

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE
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DAYS OF HIGH ADVENTURE:
THE FOOTFALLS WITHIN, PT. 1

BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

ALSO FEATURING:

**THE HEADY HEIGHTS OF
HARRIETTA MORGAN**

BY NATHAN ROWARK

**THE TELL-TALE HEART:
DEMISE OF THE BIONACLE, PT. 1**

BY OBSIDIAN M. TESLA

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This

Edition

This week's cover illustration is "Marley's Ghost" by John Leech. Cover design by C Priest Brumley.

Editorial by Gavin Chappell

Days of High Adventure: The Footfalls Within (Part Two) by Robert E Howard - Solomon Kane learns the secret of his ju-ju stick... SWORD AND SORCERY

Childish Negotiations by C Priest Brumley - How to get your own way with Dad... HORROR

The Hettford Witch Hunt by James Rhodes - Christmas Special! OCCULT SIT-COM

State of Emergency - Part Nineteen by David Christopher - The battle for High Wycombe has begun... SCIENCE FICTION

Geraldine by Gary Sparrow - She seemed like some high-enchantress... FANTASY

Schlock! Classic: The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton by Charles Dickens - A forgotten Christmas classic... FANTASY

The Tell Tale Heart: Demise of the Bionacle Part Two by Obsidian M. Tesla - The plot, as they say, thickens... STEAMPUNK

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

Schlock! Classic Serial: Brigands of the Moon (Part 30) by Ray Cummings - This duty man was a full seven feet tall, and the most heavy-set Martian I had ever seen... SPACE OPERA

EDITORIAL

So here it is, Merry Christmas...

Welcome to the first Schlock! Christmas Special. It's hard to believe we've been going since last spring. Almost every week since 10 April, Schlock! has provided you with another helping of the best in science fiction, fantasy and horror on the net. With art from Gav Roach and Paul Mellino, stories from James Rhodes, James Talbot, C Priest Brumley, Todd Nelsen and many more.

This week, we have a special Christmas ghost story from Charles Dickens; a Hettford Witch Hunt Christmas Special; the second and final part of the Solomon Kane jungle adventure *The Footfalls Within*; the return of C Priest Brumley with another Masach story; the continuation of Obsidian Tesla's *Tell Tale Heart* steampunk mash-up; *Geraldine* by Gary Sparrow; and State of Emergency begins with the battle for High Wycombe. Plus *Varney the Vampyre* and *Brigands of the Moon*.

Here's to another year of Schlock!

Gavin Chappell

THE FOOTFALLS WITHIN by Robert Ervin Howard

II

The day wore on. The sun beat down mercilessly, then screened itself in the great trees as it slanted toward the horizon. The slaves suffered fiercely for water and a continual whimpering rose from their ranks as they staggered blindly on. Some fell and half-crawled, and were half-dragged by their reeling yoke-mates. When all were buckling from exhaustion, the sun dipped, night rushed on, and a halt was called. Camp was pitched, guards thrown out. The slaves were fed scantily and given enough water to keep life in them—but only just enough. Their fetters were not loosened, but they were allowed to sprawl about as they might. Their fearful thirst and hunger having been somewhat eased, they bore the discomforts of their shackles with characteristic stoicism.

Kane was fed without his hands being untied, and he was given all the water he wished. The patient eyes of the slaves watched him drink, silently, and he was sorely ashamed to guzzle what others suffered for; he ceased before his thirst was fully quenched. A wide clearing had been selected, on all sides of which rose gigantic trees. After the Arabs had eaten and while the black Moslems were still cooking their food, old Yussef came to Kane and began to talk about the staff again. Kane answered his questions with admirable patience, considering the hatred he bore the whole race to which the Hadji belonged, and during the conversation, Hassim came striding up and looked down in contempt. Hassim, Kane ruminated, was the very symbol of militant Islam—bold, reckless, materialistic, sparing nothing, fearing nothing, as sure of his own destiny and as contemptuous of the rights of others as the most powerful Western king. “Are you maundering about that stick again?” he gibed. “Hadji, you grow childish in your old age.” Yussef’s beard quivered in anger. He shook the staff at his sheikh like a threat of evil.

“Your mockery little befits your rank, Hassim,” he snapped. “We are in the heart of a dark and demon-haunted land, to which long ago were banished the devils from Arabia, if this staff, which any but a fool can tell is no rod of any world we know, has existed down to our day, who knows what other things, tangible or intangible, may have existed through the ages? This very trail we follow—know you how old it is? Men followed it before the Seljuk came out of the East or the Roman came out of the West. Over this very trail, legends say, the great Sulieman came when he drove the demons westward out of Asia and prisoned them in strange prisons. And will you say—“

A wild shout interrupted him. Out of the shadows of the jungle a warrior came flying as if from the hounds of Doom. With arms flinging wildly, eyes rolling to display the whites, and mouth wide open so that all his gleaming teeth were visible, he made an image of stark terror

not soon forgotten. The Moslem horde leaped up, snatching their weapons, and Hassim swore:

“That's Ali, whom I sent to scout for meat — perchance a lion—”

But no lion followed the man who fell at Hassim's feet, mouthing gibberish and pointing wildly back at the black jungle whence the nerve-strung watchers expected some brain-shattering horror to burst. “He says he found a strange mausoleum back in the jungle,” said Hassim with a scowl, “but he cannot tell what frightened him. He only knows a great horror overwhelmed him and sent him flying. Ali, you are a fool and a rogue.”

He kicked the grovelling savage viciously, but the other Arabs drew about him in some uncertainty. The panic was spreading among the native warriors.

“They will bolt in spite of us,” muttered a bearded Arab, uneasily watching the native allies who, milled together, jabbered excitedly and flung fearsome glances over the shoulders. “Hassim, 'twere better to march on a few miles. This is an evil place after all, and though 'tis likely the fool, Ali, was frightened by his own shadow—still—”

“Still,” jeered the sheikh, “you will all feel better when we have left it behind. Good enough; to still your fears I will move camp—but first I will have a look at this thing. Lash up the slaves we'll swing into the jungle and pass by this mausoleum; perhaps some great king lies there. No one will be afraid if we all go in a body with guns.”

So the weary slaves were whipped into wakefulness and stumbled along beneath the whips again. The native allies went silently and nervously, reluctantly obeying Hassim's implacable will but huddling close to the Arabs. The moon had risen, huge, red and sullen, and the jungle was bathed in a sinister silver glow that etched the brooding trees in black shadow. The trembling Ali pointed out the way, somewhat reassured by his savage master's presence. And so they passed through the jungle until they came to a strange clearing among the giant trees—strange because nothing grew there. The trees ringed it in a disquieting symmetrical manner, and no lichen or moss grew on the earth, which seemed to have been blasted and blighted in a strange fashion. And in the midst of the glade stood the mausoleum.

A great brooding mass of stone it was, pregnant with ancient evil. Dead with the dead of a hundred centuries it seemed, yet Kane was aware that the air pulsed about it, as with the slow, unhuman breathing of some gigantic, invisible monster.

The Arab's native allies drew back muttering, assailed by the evil atmosphere of the place; the slaves stood in a patient, silent group beneath the trees. The Arabs went forward to the frowning black mass, and Yussef, taking Kane's cord from his guard, led the Englishman with him like a surly mastiff, as if for protection against the unknown.

“Some mighty sultan doubtless lies here,” said Hassim, tapping the stone with his scabbard.

“Whence come these stones?” muttered Yussef uneasily. “They are of dark and forbidding aspect. Why should a great sultan lie in state so far from any habitation of man? If there were ruins of an old city hereabouts it would be different—”

He bent to examine the heavy metal door with its huge lock, curiously sealed and fused. He shook his head forebodingly as he made out the ancient Hebraic characters carved on the door.

“I can not read them,” he quavered, “and belike it is well for me I can not. What ancient kings sealed up is not good for men to disturb. Hassim, let us hence. This place is pregnant with evil for the sons of men.”

But Hassim gave him no heed. “He who lies within is no son of Islam,” said he, “and why should we not despoil him of the gems and riches that undoubtedly were laid to rest with him? Let us break open this door.”

Some of the Arabs shook their heads doubtfully but Hassim's word was law. Calling to him a huge warrior who bore a heavy hammer, he ordered him to break open the door.

As the man swung up his sledge, Kane gave a sharp exclamation. Was he mad? The apparent antiquity of this brooding mass of stone was proof that it had stood undisturbed for thousands of years. Yet he could have sworn that he heard the sounds of footfalls within! Back and forth they padded, as if something paced the narrow confines of that grisly prison in a never-ending monotony of movement.

A cold hand touched the spine of Solomon Kane. Whether the sounds registered on his conscious ear or on some un-sounded deep of soul or sub-feeling, he could not tell, but he knew that somewhere within his consciousness there reechoed the tramp of monstrous feet from within that ghastly mausoleum.

“Stop!” he exclaimed. “Hassim, I may be mad, but I hear the tread of some fiend within that pile of stone.” Hassim raised his hand and checked the hovering hammer. He listened intently, and the others strained their ears in a silence that had suddenly become tense.

“I hear nothing,” grunted a bearded giant, “Nor I,” came a quick chorus. “The Frank is mad!”

“Hear ye anything, Yussef?” asked Hassim sardonically.

The old Hadji shifted nervously. His face was uneasy.

“No. Hassim, no, yet—”

Kane decided he must be mad. Yet in his heart he knew he was never saner, and he knew somehow that this occult keenness of the deeper senses that set him apart from the Arabs came from long association with the ju-ju staff that old Yussef now held in his shaking hands.

Hassim laughed harshly and made a gesture to the warrior. The hammer fell with a crash that re-echoed deafeningly and shivered off through the black jungle in a strangely altered cachinnation. Again—again— and again the hammer fell, driven with all the power of rippling muscles and mighty body. And between the blows Kane still heard that lumbering tread, and he who had never known fear as men know it, felt the cold hand of terror clutching at his heart. This fear was apart from earthly or mortal fear, as the sound of the footfalls was apart from mortal tread. Kane's fright was like a cold wind blowing on him from outer realms of unguessed Darkness, bearing him the evil and decay of an outlived epoch and an unutterably ancient period. Kane was not sure whether he heard those footfalls or by some dim instinct sensed them. But he was sure of their reality. They were not the tramp of man or beast; but inside that black, hideously ancient mausoleum some nameless thing moved with sour-shaking and elephantine tread.

The powerful warrior seated and panted with the difficulty of his task. But at last, beneath the heavy blows the ancient lock shattered; the hinges snapped; the door burst inward. And Yussef screamed.

From that black gaping entrance no tiger-fanged beast or demon, of solid flesh and blood leaped forth. But a fearful stench flowed out in billowing, almost tangible waves and in one brain-shattering, ravaging rush, whereby the gaping door seemed to gush blood, the Horror was upon them. It enveloped Hassim, and the fearless chieftain, hewing vainly at the almost intangible terror, screamed with sudden, unaccustomed fright as his lashing simitar whistled

only through stuff as yielding and unharmable as air, and he felt himself lapped by coils of death and destruction.

Yussef shrieked like a lost soul, dropped the ju-ju stave and joined his fellows who streamed out into the jungle in mad flight, preceded by their howling allies. Only the slaves fled not, but stood shackled to their doom, wailing their terror. As in a nightmare of delirium Kane saw Hassim swaying like a reed in the wind, lapped about by a gigantic pulsing red Thing that had neither shape nor earthly substance. Then, as the crack of splintering bones came to him, and the sheikh's body buckled like a straw beneath a stamping hoof, the Englishman burst his bonds with one volcanic effort and caught up the ju-ju stave.

Hassim was down, crushed and dead, sprawled like a broken toy with shattered limbs awry, and the red pulsing Thing was lurching toward Kane like a thick cloud of blood in the air, that continually changed its shape and form, and yet somehow trod lumberingly as if on monstrous legs!

Kane felt the cold fingers of fear claw at his brain, but he braced himself, and lifting the ancient staff, struck with all his power into the centre of the Horror. And he felt an unnameable, immaterial substance meet and give way before the falling staff. Then he was almost strangled by the nauseous burst of unholy stench that flooded the air, and somewhere down the dim vistas of his soul's consciousness re-echoed unbearably a hideous formless cataclysm that he knew was the death-screaming of the monster. For it was down and dying at his feet, its crimson paling in slow surges like the rise and receding of red waves on some foul coast. And as it paled, the soundless screaming dwindled away into cosmic distances as though it faded into some sphere apart and aloof beyond human ken.

Kane, dazed and incredulous, looked down on a shapeless, colourless, all but invisible mass at his feet which he knew was the corpse of the Horror, dashed back into the black realms from whence it had come, by a single blow of the staff of Solomon. Aye, the same staff, Kane knew, that in the hands of a mighty King and magician had ages ago driven the monster into that strange prison, to bide until ignorant hands loosed it again upon the world.

The old tales were true then, and King Solomon had in truth driven the demons westward and sealed them in strange places. Why had he let them live? Was human magic too weak in those dim days to more than subdue the devils? Kane shrugged his shoulders in wonderment. He knew nothing of magic, yet he had slain where that other Solomon had but imprisoned.

And Solomon Kane shuddered, for he had looked on Life that was not Life as he knew it, and had dealt and witnessed Death that was not Death as he knew it. Again the realization swept over him. as it had in the dust-haunted halls of Atlantean Negari, as it had in the abhorrent

Hills of the Dead, as it had in Akaana—that human life was but one of a myriad forms of existence, that worlds existed within worlds, and that there was more than one plane of existence. The planet men call the earth spun on through the untold ages, Kane realized, and as it spun it spawned Life, and living things which wriggled about it as maggots are spawned in rot and corruption. Man was the dominant maggot now; why should he in his pride suppose that he and his adjuncts were the first maggots—or the last to rule a planet quick with unguessed life. He shook his head, gazing in new wonder at the ancient gift of N'Longa, seeing in it at last not merely a tool of black magic, but a sword of good and light against the powers of inhuman evil forever. And he was shaken with a strange reverence for it that was almost fear. Then he bent to the Thing at his feet, shuddering to feel its strange mass slip through his fingers like wisps of heavy fog. He thrust the staff beneath it and somehow lifted and levered the mass back into the mausoleum and shut the door.

Then he stood gazing down at the strangely mutilated body of Hassim, noting how it was smeared with foul slime and how it had already begun to decompose. He shuddered again, and suddenly a low timid voice aroused him from his sombre cogitations. The captives knelt beneath the trees and watched with great patient eyes. With a start he shook off his strange mood. He took from the mouldering corpse his own pistols, dirk and rapier, making shift to wipe off the clinging foulness that was already flecking the steel with rust. He also took up a quantity of powder and shot dropped by the Arabs in their frantic flight. He knew they would return no more. They might die in their flight, or they might gain through the interminable leagues of jungle to the coast; but they would not turn back to dare the terror of that grisly glade.

Kane came to the wretched slaves and after some difficulty released them. “Take up these weapons which the warriors dropped in their haste,” said he, “and get you home. This is an evil place. Get ye back to your villages and when the next Arabs come, die in the ruins of your huts rather than be slaves.”

Then they would have knelt and kissed his feet. but he, in much confusion, forbade them roughly. Then as they made preparations to go, one said to him: “Master, what of thee? Wilt thou not return with us? Thou shalt be our king!”

But Kane shook his head.

“I go eastward,” said he. And so the tribespeople bowed to him and turned back on the long trail to their own homeland. And Kane shouldered the staff that had been the rod of the Pharaohs and of Moses and of Solomon and of nameless Atlantean kings behind them, and turned his face eastward, halting only for a single backward glance at the great mausoleum that other Solomon had built with strange arts so long ago, and which now loomed dark and forever silent against the stars.

CHILDISH NEGOTIATIONS by C. Priest Brumley

“Dad, why do they do that?”

At long last, I let my exasperation show with a slight sigh, my breath misting in the humid December cold. “Do what, Billy?”

“Put that purple light over those jellyfish? They glow anyways, right Dad?”

I turned to Billy, seeing his inquisitive stare burning holes into my black leather jacket. Our time together was a rarity now, with my new job taking over the majority of my life and leaving little time left to spend with my only son. So on a day off such as this, it stood to reason that whatever he wanted to do, we did without question. And Billy wanted to see the sharks.

So off to the Aquarium we went. We left our house early and stopped for breakfast first, where I contended with Billy over our choice of venue (his McDonald’s beat my Dot’s Diner, much to my half-hearted chagrin). Then, downtown we sped, parking the car at a random hotel along the streetcar line and taking the oncoming Trolley as soon as we could. Despite the long bit of walking in the cold he endured, Billy was a real trouper, and only complained once when he tripped and had to re-tie his shoe.

Judging by the look on his face, the entrance to the Aquarium was a true gift from God. We paid for our tickets at the door and went inside quickly, offering a brief, “Happy Holidays” to the poor employee stuck outside with the Santa hat on as we went past. And after obtaining a rather expensive cup of hot chocolate just inside, we were off.

He fawned at length over the myriad displays and marvels we encountered at first, from the opening tube-like walkway full of manta rays to the display of electric eels, and even found the courage to get close to the albino alligator’s tank. I showed him the various aquatic plants and smaller displays, moving on to the next section at any sign of boredom. At about noon Billy and I were both starving, so we took lunch in the Aquarium’s cafeteria.

But the crowning moment was, of course, the enormous shark tank. The moment one of the mako sharks appeared coming around the leg of the false oil rig, Billy lost his mind. He asked the information guide what seemed to be hundreds of questions, irritating the man to no end with repeats and variations until he excused himself to attend to the next group. Billy tried following the man away, still firing off questions in rapidity, until I dragged him off.

The last exhibit we saw was the jellyfish. He was flabbergasted by the ghostly creatures, rapidly asking questions once more drawn from his seemingly never-ending well. After an hour, though, the magic lost its touch. I ushered Billy along to the exit, more for my sanity than his.

“Well, Dad? Why do they do that?”

I sighed once more. “Because, buddy, they don’t glow. The jellyfish are normally really hard to see, but they glow under the bl... purple light. So, they put the lights in there so people can see them, okay?” The answer seemed to mollify Billy’s curiosity, and we walked on in silence for a bit.

Then, my phone rang. Checking the caller ID showed me a blurry picture of my boss, and I hastened to find an alcove to take the call in. I pulled Billy off of the sidewalk towards me, holding his hand tightly with my left while my right answered my boss’s beck and call on its own.

“Hello?”

“Mark McAle! Where the hell have you been all day?” He was shouting. Not good.

“Sir, I’ve had this day scheduled off for weeks now so I could do my Christmas shopping and spend some...”

“Who gave you the authorization to take the day off?”

I sighed for what felt the millionth time today. “You did, sir. I brought you the ‘request for time off’ slip directly over from HR, you signed it and agree...”

“Well, we’ve established that you’re alive,” he cut me off, “And I recall no such thing. You’re not listed on the calendar for being off today. So why aren’t you here, now?”

“Mister Hayden, I swear to God, I brought the slip directly to you four or five weeks ago, you okayed it, and I even watched you write it down,” I told him. I was almost crying at this point; fear of losing that job had taken control of my every faculty. I turned to the left to look for Billy, and spotted him a yard away, having found a curb to sit on and wait out the duration of the call.

And he was smiling and talking to himself. Huh.

“Listen here, McAle,” my boss was saying into the phone, “I don’t have time for this bullshit. There are too many good artists out there who’d love a job like this. I want your desk cleared by close of business tomorrow. Leave a forwarding address for your royalties with Payroll. Bye, McAle.”

My arm went numb from shock, dropping the phone in my hand to the concrete below. I heard the clatter, but it didn’t register on my conscious mind. Instead, I was watching Billy’s imaginary conversation unfold on the curb below me, baffled by the *completeness* of it.

“...to meetcha, Mister Muh-Sock. Yeah, Daddy’s gone a lot, but maybe now he can stay home with me some more! Thank you!”

Billy raised his hand and shook it in the air, as if shaking someone’s hand.

“What? *Now?* ‘Kay, but I have to tell daddy where I’m going. I’ll be right back.” Billy stood up and covered the small distance between us in a few strides, looking up at me with his childish gaze.

“Daddy, Mister Muh-Sock says I have to go to Purgatory with him because I asked him to make you be home with me more. Is that okay?”

HETTFORD CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

1.

Alison looked at the phone. She simply couldn't fathom that it was ringing. She poked Gary in the ribs, her touch sent his body into a spasm, but it did not wake him. After what seemed like an eternity, the ringing stopped. A minute passed and the phone began to ring again. Alison punched Gary hard in the back. He sat bolt upright and looked at the cordless phone: it was on his side of the bed. He looked at the curtains and ascertained that it was dark outside, and then he looked at the clock and ascertained it was ten past five in the morning. He pressed the button to answer the phone. He considered being very rude with whomever was on the other end of the line but he was worried that it might be a medical emergency so he just said:

"Hello."

Milton's voice, rattled excitedly at the other end of the phone.

"Can you get over here right now?"

"It's five o'clock on Christmas day," moaned Gary.

"This is the biggest thing we've ever had," Milton's voice was filled with wonder. "You have to see this before it goes."

Gary looked at Alison. She had gone back to sleep.

"Alright," he whispered. "Where are you?"

"The shop, hurry up."

Gary got out of bed. He was not sure if he was shivering from the cold of his room or from the excessive alcohol consumption that he had marked Christmas Eve with. Either way, he was shivering hard.

He pulled on fresh clothes, brushed his teeth and tongue and headed out the front door. Even with three layers, a hat and gloves on, he was still shivering. His digital camera was still in his pocket from the night before. As he stepped out of the front door, he was surprised to tread onto four inches of virginal snow.

2.

“Happy Christmas.”

Milton and Dan cheered as Gary approached. They were stood next to a snow woman (they had given her breasts), that was wearing a witch’s hat. Dan was holding a wrapped gift.

“Tell me this isn’t what I’ve come out to see.”

Milton smiled.

“Of course not, Gary, but it’s a white Christmas – just like the ones we’ve never had. You can at least try to enjoy it.”

“I think I’d enjoy it more on another hour’s sleep.”

“We were worried that the snow would melt.”

Gary was too hung-over to be furious.

“Well, I guess this is probably the best proof of witches we’ve ever had,” he grinned.

He took a picture of his two friends with their snow-witch.

“We did get you a present,” said Dan.

He handed the wrapped gift to Gary. Gary pulled the wrapping apart to reveal a silver hip flask. On the front was carved a pentagram and some runes.

“That’s a very special gift,” Milton told him, “because the outside wards off evil spirits.”

“And the inside contains some,” Dan finished.

Gary twisted the top open.

“Hair of the dog,” he told them.

The brandy inside the flask warmed Gary almost instantly, and it dramatically reduced his shivering.

“Thanks. I didn’t bring your gifts because I haven’t wrapped them yet.”

“No worries, it’s very early.”

Gary took another swig from the flask.

“I suppose you are wondering what we’ve brought you out here for?” Milton asked him.

“I thought this was it.”

“No, no dear boy,” Dan declared. “Come and see.”

3.

Gary stared at the side of Occultivated. Milton pointed up at the shop’s roof.

“You see, the tracks run all the way across the roof, and then start again at the other side.”

Gary shook his head.

“This is unbelievable, devil’s footprints...”

A row of cloven hoof prints ran along the ground up to the side of the shop, and then continued vertically up the wall and over the roof.

“I know; the last recorded incident of this happening was in Devon in the mid nineteenth century. We can actually document the phenomena,” Milton bristled with excitement.

“Even better,” added Dan, “we can get to the bottom of it.”

“The tracks in Devon were supposed to have spread over a hundred miles, crossing rivers and obstacles all along the way.”

“That’s right, Gary,” Milton nodded.

“Well balls to that, it’s Christmas.”

“That’s hardly the attitude to take.”

Gary took a swig of brandy from his flask.

“It’s Christmas and I’m hung-over and I’m still not sure if I did anything stupid last night. So double-balls to it. I’m not walking a hundred miles; I have to be home before Alison wakes up.”

“It might not be a hundred miles; can you just come with us for a bit and take some pictures?”

Milton’s eyes met Gary’s in earnest. Gary nodded.

“Do we know where they start?”

“Yes, right in front of Ron’s All Night Garage.”

“What, just in the middle of the road?”

“Yes, they sort of fade into the snow as if it had just begun snowing when the footprints were made.”

“There’s no sleigh tracks, is there?” asked Gary, “Because I have one hypothesis.”

“Dan made that joke two hours ago.”

Gary rolled his eyes.

“Do you think whatever made these tracks also brought the snow?”

Milton nodded.

“I think they’re both part of the same spell.”

Gary began to take photographs of the scene. When he had captured a few, he asked Milton.

“Do you have a ladder? I’d like to get some shots of the roof.”

Milton shook his head.

“We’ll have to just follow them,” Milton suggested, “see if they go over any lower buildings.”

Gary looked at his watch, it was only twenty past five, and he had a good three hours before Alison would wake up.

4.

The tracks continued over the row of houses adjacent to Milton's shop. After that, they crossed the road and walked over somebody's fence. It was a seven foot wooden panel fence with pointed tips. None the hunt members fancied the job of scaling it. Gary took some photographs and stared at it seriously, but he had no intent of trying to follow it over the top.

"Come on, Gary," said Dan. "I'll give you a leg up."

Gary looked at him.

"Wouldn't it make more sense to check the next garden down? They have a lower fence."

"You just don't want to climb?" Dan asked.

"Do you?"

Dan thought about it.

"How about you get on my shoulders and then we can see if the footprints carry on straight?"

Gary agreed, and Dan kneeled down. Gary climbed on his shoulders like a topless, 50 year old woman at a Bon Jovi concert. With Milton's help, Dan made it to his feet and walked up to the fence. Gary peered into the garden. He took some photographs.

"It went straight through," he told them. "Let me down."

"I can't," said Dan. "I think my knees have locked."

“Well, let go of my legs and I’ll swing myself down.”

“I’m worried you’ll kick me in the face. Can’t I just fall backwards?”

“Dan,” Gary said sternly, “I need the toilet.”

Dan let Gary down.

5.

The tracks continued without regard for the fact that Gary’s feet were incredibly cold. They continued up and over hedges, they continued over fragile garden sheds and greenhouses. Gary had taken a lot of photographs and he was beginning to think he might at least be able to sell some of them. The tracks continued over an articulated lorry and out towards the woods.

When it crossed the privet hedges that marked a particular farm, Milton, Dan and Gary all had reason to pause.

“Do you really think we should?” Milton asked.

“Why not?”

“He did try to shoot us last time we were here, Dan.”

“I know, but I’m sure he’s still asleep – it’s not even light yet.”

The three friends walked to the nearest gate and scrambled over it.

Gary snagged his left ball as he swung his leg over the metal gate.

“This is technically trespassing,” he snapped.

“It’s investigation Gary,” Dan told him.

They followed the hoof prints out into the middle of one of the larger fields, and then they stood and scratched their heads. At the very centre of the field, the hoof prints formed a figure-eight pattern. Whatever had made them had reached the middle of the field and simply kept on running in the same pattern. There were no foot prints leading away from the figure-eight, only those that lead up to it.

Gary took a picture.

“Well, I guess that’s it.”

“There has to be some other clue,” said Dan.

“If there is, I certainly can’t see it.”

“Just because you can’t see something doesn’t mean it’s not there. You can’t see air, can you? But you know that’s there. What does that indicate to you?”

“I can see my breath clearly enough,” Gary snapped. “That indicates to me that it’s freezing and it’s time to go home.”

“Don’t you want to get to the bottom of this?”

“Sure I do, Dan, but let’s face it we’re not going to. The snow will melt and all will be left is the photographs.”

“That’s the problem with magic,” said Milton, “it’s incorporeal.”

“Well, I’m cold and I’m obviously still drunk and I want at least an hour more in bed, so I’m going home.”

Milton patted him on the back.

“Thanks for coming; the pictures will be very helpful. We’re going to stay and look for clues.”

Gary patted him back and started walking home.

“Merry Christmas, I’ll see you later.”

6.

Gary was much more careful climbing back over the fence; he managed not to snag anything. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets but his fingers still felt cold. His bladder had shrunk and was beginning to get painful.

As there was no traffic and nobody was around, he took great pleasure in trying to write his name in the snow. His fingers felt like ice on his penis and the whole event was far less gratifying than he imagined it would be when he had conceived it. Once he was a few paces past his pee, he began to kick at the snow with his feet.

He hunched his shoulders and realised he was shivering again. He took a swig of brandy but it failed to warm him. He glanced over his shoulder to see if there were any witnesses to his childish behaviour and as he did so he noticed that the air had become quite misty. Probably just the melting snow, he thought to himself, releasing water vapour into the air.

Within three paces, his visibility was so impaired that he could not see his hand until it was four inches from his face. He made the best of the situation by successfully drinking some more brandy.

7.

Milton looked at the snow, it was snow.

“There’s nothing.”

“There has to be something.”

“Not a footprint, not a whisper, not a hint.”

Dan rubbed his tummy, he was thinking about Whispers, especially the Gold ones with caramel.

“I guess we should keep looking.”

“We’ve seen everything; we should go before that batty farmer starts taking pot-shots at us.”

“We’ve only been looking for twenty minutes, there has to be something we’ve missed.”

“Dan, I know we are seasoned witch hunters and that this is one of the only pieces of solid evidence we’re ever found.”

“But...”

“But, I’m tired and my nose is cold. I don’t think I’m in the right frame of mind to be useful.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“We go home, have some breakfast and come back in the light.”

Dan nodded.

“Did you by any chance get me a selection box for Christmas?”

“No.”

“No worries, I did get myself one.”

The two of them trudged back towards the gate.

8.

Gary was surprised at how much more tiring it was to walk in the snow. He could feel his legs burning. He had moved to the side of the country road to lessen the chance of a car hitting him in the lowered visibility. As a result of this, he kept stumbling over rocks, tree stumps and road killed meat. The fog was too thick and the sky too dusky for him to be able to identify what sort of animals he had trodden in and after the second time he had crouched down to see what he was stumbling over, he resolved to simply pretend it wasn't happening.

He caught his foot on a thick tree root and even in the murky light, he was able to see that it belonged to a stump rather than a tree. He took the opportunity to sit down. The cold and wet of the snow soaked into the backside of his jeans but he was in no hurry to stand up again.

He leaned forward and put his hands on his head. The cold snow against his bottom began to feel warm, his eyelids to feel heavy. He didn't sleep but he didn't move or open his eyes for what seemed like a terribly long time.

He heard a warm crackling like the sound of an open fire and he raised his head to look for its source. Through the mist, he could make out the orange glow of flames, as slowly, she approached him.

The woman's steps were controlled, she walked slowly but tenderly. Her bare feet were as graceful as if Tchaikovsky had composed them. Every step was measured; her body moved like slender ocean waves, the twist of her hips flowing through a loose green dress that shifted in synchrony with her. The movement swelled into a crest that began at her breasts and ended with the gentlest flick of her hair. Her skin was a pale with just a hint of rose; her lips were holly-berry red. Around her hair was a wreath of evergreen. Her hair was tongues of flame, it cascaded down over her shoulders, and it did not burn her skin or the wreath. She was the single most beautiful thing Gary had ever seen.

He rubbed his eyes hard. When he let his hands fall again, she was still stood in front of him. She beckoned to him with one long slender finger.

“Ruth?” He gasped.

The woman shook her head, the faintest hint of a smile on her lips. He stood and walked to her, she clasped his face with both hands, and they felt as warm as the snow had begun to. The woman leant forward and placed her lips against his. The second that he remained conscious for, had in it enough joy to fill a life time.

9.

“Well, there goes that then,” said Dan.

The rain had begun falling heavily and the snow was disappearing with each drop.

“I bet Gary’s home by now,” grumbled Milton.

“Well, maybe if he’d stayed we’d have found something and the rain wouldn’t wash it all away.”

“At least he took photographs.”

“They’ll probably all come out as orbs; you know how shit cameras are at collecting spiritual phenomena.”

“Spiritual phenomena! What about that barge trip we took? Was that spiritual phenomena?”

“There must have been some, or all the photos wouldn’t have come out as orbs.”

Milton’s voice shifted up an octave.

“Hello, what’s this? That wasn’t there when we walked past.”

In the middle of the road was a large pile of holly leaves, it was large enough to obstruct a car.

“Let’s see,” said Dan.

The two of them launched a half hearted jog over to the pile of leaves. It was stretched out over about six and a half feet in length and it sat four feet off the ground. At the far end of the pile there was a small hole, through which could clearly be seen the face of their good friend Gary Sparrow. His eyes were closed with all the serenity of Snow White in her glass coffin.

Dan laughed and Milton punched him in the arm. The two of them leant over him.

“Gary, Gary, are you alright Gary?”

Gary’s eyes opened and he looked up at them.

“Never felt better,” he said. “Why?”

“Oh, this is priceless,” Dan told Gary, “if only we had your camera.”

Gary sat up. Holly leaves fell around him as he moved.

“Are you not cold?” Milton asked.

“No, why would I be?”

“You’re not wearing any clothes.”

Gary looked down at himself, then with a sense of panic he scrambled out of the holly pile, pricking himself uncomfortably as he did.

“Where are my clothes?” he stammered. “What happened?”

“You tell us, Gary.”

“I don’t know, I was walking back and then...”

A memory came back to Gary but he did not feel like sharing it.

“I don’t know.”

Milton took his coat off and gave it to Gary.

“I guess your camera was in your pocket,” said Dan.

“Well, it’s certainly not in my arse,” replied Gary, then he sighed apologetically. “I’ve lost my Christmas present too.”

Milton smiled.

“I think that’s it by the tree trunk.”

Dan shook his head in disdain.

“We could have got another one of those.”

The three of them walked home in the rain.

10.

As he opened his front door with the spare key he kept under one of his flagstones, Gary was relieved to hear the gentle sound of Alison snoring upstairs. It was only eight o’clock in the morning still. Gary took off Milton’s coat and hung it up to dry.

He lit the gas fire in the living room and sat naked in front of it. For some reason he didn't feel tired, just really cold. He sprawled out on the floor, his genitals hung with a satisfaction he could not remember them earning.

He leaned back and let the fire warm his belly. He was thinking about how good the breakfast he was going to make would be. He glanced at the gifts under his tree and was less excited about them than he thought he should have been. He stared back at the gas fire and its flames seemed to smile at him.

STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

Chapter Nineteen: Enemy Lines

Mercer picked up the phone.

‘Hi, is that Security Solutions? Hi, yes, my name is Roger Mercer.... Yes, I am on your books... Yes, my security number is 18436201763923AFW.

‘Yes, I want to make an enquiry about my current assignment. What? I’ve just checked my bank account and there’s no sign of any payments for the last two weeks. Yes, my assignment began then. I’ve been working for the police, in London. Yes, London. What? Oh, yes, it’s been a riot. What?’

Mercer sighed, and covered the receiver. He looked at Will. ‘They’re saying that I haven’t been paid because I haven’t filed my online timesheets,’ he explained briefly.

He put his mouth to the receiver again. ‘Listen to me, madam, I’ve spent the last two weeks in London. I’ve spent most of the assignment trying not to get shot. No, I haven’t had time to file my timesheet online. Will you just pay me for the work I’ve done? No, I can’t get my line manager to confirm the work I’m claiming for.

‘Because my line manager was gunned down by rogue members of the security forces somewhere in Central London.

‘No, I’m on my own. The rest of my unit has also been killed. Because I need the money to buy some petrol so I can get the hell out of the London area. I don’t care if that wasn’t mentioned in the contract.... Look, it’s not that difficult to understand... Will you listen to me, madam... Hello? Yes, I was just speaking to her... Upset? She’s upset? I’m pretty upset myself, mate. Yes, everyone has the right to do their job without receiving abuse... I agree totally, but.... Look, will you just pay me?’

Mercer listened for a moment. ‘Thank you. Thank you, that’s great. When will the money be in my account?’

‘Oh, well that’s just fucking great.’

Mercer slammed down the phone.

‘The agency says that they’ll make a special payment even though I haven’t filed any timesheets or had them ratified by my line manager,’ he said, breathing heavily.

‘Great,’ said Will. ‘We can pay for this food.’ He indicated the cereal bars and sandwiches and bottles of orange they had collected from amid the wreck of the shop.

‘No we can’t,’ said Mercer levelly. ‘The money won’t enter my account until next Monday.’

Will stared at him in dismay.

The girl, whose name was Anna, broke in.

‘Look, you can have these on account,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry to make a fuss, but I’ll lose my job if they think I’ve been stealing from the store.’

After breakfasting, they began to sweep away the broken glass that lay across the forecourt in drifts between the SUV and the exit. Once this was done, Mr Towers filled up the tank –Anna paid for the petrol – and then started the engine. Anna included, they all climbed into the vehicle. Will shivered in the cold air from the broken windows.

The boom of the distant guns continued, and bright flashes lit up the horizon beyond the houses.

‘I want to go to Daws Hill,’ Anna declared suddenly. Will looked at her.

She was sitting in the back, between him and Mercer, a resolute expression on her face.

‘I want to see what’s happened to my boyfriend,’ she added.

‘I thought you were coming with us,’ said Mercer.

‘I will come with you,’ she replied. ‘I want to make sure Will succeeds. But I need to know what happened at Daws Hill. Where *he* is.’

Will and Mercer exchanged glances across her. Gently, Mercer said, ‘I think you’d better prepare yourself for the worst.’

‘He’ll be okay,’ she said defiantly. ‘He always is.’

‘Well, where is Daws Hill?’ Will asked. He asked Malory to pass him the road atlas and found Buckinghamshire.

Anna stabbed the map with a slim finger. ‘We’re *here*, and the town’s here. Daws Hill is over *there*.’

Will saw that they were still some way from the town itself, and that Daws Hill lay down a side road off the main road that they had been following. He leant forward and pointed out the route to Malory.

But before they reached the air base, as they drove cautiously down the road with the wind whistling through the glassless windows, they found the surrounding area crawling with troops, and soon they came to a roadblock. The officer in charge approached them while his men stared curiously at the battered vehicle.

‘Where are you going?’ he asked. ‘You can’t come this way. It’s dangerous. Rebels are about.’

‘Was that them attacking the air base?’ asked Anna, leaning forward.

‘What do you know about it?’ the officer asked suspiciously.

‘My boyfriend works there,’ she said impatiently. ‘Did the rebels attack the base? Or was it your lot?’

The officer gave his men a sidelong glance, and said, 'Look, I can't tell you too much. But the rebels bombed the place. We seized it before they could deploy ground troops. But...'

'What about the people who were there when the rebels attacked?'

The officer shook his head. 'There weren't any survivors.'

He was silent for a moment, then turned to Towers.

'I'm sorry, but you can't come this way. Where are you heading for? You'd do better to keep away from High Wycombe completely. The rebels are advancing up the A40. Our chaps are dealing with them. It could get ugly.' He turned again to Anna. 'Sorry.'

They drove back to the main road in silence. Anna spoke as they approached the intersection.

'I'm not going to give up hope,' she said, her voice a monotone. 'I'd find him. if only they'd let me search the place. He always turns up.' She turned to look levelly at Will. 'But in the meantime, I want to come with you,' she said. 'I'm going to do everything I can to make sure you get that manuscript to the publishers.'

Will hugged her.

'Thank you,' he said.

'Left here,' he added, leaning forward. 'If you really want us to go into the warzone.'

As he leaned back, Mercer caught his gaze.

'We don't have any alternative, Will,' he said.

Anna squeezed his hand.

As they drove on, and the wind whistled through the empty windows, numbing Will to the bone, he reflected that Anna's fervour was yet another reason why he had to carry on with

this, despite his own lack of faith in the outcome. They passed groups of refugees, some on foot, weighed down with bundles and suitcases, others in cars like their own.

There had been a time when the Professor's book might have defused the situation, but it had blown up out of all proportion since then. When the police had began firing on protestors with live rounds, that had been the point of no return, the point when no amount of theorising could solve the nation's problems. Surely? Or would Quigley's Manifesto save the day, like everyone else in the car seemed to believe? Was it Will who was wrong to doubt it?

But what if he was right? What if they were to fight their way on through the hell of civil war, maybe win through to rebel-held Oxford at last, perhaps even persuade the publishers to get Quigley's book into print. What then? *What then?*

Woods grew on either side of the dual carriageway, but up ahead Will could see flashes illuminating the horizon and the rumble of the guns went on. Where was the battle? It floated hauntingly ahead of them like a lethal mirage.

Then they turned a corner and it was before them.

Tanks were rumbling across a roundabout. Ahead of them, large buildings were on fire, a hospital, a hotel, a branch of Staples... Other buildings had collapsed into rubble. Shell craters pockmarked the tarmac. As Towers braked suddenly, and they came to an abrupt halt beside the central reservation, Will saw more tanks scooting forward out of the shadow of the hotel, followed by ground troops. They were firing on the nearer tanks. The air was alive with deafening noise and electric with tension. As Will watched numbly, a shell exploded with a roar only a couple of hundred yards away, raining the car with debris.

Towers turned and tried to reverse back the way they had come. Another shell exploded nearby, and the ground seemed to give way. The SUV lurched, and ground to a halt at a thirty degree angle.

More shells whistled through the air. Soldiers were running across the tarmac. Will didn't know if they were rebels or loyalists, didn't know which scared him more. The noise was incredible.

He realised Mercer was shaking him, pointing to the door beside him. Mercer's own door was blocked by earth and rubble thrown up by the exploding shell. Anna's eyes were wide with horror.

Will scabbled at the door, but it wouldn't open. He grabbed the sides of the window and hauled himself out, turning hurriedly to help Anna. Mercer came next, and he helped Malory and her husband out of the front.

'*Get into cover,*' Will shouted, but no one heard him over the whine and boom of shells. Mercer was looking over his shoulder in horror. Will turned.

A group of soldiers was training guns on them. Will realised they had all left their own guns in the SUV.

Another shell exploded nearby, raining them with mud and hot tar. The leader of the patrol scowled at them, and gestured with his gun.

Some of the soldiers marched them away.

As soon as they were behind the immediate bedlam of the battle, the corporal in charge of the squaddies turned to Will.

'Thanks mate,' he said with a laugh. 'We needed an excuse to get outa there.'

'Where are you taking us?' Will asked.

'Forward command post is in the public library,' the corporal replied. He was a thin-faced youth, a bit younger than Will, with a weak moustache. 'Better take you there. The officer I/C will work out what to do with you. What were you doing, trying to cross the lines? Don't you know there's a war on?'

'We didn't realise it had got so bad,' said Mercer. 'We were trying to get to Leamington. These people have got relations there.'

The corporal looked curiously at Mercer's tattered police uniform. 'Well, you won't get through this way,' he said.

They reached the library, a venerable redbrick building that looked as if it dated from about 1900. Soldiers stood on guard at the main doors.

The corporal led them in through the lobby and into the large central space, where a group of men were gathered around a map spread out on the lending desk. In here, the noise from outside was muted.

The corporal marched forward, snapped to attention, and one of the officers came to speak with him. After a hurried conversation, the officer, who wore the uniform of a captain, gestured angrily outside, and the corporal marched from the building at the double.

The captain joined the five civilians.

‘These squaddies will do anything to get out of doing their job. I hear you were trying to cross the lines. Maybe you could answer a few questions... *Will?*’

The captain broke off, and looked open-mouthed at Will. Will blinked. He had only noticed the uniform, the peaked cap. Suddenly everything fell into place.

The face beneath the cap was that of his brother Geoff.

‘Will!’ Geoff repeated. ‘What are you doing here? Dad’s been trying to ring you on your mobile. He’s worried about you. He said he managed to get through at one point and you were with the police’ – Geoff eyed Mercer’s bedraggled figure – ‘but since then your phone’s been dead. He was worried that...’

Will frowned, took out his phone. The battery had run out. No wonder no one had tried to contact him recently.

‘But what are you doing here?’ Geoff went on. ‘When the regiment was in London, I took the opportunity to pop down to your flat, but they said you’d been gone for several days. What have you been up to? And why have you come this way? You won’t get to Leeds following the A40. Never was any good at Geography,’ he confided in Anna.

‘Won’t you introduce me?’ Geoff added, eyeing the girl.

Will felt the need to sit down. He sat on a chair by a reading table and took several deep breaths. The other came to join him while Geoff remained standing, hands behind his back.

‘This is my brother Geoff,’ he told them. ‘He followed the family tradition and joined the army.’

‘Family tradition, is it?’ Mercer asked. ‘So that’s why you’re so good at sh...’

Will cut in. ‘I wasn’t going to Leeds,’ he told Geoff. ‘I’m going to Leamington, where Mr and Mrs Towers have relatives.’

Geoff shook their hands.

‘And this is Anna,’ Will added. Geoff schmoozed all over the poor girl. Will coughed. ‘And Mercer.’

Geoff shook Mercer’s hand. ‘Good morning, officer,’ he said. ‘I hope my brother hasn’t been too much of a problem. He’s been in trouble with the law before. Black sheep, you know.’

Mercer drew himself up. ‘Your brother is a hero, man.’

Will blushed. Geoff looked at him in amazement.

‘Where did you pick this lot up?’ he murmured.

‘Here and there,’ said Will evasively. He slumped back in his chair.

‘Well, don’t get too comfortable,’ Geoff added. ‘Obviously I want to welcome my brother and his friends, but the first priority is to get you out of the warzone and back home. Then Dad’ll stop nagging me and I can get on with fighting these bloody rebels. I told you no good would come of your liberal bullshit, Will. Look where it’s ended up.’

‘Shut up, Geoff,’ Will said tiredly.

‘Charming,’ said Geoff merrily. He seemed on top of the world. Whether it was the excitement of battle, or combat drugs, or just the satisfaction of telling his brother what to do, Geoff seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. ‘You stay here and I’ll go and ask my CO about it. I’ll try and get you a staff car to get you to Leeds.’

‘We’re not going to Leeds...’ Will said, but Geoff had already walked away.

‘We can’t tell him we’re going to Oxford,’ Mercer hissed. ‘Not now it’s under rebel control.’

‘I know, I know,’ Will snapped. Being with Geoff always made him irritable.

‘We could hijack the staff car,’ said Towers enthusiastically.

‘With what?’ Will asked. ‘All our weapons are still in your SUV. Probably blown up by now. Did your policy include insurance against political violence?’

‘We’ve got to get that manuscript to Oxford,’ Anna said firmly. ‘Too much depends on it. I think we should run for it, then cross the lines on foot.’

Will rubbed his eyes tiredly. He was about to say something when his brother returned, followed by another officer and two armed guards. Geoff’s face was a picture of confusion.

‘Look, Will...’ he stammered. ‘What is this? The lieutenant tells me there was a message from Intelligence. They said you’d be coming. With a rogue policeman.’ He stared at Mercer again. ‘You’re wanted for questioning by the security services, Will! What have you been *doing?*’

The lieutenant nodded to the two soldiers, who levelled their guns at the little group.

‘You’re all under military arrest,’ he barked. ‘You’ll remain here under armed guard until the spooks arrive. Then... heaven help you.’

GERALDINE by Gary Sparrow

The woodcut decorations she had hung in the window shook gently in the draft. Their silhouettes danced in the rectangle of moonlight at the foot of the bed. As he shifted his feet, the ripple of linen distorted the shadows of stars, moon and sun. Richard's eyes were drawn to the centre of the display; Geraldine had carved their initials in the wood so that the light shone clearly through displaying the interlocked letters, G and R, in long cursive strokes. She hung it in the window a week after they had first made love.

"Some things are always there," she had told him. "The sun disappears in the night and the stars and moon disappear in the day but though we can't see them, they're still there. Just like you and I cannot ever be separated."

He had been nineteen then, Geraldine had seemed like some high-enchantress. Kissing her neck was the height of human accomplishment. He would rush home from work to tidy any mess that she had made during the day. He shopped, cooked and paid the bills. Richard was so dedicated to Geraldine that he had little time for anything else besides her. He quickly lost contact with his friends and after three years of intermittent effort on their part, his family.

Richard met Geraldine on the landscaping job he had taken to earn fun money during his summer holidays at college. At first, he had assumed she was the daughter of the woman who lived at the house, but the kindly, aging face of the cardigan-clad woman was gone now. After asking about her more than twenty times, Richard truly believed that he'd imagined her.

Geraldine wore long, bright green dresses that billowed around her slender figure. The rich colour of her outfits was all the more intense against the birch tree paleness of her skin. Her fine hair was a deep, natural red. It had been too much for him to leave behind, so he had left college instead.

The apartment that she made him keep for nights when she found him "tiresome" was cold and barely furnished. Most of his bills were overdue, and there was no food to eat. His only comforts were library books and an AM/FM radio. His earnings went to her house and to her fridge as his tribute to her.

The calluses on his hands were a monument to his mistake. He wanted to tell her that she was ruining him, to ask her to be less selfish and to hope that she would let him go. He had never had the courage even to think it in her presence before tonight. Though it felt like sacrilege, Richard placed his hand on her bare shoulder and gently shook her. Geraldine's eyes slowly

opened and their pupils, black against bright green, filled with a vibrancy that instantly killed two thirds of Richard's courage.

"Why are you awake?" Her voice was as subtle as the heat of white coal but Richard was just able to rally himself.

Staring down at his feet, he answered, "We need to talk."

"It must be very important if you've woken me up in the middle of the night. What is it, my sweet?" Geraldine cooed as she sat up next to Richard and ran her fingers along the nape of his neck. She snaked her hands around his neck and ran one finger from side to side. Richard swallowed and tried to gulp away his reticence to speak.

"I..." Richard could feel tears welling in his eyes, "I..."

Geraldine reached over to the bedside table and lit a purple candle. It spluttered and a thick oily smoke spread toward the ceiling. With one deep inhalation of breath, Richard rose from the bed and met Geraldine's gaze.

"I have to leave you," he said. He was not going to explain himself any further; he simply lacked the strength. Richard started to pull on his clothes and Geraldine lay still, propped up by one arm on the antique four-poster bed. In his peripheral vision, he could see her unbutton the top of her sheer silk nightdress. His head turned towards her, and she had him.

"Don't be sad," she said, "it has been twelve years now. It is time for it to end."

He nodded bowing his head a little to try to hide his tears.

"Come and kneel by my bed so I can kiss you goodbye."

The kindness of Geraldine's voice was such a relief to Richard that he knelt down and wept shivering the words, "I'm so sorry," over and over again.

"I normally wouldn't let you stay," whispered Geraldine as she stroked his hair, "but you're such a good boy."

Richard nodded and looked gratefully up in to Geraldine's eyes. The brush of her fingers on his head was hypnotic. He felt his strength coming back and his exhaustion fading away. For the first time since he'd met Geraldine, Richard felt truly content. She stroked behind his ear and he felt his head nuzzle into her lap.

"You won't have to work anymore, we can just be friends."

He moaned agreeably.

Geraldine patted him on top of the head.

"Now, go lie down in the corner."

Filled with a sense of complete and total satisfaction Richard began to wag his tail. He found a cushion under the window and settled down to the rhythmical clack of the wooden ornament above him.

THE STORY OF THE GOBLINS WHO STOLE A SEXTON by Charles Dickens



In an old abbey town, down in this part of the country, a long, long while ago - so long, that the story must be a true one, because our great-grandfathers implicitly believed it - there officiated as sexton and grave-digger in the churchyard, one Gabriel Grub. It by no means follows that because a man is a sexton, and constantly surrounded by the emblems of mortality, therefore he should be a morose and melancholy man; your undertakers are the merriest fellows in the world; and I once had the honour of being on intimate terms with a mute, who in private life, and off duty, was as comical and jocose a little fellow as ever chirped out a devil-may-care song, without a hitch in his memory, or drained off a good stiff glass without stopping for breath. But notwithstanding these precedents to the contrary, Gabriel Grub was an ill-conditioned, cross-grained, surly fellow - a morose and lonely man, who consorted with nobody but himself, and an old wicker bottle which fitted into his large deep waistcoat pocket - and who eyed each merry face, as it passed him by, with such a deep scowl of malice and ill-humour, as it was difficult to meet without feeling something the worse for.

A little before twilight, one Christmas Eve, Gabriel shouldered his spade, lighted his lantern, and betook himself towards the old churchyard; for he had got a grave to finish by next morning, and, feeling very low, he thought it might raise his spirits, perhaps, if he went on with his work at once. As he went his way, up the ancient street, he saw the cheerful light of the blazing fires gleam through the old casements, and heard the loud laugh and the cheerful shouts of those who were assembled around them; he marked the bustling preparations for next day's cheer, and smelled the numerous savoury odours consequent thereupon, as they steamed up from the kitchen windows in clouds. All this was gall and wormwood to the heart of Gabriel Grub; and when groups of children bounded out of the houses, tripped across the road, and were met, before they could knock at the opposite door, by half a dozen curly-headed little rascals who crowded round them as they flocked upstairs to spend the evening in their Christmas games, Gabriel smiled grimly, and clutched the handle of his spade with a

firmer grasp, as he thought of measles, scarlet fever, thrush, whooping-cough, and a good many other sources of consolation besides.

In this happy frame of mind, Gabriel strode along, returning a short, sullen growl to the good-humoured greetings of such of his neighbours as now and then passed him, until he turned into the dark lane which led to the churchyard. Now, Gabriel had been looking forward to reaching the dark lane, because it was, generally speaking, a nice, gloomy, mournful place, into which the townspeople did not much care to go, except in broad daylight, and when the sun was shining; consequently, he was not a little indignant to hear a young urchin roaring out some jolly song about a merry Christmas, in this very sanctuary which had been called Coffin Lane ever since the days of the old abbey, and the time of the shaven-headed monks. As Gabriel walked on, and the voice drew nearer, he found it proceeded from a small boy, who was hurrying along, to join one of the little parties in the old street, and who, partly to keep himself company, and partly to prepare himself for the occasion, was shouting out the song at the highest pitch of his lungs. So Gabriel waited until the boy came up, and then dodged him into a corner, and rapped him over the head with his lantern five or six times, just to teach him to modulate his voice. And as the boy hurried away with his hand to his head, singing quite a different sort of tune, Gabriel Grub chuckled very heartily to himself, and entered the churchyard, locking the gate behind him.

He took off his coat, set down his lantern, and getting into the unfinished grave, worked at it for an hour or so with right good-will. But the earth was hardened with the frost, and it was no very easy matter to break it up, and shovel it out; and although there was a moon, it was a very young one, and shed little light upon the grave, which was in the shadow of the church. At any other time, these obstacles would have made Gabriel Grub very moody and miserable, but he was so well pleased with having stopped the small boy's singing, that he took little heed of the scanty progress he had made, and looked down into the grave, when he had finished work for the night, with grim satisfaction, murmuring as he gathered up his things-

Brave lodgings for one, brave lodgings for one,

A few feet of cold earth, when life is done;

A stone at the head, a stone at the feet,

A rich, juicy meal for the worms to eat;

Rank grass overhead, and damp clay around,

Brave lodgings for one, these, in holy ground!

"Ho! ho!" laughed Gabriel Grub, as he sat himself down on a flat tombstone which was a favourite resting-place of his, and drew forth his wicker bottle. "A coffin at Christmas! A Christmas box! Ho! ho! ho!"

"Ho! ho! ho!" repeated a voice which sounded close behind him.

Gabriel paused, in some alarm, in the act of raising the wicker bottle to his lips, and looked round. The bottom of the oldest grave about him was not more still and quiet than the churchyard in the pale moonlight. The cold hoar frost glistened on the tombstones, and sparkled like rows of gems, among the stone carvings of the old church. The snow lay hard and crisp upon the ground; and spread over the thickly-strewn mounds of earth, so white and smooth a cover that it seemed as if corpses lay there, hidden only by their winding sheets. Not the faintest rustle broke the profound tranquillity of the solemn scene. Sound itself appeared to be frozen up, all was so cold and still.

"It was the echoes," said Gabriel Grub, raising the bottle to his lips again.

"It was NOT," said a deep voice.

Gabriel started up, and stood rooted to the spot with astonishment and terror; for his eyes rested on a form that made his blood run cold.

Seated on an upright tombstone, close to him, was a strange, unearthly figure, whom Gabriel felt at once, was no being of this world. His long, fantastic legs which might have reached the ground, were cocked up, and crossed after a quaint, fantastic fashion; his sinewy arms were bare; and his hands rested on his knees. On his short, round body, he wore a close covering, ornamented with small slashes; a short cloak dangled at his back; the collar was cut into curious peaks, which served the goblin in lieu of ruff or neckerchief; and his shoes curled up at his toes into long points. On his head, he wore a broad-brimmed sugar-loaf hat, garnished with a single feather. The hat was covered with the white frost; and the goblin looked as if he had sat on the same tombstone very comfortably, for two or three hundred years. He was sitting perfectly still; his tongue was put out, as if in derision; and he was grinning at Gabriel Grub with such a grin as only a goblin could call up.

"It was NOT the echoes," said the goblin.

Gabriel Grub was paralysed, and could make no reply.

"What do you do here on Christmas Eve?" said the goblin sternly.

"I came to dig a grave, Sir," stammered Gabriel Grub.

"What man wanders among graves and churchyards on such a night as this?" cried the goblin.

"Gabriel Grub! Gabriel Grub!" screamed a wild chorus of voices that seemed to fill the churchyard. Gabriel looked fearfully round - nothing was to be seen.

"What have you got in that bottle?" said the goblin.

"Hollands, sir," replied the sexton, trembling more than ever; for he had bought it of the smugglers, and he thought that perhaps his questioner might be in the excise department of the goblins.

"Who drinks Hollands alone, and in a churchyard, on such a night as this?" said the goblin.

"Gabriel Grub! Gabriel Grub!" exclaimed the wild voices again.

The goblin leered maliciously at the terrified sexton, and then raising his voice, exclaimed -

"And who, then, is our fair and lawful prize?"

To this inquiry the invisible chorus replied, in a strain that sounded like the voices of many choristers singing to the mighty swell of the old church organ - a strain that seemed borne to the sexton's ears upon a wild wind, and to die away as it passed onward; but the burden of the reply was still the same, "Gabriel Grub! Gabriel Grub!"

The goblin grinned a broader grin than before, as he said, "Well, Gabriel, what do you say to this?"

The sexton gasped for breath.

"What do you think of this, Gabriel?" said the goblin, kicking up his feet in the air on either side of the tombstone, and looking at the turned-up points with as much complacency as if he had been contemplating the most fashionable pair of Wellingtons in all Bond Street.

"It's - it's - very curious, Sir," replied the sexton, half dead with fright; "very curious, and very pretty, but I think I'll go back and finish my work, Sir, if you please."

"Work!" said the goblin, "what work?"

"The grave, Sir; making the grave," stammered the sexton.

"Oh, the grave, eh?" said the goblin; "who makes graves at a time when all other men are merry, and takes a pleasure in it?"

Again the mysterious voices replied, "Gabriel Grub! Gabriel Grub!"

"I am afraid my friends want you, Gabriel," said the goblin, thrusting his tongue farther into his cheek than ever - and a most astonishing tongue it was - "I'm afraid my friends want you, Gabriel," said the goblin.

"Under favour, Sir," replied the horror-stricken sexton, "I don't think they can, Sir; they don't know me, Sir; I don't think the gentlemen have ever seen me, Sir."

"Oh, yes, they have," replied the goblin; "we know the man with the sulky face and grim scowl, that came down the street to-night, throwing his evil looks at the children, and grasping his burying-spade the tighter. We know the man who struck the boy in the envious malice of his heart, because the boy could be merry, and he could not. We know him, we know him."

Here, the goblin gave a loud, shrill laugh, which the echoes returned twentyfold; and throwing his legs up in the air, stood upon his head, or rather upon the very point of his sugar-loaf hat, on the narrow edge of the tombstone, whence he threw a Somerset with extraordinary agility, right to the sexton's feet, at which he planted himself in the attitude in which tailors generally sit upon the shop-board.

"I - I - am afraid I must leave you, Sir," said the sexton, making an effort to move.

"Leave us!" said the goblin, "Gabriel Grub going to leave us. Ho! ho! ho!"

As the goblin laughed, the sexton observed, for one instant, a brilliant illumination within the windows of the church, as if the whole building were lighted up; it disappeared, the organ pealed forth a lively air, and whole troops of goblins, the very counterpart of the first one, poured into the churchyard, and began playing at leap-frog with the tombstones, never stopping for an instant to take breath, but "overing" the highest among them, one after the other, with the most marvellous dexterity. The first goblin was a most astonishing leaper, and none of the others could come near him; even in the extremity of his terror the sexton could not help observing, that while his friends were content to leap over the common-sized gravestones, the first one took the family vaults, iron railings and all, with as much ease as if they had been so many street-posts.

At last the game reached to a most exciting pitch; the organ played quicker and quicker, and the goblins leaped faster and faster, coiling themselves up, rolling head over heels upon the ground, and bounding over the tombstones like footballs. The sexton's brain whirled round with the rapidity of the motion he beheld, and his legs reeled beneath him, as the spirits flew before his eyes; when the goblin king, suddenly darting towards him, laid his hand upon his collar, and sank with him through the earth.

When Gabriel Grub had had time to fetch his breath, which the rapidity of his descent had for the moment taken away, he found himself in what appeared to be a large cavern, surrounded on all sides by crowds of goblins, ugly and grim; in the centre of the room, on an elevated seat, was stationed his friend of the churchyard; and close behind him stood Gabriel Grub himself, without power of motion.

"Cold to-night," said the king of the goblins, "very cold. A glass of something warm here!"

At this command, half a dozen officious goblins, with a perpetual smile upon their faces, whom Gabriel Grub imagined to be courtiers, on that account, hastily disappeared, and presently returned with a goblet of liquid fire, which they presented to the king.

"Ah!" cried the goblin, whose cheeks and throat were transparent, as he tossed down the flame, "this warms one, indeed! Bring a bumper of the same, for Mr. Grub."

It was in vain for the unfortunate sexton to protest that he was not in the habit of taking anything warm at night; one of the goblins held him while another poured the blazing liquid down his throat; the whole assembly screeched with laughter, as he coughed and choked, and wiped away the tears which gushed plentifully from his eyes, after swallowing the burning draught.

"And now," said the king, fantastically poking the taper corner of his sugar-loaf hat into the sexton's eye, and thereby occasioning him the most exquisite pain; "and now, show the man of misery and gloom, a few of the pictures from our own great storehouse!"

As the goblin said this, a thick cloud which obscured the remoter end of the cavern rolled gradually away, and disclosed, apparently at a great distance, a small and scantily furnished, but neat and clean apartment. A crowd of little children were gathered round a bright fire, clinging to their mother's gown, and gambolling around her chair. The mother occasionally rose, and drew aside the window-curtain, as if to look for some expected object; a frugal meal was ready spread upon the table; and an elbow chair was placed near the fire. A knock was heard at the door; the mother opened it, and the children crowded round her, and clapped their hands for joy, as their father entered. He was wet and weary, and shook the snow from his garments, as the children crowded round him, and seizing his cloak, hat, stick, and gloves, with busy zeal, ran with them from the room. Then, as he sat down to his meal before the fire, the children climbed about his knee, and the mother sat by his side, and all seemed happiness and comfort.

But a change came upon the view, almost imperceptibly. The scene was altered to a small bedroom, where the fairest and youngest child lay dying; the roses had fled from his cheek, and the light from his eye; and even as the sexton looked upon him with an interest he had never felt or known before, he died. His young brothers and sisters crowded round his little bed, and seized his tiny hand, so cold and heavy; but they shrank back from its touch, and looked with awe on his infant face; for calm and tranquil as it was, and sleeping in rest and peace as the beautiful child seemed to be, they saw that he was dead, and they knew that he was an angel looking down upon, and blessing them, from a bright and happy Heaven.

Again the light cloud passed across the picture, and again the subject changed. The father and mother were old and helpless now, and the number of those about them was diminished more than half; but content and cheerfulness sat on every face, and beamed in every eye, as they crowded round the fireside, and told and listened to old stories of earlier and bygone days. Slowly and peacefully, the father sank into the grave, and, soon after, the sharer of all his cares and troubles followed him to a place of rest. The few who yet survived them, kneeled by their tomb, and watered the green turf which covered it with their tears; then rose, and turned away, sadly and mournfully, but not with bitter cries, or despairing lamentations, for they knew that they should one day meet again; and once more they mixed with the busy world, and their content and cheerfulness were restored. The cloud settled upon the picture, and concealed it from the sexton's view.

"What do you think of THAT?" said the goblin, turning his large face towards Gabriel Grub.

Gabriel murmured out something about its being very pretty, and looked somewhat ashamed, as the goblin bent his fiery eyes upon him.

"You miserable man!" said the goblin, in a tone of excessive contempt. "You!" He appeared disposed to add more, but indignation choked his utterance, so he lifted up one of his very pliable legs, and, flourishing it above his head a little, to insure his aim, administered a good sound kick to Gabriel Grub; immediately after which, all the goblins in waiting crowded round the wretched sexton, and kicked him without mercy, according to the established and invariable custom of courtiers upon earth, who kick whom royalty kicks, and hug whom royalty hugs.

"Show him some more!" said the king of the goblins.

At these words, the cloud was dispelled, and a rich and beautiful landscape was disclosed to view - there is just such another, to this day, within half a mile of the old abbey town. The sun shone from out the clear blue sky, the water sparkled beneath his rays, and the trees looked greener, and the flowers more gay, beneath its cheering influence. The water rippled on with a pleasant sound, the trees rustled in the light wind that murmured among their leaves, the birds sang upon the boughs, and the lark carolled on high her welcome to the morning. Yes, it was morning; the bright, balmy morning of summer; the minutest leaf, the smallest blade of grass, was instinct with life. The ant crept forth to her daily toil, the butterfly fluttered and basked in the warm rays of the sun; myriads of insects spread their transparent wings, and revelled in their brief but happy existence. Man walked forth, elated with the scene; and all was brightness and splendour.

"YOU a miserable man!" said the king of the goblins, in a more contemptuous tone than before. And again the king of the goblins gave his leg a flourish; again it descended on the shoulders of the sexton; and again the attendant goblins imitated the example of their chief.

Many a time the cloud went and came, and many a lesson it taught to Gabriel Grub, who, although his shoulders smarted with pain from the frequent applications of the goblins' feet thereunto, looked on with an interest that nothing could diminish. He saw that men who worked hard, and earned their scanty bread with lives of labour, were cheerful and happy; and that to the most ignorant, the sweet face of Nature was a never-failing source of cheerfulness and joy. He saw those who had been delicately nurtured, and tenderly brought up, cheerful under privations, and superior to suffering, that would have crushed many of a rougher grain, because they bore within their own bosoms the materials of happiness, contentment, and peace. He saw that women, the tenderest and most fragile of all God's creatures, were the oftenest superior to sorrow, adversity, and distress; and he saw that it was because they bore, in their own hearts, an inexhaustible well-spring of affection and devotion. Above all, he saw that men like himself, who snarled at the mirth and cheerfulness of others,

were the foulest weeds on the fair surface of the earth; and setting all the good of the world against the evil, he came to the conclusion that it was a very decent and respectable sort of world after all. No sooner had he formed it, than the cloud which had closed over the last picture, seemed to settle on his senses, and lull him to repose. One by one, the goblins faded from his sight; and, as the last one disappeared, he sank to sleep.

The day had broken when Gabriel Grub awoke, and found himself lying at full length on the flat gravestone in the churchyard, with the wicker bottle lying empty by his side, and his coat, spade, and lantern, all well whitened by the last night's frost, scattered on the ground. The stone on which he had first seen the goblin seated, stood bolt upright before him, and the grave at which he had worked, the night before, was not far off. At first, he began to doubt the reality of his adventures, but the acute pain in his shoulders when he attempted to rise, assured him that the kicking of the goblins was certainly not ideal. He was staggered again, by observing no traces of footsteps in the snow on which the goblins had played at leap-frog with the gravestones, but he speedily accounted for this circumstance when he remembered that, being spirits, they would leave no visible impression behind them. So, Gabriel Grub got on his feet as well as he could, for the pain in his back; and, brushing the frost off his coat, put it on, and turned his face towards the town.

But he was an altered man, and he could not bear the thought of returning to a place where his repentance would be scoffed at, and his reformation disbelieved. He hesitated for a few moments; and then turned away to wander where he might, and seek his bread elsewhere.

The lantern, the spade, and the wicker bottle were found, that day, in the churchyard. There were a great many speculations about the sexton's fate, at first, but it was speedily determined that he had been carried away by the goblins; and there were not wanting some very credible witnesses who had distinctly seen him whisked through the air on the back of a chestnut horse blind of one eye, with the hind-quarters of a lion, and the tail of a bear. At length all this was devoutly believed; and the new sexton used to exhibit to the curious, for a trifling emolument, a good-sized piece of the church weathercock which had been accidentally kicked off by the aforesaid horse in his aerial flight, and picked up by himself in the churchyard, a year or two afterwards.

Unfortunately, these stories were somewhat disturbed by the unlooked-for reappearance of Gabriel Grub himself, some ten years afterwards, a ragged, contented, rheumatic old man. He told his story to the clergyman, and also to the mayor; and in course of time it began to be received as a matter of history, in which form it has continued down to this very day. The believers in the weathercock tale, having misplaced their confidence once, were not easily prevailed upon to part with it again, so they looked as wise as they could, shrugged their shoulders, touched their foreheads, and murmured something about Gabriel Grub having drunk all the Hollands, and then fallen asleep on the flat tombstone; and they affected to explain what he supposed he had witnessed in the goblin's cavern, by saying that he had seen

the world, and grown wiser. But this opinion, which was by no means a popular one at any time, gradually died off; and be the matter how it may, as Gabriel Grub was afflicted with rheumatism to the end of his days, this story has at least one moral, if it teach no better one - and that is, that if a man turn sulky and drink by himself at Christmas time, he may make up his mind to be not a bit the better for it: let the spirits be never so good, or let them be even as many degrees beyond proof, as those which Gabriel Grub saw in the goblin's cavern.

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

Not currently available

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE REMOVAL FROM THE HALL.—THE NIGHT WATCH, AND THE ALARM.

Mrs. Bannerworth's consent having been already given to the removal, she said at once, when appealed to, that she was quite ready to go at any time her children thought expedient.

Upon this, Henry sought the admiral, and told him as much, at the same time adding,—

"My sister feared that we should have considerable trouble in the removal, but I have convinced her that such will not be the case, as we are by no means overburdened with cumbrous property."

"Cumbrous property," said the admiral, "why, what do you mean? I beg leave to say, that when I took the house, I took the table and chairs with it. D—n it, what good do you suppose an empty house is to me?"

"The tables and chairs!"

"Yes. I took the house just as it stands. Don't try and bamboozle me out of it. I tell you, you've nothing to move but yourselves and immediate personal effects."

"I was not aware, admiral, that that was your plan."

"Well, then, now you are, listen to me. I've circumvented the enemy too often not to know how to get up a plot. Jack and I have managed it all. To-morrow evening, after dark, and before the moon's got high enough to throw any light, you and your brother, and Miss Flora and your mother, will come out of the house, and Jack and I will lead you where you're to go to. There's plenty of furniture where you're a-going, and so you will get off free, without anybody knowing anything about it."

"Well, admiral, I've said it before, and it is the unanimous opinion of us all, that everything should be left to you. You have proved yourself too good a friend to us for us to hesitate at all

in obeying your commands. Arrange everything, I pray you, according to your wishes and feelings, and you will find there shall be no cavilling on our parts."

"That's right; there's nothing like giving a command to some one person. There's no good done without. Now I'll manage it all. Mind you, seven o'clock to-morrow evening everything is to be ready, and you will all be prepared to leave the Hall."

"It shall be so."

"Who's that giving such a thundering ring at the gate?"

"Nay, I know not. We have few visitors and no servants, so I must e'en be my own gate porter."

Henry walked to the gate, and having opened it, a servant in a handsome livery stepped a pace or two into the garden.

"Well," said Henry.

"Is Mr. Henry Bannerworth within, or Admiral Bell?"

"Both," cried the admiral. "I'm Admiral Bell, and this is Mr. Henry Bannerworth. What do you want with us, you d——d gingerbread-looking flunkey?"

"Sir, my master desires his compliments—his very best compliments—and he wants to know how you are after your flurry."

"What?"

"After your—a—a—flurry and excitement."

"Who is your master?" said Henry.

"Sir Francis Varney."

"The devil!" said the admiral; "if that don't beat all the impudence I ever came near. Our flurry! Ah! I like that fellow. Just go and tell him—"

"No, no," said Henry, interposing, "send back no message. Say to your master, fellow, that Mr. Henry Bannerworth feels that not only has he no claim to Sir Francis Varney's courtesy, but that he would rather be without it."

"Oh, ha!" said the footman, adjusting his collar; "very good. This seems a d——d, old-fashioned, outlandish place of yours. Any ale?"

"Now, shiver my hulks!" said the admiral.

"Hush! hush!" said Henry; "who knows but there may be a design in this? We have no ale."

"Oh, ah! dem!—dry as dust, by God! What does the old commodore say? Any message, my ancient Greek?"

"No, thank you," said the admiral; "bless you, nothing. What did you give for that waistcoat, d—n you? Ha! ha! you're a clever fellow."

"Ah! the old gentleman's ill. However, I'll take back his compliments, and that he's much obliged at Sir Francis's condescension. At the same time, I suppose may place in my eye what I may get out of either of you, without hindering me seeing my way back. Ha! ha! Adieu—adieu."

"Bravo!" said the admiral; "that's it—go it—now for it. D—n it, it is a do!"

The admiral's calmness during the latter part of the dialogue arose from the fact that over the flunkey's shoulder, and at some little distance off, he saw Jack Pringle taking off his jacket, and rolling up his sleeves in that deliberate sort of way that seemed to imply a determination of setting about some species of work that combined the pleasant with the useful.

Jack executed many nods to and winks at the livery-servant, and jerked his thumb likewise in the direction of a pump near at hand, in a manner that spoke as plainly as possible, that John was to be pumped upon.

And now the conference was ended, and Sir Francis's messenger turned to go; but Jack Pringle bothered him completely, for he danced round him in such a singular manner, that, turn which way he would, there stood Jack Pringle, in some grotesque attitude, intercepting him; and so he edged him on, till he got him to the pump.

"Jack," said the admiral.

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Don't pump on that fellow now."

"Ay, ay, sir; give us a hand."

Jack laid hold of him by the two ears, and holding him under the pump, kicked his shins until he completely gathered himself beneath the spout. It was in vain that he shouted "Murder! help! fire! thieves!" Jack was inexorable, and the admiral pumped.

Jack turned the fellow's head about in a very scientific manner, so as to give him a fair dose of hydropathic treatment, and in a few minutes, never was human being more thoroughly saturated with moisture than was Sir Francis Varney's servant. He had left off hallooing for aid, for he found that whenever he did so, Jack held his mouth under the spout, which was decidedly unpleasant; so, with a patience that looked like heroic fortitude, he was compelled to wait until the admiral was tired of pumping.

"Very good," at length he said. "Now, Jack, for fear this fellow catcher cold, be so good as to get a horsewhip, and see him off the premises with it."

"Ay, ay, sir," said Jack. "And I say, old fellow, you can take back all our blessed compliments now, and say you've been flurried a little yourself; and if so be as you came here as dry as dust, d——e, you go back as wet as a mop. Won't it do to kick him out, sir?"

"Very well—as you please, Jack."

"Then here goes;" and Jack proceeded to kick the shivering animal from the garden with a vehemence that soon convinced him of the necessity of getting out of it as quickly as possible.

How it was that Sir Francis Varney, after the fearful race he had had, got home again across the fields, free from all danger, and back to his own house, from whence he sent so cool and insolent a message, they could not conceive.

But such must certainly be the fact; somehow or another, he had escaped all danger, and, with a calm insolence peculiar to the man, he had no doubt adopted the present mode of signifying as much to the Bannerworths.

The insolence of his servant was, no doubt, a matter of pre-arrangement with that individual, however he might have set about it *con amore*. As for the termination of the adventure, that, of course, had not been at all calculated upon; but, like most tools of other people's insolence or ambition, the insolence of the underling had received both his own punishment and his master's.

We know quite enough of Sir Francis Varney to feel assured that he would rather consider it as a good jest than otherwise of his footman, so that with the suffering he endured at the Bannerworths', and the want of sympathy he was likely to find at home, that individual had certainly nothing to congratulate himself upon but the melancholy reminiscence of his own cleverness.

But were the mob satisfied with what had occurred in the churchyard? They were not, and that night was to witness the perpetration of a melancholy outrage, such as the history of the time presents no parallel to.

The finding of a brick in the coffin of the butcher, instead of the body of that individual, soon spread as a piece of startling intelligence all over the place; and the obvious deduction that was drawn from the circumstance, seemed to be that the deceased butcher was unquestionably a vampyre, and out upon some expedition at the time when his coffin was searched.

How he had originally got out of that receptacle for the dead was certainly a mystery; but the story was none the worse for that. Indeed, an ingenious individual found a solution for that part of the business, for, as he said, nothing was more natural, when anybody died who was

capable of becoming a vampyre, than for other vampyres who knew it to dig him up, and lay him out in the cold beams of the moonlight, until he acquired the same sort of vitality they themselves possessed, and joined their horrible fraternity.

In lieu of a better explanation—and, after all, it was no bad one—this theory was generally received, and, with a shuddering horror, people asked themselves, if the whole of the churchyard were excavated, how many coffins would be found tenantless by the dead which had been supposed, by simple-minded people, to inhabit them.

The presence, however, of a body of dragoons, towards evening, effectually prevented any renewed attack upon the sacred precincts of the churchyard, and it was a strange and startling thing to see that country town under military surveillance, and sentinels posted at its principal buildings.

This measure smothered the vengeance of the crowd, and insured, for a time, the safety of Sir Francis Varney; for no considerable body of persons could assemble for the purpose of attacking his house again, without being followed; so such a step was not attempted.

It had so happened, however, that on that very day, the funeral of a young man was to have taken place, who had put up for a time at that same inn where Admiral Bell was first introduced to the reader. He had become seriously ill, and, after a few days of indisposition, which had puzzled the country practitioners, breathed his last.

He was to have been buried in the village churchyard on the very day of the riot and confusion incidental to the exhumation of the coffin of the butcher, and probably from that circumstance we may deduce the presence of the clergyman in canonicals at the period of the riot.

When it was found that so disorderly a mob possessed the churchyard, the idea of burying the stranger on that day was abandoned; but still all would have gone on quietly as regarded him, had it not been for the folly of one of the chamber-maids at the tavern.

This woman, with all the love of gossip incidental to her class, had, from the first, entered so fully into all the particulars concerning vampyres, that she fairly might be considered to be a little deranged on that head. Her imagination had been so worked upon, that she was in an unfit state to think of anything else, and if ever upon anybody a stern and revolting superstition was calculated to produce direful effects, it was upon this woman.

The town was tolerably quiet; the presence of the soldiery had frightened some and amused others, and no doubt the night would have passed off serenely, had she not suddenly rushed into the street, and, with bewildered accents and frantic gestures shouted,—

"A vampyre—a vampyre—a vampyre!"

These words soon collected a crowd around her, and then, with screaming accents, which would have been quite enough to convince any reflecting person that she had actually gone distracted upon that point, she cried,—

"Come into the house—come into the house! Look upon the dead body, that should have been in its grave; it's fresher now than it was the day on which it died, and there's a colour in its cheeks! A vampyre—a vampyre—a vampyre! Heaven save us from a vampyre!"

The strange, infuriated, maniacal manner in which these words were uttered, produced an astonishingly exciting effect among the mob. Several women screamed, and some few fainted. The torch was laid again to the altar of popular feeling, and the fierce flame of superstition burnt brightly and fiercely.

Some twenty or thirty persons, with shouts and exclamations, rushed into the inn, while the woman who had created the disturbance still continued to rave, tearing her hair, and shrieking at intervals, until she fell exhausted upon the pavement.

Soon, from a hundred throats, rose the dreadful cry of "A vampyre—a vampyre!" The alarm was given throughout the whole town; the bugles of the military sounded; there was a clash of arms—the shrieks of women; altogether, the premonitory symptoms of such a riot as was not likely to be quelled without bloodshed and considerable disaster.

It is truly astonishing the effect which one weak or vicious-minded person can produce upon a multitude.

Here was a woman whose opinion would have been accounted valueless upon the most common-place subject, and whose word would not have passed for twopence, setting a whole town by the ears by force of nothing but her sheer brutal ignorance.

It is a notorious physiological fact, that after four or five days, or even a week, the bodies of many persons assume an appearance of freshness, such as might have been looked for in vain immediately after death.

It is one of the most insidious processes of that decay which appears to regret with its

"————— offensive fingers, To mar the lines where beauty lingers."

But what did the chamber-maid know of physiology? Probably, she would have asked if it was anything good to eat; and so, of course, having her head full of vampyres, she must needs produce so lamentable a scene of confusion, the results of which we almost sicken at detailing.

BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XXXI

“Hurry, Anita!”

I feared that Potan might come up from the hull at any moment and stop us. The duty man over us gazed down, his huge head and shoulders blocking the small signal room window. Brotow called up in Martian, telling him to let us come. He scowled, but when we reached the trap in the room floor grid, we found him standing aside to admit us.

I flung a swift glance around. It was a metallic cubby, not much over fifteen feet square, with an eight foot arched ceiling. There were instrument panels. The range finder for the giant projector was here; its telescope with the trajectory apparatus and the firing switch were unmistakable. And the signaling apparatus was here! Not a Martian set, but a fully powerful Botz ultra-violet sender with its attendant receiving mirrors. The Planetara had used the Botz system, so I was thoroughly familiar with it.

I saw too, what seemed to be weapons: a row of small fragile glass globes, hanging on clips along the wall—bombs, each the size of a man's fist. And a broad belt with bombs in its padded compartments.

My heart was pounding as my first quick glance took in these details. I saw also that the room had four small oval window openings. They were breast high above the floor; from the deck below I knew that the angle of vision was such that the men down there could not see into this room except to glimpse its upper portion near the ceiling. And the helio set was banked on a low table near the floor.

In a corner of the room a small ladder led through a ceiling trap to the cubby roof. This upper trap was open. Four feet above the room's roof was the arch of the dome, with the entrance to the exit-lock directly above us. The weapons and the belt of bombs were near the ascending ladder, evidently placed here as equipment for use from the top of the dome.

I turned to the solitary duty man. I must gain his confidence at once. Anita had laid her helmet aside. She spoke first.

“We were with Set Miko,” she said smilingly, “in the wreck of the Planetara. You heard of it? We know where the treasure is.”

This duty man was a full seven feet tall, and the most heavy-set Martian I had ever seen. A tremendous, beetle-browed, scowling fellow. He stood with hands on his hips, his leather-garbed legs spread wide; and as I confronted him, I felt like a child.

He was silent, glaring down at me as I drew his attention from Anita.

“You speak English?” I asked. “We are not skilled with Martian.”

I wondered if at the next time of sleep this fellow would be on duty here. I hoped not: it would not be easy to trick him and find an opportunity to flash a signal. But that task was some hours away as yet; I would worry about it when the time came. Just now I was concerned with Miko and his little band, who at any moment might arrive in sight. If we could persuade this duty man to turn the projector on them!

He answered me in ready English:

“You are the man Gregg Haljan? And this is the sister of George Prince—what do you want up here?”

“I am a navigator. Brotow wants me to pilot the ship when we advance to attack Grantline.”

“This is not the control room.”

“No, I know it isn't.”

I put my helmet carefully on the floor beside Anita's. I straightened to find the brigand gazing at her. He did not speak: he was still scowling. But in the dim blue glow of the cubby, I caught the look in his eyes.

I said hastily, “Grantline knows your ship has landed here on Archimedes. His camp is off there on the Mare Imbrium. He sent up a signal—you saw it, didn't you?—just before Miss Prince and I came aboard. He was trying to pretend he was your Earth party, Miko and Coniston.”

“Why?”

The fellow turned his scowl on me, but Anita brought his gaze back to her. She put in quickly:

“Grantline, as brother always said, has no great cunning. I believe now he plans to creep up on us unawares, by pretending that he is Miko.”

“If he does that,” I said, “we will turn this electronic projector on him and his party and annihilate them. You have its firing mechanism here.”

“Who told you so?” he shot at me.

I gestured. “I see it here. It's obvious: I'm skilled at trajectory firing. If Grantline appears down there now, I'll help you.”

“Is it connected?” Anita demanded boldly.

“Yes,” he said. “You have on your Erentz suits: are you going to the dome roof? Then go.”

But that was what we did not want to do. Anita's glance seemed to tell me to let her handle this. I turned toward one of the cubby windows.

She said sweetly, “Are you in charge of this room? Show me how the projector is operated. I know it will be invincible against the Grantline camp.”

I had my back to them for a moment. Through the breast-high oval I could see down across the deck-space and out through the side dome windows. And my heart suddenly leaped into my throat. It seemed that down there in the Earthlit shadows, where the spreading base of the giant crater joined the plains, a light was bobbing. I gazed, stricken. Miko's lights? Was he advancing, preparing to signal? I tried to gauge the distance; it was not over two miles from here.

Or was it not a light at all? With the naked eye, I could not be sure. Perhaps there was a telescope finder here in the cubby....

I was subconsciously aware of the voices of Anita and the duty man behind me. Then abruptly I heard Anita's low cry. I whirled around.

The giant Martian had gathered her into his huge arms, his heavy jowled gray face, with a leering grin, close to hers!

He saw me coming. He held her with one arm! his other flung at me, caught me, knocked me backward. He rasped:

“Get out of here! Go up to the dome—”

Anita was silently struggling with her little hands at his thick throat. His blow flung me against a settle. But I held my feet. I was partly behind him. I leaped again, and as he tried to disengage himself from Anita to front me, her clutching fingers impeded him.

My projector was in my hand. But in that second as I leaped, I had the sense to realize I should not fire it because its noise would alarm the ship. I grasped its barrel, reached upward and struck with its heavy metal butt. The blow caught the Martian on the skull, and simultaneously my body struck him.

We went down together, falling partly upon Anita. But the giant had not cried out, and as I gripped him now, I felt his body go limp. I lay panting. Anita squirmed silently from under us. Blood from the giant's head was welling out, hot and sticky against my face as I lay sprawled on him.

I cast him off. He was dead, his fragile Martian skull split open by my blow.

There had been no alarm. The slight noise we made had not been heard down on the busy deck. Anita and I crouched by the floor. From the deck all this part of the room could not be seen.

“Dead.”

“Oh Gregg—”

It forced our hand. I could not wait now for Miko to come. But I could flash the Earth signal now, and then we would have to make our run to escape.

Then I remembered that light down by the base! I kept Anita out of sight down on the floor and went cautiously to a window. The deck was in turmoil with brigands moving about excitedly. Not because of what had happened in our tower signal room: they were unaware of that.

Miko's signals were showing! I could see them now plainly, down at the crater base. A group of hand lights and small waving helio beam.

And they were being answered from the ship! Potan was on the deck—a babble of voices, above which his rose with roars of command. At one of the dome windows a brigand with a hand searchbeam was sending its answering light. And I saw that Potan was working over a deck telescope finder.

It had all come so suddenly that I was stunned. But I did not wait to read the signals. I swung back at Anita, who stared helplessly at me.

“It's Miko! And they are answering him! Get your helmet: I'll try firing the projector.”

Or would I instead try and send a brief flash signal to Earth? There would be no time to do both: we must escape out of here. The route up through the dome was the only feasible one now.

This range mechanism of the projector was reasonably familiar, and I felt that I could operate it. The range-finder and the switch were on a ledge at one of the windows. I rushed to it. As I swung the telescope, training it down on Miko's lights, I could see the huge projector on the deck swinging similarly. Its movement surprised the men who were attending it. One of them called up to me, but I ignored him.

Then Potan looked up and saw me. He shouted in Martian at the duty man, whom he doubtless thought was behind me: “Be ready! We may fire on them. I'll give you the word.”

The signals were proceeding. It had only been a moment. I caught something like, “Haljan is imposter.”

I was aiming the projector. I was aware of Anita at my elbow. I pushed her back.

“Put on your helmet!”

I had the range. I flung the firing switch.

At the deck window the giant projector spat its deadly electronic stream. The men down there leaped away from it in surprise. I heard Potan's voice, his shout of protest and anger.

But down in the Earth glow at the crater base, Miko's lights had not vanished! I had missed! An error in the range? Abruptly I knew it was not that. Miko's lights were still there. His signals still coming. And I noticed now a faint distortion about them, the glow of his little group of hand lights faintly distorted and vaguely shot with a greenish cast. Benson curve lights!

My thoughts whirled in the few seconds while I stood there at the tower window. Miko had feared he might be summarily fired on. He had gone back to his camp, equipped all his lights with the Benson curve. He was somewhere at the crater base now. But not where I thought I saw him! The Benson curve light changed the path of the light rays traveling from him to me, I could not even approximate his true position!

Anita was plucking at me. “Gregg, come.”

“I can't hit him,” I gasped.

Should I try the flash signal to Earth? Did we dare linger here? I stood another few seconds at the window. I saw Potan down in the confusion of the deck, training a telescope. He had shouted up violently at his duty man here not to fire again.

And now he let out a roar. “I can see them! It's Miko! By the Almighty—his giant stature—Brotow, look! That's not an Earth man!”

He flung aside his telescope finder. “Disconnect that projector! It's Miko down there! This Haljan is a trickster! Where is he? Braile—Braile, you accursed fool! Are Haljan and the girl up there with you?”

But the duty man lay in his blood at our feet.

I had dropped back from the window. Anita and I crouched for an instant in confusion, fumbling with our helmets.

The ship rang with the alarm. And amid the turmoil we could hear the shouts of the infuriated brigands swarming up the tower ladder after us!