



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 "Frontispiece to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein" by Theodor von Holst. Cover design by [C Priest Brumley](#).

Editorial by Gavin Chappell

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Schlock! Classic Serial The Horror in the Museum: Part Two by HP Lovecraft and Hazel Heald - ... *Jones felt that that triangle of bulging fish-eyes and that obliquely poised proboscis all bespoke a blend of hate, greed, and sheer cruelty incomprehensible to mankind because mixed with other emotions not of the world or this solar system.* HORROR

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Babbage Must Die - Part Twenty Three by Gavin Chappell - *Brian finds unexpected recognition in Bedlam...* SCIENCE FICTION

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

Schlock! Classic Serial: Brigands of the Moon (Part 23) by Ray Cummings - *Another day. A tenseness was upon all of us, despite the absorption of our feverish activities. To conserve power, the camp was almost dark...* SPACE OPERA

EDITORIAL by Gavin Chappell

Halloween's an important time in the Schlock! Schloss. The lightning arches over the highest tower. Down in the cellar oozes a blasphemous abnormality. There's a madwoman in the attic, and an unnameable feast awaiting the weary traveller in the great hall...

This week we get all literary on your ass with the beginnings of *Fantasmagoriana*, a collection of Gothic tales by Mary Shelley, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Polidori, all originating in a night of ghost storytelling on the shores of lake Geneva. We have new stories from Bob Ray, C Priest Brumley, and John Jennings. And the continuation of all our usual serials. A feast of horror and fantasy as the nights draw in and darkness falls.

Well, we're off to the hills now, to celebrate the season in unspeakable rites of daemonic revelry. See you next week.

Gavin Chappell.

FANTASMAGORIANA,
OR, TALES FROM THE VILLA DIODATI

INTRODUCTION by Gavin Chappell

In the summer of 1816, a motley collection of poets, exiles and adulterers gathered at the Villa Diodati, on the shores of Lake Geneva in Switzerland. Among their number was the Romantic poet Lord Byron, recently separated from his wife and his young daughter, and dogged by rumours of marital violence, adultery, incest, and sodomy. Also accompanying Byron was his physician, John Polidori. Visiting the villa was the elderly Gothic novelist, Mathew 'Monk' Lewis, on his way to his plantations in Jamaica. Another guest was Percy Bysshe Shelley, a fellow poet who had been expelled from Oxford after preaching atheism and summoning demons. He had recently abandoned his wife Harriet to elope with a girl named Mary, daughter of the political radicals William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft.

This was their second trip to Switzerland, accompanied once again by Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont, who had briefly been Byron's lover. Hoping to win back his favours, and possibly aware that she was pregnant with Byron's child, she had arranged this meeting between Byron and Shelley.

On the evening of June 16, after they had read from a collection of horror tales translated from a French work entitled *Fantasmagoriana*, Byron suggested that they should each write a ghost story.

Shelley's contribution was "A Fragment of a Ghost Story" and five ghost stories recounted by 'Monk' Lewis. Polidori wrote *The Vampyre*, a story that created the vampire in its modern form, heavily influenced by Lord Byron. Byron himself began a Gothic novel on a similar theme, unfortunately never finished. Ironically, his physician's tale was long attributed to Byron himself.

Mary Shelley (to give her married name) took some time to begin work, until she was inspired by a dream or vision:

"I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination unbidden, possessed and guided me. I saw with shut eyes, but acute

mental vision, - the pale student of unhallowed arts standing before the thing he had put together, I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion... frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handiwork, horror stricken.... He (the artist) sleeps but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold, the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes."

She went on to write the story that became the nucleus of the classic *Frankenstein*.

The entire incident is of immense significance to the horror genre. Although the two literary heavyweights, Byron and Shelley, made a poor showing, it witnessed the genesis of two of the most abiding figures in modern horror, Frankenstein and the vampire as we know it (the earlier vampire of folklore is a rather different character). It also saw the swan song of 'Monk' Lewis, who, though almost forgotten today, was a Gothic writer of great fame and notoriety in the late eighteenth century, mainly for his semi-pornographic *The Monk*, which in its day rivalled Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* and Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* in its disreputable popularity.

PART ONE

FRAGMENT OF A GHOST STORY

A poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley

*A shovel of his ashes took
From the hearth's obscurest nook,
Muttering mysteries as she went.
Helen and Henry knew that Granny
Was as much afraid of Ghosts as any,
And so they followed hard--
But Helen clung to her brother's arm,*

And her own spasm made her shake.

from JOURNAL AT GENEVA by Percy Bysshe Shelley

(including ghost stories)

AND ON RETURN TO ENGLAND, 1816.

Geneva, Sunday, 18th August, 1816.

See Apollo's Sexton, who tells us many mysteries of his trade. We talk of Ghosts. Neither Lord Byron nor M. G. L. ['Monk' Lewis] seem to believe in them; and they both agree, in the very face of reason, that none could believe in ghosts without believing in God. I do not think that all the persons who profess to discredit these visitations, really discredit them; or, if they do in the daylight, are not admonished by the approach of loneliness and midnight, to think more respectfully of the world of shadows. Lewis recited a poem, which he had composed at the request of the Princess of Wales. The Princess of Wales, he premised, was not only a believer in ghosts, but in magic and witchcraft, and asserted, that prophecies made in her youth had been accomplished since. The tale was of a lady in Germany.

This lady, Minna, had been exceedingly attached to her husband, and they had made a vow that the one who died first, should return after death to visit the other as a ghost. She was sitting one day alone in her chamber, when she heard an unusual sound of footsteps on the stairs. The door opened, and her husband's spectre, gashed with a deep wound across the forehead, and in military habiliments, entered. She appeared startled at the apparition; and the ghost told her, that when he should visit her in future, she would hear a passing bell toll, and these words distinctly uttered close to her ear, "Minna, I am here." On inquiry, it was found that her husband had fallen in battle on the very day she was visited by the vision. The intercourse between the ghost and the woman continued for some time, until the latter laid aside all terror, and indulged herself in the affection which she had felt for him while living. One evening she went to a ball, and permitted her thoughts to be alienated by the attentions of a Florentine gentleman, more witty, more graceful, and more gentle, as it appeared to her, than any person she had ever seen. As he was conducting her through the dance, a death knell tolled. Minna, lost in the fascination of the Florentine's attentions, disregarded, or did not hear the sound. A second peal, louder and more deep, startled the whole company, when Minna heard the ghost's accustomed whisper, and raising her eyes, saw in an opposite mirror the reflexion of the ghost, standing over her. She is said to have died of terror.

Lewis told four other stories—all grim.

A YOUNG man who had taken orders, had just been presented with a living, on the death of the incumbent. It was in the Catholic part of Germany. He arrived at the parsonage on a Saturday night ; it was summer, and waking about three o'clock in the morning, and it being broad day, he saw a venerable-looking man, but with an

aspect exceedingly melancholy, sitting at a desk in the window, reading, and two beautiful boys standing near him, whom he regarded with looks of the profoundest grief. Presently he rose from his seat, the boys followed him, and they were no more to be seen. The young man, much troubled, arose, hesitating whether he should regard what he had seen as a dream, or a waking phantasy. To divert his dejection, he walked towards the church, which the sexton was already employed in preparing for the morning service. The first sight that struck him was a portrait, the exact resemblance of the man whom he had seen sitting in his chamber. It was the custom in this district to place the portrait of each minister, after his death, in the church.

He made the minutest inquiries respecting his predecessor, and learned that he was universally beloved, as a man of unexampled integrity and benevolence ; but that he was the prey of a secret and perpetual sorrow.

His grief was supposed to have arisen from an attachment to a young lady, with whom his situation did not permit him to unite himself. Others, however, asserted, that a connexion did subsist between them, and that even she occasionally brought to his house two beautiful boys, the offspring of their connexion.—Nothing further occurred until the cold weather came, and the new minister desired a fire to be lighted in the stove of the room where he slept. A hideous stench arose from the stove as soon as it was lighted, and, on examining it, the bones of two male children were found within.

II.

Lord Lyttleton and a number of his friends were joined during the chase by a stranger. He was excellently mounted, and displayed such courage, or, rather so much desperate rashness, that no other person in the hunt could follow him. The gentlemen, when the chase was concluded, invited the stranger to dine with them.

His conversation was something of a wonderful kind. He astonished, he interested, he commanded the attention of the most inert. As night came on, the company, being weary, began to retire one by one, much later than the usual hour : the most intellectual among them were retained latest by the stranger's fascination. As he perceived that they began to depart, he redoubled his efforts to retain them. At last, when few remained, he entreated them to stay with him ; but all pleaded the fatigue of a hard day's chase, and all at last retired. They had been in bed about an hour, when they were awakened by the most horrible screams, which issued from the stranger's room. Every one rushed towards it. The door was locked. After a moment's deliberation they burst it open, and found the stranger stretched on the ground, writhing with agony, and weltering in blood. On their entrance he arose, and collecting himself, apparently with a strong; effort, entreated them to leave him—not to disturb him, that he would give every possible explanation in the morning. They complied. In the morning, his chamber was found vacant, and he was seen no more.

III.

Miles Andrews, a friend of Lord Lyttleton, was sitting one night alone when Lord Lyttleton came in, and informed him that he was dead, and that this was his ghost which he saw before him. Andrews pettishly told him not to play any ridiculous tricks upon him, for he was not in a temper to bear them. The ghost then departed. In the morning Andrews asked his servant at what hour Lord Lyttleton had arrived. The servant said he did not know that he had arrived, but that he would inquire. On inquiry it was found that Lord Lyttleton had not arrived, nor had the door been opened to any one during the whole night. Andrews sent to Lord Lyttleton, and discovered, that he had died precisely at the hour of the apparition.

IV

A GENTLEMAN on a visit to a friend who lived on the skirts of an extensive forest in the east of Germany lost his way. He wandered for some hours among the trees, when he saw a light at a distance. On approaching it, he was surprised to observe, that it proceeded from the interior of a ruined monastery. Before he knocked he thought it prudent to look through the window. He saw a multitude of cats assembled round a small grave, four of whom were letting down a coffin with a crown upon it. The gentleman, startled at this unusual sight, and imagining that he had arrived among the retreats of fiends or witches, mounted his horse and rode away with the utmost precipitation. He arrived at his friend's house at a late hour, who had sate up for him. On his arrival his friend questioned as to the cause of the traces of trouble visible in his face. He began to recount his adventure, after

much difficulty, knowing that it was scarcely possible that his friends should give faith to his relation. No sooner had he mentioned the coffin with a crown upon it, than his friend's cat, who seemed to have been lying asleep before the fire, leaped up, saying

—

"Then I am the King of the Cats !" and scrambled up the chimney, and was seen no more.

THE HORROR IN THE MUSEUM by H. P. Lovecraft and Hazel Heald

The thing in the picture squatted or was balanced on what appeared to be a clever reproduction of the monstrosly carved throne in the other curious photograph. To describe it with any ordinary vocabulary would be impossible, for nothing even roughly corresponding to it has ever come within the imagination of sane mankind. It represented something meant perhaps to be roughly connected with the vertebrates of this planet—though one could not be too sure of that. Its bulk was Cyclopean, for even squatted it towered to almost twice the height of Orabona, who was shewn beside it. Looking sharply, one might trace its approximations toward the bodily features of the higher vertebrates.

There was an almost globular torso, with six long, sinuous limbs terminating in crab-like claws. From the upper end a subsidiary globe bulged forward bubble-like; its triangle of three staring, fishy eyes, its foot-long and evidently flexible proboscis, and a distended lateral system analogous to gills, suggesting that it was a head. Most of the body was covered with what at first appeared to be fur, but which on closer examination proved to be a dense growth of dark, slender tentacles or sucking filaments, each tipped with a mouth suggesting the head of an asp. On the head and below the proboscis the tentacles tended to be longer and thicker, and marked with spiral stripes—suggesting the traditional serpent-locks of Medusa. To say that such a thing could have an expression seems paradoxical; yet Jones felt that that triangle of bulging fish-eyes and that obliquely poised proboscis all bespoke a blend of hate, greed, and sheer cruelty incomprehensible to mankind because mixed with other emotions not of the world or this solar system. Into this bestial abnormality, he reflected, Rogers must have poured at once all his malignant insanity and all his uncanny sculptural genius. The thing was incredible—and yet the photograph proved that it existed.

Rogers interrupted his reveries.

“Well—what do you think of It? Now do you wonder what crushed the dog and sucked it dry with a million mouths? It needed nourishment—and It will need more. It is a god, and I am the first priest of Its latter-day hierarchy. Iä! Shub-Niggurath! The Goat with a Thousand Young!”

Jones lowered the photograph in disgust and pity.

“See here, Rogers, this won’t do. There are limits, you know. It’s a great piece of work, and all that, but it isn’t good for you. Better not see it any more—let Orabona break it up, and try to forget about it. And let me tear this beastly picture up, too.”

With a snarl, Rogers snatched the photograph and returned it to the desk.

“Idiot—you—and you still think It’s all a fraud! You still think I made It, and you still think my figures are nothing but lifeless wax! Why, damn you, you’re a worse clod than a wax image yourself! But I’ve got proof this time, and you’re going to know! Not just now, for It is resting after the sacrifice—but later. Oh, yes—you will not doubt the power of It then.”

As Rogers glanced toward the padlocked inner door Jones retrieved his hat and stick from a nearby bench.

“Very well, Rogers, let it be later. I must be going now, but I’ll call around tomorrow afternoon. Think my advice over and see if it doesn’t sound sensible. Ask Orabona what he thinks, too.”

Rogers actually bared his teeth in wild-beast fashion.

“Must be going now, eh? Afraid, after all! Afraid, for all your bold talk! You say the effigies are only wax, and yet you run away when I begin to prove that they aren’t. You’re like the fellows who take my standing bet that they daren’t spend the night in the museum—they come boldly enough, but after an hour they shriek and hammer to get out! Want me to ask Orabona, eh? You two—always against me! You want to break down the coming earthly reign of It!”

Jones preserved his calm.

“No, Rogers—there’s nobody against you. And I’m not afraid of your figures, either, much as I admire your skill. But we’re both a bit nervous tonight, and I fancy some rest will do us good.”

Again Rogers checked his guest’s departure.

“Not afraid, eh?—then why are you so anxious to go? Look here—do you or don’t you dare to stay alone here in the dark? What’s your hurry if you don’t believe in It?”

Some new idea seemed to have struck Rogers, and Jones eyed him closely.

“Why, I’ve no special hurry—but what would be gained by my staying here alone? What would it prove? My only objection is that it isn’t very comfortable for sleeping. What good would it do either of us?”

This time it was Jones who was struck with an idea. He continued in a tone of conciliation.

“See here, Rogers—I’ve just asked you what it would prove if I stayed, when we both know. It would prove that your effigies are just effigies, and that you oughtn’t to let your imagination go the way it’s been going lately. Suppose I do stay. If I stick it out till morning, will you agree to take a new view of things—go on a vacation for three months or so and let Orabona destroy that new thing of yours?

Come, now—isn't that fair?"

The expression on the showman's face was hard to read. It was obvious that he was thinking quickly, and that of sundry conflicting emotions, malign triumph was getting the upper hand. His voice held a choking quality as he replied.

"Fair enough! If you do stick it out, I'll take your advice. But stick you must. We'll go out for dinner and come back. I'll lock you in the display room and go home. In the morning I'll come down ahead of Orabona—he comes half an hour before the rest—and see how you are. But don't try it unless you are very sure of your scepticism. Others have backed out—you have that chance. And I suppose a pounding on the outer door would always bring a constable. You may not like it so well after a while—you'll be in the same building, though not in the same room with it."

As they left the rear door into the dingy courtyard, Rogers took with him the piece of burlap—weighted with a gruesome burden. Near the centre of the court was a manhole, whose cover the showman lifted quietly, and with a shuddersome suggestion of familiarity. Burlap and all, the burden went down to the oblivion of a cloacal labyrinth. Jones shuddered, and almost shrank from the gaunt figure at his side as they emerged into the street.

By unspoken mutual consent, they did not dine together, but agreed to meet in front of the museum at eleven.

Jones hailed a cab, and breathed more freely when he had crossed Waterloo Bridge and was approaching the brilliantly lighted Strand. He dined at a quiet café, and subsequently went to his home in Portland Place to bathe and get a few things. Idly he wondered what Rogers was doing. He had heard that the man had a vast, dismal house in the Walworth Road, full of obscure and forbidden books, occult paraphernalia, and wax images which he did not choose to place on exhibition. Orabona, he understood, lived in separate quarters in the same house.

At eleven Jones found Rogers waiting by the basement door in Southwark Street. Their words were few, but each seemed taut with a menacing tension. They agreed that the vaulted exhibition room alone should form the scene of the vigil, and Rogers did not insist that the watcher sit in the special adult alcove of supreme horrors. The showman, having extinguished all the lights with switches in the workroom, locked the door of that crypt with one of the keys on his crowded ring. Without shaking hands he passed out the street door, locked it after him, and stamped up the worn steps to the sidewalk outside. As his tread receded, Jones realised that the long, tedious vigil had commenced.

II.

Later, in the utter blackness of the great arched cellar, Jones cursed the childish naiveté which had brought him there. For the first half-hour he had kept flashing on his pocket-light at intervals, but now just sitting in the dark on one of the visitors' benches had become a more nerve-racking thing. Every time the beam

shot out it lighted up some morbid, grotesque object—a guillotine, a nameless hybrid monster, a pasty-bearded face crafty with evil, a body with red torrents streaming from a severed throat. Jones knew that no sinister reality was attached to these things, but after that first half-hour he preferred not to see them.

Why he had bothered to humour that madman he could scarcely imagine. It would have been much simpler merely to have let him alone, or to have called in a mental specialist. Probably, he reflected, it was the fellow-feeling of one artist for another. There was so much genius in Rogers that he deserved every possible chance to be helped quietly out of his growing mania. Any man who could imagine and construct the incredibly life-like things that he had produced was surely not far from actual greatness. He had the fancy of a Sime or a Doré joined to the minute, scientific craftsmanship of a Blatschka. Indeed, he had done for the world of nightmare what the Blatschkas with their marvellously accurate plant models of finely wrought and coloured glass had done for the world of botany.

At midnight the strokes of a distant clock filtered through the darkness, and Jones felt cheered by the message from a still-surviving outside world. The vaulted museum chamber was like a tomb—ghastly in its utter solitude. Even a mouse would be cheering company; yet Rogers had once boasted that—for “certain reasons,” as he said—no mice or even insects ever came near the place. That was very curious, yet it seemed to be true. The deadness and silence were virtually complete. If only something would make a sound! He shuffled his feet, and the echoes came spectrally out of the absolute stillness. He coughed, but there was something mocking in the staccato reverberations. He could not, he vowed, begin talking to himself. That meant nervous disintegration. Time seemed to pass with abnormal and disconcerting slowness. He could have sworn that hours had elapsed since he last flashed the light on his watch, yet here was only the stroke of midnight.

He wished that his senses were not so preternaturally keen. Something in the darkness and stillness seemed to have sharpened them, so that they responded to faint intimations hardly strong enough to be called true impressions. His ears seemed at times to catch a faint, elusive susurrus which could not quite be identified with the nocturnal hum of the squalid streets outside, and he thought of vague, irrelevant things like the music of the spheres and the unknown, inaccessible life of alien dimensions pressing on our own. Rogers often speculated about such things.

The floating specks of light in his blackness-drowned eyes seemed inclined to take on curious symmetries of pattern and motion. He had often wondered about those strange rays from the unplumbed abyss which scintillate before us in the absence of all earthly illumination, but he had never known any that behaved just as these were behaving. They lacked the restful aimlessness of ordinary light-specks—suggesting some will and purpose remote from any terrestrial conception.

Then there was that suggestion of odd stirrings. Nothing was open, yet in spite of the general draughtlessness Jones felt that the air was not uniformly quiet. There were intangible variations in pressure—not quite decided enough to suggest the loathsome pawings of unseen elementals. It was abnormally chilly,

too. He did not like any of this. The air tasted salty, as if it were mixed with the brine of dark subterranean waters, and there was a bare hint of some odour of ineffable mustiness. In the daytime he had never noticed that the waxen figures had an odour. Even now that half-received hint was not the way wax figures ought to smell. It was more like the faint smell of specimens in a natural-history museum. Curious, in view of Rogers' claims that his figures were not all artificial—indeed, it was probably that claim which made one's imagination conjure up the olfactory suspicion. One must guard against excesses of the imagination—had not such things driven poor Rogers mad?

But the utter loneliness of this place was frightful. Even the distant chimes seemed to come from across cosmic gulfs. It made Jones think of that insane picture which Rogers had shewed him—the wildly carved chamber with the cryptic throne which the fellow had claimed was part of a three-million-year-old ruin in the shunned and inaccessible solitudes of the Arctic. Perhaps Rogers had been to Alaska, but that picture was certainly nothing but stage scenery. It couldn't normally be otherwise, with all that carving and those terrible symbols. And that monstrous shape supposed to have been found on that throne—what a flight of diseased fancy! Jones wondered just how far he actually was from the insane masterpiece in wax—probably it was kept behind that heavy, padlocked plank door leading somewhere out of the workroom. But it would never do to brood about a waxen image. Was not the present room full of such things, some of them scarcely less horrible than the dreadful "IT"? And beyond a thin canvas screen on the left was the "Adults only" alcove with its nameless phantoms of delirium.

The proximity of the numberless waxen shapes began to get on Jones's nerves more and more as the quarter-hours wore on. He knew the museum so well that he could not get rid of their usual images even in the total darkness. Indeed, the darkness had the effect of adding to the remembered images certain very disturbing imaginative overtones. The guillotine seemed to creak, and the bearded face of Landru—slayer of his fifty wives—twisted itself into expressions of monstrous menace. From the severed throat of Madame Demers a hideous bubbling sound seemed to emanate, while the headless, legless victim of a trunk murder tried to edge closer and closer on its gory stumps. Jones began shutting his eyes to see if that would dim the images, but found it was useless. Besides, when he shut his eyes the strange, purposeful patterns of light-specks became more disturbingly pronounced.

Then suddenly he began trying to keep the hideous images he had formerly been trying to banish. He tried to keep them because they were giving place to still more hideous ones. In spite of himself his memory began reconstructing the utterly non-human blasphemies that lurked in the obscurer corners, and these lumpish hybrid growths oozed and wriggled toward him as though hunting him down in a circle. Black Tsathoggua moulded itself from a toad-like gargoyle to a long, sinuous line with hundreds of rudimentary feet, and a lean, rubbery night-gaunt spread its wings as if to advance and smother the watcher. Jones braced himself to keep from screaming. He knew he was reverting to the traditional terrors of his childhood, and resolved to use his adult reason to keep the phantoms at bay. It helped a bit, he found, to flash the light again. Frightful as

were the images it shewed, these were not as bad as what his fancy called out of the utter blackness.

But there were drawbacks. Even in the light of his torch he could not help suspecting a slight, furtive trembling on the part of the canvas partition screening off the terrible "Adults only" alcove. He knew what lay beyond, and shivered. Imagination called up the shocking form of fabulous Yog-Sothoth—only a congeries of iridescent globes, yet stupendous in its malign suggestiveness. What was this accursed mass slowly floating toward him and bumping on the partition that stood in the way? A small bulge in the canvas far to the right suggested the sharp horn of Gnoph-keh, the hairy myth-thing of the Greenland ice, that walked sometimes on two legs, sometimes on four, and sometimes on six. To get this stuff out of his head Jones walked boldly toward the hellish alcove with torch burning steadily. Of course, none of his fears was true. Yet were not the long, facial tentacles of great Cthulhu actually swaying, slowly and insidiously? He knew they were flexible, but he had not realised that the draught caused by his advance was enough to set them in motion.

Returning to his former seat outside the alcove, he shut his eyes and let the symmetrical light-specks do their worst. The distant clock boomed a single stroke. Could it be only one? He flashed the light on his watch and saw that it was precisely that hour. It would be hard indeed waiting for morning. Rogers would be down at about eight o'clock, ahead of even Orabona. It would be light outside in the main basement long before that, but none of it could penetrate here. All the windows in this basement had been bricked up but the three small ones facing the court. A pretty bad wait, all told.

His ears were getting most of the hallucinations now—for he could swear he heard stealthy, plodding footsteps in the workroom beyond the closed and locked door. He had no business thinking of that unexhibited horror which Rogers called "It." The thing was a contamination—it had driven its maker mad, and now even its picture was calling up imaginative terrors. It could not be in the workroom—it was very obviously beyond that padlocked door of heavy planking. Those steps were certainly pure imagination.

Then he thought he heard the key turn in the workroom door. Flashing on his torch, he saw nothing but the ancient six-panelled portal in its proper position. Again he tried darkness and closed eyes, but there followed a harrowing illusion of creaking—not the guillotine this time, but the slow, furtive opening of the workroom door. He would not scream. Once he screamed, he would be lost. There was a sort of padding or shuffling audible now, and it was slowly advancing toward him. He must retain command of himself. Had he not done so when the nameless brain-shapes tried to close in on him? The shuffling crept nearer, and his resolution failed. He did not scream but merely gulped out a challenge.

"Who goes there? Who are you? What do you want?"

There was no answer, but the shuffling kept on. Jones did not know which he feared most to do—turn on his flashlight or stay in the dark while the thing crept upon him. This thing was different, he felt profoundly, from the other terrors of the evening. His fingers and throat worked spasmodically. Silence was impossible, and the suspense of utter blackness was beginning to be the most intolerable of

all conditions. Again he cried out hysterically—"Halt! Who goes there?"—as he switched on the revealing beams of his torch. Then, paralysed by what he saw, he dropped the flashlight and screamed—not once but many times.

Shuffling toward him in the darkness was the gigantic, blasphemous form of a black thing not wholly ape and not wholly insect. Its hide hung loosely upon its frame, and its rugose, dead-eyed rudiment of a head swayed drunkenly from side to side. Its fore paws were extended, with talons spread wide, and its whole body was taut with murderous malignity despite its utter lack of facial expression. After the screams and the final coming of darkness it leaped, and in a moment had Jones pinned to the floor. There was no struggle, for the watcher had fainted.

Jones's fainting spell could not have lasted more than a moment, for the nameless thing was apishly dragging him through the darkness when he began recovering consciousness. What started him fully awake were the sounds which the thing was making—or rather, the voice with which it was making them. That voice was human, and it was familiar. Only one living being could be behind the hoarse, feverish accents which were chanting to an unknown horror.

"lä! lä!" it was howling. "I am coming, O Rhan-Tegoth, coming with the nourishment. You have waited long and fed ill, but now you shall have what was promised. That and more, for instead of Orabona it will be one of high degree who had doubted you. You shall crush and drain him, with all his doubts, and grow strong thereby. And ever after among men he shall be shewn as a monument to your glory. Rhan-Tegoth, infinite and invincible, I am your slave and high-priest. You are hungry, and I provide. I read the sign and have led you forth. I shall feed you with blood, and you shall feed me with power. lä! Shub-Niggurath! The Goat with a Thousand Young!"

In an instant all the terrors of the night dropped from Jones like a discarded cloak. He was again master of his mind, for he knew the very earthly and material peril he had to deal with. This was no monster of fable, but a dangerous madman. It was Rogers, dressed in some nightmare covering of his own insane designing, and about to make a frightful sacrifice to the devil-god he had fashioned out of wax. Clearly, he must have entered the workroom from the rear courtyard, donned his disguise, and then advanced to seize his neatly trapped and fear-broken victim. His strength was prodigious, and if he was to be thwarted, one must act quickly. Counting on the madman's confidence in his unconsciousness he determined to take him by surprise, while his grasp was relatively lax. The feel of a threshold told him he was crossing into the pitch-black workroom.

With the strength of mortal fear Jones made a sudden spring from the half-recumbent posture in which he was being dragged. For an instant he was free of the astonished maniac's hands, and in another instant a lucky lunge in the dark had put his own hands at his captor's weirdly concealed throat. Simultaneously Rogers gripped him again, and without further preliminaries the two were locked in a desperate struggle of life and death. Jones's athletic training, without doubt, was his sole salvation; for his mad assailant, freed from every inhibition of fair play, decency, or even self-preservation, was an engine of savage destruction as formidable as a wolf or panther.

THE BARLOW by Bob Ray

The antiques store that Max Appleby owned was moderately getting by in this bad economy and he had to keep a keen eye out for bargains he could resell in the store for a profit. As he was dogging the estate auctions in the area he had the opportunity to bid on and purchase several boxes of small items. These were mostly comprised of mismatched flatware, coffee cups & saucers, books, some old pocketknives and the like. The price he paid was certainly right and he could make a few dollars on the items for sure he thought.

When Max returned to the store he took the newfound treasures to the back room to clean up and price the new merchandise. As he worked, he noticed that one of the pocketknives in the bunch was in much better condition than the other knives. Some had chipped handles or broken and missing blades but this one Barlow was in good condition, in fact, it looked darn near new. Max laid it aside as he concentrated on making the other pieces look their best and he worked on them the rest of the afternoon and up until closing, forgetting about the Barlow.

Upon returning the next morning, Max opened the store, turned on the lights, and prepared for the day's business. He strategically placed his new items where his customers would see them as soon as they entered the store hoping for a quick turn on his investments. As he went to the back room for some cash register tape, he noticed the Barlow lying on the counter. He thought, "Well, I need to put that beauty out front too," and as he reached to pick it up a most unusual giddy and euphoric feeling came over him. As Max held the knife in his hand he actually started to chuckle and then laugh out loud, he hadn't felt this good in years! He turned the Barlow over in his hand and stared closely at the handle. It was made of faultless animal bone without any scratches or nicks; it actually looked brand new but had the heft and feel of having been created long ago when both materials and craftsmanship were of finer stuff. Feeling exhilarated at this point Max pulled on the blade of the knife and it opened effortlessly exposing the perfect shiny steel blade that was wider at the point than at the handle where it attached. The blade was in the shape of a question mark and was known as a "hawk billed" knife because its shape resembled that of a beak of a bird of prey and the cutting edge was expertly honed like a razor.

The buzzer on the front door of the store blared as it announced that a customer had just entered. Making his way back to the front of the store Max still felt

wonderful as he made a place in the central showcase for the Barlow to be exhibited to the public. When he let go of the knife to close the case he felt his sensational mood start to subside gradually and his attention was then turned to the new buyer as she perused the antiques.

The Barlow sat beautifully in the case for several weeks and Max had not thought about it again. Then on a fall afternoon, a fellow came through the store walking and looking and stopped at the front case. He asked Max to open the case, as he wanted to see the Barlow. Max did as requested but this time there was no feeling of euphoria as he handed the knife to his customer.

But the very second that John Sheffield took the knife from Max he felt a sensation that was ten times any drug or alcohol induced high he had ever experienced! His mind raced at a breakneck speed and he vividly remembered the most pleasurable events of his 32 years. As he opened the blade he saw his reflection in the polished steel and as he turned the blade over, and just for a second, he saw a reflection of a man's face not his own; mostly covered with a black slouch hat. John knew that he must possess the Barlow, he must buy it now. So as he placed the knife on the counter and reached for his wallet his emotions began to calm and whatever affected him was subsiding as he paid Max for the Barlow and didn't even ask for a discount.

John's next destination today is the nursing home where his great grandfather, "Grandpa Sheff" is in residence and has been for the last four years. The family Sheffield is descended from a long established British line that traces its roots to England as far back as the early 1700's. Bernard Sheffield is now 103 years of age and has several ailments that keep him in the nursing facility; fortunately, old family money earned from a world-renowned cutlery business keeps "Grandpa Sheff" in rather comfortable surroundings. John enjoys his weekly visits with the elder Sheffield and today will be no exception as John is going to show Grandpa his new find. The Barlow John purchased is sure to impress the old fellow as he has an appreciation of fine cutlery, after all, knife manufacturing is where he had spent his adult working life.

"Grandpa Sheff" was quietly sleeping when John entered the room and sat down beside the bed waiting for the old man to stir. Patiently John sat as "Grandpa Sheff" came awake and he excitedly acknowledged John, as he enjoyed his visits tremendously. After some conversation John takes the Barlow from the shopping bag and tells Bernard about how he found it in an antique store and how pristine the condition for such an old piece. When the old gentleman takes the knife in

hand to look it over he immediately sits bolt upright in his bed and has a look of astonishment and terrible fear on his face! For what seemed like an eternity for the old man but only seconds to John, "Grandpa Sheff" looked directly into John's eyes and with an intensity

John has never witnessed before from him he said, "Take it away...Now, boy...Take it far away and throw it in the ocean....Do it now...."

And with that, the old man dropped the Barlow, fell back in his bed, closed his eyes and began to mumble and shake violently. John called for an attendant and after some moments, the staff suggested that John leave and come back another time.

As John was leaving the room, "Grandpa Sheff" whispered softly, "Pure evil....Horrible death....Thought it was buried long, long ago..." but John was already out the door.

As he walked to his car, John was very puzzled and somewhat upset by his great grandfather's reaction. The more he thought about it the more concerned he became as episodes of extreme emotion were out of the ordinary for the Sheffield family and that was true even more so with John. For John was still unmarried, had a great job, was active in his church, and volunteered at the VA hospital twice a month. John didn't even smoke or drink. In fact, he only had one little vice, actually; he favored dating working ladies of the evening. Because with those ladies, there was no emotional connection or commitment and after a "date," everyone went their own way without involvement and that was a neat and clean arrangement that John preferred.

At his condo as he showered John kept replaying "Grandpa Sheff's" words over and over in his mind...

"Take it away...Now, boy...Take it far away and throw it in the ocean...Do it now...."

He couldn't understand the old man's fervor and momentarily wrote it off to the decline of age. John proceeded to get ready for his "date" for the evening. This one was Lisa and John had selected a new restaurant for dinner, each "date" started out the same way with dinner, wine, and conversation and then retiring to

a local hotel to consummate their arranged liaison. John Sheffield, the ever-efficient planner, had checked into the hotel earlier in the day and had pre-paid Lisa the usual fee plus a generous gratuity, all in cash, to avoid any awkwardness for the evening and to allow the liaison to last until morning. As the mellowness from the wine began its journey, John was relieved that any angst from the session with his great grandfather earlier in the afternoon was fading away.

Lisa was a rather pretty lady with long blonde hair and pale blue eyes. She was not too heavy or too thin and wore a black thick fabric pull over dress with a matching fabric hat with a wide brim and black leather boots. Her blonde hair and gold jewelry offset the ensemble very well and made her to look most fashionable; and John appreciated that she turned other men's heads as they passed by on the walk to the hotel.

The room was somewhat spacious as older downtown hotel rooms go with a small sitting area and a nicely appointed king bed at one end. As they entered, Lisa excused herself to the bathroom to disrobe and prepare for the evening and John went to the closet area to hang up his clothes. When hanging up his slacks John noticed the Barlow was still in his hip pocket so he took it out and placed it out of sight on the floor just under his side of the bed so as not to unintentionally alarm Lisa. When John got into bed, he felt a total calm and a supreme confidence that had not been there before and he thought that Lisa brought out the best in him. When she came out of the bathroom and walked to the bed the reflected light from around the drapes made her appear as the most beautiful creature John had ever experienced!

As Lisa fell into John's arms a contented sigh, "Ahhhh...uh...uh...ahhhh..." could be heard as they began a most extraordinary descent into the sphere of passion. As their lovemaking craze built to a crescendo of release time and time again it seemed to John that he got stronger with each moment and all track of time was lost in their unified oblivion. Finally, John collapsed beside her on the bed and fell soundly asleep, an exhausted, velvety sleep.

Something, something was pulling at John's conscious mind tugging it from the REM sleep to becoming awake. When his eyes opened, it was still dark and he saw the red glaring LED numbers on the bedside clock...4:30 am. Instantly he began to remember his dream; he was observing events from above on a dimly lit cobblestone street with old gaslight street lamps flickering small pieces of illumination that faded away into the darkness. Then he saw an English bobbie with the tall round hat and small brim running after another person and blowing

loudly on a whistle. The person in front of the policeman was running hard and fast, his arms churning, with a gleaming knife in his hand that looked remarkably like John's Barlow. As the race continued with John's mind floating above the unfolding scene he observes the man in black round a corner light post with a street sign that read: "*Whitechapel*" with the policeman in a slowing pursuit. The man in black cuts quickly down a darkened alley adjacent to a building with the name; "*Sheffield Cutlery*" painted boldly above the entrance. The dream took only seconds to recall but it seemed to be so very real as some dreams can be, in fact, John felt wet and sticky all over and thought, "Man, that dream really got me steamed up," as he reached for the bedside lamp.

It took a minute for John's eyes to adjust to the light and when they did, he was frozen with horror! For all about him was blood and human gore, on the bed, walls, floor, and lampshade, everywhere. The wet and sticky feeling he had was from blood being all over his naked body. John looked frantically to see if he was injured and bleeding but he was not; then he saw Lisa, or what was left of her. Her sensual body was now a ghastly exposed cadaver with a large cut from just under the left armpit all the way down across the lower belly just above the pubis and up the other side to the right armpit. The flap of skin the cut created was pulled up and was laying over her face and breasts. Thoughts began to flood John's mind.

"How could this have happened....What caused....who did this atrocious thing?"

It was then John saw the Barlow on the bed beside Lisa's lifeless corpse open and covered with blood.

In his addled condition, John picked up the Barlow and immediately (as if his mind was taken over by another) he began to smile as he recalled everything about last night. The wonderful sex, the extreme satisfaction he received from cutting her body and stifling her screams; her blood still flowing for a moment after the body incisions. The absolute calm and confidence he felt as he laid the Barlow on the dresser and went to the shower was transforming for him. He felt, no, he knew he would not be caught for this act of grotesque inhumanity after all, his great-great uncle Jack was never caught over 123 years ago!

After his shower, John came out of the bathroom in a sensational mood. He was totally overtaken now and the Barlow had performed marvelously well; it had closed itself with no blood on it whatsoever. In fact, John's bloody hand and footprints were also gone. Only the mass of protoplasm that was Lisa remained

on the bed. John continued smiling as he dressed to leave. It was still dark outside and he remembered that he could exit the old hotel down the back stairs. He grabbed the Barlow and put it in his hip pocket and as he moved to the door. Almost as an afterthought, he grabbed Lisa's floppy brimmed black hat to pull low over his face and faded into the pre-dawn soft blackness of another day.

PAYBACK FOR BENTON by C. Priest Brumley

The night air was full of the excited babble of dozens of children and at least as many adults. The Halloween block party was in full swing, and between the loud music, games, random chatter, and occasional screams of genuinely frightened children, no one heard Lucy or even remembered that she had bothered to show up. Which was absolutely fine by her. If she had her way, not a soul would ever remember her.

Just leave me be, you dumb fucktards, she thought bitterly to herself as she wound her way through the teething swarm around the dance floor. *The less of you that fuck with me, the better.*

Lucy was tall for eighteen, but not so tall as to elicit the cacophony of WNBA jokes her sister had to endure daily. Her hair was black, her eyes were gray, her lip was pierced and fuck you if you didn't like it. "Don't like me, don't look at me" was her motto. And Halloween was her favorite holiday for that very reason. Too many people stared, in her opinion. Too many people wondered what her "deal" was. Why does she listen to that heavy metal bullshit? Why don't she dress like a proper girl should? Why don't she take a man and make him a damn sammich like a good girl? But on Halloween she was normal. What was an act for everyone else was a regular day for her. And she relished every second of it.

Fuck you, she thought as she continued to push through the crowd. *Fuck each and every single one of you. I'll be what I wanna be and not a damn thing you can say will stop me. I'll date who I wanna date and dress how I wanna dress and HOW DARE THEY try to tell me how to live my life? Those hypocrite Christian sons of whores want me to be what, a damn Stepford Wife? Fuck that. Don't look at me, don't hear me, just leave me* "Oh My God will you stop that?!" She said that last bit aloud at the person tapping her insistently on her shoulder. She spun around with her arm out, intent on backhanding the arrogant prick trying to get her attention, when a calm and calloused hand caught her wrist, then wrapped it around her chest and yanked her close to his.

"Listen here, sweetheart," the guy said in a thick country accent, "you

might be all grit and gristle on the outside, but I know like hell you'd be a lot nicer you let a guy like me tame you up some." *Great. Billy Ray's drunk like hell and lookin' for a hole*, she thought. She looked around, noticing they were secluded behind the stage with that awful hick band on it. *Jee-zus. No one to hear you scream, and all that.*

Lucy tried twisting her wrist erratically, looking for a way out of his farmer's grip, but no luck. Billy Ray adjusted his ball cap with his free hand, then wrapped it around Lucy and locked it on to his other wrist. "Why don't you and I get some bump and grind goin' back at yor place?" His breath was half P.B.R. and half Camel unfiltered. And it was way too close for comfort.

Lucy couldn't move the arm locked down, but she managed to slowly work her semi-free hand down to the pocket of her black jeans, then work her pocket knife up from where the clip had it held at the top. Billy Ray moved his head in closer, presumably to kiss on Lucy's neck. He never made it.

"What the fuck?!" was all Billy Ray managed before Lucy's forearm caught his chest, knocking him down to the ground. Billy Ray was clutching his thigh, watching the circle of red slowly widening as the blood soaked through his Wal-Mart jeans. Lucy bent down and jerkily withdrew the four-inch blade from his leg, wiped it hastily on the arm of Billy Ray's worn flannel shirt, and folded it until she heard the satisfying *click* of a job well done. He wasn't grievously hurt, she knew, but she hastened from the scene regardless.

She easily slipped back into the crowd towards the outskirts of the party and disappeared. No one even noticed Billy Ray was missing from the party until the ambulance showed up later. And the appearance of the Body Bag from behind the stage brought the entire party to a rather abrupt end.

* * * * *

Lucy didn't return home until two days later.

As it transpired, she had hopped in her tired old Jeep Wrangler and made the trip to New Orleans to see her old friend Thomas after leaving the party. For some reason, though, neither he nor his boyfriend Jim were home. She waited on their back porch all day, venturing out once to grab a cheeseburger at the local MickyDees. She wanted to call Thomas, but realized her cell phone was back home, and she didn't know his or Jim's number off hand. Eventually Lucy chalked it up to fate and decided to move on.

After hitting I-10 back to Baton Rouge (and making a four-hour detour at the Saenger Outlet Mall in Gonzalez), she managed to make it home to her trailer in Denham Springs. Nothing awaited her when she got home, although (as she had expected from previous excursions), her German Shepard, Benton, had used the kitchen floor repeatedly as his toilet. Surprisingly, he had also shredded the large bag of Kibble to a pulp and spread it all over the trailer. *Damn dog*, she thought ruefully, noting as well the toilet being completely out of water. *He never acted this way before*, she realized, and made a mental note to lock Benton in the bathroom with food and water next time she made a trip to New Orleans.

She cleaned up the litany of messes Benton had gifted her fairly quickly, then put Benton on his chain leash outside by the doghouse. Then, sighing all the while, she made way to take a much-needed shower and change out of her now three day old clothes. A pair of old black sweat pants, a worn out scrunchi, and a faded Nightwish shirt completed the change. Her Halloween marathon, which she had set aside in order to attend that absolutely lame party (although, admittedly, getting to one-up Billy Ray Babineaux and give him a limp at the same time made the excursion somewhat worth her while), was the cap off.

Lucy cued up the first movie in her marathon, Lucky McKee's indie classic *May*. Lucy loved this one; in addition to empathizing with the title character, Angela Bettis was one of her favorite actresses ever since she first saw *Girl, Interrupted* and her turn in the television remake of *Carrie* only confirmed what she knew. She pressed play on the worn VCR remote, flinched at the opening scream, and nestled herself into her worn out couch with her 2-liter of Pepsi and the stereotypical bowl of (unsalted) popcorn. It was going to be a good night.

Then, Benton went berserk.

Letting out a sigh, Lucy paused *May*, heavily annoyed at the interruption. *Stupid fucking dog*, she thought heavily, and got up from her comfy spot to see what was driving him to insanity. She made it two feet towards the door before Benton's yelps reached her ears.

She paused, caution and concern having taken control and guiding her every action. *Most likely it's a damn copperhead*, Lucy thought, remembering the one she killed a few weeks back that had somehow gotten up the front steps and settled on the trailer's porch. She had dispatched that one with extreme prejudice (and still needed to patch up or sand down the hole in the wood). Lucy quickly turned on the spot and jogged to her end table at the far end of the comfy sofa, threw open the tiny drawer on the front, and withdrew her neutralizer: a Smith and Wesson .38 special revolver, loaded and waiting.

Lucy kept the muzzle depressed and her trigger finger laying on the side of the gun, just like her father taught her to, and slowly advanced to the front door

of her trailer. She took her free hand and slowly opened the front door, peeking her head around the corner to try and glimpse the threat before it got her, too. Benton's yelps had subsided, and she couldn't hear anything going on outside the door anymore; an ominous threat. Lucy pressed her head farther past the angle of the door, trying to get a better view of the yard surrounding her mobile home. Everything looked normal, save for Benton not being anywhere in sight. She took a tentative step outside the door, still on edge, and swept the yard with her overly alert senses. Then, she screamed.

Benton was hanging from his neck off the elm tree near her trailer. He was already dead.

Lucy turned and tossed the revolver inside the apartment towards the couch and sprinted down the steps to the tree, intent on getting Benton's body down as soon as possible. It took a minute or two of climbing to reach the branch they used, but it was a relatively low one and the knot they used to secure the rope was extremely simple (*especially for the daughter of a Coast Guard vet, she thought smugly*). He was undone and lowered to the ground within minutes of discovery. Her tears began welling up as soon as she got back on the ground. She cried for what seemed an eternity, holding his body, remembering how she rescued him as a puppy from a kill shelter three years ago, how she painstakingly house trained him, how he would try and protect her when those redneck assh...

Billy Ray. That creepy, no good, pig fucking sunuvabitch did this! She stood up, eyes blazing and fists clenched in righteous indignation. She pictured a scenario in her head of Billy Ray creeping past her window with his pathetic limp... peeking through her window to make sure she was busy... wringing Benton's neck until he fell silent... making a noose from a length of nylon hunting rope... *If he thought Halloween night was bad, wait until I get a hold of his ass now.* She stalked off to the house, dragging Benton's corpse with her along the way. She wanted to bury him, of course, but that could wait until after her payback was complete. *Until then, Lucy thought, under the porch will have to do.* Benton's body fit under the stairs relatively easily, and a spare bed sheet pulled from the hall closet helped hide the corpse from prying neighbours.

The pistol got picked up from the seat cushion she had been inhabiting and tucked in to the waistband of her sweatpants as a last resort. Her pocketknife was clipped to her waistband on the other side and was within easy reach of her hand. After some deliberation, the shirt was scrapped in favor of a different one that she wasn't as fond of in case something should happen. And finally, she donned her everyday combat boots over the bottom of her sweat pants. She laced

them up slowly, taking the time to plot out in her head the course of action she wanted to take. His precious pit bull would be the obvious choice... But what Lucy *really* wanted was to finish what she started Halloween night. *Then that's what I'll do*, she told herself as she slung on her BDU jacket and made sure the revolver was covered. *I'm gonna end this bullshit right here, right now, motherfucker*. Lucy stood up and marched out of the trailer, murder in her eyes and purpose in her gait.

She didn't have to go far to find her objective.

He was waiting at the end of her driveway, still dressed in the same Wal-Mart's Best she had left him in. He hadn't even bothered to try to clean up the enormous bloodstain, which, Lucy noted sickeningly, comprised the entire front of his right pants leg, down to his bare foot. The wound was visible through the hole, and almost looked as though it was congealing and matting together with the blue jeans to form an infectious, pulsing mass of gore. *What the hell did I do to him?!* Lucy asked herself, noting that based on his appearance, it looked like he hadn't slept or done anything in days. Even his stare seemed... off... somehow... Like he only knew he wanted to be there, but had no reason why...

Lucy, not sure of what to do, approached Billy Ray carefully, keeping her hand on the butt of the revolver in case he's faking and it's an attack. She took the approach step by step, inching herself nearer at a pace that would make the Tortoise proud. The loose gravel of her improvised driveway crunched with every footfall, and when she got three feet away, she called out to him.

"Billy Ray?" She called in a low voice, trying to get him to pay attention to her and not the scenery. His gaze was locked elsewhere for the moment, though, and she tried again. "Billy Ray, answer me, you dumb peckerwood son of a whore!" Nothing. *This is too fucking freaky*, she thought, and wondered whether she should just leave him alone and let the wound finish the job it had started.

No. This motherfucker needs to pay for what he did to Benton, dammit! One more try, and then I'll... Her train of thought was instantly derailed by an emerging sense of being *watched*, and, looking up, she knew why: Billy Ray had finally noticed her. His head cocked inquisitively to one side, appearing as though he were trying to remember who she was. Lucy took a half step backwards at his glare, fighting her instinct to run and hide with everything in her willpower. Instead, swallowing against a suddenly very dry throat, she cried, "FUCK YOU!!!" and charged at him with her pocketknife drawn and held high.

Billy Ray stood still, confused at the events transpiring before him. He didn't flinch when the knife sunk into his neck muscle, but merely turned his head to look in amazement at the wound... And noticed Lucy's arm clasped to the knife. A bright look flashed over Billy Ray's face, and in a heartbeat he opened his mouth impossibly wide, threw his head to the side, and tore off a sizeable chunk of Lucy's forearm with one bite.

Lucy shrieked in pain, withdrawing her arm close to her chest and holding the part missing the flesh as tight as she could. She didn't feel any pain; the shock of being bitten was still fresh on her mind. She looked down at her arm and then back at Billy Ray, watching the blood (*My blood*) dribble from his mouth the way a toddler might drool on itself, and took a horrified step back. The knife, she noticed, was still sticking out from his neck at an odd angle, and he paid it no mind whatsoever. She took another step back, unclenched her hand from the wound, and pulled the revolver.

BLAM! BLAM!

Lucy spun around from the impact of the one bullet that connected with her shoulder. The pain was immeasurable, and mingling with the fresh sensation of pain trickling in from her arm, the agony was completely unbearable. Lucy landed hard on her back in the gravel driveway, bits of rock and dirt becoming embedded in her skin in the process. She opened her mouth and screamed monotonously, a never-ending wailing punctuated only by the necessity to draw in breath to scream more. She screamed from pain, from hatred, from injustice felt towards the two men walking up to her prone body, and most of all, she screamed for Benton.

She could hear the two men talking as they walked up to her and prodded her with the toes of their trailer-trash sneakers, although she couldn't make out what they were saying over the cacophony of her own raw vocal chords. She thought she heard something along the lines of "did it for you" and "how're you even here, bubba?", then screaming, but it was far off and she didn't much care at this point. Her vision started going foggy slowly but surely, like an old tube television fading out after being turned off. *That's it*, she thought, *I'm being turned off... but I could be mistaken.... I'm just.... sooooo fuckin' tired..... and I want Benton now.... I.... Want.... Mom.....*

-Fin.

THE EAR DOCTOR by John Jennings

Sitting on the bathroom floor Bill shrieked, "Noooo ... I don't understand... I don't..." But no matter how much he screamed, it couldn't change the pure horror of the situation...

Bill sat nervously in the doctor's waiting room. He looked around anxiously at the other patients. He didn't want to miss hearing the receptionist calling his name because he had a problem with his ear.

"It's my ear," said Bill, "I think there's something inside."

The doctor casually looked. "Just a little infection ... Take these drops twice a day ... We'll do the first ones now."

Bill lay sideways on the surgical bed and the doctor began his treatment. Bill felt it drop into his ear. "Just stay there a minute."

Suddenly Bill felt a strange painful stinging. "Ahhh," he yelped.

"That's OK... there's always a little discomfort at the start," the doctor noted reassuringly.

Bill was a little shaken. The doctor helped him up and sent him on his way. "Come back in two weeks or so."

Bill arrived back at his empty apartment, placed the ear drops on his kitchen table, and looked around at all the unopened moving boxes.

"OK... I'll unpack now." Suddenly there was a sharp pain in his ear. Bill put his hand over his ear as he cringed in pain.

"It felt as if something was moving," he said on the phone to the doctor.

"Don't worry, that's just the drops doing their work." Bill wasn't satisfied with the

answer but was resigned to finish the medication before getting a second opinion. A few days went by and Bill's ear pain had settled down but it still felt as if there was something inside.

About a week later, Bill woke up with an agonising pain in his jaw. He scrambled into the bathroom and saw in the mirror that the entire side of his face had turned green.

He called the doctor and immediately an ambulance appeared and brought him to the doctor's night clinic.

"What's wrong with me?"

The doctor looked him over. "This happens sometimes. Just a reaction to the drops. It means they've done their work. You can stop taking them now. Just go back to your apartment and sleep it off." Bill obeyed the doctor went home and passed out on his bed.

In the morning, he opened his eyes. He felt really strange, but decided to get on with his morning routine. Bill looked in the mirror and was still a bit green so he got into the shower, closed his eyes, and stood under the hot shower water. It felt fantastic, as if all his cares were washing away. Suddenly, he heard a gurgling noise. Something was blocking the drain. He looked down. The shower floor was covered in blood and skin, and his body had turned entirely green. Bill ran out to the mirror and saw he was now... something alien.

STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

Chapter Eleven: Dying London

They halted on a street corner as Will opened up his looted A-Z and tried to work out exactly where they were going. Curtis and Steve scanned the surrounding area, guns at the ready, while Mercer asked:

'What's the name of this hotel, anyway?'

Will frowned. 'I've been trying to remember that,' he said. 'It had the same name as a cinema. Regency? Something like that. It was near TV Centre. Well, a short drive away. We got taken off to Thames House and then back again, so I don't know the exact route.'

'I spent two years near Shepherds Bush,' Curtis commented, not taking his eye off the deserted street. Will looked up.

'Maybe you'll know where the Regency Hotel is, then,' he said.

Curtis shook his head. 'Nah,' he said. 'Didn't get out much.'

'Why not?' asked Steve.

'The screws in the Scrubs wouldn't let me,' Curtis replied with a laugh. 'Did two years in Wormwood Scrubs for one job.'

'Most of the hotels are off Uxbridge Road,' Steve said.

'Just off Holland Road, isn't it?' Mercer asked. 'Near the tube station.'

Will found it on the map. Now to work out where they were.

'Down!' Mercer yelled, flinging Will to the ground as gunfire opened up from further up the street. Will was deafened as Curtis and Steve opened fire right next to him. He tried to lift his head but Mercer forced it down again.

The gunfire trailed away. Suddenly Mercer was shouting 'Up! Up!' in his ear. They scrambled up and got into cover round the corner. Curtis and Steve were also in cover, behind a parked car. Curtis gave Steve covering fire as he raced towards them, then Steve and Mercer did the same for him as Curtis also joined them. Now they were all in cover. Mercer peered round the corner.

Silence.

It became unbearable. Mercer stepped out into the street. Still nothing. He glanced back at them.

'Cover me,' he said. He advanced, vanishing from Will's sight. A little later, he came running back.

'They've gone,' he panted. 'Well, most of them.'

'What d'you mean, most of them?' Will asked.

Mercer grinned harshly. 'You'll see.'

He led them up the road. One man in army uniform was lying in the middle, blood pooling around his motionless body. An assault rifle lay beside him. Will looked around him. The street was still deserted apart from his companions. He ran into the road and seized the rifle. The man had an ammo belt. Gritting his teeth, Will removed it from the cooling corpse and put it on. Then he returned to the others, brandishing his newfound gun triumphantly.

'Good thinking,' said Mercer.

They moved on down the tree lined street.

Crossing Kensington High Street, which was deserted except for the guttering shape of an armoured car, and the bodies of two policemen, they moved on towards Shepherd's Bush. Street after street, with Kensington's odd combination of Georgian houses and ultra modern developments. Will thought that if it hadn't been for the utter fear that hung over these empty streets, the looted shops and the occasional corpses, it would have been very pleasant. Not the London he knew at all.

Still, he was starting to get footsore. He'd walked back and forth across London all this day, and not had much to eat. Nothing, in fact, since he'd left the heliport. And this rifle, though comforting under the current conditions, was heavy.

He sneaked another look at the A-Z as they walked, uncomfortably juggling it with the rifle. To his relief, he saw that the road they were following, which had seemed to be going on for ever, reached Shepherd's Bush not much further on.

A burst of gunfire from up ahead made him drop the map as he brought up the rifle.

They stood in the middle of the street, guns at the ready. Mercer listened cautiously as the gun battle went on.

'Sounds like it's some way away,' he commented.

'But it's in the direction we're going,' Will said, shouldering his rifle and picking up the A-Z. He brushed the dirt off the page and showed it to Mercer. 'We're here. And Shepherd's Bush is here, in Hammersmith. God knows what's going on, but...'

He halted, as he heard the dull crump of a distant explosion. He exchanged glances with Mercer.

'Sounds bad,' Mercer breathed. 'You sure you want to go that way?'

Will was taken aback. 'Well, I don't even know if we'll be able to find the manifesto...' he started. 'We could always just get out of London.'

Mercer looked pensive. Then he shook his head.

'No,' he said. 'If what you say is true, we owe it to the country to get that book published. We keep going.' He looked over at the other two. 'Agreed?'

They both shrugged, then nodded. 'What the fuck,' said Curtis. 'You only die once.'

They kept going.

The closer they came to the hotel, the further they went through the streets of Shepherd's Bush, the louder the sounds of battle became. The entire city was deserted, Will thought, but the rogue soldiers had chosen the one place had had to get to in which to have their gunfight.

They turned a corner and the roar of gunfire was deafening. Soldiers were crouching in cover nearby, blazing away at other figures further up the street. And at the other end of the street was the hotel.

They concealed themselves in a nearby park and watched the gunfight. Two soldiers lay dead or wounded in the gutter. The rest were still firing. Halfway up the street a house was on fire.

‘Yes,’ Will said, in reply to Mercer’s enquiry. ‘The hotel’s up there. Other end of the street.’

‘What are we gonna do?’ Curtis asked.

‘I reckon we give up now,’ said Steve. ‘We can’t say we haven’t tried.’

Mercer shook his head. ‘Stop talking about giving up,’ he growled. ‘We get the manifesto.’

Will was surprised by the way that Mercer had changed. Now it was him who was obsessed with getting Quigley’s book published. Will himself was willing to give it up. Like Steve said, they’d tried. But how were they going to get the thing out of the middle of a warzone?

‘We could wait until they move on,’ Mercer said thoughtfully.

‘How long is that going to take?’ Curtis demanded. ‘You can wait. I’m not staying here. I wanna get out of this city. Worse than the street fighting in Damascus.’

‘Curtis is right,’ said Will gloomily. ‘The longer we wait, the worse things will get.’

Mercer nodded grimly. ‘Then we’d better start right now,’ he said. He rose. Will grabbed his arm and dragged him back down into cover. Mercer glowered at him and shook him off.

‘What are you doing?’ Will demanded. ‘Are you just going to wade in there? You’ll get us all killed, and then who’s going to publish the Manifesto?’

Mercer gave him a sardonic look. He indicated the alleyway running behind the houses and hotels in the road.

‘I’m not that mad,’ he said. ‘I say we sneak in the back.’

Will relaxed a little. The crackle of gunfire continued.

‘Oh,’ he said.

The soldiers were so intent on blowing the hell out of each other that it was a relatively easy matter to cross the adjacent street and walk up the alley. After

what seemed like an impossibly long time, they found themselves at the back of what Will was sure must be the hotel. A wall topped by razorwire surrounded a yard. Behind it, Will could see a fire escape running down the back of the building. Painted on the big delivery gates were the words REGENT'S HOTEL.

'Regent's,' Will muttered. 'Not Regency. Regent's.'

'How do we get over all that?' Curtis asked, indicating the razorwire queasily.

Mercer shrugged. 'We don't need to,' he said. He tried the gates. They were locked, unsurprisingly. Mercer pulled out his gun and blasted the doors open. He turned to the others and bowed.

The gunfire was continuing in the street. No worries that Mercer's shot would attract attention. Will pushed open the gates and entered a small yard, stacked with crates and kegs, and overgrown with weeds. Directly opposite was a door. He tried it. It was locked.

Enthusiastically, Mercer pushed him aside and flung himself at the door. It burst open on his second attempt, and they crowded into a deserted hotel kitchen.

'Shit, I'm starving,' said Curtis, opening the fridge. Mercer looked on dourly as Curtis, followed by Steve and then Will helped themselves to food. After a while, he relented, and joined them.

It had been a long journey, and Will was relieved at a chance to lean against a work surface, prop up his gun and tuck into what he'd found; a jar of pickled onions and some cheese. Not much of a meal really, and the constant roar of gunfire from outside was a bit of a distraction. But it was good to fill his empty belly.

'We should secure the place before we start tucking in,' Mercer said after a few mouthfuls.

'It's deserted,' Curtis said dismissively. 'We need the rest.'

'And the food,' Will chipped in.

Mercer glared at them, produced his gun, and went out into the hotel.

The other three sat in silence. Without Mercer, Steve and Curtis seemed ill at ease in Will's presence. He finished his impromptu meal and got up. following the direction Mercer had taken, he crept up a flight of steps and into a plush-carpeted vestibule that he remembered from his last, brief visit to the hotel. Movement from upstairs made him tense until Mercer came thumping down the steps, gun at the ready. He stopped, seeing Will.

'Deserted,' he said. 'Where was the Professor's room?'

'Upstairs,' Will said. 'I'll know it when I see it.'

'Are those other two still stuffing themselves?' Mercer asked disapprovingly. Will nodded. 'Looters,' Mercer added, filling the word with venom. 'They're exactly what's wrong with this country.'

'I thought they were your mates,' Will said as they made their way along a familiar looking passage at the top of the stairs. He remembered the horrible wallpaper from his last visit.

'Tossers,' Mercer said viciously. 'God knows why I ended up lumbered with them.'

Will was about to reply when he saw a door on the right hand wall.

'This is it, I'm sure,' he said. 'This is where the Professor was staying.' He tried to the door. It was locked, inevitably.

Mercer slammed his shoulder against it. As he did so, the gunfire out in the street broke off suddenly. Mercer rubbed his shoulder and tried again.

'Wait,' said Will urgently. Silence had fallen outside. Then there was a cheer and the sound of running men. 'One side is retreating,' he said. A series of shots rang out. Men screamed. More gunfire. Will turned to Mercer. 'Get that door open, now!'

Mercer produced his gun. Before he did, there was a crashing, splintering sound from downstairs.

'What's that?' Mercer asked, looking up. 'Go and check. It's probably those wankers. Tell them to keep quiet.'

Will ran back to the landing. Looking down into the hotel vestibule, he saw that the main doors had been broken open and a man in khaki uniform was standing by the main desk, looking around him. He was about to dodge back when he heard the crack of Mercer's gun.

The soldier looked up in shock and saw Will. Terrified, he opened fire and Will jumped back just in time.

Will ran back to Mercer, who had his hand on the open hotel room door and was looking back up the passage. He'd shot the lock out.

'What is it?' he demanded. 'What was that gunfire?'

More shooting from below, pistol fire followed by rifle shots. Will looked back in horror.

'One of the soldiers,' he told Mercer. 'He'd broken in at the front. When you shot the lock out he looked up and saw me. He fired at me, but I got back in cover.'

More shooting from below, ending with a brutal, deliberate couple of rifle shots. Then silence, except the distant thunder of gunfire outside.

Mercer's eyes were wide with fear. 'Curtis and Steve?' he whispered.

'They must have come up from the kitchen!' Will surmised.

'That soldier...' Mercer said. 'You say he saw you?'

Will nodded, unslung his rifle, and covered the passageway in the direction of the stairs.

'No,' said Mercer. 'I'll keep us covered. You find that pen drive. You know where it is. I don't.'

'Okay,' said Will. He handed Mercer the rifle. 'But use this. He's got a rifle too.'

He heard stealthy movements from the stairs. Mercer shoved him into the hotel bedroom and covered the passage.

Will hurried towards the bed. The room was musty and covered in dust. It seemed like it hadn't been occupied in weeks. He tried to remember where Quigley had put the pen drive containing the manuscript. Of course, in the vent over the bed.

He climbed onto the bed and tried to prise the vent off the wall. It was screwed on. He felt in his pockets and produced a two pence coin, which he used to unscrew it. Then he felt around inside. No. No sign.

Will felt bitterly disappointed.

Either Quigley had changed his mind and taken the pen drive with him, or else someone had removed it since. Maybe the security forces. Maybe just a maintenance worker. Will groped around one more time.

Gunfire blazed out from the passage and he jumped nervously. As he did so, he dislodged something and it fell down onto the bed. The gunfire cracked out again. Will looked down at the coverlet.

There it was! The Professor's pen drive, furred with dust. He jumped down and seized it. As he did so, the gunfire ended, followed by the thud of a body falling to the floor. Then there was silence throughout the hotel.

Will slipped the pen drive into his sock, then rose and faced the door to the passage. Tentatively, he called out:

'Mercer?'

SUPER DUPER by James Rhodes

Chapter 23

Smith swirled the teabag in the cup. He had let it sit for over an hour.

“Come on you bastard, brew.”

Corrine looked up at him patiently.

“I’m glad to see you looking so well.”

“I’d be looking a lot better if I could make a cup of tea. You’d think the police would have a gas hob at their station. They should still be on, right? You don’t need electricity to pipe gas do you?”

“I don’t know.”

“It always stays on in a power cut, I’m sure that you don’t.”

“I think we have slightly bigger concerns at the moment.”

“The Don says he’s fine, we’re ready to go sort out the electricity. Plus, that big guy said he was going to dress the wound properly.”

“You mean the man who shot him?”

“He said it was the least he could do.”

“Well, as much as he is being very apologetic and trying to win over Ellie, I don’t think we should forget that he’s mentally ill. He thinks I’m the Queen, you know.”

“You said. Still, that’s hardly reassuring is it? I mean, from a mental health perspective. Still, I think it will keep him from killing us. ”

“No, it isn’t at all reassuring. Explain to me why you’re going to Sellafield with him.”

“And The Don.”

“And The Don?”

“To save the world, something like that – so much has happened since I decided to do it that I’ve forgotten.”

“But you’re still going.”

“I have to.”

Corrine stared hard at Smith. There was a determined look in his face that she wasn’t quite comfortable with.

“No really, why?”

“I don’t want it to blow up.”

“Because...”

“Because then everyone would die, and, you know, you’re part of everyone – even though you dumped me.”

“That’s very sweet.”

“Do you want to have sex?”

“No. But I’m glad you’re strong enough to want to.”

“Alright, well I best be off then.”

Smith strode efficiently out of the small kitchen and back towards the reception area. Ellie was sat watching her father bandaging a man who less than an hour ago he had shot. The Don was taking things with good grace.

“You see,” he told Ellie, “I’m all back together now.”

“Are you going to stop crying now?”

“I didn’t cry,” said The Don defensively.

“I was talking to my dad.”

Biggy nodded but he couldn’t say yes in case he started crying again.

“Are you sure that doesn’t hurt too much?” Smith asked The Don.

“It didn’t break any bones and there’s no internal organs for it to hit higher up than the heart, so I think I’ll be OK.”

“Do we need to get some painkillers?”

“Yes, there’s a hospital close to here. We can get some there.”

“How do you know?”

“There’s always a hospital near a police station, you know, for discreet incineration.”

“OK, shall we go then?”

The Don pulled on a white shirt and a coat. Smith helped him get the right arm in. The Don let it hang limply.

“C-can you move that?” asked the timid Biggy.

“Yes, it just really hurts when I do.”

Biggy dug a triangle bandage out of the triage kit and tied up The Don’s arm. As he did so, yet more tears welled up in his eyes. He wiped them away with his sleeve, then turned to his daughter.

“Look, the man you saw shoot him, that’s not me. I’m not a monster. I’m not Doctor, Doctor...”

“Robotnik,” interjected Ellie, she didn’t look up as she talked to him.

“No, I’m not Doctor Robotnik.”

“Not even Doctor Robotnik shoots people,” said Ellie.

“I’ve told you, it was close range, I knew he wouldn’t die. I didn’t expect him to get up but I knew he wouldn’t die.”

“The Don is well hard,” Smith told them all.

The Don shot a stern paternal glance at Smith and put one finger to his lip.

“Anyway,” said Biggy. “I’m going to go with your friends and make sure the power station doesn’t explode. Maybe when I get back you’ll be able to look at me again.”

Ellie shrugged. Biggy’s enormous shoulders drooped. He had been beaten up, rejected by his daughter and forgiven by a man he shot all within the space of about an hour. He looked ready to crumble.

“Look,” said Smith, “maybe your dad is like Knuckles. He seems like an idiot because he’s so aggressive and anti-social but his heart’s in the right place. And, he starts out working with Robotnik but then he figures out who the good guys are.”

Ellie nodded, she still wasn’t looking up.

“Who’s Knuckles?” she asked.

“He’s in Sonic 3. It’s not very good, to be honest.”

“OK.”

“But Knuckles is pretty cool, he’s a hero.”

Ellie nodded again, looked up at Smith as he spoke.

“Corrine’s going to take you back to the others, we’ll be back soon.”

Ellie ran up to Smith and wrapped her arms around his legs.

“Don’t be long,” she said.

Biggy started to cry again. The Don hobbled out of the room clutching his shoulder. Biggy followed him, attempting a sincere wave at Ellie. When they were gone, Smith looked down at Ellie.

“Will you look after Corrine for me?”

Ellie nodded.

“And tell Nicola we’ll be back soon.”

He ruffled her hair and walked outside to the others. He didn’t feel quite so well now that the cold air hit him. He stood there with the other two men, staring in silence at the empty streets. An outside observer would have seen that each one of them was green faced and swaying with nausea but there were no outside observers.

“Bagsy we don’t walk there,” said Smith.

BABBAGE MUST DIE by Gavin Chappell

Chapter Twenty Three

Brian moved without thinking. He brought his knee up with punishing force, straight into Piper’s groin, and at the same time smashed his fist into the man’s face, knocking him flat on the floor of the ballroom. Turning briefly to say to the short man, ‘I want to talk to you later!’ he ran for the door.

Glancing back, he saw Piper being helped to his feet by an older man with whiskers and a frockcoat. Other men were moving in Brian's direction. The man who feared that Ada was "lost to this world" watched the proceedings with a grim expression of humour. Catesby was standing with his dancing partner, looking around in confusion; he hadn't seen what had happened. Brian turned and forced his way through the crowd around the door.

He broke from the doors of Almack's and raced down the street. Soon he could hear shouts and running footsteps from behind him. He ducked down an alleyway.

Shit! What was Piper doing here? Not only had the bastard survived the shipwreck, he'd come to London – was he following Brian? And what fool had let him into a gentleman's club? The older man, the one with whiskers... was he Piper's uncle, maybe? Perhaps the lieutenant had good connections.

Brian slipped and slithered in the muck that lined the alleyway. Gap-toothed whores and brutal-looking thugs glared at him from the shadows. He realised he hadn't a clue where he was. Where was he going to, anyway? Somewhere that led him as far as possible from the sounds of pursuit, that was certain.

He halted briefly in an archway and listened. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but he was sure that the shouting was now coming from further away, moving off into the distance parallel to him. He drew a deep breath. He'd shaken them off. But now he was lost.

The backstreets of Regency London didn't look like a good place to be lost in. And if he wasn't wrong, those probing tendrils of mist creeping through the night air were the first signs of a pea-souper. Funny, he'd only ever associated fog with Victorian London. Looked like it was pretty much as bad in this age.

Brian retraced his steps, spattering his elegant boots in filth, passing gin-raddled drunks and attracting the attention of a growing group of urchins. Surely they ought to be in bed by now? He saw a couple of ruffians were following him.

Now he wasn't sure where he was going. All these brick alleys looked the same. He halted. The fog was growing. He nodded to the ruffians.

'Looks like it'll be a bad night,' he said cheerily. 'Could either of you gentlemen point me in the direction of the Albany?'

The two men looked at each other in baffled surprise. One stepped closer, rolling up his sleeves, but the other gripped his arm, and looked at Brian.

'Foller the alley like yer doin', yer 'onour, then turn left, then right, then yer back at Pickerdilly. Can't miss it.'

His companion frowned and growled something at him, then shook him off and came at Brian, producing a cosh as he did so. Brian's friendly grin didn't leave his face as he drew his rapier.

'Come on, Finn,' said the first ruffian. 'The gennelman wants to go 'ome.'

'If 'e thinks 'e can come dahn 'ere wiv 'is fancy ways...' the second ruffian growled, but he was eyeing Brian's blade with trepidation.

'You listen to your mate,' Brian advised. 'You've picked the wrong guy to threaten tonight. You never heard of Captain Wells of the *Black Flag*?'

'Can't say I 'as,' the ruffian replied. He lunged with his cosh raised, and Brian leapt forward, grabbed the man's uplifted arm with his left arm and did his best to slash a Z into the front of his shirt. He eyed the result critically, let go of the man's arm and booted him in the chest, sending him staggering back. The ruffian collided with a horse trough and fell straight into it.

The ruffian's mate helped him up, looking apologetically at Brian as he did so. 'Sorry abaht this,' he said. 'The bugger can't take 'is gin.'

'Don't mention it,' Brian said, and he hurried from the scene.

A few minutes later, he came back onto the street. It was deserted except for the usual groups of gentlemen, strolling or staggering from one club to another. Brian sheathed his still drawn rapier and hurried in the direction of the Albany.

Humphrey was waiting for him when he finally made it back to his rooms. The boy sat by the fireplace in the little sitting room, his expression stormy as Brian staggered in, his finery spattered with muck and blood on his right hand from where he'd punched Piper.

'Where've you been?' he demanded in outrage. 'You said I had the morning off, then you go off with that Catesby and you're gone for hours!'

Brian sat down in the chair on the other side of the fire.

'Don't forget, you're my servant,' he said grumpily. 'Don't take that tone with me. You'd think we were married! Get these boots off me and clean them.'

Grumbling, Humphrey complied. As he was doing his best to remove the worst of the filth, Brian told him what had happened. When he mentioned his encounter with the man in the ballroom, he looked up.

'This man knew where your Ada is?' he asked.

'Not exactly,' Brian replied. 'He'd met her recently. Somewhere in the city, I suppose. I was going to ask him where, but then I met an old chum.' Humphrey listened in horror to the rest of the tale.

'You mean this Piper knows who you are?' he said when Brian concluded his tale. 'Who you really are, I mean?'

Brian nodded. 'I don't think I'd better stay in London much longer,' he said. 'I just need to find Ada ...'

'You'd better find who that man was, the one who'd seen her,' Humphrey said. 'Then find her and get out of Town. Otherwise they'll hang you high from Tyburn Tree.'

'Too right,' Brian grunted. He went to bed and slept the deep sleep of weariness.

He rose late in the morning and made his way to the sitting room.

'Up at last, are you?' Humphrey asked. The boy was getting cheeky, Brian noted. 'That Catesby's waiting for you downstairs.'

'You should have asked him in,' Brian said.

'I'm not having him in the same room as me.' Humphrey sneered. 'I'm surprised he's turned up, now everyone knows you're a pirate.'

Brian went white. 'Do they?'

Humphrey shrugged. 'It's probably all round London by now. You know how stories get around.'

Brian scowled. 'We'd better get busy. Help me get dressed.' Brian would like to think he was old enough to do this on his own, but that didn't apply to dressing like a Regency dandy, which was something you could only do with at least one servant to help. As Humphrey sullenly moved to comply, he added, 'Then go and tell Catesby to come up.'

'You're not going to go out with him, are you?'

'What else can I do?' Brian demanded. 'I need someone who knows London. You don't know London, do you? I want to find that guy from last night. Then Ada.'

Humphrey sighed. 'Catesby will fleece you, like you said. How much money have you splashed about already? Take me with you, I'll keep an eye on him.'

'Okay,' Brian snapped. 'Now go and get him.'

Humphrey returned with the dandy, who entered wearing a sardonic expression.

'Demme, I'm surprised to find you here, milord,' Catesby said. 'When you took, ahem, French leave last night, I wondered if you were staying. Particularly after I heard the rumours this morning.'

'What rumours?' Brian asked, feeling a chill. He could just imagine the noose closing round his neck...

'Oh, preposterous balderdash!' Catesby said easily. 'That you're not a Frenchman at all – though I must say, you seem to have lost your accent!'

Brian laughed nervously. 'Zey say zat I am no Frenchman?' he asked, hurriedly readopting the accent. 'Ze curs!'

'I didn't believe a word,' Catesby replied. 'After all, who but a Frenchman would leave a fellow without a word of warning?' There was an edge to his words, but as Brian looked suspiciously at the dandy, he got the impression Catesby didn't believe the rumours.

'Ah, my apologies, sir,' Brian replied. 'Well, what do you have prepared for us today?'

'Well,' said Catesby, 'there's a hanging at Tyburn this noon. But before that, I thought I would take you for a promenade of the streets.'

'Sounds charming,' said Brian, although the last thing he wanted to be thinking about right now was public execution. They left the room. Humphrey followed suspiciously.

Catesby took them through the more fashionable London streets, passing Covent Garden again, then on towards the City, where the only thing Brian recognised was St Paul's. Very interesting it was too, but Brian had other things on his mind.

'I met a man at ze ball who told me he had met my Ada,' he remarked as they headed east through Covent Garden. 'I wish to speak with him again. Perhaps you saw him? He was ze other man who was not dancing.'

Catesby nodded. 'I know the man. He's well known in London. I could take you to his lodgings. But you can't possibly come to London without visiting the famous Bethlem Royal Hospital! The best entertainment available, bar a hanging.'

'Bethlem?' Brian asked.

Humphrey, who had been silent until now, piped up. 'You mean you haven't heard of Bedlam? You're in for a treat, sir!'

'Your servant's correct,' Catesby said icily. No love was lost between the two.

Brian had vague memories of a lunatic asylum that people had visited for shits and giggles, back in the olden days.

'You mean go to the madhouse for the fun of watching the poor bastards?' he asked. The idea sickened him.

A poster on the nearby wall caught his eye and he stepped closer to study it.

WANTED

it read

THE MOST NOTORIOUS
ROBBER AND
PYRATE
CAPTAIN WELLS
OF THE BLACK FLAG

AT LARGE IN LONDON TOWN
AND STYLING HIMSELF
THE COMTE DE MONTE CARLO

He started sweating freely.

A reward was offered; thirty pounds. Pretty substantial, if Brian knew anything about money in this period. He wondered if Piper's rich uncle or father or gay lover or whatever was stumping up the cash.

Catesby came to join him.

'What is it, milord?' he asked, glancing at the poster. If Catesby realised a price was on Brian's head, he'd not think twice to turn him in. Brian caught the dandy's arm and steered him back up the street.

'I think you were saying Bedlam would be worth a visit...'

'Of course, milord,' said Catesby. 'And then we can visit Lord Byron.'

Brian stared at him. He halted. 'Lord Byron?'

'Of course,' Catesby said. 'Didn't I mention his name? He was the man you were speaking to last night. He has some small reputation as a poet, I believe.' He turned and sauntered up the street.

Brian rubbed his eyes tiredly. Ada had mentioned meeting Byron. That must have been what the man had been talking about last night. Brian had been convinced that he'd met Ada only recently, but it must have been months ago, when she was with the Luddites. Brian felt hope die. Shades of gloom settled on his mind. It meant he had no idea where he might find Ada. This city was huge, teeming with people. and he was a wanted man, known to be 'at large' in the city. He had to get out of the place before they caught him and strung him up. He couldn't wait for the Bay City Runners or whatever they were called to find Ada. And yet he couldn't leave without her. It was hopeless.

Despairing, he followed Catesby.

Bedlam was a large house that stood in its own tree-lined grounds. It looked like a country house in the middle of the city, the kind of mansion that, in the next century, the National Trust would be running. Respectable looking families strolled up and down the avenue that led to the main entrance, or picnicked on the wide lawns. It was hardly what Brian had been anticipating. He'd been expecting some kind of grimy hovel with an old crone on the door and a bunch of nutters screaming in the corners.

He really didn't want to go in. He'd thought it would be an obscure spot where he could get away from people who might think he was a pirate or something. Turned out it was a place for a day out for all the family.

A flunkey on the doors charged them each a penny to enter, and soon they were walking through grimy corridors, past door after door of cells filled with capering, gibbering lunatics. Bedlam. It was that.

Brian wanted to get it over and done with as quickly as possible. He felt sick. The place was grim. It depressed him. It looked like it was falling down in places. Even the NHS was better than this. He felt like he was lost in a barbaric bygone age with no hope of escape.

Catesby took his arm.

'So hasty, milord,' he said. 'Let's enjoy ourselves. Look in this cell! Why, don't some of those beauties there tempt you?' His voice was heavy with irony.

The cell in question was crowded with badly dressed men and women. The girls Catesby was indicating were scrawny, with wide staring eyes and lank, unwashed hair. Some of them were hugging themselves, rocking back and forth. The stench from the cell was enough to make Brian feel sick. To placate Catesby, however, he laughed, and made some equally witty remark.

One of the madwomen came to the window. She gripped the bars and stared at him with an unnerving intensity.

‘So here you are at last!’ she said. ‘And who are you this time? Regency Buck?’

Brian stared at the raving lunatic in bewilderment.

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE MOB'S ARRIVAL AT SIR FRANCIS VARNEY'S.—THE ATTEMPT TO GAIN ADMISSION.

The soldiery had been sent for from their principal station near the churchyard, and had advanced with some degree of reluctance to quell what they considered as nothing better nor worse than a drunken brawl at a public-house, which they really considered they ought not to be called to interfere with.

When, however, the party reached the spot, and heard what a confusion there was, and saw in what numbers the rioters were assembling, it became evident to them that the case was of a more serious complexion than they had at first imagined, and consequently they felt that their professional dignity was not so much compromised with their interference with the lawless proceedings.

Some of the constabulary of the town were there, and to them the soldiers promised they would hand what prisoners they took, at the same time that they made a distinct condition that they were not to be troubled with their custody, nor in any way further annoyed in the business beyond taking care that they did not absolutely escape, after being once secured.

This was all that the civil authorities of the town required, and, in fact, they hoped that, after making prisoners of a few of the ringleaders of the riotous proceedings, the rest would disperse, and prevent the necessity of capturing them.

Be it known, however, that both military and civil authorities were completely ignorant of the dreadful outrage against all common decency, which had been committed within the public-house.

The door was well guarded, and the question now was how the rioters were to be made to come down stairs, and be captured; and this was likely to remain a question, so long as no means were adopted to make them descend. So that, after a time, it was agreed that a couple of troopers should march up stairs with a constable, to enable him to secure any one who seemed a principal in the riot.

But this only had the effect of driving those who were in the second-floor, and saw the approach of the two soldiers, whom they thought were backed by the whole of their comrades, up a narrow staircase, to a third-floor, rather consisting of lofts than of actual rooms; but still, for the time, it was a refuge; and owing to the extreme narrowness of the approach to it, which consisted of nearly a perpendicular staircase, with any degree of tact or method, it might have been admirably defended.

In the hurry and scramble, all the lights were left behind; and when the two soldiers and constables entered the room where the corpse had lain, they became, for the first time, aware of what a horrible purpose had been carried out by the infuriated mob.

The sight was one of perfect horror, and hardened to scenes which might strike other people as being somewhat of the terrific as these soldiers might be supposed to be by their very profession, they actually sickened at the sight which the mutilated corpse presented, and turned aside with horror.

These feelings soon gave way to anger and animosity against the crowd who could be guilty of such an atrocious outrage; and, for the first time, a strong and interested vengeance against the mob pervaded the breasts of those who were brought to act against it.

One of the soldiers ran down stairs to the door, and reported the scene which was to be seen above. A determination was instantly come to, to capture as many as possible of those who had been concerned in so diabolical an outrage, and leaving a guard of five men at the door, the remainder of the party ascended the

staircase, determined upon storming the last refuge of the rioters, and dragging them to justice.

The report, however, of these proceedings that were taking place at the inn, spread quickly over the whole town; and soon as large a mob of the disorderly and the idle as the place could at all afford was assembled outside the inn.

This mob appeared, for a time, inertly to watch the proceedings. It seemed rather a hazardous thing to interfere with the soldiers, whose carbines look formidable and troublesome weapons.

With true mob courage, therefore, they left the minority of their comrades, who were within the house, to their fate; and after a whispered conference from one to the other, they suddenly turned in a body, and began to make for the outskirts of the town.

They then separated, as if by common consent, and straggled out into the open country by twos and threes, consolidating again into a mass when they had got some distance off, and clear of any exertions that could be made by the soldiery to stay them.

The cry then rose of "Down with Sir Francis Varney—slay him—burn his house—death to all vampyres!" and, at a rapid pace, they proceeded in the direction of his mansion.

We will leave this mob, however, for the present, and turn our attention to those who are at the inn, and are certainly in a position of some jeopardy. Their numbers were not great, and they were unarmed; certainly, their best chance would have been to have surrendered at discretion; but that was a measure which, if the sober ones had felt inclined to, those who were infuriated and half maddened with drink would not have acceded to on any account.

A furious resistance was, therefore, fairly to be expected; and what means the soldiery were likely to use for the purpose of storming this last retreat was a matter of rather anxious conjecture.

In the case of a regular enemy, there would not, perhaps, have been much difficulty; but here the capture of certain persons, and not their destruction, was the object; and how that was to be accomplished by fair means, certainly was a question which nobody felt very competent to solve.

Determination, however, will do wonders; and although the rioters numbered over forty, notwithstanding all their desertions, and not above seventeen or eighteen soldiers marched into the inn, we shall perceive that they succeeded in accomplishing their object without any manoeuvring at all.

The space in which the rioters were confined was low, narrow, and inconvenient, as well as dark, for the lights on the staircase cast up that height but very insufficient rays.

Weapons of defence they found but very few, and yet there were some which, to do them but common credit, they used as effectually as possible.

These attics, or lofts, were used as lumber-rooms, and had been so for years, so that there was a collection of old boxes, broken pieces of furniture, and other matters, which will, in defiance of everything and everybody, collect in a house.

These were formidable means of defence, if not of offence, down a very narrow staircase, had they been used with judgment.

Some of the rioters, who were only just drunk enough to be fool-hardy, collected a few of these articles at the top of the staircase, and swore they would smash anybody who should attempt to come up to them, a threat easier uttered than executed.

And besides, after all, if their position had been ever so impregnable, they must come down eventually, or be starved out.

But the soldiers were not at liberty to adopt so slow a process of overcoming their enemy, and up the second-floor staircase they went, with a determination of making short work of the business.

They paused a moment, by word of command, on the landing, and then, after this slight pause, the word was given to advance.

Now when men will advance, in spite of anything and everything, it is no easy matter to stop them, and he who was foremost among the military would as soon thought of hesitating to ascend the narrow staircase before him, when ordered so to do, as paying the national debt. On he went, and down came a great chest, which, falling against his feet, knocked him down as he attempted to scramble over it.

"Fire," said the officer; and it appeared that he had made some arrangements as to how the order was to be obeyed, for the second man fired his carbine, and then scrambled over his prostrate comrade; after which he stooped, and the third fired his carbine likewise, and then hurried forward in the same manner.

At the first sound of the fire arms the rioters were taken completely by surprise; they had not had the least notion of affairs getting to such a length. The smell of the powder, the loud report, and the sensation of positive danger that accompanied these phenomena, alarmed them most terrifically; so that, in point of fact, with the exception of the empty chest that was thrown down in the way of the first soldier, no further idea of defence seemed in any way to find a place in the hearts of the besieged.

They scrambled one over the other in their eagerness to get as far as possible from immediate danger, which, of course, they conceived existed in the most imminent degree the nearest to the door.

Such was the state of terror into which they were thrown, that each one at the moment believed himself shot, and the soldiers had overcome all the real difficulties in getting possession of what might thus be called the citadel of the inn, before those men who had been so valorous a short time since recovered from the tremendous fright into which they had been thrown.

We need hardly say that the carbines were loaded, but with blank cartridges, for there was neither a disposition nor a necessity for taking the lives of these misguided people.

If was the suddenness and the steadiness of the attack that had done all the mischief to their cause; and now, ere they recovered from the surprise of having their position so completely taken by storm, they were handed down stairs, one by one, from soldier to soldier, and into the custody of the civil authorities.

In order to secure the safe keeping of large a body of prisoners, the constables, who were in a great minority, placed handcuffs upon some of the most capable of resistance; so what with those who were thus secured, and those who were terrified into submission, there was not a man of all the lot who had taken refuge in the attics of the public-house but was a prisoner.

At the sound of fire-arms, the women who were outside the inn had, of course, raised a most prodigious clamour.

They believed directly that every bullet must have done some most serious mischief to the townspeople, and it was only upon one of the soldiers, a non-commissioned officer, who was below, assuring them of the innoxious nature of the proceeding which restored anything like equanimity.

"Silence!" he cried: "what are you howling about? Do you fancy that we've nothing better to do than to shoot a parcel of fellows that are not worth the bullets that would be lodged in their confounded carcasses?"

"But we heard the gun," said a woman.

"Of course you did; it's the powder that makes the noise, not the bullet. You'll see them all brought out safe wind and limb."

This assurance satisfied the women to a certain extent, and such had been their fear that they should have had to look upon the spectacle of death, or of grievous wounds, that they were comparatively quite satisfied when they saw husbands, fathers, and brothers, only in the custody of the town officers.

And very sheepish some of the fellows looked, when they were handed down and handcuffed, and the more especially when they had been routed only by a few blank cartridges—that sixpenny worth of powder had defeated them.

They were marched off to the town gaol, guarded by the military, who now probably fancied that their night's work was over, and that the most turbulent and troublesome spirits in the town had been secured.

Such, however, was not the case, for no sooner had comparative order been restored, than common observation pointed to a dull red glare in the southern sky.

In a few more minutes there came in stragglers from the open country, shouting "Fire! fire!" with all their might.

BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XXIII

"Try it again," Snap urged. "Good God, Johnny, we've got to raise some Earth station! Chance it! Use the power—run it up full. Chance it!"

We were gathered in Grantline's instrument room. The duty man, with blanched grim face, sat at his senders. The Grantline crew shoved close around us. There were very few observers in the high-powered Earth stations who knew that an exploring party was on the Moon. Perhaps none of them. The Government officials who had sanctioned the expedition and Halsey and his confrères in the Detective Bureau were not anticipating trouble at this point. The Planetara was supposed to be well on her course to Ferrok-Shahn. It was when she was due to return that Halsey would be alert.

Grantline used his power far beyond the limits of safety. He cut down the lights; the telescope intensifiers and television were completely disconnected; the ventilators were momentarily stilled, so that the air here in the little room crowded with men rapidly grew fetid. All, to save power pressure, that the vital Erentz system might survive.

Even so, it was strained to the danger point. Our heat was radiating away; the deadly chill of space crept in.

"Again!" ordered Grantline.

The duty man flung on the power in rhythmic pulses. In the silence, the tubes hissed. The light sprang through the banks of rotating prisms, intensified up the scale until, with a vague, almost invisible beam, it left the last swaying mirror and leaped through our overhead dome and into space.

"Enough," said Grantline. "Switch it off. We'll let it go at that for now."

It seemed that every man in the room had been holding his breath in the chill darkness. The lights came on again; the Erentz motors accelerated to normal. The strain on the walls eased up, and the room began warming.

Had the Earth caught our signal? We did not want to waste the power to find out. Our receivers were disconnected. If an answering signal came, we could not know it. One of the men said:

"Let's assume they read us." He laughed, but it was a high-pitched, tense laugh. "We don't dare even use the telescope or television. Or electron radio. Our rescue ship might be right overhead, visible to the naked eye, before we see it. Three days more—that's what I'll give it."

But the three days passed and no rescue ship came. The Earth was almost at the full. We tried signaling again. Perhaps it got through—we did not know. But our power was weaker now. The wall of one of the rooms sprang a leak, and the men were hours repairing it. I did not say so, but never once did I feel that our signals were read on Earth. Those cursed clouds! The Earth almost everywhere seemed to have poor visibility.

Four of our eight days of grace were all too soon passed. The brigand ship must be half way here by now.

They were busy days for us. If we could have captured Miko and his band, our danger would have been less imminent. With the treasure insulated, and our camp in darkness, the arriving brigand ship might never find us. But Miko knew our location; he would signal his oncoming ship when it was close and lead it to us.

During those three days—and the days which followed them—Grantline sent out searching parties. But it was unavailing. Miko, Moa and Coniston, with their five underlings, could not be found.

We had at first hoped that the brigands might have perished. But that was soon dispelled! I went—about the third day—with the party that was sent to the Planetara. We wanted to salvage some of its equipment, its unbroken power units. And Snap and I had worked out an idea which we thought might be of service. We needed some of the Planetara's smaller gravity plate sections. Those in Grantline's wrecked little Comet had stood so long that their radiations had gone dead. But the Planetara's were still working.

Our hope that Miko might have perished was dashed. He too had returned to the Planetara! The evidence was clear before us. The vessel was stripped of all its power units save those which were dead and useless. The last of the food and water stores were taken. The weapons in the chart room—the Benson curve lights, projectors and heat rays—had vanished!

Other days passed. Earth reached the full and was waning. The fourteen day Lunar night was in its last half. No rescue ship came from Earth. We had ceased our efforts to signal, for we needed all our power to maintain ourselves. The camp would be in a state of siege before long. That was the best we could hope for. We had a few short-range weapons, such as Bensons, heat-rays and projectors. A few hundred feet of effective range was the most any of them could obtain. The heat-rays—in giant form one of the most deadly weapons on Earth—were only slowly efficacious on the airless Moon. Striking an intensely cold surface, their warming radiations were slow to act. Even in a blasting heat beam a man in his Erentz helmet-suit could withstand the ray for several minutes.

We were, however, well equipped with explosives. Grantline had brought a large supply for his mining operations, and much of it was still unused. We had, also, an ample stock of oxygen fuses, and a variety of oxygen light flares in small, fragile glass globes.

It was to use these explosives against the brigands that Snap and I were working out our scheme with the gravity plates. The brigand ship would come with giant projectors and some thirty men. If we could hold out against them for a time, the fact that the Planetara was missing would bring us help from Earth.

Another day. A tenseness was upon all of us, despite the absorption of our feverish activities. To conserve power, the camp was almost dark, we lived in dim, chill rooms, with just a few weak spots of light outside to mark the watchmen on their rounds. We did not use the telescope, but there was scarcely an hour when one or the other of the men was not sitting on a cross-piece up in the dome of the little instrument room, casting a tense, searching gaze through his glasses into the black, starry firmament. A ship might appear at any time now—a rescue ship from Earth, or the brigands from Mars.

Anita and Venza through these days could aid us very little save by their cheering words. They moved about the rooms, trying to inspire us; so that all the men, when they might have been humanly sullen and cursing their fate, were turned to grim activity, or grim laughter, making a joke of the coming siege. The morale of the camp now was perfect. An improvement indeed over the inactivity of their former peaceful weeks!

Grantline mentioned it to me. "Well put up a good fight, Haljan. These fellows from Mars will know they've had a task before they ever sail off with the treasure."

I had many moments alone with Anita. I need not mention them. It seemed that our love was crossed by the stars, with an adverse fate dooming it. And Snap and Venza must have felt the same. Among the men, we were always quietly, grimly active. But alone.... I came upon Snap once with his arms around the little Venus girl. I heard him say:

"Accursed luck! That you and I should find each other too late, Venza. We could have a lot of fun in Greater New York together."

"Snap, we will!"

As I turned away, I murmured, "And pray God, so will Anita and I."

The girls slept together in a small room of the main building. Often during the time of sleep, when the camp was stilled except for the night watch, Snap and I would sit in the corridor near the girls' door, talking of that time when we would all be back on our blessed Earth.

Our eight days of grace were passed. The brigand ship was due—now, tomorrow, or the next day.

I recall, that night, my sleep was fitfully uneasy. Snap and I had a cubby together. We talked, and made futile plans. I went to sleep, but awakened after a few hours. Impending disaster lay heavily upon me. But there was nothing abnormal nor unusual in that!

Snap was asleep. I was restless, but I did not have the heart to awaken him. He needed what little repose he could get. I dressed, left our cubby and wandered out into the corridor of the main building.

It was cold in the corridor, and gloomy with the weak blue light. An interior watchman passed me.

"All as usual, Haljan."

"Nothing in sight?"

"No. They're watching."

I went through the connecting corridor to the adjacent building. In the instrument room several of the men were gathered, scanning the vault overhead.

"Nothing, Haljan."

I stayed with them awhile, then wandered away. An outside man met me near the admission lock chambers of the main building. The duty man here sat at his

controls, raising the air pressure in the locks through which the outside watchman was coming. The relief sat here in his bloated suit, with his helmet on his knees. It was Wilks.

"Nothing yet, Haljan. I'm going up to the peak of the crater to see if anything is in sight. I wish that damnable brigand ship would come and get it over with."

Instinctively we all spoke in half whispers, the tenseness bearing in on us.

The outside man was white and grim, but he grinned at Wilks. He tried the familiar jest: "Don't let the Earthlight get you!"

Wilks went out through the ports—a process of no more than a minute. I wandered away again through the corridors.

I suppose it was half an hour later that I chanced to be gazing through a corridor window. The lights along the rocky cliff were tiny blue spots. The head of the stairway leading down to the abyss of the crater floor was visible. The bloated figure of Wilks was just coming up. I watched him for a moment making his rounds. He did not stop to inspect the lights. That was routine. I thought it odd that he passed them.

Another minute passed. The figure of Wilks went with slow bounds over toward the back of the ledge where the glassite shelter housed the treasure. It was all dark off there. Wilks went into the gloom, but before I lost sight of him, he came back. As though he had changed his mind, he headed for the foot of the staircase which led up the cliff to where, at the peak of the little crater, five hundred feet above us, the narrow observatory was perched. He climbed with easy bounds, the light on his helmet bobbing in the gloom.

I stood watching. I could not tell why there seemed to be something queer about Wilks' actions. But I was struck with it, nevertheless. I watched him disappear over the summit.

Another minute went by. Wilks did not reappear. I thought I could make out his light on the platform up there. Then abruptly a tiny white beam was waving from

the observatory platform! It flashed once or twice, then was extinguished. And now I saw Wilks plainly, standing in the Earthlight, gazing down.

Queer actions! Had the Earthlight touched him? Or was that a local signal call which he sent out? Why should Wilks be signaling? What was he doing with a hand helio? Our watchmen, I knew, had no reason to carry one.

And to whom could Wilks be signaling? To whom, across this Lunar desolation? The answer stabbed at me: to Miko's band!

I waited less than a moment. No further light. Wilks was still up there!

I went back to the lock entrance. Spare helmets and suits were here beside the keeper. He gazed at me inquiringly.

"I'm going out, Franck. Just for a minute." It struck me that perhaps I was a meddlesome fool. Wilks, of all of Grantline's men, was, I knew, most in his commander's trust. The signal could have been some part of this night's ordinary routine, for all I knew.

I was hastily donning an Erentz suit. I added, "Let me out. I just got the idea Wilks is acting strangely." I laughed. "Maybe the Earthlight has touched him."

With my helmet on, I went through the locks. Once outside, with the outer panel closed behind me, I dropped the weights from my belt and shoes and extinguished my helmet light.

Wilks was still up there. Apparently he had not moved. I bounded off across the ledge to the foot of the ascending stairs. Did Wilks see me coming? I could not tell. As I approached the stairs the platform was cut off from my line of vision.

I mounted with bounding leaps. In my flexible gloved hand I carried my only weapon, a small projector with firing caps for use in this outside near-vacuum.

I held the weapon behind me. I would talk to Wilks first. I went slowly up the last hundred feet. Was Wilks still up there? The summit was bathed in Earthlight. The little metal observatory platform came into view above my head.

Wilks was not there. Then I saw him standing on the rocks nearby, motionless. But in a moment he saw me coming.

I waved my left hand with a gesture of greeting. It seemed to me that he started, made as though to leap away, and then changed his mind. I sailed from the head of the staircase with a twenty foot leap and landed lightly beside him. I gripped his arm for audiphone contact.

"Wilks!"

Through my visor his face was visible. I saw him and he saw me. And I heard his voice:

"You, Haljan. How nice!"

It was not Wilks, but the brigand Coniston.