

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

# **Schlock!** **WEBZINE**

VOL. 15, ISSUE 16  
20TH OCTOBER 2019

## **KASSI AND THE DUNGEON OF DWARVES**

BY STE  
WHITEHOUSE—  
DEEP WITHIN A  
DWARVEN  
DUNGEON...

## **FREDERICK'S DREAM OF LILITH BY FRANCIS-MARIE DE CHÂTILLON**

[WWW.SCHLOCK.CO.UK](http://WWW.SCHLOCK.CO.UK)

## **DIARY OF A SKINNY KID**

BY STEVE  
LAKER—  
THE MOST  
EXCLUSIVE IN  
THIS RAREFIED  
WORLD IS  
MOBIUS...

## **BLOOD OF JUDAS BY GK MURPHY**

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by  
Gavin Chappell

PUBLISHED BY:  
Schlock! Publications  
([www.schlock.co.uk](http://www.schlock.co.uk))

Schlock! Webzine

*Copyright © 2019 by Vincent Davis, GK Murphy, Christopher T Dabrowski, Ste Whitehouse,  
Francis-Marie de Châtillon, Steve Laker, Blake Rogers, A Merritt, Charles B Stilson*

## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 15, Issue 16  
20<sup>th</sup> October 2019

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)

The stories, articles and illustrations contained in this webzine are copyright © to the respective authors and illustrators, unless in the public domain.  
Schlock! Webzine and its editor accept no liability for views expressed or statements made by contributors to the magazine.

*This Edition*

This week's cover illustration is [fantasy-4262313\\_1920](#) by [Mark Frost](#) from [Pixabay](#).  
Graphic design © by [Gavin Chappell](#), logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

EDITORIAL

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL! *Horror Comics and Comic Horror* from Vincent Davis

KASSI AND THE DUNGEON OF DWARVES by Ste Whitehouse—*Deep within a Dwarven dungeon...* SWORD AND SORCERY

DIARY OF A SKINNY KID by Steve Laker—*The most exclusive in this rarefied world is Mobius...* SCIENCE FANTASY

FREDERICK'S DREAM OF LILITH by Francis-Marie de Châtillon—*A curious dream, a lovely dream...* HORROR

BLOOD OF JUDAS by GK Murphy—*Written in blood...* HORROR

INCIDENT IN THE AIRPORT by Christopher T Dabrowski—*All things...* FLASH FICTION

THE LAST TERRAN Part Two by Blake Rogers—*The Attack...* SPACE OPERA

BURN, WITCH, BURN Chapter Three by A Merritt—*The Death and Nurse Walters...* HORROR CLASSIC

POLARIS OF THE SNOWS Chapter Eight by Charles B Stilson—*The Stranger...* SCIENCE FANTASY CLASSIC

## EDITORIAL

This week Kassi and Sebastian plumb the depths of the Pipeworld. A cult author is curated. A man's erotic dreams lead him into temptation. An English teacher discovers a manuscript written by a notorious traitor. And one woman's literal minded-ness causes a commotion.

Sporn City is attacked by terrorist interlopers. Lowell ponders the causes of the unknown death. And Polaris reads an ancient inscription.

—Gavin Chappell

Now available from Rogue Planet Press: [Schlock Quarterly Volume 3, Issue 9](#)



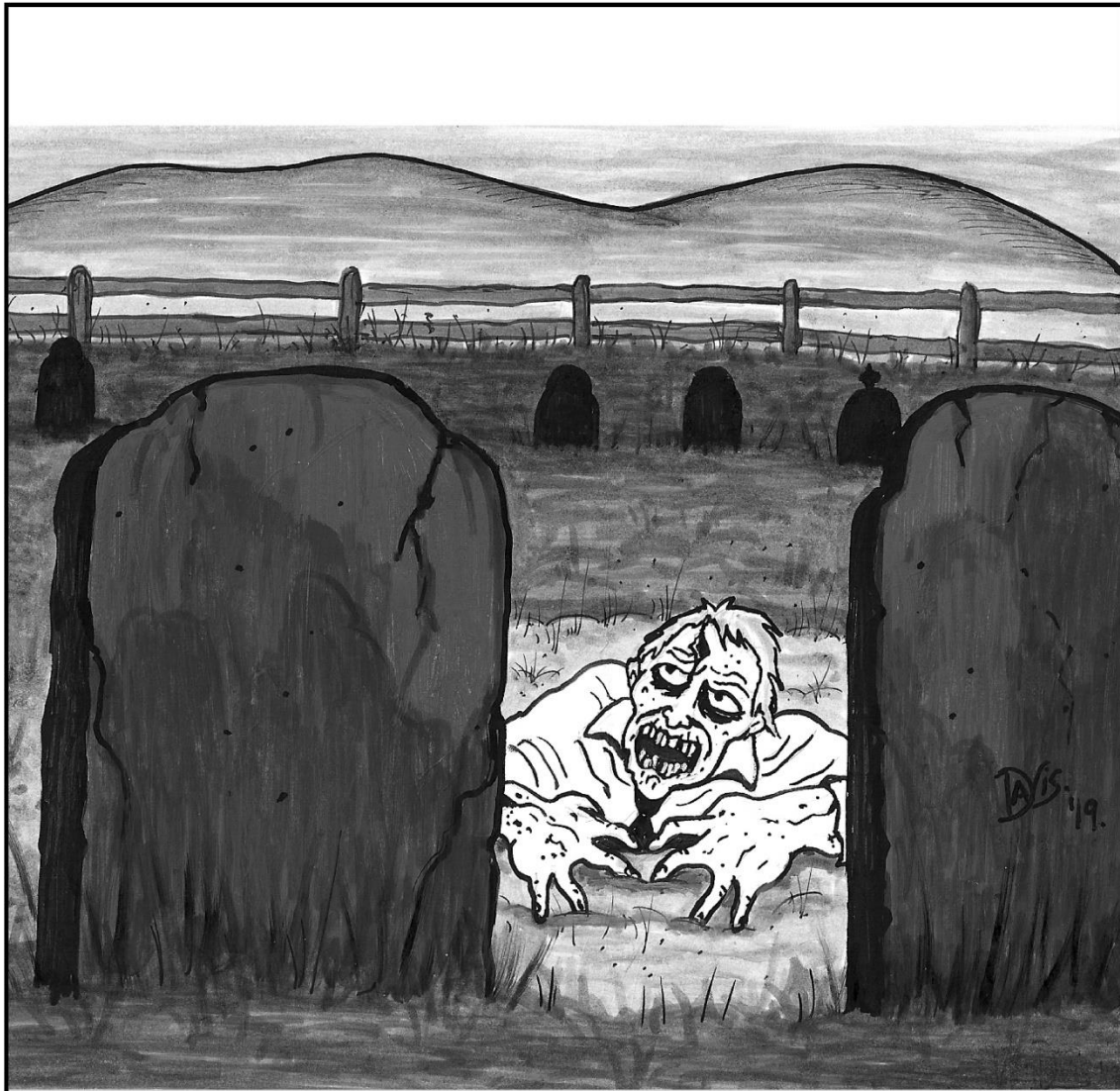
[Return to Contents](#)



IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

## IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



**"MORONS! THERE'S ONLY ONE *N* IN MY LAST NAME NOT TWO!"**

*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>

[Return to Contents](#)

## KASSI AND THE DUNGEON OF DWARVES by Ste Whitehouse

*'The Pipe-world, Ah'kis, is five thousand miles long and just over ten miles in diameter. Kassi seeks her brother who has been kidnapped by 'demons' and now travels north to the end of the world. She is accompanied by Sebastian a sentient bot of dubious origins with whom she can communicate telepathically. That ability seems to set her apart from the rest of the world's population. This is an earlier tale.'*

There had been sixteen at the beginning—seventeen if you included Sebastian which Kassi naturally did even if no one else would—and now there were twelve. Even D'naillë their guide looked worried and he was an actual dwarf. The invitation had appeared innocuous. 'Wanted; adventurers to help unblock a passageway deep within a Dwarven dungeon. Excellent rates of pay.' That last bit had attracted more than a fair share of nutters, including—if she were honest—Kassi herself. Making her way on her own was all well and good but she had a handful of coin to her name; and all of it bronze or lesser value. Sebastian may be able to live off the sunline and fresh air but she needed food and the occasional lodgings.

She was eighteen summers young and eager to prove herself. That spring had seen her brought down by a magic wand<sup>1</sup> and incapacitated for a month or two. Now summer was almost over and she felt something intangible slipping through her fingers. It was as though she needed to prove herself now or for her fate to be forever lost. Of course four people were now dead and they had barely left the surface. The extra gravity—brought about by what Sebastian called 'centrifugal force'—slowed them a little but in theory not enough to create a problem. Except. Four lay dead. Kassi had seen death many times before. It was a fact of life on Ah'kis. She had lost a sister when young and did not know of one family in her village who had not lost a child before its fifth birthday. Life was hard. Even harder as a warrior.

So the weird and wonderful had gathered and been accepted or rejected by two desolate dwarfs, their petulance only making their albino white faces more exotic. Kassi had of course heard of the qualities of dwarven blood and wondered if that sensuality was inherent in all they did. Still Sebastian and she had been accepted and after a short journey they came upon the opening to the dwarfs' home dungeon. Sebastian, her companion and constant grit in her shoe, had informed her that dungeon was in fact a misnomer as the dwarfs lived deep within the corridors surrounding Ah'kis but over the past ten years she had come to realise that the mechanoid sprouted a fair bit of nonsense and so ignored him; excited instead to be entering an actual dungeon for the first time.

The attack by a swarm of rats when it came was sudden. Two went down immediately followed by a third—a grim pockmarked man gaunt and grey—under a wave of soft flowing bodies. Only one of the twins—a Sigh of some sort—had stopped the tide with some mech which (he said) gave off a scream pitched so that only the rats could hear. That gave the dwarves time enough to open a side door away from the scurrying creatures. The fourth had stepped perilously close to the edge of a large shaft before a large pale night-eagle swooped down and carried him away. His screams had echoed for twenty seven minutes before falling ominously silent.

---

<sup>1</sup> See [Kassi and the Mech Merchants](#).



D'naillë made light of the fact that a quarter of their band had gone within the first hour and he was assisted by the peacefulness of the next three hours. In fact Kassi was beginning to chaff a little at the monotony when Sebastian halted suddenly, causing her to stumble over an appendage hovering in mid-move. The mech turned slowly to look behind them. The corridor they now traversed was fairly wide and of average height. It was metal lined yet their boots barely sounded off the rough surface of the floor. Kassi knew enough not to disturb her friend as he scanned around them. Whatever he was looking for—or had sensed—he would inform them soon enough.

Sebastian in fact did not say a word; instead a tall man whose skin was as black as the night suddenly stood still. He was last in line and if Sebastian had not stopped Kassi would not even have noticed. The tall thin black man stood preternaturally still as though he had been turned to stone—albeit a type of stonework that was altogether life-like. Smoke slipped from some vent and moved lazily through the air; drifting on unseen currents around the man. Then his form shimmered as though some great expanse of heat had risen between him and the group bending the light.

Even as she watched, Kassi was aware that his body seemed to be disappearing into a mist. Its shape and form gave the impression of melting or fading. A slight redness of the mist clouded his face until the pale whiteness of bone shone through. The mist itself thickened and Kassi thought that she heard a soft buzz as though a swarm of bees had entered the corridor. A wave of unease emanated from her friend.

“Shit! Nanobots!” Sebastian muttered.

The rest of the group were still only partially aware of what was happening. A second man, a boy in reality, froze and like the first visibly melted into nothing the mist swirled around the second.

“MOVE!” someone screamed and a loud explosion echoed, almost deafening Kassi. A slug of metal rebounded off the walls and ricocheted back and forth. She felt Sebastian’s ‘arm’ fold over her, pulling her away from the men—man; only one body was in view now.

The mechanoid called out. “Don’t shoot. The walls are magnetised to support the nanobots and power them. Firing a gun, a wand, in here will only get one of us killed.”

{Magnetism!} She ‘heard’ her friend exclaim. {That could actually work!}

They followed the dwarfs around a corner and found a dead-end. Someone whimpered. Kassi was almost sure it may have been her until she saw one of the dwarfs shit himself in terror. Oddly the only thought that registered in that moment was that it was the same colour as hers.

“Show me the gun,” Sebastian demanded. “The WAND!”

Reluctantly the burly knight in chainmail handed the weapon to Sebastian. “Yes. Yes. We can use the magnets.” He looked up and only Kassi could see the gleam of panic in his visual sensors. “Rip up the flooring. Find the magnets. Hurry.”

Dubiously the remaining ten pulled open the thin sheets of metal, using whatever came to hand. Kassi used the rim of her metal edged shield, hammering it into the floor where two

sheets of metal ran against each other. Underneath she found a handful of small cylinders. She was aware behind of a faint buzz as the now larger cloud of nanobots hovered ever closer.

“Why are they doing this?” one of the twins asked; Gerant or Garrent she never could tell which.

“On a molecular level nanobots may be fashioned out of purely inorganic metals or organic compounds. Obviously this lot are either fully organic or else most likely have need for organic chemicals to reproduce.”

Nine pairs of eyes looked at Kassi for interpretation. She shrugged and said. “I know as much as you do.”

Sebastian sighed loudly and replied in what Kassi recognised as his ‘can-these-people-be-any-stupider’ voice. “They eat humans to create more bots. Hence the cloud is denser.”

A few faces flickered with understanding and some nodded their heads as though it was all so clear. Kassi merely wrenched a second section of wall away to reveal more magnets.

“Now hold those sections of metal up before you. The magnets will prevent the cloud of bots coming near. Then you...” Sebastian pointed at the burly knight again holding the large blunderbuss rifle gently in his arms. “... you fire at the cloud while we push the bots closer. Understood?”

Everyone nodded stiffly; all aware of the cloud of nanobots now filling their only way out. All knowing that there was no escape.

In the ensuing stillness Kassi stepped forward, a section of flooring in hand. The mist thickened away from the sheet and tried to flow over and around. The other members of the group, seeing that Sebastian had been correct, were suddenly galvanised into action. They surrounded the nanobots pushing them closer until the air was thick with their stench; oil and sweat.

The knight raised his wand and fired. The thick pellet rammed into the glutinous gel of bots and sped out the other side, just missing the tall red haired woman who wore very little. As though in slow motion Kassi could see the blooming of a pressure wave within the thickened morass of nanobots; a sphere rippling outwards from the path of the bullet. The cloud of bots dissipated, a fine grey powder drifting to the floor.

“Quickly! We may not have much time.” Sebastian exhorted the group.

“Wait!” D’naillë called from the end wall. “We brought you this way because there is a hatchway leading deeper underground.” He looked around embarrassed, trying to disguise his words as he whispered. “Access One Zero Alpha; Priority.”

They waited impatiently as nothing happened.

The pale dwarf coughed and repeated the words slightly louder.

Sebastian added—unhelpfully. “I only suggested we leave swiftly because not all the nanobots will have been destroyed. A handful could still infect one of us and then begin the cycle of alteration again.”

Kassi noted the slight shift in his ‘head’ and a softening of his lenses; a sign that he was smiling nervously. Of course it went over everyone else’s heads.

The dwarfs both took it calmly by screaming at the door together, ACCESS ONE ZERO ALPHA PRIORITY! again and again.

Sebastian heaved a silent sigh and pushed them apart, lifting one appendage—now becoming a hand rather than a leg—and probing the panel gently with thin filaments. “Ah; I see the issue.” He gently pulled his ‘hand’ away and then smashed it into the panel. A few sparks erupted drifting in the stale air before a door slowly creaked open. Even the blind would have recognised the broad ‘smile’ that emanated from the mech’s smooth featureless ‘face’.

A second later there was a scrum of flesh as seven humans and two dwarfs squeezed through the still wheezing doorway, leaving Kassi waiting. Inside there was little metal—apart from a handrail that followed a set of concrete steps downwards. At least the nanobots could not follow them.

“The way is down here,” D’naillë said more firmly this time, regaining his composure.

An hour later they were still descending and Kassi’s back hurt as well as the muscles in her thighs. Gently her weight had increased as they passed the two mile mark below ground, and gradually each step—no matter that it was downwards—became a chore. Her mind was almost blank from the boredom. It began to shift and at least once she thought she had heard her mother call her for lunch.

‘Why did your weight increase?’ she wondered. Sebastian had told her that Ah’kis was a tube of rocky asteroids flying through a void he called space and that it rotated, so creating centrifugal force, but Kassi had a hard time imagining something other than her world. Some philosophers thought that the sun-line far above them was the answer; that light was in fact light—or lighter.

Their bodies absorbed the light and that kept them at a certain weight but when they descended the depths of a dungeon—or what Sebastian called corridors—this lack of light caused people to put on weight. The deeper you went, the less light made it down here and hence the heavier you became. It ‘sounded’ right but Kassi was unsure. For a start she knew full well that light did not penetrate underground at all. Sometimes all you needed to do was walk ten steps and there was no sun-line visible, and what happened indoors at night? Besides Dwarfs LIVED underground and yet they never became heavier because of it. No one did. She bumped into the man in front who had stopped suddenly and was aware that D’naillë was speaking.

“... to be as quiet as possible. There are Trolls along the length of the passageway.”

“Trolls? Why the worry?” the old man with a limp asked.

The dwarf grimaced and replied, “The Trolls you see above ground are mostly accustomed to men and are thus tamed but down here many have become much ... wilder.” The second dwarf said something quietly in D’naillë’s ear. “Yes, they are also prone to experiment with body shapes and forms more than their cousins above.”

Kassi had seen many Trolls working the fields of Ah’kis. Some had modified chassis; some had even reduced their overall tonnage, but bar ‘Old Cid’ none had been dangerous.

{Many have limited positronic brains which means that they remain only vaguely sentient, but the creation of pathways is always a veiled science, with vague outcomes. It is possible that over the millennia some may have descended into madness.}

{Well THAT’S cheerful!} Kassi replied.

The other dwarf softly opened the door way. Over his head Kassi could see a vast stretch of corridor wide and tall. Strip lights like miniature sun-lines illuminated the space badly. As she entered she could just sense the buzz of the lights as four or five flickered dispassionately far above.

“Buggeration!” D’naillë exclaimed.

Far enough away from them that it was almost a blob of shadow a bulky Troll sat waiting dead centre of the corridor. If they needed to cross this part of the dungeon then the Troll stood defiantly in their way.

The ten huddled together, waiting for someone to make a decision. Nothing moved and Kassi looked around nervously. Surely only a confident predator would sit so openly waiting? What was to stop the group, or any other prey, from just stepping back through the small doorway? Sensing something, Kassi peered upwards. The ceiling was shrouded in darkness, but suddenly she was aware of how a cluster of lights was damaged just around the entrance. Something shifted in the darkness and she had enough time to call out and warn people before a thin tentacle snaked downwards and circled the older man’s neck.

People darted outwards as three other tentacles wavered across the door at their back. They were trapped. The thickset woman, Barnabi, thundered and swung her own wand upwards, but instead of bullets a river of flame flowed upwards, illuminating the darkness above them. Even as the flames roared Kassi heard the sound of the old man’s neck breaking, a sharp retort almost swamped by the sound and fury of the flames.

Above them a number of small mechanoids sat clinging to the ceiling. A dozen or more had thin elongated tentacles which whipped back and forth whilst others dropped rocks onto the group below. The woman’s flame arched across a swathe of them and Kassi thought that she heard screams from the machines; and the smell of burnt flesh. One machine fell at her feet and she could see that it was a collection of machine and animal—mostly rat, it seemed.

She called out for everyone to stop and gather together. “It WANTS us to panic, to spread out away from each other. That way it can take us on one by one,” she explained.

“Have you seen the size of that thing?” one of the younger men said, a look of fear in his black eyes.

“Well,” Kassi retorted. “As a woman I’ve come to understand that the size of a thing usually means nothing.” She smiled sweetly.

“Well dahling, if you and your ... machine were to draw it away, I’m sure Gavin and myself could handle it,” the barely dressed woman replied, her red hair almost alive in the flickering embers of dying flames. She patted the young man’s arm and he briefly stood a little taller, his chest puffed out a little more.

“We can do much better than that,” Sebastian said politely.

{ We can!?! } Kassi asked silently.

{ A little snipping here and there should leave our large opponent powerless. } Sebastian replied as silently.

“Okay,” she replied and ran forward calling to the others. “Stay back, and for the god’s sake stay together.”

{ Okay, a little plan here would help. } she said.

{ Well I thought that you could ... }

{ Yes? }

{ Run at it hacking away and I can then sneak underneath somehow and hopefully find a few wires I can snip. }

{ Somehow; hopefully? THAT does not sound like a plan. } Kassi replied.

{ I never claimed to be a tactician. You are the one who says how marvellous she is at fighting. Oh shit. }

{ What’s the matt ...? }

She saw instantly that the Troll sat upon two large tracks that stretched alongside its body. ‘Underneath’ was about one inch in height.

“What is that smell?” Kassi asked.

“Burnt petrol. This Troll runs on petrochemicals so little in the way of batteries.”

She understood that Sebastian meant treys, usually a flat oblong of black plastic from which Sighs drew energy.

“So no wire snipping?” she asked.

“IF we can get close enough we may be able to cut a fuel line. Spilled petrol burns quite effectively.”



“So let’s get close enough.”

Kassi leapt up at the Troll, somersaulting through its large pincers and landing on one of the large rubber tracks. Sebastian dropped back moving to the other side of the creature as it swung its largest appendage at the girl. There was a burst of noise and a shift deep within the Troll as it began to spin its left track, trying to unbalance her, but she was already clambering upwards.

The Troll was, as all Trolls were, a collection of parts. Disconcerting for Kassi was the fact that this Troll’s parts included creatures that had at one time lived. Rats, mice, even a few cats and dogs all seemed to have become incorporated into the Troll. Tubes pierced furred bodies and she caught herself almost stopping in fascination as multi-coloured liquids were pumped in and out of obviously dead bodies.

{It may have upped its neural net using the brains of these animals.} Sebastian added as way of explanation. Kassi did not reply, her mind was almost incoherent with horror, and besides what COULD she say to that?

Instead she dug her sword into the Troll’s side and pulled haphazardly at a plate before moving on. A smaller arm swept past the spot she had occupied a second before as the Troll tried to dislodge her from its side. She dropped down suddenly and cut through a dozen tubes, filling the air with an acrid, dewy smell that leant itself to thoughts of rotting leaves and autumn nights.

As Kassi distracted the Troll, Sebastian leapt upwards and began to copy his friend’s approach; dislodging plates of metal and plastic to expose either flesh, tubes or wiring. Wherever he could the mech tore quickly, hoping to find something, anything, important. The tall redhead with her male companion jumped forward, parrying at the Troll and confusing it. The woman was quick on her feet, dodging left and right, and even managed to strike one of the Trolls arms ineffectually. Inspired the two dwarfs ran forward—although not TOO far forward—yelling and waving their arms and the stout woman fired her flame-thrower at the Troll, almost hitting the young man.

Kassi found a dozen lengths of thick tubing running beneath the Troll’s back and managed to slice through them before its larger arm swatted at her. It caught her shoulder and she was momentarily knocked off her feet. The smell of lubricants and hydraulic fluid filled the air and Kassi rolled away sliding off its back and hitting the ground running.

She called out, “It’s back. Hit its back with fire.” Before rolling out of the way of an arm. The woman lifted her wand, just as Sebastian dropped away, and sent a stream of burning flame in an arch that ended partially over the Trolls back. Kassi waited a few seconds and then whopped with delight as its back flickered with flame. The Troll started towards her but its right tread froze and it spun in a circle. Kassi ran around the Troll and backed away along the wide tall corridor.

The others joined her, one of the older men limping from a wound caused by the Troll’s earlier attack. A cry, part machine part animal, rose. First as a moan and then a screech. It reverberated from wall and ceiling; a death knell that sent shudders through the group. Then the flames billowed outwards, scorching the air along the ceiling for the briefest of seconds before shading into acrid smoke. A thud sounded by Kassi’s side and she saw a rotting,

melted piece of twisted metal. Part of the Troll's defence system from the ceiling; obviously they had been kept 'alive' by the Troll and now were little more than inert metal and fur chandeliers. Other thuds sounded around her and someone screamed.

"The lights! There are no traps around the lights!" Sebastian cried out and the group hurried beneath the small islands of light that shone down from the tall ceiling. There were five of them, plus the dwarfs and Sebastian. The young male companion to the red-haired woman was not amongst them. They had lost another three.

Despondent, they followed the dwarfs through a large pair of doors at the end and along long narrow corridors and large caverns. They walked on in heavy silence, dimly aware of the changing face of their surroundings as the symmetrical cut walls gave way to roughhewn passageways and dank, dew-stained floors. Slowly, as they continued ever downwards, the regular square walls gave way to true caverns and the straight corridors became twisted and fractured. They neared one of the world's famed underground rivers which pumped water from north to south, from Circular Sea to the mountain-tops of Quellm. As they soldiered on they all became aware of a dull roar from somewhere ahead of them. (The rivers also fed, or so Sebastian had said, the great reservoirs of water that surrounded Ah'kis and protected it from outside radiation.)

As they walked the young woman fell into step with Kassi.

"That was quite brave of you, dahling. Utterly fantastic. Ah would not have thought it possible with so much ... armour." She smiled sweetly at Kassi but underneath the smile was a steel façade.

"Hardened leather," Kassi replied. "Almost as tough as steel but weighs much less."

"I can understand that but you made that leap look so effortless, honee." She indicated her own voluptuous body. "Ah am afraid this could never have done something like that." She held out a hand whilst flicking back her long red bangs. "Dread Sonja."

"The form said that your name was Penelopi," Sebastian said sardonically.

The girl looked surprised.

"He's a nosey bastard, always peering over people's shoulders and looking into things that aren't his concern," Kassi answered, taking the girl's hand and shaking it curtly.

"Ah admit to taking the name from a book with many pictures. Ah did feel that Penelopi was less fearsome."

The two women walked on side by side in silence for a while; a stark contrast to each other. While Kassi was garbed in full leather armour with round buckler and heavy broadsword Dread Sonja wore a... well the best Kassi could describe it was a chainmail bikini that hardly contained the girl's ample breasts and left little to imagine below, either. A long sword swung a little too easily at her side and Kassi suspected that it was lightweight and insubstantial; suitable only for show. Sonja's only weapon appeared to be a man's inability to strike such pretty smooth skin.

“I ah...” Sonja stumbled over the words as she spoke softly. “I am perhaps not as experienced as yourself. And so ah wondered if perhaps you would offer me protection if we are attacked again.” She laughed somewhat nervously. “I appear to have forgotten my other armour this day.”

“And your shield, basic medical kit, helmet, secondary weapon, bedding, canteen...”

Kassi gave Sebastian a look and he stopped speaking. Then she said. “The tall pale man has a mean look in his one good eye and has made no attempt to speak to anyone at all, Mazack is injured and Barnabi...”

“...Has little fluid left to power her wand,” Sonja answered softly.

{I noted this woman’s behaviour earlier. She appears to pair with the one she considers strategically superior and offers little in return.} Sebastian ‘said’ angrily.

“So I’m all that’s left?”

Sonja nodded silently, looking with sudden interest at the floor.

“I am good with a sword. It’s just that no one ever takes me seriously enough.”

Dressed like that I’m not surprised, Kassi thought before saying. “Then you make them take serious notice of you.”

Sonja spun around as though basking in hidden sunlight, a broad smile on her full lips. “But people NOTICE me.... as a woman. Don’t you get mistaken for a man?”

Kassi’s reply was lost as they turned a corner and the cavern opened up, rising above their heads by hundreds of yards and all of that space was filled with the deafening roar of a mighty river. The walls were slick with a bioluminescent moss and the whole place had an ethereal essence, apart from the shuddering sound of the river as it sped its way from pole to pole. The water itself held light as it rushed along its granite channel. Streamers of blue and green momentarily pulsed to some unheard tune and Kassi noted dark shapes swim across the ribbons of light. Life, as always, found a way to exist.

In the smothering roar of water the two dwarfs indicated a narrow pathway, hurrying the small group onwards. Ahead the sound subtly changed and as the pathway rose and fell like some frozen wave caught in rock, Kassi could see the river open up before them. They twisted around the heavy slick rock to suddenly find the vast river tumbling downwards over a mile; a vast waterfall taller than most mountains. Its sound was swallowed up by the enormous basin that it had carved out over the centuries.

They followed the pathway along a narrowing gorge as the group descended nearer to the white water frothing below them. As they neared, all became aware of a scent that caught in their throats.

“What IS that smell?” Sonja asked pinching her nose in distaste.

D'naillë smiled nervously. "All of Ah'kis' waste needs to go somewhere to be R'syk-auld. Once there were mighty machines to do such work, but now..." He hesitated for a second. "Now some dwarven tribes R'syk-aul. It is contentious. A dwarf doing what once was a machine's job. They are seen as.... lesser dwarfs."

"But if the work was not done?" Sebastian asked.

"It is true that many of the mighty rivers would become little more than cesspits," D'naillë admitted ruefully. He added quickly. "Relations between our tribe and the tribe that inhabits this region are fraught."

As if to illustrate that fact, a cry could be heard from across the gorge and a large band of dwarfs swarmed over the rough terrain, shouting and pointing at their group.

"By fraught you mean, murderously awful?" Kassi asked.

The dwarf nodded remorsefully.

"There's a bridge!" the large woman said, pointing to an arch of rock that joined the two sides of the chasm together. Kassi looked at her companions in the forlorn hope that they had recruited another hundred or so people whilst strolling along the river's edge. Sadly it was still Mazack (who hobbled along desolately), Barnabi, Sonja, the pale man and Kassi herself. At least she had seen an actual dwarven dungeon, she thought morosely to herself before Sebastian spoke to her telepathically. She nodded.

"You hurry along the pathway. We'll hold them off," she said. Five faces looked at her as though she were mad. Perhaps she was, she thought but she trusted Sebastian and so ran for the bridge of rock. They reached the arch of rock—which was surprisingly wide when seen close up—just as the first of the dwarfs reached their end.

Sebastian raced forward whilst Kassi jumped about, yelling and generally drawing attention to herself. A flood of bodies poured over the bridge, screaming obscenities and spinning small neat slings. A rain of pebbles fell around the girl but she stood her ground as Sebastian reached the narrowest section of rock, hesitated and then ran back towards his friend.

Suddenly he paused and turned. With a prompt by the mechanoid, Kassi ran back onto the thick rocky ledge as Sebastian raised himself up onto his back four legs and shouted out so loudly that his voice echoed around the tall cliffs that enclosed them. The girl heard a soft voice in her head say with amusement. {I have always wanted to do this.} before he spoke.

"You SHALL NOT pass!"

A second passed and Kassi wondered if her friend's plan would work, but then she saw a ball of red blossom outwards from where Sebastian had paused and a crack like thunder filled her head. Sebastian was already running back to her as the middle section of the bridge collapsed in the explosion. They slowly walked over to the rest of the group who had stopped in amazement, the two dwarfs looking pissed.

"You had no right to do that," D'naillë said searching his rucksack. "We will need the sacred flower of force later to secure the blockage."

Sebastian tossed a wedge of Semtex at the dwarf. "I did not need to use all of the explosive." He emphasised the last word. "So we'll have plenty left for whatever this blockage is." If a machine could smile then Sebastian was positively glowing.

"But how did you know we had the sacred flower?" the dwarf asked, nervously replacing the slab of Semtex.

"He is inordinately nosey," Kassi said.

"My chemical sensors picked up traces," Sebastian replied at his most gracious. "And when I saw the problem with the bridge it seemed the perfect solution. Of course, I could have left well alone and allowed the two of you the honour of fighting your brethren."

The two dwarves looked chagrined but thankful as, neither had a fighter's physique. They moved on. Miles of cavern passed slowly until eventually D'naillë paused and told them to make camp for the night; such as it was. The low illumination that originated from their surroundings made sleep difficult and although Kassi was aware that Sebastian would guard them more than adequately she still found herself lying awake, staring at the rocky ceiling yards above them.

"You all can't sleep either, sugah?" The redhead slid alongside her and Kassi felt a momentary annoyance. Sonja continued. "We all thought that the two of you had gone mad." Then she whispered, her voice low and throaty. "Did your ... uh friend discover where the dwarfs keep the coins? Ah mean; they've been good at avoiding death so far but who knows what tomorrow may bring and if we needed to leave without them, well..." She looked Kassi in the eye. "Why leave without the coin, eh?"

Kassi felt irked as the woman had only echoed what she had asked Sebastian earlier. Somehow she felt that she ought to be 'better' than some floozy. She wanted to tell Sonja that they were there to help, but then the real reason she and Sebastian had volunteered was the promise of gold. Kassi hated been confronted by her own failings and would normally have snapped at the redhead if the rest of the group had not been asleep. As it was, she smiled as sweetly as she could and said, "I'm sure when the time comes that you will be rewarded for all you have brought to the group."

"Hey!" Sonja whispered as harshly as she dared. "I bring plenty. If not for me neither Gerant nor Garrent would have committed to this adventure. I persuaded them." She held her chin up defiantly, her ample cleavage fairly quivering.

Kassi did not have the energy to reply that both were now dead along with the lad Sonja had then settled on.

As though sensing Kassi's thoughts the woman added. "I will admit that I may encourage certain men to help me and that dressed thus it is easier." She flicked her hair back as if emphasising the point. "I did start out to be a warrior but then I met this barbarian type who took a shine to me and sort of did most of the fighting. It just became a habit." She sighed softly. "I guess I suck at this."



Kassi inwardly rolled her eyes, trying hard not to feel sorry for the young woman. “Hey. We don’t have many role models. I’ve met just one woman fighter and she was encased in so much armour it was hard to tell. Perhaps there are more out there. In the end all we can do is be the best at who we are. I would never wear such ... armour, but if you are unscathed then it works for you.”

“Thank you.” She squeezed Kassi’s hand warmly. “Does that mean if things go awry you’ll help me?”

Kassi smiled and said *yes* even as the words Brazen and Hussy echoed in her mind from somewhere north of the camp. Sonja rolled over and within a minute a gentle snore came from her. Kassi sighed, lay back and tried to think of better nights.

The next morning Mazack lay dead in his blankets. His body was still warm, meaning that he had died only recently, but although both Kassi and Sebastian examined him closely they could see no real cause of death.

“He was crippled anyway,” Barnabi said briskly whilst the tall pale man said nothing, his eyes looking away.

{ The bastard killed him. } Kassi said vehemently.

{ To which we have no proof. It’s possible he was strangled or smothered but I can see no markings to indicate as such. } He lay a ‘hand’ gently across the back of Kassi’s calming her. { He WAS slowing us down. }

{ And the redhead is fucking useless, so is Barnabi if we’re honest. That does not mean... }

Sebastian soothed Kassi as best he could while the others guiltily packed. In silence they left the man, his body buried beneath a handful of rocks and gravel; a sad end to a life.

It was an hour later that the essence of the river still flowing to their right changed. Slowly a grimy froth began to appear on its surface and larger objects protruded from its depth. Things could be seen floating past, spinning or stopping against larger obstacles until the river became subsumed beneath the detritus; an underground river now flowing under a roof of human waste.

The smell grew more pungent until it became so overpowering that it was a physical thing assaulting their bodies. The air felt thick and rancid, clinging to them with each step. The dwarves had provided masks to filter the worst but these did nothing to stop the smell. Surprisingly after a while they all stopped noticing it. Five miles on they found the blockage; a large dirty white plug growing around a narrowing in the river.

“It’s a fatberg,” Sebastian said in astonishment.

“A what?” Dread Sonja asked scratching at her bare skin as the smell seemed to blanket her.

“A fatberg. A collection of fats and oils and...well, things. They can clog up the best of pipes; even here in this world. I guess shifting this will make us plumbers.” For some reason Sebastian found this funny although Kassi couldn’t understand why.

D'naillë asked, "Do you think that the sacred flower of force, See Tex, will work?"

Sebastian took in the fatberg microscopically. "If we place the charge in the right place it should dislodge a large portion of it."

All six made their way to the blockage. Barnabi used the remaining fluid to burn much of the outer shell of fats away while Kassi and Sonja dug away with the dwarfs and the pale man. An hour passed. Two. Finally a narrow passage was formed, through which Sebastian could traverse with the Semtex. The four humans with dwarfs moved back and away from the river channel, climbing the slippery bank up towards the safety of the high ridge, Kassi bringing up the rear.

When they were almost at the ridge Kassi saw Barnabi swing out, holding on with her left hand, a dagger in her right. Her arc brought the dagger across the thin man's arm and he let go in shock. All at once he was unbalanced. He grasped fruitlessly at the rock face before falling silently down the cliff face, his body slamming into the rocks in sickening squelches. Suddenly Kassi saw the lack of any real intelligence in his eyes. She understood his silence was due to muteness and a barely functioning mind. The evil she had sought within him was in fact plain to see in the plump woman now swinging her sharp dagger at Kassi's head.

She pulled herself level with the woman, grasping a tuft of pale yellow grass in her right hand.

"You killed Mazack," she said flatly.

"More profit for me." Despite her weight the woman was deft with a knife. Only their precarious situation prevented the woman from fully engaging Kassi in swordsmanship. She laughed and taunted Kassi, nodding at her struggle to hold onto the rock face with her right hand, "You're at a disadvantage, dearie."

"And you're unobservant luv," Kassi retorted.

The woman looked momentarily puzzled.

"I'm left handed," Kassi said parrying the small blade and sweeping her broadsword neatly across the woman's stomach. For a second everything was still, the woman unmoving, and then, as though she moved through treacle Barnabi slowly slipped from the rock face and tumbled downwards, bouncing across spines of granite, screaming as she fell.

{I see you've started without me.} Kassi saw Sebastian in the distance.

{She killed the pale man right before my eyes. What else was I to do?}

Before he could answer the ground shuddered, followed by a dull retort. The waxy surface of oils and fat ballooned before collapsing in on itself. A putrid smell wafted gently over them.

"Is that it?" Kassi asked. The destruction of the bridge was much more satisfying.

“The blockage is mostly removed, the pressure of water should clear out the debris within a month or so,” Sebastian said pedantically as he climbed the incline with ease passing her and the dwarfs in minutes.

When Kassi reached the top Sonja stood hands on hips staring down the dwarfs. “And I say that we should get ALL the coin you have; as recompense.”

D’naillë squirmed uncomfortably. “And as I said, we cannot pay you for all sixteen people.”

Kassi walked over and said flatly. “Because you figured a lot of us wouldn’t survive so you only brought a fraction of the money. How much?”

The dwarf looked at the ground in dismay, whispering, “Five. We brought coin for five of you.”

Kassi looked across at the redheaded woman and said, “Well, I reckon we both come out with two and a half times the amount of money you promised us, so that’s not too bad.”

Sonja looked annoyed but muttered her agreement. “As long as we are paid NOW!” she added.

“So if sixteen warriors started out and only two remain how many will it take for us to reach the surface? Because payment is academic if we do not,” Sebastian said cheerfully.

“There is an elevator close by. An hour’s walk at most. That will take us much of the way and, most crucially, it will deposit us within our tribe’s territory,” D’naillë said sullenly as he handed over the coins.

Kassi held her sword under his chin. “And why could we not have used this ‘elevator’ to bring us UNHARMED to this place?”

A look of terror filled the dwarf’s face as he stuttered. “We ... we did not kn... know where the actual blockage was. It is but by chance we can leave easily. I swear, milady.”

At the last word Sebastian sniggered until Kassi gave him a ‘look’.

The five adventures slowly made their way back and, despite the decrepit look of the beast, the lift—as Sebastian insisted on calling it—worked fine. Once on the surface Kassi made Sebastian promise that if she ever suggested a dungeon again he was to lock her up. He agreed too readily for her liking but she was much too tired to really care. At least she had coin to spend.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

## DIARY OF A SKINNY KID by Steve Laker

What's beneath the headline is the story of everything below the neck. Once a story breaks, trust is lost, like a cradle from a tree. I learned that as a journalist for a local newspaper, before taking a more sedentary and solitary path as a freelancer, writing mainly about the arts and humanities. Sometimes I cross over into fiction, but I try to blur the edges when stories have a basis in past experience.

The internet means I can write and do most of my research from home, and digital printing democratised publishing, helping me and thousands of other writers become published authors. Previously the only way was vanity publishing, where the writer took a leap of faith and paid for stacks of their own books from a traditional printer. With editors removed from the publishing machine, it's pumped out a lot of shit. As a result, a niche industry has developed underground.

The rage among the entitled classes are bespoke, one-off printed editions of books, a market served by boutique publishers, who are always striving for something new and different. The most exclusive in this rarefied world is Mobius, who can somehow gather sought-after cult writers better than any little black book in the underworld of pulp fiction.

Few writers have one or more novels in them. Most have a collection of short stories which make up their own fictional autobiography. There's still a big difference between publishing your own novel and having a publishing house, but there's a far greater difference between self-publishing your own shorts (as simple as posting them on a blog), and having them accepted for outside publication, whether it be online or in print. Writing short stories is more difficult than writing a book, simply because the author has fewer words.

The editor of an anthology or periodical, online or in print, is like a conductor, a Master of Ceremony. The captains of those ships are curators and innkeepers, of works and writers who might not otherwise find themselves together.

I've had many stories published by third parties, online, in magazines, and in cult collections. I've published my own novels in paperback, but apart from the quarterlies, I've not had a short story published in an anthology (although I've published two of my own). Published periodically but not permanently, my stories are my own and those of others I never chose to be with. This is where the story starts, when I saw an ad for Mobius in a friend's university rag mag.

My friend is a psychology student from UCL, on a placement with Lewisham Hospital, just up the road from me. 30 years my junior, we'd been friends since she was at school, through consequence and convenience when the weather was fair, and sometimes she's stayed over when it rains, sharing stories only we could tell, beyond the birth dates of children and the expiry of parents in our tattoos. Now she spoon-feeds me, as we talk about our lives and she gives me ideas for new stories.

She didn't like red horror, so this would be a psychological story, more black mirror. Nothing new there, but I was trying to branch out further with my writing, and wanted something I might make into a screenplay, a story within a story, which could turn in on itself and stand up to repeated reading. A story which might be suited to the stage. Mobius could be that.

The ad was brief, a few lines in amongst vacancies for student flat shares, campus clubs and guinea pigs:

*Mobius is launching a student arts council project, and we're looking for volunteers and contributors. We are inviting submissions from authors which tell the stories of the individuals we all are. Successful entries will be published in a unique anthology, which forms the centrepiece for a planned exhibition at The British Library, to raise awareness for our ongoing and future humanities work. Entitled 'Fictional Reality', we aim to present something which could only exist in fiction (or the mind) as real. We want the viewer to confront the realism of fiction.*

Fictional realism is the theory that in an infinite universe, everything which can happen, has happened. All fiction—places and people—are created as they're written, then exist as chance would predict they must, in a multiverse of infinite possibilities.

There was an email address, so I sent off a query letter (basically, I'd be interested in contributing, could you send me the editorial guidelines please?) My friend had returned to her student digs, so while I was waiting, I continued writing.

All stories are tales within others, when each contains a part of the writer. Whether it be a mannerism of a character, or a location in a familiar distant dream, the writers of short fiction tell their bigger story in parts, which don't necessarily fit together, in the way some people don't when they first meet.

It's a lonely existence, being a writer, so to be curated into a fiction anthology would mean my story was part of a whole made of many other people. Being a writer suits me, because I can work on my own. I miss the human contact, not of any workplace, but in an outside life. All I have is my psychologist friend, and she's rarely around now she's of legal drinking age. Acceptance into this anthology would help the reclusive writer get out and meet new people.

Writers don't all like to get together in real life (the one outside this writing life, the bigger story beyond), so the publisher has to think about a seating plan. Authors are unlikely to ever dine together, but the order of the stories in the anthology should reflect the kind of conversation which might be expected around an unlikely dining table.

Anyone reading that book in the British Library would be privy to a conversation between minds who wouldn't normally meet, because they never met, only in the collaboration of a secret world spewing its guts into a bowl. With each story carrying its character, the whole volume should speak an interesting narrative, a whole of many parts, which individually have bigger stories to tell.

The chapters in this exclusive Mobius project would make up a unique life, a new one. So does any collected works anthology, where something can be one of a collection of unique things. I wondered what Mobius could do which would make this venture truly unique, unlike anything before.

Away from the modern democracy of digital, the traditional methods of printing still thrive, even the fine art of letterpress, where galleys of text are assembled by hand before impressing by mechanical platen into the paper. Before print became technology, it was a skilled craft which allowed the fast distribution of information through multiple copies. The only truly



unique printed documents are antiquated texts and scrolls, hand-written by artisan scribes. That couldn't be the truly unique centrepiece promised for the British Library, as it had been done before.

I've had many writing desks, many temporary, some in public libraries, others bolted to the floor, and all doubling as dining tables. The one I'm sitting at now is the horse for my typewriter, where many of the stories only me and the psychologist could tell are hidden in a dark web; and where I was invited to meet an agent for Mobius, who I assumed would be an arts student from UCL. An email arrived on my desktop, inviting me to meet a guy called Rupert Surname in the reading room of the British Library.

Rupert hadn't described himself, leaving him to my imagination. I didn't know his full name, so I couldn't look him up on social media. Most people called Rupert at university would probably revert to Facebook's roots, and use it as an in-campus social network. I didn't know how tall he was, how old (although I assumed student-age), or what he'd be wearing. I'd ruled out a red jersey and yellow-checked trousers with matching scarf.

The reading room at the British Library is huge, a cathedral to reading and learning. There are hundreds of desks, some grouped socially, like wooden beasts of burden for books and computers. Other desks roam alone, seeking light beneath a window, or preferring the solitude offered by walls of bookshelves. There are nomadic chairs, ridden by students to feast around a beast, a camp fire, or left at a universe laid flat in MDF. Some were tethered to unattended laptops, while the riders smoked outside the realm of fictional realism.

Among the menagerie of mascots left to guard unattended windows on other worlds there was a Rupert, naked and white: A stuffed bear, sans his usual modesty, sitting next to a laptop about the same height as him. Anyone at eye level could have read what I did on the screen:

*Your story must clothe the bear. His jersey will need two sheets of material for the body and one sheet for each arm. The bear's trousers require two sheets in total, and the length of his scarf is to be your own space, to weave as long as you wish. Please submit the first three sheets for preview.*

Was this a student's own project? A student of what? Fashion, knitting, philosophy? It gave me another idea for the story I was already writing. My journey to King's Cross hadn't been for nothing, as I had a plot device.

A sheet of A4 cartridge paper holds around 500 words from my typewriter, so I'd already knitted most of Rupert's upper half, the first three pages I'd normally send to a prospective publisher. I sent it to Rupert Surname, and queried whether they'd like a synopsis of the whole story. As mine was to be one part of a curated volume, the final work would only be complete once all the contributors' chapters had been chosen. The publisher retained license of freedom for the final work. If my own life outside this story was one they could influence, by placing it among the tales of others, then I was happy to be guided.

Although the British Library was outside my comfort zone (away from home), in the brief time I'd been there, I'd not felt alienated. There I was, surrounded by knowledge and almost silence, alone but not, part of many stories unfolding in one place as I wrote my own. If Rupert invited me there again, I'd be glad of the excuse to visit. If not, then perhaps to view

the final exhibit at the end of this Mobius project. Even if I wasn't a part of it, I'd still been on the stage where it was produced.

While I waited for a response, I worked on another story I'd been writing for the general market. It was about an understudy actor, stumbling home and ringing on the wrong doorbell. Fictional realism was the music of chance, when my doorbell rang.

It was my UCL psychology student from Lewisham. It was still rag week and there was a new edition of the student mag, with a pulp fiction supplement. And my story was in it.

The story I was writing for Mobius and the British Library, the one which was meant to be exclusive; tales of individuals making a unique whole life for visitors to gaze at; the book produced in some way which made it truly unique, which was meant to enclose my own story, safe from reproduction, was now in a photocopied pulp comic; and I was reading it just as you are now, and just like anyone so inclined, not to seek out something completely new and singular, but happy to read cheap, disposable fiction on the underground.

"What," I wondered, "about the British Library?"

"Oh, that's still going ahead," she said. "I'm taking your story there."

"What? But I never finished it."

"And you never will. But you have already."

"How?"

"The truly unique nature of the project is in the way the story will be presented, in a way which can't be reproduced."

Beneath the forest and savannah of the reading room at the British Library, is a network of tunnels lined with shelves. Everything which is published in Britain is held there: one copy of every book, magazine, newspaper, musical score, screenplay, script, and even university rag mags. Even the poorest writer, with no sales, can take comfort in knowing that a copy of their story is held in that subterranean cavern for reference, knowledge and learning. It's a world off-limits to the reading room, but readers can request a copy of anything ever published, which is retrieved by a robot and delivered to the student's desk. We are never truly dead until we're forgotten, and published authors will live in that underground publishing world for as long as The British Library still stands.

"So," I wondered, "what's so unique about the curation?"

"Well," she said, "words can be copied." Of course, even if it's an ancient scribe plagiarising the bible to make his own version. "And so can DNA."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Would you donate your own skin to have your story told?"

"Why would I?"

“It would be a way of telling your story as very much your own, if it was printed on sheets of your own skin. Bound into a book, with 49 other shades of flesh, wouldn’t that make for quite the publishing sensation?”

“For starters, I wouldn’t do that. Donate my skin? Maybe to a burns victim, but for people to stare at in an exhibition, as I’m stretched over some sort of frame?”

“Your skin grafts would be bound with others in the book.”

“What, and people would just be able to flick through the pages, looking at my story, all stretched and laid bare?”

“Among others, and together you tell the whole story.”

“In a book which anyone at all can just finger? I thought this was exclusive. Surely such a unique thing should be encased in glass?”

“No-one could read the book in its entirety. It’s not the kind of book you’d borrow from any normal library.”

“Well, I wouldn’t donate my skin. That contains me and protects me.”

“As does mine, as a student. That’s how comes I’m part of the final story. Student financing, pulp fiction sales; those only cover accommodation and books, not the life I want to live.” She looked down at her white coat. “So I sold my skin. I want to pay you back for all the favours you’ve done me.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I’m far more comfortable if one story is told upon another, in a safe place where one can meet like-minded people. Like a glass cage at the British Library, where my body can entwine with others for public entertainment, but remain safe. You’ll be there. Your story will be there, writhing in and out of others, your words coming together like so many authors of others’ stories, trapped in a box and in their own skin, while people file past and gawk at an artistic representation of you and others at work. Reality stripped naked in fiction, Q.E.D. Mind if I take a shower?”

I pushed my chair out of her way. As she stood up, I noticed a new tattoo above her collar:

*Diary of a skinny kid  
What’s beneath the headline  
is the story of everything below the neck...*

THE END

© Steve Laker, 2019

stevelaker.net

[Return to Contents](#)

## FREDERICK'S DREAM OF LILITH by Francis-Marie de Châtillon

I awoke in the night from a curious dream, a lovely dream in fact. The night was dark yet a warm dark, if you can understand me. It enveloped and enfolded like a soft blanket. A slow vinifera-black blanket of night-time settled comfort. I had slept but a short time, or so it seemed to me; but in fact it was many hours and it had been a deep and vivid slumber. I lay on my face and wrapped my arms contentedly around my pillow, wistfully remembering the dream through my tears of joy.

And the dream was of this: seemingly, I had been awoken from my sleep by the soft breath of a woman. It flowed smooth as a silken ribbon over my cheek, caressing my skin, tantalizing my senses. I breathed her in deep inhalations; I felt her presence next to me, warm and soothing. In the half-light of my room, I could see that she was of the dearest and loveliest face. She was golden-haired and of noble, sensual aspect. Her skin was white as the frost on Lithuanian trees on a winter's morning; indeed, she was the fairest-of-the-fair. I looked at her, and unafraid we reached for each other and our arms enwrapped one another tenderly.

I felt the beauty of her body against me in the darkness, the fulsome curves of her form running like the purest of arithmetic. She was perfect in every detail; in every change and movement and volume.

As if in slow-motion our fingers entwined. How smooth her skin! How gentle her touch! How lovely her feel! I felt her hips and soothed the tops of her thigh; her warmth next to me was as of a summer's day and my heart sang like birds at her nearness. We both stretched our arms above us and she rested her head upon my chest.

Although darkness was around us, in my dream I saw clearly the cool blue of her eyes and looked into their depths. She, in turn, looked into mine and together we sank into the purest of waters. I stroked her hair and felt her vitality.

Willingly our lips met and our breath became as one. She held me close and her kiss was like no other. Gently our mouths moved together, tasting the other's freshness and heat. Hers was the kiss of an angel, the kiss of a beauty, but also the kiss of a real woman. I held each kiss as a precious moment, a sacred instant in my heart. Such a feeling moved through me like some God-given intoxicant, such was the wonder of her. I held her gentle tongue within my mouth and she took mine in return; together they loved and moved just as our whole bodies would.

Holding her face close to mine I asked her name, "I'm Lilith," she said.

"How beautiful! I'm Frederick," I whispered. And so we kissed again and with each caress we called to the inner spirit of the other.

"Kiss me more," she said in the darkness, and her arms guided me to between her legs and the tenderest of her regions; directed me to those parts where a man may easily lose himself. I kissed her there deeper than her mouth and I tasted of her inner body. Honey tastes as nothing. The smell of her was as some opiate drug: hypnotic and somnambulist. Yet a fire flamed high within me at the long sounds of her pleasure; low moans and high sighs filled the room as she guided my head to where she wanted my tongue. I kissed her as I would a perfect lover's lips and I spoke words of honest love. Oh, such a dream! Slowly, she grew tense and her time had come. With burning desire for her I watched her eyes close tightly and her

breathing shorten. Suddenly the mixed sounds of release and heavenly pain captured her and just as suddenly also, she filled my mouth with a musky juice, which I swallowed so eagerly. It was her and it was all I wanted. All I would ever want now. I held her hips hard and pulled her fast up to me as she thrust at my mouth. In those moments I tumbled and fell and toppled into her, I loved her so very, very much.

I listened to her gradually slowing breathing and then, when recovered, she moved herself down upon me in turn and lit the fiercest of all fires within my body, such was the sweetness of her. And her eyes sought mine as she loved me in long slow movements. Was it hours? Was it minutes? I truly cannot say: it seemed like eternity and yet it was but perhaps moments. I uttered her name under my breath over and over like some mantra, like the measured click of rosary beads, and at that sacred instant where a man's reason can be lost as easily as a ship in a storm, I stretched my hand out to her hair and gently pulled her in rhythm, my body shuddering with the enjoyment she so willingly and generously gave to me. I cried her name loudly and she squeezed my hand in tender recognition. Then, sated, we finally both slept like children aware of nothing but the other.

“Will you come again?” I asked later as we awoke.

“Yes, every night,” she whispered back.

And so I now lie in my bed waiting for my dream to return tomorrow night. Strangely, I want no food, no drink. My strength seems to have deserted me: I feel listless, weak of body and vapid of mind. I want no company but hers, no sound of voice but hers; my thoughts seem held captive by her. I feel no desire to pray—as is my usual practice; I just long for her soft mouth and tender touch and the desire for an all-consuming union. I want nothing but her and to be with her. In the long, dark night as I patiently await her, slow, sharp tears come to my eyes for the lack of her. For such is my love.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

## BLOOD OF JUDAS by GK Murphy

Casper Dame was a divorcee currently working part-time as an English teacher at Workington University, yet in his infinite wisdom, had embarked on the difficult route towards wannabe author, forever embroiled in the fantasy of striking it rich upon publication. The very first fabled debut novel so many of his literary ilk worked towards.

Tonight, in his writer's Master Class held by stuffy but likeable tutor Miss Carey Newman, he sat at the back of class, alert and listening to her intently as she referred to the blackboard and gave her thoughts and ideas on the art of turning out a good readable tome. Of course, for Casper, it was going over old ground, and this being Module One of the course, he reckoned he could have done a better job and more or less have stood up there and instructed the classroom three times better than Newman on his own.

It was unusual for an English teacher to take such a course. Yet, like so many, he considered himself forever the student, never satisfied with the rudimentary rigmarole of blatant popular opinion passed around in literary circles. He believed that that no one man could harbour knowledge and meaning of every aspect of ill-gotten deed—every crook and cranny—of the English language and its cultural power-play in the modern world, or the vast and ever-expanding sphere that seemed was the global literary bonanza teeming with those like him, working to earn a crust.

Sitting there, he seemed oblivious as he drifted off into a magical and mystical excursion of deep thought now and then, where he gazed out the window next to his desk every so often whilst his eyelids blinked and fluttered, almost in a dreamy sense. Yet, this was for good reason in tonight's tutorial, for earlier this afternoon he had stumbled across a strange and utterly bizarre discovery at home. Oddly, it was in one of the crumbling walls of his basement no less. It was something that befuddled and flummoxed him beyond all reason. What he had held in his very own hands, in fact, he dared to imagine may have been worth a lot of money and the solution to his financial woes, or at least something deserved of a place in a museum or art gallery. However, uncertain of this, Casper merely decided to drop his find off at Professor Silas Robertson's house on the way to tonight's class on the off-chance that the old bugger knew what the scruffy old thing was. Whatever this ancient piece of yellowed parchment was, the inscription daubed on it in red ink (or blood, perhaps) wasn't scrawled in English—in fact, if anything, it was Arabic.

“Are you awake this evening, Mr Dame?” the tutor enquired, having some of the class chuckle and giggle. She continued, “We're considering Characterization and Personalities, and how to weave them together in the beginning of the story, and pinpoint certain Quirks and Disabilities the main character may have... can you elaborate?”

The class went silent. Dumbly, Casper shook his head yet curtly replied, “I believe Characterization is the crux of every story, and Personality is integral to this, whereby it should be the author's responsibility to make prevalent from the outset apt clarification of his or her main character's major as well as minor Quirks and Disabilities. Yes, this might be laborious for any self-respecting or astute reader, so most of the time this ideology is not always a necessity. But if they are portrayed in the designated print with a peculiar or entertaining gusto, henceforth it will hopefully serve as an engrossing and refreshing opener to the tale presented and keep readers suitably enthralled and eager to keep turning pages.”

The class were in awe. Some were slack-jawed and opened mouthed whereas others simply wanted to administer a round of applause.

The ageing tutor seemed to grimace as she blew her tiny pointed nose into her hankie and turned to the blackboard. She said, "That is all, class...next session I believe will be Thursday night at seven-thirty and so see you all then...including yourself, Casper..." she said. Absently almost, she quipped with a wry smile, "...perhaps you might bring a pillow with you next time?"

The class were too busy exiting to laugh at this latest comment.

However, Casper heard it and gave a thumbs' up to the teacher. Head bowed, he headed for the door before then hurriedly heading along the corridor. By now, he was eager to see Silas Robinson to get the low-down on his basement discovery.

On arriving at his home on the edge of town, the Professor was standing in the doorway at the end of the garden path, yet to Casper, the 73 year old appeared a shadow of his normal self, worn out, tired, subdued. But he managed a rickety smile of sorts for his younger friend.

"Come inside, Casper," Silas said, ushering him in, "I have some very important news for you...news that will thrill you to the core, or rather if you are of my disposition, chill you to the core. You have made a fantastical discovery!"

"I'm intrigued, Silas!"

Silas led Casper Dame into his darkened study, out the back beyond a sizeable kitchenette. As ever, it stank of farts and cigar smoke.

"Can I tempt you into a brandy, sir?" he asked Casper, adding, "You will need one, I'd say."

"No, I'm driving," Casper chuckled, pointing out, "One brandy would likely lead to two or three more, meaning I might sleep the night on your couch."

The professor gestured for him to be seated in the bouncy leather armchair facing his mahogany desk. The room was dark and somewhat squalid, roomy yet crammed with papers layered on top of each other on surfaces and panels, his desk and surrounding shelves, articles that had not been touched or moved—let alone read or examined—in decades probably. There was a thick layer of dust and muck on everything.

Silas had been smoking cigars, Casper recognized this straight away, covering his mouth as he spluttered and coughed upon entry. Did the old bugger never open a window?

The Professor sat down and studied Casper for a little while. His face was craggy and pallid, gaunt and skeletal, almost Gothic looking. He remained silent for quite some time before (finally) he decided to break the growing monotony and disclose his recent findings on the sacred parchment Casper had found in an old wall in his basement.

"For starters, the inscription on the paper appears to be Arabic and yet after close inspection I have concluded it is not. It seems it is not written in any language. If anything, it is written in code. It is a complicated and obscure code only wise, clever men would even struggle to

decipher due to its style and age, or determine the era in which it was written. I can assure, though...I have also concluded that it is from the era of Christ, and I think I know who wrote it, due a tiny scrawl—almost like an initial—at the very end of the document. It is a signature, one which is dubious I admit. Yes, granted, yet this particular signature disturbs me, and it would disturb the entire world's population if your find was to ever entered the public arena—which I think, must.”

“Is it valuable?” Casper asked.

“Priceless...” the Professor said, “...in fact, it should not exist. Museums will bite your arm off for this ancient relic, Casper.”

“Who wrote it?”

“In earnest, Casper, I have an idea, judging by the signature alone, as that is the only sense this document offers. As I say, the entire offering is unreadable and could be just plain nonsense—but I sincerely doubt that—since, to be frank and honest, I truly believe it is the most important find of the twentieth century and modern times. It is not written in red ink, that's for sure...” He paused, biting on his lip, adding suddenly, “...it is written in blood, and the parchment is not paper, it is human flesh.”

“Wow, holy shit.”

“Holy shit, that's exactly right.”

Casper frowned deeply. He said, “So, where is it from?”

“My research—and I've been engrossed in this all day—leads me to believe the Knights Templar discovered this during the Crusades and brought it back to the homeland, Sacred Albion, but somehow—perhaps, perhaps—it was misplaced, or even **STOLEN**—and then **HIDDEN**—or **PASSED AROUND** to different crucial sources—or just **MOVED ALONG** amongst dignitaries and those of importance, or those with considerable wealth.”

From a brown envelope on the desk, the Professor extracted the mystical piece of flesh. He lifted it for Casper to observe as he pointed something out. “See that mark there, Casper? That is the initial of the piece's author...”

Nonplussed, Casper shook his head.

Clearing his throat, the cranky Professor said gravely, “It is the mark of Judas, the traitor, the one responsible for Jesus Christ's death at the hands of the Romans.”

Stunned, Casper was speechless.

“I can't believe it.”

The Professor reached into the drawer of his desk and extracted his old service revolver. Seeing it, Casper realized he was about to be shot and killed by his old friend. Perhaps, with this important discovery, the Professor had turned greedy and wished to reap the entire reward the relic might fetch at auction. Perhaps he was angry or confused over something



else—nobody would ever know. Here, Casper could only pray and surmise...either way it was surely the end of the line.

“Our souls are damned...” the Professor muttered, his eyes glazed with tears.

Suddenly, Silas placed the tip of the revolver’s barrel under his chin and pulled the trigger, making for a massive bang which instilled the fear of God in Casper as he watched the senior’s brains explode across the bookshelves behind, mixed with fragments of skull.

As he sat there shell-shocked and silent, something happened equally shocking, for the sacred parchment on the desk before him seemed to glow a neon blue, then green, then orange, until deep within its light and mesmeric glare, a pair of dark yet beautiful eyes formed in the misty ether, for these were the eyes of Judas Iscariot. It was the most terrifying thing Casper Dame had ever experienced in his entire existence on the planet—a planet, with its climate trouble, as doomed as the Professor, and like him, also an old friend.

In one huge spasmodic jerk, Casper was suddenly held by invisible forces and lifted from his chair. Swiftly, he hovered above the room until thrown through the air until he crashed against one of the study walls where he momentarily was rendered suspended, when abruptly, he experienced something HOLDING him—HOLDING HIS ARMS AND LEGS.

The huge iron nails came from nowhere. They entered and pierced his hands and feet. The young English teacher squealed in agonized pain as each one was hammered into his flesh and cracked his bones. Yet, this was no ordinary crucifixion, or one popular storytelling explained at times. No, it was different in so many ways—most notably because he had been brought here to this house and suffered being crucified UPSIDE DOWN.

Through bloodied vision, just about to die, Casper watched as the fully-garbed solitary ghost of the Templar appeared from the misty smog to retain the spirited Judas document, which the knight placed in his leather pouch for safety. Casper had no idea about any of it. A curse, at the end of the day, was simply a curse. And what better magician than Judas?

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

## INCIDENT IN THE AIRPORT by Christopher T Dabrowski

*Locale—airport, briefing hall:*

Asia dressed in a terribly kitschy, pink dress, chewing gum and making balloons stands in a queue to the scanning gate. She hears a command given to someone at the front of the queue:

- *Please leave your luggage and all things here.*

Asia frowns, scratching her head. Then she spits out chewing gum. She takes her dress off. Then a bra, freeing her supple bobbies. When her panties fall to the floor it gets crowded. Women are disgusted, children are surprised, but men excited. Naked, Asia approaches the belt. She lays down her luggage and clobber. A guard runs up to her and draws aside.

- *But you said to leave all things.*

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

## THE LAST TERRAN by Blake Rogers

### 2 The Attack

At last they reached Sporn City, the main settlement on the planet and site of Sporn spaceport, its landing field currently empty of space vessels. The 'city' itself was a meagre collection of mud huts, dirt floored, linked by crudely fashioned duckboards. These 'streets' were home to a heterogeneous mixture of native Sporn and interstellar wanderers like Lod, with whom the Sporn traded while they aimlessly awaited the next shuttle out of here.

Into this stinking, festering, noxious dung heap of a place rode Lod Jovis, leading his captive at his saddlebow.

His thumb rested on the control device as he used the barbarian to force a way through the bustle towards the square, on whose edges stood the entrance to the spaceport—currently barred to the impecunious Lod—the administration centre; the Temple of the Flame, centre of what passed for religion on this planet; and the market. On the fourth side of the square was a muddy little river. The market was his intended destination, since it was only here he could have his captive sold. His plan was then to pocket the proceeds, buy himself an exit visa, and spend the rest of the credits on ensuring that his wait for the next ship was as pleasant as this planet could make it.

For the moment, however, Lod's captive made a good icebreaker. The barbarian shambled through the mass of natives, knocking them aside if they did not get out of the way quickly enough, and then Lod and his mount trotted through unimpeded. What brought so many people to this planet the Protean did not know. He had come here as a stowaway, hoping to get somewhere more interesting. Surely this narrow fertile strip held nothing of interest. The question was academic now: he was getting out of here.

At last they came out into the square. Here the crowds were less clotted, and Lod rode towards the market, a collection of tents and stalls surrounded by a ramshackle palisade. The captive at his side seemed quiescent, but Lod knew not to trust him. He kept the control device in his hand, ready to send a bolt of energy through the barbarian at an instant's notice. If that didn't work, he might be forced to use the sword he had taken when he enslaved the barbarian, but it would be unprofitable to kill his captive. Yet now the market was in sight the chances of an escape attempt were their highest.

The captive's hairy head had sunk almost to his chest. Suddenly it shot up, his attention caught by a newcomer on the scene. A tall, pale skinned Sporn had stridden into the square, forcing its way past the other natives who viewed its appearance with apparent consternation. Lod watched dully from his mount as the Sporn rooted itself almost in the exact centre of the square, facing the log walled administration centre.

Lod cast the pale skinned newcomer an unfavourable look. The Sporn was standing stock-still but as Lod watched it was trembling, its head shaking back and forth. The head exploded.

Lod almost fell from his saddle in surprise. His control unit dropped from his nerveless hand into the mud. The barbarian seemed not to have noticed, however; he was watching the

Sporn. The head was gone, leaving a headless trunk still standing. The other natives were running. From the cracked ruin of the head was drifting a white plume of... smoke?

No, that wasn't it. Something else floated gossamer like on the gentle breeze. Drifting down on every hand, it began to settle on the churned up mud of the square. Now the headless body fell withering to the ground, as if its task was done.

By now most of the Sporn had fled the square and the sounds of consternation were spreading through the settlement. The barbarian was peering at the ground nearby. He still had not seen that Lod had dropped the control device. Lod quietly slid from the saddle, intent on retrieving the control device before it got into the wrong paws.

The barbarian swung round. Lod froze, as if caught committing a criminal act. The barbarian's face was grim. He gestured.

'Beware!'

Lod whirled round to see the ground swelling up beside him with a pale shape like the Sporn newcomer who had died so strangely. Another appeared, mushrooming up from the mud. And another... and another... they were all around him! The head of the first one to appear burst with a pop, and more white smoke—no! Lod Jovis thought numbly. Spores!—drifted gently away.

Desperate, the barbarian seized the sword from Lod's saddlebag, then pounded forwards, feet splattering through the mud. With a swing of his great arm, he cut the next pale Sporn to the ground but even as he did its head popped, showering him with spores. Roaring, the barbarian clawed at the air. More spores drifted down to the ground, and almost immediately swelled up into pale Sporn. Some landed on the bodies of running green Sporn, who slowed their movements as their hide lost its green hue.

It was happening all around the square. The pale Sporn reproduced exponentially, swelling up into full size before their heads popped, releasing more spores that grew into more pale Sporn or infected the greens. Lod cursed, wishing he had a beam weapon about his person, but they were forbidden on the planet. The green Sporn regarded any source of fire or heat as sacred, and it was an offense to prostitute the Holy Flame. All beam weapons were kept locked in a hut within the spaceport—beyond Lod's reach.

The barbarian ran. Lod snarled.

'Come back here!' he shrilled, and searched the mud for the fallen control device.

The cunning barbarian had seized this distraction as a chance to escape. Lod should have guessed he would. Now where was that device?

His zymoron was also fleeing. He was almost entirely surrounded by pale Sporn. The square was thick with them. Curse the green Sporn and their foolish religion! A beam weapon would clear the square in no time. And curse that coward barbarian. Lod turned to run, but the pale Sporn surrounded him on all sides. He cowered down to his knees.

But they seemed not to notice him, intent on reproduction. The air was thick with spores, each swelling into fecund life the instant they touched the muddy ground. Decisively, Lod rose and tried to force his way through the crowd of pale beings, but he soon found that there were too many of them. So many that he was trapped. He felt pale hands pawing at him. One covered his face, and he felt himself suffocating.

With an effort, he tore himself free and staggered away into a more open area. The barbarian had not fled the square, but was wildly swinging his sword, fighting the interloping pale Sporn. The only other person Lod could see in the square was a willowy green Sporn who stood in the entrance to the administration centre, watching the chaos in apparent horror.

‘You lummo!’ Lod shouted at his erstwhile captive. ‘You’ll never defeat them like that.’

The barbarian cut down another Sporn but its exploding head exhaled a cloud of spores right at his face and he choked. Wiping tears from his eyes, the barbarian yelled, ‘How will I defeat them, then?’

An idea flashed through Lod’s mind. ‘Fire! Get fire! That will destroy them!’

The barbarian thrust the sword into his belt and sprinted over to the temple. Lod fought his way through the growing ranks of Sporn. Where was his mount? He had lost everything this day, his chance of leaving this planet... Spores filled the air. He began to choke. Writhing, he fell to the ground, his face turning blue.

The stink of burning vegetable matter reached him and he heard the roar of fire, felt a wave of heat rush over him. Still he coughed, but it seemed that the cloud of spores was reducing somehow. He gasped for air, and rolled over onto his back.

Flaming pale Sporn were fleeing past him. Drifting spores dropped blazing from the air. On none of the alien worlds Lod had visited in his wanderings had he seen anything so strange. He saw the barbarian now, blundering through the ranks of pale Sporn. What was it that he now gripped in his mighty paw?

It was an ornate brazier from which blazed a great flame, and he was chasing the pale Sporn down with it. They were highly flammable, Lod Jovis realised as he rose to a crouch; much as he had assumed. The fire was spreading from one Sporn to another, and the spores were burnt black. Now nothing remained of the throng of pale Sporn but ashes, over which stood the barbarian, brazier in one paw now guttering down, an expression of immense arrogance on his face.

Green Sporn had crept back into the square and now stood rooted at its edges, watching the barbarian in amazed silence. The Sporn in the entrance to the administration centre was also watching. Some of the buildings were on fire, the market palisade was blazing. If no one did anything the whole settlement would soon be an inferno.

Lod Jovis noticed the control device lying half trampled in the mud nearby. He snatched it up.

‘Look what you’ve done, you clumsy lummo!’ he scolded the barbarian. ‘The market and everything else is going to go up in flames! I only meant for you to destroy the invaders.’

‘I found the brazier in the temple, O wizard,’ rumbled the barbarian. ‘They worship fire, seemingly.’

‘And look what it does to them,’ said Lod, as if it had been the barbarian’s plan. ‘Those pale ones... you’ve killed them all. But now the rest are in danger.’ His skin prickled with mortification. This was all his fault. But at least he could blame the barbarian.

The green Sporn had been galvanised into action, and were organising long bucket chains to extinguish the flames with water from the river. As they did so, a small group of Sporn came up to Lod and his slave. Two of them gently detached the brazier from the barbarian’s paw and took it back into the temple.

‘My humblest apologies, O Sporn,’ said Lod hastily. ‘My captive has caused endless damage. He was well intentioned. He thought, as did I, that the pale interlopers constituted a threat of some kind.’ He laughed nervously as the Sporn turned their featureless faces in his direction. ‘But now the lummo has almost burnt down the entire town. Of course, I am willing to make all possible reparations. Perhaps you will accept this slave in payment?’

The leader of the Sporn contingent said nothing, but made a pointing gesture at Lod, then at the barbarian. Then beckoned. Without turning, he moved in the opposite direction. Lod, with heavy heart, began following him. He seized the barbarian by his brawny forearm and dragged him along as the other Sporn closed ranks behind them. They were taken towards the administration centre.

‘You’ve got a lot to make up for, you great lummo,’ he hissed at the barbarian, who loped along at his side, an imperturbable expression on his brutal face. ‘Do you know nothing about alien relations? One must respect all the customs and traditions of an alien planet’s inhabitants. One doesn’t simply stroll into a native temple and desecrate their holy of holies.’

‘All I know of other planets is how to conquer them,’ the barbarian muttered, hand set arrogantly on the hilt of his sword. ‘Once I trod a thousand worlds beneath my feet, heaped up the heads of aliens into great pyramids in the blazing ruins of their capital cities. I crushed a score of rebellions on a score of worlds, expanded the empire, drove back other barbarians, fought for emperors who came and went. I was a hero to half the galaxy, a curse on the lips of the rest. These vegetable men are nothing.’

Lod listened to these incoherent boasts with mounting anger and incredulity.

‘I don’t know half of what you’re talking about, barbarian, but I’ve half a mind to send a terminal shock through you. The only thing that deters me is the fact that I hope to sell you and make a profit, or at least buy myself out of the mess your impetuosity and impiety has put me in.’ He scowled. ‘Who are you, anyway?’

Introductions had seemed unnecessary when he enslaved the barbarian. Now that they were facing judgement of the Sporn, it might help if he knew his brutal companion’s name.

‘I am Kroom,’ the barbarian said distantly. ‘Kroom the Terran, Imperial Galactic Warlord. And who are you, O wizard?’

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

## BURN, WITCH, BURN by A Merritt

### III. —The Death and Nurse Walters

THAT Braile had voiced the thought lurking behind my own mind—and without a shred of evidence so far as I could see to support it—irritated me.

“You’re a better man than I am, Sherlock Holmes,” I said sarcastically. He flushed, but repeated stubbornly:

“They were murdered.”

“La strega!” whispered Ricori. I glared at him.

“Quit beating around the bush, Braile. What’s your evidence?”

“You were away from Peters almost two hours; I was with him practically from start to finish. As I studied him, I had the feeling that the whole trouble was in the mind—that it was not his body, his nerves, his brain, that refused to function, but his will. Not quite that, either. Put it that his will had ceased to care about the functions of the body—and was centred upon killing it!”

“What you’re outlining now is not murder but suicide. Well, it has been done. I’ve watched a few die because they had lost the will to live—”

“I don’t mean that,” he interrupted. “That’s passive. This was active—”

“Good God, Braile!” I was honestly shocked. “Don’t tell me you’re suggesting all eight passed from the picture by willing themselves out of it—and one of them only an eleven-year-old child!”

“I didn’t say that,” he replied. “What I felt was that it was not primarily Peters’ own will doing it, but another’s will, which had gripped his, had wound itself around, threaded itself through his will. Another’s will which he could not, or did not want to resist—at least toward the end.”

“La maledetta strega!” muttered Ricori again.

I curbed my irritation and sat considering; after all, I had a wholesome respect for Braile. He was too good a man, too sound, for one to ride roughshod over any idea he might voice.

“Have you any idea as to how these murders, if murders they are, were carried out?” I asked politely.

“Not the slightest,” said Braile.

“Let’s consider the murder theory. Ricori, you have had more experience in this line than we, so listen carefully and forget your witch,” I said, brutally enough. “There are three essential factors to any murder—method, opportunity, motive. Take them in order. First—the method.



“There are three ways a person can be killed by poison or by infection: through the nose—and this includes by gases—through the mouth and through the skin. There are two or three other avenues. Hamlet’s father, for example, was poisoned, we read, through the ears, although I’ve always had my doubts about that. I think, pursuing the hypothesis of murder, we can bar out all approaches except mouth, nose, skin—and, by the last, entrance to the blood can be accomplished by absorption as well as by penetration. Was there any evidence whatever on the skin, in the membranes of the respiratory channels, in the throat, in the viscera, stomach, blood, nerves, brain—of anything of the sort?”

“You know there wasn’t,” he answered.

“Quite so. Then except for the problematical lighted corpuscle, there is absolutely no evidence of method. Therefore we have absolutely nothing in essential number one upon which to base a theory of murder. Let’s take number two—opportunity.

“We have a tarnished lady, a racketeer, a respectable spinster, a bricklayer, an eleven-year-old schoolgirl, a banker, an acrobat and a trapeze performer. There, I submit, is about as incongruous a congregation as is possible. So far as we can tell, none of them except conceivably the circus men—and Peters and the Darnley woman—had anything in common. How could anyone, who had opportunity to come in close enough contact to Peters the racketeer to kill him, have equal opportunity to come in similar close contact with Ruth Bailey, the Social Registerite maiden lady? How could one who had found a way to make contact with banker Marshall come equally close to acrobat Standish? And so on—you perceive the difficulty? To administer whatever it was that caused the deaths—if they were murder—could have been no casual matter. It implies a certain degree of intimacy. You agree?”

“Partly,” he conceded.

“Had all lived in the same neighbourhood, we might assume that they might normally have come within range of the hypothetical killer. But they did not—”

“Pardon me, Dr. Lowell,” Ricori interrupted, “but suppose they had some common interest which brought them within that range.”

“What possible common interest could so divergent a group have had?”

“One common interest is very plainly indicated in these reports and in what McCann has told us.”

“What do you mean, Ricori?”

“Babies,” he answered. “Or at least—children.”

Braile nodded: “I noticed that.”

“Consider the reports,” Ricori went on. “Miss Bailey is described as charitable and devoted to children. Her charities, presumably, took the form of helping them. Marshall, the banker, was interested in child-welfare. The bricklayer, the acrobat and the trapeze performer had

children. Anita was a child. Peters and the Darnley woman were, to use McCann's expression, 'daffy' over a baby."

"But," I objected, "if they are murders, they are the work of one hand. It is beyond range of possibility that all of the eight were interested in one baby, one child, or one group of children."

"Very true," said Braile. "But all could have been interested in one especial, peculiar thing which they believed would be of benefit to or would delight the child or children to whom each was devoted. And that peculiar article might be obtainable in only one place. If we could find that this is the fact, then certainly that place would bear investigation."

"It is," I said, "undeniably worth looking into. Yet it seems to me that the common-interest idea works two ways. The homes of those who died might have had something of common interest to an individual. The murderer, for example, might be a radio adjuster. Or a plumber. Or a collector. An electrician, and so and so on."

Braile shrugged a shoulder. Ricori did not answer; he sat deep in thought, as though he had not heard me.

"Please listen, Ricori," I said. "We've gotten this far. Method of murder—if it is murder—unknown. Opportunity for killing—find some person whose business, profession or what not was a matter of interest to each of the eight, and whom they visited or who visited them; said business being concerned, possibly, in some way with babies or older children. Now for motive. Revenge, gain, love, hate, jealousy, self-protection? None of these seems to fit, for again we come to that barrier of dissimilar stations in life."

"How about the satisfaction of an appetite for death—wouldn't you call that a motive?" asked Braile, oddly. Ricori half rose from his chair, stared at him with a curious intentness; then sank back, but I noticed he was now all alert.

"I was about to discuss the possibility of a homicidal maniac," I said, somewhat testily.

"That's not exactly what I mean. You remember Longfellow's lines:

*I shot an arrow into the air.  
It fell to earth I know not where.*

"I've never acquiesced in the idea that that was an inspired bit of verse meaning the sending of an argosy to some unknown port and getting it back with a surprise cargo of ivory and peacocks, apes and precious stones. There are some people who can't stand at a window high above a busy street, or on top of a skyscraper, without wanting to throw something down. They get a thrill in wondering who or what will be hit. The feeling of power. It's a bit like being God and unloosing the pestilence upon the just and the unjust alike. Longfellow must have been one of those people. In his heart, he wanted to shoot a real arrow and then mull over in his imagination whether it had dropped in somebody's eye, hit a heart, or just missed someone and skewered a stray dog. Carry this on a little further. Give one of these people power and opportunity to loose death at random, death whose cause he is sure cannot be detected. He sits in his obscurity, in safety, a god of death. With no special malice against

anyone, perhaps—impersonal, just shooting his arrows in the air, like Longfellow's archer, for the fun of it."

"And you wouldn't call such a person a homicidal maniac?" I asked, dryly.

"Not necessarily. Merely free of inhibitions against killing. He might have no consciousness of wrongdoing whatever. Everybody comes into this world under sentence of death—time and method of execution unknown. Well, this killer might consider himself as natural as death itself. No one who believes that things on earth are run by an all-wise, all-powerful God thinks of Him as a homicidal maniac. Yet He looses wars, pestilences, misery, disease, floods, earthquakes—on believers and unbelievers alike. If you believe things are in the hands of what is vaguely termed Fate—would you call Fate a homicidal maniac?"

"Your hypothetical archer," I said, "looses a singularly unpleasant arrow, Braile. Also, the discussion is growing far too metaphysical for a simple scientist like me. Ricori, I can't lay this matter before the police. They would listen politely and laugh heartily after I had gone. If I told all that is in my mind to the medical authorities, they would deplore the decadence of a hitherto honoured intellect. And I would rather not call in any private detective agency to pursue inquiries."

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"You have unusual resources," I answered. "I want you to sift every movement of Peters and Hortense Darnley for the past two months. I want you to do all that is possible in the same way with the others—"

I hesitated.

"I want you to find that one place to which, because of their love for children, each of these unfortunates was drawn. For though my reason tells me you and Braile have not the slightest real evidence upon which to base your suspicions, I grudgingly admit to you that I have a feeling you may be right."

"You progress, Dr. Lowell," Ricori said, formally. "I predict that it will not be long before you will as grudgingly admit the possibility of my witch."

"I am sufficiently abased," I replied, "by my present credulity not to deny even that."

Ricori laughed, and busied himself copying the essential information from the reports. Ten o'clock struck. McCann came up to say that the car was waiting and we accompanied Ricori to the door. The gunman had stepped out and was on the steps when a thought came to me.

"Where do you begin, Ricori?"

"With Peters' sister."

"Does she know Peters is dead?"

"No," he answered, reluctantly. "She thinks him away. He is often away for long, and for reasons which she understands he is not able to communicate with her directly. At such times

I keep her informed. And the reason I have not told her of Peters' death is because she dearly loved him and would be in much sorrow—and in a month, perhaps, there is to be another baby."

"Does she know the Darnley woman is dead, I wonder?"

"I do not know. Probably. Although McCann evidently does not."

"Well," I said, "I don't see how you're going to keep Peters' death from her now. But that's your business."

"Exactly," he answered, and followed McCann to the car.

Braile and I had hardly gotten back to my library when the telephone rang. Braile answered it. I heard him curse, and saw that the hand that held the transmitter was shaking. He said: "We will come at once."

He set the transmitter down slowly, then turned to me with twitching face.

"Nurse Walters has it!"

I felt a distinct shock. As I have written, Walters was a perfect nurse, and besides that a thoroughly good and attractive young person. A pure Gaelic type—blue-black hair, blue eyes with astonishingly long lashes, milk-white skin—yes, singularly attractive. After a moment or two of silence I said:

"Well, Braile, there goes all your fine-spun reasoning. Also your murder theory. From the Darnley woman to Peters to Walters. No doubt now that we're dealing with some infectious disease."

"Isn't there?" he asked, grimly. "I'm not prepared to admit it. I happen to know Walters spends most of her money on a little invalid niece who lives with her—a child of eight. Ricori's thread of common interest moves into her case."

"Nevertheless," I said as grimly, "I intend to see that every precaution is taken against an infectious malady."

By the time we had put on our hats and coats, my car was waiting. The hospital was only two blocks away, but I did not wish to waste a moment. I ordered Nurse Walters removed to an isolated ward used for observation of suspicious diseases. Examining her, I found the same flaccidity as I had noted in the case of Peters. But I observed that, unlike him, her eyes and face showed little of terror. Horror there was, and a great loathing. Nothing of panic. She gave me the same impression of seeing both within and without. As I studied her I distinctly saw a flash of recognition come into her eyes, and with it appeal. I looked at Braile—he nodded; he, too, had seen it.

I went over her body inch by inch. It was unmarked except for a pinkish patch upon her right instep. Closer examination made me think this had been some superficial injury, such as a chafing, or a light burn or scald. If so, it had completely healed; the skin was healthy.

In all other ways her case paralleled that of Peters—and the others. She had collapsed, the nurse told me, without warning while getting dressed to go home. My inquiry was interrupted by an exclamation from Braile. I turned to the bed and saw that Walters' hand was slowly lifting, trembling as though its raising was by some terrific strain of will. The index finger was half-pointing. I followed its direction to the disclosed patch upon the foot. And then I saw her eyes, by that same tremendous effort, focus there.

The strain was too great; the hand dropped, the eyes again were pools of horror. Yet clearly she had tried to convey to us some message, something that had to do with that healed wound.

I questioned the nurse as to whether Walters had said anything to anyone about any injury to her foot. She replied that she had said nothing to her, nor had any of the other nurses spoken of it. Nurse Robbins, however, shared the apartment with Harriet and Diana. I asked who Diana was, and she told me that was the name of Walters' little niece. This was Robbins' night off, I found, and gave instructions to have her get in touch with me the moment she returned to the apartment.

By now Hoskins was taking his samples for the blood tests. I asked him to concentrate upon the microscopic smears and to notify me immediately if he discovered one of the luminous corpuscles. Bartano, an outstanding expert upon tropical diseases, happened to be in the hospital, as well as Somers, a brain specialist in whom I had strong confidence. I called them in for observation, saying nothing of the previous cases. While they were examining Walters, Hoskins called up to say he had isolated one of the shining corpuscles. I asked the pair to go to Hoskins and give me their opinion upon what he had to show them. In a little while they returned, somewhat annoyed and mystified. Hoskins, they said, had spoken of a "leucocyte containing a phosphorescent nucleus." They had looked at the slide but had been unable to find it. Somers very seriously advised me to insist upon Hoskins having his eyes examined. Bartano said caustically that he would have been quite as surprised to have seen such a thing as he would have been to have observed a miniature mermaid swimming around in an artery. By these remarks, I realized afresh the wisdom in my silence.

Nor did the expected changes in expression occur. The horror and loathing persisted, and were commented upon by both Bartano and Somers as "unusual." They agreed that the condition must be caused by a brain lesion of some kind. They did not think there was any evidence either of microbic infection or of drugs or poison. Agreeing that it was a most interesting case, and asking me to let them know its progress and outcome, they departed.

At the beginning of the fourth hour, there was a change of expression, but not what I had been expecting. In Walters' eyes, on her face, was only loathing. Once I thought I saw a flicker of the devilish anticipation flash over her face. If so, it was quickly mastered. About the middle of the fourth hour, we saw recognition again return to her eyes. Also, there was a perceptible rally of the slowing heart. I sensed an intense gathering of nervous force.

And then her eyelids began to rise and fall, slowly, as though by tremendous effort, in measured time and purposefully. Four times they raised and lowered; there was a pause; then nine times they lifted and fell; again the pause, then they closed and opened once. Twice she did this—

"She's trying to signal," whispered Braile. "But what?"

Again the long-lashed lids dropped and rose—four times... pause... nine times... pause... once...

“She’s going,” whispered Braille.

I knelt, stethoscope at ears... slower... slower beat the heart... and slower... and stopped.

“She’s gone!” I said, and arose. We bent over her, waiting for that last hideous spasm, convulsion—whatever it might be.

It did not come. Stamped upon her dead face was the loathing, and that only. Nothing of the devilish glee. Nor was there sound from her dead lips. Beneath my hand I felt the flesh of her white arm begin to stiffen.

The unknown death had destroyed Nurse Walters—there was no doubt of that. Yet in some obscure, vague way I felt that it had not conquered her.

Her body, yes. But not her will!

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

8: The Stranger

POLARIS stood so long at the lip of the strange path that Rose Emer uncurled from her seat on the sledge and ran forward to see what held him.

“A path—in this wilderness!” she cried in wonder. And then: “Why, we must be near to one of Captain Scoland’s stations. Our troubles are nearly at an end.”

“No, lady; I think these tracks lead to no station of your captain’s, and our troubles may be just begun. Here are the tracks of many men—”

“But they must be those of our men,” returned Rose Emer, “for who else could have made them?”

Polaris stepped into the trail and examined it with keen eyes.

“Lady, did they of your company dress their feet as do you or as I do?” he asked, pointing to his moccasins of bearskin.

“Why, they wore heavy boots of felt, with an overshoe of leather, spiked with steel,” said the girl.

“And did they have with them any beasts other than the dogs of which you have told me?” queried Polaris.

Rose Emer shook her head. “No, they had only the dogs,” she replied. “What tracks are there?”

Polaris arose from his examination of the trail. “Now, of all the strange things we have met by land and by sea, I account this the strangest of all,” he said. “Here are the footprints of many men whose feet were clad as are my own, and with them the marks of a heavy sledge and the hacks of four-footed animals new to me—unless, indeed, they be those of dogs in boots—”

“What? Show me where!” Rose Emer knelt beside him to stare at the medley of footprints. She looked up at him wide-eyed a moment later.

“Why, this is impossible!” she gasped. “And yet—what can it mean? Those are the hoofprints of unshod horses!”

Polaris smiled down at her. “Remember the showers of ashes, Rose Emer; and that I told you that we were to learn some great new thing if we won safe to shore,” he said. “Now are we at its gates. Stay—something glimmers yonder in the trail!”

He strode away, and returned shortly, bearing something that he had plucked from the snow.

“Bore any man in your company aught like this?” he asked, and held out to her a long, slender-bladed knife.

Wider grew the eyes of the girl in wonder as she took the weapon from him and looked at it. It was of one piece, both blade and shaft, nicely balanced and exquisitely wrought; but it was of no metal which the girl had ever seen. Only in the finest of iridescent glass had she ever seen the bewildering play of colours that was reflected from its bright blade when the sunlight fell on it. It was nearly a foot long, needlepointed and razor-keen.

From the glittering dagger to the man's face the girl looked slowly. "There is no metal known in the world to-day like that from which this knife is made," said she. "Who and what are they who dropped it here? And here, there are letters on the blade. They look like Greek."

She pointed to a beautifully clear inscription running down the blade. It read as follows:

**ΟΧΑΛΚΕΥΣΚΑΡΔΕΠΟΙΗΜΕ**

Polaris took the knife quickly and read where the girl pointed.

"A strange thing in a strange land," he said. "The words are Greek. They read: 'Ho chalkeus Kard epoie me'—'Kard the Smith made me.'"

In the midst of her amazement at their discovery the girl marvelled again at the living wonder who stood before them—a man who had survived in this awful wilderness, and who had there acquired through the patience of his father an education superior to her own, with all her advantages. For Polaris spoke and read Greek and something of Latin, besides being conversant with several of the languages of the modern world.

"Now we must make choice," he said. "Shall we cross this path and go on, seeking a pass in the mountains? Shall we follow it back whither it came from, or shall we follow on whither it leads, and asked of them who made it if there be a way to the north that we may take?"

"Polaris," she answered, and the heart of the man thrilled to the answer, for it was the first time he had heard his name on her lips, "it must be as you think best. In these places I am helpless, and you are the master. We will do whatever you think for the best."

"No, lady; in no way am I the master," he replied quickly. "I do but wish to serve you. Perhaps it were better to go on alone. And then, perhaps again, it were much time and wandering saved to find these folk and ask them of the ways. It may be that they, too, have a ship and are on the trail of the great pole, although something seems to tell me that such is not so."

"You mean that you think they live here?" asked the girl.

Polaris inclined his head. "Yes, lady, and I am curious to see what manner of men they may be, they who drive horses across the snows and leave knives of unknown metal to mark their trail. Now it is for you to say."



THE end of it was that they turned south on the trail of the strange people, and as they went they wondered much who Kard the Smith might be, who stamped his wares with ancient Greek inscriptions, yet who did not shoe his horses—or ponies, for the hoofprints were very small.

It was only after some urging that Polaris persuaded the pack to take the path. When they did he let them out to their speed, for the going was plain, and he had no fear of accident in a road travelled by so many. Straight on the trail led them toward the cloud-tipped mountain cluster that lay dim to the south.

As they travelled other circumstances arose to puzzle them. Once a flight of strange birds passed far above them, flying in the same direction. They came to a spot where the strangers had made camp, and there were the remains of a fire with charred wood. Then as they drew nearer, with many miles passed, they saw that the haze which hung about the mountain summits appeared to be not of clouds, but of smoke.

On the second stage of their journey Polaris halted the dogs at a new wonder. “Lady,” he said, “look hard and tell me the colour of those hills, or is it that my eyes are giving way to the snow blindness?”

Rose Emer arose in the sledge and gazed at the hills, and cried: “Green! Green! But how can they be?”

“Warm air, green hills, and people with horses,” Polaris smiled. “It seems that such are not all in the north. Ah, the good green hills I have read of and which I have so longed to see!”

On sped the dogs, and nearer and nearer loomed the hills of green, set like immense, dull emeralds in the white of the snows. Only at their summits were they black and craggy and scarred. Above them spiralled shifting clouds of smoke.

And as they journeyed, the sun shining on the softening snows, and the air growing warmer and warmer, in an ice-locked sound five hundred miles to the north, a little company of weary-faced men gathered on the deck of the good ship Felix, and one of their number read the burial service for the repose of Rose and John Emer and Homer Burleson, strayed from the ship and given up for dead after a searching party had failed to find any trace of them.

As the travellers neared the base of the foot-hills of the mountain range the ground became more uneven, being broken by rock slopes and small hills, many of which were bare of snow. Around these the trail wound zigzag. They swung around one of the sharp curves, and Polaris reined in the dogs.

“Now, lady, here comes one along the trail who may solve for us all our riddles!” he cried, and pointed ahead.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)