

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 28
12TH JANUARY 2019

THE THING THEY CREATED

BY BRAD
GALLOWAY—
YOU
BLAME ME FOR
YOUR SISTER'S
DISAPPEARANCE...

FROM THE PRAYER BOOK OF THE ANT

BY PAWEL
MARKIEWICZ—
PROFITIOUSLY
GORGEOUS
DAYDREAMS...

BESIDE THE DYING FIRE CARLTON HERZOG

PICKLOCK LANE EW FARNSWORTH

WWW.SCHLOCK.CO.UK

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

PUBLISHED BY:
Schlock! Publications
(www.schlock.co.uk)

Schlock! Webzine

*Copyright © 2019 by Vincent Davis, Brad Galloway, EW Farnsworth, John C Adams,
Carlton Herzog, Pawel Markiewicz, Kevin O'Brien, A Merritt, Charles B Stilson*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 15, Issue 28
12th January 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. 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

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 *Science Fiction Space* by [Thomas Budach](#) 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

[THE THING THEY CREATED](#) by Brad Galloway—*You blame me for your sister's disappearance...* HORROR

[FROM THE PRAYER BOOK OF THE ANT](#) by Pawel Markiewicz—*Propitiously gorgeous daydreams...* FLASH FICTION

[BESIDE THE DYING FIRE](#) by Carlton Herzog—*A fantastic plan to save us...* SCIENCE FICTION

[PICKLOCK LANE](#) by EW Farnsworth—*Who was Molly the whore?* STEAMPUNK NOIR
[REVIEW](#) by John C Adams—*Burnt (Perception Book 1)* by Pat Nguyen-Smith and Mary Harris... ARTICLE

[THE ADVENTURE OF THE TOXIC CELEBUTANTE](#) Part One by Kevin O'Brien—*"What is this place?" she asked.* HEROIC FANTASY

[BURN, WITCH, BURN](#) Chapter Fifteen by A Merritt—*The Witch Girl...* HORROR CLASSIC

[POLARIS OF THE SNOWS](#) Chapter Twenty-One by Charles B Stilson—*Hope—and a Will...* SCIENCE FANTASY CLASSIC

EDITORIAL

This week Robert writes a letter to Antonio, to explain a long ago disappearance. An annalist ant composes a paeon to a butterfly. An American president unveils his plans to save humanity from extra-terrestrial peril. Fatty Millstone accompanies a toymaker to rescue a damsel in distress. John C Adams reviews a paranormal romance.

In a new Dreamlands story, Eile and Sunny encounter a jungle deity. Lowell encounters the Witch Girl. And Polaris of the Snows meets an aeronautical expedition.

—Gavin Chappell

PS: Still time to vote for your favourite webzine in the [Preditors and Editors Annual Poll](#)! Ends January 14th.

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



[Return to Contents](#)

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"IT'S A SHAME I'VE GOT TO TAKE IT DOWN,
THE TREE CAME OUT GOOD THIS YEAR."

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](#)

THE THING THEY CREATED by Brad Galloway

Dear Antonio,

Hey, Tony. It's me, Robert. I know we haven't talked in years, and I know why. You blame me for your sister's disappearance. You never said it outright, but you didn't have to. You said it with the looks you gave me while they questioned me. You said it with your silence when your father accused me of killing her and dropping her body in a cave. You said it when you "failed" to notice me in the halls or answered with a single word my questions you couldn't ignore.

I don't blame you. What happened made me look very suspicious, and I wasn't telling the truth. I've been hiding a secret like a bomb, a bomb that would go off if I spoke about it. So, I tucked it out of the way. I put it in a shoebox at the back of my mind hoping maybe I could forget about it and have a normal life. Did you know I'm 37 and still a virgin? Did you know that I work from home and I only go out to buy food? Now with food delivery services, I don't even have to do that most of the time. The bomb has ruined my life; I've never been able to put it out of my mind. I've never been able to open up. I'm tired of this bomb. It's time to blow it up.

I guess I should start when you and the other Boy Scouts had gone off to fix a bike trail or some other goody-two-shoes project. I couldn't do it. It was springtime and all those blooming trees were shooting DNA at each other and raping my sinuses. Ugh, why do plants have to be so disgusting? I can't look at a field of weeds without wanting to rub my eyes and scratch at my ankles. Anyway, I faked illness. Well, not faked, but exaggerated my symptoms. Nothing too bad, I just wanted to get out of the project, not the whole campout. I wasn't going to miss the chance for s'mores and to sit by Tori at the campfire. Sorry, I know she was your sister, but I did have designs on her. She was pretty; she like comic books as much as I did, and she wasn't stuck up like a lot of girls our age. This was a time when being a geek still carried a social risk, and she was willing to take it. I was sitting in our tent, reading comics when she snuck off to see me. Don't worry, we didn't hang out in the tent, we went to a stream instead. There was a huge, sturdy log crossing the stream, making a perfect bench to sit over the rushing water. The creek was perfect with its gentle bubbling sounds and dappled sunlight filtered through the tall trees. It was the perfect place to for two kids to fall in love. At least that's what I liked to think. Not sure what Tori thought, but she picked the spot. I picked a white mayflower for her hair. It went well with the white sundress she wore. I always felt kind of sorry for you, being that close all day to someone so beautiful, but being her brother you could never fully appreciate her.

We sat and talked for at least an hour. It was the easiest, freest conversation of my life. We talked about comics, school, scouts, and she talked a lot about your dad. Mostly she complained about him, saying he was too overprotective and was trying to get her to go to a "Purity Ball" so she could be protected until it was time to pass ownership of her to another man. I might be a little biased here, but your dad really was a nut job. No offense. I was so engrossed in our conversation, I didn't even notice the tickling sensation on my hand. I didn't notice it until it got to my leg and Tori gasped. That's when I looked down. A spider, as large as your dad's hand and twice as hairy, was staring up at me with eight black orbs and a tangle of eight legs. I screamed. I know everyone said they heard a girl's scream, and Tori took credit for it, but no, it was me. I fell backward into the water. I immediately got up and ran

around like a Muppet on fire trying to shake it off. The monster must have fallen off me when I fell back into the stream. Hopefully, the fucker drowned.

Parents started to show up; my dad, staring down and shaking his head with a huge grin; Scoutmaster Sandal-Sock's wife, fussing over me checking every bone in my body; and your dad, his face like a boiled ham with an angry woolly bear stapled to it. If there hadn't been witnesses, I'm sure he would have hit me with that ugly iron ring of his. Instead, all he could do was threaten me in his broken English.

"You stay away. Don't talk to her." He pointed at your sister and shook his meaty finger to make sure I got the message. That's when Tori got down from the log and they started yelling at each other in rapid Spanish. He made her go back to the tent, and she gave me a sad sort of look and he yelled at her again. I turned to my dad in protest, but he just held up a placating hand and said we had to respect his wishes.

That night at the campfire I didn't get to sit next to Tori. I caught her eye several times, but your father was always there. He made you sleep in a different tent, too. That just seemed petty. Taking away my best friend for the night. David had gone home early so you took his spot with Kyle, leaving me to a tent by myself. I wish I had gone home early, too.

I climbed into my sleeping bag, turned my flashlight on low and began to read comic books until Scoutmaster Sandal-Socks came by and hit my tent with his stick telling me "lights out." I put my flashlight and comic up and stared at the propane lantern for what seemed like hours. I watched the dim glow and listened to the hypocritical chatter coming from the adult camp.

"Lights out my ass," I said to myself.

I must have dozed off after that because the sound of chatter was replaced by the sound of loud snores. I also heard what I thought was the sound of footsteps off in the forest. Must have been someone going to pee, I thought. That's when I heard it. A soft, melodious tune coming from the forest. There were no words behind it, but the sound was attractive. It put me in mind of Tori, standing on a beach in a bathing suit, or perhaps under a waterfall. It didn't even occur to me to be worried about the sound. Nothing that beautiful could be bad. I thought about getting up to stick my head out of the tent, and see if I could locate the direction of the song. That's when I noticed the shadow.

At first, I just thought it was a hole in the light. Its form was blurry and indistinct. Then I began to notice the eight individual feet clinging to the side of the tent, and attached to those eight feet were eight legs all joined together at the base of one hairy spider body with two vicious looking fangs, and all of those parts were looking for a way into my tent—a way to nibble at my exposed toes and fingers and eyes and nose and genitals and the insides of my thighs and every other tender bit of flesh and then they would wrap me in their web and drag me back to their spider lair and hang me up from the ceiling and lay eggs in my stomach and then I'd become a meal for their children as they slowly ate their way out of me while I was still alive...

I tried to scream. I really did. My voice only came out as a squeak. A tiny squeak. A mouse's squeak. A dead mouse. A mouse caught in the fangs of a tarantula. A large tarantula. The size of a man. There was another one. Another spider. It climbed on the other wall. I pulled my

sleeping bag up. What if there was one in the bag with me? What was it that I felt crawling up my leg? Help. Someone help. I thought I had said it. Why was no one coming? There was one right next to my head. Had the spiders killed everyone?

“Help!” It came out soft, more like the whimper of a dog than the scream of a boy. My legs unfroze and I started to thrash. The zipper at my feet gave way. “Help!” Louder this time. Loud and clear. I could do it, I knew I could. I needed to wake everyone up. “HEELLPP!”

I heard the groggy sounds of adults waking, then Scoutmaster Sandal-Socks tent being unzipped. “Who needs help?” I could imagine him rubbing his eyes.

I screamed again and I saw the spider’s scatter as he stormed over to my tent. He unzipped it, staring at me and the mess that was my tent. The lower half of my bag was ripped open. Two litres of water had been knocked over and soaked through a few of my comic books. I didn’t care about that right now. I didn’t care if it was my dad’s copy of Wolverine #1, I just wanted out of that tent; I wanted out of that campsite; I wanted out of the entire state of Kentucky.

Instead, I got to go to my dad’s tent. Dad was good about it, but he wouldn’t take me home. I stayed up the rest of the night, rocking on an air mattress with my knees up to my chest and my flashlight gripped so tightly that my knuckles were white. The minute the sky began to lighten I woke my father up and insisted we tear down our tent. As far as I was concerned the trip was over. I didn’t care about anything but getting home, burning everything that came with us, and taking a shower. Dad wouldn’t do it, though. We had to stay and wait for everyone to finish. That’s when your dad woke up.

“Victoria!” he yelled it across the campsite. It took me a moment to realize that was Tori’s full first name. Your father made a beeline for me when he saw me. “You,” he wagged a huge finger at me, the one with the iron ring, “Where is Victoria?”

I told him I didn’t know. I hadn’t seen her since the campout. He grabbed my shirt with his meaty hand and my dad pushed him off me.

“Hey, that’s my son you’re grabbing.” My dad didn’t get angry often, I could have counted the times on one hand, but this time was worth a whole fist. The look your dad gave mine in that moment made me think it was about to come to that. That’s when the Scoutmaster came over.

Your dad had woken up to find Tori gone. You had both seen her before bed. After some relatively calm discussion, everyone started searching the campsite. All the tents, cars, bathrooms, and surrounding woods were searched. All the time, your father was giving me the evil-eye, or whatever they call it in Spain.

I tried to ignore him, my own concern for Tori growing by the minute. I thought back to the footsteps and the song from the night before. But surely those footsteps were too heavy for Tori. I had thought it was someone who had gone to the bathroom and started singing to keep themselves company. I told Sandal-Socks what I had seen and heard the night before, and you were standing there giving me that look. Is that when you started suspecting me, Tony? Did you believe your father? Is that why you agreed to search with me?

You'll remember the next hour as clearly as I do. We searched the north side of the campsite, walking deeper into the woods as the trees grew closer and closer together. I didn't even mind walking through the weeds. My only thought was of finding Tori. Maybe your dad wouldn't hate me then. Maybe I'd impress Tori by finding her. She was probably at the bottom of some hole. I'd jump down like a hero, lift her up on my shoulders, you'd pull her out, and she'd be so impressed she'd give me a kiss right on the spot. Everything would be perfect. It wasn't though. We had the fight. We separated. You went east; I went west. I wish I had gone east. I wish I had gone back south. I wished I had been a younger scout and sent home. I wish anything else had happened.

I came across a stream. It was moving swiftly, rocks cleaning the water as it flowed, and I realized this was probably the same creek her and I had sat over the day before. I wanted to sit down and cry. Was it a bear that got her? There were black bears in the area. Maybe it was a person creeping around in the woods. I didn't know. All I knew was that the longer it took for us to find her, the less likely we were to find her alive. That's when I saw them. Across the creek, I saw a bunch of white mayflowers, just like the one I had picked for Tori the day before. Stepping across the creek on a few high rocks, I made it across without getting too wet. I reached out to grab a flower.

My foot fell through the ground, then the rest of me. My walking stick flew out of my hand and my face hit a rock on the way down and I was unconscious. When I came to I was lying face down in the mud, wet grass and twigs in my hair, my t-shirt soaked. My head hurt, and I was sure my nose was broken. Blood streamed from either nostril, but I couldn't taste it for all the mud. Luckily, my teeth were spared but my lip was swollen. I pushed myself up, and I felt like one big bruise. My arms and legs worked, so I counted myself lucky.

It took me a minute before I got my bearings. I was in a cave, maybe fifteen feet above me, I could see the hole I had fallen through. From the way the light shined in, I guessed it was almost noon. Okay, maybe it was what my watch was telling me. I wasn't a very good scout. I knew enough to wait, though. Wait to be rescued. I yelled out a few times, hoping I would hear an answer back, but neither your voice nor any other voice called back. All I could hear was the rushing of the creek. That was probably all anyone else could hear around here, too. I pulled my backpack off and found the driest bit of ground to sit on. I didn't have much that would help me. As I needed my flashlight the previous night to save me from spiders, its light was dim, but I did have a hanging lantern that I could clip onto my belt. I would save that in case I needed it at night. I had a full water bottle and package of peanut butter crackers. I had a rain poncho, a splint, a first aid kit (which I used to patch up my nose), a bag of trail mix, a compass, a pocket knife, some sunscreen, a flint and steel, a change of clothes, and a whistle. I thanked God for the whistle and I began to blow it. I blew and blew for about an hour, but no answer came. No one heard me.

I sat in that dark cave, alone, injured, cold, and terrified. Each shadow was a spider, each sound was a bear. I kept drawing out and unfolding my pocket knife. It gave me a little bit of courage and I carved the words "Help, I'm lost" in dirt walls. I wonder if it's still there. Every few minutes I'd blow the whistle, I'd dig a bit more, and I would make some sparks with my flint and steel, but I had nothing to burn. Nothing to make a signal with. The sky darkened, and still, no one had found me. My whistles became half-hearted. As the sun faded, I began to see more of the cave, which stretched on in either direction from where I sat. I needed to stay where I was. Someone would find me. The image of other kids coming upon the hole and seeing a skeleton in my clothing sitting on against the wall with a bright orange

whistle between its teeth came into my mind. I began to cry. Manly, I wasn't. I was a scared boy in a dark cave. All I wanted was my father or my mother or even Sandal-Socks. I was worried enough I'd even take a molester if he'd get me out of there after molesting me. I calmed down and took my first gulp of water. I also ate a handful of trail mix before pulling out the poncho and spreading it on the ground to sleep on. Then I pulled out the emergency blanket and crawled under it. I stuck the whistle in my mouth and gave it a few more feeble tweets before passing out.

Sleep didn't last long. I woke up around midnight per the green glow of my wristwatch. The gentle song was back, this time echoing off the walls of the tunnel. The voice was clearly human and it gave me a bit of hope. It also gave me a bit of fear. That was the voice I had heard last night. Last night before the spiders. I laughed at myself. It was a stupid thought. A voice couldn't control spiders. Just in case, though, I pulled out my lantern and looked around with its yellow glow. When I didn't see any of the eight-legged horrors I stood up, leaving the blanket and poncho, but putting my pack on. I did pull out my knife first, just in case. I slipped it into my pocket next to the flint and steel. I wished I still had my walking stick, but it must have fallen into the creek when I fell down the hole because it wasn't here with me. I clipped the lantern onto my belt.

I walked down the tunnel towards the song. It was just as beautiful as the night before. More so, really. Tonight, it meant another human and a way out of this cave. Maybe by this time tomorrow, I'd be at home in my bed, and I'd never set foot in the woods again. I wondered if your sister had made it out. Had they found her? I felt guilty for wanting out when she could still be missing. I kept walking. The tunnel had many bends but no forks, thankfully. It was a large tunnel, you could easily drive an SUV through it and I never had to stoop once. I kept seeing some weird looking fungus on the walls, though. They were pretty much just big white balls from what I could tell. They almost looked like powered doughnuts. I didn't eat one, though.

After a few minutes of walking, stepping over the fungus, and listening to the beautiful song, the tunnel widened, and I could see a bit of moonlight. There was the mouth of the cave. Sweet Saint Anthony, there was the exit and I broke into a run, all thoughts of the song forgotten. I stopped when I noticed the old woman.

She was illuminated by pale moonlight coming from a hole in the wall. The floor sloped up to the exit, meaning that I was only a few feet from freedom. The lady sat, facing the entrance, moving her hands back and forth and I heard knitting needles clicking and saw a white yarn trailing in front of her. Her hair was white, thin, and wispy barely covering the greyish-white scalp underneath. Over her shoulders was draped a white, silk shawl that seemed to glow in the moonlight. I realized the song was coming from her as she worked, sitting on a large, black rock. She must have been a homeless vagrant I thought—a little old lady, whose family had long abandoned her. She needed my help, and maybe she knew the way to camp. Funny how a child's mind works. As an adult, I could see several warning bells with this scene, but not as a young boy who had been taught it was his duty to help little old ladies cross the street.

“Ma’am?”

Her needles stopped and her head perked up like a dog. I saw the corner of huge black spectacles as her head angled slightly towards me.

“Ma’am, can you help me? I fell into the cave back down that tunnel.” I turned to point, only to realize that there were several tunnels, and I couldn’t pick the one I had come out of.

She motioned with her hand to come closer but didn’t turn any further.

I took a few steps closer. “I was camping, and a girl went missing. We were looking for her, and I fell down a hole after I got separated from everyone. That was this morning.”

She moved her head, though whether nodding or shaking, I couldn’t tell.

Another step. “Did you see a girl? A really pretty one, about thirteen, maybe with a flower in her hair.”

This time it was definitely a nod. She had seen Tori. She motioned for me to come closer.

This time I all but broke into a run. “You saw her, that’s great! Where...is...she?”

The old woman spun as fast as a mouse trap, throwing off her shawl, facing me and what I saw...what I saw was the worst nightmare anyone has ever had to see. My lantern illuminated every horrible feature. What I had mistaken for a rock was a huge mass of shiny black chitin and hair, a red hourglass shape underneath. Eight impossibly long, spindly legs, each one razor sharp. Her spider body met with a human-like torso of grey-white skin and eight disgusting, pulsating breasts with black nipples oozing with greenish-white milk. The worst, though, the absolute worst and most maddening thing about her was her face. What I had mistaken for glasses were two huge eyes, surrounded by six smaller ones, and just beneath those a pair of fangs beside a vertical mouth, lined with razor-like teeth and hairs. Between her hands was a huge mass of white silk from which I could see a set of antlers and a solitary, dead eye.

My knees were gelatine and my bowels were water as she let out a hissing sound. I skittered backward on my hands and feet until I put my hand firmly down on one of the large mushrooms only to find out they weren’t mushrooms. I pushed through the outer threads to have a mass of hairy, chitinous bodies crawling all over my hands and I screamed, shaking every part of my body that could move. I found my feet as she began to bowl towards me, a mass of hair, black armour, and those eight glassy eyes.

I didn’t know which hole I had come from, it looked like a wasp nest in its complexity. I just picked a hole large enough for me to fit through, but hopefully too small for her. My lantern lit up the small room, three silk bundles, each the size of a man, lay stacked in one corner. I turned just in time to avoid the swipe of one sword-like leg. I saw half of her horrible, withered face. She stepped back and began to sing once again. The once beautiful song, now more horrible because I imagined it coming from that horrible, lipless mouth. A moment later I saw a small, black spider crawl through the opening, and then another. Black widow spiders with their shiny black bodies, mouse spiders with shiny red heads, tarantulas with large, hairy bodies, and many more too numerous for me to name came pouring through the hole, forming a creeping tide of horror, one that I could only back away from a little bit before I hit a wall. That’s when I fell backward. What I had mistaken for solid stone wall had given way in an avalanche of dirt, stone, and webbing and I found myself sprawled out on the ground in

an open tunnel. One of the spiders reached my foot and I kicked it off. The song changed to a scream of rage and I bolted away from it as fast as I could.

The tunnel was narrow, but I wasn't sure she couldn't follow. I wasn't sure where I was, and there were many branches and turns. I'd like to say there was a pattern as to which one I chose each time, but there wasn't. Just blind panic, and a hope that all of them were behind me and couldn't follow. My chest burned, and still I moved forward. My heart pounded in my ears, and still I moved forward. I tripped, and I got up and continued moving forward. I kept moving, choosing tunnel after tunnel until I heard rushing water. Was it the same creek? Yes. I turned to my right and saw a shaft of moonlight and my poncho and blanket in the mud where I had landed earlier. I looked to my left and I saw firelight reflected off the wall. I knew I couldn't climb out of the hole, but the orange glow of a fire, or maybe a lightbulb, meant people were there or had been there. I turned off my lantern.

I made my way and found a hole in the wall. When I peered through it, I looked down into a round chamber, torches sat in sconces along the walls at regular intervals. I could see three exits to the room, and a huddled mass of black in the centre of the room. The mass of black was shifting slowly, and when they stood up I realized that it was a group of people in hooded robes. A large, dark red hourglass was just barely visible on their backs in the dim torchlight. They turned and I stepped back a little, but no one was looking up at me. Their heads were bowed above their clasped hands. Their hoods were pulled low so all I could see were their mouths muttering a chant.

In the centre of the room where they had been huddled lay a slight, pale figure. They had stripped her of all her clothing, and her hands and legs were bound by what looked like spider silk. Her eyes looked like coins spinning back and forth between her captors, and she had reverted to her native Spanish. She talked rapidly, and I was unable to make out any of the words. Her gaze fixed on one of the robed figures, one with large, trembling hands and an ugly, iron ring. Was it him? Was it your dad? I don't know, but every time he accused me of murdering her I felt like yelling at him, accusing him.

The smallest of the robed figures lowered her hood and raised her hands to the ceiling. I expected to hear her praise some crazy god, instead, all I heard were clicks. The clicks reverberated all through the walls, and soon the others joined in. I guess I really was hearing a prayer to a strange god. Your sister struggled against her bonds, but the silk was too sticky, too strong. Her head rolled around on the floor until eventually, our eyes met. I know she saw me, because there was a silent plea in them, along with the realization that I could do nothing to help her. She might have been urging me to run or urging me to bust in with some karate moves that I didn't know to save her. Whatever she wanted me to do, I couldn't move my feet.

The group stopped clicking, and the leader of the group reverted to English. "Jeremiah, would you please prepare the vessel, so that the avatar may be born anew." The tallest, most slender man I ever saw came forward and picked up what I thought had been a shadow. It wasn't though. It was a long cleaver, maybe about five feet long, and maybe a foot at the blade's base. He had to drag it across the ground, the steel and stone together making a grinding sound that tore at my ears. I realized what was about to happen as Jeremiah positioned himself beside Tori and raised the cleaver. I closed her eyes, and in that instant, I heard her yell, "Robert, help me!" Then the sound of her scream. Wetness. A clank of metal on stone. Her screams turned into gurgles of blood.

No one seemed to pay attention to her dying words. There were no shouts, no one saying “Grab him!” I still didn’t open my eyes, but I heard something large being dragged across the ground.

“Quick, before she bleeds out,” the leader said. I backed away. I didn’t want to see. I thought that by not seeing, I could spare myself some small bit of horror in a night that had already been full of it. I turned my lantern back on and headed back down the path. The spider queen must still be in the tunnels, and I hoped I could sneak out the entrance. Even if I couldn’t, it was probably better that I not wait around there.

I found my way back through the tunnel, and a large shape stood in the middle of the room. It was that spider-woman-thing, it was dead. Her hair had fallen to one side of her face, and I could see every horrible detail of her face. Little spiders crawled all over her body, none of them sparing a thought for me. I thanked God and St Michael for that. I gave the corpse a wide berth and ran out of the cave. Dawn was getting close, at least the darkness had lessened. I followed the creek back to where our campsite had been. A camp ranger pickup was there, waiting for me.

“Boy, you look like you’ve been through the wringer.” A large, stocky man wearing a ranger hat said. He sat on the tailgate of the pickup, chewing tobacco. “You Robert?”

I nodded. “Please, take me to my dad.”

The ranger looked thoughtfully at me. He spat out a brown gob. “You know those caves back there. They are full of mushrooms. Can’t no one be sure what they saw when they go in there.”

I noticed a pin the shape of a red hour glass on his collar. “Spores cause people to see all sorts of crazy things. Whatever you saw, it wasn’t real. Ya got me?”

I wanted to run. I wanted to scream. I know what I had seen was real. I knew no one would believe me, though. The stories had already been laid out. I was just a kid, there was nothing I could do. Somewhere in the distance, I heard the song start up again.

Over the next few weeks the police, rangers, and even an agent from the FBI questioned me. I didn’t mention what I saw. I just told them I fell in a hole, and that was it. I fell in, found my way out, and a ranger found me. I haven’t had a normal life since. I haven’t gotten close to a female because the disgusting image of that creature’s perversion of the feminine form is just too much for me. Every time I go to sleep I’m convinced I’ll wake up covered in spiders, that haunting song coming from the door where your sister will stand with a huge black body, pale hair and glassy, black eyes.

I don’t think you’ll believe me, but I thought you deserved to know the truth. Accept it or not. Now, I’ve got a bottle of sleeping pills with my name on it. After I hit ‘send’ I plan on never having another nightmare again.

Goodbye,
Robert

THE END
[Return to Contents](#)



Vincent Davis ©2019.

Now [available](#) from Schlock! Publications.

FROM THE PRAYER BOOK OF THE ANT by Pawel Markiewicz

*From the prayer-book of the
ant such a dreamy Promethean letter A
amid pearls of winged muses*

A like Amphora

I, Adam, an admirable adolescent-ant with some acumen as well as with the propitious admiration, without the apples, am adhering to an alluring address and I like to adorn each Parnassian Apollo, the dreamy sibyl-like butterfly, so tender as meekly cute amethyst of an amicable freed boar from ancient holt of the propitiously gorgeous daydreams.

First of all, You miraculously Apollonian butterfly are able to allay a gloam just after a blue hour. Alike all night will be for Your sake alight. The bright flame is enchanted by ghosts full of weird-fantasy. A sheen of muselike starlets on the propitious heaven is Your allegiance. I want to see an allegory of Your alley into word of dreams born from a dew-fulfilment. You are allocating dreams into weird-like small dwarf-land at the back of a mead beloved by The Morning Star fulfilled and freed in the magical as well as druidical holt-time. The holt likes fantasy of the dreaming oaks that are carrying the invisible thought of tender Erkinings—allied with the butterflies of nights, the companions of the moon and birds from the starlets of ontology. I am an all-purpose being philosophizing about the dreamery of the sempiternity and eternity of some rainbows. You have alluring vans, the bewitched wings of melancholy. Thus, You are in the most tender epistemology all-knowing such an all-powerful lady beetle which seems to allure the dew-spirits of the dreamiest springtide. I love Your allusions like the almighty Druid. I would pray to You aloud. Alpine roses are being carried by the blossom-like mermaids for You. At a druidic altar—the amassing ants. I am the amateur of Your mermaid-like amazement beloved by sibyls of ethics. I collected amber for Your ancestors, the kinfolk of dreamed suns, like the ambrosia from morning dew and honey from ancient pixies. You are counting all stars before the Morning Star on the alluring heaven, such an amethyst fulfilled in the aesthetics. The most I like your dreamy wings like the most Apollonian poetical vans as if I were never the anchorite. You animate angels, although you are not from a heaven of angelical beings, but You are also true, alive. Your soft antennae are answerable to the Adonis butterfly, the biggest god of fauna. In my anthill bacchanalian songs are always heard. You can and may rule with antlerling—the small antler of fairies which ought to call all awful wolves of the woodland. These wolves having become an aesthetic-aethetical apocalypse, waiting as the apotheosis of antlike apology.

written by
annalist ant Adam

THE END

Paweł Markiewicz born 1983, lives in Bielsk Podlaski—Poland, a poet from Poland who also writes flash fiction. In 2007 and 2010 Paweł was in Forum Alpbach, a village of thinkers in Austria. After his experience with poetry, he wants to create some good stories.

[Return to Contents](#)

BESIDE THE DYING FIRE by Carlton Herzog

When you get a life sentence, you invariably become, to a greater or lesser extent, a prison philosopher. It is not something you consciously choose. Rather, the law of vacant minds compels me to ponder matters great and small to pass the time and otherwise keep from going insane. Some of my pet speculations concern the nature and quality of the First and Second Amendments. At this juncture of my story, I don't mean the constitutional ones. But rather the great cosmic ones: the first giving dead matter the freedom to acquire life under certain conditions and the second taking that life away after a time.

For example, on June 10, 2039, President Baron P. Murt declared that ten years hence to the day a rogue brown dwarf star would pulverize the earth and extinguish all its life. Given the density and size of the object there would be no reprieve. To allay everyone's fears, he told us that he had a fantastic plan to save us all. And one day soon he would reveal it.

It was just one more of his highly touted unrevealed plans to save the day joining a long list that included Middle East Peace, Immigration, the Trade Wars, gun control and the environment. Presumably, they were being kept in mayonnaise jars in Russia.

No one in their right mind believed Murt save his mindless following of yea-sayers. We all knew that the jig was up and we had all better make peace with it.

I found obsessing myself over how much life I and my family could squeeze into the time we had left. I want to live it, not mark it like some woeful prisoner etching marks on a grimy stone wall.

President Murt met with the world's leaders to formulate a contingency plan. But all the evidence pointed to a plan that would save only the very rich, despite his folksy egalitarian rhetoric. And as more details of the plan leaked out, it became it was merely the pipedream of someone who had never had a working relationship with reality and the truth. As one late night commentator was quick to point out, "he can't misdirect, obfuscate, bury or bullshit his way out of this one."

Murt went into seclusion. The few times he was seen boarding Air Force One, he had a scowl grafted to his face and from the degree that his back bent forward, he seemed to be carrying an invisible anvil on his back. The same commentator I mentioned before observed that "the con man is finally getting his day of reckoning. Although it seems unfair that the rest of us are getting burned in the process, I, personally, take a measure of satisfaction in knowing that guy can't ruin any more lives with his invincible stupidity."

We peasants went to church on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings. The preachers tried to convince us that the end of the world was all part of God's plan. What else could they say?

The scientists didn't seem surprised. They said that if it hadn't been a failed star, it would have been an asteroid, a comet, a coronal mass ejection or a supernova. Or we would have nuked ourselves to death. They didn't say it, but they implied that the forthcoming extinction event was an amendment of sorts that had always been waiting in the wings and soon would take existential effect.

Just as the great Cosmic Second Amendment doomed the earth, the erroneous interpretation of the constitutional one doomed me. Specifically, President Murt, his Republican Senate Majority, the NRA, and the gun lobby all championed the notion that the Second Amendment conferred the right of combat weapon ownership on any half-wit or nut case. The effect of that position led to my incarceration. Specifically, it allowed four disturbed twenty-one-year-olds seeking validation and twisted personal glory to purchase semi-automatic rifles and shoot up a school.

It was a month or so after the Presidential announcement concerning the end of the world. I was on the day shift when we got called to the mass shooting at the local High School. Psychotic adolescents and AR-15s. I kept thinking to myself what a waste of time. Instead of savouring their last bits of life they were poisoning them.

The survivors inside used their phones to tell us that there were four shooters in all. They had already killed 12, wounded 20, and were holding the rest as hostages at gunpoint.

We couldn't risk a frontal assault because they had positioned themselves at all four points of the compass. They didn't have a shortage of ammo.

They lit us up the moment we drove into the lot. As we ducked down below the patrol car, I looked at the watch my father had given me. It had been passed down to him by his father who had been at Hiroshima when the bomb dropped on August 6, 1945. The watch had stopped the moment the bomb had exploded: 8:16 am.

In that moment, I saw the tomorrows that might be. Not all of them were good. Some were down-right bad. But in each one the living had a foothold on this world, struggling to do better. I realized that the surviving kids in that school deserved to have a tomorrow or two, however short that might be. I couldn't just sit there and mark time until SWAT showed, or the negotiator got to those homicidal kids.

I was like the butterfly counting time in moments not years.

I could see a blind spot along a line to the maintenance office door. I didn't say a word to my partner. I ran along it, and the more I ran, the angrier I got. I wanted to kill time itself: to bash its bastard hourglass body and smash its tick-tock tolling grandfather face.

I saw those kids inside the school, not as victims of cosmic caprice, but as the tick-tock men stealing our precious moments. I was going to make them repent and give it back even if that meant kicking those adolescent brains out of their skulls.

I got inside and tip-toed to the door leading to the hallway. I cracked it open. Not ten feet from me stood a pimply faced kid shouldering an AR-15. I slid out the door and shot him in the head. As I grabbed the AR-15 from his dead hands, I said, it's later than you think.

I was on the North End of the school. I crept east. I used my flexible hand mirror to peek around corners.

I could hear more shots. They were executing students. I didn't have a lot of time. I looked at my Mad Hatter novelty watch that substituted months for minutes. It was if I were staring at a blank space. Time had ceased to have any real meaning.

I came to a corner. I could hear someone talking in the hallway: we don't have forever. Shoot as many as you can and meet me in the gym.

My mirror caught the image of the shooter standing in a classroom doorway. The room itself was filled with students face-down on the floor.

Time slowed down to a crawl: I knew I would only have a moment to sight the AR-15 and squeeze. I stepped forward and as I did, he saw me and went to raise his. I pulled the trigger and unloaded an entire clip into his head. Brains and bone and blood exploded into the air showering the floors and walls.

I ran forward and grabbed his gun. I told the kids to break the window and go as quickly as possible.

I felt strange, like I was moving in syrup. My arms and legs felt heavy. I felt dizzy. But I kept on mission. Two down two to go.

I don't know how long I had been in the school. It seemed like forever.

I made my way to the South End. I could hear a shooter ahead of me listening to a phone voice: something's wrong with Bobby and Jake. I think the cops are in the school. Shoot the hostages and meet me in the gym.

I used my flexible mirror. She was standing in the cafeteria blocking the door. I could see the students sitting with their heads down on the tables. There more on the floor dead.

When she turned away, I stepped out to shoot, but the AR-15 jammed. She heard the click, turned and emptied her clip at me. I had already stepped behind the corner when the rounds flew by. A moment later, I heard the click-click-click of an empty gun. I didn't hesitate. I stepped out and shot her in the head with my revolver and emptied the chamber into her chest. One moment she was alive, the next dead.

I ran over to the door and gave the kids the same instruction I had given the others. Get moving out that window. You don't have a lot of time before the other one shows up here.

I grabbed her AR-15, her ammo clips, reloaded the rifle and headed for the gym. I could hear gunshots. The final execution had begun.

I ran as fast as I could to the West End of the school. I didn't bother with the mirror but ran straight through the gym's double doors and collided with the shooter. We banged together and rolled apart. He could not have weighed more than 150 pounds. I am a solid 220.

He didn't get up. I did. I kicked him in the head. Then I kicked him again. And then I stomped his skull until it was as flat as a pancake. His funeral was a closed casket affair.

I am currently sitting in jail awaiting trial for first degree murder. The prosecutor's rationale is that I didn't need to kill him once he was incapacitated. He also argues that the mode of execution was especially cruel.

My life isn't worth the time meant to save it. But my family's is. They need more time. I wrack my brains every day in this cell looking for a solution. I wish I could superman around the earth and reverse time to give them more. Hit the reset button on the existential stopwatch. Slow time down by either moving the earth closer to a stronger source of gravity or accelerating it to relativistic speeds. Talk to the author of all things and have him or it or her go back in time and put the nascent earth on a different orbital plane, near enough to the sun for life to continue but clear of the impending doom.

I have my supporters and a good defence lawyer. But either way I lose. To rot in this jail cell awaiting trial and if convicted to rot some more as my appeal wends its way through the courts adds insult to injury. After all, no matter how the court case lands, I'm still a goner marking time along with everyone else beside the dying fire. I only wish I could be standing near Murt when the world is shattered, and he is sucked into the cold airless void of space.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

PICKLOCK LANE by EW Farnsworth

Fatty Millstone never worried when he walked the dangerous streets of his adopted city. Others fell to mischief and ruin around him, but his mass and might seemed to make him immune. He reasoned that he could take care of any eventuality, and the resultant confidence kept him upright and moving forward as gangs waylaid luckless couples or single actors shot and fleeced the few enforcers. Out past the ten o'clock curfew, he did risk summary execution by a random patrol, but those well-armed men and women minded their own agenda. Fatty was a known quantity among the police. As long as he abided by the law while in their sights, he was untouchable.

The underworld understood Millstone's apparent invulnerability as an opportunity. Where he walked, relative safety followed. If an armed robbery or a contract killing could be accomplished at about the time of his predictable passing, it might go unhindered while in progress and neglected among more pressing cases. Fatty had not intended to become a foil or shill for malefactors, but he was dimly aware of his broader effects on his surroundings. This was especially true for supplicants, who often huddled near him during his peregrinations.

The fog near the river slithered into the wet streets and reduced visibility to meters while amplifying the sounds of shoes on pavement. Fatty's unmistakable gait was audible above the shuffling and halting of his motley retinue. Like a behemoth swimming in an ocean with small, radiating currents, the huge man pressed toward his Wednesday night destination, the Cracked Bell Pub on Picklock Lane. There he would abide till Closing Time. Then, invariable as crime, he would return the way he came to spend the wee hours alone in his tenement.

This Wednesday was special for Fatty as it was the first of his birthdays that had fallen on the woeful day of the week when he was born. As he entered the pub, he was struck by the silence of the assembled drinkers. They seemed a surly lot, mostly male and rough. They were the usual publican crowd, scowling over their pints when he entered and edged his way to the bar where Anophalous Hurd tended the taps and wiped the wooden surface of the serving area with a dirty rag.

"What will it be?" the gruff barkeep asked his newly arrived regular.

"The usual," answered Fatty.

"Not entirely the usual, at that," Mr. Hurd intoned as he moved toward the Guinness tap and drew a pint.

It was too late for Fatty to avoid what was about to happen, and he cringed as the entire pub burst into singing "Happy Birthday!" When they had finished their song, one wag called out for Fatty to buy a round for the house. It was the custom in those days for the celebrant to spread the good cheer in that way. So he nodded to Mr. Hurd to make it so, and the establishment took on a wholly different character, with everyone smiling and raising his hand to be served. While Fatty pressed through the teeming mass to his usual table near the back door, the crowd pressed toward the taps where the barkeep drew and his waiters distributed the potions.

As the birthday boy slouched into his usual seat, he discovered he was surrounded by the three most unsavoury habitual denizens of the establishment. One was paring his fingernails with a long knife. Another was oiling his pistol. The third was playing with a complex toy that might have been a limpet mine.

“Happy Birthday, Fatty. We’re here to see that you’re not harmed on your special day. We figure you owe us only as much as we can drink—unless you want us to accompany you home.”

“Good of you to wish me well on this day. I’ll be happy to regale you till Closing Time. By then, I’m sure I’ll be out of fresh cash. So there’ll be no need for you to protect me as I find my way home again.”

The man with the toy smiled wickedly as he teased out a wire from his creation. “You made it here in safety. I suppose you can do the same on your return.”

The birthday round arrived, and Fatty noticed each of his three companions was served a pint with bitters and a single shot glass full of some brown spirit. They followed a ritual of drinking the first two inches of their pints before dropping their shot glass into the depths of the glass. Boiler makers were only the beginning for those dark men, whose dispositions drifted from amused to hostile to menacing.

Before long, it was nearing Closing Time. Mr. Hurd arrived at Fatty’s table with the reckoning. The tapster tried to avoid making eye contact with the three criminal types who were finishing the last of their drinks just in time for the last call.

“Thank you, Mr. Hurd. I’ll just add to your bill the cost of one more round for my three friends.” He thumbed down the amount required in a stack of twenty-pound notes, which Mr. Hurd hastily swept off the table before whispered something in his guest’s ear before he disappeared.

“Let’s have no secrets among friends, Birthday Boy. Tell us what old Mr. Hurd just told you. Don’t be shy.”

“He said to let you three enjoy your drinks while I slip out the back. I suppose he figures trouble lies outside the front door where I came in. But I have no more money. So where’s the harm? Nevertheless, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll follow mine host’s instructions to the letter. Your final drinks are doubtless on the way. Thank you again for giving me protection on my special day.”

Fatty made his way out the back door into the pea-soup fog. He heard no pursuing footfalls behind him as he sidled through two lanes to Picklock Lane a few blocks north of the pub. All remaining of his impromptu party was a distant din of raucous singing by people who had no idea their guest of honour had escaped.

As he retraced his path by memory, Fatty heard occasional male shrieks of pain and gales of mirthful, female laughter. Of course, the bawdy houses would be full to capacity tonight. As he had no money, he would not be among the partakers of Mistress Doll Tearsheets’ delights. He was startled but not surprised to discover a battery of four roughneck gang members in his path. They had evidently not heard the news of his enforced poverty.

“Your money or your life!” the leader of the four demanded.

“As I have no money, I suppose you’re going to have to take my life.”

From behind him, Fatty heard a familiar voice say, “Pay these blokes no mind. Keep moving forward. If they harm as much as one hair on your head, my toy will lay them all low, permanently”

Fatty did as the voice directed. He walked through the line of four thieves unmolested. He did not heed the scuffling that occurred behind him. A few minutes later, his three self-proclaimed protectors caught up and ranged themselves in a forward van against other attempted depredations.

Fatty told the toymaker, “You know I have no money to repay you for your protection.”

“We are richly paid by another man. He pays in gold coins. So we’ll see you home and leave you when you are safely inside.”

So Fatty made it home safe and sound in the early morning after his birthday. His three protectors went about their nefarious night work after he was behind a locked door. Fatty did not know when he had passed a more peaceful night. He did not count what he owed his unseen benefactor for the service the three men had performed in ushering him home.

Underworld obligations are rarely repaid in full, and, given the stakes involved, are often parsed out in a long sequence of “favours.” It was therefore seven weeks later that the toymaker appeared at Fatty’s right shoulder while he walked to his pub.

“You can forget your usual drink tonight, Fatty. You’re coming with me and my two friends. We’re all going to visit Doll Tearsheets to rescue a fair damsel from a life of ill repute.”

“From your expression, I can tell you are in earnest. May I ask the identity of the young woman we are to set free?”

“No. You have no need to know her name. Follow my lead when we get to the house. You will be introduced to the lady in question. When you go upstairs to take your pleasure, we’ll follow and orchestrate the girl’s escape. We’ll have to be careful as the chief of police is the house’s protector. At least one of his officers is in the place at all times.”

When they arrived at the house, the toymaker made the introductions. Fatty Millstone was presented to the pretty young woman in the blonde wig, called Molly. He wasted no time walking the whore up the stairs while the toymaker paid the mistress in charge. The three protectors filed up the stairs as if they were going to join Fatty while they all enjoyed Molly’s charms. In her room, the toymaker took charge immediately.

“Clem and Hal, tear up the sheets and make a rope ladder to hang from the window. Hurry, as we don’t have much time.”

Molly kept saying, “Don’t you want to have me? I’ll be beaten with a rod on my bare behind if I don’t perform.”

“Just keep quiet, or we’ll take turns beating you. Be good, or be gagged.”

The rope ladder was nothing but a strand formed by knotted sheets. Clem tested the rig and stood in the street below the window while the toymaker tied Molly and lowered her into Clem’s waiting arms. The toymaker then let Hal descend to the street and signalled for them to hie to their destination with the whore.

“What about us?” Fatty asked the toymaker.

“What do you think are the odds you could get down our sheet rig without breaking it?”

Millstone nodded his understanding. “You could slip down.”

“Yes, but then we could not execute the rest of our plan.”

As if on cue, a gun butt knocked on the door. “Open up, at once!”

The toymaker said, “Just a minute.” He gestured for Fatty to stand behind the door as he opened it to let the man with the gun inside. The man was astonished to see no one in the bed. He was about to turn around, but the toymaker knocked him out with a cosh. The man fell onto the bed where the toymaker tied his hands securely behind his back.

“All right, it’s time for us to depart. Just walk as if you had just experienced the greatest sex of your life.”

He led Fatty down the stairs and paid a final tip to the house’s mistress. “Madam, I hope you’ll give your protection the courtesy of a free ride for a while. He deserves it, as do you all.”

When they had walked two blocks into the fog, the toymaker bade Fatty farewell. “Enjoy the rest of your evening. My master thanks you and I thank you for your service.”

Fatty went to his pub and drank until closing time. Just before he departed, the chief of police and three officers entered to ask everyone present about an escapee whose name was Molly. Receiving no gratification, the lawmen rushed out of the establishment looking for witnesses along the foggy street. Fatty guessed that the toymaker had eluded them by his stratagems. He went out through the front entrance and made his way home the usual way since with the police in the streets, he would have no trouble this night.

Fatty Millstone read nothing about the disappearance of the whore named Molly in the newspapers of the next two weeks. He did read about a policeman sacked for dereliction of duty, but that required only one column inch of the news hole.

Five weeks later as he was returning from his pub, Millstone heard a hiss at his right shoulder and turned to find the toymaker. Even in the dim lighting, the criminal looked melancholy.

“What help do you need this time?” Fatty asked him.

“My two mates are being held by the police for questioning. They’re keeping mum, but while they’re inside, I have to do the work of all three of us by myself. Are you game to help tonight?”

Fatty thought about the matter for a moment. “If you’ll make this my last obligation, I’ll agree to help—as long as there is no killing involved.”

The toymaker shrugged. “I don’t do the accounting, but I’ll see what I can arrange. You’d best wear your gloves on this operation. We don’t want you to be identified by police forensics.”

Off the little man ran with Fatty struggling to keep up his pace in the foggy night. Their quest was a delivery truck with a full load of liquor. The truck’s driver was neatly trussed up in the back. The toymaker tossed Fatty the keys to the vehicle and jumped into the passenger seat. He directed Millstone to the back of his favourite pub where they unloaded the liquor into the cellar of the pub.

When they had finished, the toymaker and Millstone climbed back into the now-empty truck. Fatty drove the vehicle to a place in the warehouse district where the toymaker had arranged for it to be found by the authorities the next morning. The toymaker made sure that the truck driver was still breathing in the back of the truck when they left the area.

The little man escorted Millstone to his residence before dawn. Fatty felt mildly exhilarated and not a whit guilty about his actions. In the newspapers for weeks thereafter, he read nothing about a liquor heist. In fact, he was surprised not to find anything about two hoodlums being held for questioning about a missing whore.

Fatty’s routine continued without further interruptions for another four weeks after the liquor heist. He sat at his usual table in his pub, imbibing liquor he had helped liberate. There he was met by a gentleman in fine array.

“Mr. Fatty Millstone, I presume?”

“That’s right. What do you want?”

“After we’ve finished our drinks, I want to walk and talk with you for a while. I have a business proposition, for which a mutual friend has highly recommended you.”

“What friend?”

“Some people call him The Toymaker, that’s who.” The man’s face broke into a smile as the light dawned in Fatty’s mind. When they finished their drinks, they slipped out the back door into the enveloping night fog.

“I’ll only ask once, and I’ll let you alone if you decide against it, but I need a replacement for the toymaker, whose luck has just run out. The man has steadfastly refused to name the person who helped him rob a liquor shipment a few weeks ago. I happen to know you were the one who helped him. I also know where the stolen liquor was taken.”

“What are your terms?”

“If you say yes, I’ll give you this hundred-pound note as earnest money towards your first job. In future you’ll earn gold coins. If you say no, I’ll give the toymaker permission to give your name as his accomplice to the chief of police.”

Fatty extended his right hand, and the gentleman shook it.

“How will we communicate?”

“I will get in touch with you when I need you. Each time, I’ll give you directions and the fee for your service.”

“So it’s going to be that simple?”

“Yes, unless you complicate matters, it will be that simple.”

Fatty Millstone shook his head. “I have a question for you.”

“Ask anything you like. I’ll determine whether I can answer honestly.”

“Who was Molly the whore? Why was she so important?”

“Molly was the illegitimate daughter of the police chief. She is only important in a game we are always playing among bawdy houses in this city. Now she is established in a new house in the South End.”

Fatty nodded. He turned to look the gentleman in the eyes, but the man had vanished. Fatty tried to discern the man’s footsteps in the silence, but he heard nothing.

During the long association of Fatty and the gentleman, nothing was ever shared about the toymaker or his two henchmen. Fatty never saw them—or the gentleman, for that matter—again.

Fatty received his instructions from strangers in the back of his pub near closing time. Always, he had to perform criminal mischief by daybreak of the following day. To be sure, he was tasked to keep his pub well provisioned. He was not tasked to traffic in young working women, though he read the grisly account of Molly’s murder in the Times. To feel safe, Fatty Millstone avoided Doll Tearsheets house on Picklock Lane. He had been lucky, but then he never took risks. To be sure, he was not a greedy man. An extra drink “on the house” was all he required to keep quiet about how his pub got its liquor.

Once each year, Fatty Millstone suffered the tax of funding his birthday party. He did not mind paying this trifling tribute to deflect others’ thoughts from his quiet involvement in the liquor business of the city.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

REVIEW by John C Adams



[Burnt \(Perception Book 1\) by Pat Nguyen-Smith and Mary Harris](#)

This novel was recently self-published on Kindle by my good friend, editor Mary Harris, and debut author Pat Nguyen-Smith.

I like a character-driven book so this was right up my street. And who doesn't enjoy a helping of fantasy paranormal romance?

Art Crocket has been suffering bizarre hallucinogenic visions since childhood, something that makes his every day a struggle. He's also so improbably tall and unintelligent that even his easy-going roommate finds him a challenge to be around. But the biggest challenge of all is that the skin on his back is on fire.

As starting premises go for a novel about finding love, this is a great starting point and the hook is supplied nice and early, so you're right in there with Art's difficulties, such as how to go on a first date. Almost all of us understand how nerve wracking that can be, and Art is a very sympathetic and likeable protagonist.

The viewpoint is intriguing, with shifts from Doug's third person for the prologue to the first person with Art, but with interruptions from what sounds very much like an authorial voice.

Personally, I didn't find that an intrusion, and it's always good to see a debut author who's confident enough to try something experimental. And it works.

The structure is also unusual, but speaking as someone who usually writes long fiction with chapter names as unimaginative as 'One' through 'Sixty' that can be a good thing, if deftly handed as it is here.

First novels are often autobiographical, but I suspect a fledgling interest in perspective (it isn't an accident that the Series name for this book is Perception) and structure will lead to more overtly experimental works in the future, and I'd certainly be interested to know how this aspect of Pat's work develops. Crystal ball in hand, I'd guess at something emerging which looks like a cross between J D Salinger and Virginia Woolf, and there are worse places for a new author to end up!

Enjoy!

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

THE ADVENTURE OF THE TOXIC CELEBUTANTE by Kevin O'Brien

Part One

"Despite the lack of industrialization, craftspeople in the Dreamlands have access to a wide variety of metals: not just standard industrial metals like iron, copper, tin, mercury, lead, silver, or gold, but also more exotic ones, such as titanium, vanadium, chromium, cobalt, nickel, molybdenum, antimony, and tungsten. Even radioactive thorium and the so-called 'rare earth' metals can be extracted and in some cases purified. Extraction processes tend to be crude at best, but purified metals are not required in the majority of uses. However, extraction and purification can produce toxic waste, which can wreak havoc with the environment and the local inhabitants if simply discarded instead of contained."

—The Dreamlands for Dummies, by Aislinn Síle

Eile and Sunny ran side by side as fast as they could push their way through the dense jungle foliage. Behind them, Eile could hear the cries and screams of dozens of pygmy creatures in pursuit.

Panting, she asked, "Tell me again: why are we running from these guys?!"

"Because they've got poison blowguns!"

"Oh, yeah." She ducked as a dart flew past her ear.

They burst out of the trees into a clearing, picking up speed over the open ground. They sped through a group of ruins that barely registered in Eile's consciousness, then approached the opposite side, but they skidded to a halt as pygmies poured out the jungle ahead of them. They pivoted and raced off in a different direction, only to be cut off by another group. They changed direction twice more, but each time were intercepted by a horde of shrieking, gibbering creatures.

"Cripes, we're surrounded!" She searched desperately for a way out.

"This way!" Sunny sprinted for the ruins. Eile wasn't sure that was a good idea, but there was nowhere else to go. Besides, they might find some cover there.

Unfortunately, the rubble offered no hiding places, and the area was too open to obscure their movements. The pygmies converged on the ruins and corralled them in, finally trapping them with their backs to a large well, one of the few structures left more or less intact.

Eile surveyed the tightening ring of diminutive creatures clustered around them. It was the first time she had gotten a good look at them. They resembled groundhogs, but with longer limbs, bigger eyes, and a ridge of porcupine quills running down their spines. They stood and walked upright, and each held either a blowgun or a short-hafted spear with a large stone blade. Though naked except for their fur, they wore decorative collars, arm and wristbands, earrings, and belts, all made of leather and beads of bone and shell. Their fur was muddy brown, but with a tinge of green to it.

She drew her sword and held it ready as Sunny took up a fighting stance, holding her quarterstaff in both hands.

“How the hell do we get ourselves into these messes?”

“We were taking a short cut, and I think we trespassed onto their tribal lands.”

Eile gave her an exasperated look. “I know how we got into this mess; I was speaking generally.”

“Oh, sorry. We’re just lucky, I guess.”

Eile scowled. “Gaah, sometimes you can be such a ditz.”

She watched as those with blowguns loaded them with darts, but none tried to take a shot. “Why aren’t they attacking?”

“You know, we haven’t actually tried confronting them. Maybe they’re intimidated by us.”

She shot her a bewildered look. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

She shook her head. “I think there’s a slim chance of that.”

“Maybe, but what have we got to lose?”

Just our lives, she thought, but she might be right. “Okay, I’ll give it a try.” She took a deep breath, then raised her sword and waved it around above her head.

“Aaaaarrrrr!” She dashed towards those in front of her.

The pygmy creatures answered her with screams of their own, but they also wore expressions of abject terror. Some threw down their weapons; all broke and ran for the cover of the piles of rubble.

Stupefied, she came to a stop and looked around. None of their pursuers were left in the open, though some of them peered through, around, or over the debris.

“Well, I be damned, it worked!” She felt both surprised and happy. Maybe they’d get out of this mess yet.

“Umm, Braveheart?”

“What?” She turned her head, and when she saw it, she whirled around in shock. “Holy Jesus God!”

Sunny stood rigid, staring at the well, or rather the air above it. A column of blue-white smoky mist had risen out of the shaft and coalesced above the opening. It took on a form that constantly shifted size and shape, but the overall effect was that of a woman with long

flowing hair and a blank face. Some streamers looked like multiple wings; others like a flowing gown. It reminded Eile of pictures by surrealist artists depicting seraphim.

“Why have you disturbed my children?” The voice was feminine, soft and gentle, but it rang in her mind rather than her ears.

“Yer children?!”

“I have adopted them as such. I care for them, protect them, and guide them.”

“Like a god?” Sunny asked, in awe.

“You may think of me that way.”

Eile snorted in derision.

“You do not believe in gods?”

“Yeah, I do, but whatever you are, yer not a god.”

“You are more sophisticated than I expected, but you are not as wise as you believe. At this stage in their cultural evolution, it is natural and healthy for my children to believe I am a god. In time, our relationship will change, until they will interact with me as equals, but for now, it is better if they worship me than something twisted and evil.”

Though the entity spoke with a kind and soothing tone, the reprimand was clear. Eile fumed, but she decided not to press the matter.

“Now, please answer the question.”

Eile lost her temper. “We didn’t do anything ta them! They attacked us for no reason!”

“Umm, Ma’am?” Sunny interjected. “We’re just trying to get home. We were taking a shortcut, and I guess we intruded into their territory. It was an accident, and we’re sorry. We promise we won’t do it again.”

“A short cut?”

“Yeah. We were following the Squros River upstream, heading for the Tabas Oasis, when we met a traveller heading downstream. He told us that if we followed the river into the forest to the Palin Hills then skirted around them, we could save a whole day’s travel. Unfortunately, we got lost and had to camp for the night. Now we’re just trying to find a way out.”

“It sounds like an honest mistake. I can forgive you, but my children are as yet too primitive to understand the altruism of mercy. You broke a taboo, and that requires retribution, otherwise their tribal spirits will be angry and punish them. Or so they believe.”

“Couldn’t you talk to them?”

“I can try, but even if I manage to persuade them, they will require some form of penance.”

“Can’t you just order them to let us go?” Eile asked.

“I am their god, not their leader.”

“What the hell does that mean?!”

“Braveheart!” Sunny squealed. “Please, be nice!”

“It means, I can impose a moral code backed by the threat of divine retribution, but my children make their own laws. All I can do is make suggestions. My word carries great weight, but I do not have the final say. Now, keep still while I see what I can do.”

The entity lifted its “head” and emitted a high-pitched ululation that rose and fell for a few minutes. When it finished, it looked down at them. “I have summoned the lead shaman and the chief. They will be here shortly. In the meantime, tell me who you are.”

“Oh, sorry! I should have introduced us already. We’re Team Girl! I’m White-Lion, and this is my partner, Braveheart. We’re from Ulthar in the Six Kingdoms.”

There was a pause. “You are The Twins.”

Eile felt rage boil up inside her, but she bit her tongue to stifle her blazing retort. She was heartily sick of hearing that canard come up over and over again.

Sunny giggled. “Yeah, that’s what they call us!”

Any further exchange was cut off when the assembled pygmies whistled and gibbered in an excited manner. When Eile turned, she saw two new creatures approaching. One stood tall and straight. It was laden with ornaments of beads, feathers, and bits of precious metal. Its back quills were polished to a high sheen that made them flash in the sun. It carried a sword, the first metal-bladed weapon she had seen all day, though she realized that in human hands it would be just a big knife. The other wore the first real clothing she had seen on any of them: a cloak made of fur and feathers. Its head was crowned with an animal skull and it carried a sceptre intricately carved from wood and inlaid with ivory and semi-precious stones.

The pair came to within six feet of the well and stopped. “You must move aside,” the entity told them; “they will not come near as long as you are there.”

Sunny took Eile by the elbow. “Come on, let’s go over here.” She led her a quarter of the way around the circumference, and the pygmy leaders stepped up before the entity. They conversed in a language of squeaks, clicks, whistles, chucks, and squawks, with the occasional growl and snarl. Unlike when it spoke to them, she heard the entity’s “words” through the air rather than in her mind.

Sunny put an arm around Eile’s shoulders and leaned her head close. “You need to calm down; try to relax.”

“I’m sorry, but I just find this whole thing retarded.”

“I know, but getting mad and mouthing off isn’t gonna help. We hafta make friends, if we’re gonna get out of this with whole skins.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever you say.”

“Just try to be civil, for me?”

She glanced at Sunny. Her partner displayed big, sad, soulful, puppy-dog eyes over her granny glasses perched on the tip of her nose. She never could resist them, and she felt her anger dissolve and her resolve melt.

She smiled. “Oh, alright. For you, Sunny.”

She crinkled her eyes and smiled. “Thanks, partner.” And she gave her a smooch on the cheek.

“Yeah, yeah.” She felt herself blush.

The conference took the better part of an hour, but finally the conversation ended. The pygmy leaders turned to face them; the entity didn’t move, but its “head” flowed to a new position.

“My children have agreed to let you expiate the violated taboo through penance rather than the shedding of your blood.”

Eile bit off a sarcastic reply as Sunny said, “Thank you.”

“What do they want us ta do?”

“They have selected a representative to explain. However, I must make it possible for you to understand him.”

“Wha—” A blast of brilliant blue-white light leapt from the entity’s face and engulfed her vision. She stood paralyzed, unable to move or speak, blinded by the glare, but she felt no pain. Then, as suddenly as it started, it shut off.

“—t? Sweet Jesus!” Her head rang like she has been hit. Looking at Sunny, she saw her partner had a dazed expression as she blinked her eyes.

“That is all I can do for you, the rest is in your hands.” The entity flowed back down into the well. “Good luck, Team Girl.” And with that it was gone.

The ringing faded, and Eile soon regained her full senses. She looked around and saw that the creatures were leaving, heading back into the jungle.

All except one; it came towards them with a purposeful stride. She noted it looked different from all the others. For one thing, it had no decorations, just a plain belt. For another, its pelt was dull and ragged, and some of its quills were broken or missing. It carried scars about the face, chest, and arms, and it bore a sickle that was almost too big for it. However, the blade was sharp and bright, as if lovingly cared for.

It came to within three feet of them before it stopped. It spoke to them in a high pitched, reedy voice, only its words sounded like English.

“I am Liaison.”

Eile glanced at Sunny, who returned a puzzled expression. “Is that your name or a title?” Sunny asked.

He shrugged (knowing his identity, Eile couldn’t think of him as an ‘it’ anymore). “It is what I am called; there is no distinction. Though outcast from my tribe, I act as a go-between for them and our neighbours. This permits me to be of service, even if they barely acknowledge my existence.”

“Oh, my! We’re sorry.”

He blinked and gave Sunny what Eile thought was a puzzled stare. “Why should you apologize? My disgrace was not your fault. If it was, I would kill you for it.”

Sheesh, these guys are pretty hard-core! “Umm, no, she was commiserating.”

“I do not understand that word.”

“She was expressing sympathy for yer situation. It made her sad, and she wanted you ta know that she felt bad for you.”

He blinked again. “You are not my mates, my family, or my friends. Why should you feel sympathy for me?”

Cripes, how do we reply ta that?

Fortunately, Sunny had an answer. “It’s natural for our people to feel empathy for the plight of a fellow creature. It’s how we are. It makes it easier for us to cooperate with others in a peaceful way.”

He blinked a third time, and Eile figured he just wasn’t getting it.

But then he shrugged. “This does not matter. I have been instructed to inform you what you need to do to expiate the taboo you violated. Our tribe is being assailed by a mysterious illness, one that has never occurred before, one that the shamans cannot cure. We need you to find one. Do that, and the taboo will be forgiven.”

She glanced at Sunny, who appeared as surprised and concerned as she felt.

“Buuuut, we’re not doctors,” Sunny said.

“Dock-tores?”

“Physicians; healers.”

He flexed his quills, seemingly in irritation. “That does not matter. It is the compensation we demand. You should know: if you refuse, if you fail, or if you try to run away, I have been instructed to cut your throats.”

Eile gulped. Hard-core is right! “Well then, I guess we don’t really have a choice.” She glanced at Sunny, who nodded.

Looking back at him, she added, “Alright, we’ll do what we can “

“Come with me,” he said, and he turned and headed out of the ruins.

Eile estimated it took them about an hour to get through the jungle to their destination. It turned out to be an open area, not quite a clearing, but a place where the trees thinned and the ground had little vegetation. She could see open sky through gaps in the canopy, and shafts of sunlight penetrated to illuminate the tableau. But it was a pretty dismal scene. About three dozen creatures were present, a few ambulatory, some huddled around several tiny smoky fires, but the rest were scattered about lying on the ground covered with tattered, filthy blankets, a number of which weren’t moving. The only shelters were half a dozen ragged dome-shaped huts made from branches, moss, and leaves. And the stench overwhelmed her. It smelled like a combination of rotting flesh, festering sores, and unburied faeces.

As she and Sunny came into view, she saw the ambulatory creatures collect weapons and advance on them as if eager to fight, but she realized most of them didn’t have the strength for combat. Fortunately, Liaison strode ahead and confronted them.

“Be at ease, brethren. These strangers are friends. They have come to help us. They risk their lives and their virtue to go where no shaman will follow. Grant them the respect and honour they deserve.”

She felt relieved when they turned away and went about their business, putting their weapons back where they had found them.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“It is the Dying Camp.”

“Dying?!” Sunny sounded shocked.

“When my people become ill, they go to the shamans to be cured. Those whom they cannot cure come here. If they recover, they may return after purifying themselves. Otherwise they remain until they die.”

Eile felt outraged, but she held her temper in check. “I don’t understand. Don’t yer people take care of each other?”

“Sickness is a scandal, a degradation brought on by stigma and ignominious guilt. It is a deep shame that brings humiliation and dishonour to the afflicted. No one will care for them, no one will even come near them, lest they become contaminated and share the stigma.”

“No, you’re wrong—!”

“White-Lion, hush!” Her partner gave her an exasperated look, but said no more.

Liaison had turned to look at her, and Eile said, “You don’t seem worried.”

Their go-between eyed Sunny in a suspicious manner, but replied, “I am already shamed, so nothing here can harm me.”

She filed that away for future reference. “What about the two of us?”

“Your breaking taboo places a stigma upon you as well, so as with myself no harm can befall you here. Besides, you are outsiders; you are already dishonoured.”

She nodded. She recognized the pattern. Though a few surprises were inevitable, she figured she understood these creatures better. Still—“If these people are sufferin’ from some kinda moral malaise, how do you expect us ta cure ‘em?”

He grunted. “Our leaders have dealt with outsiders long enough to know that there are two types of sickness: our own and outsiders’. Though we have some illnesses we cannot cure through magic, they afflict only a few people at long intervals. But this illness has struck down many in a short period of time. As such, we suspect it is an outsider sickness. We have no knowledge of these, but being outsiders yourselves, you may. That they became sick is still due to their weak characters, but outsider magic may be needed to cure them in any event.”

Sunny nodded in a forceful manner. “Then we’d better get started! What are their symptoms?”

“Simp-tomes?”

“Yeah! How are they different from normal?”

“I understand.” He stroked his chin as he considered his answer. “The signs are many and varied, but primarily I have seen cold sweating, hoarseness of voice, burning urination, cramps, violent bowel pains, vomiting up green or yellow slime tinged with red, and diarrhoea with blood. In extreme cases, the afflicted have irregular heartbeats and convulsions, and become delirious before they finally succumb.”

Eile felt sick to her stomach. These poor people are suffering pretty badly.

“Right!” Sunny leaned her staff against a tree. “First things first, though.” She pulled out her dagger and stuck it into the bark, the handle turned up. “We gotta get this place cleaned up. These people would recover a lot faster if they weren’t living in filth. Braveheart, I’d like you to organize that while I examine the others. Liaison, can you get some of your people to help?”

“I doubt it. They would be afraid of contamination.”

“They’re already shamed,” Eile said; “how could they get hurt?”

He gave her a crafty, approving look. “You have a point. I will see what I can do.” And he walked off towards a knot of creatures gathered around one of the fires.

She watched as Sunny removed her jacket and Robin Hood hat, and hung them on the dagger. “Do you know what’s wrong with them?”

Her partner hesitated, giving her a worried glance. “Not yet. The problem is, it could be almost anything, but it does sound familiar, somehow. I think I read something in college about it.” She shook her head. “I wish we had Internet access here!”

“Can’t you use yer magic?”

“I don’t have a diagnosis spell. I could invent one, but it’d take time, and I’d hafta find the right trigger word.” She looked past her. When Eile turned around, she saw Liaison talking with some of the other creatures, and more joined him.

“Meanwhile, we’ve gotta keep up a confident front. Setting up proper care and sanitation is necessary, but it’ll also buy us some time while I try to figure out what to do.”

Eile turned back at her and grinned. “Gotcha.”

Sunny crinkled her eyes and smiled. “Let’s get to work, partner.”

Over the next few hours, Eile and Sunny worked with the creatures to clean up the camp. The first thing they did was to line up those still able to walk while Sunny examined them, making note of their symptoms and gauging their strength. The strongest she assigned to Eile as a work force, whereas the remainder she kept with her to help check and care for the rest of the inhabitants. Afterwards, she went around and checked every creature that couldn’t walk, and assigned them to one of three categories: bad, those who were sick but still capable of taking care of themselves; critical, those too sick to care for themselves; and dead. The criticals she then divided into two groups: those she could help and those she could not. Eile knew how much it hurt for her to put any individual into that last group, but as generous as she tried to be, there were some that just couldn’t be saved. The dead she had moved away from the living to a collection point off to one side.

Meanwhile, Eile organized her force into three teams. With Liaison’s help, she determined the lay of the land. Then she had one team construct new, better shelters on higher ground. She felt relieved when he told her that there was no special significance to the camp’s location; it was simply traditional, so moving it several yards was no problem. She made sure each ambulatory and bad creature had its own shelter, and she had two communal buildings constructed, one to serve as a hospital for the criticals that could be saved and one as a place for those waiting to die. She also had a large fire built in the centre of the shelters, to serve not only for warmth, but also for cooking, and to help drive away the smell. The second team she instructed to dig two pits down-slope of the old camp, while the third she had destroy the old shelters and scrape the ground, collecting all the refuse, offal, accumulated waste, and contaminated soil, which they dumped into one pit when it was ready and then buried. Over

the other pit she had an open structure constructed, for use as a latrine. Finally, she had her teams carry the bad and critical cases up to the new camp and place them in their shelters.

Eile and Sunny stood by the fire, during a break after they had finished the move, and surveyed their accomplishment.

“We should put in a path to the latrine to make it easier for the people to reach it,” Sunny suggested.

Eile nodded. “Good idea.” Working closely with them, Sunny had started calling them people, whereas she still thought of them as creatures, except for Liaison, but she was nonetheless warming to them. Once they believed in the rightness of an idea, they were dedicated, hard workers. And despite their hard-core behaviour and beliefs, she felt surprised by how gentle they were with their sickened comrades. For example, she knew that if it was possible, Sunny would personally sit with each incurable critical until it died, but in the end she didn’t have to, as there were no shortage of volunteers among the weaker ambulatories and the healthier bads.

“By the way, you any closer ta figuring out what’s wrong with these guys?”

She shook her head. “It’s complicated; what with malnutrition, contamination, and opportunistic diseases, there are so many competing symptoms that I haven’t sorted it all out yet.”

“So, what’s next?”

Sunny sighed. “Next comes the hard part, keeping as many of these people alive as we can. Fresh water would be a big help! They’ve been drinking outta mud holes between rain showers.”

“I’ll talk to Liaison. What about the dead?”

“We hafta dispose of them, preferably by burning.”

“I don’t know if these guys’ll go for that.”

“That is not a problem,” Liaison said as he walked up to them. “We prefer to expose our dead, then bury their bones in clay pots in a cemetery in the ruins. However, those who die unclean would be rejected by the scavengers who would tend to their bodies, so the only way we can dispose of them is by burning. Fire cleanses the bones and sanctifies them for burial.”

She glanced at the pile of corpses in the collection spot. “There’re a lot of ‘em, maybe a dozen. You know a place big enough ta handle that big a fire without it spreading to the trees?”

He thought for a moment, stroking his chin. “Yes, about a quarter-hour’s walk from here. It is a large clearing filled with rocks, most of which are flat. We can light several large bonfires there.”

“Good. We also need water. You know of a source nearby?”

“Yes, but we are only permitted to drink from the Milk Stream that flows out of the Hills of Life.”

“What are those?” Sunny asked.

“The earth is our Mother; we sprang from Her when She gave birth to our Forefather and Foremother. The hills are Her breasts and the stream is the milk that flows from them and nourishes all life.”

Eile felt surprised at how sophisticated that belief was. She wondered if the entity in the ruins had anything to do with it.

“The goddess in the well,” Sunny ventured; “is she your Mother?”

“No, she is one of Her children, even as we are. But she is the spirit of the rocks, the bones of the Mother, and as such speaks for Her so that we may know Her will.”

“Are other water sources taboo?” Eile asked.

“No, but they cannot nourish us as the milk does. Only the rain, the tears of our Father the sky, can sustain us as well, but He cries seldom.”

“What happens if you don’t drink from the stream?”

He gave her a sly look. “We are not shamed if we drink from unblessed water, if that was what you hoped, but we eventually wither and die.”

“Okay, then why were these guys drinking out of hollows in the ground?”

“Because those who are shamed may not drink from the stream for fear of contaminating it, neither may they touch it or even go near it.”

“How long can one of yer people go without drinking the milk?”

That seemed to catch him unawares. He thought before he responded, once again stroking his chin. She wondered if he meant it to be a magical gesture.

“Now that you ask, I have gone for as long as six months with no ill effects.”

“How long have most of these guys been here?”

“Six weeks, nine at the most.”

“Well,” Sunny said, “it shouldn’t take nearly that long to know if we can cure them.”

He nodded. “There is a spring a short walk from here. The water bubbles out from an outcrop of rocks and flows into the stream. I have often wondered if it too is milk from the Mother.”

Eile nodded. "If it is, then it'll help yer people recover. If it isn't, it's still healthier than drinking out of a puddle in the dirt."

He spared her a crafty look. "You have come to understand us quite well in a very short time. I will show you where it is."

"First, we need to figure out how to store it," Sunny said. "Any craftspeople in the camp? That are healthy enough to work?"

"A few. I will set them to work making buckets and a cistern."

"They'll also recover faster with good food. Any women about?"

He gave her an uncertain look. "Why would you want women?"

Sunny blinked in surprise. "To cook, of course!"

He bared his teeth, but he didn't appear angry. Then Eile realized he was grinning.

"Women do not cook; that is man's work. Men fight, hunt, and cook; women raise children and make crafts. Among other things."

Eile chuckled as her partner looked floored. "Kinda an interesting role reversal."

Sunny giggled, finally getting the joke. "Okay, you little rascal! You got any cooks around?"

"I am fairly adept, and there are a few others."

"Then after we get the water, start making some soup. That's probably all most can stand for now. Finally, we need medicines to treat the sores and infections. Do you know if there are any around?"

"Meh-dih-sins?" He had a confused look on his face.

"A-ha! Gotcha! That'll teach you to match wits with White-Lion, Magic Girl Extraordinaire!"

"Yeah, he's probably not used ta fightin' with an unarmed opponent." That earned Eile a punch in the arm. Laughing, she danced a few steps away, holding up her hands as if to ward off more blows.

Liaison gave them a look as if he wondered whether they had gone Looney Tunes.

"Don't worry," Eile told him, "we're just horsin' around."

"If you say so." But he didn't sound entirely convinced.

Sunny grinned at him. "Don't worry about the medicines; I'll take care of those. Meanwhile, break's over, folks. We've got more work to do!"

“Heh, slave driver,” Eile muttered, but with a wide grin.

By first dusk they had finally finished all their chores. Eile and her work crew, along with some volunteers from Sunny’s ambulatory group, hauled the bodies off to the clearing while Liaison led them. There were enough large, flat rocks that they could place the bodies one or two per location, thus keeping each fire relatively small. Once the cadavers were laid out, the creatures scattered into the jungle, looking for wood. She wasn’t sure they would find any, but in fact they returned with quite a bit, including several good-sized deadfalls. With no axe, she used her sword to cut up the trunks and branches into kindling and logs, but she let her companions build the tipi structures around their fellow creatures, both out of respect for their feelings and because they knew how to do it right. She contented herself with making the smaller fire from which the others would be lit. Once the blazes were set, they stayed around to make sure none of the fires spread beyond their rocks. The smell was, of course, awful, but to her it seemed cleaner than the smell of the camp, with its rotten, pestilential foulness. The creatures stood still and moaned a low dirge, as if singing their brethren into the next world. It took a good few hours for the pyres to burn down enough that they could be tended to by only a couple of watchers, and it was late afternoon by the time she got back to the camp with the rest.

She discovered that the other creatures had not been idle. The cistern, a three-foot wide by two-foot tall tub made of woven green shoots and saplings sealed with gum resin, stood ready, along with half a dozen buckets made of the same material. The craftswomen had also created a makeshift cauldron out of a fireproof wood, as well as the rigging to hang it suspended near the main fire, and bowls and utensils to eat the soup. Different types of food—roots, vegetable bulbs, coarse fruits, nuts, fungi, large grubs, and several tortoises—had already been collected and laid out on huge leaves, ready for the water. Sunny had also gone out into the jungle and found the herbs and other plants for her medicines, and busily made potions and salves. Eile passed the buckets to the strongest of her workers and Liaison showed them where the spring was located. The outpour volume was not particular great, so it took a while to fill each bucket, and several trips to fill the cistern and cauldron, but by evening they had finished, and the soup simmered away, filling the camp with a delicious smell. At the same time, Sunny went around and ministered to the inhabitants, first the criticals that had a chance, then the bad cases, and finally the ambulatories, giving them draughts of her potions and applying salves covered with moss dressings wrapped in leaf bandages. She also gave the criticals she couldn’t help special teas that deadened their pain and helped them sleep. Eile figured a few of them wouldn’t wake up again.

The creatures were fascinated by her concoctions, but a couple of her methods left them rather disturbed. Her willingness to actually break the skin, such as lancing boils or opening wounds to clean out infection, seemed to give them the willies. And at one point, Liaison came running up to Eile as she emptied her bucket.

“Your partner is putting maggots on wounds!”

She figured that despite his agitation and aggressive tone of voice, had he really believed she was harming anyone he would have killed her.

She put the bucket down and stepped out of the way of the next individual to allow him to empty his pail. “Well, yeah, sure. It’s the best way ta cure ‘em.” Her reply took Liaison aback, but she went with him to see what her partner was doing. She crouched down beside the opening to a single hut and watched Sunny drop a number of maggots onto an open skin ulcer. She took a leaf, crumpled it up, and chewed on it until it was a pulpy mass, then wetted it in water and applied it over the maggots, followed by wrapping the wound with a sheet of what looked like Spanish moss.

She stood up and confronted Liaison. “It’s alright, she’s done this several times before. It sounds weird and looks disgusting, but they’ll actually help the wound ta heal, and faster than normal.”

He didn’t look convinced, but he nodded and walked off. Still, she figured he would be keeping a closer eye on Sunny, and her patients.

Finally, when first dusk came, all the work had been finished. Liaison declared the soup ready and the ambulatory creatures lined up to fill bowls. The first group was taken to the bad cases in their shelters, the next to the criticals able to feed themselves. Afterwards the ambulatories then filled their own bowls and sat around the fire. Liaison, Eile, and Sunny ate last of all. Eile wasn’t too keen on grub soup, but at least their bodies had disintegrated, and the dregs of the soup were thicker with more tortoise meat. It also tasted good and felt filling, her only complaint being it was rather bland. She figured she’d have to introduce Liaison to spices. Even after they took their share, there was still enough liquid left over that, when the ambulatories had finished their meal, they divided up the remainder and fed the criticals who could eat but couldn’t feed themselves.

When everyone had finished eating, Sunny had the ambulatory creatures wash out the cauldron, then fill it with water and boil it to clean the bowls. Eile figured they would need to refill the cistern in the morning. After that, when Sunny seemed satisfied everything that needed to be done had been done, she finally declared the day’s work to be over. Liaison and the ambulatories gathered around the fire and began chanting, but Sunny indicated she was tired, and after she and Eile used the latrine and washed up, they retired to their shelter, a somewhat larger one to accommodate their size.

“I wish we could go back to our camp and collect our things,” Sunny said, as they undressed. They had just gotten up that morning and were preparing to break camp when the pygmy creatures had discovered them and attacked. They had to abandon their stuff to flee for their lives.

“Well, it won’t be the first time we’ve slept nude.” Eile folded her adventuring outfit and laid her sword on it. “But at least we’ve gotta roof over our heads for tonight.”

Sunny yawned. “Uh-huh, and it’s warm enough to sleep without a blanket. I just hope there’s nothing sticky or stingy in here.” She patted the floor of the shelter, which was made of twigs, moss, and leaves.

Eile lay down beside Sunny. “Heh, anything that bites you in the butt will die in agony.”

“Oh, hardy-har.” Sunny rolled onto her side and propped her torso up on one elbow. “Just for that, I’m not gonna give you a body rub.”

“Huh, and I could really use one. Alright, I’m sorry.”

“Not good enough, partner.”

“Okay, what if I promised ta give you a rub after me?”

“Nope, still not good enough. I wanna see you grovel.”

“Grovel, huh? Well, then, how about if I give you head until you blow yer top?”

“Oh, nice! I like the way you grovel.”

“But I get my rub first?”

Sunny giggled. “Sure, why not?”

Eile laid herself flat on her back as Sunny sat up and moved to straddle her and sit on her hips. They shifted position a few times until they were comfortable.

“You know, I think these people are feeling better already.” Sunny leaned forward and started running her hands over Eile’s neck and shoulders.

“Yeah, I know wha’cha mean. Bein’ active seems to have improved their morale quite a lot.”

“Well, a good positive attitude helps make for a speedy recovery.” Sunny moved down to her breasts.

Eile gasped as she massaged her bosom. “Hell, I can believe that!” Sunny started playing with her nipples. “Oh, god, do I believe that!”

After that, conversation became impossible.

Eile awoke when Sunny shook her shoulder.

“Knock it off, ya spaz!” She felt too sleepy to move. “It’s still the middle of the night.”

“I’ve got it!”

“Well, whatever it is, I don’t want it. You keep it, and have fun with it.”

She felt a sharp slap to her rump. “Ow!” She rolled over onto her back and glared at her partner. “Hey! What gives, ya butthead?!”

“I know what’s wrong with these people! Come on, get up and get dressed!”

“Well, can’t it wait until morning?”

“Alright, you stay here if you want, but I’m gonna go test my theory!” And she jumped up and lit up the tip of her staff with a lighting spell.

“Aw, cripes.” Eile stood up, too. They didn’t put on their full outfits, just their tops and skirt and trousers, but Eile took her sword.

When they stepped outside, Eile realized it was later than she had first thought. She doubted it was even first dawn yet, but the landscape was dark grey with deep shadows rather than pitch black. A few of the creatures were up and around, but she figured the rest were still asleep, or at least incapacitated.

“Hey, Eile, look!”

She glanced where Sunny pointed, and found their packs and bedrolls stacked up beside the hut, along with Sunny’s composite bow and quiver.

“Where’d those come from?!”

“I retrieved them.” Liaison came around the hut.

“Wow, thanks!”

“Last evening I overheard you saying you had to leave your gear behind when my people attacked you, so I selected the two healthiest camp dwellers and we went to collect it. We may not have packed it well, but everything should be there.”

“We really appreciate it,” Eile said.

He shrugged. “It is of no importance. I am more concerned with your current activity. You would not be thinking of running off, would you?”

“Huh? What left field did that come out of?”

“I also overheard your partner tell you she did not know what ails my people. I wanted to make sure you did not try to leave.”

“Hey!” Eile felt her temper flare. “Now just a freakin’ minute. We gave you our word, and we wouldn’t break that without a damn good reason. So lighten up, you animated furball!”

He pulled his sickle half-way out of his belt. “You talk brave, for one inches from death.”

“Alright, that’s enough, both of you!” Sunny barked. “There’s no need for either of you to get your hackles up. I’ve figured a way to find out what’s wrong, and I’m gonna check it out. Now, keep quiet and come along!” And she stalked off towards one of the huts of the bad cases.

“Is she always that assertive?” Liaison slid his sickle back into place.

She shook her head. “Nah, but when she is, watch out! Come on, let’s go see what she’s up to.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

BURN, WITCH, BURN by A Merritt

XV.—The Witch Girl

I stood up. I said bitterly:

“You were right, Ricori—her servants are better than yours.”

He did not answer, looking down at Braile with pity-filled face.

I said: “If all your men fulfil their promises like McCann, that you are still alive I count as one of the major miracles.”

“As for McCann,” he turned his gaze to me sombrely, “he is both intelligent and loyal. I will not condemn him unheard. And I say to you, Dr. Lowell, that if you had shown more frankness to me this night—Dr. Braile would not be dead.”

I winced at that—there was too much truth in it. I was racked by regret and grief and helpless rage. If I had not let my cursed pride control me, if I had told them all that I could of my encounter with the doll-maker, explained why there were details I was unable to tell, given myself over to Braile for a cleansing counter-hypnotization—no, if I had but accepted Ricori’s offer of protection, or Braile’s to watch over me while asleep—then this could not have happened.

I looked into the study and saw there Ricori’s nurse. I could hear whispering outside the study doors—servants, and others from the Annex who had been attracted by the noise of the falling chandelier. I said to the nurse, quite calmly:

“The chandelier fell while Dr. Braile was standing at the foot of my bed talking to me. It has killed him. But do not tell the others that. Only say that the chandelier fell, injuring Dr. Braile. Send them back to their beds—say that we are taking Dr. Braile to the hospital. Then return with Porter and clean up what you can of the blood. Leave the chandelier as it is.”

When she had gone I turned to Ricori’s gunmen.

“What did you see when you shot?”

One answered: “They looked like monkeys to me.”

The other said: “Or midgets.”

I looked at Ricori, and read in his face what he had seen. I stripped the light blanket from the bed.

“Ricori,” I said, “let your men lift Braile and wrap him in this. Then have them carry him into the small room next to the study and place him on the cot.”

He nodded to them, and they lifted Braile from the debris of shattered glass and bent metal. His face and neck had been cut by the broken prisms and by some chance one of these wounds was close to the spot where the dagger-pin of the doll had been thrust. It was deep,

and had probably caused a second severance of the carotid artery. I followed with Ricori into the small room. They placed the body on the cot and Ricori ordered them to go back to the bedroom and watch while the nurses were there. He closed the door of the small room behind them, then turned to me.

“What are you going to do, Dr. Lowell?”

What I felt like doing was weeping, but I answered: “It is a coroner’s case, of course. I must notify the police at once.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

“What did you see at the window, Ricori?”

“I saw the dolls!”

“And I. Can I tell the police what did kill Braile before the chandelier fell? You know I cannot. No, I shall tell them that we were talking when, without warning, the fixture dropped upon him. Splintered glass from the pendants pierced his throat. What else can I say? And they will believe that readily enough when they would not believe the truth-”

I hesitated, then my reserve broke; for the first time in many years, I wept.

“Ricori—you were right. Not McCann but I am to blame for this—the vanity of an old man—had I spoken freely, fully—he would be alive... but I did not... I did not... I am his murderer.”

He comforted me—gently as a woman...

“It was not your fault. You could not have done otherwise... being what you are... thinking as you have so long thought. If in your unbelief, your entirely natural unbelief, the witch found her opportunity... still, it was not your fault. But now she shall find no more opportunities. Her cup is full and overflowing...”

He put his hands on my shoulders.

“Do not notify the police for a time—not until we hear from McCann. It is now close to twelve and he will telephone even if he does not come. I will go to my room and dress. For when I have heard from McCann I must leave you.”

“What do you mean to do, Ricori?”

“Kill the witch,” he answered quietly. “Kill her and the girl. Before the day comes. I have waited too long. I will wait no longer. She shall kill no more.”

I felt a wave of weakness. I dropped into a chair. My sight dimmed. Ricori gave me water, and I drank thirstily. Through the roaring in my ears I heard a knocking at the door and the voice of one of Ricori’s men:

“McCann is here.”

Ricori said: "Tell him to come in."

The door opened. McCann strode into the room.

"I got her--"

He stopped short, staring at us. His eyes fell upon the covered body upon the cot and his face grew grim:

"What's happened?"

Ricori answered: "The dolls killed Dr. Braile. You captured the girl too late, McCann. Why?"

"Killed Braile? The dolls! God!" McCann's voice was as though a hand had gripped his throat.

Ricori asked: "Where is the girl, McCann?"

He answered, dully: "Down in the car, gagged and tied."

Ricori asked: "When did you get her? And where?"

Looking at McCann, I suddenly felt a great pity and sympathy for him. It sprang from my own remorse and shame. I said:

"Sit down, McCann. I am far more to blame for what has happened than you can possibly be."

Ricori said, coldly: "Leave me to be judge of that. McCann, did you place cars at each end of the street, as Dr. Lowell instructed?"

"Yes."

"Then begin your story at that point."

McCann said: "She comes into the street. It's close to eleven. I'm at the east end an' Paul at the west. I say to Tony: 'We got the wench pocketed!' She carries two suitcases. She looks around an' trots where we located her car. She opens the door. When she comes out she rides west where Paul is. I've told Paul what the Doc tells me, not to grab her too close to the doll-shop. I see Paul tail her. I shoot down the street an' tail Paul.

"The coupe turns into West Broadway. There she gets the break, a Staten Island boat is just in an' the street's lousy with a herd of cars. A Ford shoots over to the left, trying to pass another. Paul hits the Ford and wraps himself round one of the El's pillars. There's a mess. I'm a minute or two getting out the jam. When I do, the coupe's outa sight.

"I hop down an' telephone Rod. I tell him to get the wench when she shows up, even if they have to rope her off the steps of the doll-shop. An' when they get her, bring her right here.

“I come up here. I figure maybe she’s headed this way. I coast along by here an’ then take a look in the Park, I figure the doll-hag’s been getting all the breaks an’ now one’s due me. I get it. I see the coupe parked under some trees. We get the gal. She don’t put up no fight at all. But we gag her an’ put her in the car. Tony rolls the coupe away an’ searches it. There ain’t a thing in it but the two suitcases an’ they’re empty. We bring the gal here.”

I asked: “How long between when you caught the girl and your arrival?”

“Ten-fifteen minutes, maybe. Tony nigh took the coupe to pieces. An’ that took time.”

I looked at Ricori. McCann must have come upon the girl just about the moment Braile had died. He nodded:

“She was waiting for the dolls, of course.”

McCann asked: “What do you want me to do with her?”

He looked at Ricori, not at me. Ricori said nothing, staring at McCann with a curious intentness. But I saw him clench his left hand, then open it, fingers wide. McCann said:

“Okay, boss.”

He started toward the door. It did not take unusual acumen to know that he had been given orders, nor could their significance be mistaken.

“Stop!” I intercepted him and stood with my back against the door. “Listen to me, Ricori. I have something to say about this. Dr. Braile was as close to me as Peters to you. Whatever the guilt of Madame Mandilip, this girl is helpless to do other than what she orders her. Her will is absolutely controlled by the doll-maker. I strongly suspect that a good part of the time she is under complete hypnotic control. I cannot forget that she tried to save Walters. I will not see her murdered.”

Ricori said: “If you are right, all the more reason she should be destroyed quickly. Then the witch cannot make use of her before she herself is destroyed.”

“I will not have it, Ricori. And there is another reason. I want to question her. I may discover how Madame Mandilip does these things—the mystery of the dolls—the ingredients of the salve—whether there are others who share her knowledge. All this and more, the girl may know. And if she does know, I can make her tell.”

McCann said, cynically: “Yeah?”

Ricori asked: “How?”

I answered grimly: “By using the same trap in which the doll- maker caught me.”

For a full minute Ricori considered me, gravely.

“Dr. Lowell,” he said, “for the last time I yield my judgment to yours in this matter. I think you are wrong. I know that I was wrong when I did not kill the witch that day I met her. I

believe that every moment this girl is permitted to remain alive is a moment laden with danger for us all. Nevertheless, I yield—for this last time.”

“McCann,” I said, “bring the girl into my office. Wait until I get rid of anyone who may be downstairs.”

I went downstairs, McCann and Ricori following. No one was there. I placed on my desk a development of the Luys mirror, a device used first at the Salpêtrière in Paris to induce hypnotic sleep. It consists of two parallel rows of small reflectors revolving in opposite directions. A ray of light plays upon them in such a manner as to cause their surfaces alternately to gleam and darken. A most useful device, and one to which I believed the girl, long sensitized to hypnotic suggestion, must speedily succumb. I placed a comfortable chair at the proper angle, and subdued the lights so that they could not compete with the hypnotic mirror.

I had hardly completed these arrangements when McCann and another of Ricori’s henchmen brought in the girl. They placed her in the easy chair, and I took from her lips the cloth with which she had been silenced.

Ricori said: “Tony, go out to the car. McCann, you stay here.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

21: Hope—and a Will

WITHOUT arousing the girl, Polaris made hasty search Some rods along the back trail, he saw a break in the snow at the side of the trail There he found the priest lying on his back, with his face turned up to the sun and his keen-pointed dagger piercing his heart He had stumbled thither as far as his endurance would sustain him More joyful than ever it had seemed in life was the half smile at the lips of the dead man.

That smile was the only message he had left. He had been dead for hours.

Polaris drew the dagger from the dead heart that had loved him well and hurled it afar in the snow He smoothed the dress of the priest and bore the body to the camp. Before he aroused the girl he placed the corpse again in the sleeping parka.

Then he called the girl and told her that Kalin was dead, but made no mention of the way the priest had taken.

“Ah, another brave heart stilled—and because of me!” she cried, and the tears came, for she had liked the priest well. As she wept, Polaris told her of the love the man had borne her.

“And, lady,” he said, ‘wherever Kalin is, he is well content, for he has aided you toward your dearest wishes and his soul asked no more than that.’”

He dug with the blade of a spear at the foot of one of the icy monoliths, and laid the corpse of Kalin there, while the dogs, which always seemed to sense the presence of death, bayed a hoarse requiem above the grave. But neither then nor at any future time did Polaris tell the girl of the supreme sacrifice Kalin made at the last, not wishing to make her suffer more regret.

On the rude grave he had made he piled a few loose fragments of rock, and turned to the task of breaking camp for the next northward lap into the wild land.

TWO hundred miles to the north and east, three men were gathered on the snow-crust in a little valley, wrenching and thrumming at the wires and pinions of the first bird-machine that ever had penetrated into the fastnesses of the Antarctic.

All was taut for the start. The wings were set. The engines responded to the power. The propeller thrilled the air. Into the seat climbed a lean, fur-clad young man, with a thin face, high cheek-bones shadowing deep set, cold, blue eyes, and a wisp of drab moustache above thin, eager lips.

‘Ready there. Aronson,’ he said, to a man standing by.

A second later Captain James Scoland sailed majestically away into the white mystery of the unknown polar land.

At the door of the snow house that had been their home for days, Aronson and Mikel, who had pressed with him to his farthest south camp, watched him going with shaded eyes. A tiny silken flag bearing the stars and stripes, fluttered from one of the canvas plane wings. Mikel watched it as far as it was distinguishable.

‘An here’s hopin he carries Old Glory safely through to the pole—an’ back again!’ he shouted.

Leagues farther to the north, in another tiny camp, three other men were waiting, also. Still farther on, in an ice-locked harbour, the good ship Felix rode day by day. The little company of its crew watching the slow passing of the hours, with every ear attuned to catch the first voice returning from the south that should tell of success, or of defeat and death.

And were that tale of success, those on the ship nursed a heavy sorrow that would turn into bitterness all the glory of success. A glorious maid and two men who had been of their company had strayed from the ship and perished in the wilderness.

SILENCE.

As far as the eye could reach, a dull wilderness, stretching wearily under a leaden, sunless sky. A rolling plain of lustreless snow, cut sharply here and there by crevasses, gashed at intervals by rifts of unknown depths and tortuous gulleys. North and south seemingly without bounds; east and west, many a mile of bleak fatigue between low, sullen hills of grey.

A land without sound, without life, and without hope.

Yet, among the ridges in that dead and twilight chaos, something stirred. A dark speck crawled on and on, writhing along the brinks of the crevasses, skirting the yawning rifts, twisting in and out around the hummocks, like the course of some wriggling vermin across the cracked and gaping skin of a white, unholy corpse.

Northward, ever northward, the blot dragged its crooked way. Nearer would it resolve itself into two wearily plodding beasts, tugging, slipping, stumbling, but going on, the creaking straps of their leathern harness pulling a sledge with a heap of skins upon it. Still nearer—a fur-clad, haggard man with hollow, blazing eyes glittering through an unkempt shock of golden hair and a gaunt grey dog with drooping tail picking their way with soundless feet through the white reaches, dragging their sledge; like a fantasy passing across the white and silent dream of the cold end of the world.

Once the dog had looked up into the face of the master, the dumb eloquence of sacrifice shining through its eyes, an age-old fire. The massive jaws slipped apart, but closed again; only a sigh was breathed from the beast’s broad chest.

“Aye; Marcus, I know,” muttered the man. “I know that you’ll die on your four feet, if you can, and in the straps. And I, Marcus,” his voice dropped to a whisper. “I’ll die, too, Marcus, as you will—for the Rose—all for the Rose- But not yet, Marcus; for the Rose yet lives, and death is slow for the very strong.”

Five luckless days had passed since the priest had laid his burdens by. One by one the cruel south had taken lives in toll, until only Polaris and the grim pack leader stood in harness to race with death, on the course to the north.

First polar bears, made mad by hunger, attacked the party, and two of the dogs, Juno and Nero, died under the sweeping crescent claws.

A nameless distemper, from which no dog, however carefully bred, is quite immune, had seized both Hector and Julius. For hours they acted strangely as they ran, and then, at a stopping place, they went quite mad and turned on the man and girl. Hector went down to silence under the crushing jaws of Marcus, who rose with a mighty roar to quell this insane mutiny; and Julius died on the spear of Polaris. There were tears on the cheek of the man as he drove the weapon home.

Refashioning the harness to suit his own wide shoulders, Polaris then took up the work of the lost dogs. For two long, days of many marches he and Marcus had dragged the sledge. Now, with their stock of provisions dwindled away and their rations slender, the terrific strain of the journey was telling almost to madness on the man and the dog.

They came to rest in the shelter of one of the thousands of hummocks, and Polaris realized, with-a chill at his stout heart, that their march had advanced them a bare score of miles from, their last stopping place, when they should have covered at least twice that distance.

From her nestling place beneath the heap of furs on the sledge he gently aroused Rose Emer, The girl rode most of the weary miles in light and fitful slumbers, drowsy with the cold, and her brain at times benumbed by the prospect, now nearer and nearer, of almost certain disaster—a contingency which the man would not admit.

She came forth listlessly, and they prepared their poor meal over the flame of the little oil-burner, and ate it within the shelter of the skins which the man stretched to confine the heat from the stove. They divided their rations with Marcus, and girl and man and dog huddled at the side of the sledge, to sleep if they might until the time for the next setting forth along the terrible way.

SOME hours later, when Polaris awakened her, ready for the next march forward, she shook her head wearily. “No, my dear friend, you will have to go on without me. No,” as he opened his mouth in quick question, “listen to me. I have thought it all out. If we continue on in this way we can proceed but a few miserable miles at the best, and then perish in the snow I am the handicap. Without me, you and the dog could leave the sledge and go on alone, and, perhaps, save yourselves. You were born and have lived in this land, and you could get through alone; where, with me to look after, you will not succeed.’

Polaris listened in silence, and a smile gathered at the corners of his mouth, as sad and wistful as any of Kalin’s.

“Too much has been done and suffered already on my account,” the girl went on. “I cannot let you make this sacrifice. You are as brave and. true a gentleman as lives in the world

today. All that human being can do, you have done for me. You must not die for me. You must go on and leave me—”

Her voice broke, and she hid her face in her hands. She felt the touch of Polaris’s hand on her shoulder.

“Lady,” he began, and his strong voice quivered. “Lady, what has Polaris done that you judge him so.”

“Ah, no, no!” she sobbed, “you have been good and brave and true, even to the end, but the end is here. Oh, you must go on—”

For a moment the man stood and gazed down on her, as she sat with her head bent low: He started to hold out his arms toward her, then clenched his hands at his sides.

Immediately he relaxed them, stooped, and swung her lightly from her seat on the furs, and tucked her tenderly in her place on the sledge.

“Dear lady,” he said softly, “never did Polaris think to quarrel with you, and here, least of all places, is fitting for it. Yet speak no more like this. Polaris will, he must go on as he has gone. If he dies, it will be the death of an American gentleman, not that of a savage and a coward. Come, Marcus!”

He slipped his shoulders into the harness with the dog, and again they went forward into the grey unknown. Through tears the girl watched the strong back bending to its task ahead of her. In her eyes a great light kindled and burned steadily. Not all the Antarctic snows might quench it.

They traversed four more laps across the snows, and were starting on their fifth when the final calamity fell.

As usual, they had camped close against the side of one of the larger mounds or hummocks. It was of rock, coated heavily with ice and frozen snow. On its beetling side, just above their little camp, a mass of rock had cracked away from the main body of the hummock. Its slow separation had been a matter of years, perhaps ages. That fracture might have been begun by the grinding fangs of a glacier five thousand years ago, and- completed by the tireless and eternal frosts.

There it was poised, masked by the snow and ice, waiting its time to fall.

At the moment that the travellers turned their faces from camp, and Polaris started to assist Rose Emer to her seat on the sledge, the hour struck for the fall. Rock grated on rock above them, warning the man to spring back. He dragged the girl aside. A few pieces of ice rattled down. Then the fragment, a weight of tons, toppled squarely down upon the rear of the sledge, crushing it to splinters, and burying it in the loose snow.

They stared at the wreck, and Marcus growled and strained to free himself from the harness.

Polaris dug aside the covering snow. A moment’s inspection showed that the sledge was nothing but shattered uselessness. Indeed, could he have repaired it, he had not the chance. It

was beneath the mass of the fallen rock, too great a weight for even his powers to remove. Some of their vanishing store of provisions also lay under the rock.

“We still can walk, lady,” Polaris said. “We will go on together.”

“No, dear friend, we will not walk on,” she replied. “See, my foot is hurt, and I can scarcely stand upon it. A splinter of ice struck it when the rock fell—”

Polaris leaped to her side and examined the extended ankle. He found it not broken, but bruised and swelling rapidly. It was true that she could not walk on it, nor would for many days.

HE MADE no answer to her last argument. He tore several skins robes from the fore part of the sledge, and set her down on them. Then, as well as he could, he bandaged the bruised ankle, winding it with strips of hide, outside the girl’s boot, for he dared not remove the coverings from the injured limb lest the cold do it irreparable injury.

His hasty surgery completed, he stepped to the ruin of the sledge and filled two skin sacks with the remains of the meat which he could come at. He strapped one of them on the back of Marcus, and the other he slung on his own shoulders.

With his knife he cut and fashioned at one of the skin robes. When he approached the girl again he wore a rude sling, which he had passed about his neck and shoulders, so that it hung across his broad chest.

He plucked her from the snow, wrapped her in a robe, and set her in the sling at his breast. He stooped, and with his knife cut Marcus out of the useless harness.

Unbelievable as it was that human beings so beset could continue to exist, they proceeded thus for the space of two days. At the end of each short march they huddled together in their robes—the girl and the dog and the man, and warmed with the heat of their bodies their frozen food, until they might chew and mumble it. Still closer they huddled for their fitful slumbers.

On the march the girl swooned many times with the throbbing pain of her swollen ankle. Always she awoke to find herself in the man’s arms. They wound about her, a living barrier, which death itself could not pass. All the weary miles of the weary marches he carried her.

Under her weight, every muscle of his splendid body was racked with the pangs of torture, until the fierce pain was succeeded by a numbness that slowly enveloped his body and crept up to his brain. He felt that he had been transformed into a ‘marching machine of unfeeling steel. He went on, bearing his burden, mile after mile, stolidly, doggedly, splendidly.

Two days passed. Polaris roused himself from where they slept huddled in a little hollow in the snow.

The mere rising to his feet was a matter of minutes, and he swayed uncertainly. Once more he fought fiercely with the temptation to acknowledge that this, indeed, was the end, and to

follow the footsteps of Kalin. Once more his courage upheld his resolve. He would go on. He would walk until he could walk no longer. Then he would crawl on his hands and knees, drag himself forward with his hands, but he would go on.

As he stooped there came to his ears a humming, faint and far away. He arranged the robe and gathered Rose Emer gently into the ling. With immense effort he straightened his knees and back and stood erect again. Again the humming noise, nearer now, and louder! Marcus floundered out of the hollow, both ears pricked, and growled a weak, hoarse defiance. Polaris followed.

From a distant humming the noise rose to a shrilling; from a shrilling to a prolonged shriek. The man came out of the hollow, and his eyes sought the sky, whence came the sound. His heart bounded and threatened to burst in his breast.

SHARPLY outlined against the dazzling sky, sailing along on steady planes like a great white bird of the air, her engine purring and thrilling, and her propeller screaming, an air-ship passed athwart his vision! Enthralled, his eyes, followed it. It was less than half a mile away to his right! He tried to shout aloud, but his voice was feeble, and seemed to be thrown back at him from the air. Before he could rouse the girl, or convey to her senses what was occurring, the ship of the air had vanished. It dipped out of sight into the mouth of a little valley. He looked again. No, his eyes did not deceive. Smoke was' curling up from the valley, a thin blue spiral. The bird man had alighted there. There was a camp of men. Food and warmth, rescue and life for his precious burden—all were there in that little valley, a bare quarter of a mile away across the snow. Could he ever reach it?

Into his brain leaped a multitude of quick thoughts. Joy and the shadow of an old suspicion came together. He knelt again in the snow and aroused Rose Emer.

“Lady,” he said very softly, “you are saved. Yonder,” and he pointed across the snow toward the valley—“yonder is the smoke of a camp, and an air-ship from the south just landed in that valley.”

Rose Emer strained her eyes across the snow. She saw the smoke and comprehended. For an instant she bowed her face on her arms. When she raised it her eyes were streaming. Out of hard despair their time had come again. She caught his hand to her breast, and then raised it to her lips. He snatched it from her.

“Oh, but I thank you—, words are too feeble to say it. I thank you for life, Polaris!”

“Lady,” he made answer, “I am going to make a strange request of you. Yonder are those of your own people—the American captain and his men. It is my wish that when we come among them you will say nothing of my origin, of where you found me, or what has befallen us, more than is necessary to tell—”

“It is enough that you ask it,” the girl broke in. “Never mind any further reason. I will do as you say.”

He groped within the breast of his furred waistcoat and took out a small, flat packet, sewn in membranous parchment. “One more favour of your kindness, lady,” he asked. “Please keep

this packet until I ask it of you again. It is the message which I carry to the world at the north. Should I pass into the world of shadows, you will do me a great service if you will open it and send its contents to whom it is directed.”

Rose Emer took the packet and hid it in her bosom.

“Now we will go on to the valley, before strength fails entirely,” he said. He straightened up again, and bent to the toil of the pathway which he had marked out for himself. The girl leaned back against his straining breast. Once more, when she might have spoken, she kept silence.

They went on. Slowly, uncertainly, for Polaris staggered much, foot by foot, he fought his way across that bleak and endless quarter of a mile of snow.

Three hours after the air-ship had landed from its history-making dash in and out of the jaws of the Antarctic. Captain Scoland and his two men were startled in their camp by an apparition.

Down the slope of the valley and through a circle of snarling dogs that rushed to attack and then slunk back affrighted, strode a grim-faced and silent man. On he came like a machine, or like one who walks wide-eyed at night. Behind him crept the tottering skeleton of a great grey wolf dog. Slung across the breast of the man was a fur-wrapped bundle. With measured tread he walked on to the door of the shelter, paused, and with no word let his burden gently down into the snow. A corner of the robe fell aside and disclosed the face of Rose Emer. She had swooned, and lay like one dead.

Captain Scoland sprang forward with a strained cry of surprise and question. The strange man stood for an instant, his unseeing eyes fixed on the snow reaches beyond the valley. Then he tossed his arms above his head and pitched backward, inert and lifeless. The tottering wreck of a dog crept up and licked his face.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)