

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

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

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

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This Edition

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

The Bombastic Prince by James Rhodes - The Prince of Slaughter seeks to rescue a politician's child - and his own reputation!

The Jackal: Part One by Gavin Roach - romance, betrayal, horror and a sinister obsidian statue spell trouble on the Spanish Main! First in a five-part series.

Schlock! **Classic Serial: Varney the Vampyre, or, The Feast of Blood - Part One** - The girl has swooned, and the vampyre is at his hideous repast! Before Twilight... before Nosferatu... before Dracula... there was Varney...

Exodus by Gavin Chappell and Gavin Roach - Medina does a deal with Papa Humfo to escape her war-torn country. But what awaits her beyond the ruined city?

Castle of the Blood Visage: Part One by Gavin Chappell - Viking shieldmaiden the Red Daughter encounters a nest of Celtic Vampires. Concluded in our next edition.

Schlock! **Classic Serial: Edison's Conquest of Mars (Part 1)** by Garrett P. Serviss - Following the Martian invasion chronicled by Mr Wells in The War of the Worlds, threat of a second attack prompts Thomas Edison to lead a pre-emptive strike on the Red Planet!

Last of the Ogres by Sue Denimes - a perfect, gentle knight grows up at last.

Off to Bedlam Without Any Supper by David Christopher - an old man faces a dystopian future where hilarity is compulsory.

Schlock! Classic: Queen of the Black Coast by Robert E Howard - barbarians, pirates and prehistoric jungle cities abound in this 1934 sword and sorcery masterpiece.

The Bombastic Prince by James Rhodes

It had taken twenty hours of preparation, of studying schematics and software protocol, and fourteen hours of space flight, just to begin the rescue. Wells donned his climate suit and turned to his crewmates. The full crew had gathered in the preparation lounge of the salvage ship *Detritus* to wish him luck. This was Wells' first mission with them and he knew that all of their livelihoods rested on his success - not to mention the life of a child. Angelica tested the integrity of Wells' helmet, then banged her hand reassuringly against the side of it. He rolled his neck around to check its mobility.

"Is this comfortable?"

Wells put his thumb up in approval.

"Good, 'cause that's not coming off until you get back."

The breathing equipment was covering his mouth so that the rest of the crew wouldn't be able to hear a word he said, until Angelica activated his communicator. Ship technology officer Angelica knew better than to reveal any protocols in front of the rest of the team. She wouldn't want them discovering how easily she could be replaced. However, the reason she had given Wells for his forced silence was, "to preserve energy until it was needed."

Angelica took a few steps backwards to appraise the full suit. The sheer silver suit clung impressively to the brutality of Wells' physique.

“You look great,” she said. “How’s the external vision filter?”

Wells raised his thumb again.

“OK, now I need you to test your indoor lens—can you raise your solar visor?”

Wells pressed a button on his wrist and the shiny black layer that had been obscuring his face slid upwards to reveal a clear visor. Immediately the crew began to laugh hysterically. Unable to speak and confused as to the source of their amusement, Wells began looking around and shrugging his arms. This, of course, caused the crew to laugh even harder.

After a few minutes, more than was tasteful, somebody passed Angelica a hand-mirror and she held it up to Wells’ face. The reversed writing at the bottom of Wells’ visor ascribed the legend Dick Face in neat black marker pen. He clapped his hands and rolled his eyes, but it was obvious even to the least observant among the crew that he was not at all amused.

A young navigator named Jones, who had not been paying full attention, pointed at him.

“We really mean that, you humourless bastard.”

One of Jones’ friends slapped him on the shoulder and hissed into his ear.

“He can still hear us you know.”

The blood drained from Jones’ face. He put his head down and stepped backwards hoping that Wells hadn’t noticed him. Even as he scuffled to the back of the crowd, Jones could see Wells in his periphery: eyeing him with a calm but unpleasant focus.

“You better pray he doesn’t make it back alive,” somebody whispered.

With the joke over, the send-off crowd filtered out of the room leaving only Wells, Angelica, and Captain Barnes. Ten minutes later Angelica turned Wells’ communicator on and helped him down into the launch chute.

The launch was the only part of the mission that Wells was uncertain about. Boarding a bulk traveller, overcoming the guards and finding one child amidst thousands of people was the sort of thing he could deal with. Being shot from one object, travelling at around a thousand miles an hour into the vacuum of space, with the specific intention of colliding into a larger object travelling at the same speed, seemed like madness.

The captain had helped him train for the event. She had said, "Just hold these two grip pads in front of you like you were holding a steering wheel, and you'll be fine." Wells hadn't found the advice especially helpful.

Angelica told him to relax, that the countdown would commence shortly and to get as comfortable as possible. Wells sank back into his chair for a moment and without warning, the launch mechanism hurled him rudely from the ship.

The ship towards which he was hurtling was massive. Even during his time in the military Wells had never seen a ship quite so colossal. There was no style to the ship: it had the structure of a massive dart painted uniformly in navy blue. Two large cylinders held together by a smaller cylinder tapered to a point at the far end. Each one of the larger cylinders was easily a kilometre in radius.

What kind of money does it take to fuel a thing like that? Wells thought. He only held the notion for a second before a slight revolution of the ship revealed the company name WALTON in thick white block capitals.

The UN had attempted to establish various industrial ventures on Mars but due to the cost of interstellar shipping any goods produced or mined on the planet were too expensive to mass market. Unfortunately, the governments of the world only came to realise how inefficient the industrial Mars project was after they had bankrupted the world by building eco-domes, barracks and hotels over a four hundred square mile area of the red planet. To a world starving for prosperity, the Mars project presented the promise of enormous economic expansion. When it became apparent to the citizens of the world that their leaders had only worsened things, they took to rioting and looting. The civil unrest catalysed further problems. In the UK alone, statistics reported that for every unit of currency put into the economy by the work force, the cost of the incarcerated millions removed four units.

When Walton asked to buy the exclusive industrial rights to Mars for the next hundred years the governments simply took their money and kept any concerns to themselves. Workers for Walton on Mars earned well below minimum wage but off-world tax reduction and life in a micro-economy that could actually sustain them tempted the unemployed and disenfranchised in their tens of thousands. A colony developed that led Walton to triple its already substantial yearly profits. Fast food chains placed stalls almost everywhere on Mars, banks set up Martian branches, and a chain of mock-Tudor pubs was established. Walton took a healthy share of all of this lovely new profit and used it to generate even more. There was no good reason for them to be stealing children

It was a short notice job. One of the most powerful men in the world had contacted Captain Barnes. Edward Manfred was a politician, news-media mogul and known crime boss. Manfred had told Barnes that one of the Walton ships had kidnapped his twelve-year-old son, Thomas. The offered reward for retrieving the boy was enough to run a crew for a decade in a brand new ship. For a salvager like Barnes it wasn't even a matter for discussion. She immediately drafted the man that one of Manfred's tabloids had dubbed "The Prince of Slaughter."

Wells didn't consider the matter for long, either. After his dishonourable discharge from NASA Division 5, the Manfred job was his only chance at ever making enough money to live off. Furthermore, rescuing a kidnapped child might help him redress the mistake that got him his nickname.

Wells braced himself for impact, holding the clamps out in front of him as instructed, and grimacing as if it would prevent the coming collision. To his amazement, as he got close to the ship, the electromagnetic fields of the clamps slowed his flight, gently but firmly securing him to the ship's hull. Having survived what he thought was the worst of it he got back enough breath to speak.

“Angelica, what the hell happened to the countdown?”

“Sorry chick! Just needed you to relax—the jolt of the launch causes all kinds of nasty injuries if you don't.”

“Next time just give me some pills and don't call me chick! “

“Well, the good news is you're only five metres away from the airlock. You're going to lose contact with us until you register yourself as part of their crew. If you have any last minute questions, now is the time.”

Wells had none. He crawled along the side to the opening. After a number of accidents in which expensive cargo had been trapped onboard failed ships, it had been the law that all airlocks must allow constant access to the ship for emergency purposes. All Wells had to do was press a couple of buttons and he was in.

The inside of the ship was as unsurprising as any large and dusty warehouse. Although, the contrast between the whipping debris of the exterior and the almost mundane ugliness of the interior gave Wells cause to pause for just a moment. Even after he switched his visor to its interior lens, the room looked unnaturally dark and gloomy. Row after row of brown cardboard boxes, packed tightly though not always neatly into metal framed shelving units, reached upwards to a height of fifteen metres. The hard, cold, and easily cleanable floor had developed a layer of dust that at first glance could have easily been mistaken for mud. Scaling one of the nearby blocks of shelves, Wells surveyed the hull of the ship, looking for an entrance to the passenger deck and a system access terminal. The only unique structure was a spiral staircase at the far end of the room, about half a kilometre away.

It wasn't an easy trek. The layout of the shelving seemed to have been planned with no regard to access whatsoever. Mazes of rows seemed to lead the way then suddenly met with a dead-end. Mountaineering the precariously over-packed shelving was a dangerous and noisy venture. Large boxes of plastic utensils and nylon clothing spilt out in the wake of every clamber. As Wells made it to the staircase, he noticed with dismay a sign reading: Floor 1 of 5.

Sure enough, Floor 2 of 5 had another staircase placed, almost belligerently, at the opposite side of the room and Wells began his second scramble. The thought occurred

to him that he was soon going to have to make this journey a second time but with a twelve-year-old boy in tow, doubtlessly pursued by a series of armed guards. The guards, he would enjoy.

As luck would have it, the third floor contained both the exit to the passenger deck and a ship's computer. Both were totally unguarded. When he reached the terminal, he quickly loaded a Trojan that installed him on the Walton system as a high-level employee and shut down their satlink to the outside worlds. Walton's did everything on the cheap and security was no exception; they were still using a near-medieval swipe card system. What that meant in practical terms was that only a moment after the worm was loaded Wells had access to the ship's schematics, passenger / cargo lists, communication system, and docking permissions.

He studied the data in front of him and did some mathematics; it would take forty-five minutes to reach the kid and about an hour to fight his way out of there. Luckily, the schematics revealed another docking bay, up towards the ship's cockpit. If his own ship docked at the far end, he could reach them from the kid's room in twenty minutes. He could run the schematics in the peripheral window of his helmet to avoid getting lost. Even allowing extra time for any screw-pusher could do the job in an hour and ten minutes. He raised an external line through the company communicator and contacted Angelica.

"Where've you been?" she teased.

"The hull is not a viable exit point. I've arranged for you to dock at the port near the cockpit, in seventy minutes."

"OK, chicky, I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks."

Wells sprinted through the corridors of the hull towards the deck that held the child. The passenger decks were almost as bleak as the hull; bare beige walls carpeted with light brown tiles that had more in common with scouring pads than with rugs. It was as well that he was navigating with the schematics, because there was absolutely nothing to distinguish between one corridor and another. After his third corner and his second set of oak-effect plastic folding doors Wells hit the first communal area.

The tranquillity of the mandatory multi-faith prayer and meditation room was a tenuous one at the best of times. It was a large square room, and apart from its size and shape, it was identical to the corridor he had just left. It was largely bare except for a few burgundy kneeling pads and a row of pews. Against the far wall there was a non-denominational altar. The altar was little more than a table with a tiny plinth on it. An arrow pointed to the plinth under which there read the instructions, "Insert Your Deity Here."

A group of six employees sat in their blue shirted uniforms, legs crossed in a circle at the centre of the room, playing cards. Wells burst through the door adorned in his slick climate suit, hands up ready to fight. The clamour of movement that Wells was expecting never came. Two of the employees shot Wells quick glances that suggested

they would appreciate it if he moved quickly on but the rest of them did their best to ignore him completely.

As Wells stormed through the ship, he passed countless crewmembers, all of whom were completely apathetic to this silver maniac bouncing down their corridors. Wells had only ever been on two types of space ships; the type from his NASA days that would ID him upwards of three times in an hour and salvage ships like Detritus with small crews of twenty. He had not expected to pass so easily through the Walton ship, seen by the drone eyes of the workforce but not really noticed.

Occasionally Wells passed a sign intended to inspire the workers to greater contentment with their positions: a yellow on black poster read, "Accident Free for 1 Week." Another had a picture of a woman standing at the top of a mountain in a bikini with, "Perseverance" written across the bottom of it in bold print. In addition to these motivational signs, the Walton logo peeped around almost every corner.

With ease and minor bemusement, Wells finally reached the last public section of the ship that stood between him and Thomas Manfred. A large sign stood over an uninviting doorway that read simply, "Rest Area (no outside food)."

Wells passed through the door, astonished by the colossal size of the room. At least four hundred four-seated tables, the ones with the fixed chairs, stood side by side. Almost every chair occupied with muttering, thousand-yard staring employees. As he stepped through the door, Wells immediately hit a small enclosure of low steel bars that led to a waist height turnstile. On the other side of the enclosure sat a rotund middle-aged man wearing a blue blazer jacket that Wells recognised as a symbol of low-grade authority in the Walton Corporation. It was the kind of jacket worn by shop greeters.

"Can I see your rest pass please?"

Wells gave him his pass card.

"This is a door pass, you need a rest pass! "

"What?"

"No rest without a rest pass! "

Wells vaulted the turnstile, jogging dismissively onwards. A moment later, a loud and intrusive siren began to whine and the lights of the building to flash in sickly red and blue. Then, Wells had his first encounter with the guards.

One thing that Wells enjoyed about working off world was that the space agency had banned all ballistic weapons on spacecrafts quite early on into the industrial fleet movement. A few too many hulls had been breached as a consequence of the numerous suicides that took place on those vessels. Handguns were universally capable of piercing the toughest armour.

The four guards that charged Wells with batons were doing their job properly for the first time. Until Wells showed up, they had stood idle for long hours watching the workers and occasionally harassing them about petty theft and health and safety infractions. They had no idea what they were getting into.

Wells brushed aside the first baton and drove his head hard into the man's face. Wells' visor, intended to reflect space debris, broke through cartilage and into bone with a sickening crunch. The second guard lucked out and caught a kick to the stomach that dropped him instantly. Liberating the baton from the third guard with a messy elbow separation, Wells used it to break out the teeth of the final guard. There were no further immediate attacks.

Wells ran across the rest area using the tables like steps: pre-packaged salads and grey burgers burst around his footfalls like shrapnel. He didn't want to imagine what use the people on that ship would have for a stolen child. However, most of the images that came to him were more horrible than the things he thought were acceptable. Manfred would be of no value to the crew if these bastards had killed him.

Wells charged, onwards and upwards until the dot inside his visor that represented him came close to the one that represented the boy.

The deck offered its crew bog-standard single-berth cabins. There was the standard arrangement of necessities, a single bed, a small table, and an AV port. Wells checked each of the room numbers as he passed them by, until eventually he reached the one he had pulled off the ship's computer-room 778965c. He peered through the PVC window.

On the other side of the window was a sleeping young man of about eighteen years of age. He was tall, frail and defeated looking. He didn't look the sort to be involved in child molestation but Wells didn't set much stock in appearances. He burst through the door and grabbed the young man by his throat, delicately placing his fingers to repress both the jugular and windpipe. It was an unpleasant way to awaken and the expression of terror and confusion on the young man's face reflected that unpleasantness.

"Where's Thomas Manfred?" Wells barked. The young man attempted to answer but could only manage a series of incomprehensible gurgles. "You better pray that I find him in one piece."

Wells tightened his grip. The young man frantically pointed to Wells' hands, which Wells assumed to mean he wanted to be let go. Finally, the young man gave up the struggle and blacked out.

After only a second, he woke to the slap of Wells' gloved palm across his face. His eyes blurred into vision and he unconsciously mumbled the first image that entered his view.

"Dick face." Wells broke his nose. The boy started crying. "What do you want?"

"I want Thomas Manfred and I want him alive."

The look in Wells' eyes was manic but sincere enough to convince any audience. His victim shoved lamely at him.

"Then stop trying to kill him! "

"Thomas Manfred is twelve years old! I know you've got him here somewhere. Now bring him out."

Thomas reached for his wallet and pulled out a photo ID. He held it up to Wells' face with defiant but childish screeches of, "see, see."

Wells did a quick search of the room and found multiple pieces of identifying evidence that confirmed Thomas' identity: His rest card, his passport, birth certificate and finally the DNA in his blood. Wells had to concede that he did see.

"So why did your dad tell us you were twelve?"

Thomas' face went bright red and not in embarrassment.

"Because that's how old I was the last time I did anything he noticed."

"Well, he's noticed you now. Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"To see your father," Wells allowed his tone to suggest a degree of finality.

Thomas thought about it for a second.

"He's not on the ship is he?" he observed mournfully.

Wells reached over his shoulder and clutched the handle of what turned out to be a twenty-inch blade.

"Don't get any funny ideas, kid. You're coming."

By the time that they had arrived at the docking bay Wells had incapacitated twenty-four guards, six of them permanently. The feat impressed Thomas doubly as he was handcuffed to Wells' left wrist and struggling for freedom. In an effort to sabotage the rescue attempt, he had deliberately attempted to pull Wells off balance during each wave of attack but it was to no avail. Wells had twisted his arm around and put the boy into a painful joint lock, keeping him still as he hacked ribbons of flesh out of the oncoming guards.

Thomas' head hung low as Wells dragged him towards the awaiting door of the Detritus. It had docked as requested but they had left the doors sealed to allow time for the rescue to play out.

The crew on the docking bay looked on in surprise as Wells passed through the high-level security doors. Thomas dropped to the floor again but Wells yanked him to his feet like a spoiled child with a Victorian nanny.

"I'm here, open up," hailed Wells.

"We know, where's the kid?" Angelica cooed back.

"This is him; I've got a blood match."

Some of the crew began edging bravely towards Wells. He responded by raising the blade up to head height. It dripped a little as he did so and they promptly stepped back again.

"Wells, how much damage have you caused?"

"I'll give the captain my full report when I'm on board."

"We're all in the shit if this gets out."

There was a hint of doubt in Angelica's voice that made Wells nervous. A further team of guards, this time armed with makeshift riot shields and kitchen knives had just shown up at the room's only entrance. Wells turned quickly to the boy next to him.

"If you drop on this one, I swear I'll cut your arm off."

Thomas' one chance at escape disappeared as the doors to the Detritus finally began to rise and Wells quickly backed him into them. The guards valiantly charged. They timed it exactly so the door closed in their faces, each one of them exhaling a secret sigh of relief.

Wells had just finished shouting at Captain Barnes. During her twenty years of service with some of the crudest individuals in space, she had never been on the receiving end of a tirade of that magnitude.

"Well, I'll admit I did make an oversight," Barnes offered diplomatically, "but with that kind of a payoff you assume the guy will at least know how old his own son is." She paused, measuring Wells' expression. "Of course, we should have double checked but thanks to you our payday is safe and, of course, you'll get an increased cut." Wells gave a nod of stoic indifference and fixed his eyes hard into those of Captain Barnes. "I'll get to the point shall I? If Manfred had been the right age, this

wouldn't be a problem but, as he's eighteen and a member of the work force, we're now linked to multiple charges of piracy and kidnap. I can't even image the charges you would be looking at."

Wells leaned back in his chair never allowing his gaze to waver.

"So?"

"So, thanks to the virus you installed on their network they haven't been able to satlink to their offices or the authorities." Barnes was gearing up to a sales pitch

"What do you want me to do?" Wells interrupted.

With a sigh, the captain continued.

"Basically, we need you to go back on, destroy all their data, and kill every senior officer... We'll help, obviously, and we'll need to steal every bit of expensive merchandise and equipment we can find to make it look like pirates."

"That's convenient for you, but I'm not a butcher."

The look that Wells gave her as he spoke the words conveyed the first shred of humanity that Barnes had ever witnessed in him. She broke his gaze, disturbed that sincerely he believed what he said.

"I do appreciate that, Wells, but I don't think that the courts will."

"Who'll keep the kid quiet?"

"Are you joking?" Barnes laughed. "Manfred's father can silence anyone—including us if he has to."

Above all else, Wells was a pragmatist. He grunted in grim acceptance of the situation and Barnes visibly wiped the sweat from her brow. She had a feeling that she wasn't going to enjoy being indebted to Wells. To cheer himself up after a bad day, Wells made his first capitalisation on the debt immediately.

"You know that guy from navigation?"

"You mean Jones?" Barnes winced.

Wells was grinning sadistically.

"Tell him I need some sparring practice and send him in this direction."

"OK! But before you rob me of a valuable team member, is there any chance you could go and see Thomas Manfred? He has requested your presence."

"Oh, really? What does the little lord require?"

“He says he wants you to teach him how to kill somebody.”

Wells thought about it for a moment. He didn't blame the kid for being angry.

“If he wants to kill who I think he does, he's going to have to know how to kill everybody.”

You'd be the one to ask, Captain Barnes thought, as Wells walked away. For the rest of that day she couldn't help worrying that maybe she'd thought it loud enough for him to hear.

The Jackal: Part One by Gavin Roach

Prologue

The merchant ship Morning Star, outward bound from the British Virgin Islands, the Caribbean, 1708.

“Skipper, it's Saintjohn! He and his followers have barricaded themselves in the hold and sealed all the hatches. I don't know what they're doing in there but it doesn't sound natural! “

“Very well, Mr. Simmonds, Mr. Saintjohn has gone too far this time.”
Depositing all their earthly possessions overboard was one thing, but this...”Gather some men, make sure they are armed and join me below deck. Oh, and Simmonds, bring an axe.”

Captain Lockton pushed his chair away from his desk and stood. “This really is too much,” he sighed. He should have known that damnable Alexander Saintjohn would be trouble. He shouldn't have let that mumbo-jumbo spouting bugger on board in the first place. He marched out of his cabin stroking his moustache.

The Captain climbed through the hatch leading to the hold and approached his men gathered there. “Captain, I don't know what they're up to now, but I can't hear anything in there,” said first mate Simmonds.

“Right, I've had quite enough of this nonsense! Simmonds, hand me that axe and stand aside, there's a good chap.”

Once I've found out what's going on in there, I'm putting Saintjohn and his followers ashore on the first scrap of land we come to, habitable or not, Captain Lockton thought. He squared up to the barricaded door, readying his axe.

A few well placed swings later and the door was off its hinges. The Captain and his men staggered back as the stench of blood threatened to overpower them. Foetid tendrils of fog rolled out from the dark, silent hold.

The captain turned to his men. "Do what you have to when we go in, but know this; I want these bastards off my ship! Mr. Simmonds, I want you on deck. The ship is yours until this mess is dealt with." With that he drew his pistol and stepped into the hold, his men close behind him.

As he stepped up on deck, first mate Simmonds became concerned. "That fog is coming in awfully fast," he said.

Hobbs, the boatswain, stopped work and looked up, "Aye, it is. Should we tell the skipper?"

"Perhaps not. I think his hands will be full with Saintjohn." Simmonds glanced up at the sky. "I say, what happened to the wind...?"

"Ah, sir..."

"What now, Hobbs?" Silence from the other man. "Hobbs? Out with it, man!" said Simmonds as he turned. His eyes following the boatswain's terrified gaze. Thick grey tendrils of fog were coiling out of the hold.

Back in the hold, things did not feel right for Captain Lockton. "Steady now, men. Spread out and for God's sake, get some light in here," he said, louder than he intended. One of the men began struggling with a lantern. As Lockton advanced into the gloom, something wet and warm dripped onto his cheek.

"Blood! There's blood all over the place!" shouted a sailor.

Lockton peered at his hand. It was indeed covered in blood.

At the far end of the hold, one of the men started screaming. The scream quickly turned into a gargled choking. As Lockton started forwards and his men began to shift uneasily, he felt something give under his foot. He hit the floor hard. Blood splashed into his eyes, blinding him. Panic gripped the captain as he scabbled over the gore-soaked floor, wiping at his face.

Blinking, Captain Lockton staggered to his feet. As he straightened, something caught his eye in the flickering light. He scooped it up from a pool of congealing blood. It appeared to be volcanic glass carved into some sort of semi-humanoid form.

The screaming started again, this time all around him. Unidentifiable, grotesque shapes shifted in the darkness, mercifully obscured by the fog. The men began to

panic. Some of them rushed for the doorway. Others stood, rooted to the spot, crying and gibbering.

Briefly, as the fog parted, Lockton glimpsed the dark longhaired form of Saintjohn. The man was naked, his body a mass of lacerations. Blood poured freely from his wounds, splattering to the floor. Lockton could not be sure if Saintjohn was screaming, or laughing.

As Lockton gaped, some abominable form stirred in the shadows behind Saintjohn. The captain screamed, and soiled himself in terror. He staggered, then fled for the shattered door, dropping the obsidian carving. Some of his men had made it out of the hold.

“Barricade that doorway!” yelled Lockton as he ran into the dull grey daylight. Some of the men began grabbing whatever they could and began blocking up the ruined door, heedless of their shipmates still trapped within.

Simmonds approached the captain, but stopped short when he saw the gore-splattered, reeking figure before him. “I... it appears we are becalmed in the middle of this damnable fog, sir.”

“Sail to aft, looks like a brigantine!” A shout came from the rear of the ship. As the captain turned, he saw a ship close enough for its colours to be distinguished through the murk.

“Pirates!” gasped Simmonds, as Captain Lockton turned and strode off across the deck.

“Skipper, skipper! What do we do?” called Simmonds after him.

Lockton ignored him and walked into his cabin. He sat down behind his desk and drew his pistol. Placing the barrel into his mouth he pulled the trigger.

Part I

Road Town, capital of Tortola, British Virgin Islands, 1708.

Lord Manfred Thornville stepped out into the warm evening air, leaving the luxurious town house behind him. Poplar trees lining the avenue stirred softly as he strolled towards his carriage. Thornville took his time, enjoying the warm jasmine-scented breeze.

Life was indeed good for Thornville this evening. He had, it appeared, solved one of his most pressing problems; he had finally procured a husband for his daughter, Charlotte. And in doing so, he had also secured his own financial future.

“I trust all went well with Mr. Hobart, milord?” said Mortimer, Thornville’s driver.

“Indeed, Mortimer, very well. That corpulent fool Hobart finally agreed to my terms. The greedy oaf is desperate for a connection with nobility and the thought of a hereditary title sealed the deal.”

“If it’s not too bold of me to say milord, but ‘e’s a merchant. Is that suitable for Miss Thornville?”

“Alas Mortimer, suitability has nothing to do with it.” Thornville sighed. “Hobart is rich and we must, I fear, move with the times. The man has several sugar plantations to his name. History and titles will get one only so far. Without money they are empty and meaningless.”

“Yes milord. Just doesn’t seem right, is all.”

“Mark my words; coin is the only real power these days. And I mean to take as much as I can. The world has moved on. Business and merchants are the future, I fear.”

“Beggin’ your pardon sir, what about that Tobias Day fellow? I understood Miss Thornville was to be marryin’ ‘im. She can’t very well be betrothed to both gentlemen now, can she?”

“Mortimer, you know I encourage you to speak your mind, and I am glad you do so. But it does not behove you to listen to the mindless chatter of the house staff.” Thornville paused and flicked at a tiny speck upon the cuff of his frockcoat. “Rest assured Charlotte will be marrying Hobart. She will soon forget about this infatuation with a penniless poet. Anyway, even if she doesn’t, I’d wager that Mr. Day will be gone by morning, and therefore, no longer my problem.”

“Very good sir.”

As he climbed aboard the carriage, Thornville found his previous good mood diminished by thoughts of the troublesome poet; and the seemingly unavoidable descent into the ranks of the merchant class. Well, he thought, attempting to shake off the melancholic mood, on with the final business of the evening. Unpleasant as his new associates were, the association was certainly proving to be very profitable. If all went according to plan, his money worries would finally be over. Perhaps, he mused, later on he might indulge in a little pleasure. God knows he’d earned it.

“Mortimer, take me to the docks. I am in need of company this evening,” said Thornville as he eased back into the seat. The carriage lurched forward, the horses’ hooves clattered on cobbles, echoing down the street of well-to-do merchants.

Unseen by either Lord Thornville or Mortimer, a figure stepped out from the shadows and watched the carriage as it rumbled off down the road. The figure glanced left and right, as if in the grip of indecision. Then it hurried off down the street, in the opposite direction to the carriage.

~o0o~

At first glance, Charlotte Thornville appeared to be working diligently upon a piece of embroidery. Although cloth, embroidery hoop and needle were indeed upon her knee, they only served to conceal the real focus of her attention; a fully illustrated copy of the Kama Sutra. She turned a page and gazed at the illustration. "Oh my..." she whispered, turning the book in an attempt to discern who was doing what to whom.

"Excuse me, miss."

Surprised by her maid, Charlotte managed to drop the book and prick her thumb at the same time. "Can't you knock?" she snapped, standing and attempting to hide the scandalous volume.

"Begging your pardon miss, I've been knocking for the last five minutes," said the maid, pretending not to notice the book. "There's a visitor arrived for you miss."

Charlotte walked over to the maid. "At this time? Who is it Rachel?"

"It's that Mr. Baskin, he's waiting outside."

"Oh, invite him in."

"At this time of night, miss? I don't think Sir Thornville would approve."

"My father isn't here, Rachel, and what he doesn't know won't hurt him. Let Mr. Baskin in. he would not trouble us this late without good reason."

A short time later, Charlotte entered the kitchens. Louis Baskin was pacing back and forth, a deep frown on his young face as he looked up at his friend. "I am, I fear, the bearer of terrible news! " the young artist gasped.

"Really, Louis! Calm down, it can't be that bad. Your patron Lord Blackwood isn't threatening to join the priesthood again is he?"

"What? Oh no, no it is far worse."

A flippant remark died on Charlotte's lips as she realised the very real anxiety gripping him. "Sit down, Louis. Tell me what is wrong."

Louis sighed. He looked into the young, beautiful face of his friend. "It is your father, Charlotte. He has arranged for you to be married."

"Married! Louis, what do you mean?"

The young man composed himself then began to speak. "My dear sweet friend, your father has 'sold' you to that bloated merchant Arthur Hobart." Charlotte's face paled. "For nothing more than a share in Hobart's business, and a hereditary title bestowed upon him by your father."

Charlotte was speechless. She gaped at Louis, completely at a loss.

"It is worse still Charlotte." The artist stood and began pacing once more. "I fear that he has dire plans concerning Tobias."

"Toby?" Charlotte stood. "How do you know this, Louis?"

"There is no time! We must go to Tobias now and warn him. I fear your father intends to act upon his schemes this very night."

"Louis, please! You must tell me how you discovered this! "

Louis stopped pacing, took a deep breath. "Herr Schiffmacher keeps a town house near Hobart's residence. He is away on business at the moment so I was enjoying the company of his lovely twin daughters, earlier this evening.

"After bidding them my fondest of farewells and making my way out of their bedroom window, I spied your father's carriage. Not wanting news of my visit to get back to Herr Schiffmacher, I resolved to remain out of sight until your father's carriage departed. Hidden as I was, I overheard him talking to his driver. That is when I discovered his plans for Tobias and your marriage."

Charlotte sat. "I will talk with my father as soon as he returns. It can't be as bad as it appears."

"I doubt your father will be returning before dawn, Charlotte. When he left, he was travelling towards the docks and I heard him say to his driver that he intended to seek out company this evening."

Charlotte was silent for a short while. "If my father wishes to seek out the company of common whores and rogues, I am certainly not waiting for him. You're right, Louis, we must warn Toby." Charlotte would be damned if she would let anything happen to her true love; even if it meant going against the wishes of her father. They both hurried out into the evening.

TO BE CONTINUED

Varney the Vampyre - Part One

CHAPTER I.

-”How graves give up their dead,
And how the night air hideous grows
With shrieks! “

MIDNIGHT. - THE HAIL-STORM. - THE DREADFUL VISITOR. - THE
VAMPYRE.

The solemn tones of an old cathedral clock have announced midnight - the air is thick and heavy - a strange, death like stillness pervades all nature. Like the ominous calm which precedes some more than usually terrific outbreak of the elements, they seem to have paused even in their ordinary fluctuations, to gather a terrific strength for the great effort. A faint peal of thunder now comes from far off. Like a signal gun for the battle of the winds to begin, it appeared to awaken them from their lethargy, and one awful, warring hurricane swept over a whole city, producing more devastation in the four or five minutes it lasted, than would a half century of ordinary phenomena.

It was as if some giant had blown upon some toy town, and scattered many of the buildings before the hot blast of his terrific breath; for as suddenly as that blast of wind had come did it cease, and all was as still and calm as before.

Sleepers awakened, and thought that what they had heard must be the confused chimera of a dream. They trembled and turned to sleep again.

All is still - still as the very grave. Not a sound breaks the magic of repose. What is that - a strange pattering noise, as of a million fairy feet? It is hail - yes, a hail-storm has burst over the city. Leaves are dashed from the trees, mingled with small boughs; windows that lie most opposed to the direct fury of the pelting particles of ice are broken, and the rapt repose that before was so remarkable in its intensity, is exchanged for a noise which, in its accumulation, drowns every cry of surprise or consternation which here and there arose from persons who found their houses invaded by the storm.

Now and then, too, there would come a sudden gust of wind that in its strength, as it blew laterally, would, for a moment, hold millions of the hailstones suspended in mid air, but it was only to dash them with redoubled force in some new direction, where more mischief was to be done.

Oh, how the storm raged! Hail - rain - wind. It was, in very truth, an awful night.

* * *

There was an antique chamber in an ancient house. Curious and quaint carvings adorn the walls, and the large chimneypiece is a curiosity of itself. The ceiling is low, and a large bay window, from roof to floor, looks to the west. The window is latticed, and filled with curiously painted glass and rich stained pieces, which send in a strange, yet beautiful light, when sun or moon shines into the apartment. There is but one portrait in that room, although the walls seem panelled for the express purpose of containing a series of pictures. That portrait is of a young man, with a pale face, a stately brow, and a strange expression about the eyes, which no one cared to look on twice.

There is a stately bed in that chamber, of carved walnut-wood is it made, rich in design and elaborate in execution; one of those works which owe their existence to the Elizabethan era. It is hung with heavy silken and damask furnishing; nodding feathers are at its corners - covered with dust are they, and they lend a funereal aspect to the room. The floor is of polished oak.

God! how the hail dashes on the old bay window! Like an occasional discharge of mimic musketry, it comes clashing, beating, and cracking upon the small panes; but they resist it - their small size saves them; the wind, the hail, the rain, expend their fury in vain.

The bed in that old chamber is occupied. A creature formed in all fashions of loveliness lies in a half sleep upon that ancient couch - a girl young and beautiful as a spring morning. Her long hair has escaped from its confinement and streams over the blackened coverings of the bedstead; she has been restless in her sleep, for the clothing of the bed is in much confusion. One arm is over her head, the other hangs nearly off the side of the bed near to which she lies. A neck and bosom that would have formed a study for the rarest sculptor that ever Providence gave genius to, were half disclosed. She moaned slightly in her sleep, and once or twice the lips moved as if in prayer - at least one might judge so, for the name of Him who suffered for all came once faintly from them.

She had endured much fatigue, and the storm dose not awaken her; but it can disturb the slumbers it does not possess the power to destroy entirely. The turmoil of the elements wakes the senses, although it cannot entirely break the repose they have lapsed into.

Oh, what a world of witchery was in that mouth, slightly parted, and exhibiting within the pearly teeth that glistened even in the faint light that came from that bay window. How sweetly the long silken eyelashes lay upon the cheek. Now she moves, and one shoulder is entirely visible - whiter, fairer than the spotless clothing of the bed on which she lies, is the smooth skin of that fair creature, just budding into womanhood, and in that transition state which presents to us all the charms of the girl - almost of the child, with the more matured beauty and gentleness of advancing years.

Was that lightning? Yes - an awful, vivid, terrifying flash - then a roaring peal of thunder, as if a thousand mountains were rolling one over the other in the blue vault of Heaven! Who sleeps now in that ancient city? Not one living soul. The dread trumpet of eternity could not more effectually have awakened any one.

The hail continues. The wind continues. The uproar of the elements seems at its height. Now she awakens - that beautiful girl on the antique bed; she opens those eyes of celestial blue, and a faint cry of alarm bursts from her lips. At least it is a cry which, amid the noise and turmoil without, sounds but faint and weak. She sits upon the bed and presses her hands upon her eyes. Heavens! what a wild torrent of wind, and rain, and hail! The thunder likewise seems intent upon awakening sufficient echoes to last until the next flash of forked lightning should again produce the wild concussion of the air. She murmurs a prayer - a prayer for those she loves best; the names of those dear to her gentle heart come from her lips; she weeps and prays; she thinks then of what devastation the storm must surely produce, and to the great God of Heaven she prays for all living things. Another flash - a wild, blue, bewildering flash of lightning streams across that bay window, for an instant bringing out every colour in it with terrible distinctness. A shriek bursts from the lips of the young girl, and then, with eyes fixed upon that window, which, in another moment, is all darkness, and with such an expression of terror upon her face as it had never before known, she trembled, and the perspiration of intense fear stood upon her brow.

“What - what was it?” she gasped; “real or delusion? Oh, God, what was it? A figure tall and gaunt, endeavouring from the outside to unclasp the window. I saw it. That flash of lightning revealed it to me. It stood the whole length of the window.”

There was a lull of the wind. The hail was not falling so thickly - moreover, it now fell, what there was of it, straight, and yet a strange clattering sound came upon the glass of that long window. It could not be a delusion - she is awake, and she hears it. What can produce it? Another flash of lightning - another shriek - there could be now no delusion.

A tall figure is standing on the ledge immediately outside the long window. It is its finger-nails upon the glass that produces the sound so like the hail, now that the hail has ceased. Intense fear paralysed the limbs of the beautiful girl. That one shriek is all she can utter - with hand clasped, a face of marble, a heart beating so wildly in her bosom, that each moment it seems as if it would break its confines, eyes distended and fixed upon the window, she waits, froze with horror. The pattering and clattering of the nails continue. No word is spoken, and now she fancies she can trace the darker form of that figure against the window, and she can see the long arms moving to and

fro, feeling for some mode of entrance. What strange light is that which now gradually creeps up into the air? red and terrible - brighter and brighter it grows. The lightning has set fire to a mill, and the reflection of the rapidly consuming building falls upon that long window. There can be no mistake. The figure is there, still feeling for an entrance, and clattering against the glass with its long nails, that appear as if the growth of many years had been untouched. She tries to scream again but a choking sensation comes over her, and she cannot. It is too dreadful - she tries to move - each limb seems weighted down by tons of lead - she can but in a hoarse faint whisper cry,

“Help - help - help - help! “

And that one word she repeats like a person in a dream. The red glare of the fire continues. It throws up the tall gaunt figure in hideous relief against the long window. It shows, too, upon the one portrait that is in the chamber, and the portrait appears to fix its eyes upon the attempting intruder, while the flickering light from the fire makes it look fearfully lifelike. A small pane of glass is broken, and the form from without introduces a long gaunt hand, which seems utterly destitute of flesh. The fastening is removed, and one-half of the window, which opens like folding doors, is swung wide open upon its hinges.

And yet now she could not scream - she could not move. “Help! - help! - help! “was all she could say. But, oh, that look of terror that sat upon her face, it was dreadful - a look to haunt the memory for a life-time - a look to obtrude itself upon the happiest moments, and turn them to bitterness.

The figure turns half round, and the light falls upon its face. It is perfectly white - perfectly bloodless. The eyes look like polished tin; the lips are drawn back, and the principal feature next to those dreadful eyes is the teeth - the fearful looking teeth - projecting like those of some wild animal, hideously, glaringly white, and fang-like. It approaches the bed with a strange, gliding movement. It clashes together the long nails that literally appear to hang from the finger ends. No sound comes from its lips. Is she going mad - that young and beautiful girl exposed to so much terror? she has drawn up all her limbs; she cannot even now say help. The power of articulation is gone, but the power of movement has returned to her; she can draw herself slowly along to the other side of the bed from that towards which the hideous appearance is coming.

But her eyes are fascinated. The glance of a serpent could not have produced a greater effect upon her than did the fixed gaze of those awful, metallic-looking eyes that were bent down on her face. Crouching down so that the gigantic height was lost, and the horrible, protruding white face was the most prominent object, came on the figure. What was it? - what did it want there? - what made it look so hideous - so unlike an inhabitant of the earth, and yet be on it?

Now she has got to the verge of the bed, and the figure pauses. It seemed as if when it paused she lost the power to proceed. The clothing of the bed was now clutched in her hands with unconscious power. She drew her breath short and thick. Her bosom heaves, and her limbs tremble, yet she cannot withdraw her eyes from that marble-looking face. He holds her with his glittering eye.

The storm has ceased - all is still. The winds are hushed; the church clock proclaims the hour of one: a hissing sound comes from the throat of the hideous being, and he raises his long, gaunt arms - the lips move. He advances. The girl places one small foot on to the floor. She is unconsciously dragging the clothing with her. The door of the room is in that direction - can she reach it? Has she power to walk? - can she withdraw her eyes from the face of the intruder, and so break the hideous charm? God of Heaven! is it real, or some dream so like reality as to nearly overturn judgment forever?

The figure has paused again, and half on the bed and half out of it that young girl lies trembling. Her long hair streams across the entire width of the bed. As she has slowly moved along she has left it streaming across the pillows. The pause lasted about a minute - oh, what an age of agony. That minute was, indeed, enough for madness to do its full work in.

With a sudden rush that could not be foreseen - with a strange howling cry that was enough to awaken terror in every breast, the figure seized the long tresses of her hair, and twining them round his bony hands he held her to the bed. Then she screamed - Heaven granted her then power to scream. Shriek followed shriek in rapid succession. The bed-clothes fell in a heap by the side of the bed - she was dragged by her long silken hair completely on to it again. Her beautifully rounded limbs quivered with the agony of her soul. The glassy, horrible eyes of the figure ran over that angelic form with a hideous satisfaction - horrible profanation. He drags her head to the bed's edge. He forces it back by the long hair still entwined in his grasp. With a plunge he seizes her neck in his fang-like teeth - a gush of blood, and a hideous sucking noise follows. The girl has swooned, and the vampyre is at his hideous repast!

Chapter II.

THE ALARM. - THE PISTOL SHOT. - THE PURSUIT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

Lights flashed about the building, and various room doors opened; voices called one to the other. There was an universal stir and commotion among the inhabitants.

“Did you hear a scream, Harry?” asked a young man, half-dressed, as he walked into the chamber of another about his own age.

“I did - where was it?”

“God knows. I dressed myself directly.”

“All is still now.”

“Yes; but unless I was dreaming there was a scream.”

“We could not both dream there was. Where do you think it came from?”

“It burst so suddenly upon my ears that I cannot say.”

There was a tap now at the door of the room where these young men were, and a female voice said, -

“For God’s sake, get up! “

“We are up,” said both the young men, appearing.

“Did you hear anything?”

“Yes, a scream.”

“Oh, search the house - search the house; where did it come from, can you tell?”

“Indeed we cannot, mother.”

Another person now joined the party. He was a man of middle age, and, as he came up to them, he said, -

“Good God! what is the matter?”

Scarcely had the words passed his lips, than such a rapid succession of shrieks came upon their ears, that they felt absolutely stunned by them. The elderly lady, whom one of the young men had called mother, fainted, and would have fallen to the floor of the corridor in which they all stood, had she not been promptly supported by the last comer, who himself staggered, as those piercing cries came upon the night air. He, however, was the first to recover, for the young men seemed paralysed.

“Henry,” he cried, “for God’s sake support your mother. Can you doubt that these cries come from Flora’s room?”

The young man mechanically supported his mother, and then the man who had just spoken darted back to his own bed-room, from whence he returned in a moment with a pair of pistols, and shouting, -

“Follow me who can! “ he bounded across the corridor in the direction of the antique apartment, from whence the cries proceeded, but which were now hushed.

That house was built for strength, and the doors were all of oak, and of considerable thickness. Unhappily, they had fastenings within, so that when the man reached the chamber of her who so much required help, he was helpless, for the door was fast.

“Flora! Flora! “he cried; “Flora, speak! “

All was still.

“Good God! “ he added; “we must force the door.”

“I hear a strange noise within,” said the young man, who trembled violently.

“And so do I. What does it sound like?”

“I scarcely know; but it closest resembles some animal eating, or sucking some liquid.”

“What on earth can it be? Have you no weapon that will force the door? I shall go mad if I am kept here.”

“I have,” said the young man. “Wait here a moment.”

He ran down the staircase, and presently returned with a small, but powerful, iron crow-bar.

“This will do,” he said.

“It will, it will. - Give it to me.”

“Has she not spoken?”

“Not a word. My mind misgives me that something very dreadful must have happened to her.”

“And that odd noise! “

“Still goes on. Somehow, it curdles the very blood in my veins to hear it.”

The man took the crow-bar, and with some difficulty succeeded in introducing it between the door and the side of the wall - still it required great strength to move it, but it did move, with a harsh, crackling sound.

“Push it! “ cried he who was using the bar,” push the door at the same time.”

The younger man did so. For a few moments the massive door resisted. Then, suddenly, something gave way with a loud snap - it was part of the lock, - and the door at once swung wide open.

How true it is that we measure time by the events which happen within a given space of it, rather than by its actual duration.

To those who were engaged in forcing open the door of the antique chamber, where slept the young girl whom they named Flora, each moment was swelled into an hour of agony; but, in reality, from the first moment of the alarm to that when the loud cracking noise heralded the destruction of the fastenings of the door, there had elapsed but very few minutes indeed.

“It opens - it opens,” cried the young man.

“Another moment,” said the stranger, as he still plied the crowbar -”another moment, and we shall have free ingress to the chamber. Be patient.”

This stranger’s name was Marchdale; and even as he spoke, he succeeded in throwing the massive door wide open, and clearing the passage to the chamber.

To rush in with a light in his hand was the work of a moment to the young man named Henry; but the very rapid progress he made into the apartment prevented him from observing accurately what it contained, for the wind that came in from the open window caught the flame of the candle, and although it did not actually extinguish it, it blew it so much on one side, that it was comparatively useless as a light.

“Flora - Flora! “ he cried.

Then with a sudden bound something dashed from off the bed. The concussion against him was so sudden and so utterly unexpected, as well as so tremendously violent, that he was thrown down, and, in his fall, the light was fairly extinguished.

All was darkness, save a dull, reddish kind of light that now and then, from the nearly consumed mill in the immediate vicinity, came into the room. But by that light, dim, uncertain, and flickering as it was, some one was seen to make for the window.

Henry, although nearly stunned by his fall, saw a figure, gigantic in height, which nearly reached from the floor to the ceiling. The other young man, George, saw it, and Mr. Marchdale likewise saw it, as did the lady who had spoken to the two young men in the corridor when first the screams of the young girl awakened alarm in the breasts of all the inhabitants of that house.

The figure was about to pass out at the window which led to a kind of balcony, from whence there was an easy descent to a garden.

Before it passed out they each and all caught a glance of the side-face, and they saw that the lower part of it and the lips were dabbled in blood. They saw, too, one of those fearful-looking, shining, metallic eyes which presented so terrible an appearance of unearthly ferocity.

No wonder that for a moment a panic seized them all, which paralysed any exertions they might otherwise have made to detain that hideous form.

But Mr. Marchdale was a man of mature years; he had seen much in life, both in this and in foreign lands; and he, although astonished to the extent of being frightened, was much more likely to recover sooner than his younger companions, which, indeed, he did, and acted promptly enough.

“Don’t rise, Henry,” he cried. “Lie still.”

Almost at the moment he uttered these words, he fired at the figure, which then occupied the window, as if it were a gigantic figure set in a frame.

The report was tremendous in that chamber, for the pistol was no toy weapon, but one made for actual service, and of sufficient length and bore of barrel to carry destruction along with the bullets that came from it.

“If that has missed its aim,” said Mr. Marchdale, “I’ll never pull trigger again.”

As he spoke he dashed forward, and made a clutch at the figure he felt convinced he had shot.

The tall form turned upon him, and when he got a full view of the face, which he did at that moment, from the opportune circumstance of the lady returning at the instant with a light she had been to her own chamber to procure, even he, Marchdale, with all his courage, and that was great, and all his nervous energy, recoiled a step or two, and uttered the exclamation of, “Great God!”

That face was one never to be forgotten. It was hideously flushed with colour - the colour of fresh blood; the eyes had a savage and remarkable lustre whereas, before, they had looked like polished tin - they now wore a ten times brighter aspect, and flashes of light seemed to dart from them. The mouth was open, as if, from the natural formation of the countenance, the lips receded much from the large canine looking teeth.

A strange howling noise came from the throat of this monstrous figure, and it seemed upon the point of rushing upon Mr. Marchdale. Suddenly, then, as if some impulse had seized upon it, it uttered a wild and terrible shrieking kind of laugh; and then turning, dashed through the window, and in one instant disappeared from before the eyes of those who felt nearly annihilated by its fearful presence.

“God help us!” ejaculated Henry.

Mr. Marchdale drew a long breath, and then, giving a stamp on the floor, as if to recover himself from the state of agitation into which even he was thrown, he cried, -

“Be it what or who it may, I’ll follow it.”

“No - no - do not,” cried the lady.

“I must, I will. Let who will come with me - I follow that dreadful form.”

As he spoke, he took the road it took, and dashed through the window into the balcony.

“And we, too, George,” exclaimed Henry; “we will follow Mr. Marchdale. This dreadful affair concerns us more nearly than it does him.”

The lady who was the mother of these young men, and of the beautiful girl who had been so awfully visited, screamed aloud, and implored them to stay. But the voice of Mr. Marchdale was heard exclaiming aloud, -

“I see it - I see it; it makes for the wall.”

They hesitated no longer, but at once rushed into the balcony, and from thence dropped into the garden.

The mother approached the bed-side of the insensible, perhaps murdered girl; she saw her, to all appearance, weltering in blood, and, overcome by her emotions, she fainted on the floor of the room.

When the two young men reached the garden, they found it much lighter than might have been fairly expected; for not only was the morning rapidly approaching, but the mill was still burning, and those mingled lights made almost every object plainly visible, except when deep shadows were thrown from some gigantic trees that had stood for centuries in that sweetly wooded spot. They heard the voice of Mr. Marchdale, as he cried, -

“There - there - towards the wall. There - there - God! how it bounds along.”

The young men hastily dashed through a thicket in the direction from whence his voice sounded, and then they found him looking wild and terrified, and with something in his hand which looked like a portion of clothing.

“Which way, which way?” they both cried in a breath.

He leant heavily on the arm of George, as he pointed along a vista of trees, and said in a low voice, -

“God help us all. It is not human. Look there - look there - do you not see it?”

They looked in the direction he indicated. At the end of this vista was the wall of the garden. At that point it was full twelve feet in height, and as they looked, they saw the hideous, monstrous form they had traced from the chamber of their sister, making frantic efforts to clear the obstacle.

They saw it bound from the ground to the top of the wall, which it very nearly reached, and then each time it fell back again into the garden with such a dull, heavy sound, that the earth seemed to shake again with the concussion. They trembled - well indeed they might, and for some minutes they watched the figure making its fruitless efforts to leave the place.

“What - what is it?” whispered Henry, in hoarse accents. “God, what can it possibly be?”

“I know not,” replied Mr. Marchdale. “I did seize it. It was cold and clammy like a corpse. It cannot be human.”

“Not human?”

“Look at it now. It will surely escape now.”

“No, no - we will not be terrified thus - there is Heaven above us. Come on, and, for dear Flora’s sake, let us make an effort yet to seize this bold intruder.”

“Take this pistol,” said Marchdale. “It is the fellow of the one I fired. Try its efficacy.”

“He will be gone,” exclaimed Henry, as at this moment, after many repeated attempts and fearful falls, the figure reached the top of the wall, and then hung by its long arms a moment or two, previous to dragging itself completely up.

The idea of the appearance, be it what it might, entirely escaping, seemed to nerve again Mr. Marchdale, and he, as well as the two young men, ran forward towards the wall. They got so close to the figure before it sprang down on the outer side of the wall, that to miss killing it with the bullet from the pistol was a matter of utter impossibility, unless wilfully.

Henry had the weapon, and he pointed it full at the tall form with steady aim. He pulled the trigger - the explosion followed, and that the bullet did its office there could be no manner of doubt, for the figure gave a howling shriek, and fell headlong from the wall on the outside.

“I have shot him,” cried Henry, “I have shot him.”

CHAPTER III.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE BODY. - FLORA’S RECOVERY AND MADNESS. - THE OFFER OF ASSISTANCE FROM SIR FRANCIS VARNEY.

“He is human!” cried Henry; “I have surely killed him.”

“It would seem so,” said M. Marchdale. “Let us now hurry round to the outside of the wall, and see where he lies.”

This was at once agreed to, and the whole three of them made what expedition they could towards a gate which let into a paddock, across which they hurried, and soon found themselves clear of the garden wall, so that they could make way towards where they fully expected to find the body of him who had worn so unearthly an aspect, but who it would be an excessive relief to find was human.

So hurried was the progress they made, that it was scarcely possible to exchange many words as they went; a kind of breathless anxiety was upon them, and in the speed they disregarded every obstacle, which would, at any other time, have probably prevented them from taking the direct road they sought.

It was difficult on the outside of the wall to say exactly which was the precise spot which it might be supposed the body had fallen on; but, by following the wall its entire length, surely they would come upon it.

They did so; but, to their surprise, they got from its commencement to its further extremity without finding any dead body, or even any symptoms of one having lain there.

At some parts close to the wall there grew a kind of heath, and, consequently, the traces of blood would be lost among it, if it so happened that at the precise spot at which the strange being had seemed to topple over, such vegetation had existed. This was to be ascertained; but now, after traversing the whole length of the wall twice, they came to a halt, and looked wonderingly in each other's faces.

"There is nothing here," said Harry.

"Nothing," added his brother.

"It could not have been a delusion," at length said Mr. Marchdale, with a shudder.

"A delusion?" exclaimed the brothers. "That is not possible; we all saw it."

"Then what terrible explanation can we give?"

"By heavens! I know not," exclaimed Henry. "This adventure surpasses all belief, and but for the great interest we have in it, I should regard it with a world of curiosity."

"It is too dreadful," said George; "for God's sake, Henry, let us return to ascertain if poor Flora is killed."

"My senses," said Henry, "were all so much absorbed in gazing at that horrible form, that I never once looked towards her further than to see that she was, to appearance, dead. God help her! poor - poor, beautiful Flora. This is, indeed, a sad, sad fate for you to come to. Flora - Flora -"

"Do not weep, Henry," said George. "Rather let us now hasten home, where we may find that tears are premature. She may yet be living and restored to us."

"And," said Mr. Marchdale, "she may be able to give us some account of this dreadful visitation."

"True - true," exclaimed Henry; "we will hasten home."

They now turned their steps homewards, and as they went they much blamed themselves for all leaving home together, and with terror pictured what might occur in their absence to those who were now totally unprotected.

"It was a rash impulse of us all to come in pursuit of this dreadful figure," remarked Mr. Marchdale; "but do not torment yourself, Henry. There may be no reason for your fears."

At the pace they went, they very soon reached the ancient house; and when they came in sight of it, they saw lights flashing from the windows, and the shadows of faces moving to and fro, indicating that the whole household was up, and in a state of alarm.

Henry, after some trouble, got the hall door opened by a terrified servant, who was trembling so much that she could scarcely hold the light she had with her.

“Speak at once, Martha,” said Henry. “Is Flora living?”

“Yes; but -”

“Enough - enough! Thank God she lives; where is she now?”

“In her own room, Master Henry. Oh, dear - oh, dear, what will become of us all?”

Henry rushed up the staircase, followed by George and Mr. Marchdale, nor paused he once until he reached the room of his sister.

“Mother,” he said, before he crossed the threshold, “are you here?”

“I am, my dear - I am. Come in, pray come in, and speak to Flora.”

“Come in, Mr. Marchdale,” said Henry - “come in; we will make no stranger of you.”

They all entered the room.

Several lights had been now brought into that antique chamber, and, in addition to the mother of the beautiful girl who had been so fearfully visited, there were two female domestics, who appeared to be in the greatest possible fright, for they could render no assistance whatever to anybody.

The tears were streaming down the mother’s face, and the moment she saw Mr. Marchdale, she clung to his arm, evidently unconscious of what she was about, and exclaimed, -

“Oh, what is this that has happened - what is this? Tell me, Marchdale! Robert Marchdale, you whom I have known even from my childhood, you will not deceive me. Tell me the meaning of all this?”

“I cannot,” he said, in a tone of much emotion. “As God is my judge, I am as much puzzled and amazed at the scene that has taken place here to-night as you can be.”

The mother wrung her hands and wept.

“It was the storm that first awakened me,” added Marchdale; “and then I heard a scream.”

The brothers tremblingly approached the bed. Flora was placed in a sitting, half-reclining posture, propped up by pillows. She was quite insensible, and her face was

fearfully pale; while that she breathed at all could be but very faintly seen. On some of her clothing, about the neck, were spots of blood, and she looked more like one who had suffered some long and grievous illness, than a young girl in the prime of life and in the most robust health, as she had been on the day previous to the strange scene we have recorded.

“Does she sleep?” said Henry, as a tear fell from his eyes upon her pallid cheek.

“No,” replied Mr. Marchdale. “This is a swoon, from which we must recover her.”

Active measures were now adopted to restore the languid circulation, and, after persevering in them for some time, they had the satisfaction of seeing her open her eyes.

Her first act upon consciousness returning, however, was to utter a loud shriek, and it was not until Henry implored her to look around her, and see that she was surrounded by none but friendly faces, that she would venture again to open her eyes, and look timidly from one to the other. Then she shuddered, and burst into tears as she said, -

“Oh, Heaven, have mercy upon me - Heaven, have mercy upon me and save me from that dreadful form.”

“There is no one here, Flora,” said Mr. Marchdale, “but those who love you, and who, in defence of you, if needs were would lay down their lives.”

“You have been terrified. But tell us distinctly what has happened? You are quite safe now.”

She trembled so violently that Mr. Marchdale recommended that some stimulant should be give to her, and she was persuaded, although not without considerable difficulty, to swallow a small portion of some wine from a cup. There could be no doubt but that the stimulating effect of the wine was beneficial, for a slight accession of colour visited her cheeks, and she spoke in a firmer tone as she said, -

“Do not leave me. Oh, do not leave me, any of you. I shall die if left alone now. Oh, save me - save me. That horrible form! That fearful face! “

“Tell us how it happened, dear Flora?” said Henry.

“No - no - no,” she said, “I do not think I shall ever sleep again.”

“Say not so; you will be more composed in a few hours, and then you can tell us what has occurred.”

“I will tell you now. I will tell you now.”

She placed her hands over her face for a moment, as if to collect her scattered thoughts, and then she added, -

“I was awakened by the storm, and I saw that terrible apparition at the window. I think I screamed, but I could not fly. Oh, God! I could not fly. It came - it seized me by the hair. I know no more. I know no more.”

She passed her hand across her neck several times, and Mr. Marchdale said, in an anxious voice, -

“You seem, Flora, to have hurt your neck - there is a wound.”

“A wound!” said the mother, and she brought a light close to the bed, where all saw on the side of Flora’s neck a small punctured wound; or, rather two, for there was one a little distance from the other.

It was from these wounds the blood had come which was observable upon her night clothing.

“How came these wounds?” said Henry.

“I do not know,” she replied. “I feel very faint and weak, as if I had almost bled to death.”

“You cannot have done so, dear Flora, for there are not above half-a-dozen spots of blood to be seen at all.”

Mr. Marchdale leaned against the carved head of the bed for support, and he uttered a deep groan. All eyes were turned upon him, and Henry said, in a voice of the most anxious inquiry, -

“Have you something to say, Mr. Marchdale, which will throw some light upon this affair.”

“No, no, no, nothing!” cried Mr. Marchdale, rousing himself at once from the appearance of depression that had come over him. “I have nothing to say, but that I think Flora had better get some sleep if she can.”

“No sleep - no sleep for me,” again screamed Flora. “Dare I be alone to sleep?”

“But you shall not be alone, dear Flora,” said Henry. “I will sit by your bedside and watch you.”

She took his hand in both hers, and while the tears chased each other down her cheeks, she said, -

“Promise me, Henry, by all your hopes of Heaven, you will not leave me.”

“I promise.”

She gently laid herself down, with a deep sigh, and closed her eyes.

“She is weak, and will sleep long,” said Mr. Marchdale.

“You sigh,” said Henry. “Some fearful thoughts, I feel certain, oppress your heart.”

“Hush - hush!” said Mr. Marchdale, as he pointed to Flora. “Hush! not here - not here.”

“I understand,” said Henry.

“Let her sleep.”

There was a silence of some few minutes’ duration. Flora had dropped into a deep slumber. That silence was first broken by George, who said, -

“Mr. Marchdale, look at that portrait.”

He pointed to the portrait in the frame to which we have alluded, and the moment Marchdale looked at it he sunk into a chair as he exclaimed, -

“Gracious Heaven, how like! “

“It is - it is,” said Henry. “Those eyes -”

“And see the contour of the countenance, and the strange shape of the mouth.”

“Exact - exact.”

“That picture shall be moved from here. The sight of it is at once sufficient to awaken all her former terrors in poor Flora’s brain if she should chance to awaken and cast her eyes suddenly upon it.”

“And is it so like him who came here?” said the mother.

“It is the very man himself,” said Mr. Marchdale. “I have not been in this house long enough to ask any of you whose portrait that may be?”

“It is,” said Henry, “the portrait of Sir Runnagate Bannerworth, an ancestor of ours, who first, by his vices, gave the great blow to the family prosperity.”

“Indeed. How long ago?”

“About ninety years.”

“Ninety years. ‘Tis a long while - ninety years.”

“You muse upon it.”

“No, no. I do wish, and yet I dread -”

“What?”

“To say something to you all. But not here - not here. We will hold a consultation on this matter to-morrow. Not now - not now.”

“The daylight is coming quickly on,” said Henry; “I shall keep my sacred promise of not moving from this room until Flora awakens; but there can be no occasion for the detention of any of you. One is sufficient here. Go all of you, and endeavour to procure what rest you can.”

“I will fetch you my powder-flask and bullets,” said Mr. Marchdale; “and you can, if you please, reload the pistols. In about two hours more it will be broad daylight.”

This arrangement was adopted. Henry did reload the pistols, and placed them on a table by the side of the bed, ready for immediate action, and then, as Flora was sleeping soundly, all left the room but himself.

Mrs. Bannerworth was the last to do so. She would have remained, but for the earnest solicitation of Henry, that she would endeavour to get some sleep to make up for her broken night’s repose, and she was indeed so broken down by her alarm on Flora’s account, that she had not power to resist, but with tears flowing from her eyes, she sought her own chamber.

And now the calmness of the night resumed its sway in that evil-fated mansion; and although no one really slept but Flora, all were still. Busy thought kept every one else wakeful. It was a mockery to lie down at all, and Henry, full of strange and painful feelings as he was, preferred his present position to the anxiety and apprehension on Flora’s account which he knew he should feel if she were not within the sphere of his own observation, and she slept as soundly as some gentle infant tired of its playmates and its sports.

TO BE CONTINUED

Exodus by Gavin Chappell and Gavin Roach

Medina raised her head as Wassawa's bodyguard entered the tent, holding a struggling figure in his muscular arms. Her eyes widened, and she stifled a gasp. It was Simba. What was he doing in the rebel camp?

She looked away immediately, not wanting her captors to see that she recognised the boy. Wassawa strode forward, his henchmen moving aside. The warlord gazed questioningly at his bodyguard.

'Look who we found sneaking into the camp,' the bodyguard rumbled. 'Some rich city kid with a death wish.'

Wassawa's eyes blazed. He flung up his hands, his white robes flapping about him like vulture's wings.

'Papa Humfo! You send Wassawa a sacrifice!' He turned to Medina. 'Then he won't be offering a slave, eh—witch?'

Medina shook her head tightly. 'Papa Humfo is kind,' she said, with her eyes downcast. But inwardly, she felt furious. What was the idiot doing here? Had Papa Humfo truly sent him? The ways of the gods were strange.

'Wassawa's attack will begin at dawn,' the warlord continued. 'My bodyguard will prepare the sacrifice and take him to the grove. Medina will look at Wassawa,' he added as the bodyguard dragged the prisoner from the tent.

Medina raised her head. She met Wassawa's chilling snake-like eyes. He moved closer and Medina shuddered.

'Wassawa wishes you to speak to Papa Humfo,' the warlord breathed. 'Offer him this sacrifice in return for Wassawa's victory. As he dies, so die all Wassawa's enemies.'

Medina stepped lightly into the sacred grove, past the ghost wall and into the spirit ring where the altar lay. The sounds of the camp were muted here. It was as if the jungle held its breath in anticipation. She could feel Papa Humfo's presence.

It was wrong that such a man as Wassawa, a warlord and a black magician, should have control over a holy place like this. He was powerful, but he did not understand the might he wielded. To him it was simply a means to an end. Perhaps this was why Papa Humfo would speak only to Medina.

Wassawa's bodyguard lumbered into the clearing, dragging Simba behind him. Medina looked at the man, careful to conceal her feelings. How she loathed him. She remembered how he had raped her, nearly killed her when she was first captured by the rebels—before Wassawa discovered that she could conjure spirits.

All other thoughts ceased as Papa Humfo's deep baritone voice seemed to echo in the night beyond the grove.

The god knew her desire, and knew what Wassawa would have her ask for. He knew that these two hopes were at odds.

‘Then what am I to do?’ Medina asked inside her head.

She must make her own decisions. All that the god desired was to be fed. He would accept any deal that profited him.

‘I can’t make this sacrifice,’ Medina told the god. She looked in pain at Simba as Wassawa’s bodyguard bound him to the altar and placed the long mask over his face.

She must offer up another one’s life. Then the god would readily grant her what she asked for—to get away from this land. Wassawa’s plans meant nothing to Papa Humfo.

Now Medina knew what to do. As the bodyguard picked up the mask that he would wear during the ritual, she came to his side.

‘I have spoken with Papa Humfo,’ she murmured. The bodyguard looked down at her in surprise. She seldom spoke to him willingly.

‘What did he say?’ the bodyguard asked uncomfortably. His eyes flicked up and down her vulnerable form. ‘Will he give Wassawa the victory he demands?’

Medina gazed at him without fear, but did not answer him directly. ‘He promises great things for you,’ she told him.

‘Me?’ the big man asked, startled. ‘Will he give me back the power I had? What did he promise?’

‘This,’ Medina said simply, rising on tiptoe to kiss him.

The bodyguard crushed her frail figure to his own body as he returned the kiss fiercely. His tongue slobbered into Medina’s mouth. For a moment she endured it. Then she bit down.

Wassawa’s bodyguard fell back, trying to scream through the frothing gore. On his knees, he scrabbled frantically with his right hand, searching for his tongue as it lay where Medina had spat it. He held his mouth with his other hand in a vain attempt to stem the flow of blood. As his right hand grasped something fleshy and cooling, a foot pinned it and the grisly trophy to the hard packed earth. He looked up.

Still crushing his hand beneath her foot, Medina brought the skull she had snatched from the altar down with all her force. He sprawled across the ground and lay still, hardly breathing.

Scooping up the bodyguard’s mask, she hurried over to the altar where Simba lay bound. She ripped the sacrificial mask from his face and began to untie him. ‘What did you think you were doing, entering rebel territory alone?’

‘I was worried, sister,’ Simba replied as the last rope dropped to the ground. ‘I knew you would take this route to the city. When you did not appear, and I heard

Wassawa's rebels had recently moved into this area, I had to come looking for you. They're worse than the other rebels—dangerous savages, out for themselves.'

Medina's face softened. 'I'm sorry I shouted, I understand. But you should have remained in the city. It's safer there.'

'What are you doing with Wassawa and his madmen?' Simba asked, clambering to his feet.

'They captured me when I was travelling, and Wassawa discovered my talent,' said Medina. 'If Grandmother had not passed on her secrets to me, I might not be here. But how did you get here?'

Simba was about to answer when drums began to throb in the distance. 'Quickly! Put this on and help me get the bodyguard onto the altar!' she hissed.

When Wassawa led his men into the grove, Medina and a masked man were binding a third figure to the altar. Two of Wassawa's men beat traditional goat-hide drums that were slung around their waists. The drumbeats rose to a crescendo, echoing back from the trees, and then stopped abruptly. Wassawa stepped forward and gave a nod to Medina.

She and her masked companion stepped away from the prone figure on the altar as Wassawa lifted a gourd of palm wine to his lips. He drank ritualistically, and then passed it to his companions, and each drank. Then each man took one of the masks that lay at the altar's foot and placed them over their faces.

Wassawa stepped forward, his mask nodding eerily in the flickering light. With a scraping noise he drew a machete from his belt. He held it above the feebly struggling body, and then plunged it down.

Medina nodded to Simba. His masked face looked back at her, and then he followed her quietly towards the edge of the clearing. He took a last look back.

Wassawa and his henchmen were hacking at the masked figure on the altar, cutting strips of flesh from the still living body, and thrusting them raw into their mouths. The bodyguard's bloody form thrashed spasmodically as the knives sunk in. Wassawa's white robes were now blotched with gore. He leaned forward to hack more flesh from the body and the bodyguard's head fell back. The mask fell off, revealing the bodyguard's tortured face. His eyes stared glassily into the night.

Wassawa rose, horror etched into his own powerful features, his snake eyes glittering. The machete dripped gore on the hard earth.

Medina whirled round. Simba seemed paralysed by the sight. She seized his brawny arm and forced him into a run.

The pair flew through the jungle, their feet barely touching the ground. They had circled the great rebel camp without being seen, but Medina had no idea where they were heading.

‘Quickly! This way!’ Simba panted. They passed shadowy, vine-hung trees. ‘Someone’s waiting for us.’

‘Who?’ Medina gasped.

‘Barclay Obote, the man I worked for in the city,’ Simba answered.

Gunfire raked the ground beside them as they pressed on into the undergrowth. Medina’s pulse was racing, and her lungs seemed to be on fire. The shouting of the rebels was growing closer and the darkness couldn’t hide them forever.

Just as Medina was giving up hope, bright lights flared in front of them, freezing them to the spot.

‘What took you so long?’ a voice drawled from behind the glaring headlights. ‘We nearly left without you, man!’

The jeep’s engines roared into life as Medina and Simba clambered inside.

Medina saw a longhaired man in an expensive suit sitting in the passenger seat. Another man sat at the wheel, a third in the back beside Simba. But the man in the suit drew her attention the most as the driver put his foot down and sent the vehicle speeding back the way that it had come.

‘That man Wassawa, he’s no good, you know,’ said the man in the suit, leaning over and giving Medina a charming smile. He had gold fillings. ‘Simba, I’m ashamed of you, man, letting your pretty little sister get into his hands.’

‘Yeah, Mr Obote,’ Simba said. ‘I just want my sister and me to get outa this place.’

‘You wanna go to Babylon?’ Barclay Obote asked Medina. She looked at him in silence.

Ever since the country had collapsed, she had wanted to get away, go somewhere where there was still civilisation—if it existed. Stuck out in her village in the bush after losing most of her family in the famine, she had thought her brother in the big city was her only hope. When he sent her his message, she had thought she was finally going to escape. The last few months of jungle travel and the nightmare of captivity among the rebels had sapped her will. She had been close to utter despair. But now escape seemed certain.

Gunfire lit up the night behind them as Obote’s driver forced the jeep down a rutted track. Medina gasped, and looked over her shoulder.

Rebel vehicles were sweeping through the night, their headlights bouncing in the darkness as they shot across the churned up terrain. More gunfire rattled, and bullets whizzed around them.

‘Dakota!’ Barclay addressed the man in the back languidly. ‘Discourage these infidels.’

The man sitting to Simba’s right leapt up and opened fire with the assault rifle he had been clutching, blazed away at the pursuers as Barclay’s driver drove on through the darkness and the vehicle bounced across potholes.

Dawn revealed the city on the horizon, a blasted shadow of its former magnificence. Years of civil war and one uprising after another had taken their toll. It looked as if the city wanted the jungle to smother it and put an end to its misery.

Barclay’s jeep bounced and jolted across the no-man’s-land between the forest and the city. The rebels poured out from the jungle. The 4x4 rapidly approached the checkpoint, slowed enough for Barclay to shout orders at the guards, then accelerated into the city beyond.

Gunfire rattled in the distance as Barclay’s driver took them down a badly maintained road flanked by ruins and semi-ruins. A huge statue of the first president stood headless in the centre of a plaza. It was otherwise empty except for small groups of citizens clutching guns and staring numbly north, towards the jungle.

The jeep pulled up outside a rundown government office block, and Barclay took them inside. Ignoring the lift, he ushered them up a dark concrete stairwell that stank of urine. Six flights up, a passage led them to a door. Dakota opened it and Barclay ushered Medina and Simba into a large, brightly illuminated office with a view of the ruinous presidential palace.

He sat down and put his feet up on the wide desk, while Medina and Simba sat on the other side. Dakota and the driver remained on guard in the passage.

Barclay gestured expansively around at the office.

‘British desk, American computers, Swedish furniture, Japanese radio,’ he said proudly. ‘All shipped in at personal cost. But nothing’s too much for a high-ranking official.’ He switched on the radio and was rewarded with a blast of reggae music. Simba grinned. ‘You wanna leave our fine country, man?’ Barclay added, looking at Simba. ‘Why?’

Simba indicated the radio. ‘It was Bob Marley who inspired me,’ he said. ‘Exodus! Gotta go elsewhere. And I’ve saved up money while I’ve been working for you. I think I can pay my way.’

‘But Babylon, man,’ Barclay said lazily. The reggae on the radio was cut off suddenly by swelling chords of martial music. The President began shouting:

‘We will not submit to the insurgents! Again, the Habesh Rebel Alliance attack innocent people, but the mighty Civilian Defence Force will crush them. Long live the Republic of Habesh...’

Barclay switched off the radio in annoyance.

‘He’s so full of shit, man,’ he said.

Medina was growing impatient, waiting for Barclay to get down to business. ‘You can get us out of this country?’ she demanded. ‘I’ve got no money but Simba says he can pay.’

All charm vanished from Barclay’s voice. ‘Let me see the money,’ he said. Unwillingly, Simba opened his jacket and took note after note from a money belt.

‘All American dollars,’ he said anxiously.

‘Of course, my man,’ Barclay replied. ‘Would I pay my employees anything else?’ He counted the money, speaking as he did so. ‘You’ll be taken to the UK. Ever heard of it? Somewhere they have food to spare, and hot water, and good houses, and no civil war. They’ll give you money if you don’t work. Paradise, man.’

‘What do we have to do?’ Medina demanded. The noise of gunfire seemed to draw closer. She was desperate to escape.

Barclay fixed her with his cold gaze, and suddenly she was reminded of Wassawa.

‘Tell the officials that you’re seeking political asylum,’ he replied. ‘They fall for it every time. And it’s not like you’re lying. You’re escaping hell.’

‘I thought you liked it here,’ Medina replied. ‘You call the UK Babylon.’

Barclay stopped counting. ‘One day, when I’ve made my money - or the government’s ousted - I’ll move to Babylon to live in style. And by its river will I lay me down, and weep. For joy. Dakota!’ he called. The man entered quickly. ‘Their money’s good. Take them to the ship, man.’ He turned to his two customers. ‘You set sail tonight. Bon voyage.’

The car pulled into the dock entrance. Medina’s spirits rose as she caught the tang of sea air. This was it; finally they were going to escape, away from this madness. They were going somewhere where they would be treated like human beings. Somewhere they would be welcome.

The car came to a halt near a huge rusty freighter. Old, by the look of it, but that didn’t matter. It was their way out. Her deal with Papa Humfo was paying off.

‘Get out,’ said Dakota in a bored monotone. The driver stayed behind the wheel as Dakota stepped out of the car and waited for Medina and Simba.

As he led them up the gangway Medina noticed a faint but unpleasant odour. Dakota took them over to one of many containers. As they approached the smell became more pungent. Dakota opened the container door. It was packed with people. Dakota ushered them in, and Medina and Simba stepped forward uncertainly. Darkness fell as the doors closed with a clang.

Their journey had begun.

Castle of the Blood Visage: Part One by Gavin Chappell

One

The ancient ring-fort loomed above the huddled village like a threat. In the stony pass solace was a thing unknown; the mountain walls themselves menaced the fragile little settlement, seeming forever on the brink of falling and crushing the life out of it. But the dark old fortress on the heights emanated an air of pure menace.

Its circular walls consisted of massive dry-stone blocks, crude but mighty, raised in an age long gone when the humble little church in the village was founded. Many raths and cashels dot the countryside of Ireland, but most are decaying hummocks, haunted by feeble spirits of long ago. Dún Dreach-Fhoula still stood, and remained inhabited even in these troubled times. But few people in the village thought of their lords on the day when the foreigners came.

A cold drizzle hung in the air that morning. Young Oengus was picking his way across the muddy village street when a distant thunder of hoofs reached his ears.

He skittered across the lane and climbed onto a vantage point atop a rocky outcrop. Suibhne the priest appeared from the dark door to the wattle church.

‘What is it, boy?’ he called urgently. ‘They say there’s trouble afoot, down on the coast.’

Unspeaking, Oengus paused at the top of the wet rock and gazed down into the valley below.

Through sheets of rain and mist, the path that led up from the valley below was visible, the same track that wound through the village and continued on into the pass. Involuntarily, he glanced at the steep cliff that rose above the village, and the ancient walls that ringed it, but hurriedly drew his attention back to the valley. He caught his breath.

The sheets of rain had parted momentarily. He glimpsed the crowded valley floor.

‘Riders!’ he called wildly, turning towards the priest. ‘Two miles down the valley. Heading towards us!’

‘Are they Munster-men?’ the priest asked quickly.

Oengus stared hard through the shifting mists. Did it matter where they came from? The lords of the valleys were no better than the foreigners, when it was campaigning season - not to honest peasant folk, at least. Besides, however dreadful, no warriors could be as terrible as they who ruled this valley.

Again the mists parted.

The plodding cavalcade of horsemen was nearer now, drawing closer to the foot of the slope. Oengus could see the riders’ rain-drenched clothes, bright and outlandishly coloured despite the downpour. Equally visible were their vast beards, and the axes slung over their shoulders, that told him they were no native Irishmen. He caught sight of their leader.

A chill of fear, mixed with awed wonder, shot through him.

‘Well, boy?’ the priest called querulously.

Oengus turned to see Suibhne had ventured out of the church, and now stood in the muddy lane below, peering up at him. Other faces had appeared in the doors of the huts around the village square.

‘They’re not Irish,’ the boy replied, his voice thick. He pushed the hair from his eyes as Loeaghair the headman appeared at the entrance to his roundhouse.

‘Are they foreigners, then?’ Loeaghair asked. A murmur rose from the watching villagers.

The words stuck in Oengus’ throat. He stammered

‘I think the leader is Ingunn the Red.’

‘What’s that, lad?’ Suibhne frowned.

‘Their leader is the Red Daughter.’

Oengus’ words were audible across the rain-lashed village square. The villagers’ faces fell. Suibhne clutched his crucifix, muttering to himself. Loeaghairé stood steadfast and firm, but his face was pale.

The Red Daughter? Why had she come to their remote mountain village?

‘I can see a fort up there,’ said Bjorn suddenly, peering up into the mists at the head of the line.

Ingunn looked up from her gloomy thoughts.

‘A fort?’ she demanded harshly. She glanced around at the forty-strong force that she had led up here from the coast. ‘I thought I told you to keep your eyes open!’

‘Not easy, in this rain,’ Thorkell Treebone remarked. ‘Besides, that place is ancient. Look at it!’

Ingunn craned her neck back to gaze up the slope. Silent and ominous, the megalithic dry-stone walls of the fort crowned the ridge above the pass. Granted, it looked far older than the forts the natives favoured, and for all she knew it might have been built in ancient days, before the gods triumphed over the giants. But who was to say no robber chieftain of these grim mountains had reoccupied the place? They might be facing ambush at any second.

‘Keep alert!’ she ordered. ‘Our mission is far too important to jeopardise. King Sigtrygg expects to meet us at the foot of the Boggeragh Mountains by tomorrow afternoon. I swore by Thor and Odin that we would meet him there, and join forces to attack the Danes of Cork from the rear. I swore it, and by all the gods, I’ll not break my word, nor die with an oath unfulfilled!’

Thorkell Treebone heaved a sigh, and led them cautiously onward.

‘They’re beginning to ride up the slope now,’ Oengus reported.

‘What do you suggest, headman?’ Suibhne asked Loeaghairé acerbically. ‘You are the one who makes the decisions here.’

The village elders had congregated in the lane, beneath Oengus’ rock, from which the boy issued frequent reports. It seemed that in the driving rain the foreigners had not yet noticed their village, but the elders were still to reach a decision.

‘We cannot flee,’ Loeaghair said darkly. ‘We are the vassals of our lord in the fort above...’ A murmur rose from the villagers. Suibhne crossed himself devoutly. ‘He would hunt us down wherever we went, should we flee his domain, and it would be the worse for us,’ the headman added. He shook his head. ‘We must stand our ground. Perhaps our lord will welcome these visitors. Certainly, it seems that we must.’ He clapped his hands. ‘Come! We shall prepare to greet these foreigners as guests.’

Lulled by the swaying of her horse’s back, Ingunn felt little but the rain on her face. Her mail-encased body was cold, but no more than it would be were she aboard her longship. Water was her element, and only the crags towering above them made her uneasy. The crags and the half-ruined ring-fort that had now vanished in the mists.

The little village came as a complete surprise.

The Norsemen crested the rise as the rain began to lash down harder, splashing from their heavy sea-capes and the backs and flanks of their mounts - and there it was, ahead of them. In the shadow of the cliff, twelve or thirteen roundhouses straddled the winding road; peasant dwellings of the kind common in the lowlands, but rare up in these lonely mountains. A small crowd had gathered in the middle of the village.

Ingunn glared down at the rain-drenched figures. She had been expecting an ambush, not a welcoming committee.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded, casting her eyes from left to right. These peasants posed no threat to her, with forty men at her back. As the Vikings rode into the village on either side of her, the Irishmen stared up at them with awe.

Finally, a man shuffled forward.

‘Welcome to Dún Dreach-Fhoula,’ he stuttered in thickly-accented Norse.

‘Welcome to where?’ Ingunn’s words rang out across the village. ‘What gods-forsaken heap of hovels is this?’

‘Dún Dreach-Fhoula,’ the man repeated awkwardly. ‘I am Loeaghair, the headman of the village beneath the fort.’

Thorkell Treebone rode forward.

‘Yes, the fort,’ he said. ‘Who dwells there? Is he the King of Munster’s man? How strong is his garrison? Tell us, or suffer the consequences.’

‘Lord Dreach-Fhoula is no king’s man,’ Loeaghair was saying as Oengus broke away from the crowd, and slipped closer to the leader of the foreigners. Never had he seen so beautiful a woman; not even his cousin Emer. Though diminutive in size, the

Red Daughter was a commanding presence atop her steed, and Oengus was sure she would remain impressive down amongst the villagers.

Her followers were mighty men, strong and wild in appearance. Their impassive, savage faces frightened the young lad. But they seemed to be equally in awe of their auburn-headed chieftainess...

‘Where d’you think you’re going?’ hissed a voice in Oengus’ ear.

He turned, with a sigh.

‘Emer,’ he muttered. His cousin had followed him round the crowd, and now she was looking at him with that vexed expression she had learnt from her mother. ‘I wanted to look at the foreign woman,’ he added hesitantly. Emer folded her arms.

‘I’m sure you did,’ she hissed. ‘The heathen hussy! The shameless pagan! She dresses like a man! She’s as hideous as these heathens who accompany her.’

One of the nearest Vikings looked down at them from his horse. Oengus’ bowels turned to water as the man’s intense glare caught his own.

Suddenly, the Viking’s face split with a grin, and he chuckled.

‘Very well, then,’ said the Red Daughter loudly, closing her negotiations with the headman. ‘We accept your offer. If you can adequately stable forty horses, and supply us with food and ale for the night, you will not find us ungrateful.’

‘I’m not sure this is a good idea, Ingunn,’ said Thorkell Treebone quietly.

She shrugged, and gestured towards the grey skies that relentlessly poured rain upon the dismal scene.

‘We need decent shelter if we’re to be any use to King Sigtrygg,’ she replied. ‘We won’t get it anywhere else in this country. These robbers in the old fort accept no king, Irish or Danish. This is what we need.’

‘We have yet to meet our mysterious benefactors,’ Thorkell Treebone reminded her. ‘Currently we have only the words of this peasant.’

‘Lord Dreach-Fhoula will welcome you,’ said Loeaghair quickly. ‘You may depend on that.’

The Vikings stared down at the huddled, uneasy villagers. The rain hissed down. Oengus and Emer watched from the side, their eyes wide.

‘Come on, then,’ said another Viking, a large man with a vast beard. He leapt down from his horse and led it across the square. ‘Stable him well,’ he told Loeaghair.

The Red Daughter sighed.

‘You’re right, Bjorn,’ she muttered. ‘Stable these horses, Irishman! Ignore my cautious comrade. Thorkell Treebone is so cunning he could never believe another man might have simple motives.’

She climbed down from her horse, and the rest of the Vikings dismounted. Thorkell Treebone slid off his horse painfully and waddled forward. Oengus saw that he had a wooden leg. At Loeaghair’s bidding, the villagers hurried forward to take care of their guests’ beasts. Ingunn strode towards the largest roundhouse.

Oengus watched her go, smiling to himself.

Two

That night, Loeaghair’s hut was full. Most evenings, the men of the village would crowd in there to drink and perhaps discuss the events of the day, such as they were, and the prospects for next harvest. But tonight they had guests, and their uneasy silence undercut the boisterous roar of the foreigners.

‘There’s that woman again,’ said Emer disapprovingly. Oengus nodded. Both had slipped away from their own huts to watch the proceedings from the shadows of the entrance. The guests were carousing and drinking, while the villagers sat nervously in one corner, attentive, at Loeaghair’s urging, to the foreigners’ every need.

‘Why does our headman welcome them like this?’ Emer added peevishly. ‘They eat our food and drink our ale. Nothing will be left once these ogres are done.’

‘So, Irishman.’ Ingunn’s words split the hubbub. Alone among her followers, she had been drinking moderately, and seemed cold sober.

‘Yes, my lady?’ Loeaghair asked unctuously.

‘When do we meet your lord?’ she asked. ‘We are not accustomed to drinking with peasants. Your hospitality is all well and good, but that of your betters leaves much to be desired.’

‘Indeed,’ Loeaghair replied thoughtfully. ‘You will soon meet him.’

‘We don’t want to stay here too long,’ said Thorkell. ‘I say we get going first thing in the morning. No profit in talking with this robber chieftain. He might seek recompense.’

‘I have something to offer them,’ Ingunn replied, tossing back her head. ‘If they are worth our while, we could enlist them against our foes.’

‘I am sure they will be keen to discuss this matter with you,’ Loeaghairé broke in. ‘May I ask who your foes are?’

Ingunn looked at him scornfully. ‘That’s nothing I’d tell you,’ she replied. ‘Get me this mysterious lord of yours, and I’ll tell him all about it.’

‘It is to be hoped,’ said Suibhne ponderously, in his cups as he was most nights,’ that you do not ride against men of God.’

In the silence that fell, he blinked uncertainly, and blustered on. ‘Your people are notorious for showing the House of God little respect.’ He paused, and swallowed audibly.

Ingunn turned her ice blue gaze upon him.

‘You suggest we might plunder holy places?’ she purred. Bjorn laughed loudly beside her.

‘It is said, it is said,’ the priest replied nervously.

‘And yet, in thanks for my victory over Varg the Black, I bestowed much gold on the convent on Innis Cotrice,’ Ingunn said slowly. ‘I was the deliverance for which the nuns had prayed - though it was vengeance for my father’s death that I sought. Our desires were one. Perhaps the White Christ had a hand in my victory. I made offerings to him as I did to Thor and Odin. What of it?’

‘But they say you heathens loot monasteries,’ Suibhne replied. ‘It is common knowledge.’

Ingunn shrugged. ‘Sometimes it is necessary to forage from holy men, as from others. If they truly wished to give their treasures to their god - rather than to covet them and gloat over them - they should break or burn them, so none in this world might use them. That is the custom among my people. But as to your question, we ride against no monastery.’

She turned away abruptly, the discussion ended. From the shadows, Oengus gazed at her, and sighed.

‘You like her, don’t you?’ said Emer accusingly.

Oengus nodded quietly. Emer snorted. ‘She’s horrid,’ the girl said.

Oengus was about to reply when he saw two figures move towards the entrance. The children ducked back.

After a couple of seconds, Oengus peered warily round the corner.

‘Are they coming out?’ Emer hissed, afraid they would get in trouble. ‘Who is it?’

‘It’s Loeaghairé and Suibhne,’ Oengus muttered. ‘They’re just standing there.’

He peered round the corner again.

‘What is it, priest?’ Loeaghair was saying. ‘Don’t try to stop me. You’re drunk. And don’t anger our guests. These foreigners are dangerous unless treated with caution.’

‘Dangerous, but not as evil as we are told,’ Suibhne slurred. ‘Perhaps at last we have a chance!’

‘A chance for what?’ Loeaghair demanded. ‘What are you talking about, priest? I must be going.’

‘What am I talking about?’ the priest asked. ‘Why, what do you think? Do you enjoy being the servant of evil? Lord Dreach-Fhoula is an agent of the Devil, as are all his followers. And you aid them!’

‘I would rather they preyed upon others,’ Loeaghair replied. ‘I would rather they let my own people be. And maybe they will, for a while, at least. If I tell them of our guests.’

Suibhne seized the headman’s arm.

‘You can’t mean to... No!’ he hissed. ‘That will solve nothing! This village has laboured under the curse since before Saint Patrick’s time. Even the Druids were afraid of Lord Dreach-Fhoula. But the Red Daughter is a mighty warrior. Maybe she will free us!’

‘Why should she?’ Loeaghair replied. ‘She is a mercenary. What have we to offer her, or any of her kind? The foreigners have been tearing Ireland apart for a hundred years. Lord Dreach-Fhoula has been here far longer, and what his people ask of us is a small price. Don’t try to stop me. I’m going up to the fort, and that’s all I have to say.’

He pushed past the priest. Oengus and Emer ducked into the shadows as Loeaghair strode resolutely across the village square in the direction of the precipitous path to the ring-fort. The two children exchanged glances.

Once the headman had gone, Oengus returned quickly to the door.

The Vikings were still eating, though little food was left. Suibhne had retired to a corner, where he sat in silent meditation. Oengus’ eyes strayed back to Ingunn.

She stood talking with her two lieutenants, slightly away from both her men and the villagers. Oengus’ eyes narrowed. He could easily crawl round the wall to their position, and hear the great woman speak. He was about to move when Emer’s hand landed on his shoulder.

‘What are you thinking about?’ she asked petulantly. ‘What’s going on?’

Oengus bit his lip.

‘I think our headman hopes to betray our guests to his lordship,’ he replied.

Emer’s eyes wavered, but she shook her head. ‘What of it?’ she replied. ‘We’ll be rid of them.’

‘But the priest wants to use them to rid us of Lord Dreach-Fhoula,’ Oengus added. He glanced back at Ingunn. ‘I want to know if she realises people are plotting against her.’

Before Emer could say more, he slipped away.

‘I don’t trust these Irishmen,’ Thorkell Treebone was saying.

The Red Daughter flashed him an uncharacteristic smile.

‘But you trust no one, Thorkell,’ she replied gently.

‘I don’t see what’s wrong with them,’ Bjorn protested. ‘They’ve been very hospitable.’

‘While you trust too many,’ said Ingunn. ‘But as long as we keep what wits we have about us, there’s nothing these peasants can do. Their lord is a different matter. A robber chieftain by the sound of things, and the fort up there is his stronghold. But if we were to speak with him, we should be able to bring him over to our way of thinking.’

‘He’ll ride against the folk of Cork?’ asked Bjorn.

Ingunn scowled.

‘Don’t mention our mission here,’ she said swiftly. ‘King Sigtrygg wants the Danes to suspect nothing - until we descend upon them. A surprise attack will win us the town, nothing else.’

‘Yes, Bjorn,’ agreed Thorkell. ‘We can trust no one but our sworn comrades. Were we to enlist these robbers, we would run a heavy risk of treachery, Ingunn... Ingunn?’

The Red Daughter was staring absently towards the wall.

‘Ingunn, this idea of yours is risky!’ he said loudly.

Ingunn raised a hand for silence. The two men exchanged glances as she strode towards the shadowy wall.

There was a squawk. Ingunn’s hand flashed out, and she seized a fleeing figure.

As she dragged the young boy out from his hiding place, she looked at Thorkell.

‘And it seems we’re at risk even here,’ she replied grimly.

Three

The roundhouse rose in uproar. Oengus drooped limply. He had been listening to the foreigners’ conversation with little comprehension, as they discussed matters beyond him; lying still, in the lea of the wall, as quiet as a mouse - until the rat ran over his hand.

Even then, he’d had the presence of mind to muffle his startled cry. No one had heard it, except her, it seemed. But now he was her prisoner. The Red Daughter gazed around at the villagers.

‘What is this spy doing here?’ she asked, in a low, dangerous voice. The villagers looked uncomfortable, and some glanced around for Loeaghair.

‘Well?’ demanded Ingunn. ‘Will none of you speak? Who set this spy to listen to our speech?’

The priest rose unsteadily from the corner.

‘I know nothing of such a plan,’ he said in a wavering voice.

‘Where is your headman?’ Ingunn demanded suddenly.

‘He went up to the fort, to speak with... his lordship,’ the priest replied, with a shudder.

‘A trap!’ Thorkell exclaimed. ‘His robber masters will descend upon us and plunder us!’

Suibhne shuffled forward. ‘I told him it would be better to ally ourselves with you,’ he said.

Ingunn shifted Oengus to one side, and then drew her sword. Its razor-sharp edge whisked past the boy’s face, and he screwed his eyes shut.

‘Come no closer, if you value this lad’s life!’ she ordered. A frown crossed her face. ‘Ally yourselves? What benefit could you be to warriors like us? We want fighting men, not peasants!’

His heart beating madly, Loeaghair halted beneath the massive stone archway leading into the fort. Two torches burned within, revealing a silent courtyard, and a stone hall beyond. He stepped forward.

The instant he passed through the arch, the torches winked out, and he was left in darkness. Fear seized him, and he turned to flee, plans forgotten.

Hands reached out of the darkness, and superhuman strength bore him to the ground.

Before he could think to struggle, his captor dragged him towards the hall. Never had he been so far into the fort before.

As he passed under the heavy stone lintel, he found himself confronted by an eerie, uncanny scene. The hall opened out into red-lit darkness. Crudely carved pillars supported a high roof that towered above the hall, where a large trench lay, brimful with a dark liquid that glistened in the light of four smoking torches. Beside it stood a stone slab, like an altar. Otherwise the hall was in darkness. But the light was sufficient to hint, if not reveal, the dark forms lurking in the shadows around him.

‘What is this?’ came a dusty, ancient voice from the darkness beyond the trench.

‘I found him lurking at the gate,’ hissed Loeaghair’s captor. His voice sounded strangely familiar. The headman tried to turn and see who held him, but a strong paw forced his face back, and held it there.

‘Who are you, mortal?’ the dusty voice demanded.

‘I... My name is Loeaghair,’ he replied. ‘I am headman of the village! I bring the tribute.’

‘Pah!’ spat the unseen speaker. ‘These mortals all look alike to me. But why do you come here with no tribute? Now is not the time to trouble us. Unless you offer yourself.’

‘But I have news,’ Loeaghair gasped. ‘A group of foreigners, Viking raiders, have come to the village...’

‘What of it?’ sneered the dark voice. ‘Can you not fight your own battles?’

‘Listen to me!’ Loeaghair demanded. At this, a hideous chorus of cackles and sniggers came from the surrounding audience. ‘I said listen!’ he shouted, and this time his voice quelled the noise.

‘We listen,’ said the voice calmly. ‘Bring him closer!’ it added in a commanding tone.

Loeaghairé's captor forced him forward, across the hall floor to the edge of the trench. The headman peered uncertainly into the darkness beyond, but saw nothing.

'Speak!' commanded the voice.

'If I can convince them, they might come here,' Loeaghairé babbled. 'You could take them as tribute, not my people. A glut of strong, hardy warriors. And at their head is the shield maiden known as the Red Daughter.'

'The Red Daughter? The Red Daughter?' The chorus took up the name.

'Silence!' the voice commanded, and they spoke no more.

'We have heard of the Red Daughter,' it told Loeaghairé. 'We have heard how she has battled Fomorians and Fir Bolg and Sidhe. But she has met her match with the Lord of Dún Dreach-Fhoula!'

'Shall I lead her to you?' asked Loeaghairé eagerly.

'No need,' hissed the voice. 'My companions are perfectly capable. You, however, will remain to serve your true function. Only once that is done will we begin to deal with these Vikings.'

'No! No!' screamed Loeaghairé, as the speaker moved slowly into the torchlight. But it was at Lord Dreach-Fhoula's companions that he screamed, when he realised who would be first to drink his blood.

'Father...' he gulped.

The man's mouth opened to reveal long canines. He ducked towards his son's neck. Blood ran down the headman's skin. Loeaghairé's body slumped forward, a dead weight.

The blood-drinkers moved into the light, to feast.

Four

'This village is cursed,' announced the priest. The Vikings crowded round at the centre of the roundhouse, and the villagers cowered at the edges. Oengus, almost forgotten by his captor, watched as the priest bravely told his dangerous guests the tale of their people.

'When the Irish first came to these shores,' Suibhne went on, 'it was to an uncanny, haunted land. Demons dwelt here; gods, our forefathers called them - some of them,

at least. One tribe, the Tuatha de Danaan, were benign spirits. Of a lesser order than angels; fallen perhaps, but not as far as Lucifer.'

'Your words mean nothing to us,' Ingunn said. 'You mean that this country was infested with elves and trolls?'

'As you might say, madam,' the priest replied. 'Our forefathers fought against them in those dark days, and most of the devils retreated into the barrows and burial mounds that dot the landscape to this day. Occasionally they appeared to superstitious folk who risked damnation by making offerings to them, to Cromm Cruaich and his diabolical companions. The forefathers of my flock were far from innocent in this respect.'

'With the coming of the Blessed Patrick, such observances were stamped out, and few clung to the old ways. But the forefathers of my fellow-villagers, alas, kept up the rites of sacrifice. For their sins, they were driven out from their ancestral lands in Meath, and came here, to these stark, lonely mountains, where it was thought that no one dwelt. Here they settled, only to come under a worse tyranny.'

'The gods of our forefathers themselves took Ireland from elder demons, misshapen fiends who haunt our legends. Foremost among them were the Fomorians, who still dwell among the islands of the ocean. But here in this valley dwelt a worse kind of evil - the Lord of Dún Dreach-Fhoula, who was a *dearg-diúlaí*, a drinker of human blood.'

'A bloodsucker?' asked Ingunn. 'I heard of them from the Slavs, when I went raiding in the Baltic. Vampires, they called them.'

Suibhne continued. 'By fleeing into these mountains, my people became the serfs of this demon and his companions. He forced them to yield up human sacrifices to him, and from these an army of followers has grown, a host of the *neamh-mhairbh*, the undead. Even after the Bishop of Tuam had the villagers forcibly baptised, these oppressions continued unabated.'

'Your White Christ is a weakling, an unmanly god,' said Thorkell Treebone quietly. 'He is no guard against trolls, vampires, or whatever they are.'

The priest looked bleakly at him. 'Perhaps you are right,' he replied sombrely. 'Lord Dreach-Fhoula was unaffected by the coming of the church. And still my people must offer up their kin to placate the *dearg-diúlaí*...'

But for the moment, the blood-drinkers were sated.

'What of these Vikings, my lord?' asked a male voice.

‘Yes... How shall we take our vengeance on she who has slain so many of our kin?’
The second voice was softer - that of a woman.

‘Ingunn the Red...’ came the dusty voice that had spoken before. ‘A great warrior, by all accounts - and a great beauty. A shame that she is a mere mortal. Were she of our folk, she would make a fitting consort for me - aye, and war-chief!’

‘But Lord Dreach-Fhoula!’ the male exclaimed. ‘You promised that I would lead your armies when we ride out to conquer!’

The female voice laughed scornfully.

‘Surely Lord Dreach-Fhoula jests, Sreng,’ she hissed. ‘After all - she is a mere mortal.’

Lord Dreach-Fhoula chuckled.

‘That is easily rectified, Badb,’ he replied. ‘Now do as I tell you. Go down to the village and catch me one of these mortals. We need to bait a trap...’

‘But why did you set this spy on us?’ Ingunn asked suspiciously. ‘You - or your headman, wherever he’s gone.’

Suibhne shook his head. He looked sternly at the boy.

‘I’m no one’s spy!’ Oengus replied defiantly.

‘Then why were you listening to us?’ Ingunn demanded.

‘I wanted to hear you speak,’ Oengus said feebly. ‘I have heard so many stories about you.’ He clutched at her. ‘You will help us, won’t you? You are a mighty warrior - the Red Daughter. We need your help.’

Impassively, Ingunn returned the boy’s gaze. Then, incredibly, it seemed, her face began to soften. She looked to Thorkell Treebone and Bjorn.

‘My advice is that we ride out of this cursed valley at high speed,’ said Thorkell.

‘What chance do we have against vampires, anyway?’ Bjorn said in agreement. ‘We won’t...’

He broke off. A high-pitched shriek rang out from beyond the roundhouse.

‘Emer!’ shouted Oengus. He broke away from Ingunn and ran for the door.

‘Don’t be a fool, lad!’ cried Suibhne, reaching out to grab him. ‘They’ll take you too!’ he added, as Oengus broke free, and vanished outside.

‘Is it Lord Dreach-Fhoula?’ Ingunn asked.

‘That, or one of his retainers,’ gasped Suibhne. Ingunn drew her sword.

‘Don’t risk your life for these peasants!’ shouted Thorkell, as she raced across the roundhouse. She ignored him.

Bursting out into the square, she almost stumbled over Oengus, who stood stock still before the entrance, staring across the square. Ingunn followed his gaze. She caught a glimpse of a figure standing in the shadows of a hut.

‘I have the mortal girl,’ it hissed. ‘Come up to the fort and speak with my lord, or she will die!’

‘What are you talking about?’ demanded Ingunn.

‘Are you the one they call the Red Daughter?’ it asked.

‘That’s what the Irish call me,’ she replied.

‘The *neamh-mhairbh* will come for you soon.’

The sinister figure disappeared into the shadows. Ingunn rushed towards the hut, turning the corner to see an empty space between the houses. She looked left and right. No sign of the thing. Slowly, she trailed back towards the main roundhouse.

‘It took Emer,’ came a choked voice. She crouched down, and took Oengus’ hand. He looked feebly at her.

‘I’ll get her back, boy,’ she vowed. ‘I swear it!’

Five

‘Sentimentality!’ Thorkell Treebone exploded, a couple of minutes later. ‘Ingunn, I’d never have expected you to allow something this lowly to affect you.’

Ingunn looked round the roundhouse at the assembled Norsemen and Irishmen.

‘It said that the undead would come for us soon. I must go and speak with Lord Dreach-Fhoula, or the lad’s friend will die.’ She reached out to ruffle Oengus’ hair, and he started nervously.

Thorkell Treebone spat disgustedly.

‘We should leave this place, and these luckless folk,’ he growled. ‘Before their ill-luck rubs off on us!’

Ingunn shook her head emphatically. ‘These people have given us hospitality,’ she replied. ‘We owe them something, at least.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Thorkell. ‘If they could, they’d hand us over to their lord without a qualm. We should leave now. Otherwise, we may never join up with King Sigtrygg!’

‘He’s not important,’ Ingunn replied. ‘Not as important as our honour.’

‘Our honour?’ sneered Thorkell. ‘We’ll gain no honour aiding these wretches. More important matters need attending to, ones that will give us far greater honour than dying at the hands of vampires. You swore to join Sigtrygg at the appointed time. What will your honour be if you do not fulfil your oath?’

‘We owe something to this people,’ Ingunn insisted. ‘By Odin! we’re not leaving that girl to die!’

‘You’re not our queen,’ Thorkell Treebone replied. ‘We’re equals. We all have a say when it comes to risking our lives needlessly.’ He glanced around at the silent Vikings. ‘We’ll vote on it,’ he added.

Ingunn scowled. Oengus glanced up at her, seeing her face troubled by emotion. But then she sighed.

‘Very well - vote,’ she snapped. ‘Who wants to remain here and crush the vampires?’

‘I will!’ said Bjorn. He looked at Thorkell Treebone guiltily. ‘Ingunn’s right. We owe it to these people.’

‘I’ll fight,’ said Gunnholm the Berserker, and his three brothers nodded. Thorkell Treebone went red with anger.

‘Who else?’ said Ingunn, looking round at her followers. ‘Come on, don’t be shy,’ she added sarcastically.

‘My vote is that we join King Sigtrygg with all haste,’ said one of the other Vikings. His fellows nodded in agreement.

‘This isn’t our fight,’ added another.

Suibhne stepped forward. ‘May I add a few words?’ he asked. ‘All I have to say is that it is every man’s duty to fight evil where they find it - if they can. My people are weak, and cannot fight. But you are strong.’

Thorkell Treebone shook his head.

‘A prudent man doesn’t step heedless into a den of wolves,’ he replied. ‘Few of my fellows are crazy enough to risk their lives for you, priest. We have higher loyalties.’

Ingunn stared bitterly at the ground for a few seconds. Oengus watched her anxiously, wondering quite how she would convince her men. She had sworn to him that she would save Emer, but this oath conflicted with her existing obligations. How would she resolve this problem?

Ingunn raised her face. Impassive, she looked round at them. ‘Very well,’ she said.

Oengus choked. He looked up at her, his eyes wide. Surely she wasn’t so weak that she would allow her men to get the better of her? This must be a trick.

She looked down at him.

‘My apologies, lad,’ she said. ‘But we have other commitments. And I cannot fight these vampires alone.’ She turned to her men. ‘Shall we leave, then? Now, before they come for us?’

‘You’d run away and abandon us?’ Suibhne gaped at her.

Ingunn regarded him coldly. ‘You mean nothing to me besides my men,’ she said, her voice level. ‘It was a majority decision, and I respect it. I am no tyrant, and my men are not thralls. Never have I broken my word. But perhaps I swore rashly in this instance.’ Her gaze flickered to Oengus, and it seemed to her that her eyes softened.

‘Farewell, boy,’ she said. ‘It seems that tonight you learn a lesson - that there is more to life than the heroism of which the bards sing. Practical concerns must come first.’

Oengus was horrified. He had heard so many tales of her, of how she had battled men and monsters, how she had avenged her father’s death with cunning and cruelty, how she had saved entire clans from destruction. Even Irish bards sang of her exploits, and many said that she was one of the old warrior women reborn.

But rumours and hearsay were one thing: here she was in the flesh, and it seemed that she fell short of her legendary stature. The dreams on which Oengus had built his hopes were crumbling.

‘But Emer...’ was all he had time to gulp.

Coldly, Ingunn turned away. ‘Saddle the horses,’ she commanded. ‘If we leave, let us leave now!’

Oengus watched in cold despair as the Vikings made their preparations. One man departed in the direction of the hut they had commandeered as a stable, while the rest gathered up their equipment and accoutrements.

Ingunn paced up and down the roundhouse. After a while, she scowled. ‘Where are the horses? They should be here by now. Bjorn! Go and see what’s holding Oli up.’

Bjorn ducked out of the door.

Before Oli reached the stables he knew something was wrong. Snorting and whinnying, the horses moved restlessly in the musty darkness of the stables. He slipped in through the doors, and tried to calm them, but to no avail. What had upset them? He scrambled back as one reared up, hoofs missing his skull by inches. Staggering away, he collided with the wattle wall. All was noise and confusion as the beasts stamped and snorted, eyes rolling in the darkness. He'd have to go back and get the others. There was nothing he could do on his own here.

'Oli!'

He recognised the distant cry as Bjorn's voice, calling to him from outside. He was about to reply when something moved in the darkness beside him. Too small to be a horse, it seemed almost human.

'Who's that?' he hissed.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom he saw a slight, female figure, holding a child in her arms. His face cleared.

'Are you one of the villagers?' he asked. The woman was silent. 'Were you hiding from us?' Oli added. He licked his lips, and glanced in the direction of the main hut. 'Don't be afraid,' he said reassuringly, and the woman regarded him in silence. 'Put your child down and come here. That's right. There's nothing to fear. Come closer.'

Oli panted eagerly, as the woman slipped skinny arms around his bulky frame. Her lips were hot and wet as they nuzzled his skin. He heard Bjorn shout his name again.

'Wait here,' he muttered. The woman refused to let go. 'Let me go!' he barked, but the woman had a strength that belied her frail figure. He struggled, then froze as he felt sharp teeth sink into his neck...

Bjorn could hear the horses moving restlessly in the stables. Oli had not replied to his call. Had a horse knocked him out, or even killed him? What had disturbed them, anyway? He glanced around the village. From the main hut came a glimmer of light, but otherwise all was in darkness.

He whirled round at a footstep from behind him. Oli stood before him in the doorway of the stables. There was something odd in his manner. He gazed at Bjorn in silence.

‘What’s happened?’ Bjorn rumbled. ‘Why have you taken so long?’

Oli made no reply, but lifted his hand numbly up to his neck. Impatient, Bjorn pushed past him, and went to calm the horses.

Ingunn strode up and down. What was taking Bjorn so long?

Hearing a noise from the doorway, she looked up, expecting to see Bjorn returned. Her eyes widened at the sinister figures before her. Three dark, cloaked figures, cowls pulled up to hide their faces stood there. Suibhne gasped.

Without taking her eyes away from the figures, Ingunn said, ‘Who are they, priest? Are these the vampires?’

‘I don’t know,’ Suibhne muttered. ‘Only Loeaghaire ever went up to the hillfort.’

‘Come with us,’ said one of the figures, in a hissing, inhuman voice that nevertheless sounded oddly familiar. ‘Red Daughter, come with us. Our lord wishes to speak with you.’

Ingunn stared at them. She turned towards her men. Oengus looked up at her, eyes wide with mute appeal. Thorkell Treebone folded his arms.

‘Come with us,’ the figure repeated. ‘Lord Dreach-Fhoula has an offer to make.’

Ingunn halted, and studied the enigmatic messenger in silence. Finally, she spoke. ‘What offer?’ she demanded. ‘Where have you taken this boy’s friend?’

‘Come with us,’ the figure said once more, ‘and all will be made clear to you.’

Ingunn took an impulsive step forward.

‘Where are you going?’ Thorkell Treebone demanded. Ingunn looked over her shoulder.

‘You heard him,’ she said. ‘This Lord Dreach-Fhoula has an offer to make.’ She looked down at Oengus. ‘Perhaps I can fulfil both my vows,’ she added. Before anyone could speak, she turned, and strode towards the uncanny messengers.

‘Let me come with you!’ said Oengus impulsively, and ran after her.

‘Wait!’ cried Thorkell. But it was too late. In a swirl of cloaks, the three figures had ushered Ingunn and the boy from the hall.

Thorkell Treebone halted at the doors. Suibhne laid his hand on the Viking’s shoulder.

‘What do you want, priest?’ he growled. Suibhne bravely returned his gaze.

‘Let her go,’ he said. ‘She goes to solve our predicament.’

Thorkell Treebone glowered at him. ‘Is it any concern of ours what curse you labour under?’ he barked.

‘She swore to save the young girl,’ Suibhne said.

Thorkell Treebone gave the priest a black look. ‘An oath she regretted. She also swore to join King Sigtrygg by tomorrow afternoon. Unless...’ He broke off suddenly.

‘Unless what?’ Suibhne asked.

‘Aye!’ a voice rumbled from the doorway. ‘Unless what?’

Thorkell Treebone turned to see Bjorn standing there. Behind him was Oli, the Viking who had been sent to the stables, staring round vaguely. In the courtyard beyond were the horses.

‘I saw Ingunn going up the hill with three men,’ Bjorn added. ‘I called out to her, but she didn’t seem to hear me. What’s going on?’

‘She said something about fulfilling both vows,’ Thorkell Treebone said slowly. ‘Never before has she broken her word - her entire renown among our people is rooted in that reputation. Oh, you peasants would not understand,’ he added, looking at Suibhne, ‘but all warriors who wish to prosper in their craft must keep their honour spotless - all the more a woman who takes up the sword in a man’s world. Who would employ traitors in their host?’

‘Before we learnt the truth concerning this vampire lord and his undead army, Ingunn was hoping to enlist the Lord of Dreach-Fhoula in her warband. With reinforcements, we would ensure Sigtrygg’s victory tomorrow.’ His eyes were bleak as he looked at the priest. ‘Does she hope to bargain for that girl’s life and enlist the undead in her ranks as well?’

Suibhne looked at the Viking in horror.

TO BE CONTINUED

Edison's Conquest of Mars

Chapter I.

It is impossible that the stupendous events which followed the disastrous invasion of the earth by the Martians should go without record, and circumstances having placed the facts at my disposal, I deem it a duty, both to posterity and to those who were witnesses of and participants in the avenging counterstroke that the earth dealt back at its ruthless enemy in the heavens, to write down the story in a connected form.

The Martians had nearly all perished, not through our puny efforts, but in consequence of disease, and the few survivors fled in one of their projectile cars, inflicting their cruelest blow in the act of departure.

Their Mysterious Explosive.

They possessed a mysterious explosive, of unimaginable puissance, with whose aid they set their car in motion for Mars from a point in Bergen County, N. J., just back of the Palisades.

The force of the explosion may be imagined when it is recollected that they had to give the car a velocity of more than seven miles per second in order to overcome the attraction of the earth and the resistance of the atmosphere.

The shock destroyed all of New York that had not already fallen a prey, and all the buildings yet standing in the surrounding towns and cities fell in one far-circling ruin.

The Palisades tumbled in vast sheets, starting a tidal wave in the Hudson that drowned the opposite shore.

Thousands of Victims.

The victims of this ferocious explosion were numbered by tens of thousands, and the shock, transmitted through the rocky frame of the globe, was recorded by seismographic pendulums in England and on the Continent of Europe.

The terrible results achieved by the invaders had produced everywhere a mingled feeling of consternation and hopelessness. The devastation was widespread. The death-dealing engines which the Martians had brought with them had proved irresistible and the inhabitants of the earth possessed nothing capable of contending against them. There had been no protection for the great cities; no protection even for the open country. Everything had gone down before the savage onslaught of those merciless invaders from space. Savage ruins covered the sites of many formerly flourishing towns and villages, and the broken walls of great cities stared at the

heavens like the exhumed skeletons of Pompeii. The awful agencies had extirpated pastures and meadows and dried up the very springs of fertility in the earth where they had touched it. In some parts of the devastated lands pestilence broke out; elsewhere there was famine. Despondency black as night brooded over some of the fairest portions of the globe.

All Not Yet Destroyed.

Yet all had not been destroyed, because all had not been reached by the withering hand of the destroyer. The Martians had not had time to complete their work before they themselves fell a prey to the diseases that carried them off at the very culmination of their triumph.

From those lands which had, fortunately, escaped invasion, relief was sent to the sufferers. The outburst of pity and of charity exceeded anything that the world had known. Differences of race and religion were swallowed up in the universal sympathy which was felt for those who had suffered so terribly from an evil that was as unexpected as it was unimaginable in its enormity.

But the worst was not yet. More dreadful than the actual suffering and the scenes of death and devastation which overspread the afflicted lands was the profound mental and moral depression that followed. This was shared even by those who had not seen the Martians and had not witnessed the destructive effects of the frightful engines of war that they had imported for the conquest of the earth. All mankind was sunk deep in this universal despair, and it became tenfold blacker when the astronomers announced from their observatories that strange lights were visible, moving and flashing upon the red surface of the Planet of War. These mysterious appearances could only be interpreted in the light of past experience to mean that the Martians were preparing for another invasion of the earth, and who could doubt that with the invincible powers of destruction at their command they would this time make their work complete and final?

A Startling Announcement.

This startling announcement was the more pitiable in its effects because it served to unnerve and discourage those few of stouter hearts and more hopeful temperaments who had already begun the labor of restoration and reconstruction amid the embers of their desolated homes. In New York this feeling of hope and confidence, this determination to rise against disaster and to wipe out the evidences of its dreadful presence as quickly as possible, had especially manifested itself. Already a company had been formed and a large amount of capital subscribed for the reconstruction of the destroyed bridges over the East River. Already architects were busily at work planning new twenty-story hotels and apartment houses; new churches and new cathedrals on a grander scale than before.

The Martians Returning.

Amid this stir of renewed life came the fatal news that Mars was undoubtedly preparing to deal us a death blow. The sudden revulsion of feeling flitted like the shadow of an eclipse over the earth. The scenes that followed were indescribable. Men lost their reason. The faint-hearted ended the suspense with self-destruction, the stout-hearted remained steadfast, but without hope and knowing not what to do.

But there was a gleam of hope of which the general public as yet knew nothing. It was due to a few dauntless men of science, conspicuous among whom were Lord Kelvin, the great English savant; Herr Roentgen, the discoverer of the famous X ray, and especially Thomas A. Edison, the American genius of science. These men and a few others had examined with the utmost care the engines of war, the flying machines, the generators of mysterious destructive forces that the Martians had produced, with the object of discovering, if possible, the sources of their power.

Suddenly from Mr. Edison's laboratory at Orange flashed the startling intelligence that he had not only discovered the manner in which the invaders had been able to produce the mighty energies which they employed with such terrible effect, but that, going further, he had found a way to overcome them.

The glad news was quickly circulated throughout the civilized world. Luckily the Atlantic cables had not been destroyed by the Martians, so that communication between the Eastern and Western continents was uninterrupted. It was a proud day for America. Even while the Martians had been upon the earth, carrying everything before them, demonstrating to the confusion of the most optimistic that there was no possibility of standing against them, a feeling—a confidence had manifested itself in France, to a minor extent in England, and particularly in Russia, that the Americans might discover means to meet and master the invaders.

Now, it seemed, this hope and expectation were to be realized. Too late, it is true, in a certain sense, but not too late to meet the new invasion which the astronomers had announced was impending. The effect was as wonderful and indescribable as that of the despondency which but a little while before had overspread the world. One could almost hear the universal sigh of relief which went up from humanity. To relief succeeded confidence—so quickly does the human spirit recover like an elastic spring, when pressure is released.

“We Are Ready for Them! “

“Let them come,” was the almost joyous cry. “We shall be ready for them now. The Americans have solved the problem. Edison has placed the means of victory within our power.”

Looking back upon that time now, I recall, with a thrill, the pride that stirred me at the thought that, after all, the inhabitants of the Earth were a match for those terrible men

from Mars, despite all the advantage which they had gained from their millions of years of prior civilization and science.

As good fortunes, like bad, never come singly, the news of Mr. Edison's discovery was quickly followed by additional glad tidings from that laboratory of marvels in the lap of the Orange mountains. During their career of conquest the Martians had astonished the inhabitants of the earth no less with their flying machines—which navigated our atmosphere as easily as they had that of their native planet—than with their more destructive inventions. These flying machines in themselves had given them an enormous advantage in the contest. High above the desolation that they had caused to reign on the surface of the earth, and, out of the range of our guns, they had hung safe in the upper air. From the clouds they had dropped death upon the earth.

Edison's Flying Machine.

Now, rumor declared that Mr. Edison had invented and perfected a flying machine much more complete and manageable than those of the Martians had been. Wonderful stories quickly found their way into the newspapers concerning what Mr. Edison had already accomplished with the aid of his model electrical balloon. His laboratory was carefully guarded against the invasion of the curious, because he rightly felt that a premature announcement, which should promise more than could be actually fulfilled, would, at this critical juncture, plunge mankind back again into the gulf of despair, out of which it had just begun to emerge.

Nevertheless, inklings of the truth leaked out. The flying machine had been seen by many persons hovering by night high above the Orange hills and disappearing in the faint starlight as if it had gone away into the depths of space, out of which it would re-emerge before the morning light had streaked the east, and be seen settling down again within the walls that surrounded the laboratory of the great inventor. At length the rumor, gradually deepening into a conviction, spread that Edison himself, accompanied by a few scientific friends, had made an experimental trip to the moon. At a time when the spirit of mankind was less profoundly stirred, such a story would have been received with complete incredulity, but now, rising on the wings of the new hope that was buoying up the earth, this extraordinary rumor became a day star of truth to the nations.

And it was true. I had myself been one of the occupants of the car of the flying Ship of Space on that night when it silently left the earth, and rising out of the great shadow of the globe, sped on to the moon. We had landed upon the scarred and desolate face of the earth's satellite, and but that there are greater and more interesting events, the telling of which must not be delayed, I should undertake to describe the particulars of this first visit of men to another world.

But, as I have already intimated, this was only an experimental trip. By visiting this little nearby island in the ocean of space, Mr. Edison simply wished to demonstrate

the practicability of his invention, and to convince, first of all, himself and his scientific friends that it was possible for men—mortal men—to quit and to revisit the earth at their will. That aim this experimental trip triumphantly attained.

Gravity Overcome.

Now, what Mr. Edison had done was, in effect, to create an electrified particle which might be compared to one of the atoms composing the tail of a comet, although in reality it was a kind of car, of metal, weighing some hundreds of pounds and capable of bearing some thousands of pounds with it in its flight. By producing, with the aid of the electrical generator contained in this car, an enormous charge of electricity, Mr. Edison was able to counterbalance, and a trifle more than counterbalance, the attraction of the earth, and thus cause the car to fly off from the earth as an electrified pithball flies from the prime conductor.

As we sat in the brilliantly lighted chamber that formed the interior of the car, and where stores of compressed air had been provided together with chemical apparatus, by means of which fresh supplies of oxygen and nitrogen might be obtained for our consumption during the flight through space, Mr. Edison touched a polished button, thus causing the generation of the required electrical charge on the exterior of the car, and immediately we began to rise.

The moment and direction of our flight had been so timed and prearranged, that the original impulse would carry us straight toward the moon.

A Triumphant Test.

When we fell within the sphere of attraction of that orb it only became necessary to so manipulate the electrical charge upon our car as nearly, but not quite, to counterbalance the effect of the moon's attraction in order that we might gradually approach it and with an easy motion, settle, without shock, upon its surface.

We did not remain to examine the wonders of the moon, although we could not fail to observe many curious things therein. Having demonstrated the fact that we could not only leave the earth, but could journey through space and safely land upon the surface of another planet, Mr. Edison's immediate purpose was fulfilled, and we hastened back to the earth, employing in leaving the moon and landing again upon our own planet the same means of control over the electrical attraction and repulsion between the respective planets and our car which I have already described.

Telegraphing the News.

When actual experiment had thus demonstrated the practicability of the invention, Mr. Edison no longer withheld the news of what he had been doing from the world. The telegraph lines and the ocean cables labored with the messages that in endless succession, and burdened with an infinity of detail, were sent all over the earth. Everywhere the utmost enthusiasm was aroused.

“Let the Martians come,” was the cry. “If necessary, we can quit the earth as the Athenians fled from Athens before the advancing host of Xerxes, and like them, take refuge upon our ships—these new ships of space, with which American inventiveness has furnished us.”

And then, like a flash, some genius struck out an idea that fired the world.

“Why should we wait? Why should we run the risk of having our cities destroyed and our lands desolated a second time? Let us go to Mars. We have the means. Let us beard the lion in his den. Let us ourselves turn conquerors and take possession of that detestable planet, and if necessary, destroy it in order to relieve the earth of this perpetual threat which now hangs over us like the sword of Damocles.”

This enthusiasm would have had but little justification had Mr. Edison done nothing more than invent a machine which could navigate the atmosphere and the regions of interplanetary space.

He had, however, and this fact was generally known, although the details had not yet leaked out—invented also machines of war intended to meet the utmost that the Martians could do for either offence or defence in the struggle which was now about to ensue.

A Wonderful Instrument.

Acting upon the hint which had been conveyed from various investigations in the domain of physics, and concentrating upon the problem all those unmatched powers of intellect which distinguished him, the great inventor had succeeded in producing a little implement which one could carry in his hand, but which was more powerful than any battleship that ever floated. The details of its mechanism could not be easily explained, without the use of tedious technicalities and the employment of terms, diagrams and mathematical statements, all of which would lie outside the scope of this narrative. But the principle of the thing was simple enough. It was upon the great scientific doctrine, which we have since seen so completely and brilliantly developed, of the law of harmonic vibrations, extending from atoms and molecules at one end of the series up to worlds and suns at the other end, that Mr. Edison based his invention.

Every kind of substance has its own vibratory rhythm. That of iron differs from that of pine wood. The atoms of gold do not vibrate in the same time or through the same

range as those of lead, and so on for all known substances, and all the chemical elements. So, on a larger scale, every massive body has its period of vibration. A great suspension bridge vibrates, under the impulse of forces that are applied to it, in long periods. No company of soldiers ever crosses such a bridge without breaking step. If they tramped together, and were followed by other companies keeping the same time with their feet, after a while the vibrations of the bridge would become so great and destructive that it would fall in pieces. So any structure, if its vibration rate is known, could easily be destroyed by a force applied to it in such a way that it should simply increase the swing of those vibrations up to the point of destruction.

Now Mr. Edison had been able to ascertain the vibratory swing of many well-known substances, and to produce, by means of the instrument which he had contrived, pulsations in the ether which were completely under his control, and which could be made long or short, quick or slow, at his will. He could run through the whole gamut from the slow vibrations of sound in air up to the four hundred and twenty-five millions of millions of vibrations per second of the ultra red rays.

Having obtained an instrument of such power, it only remained to concentrate its energy upon a given object in order that the atoms composing that object should be set into violent undulation, sufficient to burst it asunder and to scatter its molecules broadcast. This the inventor effected by the simplest means in the world—simply a parabolic reflector by which the destructive waves could be sent like a beam of light, but invisible, in any direction and focused upon any desired point.

Testing the “Disintegrator.”

I had the good fortune to be present when this powerful engine of destruction was submitted to its first test. We had gone upon the roof of Mr. Edison’s laboratory and the inventor held the little instrument, with its attached mirror, in his hand. We looked about for some object on which to try its powers. On a bare limb of a tree not far away, for it was late in the Fall, sat a disconsolate crow.

“Good,” said Mr. Edison, “that will do. “He touched a button at the side of the instrument and a soft, whirring noise was heard.

“Feathers,” said Mr. Edison, “have a vibration period of three hundred and eighty-six million per second.”

He adjusted the index as he spoke. Then, through a sighting tube, he aimed at the bird.

“Now watch,” he said.

The Crow’s Fate.

Another soft whirr in the instrument, a momentary flash of light close around it, and, behold, the crow had turned from black to white!

“Its feathers are gone,” said the inventor; “they have been dissipated into their constituent atoms. Now, we will finish the crow.”

Instantly there was another adjustment of the index, another outshooting of vibratory force, a rapid up and down motion of the index to include a certain range of vibrations, and the crow itself was gone—vanished in empty space! There was the bare twig on which a moment before it had stood. Behind, in the sky, was the white cloud against which its black form had been sharply outlined, but there was no more crow.

Bad for the Martians.

“That looks bad for the Martians, doesn’t it?” said the Wizard. “I have ascertained the vibration rate of all the materials of which their war engines whose remains we have collected together are composed. They can be shattered into nothingness in the fraction of a second. Even if the vibration period were not known, it could quickly be hit upon by simply running through the gamut.”

“Hurrah! “cried one of the onlookers. “We have met the Martians and they are ours.”

Such in brief was the first of the contrivances which Mr. Edison invented for the approaching war with Mars.

And these facts had become widely known. Additional experiments had completed the demonstration of the inventor’s ability, with the aid of his wonderful instrument, to destroy any given object, or any part of an object, provided that that part differed in its atomic constitution, and consequently in its vibratory period, from the other parts.

A most impressive public exhibition of the powers of the little disintegrator was given amid the ruins of New York. On lower Broadway a part of the walls of one of the gigantic buildings, which had been destroyed by the Martians, impended in such a manner that it threatened at any moment to fall upon the heads of the passers-by. The Fire Department did not dare touch it. To blow it up seemed a dangerous expedient, because already new buildings had been erected in its neighborhood, and their safety would be imperiled by the flying fragments. The fact happened to come to my knowledge.

“Here is an opportunity,” I said to Mr. Edison,” to try the powers of your machine on a large scale.”

“Capital! “he instantly replied. “I shall go at once.”

Disintegrating a Building.

For the work now in hand it was necessary to employ a battery of disintegrators, since the field of destruction covered by each was comparatively limited. All of the

impending portions of the wall must be destroyed at once and together, for otherwise the danger would rather be accentuated than annihilated. The disintegrators were placed upon the roof of a neighboring building, so adjusted that their fields of destruction overlapped one another upon the wall. Their indexes were all set to correspond with the vibration period of the peculiar kind of brick of which the wall consisted. Then the energy was turned on, and a shout of wonder arose from the multitudes which had assembled at a safe distance to witness the experiment.

Only a Cloud Remained.

The wall did not fall; it did not break asunder; no fragments shot this way and that and high in the air; there was no explosion; no shock or noise disturbed the still atmosphere—only a soft whirr, that seemed to pervade everything and to tingle in the nerves of the spectators; and—what had been was not! The wall was gone! But high above and all around the place where it had hung over the street with its threat of death there appeared, swiftly billowing outward in every direction, a faint, bluish cloud. It was the scattered atoms of the destroyed wall.

And now the cry “On to Mars!” was heard on all sides. But for such an enterprise funds were needed—millions upon millions. Yet some of the fairest and richest portions of the earth had been impoverished by the frightful ravages of those enemies who had dropped down upon them from the skies. Still, the money must be had. The salvation of the planet, as everybody was now convinced, depended upon the successful negotiation of a gigantic war fund, in comparison with which all the expenditures in all of the wars that had been waged by the nations for 2,000 years would be insignificant. The electrical ships and the vibration engines must be constructed by scores and thousands. Only Mr. Edison’s immense resources and unrivaled equipment had enabled him to make the models whose powers had been so satisfactorily shown. But to multiply these upon a war scale was not only beyond the resources of any individual—hardly a nation on the globe in the period of its greatest prosperity could have undertaken such a work. All the nations, then, must now conjoin. They must unite their resources, and, if necessary, exhaust all their hoards, in order to raise the needed sum.

The Yankees Lead.

Negotiations were at once begun. The United States naturally took the lead, and their leadership was never for a moment questioned abroad.

Washington was selected as the place of meeting for a great congress of the nations. Washington, luckily, had been one of the places which had not been touched by the Martians. But if Washington had been a city composed of hotels alone, and every hotel so great as to be a little city in itself, it would have been utterly insufficient for the accommodation of the innumerable throngs which now flocked to the banks of the Potomac. But when was American enterprise unequal to a crisis? The necessary hotels, lodging houses and restaurants were constructed with astounding rapidity. One

could see the city growing and expanding day by day and week after week. It flowed over Georgetown Heights; it leaped the Potomac; it spread east and west, south and north; square mile after square mile of territory was buried under the advancing buildings, until the gigantic city, which had thus grown up like a mushroom in a night, was fully capable of accommodating all its expected guests.

At first it had been intended that the heads of the various governments should in person attend this universal congress, but as the enterprise went on, as the enthusiasm spread, as the necessity for haste became more apparent through the warning notes which were constantly sounded from the observatories where the astronomers were nightly beholding new evidences of threatening preparations in Mars, the kings and queens of the old world felt that they could not remain at home; that their proper place was at the new focus and centre of the whole world—the city of Washington. Without concerted action, without interchange of suggestion, this impulse seemed to seize all the old world monarchs at once. Suddenly cablegrams flashed to the Government at Washington, announcing that Queen Victoria, the Emperor William, the Czar Nicholas, Alphonso of Spain, with his mother, Maria Christina; the old Emperor Francis Joseph and the Empress Elizabeth, of Austria; King Oscar and Queen Sophia, of Sweden and Norway; King Humbert and Queen Margherita, of Italy; King George and Queen Olga, of Greece; Abdul Hamid, of Turkey; Tsait'ien, Emperor of China; Mutsuhito, the Japanese Mikado, with his beautiful Princess Haruko; the President of France, the President of Switzerland, the First Syndic of the little republic of Andorra, perched on the crest of the Pyrenees, and the heads of all the Central and South American republics, were coming to Washington to take part in the deliberations, which, it was felt, were to settle the fate of earth and Mars.

One day, after this announcement had been received, and the additional news had come that nearly all the visiting monarchs had set out, attended by brilliant suites and convoyed by fleets of warships, for their destination, some coming across the Atlantic to the port of New York, others across the Pacific to San Francisco, Mr. Edison said to me:

“This will be a fine spectacle. Would you like to watch it?”

“Certainly,” I replied.

A Grand Spectacle.

The Ship of Space was immediately at our disposal. I think I have not yet mentioned the fact that the inventor's control over the electrical generator carried in the car was so perfect that by varying the potential or changing the polarity he could cause it slowly or swiftly, as might be desired, to approach or recede from any object. The only practical difficulty was presented when the polarity of the electrical charge upon an object in the neighborhood of the car was unknown to those in the car, and happened to be opposite to that of the charge which the car, at that particular moment, was bearing. In such a case, of course, the car would fly toward the object, whatever it might be, like a pith ball or a feather, attracted to the knob of an electrical machine. In this way, considerable danger was occasionally encountered, and a few accidents

could not be avoided. Fortunately, however, such cases were rare. It was only now and then that, owing to some local cause, electrical polarities unknown to or unexpected by the navigators, endangered the safety of the car. As I shall have occasion to relate, however, in the course of the narrative, this danger became more acute and assumed at times a most formidable phase, when we had ventured outside the sphere of the earth and were moving through the unexplored regions beyond.

On this occasion, having embarked, we rose rapidly to a height of some thousands of feet and directed our course over the Atlantic. When half way to Ireland, we beheld, in the distance, steaming westward, the smoke of several fleets. As we drew nearer a marvellous spectacle unfolded itself to our eyes. From the northeast, their great guns flashing in the sunlight and their huge funnels belching black volumes that rested like thunder clouds upon the sea, came the mighty warships of England, with her meteor flag streaming red in the breeze, while the royal insignia, indicating the presence of the ruler of the British Empire, was conspicuously displayed upon the flagship of the squadron.

Following a course more directly westward appeared, under another black cloud of smoke, the hulls and guns and burgeons of another great fleet, carrying the tri-color of France, and bearing in its midst the head of the magnificent republic of western Europe.

Further south, beating up against the northerly winds, came a third fleet with the gold and red of Spain fluttering from its masthead. This, too, was carrying its King westward, where now, indeed, the star of empire had taken its way.

Universal Brotherhood.

Rising a little higher, so as to extend our horizon, we saw coming down the English channel, behind the British fleet, the black ships of Russia. Side by side, or following one another's lead, these war fleets were on a peaceful voyage that belied their threatening appearance. There had been no thought of danger to or from the forts and ports of rival nations which they had passed. There was no enmity, and no fear between them when the throats of their ponderous guns yawned at one another across the waves. They were now, in spirit, all one fleet, having one object, bearing against one enemy, ready to defend but one country, and that country was the entire earth.

It was some time before we caught sight of the Emperor William's fleet. It seems that the Kaiser, although at first consenting to the arrangement by which Washington had been selected as the assembling place for the nations, afterwards objected to it.

Kaiser Wilhelm's Jealousy.

"I ought to do this thing myself," he had said. "My glorious ancestors would never have consented to allow these upstart Republicans to lead in a warlike enterprise of

this kind. What would my grandfather have said to it? I suspect that it is some scheme aimed at the divine right of kings.”

But the good sense of the German people would not suffer their ruler to place them in a position so false and so untenable. And swept along by their enthusiasm the Kaiser had at last consented to embark on his flagship at Kiel, and now he was following the other fleets on their great mission to the Western Continent.

Why did they bring their warships when their intentions were peaceable, do you ask? Well, it was partly the effect of ancient habit, and partly due to the fact that such multitudes of officials and members of ruling families wished to embark for Washington that the ordinary means of ocean communications would have been utterly inadequate to convey them.

After we had feasted our eyes on this strange sight, Mr. Edison suddenly exclaimed: “Now let us see the fellows from the rising sun.”

Over the Mississippi.

The car was immediately directed toward the west. We rapidly approached the American coast, and as we sailed over the Alleghany Mountains and the broad plains of the Ohio and the Mississippi, we saw crawling beneath us from west, south and north, an endless succession of railway trains bearing their multitudes on to Washington. With marvellous speed we rushed westward, rising high to skim over the snow-topped peaks of the Rocky Mountains and then the glittering rim of the Pacific was before us. Half way between the American coast and Hawaii we met the fleets coming from China and Japan. Side by side they were ploughing the main, having forgotten, or laid aside, all the animosities of their former wars.

I well remember how my heart was stirred at this impressive exhibition of the boundless influence which my country had come to exercise over all the people of the world, and I turned to look at the man to whose genius this uprising of the earth was due. But Mr. Edison, after his wont, appeared totally unconscious of the fact that he was personally responsible for what was going on. His mind, seemingly, was entirely absorbed in considering problems, the solution of which might be essential to our success in the terrific struggle which was soon to begin.

Back to Washington.

“Well, have you seen enough?” he asked. “Then let us go back to Washington.”

As we speeded back across the continent we beheld beneath us again the burdened express trains rushing toward the Atlantic, and hundreds of thousands of upturned eyes watched our swift progress, and volleys of cheers reached our ears, for every one knew that this was Edison’s electrical warship, on which the hope of the nation, and the hopes of all the nations, depended. These scenes were repeated again and again

until the car hovered over the still expanding capital on the Potomac, where the unceasing ring of hammers rose to the clouds.

Chapter III.

The day appointed for the assembling of the nations in Washington opened bright and beautiful. Arrangements had been made for the reception of the distinguished guests at the Capitol. No time was to be wasted, and, having assembled in the Senate Chamber, the business that had called them together was to be immediately begun. The scene in Pennsylvania avenue, when the procession of dignitaries and royalties passed up toward the Capitol, was one never to be forgotten. Bands were playing, magnificent equipages flashed in the morning sunlight, the flags of every nation on the earth fluttered in the breeze. Queen Victoria, with the Prince of Wales escorting her, and riding in an open carriage, was greeted with roars of cheers; the Emperor William, following in another carriage with Empress Victoria at his side, condescended to bow and smile in response to the greetings of a free people. Each of the other monarchs was received in a similar manner. The Czar of Russia proved to be an especial favorite with the multitude on account of the ancient friendship of his house for America. But the greatest applause of all came when the President of France, followed by the President of Switzerland and the First Syndic of the little Republic of Andorra, made their appearance. Equally warm were the greetings extended to the representatives of Mexico and the South American States.

The Sultan of Turkey.

The crowd apparently hardly knew at first how to receive the Sultan of Turkey, but the universal good feeling was in his favor, and finally rounds of hand clapping and cheers greeted his progress along the splendid avenue.

A happy idea had apparently occurred to the Emperor of China and the Mikado of Japan, for, attended by their intermingled suites, they rode together in a single carriage. This object lesson in the unity of international feeling immensely pleased the spectators.

An Unparalleled Scene.

The scene in the Senate Chamber stirred every one profoundly. That it was brilliant and magnificent goes without saying, but there was a seriousness, an intense feeling of expectancy, pervading both those who looked on and those who were to do the work for which these magnates of the earth had assembled, which produced an ineradicable impression. The President of the United States, of course, presided. Representatives of the greater powers occupied the front seats, and some of them were honored with special chairs near the President.

No time was wasted in preliminaries. The President made a brief speech.

“We have come together,” he said, “to consider a question that equally interests the whole earth. I need not remind you that unexpectedly and without provocation on our part the people—the monsters, I should rather say—of Mars, recently came down upon the earth, attacked us in our homes and spread desolation around them. Having the advantage of ages of evolution, which for us are yet in the future, they brought with them engines of death and of destruction against which we found it impossible to contend. It is within the memory of every one in reach of my voice that it was through the entirely unexpected succor which Providence sent us that we were suddenly and effectually freed from the invaders. By our own efforts we could have done nothing.”

McKinley’s Tribute.

“But, as you all know, the first feeling of relief which followed the death of our foes was quickly succeeded by the fearful news which came to us from the observatories, that the Martians were undoubtedly preparing for a second invasion of our planet. Against this we should have had no recourse and no hope but for the genius of one of my countrymen, who, as you are all aware, has perfected means which may enable us not only to withstand the attack of those awful enemies, but to meet them, and, let us hope, to conquer them on their own ground.”

“Mr. Edison is here to explain to you what those means are. But we have also another object. Whether we send a fleet of interplanetary ships to invade Mars or whether we simply confine our attention to works of defence, in either case it will be necessary to raise a very large sum of money. None of us has yet recovered from the effects of the recent invasion. The earth is poor to-day compared to its position a few years ago; yet we cannot allow our poverty to stand in the way. The money, the means, must be had. It will be part of our business here to raise a gigantic war fund by the aid of which we can construct the equipment and machinery that we shall require. This, I think, is all I need to say. Let us proceed to business.”

“Where is Mr. Edison?” cried a voice.

“Will Mr. Edison please step forward?” said the President.

There was a stir in the assembly, and the iron-gray head of the great inventor was seen moving through the crowd. In his hand he carried one of his marvellous disintegrators. He was requested to explain and illustrate its operation. Mr. Edison smiled.

Edison to the Rescue.

“I can explain its details,” he said, “to Lord Kelvin, for instance, but if Their Majesties will excuse me, I doubt whether I can make it plain to the crowned heads.”

The Emperor William smiled superciliously. Apparently he thought that another assault had been committed upon the divine right of kings. But the Czar Nicholas appeared to be amused, and the Emperor of China, who had been studying English, laughed in his sleeve, as if he suspected that a joke had been perpetrated.

“I think,” said one of the deputies,” that a simple exhibition of the powers of the instrument, without a technical explanation of its method of working, will suffice for our purpose.”

This suggestion was immediately approved. In response to it, Mr. Edison, by a few simple experiments, showed how he could quickly and certainly shatter into its constituent atoms any object upon which the vibratory force of the disintegrator should be directed. In this manner he caused an inkstand to disappear under the very nose of the Emperor William without a spot of ink being scattered upon his sacred person, but evidently the odor of the disunited atoms was not agreeable to the nostrils of the Kaiser.

Mr. Edison also explained in general terms the principle on which the instrument worked. He was greeted with round after round of applause, and the spirit of the assembly rose high.

Next the workings of the electrical ship were explained, and it was announced that after the meeting had adjourned an exhibition of the flying powers of the ship would be given in the open air.

These experiments, together with the accompanying explanations, added to what had already been disseminated through the public press, were quite sufficient to convince all the representatives who had assembled in Washington that the problem of how to conquer the Martians had been solved. The means were plainly at hand. It only remained to apply them. For this purpose, as the President had pointed out, it would be necessary to raise a very large sum of money.

“How much will be needed?” asked one of the English representatives.

“At least ten thousand millions of dollars,” replied the President.

“It would be safer,” said a Senator from the Pacific Coast,” to make it twenty-five thousand millions.”

“I suggest,” said the King of Italy,” that the nations be called in alphabetical order, and that the representatives of each name a sum which it is ready and able to contribute.”

“We want the cash or its equivalent,” shouted the Pacific Coast Senator.

“I shall not follow the alphabet strictly,” said the President,” but shall begin with the larger nations first. Perhaps, under the circumstances, it is proper that the United States should lead the way. Mr. Secretary,” he continued, turning to the Secretary of the Treasury,” how much can we stand?”

An Enormous Sum.

“At least a thousand millions,” replied the Secretary of the Treasury.

A roar of applause that shook the room burst from the assembly. Even some of the monarchs threw up their hats. The Emperor Tsait'ten smiled from ear to ear. One of the Roko Tuis, or native chiefs, from Fiji, sprang up and brandished a war club.

The President then proceeded to call the other nations, beginning with Austria-Hungary and ending with Zanzibar, whose Sultan, Hamoud bin Mahomed, had come to the congress in the escort of Queen Victoria. Each contributed liberally.

Germany coming in alphabetical order just before Great Britain, had named, through its Chancellor, the sum of \$500, 000, 000, but when the First Lord of the British Treasury, not wishing to be behind the United States, named double that sum as the contribution of the British Empire, the Emperor William looked displeased. He spoke a word in the ear of the Chancellor, who immediately raised his hand.

A Thousand Million Dollars.

“We will give a thousand million dollars,” said the Chancellor.

Queen Victoria seemed surprised, though not displeased. The First Lord of the Treasury met her eye, and then, rising in his place, said:

“Make it fifteen hundred million for Great Britain.”

Emperor William consulted again with his Chancellor, but evidently concluded not to increase his bid.

But, at any rate, the fund had benefited to the amount of a thousand millions by this little outburst of imperial rivalry.

The greatest surprise of all, however, came when the King of Siam was called upon for his contribution. He had not been given a foremost place in the Congress, but when the name of his country was pronounced he rose by his chair, dressed in a gorgeous specimen of the peculiar attire of his country, then slowly pushed his way to the front, stepped up to the President's desk and deposited upon it a small box.

“This is our contribution,” he said, in broken English.

The cover was lifted, and there darted, shimmering in the half gloom of the Chamber, a burst of iridescence from the box.

The Long Lost Treasure.

“My friends of the Western world,” continued the King of Siam,” will be interested in seeing this gem. Only once before has the eye of a European been blessed with the sight of it. Your books will tell you that in the seventeenth century a traveler, Tavernier, saw in India an unmatched diamond which afterward disappeared like a meteor, and was thought to have been lost from the earth. You all know the name of that diamond and its history. It is the Great Mogul, and it lies before you. How it came into my possession I shall not explain. At any rate, it is honestly mine, and I freely contribute it here to aid in protecting my native planet against those enemies who appear determined to destroy it.”

When the excitement which the appearance of this long lost treasure, that had been the subject of so many romances and of such long and fruitless search, had subsided, the President continued calling the list, until he had completed it.

Upon taking the sum of the contributions(the Great Mogul was reckoned at three millions)it was found to be still one thousand millions short of the required amount.

The Secretary of the Treasury was instantly on his feet.

“Mr. President,” he said,” I think we can stand that addition. Let it be added to the contribution of the United States of America.”

When the cheers that greeted the conclusion of the business were over, the President announced that the next affair of the Congress was to select a director who should have entire charge of the preparations for the war. It was the universal sentiment that no man could be so well suited for this post as Mr. Edison himself. He was accordingly selected by the unanimous and enthusiastic choice of the great assembly.

“How long a time do you require to put everything in readiness?” asked the President.

“Give me carte blanche,” replied Mr. Edison,” and I believe I can have a hundred electric ships and three thousand disintegrators ready within six months.”

A tremendous cheer greeted this announcement.

“Your powers are unlimited,” said the President,” draw on the fund for as much money as you need,” whereupon the Treasurer of the United States was made the disbursing officer of the fund, and the meeting adjourned.

Not less than 5, 000, 000 people had assembled at Washington from all parts of the world. Every one of this immense multitude had been able to listen to the speeches and the cheers in the Senate chamber, although not personally present there. Wires had been run all over the city, and hundreds of improved telephonic receivers provided, so that every one could hear. Even those who were unable to visit Washington, people living in Baltimore, New York, Boston, and as far away as New Orleans, St. Louis and Chicago, had also listened to the proceedings with the aid of these receivers. Upon the whole, probably not less than 50, 000, 000 people had heard the deliberations of the great congress of the nations.

The Excitement in Washington.

The telegraph and the cable had sent the news across the oceans to all the capitols of the earth. The exultation was so great that the people seemed mad with joy.

The promised exhibition of the electrical ship took place the next day. Enormous multitudes witnessed the experiment, and there was a struggle for places in the car. Even Queen Victoria, accompanied by the Prince of Wales, ventured to take a ride in it, and they enjoyed it so much that Mr. Edison prolonged the journey as far as Boston and the Bunker Hill monument.

Most of the other monarchs also took a high ride, but when the turn of the Emperor of China came he repeated a fable which he said had come down from the time of Confucius:

A Chinese Legend.

“Once upon a time there was a Chinaman living in the valley of the Hoang-Ho River, who was accustomed frequently to lie on his back, gazing at, and envying, the birds that he saw flying away in the sky. One day he saw a black speck which rapidly grew larger and larger, until as it got near he perceived that it was an enormous bird, which overshadowed the earth with its wings. It was the elephant of birds, the roc. ‘Come with me,’ said the roc, ‘and I will show you the wonders of the kingdom of the birds.’ The man caught hold of its claw and nestled among its feathers, and they rapidly rose high in the air, and sailed away to the Kuen-Lun Mountains. Here, as they passed near the top of the peaks, another roc made its appearance. The wings of the two great birds brushed together, and immediately they fell to fighting. In the midst of the melee the man lost his hold and tumbled into the top of a tree, where his pigtail caught on a branch, and he remained suspended. There the unfortunate man hung helpless, until a rat, which had its home in the rocks at the foot of the tree, took compassion upon him, and, climbing up, gnawed off the branch. As the man slowly and painfully wended his weary way homeward, he said: ‘This teaches me that creatures to whom nature has given neither feathers nor wings should leave the kingdom of the birds to those who are fitted to inhabit it.’”

Having told this story, Tsait'ien turned his back on the electrical ship.

The Grand Ball.

After the exhibition was finished, and amid the fresh outburst of enthusiasm that followed, it was suggested that a proper way to wind up the Congress and give suitable expression to the festive mood which now possessed mankind would be to have a grand ball. This suggestion met with immediate and universal approval.

But for so gigantic an affair it was, of course, necessary to make special preparations. A convenient place was selected on the Virginia side of the Potomac; a space of ten acres was carefully levelled and covered with a polished floor, rows of columns one hundred feet apart were run across it in every direction, and these were decorated with electric lights, displaying every color of the spectrum.

Unsurpassed Fireworks.

Above this immense space, rising in the centre to a height of more than a thousand feet, was anchored a vast number of balloons, all aglow with lights, and forming a tremendous dome, in which brilliant lamps were arranged in such a manner as to exhibit, in an endless succession of combinations, all the national colors, ensigns and insignia of the various countries represented at the Congress. Blazing eagles, lions, unicorns, dragons and other imaginary creatures that the different nations had chosen for their symbols appeared to hover high above the dancers, shedding a brilliant light upon the scene.

Circles of magnificent thrones were placed upon the floor in convenient locations for seeing. A thousand bands of music played, and tens of thousands of couples, gayly dressed and flashing with gems, whirled together upon the polished floor.

Queen Victoria Dances.

The Queen of England led the dance, on the arm of the President of the United States.

The Prince of Wales led forth the fair daughter of the President, universally admired as the most beautiful woman upon the great ballroom floor.

The Emperor William, in his military dress, danced with the beautiful Princess Masaco, the daughter of the Mikado, who wore for the occasion the ancient costume of the women of her country, sparkling with jewels, and glowing with quaint combinations of color like a gorgeous butterfly.

The Chinese Emperor, with his pigtail flying high as he spun, danced with the Empress of Russia.

The King of Siam essayed a waltz with the Queen Ranavalona, of Madagascar, while the Sultan of Turkey basked in the smiles of a Chicago heiress to a hundred millions.

The Czar choose for his partner a dark-eyed beauty from Peru, but King Malietoa, of Samoa, was suspicious of civilized charmers and, avoiding all of their allurements, expressed his joy and gave vent to his enthusiasm in a pas seul. In this he was quickly joined by a band of Sioux Indian chiefs, whose whoops and yells so startled the leader of a German band on their part of the floor that he dropped his baton and, followed by the musicians, took to his heels.

This incident amused the good-natured Emperor of China more than anything else that had occurred.

“Make muchee noisee,” he said, indicating the fleeing musicians with his thumb. “Allee same muchee flaid noisee,” and then his round face dimpled into another laugh.

The scene from the outside was even more imposing than that which greeted the eye within the brilliantly lighted enclosure. Far away in the night, rising high among the stars, the vast dome of illuminated balloons seemed like some supernatural creation, too grand and glorious to have been constructed by the inhabitants of the earth.

All around it, and from some of the balloons themselves, rose jets and fountains of fire, ceaselessly playing, and blotting out the constellations of the heavens by their splendor.

The Prince of Wales’s Toast.

The dance was followed by a grand banquet, at which the Prince of Wales proposed a toast to Mr. Edison:

“It gives me much pleasure,” he said,” to offer, in the name of the nations of the Old World, this tribute of our admiration for, and our confidence in, the genius of the New World. Perhaps on such an occasion as this, when all racial differences and prejudices ought to be, and are, buried and forgotten, I should not recall anything that might revive them; yet I cannot refrain from expressing my happiness in knowing that the champion who is to achieve the salvation of the earth has come forth from the bosom of the Anglo-Saxon race.”

Several of the great potentates looked grave upon hearing the Prince of Wales’s words, and the Czar and the Kaiser exchanged glances; but there was no interruption to the cheers that followed. Mr. Edison, whose modesty and dislike to display and to speechmaking were well known, simply said:

“I think we have got the machine that can whip them. But we ought not to be wasting any time. Probably they are not dancing on Mars, but are getting ready to make us dance.”

Haste to Embark.

These words instantly turned the current of feeling in the vast assembly. There was no longer any disposition to expend time in vain boastings and rejoicings. Everywhere the cry now became,” Let us make haste! Let us get ready at once! Who knows but the Martians have already embarked, and are now on their way to destroy us?”

Under the impulse of this new feeling, which, it must be admitted, was very largely inspired by terror, the vast ballroom was quickly deserted. The lights were suddenly put out in the great dome of balloons, for someone had whispered:

“Suppose they should see that from Mars? Would they not guess what we were about, and redouble their preparations to finish us?”

Upon the suggestion of the President of the United States, an executive committee, representing all the principal nations, was appointed, and without delay a meeting of this committee was assembled at the White House. Mr. Edison was summoned before it, and asked to sketch briefly the plan upon which he proposed to work.

Thousands of Men for Mars.

I need not enter into the details of what was done at this meeting. Let it suffice to say that when it broke up, in the small hours of the morning, it had been unanimously resolved that as many thousands of men as Mr. Edison might require should be immediately placed at his disposal; that as far as possible all the great manufacturing establishments of the country should be instantly transformed into factories where electrical ships and disintegrators could be built, and upon the suggestion of Professor Sylvanus P. Thompson, the celebrated English electrical expert, seconded by Lord Kelvin, it was resolved that all the leading men of science in the world should place their services at the disposal of Mr. Edison in any capacity in which, in his judgment, they might be useful to him.

The members of this committee were disposed to congratulate one another on the good work which they had so promptly accomplished, when at the moment of their adjournment, a telegraphic dispatch was handed to the President from Professor George E. Hale, the director of the great Yerkes Observatory, in Wisconsin. The telegram read:

What's Happening on Mars?

“Professor Barnard, watching Mars to-night with the forty-inch telescope, saw a sudden outburst of reddish light, which we think indicates that something has been shot from the planet. Spectroscopic observations of this moving light indicated that it was coming earthward, while visible, at the rate of not less than one hundred miles a second.”

Hardly had the excitement caused by the reading of this dispatch subsided, when others of a similar import came from the Lick Observatory, in California; from the branch of the Harvard Observatory at Arequipa, in Peru, and from the Royal Observatory, at Potsdam.

When the telegram from this last-named place was read the Emperor William turned to his Chancellor and said:

“I want to go home. If I am to die I prefer to leave my bones among those of my Imperial ancestors, and not in this vulgar country, where no king has ever ruled. I don’t like this atmosphere. It makes me feel limp.”

And now, whipped on by the lash of alternate hope and fear, the earth sprang to its work of preparation.

TO BE CONTINUED

Last of the Ogres by Sue Denimes

I

The ogre loomed above him, bellowing angrily, its long matted hair lashing about its huge head, its claws and tusks glimmering in the sickly light of the moon. The knight turned to the slab, and brought his axe slamming down on the chains that held the girl. The ring of steel on steel echoed back from the trees: a clear note contrasting sharply the basso rumbling of the ogre. The broken fetters fell to the hard earth.

‘Quick!’ he screamed at the girl. ‘Run!’ She gave him a horrified, fearful glance, and fled towards the distant trees.

The knight saw no more of her flight as he brought his shield up to deflect the ogre’s ham-like fist. The shield broke with a hollow crack and fell from his numbed arm. The ogre’s stench almost choked the knight as it swung another blow at him. He hacked at the creature with his axe. Fear rushed through his body like a cold wave at the horrible, terrible presence of the ogre, but now he was fighting, following his training. He was strangely calm. But the ogre roared in fury and attacked him with wild, frenzied blows.

It seized a huge boulder from the ground and lifted it, to bring it crushing down on the knight. Rather than flee, the knight charged forward under the ogre’s guard, gouging its flesh with a swing of his axe. The ogre roared in pain and dropped the boulder, which slammed into the turf to the knight’s side. He danced away, his chainmail jingling as the ogre clutched at its gut, peering down in anger. Then it lashed out at him with a backward swing of its right arm. Lights seemed to explode within the knight’s head and he found himself flying through the air. He landed with a heavy

thud that knocked all the air from his lungs, leaving him wheezing painfully. Unable to move, he lay still.

A shriek roused him, and he lifted his head painfully. He saw the ogre rushing towards the girl, who had reached the edge of the trees. She was looking over her shoulder in fear as the ogre pursued her.

Fire seemed to rush through the knight's body as he forced his aching body to rise. His axe lay on the sward nearby, and he snatched it up. The ogre bore down on the fleeing girl. The knight lifted the axe, aimed it at the ogre's neck, and threw it.

It flashed in the moonlight like midnight lightning as it whirred across the clearing and sank into the dark bulk of the ogre. The monster threw up its arms, bellowed mournfully, and collapsed at the foot of a tree. The knight glimpsed the pale shape of the girl as she ran heedlessly into the woods.

Wheezing, he limped forward, weighed down by his armour, weak and shivering. The ogre lay struggling vainly on the grass, then was still. The knight looked down at it. He called into the trees.

'Come back! It's dead.'

He heard nothing but silence, and hoped she was not out of earshot. He had rescued the girl! She could show some consideration. How could he ever win a reputation as the finest knight in all Christendom if the girl he rescued didn't even know he had done it? Then her pale face bobbed into sight, and she approached the clearing cautiously.

She was stiff with fear. He came forwards. Her ordeal of terror had been worse than his own struggle. He wrenched the axe from the ogre's flesh, and she shuddered. With a rough laugh, he put his arm around her shoulders.

'It's over now,' he said simply. 'We can go back.'

That night there was rejoicing throughout the girl's village as her father and her family and all her folk celebrated her unanticipated liberation. They had thought their last sight of her was when they had chained her to the rock in the ogre's forest. They feasted and drank and danced until the early hours. Her father, who had greeted the knight's arrival dourly, expecting little from one who had won his spurs only days before, spoke earnestly with him as he sat in the seat of honour at the edge of the village green.

'I doubted you, young sir,' he said. 'I had no faith. You had faith; that's where we differ. Oh, I'm no heathen, I attended Mass every year, but when the ogre demanded we give it our girls I could see no hope of salvation. After years of drudgery, never knowing whether it would be feast or famine when harvest time came, my faith was all but used up.' He patted the knight on the arm. 'You believed! You had faith in yourself, and it led you to victory.'

'Yet a word of wisdom from an old man: sometimes faith isn't enough.'

The knight smiled at him absently. 'Faith means little without deeds.' He remembered what a man-at-arms had told him at his foster-father's castle.

The girl appeared from the green, where the youths and maidens of the village had been dancing. She seemed fully recovered from her fear of before, and she gave the knight a bold, appraising glance.

'Father!' she said. 'You don't mean to bore my hero all night, do you?'

Her father looked sternly down at her impudent face and laughing eyes, then his weather-beaten features cracked open into a smile.

'The least you owe the knight is to dance with him,' he said. 'Go, daughter. With my blessing.'

She reached out a long slim hand to help the knight out of his seat, and led him at a run towards the green, laughing as she went.

'I'm glad you took off all that armour,' she said. 'You wouldn't be much good dancing with that on.'

He was about to say point out that he had fought well enough in his armour, and dancing could be no less taxing. But then the musicians struck up a tune, and they were amidst a laughing, dancing crowd. Soon the knight found that dancing, and other amusements, could be at least as tiring as warfare.

They lay together among the bushes, his mighty arm around her slim shoulders, as they gazed into each other's eyes, breathless. Her face was flushed and content. She lifted a hand to play teasingly with his moustaches.

'You saved me,' she murmured. 'You saved me, my knight, my prince!'

He kissed her. 'My own fair damosel! When I set out from my foster-father's castle, I had no lady's favours to tie upon my armour, and I thought that a great shame. But now I can wear your favours when I ride to the jousts and out on errantry.'

She frowned a little, and drew away from her. Looking out across the village beyond the bushes, she asked, 'Don't you want to stay here?'

He laughed awkwardly. 'I can't stay.' Did she know nothing of the duties of a knight? She was little more than a peasant girl, though he wouldn't let that stand in the way of his love. Yet he was a knight; he had been trained to a life of war against the foes of Holy Mother Church.

'I can't stay,' he said again, after she said nothing. 'I must become the finest knight in all Christendom!' Again, she made no reply, but stared out into the dark. He touched her arm, and she half-looked at him, irritably. 'Don't you want to have the love of Christendom's finest knight?'

She looked straight at him, her eyes troubled. 'I just want you,' she said, her voice low.

Laughing, he drew her towards him. He buried his face in her long, silky, sweet-scented hair. She resisted him, turned her face away as he tried to kiss her again.

'But I will be the finest knight in Christendom!' he exclaimed. 'Look at the start I've made: dubbed a knight days before and already I've saved a fair damosel. If I can build on that, by the time I'm twenty I will be renowned throughout all kingdoms! Wouldn't you be proud to have such a man as your lover?'

She leant her head against his chest, and said weakly, 'Don't go.' Her fingers closed on the folds of his tunic, and she lifted a tear-streaked face.

'It won't be for long,' he said. With a sigh, she rested her head against his chest again. 'I'll win myself a castle, and then I will return to claim your hand, and you can come and live with me in luxury and splendour! My every victory will be in your name. Wherever I go, maidens will swoon, but they will all know that I am dedicated to you, that I have foresworn the love of all maidens, except you!'

'Don't go,' she said again, her voice muffled. 'Don't go.'

The next morning, he had his horse saddled and ready. The village folk had made him a shield to replace the one he'd lost fighting the ogre. The blacksmith had hammered out the dents in his armour, where he now wore the girl's kerchief as a favour. The girl's father stood by his horse's crupper as he swung himself up. At last, the girl herself appeared from their house. Her face was sombre.

'You're sure you intend to leave?' the girl's father was saying. 'You'll be welcome to stay here, but I realise we could never keep a knight in the style he expects.' He noticed his daughter. 'What's that long face for? Hasn't he said that he'll only be gone a year or two? And as soon as he's won himself a castle, he'll come for you. I'll be proud to give you away to a man such as him.'

'What if he never returns?' she asked dolefully.

Her father laughed awkwardly, and looked up at the knight, who was watching them from his horse. 'Don't speak such ill-omened words, girl!' he said. 'You'll put a curse on his whole career, talking like that. Well, young sir, I hope we'll see you soon.'

The knight nodded. He beckoned to the girl, and she came slowly to his side. He leaned over to kiss her again but she returned it with little enthusiasm. Then he shook his reins, spurred his horse, and galloped off into the morning sun, leaving a trail of dust as he galloped down the track leading into the forest.

She watched him go in silence.

Years passed.

II

The knight rode at full tilt through a ravaged land, desperation in his eyes. On every side, smoke rose from pillaged villages. Corpses clogged the streams and dikes or lay rotting in the fields, prey to kites and crows and ravens. Leagues behind him, his comrades all lay dead on the field of battle, staring up with sightless eyes at bleak skies. They had been betrayed.

Betrayed. The word burnt fiercely in his bitter mind. The free company he had joined only months before had been hired by a rebel count, a man with a claim to the throne. The rebel had unleashed an assault on the western counties of the kingdom, looting villages, pillaging abbeys, and besieging royal castles. Soon all the west had declared its allegiance to him or suffered his wrath. The king raised his own armies against the rebel, and civil war ravaged the lands. Yet after the count met the king secretly to agree a settlement, his mercenary army became an embarrassment, and he had led them, unwitting, to a place where the king's men had slaughtered them.

Now the knight rode in fear and weariness, the last survivor. He had learnt the truth too late to save his comrades but at least he had saved his own skin. As he had so many times over the years. He had careered from one squalid mercenary venture to another, turning to highway robbery when the pickings were few and times were hard. Much that he had done had been little to his honour, but he had seldom had any choice.

His youthful ambitions had faded into a dream of long-ago summer days, before the long, lonely, empty years of selling his axe to the highest bidder. Once he'd joined a crusade against a heretical barony in the hopes of winning enough plunder to buy a castle and estates and men-at-arms, only to learn that the heretics were ill-favoured peasants who lived in a poverty that put shame to that professed by the Church. They had been easy prey, but the profits had been small.

He had known many women in his wanderings; harlots and camp followers. Yet he had never forgotten the girl he saved, in that year of his youth when everything had seemed possible and the whole world had lain at his feet. He had worn her favours until they were rags. Never had he forgotten her, or that night when they had been together. How she had adored him, how she had told him he would become the greatest knight in Christendom, urged him to ride out to win glory and honour in her name.

He had never forgotten her. But he had never returned.

He had considered it many times, told himself that next year, when he had enough booty left over from the summer campaign and the never-ending carousing in winter quarters, he would ride back to find her. He had no castle, no lands, and little glory to brag of. Yet he had faith in her, knew that she still waited for him, that not a day had gone by when her thoughts had not turned to him. The memory of her had kept him going through those long, lonely, empty years. The memory of her love.

Now he was alone, and an entire kingdom was at his heels. He had to find a bolthole, somewhere where people would shelter him. He was a wanted man in many kingdoms. Where could he find safety?

That night as he lay in his bedroll, and his mare snorted and wheezed in the cold air, he considered his chances. Then it struck him. The notion kept him awake all night, and all that held him back from riding off through the dark was the knowledge that his mare needed rest. Yet he could find none himself.

When a watery sun rose above the plain, he hastened to his steed, and hurriedly prepared for the journey.

Her village lay beyond the mountains to the south and west, a day's ride from the border of the free cities. He no longer remembered the way fully, but he was confident that he could make his way through the maze of forest paths to her home. She would welcome him, and his enemies would never think to find him sheltering in an obscure, backwoods village, leagues from any court or city.

Perhaps he would settle down with her, marry her, till the earth and lead the easy life of a peasant. His fighting days were done. He had never gained the glory he sought, only wounds and foes. Perhaps a new life of humility and happiness awaited him...

He found her finally, in the last tumbledown hut of the village. He had led his mare through the place, which seemed so small, and mean, and cramped, when in his memory it shone in the sun of a summer dawn. The villagers were sullen, suspicious of him. No one seemed to remember him. They pointed him to her hut: her old house had been burnt down during the wars, they told him. Then they watched him lead his mare down the street.

He hitched his steed to a fence post and approached the hut. Dirty, semi-naked children were playing in the mud. A stout woman walked tiredly from a well, carrying a bucket of water. As he stood at the gate, she saw him, and stopped still. The bucket dropped from her nerveless fingers to spill on the hard-packed earth, but she paid it no heed.

He came closer, frowning uncertainly. He saw a thickset woman in early middle age, her face seamed, her hair greying. With a lump in his throat, he noticed fresh bruising around her eyes. Yet it was those eyes that made him recognise her.

'I thought you were dead,' she said at last.

He said nothing, merely extended his arms in a gesture as if to say, here I am, alive. He looked at the squabbling children.

‘I waited,’ she said harshly. ‘I did wait. I waited a year. And another year. I ate my heart out waiting. Then the wars came to this land, and my father was killed defending his house. The bloom of my youth was almost over when I met another man. A man who cared for me after my father’s death, who gave me a roof over my head, and children. He provides for me still.’

He looked uneasily at her black eyes. She touched them and shrugged.

‘I answer back too much, he says,’ she explained. ‘He has to teach me a lesson from time to time.’ She looked at him proudly, defiantly, daring him to comment.

He turned his face away as pity welled up in his heart, glistened in his eyes. He couldn’t speak.

‘He’s a good man,’ she insisted. ‘He drinks when he comes in from the fields but he works long and hard in the sun. He provides for us.’ She indicated her children. ‘That’s what matters. He doesn’t own a castle, but he’s there. Do you understand me?’

He nodded his head silently, ashamed. All his hopes, his aspirations, had been founded on nothing. A lost dream, a memory of youth—and of long, dark years of brooding and hoping. It was the thought of her that had kept him going all those years; the thought that she was waiting for him. That she loved him. A hollow hope.

‘I should have come back long ago,’ he said at last. ‘I never got that castle. Sometimes I came close, but...’

‘I suppose you’ve found some high-born woman, at least,’ she said. He shook his head in silence.

‘Is there anything I can do for you?’ he asked, trying not to look critically at the filth and squalor of her home. He meant, was there any way he could regain her love, that love of a night half a lifetime ago?

She shook her head. ‘There’s no work for the likes of you here,’ she told him. ‘You killed the last of the ogres. There are none left these days.’ He looked at the bruises on her face and wondered if that was true. ‘Still,’ she added bitterly. ‘You were always good with that axe. I need firewood. Why don’t you go into the forest and cut me some?’

He spent most of that day cutting firewood. He was determined to do this as well as he could, to bring back enough fuel to keep her for a year. He would show her how much he loved her: if not by saving her from an ogre, then by providing for her. The sun was descending before he finally loaded up his mare with the firewood and led her back towards the village.

When he reached the hut, he heard the sound of raised voices. He came closer, and heard her own high-pitched voice and the deeper boom of a man. Then he heard the sound of a slap, and his stomach lurched. He had seen men flogged to death for insubordination on the battlefield, but this was more than he could bear. He left his

horse, crossed the yard hurriedly, pushed back the hide curtain, and stepped into the hut.

She was sprawled across the floor on the far side. Her children cowered in corners of the hut. A large, hairy, unwashed man in homespun stood over her, fists doubled. As the knight entered, the man swung round. His face was flushed, dangerous.

‘So this is the big man,’ he sneered. ‘The old flame.’ He seized his wife by the hair and pulled her up. ‘Is this him? I remember him when he was a young knight, when he came here. He’s put on weight!’

‘Please don’t...’ she murmured. He raised his hand to strike her again.

The knight moved without thinking. His axe was in his hand. It flashed in the firelight. Children scampered out of his way. Blood sprayed from the man’s neck as his head hit the floor with a thump. His body joined it soon after, dragging her down with it.

She rose, shuddering, sobbing, staring in horrified disbelief at her husband’s corpse. Then she rounded on him.

‘What have you done!’ she shrieked.

‘He...he was going to hit you!’ the knight exclaimed. He had saved her, hadn’t he? He had saved her! Did that mean nothing?

She gestured at the frightened children. ‘Who will look after them now?’ she demanded. ‘Who’ll go and work in the fields? He kept our bellies full. Who will do that now?’

‘Well, I could do that....’he began.

‘You!’ she sneered; he saw the hatred in her eyes, the anger. ‘You! What could you do? All you could ever do was kill! Get out! Get out!’

Barely comprehending, he stumbled from the hut. The sun was setting over the forest. Finding his horse cropping the grass nearby, he flung the firewood down by her gate, then mounted. Everything he had believed in had been based on a lie, a hollow dream, an illusion. He had saved her from the ogre when they had been young. Yet he could not save her from the ogre he had become.

He spurred his horse and rode towards the forest.

Off To Bedlam Without Any Supper by David Christopher

Night.

The streets of a post-industrial city, each one identical; suburban residential housing, bungalows, flats: windows bright against the all-encompassing night. As we proceed through the streets, we hear from every one the peal of hysterical laughter. The streets are deserted, but in every single house spirits are clearly high.

No, the streets are not entirely deserted. An unmarked white van trundles slowly up and down them. From within the cab, two helmeted men, resembling security guards or riot police, survey the maniacally giggling houses with suspicion on their faces.

It takes time, but finally they find what they are looking for; another anonymous house in another anonymous street, but this one is dark and silent. No laughter, no voices, no sound.

Immediately the van comes to a halt. The driver leaps out, followed by his companion. They march round to the back of the van and bang loudly on the doors.

The van doors spring open, and six men pile out. They are dressed like the others and carry large truncheons. As the laughter pours ceaselessly from the other bungalows, the guards tramp up to the front door of the silent house. The leader bangs on the door. No answer. He exchanges a grim glance with the others, then nods significantly to the biggest of the men. He steps forward and shoulder-barges down the door.

They pour into the bungalow. In the back room beyond the lounge they find an old man sitting alone, looking out into the darkness of his garden. He looks up startled as they burst in.

The leader of the guards bears down on him.

‘You didn’t take your medication tonight, did you?’ the leader sneers. ‘You’ve been a very naughty boy.’

‘I... I didn’t want to,’ the old man stammers bravely. ‘I have nothing to laugh about tonight.’

‘Not laughing?’ the guard barks. ‘So you were plotting, then?’

‘Nothing of the sort!’ the old man protests. He looked sadly down at the photograph dangling in his hands. A young woman beams up at him from a long ago summer. ‘I needed a clear head to think. These pills the government prescribes, they stop you from thinking at all.’

The guard spits in disgust. ‘Your type make me sick,’ he snarled. He nodded to the others. ‘Alright, boys, take him out.’

Brutally, the guards grab hold of the old man; drag him across the lounge and out of the house. Outside, they fling him against the van with a bang that cuts harshly through the laughter from the other houses. Mercilessly, they lay into him with their truncheons.

The sounds of the beating are distant but audible in a house on the other side of the street. In the lounge, a family - a father, a mother, and two young daughters - sits laughing wildly; tears roll down their cheeks and they hold their sides as they stare at each other in hilarious rapture.

‘What’s that?’ the father laughs after the noise of the beating has gone on for at least a minute.

‘Ignore it, dear,’ the mother gasps through her laughter.

‘This isn’t right!’ the father hoots, still laughing helplessly. Getting up, he staggers towards the front door.

The two young girls on the sofa titter uncontrollably at his antics.

The leader of the guards looks up from where his men are beating the old man to see the door of the house opposite framing a middle-aged man, laughing maniacally and clinging to the doorpost. Despite his laughter, he stares at the scene with concern.

The leader taps two of the guards on their brawny shoulder, and nods towards the laughing man.

‘Get him!’ he orders curtly.

The two guards break off from their fellows and march over to grab the man. He laughs wildly as they drag him out into the road and lay into him with their truncheons.

But he goes silent after a while. Once he is quiet, the leader raps out another order.

‘Take this into the van.’ He indicates the beaten old man. The guards grab him and fling him, bloody and battered, into the back. They pile in after him. The two remaining guards give the man in the road a couple more kicks, then join their fellows. The driver and the leader get into the cab. They drive off, leaving the man bleeding in the gutter, feebly struggling to rise.

The sun rises over the roofs of the bungalows, beaming down on another cheerful morning. The mother is saying goodbye to her two daughters as they set off for school.

At the gate, the younger girl stops, eyeing the feebly moving figure of her battered father. The older girl, red with shame, grabs her hand and drags her away. They hurry up the street.

‘Come on,’ she says bossily, copying her mother. ‘Oh, he’s such an embarrassment.’

Arguing as sisters do, they disappear over the brow of the hill. Behind them, the man still lies in the gutter, moaning feebly.

But to the older girl’s relief, by the time they come home from school, he has stopped moving.

Queen of the Black Coast by Robert E Howard

I: Conan Joins the Pirates

*Believe green buds awaken in the spring,
That autumn paints the leaves with somber fire;
Believe I held my heart inviolate
To lavish on one man my hot desire.*

The Song of Bêlit

Hoofs drummed down the street that sloped to the wharfs. The folk that yelled and scattered had only a fleeting glimpse of a mailed figure on a black stallion, a wide scarlet cloak flowing out on the wind. Far up the street came the shout and clatter of pursuit, but the horseman did not look back. He swept out onto the wharfs and jerked the plunging stallion back on its haunches at the very lip of the pier. Seamen gaped up at him, as they stood to the sweep and striped sail of a high-prowed, broadwaisted galley. The master, sturdy and black-bearded, stood in the bows, easing her away from the piles with a boat-hook. He yelled angrily as the horseman sprang from the saddle and with a long leap landed squarely on the mid-deck.

‘Who invited you aboard?’

‘Get under way!’ roared the intruder with a fierce gesture that spattered red drops from his broadsword.

‘But we’re bound for the coasts of Kush!’ expostulated the master.

‘Then I’m for Kush! Push off, I tell you!’ The other cast a quick glance up the street, along which a squad of horsemen were galloping; far behind them toiled a group of archers, crossbows on their shoulders.

‘Can you pay for your passage?’ demanded the master.

‘I pay my way with steel!’ roared the man in armor, brandishing the great sword that glittered bluely in the sun. ‘By Crom, man, if you don’t get under way, I’ll drench this galley in the blood of its crew!’

The shipmaster was a good judge of men. One glance at the dark scarred face of the swordsman, hardened with passion, and he shouted a quick order, thrusting strongly against the piles. The galley wallowed out into clear water, the oars began to clack rhythmically; then a puff of wind filled the shimmering sail, the light ship heeled to the gust, then took her course like a swan, gathering headway as she skimmed along.

On the wharfs the riders were shaking their swords and shouting threats and commands that the ship put about, and yelling for the bowmen to hasten before the craft was out of arbalest range.

‘Let them rave,’ grinned the swordsman hardily. ‘Do you keep her on her course, master steersman.’

The master descended from the small deck between the bows, made his way between the rows of oarsmen, and mounted the mid-deck. The stranger stood there with his back to the mast, eyes narrowed alertly, sword ready. The shipman eyed him steadily, careful not to make any move toward the long knife in his belt. He saw a tall powerfully built figure in a black scalemail hauberk, burnished greaves and a blue-steel helmet from which jutted bull’s horns highly polished. From the mailed shoulders fell the scarlet cloak, blowing in the sea-wind. A broad shagreen belt with a golden buckle held the scabbard of the broadsword he bore. Under the horned helmet a square-cut black mane contrasted with smoldering blue eyes.

‘If we must travel together,’ said the master, ‘we may as well be at peace with each other. My name is Tito, licensed mastershipman of the ports of Argos. I am bound for Kush, to trade beads and silks and sugar and brass-hilted swords to the black kings for ivory, copra, copper ore, slaves and pearls.’

The swordsman glanced back at the rapidly receding docks, where the figures still gesticulated helplessly, evidently having trouble in finding a boat swift enough to overhaul the fast-sailing galley.

‘I am Conan, a Cimmerian,’ he answered. ‘I came into Argos seeking employment, but with no wars forward, there was nothing to which I might turn my hand.’

‘Why do the guardsmen pursue you?’ asked Tito. ‘Not that it’s any of my business, but I thought perhaps -’

‘I’ve nothing to conceal,’ replied the Cimmerian. ‘By Crom, though I’ve spent considerable time among you civilized peoples, your ways are still beyond my comprehension.’

‘Well, last night in a tavern, a captain in the king’s guard offered violence to the sweetheart of a young soldier, who naturally ran him through. But it seems there is some cursed law against killing guardsmen, and the boy and his girl fled away. It was bruited about that I was seen with them, and so today I was haled into court, and a judge asked me where the lad had gone. I replied that since he was a friend of mine, I could not betray him. Then the court waxed wroth, and the judge talked a great deal about my duty to the state, and society, and other things I did not understand, and bade me tell where my friend had flown. By this time I was becoming wrathful myself, for I had explained my position.’

‘But I choked my ire and held my peace, and the judge squalled that I had shown contempt for the court, and that I should be hurled into a dungeon to rot until I betrayed my friend. So then, seeing they were all mad, I drew my sword and cleft the judge’s skull; then I cut my way out of the court, and seeing the high constable’s stallion tied nearby, I rode for the wharfs, where I thought to find a ship bound for foreign parts.’

‘Well,’ said Tito hardily, ‘the courts have fleeced me too often in suits with rich merchants for me to owe them any love. I’ll have questions to answer if I ever anchor in that port again, but I can prove I acted under compulsion. You may as well put up your sword. We’re peaceable sailors, and have nothing against you. Besides, it’s as well to have a fighting-man like yourself on board. Come up to the poop-deck and we’ll have a tankard of ale.’

‘Good enough,’ readily responded the Cimmerian, sheathing his sword.

The Argus was a small sturdy ship, typical of those trading-craft which ply between the ports of Zingara and Argos and the southern coasts, hugging the shoreline and seldom venturing far into the open ocean. It was high of stern, with a tall curving prow; broad in the waist, sloping beautifully to stem and stern. It was guided by the long sweep from the poop, and propulsion was furnished mainly by the broad striped silk sail, aided by a jibsail. The oars were for use in tacking out of creeks and bays, and during calms. There were ten to the side, five fore and five aft of the small mid-deck. The most precious part of the cargo was lashed under this deck, and under the fore-deck. The men slept on deck or between the rowers’ benches, protected in bad weather by canopies. With twenty men at the oars, three at the sweep, and the shipmaster, the crew was complete.

So the Argus pushed steadily southward, with consistently fair weather. The sun beat down from day to day with fiercer heat, and the canopies were run up - striped silken cloths that matched the shimmering sail and the shining goldwork on the prow and along the gunwales.

They sighted the coast of Shem - long rolling meadowlands with the white crowns of the towers of cities in the distance, and horsemen with blue-black beards and hooked

noses, who sat their steeds along the shore and eyed the galley with suspicion. She did not put in; there was scant profit in trade with the sons of Shem.

Nor did master Tito pull into the broad bay where the Styx river emptied its gigantic flood into the ocean, and the massive black castles of Khemi loomed over the blue waters. Ships did not put unasked into this port, where dusky sorcerers wove awful spells in the murk of sacrificial smoke mounting eternally from blood-stained altars where naked women screamed, and where Set, the Old Serpent, arch-demon of the Hyborians but god of the Stygians, was said to writhe his shining coils among his worshippers.

Master Tito gave that dreamy glass-floored bay a wide berth, even when a serpent-prowed gondola shot from behind a castellated point of land, and naked dusky women, with great red blossoms in their hair, stood and called to his sailors, and posed and postured brazenly.

Now no more shining towers rose inland. They had passed the southern borders of Stygia and were cruising along the coasts of Kush. The sea and the ways of the sea were never-ending mysteries to Conan, whose homeland was among the high hills of the northern uplands. The wanderer was no less of interest to the sturdy seamen, few of whom had ever seen one of his race.

They were characteristic Argosean sailors, short and stockily built. Conan towered above them, and no two of them could match his strength. They were hardy and robust, but his was the endurance and vitality of a wolf, his thews steeled and his nerves whetted by the hardness of his life in the world's wastelands. He was quick to laugh, quick and terrible in his wrath. He was a valiant trencherman, and strong drink was a passion and a weakness with him. Naive as a child in many ways, unfamiliar with the sophistry of civilization, he was naturally intelligent, jealous of his rights, and dangerous as a hungry tiger. Young in years, he was hardened in warfare and wandering, and his sojourns in many lands were evident in his apparel. His horned helmet was such as was worn by the golden-haired Aesir of Nordheim; his hauberk and greaves were of the finest workmanship of Koth; the fine ring-mail which sheathed his arms and legs was of Nemedias; the blade at his girdle was a great Aquilonian broadsword; and his gorgeous scarlet cloak could have been spun nowhere but in Ophir.

So they beat southward, and master Tito began to look for the high-walled villages of the black people. But they found only smoking ruins on the shore of a bay, littered with naked black bodies. Tito swore.

'I had good trade here, aforetime. This is the work of pirates.'

'And if we meet them?' Conan loosened his great blade in its scabbard.

'Mine is no warship. We run, not fight. Yet if it came to a pinch, we have beaten off reavers before, and might do it again; unless it were Bêlit's Tigress.'

'Who is Bêlit?'

‘The wildest she-devil unchanged. Unless I read the signs awrong, it was her butchers who destroyed that village on the bay. May I some day see her dangling from the yard-arm! She is called the queen of the black coast. She is a Shemite woman, who leads black raiders. They harry the shipping and have sent many a good tradesman to the bottom.’

From under the poop-deck Tito brought out quilted jerkins, steel caps, bows and arrows.

‘Little use to resist if we’re run down,’ he grunted. ‘But it rasps the soul to give up life without a struggle.’

It was just at sunrise when the lookout shouted a warning. Around the long point of an island off the starboard bow glided a long lethal shape, a slender serpentine galley, with a raised deck that ran from stem to stern. Forty oars on each side drove her swiftly through the water, and the low rail swarmed with naked blacks that chanted and clashed spears on oval shields. From the masthead floated a long crimson pennon.

‘Belit!’ yelled Tito, paling. ‘Yare! Put her about! Into that creek-mouth! If we can beach her before they run us down, we have a chance to escape with our lives!’

So, veering sharply, the Argus ran for the line of surf that boomed along the palm-fringed shore, Tito striding back and forth, exhorting the panting rowers to greater efforts. The master’s black beard bristled, his eyes glared.

‘Give me a bow,’ requested Conan. ‘It’s not my idea of a manly weapon, but I learned archery among the Hyrkanians, and it will go hard if I can’t feather a man or so on yonder deck.’

Standing on the poop, he watched the serpent-like ship skimming lightly over the waters, and landsman though he was, it was evident to him that the Argus would never win that race. Already arrows, arching from the pirate’s deck, were falling with a hiss into the sea, not twenty paces astern.

‘We’d best stand to it,’ growled the Cimmerian; ‘else we’ll all die with shafts in our backs, and not a blow dealt.’

‘Bend to it, dogs!’ roared Tito with a passionate gesture of his brawny fist. The bearded rowers grunted, heaved at the oars, while their muscles coiled and knotted, and sweat started out on their hides. The timbers of the stout little galley creaked and groaned as the men fairly ripped her through the water. The wind had fallen; the sail hung limp. Nearer crept the inexorable raiders, and they were still a good mile from the surf when one of the steersmen fell gagging across a sweep, a long arrow through his neck. Tito sprang to take his place, and Conan, bracing his feet wide on the heaving poop-deck, lifted his bow. He could see the details of the pirate plainly now. The rowers were protected by a line of raised mantelets along the sides, but the warriors dancing on the narrow deck were in full view. These were painted and plumed, and mostly naked, brandishing spears and spotted shields.

On the raised platform in the bows stood a slim figure whose white skin glistened in dazzling contrast to the glossy ebon hides about it. Bêlit, without a doubt. Conan drew the shaft to his ear - then some whim or qualm stayed his hand and sent the arrow through the body of a tall plumed spearman beside her.

Hand over hand the pirate galley was overhauling the lighter ship. Arrows fell in a rain about the Argus, and men cried out. All the steersmen were down, pincushioned, and Tito was handling the massive sweep alone, gasping black curses, his braced legs knots of straining thews. Then with a sob he sank down, a long shaft quivering in his sturdy heart. The Argus lost headway and rolled in the swell. The men shouted in confusion, and Conan took command in characteristic fashion.

‘Up, lads!’ he roared, loosing with a vicious twang of cord. ‘Grab your steel and give these dogs a few knocks before they cut our throats! Useless to bend your backs any more: they’ll board us ere we can row another fifty paces!’

In desperation the sailors abandoned their oars and snatched up their weapons. It was valiant, but useless. They had time for one flight of arrows before the pirate was upon them. With no one at the sweep, the Argus rolled broadside, and the steel-baked prow of the raider crashed into her amidships. Grappling-irons crunched into the side. From the lofty gunwales, the black pirates drove down a volley of shafts that tore through the quilted jackets of the doomed sailormen, then sprang down spear in hand to complete the slaughter. On the deck of the pirate lay half a dozen bodies, an earnest of Conan’s archery.

The fight on the Argus was short and bloody. The stocky sailors, no match for the tall barbarians, were cut down to a man. Elsewhere the battle had taken a peculiar turn. Conan, on the high-pitched poop, was on a level with the pirate’s deck. As the steel prow slashed into the Argus, he braced himself and kept his feet under the shock, casting away his bow. A tall corsair, bounding over the rail, was met in midair by the Cimmerian’s great sword, which sheared him cleanly through the torso, so that his body fell one way and his legs another. Then, with a burst of fury that left a heap of mangled corpses along the gunwales, Conan was over the rail and on the deck of the Tigress.

In an instant he was the centre of a hurricane of stabbing spears and lashing clubs. But he moved in a blinding blur of steel. Spears bent on his amour or swished empty air, and his sword sang its death-song. The fighting-madness of his race was upon him, and with a red mist of unreasoning fury wavering before his blazing eyes, he cleft skulls, smashed breasts, severed limbs, ripped out entrails, and littered the deck like a shambles with a ghastly harvest of brains and blood.

Invulnerable in his amour, his back against the mast, he heaped mangled corpses at his feet until his enemies gave back panting in rage and fear. Then as they lifted their spears to cast them, and he tensed himself to leap and die in the midst of them, a shrill cry froze the lifted arms. They stood like statues, the black giants poised for the spearcasts, the mailed swordsman with his dripping blade.

Belit sprang before the blacks, beating down their spears. She turned toward Conan, her bosom heaving, her eyes flashing. Fierce fingers of wonder caught at his heart.

She was slender, yet formed like a goddess: at once lithe and voluptuous. Her only garment was a broad silken girdle. Her white ivory limbs and the ivory globes of her breasts drove a beat of fierce passion through the Cimmerian's pulse, even in the panting fury of battle. Her rich black hair, black as a Stygian night, fell in rippling burnished clusters down her supple back. Her dark eyes burned on the Cimmerian.

She was untamed as a desert wind, supple and dangerous as a she-panther. She came close to him, heedless of his great blade, dripping with blood of her warriors. Her supple thigh brushed against it, so close she came to the tall warrior. Her red lips parted as she stared up into his somber menacing eyes.

'Who are you?' she demanded. 'By Ishtar, I have never seen your like, though I have ranged the sea from the coasts of Zingara to the fires of the ultimate south. Whence come you?'

'From Argos,' he answered shortly, alert for treachery. Let her slim hand move toward the jeweled dagger in her girdle, and a buffet of his open hand would stretch her senseless on the deck. Yet in his heart he did not fear; he had held too many women, civilized or barbaric, in his iron-Chewed arms, not to recognize the light that burned in the eyes of this one.

'You are no soft Hyborian!' she exclaimed. 'You are fierce and hard as a gray wolf. Those eyes were never dimmed by city lights; those thews were never softened by life amid marble walls.'

'I am Conan, a Cimmerian,' he answered.

To the people of the exotic climes, the north was a mazy half-mythical realm, peopled with ferocious blue-eyed giants who occasionally descended from their icy fastnesses with torch and sword. Their raids had never taken them as far south as Shem, and this daughter of Shem made no distinction between Aesir, Vanir or Cimmerian. With the unerring instinct of the elemental feminine, she knew she had found her lover, and his race meant naught, save as it invested him with the glamour of far lands.

'And I am Bêlit,' she cried, as one might say, 'I am queen.'

'Look at me, Conan!' She threw wide her arms. 'I am Bêlit, queen of the black coast. Oh, tiger of the North, you are cold as the snowy mountains which bred you. Take me and crush me with your fierce love! Go with me to the ends of the earth and the ends of the sea! I am a queen by fire and steel and slaughter - be thou my king!'

His eyes swept the blood-stained ranks, seeking expressions of wrath or jealousy. He saw none. The fury was gone from the ebon faces. He realized that to these men Bêlit was more than a woman: a goddess whose will was unquestioned. He glanced at the Argus, wallowing in the crimson sea-wash, heeling far over, her decks awash, held up by the grappling-irons. He glanced at the blue-fringed shore, at the far green hazes of the ocean, at the vibrant figure which stood before him; and his barbaric soul stirred within him. To quest these shining blue realms with that white-skinned young tiger-cat - to love, laugh, wander and pillage - 'I'll sail with you,' he grunted, shaking the red drops from his blade.

‘Ho, N’Yaga!’ her voice twanged like a bowstring. ‘Fetch herbs and dress your master’s wounds! The rest of you bring aboard the plunder and cast off.’

As Conan sat with his back against the poop-rail, while the old shaman attended to the cuts on his hands and limbs, the cargo of the ill-fated Argus was quickly shifted aboard the Tigress and stored in small cabins below deck. Bodies of the crew and of fallen pirates were cast overboard to the swarming sharks, while wounded blacks were laid in the waist to be bandaged. Then the grappling-irons were cast off, and as the Argus sank silently into the blood-flecked waters, the Tigress moved off southward to the rhythmic clack of the oars.

As they moved out over the glassy blue deep, Bêlit came to the poop. Her eyes were burning like those of a she-panther in the dark as she tore off her ornaments, her sandals and her silken girdle and cast them at his feet. Rising on tiptoe, arms stretched upward, a quivering line of naked white, she cried to the desperate horde: ‘Wolves of the blue sea, behold ye now the dance - the mating-dance of Bêlit, whose fathers were kings of Askalon!’

And she danced, like the spin of a desert whirlwind, like the leaping of a quenchless flame, like the urge of creation and the urge of death. Her white feet spurned the blood-stained deck and dying men forgot death as they gazed frozen at her. Then, as the white stars glimmered through the blue velvet dusk, making her whirling body a blur of ivory fire, with a wild cry she threw herself at Conan’s feet, and the blind flood of the Cimmerian’s desire swept all else away as he crushed her panting form against the black plates of his corseleted breast.

II: The Black Lotus

*In that dead citadel of crumbling stone,
Her eyes were snared by that unholy sheen,
-And curious madness took me by the throat,
As of a rival lover thrust between.*

The Song of Bêlit

The Tigress ranged the sea, and the black villages shuddered. Tom-toms beat in the night, with a tale that the she-devil of the sea had found a mate, an iron man whose wrath was as that of a wounded lion. And survivors of butchered Stygian ships named Bêlit with curses, and a white warrior with fierce blue eyes; so the Stygian princes remembered this man long and long, and their memory was a bitter tree which bore crimson fruit in the years to come.

But heedless as a vagrant wind, the Tigress cruised the southern coasts, until she anchored at the mouth of a broad sullen river, whose banks were jungle-clouded walls of mystery.

‘This is the river Zarkheba, which is Death,’ said Bêlit. ‘Its waters are poisonous. See how dark and murky they run? Only venomous reptiles live in that river. The black people shun it. Once a Stygian galley, fleeing from me, fled up the river and vanished. I anchored in this very spot, and days later, the galley came floating down the dark waters, its decks blood-stained and deserted. Only one man was on board, and he was mad and died gibbering. The cargo was intact, but the crew had vanished into silence and mystery.’

‘My lover, I believe there is a city somewhere on that river. I have heard tales of giant towers and walls glimpsed afar off by sailors who dared go part-way up the river. We fear nothing: Conan, let us go and sack that city.’

Conan agreed. He generally agreed to her plans. Hers was the mind that directed their raids, his the arm that carried out her ideas. It mattered little to him where they sailed or whom they fought, so long as they sailed and fought. He found the life good.

Battle and raid had thinned their crew; only some eighty spear-men remained, scarcely enough to work the long galley. But Bêlit would not take the time to make the long cruise southward to the island kingdoms where she recruited her buccaneers. She was afire with eagerness for her latest venture; so the Tigress swung into the river mouth, the oarsmen pulling strongly as she breasted the broad current.

They rounded the mysterious bend that shut out the sight of the sea, and sunset found them forging steadily against the sluggish flow, avoiding sandbars where strange reptiles coiled. Not even a crocodile did they see, nor any four legged beast or winged bird coming down to the water’s edge to drink. On through the blackness that preceded moonrise they drove, between banks that were solid palisades of darkness, whence came mysterious rustlings and stealthy footfalls, and the gleam of grim eyes. And once an inhuman voice was lifted in awful mockery the cry of an ape, Bêlit said, adding that the souls of evil men were imprisoned in these man-like animals as punishment for past crimes. But Conan doubted, for once, in a gold-barred cage in an Hyrkanian city, he had seen an abysmal sad-eyed beast which men told him was an ape, and there had been about it naught of the demoniac malevolence which vibrated in the shrieking laughter that echoed from the black jungle.

Then the moon rose, a splash of blood, ebony-barred, and the jungle awoke in horrific bedlam to greet it. Roars and howls and yells set the black warriors to trembling, but all this noise, Conan noted, came from farther back in the jungle, as if the beasts no less than men shunned the black waters of Zarkheba.

Rising above the black denseness of the trees and above the waving fronds, the moon silvered the river, and their wake became a rippling scintillation of phosphorescent bubbles that widened like a shining road of bursting jewels. The oars dipped into the shining water and came up sheathed in frosty silver. The plumes on the warrior’s head-piece nodded in the wind, and the gems on sword-hilts and harness sparkled frostily.

The cold light struck icy fire from the jewels in Bêlit's clustered black locks as she stretched her lithe figure on a leopardskin thrown on the deck. Supported on her elbows, her chin resting on her slim hands, she gazed up into the face of Conan, who lounged beside her, his black mane stirring in the faint breeze. Bêlit's eyes were dark jewels burning in the moonlight.

'Mystery and terror are about us, Conan, and we glide into the realm of horror and death,' she said. 'Are you afraid?'

A shrug of his mailed shoulders was his only answer.

'I am not afraid either,' she said meditatively. 'I was never afraid. I have looked into the naked fangs of Death too often. Conan, do you fear the gods?'

'I would not tread on their shadow,' answered the barbarian conservatively. 'Some gods are strong to harm, others, to aid; at least so say their priests. Mitra of the Hyborians must be a strong god, because his people have builded their cities over the world. But even the Hyborians fear Set. And Bel, god of thieves, is a good god. When I was a thief in Zamora I learned of him.'

'What of your own gods? I have never heard you call on them.'

'Their chief is Crom. He dwells on a great mountain. What use to call on him? Little he cares if men live or die. Better to be silent than to call his attention to you; he will send you dooms, not fortune! He is grim and loveless, but at birth he breathes power to strive and slay into a man's soul. What else shall men ask of the gods?'

'But what of the worlds beyond the river of death?' she persisted.

'There is no hope here or hereafter in the cult of my people,' answered Conan. 'In this world men struggle and suffer vainly, finding pleasure only in the bright madness of battle; dying, their souls enter a gray misty realm of clouds and icy winds, to wander cheerlessly throughout eternity.'

Bêlit shuddered. 'Life, bad as it is, is better than such a destiny. What do you believe, Conan?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I have known many gods. He who denies them is as blind as he who trusts them too deeply. I seek not beyond death. It may be the blackness averred by the Nemedian skeptics, or Crom's realm of ice and cloud, or the snowy plains and vaulted halls of the Nordheimer's Valhalla. I know not, nor do I care. Let me live deep while I live; let me know the rich juices of red meat and stinging wine on my palate, the hot embrace of white arms, the mad exultation of battle when the blue blades flame and crimson, and I am content. Let teachers and priests and philosophers brood over questions of reality and illusion. I know this: if life is illusion, then I am no less an illusion, and being thus, the illusion is real to me. I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and am content.'

‘But the gods are real,’ she said, pursuing her own line of thought. ‘And above all are the gods of the Shemites - Ishtar and Ashtoreth and Derketo and Adonis. Bel, too, is Shemitish, for he was born in ancient Shumir, long, long ago and went forth laughing, with curled beard and impish wise eyes, to steal the gems of the kings of old times.’

‘There is life beyond death, I know, and I know this, too, Conan of Cimmeria -’ she rose lithely to her knees and caught him in a pantherish embrace - ‘my love is stronger than any death! I have lain in your arms, panting with the violence of our love; you have held and crushed and conquered me, drawing my soul to your lips with the fierceness of your bruising kisses. My heart is welded to your heart, my soul is part of your soul! Were I still in death and you fighting for life, I would come back from the abyss to aid you - aye, whether my spirit floated with the purple sails on the crystal sea of paradise, or writhed in the molten flames of hell! I am yours, and all the gods and all their eternities shall not sever us!’

A scream rang from the lookout in the bows. Thrusting Bêlit aside, Conan bounded up, his sword a long silver glitter in the moonlight, his hair bristling at what he saw. The black warrior dangled above the deck, supported by what seemed a dark pliant tree trunk arching over the rail. Then he realized that it was a gigantic serpent which had writhed its glistening length up the side of the bow and gripped the luckless warrior in its jaws. Its dripping scales shone leprously in the moonlight as it reared its form high above the deck, while the stricken man screamed and writhed like a mouse in the fangs of a python. Conan rushed into the bows, and swinging his great sword, hewed nearly through the giant trunk, which was thicker than a man’s body. Blood drenched the rails as the dying monster swayed far out, still gripping its victim, and sank into the river, coil by coil, lashing the water to bloody foam, in which man and reptile vanished together.

Thereafter Conan kept the lookout watch himself, but no other horror came crawling up from the murky depths, and as dawn whitened over the jungle, he sighted the black fangs of towers jutting up among the trees. He called Bêlit, who slept on the deck, wrapped in his scarlet cloak; and she sprang to his side, eyes blazing. Her lips were parted to call orders to her warriors to take up bow and spears; then her lovely eyes widened.

It was but the ghost of a city on which they looked when they cleared a jutting jungle-clad point and swung in toward the incurving shore. Weeds and rank river grass grew between the stones of broken piers and shattered paves that had once been streets and spacious plazas and broad courts. From all sides except that toward the river, the jungle crept in, masking fallen columns and crumbling mounds with poisonous green. Here and there buckling towers reeled drunkenly against the morning sky, and broken pillars juttied up among the decaying walls. In the centre space a marble pyramid was spired by a slim column, and on its pinnacle sat or squatted something that Conan supposed to be an image until his keen eyes detected life in it.

‘It is a great bird,’ said one of the warriors, standing in the bows.

‘It is a monster bat,’ insisted another.

‘It is an ape,’ said Bêlit.

Just then the creature spread broad wings and flapped off into the jungle.

‘A winged ape,’ said old N’Yaga uneasily. ‘Better we had cut our throats than come to this place. It is haunted.’

Bêlit mocked at his superstitions and ordered the galley run inshore and tied to the crumbling wharfs. She was the first to spring ashore, closely followed by Conan, and after them trooped the ebon-skinned pirates, white plumes waving in the morning wind, spears ready, eyes rolling dubiously at the surrounding jungle.

Over all brooded a silence as sinister as that of a sleeping serpent. Bêlit posed picturesquely among the ruins, the vibrant life in her lithe figure contrasting strangely with the desolation and decay about her. The sun flamed up slowly, sullenly, above the jungle, flooding the towers with a dull gold that left shadows lurking beneath the tottering walls. Bêlit pointed to a slim round tower that reeled on its rotting base. A broad expanse of cracked, grass-grown slabs led up to it, flanked by fallen columns, and before it stood a massive altar. Bêlit went swiftly along the ancient floor and stood before it.

‘This was the temple of the old ones,’ she said. ‘Look - you can see the channels for the blood along the sides of the altar, and the rains of ten thousand years have not washed the dark stains from them. The walls have all fallen away, but this stone block defies time and the elements.’

‘But who were these old ones?’ demanded Conan.

She spread her slim hands helplessly. ‘Not even in legendary is this city mentioned. But look at the handholes at either end of the altar! Priests often conceal their treasures beneath their altars. Four of you lay hold and see if you can lift it.’

She stepped back to make room for them, glancing up at the tower which loomed drunkenly above them. Three of the strongest blacks had gripped the handholes cut into the stone curiously unsuited to human hands - when Bêlit sprang back with a sharp cry. They froze in their places, and Conan, bending to aid them, wheeled with a startled curse.

‘A snake in the grass,’ she said, backing away. ‘Come and slay it; the rest of you bend your backs to the stone.’

Conan came quickly toward her, another taking his place. As he impatiently scanned the grass for the reptile, the giant blacks braced their feet, grunted and heaved with their huge muscles coiling and straining under their ebon skin. The altar did not come off the ground, but it revolved suddenly on its side. And simultaneously there was a grinding rumble above and the tower came crashing down, covering the four black men with broken masonry.

A cry of horror rose from their comrades. Bêlit’s slim fingers dug into Conan’s arm-muscles. ‘There was no serpent,’ she whispered. ‘It was but a ruse to call you away. I feared; the old ones guarded their treasure well. Let us clear away the stones.’

With herculean labor they did so, and lifted out the mangled bodies of the four men. And under them, stained with their blood, the pirates found a crypt carved in the solid stone. The altar, hinged curiously with stone rods and sockets on one side, had served as its lid. And at first glance the crypt seemed brimming with liquid fire, catching the early light with a million blazing facets. Undreamable wealth lay before the eyes of the gaping pirates; diamonds, rubies, bloodstones, sapphires, turquoises, moonstones, opals, emeralds, amethysts, unknown gems that shone like the eyes of evil women. The crypt was filled to the brim with bright stones that the morning sun struck into lambent flame.

With a cry Wit dropped to her knees among the bloodstained rubble on the brink and thrust her white arms shoulder-deep into that pool of splendor. She withdrew them, clutching something that brought another cry to her lips - a long string of crimson stones that were like clots of frozen blood strung on a thick gold wire. In their glow the golden sunlight changed to bloody haze.

Bêlit's eyes were like a woman's in a trance. The Shemite soul finds a bright drunkenness in riches and material splendor, and the sight of this treasure might have shaken the soul of a sated emperor of Shushan.

'Take up the jewels, dogs!' her voice was shrill with her emotions.

'Look!' a muscular black arm stabbed toward the Tigress, and Bêlit wheeled, her crimson lips a-snarl, as if she expected to see a rival corsair sweeping in to despoil her of her plunder. But from the gunwales of the ship a dark shape rose, soaring away over the jungle.

'The devil-ape has been investigating the ship,' muttered the blacks uneasily.

'What matter?' cried Bêlit with a curse, raking back a rebellious lock with an impatient hand. 'Make a litter of spears and mantles to bear these jewels - where the devil are you going?'

'To look to the galley,' grunted Conan. 'That bat-thing might have knocked a hole in the bottom, for all we know.'

He ran swiftly down the cracked wharf and sprang aboard. A moment's swift examination below decks, and he swore heartily, casting a clouded glance in the direction the bat-being had vanished. He returned hastily to Bêlit, superintending the plundering of the crypt. She had looped the necklace about her neck, and on her naked white bosom the red clots glimmered darkly. A huge naked black stood crotch-deep in the jewel-brimming crypt, scooping up great handfuls of splendor to pass them to eager hands above. Strings of frozen iridescence hung between his dusky fingers; drops of red fire dripped from his hands, piled high with starlight and rainbow. It was as if a black titan stood straddle-legged in the bright pits of hell, his lifted hands full of stars.

'That flying devil has staved in the water-casks,' said Conan. 'If we hadn't been so dazed by these stones we'd have heard the noise. We were fools not to have left a man

on guard. We can't drink this river water. I'll take twenty men and search for fresh water in the jungle.'

She looked at him vaguely, in her eyes the blank blaze of her strange passion, her fingers working at the gems on her breast.

'Very well,' she said absently, hardly heeding him. 'I'll get the loot aboard.'

The jungle closed quickly about them, changing the light from gold to gray. From the arching green branches creepers dangled like pythons. The warriors fell into single file, creeping through the primordial twilights like black phantoms following a white ghost.

Underbrush was not so thick as Conan had anticipated. The ground was spongy but not slushy. Away from the river, it sloped gradually upward. Deeper and deeper they plunged into the green waving depths, and still there was no sign of water, either running stream or stagnant pool. Conan halted suddenly, his warriors freezing into basaltic statues. In the tense silence that followed, the Cimmerian shook his head irritably.

'Go ahead,' he grunted to a sub-chief, N'Gora. 'March straight on until you can no longer see me; then stop and wait for me. I believe we're being followed. I heard something.'

The blacks shuffled their feet uneasily, but did as they were told. As they swung onward, Conan stepped quickly behind a great tree, glaring back along the way they had come. From that leafy fastness anything might emerge. Nothing occurred; the faint sounds of the marching spearmen faded in the distance. Conan suddenly realized that the air was impregnated with an alien and exotic scent. Something gently brushed his temple. He turned quickly. From a cluster of green, curiously leafed stalks, great black blossoms nodded at him. One of these had touched him. They seemed to beckon him, to arch their pliant stems toward him. They spread and rustled, though no wind blew.

He recoiled, recognizing the black lotus, whose juice was death, and whose scent brought dream-haunted slumber. But already he felt a subtle lethargy stealing over him. He sought to lift his sword, to hew down the serpentine stalks, but his arm hung lifeless at his side. He opened his mouth to shout to his warriors, but only a faint rattle issued. The next instant, with appalling suddenness, the jungle waved and dimmed out before his eyes; he did not hear the screams that burst out awfully not far away, as his knees collapsed, letting him pitch limply to the earth. Above his prostrate form the great black blossoms nodded in the windless air.

III: The Horror in the Jungle

*Was it a dream the nighted lotus brought?
Then curst the dream that bought my sluggish life;*

*And curst each laggard hour that does not see
Hot blood drip blackly from the crimsoned knife.*

The Song of Bêlit

First there was the blackness of an utter void, with the cold winds of cosmic space blowing through it. Then shapes, vague, monstrous and evanescent, rolled in dim panorama through the expanse of nothingness, as if the darkness were taking material form. The winds blew and a vortex formed, a whirling pyramid of roaring blackness. From it grew Shape and Dimension; then suddenly, like clouds dispersing, the darkness rolled away on either hand and a huge city of dark green stone rose on the bank of a wide river, flowing through an illimitable plain. Through this city moved beings of alien configuration.

Cast in the mould of humanity, they were distinctly not men. They were winged and of heroic proportions; not a branch on the mysterious stalk of evolution that culminated in man, but the ripe blossom on an alien tree, separate and apart from that stalk. Aside from their wings, in physical appearance they resembled man only as man in his highest form resembles the great apes. In spiritual, aesthetic and intellectual development they were superior to man as man is superior to the gorilla. But when they reared their colossal city, man's primal ancestors had not yet risen from the slime of the primordial seas.

These beings were mortal, as are all things built of flesh and blood. They lived, loved and died, though the individual span of life was enormous. Then, after uncounted millions of years, the Change began. The vista shimmered and wavered, like a picture thrown on a windblown curtain. Over the city and the land the ages flowed as waves flow over a beach, and each wave brought alterations. Somewhere on the planet the magnetic centers were shifting; the great glaciers and ice-fields were withdrawing toward the new poles.

The littoral of the great river altered. Plains turned into swamps that stank with reptilian life. Where fertile meadows had rolled, forests reared up, growing into dank jungles. The changing ages wrought on the inhabitants of the city as well. They did not migrate to fresher lands. Reasons inexplicable to humanity held them to the ancient city and their doom. And as that once rich and mighty land sank deeper and deeper into the black mire of the sunless jungle, so into the chaos of squalling jungle life sank the people of the city. Terrific convulsions shook the earth; the nights were lurid with spouting volcanoes that fringed the dark horizons with red pillars.

After an earthquake that shook down the outer walls and highest towers of the city, and caused the river to run black for days with some lethal substance spewed up from the subterranean depths, a frightful chemical change became apparent in the waters the folk had drunk for millenniums uncountable.

Many died who drank of it; and in those who lived, the drinking wrought change, subtle, gradual and grisly. In adapting themselves to the changing conditions, they had sunk far below their original level. But the lethal waters altered them even more

horribly, from generation to more bestial generation. They who had been winged gods became pinioned demons, with all that remained of their ancestors' vast knowledge distorted and perverted and twisted into ghastly paths. As they had risen higher than mankind might dream, so they sank lower than man's maddest nightmares reach. They died fast, by cannibalism, and horrible feuds fought out in the murk of the midnight jungle. And at last among the lichen-grown ruins of their city only a single shape lurked, a stunted abhorrent perversion of nature.

Then for the first time humans appeared: dark-skinned, hawkfaced men in copper and leather harness, bearing bows - the warriors of pre-historic Stygia. There were only fifty of them, and they were haggard and gaunt with starvation and prolonged effort, stained and scratched with jungle-wandering, with bloodcrusted bandages that told of fierce fighting. In their minds was a tale of warfare and defeat, and flight before a stronger tribe which drove them ever southward, until they lost themselves in the green ocean of jungle and river.

Exhausted they lay down among the ruins where red blossoms that bloom but once in a century waved in the full moon, and sleep fell upon them. And as they slept, a hideous shape crept red-eyed from the shadows and performed weird and awful rites about and above each sleeper. The moon hung in the shadowy sky, painting the jungle red and black; above the sleepers glimmered the crimson blossoms, like splashes of blood. Then the moon went down and the eyes of the necromancer were red jewels set in the ebony of night.

When dawn spread its white veil over the river, there were no men to be seen: only a hairy winged horror that squatted in the centre of a ring of fifty great spotted hyenas that pointed quivering muzzles to the ghastly sky and howled like souls in hell.

Then scene followed scene so swiftly that each tripped over the heels of its predecessor. There was a confusion of movement, a writhing and melting of lights and shadows, against a background of black jungle, green stone ruins and murky river. Black men came up the river in long boats with skulls grinning on the prows, or stole stooping through the trees, spear in hand. They fled screaming through the dark from red eyes and slavering fangs. Howls of dying men shook the shadows; stealthy feet padded through the gloom, vampire eyes blazed redly. There were grisly feasts beneath the moon, across whose red disk a batlike shadow incessantly swept.

Then abruptly, etched clearly in contrast to these impressionistic glimpses, around the jungled point in the whitening dawn swept a long galley, thronged with shining ebon figures, and in the bows stood a white-skinned ghost in blue steel.

It was at this point that Conan first realized that he was dreaming. Until that instant he had had no consciousness of individual existence. But as he saw himself treading the boards of the Tigress, he recognized both the existence and the dream, although he did not awaken.

Even as he wondered, the scene shifted abruptly to a jungle glade where N'Gora and nineteen black spearmen stood, as if awaiting someone. Even as he realized that it was he for whom they waited, a horror swooped down from the skies and their stolidity was broken by yells of fear. Like men maddened by terror, they threw away their

weapons and raced wildly through the jungle, pressed close by the slaving monstrosity that flapped its wings above them.

Chaos and confusion followed this vision, during which Conan feebly struggled to awake. Dimly he seemed to see himself lying under a nodding cluster of black blossoms, while from the bushes a hideous shape crept toward him. With a savage effort he broke the unseen bonds which held him to his dreams, and started upright.

Bewilderment was in the glare he cast about him. Near him swayed the dusky lotus, and he hastened to draw away from it.

In the spongy soil near by there was a track as if an animal had put out a foot, preparatory to emerging from the bushes, then had withdrawn it. It looked like the spoor of an unbelievably large hyena.

He yelled for N'Gora. Primordial silence brooded over the jungle, in which his yells sounded brittle and hollow as mockery. He could not see the sun, but his wilderness-trained instinct told him the day was near its end. A panic rose in him at the thought that he had lain senseless for hours. He hastily followed the tracks of the spearmen, which lay plain in the damp loam before him. They ran in single file, and he soon emerged into a glade - to stop short, the skin crawling between his shoulders as he recognized it as the glade he had seen in his lotus-drugged dream. Shields and spears lay scattered about as if dropped in headlong flight.

And from the tracks which led out of the glade and deeper into the fastnesses, Conan knew that the spearmen had fled, wildly. The footprints overlay one another; they weaved blindly among the trees. And with startling suddenness the hastening Cimmerian came out of the jungle onto a hill-like rock which sloped steeply, to break off abruptly in a sheer precipice forty feet high. And something crouched on the brink.

At first Conan thought it to be a great black gorilla. Then he saw that it was a giant black man that crouched ape-like, long arms dangling, froth dripping from the loose lips. It was not until, with a sobbing cry, the creature lifted huge hands and rushed towards him, that Conan recognized N'Gora. The black man gave no heed to Conan's shout as he charged, eyes rolled up to display the whites, teeth gleaming, face an inhuman mask.

With his skin crawling with the horror that madness always instills in the sane, Conan passed his sword through the black man's body; then, avoiding the hooked hands that clawed at him as N'Gora sank down, he strode to the edge of the cliff.

For an instant he stood looking down into the jagged rocks below, where lay N'Gora's spearmen, in limp, distorted attitudes that told of crushed limbs and splintered bones. Not one moved. A cloud of huge black flies buzzed loudly above the bloods-plashed stones; the ants had already begun to gnaw at the corpses. On the trees about sat birds of prey, and a jackal, looking up and seeing the man on the cliff, slunk furtively away.

For a little space Conan stood motionless. Then he wheeled and ran back the way he had come, flinging himself with reckless haste through the tall grass and bushes,

hurdlng creepers that sprawled snake-like across his path. His sword swung low in his right hand, and an unaccustomed pallor tinged his dark face.

The silence that reigned in the jungle was not broken. The sun had set and great shadows rushed upward from the slime of the black earth. Through the gigantic shades of lurking death and grim desolation Conan was a speeding glimmer of scarlet and blue steel. No sound in all the solitude was heard except his own quick panting as he burst from the shadows into the dim twilight of the river-shore.

He saw the galley shouldering the rotten wharf, the ruins reeling drunkenly in the gray half-light.

And here and there among the stones were spots of raw bright color, as if a careless hand had splashed with a crimson brush.

Again Conan looked on death and destruction. Before him lay his spearmen, nor did they rise to salute him. From the jungle edge to the riverbank, among the rotting pillars and along the broken piers they lay, torn and mangled and half devoured, chewed travesties of men.

All about the bodies and pieces of bodies were swarms of huge footprints, like those of hyenas.

Conan came silently upon the pier, approaching the galley above whose deck was suspended something that glimmered ivory-white in the faint twilight. Speechless, the Cimmerian looked on the Queen of the Black Coast as she hung from the yard-arm of her own galley. Between the yard and her white throat stretched a line of crimson clots that shone like blood in the gray light.

IV: The Attack From the Air

*The shadows were black around him,
The dripping jaws gaped wide,
Thicker than rain the red drops fell;
But my love was fiercer than Death's black spell,
Nor all the iron walls of hell
Could keep me from his side.*

The Song of Bêlit

The jungle was a black colossus that locked the ruin-littered glade in ebon arms. The moon had not risen; the stars were flecks of hot amber in a breathless sky that reeked of death. On the pyramid among the fallen towers sat Conan the Cimmerian like an iron statue, chin propped on massive fists. Out in the black shadows stealthy feet

padded and red eyes glimmered. The dead lay as they had fallen. But on the deck of the Tigris, on a pyre of broken benches, spear-shafts and leopardskins, lay the Queen of the Black Coast in her last sleep, wrapped in Conan's scarlet cloak. Like a true queen she lay, with her plunder heaped high about her: silks, cloth-of-gold, silver braid, casks of gems and golden coins, silver ingots, jeweled daggers and teocallis of gold wedges.

But of the plunder of the accursed city, only the sullen waters of Zarkheba could tell where Conan had thrown it with a heathen curse. Now he sat grimly on the pyramid, waiting for his unseen foes. The black fury in his soul drove out all fear. What shapes would emerge from the blackness he knew not, nor did he care.

He no longer doubted the visions of the black lotus. He understood that while waiting for him in the glade, N'Gora and his comrades had been terror-stricken by the winged monster swooping upon them from the sky, and fleeing in blind panic, had fallen over the cliff, all except their chief, who had somehow escaped their fate, though not madness. Meanwhile, or immediately after, or perhaps before, the destruction of those on the riverbank had been accomplished. Conan did not doubt that the slaughter along the river had been massacre rather than battle. Already unmanned by their superstitious fears, the blacks might well have died without striking a blow in their own defense when attacked by their inhuman foes.

Why he had been spared so long, he did not understand, unless the malign entity which ruled the river meant to keep him alive to torture him with grief and fear. All pointed to a human or superhuman intelligence - the breaking of the watercasks to divide the forces, the driving of the blacks over the cliff, and last and greatest, the grim jest of the crimson necklace knotted like a hangman's noose about Belit's white neck.

Having apparently saved the Cimmerian for the choicest victim, and extracted the last ounce of exquisite mental torture, it was likely that the unknown enemy would conclude the drama by sending him after the other victims. No smile bent Conan's grim lips at the thought, but his eyes were lit with iron laughter.

The moon rose, striking fire from the Cimmerian's horned helmet. No call awoke the echoes; yet suddenly the night grew tense and the jungle held its breath. Instinctively Conan loosened the great sword in its sheath. The pyramid on which he rested was four-sided, one - the side toward the jungle carved in broad steps. In his hand was a Shemite bow, such as Belit had taught her pirates to use. A heap of arrows lay at his feet, feathered ends towards him, as he rested on one knee.

Something moved in the blackness under the trees. Etched abruptly in the rising moon, Conan saw a darkly blocked-out head and shoulders, brutish in outline. And now from the shadows dark shapes came silently, swiftly, running low - twenty great spotted hyenas. Their slavering fangs flashed in the moonlight, their eyes blazed as no true beast's eyes ever blazed.

Twenty: then the spears of the pirates had taken toll of the pack, after all. Even as he thought this, Conan drew nock to ear, and at the twang of the string a flame-eyed shadow bounded high and fell writhing. The rest did not falter; on they came, and like

a rain of death among them fell the arrows of the Cimmerian, driven with all the force and accuracy of steely thews backed by a hate hot as the slag-heaps of hell.

In his berserk fury he did not miss; the air was filled with feathered destruction. The havoc wrought among the onrushing pack was breathtaking. Less than half of them reached the foot of the pyramid. Others dropped upon the broad steps. Glaring down into the blazing eyes, Conan knew these creatures were not beasts; it was not merely in their unnatural size that he sensed a blasphemous difference. They exuded an aura tangible as the black mist rising from a corpse-littered swamp. By what godless alchemy these beings had been brought into existence, he could not guess; but he knew he faced diabolism blacker than the Well of Skelos.

Springing to his feet, he bent his bow powerfully and drove his last shaft point blank at a great hairy shape that soared up at his throat. The arrow was a flying beam of moonlight that flashed onward with but a blur in its course, but the were-beast plunged convulsively in midair and crashed headlong, shot through and through.

Then the rest were on him, in a nightmare rush of blazing eyes and dripping fangs. His fiercely driven sword shore the first asunder; then the desperate impact of the others bore him down. He crushed a narrow skull with the pommel of his hilt, feeling the bone splinter and blood and brains gush over his hand; then, dropping the sword, useless at such deadly close quarters, he caught at the throats of the two horrors which were ripping and tearing at him in silent fury. A foul acrid scent almost stifled him, his own sweat blinded him. Only his mail saved him from being ripped to ribbons in an instant. The next, his naked right hand locked on a hairy throat and tore it open. His left hand, missing the throat of the other beast, caught and broke its foreleg. A short yelp, the only cry in that grim battle, and hideously human-like, burst from the maimed beast. At the sick horror of that cry from a bestial throat, Conan involuntarily relaxed his grip.

One, blood gushing from its torn jugular, lunged at him in a last spasm of ferocity, and fastened its fangs on his throat - to fall back dead, even as Conan felt the tearing agony of its grip.

The other, springing forward on three legs, was slashing at his belly as a wolf slashes, actually rending the links of his mail. Flinging aside the dying beast, Conan grappled the crippled horror and, with a muscular effort that brought a groan from his blood-flecked lips, he heaved upright, gripping the struggling, bearing fiend in his arms. An instant he reeled off balance, its fetid breath hot on his nostrils; its jaws snapping at his neck; then he hurled it from him, to crash with bone-splintering force down the marble steps.

As he reeled on wide-braced legs, sobbing for breath, the jungle and the moon swimming bloodily to his sight, the thrash of bat-wings was loud in his ears. Stooping, he groped for his sword, and swaying upright, braced his feet drunkenly and heaved the great blade above his head with both hands, shaking the blood from his eyes as he sought the air above him for his foe.

Instead of attack from the air, the pyramid staggered suddenly and awfully beneath his feet. He heard a rumbling crackle and saw the tall column above him wave like a

wand. Stung to galvanized life, he bounded far out; his feet hit a step, halfway down, which rocked beneath him, and his next desperate leap carried him clear. But even as his heels hit the earth, with a shattering crash like a breaking mountain the pyramid crumpled, the column came thundering down in bursting fragments. For a blind cataclysmic instant the sky seemed to rain shards of marble. Then a rubble of shattered stone lay whitely under the moon.

Conan stirred, throwing off the splinters that half covered him. A glancing blow had knocked off his helmet and momentarily stunned him. Across his legs lay a great piece of the column, pinning him down. He was not sure that his legs were unbroken. His black locks were plastered with sweat; blood trickled from the wounds in his throat and hands. He hitched up on one arm, struggling with the debris that prisoned him.

Then something swept down across the stars and struck the sword near him. Twisting about, he saw it - the winged one!

With fearful speed it was rushing upon him, and in that instant Conan had only a confused impression of a gigantic manlike shape hurtling along on bowed and stunted legs; of huge hairy arms outstretching misshapen black-nailed paws; of a malformed head, in whose broad face the only features recognizable as such were a pair of blood-red eyes. It was a thing neither man, beast, nor devil, imbued with characteristics subhuman as well as characteristics superhuman.

But Conan had no time for conscious consecutive thought. He threw himself toward his fallen sword, and his clawing fingers missed it by inches. Desperately he grasped the shard which pinned his legs, and the veins swelled in his temples as he strove to thrust it off him. It gave slowly, but he knew that before he could free himself the monster would be upon him, and he knew that those black-taloned hands were death.

The headlong rush of the winged one had not wavered. It towered over the prostrate Cimmerian like a black shadow, arms thrown wide - a glimmer of white flashed between it and its victim.

In one mad instant she was there - a tense white shape, vibrant with love fierce as a she-panther's. The dazed Cimmerian saw between him and the onrushing death, her lithe figure, shimmering like ivory beneath the moon; he saw the blaze of her dark eyes, the thick cluster of her burnished hair; her bosom heaved, her red lips were parted, she cried out sharp and ringing at the ring of steel as she thrust at the winged monster's breast.

'Bêlit!' screamed Conan. She flashed a quick glance at him, and in her dark eyes he saw her love flaming, a naked elemental thing of raw fire and molten lava. Then she was gone, and the Cimmerian saw only the winged fiend which had staggered back in unwonted fear, arms lifted as if to fend off attack. And he knew that Belit in truth lay on her pyre on the Tigris's deck. In his ears rang her passionate cry: 'Were I still in death and you fighting for life I would come back from the abyss -'

With a terrible cry he heaved upward hurling the stone aside. The winged one came on again, and Conan sprang to meet it, his veins on fire with madness. The thews

started out like cords on his forearms as he swung his great sword, pivoting on his heel with the force of the sweeping arc. Just above the hips it caught the hurtling shape, and the knotted legs fell one way, the torso another as the blade sheared clear through its hairy body.

Conan stood in the moonlit silence, the dripping sword sagging in his hand, staring down at the remnants of his enemy. The red eyes glared up at him with awful life, then glazed and set; the great hands knotted spasmodically and stiffened. And the oldest race in the world was extinct.

Conan lifted his head, mechanically searching for the beast-things that had been its slaves and executioners. None met his gaze. The bodies he saw littering the moon-splashed grass were of men, not beasts: hawk-faced, dark skinned men, naked, transfixed by arrows or mangled by sword-strokes. And they were crumbling into dust before his eyes.

Why had not the winged master come to the aid of its slaves when he struggled with them? Had it feared to come within reach of fangs that might turn and rend it? Craft and caution had lurked in that misshapen skull, but had not availed in the end.

Turning on his heel, the Cimmerian strode down the rotting wharfs and stepped aboard the galley. A few strokes of his sword cut her adrift, and he went to the sweep-head. The Tigress rocked slowly in the sullen water, sliding out sluggishly toward the middle of the river, until the broad current caught her. Conan leaned on the sweep, his somber gaze fixed on the cloak-wrapped shape that lay in state on the pyre the richness of which was equal to the ransom of an empress.

V: The Funeral Pyre

*Now we are done with roaming, evermore;
No more the oars, the windy harp's refrain;
Nor crimson pennon frights the dusky shore;
Blue girdle of the world, receive again
Her whom thou gavest me.*

The Song of Bêlit

Again dawn tinged the ocean. A redder glow lit the river-mouth. Conan of Cimmeria leaned on his great sword upon the white beach, watching the Tigress swinging out on her last voyage. There was no light in his eyes that contemplated the glassy swells. Out of the rolling blue wastes all glory and wonder had gone. A fierce revulsion shook him as he gazed at the green surges that deepened into purple hazes of mystery.

Belit had been of the sea; she had lent it splendor and allure. Without her it rolled a barren, dreary and desolate waste from pole to pole. She belonged to the sea; to its everlasting mystery he returned her. He could do no more. For himself, its glittering blue splendor was more repellent than the leafy fronds which rustled and whispered behind him of vast mysterious wilds beyond them, and into which he must plunge.

No hand was at the sweep of the Tigress, no oars drove her through the green water. But a clean tanging wind bellied her silken sail, and as a wild swan cleaves the sky to her nest, she sped seaward, flames mounting higher and higher from her deck to lick at the mast and envelop the figure that lay lapped in scarlet on the shining pyre.

So passed the Queen of the Black Coast, and leaning on his red-stained sword, Conan stood silently until the red glow had faded far out in the blue hazes and dawn splashed its rose and gold over the ocean.

THE END