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# Schlock!

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This Week's Featured Story:

A Schlock! Classic Presentation

## The Valley Of The Worm

By ROBERT E HOWARD

Also Featuring:

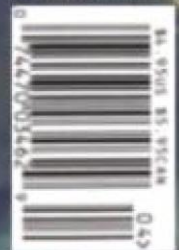
## Heirs Of Atlantis

By MICHELE DUTCHER

## In The Far Deeps Of Gre-Felhn (A Stone Of Memories)

By SERGIO PALUMBO

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

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Schlock! is an exciting new 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 schlock fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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### **This Edition**

***This week's cover illustration is "Gibel Atlantidy" by Nicholas Roerich.  
Cover design by C Priest Brumley.***

**Editorial by Gavin Chappell**

**Valley of the Worm by Robert E Howard - *James Allison remembers another life...* SWORD AND SORCERY**

**Heirs of Atlantis by Michele Dutcher - *An encounter with an Atlantean...* HORROR**

**Ayame's Love - Part Eight by Thomas C Hewitt - *A woman that had too many stories entered a town that gave away nothing...* EPIC POEM**

**The Dwarf-Forged Sword by Gavin Chappell - *A sword forged by dwarves and a battle that will only cease at the world's ending...* MYTHOLOGY**

**Humanoid by Nathan Rowark - *Robots have always held dread for me, in regards to how they will one day treat us...* POETRY**

**In the Far Deeps of Gre- Felhn - *A Stone of Memories by Sergio Palumbo - The early part of the quest had been easy...* FANTASY**

**The House of Skulls - Part Seven by Gavin Chappell - *The way back...* FANTASY/HORROR**

**Schlock! Classic Serial: Varney the Vampire: Part Forty-Eight ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest. *Before Twilight... before Nosferatu ... before Dracula... there was Varney...* GOTHIC HORROR**

**Schlock! Classic Serial: After London - Part Six by Richard Jefferies -  
Introducing Felix Aquila, slumbering hero of our tale... SCIENCE  
FICTION**

EDITORIAL

This week we have another story from Italian writer Sergio Palumbo, dwarf-oriented fantasy-tale *In the Far Deeps of Gre-Felhn*, and also *Heirs of Atlantis*, a story by Michele Dutcher, who also edits Sergio's stories. We also have *Valley of the Worm*, from Robert E Howard, one of several stories featuring James Allison, a sickly man (by no means one of REH's musclemen!) who recalls one of his many past incarnations in the prehistoric past.

Meanwhile, post-apocalyptic tale *After London* reaches Book Two, in which we are introduced to its hero, Felix Aquila. *Ayame's Love* reaches part eight, and coincidentally, introduces its eponymous heroine. My *House of Skulls* reaches its ambiguous close, and I've also included another retelling from Norse mythology in the story of *The Dwarf-Forged Sword*. And of course, there's always *Varney the Vampyre*.

-Gavin Chappell

I WILL TELL YOU OF NIORD AND THE WORM. You have heard the tale before in many guises wherein the hero was named Tyr, or Perseus, or Siegfried, or Beowulf, or St George. But it was Niord who met the loathly demoniac thing that crawled hideously up from hell, and from which meeting sprang the cycle of hero-tales that revolves down the ages until the very substance of the truth is lost and passes into the limbo of all forgotten legends. I know whereof I speak, for I was Niord.

As I lie here awaiting death, which creeps slowly upon me like a blind slug, my dreams are filled with glittering visions and the pageantry of glory. It is not of the drab, disease-racked life of James Allison I dream, but all the gleaming figures of the mighty pageantry that have passed before, and shall come after; for I have faintly glimpsed, not merely the shapes that come after, as a man in a long parade glimpses, far ahead, the line of figures that precede him winding over a distant hill, etched shadow-like against the sky. I am one and all the pageantry of shapes and guises and masks which have been, are, and shall be the visible manifestations of that illusive, intangible, but vitally existent spirit now promenading under the brief and temporary name of James Allison.

Each man on earth, each woman, is part and all of a similar caravan of shapes and beings. But they cannot remember—their minds cannot bridge the brief, awful gulfs of blackness which he between those unstable shapes, and which the spirit, soul or ego, in spanning, shakes off its fleshy masks. I remember. Why I can remember is the strangest tale of all; but as I lie here with death's black wings slowly unfolding over me, all the dim folds of my previous lives are shaken out before my eyes, and I see myself in many forms and guises—braggart, swaggering, fearful, loving, foolish, all that men have been or will be.

I have been man in many lands and many conditions; yet—and here is another strange thing—my line of reincarnation runs straight down one unerring channel. I have never been any but a man of that restless race men once called Nordheimr and later Aryans, and today name by many names and designations. Their history is my history, from the first mewling wail of a hairless white ape cub in the wastes of the Arctic, to the death-cry of the last degenerate product of ultimate civilization, in some dim and unguessed future age.

My name has been Hialmar, Tyr, Bragi, Bran, Horsa, Eric and John. I strode red-handed through the deserted streets of Rome behind the yellow-maned Brennus; I wandered through the violated plantations with Alaric and his Goths when the flame of burning villas lit the land like day and an empire was gasping its last under our sandalled feet; I waded sword in hand through the foaming surf from Hengist's galley to lay the foundations of England in blood and pillage; when Leif the Lucky sighted the broad white beaches of an unguessed world, I stood beside him in the bows of the dragon-ship, my golden beard blowing in the wind; and when Godfrey of Bouillon led his Crusaders over the walls of Jerusalem, I was among them in steel cap and brigandine.

But it is of none of these things I would speak. I would take you back with me into an age beside which that of Brennus and Rome is as yesterday. I would take you back through, not merely centuries and millenniums, but epochs and dim ages unguessed by the wildest philosopher. Oh far, far and far will you fare into the nighted past before you win beyond the boundaries of my race, blue-eyed, yellow-haired, wanderers, slayers, lovers, mighty in rapine and wayfaring.

It is the adventure of Niord Worm's-bane of which I would speak—the rootstem of a whole cycle of herotales which has not yet reached its end, the grisly underlying reality that lurks behind time-distorted myths of dragons, fiends and monsters.

Yet it is not alone with the mouth of Niord that I will speak. I am James Allison no less than I was Niord, and as I unfold the tale, I will interpret some of his thoughts and dreams and deeds from the mouth of the modern I, so that the saga of Niord shall not be a meaningless chaos to you. His blood is your blood, who are sons of Aryan; but wide misty gulfs of aeons lie horrifically between, and the deeds and dreams of Niord seem as alien to your deeds and dreams as the primordial and lion-haunted forest seems alien to the white-walled city street.

It was a strange world in which Niord lived and loved and fought, so long ago that even my aeon-spanning memory cannot recognize landmarks. Since then the surface of the earth has changed, not once but a score of times; continents have risen and sunk, seas have changed their beds and rivers their courses, glaciers have waxed and waned, and the very stars and constellations have altered and shifted.

It was so long ago that the cradle-land of my race was still in Nordheim. But the epic drifts of my people had already begun, and blue-eyed, yellow-maned tribes flowed eastward and southward and westward, on century-long treks that carried them around the world and left their bones and their traces in strange lands and wild waste places. On one of these drifts I grew from infancy to manhood. My knowledge of that

northern homeland was dim memories, like half-remembered dreams, of blinding white snow plains and ice fields, of great fires roaring in the circle of hide tents, of yellow manes flying in great winds, and a sun setting in a lurid wallow of crimson clouds, blazing on trampled snow where still dark forms lay in pools that were redder than the sunset.

That last memory stands out clearer than the others. It was the field of Jotunheim, I was told in later years, whereon had just been fought that terrible battle which was the Armageddon of the Æsir-folk, the subject of a cycle of hero-songs for long ages, and which still lives today in dim dreams of Ragnarok and Goetterdaemmerung. I looked on that battle as a mewling infant; so I must have lived about—but I will not name the age, for I would be called a madman, and historians and geologists alike would rise to refute me.

But my memories of Nordheim were few and dim, paled by memories of that long, long trek upon which I had spent my life. We had not kept to a straight course, but our trend had been for ever southward. Sometimes we had bided for a while in fertile upland valleys or rich river-traversed plains, but always we took up the trail again, and not always because of drouth or famine. Often we left countries teeming with game and wild grain to push into wastelands. On our trail we moved endlessly, driven only by our restless whim, yet blindly following a cosmic law, the workings of which we never guessed, any more than the wild geese guess in their flights around the world. So at last we came into the Country of the Worm.

I will take up the tale at the time when we came into jungle-clad hills reeking with rot and teeming with spawning life, where the tom-toms of a savage people pulsed incessantly through the hot breathless night. These people came forth to dispute our way short, strongly built men, black-haired, painted, ferocious, but indisputably white men. We knew their breed of old. They were Picts, and of all alien races the fiercest. We had met their kind before in thick forests, and in upland valleys beside mountain lakes. But many moons had passed since those meetings.

I believe this particular tribe represented the easternmost drift of the race. They were the most primitive and ferocious of any I ever met. Already they were exhibiting hints of characteristics I have noted among black savages in jungle countries, though they had dwelled in these environs only a few generations. The abysmal jungle was engulfing them, was obliterating their pristine characteristics and shaping them in its own horrific mould. They were drifting into head-hunting, and cannibalism was but a step which I believe they must have taken before they became extinct. These things are natural adjuncts to the jungle; the Picts did not learn them from the black people, for then there were no blacks among those hills. In later years they came up from the south, and the Picts first enslaved and then were absorbed by them. But with that my saga of Niord is not concerned.

We came into that brutish hill country, with its squalling abyssms of savagery and black primitiveness. We were a whole tribe marching on foot, old men, wolfish with their long beards and gaunt limbs, giant warriors in their prime, naked children running along the line of march, women with tousled yellow locks carrying babies which never cried—unless it were to scream from pure rage. I do not remember our numbers, except that there were some 500 fighting-men—and by fighting-men I mean

all males, from the child just strong enough to lift a bow, to the oldest of the old men. In that madly ferocious age all were fighters. Our women fought, when brought to bay, like tigresses, and I have seen a babe, not yet old enough to stammer articulate words, twist its head and sink its tiny teeth in the foot that stamped out its life.

Oh, we were fighters! Let me speak of Niord. I am proud of him, the more when I consider the paltry crippled body of James Allison, the unstable mask I now wear. Niord was tall, with great shoulders, lean hips and mighty limbs. His muscles were long and swelling, denoting endurance and speed as well as strength. He could run all day without tiring, and he possessed a coordination that made his movements a blur of blinding speed. If I told you his full strength, you would brand me a liar. But there is no man on earth today strong enough to bend the bow Niord handled with ease. The longest arrow-flight on record is that of a Turkish archer who sent a shaft 482 yards. There was not a stripling in my tribe who could not have bettered that flight.

As we entered the jungle country we heard the tom-toms booming across the mysterious valleys that slumbered between the brutish hills, and in a broad, open plateau we met our enemies. I do not believe these Picts knew us, even by legends, or they had never rushed so openly to the onset, though they outnumbered us. But there was no attempt at ambush. They swarmed out of the trees, dancing and singing their war-songs, yelling their barbarous threats. Our heads should hang in their idol-hut and our yellow-haired women should bear their sons. Ho! ho! ho! By Ymir, it was Niord who laughed then, not James Allison. Just so we of the Æsir laughed to hear their threats—deep thunderous laughter from broad and mighty chests. Our trail was laid in blood and embers through many lands. We were the slayers and ravishers, striding sword in hand across the world, and that these folk threatened us woke our rugged humour.

We went to meet them, naked but for our wolfhides, swinging our bronze swords, and our singing was like rolling thunder in the hills. They sent their arrows among us, and we gave back their fire. They could not match us in archery. Our arrows hissed in blinding clouds among them, dropping them like autumn leaves, until they howled and frothed like mad dogs and changed to hand-grips. And we, mad with the fighting joy, dropped our bows and ran to meet them, as a lover runs to his love.

By Ymir, it was a battle to madden and make drunken with the slaughter and the fury. The Picts were as ferocious as we, but ours was the superior physique, the keener wit, the more highly developed fighting-brain. We won because we were a superior race, but it was no easy victory. Corpses littered the blood-soaked earth; but at last they broke, and we cut them down as they ran, to the very edge of the trees. I tell of that fight in a few bald words. I cannot paint the madness, the reek of sweat and blood, the panting, muscle-straining effort, the splintering of bones under mighty blows, the rending and hewing of quivering sentient flesh; above all the merciless abysmal savagery of the whole affair, in which there was neither rule nor order, each man fighting as he would or could. If I might do so, you would recoil in horror; even the modern I, cognizant of my close kinship with those times, stand aghast as I review that butchery. Mercy was yet unborn, save as some individual's whim, and rules of warfare were as yet undreamed of. It was an age in which each tribe and each human fought tooth and fang from birth to death, and neither gave nor expected mercy.

So we cut down the fleeing Picts, and our women came out on the field to brain the wounded enemies with stones, or cut their throats with copper knives. We did not torture. We were no more cruel than life demanded. The rule of life was ruthlessness, but there is more wanton cruelty today than ever we dreamed of. It was not wanton bloodthirstiness that made us butcher wounded and captive foes. It was because we knew our chances of survival increased with each enemy slain.

Yet there was occasionally a touch of individual mercy, and so it was in this fight. I had been occupied with a duel with an especially valiant enemy. His tousled thatch of black hair scarcely came above my chin, but he was a solid knot of steel-spring muscles, than which lightning scarcely moved faster. He had an iron sword and a hide-covered buckler. I had a knotty-headed bludgeon. That fight was one that glutted even my battle-lusting soul. I was bleeding from a score of flesh wounds before one of my terrible, lashing strokes smashed his shield like cardboard, and an instant later my bludgeon glanced from his unprotected head. Ymir! Even now I stop to laugh and marvel at the hardness of that Pict's skull. Men of that age were assuredly built on a rugged plan! That blow should have splattered his brains like water. It did lay his scalp open horribly, dashing him senseless to the earth, where I let him lie, supposing him to be dead, as I joined in the slaughter of the fleeing warriors.

When I returned reeking with sweat and blood, my club horridly clotted with blood and brains, I noticed that my antagonist was regaining consciousness, and that a naked tousle-headed girl was preparing to give him the finishing touch with a stone she could scarcely lift. A vagrant whim caused me to check the blow. I had enjoyed the fight, and I admired the adamant quality of his skull.

We made camp a short distance away, burned our dead on a great pyre, and after looting the corpses of the enemy, we dragged them across the plateau and cast them down in a valley to make a feast for the hyenas, jackals and vultures which were already gathering. We kept close watch that night, but we were not attacked, though far away through the jungle we could make out the red gleam of fires, and could faintly hear, when the wind veered, the throb of tom-toms and demoniac screams and yells keenings for the slain or mere animal squallings of fury.

Nor did they attack us in the days that followed. We bandaged our captive's wounds and quickly learned his primitive tongue, which, however, was so different from ours that I cannot conceive of the two languages having ever had a common source.

His name was Grom, and he was a great hunter and fighter, he boasted. He talked freely and held no grudge, grinning broadly and showing tusk-like teeth, his beady eyes glittering from under the tangled black mane that fell over his low forehead. His limbs were almost ape-like in their thickness.

He was vastly interested in his captors, though he could never understand why he had been spared; to the end it remained an inexplicable mystery to him. The Picts obeyed the law of survival even more rigidly than did the Æsir. They were the more practical, as shown by their more settled habits. They never roamed as far or as blindly as we. Yet in every line we were the superior race.

Grom, impressed by our intelligence and fighting qualities, volunteered to go into the hills and make peace for us with his people. It was immaterial to us, but we let him go. Slavery had not yet been dreamed of.

So Grom went back to his people, and we forgot about him, except that I went a trifle more cautiously about my hunting, expecting him to be lying in wait to put an arrow through my back. Then one day we heard a rattle of tom-toms, and Grom appeared at the edge of the jungle, his face split in his gorilla grin, with the painted, skin-clad, feather-bedecked chiefs of the clans. Our ferocity had awed them, and our sparing of Grom further impressed them. They could not understand leniency; evidently we valued them too cheaply to bother about killing one when he was in our power.

So peace was made with much pow-wow, and sworn to with many strange oaths and rituals we swore only by Ymir, and an Æsir never broke that vow. But they swore by the elements, by the idol which sat in the fetish-hut where fires burned for ever and a withered crone slapped a leather-covered drum all night long, and by another being too terrible to be named.

Then we all sat around the fires and gnawed meat-bones, and drank a fiery concoction they brewed from wild grain, and the wonder is that the feast did not end in a general massacre; for that liquor had devils in it and made maggots writhe in our brains. But no harm came of our vast drunkenness, and thereafter we dwelled at peace with our barbarous neighbours. They taught us many things, and learned many more from us. But they taught us iron-workings, into which they had been forced by the lack of copper in those hills, and we quickly excelled them.

We went freely among their villages—mud-walled clusters of huts in hilltop clearings, overshadowed by giant trees—and we allowed them to come at will among our camps—straggling lines of hide tents on the plateau where the battle had been fought. Our young men cared not for their squat beady-eyed women, and our rangy clean-limbed girls with their tousled yellow heads were not drawn to the hairy-breasted savages. Familiarity over a period of years would have reduced the repulsion on either side, until the two races would have flowed together to form one hybrid people, but long before that time the Æsir rose and departed, vanishing into the mysterious hazes of the haunted south. But before that exodus there came to pass the horror of the Worm.

I hunted with Grom and he led me into brooding, uninhabited valleys and up into silence-haunted hills where no men had set foot before us. But there was one valley, off in the mazes of the south-west, into which he would not go. Stumps of shattered columns, relics of a forgotten civilization, stood among the trees on the valley floor. Grom showed them to me, as we stood on the cliffs that flanked the mysterious vale, but he would not go down into it, and he dissuaded me when I would have gone alone. He would not speak plainly of the danger that lurked there, but it was greater than that of serpent or tiger, or the trumpeting elephants which occasionally wandered up in devastating droves from the south.

Of all beasts, Grom told me in the gutturals of his tongue, the Picts feared only Satha, the great snake, and they shunned the jungle where he lived. But there was another thing they feared, and it was connected in some manner with the Valley of Broken



Stones, as the Picts called the crumbling pillars. Long ago, when his ancestors had first come into the country, they had dared that grim vale, and a whole clan of them had perished, suddenly, horribly and unexplainably. At least Grom did not explain. The horror had come up out of the earth, somehow, and it was not good to talk of it, since it was believed that It might be summoned by speaking of It—whatever It was.

But Grom was ready to hunt with me anywhere else; for he was the greatest hunter among the Picts, and many and fearful were our adventures. Once I killed, with the iron sword I had forged with my own hands, that most terrible of all beasts—old sabre-tooth, which men today call a tiger because he was more like a tiger than anything else. In reality he was almost as much like a bear in build, save for his unmistakably feline head. Sabre-tooth was massive-limbed, with a low-hung, great, heavy body, and he vanished from the earth because he was too terrible a fighter, even for that grim age. As his muscles and ferocity grew, his brain dwindled until at last even the instinct of self-preservation vanished. Nature, who maintains her balance in such things, destroyed him because, had his super-fighting powers been allied with an intelligent brain, he would have destroyed all other forms of life on earth. He was a freak on the road of evolution organic development gone mad and run to fangs and talons, to slaughter and destruction.

I killed sabre-tooth in a battle that would make a saga in itself, and for months afterwards I lay semi-delirious with ghastly wounds that made the toughest warriors shake their heads. The Picts said that never before had a man killed a sabre-tooth single-handed. Yet I recovered, to the wonder of all.

While I lay at the doors of death there was a secession from the tribe. It was a peaceful secession, such as continually occurred and contributed greatly to the peopling of the world by yellow-haired tribes. Forty-five of the young men took themselves mates simultaneously and wandered off to found a clan of their own. There was no revolt; it was a racial custom which bore fruit in all the later ages, when tribes sprung from the same roots met, after centuries of separation, and cut one another's throats with joyous abandon. The tendency of the Aryan and the pre-Aryan was always towards disunity, clans splitting off the main stem, and scattering.

So these young men, led by one Bragi, my brother-in-arms, took their girls and venturing to the south-west, took up their abode in the Valley of Broken Stones. The Picts expostulated, hinting vaguely of a monstrous doom that haunted the vale, but the Æsir laughed. We had left our own demons and weirds in the icy wastes of the far blue north, and the devils of other races did not much impress us.

When my full strength was returned, and the grisly wounds were only scars, I girt on my weapons and strode over the plateau to visit Bragi's clan. Grom did not accompany me. He had not been in the Æsir camp for several days. But I knew the way. I remembered well the valley, from the cliffs of which I had looked down and seen the lake at the upper end, the trees thickening into forest at the lower extremity. The sides of the valley were high sheer cliffs, and a steep broad ridge at either end cut it off from the surrounding country. It was towards the lower or southwestern end that the valley floor was dotted thickly with ruined columns, some towering high among the trees, some fallen into heaps of lichen-clad stones. What race reared them none

knew. But Grom had hinted fearsomely of a hairy, apish monstrosity dancing loathsomely under the moon to a demoniac piping that induced horror and madness.

I crossed the plateau whereon our camp was pitched, descended the slope, traversed a shallow vegetation-choked valley, climbed another slope, and plunged into the hills. A half-day's leisurely travel brought me to the ridge on the other side of which lay the valley of the pillars. For many miles I had seen no sign of human life. The settlements of the Picts all lay many miles to the east. I topped the ridge and looked down into the dreaming valley with its still blue lake, its brooding cliffs and its broken columns jutting among the trees. I looked for smoke. I saw none, but I saw vultures wheeling in the sky over a cluster of tents on the lake shore.

I came down the ridge warily and approached the silent camp. In it I halted, frozen with horror. I was not easily moved. I had seen death in many forms, and had fled from or taken part in red massacres that spilled blood like water and heaped the earth with corpses. But here I was confronted with an organic devastation that staggered and appalled me. Of Bragi's embryonic clan, not one remained alive, and not one corpse was whole. Some of the hide tents still stood erect. Others were mashed down and flattened out, as if crushed by some monstrous weight, so that at first I wondered if a drove of elephants had stampeded across the camp. But no elephants ever wrought such destruction as I saw strewn on the bloody ground. The camp was a shambles, littered with bits of flesh and fragments of bodies—hands, feet, heads, pieces of human debris. Weapons lay about, some of them stained with a greenish slime like that which spurts from a crushed caterpillar.

No human foe could have committed this ghastly atrocity. I looked at the lake, wondering if nameless amphibian monsters had crawled from the calm waters whose deep blue told of unfathomed depths. Then I saw a print left by the destroyer. It was a track such as a titanic worm might leave, yards broad, winding back down the valley. The grass lay flat where it ran, and bushes and small trees had been crushed down into the earth, all horribly smeared with blood and greenish slime.

With berserk fury in my soul I drew my sword and started to follow it, when a call attracted me. I wheeled, to see a stocky form approaching me from the ridge. It was Grom the Pict, and when I think of the courage it must have taken for him to have overcome all the instincts planted in him by traditional teachings and personal experience, I realize the full depths of his friendship for me.

Squatting on the lake shore, spear in his hands, his black eyes ever roving fearfully down the brooding tree-waving reaches of the valley, Grom told me of the horror that had come upon Bragi's clan under the moon. But first he told me of it, as his sires had told the tale to him.

Long ago the Picts had drifted down from the north-west on a long, long trek, finally reaching these jungle-covered hills, where, because they were weary, and because the game and fruit were plentiful and there were no hostile tribes, they halted and built their mud-walled villages.

Some of them, a whole clan of that numerous tribe, took up their abode in the Valley of the Broken Stones. They found the columns and a great ruined temple back in the

trees, and in that temple there was no shrine or altar, but the mouth of a shaft that vanished deep into the black earth, and in which there were no steps such as a human being would make and use. They built their village in the valley, and in the night, under the moon, horror came upon them and left only broken walls and bits of slime-smearred flesh.

In those days the Picts feared nothing. The warriors of the other clans gathered and sang their war-songs and danced their war-dances, and followed a broad track of blood and slime to the shaft-mouth in the temple. They howled defiance and hurled down boulders which were never heard to strike bottom. Then began a thin demoniac piping, and up from the well pranced a hideous anthropomorphic figure dancing to the weird strains of a pipe it held in its monstrous hands. The horror of its aspect froze the fierce Picts with amazement, and close behind it a vast white bulk heaved up from the subterranean darkness. Out of the shaft came a slaving mad nightmare which arrows pierced but could not check, which swords carved but could not slay. It fell slobbering upon the warriors, crushing them to crimson pulp, tearing them to bits as an octopus might tear small fishes, sucking their blood from their mangled limbs and devouring them even as they screamed and struggled. The survivors fled, pursued to the very ridge, up which, apparently, the monster could not propel its quaking mountainous bulk.

After that they did not dare the silent valley. But the dead came to their shamans and old men in dreams and told them strange and terrible secrets. They spoke of an ancient, ancient race of semi-human beings which once inhabited that valley and reared those columns for their own weird inexplicable purposes. The white monster in the pits was their god, summoned up from the nighted abysses of mid-earth uncounted fathoms below the black mould by sorcery unknown to the sons of men. The hairy anthropomorphic being was its servant, created to serve the god, a formless elemental spirit drawn up from below and cased in flesh, organic but beyond the understanding of humanity. The Old Ones had long vanished into the limbo from whence they crawled in the black dawn of the universe, but their bestial god and his inhuman slave lived on. Yet both were organic after a fashion, and could be wounded, though no human weapon had been found potent enough to slay them.

Bragi and his clan had dwelled for weeks in the valley before the horror struck. Only the night before, Grom, hunting above the cliffs, and by that token daring greatly, had been paralyzed by a high-pitched demon piping, and then by a mad clamour of human screaming. Stretched face down in the dirt, hiding his head in a tangle of grass, he had not dared to move, even when the shrieks died away in the slobbering, repulsive sounds of a hideous feast. When dawn broke he had crept shuddering to the cliffs to look down into the valley, and the sight of the devastation, even when seen from afar, had driven him in yammering flight far into the hills. But it had occurred to him, finally, that he should warn the rest of the tribe, and returning, on his way to the camp on the plateau, he had seen me entering the valley.

So spoke Grom, while I sat and brooded darkly, my chin on my mighty fist. I cannot frame in modern words the clan feeling that in those days was a living vital part of every man and woman. In a world where talon and fang were lifted on every hand, and the hands of all men raised against an individual, except those of his own clan, tribal instinct was more than the phrase it is today. It was as much a part of a man as

was his heart or his right hand. This was necessary, for only thus banded together in unbreakable groups could mankind have survived in the terrible environments of the primitive world. So now the personal grief I felt for Bragi and the clean-limbed young men and laughing white-skinned girls was drowned in a deeper sea of grief and fury that was cosmic in its depth and intensity. I sat grimly, while the Pict squatted anxiously beside me, his gaze roving from me to the menacing deeps of the valley where the accursed columns loomed like broken teeth of cackling hags among the waving leafy reaches.

I, Niord, was not one to use my brain over-much. I lived in a physical world, and there were the old men of the tribe to do my thinking. But I was one of a race destined to become dominant mentally as well as physically, and I was no mere muscular animal. So as I sat there, there came dimly and then clearly a thought to me that brought a short fierce laugh from my lips.

Rising, I bade Grom aid me, and we built a pyre on the lake shore of dried wood, the ridge-poles of the tents, and the broken shafts of spears. Then we collected the grisly fragments that had been parts of Bragi's band, and we laid them on the pile, and struck flint and steel to it.

The thick sad smoke crawled serpent-like into the sky, and, turning to Grom, I made him guide me to the jungle where lurked that scaly horror, Satha, the great serpent. Grom gaped at me; not the greatest hunters among the Picts sought out the mighty crawling one. But my will was like a wind that swept him along my course, and at last he led the way. We left the valley by the upper end, crossing the ridge, skirting the tall cliffs, and plunged into the fastnesses of the south, which was peopled only by the grim denizens of the jungle. Deep into the jungle we went, until we came to a low-lying expanse, dank and dark beneath the great creeper-festooned trees, where our feet sank deep into the spongy silt, carpeted by rotting vegetation, and slimy moisture oozed up beneath their pressure. This, Grom told me, was the realm haunted by Satha, the great serpent.

Let me speak of Satha. There is nothing like him on earth today, nor has there been for countless ages. Like the meat-eating dinosaur, like old sabre-tooth, he was too terrible to exist. Even then he was a survival of a grimmer age when life and its forms were cruder and more hideous. There were not many of his kind then, though they may have existed in great numbers in the reeking ooze of the vast jungle-tangled swamps still further south. He was larger than any python of modern ages, and his fangs dripped with poison a thousand times more deadly than that of a king cobra.

He was never worshipped by the pure-blood Picts, though the blacks that came later deified him, and that adoration persisted in the hybrid race that sprang from the negroes and their white conquerors. But to other peoples he was the nadir of evil horror, and tales of him became twisted into demonology; so in later ages Satha became the veritable devil of the white races, and the Stygians first worshipped, and then, when they became Egyptians, abhorred him under the name of Set, the Old Serpent, while to the Semites he became Leviathan and Satan. He was terrible enough to be a god, for he was a crawling death. I had seen a bull elephant fall dead in his tracks from Satha's bite. I had seen him, had glimpsed him writhing his horrific way

through the dense jungle, had seen him take his prey, but I had never hunted him. He was too grim, even for the slayer of old sabre-tooth.

But now I hunted him, plunging further and further into the hot, breathless reek of his jungle, even when friendship for me could not drive Grom further. He urged me to paint my body and sing my death-song before I advanced further, but I pushed on unheeding.

In a natural runway that wound between the shouldering trees, I set a trap. I found a large tree, soft and spongy of fibre, but thick-boled and heavy, and I hacked through its base close to the ground with my great sword, directing its fall so that when it toppled, its top crashed into the branches of a smaller tree, leaving it leaning across the runway, one end resting on the earth, the other caught in the small tree. Then I cut away the branches on the underside, and cutting a slim, tough sapling I trimmed it and stuck it upright like a prop-pole under the leaning tree. Then, cutting away the tree which supported it, I left the great trunk poised precariously on the prop-pole, to which I fastened a long vine, as thick as my wrist.

Then I went alone through that primordial twilight jungle until an overpowering fetid odour assailed my nostrils, and from the rank vegetation in front of me Satha reared up his hideous head, swaying lethally from side to side, while his forked tongue jetted in and out, and his great yellow terrible eyes burned icily on me with all the evil wisdom of the black elder world that was when man was not. I backed away, feeling no fear, only an icy sensation along my spine, and Satha came sinuously after me, his shining 80-foot barrel rippling over the rotting vegetation in mesmeric silence. His wedge-shaped head was bigger than the head of the hugest stallion, his trunk was thicker than a man's body, and his scales shimmered with a thousand changing scintillations. I was to Satha as a mouse is to a king cobra, but I was fanged as no mouse ever was. Quick as I was, I knew I could not avoid the lightning stroke of that great triangular head; so I dared not let him come too close. Subtly I fled down the runway, and behind me the rush of the great supple body was like the sweep of wind through the grass.

He was not far behind me when I raced beneath the dead-fall, and as the great shining length glided under the trap, I gripped the vine with both hands and jerked desperately. With a crash the great trunk fell across Satha's scaly back, some 6 feet back of his wedge-shaped head.

I had hoped to break his spine but I do not think it did, for the great body coiled and knotted, the mighty tail lashed and thrashed, mowing down the bushes as if with a giant flail. At the instant of the fall, the huge head had whipped about and struck the tree with a terrific impact, the mighty fangs shearing through bark and wood like scimitars. Now, as if aware he fought an inanimate foe, Satha turned on me, standing out of his reach. The scaly neck writhed and arched, the mighty jaws gaped, disclosing fangs a foot in length, from which dripped venom that might have burned through solid stone.

I believe, what of his stupendous strength, that Satha would have writhed from under the trunk, but for a broken branch that had been driven deep into his side, holding him like a barb. The sound of his hissing filled the jungle and his eyes glared at me with

such concentrated evil that I shook despite myself. Oh, he knew it was I who had trapped him! Now I came as close as I dared, and with a sudden powerful cast of my spear transixed his neck just below the gaping jaws, nailing him to the tree-trunk. Then I dared greatly, for he was far from dead, and I knew he would in an instant tear the spear from the wood and be free to strike. But in that instant I ran in, and swinging my sword with all my great power, I hewed off his terrible head.

The heavings and contortions of Satha's prisoned form in life were naught to the convulsions of his headless length in death. I retreated, dragging the gigantic head after me with a crooked pole, and at a safe distance from the lashing, flying tail, I set to work. I worked with naked death then, and no man ever toiled more gingerly than did I. For I cut out the poison sacs at the base of the great fangs, and in the terrible venom I soaked the heads of eleven arrows, being careful that only the bronze points were in the liquid, which else had corroded away the wood of the tough shafts. While I was doing this, Grom, driven by comradeship and Curiosity, came stealing nervously through the jungle, and his mouth gaped as he looked on the head of Satha.

For hours I steeped the arrowheads in the poison, until they were caked with a horrible green scum, and showed tiny flecks of corrosion where the venom had eaten into the solid bronze. I wrapped them carefully in broad, thick, rubber-like leaves, and then, though night had fallen and the hunting beasts were roaring on every hand, I went back through the jungled hills, Grom with me, until at dawn we came again to the high cliffs that loomed above the Valley of Broken Stones.

At the mouth of the valley I broke my spear, and I took all the unpoisoned shafts from my quiver, and snapped them. I painted my face and limbs as the Æsir painted themselves only when they went forth to certain doom, and I sang my death-song to the sun as it rose over the cliffs, my yellow mane blowing in the morning wind.

Then I went down into the valley, bow in hand.

Grom could not drive himself to follow me. He lay on his belly in the dust and howled like a dying dog.

I passed the lake and the silent camp where the pyre-ashes still smouldered, and came under the thickening trees beyond. About me the columns loomed, mere shapeless heads from the ravages of Staggering aeons. The trees grew more dense, and under their vast leafy branches the very light was dusky and evil. As in twilight shadow I saw the ruined temple, cyclopean walls staggering up from masses of decaying masonry and fallen blocks of stone. About 600 yards in front of it a great column reared up in an open glade, 80 or 90 feet in height. It was so worn and pitted by weather and time that any child of my tribe could have climbed it, and I marked it and changed my plan.

I came to the ruins and saw huge crumbling walls upholding a domed roof from which many stones had fallen, so that it seemed like the lichen-grown ribs of some mythical monster's skeleton arching above me. Titanic columns flanked the open doorway through which ten elephants could have stalked abreast. Once there might have been inscriptions and hieroglyphics on the pillars and walls, but they were long worn away. Around the great room, on the inner side, ran columns in better state of

preservation. On each of these columns was a flat pedestal, and some dim instinctive memory vaguely resurrected a shadowy scene wherein black drums roared madly, and on these pedestals monstrous beings squatted loathsomely in inexplicable rituals rooted in the black dawn of the universe.

There was no altar only the mouth of a great well-like shaft in the stone floor, with strange obscene carvings all about the rim. I tore great pieces of stone from the rotting floor and cast them down the shaft which slanted down into utter darkness. I heard them bound along the side, but I did not hear them strike bottom. I cast down stone after stone, each with a searing curse, and at last I heard a sound that was not the dwindling rumble of the falling stones. Up from the well floated a weird demon-piping that was a symphony of madness. Far down in the darkness I glimpsed the faint fearful glimmering of a vast white bulk.

I retreated slowly as the piping grew louder, falling back through the broad doorway. I heard a scratching, scrambling noise, and up from the shaft and out of the doorway between the colossal columns came a prancing incredible figure. It went erect like a man, but it was covered with fur, that was shaggiest where its face should have been. If it had ears, nose and a mouth I did not discover them. Only a pair of staring red eyes leered from the furry mask. Its misshapen hands held a strange set of pipes, on which it blew weirdly as it pranced towards me with many a grotesque caper and leap.

Behind it I heard a repulsive obscene noise as of a quaking unstable mass heaving up out of a well. Then I nocked an arrow, drew the cord and sent the shaft singing through the furry breast of the dancing monstrosity. It went down as though struck by a thunderbolt, but to my horror the piping continued, though the pipes had fallen from the malformed hands. Then I turned and ran fleetly to the column, up which I swarmed before I looked back. When I reached the pinnacle I looked, and because of the shock and surprise of what I saw, I almost fell from my dizzy perch.

Out of the temple the monstrous dweller in the darkness had come, and I, who had expected a horror yet cast in some terrestrial mould, looked on the spawn of nightmare. From what subterranean hell it crawled in the long ago I know not, nor what black age it represented. But it was not a beast, as humanity knows beasts. I call it a worm for lack of a better term. There is no earthly language that has a name for it. I can only say that it looked somewhat more like a worm than it did an octopus, a serpent or a dinosaur.

It was white and pulpy, and drew its quaking bulk along the ground, worm-fashion. But it had wide flat tentacles, and fleshy feelers, and other adjuncts the use of which I am unable to explain. And it had a long proboscis which it curled and uncurled like an elephant's trunk. Its forty eyes, set in a horrific circle, were composed of thousands of facets of as many scintillant colours which changed and altered in never-ending transmutation. But through all interplay of hue and glint, they retained their evil intelligence. Intelligence there was behind those flickering facets, not human nor yet bestial, but a night-born demoniac intelligence such as men in dreams vaguely sense throbbing titanicly in the black gulfs outside our material universe. In size the monster was mountainous; its bulk would have dwarfed a mastodon.

But even as I shook with the cosmic horror of the thing, I drew a feathered shaft to my ear and arched it singing on its way. Grass and bushes were crushed flat as the monster came towards me like a moving mountain and shaft after shaft I sent with terrific force and deadly precision. I could not miss so huge a target. The arrows sank to the feathers or clear out of sight in the unstable bulk, each bearing enough poison to have stricken dead a bull elephant. Yet on it came, swiftly, appallingly, apparently heedless of both the shafts and the venom in which they were steeped. And all the time the hideous music played a maddening accompaniment, whining thinly from the pipes that lay untouched on the ground.

My confidence faded; even the poison of Satha was futile against this uncanny being. I drove my last shaft almost straight downward into the quaking white mountain, so close was the monster under my perch. Then suddenly its colour altered. A wave of ghastly blue surged over it, and the vast bulk heaved in earthquake-like convulsions. With a terrible plunge it struck the lower part of the column, which crashed to falling shards of stone. But even with the impact, I leaped far out and fell through the empty air full upon the monster's back.

The spongy skin yielded and gave beneath my feet, and I drove my sword hilt deep, dragging it through the pulpy flesh, ripping a horrible yard-long wound, from which oozed a green slime. Then a flip of a cable-like-tentacle flicked me from the titan's back and spun me 300 feet through the air to crash among a cluster of giant trees.

The impact must have splintered half the bones in my frame, for when I sought to grasp my sword again and crawl anew to the combat, I could not move hand or foot, could only writhe helplessly with my broken back. But I could see the monster and I knew that I had won, even in defeat. The mountainous bulk was heaving and billowing, the tentacles were lashing madly, the antennae writhing and knotting, and the nauseous whiteness had changed to a pale and grisly green. It turned ponderously and lurched back towards the temple, rolling like a crippled ship in a heavy swell. Trees crashed and splintered as it lumbered against them.

I wept with pure fury because I could not catch up my sword and rush in to die glutting my berserk madness in mighty strokes. But the worm-god was death-stricken and needed not my futile sword. The demon pipes on the ground kept up their infernal tune, and it was like the fiend's death-dirge. Then as the monster veered and floundered, I saw it catch up the corpse of its hairy slave. For an instant the apish form dangled in mid-air, gripped round by the trunk-like proboscis, then was dashed against the temple wall with a force that reduced the hairy body to a mere shapeless pulp. At that the pipes screamed out horribly, and fell silent for ever.

The titan staggered on the brink of the shaft; then another change came over it—a frightful transfiguration the nature of which I cannot yet describe. Even now when I try to think of it clearly, I am only chaotically conscious of a blasphemous, unnatural transmutation of form and substance, shocking and indescribable. Then the strangely altered bulk tumbled into the shaft to roll down into the ultimate darkness from whence it came, and I knew that it was dead. And as it vanished into the well, with a rending, grinding groan the ruined walls quivered from dome to base. They bent inward and buckled with deafening reverberation, the columns splintered, and with a cataclysmic crash the dome itself came thundering down. For an instant the air



seemed veiled with flying debris and stone-dust, through which the treetops lashed madly as in a storm or an earthquake convulsion. Then all was clear again and I stared, shaking the blood from my eyes. Where the temple had stood there lay only a colossal pile of shattered masonry and broken stones, and every column in the valley had fallen, to lie in crumbling shards.

In the silence that followed I heard Grom wailing a dirge over me. I bade him lay my sword in my hand, and he did so, and bent close to hear what I had to say, for I was passing swiftly.

“Let my tribe remember,” I said, speaking slowly. “Let the tale be told from village to village, from camp to camp, from tribe to tribe, so that men may know that not man nor beast nor devil may prey in safety on the golden-haired people of Asgard. Let them build me a cairn where I lie and lay me therein with my bow and sword at hand, to guard this valley for ever; so if the ghost of the god I slew comes up from below, my ghost will ever be ready to give it battle.”

And while Grom howled and beat his hairy breast, death came to me in the Valley of the Worm.

THE END

HEIRS OF ATLANTIS by Michele Dutcher

How were we to know, at the beginning of new millennia, that two of our most intriguing mysteries would be solved at the same time? Those who revealed the answers called themselves the ‘Heirs of Atlantis’ and introduced themselves to Heads of State as first cousins to humans – and there were often humans in their entourages. These beings insisted that they had reappeared in the surface dweller’s world to help humans in our efforts to clean up the Earth’s oceans – which had been their home for the last 20,000 years: first as inhabitants of an island chain in the middle of the Atlantic, and then as an underwater empire in the same vicinity.

As an expert in mythologies both ancient and modern, my curiosity could not have been more stoked; I was delighted when a friend from ‘across the pond’ proposed an informal meeting to discuss the amazing events of the past year. “I have a surprise”, he told me.

The five of us met in a bar, which was our habit. It was towards the center of the United States in Cincinnati, Ohio – in a hotel named the Netherland Plaza Hilton built in the early 1930s. The Orchids of Palm Court was decorated in the French Art Deco style with Brazilian rosewood paneling and soaring ceiling murals depicting Romanesque scenes of recreation. The lighting was muted: indirect German silver-nickel fixtures, which hung on the walls like fountains. I had to chuckle at Marshall, for his sensibilities were definitely overpowered by the elaborate decorations, but I enjoyed the over-the-top surroundings.

When we were seated comfortably, Marshall rose to his feet, directing our attention to a tall stranger who approached us quickly through the dimness of the elaborate room.

Marshall and the pale man clasped hands before the rest of us could come to our feet. “My friends, it is my pleasure to introduce to you one of the Heirs of Atlantis – Bergio of the 7th House.”

The five of us were enthralled by our amazing visitor, some offering handshakes while others bowed slightly to acknowledge his presence.

“Please, please, let us sit,” insisted the visitor in an accent reminiscent of ancient language groups surrounding the Mediterranean. “I heard of your small gathering through a friend and became eager to meet with such distinguished experts in ancient mysteries.” His broad smile revealed the protruding canines, which were so much a part of the legend. “Please do not hesitate to ask me anything – this is why I am here tonight. Nothing would make me happier than to talk with you about my home and the seven Houses of Atlan.”

So we began to talk, the six of us, about an Atlantic-rim commercial power that suffered physical destruction. “Hundreds of thousands of us were killed when an asteroid hit our capital city.”

“What about the tales of Plato? Did those stories line up with the true history?”

“You may well be talking about the reports by Timaeus and Critias. It’s true that there was a main canal going through the heart of the main island’s plain – into the capital city itself – our nation’s symbol still reflects that. There were rings of canals surrounding the city. We had beautiful bridges, walled with towers and gates, and colonies in Egypt and Tyrrhenia. There were mountains tall enough to allow snow during the fall months.”

“Incredible,” I said.

“Sure, sure, sure. Having been born in the middle of the ocean, our nation had always seen to it that our cities were watertight and could survive tsunamis and hurricanes. After the disaster, it took the better part of a century for our inhabitants to dig out of the sediment that covered our watertight cities – which is why we prefer the darkness...there is very little light at the bottom of the ocean obviously.”

Only then did I see her in the darkness behind him. Her tiny hand was upon his shoulder now, and he brought it to his lips to kiss it in recognition. She whispered something into Bergio’s ear before looking at all of us. As clearly as Bergio was a vampire – this amazing creature was clearly a human.

“Allow me to introduce my symbiot – Merleah.”

She was the model from which all women should have been cut. Her thick auburn hair curled about her face before plunging down to her waist. Her eyes were as green as emeralds, her skin softly freckled, and her lips were as red as fresh blood. As she came around to the table, it became obvious that she was pregnant. Immediately the men began to grab chairs so she could be seated.

“You use the term ‘symbiot’,” said Marshall. “Could you explain what you mean?”

“Sure, sure, sure. When we made it to land in our vehicles, we found our metabolism had changed. We now took our nourishment in liquid form. We took humans back to Atlantis with us and these humans were bred to be our symbiots – those who supply our need for nourishment, as we supply their needs.”

We had all been trained by our academic disciplines to view societal deviation simply as a variant, but Lucinda was obviously outraged. “Isn’t what you are describing merely slavery in a disguised form?”

Bergio drew a breath as though to answer the attack, but Merleah answered instead. “I am Bergio’s symbiot by choice. Bergio protects me and supplies me with all the luxuries I could possibly imagine.” She looked around the table once quickly. She looked at me a second time, longer now. I felt myself falling into her jewel-like eyes, as if the rest of my colleagues and Bergio himself had disappeared.

“Griffin!” I heard Marshall whisper frantically, his voice piercing the mist. “Griffin! Bergio was talking to you!”

“I apologize.”

The creature chuckled softly. “She is amazing, isn’t she? Her ancestors were bred for their beauty.”

“My beauty encourages Bergio to feed deeply – so he remains healthy.”

The seven of us sat for hours. Each time Merleah spoke, I fell deeper in lust with her than I had ever imaged possible, so I was delighted when she sent a message through the desk clerk to meet her privately – so we could talk.

When I got to her room there was barely enough time to shut the door before she was in my arms and naked on the bed. My desires were so strong that I hardly realized her moans weren’t those of ecstasy, but of pain. I had barely backed off the bed when I shouted that the baby’s head was beginning to crown.

“He must have smelled dinner,” she laughed.

Suddenly Bergio was behind me, his hand on my shoulder. “How wonderful, dear, you found us a midwife.” He pinched my spinal column and I fell to my knees – paralyzed. The baby had clawed his way out now – and it smiled, revealing its sharp, pointed teeth. The last thing I remember was the infant leaping from the bed to the floor, his claws ripping into my chest.

The End

AYAME’S LOVE by Thomas C Hewitt

8.

A woman that had too many stories

entered a town that gave away nothing,  
with little to offer it but sore feet  
and a throat that tired of coughing,  
a worn weary carriage of world-bored meat,  
forehead numb and sick of the sun's sting.  
Ayame's skin was burnt from the sore heat.  
Like boiling wax in the way that it clings.

That was how Ayame entered Loughscroft,  
tired as a tortoise and thirsty as cloth,  
hungry enough to find strength to get there,  
weary enough to see day and despair.  
She had no money and nothing of worth  
no hope of food being given to her.

She managed to find sleep in a doorway  
like a nasty rag lying all twisted.  
She woke in the afternoon as sun rays  
moved their position and aimed their blisters  
hard shard against her blistered face.

In the hate of the day, fortune kissed her.  
By pure chance she stumbled to a place  
that sheltered her from the sun split glare.  
Ayame's eyes were wide at Loughscroft's size  
and glancing around she soon realised  
that money-less homeless littered the streets  
ignored by the well dressed who laugh with ease.  
It was two ignored men that she heard say,  
"Let's get some water and sit in the shade"

And so Ayame followed the two men  
against the fast moving crowds of the town.  
Panicked to keep the hope they had given  
she made of their trail a tenacious hound.

The architecture improved as they went  
and Ayame wondered where they were bound,  
not looking as though they had ought to spend  
ragged bearded cloth bags with shoulders bowed.

But still, they had more pace than Ayame  
who needed to rest to get strength to see  
their bodies entering a large building  
which had thick stone steps to welcome them in.  
Ayame invented a last resource  
of energy and head for the same doors.

Loughscroft was an old town and the biggest  
crawling mass of anxiousness and people

Ayame had ever had chance to witness;  
with a finite wealth that made their lives dull.  
It didn't take Ayame long to guess  
that it would take much to get a little.

But as she clambered up the library steps  
its size filled her with the hope not to fall.

Past the doors was shocking serenity.  
Silence filled peopled tables intensely.  
Ayame was moved by need not beauty.  
At the sight of the men her pace gained speed  
to a large water filled marble basin  
where a tin cup was without grace thrust in.

When her thirst was gone Ayame wandered  
until she found a secluded table.  
Her eyes closed and the wood soon met her head

Sleeping this way would become her staple.  
Awake through the night time and barely fed,  
taking whatever scraps she was able  
to use to sell, eat or to swap for bread  
and she was quickly given the label  
of a thief not to be trusted with work,  
which her easily remembered face made worse  
even with cracked lips and heavy rimmed eyes  
it was filled with interest and charm and life.

Though it was not that face that Joseph saw  
but old books clatter on a dirty floor  
cold autumn air had made Ayame tired  
and she slept until the library was shut.

Joseph was checking his library with pride,  
removing from tables the low stacked books  
that were mostly picked as effects to hide  
those sat behind symbols not understood,  
more glad of the warmth than the written lines  
and taking whatever sleep that they could.

Loughscroft was built on an older town.  
Some buildings were saved though most were knocked down.  
During deconstruction the books were found;  
thousands of books hopelessly strewn around,  
covering a basement floor like rotting fruit;  
collected, restored and then put to use,  
for it was the books that first made Loughscroft.  
In reputation it grew, then in wealth  
and the greatest haul of books ever stocked

was the need for food and shelter on shelves.

So the library was built with greed as blocks,  
its free admittance born of greed as well;  
a ploy to make the rich travellers stop  
to first view the books and then buy or sell.  
All trade was good for the town and taxes  
and not only wealth came from this practice,  
for they did all this under the pretence  
of praise of culture and benevolence.

That was how the library came to be  
and why the town was filled with vagrancy.

Joseph had thirty two predecessors.  
For twelve years he walked the library steps,  
controlling the filing, cleaning and more  
with an eye on the guards and staff for theft.

His steps that night made a pile of books fall,  
startling the sleeping girl at the desk;  
jumping out of her slumbering sprawl  
wild hair and wide eyes, rasping to take breath.

“It must be uncomfortable to sleep here  
where books whisper always in to your ears.”  
Joseph wistfully smiled at Ayame.  
“Tell me which one you most like to read?”

Blushing cheeks gave Ayame away  
and she confessed the purpose of her stay.

Joseph’s face filled bright with mischief.  
A pleasing notion had occurred to him.  
“I offer you pay and a place to sleep  
but all this will come on two conditions:  
firstly you must work in the library,  
cleaning floors and tales, tending to books.  
For your second task you must learn to read  
as well as I within eleven months.  
If you cannot achieve both of these tasks  
then I will somebody else that can.”

The change of pace from hunger to stillness  
appeared as fast as night frost on the grass:  
none see it come, though some see it fresh.  
The dull shuffle of sweeping quickly passed  
like the people on the library steps  
as friendly words punctuated her tasks  
bellyful and wakeful and cleanly dressed.

As for Joseph's test, that took up her nights.  
Life after Loughscroft's streets was all delight.  
Putting six hours where two were expected,  
words came to her faster than the days' speed.  
Within six months she could both write and read,  
eating books and lessons with lusty greed.

There were no windows in Ayame's room,  
just the un-distracting wood and her bed  
with candlelight to help clear the gloom  
so the books that piled the floor could be read.  
Below her the empty library loomed  
and answered every step that she tread.

Joseph proved himself a brilliant teacher,  
playing always to Ayame's interests  
and the interest in myth he gave to her  
she rescinded by organising shelves  
and once she had mastered the written word  
she found in turn that words mastered herself  
becoming almost her one single care  
as the library's work felt much like rest.  
Within nine months the written word became  
a sturdy comfort and a wealth gain.

Respect came uncomfortably to the girl  
who had not received it anywhere  
but within two years Ayame had found  
that Joseph's respect gave way to the towns.

But as much as the town gave her respect  
she could never give the town her trust  
and the two years made her less impressed  
with gaining a success that felt unjust,  
born solely of her sleeping at a desk  
and the people she was required to shush  
were those in whom she had the most interest;  
the ragged ones whose last thought were of books,  
with those she would share the stories she'd read  
and she wrote down the ones that they returned.

She had pages that literally were full  
with stories that she knitted like wool.  
The pen that moved in the night's jaundice  
twisted round her fingers like arthritis.

All the stories had one solitary theme:  
the protagonist coming a failing hero  
through work and chance finds recovery

but from there the tales had nowhere to go.  
They had Ayame's full affinity.

The flow of stories soon became slow.  
Again and again she heard them repeat  
and sound less hopeful each time they were told.  
Ayame's life became dull without them,  
filling her head with thoughts as thick as phlegm.  
Softly sighing she stepped heavy tread.  
Day dawned like dough and warmed like sweet bread;  
reading books until close to the first sun  
added exhaustion in to her boredom.

But as much as she bored of peoples' tales  
she never lost lust in asking for more  
and as passed months their answers changed.

A new tale captured the hope of the poor  
and it was one that brought Ayame shame  
as she glumly trudged the library floor.  
The world had filled with whispers of her name  
and now she was the story that she sought.

As she miserably dwelled on petty trials,  
allowing each minute to make her tired,  
people were aspiring to have her life,  
wishing that a chance like hers would arise  
and their own poverty would be relieved  
so they could complain of boredom like she.

It took six months to train a replacement;  
months Ayame passed slowly but with thanks,  
pleased at the change and that it meant  
another could leave the dejected ranks  
and build on the time Ayame had spent.

Joseph made Ayame hold out her hands  
placed in them an empty book and pen  
which came with a goodbye and one demand  
that Ayame should one day come back  
to place it in the library's stack;  
then the library's first new book could be  
a tale that concerned the library.  
So she left the Loughscroft streets full-hearted  
to finish the story she had started.

THE DWARF-FORGED SWORD by Gavin Chappell

1. The Trolls



Twenty-four years after the death of Peace-Frodi, in the days when Halfdan Brana's Fosterling ruled over Russia and his son-in-law Astro was duke of England, a man named Erling was king of Upland in Norway. He had two sons, Sorli the Strong, and Sigvald, and a daughter named Ingibjorg. Erling found a man named Karmon to tutor them. When he was fifteen Sorli was highly skilled and stronger than any man in Norway; he was so big that no horse could carry him.

When they were old enough, they became Vikings and fought many battles. Erlend gave Sorli five ships and many bold companions and Karmon also accompanied him on the voyage. He won the victory in every battle he encountered and soon he decided to return to Norway, but after a few days a great fog descended and they were lost. They sailed for several days without knowing where they were or where they were going. At last, they reached an unknown land where they weighed anchor. Sorli went ashore with eleven other men to scout out the area. The weather was mild and the land forested.

They came to the side of a mountain and the prince and his men assembled in a clearing. Twelve men approached, huge and swarthy, with iron-rimmed shields and metal-studded cudgels. Battle broke out and after a short while the big men had killed all Sorli's companions but Sorli slew them all in turn. Weary, he sat down and rested before deciding he would return to the ships.

Then he heard a noise from nearby and went to investigate. He went further into the wood along the mountainside until he came to a cave with a window in it. He peered through the window and saw a giant lying on a bed inside. Also, an old hag was butchering the bodies of men and horses.

She addressed the giant: "Skrimnir, this was the last of our food."

Skrimnir replied: "I'm not surprised. That's why I've driven several ships of men to the place so we will be able to restock our supplies after slaughtering them."

This made the hag happy and she went into a side cave. Sorli jumped in through the window and attacked Skrimnir. The hag re-entered and attacked Sorli with a short sword. He tried to push the hag down a chasm but she seized him fiercely in her claws. They wrestled together but despite her troll-strength, she could not win the advantage. Then they both fell over the side of the chasm and landed on a ledge. Although the hag still had her claws sunk into him, Sorli gripped her round the throat and refused to let her go.

She begged him for a truce and Sorli agreed eventually, "but it must be on the condition that within a month you fetch me armour that no sword can cut and a sword that cuts steel and stone. Also, you must aid me whenever I call upon you."

The hag agreed and he let her go. They both climbed back up into the cave. She flung Skrimnir's corpse down the chasm and put a cover over it, then led Sorli to a bed and gave him a drink. He got into bed and fell asleep.

When he awoke the next day, he looked around the cave and found it to be full of treasures. The hag told him, "My name is Mana. You are in the part of Africa ruled by

Estroval the Great. My husband Skrimnir and I have lived in this cave for forty years, supporting ourselves with the meat of men we brought here through witchcraft.”

She gave him gifts, a game board made of gold, a lace-worked cloak and a gold ring that would ensure he would never be lost at land or sea. He thanked her for the gifts and prepared to leave.

Mana said, “I will obtain the treasures you have demanded, and you can either remain on the coast or return to Norway and come back when you wish.”

Sorli returned to the ships and told them what had happened. He asked Karmon for advice and the man suggested they remained on the coast until Mana obtained the treasures.

One day Sorli went inland with twelve men and they came to the cave. When he entered, he saw the place was in turmoil and two hags were wrestling each other. One was Mana, the other he did not recognise. He drew his sword and told his men to aid Mana. He thrust his sword into the other hag’s breast and she sank her claws into Mana so the latter fainted. Then the hag grabbed a beam of wood and beat Sorli’s companions to death. Sorli hacked at her with his sword, slicing the flesh off her cheek and cutting the beam in two. She sank her claws into him but then Mana recovered and attacked. Sorli stabbed the hag in the belly so the sword came out of her back and she was dead. Mana thanked Sorli profusely and took him to see the treasures.

She gave him armour that she had obtained from Emperor Maskabert in Serkland. It had been made for Pantiparus who ruled Greece after Agamemnon. No sword could cut it, while the sword she gave him could slice through anything, steel or stone.

Sorli thanked her for the treasures and they parted. He returned to the ships and sailed back to Norway where he told his father and friends what had happened.

In those days, while Erling ruled Upland, the rest of Norway was under the sway of King Harald Valdimarson. One day two brothers visited him from Morland, Tofi and Gardar. Gardar wished to marry Harald’s daughter Steinvor.

The king said that every man in Norway would die on the battlefield before he gave his daughter to trolls and berserks like them. They met in battle but soon it became clear that the brothers were winning and the king retreated with the survivors of his army inside the walls of his town.

King Harald spoke with his men and it was suggested that they send word to Upland and ask King Erling for aid. He sent twelve men to Erling’s kingdom and the king and his sons Sorli and Sigvald came at once to King Harald’s aid. Together they rode from the town and fought a battle against the brothers. One of their greatest warriors was a man name Lodin, who was a giant in appearance and rode an elephant.

Sorli fought him and slew him, and when Tofi and Gardar saw this, they went berserk. Tofi rode at Sigvald who thought that the end had come until Sorli came to the rescue. But then Sorli found that his sword made no mark on Tofi’s body. They dismounted

and wrestled and Sorli tore the skin off Tofi's face whereupon he transformed himself into a dragon, breathing venom and smoke at Sorli. Sorli cut the dragon in half but fainted from the venom. When Gardar saw his brother's fall, he rode at King Erling in anger and the king took a fall. Sorli recovered in time to see this and he rode at Gardar and cut him in half with his sword. The brothers' army fled and Sorli and Sigvald pursued them, killing everyone they caught.

They returned to the battlefield and had it searched for the slain and wounded. King Harald and King Erling were brought back to their own towns and their wounds were healed, and a feast was prepared to celebrate the victory. Harald asked Sorli to choose his reward, and all the people encouraged him to ask for the king's daughter, but Sorli said, "I am not so needy as to ask for payment for my services, rather it would be better if our fame spread everywhere."

Erling and his sons then returned to Upland, weighed down with King Harald's gifts and Sorli stayed quietly at home that winter.

That spring, Sorli prepared his ship and told everyone he would spend that summer in raiding. He sailed from Norway accompanied by Karmon. He sailed widely, gaining treasure and plunder and capturing twelve ships, and taking prisoners including two brothers named Bork and Bolverk who were evil men and shape shifters with it.

## 2 The Dwarf-Forged Sword

In those days, Halfdan Brana's Foster Son ruled in Rugen; his wife was Marsibil and their two sons were named Hogni and Hakon, who were men without equals and had also become warriors on coming of age.

When still a child Hogni was carried off by a griffin and taken to its nest. Here he encountered the Princess Hild, who he rescued and later married, after returning to Rugen. Hogni was also famous for owning the sword Dainsleif, which was made by the dwarves. It never missed but always slew the foe and could not be unsheathed without taking a life.

One night when King Halfdan was going to a meeting of kings, Sorli moored off Rugen. Halfdan had a dragon-headed longship named *Skrauti*, which was one of the greatest ships the North ever knew, almost comparable to *Gnod* that Asmund built, or *Ellidi* that Thorstein Vikingsson won, and that his son Fridthjof the Bold inherited.

When Sorli awoke, he saw several ships including Halfdan's dragonship. He parleyed with the man aboard and learnt that he was King Halfdan, who had slain Sorli's uncle, Agnar the Rich. He offered Halfdan the choice to surrender his ship *Skrauti*. Halfdan was angry about this and he ordered his men to make ready for battle.

The fight broke out and all Sorli's ships were cleared and sunk, although Halfdan lost three of his own. With King Halfdan was a boy named Thorir, son of Jarl Thorvid. When Sorli saw his own ships were being destroyed, he leapt up onto *Skrauti* where Bork and Bolverk joined him. Sorli spared no one who attacked him while Bork and Bolverk fought Thorir. Halfdan attacked Sorli and they fought long and hard. But now King Halfdan was an old man and Sorli was young. When Halfdan began to weaken

Sorli urged him to accept a truce and Halfdan taunted him for his faint heart. They began to fight a second time and again Sorli offered his enemy a truce, but Halfdan refused, preferring to lay down his life with boldness rather than accept the offer. Sorli slew him, and took the ship.

Meanwhile Thorir had cut down Sorli's men like brushwood but seeing this Bork attacked him but his sword caught in the sail boom. Thorir swung his sword at Bork and shattered his skull. Then Bolverk came at him, striking him across the shoulders so he would have been killed were it not for his mail. Thorir attacked Bolverk, grabbing him by the legs and slamming him to the deck, breaking his skull too. The deck was heaving with Sorli's men and Thorir saw that he could not prevail against them. Seeing that his king had fallen he swam to the land ruled by Halfdan's old comrade Sigurd.

Now Sorli took the dragonship *Skrauti* and all King Halfdan's treasure and he sailed back to Norway and a joyful reunion with his father and friends, who all marvelled at the dragonship he had won.

King Erling spoke to Sorli and told him that he should be prepared for trouble from Halfdan's sons and they prepared the kingdom for attack.

Meanwhile, Thorir had swum to Sigurd's country where he told him about King Halfdan's death. Sigurd gave Thorir a ship and men and sent him to Rugen to tell Hogni and Hakon about their father's death. In Rugen Thorir learnt that Hogni had gone to visit Astro, Duke of England. He went to Hakon and told him what had happened. When Halfdan's queen heard this, she died of grief. She was buried splendidly in a mound with many treasures.

Hakon sent a message to Hogni and Duke Astro in England. When Hogni received the message, he set forth as soon as he could with a great army. Before he went, he told his sister Marsibil, Astro's husband, of their father's death and she swooned. When she recovered, she urged Hogni to avenge them.

Sorli decided that he would go to the brothers and seek reconciliation. He sailed away for Rugen, leaving his father and brother to guard the kingdom. As he sailed past the island of Most, he unwittingly passed Hogni, who was heading towards Norway. Sorli came to Rugen and pitched his tents outside the town. Meanwhile Hogni sailed round Norway and weighed anchor at the harbour closest to Upland. As he approached he saw forty ships at anchor, and to his wrath, he recognised his father's dragonship among them.

He gave the order to attack the ships, but first parleyed with the man on *Skrauti*, giving him the option of yielding the ship or defending it with his life. The man on the ship accepted the second option and a fierce battle broke out. Hogni and one of his men, named Sval, cut their way through the opposition. Sval encountered Ivar, the man in control of the dragonship, who cut him down, but as he lay on the deck, Sval seized Ivar's legs and brought him down so hard he cracked his skull on the timbers. Hogni gained control of the dragonship and sailed it into the harbour, then pitched his tents outside King Erling's town.

At dawn, Hogni sent twelve men to King Erling's hall, led by Sval. When they reached the hall, Sval greeted the king and said, "Hogni wants you to know that he offers battle to Sorli, if he is there, or to Erling himself if Sorli is elsewhere, to avenge his own father."

Erling assented and sent the messengers back to tell Hogni that they would come out to fight them.

When Hogni heard this message he put on his mailcoat, girded himself with Dainsleif, and led his forces to the battle. Erling came out of the town with all his forces, including King Harald and Sigvald. King Erling's standard bearer was a Finn named Sverri and when Hogni cut him down, he returned later in the form of a lion and knocked Hogni from his horse.

Hogni hacked at the lion with Dainsleif but to no avail, so he flung it down and wrestled the creature. He killed it but in the process, it spewed out such venom that Hogni collapsed unconscious on top of it. Then Erling saw him lying there and struck three blows between his shoulders but the sword did not bite because of Hogni's mail. He told one of his men to beat Hogni to death with a club but then Sval saw what was happening and rode up to knock Erling from his saddle with his lance so that the king was flung more than forty feet and every bone in his body was broken. Gellir attacked Sval and they wrestled.

When Sval felled Gellir, he called upon the troll woman who had fostered him. She came invisibly and dragged Sval away, whereupon Gellir leapt upon Sval. But then Hogni regained his senses and he cut Gellir in two with Dainsleif. Then King Harald struck Hogni across the shoulders so that he was almost slain. Hogni turned on Harald and split him in half with a single blow of Dainsleif. Then he attacked Sigvald, decapitating him with one blow. The remaining Norwegians now retreated to the town where they told the queen what had happened.

The next day Hogni entered the town and he went to the king's hall but found it deserted except for thralls.

He asked, "Where is the queen?"

"She has gone to her daughter's bower," the thralls told him.

When he reached the plank wall that surrounded the bower, a mist came down and he and his men could see neither the fence nor the bower. They found a river before them and tried to cross it and climb up the cliffs on the far side, which took them all night. But when morning came, they saw that there was no river and they had been clawing at the fence. Hogni told them to break down the gate and when it was done he entered to find no one in there, he had the treasure chests broken into and took away all the treasure and fine clothes and went away.

Looking back as he did so, he saw an old woman and a fair maiden standing on the walls. Sval thought that it was Erling's daughter Ingibjorg and her foster mother but he advised against return after the trouble they had had already. They returned to the

tents and broke camp, embarking their ships, including *Skrauti* and sailed away to Rugen.

Sorli sent messengers to the hall in Rugen and Sverri led them. They offered a settlement for Halfdan's death, along with friendship and sworn brotherhood. When Hakon heard this, he was angry and told Sverri to prepare for war. Sorli readied his forces and faced Hakon and Thorir as they rode out from the town. Battle broke out and Sorli broke Hakon's ranks repeatedly. Hakon encountered two of Sorli's men, Fal and Frodel, both Finns. He cut at Frodel who vanished into the earth. When Hakon tried to drag Frodel back out Fal came up behind him, stabbed him in the belly, and slew him. Thorir saw this and retreated into the town with his surviving men.

Sorli moved his camp closer to the town and tried to break down the walls but Thorir's men poured boiling pitch and brimstone down on them. He moved his lines farther away from the town. Meanwhile Duke Astro came from England with a vast force and attacked Sorli. The battle went on for two days and neither side gained the upper hand.

On the third day, more ships were sighted and leading them was *Skrauti*, and men guessed that these were the forces of Hogni. Sorli realised what must have happened and grieved for the fate of his people in Norway. Hogni weighed anchor and pitched his tents. When Duke Astro and Thorir saw this, they rode to his camp and greeted him joyfully. They told Hogni all that had happened, including Hakon's death, then rode to the town and remained there.

The next day Hogni sent men to Sorli's camp, told him to ready himself for further fighting, and assured him that it would mark the end of their contest. Sorli led his army forth and a fierce battle ensued, during which Thorir slew Karmon and Sorli pursued him. He encountered Hogni who said it would be better for them to fight single combat.

They rode against each other and fought fiercely but both wore excellent armour and they barely wounded each other. Then Sorli flung away his sword and grappled Hogni. They wrestled and Sorli tried to fling Hogni into a nearby brook, but Hogni escaped this trick and pinned Sorli.

Hogni observed, "Dainsleif lies somewhere on the battlefield and if you are a courageous man you would lie here until I return with my sword."

Sorli did so and when Hogni returned with Dainsleif, he was so impressed that he offered Sorli life, friendship, and sworn brotherhood. Sorli accepted and they made a firm pact. Sorli sailed away.

He died while fighting Vikings in the Baltic. When Hogni heard of this he sailed to the Baltic and harried widely, laying the kings of its shores under tribute, until twenty kings accepted him as their overlord. Later he married Hervor the daughter of Hiarvard, and they had a daughter named Hild.

### 3. The Everlasting Battle

A king of Glommen named Hiarrandi had a son called Hedin who lived the life of a Viking, raiding widely until twenty kings paid him tribute. One winter, when Hedin was at home in the land of Glommen, he went into the forest with his retainers, and it happened that in a clearing he found a woman sitting on a chair. He asked her name and she said she was called Gondul. She asked him about his achievements and he told her of all his battles and raids. She told him that he had no equal except Hogni, king of Rugen. Hedin resolved to go and test which of them was the greater.

That spring he set out in a dragon ship with three hundred men. When he reached Rugen, King Hogni welcomed him and arranged a feast. He asked Hedin why he had come, and Hedin replied that he thought they should both test themselves against each other. Hogni agreed, and the next day they went against each other in swimming matches and archery and other feats of prowess, and soon saw that they were equally matched. They swore brotherhood.

Shortly afterwards, Hogni went out raiding and he left Hedin behind as his landwarden. One day, Hedin and his men were out hunting in the woods when Hedin met Gondul again in a clearing. She gave him a drink from a horn she bore, and he drank it. As soon as he had done so, he forgot their first meeting. They talked, and she asked if he had tried himself against Hogni.

Hedin said, "I have, and we are equal in all things."

"Not so," Gondul said, "since Hogni has a queen and you are unmarried."

Hedin said, "Hogni would give him his daughter if I was to ask."

Gondul said, "It is not the way of a man as mighty as you to beg for favours."

She added that he should take the girl without asking, and that he should sacrifice Hogni's queen while he did so.

Hedin returned to his men and they went to prepare Hogni's ship *Skrauti*, since he said he was going home. Then Hedin went to the bower where Hild and her mother were, and he carried them off.

Hild told him, "If you were to ask my father for my hand then he would gladly grant it," but Hedin said, "I will not beg for you."

Then Hild said, "If you bear me away, my father will come after me and you will fight and kill each other, and yet that will not be the worst of your fate."

Then Hedin took Hervor, and placed her beneath the keel of his ship and launched it, killing her as they launched. They sailed across the sea and later Hedin went ashore alone, and in the forest, he met Gondul again, and she cast a spell over him so he fell asleep. When he awoke, he realised the shameful of his deeds and he sailed away hastily.

When Hogni returned, he learnt the truth and he sailed angrily after Hedin. When Hedin was aware of this, he dropped anchor after the island that was later called

Hedinsey (Hedin's Isle). He spoke with Hogni when the king reached him, and told him how Gondul had bewitched him, but now he only wanted to return Hogni's daughter and his ship.

However, Hogni still wanted revenge for the killing of his queen, and he had drawn his sword Dainsleif and it thirsted for blood. So they went ashore with all their men and fought each other, and that was the beginning of the everlasting Battle of the Hiadningar. At the end of the first day, the two kings went back to their ships but Hild used witchcraft to revive the dead and they fought again in the morning. The battle went on day after day, and all who fell turned to stone. But the next day they rose and fought again.

It is said that this battle will continue until the twilight of the gods.

HUMANOID by Nathan J.D.L. Rowark

The synthesis of a  
number that can split to know itself,

Dividing its own  
existence and can minus mind from wealth,

Is, indeed a  
clever thing that shows a future's promise,

Deriving life from  
a rhythmic found strife to enable fusion's homage.

Its eyes will  
glint a pastel green, its bodywork a master;

An engineering feat  
to grow, a mere footfall from caster.

The final touch  
will be the heart to make its oil flow,

And once removed  
from our assembly line, the human race can go.

IN THE FAR DEEPS OF GRE-FELHN ( A STONE OF MEMORIES) by Sergio Palumbo. Edited by Michele Dutcher

Gretke the Dwarf sat on a rock in a hidden recess of the far Deeps beneath the *Mountains of the Sky*. He busied himself with the long chisel, carving the last rune, of the seventieth line of the text written on the left side of half a thick stone slab. He kept it leaning against a massive boulder, holding it in place with his own two feet, so that it couldn't sway under his mighty blows. It was a position and an attitude he had gotten used to by then. Actually, devoting oneself to the draft and adornment of a



“*Stone of Memories*” was a common practice among the Dwarves, even if--in reality--such a tradition was normally followed only after beginning the task at a certain age. It was rumored that only the eldest were really capable of a labor which was so exacting thanks both to the experience acquired with the passing of the years and to the learning and wisdom they had achieved.

However, as a matter of fact there was not a clearly defined moment during the life of an individual to begin attending to that duty. A Dwarf did it as soon as he felt ready for it or sensed inside the urge to express something important, to leave a clear memory of himself. Upon it was recorded all the salient data, every event, the main adventures and the treasures accumulated during his life. It was a sort of ritual of meditation, in brief, like a scroll of holy sayings drawn from a Zai monk in the Old Mounts or a book of psalms from a friar of Blemt in the Kingdom of Hirmeios.

It was an arduous work that could require many years, decades and sometimes the entire existence of a Dwarf--which everybody knew--*was very long indeed*. All the male inhabitants of the Mountains of the Sky did it. Beyond that, this place had once been his home, although he had moved away more than a century before.

Other than that, the stone could undergo some changes--partial or even complete rewrites--an improving in the ornaments and in the carvings with the passing of time, corresponding to a change of mind or a new allegiance, or a new way of thinking by the author. There were people who said that such a duty could never really be regarded as completely accomplished while its proprietor was still living. This was because some believed the stones themselves convinced their makers to change their views completely, thereby forcing an entire resetting.

It traced its origin back to the Chronicles of the Ancient Sagas, written on more than one thousand texts in stone from the long departed engineers that created the legendary Underground Kingdom. This was a vast conglomeration that was supposed to have united in the past all the Dwarven communities placed inside the several mountain ranges all over Ulhar: the community in the Northern Continent; and the one in Serysa; the Southern one; and thus Gre-Felhn, Dra-Flahz and so on; maybe even Farst...

As for Gretke himself, the reason he had begun devoting himself to that duty was pretty simple: to tell the truth. He had nothing else to do down there, in that cavern that was scarcely lighted and seemingly isolated from the rest of those extensive passageways that wound endlessly into the depths of the mountains.

He put his chisel down and scrubbed his beard noisily. It had grown a lot, doubtless. Maybe that was the only indication of the passing time there, as it was indisputable that days had elapsed, one after the other, all the same, in such an obscure, remote place, completely hidden from the world. He stared at the glassy, translucent dividing wall, that was endowed with a watery texture that defined the rocky chamber he was trapped within. He had tried everything he knew to tear down the partition by using his pointed ravenbill, and his broad warhammer, and his strong chisel and he even used his bare hands. He hated being in such a hopeless state. At last he had given up, the magical barrier was made up by an indestructible matter. And that was that.

His mind turned again to what he was able to perceive on the other side of that massive restriction that enclosed his prison. Innumerable treasures, precious stones, gold and gems, and all that mithril lay gleaming in the darkness. The room full of treasure was something so beautiful, something that wetted his appetite unceasingly. And yet--Gretke thought with discouraging regret--it was a treasure he was not capable of ever reaching.

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Gretke thought back on how he and his fellows had begun their journey together. The early part of the quest had been easy. The old map they'd acquired by chance in LongPort showed them exactly where to head. Otherwise they would probably have gotten lost in one of the innumerable diversions they had run into along the way--in spite of Gretke's essential help and his expert knowledge of those places.

The trail the group had followed on the surface to get to the Mountains of the Sky had been less difficult than expected and they had even found excellent meals, as well. First they shared a warm dinner, with first-rate red wine, at a table of an inn among the trees that shaded the mercantile boulevard in the town of Frjest. Then there was venison from the forest at the slopes of the White Mountains while still inside the northern boundaries of the Commercial Union of the Free Towns. Finally, there was beef for free from the cattle herd pastured in the valley between the village of Black Pass and the borough of Verdrel. They had been careful not to incur the anger of the inhabitants of that plain.

Therefore they had entered the uneven territory of the Dwarves of Gre-Felhn where the inside upland guarded the Mountains of the Sky, whose peaks could be over 12,000 metres high. Only the secret path drawn up on their own map had allowed them to get near one of the secondary entrances into the underground dwelling of the Dwarves--who had one of the largest communities on the entire Continent--unseen from the hidden sentries positioned all along the strategic points of that mountain range.

Their party of adventurers consisted only of four persons. One female Elf, *Huerlen*, called "One-Eyelash" because she lacked part of the skin and the whole right eyebrow, cut by a showy scar made from a close range hit of a Fire Mage she had been given the job to kill several years before, *according to what she had told them*. It seemed that her adversary had been able to wound her just before falling to the ground in a wail, his heart run through by her pointed stiletto. Practical, unpleasant when needed, you wouldn't ever hear childish affirmations of love coming from her. Moreover she didn't have much of a thirst for strong drink, that was her only fault, Gretke thought, from his Dwarvish point of view, of course...

This apart, surely every man would have been stirred by how beautiful she looked in her short black hair, pointed with silver curls, and in her dress, close-fitting but comfortable, *Ehlverl*, if he still well remembered its name in Elvish. It was a unique clothing that combined black leather shoulder protectors and brown velvet mixed with grayish linen down the slender waist, actually typical and old-fashioned among all the Dark Elves.

Then there was a human named Wearl, brown eyes, a big and hefty nose, with a good head of hair, former militiaman, former mercenary, former (?) plunderer and nowadays a robber and an adventurer always in search of treasures just as they were. His body was muscular and vigorously built, his clothes were always a little untidy and were made up of chequered trousers and an ample fur-lined, quilted shirt which was crumpled by the shoulder bag he carried. He seemed to be a man more used to giving a kick to a wooden shutter, and using his boots to demolish every obstacle instead of trying to open the door by simply working its bolt...His typical saying was "Hit first and then think about it..." and one couldn't count the numerous fist fights he had been involved in without much thought. Gretke wondered how he was still alive today...

Anyway, a Black Ork named *Juuhrg* was their main brawn, a bit short--maybe--according to the standards of his race, given that he was no taller than 7.50 feet--the reason why he hadn't made a fortune as he had no chance so far as a berserk warrior in his tribe--but he was decidedly a fearful opponent for every Human or Elf. His face was can-shaped and undoubtedly terrorizing, punctuated by two blood-filled eyes, and showed a dull greenish complexion all over his body that was different from all the other Orks' skin he had previously known: it emerged here and there from the tears of the reddish blouse he wore, which was similar to an old floorcloth. All the same its coarse shade was due mainly to the dirt he had ground into it, as he didn't launder his clothes very often. On the other hand, *Juuhrg* had displayed his usefulness when necessary, especially when he easily moved a boulder that was obstructing their way, when they continued clambering up the eastern slopes of Mount Indented.

And then here he was, Gretke. An experienced Dwarf adventurer who had come from a village hidden in the farthest depths of the western part of that imposing range. He was no taller than one meter and twenty, his heavy and strong body was dotted because of the many wounds which had healed with the passing of time leaving jagged scars, two of which were on his left ear and most nearly resembled a cross-shaped carving. These made his bearded face seem harder and more rugged, although it was enriched by two blue eyes that were the same color of the ancient glacier that always stood on the highest mountain peaks. The vivid orange-reddish tone of his hair, which he wore plaited in a sort of long cord down his back, lit up his huge haversack and the worn-out leather clothes he commonly put on when traveling.

Since beginning their trek into the very long underground tunnels of Gre-Felhn, Gretke had felt uneasy. He had kept himself away from the Mountains of the Sky for more than one hundred years but he would have never imagined that his coming back would have given rise to such a strange anxiousness in him. Nevertheless he had to be on the alert, those dim places were not only an evident display of the extraordinary engineering ability of the ancient Dwarves of that community--a fact which could even make him feel proud before all his fellows, if only he didn't need to center his senses continuously on the present path so as not to fall down a cliff--but there were also thousands of traps and those were probably were protected by means of far too many contraptions. Only one mistake and one of them--*or even all of them*--would come to an awful end all at the same time. Finding and defusing any snare down there in the caverns all along the way was his main duty. He was the Dwarf, after all.

Past a deep fissure in the ground, they discovered the statue of a Warrior, definitely oversized in comparison with the common height of most individuals. In the right hand it held an enormous book of stone while its elbow rested on a pouch at its waist, the huge head was encircled by a great helmet enriched with many valuable gems. While Wearl growled something, Gretke's eyes changed into attentive slits, transfixed upon the handmade sculpture for a long time, several minutes even. He stood in silence, the torch in the passageway being fed by a magic oil which threw light on it from nearby.

All the others standing at his back were on standby, Huerlen's long tapered fingers softly laid on one of the enormous shoulders of the Black Ork, signaling him to remain patiently motionless.

The Dwarf was well acquainted with the trap set before them: if anyone touched the statue, hidden mechanisms would drop the ceiling on their heads, probably killing them at once. At any rate, even if they were able to come out of the cave-in alive, surely they would never be able to re-surface to continue their quest.

Lifting a finger before his lips reminding all of them to move cautiously without a word, Gretke made his fellows line up along the masonry opposite the enormous stone Dwarf, gesturing them to get going at a walking pace without touching the walls. While the others were marching sideways, he anxiously waited and kept watching, his nose facing the sculpture, trying to hear the faintest noise revealing the activation of a gear or a trap being sprung. When he smelled a heavy breath coming from in back of him, he knew that even the Ork had passed the critical point, so he went backwards and followed the same path as the rest of his group. It was really a great relief to his ears when, at the first diversion a bit further, he didn't hear any falling rock in the previous gallery which had already plunged back into darkness.

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Within the dim cavern, Gretke went to work again on the slow carving of his own Stone of Memories. Since he had left Gre-Felhn still fairly young, his life had not been as particularly stimulating as he had expected. He had taken part in a border dispute while in a Northern Barony's service within the Empire of Ulhar, then he had been hired as a bodyguard for a noble of the Great Marquisate of Lewxil and after that he devoted himself to a decisively more adventurous existence: some plundering while following a big gang in the west, even the theft of a work of art while teamed up with an experienced smuggler in Tralden. At last there was the homicide of the lover of a rich merchant's wife on commission, an event not too edifying for him, but he had passed through a long period in strained circumstances and he had soon discovered that one couldn't live very long on an empty stomach.

*"Wherever you go, whatever you do, against whichever enemy you fight, remember that you'll ever be a Dwarf..."* his uncle had told him more than a century ago, when he had expressed his desire to seek his fortune outside the Mountains of the Sky. "Bury this saying deep!" What a wisdom inside this phrase, he thought tensely. Only many years later had he been truly capable of comprehending its complete meaning.

He squinted at the pitiful remains of the members of his small company, which laid ahead on the ground inside that same chamber. Their corpses looked white in some parts where bones had pierced through their skin, and he wondered whether he could have saved them after all. The wretched answer was that, by now, it made no difference anyway.

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Two entire days had passed since they had cleverly avoided the trap arranged near the big statue. In the meantime they had penetrated further inside the tunnels of those mountains--tunnels too extensive for even the Dwarf to have had any experience with--running into several other dangers which were easily detected and evaded, thanks to Gretke's wit and, in one case, by means of Huerlen's innate presence of mind.

They had even miraculously saved themselves from an unforeseen landslide, and then had been forced to leap into a roaring stream that flowed powerfully at the bottom of a sheer precipice, plunging into the icy water that came up to their waists, finally exiting onto the other bank. The Ork didn't take well to the feel of penetrating the surface of the water, because that had finally scratched the perennial layer of dirt on his skin.

That night, still cold and damp, they had been definitely reassured as soon as Wearl had taken out the sackcloth with their food rations from his pouch, savoring insatiably the thin strips of meat inside without complaining at all about their lack of flavor -at least for this time. According to their calculations, that night should have been the last one before achieving the conclusion of their difficult wanderings. By then their destination was finally in sight!

By the next morning (although the time of day made no real difference because the darkness enveloped all of them, and was regarded by everyone as too oppressive - except by *the dwarf*) they had set out for the gallery leading to a long staircase sculptured in stone that clambered up to a height of two hundred meters. From there an opening in the walls burst open upon a wide cavern, bristling with jutting rocks and covered by a heap of crumbled stones which resonated irritatingly all around the walls while the small party was walking forward.

They had crossed the entire immense chamber--which was so large that their torches couldn't light up all of it--when finally they arrived before a heavy granite portal that rose suddenly. There were extremely ornate long bas-reliefs, showing scenes of hunting, war and daily life, which decorated the two doors. There were extensive portions of the rocks full of deep carvings in runic characters: they seemed to be in perfect condition, although many centuries old.

They had arrived at the final point, all his group well knew, and a sort of eagerness started seizing them. While Juuhrg stared after the portal while trying to restrain one of his usual grunts, and Wearl stroked the hilt of his own sword with irritation, it was Huerlen who cut in abruptly. "Hurry up, Gretke..." the Elf said, addressing the Dwarf that preceded all of them. "You know that for me all those words in ancient Dwarven are incomprehensible..."

Gretke nodded, so it was up to him. Now he was certain that he was the only one capable of interpreting those ancient inscriptions, so consumed with time, in spite of the fact that they had both been born in that same community. Moreover he was the only Dwarf in the whole party. And that was that.

“Yes, indeed...” he acknowledged. All the others stepped apart, while Gretke walked through them, so as to better study the runic symbols carved on the rock. At first sight, they seemed to tell the story of the people that built the community of Gre-Felhn: its web of caverns and mines as the never-ending galleries made under the hard surface of those high mountains; then the main events, the battles and the sagas of the most important characters from those places soon followed; and finally there were several passages referring to the engineers of that “reliquary”, as it was defined that way, where all the treasures they were seeking were preserved. Gretke pondered for a moment the priceless objects they were going to take possession: finds in mithril, gold and silver, money and gems; Elven arms and armor taken from the adversaries finally defeated in a war twice as long as a man’s life; sword-hilts enriched with brilliant and valuable ornaments. And who knows whatever else...He forced himself to centre again on his job.

The carvings explained the way some artifacts which were endowed with magical characteristics and extremely important had been concealed past that portal...one thing their map didn’t mention at all. Nevertheless it was not just that sudden revelation that surprised the Dwarf so much, it was the signature he found positioned at the end of the phrase: *Krtk, the Runemaker!* Gretke gave a start. He was the most famous Rune Master within the entire range of the Mountains of the Sky, a name he had heard of since he was a kid as the main hero of many fanciful tales and legends, and his works were even well known among all the people.

It was claimed that some of his traps were still operational today at the bottom of the deepest recesses of Gre-Felhn, ready to make the mountains themselves collapse on top of the enemies who had tried to invade the official dwelling of the Dwarves with effrontery.

Very worried for what he had discovered, Gretke was even more astonished when he noticed the basalt frame just under that signature, containing some other carvings in a language he recognized as part of the ancient religious texts all the youngster Dwarves usually learned while still at home with their families. Swallowing with difficulty, he mentally repeated that phrase: *“If any kind of stranger removes one of the finds inside the reliquary, the whole community will be destroyed. The mountains themselves will be shaken, the galleries will fall into ruin and the plunderers from outside will have free admittance to the Underground Kingdom of the Dwarves of the old legends. So, You, Follower of the Mysteries who knows the secret place, reveal it to no one! Keep this secret well, if you really are truly interested in the life of all the Dwarves!”*

He knew that nursery rhyme very well, he had repeated it so many times together with the old Followers of the Mysteries until he had learned by heart...He had never believed he would one day confront that legend face to face! His uncle’s old saying crossed his mind once again and he thought about the bad omen he had received just before entering Gre-Felhn. The wind had changed suddenly the night before they

started descending those caverns, inevitably this meant that no good would come according to the age-old Dwarvish traditions...

Still disturbed because of that surprise, he felt the others crowd around his back, irritated about the long wait. But now everything had changed... **he would never betray his Dwarfish honor, not for all the mithril in the entire world!**

Gretke knew that he could try to stop them from continuing with that perilous quest, though it would probably result in being mocked, or worse. He could have insisted they stop, imploring them again and again, but surely he would have had no chance, because sooner or later his fellows would have been back, with or without him. Somehow or other, after trying everything, finally they would get the better of those hidden traps and protections. After all, they already knew most of the way to follow the underground tunnels. It was also possible that maybe they would even find another Dwarven aide. There was no hope.

It was true, he could have at last tried to save them by leading the group to another chamber; to other valuable items, in another part of the mountains. Perhaps he could make them face the fact that nothing could be done about the situation now, although the treasure seemed very remunerative. But he doubted that they had truly accepted and trusted him. Most likely, they would have ceased placing confidence in him, thinking he would have an interest in deceiving them so that he could keep all the treasure just for himself. *Obviously, something **highly valuable** had been hidden beyond the old portal.* Arguments would have soon started among them, with reciprocal accusations of cowardice or deception.

He knew his fellows and the mold that each of them was made from. It was possible that he could succeed in defeating Wearl in hand-to-hand combat. However, he was not sure he would come out unharmed from their Ork's hold, despite his strength and his great ability with a mace. Or perhaps he could not surpass the mischievous experience of the Elf, whose moves in battle he wasn't familiar with – he didn't know all the tricks and surprises in battle, and he was sure she kept many of them in reserve. This did not even take into account the poisoned points she surely had inside some hidden case or inside her dress. No, he had no choice, if he wanted to follow the dictates of the sacred warning which had been etched on the frame in the bas-relief, and keep away Gre-Felhn's ruin, he had to proceed without hesitation. Even at the price of losing his own life!

He had made his decision. "I'm ready now!" he said, his eyes strayed from his companions, and he activated the gears that set slowly into motion a stone circle. But it was going the wrong way... Gretke knew this very well. With a lasting screeching, a winding passage burst open along the walls, leading to another place. Gretke swallowed once more and took a decisive step forward gesturing the others to follow him. As soon as the entire group was in, the entrance at their back was suddenly obstructed and a strange gas started coming from an air duct hidden among the rocks, while another set of lethal traps were operated at the same time in various points of the chamber. All the people, astounded and terror-stricken, stopped immediately looking around hopelessly, well aware of the tragedy was about to hit them.

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Gretke came back to reality. The makers of that trap and of the hidden devices which had activated the poisonous gas had set everything so that it couldn't prove harmful for any Dwarf, except a temporary nasty cough. Maybe this was to punish him for that awkward attempt of robbing the community of such an important thing upon which the future itself of Gre-Felhn may depend. Or perhaps the fact that it was not a fatal composition--at least for him--was only due to a precaution taken from the workers intent on completion of that contraption, with the sole purpose of protecting themselves from any unpredictable malfunction during the setting up. Whoever could know? In any case, that poisonous gas had been surely lethal for all his other fellows, as soon as they had entered that chamber.

He struck a resolute blow on the rock slab as he had before, but he was soon overwhelmed with his thoughts, and he dropped his chisel to the ground. He would have had all the time in the world to write down the most detailed particulars of his extreme Dwarvish heroism. Probably it would have been even worth a saga or a ballad. If only anyone in the world would know. But *given that most likely he would never leave that magic prison in the far reaches of those mountains*, he was deeply uncertain if his adventure would ever be told from the storytellers inside a great hall, or in the middle of some tiny village. He had serious doubts that his Stone of Memories would ever be found. And this was very disheartening.

There was a severe lesson after all in that story, he thought. His unbridled ambition which had been leading him for most of his life, often driving him to commit definitely reckless and cruel actions--had been punished at last, there was nothing left to say. He would never see again the sunlight rising late in the morning among the snow clad peaks of the Mountains of the Sky. But his "heroic deed"--understandable only for those from his own race--would live on through the carvings on that stone.

He had saved his honour as a Dwarf. And this, Gretke had discovered finally, was the most precious treasure of all.

THE END

THE HOUSE OF SKULLS by Gavin Chappell

7      The Way Back

Yeduza turned to see Assouad and his fellow nomads standing in the gap between the tents. Assouad was lowering his still smoking musket. All around them, Kikwenzi stood motionless, faces blank. As Yeduza returned her attention to Chinja's motionless corpse, the Kikwenzi slowly seemed to awaken, as if from deep sleep, rubbing at their eyes and looking in doubt and uncertainty at each other.

'I told you to wait until we had killed the Kikwenzi, woman!' Assouad blazed. He reloaded his musket and aimed it directly at the nearest warrior.

Yeduza looked at him. 'They pose no threat now.' As Assouad's finger tightened on the trigger, she brought her arm upwards, knocking the barrel away. The shot headed



for the distant trees and a pair of vultures leapt up, squawking in dismay. Assouad glared at her.

‘Where is the treasure, then?’ he demanded. ‘Pygmy--where is it?’

Dogo nodded towards the large tent. ‘That is where Chinja kept all his plunder.’

Assouad nodded coldly. He beckoned to his men, and they forced their way through the mass of bewildered Kikwenzi towards the tent. Yeduza and Dogo followed behind them.

Assouad disappeared inside the tent. Shortly after, Yeduza heard a cry, and then the barbarian returned, dragging three Nago girls with him. He flung them down on the packed earth with a grin, and spoke to his men. He caught sight of Yeduza’s eye.

‘There’s wealth aplenty in here,’ he laughed. ‘Black gold as well.’ He seized one girl roughly by her chin, and ran a caressing hand down her face.

Yeduza’s eyes widened. ‘Princess Walata!’ she exclaimed. ‘How came you here?’

The girl drew back from Assouad’s rough grasp and looked up at Yeduza.

‘General Yeduza?’ she asked softly. ‘Have you joined our enemies?’

Yeduza shook her head. ‘I have liberated you,’ she said.

‘With my aid!’ Assouad broke in. ‘We had a deal, woman. I killed Chinja. Now his loot is mine. Come here, girl.’

Yeduza thrust herself forward. ‘No!’ she said. ‘This was not in the deal. You can take the gold of Habesh. But this is Walata, daughter of Mtogo, Princess of Nago.’

‘A wool-head princess will fetch a fair price on a northern slave-block,’ the barbarian muttered rebelliously, but he turned away and led his men inside the large tent. As Yeduza spoke to the Princess and her two handmaidens, she could hear the barbarians ransacking the tent.

‘How came you here, my princess?’ she asked. ‘Does your father know you were captives?’

Walata pouted. ‘My father knows nothing, cares less,’ she said. ‘It was because of him that I fled Mnara with my handmaidens. He had my own mother executed! I knew that I would be next. We fled into the wilderness, and there the Kikwenzi found us.’ Her expression changed to one of sorrow and shame. ‘They dragged us to Chinja, who made us his meanest slaves.’

Yeduza caressed her. ‘Your father slew your mother?’ she probed.

‘He has slain many since you were banished,’ Walata replied. ‘The people say that the only folk he has not killed are the Kikwenzi. But in Mnara, he wades in blood. The

army does his bidding in everything and the people are oppressed. And he has rebuilt the House of Skulls.'

Yeduza nodded. 'I had heard as much,' she said.

'Then why did you not come back to us?' the Princess demanded. 'The people say that only you could save us from my father's insanity. And he is insane--or possessed. Another voice speaks through his lips, another's eyes look upon this world. He is not the man I have loved throughout my life.'

'Possessed...' Yeduza whispered. She looked down at Chinja's corpse. 'Princess Walata,' she said, 'I could not aid you before now, since I was a hunted exile, alone except for my courageous companion, Dogo.' The Princess smiled at the pygmy, as he bowed. 'Now I have warriors at my back, armed with new, more powerful weaponry. Mtogo's army will not prevail against them.'

'Those barbarians?' Walata asked with a shudder.

'They are valiant warriors,' Yeduza replied. 'With their aid we shall return to Mnara and speak with your father.' As she spoke, Assouad and his men swaggered back out of the tent, weighed down with gold and jewels. She beckoned to Assouad.

'Assouad,' she said. 'One last task awaits us. We must return to Mnara and end Mtogo's tyranny. He is as great a threat to the empire as ever these Kikwenzi were...'

Assouad shook his head. 'That wasn't in the deal,' he said, echoing her previous words. Yeduza's face fell. 'We have the treasure. My men fought for you. Now they are rewarded. We didn't agree to anything else.' He walked away towards the edge of the compound, followed his men.

Yeduza hobbled after them. 'Wait!' she cried. 'Can we not strike another deal? What can I offer you? I must return to the city. Mtogo is a tyrant. He must be stopped...'

Assouad halted, and grinned. He showed her the gold that weighed him down. 'What could you possibly offer me to top this?' he said. 'With this I could buy a palace north of the desert, with slaves and houris and mamluks doing my every bidding. Each of my men could have their own palace. What can you possibly offer me, in your flyspeck of an empire? Mud huts? Black sluts? No, Yeduza. This adventure ends here for me.' He turned, and swaggered away.

Yeduza watched with sadness as he and his men pushed their way through the milling throng. He was crude, insulting, objectionable... But what would she do when he was gone?

Dogo joined her, and then Walata.

'Do not be so sad,' said Dogo sympathetically.

Yeduza turned on him. 'What chance do we stand against Mtogo now?' she demanded bitterly. 'His army still remains loyal. We can only end his tyranny if we have strength on our side.'

'If we need an army,' Walata said tentatively, 'look around you!'

Yeduza looked around. All she could see were the milling, confused, ex-Kikwenzi warriors. Then it struck her, and she smiled.

'Of course!' she cried.

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The host halted at the crest of the rise. Below them, like a trickle of silver across the red earth of the savannah, the Nago River wound away into the shimmering haze. Foursquare and grim, the city of Mnara stood before them.

But it was a different city from the one Yeduza had last seen. Vultures circled above it, but she saw no smoke trails. Stakes stood along its adobe ramparts, each one bearing the black shape of an impaled figure. Other bodies hung from trees that grew out in the plain. She had followed a trail of corpses on her journey across the savannah, more and more as they neared Mnara.

She looked down from her camel--Assouad had left her that much--at her forces as they arrayed themselves on either hand. Dogo sat pillion, gazing down at the great city with troubled eyes. She had grown accustomed to the presence of the little man. Now she wondered how things would turn out once they had completed this quest. Mtogo must be stopped; he had gone mad, in the face of all-powerful enemies who only Yeduza had had the means and the desire to crush. Could she nurse him back to sanity? Or would it be her painful duty to kill him, as if he was a mad dog? What then? What would happen to the Empire of Nago without its Emperor?

Perhaps Walata could succeed. She had left the girl in a friendly village on the way. The beautiful princess was young and naïve, but perhaps with Yeduza's guidance she could become an Empress capable of holding the empire together.

She shook her head. Enough introspection. Time to stop thinking and seek some form of resolution. Well, there was no sign of resistance from the army of Nago. She turned to the Kikwenzi commanders and urged them on with a gesture. Then her camel trotted forward, carrying Dogo and her at their head.

They crossed the plain, inching gradually towards those towering brown walls, their advance watched only by the blind eyes of the impaled corpses that lined the ramparts, and the feasting vultures that flapped off in anger as they came ever closer. Yeduza found her breath coming in short pants. Anticipation constricted her chest. The sun glowered down from a sky the colour of cobalt.

At last, the ebon east gate of Mnara rose before them. A stake stood on either side, and Yeduza saw to her horror that the figures impaled upon them were members of Mtogo's Guard, women she might have recognised from parades, might have sat with

at feasts; but their faces were gone, picked clean by the vultures that still circled overhead.

‘Mtogo’s guards are not vigilant,’ Dogo murmured. Yeduza paid him no heed, but turned to one of her commanders, a tall, burly man named Pambazuko.

‘Take your warriors and scout ahead,’ she commanded. ‘We must learn the reason for this silent welcome.’

Pambazuko nodded stiffly, and went to his men. Shortly after, they were advancing on the gate. After briefly examining the impaled figures, Pambazuko led the men into the shadow of the city beyond. Rapidly, it swallowed them up.

Yeduza and her host stood silently in the glare of the sun. Seconds passed, and the only sound was a muted whisper of wind as it stirred the withered grasses. Out of the corner of her eye, Yeduza thought she saw a cloud of dust moving along the northern horizon. She peered towards it uncertainly. It resembled the dust trail created by a group of riders. What riders could be out there now? Were they Mtogo’s forces? Should she alert her forces? What did it portend?

In this eerie silence, anything seemed like an omen of doom.

‘My lady?’

She turned in her saddle to see that Pambazuko had returned. He stood looking up at her, his face grim.

‘Much of the city is deserted; at least the streets are. We think that the citizens might be hiding in their houses. But we met no resistance. All was silent, except we could hear the sound of chanting and shouting from the middle of the city.’

Yeduza listened intently. Pambazuko was a Bengue, and he had never seen Mnara before he had been dragged off to fight for Chinja. The centre of the city--that would be the direction of the palace. Or where the palace had once stood...

She made a decision. Beckoning her commanders to her, she explained

‘I will take a small party of warriors, and we shall advance into the city. At the first signs of trouble, advance after us in force. It seems that Mtogo has left all his defences down. Perhaps it is a trap. Perhaps not. We shall see. Meanwhile, I shall leave Dogo with you to represent me.’

There was some muttering as she said this, and Dogo himself looked anxious. But Yeduza was sure that she could leave the host in his hands. He had proved himself a capable companion in the time they had been together.

She gathered a picked force of thirty warriors, and together they advanced towards the gates. The stink of corruption made Yeduza gag as they came closer to the impaled corpses, both at the gate and along the ramparts. Yeduza looked back one last time, to see Dogo standing among the tall commanders.

In the distance, the cloud of dust seemed to be drawing closer. One thing at a time, she told herself. Her forces were large enough to fend off any surprise attack, assuming her imagination had not got the better of her. Then they were past the gates, and entering the city.

The city was deserted, as Pambazuko had said. Yeduza led her warriors cautiously past cracked adobe walls, along streets where sand lay in drifts, coming closer and closer to the centre, where the palace had once stood. She could see no sign of its high roofs from here. Had Mtogo destroyed it?

At last, without any resistance, Yeduza and her warriors came out into the square at the centre of Mnara, where the palace had once stood. Her heart hammered in her ears as she saw the great adobe building that had replaced it.

Human skulls lined its every surface. It had been built almost entirely of skulls, cemented together with adobe. A great archway of skulls led into the dark interior. Even the pavement before it comprised of skulls. An altar stood beneath the arch, and here a small group presided over a scene of horror.

Two women held a struggling youth down over the altar. Towering over them was a horrific figure. Yeduza stared in sick, pitying horror as she recognised it as her erstwhile emperor, Mtogo.

When last she had seen him, his eyes had been dull, his muscular body run to seed. Now all his fat had vanished, and his frame was gaunt and withered, but his eyes glared from his skull-like face... like the eyes of a serpent.

As he raised a knife above him to disembowel the writhing figure the two women pinioned, those serpent eyes, so strangely familiar, fixed on her own, and she felt a thrill of horrified, impossible recognition.

Mtogo dropped the knife, and it fell with a clatter on the pavement of skulls. He grinned, and stepped round the altar, leaving the sacrifice in the hands of his Amazons, and halted a few metres from Yeduza's motionless, paralysed form.

'You return to dog me once again,' he boomed, and even his voice seemed wrong. 'Will you try to kill me, as you did last time?'

Yeduza stirred, filled with righteous wrath.

'I made no attempt to kill you,' she blazed. 'You would have killed me, because the Kikwenzi defeated me. After my many years of service...'

'You have joined the Kikwenzi now,' the Emperor said, indicating her companions.

'I freed them!' Yeduza replied. 'I brought about Chinja's downfall. Now I come to you, to beg you--end this killing! What has happened to Nago; what has happened to you, my lord? What has brought you to this?'

Those snake-like eyes glittered, naggingly familiar. 'I--the spirit that moves this feeble frame--seek revenge on Nago; upon Mtogo, for the woes he worked me. And you were his Amazon. But you shall bring about his death. You will work my revenge...'

Yeduza shivered in horror to hear those words; the same words she had heard from Chinja, his final words. It was as if they were continuing the same conversation.

'Who are you?' she whispered. 'What spirit? Are you not Emperor Mtogo?'

'I infiltrated his dreams, spoke to him in the dark spaces of his mind,' the man said. 'Even as I animated Chinja, and held his warriors under my spell, I worked upon Mtogo himself. Then, when you forced me to flee Chinja, I put an end to my whisperings, and instead came to live in his heart. Your Emperor is gone. Only I remain--Mungu-Ovu!'

Yeduza's scalp crawled as those eyes blazed down at her. With a supreme effort of will, she lifted her assegai and plunged it into his naked chest.

He laughed as the blade passed through him as if he were no more than a phantom. 'You have tried that before,' he taunted her. 'Where are your barbarian allies now? Where are your weapons of subtle craft? I am a sorcerer. I control this land, this realm, as I did in life. I control the Emperor, and through him I will destroy the Empire that spurned me!' He clicked his fingers. 'Take her to the altar!'

Yeduza was horrified as two Kikwenzi stepped forward to take her arms. She struggled and fought and damned them as traitors as they dragged her across the skull-pavement towards the altar where Mtogo--no, Mungu-Ovu!--stood now, his knife in his hands again.

'One space remains in my house of skulls,' he said. 'I had hoped to fill it with the braincase of this oaf,'--he indicated the youth still struggling in the two women's arms--'but the skull of Mtogo's general will be more fitting.'

The two Kikwenzi bent Yeduza over the altar. Their faces were blank, as if she had never freed them from their slavery. Now Mungu-Ovu lifted the knife over her breast, ready to plunge it in. for a moment, all was silent. Yeduza struggled feebly in the iron grip of the Kikwenzi, knowing that she was close to the end.

A shot rang out across the courtyard. Yeduza's eyes widened as she saw a small hole appear in Mungu-Ovu's forehead. Blood dribbled from it. His eyes rolled upwards in their sockets. The knife clattered down on the skulls a second time. Slowly, like a toppled tree, the body collapsed.

As if waking from a dream, the two Kikwenzi looked down at Yeduza. They let go of her immediately, and she drew herself up. Then she turned.

Familiar figures stood at the edge of the courtyard. Smoke drifted up from the barrel of Assouad's musket. Behind him, his warriors sat upon camelback, watching the

scene with impassive faces. At Assouad's side stood Dogo, and the rest of the Kikwenzi commanders were behind them.

Assouad swaggered forwards. Yeduza stared down at the skulls at her feet and was silent.

'You thought I'd left you to it, eh?' he laughed. 'I couldn't. All that gold--well, it will set me up for life. But I could never settle down in a palace in the north. Not now. Not since I have known you. You are not like other women, Yeduza. Not like the soft, simpering houris north of the desert, or even the strong, earthy women of the Tiburi. You are like no one I have ever met. So I thought I would ride back and join you. Good thing I did. Your Emperor had gone mad, I see. You were in danger. I saved you.'

'You're very quiet. Didn't you want me to help you? Say something! Look at me, woman! Look at me!'

Dogo tugged at Assouad's arm, and he looked down at the pygmy.

'Yeduza is tired,' the little man said softly, his face compassionate. 'Leave her be for now. We have celebrations to prepare.'

Unwillingly, Assouad allowed the pygmy to lead him away. As the warriors moved into the city en masse, he looked over his shoulder one last time at Yeduza as she stood there in the shadows. Then he and the others filed from the courtyard. Soon sounds of jubilation were audible from the streets outside.

In the silence of the House of Skulls, Yeduza's face lifted. Serpent eyes glittered with hate.

The eyes of Mungu-Ovu.

THE END

VARNEY THE VAMPYRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE ARRIVAL OF JACK PRINGLE.—MIDNIGHT AND THE VAMPYRE.—  
THE MYSTERIOUS HAT.

"Bless me! what is that?" said Mr. Chillingworth; "what a very singular sound."

"Hold your noise," said the admiral; "did you never hear that before?"

"No; how should I?"

"Lor, bless the ignorance of some people, that's a boatswain's call."

"Oh, it is," said Mr. Chillingworth; "is he going to call again?"

"D——e, I tell ye it's a boatswain's call."

"Well, then, d——e, if it comes to that," said Mr. Chillingworth, "what does he call here for?"

The admiral disdained an answer; but demanding the lantern, he opened it, so that there was a sufficient glimmering of light to guide him, and then walked from the room towards the front door of the Hall.

He asked no questions before he opened it, because, no doubt, the signal was preconcerted; and Jack Pringle, for it was he indeed who had arrived, at once walked in, and the admiral barred the door with the same precision with which it was before secured.

"Well, Jack," he said, "did you see anybody?"

"Ay, ay, sir," said Jack.

"Why, ye don't mean that—where?"

"Where I bought the grub; a woman—"

"D——e, you're a fool, Jack."

"You're another."

"Hilloa, ye scoundrel, what d'ye mean by talking to me in that way? is this your respect for your superiors?"

"Ship's been paid off long ago," said Jack, "and I ain't got no superiors. I ain't a marine or a Frenchman."

"Why, you're drunk."

"I know it; put that in your eye."

"There's a scoundrel. Why, you know-nothing-lubber, didn't I tell you to be careful, and that everything depended upon secrecy and caution? and didn't I tell you, above all this, to avoid drink?"

"To be sure you did."

"And yet you come here like a rum cask."

"Yes; now you've had your say, what then?"

"You'd better leave him alone," said Mr. Chillingworth; "it's no use arguing with a drunken man."



"Harkye, admiral," said Jack, steadying himself as well as he could. "I've put up with you a precious long while, but I won't no longer; you're so drunk, now, that you keeping bobbing up and down like the mizen gaff in a storm—that's my opinion—tol de rol."

"Let him alone, let him alone," urged Mr. Chillingworth.

"The villain," said the admiral; "he's enough to ruin everything; now, who would have thought that? but it's always been the way with him for a matter of twenty years—he never had any judgment in his drink. When it was all smooth sailing, and nothing to do, and the fellow might have got an extra drop on board, which nobody would have cared for, he's as sober as a judge; but, whenever there's anything to do, that wants a little cleverness, confound him, he ships rum enough to float a seventy-four."

"Are you going to stand anything to drink," said Jack, "my old buffer? Do you recollect where you got your knob scuttled off Beyrout—how you fell on your latter end and tried to recollect your church cateckis, you old brute?—I's ashamed of you. Do you recollect the brown girl you bought for thirteen bob and a tanner, at the blessed Society Islands, and sold her again for a dollar, to a nigger seven feet two, in his natural pumps? you're a nice article, you is, to talk of marines and swabs, and shore-going lubbers, blow yer. Do you recollect the little Frenchman that told ye he'd pull your blessed nose, and I advised you to soap it? do you recollect Sall at Spithead, as you got in at a port hole of the state cabin, all but her behind?"

"Death and the devil!" said the admiral, breaking from the grasp of Mr. Chillingworth.

"Ay," said Jack, "you'll come to 'em both one of these days, old cock, and no mistake."

"I'll have his life, I'll have his life," roared the admiral.

"Nay, nay, sir," said Mr. Chillingworth, catching the admiral round the waist. "My dear sir, recollect, now, if I may venture to advise you, Admiral Bell, there's a lot of that fiery hollands you know, in the next room; set firm down to that, and finish him off. I'll warrant him, he'll be quiet enough."

"What's that you say?" cried Jack—"hollands!—who's got any?—next to rum and Elizabeth Baker, if I has an affection, it's hollands."

"Jack!" said the admiral.

"Ay, ay, sir!" said Jack, instinctively.

"Come this way."

Jack staggered after him, and they all reached the room where the admiral and Mr. Chillingworth had been sitting before the alarm.

"There!" said the admiral, putting the light upon the table, and pointing to the bottle; "what do you think of that?"

"I never thinks under such circumstances," said Jack. "Here's to the wooden walls of old England!"

He seized the bottle, and, putting its neck into his mouth, for a few moments nothing was heard but a gurgling sound of the liquor passing down his throat; his head went further and further back, until, at last, over he went, chair and bottle and all, and lay in a helpless state of intoxication on the floor.

"So far, so good," said the admiral. "He's out of the way, at all events."

"I'll just loosen his neckcloth," said Mr. Chillingworth, "and then we'll go and sit somewhere else; and I should recommend that, if anywhere, we take up our station in that chamber, once Flora's, where the mysterious panelled portrait hangs, that bears so strong a resemblance to Varney, the vampyre."

"Hush!" said the admiral. "What's that?"

They listened for a moment intently; and then, distinctly, upon the gravel path outside the window, they heard a footstep, as if some person were walking along, not altogether heedlessly, but yet without any very great amount of caution or attention to the noise he might make.

"Hist!" said the doctor. "Not a word. They come."

"What do you say they for?" said the admiral.

"Because something seems to whisper me that Mr. Marchdale knows more of Varney, the vampyre, than ever he has chosen to reveal. Put out the light."

"Yes, yes—that'll do. The moon has risen; see how it streams through the chinks of the shutters."

"No, no—it's not in that direction, or our light would have betrayed us. Do you not see the beams come from that half glass-door leading to the greenhouse?"

"Yes; and there's the footstep again, or another."

Tramp, tramp came a footfall again upon the gravel path, and, as before, died away upon their listening ears.

"What do you say now," said Mr. Chillingworth—"are there not two?"

"If they were a dozen," said the admiral, "although we have lost one of our force, I would tackle them. Let's creep on through the rooms in the direction the footsteps went."

"My life on it," said Mr. Chillingworth as they left the apartment, "if this be Varney, he makes for that apartment where Flora slept, and which he knows how to get admission to. I've studied the house well, admiral, and to get to that window any one from here outside must take a considerable round. Come on—we shall be beforehand."

"A good idea—a good idea. Be it so."

Just allowing themselves sufficient light to guide them on the way from the lantern, they hurried on with as much precipitation as the intricacies of the passage would allow, nor halted till they had reached the chamber where hung the portrait which bore so striking and remarkable a likeness to Varney, the vampyre.

They left the lamp outside the door, so that not even a straggling beam from it could betray that there were persons on the watch; and then, as quietly as foot could fall, they took up their station among the hangings of the antique bedstead, which has been before alluded to in this work as a remarkable piece of furniture appertaining to that apartment.

"Do you think," said the admiral, "we've distanced them?"

"Certainly we have. It's unlucky that the blind of the window is down."

"Is it? By Heaven, there's a d——d strange-looking shadow creeping over it."

Mr. Chillingworth looked almost with suspended breath. Even he could not altogether get rid of a tremulous feeling, as he saw that the shadow of a human form, apparently of very large dimensions, was on the outside, with the arms spread out, as if feeling for some means of opening the window.

It would have been easy now to have fired one of the pistols direct upon the figure; but, somehow or another, both the admiral and Mr. Chillingworth shrank from that course, and they felt much rather inclined to capture whoever might make his appearance, only using their pistols as a last resource, than gratuitously and at once to resort to violence.

"Who should you say that was?" whispered the admiral.

"Varney, the vampyre."

"D——e, he's ill-looking and big enough for anything—there's a noise!"

There was a strange cracking sound at the window, as if a pane of glass was being very stealthily and quietly broken; and then the blind was agitated slightly, confusing much the shadow that was cast upon it, as if the hand of some person was introduced for the purpose of effecting a complete entrance into the apartment.

"He's coming in," whispered the admiral.

"Hush, for Heaven's sake!" said Mr. Chillingworth; "you will alarm him, and we shall lose the fruit of all the labour we have already bestowed upon the matter; but did you not say something, admiral, about lying under the window and catching him by the leg?"

"Why, yes; I did."

"Go and do it, then; for, as sure as you are a living man, his leg will be in in a minute."

"Here goes," said the admiral; "I never suggest anything which I'm unwilling to do myself."

Whoever it was that now was making such strenuous exertions to get into the apartment seemed to find some difficulty as regarded the fastenings of the window, and as this difficulty increased, the patience of the party, as well as his caution deserted him, and the casement was rattled with violence.

With a far greater amount of caution than any one from a knowledge of his character would have given him credit for, the admiral crept forward and laid himself exactly under the window.

The depth of wood-work from the floor to the lowest part of the window-frame did not exceed above two feet; to that any one could conveniently step in from the balcony outside on to the floor of the apartment, which was just what he who was attempting to effect an entrance was desirous of doing.

It was quite clear that, be he who he might, mortal or vampyre, he had some acquaintance with the fastening of the window; for now he succeeded in moving it, and the sash was thrown open.

The blind was still an obstacle; but a vigorous pull from the intruder brought that down on the prostrate admiral; and then Mr. Chillingworth saw, by the moonlight, a tall, gaunt figure standing in the balcony, as if just hesitating for a moment whether to get head first or feet first into the apartment.

Had he chosen the former alternative he would need, indeed, to have been endowed with more than mortal powers of defence and offence to escape capture, but his lucky star was in the ascendancy, and he put his foot in first.

He turned his side to the apartment and, as he did so, the blight moonlight fell upon his face, enabling Mr. Chillingworth to see, without the shadow of a doubt, that it was, indeed, Varney, the vampyre, who was thus stealthily making his entrance into Bannerworth Hall, according to the calculation which had been made by the admiral upon that subject. The doctor scarcely knew whether to be pleased or not at this discovery; it was almost a terrifying one, sceptical as he was upon the subject of vampyres, and he waited breathless for the issue of the singular and perilous adventure.

No doubt Admiral Bell deeply congratulated himself upon the success which was about to crown his stratagem for the capture of the intruder, be he who he might, and he writhed with impatience for the foot to come sufficiently near him to enable him to grasp it.

His patience was not severely tried, for in another moment it rested upon his chest.

"Boarders a hoy!" shouted the admiral, and at once he laid hold of the trespasser. "Yard-arm to yard-arm, I think I've got you now. Here's a prize, doctor! he shall go away without his leg if he goes away now. Eh! what! the light—d——e, he has— Doctor, the light! the light! Why what's this?—Hilloa, there!"

Dr. Chillingworth sprang into the passage, and procured the light—in another moment he was at the side of the admiral, and the lantern slide being thrown back, he saw at once the dilemma into which his friend had fallen.

There he lay upon his back, grasping, with the vehemence of an embrace that had in it much of the ludicrous, a long boot, from which the intruder had cleverly slipped his leg, leaving it as a poor trophy in the hands of his enemies.

"Why you've only pulled his boot off," said the doctor; "and now he's gone for good, for he knows what we're about, and has slipped through your fingers."

Admiral Bell sat up and looked at the boot with a rueful countenance.

"Done again!" he said.

"Yes, you are done," said the doctor; "why didn't you lay hold of the leg while you were about it, instead of the boot? Admiral, are these your tactics?"

"Don't be a fool," said the admiral; "put out the light and give me the pistols, or blaze away yourself into the garden; a chance shot may do something. It's no use running after him; a stern chase is a long chase; but fire away."

As if some parties below had heard him give the word, two loud reports from the garden immediately ensued, and a crash of glass testified to the fact that some deadly missile had entered the room.

"Murder!" said the doctor, and he fell flat upon his back. "I don't like this at all; it's all in your line, admiral, but not in mine."

"All's right, my lad," said the admiral; "now for it."

He saw lying in the moonlight the pistols which he and the doctor had brought into the room, and in another moment he, to use his own words, returned the broadside of the enemy.

"D—n it!" he said, "this puts me in mind of old times. Blaze away, you thieves, while I load; broadside to broadside. It's your turn now; I scorn to take an advantage. What the devil's that?"

Something very large and very heavy came bang against the window, sending it all into the room, and nearly smothering the admiral with the fragments. Another shot was then fired, and in came something else, which hit the wall on the opposite side of the room, rebounding from thence on to the doctor, who gave a yell of despair.

After that all was still; the enemy seemed to be satisfied that they had silenced the garrison. And it took the admiral a great deal of kicking and plunging to rescue himself from some superincumbent mass that was upon him, which seemed to him to be a considerable sized tree.

"Call this fair fighting," he shouted—"getting a man's legs and arms tangled up like a piece of Indian matting in the branches of a tree? Doctor, I say! hilloa! where are you?"

"I don't know," said the doctor; "but there's somebody getting into the balcony—now we shall be murdered in cold blood!"

"Where's the pistols?"

"Fired off, of course; you did it yourself."

Bang came something else into the room, which, from the sound it made, closely resembled a brick, and after that somebody jumped clean into the centre of the floor, and then, after rolling and writhing about in a most singular manner, slowly got up, and with various preliminary hiccups, said,—

"Come on, you lubbers, many of you as like. I'm the tar for all weathers."

"Why, d——e," said the admiral, "it's Jack Pringle."

"Yes, it is," said Jack, who was not sufficiently sober to recognise the admiral's voice. "I sees as how you've heard of me. Come on, all of you."

"Why, Jack, you scoundrel," roared the admiral, "how came you here? Don't you know me? I'm your admiral, you horse-marine."

"Eh?" said Jack. "Ay—ay, sir, how came you here?"

"How came you, you villain?"

"Boarded the enemy."

"The enemy who you boarded was us; and hang me if I don't think you haven't been pouring broadsides into us, while the enemy were scudding before the wind in another direction."

"Lor!" said Jack.

"Explain, you scoundrel, directly—explain."

"Well, that's only reasonable," said Jack; and giving a heavier lurch than usual, he sat down with a great bounce upon the floor. "You see it's just this here,—when I was a coming of course I heard, just as I was a going, that ere as made me come all in consequence of somebody a going, or for to come, you see, admiral."

"Doctor," cried the admiral, in a great rage, "just help me out of this entanglement of branches, and I'll rid the world from an encumbrance by smashing that fellow."

"Smash yourself!" said Jack. "You know you're drunk."

"My dear admiral," said Mr. Chillingworth, laying hold of one of his legs, and pulling it very hard, which brought his face into a lot of brambles, "we're making a mess of this business."

"Murder!" shouted the admiral; "you are indeed. Is that what you call pulling me out of it? You've stuck me fast."

"I'll manage it," said Jack. "I've seed him in many a scrape, and I've seed him out. You pull me, doctor, and I'll pull him. Yo hoy!"

Jack laid hold of the admiral by the scuff of the neck, and the doctor laid hold of Jack round the waist, the consequence of which was that he was dragged out from the branches of the tree, which seemed to have been thrown into the room, and down fell both Jack and the doctor.

At this instant there was a strange hissing sound heard below the window; then there was a sudden, loud report, as if a hand-grenade had gone off. A spectral sort of light gleamed into the room, and a tall, gaunt-looking figure rose slowly up in the balcony.

"Beware of the dead!" said a voice. "Let the living contend with the living, the dead with the dead. Beware!"

The figure disappeared, as did also the strange, spectral-looking light. A death-like silence ensued, and the cold moonbeams streamed in upon the floor of the apartment, as if nothing had occurred to disturb the wrapped repose and serenity of the scene.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

AFTER LONDON, or, Wild England by Richard Jefferies

Part II: WILD ENGLAND

CHAPTER I: SIR FELIX

On a bright May morning, the sunlight, at five o'clock, was pouring into a room which faced the east at the ancestral home of the Aquilas. In this room Felix, the eldest of the three sons of the Baron, was sleeping. The beams passed over his head, and lit up a square space on the opposite whitewashed wall, where, in the midst of the brilliant light, hung an ivory cross. There were only two panes of glass in the window,

each no more than two or three inches square, the rest of the window being closed by strong oaken shutters, thick enough to withstand the stroke of an arrow.

In the daytime one of these at least would have been thrown open to admit air and light. They did not quite meet, and a streak of sunshine, in addition to that which came through the tiny panes, entered at the chink. Only one window in the house contained more than two such panes (it was in the Baroness's sitting-room), and most of them had none at all. The glass left by the ancients in their dwellings had long since been used up or broken, and the fragments that remained were too precious to be put in ordinary rooms. When larger pieces were discovered, they were taken for the palaces of the princes, and even these were but sparingly supplied, so that the saying "he has glass in his window" was equivalent to "he belongs to the upper ranks".

On the recess of the window was an inkstand, which had been recently in use, for a quill lay beside it, and a sheet of parchment partly covered with writing. The ink was thick and very dark, made of powdered charcoal, leaving a slightly raised writing, which could be perceived by the finger on rubbing it lightly over. Beneath the window on the bare floor was an open chest, in which were several similar parchments and books, and from which the sheet on the recess had evidently been taken. This chest, though small, was extremely heavy and strong, being dug out with the chisel and gouge from a solid block of oak. Except a few parallel grooves, there was no attempt at ornamentation upon it. The lid, which had no hinges, but lifted completely off, was tilted against the wall. It was, too, of oak some inches thick, and fitted upon the chest by a kind of dovetailing at the edges.

Instead of a lock, the chest was fastened by a lengthy thong of oxhide, which now lay in a coil on the floor. Bound round and round, twisted and intertangled, and finally tied with a special and secret knot (the ends being concealed), the thong of leather secured the contents of the chest from prying eyes or thievish hands. With axe or knife, of course, the knot might easily have been severed, but no one could obtain access to the room except the retainers of the house, and which of them, even if unfaithful, would dare to employ such means in view of the certain punishment that must follow? It would occupy hours to undo the knot, and then it could not be tied again in exactly the same fashion, so that the real use of the thong was to assure the owner that his treasures had not been interfered with in his absence. Such locks as were made were of the clumsiest construction. They were not so difficult to pick as the thong to untie, and their expense, or rather the difficulty of getting a workman who could manufacture them, confined their use to the heads of great houses. The Baron's chest was locked, and his alone, in the dwelling.

Besides the parchments which were nearest the top, as most in use, there were three books, much worn and decayed, which had been preserved, more by accident than by care, from the libraries of the ancients. One was an abridged history of Rome, the other a similar account of English history, the third a primer of science or knowledge; all three, indeed, being books which, among the ancients, were used for teaching children, and which, by the men of those days, would have been cast aside with contempt.

Exposed for years in decaying houses, rain and mildew had spotted and stained their pages; the covers had rotted away these hundred years, and were now supplied by a



broad sheet of limp leather with wide margins far overlapping the edges; many of the pages were quite gone, and others torn by careless handling. The abridgment of Roman history had been scorched by a forest fire, and the charred edges of the leaves had dropped away in semicircular holes. Yet, by pondering over these, Felix had, as it were, reconstructed much of the knowledge which was the common (and therefore unvalued) possession of all when they were printed.

The parchments contained his annotations, and the result of his thought; they were also full of extracts from decaying volumes lying totally neglected in the houses of other nobles. Most of these were of extreme antiquity, for when the ancients departed, the modern books which they had composed being left in the decaying houses at the mercy of the weather, rotted, or were destroyed by the frequent grass fires. But those that had been preserved by the ancients in museums escaped for a while, and some of these yet remained in lumber-rooms and corners, whence they were occasionally dragged forth by the servants for greater convenience in lighting the fires. The young nobles, entirely devoted to the chase, to love intrigues, and war, overwhelmed Felix Aquila with ridicule when they found him poring over these relics, and being of a proud and susceptible spirit, they so far succeeded that he abandoned the open pursuit of such studies, and stole his knowledge by fitful glances when there was no one near. As among the ancients learning was esteemed above all things, so now, by a species of contrast, it was of all things the most despised.

Under the books, in one corner of the chest, was a leather bag containing four golden sovereigns, such as were used by the ancients, and eighteen pieces of modern silver money, the debased shillings of the day, not much more than half of which was silver and the rest alloy. The gold coins had been found while digging holes for the posts of a new stockade, and by the law should have been delivered to the prince's treasury. All the gold discovered, whether in the form of coin or jewellery, was the property of the Prince, who was supposed to pay for its value in currency.

As the actual value of the currency was only half of its nominal value (and sometimes less), the transaction was greatly in favour of the treasury. Such was the scarcity of gold that the law was strictly enforced, and had there been the least suspicion of the fact, the house would have been ransacked from the cellars to the roof. Imprisonment and fine would have been the inevitable fate of Felix, and the family would very probably have suffered for the fault of one of its members. But independent and determined to the last degree, Felix ran any risk rather than surrender that which he had found, and which he deemed his own. This unbending independence and pride of spirit, together with scarce concealed contempt for others, had resulted in almost isolating him from the youth of his own age, and had caused him to be regarded with dislike by the elders. He was rarely, if ever, asked to join the chase, and still more rarely invited to the festivities and amusements provided in adjacent houses, or to the grander entertainments of the higher nobles. Too quick to take offence where none was really intended, he fancied that many bore him ill-will who had scarcely given him a passing thought. He could not forgive the coarse jokes uttered upon his personal appearance by men of heavier build, who despised so slender a stripling.

He would rather be alone than join their company, and would not compete with them in any of their sports, so that, when his absence from the arena was noticed, it was attributed to weakness or cowardice. These imputations stung him deeply, driving him

to brood within himself. He was never seen in the courtyards or ante-rooms at the palace, nor following in the train of the Prince, as was the custom with the youthful nobles. The servility of the court angered and disgusted him; the eagerness of strong men to carry a cushion or fetch a dog annoyed him.

There were those who observed this absence from the crowd in the ante-rooms. In the midst of so much intrigue and continual striving for power, designing men, on the one hand, were ever on the alert for what they imagined would prove willing instruments; and on the other, the Prince's councillors kept a watchful eye on the dispositions of every one of the least consequence; so that, although but twenty-five, Felix was already down in two lists, the one, at the palace, of persons whose views, if not treasonable, were doubtful, and the other, in the hands of a possible pretender, as a discontented and therefore useful man. Felix was entirely ignorant that he had attracted so much observation. He supposed himself simply despised and ignored; he cherished no treason, had not the slightest sympathy with any pretender, held totally aloof from intrigue, and his reveries, if they were ambitious, concerned only himself.

But the most precious of the treasures in the chest were eight or ten small sheets of parchment, each daintily rolled and fastened with a ribbon, letters from Aurora Thyma, who had also given him the ivory cross on the wall. It was of ancient workmanship, a relic of the old world. A compass, a few small tools (valuable because preserved for so many years, and not now to be obtained for any consideration), and a magnifying glass, a relic also of the ancients, completed the contents of the chest.

Upon a low table by the bedstead were a flint and steel and tinder, and an earthenware oil lamp, not intended to be carried about. There, too, lay his knife, with a buckhorn hilt, worn by everyone in the belt, and his forester's axe, a small tool, but extremely useful in the woods, without which, indeed, progress was often impossible. These were in the belt, which, as he undressed, he had cast upon the table, together with his purse, in which were about a dozen copper coins, not very regular in shape, and stamped on one side only. The table was formed of two short hewn planks, scarcely smoothed, raised on similar planks (on edge) at each end, in fact, a larger form.

From a peg driven into the wall hung a disc of brass by a thin leathern lace; this disc, polished to the last degree, answered as a mirror. The only other piece of furniture, if so it could be called, was a block of wood at the side of the table, used as a chair. In the corner, between the table and the window, stood a long yew bow, and a quiver full of arrows ready for immediate use, besides which three or four sheaves lay on the floor. A crossbow hung on a wooden peg; the bow was of wood, and, therefore, not very powerful; bolts and square-headed quarrels were scattered carelessly on the floor under it.

Six or seven slender darts used for casting with the hand, as javelins, stood in another corner by the door, and two stouter boar spears. By the wall a heap of nets lay in apparent confusion, some used for partridges, some of coarse twine for bush-hens, another, lying a little apart, for fishes. Near these the component parts of two turkey-traps were strewn about, together with a small round shield or targe, such as are used by swordsmen, snares of wire, and, in an open box, several chisels, gouges, and other tools.

A blowtube was fastened to three pegs, so that it might not warp, a hunter's horn hung from another, and on the floor were a number of arrows in various stages of manufacture, some tied to the straightening rod, some with the feathers already attached, and some hardly shaped from the elder or aspen log. A heap of skins filled the third corner, and beside them were numerous stag's horns, and two of the white cow, but none yet of the much dreaded and much desired white bull. A few peacock's feathers were there also, rare and difficult to get, and intended for Aurora. Round one footpost of the bed was a long coil of thin hide, a lasso, and on another was suspended an iron cap, or visorless helmet.

There was no sword or lance. Indeed, of all these weapons and implements, none seemed in use, to judge by the dust that had gathered upon them, and the rusted edges, except the bow and crossbow and one of the boar spears. The bed itself was very low, framed of wood, thick and solid; the clothes were of the coarsest linen and wool; there were furs for warmth in winter, but these were not required in May. There was no carpet, nor any substitute for it; the walls were whitewashed, ceiling there was none, the worm-eaten rafters were visible, and the roof tree. But on the table was a large earthenware bowl, full of meadow orchids, blue-bells, and a bunch of may in flower.

His hat, wide in the brim, lay on the floor; his doublet was on the wooden block or seat, with the long tight-fitting trousers, which showed every muscle of the limb, and by them high shoes of tanned but unblackened leather. His short cloak hung on a wooden peg against the door, which was fastened with a broad bolt of oak. The parchment in the recess of the window at which he had been working just before retiring was covered with rough sketches, evidently sections of a design for a ship or galley propelled by oars.

The square spot of light upon the wall slowly moved as the sun rose higher, till the ivory cross was left in shadow, but still the slumberer slept on, heedless, too, of the twittering of the swallows under the eaves, and the call of the cuckoo not far distant.