

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric painting. It depicts a scene with a body lying on a surface, surrounded by many red and white roses. In the foreground, there are two figures: a woman with blonde hair looking down and a man with dark hair looking up. The overall tone is somber and mysterious.

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 5
4TH AUGUST 2019

SEVEN FLOORS

BY JULIA
BENALLY
SHE WOULD
EAT HER BODY
JUST LIKE
THOSE
ZOMBIES ON
TV...

MONSTERS

BY PEADAR DE
BURCA
VIOLENTLY
AGGRESSIVE
QUADRUPEDS
OFTEN
CONFUSED
WITH
CATFISH...

CRACKS BY PS GIFFORD

THE BOOK THIEF BY STEVEN HAVELOCK

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Schlock! Webzine

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Steven Havelock, GK Murphy, H Rider Haggard, C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 15, Issue 5

4th August 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 *Sigurd and Brynhild* by C. Butler. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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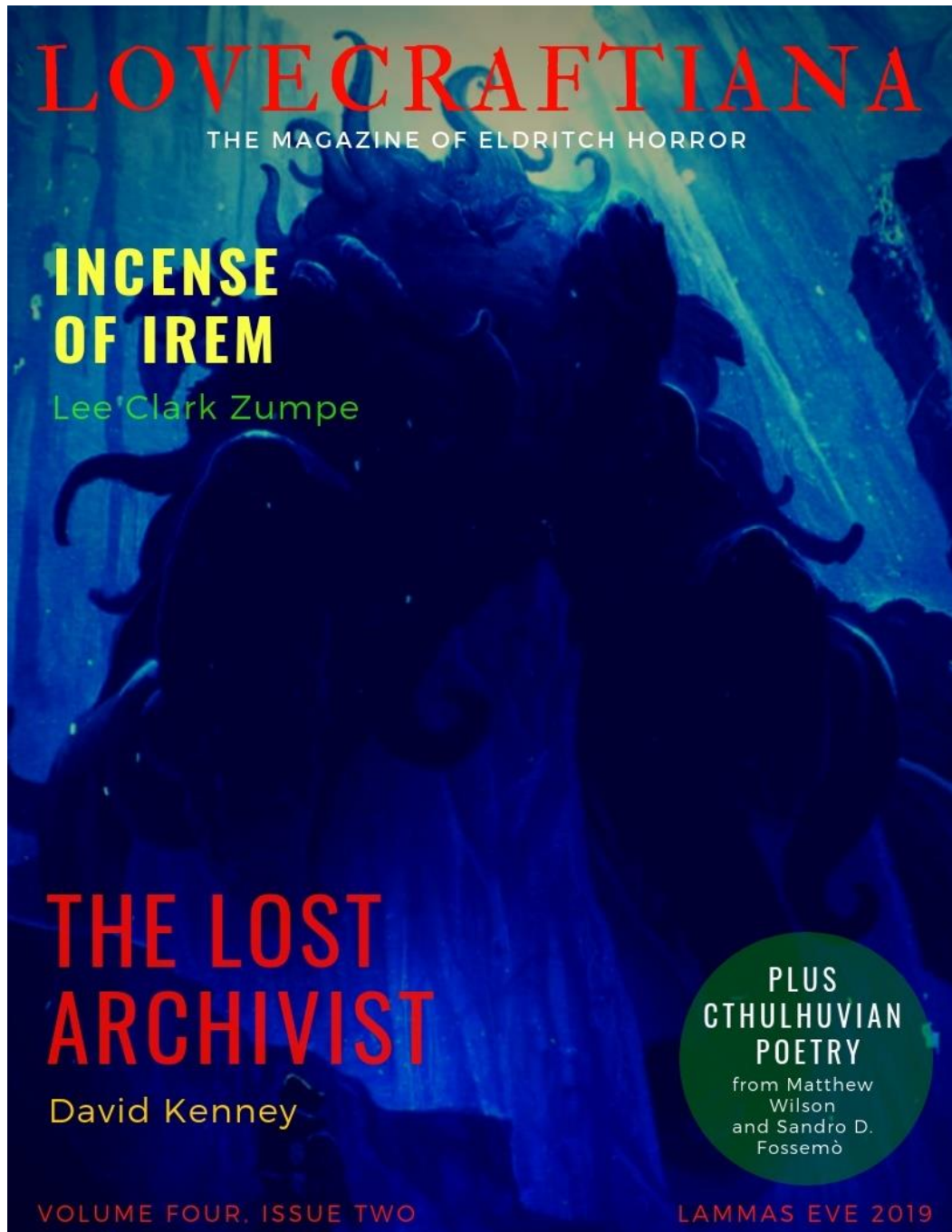
EDITORIAL

This week, Kaipo encounters a terrible pork-eating hag. Friedrich Heine packs his bags and prepares to leave the castle. Billy learns the truth about monsters and how to confront them. Paul learns only too late to listen to old wives' tales. And Emmanuel is plagued by a crank caller—or is he?

In Cumbria, Matt Johnson finds a horror in an armchair. Deep in the Dark Ages, Eric Brighteyes fights his last stand. And on Atlantis, Deucalion regains his lost love.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



UNAWARE THAT HE IS THE JERK CHARACTER IN A SLASHER FILM TROPE
KEN DELIVERS THE LINE "I'LL DO IT WHEN I GET TO IT!"
TO HIS WIFE IN THE NEXT ROOM.

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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SEVEN FLOORS by Julia Benally

Kaipo checked her jetty curls for the fiftieth time. Honolulu's humidity loved wreaking havoc on her head. Reapplying rosy lipstick, she made sure her mascara hadn't run since two minutes ago. Did her red monstera dress get funny kine in the last five minutes? She glanced at the golden sandal heels by the warped door. She wouldn't put those on until she left the room.

Knock knock!

Kaipo stumbled into the worn couch and tripped to the door. Taking a deep breath, she smoothed her dress, ran a long hand over her fuzzy head, and realized that she hadn't put her new earrings on. She was allus. She serenely opened the door.

"Baby!" Kyle smothered her in a bear hug as he slipped a three strand pikake lei—with baby's breath, tiny pink roses and a white ribbon—around her neck. Its heavenly aroma saturated the room and spilled out the window.

Kaipo ran her fingers over the velvety flowers. "Oh, this is so beautiful!"

Cupping her face in his large hands, Kyle crushed her lips against his. The kiss sent a shockwave through her limbs that radiated from her feet. Her insides switched places like a mad game of musical chairs.

A silly laugh escaped Kaipo's throat. "I so excited! What you was going tell me?"

"Marry me, baby!"

The giddiness got sucked out of the room and Kaipo put her hands on her hips. "Marry? Marry? What kine funny kine is that?"

Kyle gripped her shoulders. "I'm asking you for reals. Marry me!"

She looked at her scruffy apartment. "Whatsamatah you, bakatare or something? I oughta slap your stupid head." She thrust her finger at the floor. "This is not romantic. Romantic is one restaurant, one dinna cruise under the stars, Honolulu Country Club. Not one ugly place like this. You nevah even say you love me, eitha. Why you talking all this marriage stuffs anyway? You must think I one lolo."

He caught her in his beefy arms again, kissing her until she thought she would faint. "Just marry me! That's enough."

"O okay..." Eh, she when say what? Maybe she really was lolo. "But what about one dinna cruise under the stars?"

Laughing in glee, Kyle picked her up and spun in circles. "You ready for the big surprise now, honey?" He almost dropped her on the floor as he set her down.

Kaipo still wasn't sure if he had asked her or not. "It wasn't the marrying part?"

Kyle laughed. "That was the asking part!"

Kaipo hooked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Um..."

Kyle bellowed down the hallway. "Pohaku!"

"Who's Pohaku?"

A two year old boy raced down the hallway. Like Kyle, he wore baggy shorts, a big button shirt, brown flip flops, and sported a buzz cut. Round black eyes danced all over the place, as if storing everything into a rabid memory bank.

"What, Daddy?" he said.

Kaipo's stomach flipped. "Daddy?"

Kyle smiled proudly. "This is my son Pohaku! Pohaku, this is Kaipo. She going be your new muddah!"

New mother? Kaipo looked at Pohaku, and Pohaku looked at Kaipo. They screamed in horror. One ran down the hallway as the other slammed her door shut and locked it.

"Oh, wow. Whatsamatah?" Kyle cried, but nobody answered him. He waved it away. "Egh, they'll be all right. They just happy."

Sitting in one of the rusty fold up chairs in the employee basement lounge, Kaipo wept out the story to Lani, who lived on the fourth floor. She had switched out her elegant ensemble for shorts, tank top, and slippers.

Both women were janitors for this grungy apartment complex. Part of their pay was to live for ten percent off in whatever room they chose. Kaipo had decided to look into someone else's window on the seventh floor than on the first.

"Why me? Why me?" Kaipo wailed. "He's so big and handsome, and he not even stink. I was sure he when love me. And now I find out he has one kid!" She screamed into her arms. Mascara inked all over them.

"Calm down, no be silly," said Lani, "I mean, I should marry him. I babysit his kid anyway."

"That's not it!"

"I know, I know. You not ready to be one mom."

Kaipo stared at Lani in disbelief. "Kyle's used!"

Lani sat back. "Used? Well, what you s'pec? Look how he kisses. The thing is, he loves you now!"

“That’s it! Everything is pau! Auwe, auwe!” Kaipo became aware that she sounded like a child, but she couldn’t help it. She never wanted this! Was all jam um up! Not supposed to have one man with one small kid. Wasn’t time for be one mother. And look how he when ask her, in one ugly place like this, and only the cockroaches for to see them.

Lani patted her knee. “All I can say is, go clean the bathrooms.” The word ‘bathrooms’ sounded like ‘batchrooms.’

Kaipo wailed. “You suck! You wouldn’t care if I went makee die dead right now!”

“I going start on the second floor right now.” Metal chair legs screeched on cement as Lani stood up. “You go do the basement and the first floor. This your first time with the basement, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Kaipo wiped her cheek.

“No be scared, but there’s a thing in that bathroom. Long time ago, the people worshipped a demon, and gave it pork offerings. She would make them sick until they no can stand it anymore and gave her the pork. Anyway, everyone who cleans that bathroom will start throwing up after. She going show herself to you after that, but no worry, if you leave her some pork for one offering, then she won’t leave the bathroom and we’ll all be...” She gave the shaka sign. “...all right.”

Kaipo’s dark eyes narrowed incredulously. “Pork?”

“It’s what she eats. Otherwise she eats people until she gets it.” Lani pointed to the pea green 60’s fridge sitting under a bare light bulb. “There the pork stay. No forget, or we all going be allus.” Lani shuffled through the rickety plastic tables with their peeling fake wood tops, as if Kaipo should believe her just like that.

She rolled her eyes. It was so junk working like one slave in this stupid bathroom, in this creepy basement. Ugly apartment building full of cockroaches, and here she was living like one cockroach herself. Serve him right if she should ran away and die. Then that big, handsome unromantic Kyle with that hidden kid would be sorry for trying to turn her into an instant mother.

Stepping out of the lounge, Kaipo gazed down the long empty hallway. Two light bulbs lit the brown painted cement floor and white brick walls. The last bulb just shone on the doorless opening to the immense storage room. It seemed like a rectangular black mouth. Even in the warm humidity, a cold wind swirled out of it. The employee bathroom was halfway down that hall, between the two bare light bulbs.

“Ooie,” said Kaipo, and decided to clean the other bathroom first.

Taking her cart of cleaning supplies, she mucked out the community bathroom in the middle of the first floor. Two doors swung out to both sides of the building for easier tenant access. Roaches scurried out from beneath used toilet paper, condoms, the trashcan, stained toilets; they even trickled from the shower curtain. Kaipo had been hardened to the roaches the way a child was hardened to violence by M rated videogames.

Getting into the elevator, Kaipo headed for the basement. It shuddered and squeaked down to the bowels of the apartment complex. “Annabelle and Chucky 4 Eva” was spray painted across the cream coloured doors. The elevator ground to a halt, and the stained doors slid open onto the dim hallway.

“Lani is so junk. She did this to me on purpose,” Kaipo muttered as she pushed the cart to the bathroom door. Glancing at the black rectangle leading into the storage room, Kaipo stepped into the bathroom and flicked on the fluorescent lights.

Even without Lani’s creepy story, the two stall bathroom was a nightmare in and of itself. The single sink was stained beyond repair, and the small square mirror wasn’t even made of glass, but stainless steel. A massive crack ran across the ceiling and into the handicap bathroom.

Squeezing toilet bowl cleaner into the two toilets, the thwarted janitor scrubbed down the sink. Kyle was so shame! He couldn’t even own up to having one little kid. Where did he keep him all this time? In his back pocket? What a lolo! And he thought she was going to marry one lolo?

As she cleaned off the sad excuse for a mirror, something shuffled in the handicap stall. Chills trickled down Kaipo’s spine. Taking a deep breath, she began scrubbing the first toilet. It was nothing. She could handle. Was probably just a bunch of buggahs marching in the other stall.

Something scrubbed in the next stall. She stopped. The other scrubbing stopped. Kaipo’s eyes darted from the toilet bowl to the floor, half expecting to see a shadow, but nothing. They travelled up the linoleum wall separating her from the handicap stall. Why she did what she did next, she could never tell. She tapped on the wall three times with her finger. Three knocks resounded back from the other side. Jerking out of the stall, Kaipo fled the bathroom.

Kaipo barfed green, gelatinous muck into the bucket by her bed. She didn’t remember eating that. Was gross anyway. It flecked her chin and nose. The unbearable stench turned her stomach. “Please, just let me die!”

Carefully pushing back from the bucket, she rested her head on the pillow. It was supposed to be made of down, but at this point it felt like rocks. What a waste of feathers. Kyle had bought it for her. She hated the pillow.

Classical music streamed from her phone. What creep was calling now? She checked. Kyle. No, no, no. Why was the matter with him now? He better not start talking about last night, cuz she was pau with him!

“What?”

“Hey, baby.” He sounded relaxed for that mess he had pulled last night. “You no sound happy. You okay?”

“Why? I’m just ‘bout to makee die dead, that’s all!”

“You betta go Kaiser’s, see one doctor.”

Kaipo scowled. “What, you tink so?” She didn’t have insurance. For the last few years, she had toughed out every illness she had contracted. Ever since she had met Kyle, he had paid for all her medical. He would do it again, but she didn’t feel very grateful at the moment. She wanted to squeeze his money dry for putting her in this junk situation—and for making her sick, too. It had to be his fault.

Kyle sighed in exasperation. “I going stop by at twelve, yeah?”

“Oh, you like get sick, too?”

“Go sleep for now. Later.” He hung up.

“He’s such a big lolo!” Kaipo hurled the phone across the room. It cracked against the chalky wall. She would like to have screamed in fury, but threw up in the bucket instead. Kyle was so calm! Why couldn’t she get a rise out of him? Her anger slid off of that big Komunga’s back like water.

Leaning back on the torn leather couch, she stared at the chipped walls. The tiny open floor apartment was much like herself: a complete wreck.

She barfed into the bucket. Ooie, the stench was rancid, like rotten vegetables. If Kyle were there, he would just wash out the bucket, adjust her pillow, and baby her no matter how rotten she became. How come had to have one kid with him? Everything was perfect except for that.

Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop!

Kaipo jumped. Oh wow, somebody stay shooting out there. She threw up in the bucket. For several minutes she could only hear the squishy plop of unknown gunk dropping from her mouth. It left her gasping and sweaty.

Footsteps pounded by as muffled screams resounded through the thin floors.

“It’s coming!” somebody cried.

Kaipo stared at the tattered door. Lani’s BS story ran through her head.

Screams cut through the chalk wall from the neighbour’s. Furniture crashed, glass shattered, and a chair leg broke through the wall in a plume of white dust. Kaipo’s sickness temporarily froze in her veins. Crawling to the small hole, she looked inside.

An old hunchbacked woman in a brown cloak and maid’s cap stood over Kaipo’s screaming neighbour. The hag’s rounded back faced Kaipo. She was almost six feet high and about four feet wide. A gnarled, sand coloured hand clutched a sharp cane with a leering face on the handle. She stabbed it through the woman’s neck. Cartilage, bone and flesh squished together as blood spewed to the ceiling.

In the sudden silence, the hunchback ripped into the twitching body. She snorted like a hog in its wallow. Blood pooled across the floor. Lani's sickening words about the thing eating human flesh unless it go pork echoed back to Kaipo's mind.

Kaipo covered her mouth as her stomach turned, but she couldn't hold it in any more than she could stop from blinking. She retched all over the floor. The creature spun around. Kaipo would have screamed, had she not been throwing up.

A huge amber eye covered half of the wide yellow face. Wrinkles cascaded around the orb and the long bloody mouth. Straggles of white hair lay wet on the corrugated forehead and stuck out of the broad flat nose. A smile creasing those thin lips, it hobbled out of the room. Three foot long feet flapped in front of it as the cane tapped into the hallway towards her thin door.

Kaipo's heart lunged into her mouth. The old wahine would stick one puka in her with that sharp cane. Those flat teeth could grind, and she would eat her body just like those zombies on TV. Kaipo ripped the wall around the hole that the chair had made. The tapping cane reached the door. BAP! The door rattled as a crack ran down the middle.

Cold sweat pouring down her face, Kaipo shoved through the hole she had made and tumbled into the next room. Lukewarm blood splashed her face and arms. She retched into the carnage as her door broke down. Those long feet flapped across the cement floor.

Kaipo's eyes darted to the hole as if the big eye would be there already. A shadow darkened the floor through the hole. A scream caught in Kaipo's throat as she slipped through the blood to the door. She staggered for the elevator at the end of the yellowish hall. The light bulbs flickered. Daylight gleamed through broken doors onto mangled bodies.

Everything swirled into a vortex. The elevator doors stretched like taffy and squished together. The spray paint along the walls blinked at Kaipo as she passed by. Swaying to the elevator, she pressed the down button.

Tap...tap...tap...tap...

Kaipo's spine stiffened, not daring to look back. She murmured a Hawaiian lullaby her mother had sung to her as a child. The taps came closer. Cold sweat trickled down her temple and misted over her nose. The long feet pattered towards her.

The elevator doors opened. Kaipo rushed inside, smacking the ground floor button. The doors shut. Tap tap tap sounded on the other side.

"Oh..." Kaipo crumpled to the floor and covered her face. The red numbers above the doors counted down: 7...6...5... The elevator screeched to a halt and the cheap doors rattled partly open on a pitch dark fifth floor and half lit fourth. Kaipo tossed more green gunk in response.

Squeezing through the doors, she slipped onto the fourth floor. Silence reigned. Dark shapes lay in pools of black. Kaipo wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. Was good thing she no could smell, cuz she was tired of throwing up. She wobbled to the fire escape.

As she pushed the metal door open, the tapping cane echoed in the stairway. Kaipo's fingers iced over. Fleeing down the hall, she zipped into a random open door. She threw up until there was nothing left. Her limbs palpitated, struggling to keep her upright.

The fire escape creaked open. Tap, tap, tap, tap! Kaipo covered her mouth to keep from screaming. She teetered into the bedroom and scrambled under the bed. Something moved under there with her. Kaipo screamed and a child shrieked. The creature would hear! Seizing the panicked figure, Kaipo covered its mouth.

"Quiet," she hissed. "It's coming!"

The tiny child grew still. The tap taps reached the door, paused, and then entered the apartment. Kaipo and the child clung to one another. The long pointed shoes hobbled past the broken bedroom door. It entered the bathroom. CRASH! Something hit the wall and clunked to the floor. The hunchback would find them if they stayed.

Crushing the child to her side, Kaipo crawled out from under the bed and ran into the hall. She pushed open the fire escape door. It screeched on rusty hinges. Shivers ripped through her ears and down to her toes. The creature's heavy steps flapped across the abandoned room.

"Get away from the door!" Kaipo wasn't sure if she had thought it or said it out loud. Speeding into another room, she listened. Hopefully the hag thought she was in the fire escape. The patter of feet drew near, and then the rusty hinges squeaked. Heavy steps pounded down the stairwell.

Kaipo doubled over and spilled her stomach on the floor. Gunk splattered her feet and flecked her legs. Lani said she would be sick until it got the pork from her. It when choose her to give the offering. Was the only way she was going to stop the thing. Wiping her mouth, she surveyed the decimated room. Blood and carnage were strewn across the floor. Body pieces soaked into the thin carpet. This was no place for one small baby.

She glanced at the waif in her arms. It was Pohaku. How was he here? She suddenly remembered Lani saying that she babysat him. Where was Lani? The cane skewering her neighbour's neck crossed her mind. Kaipo threw up. She had to try for escape, but not down the stairwell, either. The monster wahine might be over there.

The window suddenly beamed brighter than a beacon. Did these people even have one rope? She scoured the apartment for one, but only found bed sheets. These was good. Tearing them into strips, she tied them together. The knot she when tie was as good as it was gonna get.

Tying one end of the sheet rope to the couch leg, she tossed the rest out the window. She had to throw up for several minutes before attempting the climb. The bathroom floor leered at her with a thousand faces. Some of them winked. Kaipo squeezed her eyes shut. Where was that lolo Kyle? He said he was going be here already. She glanced at the kitchen clock. It was late morning, not lunchtime yet.

Biting her lip, Kaipo lagged to the window and looked down. Good thing she wasn't scared of heights, but if she was, the hunchback would have scared it out of her.

“Pohaku,” she said, “we going down now.” As she picked him up, he squeezed her around the neck. She hauled herself out the window and started down. Her hands slipped. The brick wall loomed and receded. Only Pohaku’s sharp grip kept her from falling to her doom.

The windowsill of a third floor apartment touched Kaipo’s feet. Sagging against the window, she pressed her hot face against the cool glass. Her eyes shut. She just needed a small rest before going on.

“Almost there,” she said to herself.

She opened her eyes. A massive yellow eye gazed at her through the brittle glass. The parchment lips grinned and the sharp cane swung back. Kaipo screamed. She lost her grip and slid down the sheet rope to the second floor. The third floor window shattered. Sparkling shards rained on her head. Leaning out, the hag jerked the sheet rope upward.

“No, no, no!” Kaipo landed precariously on the ledge of a second floor window. Breaking it with her elbow, she dove inside. A scratchy howl tore through the air. The monster’s massive feet pounded across the ceiling. The emergency exit door screeched. In a matter of seconds the old woman would be on the second floor.

Kaipo sprinted into the hallway. The floor swayed into the swimming walls. She saw herself beckoning to her at the end of the hall, or was that auntie? As she turned the corner, the stairwell door screeched open. She might have let the creature eat her, had not Pohaku still been clinging to her neck.

Tap...tap...tap...tap...

Tears squeezed from Kaipo’s eyes. Now was the time to be akamai. If she cut through the bathroom, she could make a break for the ground floor. The taps had stopped. It had to mean was safe now to come out. She slipped out of the room and slammed into the creature.

It spun around in shock as Kaipo screamed. Without coherent thought, Kaipo raked her nails across that staring eye and fled. The hag’s infuriated howls deafened her ears as it charged down the corridor after her.

Kaipo’s legs turned to jelly as she stumbled through the bathroom. Those teeth would mash her to death! That cane would drill one puka into her neck and she’d choke on her own blood, then the devil wahine would chew on her like pork. She fell out the opposite door, near the fire exit. The heavy cane knocked the bathroom door off its hinges.

The pork monster would catch her. Thing would expect her for run down. Fleeing upward, Kaipo crouched in the turn of the stair. The door bounced on its hinges and the monster rushed onto the landing. It hesitated, as if contemplating which way she had gone. Kaipo pressed her face into the shivering baby’s hair. His little arms tightened around her neck. Seconds dragged like hours. The creature licked its parchment lips and galloped down the stairs. Tears stung Kaipo’s eyes as hysteria threatened to take her.

The lights went out.

Pohaku had endured one horror after another, but the darkness was too much. He screamed. Kaipo clapped a hand over his mouth.

“She’ll hear, she’ll hear!” She pressed him closer. “We no can holoholo unless you stay quiet!”

He struggled to silence his cries. His endeavour lent Kaipo strength, and she felt her way down the steps. In moments, the ‘EXIT’ glowed in soft green before them. The air flowed easier through Kaipo’s lungs and she pushed on the door. It wouldn’t budge. Her throat constricted. She shoved harder on the door.

“No, no, no!” Her voice choked with tears. “Open...” What was she going to do now? The pork, she had to get the pork! It was in that hideous fridge beneath the single light bulb.

She felt her way towards the basement. It had no door. The dim bulbs in the storage room made the doorway glow with ethereal light. At least they still worked, unlike the other junk lights in the rest of the building.

If only she could leave Pohaku somewhere safe, but nowhere was safe. She slipped into the storage room. Metal scaffolds were packed high with boxes and luggage from past tenants who had either died or vanished.

Tap...tap...tap...tap...

Kaipo stifled a scream and crawled in among the boxes beneath a shelf. The taps came closer. Those massive feet flapped past. Kaipo’s head spun. She just wanted Kyle. Where was that big lolo Kamunga?

Creeping through the boxes, she came out on the far end of the scaffold. She hurried through the maze of scaffolds towards the hallway. The tapping headed towards her. Kaipo hid behind a box, and watched the creature through the small gaps in the shelves. Her insides turned. In a moment, she would throw up.

The creature moved out of sight. Kaipo ran to the door, bare feet noiseless on the filthy floor. A shudder jolted through her. What if the pork never worked? What if she when figure out that she liked people meat better than pig meat? She looked at Pohaku. The baby didn’t deserve to go make so young.

The nausea rose as she pattered down the corridor. She gritted her teeth, but she had maintained control too long. She retched all over the floor. Again. Again. Again. The splattering and heaving beat against the walls like bass on the highest volume.

Pohaku screamed.

Kaipo glanced sideways. The one eyed hag stood in the storage room doorway, partially lit by the dim light. The single eye gleamed like a flickering flame. Sobbing, Kaipo dashed into the lounge. The bulb over the fridge swayed like it was drunk.

The hag blew into the room. A bloody grin cracked the wide face as she bowled through the tables and chairs. They bounced off the walls and clattered across the floor. Ripping open the fridge door, Kaipo seized a chunk of pork.

The hag slammed her to the floor. The mouth yawned over her head, dripping red and yellow saliva. Bits of ragged flesh shone in the dull flat teeth. Shrieking, Kaipo shoved the pork into its mouth. She yanked her hand back before the incisors could snip her arm off.

The hag chomped on the piece of pork, snorting as she swallowed the shiny flesh. The jowls gnashed inches from the screaming Kaipo and Pohaku's faces. With a thunderous swallow, the hag eyed the fridge with ravenous greed. It lunged inside after the rest of the pork.

The monster was going deeper into the fridge, melting into it like magic. Kaipo could only think of one thing to do. Pushing herself to her feet, she kicked the old woman further into the fridge and slammed the door shut. An awful howl, like bending metal and nails grinding into a chalkboard, curdled the air. The fridge jolted as the cane batted against the door.

Kaipo fled the basement. The screeches followed her back into the storage room and up the stairs into the foyer. Stumbling out into the balmy air, Kaipo collapsed on her knees. Red and blue police lights were the last things she saw before she blacked out.

A vase of red roses set down beside Kaipo's head as she came to.

"Kyle?"

The big man's face hovered over her. It screwed up as he smashed her in his arms and covered her with kisses.

"Where's Pohaku?" It still felt like the small boy was in her arms.

"He okay. He with Grandma. He made you one card. I'll show you later. You okay?" He smoothed the hair from her face. "You hurt? You like throw up? You need one psychiatrist?"

Kaipo smiled. "Just you."

Propping himself on Kaipo's pillows, he enfolded her in his arms. "I love you." He gazed at the picture on the wall, lost in his own thoughts. He stroked her hair, his grip tightening as if he were afraid she might vanish.

"I love you, too," said Kaipo.

Her eyes roved over the pale room. The silent television stuck to the wall reflected the pallid light gleaming in the window. Murmuring voices and hospital beeps penetrated the heavy door.

Shutting her eyes, the fridge inside that lonely basement loomed in her mind. The single yellow bulb swayed like a pendulum over the grungy green surface. Tap, tap, tap went the fridge door. Tap, tap, tap...

THE END

17 VIDEOS TUTORIAL WRITING COURSE

BY

STEVEN HAVELOCK

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THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

Chapter 16

I packed my bags and rushed them to Cybele's chamber to tell her of the exchange between her brother and me. She had been rummaging through her meagre possessions, deciding on what to take and what to leave. But her attention was soon diverted by the latest dilemma concerning our escape.

"Why would he agree so readily to post your letter?" she asked, knowing I could not provide a satisfactory explanation, only increased speculation. She paced about the room. "We have to keep in mind what he did with my letters to Anders. I don't believe he will allow it to be posted. He'll stop it somehow. He may even write his own letter dismissing the first."

I couldn't help but let free a soft laugh. Cybele's interest peaked and I revealed the second letter I had composed, awaiting the carrier's arrival.

"But how will you put either letter into the carrier's hands?" she queried. More than voiced speculation; instead a curious question. And so simple: I had not asked it of myself. My well-conceived plan was quickly slipping into obscurity.

The first letter was tucked in Kasimir's vest. Could I retrieve it? If so, how? Tell him I had forgotten to write a small postscript to Doctor Freud? But then wouldn't Kasimir be present when the carrier arrived to see me slip not one but two letters into the man's hand?

Lies rose on lies in a tower of deception.

I slipped my bags beneath the chair I had sat in previously, then slumped down my weight and sank my head into my hands as I ruminated. The greatest medical problem did not seem as paradoxical as how to escape the Castle Ouroboros.

I said as much to Cybele. Her intelligence was not only as erudite as that of any professor, but she also had the ability to see reason from a childlike vantage point.

"Why are we labouring so intently about the letters?" she asked, lifting my eyes to hers. "Why do we not simply walk out the front doors when my brother is preoccupied elsewhere?"

Incredible. She had cut the Gordian knot in one fell swoop of simplistic, clear logic. My medical mind too often constructed elaborate solutions to basic problems—thus can a scientific mind be a burden to the advancement of knowledge.

A laugh bellowed from my throat as I rushed to her and gripped her shoulders and—beside myself with joy—planted a kiss upon her lips. I shocked her as I did myself as our joy waned quickly into embarrassment. I hastened to beg her pardon for such uncouth behaviour.

Yet I averred that hers was the greatest solution to our problem.

Instead of Kasimir watching his sister, she and I would now watch him. Even though she had been largely captive within her boudoir, I insisted that she must have known some of the architecture of the castle.

She wracked her memory of the castle's layout, confided, "I have roamed a little, whenever he released me for fresh air, always by my side. I believe there may be an eyrie of sorts ... a room overlooking the front portico. But I can't be sure since I've been inside so few rooms. The door is likely locked."

"Can you take me to this door?" I asked.

"Of course. But surely my brother could not have called the carrier in so short—wait, you said he had a telegraph? I never knew."

"He has kept you in the dark, my dear, in more ways than one."

I assumed that Kasimir would contact a carrier as soon as he had left the breakfast table. But to what purpose? To take my letter, or his own letter denouncing my correspondence? Or merely to stuff a slip of paper into an envelope, seal it with wax, and address it to no one ... the message going nowhere but down into the valley and into the post carrier's fireplace?

Regardless, Cybele and I needed a vantage point from which we could spy on the activities of her brother, to attempt to spot an opportune gap in his wanderings about the castle through which we could slip.

On softened steps, she and I edged through her doorway and made our candlelit progress down the hallway of the upper floor.

We held our tongues—we held our breaths—to avoid echoing the sounds of our passage. She led me down a darkened hall lined with walnut baseboards, the floor's hardwood dampened by a trail of thin Persian carpets. Scenes of rural life and immense canvases of military and marine campaigns lined the walls. I recognized one or two masterpieces by Holbein the Younger and various Dutch and Italian masters, possibly even a lost Vermeer. We were passing a part of Cybele's fortune, which made me reflect how astounding it truly must be. No wonder Kasimir would kill for it.

We ascended a small flight of bare wooden steps and rose onto the balls of our feet. The staircase twisted up a level to a third floor and narrowed significantly, so that Cybele and I were pressed bodily between wall and bannister. It was much colder on this floor, so that we could almost see our breath. We each wrapped arms tightly around our torsos.

At the end of the hallway were three more steps which ended in a landing that spread out into a rotunda with two doors lining either side.

"I have spied this place when my brother was asleep or out of the castle, forgetting to lock my door, but I know not what it is," she whispered, her breath sputtering the candle flame. "Both doors are locked."

Ignoring my previous attempt at breaking down a door owing to my weakened condition from the elixir and the blow to my head, I assured her, “I will see if I can’t break one of them ajar.”

“Please be cautious,” she warned with a hand lightly touching my shoulder. “The sound may echo through the castle.”

“We should be far enough away from the main floor,” I tried to assure her. “But I shall attempt to create as little noise as possible.”

I stepped to the door to my left, twisted the handle, felt it remain solid against my force. I braced my shoulder against the wood while holding the door handle in a twist, and rammed my weight against the barrier.

A second, a third time, and a bruised shoulder gained us entrance. We held our steps and craned our ears back down the hallway. Thankfully, no footsteps were heard, no voice called to apprehend our progress.

The room was cold, and our breath appeared. A circular room, a turret most likely, with narrow, shuttered arrow loops around the circumference. Furniture sat abandoned, covered in white sheets. Light shone through four arrow loops, striped by the shutters so that we no longer needed our candles. I extinguished them so as not to draw an eye to our presence as we neared a stone window loop.

I lifted a small brass latch, freeing the shutter. A light rain fell outside and pelted against my brow. My view through this window was impeded by the arched back, small primate head, and curving devil horns of a stone gargoyle. One of those I saw when I first approached the castle.

I moved further along the row of loops, training my vision through the shutters, until I found one that offered a clear view over the roof of the portico to the mountain road. From such a perspective, I would not be able to see if Kasimir emerged from the castle’s front door to meet a courier rider, I would only see the rider approach and then depart once he had his package. The view stretched to my left as far as the lip of the roof of the stables, but then my sight was again blocked by a gargoyle, this one with a bat’s wings fanning high off its bony back.

I crouched low with only a small opening between the unlatched shutters to give me a panorama as I heard hooves clatter up the stone and dirt road. I squinted away the rain.

A man clad in animal skins and a fur vest appeared on the horse as it filtered from the mist and light rain. The same driver of the carriage who had brought me to this haunted abode, Axel. The chop of the hooves slowed as the rider vanished beneath the roof of the portico. I heard his boots drop to the cobblestones, but then he spoke in soft whispers.

Kasimir’s voice was no louder as the two men spoke, exchanging a dialogue I could not distinguish, especially with the static sound of the rain.

A scream pierced the air behind me—a shriek that could shatter stone!

I turned to see Cybele sink to the floor, unconscious, her night clothes lying in a pool around her.

I panicked, fearing that Kasimir and the driver must have heard the death cry. I rushed to Cybele's side, felt her vibrant pulse and saw her bosom rise and fall. I lifted her in my arms, thinking only to speed her back into her chamber, lay her in bed, then play the administering doctor at her bedside. Already in my mind I was constructing a fabrication to tell Kasimir when he would, surely, storm to the upper floors once he had finished with the courier, to see the cause of his sister's scream.

I would tell him that I, too, heard it, that she must have been wandering the castle halls and something gave her a fright. And that her horrified voice echoed off castle walls and down passages to my room.

A lie, but one unfortunately too close to the truth.

She had received a dose of terror, and with her in my arms, ready to be ushered from the circular room, I saw what had horrified her into unconsciousness.

Accidentally, (or with intent, it did not matter) she had slipped one of the billowing white sheets from off a chair. Revealing a frozen horror sitting there.

Once a man, now a skeleton, all flesh rotted off his skull, his hands worn down to white bone, a gold ring still on his finger. He wore the suit he had died in, his bone feet standing small in the depths of his shoes. A ribbon around his neck held what appeared to be a military honour: a medal coloured red with a vertical white cross—the flag of Denmark.

Anders? Could it be? Did Cybele not say that he was a military man? If it was he, it would explain Cybele's swoon into terror, her mind and body dropped with the macabre sight. And it would also prove that all she had told me of her family's past was true. That her brother was a murderer of at least one corpse sitting before me ... and yet of how many more corpses covered beneath sheets, undiscovered behind a multitude of locked castle doors?

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MONSTERS by Peadar de Burca

In the case of Billy Neary, short sighted, flat footed and profoundly deaf in his left ear, his seventh birthday was a bit of an ordeal. The autumn rains had hit Galway and the apartment where Billy lived with his mother felt like it was under attack. The party dragged, as they do when there are more adults present than kids. None of his classmates bothered to show, leaving it to relatives and a few of his mother's friends to make up the numbers and grumble about the gluten free/sugar free, tofu tart.

'This birthday cake tastes like a sweeping brush,' whispered Billy's Uncle Derek to his teenage son, Ryan.

'It's not a cake, it's a tart,' said Billy. He sat beside a glass cabinet housing a rare coin collection. They belonged to his dad, but his mother got them in the divorce. His dad wasn't at the party. He was in Legoland in Denmark with his girlfriend, a dental receptionist called Angie, and her son Trent.

Uncle Derek's eyes narrowed. 'Oh...you heard that did you?' Derek was his father's brother. He lived in Tuam and was always passing comments on immigrants and homosexuals. 'Don't wear out the batteries on your bionic ear, there's a good lad.'

Billy's fingers reached up and touched the smooth plastic of his Behind-The-Ear hearing aid. He didn't know how to react to his uncle's remark, nor the accompanying guffaw from Ryan. Somewhere in his expanding development of human interaction, he equated their laughter with his mother's description of Derek as a "work shy clown."

His uncle threw a sly wink to Ryan, a watch this wink.

'Your father says you can pick up Russian spy satellites on that thing. Be sure to warn me if Putin invades Ireland.' Then Derek whispered again into Ryan's ear, making the teenager laugh so hard he spat out the clump of tart he'd been storing in his jaw. They snorted their way out the dining room and down the hall.

'People shouldn't do that,' said a voice that sounded like wet paper left to dry on a radiator. Mrs Daly. She lived in the apartment across the hall and Billy guessed she was nearly as old as his father's coins. She lowered herself slowly onto the chair beside him. Her son lived in Clontarf and her husband had died from either drowning or drinking too much. Billy could never remember, but he knew fluids were involved. She leaned over and he got a tremendous rush of perfume, reminding him of the beautiful rose bush in his grandmother's garden, only much, much sweeter. Billy liked old people. He identified with them. Parts of their bodies didn't work either.

'Whispering at parties is rude,' she said.

Billy sighed. 'I heard what he said.'

'And what did he say?' Like a lot of Galwegians of a certain generation, Mrs Daly was tough as old boots. Billy's mind didn't verbalize this, but the understanding washed over him, much like her perfume, and it confused him. How could old people, who are weak, be strong? He wished he were strong just once in his life. Would that be so bad? To not always be the last

kid picked for gym class basketball. To be the best climber or the guy who got to wear his track+field medals into school after Sports Day.

Keep wishing, a cynical, adult voice told him. This voice belonged to his dad. Billy didn't like it, but was helpless against its constant incursions and the smoky, dirty way it made his brain feel afterwards.

'Billy?'

Oh yeah. Mrs Daly.

'He said, "Why did God make farts smell? So deaf people could enjoy them too."'

'Don't you worry, Billy, you're in good company.' Mrs Daly pulled back her purple black hair so he could see the device clipped behind her right ear.

'It's small,' Billy said. 'Does it have a remote control? Mine does—' He took a little gadget from his jeans pocket, his new jeans, bought in H+M the day before. He thumbed the hard rubber of the buttons. 'This is the microphone button. It helps me hear things from far away.'

'Does it now?' smiled the old woman, throwing her face into a fishing net of wrinkles. 'I only have to tap mine with a finger to raise the volume. Pure magic, speaking of which, here's your present '

She produced a slim rectangular shaped gift from her handbag, wrapped in silver paper. Had to be a book, Billy guessed.

His glasses slipped down his nose a fraction. 'Can I open it?'

'Of course. Don't rip the paper though. I'll need to use it again.'

Billy set about freeing the gift from its precious wrapping and Mrs Daly deftly appropriated the silver paper into her brown speckled hands.

It was a book. The cover was a dirty purple colour, the material kind of furry. It smelled the way an old coat does after being stored in an attic. Inside, written on the first page in black font was;

Compendium of Irish Monsters

For such a relatively slim book, it was an entirely heavy thing in his hands. Mrs Daly rubbed Billy's knee with gnarled, arthritic fingers. 'For best results, make sure you read it on your own and by candlelight.' She threw back her head in a gesture that had all the qualities of a laugh except the laugh itself, a huge soundless motion both eerie and affectionate. It left Billy discombobulated. His left hand went to the buttons on his remote control, stopping when he realized it was the old woman's laugh which was faulty and not the device he relied on.

He liked Mrs Daly. She would always invite him into her apartment for treats. So it was a real shame that after his birthday he never saw her again.

The Compendium of Irish Monsters proved to be too much for Billy when he took it to bed that night. There were one hundred pages, wizened, ripped in places, each featuring an ornate rendering and a written description of a nightmarish beast. A large toad creature called Bocht on page seven, with liquid black eyes and a smiling cavernous mouth, made Billy's small testicles shrink and chill. A short paragraph explained how the Bocht was a shape shifter, taking the form of its quarry, secreting a sticky membrane over it, before swallowing it whole.

Billy flicked to another random page where he encountered

Kulmora, an immaterial parasite, needing to regularly consume vast quantities of negative energy. It enters a host's mind by way of thought osmosis wherein it triggers wave after wave of destructive emotion until the host is provoked to engage in acts of wanton carnage culminating in suicide.

The worst, or so Billy thought, waited for him on page 83—

Snoads are violently aggressive quadrupeds often confused with catfish or eels. They are equally at home in water or land. During winter, they nest in stone or cement structures, lying undetected in basements or between walls. A single adult will wipe out an entire human household in minutes.

The uncredited artist's graphics were rich in colour and multi layered; tentacles oozed with viscous fluids, needle teeth were configured so as to render the victim incapable of pulling away.

A surge of nausea pulsed from Billy's stomach. The skin on his arms went cold and pimply. Wormy cramps wriggled in his gut, underlined by an understanding that if he moved too fast or sat up the wrong way, he would cover his quilt in a layer of vomit. Billy hated getting sick. Hated the soul killing apprehension preceding it and the burning taste of bile coating his throat after he spewed his stinking insides over the rim of the toilet.

Was it something he ate? His mother's disgusting tofu tart?

No. He hardly touched his slice. This was no sneaky microbe attacking his intestinal fauna. This was the book, humming with waspish power. He removed his glasses with a limp hand and pushed the book off the bed. It fell onto the floor, the dull thud acting as a tripswitch. The nausea went total. His insides whooped in a great sloppy roll of yellow puke. A supper of scrambled eggs and raw carrots shot out his mouth, staining his pyjamas and quilt, leaving him with that awful feeling of being pathetic.

Worthless.

Naturally, his mother changed the bedding and nursed him with sips of water. The tepid liquid tasted...weak, unattractive, personifying his own limp, flat footed energy.

He found no fit in his bed that night.

Every creak of the wooden frame made him grip his belly like a poisoned pup.

A month passed. Then another. Billy's routine carried the days forward. Breakfast, school, taunts from a boy sitting behind him—Sean Cuniffe, who never tired of calling him a retard or putting thumb tacks down the back of his shirt.

He returned to the book intermittently, morbidly fascinated with the contents, but only ever reading it in company, thoroughly relieved when he could set it back on the shelf. By the time the calendar landed on November fourth, Billy was shackled to an intolerable anxiety. He woke from a nightmare where a foot long Fester leeches along his inside leg. Billy knew there was nothing there, but to be sure to be sure he scratched until the skin peeled and droplets of blood pooled at his crotch.

Each night after brought a new terror. A sudden gust of wind was actually the fabled Mothman, a winged, harbinger of doom, banging at the window, wanting to hypnotize little boys and girls with his glowing red eyes. A strange smell could only be the notorious Crimp, a revenant who dug up dead bodies to eat them. Billy's fear manifested in his compulsions; he washed his hands, six or seven times a night. He emptied his mahogany wardrobe to check inside. After putting the clothes back, summer shorts and tees on the right, winter sweaters and cords on the left, he repeated the process again and again, his head aching, invisible prongs squeezing the temples. He couldn't stop, he needed to be sure nothing was in there. With its folding double doors and deep, dark shelving, his wardrobe could hold any amount of badness.

One dank night, the great rags of clouds Galway is famous for hanging over the four storey building, Billy fell asleep with his hearing aid on. A weird chorus filtered down into his subconscious. Distressing, lo-fi cries bleeding from the apartment above. Number 9 housed two students, brothers from Carlow, studying Engineering at NUI, G. Billy stirred awake. His feet were cold. By the time the dim groans subsided, his testicles were reduced to frozen chips of ice. There were eight apartments in the building, with twenty five inhabitants. Yet as far as Billy was concerned he was surrounded by a swarm of beings who wanted to bleed him, feed on him, steal his skin to drape over their slobbering, poisoned fangs as a trophy.

The ceiling.

He couldn't take his eyes off the ceiling in his room. His artificially enhanced ear kept picking out muffled thumps, closely followed by a sinister dragging noise...otherworldly...massive and so awfully patient.

Something bad lurked above him.

At breakfast, his mother was in a rush.

'Mom?'

‘Yes, Billy?’ Her face was pinched, worried. It got like that when his there was trouble with his dad. Holding back on the maintenance. Her eyes were shunted from the rest of her features in a terrible disconnect.

‘Is Mrs Daly okay?’

‘Yes, Billy.’

The television was on. He wondered if he should tell his mother about the monster upstairs. But he got the feeling she’d blame it on his dad. Whatever problems Billy had, his mother always blamed them on his dad. He bent over his cereal, watching a news story about America and North Korea, picturing two scary looking men. It was Billy’s understanding that these two men owned America and North Korea.

‘Then why don’t we see her around the building?’

‘Because it’s cold and slippy and the footpath outside hasn’t been gritted—come on, hurry, you know the drill—if we’re not on the Kingston road by 8.15, we’re toast.’ Her voice was like her face, hard, divorced from mirth. 8.15 wasn’t the problem. Billy overheard her shouting on the phone the night before. Not only was there a problem with the maintenance, but his father was going to marry Angie.

‘Can we visit her and see if she’s okay?’

‘Yes, yes Billy, now hurry please.’

In the back of the car, he pondered the meaning of monsters. Those creatures in the Compendium... Did they exist? He wasn’t entirely sure and the uncertainty tormented him. Bad things can happen to people. Little boys can...vanish. His mother warned him never to talk to strangers, to watch out for the homeless man who drank cans of Dutch Gold beer on the bench beside their building. From this, he drifted to a speculation of his Uncle Derek whose sneering face Billy believed to be a disguise concealing the face of a...rat. A man’s body, but a rat’s head, his rat heart belching with ratty wants and needs. Not all adults mean well... Who told him that? He couldn’t remember, and before his mother dropped him at the school’s locked gate to wait alone in the rain, he considered Mrs Daly; Why would she give me such a scary book...?

He never found out because they never did visit their eighty year old neighbour. There were bills to be paid, homework to be done and they simply forgot.

The next day he was in school with his friend Sebastian, eating peanut butter sandwiches outside the gym. Beyond the dirty grey windows, frantic gusts of hail and sleet howled like spectres affronted by the living.

The monster book was open, resting on their slim laps. Instead of a sandwich, Sebastian ate a shitty Dairymilk chocolate bar. Dark stains filled his chin, reminding Billy of the bloody Vampyre on page seventy eight.

‘There’s no name,’ said Sebastian. He was smaller than Billy and wore a patch over his eye. His clothes were old and unironed. His jeans weren’t from H+M. They came from the Catholic Collection Centre.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Billy.

‘It doesn’t tell who made it,’ said Sebastian, scratching at the beige plaster covering his eye. His good eye widened at the motley, stealthy grotesques spread out before him.

‘Of course someone wrote it. And drew it too.’

‘Maybe the old woman who gave it to you?’ said Sebastian, unable to lift his gaze from the book.

‘No, not her. Do you think monsters like this are real?’ asked Billy. His feet were killing him. He had forgotten his arch supports so the pain whined across the sole up into his Achilles tendons.

Sebastian didn’t answer. He was too busy turning the enduring beige pages, imbibing the drawings. He read aloud; ‘The Babaguna cooks and eats human flesh, de...vour...ing children—’

‘Stop!’ Billy jumped up, holding his stomach. He threw his sandwich on the ground. ‘There are monsters, I know there are!’

‘Aw, come on ’

‘No! I keep hearing noises... dragging noises and not small dragging but big dragging!’

Sebastian took a moment to respond. Of all people, he knew a thing or two about monsters.

‘Where?’

‘Above me. My mom says students live there. She doesn’t like them because they play music. But there is no music now. Just this dragging noise.’

Sebastian gobbled the last of his Dairymilk, his hands filthy with brown goo and a distant part of Billy’s mind hoped his friend wouldn’t paw the book.

‘Maybe someone killed them?’

Billy’s mouth fell open. ‘Ohhh...can you stop saying that!’

Sebastian stood up, licking his fingers between speaking.

‘You need to do what I do. I keep a hammer under my pillow in case my mom’s boyfriend wants to beat me.’

‘He wants to beat you?’

‘Sometimes,’ says Sebastian, taking great care to extract a glob of chocolate from his thumb. ‘He says if it weren’t for the Children’s Allowance, he’d put me in a bag and drown me in a lake.’

‘What happens if he comes when you’re asleep?’

‘I have a bell tied to my door. This is what I do. It’s good to have a plan.’

The monster chose the darkest night of the year to come for him. Billy couldn’t locate a hammer, but his mother had a peeling knife and he placed it alongside a dynamo flashlight under his pillow.

He was woken by an electronic noise in the pitch black of night—the low batt alarm on his hearing aid beeping at three second intervals. His rat uncle was right; he had worn the batteries out on his bionic ear.

Yet still enough power for his BTE to register the grotesque sound of something moving, something almost too big for the space it was trying to get through. The noise came from the wall above his wardrobe.

Icicles climbed Billy’s back. He put on his glasses and began winding his dynamo flashlight, shining it about the room. The sound in the wall grew thicker, fatter, closer, rising as steam in his head or a prolonged shushing from an adult when they don’t want to be disturbed.

A horrid waiting ensued, the dreaded drawn out quality of a sick tummy.

A very adult thought came, in the cynical voice of his father: the book, it’s come alive and you made it happen, Billy, oh yeah, because that’s what humans do, they worry monsters into life.

The plastic cover of the room’s air vent, just above the wardrobe, started to rattle. Billy’s tongue was tethered by fear. The plastic cover gave way and a head floated out over the wardrobe. A head as flat and wide as a garden spade.

Its swift gliding motion made Billy dizzy and he instantly flooded his bed with piss.

A Snoad!

The creature’s only response to Billy’s cranking, wheezing flashlight was to slip down over the front of the wardrobe, pulling a horribly long, oily body behind it. Billy rose to his knees. Raw fear guided him like a marionette. His pyjama legs stuck to his thighs from their hot wetness and he was breathing like he’d been shot in the stomach. A severe tremble ran from his ankle to his hip, telling him the peeling knife was useless against the size of this monstrosity.

In five seconds I’m going to be eaten alive

The monster's head dipped out of sight, its slimy, greasy body sliding down off the wardrobe. In three seconds it would be up on his bed and he was going to be monster food.

The rope.

On Sebastian's advice, Billy had made a plan, tying a rope around the top of the wardrobe. The other end trailed across to his bedside where he now reached for it.

Was the monster completely off the wardrobe?

He couldn't tell. He stood on the bed and pulled like a hero from the old myths. The wardrobe tilted, Billy's fingers burned into the rope fibres. The wardrobe half fell, hanging at an impossible angle just as the creature's head exploded up, jaws savagely open.

Billy pulled again, his arms burning looser in their shoulder sockets. He fell sideways off the bed, his cheek smacking against the floor, glasses snapping in two, starry pain lighting up his minus 13 vision.

The room door slammed open. His mother, shouting, fumbling for the light switch. Billy moaned, trying so hard not to cry. The wardrobe, a capsized ship on the floor, the nightmare within it thudding and banging off its ancient timber.

Hours later, five policemen, four firemen and a team from the ISPCA came with their hooks and tubes to remove the monster from Billy's giant box trap.

January. Billy and Sebastian sat on a bench outside the school gym. Billy had a leftover pancake from last night's supper. Sebastian was demolishing a Curly Wurly, scratching at his eye patch; the thick, sticky plaster had turned from beige to filthy yellow.

'So,' he asked. 'What happened to the snake?'

'A python,' said Billy. 'They had to kill it.'

'Why?'

'It killed the two students upstairs.'

'Oh Mary, Mother of God!'

'It belonged to one of them. It ate Mrs Daly too.'

'It swallowed her?'

'Um...I think it crushed her and kept her for later.'

Sebastian put the last of the chocolate to his mouth.

‘What happened to your arm?’ asked Billy. An ugly purple brown bruise stained Sebastian’s wrist.

‘My mom’s boyfriend slammed it in the door.’

‘What about your hammer?’

‘Ahh...he found it and hid it on me.’

‘Can’t you tell your mom about him?’

‘She knows. He’s the guy who did this to my eye.’ Sebastian shrugged, as if to say what are you going to do...? ‘So, what did you do with the book?’

Billy shook his head. ‘I threw it away. Come on, let’s go.’

Sebastian stared, puzzled. ‘Where?’

‘To the teacher. Let’s tell her about your mom’s boyfriend. Maybe she can help?’

THE END

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CRACKS by PS Gifford

Don't step on the cracks, Paul! That is what my mother repeatedly told me as a young boy, so of course, I never did. Whenever I walked along the sidewalk, I would do my utmost to avoid them. As a boy I always listened to my mother; well, at least I did until I turned twelve. Many things changed when I turned twelve... but I digress.

The thing is that even though I am an adult now, I still avoid them. You might consider this irrational behaviour for a well-educated 33 year old professional man, yet my mother's advice still echoes in my mind—and I believe that those words of hers surely saved my life!

It was last Tuesday that it all happened. That afternoon, after many weeks of water cooler flirting, I finally plucked up the courage to ask out Sally Jenkins in accounting. She is ten years my junior with a body that would put the Venus de Milo to shame, so I was extremely pleased that she readily consented.

We had arranged to meet at O'Leary's, an Irish pub just off Main Street. Being that it was a Tuesday night, it was quiet in there, and we relaxed and chatted over several pints of stout in front of a roaring fireplace. At the end of the evening, as happens so often on a date, came that awkward moment. Will she or won't she? I thought to myself, anticipating the carnal delights that possibly lay ahead of me.

Well, the stout had surely strengthened my nerve, and I asked her that clichéd and rather corny question. You know the one—surely, you do—I expect you have probably even used it yourself.

“Your place or mine?”

Sally reached over and whispered in my appreciative ear, and her hot breath made me tingle as I had never tingled before! I broke out in goose bumps as she simply said “Yours!”

After that, we quickly finished our drinks and fell out of O'Leary's, giddy with passion, hand in hand.

We stumbled down Main Street. It was past midnight, and I knew that tomorrow I was going to pay for this dearly. Yet, I simply did not care. For you see I was convinced that it was going to be a night to remember; in fact, I was beginning to think that maybe, just maybe, she was “the one” that I had been searching for. As we turned and ventured down Fourth Street towards my apartment, my mother's warning suddenly echoed in my intoxicated mind.

Don't step on the cracks.

I giggled the words aloud to Sally, whose green eyes sparkled with such a vibrant energy that I could hardly restrain myself. So there we were, two adults skipping down Fourth Street, cautiously avoiding the cracks. I am still not exactly sure quite what transpired next. In my mind, I have no doubt of what I saw, but I still have a hard time believing it. Perhaps I was drunker than I thought.

Sally suddenly broke free of my hand and began to run aimlessly, laughing aloud as she scurried ahead of me, her blonde shoulder length hair bouncing tantalizingly under the soft illumination offered from a flickering street lamp.

“Chase me, Paul!” she said. “Catch me and I am all yours!”

So I naturally gave chase to my prize, still somehow managing, perhaps unconsciously, to steer clear of those cracks in the pavement. She was still several yards ahead of me, tittering and skipping like a young schoolgirl, but I was quickly gaining. Then, just as she turned her head back to gaze at me, it happened. I watched as her delicate foot landed directly on a crack in the sidewalk, and suddenly, it was a crack no more. The pavement opened up all at once and folded down on itself to reveal a giant set of razor sharp teeth. I watched in shock as her leg was embedded inside the concrete slabs that served as massive jaws. Before I knew what was happening, the concrete tightened its bite and closed with vice like force, and Sally’s blood spurted in every conceivable direction.

She screamed—a deep, agonizing scream that seemed to echo across the deserted street endlessly. Horrified, I raced towards her to see if I could help, still vigilant of where I placed my own feet to avoid stepping on a crack. However, before I could reach her, the concrete jaws opened up even wider than before, and she slipped just past her slender waist, down into the gaping crevice. Then as before, the concrete jaw clamped together about her, and instantly sliced Sally in two. Her screaming suddenly stopped, and what was left of her body went limp, but her green eyes remained open, and the fear that was contained in them would make the devil himself quiver.

I swear it!

Finally, with one last obnoxious and greedy gulp, Sally was completely devoured. The only evidence that she had been there at all was the blood drenched concrete.

I stood there in shock, and with trembling fingers retrieved my cell phone from my pocket. I dialled 911 and attempted to tell the operator what just happened. As you might imagine, the person at the other end of the phone thought I was either drunk, mad, or a combination of the two. However, after much sobbing and begging, she finally succumbed to my pleas and curtly told me that she would have an officer come there to investigate.

So I stood there, too terrified to move, still trying to comprehend what had just happened until 20 minutes later a squad car pulled up to the side of the curb. A large, hefty officer eased himself out of the vehicle and turned on his flashlight. He flashed it first in my direction and then at the bloodstained sidewalk directly in front of me. He muttered something under his breath as he made his way towards me, his hand clenched firmly on his pistol.

As he left the road and climbed onto the sidewalk, I desperately tried to warn him: “Don’t step on the cracks! For God’s sake don’t step on the cracks!”

As he lifted his weapon from its holster and drew closer, I watched every step he took as it landed on the sidewalk. I began to pray as I had never prayed before, but apparently, no one was listening because on his eighth step—just six feet away from me, and directly where

Sally had met her doom—his oversized right boot landed firmly on a crack. I closed my eyes, too terrified to watch as agonizing screams filled my ears once more.

So whether you consider me crazy or not as you read this, I implore you:

“Do not walk on the cracks!”

THE END

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THE BOOK THIEF by Steven Havelock

‘Ring! Ring! Ring!’

Emmanuel heard the communal phone ringing. It was at the end of the corridor but it was still loud enough to disturb him.

Not now, I'm trying to write.

His curtains were still drawn and his flat was deep in shadow.

Why doesn't someone else answer that blasted thing?

The phone continued to ring, he tried to ignore it.

It's no use, I can't concentrate. Just wish it would stop.

He waited for but it continued to ring.

Angry now, he got up and went to answer it. He picked up the receiver.

“You stole my story.”

“What?”

“You stole my story.”

The anger slowly started to build. He clenched his fists. His breath became stuck in his throat. He felt his temperature rising.

“I'm no dirty crook. I stole your story? What a crock of shit! I never stole your story!” A silence echoed back at him.

He saw the college student who lived opposite his flat walk past and give him a quizzical look.

“You call me once more. Just call me once more!”

His voice rose in anger.

“One more call! You hear! You hear!”

He heard a click on the other end.

He slammed down the phone and headed back to his flat. Into the calming darkness of his place, his writing place.

Once inside he lay down for a few minutes, but it was no use.

I'm still worked up.

He got up and sat in front of his computer. He pulled up the latest version of his story.

How dare that dirty crook say I stole their story!

He started to read. Soon he had read to the end of what he had written and then he started to type.

A few hours later he decided to have a break.

It's time for my afternoon nap.

He lay on his bed and started to think about his life.

I'm 36 now but my first novel was accepted for publication at age 24.

Then he thought again about Lucy.

Lucy, my girlfriend, who just couldn't take it anymore...

Tears came to his eyes.

That was over ten years ago. It's time I forgot and moved on.

He turned on his side and closed his eyes. Soon he was asleep.

He was at the awards ceremony. He had won the first novel Booker Prize.

His name was called.

I'm so nervous. My heart is beating like crazy!

He made his way to the stage and gave his acceptance speech.

Then he thought about later that night.

No! Don't think about it!

But it was no use. He saw himself stagger out of a taxi as he got to his home. He opened the door. Then he saw a sight he would never forget.

Lucy was on the sofa.

Oh God no! I will never forget.

Emmanuel awoke in a cold sweat.

Not that nightmare again.

He pulled a beer out his fridge and downed most of it in one go.

The room was still deep in shadow and silent. All he could hear if he concentrated hard was the low hum of traffic from outside and...And the low hum of his computer.

He sat at his computer, his half-finished beer on the table next to him.

He started to write again. He had been writing for some forty five minutes when his flow was interrupted.

‘Ring! Ring! Ring!’

That blasted phone again. I don’t want to answer it...I won’t answer it...

It continued to ring, again and again.

Just let me flipping write!

He tried to ignore it but it continued to ring again and again.

Slowly, like in a black nightmare, he got up and headed to the phone at the bottom of the hallway. He answered it.

“Thief!”

“Look, I don’t know what you want from me, but leave me the hell alone!”

“Murderer! You killed me.”

His anger suddenly boiled over.

“You stupid freaking bitch! Just leave me the fuck alone!”

“You killed me!”

“Leave me alone!” He slammed down the phone and headed back to his flat, holding back tears. He lay in his bed and sleep slowly took him.

The awards ceremony was over. As he entered his flat, he saw something that he never thought he would see.

Lucy! I haven’t seen Lucy for nearly six months.

He looked again at Lucy. Tears came to his eyes.

He saw the knife, sticking out of her chest, congealed blood around the blade.

Then he saw it. The suicide note.

He started to read it with shaky hands.

Emmanuel,

By the time you read this I will be dead. I can't take the pain any more, it is just too unbearable... I loved you like I loved life itself but I never in my wildest dreams thought you would stoop to something so low.

Never in my wildest dreams. I hope you enjoy your new found fame and basking in your glory...But for one I won't be around to see it, the wound you have inflicted on me is just too great.

Tears came to his eyes. Emmanuel couldn't read any more.

He looked at Lucy. Her eyes stared upwards, motionless and dead. He continued to stare, his heart breaking.

Emmanuel awoke. The room was still deep in shadow. The heat of the afternoon sun outside failed to penetrate into the dark coolness of the room.

God, I'm thirsty.

He went to the fridge and pulled out a beer.

I feel like crap.

He sat down at his computer.

'Ring! Ring! Ring!'

He heard the phone ring again.

Blasted thing!

He knew it would not stop until he answered it. He walked angrily and slowly to the bottom of the hallway.

"Thief! My life's work. You stole my dream. "

Emmanuel clenched his fists.

Why won't this bitch just leave me alone! That's it!

He screamed down the phone, "Leave me the hell alone!"

There was a click and a long silence echoed back to him. With rage rushing through his body he stormed back to his flat.

Then he saw her!

Lucy was standing in front of him. Her sandy brown hair hanging limply by her side. His heart started to beat faster.

"Oh God no!"

He moved closer. He saw the knife sticking out of her chest.

What the hell is going on!

"You stole my dream. You stole my life."

Then he remembered.

Tears came to his eyes and he buckled over in pain.

He remembered.

She was my girlfriend. I stole her story.

He clutched his stomach and looked down as pain coursed through his body.

"Look at me!" screamed Lucy.

The pain is unbearable.

"Look at me!" screamed Lucy again.

"No! No!"

"You killed me!"

"Stop it!"

"You killed me as sure as if you had driven that knife into my heart yourself!"

"I never..." He was crying now, crying like he had never cried before. "I never..." A torrent of tears streamed down his cheeks.

"You killed me!"

"You bitch! Stop it! Stop it!"

He rushed towards her.

He flashed through her body, and went flying towards the window.

He smashed through the tenth floor window and plummeted towards the ground...

Knock! Knock!

The college student opened his door.

“Sir, we just conducting some enquires into the suspected suicide of Emmanuel Oley.”

“Yes, officer?”

“Is there anything you can tell us about him? How did he seem the last time you saw him?”

“Well, the last time I saw him was yesterday afternoon. He was acting a bit strange.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“He was shouting into the phone at the bottom of the hallway.”

“Okay...”

“Well, that phone hasn’t been working for six months.”

THE END

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DOMESTIKA

Four

Matt Johnson had arrived back at the KLF News building at its Workington HQ and immediately fallen asleep at his desk, and basically just sat there in his chair with head rested on arms on his desk, unaware the offices were completely empty but for him. At nine thirty, however, the place started to fill up with staff and so began another day at the office. It was bearded Peter King that politely tapped at Johnson's office door in HQ and entered, just as the senior reporter in chief lifted his head up from his folded arms and gazed sleepily at him, groaning as he narrowed his eyes at the abrupt glare of morning sun.

"Interesting news," Peter King had said, as he entered, "The Carpenter woman died this morning. She was unresponsive throughout the entire night and barely spoke two syllables to anyone at the hospital. A real basket case, apparently. The police are still questioning the husband but he's expected to be released from custody very shortly, innocence presumed worthy."

Matt raised his arms and yawned. He had then said, "But wasn't she technically dead, anyway, judging by other reports, specifically our own? Wasn't everybody in the scientific community baffled and confused how a dead woman maintained consciousness, walked around, blinked and breathed?"

"Well, opinion quickly changed," King had said, as Johnson grabbed his coat and headed outside to get into his car, "Nobody knows for sure. They're now thinking she was somehow living and breathing and the doctors that examined her last night were wrong. They now state the diagnosis was totally botched and misguided. Misleading, more like, especially for the likes of us who somehow kept a sober face as they reported a load of tripe last night. Apparently, she was alive—for a while—and died at dawn."

Oh, Matt Johnson had thought as he put his key into the car ignition and started her up—there'll be now awards for our incompetence this year!

He wanted to have a look around Whitehaven, especially the housing estate where everything occurred last night. Johnson's car pulled up to the kerb in his Volvo and got out, where he then walked over towards the front garden of the deserted Carpenter house to get a look around while it was still early and nobody was about. The cops would have probably kept George Carpenter gabbing until the afternoon. Truth was, in fact, the man had been released about three hours ago and had decided to spend a couple of days in a nearby hotel for a few days. Who could blame him? It wouldn't have been exactly great fun returning to the house his wife died in less than 24 hours previously. Peter King had got that wrong as well. Who were the truly misled ones around here?

In his car, Matt Johnson had listened to some sombre yet breezy tunes on his CD deck on the way to his destination, namely an English artist called Nick Drake, which proved refreshing so early in the morning. Drake's singing and song writing skills had often been cited as being resolutely dire and depressing. Yet these folk were so damned wrong.

Many things were misleading in this world...

Peter King was one of them.

Walking up to the Carpenter's front window, Matt shivered in the cold morning air as he turned the collar up on his jacket to warm his neck. He peeked inside but saw nothing out of place in the living room. Turning around, he then looked across the street. One house in particular he'd noticed out of the corner of his eye last night belonged to Dennis Henderson's, where Matt observed a downstairs net curtain twitch as the nosey gent peered from within. Neighbours were the same the world over—gossip was rife everywhere and shit stuck.

How better than get the latest, hottest gossip fix than tune into KLF News?

Matt smiled at the irony. Yes, he thought—guilty.

Suddenly, he reached into his pocket to retrieve a packet of cigarettes and within a moment he was smoking one, at first sucking hard to get his fix, then taking them smoothly does it...

The house across the street Matt decided would be worth looking at. There was no real front garden but there was a bigger stretch of grass and shrub out the back, so he headed around the back, where upon arrival he thought he would get a short breather and simply just loiter for a while under a large Oak and relish the remainder of his cigarette. Finished, he flicked the stump into some bushes to his right. On damp days like this, there was little threat of causing a fire.

He was stunned when he noticed the Henderson back door was still ajar. Perhaps the occupants were up and about. There was only one way to find out.

"Hello?" he said, loudly as enough, "Are you in there? Anybody home...?"

Of course, nobody replied.

Before anything, though, Matt's mobile phone suddenly chimed and he answered it. It was that fucking dipstick Peter King back at HQ.

King said, "Matt, I have some news if you can meet us in Whitehaven for a quick conference to discuss recent events. It's completely hush hush which means we can't broadcast it but I'd like to keep you informed on the latest crack anyway. Last night there was a truck that veered off the road transporting radioactive waste to the local nuclear plant—so obviously, we're keeping silent. We don't want to get sued by the folk it concerns, or the national news getting involved. Just to let you, it's on the dirt track that leads to Saint Bees resort, you know, near the Animal Concern shelters, the kennels, you know?"

"Was there a leak?"

"No, officials say no leak and that the truck carrying the plutonium shit toppled over. Rumour has it any mess has been cleaned up and the driver was unhurt in the accident. But they're being very cagey about...who knows, eh? The area is safe, but for some reason they've closed the road, nothing ingoing or outgoing...which is fucking weird."

Matt said, “I’m in Whitehaven now, so what time is the conference? Bear in mind I’ve had no frigging sleep and I’m knackered. Donkeys get more kip than me...I feel like a fucking donkey sometimes, actually.”

“About two thirty this afternoon at Sleaford Hotel in the town centre.”

“Okay, no bother, I’ll be there. I might even try and get onto that Saint Bees road, just for a nose about. I work for KLF, remember?”

Before Peter King signed off, Matt heard the Class A prick chuckle at the other end of the line.

On this note, Matt looked across at the door of the house.

He muttered, “Better late than dead on time...” but abruptly halted as he stood on something in the high grass.

It was a dead cat, a little black one. It must have perished in last night’s storm since there were no signs of decay, no maggots feasting on a dead carcass, no rot.

Not his problem, cats died all the time, nothing strange there.

He muttered, “Onwards...” as he finally reached the back door. He pushed the door a little wider open. “Hello...? Anybody in there...?”

Instantly, there was the scent of rot and decomposition, making the reporter gasp and cover his mouth before continuing further indoors into the deserted kitchen. It was difficult to know exactly where the fetid stink issued from. Either way, his concentration was captured well and truly, and Matt Johnson of KLF News ventured further, seeing the open doorway into the living room. Covering his mouth, he baulked, but entered nevertheless.

The horror was sitting in the armchair for all to see.

“Holy shit...” Matt gasped, staring—then quickly turned to look away from the grotesque vision before him, a hypnotic vision, one that beckoned him nearer. Although, he had to look—he had to see—so he turned around and faced the unimaginable horror head on. It was obscenely gory, and like nothing the reporter had witnessed before—it was perverse obscenity. Never in his entire life had he observed messed up shit like this. It terrified and sufficient enough to chill him to the core, a real organ freezer...

Tentatively, he took a step nearer.

Then two more...

Dennis Henderson’s head looked like mushroom, going by the way the skull had split in four sections and currently spewed brain tissue, entrails and other mess. Somewhere in the goo, Matt saw the deceased man’s eyeballs protruding on stalks, a stand out feature in the picture. They dangled from somewhere like his sagging mouth.

To make matters worse, Henderson's trousers were pulled down around his ankles and he was sitting in a cluster of his own black shit that had hardened and darkened in hue yet still poisoned the air in the room. It made Matt Johnson gag and want to double up and spew a large amount of puke at the scene of the crime. This man had been cruelly murdered and mutilated.

Matt needed oxygen. He needed a change of scenery. Madly, he rushed from the room, through the kitchen, and back out into the back garden and into welcome fresh air. Within three seconds, he was throwing up vomit as he wretched violently as he did so, yet as of yet he never stopped to recognize the importance of the man's death inside the house, the one he left in his wake—or what a fantastic news bulletin it would make. Suddenly, if things worked, he would be working around a police murder investigation and stuff like that paid the fucking bills. That elusive award ceremony did not seem so far off, after all.

Matt Johnson wasn't as devious as that. He knew of those who were, though. But no, not him—you would have to be a snake to leap at an opportunity like this.

Still, some snakes were attractive. They were handsome, regal beasts.

Looking around the garden, he noticed something was amiss which struck him as strange.

The dead cat had vanished. It was no longer lying dead in the grass.

“What the fuck...?” he spluttered as he paused from being sick on the grass and caught his breath. All he knew was that he needed to get the hell away from this grotesque place—give it a wide berth. If it did come down to a news report, he'd object to his being posted to here to cover it with the team. He'd protest and make some excuse. Never worked, though—the likes of him did what they were told or they were out of a job, back at the end of the dole queue, which nobody wanted, especially him.

There was a noise behind him and he swung around in case the corpse of Dennis Henderson had risen. But the noise never came from the house. It came from the nest of pink blossom bushes at the foot of the back garden, so Matt swung around once again to face the real source.

The sight infuriated and unnerved him in equal measure.

It could not be happening. Everything was warped.

The deceased black cat had woken and was making tracks away through the berry bushes, when it silently scampered off into yonder field behind the house, making its route towards the hillside in the near distance. However, over that hill in particular the Saint Bees road was located and also the Animal Concern shelter. But it was also the scene of last night's accident involving the toppled truck and the potentially volatile spillage of radioactive waste into the coastal town of Whitehaven's atmosphere.

Despite everything and more, Matt Johnson made up his mind to follow the cat.

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ERIC BRIGHTEYES by H Rider Haggard

XXXIII: How Eric and Skallagrim Fought Their Last Great Fight

Now the thrall and those with him on the crest of the fell heard the murmur of the company of Gizur and Swanhild as they won the mountain side, though they could not see them because of the rocks.

“Now it is time to begin and knock these birds from their perch,” said the thrall, “for that is an awkward corner for our folk to turn with Whitefire and the axe of Skallagrim waiting on the farther side.”

So he balanced a great stone, as heavy as three men could lift, on the brow of the rock, and aimed it. Then he pushed and let it go. It smote the platform beneath with a crash, two fathoms behind the spot where Eric and Skallagrim sat. Then it flew into the air, and, just as Brighteyes turned at the sound, it struck the wings of his helm, and, bursting the straps, tore the golden helm piece from his head and carried it away into the gulf beneath.

Skallagrim looked up and saw what had come about.

“They have gained the crest of the fell,” he cried. “Now we must fly into the cave or down the narrow way and hold it.”

“Down the narrow way, then,” said Eric, and while rocks, spears and arrows rushed between and around them, they stepped on to the stone and won the path beyond. It was clear, for Gizur’s folk had not yet come, and they ran nearly to the mouth of it, where there was a bend in the way, and stood there side by side.

“Thou wast at death’s door then, lord!” said Skallagrim.

“Head piece is not head,” answered Eric; “but I wonder how they won the crest of the fell. I have never heard tell of any path by which it might be gained.”

“There they are at the least,” said Skallagrim. “Now this is my will, that thou shouldst take my helm. I am Baresark and put little trust in harness, but rather in my axe and strength alone.”

“I will not do that,” said Eric. “Listen: I hear them come.”

Presently the tumult of voices and the tramp of feet grew clearer, and after a while Gizur, Swanhild, and the men of their following turned the corner of the narrow way, and lo! there before them—ay within three paces of them—stood Eric and Skallagrim shoulder to shoulder, and the light poured down upon them from above.

They were terrible to see, and the light shone brightly on Eric’s golden hair and Whitefire’s flashing blade, and the shadows lay dark on the black helm of Skallagrim and in the fierce black eyes beneath.

Back surged Gizur and those with him. Skallagrim would have sprung upon them, but Eric caught him by the arm, saying: "A truce to thy Baresark ways. Rush not and move not! Let us stand here till they overwhelm us."

Now those behind Gizur cried out to know what ailed them that they pushed back.

"Only this," said Gizur, "that Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail stand like two grey wolves and hold the narrow way."

"Now we shall have fighting worth the telling of," quoth Ketel the viking. "On, Gizur, Ospakar's son, and cut them down!"

"Hold!" said Swanhild; "I will speak with Eric first," and, together with Gizur and Ketel, she passed round the corner of the path and came face to face with those who stood at bay there.

"Now yield, Eric," she cried. "Foes are behind and before thee. Thou art trapped, and hast little chance of life. Yield thee, I say, with thy black wolf hound, so perchance thou mayest find mercy even at the hands of her whose husband thou didst wrong and slay."

"It is not my way to yield, lady," answered Eric, "and still less perchance is it the way of Skallagrim. Least of all will we yield to thee who, after working many ills, didst throw me in a witch sleep, and to him who slew the wife sleeping at my side. Hearken, Swanhild: here we stand, awaiting death, nor will we take mercy from thy hand. For know this, we shall not die alone. Last night as we sat on Mosfell we saw the Norns weave our web of fate upon their loom of darkness. They sat on Hecla's dome and wove their pictures in living flame, then rent the web and flew upward and southward and westward, crying our doom to sky and earth and sea. Last night as we sat by the fire on Mosfell all the company of the dead were gathered round us—ay! and all the company of those who shall die to day. Thou wast there, Gizur the murderer, Ospakar's son! thou wast there, Swanhild the witch, Groa's daughter! thou wast there, Ketel Viking! with many another man; and there were we two also. Valkyries have kissed us and death draws near. Therefore, talk no more, but come and make an end. Greeting, Gizur, thou woman murderer! Draw nigh! draw nigh! Out sword! up shield! and on, thou son of Ospakar!"

Swanhild spoke no more, and Gizur had no word.

"On, Gizur! Eric calls thee," quoth Ketel Viking; but Gizur slunk back, not forward.

Then Ketel grew mad with rage and shame. He called to the men, and they drew near, as many as might, and looked doubtfully at the pair who stood before them like rocks upon a plain. Eric laughed aloud and Skallagrim gnawed the edge of his shield. Eric laughed aloud and the sound of his laughter ran up the rocks.

"We are but two," he cried, "and ye are many! Is there never a pair among you will stand face to face with a Baresark and a helmless man?" and he tossed Whitefire high into the air and caught it by the hilt.

Then Ketel and another man of his following sprang forward with an oath, and their axes thundered loud on the shields of Eric and of Skallagrim. But Whitefire flickered up and the

axe of Skallagrim crashed, and at once their knees were loosened, so that they sank down dead.

“More men! more men!” cried Eric. “These were brave, but their might was little. More men for the Grey Wolf’s maw!”

Then Swanhild lashed the folk with bitter words, and two of them sprang on. They sprang on like hounds upon a deer at bay, and they rolled back as gored hounds roll from the deer’s horns.

“More men! more men!” cried Eric. “Here lie but four and a hundred press behind. Now he shall win great honour who lays Brighteyes low and brings down the helm of Skallagrim.”

Again two came on, but they found no luck, for presently they also were down upon the bodies of those who went before. Now none could be found to come up against the pair, for they fought like Baldur and Thor, and none could touch them, and no harness might withstand the weight of their blows that shore through shield and helm and byrnie, deep to the bone beneath. Then Eric and Skallagrim leaned upon their weapons and mocked their foes, while these cursed and tore their beards with rage and shame.

Now it is to be told that when the thrall and those with him saw Eric and Skallagrim had escaped their rocks and spears, they took counsel, and the end of it was that they slid down a rope to the platform that is under the crest of the fell. Thence, though they could see nothing, they could hear the clang of blows and the shouts of those who fought and fell—ay! and the mocking of Eric and of Skallagrim.

“Now it goes thus,” said the thrall, who was a cunning man: “Eric and Skallagrim hold the narrow way and none can stand against them. This, then, is my rede: that we turn the rock and take them in the back.”

His fellows thought this a good saying, and one by one they stood upon the little rock and won the narrow way. They crept along this till they were near to Eric and Skallagrim. Now Swanhild, looking up, saw them and started. Skallagrim noted this and glanced over his shoulder, and that not too soon, for, as he looked, the thrall lifted sword to smite the head of Eric.

With a shout of “Back to back!” the Baresark swung round and ere ever the sword might fall his axe was buried deep in the thrall’s breast.

“Now we must cut our path through them,” said Skallagrim, “and, if it may be, win the space that is before the cave. Keep them off in front, and I will mind these manikins.”

Now Gizur’s folk, seeing what had come about, took heart and fell upon Eric with a rush, and those who were with the dead thrall rushed at Skallagrim, and there began such a fight as has not been known in Iceland. But the way was so narrow that scarce more than one man could come to each of them at a time. And so fierce and true were the blows of Eric and Skallagrim that of those who came on few went back. Down they fell, and where they fell they died, and for every man who died Eric and Skallagrim won a pace towards the point of rock. Whitefire flamed so swift and swept so wide that it seemed to Swanhild, watching, as though three swords were aloft at once, and the axe of Skallagrim thundered down like the axe of a

woodman against a tree, and those groaned on whom it fell as groans a falling tree. Now the shields of these twain were hewn through and through, and cast away, and their blood ran from many wounds. Still, their life was whole in them and they plied axe and sword with both hands. And ever men fell, and ever, fighting hard, they drew nearer to the point of rock.

Now it was won, and now all the company that came with the thrall from over the mountain brow were dead or sorely wounded at the hands of black Skallagrim. Lo! one springs on Eric, and Gizur creeps behind him. Whitefire leaps to meet the man and does not leap in vain; but Gizur smites a coward blow at Eric's uncovered head, and wounds him sorely, so that he falls to his knee.

"Now I am smitten to the death, Skallagrim," cries Eric. "Win the rock and leave me." Yet he rises from his knee.

Then Skallagrim turns, red with blood and terrible to see.

"'Tis but a scratch. Climb thou the rock—I follow," he says, and, screaming like a horse, with weapon aloft he leaps alone upon the foe. They break before the Baresark rush; they break, they fall—they are cloven by Baresark axe and trodden of Baresark feet! They roll back, leaving the way clear—save for the dead. Then Skallagrim follows Brighteyes to the rock.

Now Eric wipes the gore from his eyes and sees. Then, slowly, and with a reeling brain, he steps down upon the giddy point. He goes near to falling, yet does not fall, for now he lies upon the open space, and creeps on hands and knees to the rock wall that is by the cave, and sits resting his back against it, Whitefire on his knee.

Before he is there, Skallagrim staggers to his side with a rush.

"Now we have time to breathe, lord," he gasps. "See, here is water," and he takes a pitcher that stands by, and gives Eric to drink from the pool, then drinks himself and pours the rest of the water on Eric's wound. Then new life comes to them, and they both stand on their feet and win back their breath.

"We have not done so badly!" says Skallagrim, "and we are still a match for one or two. See, they come! Say, where shall we meet them, lord?"

"Here," quoth Eric; "I cannot stand well upon my legs without the help of the rock. Now I am all unmeet for fight."

"Yet shall this last stand of thine be sung of!" says Skallagrim.

Now finding none to stay them, the men of Gizur climb one by one upon the rock and win the space that is beyond. Swanhild goes first of all, because she knows well that Eric will not harm her, and after her come Gizur and the others. But many do not come, for they will lift sword no more.

Now Swanhild draws near and looks on Eric and mocks him in the fierceness of her heart and the rage of her wolf love.

“Now,” she says, “now are Brighteyes dim eyes! What! weepest thou, Eric?”

“Ay, Swanhild,” he answered, “I weep tears of blood for those whom thou hast brought to doom.”

She draws nearer and speaks low to him: “Hearken, Eric. Yield thee! Thou hast done enough for honour, and thou art not smitten to the death of yonder cowardly hound. Yield and I will nurse thee back to health and bear thee hence, and together we will forget our hates and woes.”

“Not twice may a man lie in a witch’s bed,” said Eric, “and my troth is plighted to other than thee, Swanhild.”

“She is dead,” says Swanhild.

“Yes, she is dead, Swanhild; and I go to seek her amongst the dead—I go to seek her and to find her!”

But the face of Swanhild grew fierce as the winter sea.

“Thou hast put me away for the last time, Eric! Now thou shalt die, as I have promised thee and as I promised Gudruda the Fair!”

“So shall I the more quickly find Gudruda and lose sight of thy evil face, Swanhild the harlot! Swanhild the murderess! Swanhild the witch! For I know this: thou shalt not escape!—thy doom draws on also!—and haunted and accursed shalt thou be for ever! Fare thee well, Swanhild; we shall meet no more, and the hour comes when thou shalt grieve that thou wast ever born!”

Now Swanhild turned and called to the folk: “Come, cut down these outlaw rogues and make an end. Come, cut them down, for night draws on.”

Then once more the men of Gizur closed in upon them. Eric smote thrice and thrice the blow went home, then he could smite no more, for his strength was spent with toil and wounds, and he sank upon the ground. For a while Skallagrim stood over him like a she bear o’er her young and held the mob at bay. Then Gizur, watching, cast a spear at Eric. It entered his side through a cleft in his byrnie and pierced him deep.

“I am sped, Skallagrim Lambstail,” cried Eric in a loud voice, and all men drew back to see giant Brighteyes die. Now his head fell against the rock and his eyes closed.

Then Skallagrim, stooping, drew out the spear and kissed Eric on the forehead.

“Farewell, Eric Brighteyes!” he said. “Iceland shall never see such another man, and few have died so great a death. Tarry a while, lord; tarry a while—I come—I come!”

Then crying “Eric! Eric!” the Baresark fit took him, and once more and for the last time Skallagrim rushed screaming upon the foe, and once more they rolled to earth before him. To and fro he rushed, dealing great blows, and ever as he went they stabbed and cut and thrust at his side and back, for they dared not stand before him, till he bled from a hundred wounds.

Now, having slain three more men, and wounded two others, Skallagrim might no more. He stood a moment swaying to and fro, then let his axe drop, threw his arms high above him, and with one loud cry of “Eric!” fell as a rock falls—dead upon the dead.

But Eric was not yet gone. He opened his eyes and saw the death of Skallagrim and smiled.

“Well ended, Lambstail!” he said in a faint voice.

“Lo!” cried Gizur, “yon outlawed hound still lives! Now I will do a needful task and make an end of him, and so shall Ospakar’s sword come back to Ospakar’s son.”

“Thou art wondrous brave now that the bear lies dying!” said Swanhild.

Now it seemed that Eric heard the words, for suddenly his might came back to him, and he staggered to his knees and thence to his feet. Then, as folk fall from him, with all his strength he whirls Whitefire round his head till it shines like a wheel of fire. “Thy service is done and thou art clean of Gudruda’s blood—go back to those who forged thee!” Brighteyes cries, and casts Whitefire from him towards the gulf.

Away speeds the great blade, flashing like lightning through the rays of the setting sun, and behold! as men watch it is gone—gone in mid-air!

Since that day no such sword as Whitefire has been known in Iceland.

“Now slay thou me, Gizur,” says the dying Eric.

Gizur comes on with little eagerness, and Eric cries aloud:

“Swordless I slew thy father!—swordless, shieldless, and wounded to the death I will yet slay thee, Gizur the Murderer!” and with a loud cry he staggered towards him.

Gizur smites him with his sword, but Eric does not stay, and while men wait and wonder, Brighteyes sweeps him into his great arms—ay, sweeps him up, lifts him from the ground and reels on.

Eric reels on to the brink of the gulf. Gizur sees his purpose, struggles and shrieks aloud. But the strength of the dying Eric is more than the strength of Gizur. Now Brighteyes stands on the dizzy edge and the light of the passing sun flames about his head. And now, bearing Gizur with him, he hurls himself out into the gulf, and lo! the sun sinks!

Men stand wondering, but Swanhild cries aloud:

“Nobly done, Eric! nobly done! So I would have seen thee die who of all men wast the first!”

This then was the end of Eric Brighteyes the Unlucky, who of all warriors that have lived in Iceland was the mightiest, the goodliest, and the best beloved of women and of those who clung to him.

Now, on the morrow, Swanhild caused the body of Eric to be searched for in the cleft, and there they found it, floating in water and with the dead Gizur yet clasped in its bear grip.

Then she cleansed it and clothed it again in its rent armour, and bound on the Hell shoes, and it was carried on horses to the sea side, and with it were borne the bodies of Skallagrim Lambstail the Baresark, Eric's thrall, and of all those men whom they had slain in the last great fight on Mosfell, that is now named Ericsfell.

Then Swanhild drew her long dragon of war, in which she had come from Orkneys, from its shed over against Westman Isles, and in the centre of the ship, she piled the bodies of the slain in the shape of a bed, and lashed them fast. And on this bed she laid the corpse of Eric Brighteyes, and the breast of black Skallagrim the Baresark was his pillow, and the breast of Gizur, Ospakar's son, was his foot rest.

Then she caused the sails to be hoisted, and went alone aboard the long ship, the rails of which were hung with the shields of the dead men.

And when at evening the breeze freshened to a gale that blew from the land, she cut the cable with her own hand, and the ship leapt forward like a thing alive, and rushed out in the red light of the sunset towards the open sea.

Now ever the gale freshened and folk, standing on Westman Heights, saw the long ship plunge past, dipping her prow beneath the waves and sending the water in a rain of spray over the living Swanhild, over the dead Eric and those he lay upon.

And by the head of Eric Brighteyes, her hair streaming on the wind, stood Swanhild the Witch, clad in her purple cloak, and with rings of gold about her throat and arms. She stood by Eric's head, swaying with the rush of the ship, and singing so sweet and wild a song that men grew weak who heard it.

Now, as the people watched, two white swans came down from the clouds and sped on wide wings side by side over the vessel's mast.

The ship rushed on through the glow of sunset into the gathering night. On sped the ship, but still Swanhild sung, and still the swans flew over her.

The gale grew fierce, and fiercer yet. The darkness gathered deep upon the raging sea.

Now that ship was seen no more, and the death song of Swanhild as she passed to doom was never heard again.

For swans and ship, and Swanhild, and dead Eric and his dead foes, were lost in the wind and the night.

But far out on the sea a great flame of fire leapt up towards the sky.

Now this is the tale of Eric Brighteyes, Thorgrimur's son; of Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter; of Swanhild the Fatherless, Atli's wife, and of Ounound, named Skallagrim Lambstail, the Baresark, Eric's thrall, all of whom lived and died before Thangbrand, Wilibald's son, preached the White Christ in Iceland.

THE END

NEXT WEEK WE BEGIN: PLANETOID 127 by EDGAR WALLACE

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THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

17. Nais the Regained

Now, from where we stood together just below the crest of the Sacred Mountain, we could see down into the city, which lay spread out below us like a map. The harbour and the great estuary gleamed at its farther side; and the fringe of hills beyond smoked and fumed in their accustomed fashion; the great stone circle of our Lord the Sun stood up grim and bare in the middle of the city; and nearer in reared up the great mass of the royal pyramid, the gold on its sides catching new gold from the Sun. There, too, in the square before the pyramid stood the throne of granite, dwarfed by the distance to the size of a mole's hill, in which these nine years my love had lain sleeping.

Old Zaemon followed my gaze. "Ay," he said with a sigh, "I know where your chief interest is. Deucalion when he landed here new from Yucatan was a strong man. The King whom we have chosen—and who is the best we have to choose—has his weakness."

"It can be turned into additional strength. Give me Nais here, living and warm to fight for, and I am a stronger man by far than the cold viceroy and soldier that you speak about."

"I have passed my word to that already, and you shall have her, but at the cost of damaging somewhat this new kingdom of yours. Maybe too at the same time we may rid you of this Phorenice and her brood. But I do not think it likely. She is too wily, and once we begin our play, she is likely to guess whence it comes, and how it will end, and so will make an escape before harm can reach her. The High Gods, who have sent all these trials for our refinement, have seen fit to give her some knowledge of how these earth tremors may be set a moving."

"I have seen her juggle with them. But may I hear your scheme?"

"It will be shown you in good time enough. But for the present I would bid you sleep. It will be your part to go into the city to night, and take your woman (that is my daughter) when she is set free, and bring her here as best you can. And for that you will need all a strong man's strength."—He stepped back, and looked me up and down.—"There are not many folk that would take you for the tidy clean chinned Deucalion now, my brother. Your appearance will be a fine armour for you down yonder in the city to night when we wake it with our earth shaking and terror. As you stand now, you are hairy enough, and shaggy enough, and naked enough, and dirty enough for some wild savage new landed out of Europe. Have a care that no fine citizen down yonder takes a fancy to your thews, and seizes upon you as his servant."

"I somewhat pity him in his household if he does."

Old Zaemon laughed. "Why, come to think of it, so do I."

But quickly he got grave again. Laughter and Zaemon were very rare playmates. "Well, get you to bed, my King, and leave me to go into the Ark of Mysteries and prepare there with another of the Three the things that must be done. It is no light business to handle the tremendous powers which we must put into movement this night. And there is danger for us as there is for you. So if by chance we do not meet again till we stand up yonder behind the stars, giving account to the Gods, fare you well, Deucalion."

I slept that day as a soldier sleeps, taking full rest out of the hours, and letting no harassing thought disturb me. It is only the weak who permit their sleep to be broken on these occasions. And when the dark was well set, I roused and fetched those who should attend to the rope. Our Lady the Moon did not shine at that turn of the month: and the air was full of a great blackness. So I was out of sight all the while they lowered me.

I reached the tumbled rocks that lay at the deep foot of the cliff, and then commenced to use a nice caution, because Phorenice's soldiers squatted uneasily round their camp fires, as though they had forebodings of the coming evil. I had no mind to further stir their wakefulness. So I crept swiftly along in the darkest of the shadows, and at last came to the spot where that passage ends which before I had used to get beneath the walls of the city.

The lamp was in place, and I made my way along the windings swiftly. The air, so it seemed to me, was even more noxious with vapours than it had been when I was down there before, and I judged that Zaemon had already begun to stir those internal activities which were shortly to convulse the city. But again I had difficulty in finding an exit, and this, not because there were people moving about at the places where I had to come out, but because the set of the masonry was entirely changed. In olden times the Priests' Clan oversaw all the architects' plans, and ruled out anything likely to clash with their secret passages and chambers. But in this modern day the Priests were of small account, and had no say in this matter, and the architects often through sheer blundering sealed up and made useless many of these outlets and hiding places.

As it was then, I had to get out of the network of tunnels and galleries where I could, and not where I would, and in the event found myself at the farther side of the city, almost up to where the outer wall joins down to the harbour. I came out without being seen, careful even in this moment of extremity to preserve the ordinances, and closed all traces of exit behind me. The earth seemed to spring beneath my feet like the deck of a ship in smooth water; and though there was no actual movement as yet to disturb the people, and indeed these slept on in their houses and shelters without alarm, I could feel myself that the solid deadness of the ground was gone, and that any moment it might break out into devastating waves of movement.

Gods! Should I be too late to see the untombing of my love? Would she be laid there bare to the public gaze when presently the people swarmed out into the open spaces through fear at what the great earth tremor might cause to fall? I could see, in fancy, their rude, cruel hands thrust upon her as she lay there helpless, and my inwards dried up at the thought.

I ran madly down and down the narrow winding streets with the one thought of coming to the square which lay in front of the royal pyramid before these things came to pass. With exquisite cruelty I had been forced with my own hands to place her alive in her burying place beneath the granite throne, and if thews and speed could do it, I would not miss my reward of taking her forth again with the same strong hands.

Few disturbed that furious hurry. At first here and there some wretch who harboured in the gutter cried: "A thief! Throw a share or I pursue." But if any of these followed, I do not know. At any rate, my speed then must have outdistanced anyone. Presently, too, as the swing of the earth underfoot became more keen, and the stonework of the buildings by the street side began to grate and groan and grit, and sent forth little showers of dust, people began to run with scared cries from out of their doors. But none of these had a mind to stop

the ragged, shaggy, savage man who ran so swiftly past, and flung the mud from his naked feet.

And so in time I came to the great square, and was there none too soon. The place was filling with people who flocked away from the narrow streets, and it was full of darkness, and noise, and dust, and sickness. Beneath us the ground rippled in undulations like a sea, which with terrifying slowness grew more and more intense.

Ever and again a house crashed down unseen in the gloom, and added to the tumult. But the great pyramid had been planned by its old builders to stand rude shocks. Its stones were dovetailed into one another with a marvellous cleverness, and were further clamped and joined by ponderous tongues of metal. It was a boast that one half the foundations could be dug from beneath it, and still the pyramid would stand four square under heaven, more enduring than the hills.

Flickering torches showed that its great stone doors lay open, and ever and again I saw some frightened inmate scurry out and then be lost to sight in the gloom. But with the royal pyramid and its ultimate fate I had little concern; I did not even care then whether Phorenice was trapped, or whether she came out sound and fit for further mischief. I crouched by the granite throne which stood in the middle of that splendid square, and heard its stones grate together like the ends of a broken bone as it rocked to the earth waves.

In that night of dust and darkness it was hard to see the outline of one's own hand, but I think that the Gods in some requital for the love which had ached so long within me, gave me special power of sight. As I watched, I saw the great carved rock which formed the capstone of the throne move slightly and then move again, and then again; a tiny jerk for each earth pulse, but still there was an appreciable shifting; and, moreover, the stone moved always to one side.

There was method in Zaemon's desperate work, and this in my blind panic of love and haste, I had overlooked. So I went up the steps of the throne on the side from which the great capstone was moving, and clung there afire with expectation.

More and more violent did the earth swing grow, though the graduations of its increase could not be perceived, and the din of falling houses and the shrieks and cries of hurt and frightened people went louder up into the night. Thicker grew the dust that filled the air, till one coughed and strangled in the breathing, and more black did the night become as the dust rose and blotted the rare stars from sight. I clung to an angle of the granite throne, crouching on the uppermost step but one below the capstone, and could scarcely keep my place against the violence of the earth tremors.

But still the huge capstone that was carved with the snake and the outstretched hand held my love fast locked in her living tomb, and I could have bit the cold granite at the impotence which barred me from her. The people who kept thronging into the square were mad with terror, but their very numbers made my case more desperate every moment. "Phorenice, Goddess, aid us now!" some cried, and when the prayer did not bring them instant relief, they fell to yammering out the old confessions of the faith which they had learned in childhood, turning in this hour of their dreadful need to those old Gods, which, through so many dishonourable years, they had spurned and deserted. It was a curious criticism on the balance of their real religion, if one had cared to make it.

Louder grew the crash of falling masonry; and from the royal pyramid itself, though indeed I could not even see its outline through the darkness, there came sounds of grinding stones and cracking bars of metal which told that even its superb majestic strength had a breaking strain. There came to my mind the threat that old Zaemon had thundered forth in that painted, perfumed banqueting hall: "You shall see," he had cried to the Empress, "this royal pyramid which you have polluted with your debaucheries torn tier from tier, and stone from stone, and scattered as feathers spread before a wind!"

Still heavier grew the surging of the earth, and the pavement of the great square gaped and upheaved, and the people who thronged it screamed still more shrilly as their feet were crushed by the grinding blocks. And now too the great pyramid itself was commencing to split, and gape, and topple. The roofs of its splendid chambers gave way, and the ponderous masonry above shuttered down and filled them. In part, too, one could see the destruction now, and not guess at it merely from the fearful hearings of the darkness. Thunders had begun to roar through the black night above, and add their bellowings to this devil's orchestration of uproar, and vivid lightning splashes lit the flying dust clouds.

It was perhaps natural that she should be there, but it came as a shock when a flare of the lightning showed me Phorenice safe out in the square, and indeed standing not far from myself.

She had taken her place in the middle of a great flagstone, and stood there swaying her supple body to the shocks. Her face was calm, and its loveliness was untouched by the years. From time to time she brushed away the dust as it settled on the short red hair which curled about her neck. There was no trace of fear written upon her face. There was some weariness, some contempt, and I think a tinge of amusement. Yes, it took more than the crumbling of her royal pyramid to impress Phorenice with the infinite powers of those she warred against.

Gods! How the sight of her cool indifference maddened me then. I had it in me to have strangled her with my hands if she had come within my reach. But as it was, she stood in her place, swaying easily to the earth waves as a sailor sways on a ship's deck, and beside her, crouched on the same great flagstone, and overcome with nausea was Ylga, who again was raised to be her fan girl. It came to my mind that Ylga was twin sister to Nais, and that I owed her for an ancient kindness, but I had leisure to do nothing for her then, and indeed it was little enough I could have done. With each shock the great capstone of the throne to which I clung jarred farther and farther from its bed place, and my love was coming nearer to me. It was she who claimed all my service then.

Once in their blind panic a knot of the people in the square thought that the granite stone was too solid to be overturned, and saw in it an oasis of safety. They flocked towards it, many of them dragging themselves up the steep deep high steps on hands and knees because their feet had been injured by the billowing flagstones of the square.

But I was in no mood to have the place profaned by their silly tremblings and stares: I beat at them with my hands, tearing them away, and hurling them back down the steepness of the steps. They asked me what was my title to the place above their own, and I answered them with blows and gnashing teeth. I was careless as to what they thought me or who they thought me. Only I wished them gone. And so they went, wailing and crying that I was a devil of the night, for they had no spirit left to defend themselves.

Farther and farther the great stone that made the top of the throne slid out from its bed, but its slowness of movement maddened me. A life's education left me in that moment, and I had no trace of stately patience left. In my puny fury I thrust at the great block with my shoulder and head, and clawed at it with my hands till the muscles rose on me in great ropes and knots, and the High Gods must have laughed at my helplessness as They looked. All was being ordered by the Three who were Their trusted servants, in Their good time. The work of the Gods may be done slowly, but it is done exceeding sure.

But at last, when all the people of the city were numb with terror, and incapable of further emotion (save only for Phorenice who still had nerve enough to show no concern), what had been threatened came to pass. The capstone of the throne slid out till it reached the balance, and the next shock threw it with a roar and a clatter to the ground. And then a strange tremor seized me.

After all the scheming and effort, what I had so ardently prayed for had come about; but yet my inwards sank at the thought of mounting on the stone where I had mounted before, and taking my dear from the hollow where my hands had laid her. I knew Phorenice's vengefulness, and had a high value for her cleverness. Had she left Nais to lie in peace, or had she stolen her away to suffer indignities elsewhere? Or had she ended her sleep with death, and (as a grisly jest) left the corpse for my finding? I could not tell; I dared not guess. Never during a whole hard fighting life have my emotions been so wrenched as they were at that moment. And, for excuse, it must be owned that love for Nais had sapped my hardihood over a matter in which she was so privately concerned.

It began to come to my mind, however, that the infernal uproar of the earth tremor was beginning to slacken somewhat, as though Zaemon knew he had done the work that he had promised, and was minded to give the wretched city a breathing space. So I took my fortitude in hand, and clambered up on to the flat of the stone. The lightning flashes had ceased and all was darkness again and stifling dust, but at any moment the sky might be lit once more, and if I were seen in that place, shaggy and changed though I might be, Phorenice, if she were standing near, would not be slow to guess my name and errand.

So changed was I for the moment, that I will finely confess that the idea of a fight was loathsome to me then. I wanted to have my business done and get gone from the place.

With hands that shook, I fumbled over the face of the stone and found the clamps and bars of metal still in position where I had clenched them, and then reverently I let my fingers pass between these, and felt the curves of my love's body in its rest beneath. An exultation began to whirl within me. I did not know if she had been touched since I last left her; I did not know if the drug would have its due effect, and let her be awakened to warmth and sight again; but, dead or alive, I had her there, and she was mine, mine, mine, and I could have yelled aloud in my joy at her possession.

Still the earth shook beneath us, and masonry roared and crashed into ruin. I had to cling to my place with one hand, whilst I unhasped the clamps of metal that made the top of her prison with the other. But at last I swung the upper half of them clear, and those which pinned down her feet I let remain. I stooped and drew her soft body up on to the flat of the stone beside me, and pressed my lips a hundred times to the face I could not see.

Some mad thought took me, I believe, that the mere fierceness and heat of my kisses would bring her back again to life and wakefulness. Indeed I will own plainly, that I did but sorry credit to my training in calmness that night. But she lay in my arms cold and nerveless as a corpse, and by degrees my sober wits returned to me.

This was no place for either of us. Let the earth's tremors cease (as was plainly threatened), let daylight come, and let a few of these nerveless people round recover from their panic, and all the great cost that had been expended might be counted as waste. We should be seen, and it would not be long before someone put a name to Nais; and then it would be an easy matter to guess at Deucalion under the beard and the shaggy hair and the browned nakedness of the savage who attended on her. Tell of fright? By the Gods! I was scared as the veriest trembler who blundered amongst the dust clouds that night when the thought came to me.

With all that ruin spread around, it would be hopeless to think that any of those secret galleries which tunnelled under the ground would be left unbroken, and so it was useless to try a passage under the walls by the old means. But I had heard shouts from that frightened mob which came to me through the din and the darkness, that gave another idea for escape. "The city is accursed," they had cried: "if we stay here it will fall on us. Let us get outside the walls where there are no buildings to bury us."

If they went, I could not see. But one gate lay nearest to the royal pyramid, and I judged that in their panic they would not go farther than was needful. So I put the body of Nais over my shoulder (to leave my right arm free) and blundered off as best I could through the stifling darkness.

It was hard to find a direction; it was hard to walk in the inky darkness over ground that was tossed and tumbled like a frozen sea: and as the earth still quaked and heaved, it was hard also to keep a footing. But if I did fall myself a score of times, my dear burden got no bruise, and presently I got to the skirts of the square, and found a street I knew. The most venomous part of the shaking was done, and no more buildings fell, but enough lay sprawled over the roadway to make walking into a climb, and the sweat rolled from me as I laboured along my way.

There was no difficulty about passing the gate. There was no gate. There was no wall. The Gods had driven their plough through it, and it lay flat, and proud Atlantis stood as defenceless as the open country. Though I knew the cause of this ruin, though, in fact, I had myself in some measure incited it, I was almost sad at the ruthlessness with which it had been carried out. The royal pyramid might go, houses and palaces might be levelled, and for these I cared little enough; but when I saw those stately ramparts also filched away, there the soldier in me woke, and I grieved at this humbling of the mighty city that once had been my only mistress.

But this was only a passing regret, a mere touch of the fighting man's pride. I had a different love now, that had wrapped herself round me far deeper and more tightly, and my duty was towards her first and foremost. The night would soon be past, and then dangers would increase. None had interfered with us so far, though many had jostled us as I clambered over the ruins; but this forbearance could not be reckoned upon for long. The earth tremors had almost died away, and after the panic and the storm, then comes the time for the spoiling.

All men who were poor would try to seize what lay nearest to their hands, and those of higher station, and any soldiers who could be collected and still remained true to command, would ruthlessly stop and strip any man they saw making off with plunder. I had no mind to clash with these guardians of law and property, and so I fled on swiftly through the night with my burden, using the unfrequented ways; and crying to the few folk who did meet me that the woman had the plague, and would they lend me the shelter of their house as ours had fallen. And so in time we came to the place where the rope dangled from the precipice, and after Nais had been drawn up to the safety of the Sacred Mountain, I put my leg in the loop of the rope and followed her.

Now came what was the keenest anxiety of all. We took the girl and laid her on a bed in one of the houses, and there in the lit room for the first time I saw her clearly. Her beauty was drawn and pale. Her eyes were closed, but so thin and transparent had grown the lids that one could almost see the brown of the pupil beneath them. Her hair had grown to inordinate thickness and length, and lay as a cushion behind and beside her head.

There was no flicker of breath; there was none of that pulsing of the body which denotes life; but still she had not the appearance of ordinary death. The Nais I had placed nine long years before to rest in the hollow of the stone, was a fine grown woman, full bosomed, and well boned. The Nais that remained for me was half her weight. The old Nais it would have puzzled me to carry for an hour: this was no burden to impede a grown man.

In other ways too she had altered. The nails of her fingers had grown to such a great length that they were twisted in spirals, and the fingers themselves and her hands were so waxy and transparent that the bony core upon which they were built showed itself beneath the flesh in plain dull outline. Her clay cold lips were so white, that one sighed to remember the full beauty of their carmine. Her shoulders and neck had lost their comely curves, and made bony hollows now in which the dust of entombment lodged black and thickly.

Reverently I set about preparing those things which if all went well should restore her. I heated water and filled a bath, and tintured it heavily with those essences of the life of beasts which the Priests extract and store against times of urgent need and sickness. I laid her chin deep in this bath, and sat beside it to watch, maintaining that bath at a constant blood heat.

An hour I watched; two hours I watched; three hours—and yet she showed no flicker of life. The heat of her body given her by the bath, was the same as the heat of my own. But in the feel of her skin when I stroked it with my hand, there was something lacking still. Only when our Lord the Sun rose for His day did I break off my watching, whilst I said the necessary prayer which is prescribed, and quickly returned again to the gloom of the house.

I was torn with anxiety, and as the time went on and still no sign of life came back, the hope that had once been so high within me began to sicken and leave me downcast and despondent. From without, came the din of fighting. Already Phorenice had sent her troops to storm the passageway, and the Priests who defended it were shattering them with volleys of rocks. But these sounds of war woke no pulse within me. If Nais did not wake, then the world for me was ended, and I had no spirit left to care who remained uppermost. The Gods in Their due time will doubtless smite me for this impiety. But I make a confession of it here on these sheets, having no mind to conceal any portion of this history for the small reason that it does me a personal discredit.

But as the hours went on, and still no flicker of life came to lessen the dumb agony that racked me, I grew more venturesome, and added more essences to the bath, and drugs also such as experience had shown might wake the disused tissues into life. I watched on with staring eyes, rubbing her wasted body now and again, and always keeping the heat of the bath at a constant. From the first I had barred the door against all who would have come near to help me. With my own hands I had laid my love to sleep, and I could not bear that others should rouse her, if indeed roused she should ever be. But after those first offers, no others came, and the snarl and din of fighting told of what occupied them.

It is hard to take note of small changes which occur with infinite slowness when one is all the while on the tense watch, and high strung though my senses were, I think there must have been some indication of returning life shown before I was keen enough to notice it. For of a sudden, as I gazed, I saw a faint rippling on the surface of the water of the bath. Gods! Would it come back again to my love at last—this life, this wakefulness? The ripple died out as it had come, and I stooped my head nearer to the bath to try if I could see some faint heaving of her bosom some small twitching of the limbs. No, she lay there still without even a flutter of movement. But as I watched, surely it seemed to my aching eyes that some tinge was beginning to warm that blank whiteness of skin?

How I filled myself with that sight. The colour was returning to her again beyond a doubt. Once more the dried blood was becoming fluid and beginning again to course in its old channels. Her hair floated out in the liquid of the bath like some brown tangle of the ocean weed, and ever and again it twitched and eddied to some impulse which in itself was too small for the eye to see.

She had slept for nine long years, and I knew that the wakening could be none of the suddenest. Indeed, it came by its own gradations and with infinite slowness, and I did not dare do more to hasten it. Further drugs might very well stop eternally what those which had been used already had begun. So I sat motionless where I was, and watched the colour come back, and the waxenness go, and even the fullness of her curves in some small measure return. And when growing strength gave her power to endure them, and she was racked with those pains which are inevitable to being born back again in this fashion to life, I too felt the reflex of her agony, and writhed in loving sympathy.

Still further, too, was I wrung by a torment of doubt as to whether life or these rackings would in the end be conqueror. After each paroxysm the colour ebbed back from her again, and for a while she would lie motionless. But strength and power seemed gradually to grow, and at last these prevailed, and drove death and sleep beneath them. Her eyelids struggled with their fastenings. Her lips parted, and her bosom heaved. With shivering gasps her breath began to pant between her reddening lips. At first it rattled dryly in her throat, but soon it softened and became more regular. And then with a last effort her eyes, her glorious loving eyes, slowly opened.

I leaned over and called her softly by name.

Her eyes met mine, and a glow arose from their depths that gave me the greatest joy I have met in all the world.

“Deucalion, my love,” she whispered. “Oh, my dear, so you have come for me. How I have dreamed of you! How I have been racked! But it was worth it all for this.”

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