

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

# **Schlock!**

**WEBZINE**

VOL. 15, ISSUE 20  
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## **ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE**

BY PEADAR  
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A LONG AND  
DEEP  
GROWL...

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THE  
MADDEST OF  
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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Derby, Carlton Herzog, Blake Rogers, A Merritt, Charles B Stilson*

## 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](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk). We no longer review published and self-published novels directly, although we are willing to accept reviews from other writers. Any other enquiries, including requests to advertise in our quarterly printed magazine, also to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk)

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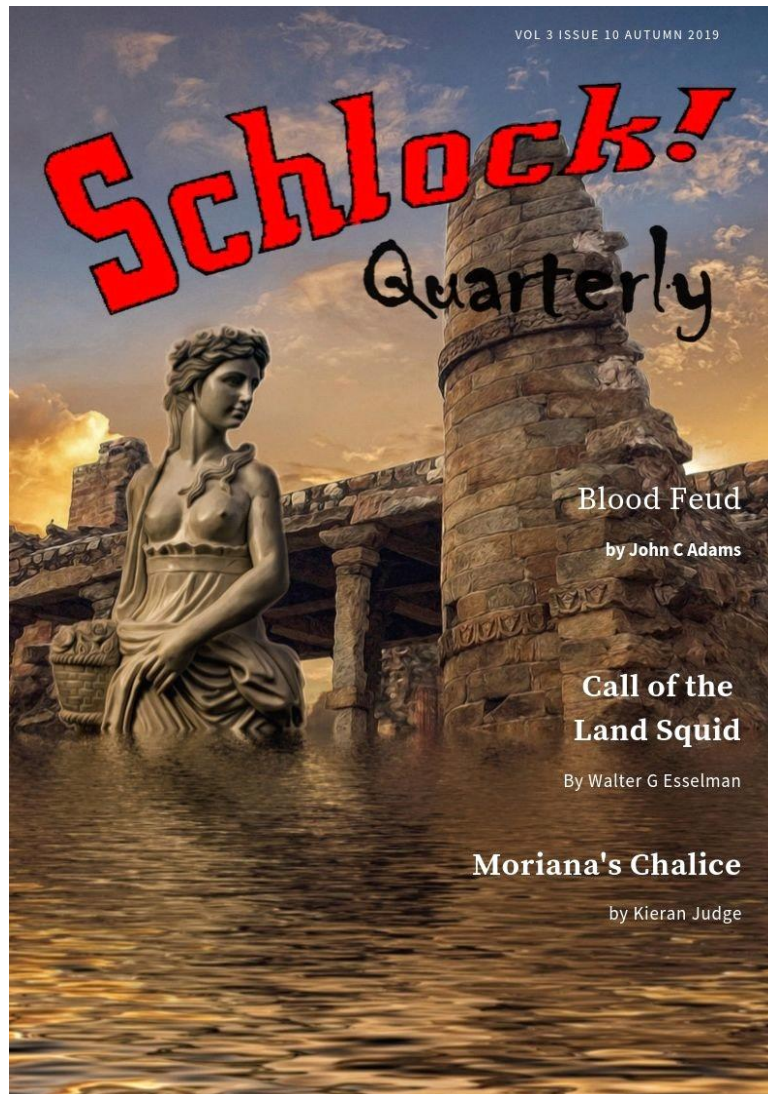
## EDITORIAL

This week, a boy finds a man in agony. An insane quest uncovers a jungle deity. A monk discovers a pagan survival. And a journal found in a rundown asylum tells a lunatic tale.

John C Adams returns to review a classic. A barbarian warlord wreaks bloody havoc on the dark side of the planet Sporn. Dr Lowell inspects the Peters doll. And Polaris clashes with the king of the Sardanians.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

**IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!**

By Vincent Davis



"I'M WORRIED ABOUT HIM. I FOUND A PAIR OF SUNGLASSES IN HIS CAPE, I THINK HE'S GOING THROUGH ANOTHER MID-CENTURY CRISIS."

*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.*

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## ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE by Peadar de Burca

Henry Roche is lying on a big brass bed with Miss Gilligan's breast in his mouth.

A car horn. The prolonged blast yanks him from his teenage erotic wonderland. Little spits of rain remind him he's walking on the South Douglas road, sodium vapour streetlights and a Maxol petrol station, a line of cars jostling for the pumps. He's on his way to the Greenhills housing estate where his friend Jason Dodd lives. They both have parts in the school musical, Joseph and his Technicolour Dreamcoat, Feb 14-16 Colaiste an Spiorad Naoimh School Hall—all proceeds in aid of Alzheimer's Cork. The first dress rehearsal is this evening, and Henry's chest flutters when he thinks of his big moment; belting out the song "One More Angel." Jason can't sing or dance worth a spit, but Miss Gilligan, their English teacher, wanted to show him there was more to life than Grand Theft Auto so she shoe-horned him into a few crowd scenes, so far to the rear Doddy was technically backstage.

Miss Gilligan. Such a perky way of standing and smiling. Henry found himself thinking of her a lot. He has his favourite Miss Gilligan memories which he never tires of swiping left on. He'd love to do another little swipe now, but he's already at Jason's house.

The lights are on. He can see Jason's brothers in the sitting room either hugging or wrestling. The latter, he supposes. A giant flat-screen TV stuck to the wall above the fireplace and a chintzy chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Henry pulls back the sliding glass door and rings the doorbell. No answer. He can hear the TV from the porch and the bass thump of shitty music coming from the room overhead.

He phones. No answer. Jason rarely answered a phone-call, yet responded to every dopey WhatsApp message straight away.

*I'm at your porch. Rehearsals 7pm!!!!*

The Jason is typing message flickers at the top of the phone-screen.

*Crazy here can u cum back in 20*

So crazy, Jason had to give the word *Come* a porno spelling. So crazy he couldn't invite Henry in. Not that he wants to go in. The place reeked like some kind of BO freakshow and Jason's brothers had this way of shouting really loud. Last time he was there, Benny Dodd gave him a purple nurple and belched in his face while he was doing it.

The Sacred Heart Church is two minutes away. Henry figures he'll kill time sitting on a pew, googling Liverpool F.C. and try not to get too hung up on singing "One More Angel" with a mic for the first time.

He breaks into a mild jog and jumps the wall into the church grounds. The rain lashes dark stains on his jeans. He dips a finger in the stone basin of holy water (just a reflex, he doesn't know why he did it) and makes for the second-last pew, sliding in, stopping by a knee-high, bronze plaque that says

*Donated by The Hardiman Family*

He's about to unzip his jacket when he hears it—

A long and deep growl.

The timbre is more animal than human. Henry doesn't know it yet, but there's going to be no singing or dancing this night.

Or maybe not ever.

The Sacred Heart is one of a slew of Catholic churches built after the optimism of the Pope's visit to Ireland in the nineteen eighties, and most look better now than they did then. Irish society caught up with the design-led architecture of the era which sacrificed pomp in favour of minimalism. The Sacred Heart is cheery, with large white walls and a huge oval chancel. There are no nooks or vestibules or stone crannies for shadows to gather and multiply.

'Hell-o?'

Henry doesn't expect an answer, but feels obligated to call out.

'Anybody there?'

The rain and wind thrash against a long horizontal window on his right.

Grrrrrruuuuunnnghhh...

While it isn't clear what's making the noise, the atavistic nature of the growl warns Henry to be careful. He slides his ass along the glossy teak pew. A German Shepherd? He'd come across one with his father on a country lane in Skibereen over the summer. A malnourished old fella, hurt and unwilling to let them get close. Henry had to beg his father to phone a vet, an English woman who took an hour to arrive, which turned out to be half an hour too late.

The memory pricks him, but in a good way, giving him courage. He moves to the centre aisle full of cold focus, like a soldier from Delta Company in Ghost Recon Wildlands. He catalogues the empty pews. Screw Joseph and his Technicolour Gimp-coat, screw Jason Dodd and screw his father who never wanted to help anyone, too busy making money with his RENTAL PORTFOLIO. Liam Roche has sixteen properties in or around Cork City. Last year he earned sixty-nine thousand euro out of one property alone. Henry's mother told him this and told him never to tell anyone else.

A shriek of wind. The church's pitched roof creaks. Henry carries on up the aisle, slowly, like someone counting out measurements in actual feet.

Grrrrrruuuuunnnghhh...

The growling is coming from the top of the church. Henry keeps advancing, his stiff body shaped in the hands-up pose of a bank robber surrendering. He should have an escape plan ready, just in case the wounded animal scenario gives way to a Thriller-era Michael Jackson werewolf, hungry for boymeat.



Wheezing noises play behind the altar. Henry steps on the carpeted lip of the chancel, angling his approach for a better view.

A boot. There's a boot, like a builder's boot, so it must be

A human!

In a way he's glad. They are easier to reason with, he supposes.

Three more steps and the full body presents itself. A man in jeans and ripped bomber jacket. His curly red hair clumped in a crusty scoria of blood. Henry thinks of those giant heads on Easter Island, but that isn't right...this guy is more...more...simian. His body too. Built like a gorilla.

'Nurrrrrrrghhhhhhhh....'

The guy (Henry can't stop the phrase "Monkey-Man" popping into his head), has his eyes closed, his shaggy, paleo head nodding from side-to-side, fighting for consciousness.

'Hold on, okay...? I'll go for the priest...' Because this is the only thing he can really do. Plus, without the need of any interior monologue, Henry has pieced together the clues we all use to identify if someone is a threat. The (Monkey-Man) guy has clumsy tats printed on his fingers. His jeans are clunky, ill-fitting, the kind you get for five euro in a bargain bin in a Retail Outlet MegaStore. He has either been assaulted or lost a fight and it doesn't take Sherlock to figure out a guy with steel-cap boots doesn't spend his spare time pressing dried flowers into a notebook made from recycled paper.

The priest's house is a little bungalow to the rear of the church. A sensor light clicks on when Henry comes to the porch and presses the bell. The door opens after the third ding-dong.

'Eh, hello,' says Henry.

The priest is tall, closer to seventy than sixty. Grey cardigan over black shirt and pants.

'Are you here about the youth group meetings?' asks the priest. 'Father Spencer...I think, yes, he takes them on...what day is this?'

'Wednesday, Father.'

'Oh...okay. Father Spencer takes them on...Friday evenings.'

He has kind eyes and the air of an old knight who spends his evenings tangled up in cobwebs, while the mice come out to steal the cheese and gin.

'I'm not here for the youth meetings, Father. There's a...eh...' It's on the tip of Henry's tongue to say Monkey-Man. '...a man...'

‘A man...?’

‘Yes, Father, he’s hurt – in the church.’

‘Oh... I see. I don’t like it when people are hurt, do you? It’s never good.’

‘Eh...yeah.’ Jesus. Is this guy playing with a full deck? Henry’s father has an expression for dodderly old goats like this – Moses has got potholes.

‘Well, let’s not hang around like a fart in a phone box—lead me to him.’

‘Eh, maybe we should phone somebody?’ But the priest is already out, patting his pockets to see if he hasn’t forgotten his keys.

‘Phone somebody? Oh there’s no need. We can do this.’

Henry thinks of another of his father’s sayings—

What’s this “we” business, paleface?

But instead he says,

‘Sure.’

‘Gerry?’

‘You know him, Father?’

The priest is bent over the wounded man, shaking his shoulder.

‘I do. He comes from a rather large family. They’ve had their troubles.’ He tries to rouse Gerry by patting the side of his cheek. Flakes of dried blood and crud are stuck to his face and in the places where the blood hasn’t hardened, Henry notices mean acne scars. The priest manages to get Gerry partially conscious, in that way when a person can’t open their eyes or speak coherently, but can hear commands and respond to them.

‘Let’s go, Gerry...to the hospital...you’ve got a nasty cut on your head, big fella.’

‘Nnnnnnnuuuuugh...’

‘Help me get him up... What’s your name again?’

‘Henry, Father, Henry Roche.’

‘I knew a Jew called Henry,’ says the priest. ‘He directed me in Saved. He said, “Arthur, if your shoes squeak, the audience will love you!”’

‘You acted?’ asks Henry.

‘Sorry?’

‘A theatre show...you...’

‘Oh yes! Birmingham Rep. Absolute murder—we’d often be rehearsing four plays at once.’

‘Wow. Must have been hard remembering the lines?’

‘Oh no. Remembering the lines is the easy part. The hard part is remembering other peoples’ lines, especially if you’re doing Pinter... “Is that you, Petey?” Yes? Have you seen The Birthday Party?’

Henry shakes his head. This old priest is nuts. The whole evening is nuts. Still, he feels good, and tough too, on account of being so close to a seriously dangerous looking, bleeding man.

Lloyd Webber has great tunes but he’s no match for a little real-life blood and guts.

They gather Gerry in an agricultural fashion and manage to set him into the front passenger seat of the priest’s two-door Toyota Yaris. He groans nonsensical declarations when they strap him in.

The priest squints at the dashboard.

‘Okay, Harry, let’s see... It’s been ages, but trust me, I’ve done this before...’

Henry smiles. The priest is pulling the piss, right?

‘I was in a crash once,’ the priest continues. ‘Coming back from Woodstock. The bus rolled over twice. Absolute decimation.’

‘Everyone got killed?’

The priest lets out a long sigh. ‘Dec-i-ma-tion. It means to lose a tenth of your forces. But everyone misuses the word. Five died Harry, the rest of us survived. Okay, I’ve figured it out – let’s go.’

He starts the car, or rather it takes three attempts to start and when he does get going, he swerves out onto the wrong side of the main road.

Henry squirms in the back seat, yanking on his seat-belt.

‘Father – the left, you need to be on the left!’

‘You sure?’

‘Yes!’

‘No worries.... Just checking.’

A little fucking around with the gears, but he changes lanes. Thankfully, the road is quiet, yet Henry can't help gasping from a weird, light-headed but heavy-hearted feeling of powerlessness.

They drive for ten minutes. The streetlights thinning out to nothing and Henry can only guess what hospital the priest is thinking of? The rain and the windscreen wipers duelling it out. The only other sound is Gerry pulling out of his coma-sleep. His head pitches backwards and forwards.

When he jerks into total wakefulness, it's like that moment in a horror movie when lightning illuminates the killer.

'What the fuck? The fuck is goin' on? I'll kill ya, fucker, fucker...!'

'Now, Gerry,' the priest soothes in the tone one reserves for a child asking to stay up late. 'You've a bad cut and we're taking you to the hospital.'

'What the fuck are ya on about? Why are ya calling me "Gerry" ya shifty-eyed prick?'

'Just relax, Gerry, we'll be there soon.'

'Lemme out!'

Gerry opens the car door and tries to jump out, not realising he's wearing a seat belt. The priest pulls over to the kerbside, nearly mounting it in his confusion and haste. Henry shouts. Fear pins his body against the backseat. Gerry's arm scrapes along the road. The open passenger door hits a street-sign pole, causing it to clatter off Gerry's head. He lets out this sound, a wail, pitiful, more suited to a little child than an overgrown thug. Because, let's face it Henry thinks, that's what he is. Oh yeah, he read the words tattooed on Monkey-man's fingers, the total cliché of a psycho nutjob and even though they're so amateurish he could still make out HERO on the left hand and ZERO on the right.

The priest manages to get the car stopped and uses both hands to pull Gerry in.

'Gerry! This is wrong, Gerry – we're only trying to help-'

'Stop calling me Gerry, you child-raping bastard—'

He gives a ferocious twist of his shoulders, lunging a head-butt at the priest, missing so badly he falls between the two front seats, staring at the car-floor and seemingly stuck.

Henry wriggles hard, as if trying to fashion an escape route with his ass. Monkey-Man is going to kill them both. They won't be decimated, they'll be annihilated. This is what happens when you try to help people and make the world a better place.

Gerry twists his head, reminding Henry of a bear who has just caught the scent of hunters. He lifts his eyes slowly.

'Who da fuck are you?'

‘N-nobody...’

‘Are you with him?’

‘Y-yeah...’

Then with no warning, because psychos never warn their targets they’re about to fuck them up, Gerry unsticks from between the front seats, thrusting at Henry, grabbing his Liverpool FC scarf. One—two—three punches into the teenager’s head. The first blow explodes against Henry’s lip, turning it into mush. The second and third make shit of his nose, stinging like nothing on earth, it feels like copper wiring being jammed up his nasal passages and into his eyes and brain. Henry is crying and bleeding at the same time, hot wetness streaming over his face. He goes rigid. He can’t scream. He can’t cry out. All he can do is take the punishment. Just before a blow lands on his eye, he notices the priest is gone. The doddering old bastard has legged it out the car. Jesus Christ, thinks Henry, I’m going to die right here, in the back of a Yaris.

The blow against his eye is the last, then they stop. With his good eye, Henry watches Gerry Monkey-Man pull back, his head arching towards the car roof. He’s swaying between the seats, unable to decide what direction he’s going. Jets of blood shoot out his neck like a bust pipe, splatting the ceiling of the Yaris and stinks of dirty copper.

The priest is leaning into the passenger side of the car, holding a broken vodka bottle in his outstretched hand. He looks more like a warlock than anything, his mouth moving in a creepy, guttural whisper, incanting a death-spell to lure Gerry-Monkey-Man into a hard, eternal slumber. The brute gurgles obscenely, hand pressed to his neck, his eyes crazy-wild from the soon to be fatal blood loss.

‘If I turned on the radio now,’ says the priest, ‘and there was that Rod Stewart song playing, wouldn’t it be mad?’

Henry hasn’t a clue what this means. All he can barely manage to say is—

‘You killed him, Father...you killed him...’

Gerry slumps his back against the steering wheel. His gurgling and fighting for breath is down to a low rattle.

The priest sighs. His face and hands drenched with blood. He turns to Gerry—

‘That’ll teach you, coming to my church with your fancy stories and your threats. Rape this, rape that—I was good friend to your family—I loved you all!’

When Henry hears this, he wonders if the priest didn’t pull out onto the wrong side of the road on purpose.... If it wasn’t a distraction because...because he never intended on going to the hospital at all...?

‘Do you know what I’m thinking, Harry?’



The priest is pushing the passenger seat forward and leaning in. Henry can see that Gerry Monkey Man is dead, wedged between the driver seat and the dash. The interior car light producing a halo effect, rendering him almost beatific.

Almost.

‘Our lines, Harry, we need to rehearse them – ahem... “We found this poor fellow in the church, threatening suicide, and we tried to take him for help, but when we let our guard down, didn’t he go and stick this bottle into his neck as hard as he could”—what do you think? Good?’

Henry isn’t allowed to answer. The priest stretches into the back of the Yaris and swipes the bottle’s glass fang off Henry’s cheek. Pain, far worse than the thumps he’d suffered, sears the left side of his face. Stars light up his vision, but they fade when Henry bursts out crying.

‘That’ll make our story plausible. You tried to stop him, but he bashed you and slashed you. Yes? What do you say?’

Henry who wants this night stop, nods his head up and down.

‘Great. I’ll phone the ambulance and the police. Take it easy. It’s been ages but trust me, I’ve done this before.’

THE END

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## THE CALL OF THE MONKEY GOD by Carlton Herzog

I am a student of the mind in all its infinite complexity and strangeness. It is the hidden sea where dreaded things glide below the surface of the sanest faces. I have found that insanity never leaves. It merely changes to a subtler form masking its brutish self beneath the trappings of the civilized man.

I do not content myself with the merely insane or the garden variety lunatic. To be of interest to me, the subject must walk in gardens few could dare hope to contemplate let alone visit with the imagination. I want those minds so warped and twisted, so bent around themselves, their neural pathways could pass for Einstein's curved space where coiled Time devours its own tail and beginnings and endings are one and the same.

That search for the maddest of the mad led to a certain patient in Bethlehem Hospital London. Andrew Ward had been a sergeant major in the British SAS and a soldier in the Coldstream Guards. He was an expert in jungle warfare and survival.

He had been institutionalized following several failed suicide attempts. When he had been questioned as to why he had tried to kill himself, he would either ramble on about the end of the world or laugh hysterically.

I had asked to see him. I was not prepared for the encounter. His nose and lips had been eaten away. In their place was a giant weeping sore.

The disfiguration stemmed from the ghastly flesh-eating disease *mucocutaneous leishmaniasis*, or white leprosy. It is caused by the bite of infected sand flies of the sort he encountered on his recent expedition to Brazil.

That sight was chilling enough. But he was also covered in scar tissue from skin grafts. Ward had been sprayed with the venom of the fer-de-lance, an Amazonian pit viper, from six feet away. It necrotized the points of contact and the dead flesh had to be debrided down to the bone.

To keep Ward calm and ameliorate his pain, the staff kept him on a Dialaudid drip. The presiding physician warned me that he would do little more than spout gibberish, but every now and then it would be punctuated with moments of lucidity. All the staff psychiatrist knew was that Ward had been the sole survivor of an expedition that went in search of Cidade Negro, or the Black City. In his hysterical moments, he would call it the City of the Monkey God.

They had him strapped down tight to prevent any further suicide attempts. Next to his bed was an artefact that he supposedly brought back from that forbidden place. It was a black onyx carving, no more than six inches high, of a winged monkey sitting on its haunches. The thing had a fiendish leer on its face of the sort you see after a monkey hurls its faeces at a zoo goer. The wings were partially opened suggesting it was about to take flight. Its arms and legs were human-like, but instead of hands there were claws, instead of feet there were talons digging into the tiny pedestal on which it perched.

Ward had claimed that he had brought it back from the Amazon. At first, I regarded it as a gag gift from a novelty shop. But the more I studied it, the more uneasy I became.

Amazonian tribes were not known for such exceptional workmanship and detail. Nor did its theme fit within the canon of artefacts recovered from that region. I picked it up and rubbed my fingernail against it. While its composition seemed to be black onyx, it was, in truth, something else, neither metal nor stone. A polymer plastic perhaps, but that would mean it was a modern piece Ward had purchased or been gifted.

I stood there looking at him as he stared into empty space seeing I know not what in his mind. It was then that I first noticed a buzzing in my ears. Very slight. And for some then unknown reason the hair on my bare arms were standing on end as if I had rubbed my feet on a carpet. Weird but not threatening, so I pushed those anomalies to back of my mind and focused on why I was there.

Without any prompting from me, he began to speak.

Friend, don't you recognize your father? Or didn't you know that the monkey is father to the man.

I mildly retorted, Wordsworth leavened with Darwin.

No, he said. Not poetry, not evolution, but, with apologies to Michelangelo, the brutish hairy hand of creation reached down and gave us the spark of life. And now, Deus Macaco brought us together after all these years. We share a blood line.

I said, I speak Portugese so I get Monkey God. But we're not related.

His riddling continued: We had the same father. *Meu irmao meis novo*. He was an organ grinder and we are his monkeys, trousered and capped, tiny tin cup in hand begging alms from passing strangers.

I stopped him: Captain Ward, I want you to tell me about your trip to Brazil.

He looked at me solemnly and said, there are certain protocols to which I must adhere before I can bestow such esoterica. I must baptize you in the name of Deus Macaco. Come closer candidate that I might cleanse thee of the world and make a monkey of you.

I leaned in and he spit in my face: I baptize you not in the name of the father but in the name of O Destruidor De Mundus. For He rules the kingdom of which I will speak, and soon enough he will rule this world again. Even now I can feel his awful stirrings within me, black legions massing in a swarm of tails and wings.

I took that as the preamble to whatever lunatic ravings he was about to bestow. Yet, he spoke in tones that were cool and unsympathetic. H seemed to regard me as an object of study the way a biologist might study a bacterium under a microscope.

I have been a soldier all my life. Nevertheless, there was a part of me that always yearned to explore arcane and hidden places. In that respect we are alike. Me for the dark places of the earth, you for those of the mind.

I was first infected with the lost city virus when I was doing covert operations in Argentina for her Majesty. Keeping an eye on things so we didn't have a repeat of the Falklands War. I

learned that NASA had recently flown a DC-10 carrying laser mapping tech over unexplored Brazilian terrain. LIDAR as it is called does not penetrate the jungle canopy. Instead, it exploits small holes in the foliage. The light goes in and the bounce-backs create a point cloud of ground images. In this case, the point cloud revealed archaeological features in the form of geometric shapes—circles, rectangles, squares and triangles.

What NASA had found was not on any map. Nor is it mentioned in a book, historical or otherwise. But there is the myth of Cidade Negra, the Black City. Supposedly it predates the Aztecs, the Incans and the Mayans. It was that legend, in conjunction with NASA's findings, that prompted Harvard and the Smithsonian to lay the groundwork for a joint archaeological expedition within the next two years.

Argentina is a stone's throw from Brazil. I took leave from Her Majesty's Service fully intending to mount my own expedition as much from scientific curiosity as from gold fever. Whatever its scientific value, the legend held that the Black City was a repository of gold artefacts.

I assembled my own mercenary team. The financing came from Bruce the Deuce Hendricks. His father had made a fortune selling his oil business to John D. Rockefeller. Bruce had Clarke Gable good looks complemented by a thick black moustache and slicked back black hair. He was known for his Palm Beach suits and white shoes.

The nuts and bolts of lost city skulduggery came from Bear Rankin, fixer, prospector, drug smuggler, tomb looter and prick. Bruce was as they say a fat fuck with more chins than a Chinese phone book and rolls of blubber that rippled under his clothes as he moved. He was loud, pretentious, dripped gold and smoked fat cigars. But if anybody could put together an expedition in short notice, let alone to one of the more dangerous places on the planet, it was he.

The three of us partnered with three mercenaries, former Brazilian Special Forces commandoes. I chartered a Huey to fly us from Base Camp to an open space near the target area. The pilot Frosty Meyers and his co-pilot and wife, Misty Meyers had stripped off the M-60 machine guns and rocket launchers and refitted the Huey with extra fuel bladders.

When we were with 10 kilometres off the LZ, we hit what I initially thought was turbulence. As the Huey bucked, I could hear the rotors grinding. Something was smacking into the blades. From the window, I could see a mass of black wings. Blood sprayed on the windows. Dusky-legged guans or black curassows, I thought.

Whatever they were, they gummed up the blades and clogged the intakes. The chopper pitched forward and dropped like a stone nose first into the jungle below. It slammed into trees and came to rest perpendicular to the ground with the stabilizer rotor spinning like crazy. I, along with everyone left alive, choked on the smell of smoke and oil.

I made my way forward. Both Frosty and Misty had been impaled by bamboo shafts. They were dead. Not slumped over dead, but impaled and split in half dead.

I came back to a chorus of moans. The three special ops commandoes were in bad shape and bleeding out. For their part Bear and Bruce were torn up but otherwise ambulatory.

We got the commandoes out of the Huey. We patched them up as best we could and hooked up morphine drips. Then we deliberated as to our next move.

Bear: We've come this far. We need to at least see what we came to see.

Bruce: Fuck you Gunga Din. These guys need serious help. Dicking around looking for a lost city is stupid. The radio is destroyed. There's no phone service. We need to make litters to carry our wounded and walk out of here.

Me: We are less than a day away from the target. I say one of us stays here and tends to the wounded. Two of us will go find the city. Otherwise, this whole expedition was a waste of time. We may not get another chance.

Bruce: And if these guys die?

Bear: We're going to leave them in your capable hands. So, see to it they don't. Sure, they're pretty banged up, but I don't see any evidence of internal bleeding. We've got enough morphine to keep them on ice for a week, if we need to.

Me: If we can grab one or two artefacts, we'll be set for life and so will they. So, a little discomfort is a small price to pay for a life of luxury.

We voted. Bear and I won. We set out with our hopes high that we would find what we came for.

Progress through the undergrowth was painfully slow. We had to cut through dense, unyielding vegetation. We had been at it for over two hours when Bear sank into quick mud. It filled up his waders and dragged him down to the waste.

I got him a line and was slowly pulling him up when a fer-de-lance that had been behind a log struck him on the neck. I cut it in half with my machete, but by then, it had juiced him with enough venom to kill a rhino.

I threw him the anti-venom. He injected himself. But because it had caught him the neck, the poison made rapid progress throughout his body. I might have pulled him out, but the venom made him so weak he couldn't use his hands to help pull himself out of the mud.

A few moments later, he slumped over into the mud. I pulled and pulled, but his dead weight sank into the goo, until he disappeared.

Now I was alone. Part of me wanted to say fuck it and turn back. But another part of me said fuck it, keep going. So, I did.

The time-chiselled, majestic trees watched my progress, silent sentinels keeping dark secrets. This was not an enchanted place, nor even primeval, but ominous and sepulchral filled with coiling vapours and enormous serpentine roots. Jaguars slunk around me while cruel corvid eyes studied me from branches and wondered if I could fit inside their beaks. Rhythmic grunts and squeals echoed all around me, a devil's chorus of thing eating thing eating thing at nature's bloody buffet where the diners soon become the dined upon. Tennyson was right:



nature red in tooth and claw; what I would have given to have those as back-up when I ran out of bullets.

My mind began to unravel from the heat and stress. How the fuck were we going to make it back to civilization lugging three bodies when walking hands free through that green hell was task enough? My body ached from the sting of fire ants and the bite of kissing bugs. And that god-awful humidity that made my ass and balls sweat and itch.

I felt a cruel intelligence watching me. Not a person. Not an animal. But a cruel jungle mind that inhabited every root and tree and twig and bug and bit of soil, an intelligence that flowed through the veins and skulls of every viper and deer and flying thing, an intelligence as old as the earth itself, that vomited forth at its dawning, a first mind if you will, that was tolerating my presence here if only to study me, and perhaps judge me, taking my measure as a living thing to decide whether I was worthy of my life or just a convenient snack for one of its many animal incarnations.

By now, I had gone completely around the bend as they say and began to see the stuff of Brazilian legend: the *bortata*, the serpent with the horns of a bull and eyes of fire; the *corpo seco*, or dry corpse, dancing in the green around me. I even saw the *lobisem*, or werewolf. I was delirious and seeing shit that wasn't there, and once or twice thought about sticking my Glock tonsil deep down my throat and squeezing the trigger to make it all go the fuck away. Time to die asshole, time to die.

I was trained to be a tough motherfucker. I had killed men before, and not batted an eye. But here I was being crushed by panic from my own psyche. What would the boys at the regiment think if they could peel back my skull and see all that little bitch cognition eating away at the foundation of my courage like so many termites eating away the foundation of a building.

Fear is the breaker of men. The adamantium to their cheap flesh and bone and blood and other emotions. Roosevelt got it right: fear itself is the only thing we truly must fear. Everything else is stamp-collecting.

I soldiered on despite myself driving forward on auto pilot. A few hours later my machete struck a barrier. When I cleared away the green, I was staring at a lustrous wall of black. It wasn't stone and it wasn't metal. I dragged my machete across it, and there was neither a scratch nor a sound in its wake.

I knew that the wall was the outermost layer of the Black City. I followed it. As I did, I could see faint images on its surface. Nothing that made sense, they were fragments and bits of things. I suspected that at one time those images were whole and displayed in brilliant colours, but whatever had once powered the wall was running low on energy. Like a flashlight as the batteries fail.

After an hour or so, I came to a pair of massive swinging doors. I knew for sure that this was the Lost City of the Monkey God because on the arch above them sat a giant monkey with outspread wings. A much grander version of my diminutive friend you have in your hand. And by the looks of things much hungrier.

I heard something crashing through the jungle behind me. Two hairy, hulking figures emerged and stood on either side of me. They grabbed my arms then called out in some

guttural tongue, half man half animal. The doors swung in to reveal a tribe of hairy giants, some men, some women, and even children. The *ulaks* of Brazilian legend. I couldn't remember if *ulaks* were cannibals, but the way things were going, being grabbed by a tribe of hairy cannibals had an air of consistency about it. Shit rolls downhill, and as it does, it gathers speed and more shit along the way.

My hirsute escorts shoved me into the city. It was an eclectic mix of black featureless geometric shaped structures and primitive grass and bamboo huts. It smelled of animals and faeces.

As we marched through the square, I could see a group of children playing soccer with an all too human head. Farther along, I saw an open-air orgy of rutting ape men and ape women pleasuring one another.

Here and there were stone carvings on pedestals: a red brocket deer with the head of a snake, a vulture with a monkey's head, a jaguar's body with a man's head, and of course, more than anything else, winged monkeys. I wondered how they had settled on that as such a powerful fetish, since I was sure not one of these monkey men had ever seen the Wizard of Oz.

Although my handlers grunted and snorted as they pushed and pulled me along according to some unspoken protocol, they didn't seem bothered by my rifle or sidearm. I don't think they had ever seen a gun before, so to them, my weapons were nothing more than a bit of attire.

We came to a large black pyramid. Inside I could hear chanting in some strange language. I could also feel a weird vibration in the air. It made my hair stand on end and my skin tingle. Even my teeth chattered.

When we passed into the pyramid proper there was a congregation of ape-men kneeling before an altar. I saw live—I mean alive—not my hallucination or febrile imagination run amuck—but live in the flesh monkey-headed vultures and winged monkeys perched on the eaves above while snake-headed deer monitored the service at ground level. Ushers and demons straight from hell or some alternate eldritch dimension where the black planets roll.

Given the city's legendary name and the other fetishes and statutes I had seen, I was not surprised to see an enormous black winged monkey statute above the altar leering like the proverbial Cheshire cat. As I looked into its jewelled eyes, the feeling of being watched by something very old and very evil returned. It was hot as hell in that temple, but I felt a chill creep over, and I started to shiver and shake. It was not the chill of an icy blast coming into a warm house of a sere winter day, but of an absence of anything alive or human or friendly to this world. A blast from beyond the frigid revolving realms of Pluto and Chiron, a blast from the nothingness of cold, dead, empty space.

And that vibration was getting stronger. I could feel it in my feet and running up my leg. I almost wanted to call it a signal, but that made zero sense. Perhaps, I considered, it was a seismic peculiar to this region or errant magnetic flux.

There was frost coming from my breath, real honest to goodness frost. It was an unnatural thing from somewhere else, an exhalation of the mephitic air of hell flowing around the frozen lake that imprisons Dante's Lucifer, perhaps. In that place, the rules were bending and

twisting so I should not have been surprised at any deviation from normalcy no matter how bizarre.

My handlers pushed me forward then down onto my knees. When I resisted, they shoved me down onto my chest and kept me grounded with their feet on my head and back.

I turned my head just enough to watch the proceedings on the altar. Behind the monkey statute, a kind of movie was playing. A great winged monkey was having his lesser monkeys build things. Structures of one kind or another. But they were having no luck. It was a combination of not understanding the instructions and being fumble-fingered despite their opposable thumbs. So, the Great Monkey God fashioned men to be his architects and builders. These he charged with building his city.

Sometimes, he would spit a mucus or venom on his subjects. I couldn't tell whether that was to punish or promote them because that yellow ooze seemed to have a curious effect. Sometimes, it would dissolve them. Other times it would transform them into howler monkeys. At others, he would make a hairy man thing by spitting on a howler monkey.

The show went on for some time. It showed the armies of the Monkey God conquering the lands around the city. Once satisfied that everything was just as he wanted it the Great Monkey God created a portal and left. Thus, the show ended. But that was just a prelude to the real show that was about to happen.

For a moment later a blast of hot air filled the temple. Where there had once been a visual narrative of the Monkey God's works, there now appeared a swelling circle of eldritch light. As that circle expanded, there came an animal stench of fur, faeces and urine that made my eyes burn.

Then as if on cue, the Great Monkey God flew through that shimmering portal and came to rest on a pedestal behind the altar. It dwarfed its monstrous effigy before it. It sat on its haunches licking its lips and drooling as it surveyed the assembly of minions and worshippers.

My handlers said something unintelligible and pointed to me. The Monkey God flapped his wings, took flight and glided to within a foot or so of where I lay prostrate. It bent over for a closer look then using its claw hand like tweezers pinched my shirt in the back and slowly lifted me up, so we were face-to-face.

I threw up all over myself at its rank odour. That didn't alter its intentions because it opened its mouth wide exposing row upon row of razor-sharp teeth. It meant to chew me up and then swallow clothes and all.

Its pink tongue, thick and long as an anaconda snaked forward to lick me.

I didn't hesitate. I unslung my rifle and gut shot the thing. 12 high velocity light armour piercing rounds. It howled and dropped me, grabbing its protuberant belly. It tried to rip me with its claws, but I ducked away. I shot it in the head with my Glock. Nine head shots. That only made it madder.

It backed up and coughed a prodigious amount of phlegm and promptly spit it all over me. It turned and flew back through the portal to wherever it had come from.

The phlegm burned my skin. It felt like it penetrated to the core.

I staggered back. As I did, the entire congregation backed away from me. They were clearly afraid of contact with that stuff.

I got outside and rolled around in the dirt. The stuff mixed with the dirt. I got most of it off me. I staggered out of the city and into the jungle.

I followed our cut path back to the Huey. When I got there, I saw my compatriots being carried away by a squadron of flying monkeys.

It took a month to get out of the jungle. During that time, I was bitten by kissing bugs and scorpions. I was sprayed with fer-de-lance venom that burned me to the bone. I had malaria and dysentery.

The worst part was the nightmares. In them, I change from a man to a monkey. I chalked it up to fear of what I saw in monkey cinema of men being changed into monkey. Whatever weird things I had seen down there, I didn't believe in magic spit that could cause such a metamorphosis. Besides, I hadn't seen any extra hair on my body.

I said, So, you believe the nightmares to be the afterburn of your experience and nothing more?

He said, No, that's what I told myself to keep myself going until I got back to civilization. I kept telling myself you're not going to change so forget about it. Be grateful you got out of that Amazonian freak show alive.

I said, Right, but what do you believe now?

He laughed, I believe that I'm totally fucked, just like everybody else. He's coming back to redo the world and finished what he started.

With that, he hopped out of bed, removed his hospital gown and turned around. I could see the beginnings of a tail emerging from his rear end. Maybe I should have been alarmed, but vestigial tail growth in humans is not unheard of. Such tails are composed of adipose and connective tissue with bundles of striated muscles, as well as blood vessels and nerves. But there's never been one with any sign of vertebrae or controlled movement.

I asked, So, you think that's from the Monkey God's spit?

He said, No, I got all that slime off me before it could make any changes. That's from his call. Ultra-low frequency. That pyramid of His is a transmitter amplifier, so it's not just me, but everybody sooner or later is going to hear his call and change. Those what are already changing are walking talking living breathing signal boosters transmitting--I guess you could say evangelizing--his message and helping to convert those who aren't. See, my knuckles weren't hairy before. Look at my ears. And see, even though its short, I can control it.

I didn't know what to say. Something was happening to him, but I assumed it was isolated. I left him to his metamorphosis and had a word with the attending physician. I left, promising to return the next day for further consultation with the patient.

It was then that realized the buzzing and tingling had abated. At some point, I thought, I'll look up potential causes for such things when I have the time.

On the drive back, I felt a strange sensation on my butt. A discomfort, as if something were sticking me. I chalked it up to the power of suggestion. Three hours of talking to a lunatic who thinks he's turning into a monkey must have affected me.

I got home and fixed myself a martini. As I sat down, I again felt that poking sensation above my buttocks. I got pissed off and put down the drink. I yanked down my pants and felt my behind. Sure enough, there was a stump of something or other sticking out of me.

I went to the bathroom. I grabbed a hand mirror to look at the protuberance and sure as shit there was a little hairy tale growing out of me. I consoled myself by classifying it as nothing more than a cyst, an innocuous growth that could be hacked off by a dermatologist.

But I made the mistake of trying an experiment. I tried to wiggle it and wiggle it did. And when it did, I felt a presence around me. Something was in the room with me, unseen, ethereal, watching me.

I looked at the bathroom mirror to see if there were any changes to my face or ears. I looked long and hard. Although I didn't see any changes to my face or ears, or any excess hair, there was something about the eyes looking back at me that seemed odd. I could see a second set of eyes—eyes with no whites to them--within my own looking back through the mirror into this world. They were big and brown, hungry and unsympathetic. They were the eyes of the Monkey God and I was now one of his subjects.

THE END

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SOLD by Sam Derby

The smell of burnt mutton and burning wool filled the smoke-dark air. Richard touched the black lesions on the side of his throat absent-mindedly. His mind replayed the words of the song he had heard in the village.

*Why do we wander, where can we turn?  
Under the moon where the dark flames burn.  
Why do we wander, who shows the way?  
Come to the wood on the eve of May.*

He lofted the brand, sloughing flames and sparks into the shadows. Little was revealed; there was a full moon, but the effect of the thick pall of smoke meant that he could see almost nothing but the glow of the torch itself. He moved forwards gingerly, straining to locate the origin of the roar and crackle of the fire. The black wool of his habit was damp from an hour of pushing his way through the rain-heavy branches of the wood. The landscape was densely packed with saplings, punctuated with the rotten, moss-bound stumps of ancient trees. The undergrowth was lush fern and bracken. It would be easy enough to move through without drawing too much attention to himself, if he were to put out the brand. Just a little further, then...

“Who comes here?”

Richard froze as an oddly familiar voice rang out across the darkness, and dropped the torch hurriedly, hoping that the wet green of the forest floor would smother it. There was a faint sizzling sound as it did so; not nearly loud enough to be heard over the increasingly violent sound of the fire.

“We the chosen,” replied a chorus of voices.

Richard breathed out, at last—he had not been seen. And then the singing began, faintly at first but quickly gathering strength. It was the same song.

*Why do we wander, where can we turn?  
Under the moon where the dark flames burn.  
Why do we wander, who shows the way?  
Come to the wood on the eve of May.*

This was why he had stolen from St Peter’s Abbey several hours after Compline, when the spring darkness had finally arrived and his fellow monks were taking a few precious hours of sleep before rising for Matins. It was heresy, he had been certain of it; but a heresy of a sort which, for some reason, the Abbott had seemed uninterested in pursuing. Perhaps he had been encouraging Richard to take action himself; perhaps he had not thought it worth stamping down upon. In any case it was too late to turn back now.

*Who are the old ones, where do they lie?  
Under the greenwood, under the sky.  
Who are the old ones, what do they say?  
Come to the wood on the eve of May.*

The singing was quiet and low, though the words carried clearly over the short distance. Richard reached as close as he dared, crouching low behind a fallen oak. Now he could see them all, in a circle around the pyre, their hands joined. There were ten, maybe a few more, women and men alike dancing naked in the oily smoke. The acrid smell of the burning flesh had intensified and he felt his tears beginning to run as the sound of the singing and the sound of the fire mingled strangely, as if the song came from the fire and the crackle and hum from the dancers around it. He had been hearing this song for some time, waking from sleep in the monastery in the small hours of the morning. Instead of the familiar sound of matins being rung, he had heard words like these, sung in the English of the villagers of the Cuda's Wold, rather than in the universal Latin spoken by those of his order, or in what passed for French in the town of Gloucester.

One night, when the singing had been at its most intense, shortly after he had been inducted into the community of St Peter, he had sought out tea from the refectory despite the lateness of the hour. From there he had followed the sound up the broad spiral stone stairs towards the star chamber. The next day, as he remembered what he had seen, it had seemed like a dream: looking for all the world like a council meeting, twelve people arrayed around the chamber in their robes; the Lord Mayor, the Baron De Montfort, Akenside the wool merchant, the Abbess of the nearby Priory and numerous others he did not recognise but whose richness of attire suggested wealth and power. At their head the Abbott himself. Why this meeting was taking place at midnight he had not begun to understand. A few years ago he would have been relentless in his pursuit of something that stank so richly of wrongdoing. But things had changed: Richard had sworn an oath of obedience to the Order, and had promised to himself that he had left behind the anger and rash action of his mendicant days. Indeed, he might have forgotten the incident entirely had not the occasional, though fainter, burst of singing awakened him from time to time in the weeks that followed.

*How shall we praise them, what shall we give?  
That which was passed from the first to live.  
How shall we praise them, where shall we pray?  
Come to the wood on the eve of May.*

The song increased in volume and Richard could feel the temperature around him rising. Ducking beneath the tree trunk for some respite, his face against the cool moss, he considered what to do next. He could feel his choler rising, with the pounding of his heart and the increasing heat within him. Richard would not have been afraid of taking on an individual heretic—he had hunted down his share of them, in the old days of itinerant freedom with Friar Beddowes, his mentor for so long in the days of chaos before he took orders at St Peter's. He could remember the feeling now, that rush of choler that possessed his soul with bravery, and the thrill of violence that often followed. Together they had hunted down what they had thought were the last vestiges of paganism in the land, until the dark day when rage had overtaken Richard's reason and conscience entirely. But this was a very different situation—not only was he, rescued from the gallows by the Abbot no less, now part of one of the largest and strictest Orders in the country, outside the monastery walls without permission, but there also seemed to be something deeply organised about this group of worshippers. It did not have the feel of a few family members keeping alive the old gods, or of a local coven sprung up around a particularly charismatic follower of the old ways. The scale of it all, if it were all linked: the length of time he had been hearing the song, that strangely bureaucratic council meeting in the star chamber, of all places, and the Abbot's apparent lack of concern when Richard had mentioned that he was worried about a group of

heretics meeting in the Abbey... might it not somehow be sanctioned anyway, and he be likely to draw the wrath of the establishment if he acted too hastily?

The smell of the meat billowed towards him on the breeze; it was an offering of mutton, he was sure of it, rather than anything more sinister; though burning one of the precious local sheep, source of the wealth of these villages for a hundred years or more, was a significant sacrifice. More so even than some old leper or lunatic they might abduct easily from the fringes of the village, or even from the ruins of one of the abandoned hamlets strewn around the surrounding countryside, the doors of its houses still fresh with the painted red plague cross. Even though they were many, he had little fear that they would seize him, an interloper dressed in the robes of a powerful Order. The song stopped, suddenly, and all that was left was the alternate murmur and roar of the fire. Richard raised his head cautiously. The dancers had stopped too, and sunk to their knees in the soft ground. He had the distinct feeling that something had been summoned. And then with a pricking feeling, as the hairs on the back of his neck stood up at some unseen and unheard prompt, something began to happen.

First, the fire quietened down as if suddenly dowsed, smoking furiously; the still dancers began to repeat a single short note in a low hum. As he looked, he could see that they were staring up as they did so. And then, out of the corner of his eye, Richard thought he could see someone on the edge of the circle, wearing some kind of helmet or crown, looking towards him. He ducked down in an instant; had he been seen? After a few moments in which nothing happened—perhaps he had imagined it in the cloud and darkness—his pulse slowed and he allowed himself to look very cautiously towards the circle once more. There was a cold light descending from the sky above the silent fire, shining through the otherwise impenetrable haze.

“Who has called me here?”

The voice was silver, like the moon; Richard heard it resounding around the ancient wood in the same way that he had heard plainsong resound around the cavernous space of the abbey church. In response, the song began again.

*What do you ask for, when will you hear?  
Come to our aid in our time of fear.  
What do you ask for, what shall we pay?  
Come to the wood on the eve of May.*

Richard’s skin was creeping as if all the ants and beetles of the wood had chosen this moment to rise from the mould-dark earth and swarm upon him, yet he dared not stand; the unseen speaker, a woman, her voice, sonorous and deep, with that odd mixture of clarity and confusion that comes with great resonance, replied, “I ask only for your souls;” and Richard realised, with a sudden feeling of great dread, that he had missed his chance to escape.

He ducked down even lower in the undergrowth as the silver light encroached upon his hiding place. Any movement now and he would be seen, he was sure of it. The voice had stopped speaking and instead had joined in the humming, bringing a discordant harmony to the single note sung by the worshippers that gave him the strangest feeling throughout his entire being, as if his soul were itching. It grew in volume until the very air around him felt thick with it; the ferns and bracken shook at the sound of it; Richard began to feel physically sick, his head dizzy, and he clung on to the cold soft moss of the forest floor. And then it

stopped, suddenly, and he heard in its place a voice that he recognised very clearly, but which he told himself he could not possibly be hearing.

“Lady of the wood,” said the familiar voice, that of a strong man in his sixties with a Normandy accent, “hear our thanks.”

The congregation of worshippers rejoined as one: “Hear our thanks, lady of the wood.”

It could not be him, thought Richard.

“We are supplicants, we are worthless, lady of the wood, and we recognise your majesty and dominion,” said the man.

“We are worthless, lady of the wood,” murmured the worshippers in response.

Richard’s mind was racing. The voice was so familiar; but then, he was dizzy, tired from lack of sleep, the situation was so incredible that he must be confused; it was another similar voice, from another member of the Norman aristocracy perhaps? It could not be the one that he thought it was.

“Lady of the wood,” continued the voice, “we speak to you on behalf of the multitude within our own small dominion, and everything that we offer you ourselves, we also offer you on their behalf; those who toil in the fields, and who are craftsmen and merchants in the towns, and who are soldiers in battle: we offer you them all. Accept our gift.”

“Accept our gift, lady of the wood. Accept our gift, lady of the wood.”

In his prone position, with the unearthly light around him, and the cold earth moulding itself around his body as if it sought to drag him to its bosom, Richard heard those words and knew that he was not mistaken. The voice of a man of power, who had rescued Richard from a life of wandering and purposelessness. It was the Abbot himself.

As he grappled with this realisation, Richard became aware that the other speakers were now audible. Some kind of catechism was being conducted by the strange lady, and as with the singing it was in English, rather than Latin.

She said: “What is the chief end of Man?”

And they replied: “To glorify the Light.”

“What is the Light?”

“The Light is of the morning star.”

“And on whom shall it shine?”

“It shall shine upon all those who give of themselves.”

“And what shall the Light reveal, to those who give what is asked?”

“Power, and glory, for all eternity.”

What was the Light of which they spoke? The morning star in the Bible, thought Richard, the light-bringer, was the fallen angel. The group stood in a circle, with the man that Richard had identified as the Abbot having stepped forward slightly to address something above his head. It was from above that the light appeared to emanate; Richard could not see the silver lady, from his position, but she must be suspended, somehow, in the air above the worshippers. Richard scanned the circle, to see who else he recognised. The figures were all naked; the silver light shone from their skin as if it had absorbed that radiance. Nonetheless he could see their faces clearly: there was Akenside the merchant, the richest man in the town by far; and the Abbess, and the Baron; once more, like the star chamber meeting, all of the most powerful people he could think of in this part of the country, gathered together; but for what dreadful purpose? And then, at the fringes of the circle, he thought once more that someone was there, and looking towards him. Richard squinted through the smoke: whether it was in fact crowned or not, there was certainly something disturbing, something other than human, about its silhouette; and then the figure vanished.

Before he could scan the circle again to locate it, the lady spoke, breaking out from the monotonous tone of the catechism.

“Who shall give me what I ask?”

“All those over whom we have dominion,” replied the Abbot.

“And who are those?”

“All of the people of the land.”

“What power do you have to promise this?”

“Together we have the power of the Church invested in the Abbey of St Peter, the power of the King exercised these last few years through his Parliament at Gloucester, and we have the power that limitless Gold can wield.”

“You will use these powers to give what I ask to me, who you call Inanna-Ishtar, the Queen of Heaven?”

“We will give them to you,” said the Abbot.

Richard was shaking with fear; once more, he glimpsed what looked like a figure on the outer edge of the circle, detached somewhat; this time he fancied that the figure wore a dark habit similar to his own, and some form of elaborate headdress. But once more it disappeared in the general smoke and chaos. Inanna-Ishtar. He remembered the name from somewhere—one of the many demons evoked by heretics in the past. Why did this one strike some kind of chord, though? Something Friar Beddowes had said, no doubt; it would come to him. Richard forced himself to look back at the circle; he could see that several of the worshippers were trembling

as much he was, or perhaps had been seized in some kind of fit. The Abbot's voice was wavering; but there was no turning back, it would seem, from striking this bargain.

"We will give them to you, Inanna-Ishtar, the Queen of Heaven, so you may bring them into your Light," said the Abbot, his voice strengthening, as if he were gathering himself. And the congregation rallied at this, and though they faltered the first few times, they sang with increasing power, again and again:

*Take what we offer you, take what we give,  
Bring us the Light so our souls can live.  
Take what you ask for, take what we pay,  
Here in the wood on the eve of May.*

The light intensified rapidly and Richard covered his eyes; he heard screams from one or two of the worshippers, cries from the others, who were closest to the source; and then the voice of Inanna-Ishtar sounded like the great Abbey bell.

*I who have divine powers, who you call Inanna-Ishtar;  
I who have ascended the holy mountain,  
I who sit upon the divine throne:  
I give you these magic words that you might bring about a new world of Light.*

At this, the light boiled over, exploding in a shower of sparks, and though Richard's eyes were closed, and his hands were held fast over his eyes, suddenly he could see the image of an eight-pointed star burning; and through that burning star he could see wondrous things. He could see honey-coloured stone and white-rigged ships that covered the world; he could see great cities blistering the earth; he could see the bodies of the rich grow tall and strong, and honey-coloured like the stone; they shone with a silver light; he could see great quarries and mines dug into the ground, and their dust covering the forest; he could see all the wealth of China and the Indies set at the Abbot's feet, and the jewels of Africa littering the foothills of England. A new world of light. He remembered the phrase now; that had been Inanna-Ishtar, too; Friar Beddowes had said something about an organisation to bring about the new world, something like that. Richard shook his head, trying to clear it, trying to remember. Friar Beddowes had said that the man of conscience, when the time came, would have a choice to make. But what choice?

The sound of that infernal humming began again, this time intermingled with the cries of the worshippers; the fire in the centre of the clearing grew to meet the light, and it blazed out across the land; Richard could feel himself rise up, could see the worshippers rise up with him in their nakedness; and he could see a great fire sweep across the land as if a curtain were being drawn. He could see that the fire burned the land, and left it clean; he could see that those who were burned and those who survived were as ants before him, raised up as he was. He could see huge infernal foundries in which the offspring of this great fire burned; immense workshops into which the labourers of the fields were crowded, their gates surrounded by demons whose tyrannical and gigantic eyes dwarfed the rest of their bodies. He could see the congregation at rest above this fiery melee, crowned with gold and set upon thrones of ruby and emerald. A bejewelled monarch sat beside them, her body naked, her face covered; and only flame-bright eyes showing through the slits of her visor. Above her blazed that silver star, eight-pointed and brilliant, and cold.

“Behold, ye are risen!”

The voice that rang out across the wood was both the voice of the goddess and the voice of the Abbott, co-mingled. It was terrible and strange, and the echo of it was still with Richard when he awoke, face down in the dew-damp ferns.

Very tentatively, Richard reached out a hand and grasped a wet frond, to feel its life in his fingers; it was dawn, and there was birdsong all around him. He raised his head at a faint scratching sound, to see a roebuck nibbling at something two or three yards from his prone body. He could smell the earth itself, and against it, the remnants of fire. He was alive; he would be missed at Prime, and again at breakfast; someone would be sent to find him. What should he do? What had he seen? And in which world had he awoken?

“Brother Richard,” said a man’s voice, “you have arisen at last.”

Had they found him so soon? Richard half-rose, on trembling legs, and looked around the glade. The smouldering fire had been abandoned, it seemed. Just off to one side, half-hidden by the branches of an old elm tree, he saw the one who had spoken. He was slight, and wore a moss-coloured habit similar to his own, the hood drawn up close and topped with a simple coronet of bone or antler.

“I must see the Abbot,” Richard muttered, still dizzy, “I must see the Abbot.”

“Him? What do you have to tell him?”

The figure’s voice was like the rustling of leaves. Richard felt a shiver run down the core of his being.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“And tell me: what did you see?”

“I—I don’t know. Let me go to him,” he said, standing at last, though still uncertain of his ability to move far.

“Brother Richard, tell me what you saw,” said the crowned figure, still half-hidden by the undergrowth, the dark green habit in the early morning light looking like nothing so much as the shadow of something otherwise invisible to him.

“I saw heresy,” said Richard, quietly, testing out his voice; he did not want to look directly at the other; it disquieted him somehow. Had he truly awoken?

There was a laugh, a flawed sound, like dragging a rotten stick across a tree trunk; the figure moved with surprising swiftness and quiet around him, going from point to point among the trees, tracing out a jagged line as it did so.

“You saw an offering being made, certainly; a deal being struck.”

“Heresy,” Richard repeated. He felt his choler rise once more; he prayed silently for the strength to run.

“There are many kinds of heresy. There are many gods, after all. You of all people should know that.”

“What do you know of me?”

There was no reply to this. Richard’s head started to clear. Who was this stranger? Someone from his past, perhaps; being freelance meant that Richard had developed a certain notoriety in his time. Or someone from the Abbey, if this was somehow related to his Order, at some mysterious level above his station as a new initiate. Richard shook his head at the thought of falling foul of some unknown rule so soon after beginning his new and orderly life within the walls.

“I know that you value freedom,” said the rustling voice. It was behind him now.

“Freedom from what?” Richard said, trying to buy time while he thought things through. What was the strange figure doing? First it had been on the edge of the ritual circle; now it seemed to be making its own circle around him.

“From heresy, once, and then from chaos and violence; now from order itself, perhaps.” The figure had almost completed its dance around him, and was perhaps fifteen yards away from regaining its starting position.

“What do you know of me?”

Shouting this question, his whole body suffused with a surge of panic and rage, Richard began to run; he moved without completing his thought, moved instinctively, and only as he accelerated, forcing his weakened legs to push through the heavy wet bracken, did he realise what had prompted him to do so. Something from an encounter many years ago with a self-proclaimed wizard: the figure was closing a circle, trying to trap him.

“Do not break the circle, if you want answers,” said the voice

Something made Richard stop running; as he was about to turn back, a sickly radiance came forth and lit the woodland, hurling a shadow, gigantic and crowned with antlers, out before him. And with the remains of the fire smouldering blackly at its centre, the radiance reached out, and took him.

“Let me show you another future.”

Richard looked around and tried to move. He could see a flickering shadow, with its antlered head, on the wall of what looked like a moss-bound cave ahead of him; he had been bound to a great tree stump with ivy.

“Set me free,” said Richard.

“That is what I seek to do.”



Richard heard some hurried incantations, and the shadows on the wall in front of him shifted.

Suddenly he could smell honeysuckle and rose. The drowsy sound of the bumble bee mingled with the song of the blackbird and the thrush; he could feel a fresh breeze upon his skin, raising goosebumps. Gradually the shadows resolved themselves: the waving grasses of a meadow. He was surrounded by water; it was an island, this place in which he stood, marshes and swamps and rivers around him, a festering place for insects. There were swarms before his eyes of black flying creatures like miniature dragons. He saw a hare leaping across the edge of the meadow, the kite diving through the summer-blue sky, the chaotic dance of the butterfly; he saw a well-trodden path through the grass, and followed it. He came to where the river god lay all around him in a circle. He walked among standing stones and un-made ways and ridges and hollows of uncertain origin in the woods; he saw a *mappa mundi* stretched out upon the forest floor, patched with blankness like the hide of a dairy cow. Richard saw disease and darkness and violence and freedom; he saw something ancient being dredged from the black stuff. His eyes followed the hare's path and the kite's fall and the gyre of the butterfly; the shadows flickered and he saw no flames and no workshops and no slavery except for a universal bond to the land; he saw no kings and no queens and no priests. Richard heard the sloshing of dark water around him and as he came to, he realised that the island he lay upon was only there in the darkness. Holding him up.

"Choose," said the voice like rustling leaves, and Richard was back in the cave.

"What should I choose?"

"Choose," said the voice again.

"What have you shown me? Who are you? A demon?"

"You have seen the future," said the voice, but it was fading.

Richard could see that the sun had climbed halfway across the morning. He would be missed at the Abbey.

"Why me?"

"You are between two worlds," said the figure, "choose."

Richard took a breath. What did it mean? Was he somehow privileged to see these visions? Was he caught between these visions of the world—that of the glorious fire-drenched land, and that of the dark wooded island—in some way?

"How should I choose?" Richard said.

There was no answer this time.

The monastery of St Peter was quiet in the midday sun. Richard strode along the north cloister. His fists were clenched beneath the voluminous sleeves of his habit, still grass-stained and full of the smell of wood smoke and burnt meat. His head hurt, and the blood from a small wound had dried upon it. His wrists were red from the bindings. One fist held a silver crucifix, and the other a rough dagger, cut from a willow branch.

Richard raised his hand to the great oak door of the Abbot, from which emanated a barely discernible glow of silver.

Knock, knock, knock.

THE END

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## CHAPTER XVIII by Steve Carr

The wind whistled as it blew through the cracks in the safety glass in the windows and between the rusted bars embedded in the crumbling cement of the window frames. The top layer of thick dust that covered the floors of the hallways and rooms shifted like sand being blown across desert dunes. Centipedes, roaches and spiders crawled about behind the rotting wallpaper in the dark and dank recesses inside offices and storage rooms. The flutter of wings from finches and sparrows that had built their nests above the doors resonated in the empty spaces as the birds took flight.

Henry Lowell pushed on the handle of the large metal door, slowly opening it, and felt a rush of hot air wash over him that was scented with age and decay, like breath exhaled from something long-dead. He glanced up at the carved stone lettering in the arch above the door. Letters were missing. It read, *Low ll Ps chi tric Hos ital*. With the door opened just enough to squeeze his skinny body through, he stepped into the building and then closed the door as goosebumps rose on his arms and a chill travelled the length of his spine. He turned, and leaving his footprints in the dust, he strode down the hall wishing he had brought along a bottle of water to ease his parched throat.

He passed rooms where the doors were open or missing, where pieces of broken chairs, benches and tables were scattered in the dust, being eaten away by mites and termites. In some rooms, empty bookshelves lined the walls; in many the shelves had collapsed one on the other. In alcoves in the hallway walls where porcelain drinking fountains had once been, exposed, rusted pipes stuck out of the walls and up from the floor. Cobwebs, like intricate, yellowing lace, spread across some of the alcoves, where trapped insects hung, entombed in cocoon-like webbing.

At the end of the hallway he stopped at the foot of a winding, metal stairwell that twisted through the ceiling and floor like a screw. Alongside the stairwell hot air rose from the basement and up through an empty elevator shaft carrying with it the aromas of mould and mildew. He placed his hand on a railing and stepped onto the top stair leading to the basement, heard the stair squeal like being stepped on was painful, took his flashlight from his back pocket, and then walked down the stairs, shining the light into darkness.

The bottom stair rattled as he stepped from it and onto the concrete floor. He walked a short distance before coming to a closed door with a small window in it, giving a view into a cell devoid of any light. The hinges on the door screeched as he opened it and shone the light into the room. A single bed with a tattered mattress sat in the middle of the floor. He closed the door, shone the light on the rear wall, capturing the outline of a loose brick. He pulled the brick from the wall and reached in and pulled out a small bundle of rags. The springs of the bed squeaked as he sat down on the mattress and unwrapped the bundle. He shone his flashlight on a leather bound book and then slowly opened it.

In the centre of the first page written in pen ink in elaborate cursive lettering were the words: *Inside the Lowell Psychiatric Hospital. My Journal*. He turned the yellowed pages of the book, careful not to rip the paper turned fragile by age and exposure to the dampness of the cell. The journal was divided into chapters, each begun with a page on which the chapter was written in Roman numerals. He stopped at the page and chapter where he had left off the last time.

## CHAPTER XIII

*As I wrote in the forward, this journal is a recounting of my time as a patient in this hospital. I couldn't write my observations and experiences in the same sequence that events happened because I had to be very careful about when I took the journal and pen and ink from behind the brick in the wall. If you found this, then it means something happened to me that prevented me from retrieving the journal myself. Hopefully you're not a member of the staff of this hospital, or my doom is imminent, which I fear it is already. I now continue.*

*The Fairy Godmother was sitting in the corner, her chin tucked. Drool spilled from her open mouth. Her hair was shaved back several inches behind the hairline, revealing the bright red scar that extends across the frontal portion of her skull. The aides placed her wand in her lap where it lay as useless as a tree branch, disconnected from its original source of magic, the power of the Fairy Godmother. Her downward gaze was fixed on the wand, its use cut from her brain along with the existence of all other forms of magic. Tragically, the Fairy Godmother's closest friend here, Cinderella, slashed her wrists with a shard from one of her broken glass slippers after the Fairy Godmother was brought back to her cell after being lobotomized. Cinderella survived but is now in a strait jacket in one of the isolation rooms.*

*For dinner tonight we were served what we thought were cuts of beef only to find out that the last existing unicorn had been slaughtered, butchered and broiled. The faerie who had fed and taken care of the unicorn had to be wrestled to the floor and restrained when he found out it had been killed. To punish the faerie for acting out, the doctors clipped his wings, rendering him earthbound. They didn't use any kind of anaesthesia when they cut into his wings. His screams could be heard throughout the hospital. It was so piercing that several of the crystals in the chandelier in the staff dining room exploded into millions of sharp fragments. It was his love of the unicorn that kept the faerie calm and here at the hospital when it would have been easy enough for him to fly away. Before bedtime they gave him high doses of a medication that along with having his wings clipped further renders him incapable of escaping. He shuffled up and down the hallway mumbling to himself before they put him in his bed, tying him to it to keep him from wandering through the hallways during the night.*

*Beast punched one of the aides when the aide, one of the more hideous ogres who works here, held up a mirror in front of Beast's face and told him how ugly he was. It took six ogres to drag Beast into the cool-down room and force him into a tub of ice water where they held him down while pouring buckets of ice on top of him. Afterward, they chained him to a wall in his cell and lashed him with leather straps until the skin beneath his fur blistered and bled. Beast remained chained for almost a week, refusing to succumb to the torture he endured until at last his heart gave out. The last word he uttered was "Belle."*

*The lights flickered when the doctors turned on the equipment for their newest method of treating patients, electroshock therapy. The ogres chased the leprechaun, Paddy, all over the hospital before catching him in the arts and crafts room where he had hidden among the clay statues of gnomes and trolls. Despite him being mischievous, those of us who watched him being wheeled into the therapy room strapped to a gurney had lumps in our throats. We didn't know what electroshock therapy was, but the ogres had gleefully told us it used electricity to treat how someone thought. That alone was enough to terrify us. We waited in*

*the hallways outside of our cells until Paddy was brought out. His eyes were open but only the whites of his eyes shown. His otherwise pale green skin had turned ashen grey. The ogres wheeled Paddy into his room and transferred him to his bed. It has been two days and Paddy remains in his bed, just as he was when he came out of the therapy room. He mumbles continuously about pots of gold.*

Henry sat bolt upright at the sound of footsteps coming down the metal stairs. He closed the journal, quickly wrapped it in the rags, and then hurriedly put it back into the wall. He turned off his flashlight and stood in the doorway of the cell when the beam of light from another flashlight shone from the bottom of the stairs.

“Hey, Lowell, you down here?”

It was the voice of Chris Morris, one of the other guys that he worked with who delivered pizzas. Henry remained silent for several moments before turning on his flashlight and waving it, sending flashes of light on the walls of the corridor. “Yeah, I’m down here,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

Chris shone the light on his own face, forming a luminescent but eerie mask that made his eyes appear sunken and his smile clown-like. “I followed you. I’ve seen you come here before.”

“You’ve been following me?” Henry asked angrily. “Why?”

Chris walked down the hallway, towards Henry. “The last living Lowell family member visiting this hospital that has been abandoned for twenty years would make anyone curious. I’ll ask you the same question. What are you doing here?” He turned his flashlight and shone it on Henry’s face.

Henry turned his head and stared into the darkness at the other end of the hallway. “Everyone in town knows that this hospital was very secretive about what went on here. When Dr. Lowell and his wife who adopted me died without telling me about what really went on in this hospital, and there were no other Lowells to turn to, I was left to find out for myself before the town has it bulldozed.” He looked at Chris who stood a couple of feet away. “It has taken a lot of searching to discover the truth.”

“So, what’s the truth?”

“Can I trust you?”

Chris raised his hand as if giving an oath. “I give my promise as one pizza delivery guy to another.”

Henry shone his flashlight into the cell. “Come in and I’ll show you something that I almost missed finding.” Chris walked past him and was only a foot away when Henry raised the flashlight and then brought it down hard on Chris’ head, knocking him out.

“I’m at chapter eighteen, the last chapter in this journal,” Henry said tapping the journal that lay open in his lap. He patted the page where he had left off. “I don’t have time to start at the beginning, but I can tell you that the Lowell Psychiatric Hospital was a very bad place.”

Chris struggled against the leather straps that were wound around his wrists and ankles. The springs of the bed squeaked beneath the weight of his shifting body. "Let me loose," he demanded.

"Not until I've reached the end of this chapter," Henry replied.

"Why keep me tied up?" Chris asked.

"I don't trust what you might do if you find out what happened here. After all, my name is attached to this horrible place."

"When you let me loose I'm going to bash your head in."

Henry shone the flashlight on the words on the page. "I've taken that into account," he said.

*After being kept locked in isolation for nearly six months, Sugarplum Mary hung herself. She pulled threads from her hospital gown and wove them into a rope that she wound around her neck and tied to the ceiling light fixture in the isolation cell. Among the elves hospitalized here, she was the tiniest, no taller than the stools we sit on at the dinner tables, and the prettiest. I watched as the ogres cut her down, and even in death, she seemed to glow with life. The psychiatrists tried to erase from her mind her history as an elf in Santa's workshop by using deprivation and seclusion, but it didn't work. Days before she committed suicide I managed to secretly talk with her through the space under the isolation room door. She talked only of her time making candy and cookies with Mrs. Claus.*

*The dragon appeared in the morning mist sitting on the front lawn. Try as they might, the ogres couldn't prevent everyone from pressing their faces against the windows and murmuring the questions to one another that we had. Who did it belong to being the most frequently asked. It sat perfectly still, its chest only slightly rising and falling with every breath, its gaze fixed on the front doors. The ogres grabbed those of us they could and locked them in their cells. When the bell sounded for lunchtime, only a few of us that remained at the windows turned away and went to the dining room. Maybe it was overwhelmed by the dozen ogres who suddenly surrounded it, but the dragon barely responded when the ogres threw their spears that pierced the dragon's thick, blue hide, creating wounds that spurted the dragon's green blood fountain-like, creating a small pond of blood around it. It died with hardly a movement, and it wasn't until her wail echoed throughout the hospital did we know the dragon belonged to the Greek woman Hesione, the oldest female inmate in the hospital. The ogres quickly grabbed her and took her into the electroshock treatment room and for a half hour afterward the lights in the hospital flickered.*

*I have been able to keep my pregnancy hidden from everyone but Dr. Lowell. I shudder to think what would happen to me or my child if the ogres found out that I was due to give birth at any moment. Dr. Lowell has promised he and his wife will take good care of my child as it is unlikely I will leave this horrible place alive. They are intent on killing off or driving insane the last of the fae, charmed and other magic folk. If I give birth to a son, I'm hopeful the Lowells will honour my wish that he is named after his father, Prince Henry.*

*Someone is coming.*

Henry slowly turned the remaining pages in the journal, all of them blank. When done he closed the book and wrapped it in the rags. Chris was sound asleep and snoring loudly. Henry returned the journal to the place in the wall and then put the brick back in place, careful to erase any sign that it had ever been disturbed. He took Chris' flashlight and untied him, careful not to wake him. As he left the cell he looked back into the complete darkness, unable to see Chris. "By the time he gets out of this hospital he'll be too angry at me for leaving him here to remember anything else," he muttered to himself. He made his way up the stairs, through the first floor hallway, and out the front door.

THE END

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REVIEW by John C Adams

*The Nightmare before Christmas (dir, Tim Burton)*

It's the same old dilemma year in, year out. You love Halloween and can't get enough of it. You like Christmas too, but probably in somewhat smaller doses. But how to span the gap between the two festivals? There's Thanksgiving, true, and for us Brits Bonfire Night but otherwise it's an awfully long wait between the two. At least it was until 1993, when Disney released *The Nightmare before Christmas* and gave us a feel-good film to watch for weeks on end until Christmas arrived.

This movie was painstakingly shot in stop-motion animation frame by frame using clay models. And, if this fact doesn't terminally deter you from thinking of watching it, I'll mention up front that it's a musical.

The premise behind the film is simple, but it's not necessarily easy to get your head around if you love Halloween as much as I do. Jack Skellington lives in Halloweentown, where it's always trick or treat season. If you're anything like me, you're thinking 'Cool! How can I move there?' But Jack feels a certain amount of chill and darkness about his home that leaves him feeling incomplete despite the loyal presence of his ghost dog Zero.

Inexplicably, Jack decides that this emptiness can be filled by exploring Christmas and attempting to introduce it into his home to make Halloween feel a little cosier. My advice to Jack would be to forget Christmas and go out on a date with Sally, the rag doll unwilling lab assistant to the scary duck-faced inventor in the creepy old house on the hill. Above all, he should remember that he's so lucky to live in Halloween all year round. But of course Jack doesn't see it that way.

Jack's attempts to introduce Christmas into Halloween are predictably amusing and disturbing in equal measure (which is pretty much Tim Burton's stock in trade). One of the things I love most about his work is that you always know what you're going to get and he delivers. Jack finds love too of course along the way and learns a few self-taught lessons about why we keep Halloween and Christmas apart.

This is a great movie, packed with all the best monsters of childhood including the Oogie Boogie Man. I even found myself singing along, greatly helped by Danny Elfman's composing.

I guess Burton intends to teach us that our festivals—pagan and Christian—are best left separate. This lesson of history needs learning, given that the Christian church has in the past seemed determined to latch onto every pagan festival and stamp it out completely. Or maybe he's trying to hint that there's a time to celebrate the darkness and a time to celebrate the light, that kind of thing. Lots of people would agree with this lesson of tolerance and moderation between different sides of our human nature, but personally I always prefer the darkness!

Enjoy!

THE END

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## THE LAST TERRAN by Blake Rogers

### 6 Capture

The wind moaned, mouthing its anguish, biting through to the bone. Lod shivered.

‘Now is our chance,’ muttered Kroom. ‘Now we fight!’

He brandished his blade. Lod looked at him in alarm. ‘What are you talking about?’ he demanded. ‘We can’t fight all of them!’

‘I can fight anyone, wizard,’ Kroom boasted. ‘Now hear me...’

‘I’ll hear nothing,’ Lod hissed. ‘We need to get away. Obviously that patrol has been despatched in search of us...’

‘So we attack,’ said Kroom. ‘Or do you want to cower in the snows until you freeze? Draw steel and join me, sorcerous dog!’

He rose and, without any more ado, charged down the side of the ravine, kicking up snow as he went. His mouth was wide open, a battle cry echoed from the crags. Lod watched in horror. Just his luck to be sent on a suicide mission into a land of darkness and cold accompanied by a berserk barbarian from out of galactic prehistory. Assuming Kroom’s story was at all true. Surely even the Warlord who brought down the Galactic Empire would do nothing as foolish as this.

Numb with cold and horror, Lod watched. The night side Sporn lowered the spears they carried and prepared to defend themselves from this one man attack.

Kroom plunged into them, a whirlwind of limbs and steel. Eviscerated Sporn sprawled in the snow, leaking hissing ichor, the barbarian hacked, kicked, and punched his way through the patrol.

And for a moment, Lod thought that the barbarian was going to win. He made a manful effort to rise from where he crouched, ready to make a display of joining the fight at the last minute—he wasn’t as fast as Kroom, was he? But he’d do his bit—then he saw the Terran fall.

Terrified, Lod shrunk back into the shadows. The big barbarian lay like a felled ox, sprawled on the white expanse of snow. The Sporn approached, nervous, fearful, spears fully extended, ringing the fallen body. Lod shook his head. Even Kroom couldn’t have expected to prevail against so many. Now the Protean was alone in the dark and the cold, with a mission he had to complete, or else he must trail back to Sporn City with a tale of failure. And then what? Back to scavenging the price of an exit visa among the lonely hills?

Lod gasped. Kroom had stirred, dragged himself up to his knees, and shaken his head as if to clear it. But then the Sporn descended on the barbarian, seizing his arms and hauling him behind his back. One of them bound him with ropes of some fibrous fungal material. Then they urged him down the ravine with kicks and blows.

Lod watched until they were all out of sight. They made no attempt to find him. He wasn't sure whether to feel glad or insulted. But it was all over now. He couldn't hope to succeed now Kroom had been captured. Curse the barbarian. What an idiotic move. Any fool could have guessed that he would have been defeated. Now he was a captive and only Lod remained at liberty.

He heard a humming sound above the moan of the wind. Looking up, he saw a pale gleam. Another drone? They were still searching for him! Fear filled him with adrenalin, and he darted away down the slope, heading round the other side of the crag. Snow spurted on either side of him, a chill white spray. He had to find a better hiding place before the drone appeared.

At the last second he flung himself into a narrow gully, snow filled. Here he lay watching from behind rocks as another glowing circular shape began to quarter the area. Lod had got past it by his downslope dart. But now it was hovering over the route back to the glacier and preventing any attempt to escape the dark land. Lod rose, brushing snow from his limbs, and staggered on down the mountainside.

Half an hour later or so—it was difficult to judge time in a land of night where the moons never set—he found himself half climbing half falling to the bottom of a cliff. Beyond it the countryside stretched into the darkness, scattered with huge, lichen grown boulders between which grew plantations of sickly looking land anemones that glowed unpleasantly in the triple moonlight. The wind had died down. Lod was exhausted. He wanted a hole to climb into, so he could lie down and sleep. But he knew that it would be a sleep from which he would never wake.

He heard movement from some way off. Groaning, he dragged himself away through the groves of land anemones and staggered up a rise. Beyond it was a trackway leading towards the distant fires of a settlement. Marching up this track was a small group of Sporn. Lumbering in their midst, paws bound behind his back, was Kroom.

Lod returned to the shelter of the anemone grove. He needed Kroom if he was to survive in this land. Or did he...? The barbarian had proved himself a liability. What else did his captivity indicate, except that simple fact? He was strong enough, yes, tough—but he lacked Lod's brainpower. And if he had been such a great warrior, why had he let himself be captured? Why not die fighting? Lod remembered the visicasts of his youth. The warriors of the old days were always dying in battle, harness on their backs... But Kroom was strong, Kroom was tough, and Lod was not.

Only one thing for it. He had to shadow the Sporn and wait until such a time as they made camp somewhere, then sneak in and cut free the barbarian. Then they could fight their way out and continue.

He rested his hands on his broad belt. Then panicked. Where was his knife? He looked down frantically. No sign of it. He had definitely hung it from his belt!

He turned and peered up the dark mountainside. He must have lost the knife up there somewhere. Probably when he dived into cover from the drone.

Now he had no hope.

No hope of freeing Kroom—what was he supposed to do, bite through the barbarian's bonds? No hope of fighting. He was small and weak. All Proteans were. They had many talents. But fighting wasn't one of them. But what he could do... it took energy. And he had very little of that. So he must make the long, wearisome journey minus weapons, companions or other assistance.

He gritted his teeth. It would be difficult, but he would do it. He had little brawn but he had brains—exactly what that lummoX had lacked!

He summoned up an image of the hologram he had seen in the Intermediary's hut. He was now on the far side of the mountains, on the edge of the plain of lichen. The Place of Power, as Kroom had named it, where the root mind was concealed, lay in... that direction!

Beyond the settlement. A long way. In this freezing darkness, staying still was not an option. He must start moving or freeze to the spot. But it took a long time to chivvy his cold limbs into action.

At last the Sporn started moving, and he made his way down the slope to enter into another grove of blue and yellow land anemones that towered above him, their tops heaped with snow. They grew alongside one trackway, another one leading to the settlement, and he scuttled into cover when he saw another patrol of Sporn passing, spears in hand. They were still looking for him, it seemed. Had they any idea of the mission he was on?

He wondered if they would torture Kroom, and if it would wrest any intelligence from the barbarian. Surely Kroom would not betray him. But he would not have thought even that prehistoric dolt would have made a full frontal attack against such crazy odds. No wonder the empire fell. What he couldn't understand was how the Old Ones had been so feckless as to let the galaxy get into such foolish hands.

The patrol passed by, and he rose and started moving into the anemone forest. He could feel chilblains developing. He knew that frostbite would come next. His belly rumbled, and he was reminded that Kroom had been the one with the food. Lod had seen no sign of any animals anywhere nearby, however unappetising.

Halting again, he inspected the land anemones that surrounded him. They looked too woody to be digestible. And how could he hope to cook them? Or cut them up? He remembered the resolve he had felt when he set out. It was fading now, fading into oblivion in the cold light of the three moons.

He snatched up a rock from the ground and began hammering at a great anemone stalk, wider than the trunk of the trees that grew on the light side of the planet. Broken fragments showered the ground. Lod flung away the rock and snatched them up. He examined them queasily, then stuffed one into his mouth and chewed experimentally. After all, didn't the Sporn eat them? Or did they just use them for building? Some of them wore leathery clothes that appeared to be made of dried anemone.

Eventually, the tough anemone meat went down. It didn't taste too bad, reminding him a little of synthiprotein. Soon he was feeling better, and he returned to walking through the anemone

arcades. Somehow it didn't look so threatening now it might provide him with a source of nutrition.

As the snow began to fall again, he wondered if he would be able to light himself a fire. He kept back some of the land anemone to dry it within his belt pouch. Next time he halted for a rest in the shelter of an anemone grove, he tried making sparks using his belt buckle and a piece of stone. It was quite successful, and soon he had them fountaining down onto the dried anemone. It began to smoulder. Lod fed the fire with dry gobbets of anemone, and soon he had quite a blaze going. He sat beside it, luxuriating in the warmth, strips of land anemone baking on stones beside it. The aroma was luxurious. But it attracted unwanted attention.

He woke from his daze to the flap of leathery wings from beyond the anemone fronds, and saw, flying down towards him, a winged creature at least seven feet from beak to tail. It opened up its grinning jaws. They were full of fangs.

Lod leapt up, his indolence absconding like shadows fleeing the scorching light of noon. The winged creature landed in a flurry of snow. It was a huge bird, pale in plumage, though the tooth filled beak seemed strange, not to say primitive—like some prehistoric nightmare out of chaos. It strutted through the snow towards him and the fire, giving the baking anemone meat sidelong glances.

Lod had a brainwave. He snatched up a hot piece of anemone meat, and flung it towards the bird. It leapt up with a flap of wings and snatched the anemone meat from the air and gulped it down. Ruefully Lod blew at his scorched fingers. It landed again, strutting forwards with more sidelong looks, first from one swivelling yellow eye, then the other. Grimacing, Lod flung it another hunk. Only one remained, he noted, as the bird gulped this one down as well.

He threw the last chunk and the bird swallowed it hungrily. But when he went over to the stem to bash some more fragments off, the bird struck at him with its beak, knocking him to the ground.

He felt at his thigh where the creature had caught him and felt it wet with blood.

As the bird jabbed again, he snarled and flung himself to one side. It swung round, looking from one eye then the other. Lod rose to his knees. His antagonist pecked again and he was knocked sprawling, landing in a snowdrift outside the anemone grove.

The cold shocked him into movement. Bleeding in two places, he forced himself to his feet and ran, the bird first sprinting after him through the forest, then flying as they came out into a snowy plain of lichen. Squawking, the bird beat at him with its wings and pecked with its fanged beak. He tripped over a rock, caught his shin on it and fell again. He felt the wind of the bird's descent as it swooped one last time.

An abrupt squawk split the air and the bird crashed into the snow. He rolled over, clutching at his shin, got to his feet and approached. The thing was dead. He soon saw the reason why. A stone tipped spear, its shaft a length of dried anemone, jutted from its breast.

Lod whirled round. A group of Sporn was watching him. He turned to run. One of them lifted some kind of weapon and began to whirl it round his featureless head.

He hadn't got more than six feet when something struck his legs with swingeing force, wrapping and tangling itself round and round them. He fell yet again, this time unable to rise. The lengths of woven mushroom leather effectively bound his legs together and he could not move them.

The Sporn all strode up, spears in hand, to surround him. He lay back, yielding to the cold embrace of the snow. It was futile. Like Kroom before him, he was now a prisoner. No wonder all the efforts of the dayside Sporn had failed. This land of darkness was deadly.

Two seized him, one his shoulders, the other his feet. Others gathered round the carcass of the bird to hack steaks from its fleshy parts, stuffing into sacks the meat they did not immediately devour. Now they returned to surround the prisoner.

Flanked by the others, the two Sporn carried Lod away into the shadows of the anemone forest.

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BURN, WITCH, BURN by A Merritt

VII.—The Peters Doll

SHEVLIN watched me as I stared at the doll. He was satisfied by its effect upon me.

“A hell of a lookin’ thing, ain’t it?” he asked. “The doctor sees it, McCann. I told you he had brains!” He jounced the doll down upon his knee, and sat there like a red-faced ventriloquist with a peculiarly malevolent dummy—certainly it would not have surprised me to have heard the diabolic laughter issue from its faintly grinning mouth.

“Now, I’ll tell you, Dr. Lowell,” Shevlin went on. “I stands there lookin’ at this doll, an’ I picks it up. ‘There’s more in this than meets the eye, Tim Shevlin,’ I says to myself. An’ I looks to see what’s become of the drunk. He’s standin’ where I left him, an’ I walk over to him an’ he says: ‘Was it a doll like I told you? Hah! I told you it was a doll! Hah! That’s him!’ he says, gettin’ a peek at what I’m carryin’. So I says to him, ‘Young fellow, me lad, there’s somethin’ wrong here. You’re goin’ to the station wit’ me an’ tell the lootenant what you told me an’ show him your legs an’ all,’ I says. An’ the drunk says, ‘Fair enough, but keep that thing on the other side of me.’ So we go to the station.

“The lootenant’s there an’ the sergeant an’ a coupla flatties. I marches up an’ sticks the doll on the top of the desk in front of the lootenant.

“‘What’s this?’ he says, grinnin’. ‘Another kidnagin’?’

“Show him your legs,” I tells the drunk. ‘Not unless they’re better than the Follies,’ grins this potato-brained ape. But the drunk’s rolled up his pants an’ down his socks an’ shows ‘em.

“‘What t’hell done that?’ says the lootenant, standin’ up.

“‘The doll,’ says the drunk. The lootenant looks at him, and sits back blinkin’. An’ I tells him about answerin’ the drunk’s yells, an’ what he tells me, an’ what I see. The sergeant laughs an’ the flatties laugh but the lootenant gets red in the face an’ says, ‘Are you tryin’ to kid me, Shevlin?’ An’ I says, ‘I’m tellin’ you what he tells me an’ what I seen, an’ there’s the doll.’ An’ he says, ‘This bootleg is fierce but I never knew it was catchin’.’ An’ he crooks his finger at me an’ says, ‘Come up here, I want t’ smell your breath.’ An’ then I knows it’s all up, because t’ tell the truth the drunk had a flask an’ I’d took one wit’ him. Only one an’ the only one I’d had. But there it was on me breath. An’ the lootenant says, ‘I thought so. Get down.’

“An’ then he starts bellerin’ an’ hollerin’ at the drunk, ‘You wit’ your soup-an’-nuts an’ your silk hat, you ought to be a credit to your city an’ what t’ hell you think you can do, corrupt a good officer an’ kid me? You done the first but you ain’t doin’ the second,’ he yelps. ‘Put him in the cooler,’ he yelps. ‘An’ throw his damned doll in wit’ him t’ keep him company!’ An’ at that the drunk lets out a screech an’ drops t’ the floor. He’s out good an’ plenty. An’ the lootenant says, ‘The poor damned fool by God he believes his own lie! Bring him around an’ let him go.’ An’ he says t’ me, ‘If you weren’t such a good man, Tim, I’d have you up for this. Take your degen’ret doll an’ go home,’ he says, ‘I’ll send a relief t’ your beat. An’ take t-morrow off an’ sober up,’ says he. An’ I says t’ him, ‘All right, but I seen what I seen. An’ t’ hell wit’ you all,’ I says t’ the flatties. An’ everybody’s laughin’ fit t’ split. An’ I says t’ the

lootenant, 'If you break me for it or not, t' hell wit' you too.' But they keep on laughin', so I take the doll an' walk out."

He paused.

"I take the doll home," he resumed. "I tell it all t' Maggie, me wife. An' what does she tell me? 'T' think you've been off the hard stuff or near off so long,' she says, 'an' now look at you!' she says, 'wit' this talk of stabbin' dolls, an' insultin' the lootenant, an' maybe gettin' sent t' Staten Island,' she says. 'An' Jenny just gettin' in high school! Go t' bed,' she says, 'an' sleep it off, an' throw the doll in the garbage,' she says. But by now I am gettin' good an' mad, an' I do not throw it in the garbage but I take it with me. An' a while ago I meet McCann, an' somehow he knows somethin', I tell him an' he brings me here. An' just fer what, I don't know."

"Do you want me to speak to the lieutenant?" I asked.

"What could you say?" he replied, reasonably enough. "If you tell him the drunk was right, an' that I'm right an' I did see the doll run, what'll he think? He'll think you're as crazy as I must be. An' if you explain maybe I was a little off me nut just for the minute, it's to the hospital they'll be sendin' me. No, Doctor. I'm much obliged, but all I can do is say nothin' more an' be dignified an' maybe hand out a shiner or two if they get too rough. It's grateful I am fer the kindly way you've listened. It makes me feel better."

Shevlin got to his feet, sighing heavily.

"An' what do you think? I mean about what the drunk said he seen, an' what I seen?" he asked somewhat nervously.

"I cannot speak for the inebriate," I answered cautiously. "As for yourself—well, it might be that the doll had been lying out there in the street, and that a cat or dog ran across just as the automobile went by. Dog or cat escaped, but the action directed your attention to the doll and you thought—"

He interrupted me with a wave of his hand.

"All right. All right. 'Tis enough. I'll just leave the doll wit' you to pay for the diagnosis, sir."

With considerable dignity and perceptibly heightened colour Shevlin stalked from the room. McCann was shaking with silent laughter. I picked up the doll and laid it on my table. I looked at the subtly malignant little face and I did not feel much like laughing.

For some obscure reason I took the Walters doll out of the drawer and placed it beside the other, took out the strangely knotted cord and set it between them. McCann was standing at my side, watching. I heard him give a low whistle.

"Where did you get that, Doc?" he pointed to the cord. I told him. He whistled again.

"The boss never knew he had it, that's sure," he said. "Wonder who slipped it over on him? The hag, of course. But how?"

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Why, the witch’s ladder,” he pointed again to the cord. “That’s what they call it down Mexico way. It’s bad medicine. The witch slips it to you and then she has power over you.” He bent over the cord... “Yep, it’s the witch’s ladder—the nine knots an’ woman’s hair... an’ in the boss’s pocket!”

He stood staring at the cord. I noticed he made no attempt to pick it up.

“Take it up and look at it closer, McCann,” I said.

“Not me!” He stepped back. “I’m telling you it’s bad medicine, Doc.”

I had been steadily growing more and more irritated against the fog of superstition gathering ever heavier around me, and now I lost my patience.

“See here, McCann,” I said, hotly, “are you, to use Shevlin’s expression, trying to kid me? Every time I see you I am brought face to face with some fresh outrage against credibility. First it is your doll in the car. Then Shevlin. And now your witch’s ladder. What’s your idea?”

He looked at me with narrowed eyes, a faint flush reddening the high check-bones.

“The only idea I got,” he drawled more slowly than usual, “is to see the boss on his feet. An’ to get whoever got him. As for Shevlin—you don’t think he was faking, do you?”

“I do not,” I answered. “But I am reminded that you were beside Ricori in the car when he was stabbed. And I cannot help wondering how it was that you discovered Shevlin so quickly today.”

“Meaning by that?” he asked.

“Meaning,” I answered, “that your drunken man has disappeared. Meaning that it would be entirely possible for him to have been your confederate. Meaning that the episode which so impressed the worthy Shevlin could very well have been merely a clever bit of acting, and the doll in the street and the opportunely speeding automobile a carefully planned manoeuvre to bring about the exact result it had accomplished. After all, I have only your word and the chauffeur’s word that the doll was not down in the car the whole time you were here last night. Meaning that-”

I stopped, realizing that, essentially, I was only venting upon him the bad temper aroused by my perplexity.

“I’ll finish for you,” he said. “Meaning that I’m the one behind the whole thing.”

His face was white, and his muscles tense.

“It’s a good thing for you that I like you, Doc,” he continued. “It’s a better thing for you that I know you’re on the level with the boss. Best of all, maybe that you’re the only one who can help him, if he can be helped. That’s all.”



“McCann,” I said, “I’m sorry, deeply sorry. Not for what I said, but for having to say it. After all, the doubt is there. And it is a reasonable doubt. You must admit that. Better to spread it before you than keep it hidden.”

“What might be my motive?”

“Ricori has powerful enemies. He also has powerful friends. How convenient to his enemies if he could be wiped out without suspicion, and a physician of highest repute and unquestionable integrity be inveigled into giving the death a clean bill of health. It is my professional pride, not personal egotism, that I am that kind of a physician, McCann.”

He nodded. His face softened and I saw the dangerous tenseness relax.

“I’ve no argument, Doc. Not on that or nothing else you’ve said. But I’m thanking you for your high opinion of my brains. It’d certainly take a pretty clever man to work all this out this-a-way. Sort of like one of them cartoons that shows seventy- five gimcracks set up to drop a brick on a man’s head at exactly twenty minutes, sixteen seconds after two in the afternoon. Yeah, I must be clever!”

I winced at this broad sarcasm, but did not answer. McCann took up the Peters doll and began to examine it. I went to the ‘phone to ask Ricori’s condition. I was halted by an exclamation from the gunman. He beckoned me, and handing me the doll, pointed to the collar of its coat. I felt about it. My fingers touched what seemed to be the round head of a large pin. I pulled out as though from a dagger sheath a slender piece of metal nine inches long. It was thinner than an average hat-pin, rigid and needle- pointed.

Instantly I knew that I was looking upon the instrument that had pierced Ricori’s heart!

“Another outrage!” McCann drawled. “Maybe I put it there, Doc!”

“You could have, McCann.”

He laughed. I studied the queer blade—for blade it surely was. It appeared to be of finest steel, although I was not sure it was that metal. Its rigidity was like none I knew. The little knob at the head was half an inch in diameter and less like a pinhead than the haft of a poniard. Under the magnifying glass it showed small grooves upon it... as though to make sure the grip of a hand... a doll’s hand a doll’s dagger! There were stains upon it.

I shook my head impatiently, and put the thing aside, determining to test those stains later. They were bloodstains, I knew that, but I must make sure. And yet, if they were, it would not be certain proof of the incredible—that a doll’s hand had used this deadly thing.

I picked up the Peters doll and began to study it minutely. I could not determine of what it was made. It was not of wood, like the other doll. More than anything else, the material resembled a fusion of gum and wax. I knew of no such composition. I stripped it of the clothing. The undamaged part of the doll was anatomically perfect. The hair was human hair, carefully planted in the scalp. The eyes were blue crystals of some kind. The clothing showed the same extraordinary skill in the making as the clothes of Diana’s doll.

I saw now that the dangling leg was not held by a thread. It was held by a wire. Evidently the doll had been moulded upon a wire frame-work. I walked over to my instrument cabinet, and selected a surgical saw and knives.

“Wait a minute, Doc.” McCann had been following my movements. “You going to cut this thing apart?”

I nodded. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a heavy hunting knife. Before I could stop him, he had brought its blade down like an axe across the neck of the Peters doll. It cut through it cleanly. He took the head and twisted it. A wire snapped. He dropped the head on the table, and tossed the body to me. The head rolled. It came to rest against the cord he had called the witch’s ladder.

The head seemed to twist and to look up at us. I thought for an instant the eyes flared redly, the features to contort, the malignancy intensify—as I had seen it intensify upon Peters’ living face... I caught myself up, angrily a trick of the light, of course.

I turned to McCann and swore.

“Why did you do that?”

“You’re worth more to the boss than I am,” he said, cryptically.

I did not answer. I cut open the decapitated body of the doll. As I had suspected, it had been built upon a wire framework. As I cut away the encasing material, I found this framework was a single wire, or a single metal strand, and that as cunningly as the doll’s body had been shaped, just as cunningly had this wire been twisted into an outline of the human skeleton!

Not, of course, with minute fidelity, but still with amazing accuracy... there were no joints nor articulations... the substance of which the doll was made was astonishingly pliant... the little hands flexible... it was more like dissecting some living manikin than a doll... And it was rather dreadful...

I glanced toward the severed head.

McCann was bending over it, staring down into its eyes, his own not more than a few inches away from the glinting blue crystals. His hands clutched the table edge and I saw that they were strained and tense as though he were making a violent effort to push himself away. When he had tossed the head upon the table it had come to rest against the knotted cord—but now that cord was twisted around the doll’s severed neck and around its forehead as though it were a small serpent!

And distinctly I saw that McCann’s face was moving closer... slowly closer... to that tiny one... as though it were being drawn to it... and that in the little face a living evil was concentrated and that McCann’s face was a mask of horror.

“McCann!” I cried, and thrust an arm under his chin, jerking back his head. And as I did this I could have sworn the doll’s eyes turned to me, and that its lips writhed.

McCann staggered back. He stared at me for a moment, and then leaped to the table. He picked up the doll's head, dashed it to the floor and brought his heel down upon it again and again, like one stamping out the life of a venomous spider. Before he ceased, the head was a shapeless blotch, all semblance of humanity or anything else crushed out of it—but within it the two blue crystals that had been its eyes still glinted, and the knotted cord of the witch's ladder still wound through it.

“God! It was... was drawing me down to it...”

McCann lighted a cigarette with shaking hand, tossed the match away. The match fell upon what had been the doll's head.

There followed, simultaneously, a brilliant flash, a disconcerting sobbing sound and a wave of intense heat. Where the crushed head had been there was now only an irregularly charred spot upon the polished wood. Within it lay the blue crystals that had been the eyes of the doll—lustreless and blackened. The knotted cord had vanished.

And the body of the doll had disappeared. Upon the table was a nauseous puddle of black waxy liquid out of which lifted the ribs of the wire skeleton!

The Annex 'phone rang; mechanically I answered it.

“Yes,” I said. “What is it?”

“Mr. Ricori, sir. He's out of the coma. He's awake!”

I turned to McCann.

“Ricori's come through!”

He gripped my shoulders—then drew a step away, a touch of awe on his face.

“Yeah?” whispered McCann. “Yeah—he came through when the knots burned! It freed him! It's you an' me that's got to watch our step now!”

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## POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

### 12: War and an Armistice

FROM many an ancient parchment Kalin read to them bits of the lore of the Sardanians, and a strange store of knowledge and incident did the yellowed, leathery scraps unfold. For, as might be judged, the Sardanians had come down from Antiquity; and, as might be guessed, they were an offshoot of old Greece—the Greece that Homer sang.

“Some great city had been sacked,” explained the priest, “and from its siege one adventurous party of warriors, with some of their women, turned their faces from their home across the Aegean Seas to the Pillars of Hercules even”—which means that they sailed through the Mediterranean to the Straits of Gibraltar— “and passed the pillars to the great seas beyond. There they sail north, seeking the barbarous isles, where strange metals and red-haired slaves might be gathered”—Britain.

“From the isles they turned southward toward home again, but a great tempest took their ship and whirled it away from the coasts. Down past the Pillars of Hercules the storm drove them, along the coasts of Libya”—Africa. “For weeks were they buffeted in a mighty gale, whirled ever to the south into the gates of the ice gods. Nearly perishing in the cold and for lack of food, on a day a mighty wave came from the north and their ship rode the crest of it through the barriers of ice, and came to this place.

“On a snow-bound shore they landed, those Achaeans, with their women and their captives, and pushed on toward the green mountains, whose smoky summits they could not see ahead of them to the south. Thus they came to Sardanes, finding it even as ye see it this day, except that the Gateway to the Future was then as are its sister mountains, for the eternal fires flared at its top.

“So was Sardanes peopled, and the Sardanians of to-day are all the descendants of that little ship’s company and their women and their captives from the barbarous isles. For a time they were sore beset in the valley by the great beasts which dwelt here, and they were fain to make their homes in the caves of the smoking hills. But as the years drew on they slew the beasts, and some of the great bones remain even until now in witness of their struggles. Then they built their homes in the valley and thrived and multiplied and became a people.’

“But what of the Gateway to the Future, and the worship, of the Lord Hephaistos?” asked Polaris, who had followed the tale of the priest with minute attention, translating it the while to the girl, who listened breathlessly to this unfolding of the pages of the dead past.

“Hephaistos was the smith god of the Achaeans,” answered Kahn, “and when they came hither they believed that it was Hephaistos who had shown mercy to them and saved them out of the cold and the icy seas. This valley, said the wise men, must be the forge and smithy of the god himself. So, as he had taken them under his protection and set them to dwell in his workshop, they came to worship him alone of all the gods they had known.

“Then, in time, when the ancient fires began to burn low in one of the hills, it was believed that the god was angered, and many sacrifices were made, that he might not forget the people and withdraw from the valley the warmth and light of his forge fires. Should he do so, the

valley must go back to the arms of the snows and the people of Sardanes perish miserable one by one with the coming of the terrible cold.

“Thus grew up the customs of the religion which thou hast seen, but ever the ancient fires eats deeper in the pit of the mountain, and ever a great fear lies in the hearts of all Sardanians that some time the fires of the other mountains will follow that fire and leave Sardanes the prey of the ice and snow and darkness that wait without her gates.”

Then Kalin questioned Polaris in turn of the world, and listened with an intentness that was wistful to stories of the histories of the great peoples that have ruled the earth since the Greece of which his traditions told him.

“Ah, that I might see it!\*” he sighed. “Fain I am to fare to the North with thee, and to see the great world and to learn new things before I go into the darkness. But I know not how that may be.”

Polaris learned from the priest that his office had been handed down from father to son for uncounted centuries, but that he himself was unwed, and thus far had no successor. He learned further that a few years before, on the coming of Prince Helicon to the throne of Sardanes, there had been a division in church and state, as it were—that the headstrong prince would have none of the domination or advice of the priesthood in conducting the affairs of the kingdom.

In consequence of that, there was a coolness between the prince and Kalin, and each had his followers in the land. Some of the people sided with the prince. Others were for the priests and the religion, and looked with terror on anything that might anger further the Lord Hephaistos. Thus far, however, there had been no open break, and the relations of the prince and his brethren with Kalin and the priests of the gateway, if cold, were not openly hostile.

“And now,” said Kalin, with a strange smile, “thou comest to Sardanes, thou and the lady with thee, and Kalin sees a storm in the brewing.”

“How meanest thou?” questioned Polaris quickly, although he guessed at Kalin’s meaning. “We come but to tarry a brief space, and then to find our way to the North again, where is the lady’s home, and whither Polaris carries a message of the dead.”

“That way to the North may be hard to win, my brother,” answered Kalin. “What wilt thou do if the Prince Helicon shall decree that thou goest not?”

Polaris laughed shortly. “Not by the Prince Helicon, or by any who dwell in Sardanes, shall Polaris be kept from that way to the North,” he answered. “Not while the breath of life is in his body.”

“Whatsoever be thy ways, O stranger, know that Kalin wisheth thee but good fortune, and will lend thee his aid to it. Aye, even though it crosseth the desires of the Prince Helicon, as well it may,” he muttered.

Grown suddenly sober, Rose Emer laid her hand earnestly on Polaris’s arm. “Can we go back to the North?” she asked. “Is it possible? Is there a chance that we can cross those leagues of snow and ice and live to find our ship?”

The man looked into her eyes. "Lady, is it your wish to go?" he questioned.

"I must go back, back to my home, and—Oh, we must go; but you—Will it not be at the risk of our lives?"

Polaris smiled quietly. "Where the Lady Rose wishes to go, Polaris will not be left behind. I, too, must go to the North. I will not even suggest that you might wait here on a chance that I might fetch aid to take you. We will go together, and, though the way be hard, as Kalin here says, we will win through to the ship and to your home. Fear it not."

Impulsively the girl held out her hand to him, and Polaris bent over it and kissed it. Through his half-closed, dreaming eyes, Kalin watched them, and smiled; but with a wistful tightening at the corners of his mouth.

THREE days they had rested at the dwelling of the priest, when there came a messenger to the mountain from the Prince Helicon, bidding their attendance at the Judgement House, where the prince would hear more of their strange tales of the world. In a gorgeous state costume Rose Emer made, a brave showing as they set forth for the Judgement House, and beside her strode Polaris in the full garb of a Sardanian noble, his gift from Kalin the priest. In dark blue, edged with bands of white, he was costumed with his necklace of bear's teeth falling on the broad bosom of his tunic. He carried no weapon openly, but under the skirt of the tunic, in its leather holster, he had belted one of his father's trusty revolvers.

They found the Prince Helicon sitting as they had left him, on his pillared throne, and Morolas and Minos, the tall twin brothers, lolled on their seats of stone at the throne's foot. Several of the Sardanian nobles occupied seats on the dais. A great number of the people were gathered to hear more of the tales of the strangers.

"Many tales of the world Polaris told them, turning often to Rose Emer for answers to those questions which his own knowledge did not hold. At length he broached the subject that was uppermost in his mind, that of their departure from the land.

At his mention of going Helicon frowned. "And thou wilt rashly dare to cross the great deserts of snow in a vain attempt to, win back to the world?" he asked.

"In the great desert was I reared, O prince," Polaris answered him. "I fear not its terrors. I must face to the North, and soon—"

"But surely thou wilt not think to expose the lady to the dangers of the path," interrupted the prince. "She will remain in Sardanes, and, if indeed thou shalt come safely to the other side of the snow wastes, perchance her own people will find a means to come and transport her afterward."

"Nay, but she shall not remain here, prince," answered Polaris sharply and steadily. "She, too, wishes to be on the way, and no one may transport her across the bitter wilderness more safely than I, who know how and have the ready means to travel it."

Prince Helicon turned his eyes to Rose Emer. A flush mounted to his cheeks and his eyes glittered as he drank in her loveliness.

“How know I that the lady wishes to be so soon gone?” he asked. “It is in my mind that Helicon, Prince of Sardanes, might persuade her to remain, had I the words to talk to her in her own tongue.”

He paused and seemed to consider. Polaris watched him with narrowing eyes, and in his anger would not answer lest he might say too much.

“Now, say thou to the lady,” spoke Helicon with sudden decision, “that Helicon offers her the love of a prince and the half of the throne of Sardanes. Tell her, and be sure that thou dost translate aright, and her answer to me also.”

POLARIS’S face was clouded, but he turned to Rose and repeated evenly to her the proposal of the prince.

Rose Emer paled and then flushed, and instinctively she rested her hand on the arm of her comrade.

“Say to the Prince Helicon that his words do me great honour, very great honour,” she answered; “but I am an American girl, and am lonely for my own home and people. Now we are rested, and I wish to go, no matter what may be the risks. And tell him also that I cannot be his wife, because—because—I already am promised to another.”

Under his anger and back of his spirit a cold hand clutched at the heart of the man of the snows, but he turned to the prince and repeated the words of the girl. Helicon’s eyes were bright with anger.

“Art altogether sure that thou hast made plain both my words and hers, O stranger?” he cried.

“He doubts my words, lady,” said Polaris. “Perhaps you can make him understand.”

“I think I can,” answered Rose. She fronted the prince, and stared him coolly in the face. Then she turned and held out her arms toward the North. Turning again to Helicon, she threw out her right hand, with the palm toward him, in a repellent gesture. “I think you will not misunderstand that, prince,” she said in English.

Nor did he. He sprang to his feet and took one step down from the throne.

“Now, by the gods of the gateway,” he cried, “thou shalt not so flout Helicon!” All forgetful that she could not understand a word, he raged at the girl. “I say that thou shalt stay in Sardanes as I will, and thy wanderer in strange places shall wander forth without thee, or—”

There Kalin interrupted.

“O prince, think well before thou speakest. Wouldst thou, the prince of great and ancient Sardanes, mate with a woman outlander of whom thou knowest naught? What will thy people think?”

“And, O prince, think well again before thou sayest that which thou canst not recall,” broke in Polaris. “For I, Polaris of the Snows, tell thee that this thing shall not be, though thou wert forty times prince. I swear it by no dark portals of the future but on the honour of an American gentleman!”

“A truce to thy interfering tongue, priest!” said Helicon furiously. “And thou, man of the wilderness, bridle thy tongue also, lest it be curbed for thee. In Sardanes Helicon is the master.”

One of the nobles, a middle-aged man, who had started from his seat, now made himself heard. “O prince,” he said anxiously, “I tell thee that Kalin hath the right. It is not meet that thou shouldst take to wife this woman from we know not where, who hath come among us. Let her go, and the man with her, lest harm befall. See, already the people murmur.”

It was true. Down in,” the great hall, where the gathered Sardanians had listened breathless, arose now a babel of voices in protest.

“Sardanes, be thou silent also,” said Helicon, but the prince could not turn a deaf ear to the murmurs of the people. He sank back in his seat, and for a space rested his chin on his hand. At length he spoke again in a low, choked voice.

“Not that I fear thee, outlander; nor thee, priest; but it shall be as the people wish. Now get thee gone, thou and the woman. In the time of ten sleeps will Helicon answer thee, after he hath taken counsel with his nobles and his people. Then will he say whether thou shalt go or stay. Go hence until that time and abide in peace with Kalin.”

As the Sardanians measured time by sleeping and waking, and not by days, in a land where the days were six months long, it would be ten ordinary days until the prince made his decision.

On their way back to the Gateway to the Future, Polaris said to Kalin: “Now what shall hinder that I be gone before the time be set?”

For once Kalin, the far-seeing, erred in his wisdom, for he made answer:

“Nay, it were best to wait, I deem it not unlikely that the prince will act in despite of the wishes of the nobles and of the people. In any case, he is a faithful man, and no harm will come to thee in the time he hath named.”

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