

SCHLOCK!

WEBZINE

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RENEWAL

By Gavin Roach

STATE OF EMERGENCY pt 8

By David Christopher

BRIGANDS OF THE MOON pt 20

By Ray Cummings

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

Welcome to Schlock!

The new Webzine for Sci-Fi, Fantasy, and Horror!

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

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This Edition:

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

This week's cover illustration is "The Horror in Porcelain" by [Gavin Roach](#). Cover design by [C. Priest Brumley](#).

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RENEWAL by Gavin Roach

The river god strolled along his river's banks, admiring the work of his fellow gods: the lofty trees; the vault of the heavens; the hot sun; the sandy soil; the beasts as they scurried about their business.

A bearded human knelt by the bank. The river god recognised him as one named Crazy Eyes, from his wild gaze. One of the few who could see him, he normally greeted the river god with joy. The god was concerned to see pain in the human's eyes.

'Why are there no fish in the river?' Crazy Eyes asked. 'My tribe starve.'

'No fish?' the god asked. It was true: the tribe must have eaten them all. 'But is there nothing else you can eat?'

'Left Hand says we must kill one of us for the others to eat,' Crazy Eyes replied. 'Red Hair sent me to ask you.'

With a flick of his hand, the river god filled the waters with fish. Crazy Eyes expressed his gratitude and the river god walked down to the beach, where the river mingled its waters with those of the sea. Along the beach two more humans stood talking angrily. As the god watched, the red-haired female turned away from her companion, a short, dark-haired male with a withered right arm. The man seized a rock in his left hand and brought it down on the woman's skull. She fell to the sand and did not move.

The man looked about shiftily, and vanished into the trees.

Something was wrong. Why did the female not move? The god's unease grew as he headed up the beach. His chest tightened as he looked down at the motionless form. It was Red Hair, a tribal leader: her hair pooled about her head, but it was mingled with a darker red. Her cooling body seemed strangely heavy when he touched it.

Looking up, the river god saw a shimmering figure before him. It resembled Red Hair but it was vague, insubstantial. Its eyes were wide with horror.

A tainted feeling overwhelmed him. The river god turned instinctively to see a hideous figure burst out of the jungle. It bore down on the shimmering form. Red Hair's image turned and ran.

The ugly thing sprinted after it, long matted hair bouncing against furry shoulders. Its clawed, bloodstained hands were raised to seize Red Hair's fleeing image.

Quick as a flash, the river god interposed himself between them. Red Hair's image crossed the stream. The pursuer halted, glaring balefully.

'What are you?' the river god asked. The thing glowered, then stared at its feet.

'I am Murder. Give me the soul!' it growled, indicating Red Hair's image.

'I do not know you. Are you a god? I have not seen you at the council.'

'Give me the soul!'

'The soul, as you call it, is mine. Begone from my realm!'

Murder pawed at the ground with its left foot, casting glances about it, not meeting his eyes. Defeated, it shambled away.

The god turned to the soul. 'What happened to you?'

'Left Hand – he killed me!'

'Killed?'

At a shout from further up the beach, the god turned to see Crazy Eyes staring down at Red Hair's body. He looked up with tears glittering in his eyes.

'She is dead!' he said. 'Left Hand returned, said she was still on the beach. She... But what is that with you?'

'This is Red Hair's soul. Left Hand killed her.'

‘What should we do?’

‘I must take her to the council of the gods,’ the god said slowly. ‘Remain with your people. Ensure that Left Hand does not do this again.’

He led Red Hair’s soul away, leaving Crazy Eyes alone on the beach.

The gods clustered round Red Hair’s soul, gazing down in curiosity. The sea god looked at his subordinate.

‘Well? What is it? Is it yours, river god?’

‘It is called a soul. It is what remains when a human dies.’

‘Doesn’t happen when other animals die,’ the sky god boomed disapprovingly.

‘You shouldn’t have done this without consulting us,’ the earth goddess said.

The river god flushed, and looked around the glade where the gods lounged in the shadow of megaliths.

‘I did nothing. It simply... happened.’

‘We have failed,’ the rain god said gloomily. ‘We must create a new world.’

‘Too radical,’ said the storm god. ‘But what are you going to do with it?’ it asked. ‘Where will you put it?’

The river god shrugged helplessly.

‘Well, let’s ask Mystery,’ the earth goddess suggested.

Mystery stepped from the shadows and gazed about him sardonically. Tall and thin, he wore a long hooded cloak that kept his face in darkness. The gods looked expectantly at the river god.

He explained the situation. ‘What are we to do?’

‘What do you think you should do, river god?’ Mystery’s voice was a smooth, silky drawl.

‘We need to do something about this soul.’

‘What do you need to do?’

‘Find somewhere to put her? She seems to... distress humans.’

‘Where will you put her?’

He thought. ‘There’s a cavern in my realm,’ he said. ‘A river flows into it. I could put her there.’

‘Of course you will,’ Mystery murmured.

‘Well, river god,’ the sky god boomed. ‘Now you know.’

‘I think so. But what of this new god, Murder? What do you think, Mystery?’ He turned.

Mystery was gone.

‘New god?’ the storm god asked. ‘What does all this mean?’

‘We must discuss this,’ the earth goddess began. They were still debating as the river god led the bewildered soul away.

The canoe drifted across the calm waters of the underground lake. Red Hair looked about in wonder as the reflections from the water’s surface rippled across her incorporeal form.

The craft reached the edge of the lake. They stepped out onto the black sand of the beach.

‘Here it is,’ the river god said. ‘I often wondered what I would do with this place.’

Torchlight flickered across the walls, making shadows shift and dance. Waves lapped gently as they entered the main chamber. Many tunnels led away from them into the comforting darkness. Natural balconies hung above them and phosphorescent fungus clustered upon rocky outcroppings. Curious shades of lichen clung to the walls, like intricate tapestries in the half light. In the distance, the thunder of a waterfall was audible.

‘So this is to be your new home. Is it to your taste?’ the river god asked Red Hair. The look of wonder had been replaced by cold anger.

‘I am dead and cannot return. It is not right that the man who did this still lives! He cannot be allowed to lead the tribe.’

As the river god stepped once more into the mortal world he met the acrid stench of smoke and the now familiar smell of death. In the clearing a writhing mass of humanity screamed and bellowed. Human killed human with bare hands, and some wielded tools made solely for murder.

Left Hand stood upon a hill at the centre of an armed group, exhorting his followers into further acts of brutality. He looked gaunt and unhealthy, as if too many summers had passed him by. As he ranted, a coughing fit seized him. Some of the large males went to his side to support him until the fit passed.

The river god felt an oily presence amidst the chaos. Above, Murder was laughing and crooning like a child, smacking his lips as if enjoying a delicious meal. With every death he grew larger.

A howl of triumph came from the throng of humans. Murder’s laughter ceased and dismay replaced his exultation. Left Hand’s followers fled from the clearing.

Crazy Eyes stood before the remaining humans, who cheered and threw stones at the retreating band. How different he looked! His wild mane of hair was now greying and his beard reached to his waist. But his eyes remained the same, sparking with intensity.

Crazy Eyes turned to survey his followers, and his wild eyes widened as they met the river god’s across the clearing. The river god walked towards him.

‘God of the river!’ Crazy Eyes exclaimed. ‘I thought you left us long ago. I did all I could but... could not stop Left Hand from killing. Now my followers kill in self defence.’

‘What of their souls?’ the god asked.

‘Murder takes them. He grows stronger with every death.’ As they spoke, Crazy Eyes’ followers knelt around them, unable to hear the river god’s responses. The river god looked at them in pity.

‘Take those who have died,’ he said. ‘I will care for their souls. Send them to me.’

‘How?’

‘Place their bodies in canoes and float them downstream.’

Crazy Eyes bowed, and the river god felt uneasy. It was as if he was no different from Murder.

The canoe drifted towards the sand. Red Hair stood on the beach, at peace. She had fallen easily into the role of comforter of souls, and in return she was loved by the multitude that dwelt there.

The river god stepped onto the sand. The lake glittered with tiny lights, growing brighter as they came closer, illuminating the prows of the canoes where they rested. A few souls sat in each canoe: some looked mournful and others looked in awe at their new home.

A sigh of greeting came from the souls with Red Hair. It was their custom to greet the newcomers.

‘There are fewer these days,’ said Red Hair. ‘Surely Murder is losing his power.’

‘I hope so. Too many here should yet be alive,’ the god replied. ‘I must visit Crazy Eyes again. You have matters in hand?’

‘They will be well looked after. But should you travel? You look pale.’

‘I am tired from governing two realms. It is nothing.’

Red Hair led the new souls into the river god’s halls, giving words of comfort where needed. Too many here, the god thought. This madness must stop.

The journey to the mortal world was harder this time, as if he was climbing uphill. All was quiet among the trees as he followed the stream. No sign of war or murder, but he felt drained. Turning a corner, he saw something that made him reel.

A tangled construction of trees lay across the stream, a wide pool behind it. The waters rushed

through a narrow channel, beside which stood a hut. A large wheel turned beside it. The trees had been cut back and the ground arranged in strips of grass or vegetables. Cowed-looking men and women moved among them. Others took baskets of grain to the hut by the pool. A man stood within, attending to a device of two stones turned by the wheel.

The river god turned to see Crazy Eyes and his followers creeping through the trees. The god called to him.

‘The war is over,’ Crazy Eyes said. ‘Few live. Left Hand enslaved most survivors. Even your river toils for him. And Murder reigns under the name of Law.’ He indicated three corpses hanging from a tree among a collection of huts.

The river god struggled for breath.

‘Destroy it! Free me!’

‘Left Hand is too strong for us,’ said Crazy Eyes

‘But I must save the souls.’

‘You must save yourself. But we shall do our best to fight them. We must prepare.’

Crazy Eyes vanished into the forest and the river god drifted downstream, listening to the burble of the water and the sighing of reeds. His mind wandered as he flowed through Murder’s machines, the dead-eyed slaves unaware of his passing. He found weaknesses in these devices and tested the strength of the dam.

At a waterfall in the mountains he gathered his power. Rejoicing in the roar of water, he summoned a herd of his proud white horses with a cry, whipped them into a frenzy and thundered downstream, riding the energy of the waterfall.

Murder’s dam hove into view and he threw himself against it, bursting it and shattering the machines. The exertion drained his energy and he fell into darkness.

He awoke to find himself in Red Hair’s arms. ‘What happened?’ she asked, concern etching her face.

‘Murder’s dam is destroyed, his machines flooded. But I used too much of my power.’

Red Hair helped him up. ‘You cannot rule two realms. It will destroy you.’ She was quiet for a moment. ‘I will be your herald and lead the souls here. You must rest.’ She got into the canoe and rowed away.

He looked around the hall as souls cavorted and played among the flickering shadows. The place was overcrowded. He compared it with the half-deserted mortal world. Soon there would be no more room.

A shadow detached itself from the rocks and turned to him.

‘Mystery?’ the river god asked. ‘I did as you said. But now we have no more room. And my struggles with Murder weaken me. What of the gods?’

‘They talk,’ said Mystery.

‘But what now? More humans are here than in the mortal realm. Where can I put them?’

‘Where can they go?’

‘There are no caves left. The only other place I control is in the mortal realm.’

‘Where the humans grow less and less.’

He stared at Mystery. ‘There is an imbalance. If there were more there and less here... These souls must be reborn!’

The river god grew excited. He would send the souls to be reborn among the surviving humans, with their memories and hatreds gone, to people the world anew. To live without Murder.

He turned to speak to Mystery, but Mystery was gone.

He stood on the beach, marshalling the souls before they returned to the world. As he did so, he saw a

canoe approaching. Red Hair stood in the prow, and beside her crouched a familiar figure.

‘Crazy Eyes!’ he exclaimed as Red Hair helped him from the canoe. ‘Then... You died?’

Crazy Eyes looked bitterly at his god.

‘I led my warriors against Left Hand. The fighting was terrible as the river broke through the dam. Left Hand’s bodyguard are fierce, merciless killers. We slew many but could get nowhere near Left Hand. One slew me.’ He looked around. ‘Do I dwell here forever?’

The river god shook his head.

‘No!’ he said. ‘You can be reborn.’ He explained his plan. ‘Any of you – you, Red Hair...’

Red Hair shook her head. ‘My duty is here, with the dead.’

‘I would not wish to return as a mortal,’ Crazy Eyes said bitterly.

The idea was not working, the river god realised. A thought struck him. ‘I am torn between two worlds,’ he said. ‘River god, I must also care for the dead.’

‘It is this that weakens you, makes you vulnerable to Murder’s attacks,’ said Red Hair. ‘You cannot be river god and god of the dead.’

‘So we need a new river god,’ he replied, and looked expectantly at Crazy Eyes.

‘I?’ said the soul in wonder.

Left Hand lay in his bed. He was old now, so very old. He thought over his life, all he had done. The palace he’d had built, the opulence that surrounded him, meant nothing.

He was dying, he could feel it. The thought terrified him. His god had abandoned him since the great flood destroyed his beautiful dam. He still felt Murder’s presence from occasionally, but it was faint and bitter. His own people diminished, yet new life burgeoned in the surrounding lands. Children were being born and the new tribes thrived. Many of his followers had turned their weapons upon themselves. Others had simply left. No one who had tried to kill him had got through his bodyguard. He was alone, an old man dying in bed. Too weak to end this waiting with his own hand.

‘How will this end?’ he whispered to the shadows.

‘With a journey,’ a voice replied from the dark.

Left Hand screamed and clutched the blankets. ‘You! You’re dead! I killed you...’

Red Hair stepped into the circle of light.

‘Go on, take your revenge! I am weak and can do nothing to defend myself. I would do it if I were you.’

Red Hair simply looked at him.

‘Speak!’ he cried. ‘I killed you and your people. You deserve revenge! Take it! Please.’ He fell back into his pillows.

‘The river is rich with life, and the new tribes do well. This is good,’ said Red Hair. ‘Where is your god, old man?’ She asked.

‘I don’t know. Out there,’ Left Hand whispered, and closed his eyes.

Left Hand sat hunched in the canoe as Red Hair rowed them down the primal river.

‘What now?’ asked Left Hand.

Red Hair was silent for a while, then turned. ‘That is for me to decide.’

‘If I choose, I can throw you overboard. You will be left to wander the earth alone forever. My lord would not think it ill of me for this. You know of him I think. He was the enemy of your master.’

Left Hand paled. ‘Not him! How has he become this powerful?’ he asked.

‘In many ways, you and your master were responsible,’ said Red Hair.

‘But...’ She sighed. ‘I suppose you can ask him yourself,’ she said as the canoe sailed into the land of the dead.

ON THE SUBJECT OF FUNERALS by C. Priest Brumley

Part 3: Going Down.

It took a minute or two for my breathing to slow down enough to talk. By that time, we were already on the highway, doing 70 miles per hour in a 45 zone. In retrospect, I'm amazed we weren't pulled over.

I thought of the situation back at the graveyard. Was everyone okay? I know Lilly and Vincent were dead, but did anyone else survive the onslaught? I felt immeasurably sick to my stomach, and I think this time it had nothing to do with being concussed. My guilty conscience at running away from the massacre was tugging at me, telling me in no uncertain terms...

"We have to go back..." I started, but Jim cut me off before I could start to explain.

"Like hell. Did you see that? *She tore Vincent's fucking head off!*"

"And it's still in the bed of the truck, yes I know!" I contested hotly, "But the fact of the matter is we need to stop that... that... *whatever* that's doing it! We need to make sure everyone else is okay! And we need to get a policeman or a SWAT team or something!"

"And why exactly would we have to go back there for that?" He countered. He was already on his third cigarette since leaving the cemetery. I couldn't smoke, my hands were shaking too badly.

"I don't know, I just... I just know it. We have to go back, baby," I added calmly. The shaking had spread from my hands to the rest of my body by the time I had finished talking, and it was all I could do to keep myself from throwing up again out of fear. Still, I have a pretty good sense of right and wrong, and I knew, in this instance, that I was right.

Jim was quiet for a minute, concentrating on maintaining his hellish speed, until he finally slowed down and pulled off to the side of the highway right in front of a grocery store.

"Are you sure, baby?" he asked in an ominous, staring at me with a face that registered both fear and anxiety. "I want you to think really hard about this, and tell me it's the right thing to do."

Lilly and Vincent dead. Mrs. Carol *back from* the dead, killing en masse. A whole funeral's worth of possible casualties. Run away. For fuck's sake, tell him to step on it and never turn back around again. Tell him to grab his stuff and we'll move to Samoa or Fiji or *somewhere!* Just don't say...

"Yes," I replied with certainty.

Idiot.

"Then we'll need supplies. You mind if we make a stop by my place?" he asked.

"Ummm... What?"

"I am not going anywhere near that thing without packing *something*, and I'd feel a lot better if you were packing too, baby. I've got a few guns my dad left me in his will with the ammo for 'em and a machete in the garage. Which one you want?" he added quickly with a glance in my direction.

I paused, the prospect of using a weapon turning over in my mind. I've never fired a gun before, but I

was pretty sure I could at least point it in the right direction if needed. But a machete? I knew how to handle a big knife well (being raised by a professional chef will do that to you), and even though I was scared shitless about having to use it, I preferred the devil I know.

I turned to Jim, still shaking so much I was practically vibrating with fear, and said, “Machete.”

He nodded curtly, pulled back into the travel lane, and floored it to his house. Ten minutes later, we got there.

He took the shortcut in, squealing around corners and barely missing the cars parked along the side of the road. He even gave his elderly neighbor down the street quite a turn, almost running her over and causing her to curse at us in a choked voice as we sped past. The last I saw of her was a middle finger in the rear-view mirror.

Jim was already unbuckled by the time we got in his driveway, and he dashed off without saying a single word to me. I hastily hit his garage door opener a split-second later, and waited patiently for the archaic machine to spring to life and let me inside. In the meantime, I looked around Jim’s yard; he had spent an awful lot of time out here, planting shrubs and meticulously edging and trimming his yard. The man lived for working outside, and it certainly showed.

At last the garage door went up enough for me to enter, and I did so rapidly, keeping my eyes peeled for any sign of the afore-mentioned machete. I spied books (many of which were so peeled and faded from years outdoors that you couldn’t tell what they were from the cover), old issues of home improvement magazines, tools and machines, and at last, a tactical machete sitting on a shelf above the washer. It was high up, but one of the boxes of faded books proved to be all the stepladder I needed to fetch it down.

And as I felt the cool plastic handle in my hand, I heard an extremely loud noise that sounded like two pieces of wood being slapped together. And at that exact moment, what little colour I had left in my face drained. I know that sound. Oh please dear God don’t let it be what I think it is. My feet started to move me without my consent, running through the door in the back of the garage into the living room.

Nothing there.

I tried the living room (“Jim?”), the kitchen (“Baby, where are you?”), the dining room (“BABY?!”), the guest bedroom (“JIM?!”), and the hall bathroom (“ANSWER ME, GOD DAMN IT!”), and found nothing out of sorts.

It was when I took my first step into the master bedroom that I knew what happened. The master bathroom light was on. He never left the lights on, and was meticulous about that fact. A sense of cold dread swept over me as I stole into his bedroom, creeping past the bed that we shared, past the dresser I picked out, and past the closet full of the clothes that still smelled like him.

Creeping to the door to the bathroom. I peeked my head around the corner and almost collapsed on the spot.

Jim was in the bathtub with the clear curtain liner drawn. You could still see the fragments of his skull sliding down the tile behind it.

I fled from the room as fast as I could, blindly running into things along the way, until I managed to

make it to the living room. I finally collapsed onto the couch and drew myself up into a ball as the tears started.

* * * * *

Day faded to night as I lay there on the couch. In my head I was recounting the times Jim and I had jostled with each other for the mirror in the bathroom, the times we would make dinner for one another (I did most of the cooking, but the man was a *genius* when it came to grilling and steaks), even the times we were making love. And that's what it all boiled down to: I loved him. I had been vehemently opposed to telling him before, but I did. And now I couldn't.

I don't know how much later it was that I got myself off of the couch. I slowly approached the master bedroom again, taking care to look for anything out of place. Nothing was wrong in the room itself, aside from an open shoebox on his bed still housing one of the guns and two boxes of ammunition. I turned away from it and went to the closet. And as I closed it, I felt my guts wrench even more. Too painful, too soon.

Also, too necessary.

I moved onto the bathroom and braced myself.

The bathtub was the same as I left it, with Jim's corpse huddled in the corner opposite the tap and surrounded by the curtain liner (presumably so as not to have left a mess behind himself). I looked around the bathroom for any sign, anything he might have left me to tell me *why*. I needed closure, almost craved it at this point. And as I turned around, I found what I was looking for: a hastily scribbled note sitting on the counter by the sink. I picked it up and read:

"Thomas,

I didn't do this to hurt you, baby. I did this because I can't deal with this shit. I can't deal with dead people walking, and I can't bring myself to kill someone. Take the guns and run away, baby. Go. Save yourself. I'm saving me.

I love you. Have since the moment I met you, and will forever in heaven.

-Jim Hollister"

I set the tear-stained note back down where I found it and slid to the floor, my back braced against the sink cabinet. I hated myself right now, more than I ever have or thought I ever would. I killed Jim, I thought. I pushed him into going back to the graveyard, and he couldn't cope. Jim was my life, he was everything I've lived for since the divorce and the coming out to my parents, and *this* is how I repay him? I'm not worthy of his love.

Despondent, pissed off, confused, and miserable, I lifted myself from the floor. Misery and fury coursed through my veins, and (at least in my mind's eye) I heard the most peculiar sound...

Snap.

I strode to the shower, threw open the curtain, and picked up the gun from the bottom where it had fallen out of Jim's hand. After wiping the gun off with a hand towel, I closed the curtain for the last time, grabbed the box off the bed, and made my way back through the house, closing doors and turning

off lights as I went. By the time I got to the garage door (shoving the machete in my pants as I got there), It was so dark I couldn't see my hand in front of my face.

The truck turned over obligingly as I cranked it. I pulled out the driveway, put the truck in drive, and sped off to meet my death.

STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

Chapter Eight: Insurgency

Sirens wailed, lights flashed. Tarrant's police escort accompanied his black limousine as it drove through the gates of an exclusive private hospital in Surrey.

Tarrant sat back in the spacious interior, listening to a report coming over the radio. It seemed that the situation in London that evening was rapidly deteriorating. Riots had broken out in several areas and despite intervention by units of the security forces, anarchy still reigned. This was exactly the situation Tarrant had predicted, exactly the circumstances he had warned Verlaine about repeatedly. She would soon see that her National Security Bill would have to be much more hardline if it was to combat this kind of dissidence.

That was, if she survived the shooting.

Tarrant hoped the chosen assassin would be as incompetent as he'd expected, and had done no more than maim the home secretary. If Verlaine died, her successor might not be so amenable to Tarrant's plans. He had used his position as liaison officer between the security services and the home office to encourage the home secretary to see things from the service's point of view. For too long had elected governments allowed themselves to be swayed by popular opinion, introducing endless rafts of so-called social reforms that had done nothing but encourage the anti-social anarchist element to loot and to destroy public property in their more and more frequent tantrums. If things worked to plan, the public in general, and the anti-social element in particular, would soon be learning a valuable lesson.

The car pulled up outside the main hospital building, an old seventeenth century manor house with some rather tasteless Victorian Gothic additions. Tarrant's driver got out and opened the door for him as the police escort pulled up on either side, their motors still running. He climbed out, nodded to the driver, and stretched elegantly. A thickset man in a well-tailored suit came down the steps that led to the main doors.

'The doctors tell me that the home secretary is no longer critical...' he began.

'That'll be the day.' Tarrant sniffed, leading the security man back inside the building.

'Politicians are always critical, in my experience, Dawson.'

Dawson hurried to keep up with Tarrant. 'She's in a ward upstairs,' he added, brow furrowing as he tried to understand Tarrant's joke. 'She's come round, and the medical team have given her painkillers.'

'The bullet didn't get her anywhere fatal,' Tarrant commented, ushering Dawson ahead to lead him to the ward. 'What did the assassin hit, her brain?'

Dawson looked solemn. 'No, sir, the lower spine, I believe. The doctor I spoke to is concerned that she will suffer a degree of paralysis.'

Tarrant considered making another crack, about Verlaine adding it to all her other qualifications, but desisted. It wasn't fair on Dawson. Security service operatives like him were not employed for their appreciation of wit, rather for loyalty and brute strength. Besides, he really had to control himself. It wouldn't do to have people thinking he found Verlaine's condition amusing.

But he felt irrepressibly exuberant. All his plans were coming together.

Verlaine's ward was large and well appointed, no NHS ward. Two doctors stood near the bed, speaking discreetly together as they examined a chart. An attractive black nurse came forward as Tarrant and Dawson entered, asking them their business. Dawson told her who they were and what they wanted and she ushered them to the bed, where Verlaine lay, gazing forward, her face locked in an expression of horror. Tubes and drips festooned her body. Her skin was deathly pale. Nevertheless, her

eyes were open, and they seemed to glint unpleasantly as Tarrant stepped forward into her line of sight. He sniffed expectantly.

‘Who did it?’ Verlaine grated at last.

Tarrant sniffed again, and rubbed his hands eagerly.

‘We’re still waiting for conclusive reports as to the assassin’s identity,’ he said, ‘but the shooting was carried out by supporters of Professor Quigley calling themselves the National Liberation Front. Unfortunately the situation has developed since the police took control of the situation...’

‘What has happened?’ Verlaine asked.

‘A state of emergency was declared,’ Tarrant told her, ‘and a curfew imposed throughout Central London. Despite this, rioters and the anti-social element spilled out onto the streets and began a systematic programme of looting and unrest.’

Verlaine grunted. ‘A systematic programme...’ she echoed him sardonically. ‘And what did the police do about that?’

‘I advised the strategic deployment of military units plus the reinforcement of police by private security contractors...’

Verlaine frowned. ‘The result?’

Tarrant began, ‘I’m still awaiting reports...’

Dawson’s phone beeped and he apologised, then hurriedly read a text. He approached the bed and coughed.

Tarrant glared at him. ‘What is it?’

‘Report in about the worsening situation,’ Dawson replied. ‘It’s confused, but it seems that some of the army units have refused to engage with the protestors...’

Despite her incapacity, Verlaine was clearly outraged. ‘The Army is refusing to obey orders?’

Dawson looked apologetic. ‘Some rogue units refused to open fire on protestors, ma’am,’ he explained. ‘There seems to have been some attempts at mutiny...’

Verlaine sighed loudly. ‘I should be out there,’ she slurred. ‘This situation is getting out of hand. I should be in control. Why am I here, wasting my time? And what are my colleagues in government doing, allowing this insanity?’

Tarrant sniffed. ‘The government has placed responsibility in the hands of the police,’ he said, ‘but they are considering a mass evacuation of Central London should the situation worsen. They are even considering martial law...’

Verlaine slumped back suddenly, her face a ghastly grey. The two doctors moved forward discreetly.

‘I must ask you to leave for the moment, sir,’ the elder of the two doctors said. ‘Ms Verlaine’s condition will only improve given rest.’

‘I must out of here as soon as possible,’ Verlaine was hissing weakly as Tarrant and Dawson left the ward. ‘I must get back in control...’

‘What’s this about mutiny, Dawson?’ Tarrant demanded, as they entered the refectory. ‘Can’t we rely on our own security forces?’

Dawson looked nervous. ‘I thought it better to keep the full extent of the situation from the home secretary,’ he said. ‘But there are reports of running gun battles between rival factions of soldiers...’

Tarrant cursed. This was getting beyond joke. The plan was that the anti-social elements would receive a well-deserved thrashing, learn their lesson, learn that the government was in control and that rebellion would not be tolerated. Now it seemed that soldiers of the British Army were too squeamish to carry this through. Feeling low, he sipped at the coffee the waitress brought him. Then he slammed it down, cracking the saucer, and rose.

'Be with you in a moment, Dawson,' he said unsteadily, and hurried towards the door marked TOILETS.

Inside a cubicle, he produced a bag of coke and prepared it on the cistern top. As he inhaled the lines through a rolled up banknote, he found himself trembling. He sat down on the toilet seat and leant against the cistern, waiting for the glorious, godlike waves of self-assurance to rush through his system.

It had all seemed so simple when he conceived the plan. For too long had anti-social elements gnawed at the body politic, taken the unpopularity of government as an excuse to riot and rampage. They wanted a fight. Why not give it to them? So the liberals would whinge, as liberals do, about a few deaths. But what else could they expect? The country was a democracy; democracy was designed to take into account people's views. There was no excuse to threaten the country's security in this way. Things needed tightening up, cracking down. The anti-social elements needed to be taught a valuable lesson. And Tarrant was the man to engineer it all, working from the shadows, the *éminence grise*, the power behind the throne.

Right now, things were on a knife-edge. They could go either way. But what did it matter? By the time this uprising was quelled, even the limp-wristed liberals would no longer think it wise to foment unrest and excuse anti-social behaviour.

Filled with that glorious confidence that only coke could bring him, Tarrant swept out of the toilet cubicle and rejoined Dawson in the refectory. Dawson was sipping coffee while reading a text on his phone with a dismayed expression on his face.

'Time to return to the home secretary, Dawson,' Tarrant said, and the big man rose and followed him from the refectory. 'Texting the girlfriend?' he added as they ascended the stairs.

Dawson's face was bleak. 'More news just in,' he said. 'Seems the mutiny is growing. The security forces are on the rampage. Several high-ranking officers are unaccounted for. There's been another street battle between rival army units. Widespread looting and destruction. Fires are raging in Piccadilly but fire crews have been unable to deal with it because they say they've been fired on by soldiers.'

Tarrant waved his hands airily as they entered. 'The home secretary will give the police more powers. We have the private security contractors. They should be able to quell the mutiny. What about the looters?'

'It seems that the looters are the least of our problems,' a familiar voice slurred from the bed.

Verlaine was sitting up, her face ruddier than before. A laptop was propped on her knees. As Tarrant approached, she pressed a button and then shut it.

'The news is bad,' she added. 'Things were bad enough after the riots earlier in the week, now they are truly getting out of control. If we lose control of the Army, we could be facing revolution!'

Tarrant smiled blandly. 'Come on, home secretary,' he said. 'This isn't some tin-pot banana republic. This is Britain.'

'I've been contacted by the PM by videophone,' she snapped. 'The government is outraged by the developing situation. The PM was highly critical of my handling of the affair. He wants me to resign.'

Tarrant's mind raced. He had spent time and patience turning Verlaine into a pliable tool in his hands. Another home secretary would not be as easily influenced.

'That's absurd,' he gabbled hastily. 'The assassination attempt has made it hard for you to do your job as best you may, but only you are capable of saving the situation. You know what is happening. Another home secretary would be, would be... incapable of dealing with this unrest...' He knew he wasn't making much sense. It was the coke. Briefly, he was convinced everyone else knew, and they were secretly laughing at him.

Dawson had received another message. He looked up. 'Sorry to interrupt,' he said suddenly,

‘but the security team that was sent in to investigate the shooting... they’ve turned up some evidence.’

‘What?’ Verlaine demanded.

‘CCTV footage identified a vehicle seen leaving the scene minutes later,’ Dawson said. ‘It’s registered in the name of one of Professor Quigley’s former students. And we have footage of what is believed to be the assassin himself coming down a fire escape from the building that was the source of the shot. The building itself has been investigated, and sniper rifle was discovered on the roof...’

‘What?’ Tarrant shouted. Verlaine and Dawson both stared at him. ‘They left evidence like that? The bunglers!’ He struggled to calm down.

‘The team believe that the weapon was bought on the black market several months ago,’ Dawson added. ‘Tests have been made and most of the evidence has been identified as belonging to a man in his mid-twenties, another former student of Professor Quigley. Got onto the DNA database after a night in the cells for drunk-and-disorderly when still a student. Seems he’s been a sleeper for the last few years, working in retail apparently. He’s called Will Youds.’

Verlaine’s face twisted. ‘I *will* take control of the situation...’ she breathed venomously. She looked up coldly. ‘Tarrant, I have a mission for you.’

‘Yes, home secretary?’

‘Hunt down Will Youds and bring him to me.’ She gave a cold, humourless smile. ‘Dead or alive, Tarrant. Dead or alive.’

‘But before that, there’s something else I want you to arrange.’

SUPER DUPER by James Rhodes

Chapter Twenty

If a benevolent and omnipotent God had cared enough to get his fat arse out of bed and see what the hell was going on in England this is what he would have seen. 95% of the adult population had simply faded away. 65% of the children of the country had passed away due to illness as a result of unhygienic living conditions and a further 12% had expired due to the slouch. There was no government and a girl called Corrine had gone from having no idea that she was related to anyone in the monarchy to being the only surviving member of royal family. She had no idea that this was the case either, nor would she have set any store by it if she had known. Corrine had no idea that her mother had died or that her father's new girlfriend was, against the odds for her age, already pregnant.

If that benevolent God were to look down on the situation and to pick a hero, he would choose a man who had overcome crippling laziness to do a few things to lead humanity back on the right track. He would look down on Sean and want to give him some kind of a poke that things were about to get tricky and that it was time to move on. Given that I am writing this story and have created the England that it is set in and given that I am the sort of person who in day to day life is so shockingly inept that he can barely buy cereal without enraging somebody, I am going to assume the responsibilities of that God and send Sean on his way.

“Sean, Sean,” I whisper.

Sean looks up from the chair that I previously dumped him on; completely unaware that freewill is a total illusion and believing that he just happened to wake up at that time. He opens his eyes and sees only the bright lights of the fluorescence. They make him feel seasick and uncomfortable as if someone is writing him in the present tense. He takes a deep sigh and slips back into a past tense third person narrative.

There was definitely something wrong with the light, thought Sean. He was acutely aware that he had a head injury and for a moment, he speculated that he was hallucinating. He stared up at the bright florescent light that had only seconds before been dulling his filling his retinas with whiteness as if their sole intent was to Tipex out with pupils. Now, the brightness was less punishing, sicklier and more colourful. It did not go away when he blinked his eyes, it became brighter. Even in his confused state of mind, Sean was pretty clear-minded about the fact that electric lights did not normally behave that way. Almost unconsciously, Sean stood up to take a closer look at the light.

“This is no ordinary light,” said Sean. “It isn't giving off any illumination at all.”

Sean shook his head, bewildered, and then remembered the existence of light switches. It did not take Sean long to locate the nearest light switch and then to discover that it was not functioning in the way that light switches had been intended to function.

Sean sighed; the thinking was tiring him out. He was just about to sit down when a sudden thought struck him.

“The electricity!”

A sudden wave of energy hit Sean; he opened the nearest door and looked frantically for a switch of some kind. A Hoover abandoned in the corridor caught Sean’s eye. Sean kicked the switch of it with his foot; it resolutely refused to come on. He opened the nearest door and to his surprise he found a kitchen in which contained a kettle, his ex-girlfriend and a small child. Sean attempted to turn on the light to the room, the switch made a clicking sound but that was all. The switch of the kettle yielded similar results. Sean looked around desperately for something else to turn on without waking up the two girls. At that moment, there was a loud crashing sound as if someone had just needlessly kicked down an unlocked door.

Corrine’s eyes opened wide and she sat bolt upright like a vampire in a Hammer film.

“Sean, you’re OK.”

“There’s no electricity.”

Corrine stood up and threw her arms around Sean. A loud voice bellowed.

“ELAINE.”

Ellie did not wake up as she was too tired.

Corrine pushed past Sean and strode purposefully in the direction of the shout. Sean shrugged and ambled after her.

As Corrine burst through the door to the reception of the police station, a massive arm knocked her sideways. Sean stepped forward to pick her up and the same massive arm gripped him around the throat.

“What have you done with my daughter,” asked the massive arm.

Sean waved his hands in the air by which he meant to communicate that if his air supply wasn’t so restricted he would happily give the information to the massive arm. However the massive arm didn’t seem to have any intent of loosening its grip. Therefore Sean’s only recourse was to panic and try and pull away from the arm. The energy he expended in doing so, combined with his weakened state and natural lethargy, made Sean’s grip on consciousness slide quickly to a blue haze.

From the corner of the blue haze, Sean witnessed his best friend’s fist smash heavily into the side of the head that was at the end of the massive arm. The massive arm loosened its grip and Biggy turned on his heels to face The Don.

Sean had never seen The Don look angry before. It was a subtle change in his face and it did not

look like rage it looked like deadness. He was a lot shorter than Biggy but considerably more bulky. As Biggy swung around to face him, the sole of The Don's left foot smashed down across the bridge of Biggy's nose. Biggy fell backwards, from the left side Jon stepped forward and hit The Don with a wooden chair. The Don didn't seem to notice the impact at all. He didn't even acknowledge Jon's presence.

The Don stepped forward and he sunk all the force of the step into a kick that levelled Biggy to the ground. Then he turned to look at Jon. Jon had just raised the chair for a second blow, he didn't hesitate to bring it down on The Don. The chair hit the floor, The Don had stepped out of the way, he now stepped forward with a barrage of punches. After about the fourth blow, Jon hit the foetal position and covered his head. Biggy was up again, this time he was pointing a handgun.

The Don lifted his arms in sheer defeat. Biggy walked up to him and hit him above the eye with the handle of the gun. The Don took the blow without so much as flinching. Biggy shoved the gun right up in The Don's face. The Don took a nervous step backwards.

"Look at the hard man," Biggy turned to check that Jon was paying attention. "Big tough fella, aren't you?"

The Don stared stoically into Biggy's eyes.

"I asked you a fucking question."

Biggy pulled the trigger backwards so that the pre set striker was primed.

"Big, hard, fucking tough as shit bastard aren't you?"

"I'm not hard," said The Don. "I'm just much stronger than you."

"You hear that?"

Jon nodded.

"Shall I kill him?"

Biggy didn't wait for an answer.

"I'm going to do it. I'm going to shoot his fucking face off right now unless some fucking person tells me where my fucking daughter is."

"She's here."

Corrine had her arm around Ellie. Ellie was stood near the door, not far away from Smith who had regained unconsciousness. Ellie's head was buried into Corrine's chest. The girl did not look up to see her dad.

BABBAGE MUST DIE by Gavin Chappell

Chapter Twenty

Brian hurt.

He didn't know much else. He could feel that he was lying on something hard yet wet and yielding. The pungent smell of rot was in his nostrils; rotting fish. It made him gag. Suddenly he was on his side, emptying his guts. Incautiously, he opened his eyes a slit. The pale, hazy light sliced into his mind like a razor and he shut them hastily. He realised he could hear distant voices. Or maybe the cries of gulls.

His entire body was one massive, throbbing ache. His head ached like he had the world's worst migraine, and his back felt like a massive bruise. He heard someone groaning, and wished they'd shut up. They didn't. He was slowly summoning up the presence of mind to get up and tell them that people were trying to sleep when he realised he recognised the voice.

It was him.

He shut up and lay there. It felt like wet sand beneath him. He could hear the hiss of surf. Why was he lying on wet sand? Something cold and wet began to tug at his legs. Irritably, he muttered at it to leave him alone. Insistently, it pulled at him. Then his legs were soaking wet. It felt like he'd lost control of his bladder.

Warily, he opened one eye and looked down. He lay half in and half out of the water, on the tideline. Looming over him was a vast, black, weed-encrusted shape that blocked out the sky. He stared at it incredulously for what seemed like a long time. Finally, everything fell into place. It was his ship that loomed above him, his ship wrecked somewhere on the English coast. He was lying on the edge of the sands, and the tide was coming in.

The realisation that he might be dragged out to sea again gave him sufficient adrenalin for him to heave himself to his feet. He gazed around himself in bewilderment.

The beach stretched into the distance on either side, in the lee of white chalk cliffs that bent round to form a cove. The wreck of the *Black Flag*, with its prow buried in the sand offshore and its stern towering above him, dominated the scene. The sands were strewn with boxes and barrels and shattered spars. Also corpses. Poorly-clad figures moved among the wreckage, greedily gathering together anything of value. A small group investigating a chest half buried in the sand nearby had turned at his rising and they were staring at him. To Brian's confusion, they looked like a family group. What a great day out at the seaside, looting the bodies of the dead!

'Should we help him?' a thin-faced, wispy haired woman asked.

A large, bearded man in a tattered frock-coat and grimy cravat shook his head.

'You knows the law,' he said. 'If any of them is alive, we ain't entitled to salvage.'

He produced a heavy club and approached Brian determinedly.

Brian wasn't in the right frame of mind for aggro. He rested his hands on his belt and his left hand brushed against the hilt of his cutlass. He looked down at it, then back at the big man. Manfully, he drew the sword and brandished it at them.

'Go on, clear off!' he muttered. 'Get out of it!'

‘Now then, young gennelman,’ the big man said, ‘we’s entitled to our share of wreck, if no one survives. So you’d better just make peace with your Maker.’

‘Who’s got the cutlass?’ Brian asked.

The big man nodded philosophically. ‘Good point, young gennelman. Maybe you could look the other way while we take our share.’

In a flash, Brian recognised the chest they had been investigating.

‘No you don’t!’ he said firmly, pointing his cutlass at the big man. ‘Get moving!’

Placatingly, the big man said, ‘Alright then, alright. We’ll find our own patch.’

Brian watched the family moved off down the beach. He staggered over to the chest and lay down beside it. He’d recognised the chest alright. He’d lugged it off the wrecked cargo ship. It was still intact. He tried to shift it. Still heavy. Not surprising, since it contained the pay for an entire regiment.

He was feeling weak. Looking up, he saw the cliffs spin above him. For a moment, he saw a familiar figure ascending high above. It appeared briefly on the skyline. Brian nodded to himself. It was Ada.

He tried to call her name, but couldn’t summon up the energy. He flopped back over the chest and curled up round it. He wondered if Puss had survived the wreck. Poor cat.

When Brian next awoke, it was dark. The crash of the surf had receded, so the tide must have gone out. A fire was burning a short way down the beach. Brian decided to get up and investigate. Before he did so, he covered the chest up in the sand.

Staggering over to the fire, he found that it was guttering for lack of fuel. It seemed to have been made from wrecked timbers. Presumably, the wreckers he’d seen before had built it while they were still plundering the ship and they’d left it to burn down. Still, it was warmer than lying out on the cold sand. Although he was still in pain, particularly when he moved, he managed to gather enough wreckage to get the fire blazing. More to the point, he found a keg of rum, which he managed to open with his trusty cutlass. Its anaesthetic qualities proved to be superb.

Next morning, Brian rose from beside the cold ashes. He still felt a bit flaky, though he wasn’t sure if that was concussion or rum. The sands were clearer now, due to the locals’ litter-gathering and private salvage operations. A few corpses bobbed in the surf.

Propping himself up with a broken spar, Brian went to investigate them. Not just morbid curiosity. He had vague memories of seeing that Ada had survived. Who else, though?

He found Boone. Definitely dead; his neck was broken. That was what he got for mutinying. Keane was also feeding the fishes or at least attracting the curiosity of a couple of crabs. Brian couldn’t find Piper though. That was worrying. Was he with Davy Jones? Or had he also survived? If he had, he was bound to insist on doing his duty and ensuring he saw that Brian was hanged for piracy.

Brian pondered his next move. It looked like he was reasonably safe here, for the moment, but the wreck was bound to attract unwelcome attention from the authorities, eventually. He’d really have to find out where Ada had gone. And when he’d found her, they’d have to make sure they got back to the cellar in time. They could always stop off to assassinate Babbage, of course, but Brian would have to find a new pistol. The sea had done for the guns he’d had aboard.

He surveyed the wreck of the *Black Flag* rather morosely. There went his career as a pirate captain. Still, it had been more profitable than most jobs. He inspected the chest. It was filled with cash. Marvellous. That would smooth the way for him in future. Surely there was enough here to persuade any hanging judge that Brian should be allowed to go free. Question was, how was he to carry all this with him? Well, obviously he couldn't. But he could find a secure place to conceal it, take what he could carry, and return for the rest of his pirate loot as and when.

He found a leather bag that would do as a wallet and filled it with a good mixture of currency; not all of it small change. If he took as much as he could with him, he might well find it easy to get across the country from wherever he was. As long as he didn't get held up by highwaymen or something.

A bit more rum down him, and he felt ready to climb the cliffs and find out just where he was. As he searched for a path up, having concealed the chest in a small cave he'd found down the beach, he found himself concocting a cunning plan.

A path up the cliffs led to a wide expanse of fields. A small village was visible across the fields, and he began to make his way towards it.

Although it was certainly a small village, Brian found a coaching inn in the square. He entered the common room and ordered himself a glass of wine. Normally he'd prefer a pint of ale, but the wine – and the assumed French accent – went with his disguise.

'Begging your pardon, sir,' said the innkeeper, 'but you sound like a French gennelman. We's at war with Bony-party, you know.'

Brian smacked him across the back, then kissed him on both cheeks. 'Good man! Good man!' he said enthusiastically. '*Sacre bleu!* I, too, am at war with Bonaparte!'

One of the drinkers in the common room looked curious. 'But ain't you a French gennelman, then?' he asked.

Brian slammed down his wine. 'I am French, that's true!' he said. 'My family were all guillotined in the Revolution. Ever since, I have sworn to get my revenge on these republican fools! For I,' he announced grandly, 'am the Count of Monte Carlo!'

'So what brings you to my humble establishment?' the innkeeper asked, eyeing Brian's tattered appearance.

'I was captured by pirates in Bonaparte's pay,' he told them glibly. 'I broke free and fought them. During the fight, their ship was wrecked on the shore. My sister was with me. I'm looking for her.'

'Oh, she was here,' the innkeeper said. 'The parson found her.'

'Is she staying at the parsonage, then?' Brian asked excitedly.

'She was,' the innkeeper said, 'but Parson took her on the coach to London.'

Brian stared at him. He almost forgot to keep up his French accent.

'She's gone to London?' he said. 'Why? Do you know where she's staying?'

'We don't interfere in Parson's business,' the innkeeper replied, 'and he don't interfere in ours. As long as that's clear, he's welcome to a bit of cheap rum or brandy when the coast's clear.'

This place was clearly a hotbed of smuggling and wrecking, and normally Brian would find that quite interesting, but right now he was more interested in what had happened to Ada. It looked like the

parson had gone with her, so he couldn't very well question him. Unless he waited for the man to come back. But that would be wasting time. Only one thing for it; he would have to make his entrance into London society.

'I intend to follow my sister to London,' he told them. 'As you see, I lost most of my possessions to the pirates and the wreck. I require a servant and a gentleman's outfitters, rooms for the night and then a coach to London. If you can arrange this for me, innkeeper, you will not find me ungrateful.' He pressed a shilling into the innkeeper's clammy grasp.

'I'll see what I can do,' the innkeeper rumbled.

Brian grinned. He was enjoying playing the exiled French aristo. It was good to have money, too. Seemed that was the most important thing in Regency England. Without money, you were up the creek and no mistake; with it, doors started opening.

He sat back in a private booth and drank his way through a bottle of wine. He was still in a fair bit of pain from being shipwrecked, and alcohol seemed to be the best anaesthetic in this century. By the time the innkeeper had arranged matters for him, he was feeling pretty positive about things.

After a few hours a fussy little tailor turned up, brought in at some expense from the nearby market town. He took Brian's measurements in the best rooms in the inn, which the innkeeper had provided in return for further munificence, deplored his sea-stained nautical garb, then vanished, reappearing some time later with some off the peg clothes, 'With my compliments,' he oozed, 'and I will have sir suitably attired by tomorrow morning.' He withdrew.

There was a scratch at the door.

'Enter,' Brian called, still admiring himself in the fly-specked mirror. If this was off-the-peg, he couldn't wait to see the tailor-made outfit tomorrow.

'If yer please, sir,' said a pimply youth who entered, holding his hat in his hands, 'the innkeeper said there was a gennelman lookin' for a manservant.'

Brian strutted imperiously up to the lad.

'Your name?'

'Humphrey Kemp, sir,' the youth replied.

'You look unkempt, Humphrey Kemp,' said Brian. 'And you'll address me as milord. Didn't the innkeeper tell you? I am the Count of Monte Carlo!'

Humphrey sniffed. 'E did say you was a Frog, milord,' he said, unabashed. 'Says you escaped the guillotine and got captured by pirates.'

'That's correct,' Brian replied. 'And now I am going to London in search of my sister.'

'Cor,' said Humphrey enthusiastically. 'Sounds like somethin' from a book by Mrs Radcliffe, milord.'

'You can read?' Brian asked, surprised.

'Yes, milord,' Humphrey replied. 'Parson learned me me letters. I can't write proper, like, but I can read! I'll read anythin', milord, but I do like stories of pirates and adventure. You've had such an excitin' life if what the innkeeper says is right, milord.'

Brian smiled and nodded smugly. 'I suppose it must sound that way to a young chap like yourself,' he said. Actually, the lad had a point. Apart from the previous two decades or so, which had been pretty dull, he'd had a pretty exciting time of it, though it hadn't seemed like it at the time. He preferred being rich to having adventures, though. At least the adventure seemed to have abated for the moment. Just right now, he could relax, lie back, drink and stuff himself while masquerading as a French aristo and having everyone grovelling to him. He wondered if there were any pretty tavern wenches willing to have their heads turned by a mysterious foreign adventurer...

That made him think of Ada, though. She wouldn't approve. Where had she got to? Why had she run off with this parson instead of searching for him? Leaving him here on this barren coast?

Then he fell to thinking about Boone and the others who hadn't survived the wreck. And Piper. Where was he? Was he alive or dead? Brian realised he was lucky to have survived, although the pain he was in caused him to doubt that momentarily.

He realised that Humphrey was still standing there expectantly, waiting for orders.

'Humphrey,' he said. 'Get down to the innkeeper and ask him to have some food sent up to my rooms. And another bottle or two of wine.'

'Yes milord,' said Humphrey. 'What would you like to eat?'

'Beef,' said Brian, salivating at the notion. 'Roast beef with all the trimmings. Followed by apple pie and cheese. And the wine should be the best in the cellar. I've lived on grog and hardtack for months.' He wasn't even sure quite how many months. Seemed like forever. 'Tomorrow I go looking for my sister. Tonight, I'm going to enjoy myself.'

**SCHLOCK! CLASSIC SERIAL: 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 commonplace 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.

SCHLOCK! CLASSIC SERIAL: BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XX

Moonlight upon Earth so gently shines to make romantic a lover's smile! But the reality of the Lunar night is cold beyond human belief. Cold and darkly silent. Grim desolation. Awesome. Majestic. A frowning majesty that even to the most intrepid human beholder is inconceivably forbidding.

And there were humans here now. On this tumbled plain, between Archimedes and the mountains, one small crater amid the million of its fellows was distinguished this night by the presence of humans. The Grantline camp! It huddled in the deepest purple shadows on the side of a bowl-like pit, a crudely circular orifice with a scant two miles across its rippling rim. There was faint light here to mark the presence of the living intruders. The blue glow radiance of Morrell tube lights under a spread of glassite.

The Grantline camp stood midway up one of the inner cliff walls of the little crater. The broken, rock-strewn floor, two miles wide, lay five hundred feet below the camp. Behind it, the jagged, precipitous cliff rose another five hundred to the heights of the upper rim. A broad level shelf hung midway up the cliff, and upon it Grantline had built his little group of glassite dome shelters. Viewed from above there was the darkly purple crater floor, the upflung circular rim where the Earthlight tinged the spires and crags with yellow sheen; and on the shelf, like a huddled group of birds' nests, Grantline's domes hung and gazed down upon the inner valley.

The air here on the Moon surface was negligible—a scant one five-thousandth of the atmospheric pressure at the sea level on Earth. But within the glassite shelter, a normal Earth pressure must be maintained. Rigidly braced double walls to withstand the explosive tendency, with no external pressure to counteract it. A tremendous necessity for mechanical equipment had burdened Grantline's small ship to capacity. The chemistry of manufactured air, the pressure equalizers, renewers, respirators, the lighting and temperature maintenance of a space-flyer was here.

There was this main Grantline building, stretched low and rectangular along the front edge of the ledge. Within it were living rooms, mess hall and kitchen. Fifty feet behind it, connected by a narrow passage of glassite, was a similar though smaller structure. The mechanical control rooms, with their humming, vibrating mechanisms were here. And an instrument room with signaling apparatus, senders, receivers, mirror-grids and audiphones of several varieties. And an electro-telescope, small but modern, with dome overhead like a little Earth observatory.

From this instrument building, beside the connecting pedestrian passage, wire cables for light, and air tubes and strings and bundles of instrument wires ran to the main structure—gray snakes upon the porous, gray Lunar rock.

The third building seemed a lean-to banked against the cliff wall, a slanting shed-wall of glassite fifty feet high and two hundred in length. Under it, for months Grantline's bores had dug into the cliff. Braced tunnels were here, penetrating back and downward into the vein of rock.

The work was over. The borers had been dismantled and packed away. At one end of the cliff the mining equipment lay piled in a litter. There was a heap of discarded ore where Grantline had carted

and dumped it after his first crude refining process had yielded it as waste. The ore slag lay like gray powder flakes strewn down the cliff. Trucks and ore carts along the ledge stood discarded, mute evidence of the weeks and months of work these helmeted miners had undergone, struggling upon this airless, frowning world.

But now all that was finished. The catalytic ore was sufficiently concentrated. It lay—this treasure—in a seventy foot pile behind the glassite lean-to, with a cage of wires over it and an insulation barrage hiding its presence.

The ore shelter was dark; the other two buildings were lighted. And there were small lights mounted at intervals about the camp and along the edge of the ledge. A spider ladder, with tiny platforms some twenty feet one above the other, hung precariously to the cliff-face. It descended the five hundred feet to the crater floor; and, behind the camp, it mounted the jagged cliff-face to the upper rim height, where a small observatory platform was placed.

Such was the outer aspect of the Grantline Treasure Camp near the beginning of this Lunar night, when, unknown to Grantline and his men, the Planetara with its brigands was approaching. The night was perhaps a sixth advanced. Full night. No breath of cloud to mar the brilliant starry heavens. The quadrant Earth hung poised like a giant mellow moon over Grantline's crater. A bright Earth, yet no air was here on this Lunar surface to spread its light. Only a glow, mingling with the spots of blue tube light on the poles along the cliff, and the radiance from the lighted buildings.

No evidence of movement showed about the silent camp. Then a pressure door in an end of the main building opened its tiny series of locks. A bent figure came out. The lock closed. The figure straightened and gazed about the camp. Grotesque, bloated semblance of a man! Helmeted, with rounded dome hood, suggestion of an ancient sea diver, yet goggled and trunked like a gas-masked fighter of the twentieth century.

He stopped presently and disconnected metal weights which were upon his shoes.

Then he stood erect again, and with giant strides bounded along the cliff. Fantastic figure in the blue lit gloom! A child's dream of crags and rocks and strange lights with a single monstrous figure in seven league boots.

He went the length of the ledge with his twenty foot strides, inspected the lights, and made adjustments. Came back, and climbed with agile, bounding leaps up the spider ladder to the dome of the crater top. A light flashed on up there. Then it was extinguished.

The goggled, bloated figure came leaping down after a moment. Grantline's exterior watchman making his rounds. He came back to the main building. Fastened the weights on his shoes. Signaled.

The lock opened. The figure went inside.

It was early evening. After the dinner hour and before the time of sleep according to the camp routine Grantline was maintaining. Nine p.m. of Earth Eastern American time, recorded now upon his Earth chronometer. In the living room of the main building Johnny Grantline sat with a dozen of his men dispersed about the room, whiling away as best they could the lonesome hours.

"All as usual. This cursed Moon! When I get home—if I ever do—"

"Say your say, Wilks. But you'll spend your share of the gold leaf and thank your constellations that you had your chance to make it."

"Let him alone! Come on, Wilks, take a hand here. This game is not any good with three."

The man who had been outside flung his hissing helmet recklessly to the floor and unsealed his suit. "Here, get me out of this. No, I won't play. I can't play your cursed game with nothing at stake!"

A laugh went up at the sharp look Johnny Grantline flung from where he sat reading in a corner of the room.

"Commander's orders. No gambling gold leafers tolerated here."

"Play the game, Wilks," Grantline said quietly. "We all know it's infernal—this doing nothing."

"He's been struck by Earthlight," another man laughed. "Commander, I told you not to let that guy Wilks out at night."

A rough but good-natured lot of men. Jolly and raucous by nature in their leisure hours. But there was too much leisure here now. Their mirth had a hollow sound. In older times, explorers of the frozen Polar zones had to cope with inactivity, loneliness and despair. But at least they were on their native world. The grimness of the Moon was eating into the courage of Grantline's men. An unreality here. A weirdness. These fantastic crags. The deadly silence. The nights, almost two weeks of Earth time in length, congealed by the deadly frigidity of space. The days of black sky, blazing stars and flaming Sun, with no atmosphere to diffuse the Sun's heat radiating so swiftly from the naked Lunar surface that the outer temperature still was cold. And day and night, always the beloved Earth disc hanging poised up near the zenith. From thinnest crescent to full Earth, then back to crescent.

All so abnormal, irrational, disturbing to human senses.

With the mining work over, an irritability grew upon Grantline's men. And perhaps since the human mind is so wonderful, elusive a thing, there lay upon these men an indefinable sense of disaster. Johnny Grantline felt it. He thought about it now as he sat in the room corner watching Wilks being forced into the plaget game, and he found the premonition strong within him. Unreasonably, ominous depression! Barring the accident which had disabled his little spaceship when they reached this small crater hole, his expedition had gone well. His instruments, and the information he had from the former explorers, had enabled him to pick up the catalyst vein with only one month of search.

The vein had now been exhausted; but the treasure was here—enough to supply every need on his Earth! Nothing was left but to wait for the Planetara. The men were talking of that now.

"She ought to be well midway from Ferrok-Shahn by now. When do you figure she'll be back here and signal us?"

"Twenty days. Give her another five now to Mars, and five in port. That's ten. We'll pick her signals in three weeks, mark me!"

"Three weeks. Just give me three weeks of reasonable sunrise and sunset! This cursed Moon! You mean, Williams, next daylight."

"Ha! He's inventing a Lunar language. You'll be a Moon man yet."

Olaf Swenson, the big blond fellow from the Scandia fiords, came and flung himself down beside Grantline.

"Ay tank they bane without enough to do, Commander ——"

"Three weeks isn't very long, Ole."

"No. Maybe not."

From across the room somebody was saying, "If the Comet hadn't smashed on us, damn me but I'd ask the Commander to let some of us take her back."

"Shut up, Billy. She is smashed."

"You all agreed to things as they are," Johnny said shortly. "We all took the same chances—voluntarily."

A dynamic little fellow, this Johnny Grantline. Short of temper sometimes, but always just, and a perfect leader of men. In stature he was almost as small as Snap. But he was thick-set, with a smooth-shaven, keen-eyed, square-jawed face; and a shock of brown tousled hair. A man of thirty-five, though the decision of his manner, the quiet dominance of his voice made him seem older. He stood up now, surveying the blue lit glassite room with its low ceiling close overhead. He was bow-legged; in movement he seemed to roll with a stiff-legged gait like some sea captains of former days on the deck of his swaying ship. Odd looking figure! Heavy flannel shirt and trousers, boots heavily weighted, and bulky metal-loaded belt strapped about his waist.

He grinned at Swenson. "When the time comes to divide this treasure, everyone will be happy, Ole."

The treasure was estimated to be the equivalent of ninety millions in gold leaf. A hundred and ten millions in the gross as it now stood, with twenty millions to be deducted by the Federated Refiners for reducing it to the standard purity for commercial use. Ninety millions, with only a million and a half to come off for expedition expenses, and the Planetara's share another million. A nice little stake.

Grantline strode across the room with his rolling gait.

"Cheer up, boys. Who's winning there? I say, you fellows——"

An audiphone buzzer interrupted him, a call from the duty man in the instrument room of the

nearby building.

Grantline clicked the receiver. The room fell into silence. Any call was unusual—nothing ever happened here in the camp.

The duty man's voice sounded over the room.

"Signals coming! Not clear. Will you come over, Commander?"

Signals!

It was never Grantline's way to enforce needless discipline. He offered no objection when every man in the camp rushed through the connecting passages. They crowded the instrument room where the tense duty man sat bending over his radio receivers. The mirrors were swaying.

The duty man looked up and met Grantline's gaze.

"I ran it up to the highest intensity, Commander. We ought to get it—"

"Low scale, Peter?"

"Yes. Weakest infra-red. I'm bringing it up, even though it uses too much of our power."

"Get it," said Grantline shortly.

"I got one slight television swing a minute ago—then it faded. I think it's the Planetara."

"Planetara!" The crowding group of men chorused. How could it be the Planetara?

But it was. The call came in presently. Unmistakably the Planetara, turned back now from her course to Ferrok-Shahn.

"How far away, Peter?"

The duty man consulted the needles of his dial scale. "Close! Very weak infra-red. But close. Around thirty thousand miles, maybe. It's Snap Dean calling."

The Planetara here within thirty thousand miles! Excitement and pleasure swept the room. The Planetara had for so long been awaited eagerly!

The excitement communicated to Grantline. It was unlike him to be incautious; yet now with no thought save that some unforeseen and pleasing circumstance had brought the Planetara ahead of time; incautious, Grantline certainly was!

"Raise the barrage."

"I'll go. My suit is here."

A willing volunteer rushed out to the shed.

"Can you send, Peter?" Grantline demanded.

"Yes. With more power."

"Use it."

Johnny dictated the message of his location which we received. In his incautious excitement he ignored the secret code.

An interval passed. No message had come from us—just Snap's routine signal in the weak infra-red, which we hoped Grantline would not get.

The men crowding Grantline's instrument room waited in tense silence. Then Grantline tried the television again. Its current weakened the lights with the drain upon the distributors, and cooled the room with a sudden deadly chill as the Erentz insulating system slowed down.

The duty man looked frightened. "You'll bulge out our walls, Commander. The internal pressure —"

"We'll chance it."

They picked up the image of the Planetara. It shone clear on the grid—the segment of star-field with a tiny cigar-shaped blob. Clear enough to be unmistakable. The Planetara! Here now, over the Moon, almost directly overhead, poised at what the altimeter scale showed to be a fraction under thirty thousand miles.

The men gazed in awed silence. The Planetara coming....

But the altimeter needle was motionless. The Planetara was hanging poised.

A sudden gasp went about the room. The men stood with whitening faces, gazing at the Planetara's image. And at the altimeter's needle. It was moving now. The Planetara was descending. But not with an orderly swoop.

The grid showed the ship clearly. The bow tilted up, then dipped down. But then in a moment it swung up again. The ship turned partly over. Righted itself. Then swayed again, drunkenly.

The watching men were stricken in horrified silence. The Planetara's image momentarily, horribly, grew larger. Swaying. Then turning completely over, rotating slowly end over end.

The Planetara, out of control, was falling!

AT THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH by Gavin Chappell

2

‘Welcome!’

As the SS men thrust the three teenagers and their dog through the archway in the building that stood before the pyramid, a figure looked up from inspecting a high doorway that dominated the far wall.

‘Welcome,’ the tall, lean man repeated, his voice echoing and re-echoing around the pillared hall. ‘Welcome to the City of Agarth!’

‘Kohl,’ said Eloise. ‘So you survived the wreck of the submersible?’ The SS soldiers urged them on across the vast marble floor.

‘I must admit,’ Kohl replied, ‘that on hope of your own survival I had given up. I see your numbers have been thinned, regardless. Survival of the fittest?’

‘Och, you don’t care about us,’ Hamish growled. ‘Don’t try to pretend you do!’

As the SS men brought them to a halt before Kohl, Eloise added; ‘Where did you get these goons, anyway? These aren’t your Rudolf Hess clones.’

‘No, indeed,’ Kohl replied. ‘These are in fact mere chance acquaintances.’ He clicked his tongue. ‘But I forget myself. May I introduce you to the Black Order of Shamballah?’

At his words, the silent SS men stood to attention and saluted.

‘Aren’t they marvellous?’ Kohl laughed. ‘And so very loyal to the cause. They’ve been here since 1945. The Führer despatched them here from Neuschwäbenland when he saw the way the wind was blowing. Ever since, these Guardians of the Grail have been awaiting the coming of the Spear-Bearer.’ A sharp expression crossed his face. ‘You have the Spear, do you not?’

‘Where is the Grail?’ Eloise demanded. She checked herself. ‘The Cauldron of Rebirth, I mean.’

‘It is within,’ Kohl replied. ‘All we need to open those doors and perform the ritual that will give us the Waters of the Cauldron is the Spear.’ His face purpled with rage. ‘Now! Where - is - the - Spear?’ Eloise and Hamish were silent.

Nick looked at them. He looked back at the wrathful Nazi.

‘Er, we left it back at the beach,’ he said. ‘We were hunting, you see, and Eloise didn’t reckon we should take a mystical artefact hunting. But we brought my dog. I call him Timmy...’

‘Silence!’ Kohl barked. One of the SS men clubbed Nick to the ground with his gun butt. Nick’s grip on Timmy’s leash slipped and the dog went bounding away out of the hall.

Nick rose, looking stricken. ‘Ow!’ he said to the SS man. ‘What did you do that for?’ He turned towards Timmy. ‘Come back, you daft mutt! Heel! Fuckin’ hell,’ he went on, as Timmy vanished through the archway, ‘talk about Man’s best friend!’

‘That - is - enough!’ Kohl barked. ‘For the last time! Where did you leave the Spear?’ He glared at Hamish. ‘At the beach? Whereabouts? Are you in league with the subhumans?’

‘Ah’m telling you nuhin’,’ said Hamish defiantly. ‘What subhumans?’

Kohl shuddered. 'Worse degenerates than you!' he said. Briefly, his face showed fear. 'They harried me on my journey from the beach... Worse than Jews. Worse than Gypsies. Worse even than the Welsh...' The three teenagers exchanged glances. They had seen no one during their own journey. Eloise tried to imagine the creatures who might dwell in such a place, then wished she hadn't. Kohl seemed to recollect himself. 'Tell me!'

'Ah'm telling you nuhin'!' Hamish replied. 'Ah'mno gaun back to get it if it means gaun through a forest full of fuckin' apemen!'

Kohl folded his arms. He nodded towards Eloise.

'What if I were to order my minions to thrash your charming friend here senseless?' he asked in an oily voice.

'Go right ahead!' said the Scot coolly. 'Ah'll be next in the queue.' Eloise looked indignant.

'Of course,' said Kohl thoughtfully. 'I was forgetting. At our first meeting you displayed a disturbing lack of chivalry. I wonder what it would take to persuade you. Perhaps if I was simply to hand her over to my men and let them do what they wish with her. The very presence of the Cauldron of Rebirth has bestowed upon them everlasting youth, but sixty years is a long time to go without access to the joy division.'

'Och, Joy Division were shite,' Hamish replied. 'Fuckin' Mancunian keeches!'

Kohl sighed. 'I must use different tactics,' he said. He produced a Biro from his jacket pocket and looked at it thoughtfully. 'Such an inoffensive instrument,' he reflected, 'despite being the invention of a Jew-Hungarian. But it has so many uses.' He fixed his gaze on Hamish. 'Either you bring me the Spear, or I forcibly insert this into your urethra!'

Hamish frowned.

'What's a urethra?' he asked. Eloise told him in a whisper. Hamish went green and gagged. 'Och, well, if you're gaun to put it like that...'

A few minutes later, the expedition set out; Hamish, manacled, surrounded by SS men, departed through the archway. Eloise and Nick watched them go.

'Now,' said Kohl. 'Enough of this. Take these degenerates down to the cells.'

'But what about the subhumans you were talking about?' Eloise demanded. 'What if they attack?'

'Your friend will do his utmost to return,' said Kohl. 'Otherwise he may never see you, his love.'

Eloise frowned. 'You really think he cares?' she murmured.

Kohl sneered. 'Have not you seen the way he looks at you?' he replied. 'But enough of this. Guards! Take them away.'

They were marched away down an echoing corridor of marble and polished stone walls, lit by flaming sconces, down a short flight of steps and into a dungeon. The SS guards unlocked a cell door and flung Nick and Eloise inside.

They sat down on the stone bench on the far side of the wall. The cell was no smaller than the rooms in hostels Nick had stayed in after running away from home, or indeed the various police cells he had known, but at least those had windows. The only light source here came from the door.

Eloise sighed. 'I hope Hamish returns,' she said in a choked voice.

'Never mind Hamish,' said Nick. 'What about Timmy? Little bastard, running out on me like that!'

‘But if Hamish does come back,’ said Eloise dolefully, ‘he’ll come back with the Spear and Kohl will finally be able to use the Cauldron of Rebirth to plunge Europe back into the darkness of Nazi supremacy...’

Nick grunted. He patted his pockets and finally produced his pen-torch.

‘I forgot I had that,’ he said, flicking it on and shining it round the dark cell. He shone it on Eloise’s sombre face.

‘Don’t do that,’ she snapped. Nick turned it away again. Eloise was silent for a while. Then she said, ‘Nick...’

‘Yeah?’ he said.

‘Is Kohl right?’

Nick shone the torch back on her face, frowning. She blinked and repeated her question. Nick turned off the torch and pondered the question.

‘Well, I quite like the Welsh,’ he said after a while.

‘Not that,’ she said. ‘The other thing he said.’

Nick thought. ‘I can’t see life under the Nazis could be any worse than under the Tories,’ he said worriedly. Was Eloise being tempted by the dark side?

‘Not that!’ Eloise snapped. ‘No,’ she said in a small voice. ‘I mean, do you think Hamish fancies me?’

Nick was dumbfounded.

Hamish was whistling to keep his spirits up. At first, he’d thought it was pretty cool, him marching along with a bunch of guys in SS uniforms - pity about the manacles, though. But as they crossed the causeway, his thoughts grew gloomy.

What Kohl had said about subhumans worried him. True, him and his friends had seen nothing of the sort during the journey, but they’d been going pretty quietly. Maybe they had been lucky. But he didn’t reckon a bunch of goose-stepping SS fuckwits would be less conspicuous.

‘I’ve got an idea!’ Nick declared suddenly, flicking on his torch again. ‘Why don’t we knock out the guard and I put on his uniform?’

Eloise looked at him.

‘Aren’t you a little short to be a storm trooper?’ she said.

‘It was just an idea,’ Nick said sulkily.

Hamish and the SS men reached the edge of the acid swamps without further complications. He led them to the pass and down into the cycad forests at a quick hobble.

They marched through the trees. Hamish was not sure they were going the same way he had come, but he said nothing of this to his captors - they couldn’t understand a word he said, no matter how loud he shouted it. And he knew no more German than anyone exposed to ‘*Allo ‘Allo* and *Dad’s Army* in their formative years. So there was no way he could tell them that he thought they were being followed.

Every so often, he had half-glimpsed sinister shapes ducking behind trees on either side of the

path - manlike figures, as far as he could judge, but not necessarily human. Kohl's words repeated themselves in his brain. Subhumans... What could that mean?

He caught himself envisaging shambling apeman cannibals, wielding stone clubs and jawbones. He tried to laugh it off, but definitely, there was something out there.

Something ducked behind a tree up ahead and he halted.

'*Raus!*' shouted the *gruppenführer* automatically and pushed him forward.

'Didnae you see it, you blind Kraut?' Hamish said. 'We're being followed by extras from Planet of the Apes.'

He had seen nothing except movement, but the visions in his mind coloured his perceptions. One thing worse than seeing the bogeyman, he reflected, is not seeing him.

But he noticed that the soldiers were growing warier, glancing about them as they marched on through the cycads. Several had unslung their Sten-guns and they seemed to be anticipating imminent attack. Hamish found himself very unwilling to go on.

He thought he glimpsed another figure about forty yards through the trees.

Manfully, he willed himself to keep marching. At least when they reached the beach, it would be harder for the subhumans to ambush them.

Again, images of apemen flitted through his mind.

At last, they came out of the trees and onto the grey sand of the beach. Hamish halted. He didn't recognise these dunes! He looked up and down the beach.

'*Er weiß nicht, wohin er gehen soll!*' sneered one of the SS men.

'Och, don't sneer things Ah don't fuckin' understand, pal,' Hamish said absently.

'*Entschuldigung?*' said the soldier.

'Aye and up yours, an' awe,' Hamish said. Then his face brightened. 'This way!' he cried, leading them down the beach. He'd spotted the wreck of the submersible drifting just off the headland.

The SS men followed him hurriedly, glancing warily at the trees. Hamish led them over the headland and down onto the beach beyond.

'There it is,' he said, indicating the little pile of their possessions with his head. 'Go on, *raus!*'

The *gruppenführer* glared at him, then barked an order at one of his subordinates, who hurried forward to seize the Spear of Lugus. The man returned to the group and the *gruppenführer* led them at a quick march up into the trees. They were marching through the forest at the double when the trees began raining hairy figures.

Two of the soldiers went down instantly and Hamish tripped over one when he tried to run. He hit the sandy forest floor with a thud; vainly he tried to get up again, but it was useless. The soldiers were struggling with their attackers, although all Hamish could see was a confusion of stamping boots.

Someone started shooting and machine gun fire lit up the trees. Hamish saw an attacker reach down and grab a gun from the inert body beside him. The second its hand vanished from his line of sight, he heard the subhuman opened fire.

The fire fight raged on, while Hamish lay low and kept stum. When the firing came to an abrupt end, he raised his head slightly to see SS soldiers lying dead around him and one man - the *gruppenführer* - running into the trees, clutching something.

Hamish lay still. The subhumans had won! Maybe if he played dead they would leave him alone.

But what if they really were cannibals? He gulped, hearing something pad up beside him. Whimpering, he tried to bury himself into the cold sand. He gagged at a waft of incredibly bad breath from just by his ear. Then he went dead still.

Something had started licking his face.