

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 14, ISSUE 23
12TH MAY 2019

**THE SHADOW
OF HISTORY**

BY AARON
ALAN PFAU
*A SENSE OF
VAGUE
HORROR...*

**ALL THAT
IS HOLY IS
NOT WHOLE**

BY PAUL
LUBACZEWSKI
*WHO DREW
STEEL AGAINST
THE LORD...*

**SCI-FI
BY LOUIS KASATKIN**

**CLUSTERFUCKED
BY GK MURPHY**

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

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Schlock! Webzine

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

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

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EDITORIAL

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL! *Horror Comics and Comic Horror*
from [Vincent Davis](#)

THE SHADOW OF HISTORY by Aaron Alan Pfau—*A sense of vague horror...* GHOST
STORY

THE CASTLE OUROBOROS Part Four by Rob Bliss—*An old friend ...* HORROR

ALL THAT IS HOLY IS NOT WHOLE by Paul Lubaczewski—*Who drew steel against the
Lord...* HORROR

SCI-FI by Louis Kasatkin—*The Delta ships stopped...* POETRY

CLUSTERFUCKED by GK Murphy—*The pain came in waves...* HORROR

THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE Part Sixty-One by Gregory KH Bryant—*Ward?*
SPACE OPERA

ERIC BRIGHT EYES Chapter Twenty by H Rider Haggard—*How Hall of Lithdale Took
Tidings to Iceland...* SWORD AND SORCERY

THE LOST CONTINENT Chapter Five by C. J. Cutliffe Hyne—*Zaemon's
Curse...* SCIENCE FANTASY CLASSIC

EDITORIAL

This week, a guided tour around Auschwitz results in horrific revelations. Friedrich Heine finally meets Kasimir Kohl. A fallen angel appears in answer to a heartfelt prayer. Transmissions return from space strangely changed. And Peach Morrison witnesses scenes of horror.

Carter Ward battles the Scavengers. Hall of Lithdale takes tidings to Iceland. And Deucalion learns something of Phoenice's Atlantis from Ylga the fan-girl.

—Gavin Chappell

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THE SKUDDA

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Mark Mellon

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ART

from Dean
Wirth

VOLUME FOUR, ISSUE ONE

WALPURGISNACHT 2019

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



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

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

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

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

THE SHADOW OF HISTORY by Aaron Alan Pfau

Peter Schuster couldn't remember how he had gotten separated from the rest of his guided tour group. He had been looking fixedly at something with vague horror for so long that he hadn't noticed the movement of the group. What it was, he couldn't recall. There wasn't anything in Auschwitz that didn't fill him with a sense of vague horror.

Suddenly, he found himself alone in a brown-bricked building, running. On both sides of him were rows of wooden cots, triple stacked. Here, Jewish inmates would sleep three to a cot. Over 1000 inmates per building. The tour guide had illustrated this fact by allowing visitors the chance to lay down on one of the cots. Peter had found it a tight fit for himself. He could recall that. But how he had ended up back here all alone, he couldn't remember.

Peter stopped running, despite his urgency, to marvel at the barracks building, untouched since its inception in 1940. Square openings between the roof and the brick walls let in the light and the outside weather. A chill shivered up Peter's entire frame. Odd, he thought, for such a beautiful June day. He passed it off. Just the shakes. Who wouldn't get the shakes in a place like this? Time to find the rest of his tour group.

He ran the length of the barracks, checking his watch, forcing himself to remain calm. It's not like the train is going to leave without you, he assured himself. Even if it did, the camp hosted tours at regular intervals throughout the day until 7PM. The day was still early. He would be sure to catch a train, even if it meant getting back a bit late. Hell, if he didn't feel like waiting, it was only a 25-minute walk from the camp to Krakow Główny, the main train station, if you followed the rails. Or to the Dworzec MDA, the local bus station, located right behind the Główny. The weather had been gorgeous all day and Peter supposed that he wouldn't mind a chance to stroll past some of Poland's rural vistas and make the most of his trip. But something else, a feeling that he couldn't quite place, made him feel directly compelled to find the rest of his tour group at once. To get back on the train to Oswiecim, then back to his hotel room in Krakow.

At the end of the long gallery surrounded on both sides by columns of cots, Peter exited through a solitary wooden door. Outside, rows of similar brown bricked-huts stretched down the length of the camp. Peter had to stop again to appreciate the structure of the huts. They held up remarkably well, Peter thought, despite the span of some 70 years. Seemingly untouched by rot or decay. He wondered if the museum had put in any efforts at restoration. It seemed, to him, distasteful in theory to renovate that which should have been destroyed long ago, even if for the sake of remembrance. He looked around but couldn't seem to find any information plaques or displays. Come to think of it, he hadn't seen any in the barracks hut either. Strange. After the effect wore off, Peter was struck by another strange sensation. The sky, formally sunny and cloudless, was now dim and moody, almost dark. Deep blue clouds lingered over the camp and the wind blew as cold as September. That morning, it had been so hot that Peter hadn't worn anything heavier than a T-shirt. Now, he found himself shivering and wishing for a coat. Surely the weather couldn't have changed so much in such a short time, Peter thought. He began to wonder exactly how long he had been separated from his tour group. Fresh panic overtook him, and he ran through the gap between two of the huts.

HALT! STOJ! Those were the words printed in bold on the wooden sign that hung from

the electric fence. Translation; Stop! Stand! Above them, a skull with two crossbones. The universal sign for the danger of death. The fence had long ago ceased to be operable, Peter knew logically, but he froze anyhow, keeping his distance, as if the fence still held the ghost of the electricity that so many Jews had thrown themselves onto to avoid an even more agonizing death. Through barbed wire he could see the railroad tracks that cut across an open pasture and eventually back to Oswiecim. Crap, Peter thought, panting. The last he could recall; his tour group had been heading back towards the train tracks in the centre of Auschwitz. He wondered how in the world he could have ended up at the complete opposite end of the camp. I must have gotten myself more lost than I thought, he told himself.

Abruptly, a voice from behind him spoke, and he startled violently, not knowing why. The voice was German, but in a strange dialect that Peter had never before heard. "Hey, you!" it said.

Peter turned around. What he saw filled him with bewilderment and terror. Approaching him was a man dressed in a period WW2 uniform. Peter noted that the uniform held the rank of an SS officer. His cap bore the Totenkopf emblem (the Death's Head symbol). He wore boots, black and polished to a shine, up to his knees. A red band wrapped around his left arm, just above the elbow, with the swastika insignia sewn into it. In his hands he held a rifle.

Peter smiled, feeling foolish at his momentary fright. The man simply worked for the museum, that's all. A wave of relief washed over him. It quickly passed and was replaced with a deep sense of disgust and distaste. A history aficionado all his life, Peter had been to museums and famous landmarks before that featured re-enactments. Notably, in Gettysburg, where actors would dress up in Union and Confederate uniforms and re-enact Lee's defeat and surrender. But he felt that this crossed the line of good taste, or of taste in general, for that matter. What next, a gift shop? Peter thought sardonically.

The man stopped, holding the rifle fervently in his hands. Peter remarked on its craftsmanship. It looked damned-near authentic, he thought. The uniform that the man wore also impressed Peter with its contingent to historical accuracy.

The man spoke again, still in that German that sounded stilted and strange to Peter. "Why aren't you with the others?"

"I'm sorry," Peter said gratefully, in his Americanized German dialect. "I got separated from my group. I was worried that I missed the train. It didn't leave yet, did it? The train, I mean?"

The man in the SS uniform relaxed. He pressed the barrel of his rifle into the ground and leaned against the butt. "The train is just now pulling in."

Peter's relief resurfaced. He no longer felt any desire to wander the picturesque Poland vistas on foot. No desire to spend another waking moment in this death camp.

The museum worker frowned. "Say, why aren't you in uniform?"

Peter chuckled, then ran a hand through his thick blonde hair. It was the first time that he had chuckled since boarding the train in Oswiecim and it felt good and reassuring. “No, I don’t work here,” he explained. “I just need to get back to my group. See, I was with the last tour. I was looking at one of the exhibits and I guess that I must have lost track of time and got myself lost.”

The man observed him thoughtfully. He then broke out laughing. It was a rich, bawdy laugh. Peter wondered if these brick walls and wooden barracks had ever heard such a laugh. It didn’t suit this place. Despite not feeling the urge to, Peter laughed as well. He felt as though he should. The man slugged Peter on the shoulder hard enough to leave a bruise.

“If you were sleeping with one of those Poland girls, you don’t need to explain yourself to me, comrade” the man said, holding one hand out in a circle and poking his other index finger through it in a crude motion.

Peter felt greatly offended, both as a married man and at such a crude joke being made in such a place as Auschwitz but said nothing. He merely wanted to rejoin the others and board the train as soon as possible.

“Can you tell me where the others are?” Peter asked measuredly.

The man spat on the ground. “The others are all at the train, of course. If I were you, I’d get your ass there on the double. It doesn’t look good shirking behind. Not on opening night, eh? Not with all the higher-ups in attendance.”

Peter could hardly comprehend the words that came out of the man’s mouth. Opening night? Higher-ups? He didn’t try to comprehend them. For a reason that Peter couldn’t even begin to conjecture on, this man was obviously having a sick laugh at his expense. Wanting to leave, Peter thanked the man flatly and took off towards the entrance of the camp.

As he did, he could hear the man call out, “And be sure to show up in uniform!” Then start to laugh.

Peter heard the sharp sound of a train’s whistle. Then, brakes grinding against metal, a sound like a violin shrieking. He ran with greater enthusiasm past the brown-bricked huts. Just in time, he told himself. In a matter of minutes, you’ll be out of this terrible place. He imagined how he’d think back and laugh about this whole ordeal when on the train. It didn’t seem possible now, but he supposed that’s what would make it so funny later.

However, he became suddenly aware of a strange, distinctly horrible, odour floating above the camp. He glanced up and saw a billow of smoke rising into the sky. From where it came, he couldn’t tell. His view was still obscured by one of the brick huts. The train, he thought. Exhaust from the train’s smokestack, that’s all. He could hear the engine revving down. But the exhibits and pictures that he had witnessed of the camp’s notorious chimneys and furnaces sprang to mind like an inescapable itch. One that, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t scratch away.

When he saw the train, he became aware of the tumult all around him. It was a slow, sleepy realization, like a waking nightmare. So sudden and so wild was the sight that his brain could hardly register what he saw as reality. He had seen the man dressed in the Nazi uniform at the fence and had been prepared for a re-enactment of sorts. However, standing before him wasn't simply one Nazi soldier, nor was it a dozen, nor a dozen dozen, but hundreds. Hundreds of men wearing authentic Nazi uniforms, all with rifles in their hands or slung across their shoulders. There was a train on the tracks, but it didn't hold any resemblance at all to the one that had dropped Peter off at noon that day. The train coming to a lazy stop resembled an old *Kriegslokomotiven*, the kind used in the 1940's. Trailing behind were a row of cattle cars. From within each individual car, Peter could hear the clamour of many voices; scared, frightened voices. A man dressed like an officer stepped up onto the platform and pulled open one of the large slab doors. Inside, men, women, children, were packed so tight that they weren't even afforded the luxury of sitting. Peter gaped, open-mouthed, horror-struck, as men dressed like officers drove the inmates from the cattle cars with their clubs and fists. There was much screaming. An older woman pointed and shrieked something in Yiddish that Peter couldn't understand, her face deformed with terror. He followed her horrified gaze and saw that the smoke that he had noticed just moments ago didn't come from the train. No, it came from the chimney of a large brick building.

"Give me a hand over here," an officer called out to Peter. He was trying to wrestle a defiant son out of the clutching grasp of his mother.

I'm dreaming, Peter thought absently. I sat down somewhere to take a rest and I'm dreaming, that's all. I was exhausted, dehydrated, it was hot, none of this is real. He pinched himself, he bit his lip, he slapped his face, but he didn't wake.

A newspaper lay on the ground. One of the German officers had been reading it prior to the train pulling in. Peter stumbled over on weightless feet and grabbed it. He held it up to his eyes. It felt as though it were miles away. Still, he could read the text as clearly as he could hear the screams and sobs swelling all around him. As clearly as he could smell the aroma of smoke descending over the camp like a fog. 1940, that was the year at the top of the paper. 1940. Peter could now remember the last exhibit that he had been looking at before everything went black. It had been a photographic series. 1940. Opening night. The evening that Auschwitz began its occupation. Peter let the newspaper sag to the ground. His own legs sagged. He fell to his hands and knees. He could now remember the last picture that he had seen in that exhibit. That last terrible, familiar photograph that broke his sanity into fragments.

The German officers had achieved dominance over the inmates, who were now settling into single file; women to the right, men to the left. Their belongings were stripped from them. Sure, Peter had seen that exhibit on the tour as well. The tower of suitcases and clothes, forlorn and forgotten. A pile of reading glasses. A mountain of human hair. They were stripped of their clothes. A German man in a white coat observed the inmates and pointed them in one of two directions. One; to the barracks. Two; to the furnace. Peter recognized him at once. Dr. Mengele. Dr. Joseph Mengele. To his right stood a German Leutnant. Peter gazed into the man's face with paralyzing horror. It was also a face that he knew well.

A young Jewish boy was summoned to the right. His father was commanded to step to the left. The boy wouldn't let go of his father. Peter covered his eyes. He wanted to gouge them out. He had seen the photograph. History could not be rewritten. The Leutnant stepped forward, pistol drawn. He pressed it into the back of the old Jew's head. A flash. A photograph was taken by a German photographer. It would end up in the museum at Auschwitz under the title, Young Boy Witnesses the Death of His Father. The next flash came from the muzzle of the pistol. The sound of the gun going off was agonizingly clear, despite the chaos surrounding it. The old man fell forward, his lifeless body sliding out of his son's hands.

Peter gazed up into the darkening sky and began to scream madly as the smoke continued to swirl above him.

The last tour that day was held at 5PM. It was then who found thirty-three-year-old Peter Schuster sobbing and clawing crazily at his own eyes on the floor before one of the exhibits. He had torn whole strips of skin from his face. Apparently in a delirium, Mr. Schuster was unresponsive. All he could do was sob and claw at his eyes. Psychological help proved ineffective. Three days later, he was placed in a mental hospital. He beat his head against a padded wall until August 21st, when Peter Schuster committed suicide by biting through his own wrists and bleeding out.

A mental breakdown was the consensus of medical professionals. A mental breakdown brought on by the shock of the final exhibit that Mr. Schuster had laid his eyes upon that day. A photograph taken on the opening night of Auschwitz. In the photograph, a young Jewish boy clings desperately to his father. A German Leutnant has his pistol drawn and is pointing it at the back of the old man's head.

Peter had no knowledge of his family's participation in the death camps until looking at the photograph on exhibit and seeing the face of his own grandfather staring back at him from underneath the Leutnant's hat.

THE END

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THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

Chapter 4

I stood inside a cavernous room of stone that echoed with my footsteps. Tall tapers were lit to flicker a yellow glow between thick swathes of shadow. Twin stone staircases rose at the rear of the room, curving to an upper floor like the horns of some buried giant. Weapons of medieval and earlier ages than this lined the walls. Tall, thin stained glass windows stretched across the walls to my left and right, depicting strange tableaux from unknown legends and myths, many of the scenes having an Ouroboros somewhere within their imagery.

I listened to myself breathe, hands clenched around the handles of my bags, standing in awe at the vastness of the space. The stone walls were thick enough to mute the rain outside.

From the shadows appeared an old friend. An acquaintance, but one who seemed to have deteriorated over the handful of years since I saw him last. Once a young man, now aged prematurely. His dark suit hung off him as a shroud off a skeleton. Cheekbones set at pronounced angles and eyes sunken, a dark half-moon beneath each eye, deep lines of accelerated age etched across his face. Kasimir.

And yet he smiled to welcome me, stretched forth a hand of blue veins worming over bone, webs of skin between his fingers.

“Friedrich,” his baritone echoed my name against the walls. “Good of you to come. I hope your journey wasn’t too unpleasant. We do seem to catch the most inclement weather in this part of the world.”

I put on my most welcoming smile and returned his pleasantries. He bade me leave the bags where I stood, informing me that a manservant, Gustav, would collect them in due time. A doctor rarely enjoys relinquishing his medical kit, but I acquiesced so as not to insult my host.

“You must be hungry after such an endless journey.”

I admitted that I was as I followed him out of the light and into shadow. Tapers sat in sconces in the shapes of dragons, gremlins, gargoyles, and assorted demons and other-worldly figures of fantasy. Wax dripped down the metal and onto the stone floor of the hallway we ventured down. Kasimir’s voice echoed off the low-vaulted roof.

A wooden door, which opened with a creak of its hinges, ended our journey at the entrance to the dining hall. A vast iron chandelier made in a previous century hung from thick chains in the centre of the hall, not all of its candles lit. An ancient castle which had none of the modern conveniences to bring it into the current century.

A long, heavy oak table stretched down the centre of the room, with high-backed, maroon leather-padded chairs lining its length. Only the end of the table was set with places for two to dine. Dishes were already steaming beneath the candelabra set amongst the dishes.

Whatever maid or cook prepared the dining area was nowhere to be seen.

We sat. Kasimir poured a Mosel Riesling from a decanted bottle into a crystal goblet resting at my place setting. We toasted my arrival and my host began with his questions about my medical career under Herr Freud's tutelage.

Again, so as not to offend, I enlightened my host on the great advances being made in the psychological sciences. He was rapt with attention as I described how an individual's dreams can inform them, and their doctor, as to their psyche. I spoke of Eros and Thanatos, of the Oedipal and Electra Complexes, of the Id, Ego, and Superego. I even touched upon some of the theories of archetypes as put forth by Doctor Jung, another Wednesday Psychological Society adherent. Kasimir was stunned by all I told him, as though I had casually admitted that I knew the whereabouts of El Dorado, and had been there and back repeatedly.

He asked questions upon questions, never ending, and yet I wished to merely ask him about the health of his sister. Was she suffering to the extent mentioned in his letter, had her conditioned worsened, was she located in the castle or somewhere in the town below, or in another city? Would he be ushering me directly to the patient in waiting, or would I need to wait until after dinner? Alas, we medical men are accustomed to suffering gastronomically for the sake of our patient's health.

"In time," he answered my query, stabbing a long, two-pronged fork into a flank of pink lamb.

I ate, but did not have his appetite for such cuisine. I preferred my meat cooked to a greater degree, preferably without watery blood squeezing from its inner mass with every jab of the fork.

"Her suffering shall not decrease, I fear, in an hour, a day ... perhaps a year or more. After our repast, I will take you to her to allow you to conduct your diagnosis. Please, enjoy your dinner."

I chewed and swallowed, but did not enjoy. No manservant attended our needs, standing just out of sight to take away an empty plate or to refill a diminished goblet. Could only Kasimir and his sister live in such a vast abode and see to all their needs, I wondered? Was Kasimir such a helpmate? I understood better why he wrote to me for my assistance.

"And how is your health?" I queried, not to be impolite, seeing too much the bones beneath the skin of his face. "In all honesty, you seem to have deteriorated to a degree. My services, naturally, are at your disposal as well."

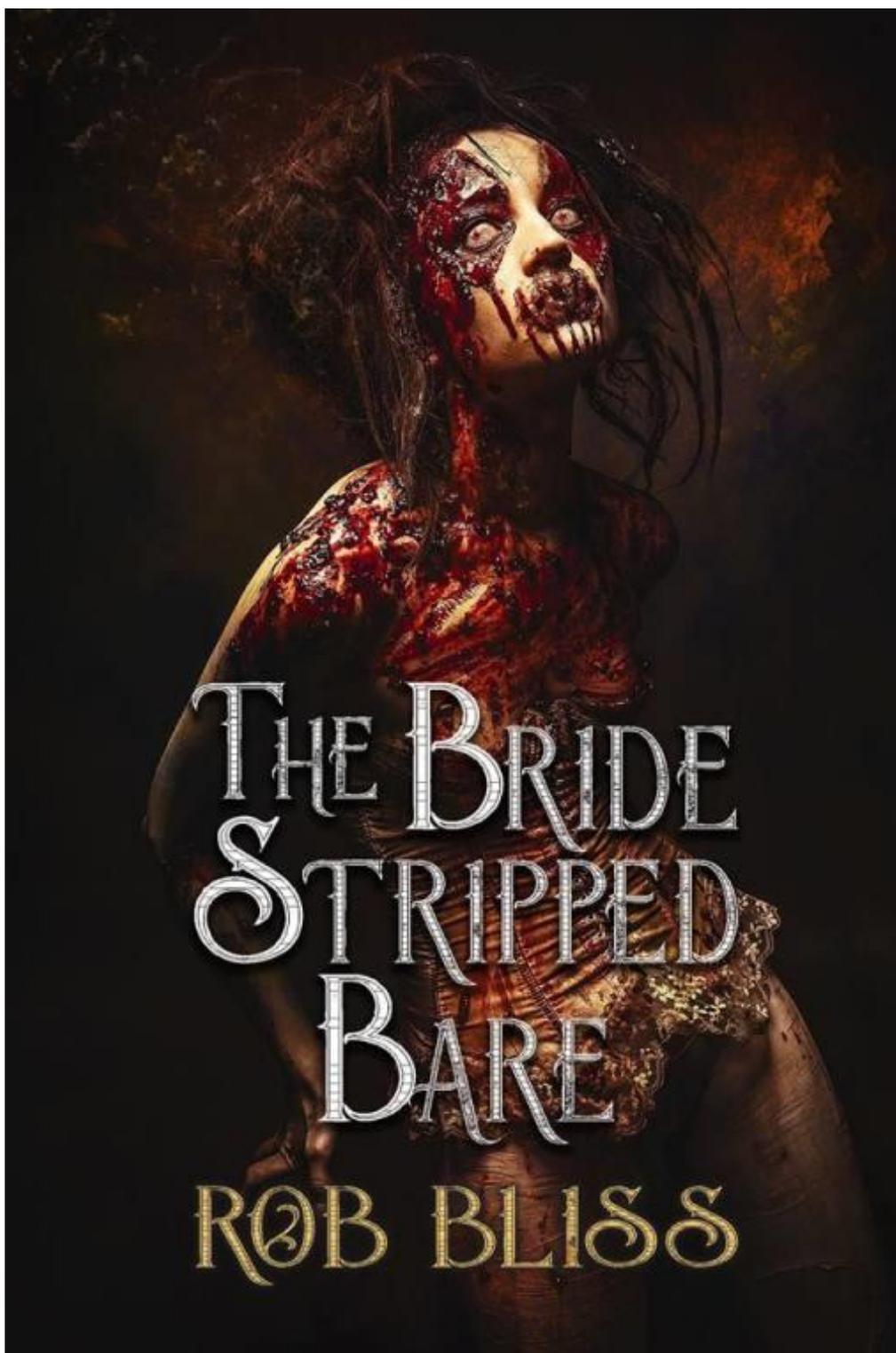
He leaned back in his chair, tipped up his chin and smiled as he chewed a particularly tough piece of meat. "Fear not, my good Friedrich. I assure you I am quite fit. Stale air in these old castles may dry the skin somewhat, and the weather is far too abominable to allow much sunlight through the clouds. Once Cybele is her usual self again, I shall spend half a year or more in Mediterranean climates. And eat much more nourishing food. I see you haven't touched much of this banquet. I don't blame you. My culinary supplies come once a week, and then largely from that despicable hovel called a village in the valley

below. Barbarians, all of them. But we must make do with what we have until better trade routes are established, yes?"

He sawed off another piece of lamb and chewed as he smiled. I smiled in return and let my molars crunch a few of the vegetables. I asked no more interrogative questions, and allowed Kasimir to reveal what he wished in his own good time. He seemed to enjoy a slower pace in his mountain eyrie, so I could hardly fault him. I had been acclimatized to the faster pace of Vienna for too long. If anything, I was at fault for not letting my temperament ease.

But when the meal was finished, he was as good as his word, and took me to an upper floor to meet my patient.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



Available from Necro Publications.

ALL THAT IS HOLY IS NOT WHOLE by Paul Lubaczewski

Kenneth Tilton had his head bowed in prayer. His nostrils flared as they filled with the scent of his surroundings, sadness, guilt, stale sweat, dust, and misery. He had known these smells since the day he was born, but it had been a long time since he'd smelled this mixture in its purest most unadulterated back-country form. He had never stopped going to church, he went numerous times a week to a shiny multi-million dollar one, Kenneth had just stopped going in a place like this. A place where you knew from the moment you walked in that you were damned as a sinner. Hellfire awaited you for almost everything in these little houses of the Lord. He found it comforting, it felt like home. Sometimes a man needs to be in a place where he can smell the brimstone heavy in the air.

When the money, a true sign of God's blessing, had finally not been enough anymore to salve his troubled soul, he'd come home. He needed a down-home church more than he needed some self-help club with hymns built to make him joyous over his own good fortune. "God's blessings" had proven useless against a rape and two murders. There was no great solace provided for something like that in the land of choreographed dancing and singing. Not in a place where the sick were being healed only after a good audition tape got them in the door and down the aisle. Worse, he suspected that the perpetrator of these grievous sins to be someone who told everyone he was a man of God. If God could let the man who told him, who told everyone all that truth about the blessings from God himself, if God could let him do that... And if after he had, if he could still preach on Sunday and still receive the Lord's financial gifts... Maybe Kenneth would have been better off if he had just stayed here worrying about fire and brimstone.

"Not necessarily."

Kenneth whirled in the pew. Seated only a little bit away from him was a handsome man of middle years, a man who Kenneth would have sworn had not been there an instant before! He certainly had not been there when Kenneth had seated himself to pray on his tribulations, the church had been empty.

The man smiled beatifically at Kenneth, "Were you not warned the devil would have a beautiful countenance? Did y'all think he'd just come right out and say things that you knew weren't true to let you know he was the devil? Or do you think it might have been smarter to preach the truth in public and do his evil in private?"

"Who...who are you?" Kenneth demanded, angry at the intrusion on his grief, and confused by the man's timely words.

"You are in your hour of need, you prayed with all your heart, Kenneth. Well, here I am as an answer." The man smiled again.

Kenneth grunted, "Unless you're here to tell me how to kill that son of a bitch, don't know how much good you are to me."

Again, with the beatific smile, "Would you presume to do the Lord's work, Kenneth? Would you tell your God who lives and dies? Would you wash your hands of your loved one's death with more blood? Who put them in harm's way, Kenneth? Who left them alone with the monster? Who trusted his loved ones to a man, who when you really get down to it, you

barely really knew?”

Kenneth looked stricken both by the man’s words, and his own suspicions as to why he knew what he did. “Why on earth would I distrust a preacher? A man who has the Lord’s favour upon him to the tune of millions of dollars? A man who has been allowed to preach from a temple as grand as his?”

The man frowned and shook his head, “Kenneth, rather than allow the lord to further bless you with his gifts, you toadied. You crawled to a man and debased yourself to him. Was that using your talents? Rather than work for more blessings, to have faith that they would come, you thought to insinuate yourself to a man in the hope that man would bless you. That man killed your son, he killed your son because your son saw the rape of his mother. With the blood of your child wet on his hands, he killed your wife too. Shows what you get when you put your faith in a man rather than the Lord now, don’t it? You defied the Lord’s will boy, and you paid for it hard.”

Kenneth slumped his shoulders, a sob forcing itself from him. This unknown man, a complete stranger, had just said what lay hidden in his heart this whole time. The police had arrested a man for the crime already, an African American man, but Kenneth had known deep inside himself that man hadn’t done this. He had known in his heart who had committed the act, and Kenneth blamed himself for letting him.

His voice, now hoarse with grief, whispered, “I am gonna kill that bastard, I SWEAR!”

Both stared forward at the cross hanging in the dim light of the church for a moment. Both sets of eyes riveted to the mangled Anglo form hung from the structure covered in wounds and blood. The man turned to Kenneth and said, “No you aren’t.”

Kenneth didn’t even turn to look at the man, growling under his breath, “The devil you say!”

The man leaned back and shook his head, a smirk playing across his lips, “Kenneth, I am here for your benefit. I well, and truly am. Also, equally true, an imperfect vessel may still carry clean water, and that man brings the truth to the masses. It isn’t your place to pass judgment on him, only the Lord can, and trust me on this he will, and it will be a more terrible thing than anything a mortal man can deliver. Your baby boy and your pretty Missus are with the Lord now, hallelujah, killing him won’t bring them back. “

“So, I’m to be left with nothing? Not even vengeance?” Kenneth’s red, tear-stained visage twisted to gape at this edict.

“There are others, ones that don’t point the way to the truth even if they themselves are not of it. What if I told you there was a man who was as far from godly as possible? He fed vermin, clothed them, sheltered them, gave them sustenance so they could breed like the diseased rats they were? The hordes of them growing larger all the time, becoming a threat to the righteous that God had smiled upon with good fortune and wealth? That one day those vermin might even come for that wealth, driven by envy and lust? If I gave unto ye this traitor against the power and the glory and told you that ye might have thine vengeance on this wretch instead, would that ease thy troubled soul, Kenneth?”

Kenneth stared straight ahead, his mind reeling at what had he had just heard. He searched his

soul to find what on earth his answer might be to that. But he knew already. Quietly, he looked at everything he truly believed in his heart, and answered, "It might do, yes."

"I will give this to you, Kenneth, for I would calm thy troubled heart. Thou may call me Asbeel who once, long ago, drew steel against the enemies of God himself!"

"I'm still not sure. How can killing a man who's wronged me is wrong, but killing one I've never met is right." Kenneth shook his head.

Asbeel, who appeared as a kindly southern preacher, a form comforting to Kenneth, shook his head, "Son, it's like this, one is vengeance, which is God's right alone, and the other is prevention. Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord, but your Granny said an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. They were both right. That man who done you wrong will pay when the Lord gets him, and who knows, he still might have purpose in God's great plan. But that other, well we know he's perpetrating a great evil, and that evil is gonna grow all the time my boy unless it's checked. Why you ask most people, they'd say they'd go back in time and kill Hitler right?" Asbeel looked at Kenneth for a moment and made a snap decision that was maybe the wrong tact, so he added, "Say what you want about the man's views, that war killed almost nothing but good Christian boys and babies on both sides. Think of all that Christian wealth that went up in flames because of him."

He saw that last comment was successful in reaching Kenneth a bit, who was nodding, so he added, "Now I know, you will eat yourself alive if you can't let your anger out on someone son, I understand that. So, I'm trying to let you do it where it will do the most good for everyone. The Lord has work for you, Kenneth. That's why we're here."

Here, had turned out to be an efficiency apartment in a part of town that normally Kenneth would never go. Asbeel viewed it as a good sign of faith that he had been able to convince Kenneth to even rent this place, let alone the shopping at various thrift stores to buy himself clothes that would fit in here better. No, he knew, Kenneth just needed reassurances, he needed bucking up. It may frustrate Asbeel at this moment, but he would rather shore up the man's resolve here in this little rat trap efficiency apartment than to have it slip at some later crucial moment.

Asbeel was waiting for Kenneth when he returned to their room. When the door opened, he smiled cheerfully, "So, how was your day, Kenneth?"

Kenneth glowered at him snarling, "How do you think it was?"

"Alright, I can acknowledge that. Here, sit down, pour yourself some scotch. Let us discuss what you have seen today. I can minister to you better that way if you say it yourself. I can interpret it for you," Asbeel replied smoothly. The role of a confessor had always served not unlike a psychiatrist of today, Asbeel had plenty of practice playing the role.

He watched Kenneth go get himself a drink. The furnishings might not look like much, and the space itself might be cramped, but they weren't living like the rest of the animals in the

area. He had instructed Kenneth to bring good food and spirits, no need to suffer after all. What they did behind closed doors was nobody's business but their own.

"So, Kenneth," Asbeel began again once Kenneth settled down in the other tattered easy chair, "what were you made to do on your first day as a volunteer?"

"Oh, they had me serving food. They had me washing pans. That sort of thing," Kenneth replied with disgust as he scowled forlornly at his now destroyed manicure.

"Let me ask you, do you think anyone was saved today, Kenneth? I mean, eternally?"

"Not by my estimation. I barely even saw a bible in the place," he snorted at Asbeel's question.

"Well, if it isn't for the good of their souls, why does the place exist?"

"It feeds people, gives 'em clothing, directs them to shelter..."

"Making them stronger," Asbeel provided smoothly. He saw the look of realization on Kenneth's face as he said it, so he pressed his point home, "That's what they do there Kenneth. This is what I wanted you to see for your OWN eyes. They make vermin stronger, they help the angry failures survive. Tell me, Kenneth, did you see many good Christians there at all? Men or women that you'd be happy to introduce in the halls of your church as your friend? That you'd let sleep in your own house in brotherhood, Kenneth?"

"No," Kenneth responded quietly, but without any hesitation.

"Just think of them, warm and well fed, strong and getting stronger. Maybe willing to take their resentment at God's obvious disfavour out on the Lord's chosen, Kenneth?"

"But, what can I even do about it? I'm just one man!"

"You know the answer already. Who hired you on as a volunteer, Kenneth? Who runs this little nest of vipers in the heart of virtue that is God's world?" Asbeel demanded.

"Ummm his name is Zach, I forget his last name," Kenneth shrugged.

Asbeel leaned forward grinning, showing his gleaming teeth, "Of course it is. I know exactly who this 'Zach' is. He doesn't even hide who he is very well at all. He practically dares you to notice. Would it surprise you if I said he was a demon?"

Kenneth started at that, spilling a little scotch as he did, "A demon?"

Asbeel reached to the side of his own chair, bringing up an object wrapped in a black cloth of some kind. He shook it lightly causing the cloth to slip off revealing a weapon, a sword to be exact. Kenneth couldn't help but gape at it dumbstruck for a moment. He'd never even seen a real sword in his life, even if he had, it wouldn't have been one like this! The metal, from the hilt to the tip, somehow contrived to be black as night. More than that, it even appeared to drink the light from the room itself into its depths, creating shadows where none had been before.

Asbeel smiled wider and said, “Well, I did promise you, you were going to get to kill something did I not? Now, why don’t we see about teaching you how to use this thing a little, so you don’t make a mess of it?”

Even though Kenneth was sweating bullets, nobody would notice in here. Serving was hot, tiring work, everyone else was sweating equally. The heat from the streaming trays washed over you in waves as you refilled them, perspiration was inevitable. Every time you leaned in to scoop up the cheap stuffing, or even cheaper macaroni and cheese on to someone’s Styrofoam plate your body temperature increased more and more. But even if he had been serving cold food today, he still would be just as drenched in perspiration. His nerves were shot by anticipation and worry, he was surprised his hand didn’t shake as he swung the large spoon around.

For all the anger and the soul sickness he had over the death of Rachel and Caleb, this, here and now, was not an act in the heat of passion. What he intended to do here was anything but, it was cold-blooded murder. He had felt so sure in that little church where he had gone as a boy that he could kill a man, but this was different, this was not a boast made in anger. Surely, he believed Asbeel that the thing running this place was a demon breeding vermin, vermin who would prey on good Christians sooner rather than later, but it seemed cold comfort now. This was not an abstract, practicing with a sword in a rented hovel, this was going through with using it on another living creature.

It helped, knowing that the only reason Asbeel was not with him now, was that he couldn’t be. He’d explained that the demon would be able to sense his divinity close at hand, Asbeel would accidentally expose them both by his presence. He’d even demonstrated for Kenneth. They’d gone close by another one of these rat nests, and as soon as Asbeel approached, he could see the proprietor’s face blanch, sensing Asbeel almost immediately. Proof right there of their evil if ever Kenneth needed it. Asbeel promised him, that as soon as the deed was done, he would personally spirit Kenneth away, and that Kenneth would find himself blessed as he had never been blessed before. Kenneth was already contemplating what he could buy with that kind of money.

Kenneth supposed true faith in God is having your doubts and doing his holy work anyway. Finding strength by knowing the rewards awaiting you.

“Hey Zach, could I speak to you for a minute?”

“Hmph? Oh, Kenneth! Sure, what do you need me for?” said the tall, bearded man.

“Something came in with the donations, I don’t know what the heck to do with it. So, I figured, if anyone would... well, you’re the boss,” Kenneth said with a sheepish little grin.

“Yeah, just a second, let me just take this pan to the kitchen to wash up,” the man said around the empty pan he was hustling away. This was the all-important Zach, you could tell he was in charge, just looking at him. His face only had a few lines on it, and his eyes shone with

energy that could have placed him anywhere from early thirties all the way to his fifties, impossible to pin down. At first glance, his white hair pulled back in a ponytail and his white beard would mark him as much older, but his eyes told a different story entirely. His eyes shone, not just with a vitality, but a feeling of total control of his situation at every moment. Kenneth hoped that he wouldn't be getting any older after today. He'd prayed on it all night last night.

Kenneth couldn't help but fidget as he waited, this was the grand moment, his recompense for all that he had lost. He was looking out towards the serving area, where a few clients still sat on the benches talking among themselves. As he watched, two of them who he knew spent much of their time together, a man and another man kissed each other! Right there in front of everyone! In front of God himself! It was only a peck on the lips, but there could be no more forbidden kiss than that, could there be? An overture to homosexual congress in this filth? How dare they!

When he turned to see Zach coming back to him smiling, Kenneth had to bite back his bile and put on his own smiling face to greet the founder of this godlessness. "Ready to go look?" Kenneth asked, his resolve completely solidified by what he had just witnessed.

"Yep, let's see this mysterious donation!" Zach replied with a smile.

They walked together through the building to the storage area where donations of clothing and other things were kept. Clothes and blankets were the majority of what they received, but oddly enough that was never ALL the shelter received. Things like furniture and such would appear as well, all of it had to be sorted. Some of it got sold off for proceeds to help the soup kitchen, some given away, rarely was anything just thrown away. There was no scrap these rats could not make some use of. Kenneth had made a point of making sure he was going through donations today alone.

Kenneth led the way, shutting the door after Zach followed him in. "It just came in today, damndest thing!" he said cheerfully, and loud enough to cover the noise of him turning the lock on the door.

From there he strode quickly to the dimmer areas of the room, where oddballs often got shunted until a decision could be made on them. Kenneth had to rifle through a few things until he found what he was looking for. He'd made sure to hide it so anybody walking in wouldn't find it by accident. Kenneth turned back towards Zach as the cloth fell away and the light in the room darkened, "This just came in today."

Zach took a step back from him, Kenneth could see the recognition in Zach's eyes at what he held! He could see the fear from the demon who knew that its unmaking was at hand! Most importantly of all, that it was in Kenneth's hand!

"Where did you get that?" Zach gasped, his eyes wide with fear.

"You know, I could lie to you, and say, 'No really it came in with the donations' again, but since I'm about to kill you with it... well it just isn't nice to lie," Kenneth sneered. "An angel gave it to me Zach and entrusted me with a holy duty."

"A holy duty?" Zach stammered his face a mask of confusion, "But what?"

“This!” Kenneth snarled as he lunged with the blade at Zach, feeling the blade find its way home in the body standing in front of him. He would never know later, why he hadn’t struck at the heart. He’d always question if it was still some self-doubt at the rightness of all of this, or did Zach partially block the blade in his terror? For whatever reason, instead of the heart, the blade instead bit deep into Zach’s side, causing him to gasp in pain before sliding off the blade with a thump!

Kenneth barely had time to take in what he had done when Asbeel appeared out of the very air and thrust the Kenneth aside! In one fluid motion, Asbeel was kneeling next to the demon that he had instructed Kenneth to kill. He held the thing’s head in his hands as it gasped out its last breathes there in this dingy storeroom. Kenneth lay where he had landed, stunned for the moment, listening to the two of them talk to each other.

“Poor Zacheriel,” Asbeel said stroking the man’s hair back tenderly, “you could have been on the winning side you know. Did you think one great battle and you’d won that easily?”

“Ah, Asbeel, but it isn’t over yet. Now is it?” Zacheriel gasped out, Kenneth could see some blood frothing out to stain the man’s pure white beard from where he lay viewing the scene play out.

“But it is for you poor Zacheriel. It is for you,” Asbeel sighed regretfully still stroking his hair.

“One promise,” Zacheriel managed to put urgency into his voice.

“Oh, and what could you possibly demand now?” Asbeel sneered, but good-naturedly almost as a parent to a cranky toddler before bed.

“Promise you’ll tell Kenneth the truth,” Zacheriel gasped, “tell him the whole truth. You’ve had your use of him, he deserves that. Do that, or I swear I will mark you Asbeel. My kind will hunt you down, and yours will shun you rather than risk being in the crossfire when you’re found. Promise me Asbeel!”

Asbeel sighed, “Very well, if it means so much to you. I don’t suppose it matters one way or the other now anyway.”

“Promise to your maker, Asbeel.”

“I solemnly swear to him who made me, to the bindings of the universe that I will tell Kenneth Tilton, my servant, the full truth of what happened here,” Asbeel said petulantly and with bad grace.

“At least there is that then, fare thee well, Asbeel.”

“Goodbye Zacheriel, old friend.” With that, Asbeel gently and lovingly drew the eyes of the one known as Zacheriel closed. The moment he did the space the man had occupied flamed with a light of blinding proportions causing Kenneth to slam his own eyes shut!

When he opened them again, there was only himself and Asbeel.

Pulling himself up gingerly from where he had landed when Asbeel thrust him aside, he demanded, "Tell me the truth about what?"

Kenneth's voice seemed to shake Asbeel out of his reverie, staring at the spot where Zacheriel had been. He stood up and turned to face his helper. In an instant he was in front of Kenneth, grasping him by his shoulders, "Well, about everything I suppose."

Kenneth felt the wrongness of this all now, and would not be so easily played with, "Starting with what for instance?"

"You have done what almost no mortal has done in such a long time, Kenneth. An amazing thing! You, Kenneth Tilton, have killed an angel! And it was easy!"

Kenneth's mind jumped to the only possible conclusion, "Well, of course, demons are nothing if not fallen ang-"

Asbeel interrupted him putting his index finger over Kenneth's mouth, "No, Zacheriel was not fallen, he did not fight with Lucifer during his war with the heavens. I did."

"But-"

Asbeel pressed his finger back smiling at him, "Oh but never fear, Kenneth, you did indeed serve your church well this day. For almost all the stone structures and money-making operations of the holy Jesus Incorporated should rejoice today. You've done them a great service in this low place of lost lambs and grace! The mighty and the powerful have gotten stronger on this day!"

"What do you mean, what could you possibly mean by that!"

"Haven't you figured it out yet? A smart fellow like you? So many branches of Christianity, so few Christians giving and being charitable as Christ commanded, why do you suppose that is?" Asbeel chuckled happily. And the demon was happy, the look on this mortal's face was all too precious, he wished he could eat it.

"You liar!" Kenneth spat at him pulling himself away from Asbeel's hands. "They said the devil lied, and they were right!"

"Oh, poor Kenneth, it hurts so to have one's illusions dashed doesn't it. Who convinced men to burn other men alive for lack of payment to the church? Who convinced them to commit torture conversions out of the unbelievers? Who convinced them that priests needed gold chalices and purple robes? All the church, all us," Asbeel smiled.

"But the Protestant Reformation!" Kenneth protested with a wail.

"Oh, you mean where we convinced you that working yourself to death for a slave wage was holy? Where mental illness, ILLNESS, Kenneth, became classified as sloth? Where we got you to believe that wealth was a sign of God's favour? Did you even read the actual bible, Kenneth? It says right in there to give all your wealth away! It says to nurture the poor! It says the rich aren't even getting into the big happy show above! Over and over it says it!"

Asbeel who was almost dancing with glee by this point, he had gotten his assassination, and now he was receiving a show as a bonus.

“But the parable of the gifts,” Kenneth whispered in a tiny broken voice.

“It’s a parable, do you even know what that means? When Aesop wrote about the fox and the sour grapes, he wasn’t talking about a literal fox he had witnessed either you know? It’s a story to make a point, not the point in and of itself! It means to use the gifts God has given you to best SERVE HIM, not yourself, Kenneth,” Asbeel replied, grasping Kenneth once again.

“I...killed...an angel?” Kenneth stared right into the demon’s eyes, the horror of what he had just done fully dawning on him finally.

Asbeel smiled warmly at him, “Yes Kenneth, yes you did. When you die, you are doomed to serve me in my legions in hell for what you’ve done. Isn’t that nice? We’ll get to spend more time together. I told you I’d look out for you!” Asbeel took his hand and placed it over Kenneth’s eyes, “But you still have your allotted time to live, Kenneth, even I cannot steal that from you. I give unto thee a blessing, I will let you wander broken and mad to the world. None shall look upon you, but they will see a pathetic madman. You will never be able to tell them what you have done lest they stone you to death for it. Your madness will be your shield against the consequences of your actions on this earth. Unfortunately, even as you wander mad and shambling from my mark, you will always know the truth about yourself and all you have learned. None shall know, because you will never be able to speak it to a soul!”

When Asbeel removed his hand, there lay on Kenneth’s forehead burned into the flesh Asbeel’s mark. No mortal could ever see it, but it was there, nonetheless. Asbeel looked down into Kenneth’s disoriented and clearly mad eyes and said, “Go forth, Kenneth, and wander among the lost lunatics of the city, from now until you come to serve me below.”

“Mustn’t talk about things like that,” he muttered to himself. “Just makes ‘em mad, just makes ‘em screw you, well screw ‘em I tols ‘em!”

Kenny was trying his best to keep it together as he stood in line to get food at the soup kitchen. He had good days, and he had bad days, but even on bad days, a body needed to be fed. He would just have to muddle through it as best he could. The sooner he got out of here the better, he had a couple of bucks he could get some vodka and go sleep on his grate later. He just needed to keep it together for now.

As he reached the next station in the line, he thrust out his plate to the server. The man had white hair tied back in a hair net. And a perfect white beard. His eyes shone with a stunning blue looking out to the world. Even though Kenny did not know who he was, he knew deep in himself what he was.

Staring directly into the angel’s eyes, Kenny croaked, “Please, please God, charity...”

The angel could only sadly shake his head as he ladled the macaroni and cheese on to

Kenneth's Styrofoam plate

*“For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”—
Mark 8:36*

THE END

SCI-FI by Louis Kasatkin

twinkle twinkle distant star
how I wonder where you are;
..the Delta-ships stopped,
our transmitters failed
though they had brought our
words back to us as palimpsest,
from long lost millennia ago,
distorted and disfigured
rendered alien
by countless Doppler-shifts;
our own broadcasts came back
to haunt us,
to betray the illusion
that we were reaching out
and yet we never were;
leaving us bereft,
we commodified them,
all of our ancestors,
the patina of their vaunted
golden age ages old by now,
were bought and sold
and kept us all so amused,
that was in the time of the
Delta-ships and their last flight;
Somehow the Epsilon-points
became shrouded in mystery,
lacking knowledge
still we search for them,
but the apparatus is gone too,
Magellan without astrolabe
Galileo without plans,
seared into our racial unconscious
we yearn for the path
outward and home for
an end to cosmic labyrinths;
the failed gleaming,
the sputtering glimmer of
candles that burned so bright,
yet for so brief a span;
hierarchies perpetuate themselves,
vaunt their traditions
and call them "ours"
yet "we" no longer remember;
Our own images haunt us
deep deep into the night,
we awaken to the cadence
of our own scream,
we cling to driftwood

in a shipwrecked sea;
the Delta-ships are gone,
tumbled long long ago
into a memory hole,
and where are those
pinpoints of transfiguration?
the Epsilon-points,
that took us, always,
outward and home;
Amid the chaos of ages,
redolent with anguish and fear,
a haunted face peers
into the looking glass
and beholds darkly,
a trembling trembling hand,
in its tenuous grasp
an ancient artefact,
its sleek barrel
caressing his temple.
twinkle, twinkle...

THE END

CLUSTERFUCKED by GK Murphy

Alone, Peach Morrison stood by the window and looked down at the busy High Street below, his apartment being just one in a block of five on the third floor. He'd lived here just over seven months since getting the heave-ho from his crappy job working in a factory producing berets to the world, not a job with that many prospects all told and very little in the way of wages and job satisfaction. His advice to anyone considering working on the assembly line was, wait, consider, say no, fuck it, consider again, again say fuck it and walk away in a hurry—which he wished he'd done, saying as they were four months of his life he'd never get back.

As aforementioned, the wages were shit—they sucked—plus he was surrounded by Job Centre leeches, those that shunned honest work and mostly opted for benefits, yet had to work in no-future jobs (jobs that lasted like his did, perhaps four months), just to save face with the Job Centre, just to show they were doing...well, something.

With a name like Peach you might have expected him to be something special, which he was in a way, since Peach was his party name, and he WAS special, since he was proud to admit he was gay and really couldn't care less if the fact offended people. Not many nowadays, it seemed, so everything in his daily routine was pretty cool. His real name was Peter Morrison, 22-years-old, blond/blue hair, quiffed, who often donned deep scarlet red lipstick as well pink blusher and blue mascara every time...and besides, wasn't Peach a way cooler name than Peter, especially when you were up there with the best of queens in the community?

But he suffered from an unusual disposition. So unusual, in fact, it was difficult to consult with a doctor or shrink about it and he was forced to keep his distance from GP surgeries and hospitals, since if he disclosed his symptoms they might very well have locked him up in a funny farm, such was the strangeness of the condition. But he realized recently he would have to bite his lip and dive in at the deep end and see one of these people. He couldn't let it go on much longer. It made him want to commit suicide sometimes. It had affected him since being made redundant from the hat factory. No connection there, or at least he imagined, but why should there be? The notion seemed ridiculous.

Every now and then, Peach witnessed things that those in the know may have described as horrific, terrifying visions, violent scenes, some bloody, some absurdly sexual. Yet, when he saw these bizarre sights, he was merely prone to just stand or sit there motionlessly and transfixed to what he observed in a trance-like state, staring into space.

He never fainted or blacked out. They were not those kinds of visions. They never incited unconsciousness in any way. They just demanded his utmost attention and no fuss or argument. However, he decided the purpose for consulting a professional flared up more and more in his mind after he noticed the headaches were increasing and worsening, and now seemed to always accompany these sickening mental film-shows, which also started off blinding clusters of agonizing pain inside the cranium, so violent all he wanted to do was bang or smash his very skull on something, simply knock the shit out of his head until the symptoms dissipated, or rid his head of massive pain.

As a young gay man, getting fucked up the arse for the very first time might have been painful, yet nothing compared to the headaches during his visions.

That was another thing...

As a gay man of 22 years, Peach may well have been the biggest queen and party animal in the small Northern town of Whitehaven in West Cumbria (a place of wind and rain—whatever time of the year), he had to admit, he preferred to give rather than receive, and preferred sucking and fucking to actually getting fucked, since like every gay man knew (or anybody, for that matter) the old rectum could be a tender wee spot to pummel at times. So much could go wrong, muscles and nerves could collapse, and you could end up in nappies collecting your own waste for the rest of your life. But in all honesty, engaged in the act of doing the fucking was better than getting fucking. Yet, sucking off a massive cock proved just as big a thrill as anything also.

Right now, he was on the upper deck of a red Stagecoach bus into the neighbouring town of Workington on his way to see the GP at the local surgery, where he planned on explaining everything, in graphic detail if he had to, where he'd disclose the horrors and bloodshed involved, and whatever else his mental psyche-outs entailed.

It was as he stared out at the rain-sodden fields through the bus window, one of his visions emerged from a dark recess, somewhere hidden in the back of his mind.

Peach began to breathe heavily as his heart rate quickened. He looked down onto his lap where a severed arm lay, snapped off at the elbow, dowsed in blood and leaking entrails from the part where it had been severed or ripped from the rest of the limb. He could smell the decomposition, as if the meat was old, ripped perhaps fresh from the bone the night before, or at least many, many hours ago. Yet, the black blood still oozed, and the stench intensified. Peach could never control his actions in such cases as these, and he found himself doing things involuntarily, which he really didn't want to—or, rather, committing acts he would never have wished to in his normal existence. It was like, during these trances—like in dreams—inhibitions went through the window, and the imaginer became the main character in his/her dreams (or nightmares) where, as here, the act of taking a bite out of this dismembered arm seemed the natural thing to do, given presently Peach wasn't his own person. It was like he was just a Penny Arcade puppet like the ones you came across at Blackpool Pleasure Beach in the summer holidays, with an invisible demonic force pulling each and every tiny string.

He tasted the raw meat in his mouth and sank his teeth into the tethered flesh. Blood filled his mouth and gullet, cementing the blind fact it was the real McCoy, since he experienced the thick warmth in his stomach as he swallowed more and more as he licked his sticky, cloying lips with relish—for him, it was a delicious snack.

The pain came in waves, just as the truck ploughed into the bus head-on.

Yet, no truck ploughed into the bus—it was solely his imagination, the vision enacting this and taking him to a separate, new extreme, one of complete and extreme horror.

In his agony, Peach stared through pained eyes as a young woman was catapulted from her seat on the bus into the front upstairs window, where as her skull made contact with the hard surface, it cracked and split. Her blood and brain tissue fragmented and exploded from her heavily fractured cranium, showering other windows and seats with pus and goo. There was nothing left of it in the end except just an oozing stump as her deceased body collapsed in a

heap at the front of the bus, when it screeched to a halt and suddenly swerved off the road into a grass gully.

“Please no, this isn’t happening!” Peach yelled as he was jerked about.

And then he heard the voice...

“We’ve arrived at the station in Workington. Are you all right?” the woman said, the one whose brain exploded during the collision with the oncoming speeding truck on the wrong side of the road. “You look as if you just saw a ghost?”

Blinking rapidly, Peach had to admit, “Perhaps I just have. I’m sorry, are we here?”

“We’re at the station. The stop ends here. You’re at Workington...last stop, the station.”

Still in pain, Peach managed a weak smile and got up out of his seat. “Thank you, miss. I must have fallen asleep. A bit of a bad dream...these things happen, nightmares and scary shit, eh?” he chuckled.

The woman laughed, “We all get nightmares. Some worse than others, I suppose. We don’t all dream the same things.”

Together, they made their way off the bus, where they separated with brief smiles in the station and a minor wave.

She was an attractive girl yet not the kind Peach went for.

Looking around for a shop, he decided a Red Bull energy drink might perk him up, but then decided against it, finally entering a Heron Store and purchasing a can of Diet Coke. Red Bull would have sped his heart and increased his headache. Ten minutes later, Peach felt fine and good as new when he made his way along the pavement through Workington town towards the surgery—the doctor’s clinic was not far from here. He’d be there in no time at all, give it five or ten minutes for the breezy walk across the sloping gables and down the grass embankment next to the small beck. The clinic was just down the hill from here.

The beck was a rudimentary old-fashioned stream, a river if you like, often frequented in these hazy summer months by locals and tourists to the area alike. It was pretty here, with smatterings of colourful flowers and shrubs. These blossomed here and there, mainly across the embankment and the river’s edge, with tall, tortured-looking Oaks that stood there in their full spooked majesty. Their branches and spindly bows stretched out to grab those they didn’t like the look of, or just to verify how tortured they indeed were. A horror author would relish in setting to work and describing these warped scenic wonders. It was a deep shame that today of all days it rained heavily and blew a gale. The Oaks branches swayed and even looked loose or in danger of getting dismembered, snapping off in the wind. The stream seemed to enact a mode of panic-stricken confusion, hurriedly rushing along in the heavy winds that upset and dominated its ebb and flow—its tide looked bewildered and erratic, shunting any prospective promise of an early reprieve.

Regardless, Peach Morrison decided to sit on this embankment for a while and observe the water’s activity in the wind, as well as listen to the trees. The groans of its expedient timber

and the rustle of its branches and escaping leaves continued, opting to settle on the grass and shrubbery below, or simply wash away from hereabouts and head downstream to perhaps more sunnier climbs.

After a while, Peach shivered as he realized he had better shift his arse and quick, since his appointment with the GP was a mere ten minutes away and it was more often than not better to be early instead of late on such occasions. He stood up after he paused to drain and toss his empty can of pop into the beck. So much for a cleaner environment...

He laughed and thought, fuck it, who cares, I certainly don't, why should I? It was totally the wrong attitude, of course, but the attitude of many of his generation nevertheless. Let the sea creatures choke and die, not my problem...

Before long, Peach had arrived and was sat amongst at least ten other folk in the waiting room of the GP surgery. In his mind, over and over—like during most of the bus trip here, and his time at the beck—he discovered he was in deep concentration, seeking some obstinate help that was simply not forthcoming—as he mustered anything and everything to say to his consultant regards his description of this ridiculous condition. He recognized the difficulty he'd have in projecting his case and explaining the main symptoms. Aware of this, he stood when summoned and entered the kindly Pakistani gentleman's office. Peach was glad to leave the waiting room. Somebody—an OAP geezer maybe—had farted and the whole fucking room required fumigating—and bloody fast—to perhaps make attempts to stave off a potential zombie-like contagion, brought about by the aromatic stink hanging in the atmosphere.

The doctor smiled warmly and gestured for Peach to sit down. "Mr Morrison, I believe? May I call you Peter?"

"No bother, yes, of course."

Dr Khan typed a few things onto his data base and then grinned more. His two front teeth looked at odds with each other, slightly splayed in his gums. Surely he'd heard of a brace?

"What seems to be the matter, Peter...?"

Already, Peach felt patronized and offended by the doctor. This wasn't going to be easy, he knew. "I've been having mental visions," he explained, trying not to grin (although he wanted to—and desperately), since everything was so damned surreal, as he added, "I've been having nightmares, except I'm fully awake when I have them."

Dr Khan frowned, "That sounds highly peculiar." He sat back in his chair and folded his arms. "Are they frightful visions, horrible and gory, bloody and nightmarish, only they happen in daylight hours whilst you are completely awake?"

Sighing, Peach said, "Yes, precisely—that's exactly the problem!"

"Can you differentiate between the visions and reality? I mean, how do you know you are conscious and fully awake and alert right this moment, or in fact presently embroiled in one of your visions?"

“I’m awake now, I know I am,” Peach said, and saw the doctor flinch slightly, perhaps at how effeminate he came across, since Peach could be quite the drama queen at times. He added, “I see bloody, horrible things, dismembered limbs ripped from their sockets, eyeballs exploding, ripped out tongues, toothless mouths...but when presented with these horrors, although shocked and horrified, I continue to love and eat the raw decomposing flesh...I can taste it, and I like it!”

“That sounds thoroughly disgusting. It sounds to me like you have a vivid imagination. Ever thought of writing these thoughts down in a novel...I dare say, you’d make a living at it?”

“No, the thought hadn’t crossed my mind.”

“Tell me something, sir, and this might sound a bit odd, a bit imposing?”

Peach looked at the man in disbelief. He think he knew what was coming next as it was asked many, many times. It was getting ridiculous, because the simple and same response was so bloody obvious every time. It was nobody’s business. The dumbest question ever but asked almost all the time.

The doctor tilted his head to one side and seemed to ponder. He knew his question was offensive. “Are you homosexual, sir?”

“Yes, I am, for your information. I didn’t come here to sit facing you and listen to you question my sexuality.”

Dr Khan smiled knowingly, and said, “But this explains a great deal. Homosexuality can be the main cause of the problem for...” He paused, quickly asking, “...are you a practising homosexual, by chance, Mr Morrison?”

It had suddenly turned from Peter to Mr Morrison. Some fucking doctor’s appointment this was turning out to be.

“I was Peter a minute ago, what changed? Is it because I’m gay...or a dirty homosexual as you might put it, rotten and depraved, a social outcast, a pervert that deserves nothing smaller than death, perhaps a quick uniform beheading for his crimes?”

Khan looked at Peach gravely and said curtly, “I’m not a Jihad terrorist, sir. I’m merely stating the facts, and suggesting that one’s sexual preferences and the way they are conducted, in private or elsewhere, may indeed be the root cause of your schizophrenia, and—as in your case—the cause of all the problems you are experiencing presently, these horrors you envisage during your daily routine...as simple as that, Mr Morrison.”

“I’m not schizophrenic, Dr Khan. Just because I’m gay doesn’t ordain me as somebody suffering from a mental illness...Christ, where do you people draw the line?” Peach said, by now frustrated with this utter buffoon.

Khan leant forward in his chair. “Look deep into my face,” he said, “and tell me what you see.”

“I already see it, doctor. I see ignorance.”

But Peach did look into Khan's face, before long realizing nothing here was based in reality yet steeped in the quagmire of fantasy. He wasn't in the surgery. He was still on the upper deck of the bus on his way to Workington. He looked down to his lap and observed the severed limb, dowsed in thick, black congealed blood, a mess on his trousers as it oozed pus. He looked to the front window of the bus and already he had begun to anticipate that big truck blustering forth out of the rain and gale, when it would collide with the bus head-on, killing everybody on board including Peach Morrison—because this he now knew and was at peace with it, when tempered understanding and knowledge of the Unknown flushed through him in quick sudden waves, making him tingle from head to foot. Obviously, this was the sum of all his previous visions. Also, this was the grand finale which marked an utter completion of all visions, as the moulds of Unknown Law shaped and dripped like blood into the crooks and hollows of his psyche and prepared to nestle there for an eternity. Indeed, this was a vision of truth. Peach even turned and looked at the young woman who sat there to his left, and she did not know what was coming or that she was about to get flung through the upper deck of the red Stagecoach bus to her sudden, messy death. In fact, her head was about to get smashed, her brain splattered everywhere.

Suddenly, pandemonium took place as the truck struck and death and its quarry took precedence. Here, as these seemingly innocent lives extinguished, the visions and their like shifted through time and space to occupy other residencies and residents, in swift preparation that they may dwell elsewhere in the minds and psyches of those previously weakened and troubled in life.

THE END

THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Sixty-One

“Ward?”

“Yeah, what is it, babe... uh, Lacey...” Ward asked her.

(“Dammit,” Ward muttered silently to himself. ‘What the hell is it with all these chicks tryin’ to civilize me? First, Illara, then Emily, then Dimara, fer gawd’s sake! After that, it’s Emily’s mother, Joyce, and finally, at last, it’s Lacey. And Lacey’s a gawddamn hooker!

“And every damn last one of them gotta be improving me. Gotta be civilizing the hell outta me. Damn it.” Soon as I get myself untangled from all this slapstick horse shit, I’m sticking with the party girls. They don’ want nuthin’ from me but a good time. And money.”)

“That red light...”

“Yeah. I’ve been watchin’ it.”

“What is it? What does it mean, I wonder?”

“It means they have power over there, for one thing,” Ward remarked. Lacey giggled.

“Yeah. That’s one thing we can be sure of,” she said. “But what else? Have you ever seen anything like that before?”

“Lights? Beams, laser beacons? Yeah, sure. I’ve seen all of them, and I’m guessing you maybe have, too.”

“Yeah, I guess so...” Lacey began to say.

“I can’t be sure,” Ward said. “But I’m supposin’ motion detector. Makes most sense. Cheap. You can put them up damn near everywhere....”

“Yeah...” Lacey agreed. “Ed had a few dozen at his place...”

“Ssst!” Ward threw up his hand, signaling Lacey to silence.

He pushed her sidelong into the narrow crevasse between two cages, a bit of accidental architecture brought about by lazy workmanship. This careless effort happened to work in Ward’s favor.

Some distance away, the silhouettes of three men passed before the gleaming red beam. Pistols were clearly drawn, and the targets of those pistols were obvious. The three silhouettes turned toward the

Ward shoved Lacey behind himself, pulled his combat knife from its sheath, threaded his fingers through the grips in the handle, and waited for the three silhouettes to pass before him.

Hollow footsteps echoed down the darkened, rusted hallway. Whispered commands given back and forth between those who hunted him came to Ward's ears.

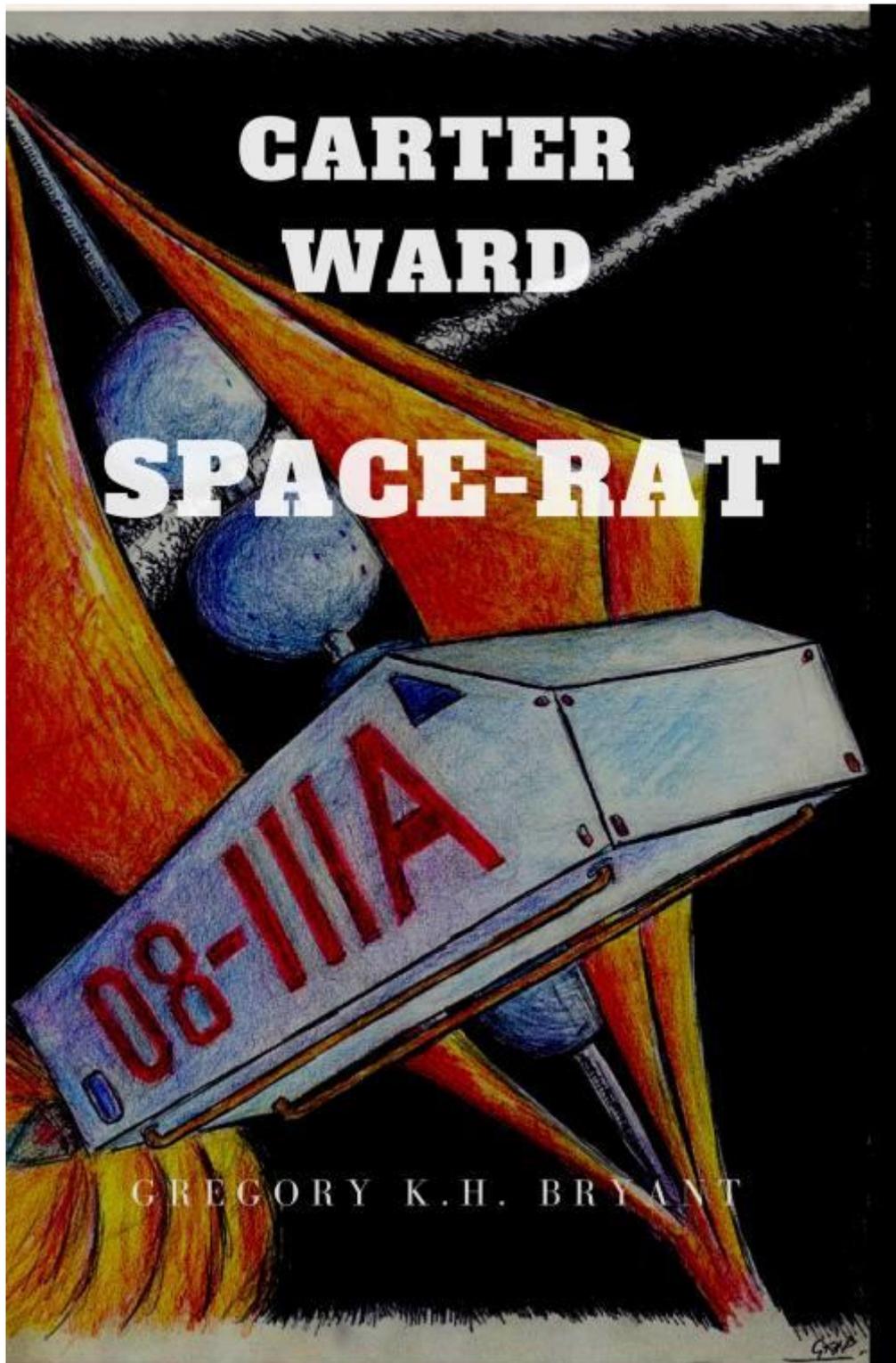
"Yuh sure?" came the whispered question.

"Yeah," came the nearly inaudible answer. "Thuh machine said it caught some motion this way."

"Shut it, idiots. Keep yer yaps closed."

All three men fell silent. They passed Ward's position in a single file, with a good six feet separating each from the man in front of him.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE



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

ERIC BRIGHTEYES by H Rider Haggard

XXI: How Hall of Lithdale Took Tidings to Iceland

Now on the same night that Atli died at the hand of Eric, Swanhild spake with Hall of Lithdale, whom she had summoned from the mainland. She bade him do this: take passage in a certain ship that should sail for Iceland on the morrow from the island that is called Westra, and there tell all these tidings of the ill-doings of Eric and of the slaying of Atli by his hand.

“Thou shalt say this,” she went on, “that Eric had been my love for long, but that at length the matter came to the ears of Atli, the Earl. Then, holding this the greatest shame, he went on holmgang with Eric and was slain by him. This shalt thou add to thy tale also, that presently Eric and I will wed, and that Eric shall rule as Earl in Orkneys. Now these tidings must soon come to the ears of Gudruda the Fair, and she will send for thee, and question thee straightly concerning them, and thou shalt tell her the tale as thou toldest it at first. Then thou shalt give Gudruda this packet, which I send her as a gift, saying, that I bade her remember a certain oath which Eric took as to the cutting of his hair. And when she sees that which is within the packet is somewhat stained, tell her that is but the blood of Atli that is upon it, as his blood is upon Eric’s hands. Now remember thou this, Hall, that if thou fail in the errand thy life shall pay forfeit, for presently I will also come to Iceland and hear how thou hast sped.”

Then Swanhild gave him faring-money and gifts of wadmál and gold rings, promising that he should have so much again when she came to Iceland.

Hall said that he would do all these things, and went at once; nor did he fail in his tasks.

Atli being dead, Eric loosed his hand and called to the men to take up his body and bear it to the hall. This they did. Eric stood and watched them till they were lost in the darkness.

“Whither now, lord?” said Skallagrim.

“It matters little,” said Eric. “What is thy counsel?”

“This is my counsel. That we take ship and sail back to the King in London. There we will tell all this tale. It is a far cry from Straumey to London town, and there we shall sit in peace, for the King will think little of the slaying of an Orkney Earl in a brawl about a woman. Mayhap, too, the Lady Elfrida will not set great store by it. Therefore, I say, let us fare back to London.”

“In but one place am I at home, and that is Iceland,” said Eric. “Thither I will go, Skallagrim, though it be but to miss friend from stead and bride from bed. At the least I shall find Ospakar there.”

“Listen, lord!” said Skallagrim. “Was it not my rede that we should bide this winter through in London? Thou wouldst none of it, and what came about? Our ship is sunk, gone are our comrades, thine honour is tarnished, and dead is thy host at thine own hand. Yet I say all is not lost. Let us hence south, and see no more of Swanhild, of Gudruda, of Björn and Ospakar. So shall we break the spell. But if thou goest to Iceland, I am sure of this: that the evil fate which Atli foretold will fall on thee, and the days to come shall be even more unlucky than the days that have been.”

“It may be so,” said Eric. “Methinks, indeed, it will be so. Henceforth I am Eric the Unlucky. I will go back to Iceland and there play out the game. I care little if I live or am slain—I have no more joy in my life. I stand alone, like a fir upon a mountain-top, and every wind from heaven and every storm of hail and snow beats upon my head. But I say to thee, Skallagrim: go thy road, and leave a luckless man to his ill fate. Otherwise it shall be thine also. Good friend hast thou been to me; now let us part and wend south and north. The King will be glad to greet thee yonder in London, Lambstail.”

“But one severing shall we know, lord,” said Skallagrim, “and that shall be sword’s work, nor will it be for long. It is ill to speak such words as these of the parting of lord and thrall. Bethink thee of the oath I swore on Mosfell. Let us go north, since it is thy will: in fifty years it will count for little which way we wended from the Isles.”

So they went together down to the shore, and, finding a boat and men who as yet knew nothing of what had chanced to Atli, they sailed across the firth at the rising of the moon.

Two days afterwards they found a ship at Wick that was bound for Fareys, and sailed in her, Eric buying a passage with the half of a gold ring that the King had given him in London.

Here at Fareys they sat a month or more; but not in the Earl’s hall as when Eric came with honour in the Gudruda, but in a farmer’s stead. For the tale of Eric’s dealings with Atli and Atli’s wife had reached Fareys, and the Earl there had been a friend of Atli’s. Moreover, Eric was now a poor man, having neither ship nor goods, nor friends. Therefore all looked coldly on him, though they wondered at his beauty and his might. Still, they dared not to speak ill or make a mock of him; for, two men having done so, were nearly slain of Skallagrim, who seized the twain by the throat, one in either hand, and dashed their heads together. After that men said little.

They sat there a month, till at length a chapman put in at Fareys, bound for Iceland, and they took passage with him, Eric paying the other half of his gold ring for ship-room. The chapman was not willing to give them place at first, for he, too, had heard the tale; but Skallagrim offered him choice, either to do so or to go on holmgang with him. Then the chapman gave them passage.

Now it is told that when his thralls and house-carles bore the corpse of Atli the Earl to his hall in Straumey, Swanhild met it and wept over it. And when the spokesman among them stood forward and told her those words that Atli had bidden them to say to her, sparing none, she spoke thus:

“My lord was distraught and weak with loss of blood when he spoke thus. The tale I told him was true, and now Eric has added to his sin by shedding the blood of him whom he wronged so sorely.”

And thereafter she spoke so sweetly and with so much gentleness, craft, and wisdom that, though they still doubted them, all men held her words weighty. For Swanhild had this art, that she could make the false sound true in the ears of men and the true sound false.

Still, being mindful of their oath, they hunted for Koll and found him. And when the thrall knew that they would slay him he ran thence screaming. Nor did Swanhild lift a hand to save

his life, for she desired that Koll should die, lest he should bear witness against her. Away he ran towards the cliffs, and after him sped Atli's house-carles, till he came to the great cliffs that edge in the sea. Now they were close upon him and their swords were aloft. Then, sooner than know the kiss of steel, the liar leapt from the cliffs and was crushed, dying miserably on the rocks below. This was the end of Koll the Half-witted, Groa's thrall.

Swanhild sat in Straumey for a while, and took all Atli's heritage into her keeping, for he had no male kin; nor did any say her nay. Also she called in the moneys that he had out at interest, and that was a great sum, for Atli was a careful and a wealthy man. Then Swanhild made ready to go to Iceland. Atli had a great dragon of war, and she manned that ship and filled it with stores and all things needful. This done, she set stewards and grieves over the Orkney lands and farms, and, when the Earl was six weeks dead, she sailed for Iceland, giving out that she went thither to set a blood-suit on foot against Eric for the death of Atli, her lord. There she came in safety just as folk rode to the Thing.

Now Hall of Lithdale came to Iceland and told his tale of the doings of Eric and the death of Atli. Oft and loud he told it, and soon people gossiped of it in field and fair and stead. Björn, Asmund's son, heard this talk and sent for Hall. To him also Hall told the tale.

"Now," said Björn, "we will go to my sister Gudruda the Fair, and learn how she takes these tidings."

So they went in to where Gudruda sat spinning in the hall, singing as she span.

"Greeting, Gudruda," said Björn; "say, hast thou tidings of Eric Brighteyes, thy betrothed?"

"I have no tidings," said Gudruda.

"Then here is one who brings them."

Now for the first time Gudruda the Fair saw Hall of Lithdale. Up she sprang. "Thou hast tidings of Eric, Hall? Ah! thou art welcome, for no tidings have come of him for many a month. Speak on," and she pressed her hand against her heart and leaned towards him.

"My tidings are ill, lady."

"Is Eric dead? Say not that my love is dead!"

"He is worse than dead," said Hall. "He is shamed."

"There thou liest, Hall," she answered. "Shame and Eric are things apart."

"Mayst thou think so when thou hast heard my tale, lady," said Hall, "for I am sad at heart to speak it of one who was my mate."

"Speak on, I say," answered Gudruda, in such a voice that Hall shrank from her. "Speak on; but of this I warn thee: that if in one word thou liest, that shall be thy death when Eric comes."

Now Hall was afraid, thinking of the axe of Skallagrim. Still, he might not go back upon his

word. So he began at the beginning, telling the story of how he was wounded in the fight with Ospakar's ships and left Farey isles, and how he came thence to Scotland and sat in Atli's hall on Orkneys. Then he told how the Gudruda was wrecked on Straume, and, of all aboard, Eric and Skallagrim alone were saved because of Swanhild's dream.

"Herein I see witch-work," said Gudruda.

Then Hall told that Eric became Swanhild's love, but of the other tale which Swanhild had whispered to Atli he said nothing. For he knew that Gudruda would not believe this, and, moreover, if it were so, Swanhild had not sent the token which he should give.

"It may well be," said Gudruda, proudly; "Swanhild is fair and light of mind. Perchance she led Brighteyes into this snare." But, though she spoke thus, bitter jealousy and anger burned in her breast and she remembered the sight which she had seen when Eric and Swanhild met on the morn of Atli's wedding.

Then Hall told of the slaying of Atli the Good by Eric, but he said nothing of the Earl's dying words, nor of how he goaded Brighteyes with his bitter words.

"It was an ill deed in sooth," said Gudruda, "for Eric to slay an old man whom he had wronged. Still, it may chance that he was driven to it for his own life's sake."

Then Hall said that he had seen Swanhild after Atli's slaying, and that she had told him that she and Eric should wed shortly, and that Eric would rule in Orkneys by her side.

Gudruda asked if that was all his tale.

"Yes, lady," answered Hall, "that is all my tale, for after that I sailed and know not what happened. But I am charged to give something to thee, and that by the Lady Swanhild. She bade me say this also: that, when thou lookest on the gift, thou shouldst think on a certain oath which Eric took as to the cutting of his hair." And he drew a linen packet from his breast and gave it to her.

Thrice Gudruda looked on it, fearing to open it. Then, seeing the smile of mockery on Björn's cold face, she took the shears that hung at her side and cut the thread with them. And as she cut, a lock of golden hair rose from the packet, untwisting itself like a living snake. The lock was long, and its end was caked with gore.

"Whose hair is this?" said Gudruda, though she knew the hair well.

"Eric's hair," said Hall, "that Swanhild cut from his head with Eric's sword."

Now Gudruda put her hand to her bosom. She drew out a satchel, and from the satchel a lock of yellow hair. Side by side she placed the locks, looking first at one and then at the other.

"This is Eric's hair in sooth," she said—"Eric's hair that he swore none but I should cut! Eric's hair that Swanhild shore with Whitefire from Eric's head—Whitefire whereon we plighted troth! Say now, whose blood is this that stains the hair of Eric?"

"It is Atli's blood, whom Eric first dishonoured and then slew with his own hand," answered

Hall.

Now there burned a fire on the hearth, for the day was cold. Gudruda the Fair stood over the fire and with either hand she let the two locks of Eric's hair fall upon the embers. Slowly they twisted up and burned. She watched them burn, then she threw up her hands and with a great cry fled from the hall.

Björn and Hall of Lithdale looked on each other.

"Thou hadst best go hence!" said Björn; "and of this I warn thee, Hall, though I hold thy tidings good, that, if thou hast spoken one false word, that will be thy death. For then it would be better for thee to face all the wolves in Iceland than to stand before Eric in his rage."

Again Hall bethought himself of the axe of Skallagrim, and he went out heavily.

That day a messenger came from Gudruda to Björn, saying that she would speak with him. He went to where she sat alone upon her bed. Her face was white as death, and her dark eyes glowed.

"Eric has dealt badly with thee, sister, to bring thee to this sorrow," said Björn.

"Speak no evil of Eric to me," Gudruda answered. "The evil that he has done will be paid back to him; there is little need for thee to heap words upon his head. Hearken, Björn my brother: is it yet thy will that I should wed Ospakar Blacktooth?"

"That is my will, surely. There is no match in Iceland as this Ospakar, and I should win many friends by it."

"Do this then, Björn. Send messengers to Swinefell and say to Ospakar that if he would still wed Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter, let him come to Middalhof when folk ride from the Thing and he shall not go hence alone. Nay, I have done. Now, I pray thee speak no more to me of Eric or of Ospakar. Of the one I have seen and heard enough, and of the other I shall hear and see enough in the years that are to come."

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

5. Zaemon's Curse

It appeared that for the present at any rate I was to have my residence in the royal pyramid. The glittering cavalcade drew up in the great paved square which lies before the building, and massed itself in groups. The mammoth was halted before the doorway, and when a stair had been brought, the trumpets sounded, and we three who had ridden in the golden half-castle under the canopy of snakes, descended to the ground.

It was plain that we were going from beneath the open sky to the apartments which lay inside the vast stone mazes of the pyramid, and without thinking, the instinct of custom and reverence that had become part of my nature caused me to turn to where the towering rocks of the Sacred Mountain frowned above the city, and make the usual obeisance, and offer up in silence the prescribed prayer. I say I did this thing unthinking, and as a matter of common custom, but when I rose to my feet, I could have sworn I heard a titter of laughter from somewhere in that fancifully bedecked crowd of onlookers.

I glanced in the direction of the scoffers, frowningly enough, and then I turned to Phorenice to demand their prompt punishment for the disrespect. But here was a strange thing. I had looked to see her in the act and article of rising from an obeisance; but there she was, standing erect, and had clearly never touched her forehead to the ground. Moreover, she was regarding me with a queer look which I could not fathom.

But whatever was in her mind, she had no plan to bawl about it then before the people collected in the square. She said to me, "Come," and, turning to the doorway, cried for entrance, giving the secret word appointed for the day. The ponderous stone blocks, which barred the porch, swung back on their hinges, and with stately tread she passed out of the hot sunshine into the cool gloom beyond, with the fan-girl following decorously at her heels. With a heaviness beginning to grow at my heart, I too went inside the pyramid, and the stone doors, with a sullen thud, closed behind us.

We did not go far just then. Phorenice halted in the hall of waiting. How well I remembered the place, with the pictures of kings on its red walls, and the burning fountain of earth-breath which blazed from a jet of bronze in the middle of the flooring and gave it light. The old King that was gone had come this far of his complaisance when he bade me farewell as I set out twenty years before for my vice-royalty in Yucatan. But the air of the hall was different to what it had been in those old days. Then it was pure and sweet. Now it was heavy with some scent, and I found it languid and oppressive.

"My minister," said the Empress, "I acquit you of intentional insult; but I think the colonial air has made you a very simple man. Such an obeisance as you showed to that mountain not a minute since has not been made since I was sent to reign over this kingdom."

"Your Majesty," I said, "I am a member of the Priests' Clan and was brought up in their tenets. I have been taught, before entering a house, to thank the Gods, and more especially our Lord the Sun, for the good air that He and They have provided. It has been my fate more than once to be chased by streams of fire and stinking air amongst the mountains during one of their sudden boils, and so I can say the prescribed prayer upon this matter straight from my heart."

“Circumstances have changed since you left Atlantis,” said Phorenice, “and when thanks are given now, they are not thrown at those old Gods.”

I saw her meaning, and almost started at the impiety of it. If this was to be the new rule of things, I would have no hand in it. Fate might deal with me as it chose. To serve truly a reigning monarch, that I was prepared for; but to palter with sacrilege, and accept a swineherd’s daughter as a God, who should receive prayers and obeisances, revolted my manhood. So I invited a crisis.

“Phorenice,” I said, “I have been a priest from my childhood up, revering the Gods, and growing intimate with their mysteries. Till I find for myself that those old things are false, I must stand by that allegiance, and if there is a cost for this faithfulness I must pay it.”

She looked at me with a slow smile. “You are a strong man, Deucalion,” she said.

I bowed.

“I have heard others as stubborn,” she said, “but they were converted.” She shook out the ruddy bunches of her hair, and stood so that the light of the burning earth-breath might fall on the loveliness of her face and form. “I have found it as easy to convert the stubborn as to burn them. Indeed, there has been little talk of burning. They have all rushed to conversion, whether I would or no. But it seems that my poor looks and tongue are wanting in charm to-day.”

“Phorenice is Empress,” I said stolidly, “and I am her servant. To-morrow, if she gives me leave, I will clear away this rabble which clamours outside the walls. I must begin to prove my uses.”

“I am told you are a pretty fighter,” said she. “Well, I hold some small skill in arms myself, and have a conceit that I am something of a judge. To-morrow we will take a taste of battle together. But to-day I must carry through the honourable reception I have planned for you, Deucalion. The feast will be set ready soon, and you will wish to make ready for the feast. There are chambers here selected for your use, and stored with what is needful. Ylga will show you their places.”

We waited, the fan-girl and I, till Phorenice had passed out of the glow of the light-jet, and had left the hall of waiting through a doorway amongst the shadows of its farther angle, and then (the girl taking a lamp and leading) we also threaded our way through the narrow mazes of the pyramid.

Everywhere the air was full of perfumes, and everywhere the passages turned and twisted and doubled through the solid stone of the pyramid, so that strangers might have spent hours—yes, or days—in search before they came to the chamber they desired. There was a fine cunningness about those forgotten builders who set up this royal pyramid. They had no mind that kings should fall by the hand of vulgar assassins who might come in suddenly from outside. And it is said also that the king of the time, to make doubly sure, killed all that had built the pyramid, or seen even the lay of its inner stones.

But the fan-girl led the way with the lamp swinging in her hand, as one accustomed to the

mazes. Here she doubled, there she turned, and here she stopped in the middle of a blank wall to push a stone, which swung to let us pass. And once she pressed at the corner of a flagstone on the floor, which reared up to the thrust of her foot, and showed us a stair steep and narrow. That we descended, coming to the foot of an inclined way which led us upward again; and so by degrees we came unto the chamber which had been given for my use.

“There is raiment in all these chests which stand by the walls,” said the girl, “and jewels and gauds in that bronze coffer. They are Phorenice’s first presents, she bid me say, and but a small earnest of what is to come. My Lord Deucalion can drop his simplicity now, and fig himself out in finery to suit the fashion.”

“Girl,” I said sharply, “be more decorous with your tongue, and spare me such small advice.”

“If my Lord Deucalion thinks this a rudeness, he can give a word to Phorenice, and I shall be whipped. If he asks it, I can be stripped and scourged before him. The Empress will do much for Deucalion just now.”

“Girl,” I said, “you are nearer to that whipping than you think for.”

“I have got a name,” she retorted, looking at me sullenly from under her black brows. “They call me Ylga. You might have heard that as we rode here on the mammoth, had you not been so wrapped up in Phorenice.”

I gazed at her curiously. “You have never seen me before,” I said, “and the first words you utter are those that might well bring trouble to yourself. There is some object in all this.”

She went and pushed to the massive stone that swung in the doorway of the chamber. Then she put her little jewelled fingers on my garment and drew me carefully away from the airshaft into the farther corner. “I am the daughter of Zaemon,” she said, “whom you knew.”

“You bring me some message from him?”

“How could I? He lives in the priests’ dwellings on the Mountain you did obeisance to. I have not put eyes on him these two years. But when I saw you first step out from that red pavilion they had pitched at the harbour side, I—I felt a pity for you, Deucalion. I remembered you were my father’s, Zaemon’s, friend, and I knew what Phorenice had in store. She has been plotting it all these two months.”

“I cannot hear words against the Empress.”

“And yet—”

“What?”

She stamped her sandal upon the stone of the floor. “You must be a very blind man, Deucalion, or a very daring one. But I shall not interfere further; at least not now. Still, I shall watch, and if at any time you seem to want a friend I will try and serve you.”

“I thank you for your friendship.”

“You seem to take it lightly enough. Why, sir, even now I do not believe you know my power, any more than you guess my motive. You may be first man in this kingdom, but let me tell you I rank as second lady. And remember, women stand high in Atlantis now. Believe me, my friendship is a commodity that has been sought with frequency and industry.”

“And as I say, I am grateful for it. You seem to think little enough of my gratitude, Ylga; but, credit me, I never have bestowed it on a woman before, and so you should treasure it for its rarity.”

“Well,” she said, “my lord, there is an education before you.” She left me then, showing me how to call slaves when I wished for their help, and for a full minute I stood wondering at the words I had spoken to her. Who was the daughter of Zaemon that she should induce me to change the habit of a lifetime?

The slaves came at my bidding, and showed themselves anxious to deck me with a thousand foolishnesses in the matter of robes and gauds, and (what seemed to be the modern fashion of their class) holding out the virtues of a score of perfumes and unguents. Their manner irritated me. Clean I was already, and shaved; my hair was trim, and my robe was unsoiled; and, considering these pressing attentions of theirs something of an impertinence, I set them to beat one another as a punishment, promising that if they did not do it with thoroughness, I would hand them on to the brander to be marked with stripes which would endure. It is strange, but a common menial can often surpass even a rebellious general in power of ruffling one.

I had seen many strange sights that day, and undergone many new sensations; but of all the things which came to my notice, Phorenice’s manner of summoning the guests to her feast surprised me most. Nay, it did more; it shocked me profoundly; and I cannot say whether amazement at her profanity, or wonder at her power, was for the moment strongest in my breast. I sat in my chamber awaiting the summons, when gradually, growing out of nothing, a sound fell upon my ear which increased in volume with infinitely small graduations, till at last it became a clanging din which hurt the ear with its fierceness; and then (I guessed what was coming) the whole massive fabric of the pyramid trembled and groaned and shook, as though it had been merely a child’s wooden toy brushed about by a strong man’s sandal.

It was the portent served out yearly by the chiefs of the Priests’ Clan on the Sacred Mountain, when they bade all the world take count of their sins. It was the sacred reminder that from roaring, raging fire, and from the agony of monstrous earth-tremors, man had been born, and that by these same agencies he would eventually be swallowed up—he and the sins within his breast. And here the Empress was prostituting its solemnities into a mere call to gluttony, and sign for ribald laughter and sensuous display.

But how had she acquired the authority to do this thing? Who was she that she should tamper with those dimly understood powers, the forces that dwell within the liquid heart of our mother earth? Had there been treachery? Had some member of the Priests’ Clan forgotten his sacred vows, and babbled to this woman matters concerning the holy mysteries? Or had Phorenice discovered a key to these mysteries with her own agile brain?

If that last was the case, I could continue to serve her with silent conscience. Though she might be none of my making, at least she was Empress, and it was my duty to give her obedience. But if she had suborned some weaker member of the Clan on the Sacred Mount,

that would be a different matter. For be it remembered that it was one of the elements of our constitution to preserve our secrets and mysteries inviolate, and to pursue with undying hatred both the man who had dared to betray them, and the unhappy recipient of his confidence.

It was with very undecided feelings, then, that I obeyed the summons of the earth-shaking, and bade the slaves lead me through the windings of the pyramid to the great banqueting-hall. The scene there was dazzling. The majestic chamber with its marvellous carvings was filled with a company decked out with all the gauds and colours that fancy could conceive. Little recked they of the solemn portent which had summoned them to the meal, of the death and misery that stalked openly through the city wards without, of the rebels which lay in leaguer beyond the walls, of the neglected Gods and their clan of priests on the Sacred Mountain. They were all gluttonous for the passions of the moment; it was their fashion and conceit to look at nothing beyond.

Flaming jets of earth-breath lit the great hall to the brightness of midday; and when I stepped out upon the pavement, trumpets blared, so that all might know of my coming. But there was no roar of welcome. "Deucalion," they lisped with mincing voices, bowing themselves ridiculously to the ground so that all their ornaments and silks might jangle and swish. Indeed, when Phorenice herself appeared, and all sent up their cries and made lawful obeisance, there was the same artificiality in the welcome. They meant well enough, it is true; but this was the new fashion. Heartiness had come to be accounted a barbarism by this new culture.

A pair of posturing, smirking chamberlains took me in charge, and ushered me with their flimsy golden wands to the dais at the farther end. It appeared that I was to sit on Phorenice's divan, and eat my meat out of her dish.

"There is no stint to the honour the Empress puts upon me," I said, as I knelt down and took my seat.

She gave me one of her queer, sidelong looks. "Deucalion may have more beside, if he asks for it prettily. He may have what all the other men in the known world have sighed for, and what none of them will ever get. But I have given enough of my own accord; he must ask me warmly for those further favours."

"I ask," I said, "first, that I may sweep the boundaries clear of this rabble which is clamouring against the city walls."

"Pah," she said, and frowned. "Have you appetite only for the sterner pleasures of life? My good Deucalion, they must have been rustic folk in that colony of yours. Well, you shall give me news now of the toothsome of this feast."

Dishes and goblets were placed before us, and we began to eat, though I had little enough appetite for victual so broken and so highly spiced. But if this finicking cookery and these luscious wines did not appeal to me, the other diners in that gorgeous hall appreciated it all to the full. They sat about in groups on the pavement beneath the light-jets like a tangle of rainbows for colour, and according to the new custom they went into raptures and ecstasies over their enjoyment. Women and men both, they lingered over each titillation of the palate as though it were a caress of the Gods.

Phorenice, with her quick, bright eyes, looked on, and occasionally flung one or another a few words between her talk with me, and now and again called some favoured creature up to receive a scrap of viand from the royal dish. This the honoured one would eat with extravagant gesture, or (as happened twice) would put it away in the folds of his clothes as a treasure too dear to be profaned by human lips.

To me, this flattery appeared gross and disgusting, but Phorenice, through use, perhaps, seemed to take it as merely her due. There was, one had to suppose, a weakness in her somewhere, though truly to the outward seeing none was apparent. Her face was strong enough, and it was subtle also, and, moreover, it was wondrous comely. All the courtiers in the banqueting-hall raved about Phorenice's face and the other beauties of her body and limbs, and though not given to appreciation in these matters, I could not but see that here at least they had a groundwork for their admiration, for surely the Gods have never favoured mortal woman more highly. Yet lovely though she might be, for myself I preferred to look upon Ylga, the girl, who, because of her rank, was privileged to sit on the divan behind us as immediate attendant. There was an honesty in Ylga's face which Phorenice's lacked.

They did not eat to nutrify their bodies, these feasters in the banqueting-hall of the royal pyramid, but they all ate to cloy themselves, and they strutted forth new usages with every platter and bowl that the slaves brought. To me some of their manners were closely touching on disrespect. At the halfway of the meal, a gorgeous popinjay—he was a governor of an out-province driven into the capital by a rebellion in his own lands—this gorgeous fop, I say, walked up between the groups of feasters with flushed face and unsteady gait, and did obeisance before the divan. “Most astounding Empress,” cried he, “fairest among the Goddesses, Queen regnant of my adoring heart, hail!”

Phorenice with a smile stretched him out her cup. I looked to see him pour respectful libation, but no such thing. He set the drink to his lips and drained it to the final drop. “May all your troubles,” he cried, “pass from you as easily, and leave as pleasant a flavour.”

The Empress turned to me with one of her quick looks. “You do not like this new habit?”

To which I replied bluntly enough that to pour out liquor at a person's feet had grown through custom to be a mark of respect, but that drinking it seemed to me mere self-indulgence, which might be practised anywhere.

“You still keep to the old austere teachings,” she said. “Our newer code bids us enjoy life first, and order other things so as not to meddle with our more immediate pleasure.”

And so the feast went on, the guests practising their gluttonies and their absurdities, and the guards standing to their arms round the circuit of the walls as motionless and as stern as the statues carven in the white stone beyond them. But a term was put to the orgy with something of suddenness. There was a stir at the farther doorway of the banqueting-hall, and a clash, as two of the guards joined their spears across the entrance. But the man they tried to stop—or perhaps it was to pin—passed them unharmed, and walked up over the pavement between the lights, and the groups of feasters. All looked round at him; a few threw him ribald words; but none ventured to stop his progress. A few, women chiefly, I could see, shuddered as he passed them by, as though a wintry chill had come over them; and in the end he walked up and stood in front of Phorenice's divan, and gazed fixedly on her, but without making

obeisance.

He was a frail old man, with white hair tumbling on his shoulders, and ragged white beard. The mud of wayfaring hung in clots on his feet and legs. His wizened body was bare save for a single cloth wound about his shoulders and his loins, and he carried in his hand a wand with the symbol of our Lord the Sun glowing at its tip. That wand went to show his caste, but in no other way could I recognize him.

I took him for one of those ascetics of the Priests' Clan, who had forsworn the steady nurtured life of the Sacred Mountain, and who lived out in the dangerous lands amongst the burning hills, where there is daily peril from falling rocks, from fire streams, from evil vapours, from sudden fissuring of the ground, and from other movements of those unstable territories, and from the greater lizards and other monstrous beasts which haunt them. These keep constant in the memory the might of the Holy Gods, and the insecurity of this frail earth on which we have our resting-place, and so the sojourners there become chastened in the spirit, and gain power over mysteries which even the most studious and learned of other men can never hope to attain.

A silence filled the room when the old man came to his halt, and Phorenice was the first to break it. "Those two guards," she said, in her clear, carrying voice, "who held the door, are not equal to their work. I cannot have imperfect servants; remove them."

The soldiers next in the rank lifted their spears and drove them home, and the two fellows who had admitted the old man fell to the ground. One shrieked once, the other gave no sound: they were clever thrusts both.

The old man found his voice, thin, and high, and broken. "Another crime added to your tally, Phorenice. Not half your army could have hindered my entrance had I wished to come, and let me tell you that I am here to bring you your last warning. The Gods have shown you much favour; they gave you merit by which you could rise above your fellows, till at last only the throne stood above you. It was seen good by those on the Sacred Mountain to let you have this last ambition, and sit on this throne that has as long and honourably been filled by the ancient kings of Atlantis."

The Empress sat back on the divan smiling. "I seemed to get these things as I chose, and in spite of your friends' teeth. I may owe to you, old man, a small parcel of thanks, though that I offered to repay; but for my lords the priests, their permission was of small enough value when it came. I would have you remember that I was as firm on the throne of Atlantis as this pyramid stands upon its base when your worn-out priests came up to give their tottering benediction."

The old man waved aside her interruption. "Hear me out," he said. "I am here with no trivial message. There is nothing paltry about the threat I can throw at you, Phorenice. With your fire-tubes, your handling of troops, and your other fiendish clevernesses, you may not be easy to overthrow by mere human means, though, forsooth, these poor rebels who yap against your city walls have contrived to hold their ground for long enough now. It may be that you are becoming enervated; I do not know. It may be that you are too wrapped up in your feastings, your dressings, your pomps, and your debaucheries, to find leisure to turn to the art of war. It may be that the man's spirit has gone out from your arm and brain, and you are a woman once more—weak, and pleasure-loving; again I do not know.

“But this must happen: You must undo the evil you have done; you must give bread to the people who are starving, even if you take it from these gluttons in this hall; you must restore Atlantis to the state in which it was entrusted to you: or else you must be removed. It cannot be permitted that the country should sink back into the lawlessness and barbarism from which its ancient kings have digged it. You hear, Phorenice. Now give me true answer.”

“Speak him fair. Oh! For the sake of your fortune, speak him fair,” came Ylga’s voice in a hurried whisper from behind us. But the Empress took no notice of it. She leaned forward on the cushions of the divan with a knit brow.

“Do you dare to threaten me, old man, knowing what I am?”

“I know your origin,” he said gravely, “as well as you know it yourself. As for my daring, that is a small matter. He need be but a timid man who dares to say words that the High Gods put on his lips.”

“I shall rule this kingdom as I choose. I shall brook interference from no creature on this earth, or beneath it, or in the sky above. The Gods have chosen me to be Their regent in Atlantis, and They do not depose me through such creatures as you. Go away, old man, and play the fanatic in another court. It is well that I have an ancient kindness for you, or you would not leave this place unharmed.”

“Now, indeed, you are lost,” I heard Ylga murmur from behind, and the old man in front of us did not move a step. Instead, he lifted up the Symbol of our Lord the Sun, and launched his curse. “Your blasphemy gives the reply I asked for. Hear me now make declaration of war on behalf of Those against whom you have thrown your insults. You shall be overthrown and sent to the nether Gods. At whatever cost the land shall be purged of you and yours, and all the evil that has been done to it whilst you have sullied the throne of its ancient kings. You will not amend, neither will you yield tamely. You vaunt that you sit as firm on your throne as this pyramid reposes on its base. See how little you know of what the future carries. I say to you that, whilst you are yet Empress, you shall see this royal pyramid which you have polluted with your debaucheries torn tier from tier, and stone from stone, and scattered as feathers spread before a wind.”

“You may wreck the pyramid,” said Phorenice contemptuously. “I myself have some knowledge of the earth forces, as I have shown this night. But though you crumble every stone above us now and grind it into grit and dust, I shall still be Empress. What force can you crazy priests bring against me that I cannot throw back and destroy?”

“We have a weapon that was forged in no mortal smithy,” shrilled the old man, “whereof the key is now lodged in the Ark of the Mysteries. But that weapon can be used only as a last resource. The nature of it even is too awful to be told in words. Our other powers will be launched against you first, and for this poor country’s sake I pray that they may cause you to wince. Yet rest assured, Phorenice, that we shall not step aside once we have put a hand to this matter. We shall carry it through, even though the cost be a universal burning and destruction. For know this, daughter of the swineherd, it is agreed amongst the most High Gods that you are too full of sin to continue unchecked.”

“Speak him fairly,” Ylga urged from behind. “He has a power at which you cannot even

guess.”

The Empress made to rise, but Ylga clung to her skirt. “For the sake of your fame,” she urged, “for the sake of your life, do not defy him.” But Phorenice struck her fiercely aside, and faced the old man in a tumult of passion. “You dare call me a blasphemer, who blaspheme yourself? You dare cast slurs upon my birth, who am come direct from the most high Heaven? Old man, your craziness protects you in part, but not in all. You shall be whipped. Do you hear me? I say, whipped. The lean flesh shall be scourged from your scraggy bones, and you shall totter away from this place as a red and bleeding example for those who would dare traduce their Empress. Here, some of you, I say, take that man, and let him be whipped where he stands.”

Her cry went out clearly enough. But not a soul amongst those glittering feasters stirred in his place. Not a soldier amongst the guards stepped from his rank. The place was hung in a terrible silence. It seemed as though no one within the hall dared so much as to draw a breath. All felt that the very air was big with fate.

Phorenice, with her head crouched forward, looked from one group to another. Her face was working. “Have I no true servants,” she asked, “amongst all you pretty lip-servers?”

Still no one moved. They stood, or sat, or crouched like people fascinated. For myself, with the first words he had uttered, I had recognized the old man by his voice. It was Zaemon, the weak governor who had given the Empress her first step towards power; that earnest searcher into the mysteries, who knew more of their powers, and more about the hidden forces, than any other dweller on the Sacred Mountain, even at that time when I left for my colony. And now, during his strange hermit life, how much more might he not have learned? I was torn by warring duties. I owed much to the Priests’ Clan, by reason of my oath and membership; it seemed I owed no less to Phorenice. And, again, was Zaemon the truly accredited envoy of the high council of the priests of the Sacred Mountain? And was the Empress of a truth deposed by the High Gods above, or was she still Empress, and still the commander of my duty? I could not tell, and so I sat in my seat awaiting what the event would sow.

Phorenice’s fury was growing. “Do I stand alone here?” she cried. “Have I pampered you creatures out of all touch with gratitude? It seems that at last I want a new chief to my guards. Ho! Who will be chief of the guards of the Empress?”

There was a shifting of eyes, a hesitation. Then a great burly form strode up from the farther end of the hall, and a perceptible shudder went up from all the others as they watched him.

“So, Tarca, you prefer to take the risks, and remain chief of the guard yourself?” she said with an angry scoff. “Truly there did not seem to be many thrusting forward to strip you of the office. I shall have a fine sorting up of places in payment for this night’s work. But for the present, Tarca, do your duty.”

The man came up, obviously timorous. He was a solidly made fellow, but not altogether unmartial, and though but little of his cheek showed above his decorated beard, I could see that he paled as he came near to the priest. “My lord,” he said quietly, “I must ask you to come with me.”

“Stand aside,” said the old man, thrusting out the Symbol in front of him. I could see his eyes

gather on the soldier and his brows knit with a strain of will.

Tarca saw this too, and I thought he would have fallen, but with an effort he kept his manhood, and doggedly repeated his summons. "I must obey the command of my mistress, and I would have you remember, my lord, that I am but a servant. You must come with me to the whip."

"I warn you!" cried the old man. "Stand from out of my path, you!"

It must have been with the courage of desperation that the soldier dared to use force. But the hand he stretched out dropped limply back to his side the moment it touched the old man's bare shoulder, as though it had been struck by some shock. He seemed almost to have expected some such repulse; yet when he picked up that hand with the other, and looked at it, and saw its whiteness, he let out of him a yell like a wounded beast. "Oh, Gods!" he cried. "Not that. Spare me!"

But Zaemon was glowering at him still. A twitching seized the man's face, and he put up his sound hand to it and plucked at his beard, which was curled and plaited after the new fashion of the day. A woman standing near screamed as the half of the beard came off in his fingers. Beneath was silver whiteness over half his face. Zaemon had smitten him with a sudden leprosy that was past cure.

Yet the punishment was not ended even then. Other twitchings took him on other parts of the body, and he tore off his armour and his foppish clothes, and always where the bare flesh showed, there had the horrid plague written its white mark; and in the end, being able to endure no more, the man fell to the pavement and lay there writhing.

Zaemon said no further word. He lifted the Symbol before him, set his eyes on the farther door of the banqueting-hall and walked for it directly, all those in his path shrinking away from him with open shudders. And through the valves of the door he passed out of our sight, still wordless, still unchecked.

I glanced up at Phorenice. The loveliness of her face was drawn and haggard. It was the first great reverse, this, she had met with in all her life, and the shock of it, and the vision of what might follow after, dazed her. Alas, if she could only have guessed at a tenth of the terrors which the future had in its womb, Atlantis might have been saved even then.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK