

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 14, ISSUE 26
2ND JUNE 2019

CTHULHU'S DAUGHTERS

BY WAYNE
PAYNE—
SACRIFICES...

APRIL

BY PS
GIFFORD—
*OF COURSE, I
HAD TO KILL
HER...*

THE MIND INVADERS BY STEVEN HAVELOCK

ARACHNOPUS BY GK MURPHY

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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Schlock! Webzine

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

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 14, Issue 26
2nd 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 *Viking sunset* by NASA. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week it is our sad duty to inform you that on 27th May Gregory KH Bryant passed away, after several years struggling with cancer. Almost until the last he entertained us all with his Carter Ward saga. He is sadly missed.

In this week's edition, a mother makes the ultimate sacrifice. Friedrich Heine explores the secret passage. An egotistical monster is tamed by love—or is he? A reporter learns of an invasion. Two loan sharks are cursed. At the wedding feast of his beloved, Eric Brighteyes comes to blows with Ospakar the Niddering. And in Atlantis, Deucalion hearkens to the words of Zaemon the Priest.

—Gavin Chappell

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

LOVECRAFTIANA

THE MAGAZINE OF ELDRITCH HORROR

THE SKUDDA

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WOE, BABYLON BESIEGED

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PLUS
CTHULHUVIAN
ART

from Dean
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WALPURGISNACHT 2019

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"OH VLAD YOU HAVE SUCH AN INFECTIOUS LAUGH!"

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

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

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

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

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CTHULHU'S DAUGHTERS by Wayne Payne

*Darlin you thrill me,
I know you thrill me,
Darlin you thrill me,
Honest you do,
Honest you do,
Honest you do.*

At first I thought it was infatu...” The power went out. I checked the cord on the record player and the light switches to be sure. Hail fell hard on the roof and rattled like nails above our heads. It woke the baby in the next room, which got the dog barking. Jack, the middle one who never sleeps, burst into our room with an empty brown paper bag and a little flashlight. “Dad, Charlotte said popcorn is popping outside, I’m going out to get some for you and mom.”

I kissed my five-year-old son on the forehead and left him with my husband to go and light the candles. “Thanks, Pumpkin Seed.” My grandmother’s candelabra emitted a copper glow in the baby’s room. Shadows frolicked on the window curtains beside the dresser and others were on their own shadowy journeys on the walls. Madelyn stopped crying as soon as I picked her up and so did the dog. I carried her on my hip and walked down the hallway with the candelabra into the kitchen. I put Madelyn down in her crib in the great room and spun the pink, wooden, floating lambs over her playpen three time to get them going. One. Two. Three. Rosy, our eighteen month old Rottweiler we acquired the day Madelyn was born, laid down beside the pen and cocked her massive head to the side, watching me while I poured myself a bourbon.

Jack marched downstairs with my husband in tow and then stood with me in the window. I could hear the faint sound of the ocean heaving itself against the cliffs below our beach home but it was too dark and foggy to see the hail because the porch lights were out.

“We should go outside right now, while the popcorn’s still hot,” Jack said, squeezing the bag closed with both fists as if popcorn was already in it with his flashlight tucked underneath his arm.

“Jack, I don’t think it’s safe right now, it’s a little too,” my husband, Charles, hesitated, “too dark and slippery outside, you could hurt yourself. And I told you it’s called hail. It’s like hard snowflakes, not popcorn. Your sister’s teasing you.”

“You said I can see for myself.” Jack marched in place on the carpet while pumping his shoulders up-and-down and rattling the paper bag.

“I know what I said, mister, but not now.” My husband looked at me and turned away from me when he spoke. “Honey, tell him it’s too dangerous, will ya? Are you supposed to drink with those kinda pills?”

“Charles, it’s dark but you’re just taking him out front. Just put his soccer shoes on and bring an umbrella. He’ll be fine.”

As soon as Charles touched the knob, our dog Rosy took off towards the door, but when it opened she backed up steadily, sniffing the dark heavily and then padded back to Madelyn, who was now cooing in her pen. "Crazy dog," Charles said as he closed the door behind him.

Outside, I watched Jack's flashlight beam search up and out of sight then back to the ground again. Jack swinking the flashlight back and forth over his red, soccer cleats. And from the window, it looked like a light house scanning out over little lost red tugboats.

When Charles and Jack returned, they removed their shoes and left them in the entryway. "Nothin, we couldn't see nothin. We waited too long," my son said sulking and clinching his fists.

"It stopped hailing," Charles whispered, walking passed me looking passed me at the clock. "Let's get some sleep buddy, go make your tent. I'll read you a story."

"It hasn't stopped. Listen," I said, holding the Old Fashion with both hands to my chest, just barely hiding the spot of bourbon that clung a green patch of my silk gown to my skin.

"What the hell, it started back?" Charles scratched his head.

"It never stopped," I said. And then Charles looked over at Jack, who was already putting his shoes back on.

"Let's go, we don't want to miss it this time." Jack sounded out of breath as he squeezed back into his tied shoes.

"Alright, alright, mister." My husband slipped back into his snow boots and led my son back into the misty dark. When they returned, they went straight to their rooms without a word.

Charles was asleep when the fog got into the house, and I was unable to wake him. It seeped in from every crevice like grey ghosts. I stumbled blindly through it to my son's room, calling his name. The flashlight lay shining in his tent next to a comic book. I yelled his name again and felt under his bed then into his closet. I searched corner to corner only reaching out to cold walls. I tripped over Rosy's thick, warm body. She was quiet and still and I wondered for only a second, what she was doing in Jack's room.

I picked up Madelyn and walked through the hallway. The door to my right creaked open, and Charlotte, my eldest daughter, grabbed my hand. Rosy howled from somewhere in the smoky shadows of the house and I froze, holding on tightly to my daughters. "Rosy, let's go." I suddenly felt her bump up against my hip, sniffing for Madelyn. "Good girl." Such good girls.

In the dawn, they found us down the long flagstone steps huddled together on the beach. The coroner's report said my husband drowned in his bed. My son, Jack, was never found. Police theorized that he must've wandered out of the house alone and was swept away by the ocean.

On some nights I awake to a little flashlight blinding me, but nothings there when the fogginess of my mind clears. We can only hope that our sacrifices are rewarded.

THE END

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THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

Chapter 7

I noticed on the other side of the tiny window was the symbol so well-represented in my host's abode: the Ouroboros. Why would such an emblem be needed in such a location? I smoothed fingertips over the circular snake and felt it to be raised, possibly constructed of brass or iron. A person in this dark recess would, if not see, then feel the location of the spycave. And yet, to what purpose?

With the taper lighting my way, I cut through the shadows of the stone tunnel. Cobwebs stretched across the breadth of the space and hung low so that I needed to duck, the flame melting the webbing to open further my path.

I halted my steps and heard scratching against the walls. Had I come to another doorway, leading through the bookshelf into another room? To where did this tunnel lead?

Vermin ran across my foot—a mouse—I felt its tiny pin-prick nails on the tops of my bare feet. More of these beasts ran helter-skelter, and I danced where I stood. Stretching forth the candle, I rushed through the darkness, attempting to leave the vermin behind me.

I felt as though the dust of the ages coated my visage and had absorbed into my clothing. I felt ancient. The walls seemed to squeeze me into a smaller and smaller space the farther into the tunnel I ventured. Cobwebs descended further—old and dusted, abandoned by their arachnids—until I had to stoop as I walked, the candle held out before me, its black, spidering smoke trailing back with the mildew breeze, choking my mouth and stinging my eyes.

A cough wracked my body and dropped me to the floor. I leaned back, suspecting a stone wall would buttress my weight, yet I was wrong. A stone on a hinge swung inward, and my head fell hard backwards to the ground.

Ignoring the throb at the back of my cranium, I dug into my breast pocket to feel for the box of matches, and by feel was able to procure one. The light of the match flared off the sulphur tip and I found myself staring at a stone ceiling that was perhaps six inches from my eyes.

I snapped my wrist so as to douse the match burning down to the flesh. I lit another, searched the confined space around me for the candle. It had snapped off, but there was still enough left in the candlestick to provide illumination. I twisted my body so that I was on my stomach, lit the candle stub, and crawled forward through the tunnel that was only spacious enough for my supine body.

Without a draft, the candle did not sputter. Instead, it jumped and waved about with the writhing crawl of my body. Edging through the dust, I made my way across stone until my path was blocked by a metal plate.

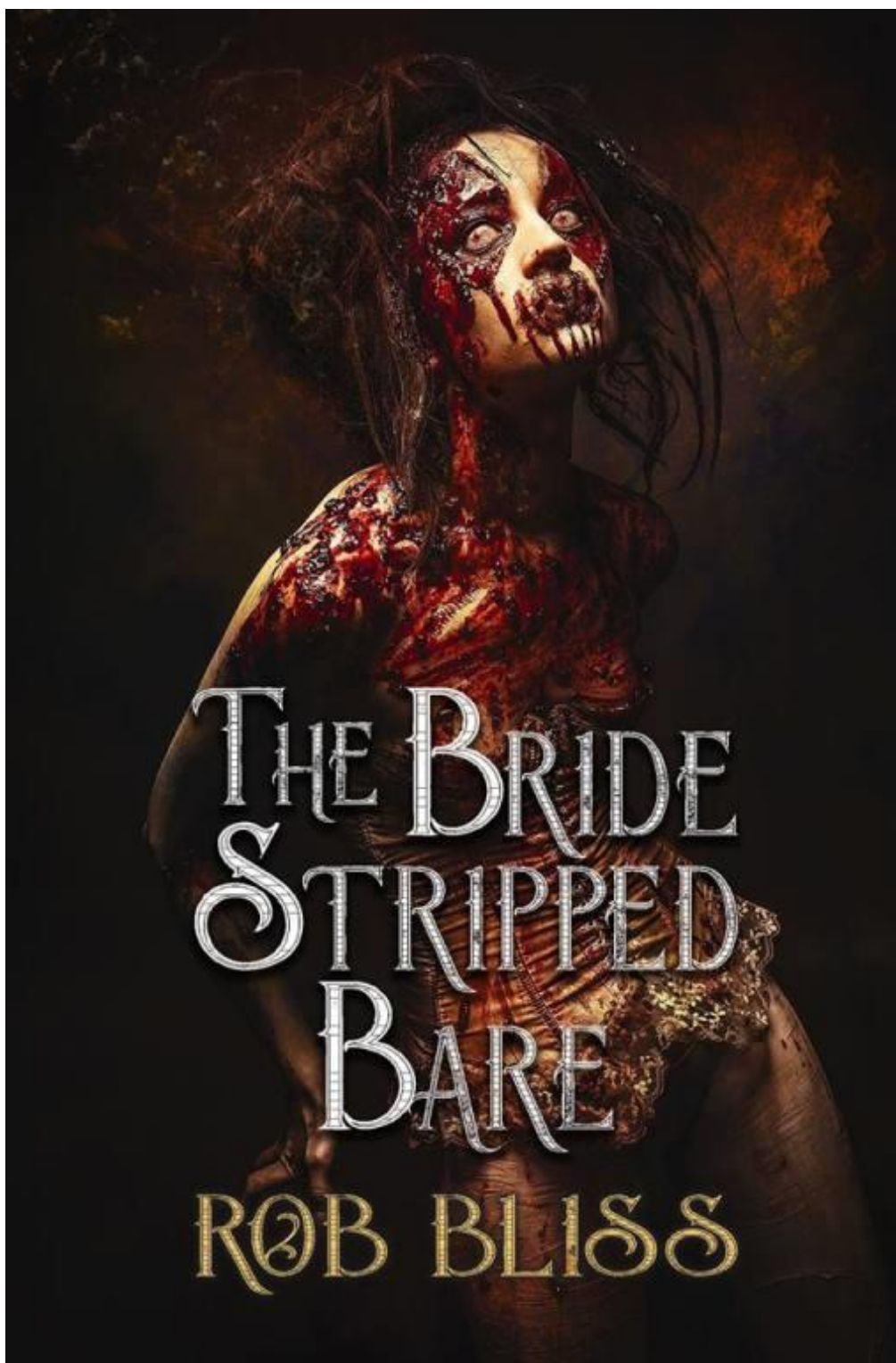
I formed a fist to push against the barrier. Metal scraped across stone as the plate gave way. The candle jumped and crackled with a fresh wind, warmer and sweeter than the one

in the tunnel. I held still, trying to peer into the darkness before me. But I could determine very little detail. Though I could tell that a room opened before me.

I inched my way out further until half of my torso was protruding from the claustrophobic passage and into the room. I tried to see into the blackness, but to no use.

All I did see was a quick flash of pale skin—an arm perhaps—before a weight fell on my already pained head, and I was unconscious.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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APRIL by PS Gifford

April was the greatest love of my life. She made me understand all the meaninglessness I was drowning in before we met. She transformed me from an egocentric monster into a man of reason and even tenderness.

So, of course, I had to kill her.

We met, quite by chance, at a local coffee shop. It was mid-morning and I was in a desperate need for a caffeine fix. I had spent the day doing research for my next book, and was drained from the human interaction it required. As I stumbled into the coffee house, the aroma of freshly ground beans perked my senses. I wished I had ordered all the books online and not had to hassle dealing with the pretentious sales clerks who look at me with no attempt to veil their abhorrent disgust at my choice of reading matter. However, my impatience turned out a stronger call than my desire to live as a hermit. And my addiction to caffeine had an even stronger pull on me than all my multitude of insecurities and peccadilloes.

So there I was, ordering a triple shot espresso, when I saw her. Her features, to the average observer, I suppose would be considered plain and ordinary. She had mousy brown hair held back over her forehead with a large faux tortoiseshell barrette. On her nose perched a pair of reading glasses that reminded me of something straight from the 1970s—no doubt purchased at a budget drugstore that specialized in the blue rinse aged group. Her figure was ample—bordering on plump. But two things separated her from any other girl I had ever seen—her lips. They were red, full, pouting and oh so inviting. Plus, the deal breaker was that she was heavily absorbed in a book—not overly unusual in itself; however this book is very special to me—*Suffer the Children* by John Saul. As my attention returned to the barista who was handing me my fix, I remember thanking him, as my mind tried to frantically search for an angle to create an introduction.

I have had limited interaction with members of the opposite sex. Not that I hadn't had desires. God, have I had those... I just never had the confidence to follow through. It seemed that fate, in this instance, was on my side, for a stumbling business man, too interested in his cell phone call, managed to trip over her feet, spilling a third of his steaming coffee on the table where she was seated. The man didn't apologize but just continued his way mindlessly to the exit, without even pausing his conversation for as much as a glance back. Grabbing a towel from the barista, I sprung into heroic action.

As I dabbed up the spilt coffee, trying to conceal my nervousness, she looked up at me with curiosity.

"Thanks," she uttered softly. "That guy redefines the term 'asshole'." Her perfectly formed mouth fashioned into a welcoming smile. I found, to my delight, that I was smiling back.

"Mind if I take a seat?" I asked, discovering my mouth now dry and not quite believing I was actually talking.

She gently nodded.

And so it began.

We sat there for over an hour—drinking coffee after coffee and discussing everything from politics to global warming, but most importantly we talked about books! It turned out that we had a mutual obsession with the macabre... and even more significantly, the thin line between pleasure and pain. We discussed in great detail the pleasure people achieve watching someone else being hurt. The fascination people have as they drive past a car crash—the one that makes them slow down, almost despite themselves, to catch a glorious glimpse of carnage. It is an impulse etched deep into our genes. Hence the popularity of such movies as *Saw* and the ilk; the human animal, as a general rule, extracts unparalleled pleasure from scenes of intense gore—and the more gruesome and blood-soaked the victim, the more enjoyment is attained. Yet, whereas most people are in denial of this dark side of them, maybe even ashamed or embarrassed by it, or considered it as religiously taboo—April, just as I, embraced it.

Talking to her was different, unlike any other conversation I had even had in my life. The cliché says there is somebody for everybody—I always mocked the concept, thinking that my passions for the dark underbelly of human compulsions were unique. However, to my delight, it was proving deliciously true.

Our first date was of a midnight showing of the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. We sat there enthralled, giggling like two adolescents throughout the entire performance. Afterwards was the first time we kissed. And oh, what a kiss! It was as if the movie had acted as some amazing aphrodisiac! I swear, every single part of me, spiritually and physically, became sexually aroused. As our tongues energetically explored each other's, I felt her teeth clamp down, to be rewarded with the sweetness of my blood. I did not pull away—on the contrary, this only aroused me further, and I allowed her to suck away for a good twenty minutes. I almost felt as if my very soul was being drained from me, yet I was savouring each blissful second. Finally, alas, the elongated kiss came to an end, and we stared into each other's eyes, not needing anything as simplistic as words to communicate.

From that point on the relationship progressed quickly. Two months later she agreed to move into my apartment—and my cold, scantily furnished residence was transformed by her decorating abilities into a home. She brought with her *Stoker*, a black moggie of dubious heredity. Yet, I came to adore that cat, as each night I watched, almost envious, as he went out for his midnight prowlf unfettered from social taboos that restricted polite modern society. It hunted, it screwed, and it lived each moment to the fullest, relishing in all the carnal and primeval pleasures life had to offer.

Our love making was also becoming increasingly exhilarating. Our bedroom quickly transformed, in a matter of weeks, into a room resembling more of a torture chamber than sleeping quarters. Through various internet auctions we accumulated bizarre instruments to induce various levels and degrees of pain. The bed itself, a rather mundane four-poster, was replaced by an eight-foot-square rubber mat which was two inches thick; I strongly recommend them. Not only was it incredibly soft, absorbing our sexual acrobatics with amazing ease, blood—and other bodily liquid—stains were remarkably easy to eradicate simply using a cloth and an over the counter disinfectant. The instruments we used for our beating sessions were varied and included various types of whips, crops, canes, a tawse, belts and my personal favourite, a leather paddle.

We delved deep, through text after text, in the deliciously wicked mind of the Marquis de Sade, delighting in his delicious, and flagrant, licentiousness. This not only elevated our

sexual exploits to amazing new heights, but also proved to be excellent fodder for a novel I was writing which revolved around an autoerotic theme.

We also experimented with asphyxiophilia, taking it in turns to limit, by the use of a crimson silk kerchief, the amount of oxygen reaching our brains to both extend and heighten the pleasure from orgasm.

Yet, after several more weeks, and after pushing our insatiable bodies to the maximum, even this began to lose its desired impact, our lovemaking exploits and experimentations almost becoming dull, tedious, and worst of all, predictable. We both desperately craved more—the ultimate sexual experience—at, and this is an important point to interject, whatever cost.

We experimented with electricity next. Quite the experience, let me tell you! We plugged in a transformer and attached the positive connection to the big toe of my right foot, and the negative to April's left toe. She giggled in apprehensive anticipation as I turned the transformer on. I had the dial on low—nothing more than twenty volts at first. Wherever our bodies met, there was the tingling sensation of the current being completed. I blindfolded April with a black scarf and she lay down on the rubber mat. And then ever so gently I allowed my index finger to gradually explore every enticing curve and crevice of her sumptuous torso. She trembled with delight and delicious expectation as I ventured into her most sacred of places. She wiggled and moaned in pleasure, and as I withdrew, she begged me to continue. I knew that we were on to something—that none of our previous experiments had come anywhere close to the thrill of electricity.

Then I increased the voltage to eighty... and embraced. The sensation was erotically sublime. Every nerve in my body tingled with pleasure, and she screamed my name repetitiously in pleasure as her eager mouth navigated to my left ear and her teeth bit down hard. She was rewarded with the taste of my blood and simultaneous orgasm.

Yet still we craved more.

I turned the dial to the maximum—240 volts.

April was still blindfolded and was unaware of what I was doing. But she kept murmuring under heated breath... “More, more, for God's sake, more...”

I realized that what I was considering was risky. Damned risky, in fact. However, a small part of my brain kept insisting it was the right thing to do. Perhaps that was a little devil inside of me—or perhaps, more likely, the real me, the me that I all too often tried to suppress. The very same me I try to tame and control as I use his screaming voice to write my successful horror books. But now I could not censor or manipulate it, as it screamed repeatedly and assertively within my skull.

“More, more, more,” begged April. “Give it to me, baby. Give me all you got...”

So once more I allowed my finger to caress her soft skin. However, this time she did not moan with pleasure; her body literally convulsed at my touch. I felt the electricity surge through my body causing me pain I never even dreamed was possible. Yet, despite this, I was exhilarated more than I had ever been before. I was fully aware that I was playing with death, almost taunting it. Yet this only aroused me further. April's body reacted to the jolt more

dramatically than I did. For where I was more or less able to maintain a steady hand, her body continued to convulse and dance at my touch. I could see her trying to formulate words; her mouth, that luscious, inviting cavity, hung open. I slowly allowed my finger to crawl up her stomach, gently brushing her belly button. Then I realized that I too was starting to convulse—I felt as if my heart was about to beat out of my very chest. It took every ounce of self will I could muster to maintain contact with her. Agony and pleasure filled my every sense. Every memory of the past, every dream of the future was extinguished—all that remained was the powerful now, eclipsing every sensation I had ever experienced. My finger made it to the enticing cleft between her heaving breasts. I could tell by the twisted smile on her face that she was experiencing ecstasy as much as pain. Her shaking was intensifying now. All at once I plunged my finger into her mouth, and she reflectively bit down, again causing me to breathe. For a few moments we were joined more than I ever considered it possible for two people to be connected. She met my gaze; her eyes told me she was experiencing intense pleasure that neither of us had ever even contemplated up to that point.

Then she stopped moving.

I withdrew my bloodied finger and methodically turned off the transformer.

I was drained from emotion at this point, and was very matter-of-fact about the whole experience.

As I wrapped my bleeding finger with tissue, I examined April's motionless body. There was no question in my mind she was dead. But there was no doubt in my mind that this is precisely what she had wanted. Her contorted mouth appeared to still be smiling—and her eyes, despite being dead, still appeared to be filled with more life than I had ever seen in them. My only regret was that I, somehow, perhaps miraculously, had survived the ordeal. It was then a seed of emotion began to grow and fester in my gut. Not one of regret—but one of jealousy. Through death, I had given her the ultimate experience that life can offer.

I am writing this account to explain the bizarre circumstances that are surely soon to be uncovered. Some of you, reading these words, might consider what I did was an act of cruelty—and almost a deed of premeditated murder. And perhaps to a degree you are correct. But I am also equally sure that at least one of you grasps it for precisely what it was—the ultimate expression of love and sexuality.

I am now about to take the transformer to the bath tub. I am intent on filling the tub with water, climbing in, and dropping the transformer turned onto its maximum output into the water. This time death will have to envelop me, and I shall once again be joining April—almost certainly in Hell—for all eternity.

And I have to confess—I cannot wait.

THE END

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THE MIND INVADERS by Steven Havelock

The man in the dark coat walked up to the car.

“Excuse me, professor,” he said.

The academic lowered the window.

“What can I do for yo—?”

He didn’t get a chance to finish.

Two Days Earlier

Jane’s eyes snapped open. Then she realized what had awoken her.

My mobile!

She answered it through bleary and barely awake eyes. It was a number she didn’t recognize.

“Hello?”

“Jane, it’s Daniel.”

Daniel was the hotshot reporter who worked at the same news firm as her. Why’s he calling me? We work at the same news firm but we have never really spoken.

“Yes, Daniel?” she asked, coming fully alert and awake in an instant.

“This is very important,” Daniel replied.

“It must be for you to call me at this hour of the night.”

“Meet at the all night café on King Street in fifteen minutes.”

“What?”

“I don’t have time to explain, meet me in fifteen minutes at King Street café. Tell no one.”

The phone went dead.

Fifteen to twenty minute later. Jane walked into the all night café. She saw Daniel sitting in the far corner, a cup in his hand and his shoulders hunched forward; his dark coat and hat covering most of his body.

He looked as she approached. She sat opposite.

“Daniel, whatever story you’re on now must be important. You haven’t been seen in the office for the last two weeks.”

Without any pleasantries she added, “How big is this story you are working on?”

“Big, very big. I don’t know whether to ring the Pentagon or CNN.”

Suddenly he grabbed her face in his hands.

“Look straight at me.”

“What?” She barely managed to ask through the pain and shock of having her head gripped so tightly.

He stared at her intensely for a few seconds, then let go.

“Sorry. I had to make sure.”

“Sure..?”

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t have time to explain.”

He looked around nervously for a second. His breath coming in short gasps.

He’s scared, really scared.

“Come with me,” he said, getting up abruptly. She followed.

Outside the night was silent apart from the whistle of the cold wind that bit into her remorselessly. She looked up briefly for a second and saw a billion stars.

They got into Daniel’s car; it started with a shaky coughing sound.

“Where are we going?”

“I will show you. We will be there in a short while.”

“So what’s so important that you have to wake me up in the middle of the night?”

“You know I been investigating missing persons for a while now?”

He looked in the rear-view mirror nervously as if he was expecting someone to be following them.

She didn’t but she said, “Yes?”

“Well, I’ve noticed that over the last few weeks more people than average were going missing.”

“OK.”

“I found a link.”

Jane saw him look in the rear-view mirror again.

“The people recently going missing were all highly educated, many of them researchers in various topics such as neuroscience or advanced astrophysics.”

He looked in the rear-view mirror again. Jane saw his knuckles had turned white and his breathing was rapid.

Soon they were on the highway heading out of town into the countryside.

“So I had a hunch, I started tailing one of the researchers at the local university, and I got lucky.”

Again Jane saw him look in the review mirror.

“I got lucky. I was tailing Jim Morgan, a professor and researcher in the field of advanced quantum physics.”

Then Jane saw lights behind her and the colour drained from Daniel’s face.

“Anyway,” he continued shakily “I tailed the professor to his house and saw him get out of his car. There was a van parked in front of his driveway. He must have seen someone sitting in the driver’s seat as he knocked on the van. I heard him ask the driver to move. The driver got out of the van slowly, he seemed to move oddly.”

Daniel put his foot down on the pedal.

“Oh God! I hope they haven’t found me!”

Jane was pushed back in her seat by the G-force as Daniel went from 40 MPH to 70 MPH in just a few seconds.

“Anyway, this guy grabbed the professor by his arms and looked straight into his eyes. I was fairly close and I thought I saw something white and snake like leap out of the strange man’s eyes and enter the professors. I jumped out of my car and pulled out my gun. I told the person to freeze but he rushed towards me and I instinctually opened fire. The man went down, I ran to the professor but there was something wrong with his eyes, the pupils were red. I pulled him off the ground. As I pulled him up he said ‘it’s too late’ and he grabbed me around the throat. He stared straight into my eyes and I saw something flash towards me, it hit my glasses. The glass smashed, that gave me a second to run, and I got to my car, my head spinning.”

He took a deep breath.

The car behind had sped up.

“I ran to my car and drove away. My head was spinning and was I about to pass out. A short while later I drove into a side street and did. The nightmares were like nothing I had ever experienced before.

“I saw a planet with strange alien tall spindly like creatures walking amongst it. I felt more then saw their minds, minds as cold as a reptilian snake, not a trace of humanity or compassion.”

The he said it softly and without emotion and Jane felt her blood turn ice cold.

“We are being invaded.”

Jane saw a sharp bend in the road.

We are going too fast!

Daniel lost control on the bend and the car went flying into the underbrush.

A few minutes later Daniel awoke.

I can smell petrol!

He heard a painful moan and looked to his right.

She's bleeding!

He suddenly found new strength and kicked open the car door, the car had landed on its side. He climbed out and grabbed Jane, dragging her out of the car as he pulled himself free.

He dragged her with the last vestiges of his strength, the smell of petrol hanging in the air. Then he heard a massive roar from behind him as the car exploded.

He collapsed and blackness assailed him. He passed out.

Present Day

The man in the dark coat walked up to the car.

“Excuse me, professor,” he said.

The academic lowered the window.

“What can I do for yo—?”

He didn't get a chance to finish.

The man looked into his eyes...

Daniel awoke. Pain flashed through his face. Jane was slapping him on his face.

“Wake up! Wake up!” he heard her scream. He was grateful to be alive.

“I’m alive! I’m alive!” he screamed.

Then his blood ran cold and his heart grew weak.

“We have been hunting for you for some time.”

“What?”

“You know too much.”

The memory of the nightmares returned.

In that second that he had connected with the strange man creature, Daniel had seen the alien’s whole civilization. Pure terror had ran through his veins.

“Jane? What are you saying?”

“I’m one of them.”

“But your eyes! I checked your eyes!”

She reached up and pulled off a plastic lens.

Oh, God no!

“Contacts!”

Present Day

The academic looked into his eyes and something white and snake like flashed out of them. Daniel saw the man’s eyes turn red.

He’s one of us now.

THE END

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ARACHNOPUS by GK Murphy

Miami was swarming with poisonous snakes and spiders and if ever one of these critters bit somebody, that person would more than likely perish if the bite wounds were untreated.

On the shoreline, Mike Chaplin lived with his sister in a plush beach-house, a rare expensive set-up which he and Trudy worked hard and many extra hours in the office to obtain, where they bought the property outright rather than opting to rent. Most of the year, the weather proved refreshing and cool, sometimes blistering hot. Yet still, they lived forever under the threat of tropical storms comprising of tornados and hurricane winds which could be devastating and destructive for the whole island. However, thus far they'd been fortunate and dodged such extremities. It was just three years ago, a storm levelled the entire area, yet it soon got back on its feet and was raring to go again in no time at all, whereby locals flipped the middle-finger towards murky skies and decided to simply get on with life as they knew it.

Mike and Trudy worked for Wren Loans, a tiny firm situated in town not two miles away from their home on the coast. It was a job which carried many hardships and responsibilities for those working there, since this young pair in particular who were forever kind-hearted and warm, they were two 22 year old twins that tried their damndest to go out of their way to help others as best they could. But many people in sometimes dire straits had to be turned away and marched out of the office disgruntled and even angry. This happened every day of the week, much to Mike and Trudy's chagrin, but if these people had a credit score that was bad (or even minutely bad—precautions had to be taken, since it was a business after all), rules simply had to be enforced. As the overweight, over-fed and overpaid boss, Paul Chatterley, said, "We're not a fucking charity. If these fuckers are too lazy to get a job, they get nothing out of me but grabbed by the scruff of the neck and directed to the door and then tossed out onto the fucking street!" He was a horrible cunt.

Tonight, as Trudy and Mike sat on the veranda downing cocktails they looked out to the ocean as they reflected the day's events. Many punters had been flatly refused a loan today and in two cases it had gotten violent whereby the police had to be called to come and escort the people off the premises. It was a fact of life with loan sharks that if you had no back-up, no job, you were most likely to leave Wren Loans empty handed and disappointed with the situation they found themselves in. No two ways about it, if you had no money to assure payments, there'd be no damned loan given—because it was a business and if Trudy and Mike did not abide by the company rules and regulations, well, even they would find they would have been out of jobs as well, so at the end of the day the whole malarkey was a no-brainer.

As Mike lay on the bamboo recliners in the cool night air, Trudy wiped the sliver of spunk from her chin after giving her brother the best blowjob of his life and then walked across to the mini-bar to pour them both two Malibu and Cokes.

It was not long before something caught the male-twin's attention in the grounds beneath the tall veranda. Mike got up and walked a short way across towards the railings to get a better look. "Trudy," he said, "Look at this, it's the guy from the offices today, who Bolo had to throw out. The guy who was shouting and swearing at us...he's here in the gardens, and he doesn't look too pleased!" Bolo was the hard dude in the office, one of the heavies—every loan shark business required such a guy. He was Filipino and built like a brick shithouse.

Trudy looked down at the man looking up at them, something in his hands. It looked like a bird, some kind of white dove, or a wood pigeon perhaps—but it was definitely white in appearance.

“It’s Mr Todd...the guy who needed the money for his daughter’s operation. He had no credit score to speak of, so Bolo had to show him out because Mr Todd started getting nasty.” She said this almost jokily, like the three people present were starring in some comedy Hollywood farce on Broadway. “Poor fucker...” she added, “...he seemed to get a bit irate and upset when Bolo grabbed him by the throat and almost choked him...wouldn’t you, Mike?”

Mike said, “What is he doing down there?” He decided to raise his voice and ask the intruder, “WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU, MR TODD?”

Suddenly, Todd held the dove aloft and brought up a sharp knife, which he then severed the bird’s head from its body with, an act which sprayed bloody scarlet arcs into the atmosphere. Here, Todd seemed entranced as he recited some warped ancient verse, some local curse. Just then, he reached into his jacket pocket and extracted something else, also something white in appearance. It was a huge tarantula spider—a WHITE TARANTULA SPIDER!

“My God, man,” Mike said in shocked awe, “What are you supposed to be doing?”

“I curse you!” Todd cried, “I curse you and your sister—and everybody on this island. I bring the beast from the deep to cause you all havoc and murder in cold blood!”

Here, Todd lifted the huge white tarantula to his mouth, and bit down on its fat bulbous body. Again, the force of the bite broke the arachnid’s flesh and blood squirted from the wound, spraying everywhere.

“I’ll call the police!” Mike hollered, clearly shaken, as was Trudy as she stared in quiet bewilderment and horror, “I’ll have you sent to jail!”

Trudy reached out for her brother’s arm to steady herself from passing out. “Mike, I don’t feel very well. I think we should go inside. The cool air is affecting me. I feel very faint all of a sudden.”

“I’m calling the cops on this guy. He’s a crazed fucking lunatic.”

Mr Todd, a native of the island, dark-skinned with mottled facial features and tattoos everywhere to be seen, spat the spider’s flesh from his mouth, before holding both dead creatures skyward and reciting some sacred epiphany. The white spider and dove twitched and danced a deathly jig in his grip as suddenly a severe wind picked up rattling the nearby palm trees and garden shrub. Todd began to laugh as this happened, knowing his curse had been set and was about to unload misery upon the two sibling office workers in his midst. For him, it was a joyous, justified occasion, a prophecy concluded. Justice was about to be served, yet after one final act. The ocean was not that far from here, and to reach it quick might have manifest in no time at all if Todd ran towards it, which he did as the twins watched in sheer horror.

Todd was there in no time. Holding the two white—now bloodied—sacrificial creatures up for the huge full moon in the sky to approve at the shoreline, he stepped slightly into the water and, after kissing each one in turn, tossed the two stained, dead carcasses into the sea.

“Come on, we’ve seen enough here,” Mike said, grabbing Trudy’s arm roughly and taking her inside the house, and into the living room where he picked up the telephone receiver. He couldn’t believe it. It was out of order. “The line is dead, Trudy...we’re fucked for the time being. We might just have to sit tight until morning, unless we drive into town to the Sherriff’s Office and register a complaint there. We’ll get Todd arrested and charged.”

Trudy said, “It looks like a storm is getting up. It might be a mistake to leave the building. Let’s go into the bedroom and fuck or something.”

Mike smiled knowingly, “You’re insatiable, Trudy. Less than ten or fifteen minutes ago I came in your throat!”

“We should just wait for the winds to pass.”

Mike reached out and stroked his sister’s face. His glare seemed evil or malevolent somehow, which only served to unnerve a bashful, sex-hungry Trudy, “My sweet nymphomaniac twin sister,” he said.

She chided with a sickly-sweet smile, “Only because my brother has a massive cock!”

They both stood there staring into each other’s eyes lovingly, in a twisted way that only those practitioners of incest carried, with a blindfolded sense of what modern society would regard as strictly taboo. Brother and sister was the ultimate taboo.

Mike gestured to the balcony railing. He said, “I think that creep has buggered off back to his refugee camp for the night, probably to feast on raw goat with his creepy grandparents. We should just crash for the night, go to bed, and take matters in hand tomorrow before work. If the phone is working later, I’ll contact Sherriff Buchanan and seek his advice on the situation. He’s probably seen loads of this local Voodoo crap.”

Trudy gestured towards the skies and ocean in the near distance. “The sea looks choppy with the wind, plus it’s going to rain. I think I’ll watch TV until it blows over. I think I’ll watch Game of Thrones before I turn in.”

Mike sighed, “Are you sure, Trudy? I mean, you still look pretty scared by that guy. Do you want me to stay and watch TV with you for a while?”

“No, really, I’m fine. It’s a warm humid night despite the wind and rain—it’s Miami, after all. I might crash down on the settee for the remainder of the night. Mike, you just stop worrying about me and get off to bed, I’ll be okay.”

“Sure, honey...?”

“Yeah, positive...if I get horny later, which is a massive possibility, I’ll wake you.”

Mike Chaplin chuckled and kissed his twin on the brow, reaching around to pinch her left buttock while he was at it. Rather jokingly, Trudy jumped at the pressure of the squeeze on her ass and comically feigned to slap his face, which then was apparently combined with a girlish giggle as she turned and headed towards the en-suite bathroom, if anything to douse her face with refreshing cold water, just to spruce up a bit. It was quite warm in the beach-house tonight, despite the threat of an incoming storm as Mike sloped off into the bedroom, leaving the door ajar just in case of emergencies, such as the possibility of the crazy local guy returning to the scene of his prior madness, or perhaps in case Trudy just required his presence in the room next door.

Soon, Mike was in bed asleep. And Trudy was asleep on the settee in the lounge. Yet, she was the first to wake when she heard a noise from outside in the garden down below the balcony, a garbled shuffling, something like minor squealing or mewling like a trapped animal. Instantly, Trudy was up off the settee and looking down over the balcony. What she witnessed was truly otherworldly and nightmarish in width and scope.

She moaned in a low guttural voice, “Mike, please, come here...I’m frightened...”

On the lawn below, a huge monstrosity had materialized and stood there ready to pounce, since with its white, hairy arachnid legs it could easily have scaled the building to reach its prey, its next feast. It had a slimy, deformed, bulbous body—not a spider’s body—yet ridiculously possessed the shape and form of one of the oceanic octopuses local to the area, one that sat on the framework of a huge tarantula spider, a white tarantula spider of the like sacrificed by the Miami native earlier this evening.

The bizarre monster seemed to loiter there as it considered matters and looked up at the lone petite figure of the human Trudy Chaplin, sussing out the lonely petrified woman glaring in bewildered fear and the area as a whole, perhaps deliberating its next move, or how to get to her.

As she screamed, “MIKE!” her bladder gave way and hot urine spilled from her.

Like a shot, Mike was beside her. “What are you screaming for, Trudy? All that noise is enough to wake the dead!”

She pointed, screeching, “Look, look, a spider...an octopus...it has come for us, the native curse...Mr Todd and his sacrifice...it’s coming true...we’re doomed!”

Eyes widening, Mike looked over the railings and down at the twitching white, hairy monster in shocked disbelief, when his mouth fell open and his stricken heart filled with fear.

Then, it made its move.

Trudy and Mike Chaplin backed up into the living room, away from the long patio doors which remained completely open, as they did most of the time. The weather around these parts never demanded they ever be shuttered.

There was a loud shuffling as the arachnid-octopus scuttled across the lawn and began to climb the building wall, heading upwards towards its prey, its feast, the young couple.

Mike quickly opened a drawer in the chest by the TV, extracting a pistol. Very fast, he checked the gun chambers were full (which they were) and then positioned his body in a ready stance, prepared to shoot that fucker once it invaded the room. If anything, a bullet or two in the head would deter this monstrous bastard. By rights, bullets should to have fucking outright killed it!

Suddenly, mewling like a huge cat, the slimy spider was at the open patio window, its huge bulk squeezing through the doors whilst its white hairy legs reached and stretched out menacingly, as Trudy screamed and descended into full-panic mode.

Mike took aim and fired at the white slimy, shiny head.

Ridiculously, when the bullets struck they opened up mammoth holes in the shiny flesh, and suddenly a flurry of other white tarantula spiders flooded out in swarms. They all scuttled towards the frightened young couple in vast numbers and at a rapid rate. They crawled up the legs of Mike and Trudy, clambering to get at their faces and bite into the flesh, ripping eyeballs from their sockets and burrowing deeper inside, reaching out to penetrate the brain. Soon, brother and sister were deceased and the curse fulfilled. It was like an afterthought, when the Arachnid-Octopus began to lunch on the deceased, messy bodies of the pair before setting off to terrorize the remaining islanders, those also a factor in the Todd gentleman's initial spell. But the storm was massive tonight and within minutes the hurricane struck and flooded the area. Soon, everything was driven out towards the sea including this one-off deformed abomination. Before long, Miami was entrenched and submerged and the vast majority of the population sapped. The Chaplin beach-house was uprooted and swallowed by rising waters. It seemed just like nothing had happened.

However, it seemed there was a new monstrous creature that traversed the depths of the world's oceans and the planet was its oyster. No one knew it ever existed—at least, not at the moment. But it waited and waited, and waited...

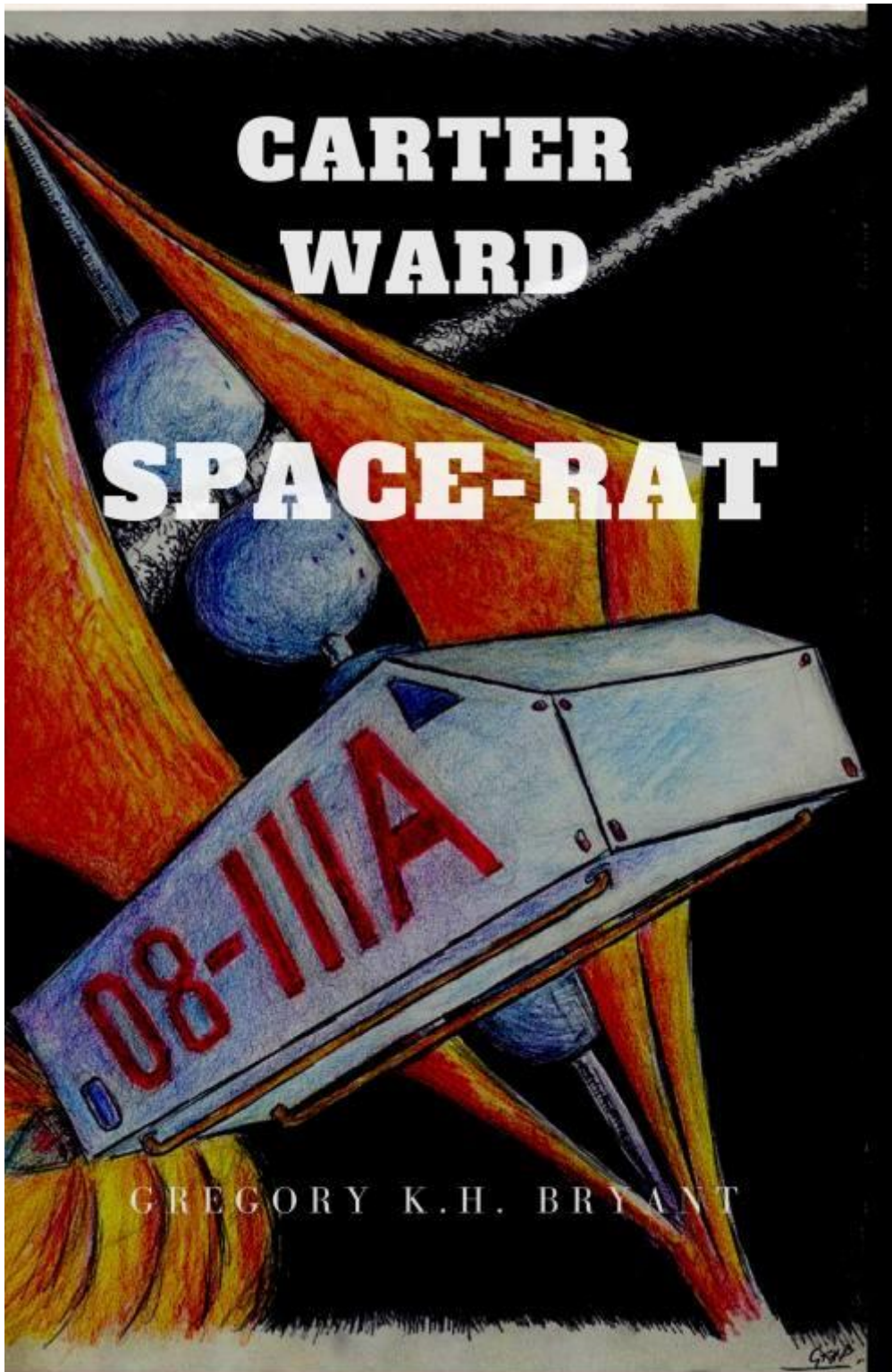
THE END

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Sadly, we have to announce that the author passed away 27th May after a long struggle with cancer. He is deeply missed.

THE END



Now available from Schlock! Publications:

[Carter Ward—Space Rat](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.

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ERIC BRIGHTEYES by H Rider Haggard

XXIV: How the Feast Went

“Hearken all men!” said Eric.

“Thrust him out!” quoth Björn.

“Nay, cut him down!” said Ospakar, “he is an outlawed man.”

“Words first, then deeds,” answered Skallagrim. “Thou shalt have thy fill of both, Blacktooth, before day is done.”

“Let Eric say his say,” said Gudruda, lifting her head. “He has been doomed unheard, and it is my will that he shall say his say.”

“What hast thou to do with Eric?” snarled Ospakar.

“The bride-cup is not yet drunk, lord,” she answered.

“To thee, then, I will speak, lady,” quoth Eric. “How comes it that, being betrothed to me, thou dost sit there the bride of Ospakar?”

“Ask of Swanhild,” said Gudruda in a low voice. “Ask also of Hall of Lithdale yonder, who brought me Swanhild’s gift from Straumey.”

“I must ask much of Hall and he must answer much,” said Eric. “What tale, then, did he bring thee from Straumey?”

“He said this, Eric,” Gudruda answered: “that thou wast Swanhild’s love; that for Swanhild’s sake thou hadst basely killed Atli the Good, and that thou wast about to wed Swanhild’s self and take the Earl’s seat in Orkneys.”

“And for what cause was I made outlaw at the Althing?”

“For this cause, Eric,” said Björn, “that thou hadst dealt evilly with Swanhild, bringing her to shame against her will, and thereafter that thou hadst slain the Earl, her husband.”

“Which, then, of these tales is true? for both cannot be true,” said Brighteyes. “Speak, Swanhild.”

“Thou knowest well that the last is true,” said Swanhild boldly.

“How then comes it that thou didst charge Hall with that message to Gudruda? How then comes it that thou didst send her the lock of hair which thou didst cozen me to give thee?”

“I charged Hall with no message, and I sent no lock of hair,” Swanhild answered.

“Stand thou forward, Hall!” said Eric, “and liar and coward though thou art, dare not to speak other than the truth! Nay, look not at the door: for, if thou stirrest, this spear shall find thee before thou hast gone a pace!”

Now Hall stood forward, trembling with fear, for he saw the eye of Skallagrim watching him close, and while Lambstail watched, his fingers toyed with the handle of his axe.

“It is true, lord, that Swanhild charged me with that message which I gave to the Lady Gudruda. Also she bade me give the lock of hair.”

“And for this service thou didst take money, Hall?”

“Ay, lord, she gave me money for my faring.”

“And all the while thou knewest the tidings false?”

Hall made no reply.

“Answer!” thundered Eric— “answer the truth, knave, or by every God that passes the hundred gates I will not spare thee twice!”

“It is so, lord,” said Hall.

“Thou liest, fox!” cried Swanhild, white with wrath and casting a fierce look upon Hall. But men took no heed of Swanhild’s words, for all eyes were bent on Eric.

“Is it now your pleasure, comrades, that I should tell you the truth?” said Brighteyes.

The most part of the company shouted “Yea!” but the men of Ospakar stood silent.

“Speak on, Eric,” quoth Gudruda.

“This is the truth, then: Swanhild the Fatherless, Atli’s wife, has always sought my love, and she has ever hated Gudruda whom I loved. From a child she has striven to work mischief between us. Ay, and she did this, though till now it has been hidden: she strove to murder Gudruda; it was on the day that Skallagrim and I overcame Ospakar and his band on Horse-Head Heights. She thrust Gudruda from the brink of Golden Falls while she sat looking on the waters, and as she hung there I dragged her back. Is it not so, Gudruda?”

“It is so,” said Gudruda.

Now men murmured and looked at Swanhild. But she shrank back, plucking at her purple cloak.

“It was for this cause,” said Eric, “that Asmund, Swanhild’s father, gave her choice to wed Atli the Earl and pass over sea or to take her trial in the Doom-Ring. She wedded Atli and went away. Afterwards, by witchcraft, she brought my ship to wreck on Straumey’s Isle—ay, she walked the waters like a shape of light and lured us on to ruin, so that all were drowned except Skallagrim and myself. Is it not so, Skallagrim?”

“It is so, lord. I saw her with my eyes.”

Again folk murmured.

“Then we must sit in Atli’s hall,” said Eric, “and there we dwelt last winter. For a while Swanhild did no harm, till I feared her no more. But some three months ago, I was left with her: and a man called Koll, Groa’s thrall, of whom ye know, came out from Iceland, bringing news of the death of Asmund the priest, of Unna my cousin, and of Groa the witch. To these ill-tidings Swanhild bribed him to add something. She bribed him to add this: that thou, Gudruda, wast betrothed to Ospakar, and wouldst wed him on last Yule Day. Moreover, he gave me a certain message from thee, Gudruda, and, in token of its truth, the half of that coin which I broke with thee long years ago. Say now, lady, didst thou send the coin?”

“Nay, never!” cried Gudruda; “many years ago I lost the half thou gavest me, though I feared to tell thee.”

“Perchance one stands there who found it,” said Eric, pointing with his spear at Swanhild. “At the least I was deceived by it. Now the tale is short. Swanhild mourned with me, and in my sorrow I mourned bitterly. Then it was she asked a boon, that lock of mine, Gudruda, and, thinking thee faithless, I gave it, holding all oaths broken. Then too, when I would have left her, she drugged me with a witch-draught—ay, she drugged me, and I woke to find myself false to my oath, false to Atli, and false to thee, Gudruda. I cursed her and I left her, waiting for the Earl, to tell him all. But Swanhild outwitted me. She told him that other tale of shame that ye have heard, and brought Koll to him as witness of the tale. Atli was deceived by her, and not until I had cut him down in anger at the bitter words he spoke, calling me coward and nidding, did he know the truth. But before he died he knew it; and he died, holding my hand and bidding those about him find Koll and slay him. Is it not so, ye who were Atli’s men?”

“It is so, Eric!” they cried; “we heard it with our own ears, and we slew Koll. But afterwards Swanhild brought is to believe that Earl Atli was distraught when he spoke thus, and that things were indeed as she had said.”

Again men murmured, and a strange light shone in Gudruda’s eyes.

“Now, Gudruda, thou hast heard all my story,” said Eric. “Say, dost thou believe me?”

“I believe thee, Eric.”

“Say then, wilt thou still wed yon Ospakar?”

Gudruda looked on Blacktooth, then she looked at golden Eric and opened her lips to speak. But before a word could pass them Ospakar rose in wrath, laying his hand upon his sword.

“Thinkest thou thus to lure away my dove, outlaw? First I will see thee food for crows.”

“Well spoken, Blacktooth,” laughed Eric. “I waited for such words from thee. Thrice have we striven together—once out yonder in the snow, once on Horse-Head Heights, and once by Westman Isles—and still we live to tell the tale. Come down, Ospakar: come down from that soft seat of thine and here and now let us put it to the proof who is the better man. When we

met before, the stake was Whitefire set against my eye. Now the stake is our lives and fair Gudruda's hand. Talk no more, Ospakar, but fall to it."

"Gudruda shall never wed thee, while I live!" said Björn; "thou art a landless loon, a brawler, and an outlaw. Get thee gone, Eric, with thy wolf-hound!"

"Squeak not so loud, rat—squeak not so loud, lest hound's fang worry thee!" said Skallagrim.

"Whether I wed Gudruda or whether I wed her not is a matter that shall be known in its season," said Eric. "For thy words, I say this: that it is risky to hurl names at such as I am, Björn, lest perchance I answer them with spear-thrusts. Thy answer, Ospakar! What need to wait? Thy answer!"

Now Ospakar looked at Brighteyes and grew afraid. He was a mighty man, but he knew the weight of Eric's arm.

"I will not fight with thee, carle," he said, "who hast naught to lose."

"Then thou art coward and niddering!" said Eric. "Ospakar Niddering I name thee here before all men! What! thou couldst plot against me—thou couldst waylay me, ten to one and two ships to one, but face to face with me alone thou dost not dare to stand? Comrades, look on your lord!—look at Ospakar the Niddering!"

Now the swarthy brow of Blacktooth grew red with rage, and his breath came in great gasps. "Ho, men!" he cried, "drive this knave away. Strip his harness off him and whip him hence with rods."

"Let but a man stir towards me and this spear flies through thy heart, Niddering," cried Eric. "Gudruda, what thinkest thou of thy lord?"

"I know this," said Gudruda, "that I will not wed a man who is named 'Niddering' in the face of all and lifts no sword."

Gudruda spoke thus, because she was mad with love and fear and shame, and she desired that Eric should stand face to face with Ospakar Blacktooth, for thus, alone, she might perhaps be rid of Ospakar.

"Such words do not come well from gentle lips," said Björn.

"Is it to be borne, brother," answered Gudruda, "that the man who would call me wife should be named Ospakar the Niddering? When that shame is washed away, and then only, can I think on marriage. I will never be Niddering's bride!"

"Thou hearest, Ospakar Niddering?" said Eric. Then he gave the spear in his hand to Skallagrim, and, gripping Whitefire's hilt, he burst the peace-strings, and tore it from the scabbard.

Now the great sword shone on high like lightning leaping from a cloud, and as it shone men shouted, "Ospakar! Ospakar Niddering! Come, win back Whitefire from Eric's hand, or be for ever shamed!"

Blacktooth could endure this no more. He snatched sword and shield, and, like a bear from a cave, like a wolf from his lair, rushed roaring from his seat. On he came, and the ground shook beneath his bulk.

“At last, Niddering!” cried Eric, and sprang to meet him.

“Back! all men, back!” shouted Skallagrim, “now we shall see blows.”

As he spoke the great swords flashed aloft and clanged upon the iron shields. So heavy were the blows that fire leapt out from them. Ospakar reeled back beneath the shock, and Eric was beaten to his knee. Now he was up, but as he rushed, Ospakar struck again and swept away half of Brighteyen’s pointed shield so that it fell upon the floor. Eric smote also, but Ospakar dropped his knee to earth and the sword hissed over him. Blacktooth cut at Eric’s legs; but Brighteyes sprang from the ground and took no harm.

Now some cried, “Eric! Eric!” and some cried “Ospakar! Ospakar!” for no one knew how the fight would go.

Gudruda sat watching in the high seat, and as blows fell her colour came and went.

Swanhild drew near, watching also, and she desired in her fierce heart to see Eric brought to shame and death, for, should he win, then Gudruda would be rid of Ospakar. Now by her side stood Gizur, Ospakar’s son, and near to her was Björn. These two held their breath, for, if Eric conquered, all their plans were brought to nothing.

Even as he sprang into the air, Eric smote down with all his strength. The blow fell on Ospakar’s shield. It shored through the shield and struck on the shoulder beneath. But Blacktooth’s byrnie was good, nor did the sword bite into it. Still the stroke was so heavy that Ospakar staggered back four paces beneath it, then fell upon the ground.

Now folk raised a shout of “Eric! Eric!” for it seemed that Ospakar was sped. Brighteyes, too, cried aloud, then rushed forward. Now, as he came, Swanhild whispered an eager word into the ear of Björn. By Björn’s foot lay that half of Eric’s shield which had been shorn away by the sword of Ospakar. Gudruda, watching, saw Björn push it with his shoe so that it slid before the feet of Brighteyes. His right foot caught on it, he stumbled heavily—stumbled again, then fell prone on his face, and, as he fell, stretched out his sword hand to save himself, so that Whitefire flew from his grasp. The blade struck its hilt against the ground, then circled in the air and fixed itself, point downwards, in the clay of the flooring. The hand of Ospakar rising from the ground smote against the hilt of Whitefire. He saw it, with a shout he cast his own sword away and clasped Whitefire.

Away circled the sword of Ospakar; and of that cast this strange thing is told, false or true. Far in the corner of the hall lurked Thorunna, she who had betrayed Skallagrim when he was named Ounound. She had come with a heavy heart to Middalhof in the company of Ospakar; but when she saw Skallagrim, her husband—whom she had betrayed, and who had turned Baresark because of her wickedness—shame smote her, and she crept away and hid herself behind the hangings of the hall. The sword sped along point first, it rushed like a spear through the air. It fell on the hangings, piercing them, piercing the heart of Thorunna, who cowered behind them, so that with one cry she sank dead to earth, slain by her lover’s hand.

Now when men saw that Ospakar once more held Whitefire in his hand—Whitefire that Brighteyes had won from him—they called aloud that it was an omen. The sword of Blacktooth had come back to Blacktooth and now Eric would surely be slain of it!

Eric sprang from the ground. He heard the shouts and saw Whitefire blazing in Ospakar's hand.

“Now thou art weaponless, fly! Brighteyes; fly!” cried some.

Gudruda's cheek grew white with fear, and for a moment Eric's heart failed him.

“Fly not!” roared Skallagrim. “Björn tripped thee. Yet hast thou half a shield!”

Ospakar rushed on, and Whitefire flickered over Eric's helm. Down it came and shone one wing from the helm. Again it shone and fell, but Brighteyes caught the blow on his broken shield.

Then, while men waited to see him slain, Eric gave a great war-shout and sprang forward.

“Thou art mad!” shouted the folk.

“Ye shall see! Ye shall see!” screamed Skallagrim.

Again Ospakar smote and again Eric caught the blow; and behold! he struck back, thrusting with the point of the shorn shield straight at the face of Ospakar.

“Peck! Eagle; peck!” cried Skallagrim.

Once more Whitefire shone above him. Eric rushed in beneath the sword, and with all his mighty strength thrust the buckler-point at Blacktooth's face. It struck fair and full, and lo! the helm of Ospakar burst asunder. He threw wide his giant arms, then fell as a pine falls upon the mountain edge. He fell back, and he lay still.

But Eric, stooping over him, took Whitefire from his hand.

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THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

8. The Preacher from the Mountains

It was long enough since I had found leisure for a parcel of sleep, and so during the larger part of that day I am free to confess that I slumbered soundly, Nais watching me. Night fell, and still we remained within the privacy of the temple. It was our plan that I should stay there till the camp slept, and so I should have more chance of reaching the sea without disturbance.

The night came down wet, with a drizzle of rain, and through the slits in the temple walls we could see the many fires in the camp well cared for, the men and women in skins and rags toasting before them, with steam rising as the heat fought with their wetness. Folk seated in discomfort like this are proverbially alert and cruel in the temper, and Nais frowned as she looked on the inclemency of the weather.

“A fine night,” she said, “and I would have sent my lord back to the city without a soul here being the wiser; but in this chill, people sleep sourly. We must wait till the hour drugs them sounder.”

And so we waited, sitting there together on that pavement so long unvisited by worshippers, and it was little enough we said aloud. But there can be good companionship without sentences of talk.

But as the hours drew on, the night began to grow less quiet. From the distance someone began to blow on a horn or a shell, sending forth a harsh raucous note incessantly. The sound came nearer, as we could tell from its growing loudness, and the voices of those by the fires made themselves heard, railing at the blower for his disturbance. And presently it became stationary, and standing up we could see through the slits in the walls the people of the camp rousing up from their uneasy rest, and clustering together round one who stood and talked to them from the pedestal of a war engine.

What he was declaiming upon we could not hear, and our curiosity on the matter was not keen. Given that all who did not sleep went to weary themselves with this fellow, as Nais whispered, it would be simple for me to make an exit in the opposite direction.

But here we were reckoning without the inevitable busybody. A dozen pairs of feet splashing through the wet came up to the side of the little temple, and cried loudly that Nais should join the audience. She had eloquence of tongue, it appeared, and they feared lest this speaker who had taken his stand on the war engine should make schisms amongst their ranks unless some skilled person stood up also to refute his arguments.

Here, then, it seemed to me that I must be elbowed into my skirmish by the most unexpected of chances, but Nais was firmly minded that there should be no fight, if courage on her part could turn it. “Come out with me,” she whispered, “and keep distant from the light of the fires.”

“But how explain my being here?”

“There is no reason to explain anything,” she said bitterly. “They will take you for my lover. There is nothing remarkable in that: it is the mode here. But oh, why did not the Gods make

you wear a beard, and curl it, even as other men? Then you could have been gone and safe these two hours.”

“A smooth chin pleases me better.”

“So it does me,” I heard her murmur as she leaned her weight on the stone which hung in the doorway, and pushed it ajar; “your chin.” The ragged men outside—there were women with them also—did not wait to watch me very closely. A coarse jest or two flew (which I could have found good heart to have repaid with a sword-thrust) and they stepped off into the darkness, just turning from time to time to make sure we followed. On all sides others were pressing in the same direction—black shadows against the night; the rain spat noisily on the camp fires as we passed them; and from behind us came up others. There were no sleepers in the camp now; all were pressing on to hear this preacher who stood on the pedestal of the war engine; and if we had tried to swerve from the straight course, we should have been marked at once.

So we held on through the darkness, and presently came within earshot.

Still it was little enough of the preacher’s words we could make out at first. “Who are your chiefs?” came the question at the end of a fervid harangue, and immediately all further rational talk was drowned in uproar. “We have no chiefs,” the people shouted, “we are done with chiefs; we are all equal here. Take away your silly magic. You may kill us with magic if you choose, but rule us you shall not. Nor shall the other priests rule. Nor Phorenice. Nor anybody. We are done with rulers.”

The press had brought us closer and closer to the man who stood on the war engine. We saw him to be old, with white hair that tumbled on his shoulders, and a long white beard, untrimmed and uncurled. Save for a wisp of rag about the loins, his body was unclothed, and glistened in the wet.

But in his hand he held that which marked his caste. With it he pointed his sentences, and at times he whirled it about bathing his wet, naked body in a halo of light. It was a wand whose tip burned with an unconsuming fire, which glowed and twinkled and blazed like some star sent down by the Gods from their own place in the high heaven. It was the Symbol of our Lord the Sun, a credential no one could forge, and one on which no civilised man would cast a doubt.

Indeed, the ragged frantic crew did not question for one moment that he was a member of the Clan of Priests, the Clan which from time out of numbering had given rulers for the land, and even in their loudest clamours they freely acknowledged his powers. “You may kill us with your magic, if you choose,” they screamed at him. But stubbornly they refused to come back to their old allegiance. “We have suffered too many things these later years,” they cried. “We are done with rulers now for always.”

But for myself I saw the old man with a different emotion. Here was Zaemon that was father to Nais, Zaemon that had seen me yesterday seated on the divan at Phorenice’s elbow, and who to-day could denounce me as Deucalion if so he chose. These rebels had expended a navy in their wish to kill me four days earlier, and if they knew of my nearness, even though Nais were my advocate, her cold reasoning would have had little chance of an audience now.

The High Gods who keep the tether of our lives hide Their secrets well, but I did not think it impious to be sure that mine was very near the cutting then.

The beautiful woman saw this too. She even went so far as to twine her fingers in mine and press them as a farewell, and I pressed hers in return, for I was sorry enough not to see her more. Still I could not help letting my thoughts travel with a grim gloating over the fine mound of dead I should build before these ragged, unskilled rebels pulled me down. And it was inevitable this should be so. For of all the emotions that can ferment in the human heart, the joy of strife is keenest, and none but an old fighter, face to face with what must necessarily be his final battle, can tell how deep this lust is embroidered into the very foundations of his being.

But for the time Zaemon did not see me, being too much wrapped in his outcry, and so I was free to listen to the burning words which he spread around him, and to determine their effect on the hearers.

The theme he preached was no new one. He told that ever since the beginning of history, the Gods had set apart one Clan of the people to rule over the rest and be their Priests, and until the coming of Phorenice these had done their duties with exactitude and justice. They had fought invaders, carried war against the beasts, and studied earth-movements so that they were able to foretell earthquakes and eruptions, and could spread warnings that the people might be able to escape their devastations. They are no self-seekers; their aim was always to further the interest of Atlantis, and so do honour to the kingdom on which the High Gods had set their special favour. Under the Priestly Clan, Atlantis had reached the pinnacle of human prosperity and happiness.

“But,” cried the old man, waving the Symbol till his wet body glistened in a halo of light, “the people grew fat and careless with their easy life. They began to have a conceit that their good fortune was earned by their own puny brains and thews, and was no gift from the Gods above; and presently the cult of these Gods became neglected, and Their temples were barren of gifts and worshippers. Followed a punishment. The Gods in Their inscrutable way decreed that a wife of one of the Priests (that was a governor of no inconsiderable province) should see a woman child by the wayside, and take it for adoption. That child the Gods in their infinite wisdom fashioned into a scourge for Atlantis, and you who have felt the weight of Phorenice’s hand, know with what completeness the High Gods can fashion their instruments.

“Yet, even as they set up, so can they throw down, and those that shall debase Phorenice are even now appointed. The old rule is to be re-established; but not till you who have sinned are sufficiently chastened to cry to it for relief.” He waved the mysterious glowing Symbol before him. “See,” he cried in his high old quavering voice, “you know the unspeakable Power of which that is the sign, and for which I am the mouthpiece. It is for you to make decision now. Are the Gods to throw down this woman who has scorned Them and so cruelly trodden on you? Or are you to be still further purged of your pride before you are ripe for deliverance?”

The old priest broke off with a gesture, and his ragged white beard sank on to his chest. Promptly a young man, skin clad and carrying his weapon, elbowed up through the press of listeners, and jumped on to the platform beside him. “Hear me, brethren!” he bellowed, in his strong young voice. “We are done with tyrants. Death may come, and we all of us here have

shown how little we fear it. But own rulers again we will not, and that is our final say. My lord," he said, turning to the old man with a brave face, "I know it is in your power to kill me by magic if you choose, but I have said my say, and can stand the cost if needs be."

"I can kill you, but I will not," said Zaemon. "You have said your silliness. Now go you to the ground again."

"We have free speech here. I will not go till I choose."

"Aye, but you will," said the old man, and turned on him with a sudden tightening of the brows. There was no blow passed; even the Symbol, which glowed like a star against the night, was not so much as lifted in warning; but the young man tried to retort, and, finding himself smitten with a sudden dumbness, turned with a spasm of fear, and jumped back whence he had come. The crowd of them thrilled expectantly, and when no further portent was given, they began to shout that a miracle should be shown them, and then perchance they would be persuaded back to the old allegiance.

The old man stooped and glowered at them in fury. "You dogs," he cried, "you empty-witted dogs! Do you ask that I should degrade the powers of the Higher Mysteries by dancing them out before you as though they were a mummers' show? Do you tickle yourselves that you are to be tempted back to your allegiance? It is for you to woo the Gods who are so offended. Come in humility, and I take it upon myself to declare that you will receive fitting pardon and relief. Remain stubborn, and the scourge, Phorenice, may torment you into annihilation before she in turn is made to answer for the evil she has put upon the land. There is the choice for you to pick at."

The turmoil of voices rose again into the wetness of the night, and weapons were upraised menacingly. It was clear that the party for independence had by far the greater weight, both in numbers and lustiness; and those who might, from sheer weariness of strife, have been willing for surrender, withheld their word through terror of the consequence. It was a fine comment on the freedom of speech, about which these unruly fools had made their boast, and, with a sly malice, I could not help whispering a word on this to Nais as she stood at my elbow. But Nais clutched at my hand, and implored me for caution. "Oh, be silent, my lord," she whispered back, "or they will tear you in pieces. They are on fire for mischief now."

"Yet a few hours back you were for killing me yourself," I could not help reminding her.

She turned on me with a hot look. "A woman can change her mind, my lord. But it becomes you little to remind her of her fickleness."

A man in the press beside me wrenched round with an effort, and stared at me searchingly through the darkness. "Oh!" he said. "A shaved chin. Who are you, friend, that you should cut a beard instead of curling it? I can see no wound on your face."

I answered him civilly enough that, with "freedom" for a watchword, the fashion of my chin was a matter of mere private concern. But as that did not satisfy him, and as he seemed to be one of those quarrelsome fellows that are the bane of every community, I took him suddenly by the throat and the shoulder, and bent his neck with the old, quick turn till I heard it crack, and had unhanded him before any of his neighbours had seen what had befallen. The fierce press of the crowd held him from slipping to the ground, and so he stood on there where he

was, with his head nodded forward, as though he had fallen asleep through heaviness, or had fainted through the crushing of his fellows. I had no desire to begin that last fight of mine in a place like this, where there was no room to swing a weapon, nor chance to clear a battle ring.

But all this time the lean preacher from the mountains was sending forth his angry anathemas, and still holding the strained attention of the people. And next he set forth before them the cult of the Gods in the ancient form as is prescribed, and they (with old habit coming back to them) made response in the words and in the places where the old ritual enjoins. It was weird enough sight, that time-honoured service of adoration, forced upon these wild people after so long a period of irreligion.

They warmed to the old words as the high shrill voice of the priest cried them forth, and as they listened, and as they realised how intimate was the care of the Gods for the travails and sorrows of their daily lives, so much warmer grew their responses.

“... WHO STILLED THE BURNING OF THE MOUNTAINS, AND MADE COOL PLACES ON THE EARTH FOR US TO LIVE!—PRAISE TO THE MOST HIGH GODS.

“WHO GAVE US MASTERY OVER THE LESSER BEASTS AND SKILL OF TEN TIMES TO PREVAIL!—PRAISE TO THE MOST HIGH GODS....”

“WHO GAVE US MASTERY OVER THE LESSER BEASTS AND SKILL OF TEN TIMES TO PREVAIL!—PRAISE TO THE MOST HIGH GODS....”

It thrilled one to hear their earnestness; it sorrowed one to know that they would yet be obdurate and not return to their old allegiance. For this is the way with these common people; they will work up an enthusiasm one minute, and an hour later it will have fled away and left them cold and empty.

But Zaemon made no further calls upon their loyalty. He finished the prescribed form of sentences, and stepped down off the platform of the war engine with the Symbol of our Lord the Sun thrust out resolutely before him. To all ordinary seeming the crowd had been packed so that no further compression was possible, but before the advance of the Symbol the people crushed back, leaving a wide lane for his passage.

And here came the turning point of my life. At first, like, I take it, everyone else in that crowd, I imagined that the old man, having finished his mission, was making a way to return to the place from which he had come. But he held steadily to one direction, and as that was towards myself, it naturally came to my mind that, having dealt with greater things, he would now settle with the less; or, in plainer words, that having put his policy before the swarming people, he would now smite down the man he had seen but yesterday seated as Phorenice's minister. Well, I should lose that final fight I had promised myself, and that mound of slain for my funeral bed. It was clear that Zaemon was the mouthpiece of the Priests' Clan, duly appointed; and I also was a priest. If the word had been given on the Sacred Mountain to those who sat before the Ark of the Mysteries that Atlantis would prosper more with Deucalion sent to the Gods, I was ready to bow to the sentence with submissiveness. That I had regret for this mode of cutting off, I will not deny. No man who has practised the game of arms could abandon the promise of such a gorgeous final battle without a qualm of longing.

But I had been trained enough to show none of these emotions on my face, and when the old man came up to me, I stood my ground and gave him the salutation prescribed between our ranks, which he returned to me with circumstance and accuracy. The crowd fell back, being driven away by the ineffable force of the Symbol, leaving us alone in the middle of a ring. Even Nais, though she was a priest's daughter, was ignorant of the Mysteries, and could not withstand its force. And so we two men stood there alone together, with the glow of the Symbol bathing us, and lighting up the sea of ravenous faces that watched.

The people were quick to put their natural explanation on the scene. "A spy!" they began to roar out. "A spy! Zaemon salutes him as a Priest!"

Zaemon faced round on them with a queer look on his grim old face. "Aye," he said, "this is a Priest. If I give you his name, you might have further interest. This is the Lord Deucalion."

The word was picked up and yelled amongst them with a thousand emotions. But at least they were loyal to their policy; they had decided that Deucalion was their enemy; they had already expended a navy for his destruction; and now that he was ringed in by their masses, they lusted to tear him into rags with their fingers. But rave and rave though they might against me, the glare from the Symbol drove them shuddering back as though it had been a lava-stream; and Zaemon was not the man to hand me over to their fury until he had delivered formal sentence as the emissary of our Clan on the Sacred Mount. So the end was not to be yet.

The old man faced me and spoke in the sacred tongue, which the common people do not know. "My brother," he said, "which have you come to serve, Deucalion or Atlantis?"

"Words are a poor thing to answer a question like that. You will know all of my record. According to the Law of the Priests, each ship from Yucatan will have carried home its sworn report to lay at the feet of their council, and before I went to that vice-royalty, what I did was written plain here on the face of Atlantis."

"We know your doings in the past, brother, and they have found approval. You have governed well, and you have lived austere. You set up Atlantis for a mistress, and served her well; but then, you have had no Phorenice to tempt you into change and fickleness."

"You can send me where I shall see her no more, if you think me frail."

"Yes, and lose your usefulness. No, brother, you are the last hope which this poor land has remaining. All other human means that have been tried against Phorenice have failed. You have returned from overseas for the final duel. You are the strongest man we have, and you are our final champion. If you fail, then only those terrible Powers which are locked within the Ark of the Mysteries remains to us, and though it is not lawful to speak even in this hidden tongue of their scope, you at least have full assurance of their potency."

I shrugged my shoulders. "It seems that you would save time and pains if you threw me to these wolves of rebels, and let them end me here and now."

The old man frowned on me angrily. "I am bidding you do your duty. What reason have you for wishing to evade it?"

“I have in my memory the words you spoke in the pyramid, when you came in amongst the banqueters. ‘PHORENICE,’ was your cry, ‘WHILST YOU ARE YET EMPRESS, YOU SHALL SEE THIS ROYAL PYRAMID, WHICH YOU HAVE POLLUTED WITH YOUR DEBAUCHERIES, TORN TIER FROM TIER, AND STONE FROM STONE, AND SCATTERED AS FEATHERS BEFORE A WIND.’ It seems that you foresee my defeat.”

The old man shuddered. “I cannot tell what she may force us to do. I spoke then only what it was revealed to me must happen. Perhaps when matters have reached that pass, she will repent and submit. But in the meanwhile, before we use the more desperate weapons of the Gods, it is fitting that we should expend all human power remaining to us. And so you must go, my brother, and play your part to the utmost.”

“It is an order. So I obey.”

“You shall be at Phorenice’s side again by the next dawn. She has sent for you from Yucatan as a husband, and as one who (so she thinks, poor human conqueror) has the weight of arm necessary to prolong her tyrannies. You are a Priest, brother, and you are a man of convincing tongue. It will be your part to make her stubborn mind see the invincible power that can be loosed against her, to point out to her the utter hopelessness of prevailing against it.”

“If it is ordered, I will do these things. But there is little enough chance of success. I have seen Phorenice, and can gauge her will. There will be no turning her once she has made a decision. Others have tried; you have tried yourself; all have failed.”

“Words that were wasted on a maiden may go home to a wife. You have been brought here to be her husband. Well, take your place.”

The order came to me with a pang. I had given little enough heed to women through all of a busy life, though when I landed, the taking of Phorenice to wife would not have been very repugnant to me if policy had demanded it. But the matters of the last two days had put things in a different shape. I had seen two other women who had strangely attracted me, and one of these had stirred within me a tumult such as I had never felt before amongst my economies.

To lead Phorenice in marriage would mean a severance from this other woman eternally, and I ached as I thought of it. But though these thoughts floated through my system and gave me harsh wrenches of pain, I did not thrust my puny likings before the command of the council of the Priests. I bowed before Zaemon, and put his hand to my forehead. “It is an order,” I said. “If our Lord the Sun gives me life, I will obey.”

“Then let us begone from this place,” said Zaemon, and took me by the arm and waved a way for us with the Symbol. No further word did I have with Nais, fearing to embroil her with these rebels who clustered round, but I caught one hot glance from her eyes, and that had to suffice for farewell. The dense ranks of the crowd opened, and we walked away between them scathless. Fiercely though they lusted for my life, brimming with hate though they made their cries, no man dared to rush in and raise a hand against me. Neither did they follow. When we reached the outskirts of the crowd, and the ranks thinned, they had a mind, many of them, to surge along in our wake; but Zaemon whirled the Symbol back before their faces with a blaze of lurid light, and they fell to their knees, grovelling, and pressed on us no more.

The rain still fell, and in the light of the camp fires as we passed them, the wet gleamed on the old man's wasted body. And far before us through the darkness loomed the vast bulk of the Sacred Mountain, with the ring of eternal fires encincturing its crest. I sighed as I thought of the old peaceful days I had spent in its temple and groves.

But there was to be no more of that studious leisure now. There was work to be done, work for Atlantis which did not brook delay. And so when we had progressed far out into the waste, and there was none near to view (save only the most High Gods), we found the place where the passage was, whose entrance is known only to the Seven amongst the Priests; and there we parted, Zaemon to his hermitage in the dangerous lands, and I by this secret way back into the capital.

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