

Schlock! webzine

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

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

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Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, reviews and art. Feel free to submit fiction, articles, art or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk.

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Schlock! Publishing

This Edition

Featured in this edition is a collection of stories, new and old.

[Super Duper: Part Two](#) by [James Rhodes](#) - The army is asked to intervene as Britain throws history's most expensive sicko.

[The Jackal: Part Five](#) by [Gavin Roach](#) - romance, betrayal, horror and a sinister obsidian statue spell trouble on the Spanish Main! *Last in a five-part series.*

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Varney the Vampire: Part Five](#) ascribed to [Thomas Preskett Prest](#) - Before *Twilight*... before Nosferatu... before Dracula... there was Varney...

[The Nuppets of Nwci Mountain](#) by Millicent 'Mad Dog' McGuire - more farcical comic fantasy featuring highland rogue Dougal the Wanderer.

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Edison's Conquest of Mars \(Part 5\)](#) by [Garrett P. Serviss](#) - *Marvellous Discoveries. The Martians Were the Builders of the Great Sphinx and the Pyramids.*

[Going Underground](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - the three runaways encounter Neo-Nazis, mole-people and clones. *Third in the [Going Underground](#) series.*

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Saga of the Ere-Dwellers - Part Three](#) - supernatural soap opera from Iceland, translated by [William Morris](#) and Eirikr Magnusson.

[413 Creates a Difficulty](#) - horror flash fiction from [James Rhodes](#), previously published [here](#).

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Herbert West: Reanimator - Part Two](#) by [HP Lovecraft](#) - Herbert West continues his quest to successfully reanimate the dead!

Super Duper

Chapter Two

What became known in the press as *The Augustus Incident* would barely have warranted a footnote in the Financial Times, were it not for the fact that a good deal more of the most influential people on the British Isles felt much inclined to follow suit its eponymous sufferer. The driven elite were throwing history's most expensive sickly. The tabloids had a field day attempting to coin a catchy name for the phenomena; the suggestions were moderately broad and somewhat varied. Among some of the better attempts were: The Monday Bug, Yuppie Blues, Augustus Syndrome and The Fat Cat Nap.

The condition hit the country like a foot-and-mouth outbreak. Most people said they felt bad for the people it affected but none of them actually felt quite bad enough to give a shit.

At first it was only the super rich who were affected and, for the most part, the good people of Britain (even those who wouldn't actually say as much) were inclined to think that they probably deserved it. Then it started to affect other driven members of society. Factory farmers were one of the first groups to go down, and then factory owners; after that it began to hit the work force from the management down. Services began to disappear imperceptibly. If you needed to market a new brand moisturiser that fought wrinkles by waving a celebrity facelift at your demographic you would be shit out of luck.

The slouch, as the papers finally settled on, did not affect the whole country simultaneously. It spread upwards from London - initially leaving the West Country entirely unaffected. Despite the fact that it hadn't claimed a single mortality, it was already drawing strong comparisons with the Plague. As with the Plague, the slouch seemed to travel from region to region and when it got to a region its effect was immediate and devastating. Another similarity with the Plague was that there were some people who were immune to the disorder. The immune were easy to spot as they were almost universally the first ones to phone into their jobs and say:

"I won't be in today; I think I'm coming down with the slouch."

And later in the phone-call, add:

"I imagine I'll be better by Thursday. I'll see how it goes and give you a call."

When the slouch made it up to Northampton, the job agencies were initially delighted. The factories were all of a sudden begging for lazy students and social miscreants to stroll in late and do as little as possible whilst still picking up a paycheque, and paycheques got larger and larger for the unskilled labourer until they were nearing a living wage. That was when the government stepped in.

By complete chance, when news of the outbreak had first hit the British press, the Prime Minister happened to be at a meeting at Camp Four in the Cactoctin National Park in Maryland USA - more commonly known as Camp David. In an Eton voice, the Prime Minister declared, as indeed the cabinet was riddled with the slouch, that it was for the best if he stayed away from Britain and co-ordinated things where it was safe. His first decision was to call back every available member of the military to help with the effort at home.

Yes, people were starving: children who were born of the kind of parents that instinctively place their careers before their genetic responsibilities were the worst hit

of all as most of their parents could barely stand up anymore. Food supplies were almost entirely shut down for everyone and when shopkeepers couldn't be bothered showing up for work anymore the looting broke out. Then, when the pubs had finally been drunk dry, the riots started. But the military hadn't been called in to help settle any of these matters. Their job was, as the Prime Minister put it, "to attack the problem at its root by assuring that all capable bodied individuals return to the industries that support the country."

* * * * *

"Wouldn't it make more sense for use to try and clear the motorways? I hear there's thousands of people still trapped on them."

When Jon had got the call to return from his duty on the Falkland Islands - guarding the sheep, as he called it - it had been his hope that he might get put to active and helpful use. His lance corporal Jeff Purlew (better known as Biggy because he was six foot seven) had been hoping the same. It had just been killing time up till now, but now they could get to work.

"Fuck yes, but then when has anything we do had to make sense? We're being choppered into the arse end of Great Britain to do what is essentially a recruitment drive. I'm not sure I want it to make sense."

The chopper put down on the Racecourse, a large stretch of grass near Northampton town centre, and the team piled out. Twelve soldiers in full combat fatigues stood waiting for instruction. Biggy began to speak:

"Remember what we were told in the briefing. We not expecting any hostilities, so pair up and take the sector indicated on your map. Anyone you can persuade to work should be sent to the chopper where they will receive rations and directions from our pilots, who are doubling up as maids today. Everyone clear?"

His team nodded precisely and vocalised their consent with laser guided accuracy.

"Yes," they said and with that they set out on their respective ways.

Biggy and Jon had been allocated both the easiest and the most troublesome routes. Their first sector was only a couple of hundred yards from the Racecourse, whereas the second sector was all the way on the other side of town, by the train station. However, as they had both served the last two years in the Falkland Islands - decades after there had been a conflict there - the short walk seemed very short to them.

Biggy had been worried about the operation since it was allocated to him. He had heard reports of massive levels of desertion on these operations and he was worried that once his own troops saw the situation that Britain was in they might be inclined to do the same. His fears were allayed, however, as before he even made it off the Racecourse Jon spotted a group of early teenagers playing football. The two soldiers approached them, saying:

"Which one of you lot wants to eat tonight?"

It was an easy sell and Biggy didn't have to go too overboard with the "Britain needs you" speech that he had planned. The youths took their football a bit closer to the helicopter and simply waited to be told what to do next. Easy!

They had another spot of luck with a dishevelled man who was standing outside a shop front on Kettering Road, just outside the Racecourse.

"What are you doing here?"

Biggy's stature added an authority to his voice that almost went past

authoritarian and all the way around to ridiculous but, in actuality, was absolutely terrifying.

The dishevelled man looked hung-over, jittery and desperate.

“I’m waiting for someone to start looting the shop so I can get something to drink.” The store front was protected by steel shutters. “I’ve no idea how to get past those things,” the man admitted.

It was another easy sell. If he waited by the helicopter and did as he was told then he’d get something to drink by the end of the day. Without congratulating themselves Biggy and Jon moved on to the first street on their list, Talbot Road.

Talbot Road did not prove quite such a fruitful endeavour. The closely packed terraced houses made the job expedient but tiresome. First house, no answer. Second house, no answer. Third house, no answer and so on.

“I think they’re in there taking the piss,” Jon told Biggy.

After the fourth knock went unanswered Biggy and John bashed in the door. The house was silent. Rotting foodstuffs decorated the living room and what had once been a respectable middle-aged couple were sitting naked together on the couch, watching a television that was showing only white static. Once Biggy and Jon had discerned that even holding a rifle directly against the man’s genitals and threatening to shoot wasn’t going to motivate him back to work, they gave up the residence as a bad loss and quickly moved on to the next. The second house appeared to be occupied only by a cat until closer examination revealed its owner to be sitting slumped in a wardrobe:

“I can’t come out,” he told them. “I can’t stand to see the house this way and I can’t be bothered tidying it.”

“But your cat,” Jon protested earnestly, “surely you don’t want your cat to starve.”

“Oh, I’m sure the rats’ll be along soon enough. Have you seen it down there?”

Each door they knocked on revealed another bad loss until they reached the middle point in the road when much to their surprise they got actually got an answer. It was from a gangly looking student type who instantly sneered at them when he saw their uniforms:

“Haven’t you heard? The country’s on strike!”

Biggy and Jon were already getting desperate and were doing their best effort at intimidation.

“You know we’re authorised to use lethal force against any able-bodied person who refuses to help the country.”

“Fuck you, Nazi!” said the gangly student type.

Biggy’s fist levelled the young man instantly and he and Jon dragged him by his legs out in to the street. When they found the most visible spot they could, Biggy ordered Jon to fire shots in the air. He waited a moment to give people time to get to their windows.

“Are you going back to work?” shouted Biggy.

“I have never worked.”

There was a loud crack as Biggy’s size thirteen boot fractured several ribs.

“Are you going back to work?”

The young man repeated his previous reply.

Jon dropped his knee on to the young man’s solar plexus and landed a punch that shattered the bridge of his nose.

“Are you going back to work?”

The gangly youth didn’t have the strength to reply, but he managed to find

enough strength to spit some blood at them.

“You better not have AIDS!” Jon squealed.

Biggy put the young man in an arm lock and twisted it almost to the point of snapping the wrist. He slowly increased the tension in a way that suggested he wasn't going to stop until the job was finished.

“I'll ask again, are you coming to work?”

The young man did his best impression of a scoffing laugh and slowly shook his head. The limb burst open and their victim fell to the floor screaming and definitely incapable of going to work.

“A fat lot of good that did.”

“You never know, Jon; it might scare some of the others into being a bit more helpful.”

It didn't. Door after door plodded on with rooms full of people who just wouldn't move. Nobody else answered their door and the only brief glimmer of hope that the two soldiers got was from the few houses they found that were empty. By the time Biggy and Jon had made it down to the train station neither one of them especially felt like knocking on another door.

“I can't believe no-one's looted those shops,” Jon was saying.

They had just passed through the main town centre; most of the shops had been left unoccupied, unlocked and fully stocked with consumer goods.

“I've half a mind to do it myself. I wonder why no-one's stealing anything,” said Biggy.

“You've seen them, listless fucks.”

“My point is, if people can't even be bothered stealing, how are we going to get them to work? What can you offer people who don't want anything? And, how are you supposed to light a fire under the arse of someone who can't even be bothered eating?”

“Well, we could try that couldn't we?” Jon suggested. “You know, set their houses on fire - get them out in to the street.”

“It's worth a shot, I suppose; they're all going to die anyway.”

By the time that the two soldiers reached their next area, they were completely resolved on their course of action. Biggy and Jon kicked in the front door of every house along Victoria Road and lit as much of a fire as they could manage. As most of the houses were rental properties they were fitted with smoke alarms so there was plenty of warning to the occupants. Once they had a fair blaze on the go they stood out at the other side of the street in a supermarket carpark and waited for the occupants (or at least some of them) to come rushing out.

As they waited it began to dawn on the two men that fire would not be enough. They could hear screams but not one single person even attempted to get out. Neither one of them talked on the way back to the Racecourse.

When they finally made it back to the helicopter they found that it had been entirely abandoned and stripped of its supplies of food and alcohol. A scruffy note on one of the seats read, “Cheers for the food. Sorry I can't make it to work tonight.”

Biggy and Jon lay down and slept on the grass of the Racecourse and in the morning they continued to lie.

The Jackal

Part V

Below deck on the *Jackal*, strange things were afoot. The hold had filled with a cold, grey mist. Thin tendrils of the stuff were creeping their way up onto deck and into cabins. Deep within the murk, Charlotte remained motionless, as if in a trance, the obsidian statue clutched in her hand. Behind her, a writhing, shadowy form began to materialize.

Outside, as if in answer to some unheard summons, a heavy sea fog was rolling into Soapers Hole and towards the pirate brigantine. Along with the fog, a small boat made its way towards the *Jackal*. On board were Manfred Thornville and one of the *Jackal*'s crewmen, Isaacs. Thornville had his pistol aimed at the pirate as the man strained at the oars.

Elsewhere on board the *Jackal*, Captain Cole moaned and thrashed in his sleep. The drunken stupor could not lessen the torment of his dreams. With a start the captain awoke, then gaped with fear as tendrils of fog twisted their way under his door.

~oOo~

"I can feel your pain..." said a dry and impossibly ancient voice deep in Charlotte's mind. She blinked and stared into the gloom before her, looking for the owner of the strange voice.

"I can feel your desire..."

Charlotte spun around. What is this, what's happening? Her mind raced. Are they coming back for me? She crouched and cast desperately around her, looking for any sign of the pirates returning. Then she saw the shadow looming in the fog.

"I can give you what you want..."

Charlotte glanced at the statue she still held and then rose unsteadily to her feet. "How do you know what I want?" she whispered.

"I can taste it. I can hear it, smell it, every fibre of your being cries out for it. You want vengeance." The shadow moved closer to Charlotte, still whispering in her mind. *"With my help, it can be yours..."* Charlotte opened her mouth to speak, and then stopped as the fog parted before her.

A tall, half naked man stepped out from the churning gloom. His eyes were rolled back so Charlotte could only see the whites and his flesh was a criss-cross of fresh scar tissue. He went barefoot and his hair hung to his shoulders. Something shifted under his skin; it was as if something else were in there with him. His body convulsed and his eyes flicked back down. They were a bright piercing blue.

"What have you done?" the figure gasped. He could not take his eyes from the volcanic glass idol. "Do not listen to anything that thing says, I implore you!" he said as he stepped forward.

"What... who are you?" said Charlotte backing away from the man.

He stopped. "Wait, please, I beg you! My name is Alexander Saintjohn and that thing you hold, it is very dangerous! You risk your very soul by simply being near it."

"He lies," whispered the voice inside her head.

Charlotte looked at the statue, than at Saintjohn. She gripped it tighter.

Saintjohn's skin twisted, something shifted under his flesh. He staggered, eyes

clenched shut in concentration. "I do not have time..." he gasped, "You must return that... to the stone box!" He stopped, bent double and panting. "I don't have time to fully explain it. Your soul is in peril."

"*What of the soul?*" whispered the ancient voice. "*When you have been through so much pain, your body has been ruined and your lover bled like a pig in front of your eyes. What do you care for flighty notions of the soul when this is allowed to happen?*"

Saintjohn took a deep breath then straightened; he had himself under control once more. He continued. "I have sacrificed a great deal to keep that thing from this world; my earthly possessions, friends and family, even my body! I remain in limbo between the worlds, keeping it locked away. Yet still it persists, and you risk letting it loose. Whatever those men have done to you could not be as terrible as letting that thing roam the earth once more."

The ancient thing that nestled within Charlotte's mind waited.

Charlotte's expression became cold. "Who, sir, are you to quantify my pain? I too have lost my friend, my lover and my body to these men. The only difference between us sir is this; you chose to give up those things, I did not. They were taken from me." She stepped towards Saintjohn. "I am quite sick, sir, of the whims of small men directing my fate. I choose to take control for myself and everything else be damned!"

Saintjohn's face twisted with rage. "You will not do this!" He flung himself upon Charlotte. He seized her by the throat and she staggered under his weight, struggling for breath. As Saintjohn tightened his grip, Charlotte swung the obsidian idol in a wild arc, dashing it against his head. His hands dropped from her throat as he stood, stupefied, gazing at her. The blow had left an open gash and bone was clearly visible, yet no blood flowed from the wound. She stepped away from him, brandishing the idol before her.

Saintjohn began to shudder and then writhe, the nameless thing within him struggling for control. "Curse you, woman! You have doomed us all!" he screamed. He made a small choking noise and was still. His eyes rolled back. "*What is your choice?*" Saintjohn's rich English accent had changed; it was now the dry whisper of the nameless creature.

"I accept your offer sir."

"*There is a price...*"

"Of course there is and I pay it willingly."

"*Very well, take your vengeance...*"

~o0o~

"So it's agreed then," growled Mr. Clench. "When I make my move against Cole, you'll back me up." The pirates gathered around him nodded.

"Aye, we've 'ad enough of Cole," said Mr. Kelly, the master gunner.

Where'd this damn fog come from? Clench wondered as the group began to disband. He started walking towards captain Cole's quarters when a commotion broke out on deck.

"Damn your eyes, Cole! Where is my daughter?"

Clench peered through the gloom; he could just make out the shape of a man running across the deck in his direction. It was Thornville! "Isaacs! What's that bloody fool doing on board?" he shouted, pointing at the dishevelled aristocrat.

Isaacs shrugged as he gave chase, "'e 'ad me at gunpoint. I 'ad to bring 'im on

board.”

“What have you bastards done with my Charlotte?” Thornville raved as he tried to charge past Mr. Clench. The great bear of a man grabbed him by his lapels and head-butted him. Thornville crumpled to the floor, insensible.

“Isaacs, go an’ get the...” Clench stopped. He peered into the fog, “ell’s teeth... sail to starboard, it’s coming right for us!”

Captain Cole was paralysed with dread. Thick tendrils of fog wormed their way under his door and slithered towards him. As the fog pooled around his feet, a pale, shadow-figure rose from the miasma in front of him. He whimpered and twitched. Cold sweat trickled down his brow.

For what felt like an age, Cole stared at the mist-covered floor and the thing stood in front of him. He knew this was the herald of his doom. All he had to do was to look at the creature before him and the nightmares and terror would be over. But he could not. The shadow thing drew the faintest of breaths; Cole leapt to his feet and bolted for the door, screaming like the devil himself was giving chase.

“Where’d it go?” Clench peered into the fog. The ship had been there a second ago and now it was gone. He turned to the men. “Any of you see where that bloody thing went?” He could see nothing save for a heavy wall of fog.

“It’s a ghost ship, that’s what it is!” Isaacs whispered, his face white and eyes wide.

“Don’t be bloody ridiculous.” Clench stared out into the fog. “There’s somethin’ out there. Just can’t see it in the fog, is all.”

Suddenly, somewhere in the murk, one of the men began to scream. Clench panicked. His breaths came in short gasps and his eyes darted to and fro as more men started yelling out. He drew his cutlass and forged forward into the fog. They were being boarded and he was damn well going to find out by whom!

Clench almost tripped as something caught his foot. He tugged at it but it held on with a cold, vice-like grip. All over the deck now there were terrified screams. He thought about abandoning ship, leaping over the side and taking his chances. But as he tried to free himself, he doubled over in agonising pain. Something was crushing his foot!

Whatever it was that had hold of him tugged. He felt the hard wood of the deck collide with his knee. As the fog momentarily cleared, Clench looked down and gaped with disbelief; his leg had disappeared into the deck, up to the knee. The vice-grip tightened and pulled again. Searing agony ravaged him; he was dragged through the deck as if it were water.

Cole fled in a blind panic. He ran and ran; half glimpsed things leered and gibbered at him from the murk. The screams of the damned assailed him, his own joining with them. Then, as he fled, he saw an open hatch that led to the hold. Without thinking he dashed down through it. He stumbled down the stairs and fell heavily to his knees. He peered at the open hatch behind him, searching for any sign of pursuit. In the darkness behind him, he heard a gentle sigh and stiffened. Eyes wide, Cole turned. A pale, claw-like hand grabbed him by the throat and dragged him into the dark.

Thornville awoke, cold and alone on the deck of the *Jackal*, his clothes damp and chilly from the fog. Slowly, he rose to his feet, one hand clutching his aching head.

He looked around. There was nothing save for the silent oppressive fog.

“Cole...where is Charlotte, you bastard...?” Thornville muttered and staggered off in search of the captain and his daughter.

Some time later Thornville stood, breathing heavily, in Captain Cole’s cabin. He had searched the ship and found nothing, yet for some reason he had avoided the hold. Thornville dreaded what he might find within, but if he was to find his daughter he must venture into the darkness. He scooped up a lantern lying amongst the wreckage of Cole’s cabin and walked out into the fog.

As Thornville moved slowly through the foul vapour he began to hear something, a low keening wail. It got louder as he approached the hatchway leading to the hold. He stopped as a shiver of dread ran down his spine and his hands shook as he attempted to light the lantern.

The wailing was louder now and he could smell blood. He faltered at the entrance. *What if I just left, got on the boat and went back home? Would that be so bad?* But his future financial security hung on Charlotte marrying Hobart; he would not put that in danger, not for anything. Thornville took a deep breath and stepped through the hatch.

With each step his legs felt like they were becoming heavier. His breath rasped in his throat and sweat trickled down his back. The lantern flame was guttering, making nightmarish shadow things dance and lurk in the dark. Thornville jumped and shook as he crept closer to the hold’s main doorway. In the dark, the creaking of the ship sounded like the laboured, malignant breathing of some vast leviathan, and he was deep in its belly.

The metal stench of blood was so very strong now. Thornville had to fight to keep from retching and each breath came in a faint sob. He placed his hand against the damp wood of the door, gingerly, as if he expected it to bite it off at the wrist. Every instinct was screaming at him to flee, but he knew he could not stop and turn back, not now. Thornville opened the door.

In the flickering lantern light Thornville looked into hell. At first he could not tell quite what he was seeing. It was a kaleidoscopic confusion of crimson. Through the miasmatic stench of spilled blood, he began to recognise certain shapes; an arm twisted at an impossible angle here, a mouth stretched open wider than it should be there, flayed skin hanging from the walls, a torso slit from neck to groin spilling organs, ruined human beings staggering through the carnage clawing at eyeless sockets or trying to hold in their intestines and a viscous slurry of blood, shit, bones and offal flowing through it all.

Thornville staggered and slipped in the gore. As he hung onto the doorframe he saw inhuman things lurking within the charnel house. In the dancing light, he could not see them fully; he glimpsed horribly elongated skulls, yellow luminescent eyes, spike-teeth, thin vicious fingers and spindle limbs. They leered at him, hunger in their soulless eyes. One of them, crouching over the body of a large bear-like man, dropped the spine it had been gnawing and skittered towards him, bloodstained hands outstretched and grasping.

“Not that one...” a sweet, soft voice rang out.

Thornville had not realised that he was screaming, until now. His scream died on his lips as he stared across the hold to the owner of the angelic voice.

He saw a pale figure of a girl standing atop the pile of tortured bodies. Her red rimmed eyes had rolled back in the sockets, exposing the whites, and her long dark hair flowed as if underwater.

“Charlotte?” Thornville whispered. She smiled and it was terrible to behold. A

sudden movement caught Thornville's eye. A man was crouched at her feet; he was bloodied and battered. She dragged him closer then thrust her hand into his mouth. The man began to struggle and squeal round her fist. Eventually Thornville recognised him. It was Captain Cole. Charlotte stared at her father, her hideous eyes transfixing him. Then, with a sudden jerk, she ripped Cole's tongue from his mouth.

"No, not Charlotte," said the damned thing that used to be his daughter. It let the body of Cole fall. "...Captain... Captain of the *Jackal* now."

Thornville collapsed to the gore-soaked floor, numb and broken. He felt nothing as the shadow things descended upon him; did nothing as they dragged him up and out into the fog and lashed him to the bow as a demented mockery of a figurehead.

Elsewhere, lurking in the gloom, the shade of Saintjohn watched. He could do nothing; impotent to act and yet bound to this ship and its crew of the damned; doomed to witness his failure ravaging other innocent lives forever. He turned away from the ruined crew and faded slowly into the shadows.

The morning sun began its slow ascension and the fog rolled out of Soapers Hole as fast as it had come. Elsewhere on the island, its inhabitants began to rise from their beds and prepare for the day ahead, but of the *Jackal* and its damned crew there was no trace.

End.

Varney the Vampire

CHAPTER XIII.

THE OFFER FOR THE HALL.—THE VISIT TO SIR FRANCIS VARNEY.—THE STRANGE RESEMBLANCE.—A DREADFUL SUGGESTION.

The party made a strict search through every nook and corner of the garden, but it proved to be a fruitless one: not the least trace of any one could be found. There was only one circumstance, which was pondered over deeply by them all, and that was that, beneath the window of the room in which Flora and her mother sat while the brothers were on their visit to the vault of their ancestors, were visible marks of blood to a considerable extent.

It will be remembered that Flora had fired a pistol at the spectral appearance, and that immediately upon that it had disappeared, after uttering a sound which might well be construed into a cry of pain from a wound.

That a wound then had been inflicted upon some one, the blood beneath the window now abundantly testified; and when it was discovered, Henry and Charles made a very close examination indeed of the garden, to discover what direction the wounded figure, be it man or vampyre, had taken.

But the closest scrutiny did not reveal to them a single spot of blood, beyond the space immediately beneath the window;—there the apparition seemed to have received its wound, and then, by some mysterious means, to have disappeared.

At length, wearied with the continued excitement, combined with want of sleep, to which they had been subjected, they returned to the hall.

Flora, with the exception of the alarm she experienced from the firing of the pistol, had met with no disturbance, and that, in order to spare her painful reflections, they told her was merely done as a precautionary measure, to proclaim to any one who might be lurking in the garden that the inmates of the house were ready to defend themselves against any aggression.

Whether or not she believed this kind deceit they knew not. She only sighed deeply, and wept. The probability is, that she more than suspected the vampyre had made another visit, but they forbore to press the point; and, leaving her with her mother, Henry and George went from her chamber again—the former to endeavour to seek some repose, as it would be his turn to watch on the succeeding night, and the latter to resume his station in a small room close to Flora's chamber, where it had been agreed watch and ward should be kept by turns while the alarm lasted.

At length, the morning again dawned upon that unhappy family, and to none were its beams more welcome.

The birds sang their pleasant carols beneath the window. The sweet, deep-coloured autumnal sun shone upon all objects with a golden luster; and to look abroad, upon the beaming face of nature, no one could for a moment suppose, except from sad experience, that there were such things as gloom, misery, and crime, upon the earth. "And must I," said Henry, as he gazed from a window of the hall upon the undulating park, the majestic trees, the flowers, the shrubs, and the many natural beauties with which the place was full,— "must I be chased from this spot, the home of my self and of my kindred, by a phantom—must I indeed seek refuge elsewhere, because my own home has become hideous?"

It was indeed a cruel and a painful thought! It was one he yet would not, could not be convinced was absolutely necessary. But now the sun was shining: it was morning;

and the feelings, which found a home in his breast amid the darkness, the stillness, and the uncertainty of night, were chased away by those glorious beams of sunlight, that fell upon hill, valley, and stream, and the thousand sweet sounds of life and animation that filled that sunny air!

Such a revulsion of feeling was natural enough. Many of the distresses and mental anxieties of night vanish with the night, and those which oppressed the heart of Henry Bannerworth were considerably modified.

He was engaged in these reflections when he heard the sound of the lodge bell, and as a visitor was now somewhat rare at this establishment, he waited with some anxiety to see to whom he was indebted for so early a call.

In the course of a few minutes, one of the servants came to him with a letter in her hand.

It bore a large handsome seal, and, from its appearance, would seem to have come from some personage of consequence. A second glance at it shewed him the name of "Varney" in the corner, and, with some degree of vexation, he muttered to himself, "Another condoling epistle from the troublesome neighbour whom I have not yet seen."

"If you please, sir," said the servant who had brought him the letter, "as I'm here, and you are here, perhaps you'll have no objection to give me what I'm to have for the day and two nights as I've been here, cos I can't stay in a family as is so familiar with all sorts o' ghostesses: I ain't used to such company."

"What do you mean?" said Henry.

The question was a superfluous one—: too well he knew what the woman meant, and the conviction came across his mind strongly that no domestic would consent to live long in a house which was subject to such dreadful visitations.

"What does I mean!" said the woman,— "why, sir, if it's all the same to you, I don't myself come of a wampyre family, and I don't choose to remain in a house where there is sich things encouraged. That's what I means, sir."

"What wages are owing to you?" said Henry.

"Why, as to wages, I only comed here by the day."

"Go, then, and settle with my mother. The sooner you leave this house, the better."

"Oh, indeed. I'm sure I don't want to stay."

This woman was one of those who were always armed at all points for a row, and she had no notion of concluding any engagement, of any character whatever, without some disturbance; therefore, to see Henry take what she said with such provoking calmness was aggravating in the extreme; but there was no help for such a source of vexation. She could find no other ground of quarrel than what was connected with the wampyre, and, as Henry would not quarrel with her on such a score, she was compelled to give it up in despair.

When Henry found himself alone, and free from the annoyance of this woman, he turned his attention to the letter he held in his hand, and which, from the autograph in the corner, he knew came from his new neighbour, Sir Francis Varney, whom, by some chance or another, he had never yet seen.

To his great surprise, he found that the letter contained the following words:—

Dear Sir,— "As a neighbour, by purchase of an estate contiguous to your own, I am quite sure you have excused, and taken in good part, the cordial offer I made to you of friendship and service some short time since; but now, in addressing to you a distinct proposition, I trust I shall meet with an indulgent consideration, whether such proposition be accordant with your views or not.

"What I have heard from common report induces me to believe that Bannerworth Hall

cannot be a desirable residence for yourself, or your amiable sister. If I am right in that conjecture, and you have any serious thought of leaving the place, I would earnestly recommend you, as one having some experience in such descriptions of property, to sell it at once.

“Now, the proposition with which I conclude this letter is, I know, of a character to make you doubt the disinterestedness of such advice; but that it is disinterested, nevertheless, is a fact of which I can assure my own heart, and of which I beg to assure you. I propose, then, should you, upon consideration, decide upon such a course of proceeding, to purchase of you the Hall. I do not ask for a bargain on account of any extraneous circumstances which may at the present time depreciate the value of the property, but I am willing to give a fair price for it. Under these circumstances, I trust, sir, that you will give a kindly consideration to my offer, and even if you reject it, I hope that, as neighbours, we may live long in peace and amity, and in the interchange of those good offices which should subsist between us.

Awaiting your reply,

“Believe me to be, dear sir,

”Your very obedient servant,

“FRANCIS VARNEY.

“To Henry Bannerworth, Esq.”

Henry, after having read this most unobjectionable letter through, folded it up again, and placed it in his pocket. Claspings his hands, then, behind his back, a favourite attitude of his when he was in deep contemplation, he paced to and fro in the garden for some time in deep thought.

“How strange,” he muttered. “It seems that every circumstance combines to induce me to leave my old ancestral home. It appears as if everything now that happened had that direct tendency. What can be the meaning of all this? ‘Tis very strange—amazingly strange. Here arise circumstances which are enough to induce any man to leave a particular place. Then a friend, in whose single-mindedness and judgment I know I can rely, advises the step, and immediately upon the back of that comes a fair and candid offer.”

There was an apparent connexion between all these circumstances which much puzzled Henry. He walked to and fro for nearly an hour, until he heard a hasty footstep approaching him, and upon looking in the direction from whence it came, he saw Mr. Marchdale.

“I will seek Marchdale’s advice,” he said, “upon this matter. I will hear what he says concerning it.”

“Henry,” said Marchdale, when he came sufficiently near to him for conversation, “why do you remain here alone?”

“I have received a communication from our neighbour, Sir Francis Varney,” said Henry.

“Indeed!”

“It is here. Peruse it for yourself, and then tell me, Marchdale, candidly what you think of it.”

“I suppose,” said Marchdale, as he opened the letter, “it is another friendly note of condolence on the state of your domestic affairs, which, I grieve to say, from the prattling of domestics, whose tongues it is quite impossible to silence, have become food for gossip all over the neighbouring villages and estates.”

“If anything could add another pang to those I have already been made to suffer,” said Henry, “it would certainly arise from being made the food of vulgar gossip. But read the letter, Marchdale. You will find its contents of a more important character than

you anticipate.”

“Indeed!” said Marchdale, as he ran his eyes eagerly over the note.

When he had finished it he glanced at Henry, who then said,—

“Well, what is your opinion?”

“I know not what to say, Henry. You know that my own advice to you has been to get rid of this place.”

“It has.”

“With the hope that the disagreeable affair connected with it now may remain connected with it as a house, and not with you and yours as a family.”

“It may be so.”

“There appears to me every likelihood of it.”

“I do not know,” said Henry, with a shudder. “I must confess, Marchdale, that to my own perceptions it seems more probable that the infliction we have experienced from the strange visitor, who seems now resolved to pester us with visits, will rather attach to a family than to a house. The vampyre may follow us.”

“If so, of course the parting with the Hall would be a great pity, and no gain.”

“None in the least.”

“Henry, a thought has struck me.”

“Let’s hear it, Marchdale.”

“It is this:—Suppose you were to try the experiment of leaving the Hall without selling it. Suppose for one year you were to let it to some one, Henry.”

“It might be done.”

“Ay, and it might, with very great promise and candour, be proposed to this very gentleman, Sir Francis Varney, to take it for one year, to see how he liked it before becoming the possessor of it. Then if he found himself tormented by the vampyre, he need not complete the purchase, or if you found that the apparition followed you from hence, you might yourself return, feeling that perhaps here, in the spots familiar to your youth, you might be most happy, even under such circumstances as at present oppress you.”

“Most happy!” ejaculated Henry.

“Perhaps I should not have used that word.”

“I am sure you should not,” said Henry, “when you speak of me.”

“Well—well; let us hope that the time may not be very far distant when I may use the term happy, as applied to you, in the most conclusive and the strongest manner it can be used.”

“Oh,” said Henry, “I will hope; but do not mock me with it now, Marchdale, I pray you.”

“Heaven forbid that I should mock you!”

“Well—well; I do not believe you are the man to do so to any one. But about this affair of the house.”

“Distinctly, then, if I were you, I would call upon Sir Francis Varney, and make him an offer to become a tenant of the Hall for twelve months, during which time you could go where you please, and test the fact of absence ridding you or not ridding you of the dreadful visitant who makes the night here truly hideous.”

“I will speak to my mother, to George, and to my sister of the matter. They shall decide.”

Mr. Marchdale now strove in every possible manner to raise the spirits of Henry Bannerworth, by painting to him the future in far more radiant colours than the present, and endeavouring to induce a belief in his mind that a short period of time might after all replace in his mind, and in the minds of those who were naturally so

dear to him, all their wonted serenity.

Henry, although he felt not much comfort from these kindly efforts, yet could feel gratitude to him who made them; and after expressing such a feeling to Marchdale, in strong terms, he repaired to the house, in order to hold a solemn consultation with those whom he felt ought to be consulted as well as himself as to what steps should be taken with regard to the Hall.

The proposition, or rather the suggestion, which had been made by Marchdale upon the proposition of Sir Francis Varney, was in every respect so reasonable and just, that it met, as was to be expected, with the concurrence of every member of the family. Flora's cheeks almost resumed some of their wonted colour at the mere thought now of leaving that home to which she had been at one time so much attached.

"Yes, dear Henry," she said, "let us leave here if you are agreeable so to do, and in leaving this house, we will believe that we leave behind us a world of terror."

"Flora," remarked Henry, in a tone of slight reproach, "if you were so anxious to leave Bannerworth Hall, why did you not say so before this proposition came from other mouths? You know your feelings upon such a subject would have been laws to me."

"I knew you were attached to the old house," said Flora; "and, besides, events have come upon us all with such fearful rapidity, there has scarcely been time to think."

"True—true."

"And you will leave, Henry?"

"I will call upon Sir Francis Varney myself, and speak to him upon the subject."

A new impetus to existence appeared now to come over the whole family, at the idea of leaving a place which always would be now associated in their minds with so much terror. Each member of the family felt happier, and breathed more freely than before, so that the change which had come over them seemed almost magical. And Charles Holland, too, was much better pleased, and he whispered to Flora,—

"Dear Flora, you will now surely no longer talk of driving from you the honest heart that loves you?"

"Hush, Charles, hush!" she said; "meet me an hour hence in the garden, and we will talk of this."

"That hour will seem an age," he said.

Henry, now, having made a determination to see Sir Francis Varney, lost no time in putting it into execution. At Mr. Marchdale's own request, he took him with him, as it was desirable to have a third person present in the sort of business negotiation which was going on. The estate which had been so recently entered upon by the person calling himself Sir Francis Varney, and which common report said he had purchased, was a small, but complete property, and situated so close to the grounds connected with Bannerworth Hall, that a short walk soon placed Henry and Mr. Marchdale before the residence of this gentleman, who had shown so kindly a feeling towards the Bannerworth family.

"Have you seen Sir Francis Varney?" asked Henry of Mr. Marchdale, as he rung the gate-bell.

"I have not. Have you?"

"No; I never saw him. It is rather awkward our both being absolute strangers to his person."

"We can but send in our names, however; and, from the great vein of courtesy that runs through his letter, I have no doubt but we shall receive the most gentlemanly reception from him."

A servant in handsome livery appeared at the iron-gates, which opened upon a lawn in

the front of Sir Francis Varney's house, and to this domestic Henry Bannerworth handed his card, on which he had written, in pencil, likewise the name of Mr. Marchdale.

"If your master," he said, "is within, we shall be glad to see him."

"Sir Francis is at home, sir," was the reply, "although not very well. If you will be pleased to walk in, I will announce you to him."

Henry and Marchdale followed the man into a handsome enough reception-room, where they were desired to wait while their names were announced.

"Do you know if this gentleman be a baronet," said Henry, "or a knight merely?"

"I really do not; I never saw him in my life, or heard of him before he came into this neighbourhood."

"And I have been too much occupied with the painful occurrences of this hall to know anything of our neighbours. I dare say Mr. Chillingworth, if we had thought to ask him, would have known something concerning him."

"No doubt."

This brief colloquy was put an end to by the servant, who said,—

"My master, gentlemen, is not very well; but he begs me to present his best compliments, and to say he is much gratified with your visit, and will be happy to see you in his study."

Henry and Marchdale followed the man up a flight of stone stairs, and then they were conducted through a large apartment into a smaller one. There was very little light in this small room; but at the moment of their entrance a tall man, who was seated, rose, and, touching the spring of a blind that was to the window, it was up in a moment, admitting a broad glare of light. A cry of surprise, mingled with terror, came from Henry Bannerworth's lip. The original of the portrait on the panel stood before him! There was the lofty stature, the long, sallow face, the slightly projecting teeth, the dark, lustrous, although somewhat sombre eyes; the expression of the features—all were alike.

"Are you unwell, sir?" said Sir Francis Varney, in soft, mellow accents, as he handed a chair to the bewildered Henry.

"God of Heaven!" said Henry; "how like!"

"You seem surprised, sir. Have you ever seen me before?"

Sir Francis drew himself up to his full height, and cast a strange glance upon Henry, whose eyes were rivetted upon his face, as if with a species of fascination which he could not resist.

"Marchdale," Henry gasped; "Marchdale, my friend, Marchdale. I—I am surely mad."

"Hush! be calm," whispered Marchdale.

"Calm—calm—can you not see? Marchdale, is this a dream? Look—look—oh! look."

"For God's sake, Henry, compose yourself."

"Is your friend often thus?" said Sir Francis Varney, with the same mellifluous tone which seemed habitual to him.

"No, sir, he is not; but recent circumstances have shattered his nerves; and, to tell the truth, you bear so strong a resemblance to an old portrait, in his house, that I do not wonder so much as I otherwise should at his agitation."

"Indeed."

"A resemblance!" said Henry; "a resemblance! God of Heaven! it is the face itself."

"You much surprise me," said Sir Francis.

Henry sunk into the chair which was near him, and he trembled violently. The rush of

painful thoughts and conjectures that came through his mind was enough to make any one tremble. "Is this the vampyre?" was the horrible question that seemed impressed upon his very brain, in letters of flame. "Is this the vampyre?"

"Are you better, sir?" said Sir Francis Varney, in his bland, musical voice. "Shall I order any refreshment for you?"

"No—no," gasped Henry; "for the love of truth tell me! Is—is your name really Varney!"

"Sir?"

"Have you no other name to which, perhaps, a better title you could urge?"

"Mr. Bannerworth, I can assure you that I am too proud of the name of the family to which I belong to exchange it for any other, be it what it may."

"How wonderfully like!"

"I grieve to see you so much distressed. Mr. Bannerworth. I presume ill health has thus shattered your nerves?"

"No; ill health has not done the work. I know not what to say, Sir Francis Varney, to you; but recent events in my family have made the sight of you full of horrible conjectures."

"What mean you, sir?"

"You know, from common report, that we have had a fearful visitor at our house."

"A vampyre, I have heard," said Sir Francis Varney, with a bland, and almost beautiful smile, which displayed his white glistening teeth to perfection.

"Yes; a vampyre, and—and—"

"I pray you go on, sir; you surely are far above the vulgar superstition of believing in such matters?"

"My judgment is assailed in too many ways and shapes for it to hold out probably as it ought to do against so hideous a belief, but never was it so much bewildered as now."

"Why so?"

"Because—"

"Nay, Henry," whispered Mr. Marchdale, "it is scarcely civil to tell Sir Francis to his face, that he resembles a vampyre."

"I must, I must."

"Pray, sir," interrupted Varney to Marchdale, "permit Mr. Bannerworth to speak here freely. There is nothing in the whole world I so much admire as candour."

"Then you so much resemble the vampyre," added Henry, "that—that I know not what to think."

"Is it possible?" said Varney.

"It is a damning fact."

"Well, it's unfortunate for me, I presume? Ah!"

Varney gave a twinge of pain, as if some sudden bodily ailment had attacked him severely.

"You are unwell, sir?" said Marchdale.

"No, no—no," he said; "I—hurt my arm, and happened accidentally to touch the arm of this chair with it."

"A hurt?" said Henry.

"Yes, Mr. Bannerworth."

"A—a wound?"

"Yes, a wound, but not much more than skin deep. In fact, little beyond an abrasion of the skin."

"May I inquire how you came by it?"

“Oh, yes. A slight fall.”

“Indeed.”

“Remarkable, is it not? Very remarkable. We never know a moment when, from some most trifling cause, we may receive really some serious bodily harm. How true it is, Mr. Bannerworth, that in the midst of life we are in death.”

“And equally true, perhaps,” said Henry, “that in the midst of death there may be found a horrible life.”

“Well, I should not wonder. There are really so many strange things in this world, that I have left off wondering at anything now.”

“There are strange things,” said Henry. “You wish to purchase of me the Hall, sir?”

“If you wish to sell.”

“You—you are perhaps attached to the place? Perhaps you recollected it, sir, long ago?”

“Not very long,” smiled Sir Francis Varney. “It seems a nice comfortable old house; and the grounds, too, appear to be amazingly well wooded, which, to one of rather a romantic temperament like myself, is always an additional charm to a place. I was extremely pleased with it the first time I beheld it, and a desire to call myself the owner of it took possession of my mind. The scenery is remarkable for its beauty, and, from what I have seen of it, it is rarely to be excelled. No doubt you are greatly attached to it.”

“It has been my home from infancy,” returned Henry, “and being also the residence of my ancestors for centuries, it is natural that I should be so.”

“True—true.”

“The house, no doubt, has suffered much,” said Henry, “within the last hundred years.”

“No doubt it has. A hundred years is a tolerable long space of time, you know.”

“It is, indeed. Oh, how any human life which is spun out to such an extent, must lose its charms, by losing all its fondest and dearest associations.”

“Ah, how true,” said Sir Francis Varney. He had some minutes previously touched a bell, and at this moment a servant brought in on a tray some wine and refreshments.

CHAPTER XIV.

HENRY'S AGREEMENT WITH SIR FRANCIS VARNEY.—THE SUDDEN ARRIVAL AT THE HALL.—FLORA'S ALARM.

On the tray which the servant brought into the room, were refreshments of different kinds, including wine, and after waving his hand for the domestic to retire, Sir Francis Varney said,—

“You will be better, Mr. Bannerworth, for a glass of wine after your walk, and you too, sir. I am ashamed to say, I have quite forgotten your name.”

“Marchdale.”

“Mr. Marchdale. Ay, Marchdale. Pray, sir, help yourself.”

“You take nothing yourself?” said Henry.

“I am under a strict regimen,” replied Varney. “The simplest diet alone does for me, and I have accustomed myself to long abstinence.”

“He will not eat or drink,” muttered Henry, abstractedly.

“Will you sell me the Hall?” said Sir Francis Varney.

Henry looked in his face again, from which he had only momentarily withdrawn his eyes, and he was then more struck than ever with the resemblance between him and the portrait on the panel of what had been Flora's chamber. What made that

resemblance, too, one about which there could scarcely be two opinions, was the mark or cicatrix of a wound in the forehead, which the painter had slightly indented in the portrait, but which was much more plainly visible on the forehead of Sir Francis Varney. Now that Henry observed this distinctive mark, which he had not done before, he could feel no doubt, and a sickening sensation came over him at the thought that he was actually now in the presence of one of those terrible creatures, vampyres.

“You do not drink,” said Varney. “Most young men are not so modest with a decanter of unimpeachable wine before them. I pray you help yourself.”

“I cannot.”

Henry rose as he spoke, and turning to Marchdale, he said, in addition,—

“Will you come away?”

“If you please,” said Marchdale, rising.

“But you have not, my dear sir,” said Varney, “given me yet any answer about the Hall?”

“I cannot yet,” answered Henry, “I will think. My present impression is, to let you have it on whatever terms you may yourself propose, always provided you consent to one of mine.”

“Name it.”

“That you never show yourself in my family.”

“How very unkind. I understand you have a charming sister, young, beautiful, and accomplished. Shall I confess, now, that I had hopes of making myself agreeable to her?”

“You make yourself agreeable to her? The sight of you would blast her for ever, and drive her to madness.”

“Am I so hideous?”

“No, but—you are—”

“What am I?”

“Hush, Henry, hush,” cried Marchdale. “Remember you are in this gentleman’s house.”

“True, true. Why does he tempt me to say these dreadful things? I do not want to say them.”

“Come away, then—come away at once. Sir Francis Varney, my friend, Mr. Bannerworth, will think over your offer, and let you know. I think you may consider that your wish to become the purchaser of the Hall will be complied with.”

“I wish to have it,” said Varney, “and I can only say, that if I am master of it, I shall be very happy to see any of the family on a visit at any time.”

“A visit!” said Henry, with a shudder. “A visit to the tomb were far more desirable. Farewell, sir.”

“Adieu,” said Sir Francis Varney, and he made one of the most elegant bows in the world, while there came over his face a peculiarity of expression that was strange, if not painful, to contemplate. In another minute Henry and Marchdale were clear of the house, and with feelings of bewilderment and horror, which beggar all description, poor Henry allowed himself to be led by the arm by Marchdale to some distance, without uttering a word. When he did speak, he said,—

“Marchdale, it would be charity of some one to kill me.”

“To kill you!”

“Yes, for I am certain otherwise that I must go mad.”

“Nay, nay; rouse yourself.”

“This man, Varney, is a vampyre.”

“Hush! hush!”

“I tell you, Marchdale,” cried Henry, in a wild, excited manner, “he is a vampyre. He is the dreadful being who visited Flora at the still hour of midnight, and drained the life-blood from her veins. He is a vampyre. There are such things. I cannot doubt now. Oh, God, I wish now that your lightnings would blast me, as here I stand, for over into annihilation, for I am going mad to be compelled to feel that such horrors can really have existence.”

“Henry—Henry.”

“Nay, talk not to me. What can I do? Shall I kill him? Is it not a sacred duty to destroy such a thing? Oh, horror—horror. He must be killed—destroyed—burnt, and the very dust to which he is consumed must be scattered to the winds of Heaven. It would be a deed well done, Marchdale.”

“Hush! hush! These words are dangerous.”

“I care not.”

“What if they were overheard now by unfriendly ears? What might not be the uncomfortable results? I pray you be more cautious what you say of this strange man.”

“I must destroy him.”

“And wherefore?”

“Can you ask? Is he not a vampyre?”

“Yes; but reflect, Henry, for a moment upon the length to which you might carry out so dangerous an argument. It is said that vampyres are made by vampyres sucking the blood of those who, but for that circumstance, would have died and gone to decay in the tomb along with ordinary mortals; but that being so attacked during life by a vampyre, they themselves, after death, become such.”

“Well—well, what is that to me?”

“Have you forgotten Flora?”

A cry of despair came from poor Henry’s lips, and in a moment he seemed completely, mentally and physically, prostrated.

“God of Heaven!” he moaned, “I had forgotten her!”

“I thought you had.”

“Oh, if the sacrifice of my own life would suffice to put an end to all this accumulating horror, how gladly would I lay it down. Ay, in any way—in any way. No mode of death should appal me. No amount of pain make me shrink. I could smile then upon the destroyer, and say, ‘welcome—welcome—most welcome.’”

“Rather, Henry, seek to live for those whom you love than die for them. Your death would leave them desolate. In life you may ward off many a blow of fate from them.”

“I may endeavour so to do.”

“Consider that Flora may be wholly dependent upon such kindness as you may be able to bestow upon her.”

“Charles clings to her.”

“Humph!”

“You do not doubt him?”

“My dear friend, Henry Bannerworth, although I am not an old man, yet I am so much older than you that I have seen a great deal of the world, and am, perhaps, far better able to come to accurate judgments with regard to individuals.”

“No doubt—no doubt; but yet—”

“Nay, hear me out. Such judgments, founded upon experience, when uttered have all the character of prophecy about them. I, therefore, now prophecy to you that Charles Holland will yet be so stung with horror at the circumstance of a vampyre visiting

Flora, that he will never make her his wife.”

“Marchdale, I differ from you most completely,” said Henry. “I know that Charles Holland is the very soul of honour.”

“I cannot argue the matter with you. It has not become a thing of fact. I have only sincerely to hope that I am wrong.”

“You are, you may depend, entirely wrong. I cannot be deceived in Charles. From you such words produce no effect but one of regret that you should so much err in your estimate of any one. From any one but yourself they would have produced in me a feeling of anger I might have found it difficult to smother.”

“It has often been my misfortune through life,” said Mr. Marchdale, sadly, “to give the greatest offence where I feel the truest friendship, because it is in such quarters that I am always tempted to speak too freely.”

“Nay, no offence,” said Henry. “I am distracted, and scarcely know what I say. Marchdale, I know you are my sincere friend—but, as I tell you, I am nearly mad.”

“My dear Henry, be calmer. Consider upon what is to be said concerning this interview at home.”

“Ay; that is a consideration.”

“I should not think it advisable to mention the disagreeable fact, that in your neighbour you think you have found out the nocturnal disturber of your family.”

“No—no.”

“I would say nothing of it. It is not at all probable that, after what you have said to him this Sir Francis Varney, or whatever his real name may be will obtrude himself upon you.”

“If he should he die.”

“He will, perhaps, consider that such a step would be dangerous to him.”

“It would be fatal, so help me. However, and then would I take especial care that no power of resuscitation should ever enable that man again to walk the earth.”

“They say that only way of destroying a vampyre is to fix him to the earth with a stake, so that he cannot move, and then, of course, decomposition will take its course, as in ordinary cases.”

“Fire would consume him, and be a quicker process,” said Henry. “But these are fearful reflections, and, for the present, we will not pursue them. Now to play the hypocrite, and endeavour to look composed and serene to my mother, and to Flora while my heart is breaking.”

The two friends had by this time reached the hall, and leaving his friend Marchdale, Henry Bannerworth, with feelings of the most unenviable description, slowly made his way to the apartment occupied by his mother and sister.

CHAPTER XV.

THE OLD ADMIRAL AND HIS SERVANT.—THE COMMUNICATION FROM THE LANDLORD OF THE NELSON’S ARMS.

While those matters of most grave and serious import were going on at the Hall, while each day, and almost each hour in each day, was producing more and more conclusive evidence upon a matter which at first had seemed too monstrous to be at all credited, it may well be supposed what a wonderful sensation was produced among the gossip-mongers of the neighbourhood by the exaggerated reports that had reached them.

The servants, who had left the Hall on no other account, as they declared, but sheer

fright at the awful visits of the vampyre, spread the news far and wide, so that in the adjoining villages and market-towns the vampyre of Bannerworth Hall became quite a staple article of conversation.

Such a positive godsend for the lovers of the marvellous had not appeared in the country side within the memory of that sapient individual—the oldest inhabitant. And, moreover, there was one thing which staggered some people of better education and maturer judgments, and that was, that the more they took pains to inquire into the matter, in order, if possible, to put an end to what they considered a gross lie from the commencement, the more evidence they found to stagger their own senses upon the subject.

Everywhere then, in every house, public as well as private, something was being continually said of the vampyre. Nursery maids began to think a vampyre vastly superior to “old scratch and old bogie” as a means of terrifying their infant charges into quietness, if not to sleep, until they themselves became too much afraid upon the subject to mention it.

But nowhere was gossiping carried on upon the subject with more systematic fervour than at an inn called the Nelson’s Arms, which was in the high street of the nearest market town to the Hall.

There, it seemed as if the lovers of the horrible made a point of holding their head quarters, and so thirsty did the numerous discussions make the guests, that the landlord was heard to declare that he, from his heart, really considered a vampyre as very nearly equal to a contested election.

It was towards evening of the same day that Marchdale and Henry made their visit to Sir Francis Varney, that a postchaise drew up to the inn we have mentioned. In the vehicle were two persons of exceedingly dissimilar appearance and general aspect. One of these people was a man who seemed fast verging upon seventy years of age, although, from his still ruddy and embrowned complexion and stentorian voice, it was quite evident he intended yet to keep time at arm’s-length for many years to come. He was attired in ample and expensive clothing, but every article had a naval animus about it, it we may be allowed such an expression with regard to clothing. On his buttons was an anchor, and the general assortment and colour of the clothing as nearly assimilated as possible to the undress naval uniform of an officer of high rank some fifty or sixty years ago.

His companion was a younger man, and about his appearance there was no secret at all. He was a genuine sailor, and he wore the shore costume of one. He was hearty-looking, and well dressed, and evidently well fed.

As the chaise drove up to the door of the inn, this man made an observation to the other to the following effect,—

“A-hoy!”

“Well, you lubber, what now?” cried the other.

“They call this the Nelson’s Arms; and you know, shiver me, that for the best half of his life he had but one.”

“D—n you!” was the only rejoinder he got for this observation; but, with that, he seemed very well satisfied.

“Heave to!” he then shouted to the postilion, who was about to drive the chaise into the yard. “Heave to, you lubberly son of a gun! we don’t want to go into dock.”

“Ah!” said the old man, “let’s get out, Jack. This is the port; and, do you hear, and be cursed to you, let’s have no swearing, d—n you, nor bad language, you lazy swab.”

“Aye, aye,” cried Jack; “I’ve not been ashore now a matter o’ ten years, and not larnt a little shore-going politeness, admiral, I ain’t been your walley de sham without

larning a little about land reckonings. Nobody would take me for a sailor now, I'm thinking, admiral."

"Hold your noise!"

"Aye, aye, sir."

Jack, as he was called, bundled out of the chaise when the door was opened, with a movement so closely resembling what would have ensued had he been dragged out by the collar, that one was tempted almost to believe that such a feat must have been accomplished all at once by some invisible agency.

He then assisted the old gentleman to alight, and the landlord of the inn commenced the usual profusion of bows with which a passenger by a postchaise is usually welcomed in preference to one by a stage coach.

"Be quiet, will you!" shouted the admiral, for such indeed he was. "Be quiet."

"Best accommodation, sir—good wine—well-aired beds—good attendance—fine air—"

"Belay there," said Jack; and he gave the landlord what no doubt he considered a gentle admonition, but which consisted of such a dig in the ribs, that he made as many evolutions as the clown in a pantomime when he vociferates hot codlings.

"Now, Jack, where's the sailing instructions?" said his master.

"Here, sir, in the locker," said Jack, as he took from his pocket a letter, which he handed to the admiral.

"Won't you step in, sir?" said the landlord, who had begun now to recover a little from the dig in the ribs.

"What's the use of coming into port and paying harbour dues, and all that sort of thing, till we know if it's the right, you lubber, eh?"

"No; oh, dear me, sir, of course—God bless me, what can the old gentleman mean?"

The admiral opened the letter, and read:—

"If you stop at the Nelson's Arms at Uxotter, you will hear of me, and I can be sent for, when I will tell you more.

"Yours, very obediently and humbly,

"JOSIAH CRINKLES."

"Who the deuce is he?"

"This is Uxotter, sir," said the landlord; "and here you are, sir, at the Nelson's Arms. Good beds—good wine—good—"

"Silence!"

"Yes, sir—oh, of course"

"Who the devil is Josiah Crinkles?"

"Ha! ha! ha! ha! Makes me laugh, sir. Who the devil indeed! They do say the devil and lawyers, sir, know something of each other—makes me smile."

"I'll make you smile on the other side of that d——d great hatchway of a mouth of yours in a minute. Who is Crinkles?"

"Oh, Mr. Crinkles, sir, everybody knows, most respectable attorney, sir, indeed, highly respectable man, sir."

"A lawyer?"

"Yes, sir, a lawyer."

"Well, I'm d——d!"

Jack gave a long whistle, and both master and man looked at each other aghast.

"Now, hang me!" cried the admiral, "if ever I was so taken in in all my life."

"Ay, ay, sir," said Jack.

"To come a hundred and seventy miles see a d——d swab of a rascally lawyer."

"Ay, ay, sir."

“I’ll smash him—Jack!”

“Yer honour?”

“Get into the chaise again.”

“Well, but where’s Master Charles? Lawyers, in course, sir, is all blessed rogues; but, howsomdever, he may have for once in his life this here one of ‘em have told us of the right channel, and if so be as he has, don’t be the Yankee to leave him among the pirates. I’m ashamed on you.”

“You infernal scoundrel; how dare you preach to me in such a way, you lubberly rascal?”

“Cos you deserves it.”

“Mutiny—mutiny—by Jove! Jack, I’ll have you put in irons—you’re a scoundrel, and no seaman.”

“No seaman!—no seaman!”

“Not a bit of one.”

“Very good. It’s time, then, as I was off the purser’s books. Good bye to you; I only hopes as you may get a better seaman to stick to you and be your walley de sham nor Jack Pringle, that’s all the harm I wish you. You didn’t call me no seaman in the Bay of Corfu, when the bullets were scuttling our nob’s.”

“Jack, you rascal, give us your fin. Come here, you d——d villain. You’ll leave me, will you?”

“Not if I know it.”

“Come in, then”

“Don’t tell me I’m no seaman. Call me a wagabone if you like, but don’t hurt my feelings. There I’m as tender as a baby, I am.—Don’t do it.”

“Confound you, who is doing it?”

“The devil.”

“Who is?”

“Don’t, then.”

Thus wrangling, they entered the inn, to the great amusement of several bystanders, who had collected to hear the altercation between them.

“Would you like a private room, sir?” said the landlord.

“What’s that to you?” said Jack.

“Hold your noise, will you?” cried his master. “Yes, I should like a private room, and some grog.”

“Strong as the devil!” put in Jack.

“Yes, sir—yes, sir. Good wines—good beds—good—”

“You said all that before, you know,” remarked Jack, as he bestowed upon the landlord another terrific dig in the ribs.

“Hilloa!” cried the admiral, “you can send for that infernal lawyer, Mister Landlord.”

“Mr. Crinkles, sir?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Who may I have the honour to say, sir, wants to see him?”

“Admiral Bell.”

“Certainly, admiral, certainly. You’ll find him a very conversible, nice, gentlemanly little man, sir.”

“And tell him as Jack Pringle is here, too,” cried the seaman.

“Oh, yes, yes—of course,” said the landlord, who was in such a state of confusion from the digs in the ribs he had received and the noise his guests had already made in his house, that, had he been suddenly put upon his oath, he would scarcely have liked to say which was the master and which was the man.

“The idea now, Jack,” said the admiral, “of coming all this way to see a lawyer.”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“If he’d said he was a lawyer, we would have known what to do. But it’s a take in, Jack.”

“So I think. Howsomdever, we’ll serve him out when we catch him, you know.”

“Good—so we will.”

“And, then, again, he may know something about Master Charles, sir, you know. Lord love him, don’t you remember when he came aboard to see you once at Portsmouth?”

“Ah! I do, indeed.”

“And how he said he hated the French, and quite a baby, too. What perseverance and sense. ‘Uncle,’ says he to you, ‘when I’m a big man, I’ll go in a ship, and fight all the French in a heap,’ says he. ‘And beat ‘em, my boy, too,’ says you; cos you thought he’d forgot that; and then he says, ‘what’s the use of saying that, stupid?—don’t we always beat ‘em?’”

The admiral laughed and rubbed his hands, as he cried aloud,—

“I remember, Jack—I remember him. I was stupid to make such a remark.”

“I know you was—a d——d old fool I thought you.”

“Come, come. Hilloa, there!”

“Well, then, what do you call me no seaman for?”

“Why, Jack, you bear malice like a marine.”

“There you go again. Goodbye. Do you remember when we were yard arm to yard arm with those two Yankee frigates, and took ‘em both! You didn’t call me a marine then, when the scuppers were running with blood. Was I a seaman then?”

“You were, Jack—you were; and you saved my life.”

“I didn’t.”

“You did.”

“I say I didn’t—it was a marlin-spike.”

“But I say you did, you rascally scoundrel.—I say you did, and I won’t be contradicted in my own ship.”

“Call this your ship?”

“No, d—n it—I—”

“Mr. Crinkles,” said the landlord, flinging the door wide open, and so at once putting an end to the discussion which always apparently had a tendency to wax exceedingly warm.

“The shark, by G—d!” said Jack.

A little, neatly dressed man made his appearance, and advanced rather timidly into the room. Perhaps he had heard from the landlord that the parties who had sent for him were of rather a violent sort.

“So you are Crinkles, are you?” cried the admiral. “Sit down, though you are a lawyer.”

“Thank you, sir. I am an attorney, certainly, and my name as certainly is Crinkles.”

“Look at that.”

The admiral placed the letter in the little lawyer’s hands, who said,—

“Am I to read it?”

“Yes, to be sure.”

“Aloud?”

“Read it to the devil, if you like, in a pig’s whisper, or a West India hurricane.”

“Oh, very good, sir. I—I am willing to be agreeable, so I’ll read it aloud, if it’s all the same to you.”

He then opened the letter, and read as follows:—

“To Admiral Bell.

“Admiral,—Being, from various circumstances, aware that you take a warm and a praiseworthy interest in your nephew, Charles Holland, I venture to write to you concerning a matter in which your immediate and active co-operation with others may rescue him from a condition which will prove, if allowed to continue, very much to his detriment, and ultimate unhappiness.

“You are, then, hereby informed, that he, Charles Holland, has, much earlier than he ought to have done, returned to England, and that the object of his return is to contract a marriage into a family in every way objectionable, and with a girl who is highly objectionable.

“You, admiral, are his nearest and almost his only relative in the world; you are the guardian of his property, and, therefore, it becomes a duty on your part to interfere to save him from the ruinous consequences of a marriage, which is sure to bring ruin and distress upon himself and all who take an interest in his welfare.

“The family he wishes to marry into is named Bannerworth, and the young lady’s name is Flora Bannerworth. When, however, I inform you that a vampyre is in that family, and that if he marries into it, he marries a vampyre, and will have vampyres for children, I trust I have said enough to warn you upon the subject, and to induce you to lose no time in repairing to the spot.

“If you stop at the Nelson’s Arms at Uxotter, you will hear of me. I can be sent for, when I will tell you more.

“Yours, very obediently and humbly,

“JOSIAH CRINKLES.”

“P.S. I enclose you Dr. Johnson’s definition of a vampyre, which is as follows:

“VAMPYRE (a German blood-sucker)—by which you perceive how many vampyres, from time immemorial, must have been well entertained at the expense of John Bull, at the court of St. James, where no thing hardly is to be met with but German blood-suckers.”

The lawyer ceased to read, and the amazed look with which he glanced at the face of Admiral Bell would, under any other circumstances, have much amused him. His mind, however, was by far too much engrossed with a consideration of the danger of Charles Holland, his nephew, to be amused at anything; so, when he found that the little lawyer said nothing, he bellowed out,—

“Well, sir?”

“We—we—well,” said the attorney.

“I’ve sent for you, and here you are, and here I am, and here’s Jack Pringle. What have you got to say?”

“Just this much,” said Mr. Crinkles, recovering himself a little, “just this much, sir, that I never saw that letter before in all my life.”

“You—never—saw—it?”

“Never.”

“Didn’t you write it?”

“On my solemn word of honour, sir, I did not.”

Jack Pringle whistled, and the admiral looked puzzled. Like the admiral in the song, too, he “grew paler,” and then Mr. Crinkles added,—

“Who has forged my name to a letter such as this, I cannot imagine. As for writing to you, sir, I never heard of your existence, except publicly, as one of those gallant officers who have spent a long life in nobly fighting their country’s battles, and who

are entitled to the admiration and the applause of every Englishman.”

Jack and the admiral looked at each other in amazement, and then the latter exclaimed,—

“What! This from a lawyer?”

“A lawyer, sir,” said Crinkles, “may know how to appreciate the deeds of gallant men, although he may not be able to imitate them. That letter, sir, is a forgery, and I now leave you, only much gratified at the incident which has procured me the honour of an interview with a gentleman, whose name will live in the history of his country. Good day, sir! Good day!”

“No! I’m d——d if you go like that,” said Jack, as he sprang to the door, and put his back against it. “You shall take a glass with me in honour of the wooden walls of Old England, d——e, if you was twenty lawyers.”

“That’s right, Jack,” said the admiral. “Come, Mr. Crinkles, I’ll think, for your sake, there may be two decent lawyers in the world, and you one of them. We must have a bottle of the best wine the ship—I mean the house—can afford together.”

“If it is your command, admiral, I obey with pleasure,” said the attorney; “and although I assure you, on my honour, I did not write that letter, yet some of the matters mentioned in it are so generally notorious here, that I can afford you information concerning them.”

“Can you?”

“I regret to say I can, for I respect the parties.”

“Sit down, then—sit down. Jack, run to the steward’s room and get the wine. We will go into it now starboard and larboard. Who the deuce could have written that letter?”

“I have not the least idea, sir.”

“Well—well, never mind; it has brought me here, that’s something, so I won’t grumble much at it. I didn’t know my nephew was in England, and I dare say he didn’t know I was; but here we both are, and I won’t rest till I’ve seen him, and ascertained how the what’s-its-name—”

“The vampyre.”

“Ah! the vampyre.”

“Shiver my timbers!” said Jack Pringle, who now brought in some wine much against the remonstrances of the waiters of the establishment, who considered that he was treading upon their vested interests by so doing.—“Shiver my timbers, if I knows what a wamphigher is, unless he’s some distant relation to Davy Jones!”

“Hold your ignorant tongue,” said the admiral; “nobody wants you to make a remark, you great lubber!”

“Very good,” said Jack, and he sat down the wine on the table, and then retired to the other end of the room, remarking to himself that he was not called a great lubber on a certain occasion, when bullets were scuttling their nobs, and they were yard arm and yard arm with God knows who.

“Now, mister lawyer,” said Admiral Bell, who had about him a large share of the habits of a rough sailor. “Now, mister lawyer, here is a glass first to our better acquaintance, for d——e, if I don’t like you!”

“You are very good, sir.”

“Not at all. There was a time, when I’d just as soon have thought of asking a young shark to supper with me in my own cabin as a lawyer, but I begin to see that there may be such a thing as a decent, good sort of a fellow seen in the law; so here’s good luck to you, and you shall never want a friend or a bottle while Admiral Bell has a shot in the locker.”

“Gammon,” said Jack.

“D—n you, what do you mean by that?” roared the admiral, in a furious tone.

“I wasn’t speaking to you,” shouted Jack, about two octaves higher. “It’s two boys in the street as is pretending they’re a going to fight, and I know d——d well they won’t.”

“Hold your noise.”

“I’m going. I wasn’t told to hold my noise, when our nobbs were being scuttled off Beyrout.”

“Never mind him, mister lawyer,” added the admiral. “He don’t know what he’s talking about. Never mind him. You go on and tell me all you know about the—the—”

“The vampyre!”

“Ah! I always forget the names of strange fish. I suppose, after all, it’s something of the mermaid order?”

“That I cannot say, sir; but certainly the story, in all its painful particulars, has made a great sensation all over the country.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, sir. You shall hear how it occurred. It appears that one night Miss Flora Bannersworth, a young lady of great beauty, and respected and admired by all who knew her was visited by a strange being who came in at the window.”

“My eye,” said Jack, “it warden’t me, I wish it had a been.”

“So petrified by fear was she, that she had only time to creep half out of the bed, and to utter one cry of alarm, when the strange visitor seized her in his grasp.”

“D—n my pig tail,” said Jack, “what a squall there must have been, to be sure.”

“Do you see this bottle?” roared the admiral.

“To be sure, I does; I think as it’s time I seed another.”

“You scoundrel, I’ll make you feel it against that d——d stupid head of yours, if you interrupt this gentleman again.”

“Don’t be violent.”

“Well, as I was saying,” continued the attorney, “she did, by great good fortune, manage to scream, which had the effect of alarming the whole house. The door of her chamber, which was fast, was broken open.”

“Yes, yes—”

“Ah,” cried Jack.

“You may imagine the horror and the consternation of those who entered the room to find her in the grasp of a fiend-like figure, whose teeth were fastened on her neck, and who was actually draining her veins of blood.”

“The devil!”

“Before any one could lay hands sufficiently upon the figure to detain it, it had fled precipitately from its dreadful repast. Shots were fired after it in vain.”

“And they let it go?”

“They followed it, I understand, as well as they were able, and saw it scale the garden wall of the premises; there it escaped, leaving, as you may well imagine, on all their minds, a sensation of horror difficult to describe.”

“Well, I never did hear anything the equal of that. Jack, what do you think of it?”

“I haven’t begun to think, yet,” said Jack.

“But what about my nephew, Charles?” added the admiral.

“Of him I know nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Not a word, admiral. I was not aware you had a nephew, or that any gentleman bearing that, or any other relationship to you, had any sort of connexion with these

mysterious and most unaccountable circumstances. I tell you all I have gathered from common report about this vampyre business. Further I know not, I assure you.”

“Well, a man can’t tell what he don’t know. It puzzles me to think who could possibly have written me this letter.”

“That I am completely at a loss to imagine,” said Crinkles. “I assure you, my gallant sir, that I am much hurt at the circumstance of any one using my name in such a way. But, nevertheless, as you are here, permit me to say, that it will be my pride, my pleasure, and the boast of the remainder of my existence, to be of some service to so gallant a defender of my country, and one whose name, along with the memory of his deeds, is engraved upon the heart of every Briton.”

“Quite ekal to a book, he talks,” said Jack. “I never could read one myself, on account o’ not knowing how, but I’ve heard ‘em read, and that’s just the sort o’ incomprehensible gammon.”

“We don’t want any of your ignorant remarks,” said the admiral, “so you be quiet.”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“Now, Mister Lawyer, you are an honest fellow, and an honest fellow is generally a sensible fellow.”

“Sir, I thank you.”

“If so be as what this letter says is true, my nephew Charles has got a liking for this girl, who has had her neck bitten by a vampyre, you see.”

“I perceive, sir.”

“Now what would you do?”

“One of the most difficult, as well, perhaps, as one of the most ungracious of tasks,” said the attorney, “is to interfere with family affairs. The cold and steady eye of reason generally sees things in such very different lights to what they appear to those whose feelings and whose affections are much compromised in their results.”

“Very true. Go on.”

“Taking, my dear sir, what in my humble judgment appears to be a reasonable view of this subject, I should say it would be a dreadful thing for your nephew to marry into a family any member of which was liable to the visitations of a vampyre.”

“It wouldn’t be pleasant.”

“The young lady might have children.”

“Oh, lots,” cried Jack.

“Hold your noise, Jack.”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“And she might herself actually, when after death she became a vampyre, come and feed on her own children.”

“Become a vampyre! What, is she going to be a vampyre too?”

“My dear sir, don’t you know that it is a remarkable fact, as regards the physiology of vampyres, that whoever is bitten by one of those dreadful beings, becomes a vampyre?”

“The devil!”

“It is a fact, sir.”

“Whew!” whistled Jack; “she might bite us all, and we should be a whole ship’s crew o’ wamphighers. There would be a confounded go!”

“It’s not pleasant,” said the admiral, as he rose from his chair, and paced to and fro in the room, “it’s not pleasant. Hang me up at my own yard-arm if it is.”

“Who said it was?” cried Jack.

“Who asked you, you brute?”

“Well, sir,” added Mr. Crinkles, “I have given you all the information I can; and I can

only repeat what I before had the honour of saying more at large, namely, that I am your humble servant to command, and that I shall be happy to attend upon you at any time.”

“Thank ye—thank ye, Mr.—a—a—”

“Crinkles.”

“Ah, Crinkles. You shall hear from me again, sir, shortly. Now that I am down here, I will see to the very bottom of this affair, were it deeper than fathom ever sounded. Charles Holland was my poor sister’s son; he’s the only relative I have in the wide world, and his happiness is dearer to my heart than my own.”

Crinkles turned aside, and, by the twinkle of his eyes, one might premise that the honest little lawyer was much affected.

“God bless you, sir,” he said; “farewell.”

“Good day to you.”

“Good-bye, lawyer,” cried Jack. “Mind how you go. D—n me, if you don’t seem a decent sort of fellow, and, after all, you may give the devil a clear berth, and get into heaven’s straits with a flowing sheet, provided as you don’t, towards the end of the voyage, make any lubberly blunders.”

The old admiral threw himself into a chair with a deep sigh.

“Jack,” said he.

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“What’s to be done now?”

Jack opened the window to discharge the superfluous moisture from an enormous quid he had indulged himself with while the lawyer was telling about the vampyre, and then again turning his face towards his master, he said,—

“Do! What shall we do? Why, go at once and find out Charles, our nevy, and ask him all about it, and see the young lady, too, and lay hold o’ the wamphigher if we can, as well, and go at the whole affair broadside to broadside, till we make a prize of all the particulars, after which we can turn it over in our minds agin, and see what’s to be done.”

“Jack, you are right. Come along.”

“I knows I am. Do you know now which way to steer?”

“Of course not. I never was in this latitude before, and the channel looks intricate. We will hail a pilot, Jack, and then we shall be all right, and if we strike it will be his fault.”

“Which is a mighty great consolation,” said Jack. “Come along.”

The Nuppets of Nwci Mountain

1: The Circling Thing.

RUMBLEBUM THE WIZARD awoke abruptly from a sweat-soaked sleep to see the concerned faces of Dougal the Wanderer and Shawtarz the Dwarf staring down at him.

‘I don’t know what they were,’ he gasped, his voice loud in the foetid air of the tent, ‘but they were square-dancing!’

Dougal and Shawtarz exchanged glances. Dougal, a tough, hard-bitten highland warrior with long, dark hair, sharpened teeth and a bulbous nose, took a deep breath. The wizard had dropped off a few moments earlier, into some kind of nightmare. But perhaps what he had seen in his dreams might help them.

‘Och, they weren’t nuppets, were they?’ he asked. ‘Coz that’s what we’re really interested in, ya noo, Rumblebum.’

The wizard’s nondescript face creased with thought as he tried to recall the now-fading figures of his dream. He shook his head.

‘No,’ he said regretfully. ‘Not nuppets.’

Shawtarz sank back on his haunches with a sigh.

‘Shame, really,’ he muttered, stroking his thick beard and glancing up at his taller companions. ‘We’ve almost reached Nwci Mountain and we’ve seen no sign of any nuppets.’

He cast his mind back to that fateful night three weeks earlier, when a sinister, dark-robed figure had approached him and his two comrades in a quiet corner of the Seedy Dragon Inn, Fflemududno, one lunchtime. Down on their luck, having gambled away all the gold the Langohari had given them after Dougal slew Porcus Maximus, the Demon of Law, and confounded his Heddlu hordes, they had found some of their visitor’s obscure references to the nuppets of Nwci Mountain more than a little intriguing.

‘Well, why the hell haven’t we seen any nuppets?’ barked Dougal. ‘That’s what I want ta noo!’

Nuppets, as Shawtarz had always known, were small, black, furry creatures who lived chiefly in the Mountains of Murglewurgle. Greatly prized for their skins, they were hunted by brave and cautious bands of Langohari and Highlanders - brave, because of the dangerous nature of the nuppets’ natural habitat; cautious, because of the nuppets’ tendency to explode under stress. However, Shawtarz, Dougal, and Rumblebum were on no ordinary nuppet hunt.

‘Well, we haven’t been very methodical about it,’ said Rumblebum resentfully. ‘If we’re to hunt down the magical nuppets of Nwci Mountain...’

‘...who bear priceless gemstones in their foreheads...’ Shawtarz broke in.

‘...who bear priceless gemstones in their foreheads,’ the wizard echoed, ‘a little logical, coherent thought might not come amiss.’

‘Och, I never used logical, coherent thought to defeat Porcus Maximus,’ Dougal growled. ‘I just hit him a few times with ma claymore.’

‘But this is a different quest,’ Rumblebum muttered. ‘We’ve got this far into the mountains; Nwci Mountain is at the end of this valley we’ve camped in. If the nuppets are to be found round here, it won’t help to go charging in with a claymore - that’ll just stress them out and they’ll explode, taking the gemstones with them. We...’

He broke off, cocking his head in a listening posture. A look of worry crossed his

face. He turned to the others.

‘Did you hear that?’ he whispered.

‘Hear what?’ demanded Dougal.

‘Ssh!’ hissed Shawtarz. ‘I heard something!’

‘Hoofsteps?’ Rumblebum asked. The dwarf nodded grimly. They fell silent.

A clatter of stone from outside made them jump. It had come from their right, as if someone - or something - had dislodged some of the nearby scree. Hearts pounding, they listened intently.

Another clatter, from dead ahead.

The wind moaned, obscuring the noises so they were impossible to identify, but one thing was certain.

‘It’s circling us,’ Rumblebum whispered.

He shivered. To his certain knowledge, the lands that surrounded Nwci Mountain were some of the bleakest, most barren wastes in the world; only the nuppet herds were even rumoured to subsist in the sparsely vegetated glens, and the three adventurers had pitched their tent high above the boggy valley, the natural habitat of all nuppets except for the enigmatic inhabitants of Nwci Mountain itself.

Nothing and no-one could possibly be circling their tent. And yet, something was.

The tension mounted. They strained to listen as the things clattered slowly round their tent. Rumblebum began to wish that he had mastered the art of X-ray vision. If he’d been able to see through the walls, he would at least have an idea of what the circling thing looked like. He realised that he was still holding his breath, and he exhaled noisily.

The others glanced at him, relieved that someone had broken the tension. Shawtarz turned to Dougal.

‘Well, you’re the big brave warrior,’ he murmured. ‘You go and see what it is.’

‘Me?’ gulped Dougal miserably. ‘Och, no. I canna. I canna go oot there!’

Shawtarz sighed. ‘Well, I suppose I’d better,’ he said heavily. He reached for the tent flap.

‘No!’ hissed Rumblebum, laying a hand on the dwarf’s arm. Impatiently, Shawtarz shook it off and stepped outside.

Rumblebum stared at Dougal. The Highlander’s face was white. They listened fearfully.

A scream rang out, followed by a wet squelching sound, like something moist and sticky pouring out into the mud. It broke off abruptly, and silence fell.

The wizard and the warrior lay in the tent, staring at each other in horror until dawn.

2: The Yawning Void

In a castle tower high above the mists, a cloaked and hooded form glowered from its throne at the fantastic beast that squatted before it.

‘Fool,’ it muttered dispassionately. ‘It was the wizard I wanted, not the dwarf! Go out and get him.’

‘Whaat should we do with the dwaarf, maaster?’ bleated the creature.

The dark figure cradled its unshaven chin in its hands. After some thought, it spoke again.

‘Hang him over the pit,’ it said. ‘We may need him for bargaining.’

Two figures strode along the mist-shrouded path. It wound steeply up the

precipitous mountain slope, weaving in and out of the semi-visible crags. Swirls of mist surrounded the pair as they marched grimly onward.

‘I can’t believe you’re still going ahead with this hunt, Dougal!’ called the thin figure in the long wizard’s robe. His companion, a tall highland barbarian whose kilt and plaid was weighed down with the gins and traps of nuppet-hunting, turned to give the wizard a baleful stare.

‘Rumblebum, this hunt could mek you and me minted for all time,’ he growled in his barbarous voice. ‘We can’t afford to worry about the filthy little nob-gazing ganvert, wherever he’s got to.’ Dougal had always been one for getting his priorities right. Trouble was, Rumblebum agreed wholeheartedly; he’d never been too fond of the smelly old dwarf himself. However, there was just one small point.

‘But he didn’t go, did he?’ the wizard murmured, drawing closer to Dougal. ‘He was taken! By what, we don’t know. But we do know one thing - it could take either of us just as easily.’

Dougal sneered. ‘It might tek you,’ he said indifferently. ‘But it won’t get me without a fight. Come on, we’d better get on with it. This path should tek us to the top of the mountain. Then we can set the nuppet-traps and wait.’

Rumblebum shrugged, and followed his avaricious partner up the winding path.

As they proceeded, Rumblebum began to get the strangest of feelings; an illusion that they were striding along a path through the clouds, many miles up above the highest of mountains. All around them, the opaque curtain of mist obscured everything else; above them, before them and behind them, to the left and the right... It even seemed to continue down into the depths on either side. Presumably, the path had climbed up onto a ridge, and the mountain sloped so steeply on either side that it seemed to be non-existent from this angle. But Rumblebum found it hard to shake off the feeling that they had left solid ground behind them long ago. They had certainly been walking long enough for this to be the case; it was hours since they’d left base camp. The wizard’s legs were aching.

‘Dougal, can’t we rest for a while?’ he begged eventually. As ever, the Highlander’s iron constitution and adamant will had him forging on relentless, leaving all considerations behind him. But at the wizard’s repeated urging, he turned and stood still.

‘Can’t tek the pace, can ya, ya wumpo wuss?’ he growled affectionately. ‘Och, sit doon then.’

The Highlander leaned against a nearby rock. Rumblebum flopped down in the middle of the stony track. For a while, he just sat there, struggling to get his reedy breath back, and luxuriating in the relief of not moving.

After a while, he returned his attention to the all-enveloping wall of mist.

‘Looks like there’s nothing in the world except this path,’ he remarked casually. Dougal grunted, and began polishing his massive claymore.

Rumblebum laughed nervously. ‘I suppose there is a mountain underneath us, isn’t there?’ Dougal stopped polishing, and gave him a scowl. ‘Of course there is,’ the wizard added hurriedly. ‘It’s just... I mean, we couldn’t be on a path to nowhere. Seems like that though, doesn’t it? I mean, we’ve been walking for hours, haven’t we? Haven’t we, though?’ A note of hysteria had crept into his voice. ‘I mean, this isn’t a bridge somewhere up in the clouds, is it? We are still climbing Nwci Mountain, aren’t we?’

‘Och, why not tek a look?’ Dougal snapped impatiently, re-sheathing his claymore and starting to check out his nuppet traps.

Rumblebum laughed again.

‘Think I will,’ he blurted. Feeling silly, he got up, and went over to the edge of the cliff.

He looked over the edge.

His eyes widened.

He turned to Dougal, and opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He turned back to check.

It was true.

‘Dougal, there’s nothing underneath us,’ said Rumblebum in a cracked voice.

‘Dougal, there’s just you, me, and a bridge of rock hanging unsupported in the middle of the clouds. Dougal? Dougal?’

He turned round again.

‘Dougal!’ he gasped. The Highlander had vanished without a sound.

3: The Test

‘No, you idiots!’ exclaimed the dark-robe figure in irritation. ‘Not the warrior!’

‘You told us the taall one,’ whined the creature. ‘There were two taall ones.’

‘Take him away!’ raged the figure on the throne. ‘We’ll have to lure the wizard in, now. Get ready for his appearance.’

Rumblebum was never quite sure how long he stood staring into the mist. He was paralysed by indecision; what should he do, carry on or run away? What would Dougal have done in such a situation?

Well, whatever he would have done, it wouldn’t have involved logical, coherent thought, Rumblebum told himself, with a shadow of his old smugness. He viewed the problem objectively, or at least with verbosity. One, (1) he was alone on an edifice of rock suspended high in the clouds. Two, (2) someone or something (s) was/were picking off his comrades one by one. Three, (3) if he got down off this mountain or whatever it was... what the hell was he going to do with the rest of his life? How could he support himself without Dougal and Shawtarz? He was doomed. He had no money and no way of making money... He’d starve!

Ah, but if he caught one of the local nuppets, he reasoned - one of the ones the man in the dark robe had spoken of, with the gemstones in their heads (or more than one, even) he would make enough money to buy himself his own little tower, and set up on his own.

Yes, that was it! He would have to be patient, but it would be worth it in the end. Yes, he would catch the magic nuppets.

Fired by this fresh resolve, Rumblebum took the winding path once more, and strode into the wall of mist.

The tunnel of fog had led him onwards for over two miles before he caught sight of his destination.

All the way up that narrow spar of rock, he had caught echoes of distant, taunting bleats from the surrounding nothingness, and occasional metallic roars. But how could there be anything out there? It was empty space as far as he could make out. And none of the noises resembled nuppets. Would he ever reach the peak of Nwci Mountain? Was he still even on the mountain? The roars that he heard reminded him of the noise made by Isernwidges, those demon-propelled metal steeds of the Langohari. Could this void be the fabled Nuffink that featured so heavily in their myths and sagas...?

It was with these thoughts running through his mind that he burst out of the mist and found himself standing before the massive gates of a colossal castle.

What supported it, he couldn't see, but it towered far above him. Pinnacles and crenellations of ebony, ivory, and steel loomed up so far into the misty sky that he could see no sign of their termination.

Before him, with a grinding of badly kept machinery, an ornate portcullis began to rise, revealing darkness beyond it.

Something moved in this darkness.

'Are you Rumblebum the Wizard?' demanded a deep, masculine voice.

'What if I am?' demanded Rumblebum, startling himself with his defiance.

'What's happened to Nwci Mountain? Where have all the nuppets gone?'

The voice chuckled.

'We spread the rumours,' it explained, 'in the full knowledge that you and your greedy companions would come here in search of the fabled creatures.'

'You did?' boggled Rumblebum. 'But why?'

'Because, if all that we have heard about you, O mighty wizard, is true, then we need you.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Rumblebum. 'Oh, that's too kind, too kind.' He preened himself momentarily.

'However,' the voice continued. 'If you fail our test - if the rumours of your supremacy over all other sorcerers prove false - then my troops will feast upon your scrawny carcass tonight, as we await the next wizard foolish enough to take up the challenge.'

Rumblebum looked deflated.

'Er, what if I give it a miss, eh?' he quavered, turning to go.

'We have your friends here, at our mercy,' the unseen speaker informed him. 'If you leave, we will be forced to kill them.'

'Oh,' said Rumblebum, disconcerted. 'Oh. Well, I suppose I'd better take this test, then, but...'

'Good. Come with me.'

The speaker stepped out into the light, revealing itself to be the tall, cloaked figure that had approached them in the Seedy Dragon Inn. It took Rumblebum by the arm and led him inside.

Rumblebum was taken down a long, winding stone passage, which sank into darkness a few yards in from the entrance. He stumbled on after the hooded shape for some time before a waft of foetid air informed him that they had reached a wider area; a room, perhaps.

'Stay here,' muttered his guide.

Rumblebum stood meekly in the darkness, waiting for his captor to light a lamp. Silence reigned over the tenebrous hall and the wizard began to feel uncomfortable.

'Ah, hello?' he called. 'Hello? Can I go now?'

No reply. Shrugging, feeling uncomfortable, Rumblebum turned to leave.

A gust of stinking air rushed at him as he did so, and he heard the beating of mighty wings. Screeches echoed from the surrounding walls. Something was swooping down on him.

'Rinsky Guatamoojoo!' He bellowed out the words of power, and a globe of glowing flame illuminated the area around him. He peered around for the source of the noise.

He frowned. Revealed in the dark hall, where alien shadows coiled and twisted,

stood a machine. It was beside the wall near the entrance, a construction of ropes and timbers and two canvas sails that thrashed back and forth. The screeching noise came from the cogs and wheels of the device. It was, Rumblebum thought, a lot of trouble to go to just to scare him out of his wits.

He gaped at the hooded figure. It stopped turning the handle and faced him.

‘You have some power, I see,’ it said loudly. ‘But what knowledge do you possess?’

Rumblebum puffed himself up self-importantly.

‘Well, actually quite a bit,’ he told the hooded man in no uncertain terms. ‘For example, I am renowned in academic circles for my famous dissertation upon the labial confections of Betulia City, capital of Himelé in the East, a ground-breaking study that opens up a multiplicity of fresh avenues for this most fascinating of disciplines....’

‘Alright then, if you’re so clever,’ the figure chuckled. ‘- what have I got in my pocket?’

Rumblebum gulped. He went pale. How the hell was he supposed to know what was in his inquisitor’s pocket? Again, he regretted that the spells required for the development of X-ray vision were beyond him. Really, this was too much. It was like something from that absurd fantasy novel he had stumbled over in a small hut in Leek and Liver Land. ‘What’s it got in it’s nasty little pocket?’ What’s it got...

Suddenly, Rumblebum’s face cleared.

‘A ring?’ he said brightly.

Beneath its hood, the inquisitor’s face fell. It nodded, disappointed. Well, it seemed like the wizard was as good as he was cracked up to be. Shame, it had almost been looking forward to feeding the smug bastard and his companions to his fleecy allies... However, there were more important things to be taken into consideration; like what it was going to do about the former owner of the castle.

But what if the wizard had just read the same books as it had? One last test would ensure that the wizard was the man for the job.

The dark figure clicked its fingers. From the encircling shadows came two strange creatures, carrying between them a covered dish. Rumblebum stared at them. Their humanoid torsos grew from large, sheep-like bodies; a woolly fleece merged with rough bodily hair; semi-human faces gazed at the wizard with glazed, yellow eyes. In wonder, he recognised them as the fabulous Heep of ancient Gogland myth - creatures rumoured to be the product of an unhealthily close relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. Though Rumblebum knew them only from the crazed descriptions penned in ‘Things Man was Not Meant to Know, vol. II’, the creatures seemed oddly familiar.

They’d been in his dreams...

The dark figure spoke again.

‘If you can tell us what is in this dish - which will otherwise be your last meal on earth - we will accept that you are as great a wizard as rumour claims. Otherwise, my friend... Well, I think you can guess the rest.’

Rumblebum certainly could. The Heep were notorious cannibals, known for carrying off lambs and babies indiscriminately. Doubtless, he would be tougher fare than they were accustomed to, but...

But, he was avoiding the question. What was inside the covered dish?

Well, how was he supposed to know? He couldn’t see through it, could he? He’d only answered the last question because of his extensive and trans-temporal reading. This question had him truly flummoxed.

He glanced at the Heep. One returned his gaze, leering suggestively. Cold sweat broke out across the wizard's brow. He wiped it away abstractedly.

'Shit,' he muttered.

At that instant, light burst into life in the great lanterns that hung from the ceiling, illuminating the pillared hall, chasing away the shadows, revealing first the serried ranks of Heep, then the hooded figure, then the dwarf and the Highlander who were hanging from a trellis above a large pit in the far corner... and finally, the contents of the dish, which one of the Heep had opened to reveal a large mound of sheep-droppings. The horde of Heep bleated their joy and began a traditional celebratory square dance. The dark figure leapt down, flinging off his cloak to reveal a muscular physique, a leopardskin loincloth, and a necklace of teeth, a mane of tatty blond hair, and a deep tan.

'I,' he declared, 'am Gonad the Barbarian!'

Rumblebum stared in amazement at a figure almost as famous - and as legendary - as the Heep. Gonad, whose exploits were sung from shore to shore in every tongue of the wide world, a warrior, a thief, buccaneer, freebooter, ex-king of Gogland...

'But you vanished into the hills years ago, after Poldanyelz betrayed you to the Manhu,' Rumblebum breathed.

'Oi, Rumblebum!' shouted the Highlander who was suspended over the pit. 'Can't ya get ya new friend to let us doon?'

The wizard glanced up, recognising the two figures as Dougal and Shawtarz. He turned to Gonad with an apologetic and ingratiating expression on his face.

4: The Wizard

Half an hour later, they were sitting at a great feasting table, waited on hand and hoof by the Heep. The food was coarse, but they had experienced far worse during their aimless wanderings across the world, and their barbarian host turned out to be an urbane, cultured man, an excellent conversationalist who could discourse upon a wide variety of fascinating topics.

Dougal, envious of Gonad's reputation as a warrior, soon got heartily sick of the barbarian. After his capture by the Heep, he had been knocked unconscious, then hung over a pit of acid for no readily apparent reason. As a result, he was feeling more than a little miffed. He fixed Gonad with a beady glare.

'So, what the fuck's all this about, then?'' he rumbled dangerously.

'I beg your pardon?' Gonad replied.

'I mean, why've ya captured us? Why did ya want ta know if Rumblebum is as good as they say he is? Maself, I think he's crap, but...'

'Ah, I see.' The barbarian smiled. 'Well, it's a long story. But as you probably know, some years ago I took on the responsibility of ruling Gogland...'

'Didn't Earl Madoic poison the old king and set you up as a figurehead?' Shawtarz demanded, tearing his attention away from the suggestively dancing Heep. Gonad coloured slightly.

'There's some truth in the rumours,' he admitted. 'But anyway, I ruled wisely for many years...'

'During which period,' Dougal growled, 'the Gogland economy collapsed to such an extent that ma colleagues and I were forced to work as hired swords for the Heddlu.'

'Indeed,' coughed Gonad. 'But then the Manhu invaded, and with the aid of your

old foe Poldanyelz the Wizard, they forced me from the throne. I was cast out of civilisation, to wander in exile along the eastern marches where I met Laa-Ree, chieftain of the Heep. After an abortive attempt to win back my kingdom, I decided to get my revenge on Poldanyelz, and traced him to this castle, in the middle of the Nuffink...'

'Always wondered where the egrash-riddled little wazzock had got ta,' Dougal snarled.

'My Heep and I stormed the place, defeating the wizard's automatons, and almost capturing the wizard himself, I...'

'Almost?' Rumblebum questioned. 'He escaped?'

'Not entirely,' Gonad replied evasively. 'He... managed to magic himself into the walls of the great hall, where he remains. I have been unable to get him, but he has blighted my troops with sorcerous ailments, and thus made it impossible for us to prepare our coming attack on the Manhu invaders...'

Rumblebum felt he could guess what was coming.

'And you want me to find the wizard?' he gulped. 'With my, er, my X-ray vision?'

'Find him and kill him,' the barbarian said firmly. 'Once he's dead, nothing will stop me and my army of Heep and Langohari from forcing the Manhu out of Gogland.'

'Er, I'm afraid I don't do that kind of thing,' Rumblebum apologised. Gonad stared at him. 'Kill people, I mean,' he added. 'I leave that to Dougal here, and his oversized claymore.'

'I don't care who kills the little rat,' said Gonad impatiently, dropping his civilised facade. 'I'll do it myself if no one else is willing to!'

'Och, no ya won't!' Dougal told him. 'If anyone's gonna deal with Poldanyelz, it's gonna be me, okay? I've been wanting to deal with him for years.'

'Oh really?' oozed a voice from the wall. They turned to see a small, bearded figure in a sorcerous robe step from the solid stone wall. Rumblebum breathed an incongruous sigh of relief. Now he wouldn't have to own up to his thaumaturgical inadequacies. But still, this didn't mean they would have any chance of dealing with the evil dwarven wizard.

However, it seemed that Gonad intended to try. Drawing out his broadsword, the muscle-bound warrior strode towards his diminutive foe. Poldanyelz looked up in vague amusement as Gonad brought his blade whistling down.

It bounced off the sorcerer's head. Poldanyelz frowned in slight annoyance.

'Ow!' he complained. 'That hurt.'

Gonad glared at the dwarf, then at his blade.

'You've blunted it!' he gasped.

'Here,' Dougal snapped. 'Get oota ma way, ya wump. I'll deal with this.'

Dougal whipped out his claymore and thrust it at Poldanyelz. A mortified expression crossed the Highlander's face when, as soon as his blade touched the wizard, it drooped limply. He ground his teeth with impotent rage.

The sorcerer smiled smugly.

'During my time in that wall, I have been busy. Not only have I called down curses upon your army, Gonad, I have also made myself impervious to weapons. Nothing in the world can stop me now!!!'

And suddenly the wizened little wizard began to grow - to expand - to tower over the bewildered warriors and to overshadow the great hall. He glared down wrathfully at the insects before him.

‘Do something, Rumblebum,’ Shawtarz urged, turning to his companion. ‘The warriors just aren’t up to it. Poldanyelz is gonna win this time, if you don’t do something.’

But Rumblebum laughed. ‘He’s just bluffing,’ the wizard smirked. ‘Don’t you remember that time in his tower? He’s not really turned into a giant - it’s just an illusion.’ He raised his hands.

‘Biletzanbalotz anbodoxanbalox,’ he intoned solemnly. A pink mist drifted from his fingers towards the giant.

But nothing happened. Rumblebum’s face fell.

The laughter of Poldanyelz rumbled round the hall. The Heep flattened themselves in terror. Dougal and Gonad were driven to their knees by the blast of halitosis. And Rumblebum fell over Shawtarz.

‘Ha! Hedge-wizard!’ the sorcerer laughed. ‘Dispell Illusion has no effect on me. For now, I have the power to truly tower over you lesser mortals! I could tower up to the stars themselves if I wished, and force the very Gods to bow before me!’

‘Do something, Rumblebum,’ Shawtarz hissed again.

Meanwhile, Dougal was getting to his feet again. Giving his drooping claymore a rueful glance, he turned to stare up at the sorcerer.

‘Och, that’s amazing,’ he said in tones of awe. Rumblebum glanced worriedly at him. ‘Och,’ the Highlander went on, ‘you must be a brilliant wazzock - wizard, I mean. No one in the world can be as great as you!’

Poldanyelz chuckled. ‘At last you see the truth, Highlander. Are you willing to bow down before me?’

‘Aye!’ said Dougal enthusiastically. ‘Aye! But just one thing. It’s truly amazing for a dwarf to become a giant, but growth is a fact of life. Can you shrink yourself, say, to the size of a frog? Ya see, that would impress me even more.’

‘Of course I could!’ the giant sorcerer assured him, laughing heartily and patronisingly. ‘Here, I’ll show you.’ He did so.

Dougal quickly reached down and grabbed the shrunken wizard.

‘Here, Gonad - tek this, shut its’ mooth so that it can’t cast any more spells and go and fling it oot into the Nuffink,’ he ordered. ‘Once you’ve done that, we can prepare the army for the invasion, then go and throw the Manhu oot of Gogland.’

As Gonad ran towards the gate, carrying the squirming, shrunken wizard towards his final doom, Dougal turned to Rumblebum.

‘Well,’ said he, looking as insufferably smug as the most self-satisfied sorcerer. ‘How’s that for logical, coherent thought?’

For the life of him, Rumblebum couldn’t think of an answer.

Edison's Conquest of Mars

Chapter XIII.

On One of Mars' Moons.

Deimos proved to be, as we had expected, about six miles in diameter. Its mean density is not very great so that the acceleration of gravity did not exceed one two-thousandths of the earth's. Consequently the weight of a man turning the scales at 150 pounds at home was here only about one ounce.

The result was that we could move about with greater ease than on the golden asteroid, and some of the scientific men eagerly resumed their interrupted experiments.

But the attraction of this little satellite was so slight that we had to be very careful not to move too swiftly in going about lest we should involuntarily leave the ground and sail out into space, as, it will be remembered, happened to the fugitives during the fight on the asteroid.

Not only would such an adventure have been an uncomfortable experience, but it might have endangered the success of our scheme. Our present distance from the surface of Mars did not exceed 12,500 miles, and we had reason to believe that Martians possessed telescopes powerful enough to enable them not merely to see the electrical ships at such a distance, but to also catch sight of us individually. Although the cloud curtain still rested on the planet it was probable that the Martians would send some of their airships up to its surface in order to determine what our fate had been. From that point of vantage, with their exceedingly powerful glasses, we feared that they might be able to detect anything unusual upon or in the neighborhood of Deimos.

The Ships are Moored.

Accordingly strict orders were given, not only that the ships should be moored on that side of the satellite which is perpetually turned away from Mars, but that, without orders, no one should venture around on the other side of the little globe, or even on the edge of it, where he might be seen in profile against the sky.

Still, of course, it was essential that we, on our part, should keep a close watch, and so a number of sentinels were selected, whose duty it was to place themselves at the edge of Deimos, where they could peep over the horizon, so to speak, and catch sight of the globe of our enemies.

The distance of Mars from us was only about three times its own diameter, consequently it shut off a large part of the sky, as viewed from our position.

But in order to see its whole surface it was necessary to go a little beyond the edge of the satellite, on that side which faced Mars. At the suggestion of Colonel Smith, who had so frequently stalked Indians that devices of this kind readily occurred to his mind, the sentinels all wore garments corresponding in color to that of the soil of the asteroid, which was of a dark, reddish brown hue. This would tend to conceal them from the prying eyes of the Martians.

The commander himself frequently went around the edge of the planet in order to take a look at Mars, and I often accompanied him.

Marvellous Discoveries.

The Martians Were the Builders of the Great Sphinx and the Pyramids.

I shall never forget one occasion, when, lying flat on the ground, and cautiously worming our way around on the side toward Mars, we had just begun to observe it with our telescopes, when I perceived, against the vast curtain of smoke, a small, glinting object, which I instantly suspected to be an airship.

I called Mr. Edison's attention to it, and we both agreed that it was, undoubtedly, one of the Martians' aerial vessels, probably on the lookout for us.

A short time afterward a large number of airships made their appearance at the upper surface of the clouds, moving to and fro, and although, with our glasses, we could only make out the general form of the ships, without being able to discern the Martians upon them, yet we had not the least doubt but they were sweeping the sky in every direction in order to determine whether we had been completely destroyed or had retreated to a distance from the planet.

Even when that side of Mars on which we were looking had passed into night, we could still see the guardships circling above the clouds, their presence being betrayed by the faint twinkling of the electric lights that they bore.

Finally, after about a week had passed, the Martians evidently made up their minds that they had annihilated us, and that there was no longer danger to be feared.

Convincing evidence that they believed we should not be heard from again was furnished when the withdrawal of the great curtain of cloud began.

A Great Phenomenon.

This phenomenon first manifested itself by a gradual thinning of the vaporous shield, until, at length, we began to perceive the red surface of the planet dimly shining through it. Thinner and rarer it became, and, after the lapse of about eighteen hours, it had completely disappeared, and the huge globe shone out again, reflecting the light of the sun from its continents and oceans with a brightness that, in contrast with the all-enveloping night to which we had so long been subjected, seemed unbearable to our eyes.

Indeed, so brilliant was the illumination which fell upon the surface of Deimos that the number of persons who had been permitted to pass around upon the exposed side of the satellite was carefully restricted. In the blaze of light which had been suddenly poured upon us we felt somewhat like malefactors unexpectedly enveloped in the illumination of a policeman's dark lantern.

Meanwhile, the object which we had in view in retreating to the satellite was not lost sight of, and the services of the chief linguists of the expedition were again called into use for the purpose of acquiring a new language. The experiment was conducted in the flagship. The fact that this time it was not a monster belonging to an utterly alien race upon whom we were to experiment, but a beautiful daughter of our common Mother Eve, added zest and interest as well as the most confident hopes of success to the efforts of those who were striving to understand the accents of her tongue.

Lingual Difficulties Ahead.

Still the difficulty was very great, notwithstanding the conviction of the professors that her language would turn out to be a form of the great Indo-European speech from which the many tongues of civilized men upon the earth had been derived.

The learned men, to tell the truth, gave the poor girl no rest. For hours at a time they would ply her with interrogations by voice and by gesture, until, at length, wearied beyond endurance, she would fall asleep before their faces.

Then she would be left undisturbed for a little while, but the moment her eyes opened again the merciless professors flocked about her once more, and resumed the tedious iteration of their experiments.

Our Heidelberg professor was the chief inquisitor, and he revealed himself to us in a new and entirely unexpected light. No one could have anticipated the depth and variety of his resources. He placed himself in front of the girl and gestured and gesticulated, bowed, nodded, shrugged his shoulders, screwed his face into an infinite variety of expressions, smiled, laughed, scowled and accompanied all these dumb

shows with posturings, exclamations, queries, only half expressed in words, and cadences which, by some ingenious manipulation of the tones of the voice, he managed to make as marvellous expressive of his desires.

He was a universal actor—comedian, tragedian, buffoon—all in one. There was no shade of human emotion which he did not seem capable of giving expression to.

The Professor Does His Best.

His every attitude was a symbol, and all his features became in quick succession types of thought and exponents of hidden feelings, while his inquisitive nose stood forth in the midst of their ceaseless play like a perpetual interrogation point that would have electrified the Sphinx into life, and set its stone lips gabbling answers and explanations.

The girl looked on, partly astonished, partly amused, and partly comprehending. Sometimes she smiled, and then the beauty of her face became most captivating. Occasionally she burst into a cheery laugh when the professor was executing some of his extraordinary gyrations before her.

It was a marvellous exhibition of what the human intellect, when all its powers are concentrated upon a single object, is capable of achieving. It seemed to me, as I looked at the performance, that if all the races of men, who had been stricken asunder at the foot of the Tower of Babel by the miracle which made the tongues of each to speak a language unknown to the others, could be brought together again at the foot of the same tower, with all the advantages which thousands of years of education had in the meantime imparted to them, they would be able, without any miracle, to make themselves mutually understood.

And it was evident that an understanding was actually growing between the girl and the professor. Their minds were plainly meeting, and when both had become focused upon the same point, it was perfectly certain that the object of the experiment would be attained.

Whenever the professor got from the girl an intelligent reply to his pantomimic inquiries, or whenever he believed that he got such a reply, it was immediately jotted down in the ever open notebook which he carried in his hand.

And then he would turn to us standing by, and with one hand on his heart, and the other sweeping grandly through the air, would make a profound bow and say:

“The young lady and I great progress make already. I have her words comprehended. We shall wondrous mysteries solve. Jawohl! Wunderlich! Make yourselves gentlemen easy. Of the human race the ancestral stem have I here discovered.”

Once I glanced over a page of his notebook, and there I read this:

“Mars—Zahmor.”

“Copper—Hayez.”

“Sword—Anz.”

“I jump—Altesna.”

“I slay—Amoutha.”

“I cut off a head—Ksutaskofa.”

“I sleep—Zlcha.”

“I love—Levza.”

Aha, Professor Heidelberg!

When I saw this last entry I looked suspiciously at the professor.

Was he trying to make love without our knowing it to the beautiful captive from Mars?

If so, I felt certain that he would get himself into difficulty. She had made a deep impression upon every man in the flagship, and I knew that there was more than one

of the younger men who would have promptly called him to account if they had suspected him of trying to learn from those beautiful lips the words, "I love." I pictured to myself the state of mind of Colonel Alonzo Jefferson Smith if, in my place, he had glanced over the notebook and read what I had read. And then I thought of another handsome young fellow in the flagship—Sidney Phillips—who, if mere actions and looks could make him so, had become exceedingly devoted to this long lost and happily recovered daughter of Eve. In fact, I had already questioned within my own mind whether the peace would be strictly kept between Colonel Smith and Mr. Phillips, for the former had, to my knowledge, noticed the young fellow's adoring glances, and had begun to regard him out of the corners of his eyes as if he considered him no better than an Apache or a Mexican greaser.

Jealousy Crops Out.

"But what," I asked myself, "would be the vengeance that Colonel Smith would take upon this skinny professor from Heidelberg if he thought that he, taking advantage of his linguistic powers, had stepped in between him and the damsel whom he had rescued?"

However, when I took a second look at the professor, I became convinced that he was innocent of any such amorous intention, and that he had learned, or believed he had learned, the word for "love" simply in pursuance of the method by which he meant to acquire the language of the girl.

There was one thing which gave some of us considerable misgiving, and that was the question whether, after all, the language the professor was acquiring was really the girl's own tongue or one that she had learned from the Martians.

But the professor bade us rest easy on that point. He assured us, in the first place, that this girl could not be the only human being living upon Mars, but that she must have friends and relatives there. That being so, they unquestionably had a language of their own, which they spoke when they were among themselves. Here finding herself among beings belonging to her own race, she would naturally speak her own tongue and not that which she had acquired from the Martians.

"Moreover, gentlemen," he added, "I have in her speech many roots of the great Aryan tongue already recognized."

We were greatly relieved by this explanation, which seemed to all of us perfectly satisfactory.

Yet, really, there was no reason why one language should be any better than the other for our present purpose. In fact, it might be more useful to us to know the language of the Martians themselves. Still, we all felt that we should prefer to know her language rather than that of the monsters among whom she had lived.

Colonel Smith expressed what was in all our minds when, after listening to the reasoning of the Professor, he blurted out:

"Thank God, she doesn't speak any of their blamed lingo! By Jove, it would soil her pretty lips."

"But also that she speaks, too," said the man from Heidelberg, turning to Colonel Smith with a grin. "We shall both of them eventually learn."

A Tedious Language Lesson.

Three entire weeks were passed in this manner. After the first week the girl herself materially assisted the linguists in their efforts to acquire her speech.

At length the task was so far advanced that we could, in a certain sense, regard it as practically completed. The Heidelberg Professor declared that he had mastered the tongue of the ancient Aryans. His delight was unbounded. With prodigious industry

he set to work, scarcely stopping to eat or sleep, to form a grammar of the language. "You shall see," he said, "it will the speculations of my countrymen vindicate." No doubt the Professor had an exaggerated opinion of the extent of his acquirements, but the fact remained that enough had been learned of the girl's language to enable him and several others to converse with her quite as readily as a person of good capacity who has studied under the instructions of a native teacher during a period of six months can converse in a foreign tongue.

Immediately almost every man in the squadron set vigorously at work to learn the language of this fair creature for himself. Colonel Smith and Sidney Phillips were neck and neck in the linguistic race.

One of the first bits of information which the Professor had given out was the name of the girl.

We Learn Her Name.

It was Aina (pronounced Ah-ee-na).

This news was flashed throughout the squadron, and the name of our beautiful captive was on the lips of all.

After that came her story. It was a marvellous narrative. Translated into our tongue it ran as follows:

"The traditions of my fathers, handed down for generations so many that no one can number them, declare that the planet of Mars was not the place of our origin."

"Ages and ages ago our forefathers dwelt on another and distant world that was nearer to the sun than this one is, and enjoyed brighter daylight than we have here."

"They dwelt—as I have often heard the story from my father, who had learned it by heart from his father, and he from his—in a beautiful valley that was surrounded by enormous mountains towering into the clouds and white about their tops with snow that never melted. In the valley were lakes, around which clustered the dwellings of our race."

"It was, the traditions say, a land wonderful for its fertility, filled with all things that the heart could desire, splendid with flowers and rich with luscious fruits."

"It was a land of music, and the people who dwelt in it were very happy."

While the girl was telling this part of her story the Heidelberg Professor became visibly more and more excited. Presently he could keep quiet no longer, and suddenly exclaimed, turning to us who were listening, as the words of the girl were interpreted for us by one of the other linguists:

"Gentlemen, it is the Vale of Cashmere! Has not my great countryman, Adelung, so declared? Has he not said that the Valley of Cashmere was the cradle of the human race already?"

"From the Valley of Cashmere to the planet Mars—what a romance!" exclaimed one of the bystanders.

Colonel Smith appeared to be particularly moved, and I heard him humming under his breath, greatly to my astonishment, for this rough soldier was not much given to poetry or music:

"Who has not heard of the Vale of Cashmere,

With its roses the brightest that earth ever gave;

Its temples, its grottoes, its fountains as clear,

As the love-lighted eyes that hang over the wave."

Mr. Sidney Phillips, standing by, and also catching the murmur of Colonel Smith's words, showed in his handsome countenance some indications of distress, as if he wished he had thought of those lines himself.

Aina Tells Her Story.

The girl resumed her narrative:

“Suddenly there dropped down out of the sky strange gigantic enemies, armed with mysterious weapons, and began to slay and burn and make desolate. Our forefathers could not withstand them. They seemed like demons, who had been sent from the abodes of evil to destroy our race.”

“Some of the wise men said that this thing had come upon our people because they had been very wicked, and the gods in Heaven were angry. Some said they came from the moon, and some from the far-away stars. But of these things my forefathers knew nothing for a certainty.”

“The destroyers showed no mercy to the inhabitants of the beautiful valley. Not content with making it a desert, they swept over other parts of the earth.”

“The tradition says that they carried off from the valley, which was our native land, a large number of our people, taking them first into a strange country, where there were oceans of sand, but where a great river, flowing through the midst of the sands, created a narrow land of fertility. Here, after having slain and driven out the native inhabitants, they remained for many years, keeping our people, whom they had carried into captivity, as slaves.”

“And in this Land of Sand, it is said, they did many wonderful works.”

“They had been astonished at the sight of the great mountains which surrounded our valley, for on Mars there are no mountains, and after they came into the Land of Sand they built there with huge blocks of stone mountains in imitation of what they had seen, and used them for purposes that our people did not understand.”

“Then, too, it is said they left there at the foot of these mountains that they had made a gigantic image of the great chief who led them in their conquest of our world.”

At this point in the story the Heidelberg Professor again broke in, fairly trembling with excitement:

The Wonders of the Martians!

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” he cried, “is it that you do not understand? This Land of Sand and of a wonderful fertilizing river—what can it be? Gentlemen, it is Egypt! These mountains of rock that the Martians have erected, what are they? Gentlemen, they are the great mystery of the land of the Nile, the Pyramids. The gigantic statue of their leader that they at the foot of their artificial mountains have set up—gentlemen, what is that? It is the Sphinx!”

The Professor’s agitation was so great that he could go no further. And indeed there was not one of us who did not fully share his excitement. To think that we should have come to the planet Mars to solve one of the standing mysteries of the earth, which had puzzled mankind and defied all their efforts at solution for so many centuries! Here, then, was the explanation of how those gigantic blocks that constitute the great Pyramid of Cheops had been swung to their lofty elevation. It was not the work of puny man, as many an engineer had declared that it could not be, but the work of these giants of Mars.

Aina’s Wonderful Story.

The Martians’ Beautiful Prisoner Recounts Her Marvellous Adventures.

Aina resumed her story.

“At length, our traditions say, a great pestilence broke out in the Land of Sand, and a partial vengeance was granted to us in the destruction of the larger number of our enemies. At last the giants who remained, fleeing before this scourge of the gods, used the mysterious means at their command, and, carrying our ancestors with them, returned to their own world, in which we have ever since lived.”

“Then there are more of your people in Mars?” said one of the professors.

“Alas, no,” replied Aina, her eyes filling with tears, “I alone am left.”

For a few minutes she was unable to speak. Then she continued:

An Ancient Martian Conquest.

“What fury possessed them I do not know, but not long ago an expedition departed from the planet, the purpose of which, as it was noised about over Mars, was the conquest of a distant world. After a time a few survivors of that expedition returned. The story they told caused great excitement among our masters. They had been successful in their battles with the inhabitants of the world they had invaded, but as in the days of our forefathers, in the Land of Sand, a pestilence smote them, and but few survivors escaped.”

“Not long after that, you, with your mysterious ships, appeared in the sky of Mars. Our masters studied you with their telescopes, and those who had returned from the unfortunate expedition declared that you were inhabitants of the world which they had invaded, come, doubtless, to take vengeance upon them.”

“Some of my people who were permitted to look through the telescopes of the Martians, saw you also, and recognized you as members of their own race. There were several thousand of us, altogether, and we were kept by the Martians to serve them as slaves, and particularly to delight their ears with music, for our people have always been especially skilful in the playing of musical instruments, and in songs, and while the Martians have but little musical skill themselves, they are exceedingly fond of these things.”

Awaiting a Rescue.

“Although Mars had completed not less than five thousand circuits about the sun since our ancestors were brought as prisoners to its surface, yet the memory of our distant home had never perished from the hearts of our race, and when we recognized you, as we believed, our own brothers, come to rescue us from long imprisonment, there was great rejoicing. The news spread from mouth to mouth, wherever we were in the houses and families of our masters. We seemed to be powerless to aid you or to communicate with you in any manner. Yet our hearts went out to you, as in your ships you hung above the planet, and preparations were secretly made by all the members of our race for your reception when, as we believed, would occur, you should effect a landing upon the planet and destroy our enemies.”

“But in some manner the fact that we had recognized you, and were preparing to welcome you, came to the ears of the Martians.”

At this point the girl suddenly covered her eyes with her hands, shuddering and falling back in her seat.

“Oh, you do not know them as I do!” at length she exclaimed. “The monsters! Their vengeance was too terrible! Instantly the order went forth that we should all be butchered, and that awful command was executed!”

“How, then, did you escape?” asked the Heidelberg Professor.

Aina seemed unable to speak for a while. Finally mastering her emotion, she replied:
Her Fortunate Escape.

“One of the chief officers of the Martians wished me to remain alive. He, with his aides, carried me to one of the military depot of supplies, where I was found and rescued,” and as she said this she turned toward Colonel Smith with a smile that reflected on his ruddy face and made it glow like a Chinese lantern.

“By ——!” muttered Colonel Smith, “that was the fellow we blew into nothing! Blast him, he got off too easy!”

The remainder of Aina’s story may be briefly told.

When Colonel Smith and I entered the mysterious building which, as it now proved,

was not a storehouse belonging to a village, as we had supposed, but one of the military depots of the Martians, the girl, on catching sight of us, immediately recognized us as belonging to the strange squadron in the sky. As such she felt that we must be her friends, and saw in us her only possible hope of escape. For that reason she had instantly thrown herself under our protection. This accounted for the singular confidence which she had manifested in us from the beginning.

Her wonderful story had so captivated our imaginations that for a long time after it was finished we could not recover from the spell. It was told over and over again from mouth to mouth, and repeated from ship to ship, everywhere exciting the utmost astonishment.

Destiny seemed to have sent us on this expedition into space for the purpose of clearing off mysteries that had long puzzled the minds of men. When on the moon we had unexpectedly to ourselves settled the question that had been debated from the beginning of astronomical history of the former habitability of that globe.

A Question Settled.

Now, on Mars, we had put to rest no less mysterious questions relating to the past history of our own planet. Adelung, as the Heidelberg Professor asserted, had named the Vale of Cashmere as the probable site of the Garden of Eden, and the place of origin of the human race, but later investigators had taken issue with this opinion, and the question where the Aryans originated upon the earth had long been one of the most puzzling that science presented.

This question seemed now to have been settled.

Aina had said that Mars had completed 5,000 circuits about the sun since her people were brought to it as captives. One circuit of Mars occupies 687 days. More than 9,000 years had therefore elapsed since the first invasion of the earth by the Martians. Another great mystery—that of the origin of those gigantic and inexplicable monuments, the great pyramids and the Sphinx, on the banks of the Nile, had also apparently been solved by us, although these Egyptian wonders had been the furthest things from our thoughts when we set out for the planet Mars.

We had travelled more than thirty millions of miles in order to get answers to questions which could not be solved at home.

But from these speculations and retrospects we were recalled by the commander of the expedition.

Does Aina Hold the Secret?

“This is all very interesting and very romantic, gentlemen,” he said, “but now let us get at the practical side of it. We have learned Aina’s language and have heard her story. Let us next ascertain whether she cannot place in our hands some key which will place Mars at our mercy. Remember what we came here for, and remember that the earth expects every man of us to do his duty.”

This Nelson-like summons again changed the current of our thoughts, and we instantly set to work to learn from Aina if Mars, like Achilles, had not some vulnerable point where a blow would be mortal.

Chapter XIV.

It was a curious scene when the momentous interview which was to determine our fate and that of Mars began. Aina had been warned of what was coming. We in the flagship had all learned to speak her language with more or less ease, but it was deemed best that the Heidelberg Professor, assisted by one of his colleagues, should act as interpreter.

The girl, flushed with excitement of the novel situation, fully appreciating the

importance of what was about to occur, and looking more charming than before, stood at one side of the principal apartment. Directly facing her were the interpreters, and the rest of us, all with ears intent and eyes focused upon Aina, stood in a double row behind them.

As heretofore, I am setting down her words translated into our own tongue, having taken only so much liberty as to connect the sentences into a stricter sequence than they had when falling from her lips in reply to the questions that were showered upon her.

She Has a Plan.

“You will never be victorious,” she said, “if you attack them openly as you have been doing. They are too strong and too numerous. They are well prepared for such attacks, because they have had to resist them before.”

“They have waged war with the inhabitants of the asteroid Ceres, whose people are giants greater than themselves. Their enemies from Ceres have attacked them here. Hence these fortifications, with weapons pointing skyward, and the great air fleets which you have encountered.”

“But there must be some point,” said Mr. Edison, “where we can.”

“Yes, yes,” interrupted the girl quickly, “there is one blow you can deal them which they could not withstand.”

“What is that?” eagerly inquired the commander.

“You can drown them out.”

“How? With the canals?”

We Must Drown Them Out.

“Yes, I will explain to you. I have already told you, and, in fact, you must have seen it for yourselves, that there are almost no mountains on Mars. A very learned man of my race used to say that the reason was because Mars is so very old a world that the mountains it once had have been almost completely levelled, and the entire surface of the planet had become a great plain. There are depressions, however, most of which are occupied by the seas. The greater part of the land lies below the level of the oceans. In order at the same time to irrigate the soil and make it fruitful, and to protect themselves from overflows by the ocean breaking in upon them, the Martians have constructed the immense and innumerable canals which you see running in all directions over the continents.”

“There is one period in the year, and that period has now arrived, when there is special danger of a great deluge. Most of the oceans of Mars lie in the southern hemisphere. When it is Summer in that hemisphere, the great masses of ice and snow collected around the south pole melt rapidly away.”

“Yes, that is so,” broke in one of our astronomers, who was listening attentively.

“Many a time I have seen the vast snow fields around the southern pole of Mars completely disappear as the Summer sun rose high upon them.”

“With the melting of these snows,” continued Aina, “a rapid rise in the level of the water in the southern oceans occurs. On the side facing these oceans the continents of Mars are sufficiently elevated to prevent an overflow, but nearer the equator the level of the land sinks lower.”

“With your telescopes you have no doubt noticed that there is a great bending sea connecting the oceans of the south with those of the north and running through the midst of the continents.”

“Quite so,” said the astronomer who had spoken before, “we call it the Syrtis Major.”

“That long narrow sea,” Aina went on, “forms a great channel through which the flood of waters caused by the melting of the southern polar snows flows swiftly

toward the equator and then on toward the north until it reaches the sea basins which exist there. At that point it is rapidly turned into ice and snow, because, of course, while it is Summer in the southern hemisphere it is Winter in the northern.”

Mars Will Be Ours.

“The Syrtis Major (I am giving our name to the channel of communication in place of that by which the girl called it) is like a great safety valve, which, by permitting the waters to flow northward, saves the continents from inundation.”

“But when mid-Summer arrives, the snows around the pole having been completely melted away, the flood ceases and the water begins to recede. At this time, but for a device which the Martians have employed, the canals connected with the oceans would run dry, and the vegetation, left without moisture under the Summer sun, would quickly perish.”

“To prevent this they have built a series of enormous gates extending completely across the Syrtis Major at its narrowest point (latitude 25 degrees south). These gates are all controlled by machinery collected at a single point on the shore of the strait. As soon as the flood in the Syrtis Major begins to recede, the gates are closed, and, the water being thus restrained, the irrigating canals are kept full long enough to mature the harvests.”

“The clew! The clew at last!” exclaimed Mr. Edison. “That is the place where we shall nip them. If we can close those gates now at the moment of high tide we shall flood the country. Did you say,” he continued, turning to Aina, “that the movement of the gates was all controlled from a single point?”

The Great Power House.

“Yes,” said the girl. “There is a great building (power house) full of tremendous machinery which I once entered when my father was taken there by his master, and where I saw one Martian, by turning a little handle, cause the great line of gates, stretching a hundred miles across the sea, to slowly shut in, edge to edge, until the flow of the water toward the north had been stopped.”

“How is the building protected?”

“So completely,” replied Aina, “that my only fear is that you may not be able to reach it. On account of the danger from their enemies on Ceres, the Martians have fortified it strongly on all sides, and have even surrounded it and covered it overhead with a great electrical network, to touch which would be instant death.”

“Ah,” said Mr. Edison, “they have got an electric shield, have they? Well, I think we shall be able to manage that.”

“Anyhow,” he continued, “we have got to get into that power house, and we have got to close those gates, and we must not lose much time in making up our minds how it is to be done. Evidently this is our only chance. We have not force enough to contend in open battle with the Martians, but if we can flood them out, and thereby render the engines contained in their fortifications useless, perhaps we shall be able to deal with the airships, which will be all the means of defence that will then remain to them.”

This idea commended itself to all the leaders of the expedition. It was determined to make a reconnaissance at once.

But it would not do for us to approach the planet too hastily, and we certainly could not think of landing upon it in broad daylight. Still, as long as we were yet at a considerable distance from Mars, we felt that we should be safe from observation, because so much time had elapsed while we were hidden behind Deimos that the Martians had undoubtedly concluded that we were no longer in existence.

So we boldly quitted the little satellite with our entire squadron and once more rapidly approached the red planet of war. This time it was to be a death grapple and our

chances of victory still seemed good.

Ready for a Death Grapple.

As soon as we arrived so near the planet that there was danger of our being actually seen, we took pains to keep continually in the shadow of Mars, and the more surely to conceal our presence all lights upon the ships were extinguished. The precaution of the commander even went so far as to have the smooth metallic sides of the cars blackened over so that they should not reflect light, and thus become visible to the Martians as shining specks, moving suspiciously among the stars.

The precise location of the great power house on the shores of the Syrtis Major having been carefully ascertained, the squadron dropped down one night into the upper limits of the Martian atmosphere, directly over the gulf.

Then a consultation was called on the flagship and a plan of campaign was quickly devised.

It was deemed wise that the attempt should be made with a single electrical ship, but that the others should be kept hovering near, ready to respond on the instant to any signal for aid which might come from below. It was thought that, notwithstanding the wonderful defences, which, according to Aina's account surrounded the building, a small party would have a better chance of success than a large one.

Mr. Edison was certain that the electrical network which was described as covering the power house would not prove a serious obstruction to us, because by carefully sweeping the space where we intended to pass with the disintegrators before quitting the ship, the netting could be sufficiently cleared away to give us uninterrupted passage.

At first the intention was to have twenty men, each armed with two disintegrators (that being the largest number that one person could carry to advantage) descend from the electrical ship and make the venture. But, after further discussion, this number was reduced; first to a dozen, and finally, to only four. These four consisted of Mr. Edison, Colonel Smith, Mr. Sidney Phillips and myself.

Both by her own request and because we could not help feeling that her knowledge of the locality would be indispensable to us, Aina was also included in our party, but not, of course, as a fighting member of it.

It was about an hour after midnight when the ship in which we were to make the venture parted from the remainder of the squadron and dropped cautiously down. The blaze of electric lights running away in various directions indicated the lines of innumerable canals with habitations crowded along their banks, which came to a focus at a point on the continent of Aeria, westward from the Syrtis Major.

Destroying The Martians.

With Aina's Aid Our Warriors Prepare an Awful Revenge on the Enemy.

We stopped the electrical ship at an elevation of perhaps three hundred feet above the vast roof of a structure which Aina assured us was the building we were in search of. Here we remained for a few minutes, cautiously reconnoitring. On that side of the power house which was opposite to the shore of the Syrtis Major there was a thick grove of trees, lighted beneath, as was apparent from the illumination which here and there streamed up through the cover of leaves, but, nevertheless, dark and gloomy above the tree tops.

"The electric network extends over the grove as well as over the building," said Aina. This was lucky for us, because we wished to descend among the trees, and, by destroying part of the network over the tree tops, we could reach the shelter we desired and at the same time pass within the line of electric defences.

With increased caution, and almost holding our breath lest we should make some

noise that might reach the ears of the sentinels beneath, we caused the car to settle gently down until we caught sight of a metallic net stretched in the air between us and the trees.

After our first encounter with the Martians on the asteroid, where, as I have related, some metal which was included in their dress resisted the action of the disintegrators, Mr. Edison had readjusted the range of vibrations covered by the instruments, and since then we had found nothing that did not yield to them. Consequently, we had no fear that the metal of the network would not be destroyed.

There was danger, however, of arousing attention by shattering holes through the tree tops. This could be avoided by first carefully ascertaining how far away the network was, and then with the adjustable mirrors attached to the disintegrators focusing the vibratory discharge at that distance.

Overcoming Their Precautions.

So successful were we that we opened a considerable gap in the network without doing any perceptible damage to the trees beneath.

The ship was cautiously lowered through the opening and brought to rest among the upper branches of one of the tallest trees. Colonel Smith, Mr. Phillips, Mr. Edison and myself at once clambered out upon a strong limb.

For a moment I feared our arrival had been betrayed on account of the altogether too noisy contest that arose between Colonel Smith and Mr. Phillips as to which of them should assist Aina. To settle the dispute I took charge of her myself.

At length we were all safely in the tree.

Then followed the still more dangerous undertaking of descending from this great height to the ground. Fortunately, the branches were very close together and they extended down within a short distance of the soil. So the actual difficulties of the descent were not very great after all. The one thing that we had particularly to bear in mind was the absolute necessity of making no noise.

At length the descent was successfully accomplished, and we all five stood together in the shadow at the foot of the great tree. The grove was so thick around that while there was an abundance of electric lights among the trees, their illumination did not fall upon us where we stood.

Peering cautiously through the vistas in various directions, we ascertained our location with respect to the wall of the building. Like all the structures that we had seen on Mars, it was composed of polished red metal.

Looking for an Entrance.

“Where is the entrance?” inquired Mr. Edison, in a whisper.

“Come softly this way, and look out for the sentinel,” replied Aina.

Gripping our disintegrators firmly, and screwing up our courage, with noiseless steps we followed the girl among the shadows of the trees.

We had one very great advantage. The Martians had evidently placed so much confidence in the electric network which surrounded the power house that they never dreamed of enemies being able to penetrate it—at least, without giving warning of their coming.

But the hole which we had blown in this network with the disintegrators had been made noiselessly, and Mr. Edison believed, since no enemies had appeared, that our operations had not been betrayed by any automatic signal to watchers inside the building.

Consequently, we had every reason to think that we now stood within the line of defence, in which they reposed the greatest confidence, without their having the least suspicion of our presence.

Aina assured us that on the occasion of her former visit to the power house there had been but two sentinels on guard at the entrance. At the inner end of a long passage leading to the interior, she said, there were two more. Besides these there were three or four Martian engineers watching the machinery in the interior of the building. A number of air ships were supposed to be on guard around the structure, but possibly their vigilance had been relaxed, because not long ago the Martians had sent an expedition against Ceres which had been so successful that the power of that planet to make an attack upon Mars had for the present been destroyed.

Supposing us to have been annihilated in the recent battle among the clouds, they would have no fear or cause for vigilance on our account.

The entrance to the great structure was low—at least, when measured by the stature of the Martians. Evidently the intention was that only one person at a time should find room to pass through it.

Drawing cautiously near, we discerned the outlines of two gigantic forms, standing in the darkness, one on either side of the door. Colonel Smith whispered to me:

The Disintegrator Again.

“If you will take the fellow on the right, I will attend to the other one.”

Adjusting our aim as carefully as was possible in the gloom, Colonel Smith and I simultaneously discharged our disintegrators, sweeping them rapidly up and down in the manner which had become familiar to us when endeavoring to destroy one of the gigantic Martians with a single stroke. And so successful were we that the two sentinels disappeared as if they had been ghosts of the night.

Instantly we all hurried forward and entered the door. Before us extended a long, straight passage, brightly illuminated by a number of electric candles. Its polished sides gleamed with blood-red reflections, and the gallery terminated, at a distance of two or three hundred feet, with an opening into a large chamber beyond, on the further side of which we could see part of a gigantic and complicated mass of machinery.

Making as little noise as possible, we pushed ahead along the passage, but when we had arrived within a distance of a dozen paces from the inner end, we stopped, and Colonel Smith, getting down upon his knees, crept forward until he had reached the inner end of the passage. There he peered cautiously around the edge into the chamber, and, turning his head a moment later, beckoned us to come forward. We crept to his side, and, looking out into the vast apartment, could perceive no enemies. What had become of the sentinels supposed to stand at the inner end of the passage we could not imagine. At any rate, they were not at their posts.

In the Great Power House.

The chamber was an immense square room at least a hundred feet in height and 400 feet on a side, and almost filling the wall opposite to us was an intricate display of machinery, wheels, levers, rods and polished plates. This we had no doubt was one end of the great engine which opened and shut the great gates that could dam an ocean.

“There is no one in sight,” said Colonel Smith.

“Then we must act quickly,” said Mr. Edison.

“Where,” he said, turning to Aina, “is the handle by turning which you saw the Martian close the gates?”

Aina looked about in bewilderment. The mechanism before us was so complicated that even an expert mechanic would have been excusable for finding himself unable to understand it. There were scores of knobs and handles, all glistening in the electric light, any one of which, so far as the uninstructed could tell, might have been

the master key that controlled the whole complex apparatus.

The Magic Lever!

“Quick,” said Mr. Edison, “where is it?”

The girl in her confusion ran this way and that, gazing hopelessly upon the machinery, but evidently utterly unable to help us.

To remain here inactive was not merely to invite destruction for ourselves, but was sure to bring certain failure upon the purpose of the expedition. All of us began instantly to look about in search of the proper handle, seizing every crank and wheel in sight and striving to turn it.

“Stop that!” shouted Mr. Edison, “you may set the whole thing wrong. Don’t touch anything until we have found the right lever.”

But to find that seemed to most of us now utterly beyond the power of man.

It was at this critical moment that the wonderful depth and reach of Mr. Edison’s mechanical genius displayed itself. He stepped back, ran his eye quickly over the whole immense mass of wheels, handles, bolts, bars and levers, paused for an instant, as if making up his mind, then said decidedly, “There it is,” and, stepping quickly forward, selected a small wheel amid a dozen others, all furnished at the circumference with handles like those of a pilot’s wheel, and, giving it a quick wrench, turned it half way around.

Surprised by the Enemy.

At this instant, a startling shout fell upon our ears. There was a thunderous clatter behind us, and, turning, we saw three gigantic Martians rushing forward.

Chapter XV.

“Sweep them! Sweep them!” cried Colonel Smith, as he brought his disintegrator to bear. Mr. Phillips and I instantly followed his example, and thus we swept the Martians into eternity, while Mr. Edison coolly continued his manipulations of the wheel.

The effect of what he was doing became apparent in less than half a minute. A shiver ran through the mass of machinery and shook the entire building.

“Look! look!” cried Sidney Phillips, who had stepped a little apart from the others.

The Grand Canal.

We all ran to his side and found ourselves in front of a great window which opened through the side of the engine, giving a view of what lay in front of it. There, gleaming in the electric lights, we saw the Syrtis Major, its waters washing high against the walls of the vast power house. Running directly out from the shore, there was an immense metallic gate at least 400 yards in length and rising 300 feet above the present level of the water.

This great gate was slowly swinging upon an invisible hinge in such a manner that in a few minutes it would evidently stand across the current of the Syrtis Major at right angles.

Beyond was a second gate, which was moving in the same manner. Further on was a third gate, and then another, and another, as far as the eye could reach, evidently extending in an unbroken series completely across the great strait.

As the gates, with accelerated motion when the current caught them, clanged together, we beheld a spectacle that almost stopped the beating of our hearts.

A Great Rush of Waters.

The great Syrtis seemed to gather itself for a moment, and then it leaped upon the obstruction and hurled its waters into one vast foaming geyser that seemed to shoot a thousand feet skyward.

But the metal gates withstood the shock, though buried from our sight in the seething white mass, and the baffled waters instantly swirled round in ten thousand gigantic eddies, rising to the level of our window and beginning to inundate the power house before we fairly comprehended our peril.

“We have done the work,” said Mr. Edison, smiling grimly. “Now we had better get out of this before the flood bursts upon us.”

The warning came none too soon. It was necessary to act upon it at once if we would save our lives. Even before we could reach the entrance to the long passage through which we had come into the great engine room, the water had risen half way to our knees. Colonel Smith, catching Aina under his arm, led the way. The roar of the maddened torrent behind deafened us.

As we ran through the passage, the water followed us, with a wicked swishing sound, and within five seconds it was above our knees; in ten seconds up to our waists.

The great danger now was that we should be swept from our feet, and once down in that torrent there would have been little chance of our ever getting our heads above its level. Supporting ourselves as best we could with the aid of the walls, we partly ran, and were partly swept along, until, when we reached the outer end of the passage and emerged into the open air, the flood was swirling about our shoulders.

Escaping the Water.

Here there was an opportunity to clutch some of the ornamental work surrounding the doorway, and thus we managed to stay our mad progress, and gradually to work out of the current until we found that the water, having now an abundance of room to spread, had fallen again as low as our knees.

But suddenly we heard the thunder of the banks tumbling behind us, and to the right and left, and the savage growl of the released water as it sprang through the breaches. To my dying day, I think, I shall not forget the sight of a great fluid column that burst through the dyke at the edge of the grove of trees, and, by the tremendous impetus of its rush, seemed turned into a solid thing.

Like an enormous ram, it plowed the soil to a depth of twenty feet, uprooting acres of the immense trees like stubble turned over by the plowshare.

The uproar was so awful that for an instant the coolest of us lost our self-control. Yet we knew that we had not the fraction of a second to waste. The breaking of the banks had caused the water again rapidly to rise about us. In a little while it was once more as high as our waists.

In the excitement and confusion, deafened by the noise and blinded by the flying foam, we were in danger of becoming separated in the flood. We no longer knew certainly in what direction was the tree by whose aid we had ascended from the electrical ship. We pushed first one way and then another, staggering through the rushing waters in search of it. Finally we succeeded in locating it, and with all our strength hurried toward it.

Then there came a noise as if the globe of Mars had been split asunder, and another great head of water hurled itself down upon the soil before us, and, without taking time to spread, bored a vast cavity in the ground, and scooped out the whole of the grove before our eyes as easily as a gardener lifts a sod with his spade.

Are We, Too, Destroyed?

Our last hope was gone. For a moment the level of the water around us sank again, as it poured into the immense excavation where the grove had stood, but in an instant it was reinforced from all sides and began once more rapidly to rise.

We gave ourselves up for lost, and, indeed, there did not seem any possible hope of salvation.

Even in the extremity I saw Colonel Smith lifting the form of Aina, who had fainted, above the surface of the surging water, while Sidney Phillips stood by his side and aided him in supporting the unconscious girl.

“We stayed a little too long,” was the only sound I heard from Mr. Edison.

The huge bulk of the power house partially protected us against the force of the current, and the water spun around us in great eddies. These swept us this way and that, but yet we managed to cling together, determined not to be separated in death if we could avoid it.

Suddenly a cry rang out directly above our heads:

“Jump for your lives, and be quick!”

At the same instant the ends of several ropes splashed into the water.

We glanced upward, and there, within three or four yards of our heads, hung the electrical ship, which we had left moored at the top of the tree.

Tom, the expert electrician from Mr. Edison’s shop, who had remained in charge of the ship, had never once dreamed of such a thing as deserting us. The moment he saw the water bursting over the dam, and evidently flooding the building which we had entered, he cast off his moorings, as we subsequently learned, and hovered over the entrance to the power house, getting as low down as possible and keeping a sharp watch for us.

But most of the electric lights in the vicinity had been carried down by the first rush of water, and in the darkness he did not see us when we emerged from the entrance. It was only after the sweeping away of the grove of trees had allowed a flood of light to stream upon the scene from a cluster of electric lamps on a distant portion of the bank on the Syrtis that had not yet given way that he caught sight of us.

Mars Is Ruined!

Immediately he began to shout to attract our attention, but in the awful uproar we could not hear him. Getting together all the ropes that he could lay his hands on, he steered the ship to a point directly over us, and then dropped down within a few yards of the boiling flood.

Now as he hung over our heads, and saw the water up to our very necks and still swiftly rising, he shouted again:

“Catch hold, for God’s sake!”

The three men who were with him in the ship seconded his cries.

But by the time we had fairly grasped the ropes, so rapidly was the flood rising, we were already afloat. With the assistance of Tom and his men we were rapidly drawn up, and immediately Tom reversed the electric polarity, and the ship began to rise.

At that same instant, with a crash that shivered the air, the immense metallic power house gave way and was swept tumbling, like a hill torn loose from its base, over the very spot where a moment before we had stood. One second’s hesitation on the part of Tom, and the electrical ship would have been battered into a shapeless wad of metal by the careening mass.

The Deluge On Mars.

How the Martians Met Their Doom Through Aina’s Plans.

When we had attained a considerable height, so that we could see to a great distance on either side, the spectacle became even more fearful than it was when we were close to the surface.

On all sides banks and dykes were going down; trees were being uprooted; buildings were tumbling, and the ocean was achieving that victory over the land which had long been its due, but which the ingenuity of the inhabitants of Mars had postponed for ages.

Far away we could see the front of the advancing wave crested with foam that sparkled in the electric lights, and as it swept on it changed the entire aspect of the planet—in front of it all life, behind it all death.

Eastward our view extended across the Syrtis Major toward the land of Libya and the region of Isidis. On that side also the dykes were giving way under the tremendous pressure, and the floods were rushing toward the sunrise, which had just begun to streak the eastern sky.

The continents that were being overwhelmed on the western side of the Syrtis were Meroe, Aeria, Arabia, Edom and Eden.

The water beneath us continually deepened. The current from the melting snows around the southern pole was at its strongest, and one could hardly have believed that any obstruction put in its path would have been able to arrest it and turn it into these two all-swallowing deluges, sweeping east and west. But, as we now perceived, the level of the land over a large part of its surface was hundreds of feet below the ocean, so that the latter, when once the barriers were broken, rushed into depressions that yawned to receive it.

Waiting for the Flood.

The point where we had dealt our blow was far removed from the great capital of Mars, around the Lake of the Sun, and we knew that we should have to wait for the floods to reach that point before the desired effect could be produced. By the nearest way, the water had at least 5,000 miles to travel. We estimated that its speed where we hung above it was as much as a hundred miles an hour. Even if that speed were maintained, more than two days and nights would be required for the floods to reach the Lake of the Sun.

But as the water rushed on it would break the banks of all the canals intersecting the country, and these, being also elevated above the surface, would add the impetus of their escaping waters to hasten the advance of the flood. We calculated, therefore, that about two days would suffice to place the planet at our mercy.

Half way from the Syrtis Major to the Lake of the Sun another great connecting link between the Southern and Northern ocean basins, called on our maps of Mars the Indus, existed, and through this channel we knew that another great current must be setting from the south toward the north. The flood that we had started would reach and break the banks of the Indus within one day.

Flooding Hundreds of Canals.

The flood travelling in the other direction, towards the east, would have considerably further to go before reaching the neighborhood of the Lake of the Sun. It, too, would involve hundreds of great canals as it advanced and would come plunging upon the Lake of the Sun and its surrounding forts and cities, probably about half a day later than the arrival of the deluge that travelled towards the west.

Now that we had let the awful destroyer loose we almost shrank from the thought of the consequences which we had produced. How many millions would perish as the result of our deed we could not even guess. Many of the victims, so far as we knew, might be entirely innocent of enmity toward us, or of the evil which had been done to our native planet. But this was a case in which the good—if they existed—must suffer with the bad on account of the wicked deeds of the latter.

I have already remarked that the continents of Mars were higher on their northern and southern borders where they faced the great oceans. These natural barriers bore to the main mass of the land somewhat the relation of the edge of a shallow dish to its bottom. Their rise on the land side was too gradual to give them the appearance of hills, but on the side toward the sea they broke down in steep banks and cliffs several

hundred feet in height. We guessed that it would be in the direction of these elevations that the inhabitants would flee, and those who had timely warning might thus be able to escape in case the flood did not—as it seemed possible it might in its first mad rush—overtop the highest elevations on Mars.

A Dreadful Scene.

As day broke and the sun slowly rose upon the dreadful scene beneath us, we began to catch sight of some of the fleeing inhabitants. We had shifted the position of the fleet toward the south, and were now suspended above the southeastern corner of Aeria. Here a high bank of reddish rock confronted the sea, whose waters ran lashing and roaring along the bluffs to supply the rapid draught produced by the emptying of the Syrtis Major. Along the shore there was a narrow line of land, hundreds of miles in length, but less than a quarter of a mile broad, which still rose slightly above the surface of the water, and this land of refuge was absolutely packed with the monstrous inhabitants of the planet who had fled hither on the first warning that the water was coming.

In some places it was so crowded that the later comers could not find standing ground on dry land, but were continually slipping back and falling into the water. It was an awful sight to look at them. It reminded me of pictures that I had seen of the deluge in the days of Noah, when the waters had risen to the mountain tops, and men, women and children were fighting for a foothold upon the last dry spots that the earth contained.

We were all moved by a desire to help our enemies, for we were overwhelmed with feelings of pity and remorse, but to aid them was now utterly beyond our power. The mighty floods were out, and the end was in the hands of God.

Fortunately, we had little time for these thoughts, because no sooner had the day begun to dawn around us than the airships of the Martians appeared. Evidently the people in them were dazed by the disaster and uncertain what to do. It is doubtful whether at first they comprehended the fact that we were the agents who had produced the cataclysm.

The Flocking of the Airships.

But as the morning advanced the airships came flocking in greater and greater numbers from every direction, many swooping down close to the flood in order to rescue those who were drowning. Hundreds gathered along the slip of land which was crowded as I have described, with refugees, while other hundreds rapidly assembled about us, evidently preparing for an attack.

We had learned in our previous contests with the airships of the Martians that our electrical ships had a great advantage over them, not merely in rapidity and facility of movement, but in the fact that our disintegrators could sweep in every direction, while it was only with much difficulty that the Martian airships could discharge their electrical strokes at an enemy poised directly above their heads.

Accordingly, orders were instantly flashed to all the squadron to rise vertically to an elevation so great that the rarity of the atmosphere would prevent the airships from attaining the same level.

Outwitting the Enemy.

This manoeuvre was executed so quickly that the Martians were unable to deal us a blow before we were poised above them in such a position that they could not easily reach us. Still they did not mean to give up the conflict.

Presently we saw one of the largest of their ships manoeuvring in a very peculiar manner, the purpose of which we did not at first comprehend. Its forward portion commenced slowly to rise, until it pointed upward like the nose of a fish approaching

the surface of the water. The moment it was in this position, an electrical bolt was darted from its prow, and one of our ships received a shock which, although it did not prove fatal to the vessel itself, killed two or three men aboard it, disarranged its apparatus, and rendered it for the time being useless.

“Ah, that’s their trick, is it?” said Mr. Edison. “We must look out for that. Whenever you see one of the airships beginning to stick its nose up after that fashion blaze away at it.”

An order to this effect was transmitted throughout the squadron. At the same time several of the most powerful disintegrators were directed upon the ship which had executed the stratagem and, reduced to a wreck, it dropped, whirling like a broken kite until it fell into the flood beneath.

A Thousand Martian Ships.

Still the Martians’ ships came flocking in ever greater numbers from all directions. They made desperate attempts to attain the level at which we hung above them. This was impossible, but many, getting an impetus by a swift run in the denser portion of the atmosphere beneath, succeeded in rising so high that they could discharge their electric artillery with considerable effect. Others, with more or less success, repeated the manoeuvre of the ship which had first attacked us, and thus the battle became gradually more general and more fierce, until, in the course of an hour or two, our squadron found itself engaged with probably a thousand airships, which blazed with incessant lightning strokes, and were able, all too frequently, to do us serious damage. But on our part the battle was waged with a cool determination and a consciousness of insuperable advantage which boded ill for the enemy. Only three or four of our sixty electrical ships were seriously damaged, while the work of the disintegrators upon the crowded fleet that floated beneath us was terrible to look upon.

They Battle on in Earnest.

Our strokes fell thick and fast on all sides. It was like firing into a flock of birds that could not get away. Notwithstanding all their efforts they were practically at our mercy. Shattered into unrecognizable fragments, hundreds of the airships continually dropped from their great height to be swallowed up in the boiling waters.

Yet they were game to the last. They made every effort to get at us, and in their frenzy they seemed to discharge their bolts without much regard to whether friends or foes were injured. Our eyes were nearly blinded by the ceaseless glare beneath us, and the uproar was indescribable.

At length, after this fearful contest had lasted for at least three hours, it became evident that the strength of the enemy was rapidly weakening. Nearly the whole of their immense fleet of airships had been destroyed, or so far damaged that they were barely able to float. Just so long, however, as they showed signs of resistance we continued to pour our merciless fire upon them, and the signal to cease was not given until the airships which had escaped serious damage began to flee in every direction. Victory Is Ours!

“Thank God, the thing is over,” said Mr. Edison. “We have got the victory at last, but how we shall make use of it is something that at present I do not see.”

“But will they not renew the attack,” asked someone.

“I do not think they can,” was the reply. “We have destroyed the very flower of their fleet.”

“And better than that,” said Colonel Smith, “we have destroyed their elan; we have made them afraid. Their discipline is gone.”

But this was only the beginning of our victory. The floods below were achieving a still greater triumph, and now that we had conquered the airships we dropped within a

few hundred feet of the surface of the water and then turned our faces westward in order to follow the advance of the deluge and see whether, as we had hoped, it would overwhelm our enemies in the very centre of their power.

The Flood Advances.

In a little while we had overtaken the front wave, which was still devouring everything. We saw it bursting the banks of the canals, sweeping away forests of gigantic trees, and swallowing cities and villages, leaving nothing but a broad expanse of swirling and eddying waters, which, in consequence of the prevailing red hue of the vegetation and the soil, looked, as shuddering we gazed down upon it, like an ocean of blood flecked with foam and steaming with the escaping life of the planet from whose veins it gushed.

As we skirted the southern borders of the continent the same dreadful scenes which we had beheld on the coast of Aeria presented themselves. Crowds of refugees thronged the high border of the land and struggled with one another for a foothold against the continually rising flood.

Watching the Destruction.

We saw, too, flitting in every direction, but rapidly fleeing before our approach, many airships, evidently crowded with Martians, but not armed either for offence or defence. These, of course, we did not disturb, for merciless as our proceedings seemed even to ourselves, we had no intention of making war upon the innocent, or upon those who had no means to resist. What we had done it had seemed to us necessary to do, but henceforth we were resolved to take no more lives if it could be avoided.

Thus, during the remainder of that day, all of the following night and all of the next day, we continued upon the heels of the advancing flood.

Going Underground

Running footsteps echoed from the walls of the sewer as three figures splashed desperately down the stream of effluent. Just audible above the noise was the scuttling and chittering of the hundreds of rats that pursued them. The three escapees had been fleeing for a long time and they panted hoarsely as they ran.

The tunnel reached an intersection where its rounded, brick-lined walls joined a larger tunnel through which a deep stream of sewage flowed. As they burst into this area, the fugitives stopped short; the water was too fast flowing for them to wade across. They glanced back.

‘Quick!’ shouted one, a young woman. ‘The rats are gaining on us!’

‘Which way?’ shouted another, a Scot by his accent. His other companion, a shorter teenager, indicated the far wall, where another sewer pipe joined with the main tunnel.

‘Over there!’ he shouted and leapt across the foul-smelling stream. He landed awkwardly on the edge of the pipe, but regained his balance and turned to the others.

‘Hurry!’ he urged.

They exchanged glances in the gloom and looked over their shoulders. Then one of them, the girl, leapt straight across the gap.

But the Scot stood facing the onrushing tide of rats. The girl glanced back at him.

‘Hamish, no!’ she shrieked. The Scot stood glaring down the pipe and as the rats rushed to surround him, he kicked down at the swarming, furry little bodies, breaking the backs of a few, although there were far too many for one person to deal with. It was a valiant effort but doomed, as the Scot soon saw. With two rats clinging to his jeans and many more at his heels, he turned and leapt after his companions. The two rodents fell with a plop into the rushing waters as he hit the other side.

He looked over his shoulder.

The rats were pouring into the water and swimming remorselessly towards them. Although the rapid current washed many of them away, the rest kept coming.

‘Run!’ shouted the girl and her two friends obeyed.

‘Oh, Susan? Before ya go, do yer fink you could sort out these files? Won’t take a second.’

DC Susan Rameiro, currently working undercover as PA to the Managing Director of Petroleum International plc, looked up from her desk where she’d been packing up to go home. It was 5:30 and if she had really been working here, she would have been well within her rights to tell her employer where he could get off and insist on putting it off till the morning. But Stephan Hammet, her boss - subject of investigation by CID - was waiting at the door with a large pile of files.

It seemed that he was working late again and if that was the case, then so was she.

‘Okay, sir,’ she said, as brightly as she could manage after a hard day. She got up and took them from him.

Hammet turned to go, but grinned over his shoulder with one last parting shot.

‘Oh and arrange ‘em alphabetically this time, won’ ya?’ He swept out.

DC Rameiro sighed and told herself that all his petty slights - not to mention his ersatz Cockney accent - would be reckoned for when they finally nailed the bastard.

She started sorting through the files, pitying the poor girls who had to do this kind of thing for a living. She arranged them into some sort of order, then crept to the door. She opened it to a crack.

The open-plan office beyond revealed no indications of life, apart from a cleaning lady with a mop on the far side. Darkness hung heavy throughout the rest of the office. No sign of Hammet.

Quickly and quietly, while the cleaner's back was turned, she glided across the room to Hammet's private office and tried the door. It was unlocked. Wincing as it creaked loudly, she opened it and slipped inside.

The office was in darkness. She glanced out of the window at the street below and watched the office workers of London scurrying past in the gloom. She shook her head; dark at half past five! And it had been dark that morning, when she came to work. It was like living underground. As she started leafing through Hammet's papers, she thought longingly of the hot white beaches of Naxos, where she and her boyfriend had spent two glorious weeks that August.

The rats were still pursuing.

Although their numbers had been reduced when they crossed the main sewer, hundreds still pursued the three fugitives. Their quarry still stumbled onwards through the effluent, growing weaker and more tired as they reeled on.

They must have run more than two miles through the labyrinth of drains, Hamish thought incoherently to himself and it was a wonder to him that he felt no giddier than he did. Adrenalin had forced him on ever since the rats started pursuing them and by now, he hardly noticed his numb legs; they seemed to be running on automatic pilot.

Beside him, Eloise was gasping deliriously, though she had initially proved a better runner than Hamish - much to his chagrin. She glanced over at him.

'How long till these rats give up?' she choked.

Hamish shook his head grimly.

Nick, who was ahead of them, shouted back;

'Look! Up ahead!'

Hamish strained his eyes to see what the crustie was indicating. There seemed to be some kind of inspection hatch on the left-hand side of the wall. He darted a look back to see the rapidly encroaching carpet of mangy fur of the pursuing rat pack was still at their heels.

Hamish grabbed Eloise by the arm and dragged her towards Nick's discovery. The crustie had reached the hatch and was tugging desperately at it. As Hamish reached him, he glared back at them.

'Fuckin' thing won't open!' he shouted over the increasing noise of the rats.

'Here, oota ma way,' Hamish said with grim condescension. Nick shrugged and stepped hurriedly back, standing between Eloise and the oncoming rats. Hamish reached out and pulled at the handle.

The hatch was old and thickly scabbed with rust. Hamish guessed that the hinges had seized up long ago. But that wouldn't stop him. He heaved and pulled and tugged and his muscles stood out in sharp relief on his sinewy arms, until suddenly the hatch gave way, coming away in Hamish's arms. He got a brief impression of a dry corridor and relatively sweet air, then turned and grabbed Eloise.

'Alright, alright,' she snapped as he bundled her up through the hatch. 'I can make it!'

‘Get in there,’ he growled and pulled himself up after her. Nick dived through the gap at the last moment, crashing into Hamish and sending him sprawling against Eloise. The pair of them tumbled down the dimly lit corridor.

Nick recovered quickly and slammed the hatch shut behind him. Panting, he slumped back against it.

Eloise and Hamish got to their feet and turned towards him.

‘What the fuck was awe that ab...’ Hamish began.

But he was cut short as a metal grille clanged down from the ceiling above, cutting them off from their friend.

Startled, Nick leapt to his feet, his dreadlocks flapping lankly about his thin face. He grabbed desperately at the bars and heaved, but to no avail. Eloise regarded him bewilderedly.

‘What’s going on in here?’ she demanded. Nick just shook his weary head in confusion.

‘Nick, can’t you get it open from your side?’ she demanded a while later. Her middle-class Sussex accent seemed incongruous beside Nick’s Scouse and Hamish’s broad Glaswegian. The Scot was resting after a couple of minutes spent heaving uselessly at the iron bars. He glanced up at the trapped crustie, but Nick shook his head.

‘Och, it’s no use,’ Hamish murmured, rubbing his shaven head in confusion. ‘It’s stuck on both sides.’

Eloise frowned. ‘What is going on?’ she said suddenly. ‘I could handle getting pursued by the police...’

‘How was I to know the bloke was gonna go to the bizzies?’ Nick demanded defensively. ‘I mean, you don’t expect that kind of thing in South London, do you? Grassing. Wasn’t as if it were obvious the stuff was nicked.’

‘Come off it!’ Hamish growled. ‘Some crustie in dreadlocks selling women’s jewellery in a pub in South London! Gey obvious.’

‘It was a stupid idea to come down here to get away from the police,’ Eloise snapped.

‘It was a stupid idea trying to sell knocked-off jewellery in a South London pub,’ Nick said bitterly. ‘Your idea, remember?’

‘But we need to get to North Wales,’ Eloise insisted. ‘We can’t afford the train fare otherwise.’

‘Och, we shoulda kept on trying to hitch,’ Hamish murmured. ‘Just ‘cause no bawbag would pick us up - we shoulda kept trying.’

‘It was useless,’ Eloise replied gloomily. ‘I mean, look at us.’

Hamish glanced from Eloise’s black clothes and Gothic make-up to Nick’s mud-stained German Army coat and tatty head of dreadlocks. Briefly, he considered his own bovver-boy appearance.

‘Suppose you’re right,’ he conceded grudgingly.

‘But like I said,’ Eloise went on. ‘It’s not that I mind running from the police...’

‘They won’t take me alive,’ Hamish said defiantly.

‘If we were in America, they wouldn’t want to - not with your record,’ Nick butted in. Hamish had begun his yearlong killing spree by murdering his own girlfriend. The police were certainly after him for that and might very well have linked him with a whole string of other anti-social acts.

‘Look, you’re both missing the point,’ Eloise said. ‘That isn’t all that’s worrying me - I didn’t much like coming down here, but I suppose, okay, we’d never have got away from the police otherwise. But it’s what’s been happening since then that I’m

talking about. Surely it isn't normal for rats to pursue people like this?'

'You did tread on their nest,' Nick pointed out.

'Anyway, I think they're rabid,' Hamish said casually. Eloise shuddered.

'But what about this,' she went on, indicating the bars that imprisoned Nick. 'Don't you think it's a bit odd?'

Nick frowned. 'Now you come to mention it,' he murmured. The last few hours had been so action-packed that he had lost the ability to think coherently. Life had narrowed down to one damn thing after another. But as his mental processes jerked back into gear, he realised that Eloise was right. It was very odd.

'This is a deliberate trap,' Hamish said slowly, wondering, as he caught on. 'What fuckwit put it here?'

DC Rameiro had been fully briefed by DI McCavity before her mission began; she knew Stephan Hammet was not the respectable businessman the world knew. Their contact had dropped hints suggesting he was at the centre of a crime-ring that would have put Professor Moriarty to shame, but until she began leafing through Hammet's papers, she hadn't had an inkling that he might have any connections with the notorious Tybalt Kohl.

But here it was in black and white; letter after letter, dating from the previous year, before the Neo-Nazi had finally vanished without trace. It seemed that Hammet's political convictions were even further to the right than would be expected from a card-carrying Thatcherite. He had paid for Kohl's accommodation after the man left Brazil to begin preaching his new ultra-fascist gospel of race war to the unemployed angry white males of Europe. He had also contributed massive amounts of money to party funds - which explained a great deal; the Brazilian police had sworn blind that Kohl lived alone in a small hut in the jungle. There had been the usual rumours of Swiss bank accounts and Jewish gold, but now Susan Rameiro had stumbled across the true explanation. Hammet had been funding Kohl with the money raised by his gambling, prostitution, extortion and protection rackets. Between them, she calculated, they had been responsible for three quarters of the crimes committed in Greater London over the last twelve months, not to mention the increase in racist attacks. In fact -

Susan stopped short. She'd heard a sound from outside the office. As she reached out to flick off the desk lamp, she saw with a shock that the door-handle was turning. She looked around in panic and her darting eyes settled rapidly on the stock cupboard, its door slightly ajar. Heart beating ten-to-the-dozen, she leapt into the cupboard and pulled the door closed behind her.

She stood in the darkness, with boxes of paper digging into her thighs and listened intently. The door had opened and someone was coming in. She heard a voice; Hammet, muttering to himself. She frowned. That wasn't like him. She listened closely.

'Fought I'd turned this lamp off,' he was muttering in his Mick Jagger voice. Susan flushed, as she realised he was referring to the desk-lamp she had left turned on. 'And what are these files doin' out 'ere?' Hammet chuntered on. Cold sweat broke out over Susan's brow and her heart beat rapidly. She heard a filing cabinet slam.

'Oh well,' - she heard Hammet talking to himself again - 'down we go.' He started whistling an old Jam song and Susan heard a hiss, like a lift door opening. Then there was another hiss and Hammet's whistling was immediately cut off.

Susan waited in the darkness for a while longer. It could be a trap - after all, she

had left enough evidence of her presence. She considered the last few things she had heard. There was a lift in the building, of course, but it was on the far side of the main office and she'd never seen anything to indicate that Hammet had a private lift.

Soon her curiosity got the better of her and she opened the cupboard door. The office was in darkness, lit only by the sodium orange of the streetlamps outside. For a few seconds, the room seemed unchanged, but then Susan noticed the large black rectangle in the centre of the opposite wall. Precisely what she had been expecting; a lift door. And it had certainly not been there when she entered the office.

She hurried over.

The door must have been hidden behind a wall-panel. Now, that was suspicious if anything was, Susan thought. Where had Hammet gone? For a second, she considered calling in for back-up, but that would mean waiting and she wasn't ready to let her prey escape. Thumbing the lift control, she awaited its return.

She wondered where it would take her. Why did Hammet need a secret lift in his office? Could it have any connection with his disappearing confederate? Kohl had vanished some time ago, but his legacy remained on the streets of London and other major European cities; an exponential increase in skinheads and Neo-Nazis and a spate of attacks on immigrants and ethnic minorities - most especially Jews, which was curious since the far right tended to target Blacks and Asians more frequently these days. Susan assumed that it was easier to identify persons of colour as a threat, since Jews tend to look little different from Caucasians; something that had troubled...

She dismissed the matter as the lift door swished open. Stepping into the small compartment revealed, she studied the controls. There were only two buttons, one with an arrow pointing upwards, the other with an arrow pointing down. She tried the 'up' arrow. The lift refused to move. She pressed the 'down' arrow.

With a shudder and a jerk, the lift machinery started up again. The door hissed shut and the lift began to descend. Susan wondered what she would find at the bottom. She folded her arms and waited patiently.

At last, the lift stopped. The door opened.

She stepped out and leapt back in shock as she caught a glimpse of someone walking straight towards her.

'Can you get out back through the hatch?' Eloise asked. Nick looked dubiously at it.

'How would I find you?' he asked. Eloise looked down the corridor. It trailed off into the distance, dimly lit by working lights.

'Maybe we could find a way up to the street this way and you could make your way through the sewers to the nearest manhole, get out that way. We could meet by Nelson's Column, say.'

Nick shrugged and turned towards the hatch. He reached forward and pulled it open.

Immediately, the angry chittering of rats flooded the passageway and Nick hastily slammed the hatch shut, but not before one mangy little rodent forced its way through. It skittered angrily round and round the enclosed space while Nick leapt up and down, shrieking like a schoolgirl frightened by a mouse.

Eventually the rat leapt through the bars, dodged between Hamish and Eloise and scuttled off squeaking down the corridor. Nick looked at his two companions and shook his head.

‘Like fuck I’m going into those sewers,’ he murmured.

‘No, well we wouldn’t expect you to, now,’ Eloise said impatiently. She sighed. ‘Look, there must be some way of freeing you...’

Hamish folded his arms. ‘Ah cannie get him out and if Ah cannie, no-one can.’

Eloise looked irritated. ‘There must be some way,’ she repeated.

‘Maybe if you find the bastards responsible and get them to free me,’ Nick suggested. ‘Take a look down the passage.’

Eloise looked doubtfully at Nick.

‘You sure you’ll be alright on your own?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, as long as no fucker opens this hatch,’ Nick replied.

‘Come on,’ said Hamish abruptly, taking Eloise’s arm and steering her away. ‘We’ll go and find someone.’

Eloise glanced back as she followed the Scot down the corridor.

‘Be careful now,’ she murmured, her voice full of concern. Then the gloom swallowed them up.

‘Me be careful,’ Nick murmured. ‘I’m fine as I am.’ He sat down in the corner and stared worriedly at the hatch.

Eloise and Hamish followed the passage.

‘Who on earth would do a thing like that, put a trap in a maintenance tunnel?’ Eloise asked.

‘Search me,’ Hamish replied. ‘There’s some weird fucks about.’

Eloise nodded. They had met a few in their time; black magicians, demons, Goths who thought they were vampires, vampires who claimed to be Goths... It had been during that particular experience that she had seen her sister die, drained of her blood by vampire cultists. But she knew that Becky could be brought back if only they could reach Caer Pedryfan in North Wales and the mystic Cauldron of Annwfyn, the Celtic Holy Grail.

Ahead of her, Hamish had stopped. Eloise looked round him and saw that they had reached a T-junction. To the right, the corridor led to a doorway; to the left, it continued as far as they could see.

‘This way?’ asked Hamish, indicating the left-hand path. Eloise shook her head and walked towards the door. Hamish followed her.

‘There might be someone through here,’ she said softly.

‘Or at least a way out,’ Hamish replied. Eloise darted him a look.

‘I hope you’re not considering leaving Nick,’ she said sternly. She reached out and opened the door.

As she did so, a scuffling sound came from the small, dark room beyond. Hamish grabbed Eloise’s shoulder and pulled her back.

‘Get off!’ she snapped.

‘Careful,’ the Scot murmured. ‘We don’t know what we’re dealing with.’ He had pulled out his combat knife, a long, wicked blade, almost the length of his brawny forearm.

He crept through the door.

Eloise hurried after him, determined not to be left behind. Hamish had an maddening tendency to come over all chivalrous in these situations and she just could not stand it.

As she followed him in, she found him confronting a motley crowd. Five or six people, grime-stained, pinch-faced and dressed in rags; a few of them were crusties like Nick and the rest had the zombie-white skin and red-rimmed eyes of heroin addicts. One of the male crusties was only about three feet high, though clearly adult,

possessing a long goatee. All of them were armed with knives and chains.

The dwarf stepped forward.

‘Get out, now,’ he rumbled in a surprisingly deep voice. He had a Yorkshire accent. ‘We don’t want to fight you, but we will if we’re forced to. And we outnumber you.’

‘Fuck you, ya little freak!’ snarled Hamish, in his characteristically tolerant manner.

Eloise stepped forward and pulled him back. ‘Hamish - don’t. They don’t pose a threat. And they may be able to help us.’ She turned to the dwarf. ‘Who are you?’ she asked.

The dwarf looked shifty. He shrugged. ‘Homeless, aren’t we? Came down here to squat, away from persecution. They call us the mole people. What are you doing down here?’

‘Oh, well, we’re travellers, I suppose,’ Eloise explained. ‘We were being chased by the police and we went down here to get away from them.’

‘Cool,’ said one of the other mole people. ‘You can join us, if you want.’ He eyed Eloise in a way she didn’t care for. But she could see that Hamish’s hackles were also rising, so she spoke quickly in an attempt to forestall him before he caused any more trouble.

‘Well, we’re not really looking for anywhere to stay, but thanks for the offer...’

‘Get ya eyes off ma girl!’ Hamish growled truculently.

‘Shut up, Hamish,’ Eloise said. ‘I’m not your girl.’ Shaking her head, she turned back to the others. ‘As I was saying, we’re not looking for somewhere to stay. You see, one of our friends is trapped, down the way. We were in the sewer tunnels and some rats were after us - we got away from them, but then this grille came down and trapped Nick. Do you know how we can get him out?’

The dwarf stroked his beard. ‘Sounds like your mate’s been caught by the fascists,’ he murmured.

‘What, the scoobies?’ Hamish asked. The dwarf shook his head.

‘No, real fascists,’ he said. ‘Nazis. Somewhere in this complex of service tunnels and sewers, a cell of Neo-Nazis have set up camp. Every so often, they come and beat us up, or drag us off to their base. We think they do experiments on the ones they drag off. They’re the only people we have to fear, except sanitary inspectors.’

Eloise stared at the dwarf doubtfully, trying to work out exactly what he’d been taking, but Hamish looked suddenly interested.

‘Nazis?’ he asked excitedly.

‘Yeah, goose-stepping, jackboot-wearing fascists,’ the dwarf said. ‘See, we can’t even escape persecution down here!’

‘What are Nazis doing down in the sewers?’ Eloise demanded. ‘Alright, alright, probably the best place for them, but...’

‘Oi!’ Hamish barked. ‘Awe that holocaust shit was Commie propaganda!’

‘Yes, Hamish,’ Eloise sighed. ‘You know, one thing that puzzles me is that Nazis spend half their time nail-bombing ethnic minorities and the other half denying the holocaust ever happened. Surely this means there’s some kind of confusion here?’

‘Fuck off,’ Hamish replied with eloquent directness.

Eloise shook her head and turned back to the mole people.

‘Well, whatever they’re doing down here...’

‘We don’t know ourselves,’ the dwarf interjected.

‘...whatever they’re doing - how can we free Nick?’

The oversexed mole person who had been eyeing Eloise volunteered some more

information.

‘They’ve got all the corridors fixed up with traps. They use them to catch us so they can experiment on us. You know - how long can degenerate Aryans like us survive Zyklon-B compared with your average well-heeled Rastafarian? I think the traps are all controlled from their base.’

‘Well, where’s their base, then?’ Eloise asked.

Susan Rameiro’s heart was pounding, but she gasped with relief at the same time. The lift door had opened out into a corridor lined with mirrored glass and the figure she had seen was just her reflection. She stood in the lift doorway, regarding herself as she recovered.

‘Christ - I’m afraid of my own shadow,’ she murmured. She could see that her lustrous black hair was ragged and elf-locked with sweat and her elegant white blouse was unpleasantly soggy around the armpits. Her rounded, heart-shaped face was white and her eyes seemed to bulge out of their sockets. She rubbed her cheek tiredly.

She heard a sound to her right. Startled, she peered round the corner into the corridor and was momentarily disorientated by a kaleidoscope of mirror images, but it resolved itself into a long corridor of reflective panels. Ahead lay a junction and just disappearing round the corner was a figure in a business suit. Hammet, Susan assumed. She hurried down the corridor.

At the junction, she peered round the corner. The passage stretched on for some way ahead before ending at another junction. No sign of Hammet here. Susan crept forward.

As she approached the next junction, her ears picked up the tramp of booted feet from the left. Back-peddalling, she looked for somewhere to hide. Spotting a convenient buttress, she ducked behind it.

Two Nazi soldiers marched across the junction.

Susan gaped. The pair had been decked out in full 1940s Third Reich uniforms; jackboots, swastika armbands - the whole bit. Also, they had been wearing gasmasks, which caused her some concern. Were they just trying to keep anonymous, or was there a real reason for having gasmasks down here?

She shook her head. Either they were utter regalia freaks, or else someone had taken them out of cold storage from a Nazi bunker. This was getting too fantastic. And she’d lost Hammet.

She decided to trail the Nazis.

The brick-lined tunnel ended at a large stretch of murky water.

Eloise and Hamish regarded it warily. They had followed the dwarf’s directions to the area where he said the Nazis were thickest on the ground and it had led them out of the inspection tunnels and into another area of sewers. Finally, they had found themselves here. Victorian brickwork curved up into the darkness and Eloise could just make out some kind of gantry hanging high above the water. Most of the area was in darkness, but a dim light shone somewhere on the far side of the water, illuminating a doorway.

‘This must be a storm-drain or something,’ Hamish murmured and he indicated a pair of logs bobbing in the water some way to the left.

‘What are we going to have to do, swim?’ Eloise said. ‘We’ll probably need tetanus jabs if we do!’

Hamish shrugged. He sat down and dangled his legs over the side. After a few seconds, he slid himself into the water.

It came up to his waist. He turned to face Eloise and as he did so, there was a faint splash from somewhere to their left.

‘Ah think we could wade across,’ Hamish began. Eloise spun round and stared into the murk, her face white. ‘What is it?’ the Scot demanded.

‘Hamish, get out of the water!’ Eloise demanded, her voice panic-stricken.

Hamish turned round, staring about him.

‘What...?’ he began again.

Then he broke off, peering nervously forward. Moving across the water ahead of him was a crescent-shaped ripple, like the bow-wave of a tiny tug-boat.

‘Eloise,’ he whispered. ‘What is it?’

‘I don’t know, Hamish, but there’s one less log over there,’ she replied ominously. ‘Get out of the water, Hamish.’

‘Ah’m coming!’ he said emphatically, turning to heave himself back out.

Then Eloise shrieked; ‘Oh, Hamish!’

He whirled round to see an alligator bursting out of the water, its jaws snapping at him. Instantly, he whipped out his combat knife and lunged.

Eloise watched in horror from the bank as her friend engaged in desperate combat with the deadly reptile. The alligator’s jaws clashed together as it thrust itself at Hamish, but the wild-eyed Scot brought his knife down again and again, filling the murky water with a darker stain of blood.

Savagely, they fought.

Meanwhile, Nick was sitting in the trap, disconsolate. He was feeling bored. For a while, he’d been worried about being trapped in rat-infested sewers for the rest of his life, but half an hour or more had passed since Hamish and Eloise departed and Nick’s attention span had never been very long.

He hoped they would come back soon, or find a way of freeing him. He was missing them already. Despite being constantly in their presence for the last few months, he longed for their company. Odd, because he never used to make really close friendships, back home in Liverpool. It had only been since running away to join a hippie convoy that he had started to come out of himself. Hamish and Eloise - especially Eloise - were the best friends he’d ever had; loyal, trustworthy... well, Eloise was. Never slagged him off, never picked on him.

Eloise didn’t.

Still, they didn’t half get him in some sticky situations. What was he doing in a sewer-system full of rabid rats? He shook his head. It was true what Eloise said, there was something unnatural about the way the creatures had pursued them.

But at least he was fairly safe here. Though whenever he listened hard, he was positive he could hear them squeaking and scratching at the hatch. It made him shudder all over.

Two alligators were attacking Hamish now and his chest was bloody. The first reptile was steadily weakening, bleeding its lifeblood into the foul waters. But the second - presumably its mate - was attacking with fresh vigour.

Eloise stood by the bank, feeling useless. These situations always made her feel inadequate; what could she do? Her function in the group was as the organiser, the

knowledgeable one, the wise woman; the witch. She knew magick. Oh, not the magic of fairy tales, or even of fantasy novels, but true supernatural powers; the ability to summon demons to aid her, to move objects with the mind, to heal, to journey in spirit form... Not much use in a combat situation, however.

The first alligator was floating upside down in the water by now, surrounded by its own blood and Hamish was struggling weakly with its enraged comrade. As Eloise watched, the creature bit a chunk out of his semi-naked chest. Blood leaked into the surrounding water.

Eloise squatted down on the floor and began to concentrate on freeing her soul from the trammels of the flesh.

Hamish stabbed at the alligator again, ripping up into its soft underbelly. It snapped savagely at him and only with a superhuman effort did he manage to dodge backwards in time. The water severely hampered his movements.

He stabbed forwards again. He had killed one of the alligators and that was something to be proud of, but it had left him in a poor condition to the fight the second reptile. He wouldn't have minded, but Eloise didn't seem to be trying to help at all. He stabbed at the thrashing alligator again. It seemed to have paused its attack. Puzzled, the skinhead made a feint. The alligator just floated in front of him. He went to stab it...

'No, Hamish,' Eloise cried. He twisted round to look at her. She was sitting on the bank looking like some Paki Buddha or something, with her legs crossed. He glared at her.

'What?' he shouted.

'Don't kill it,' she murmured. Hamish shook his head in despair. She was taking this animal rights thing a bit too far.

'It's trying to kill me, ya soft bitch!' he growled. 'What d'you mean, don't kill it?'

'Is it trying to kill you?' she demanded rhetorically. 'Look at it. It's not trying anything.'

Hamish glanced at it. True - for the moment, the alligator was still.

'Awe the more reason to kill it the noo!' he barked.

'No, Hamish,' Eloise said urgently. 'I... I melded my spirit with it and convinced it to become placid. Come on, we can get across the water now, before the effects wear off.'

Hamish stared at her. He frowned. 'This one of yer New Age occult things?' he asked finally.

She nodded. 'Psionics,' she said, getting up. 'Telepathic hypnosis. Remote influencing, the CIA call it... Come on,' she added, slipping into the water. 'Over we go.'

Hamish followed, after giving the two alligators a bewildered look - the dead one and the one Eloise had turned into a hippie. He'd never get used to Eloise's powers.

On the far side they found a door in the brick wall, with another red working light above it. Painted in the centre of the door was a large black swastika. Eloise shuddered, but Hamish grinned.

'Come on, in we go,' Eloise said, then checked herself, glancing at Hamish's wounded body. 'Are you going to be alright like that?'

'Aye, Ah'll be okay,' he replied. 'It's worse than it looks. Unless you can magic it away, you know - wave yer magic wand...'

Eloise shook her head. 'Not for a while. Magick really takes it out of you. It's

never like it is in Sabrina the Teenage witch.’

Hamish shrugged and pushed open the doors. They led to a flight of steps. He turned to Eloise.

‘Up here, Ah think.’

She nodded in agreement and they squelched cautiously up the stairs. After half a minute, they reached a landing. The steps continued, but they could see another door on the other side. Hamish opened it to a crack and peered out. She raised an eyebrow. He shrugged and opened the door.

It led into a deserted tube station.

They stepped cautiously out onto the platform. Eloise stared down the track, then looked at the wall.

“‘Charing Cross Station’,’ she read. She glanced at Hamish. ‘There isn’t a station in Charing Cross, is there?’

The Scot shrugged. ‘Ah don’t know. Ah’m no’ English.’

‘There isn’t a Charing Cross Station,’ Eloise insisted emphatically.

‘Mebbe,’ Hamish suggested in a ghoulisish whisper, ‘mebbe it’s the lost tube station.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ Eloise said dismissively. ‘That’s just an urban myth.’

‘So are alligators in the sewers,’ Hamish pointed out.

Eloise was about to come back with a scathing retort when they heard the tramp of booted feet coming from a nearby archway. Hamish looked at Eloise. ‘Quick, hide there.’ He hid on one side of the arch, Eloise on the other. Eloise mouthed a question at him, but he shook his head.

They waited.

Two Nazi soldiers marched out of the arch. Hamish leapt out, grabbing the nearest one round his neck and slid his knife into the man’s ribs.

The other guard swung round, training a Sten-gun on the skinhead. Seeing this, Eloise threw herself on the soldier, dragging him back. The shot went wild and before the Nazi could struggle, Hamish stabbed him in the heart.

Eloise let the corpse drop. She looked at Hamish.

‘I thought you liked Nazis,’ she remarked.

Hamish grinned. ‘Och, Ah do - but Ah’ve ayeways wanted to do that. Besides,’ he continued, his expression changing, ‘it’s a matter of basic loyalties.’

‘What d’you mean?’ Eloise asked.

‘Simple. They weren’t Scots.’

Reflecting bleakly on the narrow world her companion inhabited, Eloise gingerly investigated the two corpses. A thought struck her.

‘But who were they?’ she asked.

‘Ah don’t know.’ Hamish murmured. He reached forward and pulled the gasmask off the first one.

He gasped.

‘What’s the matter?’ Eloise asked, studying the thin face he had revealed. It looked vaguely like Michael Palin. Hamish looked up at her.

‘Hess.’

‘Who?’

‘Hess - Rudolf Hess.’

Eloise rubbed her chin.

‘He’s dead, isn’t he?’

Hamish shrugged. ‘He is now.’

Eloise went over to the other corpse.

‘Who’s this then, Himmler?’ she murmured. With a grimace of distaste, she pulled the gasmask off.

Exactly the same face looked glassily back at her.

She straightened.

‘Hamish,’ she said quietly.

‘Aye,’ he replied. ‘Ah know.’ He shook his head.

‘I know the Nazis were supposed to be ahead of their time when it came to genetics,’ Eloise said slowly. ‘But this...’

She stood silently for a few seconds. Then she glanced down at her clothes. ‘Oh, I’m wet through,’ she complained. She caught Hamish’s eye.

‘Are you thinking what Ah’m thinking?’ he asked. He reached towards the nearest corpse.

Susan had lost Hammet, lost the Nazis and finally lost herself. She had been wandering round and round the disorientating mirrored corridors for what seemed like hours and in all that time she had found nothing and no-one. She began to despair of ever getting out. Her walkie-talkie seemed to have stopped working, she hadn’t the faintest idea where she was, she was sick and tired, she was...

Suddenly, she caught sight of an archway ahead. There was something beyond it - she couldn’t work out what it was, but it wasn’t reflective. She hurried towards it.

She came out into a deserted tube station. The transition was shocking, surreal. Standing in the archway for a couple of seconds, completely dazed, she failed to notice a door halfway along the wall as it closed quietly. She rubbed her eyes and looked around her. She was even considering pinching herself when she realised that the station wasn’t completely deserted - two semi-naked figures lay on the platform ahead of her. She went over to take a look at them.

Both were naked apart from boxer shorts. Both had suffered fatal stab-wounds.

Both looked like Rudolf Hess.

Beside one lay a smelly, soggy pile of black female garments, beside the other was a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt, also sopping wet. Susan reached forward and picked up a metal object that someone must have dropped out when they were stripping the corpses.

She looked at it for some time. It was a Luger.

She shook her head. This was just too much, she told herself. This was - she felt as if she’d been drugged! Bewildered, she raised her eyes and gawped at her surroundings.

She was standing in the middle of Charing Cross Underground Station (wherever that was), in front of two dead carbon-copies of Rudolf Hess. This was... absurd!

She heard a scuff from the archway and turned to see Hammet marching in. He was wearing full SS dress uniform, but by now Susan was beyond astonishment.

‘There you are!’ he chuckled, his rugged face creased with a charming smile. ‘I fought you’d got lost.’

‘You knew I’d followed you?’ Susan asked.

‘I engineered it,’ Hammet replied. ‘Yer didn’t fink I’d leave the entrance to my private lift so obvious if I hadn’t been anticipatin’ yer, do ya?’

Susan shrugged dully. She indicated her surroundings. ‘Where is this?’ she asked.

Hammet raised an eyebrow. ‘Should I let an undercover policewoman know

that?’ Somehow, it failed to surprise her that he knew her true identity. Then he smiled. ‘But since you’re gonna die soon anyway, I see no reason not to. What you see around you is a complex of rooms I had built surrounding the abandoned Charing Cross station. The area’s guarded by traps and genetically modified animals...’

‘To protect Tybalt Kohl?’

‘So yer did read the letters? Yeah, Kohl - soon to be Führer of the Fourth Reich.’

‘Yes, I’ve heard all his claims...’ Susan began.

‘You’ve heard nothin’,’ he replied. ‘Yer know nothin’ about what he can do.’

‘But how did you get mixed up this?’ Susan asked. ‘Respectable businessman like you.’

‘There are no respectable businessmen,’ Hammet replied. ‘The last one died in 1980 and he was a leery bastard on the sly. I’m no different from my fellows, except that I’m actively tryin’ to put in their place all the wasters and scum and degenerates this country’s plagued wiv. All the work-shys and the liberals and the poofers and the Jews are a cancer, gnawin’ at the vitals of a once great country...’

‘You’d prefer it if Britain became part of a Neo-Nazi empire?’

‘Why not?’ Hammet asked. ‘The Führer says the Anglo-Saxons are as Aryan as the Germans and why shouldn’t we share livin’ space wiv our own folk rather than be throttled out of it by the subhuman races? All this Kohl will bring about.’

Susan shrugged. ‘Well, like most of my colleagues, I couldn’t agree with you more. What this country needs is firm discipline; an iron hand that will put an end to rampant, degenerate liberalism and poor racial hygiene...’

‘Really?’ Hammet asked. He was beginning to see this thorn in his side in a new light.

‘...but unfortunately, my duty is to arrest you and bring you to justice,’ she finished, with genuine regret.

Hammet scowled. ‘Very well,’ he said. He went for his gun.

Hamish and Eloise were still marching up the steps when a shot rang out from below. They exchanged glances.

‘What was that?’ Hamish said, pushing back his gasmask.

Eloise copied him. ‘A shot,’ she murmured. ‘Maybe someone’s found those corpses. We should’ve hidden them, really. Quick! We’d better get down there and make sure no-one raised the alarm.’

Hamish shouldered his Sten-gun and hurried back down the steps and Eloise followed. As they reached the door to the station, they slipped their gasmasks back on. Then they marched out onto the platform.

A woman stood there with a smoking Luger in her hand. She was in her mid-twenties and looked like a secretary. An expression of deep confusion was on her face. In front of lay a dead Nazi.

As Eloise and Hamish marched in, she turned and gasped. She let off a wild shot in their general direction, then disappeared through an archway.

Eloise got up from the crouch she’d instinctively adopted when the woman swung towards them and pushed back her gasmask.

‘What was all that about?’

‘Ah don’t know,’ said Hamish, ‘but she’s shot a Nazi.’ He ambled over to the corpse. ‘Cool! He’s got a sword,’ he said, eyeing the corpse’s ceremonial sabre. Quickly removing the sword-belt, he strapped it on.

‘Come on, Hamish - we just want to free Nick and get out,’ Eloise said impatiently.

‘Ah’m coming,’ snapped Hamish. He followed her out of the station. ‘What about that woman?’

‘She’s a mystery we don’t have time to solve,’ Eloise replied. She slipped her gasmask back on and started up the steps.

These led eventually to another door with a swastika painted on it. Hamish pushed it open and Eloise followed him into a large cold room lined with glass sarcophagi.

‘What’s awe this?’ Hamish asked, his voice distorted by the gasmask as he looked around the chamber. Eloise moved over to one of the sarcophagi.

‘There’s a man in here, frozen,’ she said. Inside the sarcophagus, she could see a naked figure in a block of ice. Various wires and tubes led away to a control unit on the wall above.

‘Who is it?’ asked Hamish, moving closer. ‘Anyone we know?’ He looked at the body. ‘It’s Hess again,’ he murmured. He went over to the next sarcophagus. ‘Aye, a Hess here. And a Hess there...’

‘Here a Hess, there a Hess, everywhere a Hess-Hess,’ Eloise murmured. ‘Nazi on the rocks. Weird.’

‘This must be where they keep their soldiers when they don’t need them,’ Hamish said.

‘Who does, though?’ Eloise pondered. She turned to Hamish. ‘That one the woman shot - he wasn’t Hess, was he?’

‘Och, no. Ah didnae recognise him.’

‘I think I did,’ Eloise replied. ‘I’m sure I’ve seen him in the papers - not wearing SS uniform, either. Some kind of businessman?’ She shrugged. ‘But none of this is helping Nick.’

‘There’s a way out here.’ Hamish indicated the far side of the chamber, where a pair of doors stood at the centre of a steel wall. He pushed them open and went through. Eloise hurried after him.

Beyond the doors, they found a large control room. It was lined with banks of instruments and computer screens and against the left-hand wall stood a series of monitors. On the far side, a gantry led out across a dark abyss.

Eloise went over to the monitors. They showed various views of the sewers, the inspection tunnels, a series of mirror-panelled corridors and the tube station. On one of them, Eloise saw Nick, huddled glumly in the corner where they’d left him. She turned to Hamish, who was inspecting the gantry.

‘Hamish, we’ve found him.’

Hamish came over and stared at the screen.

‘How do we get him out, though?’ he asked.

Eloise looked pensive. She noticed a long row of levers below the screens and reached out to pull the nearest one.

A hatch slid down in a distant corridor, blocking off a dead end. Water began to pour into the area. Eloise reversed the lever; the water ceased and the hatch rose. Eloise pulled a few other levers with similar results.

‘Let me try,’ Hamish said after a while.

‘I can do it,’ Eloise insisted. Hamish shouldered her aside and reached for one lever that had been in the down position all along. The grille imprisoning Nick rose and the crustie leapt up, looked around and started down the passage out of sight.

Eloise, who was embarrassed at being outsmarted by Hamish, cried; ‘No - stay

there, Nick!

‘He cannie hear you,’ Hamish said impatiently. ‘Come on, we’d better go and find him before he gets himself lost.’

They turned to go and saw, standing in the doorway, a tall, thin, grey-haired man wearing a brown uniform and a swastika armband. A ceremonial sword hung from his belt.

Behind him stood two Hess-clones cradling submachine guns.

Susan ran desperately down the mirrored corridor, panting and sobbing hysterically to herself. She had shot Hammet! - what the hell had made her do that? It had been a natural reaction; he was about to kill her, after all. But if this got out, there’d be an enquiry! - she would be severely reprimanded! - her career would be in ruins!

Suddenly, she skidded to a halt. Time to pull yourself together, my girl, she told herself. She had to find some way to make amends and she couldn’t do that running around like a mouse in a maze. Something big was going on here; the place was crawling with Nazis - Kohl must be here, plotting something. If she could foil his plan before it came to fruition, she might come out of this still smelling of roses.

She turned and started to make her way back down the passage.

Nick was also hurrying along a corridor. He had been startled when the grille rose; he’d been beginning to think that his friends had deserted him, they’d been gone so long. He had no desire to sit around in that corner any longer, so he had gone looking for Eloise and Hamish.

He came to a junction. To his right was a door; to the left the corridor continued. He turned left.

‘Here you have got at last,’ the brown-uniformed man said. There was a faint trace of a German accent in his voice, but his tanned skin suggested a familiarity with other climes. ‘I must say, sir - in that uniform, you look very good.’

Hamish pushed back his gasmask. ‘How did you know we weren’t part of yer Hess look-alike convention?’ he demanded.

‘The clones?’ the man asked. ‘Oh, for some time your progress I’ve been watching. I saw you knife them.’

He cleared his throat and suddenly his two men surged forward, grabbing at Eloise and Hamish’s guns. They were staggeringly strong and easily wrenched the weapons away. Hamish and Eloise exchanged glances, then raised their hands.

‘Oh - for that there is no need,’ the man said. ‘I am so sorry, but sometimes overbearing force is more effective than civilised discourse. Please, your hands - put them down.’

They obeyed.

‘Who are you?’ Eloise asked.

‘I,’ the man replied, striking a Napoleonic pose, ‘am Tybalt Kohl.’

The two clones raised their right arms in Nazi salutes.

‘Heil Kohl!’ they chorused dutifully. ‘Sieg heil!’

‘Tybalt Kohl?’ Hamish gaped. ‘What are you doing doon here?’

‘Ach, well - a little too hot for me things got, up above, so my colleagues

decided to assist my disappearing.'

'I'm not surprised things got hot,' Eloise said quickly. 'Weren't you the one who went round last year proclaiming the Fourth Reich as if it was the Second Coming?'

Kohl laughed. 'Oh, very good, very good,' he twinkled. 'That I must remember. I have to say that I had received the impression as I watched your approach that one of these humourless left-wingers was coming. You are unlike your friend here.'

Eloise scowled. 'I have a sense of humour,' she retorted. 'But that doesn't stop me from being left-wing.'

'So, if a place in the Neo-Nazi Empire was offered you, you would not take it?'

Kohl inquired. 'All to the good - not very congruous would it look, a woman in power, despite dear Maggie. While you, on the other hand,' - he turned from the fuming Eloise to Hamish - 'you, I can see, a true Aryan warrior you are.'

'Och, Ah suppose so,' said Hamish doubtfully. 'So what?'

'If a position of power in my empire-to-be I offered you - would you accept?'

Hamish shrugged. 'What empire?' he asked. 'How are you gonna get an empire?'

'Let me explain. Thirty years ago, I am at the German Consulate in Rio de Janeiro, working as an attaché, when rumours I hear concerning the presence of Joseph Mengeles in the nearby jungle...'

'Mengeles?' Eloise interrupted. 'The Angel of Death?'

'Exactly,' Kohl agreed. 'The supreme master of genetics, whose experiments during Hitler's first reign were dramatically curtailed by the subhuman invasion of the Third Reich...'

'Do you mean when the Allies took Germany?' Eloise asked wryly.

'Indeed - if that, my dear, is how you wish to see it. Well. There are many legends concerning Nazis in Brazil, but something about this gave it the ring of truth. The old war-hero, I tracked him down and his secret arts he taught me; into the lost sciences of the Aryans initiated me. He told me how the subhumans of Lemuria and Mu - the ancestors of the Negroes and the Semitic folks - attacked the Aryan homeland of Schampulah and our world-spanning civilisation they destroyed, forcing us to retreat to Thule in the frozen north where for thousands of years as savages we dwelt before the encroaching ice southwardly forced us. How, during Karl Haushofer's expedition to Tibet, he had discovered the ruins of Schampulah and in the vaults of the capital city found the machines and the literature of the Elder Aryan Race. With the onset of war, Mengeles discovered himself - at the behest of the Führer himself - putting into practice these ancient sciences ...'

'Well, he could certainly spin a good yarn,' Eloise said disparagingly.

'Personally, I think he'd read too much Robert E Howard and Edgar Rice Burroughs, but...'

Kohl went relentlessly on, completely ignoring Eloise's sarcasm. 'After the Nazis' final stand, he to Brazil escaped, with only the blueprints of his machines - and one priceless collection of vril samples, from the Nazi elite taken in 1941...'

'Vril?' Eloise frowned.

'The force that powers all things and throughout the cosmos flows, through matter and through ether. In terms of the Jew science you are doubtless familiar with, the vril samples included DNA.'

'DNA?' Eloise was beginning to understand.

'With which - given the right equipment - we could the whole Party bring back, from the dead, as it were.'

‘You cloned them?’ Eloise asked. ‘So why have you only got Rudolf Hess?’

Kohl looked embarrassed. ‘Mengeles and I quarrelled; he said another Reich would never be; I disagreed. Out of his hut, he threw me, but beforehand, one phial I managed to grab. Since then I have worked to build the equipment necessary to create a clone army of Nazis and with them and the army I have above ground been massing, I shall Europe return to the state it was in back in 1941. And you’ - he pointed at Hamish - ‘may join me.’

‘What about Eloise?’ Hamish asked.

‘An uppity minx who doubtless thinks she should be something other than a broodmare for the race we do not need, ja?’ Kohl asked, grinning like a genial uncle. ‘We’ll throw her to my alligators.’

The two clones instantly seized hold of Eloise and started dragging her towards the gantry. Eloise suddenly recalled the identical gantry above the storm-drain. Alligators?

It seemed unlikely that her alligator would be as placid as it had been when they left it.

‘Hamish?’ she murmured quietly. ‘Hamish, don’t do this...’

‘Shut up, bitch!’ Hamish said, suddenly vicious. He turned to Kohl. ‘Wait - don’t throw her in. She could be beaten into line.’

Kohl smiled again. ‘Anything you desire is yours. When you agree to join me.’

‘Why do you need me?’ Hamish asked.

‘Another assistant I did have - Stephan Hammet, the petrol tycoon. But a few minutes ago he inconsiderately allowed himself to be shot by a police agent. Howbeit, he would never have much of a leader made - the common touch required to lead the non-clone warriors was in him lacking sadly.’

‘And it isn’t in me?’ Hamish asked.

‘Naturally,’ Kohl replied. ‘Like all Scots, you are a “proletarian”.’

Hamish nodded.

Kohl smiled. ‘So you accept?’

Hamish grinned hugely.

‘No,’ he said quietly and whipped out his sword.

Whirling round, he stabbed first one clone and then the other. As they died silently, helplessly, docilely, Eloise staggered back and watched in amazement as Hamish turned on Kohl.

The Neo-Nazi drew his own sword. ‘If that is how you want it,’ he said. ‘Might I warn you that at Heidelberg University I learnt to fence?’

‘Och, aye?’ Hamish replied, in tones of mock-awe. ‘Well, Ah learnt ta fight on the backstreets of Glasgow.’ He attacked savagely.

Nick was not far away. His progress through the tunnels had led him into the maze of mirrors, bypassing the storm-drain entirely and now he was lost and despairing. He had found no sign of his friends and no way out.

He trudged down the corridor, head down, feeling dispirited. The whole place was empty, silent.

No, not silent. He could hear a noise, just on the edge of hearing. Pausing, he tried to make it out. It was coming closer.

Suddenly it resolved itself into running footsteps. Nervously, Nick ducked round a corner and peered out. The sound came even closer.

A woman ran round the far corner and dashed down the passage. She was

dressed like someone who worked in an office, but she had a pistol in her right hand. Nick watched her sprint past.

He tugged thoughtfully at a mangy dreadlock. What was her problem? Deciding that he would rather follow her than be on his own, he headed back down the passage.

After all, she might know the way out.

Hamish parried a thrust from his opponent and converted it into a lunge, evaded it with a scornful flick of his blade and returned the attack.

‘So,’ Tybalt Kohl gasped, as he forced Hamish backwards across the gantry, ‘Why this refusal to aid me?’

Hamish made another wild lunge, but Kohl countered it with a quick, efficient parry. Hamish began to realise that the German was playing with him; he could have despatched him a hundred times by now.

‘Why?’ he said. ‘Och, mebbe Ah just don’t like yer face.’

‘Surely there’s more to it than that?’ Kohl replied. He made a feint for Hamish’s belly and followed it up with a swing at the skinhead’s shaven skull. Hamish deflected the attack clumsily.

‘Mebbe Ah didnae like you slagging off ma countrymen.’

Again Eloise was feeling inadequate. How she hated being a damsel in distress! She hovered near the end of the gantry, one eye watching the flash and flicker of the singing steel, the other trying to work out what lay beneath them. As far as she could make out, the water beneath the gantry was indeed the storm-drain, though no alligators were visible from up here.

As she gazed downwards, she caught the sound of a scuffle of feet from behind her; she turned, expecting more Nazis and was surprised to see the woman they had briefly met in the station bursting through the doors. She trained her gun shakily on Eloise, then stared at the duelling pair on the gantry.

‘Freeze!’ she shouted. ‘Hands in the air!’

Immediately, Eloise did as she was commanded and glanced back at Hamish and Kohl.

The German swung round as the woman shouted her orders. He scowled elegantly.

‘You’re the woman Hammet was supposed to deal with!’ he cried in frustration. ‘Why aren’t you dead?’

‘I dealt with Hammet first,’ she replied viciously. ‘Now I’m arresting you, Kohl, and these kids you’ve got working with you...’

‘We’re not working with him,’ Eloise insisted.

The woman turned to her. ‘Of course you are! Why else are you wearing that uniform? Now, move over to join your friends.’ Shaking her head, Eloise headed for the others.

‘Madam,’ Kohl laughed suddenly. ‘I’d love to stop and talk with a police agent, but I’d much rather be going!’ He laughed maniacally. ‘By the Gods of Blood and Soil!’ he shouted. Before anyone could reply, he turned, vaulted the rail and leapt over the edge. His sword flashed briefly in the gantry lights and he vanished.

Seconds later, a splash echoed through the brick-lined vault, followed by a thrashing and splashing sound and a brief, agonised howl. The woman stood staring at the gantry, her face a study in dismay. Her gun-arm trembled...

And Eloise struck.

It was hardly fair. The woman had gone through a great deal recently and was far from her full strength. Eloise found it an easy matter to wrest the gun from her, though her heart raced with fear; she heaved the gun out of the woman's unresisting fingers and flung it far away, over the edge of the gantry. The woman stood silent for a second, as if incapable of accepting what had happened.

Then she went for Eloise.

'You bitch!' she hissed. 'You've ruined my whole career!' She leapt at Eloise's throat and flung her savagely against the rail. Eloise struggled, but the woman began determinedly throttling the life out of her. The girl broke away long enough to gasp:

'Get a better job, then!' but then the woman grabbed a Sten-gun from the stiffening fingers of one of the dead clones and swung it at her. Eloise stumbled backwards to evade the blow and cried out with shock as the rusty rail suddenly gave way behind her. Involuntarily, she shot out a hand, flailing for a handhold before she fell and her fingers closed on the collar of the woman's blouse. They both tumbled over the edge.

Eloise fell for a few seconds before grabbing desperately at a metal joist, one of the struts that held up this end of the gantry. She hooked her legs round another convenient strut and found herself hanging upside down. The woman fell past her and Eloise shot out a hand to grab her. A shock jerked through her body as she arrested the woman's fall and she found herself hanging from the strut with the agonising weight of the woman dangling from her arm. She whimpered with the pain. For a second, absurdly, she could only think how glad she was to be wearing trousers.

A burst of machine gun fire jerked her back to reality.

She glanced down in terror. The woman still had the Sten-gun she'd grabbed and was firing it at her. Eloise hung helpless, immobile, a sitting duck as the woman hung from her hand and struggled to aim the gun at her saviour.

'Hamish!' Eloise shrieked and she heard a clang of metal as the skinhead came dashing across the gantry. He stood silhouetted at the edge of the gantry, staring down at the scene below. The woman heaved the gun up and fired in his direction. He hit the deck.

Then the woman returned her attention to Eloise, training the weapon on the girl's helpless body. Eloise snatched a glance at the spreading waters far below her. It was too dark to see, but she knew the alligator was waiting just beneath her. She looked at the woman again.

'Don't shoot!' she gasped. 'I... I'll drop you!' But she couldn't do it. She was a pacifist! She was opposed to violence - she couldn't kill anyone, not even this maniac. If she did, she would be descending to her level!

The woman's finger was tightening on the trigger again. Eloise murmured an incoherent prayer to the Goddess and hoped to die with her eyes open, like a true Pagan. But then she realised that there was no way she could hope to keep her principles in this situation.

She let go.

With a scream and an involuntary burst of gunfire that briefly lit up the waiting waters beneath, the woman fell into the darkness in a tumble of elegant clothing. Eloise heard the splash from below her, but her attention was directed upwards.

'Help me, Hamish!' she cried. There was no answer. Oh Goddess, had the woman shot him? Weakly, she tried to struggle upwards, but gravity was against her and her right arm was on fire with pain. She felt like she had wrenched it. 'Help!' she wailed again.

The metal gantry resounded with the ring of combat boots. Eloise's heart sank as a figure wearing a green uniform jacket appeared at the rails. Then she frowned. Was it...? Could it be...?

'Nick!' she cried. The dreadlocked head grinned down at her.

'Well, well, well,' said the crustie cheerily. 'If it isn't Ilsa, she-wolf of the SS.'

'Shut up and help me up,' Eloise snarled. 'And make sure Hamish is...'

'Och, Ah'm fine,' came the Scot's voice. 'Ah ducked and banged ma head on the floor. But Ah'm okay the noo. Nice work, Nick. You ayeways turn up in the nick of time. Ha, ha - get it? Never mind. Come on, let's just get oota here before any more nutters appear.'

About an hour later, Eloise and Hamish - back in their old clothes - were hiding in the dark behind a wagon, on the sidings at Euston Station. Nick had gone to check if the coast was clear; they were hoping to get to Wales by stowing away on a goods train, one of the many tricks the boy had picked up during a colourful childhood.

'We'll soon be at this Caer Pedryfan place,' Hamish was saying. He was still nursing the bruise on his forehead he'd got when he ducked the madwoman's attack. 'If what you say is true, then you'll be able to bring yer sister back to life with yer freaky magic stuff... What's the matter?'

Eloise was shuddering.

'You remind me of Kohl, talking about bringing back the dead,' she murmured.

Hamish shrugged. 'It's yer idea,' he grunted. 'Ah'mno a black magician.'

'Neither am I,' Eloise insisted. 'I'm a white witch.'

'Same thing,' Hamish murmured. They subsided into silence, waiting for Nick to return, or else someone official to find them and call the police. Eloise caught herself wondering why the woman in the Nazi base had attacked her - she'd apparently just gone berserk. Pressures of the job, she supposed; executive stress was enough to turn anyone into a psycho. But she shuddered to imagine how she must have died - the death Eloise had so narrowly escaped, the death Eloise had forced upon her. And that wasn't the only thing she found impossible to stop thinking about. Apart from that and Kohl's suicidal attempt to escape justice, there was one other matter.

'Hamish,' she murmured.

'Aye?'

'When you told me to shut up - when you seemed to be considering joining Kohl... did you mean it?'

Hamish turned to regard her. His bloodshot eyes were tired and his face was blank, showing no emotion. He was about to answer when Nick came bounding round the corner.

'Alright, everyone - we're getting out of here,' he said excitedly. 'Train to Wales just come in. Come on, let's get moving!'

Eloise and Hamish stumbled to their feet and followed Nick. It seemed Eloise would never know the answer. Well, there were more important considerations.

They were on their way to the mystical castle of Caer Pedryfan.

Saga of the Ere-Dwellers

Chapter 25 - Of Vermund And Thorarin In Norway; Of Those Bareserks.

Now is it to be said of Vermund and Thorarin the Swart that they came up from the main as far north as Thronnheim-mouth, and stretched in for Thronnheim. In those days Earl Hakon, son of Sigurd, ruled over Norway; so Vermund went to the Earl, and became his man, but Thorarin went thence straightway that same autumn West-over-the-sea with Alfgeir, and Vermund gave them his share in the ship; and henceforward Thorarin has nought to do with this tale.

Earl Hakon abode at Hladir that winter, and Vermund was with him holden in great friendship, and the Earl did well to him, because he wotted that Vermund was of great kin out in Iceland.

With the Earl were two brothers, Swedes of kin, one called Halli, the other Leikner; they were big men of stature and strength, nor at that time were their peers herein to be found in Norway, nor far and wide elsewhere. They wrought Bareserkgang, and were not of the fashion of men when they were wroth, but went mad like dogs, and feared neither fire nor steel; but their daily wont was to be not ill to deal with, if nought was done to cross them; but they were straightway the most overreckless of men if anyone should beard them. Eric the Victorious, King of Sweden, had sent these Bareserks to the Earl, and gave him this warning therewith, that he should treat them well, and said, as was true, that of them might be the greatest avail if folk gave heed to their moods.

Now in the spring, when Vermund had been one winter with the Earl, he yearned for Iceland, and prayed the Earl for leave to fare thither. The Earl bade him go since he would, and bade him thus: "Think if there be anything in my power more than another which thou wilt take for thy furtherance, such as may be worthy and honourable for both of us."

But when Vermund had thought thereover, what thing he should ask of the Earl, it came into his mind that his ways would be greatly furthered in Iceland if he had such followers as those Bareserks were; and settled in his mind that he would pray the Earl to give him the Bareserks for his following; and this urged him to ask for them, that he deemed that his brother Stir lay heavy on his fortune, and dealt unjustly with him as with most others when he could bring his strength to bear on him. So he thought that Stir would deem it less easy to deal with him if he had such fellows as those two brothers were.

Now says Vermund to the Earl that he will take that honour from his hands, if he will give him for his safeguard and fellowship those Bareserks.

The Earl answered: "Now hast thou asked me for that which seems to me will in nowise be to thy gain, though I grant it thee. I deem that they will be to thee hard and high-minded as soon as thou hast aught to deal with them. I deem it beyond the power of most bonders: sons to curb them or hold them in fear, though they have been yielding enough in their service to me."

Vermund said that he would take them with that risk if the Earl would give him them into his power. The Earl bade him first ask the Bareserks if they would follow him. He did so, and asked if they would fare with him to Iceland, and give him fellowship and service; but he promised in return that he would do well to them in such matters as they deemed of need to them, and of which they knew how to tell him.

The Bareserks said that they had not set their minds on going to Iceland, and they wotted not if there were such chiefs there as would be meet for them to serve; "but if thou art so eager, Vermund, that we should fare to Iceland with thee, thou must look

for it that we shall take it ill if thou givest not that which we ask for, if thou hast wherewithal." Vermund said that should never be, and thereafter he gat their yea to go to Iceland with him, if that were with the Earl's will and consent.

Now Vermund tells the Earl how things had gone, and the Earl settled that the Bareserks should fare with him to Iceland, "if thou deemest that most to thine honour;" but he bade him bethink him that he should deem that a cause for enmity if he ended ill with them, so utterly as they were now in his power; but Vermund said there was no need that things should come thereto.

Thereafter Vermund fared to Iceland with the Bareserks, and had a good voyage, and came home to his house in Bearhaven the same summer that Eric the Red went to Greenland, as is written afore.

Soon after Vermund came home, Halli the Bareserk fell to talk with Vermund about getting him a seemly match, but Vermund said he saw no hope that any woman of good kin would bind herself or her fortune to a Bareserk; so he hung back in that matter. But when Halli knew that, he burst out into wolfish mood and ill-will, and all went athwart betwixt them, and the Bareserks made themselves right big and rough with Vermund, so that he began to rue it that he had gotten him those Bareserks on hand.

Now in the autumn had Vermund a great feast, and bade Arnkel the Priest to him, and the men of Ere, and Stir his brother; and when the feast was over he offered to give the Bareserks to Arnkel, and calls that a thing of the fittest; but he will not take them.

Then Vermund asked Arnkel for counsel as to how he should rid himself of this trouble; but he put in a word that he had better give them to Stir, and said it rather befitted him to have such men because of his overweening and iniquitous ways.

So when Stir was ready to go away, Vermund went to him and said: "Now will I, brother, that we lay aside the coldness which was between us before I fared abroad, and take to faithful kinship and loving-kindness; and therewith will I give thee those men that I have brought out, for thy strength and fellowship, nor do I know any men will dare to trust themselves to strife with thee if thou hast such followers as they are."

Stir answered: "I have good will, brother, to better our kinship; but that only have I heard about those men whom thou hast brought out hither, that by taking them, one shall rather get trouble than furtherance or good luck from them; nor will I that they ever come into my house, for full enough are my enmities though I get me no trouble from these."

"What counsel givest thou then, kinsman," said Vermund, "that I may put off this trouble from me."

"That is another case," said Stir, "to loose thee from thy troubles, than taking these men of thine hand as a friendly gift, and thus I will not take them; but it is the due of no man more than me to put off this thy trouble from thee, if we both have one way of thinking about it."

But though Stir spake so, Vermund chose that he should take to him the Bareserks, and the brothers parted in good love. Stir went home and the Bareserks with him, though they were not willing to this at first, and bade Vermund know that he had no right to sell or give them like unfree men; yet they said withal that it was more to their mood to follow Stir rather than Vermund; and things went very hopefully between them and Stir at first. The Bareserks were with Stir when he went west over Broadfirth to slay Thorbiorn Jaw who dwelt at Jawfirth. A lock-bed he had made exceeding strong with beams of timber, but the Bareserks brake that up, so that the naves outside sprang asunder; yet was Stir himself the bane of Thorbiorn Jaw.

Chapter 26 - Of Vigfus And Swart The Strong. The Slaying Of Vigfus.

The autumn when the Bareserks came to Stir, this happed withal, that Vigfus of Drapalith went to burn charcoal to the place called Selbrents, and three thralls with him, one of whom was Swart the Strong; but when they came into the wood Vigfus said: "Great pity it is, and so thou wilt deem it thyself, Swart, that thou shouldst be an unfree man, strong as thou art, and manly to look upon."

"Truly I deem it a great trouble," said Swart; "but it is not so with my will."

Vigfus said: "What wilt thou do that I give thee thy freedom?"

"I may not buy it with money, for I have it not," said he; "but such things as I may do I will not spare."

Said Vigfus: "Thou shalt go to Holyfell and kill Snorri the Priest, and thereafter shalt thou verily have thy freedom, and therewith will I give thee good fortune."

"Nay, I may not bring that about," said Swart.

"I shall give thee counsel," said Vigfus, "so that this may be brought about without any risk of thy life."

"Well, I will listen to it," said Swart.

"Thou shalt go to Holyfell and get into the loft that is over the outer door, and pull up the boards of the floor, so that thou may'st thrust a bill therethrough; then when Snorri goes out to his privy, thou shalt thrust the bill through the floor of the loft into his back so hard that it may come out at his belly; and then leap off out on to the roof and so over the wall, and let the mirk night cover thee."

So with this counsel went Swart to Holyfell, and broke open the roof over the outer door, and went into the loft thereby; and that was at such time as Snorri and his folk sat by the meal-fires. But in those days were the places of easement outside the houses. But when Snorri and his folk went from the fires they were minded for the place of easement, and Snorri went first, and got off out into the outer door before Swart could bring his onset about; but Mar Hallwardson came next, and Swart thrust the bill at him, and it smote the shoulder-blade, and glanced off out towards the armpit, and there cut itself through, and no great wound it was. Then Swart sprang out and over the wall, but the causeway stones were slippery under him, and he fell a great fall when he came down, and Snorri got hold of him before he got up.

Then they had a true tale of him, and he told them all that had been twixt him and Vigfus, and withal that he was burning charcoal under Selbrents.

Then was Mar's wound bound up, and thereafter Snorri set out with six men to Drapalith. And when they came up the hill-side they saw the fire wherethat Vigfus and his folk burned charcoal. Withal they came unawares upon Vigfus and his men, and slew him, but gave life to the house-carles, and thereafter Snorri went back home; but the house-carles of Vigfus told these tidings at Drapalith.

Vigfus was laid in cairn the next day, and that same day went Thorgerd his wife into Lairstead to tell the tidings to Arnkel her kinsman, and bade him take up the blood-suit for the slaying of Vigfus. But he put that off from him, and said that that belonged to the Kiallekings, the kin of Vigfus; and above all would he have the case go to Stir, and said that it was fittest to him to take up the cause for Vigfus his kinsman; "for," said he, "he is a man who is fain to meddle in many things."

Now Thormod Trefilson sang this song about the slaying of Vigfus:

First the Folk-wielder
Felled there the feller
Of fight-boar gold-bristled,
Vigfus men hight him.
The wound-mews thereafter

There were they tearing
Full meat of fight-god,
Biorn's heirship wearer.

Chapter 27 - Arnkel Takes Up The Blood-Feud For Vigfus.

Thereafter went Thorgerd out under Lava, and bade Stir take up the suit for Vigfus his kinsman. He answered: "But I promised Snorri the Priest last spring, when he sat those suits of ours with the Thorgestlings, that I would not go against him with enmity in cases for the taking up of which there were many as nigh of kin as I. Now wert thou best to seek to Vermund my brother for this matter, or other kinsmen of ours."

So then Thorgerd fared out to Bearhaven, and prayed Vermund for aid, and said that the case came most home to him, "because Vigfus was wont to trust in thee the best of all his kin."

Vermund answered: "Now am I bound to lay down some good counsel for thee; yet am I loth to go into these matters instead of other kinsmen of ours, but I shall give thee help both with furtherance and counsel such as I may get done; but first I will that thou fare west to Ere and find Steinthor, Vigfus's kinsman; he is now at ease to fight, and it is now high time for him to try himself in some kind of case."

Thorgerd answered: "Much ye make me do for this suit, but I will not spare my labour if it be to its furtherance."

Thereafter she went west to Ere and found Steinthor, and bade him be leader of the case.

Steinthor answered: "Why dost thou bid me this? I am but a young man, and have had nought to do with the cases of men. But there are kinsmen of Vigfus nearer to him than I am, who are more forward than I withal; neither is it to be anywise hoped that I should take this case from their hands; but I shall not part myself from those of my kin who may have this blood-suit to look to."

No other answer got Thorgerd than this. So she made for home thereafter and then east again along the firths to find Vermund, and told him what things had come to, and said that the whole matter would be thrown over unless he became leader thereof.

Vermund answered: "It is not unlikely that some stir will be made concerning these matters for thy comforting. However, I shall now once more lay down a rede for thee if thou wilt but do thine utmost."

She answered: "Most things would I undergo therefor."

"Now shalt thou go home, and let dig up Vigfus thy husband, and take his head and bring it to Arnkel, and say to him thus, that that head would not have weighed with others the taking up of the blood-suit after him, if need there had been thereof."

Thorgerd said she wotted not where these things were coming to in the end, but she saw well enough that they spared her neither labour nor heartburn. "Yet even this will I undergo," said she, "if thereby the lot of my foes be made heavier than before."

Thereafter she fared home, and went in about this business as she was taught in all wise; and when she came to Lairstead she told Arnkel that the kin of Vigfus would that he should be the leader in taking up the blood-suit for the slaying of Vigfus, and that they all promised their help.

Arnkel said that he had said before whereto his mind was given about the suit.

Therewithal Thorgerd drew from under her cloak the head of Vigfus, and spake:

"Here is now a head," said she, "that would not have begged off from taking up the suit for thee, if there had been need thereof."

Arnkel started back thereat, and thrust her from him, and said: "Go," says he, "and say so much to the kin of Vigfus, that henceforward they waver not more in their help against Snorri the Priest, than I shall in the leading of the suit; but so my mind tells

me that, however the case goes, they shall lay land under foot or ever I do. But I see that these thy doings are by Vermund's counsel; but no need will he have to egg me on wheresoever we brothers-in-law are in one place."

Then went Thorgerd home. The winter wore, and in the spring Arnkel set afoot the case for the slaying of Vigfus against all those who had been at the slaying, except Snorri the Priest; but Snorri set forth a cross-suit for the unhallowing of Vigfus for plotting against his life and for the wounding of Mar; and men came thronging on both sides to the Thorsness Thing.

All the Kiallekings gave help to Arnkel, and theirs was the biggest company; and Arnkel pushed on the case with great eagerness.

But when the cases came into court, men went thereto, and the cases were laid to award by the urging and peace-making of men of good will; and so it befell that Snorri the Priest made a handsel as to the slaughter of Vigfus, and great fines were awarded; but Mar should be abroad for three winters. So Snorri paid up the money, and the Thing came to an end in such wise, that peace was made in all the suits.

Chapter 28 - Of The Bareserks And The Wooing of Asdis, Stir's Daughter.

Now that happed to tell of next which is aforewritten, that the Bareserks were with Stir, and when they had been there awhile, Halli fell to talking with Asdis, Stir's daughter. She was a young woman and a stately, proud of attire, and somewhat high-minded; but when Stir knew of their talk together, he bade Halli not to do him that shame and heartburn in beguiling his daughter.

Halli answered: "No shame it is to thee though I talk with thy daughter, nor will I do that to thy dishonour; but I will tell thee straightly that I have so much love in my heart for her, that I know not how to put it out of my mind. And now," said Halli, "will I seek for fast friendship with thee, and pray thee to give me thy daughter Asdis, and thereto in return will I put my friendship and true service, and so much strength through the power of my brother Leikner, that there shall not be in Iceland so much glory from two men's services as we two shall give thee; and our furtherance shall strengthen thy chieftainship more than if thou gavest thy daughter to the mightiest bonder of Broadfirth, and that shall be in return for our not being strong of purse. But if thou wilt not do for me my desire, that shall cut our friendship atwain; and then each must do as he will in his own matter; and little avail will it be to thee then to grumble about my talk with Asdis."

When he had thus spoken, Stir was silent, and thought it somewhat hard to answer, but he said in a while:

"Whether is this spoken with all thine heart, or is it a vain word, and seekest thou a quarrel?"

"So shalt thou answer," said Halli, "as if mine were no foolish word; and all our friendship lies on what thine answer will be in this matter."

Stir answered: "Then will I talk the thing over with my friends, and take counsel with them how I shall answer this."

Said Halli: "The matter shalt thou talk over with whomsoever pleases thee within three nights, but I will not that this answer to me drag on longer than that, because I will not be a dangler over this betrothal."

And therewithal they parted.

The next morning Stir rode east to Holyfell, and when he came there, Snorri bade him abide; but Stir said that he would talk with him, and then ride away.

Snorri asked if he had some troublous matter on hand to talk of. "So it seems to me," said Stir.

Snorri said: "Then we will go up on to the Holy Fell, for those redes have been the

last to come to nought that have been taken there.”

“Therein thou shalt have thy will,” said Stir.

So they went upon to the mount, and there sat talking all day till evening, nor did any man know what they said together; and then Stir rode home.

But the next morning Stir and Halli went to talk together, and Halli asked Stir how his case stood.

Stir answered: “It is the talk of men that thou seemest somewhat bare of money, so what wilt thou do for this, since thou hast no fee to lay down therefor?”

Halli answered: “I will do what I may, since money fails me.”

Says Stir: “I see that it will mislike thee if I give thee not my daughter; so now will I do as men of old, and will let thee do some great deed for this bridal.”

“What is it, then?” said Halli.

“Thou shalt break up,” says Stir, “a road through the lava out to Bearhaven, and raise a boundary-wall over the lava betwixt our lands, and make a burg here at the head of the lava; and when this work is done, I will give thee Asdis my daughter.”

Halli answered: “I am not wont to work, yet will I say yea to this, if thereby I may the easier have the maiden for wife.”

Stir said that this then should be their bargain.

Thereafter they began to make the road, and the greatest of man’s-work it is; and they raised the wall whereof there are still tokens, and thereafter wrought the burg. But while they were at the work, Stir let build a hot bath at his house at Lava, and it was dug down in the ground, and there was a window over the furnace, so that it might be fed from without, and wondrous hot was that place.

Now when either work was nigh finished, on the last day whereon Halli and his brother were at work on the burg, it befell that thereby passed Asdis,

Stir’s daughter, and close to the homestead it was. Now she had done on her best attire, and when Halli and his brother spake to her, she answered nought.

Then sang Halli this stave:

“O fair-foot, O linen-girt goddess that beareth

The flame that is hanging from fair limbs adown!

Whither now hast thou dight thee thy ways to be wending,

O fair wight, O tell me, and lie not in telling?

For all through the winter, O wise-hearted warden

Of the board of the chess-play, not once I beheld thee

From out of the houses fare this-wise afoot,

So goodly of garments, so grand of array.”

Chapter 29 - Of Thorod Scat-Catcher And Of Biorn Asbrandson, And Of The Slaying Of The Sons Of Thorir Wooden-Leg.

There was a man called Thorod, who was of the Midfell-strand kindred. He was a trustworthy man and a great seafarer, and had a ship afloat. Thorod had sailed on a trading voyage west to Ireland and Dublin.

At that time Sigurd Lodverson, Earl of the Orkneys, had harried in the South-isles, and all the way west to Man. He had laid a tribute on the dwellers in Man; and when peace was made, the Earl left men to wait for the scat (and the more part thereof was paid up in burned silver), but he himself sailed away north to the Orkneys.

Now when they who had awaited the scat were ready to sail, the wind blew from the south-west, but when they had been at sea a while, it shifted to the south-east and east, and blew a great gale, and drove them north of Ireland. Their ship was broken to pieces on an unpeopled island there; and when they were in this plight there bore down on them Thorod the Iclander, late come from Dublin. The Earl’s men hailed

the chapmen for help, and Thorod put out a boat and went therein himself; and when they met, the Earl's men prayed him for aid, and promised him money to bring them home to the Orkneys to Earl Sigurd. But Thorod deemed he might not do that, since he was already bound for Iceland. But they prayed him hard, because they deemed that their wealth and their lives lay on their not being taken prisoners in Ireland or the South-isles, where they had harried erst. So the end of it was that he sold them his boat from his big ship, and took therefor a good share of the scat; and thereon they laid their boat for the Orkneys, but Thorod sailed boatless for Iceland.

He came upon the south coast of the land, and stretched west along the shore, and sailed into Broadfirth, and came safe and sound to Daymeal-ness, and in the autumn went to dwell with Snorri the Priest at Holyfell, and ever after was he called Thorod Scat-catcher.

Now this was a little after the slaying of Thorbiorn the Thick. And that winter was Thurid, the sister of Snorri the Priest, whom Thorbiorn the Thick had had to wife, abiding at Holyfell. A little while after his coming back to Iceland Thorod put forth the word and prayed Snorri to give him his sister Thurid; and seeing that he was wealthy of money, and that Snorri knew his conditions well, and that he saw that she needed much some good care, with all this it seemed good to Snorri to give him the woman; and he held their wedding in the winter there at Holyfell. But the spring after Thorod betook himself to keeping house at Frodis-water, and he became a good bonder and a trustworthy.

But so soon as Thurid came to Frodis-water Biorn Asbrandson got coming thither, and it was the talk of all men that there was fooling betwixt him and Thurid, and Thorod began to blame Biorn for his comings, yet that mended matters in no-wise. At that time dwelt Thorir Wooden-leg at Ernknoll, and his sons Ern and Val were grown up by then, and were the hopefulest of men. Now they laid reproach on Thorod in that he bore with Biorn such shame as he dealt him, and they offered to follow Thorod if he would put an end to Biorn's comings and goings.

On a time Biorn came to Frodis-water and sat talking with Thurid. And Thorod was ever wont to be within doors when Biorn was there; but now they saw him nowhere. Then Thurid said: "Take thou heed to thy faring, Biorn; whereas I deem that Thorod is minded to put an end to thy coming hither; and I guess that they have gone to waylay thee; and he will be minded that ye two shall not meet with an equal band."

Then Biorn sang this song:

"O ground of the golden strings, might we but gain it
To make this day's wearing of all days the longest
That ever yet hung twixt earth's woodland and heaven --
Yea, whiles yet I tarried the hours in their waning --
For, O fir of the worm that about the arm windeth,
This night amongst all nights, 'tis I and no other
Must turn me to grief now, and drink out the grave-ales
Of the joys of our life-days, full often a-dying."

Chapter 30 - Of The Evil Dealings Of Thorolf Halt-Foot.

Now must it be told of Thorolf Halt-foot that he began to get exceeding old, and became very evil and hard to deal with by reason of his old age, and full of all injustice, and things went uneasily enough betwixt him and Arnkel his son.

Now on a day Thorolf rode in to Ulfar's-fell to find Ulfar the bonder. He was a great furtherer of field-work, and much spoken of for this, that he saved his hay quicker than other men, and was so lucky with sheep withal, that his sheep never died of clemming or from storms.

So when Thorolf met him, he asked him what counsel he gave him as to how he should set about his husbandry, and what his mind told him about the summer, if it would be dry or not.

Ulfar answered: "No better rede can I give thee than what I follow myself. I shall let bear out the scythe to-day, and mow down all I may this week, because I deem it will be rainy; but I guess that after that it will be very dry for the next half month."

So things went as he had said, for it was often seen that he could foretell the weather better than other men.

So Thorolf went home, and he had with him many workmen, and now he let straightway begin the out-meadow mowing; and the weather was even as Ulfar had said.

Now Thorolf and Ulfar had a meadow in common upon the neck, and either of them at first mowed much hay, and then they spread it, and raked it up into big cocks. But one morning early when Thorolf arose, he looked out and saw that the weather was thick, and deemed that the dry tide was failing, and called to his thralls to rise and carry the hay together, and work daylong all they might, "for it seems to me," quoth he, "that the weather is not to be trusted."

The thralls did on their clothes and went to the hay-work. But Thorolf piled up the hay and egged them on to work at their most might that it might speed at its fastest. That same morning Ulfar looked out early, and when he came in, the workmen asked him of the weather, but he bade them sleep on in peace. "The weather is good," said he, "and it will clear off to-day. Therefore to-day shall ye mow in the home-field, but to-morrow will we save such hay as we have up on the neck."

Now the weather went even as he said; and when the evening was wearing on, Ulfar sent a man up to the neck, to look to the hay that stood there in cocks. But Thorolf Halt-foot carried hay with three draught-oxen the day through, and by the third hour after noontide they had saved all the hay that was his. Then he bade carry Ulfar's hay withal into his garth; and they did as he bade them.

But when Ulfar's messenger saw that, he ran and told his master. Then Ulfar went up on to the neck, and was exceeding wroth, and asked Thorolf why he robbed him. Thorolf said he heeded not what he said, and raved and was ugly to deal with, and they well-nigh came to blows. But Ulfar saw that he had no choice but to go away. So he went straightway to Arnkel, and told him of his scathe, and prayed for his warding, "else," he gave out, "all would be gone by the board."

Arnkel said he would bid his father pay boot for the hay, but said that none the less it sorely misgave him that nought would come of it.

So when father and son met, Arnkel bade his father pay Ulfar boot for the taking of the hay; but Thorolf said the thrall was far too rich already. Arnkel prayed him to do so much for his word as to atone for that hay. Then said Thorolf that he would do nought therefor but worsen Ulfar's lot; and therewith they parted.

Now when Arnkel met Ulfar, he told him of Thorolf's answer; but Ulfar deemed that Arnkel had followed up his case coldly, and said that he might have had his way with his father if he had chosen to do so.

So Arnkel paid Ulfar what he would for the hay; and when father and son next met, Arnkel claimed the price of the hay from his father, but Thorolf gave no better answers, and they parted in great wrath. But the next autumn Arnkel let drive from the fells seven oxen of his father's, and had them all slaughtered for his own household needs. That misliked Thorolf beyond measure, and he claimed their price of Arnkel; but he said that they should be in return for Ulfar's hay. Then Thorolf liked matters a great deal worse than before, and laid the whole thing on Ulfar, and said he should

feel him therefor.

Chapter 31 - Of Thorolf Halt-Foot And Snorri The Priest.

That winter at Yule-tide had Thorolf a great drinking, and put the drink round briskly to his thralls, and when they were drunk, he egged them on to go up to Ulfar's-fell and burn Ulfar in his house, and promised to give them their freedom therefor. The thralls said they would do so much for their freedom if he would hold to his word. Then they went six of them together to Ulfar's-fell, and took a brushwood stack, and dragged it to the homestead, and set fire therein.

At that time Arnkel and his men sat drinking at Lairstead, and when they went to bed they saw fire at Ulfar's-fell. Then they went thereto forthwith, and took the thralls, and slaked the fire, and the houses were but little burned.

The next morning Arnkel let bring the thralls to Vadils-head, and there were they all hanged.

Thereafter Ulfar handselled all his goods to Arnkel, who became guardian over him. But this handselling misliked the sons of Thorbrand, because they deemed that to them belonged all the goods after Ulfar their freedman, and much ill-will arose here from between Arnkel and Thorbrand's sons. Nor might they henceforth have games together, which they had hitherto held, turn and turn about; in which games was Arnkel the strongest, but that man was the best to set against him, and the next strongest, who was called Freystein Rascal, and was the foster-son of Thorbrand, and his adopted son; for it was the talk of most men that his own son he was, but that his mother was a bondmaid. He was a manly man, and mighty of his hands.

Thorolf Halt-foot took it very ill of Arnkel that those thralls had been slain, and claimed atonement for them, but Arnkel flatly refused to pay a penny for them, and then was Thorolf worse pleased than afore.

But on a day he rode out to Holyfell to find Snorri the Priest, and Snorri bade him abide. But Thorolf said he had no need to eat his meat. "Therefor am I come, because I am fain thou shouldst set my matters straight, for I call thee chief of this countryside, and it is thy part to set right the lot of such men as have been wronged already."

"By whose means is thy lot brought low, goodman?" said Snorri.

"Through Arnkel, my son," answers Thorolf.

Said Snorri: "Thou shouldst not make plaint of that, because that thou shouldst be of one mind with him in all things: withal he is a better man than thou."

"That is not the way of it," says he, "because now of all men he tramples most on me, and now will I be thy close friend, Snorri, if thou wilt but take up the blood-suit for my thralls whom Arnkel let slay, nor will I bespeak all the blood-fines for myself."

Snorri answered: "I will not enter into the strife betwixt thee and thy son."

Says Thorolf: "Thou art no friend of Arnkel's; but mayhap thou deemest me niggard of my money. But it shall not be so now," says he. "I know thou wouldst fain have Crowness, and the wood thereon, which is the best possession in the countryside. Lo, I will handsel thee all that, if thou wilt but take up the suit for my thralls, and follow it up so mightily that thou shalt grow greater thereby, but they shall deem themselves put in the wrong who have wrought me shame; nor will I spare any man who has had part therein, be he more or less my kinsman."

Now Snorri deemed that he needed the wood greatly; and so it is said that he took handsel of the land, and took over the blood-suit for the thralls. But Thorolf rode home thereafter, and was well pleased therewith. But that was not talked of over-well by other folk.

In the spring Snorri set forth a case for the Thorsness Thing, at the hand of Arnkel, for the slaying of the thralls. Both sides came thronging to the Thing, and Snorri pushed

forward the case. But when the suit came into court, Arnkel claimed for himself a verdict of not guilty, and set that forth as a defence that the thralls were taken with quickfire for the burning of a homestead.

Then Snorri set forth that the thralls were indeed out of the law on the field of deed, "but whereas thou didst bring them in to Vadils-head and slay them there, I deem that there they were not out of the law."

So Snorri pushed the case on, and set aside Arnkel's claim to a verdict of not guilty; and thereafter men busied themselves to make peace, and a bargain was come to, and those brethren, Stir and Vermund, should be umpires in the case; and they put the thralls at twelve ounces each, and the money should be paid there and then at the Thing. And when it was paid, Snorri gave the purse to Thorolf, who took it and said: "I had no mind when I gave thee my land, that thou wouldst follow up my suit with so little manhood, and I wot that Arnkel would not have withheld from me such boot for my thralls if I had left the matter to him."

"Now I say," said Snorri, "that thou hast no shame herein, but I will not stake my worth against thy evil lust and foul deeds."

Thorolf answers: "Most like it is that I shall not seek to thee in cases again; nor yet shall the woes of you folk of this country lie utterly asleep."

Thereafter men depart from the Thing, and Arnkel and Snorri disliked them of this end to the matter, but Thorolf thought worse yet of it, as was well meet.

Chapter 32 - The Slaying Of Ulfar; Thorbrand's Sons Claim The Heritage.

So it is said that this happened next to be told of, that Orlig of Orligstead fell sick, and when his sickness grew heavy on him, Ulfar his brother sat ever by him. Now of that sickness he died; but when he was dead, Ulfar sent forthwith for Arnkel, who went straightway to Orligstead, and he and Ulfar took to them all the goods that lay together there. But when Thorbrand's sons knew of the death of Orlig, they went to Orligstead, and laid claim to those same goods that there lay together, and claimed as their own what their freedman had had; but Ulfar said that it was his due to take the heritage after his brother. They asked what part Arnkel would take in this matter. Arnkel said that Ulfar should not be robbed of any man while their fellowship lasted and he might have his will.

Then Thorbrand's sons fare away, and first out to Holyfell, and told this to Snorri the Priest, and prayed him for his help in the case; but he said that he would not thrust into strife with Arnkel for this case, whereas they had done their part so slippery, that Arnkel and Ulfar had first laid hands on the goods. Then Thorbrand's sons said that he would rule there no longer if he did not heed such things as this.

The next autumn Arnkel had a great autumn feast in his house, and ever his wont was to ask Ulfar his friend to all biddings, and to see him off with gifts.

Now the day that men should depart from the feast at Lairstead, Thorolf Halt-foot rode from home, and went to see his friend Cunning-Gils, who dwelt at Thorswaterdale at Cunning-Gils- stead, and bade him ride with him east to Ulfar's-fell-neck, and a thrall of Thorolf's went with him, and when they came on to the neck Thorolf said: "There will be Ulfar going from the feast, and belike he will journey with seemly gifts about him. Now would I, Cunning-Gils," said he, "that thou go meet him and waylay him under the garth at Ulfar's-fell, and slay him, and therefor will I give thee three marks of silver, and pay all weregild for the slaying; and then, when thou hast slain Ulfar, thou wilt have of him those good things which he has had of Arnkel. Then shalt thou run along Ulfar's-fell out to Crowness, and if any pursue thee let the wood cover thee, and then come and see me, and I shall see to thee that thou shalt take no harm." Now whereas Cunning-Gils was a man of many children and very poor, he took the

bait and went out under the towngarth at Ulfar's-fell, and there he saw how Ulfar came up from below with a good shield and a fair-dight sword that Arnkel had given him. So when they met, Cunning-Gils prayed to see the sword, and flattered Ulfar much, and said he was a great man, since he was deemed worthy to have such seemly gifts from chiefs. Ulfar wagged his beard, and handed to him the sword and shield. Cunning-Gils straightway drew the sword and thrust Ulfar through, and then took to his heels and ran out along Ulfar's-fell to Crowness.

Arnkel was out a-doors and saw how a man ran bearing a shield, and thought he should know the shield, and it came into his mind that Ulfar would not have given it up of his own good will. Then Arnkel called to his folk to run after the man; "and therewith," says he, "if this has befallen by my father's redes, and this man is Ulfar's banesman, then shall ye slay him, whoso he is, and not let him come before my eyes." Then went Arnkel up to Ulfar's-fell, and there they found Ulfar dead. Thorolf Halt-foot saw Cunning-Gils run out along Ulfar's-fell with the shield, and thought he knew how it had fared between him and Ulfar. Then said he to his thrall that followed him: "Now shalt thou go to Karstead, and tell Thorbrand's sons to fare in to Ulfar's-fell, and not let themselves be robbed this time of their freedman's heritage as before; because Ulfar is now slain." So thereafter Thorolf rode home, and deemed he had done a good piece of business.

But those who ran after Cunning-Gils took him beneath a cliff which leads up from the sea. There they had a true tale out of him, and when he had told them all as it was, they slew him, and thrust him into earth beneath the cliff, but took his spoil and brought it to Arnkel.

Now the thrall of Thorolf came to Karstead, and told Thorbrand's sons the message of Thorolf, and so they went in to Ulfar's-fell; but when they came there, lo, there was Arnkel before them and many men with him. Then Thorbrand's sons gave out their claim to the goods that Ulfar had owned; but Arnkel brought forward against it the witness of those who were near at the handsel Ulfar had given him, and said that he would uphold it, because he said it had never been lawfully called in question, and bade them make no claim to the money; for he said he would hold to it, even as if it were his father's heritage.

Then Thorbrand's sons saw no choice but to come away, and they went once more out to Holyfell and found Snorri the Priest, and told him how things had befallen, and prayed for his help. Snorri said things had gone as before, that they had been one move too late in the game for Arnkel; "and ye shall not," said he, "grip out of Arnkel's hands aught of these goods, seeing that he has already got the chattels to him; and as to the lands, they lie about as near to one as to the other, and he will have them who has the strongest hand. And this is to be looked for herein that Arnkel will have the greater share of that, as in other dealings with you; and to tell truth, ye may well bear what many endure, because Arnkel rules now over every man's fortune in this countryside, and will do while he lives, whether that be longer or shorter."

Thorleif Kimbi answered: "True say'st thou, Snorri, and I deem it is to be excused in thee, though thou dost not set our matter with Arnkel right, since thou hast never held thine own against him in any due case that ye have had to do with together."

Thereafter Thorbrand's sons fared home, and took these things right heavily.

Chapter 33 - Of The Death Of Thorolf Halt-Foot.

Now Snorri the Priest let work Crowness wood, and let much wood cutting go on. Thorolf Halt-foot thought that the wood was spoilt thereby, and rode out to Holyfell, and bade Snorri give back the wood, and said that he had lent the wood and not given it. Snorri said that would be clearer when they bore witness who were by at the

handselling, and said that he would not give up the wood unless they gave it against him. Then Thorolf took himself off, and was in the worst of minds. He rode in to Lairstead to see his son Arnkel.

Arnkel gave his father good welcome, and asked his errand there. Thorolf answered: "This is my errand, that I see it is amiss that there should be ill-liking betwixt us, and now I will that we lay that aside, and take to kindly ways. For unseemly it is for us to be at enmity together; and moreover it seems to me that we should be great men here in the district with thy hardihood and my good counsel."

"The better it would like me," said Arnkel, "the closer we should draw together."

"Now will I," says Thorolf, "that this shall be the beginning of our peace-making and friendship, that we two claim Crowness wood of Snorri the Priest. It seems to me very ill that he should rule our fortune, but now he will not give up to me my wood, and says I gave it him; and therein he lies," says he.

Arnkel answers: "Thou didst that for no friendship to me when thou gavest Snorri the wood, nor shall I do so much as for thy slandering to quarrel with Snorri about it; and though I wot that he has no due title to the wood, yet will I not that thou have so much for thy lust for evil as to gladden thee by strife twixt me and Snorri."

"Methinks," said Thorolf, "that this comes rather from thy poor heart than because thou begrudgest me sport over your strife."

"Think whatso true thou wilt," said Arnkel, "but as things stand, no strife will I have with Snorri for the wood."

Therewith father and son parted, and Thorolf fared home and liked his lot exceeding ill, and thought that now he might scarce get his oar in.

Thorolf Halt-foot came home in the evening and spake to no man, but sat down in his high-seat and would eat no meat that night, and he sat there after men went to bed, and in the morning, when men arose, there he sat on still, and was dead.

Then the housewife sent a man to Arnkel, and bade him tell him of the death of his father. Then Arnkel rode up to Hvamm, and some of his home-men with him. And when they came to Hvamm, then was Arnkel ware that his father was dead, and sat in his high-seat. But the folk were all full of dread, because to all folk his face seemed loathsome.

Now Arnkel went into the fire-hall, and so up along it behind the seat at Thorolf's back, and bade all beware of facing him before lyke-help was given to him. Then Arnkel took Thorolf by the shoulders, and must needs put forth all his strength before he brought him under. After that he swept a cloth about Thorolf's head, and then did to him according to custom. Then he let break down the wall behind him, and brought him out thereby, and then were oxen yoked to a sledge, and thereon was Thorolf laid out, and they drew him up into Thorswater-dale, and it was not without hard toil that he came to the stead whereas he should lie.

There they laid Thorolf in howe strongly; and then Arnkel rode to Hvamm and took to himself all the goods that were heaped up there, and which his father had owned.

Arnkel was there three nights, and nought happed to tell of the while, and thereafter he rode home.

Chapter 34 - Thorolf Halt-Foot Walks; The Second Burial Of Him.

After the death of Thorolf Halt-foot many folk deemed it worse to be abroad as soon as the sun was getting low. But as the summer wore, men were ware of this, that Thorolf lay not quiet, and men might never be in peace abroad after sunset. And this happed withal that those oxen which had been yoked to Thorolf were troll-ridden, and all such cattle as came nigh to Thorolf's howe went mad, and bellowed till they died. Now the herdsman at Hvamm often came home in such wise that Thorolf had given

chase to him. And so it befell in the autumn at Hvamm that one day neither herdsman nor beasts came home; and in the morning men went to seek them, and found the herdsman dead, a little way from Thorolf's howe, and he was all coal-blue, and every bone in him was broken. He was buried beside Thorolf. And of all the cattle that had been in the dale, some were found dead, and some fled into the mountains, and were never found again; and if fowls settled on Thorolf's howe, they fell down dead. But so great trouble befell from this that no man durst feed his flocks up in the dale. Oft too was heard huge din abroad at Hvamm, and they were ware withal that the hall was oftentimes ridden. And when the winter came on Thorolf was seen home at the house many a time, and troubled the goodwife the most. And great hurt gat many from this, but she herself was well-nigh witless thereat; and such was the end of it all, that the goodwife died from these troublings, and was brought up to Thorswater-dale and buried beside Thorolf.

Thereafter men fled away from the homestead, and now Thorolf took to walking so wide through the dale that he laid waste all steads therein, and so great was the trouble from his walking that he slew some men, and some fled away; but all those who died were seen in his company.

Now men bewailed them much of that trouble, and deemed that it was Arnkel's part to seek rede to better it. So Arnkel bade all those abide with him who had liefer be there than elsewhere; but whereso Arnkel was, no harm befell from Thorolf and his company.

So afeard were all men of this walking of Thorolf's that none durst go a journey that winter, what errands soever they had in the countryside. But when the winter had worn away the spring was fair; and when the ice was off the earth, Arnkel sent a man into Karstead for the sons of Thorbrand, and bade them go with him and bring Thorolf away from Thorswater-dale, and search for another abode for him.

Then, according to the laws of that time, it was due, as now, for all men, to bring dead folks to burial, if they were so summoned.

But when the sons of Thorbrand heard that, they said it lay nowise on them to put away the troubles of Arnkel or Arnkel's men; but thereat the old carle Thorbrand answered and said: "Nay, need there is," says he, "to fare on all such journeys as all men are bound in law to do, and that is now bidden of you which it beseemeth you not to gainsay."

Then said Thorod to the messenger: "Go thy ways and tell Arnkel that I will go on behalf of my brethren, and come to Ulfar's-fell and meet him there."

Now the messenger goes, and tells Arnkel, and he got ready to go, and he and his were twelve in all, and had with them yoke-oxen and digging tools; and they went first to Ulfar's-fell and met there Thorod, Thorbrand's son, and he and his were three. They went up over the neck, and came into Thorswater-dale unto Thorolf's howe, and broke it open, and found Thorolf all undecayed, and most evil to look on.

They took him up from the grave, and laid him on a sledge, and yoked two strong oxen to it, and drew him up to Ulfar's-fell-neck, and by then were the oxen foundered, and others were taken that drew him up on to the neck, and Arnkel was minded to bring him to Vadils-head, and lay him in earth there. But when they came to the hill's brow the oxen went mad, and broke loose forthright, and ran thence away over the neck, and made out along the hillside above the garth of Ulfar's-fell, and so out to sea, and by then were both bursten.

But Thorolf was by then so heavy, that they could bring him no further; so they bore him to a little headland that was there beside, and laid him in earth there, and that is called sithence Halt-foot's Head.

Then let Arnkel raise a wall across the headland landward of the howe, so high that none might come thereover but fowl flying, and there are yet signs thereof. There lay Thorolf quiet as long as Arnkel lived.

Chapter 35 - Arnkel Slays Hawk.

Snorri the Priest let work Crownness wood for all that Thorolf Halt-foot had raised question about it; but that was seen of Arnkel that he deemed that the title of that wood had not gone according to law, and he deemed that Thorolf had beguiled him of his heritage in that he had given the wood to Snorri the Priest.

Now one summer Snorri the Priest sent his thralls to work in the wood, and they cut there much timber and piled it together, and then went home. Now while the timber was seasoning, the rumour ran that Arnkel would go fetch it. So it fell not out; but he bade a herdsman of his watch when Snorri the Priest let fetch the timber, and tell him thereof. But when the wood was dry, Snorri sent three thralls of his to fetch it; and he got Hawk, his follower, to go with the thralls for their aid. So they go, and bind the wood on twelve horses, and then take their way home. Arnkel's herdsman was ware of their ways, and told him thereof. He took his weapons and went after them, and came up with them west of Svelgriver twixt it and the Knolls, but as soon as he came up with them, Hawk leapt off his horse and thrust at Arnkel with a spear, and smote his shield, yet he gat no wound. Then Arnkel sprang from his horse and thrust with a spear at Hawk, and smote him in the midst, and he fell there on the place which is now called Hawks-river.

But when the thralls saw the fall of Hawk, they took to their heels and ran off on their way home, and Arnkel chased them all along beyond Oxbrents, and then turned back and drave home with him the wood-horses, and took the wood off them, and then let them loose, and bound the load-ropes on them, and they were then turned on their way out along the fell, and they went till they came home to Holyfell.

Now were these tidings told, but all was quiet through those seasons; but the next spring Snorri the Priest set on foot a suit for the slaying of Hawk to be heard at the Thorsness Thing, and Arnkel another for an onslaught for the unhallowing of Hawk. Both sides had great followings at the Thing, and men pushed forward the cases eagerly, but such was the end of it that Hawk was made guilty for the onslaught, and Snorri the Priest was nonsuited.

Therewith men ride home from the Thing, and there was much ill- blood betwixt men throughout the summer.

Chapter 36 - Thorleif Would Slay Arnkel, And Is Slain.

There was a man called Thorleif, an Eastfirther, who had been found guilty of an affair with a woman. He came to Holyfell in the autumn, and prayed Snorri the Priest to take him in, but he put him off, and they talked long together or ever he got him gone. Thereafter Thorleif went to Lairstead, and came there in the evening, and was there the next night.

Now Arnkel got up early in the morning and set to nailing together the boards of his outer door; and when Thorleif arose, he went to Arnkel, and prayed him to take him in.

He answered somewhat slowly, and asked if he had been to see Snorri the Priest.

“Yea, I have seen him,” said Thorleif, “and he would nowise take me in; ‘and indeed, it is little to my mind,’ says he, ‘to give following to such a man as will ever let himself be trodden underfoot by every man with whom he has to do.’”

“Meseems,” says Arnkel, “that Snorri would nowise mend his bargains though he give thee meat and drink for thy following.”

“Nay, here whereas thou art will I have leave to dwell, Arnkel,” said Thorleif.

“It is not my wont,” said Arnkel, “to take in out-country men.”

So there they gave and took in talk awhile, and Thorleif ever held fast by his prayer, but Arnkel put him off.

Now Arnkel fell to boring holes in the door-ledge, and laid his adze down the while. Thorleif took it up, and heaved it up swiftly over his head with the mind to bring it down on Arnkel’s skull, but Arnkel heard the whistle of it and ran in under the stroke, and heaved up Thorleif by the breast, and soon was proven the measure of either’s strength, for Arnkel was wondrous strong. So he cast Thorleif down with so great a fall that he lay stunned, and the adze flew out of his hand, and Arnkel got hold thereof and smote it into Thorleif’s head, and gave him his death-wound.

So the rumour ran that it was Snorri the Priest who sent that man for Arnkel’s head, but Snorri made as if the story had nought to do with him, and let folk say what they would. And so those seasons slipped away that nought else is to be told of.

413 Creates a Difficulty

If Simon hadn't been a prison guard, he could easily have been an accountant. That was why they trusted him on the night shifts: he had never missed a digit on a single report. He counted the images in the CCTV Monitors, checking them off as he went.

106 - Sleeping

107 - Sleeping

108 - Sleeping

They were given drugs, of course. Those men would never voluntarily sleep, it had to be induced. All of them were troubled young men who had been selected from various state boot camps to enter the military development program. All of them had excelled physically but were resistant enough to authority to be deemed a liability

201 – Sleeping

202 – Active (Contained)

203 – Sleeping

Each one of the men barely seemed to fit into their beds, they lay like twitching monoliths. The ferocity of their appearances was highlighted by the spartan minimalism of their rooms. They had enough space to get up and walk to their doors but there was nothing else in their cells, just four greying walls, a door, a camera (behind protective glass) and a keypad to remind them that they couldn't open the door. All of their brows were furrowed in anger as if their dreams were as hateful as their cells.

Prisoner 202 was beating his fist into the wall, long and committed punches that could have broken down just about anything, except for that wall. Simon wondered that it didn't hurt them when they acted up like that. It made him glad that he no longer had to do physical checks on each cell, he had lived in fear of them seeing the exit code and running riot. 202 was contained but his tranquilizer dosage would be increased on the following shift.

307 – Sleeping

308 – Sleeping

309 – Sleeping

Almost time for a coffee and a cake, thought Simon, you need these things to get through the night. He checked the last batch of prisoners.

411 – Sleeping

412 – Active (Contained)

413 –

Simon paused his typing, 413 was not acting to code. The man was sat cross legged in the center of his cell, simply staring at the camera. He had broken his bed-frame and used it to create, what looked like an abacus. As Simon stared into the monitor, 413 seemed to stare back at him.

The numbers on 413's abacus read: 7 6 9 4 – the code to the cell door. Simon looked down at his report and then back up to cell 413. He was having difficulty trying to disposition the prisoner's report status: 413 was neither Active (Contained) nor Active (Loose). He could feel the man's eyes burning into him as he moved. Simon, stared back at him defiantly.

Rumaging through the desk drawer, Simon pulled out the procedures manual. He couldn't believe that he had forgotten the number he needed to type in to the console; they used it all the time on the day shift. He typed in the number and watched casually as room 413 filled with a dense fog. The prisoner's eyes did not shift until they finally gave way to terror and he clutched desperately for breathable air.

Simon finished his report.

413 – Deceased

Simon saved the report and stood up. He took a plate of cake from the office fridge and poured some coffee from the pot.

Herbert West : Reanimator

II. The Plague-Daemon

I shall never forget that hideous summer sixteen years ago, when like a noxious afrite from the halls of Eblis typhoid stalked leeringly through Arkham. It is by that satanic scourge that most recall the year, for truly terror brooded with bat-wings over the piles of coffins in the tombs of Christchurch Cemetery; yet for me there is a greater horror in that time—a horror known to me alone now that Herbert West has disappeared.

West and I were doing post-graduate work in summer classes at the medical school of Miskatonic University, and my friend had attained a wide notoriety because of his experiments leading toward the revivification of the dead. After the scientific slaughter of uncounted small animals the freakish work had ostensibly stopped by order of our sceptical dean, Dr. Allan Halsey; though West had continued to perform certain secret tests in his dingy boarding-house room, and had on one terrible and unforgettable occasion taken a human body from its grave in the potter's field to a deserted farmhouse beyond Meadow Hill.

I was with him on that odious occasion, and saw him inject into the still veins the elixir which he thought would to some extent restore life's chemical and physical processes. It had ended horribly—in a delirium of fear which we gradually came to attribute to our own overwrought nerves—and West had never afterward been able to shake off a maddening sensation of being haunted and hunted. The body had not been quite fresh enough; it is obvious that to restore normal mental attributes a body must be very fresh indeed; and a burning of the old house had prevented us from burying the thing. It would have been better if we could have known it was underground.

After that experience West had dropped his researches for some time; but as the zeal of the born scientist slowly returned, he again became importunate with the college faculty, pleading for the use of the dissecting-room and of fresh human specimens for the work he regarded as so overwhelmingly important. His pleas, however, were wholly in vain; for the decision of Dr. Halsey was inflexible, and the other professors all endorsed the verdict of their leader. In the radical theory of reanimation they saw nothing but the immature vagaries of a youthful enthusiast whose slight form, yellow hair, spectacled blue eyes, and soft voice gave no hint of the supernormal—almost diabolical—power of the cold brain within. I can see him now as he was then—and I shiver. He grew sterner of face, but never elderly. And now Sefton Asylum has had the mishap and West has vanished.

West clashed disagreeably with Dr. Halsey near the end of our last undergraduate term in a wordy dispute that did less credit to him than to the kindly dean in point of courtesy. He felt that he was needlessly and irrationally retarded in a supremely great work; a work which he could of course conduct to suit himself in later years, but which he wished to begin while still possessed of the exceptional facilities of the university. That the tradition-bound elders should ignore his singular results on animals, and persist in their denial of the possibility of reanimation, was inexpressibly disgusting and almost incomprehensible to a youth of West's logical temperament. Only greater maturity could help him understand the chronic mental limitations of the "professor-doctor" type—the product of generations of pathetic Puritanism; kindly, conscientious, and sometimes gentle and amiable, yet always narrow, intolerant, custom-ridden, and lacking in perspective. Age has more charity for these incomplete

yet high-souled characters, whose worst real vice is timidity, and who are ultimately punished by general ridicule for their intellectual sins—sins like Ptolemaism, Calvinism, anti-Darwinism, anti-Nietzscheism, and every sort of Sabbatarianism and sumptuary legislation. West, young despite his marvellous scientific acquirements, had scant patience with good Dr. Halsey and his erudite colleagues; and nursed an increasing resentment, coupled with a desire to prove his theories to these obtuse worthies in some striking and dramatic fashion. Like most youths, he indulged in elaborate day-dreams of revenge, triumph, and final magnanimous forgiveness.

And then had come the scourge, grinning and lethal, from the nightmare caverns of Tartarus. West and I had graduated about the time of its beginning, but had remained for additional work at the summer school, so that we were in Arkham when it broke with full daemonic fury upon the town. Though not as yet licenced physicians, we now had our degrees, and were pressed frantically into public service as the numbers of the stricken grew. The situation was almost past management, and deaths ensued too frequently for the local undertakers fully to handle. Burials without embalming were made in rapid succession, and even the Christchurch Cemetery receiving tomb was crammed with coffins of the unembalmed dead. This circumstance was not without effect on West, who thought often of the irony of the situation—so many fresh specimens, yet none for his persecuted researches! We were frightfully overworked, and the terrific mental and nervous strain made my friend brood morbidly.

But West's gentle enemies were no less harassed with prostrating duties. College had all but closed, and every doctor of the medical faculty was helping to fight the typhoid plague. Dr. Halsey in particular had distinguished himself in sacrificing service, applying his extreme skill with whole-hearted energy to cases which many others shunned because of danger or apparent hopelessness. Before a month was over the fearless dean had become a popular hero, though he seemed unconscious of his fame as he struggled to keep from collapsing with physical fatigue and nervous exhaustion. West could not withhold admiration for the fortitude of his foe, but because of this was even more determined to prove to him the truth of his amazing doctrines. Taking advantage of the disorganisation of both college work and municipal health regulations, he managed to get a recently deceased body smuggled into the university dissecting-room one night, and in my presence injected a new modification of his solution. The thing actually opened its eyes, but only stared at the ceiling with a look of soul-petrifying horror before collapsing into an inertness from which nothing could rouse it. West said it was not fresh enough—the hot summer air does not favour corpses. That time we were almost caught before we incinerated the thing, and West doubted the advisability of repeating his daring misuse of the college laboratory.

The peak of the epidemic was reached in August. West and I were almost dead, and Dr. Halsey did die on the 14th. The students all attended the hasty funeral on the 15th, and bought an impressive wreath, though the latter was quite overshadowed by the tributes sent by wealthy Arkham citizens and by the municipality itself. It was almost a public affair, for the dean had surely been a public benefactor. After the entombment we were all somewhat depressed, and spent the afternoon at the bar of the Commercial House; where West, though shaken by the death of his chief opponent, chilled the rest of us with references to his notorious theories. Most of the students went home, or to various duties, as the evening advanced; but West persuaded me to aid him in "making a night of it". West's landlady saw us arrive at his room about two in the morning, with a third man between us; and told her husband

that we had all evidently dined and wined rather well.

Apparently this acidulous matron was right; for about 3 a.m. the whole house was aroused by cries coming from West's room, where when they broke down the door they found the two of us unconscious on the blood-stained carpet, beaten, scratched, and mauled, and with the broken remnants of West's bottles and instruments around us. Only an open window told what had become of our assailant, and many wondered how he himself had fared after the terrific leap from the second story to the lawn which he must have made. There were some strange garments in the room, but West upon regaining consciousness said they did not belong to the stranger, but were specimens collected for bacteriological analysis in the course of investigations on the transmission of germ diseases. He ordered them burnt as soon as possible in the capacious fireplace. To the police we both declared ignorance of our late companion's identity. He was, West nervously said, a congenial stranger whom we had met at some downtown bar of uncertain location. We had all been rather jovial, and West and I did not wish to have our pugnacious companion hunted down.

That same night saw the beginning of the second Arkham horror—the horror that to me eclipsed the plague itself. Christchurch Cemetery was the scene of a terrible killing; a watchman having been clawed to death in a manner not only too hideous for description, but raising a doubt as to the human agency of the deed. The victim had been seen alive considerably after midnight—the dawn revealed the unutterable thing. The manager of a circus at the neighbouring town of Bolton was questioned, but he swore that no beast had at any time escaped from its cage. Those who found the body noted a trail of blood leading to the receiving tomb, where a small pool of red lay on the concrete just outside the gate. A fainter trail led away toward the woods, but it soon gave out.

The next night devils danced on the roofs of Arkham, and unnatural madness howled in the wind. Through the fevered town had crept a curse which some said was greater than the plague, and which some whispered was the embodied daemon-soul of the plague itself. Eight houses were entered by a nameless thing which strewed red death in its wake—in all, seventeen maimed and shapeless remnants of bodies were left behind by the voiceless, sadistic monster that crept abroad. A few persons had half seen it in the dark, and said it was white and like a malformed ape or anthropomorphic fiend. It had not left behind quite all that it had attacked, for sometimes it had been hungry. The number it had killed was fourteen; three of the bodies had been in stricken homes and had not been alive.

On the third night frantic bands of searchers, led by the police, captured it in a house on Crane Street near the Miskatonic campus. They had organised the quest with care, keeping in touch by means of volunteer telephone stations, and when someone in the college district had reported hearing a scratching at a shuttered window, the net was quickly spread. On account of the general alarm and precautions, there were only two more victims, and the capture was effected without major casualties. The thing was finally stopped by a bullet, though not a fatal one, and was rushed to the local hospital amidst universal excitement and loathing.

For it had been a man. This much was clear despite the nauseous eyes, the voiceless simianism, and the daemoniac savagery. They dressed its wound and carted it to the asylum at Sefton, where it beat its head against the walls of a padded cell for sixteen years—until the recent mishap, when it escaped under circumstances that few like to mention. What had most disgusted the searchers of Arkham was the thing they noticed when the monster's face was cleaned—the mocking, unbelievable resemblance to a learned and self-sacrificing martyr who had been entombed but three

days before—the late Dr. Allan Halsey, public benefactor and dean of the medical school of Miskatonic University.

To the vanished Herbert West and to me the disgust and horror were supreme. I shudder tonight as I think of it; shudder even more than I did that morning when West muttered through his bandages,

“Damn it, it wasn’t quite fresh enough!”