



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

# Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 14, ISSUE 24  
19TH MAY 2019

## THE FEAR

BY SHANE  
PLASSENTHAL  
*HE SCREAMED  
SOMETHING  
TERRIBLE AND  
I LAUGHED...*

## MY BODY?

BY CHRISTOPHER  
T DABROWSKI—  
*I WOULD LIKE  
TO DIE...*

**LITTLE BASTARDS**  
BY HARRIS COVERLEY

**BLOOD OF T-REX**  
BY GK MURPHY

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by  
Gavin Chappell

PUBLISHED BY:  
Schlock! Publications  
([www.schlock.co.uk](http://www.schlock.co.uk))

Schlock! Webzine

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Harris Coverley, GK Murphy, Gregory KH Bryant, H Rider Haggard, C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne*

## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 14, Issue 24

19<sup>th</sup> May 2019

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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Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk). We no longer review published and self-published novels directly, although we are willing to accept reviews from other writers. Any other enquiries, including requests to advertise in our quarterly printed magazine, also to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk). The stories, articles and illustrations contained in this webzine are copyright © to the respective authors and illustrators, unless in the public domain. Schlock! Webzine and its editor accept no liability for views expressed or statements made by contributors to the magazine.

*This Edition*

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This week a young boy learns about fear. Friedrich Heine encounters Kasimir Kohl's beautiful sister. A man struggles with his own body. Survivors of the apocalypse scavenge amongst the ruins. Other survivors struggle against the prehistoric inhabitants of a horrific future.

Due to the author's poor health, Carter Ward is not available this week. Back in the Dark Ages, Eric Brighteyes returns home. And meanwhile, on Atlantis, Deucalion witnesses the fate that awaits prisoners.

—Gavin Chappell

PS: Don't miss Stephen Hernandez' new book: [\*Nazi Lesbian Vampires!\*](#)

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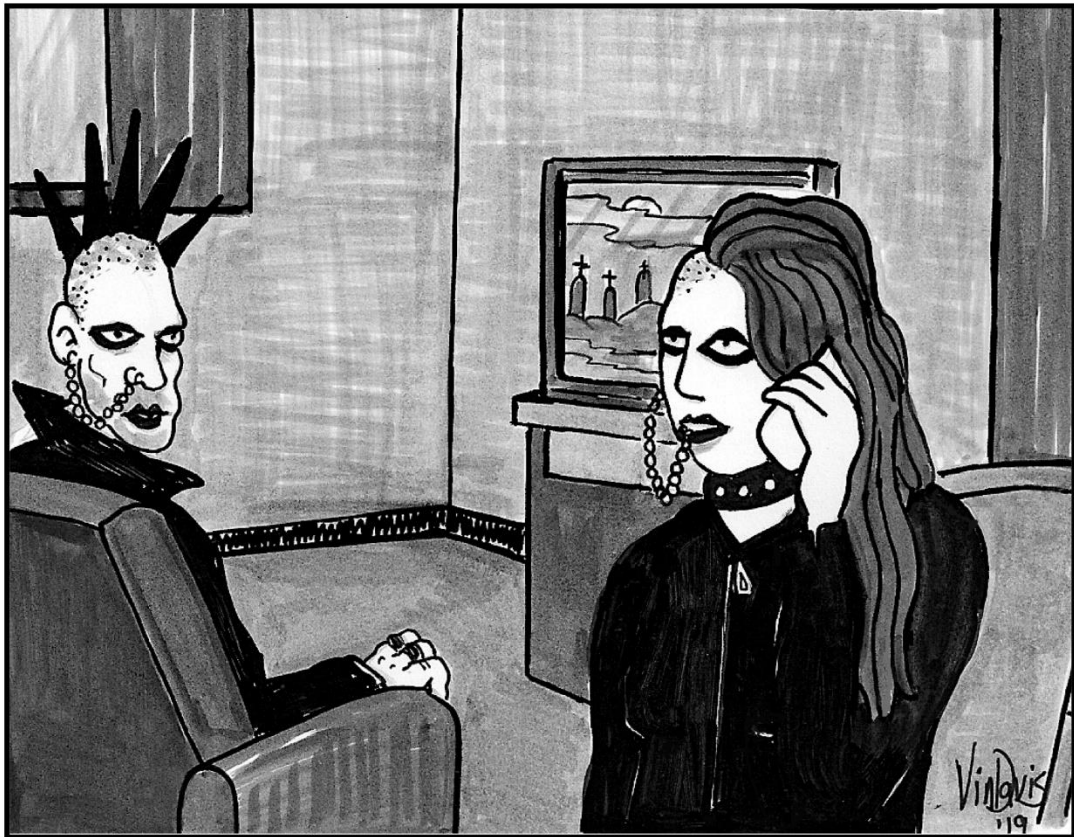
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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

## IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"SORRY, WE CAN'T MAKE IT TO YOUR GRADUATION  
WE HAVE A FUNERAL TWO WEEKS FROM NOW THAT WE **MUST**  
ATTEND!"

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

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

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

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

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## THE FEAR by Shane Plassenthal

I'm going to tell you about fear. What I know, anyway.

When I was a young boy—which is such a funny thing to say now that I have slowly but surely crept into the terribly open arms of old age—my mother moved my brother and me to a small fishing town on the coast for what she called a “fresh start”. This was after my father died. We would not have moved had it been a normal death but it was not so. For reasons I have never been able to figure out, my father felt it necessary to go out one night after work and blow his head off in the front seat of his rusted Chrysler Imperial that he had parked on the back lawn. There were rumours, vile nasty things said about my father (mainly something about him preferring the company of men) but to these I was much too young and careless to pay attention. My father was seldom home and my mother said little about him.

The town we moved to smelled of fish so strong that you couldn't help but feel sick whenever you stepped out into the grey midst that always seemed to hang about the city like an unwelcome visitor. My mother took a job waiting tables at night down at a seafood joint on the beach and slept all day.

“Be a good boy and take care of your brother,” she would always tell me when she left out for work. Then she would be off, speeding away in her sad looking wagon leaving us to fend for ourselves. Whatever impressions you have of those times being an era of leave-it-to-beaver and father knows best imitations are not so. My childhood stands as a testament to this, for I played the role of parent at the tender age of thirteen. My brother was six and as adventurous as new-born puppy. He was always trying to sneak out and had a habit of getting into the most precarious of situations. Once, when we'd first moved to the town, I caught him skipping school when I'd come home early feeling sick after our lunch period.

I remember coming up to our little shack of a house—that my mother had tried so hard to call charmingly a “cottage” that sat amongst the dreariest looking overgrown wild grass near the edge of the coast—when I could just make out a small light shining from the window that faced the sea. This was my brother's room and I crept to it, peering carefully inside of his window and looking in where he sat on the floor in what we used to call without question “Indian style” reading a stack of comic books that I had sensed he'd lifted from the five and dime store in town.

He was giggling at something he was reading and for some odd reason; perhaps just out of pure spite because I was feeling so lousy, I decided that I would scare him. I tapped on the window and then ducked. I imagined my brother's head jerking up and staring out the dusty glass at the lonely looking sea in the distance. Would he think it was just the wind pushing one of the branches from the sagging tree by his window against the window? We'd seen an old black and white movie, a horror movie that my mother would have slapped us silly had she known, where a mute woman was trapped in a house and one of the characters had said something that terrified my brother senseless: so many trees outside the windows trying so hard to make their way in...he had asked me if this was true, if trees were always trying to wrestle their way inside of our homes and snatch us up...of course, I had told him no.



A few minutes passed and I deemed it safe. I looked back in his window, the top of my forehead just barely rising above the ledge of the window and saw him happily immersed in his comic books once more. I banged on the glass once more and hurriedly bent back down. This time I knew that I had gotten him. At first, nothing happened. I covered my mouth I was giggling so hard. It was then I heard the window open from above and I saw the bottom of my brother's chin as he poked his head outside. I hardly gave it a second before I reached up and grabbed him. He screamed something terrible and I laughed. I always thought it was fun, scaring my brother.

Of course, in the summer time, when school was out and we had nothing better to do, we'd take our bikes out for a spin around the town or else along the coasts on the grassy cliff tops.

"Race you!" my brother would shout with absolute delight as his little legs paddled hard. I always let him get a head start because I knew I'd win eventually but there was a bit of joy that would fill up inside of me like an inflatable balloon in my chest as I watched how happy it made him to let him win for a while. I suppose this is what they call love. My wife Charlotte says that I'm incapable of this emotion and just yesterday served me with the most heart-breaking bundle of documents known to modern man: the divorce papers.

But Charlotte has never known about my brother or the small fishing town or any of what I'm talking about and I can't reckon why I haven't the courage to tell her. There are some things within a man's heart that stay there as if cemented in, encased like a lonely skeleton in a marble tomb, demanding the harshest of tools to etch them out.

"Do you ever miss Papa?" my brother would sometimes ask me as we sat on the beach watching the tide come in.

"Not really, do you?"

My brother would shrug and his little face would bunch up trying to comprehend the grownup emotions that only a man who had taken his own life could have experienced. This always proved too much and my brother would be silent for a while.

"Say, you want to go down and get a soda at the stand?" I would ask nodding toward the little concession that sat on the main tourist beach about a mile down the shore. This would always cheer my brother up and we'd head over talking of things that children do: who was better, Superman or Batman? What was the best magic trick at the circus? What was the craziest dare you would do for a nickel?

I suppose it is these conversations I miss most, conversations only a child can have.

In our infinite boredom that summer, my brother and I happened upon the well. It was not anything hidden, this well, for something so ordinary would not be hidden from human eyes. After all, I had imagined that it had served a very banal and simple purpose as these

things do: it had been the very source of water for somebody at one time. It was situated—perched, really—at the edge of a high cliff about five miles from our house along the sea. An old iron fence, rusted by the ravages of time and nature, surrounded it. A house or some sort of structure must have stood there once but it was long since gone. We had biked up there, my brother demanding to go to the top of the highest cliff as if it were the world's tallest mountain.

"Maybe it will put us in the book of records," he'd said as he biked up the steep incline.

"Maybe," I told him but I knew better.

"I'll bet they'll take our picture and everything," he said. "Yeah, I bet so."

He was excited and shouting for me to hurry behind him. How odd, I thought, for even then I had a feeling a (premonition?) that something bad would come of our journey. We'd lived in the town for nearly a year and my brother had noticed the high cliff for some time but I'd never managed to get up there. I'd always found some excuse, it was too hot, too windy, it might rain—but that day luck had run out I suppose. I've wondered since if this is what they call fate but that would require some sort of faith, some belief in a higher power of sorts of which I am not capable.

My brother reached the top of this cliff and when I had caught up with him I was out of breath and my legs felt like rubber. Yet I hardly had the time to focus on myself for the both of us were stopped looking at the strange sight before us. I can't possibly relate how such a simple scene could captivate us so but please, trust me, when I say that there was something so oddly compelling about the rusted iron fence and the remains of the crumbling well that sat like a testament to a forgotten era in time. It was as if there was something in the air, which sounds, I know, so silly but believe me there was almost a sort of magic about the place, there really was. I could feel it in the little wind that off the water, the wind that rustled our hair from the tops of our young skulls, the wind that pushed open the old creaky gate as if something, some force were beckoning us to enter.

So many trees trying so hard to make their way in...

Now what a strange thing to think, I thought but for some reason it felt as if it wasn't my voice that thought it.

"What is this that?" my brother asked. He pointed over at the well.

"It's a well," I told him.

"What's a well?"

"It's something they used to use a long time ago to get water out of the ground."

"Before they had pipes?"

"Yes, before they had pipes."

“Does anyone use it now?”

“No,” I told him. “They don’t use them anymore.”

“Who used this one?”

I shrugged.

I thought it was such a strange place for a well, high up on the cliff like this.

Almost as if it really shouldn’t be there at all...

Almost as if...

If what?

“Don’t go near it,” I said.

I don’t know why I said such a thing it just came out of my mouth. After I said it, I was glad. I felt an odd sense of relief, as if I had admitted some great secret I’d been harbouring along for years. My brother turned toward me with a look of confusion.

“But why not?”

“Because. Because I said so.”

“I’d like to see what it looks like down there,” my brother said.

“It’s just a hole. A long black hole.”

“Can you see the bottom?” asked my brother.

“Yes,” I lied. I had no way of knowing of course. I thought maybe if I pretended like I knew all about it his curiosity would wane.

“Yes, you can see the bottom, now come on, we ought to be going. It’ll be dark soon.”

We didn’t go back to the well.

My brother didn’t bring it up, either. The summer passed on as it does. We swam, we biked, we went to the movies sometimes even. My brother liked the scary ones even though they terrified him. At night, he’d wake up thinking that a monster was beneath his bed or else a zombie like the ones from *Night of the Living Dead*. He would come into my room, then and crawl into bed with me. I’d wake up in the morning and he’d be curled up next to me and I never gave him a hard time for it. Years later, my own daughter would do the same thing but I would always feel compelled to send her back to her room.

“Now there’s no such thing as monsters,” I would tell her even though I know this is not true. No adult believes this, really. We say we do, of course but we don’t. There are monsters everywhere you turn; they aren’t always hiding beneath the bed or in the closet. Most of the time, if you look hard enough, the monsters are right there, right in front of you.

There came a day, as summer began to draw to its inevitable close, when my brother mentioned the well.

“I want to see it again,” he told me.

We were playing a game of checkers on the back porch. I was letting him win.

“What for?” I asked him.

He shrugged.

“Well,” he said, “school’s starting soon and I want to tell everyone about it.”

“They won’t be very excited,” I said. “It’s just a well.”

“It’s not just a well,” my brother said. “It’s a magic well.”

“Now whatever gave you that idea?”

“I dreamed it,” he told me.

I didn’t ask him to tell me about his dream. Instead, I just tried to keep playing the game.

“I want to go to the well,” he said again.

“No.”

“Please.”

“No.”

“Please.”

“I said no.”

“Please, please, please, please, please—”

“Alright,” I shouted. “But we’re not going to look inside, okay?”

He only grinned.

There are some moments you'd like to freeze in time. I suppose this is what pictures are for but they're never good enough, not when you stop and think about it. I wish, instead, you could capture the moment and you could at any time stop your life and walk back into it, just for a second. I wish you could hear the sounds that were alive when you were there and feel the temperature it was. I wish this could be but it can't. So, I've got no choice but to tell you the rest.

We biked up to the cliff. I let my brother go ahead of me as usual and we got to the top where the wind was wild and the rusty gate swung like a pendulum on a grandfather clock. I stood there and watched as my brother walked toward the fence and for some reason I did not feel scared. I felt none of the feelings I had felt during the first day we'd seen the well. With the sun shining and the cool wind blowing I felt no fear. I began to realize how silly I'd been, it was just an old well, an old stupid well that had been forgotten and left up here like a discarded cigarette butt flung out the window by a speeding driver. Someone had gotten water once and now they hadn't needed it anymore, that was all. Yes, that was all.

"Can I see down inside, please?" my brother turned and asked.

"Sure," I said. "Sure, why not?"

He clapped his hands and jumped up and down excitedly.

As if on cue by an unseen hand, the rusty gate swung open and stayed open. My brother rushed inside the little yard and inched closer and closer to the well.

"I bet you can't see inside, not really!" he shouted over his shoulder. "I bet it just goes on and on down there forever. I bet it goes all the way to China!"

"I bet so," I called out but I didn't move. I don't think I could have made my legs go if I wanted to.

As I watched my brother race to the well I thought of an old nursery rhyme I used to know. We had sang it, I remembered, at recess when I had been around his age.

I hummed:

*Ding, dong, bell,  
Pussy's in the well.  
Who put her in?  
Little Johnny Flynn.  
Who pulled her out?  
Little Tommy Stout.  
What a naughty boy was that,  
To try to drown poor pussy cat...  
I hummed and I hummed...  
So many trees outside trying to make their way in...*

*What a naughty boy...  
To try to drown...*

And, then, suddenly, I felt it.

I felt the fear.

It came upon me like an unexpected storm on a sunny day. I felt it in my bones, in my lungs, in every inch of my body. I knew something was wrong, something was terrible. I tried to call out but I couldn't. I just stood there. I just stood there and then I heard the old rhyme again but this time it wasn't in my head it was all around me, a cacophony of shouting voices

*DING DONG BELL  
PUSSY'S IN THE WELL  
WHO PUT HER IN?*

I realized with a heavy heart that the words were coming from the well. My brother was screaming with wild joy as he came upon the crumbling stones. He was shouting something to me over his shoulder but I couldn't hear him over the rhyme.

*WHAT A NAUGHTY BOY WAS THAT,  
TO TRY AND DROWN—*

My brother was at the well now and then came the hands. So many hands like branches from the trees trying to make their way in. White hands, black hands, purple hands, hands smeared with blood, all coming out from the top of the well and then my brother was screaming as the hands wrapped around his little frame. They tugged and tugged.

Then he was gone.

I blinked.

The hands were gone, the rhyming had stopped.

All I could hear was the rustling of the wind blowing the creaky gate back and forth, back and forth. I thought that it sounded like laughter.

Not too long after that my mother sent me to live in Colorado with my Aunt—my Dad's sister who had a ranch out there. I never saw my mother again. She died a few years ago. She had dementia and they kept her locked away in a nursing home somewhere up north on the coast for a while. If you're looking for explanations about what happened I don't have any. I've told you all you needed to know. I don't remember much else about it, anyway. The police pulled the body out of the well. They said it must have been an accident; he must have tripped and fallen in. I didn't correct them, either. Maybe it was a sort of accident if you believe that nothing happens for a reason But I don't.



I have felt fear and now you have too.

In time, I moved on because that is what you do.

I have learned what loss is. Fear is loss and loss is fear.

As for the well, it's gone. Bright clean rows of condos cover that strip of land. I used to think about warning those who lived there about those hands. But I think it would be best if I let them be.

THE END

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## THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

### Chapter 5

A four-poster bed with a white silk awning was where she lay. Narrow windows with Tudor-style lead mesh held back the storm as it threw rain against bevelled glass. Heavy indigo drapes with black tassels framed each window.

Kasimir lit candelabra on either of the bedside tables which framed the plush pillows bearing his sister's slumbering head. A brocade sash held back a white, framing veil so that I would be able to assess the ailing victim.

Cybele was beautiful. Black ringlets framed her head sunken into the pillow, her skin as white as talcum, a thin vein curling over her slender jaw, lips as black-red as pomegranate. I felt as though I were perusing a beautiful corpse. She slept soundly, barely a rise and fall to her bosom, the heavy covers pulled up to her neck. Only a mirror held to her mouth could show the slightest breath emanating from her pursed lips.

Kasimir and I spoke in whispers, though he told me we had nothing to fear from her waking. "I've given her a sleeping draught, as was necessary. Too often she awakens at all hours, screaming terrors during both day and night. Her sleep is unsettled, so a drop or two of morphia in her tea allows her body and mind to rest. The essence of poppies has been my sister's only medicine, laying her head restfully on the pillow, softening the edges of her pain."

"What aches does she complain of?"

"Everything, to be honest. Sometimes her bones hurt, at other times she wails that demons howl in her mind—that they dance behind her eyes to skew her vision with their grotesque displays. She does not perceive reality anymore, I fear. Everything is presented to her through a lens of macabre fantasy." He wrapped his long fingers over my shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. "I knew you were the best man to call to her bedside."

I nodded silently and drew my eyes back to the slumbering beauty. Alas, I knew I would have to wait until the effects of the poppy had faded and she awoke before I could begin a diagnosis.

I communicated the same to Kasimir, so he directed me to my room.

It appeared to have been a library adjunct, the wood-panelled ceiling so low that I could stretch high my arm to touch it with fingertips. The walls were comprised entirely of bookshelves holding morocco-bound tomes. At one end of the room was a modest bed with a single table on which sat a brass candlestick and taper. My bags sat like sentinels on the Persian rug at the foot of the bed. (The manservant, who was apparently working behind the scenes, was quite shy, already come and gone from the room.)

"I do apologize," Kasimir said as he watched my eye peruse the rows of volumes that constructed the four walls, even behind the bed, "but this is frankly the best room I was able to have prepared for you on such short notice. Most of the castle is composed of closed-off rooms littered with storage items from more than just my parents' generation."

I smiled my consent as I scanned the spines of the books surrounding me, taking stock. Picking up a random volume, I flipped through it, feeling the crisp pages and enjoying the aged smell of vellum. Greek and Latin texts in the original, *The Iliad* as translated by Alexander Pope, first edition (worth a small fortune), oriental texts in translation of the *Tao Te Ching* and the works of Confucius and Mencius, as well as Hindu texts such as *The Bhagavad Gita*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Upanishads*. I found even the *Chrysopoeia of Cleopatra the Alchemist*—an esoteric alchemist text. Everything was here! All of the world's literary masterpieces seemed to be present. Including more scientific texts: the voyages and theories of Charles Darwin, the mathematics of Euclid, the medical writings of Galen, the *Theory of Colours* by Goethe, Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. A well-rounded library to surround me while I slept.

I broke from my literary revelry to ask, "Oh yes, I offer my condolences ... how did your parents pass on?"

He caught and captured my eye, seemed to tower in the room, but I assumed there was some optical illusion at play with the low roof and the somewhat chessboard pattern of the wooden ceiling tiles.

"In a quite tragic accident, I fear." His dark eyes and shadowed brow gazed down at me. "Their mortal frames were destroyed in a fire."

The shock of such a violent demise was soon replaced by a second shock of memory. The phantom—the illusion, I was sure—that I saw in the rainfall on the cobbled path leading back down the mountain. The ethereal girl who erupted into flames in the rain. A spectre of the family that haunted the ancestral castle?

I am a man of science, so even though various new theories of the brain and the psyche proposed by Herr Freud seem fantastic, they were all grounded in stable scientific inquiry.

Kasimir was a man of law and political theory—surely he would not subscribe to the possibility of a ghost haunting the mansion. At risk of embarrassing myself (since he and I were old cohorts, men of intellect), I ventured onward, amusement keeping my tone light.

"You'll think this silly of me," I began, unsure of how to approach such a subject, "but I feel I may have ... how shall I say it ... misinterpreted the patterns of the raindrops, of all things." I cleared my throat, tried to contain a mild chuckle, felt a blush fire my cheeks. "Let me rephrase. Before I knocked on your castle door ... as the coachman was marching his charges back down the mountainside ... well ... I thought I saw a ghost."

My amusement was not contagious. Kasimir's countenance dropped and a stern horror overtook him. He placed a step closer to me, placed a cold hand on my shoulder as his gaze pierced my own.

“What did she do?” he intoned in a voice of subterranean depths.

I stuttered as I caught my breath, swallowed a thickness behind my Adam’s apple, and asked, “How did you know it was ... female?”

His demeanour altered and he snapped his glance from mine, paced away from me, hands clasped tightly behind his back.

“I’ve ... I, too, have seen this ... this phantom,” he uttered, seemingly afraid to catch my eye. His shaking voice belied his fear. “Just a frivolous tale to tell misbehaving children, I’m sure. I remember my father told me of it when I bothered Cook for an extra morsel of marzipan one too many times.”

His right hand clenched its fingers white while his left remained fondling a clanking, unknown object—perhaps a ring of keys—in his vest pocket.

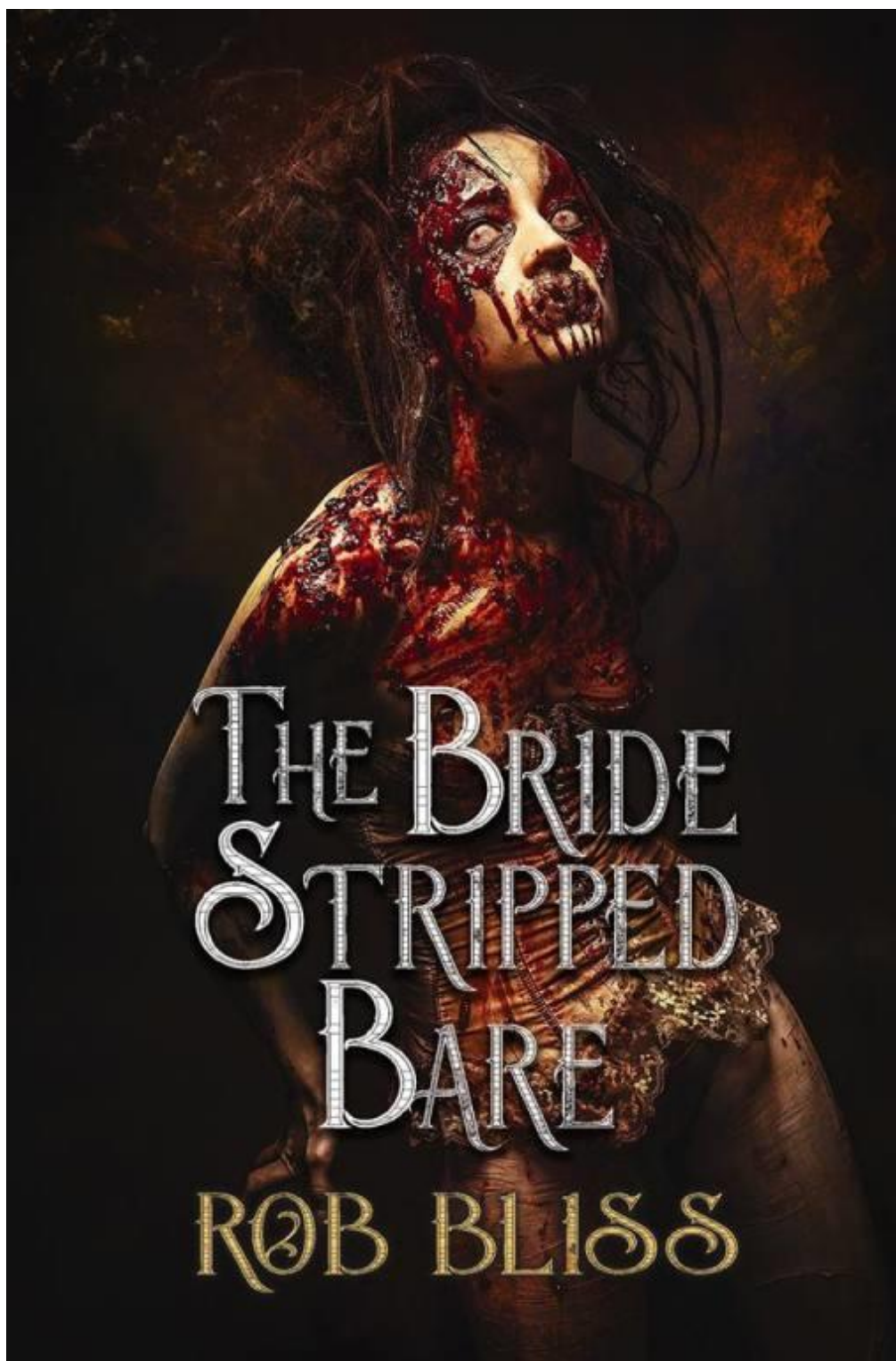
Perusing the room, eyes skittering across the chessboard ceiling, scanning absently across the vast number of volumes that lined the wall, he said, “Well, I’m sure you will be quite cosy in here. You’re still fond of the printed word, I take it? The volumes here should relax you in case of a touch of insomnia takes hold. But I’m sure you’re quite exhausted from your voyage. Is the room satisfactory?”

I watched him move closer to the door, a hand clenching around its handle as I stood with Swedenborg’s Heaven and Hell in hand. I answered simply, “Quite satisfactory, thank you.”

He nodded without meeting my eye, snapped open the door, and exited quickly.

I was left baffled and bewildered. Slowly, I slipped the tome back into its gap in the shelf.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



Available from Necro Publications.

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MY BODY? by Christopher T Dabrowski  
English translation by Monika Olasek

I

I would like to die. Stop existing. I wish My Body was finally dead, no matter what would happen to my soul. You must think I have gone mad. You wonder how anyone can dream about his own death. I assure you—IT IS POSSIBLE! I bet everything I have that if you were in my shoes you would want exactly the same thing. It would be the greatest dream of your life. You do not believe me? So listen to my story. I will describe one of many nights of nightmare. I will tell you in detail about what is going on...

II

My Body gets up. It is dark, I cannot see anything. I would like to sleep, but I cannot, because it decided to creep out of bed. I know exactly why and I hate it. Anyway, is the body still mine in this situation? It is going towards the fridge to eat something and I cannot control it in any way. I see my hand opening plastic doors, pulling out a piece of meat. This is my hand, but not me. My hand is acting on its own. Without asking for my permission, it is taking the meat and sticking it in my mouth. I am like a prisoner, stuck in this corporeal shell, which is torturing me in many ways, both physical and psychological. I chew the meat—it is disgusting, bloody. I feel the metallic taste. I want to spew, but I cannot do this, either. I would really like to eat something else, anything. Even the rice pudding I hated as a child would be the best dessert in the world. I swallow. I feel the terrible mass moving lower and lower. It is rubbing against my throat, and in a couple of seconds it will fill my (not-mine) stomach. Sometimes I try not to think about it, I imagine that I am eating something completely different, but unfortunately it does not work too well.

With a corner of my eye I spot a clock; it is a quarter past one. The Body will go out hunting again—I have no doubt about it. Using my hands it is getting dresses, taking the car keys, a small bottle with ether, cotton wool and a knife—I am only the observer. I know that another woman will die this night... and I cannot do anything to stop it!

Yes, from time to time I took over my body, but only when The Thing allowed me to. Exactly—THE THING—I have no idea what it can be; I am afraid I am possessed by a ghost or something even worse.

I think nobody could help me. You must wonder why I did not kill myself to stop the deadly impulses of my body. Well, I tried; I was doing my best to fight it. Sometimes I ran out of my house to go to the nearest police station. The result was always the same—the legs (MY LEGS!) did not listen to me and I could not feel them after a few steps. My body was walking back home. For a bystander it must have been very funny—a man wearing a coat over his pyjamas is running like mad; suddenly he stops as if he has hit an invisible wall, and turns back rapidly to go back home at a slow pace. It must have looked really comical; but I did not laugh.

After a few vain attempts I decided to kill myself. I thought I can take it by surprise. In a flash I reached for the knife, to thrust it into my chest. Unfortunately, I was under control all



the time. Those moments of virtual freedom were the same as a prisoner's daily walk; he is not a free man in that time. My hand turned into a stone, instantly. I could not move it. The knife edge was only a few centimetres from my skin. It was so close...

We are driving a car—My Body and I. We are going through empty streets, lit by dim light. Here and there, small groups of drunken youths can be seen, coming back from parties. From time to time I see somebody walking back home—this night he will survive—the body never attacks in the city centre; it is clever and does not want any witnesses.

It starts to rain. Windscreen wipers move lazily with a monotonous rasp. I am very sad. I am terrified. I scream in my body, but it sits still and just turns the fucking wheel. The car goes through successive turns—nicely, without hurry, according to the traffic regulations, although at this hour it is not likely that somebody will want to stop it for inspection.

And even if some crotchety cop would turn up and started to niggle, The Thing would find a way out of this. It is deadly intelligent—many times it has managed to settle apparently impossible situations.

We have just driven into suburbia. The traffic is practically nil—only a shaky night bus drives from time to time, that's it. The Body is happy. I can see my smiling face in the mirror. The more time passes from the moment it all has started, the more I hate it. This is not my face any more—it is the hideous mug of a ruthless murderer. The things that happen make me identify with my body less and less. Every day it is more and more strange to me.

And it all began on the day of my thirty-third birthday. All day I felt a bit uneasy—I thought that it might be an attack of the blues, after all a month earlier my girlfriend had left me (after five years)!

Oh, she was beautiful... straight, long blonde hair, of a colour of fresh hay. Her face was delicate, nearly girly; she did not look like a thirty-year-old. She was a shapely, long-legged woman with full breasts—most males would stare at her instinctively, disregarding the fact that their furious females might slap them in the face without warning. Also I had the feeling that we were much alike and good together. Yes, the girl was like a dream—simply miracle, honey and nuts! She WAS.

The thing that bothered me on that day was, however, not the blues. I did not recognize it then, but now I know that it was an under-skin, unspecified perception of somebody's presence. I was alone and yet I felt as if I had an unwelcome, invisible guest. I bet everyone knows that feeling. In moments, when you feel that someone is standing behind your back; after you turn around to see nobody (and you believe that the feeling was just your imagination)—perhaps in those moments it would turn out that there REALLY is something invisible behind your back, a demon or a ghost. It is quite possible that it is considering taking your body hostage—it wants to POSSESS you!

The thing attacked me by night, when I was almost asleep—I felt a sudden pressure on my chest and then I was paralyzed. I was scared to death! I hoped that it was sleep paralysis, but in my worst suspicions I believed I was having a heart attack and would soon die. It turned out that there are worse things than YOUR OWN DEATH!

A car is stopping on a dark car park. On one side there is a street, then a bus depot, a small stadium and a housing estate (far enough); on the other there is a forest and a narrow path running along it. It leads to a nearby single-family housing estate.

The body is getting out of the car and going towards the darkness, into the forest. I would never go there myself. I would be afraid of what I could meet there: vicious dogs, muggers or aggressive boozers. Even if there was nobody there, I still would be scared. I would have a metaphysical fear. I would be afraid of incorporeal beings—I believe that our world and the second, spiritual, one penetrate each other. It is not important that my thoughts would be irrational—some wandering ghost could visit me on a beautiful, sunny day as well as in the night in a dark forest—I would react like most of people. I would be afraid of inexplicable darkness of the night and what can be hidden in it. It is a kind of primal fear.

Now I squat, hidden behind a bush. There is the blackness of the forest behind my back. I am still scared. This fear is combined with the hope that maybe something would attack me and kill the fucking body, so I could be freed. My eyes are observing the path. My carnal cover is lurking like a predator waiting for its prey. I sometimes ask myself—is this monster, in which my heart is beating, just a possessed man or am I maybe insane, mentally disordered, and the sickness does not allow me to control myself and my deeds.

I hear footsteps. The Thing hears them! I am afraid and I pray at the same time—please, let it be a man, let there be no victim today. Unfortunately, it is a woman. I can only hope she is not a blonde with a delicate, girly face and is not similar to my ex—The Thing has a fancy for that type! And would it really be my choice? Maybe the thing was living IN ME from the moment I was born and was taking the most important decisions FOR ME? Maybe I never had free will. Could I be just the carrier of The Thing?

My worst fears become reality—it is a teenager, a dainty blonde. In the moonlight my body and I can see that her face is delicate. It is her end. I can curse The Thing. I can beg. I can threaten. I can pray. I can try as I might, but I won't stop it. It is useless. The body runs to the girl and puts cotton wool with ether to her face with MY HAND. The teenager tightens, then gets stiff for a moment and becomes flabby. The knife was not necessary this time. I can smell cheap perfume, mixed with alcohol and cigarettes. I carry her towards the car. She lands in the boot, tied and gagged. She does not stand a chance—she will die this very night. I am devastated and my (not-mine) face is smiling. The body made it smooth. The body or The Thing—I do not know how to call it and frankly speaking I don't give a damn. Does it matter? It doesn't. At all! The only important fact is that today somebody's daughter will be murdered and her desperate parents will look for her for many months, maybe even years. In vain!

The body, a gifted driver, drives slowly through corridors of streets. We turn into one narrow, dark street. There is a police car in front of us, at the side of the road. We approach it slowly, without hurry. I wish that they would stop us. I want it so badly. If only people had telepathic abilities! I would be shouting with my thoughts—THERE IS A MURDERER HERE! STOP HIM, YOU MORON! YOU DUMB DICK! STOP HIM! NOW!

We pass by the police. They are checking the ID of some dead-drunk guy. If they only knew who is driving past them, if they only knew...

The car driven by The Thing is turning. A navy-blue hope disappears round the corner. We drive on, towards a house that was once mine. Today it is a hateful mortuary for me. Yes, in the basement there are the bones of several women, covered with concrete.

A CEMETERY!

Maybe in this very moment the girl in the boot regains consciousness. I do not even want to think how scared she is. I wonder how God can allow something like this, this kind of cruelty. Why at least once can't he do something about it?

I am often scared of what is waiting for me after my longed-for death. Am I doomed to suffering in hell or would my faults be forgiven? It is not me who is murdering, just my body, and body is not soul! But what if the soul is sick?

We draw close to a lonely one-floor building that was once my home. It is surrounded by a high hedge. We drive in. The body opens the boot. I see the girl—she is conscious, her eyes are wide open, she tries to scream, despite the gag in her mouth. My (not-mine) hand catches her hair and lifts her. God, it must be painful! And this is just the beginning. Within a couple of minutes the worst will begin. How grateful I would be, if I were allowed not to be a part of this cruel show. Unfortunately, this is out of the question. I have a seat in the first row, I will watch it till the end. I am not allowed even to close my eyes.

The Thing is dragging the twisting victim to the house. It opens the door. It comes to the basement entrance. It goes down the stairs. I feel the body of the teenager bump on the steps. My hand turns on the light. For a moment I do not see anything, but then my eyes catch a well-known sight—a used gynaecological chair, an autopsy table and a set of rusty surgeons' knives. I carry the girl towards the gloomy throne—today she will be the queen of the degenerate dreams of a monster that lives in my body. If only this was just a movie, if only someone could wind it on a bit so that it would be all over. The body seats the teenager on the chair and cuts the ropes on her legs. The scared girl tries to kick. The Thing calms her down by thrusting its elbow into her stomach. The victim grows still. The murderer takes off her trousers and pants with my hands. He sets her legs in the steel holders and immobilizes them.

God, why am I so helpless? Why can't you do anything? Why can't you stop it? KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK! Is there anyone there, god damn it!?

No, as usual, there is nobody there...

I apologize for my cursing and once again I hope that one day my prayer would be heard.

Meanwhile My Body takes off the trousers and I see my (not-mine) swollen penis. It is horrible. I am not aroused; I loathe what is going to happen! It will be a RAPE! Unfortunately, I have no influence on my privy parts.

The Thing thrusts the penis hard into the girl. It does not mind her menstruation.

I AM not a murderer! I AM not a degenerate! I AM not a rapist! And yet, at the same time I am...

If only I had met the girl normally. If we went on dates, if I saw her naked in normal circumstances, I would be aroused. The girl is beautiful. And yet I feel disgust because My Body is raping her. Besides, I have seen too many horrors. I am not a surgeon who can separate the sight of intestines of a human body from his private life. Such a surgeon comes home and makes love to his wife. He does not see all the guts and blood, just a beautiful woman. I am not that kind of person. When My Body finishes raping her, it will kill the poor girl and I will have to watch the horror once again. Now, as I watch a shapely female, I see only intestines, blood, entrails stuffed with faeces and disgusting, slippery fat hidden underneath a thin layer of skin. When I feel the nice smell of a woman I know that only a thin layer of skin separates me from the deadly smell of guts and body fluids. In the moment the Body begins killing her, I cannot perceive her as a suffering, frightened human being. I see only blood and intestines. This is too much. I feel only disgust! I am sure that if The Thing left my body and gave me back my freedom, I could never be with a woman again. I would become a weirdo. A renegade. I know only one thing: if The Thing gave me back my freedom—I would KILL myself. I would not hesitate. I would be afraid that The Thing would change its mind and would want to come back.

### III

I will spare you the details. I will just say this—after raping the girl, the monster that possessed my body will cut her throat. Then it will cut her stomach and gut her—only to have fresh meat in the fridge.

For the next two or three weeks, My Body (MY PRISON!), satisfied, full and contented, will play a role of a nice bank assistant who works every day from nine to five. And all the time I will be inside it; incapacitated, tormented by horrible pangs of conscience. Are you still surprised that I want to die?

THE END

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## LITTLE BASTARDS by Harris Coverley

We had woken up colder than ever, although thankfully there was no ice in our hair this time, unlike that winter on the Eastern coast. My dad released me from his tight grip, and almost everyone in the group stood up simultaneously. There was no time to pick at what meagre rations we had saved from the night before—we had to get up and continue north to where there city was, or rather, where the remains of the city were. The sky as always was a deep grey—too many nuclear reactors exploding my dad says. He was going to explain to me one of those was as soon as he found a textbook on it.

About half a mile up the cracked overgrown road we happened upon what my dad told was once a factory. The Kews had long since reduced much of it to rubble, had ripped out any machine that was in there, and reduced the lot of it to nuts, bolts, and scraps, completely unsalvageable it seemed. My and my dad elected to go in anyway just be sure, and climbing in through the window holes—the Kews had ripped out the fixtures and dissembled them, crumbling the glass into piles either side—we managed amongst the mess to find a few crowbars under a piece of sheet metal. When we lifted it up two Kews we had not seen fled out from underneath into a hole in the brick wall. Kew-kew-kew-kew-kew...

My dad picked up one of the bars and nearly managed to hit one.

“Little bastards!” he shouted. He stood for a moment looking at the hole, thought better of chasing after them, picked the crowbar back up, and we went back outside the ruins to meet with the group leader with our goods.

Davey, our group leader, was grateful for the new crowbars we had found, along with a few screwdrivers.

“Thank Christ the Kews didn’t get ‘em!” he exclaimed, patting my father on the back.

I was glad Davey liked my father. Some previous men in the group had not been so lucky to have such a privilege.

The twenty three of us divided the new tools amongst ourselves—heaviest to the strongest, lightest to the weakest—and the group set off again. We would not rest until the husk of the M18 were in view.

As we walked along, passing across old roads, pathways, building shells, my dad read to me from a book of poems, written decades ago by a guy called Cummings. American, my dad says. I would never see America I realised. No vehicle in existence could float across a body of water that wide and deep without succumbing to a Kew infestation.

My dad always said I needed an education, and the long drawn out walks our group took were as good a time as any. Luckily, the Kews were not interested in taking books apart, and my dad picked them up whenever he could. That’s why I knew so many words compared to other kids we met my age.

We were discussing a poem about living in a small town—I think me and dad lived in a small town once—when the old man Schwab suddenly shouted at us from behind.

“Cummings is crap!” he yelled, and giggled a little. “We need some Bukowski in this group! Some Kerouac ‘ould go nicely too!”

“Shut up, Schwab,” my dad grunted, not looking back. “I’m giving my boy an education in this hellscape, and I’m damned if your bullshit is going to screw that up!”

Schwab giggled again, and said something about only making a suggestion.

My dad always said Schwab was crazy, unbalanced, had never adjusted to the world as it had become. He was a professor once my dad said—a teacher, from a country called Germany, a big name across all fields of science—but now he was a nut, what my dad called a “charity case”, which meant we only had him in the group because he was so pathetic, or something like that.

It took longer to reach the M18 than Davey had anticipated. We could barely make it out in the darkness when we settled on a hillside for the night. We would follow it west to the old city, where we could hope to spend the whole summer, if not meet up with other groups and maybe settle down permanently. My dad once told me in a hushed whisper that Davey had long fancied himself more a mayor than a nomad chief—it was that day I learned that we were nomads.

Before we had reached the M18, we had seen a Kew ship taking off—almost the same size and colour as the group’s cooking pot, making its wheeeeeewww! noise—and we had spent a good minute lobbing whatever we could at it until it disappeared. Davey said he could have got it if he still had his rifle; my Dad had looked at me as if to say he could get anyone of us if he still had his rifle. Dad didn’t trust Davey, but the situation was what it was.

We settled down, the single tent of course for Davey and the two women he had taken as his mates, while the rest of sat around the fire, shivering, eating from a pan mixing two tins of broth with a tin of beans. There was supposed to be another tin of beans but it had been pierced on the journey and case of dysentery amongst any of us couldn’t risked.

Slurping my stew out of my own wooden bowl, I noticed that Schwab was staring at me, then breaking to slurp from his own bowl, before staring back at me.

I loved my dad, I still do, so I must have been in a rebellious mood to talk to Schwab when my dad had told me repeatedly not to.

“Mr Schwab,” I asked him, putting my bowl down, “how did this all happen? The end of everything you so often talk about?”

My dad nearly choked on his own stew. He looked at me in anger, but knew he could do nothing to stop Schwab now. I had heard Schwab’s version of how the Kews came to Earth many times before, often involuntarily, but for some reason I felt like hearing it again, against my dad’s wishes.



“The Kews, my boy!” Schwab yelled, almost in joy. He stood up and waved his arms about: “The bloody Kews!”

Around the fire there was a collective groan. They were being subject to a rant yet again, as was the case at least once a week.

Schwab stopped stomping around and kneeled before me.

“Boy,” he said, itching his arms in fury, “I was a great scientist once, still am...”

“You were a crackpot then and now!” someone shouted from across the fire, and there was a general laugh of agreement.

“You laugh now!” Schwab shouted, pointing a finger at where he suspected the taunt came from, already you couldn’t really see in the dark. “But I could’ve saved you all from this total scheißewelt...if only you’d listened!”

He turned back to me and continued: “They came in little ships, just like the one we saw today, thousands of ‘em, millions maybe.”

He stopped to take a drink from his flask, but when he carried on, much of it ran down his face onto his pinned together rags.

“We were all confused, they landed all over...we tried talking to them, they wouldn’t listen...they just ran around the globe, with that little sound kew-kew-kew-kew-fucking-kew! Little bug-eyed blue men! Five inches tall! We couldn’t believe it! It had to be a hoax, but my boy, it was no hoax, oh no sir...!”

I glanced at my dad and saw he was as enthralled as me. In fact, even though they had all heard it before, and had treated the prospect of hearing it again like a curse, everyone had calmed down and was taking in Schwab’s words. If we still had religion he would probably have been our priest.

“I was there when they tried to decode their language, but it was useless, it was all nonsense! No grammar, no words...! The Kews brought us nothing but their curiosity. Bit by bit they went around. First they started with bicycles and the like, and people thought it was cute. Then they went onto phones and substations, moved onto cars and planes, bit by bit, bit by bit...”

I remembered then how my mother had died—it was Kews taking apart her ventilator that did it. A mechanical failure in her bus had sent her to hospital in the first place—also Kews.

“Entire infrastructures went down!” he went on. “The internet? Bye-bye! Military operations? How?! The radios went never mind the GPS! They tried talking to them—of course that didn’t work! They tried shooting them—too bloody small!”

Schwab broke for another swig.

“The Chinese did the best! They tried gassing them, but they turned out to be more resistant to chlorine than they thought...it didn’t matter how many you killed anyway, wave after wave kept coming, right from the darkness of space!”

He punctuated his sentence by pointing a shaking fist at the night sky and cursing the stars.

For a moment, I vaguely remembered being a very young boy, being in a stroller, playing on a mat with a light box—a TV my dad reminds me—on in the front room of our house, my mum making our evening dinner, going to a big green space full of other people—then the Kews came, and their chaos followed them.

Escaping my thoughts, I asked Schwab: “But what could you have done to save us?”

“I knew it!” he shouted, getting up again and stopping about. “I knew how to deal with them from the beginning!”

He got back down on his knees before me.

“What do you do with a creature that only destroys and doesn’t care? That comes in drove after drove? That marches on and on and on as though you don’t even exist? Hmmm?”

I thought of saying simply kill them, but I thought better of it and simply shook my head.

“You don’t negotiate with vermin!” he growled, a little spittle hitting me in the face. “You don’t treat vermin like a military foe! It’s not like they’re having a diplomatic misunderstanding! If they had followed my advice from the beginning, they would’ve been treated like rats, like termites, like the infestation they were, they are, they always will be!”

Apparently exhausted from his raging, he sat on his backside and dragged himself back to his spot, where he promptly finished his stew and fell asleep.

Before we went to sleep ourselves, my dad berated quietly but harshly for ever asking Schwab anything at all, and made me promise to never do so again.

I promised—although I was inwardly happy with the rant Schwab had given this time—we hugged, and we settled into our two man sleeping shape.

We had been walking along the M18 for about an hour when we came across a wrecked building that was labelled in big fading blue letters “CAFÉ”—a kind of eating place my dad told me.

Me and him were searching inside for any food rations and managed to find a few cans of soup just as three Kews ran out from under a table top against a wall. Kew-kew-kew-kew...

“Little bastards!” I yelled after them as they ran out of the front entrance, and foolishly threw a soup can at the last one as they scampered under the husk of a truck. Like my father before me, I missed.

THE END

*Harris Coverley has had short fiction published in Lovecraftiana, Disclaimer Magazine, and Speculative 66, as well as poetry in Gathering Storm, Oddball Magazine, and the Weird Poets Society anthology Speculations. He lives in Manchester, England.*

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## BLOOD OF T-REX by GK Murphy

### *57 YEARS AFTER THE NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST*

Nobody had surnames in the time after nuclear proliferation extinguished the remnants of Mankind on Planet Earth. One human, a male who harboured no identity whatsoever so for the sake of it we name Simon, was an inbred dwarf of roughly 40 years of age, who lived in a tiny cave of his own carving in the rocks in the hills over what was once Los Angeles in the United States of America. In the freezing winters, he struggled to keep warm, and to remain hidden from the black creatures in the skies which emerged from the night clouds. They were noisy things, squawking like maniacs in their hunger for carrion of mainly the human kind, and as humans, although also carnivores and hunters, they equally co-habited the hunting ground, searching for meat which may or indeed many not have suffered contamination from the residual fallout of the nuclear missile strikes 57 years previously.

He shared the cave with another human, an inbred woman of dark black hair which spiralled down past her shoulders and back, with barely a nose or lips, whose teeth were sparse and mainly pointed and crooked. Yet, if compared to values of a bygone age, the woman we will call Angela, was his angel and long term companion.

On this cruel afternoon as a toxic sun cut through the skies like a blunt razor, it burnt the desert floor beneath with its scorching ferocity and venom of a rattlesnake. Under shelter of the rocks, Angela dowsed Simon's wounds with water that stung his flesh like vinegar, since earlier he had narrowly escaped the wrath of one of many T-Rex in this vicinity, suffering minor wounds yet sufficient enough to rip flesh across his back and spine, and most likely cause infection in the affected areas.

As she rubbed his back with the damp blood-soaked cloth, Simon screamed in agony and cursed who was technically his wife in the world. Verbally, there was no room for communication since there was no logistical or apparent language, making interaction solely employed by arching of the arms and overtly orchestrated hand actions, plus a series of groans and grunts. However, in this nuked land, this was surely enough and increased their means to exist, just how it proved enough in the years following the very dawn of mankind and the era of Apes and those of other Prehistoric calibre.

Sobbing and weeping, Simon flinched as he shrieked in pain as the cloth up and down his spine. Secretly, in whatever terms, he prayed a silent prayer the wounds did not turn worse and take his life. However, there was something that Angela observed which she could not explain, and because this focused on his backbone, he could neither see it, and so how could she bring it to his attention?

There was a multitude of things concerning Simon that were deformed, as indeed Angela suffered similar minor afflictions—curses of the bones and flesh.

On Simon's spine, she noticed, lumps were forming, abrasion marks that had never been visible or apparent before, under the underlying flesh on the bone and amid the murderous beast's lacerations. His wounds were wide and gaping. Under the congealed lumps of blood on his back, she ran her fingertips over the bruised gashes, and over the hardening lumps. The protrusions were tough and concrete-like. They resembled coarse animal bone. To be precise, they seemed very much like dinosaur bone. In fact, something inside Simon was gestating

and transforming and Angela could not explain this to her partner in life. Like so many would have done anywhere in this world, however, she guessed these markings were a bizarre result of the vicious T-Rex attack, one in which Simon could have easily been crushed and devoured alive by the huge monster chasing him across the desert plain. Fortunately, he managed to reach the foot of the caves just in time to call himself a survivor, and enter hiding as soon as he arrived, much to the famished T-Rex's chagrin and disappointment.

There were some orange groves in the nearby hillside unaffected by the radioactivity over the years, and a single grove where apples, berries and many other fruit grew in abundance. Many varied wild animals searched for grub there and normally departed with full bellies, these being birds and other small creatures who fed on them at night. Yet, the creatures of old still never outwitted the human contingent or ever banked on the traps set for them. Often than enough, they were caught off guard and captured in the snares, which served for nice roasted lunchtimes and suppers in the shelter of blowing dust and acid rains in days to come.

Some days, it was too hot to endure the outdoors yet more often than not they still had to be negotiated. Some days it rained or snowed or wild winds blew, casting up blinding dust billows which if caught in any creature or human's eyes might have led to sightlessness for a lifetime, if ventured too far into the plains unprepared. The buildings were scarce, ruins and reminders of a bygone era. There were no reminders of the past.

Except for the guns and ammunition, the grenades, the missiles...

Somehow, some way, munitions factories across America had been invaded whilst an entire Century's worth of top-notch, innovative military equipment had been pilfered, and mostly from locations wide open to the public and unguarded by the authorities.

That could have been a standing joke—what authority? The population could not even communicate—yet, they still knew how to engage and fire a rifle or AK-47.

The New World had an abundance of artillery, brimful and stacked high towards the rafters.

However, it was perhaps a sad fact that Simon or Angela had never made contact with grenades, missiles and guns. Most of the action, wars between rival tribes across America, predominantly occurred in the dismantled cities of once-thriving New York and Chicago, as the folk there attempted to rebuild and school their offspring as they battled and scrapped for territory, maiming and murdering their fellow man in cold blood, and usually eating their dead meat, their prey—human beings. It was a fact in this new age, human flesh was high on the agenda across this vastly annihilated globe, in every town and city, every country where even the most mediocre attempt at survival under radioactive skies proved sometimes what seemed an impossible chore, a massively difficult chore, just to sustain infant life, born amid the settling dust.

Yes, once in the world, to each country, had stood one dictator.

One of these dictators had ordered global nuclear strikes across the planet, for which other dictators had responded similarly in return and struck back. No meetings to discuss matters, no dialogue, no truce—just an agreement to kill their fellow man—no shame, no guilt, no remorse. There were three or four alpha countries in the world, major powers, presided over by each respective dictator. Because none of these men could agree, each—one man in each

country - had decided the fate of millions of innocent people—and because of these three or four futile folk who proved they amounted to nothing but idiotic imbeciles, the planet and its vast population, which once thrived and lived to love, now stood on the precipice of extinction, to love no more.

Suddenly, in the cave, Angela and Simon were alerted by the vibration in the ground and walls, and a familiar noise from outside emanating from beastly feet as they trampled the desert floor, where a mighty roar sounded in the atmosphere. The huge T-Rex had returned to devour its disabled, wounded quarry. Sitting up to take notice, Simon flinched in pain as the cloth Angela brandished burnt his wounds. Frightened, the female inbred gestured to the cave entrance, waving her arms, while she attempted to mouth impossible words that proved never forthcoming.

The roars of the T-Rex become impossibly louder as its face appeared at the cave entrance as did the sound of its big snout sniffing the scent of blood inside the hollow in the rocks. Its tongue lashed the entrance, attempting to curl and bend, as it squeezed into the hole, to taste the humans inside which had backed as far as they could. In a corner was a makeshift spear which Simon grabbed and began to poke the tip of the tongue with, yet it may have well been a pin, as it took no effect whatsoever to the large aperture invading their homestead.

There was no escape. It was either Angela or Simon that was about to perish. It turned out to be Angela...

The tongue's gluey saliva attracted and pulled Angela forwards towards it, almost like a magnet as she immediately became attached to the tongue's sticky tip, whilst Simon continued to stab and poke it with the blunt spear again and again yet forever to no great effect, if any minor whatsoever.

In one final shriek, Angela's body was whipped up like a ragdoll when the long, snaky tongue retracted and once more the gap in the rocks cleared to break the darkness and return sunlight to the place. Indeed, his partner in life was gone and soon nestled in the beast's gullet. It might have proven a good hardy snack for the T-Rex, a feast of fresh human flesh and blood, the food of champions. Of course, remorse and disappointment were hard to express by modern mankind in these times and although in a sense there had existed a deep love and understanding between Angela and Simon, now she was gone forever and the dwarf merely grunted. He recognised he had to carry on as usual, like the woman had never been a feature in his life.

But as he collapsed on the cave floor he never realized a change was in effect and taking place right there and then. He suffered immense pain and hardship as he knelt on all fours and arched his back. To his horror, he found his face was changing shape as well, as a rocklike tusk thrust from his forehead. At the same time, his teeth seemed to scream as they tore through his gums and elongated, as they became crooked, razor-sharp fangs. His back and spine began to splinter and fracture as it cracked loudly. His spine disintegrated and seemed to make a fizzling sound as a foggy gas emerged from between each one of his pulverized ribs, green in texture with a pungent, toxic scent similar to nervous skunk. He coughed and spluttered blood and bile, as yellow puss emerged from his mouth and nostrils.

His neck arched and his clouded eyes bulged from their sockets on yellow sinewy stalks. They glared skyward towards the roof of the cave—to which his head and body grew nearer



as his body expanded and swelled bigger and bigger, as he also grew taller and taller and became increasingly more monolithic. Simon, in this severely deformed state, and with no correct mind, appealed to God, any God, the same God that allowed this disease to afflict him, afflict the world and drive it mad, begging why, why him, why Angela, the world, why do this to me, to Angela, to the world?

Soon, like with so many wounded by dinosaurs, the change had occurred. Mankind had a new foe. For Simon, the world was his new domain, where he would hunt and roam, and revel in his latest guise as a bona fide T-Rex. Blood became his new love and passion and, over the years as more and more humankind perished, he would bathe in this blood. This was the blood of the T-Rex, after all.

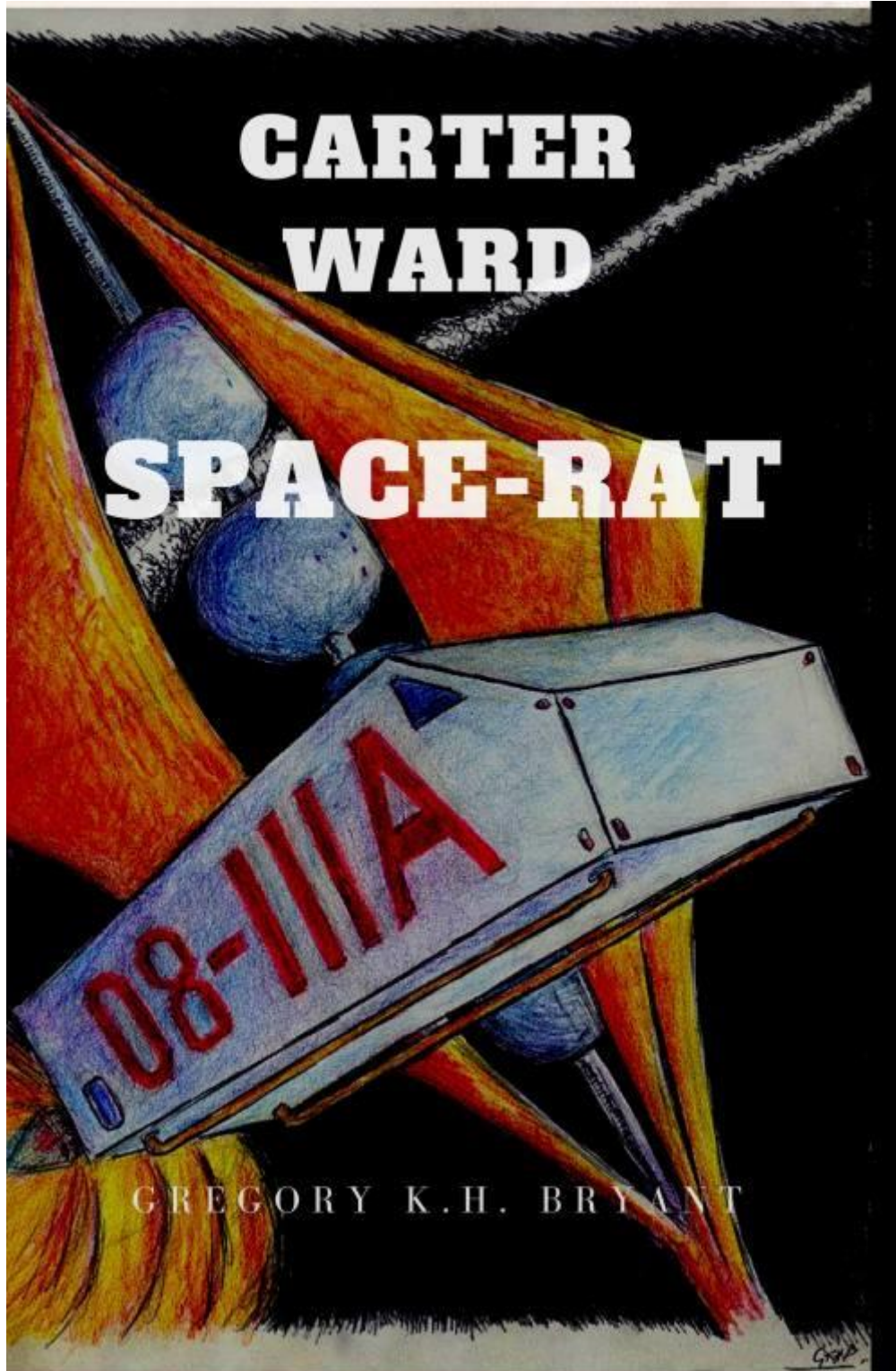
THE END

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

*...is not available this week due to the author's poor health.*

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Now available from Schlock! Publications:  
[\*Carter Ward—Space Rat\*](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.

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## ERIC BRIGHTYES by H Rider Haggard

### XXII: How Eric Came Home Again

Swanhild made a good passage from the Orkneys, and was in Iceland thirty-five days before Eric and Skallagrim set foot there. But she did not land by Westman Isles, for she had no wish to face Gudruda at that time, but by Reyjaness. Now she rode thence with her company to Thingvalla, for here all men were gathered for the Thing. At first people hung aloof from her, notwithstanding her wealth and beauty; but Swanhild knew well how to win the hearts of men. For now she told the same story of Eric that she had told to Atli, and there were none to say her nay. So it came to pass that she was believed, and Eric Brighteyes held to be shamed indeed. Now, too, she set a suit on foot against Eric for the death of Atli at his hand, claiming that sentence of the greater outlawry should be passed against him, and that his lands at Coldback in the Marsh on Ran River should be given, half to her in atonement for the Earl's death, and half to the men of Eric's quarter.

On the day of the opening of the Thing Ospakar Blacktooth came from the north, and with him his son Gizur and a great company of men. Ospakar was blithe, for from the Thing he should ride to Middalhof, there to wed Gudruda the Fair. Then Swanhild clad herself in beautiful attire, and, taking men with her, went to the booth of Ospakar.

Blacktooth sat in his booth and by him sat Gizur his son the Lawman. When he saw a beauteous lady, very richly clad, enter the booth he did not know who it might be. But Gizur knew her well, for he could never put Swanhild from his mind.

"Lo! here comes Swanhild the Fatherless, Atli's widow," said Gizur, flushing red with joy at the sight of her.

Then Ospakar greeted her heartily, and made place for her by him at the top of the booth.

"Ospakar Blacktooth," she said, "I am come to ask this of thee: that thou shalt befriend me in the suit which I have against Eric Brighteyes for the slaying of Earl Atli, my husband."

"Thou couldst have come to no man who is more willing," said Ospakar, "for, if thou hast something against Eric, I have yet more."

"I would ask this, too, Ospakar: that thy son Gizur should take up my suit and plead it; for I know well that he is the most skilful of all lawmen."

"I will do that," said Gizur, his eyes yet fixed upon her face.

"I looked for no less from thee," said Swanhild, "and be sure of this, that thou shalt not plead for nothing," and she glanced at him meaningly. Then she set out her case with a lying tongue, and afterwards went back to her booth, glad at heart. For now she learned that Hall had not failed in his errand, seeing that Gudruda was about to wed Ospakar.

Gizur gave warning of the blood-suit, and the end of it was that, though he had no notice and was not there to answer to the charge, against all right and custom Eric was declared outlaw and his lands were given, half to Swanhild and half to the men of his quarter. For now all held that Swanhild's was a true tale, and Eric the most shameful of men, and therefore they

were willing to stretch the law against him. Also, being absent, he had few friends, and those men of small account; whereas Ospakar, who backed Swanhild's suit, was the most powerful of the northern chiefs, as Gizur was the most skilled lawman in Iceland. Moreover, Björn the Priest, Asmund's son, was among the judges, and, though Swanhild's tale seemed strange to him after that which he had heard from Hall of Lithdale, he loved Eric little. He feared also that if Eric came a free man to Iceland before Gudruda was wed to Ospakar, her love would conquer her anger, for he could see well that she still loved Brighteyes. Therefore he strove with might and main that Eric should be brought in guilty, nor did he fail in this.

So the end of it was that Eric Brighteyes was outlawed, his lands declared forfeit, and his head a wolf's head, to be taken by him who might, should he set foot in Iceland.

Thereafter, the Althing being ended, Björn, Gizur, and Ospakar, with all their company, rode away to Middalhof to sit at the marriage-feast. But Swanhild and her folk went by sea in the long war-ship to Westmans. For this was her plan: to seize on Coldback and to sit there for a while, till she saw if Eric came out to Iceland. Also she desired to see the wedding of Ospakar and Gudruda, for she had been bidden to it by Björn, her half-brother.

Now Ospakar came to Middalhof, and found Gudruda waiting his coming.

She stood in the great hall, pale and cold as April snow, and greeted him courteously. But when he would have kissed her, she shrank from him, for now he was more hideous in her sight than he had ever been, and she loathed him in her heart.

That night there was feasting in the hall, and at the feast Gudruda heard that Eric had been made outlaw. Then she spoke:

"This is an ill deed, thus to judge an absent man."

"Say, Gudruda," said Björn in her ear, "hast thou not also judged Eric who is absent?"

She turned her head and spoke no more of Eric; but Björn's words fixed themselves in her heart like arrows. The tale was strange to her, for it seemed that Eric had been made outlaw at Swanhild's suit, and yet Eric was Swanhild's love: for Swanhild's self had sent the lock of Brighteyes' hair by Hall, saying that he was her love and soon would wed her. How, then, did Swanhild bring a suit against him who should be her husband? Moreover, she heard that Swanhild sailed down to Coldback, and was bidden to the marriage-feast, that should be on the third day from now. Could it be, then, when all was said and done, that Eric was less faithless than she deemed? Gudruda's heart stood still and the blood rushed to her brow when she thought on it. Also, even if it were so, it was now too late. And surely it was not so, for had not Eric been made outlaw? Men were not made outlaw for a little thing. Nay, she would meet her fate, and ask no more of Eric and his doings.

On the morrow, as Gudruda sat in her chamber, it was told her that Saevuna, Thorgrimur's widow and Eric's mother, had come from Coldback to speak with her. For, after the death of Asmund and of Unna, Saevuna had moved back to Coldback on the Marsh.

"Nay, how can this be?" said Gudruda astonished, for she knew well that Saevuna was now both blind and bed-ridden.

“She has been borne here in a chair,” said the woman who told her, “and that is a strange sight to see.”

At first Gudruda was minded to say her nay; but her heart softened, and she bade them bring Saevuna in. Presently she came, being set in a chair upon the shoulders of four men. She was white to see, for sickness had aged her much, and she stared about her with sightless eyes. But she was still tall and straight, and her face was stern to look on. To Gudruda it seemed like that of Eric when he was angered.

“Am I nigh to Gudruda the Fair, Asmund’s daughter?” asked Saevuna. “Methinks I hear her breathe.”

“I am here, mother,” said Gudruda. “What is thy will with me?”

“Set down, carles, and begone!” quoth Saevuna; “that which I have to say I would say alone. When I summon you, come.”

The carles set down the chair upon the floor and went.

“Gudruda,” said the dame, “I am risen from my deathbed, and I have caused myself to be borne on my last journey here across the meads, that I may speak with thee and warn thee. I hear that thou hast put away my son, Eric Brighteyes, to whom thou art sworn in marriage, and art about to give thyself to Ospakar Blacktooth. I hear also that thou hast done this deed because a certain man, Hall of Lithdale—whom from his youth up I have known for a liar and a knave, and whom thou thyself didst mistrust in years gone by—has come hither to Iceland from Orkneys, bearing a tale of Eric’s dealings with thy half-sister Swanhild. This I hear, further: that Swanhild, Atli’s widow, hath come out to Iceland and laid a suit against Eric for the slaying of Atli the Earl, her husband, and that Eric has been outlawed and his lands at Coldback are forfeit. Tell me now, Gudruda, Asmund’s daughter, if these tales be true?”

“The tales are true, mother,” said Gudruda.

“Then hearken to me, girl. Eric sprang from my womb, who of all living men is the best and first, as he is the bravest and most strong. I have reared this Eric from a babe and I know his heart well. Now I tell thee this, that, whatever Eric has done or left undone, naught of dishonour is on his hands. Mayhap Swanhild has deceived him—thou art a woman, and thou knowest well the arts which women have, and the strength that Freya gives them. Well thou knowest, also, of what breed this Swanhild came; and perchance thou canst remember how she dealt with thee, and with what mind she looked on Eric. Perchance thou canst remember how she plotted against thee and Eric—ay, how she thrust thee from Goldfoss brink. Say, then, wilt thou take her word? Wilt thou take the word of this witch-daughter of a witch? Wilt thou not think on Groa, her mother, and of Groa’s dealings with thy father, and with Unna my kinswoman? As the mother is, so shall the daughter be. Wilt thou cast Eric aside, and that unheard?”

“There is no more room for doubt, mother,” said Gudruda. “I have proof of this: that Eric has forsaken me.”

“So thou thinkest, child; but I tell thee that thou art wrong! Eric loves thee now as he loved thee aforetime, and will love thee always.”

“Would that I could believe it!” said Gudruda. “If I could believe that Eric still loved me—ay, even though he had been faithless to me—I would die ere I wed Ospakar!”

“Thou art foolish, Gudruda, and thou shalt rue thy folly bitterly. I am outworn, and death draws near to me—far from me now are hates and loves, hopes and fears; but I know this: that woman is mad who, loving a man, weds where she loves not. Shame shall be her portion and bitterness her bread. Unhappy shall she live, and when she comes to die, but as a wilderness—but as the desolate winter snow, shall be the record of her days!”

Now Gudruda wept aloud. “What is done is done,” she cried; “the bridegroom sits within the hall—the bride awaits him in the bower. What is done is done—I may hope no more to be saved from Ospakar.”

“What is done is done, yet it can be brought to nothing; but soon that shall be done which may never be undone! Gudruda, fare thee well! Never shall I listen to thy voice again. I hold thee shameless, thou unfaithful woman, who in thy foolish jealousy art ready to sell thyself to the arms of one thou hatest! Ho! carles; come hither. Bear me hence!”

Now the men came in and took up Saevuna’s chair. Gudruda watched them bear her forth. Then suddenly she sprang from her seat and ran after her into the hall, weeping bitterly.

Now as Saevuna, Eric’s mother, was carried out she was met by Ospakar and Björn.

“Stay,” said Björn. “What does this carline here?—and why weeps Gudruda, my sister?”

The men halted. “Who calls me ‘carline’?” said Saevuna. “Is the voice I hear the voice of Björn, Asmund’s son?”

“It is my voice, truly,” said Björn, “and I would know this—and this would Ospakar, who stands at my side, know also—why thou comest here, carline? and why Gudruda weeps?”

“Gudruda weeps because she has good cause to weep, Björn. She weeps because she has betrayed her love, Eric Brighteyes, my son, and is about to be sold in marriage—to be sold to thee, Ospakar Blacktooth, like a heifer at a fair.”

Then Björn grew angry and cursed Saevuna, nor did Ospakar spare to add his ill words. But the old dame sat in her chair, listening silently till all their curses were spent.

“Ye are evil, the twain of you,” she said, “and ye have told lies of Eric, my son; and ye have taken his bride for lust and greed, playing on the jealous folly of a maid like harpers on a harp. Now I tell you this, Björn and Ospakar! My blind eyes are opened and I see this hall of Middalhof, and lo! it is but a gore of blood! Blood flows upon the board—blood streams along the floor, and ye—ye twain!—lie dead thereon, and about your shapes are shrouds, and on her feet are Hell-shoon! Eric comes and Whitefire is aloft, and no more shall ye stand before him whom ye have slandered than stands the birch before the lightning stroke! Eric comes! I see his angry eyes—I see his helm flash in the door-place! Red was that marriage-feast at which sat Unna, my kinswoman, and Asmund, thy father—redder shall be the feast

where sit Gudruda, thy sister, and Ospakar! The wolf howls at thy door, Björn! the grave-worm opens his mouth! trolls run to and fro upon thy threshold, and the ghosts of men speed Hellwards! Ill were the deeds of Groa—worse shall be the deeds of Groa's daughter! Red is thy hall with blood, Björn!—for Whitefire is aloft and—I tell thee Eric comes!”—and with one great cry she fell back—dead.

Now they stood amazed, and trembling in their fear.

“Saevuna hath spoken strange words,” said Björn.

“Shall we be frightened by a dead hag?” quoth Ospakar, drawing his breath again. “Fellows, bear this carrion forth, or we fling it to the dogs.”

Then the men tied the body of Saevuna, Thorgrimur's widow, Eric's mother, fast in the chair, and bore it thence. But when at length they came to Coldback, they found that Swanhild was there with all her following, and had driven Eric's grieve and his folk to the fells. But one old carline, who had been nurse to Eric, was left there, and she sat wailing in an outhouse, being too weak to move.

Then the men set down the corpse of Saevuna in the outhouse, and, having told all their tale to the carline, they fled also.

That night passed, and passed the morrow; but on the next day at dawn Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail landed near Westman Isles. They had made a bad passage from Fareys, having been beat about by contrary winds; but at length they came safe and well to land.

Now this was the day of the marriage-feast of Gudruda the Fair and Ospakar; but Eric knew nothing of these tidings.

“Where to now, lord?” said Skallagrim.

“To Coldback first, to see my mother, if she yet lives, and to learn tidings of Gudruda. Then as it may chance.”

Near to the beach was a yeoman's house. Thither they went to hire horses; but none were in the house, for all had gone to Gudruda's marriage-feast. In the home meadow ran two good horses, and in the outhouses were saddles and bridles. They caught the horses, saddled them and rode for Coldback. When they had ridden for something over an hour they came to the crest of a height whence they could see Coldback in the Marsh.

Eric drew rein and looked, and his heart swelled within him at the sight of the place where he was born. But as he looked he saw a great train of people ride away from Coldback towards Middalhof—and in the company a woman wearing a purple cloak.

“Now what may this mean?” said Eric.

“Ride on and we shall learn,” answered Skallagrim.

So they rode on, and as they rode Eric's breast grew heavy with fear. Now they passed up the banked way through the home meadows of the house, but they could see no one; and now



they were at the door. Down sprang Eric and walked into the hall. But none were there to greet him, though a fire yet burned upon the earth. Only a gaunt hound wandered about the hall, and, seeing him, sprang towards him, growling. Eric knew him for his old wolf-hound, and called him by his name. The dog listened, then ran up and smelt his hands, and straightway howled with joy and leapt upon him. For a while he leapt thus, while Eric stared around him wondering and sad at heart. Then the dog ran to the door and stopped, whining. Eric followed after him. The hound passed through the entrance, and across the yard till he came to an outhouse. Here the dog stopped and scratched at the door, still whining. Eric thrust it open. Lo! there before him sat Saevuna, his mother, dead in a chair, and at her feet crouched the carline—she who had been Eric's nurse.

Now he grasped the door-posts to steady himself, and his shadow fell upon the white face of his mother and the old carline at her feet.

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## THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

### 6. The Biters of the City Walls

Here then was the manner of my reception back in the capital of Atlantis, and some first glimpse at her new policies. I freely confess to my own inaction and limpness; but it was all deliberate. The old ties of duty seemed lost, or at least merged in one another. Beforetime, to serve the king was to serve the Clan of the Priests, from which he had been chosen, and whose head he constituted. But Phorenice was self-made, and appeared to be a rule unto herself; if Zaemon was to be trusted, he was the mouthpiece of the Priests, and their Clan had set her at defiance; and how was a mere honest man to choose on the instant between the two?

But cold argument told me that governments were set up for the good of the country at large, and I said to myself that there would be my choice. I must find out which rule promised best of Atlantis, and do my poor best to prop it into full power. And here at once there opened up another path in the maze: I had heard some considerable talk of rebels; of another faction of Atlanteans who, whatever their faults might be, were at any rate strong enough to beleaguer the capital; and before coming to any final decision, it would be as well to take their claims in balance with the rest. So on the night of that very same day on which I had just re-planted my foot on the old country's shores, I set out to glean for myself tidings on the matter.

No one inside the royal pyramid gainsaid me. The banquet had ended abruptly with the terrible scene that I have set down above on these tablets, for with Tarca writhing on the floor, and thrusting out the gruesome scars of his leprosy, even the most gluttonous had little enough appetite for further gorging. Phorenice glowered on the feasters for a while longer in silent fury, but saying no further word; and then her eyes turned on me, though softened somewhat.

"You may be an honest man, Deucalion," she said, at length, "but you are a monstrous cold one. I wonder when you will thaw?" And here she smiled. "I think it will be soon. But for now I bid you farewell. In the morning we will take this country by the shoulders, and see it in some new order."

She left the banqueting-hall then, Ylga following; and taking precedence of my rank, I went out next, whilst all others stood and made salutation. But I halted by Tarca first, and put my hand on his unclean flesh. "You are an unfortunate man," I said, "but I can admire a brave soldier. If relief can be gained for your plague, I will use interest to procure it for you."

The man's thanks came in a mumble from his wrecked mouth, and some of those near shuddered in affected disgust. I turned on them with a black brow: "Your charity, my lords, seems of as small account as your courage. You affected a fine disbelief of Zaemon's sayings, and a simpering contempt for his priesthood, but when it comes to laying a hand on him, you show a discretion which, in the old days, we should have called by an ugly name. I had rather be Tarca, with all his uncleanness, than any of you now as you stand."

With which leave-taking I waited coldly till they gave me my due salutation, and then walked out of the banqueting-hall without offering a soul another glance. I took my way to the grand gate of the pyramid, called for the officer of the guard, and demanded exit. The man was obsequious enough, but he opened with some demur.

“My lord’s attendants have not yet come up?”

“I have none.”

“My lord knows the state of the streets?”

“I did twenty years back. I shall be able to pick my way.”

“My lord must remember that the city is beleaguered,” the fellow persisted. “The people are hungry. They prowl in bands after nightfall, and—I make no question that my lord would conquer in a fight against whatever odds, but—”

“Quite right. I covet no street scuffle to-night. Lend me, I pray you, a sufficiency of men. You will know best what are needed. For me, I am accustomed to a city with quiet streets.”

A score of sturdy fellows were detailed off for my escort, and with them in a double file on either hand, I marched out from the close perfumed air of the pyramid into the cool moonlight of the city. It was my purpose to make a tour of the walls and to find out somewhat of the disposition of these rebels.

But the Gods saw fit to give me another education first. The city, as I saw it during that night walk, was no longer the old capital that I had known, the just accretion of the ages, the due admixture of comfort and splendour. The splendour was there, vastly increased. Whole wards had been swept away to make space for new palaces, and new pyramids of the wealthy, and I could not but have an admiration for the skill and the brain which made possible such splendid monuments.

And, indeed, gazing at them there under the silver of the moonlight, I could almost understand the emotions of the Europeans and other barbarous savages which cause them to worship all such great buildings as Gods, since they deem them too wonderful and majestic to be set up by human hands unaided.

Still, if it was easy to admire, it was simple also to see plain advertisement of the cost at which these great works had been reared. From each grant of ground, where one of these stately piles earned silver under the moon, a hundred families had been evicted and left to harbour as they pleased in the open; and, as a consequence, now every niche had its quota of sleepers, and every shadow its squad of fierce wild creatures, ready to rush out and rob or slay all wayfarers of less force than their own.

Myself, I am no pamperer of the common people. I say that, if a man be left to hunger and shiver, he will work to gain him food and raiment; and if not, why then he can die, and the State is well rid of a worthless fellow. But here beside us, as we marched through many wards, were marks of blind oppression; starved dead bodies, with the bones starting through the lean skin, sprawled in the gutter; and indeed it was plain that, save for the favoured few, the people of the great capital were under a most heavy oppression.

But at this, though I might regret it abominably, I could make no strong complaint. By the ancient law of the land all the people, great and small, were the servants of the king, to be put without question to what purposes he chose; and Phorenice stood in the place of the king. So

I tried to think no treason, but with a sigh passed on, keeping my eyes above the miseries and the squalors of the roadway, and sending out my thoughts to the stars which hung in the purple night above, and to the High Gods which dwelt amongst them, seeking, if it might be, for guidance for my future policies. And so in time the windings of the streets brought us to the walls, and, coursing beside these and giving fitting answer to the sentries who beat their drums as we passed, we came in time to that great gate which was a charge to the captain of the garrison.

Here it was plain there was some special commotion. A noise of laughter went up into the still night air, and with it now and again the snarl and roar of a great beast, and now and again the shriek of a hurt man. But whatever might be afoot, it was not a scene to come upon suddenly. The entrance gates of our great capital were designed by their ancient builders to be no less strong than the walls themselves. Four pairs of valves were there, each a monstrous block of stone two man-heights square, and a man-height thick, and the wall was doubled to receive them, enclosing an open circus between its two parts. The four gates themselves were set one at the inner, one at the outer side of each of these walls, and a hidden machinery so connected them, that of each set one could not open till the other was closed; and as for forcing them without war engines, one might as foolishly try to push down the royal pyramid with the bare hand.

My escort made outcry with the horn which hung from the wall inviting such a summons, and a warder came to an arrow-slit, and did inspection of our persons and business. His survey was according to the ancient form of words, which is long, and this was made still more tedious by the noise from within, which ever and again drowned all speech between us entirely.

But at last the formalities had been duly complied with, and he shot back the massive bars and bolts of stone, and threw ajar one monstrous stone valve of the door. Into the chamber within—a chamber made from the thickness of the wall between the two doors—I and my fellows crowded, and then the warder with his machines pulled to the valve which had been opened, and came to me again through the press of my escort, bowing low to the ground.

“I have no vail to give you,” I said abruptly. “Get on with your duty. Open me that other door.”

“With respect, my lord, it would be better that I should first announce my lord’s presence. There is a baiting going forward in the circus, and the tigers are as yet mere savages, and no respecters of persons.”

“The what?”

“The tigers, if my lord will permit them the name. They are baiting a batch of prisoners with the two great beasts which the Empress (whose name be adored) has sent here to aid us keep the gate. But if my lord will, there are the ward rooms leading off this passage, and the galleries which run out from them commanding the circus, and from there my lord can see the sport undisturbed.”

Now, the mere lust for killing excites only disgust in me, but I suspected the orders of the Empress in this matter, and had a curiosity to see her scheme. So I stepped into the warder’s lodge, and on into the galleries which commanded the circus with their arrow-slits. The old

builders of the place had intended these for a second line of defence, for, supposing the outer doors all forced, an enemy could be speedily shot down in the circus, without being able to give a blow in return, and so would only march into a death-trap. But as a gazing-place on a spectacle they were no less useful.

The circus was bright lit by the moonlight, and the air which came in to me from it was acrid with the reek of blood. There was no sport in what was going forward: as I said, it was mere killing, and the sight disgusted me. I am no prude about this matter. Give a prisoner his weapons, put him in a pit with beasts of reasonable strength, and let him fight to a finish if you choose, and I can look on there and applaud the strokes. The war prisoner, being a prisoner, has earned death by natural law, and prefers to get his last stroke in hot blood than to be knocked down by the headsman's axe. And it is any brave man's luxury either to help or watch a lusty fight. But this baiting in the circus between the gates was no fair battle like that.

To begin with, the beasts were no fair antagonists for single men. In fact, twenty men armed might well have fled from them. When the warder said tigers, I supposed he meant the great cats of the woods. But here, in the circus, I saw a pair of the most terrific of all the fur-bearing land beasts, the great tigers of the caves—huge monsters, of such ponderous strength that in hunger they will oftentimes drag down a mammoth, if they can find him away from his herd.

How they had been brought captive I could not tell. Hunter of beasts though I had been for all my days, I take no shame in saying that I always approached the slaying of a cave-tiger with stratagem and infinite caution. To entrap it alive and bring it to a city on a chain was beyond my most daring schemes, and I have been accredited with more new things than one. But here it was in fact, and I saw in these captive beasts a new certificate for Phorenice's genius.

The purpose of these two cave-tigers was plain: whilst they were in the circus, and loose, no living being could cross from one gate to the other. They were a new and sturdy addition to the defences of the capital. A collar of bronze was round the throat of each, and on the collar was a massive chain which led to the wall, where it could be payed out or hauled in by means of a windlass in one of the hidden galleries. So that at ordinary moments the two huge beasts could be tethered, one close to either end of the circus, as the litter of bones and other messes showed, leaving free passage-way between the two sets of doors.

But when I stood there by the arrow-slit, looking down into the moonlight of the circus, these chains were slackened (though men stood by the windlass of each), and the great striped brutes were prowling about the circus with the links clanking and chinking in their wake. Lying stark on the pavement were the bodies of some eight men, dead and uneaten; and though the cave-tigers stopped their prowlings now and again to nuzzle these, and beat them about with playful paw-blows, they made no pretence at commencing a meal. It was clear that this cruel sport had grown common to them, and they knew there were other victims yet to be added to the tally.

Presently, sure enough, as I watched, a valve of the farther gate swung back an arm's length, and a prisoner, furiously resisting, was thrust out into the circus. He fell on his face, and after one look around him he lay resolutely still, with eyes on the ground passively awaiting his fate. The ponderous stone of the gate clapped to in its place; the cave-tigers turned in their prowlings; and a chatter of wagers ran to and fro amongst the watchers behind the arrow-slits.

It seemed there were niceties of cruelty in this wretched game. There was a sharp clank as the windlasses were manned, and the tethering chains were drawn in by perhaps a score of links. One of the cave-tigers crouched, lashed its tail, and launched forth on a terrific spring. The chain tautened, the massive links sang to the strain, and the great beast gave a roar which shook the walls. It had missed the prone man by a hand's breadth, and the watchers behind the arrow-slits shrieked forth their delight. The other tiger sprang also and missed, and again there were shouts of pleasure, which mingled with the bellowing voices of the beasts. The man lay motionless in his form. One more cowardly, or one more brave, might have run from death, or faced it; but this poor prisoner chose the middle course—he permitted death to come to him, and had enough of doggedness to wait for it without stir.

The great cave-tigers were used, it appeared, to this disgusting sport. There were no more wild springs, no more stubbings at the end of the massive chains. They lay down on the pavement, and presently began to purr, rolling on to their sides and rubbing themselves luxuriously. The prisoner still lay motionless in his form.

By slow degrees the monstrous brutes each drew to the end of its chain and began to reach at the man with out-stretched forepaw. The male could not touch him; the female could just reach him with the far tip of a claw; and I saw a red scratch start up in the bare skin of his side at every stroke. But still the prisoner would not stir. It seemed to me that they must slack out more links of one of the tigers' chains, or let the vile play linger into mere tediousness.

But I had more to learn yet. The male tiger, either taught by his own devilishness, or by those brutes that were his keepers, had still another ruse in store. He rose to his feet and turned round, backing against the chain. A yell of applause from the hidden men behind the arrow-slits told that they knew what was in store; and then the monstrous beast, stretched to the utmost of its vast length, kicked sharply with one hind paw.

I heard the crunch of the prisoner's ribs as the pads struck him, and at that same moment the poor wretch's body was spurned away by the blow, as one might throw a fruit with the hand. But it did not travel far. It was clear that the she-tiger knew this manoeuvre of her mate's. She caught the man on his bound, nuzzling over him for a minute, and then tossing him high into the air, and leaping up to the full of her splendid height after him.

Those other onlookers thought it magnificent; their gleeful shouts said as much. But for me, my gorge rose at the sight. Once the tigers had reached him, the man had been killed, it is true, without any unnecessary lingering. Even a light blow from those terrific paws would slay the strongest man living. But to see the two cave-tigers toying with the poor body was an insult to the pride of our race.

However, I was not there to preach the superiority of man to the beasts, and the indecency and degradation of permitting man to be unduly insulted. I had come to learn for myself the new balance of things in the kingdom of Atlantis, and so I stood at my place behind the arrow-slit with a still face. And presently another scene in this ghastly play was enacted.

The cave-tigers tired of their sport, and first one and then the other fell once more to prowling over the littered pavements, with the heavy chains scraping and chinking in their wake. They made no beginning to feast on the bodies provided for them. That would be for afterwards. In

the present, the fascination of slaughter was big in them, and they had thought that it would be indulged further. It seemed that they knew their entertainers.

Again the windlass clanked, and the tethering chains drew the great beasts clear of the doorway; and again a valve of the farther door swung ajar, and another prisoner was thrust struggling into the circus. A sickness seized me when I saw that this was a woman, but still, in view of the object I had in hand, I made no interruption.

It was not that I had never seen women sent to death before. A general, who has done his fighting, must in his day have killed women equally with men; yes, and seen them earn their death-blow by lusty battling. Yet there seemed something so wanton in this cruel helpless sacrifice of a woman prisoner, that I had a struggle with myself to avoid interference. Still it is ever the case that the individual must be sacrificed to a policy, and so as I say, I watched on, outwardly cold and impassive.

I watched too (I confess it freely) with a quickening heart. Here was no sullen submissive victim like the last. She may have been more cowardly (as some women are), she may have been braver (as many women have shown themselves); but, at any rate, it was clear that she was going to make a struggle for her life, and to do vicious damage, it might be, before she yielded it up. The watchers behind the arrow-slits recognized this. Their wagers, and the hum of their appreciation, swept loudly round the ring of the circus.

They stripped their prisoners, before they thrust them out to this death, of all the clothes they might carry, for clothes have a value; and so the woman stood there bare-limbed in the moonlight.

She clapped her back to the great stone door by which she had entered, and faced fate with glowing eye. Gods! there have been times in early years when I could have plucked out sword and jumped down, and fought for her there for the sheer delight of such a battle. But now policy restrained me. The individual might want a helping hand, but it was becoming more and more clear that Atlantis wanted a minister also; and before these great needs, the lesser ones perforce must perish. Still, be it noted that, if I did not jump down, no other man there that night had sufficient manhood remaining to venture the opportunity.

My heart glowed as I watched her. She picked a bone from the litter on the pavement and beat off its head by blows against the wall. Then with her teeth she fashioned the point to still further sharpness. I could see her teeth glisten white in the moonrays as she bit with them.

The huge cave-tigers, which stood as high as her head as they walked, came nearer to her in their prowlings, yet obviously neglected her. This was part of their accustomed scheme of torment, and the woman knew it well. There was something intolerable in their noiseless, ceaseless paddings over the pavement. I could see the prisoner's breast heave as she watched them. A terror such as that would have made many a victim sick and helpless.

But this one was bolder than I had thought. She did not wait for a spring: she made the first attack herself. When the she-tiger made its stroll towards her, and was in the act of turning, she flung herself into a sudden leap, striking viciously at its eye with her sharpened bone. A roar from the onlookers acknowledged the stroke. The cave-tiger's eye remained undarkened, but the puny weapon had dealt it a smart flesh wound, and with a great bellow of surprise and pain it scampered away to gain space for a rush and a spring.

But the woman did not await its charge. With a shrill scream she sped forward, running at the full of her speed across the moonlight directly towards that shadowed part of the encircling wall within whose thickness I had my gazing place; and then, throwing every tendon of her body into the spring, made the greatest leap that surely any human being ever accomplished, even when spurred on by the utmost of terror and desperation. In an after day I measured it, and though of a certainty she must have added much to the tally by the sheer force of her run, which drove her clinging up the rough surface of the wall, it is a sure thing that in that splendid leap her feet must have dangled a man-height and a half above the pavement.

I say it was prodigious, but then the spur was more than the ordinary, and the woman herself was far out of the common both in thews and intelligence; and the end of the leap left her with five fingers lodged in the sill of the arrow-slit from which I watched. Even then she must have slipped back if she had been left to herself, for the sill sloped, and the stone was finely smooth; but I shot out my hand and gripped hers by the wrist, and instantly she clambered up with both knees on the sills, and her fingers twined round to grip my wrist in her turn.

And now you will suppose she gushed out prayers and promises, thinking only of safety and enlargement. There was nothing of this. With savage panting wordlessness she took fresh grip on the sharpened bone with her spare hand, and lunged with it desperately through the arrow-slit. With the hand that clutched mine she drew me towards her, so as to give the blows the surer chance, and so unprepared was I for such an attack, and with such fierce suddenness did she deliver it, that the first blow was near giving me my quietus. But I grappled with the poor frantic creature as gently as might be—the stone of the wall separating us always—and stripped her of her weapon, and held her firmly captive till she might calm herself.

“That was an ungrateful blow,” I said. “But for my hand you’d have slipped and be the sport of a tiger’s paw this minute.”

“Oh, I must kill some one,” she panted, “before I am killed myself.”

“There will be time enough to think upon that some other day; but for now you are far enough off meeting further harm.”

“You are lying to me. You will throw me to the beasts as soon as I loose my grip. I know your kind: you will not be robbed of your sport.”

“I will go so far as to prove myself to you,” said I, and called out for the warder who had tended the doors below. “Bid those tigers be tethered on a shorter chain,” I ordered, “and then go yourself outside into the circus, and help this lady delicately to the ground.”

The word was passed and these things were done; and I too came out into the circus and joined the woman, who stood waiting under the moonlight. But the others who had seen these doings were by no means suited at the change of plan. One of the great stone valves of the farther door opened hurriedly, and a man strode out, armed and flushed. “By all the Gods!” he shouted. “Who comes between me and my pastime?”

I stepped quietly to the advance. “I fear, sir,” I said, “that you must launch your anger against me. By accident I gave that woman sanctuary, and I had not heart to toss her back to your beasts.”



His fingers began to snap against his hilt.

“You have come to the wrong market here with your qualms. I am captain here, and my word carries, subject only to Phorenice’s nod. Do you hear that? Do you know too that I can have you tossed to those striped gate-keepers of mine for meddling in here without an invitation?” He looked at me sharp enough, but saw plainly that I was a stranger. “But perhaps you carry a name, my man, which warrants your impertinence?”

“Deucalion is my poor name,” I said, “but I cannot expect you will know it. I am but newly landed here, sir, and when I left Atlantis some score of years back, a very different man to you held guard over these gates.” He had his forehead on my feet by this time. “I had it from the Empress this night that she will to-morrow make a new sorting of this kingdom’s dignities. Perhaps there is some recommendation you would wish me to lay before her in return for your courtesies?”

“My lord,” said the man, “if you wish it, I can have a turn with those cave-tigers myself now, and you can look on from behind the walls and see them tear me.”

“Why tell me what is no news?”

“I wish to remind my lord of his power; I wish to beg of his clemency.”

“You showed your power to these poor prisoners; but from what remains here to be seen, few of them have tasted much of your clemency.”

“The orders were,” said the captain of the gate, as though he thought a word might be said here for his defence, “the orders were, my lord, that the tigers should be kept fierce and accustomed to killing.”

“Then, if you have obeyed orders, let me be the last to chide you. But it is my pleasure that this woman be respited, and I wish now to question her.”

The man got to his feet again with obvious relief, though still bowing low.

“Then if my lord will honour me by sitting in my room that overlooks the outer gate, the favour will never be forgotten.”

“Show the way,” I said, and took the woman by the fingers, leading her gently. At the two ends of the circus the tigers prowled about on short chains, growling and muttering.

We passed through the door into the thickness of the outer wall, and the captain of the gate led us into his private chamber, a snug enough box overlooking the plain beyond the city. He lit a torch from his lamp and thrust it into a bracket on the wall, and bowing deeply and walking backwards, left us alone, closing the door in place behind him. He was an industrious fellow, this captain, to judge from the spoil with which his chamber was packed. There could have come very few traders in through that gate below without his levying a private tribute; and so, judging that most of his goods had been unlawfully come by, I had little qualm at making a selection. It was not decent that the woman, being an Atlantean, should go bereft of

the dignity of clothes, as though she were a mere savage from Europe; and so I sought about amongst the captain's spoil for garments that would be befitting.

But, as I busied myself in this search for raiment, rummaging amongst the heaps and bales, with a hand and eye little skilled in such business, I heard a sound behind which caused me to turn my head, and there was the woman with a dagger she had picked from the floor, in the act of drawing it from the sheath.

She caught my eye and drew the weapon clear, but seeing that I made no advance towards her, or move to protect myself, waited where she was, and presently was took with a shuddering.

"Your designs seem somewhat of a riddle," I said. "At first you wished to kill me from motives which you explained, and which I quite understood. It lay in my power next to confer some small benefit upon you, in consequence of which you are here, and not—shall we say?—yonder in the circus. Why you should desire now to kill the only man here who can set you completely free, and beyond these walls, is a thing it would gratify me much to learn. I say nothing of the trifle of ingratitude. Gratitude and ingratitude are of little weight here. There is some far greater in your mind."

She pressed a hand hard against her breasts. "You are Deucalion," she gasped; "I heard you say it."

"I am Deucalion. So far, I have known no reason to feel shame for my name."

"And I come of those," she cried, with a rising voice, "who bite against this city, because they have found their fate too intolerable with the land as it is ordered now. We heard of your coming from Yucatan. It was we who sent the fleet to take you at the entrance to the Gulf."

"Your fleet gave us a pretty fight."

"Oh, I know, I know. We had our watchers on the high land who brought us the tidings. We had an omen even before that. Where we lay with our army before the walls here, we saw great birds carrying off the slain to the mountains. But where the fleet failed, I saw a chance where I, a woman, might—"

"Where you might succeed?" I sat me down on a pile of the captain's stuffs. It seemed as if here at last that I should find a solution for many things. "You carry a name?" I asked.

"They call me Nais."

"Ah," I said, and signed to her to take the clothes that I had sought out. She was curiously like, so both my eyes and hearing said, to Ylga, the fan-girl of Phorenice, but as she had told me of no parentage I asked for none then. Still her talk alone let me know that she was bred of none of the common people, and I made up my mind towards definite understanding.

"Nais," I said, "you wish to kill me. At the same time I have no doubt you wish to live on yourself, if only to get credit from your people for what you have done. So here I will make a contract with you. Prove to me that my death is for Atlantis' good, and I swear by our Lord the Sun to go out with you beyond the walls, where you can stab me and then get you gone. Or the—"

“I will not be your slave.”

“I do not ask you for service. Or else, I wished to say, I shall live so long as the High Gods wish, and do my poor best for this country. And for you—I shall set you free to do your best also. So now, I pray you, speak.”

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