

SCHLOCK! CLASSIC PRESENTS: H.P. LOVECRAFT AND HAZEL HEALD'S
THE HORROR IN THE MUSEUM

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C. PRIEST BRUMLEY'S
THE LADDER

GAVIN CHAPPELL'S
BABBAGE
MUST
DIE, pt. 22

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

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

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

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This Edition

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

This week's cover illustration is "Ram-headed Demon" by Jon Bodsworth. Cover design by [C Priest Brumley](#).

Editorial by Gavin Chappell

Schlock! Classic Serial The Horror in the Museum: Part One by HP Lovecraft and Hazel Heald - *It was languid curiosity which first brought Stephen Jones to Rogers' Museum...* HORROR

The Ladder by [C. Priest Brumley](#) - *What's at the top?* HORROR

State of Emergency - Part Ten by David Christopher - *Will encounters rogue members of the security forces ...* SCIENCE FICTION

Super Duper - Part Twenty Two by [James Rhodes](#) - *In which we learn that domesticated is only a few meals from feral...* SCIENCE FICTION

Babbage Must Die - Part Twenty Two by [Gavin Chappell](#) - *Brian goes to Town...* SCIENCE FICTION

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

Schlock! Classic Serial: Brigands of the Moon (Part 22) by [Ray Cummings](#) - *The deck was aslant. A litter of wreckage! A broken human figure showed...* SPACE OPERA

At The Centre of the Earth - Part Four by [Gavin Chappell](#) - *The Wondrous Head speaks...* Last in the [Going Underground](#) series. URBAN FANTASY

EDITORIAL by Gavin Chappell

This week's edition contains beginnings and endings. We embark on *The Horror In The Museum*, a story ghost-written by HP Lovecraft for Hazel Heald and we see the dramatic conclusion of the *Going Underground* series. We also welcome another story from C Priest Brumley, who also designs Schlock!'s covers. Meanwhile, *Babbage Must Die*, *Brigands of the Moon*, and the rest of our serials continue.

See you next week for our horror-filled Halloween edition.

Gavin Chappell.

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

Part 1

It was languid curiosity which first brought Stephen Jones to Rogers' Museum. Someone had told him about the queer underground place in Southwark Street across the river, where waxen things so much more horrible than the worst effigies at Madame Tussaud's were shewn, and he had strolled in one April day to see how disappointing he would find it. Oddly, he was not disappointed. There was something different and distinctive here, after all. of course, the usual gory commonplaces were present—Landru, Dr. Crippen, Madame Demers, Rizzio, Lady Jane Grey, endless maimed victims of war and revolution, and monsters like Gilles de Rais and Marquis de Sade—but there were other things which had made him breathe faster and stay till the ringing of the closing bell. The man who had fashioned this collection could be no ordinary mountebank. There was imagination—even a kind of diseased genius—in some of this stuff.

Later he had learned about George Rogers. The man had been on the Tussaud staff, but some trouble had developed which led to his discharge. There were aspersions on his sanity and tales of his crazy forms of secret worship—though latterly his success with his own basement museum had dulled the edge of some criticisms while sharpening the insidious point of others. Teratology and the iconography of nightmare were his hobbies, and even he had had the prudence to screen off some of his worst effigies in a special alcove for adults only. It was this alcove which had fascinated Jones so much. There were lumpish hybrid things which only fantasy could spawn, moulded with devilish skill, and coloured in a horribly life-like fashion.

Some were the figures of well-known myth—gorgons, chimaeras, dragons, cyclops, and all their shuddersome congeners. Others were drawn from darker and more furtively whispered cycles of subterranean legend—black, formless Tsathoggua, many-tentacled Cthulhu, proboscidian Chaugnar Faugn, and other rumoured blasphemies from forbidden books like the *Necronomicon*, the *Book of Eibon*, or the *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* of von Junzt. But the worst were wholly original with Rogers, and represented shapes which no tale of antiquity had ever dared to suggest. Several were hideous parodies on forms of organic life we know, while others seemed taken from feverish dreams of other planets and other galaxies. The wilder paintings of Clark Ashton Smith might suggest a few—but nothing could suggest the effect of poignant, loathsome terror created by their great size and fiendishly cunning

workmanship, and by the diabolically clever lighting conditions under which they were exhibited.

Stephen Jones, as a leisurely connoisseur of the bizarre in art, had sought out Rogers himself in the dingy office and workroom behind the vaulted museum chamber—an evil-looking crypt lighted dimly by dusty windows set slit-like and horizontal in the brick wall on a level with the ancient cobblestones of a hidden courtyard. It was here that the images were repaired—here, too, where some of them had been made. Waxen arms, legs, heads, and torsos lay in grotesque array on various benches, while on high tiers of shelves matted wigs, ravenous-looking teeth, and glassy, staring eyes were indiscriminately scattered. Costumes of all sorts hung from hooks, and in one alcove were great piles of flesh-coloured wax-cakes and shelves filled with paint-cans and brushes of every description. In the centre of the room was a large melting-furnace used to prepare the wax for moulding, its fire-box topped by a huge iron container on hinges, with a spout which permitted the pouring of melted wax with the merest touch of a finger.

Other things in the dismal crypt were less describable—isolated parts of problematical entities whose assembled forms were the phantoms of delirium. At one end was a door of heavy plank, fastened by an unusually large padlock and with a very peculiar symbol painted over it. Jones, who had once had access to the dreaded Necronomicon, shivered involuntarily as he recognised that symbol. This showman, he reflected, must indeed be a person of disconcertingly wide scholarship in dark and dubious fields.

Nor did the conversation of Rogers disappoint him. The man was tall, lean, and rather unkempt, with large black eyes which gazed combustively from a pallid and usually stubble-covered face. He did not resent Jones's intrusion, but seemed to welcome the chance of unburdening himself to an interested person. His voice was of singular depth and resonance, and harboured a sort of repressed intensity bordering on the feverish. Jones did not wonder that many had thought him mad.

With every successive call—and such calls became a habit as the weeks went by—Jones had found Rogers more communicative and confidential. From the first there had been hints of strange faiths and practices on the showman's part, and later on these hints expanded into tales—despite a few odd corroborative photographs—whose extravagance was almost comic. It was some time in June, on a night when Jones had brought a bottle of good whiskey and plied his host somewhat freely, that the really demented talk first appeared. Before that there had been wild enough stories—accounts of mysterious trips to Thibet, the African interior, the Arabian desert, the Amazon valley, Alaska, and certain little-known islands of the South Pacific, plus claims of having read such monstrous and half-fabulous books as the prehistoric Pnakotic fragments and the Dhol chants attributed to malign and non-human Leng—but nothing in all this had been so unmistakably insane as what had cropped out that June evening under the spell of the whiskey.

To be plain, Rogers began making vague boasts of having found certain things in Nature that no one had found before, and of having brought back tangible evidences of such discoveries. According to his bibulous harangue, he had gone farther than anyone else in interpreting the obscure and primal books he studied, and had been directed by them to certain remote places where strange survivals are hidden—survivals of aeons and life-cycles earlier than mankind, and in some cases connected with other dimensions and other worlds, communication with which was frequent in the forgotten pre-human days. Jones marvelled at the fancy which could conjure up such notions, and wondered just what Rogers' mental history had been. Had his work

amidst the morbid grotesqueries of Madame Tussaud's been the start of his imaginative flights, or was the tendency innate, so that his choice of occupation was merely one of its manifestations? At any rate, the man's work was very closely linked with his notions. Even now there was no mistaking the trend of his blackest hints about the nightmare monstrosities in the screened-off "Adults only" alcove. Heedless of ridicule, he was trying to imply that not all of these daemoniac abnormalities were artificial.

It was Jones's frank scepticism and amusement at these irresponsible claims which broke up the growing cordiality. Rogers, it was clear, took himself very seriously; for he now became morose and resentful, continuing to tolerate Jones only through a dogged urge to break down his wall of urbane and complacent incredulity. Wild tales and suggestions of rites and sacrifices to nameless elder gods continued, and now and then Rogers would lead his guest to one of the hideous blasphemies in the screened-off alcove and point out features difficult to reconcile with even the finest human craftsmanship. Jones continued his visits through sheer fascination, though he knew he had forfeited his host's regard. At times he would try to humour Rogers with pretended assent to some mad hint or assertion, but the gaunt showman was seldom to be deceived by such tactics.

The tension came to a head later in September. Jones had casually dropped into the museum one afternoon, and was wandering through the dim corridors whose horrors were now so familiar, when he heard a very peculiar sound from the general direction of Rogers' workroom. Others heard it, too, and started nervously as the echoes reverberated through the great vaulted basement. The three attendants exchanged odd glances; and one of them, a dark, taciturn, foreign-looking fellow who always served Rogers as a repairer and assistant designer, smiled in a way which seemed to puzzle his colleagues and which grated very harshly on some facet of Jones's sensibilities. It was the yelp or scream of a dog, and was such a sound as could be made only under conditions of the utmost fright and agony combined. Its stark, anguished frenzy was appalling to hear, and in this setting of grotesque abnormality it held a double hideousness. Jones remembered that no dogs were allowed in the museum.

He was about to go to the door leading into the workroom, when the dark attendant stopped him with a word and a gesture. Mr. Rogers, the man said in a soft, somewhat accented voice at once apologetic and vaguely sardonic, was out, and there were standing orders to admit no one to the workroom during his absence. As for that yelp, it was undoubtedly something out in the courtyard behind the museum. This neighbourhood was full of stray mongrels, and their fights were sometimes shockingly noisy. There were no dogs in any part of the museum. But if Mr. Jones wished to see Mr. Rogers he might find him just before closing-time.

After this Jones climbed the old stone steps to the street outside and examined the squalid neighbourhood curiously. The leaning, decrepit buildings—once dwellings but now largely shops and warehouses—were very ancient indeed. Some of them were of a gabled type seeming to go back to Tudor times, and a faint miasmatic stench hung subtly about the whole region. Beside the dingy house whose basement held the museum was a low archway pierced by a dark cobbled alley, and this Jones entered in a vague wish to find the courtyard behind the workroom and settle the affair of the dog more comfortably in his mind. The courtyard was dim in the late afternoon light, hemmed in by rear walls even uglier and more intangibly menacing than the crumbling street facades of the evil old houses. Not a dog was in sight, and Jones wondered how the aftermath of such a frantic turmoil could have completely vanished so soon.

Despite the assistant's statement that no dog had been in the museum, Jones glanced nervously at the three small windows of the basement workroom—narrow, horizontal rectangles close to the grass-grown pavement, with grimy panes that stared repulsively and incuriously like the eyes of dead fish. To their left a worn flight of steps led to an opaque and heavily bolted door. Some impulse urged him to crouch low on the damp, broken cobblestones and peer in, on the chance that the thick green shades, worked by long cords that hung down to a reachable level, might not be drawn. The outer surfaces were thick with dirt, but as he rubbed them with his handkerchief he saw there was no obscuring curtain in the way of his vision.

So shadowed was the cellar from the inside that not much could be made out, but the grotesque working paraphernalia now and then loomed up spectrally as Jones tried each of the windows in turn. It seemed evident at first that no one was within; yet when he peered through the extreme right-hand window—the one nearest the entrance alley—he saw a glow of light at the farther end of the apartment which made him pause in bewilderment. There was no reason why any light should be there. It was an inner side of the room, and he could not recall any gas or electric fixture near that point. Another look defined the glow as a large vertical rectangle, and a thought occurred to him. It was in that direction that he had always noticed the heavy plank door with the abnormally large padlock—the door which was never opened, and above which was crudely smeared that hideous cryptic symbol from the fragmentary records of forbidden elder magic. It must be open now—and there was a light inside. All his former speculations as to where that door led, and as to what lay behind it, were now renewed with trebly disquieting force.

Jones wandered aimlessly around the dismal locality till close to six o'clock, when he returned to the museum to make the call on Rogers. He could hardly tell why he wished so especially to see the man just then, but there must have been some subconscious misgivings about that terribly unplaceable canine scream of the afternoon, and about the glow of light in that disturbing and usually unopened inner doorway with the heavy padlock. The attendants were leaving as he arrived, and he thought that Orabona—the dark foreign-looking assistant—eyed him with something like sly, repressed amusement. He did not relish that look—even though he had seen the fellow turn it on his employer many times.

The vaulted exhibition room was ghoulish in its desertion, but he strode quickly through it and rapped at the door of the office and workroom. Response was slow in coming, though there were footsteps inside. Finally, in response to a second knock, the lock rattled, and the ancient six-panelled portal creaked reluctantly open to reveal the slouching, feverish-eyed form of George Rogers. From the first it was clear that the showman was in an unusual mood. There was a curious mixture of reluctance and actual gloating in his welcome, and his talk at once veered to extravagances of the most hideous and incredible sort.

Surviving elder gods—nameless sacrifices—the other than artificial nature of some of the alcove horrors—all the usual boasts, but uttered in a tone of peculiarly increasing confidence. Obviously, Jones reflected, the poor fellow's madness was gaining on him. From time to time Rogers would send furtive glances toward the heavy, padlocked inner door at the end of the room, or toward a piece of coarse burlap on the floor not far from it, beneath which some small object appeared to be lying. Jones grew more nervous as the moments passed, and began to feel as hesitant about mentioning the afternoon's oddities as he had formerly been anxious to do so.

Rogers' sepulchrally resonant bass almost cracked under the excitement of his fevered rambling.

“Do you remember,” he shouted, “what I told you about that ruined city in Indo-China where the Tcho-Tchos lived? You had to admit I’d been there when you saw the photographs, even if you did think I made that oblong swimmer in darkness out of wax. If you’d seen it writhing in the underground pools as I did. . . .

“Well, this is bigger still. I never told you about this, because I wanted to work out the later parts before making any claim. When you see the snapshots you’ll know the geography couldn’t have been faked, and I fancy I have another way of proving that It isn’t any waxed concoction of mine. You’ve never seen it, for the experiments wouldn’t let me keep It on exhibition.”

The showman glanced queerly at the padlocked door.

“It all comes from that long ritual in the eighth Pnakotic fragment. When I got it figured out I saw it could have only one meaning. There were things in the north before the land of Lomar—before mankind existed—and this was one of them. It took us all the way to Alaska, and up the Noatak from Fort Morton, but the thing was there as we knew it would be. Great Cyclopean ruins, acres of them. There was less left than we had hoped for, but after three million years what could one expect? And weren’t the Esquimau legends all in the right direction? We couldn’t get one of the beggars to go with us, and had to sledge all the way back to Nome for Americans. Orabona was no good up in that climate—it made him sullen and hateful.

“I’ll tell you later how we found It. When we got the ice blasted out of the pylons of the central ruin the stairway was just as we knew it would be. Some carvings still there, and it was no trouble keeping the Yankees from following us in. Orabona shivered like a leaf—you’d never think it from the damned insolent way he struts around here. He knew enough of the Elder Lore to be properly afraid. The eternal light was gone, but our torches shewed enough. We saw the bones of others who had been before us—aeons ago, when the climate was warm. Some of these bones were of things you couldn’t even imagine. At the third level down we found the ivory throne the fragments said so much about—and I may as well tell you it wasn’t empty.

“The thing on that throne didn’t move—and we knew then that It needed the nourishment of sacrifice. But we didn’t want to wake It then. Better to get It to London first. Orabona and I went to the surface for the big box, but when we had packed it we couldn’t get It up the three flights of steps. These steps weren’t made for human beings, and their size bothered us. Anyway, it was devilish heavy. We had to have the Americans down to get It out. They weren’t anxious to go into the place, but of course the worst thing was safely inside the box. We told them it was a batch of ivory carvings—archaeological stuff; and after seeing the carved throne they probably believed us. It’s a wonder they didn’t suspect hidden treasure and demand a share. They must have told queer tales around Nome later on; though I doubt if they ever went back to those ruins, even for the ivory throne.”

Rogers paused, felt around in his desk, and produced an envelope of good-sized photographic prints. Extracting one and laying it face down before him, he handed the rest to Jones. The set was certainly an odd one: ice-clad hills, dog sledges, men in furs, and vast tumbled ruins against a background of snow—ruins whose bizarre outlines and enormous stone blocks could hardly be accounted for. One flashlight view shewed an incredible interior chamber with wild carvings and a curious throne whose proportion could not have been designed for a human occupant. The carvings on the gigantic masonry—high walls and peculiar vaulting overhead—were mainly symbolic, and involved both wholly unknown designs and certain hieroglyphs darkly cited in obscene legends. Over the throne loomed the same dreadful symbol which was now painted on the workroom wall above the padlocked plank door. Jones darted

a nervous glance at the closed portal. Assuredly, Rogers had been to strange places and had seen strange things. Yet this mad interior picture might easily be a fraud—taken from a very clever stage setting. One must not be too credulous. But Rogers was continuing:

“Well, we shipped the box from Nome and got to London without any trouble. That was the first time we’d ever brought back anything that had a chance of coming alive. I didn’t put It on display, because there were more important things to do for It. It needed the nourishment of sacrifice, for It was a god. of course I couldn’t get It the sort of sacrifices which It used to have in Its day, for such things don’t exist now. But there were other things which might do. The blood is the life, you know. Even the lemurs and elementals that are older than the earth will come when the blood of men or beasts is offered under the right conditions.”

The expression on the narrator’s face was growing very alarming and repulsive, so that Jones fidgeted involuntarily in his chair. Rogers seemed to notice his guest’s nervousness, and continued with a distinctly evil smile.

“It was last year that I got It, and ever since then I’ve been trying rites and sacrifices. Orabona hasn’t been much help, for he was always against the idea of waking It. He hates It—probably because he’s afraid of what It will come to mean. He carries a pistol all the time to protect himself—fool, as if there were human protection against It! If I ever see him draw that pistol, I’ll strangle him. He wanted me to kill It and make an effigy of It. But I’ve stuck by my plans, and I’m coming out on top in spite of all the cowards like Orabona and damned sniggering sceptics like you, Jones! I’ve chanted the rites and made certain sacrifices, and last week the transition came. The sacrifice was—received and enjoyed!”

Rogers actually licked his lips, while Jones held himself uneasily rigid. The showman paused and rose, crossing the room to the piece of burlap at which he had glanced so often. Bending down, he took hold of one corner as he spoke again.

“You’ve laughed enough at my work—now it’s time for you to get some facts. Orabona tells me you heard a dog screaming around here this afternoon. Do you know what that meant?”

Jones started. For all his curiosity he would have been glad to get out without further light on the point which had so puzzled him. But Rogers was inexorable, and began to lift the square of burlap. Beneath it lay a crushed, almost shapeless mass which Jones was slow to classify. Was it a once-living thing which some agency had flattened, sucked dry of blood, punctured in a thousand places, and wrung into a limp, broken-boned heap of grotesqueness? After a moment Jones realised what it must be. It was what was left of a dog—a dog, perhaps of considerable size and whitish colour. Its breed was past recognition, for distortion had come in nameless and hideous ways. Most of the hair was burned off as by some pungent acid, and the exposed, bloodless skin was riddled by innumerable circular wounds or incisions. The form of torture necessary to cause such results was past imagining.

Electrified with a pure loathing which conquered his mounting disgust, Jones sprang up with a cry.

“You damned sadist—you madman—you do a thing like this and dare to speak to a decent man!”

Rogers dropped the burlap with a malignant sneer and faced his oncoming guest. His words held an unnatural calm.

“Why, you fool, do you think I did this? Let us admit that the results are unbeautiful from our limited human standpoint. What of it? It is not human and does not pretend to be. To sacrifice is merely to offer. I gave the dog to It. What happened is Its work,

not mine. It needed the nourishment of the offering, and took it in Its own way. But let me shew you what It looks like.”

As Jones stood hesitating, the speaker returned to his desk and took up the photograph he had laid face down without shewing. Now he extended it with a curious look. Jones took it and glanced at it in an almost mechanical way. After a moment the visitor’s glance became sharper and more absorbed, for the utterly satanic force of the object depicted had an almost hypnotic effect. Certainly, Rogers had outdone himself in modelling the eldritch nightmare which the camera had caught. The thing was a work of sheer, infernal genius, and Jones wondered how the public would react when it was placed on exhibition. So hideous a thing had no right to exist—probably the mere contemplation of it, after it was done, had completed the unhinging of its maker’s mind and led him to worship it with brutal sacrifices. Only a stout sanity could resist the insidious suggestion that the blasphemy was—or had once been—some morbid and exotic form of actual life.

THE LADDER by C Priest Brumley

The rain ran slowly down the forged Plexiglass windows. These drops were just a fraction of a percent of the thousands of gallons being dumped from overhead, the low grade hurricane having stalled just prior to making landfall. Which meant all this damn rain was being dumped here.

And I'm stuck working in the middle of this crap. *Christ*, man.

The ladder looms high. Impossibly high. I don't wanna climb it, Jesus knows, but if I'm gonna take care of that effin' hole, I need to grow a damn pair and do it. Ain't nothin' to it but to do it, like the man says. I stand at the base of the ladder and grip the sides, ready to pull my fairly hefty ass up, when the damn thing creaks. I don't like this shit, pardon my language, I don't like heights, and I sure as hell don't like that damn attic.

Damn. Gotta do it.

I grit my teeth, and take the first step. The wood sags underneath me, but it's okay. I take one more step, then another, until I'm moving up at a decent pace. The wood keeps sagging underneath my weight, but I'm so concentrated on getting up the steps I barely notice. Only thing that matters right now is *UP*.

When I finally got up the stairs, I spotted the hole pretty quickly. It was the only source of light up here, with that dark light from the storm coming through it. A little tar paper and a piece of plywood should do the trick. Easy as lyin'.

As I reach for my flashlight, I go blind.

After letting my eyes adjust for a minute, I can see what blinded me: an oil lantern towards the back of the attic. I knew what it was, though I ain't seen one in a long damn time, ever since going through my Dad's...

What the *fuck* is that?

It looks like... *God damned Lucifer himself!* I crossed myself quick, praying every damn prayer I knew the words to, hoping against hope that Jesus Christ himself would come down and save my ass from this unworldly creature.

Then, the damn thing *spoke*.

"Good evening Mr... Collier. Can I have a word with you?" the devil asked me in a kind voice. I didn't trust it one damn bit. Devils is tricksters, y'know? I decided to play idiot... Maybe it'll go away.

"Wait... What?"

The devil in front of my cleared his throat, and through the light coming out of the oil lantern, I got a better look at him. He looked just like the Devil should, all red and slick and black horns on his head and everything. And he was wearing glasses. *Weird*. Damn thing made no sense.

"Sir, with all due respect, I will ask you to please refrain from attempting to 'play' me, as you would call it, and let me talk with you for a second. Do you understand?" The devil fixed me with a stare that I swear would've frozen me in my tracks if I had half a mind to run. But I couldn't. The damn Devil's got me, and there ain't a god damn thing I can do about it. *Shit*.

The devil got up and walked towards me. Son of a bitch was wearing *pants*, of all things. I let a laugh come out, and only got a quicker stride from the Devil. He got about a foot away from me, put out his hand like a good 'ole boy, and nodded at me like he knew me as a friend. If I didn't know any better, I'd think he was trying to be *friendly*, y'know?

I looked down at his hand, decided I got nothin' to lose and shook it briefly, then stepped back and waited for him to speak.

"Well, sir, my name is Masach, pleased to meet you! Please, by all means, sit!" He waved his hand towards the lantern, and I swear to you, hand on the bible, a table with a folder on it and some chairs appeared, just like *that*. I walked to the table and took the chair closest to me, and this.... Masach, or whatever he's calling himself, took the seat opposite me. He then opened the file and looked at me.

"Well then, I really hate to inform you of this, but it is my job to take your soul, sir. Are you aware of this fact?" He asked, smiling like the nicest man in the world. I shook my head. "Ah, I see. Well then, let me fill in some details, sir. On this day, ten years ago, you were involved in a gang shootout, were you not?"

Oh shit. I completely forgot about that. I rubbed my left forearm, where my old gang tatt was, remembering that day like it was yesterday. I even remember what I said... But Masach beat me to it.

"It says here you, and I quote, 'sold your soul for this shit to end, and let you live ten more years', am I correct? And immediately afterwards, our Mortal Interference Department sent the police to the scene, whereby your attackers were caught and

immediately arrested, thus affording you, Mr. JaMarcus Collier, the ten year span you had requested. Understand?"

I nodded numbly. Son of a bitch. My time's up. Like Trey said, a bullet's gonna get me one day. Sure as shit, the Devil's got mine. I felt tears start to well up in my eyes, and I didn't even try to stop 'em. Fuck trying to act like a man. This is it.

"Well, sir, there are three ways we can proceed. Would you like me to tell you what they are, or would you like me to..."

"Just do it, man. I don't care how. Just.... Just do it."

"As you wish, sir. It's been a pleasure meeting you!"

Then, my world went black.

STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

Chapter Ten: Mercer

He made his way out into the street, keeping a weather eye open for any sign of the soldiers. He'd seen no remains amongst the rubble when he passed it. They must still be around. He heard the thud of combat boots from the road ahead and he hid behind a parked car.

Several soldiers marched past. Two officers were in conversation as they approached the helipad.

'...must have got away in that chopper,' Will heard one saying as they passed his hiding place, a thickset man. 'Shouldn't we attend to the other operation?'

'I'd been hoping to intercept them before they departed, Dawson,' the other replied, a lean, tall man who looked oddly familiar, but Will couldn't quite place him. 'They would have handed the assassin over, with the right persuasion. As they shall, when we finally catch up with them. We'll just secure the area before we move on ...'

They moved on towards the helipad. As soon as they had passed round the corner of Helipad House, Will shot out from behind the parked car and hurried for the road, ducking down low to avoid being seen. He came out into the road to see several soldiers waiting near a junction and he ducked back instantly. They hadn't seen him, he was sure, but now he was caught between them and the others.

He crouched in the lea of the wall, glancing nervously back towards the helipad. Those soldiers had been talking about quartering the area and searching for fugitives. Will didn't think they sounded like soldiers gone rogue. Too official. He'd expect rogue soldiers to be half drunk, weighed down with loot. And what was all this about 'intercepting' them, and 'handing the assassin over'? The whole situation confused him.

Quietly, he made his way along the wall in the opposite direction from the second group of soldiers, and came to the end, where a gap led out into the street beyond. Keeping an eye on the soldiers, who were lounging about, smoking, and paying little attention in the absence of their officers, he squeezed through the gap and hurried across the street into more cover.

As he did so, he heard a shout from behind. Peering out, he saw a soldier running up from the heliport towards the others, who swung round, suddenly alert, cigarettes suddenly vanished, weapons at the ready. Will's heart pounded. Time to get going, before they spread the net of their mysterious search even further.

He made his way through the industrial estate that surrounded the heliport and reached a road of superstores and the towering steel and glass office blocks that lined the riverside. All was silent. He could see no sign of other army units. But in the distance, he could hear a vehicle driven at high speed. He hurried on his way, with only the vaguest idea where he was going. At some point he managed to get off the route they'd taken on their way here. He was surprised to find himself passing through an area of trees, old houses, a church. Almost like a small village in the middle of that desert of houses. Pretty soon, though, it was back to new developments. A bewildering maze of council housing followed.

A few minutes later and he had reached one of the bridges, where Battersea Road crossed the Thames. Everything was quiet. Several corpses lay in the lee of a big office block. As he hurried down the roadway, he felt horribly exposed. It was a road bridge and there was no walkway for pedestrians. He expected a car to come up behind him at any minute but the road was deathly still and deserted.

A cold wind gusted down the river and moaned around the pilings of the bridge. He remembered what Rex had said. This wasn't some post apocalyptic sci-fi film, it was just the aftermath of civil disturbance. But deserted London was eerie. Weird. It was as if he had stumbled onto a film set. It didn't seem real. He kept expecting the Beast from 10,000 Fathoms to lumber into view, put back its massive prehistoric head, and roar. He wondered where all the people had gone. What was the government doing about this sudden influx of refugees into the Home Counties? What were they doing about the situation in general? When would things return to normal?

When he reached the other side of the bridge, he realised he hadn't any very clear idea of where he was going. Shepherds Bush, he knew that much. But how to get there from Battersea – except he was in Kensington now. A nice area, residential, affluent. His dad would feel at home here. Well, it would have been nice, if it wasn't so quiet and deserted. Getting to Shepherds Bush, though, was another matter. Higgy had given him a rough idea of the direction it lay in. But that had been in another part of town, downriver from his current position. What he needed was a street map.

He looked about him for a newsagent or a bookshop. In the distance, he heard shouting, sounds of argument, and a few shots that sounded as if someone was firing into the air. From another direction, he heard the roar of a car engine and a screech of brakes. But the street ahead was deserted, and he could see no sign of any shops. He hurried on. It ended at a junction with a main road, Kings Road, apparently. Which way to Shepherds Bush? He felt hopelessly lost.

One thing he hated was the way people would namedrop in London. Not the names of famous people, the names of places. They'd rattle off St John's Wood, Finchley Green, Maida Vale, White City, Camden Town as if they expected you to have had personal experience of all these places ... Will suspected that even hardened Londoners only knew the names from tube stations. No one had ever heard of Kensal Green, which was where Caroline had come from. Why? No tube station.

He was still lost. Getting smug about the stupidity of Londoners wouldn't change that. He needed a newsagent. Surely there was one round here somewhere. There were certainly shops along this stretch.

He turned left at random and hurried along, passing through a tree-lined square, walking past restaurants and wine bars before coming to a rather grubbier,

down-at-heel area of sixties developments. Here he found a newsagent's. The door had been smashed in, so he felt no compunction about picking his way over the shattered glass and entering the shop.

The till had been smashed at, with a hammer by the looks of things, but the thieves hadn't been able to break it open. Will found a London A-Z on a shelf over the counter. He was just lifting it down when he heard the crunch of boots from the doorway. He spun round.

A large man in police uniform was standing there. Behind him were two other men. Will look at the broken glass, the battered till, then at the big man, whose craggy features were set in a scowl. The policeman produced a gun. Will dropped the A-Z.

'Did you do all this?' the policeman demanded, shocked, indicating the damage in the shop.

Will shook his head jerkily. He couldn't speak.

He could think of nothing but how the other policeman had shot Wiggy. The blood and brains exploding across the windscreen. He must still be in shock. He needed medical attention. He was shaking.

'It was like this when I came in,' he stuttered finally.

The policeman laughed grimly. 'A likely story,' he said. Will realised he had a *Coronation Street* northern accent, what his father called Mockunian. 'You're a looter, aren't you? Admit it!' He stepped forward and pressed his gun against Will's forehead. Will's skin flinched away at the touch of the cold gun barrel. He gulped. 'Admit it!' the policeman bellowed. 'Looter! And looters should be shot!'

'No,' Will squawked, 'I'm not a looter!'

Crouching down, but keeping his gun trained on Will, the policeman grabbed the A-Z from the floor. He waved it at Will.

'What about this?' he shouted. 'You were about to steal it!'

Will shrugged. 'There's no one in the shop,' he said. 'I'd pay them if they were here. Look, I'll leave some money on the counter.' He reached towards his pocket for his wallet. Suddenly all three policemen were training guns on him. He lifted his hands, wide-eyed.

'Since when did the police go round with guns in this country, anyway?' Will asked, after the silence had become awkward.

'Since the public started trying to assassinate the home secretary,' the first policeman told him. 'Since the army mutinied. It's a temporary measure, for the duration of the emergency.'

'Oh,' said Will. 'Look, guys, I wasn't really looting. All this mess was here when I came in. I came in only moments ago.'

'Yes,' said one of the other policemen. 'We saw you from across the street, where we were on patrol.'

'I saw you,' said the first policeman, 'and I thought, that little shithead's a looter. So we came over to sort you out. When I saw all this...' He trailed off.

Will was taken aback by the policeman's language. A bit unprofessional. So was waving a gun in his face. 'Do you mind,' he said, indicating the guns. 'I'm not armed, and I'm not going to do anything. Okay, I was probably going to take this, one measly London A-Z. But that was because I need to get to Shepherds Bush.'

The first policeman furrowed his brow with thought. 'Why Shepherds Bush?' he asked. 'Anyone with any sense has got out of London already.'

'Shepherds Bush is where it all started.' Will enlightened him. He began an edited version of recent events from his point of view. of course, he omitted his part in

the shooting of the home secretary, and kept quiet about the helicopter – that would also be hard to explain.

‘So your mates cleared off, but you decided to go and find this professor’s manifesto?’ the first policeman asked.

Will nodded. ‘Believe me, it’s the only hope the country has,’ he said. ‘I’ve got to get it to the publishers in Oxford.’

All three policemen had lowered their guns by now. They seemed to have warmed to Will, particularly their leader, the craggy faced man with the Mockunian accent. He’d introduced himself as Mercer.

‘If it’s as important as you reckon, as your professor reckoned, you’d better,’ he said. ‘The country’s going to the dogs. Things have been chaos since I joined the police.’

‘When was that?’ Will asked. Taking an interest in his career might keep him sweet.

‘Last week,’ Mercer said. ‘I do a lot of security work, and my agency told me the police were looking for special officers to help with riot control. A job’s a job, isn’t it? Didn’t expect it would end up like this.’

His companions had similar stories to tell. Both had been working as security contractors in the Middle East, Will learnt. One of them was an ex-professional boxer, the other had actually spent some time in the police force before certain events made overseas security work his only remaining career option. But Mercer had only been working as a security guard part-time.

‘I’m a qualified actor,’ he explained. ‘Joined the Everyman Youth Theatre in Liverpool when I was a kid, then went to RADA. Coz of the way I look and speak and everything, I got offered a lot of roles playing heavies, villains, gangsters and that. Got a bit typecast. I’ve been resting a lot recently, doing security work on the side.’ He shook his head. ‘Never thought I’d end up in this kind of drama.’

Will began to relax. ‘So, you’ll let me go?’ he asked. ‘No charges? I really will pay for the A-Z. Promise.’

‘Forget about it,’ Mercer said. Will picked it up and made to leave the newsagent. ‘Where are you going?’ the policeman shouted suddenly.

Will halted, confused. ‘I’m going to Shepherd’s Bush,’ he said.

Mercer shook his head. ‘We’ve just come down from that way,’ he said. ‘Fuckin’ insanity! Soldiers fighting each other. That area’s the worst we’ve seen in the city.’ The others agreed.

Will’s shoulders slumped. He was stuck in a city of lunatics, and his only chance of bringing an end to the situation that he had created, by shooting Verlaine, was proving impossible.

‘I’ll have to wait until the fighting dies down,’ he said determinedly.

Mercer shook his head. ‘From what you say, it’s vital for the security of the country that you get that manifesto to Oxford. The sooner the better. You’ve got to go.’

‘And we’re coming with you.’ He produced his gun and brandished it like a gangster from the movies.

Moments later, they were proceeding through the streets towards Shepherd’s Bush.

Mercer walked ahead. The two other policemen, Curtis and Steve, flanked Will, who walked in the middle. All three policemen had guns at the ready. Will felt

oddly safe, safer than he had in what seemed like a long time. Safe... but not entirely. He was confident that Mercer and his friends would keep him as safe as they could when they entered the warzone of Shepherds Bush, but he didn't feel completely safe with them.

Curtis and Steve had been telling stories of their adventures out in the world's hotspots. Governments or occupying forces in various Middle Eastern countries had employed them for security work, but what they described, guffawing as they did so, made it sound to Will like they were a bigger threat to peace than any terrorists. Mercer kept quiet mostly, but he told a story of working for crooked London businessmen that put the other two's tales into the shade.

'You've never used a gun, have you, Will?' Mercer asked suddenly.

'No, never,' Will said nervously. He noticed the pitying looks they were giving him. 'Actually, I'm a pretty good shot.'

Mercer raised an eyebrow. 'Shooting what?'

Will wished he could take back his words. What an idiot he was. 'Just hunting,' he said. 'Grouse shooting, mainly.' He smiled thinly. 'And vermin.'

Mercer looked disapproving. 'Blood sports are cruel.'

Will nodded quickly. 'I hate it myself,' he said. 'Just something my family's into. Dad's a bit of a social climber.'

'Quiet!' Curtis shouted suddenly. He was pointing his gun towards some buildings up ahead. Mercer motioned the others into cover. Will hid in a shop doorway. He peered out. What had Curtis seen?

There was a roar of gunfire from up ahead, but it was several streets away. An answering burst came from the north. Then another direction. It continued in the distance, unrelenting.

Mercer rose from cover. Whatever Curtis had seen, or thought he'd seen, it was gone.

'We're safe here,' he said. 'It's all going on ahead of us. But if we keep going, we'll be walking right into it.'

Will looked at him fearfully.

'Can't we go round?' he asked.

Mercer shook his head.

'You wanted Shepherds Bush, Will,' he said stolidly. 'You got it. I told you, the whole area's a warzone. Are you still sure you want to go there?'

He looked at Will seriously. The other two waited, alert, their guns at the ready as they scanned the surrounding buildings.

Will gave thought the question worth considerable consideration. Why was he doing this, risking his life to get Quigley's manifesto? What had got him into all this? He remembered Daisy's face gazing worriedly down from the rapidly ascending chopper. She cared about him, he could tell. It had been her who had dragged him into this. No, that was unfair. It had been his stupidity, falling for her when he was still on the rebound from Caroline.

Then there was the Professor. He had entrusted Will with getting his book published. Why was he so intent on carrying out the mission? That was what it felt like, a military mission into the heart of no man's land. And to what purpose? If he didn't end up like Wiggy, with his head blown clean off, what good would the manifesto actually be? What would its publication achieve?

Was he only doing this because he felt guilty about not handing in those essays back when he was Quigley's student? Was he trying to make up for that, to over-compensate?

But what alternative did he have? If by any chance Quigley's Manifesto would save the day, then he had to go and get it.

Or die trying?

He turned to Mercer. 'Come on,' he said.

First chance he got, he was going to get himself a gun.

SUPER DUPER by James Rhodes

Chapter 22

Jon wasn't really sure why he cared but it was pretty obvious that Biggy had lost his mind. He had been given the mandate of getting capable workers back to work to save the British economy and it was fairly clear to him that as much as the two blokes he had just seen were obviously the scrapings of the bottom of the barrel, they were only a few field dressings away from becoming capable of working.

With that in mind, he walked towards the hospital to get enough supplies to patch everybody up. He felt pretty sure that Biggy had fired his last shot and that the big chunky bloke could probably get him to calm down once everyone realised he wasn't dead. Biggy was crazy, he reasoned but even he wouldn't go on a rampage with his daughter there.

It was eerie how quiet the streets were, like empty churches. There were birds chirping but no actual noise. He was used to the quiet in the Falklands, sheep baaing and nothing else, but even amongst that quiet rural setting there had always been the reassuring background hum of electricity through wires. Jon had never really noticed it but now that it was gone, he noticed the lack of it. It was unsettling but he was rather enjoying it. He almost skipped the few roads until he reached the door of the hospital.

It was to be a quick reckon mission, he needed sterile gauze, morphine and penicillin. It was not a difficult operation. He walked through the empty emergency room and was weighed down immediately by the stink of the place. What struck him next was the horrible sound of grinding and slurping. Within seconds, they showed themselves, teeth bared, heckles raised. Their mouths were smeared with blood.

Jon took a few steps backwards and assessed his situation. It was unfortunate but he realised that he was surrounded by hungry dogs. Hungry dogs who had become used to the idea that now people had stopped feeding them, they were probably best used as food.

He shrugged, pulled out his handgun at the same moment that teeth tore through the ligament of his right ankle and he fell to the pack.

BABBAGE MUST DIE by Gavin Chappell

Chapter Twenty Two

The journey by coach did nothing for Brian's bumps and bruises, and by the time they had crossed the fifty odd miles that lay between the village and the big city, he was

feeling almost as bad as he had when he'd woken after being wrecked. In a haze of pain, he stared out of the windows at the cobbled streets and grimy buildings, bewildered.

'Where is this place?' he muttered.

Humphrey poked his head out and shouted up at the coachman. 'London!' came the curt reply. Humphrey sat back down, across from Brian. They were the only people in the coach by now, although there'd been quite a crowd until they reached the outskirts of the city.

'Doesn't look like London,' Brian said. He'd been there once, on a school trip years ago. It hadn't looked like this, not even the old bits. So grotty and mean looking. Even the buildings that looked like they'd been built to look like Greek temples were dirty and bedraggled. An unbearable stench of smoke and cooking food crept in, and Brian gagged.

'We'll be stopping soon, milord,' Humphrey observed.

Brian looked blearily at him. 'We'd better find somewhere to stay,' he said. 'So where d'you reckon an exiled French aristo would be likely to stay.'

Humphrey shrugged. 'I've never been to London before, milord,' he said, 'but I've heard all the young blades want rooms at the Albany.'

'Where's that?' Brian asked.

'Piccadilly,' Humphrey replied.

'Let's go there, then,' said Brian painfully. 'And get me some laudanum as soon as you can.' His opium addiction was developing quite nicely.

Turned out that the coach was only going to the Bull and Mouth in central London, and it came nowhere near Piccadilly. They had to get out and find a place to sit in the inn's crowded, smoky bar. Brian drank wine morosely while Humphrey went out to charter a sedan chair, leaving behind him the heavy trunk that now contained Brian's plunder.

He returned shortly after. Brian was feeling a lot better for a goblet or two of wine, although he needed to lean on his servant as they went outside. Two men were standing on either side a tall box just about large enough for Brian and Humphrey to sit in.

'To the Albany,' Humphrey told them, and soon they were hurrying through the streets. Brian felt seasick.

By the time the sedan chair had stopped, Brian really wasn't feeling well. He was also feeling pretty depressed as the streets of Old London Town chugged past. It wasn't nearly as big or as crowded as he remembered it from the last time (about two hundred years in the future) but it was still too big and too full of people. How was he supposed to find Ada in all this?

'You could always go to a thief taker, milord,' Humphrey told him.

Brian sat up straight, glaring at the boy. 'Ada's not a thief!' he objected.

Humphrey shrugged. 'That's what people do when they want to track someone down. I asked the coachman about it when he was helping me with the trunk.'

One of the bearers rapped on the top of the box.

'The Albany, Piccadilly, milord,' he whined. Grumbling to himself, Brian rose. Humphrey helped him step down onto the cobbles.

‘Pay the man,’ he told his servant. He gazed curiously at the classical building that rose before him, at the end of the street. An impressive portico surrounded a doorway at which stood a porter.

Humphrey handed over a few coins to the bearer, and soon the two men were carrying the sedan chair off, looking for new customers. Brian looked at Humphrey.

‘See if they’ve got any rooms, will you.’

He followed Humphrey up the steps.

Turned out that the Albany had only one bachelor apartment available; apparently, only bachelors were allowed to stay here. But it seemed they couldn’t do too much for the Count of Monte Carlo, and Brian found himself whisked away through the bar and to a bathroom where he eased his tired bones in a hot bath. When he’d finished, flunkeys towelled him and dressed him (Brian thought this was a bit weird, actually) and led him into the dining area, where he dined most excellently on beef-steak, boiled fowl with oyster sauce, and an apple tart. Feeling much refreshed after his arduous journey, he let them lead him to his rooms upstairs. Although opulently furnished, they were a little cramped.

Humphrey was waiting for him. His eyes were wide. Brian couldn’t help laughing.

‘They swallowed it!’ he chortled. ‘They swallowed it, the idiots. What do you think they’d say, those t offee-nosed bastards, if they knew they were putting up a notorious pirate!’

Humphrey shook his head. ‘They’d have you swinging from Tyburn Tree before you could say Jack Robinson, milord,’ he said dolefully. ‘And hang me too, as your accomplice, I don’t doubt.’

Brian looked at him sharply. ‘Regretting coming with me?’ he asked.

Humphrey shook his head. ‘All my life I’ve wanted adventure,’ he said. ‘Now it looks like I’ve got it.’

Brian grunted. Adventure! He could keep it.

‘Think I’ll turn in,’ he said.

The next morning, Brian breakfasted in his rooms. He looked through a few visiting cards that Humphrey had brought in on a silver salver.

“‘The Right Honourable Arthur Catesby’... ‘Mrs Purefoy and Miss Alice Purefoy’... ‘Madame Joubert’... Who are all these people?’

Humphrey grimaced. ‘Society types, milord,’ he said. ‘Rich mamas with their fashionable daughters, hoping to snare an eligible bachelor.’

Brian shook his head in amazement. He’d never been one of them before, though. ‘That doesn’t explain the Right Honourable Arthur Catesby,’ he said. ‘What’s he want?’

‘Oh, he’s waiting in the bar,’ Humphrey said. ‘A bit of a dandy. Younger son from a gentry family, offers to show the visiting foreign gentleman the sights.’

Brian grunted. ‘Probably plans to fleece me,’ he said. ‘Still, I need to get to know this city if I’m going to find Ada. I’ll ask this Catesby character if he can give me any advice. In the bar, is he? See you later, Humphrey. Looks like you’ve got the morning off.’ He tossed his servant a few coins and left the apartment. Humphrey watched him go, looking a bit piqued.

Catesby was definitely a dandy. Brian could tell. After inquiries at the bar, Brian had had Catesby pointed out to him, and before the over-dressed idiot even spoke to him he'd reached his own conclusions.

Catesby reeked of scent, his hair was curled into ringlets, and unlike pretty much everyone else Brian had met in the nineteenth century, he appeared to have had a bath quite recently. He wore a green velvet frockcoat, a white frilly shirt with lace cuffs, a green cravat, cream pantaloons that seemed to come up to his ribcage, knee length black boots, and he carried a black hat. The white-powdered face that peered out of all this was weak-chinned, long-nosed, and had a pair of gleaming eyes that reminded Brian of a stoat.

Catesby bowed elaborately. 'Le Comte de Monte Carlo, I presume?'

'Yer what?' Brian said, startled. 'Erm... *pardonne?*' he added.

Catesby affected surprise. 'Surely you are the famous Count of Monte Carlo, my lord? London has been abuzz with the news of your arrival.'

Brian preened himself a little, before reminding himself that he was an imposter. 'Indeed, monsieur, I 'ave zat honour,' he said, ramping up the French accent.

Catesby looked a little puzzled, then seemed to dismiss the thought. 'May I be the first to welcome you to our fine city? Although we are at war with Bonaparte, we welcome Frenchies of noble birth. My enemy's enemy, as I believe the Arabs say...'

'Thank you,' Brian said. 'No doubt you are familiar with the city.'

'Indeed, milord,' Catesby said unctuously. 'I believe I have a passing familiarity with all the more elegant haunts. Perhaps I could do you the service of introducing you to a few of my friends. All people from the most fashionable of circles.'

‘As it ‘appens,’ Brian went on, ‘I’m looking for someone. A young lady.’

Catesby lifted an elegant eyebrow. ‘Indeed, milord. I’m certain that I could introduce you to various young and accommodating ladies...’

Brian laughed. ‘No, nothing like that,’ he said. He leaned a bit closer. ‘Maybe later, mate.’ He looked around the room. ‘No, I’ve come to London looking for my... sister. Her name is Ada, and she came here with a parson.’

‘I see,’ drawled Catesby. ‘I fail to see how I can help.’

‘I don’t know where she’s gone,’ Brian replied. ‘I want to find her. I could make it worth your while.’

Catesby lifted a hand in protest. ‘Surely milord jests! The very idea of money! of course, any reimbursement for expenses in the line of duty would be something I would discuss with your servant...’

‘Speaking of my servant, he suggested that I could employ a thief taker to find Ada.’

Catesby made a moue of disapproval. ‘Very common, vulgar men,’ he said disapprovingly. ‘Naturally, anyone in such a line of business would hardly be a gentleman. However, were you to wish to employ men to find your sister, I could suggest you approach the magistrate at Bow Street. His men are highly skilled at tracking down fugitives. Perhaps the fame of the Bow Street Runners has not reached France...’

‘Weren’t they in *Carry On Dick?*’ Brian asked. Catesby looked languidly confused. ‘Well, I’d better get down to Bow Street,’ Brian added hurriedly. ‘Where is it, from Piccadilly?’

Catesby insisted on accompanying him to Bow Street, which was less than a mile to the east. On the way, he mentioned that he would be meeting a few of his friends to play cards at a place in Piccadilly called Almack's. From what he was saying, Brian gathered that it was some kind of gambling den-cum-dance hall. Before that, there was to be a prize-fight that afternoon, and the dandy suggested Boodles as the ideal place to dine before they moved on to Almack's. Sounded like a plan, Brian thought, amused by how Catesby had elected himself as tour guide.

Arm in arm with Catesby (something else Brian felt uncomfortable about, but the dandy insisted) he swept into the building. Catesby did all the negotiating with the magistrate in his dusty, Spartan office. The magistrate spoke at length about how overworked his men were. Money changed hands, and the magistrate relented.

As Brian was leaving to move on to the promised prize-fight, he passed a man who looked oddly familiar; a skinny, tall fellow in his thirties. The man stared at him in return but said nothing. Brian hurried outside, followed by Catesby.

The man went into the magistrate's office.

'I've seen a familiar face,' he told the magistrate. 'You remember how I came to work for you?'

'Your freelance work against the Luddite rebels,' the magistrate said, nodding. 'You've been commended for it. What of it? What do you mean, a familiar face?'

'I had been led to believe he'd been press-ganged,' said the thin man. 'But the fellow leaving here looked exactly like an associate of the Luddites on whom I turned king's evidence. Brian, he was called if I remember correctly.'

'Fellow just in here?' asked the magistrate. 'Nonsense. He's a foreign gentleman, exiled French aristo called the Comte de Monte Carlo. Keep your mind on the game, Yates. I don't want you causing trouble.'

Will Yates tapped his lips thoughtfully. ‘The Count of Monte Carlo, eh,’ he said. ‘I wonder.’

Another man entered to tell the magistrate that he had another visitor. ‘Naval gentleman, sir,’ he explained as Will moved away. ‘A lieutenant...’

By the time Brian got to Almack’s in Piccadilly, he had pretty much forgotten Ada, or Humphrey, for that matter, whose morning off had been extended into an entire day. Brian had won money on the prize-fight, then squandered it on a fabulous meal in Boodle’s; the rest of it he intended to lose on playing cards with Catesby’s chums in this high class gambling den. Drunkenly, he tried to listen as Catesby explained the rules of Macao.

‘Hasn’t anyone in this place ever heard of Snap?’ he mumbled.

Catesby mentioned there was a ball later on. ‘I might introduce you to a few young ladies,’ he suggested greasily. His mind fuzzy, Brian wondered if Catesby wasn’t some kind of pimp.

‘I’m having a ball right now,’ he said happily. Then a thought struck him. ‘Maybe Ada will be there.’

A while later they staggered into the ballroom. Brian was in no fit state to dance, so he propped up the wall while Catesby tripped the light fandango (or something) with a bucktoothed young miss. He started having horrible memories of school discos, and felt a little self conscious. He saw another man watching the dancing from the corner. Feeling in lonely, Brian joined him.

‘Two left feet?’ he said sympathetically.

The short, handsome man looked at him.

‘I was born with a deformity of the foot,’ he said. ‘I cannot dance.’

Brian nodded. ‘I just can’t dance at all,’ he said, but the short man went on.

‘Besides, I do not wish to dance with any female,’ he said. ‘Since I parted from *her*, no other woman has pleased my eye.’

Brian coughed. ‘Yeah, well, I know what you mean,’ he said. ‘I’m looking for a girl myself.’

The man indicated the dance floor. ‘Why not take your pick?’ he asked. ‘There are dozens of eligible females, many of whom would be ecstatic to dance with the mysterious Comte de Monte Carlo.’

‘You know me?’

‘Why, all London has heard of you,’ the man replied.

‘It’s just that I’m looking for one particular girl,’ Brian explained. ‘That’s why I’ve come to London. She’s called Ada. Don’t suppose you’ve met her?’

The man looked at him in utter surprise. ‘The woman I seek is also named Ada. But I fear she is gone from this world.’

‘Small, dark hair, big sad eyes?’ Brian asked. The man nodded. Brian frowned with concern. ‘But what do you mean, gone from this world?’

Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned, and found himself looking into the eyes of Lieutenant Piper.

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

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.

BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XXII

I opened my eyes to a dark blur of confusion. My shoulder hurt—a pain shooting through it. Something lay like a weight on me. I could not seem to move my left arm. Then I moved it and it hurt. I was lying twisted. I sat up. And with a rush, memory came. The crash was over. I was not dead. Anita—

She was lying beside me. There was a little light here in the silent blur—a soft mellow Earthlight filtering in the window. The weight on me was Anita. She lay sprawled, her head and shoulders half way across my lap.

Not dead! Thank God, not dead! She moved. Her arms went around me, and I lifted her. The Earthlight glowed on her pale face.

"It's past, Anita! We've struck, and we're still alive."

I held her as though all of life's turgid dangers were powerless to touch us.

But in the silence my floating senses were brought back to reality by a faint sound forcing itself upon me. A little hiss. The faintest murmuring breath like a hiss. Escaping air!

I cast off Anita's clinging arms. "Anita, this is madness!"

For minutes we must have been lying there in the heaven of our embrace. But air was escaping! The Planetara's dome was broken and our precious air was hissing out.

Full reality came to me. I was not seriously injured. I found I could move freely. I could stand. A twisted shoulder, a limp left arm, but they were better in a moment.

And Anita did not seem to be hurt. Blood was upon her. But not her own.

Beside Anita, stretched face down on the turret grid, was the giant figure of Miko. The blood lay in a small pool against his face. A widening pool.

Moa was here. I thought her body twitched; then was still. This soundless wreckage! In the dim glow of the wrecked turret with its two motionless, broken human figures, it seemed as though Anita and I were ghouls prowling. I saw that the turret had fallen over to the Planetara's deck. It lay dashed against the dome side.

The deck was aslant. A litter of wreckage! A broken human figure showed—one of the crew who, at the last, must have come running up. The forward observation tower was down on the chart room roof: in its metal tangle I thought I could see the legs of the tower lookout.

So this was the end of the brigands' adventure. The Planetara's last voyage! How small and futile are humans' struggles. Miko's daring enterprise—so villainous—brought all in a few moments to this silent tragedy. The Planetara had fallen thirty thousand miles. But why? What had happened to Hahn? And where was Coniston, down in this broken hull?

And Snap! I thought suddenly of Snap.

I clutched at my wandering wits. This inactivity was death. The escaping air hissed in my ears. Our precious air, escaping away into the vacant desolation of the Lunar emptiness. Through one of the twisted, slanting dome windows a rocky spire was visible. The Planetara lay bow down, wedged in a jagged cradle of Lunar rock. A miracle that the hull and dome had held together.

"Anita, we must get out of here!"

"Their helmets are in the forward storage room, Gregg."

She was staring at the fallen Miko and Moa. She shuddered and turned away and gripped me. "In the forward storage room, by the port of the emergency exit."

If only the exit locks would operate! We must find Snap and get out of here. Good old Snap! Would we find him lying dead?

We climbed from the slanting, fallen turret, over the wreckage of the littered deck. It was not difficult. A lightness was upon us. The Planetara's gravity-magnetizers were dead; this was only the light Moon gravity pulling us.

"Careful, Anita. Don't jump too freely."

We leaped along the deck. The hiss of the escaping pressure was like a clanging gong of warning to tell us to hurry. The hiss of death so close!

"Snap—" I murmured.

"Oh, Gregg, I pray we may find him alive!"

With a fifteen foot leap we cleared a pile of broken deck chairs. A man lay groaning near them. I went back with a rush. Not Snap! A steward. He had been a brigand, but he was a steward to me now.

"Get up! This is Haljan. Hurry, we must get out of here The air is escaping!"

But he sank back and lay still. No time to find if I could help him: there was Anita and Snap to save.

We found a broken entrance to one of the descending passages. I flung the debris aside and cleared it. Like a giant of strength with only this Moon gravity holding me, I raised a broken segment of superstructure and heaved it back.

Anita and I dropped ourselves down the sloping passage. The interior of the wrecked ship was silent and dim. An occasional passage light was still burning. The passage and all the rooms lay askew. Wreckage everywhere but the double dome and hull shell had withstood the shock. Then I realized that the Erentz system was slowing down. Our heat, like our air, was escaping, radiating away, a deadly chill settling on everything. The silence and the deadly chill of death would soon be here in these wrecked corridors. The end of the Planetara.

We prowled like ghouls. We did not see Coniston. Snap had been by the shifter pumps. We found him in the oval doorway. He lay sprawled. Dead? No, he moved. He sat up before we could get to him. He seemed confused, but his senses clarified with the movement of our figures over him.

"Gregg! Why, Anita!"

"Snap! You're all right? We struck—the air is escaping."

He pushed me away. He tried to stand. "I'm all right. I was up a minute ago. Gregg, it's getting cold. Where is she? I had her here—she wasn't killed. I spoke to her."

Irrational!

"Snap!" I held him. Shook him. "Snap, old fellow!"

He said normally, "Easy, Gregg. I'm all right."

Anita gripped him. "Who, Snap?"

"She—there she is...."

Another figure was here! On the grid floor by the door oval. A figure partly shrouded in a broken invisible cloak and hook. An invisible cloak! I saw a white face with opened eyes regarding me.

"Venza!" I bent down. "You!"

Venza here? Why ... how ... my thoughts swept on. Venza here—dying? Her eyes closed. But she murmured to Anita, "Where is he? I want him."

I murmured impulsively, "Here I am, Venza dear." Gently, as one would speak with gentle sympathy to humor the dying. "Here I am, Venza."

But it was only the confusion of the shock upon her. And it was upon us all. She pushed at Anita. "I want him." She saw me; this whimsical Venus girl! Even here as we gathered, all of us blurred by shock, confused in the dim, wrecked ship with the chill of death coming—even here she could jest. Her pale lips smiled.

"You, Gregg. I'm not hurt—I don't think I'm hurt." She managed to get herself up on one elbow. "Did you think I wanted you with my dying breath? What conceit! Not you, Handsome Haljan! I was calling Snap."

He was down to her. "We're all right, Venza. It's over. We must get out of the ship. The air is escaping."

We gathered in the oval doorway. We fought the confusion of panic.

"The exit port is this way."

Or was it? I answered Snap, "Yes, I think so."

The ship suddenly seemed a stranger to me. So cold. So vibrationless. Broken lights. These slanting wrecked corridors. With the ventilating fans stilled, the air was turning fetid. Chilling. And thinning, with escaping pressure, rarefying so that I could feel the grasp of it in my lungs and the pin-pricks in my cheeks.

We started off. Four of us, still alive in this silent ship of death. My blurred thoughts tried to cope with it all. Venza here. I remembered how she had bade me create a diversion when the women passengers were landing on the asteroid. She had carried out her purpose! In the confusion she had not gone ashore. A stowaway here. She had secured the cloak. Prowling, to try and help us, she had come upon Hahn. Had seized his ray cylinder and struck him down, and been herself knocked unconscious by his

dying lunge, which also had broken the tubes and wrecked the Planetara. And Venza, unconscious, had been lying here with the mechanism of her cloak still operating, so that we did not see her when we came and found why Hahn did not answer my signals.

"It's here, Gregg."

Snap and I lifted the pile of Moon equipment to which she referred. We located four suits and helmets and the mechanisms to operate them.

"More are in the chart room," Anita said.

But we needed no others. I robed Anita and showed her the mechanisms. Snap was helping Venza. We were all stiff from the cold; but within the suits and their pulsing currents, the blessed warmth came again.

The helmets had ports through which food and drink could be taken. I stood with my helmet ready. Anita, Venza and Snap were bloated and grotesque beside me. We had found food and water here, assembled in portable cases which the brigands had prepared. Snap lifted them, and signaled to me he was ready.

My helmet shut out all sounds save my own breathing, my pounding heart, and the murmur of the mechanism. The warmth and pure air were good.

We reached the hull port locks. They operated! We went through in the light of the headlamps over our foreheads.

I closed the locks after us: an instinct to keep the air in the ship for the other trapped humans lying in there.

We slid down the sloping side of the Planetara. We were unweighted, irrationally agile with this slight gravity. I fell a dozen feet and landed with barely a jar.

We were out on the Lunar surface. A great sloping ramp of crags stretched down before us. Gray-black rock tinged with Earthlight. The Earth hung amid the stars in the blackness overhead like a huge section of a glowing yellow ball.

This grim, desolate, silent landscape! Beyond the ramp, fifty feet below us, a tumbled naked plain stretched away into blurred distance. But I could see mountains off there. Behind us, the towering, frowning rampart-wall of Archimedes loomed against the sky.

I had turned to look back at the Planetara. She lay broken, wedged between spires of upstanding rock. A few of her lights still gleamed. The end of the Planetara!

The three grotesque figures of Anita, Venza and Snap had started off. Hunchback figures with the tanks mounted on their shoulders. I bounded and caught them. I touched Snap. We made audiphone contact.

"Which way do you think?" I demanded.

"I think this way, down the ramp. Away from Archimedes, toward the mountains. It shouldn't be too far."

"You run with Venza. I'll hold Anita."

He nodded. "But we must keep together, Gregg."

We could soon run freely. Down the ramp, out over the tumbled plain. Bounding, grotesque, leaping strides. The girls were more agile, more skillful. They were soon leading us. The Earth shadows of their figures leaped beside them. The Planetara faded into the distance behind us. Archimedes stood back there. Ahead, the mountains came closer.

An hour perhaps. I lost track of time. Occasionally we stopped to rest. Were we going toward the Grantline camp? Would they see our tiny waving headlights?

Another interval. Then far ahead of us on the ragged plain, lights showed! Moving, tiny spots of light! Headlights on helmeted figures!

We ran, monstrosly leaping. A group of figures were off there. Grantline's party? Snap gripped me.

"Grantline! We're safe, Gregg! Safe!"

He took his bulb light from his helmet; we stood in a group while he waved it. A semaphore signal.

"Grantline?"

And the answer came, "Yes. You, Dean?"

Their personal code. No doubt of this—it was Grantline, who had seen the Planetara fall and had come to help us.

I stood then with my hand holding Anita. And I whispered, "It's Grantline! We're safe, Anita, my darling!"

Death had been so close! Those horrible last minutes on the Planetara had shocked us, marked us. We stood trembling. And Grantline and his men came bounding up, weird, inflated figures.

A helmeted figure touched me. I saw through the helmetpane the visage of a stern-faced, square-jawed young man.

"Grantline? Johnny Grantline?"

"Yes," said his voice at my ear-grid. "I'm Grantline. You're Haljan? Gregg Haljan?"

They crowded around us. Gripped us, to hear our explanations.

Brigands! It was amazing to Johnny Grantline. But the menace was over now, over as soon as Grantline realized its existence.

We stood for a brief time discussing it. Then I drew apart, leaving Snap with Grantline. And Anita joined me. I held her arm so that we had audiphone contact.

"Anita, mine."

"Gregg—dear one!"

Murmured nothings which mean so much to lovers!

As we stood in the fantastic gloom of Lunar desolation, with the blessed Earthlight on us, I sent up a prayer of thankfulness. Not that the enormous treasure was saved. Not that the attack upon Grantline had been averted. But only that Anita was given back to me. In moments of greatest emotion the human mind individualizes. To me, there was only Anita.

Life is very strange! The gate to the shining garden of our love seemed swinging wide to let us in. Yet I recall that a vague fear still lay on me. A premonition?

I felt a touch on my arm. A bloated helmet visor was thrust near my own. I saw Snap's face peering at me.

"Grantline thinks we should return to the Planetara. Might find some of them alive."

Grantline touched me. "It's only human—"

"Yes," I said.

We went back. Some ten of us—a line of grotesque figures bounding with slow, easy strides over the jagged, rock-strewn plain. Our lights danced before us.

The Planetara came at last into view. My ship. Again that pang swept me as I saw her. This, her last resting place. She lay here, in her open tomb, shattered, broken, unbreathing. The lights on her were extinguished. The Erentz system had ceased to pulse—the heart of the dying ship, for a while beating faintly, but now at rest.

We left the two girls with some of Grantline's men at the admission port. Snap, Grantline and I, with three others, went inside. There still seemed to be air, but not enough so that we dared remove our helmets.

It was dark inside the wrecked ship. The corridors were black. The hull control rooms were dimly with Earthlight straggling through the windows.

This littered tomb. Cold and silent with death. We stumbled over a fallen figure. A member of the crew. Grantline straightened from examining it.

"Dead," he said.

Earthlight fell on the horrible face. Puffed flesh, bloated red from the blood which had oozed from its pores in the thinning air. I looked away.

We prowled further. Hahn lay dead in the pump room. The body of Coniston should have been near here. We did not see it. We climbed up to the slanting, littered deck. The air up here had all almost hissed away.

Again Grantline touched me. "That the turret?"

No wonder he asked me! The wreckage was all so formless.

"Yes."

We climbed after Snap into the broken turret room. We passed the body of that steward who just at the end had appealed to me and I had left dying. The legs of the forward lookout still poked grotesquely up from the wreckage of the observatory tower where it lay smashed down against the roof of the chart room.

We shoved ourselves into the turret. What was this? No bodies here! The giant Miko was gone! The pool of blood lay congealed into a frozen dark splotch on the metal grid.

And Moa was gone! They had not been dead. Had dragged themselves out of here, fighting desperately for life. We would find them somewhere around here.

But we did not. Nor Coniston. I recalled what Anita had said: other suits and helmets had been here in the nearby chart room. The brigands had taken them, and food and water doubtless, and escaped from the ship, following us through the lower admission ports only a few minutes after we were gone.

We made careful search of the entire ship. Eight of the bodies which should have been here were missing: Miko, Moa, Coniston and five of the crew.

We did not find them outside. They were hiding near here, no doubt, more willing to take their chances than to yield to us now. But how, in all this Lunar desolation, could we hope to locate them?

"No use," said Grantline. "Let them go. If they want death, well, they deserve it."

But we were saved. Then, as I stood there, realization leaped at me. Saved? Were we not indeed fatuous fools?

In all these emotion-swept moments since we had encountered Grantline, memory of that brigand ship coming from Mars had never once occurred to Snap and me!

I told Grantline now. He stared at me.

"What!"

I told him again. It would be here in eight days. Fully manned and armed.

"But Haljan, we have almost no weapons! All my Comet's space was taken with equipment and the mechanisms for my camp. I can't signal Earth! I was depending on the Planetara!"

It surged upon us. The brigand menace past? We were blindly congratulating ourselves on our safety! But it would be eight days or more before in distant Ferrok-Shahn the nonarrival of the Planetara would cause any real comment. No one was searching for us—no one was worried over us.

No wonder the crafty Miko was willing to take his chances out here in the Lunar wilds! His ship, his reinforcements, his weapons were coming rapidly!

And we were helpless. Almost unarmed. Marooned here on the Moon!

AT THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH by Gavin Chappell

The [Going Underground](#) series is now available for download as a Kindle ebook.

4

‘Very well, then!’ Kohl said loudly. Kummer had warned him that the Cauldron’s brew was only for those the gods deemed worthy, but Kohl was adamant. ‘Very well,’ he said again. ‘We will perform the rite!’ He turned to Eloise. ‘You must assist me.’

Eloise shook her head, but Kohl indicated Nick and his two guards.

‘What do you want me to do?’ asked Eloise miserably.

Osborne led his followers at a run through the City streets. The soldiers were retreating before them.

‘Careful,’ Menyw was panting. ‘This may be some kind of trap.’

‘I don’t know,’ Osborne admitted, ‘but they won’t stand and fight. Where’s Hamish? Shouldn’t he have appeared by now?’

Menyw wheezed. ‘Who knows what obstacles he has had to face?’

Eloise was chanting a long, ululating Celtic mantra. Kohl raised the Spear to thrust it into the Cauldron mouth. There was a commotion from the hall beyond the chamber. Eloise looked at Kohl, whose eyes were closed.

‘Ignore it,’ he said. He brought the Spear hissing down.

The Cauldron began to seethe. The Head opened its eyes and gazed down at Kohl, who raised his arms.

‘Yield unto me the Waters of the Cauldron!’ he cried.

SS soldiers flooded into the chamber. Kohl gave them an angry glare as they opened fire at unseen pursuers beyond the gateway. Eloise watched, deafened by the gunfire. Nick’s two guards thrust him away and ran to join the firelight.

Nick scrambled over to Eloise. ‘Who is it?’ he shouted.

‘I can’t see,’ Eloise replied, crouching behind the bubbling cauldron. ‘Maybe it’s these subhumans they keep talking about.’

She looked up at Kummer standing serenely in the lea of the Cauldron, then at Kohl, resolutely ignoring the battle as he waited for the Waters to brew.

By now, the crusties were fully armed, having looted fallen Nazis as they advanced. But their attempts to cross the Hall were futile. Most of the Nazis had retreated within the chamber on the far side and they kept up a scything, withering fire from the arch.

Osborne crouched behind a pillar, speaking in urgent tones with Menyw.

‘From what Hamish said, that’s where the Cauldron is located,’ he said. ‘What do we do now? This whole operation is a shambles. Who knows where Hamish has got to? We don’t seem to have any chance of getting past this section and Kohl’s got control of the chamber. He’s got the artefacts. He’s got everything he needs and we’re fucked, Menyw. What are we going to do?’

Menyw looked serenely at him.

‘Whatever we do,’ he said, ‘we must stop Kohl. Even if it means a last suicidal attack. Gather everyone together. We must take that chamber!’

Hamish halted, despairing. Beside him was Siân, the only other survivor from the flood of acid. They had escaped up the second passage with the acid rushing after them, but finally reached a passage that led upwards. But now their torches were failing and they were lost in the dark.

‘Well, we tried,’ said Siân. ‘Can’t say fairer than that.’

‘We’ve failed,’ said Hamish. ‘We’re lost. We’ve no chance of getting anywhere without light.’

At that moment, his torch, already no more than a glowing ember, went out. Siân had lost hers while escaping the acid flood.

‘Awe our companions are dead,’ Hamish went on, sinking dolefully against the wall. ‘We’re lost. We’ve got no chance.’

‘Oh, come on,’ said Siân brightly. ‘Don’t give up.’

Hamish glanced up at her dimly illuminated face. ‘Och, don’t talk shit,’ he said.

Siân sat back on her haunches and looked down at him gloomily. ‘I never thought you’d give up, Hamish Wallis,’ she said, hiding the despair in her voice. ‘We’re going to get out of here! Think positive.’

‘Don’t gie me that New Age crap,’ Hamish growled. ‘Ah know you don’t even believe what you’re saying.’

They both fell silent, sinking into their own dark thoughts. The tunnel was deathly still. Hamish berated himself for getting mixed up in this rubbish in the first place. Now they were stuck in the dark tunnels with no chance of escape and... Dark tunnels? He had been able to see Siân ever since the torch went out. He blinked and looked about him. Siân stirred.

‘What’s up?’ she said tiredly. ‘You’re right, we are fucked. We’re never going to get out of here.’

‘Ah’mno so sure about that,’ said Hamish. ‘Where’s that light coming from?’

Siân looked up and their eyes met.

‘Now that’s a good question,’ she said slowly.

Bullets ricocheted around the chamber. However exposed they might seem, up on this dais, they were escaping the worst of the firelight. Maybe the Cauldron protected them somehow, Eloise thought. Kummer also seemed unaffected. So did Kohl.

The gunfire ceased and half-familiar figures poured into the chamber to grapple with the Nazi defenders. Eloise’s eyes widened.

‘Crusties at the centre of the earth!’ Nick exclaimed.

‘Do you see who’s leading them?’ she cried. Nick peeped round the Cauldron.

‘It’s Osborne!’ he exclaimed. ‘So he didn’t drown with the others. And look - there’s Menyw.’

‘I wonder where Hamish is,’ Eloise murmured.

Osborne was fighting a man in the uniform of an SS Major. He despatched the Nazi quickly, then turned to survey the skirmish. Menyw pointed towards the dais in the centre of the large chamber.

‘There’s Kohl!’ he cried. Osborne followed his gaze.

‘And Eloise and Nick,’ he added.

There was a rumble from the dais. Kohl raised his hands and cried something in an ancient language. Then he leant forward to take something from the Cauldron.

Kummer stepped forward.

‘Hold!’ he cried and his words resounded through the chamber. The fighting ceased and all stared up at him. Nick and Eloise exchanged glances.

Kohl glanced at him.

‘Silence, old man,’ he snarled. ‘I have won. Victory is for the strong!’

‘It must still be decided whether you are worthy of this boon,’ Kummer replied. ‘Is there anyone here who has a prior claim to the Waters?’

He stared challengingly around the chamber. Eloise stared up at him. Nick nudged her.

‘Go on!’ he hissed.

But the words froze in Eloise’s throat.

Again, Kummer spoke.

‘Is there anyone who has a prior claim to the Waters of the Cauldron?’

The words echoed distantly round the tunnel.

‘The Cauldron?’ said Hamish.

‘We must be almost there,’ Siân cried. ‘Hurry! We haven’t much time!’

The question was repeated again. Something told Hamish that this was the last time. A final burst of adrenalin sent energy flooding through his body. He turned a corner and saw an archway ahead.

They ran out into a vast chamber. On the far side a crowd of people were visible, some Nazis, but also Osborne and the crusties. In the middle stood a huge cauldron.

‘Ah have a prior claim!’ Hamish shouted. Everyone turned to look at him.

Eloise watched as Hamish strode down the steps, followed by Siân. When they reached the dais, Kohl glared at him.

‘What claim do you have, urchin?’ he sneered. Hamish walked up to him and seized the Spear.

‘That’s mine, bollocks,’ he growled. He turned to face Kummer.

‘What is the basis of your claim?’ the Guardian asked.

Hamish opened his mouth to speak, then like Eloise before him, was struck dumb. Kummer gazed at him levelly.

‘See!’ Kohl crowed. ‘He has no claim! Or it is so weak he is afraid to disclose it. My claim is the strongest! It is destiny itself that claims the Waters of the Cauldron! I will use it to revive the heroes sleeping beneath the mountain, who will ride forth and save Europa in her hour of greatest need!’

‘The free nations of the Aryans have been enslaved once again by international financiers and global capitalists! Even now, Europe bows unwillingly before the Semitic conspiracy that is the European Union. But with the Waters of the Cauldron I will wake the Führer from his long sleep and he shall ride forth with his knights once more to save us all from evil!’

He folded his arms and looked to left and right, nodding in self-approval. Kummer turned expectantly to Hamish.

Hamish found his knees turn weak. His head swam and he tried to think of something to say. What was his claim to the cauldron? Whatever he thought of seemed inadequate beside Kohl’s flood of eloquence. Besides, he had long idolised the strong man, the decisive man, the man of destiny who could achieve his desires with ease, however far-reaching. Kohl’s dreams struck a chord in his mind. The grey, money-grubbing future Brussels promised for Europe seemed a poor proposition besides the glories Kohl described. Even if the bauchle was a Kraut.

Hamish looked away in confusion. Eloise caught his eye. They stared wildly at each other, in the brooding silence of the chamber. Then Hamish turned back to Kummer.

‘Och, awe this keech he’s talking about’ - the Scot nodded towards Kohl - ‘sounds verra fine, Ah must say. Ah cannie say Ah’ve got big plans like that.

‘But it’s taken me a lot of fuckin’ effort to get here and Ah don’t intend to go home empty-handed. Ah came here because people asked me to. This Celtic god bauchle wanted me to bring ma Spear here’ - he brandished the weapon - ‘and so Ah did. But before that, Ah was coming here because... because ma friend Eloise wanted me to. Her sister’s dead, you see. She reckoned the Cauldron could revive Becky...’

Kummer looked from Hamish to Kohl and back again. Kohl sneered at the boy.

‘Did you really think your petty troubles could compare with my destiny?’ he said. ‘Your pathetic schemes are nothing! I came here with ambitions! Dreams of glory! Not the ragbag of reasons you have just pr offered.’ He turned to Kummer. ‘Give me the Waters!’

Kummer turned towards the giant head.

‘I submit this judgement to the Wondrous Head,’ he said quietly. The head stared down at them.

Hamish quailed before its inhuman gaze. The chamber shook once more. Then the head spoke.

‘The Waters of the Cauldron are bestowed only upon the brave,’ it rumbled. ‘Step forward, he who has the most courage.’

Kohl stepped forward quickly. ‘I have fought my way through any number of perils to get here,’ he said smugly. ‘I think I have the most courage.’

Hamish found himself frozen to the spot. His own courage seemed to have gone. The Wondrous Head’s eyes widened. Twin beams lanced down to surround Kohl in a nimbus of colours. He staggered backward, his face stricken.

‘But...’ Kohl gasped. ‘But... it was my destiny...!’ His smoking corpse clattered to the dais and fell apart.

The Wondrous Head gazed upon Hamish.

‘Take the Waters,’ it commanded. ‘You have risked your life for another’s cause - not to glut your own insatiable ambition and cause the deaths of millions of innocents. You are the one who has true courage.’

Slowly, tentatively, Hamish stepped forward and took a glowing flask from within the cauldron. He lifted it up and stared at it in wonder.

Eloise came forward. ‘Hamish!’ she cried and caught him in her arms. He gazed down at her, then they kissed passionately.

In silence, Kummer turned and walked from the chamber. His work was done. No one saw him leave.

Nick glanced at Siân.

‘About time too,’ he said, a little jealously. ‘I was wondering when they’d get round to it.’ He looked back at Hamish and Eloise, locked in passionate embrace, then turned to the Welsh girl again.

‘What?’ she said, with a grin.

‘Oh,’ he said awkwardly. ‘I was just wondering...’

‘What?’ she said. ‘Me? With you?’

‘Oh, well,’ Nick said. ‘Maybe not...’

Laughing, she grabbed him and their lips met.

Osborne was watching the scene. He glanced over at Menyw with a happy grin. Menyw glanced at him and did a double take.

‘Now just a minute...!’ the druid exclaimed.

‘What?’ said Osborne. ‘No! No, I was just thinking...’ He shrugged. ‘Nice to see a happy ending for once.’

One of the Nazis stepped forward.

‘But what of us?’ he asked brokenly. The SS men had thrown down their weapons and Stella and her crusties were keeping them under guard. Menyw looked down at him. ‘All meaning is gone from our lives,’ the man added. ‘We have been awaiting the coming of the Spear-bearer for over forty years. Now this. What is left for us?’ Menyw made no reply.

‘Well, time to go,’ said Eloise.

It was much later. They were sitting beside the main fire in the traveller encampment. Nick had been reunited with Timmy. Dave had welcomed Stella and the returning warriors with sadness at the gaps in their ranks. The now unemployed SS men, aware of a sudden emptiness in their lives, had joined them as well, a little grudgingly, although things had changed after Dave and the *obergruppenführer* discovered a shared interest in esoteric runology.

But Eloise and her companions still had work to do in the outside world - Eloise had to revive her sister. Siân was expressing a wish to get back to her shop. Menyw had his duties to his parishioners and Osborne was thinking of heading back to Yorkshire.

‘So how do we get back?’ Hamish asked, who hadn’t a clue what to do when he returned. ‘We’re not gonna get far in that submarine thing, are we?’ The wreck of Kohl’s submersible was still visible off the beach.

‘We can go back through the tunnels,’ said Menyw. ‘I’ve been talking with Dave and he says he’ll lend us one of the vans.’

‘Lend?’ asked Eloise. ‘How will we give it back?’

The ageing hippie was idly plucking his mandolin. He shrugged. 'Anything to get you away from here,' he said. 'You can go and cause trouble for someone else.'

'Will it even get us back to reality?' Nick added, looking up from a conversation with Siân. 'Could anything, after all we've been through?'

'We'll see,' said Menyw.

Epilogue: Back to the Planet

In the end, it was just the three of them walking up from the station through the Brighton suburbs. When they came up from the caves in Somerset, Siân and Menyw had decided to return to Caer Pedryfan and Osborne went with them, intending to hitch a life to Yorkshire afterwards. But Hamish and Nick had both elected to remain with Eloise.

They turned a corner.

'There's the house,' said Nick. Eloise nodded. Ahead stood the derelict building where they had tangled with the vampires so many months ago. It was summer again; they had been inside the planet for weeks.

'Come on, then,' said Hamish. 'Sooner we get this over and done with the better.'

The back garden seemed even more overgrown as they entered the house, but the ominous, brooding atmosphere had gone. Nevertheless, Eloise's heart was thumping wildly as she picked her way down the rubble-strewn steps into the cellar.

Nick flashed his pen torch around the dank, evil-smelling room. 'There's the coffin,' he said, shining the torch on the far wall. Eloise and Hamish approached it slowly, avoiding the debris scattered across the floor.

'Ah'll open it,' said Hamish. He heaved back the lid.

A foul stench, worse than that of the rest of the cellar, rushed out. Nick flashed the torch into the coffin. Eloise gagged at the smell from the blackened, glistening flesh of her sister's corpse.

'Fuck...' Hamish choked. 'Hurry up with that thing, Eloise!'

She produced the flask from her bag and upturned it over the rotting flesh.

Nothing happened. Eloise feared the worst. But then the blacks and purples that mottled her sister's skin began to recede. The flesh swelled out. The stench dissipated. Then Becky opened her eyes and looked uncomprehendingly up at them. She frowned at her sister.

‘Eloise...?’ she said vaguely.

Eloise gasped and rushed forward to hug her.

The hollow lane echoed to the tramp of their combat boots as they entered the village at dusk. Becky had listened incredulously to the whole story as they travelled up from Brighton and seemed disinclined to believe a word of it, although she had no explanation for the loss of an entire year. She had been happy to invite Eloise’s friends back to their parents’ place. Now Eloise had come back from being a traveller, Becky hoped things would return to the way they had been in the old days.

‘So is this where you live, Eloise?’ asked Nick, looking round at the neat little cottages and gardens. He tugged at Timmy’s lead, dragging him away from a nearby flowerbed. ‘It’s dead posh, isn’t it?’

Eloise looked a little embarrassed.

‘Why do you think I ran away from it all?’ she asked.

‘Ah wouldna run away from this,’ Hamish said. They walked down the lane that led to Eloise and Becky’s parents’ cottage.

‘Are you sure your mum and dad will mind us turning up?’ Nick asked, glancing at his dog.

Becky laughed. ‘They’ll be only too happy to see me and Eloise back,’ she said confidently. ‘There won’t be any trouble. Come on!’

The tall man stepped back from the French windows and turned to the silent couple.

‘They’re coming up the lane now,’ he said.

Mr. Payne looked up. ‘Both my daughters, inspector?’

The plain-clothes policeman nodded. ‘And the two criminals who abducted them.’

‘But don’t worry,’ said the sergeant from the doorway. ‘We’ll deal with them. We’ve been following them for a long time. Isn’t that right, inspector?’

‘That’s right, Sergeant Dover,’ the inspector replied. ‘They’ve put us to some considerable inconvenience. They were even responsible for my colleague and I being suspended from the force, on allegations of corruption! But we knew they’d turn up here. Sooner or later.’

Mr. and Mrs. Payne exchanged worried glances. Mr. Payne looked out of the window.

All they could do now was wait.