“There was a blacksmith thirteen miles past.”

“Ah yes. He claimed to be shutting for the day and unable to edge my sword.”

“Two men in Castleford?”

“They wished me to stop berating a maid who had spilt wine on my table.”

“A child two miles outside of town?”

“A thief two miles outside of town.” He looked at her and smiled—although the visor of his helmet meant that she could not see his face. “Do you allow thieves and vagabonds to live?”

“The girl was but seven summers.”

“And thus old enough to know better. Really, I cannot see what you hope to achieve here.” He waved a hand undeterminably in puzzlement. “I am ready for your assault. Why need you speak of such triflings before-hand?”

“I wished to understand you better,” she replied grimly before swinging her shield onto her right arm and unbuckling her sword.

The World’s Greatest Swordsman sighed happily. Now he could get on with killing her. The woman glanced at the machine which moved away and again he had the impression that some form of communication had passed between the two. Still the machine would be his soon enough.

“We fight alone,” he said. And the girl nodded in agreement.

They both waited neither willing to attack. He sighed to himself and stepped forward. He wanted the fight over as it was lunch time and he was hungry. The woman raised her shield and swung her broadsword rolling her shoulders in preparation. He feigned right and then swung heavily left. The woman stepped deftly away, their swords barely touching, before launching her own attack.

They parried a little, dancing around each other like moths to a flame or lovers in a baroque danse macabre. He had to admit that she was good. She neither over exerted nor fell back in haste. Each swing was methodical and yet acrobatic and she moved well, almost pirouetting delicately to some unheard melody. The World’s Greatest Swordsman took a step back to apprise the situation.

The golden skinned woman stepped forward ducking and rolling suddenly coming up underneath his defences. He leapt, bringing his own shield down to catch her blade before thrusting his sword down and forward into her body. Which was no longer there. He landed and rolled, her sword cutting into the soil half an inch from his head.

He swung catching her shield. She fell back on purpose and jabbed at his waist, missing by an inch. He swung left, she caught his blade on her own. She swung right, he parried it. The world became merely the two of them and the sound of metal striking metal. Both of their swords were exquisite, capable of cutting into any lesser blade with ease. He circled her striking quick jabs which she caught with ease before circling him and slashing left and right. Each swing caught his blade perfectly. The two were evenly matched.

He leapt over her a thrust of steel missing her by an inch. She rolled under him, taking out his legs, but missed him as he gained his footing and stepped away swiftly. He charged hoping that his weight would overwhelm her but the woman was a good six inches taller than he and she stood the charge rebuffing him to the point where he near as much fell to the ground.

They stood facing one another. He bowed, modest now and with a sense of chivalry.

“You fight well, madam,” he said, waiting to catch his breath.

“And you.” The steeliness in her face remained but a look of respect filled her eyes if only briefly. “It is a shame that such talent is used to bully others.”

“I am the World’s Greatest Swordsman. It is expected of me. Besides, we who are strong must take what is ours because of said strength.”

“And the poor and weak?”

He stood, exuding a sense of mirth at her words. “Ah! I remember well my own youth. The thought that I should change the world one battle at a time. The concept that I should have some sense of responsibility towards my fellow man simply because they are weaker. How has your journey gone thus far, child? Have all welcomed you with open arms? Have the weak basked in your glory?”

The woman looked uncomfortable but remained silent.

“I see. You DO understand the way of the world. That a strong man—or woman—takes and the Builders do nought despite the unfairness. That oft it is the ill-suited man who takes up leadership and the words of others grow deaf.” He spread his arms wide to show her his armour. “How could I equip myself so if not by gold coin, whether it was given freely or not. Tell me that you have not stolen or foraged amongst those newly dead and I will be silent. Tell me that you came upon the Shield of Ornn by legitimate means and I shall acquiesce to your demands.”

Again the woman looked uncomfortable and he laughed.

“We are alike my friend. Warriors destined for greater things. We take what is due and spurn those who would turn from us. You are but young in these things, child. A pity for given time I would have been happy to pass on my mantle to you. But you challenged me and thus must bear the price.”

He leapt forward ready to kill.

{Fuck but he’s good!}

{His name’s probably a good indication, Kassi luv.} As always Sebastian delved right into the heart of the topic.

{It COULD have been ironic. You know like calling that big bloke who hung around Robin Hood, Small John.}

[Little.}

{Excuse me!}

{It was Little John.}

{Little, small, petit, who the fuck cares at the mome. . . }

The man leapt at her but Kassi had rested while he ranted on and on. She sidestepped and swung her sword across his back, or at least where his back should have been.

{Like I said, good.}

They moved in concentric circles weaving in and out first clockwise and then anticlockwise, always moving always probing each other’s defences. Neither gave ground and neither saw an opening. Each of her moves were met perfectly by the man’s own, just as each of his

strokes met her own defences. From afar Sebastian could almost appreciate the delicate beauty of their dance, if not for the fact that the man wished to kill his friend.

{Perhaps if I . . .?}

{No! I need to end this by myself.}

Sebastian sighed in his own particular way and waited. Kassi could be exceptionally stubborn at times but he knew better than to interfere at the moment. If later she needed help he would step in.

{Very well.}

She ran to one side catching the low wall of an inn and pushing herself upwards and over the swordsman. He merely dropped and rolled his sword skimming the soil seconds after she had landed. By then she had already turned and leapt to one side. The man angled his shield causing Kassi to roll off and away.

By now a crowd of people had gathered to watch the two swordsmiths fight. They kept their distance and remained quiet, unsure who to cheer for. The Swordsman they knew and had little love for but this new fighter was unknown. She could be worse than the man, although to be fair in the villagers experience very few were actually worse than the World's Greatest Swordsman.

For almost forty minutes they wove a complex dance of steel and armour. Twice he had managed to scour Kassi's armour but not deeply enough to reach flesh, and once she had scored a vicious stab which had barely scratched the man's armour. Sebastian thought that it was a form of laminated Kevlar with layers of gel to cushion bullets. It was modular, almost like the old fashioned chainmail most people used nowadays, and he could almost imagine the breastplate he could build with it. If a machine could drool Sebastian would be standing in an ever increasing puddle.

Still his fascination and enthusiasm was tempered by the man's skill. It equalled his companions—perhaps even bettered it—which brought this fight into the realm of luck. Kassi always said again and again that she trained ten hours a day to be 'lucky' but still facing The World's Greatest Swordsman even Sebastian wondered if that would be enough.

Then he saw it. A slight pause. A shift in weight from one leg to another. The man was tiring. His Kevlar armour would undoubtedly be lighter than Kassi's heavier bonded leather and chainmail but she was still young. Legend had it that he was fifty but Sebastian knew that stories first circulated about a 'great swordsman' around fourteen years ago. Still however old he was, the man would be past his prime and Kassi was just hitting hers.

Sebastian concentrated on the swordsman and his friend. He did not notice the crowd slowly draw in collectively aware that somehow the fate of one of the opponents was nearing its end. Suddenly the man darted right and pulled a child out from the crowd. He held his sword edge against the boy's throat.

"Let the boy go," Kassi said.

The man appeared slightly breathless. “It is wrong. We are a goodly match and as I have said on any other day I would consider you an able apprentice. But you are no better than I. And yet because of mere vigour you would win? Where is the fairness in such a thing?”

He shook his head and continued. “‘Tis not right at all. I am The World’s Greatest Swordsman and you are nothing, a waif. A whisper on the wind. You would not beat me as an equal but because you can sustain this fight for longer.” He pulled his sword upwards a fraction, causing Kassi to lower her own weapon.

“No! Wait! Please let the boy go. He has no part in our disagreement.”

“He watches. He sees my failure. He is as much at fault as you. I hear him cheer you on,” the man said flatly.

“Please. The boy,” Kassi pleaded.

“It is strange.” The man’s voice took on a wistfulness and vagueness. “You will soon discover the fear people have for our strength. You will understand the need for this. We are as elevated above them as the sunline is above an ant. Would you step around an ant, allow it passage when it impedes your own? Avail yourself of my mercy, join me and what wonders we could be amongst these . . . vermin.”

Her reply was a simple *No*. He saw her eyes and knew that she would never join him, learn from him. So be it. His arm tensed and Kassi lay her sword on the ground. As she stood again a strange look came upon her face. One of triumph. It unsettled the man who hesitated to cut the boys throat. Then realisation came. The machine, where was it?

As if sensing the man’s thoughts Sebastian dropped from the roof enfolding the swordsman in his eight strong arms/legs. Each leg moved independently in short precise movements that trapped the man and carefully detached him from the young boy who ran into Kassi’s arms. Man and machine rolled in the dirt as the swordsman howled in anger.

“I am the World’s Greatest Swordsman. I will not be defeated by a mere machine.”

“Here! Knock yourself out.” She threw her own sword to Sebastian, who caught it uneasily.

He uncurled himself from around the swordsman and stood on his last four legs. As if empowered by Kassi the crowd threw their own weaponry to Sebastian and a collection of rough swords and daggers littered the dirt at his feet. He picked up the three best and held them in his ‘arms’. Four swords against one.

The World’s Greatest Swordsman merely smiled.

{ Kassi luv. What the hell are you playing at? }

{ You’re always going on about how I get the easy bit. Y’know. Wearing them down with a bit of sword play. I thought you might want to see how it actually goes. }

{ By facing the self-proclaimed World’s Greatest Swordsman? }

{ We all have to start somewhere. Besides, I could do with a rest. }

He turned to see a broad smile on the girl's lips and began to run a number of words together which in truth would have been physically impossible for the girl, but then the swordsman struck.

Sebastian saw it as clear as anything—he did not need ‘peripheral vision’, ALL his vision was full on encompassing a good 310 degrees. He raised one of the swords and caught the man's own blade easily. The swordsman grunted and swung again with the same effect—but Sebastian held it back with a different blade. Twice more he tried but each time Sebastian was prepared, his own reaction time considerably faster than any humans. Such a fast reaction time also meant that he tired of the charade so much quicker. With three sharp thrusts and a delicate move—which Kassi had to admit was pretty impressive—the machine held the swordsman's blade in a five arm/leg hold and tottered imprecisely and slightly off-balance.

The man roared again. “I WILL NOT BE BROUGHT DOWN BY A MACHINE!” and ran at Sebastian, who was momentarily unable to move out of the way. He went down under the black shadow of the man's armour and Kassi saw a stiletto flash four times. The swordsman stood blade in hand as Sebastian scurried away a series of cuts along his right side. He threw Kassi's sword back to her which she caught just in time as the World's Greatest Swordsman bore down on her.

Now the man was reckless. Hacking more with anger than finesse. He was also slower, tired by the fight with Kassi and the brief skirmish with Sebastian. Either way he made mistakes, left open his side, did not follow through thoroughly. Kassi exploited them. Carefully landing blow after blow upon the black Kevlar armour. Despite that the armour held but the force of the blows did at least weaken the man. Finally he left his shield arm open and Kassi darted in, slit the leather holding the shield, and stepped back before the man's broadsword cut ineffectually through the air where she had been a second before.

His shield fell to the dirt and for a second he hesitated, wondering whether to leave the shield or not. In that split second Kassi cut at his sword hand. His armour saved his hand from permanent damage but the force of the blow caused him to drop his sword. Kassi kicked it away and stood her own sword circling near his throat.

“Surrender now,” she stated bluntly and the man appeared to deflate. He lifted his helmet off and stood his face a compilation of anger, bitterness and remorse. He looked at Kassi a thin lipped smile on his lips devoid of any warmth or humour.

“And what now? You defeat me with the use of a machine and now we are at an impasse. I have done nothing here in this hovel. No crimes have been committed so what do you want to do? Run me through in front of these cattle?” He spat at the crowd who all took two steps back. He looked up at her his black eyes hard and emotionless. “You prove that you are like me by slaughtering me here.”

Kassi smiled sweetly. “Oh! Did I not mention it? We came with some constabulary from Rundell. You remember Rundell don't you? The family you ‘cleansed’ for some Landbaron. Well, it seems that he was not as popular as he thought. Had to admit to hiring you. He's awaiting the gallows as we speak.” As she spoke ten heavily armed men stepped out of the crowd warily. He may be unarmed but he was till the World's Greatest Swordsman.

“And these gentlemen are here to ensure you face a trial and thus justice for your crimes.”

The swordsman looked puzzled. “That shithole couldn’t raise two decent men let alone ten.”

“Oh these are the people we collected on the way. It seems that a lot of places really do not like their citizens been slaughtered. Even by the World’s Greatest Swordsman. They’re all here to make sure you reach Rundell.”

He fished his stiletto out but Kassi swung her crossbow out and aimed it steadily at his head. “Which do you think is the swifter? Your arm or this bolt?”

They drank in the town’s tavern. Kassi a warm beer and Sebastian a glass of milk. Despite her best surveillance techniques Kassi had never seen how the smooth mechanoid actually took in the liquid—which he swore helped the ‘protein gel hidden beneath his laminated skin to heal.’ Which in turn filled in any cut or scratch on the surface of his body. Even as they sat she could see the long cuts shallow out and fade. She jerked her head up but he had already placed the empty mug back on the wooden table between them. Damn!

“I cannot believe it. Kevlar! The man had Kevlar!” Sebastian’s voice held a distant wonder and she had the impression of him staring wistfully out into the night.

“Wasn’t he the miller’s son back in Brackenwood?” she asked, ready to puncture Sebastian’s reverie.

“Pardon!”

“Kev’lar. He was the florist’s son.” She laughed.

Sebastian actually shook his ‘head’ in sorrow. “The swordsman’s armour was Kevlar. Laminated with shock absorbent gel. AND it’s modular.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I can adapt it to your frame. This stuff is better than steel armour and lighter than leather. AND it can take a bullet or two.” Sebastian had a semi-circle of milk on his face like a smile. Kassi knew that he would not have left a ring of milk unless it was deliberate. The ‘smile’ was above his eyes which was incongruous at best.

“But the man’s belongings went with him to Rundell an hour ago. What use is knowing he had Kevlar armour to us here?”

“Ahh...” Sebastian hesitated.

“Oh. My. Gods. You stole some of the Kevlar? You! Sebastian the saint?”

He huffed and somehow exuded a sense of displeasure. “I did NOT steal anything. And I am certainly not a saint.”

Kassi smiled. “You bribed one of the constables. I always knew the law was as crooked as the crooks.” She glanced at the large bag of gold coins that sat on the table between the beer and empty milk mug. “I thought it was lighter after you asked to ‘count’ the coin.”

“It certainly was not a bribe. At least I paid openly. Whether or not the constable declares the transaction is entirely up to him.”

They both looked at the fairly substantial cloth bag sitting there emanating wealth silently.

“What he said, Sebastian. About me. How much alike I was to him.” Kassi’s voice was low and hollow.

“He was using psychology against you. It was a fabrication, no more.”

The young woman shook her head softly with sadness. “No. No he wasn’t. Not completely. Look at me. At what I am. A woman swordsmith. I kill for a living, scrounge from the dead. Existing somewhere in between the two. He knew that feeling of power you have right before you take someone’s life. That knowledge that today you hold their existence in the palm of your hand. It can be. . . . exhilarating.”

She looked away, ashamed.

Sebastian’s ‘hand’ curled over hers and he replied. “You are not he, Kassi luv.”

“I knew even before I met you.” She carried on softly as if not hearing her friend. “I know you often think it was because of you, your encouragement to defend myself, that I became a warrior but that day we met, when I first saw the demons, that day I knew I wanted to learn to use a sword. I’d watch Goro—Mataso’s grandson—train, and I knew for certain that was what I wanted to do. And then the men fell down and the demons came and I met you¹.” There were tears in her eyes. “This bag. I’ve never asked for coin. Done the odd job to feed us but never actively gone out to hunt a man and kill him for money.”

“You did not kill him,” Sebastian replied flatly.

“He’s as good as dead isn’t he? Is this the start for me? This ‘slippery slope’ you constantly go on at me about?”

“No. And I can tell you why right now,” the mechanoid said firmly. “I know what you intend to do with the money and that is all that needs to be said. For that you show yourself to be nothing like that man. And you never will be. Besides the very act of worrying means that you are not at all like him.”

Kassi looked relieved before asking. “Is it wrong to travel back? It will add a week or two on our journey north?” Suddenly she sounded stronger, more like the Kassi he knew.

“Luv, we have no real idea that your brother lives or not, so we will arrive a week or two later because of the diversion. It has taken us near enough eleven months to travel this distance and we are still far from the Circular Sea. A week or two won’t matter.”

¹ See [Kassi and the Dig](#).

With that they fell into an easy silence—and Kassi imbibed a few more beers. During the next twelve days a blacksmith's family found a small bag of gold on their doorstep one morning, as did two families from Castleford whose sons had tried to stop a man beating a serving maid. A child's family received more and a priest found money waiting for him thus enabling a family brutally murdered to be buried in peace.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

STIGMA by Christopher T Dabrowski
English translation by Aneta Szaraniec-Sandecka

1. Angie.

Maurice—a perfect name for a cat. Unfortunately Maurice is not a cat but a crook, matrimonial deceiver who clung to my twin sister Martha. We look as alike as two peas in a pod but have got different characters since I could feel there was something wrong with that guy. I remember when we met, he gave me that exaggerated false smile. At first, I thought he could be just be shy. If he hadn't introduced himself, I would have found him a mute but I guess it goes for all the introverted ones. Everything else was even more suspicious. The guy was quite a lot younger than Martha and a hunk—he could have any woman he wanted.

When we arrived at a restaurant, I noticed that Maurice didn't act like a man in love, he didn't look at my sister like someone who loves her. Instead, he would drool looking at some Lolitas leaving the restaurant, disgusting.

When it was time and we were supposed to pay, he didn't even suggest doing that, not even half the bill as modern couples do, oh no, Martha paid for everything.

The fucker wrapped her around his stinky finger and after three months they were married. Mr Poor Maurice and Martha, a rich businesswoman. Maurice was always in need and Martha always satisfied all his cravings. Isn't that a perfect match?

I'm a smart woman, if necessary I can nose around and since it was necessary, I did so. Maurice, just like a vampire, sucked on to his victims from time to time. He could entrap any poor thing so that after a few months a woman was really poor. Of course I did tell him what I'd found out and what I thought of him. OF COURSE he replied that he had a few women in his life but none of them turned out to be the one and only. Then he added that Martha, OF COURSE, is the one. What a lying prick! None of the seduced women couldn't have been the one—they weren't rich enough. My sister, on the other hand, was rich enough to live on her for the rest of his life. Bastard loved her money. I knew exactly what was going to happen—he would do everything to persuade Martha to make him the owner of her fortune and then he would find a way to divorce her. Quite often I tried to warn my naive sister but, as they say, a woman in love is a blind woman. Unfortunately!

It's not too difficult to imagine that Maurice and I weren't the best of friends. For him, Martha was the good one (k'ching, money, money, money...) and I was the bad one—the one that saw through him right away. Whenever I visited my Marth, he was always around as if he was afraid I would try to come between them. As for Martha, her Mauricious as she called him, was a taboo we could never talk about. We even argued about him a couple of times, but when I realized I couldn't do anything about it and I would never open Martha's eyes to see what her husband was all about, I just let it go.

The wedding had been three months earlier, it was high time I visited my sister to check if she was okay. As usual, we hugged each other. I was curious how my Marth was coping with her prick husband. Of course he didn't even come out to say hello but I was sure he was eavesdropping. We took my luggage upstairs and came down afterwards to the kitchen to chat. I even wondered why the Prick didn't follow us downstairs—the kitchen was in fact far away from the rest of the house. Well, maybe he just assumed that Martha being married to

him is a sure thing and I'm not a danger anymore? I could nag, instigate but it wouldn't change anything anyway.

—Marth, where's that husband of yours? He didn't even say hello.

—He's got a headache.

Oh, little Prick has got a headache, isn't that interesting, I thought, he knew I was coming and suddenly he felt sick.

—Oh, poor little thing.

—Stop it! replied Marth and we both laughed.

Martha started fixing our favourite drink. So simple yet so delicious—flavoured special herbs, bitter vodka with Sprite and a few slices of cucumber. Yummy!

—Does he do anything at all? I asked, guessing he was just a do-nothing sponger.

—You know how hard it is to find a good job nowadays... Marth tried to explain.

—Why don't you hire him? I suggested.

—No, no way! You know what a dishonour it is for a man to have his wife as a boss.

—What about the other work? Does he at least help you around the house?

—Well, you know guys... Marth tried to joke about it.

If I mentioned anything about this do-nothing person, she was trying to make a joke. She let herself be the Prick's slave which I really didn't like at all.

—But does he at least care about you? I couldn't let it go.

—Well, sure, of course. I can always talk to him, cry on his shoulder or even cuddle up sometimes.

“Even cuddle up sometimes?” Yeah, sure, his one and only duty, just so the wife wouldn't figure out what he married her for. Poor Marth, naive like a child... Suddenly I realized how I could open her eyes.

—What about sex? I tried to make it sound like a joke. I saw her face change unpleasantly for a while.

Here we go, I thought.

—Let that be a sweet surprise of mine, she said unconfused, still playing a role of a happy wife. I knew, just then, there was something very wrong with this marriage. But I didn't want to take this conversation any further so that Mr Prick's good name wouldn't be ruined entirely.

Just like good old times, I thought so pleased on our return home, and buzzed a little. The Prick locked himself in his prick kingdom. Of course Marth wanted to drag him with us but fortunately the excuse of the sudden headache was still on. So we were left alone, thank God (for me, anyway) and we had all day to ourselves. We visited our parents' grave. I am so sure that they would never like Maurice, either. Marth and I went down memory lane at our favourite pizza restaurant where we used play hooky and used to talk about our first crushes on movie stars and singers. Yeah, we had crush on a different person every week or so and

we had always plenty to talk about. When we grew up and could afford two pizzas our talks became more down-to-earth: and were about the boys from school. I guess there wasn't a guy we didn't speak about as far as dating was concerned. Our conquest weren't impressing though, since we never were high school beauties so we could only have long conversations about it. Dream on... Those were the times!

We ate too much and we looked like stuffed twins with stomach problems. After the feast we ended up in a pub nearby. We did some small talking but whenever Marth started to speak about her Mauricious, I had to keep my big mouth shut for the sake of our little reunion. Instead, I promised myself to look at Mr M's biography a little closer—I was almost sure that the suspect must have done something very much worse than only matrimonial hanky-panky. Perhaps some sins from his youth? I decided to hire a private detective. It was high time for Mr Pricks' life inspection.

We came back home late in the evening and found a note from Mr Moody on the table. He was very hurt because he didn't get dinner so he decided to eat out this time (oh, really) and that we shouldn't wait up for him. Since he was treated so mean (poor thing, indeed!), M. decided to go out to get some beer with the guys and that he might not even come back till the next day. As far as I was concerned, he could just go to hell and drink his sorry ass to death. Marth just shrugged her shoulders and tried to make a joke: "Men!" We were completely wasted. The last time we partied so much was before Mauricious came into our lives. I went straight to bed. I didn't even feel like unpacking my bags or wash my teeth. I didn't even feel like taking my clothes off. I just fell flat and went off to sleep immediately.

I was sure nothing would be able to set me on my feet.

I was so wrong. Woken up by Marth's voice, I opened my eyes. It was pitch dark. First, I wasn't sure where I was. I heard the calling again. Finally, I realized where I was. Maybe the Prick was giving her a hard time—I started to worry—maybe he got so drunk that he wanted to hurt Marth?

I got up, turned on the light and opened the door. From then on, everything happened so quickly, yet I had the feeling I was watching a movie in slow motion. A horror movie. It all took so long. I saw... Marth falling down the stairs.

She must have been by the door. When I opened it suddenly, I must have pushed her. She was falling down with her arms spread, like a rag doll. She fell down into the darkness. I just froze, couldn't even scream. I heard an awful cracking sound of breaking bones, her body just collapsed. I ran down the stairs immediately, praying it was just a nightmare, I almost fell as well. I knelt down to Marth's body which didn't move anymore.

—Martha, Marth!—I was crying and still hoping she was only unconscious and had survived this ghostly accident.

But there was no miracle, she was dead.

—Maaaaaaaarth!—I was crying my eyes out holding her soon to be cold body. I am not sure how long it took when I was close to going insane.

I cannot explain what exactly was going on in my head, my soul—I guess nobody could understand it anyway. It was like a part of me died. I was begging God to wake me up, I punched myself, pinched my hands till they almost bled. But it was the hard truth.

MURDERER!—I kept hearing in my head.

—No, no, no!—I cried—but I would give my life for my Marth! I would never hurt her. NEVER!

And what will you say about this?—the voice in my head was unruffled—tomorrow they will put you in chains and you will spend the rest of your life in jail. And even if they let you out before, you will have the murderer stigma forever.

I couldn't argue with that. I was so numbed and didn't care about anything. I just wanted to die. But this part of my mind didn't want to let go:

You won't be able to explain yourself. The press will eat you alive: "the poor twin sister killed the rich one, pushed her down the stairs to get the money." I can already see the headlines: MONSTER WOMAN. And Mr Prick will make sure you go straight to jail. He will make up stories about your rows, threats, he will lie through his teeth. You'll see!

Fuck you!—that was all I could cry out loud. But I knew, I knew the voice was right, that I must do something before I could mourn my twin sister.

But what should I do? What?!

I didn't get the answer, instead I fell into a trance. I was in a posttraumatic dementia, my body acted but it was like this awful time took control over my actions. Everything seemed to be both real and unreal, sometimes I even thought it was a nightmare, not reality, after all. A terrifying nightmare which touched my mind like a slippery octopus. I felt separated from the reality by a thick glass. Now, I can only remember some parts of that night.

The body wrapped in a blanket.

Oven. Flames of fire.

Metal, ornamental box.

The garden. Bushes. Shovel fixed in the ground. A cross made out of wooden sticks.

And the—black, black, total black—as if this film was suddenly over.

I must have had to take a shower and put on pyjamas but I don't remember this at all.

The very next memory was persistent buzz of the doorbell. All of a sudden I got up semi-conscious and heard the sound of a key in the lock.

2. Maurice.

My father wasn't a bad person. Although, I cannot say he loved me, either. When my mother drank herself to death, he was left with me—a burden. But as they say, a man has to do what a man has to do, and my father didn't want to leave me all by myself, so he found me a babysitter. Tatiana.

The first day of her work was the first day that I started to hate women. Tatiana was Russian. My father paid her chickenfeed but it was a fortune for her. The fucking bitch was the ugliest cunt I ever saw. Or maybe I was just poisoned with hatred and my memory played tricks on me.

She told me to take my clothes off. I didn't want to so she slapped me in the face and I did undress, very ashamed. She told me to sit in the armchair. I did. Then she approached me and took my dick with her filthy hands. I froze and literally became paralyzed. She brought her spotty mug closer and started sucking me. I felt her rotten yellowish teeth and a rough tongue all over, it was disgusting, I felt like throwing up. I was scared stiff to death, I was convinced she'd kill me if I did throw up. My dick was stiff—I can remember that clearly since it was the first time in my life it became stiff. But it all happened against my will.

She was standing before me. Fat, sweaty, with a big sagging belly. She was smiling so slimy...

There are still nights that I have this nightmare and in this nightmare I'm hiding a long knife behind my back. A long carving knife.

I can only remember I was begging her like crazy, "Madame, please, please don't do this, I'm begging you, don't do anything to me, please..." FUCK!!!

And she sat on me, that fat bitch with her big belly. Then she sat on my dick. That was my very first time. She just raped me.

In my dreams, as soon as she's on her knees, I take out a knife and put it in her body. I see her frightened eyes, pain as I hurt her, I can hear she's begging for my mercy. But I hate her with all my heart and I take the revenge by stabbing her slowly. The victim becomes the torturer!

But in reality the horror lasted almost two years. My father went to work every day while his son was being raped and bullied. I was so intimidated that I was scared to say anything to anybody. I was so scared that Tatiana wasn't even a human being to me, I thought of the bitch as some demon, a devil from hell.

Some day she just vanished, I guess she went back to Russia. Tatiana may have vanished but these awful memories and hatred stayed with me, poisoning deeply my soul like some deadly plant. Because all I could do was hate, no matter who, any woman, a girl from school...

All of my friends were dating. Not me. Of course they laughed at me and called me queer. There were times however I wanted to date, in spite of my hatred I liked these beautiful girls around me, I was fascinated by them. Aroused even. But I was scared, scared of them, I hated and wanted them in the same time. As if some beautiful woman could be my antidote, as if her beauty could wash away the monstrosity from my memories.

Problems with women, problems with myself. Alienation, lack of understanding, rejection. Mean peers. Hatred towards the school where teachers didn't even react—I was humiliated each day. So I ended up as some coolie, slaving every day with a shovel. I often day dreamt I was digging graves for each person that hurt me. That was disgusting and I was disgusted with myself. My life became a nightmare but

FUCK, I DIDN'T DESERVE THIS!

All of this was because of this woman.

Someone had to pay. Pay the dues.

I spent some money at the internet cafe. Dating services. Women. The first one, the second, the third... one by one they paid back the dues but could it all even be payable?

I usually picked up ugly middle-aged women whom I was flattering like crazy. Yeah, I was always some woman's victim in the stories I was telling them, I had a wife who was so cruel to abandon me for someone else and to take my child away. Me, unhappy, determined father who was searching for his offspring for years just to tell the child: I am your daddy! The real one! Isn't that a catchy story? Oh yes, that was a catchy story indeed... Catchy and very demanding... Demanding money because looking for your flesh and blood can be very expensive. But a woman in love will do anything for her one and only, right?

I led quite a comfortable life. Of course, I avoided sex, these awful memories of mine... On the other hand, when I saw beautiful women... well, I decided to convince myself to have sex and started going to a whorehouse. Strangely enough, I didn't have any problems with getting an erection, maybe because I was the MASTER, a dominator. I pulled their hair and made them suck my cock. I was the standing one, they had to be on their knees. I was aroused by these beautiful young faces but on the other hand, I hated them, especially when my mind saw Tatiana's mug. Then, I pulled their hair as hard as I could (for extra money, of course)—it was my relief. Because it was Tatiana that I was hurting, not them.

And then I fucked them, with arousal and hatred, I was punishing them. Each move of mine was even stronger, I was like an animal sometimes, I wanted to fuck them till death, cut them in half, kill that bitch!

I was like that... I let off steam this way. At home? At home I pretended to be humble, sensitive, tender, shy... impotent. Just in case anything sexual might happen. Because unfortunately sooner or later, each one tried to get me into bed. Then I always lied and I tried to convince that I was impotent. And then I always ran away and went somewhere else to start all over yet again, with another woman (Tatiana). But how many times can you do that? I wasn't getting any younger, plus I was tired of this seeking, picking up and trying my best to please some bitch. So I decided to sit and think about my future, plan something like an experienced burglar does. I wanted to have my chance of a lifetime coming true. I yearned for something big, I wasn't interested in any of the small stuff. I wanted to get as much money as possible so that I could live like a king for the rest of my fuckin' life. Everyone deserves a good and peaceful life, right?

I found it! Well, her... After a few months of searching I managed to find a very rich woman, Martha. Irritating and not exactly a beauty but the size of her bank account... Unfortunately,

she had a twin sister, Angie. The bitch always got on my nerves. I don't know how but somehow she figured it all out and almost destroyed everything. Luckily Martha was head over heels in love with me so I convinced her we should get married quickly.

After a month I started to poison my wife. I was sure in these circumstances she would consider making her last will. I realized Martha wouldn't skip her sister in the will but God I was so wrong!

This dull old cow really lost her head and made me her one and only inheritor. ME!

One week after making her last will, my wife was perfectly healthy, I simply started to reduce the dose of poison. It's not so hard to imagine that the old cow wanted to go to the doctor but I stroked her on the fat cheek, looked into the silly little eyes and said as mild as I could:

—Honey, you really shouldn't. Maybe I'll get some doctor to come home and see you.

And so I did—brought a guy named Joe who would do anything for money. He came, wearing a doctor's smock and glasses, with a stethoscope. He put on quite a show and stated she was healthy in body and mind. And that the weakness was natural for someone her age.

It cost me a couple of hundred but it was okay, an investment in my future, ha, ha, ha!

Why didn't I poison her? Good question. But my answer is even better—I decided to make, ladies and gentlemen, a murderer out of Angie, the one and only best candidate!

Thank God hookers in our country can work legally. Why is it so important? Well, because I decided to have a strong alibi. Just in case. First of all, to make my plan work out, I had to spend the night outside of the house. Everything I needed, I hid in a small locker next to the front door. Only I had the key to open it. I got to the outskirts of the city in less than an hour by a dirt-track. I was there before 3pm, so it was far too early for the cunts to return home. Plus, they knew I would come home late. But to be one hundred percent sure, I decided to call home—I was waiting more than two minutes and made sure I was right again, they were still parting.

I was at some neglected square, near a bus depot and a taxi rank. Two old drunk bitches would be coming along sooner or later but I couldn't wait for them standing in the street. So I went to a place called "At Your Pal's" which was nearby.

The pub "At Your Pal's" was a typical joint where all drunks from the neighbourhood were sitting all day long, drinking and smoking. The Mecca of the frustrated, with dirty floor with alcohol stains all over and smoke from too many cigarettes. I really had my doubts but I had to come in, a man has to sacrifice sometimes. The bar was almost empty, there were only three mumbling heavy drinkers and one bartender. I heard trashy disco music and I ordered some brews as well as large fries. I didn't want to starve to death in this stinky surroundings while waiting for the sisters' return. You always have to be prepared.

I was prepared for many hours of waiting by the mushy fries and thin beer, many hours of looking out of the greasy window. The table was sticky all over, I tried not to touch it. I moved an ashtray full of cigarettes and I sat tight.

First, I had to call a night-club, Ecstasy—to get me an alibi. It turned out to be a piece of cake, it's so good to be a regular. All I had to do next was to sit tight, wait and observe... The first two hours were quite bearable, I was dreaming and planning what to do with the money: what to buy, where to go and in general, what to do with my fuckin' life. But in time I decided to stop dreaming, my mind was far away, too far—instead of closely watching the surroundings, I was seeing golden sand on the beach and blue sea. So I concentrated on my task, on observing.

And I saw a few young fellows smoking and looking at chicks going nearby. Young couples were kissing on the benches behind the trees. Some woman was making a fuss with her screaming brat, ugh, I don't think I could ever have a kid, I'm not patient enough. An elderly woman was stamping about with a couple of really big shopping bags. I was always wondering how in the world these old women could carry such heavy stuff.

And so I sat there, watching the place and the people. I was eating not so crispy fries, drinking some beer...

I guess someone could take me for this odious type of client who thinks too much and drinks too little, funny, isn't it? Soon many of the regulars, heavy drinkers, would start coming in and a guy like me only took their place. I was like a sponger, in fact. Interesting... If I were a barman, I'd take myself for somebody whose wife made rowed with him, and so he didn't have any other choice but to go to the bar. This type of men are usually broke, the wives are in charge of the money and the poor bastards have only got some small change for a cheap beer in this kind of place.

I felt like pissing. Fuck, why didn't I think about it before?! I could have gone to the john and made myself piss before. Shit!!!

A toilet? No. Men's room? Oh, not at all. The gents? Wrong again. Dirty, stinky shit hole, that's what it was! When I entered, I could smell shit, old pissing and God only knows what else. I almost puked so I held my breath. I was afraid to touch anything and I took out a tissue to open the door with it. I lifted the dirty toilet seat and then I really felt sick—someone left his pile of shit. I reached to get another tissue but it turned out I didn't have any more left... I knew I couldn't hold my breath any longer. I was desperate and pulled my jacket sleeve on my palm to touch the flush. It was a big mistake, the water splashed like a fucking Niagara, so hard that I got my trousers wet. It was disgusting but I had to pull myself together. I couldn't breathe so I stretched the sweater to cover my nose and I started pissing. It was stinking terribly but if I didn't have the sweater on (my nose) I'd probably vomit. I pissed very quickly and left this hellish place with a big relief. Oh yes, that was a real hell. If I were a writer and was supposed to write a story about a character who goes to hell after death, I'd definitely make this john that hell!

When I was leaving, I almost ran into some drunk. I even felt a bit sorry for him but I guess he was used to this kind of shit. When I finally got to my table, I drank half of my beer. I had to wash my throat, I still felt the stink from the john. I decided to limit myself to one beer only, I wouldn't simply handle the second visit in this snot. I dialled my home number again. Still, there was no answer. I was even glad because I knew if they drank a lot, my task would be so much simpler then. On the other hand however, I hoped they wouldn't be intoxicated too much 'cause then all my suffering and planning could just go to hell.

The time was passing so fucking slowly. More and more clients were coming as well as there was more smoke and loud conversation in the air. I hoped none of the drunks would come and talk to me when they'd had too much to drink. Unfortunately, I could only hope... In time this joint was full of drunks and the only last non-taken seats were at my table. I could bet my life—and I wouldn't lose—that someone would come along very soon. And so someone did, a bum to be more precise. He muttered something—do I mind or what—and not waiting for my reply, he sat and made himself comfortable. Thank God the table was at the window, otherwise he might have sat right opposite of me and blocked my view. The view that was already not so clear since it started to get dark. I knew exactly what would happen—making a new friend and confiding. The bum would brag about his miserable boozy life. Ugh!

—Cheeeeeeeerssss, pal, he mumbled and raised his glass.

—Fuck, no, no way, I was really pissed off.

And I was ignoring that guy and looked the other way, not giving a damn.

—Oh, eeee, what the fuck, youuu, he tried to tell me something but I still have no idea what that could be. Not that I wanted to know. I felt his bad breath, though. Fuck him! It was too much for me, couldn't he just booze in silence? Oh no, no, he had to open his stinky mouth instead and pick on me.

—Ssoo, you think you're ssoo better, huh? I made him angry just by not saying anything.

If I didn't have to watch the scenery and be careful, the fucker would end up with a broken nose on his back, crying for help. Thank God he finally decided to back off. Just because one of his pals turned up and they started minding their own business. They mumbled something about me but I really didn't give a fuck.

I was at that pub for over an hour more and then... Halleluia! Yeah, I saw them, alright. They were buzzed and heading for the taxi stand nearby. When the cunts finally left, I could leave the dive myself. I took a cab and went to Ecstasy where I paid for the whole night in advance. I chose Svetlana, the meekest and the greediest who would do anything, even the kinkiest stuff for extra money, of course.

I took the room on the first floor, gave the girl a few hundreds and promised to give her another few in the morning. All she had to do was wait for me and let me in through the window. And if somebody asked for me afterwards, she was to say we were fucking all night long like crazy. Of course she didn't ask about anything and agreed to do so. I guess she's quite hard to surprise, she must have seen lots of weird stuff in her life. Maybe she took me for another sick pervert or a fetishist, I really don't give a damn. I didn't pay her to think anything about me after all. I opened the window and jumped out. Then I took a cab and went back at the square. From the square I went home on foot, the same way that I arrived a few hours before.

I was walking surrounded by darkness, cut with a moonlight from time to time, like a surgeon's scalpel. When I finally arrived home, all the lights inside were off. Everything indicated that the drunk cunts were fast asleep. So it was up to me and me only from that time. When I realized this, I felt a little anxious. I knew if I'd screw something, I could never have another opportunity to carry out my plan. I snuck near a window which was half-open, stopped and started to listen. My lucky star was generous that night, it seemed to be silent in

the house. I went near the front door and waited a minute or so for some moonlight. Then, I found the right key on my key ring.

The hardest moment was approaching, the most uncertain one. I realized that I wasn't capable of predicting everything. The door might creak. Also there could be their shoes thrown all over in the hall. I could just trip and make some noise. Of course alcohol could make their sleep too light or they would be too fast asleep. My hands started shaking, I was sweating and my heart was pounding like crazy. I was unlocking the door with my two hands, very slowly and carefully, expecting the lock to crack any second. Luckily everything went smoothly, I opened the lock without any surprises, the door knob didn't screech and the door didn't creak at all.

It was pitch dark inside. I closed the door very carefully and crouched down, touching one hand the floor. I was going on my hands and knees towards the locker. I felt like someone was watching me but I realized it could be just an impression because of the darkness around me. My tape recorder, a little bottle and a piece of clothing was all I needed and everything was in that locker. I put everything except the tape recorder in my pocket. All I had to do then was to play a redskin. The Blackfoot would sneak in and hurt the Paleface! I took off my shoes and put them near the locker—I really didn't want to leave any dirty marks on the stairs. On my hands and knees I approached the stairs, feeling as if somebody was watching me yet again. I wouldn't be too surprised if suddenly that somebody turned on the light. After all, one of the cunts could have problems with sleeping.

In that case I guess I'd pretend to be completely buzzed. I drank only one beer but whether you drink one or ten, you smell the same. The situation would get worse if they took me for a burglar and hit me on my head. I heard a lingering snore upstairs which calmed me a little. I was about to go upstairs when suddenly I heard some noise, mumbling or something. It was creepy, I froze for a while. My heart was pounding like crazy, I was staring through the darkness. But it turned out that one of the bitches was lying on the sofa in the living room downstairs. The question was: which one? They look alike. I heard another snore from upstairs. You stupid son of a...—I was really pissed with myself—YOUR CUNT NEVER SNORES!! Yeah, yeah! But what if she snores when she's drunk?? You've never seen her so drunk before... I started to listen out for another snore and when I finally heard it, I knew exactly who was who and where. The snoring sound was coming out of the guest room upstairs which meant Angie was there and my cunt was waiting for me downstairs. Thank God, there is justice after all.

With my heart in my mouth I snuck up quietly to the sleeping one. It wasn't so hard because I was walking on a soft thick carpet. I took out a bottle carefully to chloroform the bitch who was so wasted that I wasn't even scared she'd wake up. Yeah, even bombing wouldn't make her stand up. All I had to do next was take the cunt upstairs. It was quite an obstacle but I was determined that nothing would spoil my plans. So I took Martha with me and went towards the stairs. The most difficult part of this task was to go upstairs quietly so that none of the steps would creak to put my beloved wife against the door without her falling down like before.

I have no idea how I did it, but I really did. Sometimes, when a man focuses on something, he falls into this strange trance and I guess that's what happened to me that night. My senses were keen, my moves—precise and I had this warm, calm feeling in my stomach that everything would be fine and nothing would go wrong.

And everything did go okay! When I went back downstairs, I put my shoes on, took the tape recorder and went outside. I locked the door and near the open window I turned it on. The loudspeakers helped me and shortly the scream: “Angie! Angieeeeeeeeeeeeeee! Angie!!!!!!!!!!” was heard.

Yeah, it was so clever of me! I recorded my wife when she was calling her fuckin’ sis for dinner. When I turned off the equipment, I heard a scroop of opening door, a cracking sound of breaking bones, a body was collapsing. Goodbye, my beloved wife!

I didn’t wait to see what would happen next, I ran into the darkness. I only heard a desperate scream and suddenly my soul was fulfilled. The sweet revenge, delightful fortune, freedom and independence! Everything did come true!

So I got back to the Ecstasy—for my alibi, of course! Before I got to the city, I realised I’d left the tape recorder in the woods, in the bushes. I’d only taken the tape with the recording which I’d destroyed. Luckily I had my lighter with me. The one and only piece of evidence—ruined, once and for all! The rest was a piece of cake—taxi, liquor store and some booze, a small bottle of flavoured special herbs bitter vodka. Then—the Ecstasy. I knocked on the window and Svetlana, good girl, opened it. Yeah, she knew she’d get some extra money! For the rest of the night the little whore did whatever I wanted, I was her master. In the morning I opened the bottle of vodka and drank it—I wrote on my note the day before I’d get drunk, after all.

All I had to do then was to come home. Master of it all! I guess I’d have to play the role of a widower in despair for some time but who said I was a bad actor? That would be the role of my life!

3. Angelina.

It’s been a week since my sister died. I couldn’t get it through it if it weren’t for strong tranquilizers. I felt like an emotionless dummy. Numbed, demented. Maurice, ex-Mr Prick, nowadays Fuckin’ Son of a Bitch, was just eating his soup. The one that I’d prepared especially for him. I sat in the armchair nearby and pretended to read a newspaper, I was watching him closely. The fucker was eating his last meal with relish. Suddenly he became stiff like a string, turned red, started breathing heavily, opened his mouth and touched his chest. He got up from the chair and looked at me. His eyes almost popped out like ping-pong balls. He fell on his knees and managed to moan:

My heart...

That’s right! You heartless son of a bitch—I hissed as icily as I could.

Ange...?—he guessed and fell flat right on the carpet close to my feet—as if he wanted to beg for my forgiveness.

And justice for all (of us)—I couldn’t hide my satisfaction.

I made sure he really died, like an animal. Like an animal that he was—to be sure he wouldn’t hurt anyone else. All I had to do then was pretend to be a widow in despair. I

decided to put away the drugs for the time of the Fuckers' funeral to melt into tears. But of course not to mourn him but my sister.

I called the ambulance and cried that Mr Prick probably had a heart attack (oh my God!!!). You must come quickly to save the fuck, ha, ha, ha! And so they came and confirmed the death of the Fucking Prick. Amen to that!

Why did I commit murder? Why didn't I just kick the prick out, why didn't I divorce him?

That awful morning he finally rolled into the house and looked at me—a pathetic travesty of a strong, resourceful woman I used to be: my hair was a mess, I had puffed red eyes thanks to my crying and runny nose—and pretended to care. When I watched him closely however, I saw how insincere he really was, that little smile he had—the fucker was quite delighted! Then I understood, immediately, that he had all of this planned.

My God, what happened in here?

You cannot lie, oh no, you son of a bitch—I thought.

Angelina fell down the stairs.

Mr Prick's face suddenly changed, he turned pale. I guess that was the moment he really started worrying and only one word was screaming in my head:

M U R D E R E R!

My inner voice kept on repeating it so loud as if was trying to get away and scream as loud as it could. Somehow I managed to keep it all in, crush it. I really couldn't reveal what I was almost certain of.

—It's horrible—the Prick moaned. He looked as if he was about to have heart attack—but is she okay?—asked coming near.

—She broke her leg.

—Oh!—the Prick started to dramatize again insincerely. He put out his hands towards me.

—Stop it, you stink, I can smell vodka.

—So maybe I..., well...—he kept on repeating.

—Yes, just go to bed—I ordered—I must get some sleep as well—I added. I went upstairs worrying he'd go with me. Luckily I didn't hear not his steps behind me but a BANG—he collapsed on the sofa.

I rushed into the bathroom. I had a big and bitter feeling in my throat. The bad memories from this horrible night returned and I started to experience my sister's death again. I wanted to cry as loud as possible but I knew perfectly well I couldn't do that—the fucker didn't sleep for sure. The despair and fear in my soul was overwhelming. I took a towel that was nearby and put it on my face. It muffled my weeping enough.

I have no idea how long I was sitting, squashed between the bathtub and the wash bowl, crying. But I took as much time as it was enough to go through the medicine chest in the bathroom and I wasn't disappointed, I found some tranquillizers. I took three pills and drank some water from the tap. After a while I finally dozed off.

That night something very strange happened. I woke up so cold, so penetrating cold as if my bones were made out of ice. I was forced to open my swollen eye lids because something gave me creeps and I had the feeling there was someone else with me. The room was illuminated by the moon. The moonlight gave a pale light which one by one showed the furniture and other objects in the room—the bedroom seemed full of gloomy creatures. But it wasn't this that gave me the creeps—as if something out of my sight was watching me. I sat doubtfully on the bed and instinctively looked behind my back. Of course I didn't see anyone which didn't help me at all. On the contrary, the strange feeling became even stronger. As if this someone (or something) didn't want to let me go back to bed. I looked around trying to discover the object of my fear and suddenly I noticed something on the window. I got up and in the pale moonlight discovered an inscription—a very weird one, as if written with a dirty greasy finger. I was shivering again and my heart felt like full of little needles when I read the sentence:

HE WAS THE ONE THAT KILLED ME. NOT YOU, HIM!

What happened next? I don't remember at all. A new day came. I woke up and wasn't so sure whether it was real or not. It could have been the truth but also a hallucination since I took so many drugs. Was it a message from the beyond or a projection of the anguished subconsciousness—that I didn't know. But one thing was unquestionable—it was Maurice who killed my sister!

Waking up was like the most terrible hangover I'd ever had, I was crying, so sad and helpless, suffering from paralysing depression, couldn't get up. I just wanted to die. I forced myself to get up anyway to take some pills which made me act like an automatic machine, again.

Only this emotionless state could I act.

In the bathroom I managed to hide my despair with some make-up. Afterwards I took a suitcase and went downstairs. The fuck was in the living room and he even tried to say something because I noticed his gob moving but I made sure he didn't:

I'm going to Angie's. Order pizza for dinner.

But...

No buts. You have to manage on your own for a couple of days. I'll be taking care of Angie, she really needs my help—I informed him and left the house.

I wasn't able to drive, not in my condition and certainly not after so many drugs. I ordered a taxi.

My God, it was so strange—I realized I was thinking of my sister's death and that I would kill a person soon—it didn't matter this person was a fucking prick—and yet I didn't feel anything at all! I couldn't admire the effect of the drugs—it was as if I had a paralysed soul!

I went home to pack everything I owned in boxes—I couldn't have been both Angelina and Martha. The old good Angelina had to leave, go somewhere very very far, the end of the world perhaps. Starting today, I am going to be my sister!

As soon as I arrived, I met Jens, my neighbour, who came to our country thinking it would be his “place made dreams come tru, ei, where peple is good end the land is chip.”

—God mornin!

—Hello Jens—I muttered.

—Why is you so sed?

—Well, I guess I'm leaving... I'm going for a trip around the world.

—Oooo, is a god trip, god! You must to be heppy not sed!

—But I don't think I will be back, you see, I have cancer—God, I was lying—I have only one year left, maybe two...

—Ooo my God! It is so no god, no god, you is so god neigh-bore—he seemed to be really upset.

—A neighbour Jens, neighbour.

—Neighbour—Jens said quietly—can no find other, you is one and the only—he added sadly.

I didn't want to correct him again so we said goodbye and I went home. I liked the guy but as you can imagine, I really didn't feel like talking or fraternizing that day, the whole of me was like a big NO. I started packing after I had taken all the boxes from my attic. I come up with my best ideas while I'm cleaning or doing some other housework, it was no different then. I started remembering the detective stories I read, all for nothing. What's good in a book, doesn't necessarily have to be good or—what's more important—safe in real life. Finally, I came up with a one and only, unique idea. Thank God I used to study history.

Now I can see I was as mean as Maurice. No, not because I ended his lousy life.

Unfortunately, apart from taking the fucker's life, I also had to kill another living soul—an innocent and helpless one who didn't do anything wrong. I tried to justify myself because I was taking lots of pills then. The pills made me something without a soul, only filled with flesh, blood and faeces. I was chemically anesthetized. But it's a lousy excuse, right? I didn't lose my mind completely, I knew exactly what I was doing. I even tried to explain myself that this poor creature would end up at somebody's plate anyway but this excuse seemed so lame. The blood was really on my—not some butcher's—hands.

But I didn't feel sorry for Mr Prick at all. It doesn't however change the fact that since then I have been... scared. I'm scared what will happen to me after I die. I'm afraid of condemnation. Inferno. It was revenge, getting even—an eye for an eye—but I wasn't supposed to bring anyone to justice. I didn't have the right to decide whether he could live or die. Well, it is too late now—and I'm going to have to live with that.

I bought a sweet little piglet. If I were myself then, I would definitely be delighted to have so lovely a creature. But it was different then. I felt like carrying an object, not a living thing. A piece of a deadly weapon. An element that was trying to get away—I guess the piglet could sense danger and knew its days were numbered. I was in shock and felt like I was in altered states just like on the night I cremated and buried my twin sister. I remember I took the box with the piglet to the pound and brought Mr Pooh there, my old good pet. I hurt the dog too and the poor thing had no idea why his owner was so mean. I brought the dog close to the

piglet in the box but too far to reach for Mr Pooh. And so, two animals that in normal circumstances wouldn't look at each other twice or even could become friends, would turn into arch enemies.

In the next few days Mr Pooh turned into a starving beast. Hunger may change even the gentlest character into something very disgusting. Even us, homo sapiens with morality, we are capable of eating other human beings when we face death of starvation! I acted like the worst bitch ever—my piglet would die in a couple of days of fear. There will be an enormous amount of stress hormone in its blood. I will fatten it up. The piglet will help me make a soup for Maurice. Of course what killed the piglet, would also kill Mr Prick—the stress hormone so high is a poison. The same thing that kills workaholics and bundle of nerves with a heart attack also will kill Mr Prick instantly. His heart will just stop.

In the Middle Ages people didn't even realize a stress hormone existed but they knew if a frightened animal died, its blood was a strong poison. This very poison killed many leaders, emperors and kings. No one would consider this chemical a poison. I was sure that even in case of autopsy nobody would discover anything—only this high level of a stress hormone in his blood. Everybody would just assume Mr Prick had a stressful life for a long, long time and they would write in the official death certificate: DEATH OF NATURAL CAUSES—HEART ATTACK. And, that's it!

I did it, I almost famished Mr Pooh—I guess he will never forgive me. Even today, whenever I'm around him, I can see fear in his sad eyes. I condemned the poor little piglet to unbearable sufferings. The poor thing must have felt like a convict in his cell, kept on an electric chair for hours, convinced he will soon experience a cruel death.

All of that just to kill a man. To take revenge for my twin sister's death.

Was it worth it? No, not really. I'm an intelligent woman. I could have come up with a different plan which wouldn't include killing others. On the other hand, I wasn't myself then. I was in shock, in a great despair, on strong tranquilizers, like some junkie.

Well, as they say—it's no good crying over spilt milk. I cannot turn back time, can I?

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

MISSION by Rick McQuiston

The thing pulled itself out of the ground. Frigid moonlight washed over the putrefaction on what was left of its face, revealing a heart-wrenching visage that hid sorrow beneath the rage that directed its movements.

It had a mission, one that nothing on Earth could prevent it from fulfilling.

Larry poured a cup of coffee and tried his best to steady his trembling hands. He was scared, although he didn't know why. It was an undeniable feeling that had settled over him like a bad cold, one he couldn't shake.

There is also another feeling festering inside him, one that puzzled him as much as the fear. He didn't know why he was sad, but he was. He tried to find a reason for it, roaming over his thoughts, but came up empty. He recently lost his dog, a loyal pet that he cared little for, he was passed over at work for the promotion he had slaved for, and his lower back had reared its ugly head again, causing him to resort to strong painkillers for relief. But none of it accounted for the frightened, sad mood he was in. He just couldn't understand it.

With a heavy sigh Larry stumbled into his bedroom and fell into bed.

The thing turned its head to the side and spit out insects that had taken up residence in its mouth. The tiny bugs, a variety of worms and beetles, squirmed on the ground before being crushed under the thing's body weight. One of its rear legs, broken in two places shortly before it found itself in its subterranean dwelling, was dragged along behind it. But the creature was not deterred. It continued to move along at a fairly brisk pace toward the looming structure before it.

Larry's eyes popped open. He glanced over at the clock on the nightstand and was surprised to see that two hours had passed since he had fallen asleep. He rolled over and stared out his window at the moon. It hung in the night sky like a glowing entity, organic and unforgiving.

Planting his feet on the floor, Larry stretched to allow his back time to adjust itself. He heard it crack and pop as it realigned. But he also heard something else, something other than his spine correcting itself.

Something outside his bedroom window.

The thing had reached the base of the structure, and with Herculean effort pushed its rotting bulk up against the building and slapped near-skeletal arms into the sheet of glass that stretched out before it. Hatred fuelled its movements, hatred spawned by the person residing on the other side of the glass.

The dog ran its head into the doorwall, pulled back, jagged shards of glass embedded in its dead face, and slammed into the fragile barrier again. A series of cracks spider-webbed across the pane, weakening the sheet considerably.

Vertical blinds parted and a solitary face wearing an expression of both confusion and fear peered out into the yard.

The dog, seeing its killer gazing down at it, increased its effort, leaping through the shattered doorwall and pouncing on its murderer, rending flesh with its blackened teeth and jagged claws.

Larry died quickly, his throat torn out and his face frozen in disbelief at what had killed him. He never would have guessed that sometimes, once in a million instances, hatred could be powerful enough to supersede the grave.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

DOMESTIKA

Three

Alone in his house across the street from the Carpenter household, overweight and sluggish imbecile Dennis Henderson, entered his kitchen and opened the fridge door to grab a four-pack of beer, after spending the last half an hour peering through a crack in the curtains at the commotion outside, the police, the ambulances, the local film crews all causing a load of bollocks and not giving two fucks about neighbours trying to sleep in their beds. In Dennis' eyes, they were upstart bastards, the lot of them. Far from rich like the Carpenters, Dennis lived alone, his wife having passed away twelve years ago, yet he preferred his life haven't taken this route, since he quickly discovered living with any woman—and having to work to pay for a woman—only served to piss him off vastly, so when Morag died it turned out it was a fucking blessing in disguise. At 62, he couldn't see himself tying the knot again, not in a million years. He was getting on in life, and besides, he now had a laptop and he'd since long discovered the greatness of the internet and worldwide web, which just happened to provide these fantastic online porn sites for him to log into, if anything to enable Dennis to ogle naked folks getting it on, which pleased him vastly as it made for a good pull on the old cock.

His cock was getting smaller—yes, and even smaller—in his old age, though, and he struggled to maintain a decent enough erection these days. But oh for the want of trying, because it was very rare he ejaculated, and it seemed as if his ball-sack had dried up of any come.

But if he was lucky, he got the odd twitch and wee orgasm, which suited him fine.

Behind his house in Whitehaven, there were some fields where cattle grazed and some hilly areas, so when he looked out the kitchen window this early morning, there was hardly anything worth taking notice of in the darkness. This was mainly because it was so dark nobody could see a thing anyway, because there was only the light of the moon. The rain had ceased an hour ago but threatened to resume any time now. Boy—that had been some noisy downpour earlier. Yawning, Dennis re-entered the living room when he farted as he came through the door, dressed in his pyjamas and scabby dressing gown as he clutched the four-pack of cheap Supermarket lager. Farting again, he cracked one of the cans open as he paused by the window and had another peer through the curtains at what was going on over the road. Silliness, conducted by fools, stupid cunts indeed...

He wanted to open the window and holler, “Noisy bastards, there are people trying to sleep and you couldn't give a shit! You should be ashamed, grown men acting like infants in a kindergarten!”

What good would it do?

Supping from the can, he lifted the laptop off the lounge floor and logged back onto his favourite porn site, which he'd been enjoying moments before. He rested the can on the floor and loosened his waist-string on his pyjama bottoms, reaching inside to extract his little lump of flesh, a poor excuse for a penis. You had to make the best of the tools provided, though—it was just that his tool wasn't a tool, it was more of a shrivelled parsnip, and not even one of those!

He spent five minutes straight laughing earlier at an online joke. The world presently celebrated the fall of Islamic group ISIS in Syria, and everybody was clearly pleased with this if the news proved correct and not fake. Somebody made a joke up and it surfaced online, which was never unusual...it stated how a young woman left Britain as a teenager to join ISIS in Afghanistan, yet now after giving birth to a baby boy, wanted to be allowed back into the UK (even after openly supporting murderous terrorists), and so somebody asks her what her favourite old musical film song is? She pauses and then replies, "Super Caliphate America Is Atrocious!"

Even now, thinking of it, he tossed his head back in the armchair and roared, it was so bloody funny.

Concentrating on a red-haired, small-breasted German woman sucking a dildo like it was a real cock, Dennis panted as he moaned and mouthed curse words while he jerked on his putrid flesh, yanking his stump between index finger and thumb. He gasped as the woman on the screen inserted its entire length in her arsehole and began pumping her sizeable rectum—which didn't seem to hurt her, despite the rubber dildo having a massive circumference—and then removed it from her shithole to insert into her cunt, where afterwards she chose to start sucking its greasy tip again.

"Fucking foreign bitch, suck on mine!" he mouthed, chuckling somewhat devilishly as the woman on screen moaned, whilst she expertly alternated between holes with the dildo.

He could feel his cock become slightly stiffer and this pleased the man. Excited about this, he jerked harder and relished the brief intermittent tingles that riddled his lump of flesh, especially its tiny pink tip.

The woman on the screen was called Linda. Were German women called Linda? It never actually dawned on Dennis that this video was manufactured, filmed and distributed in a tart's bedroom in Scunthorpe.

But the woman actually sounded like she was German, so where was the con? Perhaps it was a German lass who was contracted by pervert film-makers in Scunthorpe, and these fuckers financed her trip over from Germany and thus paid her well in pond-notes for her time and effort? Certainly with some great EFFORT Linda pumped her vagina and ring-piece with that huge rubber knob. In one aspect, it must have helped this particular Lady of Porn had a fanny like a yawning hippo!

Dennis paused and turned to look into the kitchen. The rain had started up again, just drizzle for the time being, but Cumbria being Cumbria, and this being the North of England, it wouldn't be long before the weather took a great turn for the worse.

But Dennis thought he heard a noise coming from the kitchen.

"Anybody there?" he said, "I'll phone the police. You'll go to prison. I'm just a defenceless old man. I mind my own business and keep my nose out of others' business...so fuck off!"

The silence was ominous, just the sound of the rain beating the kitchen windows and the winds blowing through the trees in the back garden.

He put the laptop on the floor, deciding to go and investigate.

Dennis entered the dark kitchen, not bothering to switch the light on. He stood there in the middle of the room and scanned the area, seeing nothing strange or out of place. It was odd but he could have sworn he heard something. Truth was, he was petrified. He could see the headlines, "PENSIONER MURDERED IN OWN HOME... DESERVED EVERY DAMNED WOUND HE RECEIVED"...yes, that was the top and bottom of it. These days, there was no respect for the elderly. People saw them as old, rotten farts, especially the pesky kids, teenagers in particular who Dennis avoided at all cost as these cunts were worst to deal with, arrogant, snotty-nosed little shits, druggies and drinkers. The youth had changed since his day. Now, when you walked down the street, you had to cross the road to avoid gangs congregating on roadside benches or discussing drug deals on corners. On the bus, they'd sit right at the back, laughing and mocking. There was no room for these smarmy little cunts in society. Changes had to happen if the world was to be a better and safer place.

He sighed, realizing the noise was just in his imagination. Perhaps a branch had snapped off one of the trees in the garden and that was what he heard. However, he thought he'd look out the window onto the fields and hillside.

He narrowed his eyes against the light of the full moon in the sky and wondered if he'd see more with his glasses.

"Can't see a frigging thing," he muttered, "Loads of old bollocks. Nobody around for miles, you daft old cunt...you must be going senile." He chuckled afterwards.

But he was forced to look again. And he observed something very strange, as well as quite disturbing, even scary. It scared this old fool, anyway.

On the hill at the end of the field was a row of animals, domestic animals like cats and dogs stood in a uniformly straight line, gazing upon the estate below. But something stranger than this, which was the disturbing factor. Their eyes emanated a hostile, homicidal weird yellow. There must have been at least twenty domestic pets, cats and dogs, some small, some large. They just sat there in the rain, gazing across at the quiet little housing estate on the outskirts of Whitehaven. Very weird, indeed, and not surprisingly this unlikely vision struck a frightened chord with Dennis as he lingered by the kitchen window, where he looked out and stared into the vicious rain. He shivered like a shitting dog and licked his lips nervously. The vision was obscenely scary, in many ways. He wondered, though. Dennis considered the kennels which were just behind that hill, and he wondered if the animals in shelter had all escaped, or even if their cages had been opened by someone and they had been set free into the night.

Who would do such a thing? You would have had to have been warped in the mind to do that. What man or woman would do such a thing? After all, dumb animals, cats and dogs, wouldn't have the skills to open the cages themselves and just all walk out of the kennels...would they? But what made their eyes glow that awful, crazy yellow, and why were they just sitting there on the hill looking over the estate, or rather it seemed in a way, sitting there just looking at him?

He pondered phoning the authorities to report this weird shit.

But it was only cats and dogs. It may have been a trick of the moonlight making their eyes look yellow. However, since when did the moon cast a yellow hue? It baffled Dennis.

“Ah, fuck it...” he said. He opened the fridge door to peer inside. He looked to see what scraps of food were there worth munching on at this ungodly hour of the night. Nothing worth writing home about, it seemed. No wait, there was a partially devoured peanut butter sandwich on brown bread which may or may not have turned stale, since it must have been there two days. Fuck it, no, disgusting, that fucking thing was going straight in the bin, or he’d crunch it up and scatter it around the garden for the birds in the morning.

He remembered he’d broken into a four-pack of lager. Rubbing his hands excitedly, he went back into the living room. There was no intruder in the kitchen. It was just the daft old bugger’s mind playing tricks on him. These assumptions happened at his age and make no mistake—even if, by today’s standards, 62 years of age was relatively young and considered this by all.

Before sitting, he paused to lift his right leg and fart loudly. The stink from the previous farts still hung in the atmosphere, permeating a distinctive rotten egg aroma. Scent wise, it was a mixed brew of boiled eggs and raw sulphur.

“Good arse,” he said jovially as he raised the can to his lips to drink, “A good arse speaks for itself!”

Never a truer word spoken...

He decided the online pornography could wait a while.

But the silence in the room was invaded by a mewling sound from the doorway and Dennis turned around to identify the source.

His eyes widened. He recognized that little black cat. Yet, its eyes, they shone a neon yellow.

Childlike, he gulped in horror when he muttered, “Luther...is that you?”

The cat offered absolutely no means of response yet remained transfixed on the seated, upset pensioner. Suddenly, Dennis’ body seized up with a strange and wide-ranging unorthodox stiffness which affected his entire being. He tried to moan but his neck ached, and his Adam’s-apple seemed stuck in his craw, when it pained him to swallow. The room had turned completely cold by this time, and so had Dennis. He was freezing to death. His body felt icy.

But his body continued to seize up as his muscles and limbs hardened as he shook and convulsed in the armchair. Already, his very shoulders, neck and skull had started to ache and he placed his hands on either side of his head, covering his ears to protect from a loud, deafening din, like he was trying to keep his head from fragmenting. Eventually, he was struggling to keep it together, like the fucking thing was about to explode.

Nothing was closer to the truth...

After one final agonized scream in which Dennis struggled to get oxygen into his heart and lungs, he quaked and shuddered in blind panic. Yet the pain in his skull out-grossed all other pain in his body and became the absolute nerve centre and centre-point, one which served to pave the way for the biggest shock of all.

Dennis slumped backwards into the chair.

All systems had failed and he was finally dead. Yet, his eyes remained wide and staring.

They were yellow.

Luther turned and scampered off into the kitchen.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

ERIC BRIGHTEYES by H Rider Haggard

XXXII: How Eric and Skallagrim Grew Fey

Now the night came down upon Mosfell, and of all nights this was the strangest. The air was quiet and heavy, yet no rain fell. It was so silent, moreover, that, did a stone slip upon the mountain side or a horse neigh far off on the plains, the sound of it crept up the fell and was echoed from the crags.

Eric and Skallagrim sat together on the open space of rock that is before the cave, and great heaviness and fear came into their hearts, so that they had no desire to sleep.

“Methinks the night is ghost-ridden,” said Eric, “and I am fey, for I grow cold, and it seems to me that one strokes my hair.”

“It is ghost-ridden, lord,” answered Skallagrim. “Trolls are abroad, and the God-kind gather to see Eric die.”

For a while they sat in silence, then suddenly the mountain heaved up gently beneath them. Thrice it seemed to heave like a woman’s breast, and left them frightened.

“Now the dwarf-folk come from their caves,” quoth Skallagrim, “and great deeds may be looked for, since they are not drawn to the upper earth by a little thing.”

Then once more they sat silent, and thick darkness came down upon the mountain, hiding the stars.

“Look,” said Eric of a sudden, and he pointed to Hecla.

Skallagrim looked, and lo! the snowy dome of Hecla was aglow with a rosy flame like the light of dawn.

“Winter lights,” said Lambstail, shuddering.

“Death lights!” answered Eric. “Look again!”

They looked, and behold! in the rosy glow there sat three giant forms of fire, and their shapes were the shapes of women. Before them was a loom of blackness that stretched from earth to sky, and they wove at it with threads of flame. They were splendid and terrible to see. Their hair streamed behind them like meteor flames, their eyes shone like lightning, and their breasts gleamed like the polished bucklers of the gods. They wove fiercely at the loom of blackness, and as they wove they sang. The voice of the one was as the wind whistling through the pines, the voice of the other was as the sound of rain hissing on deep waters, and the voice of the third was as the moan of the sea. They wove fearfully and they sang loudly, but what they sang might not be known. Now the web grew and the woof grew, and a picture came upon the loom—a great picture written in fire.

Behold! it was the semblance of a storm-awakened sea, and a giant ship fled before the gale—a dragon of war, and in the ship were piled the corpses of men, and on these lay another

corse, as one lies upon a bed. They looked, and the face of the corse grew bright. It was the face of Eric, and his head rested upon the dead heart of Skallagrim.

Clinging to each other, Eric and Skallagrim saw the sight of fear that was written on the loom of the Norns. They saw it for a breath. Then, with a laugh like the wail of wolves, the shapes of fire sprang up and rent the web asunder. Then the first passed upward to the sky, the second southward towards Middalhof, but the third swept over Mosfell, so that the brightness of her flaming form shone on the rock where they sat by the cave, and the lightning of her eyes was mirrored in the byrnie of Skallagrim and on Eric's golden helm. She swept past, pointing downwards as she went, and lo! she was gone, and once more darkness and silence lay upon the earth.

Now this sight was seen of Jon the thrall also, and he told it in his story of the deeds of Eric. For Jon lay hid in a secret place on Mosfell, waiting for tidings of what came to pass.

For a while Eric and Skallagrim clung to each other. Then Skallagrim spoke.

"We have seen the Valkyries," he said.

"Nay," answered Eric, "we have seen the Norns—who are come to warn us of our doom! We shall die to-morrow."

"At the least," said Skallagrim, "we shall not die alone: we had a goodly bed on yonder goblin ship, and all of our own slaying methinks. It is not so ill to die thus, lord!"

"Not so ill!" said Eric, "and yet I am weary of blood and war, of glory and of my strength. Now I desire rest alone. Light fire—I can bear this darkness no longer, the marrow freezes in my bones."

"Fire can be seen of foes," said Skallagrim.

"It matters little now," said Eric, "we are feyfolk."

So Skallagrim lighted the fire, piling much brushwood and dry turf over it, till presently it burnt up brightly, throwing light on all the space of rock, and heavy shadows against the cliff behind. They sat thus a while in the light of the flames, looking towards the deep gulf, till suddenly there came a sound as of one who climbed the gulf.

"Who comes now, climbing where no man may pass?" cried Eric, seizing Whitefire and springing to his feet. Presently he sank down again with white face and staring eyes, and pointed at the edge of the cliff. And as he pointed, the neck of a man rose in the shadow above the brink, and the hands of a man grasped the rock. But there was no head on the neck. The shape of the headless man drew itself slowly over the brink, it walked slowly into the light towards the fire, then sat itself down in the glare of the flames, which shrank away from it as from a draught of wind. Pale with terror, Eric and Skallagrim looked on the headless thing and knew it. It was the wraith of the Baresark that Brighteyes had slain—the first of all the men he slew.

"It is my mate, Eric, whom thou didst kill years ago and whose severed head spoke with thee!" gasped Skallagrim.

“It is he, sure enough!” said Eric, “but where may his head be?”

“Perchance the head will come,” answered Skallagrim. “He is an evil sight to see, surely. Say, lord, shall I fall upon him, though I love not the task?”

“Nay, Skallagrim, let him bide, he does but come to warn us of our fate. Moreover, ghosts can only be laid in one way—by the hewing off of the head and the laying of it at the thigh. But this one has no head to hew.”

Now as he spoke the headless man turned his neck as though to look. Once more there came the sound of feet and lo! men marched in from the darkness on either side. Eric and Skallagrim looked up and knew them. They were those of Ospakar’s folk whom they had slain on Horse-Head Heights, all their wounds were on them and in front of them marched Mord, Ospakar’s son. The ghosts gazed upon Eric and Skallagrim with cold dead eyes, then they too sat down by the fire. Now once more there came the sound of feet, and from every side men poured in who had died at the hands of Eric and Skallagrim. First came those who fell on that ship of Ospakar’s which Eric sank by Westmans, then the crew of the Raven who had perished upon the sea-path. Even as the man died, so did each ghost come. Some had been drowned and their harness dripped water! Some had died of spear-thrusts and the spears were yet fixed in their breasts! Some had fallen beneath the flash of Whitefire and the weight of the axe of Skallagrim, and there they sat, looking on their wide wounds!

Then came more and more. There were those whom Eric and Skallagrim had slain upon the seas, those who had fallen before them in the English wars, and all that company who had been drowned in the waters of the Pentland Firth when the witchcraft of Swanhild had brought the *Gudruda* to her wreck.

“Now here we have a goodly crew,” said Eric at length. “Is it done, thinkest thou, or will Mosfell send forth more dead?”

As he spoke the wraith of a grey-headed man drew near. He had but one arm, for the other was hewn from him, and the byrnie on his left side was red with blood.

“Welcome, Earl Atli!” cried Eric. “Sit thou over against me, who to-morrow shall be with thee.”

The ghost of the Earl seated itself and looked on Eric with sad eyes, but it spake never a word.

Then came another company, and at their head stalked black Ospakar.

“These be they who died at Middalhof,” cried Eric. “Welcome, Ospakar! that marriage-feast of thine went ill!”

“Now methinks we are overdone with trolls,” said Skallagrim, “but see! here come more.”

As he spoke, Hall of Lithdale came, and with him Koll the Half-witted, and others. And so it went on till all the men whom Eric and Skallagrim had slain, or who had died because of them, or at their side, were gathered in deep ranks before them.

“Now it is surely done,” said Eric.

“There is yet a space,” said Skallagrim, pointing to the other side of the fire, “and Hell holds many dead.”

Even as the words left his lips there came a noise of the galloping of horse’s hoofs, and one clad in white rode up. It was a woman, for her golden hair flowed down about her white arms. Then she slid from the horse and stood in the light of the fire, and behold! her white robe was red with blood, a great sword was set in her heart, and the face and eyes were the face and eyes of Gudruda the Fair, and the horse she rode was Blackmane, that Eric had slain.

Now when Brighteyes saw her he gave a great cry.

“Greeting, sweet!” he said. “I am no longer afraid, since thou comest to bear me company. Thou art dear to my sight—ay even in yon death-sheet. Greeting, sweet, my May! I laid thee stiff and cold in the earth at Middalhof, but, like a loving wife, thou hast burst thy bonds, and art come to save me from the grip of trolls. Thou art welcome, Gudruda, Asmund’s daughter! Come, wife, sit thou at my side.”

The ghost of Gudruda spake no word. She walked through the fire towards him, and the flames went out beneath her feet, to burn up again when she had passed. Then she sat down over against Eric and looked on him with wide and tender eyes. Thrice he stretched out his arms to clasp her, but thrice their strength left them and they fell back to his side. It was as though they struck a wall of ice and were numbed by the bitter cold.

“Look, here are more,” groaned Skallagrim.

Then Eric looked, and lo! the empty space to the left of the fire was filled with shadowy shapes like shapes of mist. Amongst them was Gizur, Ospakar’s son, and many a man of his company. There, too, was Swanhild, Groa’s daughter, and a toad nestled in her breast. She looked with wide eyes upon the eyes of dead Gudruda’s ghost, that seemed not to see her, and a stare of fear was set on her lovely face. Nor was this all, for there, before that shadowy throng, stood two great shapes clad in their harness, and one was the shape of Eric and one the shape of Skallagrim.

Thus, being yet alive, did these two look upon their own wraiths!

Then Eric and Skallagrim cried out aloud and their brains swam and their senses left them, so that they swooned.

When they opened their eyes and life came back to them the fire was dead, and it was day. Nor was there any sign of that company which had been gathered on the rock before them.

“Skallagrim,” quoth Eric, “it seems that I have dreamed a strange dream—a most strange dream of Norns and trolls!”

“Tell me thy dream, lord,” said Skallagrim.

So Eric told all the vision, and the Baresark listened in silence.

“It was no dream, lord,” said Skallagrim, “for I myself have seen the same things. Now this is in my mind, that yonder sun is the last that we shall see, for we have beheld the death-shadows. All those who were gathered here last night wait to welcome us on Bifrost Bridge. And the mist-shapes who sat there, amongst whom our wraiths were numbered, are the shapes of those who shall die in the great fight to-day. For days are fled and we are sped!”

“I would not have it otherwise,” said Eric. “We have been greatly honoured of the Gods, and of the ghost-kind that are around us and above us. Now let us make ready to die as becomes men who have never turned back to blow, for the end of the story should fit the beginning, and of us there is a tale to tell.”

“A good word, lord,” answered Skallagrim: “I have struck few strokes to be shamed of, and I do not fear to tread Bifrost Bridge in thy company. Now we will wash ourselves and eat, so that our strength may be whole in us.”

So they washed themselves with water, and ate merrily, and for the first time for many months Eric was merry. For now that the end was at hand his heart grew light within him. And when they had put the desire of food from them, and buckled on their harness, they looked out from their mountain height, and saw a cloud of dust rise in the desert plain of black sand beneath, and through it the sheen of spears.

“Here come those of whom, if there is truth in visions, some few shall never go back again,” said Eric. “Now, what counsel hast thou, Skallagrim? Where shall we meet them? Here on the space of rock, or yonder in the deep way of the cliff?”

“My counsel is that we meet them here,” said Skallagrim, “and cut them down one by one as they try to turn the rock. They can scarcely come at us to slay us here so long as our arms have strength to smite.”

“Yet they will come, though I know not how,” answered Eric, “for I am sure of this, that our death lies before us. Here, then, we will meet them.”

Now the cloud of dust drew nearer, and they saw that this was a great company which came up against them. At the foot of the fell the men stayed and rested a while, and it was not till afternoon that they began to climb the mountain.

“Night will be at hand before the game is played,” said Skallagrim. “See, they climb slowly, saving their strength, and yonder among them is Swanhild in a purple cloak.”

“Ay, night will be at hand, Skallagrim—a last long night! A hundred to two—the odds are heavy, yet some shall wish them heavier. Now let us bind on our helms.”

Meanwhile Gizur and his folk crept up the paths from below. Now that thrall who knew the secret way had gone on with six chosen men, and already they climbed the watercourse and drew near to the flat crest of the fell. But Eric and Skallagrim knew nothing of this. So they sat down by the turning place that is over the gulf and waited, singing of the taking of the Raven and of the slaying in the stead at Middalhof, and telling tales of deeds that they had done. And the thrall and his six men climbed on till at length they gained the crest of the fell, and, looking over, saw Eric and Skallagrim beneath them.

“The birds are in the snare, and hark! they sing,” said the thrall, “now bring rocks and be silent.”

But Gizur and his people, having learned that Eric and Skallagrim were alone upon the mountain, pushed on.

“We have not much to fear from two men,” said Gizur.

“That we shall learn presently,” answered Swanhild. “I tell thee this, that I saw strange sights last night, though I did not sleep. I may sleep little now that Gudruda is dead, for that which I saw in her eyes haunts me.”

Then they went on, and the face of Gizur grew white with fear.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

[Return to Contents](#)

THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

16. Siege of the Sacred Mountain

Now, my passage across the great continent of Atlantis, if tedious and haunted by many dangers, need not be recounted in detail here. Only one halt did I make of any duration, and that was unavoidable. I had killed a stag one day, bringing it down after a long chase in an open savannah. I scented the air carefully, to see if there was any other beast which could do me harm within reach, and thinking that the place was safe, set about cutting my meat, and making a sufficiency into a bundle for carriage.

But underfoot amongst the grasses there was a great legged worm, a monstrous green thing, very venomous in its bite, and presently as I moved I brushed it with my heel, and like the dart of light it swooped with its tiny head and struck me with its fangs in the lower thigh. With my knife I cut through its neck and it fell to writhing and struggling and twining its hundred legs into all manner of contortions, and then, cleaning my blade in the ground, I stabbed with it deep all round the wound, so that the blood might flow freely and wash the venom from its lodgement. And then with the blood trickling healthily down from my heel, I shouldered the meat and strode off, thankful for being so well quit of what might have made itself a very ugly adventure.

As I walked, however, my leg began to be filled with a tightness and throbbing which increased every hour, and presently it began to swell also, till the skin was stretched like drawn parchment. I was taken, too, with a sickness, that racked me violently, and if one of the greater and more dangerous beasts had come upon me then, he would have eaten me without a fight. With the fall of darkness I managed to haul myself up into a tree, and there abode in the crutch of a limb, in wakefulness and pain throughout the night.

With the dawn, when the night beasts had gone to their lairs, I clambered down again, and leaning heavily on my spear, limped onwards through the sombre forests along my way. The moss which grows on the northern side of each tree was my guide, but gradually I began to note that I was seeing moss all round the trees, and, in fact, was growing light-headed with the pain and the swelling of the limb. But still I pressed onwards with my journey, my last instinct being to obey the command of the High Council, and so procure the enlargement of Nais as had been promised.

My last memory was of being met by someone in the black forest who aided me, and there my waking senses took wings into forgetfulness.

But after an interval, wit returned, and I found myself on a bed of leaves in a cleft between two rocks, which was furnished with some poor skill, and fortified with stakes and buildings against the entrance of the larger marauding beasts. My wound was dressed with a poultice of herbs, and at the other side of the cavern there squatted a woman, cooking a mess of wood-grubs and honey over a fire of sticks.

“How came I here?” I asked.

“I brought you,” said she.

“And who are you?”

“A nymph, they call me, and I practise as such, collecting herbs and curing the diseases of those that come to me, telling fortunes, and making predictions. In return I receive what each can afford, and if they do not pay according to their means, I clap on a curse to make them wither. It’s a lean enough living when wars and the pestilence have left so few poor folk to live in the land.”

“Do you visit Atlantis?”

“Not I. Phorenice would have me boiled in brine, living, if she could lay easy hands on me. Our dainty Empress tolerates no magic but her own. They say she is for pulling down the Priests off their Mountain now.”

“So you do get news of the city?”

“Assuredly. It is my trade to get good news, or otherwise how could I tell fortunes to the vulgar? You see, my lord, I detected your quality by your speech, and knowing you are not one of those that come to me for spells, and potions, I have no fear in speaking to you plainly.”

“Tell me then: Phorenice still reigns?”

“Most vilely.”

“As a maiden?”

“As the mother of twin sons. Tatho’s her husband now, and has been these three years.”

“Tatho! Who followed him as viceroy of Yucatan?”

“There is no Yucatan. A vast nation of little hairy men, so the tale goes, coming from the West overran the country. They had clubs of wood tipped with stone as their only arm, but numbers made their chief weapon. They had no desire for plunder, or the taking of slaves, or the conquering of cities. To eat the flesh of Atlanteans was their only lust, and they followed it prodigiously. Their numbers were like the bees in a swarm.

“They came to each of the cities of Yucatan in turn, and though the colonists slew them in thousands, the weight of numbers always prevailed. They ate clean each city they took, and left it to the beasts of the forest, and went on to the next. And so in time they reached the coast towns, and Tatho and the few that survived took ship, and sailed home. They even ate Tatho’s wife for him. They must be curious persevering things, these little hairy men. The Gods send they do not get across the seas to Atlantis, or they would be worse plague to the poor country than Phorenice.”

Now I had heard of these little hairy creatures before, and though indeed I had never seen them, I had gathered that they were a little less than human and a little more than bestial, a link so to speak between the two orders, and specially held in check by the Gods in certain forest solitudes. Also I had learned that on occasion, when punishment was needful, they could be set loose as a devastating army upon men, devouring all before them. But I said nothing of this to the nymph, she being but a vulgar woman, and indeed half silly, as is

always the case with these self-styled sorceresses who gull the ignorant, common folk. But within myself I was bitterly grieved at the fate of that fine colony of Yucatan, in which I had expended such an infinity of pains to do my share of the building.

But it did not suit my purpose to have my name and quality blazoned abroad till the time was full, and so I said nothing to the nymph about Yucatan, but let the talk continue upon other matters. "What about Egypt?" I asked.

"In its accustomed darkness, so they say. Who cares for Egypt these latter years? Who cares for anyone or anything for that matter except for himself and his own proper estate? Time was when the country folk and the hunters hereabouts brought me offerings to this cave for sheer piety's sake. But now they never come near unless they see a way of getting good value in return for their gifts. And, by result, instead of living fat and hearty, I make lean meals off honey and grubs. It's a poor life, a nymph's, in these latter years I tell you, my lord. It's the fashion for all classes to believe in no kind of mystery now."

"What manner of pestilence is this you spoke of?"

"I have not seen it. Thank the Gods it has not come this way. But they do say that it has grown from the folk Phorenice has slain, and whose bodies remain unburied. She is always slaying, and so the bodies lie thicker than the birds and beasts can eat them. For which of our sins, I wonder, did the Gods let Phorenice come to reign? I wish that she and her twins were boiled alive in brine before they came between an honest nymph of the forest and her living.

"They say she has put an image of herself in all the temples of the city now, and has ordered prayers and sacrifices to be made night and morning. She has decreed all other Gods inferior to herself and forbidden their worship, and those of the people that are not sufficiently devout for her taste, have their hamstrings slit by their tormentors to aid them constantly into a devotional attitude.—Will you eat of my grubs and honey? There is nothing else. Your back was bloody with carrying meat when I met you, but you had lost your load. You must either taste this mess of mine now, or go without."

I harboured with that nymph in cave six days, she using her drugs and charms to cure my leg the while, and when I was recovered, I hunted the plains and killed her a fat cloven-hoofed horse as payment, and then went along my ways.

The country from there onwards had at one time carried a sturdy population which held its own firmly, and, as its numbers grew, took in more ground, and built more homesteads farther afield. The houses were perched in trees for the most part, as there they were out of reach of cave-bear and cave-tiger and the other more dangerous beasts. But others, and these were the better ones, were built on the ground, of logs so ponderous and so firmly clamped and dovetailed that the beasts could not pull them down, and once inside a house of this fashion its owners were safe, and could progue at any attackers through the interstices between the logs, and often wound, sometimes make a kill.

But not one in ten of these outlying settlers remained. The houses were silent when I reached them, the fire-hearth before the door weed-grown, and the patch of vegetables taken back by the greedy fingers of the forest into mere scrub and jungle. And farther on, when villages began to appear, strongly-walled as the custom is, to ward off the attacks of beasts, the logs which aforetime had barred the gateway lay strewn in a sprouting undergrowth, and naught

but the kitchen middens remained to prove that once they had sheltered human tenants. Phorenice's influence seemed to have spread as though it were some horrid blight over the whole face of what was once a smiling and an easy-living land.

So far I had met with little enough interference from any men I had come across. Many had fled with their women into the depths of the forest at the bare sight of me, some stood their ground with a threatening face, but made no offer to attack, seeing that I did not offer them insult first, and a few, a very few, offered me shelter and provision. But as I neared the city, and began to come upon muddy beaten paths, I passed through governments that were more thickly populated, and here appeared strong chance of delay. The watcher in the tower which is set above each village would spy me and cry: "Here is a masterless man," and then the people that were within would rush out with intent to spoil me of my weapons, and afterwards to appoint me as a labourer.

I had no desire to slay these wretched folk, being filled with pity at the state to which they had fallen, and often words served me to make them stand aside from the path, and stare wonderingly at my fierceness, and let me go my ways. And when at other times words had no avail, I strove to strike as lightly as could be, my object being to get forward with my journey and leave no unnecessary dead behind me. Indeed, having found the modern way of these villages, it grew to be my custom to turn off into the forest, and make a circuit whenever I came within smell of their garbage.

Similarly, too, when I got farther on, and came amongst greater towns also, I kept beyond challenge of their walls, having no mind to risk delay from the whim of any new law which might chance to be set up by their governors. My progress might be slinking, but my pride did not upbraid me very loudly, indeed, the fever of haste burned within me so hot and I had little enough carrying space for other emotions.

But at last I found myself within a half-day's journey the city of Atlantis itself, with the Sacred Mountain and its ring of fires looming high beside it, and the call for caution became trebly accentuated. Everywhere evidences showed that the country had been drained of its fighting men. Everywhere women prayed that the battles might end with the rout of the Priests or the killing of Phorenice, so that the wretched land might have peace and time to lick its wounds.

An army was investing the Sacred Mountain, and its one approach was most narrowly guarded. Even after having journeyed so far, it seemed as if I should have to sit hopelessly down without being able to carry out the orders which had been laid upon me by the High Council, and earn the reward which had been promised. Force would be useless here. I should have one good fight—a gorgeous fight—one man against an army, and my usefulness would be ended.... No, this was the occasion for guile, and I found covert in the outskirts of a wood, and lay there cudgelling my brain for a plan.

Across the plain before me lay the grim great walls of the city, with the heads of its temples, and its palaces, and its pyramids showing beyond. The step-sides of the royal pyramid held my eye. Phorenice had expended some of her new-found store of gold in overlaying their former whiteness with sheets of shining yellow metal. But it was not that change that moved me. I was remembering that, in the square before the pyramid, there stood a throne of granite carved with the snake and the outstretched hand, and in the hollow beneath the throne was Nais, my love, asleep these eight years now because of the drug that had been given to her,

but alive still, and waiting for me, if only I on my part could make a way to the place where Zaemon defied the Empress, and announce my coming.

In that covert of the woods I lay a day and a night raging with myself for not discovering some plan to get within the defences of the Sacred Mountain, but in the morning which followed, there came a man towards me running.

“You need not threaten me with your weapons,” he cried. “I mean no harm. It seems that you are Deucalion, though I should not have known you myself in those rags and skins, and behind that tangle of hair and beard. You will give me your good word I know. Believe me, I have not loitered unduly.”

He was a lower priest whom I knew, and held in little esteem, his name was Ro, a greedy fellow and not overworthy of trust. “From whom do you come?” I asked.

“Zaemon laid a command on me. He came to my house, though how he got there I cannot tell, seeing that Phorenice’s army blocks all possible passage to and from the Mountain. I told him I wished to be mixed with none of his schemings. I am a peaceful man, Deucalion, and have taken a wife who requires nourishment. I still serve in the same temple, though we have swept out the old Gods by order of the Empress, and put her image in their place. The people are tidily pious nowadays, those that are left of them, and the living is consequently easy. Yes, I tell you there are far more offerings now than there were in the old days. And so I had no wish to be mixed with matters which might well make me be deprived of a snug post, and my head to boot.”

“I can believe it all of you, Ro.”

“But there was no denying Zaemon. He burst into one of his black furies, and while he spoke at me, I tell you I felt as good as dead. You know his powers?”

“I have seen some of them.”

“Well, the Gods alone know which are the true Gods, and which are the others. I serve the one that gives me employment. But those that Zaemon serves give him power, and that’s beyond denying. You see that right hand of mine? It is dead and paralysed from the wrist, and that is a gift of Zaemon. He bestowed it, he said, to make me collect my attention. Then he said more hard things concerning what he was pleased to term my apostasy, not letting me put up a word in my own defence of how the change was forced upon me. And finally, said he, I might either do his bidding on a certain matter to the letter, or take that punishment which my falling away from the old Gods had earned. ‘I shall not kill you,’ said he, ‘but I will cover all your limbs with a paralysis, such as you have tasted already, and when at length death reaches you in some gutter, you will welcome it.’”

“If Zaemon said those words, he meant them. So you accepted the alternative?”

“Had I, with a wife depending on me, any other choice? I asked his pleasure. It was to find you when you came in here from some distant part of the land, and deliver to you his message.

“‘Then tell me where is the meeting place,’ said I, ‘and when.’”

“‘There is none appointed, nor is the day fixed,’ said he. ‘You must watch and search always for him. But when he comes, you will be guided to his place.’ Well, Deucalion, I think I was guided, but how, I do not know. But now I have found you, and if there’s such a thing as gratitude, I ask you to put in your word with Zaemon that this deadness be taken away from my hand. It’s an awful thing for a man to be forced to go through life like this, for no real fault of his own. And Zaemon could cure it from where he sat, if he was so minded.”

“You seem still to have a very full faith in some of the old Gods’ priests,” I said. “But so far, I do not see that your errand is done. I have had no message yet.”

“Why, the message is so simple that I do not see why he could not have got someone else to carry it. You are to make a great blaze. You may fire the grasses of the plain in front of this wood if you choose. And on the night which follows, you are to go round to that flank of the Sacred Mountain away from the city where the rocks run down sheer, and there they will lower a rope and haul you up to their hands above.”

“It seems easy, and I thank you for your pains. I will ask Zaemon that your hand may be restored to you.”

“You shall have my prayers if it is. And look, Deucalion, it is a small matter, and it would be less likely to slip your memory if you saw to it at once on your landing. Later, you may be disturbed. Phorenice is bound to pull you down off your perch up there now she has made her mind to it. She never fails, once she has set her hand to a thing. Indeed, if she was no Goddess at birth, she is making herself into one very rapidly. She has got all the ancient learning of our Priests, and more besides. She has discovered the Secret of Life these recent months—”

“She has found that?” I cried, fairly startled. “How? Tell me how? Only the Three know that. It is beyond our knowledge even who are members of the Seven.”

“I know nothing of her means. But she has the secret, and now she is as good an immortal (so she says) as any of them. Well, Deucalion, it is dangerous for me to be missing from my temple overlong, so I will go. You will carry that matter we spoke of in your mind? It means much to me.”—His eye wandered over my ragged person—“And if you think my service is of value to you—”

“You see me poor, my man, and practically destitute.”

“Some small coin,” he murmured, “or even a link of bronze? I am at great expense just now buying nourishment for my wife. Well, if you have nothing, you cannot give. So I’ll just bid you farewell.”

He took himself off then, and I was not sorry. I had never liked Ro. But I wasted no more precious time then. The grass blazed up for a signal almost before his timorous heels were clear of it, and that night when the darkness gave me cover, I took the risk of what beasts might be prowling, and went to the place appointed. There was no rope dangling, but presently one came down the smooth cliff face like some slender snake. I made a loop, slipped it over a leg, and pulled hard as a signal. Those above began to haul, and so I went back to the Sacred Mountain after an absence of so many toilsome and warring years. There

were none to disturb the ascent. Phorenice's troops had no thought to guard that gaunt, bare, seamless precipice.

The men who hauled me up were old, and panted heavily with their task, and, until I knew the reason, I wondered why a knot of younger priests had not been appointed for the duty. But I put no question. With us of the Priests' Clan on the Sacred Mountain, it is always taken as granted that when an order is given, it is given for the best. Besides, these priests did not offer themselves to question. They took me off at once to Zaemon, and that is what I could have wished.

The old man greeted me with the royal sign. "All hail to Deucalion," he cried, "King of Atlantis, duly called thereto by the High Council of the priests."

"Is Phorenice dead?" I asked.

"It remains for you to slay her, and take your kingdom, if, indeed, when all is done, there remains a man or a rood of land to govern. The sentence has gone out that she is to die, and it shall be carried into effect, even though we have to set loose the most dreadful powers that are stored in the Ark of the Mysteries, and wreck this continent in our effort. We have borne with her infamies all these years by command sent down by the most High Gods, but now she has gone beyond endurance, and They it is who have given the word for her cutting off."

"You are one of the highest Three, I am only one of the Seven, you best know the cost."

"There can be no counting the cost now, my brother, and my king. It is an order."

"It is an order," I repeated formally, "so I obey."

"If it were not impious to do so, it would be easy to justify this decision of the Gods. The woman has usurped the throne, yet she was forgiven and bidden rule on wisely. She has tampered with our holy religion, yet she was forgiven. She has killed the peoples of Atlantis in greedy useless wars, and destroyed the country's trade, yet she was forgiven. She has desecrated the old temples, and latterly has set up in them images of herself to be worshipped as a deity, yet she was forgiven. But at last her evil cleverness has discovered to her the tremendous Secret of Life and Death, and there she overstepped the boundary of the High Gods' forbearance.

"I myself went to carry a final warning, and once more faced her in the great banqueting-hall. Solemnly I recited to her the edict, and she chose to take it as a challenge. She would live on eternally herself and she would share her knowledge with those that pleased her. Tatho that was her husband should also be immortal. Indeed, if she thought fit, she would cry the secret aloud so that even the common people might know it, and death from mere age would become a legend.

"She cared no wit how she might upset the laws of Nature. She was Phorenice, and was the highest law of all. And finally she defied me there in that banqueting-hall and defied also the High Gods that stood behind my mouth. 'My magic is as strong as yours, you pompous fool,' she cried, 'and presently you shall see the two stand side by side upon their trial.'

“She began to collect an army from that moment, and we on our part made our preparations. It was discovered by our arts that you still lived, and King of Atlantis you were made by solemn election. How you were summoned, you know as nearly as it is lawful that one of your degree should know, how you came, you understand best yourself, but here you are, my brother, and being King now, you must order all things as you see best for the preservation of your high estate, and we others live only to give you obedience.”

“Then being King, I can speak without seeming to make use of a threat. I must have my Queen first, or I am not strong enough to give my whole mind to this ruling.”

“She shall be brought here.”

“So! Then I will be a General now, and see to the defences of this place, and view the men who are here to stand behind them.”

I went out of the dwelling then, Zaemon giving place and following me. It was night still but there is no darkness on the upper part of the Sacred Mountain. A ring of fires, fed eternally from the earth-breath which wells up from below, burns round one-half of the crest, lighting it always as bright as day, and in fact forming no small part of its fortification. Indeed, it is said that, in the early dawn of history, men first came to the Mountain as a stronghold because of the natural defence which the fires offered.

There is no bridging these flames or smothering them. On either side of their line for a hundred paces the ground glows with heat, and a man would be turned to ash who tried to cross it. Round full one-half the mountain slopes the fires make a rampart unbreakable, and on the other side the rock runs in one sheer precipice from the crest to the plain which spreads beyond its foot. But it is on this farther side that there is the only entrance way which gives passage to the crest of the Sacred Mountain from below. Running diagonally up the steep face of the cliff is a gigantic fissure, which succeeding ages (as man has grown more luxurious) have made more easy to climb.

Looking at the additions, in the ancient days, I can well imagine that none but the most daring could have made the ascent. But one generation has thrown a bridge over a bad gap here, and another has cut into the living stone and widened a ledge there, till in these latter years there is a path with cut steps and carved balustrade such as the feeblest or most giddy might traverse with little effort or exertion. But always when these improvers made smooth the obstacles, they were careful to weaken in no possible way the natural defences but rather to add to them.

Eight gates of stone there were cutting the pathway, each commanding a straight, steep piece of the ascent, and overhanging each gate was a gallery secure from arrow-shot, yet so contrived that great stones could be hurled through holes in the floor of it, in such a manner that they must irretrievably smash to a pulp any men advancing against it from below. And in caves dug out from the rock on either hand was a great hoard of these stones, so that no enemy through sheer expenditure of troops could hope to storm a gate by exhausting its ammunition.

But though there were eight of these granite gates in the series, we had the whole number to depend on no longer. The lowest gate was held by a garrison of Phorenice's troops, who had built a wall above them to protect their occupation. The gate had been gained by no brilliant

feat of arms—it had been won by threats, bribery, and promises, or, in other words, it had been given up by the blackest treachery.

And here lay the keynote of the weakness in our defence. The most perfect ramparts that brain can invent are useless without men to line them, and it was men we lacked. Of students entering into the colleges of the Sacred Mountain, there had been none now for many a year. The younger generation thought little of the older Gods. Of the men that had grown up amongst the sacred groves, and filled offices there, many had become lukewarm in their faith and remained on only through habit, and because an easy living stayed near them there, and these, when the siege began, quickly made their way over to the other side.

Phorenice was no fool to fight against unnecessary strength. Her heralds made proclamation that peace and a good subsistence would be given to those who chose to come out to her willingly, and as an alternative she would kill by torture and mutilation those she caught in the place when she took it by storm, as she most assuredly would do before she had finished with it. And so great was the prestige of her name, that quite one-half of these that remained on the mountain took themselves away from the defence.

There was no attempt to hold back these sorry priests, nor was there any punishing them as they went. Zaemon, indeed, was minded (so he told me with grim meaning himself) to give them some memento of their apostasy to carry away which would not wear out, but the others of the High Council made him stay his vengeful hand. And so when I came to the place the garrison numbered no more than eighty, counting even feeble old dotards who could barely walk, and of men not past their prime I could barely command a score.

Still, seeing the narrowness of the passages which led to each of the gates, up which in no place could more than two men advance together, we were by no means in desperate straits for the defence as yet, and if my new-given kingdom was so far small, consisting as it did in effect of the Sacred Mountain and no other part of Atlantis, at any rate there seemed little danger of its being further contracted.

Another of the wise precautions of the men of old stood us in good stead then. In the ancient times, when grain first was grown as food, it came to be looked upon as the acme of wealth. Tribute was always paid from the people to their Priests, and presently, so the old histories say, it was appointed that this should take the form of grain, as this was a medium both dignified and fitting. And those of the people who had it not, were forced to barter their other produce for grain before they could pay this tribute.

On the Sacred Mountain itself vast storehouses were dug in the rock, and here the grain was teemed in great yellow heaps, and each generation of those that were set over it, took a pride in adding to the accumulation.

In more modern days it had been a custom amongst the younger and more forward of the Priests to scoff at this ancient provision, and to hold that a treasure of gold, or weapons, or jewels would have more value and no less of dignity, and more than once it has been a close thing lest these innovators should not be out-voted. But as it was, the old constitution had happily been preserved, and now in these years of trial the Clan reaped the benefit. And so with these granaries, and a series of great tanks and cisterns which held the rainfall, there was no chance of Phorenice reducing our stronghold by mere close investment, even though she sat down stubbornly before it for a score of years.

But it was the paucity of men for the defence which oppressed me most. As I took my way about the head of the Mountain, inspecting all points, the emptiness of the place smote me like a succession of blows. The groves, once so trim, were now shaggy and unpruned. Wind had whirled the leaves in upon the temple floors, and they lay there unswept. The college of youths held no more now than a musty smell to bear witness that men had once been grown there. The homely palaces of the higher Priests, at one time so ardently sought after, lay many of them empty, because not even one candidate came forward now to canvass for election.

Evil thoughts surged up within me as I saw these things, that were direct promptings from the nether Gods. "There must be something wanting," these tempters whispered, "in a religion from which so many of its Priests fled at the first pinch of persecution."

I did what I could to thrust these waverings resolutely behind me, but they refused to be altogether ousted from my brain, and so I made a compromise with myself: First, I would with the help that might be given me, destroy this wanton Phorenice, and regain the kingdom which had been given me to my own proper rule, and afterwards I would call a council of the Seven and council of the Three, and consider without prejudice if there was any matter in which our ancient ritual could be amended to suit the more modern requirements. But this should not be done till Phorenice was dead and I was firmly planted in her room. I would not be a party, even to myself, to any plan which smacked at all of surrender.

And there as I walked through the desolate groves and beside the cold altars, the High Gods were pleased to show their approval of my scheme, and to give me opportunity to bind myself to it with a solemn oath and vow. At that moment from His distant resting-place in the East, our Lord the Sun leaped up to begin another day. For long enough from where I stood below the crest of the Mountain, He Himself would be invisible. But the great light of His glory spread far into the sky, and against it the Ark of the Mysteries loomed in black outline from the highest crag where it rested, lonely and terrible.

For anyone unauthorised to go nearer than a thousand paces to this storehouse of the Highest Mysteries meant instant death. On that day when I was initiated as one of the Seven, I had been permitted to go near and once press my lips against its ample curves, and the rank of my degree gave me the privilege to repeat that salute again once on each day when a new year was born. But what lay inside its great interior, and how it was entered, that was hidden from the Seven, even as it was from the other Priests and the common people in the city below. Only those who had been raised to the sublime elevation of the Three had a knowledge of the dreadful powers which were stored within it.

I went down on my knees where I was, and Zaemon knelt beside me, and together we recited the prayers which had been said by the Priests from the beginning of time, giving thanks to our great Lord that He has come to brighten another day. And then, with my eyes fixed on the black outline of the Ark of Mysteries I vowed that, come what might, I at least would be true servant of the High Gods to my life's end, and that my whole strength should be spent in restoring Their worship and glory.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)