

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 14, ISSUE 30

30TH JUNE 2019

CALL OF THE LAND SQUID

BY WALTER G
ESSELMAN
*THE BEST OF
BOTH WORLDS...*



COKE MACHINE

BY ALEX Z
SALINAS
*THERE'S A
PORTAL UNDER
HERE...*

THE STOWAWAY STEVEN HAVELOCK

RESEARCH MARTIN STEFKO

WWW.SCHLOCK.CO.UK

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

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

Schlock! Webzine

*Copyright © 2019 by Vincent Davis, Alex Z Salinas, Rob Bliss, Walter G Esselman, Steven
Havelock, Martin Stefko, Jesse Zimmerman, H Rider Haggard, C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 14, Issue 30
30th June 2019

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

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

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

This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *fantasy-2705034* by KELLEPICS. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

EDITORIAL

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

CALL OF THE LAND SQUID by Walter G Esselman—*The best of both worlds...* COMIC FANTASY

THE CASTLE OUROBOROS Part Eleven by Rob Bliss—*Faith in the asylum...* GOTHIC HORROR

COKE MACHINE by Alex Z Salinas—*There's a portal under here...* HORROR

THE STOWAWAY by Steven Havelock—*The greatest wizard that ever lived...* SCI FI

RESEARCH by Martin Stefko—*The dead can walk on earth again...* HORROR

THE CHALLENGER IN THE VALE OF DRAGOS Part Four by Jesse Zimmerman—*Lies!* MOCK HEROIC FANTASY

ERIC BRIGHTYES Chapter Twenty-Seven by H Rider Haggard—*How Swanhild Won Tidings of Eric...* SWORD AND SORCERY

THE LOST CONTINENT Chapter Twelve by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne—*The Drug of Our Lady the Moon...* SCIENCE FANTASY CLASSIC

EDITORIAL

This week a boy and a young dragon are all that stand between the city of Bon Su Pear and the terrible Land Squid. Friedrich Heine learns more about his host's other sister. Milton meets a crazy young woman who is looking for a portal. Two astronauts encounter a wizard in space. And the Professor asks his former student to kill him.

The people of the Vale of Dragos react poorly to Flora's revelation. Freya smiles upon Eric and Gudruda while Swanhild hatches her schemes. And Deucalion makes a secret visit to the temple of the Moon.

—Gavin Chappell

Now available from Rogue Planet Press: [Lovecraftiana Walpurgisnacht 2019](#)

LOVECRAFTIANA

THE MAGAZINE OF ELDRITCH HORROR

THE SKUDDA

Sam Graham

WOE, BABYLON BESIEGED

Mark Mellon

PLUS
CTHULHUVIAN
ART

from Dean
Wirth

VOLUME FOUR, ISSUE ONE

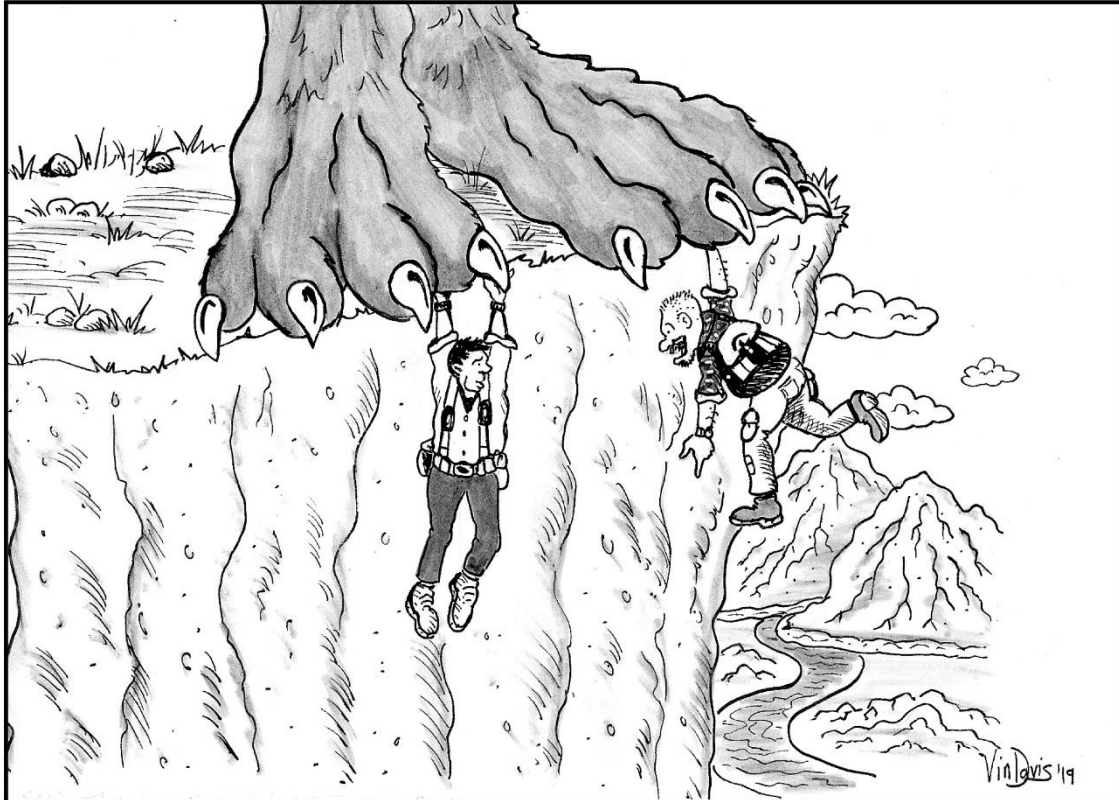
WALPURGISNACHT 2019

[Return to Contents](#)

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"LIKE I SAID, IT'S ABOUT THE JOURNEY *NOT* THE DESTINATION."

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

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

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

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

[Return to Contents](#)

CALL OF THE LAND SQUID by Walter G Esselman

Gideon heard a noise.

As he awoke slowly, his orange eyes scanned the room.

Through a hole in the castle wall—which was window-shaped—he could see an early morning sky. Opposite that, the wooden door was bolted shut.

And there was a young dragon, asleep on his back, in the middle of the floor.

Everything seemed normal.

Getting out of bed with a yawn, he walked over to the chamber pot. He was returning when he froze next to the window. Just outside was a red shell.

Muzzily, Gideon squinted, while his brain called out in alarm that something was really wrong here.

The shell looked gently mottled.

“Um, Pavataro,” called out Gideon, but the dragon just ignored him.

Tentatively, Gideon reached out towards the shell. But just as he was about to touch it, the shell shifted upwards quickly.

A giant yellow eye appeared in the window, and glared at the boy with an unblinking gaze.

“Gah!” cried out Gideon. He stumbled backwards, and his heel ran into the black and blue dragon. Tumbling backwards, the boy bounced off Pavataro’s stomach and rolled onto floor.

“What the hells!” growled Pavataro. Gideon sprung to his feet and pointed towards the window.

“Um...eye! Big eye outside window,” babbled Gideon.

The dragon, who was only six feet tall, looked over at a giant unblinking eye.

“So what, Lunchmeat?” said Pavataro using his old schoolyard nickname for the boy. “It’s a yellow eye. Next time, watch your step!”

But Gideon barely noticed that his roommate’s ill humour. The dragon was not much of a ‘Morning Person’ anyhow.

Circling the dragon, Gideon was moving closer to the eye when it shifted up.

Now the boy could hear sounds of something gigantic moving outside. The shell whipped by, and then it was gone. An enormous red tentacle swished past, and then it too disappeared from view.

“Mother of Bees,” whispered Gideon. He ran to jump into his pants and shrugged on his dragonskin coat. Hitting the door, the boy took a right. Sprinting down a quiet corridor, he reached an open door to one of the castle’s many balconies.

Out in the chill morning air, Gideon saw the spectacular city of Bon Su Pear below.

Ignoring the beautiful view, the boy twisted around and looked up. He knew that there was a lot of roof space on top of the castle.

Another tentacle whipped past overhead, but then it disappeared. It was massive. Easily as thick as an ancient tree. He hopped up onto the railing over a hundred foot drop to try and get a better look.

“Um,” came a voice from the door. “Please tell me you’re the kid who had dragon’s milk.”

Confused, Gideon looked over to see one of the royal guards in maroon watching him nervously.

“What?” asked the boy.

“You’re over a big drop,” said the young guard with a pained tone. “And I’d like to know that you wouldn’t die, if you fell.”

“Oh!” smiled Gideon. “I’m safe. I can’t fly like dragons, but I don’t plummet either.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Captain Doyle, and he came out onto the balcony followed by the rest of his squad.

“We got a big something,” said Gideon and he pointed up.

Doyle’s face contorted.

“I know—logically—that you’re not actually IN danger,” said Doyle. “But I’d appreciate it, if you came back down.”

Taking pity on him, Gideon jumped back down onto the balcony, and Doyle relaxed a little. The captain stepped over to the boy and looked up as well. But they saw only a regular white marble castle above.

“Have you seen it?” asked Doyle.

“Not really,” said Gideon. “But it’s got a big eye, and huge tentacles.”

“And it’s on top of my castle,” growled Doyle. “We’ve been trying to get to some vantage point to see the thing. But it’s not near any windows.”

“We could go up,” suggested Gideon.

Doyle looked sideways at the boy.

“How do I know you won’t do something stupid?” asked Doyle.

“Well, I’m probably going to go up there anyhow, just out of sheer curiosity,” said Gideon reasonably.

Doyle gave a long suffering sigh. “Just do it carefully. I don’t want to explain to His Majesty that I let you get eaten.”

Gideon grinned and ran back to the railing while the guard made nervous noises. Dropping his gravity, he hopped up onto the railing, and ran along it.

Leaping up onto the side of the castle, the boy started to make a series of jumps to scale the structure quickly.

The top of the castle had multiple turrets and a connecting roof. To the boy, it resembled hills and valleys.

Gideon reached a peaked roof and jumped on top of it. As he set down on the other side, a humongous red tentacle shot out at him. The boy dodged just in time as a tentacle hit the roof and punched right on through. The boy slid partly down the slanted roof.

Another tentacle came screaming towards him. He jumped away just before this second tentacle smashed into the roof. Deciding that running away was a good idea, he took a giant leap away from the tentacles.

At the edge of the rooftops, he finally stopped. But then he heard someone yelling, a little frantically.

Finding a safe spot, he peered over the edge of a roof.

“Oh thank Goddess!” shouted Doyle when he saw the boy. “You’re alive.”

“Working on not being dead, sir,” replied Gideon.

“What is it?” asked Doyle.

A voice directly behind Gideon’s ear asked. “Yes? What is it?”

The boy jumped out of his wits and almost slipped off the roof. Clutching the edge, he turned back to glare stabbingly at a grinning dragon.

“What’s wrong, Lunchmeat?” asked Pavataro with feigned innocence.

“Ass!” snapped Gideon.

“Who’s that?” asked Doyle from below.

“Just my idiot friend,” replied Gideon scathingly.

“Oh. Pavataro? Hey! You be safe too!” said Doyle with paternal concern.

The dragon leaned over the edge. "I will."

Gideon led Pavataro carefully across the rooftops this time. Taking a circular route, they finally got a good view of the creature. It was red and cylindrical with two gigantic yellow eyes at one end. And just past the eyes were eight shorter tentacles, and then two longer ones.

"What...what is that?" asked Pavataro as he squinted at it.

Before Gideon could confess his ignorance, the squid twisted. Using the eight shorter arms, it tipped the red cylinder of its body into the air.

"Hey look! At the top of it," said Gideon. "Opposite the tentacles, there's a hole in its shell. I wonder what that is..."

And the hole in the shell caught the wind.

It produced a high-pitched noise that staggered them.

The dragon's triangular ears pressed down, and he sprinted to the edge of the rooftops. Without slowing, Pavataro dove off the edge and flew away.

While the dragon escaped, Gideon ran to the edge of the roof. Dropping his gravity, the boy floated safely down to the balcony where the captain and his squad were covering their ears as well.

"What in the netherhells is that!" shouted Doyle.

"I'm... I'm not sure!" replied Gideon. He saw several of the squad suddenly dive away from the doorway. Pavataro landed heavily on to the balcony, and then he scrambled into the castle.

Gideon went to follow the dragon, who was looking miserable. Behind him, Doyle led his squad out of the noise. It was still loud, but at least more manageable inside the castle.

"I'm pretty sure I'm deaf," said Doyle.

"You should try having dragon's ears," grumbled Pavataro.

"This is not a contest in pain," admonished Gideon.

"My pain is still worse," muttered Pavataro.

Ignoring him, Gideon turned to the captain and described the creature above.

"What could that be?" wondered Doyle.

"Sounds like a land squid," said one of the squad, Glory. "My Da was a sailor, and he mentioned that these giant squids would climb up on islands, but he didn't know why."

Gideon's face lit up in joy, and he gave a shout like a battlecry. "To the library!"

As the boy sprinted towards the castle library, the young dragon let out a long suffering sigh.

"He's an idiot," muttered Pavataro. But then he sauntered in pursuit leaving a very perplexed squad.

Gideon was already in the library stacks when Pavataro arrived. The boy had a huge grin on his face as he scanned through the books. The young dragon settled down to wait since the noise was not so bad in here.

A cry of triumph woke Pavataro from a light doze.

"This had better be good," grumbled the dragon.

"It is! I found it!" cried Gideon, and he dropped in front of Pavataro. "It's a land squid!"

"We knew that, Lunchmeat," said Pavataro grumpily.

"Squidius Reallynoiscus," said Gideon.

"Gesundheit," replied Pavataro.

"No, that's its science name. It says here that the land squid comes out of the water every hundred years to... Oh! That noise is its mating call. That's what it's doing."

"And here I thought it was just trying to deafen dragons," muttered Pavataro.

"Ooooh, this book has Sound Symbols," muttered Gideon happily.

Gideon touched a symbol on the page, and a noise—which was similar to the one above—came out. But at a much more manageable volume.

"So, that's the mating call," said Gideon.

"I'm painfully aware," said the dragon as he glared at the boy.

Unruffled, Gideon pressed another symbol. The book produced a grotesque noise.

"Cute," said Pavataro. "So wait! What's the scientific name for dragons?"

"Badus Breathicus," replied Gideon absently.

"No it's not!" snapped Pavataro.

"But it's too soft a noise," said Gideon, deep in thought.

"Too soft for what?" said Pavataro cautiously.

"To lure the squid away from the castle," said Gideon.

“Even if we could get that noise to that fish, it’s going to be mad when it finds out that there isn’t another squid there.”

“We might have to move fast,” admitted Gideon. “But we’ve done that before.”

“What do you mean ‘We’?” asked Pavataro icily.

Tucking the book under his arm, Gideon ran towards the throne room.

The boy arrived only to find the throne empty of king. However, the king’s advisor was still there.

Gideon ran up to Dr. Indira Sundl.

“Where is everyone?” asked the boy worriedly.

The dark skinned woman straightened up. She had a pile of papers in her arms, but smiled warmly.

“The king is down, deep in the castle,” said Dr. Sundl. “The throne room was considered too close to all these balconies to be safe. Mind you, we’re still trying to figure out what we’re running from.”

Gideon gave her a quick overview of the creature as Pavataro ambled in.

“So, if we play this answering sound,” said Gideon, “maybe we can get the squid to leave.”

Dr. Sundl looked thoughtfully at the book, and then said. “Let us see if there’s a magical solution first.”

However, they found that the wizard and her apprentice were desperately trying to use magic to fortify the castle, so that it did not fall in on itself.

Leaving the wizard’s chambers, Dr. Sundl slowed to a stop. Gideon and Pavataro stopped as well to look at her.

“People in this land do not like engineers like me. They’re afraid we’ll pollute your air and water,” said Dr. Sundl, almost to herself. “They prefer magic.”

“I think people will be happy to get rid of the giant squid,” encouraged Gideon.

Dr. Sundl thought a moment longer, and then she nodded.

“You can make an amplifier,” said Dr. Sundl.

“A what?” asked Pavataro.

Sundl turned to the young dragon. “Can you hold these papers?”

Pavataro reluctantly took the papers, but Dr. Sundl kept the top one. With that paper she folded it into a cone with a small end. When set against the sound symbol, the cone made the noise louder.

“But to do this,” said Gideon. “How big a cone would we need?”

From above, on top of the castle, there was a huge crash. It turned into an avalanche of noise, which skidded across the roof. Gideon saw debris falling outside, just past one of the balconies. He went over, but stopped just inside the doorway to make sure that it was safe.

After a moment, he stepped out and looked up. There was nothing to see from this angle, but there were also no bits of roof falling on his head. Moving to the balcony rail, he looked over. It looked like one of the roof’s many towers had been knocked over. But luckily it had dropped onto an unused patch of the castle grounds.

Pavataro and Dr. Sundl came to stand beside the boy.

Suddenly, the dragon looked at Dr. Sundl.

“What if we had a big piece of metal?” asked Pavataro.

“That would work perfectly, but where...” started Dr. Sundl, but then she saw that the dragon’s tail was pointing downwards towards the wreckage.

“Oh! That would be perfect,” she concluded.

“Stupid, stupid me,” muttered the dragon.

“Come on,” said Gideon, huffing with exertion. “It’s not that much farther.”

“Feels like a million miles away,” grumbled Pavataro.

While their dragon magic allowed them to reduce the weight, carrying a big piece of bronze was still back-breaking work. The young dragon and the mostly-human boy were almost to the Royal Armourer though.

“Seriously, what is the scientific name for dragons?” grunted Pavataro out of nowhere.

“Biggus Butticus,” replied Gideon as he kept moving.

“No it isn’t!” snapped Pavataro.

Before the dragon could push further, they arrived at the Royal Armourer. Gratefully, the boys dropped the big piece of bronze, and it immediately cracked some cobblestones.

“Just so you know, Lunchmeat, those cobblestones are your fault,” sniffed Pavataro.

“What? They were on your end,” replied Gideon hotly.

“You couldn’t pull your weight, so I was forced to drop it. If you’d actually been helpful...”

“What? I busted my butt getting this hunk of bronze, that you pointed out ...” started Gideon, when a voice cut in.

“Can I help you two?” asked a young woman who stood in the doorway of the forge. She had a cheery smile and an orchid in her hair, slightly wilted from all the heat.

“Master forger,” said Gideon, but there was a hint of question there too. He had met a lot of people since moving here.

“Yes, hello. My name is Tulip. How can I help you?”

Gideon introduced himself and Pavataro. “We need help forging something.”

The armourer looked past the boy to the big hunk of bronze.

“A breastplate for a giant?” asked the armourer cheerfully.

Taking out a piece of paper and the book with the sound, Gideon explained what they needed. The armourer listened thoughtfully, but then looked over at the piece of bronze.

“You’re not using engineering, are you?” asked Tulip cautiously. “Only I heard there was an engineer up at the castle.”

“It’s not going to pollute anything!” said Gideon quickly.

“Are you sure?” asked Tulip wearily. “It better not be a machine that belches gases.”

“No gases,” insisted Gideon.

Pavataro pointed at the boy.

“Except from him,” smirked the dragon.

“Shut up!” hissed Gideon to his friend, and then he looked back at Tulip. “It’s only going to send that sound. And hopefully save the castle.”

Her eyes travelled up to the castle where the top of the squid was showing.

“I wondered what that thing was,” said the armourer thoughtfully. She looked back at the boy. “I might be able to do it, but that piece of bronze isn’t going to fit on my forge.” She thought for a moment. “I mean, we could cut it apart, forge the pieces and try to put them back together.”

“Um...” said Gideon thoughtfully.

“‘Um’ is not a word,” smirked Pavataro, quoting one of their teachers.

But the boy just ignored the dragon.

“How hot does the metal have to be to bend it into shape?” asked Gideon of the armourer.

“Over 800 degrees,” said Tulip as she looked at him. “Why?”

Gideon looked over at Pavataro.

“How hot is dragon flame?” asked the boy.

Pavataro opened his mouth, but then shut it. “I’m not sure. No one’s gotten close enough to test it, or at least survived enough to report.”

Tulip’s face lit up. “I’ve got an idea.”

Soon, out of the young dragon’s pursed lips, was a white hot flame. The fire was aimed at a piece of scrap metal on the end of a pair of tongs.

“Good,” said Tulip, and she moved the tongs away from Pavataro. She set the scrap on her anvil and hit it with her hammer a few times to test it. The metal bent easily. “We can do this!”

Gideon looked down at the metal. “That doesn’t look like bronze.”

“It’s actually nickel,” explained Tulip. “Which needs to be hotter in order to work it.”

“So, if it works on nickel...” started Gideon.

“We can easily do that big piece of bronze,” cried Tulip excitedly.

The young dragon stopped breathing fire, stumbled back, and sat heavily on his butt.

Gideon—who was holding the big piece of bronze—looked over at his friend.

“You okay?” asked Gideon in concern.

“You know when you blow out too much air at once, and get lightheaded...” explained Pavataro.

“Ah!” said Gideon. “That makes sense.”

Tulip made a happy noise as the bronze cooled and she could no longer bend it anymore. As Pavataro heated the metal, she was using tongs to bend it into shape. It worked, but it was slow going. She turned to Pavataro with an excited grin.

“That’s it!” said Tulip happily. “You can’t leave. I’m going to kidnap you, and keep you in my forge.”

The young dragon suddenly snapped his teeth at the armourer.

Gideon let go of the bronze piece and moved between the dragon and Tulip, while the armourer backed away quickly.

“What in the hells was that?” asked Gideon hotly. But then he saw that the dragon looked surprised.

“I...I was thinking about that dragon in the forge, and...” started Pavataro haltingly.

“Oh,” replied Gideon understanding. He turned to Tulip, but kept himself between her and the dragon. “I can explain.”

“Can you?” asked Tulip with suspicion.

That made Gideon pause. “Maybe.”

“Way to be confident,” muttered Pavataro.

Gideon looked back at the dragon. “You shush.” He turned back to Tulip. “Two weeks ago, we rescued a dragon who was being held prisoner by a weaponsmith to use the flame in his forge.”

“What? As a slave?” asked Tulip, and an angry flush ran across her face. “You’re kidding.”

Shaking his head, Gideon went on. “I think my idiot friend was thinking about that.”

“I was joking,” said Tulip, and then she looked past Gideon to the dragon. “You know I was kidding, right?”

“I know now,” said Pavataro as he looked down. “Sorry I snapped.”

Gideon’s eyes went wide and he turned to the dragon.

“Did...did you just apologize?” asked the boy.

Pavataro just looked away. Gideon faced Tulip once again.

“He doesn’t do that,” said Gideon to her. “I mean, apologize. Like ever.”

Pavataro went slowly back to where he had been standing and waited.

After a moment, Tulip spoke. “Apology accepted.”

And they went back to work.

Gideon noticed, to his surprise, that the dragon was even more helpful than before.

“We should’ve gotten a cart,” grumbled Pavataro as he and Gideon carried the newly forged amplifier.

“We can go back for one,” grunted Gideon.

The dragon looked back to the city of Bon Su Pear behind them.

They were over half way from the city to an outcrop of rocks called Torvell’s Caves near the sea.

“But we’d have to walk back,” said Pavataro, and then he ventured. “Unless you just go and get one.”

“I’m fine carrying it,” said Gideon. “The sooner we get to the caves, the better off we’ll be. I’m worried about the castle.”

“True,” said Pavataro. “Most castles are not meant to be beds for giant squids.”

They kept trudging along.

“So really, what is the scientific name for dragons?” asked Pavataro.

“How do you have breath to chat?” groaned Gideon bitterly.

“Dragons are better specimens than—well, whatever the hells you are—mostly human, I guess,” said Pavataro.

Gideon did not bother to reply. The caves seemed so far away and even with their magic, the bronze horn was so heavy.

“So?” asked Pavataro.

“So, what?”

“Scientific name.”

“Can’t we talk about this later?”

The dragon dropped the back half of the horn. The boy nearly fell back on top of it. Gideon had to let go in order to avoid getting hurt. He glared up at Pavataro.

“Mother of Bees! Why’d you do that?”

“Name,” said Pavataro coolly.

Gideon took a deep sigh. Even this far from the castle, the land squid’s whistle was audible.

“It’s Dracus Furiousus,” snapped the boy. “Happy?”

Pavataro smiled toothily. “Very.”

With a lot of grumbling, they picked up the horn and kept walking.

“Dracus Furiousus,” said Pavataro with a self-satisfied tone. “I like it.”

Gideon bit off a nasty comment and kept moving.

“Wasn’t there sharks near Torvel’s Caves?” asked the dragon as they got close to the rocky outcropping.

“Sand sharks. Yes, but we’re going to steer clear of the sand,” said Gideon.

Moving from the grassy field, they carried the horn up a rocky slope. They stopped on top of Torvell’s Caves, which were not that high. Gideon took a moment to pant, and then turned to look in the distance.

“I wonder if we should go over there,” said the boy as he pointed to a mountain further away.

“No!” said Pavataro quickly. “I don’t want to walk that far.”

“True,” shrugged Gideon, who did not want to either.

Settling the horn, they pointed the wide end towards the castle. Gideon reached into his coat for the book.

“If we did all this, and this does not work,” said Pavataro with conversational menace. “I am going to eat you.”

“Fair enough,” nodded the boy absently.

Gideon opened the book and placed the sound symbol towards the small end. With a touch, the book produced the hideous noise. But it was a loud, hideous noise.

“Sounds like a giant slug being pressed through a colander,” commented Pavataro casually.

The boy kept pressing the symbol. Suddenly, the Land Squid moved high atop the castle. It shifted a bit, but then nothing.

“We might need to move closer,” suggested Gideon sadly.

“Keep trying,” ordered Pavataro, who did not want to have to pick up that damn horn again. “Maybe...”

“Where’s the squid?” asked Gideon.

“What?” asked the dragon.

The rooftops of the castle were suddenly empty of squid.

Gideon pointed.

“There!” he said.

The squid was walking on its shorter legs between the castle and the city harbour. It was moving almost daintily, and then disappeared from view.

“So, should we keep trying?” wondered the boy. After a few more tries, he stopped pressing the button.

“Maybe it left,” suggested Pavataro with cautious optimism. He looked down at the bronze horn. “We’re not going to have to carry this thing back, are we?”

Gideon’s eyes grew wide as he crouched down. “Jump left!”

Pavataro jumped right and took to the air, while the boy sprang left. There was a rush of air and the Land Squid’s shell dropped down on top of Torvell’s Caves, right where they had been standing. Pavataro was not ten feet away when a long tentacle wrapped around him and pulled him closer.

“Hey!” cried the dragon. “Let go!”

While jumping away, Gideon saw Pavataro get tangled. The moment the boy hit the ground—just past the caves—he tried to run back. But the other long tentacle whipped towards him and he barely dodged in time. While the boy tried to get closer, Pavataro was brought around to the bottom of the squid. The tentacles shifted and revealed a giant beak, which snapped impatiently.

“It’s got a beak!” cried Pavataro on the edge of panic. “It’s got a really big beak!”

The dragon bit at the tentacle, but it was too tough. Then he blew fire on it, but the moist skin would not light. However, the tentacle holding him shot towards the water. It dunked him several times. Finally, Pavataro came up spitting water.

“Quit with the dunking,” growled the dragon. But the squid just dunked him several more times, almost slamming the dragon into the water.

Gideon, still holding the book, was dodging around the remaining tentacles. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the dragon being lifted out of the water looking mildly stunned. The squid was carrying the dragon towards its beak. The boy knew he could not get between the dragon and the beak in time.

Snapping the book shut, he threw it—spine first—like a missile. It had only just started to open when it hit the squid in one of its big yellow eyes. As the book bounced off, the creature let out a cry. Letting go of Pavataro, the squid stood up right on its eight legs and backed away from the boys.

Pavataro dropped onto the caves hard. With no more waving tentacles, the boy shot over to his friend. The squid was turning to regard them with the eye that did not sting.

Gideon grabbed the dragon's wing.

"Come on! Must escape," said Gideon.

"It dunked me," mumbled the dragon who shook his head to try and clear the cobwebs.

"The bath did you good," commented the boy. "Hurry!"

With Gideon guiding him, Pavataro started to stumble away from the squid, but they were not going fast enough. The boy and the dragon were still on the rocky outcropping heading towards a stretch of sand.

However, Gideon noticed movement down there. Just a small shifting, and he thought of the sand sharks, who were probably cheesed off by all the noise.

Gideon glanced around, but he saw water to the left and the grassy area was almost twenty feet away. He could jump towards the grass, but Pavataro was in no condition to do so. The squid began to move towards them. The boy poured his magic into the dragon to make him lighter.

"Now would be a good time for you to jump away," said Pavataro in a neutral voice.

Gideon just growled, "Shut it!"

The squid reached out one of its long tentacles towards the boys, when it stopped and stiffened.

"Do you hear that?" asked Pavataro. One of his triangular ears swivelled towards a nearby island. It was only because they were out this far out from Bon Su Pear that they could hear it.

"What?" asked Gideon.

"Giant slug," replied Pavataro, and he looked back at the squid.

The boy followed his gaze.

Turning slightly towards the water, the squid appeared to be thinking.

Suddenly, it scrambled into the water and disappeared with barely a splash.

"What just happened?" asked the boy.

A big grin spread across Pavataro's face as they stopped walking.

"I heard a sound like a giant slug," said the dragon.

"You mean..." started Gideon.

“There’s another land squid in that direction,” said Pavataro as he pointed his tail out to sea.

The boy let out a chuckle of relief.

“Snailburgers,” chuckled Gideon. “That was close.”

Soon, Pavataro was moving just fine. They walked back to where they had left the bronze horn. The squid had dropped right on top of it. Gideon squatted down, and pulled at one end. But the metal had been stamped into the rocks beneath.

“I think we should leave this here,” said the boy.

Pavataro looked towards the city.

“Help is on the way,” said the dragon with amusement.

Standing, Gideon saw that a small makeshift army was leaving the South gate, and they were moving quickly across the field. He saw Captain Doyle and his squad towards the front.

And leading them was the engineer, Dr. Sundl. Though there was a radius of 6.56 feet around her, just in case she exploded. Sure magic could be dangerous, but engineering was insanity.

Stepping down onto the grass, Gideon and Pavataro met her first.

“Where is it?” asked Dr. Sundl with nervous resolve. She was holding her Nehru jacket in front of her, and it was wrapped around something shaped like a Boomstick shotgun.

“It left,” said Gideon reassuringly, and then he raised his voice for everyone there. “The squid disappeared into the water. Pavataro heard another squid’s mating call, so we think it went there. Hopefully, it won’t return.”

“Well at least, not for another hundred years,” suggested Pavataro.

“Maybe then,” admitted Gideon.

“Oh! Thank God,” cried Dr. Sundl. She hugged the boys with joyous relief. “I was so worried about you two.”

“How did you get rid of it?” asked Captain Doyle.

“We built a bronze horn with the help of Tulip the armourer,” said Gideon.

And then he pointed to Dr. Sundl.

“But we couldn’t have done it without Dr. Sundl,” said Gideon. “She came up with an engineering solution, because the wizard and her apprentice needed all their magic to keep the castle from falling down.”

And everyone looked at Dr. Sundl in surprise, and she smiled sheepishly.

“It was nothing,” she said.

“Once we lured the squid over here with Dr. Sundl’s idea,” continued Gideon. “The squid heard another of its kind calling out, and it just left.”

Captain Doyle walked up to Dr. Sundl.

“Thank you,” he said. And then more people came up to thank the engineer for her help.

Standing back, Gideon gave a little smile, but then suddenly his face grew panicked.

“Snailburgers! The library book!” cried Gideon. “I hope it survived, or the librarian will kill me. And I’ll deserve it.”

The boy leap away, and Pavataro looked after him.

“He’s an idiot,” muttered the dragon, but then he went to follow.

The boy was cradling the library book, which had tragically sustained a bent page, as they walked back to the castle.

“What are you?” asked Pavataro out of the blue.

“What?” replied Gideon in confusion.

“What’s your scientific name?” asked Pav.

“Um...” started Gideon.

“Um is not a word,” smirked Pavataro.

“Shush,” said Gideon absently. “I...well, humans are Homus Sapien.”

“But you’re...” started Pavataro, but then the dragon stopped.

“I’m not quite human,” said Gideon glumly.

“You’re mostly human,” said Pavataro, and his voice was encouraging. “What’s dragon’s again?”

“Dracus Furiousus,” said Gideon.

“Then that’s it then,” nodded Pavataro.

Gideon looked at the dragon in confusion. “That’s what?”

“That’s you,” said Pavataro. “Homus Dracus.”

Stopping, Gideon turned to look at Pavataro. The boy's mouth was hanging open.

"I...I like it," said Gideon.

And Pavataro grinned toothily.

"I'm the best of both worlds," said Gideon.

But Pavataro gave a sour look. "Let's not go that far! I have to look at you everyday Lunchmeat, and you are definitely not the best of both worlds."

And Gideon laughed out loud.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

Chapter 11

The grandfather clock tucked in the corner of the foyer showed that it was noon of the following day. A repast was soon to be set, and Kasimir insisted that it would provide my constitution with much needed strength after my night ordeal.

Gustav was now no longer an ethereal manservant, but bodily brought out the various courses of the lunch as Kasimir and I discussed the morning's assault on my person. I returned Kasimir's key to him (though I kept the scalpel tucked safely in an inner vest pocket), and he remarked that it must have fallen from his pocket (after Gustav had returned it to him) when he was inspecting the health of Cybele. He admitted that he suspected she feigned sleep often during his visits.

He spoke more about her health, his trepidation that she would neither recover, that perhaps I would not be able to cure her, or at least, lessen the number of demons which tormented her.

I ventured to ask, "Do you know the source from which those demons sprung?"

He finished chewing the morsel of venison (freshly poached and delivered that morning from one of the townsfolk), washed it down with a claret, and answered, "I can best calculate the dementia's first occurrence a few months after the untimely demise of my parents and our other sister."

"Other sister? I never knew you had such an extensive family." My acumen faltered as I confessed, "Then again, we never had a chance to know much about the other's familial heritage when we were immersed in our studies."

He smiled with thin lips and nodded, crystal goblet in hand hovering under his chin. "Quite so. One may never know one's closest chum while the professors are demanding intellectual perfection."

He toasted me, so I took up the claret and joined him.

"Can you tell me more about the events of their demise ... if it's not too troubling? It may help me in assessing your sister's ailment."

He nodded as he set the wine on the table and folded fingers in front of his mouth. "Well, essentially, they all perished in a blaze at one of our summer homes in Germany, in the Schleswig-Holstein region. A clumsy porter tripped with a lantern in hand. Flames caught the brocade curtain, smoke filled the ground floor, making it next to impossible to alert my family members asleep on the upper floors. By the time they awoke, the blaze had blocked all stairwells and means of exit. A horrifying way to die."

I let the tragedy wash over me, my imagination echoing horror back to my senses as I pictured the scene. There was something familiar about it. Something from a dream. ...

"How did you and Cybele escape?"

He popped a wedge of cantaloupe back toward his molars and chewed while he spoke. “Neither of us were present. I was seeing to business in Lübeck, and she was vacationing in Denmark at the time. The porter was tried and sentenced to the gallows, thankfully.”

I looked at the meat on the china before me and felt the demise of my appetite, once again. My mind ruminated on Cybele, and the razor that left a thread of blood beneath my jawline. I ran a fingertip softly along it.

“I can see how that would traumatize Cybele ... and yourself, naturally. Perhaps it was just too much for her conscious mind to bear.”

He swallowed. “Precisely. She has had nightmares from which she has awoken screaming that she was being burned alive. Tragic. I fear it has broken her.”

Gustav entered and I tried not to look directly at him, his appearance unsettling me still. Yet the accuracy of his movements—of his stride and the placement of his hands on the platters as he cleared the table—was astounding. I could not but help silently marvel.

“Since her attack on you, I’ve considered settling her into an asylum in Switzerland. She may need to be locked away for the remainder of her life, her madness incurable. I am sorry that I brought you so far from home. Let’s say that you were my last hope at regaining my sister to her former sanity.”

“I see.” I folded my hands in my lap as I stared at a small spot of gravy on the white tablecloth. “I’ve found my stay fascinating, and I’ve rather enjoyed seeing you again and learning more about your heritage. I just wish I could consult Doctor Freud about such a difficulty. I’ve mentioned your sister’s case to him, but only vaguely, since I had yet to travel here. With your permission, I’d like to provide more details to him, send a letter, see what he advises. He really is doing wonders with seemingly hopeless cases. And to be frank, an asylum setting can often denigrate the psychosis of a particularly sensitive mind rather than alleviate its torments. Your sister may actually worsen when a team of doctors are trying to better her.”

Gustav had exited with an armload of dishes—which did not topple—and returned for more. I hardly noticed his quiet presence anymore as he saw to his duties.

“That’s very kind of you,” Kasimir replied. “But I have great faith in the asylum and its team of qualified medical staff. The old methods can still have some use,” he jibed with a wink. “I’m sure your Herr Freud is quite skilled, but with Cybele he would have to turn back the clock ... before the fire ... before her dementia became inextricable. She seems to have taken on the personality of our deceased sister. Which makes me wish to mention: have you read an interesting novella by a Scottish writer named R.L. Stevenson? I think the manuscript is called ‘Doctor Hyde’ or some such thing?”

“‘Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde’, yes I have. Somewhat of a precursor to the work of my mentor, actually.”

“Ah, I knew you were always the scholar, reading beyond what was demanded of you by the professors,” Kasimir said with a chuckle.

My thoughts drifted as he spoke of literature and psychology, returning to aspects of my discussion with him about the methods of Doctor Freud. I became increasingly consumed with the proposition of Cybele assuming a secondary personality, that of her sister.

It prompted my next question: “By any chance, was your deceased sister a twin to Cybele?”

His countenance fell and even more paleness blanched his skin. “Have I mentioned it?”

I shook my head as my mind attempted its analytical best to create associations. Trying desperately to assess the nature of the break in Cybele’s psyche. “No, I don’t think you did. But often there is a bond between twins that is more profound than between other siblings. Cybele may have actually ... how do I construct this ... she may have felt her sister die. Felt all of it—the flames, the pain, the fear ... felt even her throat physically constrict as though she too were inhaling the smoke of the blaze. Such phenomenon has been documented.”

Kasimir stared at me with fascination and a touch of horror in his dark eyes. “Astounding,” he whispered, more to himself than to me.

I felt bile rise up and hold at my Adam’s apple. A weight sagged onto my shoulders, exhausting me instantly. “And if such is the case, then perhaps you are correct. Your sister may never be alleviated from her many demons ... locked inside the prison of her mind.”

Gustav returned with a small silver tray on which sat a roll of parchment. I glanced at it, thinking amusedly that it was some strange aperitif. But the manservant held his posture and stood just within the peripheral vision of Kasimir, awaiting his next duty.

To my amazement, Kasimir raised two fingers to call Gustav closer, which the blind servant did, putting the parchment directly into Kasimir’s hand.

“I couldn’t agree more,” he addressed me as he unrolled the scroll, laid it on the tablecloth in front of him, angled it toward me for my better view, held it down with salt and pepper shakers. “Which is why I’ve had this diagnosis drawn up, after consulting with my attorneys and several of the asylum physicians, of course. Please read it over at your leisure, but it essentially declares Cybele to be at a permanent loss of her senses and mental faculties, and that admission into an asylum is the only possible outcome of such a dementia. If she remains a free member of a normal, decent society such as ours, she may be a harm to herself and to others.” I felt his eyes on me as I scanned what I quickly could of the document. He smiled and attempted to lighten his dark eyes. “I’ll confess I had a secondary motive for calling you here.” I held his eye, and its fathomless depths. “That, if Cybele could receive no rehabilitation from your medical expertise, your signature on this document—as a disciple of the eminent Herr Freud, and as a third party with extensive medical training—that you could help in assigning my dear sister to receiving the care she sorely needs in a reputable medical facility, and out of harm’s way.”

It took me a while to digest both his venison and his proposal. I was set uncomfortably by some of the words he had emphasized. Accentuating the asylum as a ‘medical facility’ at the end of his speech but not before. And the somewhat condescending tone he employed in refusing to acknowledge the medical accolade of Doctor Freud, and then accentuating the word ‘eminent’. As though he was disregarding my medical training as well, that his ‘old

methods' were preferable, and any new procedures were witchdoctor cures, never to be taken seriously.

But perhaps the lunch was merely not sitting right with my constitution. I remonstrated with myself: that Kasimir had measured his sister's madness better than I had (after all, I had only been in the castle a mere twenty-four hours, if that, and had not constructively interacted with the patient). He was a witness to her sudden awakenings from horrific dreams, and he had taken her into his care after a devastating family tragedy ... that he was, simply put, her brother. Who was I to either of them?

And I was sure that he loved his sister very much.

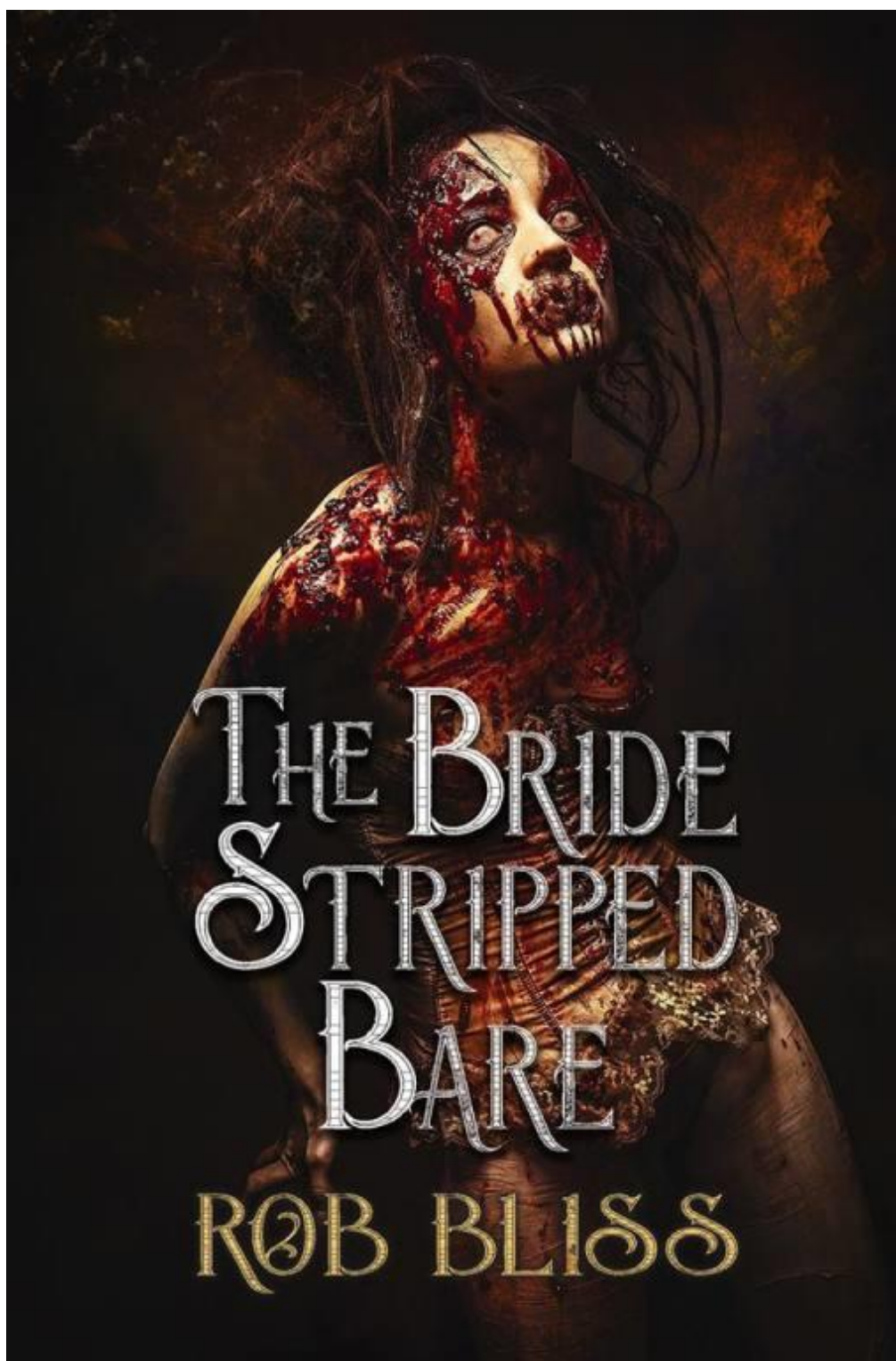
I told him that I would give the document my utmost attention. His visage shone like the sun as he thanked me and bid Gustav to freshen our goblets. He mentioned that he regretted not being able to do his duty as an attentive host for the rest of the afternoon since he had much business to attend to, but that, if I was not too troubled by his absence, I could tour the castle and grounds at my leisure. He urged me to explore. It would give me time, he suggested, to ponder the 'strange case of Ms. Hyde', he paraphrased with humour.

I asked if he wouldn't mind my attending his sister's bedside—that perhaps I could attempt an analysis. I explained about 'free association' and the 'talking cure', that I would require his sister to speak freely, her mind as unconfined by fear as possible. Only in freedom can the patient find health.

This peaked his interest, so I answered more of his questions concerning the techniques of Doctor Freud. But Kasimir urged that I not yet attempt an infiltration of Cybele's bedchamber ... so as not to have a razor slip lower than the line of my jaw.

I conceded his wish.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



Available from Necro Publications.

[Return to Contents](#)

COKE MACHINE by Alex Z Salinas

Milton Brown made his way to the far end of the mall, the side with the Sears with the busted sign that read *Sar*, and began his routine. He dunked his mop in the yellow bucket filled with murky water, twisted the handle.

Milton swung his mop in circles, producing large, glossy swirls on the dark tile. This was entertainment for him. He wasn't the type of man to bring an iPod to work. Not even a CD player. He believed he was too old for that shit.

After a while of swishing the mop around, imagining it as the girl he never took to the prom he never went to, Milton noticed a woman on her hands and knees by the Coke machine near the glass exit doors. She seemed to be looking for something, dropped money perhaps. From where he stood, Milton couldn't see her face—only a tangle of curly blonde hair. The mall wouldn't close for another two hours, but still, Milton wasn't used to seeing people on the far end this time of night.

"The hell's she up to?" Milton muttered.

He continued mopping, but kept glancing at the woman every few seconds. It seemed to Milton that she wasn't looking for something, but rather waiting. Waiting for something.

Overcome, Milton decided to approach her and find out. He walked to her slowly as not to startle her.

"Can I help ya with something, ma'am?" he asked. His voice seemed to echo in the empty mall.

The woman shot her head up at Milton. She was young, very young. There was a jagged pink scar on her cheek, and she wore a silver necklace with a small cross. A Christian. Milton thought he figured out the crazed look in her bloodshot blue eyes.

"There's a portal under here," the young woman said matter-of-factly.

"A what—uh?"

"A portal. To the Pemberton vault with all the secrets. If I can get my hands on the recipes, I'll be rich. Super rich!"

Milton scratched his balding head and wondered who the fuck Pemberton was, then he realized it didn't matter. This woman was whacked out, far gone, in another world. But Milton didn't judge these kinds of people. He understood their situation. That's because long ago, Milton lost his only brother to drugs. His older brother, Troy, got mixed up with bad people, and eventually got himself killed—a gunshot to the head. Blew all his brains out. That's how Milton remembered him.

For a good while, Milton too was mixed up in that world—a world he felt he had inherited. Like his older brother, he too once found himself on the business end of a gun, pointed right at his temple, all because he'd short-changed a bad-tempered distributor named Keith ten dollars. As Milton was on his knees before Keith, hands locked behind his head execution

style, he thought about Troy, then closed his eyes and wept. Keith, seeing Milton weep like a little bitch, felt a surge of power spread through his whole body. This is what it feels like to be a god, Keith thought. I am a god. He loved the feeling of making a weak man get on his knees and beg for his life. Keith let Milton live, but said the next time he saw him, he'd better fucking have his hundred dollars ready, because that was the new price for his life.

The next day, as Milton wandered the streets, feeling sick to his stomach, wondering how the hell he was going to scrounge up cash, he stumbled into a building where a nondenominational Christian service was taking place. Milton figured dropping in for a few minutes wouldn't hurt; he could use some uplifting. He stayed for the whole service. He was enthralled by Pastor James, who stood straight and talked straighter. After the service ended, Milton walked up to Pastor James and talked to him. Milton confessed everything, his life and his problems, addictions. Pastor James, with calmness in his face, listened to Milton without interrupting. When Milton was finished, the pastor told him to hang on a minute, then walked off somewhere.

When he returned, he held a hundred-dollar bill in front of Milton. He said, "Use this to get yourself out of trouble, son." Milton's knees trembled. He couldn't believe the pastor's kindness. All he'd wanted to do was talk. Milton felt like crying, getting on his knees again and crying. Instead, he accepted the Benjamin, stuffed it in his pocket, and asked, "Will you be here tomorrow?" Pastor James smiled and answered, "Yes," and like that, Milton took a step toward freedom away from the bad world—a world that, as a minimum-wage janitor in a crumbling mall, felt vaguely familiar to him upon seeing the strange, drugged-up young blonde.

"I'm Milton," Milton said to the woman, bending down and extending his hand to her. At first, she stared at his hand like it was a knife, but then she understood the gesture and shook it.

"Wanna help me look for the portal?" the woman asked. "We'll split the money."

"Oh, that's OK, darling, I appreciate it," Milton replied, smiling faintly. He didn't know what else to say.

Milton recently read in the papers how a new drug called Clark Kent, from Florida, was making its way across the nation. Kids were injecting the shit into their feet, and for a few hours it made them feel invincible, like they could fly—like Superman. But then came the hallucinations, the cravings. Then death. The drug was killing them and killing them fast. Milton wondered if this young woman on the ground before him was on Clark Kent.

"Too bad so sad then," the woman said blandly. "More money for me."

"What's your name, darling?"

"Susannah."

Susannah lowered her head to the floor and resumed her search underneath the Coke machine.

“I’m gonna find it,” she said, her voice directed under the machine. “Then I’m gonna be rich. Super rich!”

There was no rhyme or reason for people in Susannah’s condition, Milton thought. She was already gone.

“I know you will, darling, I know you will.” Milton got back on his feet.

The truth was, he wanted to help Susannah. Maybe it was her age, or the fact that she was a woman, or that he saw something of himself in her. Milton briefly considered offering to take her home for a hot meal and a warm bed so she could get right, but then he wondered how the hell that could work. It wasn’t possible; it’d change up too many things. Plus, Milton didn’t know Susannah at all, didn’t know her history or the kinds of people she hung with. The idea of taking in a complete stranger in this day and age was straight-up crazy. Perhaps if Milton was younger, a “young buck,” as Pastor James had called him, he’d’ve thought otherwise, but now he had to think about himself. The rest of his life, an older man.

Milton walked away from Susannah, as slowly as he came.

The next four days, as Milton made his way to the far end of the mall, he saw Susannah by the Coke machine, peeking underneath it, searching for her portal. She became part of his routine landscape. Somehow, seeing her comforted him.

On the third day, Milton called out to Susannah.

“Still looking, darling?”

“I’m gonna find it, you’ll see,” Susannah answered. “Then I’m gonna be rich. Super rich!”

“I know you will, darling, I know you will.”

On day five, Milton decided, What the hell? He’d join Susannah in her search. He’d get on all fours, even if just for a few minutes, and help out. It wouldn’t hurt, and after all, sometimes it’s good to change things up.

When Milton arrived to the far end of the mall, he found that Susannah wasn’t there. This deflated him. The sensation was like arriving to the movie theatre only to find out the movie you are dying to see is sold out. Still, during his mopping, Milton couldn’t help but glance at the Coke machine every now and then. Foolishly, he hoped, like a child, that Susannah would materialize.

The next night, when Milton saw that Susannah still was gone, worry set in. Perhaps she was in some alley, on the ground in the foetal position by a dumpster, a needle stuck in her heel. Milton didn’t want to think about that, but he couldn’t help it. He quickly became angry with himself; this showed in his work as he pushed the mop around roughly. He was ashamed. He pondered all the things he could’ve said and all the things he could’ve done. After everything Pastor James had done for him, this was how he returned the favour? Fucking asshole, thought Milton of himself. Motherfucking selfish asshole.

Later, calmed down, Milton wondered what it was that made people better versions of themselves in their heads. This was a question that had no right or wrong answers.

The next day, his day off, Milton decided to do something he hadn't done in seven years as a mall janitor: go to the mall.

He made his way to the far end and his heart pumped like crazy.

The night before, Milton had had a dream that Troy took him to shoot hoops at Miller Park. Troy commanded, all serious, "Let's roll," then he jumped and flew off like a crow. As a crow. Milton stood stunned on the court. He stared at the grey sky and accepted the absurdity of it all. When he woke up, Milton hopped out of bed and splashed cold water on his face. Unsettled, he thought of the dream as an omen. Pastor James had convinced him long ago that all dreams, one way or another, were omens. Visions from God, or Hell.

When Milton approached the red glow—the Coke machine—and no Susannah, his anxiety flushed out of him in an ugly way.

"Goddamn waste of time," he muttered. "Omens my ass."

Milton looked at the busted Sears sign. Now that he was here, he thought about walking inside the store. But there wasn't a damn thing he wanted to buy. He felt out of place all of a sudden, and now all he wanted to do was get the hell out of Dodge.

His stomach growled.

He hadn't eaten anything all day. His headspace made sense, knowing his mood was tied to his eating. Before he left, Milton decided to grab pretzel bites and a soda.

Staring at the Coke machine, Milton couldn't recall the last time he'd bought a soda from a machine.

He spotted something shiny on the ground near the machine. He bent down and picked up a silver necklace with a small cross. Susannah's, or one just like hers. Milton wondered if she was aware she'd dropped it, but then realized that was a ridiculous thing to think.

Crouched, Milton then got on all fours and lowered his face to the floor. The tile was cold against his cheek. He knew he was acting impulsive, a little nuts, but he couldn't care less. Nobody was at the mall.

Under the Coke machine was nothing. Just dust and darkness. Milton wondered, What does a portal look like anyway? Big or small? Do they make loud noises or are they as silent as cemeteries? Do they have blue energy rings around them or are they invisible? Where do they lead to—worlds with purple skies and red oceans and little green men, or inside huge vaults filled with gold bars and secret recipes?

As Milton stared into the darkness, he heard the hum of the machine. It was a sound he'd never really listened to before. It could put him to sleep if he listened long enough.

A short while later, Milton got back on his feet. His knees and lower back were achy. Still clasping the silver cross necklace, which felt sweaty in his hands, he stuffed it inside his pocket.

He left the mall and on the walk back to his truck, he thought, You're too old for this shit. Too fucking old.

On the drive home, Milton couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he felt as if something small but important, like an old lever, had been cranked inside him in the opposite direction. He was on edge. He smacked his lips and tasted metal, bitterness. His tongue was bone-dry. He'd forgotten to get food. All that stupid shit about portals had made him forget. His stomach growled again, and the only thing Milton could do was groan. He squeezed his old leathery steering wheel until veins emerged on the top of his hands like wild, black tentacles.

THE END

17 VIDEOS TUTORIAL WRITING COURSE
BY

STEVEN HAVELOCK

£3

WWW.Dynamicink09.com

[Return to Contents](#)

THE STOWAWAY by Steven Havelock

The year 2030

He was in the dock. The court had debated and come to a decision.

I can tell from their faces they didn't buy it! They think I'm mad!

The judge said, "The court here finds you guilty of murder by diminished responsibility and sentences you to life on the outer rim asteroids until you die."

"No!" he screamed "Please god no!"

"Take him away!"

"You don't understand! Not until I die! It will be an eternity!"

Six Months Earlier

A small cargo ship delivering supplies to Mars Base 1.

"God! I can't believe it was just two days ago that I last saw Jenny," said Imran.

"I know," replied Stuart, "It seems to go so fast."

"Just the two of us on this stupid ship now for the next six months!"

Imran pulled a sad face of disapproval. "When I get back my baby should be a year old. I wish I could be there for the birth."

The two man crew of cargo ship sat at the front of the ship staring into deep space. They had worked together for several years and found each other's company soothing, especially on long journeys like this one.

"Not the only two, gentlemen, that isn't quite correct." The voice was as soft as velvet, cultured and as aged as the stars.

"What the hell!" Imran spun round, not his believing his eyes. Stuart instinctually reached for his laser pistol; he had spent a long time in the military back on Earth.

Shit! No pistol! We can't carry them on simple resupplying duties.

"Who the hell are you?" asked Imran, taking in the odd shaped character that had stowed away on their ship.

He must be about six foot and he's wearing a rich velvety dark black suit.

"My name is not important, but for the purposes of this conversation you can call me Icarus." Again a voiced that seemed to be as aged as the stars.

“How did you get on this ship?” asked Stuart.

Icarus, thought Imran with a very uneasy feeling settling in his stomach.

“That is not important also. I am sorry, gentlemen, but your lives are over.”

“What the hell do you mean?” Stuart got up of his captain’s swivel chair. “No one puts Stuart in the corner!”

He faced the very pale six foot stowaway.

His eyes! His eyes! They’re boring into me! Into my soul!

Sit down!

Stuart heard the command in his head, he felt his will suddenly quashed and he turned around and sat down.

“Now, gentlemen, we can do this the hard way or the easy way.”

The two crew members felt themselves paralysed by some unseen force. Imran tried to move.

I can’t even blink!

“Do you want to do it the hard or easy way?”

The two stared straight ahead at the deep vastness of space.

“Now if you agree, nod your heads.”

Imran and Stuart found they could move their heads. Both nodded.

“Good,” said the tall pale stowaway.

Stuart looked at the uninvited guest again.

What the hell is going on?

The stowaway stood unmoving.

His pupils are deep black, just staring into deep space. What emotions and memories are those deep black pupils hiding? thought Imran.

“I’ve heard of Icarus,” said Imran “we did it in our ancient history class years ago in school.”

“Yes, gentlemen,” the voice sounding like soft velvet again. “Icarus was the guy who tried to fly into the sun, but the wax holding his wings together melted and he fell to his death,” the stowaway continued.

At the word ‘death’ a slight gasp of anticipation escaped from the stowaway’s mouth.

“Yes, my death. I have courted you for centuries, now you finally approach.”

What kind of freak is this? thought Stuart.

“You want to die?” asked Imran.

“Yes, most certainly, gentlemen.”

“Well, why don’t you just kill yourself?” Imran said.

“If I could I would have done it centuries ago.” The voice took on a pained sadness that neither the two crew members had ever heard before.

“You can’t die?” asked Imran.

“No, gentlemen, I cannot.”

“Why not?” asked Stuart.

“The whys and wherefores are not important; all I will say is that many aeons ago. I entered the kingdom of death...” The voice dropped off as if he was in deep thought. “My love... My one and only true love, I know you wait for me.”

Imran saw a soft trickle of shiny tears slowly coursing down the stowaway’s cheek.

“Whoa!” said Stuart who was getting more and more confused by the second, “How the hell could you enter the kingdom of death? Unless you’re some kind of wizard or something?”

“Exactly, gentlemen. I was exactly that, a wizard. Not just any wizard, but the greatest the world had ever seen.”

This is some trippy shit, thought Imran, not believing his ears.

“So what happened? Why can’t you die?”

“I was the greatest wizard the world had ever seen, but when death came for my beloved fiancé,” the voice had such a deep sadness and power to it that the two found themselves on the verge of tears, “When Death came for my fiancé there was nothing even I could do. I, the greatest wizard that ever lived!”

“So I cast my most powerful spells and followed Death into the kingdom of the dead...And there...And there I battled Death and won...” The voice was so low now, barely beyond a whisper.

“I did something no one had ever done before. I beat death, I humiliated Death and so Death cursed me...” he continued slowly, “Death took the coin which I needed to pass into the kingdom of the dead and replaced it with this one.”

He held up a gold coin, "One half represents life and the other half death. As you can see this coin only has one side to it, and so I cannot die. As I can't pay the ferryman." He paused then continued even lower that they could barely hear. "Death cursed me so that I cannot die." The voice faltered.

Understanding showed in Stuart's eyes.

"You're going to take us into the sun!"

There was a long pause. The stowaway seemed to come out of his reverie.

"Now, gentlemen, change course." The voice seemed to have a strange power behind it and like before Imran felt his will quashed. He flicked through the controls and set course for the sun. They felt the ship change course with a deep grinding noise as its thrusters fired in different directions.

"I will see my beloved once more. I have waited an eternity for this."

"And what about my beloved?" countered Imran, "My wife is pregnant with our first child."

"I have waited an eternity for this," was all they heard, low and sad.

Tears came to Imran's eyes

"Gentlemen, I am not without conscience," tears slowly streamed down the wizard's face. The voice again was so low and sad, "The moment I entered your ship I saw your lives." There was a pause. "I know your deepest secrets and most heartfelt desires..."

"Please! What about me? What about my wife and child?" said Imran. "There must be another way!"

The wizard was silent for the longest time. Stuart nearly thought he had turned to stone, he didn't move for so long. A small smile spread across the wizard's features.

Then he said, "There may be another way. One of you must take my place." The two crew members were suddenly hanging onto his every word.

Immortality! thought Stuart.

Immortality! thought Imran.

"Which one of you would like to take my place?"

"I will!" they both shouted together.

"I'm going to go and rest in the sleeping quarters, whilst you make your decision. I will be back in four hours."

The ancient wizard turned and walked away. Imran and Stuart sat unmoving.

I want this! thought Imran.

He's not getting one on me! thought Stuart.

The minutes ticked by, neither man saying or moving an inch. Imran heard the beat of his heart in his ears. Stuart felt the sweat running down his back.

Suddenly Stuart made a grab for Imran's throat. He got a good hold.

"I'm going to be immortal!" Stuart screamed as he tightened his grip around Imran's throat. He squeezed, tighter and tighter. Imran's body went limp and as pale and blue as the planet Neptune.

God! I've done it! What have I done?

As he stared at Imran's lifeless body he felt a tinge of remorse.

I feel like I'm going to puke!

Stuart got up and staggered towards the sleeping quarters. He entered and saw the wizard fast asleep.

"Sir..." Nothing.

"Sir!" he said again loudly.

The wizard seemed to wake.

"I've done—"

Just then pure terror flashed through his mind as he heard the ship thrusters igniting.

"No!" he screamed but he was too late. There was a grinding noise as the sleeping quarters dislocated from the other half of the cargo vessel.

Imran's voice came over the loudspeakers.

"So long, suckers!"

The jettisoned half of the ship was on a crash course for the sun.

The old wizard will finally get what he wanted.

Imran heard a voice in his head.

I chose you. Thank you.

Imran felt the weight of something in his pocket. He pulled it out.

A gold coin!

He turned it over.

It only has one side!

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

RESEARCH by Martin Stefko

Frederic Smith arrived at his mentor's manor in a horse-drawn carriage, which was tossed around rather unpleasantly. Frederic was worried that the worst would happen, and a wheel could break, but the coachman wasn't slowing down. With tight lips, Frederic tried to keep himself in one place. He was heading to hell itself. The phone call said enough.

"Frederic, my dear friend. I didn't invite you for any reason other than the simplest. I am asking you a favour."

"Favour? Professor, you are asking me a favour?"

"That's right, my friend." The professor sounded friendly, but Frederic could sense something in his voice that he didn't like. Probably ulterior motives.

"What kind of favour could I do for a man like you, professor?"

"I'm asking nothing less than to kill me."

"E-excuse me?" Frederic faltered. He thought the misunderstanding was caused by a bad line.

"Dear Frederic, I need you to kill me."

Before his telephone call, the professor had sent Frederic a letter asking his pupil and colleague to visit and help him with an experiment that allegedly concerns their earlier research. They started it at university, where they had become extremely good friends. In fact, such good friends that Frederic later found a flat near Westport, where he was practicing in a clinic that was once led by Jonathan Malloy. Dr. Malloy died under enigmatic circumstances, which Frederic was sympathetic about, but on the other hand he received an opportunity to open his own clinic to help local people. Medicine wasn't his dream field, but after research with the professor, he had to admit that several years of salty sea air and broken legs were actually good for him.

The professor called him after six years. However, Frederic watched and constantly wondered what his mentor would come up with. He was a little worried about his further research, but it turned out the professor had focused on a new area. Frederic himself had to admit that their previous research hadn't led to a way that would be beneficial to humanity. He just remembered the event that signalled his departure from the university, and he immediately shuddered.

The horses neighed loudly. The coachman pulled the reins and the carriage began to slow down. The wheels sank heavily into the hard gravel and scattered the small stones all around. The wood creaked. Frederic was concerned the construction wouldn't last, but the coachman didn't appear to care and forced the horses to stop almost instantaneously.

"Here we are!" the coachman exclaimed, and it didn't look like he would help his only customer. Frederic quietly opened the side door and stepped out. He himself stretched out from the footboard for a large bag that would be too heavy to carry on a long journey.

"Thank you," he said, as he handed the coachman the agreed sum.

The coachman didn't converse any further, he took the coins, put them in his pocket without counting them, and set off with the horses again.

When Frederic turned to look at the professor's residence, he realised that no uninvited person would want to stay in such a house for very long. Even as an invited man, he didn't really feel like he was in the right place at the right time.

He entered his old friend's property and an unexpected (but no less welcome) rival in love. *Cherchez la femme*. He loved French, but on this occasion it was wrong. *Cherchez l'homme*. Much more concise, much more accurate. Clarence was never Frederic's girlfriend, but he still loved her. He spent his university years in her presence. He never let her know how strong his feelings were for her. She liked him as a classmate. A very gifted, entertaining friend who never expressed his feelings. Perhaps she never even knew what he felt for her, how deep, and almost religious his love was. The mere mention of her name raised feelings in him which he knew were biological and chemical, but he couldn't force himself reject a higher nature. Love, such love isn't the result of a chemical process. It arises in ethereal spheres that science simply can't describe yet.

The unspoken duel was won by the older man. She chose the professor. He acted as an authority, a man who, at a young age, surprised and enthused academia with his experiments, which in later years were called quackery and necromancy. However, at that time he was proud of his status of being a brilliant man who proved that electrical stimuli could cause a reaction in a dead chimpanzee. He mapped some areas of the brain and through them he induced the desired response on the subject under research. He made the dead creature raise its hand. A discovery that stirred up excited debates and sparked expectations. Frederic couldn't compete with such a man. Clarence chose the better one. Frederic understood that. Circumstances caused him to say goodbye to Miskatonic University on the day when Clarence died due to her choice.

"Friend! Welcome!" The professor came out to meet his former pupil and assistant. "How many years have passed," he hugged Frederic, "how many long years since our paths were split?"

Frederic, surprised by the warmth of the professor's welcome, the change in his facial expressions and his body posture, didn't manage a single word. The professor grabbed him around his shoulder and led him to his immodest abode. Frederic felt that he wasn't heading to the mansion of a profligate rich man, but to the hellish castle of a bony madman. He didn't enter the professor's house as someone who was aware of the host's hospitality and the beauty of his residence.

The professor's house looked down at visitors in its modest yet sufficiently striking style. It wasn't an English-style villa, no castle with a large park, but an American house with two turrets that pointed to the sky like a bell-tower. Their shape and the black shade that had settled on them, didn't invite anyone to a banquet table with angels, but was more like an invitation to a messed-up trough in the company of demons. The huge forged doors didn't seem very welcoming to a visitor, but they tried to suck a stranger into the organism's interior where it can digest them and cast them out changed and unrecognisable.

Frederic felt a reluctance to cross the threshold of the house, crossing a milestone through which there was no return, but he didn't have a choice, did he? Didn't the bony professor warmly invite him into the interior of his palace? He didn't have a choice, and behind he had to leave open spaces full of fresh air and hope, he had to close the door behind him and found himself in a very cold room. When the professor offered to take his coat from him, he hesitated for a moment. Finally, he hung it on a hanger. He hurried to the professor who led him to the dining hall, which was incredibly overheated.

"I'll be right back, my dear Frederic. I'm sure today's banquet will be of use to you."

Frederic stared at the departing professor. The crouched walking style, unsuitable for the old man, convinced Frederic that something was wrong. The man who had previously been proud of his sculptural, aristocratic walk, a man who was able to win the heart of a beautiful, gifted and young woman who wasn't considered to be suitable for him in regard to her age, the man was now showing a hunchback that resembled a hyena's movements. Too much friendliness, an overly smiley expression also didn't really add to a feeling of sanity.

The professor entered through the door from which he had left, and behind him a pair of very untrustworthy people in well-worn servant clothes. Neither of them seemed happy to serve their master and his guest. Their deep and silly eyes showed a total and utter disinterest in the work they had to be given, they didn't lay the food trays on the table, but threw them. Pieces of meat and vegetables fell on the table as they rolled off the tray, but no one stopped or bothered to clean it.

"I'm so glad to see you again, dear friend!" the professor exclaimed warmly, gesturing to Frederic to have anything from the courses offered.

Frederic didn't seem to find much of an appetite for food that had been treated in such an inappropriate manner, but the hunger overwhelmed him. He stopped noticing the dangling figures that were standing behind the professor and tried a piece of roast beef.

"Why did you invite me here, professor?"

"Is it a sin to want to see an old friend?"

"No, certainly not, but we didn't part in a peaceful manner."

"But the wind has blown over it, my dear friend! Aren't the old injustices forgotten?"

"Some are very difficult to forget."

"I see, dear Frederic. So, let's get to the point. I want to leave you with the documents relating to the research we started together, and I almost finished. I want you to be the one who completes it."

"Surely you're not serious!" said Frederic. "That research was insane! It was madness!"

"Not really, dear friend, not really. The research was very promising."

"She died during that!"

“Clarence?” asked the professor with astonishment. As if the death of a colleague and a beloved woman seemed totally banal to him compared to the nature of his experiments. “Yes, of course. Very unfortunate event. But doesn’t the research make sense just because of the people we love? Isn’t it us who are destined to return them?”

“Professor, if you have brought me here simply because of the research, I want to leave. You know my opinion. I thought this was a friendly visit.”

“Do you know what our research means, my dear Frederic?” He spoke passionately. “Do you? After all, the dead can walk on earth again!”

“Professor!” Frederic raised his voice. “Do you realise how crazy the whole idea is? Why would anyone want to revive the dead? Why return them in a form that is no longer the same? Don’t you remember what happened to the cat? Oh, the cat!” Frederic looked away. But he couldn’t hide from the memories.

“It showed us the direction, my dear Frederic.” The professor didn’t let go of the concept.

“Clarence ended up with her throat bitten because you had to go too far! I told you we couldn’t do this! You can’t revive dead animals and then think they will listen to you!”

“Exactly, my dear, dearest Frederic. You were absolutely right! There was no point in reviving animals. They’re mindless creatures.”

“What are you trying to say?” Frederic worriedly asked.

“Revive a mindless animal and it won’t obey you, dear friend. But man, man can think! After all, that’s what makes us different from other creatures!”

Frederic remained silent, knowing where the professor was heading. He had already witnessed the insanity when he arrived. Now he was convinced. The eyes of an older colleague shone like a man who got something that most people don’t. But the spark was not the gift of the gods, but a curse of the darkness.

“What did you do, professor? What the hell did you do?” The servants were standing there, slack and uninterested in anything in their vicinity.

“I finished our research! At least for the most part,” the professor replied calmly.

“But I thought you were focusing on other areas. What about all those articles...”

“People didn’t understand us, dear friend, don’t you remember? They excluded me from the community! I had to convince them that I was still one of them. They began to trust me again, but my main research continued to focus on our magnificent work, my dear Frederic. I must say, I was sorry that you never returned. Yet I’ve prepared a surprise for you. After all, a good friend should receive a gift from the old man I am, to soften you.”

Frederic didn’t notice that someone was behind him. He couldn’t hear a single creak from a floorboard that would reveal the presence of a fifth person. Then how surprised he was when

a hand touched his shoulder. Not a heavy hand, a touch as light as a feather, but a touch that still made him jump out of his chair.

“What the...” he cried, thinking he was betrayed, and death was waiting for him. The mad eyes of his old friend indicated as much. No murder was going to take place as the person standing before him was a woman, not a murderer. However, the action that had to happen in the past was more shameful and loathsome than murder. “Oh, my God, you lunatic! How could you?” Beautiful Clarence from that time was standing in front of him as if she had been reborn. Deadly, pale, silent, uninterested in anything.

“Isn’t it beautiful, my dear friend? Clarence is my life’s work. Doesn’t she look beautiful? She is still so beautiful, as if she just slept for a long time.”

Frederic stared at the scarf she had around her neck, a scarf that covered the scar from the mortal wound that she received from the revived cat. “You’re a madman! You’ve gone totally crazy!” He didn’t realise that he was moving backwards until he bumped into the fireplace with high flames blazing.

“You’re not glad to see her? Didn’t I please you?”

“Clarence is dead! Dead!” Frederic’s hands groped around until they hit a heavy iron object. Without thinking too much, Frederic grabbed the poker.

“As you can see, it’s not true. Frederic, my dear friend, we did it. We can bring the dead back to life!”

“It’s just a dead shell! Don’t you see her look? You’re insane! How could you do it to her... how could you do this to me!” He ran with a poker in his hand, ready to strike. He didn’t miss. He struck a very intense blow. The professor fell to the ground after a single hit. He didn’t try to dodge away from it, nor did he try to defend against it. He fell to the floor and the poker after him. It smacked against the floor. The loud crashing noise made Frederic realise what had happened. He fell on his knees to the dying man.

“See, dear Frederic,” the professor wheezed. “I told you... I wanted you to... kill me. I couldn’t... do it myself. I was... dying. A little... I was hoping it would be... less painful. But I can... I can live forever... like dead. Just remember... don’t forget to study the documents and my body... fill in... in my notes... you’ll find everything. Follow the... procedure, it’s very...”

The professor paused and Frederic knew with his skilled eye of a doctor that his friend had no strength left for further words. The spirit left the professor’s body, saying goodbye to the living world. All the anger had left Frederic. He just killed a man. He killed his old teacher, his friend. But wasn’t it just the professor who said the dead could walk on the earth again?

Frederic turned to Clarence, who was silently holding the document folders in her hand. They contained wisdom to restore life to a dead body. To restoration which is permanent. Was it possible for the professor to find a way to keep the body alive forever? If so, then... then it’s something incredible!

“Give me the folders,” he ordered Clarence. Gently like a breeze, she approached him and handed them over. Although changed, it was her. Beautiful and intelligent. Silent, but certainly not empty. Can she speak? Can she think? Frederic looked reluctantly at the dead professor. He returned to the fire, determined to burn the papers forever. To destroy the life’s work of a dead man.

“Eternal life?” He snorted. However, he didn’t discard the documents. Instead, he took a longer burning log from the fireplace. He didn’t hesitate. He approached the motionless body with the flame. “For eternal life, professor.” He set fire to his colleague and let him burn. First the clothes, then the skin. As if he heard his soul scream in hellish fires. He turned away from the burning body, grabbed Clarence’s hand. She willingly went with him. Together they left the mansion with the documents that could mean a revolution in science. The flames on the dead body were burning even thirstier.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

THE CHALLENGER IN THE VALE OF DRAGOS by Jesse Zimmerman

Part Four

Our heroes, whilst standing before a crowd of the townsfolk of the Vale, were welcomed by Gemok, High Priest and (spiritual) leader. Flora, having been contacted telepathically by Qilla, an ancient woman who too has a brain slug in her head, has just revealed a great bombshell: Dragos, the dragon-god that first brought the people to the Vale, is dead.

My eyes shift to the dragon-guards on wheels, those tall sentinels with the painted faces. They must be automatons of some kind. The two of them had raised their polearms the moment the words left my mouth.

Gemok gawks at us, his lofty hat fluttering as his neck cranks backwards. Someone screams. I see mothers covering the ears of children.

“Lies!” yells Gemok.

“They lie!” calls the short retainer at his side and he blows his trumpet again before Gemok smacks his face with his staff and knocks him down.

“Hey!” yells the Challenger. “If you’re the High Priest you should be more relaxed, especially with all the green you’re wearing! If my friend says she saw the bones of a dragon on the other side of the mountain before we crashed here, then I believe her because she’s got the highest Intelligence Stats ever!”

“Silence!” declares Gemok, and I can tell he is trying to raise his voice over the crowd and he bends his spindly form over his fallen retainer and grabs the trumpet from him and blows, the booming noise overtaking the crowd’s cries.

“What do we do?” asks Fauna to my side. I see the Challenger reach for his sword from his hilt at his waist. One of the miners, a big yet squat hairy man with a sleeveless tunic that reveals bulging muscles, has stepped towards him, spade in hand.

“Challenger!” I call and raise then lower my hand. He looks over with his uncovered eye, and takes a step back. The muscular miner steps forward with two friends at his sides.

I don’t want us to fight our hosts; not monsters, not villains, but folks who healed us and have been hospitable. I regret speaking. Sister had always told me to know when to hold my tongue, especially outside of our home. I raise my hands and am about to try to be heard.

“You are unseen, all three of you,” Qilla’s voice sounds in my head. “Follow my lead!”

I see her past a thinning wing of the crowd, the long purple and white and silver hairs that fall over her back flap a little in the breeze.

“Where are they?” the first miner shouts, running over to where the Challenger stands.

“I think we are invisible,” I tell Fauna.

The Challenger steps towards the big miner, who seems to not see him, and waves his hands in front of the man’s face before the ranger extends two fingers from his gloved hand and pokes the man in the eyes.

He shrieks and covers them and the Challenger laughs and quickly side-steps him and the other two.

“Come!” I tell them in a harsh whisper and I see some of the nearby faces glance around like they heard me, which they probably did.

“Where did they go?” Gemok cries. People rush forth to where we just stood. I see Emera there, hanging back near the door. Some of the crowd parts as the blue dragon automaton wheels forward, heading right for Emera!

“Qilla!” I yell. She is now about twenty paces from the back of the shuffling crowd and turns about with surprising speed. “Our friend! Please!”

“Time,” I hear her reply. The three of us scramble to our left and we slink through a path between bodies towards the elderly woman.

“Make her unseen!” says the Challenger, seeming to understand what I am getting at.

Gemok points his staff at the healer who is standing before the tall wheeled sentinel, looking frightful. “Tell us, who are these people that you healed?”

“I—I don’t know!” Emera stammers.

“Come this way!” I cry to her as I hear more gasps, a big one from the High Priest. She too must be invisible to them!

Emera rushes to us and the four of us follow the old woman who’s speedier than expected, through the shifting bodies of folks and then through cobbled streets, passing by more than a few big wagons full of things with no horses at the front. I get a look at one as it passes, just barely missing Emera by a tiny bit as she moves. A man is in the front, the carriage filled with bags. I see one of these bags towards the top is slightly open, and I see something bright and green-blue inside.

“We are nearly there,” says Qilla in my mind. We run by a row of brick homes, a single long structure with numerous doors in its front, and then we take a turn into an alley, my

sister and me at the rear behind the Challenger and Emera now. As we come to another alley a figure darts out between us.

It is a tall man, I notice before me and Fauna crash into him. He falls at our feet and we jump over him. I see his face, pink skinned with a pair of shaded spectacles on his face above a big nose. He wears a black round cap, which falls off to reveal short black hair. He seems stunned as I see him stand once more when we turn a corner.

“That was the Constable!” Emera cries to me.

“Sorry, Constable!” Fauna yells back.

We arrive at a small courtyard area that has two tall oak-looking trees set on opposite sides. It looms over us, the library we saw earlier from afar, standing a few stories tall.

“We end up in a lot of libraries,” notes the Challenger as he takes Emera’s hand, for she had been trailing a little behind him.

“What happened?” she asks, panic in her voice.

“I told them the truth,” I say defiantly. “Why did this happen when I told the truth?”

“Some people do not want to hear it,” says Qilla, the first words that come from her mouth. “You know this, Sister Emera.”

“Is it true?” our green-haired friend asks, struggling with the next words: “Is Dragos...dead?”

Sister tells her: “If Flora saw it, she remembers perfectly. You see, you may not have seen it when you were healing her, but there is a slug in her head.”

“Yeah,” adds the Challenger. “This blue slug gives her perfect memory of everything she ever saw!”

“Come inside, I cannot keep you hidden much longer,” says Qilla, walking to the wooden door at the top of three stone steps, bunches of leaves floating from her feet as she goes. I take a quick look around the courtyard, noting the soft shadows from the trees. There are two alleyways, the one we came from to the left and another to the right between two more buildings.

We enter.

It is cool in here, on this first floor that has a ceiling four times our height. There is a wooden counter at the front covered in cobwebs and beyond are shelves of books covered in dust. It looks as if no one comes here and I ask Qilla if this is so.

“Myself and Hue,” she says.

“Hue?” Fauna asks, glancing about the dusty room.

Qilla smiles and says: “Hue!”

“Did you call me, Sweet One?” a man’s voice asks, seemingly from above us. I look up and freak out a bit. I see an old man’s face, his head with only a few white hairs and a longish silver beard that is hanging; he is upside down. His body, his torso and shoulders are small and he is dressed in a plain grey cloth tunic.

“What are you, a bat?” Challenger asks and Fauna giggles.

“I wish I were sometimes,” he says and smiles, the wrinkles on his face shifting as he lowers himself from the beams at the ceiling, one single long wooden leg reaching the floor. Now I see it, his legs, all four of them.

“Whoa!” my sister cries. To her side the Challenger and Emera’s mouths hang open as the old man lowers himself to the floor, hanging from one leg as his three other legs land, the last one letting go when the rest of him is before us.

“Welcome from the two denizens of the Library of Dragosia,” Qilla says. “More of the folks spend their time in the temple rather than the library. Here is empty of people but full of knowledge.”

We all gaze at the old man named Hue. He has his two upper thighs and pelvis, but he has instead of normal legs four long slightly curved things made of dark wood, two in front, two in back, the bottom of each of them curving sharply, likely so he can grasp things. He stands nimbly upon these large legs, twice as tall as the Challenger.

“You are using these instead of wheels?” Emera asks him.

He nods. “Wheels cannot climb. I lost my legs some time ago,” he says and smiles, showing half his teeth are missing. “Ah well, this is who I am.”

“Is there a way out of the Vale?” asks Fauna. “We didn’t mean to cause problems here, honest!”

Hue shakes his head. “There is no way out. I have tried with my mechanical legs. At night I have climbed the mountain walls, tried to get to the top of this bowl; too steep!”

“Is there way to climb back in from the other side?” Challenger asks. I wonder why he asks.

Hue shrugs. “There may be, it is said that the other side is not so steep. One may come over from the other side, and travellers have done so before but then they could never leave!”

“We are Aboves,” Qilla explains. “We wish to find ways to the outside world and we have long suspected that Dragos is not returning.”

“Oh,” I say. “Are there others?”

“More than you know,” says Qilla and Hue nods, resting forward a little on his front two legs, his two aft legs lowering a little.

Emera shrugs. “I know there are those that didn’t believe Dragos would return, but I always thought he would.” And then she looks afraid and says: “I need to get back to my daughter!”

“Is she with her father?” the Challenger asks her, looking concerned in his one eye.

“Father died some time ago,” Emera replies. “She is with her uncles, but I need to warn them that commotion is coming! I don’t know what, but the townsfolk seem upset and Gemok—when he gets angry...”

The Challenger immediately offers to escort Emera, and I am a bit taken aback at his concern for her. I think it’s sweet of him.

“I cannot make you unseen if I am not there, and not for long,” says Qilla, lamentedly.

Hue laughs and I see his small belly shake a bit. “Oh, we have some stuff in the Dramatic Arts department. Come! We’ve got some fake beards and old robes, have you two looking like wayward wizards in no time.” He walks like a tall spider, leading the Challenger and Emera down the way between the bookshelves.

It is just Qilla, Fauna and I now in this dusty chamber, when I ask about the slug. She tells me that she had one specimen in the library long ago, but knows not where it came from and has found no reference in any book, only that when it escaped its cage it crawled in her head and gave her the ability to retain all learned knowledge. She liked it at first, and as she aged it became stronger and gave her telepathy and the ability to make her and others unseen. Qilla tells me that it had made her far weaker and exhausted whenever she uses it now. I ask her how to remove it and she tells me she doesn’t know, but advises me to do so if I ever can and soon.

Fauna asks her a few questions, and I tune out, thinking about this.

After a short time I hear the footfalls of Hue’s wooden legs and I see him appear from a door at the back of the room. He greets us, telling us that the ranger and the lady have left in full disguise.

“Good,” says Fauna. “Now, we need to figure something out. The mines, can we travel underneath?”

Qilla gasps. “Oh, there are ways, or so we are told, through the mountain; Under the Dark we call it, but it is said that there are things down there more frightening than anything in the above world.”

“Who says that?” asks Fauna. “Gemok?”

Qilla laughs a little. “Well, yes, it is part of the dogma of Dragos, but we know not the ways.”

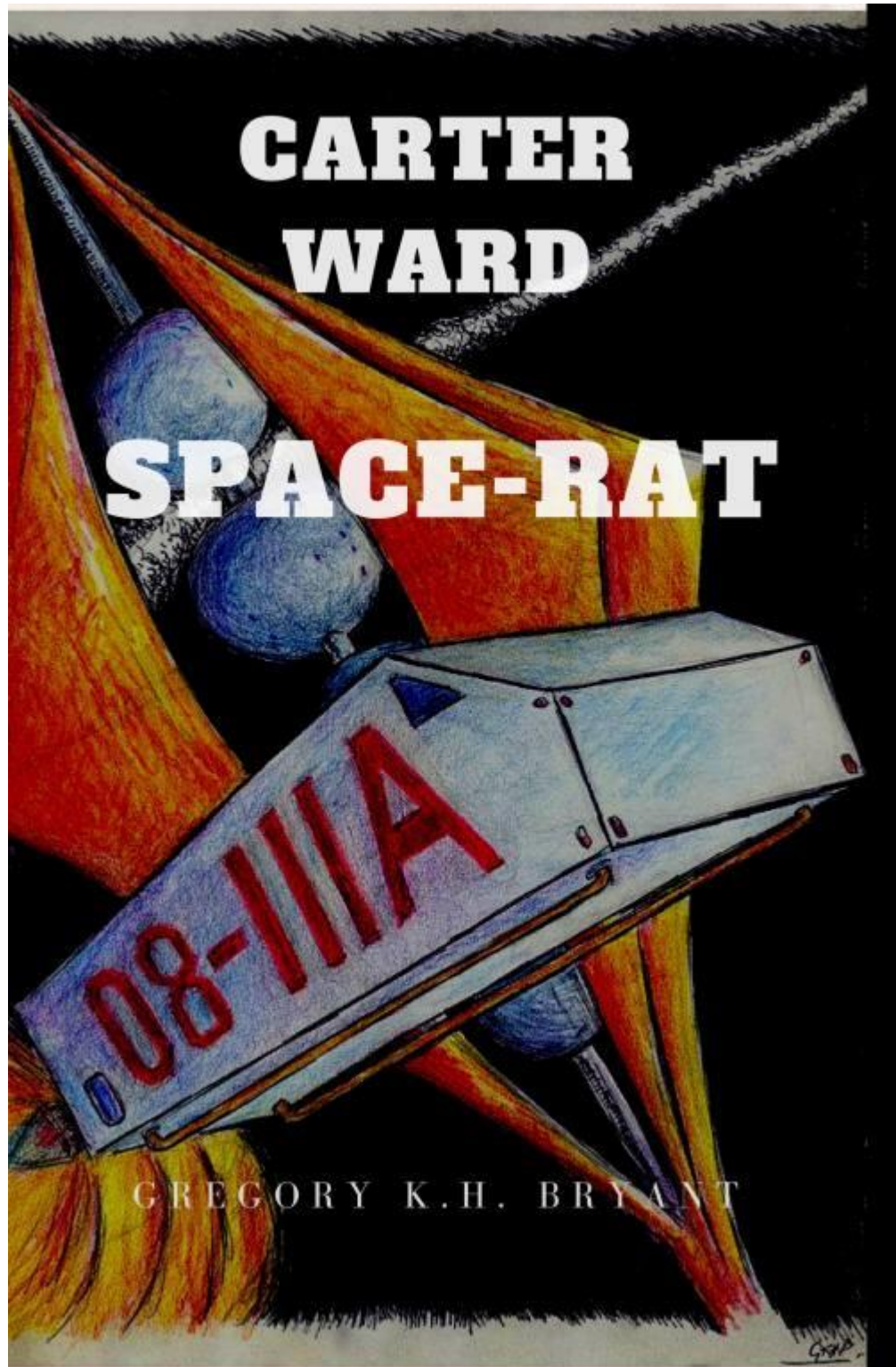
Fauna says to me: “This might be our way out.”

I begin to ponder, but am interrupted by a loud smash. There is, or was, a glass window behind us near the front. Evening light beams in and a single stone the size of my head lands near my sister.

Fauna sprints to the window. “Ah, the constable is there! Oh, and look, he’s brought friends—Gemok, that little trumpet guy, miners, oh, and those two wheeling Dragon Guard thingies!”

“We know you’re in there!” we hear the voice of Gemok shout. “Come out or we burn the library!”

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK...



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

[Return to Contents](#)

ERIC BRIGHTEYES by H Rider Haggard

XXVIII: How Swanhild Won Tidings of Eric

Now Eric's strength came back to him and his heart opened in the light of Gudruda's eyes like a flower in the sunshine. For all day long she sat at his side, holding his hand and talking to him, and they found much to say.

But on the fifth day from the day of his awakening she spoke thus:

"Eric, now I must go back to Middalhof. Thou art safe and it is not well that I should stay here."

"Not yet, Gudruda," he said; "leave me not yet."

"Yes, love, I must leave thee. The moon is bright, the sky has cleared, and the snow is hard with frost and fit for the hoofs of horses. I must go before more storms come. Listen now: in the second week of spring, if all is well, I will send thee a messenger with words of token, then shalt thou come down secretly to Middalhof, and there, Eric, we will be wed. Then, on the next day, we will sail for England in a trading-ship that I shall get ready, to seek our fortune there."

"It will be a good fortune if thou art by my side," said Eric, "so good that I doubt greatly if I may find it, for I am Eric the Unlucky. Swanhild must yet be reckoned with, Gudruda. Yes, thou art right: thou must go hence, Gudruda, and swiftly, though it grieves me much to part with thee."

Then Eric called Skallagrim and bade him make things ready to ride down to Middalhof with the Lady Gudruda.

This Skallagrim did swiftly, and afterwards Eric and Gudruda kissed and parted, and they were sad at heart to part.

Now on the fifth day after the going of Gudruda, Skallagrim came back to Mosfell somewhat cold and weary. And he told Eric, who could now walk and grew strong again, that he and Jon had ridden with Gudruda the Fair to Horse-Head Heights, seeing no man, and had left her there to go on with her thralls. He had come back also seeing no one, for the weather was too cold for the men of Gizur to watch the fell in the snows.

Now Gudruda came safely to Middalhof, having been eleven days gone, and found that few had visited the house, and that these had been told that she lay sick abed. Her secret had been well kept, and, though Swanhild had no lack of spies, many days went by before she learned that Gudruda had gone up to Mosfell to nurse Eric.

After this Gudruda began to make ready for her flight from Iceland. She called in the moneys that she had out at interest, and with them bought from a certain chapman a good trading-ship which lay in its shed under the shelter of Westman Isles. This ship she began to make ready for sea so soon as the heart of the winter was broken, putting it about that she intended to send her on a trading voyage to Scotland in the spring. And also to give colour to this tale she bought many pelts and other goods, such as chapmen deal in.

Thus the days passed on—not so badly for Gudruda, who strove to fill their emptiness in making ready for the full and happy time; but for Eric in his cave they were very heavy, for he could find nothing to do except to sleep and eat, and think of Gudruda, whom he might not see.

For Swanhild also, sitting at Coldback, the days did not go well. She was weary of the courting of Gizur, whom she played with as a cat plays with a rat, and her heart was sick with love, hate, and jealousy. For she well knew that Gudruda and Eric still clung to each other and found means of greeting, if not of speech. At that time she wished to kill Eric if she could, though she would rather kill Gudruda if she dared. Still, she could not come at Eric, for her men feared to try the narrow way of Mosfell, and when they met him in the open they fled before him.

Presently it came to her ears that Gudruda made a ship ready to sail to Scotland on a trading voyage, and she was perplexed by this tale, for she knew that Gudruda had no love of trading and never thought of gain. So she set spies to watch the ship. Still, the slow days drew on, and at length the air grew soft with spring, and flowers showed through the snow.

Eric sat in his mountain nest waiting for tidings, and watched the nesting eagles wheel about the cliffs. At length news came. For one morning, as he rose, Skallagrim told him that a man wanted to speak with him. He had come to the mountain in the darkness, and had lain in a dell till the breaking of the light, for, now that the snows were melting, the men of Gizur and Swanhild watched the ways.

Eric bade them bring the man to him. When he saw him he knew that he was a thrall of Gudruda's and welcomed him heartily.

"What tidings?" he asked.

"This, lord," said the thrall: "Gudruda the Fair bids me say that she is well and that the snows melt on the roof of Middalhof."

Now this was the signal word that had been agreed upon between Eric and Gudruda, that she should send him when all was ready.

"Good," said Eric, "ride back to Gudruda the Fair and say that Eric Brighteyes is well, but on Hecla the snows melt not."

By this answer he meant that he would be with her presently, though the thrall could make nothing of it. Then Skallagrim asked tidings of the man, and learned that Swanhild was still at Middalhof, and with her Gizur, and that they gave out that they wished to make an end of waiting and slay Eric.

"First snare your bird, then wring his neck," laughed Skallagrim.

Then Eric did this: among his men were some who he knew were not willing to sail from Iceland, and Jon, his thrall, was of them, for Jon did not love the angry sea. He bade these bide a while on Mosfell and make fires nightly on the platform of rock which is in front of the cave, that the spies of Gizur and Swanhild might be deceived by them, and think that Eric

was still on the fell. Then, when they heard that he had sailed, they were to come down and hide themselves with friends till Gizur and his following rode north. But he told two of the men who would sail with him to make ready.

That night before the moon rose Eric said farewell to Jon and the others who stayed on Mosfell, and rode away with Skallagrim and the two who went with him. They passed the plain of black sand in safety, and so on to Horse-Head Heights. Now at length, as the afternoon drew on to evening, from Stonefell's crest they saw the Hall of Middalhof before them, and Eric's heart swelled in his breast. Yet they must wait till darkness fell before they dared enter the place, lest they should be seen and notice of their coming should be carried to Gizur and Swanhild. And this came into the mind of Eric, that of all the hours of his life that hour of waiting was the longest. Scarcely, indeed, could Skallagrim hold him back from going down the mountain side, he was so set on coming to Gudruda whom he should wed that night.

At length the darkness fell, and they went on. Eric rode swiftly down the rough mountain path, while Skallagrim and the two men followed grumbling, for they feared that their horses would fall. At length they came to the place, and riding into the yard, Eric sprang from his horse and strode to the women's door. Now Gudruda stood in the porch, listening; and while he was yet some way off, she heard the clang of Brighteyen's harness, and the colour came and went upon her cheek. Then she turned and fled to the high seat of the hall, and sat down there. Only two women were left in Middalhof with her, and some thralls who tended the kine and horses. But these slept, not in the hall, but in an outhouse. Gudruda had sent the rest of her people down to the ship to help in the lading, for it was given out that the vessel sailed on the morrow. She had done this that there might be no talk of the coming of Eric to Middalhof.

Now Brighteyes came to the porch, and, finding the door wide, walked in. But Skallagrim and the men stayed without a while, and tended the horses. A fire burned upon the centre hearth in the hall, and threw shadows on the panelling. Eric walked on by its light, looking to left and right, but seeing neither man nor woman. Then a great fear took him lest Gudruda should be gone, or perhaps slain of Swanhild, Groa's daughter, and he trembled at the thought. He stood by the fire, and Gudruda, watching from the shadow of the high seat, saw the dull light glow upon his golden helm, and a sigh of joy broke from her lips. Eric heard the sigh and looked, and as he looked a stick of pitchy driftwood fell into the fire and flared up fiercely. Then he saw. There, in the carved high seat, robed all in bridal white, sat Gudruda the Fair, his love. Her golden hair flowed about her breast, her white arms were stretched towards him, and on her sweet face shone such a look of love as he had never seen.

"Eric!" she whispered softly, and the breath of her voice ran down the empty panelled hall, that from all sides seemed to answer, "Eric."

Slowly he drew near to her. He saw nothing but the glory of Gudruda's face and the light shining on Gudruda's hair; he heard nothing save the sighing of her breath; he knew nothing except that before him sat his fair bride, won after many years.

Now he had climbed the high seat, and now, wrapped in each other's arms, they sat and gazed into each other's eyes, and lo! the air of the great hall rolled round them a sea of glory, and sweet voices whispered in their ears. Now Freya smiled upon them and led them through her gates of love, and they were glad that they had been born.

Thus then they were wed.

Now the story tells that Swanhild spoke with Gizur, Ospakar's son, in the house at Coldback.

"I tire of this slow play," she said. "We have tarried here for many weeks, and Atli's blood yet cries out for vengeance, and cries for vengeance the blood of black Ospakar, thy father, and the blood of many another, dead at great Eric's hand."

"I tire also," said Gizur, "and I am much needed in the north. I say this to thee, Swanhild, that, hadst thou not so strictly laid it on me that Eric must die ere thou weddest me, I had flitted back to Swinefell before now, and there bided my time to bring Brighteyes to his end."

"I will never wed thee, Gizur, till Eric is dead," said Swanhild fiercely.

"How shall we come at him then?" he answered. "We may not go up that mountain path, for two men can hold it against all our strength, and folk do not love to meet Eric and Skallagrim in a narrow way."

"The place has been badly watched," said Swanhild. "I am sure of this, that Eric has been down to Middalhof and seen Gudruda, my half-sister. She is shameless, who still holds commune with him who slew her brother and my husband. Death should be her reward, and I am minded to slay her because of the shame that she has brought upon our blood."

"That is a deed which thou wilt do alone, then," said Gizur, "for I will have no hand in the murder of that fair maid—no, nor will any who live in Iceland!"

Swanhild glanced at him strangely. "Hearken, Gizur!" she said: "Gudruda makes a ship ready to sail with goods to Scotland and bring a cargo thence before winter comes again. Now I find this strange, for never before did I know Gudruda turn her thoughts to trading. I think that she has it in her mind to sail from Iceland with this outlaw Eric, and seek a home overseas, and that I will not bear."

"It may be," said Gizur, "and I should not be sorry to see the last of Brighteyes, for I think that more men will die at his hand before he stiffens in his barrow."

"Thou art cowardly-hearted, thou son of Ospakar!" Swanhild said. "Thou sayest thou lovest me and wouldest win me to wife: I tell thee that there is but one road to my arms, and it leads over the corpse of Eric. Now this is my counsel: that we send the most of our men to watch that ship of Gudruda's, and, when she lifts anchor, to board her and search, for she is already bound for sea. Also among the people here I have a carle who was born near Hecla, and he swears this to me, that, when he was a lad, searching for an eagle's eyrie, he found a path by which Mosfell might be climbed from the north, and that in the end he came to a large flat place, and, looking over, saw that platform where Eric dwells with his thralls. But he could not see the cave, because of the overhanging brow of the rock. Now we will do this: thou and I, and the carle alone—no more, for I do not wish that our search should be noised abroad—to-morrow at the dawn we will ride away for Mosfell, and, passing under Hecla, come round the mountain and see if this path may still be scaled. For, if so, we will return with men and make an end of Brighteyes."

This plan pleased Gizur, and he said that it should be so.

So very early on the following morning Swanhild, having sent many men to watch Gudruda's ship, rode away secretly with Gizur and the thrall, and before it was again dawn they were on the northern slopes of Mosfell. It was on this same night that Eric went down from the mountain to wed Gudruda.

For a while the climbing was easy, but at length they came to a great wall of rock, a hundred fathoms high, on which no fox might find a foothold, nor anything that had not wings.

"Here now is an end of our journey," said Gizur, "and I only pray this, that Eric may not ride round the mountain before we are down again." For he did not know that Brighteyes already rode hard for Middalhof.

"Not so," said the thrall, "if only I can find the place by which, some thirty summers ago, I won yonder rift, and through it the crest of the fell," and he pointed to a narrow cleft in the face of the rock high above their heads, that was clothed with grey moss.

Then he moved to the right and searched, peering behind stones and birch-bushes, till presently he held up his hand and whistled. They passed along the slope and found him standing by a little stream of water which welled from beneath a great rock.

"Here is the place," the man said.

"I see no place," answered Swanhild.

"Still, it is there, lady," and he climbed on to the rock, drawing her after him. At the back of it was a hole, almost overgrown with moss. "Here is the path," he said again.

"Then it is one that I have no mind to follow," answered Swanhild. "Gizur, go thou with the man and see if his tale is true. I will stay here till ye come back."

Then the thrall let himself down into the hole and Gizur went after him. But Swanhild sat there in the shadow of the rock, her chin resting on her hand, and waited. Presently, as she sat, she saw two men ride round the base of the fell, and strike off to the right towards a turf-booth which stood the half of an hour's ride away. Now Swanhild was the keenest-sighted of all women of her day in Iceland, and when she looked at these two men she knew one of them for Jon, Eric's thrall, and she knew the horse also—it was a white horse with black patches, that Jon had ridden for many years. She watched them go till they came to the booth, and it seemed to her that they left their horses and entered.

Swanhild waited upon the side of the fell for nearly two hours in all. Then, hearing a noise above her, she looked up, and there, black with dirt and wet with water, was Gizur, and with him was the thrall.

"What luck, Gizur?" she asked.

"This, Swanhild: Eric may hold Mosfell no more, for we have found a way to bolt the fox."

"That is good news, then," said Swanhild. "Say on."

“Yonder hole, Swanhild, leads to the cleft above, having been cut through the cliff by fire, or perhaps by water. Now up that cleft a man may climb, though hardly, as by a difficult stair, till he comes to the flat crest of the fell. Then, crossing the crest, on the further side, perhaps six fathoms below him, he sees that space of rock where is Eric’s cave; but he cannot see the cave itself, because the brow of the cliff hangs over. And so it is that, if any come from the cave on to the space of rock, it will be an easy matter to roll stones upon them from above and crush them.”

Now when Swanhild heard this she laughed aloud.

“Eric shall mock us no more,” she said, “and his might can avail nothing against rocks rolled on him from above. Let us go back to Coldback and summon men to make an end of Brighteyes.”

So they went on down the mountain till they came to the place where they had hidden their horses. Then Swanhild remembered Jon and the other man whom she had seen riding to the booth, and she told Gizur of them.

“Now,” she said, “we will snare these birds, and perchance they will twitter tidings when we squeeze them.”

So they turned and rode for the booth, and drawing near, they saw two horses grazing without. Now they got off their horses, and creeping up to the booth, looked in through the door which was ajar. And they saw this, that one man sat on the ground with his back to the door, eating stock-fish, while Jon made bundles of fish and meal ready to tie on the horses. For it was here that those of his quarter who loved Eric brought food to be carried by his men to the cave on Mosfell.

Now Swanhild touched Gizur on the arm, pointing first to the man who sat eating the fish and then to the spear in Gizur’s hand. Gizur thought a while, for he shrank from this deed.

Then Swanhild whispered in his ear, “Slay the man and seize the other; I would learn tidings from him.”

So Gizur cast the spear, and it passed through the man’s heart, and he was dead at once. Then he and the thrall leapt into the booth and threw themselves on Jon, hurling him to the ground, and holding swords over him. Now Jon was a man of small heart, and when he saw his plight and his fellow dead he was afraid, and prayed for mercy.

“If I spare thee, knave,” said Swanhild, “thou shalt do this: thou shalt lead me up Mosfell to speak with Eric.”

“I may not do that, lady,” groaned Jon; “for Eric is not on Mosfell.”

“Where is he, then?” asked Swanhild.

Now Jon saw that he had said an unlucky thing, and answered:

“Nay, I know not. Last night he rode from Mosfell with Skallagrim Lambstail.”

“Thou liest, knave,” said Swanhild. “Speak, or thou shalt be slain.”

“Slay on,” groaned Jon, glancing at the swords above him, and shutting his eyes. For, though he feared much to die, he had no will to make known Eric’s plans.

“Look not at the swords; thou shalt not die so easily. Hearken: speak, and speak truly, or thou shalt seek Hela’s lap after this fashion,” and, bending down, she whispered in his ear, then laughed aloud.

Now Jon grew faint with fear; his lips turned blue, and his teeth chattered at the thought of how he should be made to die. Still, he would say nothing.

Then Swanhild spoke to Gizur and the thrall, and bade them bind him with a rope, tear the garments from him, and bring snow. They did this, and pushed the matter to the drawing of knives. But when he saw the steel Jon cried aloud that he would tell all.

“Now thou takest good counsel,” said Swanhild.

Then in his fear Jon told how Eric had gone down to Middalhof to wed Gudruda, and thence to fly with her to England.

Now Swanhild was mad with wrath, for she had sooner died than that this should come about.

“Let us away,” she said to Gizur. “But first kill this man.”

“Nay,” said Gizur, “I will not do that. He has told his tidings; let him go free.”

“Thou art chicken-hearted,” said Swanhild, who, after the fashion of witches, had no mercy in her. “At the least, he shall not go hence to warn Eric and Gudruda of our coming. If thou wilt not kill him, then bind him and leave him.”

So Jon was bound, and there in the booth he sat two days before anyone came to loose him.

“Whither away?” said Gizur to Swanhild.

“To Middalhof first,” Swanhild answered.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

[Return to Contents](#)

THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

12. The Drug of Our Lady the Moon

Our Lord the Sun was riding towards the end of His day, and the smoke from a burning mountain fanned black and forbidding before His face. Phorenice wrung the water from her clothes and shivered. "Work hard with those paddles, Deucalion, and take me in through the water-gate and let me be restored to my comforts again. That merchant would rue if he saw how his pretty garments were spoiled, and I rue, too, being a woman, and remembering that he at least has no others I can take in place of these." She looked at me sidelong, tossing back the short red hair from her eyes. "What think you of my wisdom in coming where we have come without an escort?"

"The Empress can do no wrong," I quoted the old formula with a smile.

"At least I have shown you that I can fight. I caught you looking your approval of me quite pleasantly once or twice. You were a difficult man to thaw, Deucalion, but you warm perceptibly as you keep on being near me. La, sir, we shall be a pair of rustic sweethearts yet, if this goes on. I am glad I thought of the device of going near those smelly fishers."

So she had taken me out in the litter unattended for the plain purpose of inviting a fight, and showing me her skill at arms, and perhaps, too, of seeing in person how I also carried myself in a moment of stress. Well, if we were to live on together as husband and wife, it was good that each should know to a nicety the other's powers; and also, I am too much of an old battler and too much enamoured with the glorious handling of arms to quarrel very deeply with anyone who offers me a tough upstanding fight. Still for the life of me, I could not help comparing Phorenice with another woman. With a similar chance open before us, Nais had robbed me of the struggle through a sheer pity for those squalid rebels who did not even call her chieftain; whilst here was this Empress frittering away two score of the hardiest of her subjects merely to gratify a whim.

Yet, loyal to my vow as a priest, and to the commands set upon me by the high council on the Sacred Mountain, I tried to put away these wayward thoughts and comparisons. As I rowed over the swingings of the waves towards the forts which guard the harbour's mouth, I sent prayers to the High Gods to give my tongue dexterity, and They through Their love for the country of Atlantis, and the harassed people, whom it was my deep wish to serve, granted me that power of speech which Phorenice loved. Her eyes glowed upon me as I talked.

This beach of the fishers where we had had our passage at arms is safe from ship attack from without, by reason of a chain of jagged rocks which spring up from the deep, and run from the harbour side to the end of the city wall. The fishers know the passes, and can oftentimes get through to the open water beyond without touching a stone; or if they do see a danger of hitting on the reef, leap out and carry their light boats in their hands till the water floats them again. But here I had neither the knowledge nor the dexterity, and, thought I, now the High Gods will show finally if They wish this woman who has defiled them to reign on in Atlantis, and if also They wish me to serve as her husband.

I cried these things in my heart, and waited to receive the omen. There was no half-answer. A great wave rose in the lagoon behind us, a wave such as could have only been caused by an earth tremor, and on its sleek back we were hurled forward and thrown clear of the reefs with

their seaweeds licking round us, without so much as seeing a stone of the barrier. I bowed my head as I rowed on towards the harbour forts. It was plain that not yet would the High Gods take vengeance for the insults which this lovely woman had offered Them.

The sentries in the two forts beat drums at one another in their accustomed rotation, and in the growing dusk were going to pay little enough attention to the fishingboat which lay against the great chain clamouring to have it lowered. But luckily a pair of officers were taking the air of the evening in a stone-dropping turret of the roof of the nearer fort, and these recognised the tone of our shouts. They silenced the drums, torches were lowered to make sure of our faces, and then with a splash the great chain was dropped into the water to give us passage.

A galley lay inside, nuzzling the harbour wall, and presently the ladder of ropes was let down from the top of the nearest fort, and a crew came down to man the oars. There were the customary changes of raiment too, given as presents by the officers of the fort, and these we put on in the cabin of the galley in place of the sodden clothes we wore. There are fevers to be gained by carrying wet clothes after sunset, and though from personal experience I have learned that these may be warded off with drugs, I noticed with some grim amusement that the Empress had sufficiently little of the Goddess about her to fear very much the ailments which are due to frail humanity.

The galley rowed swiftly across the calm waters of the harbour, and made fast to the rings of gold on the royal quay, and whilst we were waiting for litters to be brought, I watched a lantern lit in the boat which stood guard over Phorenice's mammoth. The huge red beast stood shoulder-deep in the harbour water, with trunk up-turned. It was tamed now, and the light of the boat's lantern fell on the little ripples sent out by its tremblings. But I did not choose to intercede or ask mercy for it. If the mammoth sank deeper in the harbour mud, and was swallowed, I could have borne the loss with equanimity.

To tell the truth, that ride on the great beast's back had impressed me unfavourably. In fact, it put into me a sense of helplessness that was well-nigh intolerable. Perhaps circumstances have made me unduly self-reliant: on that others must judge. But I will own to having a preference for walking on my own proper feet, as the Gods in fashioning our shapes most certainly intended. On my own feet I am able to guard my own head and neck, and have done on four continents, throughout a long and active life, and on many a thousand occasions. But on the back of that detestable mammoth, pah! I grew as nervous as a child or a dastard.

However, I had little enough leisure for personal megrims just then. Whilst we waited, Phorenice asked the port-captain (who must needs come up officiously to make his salutations) after the disposal of Nais, and was told that she had been clapped into a dungeon beneath the royal pyramid, and the officer of the guard there had given his bond for her safe-keeping.

"It is to be hoped he understands his work," said the Empress. "That pretty Nais knows the pyramid better than most, and it may be he will be sent to the tormentors for putting her in a cell which had a secret outlet. You would feel pleasure if the girl escaped, Deucalion?"

"Assuredly," said I, knowing how useless it would be to make a secret of the matter. "I have no enmity against Nais."

“But I have,” said she viciously, “and I am still minded to lock your faith to me by that wedding gift you know of.”

“The thing shall be done,” I said. “Before all, the Empress of Atlantis.”

“Poof! Deucalion, you are too stiff and formal. You ought to be mightily honoured that I condescend to be jealous of your favours. Your hand, sir, please, to help me into the litter. And now come in beside me, and keep me warm against the night air. Ho! you guards there with the torches! Keep farther back against the street walls. The perfume you are burning stifles me.”

Again there was a feast that night in the royal banqueting-hall; again I sat beside Phorenice on the raised dais which stands beneath the symbols of the snake and the out-stretched hand. What had been taken for granted before about our forthcoming relationship was this time proclaimed openly; the Empress herself acknowledged me as her husband that was to be; and all that curled and jewelled throng of courtiers hailed me as greater than themselves, by reason of this woman’s choice. There was method, too, in their salutation. Some rumour must have got about of my preference for the older and simpler habits, and there was no drinking wine to my health after the new and (as I considered) impertinent manner. Decorously, each lord and lady there came forward, and each in turn spilt a goblet at my feet; and when I called any up, whether man or woman, to receive tit-bits from my platter, it was eaten simply and thankfully, and not kissed or pocketed with any extravagant gesture.

The flaring jets of earth-breath showed me, too, so I thought, a plainer habit of dress, and a more sober mien amongst this thoughtless mob of banqueters. And, indeed, it must have been plain to notice, for Phorenice, leaning over till the ruddy curls on her shoulder brushed my face, chided me in a playful whisper as having usurped her high authority already.

“Oh, sir,” she pleaded mockingly, “do not make your rule over us too ascetic. I have given no orders for this change, but to-night there are no perfumes in the air; the food is so plain and I have half a mind to burn the cook; and as for the clothes and gauds of these diners, by my face! they might have come straight from the old King’s reign before I stepped in here to show how tasteful could be colours on a robe, or how pretty the glint of a jewel. It’s done by no orders of mine, Deucalion. They have swung round to this change by sheer courtier instinct. Why, look at the beards of the men! There is not half the curl about many of them to-day that they showed with such exquisiteness yesterday. By my face! I believe they’d reap their chins to-morrow as smooth as yours, if you go on setting the fashions at this prodigious rate and I do not interfere.”

“Why hinder them if they feel more cleanly shaven?”

“No, sir. There shall be only one clean chin where a beard can grow in all Atlantis, and that shall be carried by the man who is husband to the Empress. Why, my Deucalion, would you have no sumptuary laws? Would you have these good folk here and the common people outside imitate us in every cut of the hair and every fold of a garment which it pleases us to discover? Come, sir, if you and I chose to say that our sovereignty was marked only by our superior strength of arm and wit, they would hate us at once for our arrogance; whereas, if we keep apart to ourselves a few mere personal decorations, these become just objects to admire and pleasantly envy.”

“You show me that there is more in the office of a ruler than meets the eye.”

“And yet they tell me, and indeed show me, that you have ruled with some success.”

“I employed the older method. It requires a Phorenice to invent these nicer flights.”

“Flatterer!” said she, and smote me playfully with the back of her little fingers on my arm. “You are becoming as great a courtier as any of them. You make me blush with your fine pleasantries, Deucalion, and there is no fan-girl here to-night to cool my cheek. I must choose me another fan-girl. But it shall not be Ylga. Ylga seems to have more of a kindness for you than I like, and if she is wise she will go live in her palace at the other side of the city, and there occupy herself with the ordering of her slaves, and the makings of embroideries. I shall not be hard on Ylga unless she forces me, but I will have no woman in this kingdom treat you with undue civility.”

“And how am I to act,” said I, falling in with her mood, “when I see and hear all the men of Atlantis making their protestations before you? By your own confession they all love you as ardently as they seem to have loved you hopelessly.”

“Ah, now,” she said, “you must not ask me to do impossibilities. I am powerful if you will. But I have no force which will govern the hearts of these poor fellows on matters such as that. But if you choose, you make proclamation that I am given now body and inwards to you, and if they continue to offend your pride in this matter, you may take your culprits, and give them over to the tormentors. Indeed, Deucalion, I think it would be a pretty attention to me if you did arrange some such ceremony. It seems to me a present,” she added with a frown, “that the jealousy is too much on one side.”

“You must not expect that a man who has been divorced from love for all of a busy life can learn all its niceties in an instant. Myself, I was feeling proud of my progress. With any other schoolmistress than you, Phorenice, I should not be near so forward. In fact (if one may judge by my past record), I should not have begun to learn at all.”

“I suppose you think I should be satisfied with that? Well, I am not. I can be finely greedy over some matters.”

The banquet this night did not extend to inordinate length. Phorenice had gone through much since last she slept, and though she had declared herself Goddess in the meantime, it seemed that her body remained mortal as heretofore. The black rings of weariness had grown under her wondrous eyes, and she lay back amongst the cushions of the divan with her limbs slackened and listless. When the dancers came and postured before us, she threw them a jewel and bade them begone before they had given a half of their performance, and the poet, a silly swelling fellow who came to sing the deeds of the day, she would not hear at all.

“To-morrow,” she said wearily, “but for now grant me peace. My Lord Deucalion has given me much food for thought this day, and presently I go to my chamber to muse over the future policies of this State throughout the night. To-morrow come to me again, and if your poetry is good and short, I will pay you surprisingly. But see to it that you are not long-winded. If there are superfluous words, I will pay you for those with the stick.”

She rose to her feet then, and when the banqueters had made their salutation to us, I led her away from the banqueting-hall and down the passages with their secret doors which led to her private chambers. She clung on my arm, and once when we halted whilst a great stone block swung slowly ajar to let us pass, she drooped her head against my shoulder. Her breath came warm against my cheek, and the loveliness of her face so close at hand surpasses the description of words. I think it was in her mind that I should kiss the red lips which were held so near to mine, but willing though I was to play the part appointed, I could not bring myself to that. So when the stone block had swung, she drew away with a sigh, and we went on without further speech.

“May the High Gods treat you tenderly,” I said, when we came to the door of her bed-chamber.

“I am my own God,” said she, “in all things but one. By my face! you are a tardy wooer, Deucalion. Where do you go now?”

“To my own chamber.”

“Oh, go then, go.”

“Is there anything more I could do?”

“Nothing that your wit or your will would prompt you to. Yes, indeed, you are finely decorous, Deucalion, in your old-fashioned way, but you are a mighty poor wooer. Don’t you know, my man, that a woman esteems some things the more highly if they are taken from her by rude force?”

“It seems I know little enough about women.”

“You never said a truer word. Bah! And I believe your coldness brings you more benefit in a certain matter than any show of passion could earn. There, get you gone, if the atmosphere of a maiden’s bed-chamber hurts your rustic modesty, and your Gods keep you, Deucalion, if that’s the phrase, and if you think They can do it. Get you gone, man, and leave me solitary.”

I had taken the plan of the pyramid out of the archives before the banquet and learned it thoroughly, and so was able to thread my way through its angular mazes without pause or blunder. I, too, was heavily wearied with what I had gone through since my last snatch of sleep, but I dare set apart no time for rest just then. Nais must be sacrificed in part for the needs of Atlantis; but a plan had come to me by which it seemed that she need not be sacrificed wholly; and to carry this through there was need for quick thought and action.

Help came to me also from a quarter I did not expect. As I passed along the tortuous way between the ponderous stones of the pyramid, which led to the apartments that had been given me by Phorenice, a woman glided up out of the shadows of one of the side passages, and when I lifted my hand lamp, there was Ylga.

She regarded me half-sullenly. “I have lost my place,” she said, “and it seems I need never have spoken. She intended to have you all along, and it was not a thing like that which could put her off. And you—you just think me officious, if, indeed, you have ever given me another thought till now.”

“I never forget a kindness.”

“Oh, you will learn that trick soon now. And you are going to marry her, you! The city is ringing with it. I thought at least you were honest, but when there is a high place to be got by merely taking a woman with it, you are like the rest. I thought, too, that you would be one of those men who have a distrust for ruddy hair. And, besides she is little.”

“Ylga,” I said, “you have taught me that these walls are full of crannies and ears. I will listen to no word against Phorenice. But I would have further converse with you soon. If you still have a kindness for me, go to the chamber that is mine and wait for me there. I will join you shortly.”

She drooped her eyes. “What do you want of me, Deucalion?”

“I want to say something to you. You will learn who it concerns later.”

“But is it—is it fitting for a maiden to come to a man’s room at this hour?”

“I know little of your conventions here in this new Atlantis. I am Deucalion, girl, and if you still have qualms, remembering that, do not come.”

She looked up at me with a sneer. “I was foolish,” she said. “My lord’s coldness has grown into a proverb, and I should have remembered it. Yes; I will come.”

“Go now, then,” said I, and waited till she had passed on ahead and was out of sight and hearing. With Ylga to help me, my tasks were somewhat lightened, and their sequence changed. In the first instance, now, I had got to make my way with as little delay and show as possible into a certain sanctuary which lay within the temple of our Lady the Moon. And here my knowledge as one of the Seven stood me in high favour.

All the temples of the city of Atlantis are in immediate and secret connection with the royal pyramid, but the passages are little used, seeing that they are known only to the Seven and to the Three above them, supposing that there are three men living at one time sufficiently learned in the highest of the highest mysteries to be installed in that sublime degree of the Three. And, even by these, the secret ways may only be used on occasions of the greatest stress, so that a generation well may pass without their being trodden by a human foot.

It was with some trouble, and after no little experiment that I groped my way into this secret alley; but once there, the rest was easy. I had never trodden it before certainly, but the plan of it had been taught me at my initiation as one of the Seven, and the course of the windings came back to me now with easy accuracy. I walked quickly, not only because the air in those deep crannies is always full of lurking evils, but also because the hours were fleeting, and much must be done before our Lord the Sun again rose to make another day.

I came to the spy-place which commands the temple, and found the holy place empty, and, alas! dust-covered, and showing little trace that worshippers ever frequented it these latter years. A vast stone of the wall swung outwards and gave me entrance, and presently (after the solemn prayer which is needful before attempting these matters), I took the metal stair from

the place where it is kept, and climbed to the lap of the Goddess, and then, pulling the stair after me, climbed again upwards till my length lay against her calm mysterious face.

A shivering seized me as I thought of what was intended, for even a warrior hardened to horrid sights and deeds may well have qualms when he is called upon to juggle with life and death, and years and history, with the welfare of his country in one hand, and the future of a woman who is as life to him in the other. But again I told myself that the hours flew, and laid hold of the jewel which is studded into the forehead of the image with one hand, and then stretching out, thrust at a corner of the eyebrow with the other. With a faint creak the massive eyeball below, a stone that I could barely have covered with my back, swung inwards. I stepped off the stair, and climbed into the gap. Inside was the chamber which is hollowed from the head of the Goddess.

It was the first time I had seen this most secret place, but the aspect of it was familiar to me from my teaching, and I knew where to find the thing which would fill my need. Yet, occupied though I might be with the stress of what was to befall, I could not help having a wonder and an admiration for the cleverness with which it was hidden.

High as I was in the learning and mysteries of the Priestly Clan, the structure of what I had come to fetch was hidden from me. Beforetime I had known only of their power and effect; and now that I came to handle them, I saw only some roughly rounded balls, like nut kernels, grass green in colour, and in hardness like the wax of bees. There were three of these balls in the hidden place, and I took the one that was needful, concealing the others as I had found them. It may have been a drug, it may have been something more; what exactly it was I did not know; only of its power and effect I was sure, as that was set forth plainly in the teaching I had learned; and so I put it in a pouch of my garment, returning by the way I had come, and replacing all things in due order behind me.

One look I took at the image of the Goddess before I left the temple. The jet of earth-breath which burns eternally from the central altar lit her from head to toe, and threw sparkles from the great jewel in her forehead. Vast she was, and calm and peaceful beyond all human imaginings, a perfect symbolism of that rest and quietness which many sigh for so vainly on this rude earth, but which they will never attain unless by their piety they earn a place in the hereafter, where our Lady the Moon and the rest of the High Ones reign in Their eternal glorious majesty.

It was with tired dragging limbs that I made my way back again to the royal pyramid, and at last came to my own private chamber. Ylga awaited me there, though at first I did not see her. The suspicions of these modern days had taken a deep hold of the girl, and she must needs crouch in hiding till she made sure it was I who came to the chamber, and, moreover, that I came alone.

“Oh, frown at me if you choose,” said she sullenly, “I am past caring now for your good opinion. I had heard so much of Deucalion, and I thought I read honesty in you when first you came ashore; but now I know that you are no better than the rest. Phorenice offers you a high place, and you marry her blithely to get it. And why, indeed, should you not marry her? People say she is pretty, and I know she can be warm. I have seen her warm and languishing to scores of men. She is clever, too, with her eyes, is our great Empress; I grant her that. And as for you, it tickles you to be courted.”

“I think you are a very silly woman,” I said.

“If you flatter yourself it matters a rap to me whom you marry, you are letting conceit run away with you.”

“Listen,” I said. “I did not ask you here to make foolish speeches which seem largely beyond my comprehension. I asked you to help me do a service to one of your own blood-kin.”

She stared at me wonderingly. “I do not understand.”

“It rests largely with you as to whether Nais dies to-morrow, or whether she is thrown into a sleep from which she may waken on some later and more happy day.”

“Nais!” she gasped. “My twin, Nais? She is not here. She is out in the camp with those nasty rebels who bite against the city walls, if, indeed, still she lives.”

“Nais, your sister is near us in the royal pyramid this minute, and under guard, though where I do not know.” And with that I told her all that had passed since the girl was brought up a prisoner in the galley of that foolish, fawning captain of the port. “The Empress has decreed that Nais shall be buried alive under a throne of granite which I am to build for her to-morrow, and buried she will assuredly be. Yet I have a kindness for Nais, which you may guess at if you choose, and I am minded to send her into a sleep such as only we higher priests know of, from which at some future day she may possibly awaken.”

“So it is Nais; and not Phorenice, and not—not any other?”

“Yes; it is Nais. I marry the Empress because Zaemon, who is mouthpiece to the High Council of the Priests, has ordered it, for the good of Atlantis. But my inwards remain still cold towards her.”

“Almost I hate poor Nais already.”

“Your vengeance would be easy. Do not tell me where she is gaoled, and I shall not dare to ask. Even to give Nais a further span of life I cannot risk making inquiries for her cell, when there is a chance that those who tell me might carry news to the Empress, and so cause more trouble for this poor Atlantis.”

“And why should I not carry the news, and so bring myself into favour again? I tell you that being fan-girl to Phorenice and second woman in the kingdom is a thing that not many would cast lightly aside.”

I looked her between eyes and smiled. “I have no fear there. You will not betray me, Ylga. Neither will you sell Nais.”

“I seem to remember very small love for this same Nais just now,” she said bitterly. “But you are right about that other matter. I shall not buy myself back at your expense. Oh, I am a fool, I know, and you can give me no thanks that I care about, but there is no other way I can act.”

“Then let us fritter no more time. Go you out now and find where Nais is gaoled, and bring me news how I can say ten words to her, and press a certain matter into her clasp.”

She bowed her head and left the chamber, and for long enough I was alone. I sat down on the couch, and rested wearily against the wall. My bones ached, my eyes ached, and most of all, my inwards ached. I had thought to myself that a man who makes his life sufficiently busy will find no leisure for these pains which assault frailer folk; but a philosophy like this, which carried one well in Yucatan, showed poorly enough when one tried it here at home. But that there was duty ahead, and the order of the High Council to be carried into effect, the bleakness of the prospect would have daunted me, and I would have prayed the Gods then to spare me further life, and take me unto Themselves.

Ylga came back at last, and I got up and went quickly after her as she led down a maze of passages and alleyways. "There has been no care spared over her guarding," she whispered, as we halted once to move a stone. "The officer of the guard is an old lover of mine, and I raised his hopes to the burning point again by a dozen words. But when I wanted to see his prisoner, there he was as firm as brass. I told him she was my sister, but that did not move him. I offered him—oh, Deucalion, it makes me blush to think of the things I did offer to that man, but there was no stirring him. He has watched the tormentors so many times, that there is no tempting him into touch of their instruments."

"If you have failed, why bring me out here?"

"Oh, I am not inveigling you into a lover's walk with myself, sir. You tickle yourself when you think your society is so pleasant as that."

"Come, girl, tell me then what it is. If my temper is short, credit it against my weariness."

"I have carried out my lord's commands in part. I know the cell where Nais lives, and I have had speech with her, though not through the door. And moreover, I have not seen her or touched her hand."

"Your riddles are beyond me, Ylga, but if there is a chance, let us get on and have this business done."

"We are at the place now," said she, with a hard little laugh, "and if you kneel on the floor, you will find an airshaft, and Nais will answer you from the lower end. For myself, I will leave you. I have a delicacy in hearing what you want to say to my sister, Deucalion."

"I thank you," I said. "I will not forget what you have done for me this night."

"You may keep your thanks," she said bitterly, and walked away into the shadows.

I knelt on the floor of the gallery, and found the air passage with my hand, and then, putting my lips to it, whispered for Nais.

The answer came on the instant, muffled and quiet. "I knew my lord would come for a farewell."

"What the Empress said, has to be. You understand, my dear? It is for Atlantis."

"Have I reproached my lord, by word or glance?"

“I myself am bidden to place you in the hollow between the stones, and I must do it.”

“Then my last sleep will be a sweet one. I could not ask to be touched by pleasanter hands.”

“But it mayhap that a day will come when she whom you know of will be suffered by the High Gods to live on this land of Atlantis no longer.”

“If my lord will cherish my poor memory when he is free again, I shall be grateful. He might, if he chose, write them on the stones: Here was buried a maid who died gladly for the good of Atlantis, even though she knew that the man she so dearly loved was husband to her murderess.”

“You must not die,” I whispered. “My breast is near broken at the very thought of it. And for respite, we must trust to the ancient knowledge, which in its day has been sent out from the Ark of the Mysteries.”—I took the green waxy ball in my fingers, and stretched them down the crooked air-shaft to the full of my span.—“I have somewhat for you here. Reach up and try to catch it from me.”

I heard the faint rustle of her arm as it swept against the masonry, and then the ball was taken over into her grasp. Gods! what a thrill went through me when the fingers of Nais touched mine! I could not see her, because of the crookedness of the shaft, but that faint touch of her was exquisite.

“I have it,” she whispered. “And what now, dear?”

“You will hide the thing in your garment, and when to-morrow the upper stone closes down upon you and the light is gone, then you will take it between your lips and let it dissolve as it will. Sleep will take you, my darling, then, and the High Gods will watch over you, even though centuries pass before you are roused.”

“If Deucalion does not wake me, I shall pray never again to open an eye. And now go, my lord and my dear. They watch me here constantly, and I would not have you harmed by being brought to notice.”

“Yes, I must go, my sweetheart. It will not do to have our scheme spoiled by a foolish loitering. May the most High Gods attend your rest, and if the sacrifice we make finds favour, may They grant us meeting here again on earth before we meet—as we must—when our time is done, and They take us up to Their own place.”

“Amen,” she whispered back, and then: “Kiss your fingers, dear, and thrust them down to me.”

I did that, and for an instant felt her fondle them down the crook of the airshaft out of sight, and then heard her withdraw her little hand and kiss it fondly. Then again she kissed her own fingers and stretched them up, and I took up the virtue of that parting kiss on my finger-tips and pressed it sacredly to my lips.

“Living, sleeping, or dead, always my darling,” she whispered. And then, before I could answer, she whispered again: “Go, they are coming for me.” And so I went, knowing that I

could do no more to help her then, and knowing that all our schemes would be spilt if any eye spied upon me as I lay there beside the air shaft. But my chest was like to have split with the dull, helpless anguish that was in it, as I made my way back to my chamber through the mazy alleys of the pyramid.

“Do not look upon mine eyes, dear, when the time comes,” had been her last command, “or they will tell a tale which Phorenice, being a woman, would read. Remember, we make these small denials, not for our own likings, but for Atlantis, which is mother to us all.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)