



YEAR 2 BEGINS!

Schlock!

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**DAYS OF HIGH ADVENTURE:
THE SHADOW
KINGDOM, Pt. 1**

By ROBERT E HOWARD

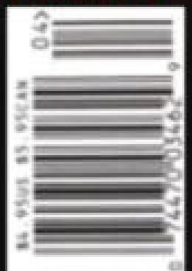
**BENNY DOES THE
RIGHT THING**

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**THE TELL-TALE HEART:
DEMISE OF THE BIONACLE, Pt. 3**

By OBSIDIAN M. TESLA

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This week's cover illustration is "Up Helly Aa" by Anne Burgess. Cover design by C Priest Brumley.

Editorial by Gavin Chappell

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The Tell Tale Heart: Demise of the Bionacle by Obsidian M. Tesla - Continues in the New Year... STEAMPUNK

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

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Slight correction: Now featuring the last part of Demise of the Bionacle by [Obsidian Mercurio Tesla](#)

EDITORIAL

A new year dawns!

What will 2012 bring? The year in which the Mayan calendar runs out, the year of the Apocalypse! Will the polar ice caps melt, flooding every continent? Will a meteor collide with the Earth? Will a rogue state begin a devastating nuclear war? Or will the global economy break down to such an extent that we all become road warriors of the freeway and no longer have to go to work on a Monday morning? We can but hope.

All or none of these things might happen; the sad likelihood is that life will continue much as normal. Except on the pages of Schlock!, where our run of Robert E Howard stories reaches *The Shadow Kingdom*, featuring Kull of Atlantis; *State of Emergency*, where Will's past finally catches up with him; the final part of Obsidian Tesla's *Tell-Tale Heart* story; and many more.

I'd like to thank all Schlock!'s dedicated readers and contributors who have made this little webzine what it is today, and wish you all the best in the New Year.

Gavin Chappell

THE SHADOW KINGDOM by Robert E Howard

Kull, the Atlantean barbarian warrior who fights his way to the throne of the civilised empire of Valusia, is in many ways a prototype of Conan. Indeed, Howard's first Conan story, The Phoenix on the Sword, was a rewrite of an unpublished Kull story entitled By This Axe I Rule! Kull is by no means identical to his Cimmerian successor – although Howard stated, in his essay The Hyborian Age, that the Cimmerians of Conan's day were descendants of the Atlanteans who survived the great Cataclysm thousands of years before.

In some ways, Kull is more barbaric, being the sole survivor of a Stone Age tribe, raised, like Tarzan, by animals. Exiled from his homeland, after a chequered career as a galley slave, a pirate, then an outlaw, gladiator and mercenary in Valusia, (like Conan), he seizes power during a time of civil strife. Unlike the Conan stories, however, the focus of the Kull saga is on his time in power, his ceaseless struggles to keep his throne and his battles to comprehend the baffling mazes of civilised thought. And the latter is as important as the former: although a fierce warrior, Kull is also a dreamy, meditative man, and an equally dreamy atmosphere permeates many of the stories.

In the final story, The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune, Kull comes to the realisation, that There comes, even to kings, the time of great weariness. Then the gold of the throne is brass, the silk of the palace becomes drab. The gems in the diadem sparkle drearily like the ice of the white seas; the speech of men is as the empty rattle of a jester's bell and the feel comes of things unreal; even the sun is copper in the sky, and the breath of the green ocean is no longer fresh. It is hard to imagine Conan pausing to ponder such profundities.

One other character of note in the stories is Kull's companion Brule the Spear-Slayer, a Pict, whose people are the ancestors of the Picts of history. His descendant is Bran Mak Morn, another of Howard's heroes, who leads his barbaric people in endless wars against the civilised might of Rome. But that is another story, for another week.

Chapter I: A King Comes Riding

The blare of the trumpets grew louder, like a deep golden tide surge, like the soft booming of the evening tides against the silver beaches of Valusia. The throng shouted, women flung roses from the roofs as the rhythmic chiming of silver hosts came clearer and the first of the mighty array swung into view in the broad white street that curved round the golden-spired Tower of Splendor.

First came the trumpeters, slim youths, clad in scarlet, riding with a flourish of long, slender golden trumpets; next the bowmen, tall men from the mountains; and behind these the heavily armed footmen, their broad shields clashing in unison, their long spears swaying in perfect rhythm to their stride. Behind them came the mightiest soldiery in all the world, the Red Slayers, horsemen, splendidly mounted, armed in red from helmet to spur. Proudly they sat their steeds, looking neither to right nor to left, but aware of the shouting for all that. Like bronze statues they were, and there was never a waver in the forest of spears that reared above them.

Behind those proud and terrible ranks came the motley files of the mercenaries, fierce, wild-looking warriors, men of Mu and of Kaa-u and of the hills of the east and the isles of the west. They bore spears and heavy swords, and a compact group that marched somewhat apart were the bowmen of Lemuria. Then came the light foot of the nation, and more trumpeters brought up the rear. A brave sight, and a sight which aroused a fierce thrill in the soul of Kull, king of Valusia. Not on the Topaz Throne at the front of the regal Tower of Splendor sat Kull, but in the saddle, mounted on a great stallion, a true warrior king. His mighty arm swung up in reply to the salutes as the hosts passed. His fierce eyes passed the gorgeous trumpeters with a casual glance, rested longer on the following soldiery; they blazed with a ferocious light as the Red Slayers halted in front of him with a clang of arms and a rearing of steeds, and tendered him the crown salute. They narrowed slightly as the mercenaries strode by.

They saluted no one, the mercenaries. They walked with shoulders flung back, eyeing Kull boldly and straightly, albeit with a certain appreciation; fierce eyes, unblinking; savage eyes, staring from beneath shaggy manes and heavy brows. And Kull gave back a like stare. He granted much to brave men, and there were no braver in all the world, not even among the wild tribesmen who now disowned him. But Kull was too much the savage to have any great love for these. There were too many feuds. Many were age-old enemies of Kull's nation, and though the name of Kull was now a word accursed among the mountains and valleys of his people, and though Kull had put them from his mind, yet the old hates, the ancient passions still lingered. For Kull was no Valusian but an Atlantean.

The armies swung out of sight around the gem-blazing shoulders of the Tower of Splendor and Kull reined his stallion about and started toward the palace at an easy gait, discussing the review with the commanders that rode with him, using not many words, but saying much.

"The army is like a sword," said Kull, "and must not be allowed to rust." So down the street they rode, and Kull gave no heed to any of the whispers that reached his hearing from the throngs that still swarmed the streets.

"That is Kull, see! Valka! But what a king! And what a man! Look at his arms! His shoulders!"
And an undertone of more sinister whispering:

"Kull! Ha, accursed usurper from the pagan isles"

"Aye, shame to Valusia that a barbarian sits on the Throne of Kings." . . .

Little did Kull heed. Heavy-handed had he seized the decaying throne of ancient Valusia and with a heavier hand did he hold it, a man against a nation. After the council chamber, the social palace where Kull replied to the formal and laudatory phrases of the lords and ladies, with carefully hidden grim amusement at such frivolities; then the lords and ladies took their formal departure and Kull leaned back upon the ermine throne and contemplated matters of state until an attendant requested permission from the great king to speak, and announced an emissary from the Pictish embassy. Kull brought his mind back from the dim mazes of Valusian statecraft where it had been wandering, and gazed upon the Pict with little favor.

The man gave back the gaze of the king without flinching. He was a lean-hipped, massive-chested warrior of middle height, dark, like all his race, and strongly built. From strong, immobile features gazed dauntless and inscrutable eyes.

"The chief of the Councilors, Ka-nu of the tribe right hand of the king of Pictdom, sends greetings and says: 'There is a throne at the feast of the rising moon for Kull, king of kings, lord of lords, emperor of Valusia.'"

"Good," answered Kull. "Say to Ka-nu the Ancient, ambassador of the western isles, that the king of Valusia will quaff wine with him when the moon floats over the hills of Zalgara." Still the Pict lingered.

"I have a word for the king, not"—with a contemptuous flirt of his hand—"for these slaves."

Kull dismissed the attendants with a word, watching the Pict warily. The man stepped nearer, and lowered his voice:

"Come alone to feast tonight, lord king. Such was the word of my chief."

The king's eyes narrowed, gleaming like gray sword steel, coldly.

"Alone?"

"Aye."

They eyed each other silently, their mutual tribal enmity seething beneath their cloak of formality. Their mouths spoke the cultured speech, the conventional court phrases of a highly polished race, a race not their own, but from their eyes gleamed the primal traditions of the elemental savage. Kull might be the king of Valusia and the Pict might be an emissary to her courts, but there in the throne hall of kings, two tribesmen glowered at each other, fierce and wary, while ghosts of wild wars and world-ancient feuds whispered to each.

To the king was the advantage and he enjoyed it to its fullest extent. Jaw resting on hand, he eyed the Pict, who stood like an image of bronze, head flung back, eyes unflinching. Across Kull's lips stole a smile that was more a sneer.

"And so I am to come—alone?" Civilization had taught him to speak by innuendo and the Pict's dark eyes glittered, though he made no reply. "How am I to know that you come from Ka-nu?"

"I have spoken," was the sullen response.

"And when did a Pict speak truth?" sneered Kull, fully aware that the Picts never lied, but using this means to enrage the man.

"I see your plan, king," the Pict answered imperturbably. "You wish to anger me. By Valka, you need go no further! I am angry enough. And I challenge you to meet me in single battle, spear, sword or dagger, mounted or afoot. Are you king or man?"

Kull's eyes glinted with the grudging admiration a warrior must needs give a bold foeman, but he did not fail to use the chance of further annoying his antagonist.

"A king does not accept the challenge of a nameless savage, he sneered, "nor does the emperor of Valusia break the Truce of Ambassadors. You have leave to go. Say to Ka-nu I will come alone." The Pict's eyes flashed murderously. He fairly shook in the grasp of the primitive blood-lust; then, turning his back squarely upon the king of Valusia, he strode across the Hall of Society and vanished through the great door.

Again Kull leaned back upon the ermine throne and meditated. So the chief of the Council of Picts wished him to come alone? But for what reason? Treachery?

Grimly Kull touched the hilt of his great sword. But scarcely. The Picts valued too greatly the alliance with Valusia to break it for any feudal reason. Kull might be a warrior of Atlantis and hereditary enemy of all Picts, but too, he was king of Valusia, the most potent ally of the Men of the West. Kull reflected long upon the strange state of affairs that made him ally of ancient foes and foe of ancient friends. He rose and paced restlessly across the hall, with the quick, noiseless tread of a lion.

Chains of friendship, tribe and tradition had he broken to satisfy his ambition. And, by Valka, god of the sea and the land, he had realized that ambition! He was king of Valusia—a fading, degenerate Valusia, a Valusia living mostly in dreams of bygone glory, but still a mighty land and the greatest of the Seven Empires. Valusia—Land of Dreams, the tribesmen named it, and sometimes it seemed to Kull that he moved in a dream. Strange to him were the intrigues of court and palace, army and people. All was like a masquerade, where men and women hid their real thoughts with a smooth mask. Yet the seizing of the throne had been easy—a bold snatching of opportunity, the swift whirl of swords, the slaying of a tyrant of whom men had wearied unto death, short, crafty plotting with ambitious statesmen out of favor at court—and Kull, wandering adventurer, Atlantean exile, had swept up to the dizzy heights of his dreams: he was lord of Valusia, king of kings. Yet now it seemed that the seizing was far easier than the keeping.

The sight of the Pict had brought back youthful associations to his mind, the free, wild savagery of his boyhood. And now a strange feeling of dim unrest, of unreality, stole over him as of late it had been doing. Who was he, a straightforward man of the seas and the mountain, to rule a race strangely and terribly wise with the mysticisms of antiquity?

An ancient race—"I am Kull!" said he, flinging back his head as a lion flings back his mane. "I am Kull!" His falcon gaze swept the ancient hall. His self-confidence flowed back. . . . And in a dim nook of the hall a tapestry moved—slightly.

Chapter II: Thus Spoke the Silent Halls of Valusia

The moon had not risen, and the garden was lighted with torches aglow in silver cressets when Kull sat down on the throne before the table of Ka-nu, ambassador of the western isles. At his right hand sat the ancient Pict, as much unlike an emissary of that fierce race as a man could be. Ancient was Ka-nu and wise in statecraft, grown old in the game. There was no elemental hatred in the eyes that looked at Kull appraisingly; no Tribal traditions hindered his judgments.

Long associations with the statesmen of the civilized nations had swept away such cobwebs. Not: who and what is this man? was the question ever foremost in Ka-nu's mind, but: can I use this man, and how? Tribal prejudices he used only to further his own schemes. And Kull watched Ka-nu, answering his conversation briefly, wondering if civilization would make of him a thing like the Pict. For Ka-nu was soft and paunchy.

Many years had stridden across the sky-rim since Ka-nu had wielded a sword. True, he was old, but Kull had seen men older than he in the forefront of battle. The Picts were a long-lived race.

A beautiful girl stood at Ka-nu's elbow, refilling his goblet, and she was kept busy. Meanwhile Ka-nu kept up a running fire of jests and comments, and Kull, secretly contemptuous of his garrulity, nevertheless missed none of his shrewd humor.

At the banquet were Pictish chiefs and statesmen, the latter jovial and easy in their manner, the warriors formally courteous, but plainly hampered by their tribal affinities. Yet Kull, with a tinge of envy, was cognizant of the freedom and ease of the affair as contrasted with like affairs of the Valusian court. Such freedom prevailed in the rude camps of Atlantis—Kull shrugged his shoulders. After all, doubtless Ka-nu, who had seemed to have forgotten he was a Pict as far as time-hoary custom and prejudice went, was right and he, Kull, would better become a Valusian in mind as in name.

At last when the moon had reached her zenith, Ka-nu, having eaten and drunk as much as any three men there, leaned back upon his divan with a comfortable sigh and said, "Now, get you gone, friends, for the king and I would converse on such matters as concern not children. Yes, you too, my pretty; yet first let me kiss those ruby lips—so; no, dance away, my rose-bloom." Ka-nu's eyes twinkled above his white beard as he surveyed Kull, who sat erect, grim and uncompromising.

"You are thinking, Kull," said the old statesman, suddenly, "that Ka-nu is a useless old reprobate, fit for nothing except to guzzle wine and kiss wenches!" In fact, this remark was so much in line with his actual thoughts, and so plainly put, that Kull was rather startled, though he gave no sign. Ka-nu gurgled and his paunch shook with his mirth.

"Wine is red and women are soft," he remarked tolerantly. "But—ha! ha!—think not old Ka-nu allows either to interfere with business." Again he laughed, and Kull moved restlessly. This seemed much like being made sport of, and the king's scintillating eyes began to glow with a feline light. Ka-nu reached for the wine-pitcher, filled his beaker and glanced questioningly at Kull, who shook his head irritably.

"Aye," said Ka-nu equably, "it takes an old head to stand strong drink. I am growing old, Kull, so why should you young men begrudge me such pleasures as we oldsters must find? Ah me, I grow ancient and withered, friendless and cheerless." But his looks and expressions failed far of bearing out his words. His rubicund countenance fairly glowed, and his eyes sparkled, so that his white beard seemed incongruous. Indeed, he looked remarkably elfin, reflected Kull, who felt vaguely resentful. The old scoundrel had lost all of the primitive virtues of his race and of Kull's race, yet he seemed more pleased in his aged days than otherwise.

"Hark ye, Kull," said Ka-nu, raising an admonitory finger, "'tis a chancy thing to laud a young man, yet I must speak my true thoughts to gain your confidence."

"If you think to gain it by flattery—"

"Tush. Who spake of flattery? I flatter only to disguard." There was a keen sparkle in Ka-nu's eyes, a cold glimmer that did not match his lazy smile. He knew men, and he knew that to gain his end he must smite straight with this tigerish barbarian, who, like a wolf scenting a snare, would scent out unerringly any falseness in the skein of his wordweb.

"You have power, Kull," said he, choosing his words with more care than he did in the council rooms of the nation, "to make yourself mightiest of all kings, and restore some of the lost glories of Valusia. So. I care little for Valusia—though the women and wine be excellent—save for the fact that the stronger Valusia is, the stronger is the Pict nation. More, with an Atlantean on the throne, eventually Atlantis will become united—"

Kull laughed in harsh mockery. Ka-nu had touched an old wound.

"Atlantis made my name accursed when I went to seek fame and fortune among the cities of the world. We—they—are age-old foes of the Seven Empires, greater foes of the allies of the Empires, as you should know." Ka-nu tugged his beard and smiled enigmatically.

"Nay, nay. Let it pass. But I know whereof I speak. And then warfare will cease, wherein there is no gain; I see a world of peace and prosperity—man loving his fellow man—the good supreme. All this can you accomplish— if you live!"

"Ha!" Kull's lean hand closed on his hilt and he half rose, with a sudden movement of such dynamic speed that Ka-nu, who fancied men as some men fancy blooded horses, felt his old blood leap with a sudden thrill. Valka, what a warrior! Nerves and sinews of steel and fire, bound together with the perfect co-ordination, the fighting instinct, that makes the terrible warrior.

But none of Ka-nu's enthusiasm showed in his mildly sarcastic tone.

"Tush. Be seated. Look about you. The gardens are deserted, the seats empty, save for ourselves. You fear not me?" Kull sank back, gazing about him warily.

"There speaks the savage," mused Ka-nu. "Think you if I planned treachery I would enact it here where suspicion would be sure to fall upon me? Tut. You young tribesmen have much to learn. There were my chiefs who were not at ease because you were born among the hills of Atlantis, and you despise me in your secret mind because I am a Pict. Tush. I see you as Kull, king of Valusia, not as Kull, the reckless Atlantean, leader of the raiders who harried the western isles. So you should see in me, not a Pict but an international man, a figure of the world. Now to that figure, hark! If you were slain tomorrow who would be king?"

"Kaanuub, baron of Blaal."

"Even so. I object to Kaanuub for many reasons, yet most of all for the fact that he is but a figure-head."

"How so? He was my greatest opponent, but I did not know that he championed any cause but his own."

"The night can hear," answered Ka-nu obliquely.

"There are worlds within worlds. But you may trust me and you may trust Brule, the Spear-slayer. Look!" He drew from his robes a bracelet of gold representing a winged dragon coiled thrice, with three horns of ruby on the head.

"Examine it closely. Brule will wear it on his arm when he comes to you tomorrow night so that you may know him. Trust Brule as you trust yourself, and do what he tells you to. And in proof of trust, look ye!" And with the speed of a striking hawk, the ancient snatched something from his robes, something that flung a weird green light over them, and which he replaced in an instant.

"The stolen gem!" exclaimed Kull recoiling. "The green jewel from the Temple of the Serpent! Valka! You! And why do you show it to me?"

"To save your life. To prove my trust. If I betray your trust, deal with me likewise. You hold my life in your hand. Now I could not be false to you if I would, for a word from you would be my doom." Yet for all his words the old scoundrel beamed merrily and seemed vastly pleased with himself.

"But why do you give me this hold over you?" asked Kull, becoming more bewildered each second.

"As I told you. Now, you see that I do not intend to deal you false, and tomorrow night when Brule comes to you, you will follow his advice without fear of treachery. Enough. An escort waits outside to ride to the palace with you, lord." Kull rose.

"But you have told me nothing."

"Tush. How impatient are youths!" Ka-nu looked more like a mischievous elf than ever. "Go you and dream of thrones and power and kingdoms, while I dream of wine and soft women and roses. And fortune ride with you, King Kull." As he left the garden, Kull glanced back to see Ka-nu still reclining lazily in his seat, a merry ancient, beaming on all the world with jovial fellowship.

A mounted warrior waited for the king just without the garden and Kull was slightly surprised to see that it was the same that had brought Ka-nu's invitation.

No word was spoken as Kull swung into the saddle nor as they clattered along the empty streets. The color and the gayety of the day had given way to the eerie stillness of night. The city's antiquity was more than ever apparent beneath the bent, silver moon. The huge pillars of the mansions and palaces towered up into the stars. The broad stairways, silent and deserted, seemed to climb endlessly until they vanished in the shadowy darkness of the upper realms. Stairs to the stars, thought Kull, his imaginative mind inspired by the weird grandeur of the scene.

Clang! clang! clang! sounded the silver hoofs on the broad, moon-flooded streets, but otherwise there was no sound. The age of the city, its incredible antiquity, was almost oppressive to the king; it was as if the great silent buildings laughed at him, noiselessly, with unguessable mockery. And what secrets did they hold?

"You are young," said the palaces and the temples and the shrines, "but we are old. The world was wild with youth when we were reared. You and your tribe shall pass, but we are invincible, indestructible. We towered above a strange world, ere Atlantis and Lemuria rose from the sea; we still shall reign when the green waters sigh for many a restless fathom above the spires of Lemuria and the hills of Atlantis and when the isles of the Western Men are the mountains of a strange land."

"How many kings have we watched ride down these streets before Kull of Atlantis was even a dream in the mind of Ka, bird of Creation? Ride on, Kull of Atlantis; greater shall follow you; greater came before you. They are dust; they are forgotten; we stand; we know; we are. Ride, ride on, Kull of Atlantis; Kull the king, Kull the fool!" And it seemed to Kull that the clashing hoofs took up the silent refrain to beat it into the night with hollow re-echoing mockery; "Kull-the-king! Kull-the-fool!"

Glow, moon; you light a king's way! Gleam, stars; you are torches in the train of an emperor! And clang, silver-shod hoofs; you herald that Kull rides through Valusia.

Ho! Awake, Valusia! It is Kull that rides, Kull the king! "We have known many kings," said the silent halls of Valusia.

And so in a brooding mood Kull came to the palace, where his bodyguard, men of the Red Slayers, came to take the rein of the great stallion and escort Kull to his rest. There the Pict, still sullenly speechless, wheeled his steed with a savage wrench of the rein and fled away in the dark like a phantom; Kull's heightened imagination pictured him speeding through the silent streets like a goblin out of the Elder World.

There was no sleep for Kull that night, for it was nearly dawn and he spent the rest of the night hours pacing the throne-room, and pondering over what had passed. Ka-nu had told him nothing, yet he had put himself in Kull's complete power. At what had he hinted when he had said the baron of Blaal was naught but a figurehead? And who was this Brule who was to come to him by night, wearing the mystic armet of the dragon? And why? Above all, why had Ka-nu shown him the green gem of terror, stolen long ago from the temple of the Serpent, for which the world would rock in wars were it known to the weird and terrible keepers of that

temple, and from whose vengeance not even Ka-nu's ferocious tribesmen might be able to save him?

But Ka-nu knew he was safe, reflected Kull, for the statesman was too shrewd to expose himself to risk without profit. But was it to throw the king off his guard and pave the way to treachery? Would Ka-nu dare let him live now? Kull shrugged his shoulders.

Chapter III: They That Walk The Night

The moon had not risen when Kull, hand to hilt, stepped to a window. The windows opened upon the great inner gardens of the royal palace, and the breezes of the night, bearing the scents of spice trees, blew the filmy curtains about. The king looked out.

The walks and groves were deserted; carefully trimmed trees were bulky shadows; fountains near by flung their slender sheen of silver in the starlight and distant fountains rippled steadily. No guards walked those gardens, for so closely were the outer walls guarded that it seemed impossible for any invader to gain access to them.

Vines curled up the walls of the palace, and even as Kull mused upon the ease with which they might be climbed, a segment of shadow detached itself from the darkness below the window and a bare, brown arm curved up over the sill. Kull's great sword hissed halfway from the sheath; then the King halted. Upon the muscular forearm gleamed the dragon armlet shown him by Ka-nu the night before.

The possessor of the arm pulled himself up over the sill and into the room with the swift, easy motion of a climbing leopard.

"You are Brule?" asked Kull, and then stopped in surprise not unmingled with annoyance and suspicion; for the man was he whom Kull had taunted in the Hall of Society; the same who had escorted him from the Pictish embassy.

"I am Brule, the Spear-slayer," answered the Pict in a guarded voice; then swiftly, gazing closely in Kull's face, he said, barely above a whisper:

"Ka nama kaa lajerama!"

Kull started. "Ha! What mean you?"

"Know you not?"

"Nay, the words are unfamiliar; they are of no language I ever heard—and yet, by Valka!~somewhere—I have heard—"

"Aye," was the Pict's only comment. His eyes swept the room, the study room of the palace. Except for a few tables, a divan or two and great shelves of books of parchment, the room was barren compared to the grandeur of the rest of the palace.

"Tell me, king, who guards the door?"

"Eighteen of the Red Slayers. But how come you, stealing through the gardens by night and scaling the walls of the palace?"

Brule sneered. "The guards of Valusia are blind buffaloes. I could steal their girls from under their noses. I stole amid them and they saw me not nor heard me. And the walls—I could scale them without the aid of vines. I have hunted tigers on the foggy beaches when the sharp east breezes blew the mist in from seaward and I have climbed the steppes of the western sea mountain. But come—nay, touch this armlet."

He held out his arm and, as Kull complied wonderingly, gave an apparent sigh of relief.

"So. Now throw off those kingly robes; for there are ahead of you this night such deeds as no Atlantean ever dreamed of."

Brule himself was clad only in a scanty loin-cloth through which was thrust a short, curved sword.

"And who are you to give me orders?" asked Kull, slightly resentful.

"Did not Ka-nu bid you follow me in all things?" asked the Pict irritably, his eyes flashing momentarily. I have no love for you, lord, but for the moment I have put the thought of feuds from my mind. Do you likewise. But come."

Walking noiselessly, he led the way across the room to the door. A slide in the door allowed a view of the outer corridor, unseen from without, and the Pict bade Kull look.

"What see you?"

"Naught but the eighteen guardsmen."

The Pict nodded, motioned Kull to follow him across the room. At a panel in the opposite wall Brule stopped and fumbled there a moment. Then with a light movement he stepped back, drawing his sword as he did so. Kull gave an exclamation as the panel swung silently open, revealing a dimly lighted passageway.

"A secret passage!" swore Kull softly. "And I knew nothing of it! By Valka, someone shall dance for this!"

"Silence!" hissed the Pict.

Brule was standing like a bronze statue as if straining every nerve for the slightest sound; something about his attitude made Kull's hair prickle slightly, not from fear but from some eery anticipation. Then beckoning, Brule stepped through the secret doorway which stood open behind them. The passage was bare, but not dust-covered as should have been the case with an unused secret corridor. A vague, gray light filtered through somewhere, but the source of it was not apparent. Every few feet Kull saw doors, invisible, as he knew, from the outside, but easily apparent from within.

"The palace is a very honeycomb," he muttered.

"Aye. Night and day you are watched, king, by many eyes."

The king was impressed by Brule's manner. The Pict went forward slowly, warily, half crouching, blade held low and thrust forward. When he spoke it was in a whisper and he continually flung glances from side to side.

The corridor turned sharply and Brule warily gazed past the turn.

"Look!" he whispered. "But remember! No word! No sound—on your life!"

Kull cautiously gazed past him. The corridor changed just at the bend to a flight of steps. And then Kull recoiled. At the foot of those stairs lay the eighteen Red Slayers who were that night stationed to watch the king's study room. Brule's grip upon his mighty arm and Brule's fierce whisper at his shoulder alone kept Kull from leaping down those stairs.

"Silent, Kull! Silent, in Valka's name!" hissed the Pict. "These corridors are empty now, but I risked much in showing you, that you might then believe what I had to say. Back now to the room of study."

And he retraced his steps, Kull following; his mind in a turmoil of bewilderment, "This is treachery," muttered the king, his steel-gray eyes a-smolder, "foul and swift! Mere minutes have passed since those men stood at guard."

Again in the room of study Brule carefully closed the secret panel and motioned Kull to look again through the slit of the outer door. Kull gasped audibly. For without stood the eighteen guardsmen!

"This is sorcery!" he whispered, half-drawing his sword. "Do dead men guard the king?"

"Aye!" came Brule's scarcely audible reply; there was a strange expression in the Pict's scintillant eyes.

They looked squarely into each other's eyes for an instant, Kull's brow wrinkled in a puzzled scowl as he strove to read the Pict's inscrutable face. Then Brule's lips, barely moving, formed the words; "The-snake—that-speaks!".

"Silent!" whispered Kull, laying his hand over Brule's mouth. "That is death to speak! That is a name accursed!"

The Pict's fearless eyes regarded him steadily.

"Look, again, king Kull. Perchance the guard was changed."

"Nay, those are the same men. In Valka's name, this is sorcery—this is insanity! I saw with my own eyes the bodies of those men, not eight minutes ago. Yet there they stand."

Brule stepped back, away from the door, Kull mechanically following.

"Kull, what know ye of the traditions of this race ye rule?"

"Much—and yet, little. Valusia is so old—"

"Aye," Brule's eyes lighted strangely, "we are but barbarians—infants compared to the Seven Empires. Not even they themselves know how old they are. Neither the memory of man nor the annals of the historians reach back far enough to tell us when the first men came up from the sea and built cities on the shore. But Kull, men were not always ruled by men!"

The king started. Their eyes met.

"Aye, there is a legend of my people—"

"And mine!" broke in Brule. "That was before we of the isles were allied with Valusia. Aye, in the reign of Lion-fang, seventh war chief of the Picts, so many years ago no man remembers how many. Across the sea we came, from the isles of the sunset, skirting the shores of Atlantis, and falling upon the beaches of Valusia with fire and sword. Aye, the long white beaches resounded with the clash of spears, and the night was like day from the flame of the burning castles. And the king, the king of Valusia, who died on the red sea sands that dim day—" His voice trailed off; the two stared at each other, neither speaking; then each nodded.

"Ancient is Valusia!" whispered Kull. "The hills of Atlantis and Mu were isles of the sea when Valusia was young."

The night breeze whispered through the open window. Not the free, crisp sea air such as Brule and Kull knew and reveled in, in their land, but a breath like a whisper from the past, laden with musk, scents of forgotten things, breathing secrets that were hoary when the world was young.

The tapestries rustled, and suddenly Kull felt like a naked child before the inscrutable wisdom of the mystic past. Again the sense of unreality swept upon him. At the back of his soul stole dim, gigantic phantoms, whispering monstrous things. He sensed that Brule experienced similar thoughts. The Pict's eyes were fixed upon his face with a fierce intensity. Their glances met. Kull felt warmly a sense of comradeship with this member of an enemy tribe. Like rival leopards turning at bay against hunters, these two savages made common cause against the inhuman powers of antiquity.

Brule again led the way back to the secret door.

Silently they entered and silently they proceeded down the dim corridor, taking the opposite direction from that in which they previously traversed it. After a while the Pict stopped and pressed close to one of the secret doors, bidding Kull look with him through the hidden slot.

"This opens upon a little-used stair which leads to a corridor running past the study-room door."

They gazed, and presently, mounting the stair silently, came a silent shape.

"Tu! Chief councilor!" exclaimed Kull. "By night and with bared dagger! How, what means this, Brule?"

"Murder! And foulest treachery!" hissed Brule.

"Nay"—as Kull would have flung the door aside and leaped forth—"we are lost if you meet him here, for more lurk at the foot of those stairs. Come!"

Half running, they darted back along the passage.

Back through the secret door Brule led, shutting it carefully behind them, then across the chamber to an opening into a room seldom used. There he swept aside some tapestries in a dim corner nook and, drawing Kull with him, stepped behind them. Minutes dragged. Kull could hear the breeze in the other room blowing the window curtains about, and it seemed to him like the murmur of ghosts. Then through the door, stealthily, came Tu, chief councilor of the king. Evidently he had come through the study room and, finding it empty, sought his victim where he was most likely to be.

He came with upraised dagger, walking silently.

A moment he halted, gazing about the apparently empty room, which was lighted dimly by a single candle. Then he advanced cautiously, apparently at a loss to understand the absence of the king. He stood before the hiding place-and- "Slay!" hissed the Pict.

Kull with a single mighty leap hurled himself into the room. Tu spun, but the blinding, tigerish speed of the attack gave him no chance for defense or counterattack. Sword steel flashed in the dim light and grated on bone as Tu toppled backward, Kull's sword standing out between his shoulders.

Kull leaned above him, teeth bared in the killer's snarl, heavy brows ascowl above eyes that were like the gray ice of the cold sea. Then he released the hilt and recoiled, shaken, dizzy, the hand of death at his spine.

For as he watched, Tu's face became strangely dim and unreal; the features mingled and merged in a seemingly impossible manner. Then, like a fading mask of fog, the face suddenly vanished and in its stead gaped and leered a monstrous serpent's head!

"Valka!" gasped Kull, sweat beading his forehead, and again; "Valka!"

Brule leaned forward, face immobile. Yet his glittering eyes mirrored something of Kull's horror.

"Regain your sword, lord king," said he. "There are yet deeds to be done."

Hesitantly Kull set his hand to the hilt. His flesh crawled as he set his foot upon the terror which lay at their feet, and as some jerk of muscular reaction caused the frightful mouth to gape suddenly, he recoiled, weak with nausea. Then, wrathful at himself, he plucked forth his sword and gazed more closely at the nameless thing that had been known as Tu, chief councilor. Save for the reptilian head, the thing was the exact counterpart of a man.

"A man with the head of a snake!" Kull murmured. "This, then, is a priest of the serpent god?"

"Aye. Tu sleeps unknowing. These fiends can take any form they will. That is, they can, by a magic charm or the like, fling a web of sorcery about their faces, as an actor dons a mask, so that they resemble anyone they wish to."

"Then the old legends were true," mused the king; "the grim old tales few dare even whisper, lest they die as blasphemers, are no fantasies. By Valka, I had thought—I had guessed—but it seems beyond the bounds of reality. Ha! The guardsmen outside the door—"

"They too are snake-men. Hold! What would you do?"

"Slay them!" said Kull between his teeth.

"Strike at the skull if at all," said Brule. "Eighteen wait without the door and perhaps a score more in the corridors. Hark ye, king, Ka-nu learned of this plot. His spies have pierced the inmost fastnesses of the snake priests and they brought hints of a plot. Long ago he discovered the secret passageways of the palace, and at his command I studied the map thereof and came here by night to aid you, lest you die as other kings of Valusia have died. I came alone for the reason that to send more would have roused suspicion.

Many could not steal into the palace as I did. Some of the foul conspiracy you have seen. Snake-men guard your door, and that one, as Tu, could pass anywhere else in the palace; in the morning, if the priests failed, the real guards would be holding their places again, nothing knowing, nothing remembering; there to take the blame if the priests succeeded. But stay you here while I dispose of this carrion."

So saying, the Pict shouldered the frightful thing stolidly and vanished with it through another secret panel. Kull stood alone, his mind a-whirl. Neophytes of the mighty serpent, how many lurked among his cities? How might he tell the false from the true? Aye, how many of his trusted councilors, his generals, were men? He could be certain—of whom?

The secret panel swung inward and Brule entered.

"You were swift."

"Aye!" The warrior stepped forward, eyeing the floor. "There is gore upon the rug. See?"

Kull bent forward; from the corner of his eye he saw a blur of movement, a glint of steel. Like a loosened bow he whipped erect, thrusting upward. The warrior sagged upon the sword, his own clattering to the floor. Even at that instant Kull reflected grimly that it was appropriate that the traitor should meet his death upon the sliding, upward thrust used so much by his race. Then, as Brule slid from the sword to sprawl motionless on the floor, the face began to merge and fade, and as Kull caught his breath, his hair a-prickle, the human features vanished and there the jaws of a great snake gaped hideously, the terrible beady eyes venomous even in death.

"He was a snake priest all the time!" gasped the king. "Valka! What an elaborate plan to throw me off my guard! Ka-nu there, is he a man? Was it Ka-nu to whom I talked in the gardens? Almighty Valka!" as his flesh crawled with a horrid thought; are the people of Valusia men or are they all serpents?"

Undecided he stood, idly seeing that the thing named Brule no longer wore the dragon armlet. A sound made him wheel.

Brule was coming through the secret door.

"Hold!" Upon the arm upthrown to halt the king's hovering sword gleamed the dragon armlet. "Valka!" The Pict stopped short. Then a grim smile curled his lips.

"By the gods of the seas! These demons are crafty past reckoning. For it must be that one lurked in the corridors, and seeing me go carrying the carcass of that other, took my appearance. So. I have another to do away with."

"Hold!" there was the menace of death in Kull's voice; "I have seen two men turn to serpents before my eyes. How may I know if you are a true man?"

Brule laughed. "For two reasons. King Kull. No snake-man wears this"—he indicated the dragon armlet—"nor can any say these words," and again Kull heard the strange phrase; "Ka nama kaa lajerama."

"Ka nama kaa lajerama" Kull repeated mechanically. "Now, where, in Valka's name, have I heard that? I have not! And yet-and yet—"

"Aye, you remember, Kull," said Brule. "Through the dim corridors of memory those words lurk; though you never heard them in this life, yet in the bygone ages they were so terribly impressed upon the soul mind that never dies, that they will always strike dim chords in your memory, though you be reincarnated for a million years to come. For that phrase has come secretly down the grim and bloody eons, since when, uncounted centuries ago, those words were watch-words for the race of men who battled with the grisly beings of the Elder Universe. For none but a real man of men may speak them, whose jaws and mouth are shaped different from any other creature. Their meaning has been forgotten but not the words themselves."

"True," said Kull. "I remember the legends— Valka!" He stopped short, staring, for suddenly, like the silent swinging wide of a mystic door, misty, unfathomed reaches opened in the recesses of his consciousness and for an instant he seemed to gaze back through the vastness that spanned life and life; seeing through the vague and ghostly fogs dim shapes reliving dead centuries—men in combat with hideous monsters, vanquishing a planet of frightful terrors.

Against a gray, ever-shifting background moved strange nightmare forms, fantasies of lunacy and fear; and man, the jest of the gods, the blind, wisdom-less striver from dust to dust, following the long bloody trail of his destiny, knowing not why, bestial, blundering, like a great murder child, yet feeling somewhere a spark of divine fire. . . . Kull drew a hand across his brow, shaken; these sudden glimpses into the abysses of memory always startled him.

"They are gone," said Brule, as if scanning his secret mind; "the bird-women, the harpies, the bat-men, the flying fiends, the wolf-people, the demons, the goblins—all save such as this being that lies at our feet, and a few of the wolf-men. Long and terrible was the war, lasting through the bloody centuries, since first the first men, risen from the mire of apedom, turned upon those who then ruled the world.

And at last mankind conquered, so long ago that naught but dim legends come to us through the ages.

The snake-people were the last to go, yet at last men conquered even them and drove them forth into the waste lands of the world, there to mate with true snakes until some day, say the sages, the horrid breed shall vanish utterly. Yet the Things returned in crafty guise as men grew soft and degenerate, forgetting ancient wars. Ah, that was a grim and secret war!

Among the men of the Younger Earth stole the frightful monsters of the Elder Planet, safeguarded by their horrid wisdom and mysticisms, taking all forms and shapes, doing deeds of horror secretly. No man knew who was true man and who false. No man could trust any man. Yet by means of their own craft they formed ways by which the false might be known from the true. Men took for a sign and a standard the figure of the flying dragon, the winged dinosaur, a monster of past ages, which was the greatest foe of the serpent.

And men used those words which I spoke to you as a sign and symbol, for as I said, none but a true man can repeat them. So mankind triumphed. Yet again the fiends came after the years of forgetfulness had gone by—for man is still an ape in that he forgets what is not ever before his eyes. As priests they came; and for that men in their luxury and might had by then lost faith in the old religions and worships, the snake-men, in the guise of teachers of a new and truer cult, built a monstrous religion about the worship of the serpent god. Such is their power that it is now death to repeat the old legends of the snake-people, and people bow again to the serpent god in new form; and blind fools that they are, the great hosts of men see no connection between this power and the power men overthrew eons ago. As priests the snake-men are content to rule—and yet—" He stopped.

"Go on." Kull felt an unaccountable stirring of the short hair at the base of his scalp.

"Kings have reigned as true men in Valusia," the Pict whispered, "and yet, slain in battle, have died serpents—as died he who fell beneath the spear of Lion-fang on the red beaches when we of the isles harried the Seven Empires. And how can this be. Lord Kull?"

These kings were born of women and lived as men!

Thus—the true kings died in secret—as you would have died tonight—and priests of the Serpent reigned in their stead, no man knowing."

Kull cursed between his teeth. "Aye, it must be. No one has ever seen a priest of the Serpent and lived, that is known. They live in utmost secrecy."

"The statecraft of the Seven Empires is a mazy, monstrous thing," said Brule. "There the true men know that among them glide the spies of the Serpent, and the men who are the Serpent's allies—such as Kaanuub, baron of Blaal—yet no man dares seek to unmask a suspect lest vengeance befall him. No man trusts his fellow and the true statesmen dare not speak to each other what is in the minds of all. Could they be sure, could a snake-man or plot be unmasked before them all, then would the power of the Serpent be more than half broken; for all would then ally and make common cause, sifting out the traitors. Ka-nu alone is of sufficient shrewdness and courage to cope with them, and even Ka-nu learned only enough of their plot to tell me what would happen—what has happened up to this time. Thus far I was prepared; from now on we must trust to our luck and our craft. Here and now I think we are safe; those

snake-men without the door dare not leave their post lest true men come here unexpectedly. But tomorrow they will try something else, you may be sure. Just what they will do, none can say, not even Ka-nu; but we must stay at each other's sides. King Kull, until we conquer or both be dead. Now come with me while I take this carcass to the hiding-place where I took the other being."

Kull followed the Pict with his grisly burden through the secret panel and down the dim corridor.

Their feet, trained to the silence of the wilderness, made no noise. Like phantoms they glided through the ghostly light, Kull wondering that the corridors should be deserted; at every turn he expected to run full upon some frightful apparition. Suspicion surged back upon him; was this Pict leading him into ambush? He fell back a pace or two behind Brule, his ready sword hovering at the Pict's unheeding back.

Brule should die first if he meant treachery. But if the Pict was aware of the king's suspicion, he showed no sign. Stolidly he tramped along, until they came to a room, dusty and long unused, where moldy tapestries hung heavy. Brule drew aside some of these and concealed the corpse behind them. Then they turned to retrace their steps, when suddenly Brule halted with such abruptness that he was closer to death than he knew; for Kull's nerves were on edge.

"Something moving in the corridor," hissed the Pict. "Ka-nu said these ways would be empty, yet—"

He drew his sword and stole into the corridor, Kull following warily. A short way down the corridor a strange, vague glow appeared that came toward them. Nerves a-leap, they waited, backs to the corridor wall; for what they knew not, but Kull heard Brule's breath hiss through his teeth and was reassured as to Brule's loyalty.

The glow merged into a shadowy form. A shape vaguely like a man it was, but misty and illusive, like a wisp of fog, that grew more tangible as it approached, but never fully material. A face looked at them, a pair of luminous great eyes, that seemed to hold all the tortures of a million centuries. There was no menace in that face, with its dim, worn features, but only a great pity—and that face—that face—

"Almighty gods!" breathed Kull, an icy hand at his soul; "Eallal, king of Valusia, who died a thousand years ago!"

Brule shrank back as far as he could, his narrow eyes widened in a blaze of pure horror, the sword shaking in his grip, unnerved for the first time that weird night. Erect and defiant stood Kull, instinctively holding his useless sword at the ready; flesh acrawl, hair a-prickle, yet still a king of kings, as ready to challenge the powers of the unknown dead as the powers of the living.

The phantom came straight on, giving them no heed; Kull shrank back as it passed them, feeling an icy breath like a breeze from the arctic snow. Straight on went the shape with slow, silent footsteps, as if the chains of all the ages were upon those vague feet; vanishing about a bend of the corridor.

"Valka!" muttered the Pict, wiping the cold beads from his brow; "that was no man! That was a ghost!"

"Aye!" Kull shook his head wonderingly. "Did you not recognize the face? That was Eallal, who reigned in Valusia a thousand years ago and who was found hideously murdered in his throne-room—the room now known as the Accursed Room. Have you not seen his statue in the Fame Room of Kings?"

"Yes, I remember the tale now. Gods, Kull! that is another sign of the frightful and foul power of the snake priests—that king was slain by snake-people and thus his soul became their slave, to do their bidding throughout eternity! For the sages have ever maintained that if a man is slain by a snake-man his ghost becomes their slave."

A shudder shook Kull's gigantic frame. "Valka! But what a fate! Hark ye"—his fingers closed upon Brule's sinewy arm like steel—"hark ye! If I am wounded unto death by these foul monsters, swear that ye will smite your sword through my breast lest my soul be enslaved."

"I swear," answered Brule, his fierce eyes lighting. "And do ye the same by me, Kull." Their strong right hands met in a silent sealing of their bloody bargain.

Chapter IV: Masks

Kull sat upon his throne and gazed broodily out upon the sea of faces turned toward him. A courtier was speaking in evenly modulated tones, but the king scarcely heard him. Close by, Tu, chief councilor, stood ready at Kull's command, and each time the king looked at him, Kull shuddered inwardly. The surface of court life was as the unrippled surface of the sea between tide and tide. To the musing king the affairs of the night before seemed as a dream, until his eyes dropped to the arm of his throne. A brown, sinewy hand rested there, upon the wrist of which gleamed a dragon armet; Brule stood beside his throne and ever the Pict's fierce secret whisper brought him back from the realm of unreality in which he moved.

No, that was no dream, that monstrous interlude.

As he sat upon his throne in the Hall of Society and gazed upon the courtiers, the ladies, the lords, the statesmen, he seemed to see their faces as things of illusion, things unreal, existent only as shadows and mockeries of substance. Always he had seen their faces as masks, but before he had looked on them with contemptuous tolerance, thinking to see beneath the masks shallow, puny souls, avaricious, lustful, deceitful; now there was a grim undertone, a sinister meaning, a vague horror that lurked beneath the smooth masks. While he exchanged courtesies with some nobleman or councilor he seemed to see the smiling face fade like smoke and the frightful jaws of a serpent gaping there. How many of those he looked upon were horrid, inhuman monsters, plotting his death, beneath the smooth mesmeric illusion of a human face?

Valusia—land of dreams and nightmares—a kingdom of the shadows, ruled by phantoms who glided back and forth behind the painted curtains, mocking the futile king who sat upon the throne—himself a shadow.

And like a comrade shadow Brule stood by his side, dark eyes glittering from immobile face. A real man, Brule! And Kull felt his friendship for the savage become a thing of reality and sensed that Brule felt a friendship for him beyond the mere necessity of statecraft.

And what, mused Kull, were the realities of life?

Ambition, power, pride? The friendship of man, the love of women—which Kull had never known—battle, plunder, what? Was it the real Kull who sat upon the throne or was it the real Kull who had scaled the hills of Atlantis, harried the far isles of the sunset, and laughed upon the green roaring tides of the Atlantean sea? How could a man be so many different men in a lifetime? For Kull knew that there were many Kulls and he wondered which was the real Kull. After all, the priests of the Serpent went a step further in their magic, for all men wore masks, and many a different mask with each different man or woman; and Kull wondered if a serpent did not lurk under every mask.

So he sat and brooded in strange, mazy thought-ways, and the courtiers came and went and the minor affairs of the day were completed, until at last the king and Brule sat alone in the Hall of Society save for the drowsy attendants.

Kull felt a weariness. Neither he nor Brule had slept the night before, nor had Kull slept the night before that, when in the gardens of Ka-nu he had had his first hint of the weird things to be. Last night nothing further had occurred after they had returned to the study room from the secret corridors, but they had neither dared nor cared to sleep. Kull, with the incredible vitality of a wolf, had aforesaid gone for days upon days without sleep, in his wild savage days but now his mind was edged from constant thinking and from the nerve-breaking eeriness of the past night.

He needed sleep, but sleep was furthest from his mind.

And he would not have dared sleep if he had thought of it. Another thing that had shaken him was the fact that though he and Brule had kept a close watch to see if, or when, the study-room guard was changed, yet it was changed without their knowledge; for the next morning those who stood on guard were able to repeat the magic words of Brule, but they remembered nothing out of the ordinary. They thought that they had stood at guard all night, as usual, and Kull said nothing to the contrary. He believed them true men, but Brule had advised absolute secrecy, and Kull also thought it best.

Now Brule leaned over the throne, lowering his voice so not even a lazy attendant could hear: "They will strike soon, I think, Kull. A while ago Ka-nu gave me a secret sign. The priests know that we know of their plot, of course, but they know not, how much we know. We must be ready for any sort of action. Ka-nu and the Pictish chiefs will remain within hailing distance now until this is settled one way or another. Ha, Kull, if it comes to a pitched battle, the streets and the castles of Valusia will run red!"

Kull smiled grimly. He would greet any sort of action with a ferocious joy. This wandering in a labyrinth of illusion and magic was extremely irksome to his nature. He longed for the leap and clang of swords, for the joyous freedom of battle.

Then into the Hall of Society came Tu again, and the rest of the councilors.

"Lord king, the hour of the council is at hand and we stand ready to escort you to the council room."

Kull rose, and the councilors bent the knee as he passed through the way opened by them for his passage, rising behind him, and following. Eyebrows were raised as the Pict strode defiantly behind the king, but no one dissented. Brule's challenging gaze swept the smooth faces of the councilors with the defiance of an intruding savage.

The group passed through the halls and came at last to the council chamber. The door was closed, as usual, and the councilors arranged themselves in the order of their rank before the dais upon which stood the king. Like a bronze statue Brule took up his stand behind Kull.

Kull swept the room with a swift stare. Surely no chance of treachery here. Seventeen councilors there were, all known to him; all of them had espoused his cause when he ascended the throne.

"Men of Valusia—" he began in the conventional manner, then halted, perplexed. The councilors had risen as a man and were moving toward him. There was no hostility in their looks, but their actions were strange for a council room. The foremost was close to him when Brule sprang forward, crouched like a leopard.

"Ka nama kaa lajerama!" his voice crackled through the sinister silence of the room and the foremost councilor recoiled, hand flashing to his robes; and like a spring released, Brule moved and the man pitched headlong and lay still while his face faded and became the head of a mighty snake.

"Slay, Kull!" rasped the Pict's voice. "They be all serpent men!"

The rest was a scarlet maze. Kull saw the familiar faces dim like fading fog and in their places gaped horrid reptilian visages as the whole band rushed forward. His mind was dazed but his giant body faltered not.

The singing of his sword filled the room, and the onrushing flood broke in a red wave. But they surged forward again, seemingly willing to fling their lives away in order to drag down the king. Hideous jaws gaped at him; terrible eyes blazed into his unblinkingly; a frightful fetid scent pervaded the atmosphere—the serpent scent that Kull had known in southern jungles. Swords and daggers leaped at him and he was dimly aware that they wounded him. But Kull was in his element; never before had he faced such grim foes but it mattered little; they lived, their veins held blood that could be spilt and they died when his great sword cleft their skulls or drove through their bodies. Slash, thrust, thrust and swing.

Yet had Kull died there but for the man who crouched at his side, parrying and thrusting. For the king was clear berserk, fighting in the terrible Atlantean way, that seeks death to deal death; he made no effort to avoid thrusts and slashes, standing straight up and ever plunging forward, no thought in his frenzied mind but to slay. Not often did Kull forget his fighting craft in his primitive fury, but now some chain had broken in his soul, flooding his mind with a red wave of slaughter-lust. He slew a foe at each blow, but they surged about him, and time and again Brule turned a thrust that would have slain, as he crouched beside Kull, parrying and warding with cold skill, slaying not as Kull slew with long slashes and plunges, but with short overhand blows and upward thrusts.

Kull laughed, a laugh of insanity. The frightful faces swirled about him in a scarlet blaze. He felt steel sink into his arm and dropped his sword in a flashing arc that cleft his foe to the breast-bone. Then the mists faded and the king saw that he and Brule stood alone above a sprawl of hideous crimson figures who lay still upon the floor.

"Valka! What a killing!" said Brule, shaking the blood from his eyes. "Kull, had these been warriors who knew how to use the steel, we had died here.

"These serpent priests know naught of swordcraft and die easier than any men I ever slew. Yet had there been a few more, I think the matter had ended otherwise."

Kull nodded. The wild berserker blaze had passed, leaving a mazed feeling of great weariness.

Blood seeped from wounds on breast, shoulder, arm and leg. Brule, himself bleeding from a score of flesh wounds, glanced at him in some concern.

"Lord Kull, let us hasten to have your wounds dressed by the women."

Kull thrust him aside with a drunken sweep of his mighty arm.

"Nay, we'll see this through ere we cease. Go you, though, and have your wounds seen to—I command it."

The Pict laughed grimly. "Your wounds are more than mine, lord king—" he began, then stopped as a sudden thought struck him. "By Valka, Kull, this is not the council room!"

Kull looked about and suddenly other fogs seemed to fade. "Nay, this is the room where Eallal died a thousand years ago—since unused and named 'Accursed.'"

"Then by the gods, they tricked us after all!" exclaimed Brule in a fury, kicking the corpses at their feet. "They caused us to walk like fools into their ambush! By their magic they changed the appearance of all—"

"Then there is further devilry afoot." said Kull, "for if there be true men in the councils of Valusia they should be in the real council room now. Come swiftly."

And leaving the room with its ghastly keepers they hastened through halls that seemed deserted until they came to the real council room. Then Kull halted with a ghastly shudder. From the council room sounded a voice speaking, and—the voice was his!

With a hand that shook he parted the tapestries and gazed into the room. There sat the councilors, counterparts of the men he and Brule had just slain, and upon the dais stood Kull, king of Valusia..

He stepped back, his mind reeling.

"This is insanity!" he whispered. "Am I Kull? Do I stand here or is that Kull yonder in very truth, arid am I but a shadow, a figment of thought?"

Brule's hand clutching his shoulder, shaking him fiercely, brought him to his senses.

"Valka's name, be not a fool! Can you yet be astounded after all we have seen? See you not that those are true men bewitched by a snake-man who has taken your form, as those others took their forms? By now you should have been slain, and yon monster reigning in your stead, unknown by those who bowed to you. Leap arid slay swiftly or else we are undone.

"The Red Slayers, true men, stand close on each hand and none but you can reach and slay him. Be swift!"

Kull shook off the onrushing dizziness, flung back his head in the old, defiant gesture. He took a long, deep breath as does a strong swimmer before diving into the sea; then, sweeping back the tapestries, made the dais in a single lion-like bound. Brule had spoken truly. There stood men of the Red Slayers, guardsmen trained to move quick as the striking leopard; any but Kull had died ere he could reach the usurper. But the sight of Kull, identical with the man upon the dais, held them in their tracks, their minds stunned for an instant, and that was long enough. He upon the dais snatched for his sword. but even as his fingers closed upon the hilt, Kull's sword stood out behind his shoulders and the thing that men had thought the king pitched forward from the dais to lie silent upon the floor.

"Hold!" Kull's lifted hand and kingly voice stopped the rush that had started, and while they stood astounded he pointed to the thing which lay before them—whose face was fading into that of a snake.

They recoiled, and from one door came Brule and from another came Ka-nu.

These grasped the king's bloody hand and Ka-nu spoke: "Men of Valusia, you have seen with your own eyes. This is the true Kull, the mightiest king to whom Valusia has ever bowed. The power of the Serpent is broken and ye be all true men. King Kull, have you commands?"

"Lift that carrion," said Kull, and men of the guard took up the thing.

"Now follow me," said the king, and he made his way to the Accursed Room. Brule, with a look of concern, offered the support of his arm but Kull shook him off.

The distance seemed endless to the bleeding king, but at last he stood at the door and laughed fiercely and grimly when he heard the horrified ejaculations of the councilors.

At his orders the guardsmen flung the corpse they carried beside the others, and motioning all from the room Kull stepped out last and closed the door.

A wave of dizziness left him shaken. The faces turned to him, pallid and wonderingly, swirled and mingled in a ghostly fog. He felt the blood from his wound trickling down his limbs and he knew that what he was to do, he must do quickly or not at all.

His sword rasped from its sheath.

"Brule, are you there?"

"Aye!" Brule's face looked at him through the mist, close to his shoulder, but Brule's voice sounded leagues and eons away.

"Remember our vow, Brule. And now, bid them stand back."

His left arm cleared a space as he flung up his sword. Then with all his waning power he drove it through the door into the jamb, driving the great sword to the hilt and sealing the room forever.

Legs braced wide, he swayed drunkenly, facing the horrified councilors. "Let this room be doubly accursed. And let those rotting skeletons lie there forever as a sign of the dying might of the Serpent. Here I swear that I shall hunt the serpent-men from land to land, from sea to sea, giving no rest until all be slain, that good triumph and the power of Hell be broken.

"This thing I swear—I—Kull—king—of—Valusia."

His knees buckled as the faces swayed and swirled. The councilors leaped forward, but ere they could reach him, Kull slumped to the floor, and lay still, face upward.

The councilors surged about the fallen king, chattering and shrieking. Ka-nu beat them back with his clenched fists, cursing savagely.

"Back, you fools! Would you stifle the little life that is yet in him? How, Brule, is he dead or will he live?"—to the warrior who bent above the prostrate Kull.

"Dead?" sneered Brule irritably. "Such a man as this is not so easily killed. Lack of sleep and loss of blood have weakened him—by Valka, he has a score of deep wounds, but none of them mortal. Yet have those gibbering fools bring the court women here at once."

Brule's eyes lighted with a fierce, proud light.

"Valka, Ka-nu, but here is such a man as I knew not existed in these degenerate days. He will be in the saddle in a few scant days and then may the serpentmen of the world beware of Kull of Valusia.

"Valka! but that will be a rare hunt! Ah, I see long years of prosperity for the world with such a king upon the throne of Valusia."

CONVERSATIONS WITH DEAD PEOPLE by C. Priest Brumley

Part 1: Dr. Swanhurst.

Dr. Emile Swanhurst, 52, Professor of Mortuary Sciences at Tulane University, and PhD in both Mortuary Science and Internal Medicine looked on in morbid fascination at the scene transpiring in the laboratory below him.

A creature was strapped to the table in the center of the room. It was young, female, not yet fully developed, with dyed black hair and multiple piercings. Long legs and a diminutive bust completed the package. The name on the tag read, "Lucille Jane Landry, D.O.B. 3-23-92 D.O.D. 11-2-10." The creature struggled against its restraints, snarling and snapping at anyone who dared come close enough.

A laboratory supervisor, in a white coat, entered the room quietly and retrieved the clipboard from a bracket on the wall near the door. She perused its contents, ignoring the table. When she was satisfied with what she read, she returned the clipboard to the wall, then walked to the old-fashioned intercom nearby and engaged the microphone.

"Dr. Swanhurst," she said. "Specimen sixteen-oh-nine is ready for cycling. Proceed?"

Emile Swanhurst sat forward from his voyeuristic viewpoint and keyed the com on the table in front of him.

"Proceed, Dr. Peterson."

Peterson nodded once, then pressed the lighted button next to the intercom. At once, the lights in the laboratory darkened, only to be replaced moments later by a dazzlingly bright spotlight directly above. A tray with surgical tools sat nearby. She put on latex gloves, then pulled the surgical tools closer.

The specimen continued to snap and scream, occasionally managing to spook Dr. Peterson to flinching, but she regained her composure rather quickly. The young Doctor continued at a relatively steady pace, removing individual organs one by one and setting them on disparate carts placed strategically nearby by an aide earlier. After she finished with the autopsy, she recorded the duration, and took to measuring the organs themselves.

Everything she pulled out of the specimen was still alive, Dr. Peterson noted with a hint of disgust. The heart still pumped, the bowels contracted as if to make, and the kidneys still worked as though to continue filtering blood. After recording her findings on a legal pad, she reached to the counter behind her and pulled back a pistol-sized crossbow that was ready and waiting.

Careful aim. A note of recognition in the specimen's eyes.

"Pllllleeeeeaaaassee..."

TWANG. THWIP.

The ashes started forming around the creature's head wound mere moments after impact. The excised organs disintegrated alongside the body as if they were still attached. The slow, arduous process, a grotesquery in its own right, was being filmed like the others before it. And, like the preceding, Dr. Swanhurst was there to watch it the first time. The disintegration process that dissolved the specimen's entire being, starting from the fatal wound of origin, took a tad bit more than a half hour on average. And for that entire duration, Dr. Swanhurst would not move from his usual spot next to the viewing monitor.

He was so utterly fascinated by the whole process that he absolutely insisted on being present. "Why does that happen?" had become his mantra these past few weeks, and was so well known amongst staffers and colleagues alike that the usual litany of parodies- the most popular of which being "Why don't you fuckoff?" -had begun cropping up in e-mails and printed office art. So complete was Dr. Swanhurst's obsession that even his abnormally pristine office was affected, now being plastered in graphs, charts, essays, detailed photographs and multi-picture scene progressions.

The first specimen of the day had completed its "cycle", as the Doctor would say, almost exactly on cue with the average. At the press of a button, a clean-up crew in HazMat suits armed with roll-along ShopVacs and sterilizing chemicals swarmed the room. The first half vacuumed any details of the prior specimen's existence away, while the second half cleaned the room to laboratory sterility in preparation for the next. The clean up lasted longer than the Cycle. And while the crew worked, Dr. Swanhurst let himself get lost in thought.

The specimens were people, or at least used to be. They were of all walks of life; race and religion were of no matter here. They were of differing gender and sexual orientations. Some had families, others did not. The only correlation, Dr. Swanhurst mused, was the fact that all had died... recently. This was not affecting the old dead, only affecting the newly deceased and those whom had suffered skin-breaking injuries from others like the affected.

No correlation, the Doctor repeated miserably to himself. *There are no similarities whatsoever. All possible connections, aside from those wounded and recent fatalities, have been discounted.* He sighed internally. *Am I working on a dead end? Will all this be in vain, in the end? Will I...*

His thoughts were interrupted by a young man nervously coughing nearby. Dr. Swanhurst ran his somewhat withered hands through his unkempt white hair in frustration, both at the interruption and at himself for allowing such thoughts to form in the first place. *I shouldn't stoop to thinking like that*, he told himself miserably before turning to face the new man. He affixed his warmest grandfathering smile and folded his hands under his chin like the proverbial mad scientist as he addressed the page.

"Can I help you with something, son?"

"Uhhh, yes sir," the page started nervously. "The former specimen is in latter stages of disposal currently, and your room is now prepared for your, err, star pupil, sir. Shall I give the order to bring him in, or would you like to, umm, spend some more prep time on the, uhh, the subject?"

Dr. Swanhurst considered the young man thoughtfully, staring over his fingertips as though mesmerized. He realized many years ago how intimidating he was, both by means of his professional status and his physical stature. *Still, it won't do. Maybe, after we finish Sixteen-Ten, I will pull this young man aside and lay down a stricter set of rules of conduct,* he thought.

The Doctor continued to survey the page as he thought, taking note of the near panic attack the man was enduring while awaiting a reply. Finally, Dr. Swanhurst lifted his chin from his fingers and coughed once to clear his throat.

"I will prep the specimen myself, son. Tell Dr. Langlonais to be prepared for filming in ten minutes, and also kindly remind him again that I would like to shoot the next one at sixty frames per second, just as I requested earlier. Thank you."

The page bolted out of the door without so much as a "bye" or equivalent. As he went to deliver the message, Dr. Swanhurst laboriously extracted himself from the wing-backed chair he insisted on using in the monitor room. Staffers scoffed at the notion of it, but if you're going to spend a great deal of time somewhere, you might as well be comfortable in the process, as Dr. Swanhurst was fond of pointing out.

The Doctor took the trip down to the prepping station quietly, preparing himself for what lay ahead. He imagined the specimen like many before it, a corpse strapped to a table with no respect for modesty and snarling against the restraints like a rabid animal. None broke free, of course, but there was that one time... *No!* Swanhurst thought, shaking his head at the thought of the staffer a month ago. *Now is not the time for that. Time enough for memories later,* he told himself sternly.

Dr. Swanhurst finished descending the stairs on the fourth floor and turned left out of the stairwell. Two doors down on the right was his destination, a door marked "Preparations: Authorized Staff ONLY". Swanhurst swiped his identification badge and swiftly stepped inside, shoving away the blackout curtains put in place to discourage photographs or video from non-staff personnel should the door be held open. The specimen was laid out like the others before it on the stainless steel table in front of him. But that's where the similarities ended. This one... was special.

Everyone knew by the extra care being taken that the Doctor meant to use the unique circumstances of the specimen's arrival to hopefully answer his lingering question. He had even invested several thousand dollars of the lab's annual funding (a marvel in and of itself due to the Doctor's intense frugality) in an extra-high-quality high-definition camera earlier that day. Dr. Langlonais of the Electronics Technology department was called in to help

operate it, being the only person in the building with prior experience. *And now, time to see if it will all pay off.*

Dr. Swanhurst prepped the specimen himself, practically humming with excitement while he swabbed the specimen's forehead first with alcohol, then with the prerequisite Betadine. He knew it wouldn't be too long before the specimen resurrected, so he hurriedly finished preparations by sewing the specimen's mouth shut through the lips and the gums using veterinary-grade sutures (previous attempts using surgical grade had proved disastrous, and the Doctor insisted on veterinary-grade every time after that). Dr. Swanhurst then hurried out of the room before resurrection could occur, locking each failsafe by hand before quickly ascending the stairs and retreating to his viewing room.

The stage is set, the curtains are drawn, and the performers are here to take the stage, the Doctor thought to himself, as he settled in his chair by the large viewing monitor.

THE HETTFORD WITCH HUNT by James Rhodes –

Continues in the New Year...

STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

Chapter Twenty: The Prisoner

Will felt cold sweat break out on his skin. He stared in shared confusion at Geoff. To have got so far and to be held up at gunpoint by soldiers of his brother's own unit.

'You can't do this!' Anna was crying. 'You've got to let Will go!'

The lieutenant shook his head, thin-lipped. 'Nothing doing,' he said. 'You're all to remain here. Any attempt at escape and my men open fire.'

Will looked at Mercer. Why had they been so stupid as to leave their weapons in the SUV? Mr Towers came forward.

'Will is the only person in this country with a chance of bringing things back to normality,' he began. 'He has to get to Ox...'

Will touched his arm, and nodded to the seat where the old man had been sitting.

'Let me deal with this,' he said.

He approached the lieutenant, who sighed audibly. 'Look, the security services didn't say they wanted all my friends for questioning, did they?'

The lieutenant shrugged. 'The message didn't specify.'

'The message only mentioned that I was accompanied by a policeman,' Will insisted. 'You can let the others go. They're nothing to do with this. There'd be fewer for you to guard then.'

The lieutenant shook his head. 'Not what my orders said. You'll all stay here under armed guard.' Will tried to say something, but the lieutenant nodded to a soldier, who lifted his rifle

butt as if to club Will down. Will relented, but was gratified to see Geoff's face go white as his brother made an involuntary step forward.

'I'm needed at the operations table,' the lieutenant snapped impatiently. 'Captain Youds, they're your responsibility.'

Geoff saluted smartly. The lieutenant marched away, leaving the soldiers behind.

'Sit down,' Geoff suggested to the group.

Slowly, they did so. Will remained standing, facing his brother.

'Geoff...' he began.

'Captain,' Geoff corrected him. He looked surreptitiously at the soldiers and leaned forward. 'I didn't get a chance to tell Lieutenant Bishop that you were family,' he added. 'And that's the way it had better stay. Now sit down, Will.'

'Yes, captain,' said Will.

He sat down. Geoff's revelation had given him the first feeling of hope he'd had in days. Okay, so they were under armed guard and the security services wanted him for questioning. But Geoff was there, and the lieutenant didn't know the connection between him and his prisoner. Surely blood was thicker than water.

Mercer leaned over.

'Can you ask your brother if we can clean ourselves?' he said. 'You might not have noticed, Will, but we're all filthy.'

Will hadn't noticed. He had had his mind on other things. But it was true; they were all in a terrible mess, travel stained and blood-spattered, some of them. He beckoned to Geoff, and asked him for soap and water.

‘I’ll see what can be provided,’ he said.

Mercer leaned over again.

‘Your brother’s an okay kind of guy,’ he said.

Will looked at him in surprise. This was an entirely new angle on Geoff.

‘He’s a smarmy bastard who thinks he’s the ultimate lady’s man,’ Will contradicted. ‘You saw him with Anna.’

Mercer shrugged. ‘But it looks like he’s doing his best for you,’ he said. ‘Do you think you could persuade him to let you go?’

Will shook his head. ‘If it was just Geoff, maybe,’ he said, ‘but even still, he’s a career-obsessive. He wouldn’t want a black mark against his name, even if it meant helping out his brother. He didn’t tell the lieutenant that we’re brothers. Maybe he plans to help us... but I’d think it more likely that he just doesn’t want to be associated with me.’

Mercer looked at Will with pained eyes. ‘You do have a cynical view of your brother,’ he commented.

Mr Towers leaned over. ‘Shouldn’t we be trying to get out of here?’ he hissed. He nodded towards the two guards. ‘Jump them! They’re not expecting anything.’

‘I think you must have watched too many war films,’ Will said gloomily. ‘What about the rest of the place? There’s men with guns everywhere.’

‘But Mr Towers is right about one thing,’ Anna said. ‘We ought to be working out some way to escape. You can’t let them keep you here. You’ve got to get to Oxford.’

Will glanced up sharply at the two guards, who were both watching the muted confab with increasing irritation.

‘Please don’t mention that particular city,’ he said.

One of the soldiers, a corporal, stamped forward.

‘Shut up, the lot of you,’ he barked. ‘You’re to sit quietly until told to do otherwise.’

‘That’s enough, corporal!’

Geoff had returned, carrying a tray of mugs, and followed by an orderly with a bowl of hot water and some towels. He was glaring at the soldier. ‘I didn’t tell you they had to keep silent.’

The corporal sprang to attention. ‘No sir. But they were whispering together. Sounded like they were plotting something.’

Geoff looked the man up and down, angrily. ‘What were you expecting, a breakout? Who’s got the gun, you or them?’

‘Sir,’ snapped the corporal.

Geoff joined them. ‘Here’s hot water and soap,’ he said, as the orderly placed the bowl down on the occasional table between the chairs. ‘Make yourselves decent. And here’s some tea. Only the usual Army crap, I’m afraid.’ He smiled oilily at Anna.

Will took a mug and sipped at it while the others took turns to clean themselves up. While he was waiting, he looked at Geoff.

‘You’re being very considerate,’ he said. ‘I would have thought you’d want to see the back of me. I must be an embarrassment.’

Geoff looked pained. ‘I wish you hadn’t turned up like this,’ he admitted. ‘You’re a right pain in the arse, always have been. But I’m going to look out for you, as much as I can. You’re my kid brother.’

Will leaned closer. 'Does that include letting me go?' h muttered.

Geoff drew back slightly. 'You need to clean yourself up,' he said. 'You smell like you haven't washed in weeks. And I want you to let the orderly look at some of those injuries.'

Rebuffed, Will put down the tea and went to sponge off the worst of the muck. Once he'd done so, the orderly joined him bearing a first aid kit and began to clean and dress his wounds. He saw that Mercer had joined Geoff and was talking to him in quiet, urgent tones. Geoff was smiling and nodding, while keeping his eyes on Anna, who was sitting with the Towers and giving every impression that he found Mercer a bore. But gradually, he began to pay more attention, withdrew his eyes from Anna, and began talking seriously with Mercer.

'That should do you for the moment, sir,' said the orderly, breaking into Will's thoughts. 'You really ought to be in a hospital, but it's the best I can do in the circumstances. Next time you get a chance, pop into a hospital and get them to look you over.'

Will smiled bleakly at the man. 'Don't know when that'll be,' he said. 'Thanks, mate.' He went to join Geoff.

The orderly took Mercer to one side and tended to his wounds while Will and his brother stared at each other.

'Bit of a storyteller, that copper,' said Geoff.

'Who, Mercer?' Will asked. What had the big man been telling him? 'Yeah, I suppose he tends to exaggerate.' He hoped Mercer hadn't mentioned the siege of Liberty Park.

'He seems to think you're civilisation's last hope,' Geoff added. 'This manuscript of Professor Quigley's...'

Will looked at him in horror, turned to glare at Mercer, who didn't notice.

'He told you about *that*?' he hissed.

Geoff nodded, seriously.

‘If he’s to be believed,’ he said, ‘then we’d better not keep you here.’

Will’s eyes widened.

‘You believe him?’

‘Shouldn’t I?’ Geoff asked. ‘You said he tends to exaggerate. But look, I don’t want to keep you prisoner, obviously, and I don’t like the idea of turning you over to the spooks. I don’t know why they want you, but the whole situation stinks. Have you heard the news recently?’

Will laughed hollowly. ‘I’ve been a bit too preoccupied to pay attention to the wider political situation,’ he said stiffly.

Geoff scowled. ‘It’s fucking insane,’ he said, ‘and it depends on which channels you watch. We’re under orders not to listen to local radio or log on to the internet. So of course we do. I know there’s some conspiracy theories out there, but...’

‘What are you on about?’ Will demanded.

Geoff frowned. ‘What they say is that these rebels in Oxford are the real government,’ he said.

‘The government was shot,’ Will said.

Geoff shook his head. ‘Some of them survived,’ he said. ‘And they flew to Oxford. The rebel factions are under their command.’

‘Well, who’s your commander-in-chief?’ Will asked.

Geoff shrugged. ‘The only politician to officially survive the attack was the home secretary,’ he said. ‘We’re under the command of Susan Verlaine.’

‘Shit...’ said Will.

‘But it gets better,’ Geoff added. ‘The UN doesn’t recognise the rebels. The international community is backing Verlaine. They’re talking about sending troops to support us against the rebels. But the rebels are the real government! That’s why half the army is fighting for them.’ He slammed his fist into his palm savagely. ‘The whole thing’s fucked up, Will.’

‘Wasn’t it always?’

‘But the thing is,’ Geoff went on, ‘is that a lot of my brother officers are unhappy with the situation. They want to join the other side. They say Verlaine has caused the situation, she’s the reason the country’s sunk into anarchy. Now, if what your cop friend says is true, this manuscript holds the key to the situation. You need to get that to Oxford, right...?’

Will stared at his brother with a sense of dawning realisation.

‘Are you trying to say you want to help?’

Geoff was about to reply when there was a commotion from the library entrance. Several armed police officers entered, flanking a thickest man who wore a Saville Row suit. He looked oddly familiar.

‘What’s happening now?’ Will asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Geoff admitted.

‘Could we make a break for it?’ Will added. Most of the men in the room were concentrating on the newcomers.

Geoff shook his head. ‘That would be a good way to get shot,’ he said.

The thickest man marched up to the officers by the map table.

‘Dawson, Security Service,’ he said. ‘You are to release your prisoner to me, lieutenant.’

Lieutenant Bishop saluted, but his face was cold. 'Prisoner, sir?' he said, indicating Will and his companions. 'You'll have to take your pick. We've got several.'

Dawson turned to stare over at them. His eyes locked on Will's and he came over. Bishop followed, giving the security man a sardonic look.

'This is the man,' Dawson said. 'I recognise him from the CCTV footage. The rest are your responsibility, lieutenant, but this is the suspect. My superior is waiting at High Wycombe custody suite to question him, and then he'll be going on a journey.' He turned to Will. 'William Youds, I am arresting you for the attempted murder of Susan Verlaine.'

There was a mass intake of breath. Will looked about him in alarm. To his horror, the people who seemed most shocked by this revelation were Mercer and his other friends. Geoff stared at Will, wide-eyed.

'You do not have to say anything,' - Dawson's words carried in a silence punctuated only by the distant boom of the guns -, 'but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence.'

Will stared at the floor in resignation.

BENNY DOES THE RIGHT THING by Tommy Chewat

The interior light briefly flickered on as the driver fumbled for whatever it was he was looking for. Presumably it was his wallet, or at least his ATM card. The driver leant out of his window reaching to punch his PIN in to the drive-through teller machine. He was a heavy set white man, of course. Although he was some distance from his observer, his observer could nevertheless make out the connected circles that designated the make of his car. And also, a magnetic yellow ribbon which was there to let people behind the car know that the driver supported the troops of his country's ongoing struggle with Iraqi insurgents. The man's skin was soft from over-indulgence, it hung down from under his chin like a pink rooster giving a silhouette that suggested a less robust version of Alfred Hitchcock's famous profile. Then, within a few seconds both he and his silver-grey Audi shifted out of the Cranbrook Shopping Area and took a left. The driver would be able to pass through the apartment complexes within the matter of a minutes and be back at the larger more expensive homes that kept Cockeyesville snooty and relatively free from people such as the man who lay just out of site in a small enclave a few shops down from the High's Dairy Store.

It was 9.30 p.m. and High's had stopped serving hot drinks. Benny had received this information from the last person that he asked for change to buy coffee from.

"What about McDonalds?" Benny asked the lady but following only two steps she was magically out of hearing range.

The big yellow M was beginning to mock his stomach. He had not eaten since the night before and had worked a six hour shift since then. He had been sent back from the job early because he'd finished what he was told to do and there was no prize for finishing quick. The boss had even subtracted a half hour for lunch so that Benny would only get five and a half hours. He got back to Labor Ready at 2 p.m. There was a sign in the window declaring that they would be back at four.

Benny and ten other workers waited until 6.30 p.m. (when the office was supposed to close) and there was still no sign of anybody. A few people came and went, but for the most part the people who worked there (on those wages) couldn't afford to just pack up and go home - especially not on a Monday. So, they hung on until there was absolutely no hope. They would complain about it the next day but not too hard because work has a way of slowing down very suddenly for those that complain at Labor Ready.

It was one of the coldest nights that Benny had felt since his sister kicked him out for standing up to her husband on her behalf. It had felt like the right choice at the time.

In fact, making the right choice had been the hallmark of Benny's adult life. The crucifix he wore around his neck had been given to him by his mother with these exact words, "This is to remind you to always do the right thing."

He had taken the words seriously at the time and now she was dead he held them as sacred. Despite, or perhaps because of, the crappy lot that Benny had had in life he was a devote Christian. When he was ready to pack it in, there was Christ. But following Christ often led Benny to an increasingly literal interpretation of "consider the lilies."

The best example of this pattern of behaviour was that Benny had lost his job teaching art at a Baltimore City elementary school simply for telling the wrong person that there seemed to be a discrepancy between the amount of funding the schools received from the state and the amount of money they actually had.

And now, broke, tired and desperately hungry, Benny made the right decision again. Instead of waiting for the next expensive car to pull up to the ATM and saving himself, he would simply wrap up in his blanket and try to sleep against the concrete wall.

He could feel the small metal crucifix lying on the skin of his chest and even with his hood up and the blanket pulled up to his nose it was the warmest thing he had on. The gold did not absorb the temperature as quickly as his skin and compared to the rest of his body it felt warm. The more that he lay still and focused on it, the less he felt like shivering. Its warmth spread through his chest and heated his neck and face. This unnatural comfort lulled him in to a phlegm-thick sleep. The first flake of the snowfall placed itself delicately on his eyelid. It melted without being wiped away.

Benny was simply too cold to notice the snow. And when he did finally wake up, it was not the snow that caught his attention.

He did not want to wake up; his body was set on rest or death. He felt the first prod dully bruising his shoulder but it was not enough to wake him. The consecutive pokes sounded in him like an alarm that he was reluctant to acknowledge. He heard voices.

"Call an ambulance, he's dead."

"Shouldn't we call a hearse then?"

They laughed. Benny knew even before opening his eyes that they were policemen. He looked up.

“I’m sorry, officers, I’ll move along.”

“You better.”

They were silhouettes against an almost blinding yellow.

“We’re evacuating the area; do you have your own transport?”

Without even bothering to chuckle Benny told them that he did and they disappeared in to the yellow. They disappeared fast.

In his early waking stage Benny had assumed the light was simply the McDonald’s sign reflected by the snow and magnified by sleepy eyes. But as the police car skidded away he saw that it was something more - Cranbrook Road had been torn open right in the centre between the commercial and residential areas. And from beneath the lacerated concrete a beam of yellow light reached up in to the sky. The snow reflected the light in every direction and was still falling heavily.

The beam was so bright that it almost appeared solid, rising up to the clouds but not stopping there. It continued on past the eye's capability to follow it. Even a glance directly at it had scarred Benny’s retinas adding blue to the concoction of radiance. He wondered how far the evacuation had reached and saw an immediate plus to the situation. If everyone was evacuated then he could safely go and sleep in a warm apartment stairwell without anyone noticing and informing the police. He wondered what time it was and what time the evacuation had taken place.

He knew that there was a clock in High’s and resolved to peek in through their window before he took any further action. To his immense surprise he found High’s with all of its lights on and its door open. The clock, that had been provided by Marlboro as part of the cigarette display case read at seventeen minutes past four. They must have been evacuated before they closed at 11 p.m. Benny realized that he must have been the absolute last person in the area. He was a little offended that no-one had thought about him or his welfare. But he

was used to that and the feeling was supplanted by a sensation that he had just been given the keys to the kingdom.

He took a Pepsi from the fridge and drained it in seconds. The store had a microwave and he cooked himself five hotdogs - revelling in the fact that the buns and condiments were only a hand reach away. The stale food sat like a feast. Then there was the cash register just waiting.

Within minutes he was not only full but richer than he'd been in a long time. He heard an intense crack outside and the light grew yet brighter in the room. Suddenly alive enough to be aware of his own mortality, he quickly gathered a bag of provisions and hastily set out.

He noticed that the tear in the street was increasing in size, spreading its yellow light in every direction. He began to run down Cranbrook Road, back in the direction of the Labor Ready. As he ran he could feel the road breaking up behind him, it was a slight vibration for such massive damage and even though it occurred to him that there was no escaping from the light, he continued to run.

Frantic with the sudden will to live, his feet tore against the snow and into the concrete almost with the same speed as this encroaching terror. Without the fear of cars in the road, he dropped his stolen groceries and tore down the open tarmac making the best time possible.

He could feel something beating against his chest as he ran but he didn't have time to consider what it was. The light was already reflected ahead of him so bright that it bounced off the parked cars, the houses, the trees - everything. And it grew brighter. As he ran from the light, he ran towards its reflection and that reflection grew brighter and brighter still.

Benny could hear his breath beating in time with the beating against his chest. He did not stop running even as he felt the ground disappear from beneath his back foot. As the road disintegrated entirely he was briefly suspended in the impact of the light. And at that moment of hopelessness he was free to investigate the thumping irritation.

Clasping his palm firmly against his chest he could just make out the shape of his mother's crucifix made bulky by his jacket and clumsy fumble of a last moment. Feeling that crucifix he also felt his full stomach and the roll of notes in his pocket. The dreadful thought occurred to him that he was dying with a sin against his soul.

THIEVES FROM THE STARS by Rex Mundy

1 The Forest

Arthur was on their tail.

As Theodric the Saxon fled with his men into the shadowy eaves of the Wild Wood, he heard the thunder of the Welsh cavalry at his tail. He cursed his treacherous chieftain Oeric as he ran.

‘What happened to those reinforcements?’ demanded Boia, his thane. ‘Oeric said he’d bring up support for us when the Welsh appeared. Did they ambush him too?’

Theodric shook his head silently. Boia had never been too bright, he reflected.

‘Through here!’ he gasped. He pushed aside a tangle of branches and revealed a path leading up a steep hillside into the heart of the forest. The ground here was too rocky for horsemen. He raised his horn to his lips and blew it to summon his men to him. They gathered around him, and he showed them the path.

As his surviving warriors rushed through the gap, he turned back, and stared out across the field. The long line of Welsh cavalry was advancing rapidly across the scrub, weapons and armour glinting in the last light of day.

‘Come on!’ he urged his fleeing men. Honour would not be theirs this night, but neither would it be Oeric’s, if word of his betrayal got out. The last Saxon warrior passed him, and scrambled up the rocky slope beyond. Theodric shoot one last glance at the advancing cavalry, then ran lithely up the slope after his men.

The horsemen reigned to a halt at the edge of the woods. One of their chieftains wrenched off his helm to reveal red hair and a wild face, and gazed angrily into the shadows of the forest.

‘Damn them!’ he cursed. ‘They’ve got away into Coit Celidon!’ He laughed. ‘Let’s hope all the old stories are true.’

‘Whether they are or not, Caius,’ called another warrior, whose blue tattoos identified him as a Pict from the North, ‘the woods of Coit Celidon are deadly. The bogs and quicksand will finish them off even if there’s no truth in the stories of monsters and wild men. Isn’t that right, Artorius?’

This was directed to the warrior in the purple cloak who had just ridden up. On seeing him, his men bowed their heads in greeting.

‘Aye, Walwain,’ Artorius replied. ‘Wild men or quicksand, wolves or bears – they’re doomed. Now we must get after Oeric, who abandoned his own men to save his own skin. Come. Duke Cato’s scouts tell me Oeric’s army fled towards Castle Guinnion.’

At their chieftain’s urging, the riders turned their steeds away from the forest edge, and they began to stream across the field towards the south. The field was theirs; the battle was won. Now to win the war...

* * * * *

‘Halt!’ Theodric called, once they were half a mile into the trees. His men sighed with relief, threw themselves to the ground, and began to loosen their armour.

After posting a couple of guards at either end of their impromptu camp, Theodric sat down with his back against a tree. He loosened the chin-strap of his helmet, and eased it off. He sniffed. There was an unpleasant stench in the air, one he couldn’t place. Not the usual forest smell of rotting vegetation and reeking bogs, but something worse. Something animal...

Boia came over to him, and sat down. The wound he’d sustained to the temple early in the battle had cracked open again, and was weeping fresh blood. But Boia’s own face was stoic and betrayed no feelings.

‘Do you think we’ve got far enough away from the Welsh?’ he demanded hoarsely.

Theodric nodded. 'They won't bring their horses into this tangled, stinking forest,' he replied. 'It's worse than Mirkwood.' He wiped the sweat from his brow, and recalled his adventures in the forests round the Vistula estuary. His face twisted with bitterness. 'Besides,' he added, 'they'll be after Oeric now.'

Boia spat in the mud. 'To think we'd be betrayed by Hengest's own son,' he snarled.

Theodric shrugged.

'I never trusted him,' he replied. 'Too much like his sister, that witch Renwein.' He tore up a handful of grass from the sward beside him, and started polishing his armour. 'Hengest was a true man, when all's said and done. But his children were an evil brood.'

'Oeric must've know that we could only hold Arthur's men off for so long,' Boia hissed venomously. 'His scouts had told him their numbers.'

'Aye,' Theodric replied shortly.

The day's events were fresh in his mind. They had been on the verge of recovering from their defeat at the River Bassus when news came to Oeric's tent. Arthur, the chieftain of the Welsh army, him the Latin-speakers named Artorius, had returned unexpectedly. The Saxon host had been anticipating a respite after their defeat, but Arthur had ridden to Cair Leil, on the borders of the forest of Coit Celidon, and levied reinforcements. He was riding back, intent on pushing them into the sea.

Oeric had panicked at this. His forces were by no means ready to face another attack, but he had told his chieftains to march their troops towards Arthur's army. Because Theodric's troop had been freshest, having only been on the periphery of the battle of the Bassus, he had put them in the vanguard. They had met Arthur's outriders at the edge of the vast forest that stretched from Cair Leil to the mountains of Caledonia, and the kingdoms of the Picts.

Here Theodric's men had fought a long and valiant battle against the forces of Arthur, forever anticipating reinforcements from the main army. But none had ever come. Though Theodric's warband had sown the field of battle with gore, and glutted the ravens with Welsh corpses, the warriors of Arthur had gradually pounded them into the dust.

'What do we do now?' Boia's voice broke into his reverie.

Theodric glanced up. Night had fallen, and the trees around them rustled eerily in the gloom. He had forbidden his men to light fires, since this would give their positions away to anyone beyond the forest's edge. What would they do? he thought to himself. Returning to Oeric was not an option, but it left them alone in a hostile country. They couldn't even rely on the Picts to take them in; the new king was a man of peace, a Christian who preferred to stay quietly at home than regain the glories of his predecessors.

'We lie up here for a few days,' said Theodric. 'Then we make for the coast.'

'For the coast?' asked Boia. 'But why don't we just head off now? We don't want to stay in this wolf-infested wilderness for too long. As long as we remain here, we could be attacked...'

His words were barely out of his mouth when the rustling in the trees above suddenly increased in volume. Suddenly, dark shapes were dropping from the branches, bringing with them a hideous stench. Great dark figures, seven foot high or more, dark and vast, blotting out the stars, reeking like animals but somehow manlike...

Theodric drew out his sword. Around him his men were shouting in fear and disgust. A great furry thing leapt at him, and he stabbed at it with his sword. Sounds of struggle erupted from the darkness around as the creatures attacked. Theodric lashed out at his invisible foe again.

Suddenly, something came whistling out of the darkness beside him, and struck his head. Stars and comets exploded in his mind, and he sank into a deep dark booming sea of impenetrable night.

THE TELL TALE HEART: DEMISE OF THE BIONACLE by Obsidian M. Tesla

Not available

SCHLOCK! CLASSIC SERIAL: VARNEY THE VAMPIRE

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE STAKE AND THE DEAD BODY.

The mob seemed from the first to have an impression that, as regarded the military force, no very serious results would arise from that quarter, for it was not to be supposed that, on an occasion which could not possibly arouse any ill blood on the part of the soldiery, or on which they could have the least personal feeling, they would like to get a bad name, which would stick to them for years to come.

It was no political riot, on which men might be supposed, in consequence of differing in opinion, to have their passions inflamed; so that, although the call of the civil authorities for military aid had been acceded to, yet it was hoped, and, indeed, almost understood by the officers, that their operations would lie confined more to a demonstration of power, than anything else.

Besides, some of the men had got talking to the townspeople, and had heard all about the vampyre story, and not being of the most refined or educated class themselves, they felt rather interested than otherwise in the affair.

Under these circumstances, then, we are inclined to think, that the disorderly mob of that inn had not so wholesome a fear as it was most certainly intended they should have of the redcoats. Then, again, they were not attacking the churchyard, which, in the first case, was the main point in dispute, and about which the authorities had felt so very sore, inasmuch as they felt that, if once the common people found out that the sanctity of such places could be outraged with impunity, they would lose their reverence for the church; that is to say, for the host of persons who live well and get fat in this country by the trade of religion.

Consequently, this churchyard was the main point of defence, and it was zealously looked to when it need not have been done so, while the public-house where there really reigned mischief was half unguarded.

There are always in all communities, whether large or small, a number of persons who really have, or fancy they have, something to gain by disturbance. These people, of course, care not for what pretext the public peace is violated; so long as there is a row, and something like an excuse for running into other people's houses, they are satisfied.

To get into a public-house under such circumstances is an unexpected treat; and thus, when the mob rushed into the inn with such symptoms of fury and excitement, there went with the leaders of the disturbance a number of persons who never thought of getting further than the bar, where they attacked the spirit-taps with an alacrity which showed how great was their love for ardent compounds.

Leaving these persons behind, however, we will follow those who, with a real superstition, and a furious interest in the affair of the vampyre, made their way towards the upper chamber, determining to satisfy themselves if there were truth in the statement so alarmingly made by the woman who had created such an emotion.

It is astonishing what people will do in crowds, in comparison with the acts that they would be able to commit individually. There is usually a calmness, a sanctity, a sublimity about death, which irresistibly induces a respect for its presence, alike from the educated or from the illiterate; and let the object of the fell-destroyer's presence be whom it may, the very consciousness that death has claimed it for its own, invests it with a halo of respect, that, in life, the individual could never aspire to probably.

Let us precede these furious rioters for a few moments, and look upon the chamber of the dead—that chamber, which for a whole week, had been looked upon with a kind of shuddering terror—that chamber which had been darkened by having its sources of light closed, as if it were a kind of disrespect to the dead to allow the pleasant sunshine to fall upon the faded form.

And every inhabitant of that house, upon ascending and descending its intricate and ancient staircases, had walked with a quiet and subdued step past that one particular door.

Even the tones of voice in which they spoke to each other, while they knew that that sad remnant of mortality was in the house, was quiet and subdued, as if the repose of death was but a mortal sleep, and could be broken by rude sounds.

Ay, even some of these very persons, who now with loud and boisterous clamour, had rushed into the place, had visited the house and talked in whispers; but then they were alone, and men will do in throngs acts which, individually, they would shrink from with compunction or cowardice, call it which we will.

The chamber of death is upon the second story of the house. It is a back room, the windows of which command a view of that half garden, half farm-yard, which we find generally belonging to country inns.

But now the shutters were closed, with the exception of one small opening, that, in daylight, would have admitted a straggling ray of light to fall upon the corpse. Now, however, that the sombre shades of evening had wrapped everything in gloom, the room appeared in total darkness, so that the most of those adventurers who had ventured into the place shrunk back until lights were procured from the lower part of the house, with which to enter the room.

A dim oil lamp in a niche sufficiently lighted the staircase, and, by the friendly aid of its glimmering beams, they had found their way up to the landing tolerably well, and had not thought of the necessity of having lights with which to enter the apartments, until they found them in utter darkness.

These requisites, however, were speedily procured from the kitchen of the inn. Indeed, anything that was wanted was laid hold of without the least word of remark to the people of the place, as if might, from that evening forthwith, was understood to constitute right, in that town.

Up to this point no one had taken a very prominent part in the attack upon the inn if attack it could be called; but now the man whom chance, or his own nimbleness, made the first of the throng, assumed to himself a sort of control over his companions and, turning to them, he said,—

"Hark ye, my friends; we'll do everything quietly and properly; so I think we'd better three or four of us go in at once, arm-in-arm."

"Psha!" cried one who had just arrived with a light; "it's your cowardice that speaks. I'll go in first; let those follow me who like, and those who are afraid may remain where they are."

He at once dashed into the room, and this immediately broke the spell of fear which was beginning to creep over the others in consequence of the timid suggestion of the man who, up to that moment, had been first and foremost in the enterprise.

In an instant the chamber was half filled with persons, four or five of whom carried lights; so that, as it was not of very large dimensions, it was sufficiently illuminated for every object in it to be clearly visible.

There was the bed, smooth and unruffled, as if waiting for some expected guest; while close by its side a coffin, supported upon tressles, over which a sheet was partially thrown, contained the sad remains of him who little expected in life that, after death, he should be stigmatised as an example of one of the ghastliest superstitions that ever found a home in the human imagination.

It was evident that some one had been in the room; and that this was the woman whose excited fancy had led her to look upon the face of the corpse there could be no doubt, for the sheet was drawn aside just sufficiently to discover the countenance.

The fact was that the stranger was unknown at the inn, or probably ere this the coffin lid would have been screwed on; but it was hoped, up to the last moment, as advertisements had been put into the county papers, that some one would come forward to identify and claim him.

Such, however, had not been the case, and so his funeral had been determined upon.

The presence of so many persons at once effectually prevented any individual from exhibiting, even if he felt any superstitious fears about approaching the coffin; and so, with one accord, they surrounded it, and looked upon the face of the dead.

There was nothing repulsive in that countenance. The fact was that decomposition had sufficiently advanced to induce a relaxation of the muscles, and a softening of the fibres, so that an appearance of calmness and repose had crept over the face which it did not wear immediately after death.

It happened, too, that the face was full of flesh—for the death had been sudden, and there had not been that wasting away of the muscles and integuments which makes the skin cling, as it were, to the bone, when the ravages of long disease have exhausted the physical frame.

There was, unquestionably, a plumpness, a freshness, and a sort of vitality about the countenance that was remarkable.

For a few moments there was a death-like stillness in the apartment, and then one voice broke the silence by exclaiming,—

"He's a vampyre, and has come here to die. Well he knows he'd be taken up by Sir Francis Varney, and become one of the crew."

"Yes, yes," cried several voices at once; "a vampyre! a vampyre!"

"Hold a moment," cried one; "let us find somebody in the house who has seen him some days ago, and then we can ascertain if there's any difference in his looks."

This suggestion was agreed to, and a couple of stout men ran down stairs, and returned in a few moments with a trembling waiter, whom they had caught in the passage, and forced to accompany them.

This man seemed to think that he was to be made a dreadful example of in some sort of way; and, as he was dragged into the room, he trembled, and looked as pale as death.

"What have I done, gentlemen?" he said; "I ain't a vampyre. Don't be driving a stake through me. I assure you, gentlemen, I'm only a waiter, and have been for a matter of five-and-twenty years."

"You'll be done no harm to," said one of his captors; "you've only got to answer a question that will be put to you."

"Oh, well, certainly, gentlemen; anything you please. Coming—coming, as I always say; give your orders, the waiter's in the room."

"Look upon the fare of that corpse."

"Certainly, certainly—directly."

"Have you ever seen it before?"

"Seen it before! Lord bless you! yes, a dozen of times. I seed him afore he died, and I seed him arter; and when the undertaker's men came, I came up with them and I seed 'em put him in his coffin. You see I kept an eye on 'em, gentlemen, 'cos knows well enough what they is. A cousin of mine was in the trade, and he assures me as one of 'em always brings a tooth-drawing concern in his pocket, and looks in the mouth of the blessed corpse to see if there's a blessed tooth worth pulling out."

"Hold your tongue," said one; "we want none of your nonsense. Do you see any difference now in the face of the corpse to what it was some days since?"

"Well, I don't know; somehow, it don't look so rum."

"Does it look fresher?"

"Well, somehow or another, now you mention it, it's very odd, but it does."

"Enough," cried the man who had questioned him, with considerable excitement of manner. "Neighbours, are we to have our wives and our children scared to death by vampyres?"

"No—no!" cried everybody.

"Is not this, then, one of that dreadful order of beings?"

"Yes—yes; what's to be done?"

"Drive a stake through the body, and so prevent the possibility of anything in the shape of a restoration."

This was a terrific proposition; and even those who felt most strongly upon the subject, and had their fears most awakened, shrank from carrying it into effect. Others, again, applauded it, although they determined, in their own minds, to keep far enough off from the execution of the job, which they hoped would devolve upon others, so that they might have all the security of feeling that such a process had been gone through with the supposed vampyre, without being in any way committed by the dreadful act.

Nothing was easier than to procure a stake from the garden in the rear of the premises; but it was one thing to have the means at hand of carrying into effect so dreadful a proposition, and another actually to do it.

For the credit of human nature, we regret that even then, when civilisation and popular education had by no means made such rapid strides as in our times they have, such a proposition should be entertained for a moment: but so it was; and just as an alarm was given that a party of the soldiers had reached the inn and had taken possession of the doorway with a determination to arrest the rioters, a strong hedge-stake had been procured, and everything was in readiness for the perpetration of the horrible deed.

Even then those in the room, for they were tolerably sober, would have revolted, probably, from the execution of so fearful an act; but the entrance of a party of the military into the lower portion of the tavern, induced those who had been making free with the strong liquors below, to make a rush up-stairs to their companions with the hope of escaping detection of the petty larceny, if they got into trouble on account of the riot.

These persons, infuriated by drink, were capable of anything, and to them, accordingly, the more sober parties gladly surrendered the disagreeable job of rendering the supposed vampyre perfectly innoxious, by driving a hedge-stake through his body—a proceeding which, it was currently believed, inflicted so much physical injury to the frame, as to render his resuscitation out of the question.

The cries of alarm from below, joined now to the shouts of those mad rioters, produced a scene of dreadful confusion.

We cannot, for we revolt at the office, describe particularly the dreadful outrage which was committed upon the corpse; suffice it that two or three, maddened by drink, and incited by the others, plunged the hedge-stake through the body, and there left it, a sickening and horrible spectacle to any one who might cast his eyes upon it.

With such violence had the frightful and inhuman deed been committed, that the bottom of the coffin was perforated by the stake so that the corpse was actually nailed to its last earthly tenement.

Some asserted, that at that moment an audible groan came from the dead man, and that this arose from the extinguishment of that remnant of life which remained in him, on account of his being a vampyre, and which would have been brought into full existence, if the body had been placed in the rays of the moon, when at its full, according to the popular superstition upon that subject.

Others, again, were quite ready to swear that at the moment the stake was used there was a visible convulsion of all the limbs, and that the countenance, before so placid and so calm, became immediately distorted, as if with agony.

But we have done with these horrible surmises; the dreadful deed has been committed, and wild, ungovernable superstition has had, for a time, its sway over the ignorant and debased.

XXXII

I was only inactive a moment. I had thought Anita would have on her helmet. But she was reluctant, or confused.

"Anita, we've got to get out of here! Up through the overhead locks to the dome."

"Yes." She fumbled with her helmet. The climbing men on the ladder were audible. They were already nearing the top. The trap door was closed; Anita and I were crouching on it. There was a thick metal bar set in a depressed groove for the grid. I slid it in place; it would seal the trap for a short time.

A degree of confidence came to me. We had a few moments before there could be any hand-to-hand conflict. The giant electronic projector would eventually be used against Grantline; it was the brigands' most powerful weapon. Its controls were here, by Heaven, I would smash them? That at least I could do!

I jumped for the window. Miko's signals had stopped, but I caught a glimpse of his distant moving curve lights.

A flash came up at me, as in the window I became visible to the brigands on the ship's deck. It was a small hand projector, hastily fired, for it went wide of the window. It was followed by a rain of small beams, but I was warned and dropped my head beneath the sill. The rays flashed dangerously upward through the oval opening, hissed against our vaulted roof. The air snapped and tingled with a shower^[189] of blue-red sparks, and the acrid odor of the released gases settled down upon us.

The trajectory controls of the projector were beside me. I seized them, ripped and tore at them. There was a roar down on the deck. The projector had exploded. A man's agonizing scream split the confusion of sounds.

It silenced the brigands on the deck. Under our floor grid, those on the ladder had been pounding at the trap door. They stopped, evidently to see what had happened. The bombardment of our windows stopped momentarily.

I cautiously peered out the window again. In the wreck of the projector, three men were lying. One of them was screaming horribly. The dome side was damaged. Potan and other men were frantically investigating to see if the ship's air was hissing out.

A triumph swept over me. They had not found me so meek and inoffensive as they might have thought!

Anita clutched me. She still had not donned her helmet.

"Put on your helmet!"

"But Gregg—"

"Put it on!"

"I... I don't want to put it on until you put yours on."

"I've smashed the projector! We've stopped them coming up for a while."

But they were still on the ladder under our floor. They heard our voices: they began thumping again. Then pounding. They seemed now to have heavy implements. They rammed against the trap.

The floor seemed holding. The square of metal grid trembled, yielded a little. But it was good for a few minutes longer.

I called down, "The first one who comes through will be shot!" My words mingled with their oaths. There was a moment's pause, then the ramming went on. The dying man on the deck was still screaming.

I whispered, "I'll try an Earth signal."

She nodded. Pale, tense, but calm. "Yes, Gregg. And I was thinking—"

"It won't take a minute. Have your helmet ready."

"I was thinking—" She hurried across the room.

I swung on the Botz signaling apparatus. It was connected. Within a moment I had it humming. The fluorescent tubes lighted with their lurid glare; they painted purple the body of the giant duty man who lay sprawled at my feet. I drew on all the ship's power. The tube lights in the room quivered and went dim.

I would have to hurry. Potan could shut this off from the main hull control room. I could see, through the room's upper trap, the primary sending mirror mounted in the peak of the dome. It was quivering, radiant with its light energy. I sent the flash.

The flattened past full Earth was up there. I knew that the Western Hemisphere faced the Moon at this hour. I flashed in English, with the open Universal Earth code:

Help. Grantline.

And again: *Help. Archimedes region near Apennines. Attacked by brigands.*

Send help at once. Grantline.

If only it would be received! I flung off the current. Anita stood watching me intently. "Gregg, look!"

I saw that she had taken some of the glass globe-bombs which lay by the foot of the ascending ladder. "Gregg, I threw some of them."

At the window we gazed down. The globes she flung had shattered on the deck. They were darkness bombs.

Through the blackness of the deck, the shouts of the brigands came up. They were stumbling about. But the ramming of our trap went on, and I saw that it was beginning to yield.

"We've got to go, Anita!"

From out of the darkness which hung like a shroud over the deck an occasional flash came up, unaimed, wide of our windows. But the darkness was dissipating. I could see now[191] the dim glow of the deck lights, blurred as through a heavy fog.

I dropped another of the bombs.

"Put on your helmet."

"Yes—yes, I will. You put yours on."

We had them adjusted in a moment. Our Erentz motors were pumping.

I gripped her. "Put out your helmet light."

She extinguished it. I handed her my projector.

"Hold it a moment. I'm going to take that belt of bombs."

The trap door was all but broken under the ramming blows of the men. I leaped over the body of the dead duty man, seized the belt of bombs and strapped it around my waist.

"Give me the projector."

She handed it to me. The trap door burst upward! A man's head and shoulders appeared. I fired a bullet into him—the leaden pellet singing down through the yellow powder flash that spat from the projector's muzzle.

The brigand screamed, and dropped back out of sight. There was confusion at the ladder top. I flung a bomb at the broken trap. A tiny heat ray came wavering up through the opening, but went wide of us.

The instrument room was in darkness. I clung to Anita.

"Hold on to my hand. You go first—here is the ladder!"

We found it in the blackness, mounted it and went through the cubby's roof-trap.

I took another look and dropped another bomb beside us. The four foot space up here between the cubby roof and the overhead dome, went black. We were momentarily concealed.

Anita located the manual levers of the lock-entrance.

"Here, Gregg."

I shoved at them. Fear leaped in me that they would not operate. But they swung. The tiny port opened wide to receive us. We clambered into the small air-chamber; the door slid closed, just as a flash from below struck at it. The brigands had seen our cloud of darkness and were firing up through it.

In a moment we were out on the dome top. A sleek, rounded spread of glassite, with broad aluminite girders. There were cross ribs which gave us a footing, and occasionally projections—streamline fin-tips, the casings of the upper rudder shafts, and the upstanding stubby funnels into which helicopters were folded.

We moved along the central footpath and crouched by a six-foot casing. The stars and the glowing Earth were over us. The curving dome top—a hundred feet or so in length, and bulging thirty feet wide beneath us—glistened in the Earthlight. It was a sheer drop and down these curving sides past the ship's hull, a hundred feet to the rocks on which the vessel rested. The towering wall of Archimedes was beside us; and beyond the brink of the ledge the thousands of feet down to the plains.

I saw the lights of Miko's band down there. He had stopped signaling. His little lights were spread out, bobbing as he and his men advanced up the crater's foothills, coming to join the ship.

I had an instant's glimpse. Anita and I could not stay here. The brigands would follow us up in a moment. I saw no exterior ladder. We would have to take our chances and jump.

There were brigands down there on the rocks. I saw three or four helmeted figures, and they saw us! A bullet whizzed by us, and then came the flash of a hand ray.

I touched Anita. "Can you make the leap? Anita dear...."

Again it seemed that this must be farewell.

"Gregg, dear one, we've got to do it!"

Those waiting figures would pounce on us.

"Anita, lie here a moment."

I jumped up and ran twenty feet toward the bow; then back toward the stern, flinging down the last of my bombs. The darkness was like a cloud down there, enveloping the outer brigands. But up there we were above it, etched by the starlight and Earthglow.

I came back to Anita. "We'll have to chance it now."

"Gregg...."

"Good-bye, dear. I'll jump first, down this side, you follow."

To leap into that black patch, with the rocks under it....

"Gregg—"

She was trying to tell me to look overhead. She gestured, "Gregg, see!"

I saw it, out over the plains, a little speck amid the stars. A moving speck, coming toward us!

"Gregg, what is it?"

I gazed, held my breath. A moving speck out there. A blob now. And then I realized it was not a large object, far away, but small, and already very close—only a few hundred feet off, dropping toward the top of our dome. A narrow, flat, ten foot object, like a wingless volplane. There were no lights on it, but in the Earthlight I could see two crouching, helmeted figures riding it.

"Anita! Don't you remember!"

I was swept with dawning comprehension. Back in the Grantline camp Snap and I had discussed how to use the *Planetara's* gravity plates. We had gone to the wreck and secured them, had rigged this little volplane flyer....

The brigands on the rocks saw it now. A flash went up at it. One of the figures crouching on it opened a flexible fabric like a wing over its side. I saw another flash from below, harmlessly striking the insulated shield.

I gasped to Anita, "Light your helmet! It's from Grantline! Let them see us!"

I stood erect. The little flying platform went over us, fifty feet up, circling, dropping to the dome top.

I waved my helmet light. The exit lock from below—up which we had come—was near us. The advancing brigands were already in it! I had forgotten to demolish the manuals. And I saw that the darkness down on the rocks was almost gone now, dissipating in the airless night. The brigands down there began firing up at us.

It was a confusion of flashing lights. I clutched at Anita.

"Come this way—run!"

The platform barely missed our heads. It sailed lengthwise of the dome top, and crashed silently on the central runway near the stern tip. Anita and I ran to it.

The two helmeted figures seized us, shoved us prone on the metal platform. It was barely four feet wide; a low railing, handles with which to cling, and a tiny hooded cubby in front.

"Gregg!"

"You, Snap!"

It was Snap and Venza. She seized Anita, held her crouching in place. Snap flung himself face down at the controls.

The brigands were out on the dome now. I took a last shot as we lifted. My bullet punctured one of them: he slid, fell scrambling off the rounded dome and dropped out of sight.

Light rays and silent flashes seemed to envelope us. Venza held the side shields higher.

We tilted, swayed crazily, and then steadied.

The ship's dome dropped away beneath us. The rocks of the open ledge were beneath us. Then the abyss, with the moving, climbing specks of Miko's lights far down.

I saw, over the side shield, the already distant brigand ship resting on the ledge with the massive Archimedes' wall behind it. A confusion back there of futile flashing rays.

It all faded into a remote glow as we sailed smoothly up into the starlight and away, heading for the Grantline camp.