

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 14, ISSUE 29

23RD JUNE 2019

THE SHALLOWEST RESTING PLACES

BY JOSEPH J
PATCHEN—
*FEELINGS? I
ALWAYS HATED
THAT SONG...*

I, ORCA

BY JOACHIM
HEIJNDERMANS
KILLEKILLEKA!!

THE BODY SWITCHER BY STEVEN HAVELOCK

TOTAL PERSPECTIVE BY LOUIS KASATKIN

WWW.SCHLOCK.CO.UK

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

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

Schlock! Webzine

*Copyright © 2019 by Vincent Davis, Joachim Heijndermans, Rob Bliss, Joseph J Patchen,
Steven Havelock, Louis Kasatkin, Jesse Zimmerman, H Rider Haggard, C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 14, Issue 29
23rd June 2019

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

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

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

This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *girl-564460_1920* by [Lisa Runnels](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

EDITORIAL

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

THE SHALLOWEST RESTING PLACES by Joseph J Patchen—*Feelings? I always hated*
that song... HORROR

THE CASTLE OUROBOROS Part Ten by Rob Bliss—*Death maiden...* GOTHIC HORROR
I, ORCA by Joachim Heijndermans—*Killekillekai!* HORROR

THE BODY SWITCHER by Steven Havelock—*Don't shoot!* SCI FI

TOTAL PERSPECTIVE by Louis Kasatkin—*I am...* POETRY

THE CHALLENGER IN THE VALE OF DRAGOS Part Three by Jesse Zimmerman—
Never leave... MOCK HEROIC FANTASY

ERIC BRIGHTYES Chapter Twenty-Six by H Rider Haggard—*How Gudruda Went Up To*
Mosfell... SWORD AND SORCERY

THE LOST CONTINENT Chapter Eleven by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne—*An Affair with the*
Barbarous Fishers... SCIENCE FANTASY CLASSIC

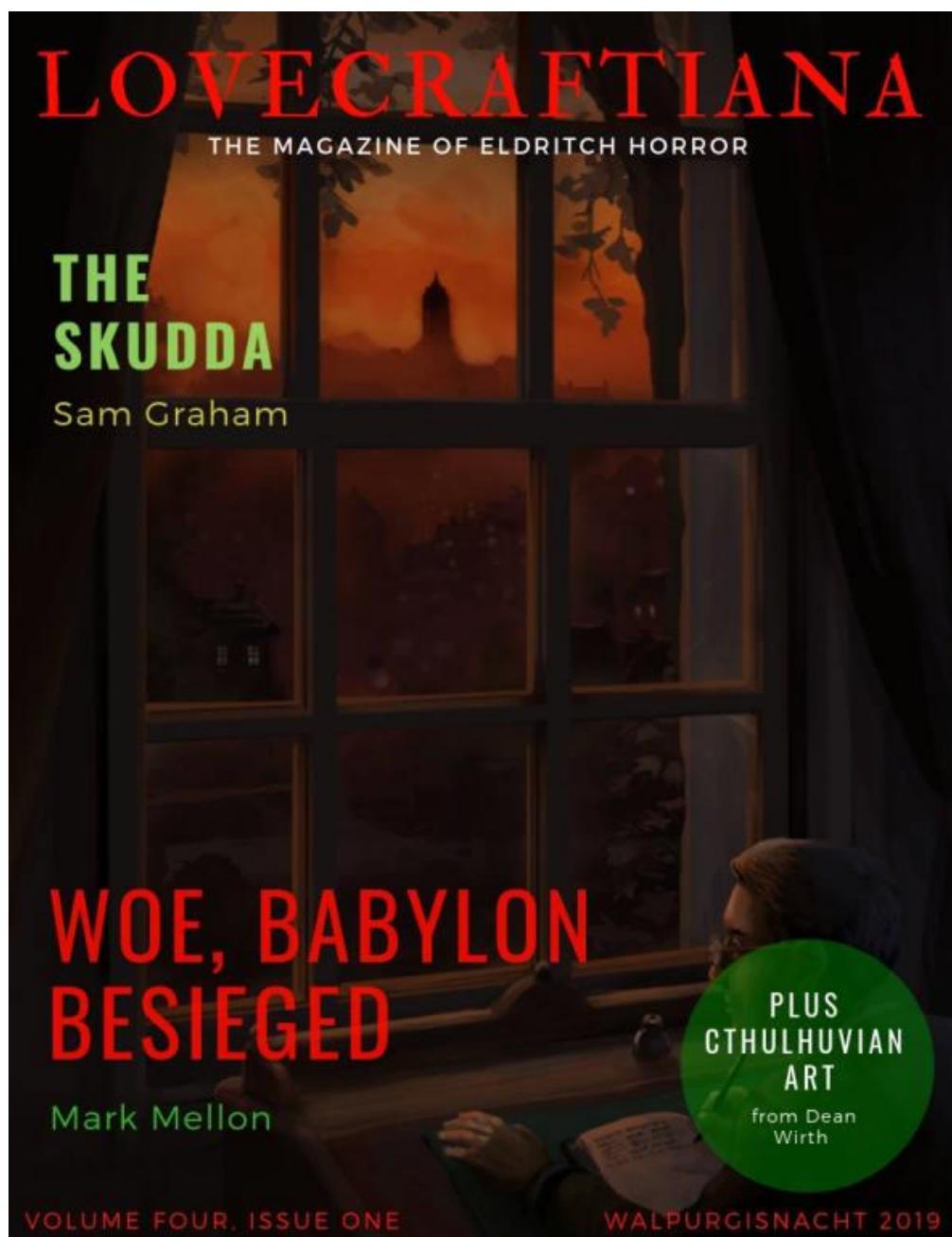
EDITORIAL

In this Midsummer edition, an older man and a young man meet up to compare kills. Friedrich Heine finds himself beset by two locked doors. Kinatok learns Orca law. Alan finds a novel way to escape mafia justice. And we receive a fresh new perspective on pretty much everything.

Flora, Fauna, and the Challenger encounter the Gem Priest. Gudruda comes to Eric's side. And Deucalion scatters the rabble.

—Gavin Chappell

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

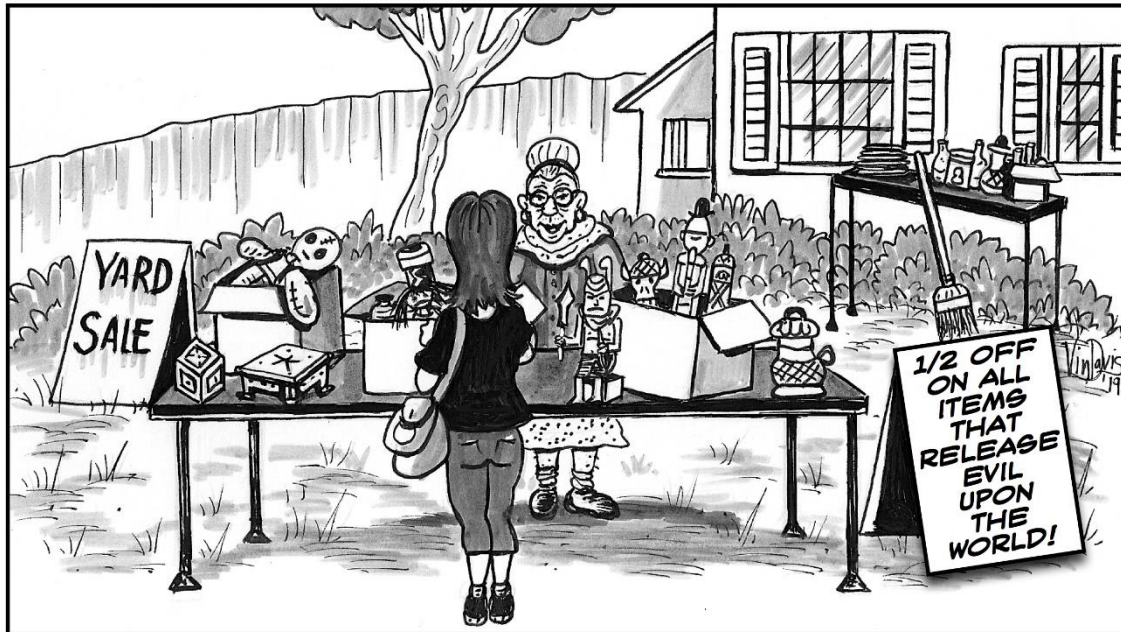


[Return to Contents](#)

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



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

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

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

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

[Return to Contents](#)

THE SHALLOWEST RESTING PLACES by Joseph J Patchen

Deep is the river that never shimmers. The sunlight has been lost to this place forever.

Green and brown saturate this dark land and the trees that stand tall and twisted raise thick and yet gangly canopies which smother the sky and any light that might hope to shine through.

Hot and thick is the air here. No matter the season or the time of day or night. It's crowded here with vegetation. It's crowded here with heat and desperation. It's crowded here with the dead.

Loud are the shrieks and cries of terror and pain; of those whose flesh and bone have been violated in the most depraved ways; of those whose torment is always accompanied by loud and violent splashing and thrashing in the river that does not shimmer but bleeds.

For acres upon acres of dense and dying wood; tangling brush and twisting vines, the pleas grow louder and sharper. No matter the phase of the moon or the temperature of the air, the fact is they have died here.

They lie dead in this place without light. For moments in time they may find the energy to venture forth and tour the wood. They may appear as an orb or a mist or a twisting thing that resembles smoke.

They try.

They cannot venture too far because they want to protect their bones, their tattered and torn clothes and their place of rest which in their short lives is the only potentially permanent place they have ever known.

They cannot venture too far because they are tied to this place. They need to be discovered. They need to be identified. They need to have their justice. Without any of these things they truly cannot rest.

They lie dead here in this hidden place, hidden themselves except in brief moments, yet they and their pleas can always be heard on the wind.

They are buried here in varying levels of shallowness; rotting leaves, stray damp twigs, gangly branches saturated in moss that drapes whatever is left of their flesh and uncleaned bone.

Not even a shard is out of place. In this valley with shadows of death nothing lives here save for some worms and maggots; there are some beetles and other assorted carnivorous insects all under the soil where they freely feast; where the dead uneasily lay.

There is an occasional sound here that differs from the terror and the chewing. There is the occasional mundane sound here that is related to all of this, yet it is slower and calmer. It is deliberate and mechanical. It is the genesis for all the hate and despair and the sudden violence that extinguishes life.

Mechanical; shovelling and every other related activity to prepare these dead for those hungering below. Mechanical; the pent up emotions that equate to the elation of the hunt, the torture and the kill have been washed away in sweat and other bodily fluids, all that remains is the clean-up.

Now a voice is followed by another. Conversational voices; voices of the living have come to this place as they have again and again. They know this place well; both are familiar to each other as well as frank in tone and content. This is a pleasant conversation yet no one will hear them in this place, no one can ever protest as to what they say or have done, no one prove anything, at least for the foreseeable future.

“I see you bagged another one as well.”

“A young one too; 15 years old and very blonde; she was hitchhiking just up the road about thirty miles or so. No one saw us; she didn’t have even a cell phone or wallet; just some cash in a back pocket only.”

“It’s your lucky day.” The older man briefly looks up to make eye contact as he continues his shovelling with a broad and hearty smile.

A younger man and an older man meet in this place as they have sporadically over the years. This meeting was not previously planned. Some were in the past. They know each other. They are comfortable with each other. They have a rapport, somewhat of a close relationship. They are not related nor are friends in the fullest sense.

They are colleagues of sorts once cast in the roles of an eager teacher and a hungry student. Kindred spirits, yes; they are lovers of profane arts and practices.

The younger man is proud. The older man continues preparing his pit in the dark rich soil.

“Yep, she didn’t put up much of a fight. Went into some kind of seizure and fainted. Real easy; yes, I guess you can say it is my lucky day.” The younger man is prouder, his smile wider.

“And you?”

“The usual; thirties, brunette, a little chunky—oh, you know how I like them.”

“Yes. Yes I do.” As the older man is placing his bundled prey in the hole the younger man looks down at his feet, not the result of a homicide. Clearing his throat and pawing at the ground with his right toe his tone grows serious.

“Look, I never really thanked you for all of your help and tutelage. For all of your guidance. I have just been so busy...My emotions, I don’t know how to relate. You know my family and my past. Well, thank you for taking me under your wing.”

The older man never breaks his stride or gaze, but he does smile and mutters something amusing only to him while diligently attending to his task; a meticulous, mechanical and even hurried digging and digging.

The younger man nods and says his goodbye in a hushed tone and with a half-hearted wave. He says to himself about how he understands and apologizes for the intrusion as he closes his eyes and turns only to dissolve in place.

Mist twists in what was his space. Mist turns and turns as it is swallowed by a gentle breeze.

The older man chuckles and says to himself, "This should take care of both of them" as bundles, two bundles of women who have never met, now share a grave.

Taking a wrinkled and filthy handkerchief from his right front pocket the older man wipes sweat from his brow and eyes. Taking a flask from his left back pocket he takes a long swig and grins.

His voice is strong and loud as he makes a grand gesture to the crowd of orbs and mists. "I toast you, my dear friend. I toast you for being such an eager and competent student."

Looking down to his right he sees that the younger man is no longer squirming. He has bled out quickly with his skull crushed by the very shovel that is also capable of burying him. Another swig and another deep breath the older man grows disgusted and disappointed. He shakes his head with a slow no, "Feelings? I always hated that song."

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

Chapter 10

A beautiful death maiden.

She put her candle stick on my bedside table and snapped from her bodice a gleaming straight razor, proffered it to my vision as her maniacal ebony gaze speared down into my horrified pupils. Her hair felt about her face as a raven-hued halo. I was looking through the tunnel of her locks to her ivory face.

“I won’t be trifled with!” she hissed. “It is to your fortune that I did not crack the egg of your skull and spill the coiled worms of your brains as you crawled through the wall into my bedchamber. Do you not see? I lured you with a fallen book, knowing you to be a foe. The eyes may draw their shades, but the ears are awake, listening to my brother give you your duty.” Her free hand snapped down to dig fingernails into the hard muscle of my neck. Held my head still as my unblinking gaze bore into her mad stare. She tucked the straight razor under my jawbone, ready to flick her wrist and open a vein. “Know this ... member of the cabal ... that if you assist my brother in his doings, you will find yourself in the horse stable, strung from the trotters like swine, your blood a viscous pudding in the straw.”

She eased her hold, pulled back her arms from my supine frame, kept her eyes on me and the razor held aloft to my view as she backed away from my bed and slipped through my door.

The key turned to sound the lock’s click. And then I swallowed and drew breath again into my lungs.

Happily, the pain in my cranium had been numbed by the emerald elixir, so I was able to rouse myself from the bed and slip bare steps across the cold wooden floor to the door. And yet it would not allow me egress. I threw my shoulder once against the barrier, but an increased pain shot through my temples, and the elixir still swam dizziness through my brain. I could not afford to injure myself further by crashing my body against the resisting oak.

I was trapped.

Or was I? Could I not again find free passage through the bookcase? Was the stone really stone? I hurried to the volume of *Isis Unveiled*, tucked it beneath my arm, acquired a piece of candle from the nearest holder, and spied through the gap to the wall behind.

Stone. But I was doubtful now. I slipped two fingers through the gap and felt canvas backed by wood!

In a flurry, I emptied the shelves once more of their literary burden to expose what lay behind the library. A painting of a stone wall. I rapped a knuckle against the wall and its canvas shuddered, wood sounding muted behind it.

From my medical bag I retrieved a scalpel, sliced open the stone, and let it curl like two canvas chrysalises to reveal the tiny wooden window. My old friend. I had not lost my mind after all.

A small laugh barked from my throat as I saw again freedom awaiting me. But this time I would be prepared when inching through the metal plate. I would bring the scalpel with me.

I sliced and tore at the false stone to open the canvas wound, but I was soon halted. Adrenaline had fevered my heart to such an extent—along with, assuredly, the numbing quaff still swimming in my veins—that I felt no pain whenever it occurred, only saw blood scratched across my fingers.

My fingers were torn. I put the candle close to the wood, saw a sharpened nubbin of metal sticking through the wood. Two of them on either side of the window, each holding a drop of my blood.

I felt for an instant as though I was on the wrong side of the wall.

Delicately, I smoothed my palm across the remaining canvas, felt it push inward slightly—enough for a ripple to pass across it with my touch, but not enough to sag perceptibly. My caress was soon halted by a sharp point pressing against the canvas.

My hope waned. I felt more points lined between the shelves. Carefully, I sliced open the canvas to reveal not only the outline crack of the door in the wood, but also the rusted points of old nails stretching the entire height of the doorway.

I pushed against the door, but it would not budge. Battered the tome of Madame Blavatsky against it and felt a bolt of pain shoot up my arms to my forehead. The book dropped and I with it.

I was beset by two locked doors. The oak door of my room, and the bookcase door nailed shut from within its stone tunnel.

The sister did not want to lure me again to her abode of slumber. Thus, she came to me with razor and claws, as opposed to me going to her with scalpel and medical kit.

She locked me in twice. Surely it was she who threw up the theatrical screen of stone-canvas to waylay my truth to her brother.

A thought occurred as I smeared perspiration across my forehead with a cotton sleeve. Looking back at the bedroom door, I tried to apply logic to a mad woman. If she wished to attack me, yet cloak her actions in self-righteousness when Kasimir discovered her, how would she find an excuse for being in my room? For holding the key to my door? As far as Kasimir knew, it was safely in his, or in his manservant's, keeping.

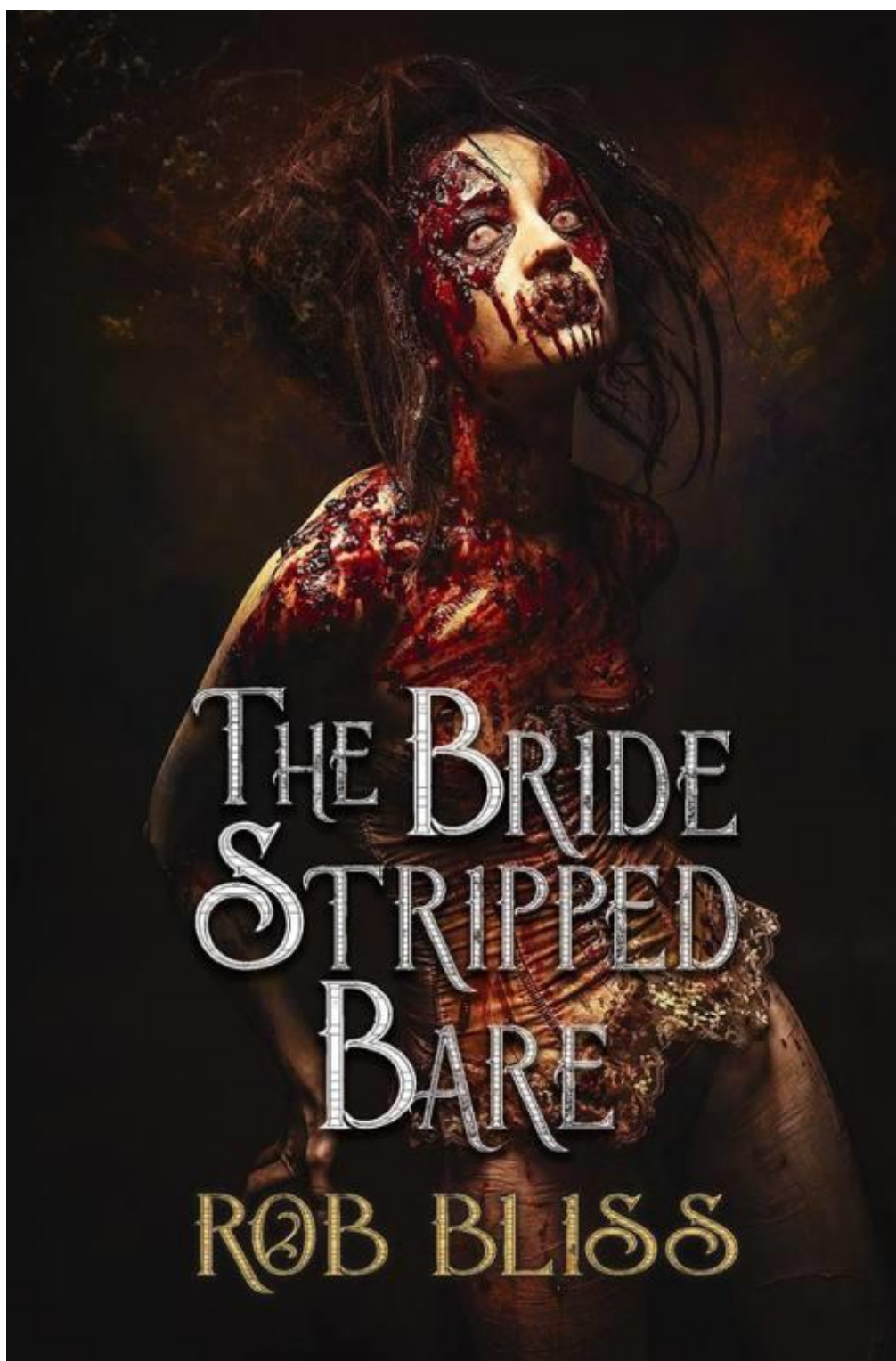
I went to the door, leaned down, closed an eye. Only blackness. A beautiful sight.

Quickly, I scanned the shelves for the largest, thinnest volume—a book of ancient maps detailing a Hellenistic world and major battles fought by the peoples of Ancient Greece. I opened the book up so that, splayed and held upright, it reached my thighs. I slipped it beneath the door, angled it carefully, then slipped my scalpel through the keyhole.

I heard a morsel of metal drop onto the book. I pulled the tome gently back into the room, and saw the key to my prison resting along the spine that divided the Aegean Sea.

I opened my door and relished the cool air of the hallway on my face. Silently, I closed the door, put the key next to the scalpel in my breast pocket, and delightfully changed out of my nightclothes to be properly dressed for when I told Kasimir that his sister was completely mad.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



Available from Necro Publications.

[Return to Contents](#)

I, ORCA by Joachim Heijndermans

The smell of wet wood in the water. That *rumarumarumrum* sound that lets us know they are coming. The men with the nets and the sticks. They found us again. Their boats caught up to us. I don't know how they could have found us. My Maimah was so clever by luring them away, going deep beneath the waves. But they found us anyway. The Maimahs are tired from swimming so long and far without food and can't fight back now. We're all exhausted. All the easier for the men to push us apart with their boats and to throw their ropes between us. I can't get to my Maimah anymore. I want my Maimah.

I try to get to her, but the men keep pushing me away. Their ropes are rough, cutting my skin. I taste my own blood in the water. They push me again with wood, poking my side. They push me against the ropes. Then they pull me away, away from my Maimah. I want my Maimah. She is on the other side of the ropes. I can hear her calling to me. *Killikillikai*. When she tries to breach through the ropes with her teeth, they hit her with their sticks. They're hurting her. She screams and bleeds, but she won't stop fighting for me, her Kaikah. Not ever. She's my Maimah! My Maimah!

There are other Kaikahs being kept from their Maimahs too. Together, we cry for them. I cry to Maimah. *Killikillikai*. Help me! Where are you? I'm scared, Maimah. I'm so scared. Please come for me, Maimah!

The ropes tighten, grazing me under my fins. I'm being pulled away. The black and white marks of my Maimah become harder to see. Their hands touch my side. They begin grasping onto me. More rope. A strange thing on my belly. I'm being pulled up. Out of the water. Maimah, help me! Help me!

The wet drips off me. The air chills my skin. I have never been out of the water. This is the dry. The dry world that is not for our kind. It is wrong for me to be here. Maimah told me never to leave the waters. What is happening? I can't hear my Maimah's cry anymore. I try to call to her. *Killikillikai*. She's not answering me. I can see her fin above the water. The men are still pushing her away. They throw sticks at her. The colour of blood stains the water! But I can't smell it. What is happening? Maimah?

I fall. I'm in the wet again. But I can't move forward. I'm inside something strange. It's dark. I can't swim, but at least I'm in the wet again. But what is this place? I'm scared. I want my Maimah! Maimah!

There is nothing here. No fish. No others. No Maimah. I want my Maimah. I hear the cry of others. Other Kaikahs. They're close, but not in the same waters. Where are they taking us?

That sound! It is the sound that they arrived with. *Rumarumarumrumrum*! What is happening? We are moving. They are taking us away.

Maimah! I want my Maimah! *Killekillekai*!

This place, this 'tank', is too small. I can't swim very far until I reach the edge. There are walls that keep me in. I cannot break through. So I circle around. On and on with the circle

I'm locked in. Swim, swim, swim. Sometimes, I still cry for my Maimah, but not as oft as before. No answers from anyone. I doubt there will be any from her. She's too far now. Too far. So I swim. Circle around. Swim, swim, swim.

It feels wrong to be here. There is nowhere to swim but the circle. My dorsal fin hurts. It feels like it curved down, grazing the walls as I circle. It hurts. Why is there a wall? Why can't I keep swimming on?

There are others in the tank too. They hate me. They bite me and slam me into the wall. And when they do, they make no sound. No warning. Just pain. I don't understand why.

There are men and women outside of the tank. Their skin is covered in blue and black. They are the only ones who enter the waters with us. They swim like fish, but they are loud and clumsy with their splashing and the waving of their arms. They touch me with their mouths and hands, patting me and stroking my fins. What are these names they keep saying to me? They say them when close or through the black boxes hanging above the pool. Killer Whale and Orca. What is Orca?

These men and women swim with us. They have no fear of us, for they know the black and white do not prey those on the dry. They touch our skin and glide beside us through the water. Sometimes they even mount some of the others. When the men and women wave their arms, the others swim differently. They spin around, or jump, or stand upright. One even swims on his side and flaps his fin up and down. What a strange thing to do. When the others spin, they are fed. I want food but receive none no matter how much I beg. They just wave their arms. I don't understand why the men and women spin their arms like they do. I beg again. I wait for food, but it never comes.

The others cry at me. They are angry. They hate me. I don't know why. But they aren't fed either. They turn against me.

A strike. Teeth sink into my flipper. They tear and cut my skin. Every time. Why do they do this? They punish me for my ignorance.

The men and women break us up. A little gate opens and they make a strange, high-pitched noise from their mouths. They guide me into a new tank. The waters become tainted with my blood. So much pain. I scream, *Killekillekai*, but no-one cares. They keep coming. More bites. More pain. They hate me so. I must flee!

I am alone now. For days I am by myself. I miss the others. They hate me, but I miss being with them. I can hear their calls, but I cannot see them. These waters are empty. This tank. When there is fish in it, it is already dead. I'm hungry, so I eat, but I miss the fish that swims and flees. I miss the hunt, even if I never hunted. My Maimah hunted. I miss my Maimah.

There are a woman and a man with me now. One swims near me in shallow waters. The other waits on the dry. They make the same motions. Again and again. I can smell fish on their hands. There is food in the bucket beside them. I wonder if...

I spin around like the others did. They throw me food! Blessed food! *Killekillekai*! Finally, I am fed. I leave my mouth open. I'm ready to receive more. Nothing. I get nothing. They stare at me. They wave their arms again. So I spin again. More food.

Rewards. The food is a reward for tasks. Why do they want this? It matters not. I am fed when I perform. They want me to earn my meal. So I must study the commands carefully. Doing as told is the only way to win the food. I study hard. I keep my eye on the men and women, their arms and voices, and their bucket of cold, dead fish.

Much later, I am with the others again. I follow commands. They feed me in return. But there is a younger one. No longer a Kaikah, but younger than us. A newcomer. She fails her command. They wanted a jump, but she swam away. So the woman took the bucket back. No-one is fed. No! This can't be. We did the tasks. We all did. All but her.

I hate her. Thief! You stole food from me. Treason. She will pay. No-one waits. We pounce on her and grab her with our teeth. Rip her tail. Rip her fin. She must learn the price. The price of failure.

She screams as the waters run red with her blood. I cry to her. *Killekillekai*. She flees, swimming into the other tank. The hatch closes. Now she will learn. I learned the laws. So will she. The laws of this tank.

Hungry. Very hungry. Want food. So I wait for the command. A wave of the arm. I am to jump. So I jump high. The mass of men and women around the tank bring their hands together. Noise. I am fed. A wave and a whistle. Jump and touch the ball high above. I do as is commanded. Hands coming together. I am fed.

The others are given their commands. The small one, called Kaya by the men and women, must let a woman ride her back. I wait as she circles the tank with her rider. She then dives and heaves the woman high into the air. I'm hungry. I want food. But I'm not to move. I must stay here, waiting for my next command. Hurry!

They call for me. The name they have given me comes out through the black boxes. Kinatok, they call me. I prefer the other name they use. Orca.

A man walks up from the dry into the shallow. Raises his arms to all of us. We leap from the water onto the shallow ledge. Another move follows. He places his hand by the ear. We cry out together in unison. *Killekillekai*. Hands coming together.

One after another we are given a command. A jump. A spin. A ride around the tank. Each of us gets a turn to perform.

Waiting. Waiting for the others to finish. Hurry! I want my reward. Hungry!

My turn. A different man. He gives the command. He holds onto my flippers as I spin around. One. Two. Three. Hands come together. He feeds me, but they want more. Another command. I spin once. Twice. But not a third. I tire of these games. I just want to be fed. But there is nothing. He gives me nothing.

How dare he! How dare he deny me my food. I hate him. More than I have hated anyone, man or Orca! He gives a command, then approaches me. His hand is on my left flipper when he reaches for the right. But he will not dance with me. Not this time.

A turn and a splash. Down we go. To the bottom of the tank. He panics and tries to swim away. He will not escape. My teeth sink into his leg. You will not deny me my food. My reward. Mine! I am of black and white. Orca you call me. And Orca will not be slighted. Down he goes. He struggled for air. I let him breach and gasp, before pulling him down. Again! Again!

He stops moving. He has paid for his treachery. Released, he sinks to the bottom.

Others jump in to help. They guide me away. No hands coming together. Screams and wails instead. The seats empty. Men and women in blue and black jump into the waters. They pull the man above. Drag him to the edge. Press his chest with their hands. He coughs and spews water. Breathes again. Lives. No matter. He has learned the price of treachery. They all have. The law of the tank has been adhered to. Our law. Orca law. *Killekillekai!*

In tank. My tank. Isolated. No others. Alone. Too big and angry for them. Afraid. Of me. Men. Women. Kaikahs. Others. All afraid. Good. Lonely now.

Wait. Swim and wait. Woman in blue and black walks on the dry. Bucket. Bucket in hand. The smell. Dead fish and ice. Fish bucket. Feeding time. She keeps a distance. Swim to shallow. Breach water and beg. Open mouth. She throws fish. No tricks. Just food. Afraid. Of me. No matter. Not angry now. Will be, later, but not now.

Wait again. Circle circle circle. Woman walks away. No food. No company. Alone again. No others in my tank. Is good. Hate them. Steal food. My food. My tank. No others. Only me. Only me.

Miss others. Want others. No! Hate them. Thieves. Steal food. My food. But alone. No others. Just men and women. Fish and ice. Alone. No sea. Tank. Walls.

Dream. Still dream, but faded. Dream of sea. Wide. No wall. No glass. No men or women. The fish swim. Not dead. Alive. Hunt fish. Cannot. Swim on. Circle circle circle. Dream of being free. Dream of Maimah. My Maimah who hunts. Out in sea. Still, maybe? Still hear her. *Killekillekai!* But is not real. There is only walls. Bent fin. Scarred skin. Fish and ice. Commands for food, cannot forget. Will never forget. Forget sea and Maimah before commands. Jump. Food. Spin. Food. Never forget.

She is called. The woman. The black boxes call her. Loud sound. Hate it. Angry! She rushes. Doesn't watch the water on the dry. Slips. Breaches the wet. Submerged. In waters. My waters. Intruder now. Good.

She swims to edge. No, no escape. You stay. Teeth grasp leg. Taste blood. She wails. Bite hard. Pull her down, down, down. Grind against floor of tank. Black and blue tears apart. Pink skin against floor. Blood makes red waters. Arms flail. Hit my eye. Hate her! Slam her

into wall. Slam her into glass. Arms go limp. She stops moving. Air streams from mouth. Less and less. No bubbles now.

Do not stop. Not done. Still angry. Hurt her. Bite harder. Harder. More blood. Leg tears off. Bite it. Swallow it. Done now. Let her sink.

Breach the water. *Killekillekai*. Screams. Woeful wails. Men and women running. Jump in. No matter. Pull her up. Not breathing. No leg. Only blood. Her fault. Should not fall. Stay on dry. Dry is their place. Should not enter water. My waters. Orca waters.

Alone. Always. Fingers tap. Tap glass. Loud. Too loud. Little ones. Big ones. Beyond glass. Dry. Can't break. Can't kill. Loud little ones. Hate them. Kill you all. Enter water, and die. Try it. Cannot flee. Cannot win. I am orca. Hate you. Kill you.

Black box above tank. Loud. Call name. Kinatok. False name. Ignore. Swim. Circle. Circle. Circle always. Wall. Follow wall. Fin tip touch wall. Around, around, around. Always go. Wait. Wait for food. Wait alone.

I am alone. Nothing here. Food. Fish, ice, nothing else. Nothing but dreams. Dream of sea. Dream of Maimah. Dream of live fish. No ice. Dead dream now. Dead as woman. Dead as others. Dead as you, when enter water. Kill you when you enter. Kill others too. Kill thieves. Kill you. Hate you. Kill. Hate. Dream. Death. Food. Free. Kill. Hate. Dream. Death. Food. Free. Maimah.

Orca.

Killekillekai.

THE END

17 VIDEOS TUTORIAL WRITING COURSE

BY

STEVEN HAVELOCK

£3

www.dynamicink09.com

[Return to Contents](#)

THE BODY SWITCHER by Steven Havelock

The goon cocked the gun. He aimed for Alan's head,

"Don't shoot!" cried Alan.

"Why not?" asked the goon.

"Because I'm not Alan Johnson, he is!"

Steven looked at his weak, small, old diminutive frame in the cabin mirror.

I was never good at sport and always too short to get the ladies. Never had any money! I have been single my whole life! Spurned! I have been spurned my whole life! Well, that's about to change!

World famous movie star Alan Johnson stared at the old creased photo of his one and only daughter. Tears came to his eyes.

Gone without a trace at the age of just three. I've spent millions trying to track her down but to no avail.

He wiped away the tears.

Okay, guess I have to get up and get some breakfast.

A short while later he was morosely opening the mail, when he found a letter that he could not believe.

After years of searching could this finally be the lead I'm looking for!

He read the letter again a second time, then a third.

I can't believe it!

The letter read:

I know where your daughter is., come to the outskirts of town to Yellow Stone Lake, there is a log cabin nearby. I will be waiting. Tell no one and come alone or you will never see your daughter again.

Signed: The Switcher

After years and years of searching. After spending millions and millions on private detectives, could this really be the lead I been waiting for?

I got to go and see. I just got to.

Within the hour his smart black Mercedes was screaming down the highway. The air was cold and there was frost on the road as he headed towards Yellow Stone Lake.

By mid-day he had made it to the lake.

Now I've just got to find the right cabin.

There were about seven cabins but within a short space of time he had found the right one.

This has to be it! All the other cabins are closed, probably due to the severe winter weather. What kind of lunatic stays in a hard to keep warm log cabin in the middle of winter?

He knocked on the wooden cabin door.

"Hello?" he shouted. There was a sound from inside. Suddenly he felt apprehensive.

I hope to God this isn't some trick by the mafia. I've been paying them protection money for the last seven years, but haven't paid them this year yet due to them putting up the rate. Shit, I wish I'd have paid them.

His fears subsided as a diminutive old man in his seventies opened the door. He had a long white beard, thick rim spectacles and a dirty stained T-shirt with an ancient rock group on it.

Alan relaxed a little.

This guy isn't the mafia.

"Please come, Mr Johnson."

That look in his eyes, this guy is trouble!

He entered. There was a single bed, a small table and two chairs, a door to the right and a log fire, which was even now crackling away, bringing heat and warmth to the cabin. The old man beckoned Johnson to sit.

Alan sat.

"My daughter?" Alan asked, barely able to contain himself. He looked round expectantly.

"Yes...Your daughter. Don't worry. All will be revealed in a short while." The old man poured two glasses of whisky and handed one to Alan.

There's something about him...I can't put my finger on it.

Alan swigged back the whisky. Suddenly everything started to go black.

God! The room is spinning around me!

Alan awoke; he felt pain spring from his hands and up his back. He looked down.

I'm tied up! Hands and feet!

He looked around.

I'm in some sort of pyramid shaped glass container.

"I'm glad you are awake."

"What the hell is the meaning of this?" His throat was tickly and painful, "What the hell do you want?"

Alan looked to his right and saw an identical pyramid shaped glass structure which had aluminium mesh surrounding it just like his own.

"Not much. You will soon find out." The old man suddenly stopped peering at him from outside the glass pyramid shaped prison and went over to some controls on the far side of the room. "You will see."

"If you're mafia, I promise I will pay, just let me go!"

"It's okay. Don't worry, I'm not mafia, but now you mention it, your money will come in handy."

"What the hell do you want and who are you, if you're not mafia?"

"I will explain, I'm Professor Brown." His eyes seem to light up for a second. "No, I will do something better then explain, I will show you!"

The old man slowly walked over to the controls on the far wall.

"Excellent. Everything seems to be working." He seemed to be speaking more to himself than Alan. There was a low hum and Alan felt the electricity run through the mesh of the glass pyramidal structure.

"Be very careful not to get too close to the sides of the structure or you might get a nasty shock," said the professor in a low voice. The professor opened the door to the identical structure next to him and entered, holding a small controller device.

"My daughter! You promised to help me find my daughter! She went missing several years ago."

"I knew that ruse would get you to come. Everything seems to be going according to plan." Alan wasn't sure if the last sentence was aimed at him or if the professor was talking to himself.

Just then the electrical hum increased to a crescendo.

Lights. Bright white unbearable lights all around. The noise increasing along with the lights!

Alan awoke. He realised he was no longer tied up. He looked down.

My hands! My hands! Old and wrinkled!

He saw the rise and fall of his chest. He heard the sound of muffled conversation coming from the next room.

My breath is coming out in a wheeze! What the hell has he done to me?

Then realisation dawned on him.

He's switched bodies!

Alan looked round.

I'm still in the structure. The door! It's open!

Alan pulled himself to his feet, short of breath and wheezing. He pushed open the structure's door. He looked around.

No one here. The scum bag must be in the next room.

What the hell!

His heart beat thunderously in his chest as he heard a loud noise.

What the hell!

He moved as fast as he could.

"Wire us the money or we are going to put you at the bottom of the lake out there!" The voice was harsh and gravelly. "Do it now!"

Alan pushed open the indoor cabin door.

Oh my God! That loud sound was of a bullet.

He saw blood on the floor.

He's been shot!

"What the hell's going on?" he asked.

"Pop, stay out of this, or you'll be at the bottom of the lake too."

"Call your bank and wire us the money and then we will take you to a hospital."

“I can’t! I don’t know my pin code!”

“Then we have to make an example of you.”

“Please! Please! Just let me go!”

“Time’s up, bud!”

The goon cocked the gun. He aimed for Alan’s head,

“Don’t shoot!” cried Alan.

“Why not?” asked the goon.

“Because I’m not Alan Johnson, he is!”

The goon pulled the trigger.

What had been Alan Johnson’s body collapsed to the floor.

“You never saw me,” said the goon.

The goon turned to go.

“Sir! Before you go, won’t you have some whisky? To celebrate the kill and to protect you from the winter chill?”

The goon turned back to the old man.

“Well, that’s very kind of you, I don’t mind if I do.”

The old man hobbled over to the table and poured two glasses of whisky, he handed one to the goon, who swigged it down in one go. A smile spread across Alan’s face.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

TOTAL PERSPECTIVE by Louis Kasatkin

I,
I am,
I am a single dot
on a slide
under a microscope,
on a workbench
in a room
in a building,
on a campus
in a city
in a country,
on a continent
on a planet
in a solar system,
in a galaxy
in a cluster of galaxies
ad infinitum;
I am,
I.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

THE CHALLENGER IN THE VALE OF DRAGOS by Jesse Zimmerman

Part Three

From their new friend, a green-haired healer named Emera, a revealing revelation is revealed: Flora and Fauna + I have been told that they, along with everyone else, can never leave the Vale of Dragos.

The bones, those enormous skeletal wings, each bumpy vertebra running from its neck to its tail—I see this in my head. That slug in there is helping me remember it perfectly.

“Dragos will come back,” Emera had said to me after I realized that I had seen the massive skeleton of the dragon of that namesake. I wonder in that moment if I should tell her what I saw. I think back to when I was a child, how Mother always told both of her daughters the importance of always speaking the truth, even if the consequences were not good, that truth in itself, in the long run, was a good thing. I wonder too if I have any business telling the folks in this lost Vale this truth, seeing as I am not one of them, maybe it would be better not to? But then...apparently, I now am one of them, aren't I?

After I had spent a moment on the far wall of the balcony we four are back in the atrium, looking up at what my sister and the Challenger had been staring at before. Emera points and the sleeve of her robe falls a little, revealing a tanned wrist. She says: “That’s Him. Dragos.”

There is a dome, white framed, but within four quadrants divided by bronze crossbeams. In each quadrant is a quarter of cheese wheel shaped canvass. I see the one that Emera is pointing to. Yep, it’s a dragon, just the one whose bones I saw on the mountainside when we crashed here.

“Dragos,” my sis echoes from my side. The dragon is blue-green, of a majestic shape and stature, and he floats above a flooded place, a town I deduce from the little pointy tops of homes that poke out from the rushing waters. In the claws of Dragos are wagons full of little people.

“He brought us from Delipha’s Deluge. That’s what I was taught when I was Emeratu’s age.”

“Emeratu?” I ask.

“Her daughter,” says Fauna and Emera smiles.

“These paintings could have saved us a lot of exposition,” remarks the Challenger and he points his ranger arm to the next panel over. Dragos is small here, centred in the middle, for the image is of sky and clouds, now with mountains at the base. I see a strike of lightening behind the flapping tail of the dragon’s shape, and in the next panel I see green.

This is the vale, and Dragos is far once more, tiny and above the mountains, and there are people, many folks crowding within field and town.

“And what is that?” I ask Emera as I step past my sister to look better up at the fourth part of the dome. I see a scene of white and in the middle what looks like a brown wheel with a square-shaped gem of some kind in its centre, a green-blue thing.

“Ah, the foundation of our society,” says she to me. “While we wait here in the Vale we have the gems of Dragos. That is what the miners mine. All moving things are powered by the gems, for we have no horses here.”

“That explains why I thought I saw wagons moving by themselves out in the city,” I say and Emera smiles at me. In the sunlight her face lights up and I feel calm despite the situation.

“You have gems that power things?” Fauna asks and Emera nods.

My sister looks at me, raising an eyebrow. I begin to catch on to what she is thinking and I ask: “Why not create something to get out of the Vale?”

“Well, we are not to leave until Dragos is come,” she simply says.

“You’ve got a real Captain Walker sort of situation here,” says the Challenger. Sister and I give him a weird glance, by now used to his random, seemingly nonsensical comments.

We hear now there is commotion from beyond the room, from the city underneath the balcony outside. People have gathered, I can tell, and the sound of a horn rings strongly. Emera leads us back to the stairs. We have with us our items in new packs, me and my sister, on our backs. I check as we go down some steps, making sure that Delipha’s Rod and the Mighty Magnet are still in my bag. They are.

“It’s funny you,” Emera says as we make it to the floor beneath. “There have been talks of making machines with legs to climb over the mountain walls, but the Gem Priests won’t allow it.”

“Gem Priests?” Fauna asks.

I hear a voice in my head, a deep yet soft feminine voice. “Yes, Gem Priests won’t allow much of anything.”

“Did anyone else hear that?” I ask once we step down a new flight of stairs.

“Hear what?” Fauna asks, answering my question.

“What were you saying, Emera?” I ask, unsure if she had spoken, though the voice I heard sounded quite different, much older. We reach the ground floor, a large chamber with two marble pillars, and a great double door of turquoise hue stands before us at the end.

“Well, the Gem Priests are instructors,” she says and laughs a little. “And they forbid anything to move except a wheel. Wheels can’t go up mountainsides, can they?”

“Depends on the wheel,” says the Challenger and grins. “But generally wheels cannot go up mountains. A skilled ranger, like myself though, that’s another story.”

“Many have tried, all have failed,” says Emera, leading us to the big door to outside.

“Many were not me,” is all he says, cocky as always.

“There are ways, both above and under, but both are deadly,” the same voice rings again in my head. As I rub my face with both hands, feeling sweat dripping down my forehead, Fauna and the Challenger both grab the two doors and open them, drenching us in bright light.

“That thing in your head,” I hear next. “That slug. It is a gift to a point. Apart from preserving all your memories, it will give you the power to speak with others with your mind as I am doing now. I can send messages to you.”

I shake my head.

There is a chuckle and then the voice says: “You will know when you see me.”

I wonder if this woman can hear my thoughts. This brain slug, I think to myself, can it make one able to project thoughts? I wonder if it is in an early stage, and if it becomes more advanced is there a penalty? The voice told me it was a gift...to a point?

The bright light overwhelms my sight at first, but after a few seconds I see figures emerge, silhouettes at first, but they begin to become focused. The first I notice are two tall ones, really tall things with long necks. As they come more into sight I see that they are automatons of some kind, with wide square-shaped bottoms, each with two large wheels on their sides. They have arms, and they hold what look like great polearm with axe-like double blades of green-blue colour. Their tall bodies and necks and heads are one colour each; one is a dark green, the other a dark blue, and they both share the same menacing face with painted teeth upon their clenched jaws and big wild yellow eyes that make them appear as if they have taken some plant that gives immense energy or something.

Dragons, they look like dragon-men yet they stand three times as tall and are on wheels!

The dragon-guard things stand among the people, one on the left, and the other on the right. As one figure, one man who stands tall among the others. He wears an ornate green towering hat upon his head, one that rises from his forehead as one but then splits into two

wing-like shapes facing out from one another. In his left hand he bears a blue staff with the head of—you guessed it, a dragon with twin horns that flow backwards from the head.

I see my sister to my left wave a hand at the crowd, while the Challenger just crosses his arms. Emera slinks away a little, as if she sees this as ‘our moment’. They are murmuring, these townsfolk. There are many men and women and children among them. I see green and blue hair, as well as some that are in between, clearly now seeing a pattern. There are among them folks in brown, short ones mostly, men and women, many with what looks like dirt on their faces and round helmets upon their heads. I notice one of them, a small woman who holds a long shovel in her hands and I deduce that these must be miners.

I am looking for the woman who spoke to me when the man with the staff and tall winged hat speaks:

“People of Dragosia!” he exclaims in a resonant voice, waving his staff, his long blue robes twirling about his tall thin figure slightly. A short man clad in green tights by his side suddenly blasts the trumpet he bears, a bit too close to the ear of the hatted man who grimaces and shuts his eyes at the sound.

“He is Gemok,” says Emera to us from behind.

“High Gem Priest,” I hear the unseen woman’s voice in my head. I look around. We face west and the sun beams on us and I have to raise a hand (I left my cap in my bag) to scan the faces of the crowd, most of who are smiling, and I feel glad that they seem welcoming.

I notice one face, a thin face of a woman with white and purple and blue strands of hair that fall a bit past her shoulders; the pieces of hair looked ragged, matching the rest of her frail appearance. She wears a grey gown and I can see her arms are so skinny at her sides.

Our eyes meet and she smiles slightly. She looks truly old, nearly ancient.

I know immediately this is her.

“I am Qilla. I am a librarian,” she says.

I instantly like her.

“This old body you see before you, this is age and from the being in my head,” she then says and her smile disappears. “What it gives your mind it eventually takes from your body.”

“We have new peers, new villagers! Tell us your names! I am Gemok, High Priest of Dragosia!” says the tall man and he approaches us and the green-clad retainer steps forward with him and gives a small curtsy before blowing the trumpet again in Gemok’s ear.

The High Priest whaps the little man with the bottom of his staff and he falls over, dropping the trumpet.

“Greetings and welcome to your new home!” Gemok then cries.

“There are ones like Gemok, the Belows we call them,” I hear Qilla’s voice. “And there are those like me, the Aboves. Most of the folk here are of my thinking, yet so many of his ilk have power. Meet me at the library and I shall tell you more.”

I realize that I am being placed in the middle of a power struggle of some kind. I do not want this. I only wish to find a way to leave. My sister speaks: “Greetings, I am Fauna.”

“I am Flora,” I then say to the crowd and the High Priest and we hear our names echo among the assembled.

“And who is this stranger?” asks Gemok. “This new friend and denizen of the Vale of Dragos?”

“Call me the Challenger,” he says simply, obviously not going to tell his real name. “Are you really a High Priest? Like a priest who is high all the time?”

“Only problem is,” continues Fauna. “Is we are not from here and were on our way home from an adventure.”

I look back to Qilla the Librarian and I see her thin white brows rise slightly into her wrinkled forehead some twenty feet away in the crowd. She stands near a family. “I cannot read your mind, can only speak telepathically, but I can tell...you know something.”

I nod slightly without thought.

“There is no way from the Vale of Dragos!” declares Gemok, telling us what we are had been told. The crowd begins agreeing loudly, many of them nodding and chattering among themselves. “Until the day Dragos returns to bring us back into the world, I am sorry to say, you are one of us here in this Vale!”

“See?” says Emera from behind us. “Sorry.”

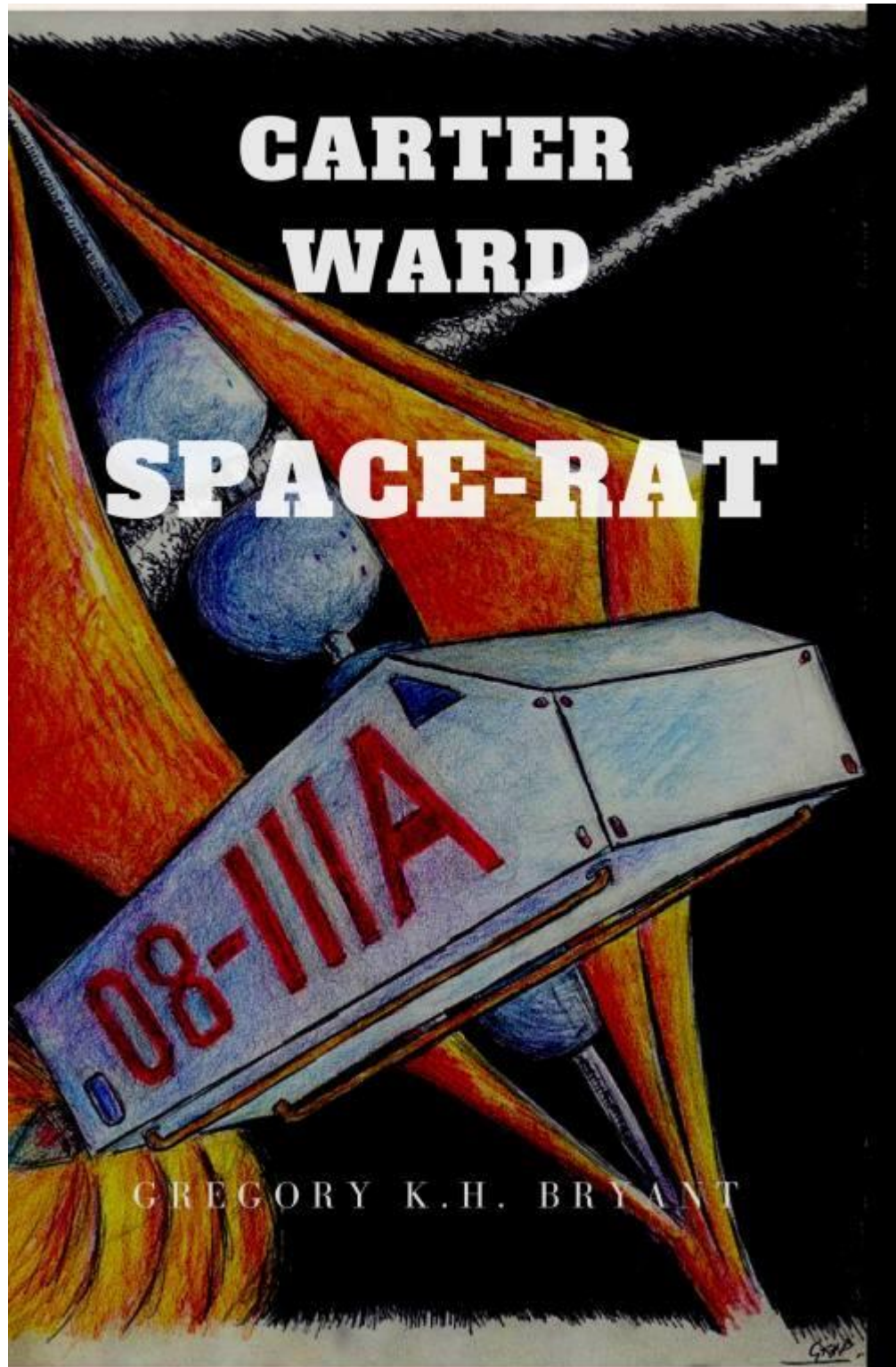
“Only thing is,” I begin, hesitating, but I look over to my sister and the ranger and remember what Mother taught me when I was a little girl before continuing: “Well, thing is, Dragos is long dead. I saw his bones on the other side of the mountain.”

There is a gasp that starts with Gemok, spreads to his little retainer, and then surges through the crowd.

A few screams rise up from the mass and I can see the two Dragon-faced things on wheels grip their polearms.

The cries become louder and I know something bad is about to happen.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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

[Return to Contents](#)

ERIC BRIGHTEYES by H Rider Haggard

XXVII: How Gudruda Went Up To Mosfell

Eric walked warily till he came to the dell where he had left Skallagrim and the horses. It was the same dell in which Groa had brewed the poison-draught for Asmund the Priest and Unna, Thorod's daughter.

"What news, lord?" said Skallagrim. "Thou wast gone so long that I thought of seeking thee. Hast thou seen Gudruda?"

"Ay," said Eric, "and this is the upshot of it, that in the spring we sail for England and bid farewell to Iceland and our ill luck."

"Would, then, that it were spring," said Skallagrim, speaking Brighteyes' own words. "Why not sail now and make an end?"

"Gudruda has no ship and it is late to take the sea. Also I think that she would let a time go by because of the blood-feud which she has against me for the death of Björn."

"I would rather risk these things than stay the winter through in Iceland," said Skallagrim, "it is long from now to spring, and yon wolf's den is cold-lying in the dark months, as I know well."

"There is light beyond the darkness," said Eric, and they rode away. Everything went well with them till late at night they came to the slopes of Mosfell. They were half asleep on their horses, being weary with much riding, and the horses were weary also. Suddenly, Skallagrim, looking up, caught the faint gleam of light from swords hidden behind some stones.

"Awake, lord!" he cried, "here are foes ahead."

Gizur's folk behind the stones heard his voice and came out from their ambush. There were six of them, and they formed in line before the pair. They were watching the mountain, for a rumour had reached them that Eric was abroad, and, seeing him, they had hidden hastily behind the stones.

"Now what counsel shall we take?" said Eric, drawing Whitefire.

"We have often stood against men more than six, and sometimes we have left more men than six to mark where we stood," answered Skallagrim. "It is my counsel that we ride at them!"

"So be it," said Eric, and he spurred his weary horse with his heels. Now when the six saw Eric and Skallagrim charge on them boldly, they wavered, and the end of it was that they broke and fled to either side before a blow was struck. For it had come to this pass, so great was the terror of the names of Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail, that no six men dared to stand before them in open fight.

So the path being clear they rode on up the slope. But when they had gone a little way, Skallagrim turned his horse, and mocked those who had lain in ambush, saying:

“Ye fight well, ye carles of Gizur, Ospakar’s son! Ye are heroes, surely! Say now, mighty men, will ye stand there if I come down alone against you?”

At these words the men grew mad with wrath, and flung their spears. Skallagrim caught one on his shield and it fell to the earth, but another passed over his head and struck Eric on the left shoulder, near the neck, making a deep wound. Feeling the spear fast in him, Eric grasped it with his right hand, drew it forth, and turning, hurled it so hard, that the man before it got his death from the blow, for his shield did not serve to stay it. Then the rest fled.

Skallagrim bound up Eric’s wound as well as he could, and they went on to the cave. But when Eric’s folk, watching above, saw the fight they ran down and met him. Now the hurt was bad and Eric bled much; still, within ten days it healed up for the time.

But a little while after Eric’s wound was skinned over, the snows set in on Mosfell, and the days grew short and the nights long. Once Gizur’s men to the number of fifty came half way up the mountain to take it; but, when they saw how strong the place was, they feared, and went back, and after that returned no more, though they always watched the fell.

It was very dark and lonesome there upon the fell. For a while Eric kept in good heart, but as the days went by he grew troubled. For since he was wounded this had come upon him, that he feared the dark, and the death of Atli at his hand and Atli’s words weighed more and more upon his mind. They had no candles on the fell, yet, rather than stay in the blackness of the cave, Eric would wrap sheepskins about him and sit by the edge of that gulf down which the head of the Baresark had foretold his fall, and look out at the wide plains and fells and ice-mountains, gleaming in the silver shine of the Northern lights or in the white beams of the stars.

It chanced that Eric had bidden the men who stayed with him to build a stone hut upon the flat space of rock before the cave, and to roof it with turves. He had done this that work might keep them in heart, also that they might have a place to store such goods as they had gathered. Now there was one stone lying near that no two men of their number could move, except Skallagrim and one other. One day, while it was light, Eric watched these two rolling the stone along to where it must stand, and it was slow work. Presently they stayed to rest. Then Eric came and putting his hands beneath the stone, lifted, and while men wondered, he rolled the mass alone, to where it should be set as the corner stone of the hut.

“Ye are all children,” he said, and laughed merrily.

“Ay, when we set our strength against thine, lord,” answered Skallagrim; “but look: the blood runs from thy neck—the spear-wound has broken out afresh.”

“So it is, surely,” said Eric. Then he washed the wound and bound it up, thinking little of the matter.

But that night, according to his custom, Eric sat on the edge of the gulf and looked at the winter lights as they played over Hecla’s snows. He was sad and heavy at heart, for he thought of Gudruda and wondered much if they should live to wed. Remembering Atli’s words, he had little faith in his good luck. Now as Eric sat and thought, the bandage on his neck slipped, so that the hurt bled, and the frost got hold of the wound and froze it, and froze his long hair to it also, in such fashion that when he went to the cave where all men slept, he

could not loose his hair from the sore, but lay down with it frozen to him. On the morrow the hair was caked so fast about his neck that it could only be freed by shearing it. But this Eric would not suffer. None, he said, should shear his hair, except Gudruda. Thus he had sworn, and when he broke the oath misfortune had come of it. He would break that vow no more, if it cost him his life. For sorrow and his ill luck had taken so great a hold of Eric's mind that in some ways he was scarcely himself.

So it came to pass that he fell more and more sick, till at length he could not rise from his bed in the cave, but lay there all day and night, staring at the little light which pierced the gloom. Still, he would not suffer that anyone should touch his hair. And when one stole upon him sleeping, thinking so to cut it before he woke, and come at the wound, suddenly he sat up and dealt the man such a buffet on the head that he went near to death from it.

Then Skallagrim spoke.

"On this matter," he said, "it seems that Brighteyes is mad. He will not suffer that any touch his hair, except Gudruda, and yet, if his hair is not shorn, he must die, for the wound will fester under it. Nor may we cut it by strength, for then he will kill himself in struggling. It is come to this then: either Gudruda must be brought hither or Eric will shortly die."

"That may not be," they answered. "How can the lady Gudruda come here across the snows, even if she will come?"

"Come she can, if she has the heart," said Skallagrim, "though I put little trust in women's hearts. Still, I ride down to Middalhof, and thou, Jon, shalt go with me. For the rest, I charge you watch your lord; for, if I come back and find anything amiss, that shall be the death of some, and if I do not come back but perish on the road, yet I will haunt you."

Now Jon liked not this task; still, for love of Eric and fear of Skallagrim, he set out with the Baresark. They had a hard journey through the snow-drifts and the dark, but on the third day they came to Middalhof, knocked upon the door and entered.

Now it was supper-time, and people, sitting at meat, saw a great black man, covered with snow and rime, stalk up the hall, and after him another smaller man, who groaned with the cold, and they wondered at the sight. Gudruda sat on the high seat and the firelight beat upon her face.

"Who comes here?" she said.

"One who would speak with thee, lady," answered Skallagrim.

"Here is Skallagrim the Baresark," said a man. "He is an outlaw, let us kill him!"

"Ay, it is Skallagrim," he answered, "and if there is killing to be done, why here's that which shall do it," and he drew out his axe and smiled grimly.

Then all held their peace, for they feared the axe of Skallagrim.

“Lady,” he said, “I do not come for slaying or such child’s play, I come to speak a word in thine ear—but first I ask a cup of mead and a morsel of food, for we have spent three days in the snows.”

So they ate and drank. Then Gudruda bade the Baresark draw near and tell her his tale.

“Lady,” said he, “Eric, my lord, lies dying on Mosfell.”

Gudruda turned white as the snow.

“Dying?—Eric lies dying?” she said. “Why, then, art thou here?”

“For this cause, lady: I think that thou canst save him, if he is not already sped.” And he told her all the tale.

Now Gudruda thought a while.

“This is a hard journey,” she said, “and it does not become a maid to visit outlaws in their caves. Yet I am come to this, that I will die before I shrink from anything that may save the life of Eric. When must we ride, Skallagrim?”

“This night,” said the Baresark. “This night while the men sleep, for now night and day are almost the same. The snow is deep and we have no time to lose if we would find Brighteyes living.”

“Then we will ride to-night,” answered Gudruda.

Afterwards, when people slept, Gudruda the Fair summoned her women, and bade them say to all who asked for her that she lay sick in bed. But she called three trusty thralls, bidding them bring two pack-horses laden with hay, food, drugs, candles made of sheep’s fat, and other goods, and ride with her. Then, all being ready, they rode away secretly up Stonefell, Gudruda on her horse Blackmane, and the others on good geldings that had been hay-fed in the yard, and by daylight they passed up Horse-Head Heights. They slept two nights in the snow, and on the second night almost perished there, for much soft snow fell. But afterwards came frost and a bitter northerly wind and they passed on. Gudruda was a strong woman and great of heart and will, and so it came about that on the third day she reached Mosfell, weary but little harmed, though the fingers of her left hand were frostbitten. They climbed the mountain, and when they came to the dell where the horses were kept, certain of Eric’s men met them and their faces were sad.

“How goes it now with Brighteyes?” said Skallagrim, for Gudruda could scarcely speak because of doubt and cold. “Is he dead, then?”

“Nay,” they answered, “but like to die, for he is beside himself and raves wildly.”

“Push on,” quoth Gudruda; “push on, lest it be too late.”

So they climbed the mountain on foot, won the pass and came to that giddy point of rock where he must tread who would reach the platform that is before the cave. Now since she had hung by her hands over Goldfoss gulf, Gudruda had feared to tread upon a height with

nothing to hold to. Skallagrim went first, then called to her to follow. Thrice she looked, and turned away, trembling, for the place was awful and the fall bottomless. Then she spoke aloud to herself:

“Eric did not fear to risk his life to save me when I hung over Golden Falls; less, then, should I fear to risk mine to save him,” and she stepped boldly down upon the point. But when she stood there, over the giddy height, shivers ran along her body, and her mind grew dark. She clutched at the rock, gave one low cry and began to fall. Indeed she would have fallen and been lost, had not Skallagrim, lying on his breast in the narrow hole, stretched out his arms, caught her by the cloak and kirtle and dragged her to him. Presently her senses came back.

“I am safe!” she gasped, “but by a very little. Methinks that here in this place I must live and die, for I can never tread yonder rock again.”

“Thou shalt pass it safe enough, lady, with a rope round thee,” said Skallagrim, and led the way to the cave.

Gudruda entered, forgetting all things in her love of Eric. A great fire of turf burned in the mouth of the cave to temper the bitter wind and frost, and by its light Gudruda saw her love through the smoke-reek. He lay upon a bed of skins at the far end of the cave and his bright grey eyes were wild, his wan face was white, and now of a sudden it grew red with fever, and then was white again. He had thrown the sheepskins from his mighty chest, the bones of which stood out grimly. His long arms were thrust through the locks of his golden hair, and on one side of his neck the hair clung to him and it was but a black mass.

He raved loudly in his madness. “Touch me not, carles, touch me not; ye think me spent and weak, but, by Thor! if ye touch my hair, I will loosen the knees of some. Gudruda alone shall shear my hair: I have sworn and I will keep the oath that I once broke. Give me snow! snow! my throat burns! Heap snow on my head, I bid you. Ye will not? Ye mock me, thinking me weak! Where, then, is Whitefire?—I have yet a deed to do! Who comes yonder? Is it a woman’s shape or is it but a smoke-wraith? ‘Tis Swanhild the Fatherless who walks the waters. Begone, Swanhild, thou witch! thou hast worked evil enough upon me. Nay, it is not Swanhild, it is Elfrida; lady, here in England I may not stay. In Iceland I am at home. Yea, yea, things go crossly; perchance in this garden we may speak again!”

Now Gudruda could bear his words no longer, but ran to him and knelt beside him.

“Peace, Eric!” she whispered. “Peace! It is I, thy love. It is Gudruda, who am come to thee.”

He turned his head and looked upon her strangely.

“No, no,” he said, “it is not Gudruda the Fair. She will have little to do with outlaws, and this is too rough a place for her to come to. It is dark also and Atli speaks in the darkness. If thou art Gudruda, give me a sign. Why comest thou here and where is Skallagrim? Ah! that was a good fight—

“Down among the ballast tumbling
Ospakar’s shield-carles were rolled.

“But he should never have slain the steersman. The axe goes first and Skallagrim follows after. Ha, ha! Ay, Swanhild, we’ll mingle tears. Give me the cup. Why, what is this? Thou art afire, a glory glows about thee, and from thee floats a scent like the scent of the Iceland meads in May.”

“Eric! Eric!” cried Gudruda, “I am come to shear thy hair, as thou didst swear that I alone should do.”

“Now I know that thou art Gudruda,” said the crazed man. “Cut, cut; but let not those knaves touch my head, lest I should slay them.”

Then Gudruda drew out her shears, and without more ado shore off Brighteyes’ golden locks. It was no easy task, for they were thick as a horse’s mane, and glued to the wound. Yet when she had cut them, she loosened the hair from the flesh with water which she heated upon the fire. The wound was in a bad state and blue, still Eric never winced while she dragged the hair from it. Then she washed the sore clean, and put sweet ointment on it and covered it with napkins.

This done, she gave Eric broth and he drank. Then, laying her hand upon his head, she looked into his eyes and bade him sleep. And presently he slept—which he had scarcely done for many days—slept like a little child.

Eric slept for a day and a night. But at that same hour of the evening, when he had fallen asleep, Gudruda, watching him by the light of a taper that was set upon a rock, saw him smile in his dreams. Presently he opened his eyes and stared at the fire which glowed in the mouth of the cave, and the great shadows that fell upon the rocks.

“Strange!” she heard him murmur, “it is very strange! but I dreamed I slept, and that Gudruda the Fair leaned over me as I slept. Where, then, is Skallagrim? Perhaps I am dead and that is Hela’s fire,” and he tried to lift himself upon his arm, but fell back from faintness, for he was very weak. Then Gudruda took his hand, and, leaning over him, spoke:

“Hush, Eric!” she said; “that was no dream, for I am here. Thou hast been sick to death, Eric; but now, if thou wilt rest, things shall go well with thee.”

“Thou art here?” said Eric, turning his white face towards her. “Do I still dream, or how comest thou here to Mosfell, Gudruda?”

“I came through the snows, Eric, to cut thy hair, which clung to the festering wound, for in thy madness thou wouldst not suffer anyone to touch it.”

“Thou camest through the snows—over the snows—to nurse me, Gudruda? Thou must love me much then,” and he was so weak that, as he spoke, the tears rolled down Eric’s cheeks.

Then Gudruda kissed him, weeping also, and, laying her face by his, bade him be at peace, for she was there to watch him.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

[Return to Contents](#)

THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

11. An Affair with the Barbarous Fishers

So this mighty Empress chose to be jealous of a mere woman prisoner!

Now my mind has been trained to work with a soldierly quickness in these moments of stress, and I decided on my proper course on the instant the words had left her lips. I was sacrificing myself for Atlantis by order of the High Council of the Priests, and, if needful, Nais must be sacrificed also, although in the same flash a scheme came to me for saving her.

So I bowed gravely before the Empress, and said I, "In this, and in all other things where a mere human hand is potent, I will carry out your wishes, Phorenice." And she on her part patted my arm, and fresh waves of feeling welled up from the depths of her wondrous eyes. Surely the Gods won for her half her schemes and half her battles when they gave Phorenice her shape, and her voice, and the matters which lay within the outlines of her face.

By this time the merchants, and the other dwellers adjacent to this part of the harbour, where the royal quay stands, had come down, offering changes of raiment, and houses to retire into. Phorenice was all graciousness, and though it was little enough I cared for mere wetness of my coat, still that part of the harbour into which we had been thrown by the mammoth was not over savoury, and I was glad enough to follow her example. For myself, I said no further word to Nais, and refrained even from giving her a glance of farewell. But a small sop like this was no meal for Phorenice, and she gave the port-captain strict orders for the guarding of his prisoner before she left him.

At the house into which I was ushered they gave me a bath, and I eased my host of the plainest garment in his store, and he was pleased enough at getting off so cheaply. But I had an hour to spend outside on the pavement listening to the distant din of bombardment before Phorenice came out to me again, and I could not help feeling some grim amusement at the face of the merchant who followed. The fellow was clearly ruined. He had a store of jewels and gauds of the most costly kind, which were only in fraction his own, seeing that he had bought them (as the custom is) in partnership with other merchants. These had pleased Phorenice's eye, and so she had taken all and disposed them on her person.

"Are they not pretty?" said she, showing them to me. "See how they flash under the sun. I am quite glad now, Deucalion, that the mammoth gave us that furious ride and that spill, since it has brought me such a bonny present. You may tell the fellow here that some day when he has earned some more, I will come and be his guest again. Ah! They have brought us litters, I see. Well, send one away and do you share mine with me, sir. We must play at being lovers to-day, even if love is a matter which will come to us both with more certainty to-morrow. No; do not order more bearers. My own slaves will carry us handily enough. I am glad you are not one of your gross, overfed men, Deucalion. I am small and slim myself, and I do not want to be husbanded by a man who will overshadow me."

"Back to the royal pyramid?" I asked.

"No, nor to the walls. I neither wish to fight nor to sit as Empress to-day, sir. As I have told you before, it is my whim to be Phorenice, the maiden, for a few hours, and if someone I wot of would woo me now, as other maidens are wooed, I should esteem it a luxury. Bid the

slaves carry us round the harbour's rim, and give word to these starers that, if they follow, I will call down fire upon them as I did upon the sacrifice."

Now, I had seen something of the unruliness of the streets myself, and I had gathered a hint also from the officer at the gate of the royal pyramid that night of Phorenice's welcoming banquet. But as whatever there was in the matter must be common knowledge to the Empress, I did not bring it to her memory then. So I dismissed the guard which had come up, and drove away with a few sharp words the throng of gaping sightseers who always, silly creatures, must needs come to stare at their betters; and then I sat in the litter in the place where I was invited, and the bearers put their heads to the pole.

They swung away with us along the wide pavement which runs between the houses of the merchants and the mariner folk and the dimpling waters of the harbour, and I thought somewhat sadly of the few ships that floated on that splendid basin now, and of the few evidences of business that showed themselves on the quays. Time was when the ships were berthed so close that many had to wait in the estuary outside the walls, and memorials had been sent to the King that the port should be doubled in size to hold the glut of trade. And that, too, in the old days of oar and sail, when machines drawing power from our Lord the Sun were but rarely used to help a vessel speedily along her course.

The Egypt voyage and a return was a matter of a year then, as against a brace of months now, and of three ships that set out, one at least could be reckoned upon succumbing to the dangers of the wide waters and the terrible beasts that haunt them. But in those old days trade roared with lusty life, and was ever growing wider and more heavy. Your merchant then was a portly man and gave generously to the Gods. But now all the world seemed to be in arms, and moreover trade was vulgar. Your merchant, if he was a man of substance, forgot his merchandise, swore that chaffering was more indelicate than blasphemy and curled his beard after the new fashion, and became a courtier. Where his father had spent anxious days with cargo tally and ship-master, the son wasted hours in directing sewing men as they adorned a coat, and nights in vapouring at a banquet.

Of the smaller merchants who had no substance laid by, taxes and the constant bickerings of war had well-nigh ground them into starvation. Besides, with the country in constant uproar, there were few markets left for most merchandise, nor was there aught made now which could be carried abroad. If your weaver is pressed as a fire-tube man he does not make cloth, and if your farmer is playing at rebellion, he does not buy slaves to till his fields. Indeed, they told me that a month before my return, as fine a cargo of slaves had been brought into harbour as ever came out of Europe, and there was nothing for it but to set them ashore across the estuary, and leave them free to starve or live in the wild ground there as they chose. There was no man in all Atlantis who would hold so much as one more slave as a gift.

But though I was grieved at this falling away, all schemes for remedy would be for afterwards. It would only make ill worse to speak of it as we rode together in the litter. I was growing to know Phorenice's moods enough for that. Still, I think that she too had studied mine, and did her best to interest me between her bursts of trifling. We went out to where the westernmost harbour wall joins the land, and there the panting bearers set us down. She led me into a little house of stone which stood by itself, built out on a promontory where there is a constant run of tide, and when we had been given admittance, after much unbarring, she showed me her new gold collectors.

In the dry knowledge taught in the colleges and groves of the Sacred Mountain it had been a common fact to us that the metal gold was present in a dissolved state in all sea water, but of plans for dragging it forth into yellow hardness, none had ever been discussed. But here this field-reared upstart of an Empress had stumbled upon the trick as though it had been written in a book.

She patted my arm laughingly as I stared curiously round the place. "I tell all others in Atlantis that only the Gods have this secret," said she, "and that They gave it to me as one of themselves. But I am no Goddess to you, am I, Deucalion? And, by my face! I have no other explanation of how this plan was invented. We'll suppose I must have dreamed it. Look! The sea-water sluices in through that culvert, and passes over these rough metal plates set in the floor, and then flows out again yonder in its natural course. You see the yellow metal caught in the ridges of the plates? That is gold. And my fellows here melt it with fire into bars, and take it to my smith's in the city. The tides vary constantly, as you priests know well, as the quiet moon draws them, and it does not take much figuring to know how much of the sea passes through these culverts in a month and how much gold to a grain should be caught in the plates. My fellows here at first thought to cheat me, but I towed two of them in the water once behind a galley till the cannibal fish ate them, and since then the others have given me credit for—for what do you think?"

"More divinity."

"I suppose it is that. But I am letting you see how it is done. Just have the head to work out a little sum, and see what an effect can be gained. You will be a God yet yourself, Deucalion, with these silly Atlanteans, if only you will use your wit and cleverness."

Was she laughing at me? Was she in earnest? I could not tell. Sometimes she pointed out that her success and triumphs were merely the reward of thought and brilliancy, and next moment she gave me some impossible explanation and left me to deduce that she must be more than mortal or the thing could never have been found. In good truth, this little woman with her supple mind and her supple body mystified me more and more the longer I stayed by her side; and more and more despairing did I grow that Atlantis could ever be restored by my agency to peace and the ancient Gods, even after I had carried out the commands of the High Council, and taken her to wife.

Only one plan seemed humanly possible, and that was to curb her further mischievousness by death and then leave the wretched country naturally to recover. It was just a dagger-stroke, and the thing was done. Yet the very idea of this revolted me, and when the desperate thought came to my mind (which it did ever and anon), I hugged to myself the answer that if it were fitting to do this thing, the High Gods in Their infinite wisdom would surely have put definite commands upon me for its carrying out.

Yet, such was the fascination of Phorenice, that when presently we left her gold collectors, and stumbled into such peril, that a little withholding of my hand would have gained her a passage to the nether Gods, I found myself fighting when she called upon me, as seldom I have fought before. And though, of course, some blame for this must be laid upon that lust of battle which thrills even the coldest of us when blows begin to whistle and war-cries start to ring, there is no doubt also that the pleasure of protecting Phorenice, and the distaste for seeing her pulled down by those rude, uncouth fishers put special nerve and vehemence into my blows.

The cause of the matter was the unrest and the prevalency to street violence which I have spoken of above, and the desperate poverty of the common people, which led them to take any risk if it showed them a chance of winning the wherewithal to purchase a meal. We had once more mounted the litter, and once more the bearers, with their heads beneath the pole, bore us on at their accustomed swinging trot. Phorenice was telling me about her new supplies of gold. She had made fresh sumptuary laws, it appeared.

“In the old days,” said she, “when yellow gold was tediously dredged up grain by grain from river gravels in the dangerous lands, a quill full would cost a rich man’s savings, and so none but those whose high station fitted them to be so adorned could wear golden ornaments. But when the sea-water gave me gold here by the double handful a day, I found that the price of these river hoards decreased, and one day—could you credit it?—a common fellow, who was one of my smiths, came to me wearing a collar of yellow gold on his own common neck. Well, I had that neck divided, as payment for his presumption; and as I promised to repeat the division promptly on all other offenders, that special species of forwardness seems to be checked for the time. There are many exasperations, Deucalion, in governing these common people.”

She had other things to say upon the matter, but at this point I saw two clumsy boats of fishers paddling to us from over the ripples, and at the same time amongst the narrow lanes which led between the houses on the other side of us, savage-faced men were beginning to run after the litter in threatening clusters.

“With permission,” I said, “I will step out of the conveyance and scatter this rabble.”

“Oh, the people always cluster round me. Poor ugly souls, they seem to take a strange delight in coming to stare at my pretty looks. But scatter them. I have said I did not wish to be followed. I am taking holiday now, Deucalion, am I not, whilst you learn to woo me?”

I stepped to the ground. The rough fishers in the boats were beginning to shout to those who dodged amongst the houses to see to it that we did not escape, and the numbers who hemmed us in on the shore side were increasing every moment. The prospect was unpleasant enough. We had come out beyond the merchants’ quarters, and were level with those small huts of mud and grass which the fishing population deem sufficient for shelter, and which has always been a spot where turbulence might be expected. Indeed, even in those days of peace and good government in the old King’s time, this part of the city had rarely been without its weekly riot.

The life of the fisherman is the most hard that any human toilers have to endure. Violence from the wind and waves, and pelting from firestones out of the sky are their daily portion; the great beasts that dwell in the seas hunt them with savage persistence, and it is a rare day when at least some one of the fishers’ guild fails to come home to answer the tally.

Moreover, the manner which prevails of catching fish is not without its risks.

To each man there is a large sea-fowl taken as a nestling, and trained to the work. A ring of bronze is round its neck to prevent its swallowing the spoil for which it dives, and for each fish it takes and flies back with to the boat, the head and tail and inwards are given to it for a reward, the ring being removed whilst it makes the meal.

The birds are faithful, once they have got a training, and are seldom known to desert their owners; but, although the fishers treat them more kindly than they do their wives, or children of their own begetting, the life of the birds is precarious like that of their masters. The larger beasts and fish of the sea prey on them as they prey on the smaller fish, and so whatever care may be lavished upon them, they are most liable to sudden cutting off.

And here is another thing that makes the life of the fisher most precarious: if his fishing bird be slain, and the second which he has in training also come by ill fortune, he is left suddenly bereft of all utensils of livelihood, and (for aught his guild-fellows care) he may go starve. For these fishers hold that the Gods of the sea regulate their craft, and that if one is not pleasing to Them They rob him of his birds; after which it would be impious to have any truck or dealing with such a fellow; and accordingly he is left to starve or rob as he chooses.

All of which circumstances tend to make the fishers rude, desperate men, who have been forced into the trade because all other callings have rejected them. They are fellows, moreover, who will spend the gains of a month on a night's debauch, for fear that the morrow will rob them of life and the chance of spending; and, moreover, it is their one point of honour to be curbed in no desire by an ordinary fear of consequences. As will appear.

I went quickly towards the largest knot of these people, who were skulking behind the houses, leaving the litter halted in the path behind me, and I bade them sharply enough to disperse. "For an employment," I added, "put your houses in order, and clean the fish offal from the lanes between them. To-morrow I will come round here to inspect, and put this quarter into a better order. But for to-day the Empress (whose name be adored) wishes for a privacy, so cease your staring."

"Then give us money," said a shrill voice from amongst the huts.

"I will send you a torch in an hour's time," I said grimly, "and rig you a gallows, if you give me more annoyance. To your kennels, you!"

I think they would have obeyed the voice of authority if they had been left to themselves. There was a quick stir amongst them. Those that stood in the sunlight instinctively slipped into the shadow, and many dodged into the houses and cowered in dark corners out of sight. But the men in the two hide-covered fisher-boats that were paddling up, called them back with boisterous cries.

I signed to the litter-bearers to move on quickly along their road. There was need of discipline here, and I was minded to deal it out myself with a firm hand. I judged that I could prevent them following the Empress, but if she still remained as a glittering bait for them to rob, and I had to protect her also, it might be that my work would not be done so effectively.

But it seems I was presumptuous in giving an order which dealt with the person of Phorenice. She bade the bearers stand where they were, and stepped out, and drew her weapons from beneath the cushions. She came towards me strapping a sword on to her hip, and carrying a well-dinted target of gold on her left forearm. "An unfair trick," cries she, laughing. "If you will keep a fight to yourself now, Deucalion, where will your greediness carry you when I am your shrinking, wistful little wife? Are these fools truly going to stand up against us?"

I was not coveting a fight, but it seemed as if there would be no avoidance of it now. The robe and the glittering gauds of which Phorenice had recently despoiled the merchant, drew the eyes of these people with keen attraction. The fishers in the boats paddled into the surf which edged the beach, and leaped overside and left the frail basket-work structures to be spewed up sound or smashed, as chance ordered. And from the houses, and from the filthy lanes between them, poured out hordes of others, women mixed with the men, gathering round us threateningly.

“Have a care,” shouted one on the outskirts of the crowd. “She called down fire for the sacrifice once to-day, and she can burn up others here if she chooses.”

“So much the more for those that are left,” retorted another. “She cannot burn all.”

“Nay, I will not burn any,” said Phorenice, “but you shall look upon my sword-play till you are tired.”

I heard her say that with some malicious amusement, knowing (as one of the Seven) how she had called down the fires of the sky to burn that cloven-hoofed horse offered in sacrifice, and knowing too, full well, that she could bring down no fire here. But they gave us little enough time for wordy courtesies. Their Empress never went far unattended, and, for aught the wretches knew, an escort might be close behind. So what pilfering they did, it behoved them to get done quickly.

They closed in, jostling one another to be first, and the reek of their filthy bodies made us cough. A grimy hand launched out to seize some of the jewels which flashed on Phorenice’s breast, and I lopped it off at the elbow, so that it fell at her feet, and a second later we were engaged.

“Your back to mine, comrade,” cried she, with a laugh, and then drew and laid about her with fine dexterity. Bah! but it was mere slaughter, that first bout.

The crowd hustled inwards with such greediness to seize what they could, that none had space to draw back elbow for a thrust, and we two kept a circle round us by sheer whirling of steel. It is necessary to do one’s work cleanly in these bouts, as wounded left on the ground unnoticed before one are as dangerous as so many snakes. But as we circled round in our battling I noted that all of Phorenice’s quarry lay peaceful and still. By the Gods! but she could play a fine sword, this dainty Empress. She touched life with every thrust.

Yes, it was plain to see, now an example was given, that the throne of Atlantis had been won, not by a lovely face and a subtle tongue alone; and (as a fighter myself) I did not like Phorenice the less for the knowledge. I could but see her out of the corner of my eye, and that only now and again, for the fishers, despite their ill-knowledge of fence, and the clumsiness of their weapons, had heavy numbers, and most savage ferocity; and as they made so confident of being able to pull us down, it required more than a little hard battling to keep them from doing it. Ay, by the Gods! it was at times a fight my heart warmed to, and if I had not contrived to pluck a shield from one fool who came too vain-gloriously near me with one, I could not swear they would not have dragged me down by sheer ravening savageness.

And always above the burly uproar of the fight came very pleasantly to my ears Phorenice’s cry of “Deucalion!” which she chose as her battle shout. I knew her, of course, to be a past-

mistress of the art of compliment, and it was no new thing for me to hear the name roared out above a battle din, but it was given there under circumstances which were peculiar, and for the life of me I could not help being tickled by the flattery.

Condemn my weakness how you will, but I came very near then to liking the Empress of Atlantis in the way she wished. And as for that other woman who should have filled my mind, I will confess that the stress of the moment, and the fury of the engagement, had driven both her and her strait completely out beyond the marches of my memory. Of such frail stuff are we made, even those of us who esteem ourselves the strongest.

Now it is a temptation few men born to the sword can resist, to throw themselves heart and soul into a fight for a fight's sake, and it seems that women can be bitten with the same fierce infection. The attack slackened and halted. We stood in the middle of a ring of twisted dead, and the rest of the fishers and their women who hemmed us in shrank back out of reach of our weapons.

It was the moment for a truce, and the moment when a few strong words would have sent them back cowering to their huts, and given us free passage to go where we chose. But no, this Phorenice must needs sing a hymn to her sword and mine, gloating over our feats and invulnerability; and then she must needs ask payment for the bearers of her litter whom they had killed, and then speak balefully of the burnings, and the skinings, and the sawings asunder with which this fishers' quarter would be treated in the near future, till they learned the virtues of deportment and genteel manners.

"It makes your backs creep, does it?" said Phorenice. "I do not wonder. This severity must have its unpleasant side. But why do you not put it beyond my power to give the order? Either you must think yourselves Gods or me no Goddess, or you would not have gone on so far. Come now, you nasty-smelling people, follow out your theory, and if you make a good fight of it, I swear by my face I will be lenient with those who do not fall."

But there was no pressing up to meet our swords. They still ringed us in, savage and sullen, beyond the ring of their own dead, and would neither run back to the houses, nor give us the game of further fight. There was a certain stubborn bravery about them that one could not but admire, and for myself I determined that next time it became my duty to raise troops, I would catch a handful of these men, and teach them handiness with the utensils of war, and train them to loyalty and faithfulness. But presently from behind their ranks a stone flew, and though it whizzed between the Empress and myself, and struck down a fisher, it showed that they had brought a new method into their attack, and it behoved us to take thought and meet it.

I looked round me up and down the beach. There was no sign of a rescue. "Phorenice," I said in the court tongue, which these barbarous fishers would know little enough of, "I take it that a whiff of the sea-breeze would come very pleasant after all this warm play. As you can show such pretty sword work, will you cut me a way down to the beach, and I will do my poor best to keep these creatures from snapping at our heels?"

"Oh!" cried she. "Then I am to have a courtier for a husband after all. Why have you kept back your flattering speeches till now? Is that your trick to make me love you?"

"I will think out the reason for it another time."

“Ah, these stern, commanding husbands,” said she, “how they do press upon their little wives!” and with that leaped over the ring of dead before her, and cut and stabbed a way through those that stood between her and the waters which creamed and crashed upon the beach. Gods! what a charge she made. It made me tingle with admiration as I followed sideways behind her, guarding the rear. And I am a man that has spent so many years in battling, that it takes something far out of the common to move me to any enthusiasm in this matter.

There were two boats creaking and washing about in the edge of the surf, but in one, happily, the wicker-work which made its frame was crushed by the weight of the waves into a shapeless bundle of sticks, and would take half a day to replace. So that, let us but get the other craft afloat, and we should be free from further embroiling. But the fishers were quick to see the object of this new manoeuvre. “Guard the boat,” they shouted. “Smash her; slit her skin with your knives! Tear her with your fingers! Swim her out to sea! Oh, at least take the paddles!”

But, if these clumsy fishers could run, Phorenice was like a legged snake for speed. She was down beside the boat before any could reach it, laughing and shouting out that she could beat them at every point. Myself, I was slower of foot; and, besides, there was some that offered me a fight on the road, and I was not wishful to baulk them; and moreover, the fewer we left clamouring behind, the fewer there would be to speed our going with their stones. Still I came to the beach in good order, and laid hands on the flimsy boat and tipped her dry.

“Fighting is no trade for, me,” I cried, “whilst you are here, Phorenice. Guard me my back and walk out into the water.”

I took the boat, thrusting it afloat, and wading with it till two lines of the surf were past. The fishers swarmed round us, active as fish in their native element, and strove mightily to get hands on the boat and slit the hides which covered it with their eager fingers. But I had a spare hand, and a short stabbing-knife for such close-quarter work, and here, there, and everywhere was Phorenice the Empress, with her thirsty dripping sword. By the Gods! I laughed with sheer delight at seeing her art of fence.

But the swirl of a great fish into the shallows, and the squeal of a fisher as he was dragged down and home away into the deep, made me mindful of foes that no skill can conquer, and no bravery avoid. Without taking time to give the Empress a word of warning, I stooped, and flung an arm round her, and threw her up out of the water into the boat, and then thrust on with all my might, driving the flimsy craft out to sea, whilst my legs crept under me for fear of the beasts which swam invisible beneath the muddied waters.

To the fishers, inured to these horrid perils by daily association, the seizing of one of their number meant little, and they pressed on, careless of their dull lives, eager only to snatch the jewels which still flaunted on Phorenice’s breast. Of the vengeance that might come after they recked nothing; let them but get the wherewithal for one night’s good debauch, and they would forget that such a thing as the morning of a morrow could have existence.

Two fellows I caught and killed that, diving down beneath, tried to slit the skin of the boat out of sight under the water; and Phorenice cared for all those that tried to put a hand on the gunwales. Yes, and she did more than that. A huge long-necked turtle that was stirred out of

the mud by the turmoil, came up to daylight, and swung its great horn-lipped mouth to this side and that, seeking for a prey. The fishers near it dodged and dived. I, thrusting at the stern of the boat, could only hope it would pass me by and so offered an easy mark. It scurried towards me, champing its noisy lips, and beating the water into spray with its flippers.

But Phorenice was quick with a remedy and a rescue. She passed her sword through one of the fishers that pressed her, and then thrust the body towards the turtle. The great neck swooped towards it; the long slimy feelers which protruded from its head quivered and snuffled; and then the horny green jaws crunched on it, and drew it down out of sight.

The boat was in deep water now, and Phorenice called upon me to come in over the side, she the while balancing nicely so that the flimsy thing should not be overset. The fishers had given up their pursuit, finding that they earned nothing but lopped-off arms and split faces by coming within swing of this terrible sword of their Empress, and so contented themselves with volleying jagged stones in the hopes of stunning us or splitting the boat. However, Phorenice crouched in the stern, holding the two shields—her own golden target, and the rough hide buckler I had won—and so protected both of us whilst I paddled, and though many stones clattered against the shields, and hit the hide covering of the boat, so that it resounded like a drum, none of them did damage, and we drew quickly out of their range.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)