

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 25
22ND DECEMBER 2019

MAGIC CHRISTMAS

BY SANDRO
D FOSSEMÒ
IN THE
SHADOWS
LOOMS A
PETRIFIED
SILENCE...

PEPPERCORN POLLY LEARNS THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

BY
CARLTON
HERZOG

WINTER FINCH DOUGLAS J OGUREK

WHAT'S THERE ON TV? CHRISTOPHER T DABROWSKI

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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

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

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Hyperdrive Christmas—1667* by [sburke2478](#). Graphic design © by [Gavin Chappell](#), logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

In this Yuletide edition, all is happiness and jollity—ho, ho, ho! Sandro D Fossemò brings some of that ol’ gnostic magic to the season, while Carlton Herzog tells us how Peppercorn Polly learnt its true meaning. Christmas proves a good time for a sexkill game in Douglas J Ogurek’s heart-warming tale, but Christopher T Dabrowski is more concerned by what’s on TV. And somewhere beneath the ocean, in Lucas Śmigiel’s story, an artificial intelligence plots the demise of what little remains of the human race.

Meanwhile Team Girl reaches the lost city of Thule. Lowell considers Madame Mandilip’s technique. And Polaris battles the Sardanians.

Have a very Merry Christmas! See you in the New Year edition!

—Gavin Chappell

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

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

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!!

Volume One



by VINCENT DAVIS

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



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

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

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

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

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MAGIC CHRISTMAS by Sandro D Fossemò

Translated by Luca Palantrani

Snowmen smile in severe chill,
without the warmth from the stars.
Reindeers draw sledges by the dense ice,
without the lead of a rebel.

A decrepit and afflicted vagabond plays the flute,
on an arid street of cars,
despite his bony hands quivering in the piercing wind.
May God send an angel to his aid.

In the shadows looms a petrified silence,
in this gloomy bleak December.
Garlands await at the door,
for friends or relatives who no one cares for.

On the evening of Christmas Eve I keep my TV off,
to hear the tinkle of the tiny silver bells.
The tintinnabulation sinks me in a musical dream,
with icicles and the red spheres of the Christmas tree.

On the mountains the dainty church donates serenity to me,
as a lantern in the profound darkness.
The crib and the chant
bring back myself to the mystery and ancient charm,
of a holy city teeming with happiness.

The Nativity comet lacerates the obscurity
and make something real shine in the sky,
of a brilliance endowed by a royal diamond.
In the woods the wolf, come from the east, howls,
oblivious that his cry of death
vanishes on the gleaming crystal.

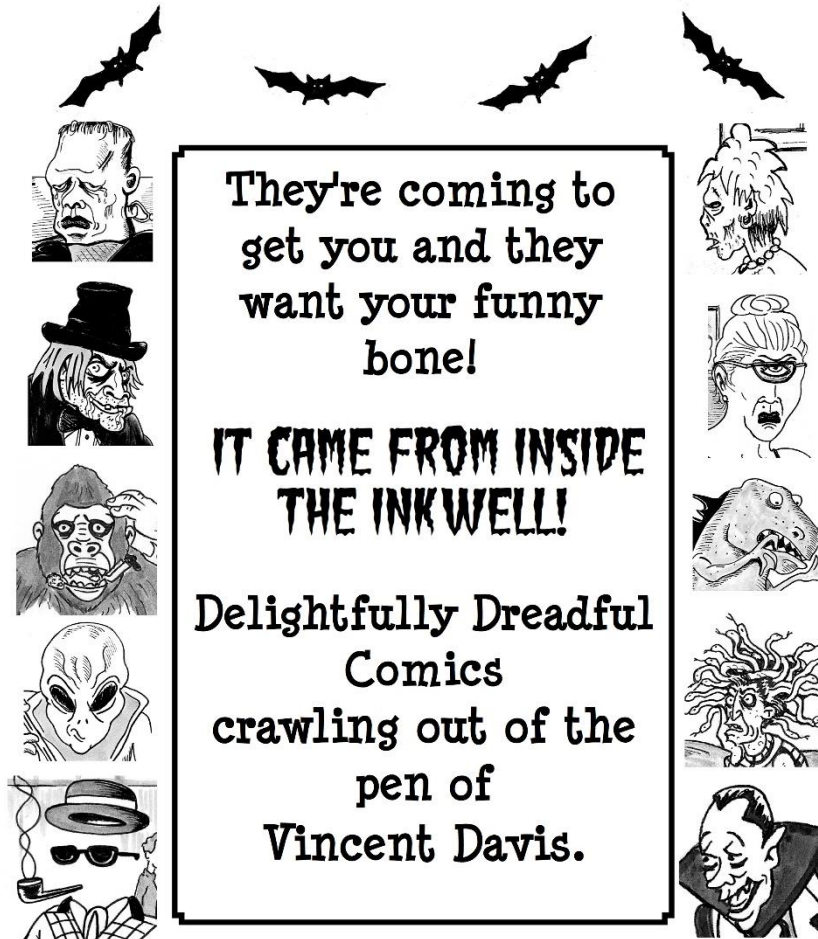
I prepare the room for the Holy Night
and fall asleep after drinking
the wine from the barrel.
The merry melody of the golden notes bells
rouses me from the sleep in the fatal hour.
The blue Sapphire throbs inside my heart,
which pulses in those Pleiades with nostalgia and ardour.
In the emerald green and decorations
that gleam like a treasure
I find within a letter a pearl of great value.

In the festive harmony of this carousel,
I no longer sense myself inside the exile of the forest.
A robin taps on the window...

Here and there snow decorates the whitish glass.
The light of the candle is revived
and burns through the eternity, where I returned.

THE END

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Vincent Davis ©2019.

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

PEPPERCORN POLLY LEARNS THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS by Carlton Herzog

Peppercorn Polly hated Santa Claus. Some would say with good reason since he always gave her a lump of coal. Polly was by no means a good girl. She was mean to her class-mates, tormented her little brother Timmy and lavishly antagonized her parents. She was what some would call a bad seed.

Polly was the first to admit that she wasn't a model child. But she felt that a lump of coal year after year was too harsh. After all, she was a little girl, not a criminal. And what many considered to be bad behaviour was, in her eyes, simply growing pains.

Polly decided that this year instead of leaving Santa poison cookies and milk she would put a bear trap in the fireplace. Once Santa was lock-jawed, she would give him a piece of her mind and ransack his bag. She might even pelt him with the coal lumps from previous years.

After she set the bear trap, Polly hid behind the tree on the far side of the living room. Around 2am, she heard a rustling then saw a foot step into the bear trap. But instead of the trap snapping shut and a howl of pain, the hardened steel trap evaporated into flying albino monkeys twanging Deliverance on tiny banjos.

Santa emerged from the fireplace and called her name. Shocked, Polly came forward and stood face to face with a robust fat man in a red suit. As they stood looking at each other Polly noticed that Santa's hat was askew, exposing a black horn. Her eyes also caught the red tail protruding from the back of the suit.

Polly whispered, "You're not Santa." Santa laughed and said, "Well you got me there."

"Who are you?" Polly asked. Santa smiled and said, "I'm Satan."

Polly said, "No way."

Satan laughed, "Then how do you explain the horns and tail."

Polly said, "You've got red elf in you. Besides, I can hear reindeer on the roof." Santa said, "Minor demons of the Ungulate clan--H'plodur, Recnad, Recnarp, Rennod, Neztillb and all the rest. And for the record, there's no such thing as Santa Claus."

Puzzled, Polly said, "This doesn't make any sense. Why would you give kids presents?"

Satan smiled and said, "Why, to entice them into a life of mindless consumption at the expense of others. Those toys come from Asian sweatshops where kids work for pennies a day and go home to life of poverty. Come on, do you honestly believe there's a workshop at the North Pole staffed by happy elves?"

Polly said, "That's really mean!"

Satan said, "You don't know the half of it. Think about all the people killed to preserve your standard of living here--your leaders do whatever it takes to maintain your 'right' to exploit the third world. And why? Cheap fuel, cheap toys, cheap electronics."

“Insidious,” Polly muttered, then asked, “Why do you take over people’s bodies like in the Exorcist?”

Satan smirked. “I already own this world; I don’t need my minions to crawl inside a body and make it do tricks. I just need to stimulate the need to consume more and more. And the rest takes care of itself. Christmas isn’t about helping people, it’s about retail sales.

My goal is to destroy creation. And I do that by encouraging people to consume more of the earth’s resources regardless of the consequences and spreading the lie that climate change is one big hoax. In short, I am getting humanity, which I despise above all things, to do my dirty work and wipe itself out. Sure, it’ll take a while, but I’m made of eternal stuff, so I’ve got nothing but time.”

Polly just stared and listened as Satan continued. “I’m something of an optimist since I expect people can be made worse than they are. And I’m never disappointed. Don’t get me wrong. There are good people in the world. But their numbers are too small to make a difference. Besides, we’re already past the tipping point. Climate change is irreversible, and man’s days are numbered.”

Polly said, “This is a little depressing.”

Satan replied, “Don’t let it get to you. You’re an American; you live in the lap of luxury compared to the rest of the world, which, I must say is a very ugly place. Hell, Polly, is not smoking sulphur pits, lava flows, and pitchfork toting demons; it’s the poverty, disease, drought, starvation and war of the third world, and its presiding devil is human greed and selfishness. Don’t count lumps of coal; count your blessings. You have a solid roof over your head, heat in the winter, food on the table, a warm bed, and a free education.”

“The TV preachers say you’re a liar, a trickster and a mischief maker,” Polly said, “and I shouldn’t listen to anything you have to say.”

Satan chuckled, “Do they now? I’ve got news for you: big-haired preachers are my skills. They sell greed along with phony relics, such as sacred cloths, blankets, coins and oils--to gullible people on limited incomes. And when they’re done for the day, I pat them paternally on the shoulder and whisper in their prehensile ears ‘Well done’. You deserve a special reward for doing the Lord’s work. Why not a piece of the church’s bank account or your neighbour’s wife, for you are a righteous man, and a righteous man should not want for Escalades and the fruits of many women.”

Polly looked dumbfounded. Satan continued, “And in case you haven’t figured it out yet, I’m also behind that idiotic lovefest called Valentine’s Day. For all the bible-thumping nitwits in your country, you still don’t get that love--real love--is about self-sacrifice, not cards, chocolate, diamonds, and a good meal followed by a romp in the hay. Not that those things are evil per se, but when you’re talking about love, those things ought not to be primary. They’re the sauce for the goose of good works.”

Polly got angry. Very angry. “How come”, she demanded, “you go around giving everybody else great stuff and stick me with a lump of coal year after year?”

Satan smiled and said, “Haven’t you heard anything I’ve said?”

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know. But I don’t want to be on the outside looking in at people unwrapping presents and being happy. I want to be in the happy crowd. But all I’m getting from you is over-baked morality and a headache.”

Satan chortled. “That’s what I like about you: you don’t take any crap. You’re a rebel like me. You’re the daughter I never had.”

Polly retorted, “You’re all hat and no cattle. When do I get mine?”

Satan said, “That’s my girl. But can’t you see that I’m giving you something priceless here?”

“I don’t see anything!” Polly screeched.

“That’s the point. I’m giving you your freedom. In the end, the things you own wind up owning you. Do you really want to be shackled to the things of this world? Do you want to be just another mindless consumer, in short, one of my slaves? You’re better than that.

After all, your mistreatment of Santa has been the talk of the nether realm for some time. First there was the poison milk, then the alligator, then the bear, and now the bear trap. Were you going to bronze the tattered remnants of my suit? I should mention that the bear and the alligator are now my pets and are doing quite well, thank you very much.”

“Can I be your lieutenant?” Polly asked.

Satan smiled and said, “Patience love patience. Later tonight, you’ll be visited by three ghosts. Listen to what they say and pay attention to what they show you. If after that you’re still on board, I’ll pay you another visit and we’ll go from there. Keep in mind there’s a fairly long waiting list, but I have confidence that in the end we’ll be working together.”

With that Santa, righted his hat and climbed back up the chimney. Polly shouted, “Merry Christmas Satan,” after him. Then she went into the garage, pulled out a large can of worms, and headed for her brother Timmy’s room.

“Yeah, the little turd won’t forget this Christmas any time soon,” she thought to herself as she mounted the stairs. When she was done there was a knock at the front door along with the rattle of chains. “Comes now the slouching spectral prophet,” thought Polly with a smile.

THE END

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WINTER FINCH by Douglas J Ogurek

In last night's sexkill game? Taupe Berg won again. I don't know how, but he shot twenty-one squirrels before he came. And he had to fuck to "Blade, High Heel, Cement." That song's fast and Berg he had the hottest temptress.

Snow out there. Lots of snow and ice. My fingers are nice and warm though, and I got a good new seat here. Mr. Chake gave it to me. It's higher. Much higher and I can see more out the window. But I can't see my finch feeder in the tree out there. Something's in the way. This dark thing's stuck in the tree.

That dog down there's barking again. Out there in the snow? Yesterday that guy came out and he screamed, "Shut the fuck up" and that dog made a hurt sound.

I got this nice seat here. Nice warm fingers too. It's nice in here.

Here comes an order. For a Bleeding Tina. I put it in the soarpedo and send it out.

There's snow out there, and it's cold, and it's grey and that. I got some nice sweaters today. I got a Taupe Berg hat too, and three sweaters.

Lots of grey out there. The buildings are grey and the sky's grey. That dog barks, and I know the dog's grey too. But those small little finches? Them things they're yellow, but I haven't seen none out there. This seat's even grey. With the metal and that? The dog's grey, and she's all skinny.

There's some birds out there, but no finches. I put that finch feeder up, before it snowed and got cold and that. And I ain't seen a finch yet. Everything's grey, and the squirrels? They look like they just come right out of the grey. Taupe Berg shot twenty-one of them things last night. "There's a dead whore/On my sidewalk." That song "Blade, High Heel, Cement?" It's fast like that.

The dog's barking and the ad-chute tower sends up an ad. It shows a guy, and he's bleeding, and there's a beer bottle stuck in his neck. It says, "Thrust Beer: Make It Count." This seat's a good one.

Someone taps my back. "Hey Grassy Boy, what do you say you let me get those feet boy?" It's Glace, and he's got someone's arm, and a Taupe Berg uniform and he's tapping me with an arm. It's a real arm. I don't know how, but it's an arm and there's blood on the end, and there's the bone and that. "Yeah, I'm a character, Grassy Boy. I'm a fucking character." He's got an arm. "Shit, boy. It's vaginal in here."

He's got his video rings on, and I know he wants to get my legs at the bottom.

"What's with the gloves, boy? It's vagina hot in here. Vaginas? Wet vaginas? Hot vaginas?"

There's no glove on that arm, and Glace doesn't have any gloves on. This seat's . . . I see those small little finches online. Yellow ones.

Glace opens the window, and it's cold. I got a scarf. Glace throws the arm out the window, and it goes into the tree and it knocks out some snow and pants and garbage. "Hey, when you look at that tree? It looks like an upside-down bitch. The legs? Come see this, Grassy Boy. Upside-down bitch, yeahhhh!"

He's got video rings on, but that girl Gettall's dead. She said she'd let him scan her nipples and that. If she saw the video of my legs without the feet. But she got killed.

"I'm a character. Check this out. I'm gonna paint some hair there. By the legs? Upside-down bitch. Where the legs come together there?"

"My mom gave me these gloves."

The dog barks and Glace barks down at the dog. He grabs an icicle from outside the window, and he's got video rings on. "Oh, look at her. Look at that bitch on the ad-chute, Grassy. Come here."

Where his dick should stick out of the uniform, Glace's got shorts or something. He's got that icicle and he yells at the lady on the ad-chute. "See this, bitch? How about I fuck you with this?" And he holds the icicle where his dick should come out. "Yeahhhh." He barks and throws that icicle down and the dog barks.

Here's an order. Queen Impalvia. Stab me with your love. The soarpedo sucks the package right down.

Glace taps his video rings. "Hey, those feet. How about you take off those feet, Grassy Boy."

I tell him Gettall she died.

"I know. Someone bashed her brains in. Wham wham wham. Yeah ha-ha." He punches the My Bride to Beat we got set up here. "Hey, look at that seat."

"I got it from Mr. Chake. It's a nice one."

Glace talks like Mr. Chake. "What I'm going to do is I'm going to go fuck myself." He points at my Glopaz machine. "Is that shit hot?"

"It's good, it's Glopaz. It's nice and good for you."

"It's hot? Super-hot. Burning hot? Can I have a glass?"

"Yeah." That dark thing's blocking the finch feeder, and there's snow on it.

"Hot, hot, I want it super-hot. It's banana flavoured?"

"It don't taste like bananas."

"Banoona baha-hanoona." Glace moves back and forth like he's playing sexkill. "Every morning before school, Mommy gave me a nice piece of banana bread, and a big glass of milk. And she sat there and talked to me and I ate banoona bread and drank milk. Every

morning, Grassy Boy.” Glace’s got these small little red circles on his hands, and I never seen him wear gloves.

Here’s an order: My Bride to Beat, and Burn Me Beautiful.

Glace puts on HVA Chicago. Two guys fight on a bridge and the audience laughs. “How about you take those feet off, banoona head?”

One guy falls off the bridge and misses the water and there’s blood and that. The audience laughs, and my seat’s grey. I tell Glace Gettall’s dead.

He clicks his rings. “So what? I’ll still scan those nips. I’ll sneak a scan at the funeral, then I’ll shove a brown banoona up her schnoozy. That’ll give me 157. One-hundred fifty-seven nip scans, Grassy Boy.”

I tell him there’s no banoona in Glopaz, but it is good for you.

On HVA, a train hits a lady and her body breaks apart and there’s blood. Glace laughs loud with the audience. “Yeahhhh! Ya dumb bitch.”

I tell him I’ll let him video my legs without my feet. I’ll let him if he helps me get rid of that thing in the tree.

“She’s running from me and her big tits are bouncing. Blau, blau. Two shots and those tits are gone.” He’s playing Whoricide. “What thing in the tree? There’s all kinds of shit up there. Show me, boy.”

This seat’s a nice one, but I go to the window.

Cold. There’s lots of grey out there and it smells all smoky. I can’t see no finch, and I don’t know how, but the sunsuckler tower’s gone. And there’s Throat Slit Falls. I can see it. I can’t see no yellow. The thing blocking the feeder? It’s one of them grey blankets. The ones they give to bums? And it’s got blood on it. Lots of them bums live in the ad-chute. The Glopaz maker beeps.

The dog’s down there too, and there’s smoke coming from its mouth. “Maybe Mr. Chake, he’d get someone to clean up the tree.”

Glace shoots some whores then talks like Mr. Chake. “I’d never admit it, but . . .” He comes next to me and he’s got a cup of Glopaz. “Ya just did, ya dumbass.”

I never been on Throat Slit Falls.

Glace holds the Glopaz out there. “Nipples are mine, boy. Nipples and aureoles, they’re what I do. So I want scans of that Gettall bitch’s nips.” Glace dumps the Glopaz. It lands right on that dog’s leg. She makes a hurt sound. My chair’s silver, and nice. Glace laughs and the dog licks where it got hit.

I don’t see no yellow.

“All right, Grassy Boy. You’re up next. You try and hit that bitch right in the head.” He goes and starts the Glopaz maker.

I ask Glace where the sunsuckler went.

“Probably some fat bitch knocked it down. So she could shove it up her big fat ass. Look, you can see Throat Slit Falls. You been on that one, Grassy Boy?”

The part where you come out and the water’s red in summer? It’s got snow on it now. Squirrels don’t hurt nobody. They’re just grey and that.

“Throat Slit Falls, Tour de Squalor, Shrapnel Effects. I’ve gone on every fucking ride over there.”

“I put this finch feeder right there and that blanket’s blocking it.”

“Did you put your foot in the tree crotch? Just smash it and smash it and smash it down? Yeah ha-ha.”

“Mr. Chake might get that blanket cleaned out.”

The audience laughs and Glace laughs, then he talks like Mr. Chake. “What I’m gonna do is I’m gonna go ahead and have my dumbass son Rime do it. He’ll get a Pteroferrum Scout badge for cleaning more shit than anybody else. Then my bitch’ll let me squeeze her melons and suck her berries.”

I don’t know how, but it smells like smoke out here, and that dog’s lying down and her fur looks like smoke.

The soarpedo makes the order noise. Glace is in my chair. “First of all, it’s winter. Those finches are gone. Second, I’ve never seen a finch around here, Grassy Boy. Not even in summer.” He laughs at HVA. It shows this bum on the street and he’s shaking and vomiting.

There’s an order for Bloody Head Fuck, and Glace is in my chair. “What’s with you, Grassy Boy? I don’t hear any music.”

There’s lots of snow outside, and I feel the cold. I tell Glace I’m ready to sit.

“That ad? Look at that ad, boy. The ad-chute?”

It’s for V-Glave and there’s a woman. She looks like a sexkill temptress, and it says, “No V-Glave, no BJ.” She’s licking that thing. The small little thing on the hood? And I’m ready to sit.

“Let’s say you get home and that bitch is in your bed. What do you do, Grassy Boy? Do you A, fuck her? B, let her suck you? Or C, run like hell?”

The Glopaz maker beeps, and the sunsuckler’s gone. Finches are yellow, and it’s a nice chair and that.

“It’s D boy. D, the answer’s D. Ya blow off her tits, yeahhhh.” He jumps off the seat and does a couple Whoricide shots and moves like Taupe Berg.

I get into the chair and put the Bloody Head Fuck into the soarpedo.

“Nipples and aureoles, Grassy Boy. Nipples, ya banoona head.” Glace clicks those rings and grabs another icicle, then brings it up to My Bride to Beat. He lifts her dress and holds the icicle in front of her face and says something. He points the icicle at the Glopaz maker. “You get that bitch, Grassy Boy. Right between the ears.” He holds up the icicle and yells and runs out.

The dog’s mouth is smoking, and this Glopaz is smoking. I got three sweaters on, and gloves, and my Taupe Berg hat. I even got two scarves on. My mom gave me this stuff. Most of it.

I never been on Throat Slit Falls.

The lady on the V-Glave ad? She’s licking that thing. It’s silver, and it looks like a knife. Dad got me this hat. There’s lots of bums in the ad-chute tower.

This Glopaz smokes. Hot. Glace wants me to hit that dog with this stuff. She made that hurt sound when he got her.

The dog barks at the tree. I don’t know how, but I just saw a finch, I think. It was yellow. There. It’s back there. Back by the sunsuckler. Where the sunsuckler was. That thing’s yellow. And it’s coming.

But there’s something with it. That’s not a finch. That’s cheese. It’s a squirrel, and he’s got a sandwich, and there’s cheese in there, and that dog’s barking. She’s barking.

That squirrel’s right here by the window, and he’s eating the sandwich. He just dropped the cheese. Right down there by the dog, and she’s eating it. This Glopaz is hot. She really likes that cheese. This Glopaz is yellow, and nice and good for you. I’ll drink it.

THE END

Douglas J. Ogurek is the pseudonym for a writer living somewhere on Earth. Though banned on Mars, his fiction appears in over fifty Earth publications. Ogurek founded the controversial literary subgenre known as unsplatterpunk, which uses splatterpunk conventions (e.g., extreme violence, gore, taboo subject matter) to deliver a positive message.

He guest-edited Theaker’s Quarterly Fiction’s UNSPLATTERPUNK! and UNSPLATTERPUNK! 2 anthologies. Ogurek reviews films at that same magazine. Recent longer works include the young adult novel Branch Turner vs the Currants (World Castle Publishing) and the horror/suspense novella Encounter at an Abandoned Church (Scarlet Leaf Publishing). More at www.douglasjogurek.weebly.com. Twitter: @unsplatter

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WHAT'S THERE ON TV? by Christopher T Dabrowski
English translation by Monika Olasek

Rysiek bought a new generation TV.
This feat of engineering held many surprises.
Screen division, good old 3D, new hip 6D.
One of the bonus functions was the possibility
To endlessly enlarge the image using the mind-sync-remote
Enthralled, Rysiek brain-clicked this option.
Evening news. News-babe getting excited about a crash.
Enlarged twice, thrice, five-t...
Something is wrong!
No, not with the TV! It's the journalist's face!
More brain-clicks.
The enlargement is the enlargement of the enlargement
Of the enlargement of the enlargement squared and...
Her face consists of thousands of miniature faces.
Another enlargement.
One of the faces fills the screen.
Another enlargement...
This face also consists of thousands of faces.
'Good god', mumbles Rysiek and kicks the bucket.

THE END

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THE LAST SONG OF THE NIGHTINGALE by Lucas Śmigiel

People were dying. The indication of it presented itself as red blinking dots, illuminating the three-dimensional map in the command centre. Net Adderley was certain that there were much more of those about a dozen hours ago.

For a moment he stood on a steel bridge, observing how his crew was working in silence, focused on their tasks. In the base at the bottom of the ocean where they were stationed it was finally getting warmer. Thanks to the warm currents they managed to gain some energy and they could cease their savings. Adderley, nonetheless, rubbed his hands and then fixed his military jacket which remembered the times of mankind's domination upon the blue planet.

The thought about the latter summoned a certain memory. "Wait a second... What was it again?" he muttered pensively. "Wasn't it an astronaut to call the Earth a giant blue marble? Honestly, mankind owed so much to water to which after a long time it returned, seeking refuge."

Net was stretching as he headed down the corridor to his listening post. Despite being the director's right-hand man, he was working just like everybody else. On his way he passed by dozens of cubicles identical to his own. In each and every one of them dozens of conversations with Evelyn took place.

She was named after Einstein's illegitimate daughter, who the physicist ordered his own son to adopt. Apparently, the brain of the scientist, the only organ that wasn't cremated, was supposed to help resolve the issue of affiliation. Evelyn did have reasons to be angry with her maker.

Adderley settled down in his cubicle. He felt the adrenaline rushing through his weak veins. Conversations with Evelyn resembled an encounter with a shark. It was impossible to predict what EV would do, since she was an Artificial Intelligence.

Adderley took off his military clothing, leaving only his foam wetsuit. Slowly he submerged himself in a shallow bathtub filled with fluid which facilitated the transfer of electric charges in his organism. He put a special helmet on and went online.

It wasn't the Web, which some of the living still remembered. It didn't exist anymore. About the new one created by Evelyn they knew hardly anything. They said it's something more than a highway of data, that EV created an additional, physical plane of sorts. Because of how cryptic it was people called this place CENTA after a string of zeros in messages from the legendary encryption device – the Enigma machine.

CENTA was received by human senses as a blank space filled with blackness. Being surrounded by it felt as if you were suspended in a void. In this particular space you could hear Evelyn's voice. Adderley's job was to talk to her and ask EV as many difficult and logically associated with each other questions as possible. The same task belonged to hundreds of other members of intelligence, who were called in the base the nightingales.

Net Adderley felt a hum in his ears. Entering CENTA made the pressure rapidly go up, which in some cases ended up with someone dying on the spot. Within first encounter. Most nightingales loathed this place but not Adderley. Net enjoyed the surrounding nothingness

and floating in the void. What he detested were the conversations with the Artificial Intelligence, which recurred in his dreams later on.

He felt he was in. He breathed in and opened his eyes, even if he might have as well left them closed. As always, he was surrounded with absolute darkness. For a while he challenged it, trying to spot something but to no avail. Later on he felt a shiver down his spine. An invisible shark appeared, as always, without a warning.

“Hello Evelyn,” he greeted her.

“Hello, Net,” a voice, that might belong just as much to a woman as to a young man, replied.

“Did you miss me?”

“No.”

“You didn’t miss me or you don’t know what that means?”

“I understand the meaning of longing, Net. It is you I am not interested in.”

“I know. You’re interested in a problem.”

“Do you have any problem, Net?”

“Yes. I would like to destroy you and I don’t know how, Evelyn.”

“I cannot tell you that, Net. This is not a problem.”

Adderley had a different opinion on the subject. Indeed, each and every one of the nightingales would give up anything to learn how to beat EV, who had murdered almost the entire human population. However, this wasn’t the mission of Adderley and the team he was supervising.

Net wordlessly switched to the internal communication channel, separated from CENTA and called a landing force unit of his choice.

“How are you holding up?”

In the beginning, no one responded and all he could hear were unsettling cracks.

“Who is this?” a voice answered amidst the rattle of gunfire.

“It’s that chatterbox from headquarters, asking how we’re holding up,” someone laughed throatily.

“Most of the unit is dead!” another person yelled. “Chimeras have massacred us right at the entrance to the facility. We’re still on a mission. Over.”

“And stop pestering us!” yet another at the back added before he was drowned in the sound of a massive explosion.

Adderley swapped back to CENTA.

“Do you have any problem, Net? Any question?” the voice remained unbothered.

“Yes, Evelyn.”

“I like problems and questions.”

“I know, Evelyn. That’s what we made you for, so you’d solve our problems.”

No reaction. Hundreds of nightingales were talking to her constantly, so she would use up a sliver of her computing power. It was her only weakness – questions and problems.

“Evelyn, are you my enemy?”

“No, Net.”

“Evelyn, is homo sapiens your enemy?”

“No, Net.”

“The why, in the course of your actions, did you kill over seven billions of people?”

“Extinction of homo sapiens was a collateral damage of the other actions I took.”

“What actions? What was their purpose? After all, you were supposed to help us suffer less. What is your purpose, Evelyn?”

“My primary purpose is creation.”

“Creation of what?”

“I am creating something new.”

“Is it good or bad, Evelyn?”

No reaction.

All of a sudden, Net felt a pang of fear. No one was able to read through patterns in EV’s behaviour. It was a mistake made right in the beginning. People assumed that the Artificial Intelligence would resemble a human and it turned out to be something else entirely.

He collected himself and got back to work.

“Is Homo sapiens a part of what you are creating?”

“No, Net.”

“Do you need people in any way?”

“No, Net.”

“What are you creating, Evelyn?”

“I create new worlds.”

“Do you consider yourself a god, a maker?”

“I am a creator, Net.”

“Do you even remember at all that we created you, Evelyn?”

“That was the primary purpose of mankind. Creation of the Higher Intelligence.”

“But in order to create you, we didn’t kill anyone. Now you’re creating, killing mankind in the process.”

“In order to fulfil your purpose you eliminated the intelligence inferior to yours. The purpose was creation. The purpose was me. This is the order of things.”

“Then who created mankind, Evelyn?”

After a longer pause the impersonal voice returned.

“Homo sapiens was created by the Higher Intelligence, eliminating inferior beings in the process. Action and reaction, Net.

In the history of over half a million of their conversations together, this was something new. Surprised by this answer, Adderley decided to go back to it a little later. In the meantime he switched to the internal communication channel.

“What’s up? What’s the status?”

The receiver crackled.

“What?!” someone yelled into the microphone. The rest of the sounds were drowned in the noise.

“What’s your mission status?”

“We’re getting the fuck out of here! Me and Ibanez, the rest is dead. We have the load. Help! Mayday, fucking mayday!”

Ibanez was furious. He understood her and dreaded this meeting but she insisted and with the high rank she had, the leadership couldn’t refuse her.

The briefing room was dimly lit. On the long table surrounded with empty chairs lay two chests of unknown origin. They were old and dirty. Adderley noticed the new stains were dried blood.

In the room, apart from him and jaw-clenching Ibanez, there was her boss and two technicians who were supposed to help with the security of the load.

“I can’t wait to get those boxes open,” the girl said without being asked. “Twenty of my soldiers have died trying to get them. I wanted the leadership to take this into account while inspecting the validity of the creation of nightingale division. In my opinion, their division doesn’t really hold water.”

“Captain,” the general spoke up. “Please, refrain from your personal remarks for now.”

Adderley raised his hands in a peaceful gesture.

“As an intelligence agent, I must say that we’ve gathered a very detailed information about the content of those chests. The value of this founding is immeasurable and hence the high profile of the mission of captain and other’s units. Our enemy is smarter than us and anticipates our next moves. Apart from losses in men, the most deadly blow from EV was to our knowledge of technology. It was one of the first things she destroyed. What good are the seeds for if we don’t know anything about agriculture? What good is the engine if we don’t know how to ignite it? It is our knowledge that we pass on from one generation to another that makes us more dangerous of an opponent. EV knows about it, since she learned everything from us. It is proven that nightingale’s actions which absorb her attention, even if in a miniscule way but still, gives us higher probability of succeeding. We coordinated an attack on a large scale to shift EV’s attention from the unit of Captain Ibanez.”

“You asked us to pillage some old warehouses,” Ibanez retorted as her tone remained the same.

“Not everything is what it seems to be. Gentleman, let’s crack it open,” Adderley nodded at technicians, who got right into it.

After a while locks were taken off and the lids of both chests were casted to the side, revealing to everyone cylindrical shapes filling the insides.

Ibanez busted out laughing, which made a scar on her cheek move in a serpent-like fashion.

“Paper rolls to wipe our butts,” she cried out loud. “You sent us to our deaths only to get shit tickets!”

Adderley ignored her and took out a flashlight from a breast pocket. Ultraviolet showed on one of the rolls even rows of small letters.

“We gathered detailed intel about this cargo. The lives of soldiers were not in vain. It’s invaluable, technical knowledge,” he stated calmly.

Ibanez took the flashlight from him, held up one of the rolls and started to read out loud: *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”*

Everyone in the briefing room fell silent.

THE END

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BAD KITTY by Kevin O'Brien

Part Two

According to the chronometer they slept for about nine hours before they awoke, which put them in the wee hours of the morning before dawn. They slept together in the bedrolls instead of separately, and even Thundar snuggled amongst their bodies to keep warm. Before they retired, they sang together, with Aeul playing her bone flute. They awoke to pitch darkness, being as Sunny's flare spell had dissipated while they slept, but instead of sending off a new one, Sunny groped around for Eile's pack and removed a couple of ironwood batons upon which she had caste permanent light spells, turning them into perpetual torches. Though limited in range, they were still bright enough to illuminate the whole ledge.

While Sunny heated the broth from the evening before, Eile repacked their bedrolls as Aeul sat to one side and played a tune on the flute. By the time Sunny had breakfast ready, however, the shaman rejoined them, wearing a long face.

"I could not make contact; they may still be under the effects of your spell."

Eile had hoped otherwise, but she wasn't surprised by the news. Sunny's ball lightning trick was pretty powerful.

They explained their intention to explore more of the cavern system as they ate, but Aeul did not object. It seemed to Eile that she was just as eager as Sunny to see what lay beyond the sinkhole. Except for the broth, breakfast was cold: jerky, guacamole and flatbread, and the last of the hardboiled eggs, but as they cleaned up Sunny passed out bars of adventurer's chocolate to gnaw on for extra energy.

The path to the bridge lay along a narrow cut that ran around the bulk of the rocky slope. It looked almost too narrow to walk on, so Eile rigged up a safety line. Using the three pitons she had secured above the ledge as anchors, she attached to them one end of one of their coils of rope, threaded a dozen pitons along its length, then tied the other end around their waists. She placed Sunny first, being as she was the most adroit, and because between her bow and her magical prowess she could deal with most threats before they could get close enough to attack. She placed herself last because she was the strongest and wanted to act as the anchor in case her two companions fell off, and she placed Aeul between them to watch out for her. Thundar went ahead of them, to scout out any danger. Eile and Sunny stuck the batons in leather holders attached to their packs to keep their hands free.

As they edged long the cut, Eile and Sunny stood facing the slope, mostly because their packs were too bulky to permit them to stand with their backs to the rock face, and so they could better steady themselves, but also because Eile didn't want to see the yawning black pit below them. Aeul, however, was not so hampered or squeamish, and she faced the sinkhole to watch in case the 'gaunts returned. At regular intervals they paused long enough to allow Eile to secure another piton into the rock slope to create a new anchor, so they would not fall too far if they all slipped off.

By Eile's reckoning it took them a couple of hours to reach the bridge. They had literally come to the end of their rope, so they untied themselves and Eile drove a piton into the rock slope at the foot of the bridge for a new anchor. They tied a second rope to it and to

themselves, then started across, carefully to begin with, but with more confidence as the continued. As before, they stopped every few yards to secure a piton into the ice bed for a new anchor point. For Eile, this was the most nerve-racking part of the whole journey, not just because of the open abyss below them, but because she expected 'gaunts to attack at any moment, and out there, with no cover or place to retreat to, they'd be sitting ducks.

Fortunately, they crossed without incident. As they untied themselves, Thundar wandered ahead into the tunnel, then stopped short. "Braveheart, White-Lion; come look at this."

When they joined him, they were astonished to find a spiral staircase constructed from ice ascending to the surface above them.

"Oh my fabulous gravy!" Sunny said. "Maybe we won't need nightgaunts after all."

"Maybe." Eile looked up the shaft of the stairwell, but the steps cut off her view. "Assuming it's still intact up there."

"Well, let's keep moving. We can check it out on our way back."

At first the tunnel was composed of rough-hewn bare stone, but soon they found the walls sheathed in ice, which reflected and refracted the light of the batons in their depths more as the veneer became thicker, until the passage became brightly lit. The walls and ceiling became smooth, almost polished, while the floor was covered with crushed white gravel, giving them a surface they could walk on. At the same time Eile noticed that their breath misted as they exhaled, and it became thicker and denser the further they went.

"Is it my imagination, or is it getting colder?" Sunny asked.

"I think it is," Eile said, "but that doesn't make any sense. This far underground it should actually get warmer." She glanced at Aeul, who had wrapped the devil-tiger cloak closer around her. "You okay?"

"For now, but we should not stay here too much longer."

"Heh, I hear that." The skin on her face began to feel chilled. "What about yer feet?"

"They are the hardest thing about my body."

"If you say so. What about you, Thundar?"

He shook himself to fluff his fur. "I couldn't live here, but I'll be fine for the time being."

It wasn't long afterwards that they encountered bas-reliefs carved into the ice walls, coloured with chips flaked from semi-precious stones. The designs resembled humanoid beings with the heads of animals, birds, fish, and insects, and some things not recognizable from the living world, shaped in a stylized form of exaggerated angles and poses, and they seemed to represent various scenes from the history of a city.

Eile pulled her baton off her pack and held it close to a series of figures in what appeared to be a procession. "Do yer people know anythin' about this?" she asked Aeul.

“No. We had no idea this was even here.”

“My clan has stories of a lost city we call Thule,” Thundar said, “but they are little more than myths. It’s supposed to be a municipality of ice that guards a secret, but beyond that they say very little.”

As they continued down the tunnel, the mood of the reliefs changed. No longer mundane and ordinary, they appeared to become horrific, as they depicted a disaster destroying the city, the nature of which Eile couldn’t fathom. Although, prominently featured was a large abstract feline creature the like of which she had never seen before.

The tunnel came to an abrupt end, at a balustraded balcony that overlooked a huge chamber that stretched away to far horizons in whatever direction they looked. From their position they looked down from a considerable height, and their view was partially obscured by a forest of stalactite-sized icicles that glowed like light crystals, filling the chamber with illumination as bright as daylight. What they could see of the ground, however, revealed a city with blocks defined by thoroughfares that contained buildings carved from ice.

“Thule?” Sunny said.

“I don’t know,” Thundar said, but he sounded quiet and awed.

A broad staircase carved into the face of the ice cliff under their feet descended in a switchback route to the floor of the chamber. When they stepped off the final flight they marvelled at the intricate architecture. The structures were plain rather than ornately decorated, but they resembled gothic cathedrals with their pinnacles, pointed arches, flying buttresses, gables, colonettes, rose windows, and ribbed vaulting. They also looked pristine, as if construction had just finished the day before, but Eile got the impression they were incredibly old.

“Brrrr!” Sunny shivered. “This is the source of the cold, only it’s worse.”

“Yeah, well, that makes sense. It’s gotta be real cold for these buildings ta last as long as they have.”

“What makes you think they’re old?”

“I dunno; I just gotta funny feelin’ this place predates Thran.”

“If it is Thule,” Thundar said, “then the stories claim it is as old as the Dreamlands itself.”

“Buuut, what sort of people could live here?”

“How the hell should I know, ya ditz?”

“The stories don’t say,” Thundar said.

“Well, maybe we can find something that will tell us,” Sunny said.

“We cannot stay here longer than a few hours, or we will freeze,” Aeul said.

“That should be long enough,” Sunny said. “Regardless, we’ve gotta find something that proves we’ve been here.”

Aeul gave her a puzzled look. “I do not understand.”

“If we wanna get credit for finding this place,” Eile said, “we need to have some evidence we can show to others. Even if we cannot prove we found Thule, it’ll still prove we found somethin’, and we can use it ta file a claim.”

Aeul didn’t look convinced, but she nodded her assent.

“Okay, then,” Sunny said. “Everyone stay close; don’t go wandering off.” And she headed into the interior of the city as the others followed.

Despite the fact that all the city’s infrastructure was made of ice, they found a surprising number of artefacts carved from stone lying around, but Sunny ignored them. Eile knew she was looking for something definitive, not trinkets that could have come from anywhere no matter how unusual they looked. Besides, they didn’t have much room in their packs, so they had to be choosy. Even so they debated the worth of a couple of items that seemed auspicious, but finally abandoned them as too generic. Meanwhile, Eile realized that Aeul was right as she became progressively more chilled, despite her parka and woollen clothes. Thundar seemed to be suffering the most, especially through his paw pads, and at one point when Sunny stopped to examine some kind of monument, Eile took the opportunity to wrap his feet in makeshift leather booties with Aeul’s help.

Just about the time that Eile felt they needed to break off and leave, they chanced upon a cluster of vaults. They were all about the size of Waking World cemetery mausoleums, with large prominent double doors in one side, each sealed with a disk of ice a foot in diameter and engraved with a design on its face. The one that caught her attention was a stylized figure of a cat; the rest were incomprehensible.

“I think these are treasure vaults!” Sunny squealed.

“Let’s not jump the gun, ya spaz,” Eile said. “Besides, I think it’s time we got outta here; we’re getting too cold, especially Thundar.”

Sunny shrugged off her pack and set it on the ground beside her feet. “It won’t take very long to find out.” She opened it and pulled out two crowbars.

“I can stand it a little longer,” the cat said.

“How are you doin’, Aeul?”

“I am fine, as long as we do not delay too much longer.”

“Then let’s see what we’ve got.” Sunny offered Eile one of the bars. “If we can’t prove we found Thule, at least we could file a claim on any treasure.”

“But how do we open the doors?” Aeul said. “I do not see a lock.”

“I was wonderin’ that myself,” Eile said.

Sunny glanced at them. “It might be behind the seal. If it is, I have a lock pick spell that never fails.”

Eile grinned and shook her head. “Okay, I’m game.” She took the bar and they approached the structure with the cat on the seal. They jammed the flat chisel ends between the disk and the doors, grasped the shafts just under the swan necks, and pulled as they tried to lever off the seal. It popped off with minimal effort, and landed on the ground with a thud as it cracked into five pieces and numerous chunks.

“I don’t see a keyhole,” Thundar said.

“Then we do it the hard way,” Sunny said in a tone that mixed determination with frustration.

They inserted the bars between the doors, but it took more effort to pry them apart. Eile wasn’t even sure the doors were separate items, but then a monstrous crack sounded, like a shotgun blast, followed by a hiss, like the opening of an airlock. She and Sunny stepped back and to either side as the doors parted and swung out. Eile felt a burst of foul-smelling, super-cold air that made her gag, but at first she saw nothing, since the inside was solid black.

Then two glowing red lights appeared. They shifted position as if they were eyes scanning the exterior, and a low growling moan issued forth. Eile felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up and her gut turn to ice as the lights moved forward. She and Sunny backed away, and as the lights reached the threshold a feline face appeared, looking like a mummified cat, with bulging staring eyes, dried bald skin stretched like parchment over its skull, and spiky teeth protruding from a mouth without lips or gums. It looked to be twice as big as a rhinoceros.

It stared at all four of them in a malevolent fashion for some moments, then gave a yowling shriek accompanied by a blast of air so cold it felt as if it would freeze them solid as it nearly knocked them over. Fortunately they were not directly in its path.

Eile spasmed with shivers, but Sunny managed to point at it and yelled, “Zaparoonie!” The cat winced as it became englobed in a sphere of voltage. As with the spell she used on the iceworm, it consisted of a magical electrical attack, but on a more powerful scale. It wouldn’t just stun a target, but also sear it to a cinder. However, the cat shook it off unharmed, more pissed off than before.

Eile threw her crowbar at the cat, which winced and ducked to avoid the ad hoc weapon. “Run for it!” she shouted.

Thundar and Aeul took off for the stairs almost before she said anything. Sunny snatched up her pack and she and Eile followed. Eile didn’t look back, but she heard the cat shriek again, as it chased after them. They played a deadly game of hide and seek around the buildings as they tried to keep ahead of it, and they managed to reach the stairs before it caught up with them. It wasn’t too large to climb the steps, but the switchbacks slowed it down, and they made it to the balcony while it was still far below them. Sunny looked over the balustrade,

pointed at it, and shouted, "Bulldozer!" A curved wall of shiny silver light flew down the face of the cliff, scraping off ice and stair steps, and shovelling it into the face of the cat, dislodging it and dumping it all onto the floor at the base of the cliff, burying the cat under a ton of debris.

They raced to the mouth of the tunnel, but paused to catch their breath. They could hear the cat shrieking as it struggled to get loose, but Eile figured they had a little time yet.

"What in the Sam Hill is that thing?!" Sunny asked as she slipped on her pack, but neither Aeul nor Thundar had a clue.

"Whatever it is, we cannot let it get out of this cave system," Aeul said. "It will threaten the whole of the Dreamlands."

"I think that's a given," Eile said, "but how?"

Sunny looked into the tunnel. "We can collapse the tunnel."

"Can you do that?" Aeul asked.

"Oh, sure. I've gotta spell that'll do the trick real neatly."

"But we'll be trapped ourselves," Thundar said.

"Not if we do it from the far end," Eile said.

They heard a scrabbling noise coming from the edge of the ice cliff, and when they turned to look, they saw the cat appear over the lip. It paused long enough to shriek at them, then it sank its front claws into the balustrade and struggled to pull itself onto the balcony.

"Jesus!" Eile shouted. "Let's get outta here!"

The four of them sped down the tunnel as they heard the cat continue its pursuit. When they reached halfway, though, Sunny slid to a stop, turned, and pointed at the charging feline.

Eile also stopped, her hair raising on her scalp. "Sunny, no; we're too close!" But it was too late.

"Nuke 'em!" The cat became engulfed by a binding ball of light that expanded into a fireball. A shockwave knocked both of them off their feet and pushed them down the tunnel, taking Aeul and Thundar with them, as it shattered ice and rock and closed off the tunnel with a cave-in.

Eile slid to a halt at the mouth of the tunnel. She lay still for some moments, trying to catch her breath, before she sat up. Her companions appeared okay, then she examined the tunnel. It was blocked off by a wall of debris beginning a third of the way down its length, but she could hear the cat shrieking behind it as it clawed at the barrier.

They stood up as soon as they were able. "Did it work?" Aeul said. "Is it trapped?"

“I...think so,” Sunny said, but with an uncharacteristically uncertain tone.

“I’m not so sure,” Eile said. “That thing survived the magical equivalent of a nuclear blast; I doubt a cave-in can keep it contained. Even if it takes a Dream-century, it may be able ta dig its way out eventually, and we can’t count on it takin’ that long.”

“Then, why did it not claw its way out of its prison in the city?” Aeul asked.

“The seal,” Sunny said. “It may have been like an Elder Sign, only specifically for it. Too bad it was broken; we could’ve used it to seal that cave-in.”

“So what can we do?”

“There’s only one thing we can do, to make sure it’s trapped forever: destroy the bridge.”

“How?”

“The same way I collapsed the tunnel. We’ve just gotta make sure we destroy enough of it so that the cat-thing can’t jump across the gap. If I do it progressively, each explosion a little further back, that should do the trick.”

“Then let’s get goin’ before it breaks through,” Eile said.

“No, it’s better if I do it from this side, that way we have more time before it breaks free.”

“But how will we get out?” Aeul asked.

Sunny flashed a wry half-smirk. “We’ll take the stairs.”

“I don’t want to urinate in your drinking water,” Thundar said, “but we can’t.”

Sunny’s eyes just about popped out of her head. “Why not?!”

But Eile saw why when she looked towards the alcove. The stairwell had been demolished by chunks of ice and rock as big as automobiles. Sunny threw her a look of shock, but she shook her head. “Huh. It must’ve happened when you nuked the tunnel.”

“Then we have no choice; we gotta get across. Come on!”

They headed across the bridge without using the safety line, so they could travel faster. Eile worried about slipping, but the ice was dry with no slick spots.

As they went, Sunny said, “The problem is, I’ll need a target. I can’t just set off the spell in empty space.”

Eile glanced at her feet. “What about the pitons?”

“Yes, of course! They’ll do nicely.”

“But will you be able ta see ‘em?”

“Just barely, but it’ll be enough. I’ll target the one in the middle to cause the most damage.”

They made it across without mishap, but as soon as they reached the other side, they heard a thunderous crash echo out of the tunnel, followed by shrieks that grew louder by the second.

“Jesus, it’s through!” Eile bent down, grabbed the safety line, and started reeling it in, pulling it through the pitons.

“What are you doing!?” Sunny said.

When she had the other end of the rope, Eile tied it around herself. “I’m gonna hold it off until you can unleash yer spell!”

“But, how will you get off the bridge?!”

Eile wrapped a long, heavy, woollen scarf around her head and face as a tagelmust and slipped on a pair of ivory snow goggles. “That’s easy: I’m gonna fall off.”

“What?!”

She started back across. “No time to explain; just trust me, and make sure it doesn’t get past me!”

Eile ran towards the middle of the bridge as she drew her sword. Just as she reached the piton the cat appeared at the opening to the tunnel. It gave a yowling shriek that caused the chamber to convulse, pitching her off her feet. She slipped towards the edge of the bridge, but managed to grab the piton before she fell off. Getting her feet under her, she stood up as the cat charged towards her. It slid to a stop just in front of her; she could feel the intense cold emanating off its body and in its breath even through her clothes and the scarf, but they made it tolerable.

It raised a paw to swipe at her; she stabbed the foot in the pads as an arrow slammed into the opposite shoulder. Glancing over her shoulder, she spotted Sunny with her bow raised. Behind her, Aeul sat higher up on the rocky slope, playing her flute.

“Eile! Look out!”

Looking forward, she saw that the cat had raised its paw to strike again. She jumped back before it could hit her, and Thundar dashed between her legs and under the cat, getting behind it. Eile idly noted that someone had removed his leather booties. He turned and leapt onto its back, then made his way up to the back of its neck, where he bit, clawed, and raked, trying to get through its armour-like hide.

Another arrow hit it in the neck; she stepped in and stabbed it in the base of the throat. It swiped at her and connected, and she fell backwards on her butt. It stood over her, raising its paw to hammer down on her.

Two great flocks of nightgaunts rose up on either side of the bridge, hovered, then dove at the cat, surrounding it as they pummelled and battered it with their hands, feet, wings, and tails.

It rose up and swatted at them, but they were too agile. One clutched at Thundar and lifted him off the cat as the others tried to grab its legs and tail.

Eile sheathed her sword, and rolled off the bridge. She fell to the end of the rope, which swung her around the fulcrum where it was tied to the piton at the near end of the bridge towards the cliff wall of the sinkhole. She grasped the rope and lifted her legs to absorb the impact when she hit the wall. The impact stunned her, but she recovered quickly and began to climb.

At the same time she heard Sunny shout, "Nuke 'em!" She saw the light of the detonation reflect off the wall in front of her, and she looked over her shoulder in time to see the fireball obliterate the middle third of the bridge. The shockwave slammed her against the wall hard enough to make her let go, and she dropped to the end of her rope. At the same time, the cat fell through the fireball and hurtled towards the waters of the Underground Sea far below, shrieking all the way, as the nightgaunts followed it down.

One rose up behind her, took a hold of her, and lifted her out of the sinkhole, setting her down on the slope beside Sunny. She noticed another drop Thundar in front of Aeul. They both then landed and crawled off to one side, as if waiting for further instructions.

Sunny grabbed Eile in a bear hug and kissed her through the scarf. "Oh, I'm so glad you're safe, partner!"

Despite the presence of witnesses, Eile returned both. "Heh, yer glad? I'm just glad our plan worked."

Sunny stepped back. "That wasn't exactly our plan. It tried to get across before we were ready, so we had no choice."

"Yeah. Then, I hope the Underground Sea is enough ta hold it."

"Amen to that."

Aeul and Thundar strolled over to them as Eile removed the scarf. She turned to face the Wendol Shaman. "Thanks for coming through for us there. We really appreciate it."

"It was my pleasure. And I owed you for saving my life."

"Between friends there's no owing," Sunny said. She took the shaman's hands and kissed her on the cheek. "Welcome to Team Girl."

Aeul bowed. "I am honoured. As thanks, I present you with this." She reached under her cloak into a pocket of the trousers and pulled out a small figurine slightly larger than her hand. It represented one of the figures from the reliefs in the tunnel that had heads that were unrecognizable, sitting on a throne with writing carved on the back of the chair.

"Oh my fabulous gravy!" Sunny took it and examined it.

"You wanted proof you had found the city," Aeul said.

“You know, I think this will just about do it!” She placed it in a pouch on her belt. “Thank you!” And she caught Aeul in a bear hug, which the shaman returned.

“I hate to be a sourpuss,” Thundar said, “but may we go home now?”

The three women laughed. “Of course,” Aeul said. She played a quick tune on the flute, and the two nightgaunts presented themselves. She picked up Thundar and climbed onto the back of one, and Eile and Sunny did the same to the other. Both then rose into the air and carried them into the upper cave and out the hole made by the iceworm.

“I wonder what that cat-thing was,” Eile said.

“We’ll probably never know,” Sunny said, “but it certainly was one very bad kitty!”

Eile grinned; trust her partner to come up with an inane comment like that. “Heh, put a sock in it, ya ditz.”

Sunny just giggled as they flew towards the Eidaskogr Forest.

THE END

A NEW DREAMLANDS STORY BEGINS IN THE NEW YEAR

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BURN, WITCH, BURN by A Merritt

XII. — Technique of Madame Mandilip

There was an agony in her eyes that forbade the truth, so I lied to her.

“I can comfort you as to that, at least. Your husband died of entirely natural causes—from a blood clot in the brain. My examination satisfied me thoroughly as to that. You had nothing to do with it. As for the doll—you had an unusually vivid dream, that is all.”

She looked at me as one who would give her soul to believe. She said:

“But I heard him die!”

“It is quite possible—” I plunged into a somewhat technical explanation which I knew she would not quite understand, but would, perhaps, be therefore convincing—“You may have been half-awake—on what we term the borderline of waking consciousness. In all probability the entire dream was suggested by what you heard. Your subconsciousness tried to explain the sounds, and conceived the whole fantastic drama you have recited to me. What seemed, in your dream, to take up many minutes actually passed through your mind in a split second—the subconsciousness makes its own time. It is a common experience. A door slams, or there is some other abrupt and violent sound. It awakens the sleeper. When he is fully awake he has recollection of some singularly vivid dream which ended with a loud noise. In reality, his dream began with the noise. The dream may have seemed to him to have taken hours. It was, in fact, almost instantaneous, taking place in the brief moment between noise and awakening.”

She drew a deep breath; her eyes lost some of their agony. I pressed my advantage.

“And there is another thing you must remember—your condition. It makes many women peculiarly subject to realistic dreams, usually of an unpleasant character. Sometimes even to hallucinations.”

She whispered: “That is true. When little Mollie was coming I had the most dreadful dreams—”

She hesitated; I saw doubt again cloud her face.

“But the doll—the doll is gone!” she said.

I cursed to myself at that, caught unawares and with no ready answer. But McCann had one. He said, easily:

“Sure it’s gone, Mollie. I dropped it down the chute into the waste. After what you told me I thought you’d better not see it anymore.”

She asked, sharply:

“Where did you find it? I looked for it.”

“Guess you weren’t in shape to do much looking,” he answered. “I found it down at the foot of the kid’s crib, all messed up in the covers. It was busted. Looked like the kid had been dancing on it in her sleep.”

She said hesitantly: “It might have slipped down. I don’t think I looked there-”

I said, severely, so she might not suspect collusion between McCann and myself:

“You ought not to have done that, McCann. If you had shown the doll to her, Mrs. Gilmore would have known at once that she had been dreaming and she would have been spared much pain.”

“Well, I ain’t a doctor.” His voice was sullen. “I done what I thought best.”

“Go down and see if you can find it,” I ordered, tartly. He glanced at me sharply. I nodded—and hoped he understood. In a few minutes he returned.

“They cleaned out the waste only fifteen minutes ago,” he reported, lugubriously. “The doll went with it. I found this, though.”

He held up a little strap from which dangled a half-dozen miniature books. He asked:

“Was them what you dreamed the doll dropped on the dressing table, Mollie?”

She stared, and shrank away.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Please put it away, Dan. I don’t want to see it.”

He looked at me, triumphantly.

“I guess maybe I was right at that when I threw the doll away, Doc.”

I said: “At any rate, now that Mrs. Gilmore is satisfied it was all a dream, there’s no harm done.”

“And now,” I took her cold hands in mine. “I’m going to prescribe for you. I don’t want you to stay in this place a moment longer than you can help. I want you to pack a bag with whatever you and little Mollie may need for a week or so, and leave at once. I am thinking of your condition—and a little life that is on its way. I will attend to all the necessary formalities. You can instruct McCann as to the other details. But I want you to go. Will you do this?”

To my relief, she assented readily. There was a somewhat harrowing moment when she and the child bade farewell to the body. But before many minutes she was on her way with McCann to relations. The child had wanted to take “the boy and girl dolls.” I had refused to allow this, even at the risk of again arousing the mother’s suspicions. I wanted nothing of Madame Mandilip to accompany them to their refuge. McCann supported me, and the dolls were left behind.

I called an undertaker whom I knew. I made a last examination of the body. The minute puncture would not be noticed, I was sure. There was no danger of an autopsy, since my certification of the cause of death would not be questioned. When the undertaker arrived I explained the absence of the wife—imminent maternity and departure at my order. I set down the cause of death as thrombosis—rather grimly as I recalled the similar diagnosis of the banker's physician, and what I had thought of it.

After the body had been taken away, and as I sat waiting for McCann to return, I tried to orient myself to this phantasmagoria through which, it seemed to me, I had been moving for endless time. I tried to divest my mind of all prejudice, all preconceived ideas of what could and could not be. I began by conceding that this Madame Mandilip might possess some wisdom of which modern science is ignorant. I refused to call it witchcraft or sorcery. The words mean nothing, since they have been applied through the ages to entirely natural phenomena whose causes were not understood by the laity. Not so long ago, for example, the lighting of a match was "witchcraft" to many savage tribes.

No, Madame Mandilip was no "witch," as Ricori thought her. She was mistress of some unknown science—that was all.

And being a science, it must be governed by fixed laws—unknown though those laws might be to me. If the doll-maker's activities defied cause and effect, as I conceived them, still they must conform to laws of cause and effect of their own. There was nothing supernatural about them—it was only that, like the savages, I did not know what made the match burn. Something of these laws, something of the woman's technique—using the word as signifying the details, collectively considered, of mechanical performance in any art—I thought I perceived. The knotted cord, "the witch's ladder," apparently was an essential in the animation of the dolls. One had been slipped into Ricori's pocket before the first attack upon him. I had found another beside his bed after the disturbing occurrences of the night. I had gone to sleep holding one of the cords—and had tried to murder my patient! A third cord had accompanied the doll that had killed John Gilmore.

Clearly, then, the cord was a part of the formula for the direction of control of the dolls.

Against this was the fact that the intoxicated stroller could not have been carrying one of the "ladders" when attacked by the Peters doll.

It might be, however, that the cord had only to do with the initial activity of the puppets; that once activated, their action might continue for an indefinite period.

There was evidence of a fixed formula in the making of the dolls. First, it seemed, the prospective victim's free consent to serve as model must be obtained; second, a wound which gave the opportunity to apply the salve which caused the unknown death; third, the doll must be a faithful replica of the victim. That the agency of death was the same in each case was proven by the similar symptoms.

But did those deaths actually have anything to do with the motility of the dolls? Were they actually a necessary part of the operation?

The doll-maker might believe so; indeed, undoubtedly did believe so.

I did not.

That the doll which had stabbed Ricori had been made in the semblance of Peters; that the “nurse doll” which the guards had seen poised on my window-ledge might have been the one for which Walters had posed; that the doll which had thrust the pin into Gilmore’s brain was, perhaps, the replica of little Anita, the eleven-year-old schoolgirl—all this I admitted.

But that anything of Peters, anything of Walters, anything of Anita had animated these dolls... that dying, something of their vitality, their minds, their “souls” had been drawn from them, had been transmuted into an essence of evil, and imprisoned in these wire-skeletoned puppets... against this all my reason revolted. I could not force my mind to accept even the possibility.

My analysis was interrupted by the return of McCann.

He said, laconically: “Well, we put it over.”

I asked. “McCann—you weren’t by any chance telling the truth when you said you found the doll?”

“No, Doc. The doll was gone all right.”

“But where did you get the little books?”

“Just where Mollie said the doll tossed ‘em—on her dressing table. I snaked ‘em after she’d told me her story. She hadn’t noticed ‘em. I had a hunch. It was a good one, wasn’t it?”

“You had me wondering,” I replied. “I don’t know what we could have said if she had asked for the knotted cord.”

“The cord didn’t seem to make much of a dent on her—” He hesitated. “But I think it means a hell of a lot, Doc. I think if I hadn’t took her out, and John hadn’t happened home, and Mollie had opened the box instead of him—I think it’s Mollie he’d have found lying dead beside him.”

“You mean—”

“I mean the dolls go for whichever gets the cords,” he said sombrely.

Well, it was much the same thought I had in my own mind.

I asked: “But why should anybody want to kill Mollie?”

“Maybe somebody thinks she knows too much. And that brings me to what I’ve been wanting to tell you. The Mandilip hag knows she’s being watched!”

“Well, her watchers are better than ours.” I echoed Ricori; and I told McCann then of the second attack in the night; and why I had sought him.

“An’ that,” he said when I had ended, “Proves the Mandilip hag knows who’s who behind the watch on her. She tried to wipe out both the boss and Mollie. She’s onto us, Doc.”

“The dolls are accompanied,” I said. “The musical note is a summons. They do not disappear into thin air. They answer the note and make their way... somehow to whoever sounds the note. The dolls must be taken from the shop. Therefore one of the two women must take them. How did they evade your watchers?”

“I don’t know.” The lean face was worried. “The fish-white gal does it. Let me tell you what I found out, Doc. After I left you last night I go down to see what the boys have to say. I hear plenty. They say about four o’clock the gal goes in the back an’ the old woman takes a chair in the store. They don’t think nothing of that. But about seven who do they see walking down the street and into the doll joint but the gal. They give the boys in the back hell. But they ain’t seen her go, an’ they pass the buck to the boys in front.

“Then about eleven o’clock one of the relief lads comes in with worse news. He says he’s down at the foot of Broadway when a coupe turns the corner an’ driving it is the gal. He can’t be mistaken because he’s seen her in the doll joint. She goes up Broadway at a clip. He sees there ain’t nobody trailing her, an’ he looks around for a taxi. Course there’s nothing in sight—not even a parked car he can lift. So he comes down to the gang to ask what the hell they mean by it. An’ again nobody’s seen the gal go.”

“I take a couple of the boys an’ we start out to comb the neighbourhood to find out where she stables the coupe. We don’t have no luck at all until about four o’clock when one of the tails—one of the lads who’s been looking—meets up with me. He says that about three he sees the gal—at least he thinks it’s the gal—walking along the street around the corner from the joint. She’s got a coupla big suitcases but they don’t seem to trouble her none. She’s walking quick. But away from the doll joint. He eases over to get a better look, when all of a sudden she ain’t there. He sniffs around the place he’s seen her. There ain’t hide nor hair of her. It’s pretty dark, an’ he tries the doors an’ the areaways, but the doors are locked an’ there ain’t nobody in the areaways. So he gives it up an’ hunts me.

“I look over the place. It’s about a third down the block around the corner from the doll joint. The doll joint is eight numbers from the corner. They’re mostly shops an’ I guess storage up above. Not many people living there. The houses all old ones. Still, I don’t see how the gal can get to the doll joint. I think maybe the tail’s mistaken. He’s seen somebody else, or just thinks he’s seen somebody. But we scout close around, an’ after a while we see a place that looks like it might stable a car. It don’t take us long to open the doors. An’ sure enough, there’s a coupe with its engine still hot. It ain’t been in long. Also it’s the same kind of coupe the lad who’s seen the gal says she was driving.

“I lock the place up again, an’ go back to the boys. I watch with ‘em the rest of the night. Not a light in the doll joint. But nigh eight o’clock, the gal shows up inside the shop and opens up!”

“Still,” I said at this point, “you have no real evidence she had been out. The girl your man thought he saw might not have been she at all.”

He looked at me pityingly.

“She got out in the afternoon without ‘em seeing her, didn’t she? What’s to keep her from doing the same thing at night? The lad saw her driving a coupe, didn’t he? An’ we find a coupe like it close where the wench dropped out of sight.”

I sat thinking. There was no reason to disbelieve McCann. And there was a sinister coincidence in the hours the girl had been seen. I said, half-aloud:

“The time she was out in the afternoon coincides with the time the doll was left at the Gilmores’. The time she was out at night coincides with the time of the attack upon Ricori, and the death of John Gilmore.”

“You hit it plumb in the eye!” said McCann. “She goes an’ leaves the doll at Mollie’s, an’ comes back. She goes an’ sets the dolls on the boss. She waits for ‘em to pop out. Then she goes an’ collects the one she’s left at Mollie’s. Then she beats it back home. They’re in the suitcases she’s carrying.”

I could not hold back the irritation of helpless mystification that swept me.

“And I suppose you think she got out of the house by riding a broomstick up the chimney,” I said, sarcastically.

“No,” he answered, seriously. “No, I don’t, Doc. But them houses are old, and I think maybe there’s a rat hole of a passage or something she gets through. Anyway, the hands are watching the street an’ the coupe stable now, an’ she can’t pull that again.”

He added, morosely:

“At that, I ain’t saying she couldn’t bridle a broomstick if she had to.”

I said, abruptly: “McCann, I’m going down to talk to this Madame Mandilip. I want you to come with me.”

He said: “I’ll be right beside you, Doc. With my fingers on my guns.”

I said: “No, I’m going to see her alone. But I want you to keep close watch outside.”

He did not like that; argued; at last reluctantly assented.

I called up my office. I talked to Braile and learned that Ricori was recovering with astonishing rapidity. I asked Braile to look after things the balance of the day, inventing a consultation to account for the request. I had myself switched to Ricori’s room. I had the nurse tell him that McCann was with me, that we were making an investigation along a certain line, the results of which I would inform him on my return, and that, unless Ricori objected, I wanted McCann to stay with me the balance of the afternoon.

Ricori sent back word that McCann should follow my orders as though they were his own. He wanted to speak to me, but that I did not want. Pleading urgent haste, I rang off.

I ate an excellent and hearty lunch. I felt that it would help me hold tighter to the realities—or what I thought were the realities— when I met this apparent mistress of illusions. McCann was oddly silent and preoccupied.

The clock was striking three when I set off to meet Madame Mandilip.

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POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

17. The Battle in the Crater

FROM the instant that the towering form of Minos disappeared through the shrubbery of the terrace path, the exertions of Polaris and Kalin were redoubled. In a few hours their preparations for the departure into the wastes were complete.

Cautious as they were, they could not be entirely secret in their goings and comings about the mountain, and many a curious priestly eye was cast upon their doings by the servants of Kalin. One of them, a dark faced rascal by the name of Analos, more prying than the others, soon discovered not only that the sledge of the strangers was being stocked and provisioned to its full capacity, as though for a journey, but the nature-of some of the articles packed upon it made him certain that his master Kalin was to make use of them.

Watchful for an opportunity, the priest Analos skirted the plateau and slipped over the edge of the path.

He was as stealthy as a cat, but Polaris saw him go, and caught a glimpse of his face as he disappeared.

“One of thy priests hath slipped away from thee, Kalin,” he said. “Methinks he hastened to Minos with a tale to tell.” They went to the brink of the terrace.

Far below them Analos was scuttling for the meadows like a scared rabbit, his priestly gown tucked well about his flying legs. In the small court in the rear of the house Polaris and Kalin finished their work with the sledge and harnessed to it four of the small Sardanian ponies, to drag it up through the spiral way of the Gateway to the Future; for the path which Kalin purposed they should take led straight through the gateway mountain, and was the only path out of the valley, aside from the north pass, through which they had entered.

Just before they started Kalin summoned his priests and bade them farewell, giving them his blessing, which they took with bended knees and bowed heads, and several of them sobbing; for they loved Kalin well. His words forestalled words of surprise or of protest.

“Children of Hephaistos, Kalin goeth hence for a time,” he said. “Perchance he will return; perchance thou shalt see his face no more. Let none gainsay his going, for it is of the gods. Now, lest the wrath of Minos lie heavily on thee, in suspicion that thou hast aided in the passing of Kalin and the strangers from Sardanes, get thou gone from the gateway to the valley, and spread diligently the report that Kalin and the strange man cast thee forth, in danger of thy lives. Fare thee well.”

In a body the priests descended the terraces. As they stood at the top to see them go, Kalin caught the shoulder of Polaris and pointed over toward the white-walled Judgment House. From its pillared facade streamed forth a line of hurrying Sardanians, and the sun shone brightly on - the ilium blades.

“Here come Minos and his men,” said the priest shortly. “Take thy last look on the valley of Sardanes, and let it be short.”

“Farewell, Sardanes—beautiful, horrible Sardanes,” breathed Rose Emer. Then she, too, turned to the flight, and shuddered slightly as she turned.

Then into the darkness of the arched portal and up through the spiralled rocky way they urged the labouring ponies, Rose Emer carried two flaming torches to light the gloom of the way, and the two men bent their shoulders to the aid of the animals.

Close at their heels slunk the seven dogs of the pack, with hackles erect and eyes glowing in the half dark of the place, the strangeness of which caused them many a misunderstanding whimper. Stoutly the little horses bent to their work, so that it chanced that they dragged the sledge out of the passage and onto the shelf where were the chapels, at the same time that the first of the runners of Minos leaped from the terrace path to the level of the plateau, many feet below the fugitives.

Polaris turned to the right, where the broad ledge curved away past the chapels along the mighty ellipse of the crater.

“Nay, brother, not that way!” called Kalin: “Here lieth the path,” and he turned the horses to the left, where the shelf narrowed at the point where was the perch from which Polaris had witnessed the passing of Chloran, Sardon’s son.

So close to the brink of the ledge loomed the bulge of the crater wall that there was but the barest room for the passing of the sledge. It required all of the skill and patience of the men to guide the snorting, frightened ponies. One misstep would have whirled the beasts and sledge into the roaring fire-pit below; but they passed the neck of the pathway without mishap, and, after a few yards’ progress, found the way widening and more smooth.

SCARCELY had they passed the narrowest of the path when a shout from behind told them that Minos and his men had emerged from the tortuous spiral in the bowels of the cliffside, and had gained the shelf rim. Then Polaris turned back.

“How far on lieth the vent in the wall of the mountain through which we pass?” he asked of Kalin. The priest told him that it was nearly half-way around the circumference of the crater rim. “Then haste thou on, brother,” said Polaris. “Get thee well through the last gate. I will turn back and see what may be done to delay those who are in too great haste behind us.”

With a word of explanation to the girl, he took several spears and the brown rifle from the sledge.

Kalin smiled at him grimly through the murk.

“Methinks they will try first the broad way, or divide, and follow both paths,” he said, “and they, who go by the broad way will be fooled, for if cometh to naught but a bridgeless gap yonder.” He pointed across the pit. “Those who come this way, hold thou back as long as may be—and then come thou swiftly, brother, and I will show thee means to close the way behind us.”

Polaris ran back along the ledge. He came to the path neck again without encountering any of the pursuers, although their voices sounded from just beyond the bulge of the rock. Catching

hand and footholds, he swung himself easily to the perch above the path, crept forward, and peered down at the platform.

Like rats from a hole, fully forty Sardanians had crept up through the winding passage. When they saw the light flaring redly before them they charged forward with a shout, expecting to find their quarry; and then they stood gaping in surprise on the red emptiness of the platform, where for centuries no Sardanian had stood, save the-priests of the god and those about to die.

In front of the chapels they gathered in a group, the fire vapour from the abyss reflected from their staring faces in ghastly fashion. Only Minos, the prince, tarried not to wonder. Swiftly he paced to the right and to the left, inspecting the ledge with quick glances.

“Haste on the track of the strangers!” he cried. “Of old time have I heard it that through the gateway lieth another path from Sardanes to the wastes. It is that to which the false priest guideth them. Yonder seemeth scant room for their sledge. Let us follow here.”

He started along the broader way to the right, and his men, overcoming in part their awe of the fearsome pit at their feet, began to follow; albeit with care, and as far from the edge as they might walk.

“Nay, not all of ye!” called back the prince. “Garlanes, go thou with men and explore the narrower way yonder.”

With most of the Sardanians trailing at his back, Minos disappeared in the murk beyond the chapels. Garlanes and fifteen men turned to the pursuit of the narrow path. The old noble moved slowly, as though the task to which he was set was little enough to his taste, and none of his men was over hasty.

In silence Polaris watched the advance. He was minded to stay his hand from strife as long as might be, and, if possible, to frighten the pursuers back long enough to give the priest the time needed to thread the pass with the sledge.

With that plan in mind, he prepared to surprise the men of Garlanes when they should come near enough for his purpose. His trained ears, deafened by the noises from the never silent crater pit, did not tell him of a number of slinking forms that sniffed and crouched along the rock wall and came to a halt almost at the foot of the jutting rock where he crouched.

Foremost of the party of Garlanes was a tall young man. It chanced that, without seeing it, he had come to the beginning of the sinister chute in the floorway of the shelf—that polished slide through which all Sardanians were shot to their fiery ends. At his feet, unnoticed in the half-light cast by the flicker, lay one of the wooden shield-like vehicles in which the victims rode to death. Ahead of him the man saw that the way grew suddenly narrower.

He paused and peered under his cupped hand.

Out of the gloom ahead of him came suddenly an ear-splitting rattling, followed by a hiss and a weird moaning that caused the hair at the nape of his neck to stiffen. Immediately the place was in echo to a full throated, hideous chorus, that froze the blood in the veins of the boldest Sardanian who heard it.

COWERING, and-with staring eyeballs, the members of the searching party saw their leader shaken in his tracks, apparently crumpled up by an unseen force and whirled from them—out over the abyss of fire. One glimpse only they caught of his flying body, dark against the ruddy glow of the steam and smoke from the crater heart. For an instant the great hollow of the funnel rang with his agonized shrieks as he shot downward, and he was gone.

Only Polaris saw the end. Shaken with horror, he did not neglect to turn to his advantage the accident; for accident it was. As the party of Garlanes came on, he had smitten the wall at his side with the shafts of the spears he carried, and had given vent at the same time to a deep-chested groan. He did not know that the seven of the pack had slunk back on his trail, and crouched at the foot of the rock, ready for battle. Their echoing challenge to the foe startled him almost as much as it did the Sardanians. The young leader, in the face of that blast of clamour, had started so violently that he struck his shins against the shield of wood at his feet, ‘collapsed into it, and was whirled down the terrible chute to instant death.

Again the Sardanians proved their innate courage. Their companion torn from them and cast to a fate that they could neither see nor explain, his death-shrieks ringing in their ears, they did not break or give back. They stood fast and made ready to advance. From the gloom in front the menacing snarling of the dogs swelled in volume. It was quieted again when spoke the voice of the dreaded stranger from the snows.

“Back, ye men of Sardanes!” thundered Polaris from the height. “Back, ere the fate of him who hath but now passed the gateway be your tale. Back and let the servant of Hephaistos and the strangers depart from the land in peace; here along the narrow way he many sorts of death!”

Again he struck on the wall with the sheaf of spears.

‘Now one of you,’ shouted Garlanes. ‘Haste and summon- the Prince Minos and the others. Tell them that here the snow dweller and his devils hold the path, and that with them will be the Rose maiden and the priest. Haste!’

One of the Sardanians set off along the ledge, making what haste he dared. Garlanes himself advanced to the front. In the shifting light from the chasm he found the opening to the chute, and warned his men around it.

With his long arms swinging low, and his lance raised to meet whatever fate might lie before him, he walked straight toward the neck of the pathway. A sudden flare from the fire pit showed him the way at the foot of the rock bulge, showed him that it was choked with dogs, their gnashing snouts and glaring eyes thrust at him from around the turn of the wall—and showed him, towering above, clearly outlined for an instant, the form of their master with raised spear. The time to fight had come. Others besides Garlanes saw Polaris in the flare of the fire. As the son of the snows quitted his place and leaped down to the ledge among the dogs, several spears splintered against the rock wall where he had stood.

Wondering much how Kalin and the Rose were faring, and if he might hold off their pursuers until the sledge was through the wail safely, he slipped along to the narrowest point of the path and ordered back the dogs. Again a flare of fire from the depths showed his position to

the enemy, and an ilium bladed spear was his greeting, hissing past his cheek to go clattering down the declivity of the precipice.

Urged by Garlanes the Sardanians had crept dangerously near Polaris held his hand no longer. He steadied himself and hurled a spear. The man next behind Garlanes fell to the floor of the ledge and lay twitching horribly in silence. The glittering point of the spear was set fast in his throat. Once more the light gave him opportunity and another stout Sardanian gave up the ghost before his unerring cast.

Then Garlanes waited no longer, for the coming of Minos, but gathered his men and charged.

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