

**THE BEST WEBZINE FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY, AND HORROR!**

# **Schlock!**

## **WEBZINE**

VOL. 15, ISSUE 22  
8th DECEMBER 2019

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 15, Issue 22  
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Schlock! is a 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 new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

For details of previous editions, please go to the [website](#).

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk). We no longer review published and self-published novels directly, although we are willing to accept reviews from other writers. Any other enquiries, including requests to advertise in our quarterly printed magazine, also to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk)

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*This Edition*

This week's cover illustration is *The horror of the space crab* by *Elijah van der Giessen*.  
Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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## EDITORIAL

This week, Hell turns out to be quite a different place. On the beach, one man's fortunes sink to their lowest nadir. John C Adams reviews a tale of seasonal chills. An account of brotherly rivalry conceals a tragic twist. Norbert Gora shares two ultra-short stories of the weird and horrific. And Kevin O'Brien relates the first of several sagas set in HP Lovecraft's Dreamlands.

Meanwhile, Lowell continues to investigate witchcraft. And Polaris struggles against Prince Helicon.

—Gavin Chappell

PS: If you're looking for a suitably ghoulish present for your nearest and dearest this Christmas, look no further than Schlock! Publications. Our latest offering is a book length collection of Vincent Davis' hilariously horrifying *It Came From Inside the Inkwell!* comic that has been appearing in Schlock! this year. Available from the link below:

Now available from Schlock! Publications: [\*It Came From Inside The Inkwell!\*](#)



# IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!!

Volume One



by VINCENT DAVIS

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

## IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



*Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.*

*In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.*

*He lives in Mamaroneck NY with his wife Jennie and dog Skip.*

<https://www.freelanced.com/vincentdavis>

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## THE HOTEL AT THE END OF THE UNIVERSE by Carlton Herzog

I knew that I was dead. Since I had renounced shrooms and acid long ago, how else could I explain hovering above my motionless, blood-smeared body? Besides, I remembered the shoot-out with the cops. But my ethereal musings were interrupted by a very powerful gust of wind carrying me up through the ceiling and into a large tear in the sky. Stars flashed past me in streaks of coloured light until I alighted in a hotel lobby.

The next thing I knew I was standing before the façade of an enormous hotel. On the lawn behind me a sign read *Welcome to Eternity* in big, bold, flaming red letters. It was flanked by two enormous pitchfork-wielding devils. I entered and went up to the hostess. She had the reddest lips and palest skin I had ever seen on a woman. She wore a red blouse and a black leather mini-skirt with a slit in the back for her serpentine tail. Her nametag read Maltista, Head Succubus.

“Mr. Swain, I presume.”

“Yes.”

“Welcome to Eternity. May I see your Visa?”

Somehow, I knew what she meant. I reached into my now blood-free coat and retrieved the document in question.

“From your paperwork, I see that your stay in Hell will be brief before you’re recycled. You have your choice of room, suite, cottage or tent.”

“I’ll take a room.”

“Excellent choice. Remember, this is a family run hotel where you’ll find demonic hospitality with a human touch. Do you want me to have the concierge take your bags up?”

I hadn’t noticed the bags before and gave her a quizzical look.

“Those are your so-called sins, Mr. Swain. The big suitcase is for the mortal ones; the little one is for peccadillos and misdemeanours. Good Jelly is our concierge. He’ll bring them up for you.”

Good Jelly was a huge ball of quivering purple gelatine with sausage fingers, tree trunk legs, and horse teeth. I had heard of a hipster dufus but never a demon dufus.

The astonished look on my face prompted Maltista to remark: “He’s a big fan of the Kool-Aid guy.”

I said, “Wait a minute. What about the fire and brimstone, the demons torturing the damned with pitchforks and rivers of fire?”

“We have all manner of Hospitality packages for our guests. What you have described is just one of our many kink packages. You can order that if you like. We also have the landscape of open graves with a mass of twisted and emaciated corpses trying to eat you. Or you can swim



around in a river of boiling blood along with other bodies and be poked and prodded by a regiment of centaurs. Or we can fuse your body to a dead tree in the wood of the damned, and let you get pecked by Harpies. It's all up to you, Mr. Swain."

"I thought hell was a place of punishment, shame, moral condemnation."

"Nope. That's a tall tale we have spread to keep folks from offing themselves every time the going gets rough up there. It's just a relaxed waiting room for the soul."

"Where is it exactly?"

"Think of the universe as a great ball. Hell is its circumference or bound. Hence the name, the Hotel at the End of The Universe. You can tour the circle by rail if you like, see all the sights from above. Rent a pet to keep you company or purchase one or more escorts."

"Wouldn't that would take a very long time?"

"We can manipulate the perception of time here, so a million years seems like a day, or a day seems like a million years. So, an extended train ride for a million years could be said to seem only as long as one from Milan to Paris. Why, look—it's our house comedian Diabolicus. Hey D, got a joke for our new guest?"

D laughed and said, "I sure do. Guy dies and goes to heaven. When he gets to the Pearly Gates Saint Peter says, 'You're too much of a sinner for this place.'"

"That's nonsense. How many times did I take the Lord's name in vein?"

"Saint Peter says, 'A million six.

"The guy says, 'A million six! Jesus Christ that's a lot!'"

We all laughed at the blasphemous humour.

"Thank you for helping Mr. Swain feel welcome, D. Now off with you. Mr. Swain, what kind of food do you like?"

"I'm dead, why do I need food at all?"

"Many of our guests still like to enjoy a good meal. Your hospitality package could be coded for normal human appetites and nutrition requirements. If that's what you want, then you have the option of a room with a kitchenette and grocery delivery, room service, or simply visit the banquet room which serves 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The only thing not on the menu is other people. Some things are not permitted and encouraging cannibalism is one of them."

"Fine."

As I stood there, Elvis and Buddy Holly came strolling by en route to the banquet hall. They were laughing and joking.

I said, "I get why Elvis is here, but not Buddy Holly."

She said, "Buddy would wake up every morning and shoot God the double-bird and say, *You sir, are a piece of shit*. Of course, such blasphemy counts for nothing in the long run, since there is no actual punishment for sins, just a weak acknowledgement. Forget about all that stuff and go try the Bizarro, our hotel bar."

"Sure, why not. I'll freshen up and then go have a few drinks."

After Maltista finished my paperwork, she said, "Good Jelly can't make it. Little Evil will take your bags." With that in came a giant drooling baby's head skittering about on eight chubby legs. He brought my bags into the room. I searched in my pockets for a tip but there was neither change nor bills.

He saw what I was about and said, "No need, Sir. The pleasure is all mine. Besides, here the only coin of the realm is goodwill."

After I cleaned up, I headed over to the Bizarro. The sign over the vestibule read ANYTHING GOES!

As I walked over to the very large circular bar, I noticed that there was a peculiar division of labour. Babies smelling of talc and shampoo walked or crawled along the bar taking drink orders, then in gurgling tones called them out to headless pourers in black bow-ties and vests.

Incredulous, I just stared. One of the babies saw me and drooled as babies are wont to do. It slithered over and asked me in the underdeveloped palette lisp of a toddler what I was drinking. Maintaining my composure, I replied, "Jack Daniels. Make it a double."

In the next moment, I was, drink in hand, standing at the edge of a sunlit field filled with apple trees. Yards away I could see a man and a woman naked except for fig leaves covering their privates. They were diligently picking apples and tossing them into a massive juicer. They were watched by a coiled cobra that hissed at them to "Work faster; money doesn't grow on trees." A few feet away an old man worked in a flower garden. He wore a white toga and sandals. He had majestic white hair and beard together with a stern disapproving face. He wore Mr. Magoo thick glasses. He was angry about the theft of his apples. He would yell at the man and the woman to "Get out before I throw you out." When he did the man and the woman stopped picking apples, walked over to his flower bed and urinated. The cobra laughed and then hissed "Shame on you. That's no way to treat your father."

Then I heard applause and was seated back in the bar. Apparently, the Bizarro hospitality package included an impromptu and snarky take on the Fall of Man. It was followed by Diabolicus' short comedy routine called The Three Doors.

"Guy dies and goes to hell. Devil says you can pick your punishment from what's behind these three doors. Guy opens the first door, and everybody is standing on their head atop a wooden floor. Guy opens the second door, and the scenario is the same except the floor is made of concrete. Guy opens the third door, and everyone is standing in shit up to their knees, but are otherwise drinking coffee, chatting and having a good time. Naturally, the guy picks the third door. A moment later the Devil reopens the third door and yells, 'Okay—coffee break's over; everybody back on your head.'"

Hysterical. I had a few more drinks and left. As I walked back to my room I thought, ain't hell grand? It has the worst P.R. but the best hospitality. I wouldn't mind sticking around here for all eternity.

When I passed through the lobby, I stopped to thank the hostess for the good time I was having. Maltista was gone. In her place was her sister Malvista.

I said, "This is the best hotel I have ever stayed at."

She smiled and said, "Of course it is. It has all the bells and whistles and you've only seen but a few. I can show you more, if you like. But there is a catch."

"Tell me."

"Well, you're a short timer. That means you don't have enough time to see much more. You would have to waive recycling for a time. You would just need to sign on the dotted line. A small formality."

"Is this a trick?"

"Heavens no. But even if it were, you said yourself hell is a great place to spend eternity, so what's the big deal?"

I didn't think they had to trick me into anything, since I was already in hell and at their mercy. So, I signed the contract of extension. And Malvista delivered on her promise. I had an amazing time. When it was over, I expected to be whisked back to the land of the living and installed in a new-born.

But she said, "You should have read the fine print. You permanently waived your right of return. Your fate is now in the discretion of the presiding authority, namely, Lucifer. And He has decided to be merciful."

I thought for a moment. "So I won't be baked or broiled for all time?"

"That would be barbaric."

"So, what are you going to do to me?"

"You get the Third Door."

And with that she snapped her fingers, and the next thing I knew I was standing in this shit pile with you losers. Say, how long do these breaks last?

THE END

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## ROCK BOTTOM FEEDERS by Sheldon Birnie

Frank woke slowly, his head pounding along to the sound of water lapping against the rocky shore. Thousands of stars and a bright full moon shone through the darkness above, reflecting in twinkling waves across the water.

Moaning, dizzy and nauseous, Frank blinked. He wasn't sure just where he was or what he was doing there, but his feet were wet and he felt a strange tingling sensation all over his body. Behind him somewhere, a babbling creek dumped water into the bay.

It all came back to him slowly through a haze of pain. He was 43 years old and on the bender to end all benders, devastatingly hungover if not still wasted from the previous day's boozing.

Something, at some point, had gone wrong. Real wrong.

The last thing he could recall clearly, he'd been drinking in a bar not far from the ferry terminal. How much time had passed since then? Hours? Days? Frank did not know. He'd been drinking hard for weeks, since before he'd hopped on the Greyhound back on the prairies and headed west, redoubling his efforts to reach oblivion once he'd hit the coast. Time had begun to lose meaning.

When the web of deceit he'd been spinning for years came unwound and he'd finally and irrevocably fucked up everything in his life, he'd fled. Why stick around while the lake froze over and the walls and the bank and the long list of varied creditors he'd accrued over the past few years, who had yet to clue into the fact he was beyond broke, closed in? He'd always wanted to live between the mountains and the sea. If not now, then when? There would be no happy retirement in Frank's future, unless he won the lottery, and maybe not even then, if his soon-to-be-ex-wife had anything to say about it.

Diane had left him. Of that he was sure. However, he had trouble identifying just why, at the moment. The drinking, maybe. But who didn't like a cocktail now and then? Diane certainly did. And how. Most likely it had been the gambling, and no doubt the subsequent loss of their home and business. Yes, that was it. All the money they'd had was gone, along with the house, the restaurant, the truck, the boat and the third wheel. The run of bad luck had started as a trickle before escalating into a full-on fucking tsunami and then, bingo bango bongo, Frank and Diane were way beyond broke and wasn't that a surprise to Diane.

"I never want to see you again," she'd screamed from the porch of her mother's house when he'd stopped by earlier that fall, for one last ditch effort to patch things up before adding, "You're a fucking disgrace, Frank!"

Then she'd turned and slammed the door in his face, leaving him standing on the front step in the cold wind, alone.

They'd spent 10 decent years together. The restaurant they'd run for the last seven, The Dock, had been a success. The dining room had commanded a beautiful view of the lake, with a menu that leant heavy on the seafood, and nautical decor that catered heavily to the tourist crowd. Tourists were happy to scarf down flash frozen fish dishes while they dined out, a chance to forget their Midwestern worries for the weekend and soak up the brilliant prairie palette on display (most evenings) between eight and ten every evening, while the



locals were happy for a different place to wet their whistles for six months of the year that The Dock was open for business.

Neither Frank nor Diane had particularly liked seafood. That was just what The Dock had always served, and what the tourists who came back every year expected. Sure, Frank would admit he'd come to develop an unhealthy penchant for deep fried crab cakes, but that was incidental. The fact that The Dock was a sure-fire money maker which also featured a prominent lakeside lounge had been the prime selling features for both Frank and Diane.

"If we're going to be drinking on a patio all summer," Diane had said over innumerable drinks on countless occasions over the past seven summers, "we might as well be making money doing it."

When they'd first bought the place it had been a rundown fixture of the lakeside cottage community for decades. They'd got it for a bargain, thanks to small town family connections and the previous owner's mounting and costly health problems. All they'd really done to the place was slap a few coats of paint on the walls and replace the ancient, cigarette-and-fried-fish reeking carpet with industrial laminate. Over the years, they'd replaced pieces of the kitchen, but even then, they'd bought used equipment. As a secondary source of income for the couple, The Dock had been easy money six months of the year.

Now, though, the good times and the easy money were gone. Long gone. Their marriage was over and The Dock had new owners. Maybe the new couple would replace the basa burger with bison, but it didn't matter at all to Frank. They could turn the menu upside down or burn the place to the goddamn ground for the insurance money for all Frank cared. At least, he thought bitterly, he and Diane had never had kids.

Painful as it was to admit, Frank had gambled and lost every last cent and then plenty more on credit and he didn't have a goddamn thing to show for it. He'd always enjoyed putting a bet down on a football game, had bet the ponies when he'd had an opportunity. The slappers were bad enough, but he'd learned the hard way years ago to stay away from them, especially when he'd had a few to drink and felt like getting lucky.

In the end, online poker was his downfall. It was a slippery slope, and so easy to sluff off the losses when they only appeared on an electronic credit card statement for a card he'd taken out in their joint names for the express purpose of gambling online. A card that Diane had never known about, until its balance in full came due and Frank was forced to admit he had no way to pay for, as he'd already extended credit on every conceivable asset they owned.

Now, not two years after he first logged on as DockDude69, Frank's divorce was proceeding through the lawyers, and he had no way to pay for his half of it. Instead, he'd hopped a Greyhound westward, disembarking at the end of the line before stumbling on to a ferry a few days later on the fumes of his rapidly diminishing MasterCard balance.

He'd crashed with his older brother Bob those first few days on the coast, in the nice old West End home he shared with his wife Sharon, who still looked as good to Frank at 50 as she did when he'd made a drunken pass at her a couple weeks before she and Bob were married, 20 years earlier.

“Happy to have you,” Bob had said, and he’d meant it, Sharon had smiling patiently at his side. “Stay as long as you want to, bro. We’ll have some fun.”

But brother Bob had three kids who didn’t need to find their sad old Uncle Frank snoring through a hangover on the couch every morning when they woke up to get ready for school. Bob hadn’t said as much. No, Bob would never, but he didn’t have to. Bob knew it. Frank knew it. And while Sharon, bless her heart, had never once mentioned the fumbling drunken fool he’d made of himself those 20 years earlier, Frank knew she hadn’t forgotten it, either.

After a few days on the couch, Frank had left a *Thank You* note on the breakfast nook table, helped himself to a fresh bottle of Bobby’s finest single malt, and hit the road.

Now, here he was, lying on some miserably rocky beach in the dark. With some trouble, Frank rubbed his face with his gritty left hand, shooting pain down the arm well past the elbow. The smell of brine, rotting vegetation and blood cut through the clouds of boozy stink he exhaled with every breath. A wave of nausea washed over him, like the waves lapping at his feet which, Frank realized through the haze were bare. Where had his boots gone and why did it feel like his toes were being slowly flayed, cold little wet piggie by cold little wet piggie?

He’d met a woman that first day off the ferry, he remembered. Half cut, he’d waltzed into a restaurant by the harbour, sat down at in a booth overlooking the sea, and ordered the oysters.

“Fresh?” he’d asked the waitress.

“You betcha,” replied the robust redhead who didn’t look a day over 40, though she may well have had a couple years on Frank.

“I’m in,” Frank had said with a wink. “Let’s do it.”

The two had continued to flirt as Frank racked up his bill. He’d managed to get her phone number from her, which he dutifully called from the payphone at a pub she’d told him she might enjoy meeting him for a drink at, after her shift was over. While he waited, he kept on drinking, ordering a lavish dinner of crab legs and a sirloin steak, rare, that he had to admit was above and beyond anything The Dock had ever served during his tenure.

Carla, the waitress, met him an hour later. They’d spent the rest of the evening boozing at a pub up the road from the ferry terminal. He’d then spent the night naked and drunk, rolling and groping, fucking and sucking across the floor and futon in her one bedroom apartment. When he’d awoken in the morning, she was off to work an early shift.

“Call me later, big boy,” Carla’d said with a lascivious wink as she headed out the door. Frank had a shower, got dressed, and finished off the heel of whisky they’d left on the coffee table, before heading back out to hit the nearest bar.

It had been Frank’s first night in over a decade with a woman who wasn’t Diane. Never once during their marriage had he strayed, sexually. Rather, when the two began to drift apart, Frank had found solace in gambling and online pornography, while Diane had taken to drinking ever more wine in the evenings. Occasionally, they’d come together in the bed they shared, and they almost always enjoyed those times together. But all the good loving in the

world wouldn't bring back the money Frank had secretly blown chasing a run of good luck that never arrived.

The night with Carla had been fun, sure. But it had also been sloppy. Lying on the beach, every part of him awash with pain, Frank could not remember if he'd seen Carla again or not, because from the previous afternoon on, Frank's memories were blotto. If he had, he'd certainly said or done something to lose favour with the busty, red haired waitress. Why else would he have stumbled down to the beach to pass out? Clearly, he had a long way to go if he were ever to get back into her, or any other lady's, good books again.

Shutting his eyes against the night, Frank groaned. His head pounded. Even the ground beneath him seemed to crawl. Good Lord. What a mess.

Could this, he wondered, be rock bottom? Had he finally hit it?

Frank opened his eyes again. Across the water, a red light blinked on and off, on and off in the darkness. Was it a buoy bobbing on the waves, or a signal light on a lonely island of rock? It didn't matter. What mattered was figuring out where he was and how he got there and what in the Christ was that nipping and gnawing he felt in his legs and arms and back?

Pushing himself up off his back, Frank felt a sharp crunching under his elbows and his palms, which preceded a flurry of sharp pains rippling up his arms.

"Oh my god," Frank croaked, eyes watering as he shuffled frantically upright.

The ground crunched beneath him while something needled him at every pressure point. He raised his hands up before his eyes and stared at them in the gloom for what seemed like a long time, but couldn't have been more than a couple seconds. Then he blinked his blurry eyes, and looked again to confirm that what he thought he'd seen was, in fact, what he had seen.

It was. There was no mistaking it, horrifying as it was.

Dozens of tiny crabs clung to the flesh from his shredded palms, their little legs moving helplessly in the moonlight, searching desperately for purchase.

Frank screamed.

Flailing, swatting, pin-wheeling his arms madly, Frank scrambled up off the rocky beach, which was crawling with shadowy crustaceans. The pain in his feet as they slapped against the rocky sea bottom obliterated any discomfort he'd experience upon waking, hungover, on the beach only moments earlier.

Scrambling backward, Frank screamed again when he caught sight of his feet out of water, covered in a seething mass of miniature creatures. Though his feet were still submerged in the cold water, but he could feel them biting, pinching, clawing their way up the flesh of his legs beneath his loose fitting cargo pants.

Frank fell back on his ass with a sickening crunch. He tried to brush the crabs off his arms and hands, but their claws and their tiny pincher-mouths, their mandibles and maxillae, held

tight. Worse, for every successful brush, the crabs that were knocked loose tore off strips of flesh as they fell to the rocky shore below, where they were joined by dozens, hundreds, thousands of their kind, all seething up from the sea.

“What the shit?” Frank babbled, his mouth tasting as foul as the bilge water of a frigate long left adrift to the currents.

For all the thousands of pounds of crab The Dock had sold over the seven years he and Diane had been at its helm, not one had ever come through the back doors off the supply truck live. They hadn’t even come in their shell, but long processed into deep fryer-ready cakes far removed from their wild, bottom dwelling lives. The only live crabs he’d ever seen were in the tank at the Superstore, or the one time he and Diane had visited the aquarium, when they’d visited brother Bob and Sharon shortly after they’d first been married. He’d never even thought about them, outside of doing inventory or considering a tasty treat, not once.

“Why?” Frank howled as he pushed himself upright once again, turning to run up the beach.

Why was it, he wondered fleetingly, that something so terrible could come upon him all at once? What drunken, woebegone romantic impulse had compelled him to stumble down to this beach to rest his booze besotted head and not taken rest in a back alley or park bench instead?

The night provided no reply to Frank’s desperate query. Instead, his feet, bare, lacerated and throbbing with pain, slipped on a large, slimy piece of cast off kelp. He fell back down to the beach, cracking the side of his head against a barnacle encrusted rock.

His vision blurred, eyelids unfathomably heavy, Frank made one last vain bid to get up and run. But his limbs seemed a million miles away, attached to some other body. A body, perhaps, that had never known the thrills and spills, the lofty peaks nor the festering lagoon like depths of the problem gambler; a body that had never left the placid, uneventful shores of Lake Manawaka; one that had never fucked up a fine and good thing so utterly, so completely; one that hadn’t hit rock bloody bottom, running in vain from facing up to the consequences of his actions; a body that wasn’t, at that very moment, being made a feast for crabs.

And still they poured from the sea, swarming up ahead of the creeping tide, water glistening off their shells in the gloom like a million drops of rain on a flat, clear lake as their tiny legs skittered sideways over the rocky beach. Among their countless dime and dollar size brothers and sisters emerged crabs the size of fists and rocks and small dogs and larger still from the waters, dripping and sparkling in the moonlight, headed ashore; claws clicking open and shut, open and shut, open and shut with mindless, mechanical certainty. Headed for Frank.

Frank screamed again, a wordless cry that echoed in his ears as if from the darkest depth of the sea. He continued to scream as the scurrying crabs made for the soft meat of his belly and the jowls of his chins, soft and sweet from years of feasting on the deep fried bounty of the seas, and the puffy, wet pouches under his eyes from trying to drown the memory of those years in booze. Frank’s world went black, fully and completely, as the seething mass of crabs dug in for the kill.

THE END

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REVIEW by John C Adams

### [The Christmas Banquet by Nathaniel Hawthorne](#)

At just twenty pages this story is pretty snappy. It was published in 1844, following the success of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* the year before, but providing none of the heart-warming, family-oriented character development and happy ending. If you'd like an eerie, ghostly tale for Christmas but want to sidestep the worst of the saccharine element to which seasonal fiction is especially prone, I'd heartily recommend *The Christmas Banquet*.

Rosina, Roderick and their mutual friend 'the sculptor' discuss an acquaintance of Roderick's—a hopeless puzzle and attempt to understand his psychology. Roderick warns his friends that comprehending someone who gives every impression of being carved out of marble will be no easy task. But he begins his tale anyway.

An old gentleman died, leaving an unaccountable bequest for an annual Christmas Banquet to be held in his honour, but specifies that the guests must be the most miserable people available. He then attends it—or rather his skeleton sits at the head of the table.

*He devised a considerable sum for establishing a fund, the interest of which was to be expended, annually, forever, in preparing a Christmas Banquet for ten of the most miserable persons that could be found.*

Sadly, the dead man's intent isn't to spread a little joy. He seeks rather to reassure himself from the afterlife that some souls cannot be touched by the joy of Christmas.

Bah humbug, indeed!

The first banquet proceeds, the guests even cope with the skeleton sat at the head of the table, and none rise to any kind of happiness or merriment. The guests are varied but depressing. I felt sorry for all of them—the hypochondriac, the depressive, the sufferer from heart disease. And so on. The final guest is chilling in a wholly different way—he's smooth, cold and immune to all kinds of suffering or emotion. We all know people like that and personally I find them terrifying.

The banquet goes on for years and years. Unfortunates come and go, with the stewards searching high and low for the worst afflicted people to invite as guests. But the one constant is Gervase Hastings and the most terrifying thing of all is his response to the sufferers with whom he dines once a year at Christmas.

I loved this dark tale with its emphasis on psychology. There are moments when the heart-warming decency of *A Christmas Carol* hits the spot but for me there are just as many, if not more, when the chill of *The Christmas Banquet*, fits the bill.

Enjoy!

THE END

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BRRROTHER by Christopher T Dabrowski  
English translation by Monika Olasek

Winter. Biting frost. Chins stiff from cold. The snow was sparkling in the sunshine and cracking under the feet of passers-by. That day my father and I were alone. My mum was in a hospital because of a large belly, where, as I was told, my brother was. Indeed, three days later we went there to see my little brother. At first I was really disgusted—this little wrinkled yelling creature, was it really my brother? Well, I could only be glad that I don't look the same. It was a nightmare!

After a few days dad brought them home. At first I was glad to be the older brother (it sounded so good). But I quickly came to my senses—my joy was precocious. There was I, the first-born, the apple of everyone's eye, whose wishes were immediately fulfilled, the cuddled darling—and now, suddenly, I was pushed into being a servant, the worse one, who hardly deserves any attention. Our house was now ruled by a little piggy-pink god, to whom our parents run night and day, whom they nearly worshipped. Now he was the centre of their attention. I was cruelly degraded—be quiet, you'll wake your brother... go play with your little brother... see? Adam is so good, try to be the same... It made me sick. What's got into them? Why did the little creature change them so much? How did he dare? Soon I developed a real dislike to that little gnome. My brother, who was supposed to be such joy for me, appeared to be a monster!

Now I think how stupid I was. Now, when I'm a grown-up, I see it all in different ways. Those days I felt pushed away, unwanted. And yet it is normal and logical that a little baby needs more time and care than the older one.

If only I had known then what I know now, I would have behaved totally differently.

The gnome was growing very fast. The older he was, the more he demanded from the surrounding world. My world! At first I had to help serving the master: carry his milk bottle, play with him and take him for a walk. Then, good heavens, my room was divided into two halves. Yes! The same room, where I kindly spared a corner for this little scum's bed. I felt sick when my father announced, that from now on the other half would belong to Junior, and it was my duty to accept it. OUTRAGE!

Damn, now, when I'm nearly thirty I realize how much I lost because of this stupid jealousy.

My parents did not give me a miss, they just started treating me as more mature. It was an ennoblement but I didn't understand it, I treated it as a punishment...

He was such a drag—at first he crawled alongside me when I walked him to the kindergarten, then when we were at school. After classes, instead of playing ball with the guys, I had to

take the little tot home. As if this was not enough, I got some new duties: dusting, dishwashing and helping with the shopping. It is not that I'm lazy and evading. Not at all! But I got really pissed off because I had to work like a horse and that lazybones was lying with his tummy up. And all that explaining—he is too small; when he grows up, he would have as much to do as I have now (yeah, sure! He will certainly scrimshank).

A tear runs down my cheek. Now, when it's too late to turn the clock back. The first time I treated my brother as a friend not as a rival was when I was in college—he was then second grade high school. I don't know why, but I grow up a secretive, shy boy. And my younger brother was dating chicks like wow!

All the civil wars were forgotten, we both grew up, but every time he brought some girl home I felt a bite of jealousy—Once again he is better; the world loves him more than me... why him and not me? I remember that once I was really down. Then Junior patted on my back and ordered that we should go for a beer, like two brothers; to talk a bit. We ended up in one of the local pubs. When I was totally stoned, all the grudges, jealousy and accusations, everything that grew in me all those years—it all came out. Surprisingly, he understood. We did some more dives.

In the morning it turned out that the lousy creature, my Bro, is my best friend. He soon taught me how to pick up the girls and make them fall for you. He invited me into his gang. He became my true friend. How I regret that through all those years I treated him as a brat, as a necessary evil, although he was not the one to blame. I fully realized this just now, holding tight the telephone in my hand. I couldn't believe what I have just heard. My brother, Adam... was yesterday killed in Afghanistan ...

THE END

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## DRABBLES by Norbert Góra

### *They are always fooled by sweets*

It's going to be my first Halloween without sweets. This devastating thought accompanied me all the way home. I looked with envy at the kids who kept their bags full of candies. "What an unjust world," I whispered and glanced towards the dark forest. A hollow pumpkin stood beside the first of the trees. Unbelievable. Who could leave it here, packed to the brim with sweets? Unfortunately, before I reached it, I felt pain. Much to my dismay, the pumpkin's lips moved and took the form of a devilish smile.

"They are always fooled by sweets," it said with satisfaction.

### *He loved her too much*

Today was supposed to be the day when he would honestly talk to his wife about what was bothering them. He had the whole conversation scenario in his head. Thinking about it, he kept telling himself that it would be okay. Unfortunately, when the wife entered the house, he lost his mind.

He grabbed his wife by the hair so hard that she hit her head against the wall. Before he could even wonder what he had done, it was too late.

A moment later he realized the irony of the situation. He loved her so much that he killed her.

THE END

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GEM EXCHANGE by Kevin O'Brien

*"In his poem, 'To a Mouse', Robert Burns wrote: 'The best laid schemes of mice and men / Go often askew' (translated from his Scottish dialect). Fortunately, the Dreamlands offers no dearth of possible allies, if one makes the right connections."*

—The Dreamlands for Dummies, by Aislinn Síle

The Dylath-Leen excise agents glided the catboat alongside the Leng black galley. That had been a condition of this meeting: Differel Van Helsing could arrive in the city by whatever means she chose, but she had to use an official harbour boat to approach the galley. It had been devilishly difficult to convince the Prince of the city to lend her one without telling him why, and in the end she had to promise to do him a favour sometime in the future. She just hoped it would not be too onerous.

She stood up and watched the rope ladder approach. When it reached her she took hold of it and let it pull her off the catboat as it continued on past the galley. She hung from it for a few moments, suspended over the harbour waters, as it stopped swinging, then planted her bare feet on the lower rungs and climbed up to the deck. As soon as her head rose above the gunwale she spotted three turbaned satyrish Leng Men waiting for her, each grinning with their wide frog-like mouths full of blunt teeth. She couldn't help noting that they were armed with cutlasses and large killing knives.

She paused and laid an arm on the gunwale. "Permission to come abroad," she said in her British contralto.

The middle crewman, most likely a boatswain, bowed deeply, but with a sarcastic air. "But of course, My Lady Elissa." If anything, his companions' grins grew broader.

Ignoring them, she climbed over the gunwale, and when she stood before them she raised her arms up to shoulder level out to either side and spread her legs. The two end crewmen came forward and frisked her none too gently, nor with proper decorum, and she gritted her teeth as they fondled her bosom and backside.

Finally they stepped away to either side. "She's clean," the one on her right stated.

"I even washed my hair," she quipped with a Cheshire Cat smile as she brushed a long stringy grey lock out of her face. But as she expected, the boatswain gave her a puzzled look, not getting the association.

Another of the Leng Men's conditions for the meeting was that she come unarmed. They had originally demanded that she arrive naked, but she refused, and did so again when they offered to allow her to wear undergarments. Finally they agreed to let her have a chemise and trousers, as long as the former was tucked inside the latter, which had to be as nearly skin-tight as comfortable, and she wore no boots in which she could hide a knife or pistol. She even left her glasses behind, but they weren't really necessary since her Dream-body had perfect eyesight. She suspected though that the frisking was more to confiscate her "gift" than to make sure she kept her word.



Of course, even if she had agreed to being nude, that would not have divested her of her two most powerful weapons. She felt her Wakiya, Eleanor d'Aquitaine, with whom she shared an empathic bond, soaring above the city, awaiting her command, and she could call her greatsword Caliburn at a moment's notice.

"Welcome aboard the *Raubtier*," and the boatswain bowed again, though not as deeply. "Come with me." And he turned away.

The crewmen that flanked her urged her on, and she followed their leader towards the stern. She was familiar with the layout of a black galley, but there had been only one other instance when she had seen one this close, and she had been a prisoner at the time. They were based on the design of the ancient Greek trireme, and so had three banks of oars on either side, but they were larger and had numerous early modern features, such as bow and sterncastles. As their name suggested, they were painted entirely black, including the sails and brass fixtures. They were powered mainly by their oars, which allowed them to go anywhere at any time, but they also had two masts with square sails to provide extra speed. And they were well armed. On board this vessel she saw numerous ballistae lining the gunwales of the main deck, and scorpions at the corners of the sterndeck above the sterncastle. She had little doubt the bowcastle had scorpions as well, or that the galley was equipped with a ram, and she suspected it probably also had a forward-projecting Greek fire siphon. Sitting between the aft mast and the sterncastle was a mangonel style catapult, and she had glimpsed a second sitting between the foremast and the bowcastle. She wondered if it kept shantaks for aerial assault on its cargo deck. She reflected that black galleys were much like Elizabethan privateers, able to operate as merchantmen or raiders depending upon the opportunities that presented themselves.

One feature she could not miss was the foul stench that arose from below deck. She knew its source: the oars of a black galley were manned by Moonbeasts, who could row longer and faster than any human crew. Fortunately, they never left their private areas unless the galley came under attack, or to participate in a ship-boarding or shore raid. What she couldn't tell by observation was whether the hull had been saturated with space-mead. Many galleys were, but not all; in this case, she hoped not.

The problem was, it could throw a huge spanner into her scheme if she guessed wrong.

Her escort paused at the foot of one of the ladders leading up to the quarterdeck, and the boatswain gestured for her to ascend. None of them followed her, but they didn't need to. There were only three ways off that deck: back down into their waiting arms, up to the sterndeck and a dead end, or over the side into the harbour. None were particularly appealing.

Once she reached the deck, she saw four Leng Men waiting for her, most likely officers. Three, most likely junior officers, stood behind the fourth, who sat in a padded chair behind a small round table with a tea service on a Lazy Susan. Behind and above them, more officers and crew stood on the sterndeck, either manning the tiller, watching the harbour for threats, or keeping an eye on her; they were probably the ones armed with crossbows.

She recognized the seated officer immediately: Dey'mun Teiron Bael. If black galleys were like old English privateers, dey'muns were like the Sea Hawks who commanded them, the only exception being that it was the Moonbeasts who called the shots. Still, the dey'mun commanded the Leng Man crew, conducted trade, decided when and where to conduct raids,

and oversaw the general operation of the galley even as he worked to fulfil the mission dictated by his masters.

He grinned at her, but then Leng Men were always grinning about something. “Ah, welcome, welcome, My Lady. Please...” He gestured across the table to an empty chair. “Make yourself comfortable. Have some tea.”

She did as he requested. She had encountered him seven times before, and each time had given him ample reasons for regretting it, though a couple of them had been near squeaks. The last time he had run afoul of Eleanor, who had pierced him through with her talons and dropped him into the sea from a great height. She remembered being quite surprised when she heard he had survived, though seeing him now she realized he had paid a high price for his folly.

She filled a cup, and added milk and sugar, rotating the Lazy Susan to reach them. She wasn't worried about drugs or poison; she knew he would prefer to take her alive to rape and torture to death, and if he drugged her before their transaction was completed he would lose big. While she had little doubt he would try to double cross her at some point, he would do nothing until he had what he wanted.

Speaking of which: “Do you have it?” he asked in a pointed manner.

She looked up over her cup. “That was a pointless question. Your men searched me and found nothing.”

“I assure you, they would not have confiscated it if they had.”

“Perhaps not, but I could not take the chance that they might try to keep it for themselves.” She set her cup down and buttered a slice of bread. From his expression, she noted that he had not considered that possibility.

He then gave her a grim look. “Is this a waste of my time?”

She swallowed her bite. “Certainly not. We both know that if you had the slightest suspicion that I would not play fair, you could claim me as a consolation prize. However, I am merely playing it safe. It's here in Dylath-Leen, and I can produce it at a moment's notice.” She took another bite and washed it down with a sip of tea. “I believe a more pertinent question is, do you have what I want?”

Bael held out his hand, and one of his officers placed a largish wooden cube on the palm. He held it against his chest, removed the top, and tilted it towards her to show her the contents.

Inside, on a bed of plush royal purple velvet, lay a round cabochon with a domed obverse, a flat reverse, and a smoothly bevelled edge. It was black but heavily flecked with red, and had a golden starburst in the centre. The sixteen arms were curved into shallow half-circles arranged in a counter-clockwise spiral, and the four at the cardinal points were long enough to reach the edge.

It was the Star of Kohrab, the most precious of the crown jewels of Celephaïs. How Bael had got a hold of it was still a mystery, but King Kuranos had instructed her to retrieve it by any

means necessary, not solve that conundrum. She just hoped he would approve of the method she had chosen.

“Place it on the table.”

He replaced the top and put the box in his lap. “Not until I know you have what I came for.”

“Very well.” Now, Eleanor, she thought as she placed the cup and the half-eaten slice of bread on the Lazy Susan. “It will be here shortly.”

He frowned in confusion, but moments later the giant raptor let loose with a titanic scream that rent the air. Bael and his officers looked up and around with expressions of fear as the thunderbird rapidly soared scant feet above the tops of the masts. Differel held out a hand and a leather bag with a looped drawstring dropped into her palm. Meanwhile, Eleanor flapped her wings and rose up into the sky to return to her station above the city.

Differel opened the bag and dropped its contents into her other hand. It was a smooth sphere the size of a cricket ball, but while the flawless surface was as transparent as clear glass, the interior was filled with a conglomerate of golden and brass-coloured crystalline flakes.

“Voila!” She held it up on her fingertips. “One Crystallizer of Dreams, as ordered.”

Bael and his officers stared at it with expressions of awe mixed with lust, as if she had unveiled a real live buxom and curvy anime bimbo for their enjoyment. Still, she couldn’t blame them. A Crystallizer was an exceptionally powerful artefact. In the Waking World, it could send the possessor to other worlds and universes, including the Dreamlands, while in the Dreamlands it could allow a Dreamer to bring Dream-constructs back into the Waking World when she awoke, something that was normally impossible. Worse, it could allow Waking-artefacts to enter the Dreamlands unchanged, even if the technological restriction normally prevented it. She remembered a story of a gangster who had used one to bring Thompson submachine guns into the Dreamworld.

“That must have been some adventure acquiring it,” Bael barely whispered.

“It wasn’t without incident.”

He swiftly sobered. “Hand it over.” His officers placed hands on their cutlasses for emphasis as the crewmen on the sterndeck raised their crossbows and sighted on her.

She closed her fist around the Crystallizer. “Place the Star on the table.”

He frowned, a grim sour expression. “I need only order my men to shoot and you will be dead. Give it to me, and I will let you leave unharmed for another encounter.”

“That wasn’t our deal.”

He shrugged. “I’ve changed my mind. This seems more efficient.”

“And more profitable. A well-conceived plan.”

He nodded acknowledgement of her compliment. "You really have only two choices: surrender the Crystallizer and live, or keep it and die."

"What guarantee do I have you will actually let me go?"

He grinned. "None, except my word. However, I can guarantee that you will die if you choose not to trust me."

"There is a third option, you know."

"True; if my men only wound you, I can claim you as well. Though, I warn you, once I am through with you, you will beg me for the release of death." He actually chortled.

She displayed a Cheshire Cat smile. "Actually, I had something else in mind."

Eleanor broke out of a stooped dive by snapping her wings open with an ear-splitting crash of thunder, stopping just above the harbour a few yards from the port side of the galley. She shrieked as she hovered as a kestrel, her wings sounding rumbling peals of muffled thunder as they beat to hold her aloft. Her feathers flashed with St. Elmo's Fire from the static electricity they stored, as her rostrum glowed in anticipation of unleashing a lethal bolt of lightning.

Shouts of alarm arose from the main and sterndeck as crewmen rushed to man the ballistae and scorpions.

"I would order them to stand down if I were you," she told Bael in a calm quiet voice. "She will defend herself contrary to my orders."

He hesitated a moment, then gestured madly at his underlings. One blew on a whistle and the crew stepped away from their weapons, but they did not abandon them.

"Shoot me and Eleanor will blast you, even if I am still alive. That may even destroy your ship, but you will be dead in any event. Or, we can complete our transaction. The choice is yours."

The look he gave her was pure vile hate, but after a short pause he placed the box on the Lazy Susan, and she did the same with the Crystallizer. He spun the turntable; she stopped it when the box reached her, and snatched it up before he could spin it again. As he examined his prize, she opened the box, dumped the Star into her hand, and placed it inside the bag, then closed it and draped the looped drawstring around her neck.

*Thank you, Eleanor.* The Wakiya shrieked, rose in the air, and veered around to gain altitude.

"Are we satisfied?" she asked Bael.

He watched as Eleanor disappeared into the sky, then he gazed at her. "For now."

She started to rise. "Then, if you will excuse me."

"Sit down and don't move."

She had half-risen, but the determined tone of his voice convinced her to obey.

He held out one hand and raised the other, with all five fingers open and spread. “Give me the Star.” Two of his officers moved to stand behind her as he ticked off a countdown by folding his fingers one at a time into a fist.

She grabbed the table, tilting it up, and dumped the tea service into his lap. She raised it as he shrieked from the scalding, and two bolts slammed into it, the points penetrating through to the underside. Freeing her right hand, she summoned Caliburn, turned to her left, and struck the officer on that side with the table. She spun in the opposite direction and chopped at the other officer. She threw the table over Bael at the third officer and knocked him down. Then she charged Bael and overturned his chair, throwing him to the deck. He let go of the Crystallizer, and she chased it as it rolled towards the starboard gunwale. She grabbed it as another bolt hit the deck behind her ankles, dropped it down the front of her chemise, threw Caliburn overboard, and vaulted over the gunwale as another bolt struck the railing. She dropped feet-first into the harbour as she took a deep breath and wrapped her arms across her chest.

She penetrated a good ten feet before she stopped and started to rise again. Something took hold of her by the ankles and turned her around; it was a mermaid, and she saw six more of the shark-like sentients swim towards her from under the *Raubtier* as a seventh presented her with a scubapus. She exhaled and opened her mouth to allow the cephalopod to insert its funnel. It then wrapped its tentacles around her head, and when its sack body pulsed, foul-tasting air filled her lungs. The two closest mermaids took her by the wrists and sped away from the galley, dragging her behind them as the others surrounded them.

In short order they reached a boat that had lain a hundred yards off *Raubtier*’s starboard side. After one of the Mermaids removed the scubapus, she rose to the surface beside the metallic hull. She found a rope dangling over the side and hauled herself up to the gunwale. Bettie Stivic helped her over the side and onto the deck of the *Dream Skimmer*, a star-boat owned and operated by Team Girl, and presented her with a towel to wrap around her waist-long hair. A dozen cats were gathered around Bettie’s feet, and she spotted Eile standing beside the vertical main mast.

Differel heard a shout from the harbour. “Does this square us?” She looked over the side and saw the heads of all eight Mermaids bobbing at the surface. She gave them a thumbs-up; one waved back, and then they disappeared beneath the water.

As she wrapped her hair, she heard Eile shout, “Alright, people, let’s kick this pig!” She started to raise the mainsail of the Bermuda rig as the cats scattered to different parts of the boat. Differel quickly undressed, even stripping off her braies, and placed the Crystallizer in the leather bag with the Star, before accepting a robe from Bettie. She then hurried over to help Eile as Differel slipped it on. She felt the boat lurch forward even before the main sail was fully deployed.

She climbed the starboard ladder to the sterndeck and found Sunny manning the tiller. Beside her, sitting on top of a barrel, was a sable Persian, Commodore Skua Stormrider.

“Are you alright?!” Sunny squealed as she approached them.



“Yes, fine, and I have them both.”

“Report later,” the cat said gruffly. Despite his tone, like all talking cats he sounded like a Munchkin from *The Wizard of Oz*. “For now, take the tiller. Mr. Hiver, prepare to deploy the spinnakers as soon as we lift off.” The retired feline naval officer was professional to a fault and an unabashed authoritarian, but he knew his business, and woe to anyone who failed to show him the proper respect.

“Aye-aye, Capt’n!” Sunny saluted then sped off down the port ladder.

“Steady as she goes, Mr. Van Helsing.”

“Aye, Captain. What’s our speed?”

“Slow; we’ll increase once the main mast is rigged.”

“The galley is getting underway!” Shadow-Stalker stood on the starboard spur of the sterndeck, looking out over the harbour. She had stretched her lean smoky-black body so as to brace her front paws on the railing of the gunwale. Differel spared a glance and saw the oars moving as *Raubtier* pivoted towards them.

Looking forward again, she saw Eile and Bettie raise the Bermuda headsail. “Mast rigged, Captain.”

“Increase to half.”

She stepped back to the column the tiller was attached to and placed her hand on a lever set on the starboard side. “Half speed; aye.” She moved the lever on the annunciator to the “half” position on a gauge; moments later, an indicator light winked on.

“Answering half speed.” The annunciator triggered the control mechanism in the engine room in the bottom aft of the boat to increase power to the aether sweeps attached to the lowest part of the hull on the stern, which steered the boat and helped to propel it forward.

“Set throttle to three-quarter power.”

She stepped around the back of the column to the opposite side where another lever was attached. According to the gauge it was set at “90”. “Three-quarter power; aye.” She shifted the lever to “75” on the gauge as another indicator light blinked on.

“Answering three-quarter power.” The throttle lever directed how much power was fed into the boat’s keel and superstructure, which created a gravity-resist field that lifted it above the ground. It operated under the counter-intuitive principle that the weaker the field, the higher the boat would rise. She didn’t fully understand it, and she wasn’t sure the Girls did either. She only knew it worked, because even as she returned to the tiller the harbour began to recede beneath them. She simply chalked it up to the fact that the star-boat had been built in Fabulous Cathuria, and it utilized that land’s magical technology.

A cat standing on the port-side spur yowled.

“There are harbour patrol sloops closing in to cut us off before we rise too high,” Skua said. “Decrease throttle to half power.” As Differel moved to comply, he jumped off the barrel and trotted to the edge of the deck. He gave a loud caterwauling howl, and every human and feline on the deck below stopped and looked up at him.

“Deploy the spinnakers!”

When Differel returned to the tiller, Eile saluted, and as she ran to the port side, Sunny sprinted for starboard and Bettie headed for the bow as the cats divided themselves into three groups of four and followed the women.

“Answering half power,” she reported as Skua returned to the barrel. She could actually feel the boat accelerate as it rose higher.

“Turn to port, thirty degrees.”

“Port thirty degrees; aye.” She pushed the tiller to the right a third of the way, then held it as the boat gently and smoothly turned towards the left. The sweeps looked and operated as rudders, except they interacted with the aether that permeated the atmosphere, although they could push against the air as well.

“Answering thirty degree port turn.” She watched as the Girls unfolded parachute-like sails on horizontal wing masts set in the port and starboard sides, and Bettie rigged two triangular sails on either side of the bowsprit. She knew from past experience that the spinnakers were the boat’s main mode of propulsion, while the Bermuda rig on the main mast was for guidance and the spritsails were for stability. The cats ran along the masts and spars and across the rigging as they helped to deploy the sails, oblivious to the fact that one slip and they would plunge into the harbour below, safety netting notwithstanding.

When fully rigged, the sails ballooned in the wind and she felt the boat jerk forward. The Girls and Bettie with the cats returned to the Bermuda rig to trim it to manoeuvre the boat to fill the spinnakers as fully as possible to get maximum thrust.

“Come to zero-true,” Skua said.

“Zero-true; aye.” She pulled the tiller back to the left until she held it parallel to the length of the boat and pointing at the main mast.

“Answering zero-true.” The boat stopped turning and straightened out, and ahead she saw they were now on course for the mouth of the harbour. At the same time she heard what sounded like bullets ricocheting off the bottom of the boat, and she realized they must be passing over the sloops, and that they were firing ballistae bolts at them. Fortunately the planking of *Dream Skimmer*’s hull was made from meteorite steel alloyed with mithril, making the boat stronger than titanium but lighter than aluminium. Short of an armour-piercing shell made of adamantum, they had little to fear from the armament in the harbour below.

“The galley has lifted clear of the water,” Shadow reported.

“Bloody hell!” So, she had guessed wrong. A wooden hull saturated with space-mead would turn any vessel into the Dreamlands equivalent of a Waking World lighter-than-air craft. On top of that, the oars of a black galley were also so saturated, which allowed them to push against the aether as they could water. With sails fully deployed, *Dream Skimmer* could still outrun *Raubtier*, especially with the assistance of the sweeps, but that put her at the mercy of the wind, because the sweeps could not propel the star-boat fast enough by themselves, whereas the galley could go anywhere, wind or no wind, and the Moonbeasts were strong and tireless.

“She’s gaining on us,” Shadow reported, and Differel could see *Raubtier* rapidly close the distance. She spotted a heavy ram jutting forth from the stem of the bow and a suspicious pipe sticking out from the prow above it, which she assumed was the Greek fire siphon. The ram couldn’t hurt them, because the boat’s superstructure was as strong as the hull planking, though it could knock them off course and crush one of the wing masts, but Greek fire was a real danger. Only a few parts of the boat could burn, but the burning oily liquid could cook every living thing on board.

“Increase to flank,” Skua ordered; “reduce throttle to 10%. We need to get above that monster!”

Differel rushed to comply as the Girls and Bettie trimmed the Bermuda rig to try to get more thrust, but she knew it would take time for the boat to gain speed or altitude. In fact, with its current velocity she estimated *Raubtier* would be on top of them before they could even clear the harbour. At that point, they would have no choice but to surrender.

Eleanor; help us! She didn’t want to put her Wakiya in danger, but she couldn’t see any alternative.

Her anxiety made time seem to crawl by as the black galley ate up the distance with greater speed. It felt as if the thunderbird would arrive too late, but then she flashed past *Raubtier*, from port to starboard, and tore the fore sail apart. The galley’s crew rushed to man the ballistae as she wheeled around beneath the ship and rose up on the port side to shred the aft sail to ribbons. She stalled above the masts, then rolled and dove down over the bow, rolling onto her back as she passed the bowsprit and ripped the square spritsail off its spar. The crew on top of the forecastle managed to shoot scorpio bolts at her, but all missed.

But that barely slowed the galley down, and Differel felt her heart seize as the Leng Men opened a hatch in the deck and five shantaks flew out. In her opinion the ugliest creatures to fly through God’s skies, they resembled a cross between a bird, a dragon, and a pterosaur with an equine-shaped head. Three went straight for Eleanor while the other two came at them.

And *Dream Skimmer* had no armament.

“Take evasive action!” Skua barked. She pulled the tiller to the left, then pushed it to the right, but she knew the boat wasn’t able to manoeuvre that quickly. Eile and Bettie tried to trim the Bermuda rig to keep pace with her actions as Sunny retrieved her composite bow, but the Shantaks were too agile and fast, and they matched the turns of the boat exactly. One ripped the headsail off the main mast; Sunny fired at it, but only wounded it. Eleanor gutted one that was foolish enough to take her on talon to talon, but the other two chased after her to

drive her off. She rolled, dived, wheeled and climbed, and tore the head off one with her beak as the other banked away. The last passed beneath the stern of the boat to attack the sweeps, but was deterred by their strong power fields.

Meanwhile, *Raubtier* manoeuvred to pass above them to drench them with Greek fire.

*Eleanor! We're out of time!*

The giant raptor pivoted in mid-air and dove, the shantak right behind her. The wounded monster returned to take out the mainsail; Sunny took careful aim and loosed an arrow into one eye, penetrating to the brain. The shantak went limp almost immediately and dropped towards the water.

“Look out!” Skua cried. The one that had tried for the sweeps rose up past the transom, arched, and dove for Differel. She had only seconds. She summoned Caliburn, gripped it by the ricasso, and threw it overhanded as a javelin. Even as the monster reached the sterncastle, the greatsword pierced its heart. It jerked away from the boat as it convulsed, somersaulted backwards, and dropped out of sight.

She summoned the sword to retrieve it and turned towards *Raubtier*. It was nearly on top of them, but Eleanor hurtled towards the galley, her wings folded against her body. At point-blank range, she discharged a blue-hot bolt of lightning from her beak, which slammed into the bow and pierced clean through to the other side. She dove past without stopping or slowing down, and the entire bow erupted in a great explosion. Differel ducked out of reflex as Skua leapt off the barrel and he, Shadow, and the other watch cat fled the sterndeck. The bowsprit went flying as a crossbow bolt as the fireball consumed the forecastle and the last shantak, which flew straight into it by mistake. She desperately pushed the tiller as far to the right as she could manage to turn the boat hard to port to get it out from under the stricken galley, but some burning debris fell onto the main deck. The galley veered to starboard, listed, and almost immediately tipped nose-down and began to drop towards the harbour as the Greek fire spread up the hull as a flame up a matchstick, thanks to the space-mead in its wood. Once *Dream Skimmer* was clear, Differel returned the tiller to zero-true, and when *Raubtier* passed beneath them she pulled the tiller to the left to get back on course for the harbour entrance. Before it passed out of sight, she saw Leng Men and Moonbeasts leaping off the doomed galley, despite the fact that none were likely to survive the fall. She wondered if Bael could somehow live through that.

“Get that wreckage cleared away!” she heard Skua command, and the Girls and Bettie rushed to drag the burning debris to the sides and dump it overboard. Differel took a moment to dismiss Caliburn before she reduced the boat’s speed to full and increased the throttle to 25%, and spotted Eile and Sunny pull out a new headsail. She hoped that when the emergency was finally over, one of them could relieve her so she could dress and get a message to Kuran.

Meanwhile, Eleanor performed loops and barrel rolls around the boat in pure joy, and she couldn’t help grinning at the Wakiya’s exuberance.

*Thank you, Eleanor.*

The thunderbird shrieked in reply as she drew up alongside *Dream Skimmer* to escort them away from the city.

NEXT WEEK: ANOTHER DREAMLANDS STORY BEGINS

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BURN, WITCH, BURN by A Merritt

X—Nurse's Cap and Witch's Ladder

"She knows how to get rid of the evidence!"

Braile laughed—but there was no mirth in his laughter. I said nothing. It was the same thought I had held of McCann when the doll's head had vanished. But McCann could not be suspected of this. Evading any further discussion of the matter, we went to the Annex to see Ricori.

There were two new guards on watch at his door. They arose politely and spoke to us pleasantly. We entered softly. Ricori had slipped out of the drug into a natural sleep. He was breathing easily, peacefully, in deep and healing slumber.

His room was a quiet one at the rear, overlooking a little enclosed garden. Both my houses are old-fashioned, dating back to a more peaceful New York; sturdy vines of Virginia creepers climb up them both at front and back. I cautioned the nurse to maintain utmost quiet, arranging her light so that it would cast only the slightest gleam upon Ricori. Going out, I similarly cautioned the guards, telling them that their chief's speedy recovery might depend upon silence.

It was now after six. I asked Braile to stay for dinner, and afterward to drop in on my patients at the hospital and to call me up if he thought it worthwhile. I wanted to stay at home and await Ricori's awakening, should it occur.

We had almost finished dinner when the telephone rang. Braile answered.

"McCann," he said. I went to the instrument.

"Hello, McCann. This is Dr. Lowell."

"How's the boss?"

"Better, I'm expecting him to awaken any moment and to be able to talk," I answered, and listened intently to catch whatever reaction he might betray to this news.

"That's great, Doc!" I could detect nothing but deepest satisfaction in his tones. "Listen, Doc, I seen Mollie an' I got some news. Dropped round on her right after I left you. Found Gilmore—that's her husband—home, an' that gave me a break. Said I'd come in to ask her how she'd like a little ride. She was tickled an' we left Gil home with the kid—"

"Does she know of Peters' death?" I interrupted.

"Nope. An' I didn't tell her. Now listen. I told you Horty—What? Why Missus Darnley, Jim Wilson's gal. Yeah. Let me talk, will you? I told you Horty was nuts on Mollie's kid. Early last month Horty comes in with a swell doll for the kid. Also she's nursing a sore hand she says she gets at the same place she got the doll. The woman she gets the doll from gave it to her, she tells Mollie—What? No, gave her the doll, not the hand. Say, Doc, ain't I speaking clear? Yeah, she gets her hand hurt where she got the doll. That's what I said. The woman

fixes it up for her. She gives her the doll for nothing, Horty tells Mollie, because she thought Horty was so pretty an' for posing for her. Yeah, posing for her, making a statue of her or something. That makes a hit with Horty because she don't hate herself an' she thinks this doll woman a lallapaloozer. Yeah, a lallapaloozer, a corker! Yeah.

"About a week later Tom—that's Peters—shows up while Horty's there an' sees the doll. Tom's a mite jealous of Horty with the kid an' asks her where she got it. She tells him a Madame Mandilip, an' where, an' Tom he says as this is a gal-doll she needs company, so he'll go an' get a boy-doll. About a week after this Tom turns up with a boy-doll the lick-an'-split of Horty's. Mollie asks him if he pays as much for it as Horty. They ain't told him about Horty not paying nothing for it or posing. Mollie says Tom looks sort of sheepish but all he says is, well, he ain't gone broke on it. She's going to kid him by asking if the doll woman thinks he's so pretty she wants him to pose, but the kid sets up a whoop about the boy-doll an' she forgets it. Tom don't show up again till about the first of this month. He's got a bandage on his hand an' Mollie, kidding, asks him if he got it where he got the doll. He looks surprised an' says 'yes, but how the hell did you know that?' Yeah-yeah, that's what she says he told her. What's that? Did the Mandilip woman bandage it for him? How the hell—I don't know. I guess so, maybe. Mollie didn't say an' I didn't ask. Listen, Doc, I told you Mollie's no dummy. What I'm telling you took me two hours to get. Talking 'bout this, talking 'bout that an' coming back casual like to what I'm trying to find out. I'm afraid to ask too many questions. What? Oh, that's all right, Doc. No offense. Yeah, I think it pretty funny myself. But like I'm telling you I'm afraid to go too far. Mollie's too wise.

"Well, when Ricori comes up yesterday he uses the same tactics as me, I guess. Anyway, he admires the dolls an' asks her where she gets 'em an' how much they cost an' so on. Remember, I told you I stay out in the car while he's there. It's after that he goes home an' does the telephoning an' then beats it to the Mandilip hag. Yeah, that's all. Does it mean anything? Yeah? All right then."

He was silent for a moment or two, but I had not heard the click of the receiver. I asked:

"Are you there, McCann?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking." His voice held a wistful note. "I'd sure like to be with you when the boss comes to. But I'd best go down an' see how the hands are getting along with them two Mandilip cows. Maybe I'll call you up if it ain't too late. G'by."

I walked slowly back to Braile, trying to marshal my disjointed thoughts. I repeated McCann's end of the conversation to him exactly. He did not interrupt me. When I had finished he said quietly:

"Hortense Darnley goes to the Mandilip woman, is given a doll, is asked to pose, is wounded there, is treated there. And dies. Peters goes to the Mandilip woman, gets a doll, is wounded there, is presumably treated there. And dies like Hortense. You see a doll for which, apparently, he has posed. Harriet goes through the same routine. And dies like Hortense and Peters. Now what?"

Suddenly I felt rather old and tired. It is not precisely stimulating to see crumbling what one has long believed to be a fairly well ordered world of recognized cause and effect. I said wearily:

“I don’t know.”

He arose, and patted my shoulder.

“Get some sleep. The nurse will call you if Ricori wakes. We’ll get to the bottom of this thing.”

“Even if we fall to it,” I said, and smiled.

“Even if we have to fall to it,” he repeated, and did not smile.

After Braile had gone I sat for long, thinking. Then, determined to dismiss my thoughts, I tried to read. I was too restless, and soon gave it up. Like the room in which Ricori lay, my study is at the rear, looking down upon the little garden. I walked to the window and stared out, unseeingly. More vivid than ever was that feeling of standing before a blank door which it was vitally important to open. I turned back into the study and was surprised to find it was close to ten o’clock. I dimmed my light and lay down upon the comfortable couch. Almost immediately I fell asleep.

I awoke from that sleep with a start, as though someone had spoken in my ear. I sat up, listening. There was utter silence around me. And suddenly I was aware that it was a strange silence, unfamiliar and oppressive. A thick, dead silence that filled the study and through which no sound from outside could penetrate. I jumped to my feet and turned on the lights, full. The silence retreated, seemed to pour out of the room like something tangible. But slowly. Now I could hear the ticking of my clock—ticking out abruptly, as though a silencing cover had been whisked from it. I shook my head impatiently, and walked to the window. I leaned out to breathe the cool night air. I leaned out still more, so that I could see the window of Ricori’s room, resting my hand on the trunk of the vine. I felt a tremor along it as though someone were gently shaking it—or as though some small animal were climbing it -

The window of Ricori’s room broke into a square of light. Behind me I heard the shrilling of the Annex alarm bell which meant the urgent need of haste. I raced out of the study, and up the stairs and over.

As I ran into the corridor I saw that the guards were not at the door. The door was open. I stood stock-still on its threshold, incredulous -

One guard crouched beside the window, automatic in hand. The other knelt beside a body on the floor, his pistol pointed toward me. At her table sat the nurse, head bent upon her breast—unconscious or asleep. The bed was empty. The body on the floor was Ricori!

The guard lowered his gun. I dropped at Ricori’s side. He was lying face down, stretched out a few feet from the bed. I turned him over. His face had the pallor of death, but his heart was beating.

“Help me lift him to the bed,” I said to the guard. “Then shut that door.”

He did so, silently. The man at the window asked from the side of his mouth, never relaxing his watch outward:



“Boss dead?”

“Not quite,” I answered, then swore as I seldom do—“What the hell kind of guards are you?”

The man who had shut the door gave a mirthless chuckle.

“There’s more’n you goin’ to ask that, Doc.”

I gave a glance at the nurse. She still sat huddled in the limp attitude of unconsciousness or deep sleep. I stripped Ricori of his pyjamas and went over his body. There was no mark upon him. I sent for adrenalin, gave him an injection and went over to the nurse, and shook her. She did not awaken. I raised her eyelids. The pupils of her eyes were contracted. I flashed a light in them, without response. Her pulse and respiration were slow, but not dangerously so. I let her be for a moment and turned to the guards.

“What happened?”

They looked at each other uneasily. The guard at the window waved his hand as though bidding the other do the talking. This guard said:

“We’re sitting out there. All at once the house gets damned still. I says to Jack there, ‘Sounds like they put a silencer on the dump.’ He says, ‘Yeah.’ We sit listening. Then all at once we hear a thump inside here. Like somebody falling out of bed. We crash the door. There’s the boss like you seen him on the floor. There’s the nurse asleep like you see her. We glim the alarm and pull it. Then we wait for somebody to come. That’s all, ain’t it, Jack?”

“Yeah,” answered the guard at the window, tonelessly. “Yeah, I guess that’s all.”

I looked at him, suspiciously.

“You guess that’s all? What do you mean—you guess?”

Again they looked at each other.

“Better come clean, Bill,” said the guard at the window.

“Hell, he won’t believe it,” said the other.

“And nobody else. Anyway, tell him.”

The guard Bill said:

“When we crash the door we seen something like a couple of cats fighting there beside the window. The boss is lying on the floor. We had our guns out but was afraid to shoot for what you told us. Then we heard a funny noise outside like somebody blowing a flute. The two things broke loose and jumped up on the window sill, and out. We jumped to the window. And we didn’t see nothing.”

“You saw the things at the window. What did they look like then?” I asked.

“You tell him, Jack.”

“Dolls!”

A shiver went down my back. It was the answer I had expected—and dreaded. Out the window! I recalled the tremor of the vine when I gripped it! The guard who had closed the door looked at me, and I saw his jaw drop.

“Jesus, Jack!” he gasped. “He believes it!”

I forced myself to speak.

“What kind of dolls?”

The guard at the window answered, more confidently.

“One we couldn’t see well. The other looked like one of your nurses if she’d shrunk to about two feet!”

One of my nurses... Walters... I felt a wave of weakness and sank down on the edge of Ricori’s bed.

Something white on the floor at the head of it caught my eye. I stared at it stupidly, then leaned and picked it up.

It was a nurse’s cap, a little copy of those my nurses wear. It was about large enough to fit the head of a two foot doll...

There was something else where it had been. I picked that up.

It was a knotted cord of hair pale ashen hair with nine curious knots spaced at irregular intervals along it...

The guard named Bill stood looking down at me anxiously. He asked:

“Want me to call any of your people, Doc?”

“Try to get hold of McCann,” I bade him; then spoke to the other guard: “Close the windows and fasten them and pull down the curtains. Then lock the door.”

Bill began to telephone. Stuffing the cap and knotted cord in my pocket, I walked over to the nurse. She was rapidly recovering and in a minute or two I had her awake. At first her eyes dwelt on me, puzzled; took in the lighted room and the two men, and the puzzlement changed to alarm. She sprang to her feet.

“I didn’t see you come in! Did I fall asleep... what’s happened?...” Her hand went to her throat.

“I’m hoping you can tell us,” I said, gently.

She stared at me uncomprehendingly. She said, confusedly:

“I don’t know... it became terribly still... I... thought I saw something moving at the window... then there was a queer fragrance and then I looked up to see you bending over me.”

I asked: “Can you remember anything of what you saw at the window? The least detail—the least impression. Please try.”

She answered, hesitantly: “There was something white... I thought someone... something... was watching me... then came the fragrance, like flowers... that’s all.”

Bill hung up the telephone: “All right, Doc. They’re after McCann. Now what?”

“Miss Butler,” I turned to the nurse. “I’m going to relieve you for the balance of the night. Go to bed. And I want you to sleep. I prescribe—” I told her what.

“You’re not angry—you don’t think I’ve been careless—”

“No, to both.” I smiled and patted her shoulder. “The case has taken an unexpected turn, that’s all. Now don’t ask any more questions.”

I walked with her to the door, opened it.

“Do exactly as I say.”

I closed and locked the door behind her.

I sat beside Ricori. The shock that he had experienced—whatever it might have been—should either cure or kill, I thought grimly. As I watched him, a tremor went through his body. Slowly an arm began to lift, fist clenched. His lips moved. He spoke, in Italian and so swiftly that I could get no word. His arm fell back. I stood up from the bed. The paralysis had gone. He could move and speak. But would he be able to do so when consciousness assumed sway? I left this for the next few hours to decide I could do nothing else.

“Now listen to me carefully,” I said to the two guards. “No matter how strange what I am going to say will seem, you must obey me in every detail! Ricori’s life depends upon your doing so. I want one of you to sit close beside me at the table here. I want the other to sit beside Ricori, at the head or the bed and between him and me. If I am asleep and he should awaken, arouse me. If you see any change in his condition, immediately awaken me. Is that clear?”

They said: “Okay.”

“Very well. Now here is the most important thing of all. You must watch me even more closely. Whichever of you sits beside me must not take his eyes off me. If I should go to your chief it would be to do one of three things only—listen to his heart and breathing—lift his eyelids—take his temperature. I mean, of course, if he should be as he now is. If I seem to awaken and attempt to do anything other than these three—stop me. If I resist, make me

helpless—tie me up and gag me—no, don't gag me—listen to me and remember what I say. Then telephone to Dr. Braile—here is his number.”

I wrote, and passed it to them.

“Don't damage me any more than you can help,” I said, and laughed.

They stared at each other, plainly disconcerted. “If you say so, Doc-” began the guard Bill, doubtfully.

“I do say so. Do not hesitate. If you should be wrong, I'll not hold it against you.”

“The Doc knows what he's about, Bill,” said the guard Jack.

“Okay then,” said Bill.

I turned out all the lights except that beside the nurse's table. I stretched myself in her chair and adjusted the lamp so my face could be plainly seen. That little white cap I had picked from the floor had shaken me—damnably! I drew it out and placed it in a drawer. The guard Jack took his station beside Ricori. Bill drew up a chair, and sat facing me. I thrust my hand into my pocket and clutched the knotted cord, closed my eyes, emptied my mind of all thought, and relaxed. In abandoning, at least temporarily, my conception of a sane universe I had determined to give that of Madame Mandilip's every chance to operate.

Faintly, I heard a clock strike one. I slept.

Somewhere a vast wind was roaring. It circled and swept down upon me. It bore me away. I knew that I had no body, that indeed I had no form. Yet I was. A formless sentience whirling in that vast wind. It carried me into infinite distance. Bodiless, intangible as I knew myself to be, yet it poured into me an unearthly vitality. I roared with the wind in unhuman jubilation. The vast wind circled and raced me back from immeasurable space...

I seemed to awaken, that pulse of strange jubilation still surging through me... Ah! There was what I must destroy... there on the bed... must kill so that this pulse of jubilation would not cease... must kill so that the vast wind would sweep me up again and away and feed me with its life... but careful... careful... there—there in the throat just under the ear... there is where I must plunge it... then off with the wind again... there where the pulse beats... what is holding me back?... caution... caution, “I am going to take his temperature”... that's it, careful, “I am going to take his temperature.”... Now—one quick spring, then into his throat where the pulse beats... “Not with that you don't!”... Who said that?... still holding me... rage, consuming and ruthless blackness and the sound of a vast wind roaring away and away...

I heard a voice: “Slap him again, Bill, but not so hard. He's coming around.” I felt a stinging blow on my face. The dancing mists cleared from before my eyes. I was standing halfway between the nurse's table and Ricori's bed. The guard Jack held my arms pinioned to my sides. The guard Bill's hand was still raised. There was something clenched tightly in my own hand. I looked down. It was a strong scalpel, razor-edged!

I dropped the scalpel. I said, quietly: “It's all right now, you can release me.”

The guard Bill said nothing. His comrade did not loose his grip. I twisted my head and I saw that both their faces were sallow white. I said:

“It was what I had expected. It was why I instructed you. It is over. You can keep your guns on me if you like.”

The guard who held me freed my arms. I touched my cheek gingerly. I said mildly:

“You must have hit me rather hard, Bill.”

He said: “If you could a seen your face, Doc, you’d wonder I didn’t smash it.”

I nodded, clearly sensible now of the demonic quality of that rage, I asked:

“What did I do?”

The guard Bill said: “You wake up and set there for a minute staring at the chief. Then you take something out of that drawer and get up. You say you’re going to take his temperature. You’re half to him before we see what you got. I shout, ‘Not with that you don’t!’ Jack grabs you. Then you went crazy. And I had to slam you. That’s all.”

I nodded again. I took out of my pocket the knotcord of woman’s pale hair, held it over a dish and touched a match to it. It began to burn, writhing like a tiny snake as it did so, the complex knots untying as the flame touched them. I dropped the last inch of it upon the plate and watched it turn to ash.

“I think there’ll be no more trouble tonight,” I said. “But keep up your watch just as before.”

I dropped back into the chair and closed my eyes...

Well, Braile had not shown me a soul, but—I believed in Madame Mandilip.

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## POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

### 15 Hephaistos Claims a Sacrifice

KALIN carried a bundle in his hand, and as they reached the thickets at the foot of the hill he paused.

“Now, for our purpose thou must go unknown of men. Thou canst hide thyself in one of these.”

He shook out his bundle, and revealed two of the long sable robes of his priestly order. He threw one of them over Polaris and donned the other. They were loose and cowed, and covered both men entirely. “As a priest of Hephaistos thou goest,” said Kalin. “Thou must leave the spear, but that strange club of thine thou mayest hide beneath the robe.”

“Nay, I can take the spear also,” answered Polaris, and snapped the stout shaft off short in his hands, so that the weapon was rendered little longer than the rifle, and he could hide both of them under the garment.

“Priest,” he said, as they started across the meadows toward the bridge, “but shortly I said that in anger which I fain would recall, for twice thou hast shown thyself a true man.”

Kalin waved his hand deprecatingly. “It is forgotten, as though it were not,” he said with one of his rare and melancholy smiles “Thou art as my brother.”

“But now,” persisted Polaris, “we fare on an errand to which thy feeling of brotherhood doth not bind thee. Why goest thou into danger with me, Kalin, into danger that may end in death, thou, who art of this land, and its priest?”

Kalin halted and regarded him strangely “Say, thou, Polaris, thou lovest Rose?” he questioned. Into the face of the man of the snows the red blood flamed afresh.

“Ay, so it seemeth—unto death,” he said simply.

The priest nodded slowly. “And the Rose—doth she return thy love, my brother?” he asked.

Then was Polaris silent for a long moment.

“Nay,” he answered at length. “Nay, Kalin, the love of the Rose is not mine. Somewhat I have guessed, and the rest her own words have made plain. There is a man—a brave American—” the words cost him an effort, “whom she loveth, and whom she will wed. He leadeth the party with which she came hither. He fareth forth on a dangerous quest, to return in honour and greatness to his own land—and the Rose—”

He stopped.

Again Kalin looked strangely into his eyes. “And to save her for another thou darest all, even to thy life?”

“Ay, the man is worthy. And that she loveth me not, should my love for her be less that I should falter in her service? No, Kalin, that is not the way of Polaris,” answered the son of the snows.

“And when thou hast won her way home, as I think thou wilt—for thou darest all things, and the high gods love those greatly daring—what then?”

“I have a duty laid on me, in the far North; and then—I know not.”

Once again his strange smile passed over the face of Kalin the priest. “Now, thou Polaris, we indeed are brothers in all. Know that I, too, love the Rose, and would die even as thou wouldst, to save her, even to save her for another—but I had hoped that the other might be thee—I dearly hoped it. Nor that it may not be, lesseneth not the measure of the service of Kalin.”

Polaris held out his hand, and his eyes were very bright as their fingers clasped. “Kalin, my brother, may the gods set our feet in the same path, wherever it leadeth,” he said.

As they proceeded toward the Judgment House they saw that many Sardanians were gathered there and ever among the throng passed back and forth the black-robed figures of the priests of the gateway.

Kalin stationed Polaris by a pillar in the great hall, not far from the platform. “Stay thou there, brother, and be silent, unless great need cometh,” he said, and passed up the steps to his black stone seat near the throne.

A friendly murmur arose from the Sardanians in the hall when they saw the priest throw aside his robe and take his seat. That something untoward was on foot it was easy to guess. All over the hall, the voices of men were raised in discussion, and chiming with them the voices of women also. And ever from group to group passed the priests of Kalin, exhorting here and rebuking there, setting the stage for the denouement planned by their master.

PRESENTLY entered Gardanes and a group of Sardanian nobles, among whom towered Minos, the brother of the prince—Minos, whose twin brother lay stiffening in the snow in the Hunters’ Road.

Then, after some delay, came Helicon himself. As the prince ascended the steps to his throne, Polaris leaned forward from his sheltering pillar, his whole frame taut as a bowstring, the hand that held the brown rifle clenched so that it seemed that the steel barrel itself would crumple in his terrible grip.

Helicon’s face was darkly clouded. He did not glance once in the direction of Kalin, but sat a while in thought, and in all the hall was silence. His musing ended, the prince raised his head.

“Wherefore do the people of Sardanes gather in the Judgment House and summon their ruler?” he asked harshly, and bent his stern gaze on the people below the platform.

None answered him. He smiled grimly, and again he questioned: "What matter would Sardanes's people bring before Sardanes' prince? Speak."

From among the people rose a subdued murmur, a note of protest, but no man was bold enough to voice it. In a silence that followed Helicon sat impatiently, his fingers twitching on the stone arms of his throne. From his seat Kalin the priest rose and stepped to the foot of the throne.

"Thy people murmur because of a deed that to them seemeth ill, Helicon the Prince," he said. He paused, and behind him in the hall rose another murmur of support from the people.

"They are assembled in the Judgment House to beg that Helicon the Prince shall sit in judgment on himself and render answer," continued Kalin. "Thy people murmur because thou wouldst take to wife an alien woman and place her with thee on the throne of Sardanes, supplanting the right of a daughter of Sardanes.

"They murmur," the priest raised his voice slightly, in a note of accusation, "because thou hast reft her from the hospitality of Sardanes's priest with violence, under a broken pledge, and that thou hast lifted thy hand against the priests of Sardanes, the ministers of the mighty Lord Hephaistos of the Gateway, who speak the word of Hephaistos in Sardanes—"

"Enough, priest!" shouted Helicon, red with rage. "Cease thy slander of Sardanes' ruler!" He turned his eyes on the Sardanians in the hall. "Helicon, Prince of Sardanes, rendereth account to no man," he cried. "It is his will that he weddeth with the Rose maiden. Let the man who gainsaith look to himself!"

As the voices of the people were raised in an angry babel of protest, he lifted his hand.

"Beware," he cried, his voice ringing through the hall. "Take warning! Helicon rules in Sardanes. Bitter shall be the punishment meted out to him that opposeth the will of the prince."

Before his fierce eyes the people fell silent again, and he turned again to Kalin.

"As for thee, priest," he said hoarsely, "get thee back with thy black-robed crew, to thy station, and attend thy priestly duties. Attend them well. Too long hath thy priesthood interfered in the affairs of Sardanes. It shall be so no longer. Go, ere I am moved to lessen thy number by one meddler!"

He glared at the priest, and men in the hall stood all aghast at his words. Many there were of the priest's party, but they knew that many others were for the prince and against the priest, and none knew to what lengths Helicon might go in his anger.

STILL at the foot of the throne Kalin stood undaunted, and holding his last card in the game. A bitter smile came to his lips, and his voice was low and deep as he answered:



“Prince, thou growest mad, who would override the will of thy people and dare the anger of the god. It is the will of the god, as it is the will of the people that thou shalt wed a maid of Sardanes.”

Assuming for his own purposes that he was unaware of the fate which had been intended for Polaris, he continued:

“When the stranger with whom the maid came hither returneth from the hunt, then he shall take her and fare again to the north, as they wish—”

Helicon, secretly worried because of the long absence of Morolas and his party, yet not dreaming of the end of their mission, broke in again.

“The stranger cometh not again to Sardanes. He hath left the maid, and fared alone on his road to the north. I will wed the maid. I, Helicon, have said it, and it shall be.”

“Have thy hunters then returned?” asked Kalin pointedly.

“Be thou silent, priest!” roared Helicon. Another thought flashed into his mind. “Tarry thou here, for there shall be work for thee.” He turned to his brother Minos. “Go thou and fetch the Rose maid hither,” he said.

Kalin stood back with folded arms, his head held high. In all the hall was no sound, save the suppressed breathing of the people. Smiling, as was his wont, the tall Minos left the hall through the pillared entrance behind the throne. Helicon sat glowering, with his chin on his hand, until he heard Minos returning.

Then he sprang to his feet and stepped from the throne to the floor of the platform, fronting Kalin.

Minos and Rose Emer came into the hall. The girl’s face was white, but she did not falter as she advanced with Minos and stood near Helicon. Only once her face lighted as she saw Kalin; then she turned her eyes, and through the pillared façade of the Judgment House she scanned anxiously the reaches of the valley.

The heart of Polaris bounded as, crouched behind his pillar, he followed the course of that gaze. She was looking for him to return -he would not fail her!

“Now, whether it be the will of the god or of the people, or of the maid herself, I, Helicon, will wed the Rose,” said the prince shortly. “And thou, Kalin, of whom and of whose pratings I tire sadly, thou art still priest in Sardanes—thou shalt wed us—now! Proceed!”

An enigmatical smile overspread the face of the priest. Full in the eyes of the angry prince he looked as he towered scarce a yard away.

“Thou goest far in thy folly, Helicon,” he said, and there was a note of pity in his low tones. Then he raised his voice. “I wed thee not, nor shall such a marriage ever be!”

Helicon hissed a direction into the ear of Minos, and the tall prince, still smiling, stepped toward the edge of the platform and fronted the people in the lower section of the hall with

dagger drawn and spear aloft. Helicon snatched his own ilium blade from his girdle and leaped on Kalin.

He caught the priest by the, shoulder, and sought to crush him to his knees; but, great as was his strength, he could not bend the wiry form to his will. Kalin stood firm.

One searching glance he sent down the hall, where men were shouting and urging forward, “and where the foremost were held back by the menace of Minos. Then the priest turned his gaze back to the face of Helicon.

Up flashed the bright blade in the hand of the prince and quivered over the heart of Kalin. “Choose, priest; choose or die!” he shouted hoarsely. “Wed Helicon to the Rose and go hence, or refuse and perish—and thy religion shall give way to a better!”

“Strike, fool, and thou darest,” said Kalin contemptuously, and lifted no hand to save himself.

Along the great arm of the prince the muscles tightened. The blade came flashing down. Midway in his stroke Helicon shuddered. The knife clattered on the stone floor. A crashing roar reverberated through the judgment chamber, and a cloud of dark smoke floated upward.

Helicon crashed down on his back with widespread arms—dead!

A groan of awe rose in the hall. Everywhere men fell on their knees and covered their faces. Even Kalin, greatly shaken, knelt. Rose Emer swayed where she stood, and stretched out her arms with a glad cry of “Polaris!”

With his cowl thrown back from his golden head and his topaz eyes flaming, Polaris strode onto the platform. Under the black robe he clutched the smoking rifle.

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