

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 27
4TH NOVEMBER 2018

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LAWS ARE
MADE TO TURN
CHAOS INTO
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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

PUBLISHED BY:
Schlock! Publications
(www.schlock.co.uk)

Schlock! Webzine

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Steven Havelock, Gregory KH Bryant, Rex Mundy, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, A Merritt*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 13, Issue 27
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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

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. We will also review published and self-published novels. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *science-fiction-space-ship-rocket-441708* by [Stevebidmead](#).
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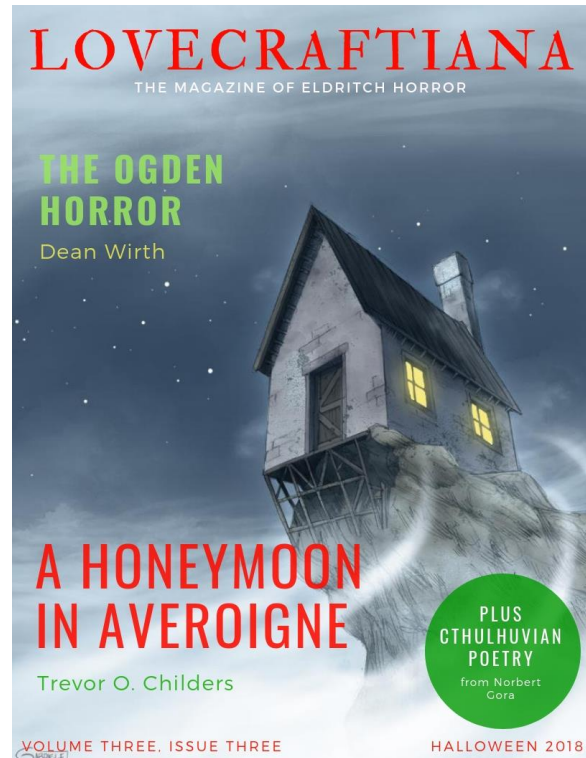
EDITORIAL

This week the forces of law and order meet their comeuppance. In a far flung world of the future, Chren's child proves to be of the greatest significance in the first of a two part science fiction story. An insect drives one woman to the edge of insanity. And a cheating boyfriend pushes Pamela even further.

Aajika encounters the leader of the invaders, but what of Kursaal? Dimara ponders her gratitude to Carter Ward. Malone set out on an expedition of his own. And Goodwin and Larry explore Muria.

—Gavin Chappell

Now out from Rogue Planet Press: [*Lovecraftiana: Halloween Eve 2018*](#).



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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"CLEARLY YOU'RE EXPERIENCING SOME ADVERSE SIDE EFFECTS FROM THE MEDS, BUT IS THE DEPRESSION LIFTING?"

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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COP CHOPPER by Rob Bliss

The police helicopter circled a few times over a section of field and farms on its GPS map, found nothing, and moved onto the next sector. Its spotlight stayed off unless and until it found something, but the camera scanning the terrain below transmitted and recorded all it saw. Eleven o'clock on an autumn night, they only flew when there was no moon so as not to get an inaccurate reading. Infrared and heat signatures were captured by the camera, displayed on a computer console in the cockpit. Corn gave off heat, but hemp plants were hotter, so they couldn't be well-hidden, no matter what the growers tried.

"It's gonna be legal in less than a year," the pilot said to his passenger.

"Yeah, but until then we're gonna bust every field and grower we can."

"So we're doing this every night?" the pilot asked. "For how long? Till legislation passes?"

"Damn right. Scare the shit out of them all, then maybe they won't keep going, or have more start up, in this area. This is *my* neck of the woods."

The pilot chuckled into his mike. "Yeah, I can tell by your accent. I guess you're pissed about legislation?"

"Laws are made to turn chaos into order. You kill a law, then my power is lessened. When people get more freedom, cops lose more power. If they don't have to obey a stricken-down law, then what else are they gonna try to grow? Opium? Didn't we go to war 'cuz of that?"

"I don't think opium grows in this country."

"It can in greenhouses!" the passenger shot back, spearing a finger at the pilot. "You on their side? I'm tellin' ya—it'll be chaos. That's why I'm gonna nail every one of them I can. Give them a record that'll follow them for life. That won't get erased from the books, no matter who gets voted in." He rocked in his seat, gave side glares to the pilot. "Just fly the goddamn chopper—do yer job."

The chopper flew on without further conversation, making wide circles over farms that slept, over forests and stands of trees in which nothing appeared to grow. The police officer and his pilot had a long night ahead of them, but it was a good way to make a living. To make a difference.

Ed smacked Mickey's pale cheek, holding the frayed collar of his jean jacket. "Wake up! I think I see 'em."

Mikey's eyes fluttered and, if his best friend hadn't been holding him up, he would've fallen over. "I really don't feel good, man. This is a dumb idea. We're gonna get nailed."

“No we ain’t,” Ed answered, pulling Mickey off the dented, manure-flecked tailgate of his pickup truck. “This is gonna keep us outa jail. Cops are upping their patrols, wanna bust everyone. To hell with that. They got their tricks, we got ours.”

Standing tilted backwards, Mickey rubbed his neck, smeared a hand across the cold sweat pasted on his forehead. “We shouldn’t have talked to that chick.”

“Are you kidding? Hottest thing to ever wander into a shit small town dive. You see all the farm girls checking her out, hating her at first sight? All the guys ignoring their white trash girlfriends? And she came up to us. To you! You were chewing Skoal and had zits on your chin and straw in your hair, but she still said you were the cutest cowboy in the bar.”

“She was shitting us, man. Girls, you know.”

“She weren’t no girl. That’s the point. She was a woman! Long black hair, red bubble-gum lips, and tits till Tuesday. And that ass—goddamn!”

Mickey’s eyes flared open and he nodded and smiled. “Yeah... that ass.”

“And she chose you! Hell, maybe she’ll choose me next Friday—said she’d come back.”

“She’s gotta be married. We’re gonna get our asses kicked by a goddamn husband if we go back.”

“No we won’t,” Ed said, grabbing an arm and walking Mickey along the roadside gravel. No other vehicles were likely to pass on the dirt road at night, far from any paved route. Vitality returned to Mickey’s limbs and he was soon able to pace to and from the truck on his own.

“I don’t think you should do it, if we go back,” Mickey said, snapping the collar of his jacket up, feeling a chill. “I think we went too far, had too much to drink.”

“With a woman like that,” Ed smiled, did a soft-shoe in the gravel, “ain’t no such thing as too far.” He pointed at the night sky far at the end of the road, far from where the truck was parked, ignition off. “Look, there they are.”

Mickey swung his head around to see a small red light flashing in the sky. He could hear the thud of the rotors, but he shouldn’t have given the distance.

“I can hear it,” he muttered.

Ed slapped his chest. “See! Like she said. You got powers now, son. Use ‘em. Protect our stash. It’s gonna be legal soon, so we won’t have to do this again and again. The cops are just being pricks, trying to round us all up before they can’t no more.”

“Again?” Mickey asked, wrinkling eyebrows. “You mean you want me to do it a bunch of times?”

Ed stepped to his friend, eyes wide and serious, his tone lowered. “Every time they go up, you go up too.”

“Jesus,” Mickey sighed. “It won’t work.”

“Don’t know until you try.” Ed watched the red light move across the night, going further east. “They’ll call it pilot error. Maybe blame some kid with a laser. Who cares? Just make sure they’re a few roads away from our shit. Don’t want more pigs coming to the rescue and searching the area.”

“How far away?” Mickey asked, watching the light.

“Half a dozen roads, maybe a dozen. They’ll probably turn around when they get to the county line, no enforcement out of their jurisdiction.”

“Well, where’s that?”

“Don’t worry. You just follow as far as you can, keep low, they won’t be expecting you, won’t know what you are. Then you strike!”

Mickey shook his arms, watched the light, unsure. He removed his jeans jacket, gave it to Ed. “All right, fuck it, let’s give it a shot.”

“Atta boy,” Ed said, slapping his friend’s back.

Mickey jogged down the unlit country road, then sped into a sprint impossibly fast for a normal human being. Ed cheered and hollered when Mickey jumped high off the road and bounded in flying leaps across the farmer’s field, heading for the light.

“There’s gotta be one—even just one small patch—somewhere around here!” the passenger police officer yelled at the computer console screen. “Where do these goddamn hicks get the shit?—we know they all smoke it!”

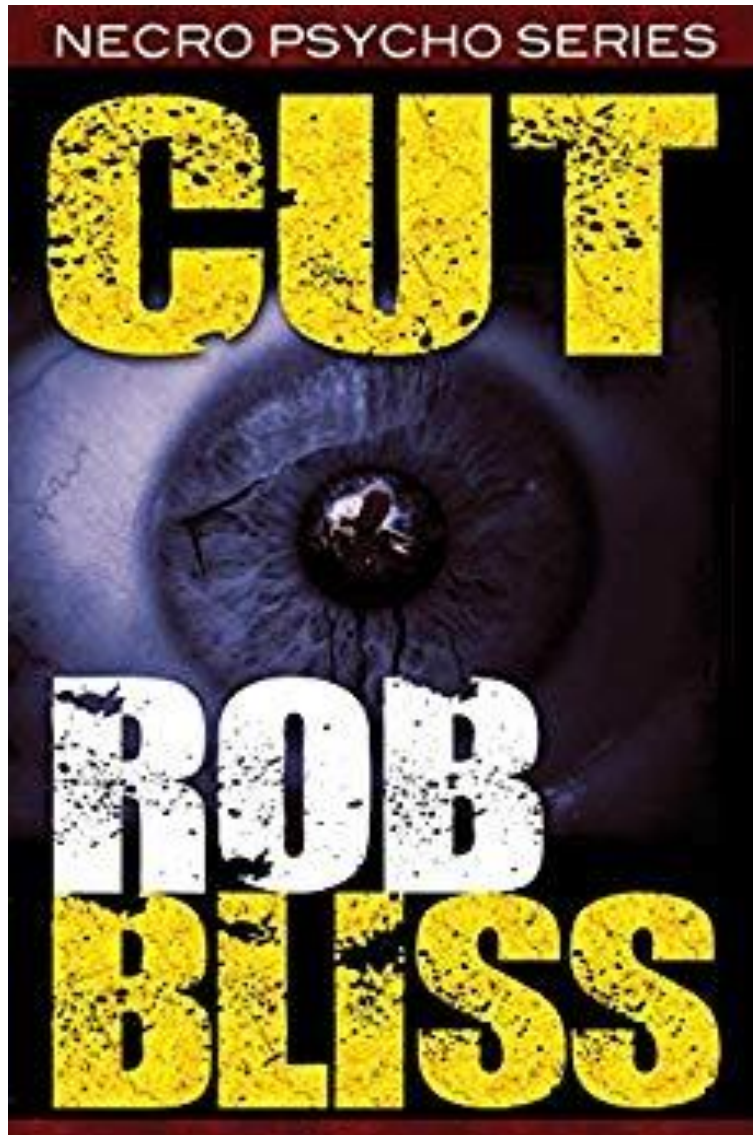
“What the hell—” the pilot said, his last words.

Mickey slammed head-first through the bubble dome of the cockpit windshield, shattered it into a sparkling rain, and sank fangs into the pilot’s neck. Not realizing the full extent of his new power, he tore off a wedge of skin and muscle, and the jugular spat blood in a pumping stream across his face.

The passenger pulled out his gun, but Mickey hammered down a fist, shattering the officer's forearm bone. Fangs sunk in and tore out the trachea and a second spray of blood was released. The chopper spun and plummeted, but Mickey jumped out the way he had entered and bounded back across the many farmers' fields. A mushroom of fire rose behind him.

Back at the truck, Ed stared at his friend's bloody face and beaming smile. He clapped hands on Mickey's shoulders and danced. "Goddamn! We are going back next Friday night! And I'm gonna let her bite me wherever she wants!"

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

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THE CHILD OF THE OBJECT by JW Baker

1

Chren hadn't prayed in years and hadn't been to church in even longer. He'd married Xhaja at a Humanist centre and given the first payment on a set of gilded volumes entitled 'The Complete Works of Dawkins' but hadn't done anything more towards what he once would have called his 'spiritual self.' He didn't really believe and didn't really care. Yet coming home from trying to find Kuela buyers he had rummaged through his bedside cabinet and found his old set of rosary beads beneath a pair of old underwear and some tattered pornography magazines. He thumbed them impatiently while he watched the city go by; he didn't pray, he just felt the tiny spheres go past his fingers as he thought about the meeting. The city was still buzzing along with its same strange energy that had sustained it for centuries. It was alive in a way, Chren, thought, but altered, twisted. You couldn't tell immediately, you'd have to have been living there as long as he had to sense that strange disquiet that permeated everything from the luxury gene splicing parlours of the penthouse district to the cheap, alcohol soaked Insta-surgery bars in the slums. It was a subtle whisper that said;

"Guys, some thing's wrong here.

It made Chren nervous. Politicals, Leftists, Religious Cultists, Pro-Earthers and the like would have blamed this on the secession from Earth but Chren wasn't remotely political. He had a perfect view of the Object', it had been there since before the city, Chren often thought about it when stressed, which these days was often, what with the riots, the secession and his joblessness, he found its mysterious dark presence oddly comforting. A mystery in a city where the only mysteries were where the next pay check would come from and what government would be in charge next. The Object was a black smear on the horizon line, hanging just above the tips of the tallest towers and tenement blocks, just out of reach, unreflecting, unyielding. He liked the apartment's view of the city, it helped him think. He extinguished his cigarette, careful to have smoked right down to the filter. Tobacco duty had gone up exponentially along with every other Earth import and suddenly a packet of fags cost more than a petrol car or a Monobike. Chren considered himself quite smart for having hidden a pack under the ply boards in his room when the news first broke. He'd sold half and covered six months of ludicrously overcharged rent and had smoked the rest when he'd discovered Xhaja was pregnant.

"Honey, I'm gettin' scared."

She cooed from the kitchenette—it looked more like a large window box, bolted onto the side of the building.

"These are business people."

He assured her, ripping the paper around the filter into tiny strips, a nervous habit he'd never been able to kick.

"Yeah, the business of drive-bys."

Xhaja always knew when he was nervous, even from across the room, though to be fair the room in question was less than three metres end to end. He didn't look at her, he just continued to watch the city, the neon and holographics threw the dense concrete jungle into sharp relief, all Crystal spires with walls of shrubbery and shanty towns built a hundred stories high. The Object loomed above it all like some fat deity. Its smooth black bulk just visible in the gloom between two of the taller 'slum-scrapers', it was only just possible, from Chren's distance, to see that the thing was spherical. To the people beneath it was just one large occluding stain which left them in permanent shadow. In a few weeks Xhaja would be getting spherical too, he thought, then their problems really began.

"They're concerned for the working man."

Chren sighed. A police cruiser snooped by, its sirens off, its gun ports loaded. It was the only traffic Chren had seen all day.

"Not you then, Chren."

Xhaja chided him as she worked on filleting a particularly weedy Kuela, flicking out the little pockets of meat from its many thighs with a knife. The bulge was pressing ever so slightly against the belt of her dress, the scan had said it was going to be boy.

"When they pay me, I'll not need to work, hell our great grandchildren won't need to work." He turned away from the city to smile at her. "We'll be richer than the Gates, enough to make the Murdoch dynasty jealous,"

She looked up from her work, a pretty girl of barely thirty with blemish-less azure skin (the classic look of a Numan and a target for bigotry within their tenement block) which matched surprisingly well with her lustrous blue-black hair, the fringe of which had caught a splodge of Kuela blood. Chren knew he didn't deserve her.

"We could live on Titan."

She mused dreamily: "I've always wanted to live underwater."

She flicked out the last of the white tender meat. It would take some to distil the naturally occurring painkiller, longer still to find a buyer. She was a Reader and could tell if he was downplaying the truth—Chren could never believe he was out right lying-but she wouldn't, which made Chren feel guilty about keeping secrets. She might already know everything; his meeting with Puzzo, the size of his credit card bill, Kalyssa—that beautiful real reason why he'd left his job, he'd stressed over that one for months. Xhaja had sat him down, poured a large Gordon's gin, finishing off the bottle (in hindsight a bad idea, Earth gin now cost roughly the same price as a yacht apartment on the river) and confessed she was a mid-level telepath, able to selectively interpret some of the thoughts and feelings of people close to her. It was a common 'gift' amongst Numen and not something normally talked about outside their gilded communities or Glieses' tangled, rat trap legal system. She'd had surgery when she was younger so she didn't

have the bulbous head that characterized a lot of readers— ‘headers’ the popular slang called them—and took a couple of pills every week so she was the telepathic equivalent of deaf, so he hadn’t imagined she was blessed with that particular gift. He hadn’t known what to think. After spending the last of the cigarette money on a lead-lined tin foil hat she’d assured him she’d never probed to deeply; just enough to get a sense of mood or how he really felt. Chren had loved her for that but still... paranoia was a hard beast to slay.

“These guys are politicals, I’ll be okay.”

Chren remarked, pacing nervously. The meeting was about to take place and his feet were feeling decidedly cold.

“They say you can surf the ice volcanoes.”

Khaja was excited already about money they didn’t even have, “load up a back-up body an—”

Chren collapsed to the floor. The meeting had begun.

Khaja sighed and scraped the meat of the chopping board and into the distiller.

Chren found himself staring up at an intricately painted ceiling, pictures of apple-cheeked Putti and ‘roided Xeraphim fluttering around an English country garden. The paintings were on bone coloured porcelain mounted to lacquered mahogany panels. If there was one thing you could say about MM Puzzo, Chren thought, it was he liked the finer things in life. He scrambled to his feet, feeling as though he’d the best night out in the world. He was in a mansion from Old Earth times, in the middle of an expanse of marble tiling. It was cool and airy, a million miles away from the cloying heat of the apartment.

He rubbed his eyes, half his brain was telling him he’d just had a fifth of vodka and half a pound of OxyContin, while the other half was trying to assure itself this is what happened when you met via Implant and it was all perfectly normal. Signals from the cortex piggybacking on invisible streams of data being thrown up to a satellite and into a labyrinth of servers and substrates on the other side of the world then back to the city, mind smushed up and zoomed about fibre optics and circuit boards in a data soup, while the brain slept back in the living room.

While the two parts of his brain argued, he looked around, it was indeed a grand space but sparse and unfurnished, except for a few tatty mattresses in the far corner. M.M Puzzo was in the centre, more grandiose and over-adorned in Chren’s opinion, than his surroundings.

“Do you like?” he asked pleasantly. “It’s recreated from photographs of a British aristocrat’s summerhouse in 1916.”

Chren didn’t know how to respond. No matter what reality he was in, Puzzo terrified him.

“This the chapel for religious ceremonies, cleared to make way for injured servicemen returned from the war.”

Chren considered himself a bit of an ancient history buff and was quite glad to be given a chance to sound intelligent. “The oil wars,” he confirmed tentatively, not quite looking at Puzzo in the eye.

“Oh dear,” sighed the man with a ridiculous theatricality. “Not very sharp on history are we? The First World War in Europe. The oil wars were a good century away.”

He sounded like a particularly good-humoured history teacher, helping a student brush up on relevant dates. His plummy, measured accent fit the mansion well.

“Of course, before the floods and...and just before....um...”

His voice dried and he went back to looking out the window.

“Hitler,” Puzzo finished, “but we didn’t come here to discuss history.”

Chren walked over to him. He had chosen to appear exactly how he was rumoured to look like in real life, a mountain of squishy wet fat, topped by a bald head. The man lived almost exclusively online and had a thousand faces but this was his most popular and thusly what everyone assumed he really looked like.

His limbs were thick rolls of blubber, his feet almost entirely disappeared, and his neck non-existent. At various points clusters and garnets of precious stones had been inlaid into the fat, making his nipples, nose and naval shimmer with a strange beauty. He had—so the rumour went—very deliberately chosen to gain the almost unheard of 923 pounds, employing microsurgery techniques and gene sculpting to maintain the incredible weight and still be healthy. He’d been no midget originally and standing at over seven feet tall the effect was truly grotesque, almost terrifying—exactly what Puzzo had been going for.

“Wars used to be fought with people,” Puzzo lamented. “Tommies, guns and bullets. Our war with Earth should have been like that.”

He was hosting the implant, which meant he could take liberties with the reality of the world’s reality. Poppies started to sprout up from the ground.

“Our war with Earth...”

Chren had heard that Puzzo had a ‘unique political outlook’ but he wasn’t in the mood to discuss politics.

“We are at war with Earth,” Puzzo assured him, that reassuring, not quite patronizing tone again. “Taxes are up, ships from the UN are all over the wormhole, military all of them, with more coming in every day,”

The poppies now carpeted the floor, the marble couldn't be seen.

"You say I have somethin—"

"The modern wars are wars of ideas." Puzzo conjured a glass into life, it was filled with a dark, sticky looking wine. "Ideologies and thoughts, no room for people anymore."

He raised the wine to his pouted lips, the movement showed his elbow to be sparkling with jewels as well, though nearly lost under the fat. He was more pensive and thoughtful than Chren would have imagined, more like an ivory tower academic than a stereotypical gangster.

"You used to be able to coerce people into acting as a group, that's what religion was used for, social manipulation. We need something like that if we are to win against Earth."

"This is all very intere—"

"Who controls thoughts these days?" Puzzo spoke as though he wasn't there and for a moment Chren got a disconcerting feeling that the man's mind had wandered away entirely. A frequent patron of dive bars, drug dens and strip clubs, Chren had heard a lot of stories about Puzzo, his wealth and power had made him infamous as had his rather tenuous connection with the land of the sane. He had fought tooth and podgy claw to insure Gliese got its independence, even, allegedly, hiring an entire mercenary fleet to kick out the Earth space craft. Puzzo was a man of many tricks and talents and Chren believed he probably could have gone to war but the final victory had been in the conference room, the death blow of colonialism had been the flourish of a pen. The ink was barely dry on the secession agreement when he'd demanded they go back to being a colony. Chren imagined when you were rich and powerful it was all just a hobby, seeing how you could affect politics, expanding your sphere of influence.

"I suppose—"

"Your wife is pregnant," he interrupted, his voice booming.

Chren nodded, God alone who could have known that.

"The baby, so my physicians assure me, will be a halfling,"

He allowed Chren sometime to process the information. When you were as powerful as Puzzo you didn't shout and rant and rave, you gave things their time to digest. Puzzo owned—near as damn it—every bank, building society and stock exchange in the system, as well as a multitude of shady criminal enterprises, guns, illegal body implants, clone prostitute labour forces and Kuela based morphine plantations—of which Xhaja was doing a very a pale imitation. He had power and even worse, he knew he had power.

"Temper temper, you're certainly very PC."

He held up a podgy hand in a ‘cool it’ kind of gesture.

“Is any of that relevant?” he asked.

“I know the baby’ll need money, the Eugenics people will want buying off. You’ve got me sold already.”

That was the real carrot Puzzo offered, Chren reflected, not just unspecified ‘vast amounts of money’ but also getting the Eugenics Council of his back. Puzzo apparently had a lot of say with those guys, particularly with who ‘disappeared’ and who didn’t.

“Yes...yes, you’ll need a jolly good bribe, a jolly good bribe indeed.”

Puzzo stroked his many chins, “Very diligent are our dear ol’ Eugenics.”

Chren wondered at how the man supported himself under all that weight. Maybe it was a trick of artificial reality or maybe more gene manipulation.

“What I ask of you is very simple,” he assured after a suitably long pause, “half-babies are rare, maybe Numen don’t find us attractive or maybe it’s just good old ignorant prejudice—”

“Please, get to the point,” Chren insisted through gritted teeth, Puzzo smiled pleasantly.

“As I was saying, Numen are a funny breed, they reckon because they’ve got all the latest gene therapy and can do all sorts of biological tricks, that they don’t want to...disadvantage their kids by getting with people like us.”

Puzzo smiled again. It was prejudice disguised gently enough but Chren still felt the sting of it. Numen had been around for a good two and a bit centuries, genetically engineered back on Earth, officially for the Great War which Earthmen always got so excited about, unofficially as the perfect sex partners for the planets uber rich over class. Numen, according to Xhaja anyway, were behind a lot of the feelings of discontent in the city, she said that once you were considered a ‘superman’ everything seemed a little dissatisfying.

“....So your baby is pretty rare, valuable to the right people.” Puzzo had been talking for some time and Chren realized he had not been listening.

“So it’s the baby you want,” he surmised, hoping he’d got about the gist of it. Saying no to a man like Puzzo was hard, he hoped he could ease him into his refusal, flatter him and politely decline. Not here though. Here he was an idea, a thought transmitted through signals, satellites and fibre optics. Murder had been committed before via implant before; a burst of X-rays or a jolt of electric was enough to burn out the neurons or blow a blood vessel and with the right people in the right places who was to say it wasn’t a natural aneurism—rare as they were with modern medicine and easily available blood checking software.

“You can’t have the baby.” Chren hoped he sounded firm, even in the simulated reality he felt

his gorge rise and the room pitch slightly.

“Not forever,” Puzzo assured amicably,

“Just once and for one specific function, it won’t cause pain or harm in anyway.” He smiled, teeth white, clean and even.

“We need your child to open something for us.”

He leaned down as much as his overstressed spine would allow, it was only when he did this did Chren realize he was actually on his knees, the vast paunch covering his legs.

“We need him to open the Object.”

A coffee table materialized between them with a Crystal decanter and a set of glasses on top.

“Something to drink,” he proffered casually, “that’s why I like these meetings, you can anything you want.”

At this the decanter filled up with whiskey the colour of amber and the glasses some kind of strong smelling golden liquor. Puzzo sipped some of it quietly, the silence wasn’t natural.

“Open...”

Chren reached out for a glass but Puzzo dissolved it before he could bring it up to his lips.

“Metaphorically speaking,” Puzzo managed not to sound patronizing.

“This...this is a bit over my head,” Chren managed eventually.

He felt disconnected, not literally thankfully but anesthetized to the whole affair. Suddenly the view changed entirely and they were above the city, amongst the top of the apartment blocks and skyscrapers, neon and light pulsing beneath them like blood threw the veins of the city streets. Chren noticed they were probably not far from where his body was currently lying ‘IRL’. Virtual reality, he reflected, could be frighteningly realistic. He felt the cold rush of air on his face and the sickening tug of vertigo as he looked down and couldn’t see the ground.

“Bracing, isn’t it?” Puzzo boomed, his dumpy feet, hanging on swollen ankles dangling in mid-air, back fat rippling behind him so he resembled some horrible kind of angel. “I have sim’d maps of even higher up.”

He floated a little, weightless in his imagined world.

“Even ones of the volcano’s summit. I like to fly of them when I’m thinking,”

He laughed and clapped Chren over the back. They were right next to the Object, only it had

some rather unrealistic glowing lines superimposed over it, which Chren could tell where an addition by the artificial reality. He noticed how high up he was again. The Object topped the tallest buildings in the city, so, he thought, he must be pretty damn high. It was like in *A Christmas Carol* where Scrooge and the ghost fly over the city, only the ghost here was real and the city wasn't.

"Last six months we've been getting this transmitted," Puzzo explained, that oddly comforting tone of voice slipped into use again. It was probably a part of how he kept so many fingers in so many pies; he sounded like someone you should trust.

"Now that to me looks a lot like the same wave your average reader communicates along."

The net of lines curled out and began emanating spears of coloured lights. Chren was fairly certain this was all meant to represent something very scientific but he had no idea what. It looked like a load of wavy coloured lines.

"But not just any reader, these are low bands, what I hear been called 'bio-Wi-Fi', outa range for the normal reader, if such a thing exists."

He waved a hand and the lines vanished.

"Brainwaves, Chren, my boy, I'm talking about brainwaves."

A paternal hand on his shoulder and they were in the pews of some great ancient church.

"The Object needs someone like your son."

He took a glass of communion wine from a passing priest and grinned at the congregation whilst he drank. This was all taken from centuries ago, Chren supposed. Not only was everyone dressed in things like denim and nylon but there were few churches on Gliese.

"Why do you want the Object opened?" Chren asked, reaching for his glass of communion. His hand passed right through it. Puzzo seemed to like screwing with people. Puzzo laughed in a way which made Chren decidedly unwell.

"If we're going to win the war with Earth, we may need whatever's inside."

Puzzo floated up, sacks of lard billowing around him. The light from the stained glass windows really did complete the look of some hellish angel.

"An...and if I want out?"

He stood up and did his best to look Puzzo in the eye but the man had floated up to the rafters, drops of wine from his glass where spilling down on the congregation.

"It must be hard to learn your lovely wife's a reader." Puzzo sympathized, finishing the glass and

refilling it again with a thought, this time with ice water, “Think she’s read you in the past?”

Chren felt a flush of anger creep over him in a nauseous wave.

“But I digress,” Puzzo, proffered him a glass eagerly, “Go and think it over, talk to...Zajsha, or however you say it and get in touch when you feel you want to make a decision.”

The ground ripped away from him and he was falling down. Everything was dark and cold. The meeting had ended.

“I dunno, man,” Steinbeck admitted, splitting the fruit with a wet thwack. “Lived near the object for a good ten year now an’ never heard nothin’ like that,”

He handed Chren his half. It was slim replacement for the breakfast he’d skipped. Steinbeck was what Xhaja liked to call a ‘hobbyist activist’; he’d make little placards, go to demonstrations and was signed up to every political forum online, but rarely attended a protest or got involved with any serious rioting. He could talk for hours on ‘neo-imperialism’ and ‘bread and circuses philosophy’ but would usually leave for one of his countryside properties once the bullets and bottles started flying.

Chren couldn’t blame him, given how fierce the crowds had got outside their block the previous months but Xhaja was a real firecracker when it came to politics and believed that if you believed in something you should probably be prepared to strap on a riot shield. He hadn’t seen Steinbeck since seeing a zero-g soccer game with him the previous year but after his meeting with Puzzo, well, it was his closest thing to a friend in a high place.

“So...nobody could open it?” Chren tried to sound casual, having a mouthful of fruit helped.

“Hell, people-a been trying, specially ‘round summer season, everybody’s got some new way-a breakin’ it open.”

He dug around in his own fruit with a plastic spoon. The air hung heavy with the heat and the sickly sweet smell of the fruit, a welcome change from the city odours of people, fried food and the eye watering aroma of the super rich gasoline powered cars.

“They got ‘em electromagnets, particle ‘ccelerators an’ all kinda’ fancy techno-bobbins.”

Steinbeck clicked open the doors of his tiny electric car. He was a giant even amongst Numen. Born on the low-g moon ‘G-Gemini’, at nearly eight feet tall, he made the vehicle into a clown car just by climbing in the driver’s seat.

“They be wonderin’ what’s inside since before my grandpa’ was a youngen. They’ve fired stuff at it, tried to scrape bits off an’ analyse what it’s made of, only to have diamond blades and zero-edged graphene scalpels break like chalk in a batter barrel.”

He took out his gun from the dashboard. An expensive luxury, with a mother of pearl muzzle and Earth cherry wood along the grip, a clue perhaps, that, despite the self-image he projected, Steinbeck was an urbanite with a great deal of money whom took pleasures in the country surrounding him.

“Bouncin’ lasers and X-rays off it, nothin’ gets through, not a scratch or dent on the darn thing, even shoved neutronium mines on its underside but it don’t do no good, ya’ can try an open it but ya’ know what I reckon?”

He speeded the little car along the lane of tightly packed earth, steering with one hand, finishing the fruit with the other.

“I reckon that it’s not that we can’t open it, hell no, it just don’t wanna open.”

Steinbeck fished around in the dashboard and brought out a packet of E-cigarettes. It was odd. Chren had never heard of anyone talk about the Object like it had free will before. The forest of Mushroom fruit towered around them now, fungi on rubbery trunks that rivalled the height of the corporate towers and slum spires on the horizon. Mushroom? Tree? Alien Organism? Nobody knew what the Mushroom Trees were, only that they’d been a boon to Gliese’s flagging economy.

“Rare that you come down these parts,” Steinbeck observed casually, “couldn’t resist one-a my famous huntin’ trips, eh?”

Steinbeck smiled and they drove deeper into the ‘forest’. He knew you didn’t except an invite to hunting trip you received over a month ago, especially when you’d blown off said hunting trip a good half dozen times before. He was a Numan and even though he wasn’t a reader like his sister but he was smart, smart enough to act the country bumpkin when necessary.

“Guess the whole Earth thing...ya’ know it’s upset life in the city. I been real busy.” Chren assured him, things had indeed been shock up since Gliese’s independence but it was hard to be too busy when you’re unemployed. Steinbeck nodded sagely. They were in deep now and the cap-foliage had grown thick overhead, occluding the early morning sunshine and giving the narrow roadway the feel of twilight.

“Good. Good time to unwind and catch a couple of Kuela’s...an always been wondering about the Object.”

The Mushroom-Tree farms felt a million miles away from the city, yet they were only on its outskirts, where big industrial complexes and automated factories gave way to farms and freeholds, the Object was less than five miles away, hazed slightly by clouds on the horizon, tantalizingly just above the towers and high rises. You had to go a long way to get the Object out of mind.

“Yeah, my apartments in Muir Grove Park, right under it alright. Mari an the youngens

sometimes be jokin' they can feel it speak but I reckon that ain't true,"

"What do people think the Object is, then?"

Chren knew he was pressing. Steinbeck would talk about his kids, crazy theories he'd heard on the subject and general chat, then he'd get to what Chren really wanted.

"Boy, we are fulla questions today." He smiled jovially and cut the engine, leapt out of the car and waded into the shallows of the lake. It took at least ten minutes of standing in near suspended animation for the Chugies to come. Chren hit a couple but his heart wasn't in it.

They loaded their prizes back into the car. Chren didn't like looking at the ruin of the bodies. Steinbeck whistled a tune as he sealed them up safe in disposable polythene bags. The stomachs were fat from hibernation, filled with the richly fermented fruit juices which would be distilled further into a luxury wine and sold out of system for an exorbitant amount.

"Now after all that excitement why don't you tell me about why you're so interested in the Object?"

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK

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THE FLY by Sophie Crockett

Darkness descended upon the bedroom. Night was fast approaching. I closed the curtains, and made the bed, ready for a long and peaceful sleep.

My head rested against the soft down pillow. My eyes slowly started to close and I could feel myself drifting into the land of imagination. Suddenly I heard a loud buzzing sound.

I opened my eyes turned on the electric light and looked around the bedroom for the source of this irritating noise and there I saw it. A huge, black, dirty fly on the wall.

I rolled up a magazine, ready to end its life early, but just as I launched at it, it flew away buzzing around the room.

It flew around me, into my face, around my head. It just would not land. I swatted it away with my hand and the buzzing stopped.

After about five minutes of looking for it I convinced myself that I had been triumphant.

I put out the light and again laid down to rest.

I fell into a deep sleep. I do not know how much time had passed when again I heard the buzzing. The sound of that accursed fly.

I leapt out of bed, ready once again to do battle. At first I couldn't see it, just hear its infernal buzzing like daggers piercing my brain.

"Where are you?" I shouted.

I could still hear it but it was nowhere to be seen.

My heart pounded hard against my chest. My palms started to sweat. But the infernal buzzing continued.

I couldn't stick the noise. The thought of that disgusting flying monster in my bedroom drove me crazy. I needed to rid the world of it.

I looked under the bed, scattering my books and shoes everywhere. It wasn't there.

I threw the cushions and bedclothes off from the bed. They fell to the floor in a heap. And it wasn't there.

I opened my wardrobe and started frantically flinging clothing around the room until the wardrobe was empty. But again it wasn't there.

I felt like I was losing control. I pulled everything off the shelves. Ornaments smashed into a thousand pieces on the wooden floors. It wasn't there yet the buzzing continued. It even seemed louder than before like it was deliberately taunting me.

Maybe it has gotten behind the wallpaper, I thought. I started pulling the paper off the wall ripping and tearing it. I was like a wild beast going into frenzy but I couldn't stop.

A few hours must have passed and all the wallpaper was off the wall. No fly. But still it buzzed!

"Where are you, you bastard?" I shouted.

I ran down to the kitchen and grabbed a kitchen knife. This will get it, I thought.

Running back up the stairs I fell and knocked my head. Blood poured down upon my face but I didn't feel it. I just wanted to kill that thing.

I approached the bedroom hiding the knife behind my back. I shut the bedroom door and I was greeted with the buzzing. But this time I saw it, rubbing its face with its disgusting legs it looked like it had grown to enormous proportions.

Its bulging eyes staring at me, it turned its head. Seizing my chance, I lunged full force at it, throwing the knife against the wall but the fly calmly and casually flew away from the knife, missing it by mere inches.

I picked up the knife and started swirling it around my head. The fly descended. It landed right there, right on my left leg. I lifted up the knife and swung it down it cut right down through my flesh but the fly flew onto my right arm! Again I swung the knife, this time embedding it in my flesh.

The blood poured out. But I felt elated, "I must have killed it!" I cried in ecstasy. Then I heard the buzzing.

"No. It can't be!" I screamed.

My husband stood at the bedroom door, pale and trembling. He looked around the room with frightened eyes, saw me full of blood, spittle running down my face.

"It's the beast. The fly. It's here. Listen! The buzzing. The buzzing!"

He slammed the door and locked it from the outside. "It's not me, it's the fly!" I punched the door with all my might.

Hours seemed to have passed but in reality it must have been minutes. I sat in delirium, leaning against the door.

The fly still buzzed around me, but then I had a marvellous idea. I couldn't believe that I had not thought of this before!

What kills flies...? Spiders of course!

I closed my eyes and imagined myself turning. I felt hair growing. I felt myself growing legs and eyes. I looked down at myself and I saw eight hairy legs.

"Now I will get you, you bastard." I laughed hysterically. I crawled across the floor on my newly grown legs and I was able to climb the wall.

I went in pursuit of the fly but it still kept eluding me!

Just then the door flew open; my husband stood there with five men in white coats. "Stay back," I screamed, "or I will sting you with my stinger!"

The next thing I knew I was tied up and being loaded into the back of a van. I screamed incoherently, "The fly, the fly," as I was pushed into the van. I looked up at my bedroom window and saw the enormous black beast looking down at me.

It grinned and waved as I was taken away.

THE END

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HELL ON EARTH by Steven Havelock

Pamela looked down and saw her death. The wind swept her blonde hair behind her. She looked up briefly and saw a trillion stars. Tears streamed down her cheek.

My boyfriend left me. I know the end is coming...Soon.

She looked down.

The old man jerked upright. He gasped one last breath and then he saw something that Pamela could not.

“It’s beautiful...” he whispered in awe and then collapsed back onto the bed.

I’ve seen more people die than some people have hot dinners.

A short while later once the DR had issued the death certificate, Pamela was bathing the dead body of the elderly man.

I’m just a lowly support worker. I have to do what the nurses tell me, but that doesn’t mean I have to enjoy it.

She threw the jug of cold water over the old man’s head. His eyes glassy and sightless stared upwards, his mouth open.

All my life it’s been the same, I was never any good at school and I’m not smart enough to be a nurse, but I have Dominic...

A tear came to her eye.

Yes, Dominic...I know he’s cheating, always making excuses for why he can’t come round anymore.

She was alone in the hospital bathroom. Something inside her seemed to burst.

She held her head in her hands as the tears gushed out. She gave a loud yelp of pain. She started to get up and wipe the tears away with the old man’s bath towel, hoping that none of the nurses had heard her scream.

She looked again at the old man. His eyes fixed, glassy and staring upwards.

As if in awe? What could have awed him so much? It’s always the same...

Then she remembered a phrase she had heard often but never given much thought to.

‘The good die young’

What the hell did that mean? What the hell did anything mean anymore and why do I feel so wretched and miserable?

Dominic...

The wind whistled and bit into Pamela mercilessly. Down below the night was as cold and bleak as an arctic glacier, and the cold seemed to have taken root in her soul.

I’m 23, not had a good life, mama died when I was eight and my papa couldn’t cope...He just couldn’t cope and I was moved from foster home to foster home...

Then she thought of that phrase again.

‘The good die young’

Why is my life such a mess? Lousy job, lousy cheating boyfriend...

Four weeks ago she had been at Dominic’s flat. He was taking a shower and his mobile rang. The name Melissa flashed on the mobile. She hadn’t known his pin code so couldn’t answer it.

A tear rolled down her cheek as she thought about the call.

When he’d come out the shower, she had confronted him.

“Who’s Mellissa?”

He had been startled.

“No one. Just a friend from work.”

Then he had started making excuses as to why he couldn’t meet her...

Now the tears were flowing freely down her face like a small river. Two years! Two lousy years we’ve been together and now this...

‘The good die young’

The phrase popped inside her head again.

Why do all the old people gasp and marvel in wonder when they take their last breath?

The city below blurred in a rush of tears.

What do they see? Do they go to heaven? I've e never seen anyone gasp in horror...

Pamela was in the bathroom.

A nurse, Nicola, popped her head around the door. "Are you alright, Pamela?" Her voice was concerned but also irritated, "We heard a scream."

Pamela had dried her tears and now looked up.

"Sorry, just this poor fellow here."

Nicola nodded in understanding. "Once you have washed him," her voice slightly lower, "go for your break."

The wind was cold and painful.

I don't care, I've never being much good at anything. The other kids bullied me, I was the odd one out; I was 'that' foster kid'. Papa just couldn't look after me...

She lifted her leg, ready for the end...

Failed my exams, couldn't get another job apart from this crappie dingy support worker role... I feel like I'm in hell...

The phrase was running around in her head.

'The good die young'

It led to another thought.

Maybe I am in hell? It sure feels like it. My whole life has been a nightmare.

She counted down. 3...

My Mama died.

2...

I failed my exams.

1...

My boyfriend is cheating.

She stepped forward.

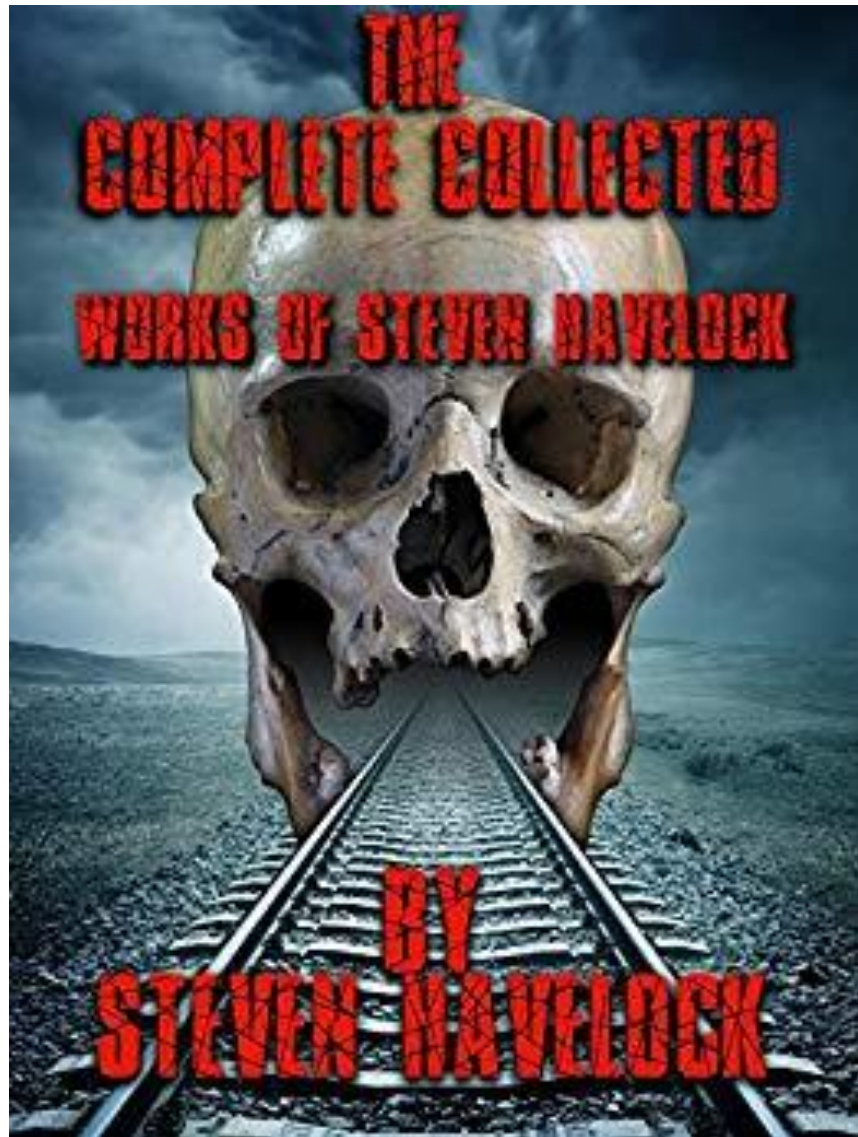
Papa couldn't look after me...I tried to tell people but I could never do it...Tell people what papa had done to me...But I never could and now I never will.

The phrase was going round and round in her head 'The good die young... The good die young...'

Her body hit the floor and her eyes stared up like those of the hundreds of old people whose eyes had stared upwards.

It is beautiful, just so beautiful... I was right!

THE END



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Aajika slumped back, still holding on to the wicker bars of the slave pen. Her sister Wanii patted her on the shoulder. 'Is Kursaal not coming to save us?'

She laid her head against the bars and shut her eyes, rolling her head back and forth in weary negation. 'He's not coming,' she said.

For a moment, she had believed that they might soon be free again. When the sound of shouts and running feet had reached her ears, she had come out of the numb trance into which she had retreated when the Deathcaps dragged her and her sisters and brothers away, leaving the dead bodies of their elders in the cave where they had lived their entire lives.

They had been bound to a coffle and marched off into the mushroom jungle by the reptile riders. Later they joined up with others slaves seized from the outlying caves and were forced onto a raft of logs, then taken through the shallow waters of the swamp and the lagoon beyond, finally to this floating island. Aajika had been without hope. But then the appearance of the fighters of the Tribe awoke something in her heart again.

But now it had been dashed.

She opened her eyes again and forced herself to watch numbly as the flying vessel darted after the fleeing warriors, as the reptile riders harried them from the village. The air seemed to shudder, almost as if a thunderstorm was brewing. Crimson beams of death cracked down from the belly of the vessel, and Crag Folk warriors were struck down. Now they were out of sight beyond the houses of the square and the vessel flew after them. She heard more crackling sounds, and a hissing of water.

'That's the last we'll ever see of them,' she said despondently, and sat back down, hugging her knees despondently. The others who had been taken with her clustered round muttering in concern. Aajika paid them no heed, gazing mournfully into the distance. There was no way out of this pen. She had no notion of where they were to be taken. Were they slaves of the Deathcaps? And what of the others, the white faced people of the flying vessel? She had seen them briefly, seen their tall leader at least. What were they doing here? They did not resemble any of the tribes of Venus that she had seen, and their flying vessel was beyond her comprehension.

It reappeared over the rooftops at that moment. To Aajika's mind the vessel was like some well-fed predator, grinning with satiation. Reptile riders returned to the square, and now the flying vessel landed in the middle. A mouth seemed to open in its black hide and out strode the tall leader of the pale folk. He turned to look back into the vessel, and lifted a gauntleted hand in signal to others within. Then he went to speak with the leaders of the Deathcaps.

Aajika watched him as he spoke. A lofty man with pale skin, he wore a long red cloak, a kilt of

some material that shimmered in the weak daylight, and a lunula of a similar material round his neck. On his head was a gleaming helmet of some kind, and in one hand he held a long spear-like weapon with a glowing crystal at one end. He spoke long and boastfully to the Deathcaps, who all seemed overawed by him.

As he spoke, he examined his surroundings with apparent distaste. His eyes wandered around until they fixed on Aajika's, to her shock. She dropped her gaze at once, and studied the wooden struts of the floor, remembering Kursaal's face. Had he truly abandoned them to their fate?

A shadow fell over her.

She looked up and caught her breath. The others cringed away as the tall pale man peered down at them. It was how a cub might peer at insects. She met his eyes again, this time unflinching. A craggy smile appeared on his face.

'A green woman,' he muttered in thickly accented Venusian. 'It has novelty value, I'll tell you that.'

He swore and slapped at his neck, then peered at his gauntleted hand and the crushed remains of the jewelled fly that had been crawling on him. 'Curse this climate,' he said, and she saw he was sweating. 'Too hot, too wet. Too much! You!' he addressed her suddenly. 'You seem to have some spirit. What is your name?' He scowled. 'You do understand speech, do you not?'

She swallowed, and tried to speak. At last she stuttered out, 'Aajika is my name. Who are you?'

'It speaks!' the tall man said with a laugh. 'Even the ape men of Lemuria speak, after a fashion, but I had thought you dumb. Aajika, is it?' He pronounced her name very badly. 'You understand what is happening to you?'

'I am a slave,' she said. 'Who are you? Where are you from? You are not of the mountains, or the shore, or the jungle.'

'A slave in fact if not in spirit,' said the man. 'Very well, I am Yek Zerab. And you are right that I am not from any of those places, though I fear your frame of reference is limited, you primitive savage. I came here from Terra.'

'I do not know where that is. What have you done with my people?'

He laughed again. He seemed to be enjoying himself. 'Your people, who came to rescue you? I slew them all. Or drove them off. Some reached the trees and my atmosphere craft could not follow them there. But most are dead in the water.' His kohl rimmed eyes narrowed. 'You truly do not know where Terra is?'

'It must be far away,' she said. A thought struck her. 'Is it in the underworld? You have the look of a corpse.'

Again he laughed. 'No, it is not beneath the ground, but rather above the clouds.'

She looked fearfully at the sky. 'You came from down there in your airship?' she asked. 'But then what is beyond the clouds?' Her people's folk tales made no mention of a land in the sky.

'Our ether ship landed in the equatorial region,' Yek-Zerab said, 'but I flew here in my atmosphere craft. Beyond the clouds is the edge of the atmosphere. Beyond the atmosphere is the void of chaos. Your world hangs in the void, as do many other worlds.'

She had trouble understand the concept. Chaos meant nothing to her. 'And Terra is another world?' she asked, and Yek-Zerab nodded. 'Is it like Venus?'

'It is not so infernally hot,' Yek-Zerab told her irritably, lifting his helmet to brush sweat from his pale hair. 'Ice covers much of its landmasses. My people dwell there on the island of Atlantis.'

'But why did you come to Venus?' she asked.

'For slaves,' Yek-Zerab said simply. 'The stronger among you will be taken back to Terra to work in the orichalcum mines of Atlantis until they die. The rest....' He tittered strangely. 'Well, perhaps some will be more privileged.'

'Why do you need slaves to work in these mines?'

'The work is hard,' Yek-Zerab explained, 'though necessary. It is the orichalcum ore that is used to provide the vril that powers all our machines, from our atmosphere craft to our vril lances.' He patted the spear he carried. 'Yet all who work in the mines die after a few lunations. We enslaved the ape-men but they are scarce now, and orichalcum is still needed, both on Terra and Mars, the world from which my people originated. We need a new source of slaves. So we came to Venus.'

'There are few of my kind here,' he went on, 'and no females. Your folk are hideous to me, though no doubt in your own eyes you have some beauty. You, yourself, despite your green skin and hairless scalp, have some merit. You are my slave, without hope. Your tribesmen's futile attempt to free you has failed. I give you a choice. Either join your fellow slaves working in the dangerous orichalcum mines, or join me in my bed as my concubine.'

Her short cropped hair bristling in outrage, Aajika drew away from the bars. 'Never!' she hissed. 'Never would I desert my people. I will not warm your bed, Yek-Zerab.'

He looked her up and down, and she wished she wore a cloak as he did so she could conceal her naked skin from his avid eyes. 'I could force you,' he remarked. 'But perhaps you should pay the price of your stubbornness. It will be a punishment for you, for rebuffing me.' He shrugged. 'But I will give you time to see sense.'

He turned and walked away in a swirl of red cloak.

‘Kursaal will come for me!’ she cried out. ‘He will come for me and he will rescue me!’

Yek-Zerab paid her no heed, but kept walking in the direction of his airship. Wanii, who had been listening to the exchange, eyes downcast as if she feared Yek-Zerab would cast a spell on her, touched her arm.

‘You should have gone with him,’ she whispered.

Aajika looked at her in surprise. ‘You know what he wanted from me?’

‘It would be a small price to pay,’ Wanii murmured, ‘if it freed you from slavery in the mines. I would have taken the chance if he had spoken to me. But I was too afraid to catch his eye.’ She gazed round at the Deathcap guards who sat riding reptiles at strategic positions round the square. Things were growing quieter, however, as many people retired to their huts to sleep. Aajika yawned, and realised that she was tired. ‘Maybe one of them will take a liking to me,’ Wanii added hopefully. ‘Aajika, you were a fool.’

‘Maybe,’ Aajika conceded. She was a fool to think that Kursaal would come to her aid. Unless he was one of those who had fled like cowards into the forest, Kursaal, like most of the Tribe’s warriors, was dead.

But Aajika was wrong.

When he slid from his canoe during the air attack, Kursaal had plunged deep into the waters of the lagoon. He had swam despite the pain from the caustic liquid, swam until his lungs were bursting. Then he had come up only a short way from the timbers of the floating island of the Deathcaps.

The waters were still now, the flying vessel was settling down on the island, vanishing from sight behind the huts. There was a boom from the timbers and they shook, sending ripples skipping across the waters of the lagoon. The lagoon itself was empty except for burnt logs and charred corpses that floated on its still waters. Kursaal saw no sign of his father.

He seized hold of the timbers and pulled himself up, then ducked back down as he saw a patrol of mounted Deathcaps trotting past. He slid back into the sizzling water, ignoring the pain, and remained submerged for a long time.

He rose again. Silence had descended over the excited village. It must be a sleeping period. His own tribe slept whenever they wished, although most clans slumbered together when they did sleep, just as they did while hibernating at night. The Deathcaps, it seemed, had set times for sleep. He hauled himself from the water, up onto the wharves.

He stood there dripping for some time, inspecting his blistered limbs. No one seemed to be about. He crept down the lane. Hearing the pad of trotting reptiles, and dived for cover in a

narrow alleyway. Concealed behind a pile of nets and rotting fish, he watched as a patrol of two mounted Deathcaps passed.

He produced his chert dagger from where it hung from his loincloth belt. He had lost his spear when he flung it at the flying vessel; now the serrated edge of reptile bone, with its polished handle, was the only weapon he had. It would be useless in anything other than close combat. With spears his people might prevail against mounted Deathcaps, but it would be suicide to attack them armed only with a knife. And suicide would not help Aajika.

When the patrol had passed, he crept out and made his way to the main square. Here the flying vessel took up so much room the slave pen was out of sight. Kursaal gazed at the black curving walls of the egg shaped vehicle, eyes red with anger. What lay within there? How did it fly? How did it kill? How could he kill it? His spear had splintered on its black hide. What must he do to slay this threat to his Tribe?

His eyes lighted on something lying on the planks nearby and he went to it. It was his spear. He snatched it up and examined it, only to grunt in disapproval. The shaft was splintered, the spearhead shattered. It was useless. The impact with the vessel's hide had destroyed it. He flung it aside with a clatter. The invaders would not break him in the same way.

Now he began to edge round the vessel, looking for the slave pen where Aajika would be. The hits were jammed up against each other, the floating platform was so thickly inhabited, and in the gaps between them were bound human skeletons. Had they been sacrifices? Criminals? The subject of worship? Kursaal couldn't guess. Dozens of hollow eyes seemed to watch his progress. Skulls had been built into the walls of huts, and they also seemed to follow his progress with their sightless eyes.

He found several pens on one side of the square, but they contained the torpid forms of riding reptiles, curled up, their mighty fanged heads wrapped in their spiked tails, squamous flanks rising and falling gently with the breathing of sleep. Kursaal moved on.

The slave pen lay in an open space between two huts within which people of the Deathcap tribe slumbered beside smoking hearths of charcoal. Kursaal felt an urge to enter the huts with his knife and stab and stab and kill and kill. But he quelled it when he saw that the pen was ahead of him. Should he give in to the urge, the alarm would be called, the patrols would come, and he would not prevail against them.

The pen was also littered with slumbering bodies. Some were folk he recognised as members of his people. Others were not of his Tribe. Some seemed barely human, more like reptiles than folk for all that they were human in shape. He crept around it, his back to the great black egg of the flying vessel, until he found a sleeping form he recognised.

He hissed her name. She quivered, moved in her sleep, spoke his name in return.

‘Aajika!’ he hissed again. ‘Wake up!’

Aajika's eyes sprang open. She looked up at him. 'Kursaal!' she cried. 'You have come for me!'

Kursaal went to the wicker bars and tested them. He produced his bone knife and sawed at the wooden weave. Aajika rose and came to meet him, slipping a paw through the bars to touch his green hide.

'You came for me,' she repeated.

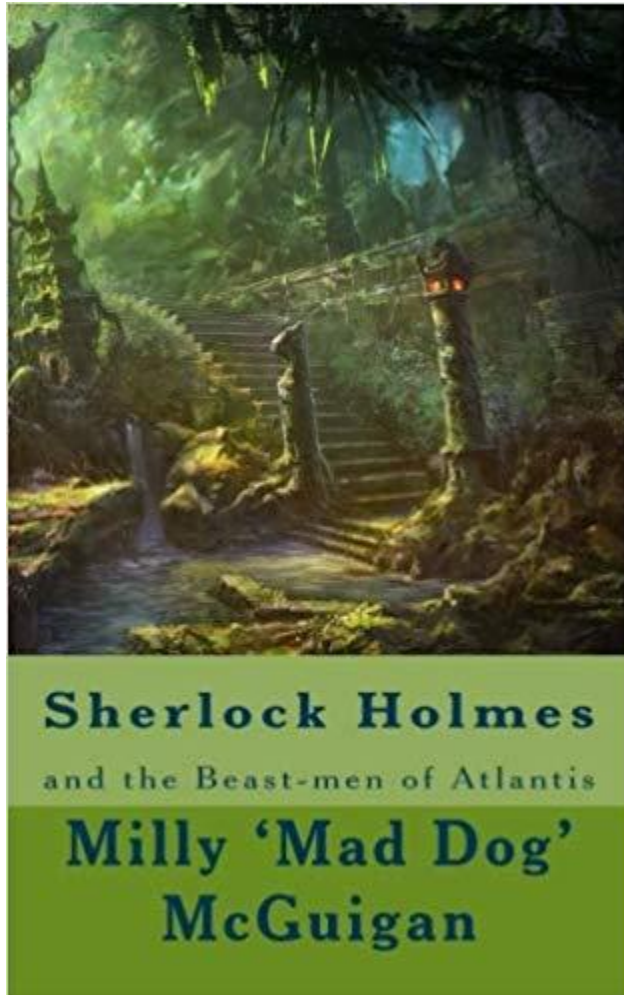
Then she began to help him, tugging at the wicker work. What tree the wicker came from Kursaal did not know, but it was tough. It began to splinter. He looked up and met Aajika's eyes. The light of triumph was in them. Then they focused on something behind him.

Kursaal spun round. Standing in an opening in the flying vehicle was a tall, pale faced man who wore a red cloak. In his hands he held a jewelled spear, like the ones in the hull of the flying vessel that emitted deadly rays. Behind him was another pale man, stockier but also armed.

'I was watching your friend's progress from the atmosphere craft, Aajika,' the tall man said to the slave girl. 'It seems that not all your tribe is yet dead.'

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Sherlock Holmes

and the Beast-men of Atlantis

**Milly 'Mad Dog'
McGuigan**

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Thirty-Five

And Dimara? What of her? While Carter Ward was fighting for his life in the darkened Derelict, why did she remain, as it seems, idle? Had she been anything other than an artificial companion composed entirely subatomic quasi-particles, she would surely would have been distraught. But Dimara had no emotions. She did not love or hate, or fear, anything.

Among the things Dimara had that we might call an emotion was her insatiable curiosity. Everything she saw through the eyes that artificial corporeality had given her was the source of endless fascination.

Curiosity, and gratitude. Dimara was filled with a fierce and undying gratitude to the man who had brought her into this vastly amusing world of time and of space. It was Ward who had made it possible for Dimara to experience... well, to have anything resembling what we call an 'experience'.

It was Carter Ward who, by means of cajoling, bribing and threatening a friend who worked at Deimos Labs, was able to order the not-yet-legal Dimara to be programmed into his ship. Not yet legal, because these 'quantum companions' (as they had come to be called) having been mapped and proven to be theoretically possible were also proven to be extremely—very extremely—dangerous.

And Dimara's gratitude to Ward was remorseless, relentless.

But though she was extremely powerful within the O8-111A, unless she were directly connected to some external thing, she could not act outside Ward's ship.

Nor was Ward perfect himself. Though he was methodical in everything he did, though he moved with caution and calculation, he also slipped up sometimes.

Had he paused to lock the O8-111A down to the "Derelict", Dimara would then have been able to watch Ward's movements through the ship's surveillance systems.

But he didn't, and she couldn't.

So intent was Ward to plunge his blade into Turhan Mot's chest (and to release the CO2 cartridge secreted within the blade into the Scrounger's heart), that he gave no thought to locking the ship down. And so it was that, most uncharacteristically for this otherwise very methodical man, he left his ship unaligned with any of the 'Derelict's landing chocks.

Though Dimara had complete control over a wide array of some very droll weapons, she was hardly able to use them. Unable to track Ward's movements within the "Derelict", Dimara could only have been shooting blindly, with an equal chance of hitting Ward with every burst of fire she unleashed.

Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet had been very wise in avoiding Ward's ship. Had they come within any possible line of sight of the O8-111A, Dimara would have recognized them instantly, and obliterated them that self-same instant.

It added another wrinkle in their search for Carter Ward. Turhan Mot was annoyed, but he did not waver from his plan, nor did Mokem Bet. They searched the landing bay of the "Derelict" for hours, first flushing out Lacey, who had followed their directions to turn herself over to the crew of the "Dawnsmasher".

Shortly afterwards, Mokem Bet tracked Carter Ward to the bridge of the "Derelict". Two well-placed shots from his cannons, and the bridge crumbled. Ward came spilling out, unconscious.

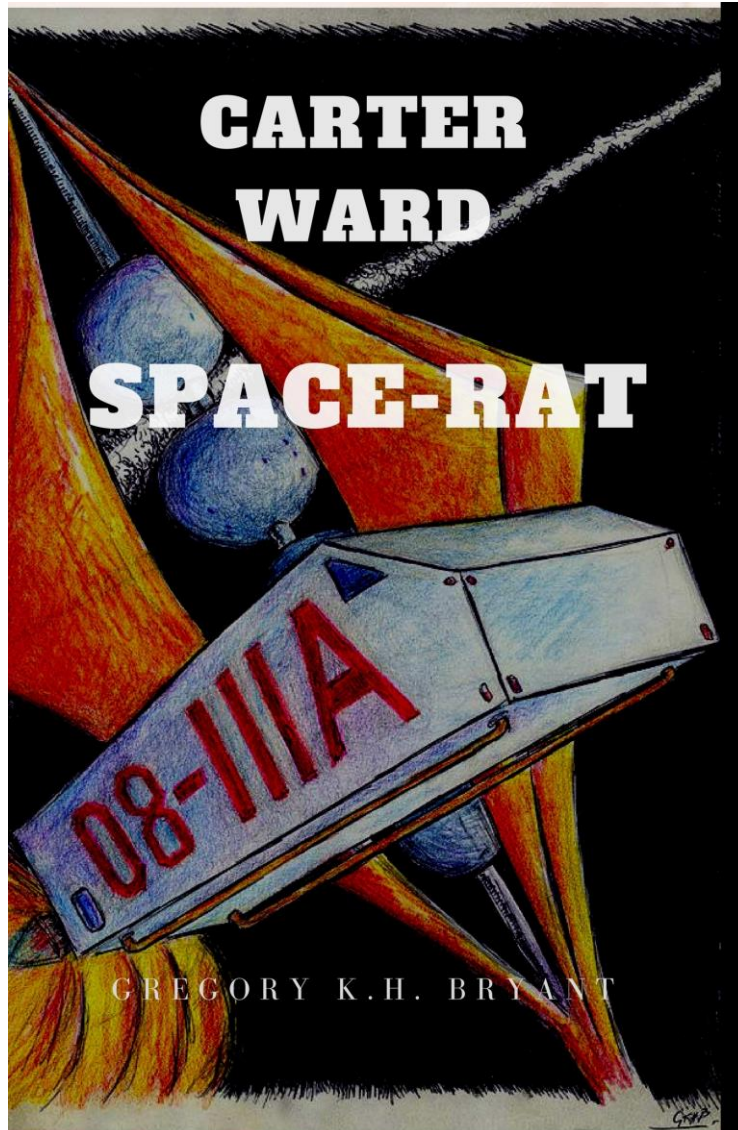
From there, it was a simple matter of stripping him, searching him and quickly tossing him into the cell that held Lacey. And then, still carefully avoiding the deadly eyes of Dimara, taking the "Dawnsmasher" out, and on its way to Astra Palace as quickly as possible.

Dimara saw the "Dawnsmasher" leave the "Derelict". Follow it? Stay with the "Derelict"? She came quickly to a decision as the ship approached the plasma wall. As the "Dawnsmasher" passed above the O8-111A, Dimara was able to fire off a tracker from one of the ship's stern guns. A tiny tracker, it still set off the "Dawnsmasher's" surveillance systems. Even before they left the Derelict, Turhan Mot knew that a tracker had been placed on the ship.

This was not a problem. By the time Mokem Bet had found a harbour where he would be able to have the tiny tracker removed, Dimara calculated that she'd be able to determine whether Ward was still upon the Derelict, or had been carried away in the "Dawnsmasher".

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



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THE LOST WORLD by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Chapter XI: "For once I was the Hero"

Lord John Roxton was right when he thought that some specially toxic quality might lie in the bite of the horrible creatures which had attacked us. On the morning after our first adventure upon the plateau, both Summerlee and I were in great pain and fever, while Challenger's knee was so bruised that he could hardly limp. We kept to our camp all day, therefore, Lord John busying himself, with such help as we could give him, in raising the height and thickness of the thorny walls which were our only defence. I remember that during the whole long day I was haunted by the feeling that we were closely observed, though by whom or whence I could give no guess.

So strong was the impression that I told Professor Challenger of it, who put it down to the cerebral excitement caused by my fever. Again and again I glanced round swiftly, with the conviction that I was about to see something, but only to meet the dark tangle of our hedge or the solemn and cavernous gloom of the great trees which arched above our heads. And yet the feeling grew ever stronger in my own mind that something observant and something malevolent was at our very elbow. I thought of the Indian superstition of the Curupuri—the dreadful, lurking spirit of the woods—and I could have imagined that his terrible presence haunted those who had invaded his most remote and sacred retreat.

That night (our third in Maple White Land) we had an experience which left a fearful impression upon our minds, and made us thankful that Lord John had worked so hard in making our retreat impregnable. We were all sleeping round our dying fire when we were aroused—or, rather, I should say, shot out of our slumbers—by a succession of the most frightful cries and screams to which I have ever listened. I know no sound to which I could compare this amazing tumult, which seemed to come from some spot within a few hundred yards of our camp. It was as ear-splitting as any whistle of a railway-engine; but whereas the whistle is a clear, mechanical, sharp-edged sound, this was far deeper in volume and vibrant with the uttermost strain of agony and horror. We clapped our hands to our ears to shut out that nerve-shaking appeal. A cold sweat broke out over my body, and my heart turned sick at the misery of it. All the woes of tortured life, all its stupendous indictment of high heaven, its innumerable sorrows, seemed to be centred and condensed into that one dreadful, agonized cry. And then, under this high-pitched, ringing sound there was another, more intermittent, a low, deep-chested laugh, a growling, throaty gurgle of merriment which formed a grotesque accompaniment to the shriek with which it was blended. For three or four minutes on end the fearsome duet continued, while all the foliage rustled with the rising of startled birds. Then it shut off as suddenly as it began. For a long time we sat in horrified silence. Then Lord John threw a bundle of twigs upon the fire, and their red glare lit up the intent faces of my companions and flickered over the great boughs above our heads.

"What was it?" I whispered.

"We shall know in the morning," said Lord John. "It was close to us—not farther than the glade."

“We have been privileged to overhear a prehistoric tragedy, the sort of drama which occurred among the reeds upon the border of some Jurassic lagoon, when the greater dragon pinned the lesser among the slime,” said Challenger, with more solemnity than I had ever heard in his voice. “It was surely well for man that he came late in the order of creation. There were powers abroad in earlier days which no courage and no mechanism of his could have met. What could his sling, his throwing-stick, or his arrow avail him against such forces as have been loose to-night? Even with a modern rifle it would be all odds on the monster.”

“I think I should back my little friend,” said Lord John, caressing his Express. “But the beast would certainly have a good sporting chance.”

Summerlee raised his hand.

“Hush!” he cried. “Surely I hear something?”

From the utter silence there emerged a deep, regular pat-pat. It was the tread of some animal—the rhythm of soft but heavy pads placed cautiously upon the ground. It stole slowly round the camp, and then halted near our gateway. There was a low, sibilant rise and fall—the breathing of the creature. Only our feeble hedge separated us from this horror of the night. Each of us had seized his rifle, and Lord John had pulled out a small bush to make an embrasure in the hedge.

“By George!” he whispered. “I think I can see it!”

I stooped and peered over his shoulder through the gap. Yes, I could see it, too. In the deep shadow of the tree there was a deeper shadow yet, black, inchoate, vague—a crouching form full of savage vigour and menace. It was no higher than a horse, but the dim outline suggested vast bulk and strength. That hissing pant, as regular and full-volumed as the exhaust of an engine, spoke of a monstrous organism. Once, as it moved, I thought I saw the glint of two terrible, greenish eyes. There was an uneasy rustling, as if it were crawling slowly forward.

“I believe it is going to spring!” said I, cocking my rifle.

“Don’t fire! Don’t fire!” whispered Lord John. “The crash of a gun in this silent night would be heard for miles. Keep it as a last card.”

“If it gets over the hedge we’re done,” said Summerlee, and his voice crackled into a nervous laugh as he spoke.

“No, it must not get over,” cried Lord John; “but hold your fire to the last. Perhaps I can make something of the fellow. I’ll chance it, anyhow.”

It was as brave an act as ever I saw a man do. He stooped to the fire, picked up a blazing branch, and slipped in an instant through a sallyport which he had made in our gateway. The thing moved forward with a dreadful snarl. Lord John never hesitated, but, running towards it with a quick, light step, he dashed the flaming wood into the brute’s face. For one moment I had a vision of a horrible mask like a giant toad’s, of a warty, leprous skin, and of a loose mouth all

beslobbered with fresh blood. The next, there was a crash in the underwood and our dreadful visitor was gone.

“I thought he wouldn’t face the fire,” said Lord John, laughing, as he came back and threw his branch among the faggots.

“You should not have taken such a risk!” we all cried.

“There was nothin’ else to be done. If he had got among us we should have shot each other in tryin’ to down him. On the other hand, if we had fired through the hedge and wounded him he would soon have been on the top of us—to say nothin’ of giving ourselves away. On the whole, I think that we are jolly well out of it. What was he, then?”

Our learned men looked at each other with some hesitation.

“Personally, I am unable to classify the creature with any certainty,” said Summerlee, lighting his pipe from the fire.

“In refusing to commit yourself you are but showing a proper scientific reserve,” said Challenger, with massive condescension. “I am not myself prepared to go farther than to say in general terms that we have almost certainly been in contact to-night with some form of carnivorous dinosaur. I have already expressed my anticipation that something of the sort might exist upon this plateau.”

“We have to bear in mind,” remarked Summerlee, “that there are many prehistoric forms which have never come down to us. It would be rash to suppose that we can give a name to all that we are likely to meet.”

“Exactly. A rough classification may be the best that we can attempt. To-morrow some further evidence may help us to an identification. Meantime we can only renew our interrupted slumbers.”

“But not without a sentinel,” said Lord John, with decision. “We can’t afford to take chances in a country like this. Two-hour spells in the future, for each of us.”

“Then I’ll just finish my pipe in starting the first one,” said Professor Summerlee; and from that time onwards we never trusted ourselves again without a watchman.

In the morning it was not long before we discovered the source of the hideous uproar which had aroused us in the night. The iguanodon glade was the scene of a horrible butchery. From the pools of blood and the enormous lumps of flesh scattered in every direction over the green sward we imagined at first that a number of animals had been killed, but on examining the remains more closely we discovered that all this carnage came from one of these unwieldy monsters, which had been literally torn to pieces by some creature not larger, perhaps, but far more ferocious, than itself.

Our two professors sat in absorbed argument, examining piece after piece, which showed the marks of savage teeth and of enormous claws.

“Our judgment must still be in abeyance,” said Professor Challenger, with a huge slab of whitish-coloured flesh across his knee. “The indications would be consistent with the presence of a sabre-toothed tiger, such as are still found among the breccia of our caverns; but the creature actually seen was undoubtedly of a larger and more reptilian character. Personally, I should pronounce for allosaurus.”

“Or megalosaurus,” said Summerlee.

“Exactly. Any one of the larger carnivorous dinosaurs would meet the case. Among them are to be found all the most terrible types of animal life that have ever cursed the earth or blessed a museum.” He laughed sonorously at his own conceit, for, though he had little sense of humour, the crudest pleasantry from his own lips moved him always to roars of appreciation.

“The less noise the better,” said Lord Roxton, curtly. “We don’t know who or what may be near us. If this fella comes back for his breakfast and catches us here we won’t have so much to laugh at. By the way, what is this mark upon the iguanodon’s hide?”

On the dull, scaly, slate-coloured skin somewhere above the shoulder, there was a singular black circle of some substance which looked like asphalt. None of us could suggest what it meant, though Summerlee was of opinion that he had seen something similar upon one of the young ones two days before. Challenger said nothing, but looked pompous and puffy, as if he could if he would, so that finally Lord John asked his opinion direct.

“If your lordship will graciously permit me to open my mouth, I shall be happy to express my sentiments,” said he, with elaborate sarcasm. “I am not in the habit of being taken to task in the fashion which seems to be customary with your lordship. I was not aware that it was necessary to ask your permission before smiling at a harmless pleasantry.”

It was not until he had received his apology that our touchy friend would suffer himself to be appeased. When at last his ruffled feelings were at ease, he addressed us at some length from his seat upon a fallen tree, speaking, as his habit was, as if he were imparting most precious information to a class of a thousand.

“With regard to the marking,” said he, “I am inclined to agree with my friend and colleague, Professor Summerlee, that the stains are from asphalt. As this plateau is, in its very nature, highly volcanic, and as asphalt is a substance which one associates with Plutonic forces, I cannot doubt that it exists in the free liquid state, and that the creatures may have come in contact with it. A much more important problem is the question as to the existence of the carnivorous monster which has left its traces in this glade. We know roughly that this plateau is not larger than an average English county. Within this confined space a certain number of creatures, mostly types which have passed away in the world below, have lived together for innumerable years. Now, it is very clear to me that in so long a period one would have expected that the carnivorous creatures, multiplying unchecked, would have exhausted their food supply and have been

compelled to either modify their flesh-eating habits or die of hunger. This we see has not been so. We can only imagine, therefore, that the balance of Nature is preserved by some check which limits the numbers of these ferocious creatures. One of the many interesting problems, therefore, which await our solution is to discover what that check may be and how it operates. I venture to trust that we may have some future opportunity for the closer study of the carnivorous dinosaurs.”

“And I venture to trust we may not,” I observed.

The Professor only raised his great eyebrows, as the schoolmaster meets the irrelevant observation of the naughty boy.

“Perhaps Professor Summerlee may have an observation to make,” he said, and the two savants ascended together into some rarefied scientific atmosphere, where the possibilities of a modification of the birth-rate were weighed against the decline of the food supply as a check in the struggle for existence.

That morning we mapped out a small portion of the plateau, avoiding the swamp of the pterodactyls, and keeping to the east of our brook instead of to the west. In that direction the country was still thickly wooded, with so much undergrowth that our progress was very slow.

I have dwelt up to now upon the terrors of Maple White Land; but there was another side to the subject, for all that morning we wandered among lovely flowers—mostly, as I observed, white or yellow in colour, these being, as our professors explained, the primitive flower-shades. In many places the ground was absolutely covered with them, and as we walked ankle-deep on that wonderful yielding carpet, the scent was almost intoxicating in its sweetness and intensity. The homely English bee buzzed everywhere around us. Many of the trees under which we passed had their branches bowed down with fruit, some of which were of familiar sorts, while other varieties were new. By observing which of them were pecked by the birds we avoided all danger of poison and added a delicious variety to our food reserve. In the jungle which we traversed were numerous hard-trodden paths made by the wild beasts, and in the more marshy places we saw a profusion of strange footmarks, including many of the iguanodon. Once in a grove we observed several of these great creatures grazing, and Lord John, with his glass, was able to report that they also were spotted with asphalt, though in a different place to the one which we had examined in the morning. What this phenomenon meant we could not imagine.

We saw many small animals, such as porcupines, a scaly ant-eater, and a wild pig, piebald in colour and with long curved tusks. Once, through a break in the trees, we saw a clear shoulder of green hill some distance away, and across this a large dun-coloured animal was traveling at a considerable pace. It passed so swiftly that we were unable to say what it was; but if it were a deer, as was claimed by Lord John, it must have been as large as those monstrous Irish elk which are still dug up from time to time in the bogs of my native land.

Ever since the mysterious visit which had been paid to our camp we always returned to it with some misgivings. However, on this occasion we found everything in order.

That evening we had a grand discussion upon our present situation and future plans, which I must describe at some length, as it led to a new departure by which we were enabled to gain a more complete knowledge of Maple White Land than might have come in many weeks of exploring. It was Summerlee who opened the debate. All day he had been querulous in manner, and now some remark of Lord John's as to what we should do on the morrow brought all his bitterness to a head.

"What we ought to be doing to-day, to-morrow, and all the time," said he, "is finding some way out of the trap into which we have fallen. You are all turning your brains towards getting into this country. I say that we should be scheming how to get out of it."

"I am surprised, sir," boomed Challenger, stroking his majestic beard, "that any man of science should commit himself to so ignoble a sentiment. You are in a land which offers such an inducement to the ambitious naturalist as none ever has since the world began, and you suggest leaving it before we have acquired more than the most superficial knowledge of it or of its contents. I expected better things of you, Professor Summerlee."

"You must remember," said Summerlee, sourly, "that I have a large class in London who are at present at the mercy of an extremely inefficient locum tenens. This makes my situation different from yours, Professor Challenger, since, so far as I know, you have never been entrusted with any responsible educational work."

"Quite so," said Challenger. "I have felt it to be a sacrilege to divert a brain which is capable of the highest original research to any lesser object. That is why I have sternly set my face against any proffered scholastic appointment."

"For example?" asked Summerlee, with a sneer; but Lord John hastened to change the conversation.

"I must say," said he, "that I think it would be a mighty poor thing to go back to London before I know a great deal more of this place than I do at present."

"I could never dare to walk into the back office of my paper and face old McArdle," said I. (You will excuse the frankness of this report, will you not, sir?) "He'd never forgive me for leaving such unexhausted copy behind me. Besides, so far as I can see it is not worth discussing, since we can't get down, even if we wanted."

"Our young friend makes up for many obvious mental lacunae by some measure of primitive common sense," remarked Challenger. "The interests of his deplorable profession are immaterial to us; but, as he observes, we cannot get down in any case, so it is a waste of energy to discuss it."

"It is a waste of energy to do anything else," growled Summerlee from behind his pipe. "Let me remind you that we came here upon a perfectly definite mission, entrusted to us at the meeting of the Zoological Institute in London. That mission was to test the truth of Professor Challenger's statements. Those statements, as I am bound to admit, we are now in a position to endorse. Our

ostensible work is therefore done. As to the detail which remains to be worked out upon this plateau, it is so enormous that only a large expedition, with a very special equipment, could hope to cope with it. Should we attempt to do so ourselves, the only possible result must be that we shall never return with the important contribution to science which we have already gained. Professor Challenger has devised means for getting us on to this plateau when it appeared to be inaccessible; I think that we should now call upon him to use the same ingenuity in getting us back to the world from which we came.”

I confess that as Summerlee stated his view it struck me as altogether reasonable. Even Challenger was affected by the consideration that his enemies would never stand confuted if the confirmation of his statements should never reach those who had doubted them.

“The problem of the descent is at first sight a formidable one,” said he, “and yet I cannot doubt that the intellect can solve it. I am prepared to agree with our colleague that a protracted stay in Maple White Land is at present inadvisable, and that the question of our return will soon have to be faced. I absolutely refuse to leave, however, until we have made at least a superficial examination of this country, and are able to take back with us something in the nature of a chart.”

Professor Summerlee gave a snort of impatience.

“We have spent two long days in exploration,” said he, “and we are no wiser as to the actual geography of the place than when we started. It is clear that it is all thickly wooded, and it would take months to penetrate it and to learn the relations of one part to another. If there were some central peak it would be different, but it all slopes downwards, so far as we can see. The farther we go the less likely it is that we will get any general view.”

It was at that moment that I had my inspiration. My eyes chanced to light upon the enormous gnarled trunk of the ginkgo tree which cast its huge branches over us. Surely, if its bole exceeded that of all others, its height must do the same. If the rim of the plateau was indeed the highest point, then why should this mighty tree not prove to be a watchtower which commanded the whole country? Now, ever since I ran wild as a lad in Ireland I have been a bold and skilled tree-climber. My comrades might be my masters on the rocks, but I knew that I would be supreme among those branches. Could I only get my legs on to the lowest of the giant off-shoots, then it would be strange indeed if I could not make my way to the top. My comrades were delighted at my idea.

“Our young friend,” said Challenger, bunching up the red apples of his cheeks, “is capable of acrobatic exertions which would be impossible to a man of a more solid, though possibly of a more commanding, appearance. I applaud his resolution.”

“By George, young fella, you’ve put your hand on it!” said Lord John, clapping me on the back. “How we never came to think of it before I can’t imagine! There’s not more than an hour of daylight left, but if you take your notebook you may be able to get some rough sketch of the place. If we put these three ammunition cases under the branch, I will soon hoist you on to it.”

He stood on the boxes while I faced the trunk, and was gently raising me when Challenger

sprang forward and gave me such a thrust with his huge hand that he fairly shot me into the tree. With both arms clasping the branch, I scrambled hard with my feet until I had worked, first my body, and then my knees, onto it. There were three excellent off-shoots, like huge rungs of a ladder, above my head, and a tangle of convenient branches beyond, so that I clambered onwards with such speed that I soon lost sight of the ground and had nothing but foliage beneath me. Now and then I encountered a check, and once I had to shin up a creeper for eight or ten feet, but I made excellent progress, and the booming of Challenger's voice seemed to be a great distance beneath me. The tree was, however, enormous, and, looking upwards, I could see no thinning of the leaves above my head. There was some thick, bush-like clump which seemed to be a parasite upon a branch up which I was swarming. I leaned my head round it in order to see what was beyond, and I nearly fell out of the tree in my surprise and horror at what I saw.

A face was gazing into mine—at the distance of only a foot or two. The creature that owned it had been crouching behind the parasite, and had looked round it at the same instant that I did. It was a human face—or at least it was far more human than any monkey's that I have ever seen. It was long, whitish, and blotched with pimples, the nose flattened, and the lower jaw projecting, with a bristle of coarse whiskers round the chin. The eyes, which were under thick and heavy brows, were bestial and ferocious, and as it opened its mouth to snarl what sounded like a curse at me I observed that it had curved, sharp canine teeth. For an instant I read hatred and menace in the evil eyes. Then, as quick as a flash, came an expression of overpowering fear. There was a crash of broken boughs as it dived wildly down into the tangle of green. I caught a glimpse of a hairy body like that of a reddish pig, and then it was gone amid a swirl of leaves and branches.

"What's the matter?" shouted Roxton from below. "Anything wrong with you?"

"Did you see it?" I cried, with my arms round the branch and all my nerves tingling.

"We heard a row, as if your foot had slipped. What was it?"

I was so shocked at the sudden and strange appearance of this ape-man that I hesitated whether I should not climb down again and tell my experience to my companions. But I was already so far up the great tree that it seemed a humiliation to return without having carried out my mission.

After a long pause, therefore, to recover my breath and my courage, I continued my ascent. Once I put my weight upon a rotten branch and swung for a few seconds by my hands, but in the main it was all easy climbing. Gradually the leaves thinned around me, and I was aware, from the wind upon my face, that I had topped all the trees of the forest. I was determined, however, not to look about me before I had reached the very highest point, so I scrambled on until I had got so far that the topmost branch was bending beneath my weight. There I settled into a convenient fork, and, balancing myself securely, I found myself looking down at a most wonderful panorama of this strange country in which we found ourselves.

The sun was just above the western sky-line, and the evening was a particularly bright and clear one, so that the whole extent of the plateau was visible beneath me. It was, as seen from this height, of an oval contour, with a breadth of about thirty miles and a width of twenty. Its general shape was that of a shallow funnel, all the sides sloping down to a considerable lake in the

centre. This lake may have been ten miles in circumference, and lay very green and beautiful in the evening light, with a thick fringe of reeds at its edges, and with its surface broken by several yellow sandbanks, which gleamed golden in the mellow sunshine. A number of long dark objects, which were too large for alligators and too long for canoes, lay upon the edges of these patches of sand. With my glass I could clearly see that they were alive, but what their nature might be I could not imagine.

From the side of the plateau on which we were, slopes of woodland, with occasional glades, stretched down for five or six miles to the central lake. I could see at my very feet the glade of the iguanodons, and farther off was a round opening in the trees which marked the swamp of the pterodactyls. On the side facing me, however, the plateau presented a very different aspect. There the basalt cliffs of the outside were reproduced upon the inside, forming an escarpment about two hundred feet high, with a woody slope beneath it. Along the base of these red cliffs, some distance above the ground, I could see a number of dark holes through the glass, which I conjectured to be the mouths of caves. At the opening of one of these something white was shimmering, but I was unable to make out what it was. I sat charting the country until the sun had set and it was so dark that I could no longer distinguish details. Then I climbed down to my companions waiting for me so eagerly at the bottom of the great tree. For once I was the hero of the expedition. Alone I had thought of it, and alone I had done it; and here was the chart which would save us a month's blind groping among unknown dangers. Each of them shook me solemnly by the hand.

But before they discussed the details of my map I had to tell them of my encounter with the ape-man among the branches.

"He has been there all the time," said I.

"How do you know that?" asked Lord John.

"Because I have never been without that feeling that something malevolent was watching us. I mentioned it to you, Professor Challenger."

"Our young friend certainly said something of the kind. He is also the one among us who is endowed with that Celtic temperament which would make him sensitive to such impressions."

"The whole theory of telepathy——" began Summerlee, filling his pipe.

"Is too vast to be now discussed," said Challenger, with decision. "Tell me, now," he added, with the air of a bishop addressing a Sunday-school, "did you happen to observe whether the creature could cross its thumb over its palm?"

"No, indeed."

"Had it a tail?"

"No."

“Was the foot prehensile?”

“I do not think it could have made off so fast among the branches if it could not get a grip with its feet.”

“In South America there are, if my memory serves me—you will check the observation, Professor Summerlee—some thirty-six species of monkeys, but the anthropoid ape is unknown. It is clear, however, that he exists in this country, and that he is not the hairy, gorilla-like variety, which is never seen out of Africa or the East.” (I was inclined to interpolate, as I looked at him, that I had seen his first cousin in Kensington.) “This is a whiskered and colourless type, the latter characteristic pointing to the fact that he spends his days in arboreal seclusion. The question which we have to face is whether he approaches more closely to the ape or the man. In the latter case, he may well approximate to what the vulgar have called the ‘missing link.’ The solution of this problem is our immediate duty.”

“It is nothing of the sort,” said Summerlee, abruptly. “Now that, through the intelligence and activity of Mr. Malone” (I cannot help quoting the words), “we have got our chart, our one and only immediate duty is to get ourselves safe and sound out of this awful place.”

“The flesh-pots of civilization,” groaned Challenger.

“The ink-pots of civilization, sir. It is our task to put on record what we have seen, and to leave the further exploration to others. You all agreed as much before Mr. Malone got us the chart.”

“Well,” said Challenger, “I admit that my mind will be more at ease when I am assured that the result of our expedition has been conveyed to our friends. How we are to get down from this place I have not as yet an idea. I have never yet encountered any problem, however, which my inventive brain was unable to solve, and I promise you that to-morrow I will turn my attention to the question of our descent.” And so the matter was allowed to rest.

But that evening, by the light of the fire and of a single candle, the first map of the lost world was elaborated. Every detail which I had roughly noted from my watch-tower was drawn out in its relative place. Challenger’s pencil hovered over the great blank which marked the lake.

“What shall we call it?” he asked.

“Why should you not take the chance of perpetuating your own name?” said Summerlee, with his usual touch of acidity.

“I trust, sir, that my name will have other and more personal claims upon posterity,” said Challenger, severely. “Any ignoramus can hand down his worthless memory by imposing it upon a mountain or a river. I need no such monument.”

Summerlee, with a twisted smile, was about to make some fresh assault when Lord John hastened to intervene.

“It’s up to you, young fellah, to name the lake,” said he. “You saw it first, and, by George, if you choose to put ‘Lake Malone’ on it, no one has a better right.”

“By all means. Let our young friend give it a name,” said Challenger.

“Then,” said I, blushing, I dare say, as I said it, “let it be named Lake Gladys.”

“Don’t you think the Central Lake would be more descriptive?” remarked Summerlee.

“I should prefer Lake Gladys.”

Challenger looked at me sympathetically, and shook his great head in mock disapproval. “Boys will be boys,” said he. “Lake Gladys let it be.”

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter XV: The Angry, Whispering Globe

Our way led along a winding path between banked masses of softly radiant blooms, groups of feathery ferns whose plumes were starred with fragrant white and blue flowerets, slender creepers swinging from the branches of the strangely trunked trees, bearing along their threads orchid-like blossoms both delicately frail and gorgeously flamboyant.

The path we trod was an exquisite mosaic—pastel greens and pinks upon a soft grey base, garlands of nimbused forms like the flaming rose of the Rosicrucians held in the mouths of the flying serpents. A smaller pavilion arose before us, single-storied, front wide open.

Upon its threshold Rador paused, bowed deeply, and motioned us within. The chamber we entered was large, closed on two sides by screens of grey; at the back gay, concealing curtains. The low table of blue stone, dressed with fine white cloths, stretched at one side flanked by the cushioned divans.

At the left was a high tripod bearing one of the rosy globes we had seen in the house of Yolara; at the head of the table a smaller globe similar to the whispering one. Rador pressed upon its base, and two other screens slid into place across the entrance, shutting in the room.

He clapped his hands; the curtains parted, and two girls came through them. Tall and willow lithe, their bluish-black hair falling in ringlets just below their white shoulders, their clear eyes of forget-me-not blue, and skins of extraordinary fineness and purity—they were singularly attractive. Each was clad in an extremely scanty bodice of silken blue, girdled above a kirtle that came barely to their very pretty knees.

“Food and drink,” ordered Rador.

They dropped back through the curtains.

“Do you like them?” he asked us.

“Some chickens!” said Larry. “They delight the heart,” he translated for Rador.

The green dwarf’s next remark made me gasp.

“They are yours,” he said.

Before I could question him further upon this extraordinary statement the pair re-entered, bearing a great platter on which were small loaves, strange fruits, and three immense flagons of rock crystal—two filled with a slightly sparkling yellow liquid and the third with a purplish drink. I became acutely sensible that it had been hours since I had either eaten or drunk. The yellow flagons were set before Larry and me, the purple at Rador’s hand.

The girls, at his signal, again withdrew. I raised my glass to my lips and took a deep draft. The taste was unfamiliar but delightful.

Almost at once my fatigue disappeared. I realized a clarity of mind, an interesting exhilaration and sense of irresponsibility, of freedom from care, that were oddly enjoyable. Larry became immediately his old gay self.

The green dwarf regarded us whimsically, sipping from his great flagon of rock crystal.

“Much do I desire to know of that world you came from,” he said at last—“through the rocks,” he added, slyly.

“And much do we desire to know of this world of yours, O Rador,” I answered.

Should I ask him of the Dweller; seek from him a clue to Throckmartin? Again, clearly as a spoken command, came the warning to forbear, to wait. And once more I obeyed.

“Let us learn, then, from each other.” The dwarf was laughing. “And first—are all above like you—drawn out”—he made an expressive gesture—“and are there many of you?”

“There are—” I hesitated, and at last spoke the Polynesian that means tens upon tens multiplied indefinitely—“there are as many as the drops of water in the lake we saw from the ledge where you found us,” I continued; “many as the leaves on the trees without. And they are all like us—varyingly.”

He considered sceptically, I could see, my remark upon our numbers.

“In Muria,” he said at last, “the men are like me or like Lugur. Our women are as you see them—like Yolara or those two who served you.” He hesitated. “And there is a third; but only one.”

Larry leaned forward eagerly.

“Brown-haired with glints of ruddy bronze, golden-eyed, and lovely as a dream, with long, slender, beautiful hands?” he cried.

“Where saw you her?” interrupted the dwarf, starting to his feet.

“Saw her?” Larry recovered himself. “Nay, Rador, perhaps, I only dreamed that there was such a woman.”

“See to it, then, that you tell not your dream to Yolara,” said the dwarf grimly. “For her I meant and her you have pictured is Lakla, the hand-maiden to the Silent Ones, and neither Yolara nor Lugur, nay, nor the Shining One, love her overmuch, stranger.”

“Does she dwell here?” Larry’s face was alight.

The dwarf hesitated, glanced about him anxiously.

“Nay,” he answered, “ask me no more of her.” He was silent for a space. “And what do you who are as leaves or drops of water do in that world of yours?” he said, plainly bent on turning the subject.

“Keep off the golden-eyed girl, Larry,” I interjected. “Wait till we find out why she’s tabu.”

“Love and battle, strive and accomplish and die; or fail and die,” answered Larry—to Rador—giving me a quick nod of acquiescence to my warning in English.

“In that at least your world and mine differ little,” said the dwarf.

“How great is this world of yours, Rador?” I spoke.

He considered me gravely.

“How great indeed I do not know,” he said frankly at last. “The land where we dwell with the Shining One stretches along the white waters for—” He used a phrase of which I could make nothing. “Beyond this city of the Shining One and on the hither shores of the white waters dwell the *mayia ladala*—the common ones.” He took a deep draft from his flagon. “There are, first, the fair-haired ones, the children of the ancient rulers,” he continued. “There are, second, we the soldiers; and last, the *mayia ladala*, who dig and till and weave and toil and give our rulers and us their daughters, and dance with the Shining One!” he added.

“Who rules?” I asked.

“The fair-haired, under the Council of Nine, who are under Yolara, the Priestess and Lugur, the Voice,” he answered, “who are in turn beneath the Shining One!” There was a ring of bitter satire in the last.

“And those three who were judged?”—this from Larry.

“They were of the *mayia ladala*,” he replied, “like those two I gave you. But they grow restless. They do not like to dance with the Shining One—the blasphemers!” He raised his voice in a sudden great shout of mocking laughter.

In his words I caught a fleeting picture of the race—an ancient, luxurious, close-bred oligarchy clustered about some mysterious deity; a soldier class that supported them; and underneath all the toiling, oppressed hordes.

“And is that all?” asked Larry.

“No,” he answered. “There is the Sea of Crimson where—”

Without warning the globe beside us sent out a vicious note, Rador turned toward it, his face paling. Its surface crawled with whisperings—angry, peremptory!

“I hear!” he croaked, gripping the table. “I obey!”

He turned to us a face devoid for once of its malice.

“Ask me no more questions, strangers,” he said. “And now, if you are done, I will show you where you may sleep and bathe.”

He arose abruptly. We followed him through the hangings, passed through a corridor and into another smaller chamber, roofless, the sides walled with screens of dark grey. Two cushioned couches were there and a curtained door leading into an open, outer enclosure in which a fountain played within a wide pool.

“Your bath,” said Rador. He dropped the curtain and came back into the room. He touched a carved flower at one side. There was a tiny sighing from overhead and instantly across the top spread a veil of blackness, impenetrable to light but certainly not to air, for through it pulsed little breaths of the garden fragrances. The room filled with a cool twilight, refreshing, sleep-inducing. The green dwarf pointed to the couches.

“Sleep!” he said. “Sleep and fear nothing. My men are on guard outside.” He came closer to us, the old mocking gaiety sparkling in his eyes.

“But I spoke too quickly,” he whispered. “Whether it is because the Afyo Maie fears their tongues—or—” he laughed at Larry. “The maids are not yours!” Still laughing he vanished through the curtains of the room of the fountain before I could ask him the meaning of his curious gift, its withdrawal, and his most enigmatic closing remarks.

“Back in the great old days of Ireland,” thus Larry breaking into my thoughts raptly, the brogue thick, “there was Cairill mac Cairill—Cairill Swiftspear. An’ Cairill wronged Keewan of Emhain Abhlach, of the blood of Angus of the great people when he was sleeping in the likeness of a pale reed. Then Keewan put this penance on Cairill—that for a year Cairill should wear his body in Emhain Abhlach, which is the Land of Faery and for that year Keewan should wear the body of Cairill. And it was done.

“In that year Cairill met Emar of the Birds that are one white, one red, and one black—and they loved, and from that love sprang Ailill their son. And when Ailill was born he took a reed flute and first he played slumber on Cairill, and then he played old age so that Cairill grew white and withered; then Ailill played again and Cairill became a shadow—then a shadow of a shadow—then a breath; and the breath went out upon the wind!” He shivered. “Like the old gnome,” he whispered, “that they called Songar of the Lower Waters!”

He shook his head as though he cast a dream from him. Then, all alert—

“But that was in Iceland ages ago. And there’s nothing like that here, Doc!” He laughed. “It

doesn't scare me one little bit, old boy. The pretty devil lady's got the wrong slant. When you've had a pal standing beside you one moment—full of life, and joy, and power, and potentialities, telling what he's going to do to make the world hum when he gets through the slaughter, just running over with zip and pep of life, Doc—and the next instant, right in the middle of a laugh—a piece of damned shell takes off half his head and with it joy and power and all the rest of it”—his face twitched—”well, old man, in the face of that mystery a disappearing act such as the devil lady treated us to doesn't make much of a dent. Not on me. But by the brogans of Brian Boru—if we could have had some of that stuff to turn on during the war—oh, boy!”

He was silent, evidently contemplating the idea with vast pleasure. And as for me, at that moment my last doubt of Larry O'Keefe vanished, I saw that he did believe, really believed, in his banshees, his leprechauns and all the old dreams of the Gael—but only within the limits of Ireland.

In one drawer of his mind was packed all his superstition, his mysticism, and what of weakness it might carry. But face him with any peril or problem and the drawer closed instantaneously leaving a mind that was utterly fearless, incredulous, and ingenious; swept clean of all cobwebs by as fine a sceptic broom as ever brushed a brain.

“Some stuff!” Deepest admiration was in his voice. “If we'd only had it when the war was on—imagine half a dozen of us scooting over the enemy batteries and the gunners underneath all at once beginning to shake themselves to pieces! Wow!” His tone was rapturous.

“It's easy enough to explain, Larry,” I said. “The effect, that is—for what the green ray is made of I don't know, of course. But what it does, clearly, is stimulate atomic vibration to such a pitch that the cohesion between the particles of matter is broken and the body flies to bits—just as a fly-wheel does when its speed gets so great that the particles of which it is made can't hold together.”

“Shake themselves to pieces is right, then!” he exclaimed.

“Absolutely right,” I nodded. “Everything in Nature vibrates. And all matter—whether man or beast or stone or metal or vegetable—is made up of vibrating molecules, which are made up of vibrating atoms which are made up of truly infinitely small particles of electricity called electrons, and electrons, the base of all matter, are themselves perhaps only a vibration of the mysterious ether.

“If a magnifying glass of sufficient size and strength could be placed over us we could see ourselves as sieves—our space lattice, as it is called. And all that is necessary to break down the lattice, to shake us into nothingness, is some agent that will set our atoms vibrating at such a rate that at last they escape the unseen cords and fly off.

“The green ray of Yolara is such an agent. It set up in the dwarf that incredibly rapid rhythm that you saw and—shook him not to atoms—but to electrons!”

“They had a gun on the West Front—a seventy-five,” said O'Keefe, “that broke the eardrums of

everybody who fired it, no matter what protection they used. It looked like all the other seventy-fives—but there was something about its sound that did it. They had to recast it.”

“It’s practically the same thing,” I replied. “By some freak its vibratory qualities had that effect. The deep whistle of the sunken Lusitania would, for instance, make the Singer Building shake to its foundations; while the Olympic did not affect the Singer at all but made the Woolworth shiver all through. In each case they stimulated the atomic vibration of the particular building—”

I paused, aware all at once of an intense drowsiness. O’Keefe, yawning, reached down to unfasten his puttees.

“Lord, I’m sleepy!” he exclaimed. “Can’t understand it—what you say—most—interesting—Lord!” he yawned again; straightened. “What made Reddy take such a shine to the Russian?” he asked.

“Thanaroa,” I answered, fighting to keep my eyes open.

“What?”

“When Lugur spoke that name I saw Marakinoff signal him. Thanaroa is, I suspect, the original form of the name of Tangaroa, the greatest god of the Polynesians. There’s a secret cult to him in the islands. Marakinoff may belong to it—he knows it anyway. Lugur recognized the signal and despite his surprise answered it.”

“So he gave him the high sign, eh?” mused Larry. “How could they both know it?”

“The cult is a very ancient one. Undoubtedly it had its origin in the dim beginnings before these people migrated here,” I replied. “It’s a link—one—of the few links between up there and the lost past—”

“Trouble then,” mumbled Larry. “Hell brewing! I smell it—Say, Doc, is this sleepiness natural? Wonder where my—gas mask—is—” he added, half incoherently.

But I myself was struggling desperately against the drugged slumber pressing down upon me.

“Lakla!” I heard O’Keefe murmur. “Lakla of the golden eyes—no Eilidh—the Fair!” He made an immense effort, half raised himself, grinned faintly.

“Thought this was paradise when I first saw it, Doc,” he sighed. “But I know now, if it is, No-Man’s Land was the greatest place on earth for a honeymoon. They—they’ve got us, Doc—” He sank back. “Good luck, old boy, wherever you’re going.” His hand waved feebly. “Glad—knew—you. Hope—see—you—’gain—”

His voice trailed into silence. Fighting, fighting with every fibre of brain and nerve against the sleep, I felt myself being steadily overcome. Yet before oblivion rushed down upon me I seemed to see upon the grey-screened wall nearest the Irishman an oval of rosy light begin to glow;

watched, as my falling lids inexorably fell, a flame-tipped shadow waver on it; thicken; condense—and there looking down upon Larry, her eyes great golden stars in which intensest curiosity and shy tenderness struggled, sweet mouth half smiling, was the girl of the Moon Pool's Chamber, the girl whom the green dwarf had named—Lakla: the vision Larry had invoked before that sleep which I could no longer deny had claimed him—

Closer she came—closer—the eyes were over us.

Then oblivion indeed!

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