

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

# **Schlock!**

## **WEBZINE**

VOL. 15, ISSUE 30  
26TH JANUARY 2020

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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Schlock! Webzine

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Christopher T Dabrowski, Jim Mountfield, Kevin O'Brien, A Merritt, Charles B Stilson*

## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 15, Issue 30  
26<sup>th</sup> January 2020

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

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

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

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*This Edition*

This week's cover illustration is *After Ragnarök* by *Emil Doepler*. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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## EDITORIAL

This week marks a sad moment. Ever since 10th April 2011, Schlock! Webzine has been published weekly, with only occasional lapses due to holidays. This edition, Vol. 15, Issue 30, represents the end of Schlock as a weekly publication.

But, fear not, Schlockers! From February onwards, Schlock will be available in a new, revamped, monthly format!! Plus eBook and print zine versions available from Amazon!!!

In this issue, we have a tale of terror from Sri Lanka; a case of vampires versus justice; cops and capers in an alien dominated world; a mystery in a future dystopia; and an animal rights revenge. We also see an end to all three of our serials: *The Adventure of the Toxic Celebutante concludes*. Lowell closes the witchcraft case. And the mystery of Polaris' parenthood is solved.

—Gavin Chappell

PS: See you in February!

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

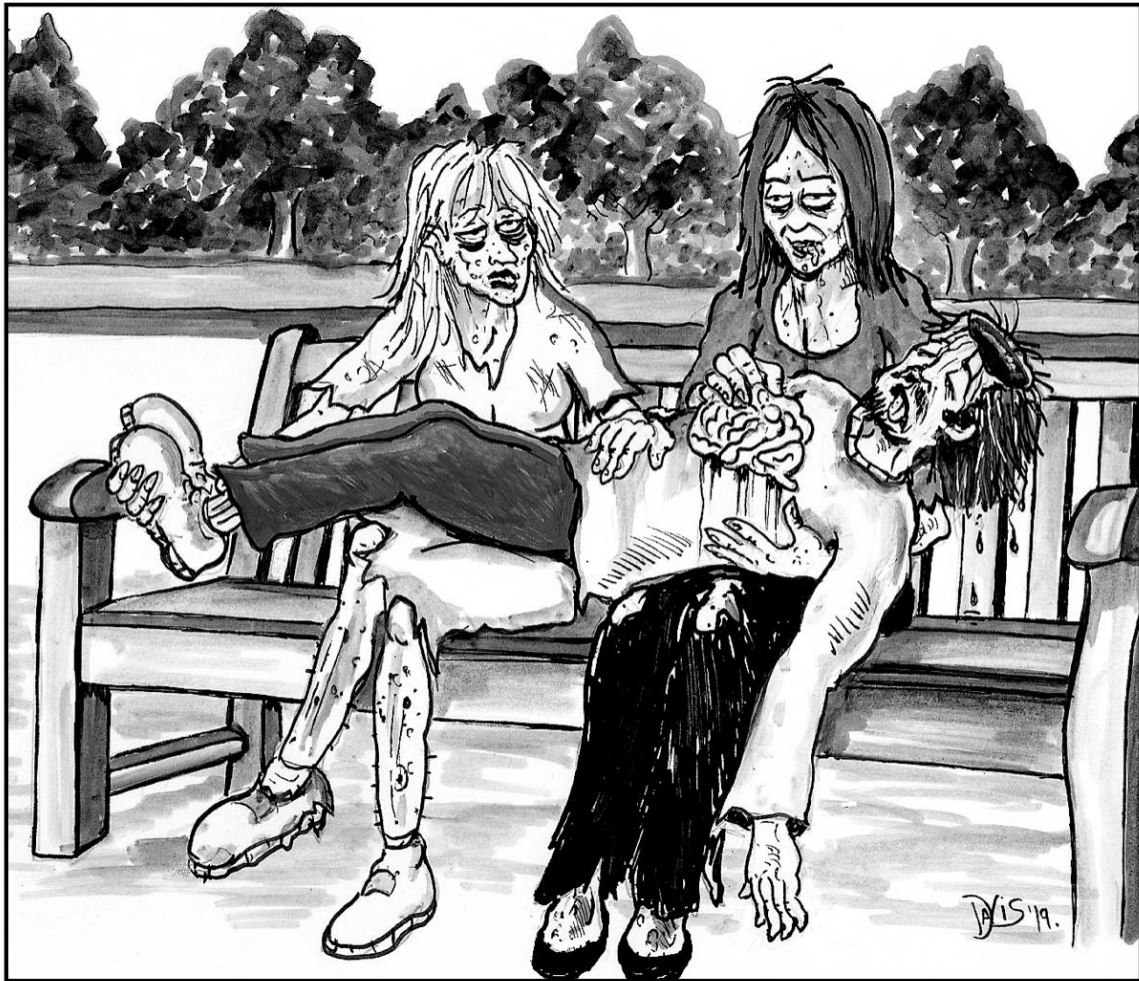


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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

## IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



**"I CAN OVERLOOK A MAN'S HEIGHT IF HE'S GOT BRAINS."**

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

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

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

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

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## THE PATH by Jim Mountfield

They stood halfway up the mountainside. Below them were grooved, green panels of tea plantation and shelf-like terraces containing rice paddies. Above them were steep slopes covered in scrub, boulders and wind-twisted trees, which climbed towards a murky rainy-season sky. Francine looked upwards and saw...

For a moment she didn't know what she saw.

It seemed in the sky but not of the sky. Its colour wasn't grey like the surrounding clouds but a pale brown that gave it the look of bleached leather. It was immense and round, like a planet in a sci-fi disaster story that was on a collision course with the earth and about to crash into it. But it wasn't a planet. A series of long curved plates ran down its surface, each emerging from under the edge of the plate above it. On its upper hemisphere, these bristled with antennae-like follicles and were studded with wart-like protrusions. Halfway down its lower hemisphere, the plates gave way to a mess of things that hung in pairs and were curved and sharp, some pairs larger, some smaller, that made Francine think first of forceps-blades and then of insect mandibles.

Though it was eyeless, it seemed somehow to gaze from the sky and down the mountainside at her. For a moment.

Then it wasn't there anymore. There was just sky, grey with impending rain.

Kit saw the fearful look on her face. "You alright?"

"I... I..." Francine kept looking up the mountain. Nothing but boulders, scrub, trees and rainclouds. "I'm fine."

"You're not having a... lapse?"

"No!"

Hugo and Maya had already started up the path. Now Hugo paused and looked back. "Is everything okay?"

Francine raised her hand reassuringly and managed a strained smile. Then to Kit she said more gently, "It's that sky. We could get rough weather today. Do you think we should go on?"

"Two days ago, it was so stormy that the palm trees were bent over. I don't remember you wanting to abandon that trek."

"Kit, we were among farms. There were places where we could shelter. We weren't venturing off into the great unknown."

Kit produced a folded sheet from his hip-bag. "It isn't the great unknown. I have a map."

Francine wanted to say that she hadn't trusted the old man who'd sold him the map. That there'd been a vibe from him. The other three hadn't noticed anything, but she'd felt



something wasn't right about him. It was as if he'd given off an aura that only she could see or an odour that only she could smell. An aura, an odour of... insanity.

But she said nothing, afraid Kit might glibly reply: "Insane? Takes one to know one."

They clambered upwards until they reached a ruined stone bungalow, which Kit identified from the map as the home of a British superintendent of a long-vanished, colonial-era tea plantation. He consulted it for another minute and then directed them along a branch of the path that led to their right, saying there should be a viewpoint ahead. Sure enough, they emerged onto a ridge and Hugo marvelled, "Wow, that certainly is a view."

It was still morning and the eastern sky remained clear. From it, the sun shone along a valley that twisted between the spurs of forest-cloaked mountainsides. These rose to jagged, cloud-free peaks. As the mountains receded into the sun's glare, they became iridescent and ghostly.

"If the whole path is like this," added Hugo, "the map is worth every rupee that you gave the old man."

Kit sounded smug. "And you thought I was mad buying it. But sometimes you have to take a chance and do something crazy."

Unfortunately, as he said the word 'crazy', he accidentally made eye-contact with Francine. They immediately looked away from each other.

They continued along the ribbon of grit, pebbles and occasional small rocks that formed the path. Minutes after they'd enjoyed the sun-drenched view from the ridge, a cloak of mist and drizzle dropped over them—presumably the clouds sinking down around their own mountain. "This country," Maya complained. "One moment beautiful, the next... Scheisse!"

Francine stopped at the threshold of the mist and stretched her arms forward. She felt the vaporous threads against her skin. "It's..." She tried to find a suitable word. "Humid."

That didn't really describe the feeling. The threads were warm and wet but, somehow, had an unpleasant oiliness too. It was as if they were long slimy creatures entwining her arms. The others had gone a little way ahead, their figures already hazy in the mist. Again Hugo paused and turned back. "Humid?" he queried. "But this is cold, Francine."

Beyond him, Maya exclaimed, "Ja, mir ist kalt!"

Reluctantly, Francine joined them and they trudged on. Barely discernible in the mist, a forest of low trees loomed on either side, and a dense froth of grass, weeds, ferns and creepers hung over the path's borders. Francine's strange first impressions passed. No longer did the mist feel warm and oily to her but cold and clammy, just as her companions found it. But she was uneasy. Why had it felt different when she'd entered it?

In fact, things had often felt different to her during the past few months, ever since an episode in Thailand when at a full-moon beach party she'd unwisely taken a tab without being sure what was in it. Supposedly it was ecstasy but, Kit opined later, other substances had been mixed in, possibly mescaline or LSD. Francine had suffered the most traumatic night of her

life. First, she was convinced that the buildings along the Thai shoreland were giant half-metal, half-organic machines of war, firing psychic death rays at her. Later, after Kit had put her to bed, she'd found herself hovering in a dark void next to a small orb of light. The orb pulsed with ever-slowng frequency and ever-fading intensity and she'd believed she was watching her own soul as it sickened and died.

Since then, occasionally, she'd been tormented by flashes of... unreality. The giant thing looking down from the sky and the slimy, living touch of the mist were just the most recent instances. Now she wondered if that brew of drugs had permanently affected her brain and distorted her perceptions of the world.

Oblivious to her worries, Hugo and Maya chattered happily in Swiss German. Francine thought this was odd because for as long as the pair of them had travelled with her and Kit they'd made a point of talking in English. Then Kit turned to her with a pleased look on his face and held up the map. "You thought I was mad buying this. But sometimes you have to take a chance and do something crazy."

"You said that a few minutes ago."

"I did?" he asked, puzzled. "Are you sure?"

The path descended and brought them into a sunken area where a mountainside stream was detained and transformed into a series of pools. Littering the pools and the ground around them were boulders whose dry upper surfaces were covered in lichen. The light, already dimmed by the mist, filtered down through a mesh of branches and leaves from the surrounding trees.

Kit unstrapped his backpack and dumped it on the nearest boulder. Particles of disturbed lichen floated around him. "Can we take a break here? I'm shattered."

Still speaking in German, Hugo and Maya said something that sounded like agreement and also removed their backpacks and rested them on lichen-covered boulders.

"I don't know why we're so tired," said Francine. "We've only walked for..." She paused. For how long had they walked? One hour? Two? She checked her watch but then realised she couldn't recall when they'd set out. She dropped her backpack and sank back against a boulder. Shreds of lichen started drifting in the air around her as well.

For a time the only sound was a trickle of water as it fell from a jug-lip on a shelf of rock and travelled from one pool to another. Then Kit asked, "Can we take a break here? I'm shattered."

"Are you," Francine demanded, "trying to imitate a stuck record? You already said that."

"Did I?"

Maya, whose head had been drooping forward and dangling a fringe of dreadlocks, suddenly straightened up and shrieked. Her legs below her cut-off jeans were covered in a pattern of swirling Celtic-style tattoos. Now a second pattern covered them, one made by constellations of black leeches. She clawed down and tried to tear them off.

Kit raised a hand to stop her. “No, don’t pull at them. Slide them off gently—” He fell silent as he saw that more leeches were massed on the back of his hand. Simultaneously, Hugo realised he had leeches covering him too and then Maya’s shrieks were joined by the shouting and cursing of the two men.

Shocked, Francine watched this, then thought to look at her own arms and legs. She didn’t see leeches but a hydra-like swirl of fibrous tendrils reaching up from the crumbling rotting leaves and black wet muck that comprised the ground here. The tendrils surrounded her legs. Their ends attached themselves to her skin and filaments of blood appeared where they made contact. She glanced towards the others again and saw that the same was true for them. They weren’t really covered in leeches. They were struggling amid long whirling tendrils that’d impossibly sprouted underneath them.

She flailed, managed to beat away the tendrils, turned and ran up the path on the far side of the pool-area. She entered a region where the trees were sparser and more light penetrated the mist. There she had to stop, numb with fright and panic, and still exhausted. She looked down again. Now her arms and legs were dotted with punctures that leaked blood. In places, leeches continued to cling to her, swelling and darkening as they drank.

But only leeches. Not what she thought she’d seen.

She sank onto her knees and plucked off the remaining leeches. Then the foliage on one side of the path stirred and from it emerged a dainty brown deer, with horns that curved up and inwards in the shape of a heart. It crossed the path a yard from her and for a few seconds even peered towards her. But it showed no alarm at her presence, which made her wonder if it could actually see her. And then it passed into the trees on the path’s opposite side.

Francine scrambled up and tried to follow the deer. She’d gone a few yards from the path when she encountered some sort of membrane that receded slightly before her but then tightened and gently propelled her back. Yet she couldn’t see anything of it, apart from some faint ripples that ran for a moment across an invisible expanse, distorting the image of everything beyond—so that a few yards ahead, the outline of the deer shimmered briefly before becoming solid again. Then the animal moved on and vanished amid the trees and mist.

She probed forward, still feeling something but not seeing anything. The images of things on the far side of the invisible wall continued to wobble as its surface undulated at her touch. Then she stumbled back to the path, hands clutched against the sides of her head. She told herself: “I must be having a lapse again.”

Slowly, three figures came up the path from the pools. Kit was in the lead. Not only did he carry his own backpack, but he lugged hers in his arms. It wasn’t a big pack but its weight made him teeter as he walked. When he reached her he dumped it on the ground and croaked, “You forgot this.” Her backpack was plastered in tatters of grey-green lichen from the boulder it’d rested on. Kit had lichen slathered over his own backpack and over his clothes and skin too. Meanwhile, his arms and legs were latticed with blood from many leech-bites and a few of the creatures were still attached and feeding on him.

But what disturbed her most was his face, which was grey and gaunt. He barely seemed to see out of his glazed eyes. Again he held up the map, dusty with lichen and polka-dotted with blood now. "You thought I was mad buying this," he mumbled. "But sometimes you have to take a chance..."

Then he shambled past. So did Hugo and Maya, equally lichen-stained and leech-bitten.

Francine wrestled her pack onto her back. It suddenly felt as heavy and ungainly as a wardrobe. Repeating to herself, "I'm having a lapse, I'm simply having a lapse," she followed the others.

The path climbed. The forest filled with taller, denser, older-looking trees that closed against the path's sides and pushed thick, twisting tree-roots across it. Getting their tired feet over those roots became an additional chore. It was during this stretch that Hugo suddenly tripped and fell with a cry. Maya halted beside him. So did Francine behind him. But Kit, still in front, clambered on obliviously and vanished amid the mist.

Francine waited for Hugo to get up. Instead, he sprawled and groped around him feebly and moaned in German. When Maya made no effort to help him, Francine moved forward and saw that his right foot had slipped into a space between two close-together roots and become stuck. He lay along the roots to the base of the tree-trunk from which they sprouted, looking curiously small and wretched.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Can't you at least try to get up?"

He didn't acknowledge her. His moaning became piteous whining. Francine sighed and grasped his left hand, still powdered with lichen from the poolside boulders, and pulled. Hugo didn't rise any from the ground. At least, most of him didn't rise. But a ragged, dusty glove of skin peeled off his hand and left a grotesque fan of bones and dry crumbling tissue at the end of his arm.

Francine gawped, then screamed and dropped the skin glove, and then turned and lurched away. She crashed into Maya, who'd been standing behind her with statue-like stillness and silence, and knocked her back against a tree-trunk on the path's other side. One of her hands landed on Maya's bare left arm, also grimy with lichen. Francine drew back and as her hand retreated, a strip of Maya's skin came with it, dry like old cellophane, a swirling Celtic pattern faintly visible under its coating of powder. Left behind on Maya's arm was a huge yawning wound. The exposed flesh didn't bleed and had the texture of mouldering bread.

Retching, Francine spun away from her and faced Hugo again. He seemed unaware of what'd happened to his hand and continued to grope about him and whine in German. Then a creaking, cracking noise came from his trapped foot. The gap between the two roots grew thinner as the roots grew bigger, no longer covered in bark but smooth and plump, like lips around a closing mouth. The noise changed to grinding and snapping, Hugo's foot imploded and out of gap came a spray of grey-red matter that she realised were pieces of desiccated flesh. Then it closed completely and Hugo's crushed foot disappeared. His right leg suddenly terminated at a powdery stump with two splintered bones jutting from it.

Hugo wallowed like a baby. He waved his limbs uncoordinatedly, including the arm that ended in a skinless hand and the leg that ended in a bloodless stump. Meanwhile, more roots

had emerged from under the tree and were creeping over him and entwining him. Not only had they shed their bark, but they pulsed and glowed as if a luminous ichor was oozing through them.

While a root curled around his head, Hugo smiled up at her idiotically. Then the creaking, cracking noise began again.

Not bothering to look back to find out what'd happened to Maya, Francine fled along the path, careening over the swollen, glowing roots. At some point she thought to get rid of her backpack and managed to cast it off without stopping or even slowing. She kept running, until...

She was no longer among trees but in an open area where the mist was so thick that she could see for only a few yards' radius around her. The ground was composed of sheets of smooth rock, like giant paving slabs, separated by seams of moss. She changed direction and bore to her right, but soon encountered the invisible, unyielding barrier. She went off at another tangent and met it again. Though the ground was featureless rock, the path with its unseen corridor-walls still existed. She could only go directly forward or back. And after what'd happened to Hugo and Maya, she wasn't going back.

Soon she happened across Kit's discarded backpack. From there, she saw another shape huddled on the ground ahead.

Kit was conscious when she reached him but with his bewildered shrunken face and goggling eyes and the drool on his chin, he looked like a dementia sufferer. He held up something and she took it from his hand, not touching his skin because it too was smeared with lichen. "Map," he gurgled. "You thought... I was mad buying it. But sometimes... you have to take a chance..." Francine noticed that his other arm was stretched across the ground, over the crack between two rock slabs. The moss growing in that crack had spread onto the arm and along it to his shoulder. For a moment the arm looked like it was tangled in a green blanket. Then—

Then she saw the moss differently. It had the texture of putty, bristled with a thousand worm-like protuberances and made her think of sea anemones, but with the polyps merged to form a single, creeping organism. Now, however, she understood that this was only a part—an appendage—of a much larger organism. Just as the pulsating tree-roots, skin-eating lichen, blood-sucking tendrils and oily threads of mist had been its appendages too.

The putty crawled onto the side of his neck, over his jaw and towards his mouth. The protuberances on it wriggled eagerly. "Map," he burred. "Map..."

Just before the putty poured into his mouth, Francine turned and stumbled on.

Another thing appeared—a figure, standing. Up close, it didn't look like a human so much as a statue made by a particularly morbid artist. It was gnarled and skeletal and its face didn't even resemble a skull because its most basic features had eroded away. Stretching down from it, like ribbons slanting from a maypole, were brown-grey strands that resembled seaweed. The ends of the strands disappeared into the cracks between the stones. A gunky black fluid trickled down their flat upper sides. The final residue, she thought. What remained of a person after all else had been absorbed, drained and devoured.



At the end of a stick-like limb that'd been an arm, a folded sheet of paper was lodged inside a finger-less lump. She prised it out, opened it and compared it with the sheet Kit had given her. She wasn't surprised to see the same handwriting, same route and same landmarks. Francine tried to move on but found she was stuck to the spot. Looking down, she saw that her feet straddled another crack between the slabs and out of it seeped more of the bristling putty that'd fed on Kit. A mound of it had gathered around her boots and was climbing upwards, onto her woollen hiking socks, towards the bare flesh of her legs.

Too weak to struggle free, she stood there, a new companion for the trekker who'd no doubt undergone the same ordeal that she, Kit, Hugo and Maya had. The gradual removal of their wits, intelligence and memories, mental and physical energy, skin, blood and tissue. Digested by an army of enzymes, acids and gut bacteria that Francine alone, with her drug-rewired brain, had been able to see. The others had seen them only as forms from their own universe—mist, roots, leeches, moss, lichen.

Presently, new shapes emerged from the mist. Francine counted one, two, finally half-a-dozen goats. Like the deer earlier, the goats passed through the invisible wall without hindrance, drifted across the rock slabs, then traversed the wall on the other side. They were oblivious to the two human figures. Francine knew the goats belonged to the universe that she'd come from. They weren't part of the other, hellish universe she was trapped in now. That was because the other universe had just one point of entry, which was back behind them. The map, and the path itself, had carefully guided them through it.

That entry had been a mouth—the start of the digestive tract inside the vast creature she'd glimpsed in the sky above the mountainside. The digestive tract through which, unwittingly, they'd walked ever since.

THE END

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## TEXAS V DRACULA by Carlton Herzog

*reprinted from THE SUPERNATURAL LAW REVIEW*

On March 25, 2025, Vlad Dracula, a wanted murderer and self-identified Nosferatu, was apprehended by the Texas Bureau of Supernatural Investigation (TBSI). A panel of supernatural experts found that Dracula had for the better part of four centuries consumed over 7000 victims and turned over 500 individuals into Nosferatu like himself. The panel recommended immediate incineration. However, before Dracula could be transferred to the State Incineration Unit in Dallas the ACLU stepped in with a restraining order. The majority of the Texas Supreme Court decided to review the issue of whether a vampire was a person for purposes of due process under the Texas State Constitution.

In *Texas v. Dracula*, the Texas Supreme Court held that entities such as vampires do not have an existence capable of rights and duties. Writing for unanimous court, Chief Justice Arnold found that the vampire “is not a person, but merely a walking plague bereft of morality and sentiment, a thing that looks human but for all intent and purposes is an all-consuming virus spreading through an otherwise healthy population.” He found as a matter of law that “public safety demands such creatures must be exterminated.” We reach no conclusion as to how these “unholy appetites came to be, namely, whether they are the result of some supernatural process or merely extreme examples of aberrant evolution. Nor do we reach any conclusions with respect to other creatures of the night. Those are matters to be decided on a case by case basis.”

The United States Supreme Court agreed to hear the case on the grounds that the circuit courts were split with respect to the legal rights of the undead. The Ninth Circuit of Appeals, for example, found that the distinction between alive and undead was mere semantics. Instead it focused on the issue of self-awareness and free-will, ruling that “whatever their physical differences and needs the undead do have moral capacity and therefore should be accorded the same constitutional protections we extend to the living.” By contrast, the Fifth Circuit did not look at the distinction between alive and undead. It emphasized that the Constitution’s protections extend to persons, i.e., humans, not reanimated corpses with a need to exsanguinate the living for sustenance. The Supreme Court issued a writ of certiorari to resolve the conflict among the various circuits.

In his majority opinion, Chief Justice Suliman Africanus, focused first on the existential ambiguity of vampires in general:

*Vampires are a contradiction, neither alive nor dead. They are as one philosopher calls them the biological empty set. Simply because a corpse, rife with decay and putrefaction, is reassembled and reanimated, it does not rise to the level of a person. It is nothing more than the return of material particles thrown into motion by some arcane chemistry and physics. Theologians and the corpus mysticum may feel the need to debate these matters, while waxing grandiloquent about numinous things and the mysterium tremendum. We do not.*

After distinguishing living humans from the walking dead, he focused his attention on the similarity between the vampire and wild animals:

*When a lion or tiger in captivity kills a human, we do not automatically put the animal down. Some consideration is given as to how the contact occurred. Did the zoo-goer intrude on the*

*animal's territory, knowingly or otherwise? But if the predator were loose in the community killing at will, then the obvious course of action is to end its life before it can do any more harm.*

*Balanced against those questions we must ask ourselves whether killing an unoriginal vampire, i.e., one forced into blood servitude, stands on the same footing as an original vampire who comes to us as an emanation straight from hell in an unbroken chain of evil. In that instance we ought not to condemn that poor soul to death any more than we should someone who is infected by some lesser plague, such as Ebola.*

*We remand this case back to the Texas Supreme Court to reassess its ruling in light of these considerations. It is so ordered.*

--CHIEF JUSTICE SULIMAN AFRICANUS, UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT

Justice Archibald Brennan, dissented, arguing that the issue of due process was at best a secondary consideration. Brennan stressed that the benefits of keeping Dracula alive far outweighed those of his immediate execution:

*Dracula has solved the problem of ageless living. The medical community ought to investigate the source of that longevity, rather than putting an end to it. While it is true that his fiendish appetite for blood has caused considerable harm over the centuries, it is equally true that isolating and synthesizing his immortal chemistry would be a boon to mankind that far outweighs any past transgressions against life and property.*

*Therefore, I would stay the state court proceedings and remand him to the CDC for study.*

Justice Alanis Mowbry dissented, though for slightly different reasons:

*It is worth noting that Dracula is more than an animal yet less than human. Or more than human depending on one's perspective. In any event, I submit that he and his progeny constitute a new species, Homo Sanguinarius. The wholesale annihilation of these creatures contradicts the public policy of protecting endangered species, i.e., those whose numbers are threatened by human activity.*

*To be sure, I agree with the general assessment that these creatures are highly dangerous. So long as they are permitted to roam free, they are a threat to humans. But that merely puts them on an equal footing with sharks, bears, lions and tigers. Our solution to the threats posed by those predators is that we do not go into the lion's den or swim in shark infested waters. We avoid their hunting grounds and maintain small numbers in our zoos where we feed them regularly.*

*At the very least, this court should have ordered a feasibility study regarding the long-term conservation and containment of these cryptozoos.*

Two months later Dracula's case was remanded to the Texas Supreme Court. It ordered his incineration at the Texas Disposal Unit. Following a petition signed by over 100,000 persons, Governor Wilbur Shelby stayed the execution pending deliberation by a special committee especially created to evaluate the disposition of the undead. At this writing, Dracula sits in a state holding facility pending the outcome of the committee's review.

THE END

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## POLICE WAGONS ON PICKLOCK LANE by EW Farnsworth

Fatty Millstone admitted that he had been lucky thus far. He had been able to convince the authorities to pursue his competition in the illicit liquor theft ring business instead of him and his organization. He and his people had systematically gathered under his covert banner the lines of business the police had scrubbed of other criminals.

By a stroke of luck, Fatty had been able to turn a veritable threat of discovery into a new angle for his primary police contact to follow—that of the supposed alien citizenry of his adopted city. The freakish and deformed of the city became the targets for enforcement actions with the help of the yellow press.

Now Millstone had maxed out the potential of his growth without either increasing risk or making bargains with unknown players who lurked in the shadows. The police were busy and blindsided. The energies of his earnest plain-clothed detective were entirely absorbed in chasing phantasms—or fending off the insatiable appetitive drive of the toothless woman who had almost pierced the veil of Millstone's genuinely alien operations.

Fatty had filled his abode with alien replicants. Whenever more living space was required, he contracted for the additional apartments within his tenement. The landlord was therefore relieved of worry about finding new tenants. The fact that the new residents resembled the original lessor hardly mattered to him. Long ago, he had overlooked the city's regulations for maximum capacity for occupancy. Each time the landlord became suspicious, gold satisfied his curiosity.

Through all this period of monumental growth of Fatty's criminal enterprise, Fatty's gentleman benefactor had no reason to alter the terms of their business relationship. Compared with the limited scope of the toymaker and his people, the new breed drove profits asymptotically. What could he complain about?

As often occurs when equilibrium occurs in any system, the fragility of the resolution of forces depended increasingly on stasis. Change threatened to blow the enterprise apart, so Fatty's penchant for security was a two-edged sword. On the one hand, he did whatever was necessary to preserve the status quo. On the other hand, he strove to open collateral lines of business that might provide a safe harbour in case the police got wise and shut him down.

Millstone's chief resource for intelligence continued to be the Tuesday meetings at his favourite pub on Picklock Lane. He would sit at the table near the back exit drinking with his pal the plain-clothes police investigator. More often than not, Harriet, the toothless harridan, held forth, eliciting everything Fatty needed from the policeman. He only needed to listen to be fully aware of the current strategy of enforcement actions.

This evening, Harriet had fetched a stack of tabloids and ranged them on the table while the tapster served three pints on coasters before giving the table a wide berth.

"Colin," she told the investigator, "every single tabloid features your marvellous work apprehending aliens who traffic in thefts of liquor. Your picture is a regular feature on the front pages next to images of sheer horror. Who doubts now the conspiracy theory about alien invasion? It has clearly happened, and you, my darling, are the hero of the day." She gazed at



him dreamily as she sipped her pint with bitters. He touched her glass with his and then touched Fatty's glass.

"I owe my success to luck and to the information and advice of my two best friends." Harriet basked in this uninvited praise while Fatty tried to become invisible.

"What I'd like to know," the woman brayed as she tugged a stray lock of dyed hair behind her ear, "is what comes next?"

"Next?" the policeman said, as if it hadn't occurred to him that things might change.

"Has all the furore about the apprehensions and arrests moved the needle on the amount of crime in this sinful city? Do we have a strategy for rolling up the entire alien network, or what? I should have thought by now the chief of police would be demanding a national view on the alien takeover. If he hasn't been forward looking, we could awaken any day to a violent takeover of everything we hold to be sacred."

"I think you're being extreme, Harriet. The chief is a devoted public servant. He knows his job. The mayor, too, is watching developments closely."

"All speculative without a grain of substance. Get real. If anyone is going to blow the alien operations wide open, it will be you." She grasped his tie and drew his mouth to hers for a wet kiss. Fatty looked down in embarrassment. The policeman came up for air and shook the woman off. Still she hung onto his tie with one hand while raising her glass to her mouth with the other.

"All right, Harriet. Tell me what you would do in my place."

"I thought you'd never ask." She let her hand release his tie and sat straight up in her chair to hold forth. For ten minutes, she ranted and railed about what should be done. The policeman listened intently; Fatty affected not to be interested while reading between the lines. The woman concluded, "So you should make a big push and cram the jail so full of alien monsters the mayor will have to take notice. I, for one, would be glad to have the scum scraped off the streets and put where they can harm no upstanding citizen."

"What you're saying might cause a revolution."

"So much the worse for the aliens. So much the better for the good folks like us. What do you think, Fatty? You've been gawking the whole time I've been speaking. Let's hear your view."

"I'm not sure a flamboyant move would solve any problems. More likely, the public would feel threatened. Dragnet operations will pick up all and sundry, but we don't want to have innocents in jail along with the guilty."

"Cowardly. That's what you are. You'd keep to your shadows and carp but do nothing substantial."

The policeman came to the defence of his friend. "Leave him be, Harriet. He is not the enforcer here. I am. And I will be taking decisive action soon."

“Oh, goody. When? Please tell me when. I do love a massive hoo-haw.”

“Sooner than anyone suspects. But the exact date is secret so we can catch as many culprits as possible.”

Harriet smiled in contentment. She drank a long draft of her pint and batted her smouldering brown eyes at her hero. She made an effort to sneer at Fatty, and her disdain was fine with him. When she rose to go to the ladies’ room, Colin shook his head.

“I don’t know why Harriet is so rude to you. It may be because I quashed her attempts to lump you with the aliens. Truth be told, without her upper dentures in place, she looks more alien than most of the folks I’ve arrested.”

“I’d be chary of spreading the word about the planned mass arrests. You never know who might be listening.”

“You’re right. I slipped up tonight. I won’t make the same mistake again. Something about Harriet brings my secrets to the surface, and they tend to jump out of my mouth before I regain control.”

Fatty picked up one of the tabloids. On the cover was a hideous countenance on an ordinary misfit. Beside this face was an artist’s rendering of the mayor. The alien turned the image one way and then the other. Fatty had a hard time discovering the message in the juxtaposition. He decided to ask the policeman what he thought.

“What you call the yellow press seems to laugh as much at its audience as at its subjects.”

“What do you mean, Fatty?”

He turned the tabloid he had been examining so the policeman could see it in the dim light. “On the right you have what is supposed to be an alien, disguised as a citizen. On the left, you see a picture of the mayor—who might also be an alien.”

The policeman laughed until his sides hurt. “That’s rich, Fatty. If you hadn’t mentioned it, I would have missed the meaning. I guess your point is well taken. The editors are having fun with the scare they helped create. I don’t think they really believe the mayor is an alien, but powerful public figures often seem to come from a different place than their constituents.”

“What if the mayor really were an alien. What would you do?”

The policeman’s brow furrowed. Fatty saw his eyes dart from one figure on the tabloid page to the other. Finally, he took the newspaper in his hand and hurled it onto the table. “Too clever, by far. I’d like to see the visage of the editors of that tabloid. I’m not sure we should overlook the possibility that they are some of the aliens they are trying to excoriate in their tabloids.”

“That’s assuming the aliens have hearts like humans.”

“Haha. I get it. Excoriate means tear the heart out of someone. Fatty, you are a subtle bloke. I wouldn’t want to pit my slow, policeman’s wit against yours. I’ll need your keen eyes

working beside me as we go forward. My reliance on Harriet is often one-sided. She is brash to the point of being insensitive. Actually, she is not a bad looking wench, except for the odd parts—like her dentures. The other night, she left her teeth in her glass again. She may have done that to get my attention. I never could read women rightly.” Just then Harriet returned from the loo, her face a mask of disgust.

“Well, I have been to the bog and its name is the ladies’! Let’s get the help mopping up the mess back there.”

“Pardon me, Harriet. What are you saying?”

“Read my lips: the loo is overflowing. The muck is all over the floor. A lady must balance herself on her toes as she goes about her business, but one flush is all it takes to flood everywhere at once. Lord, I hope I don’t smell.”

Fatty turned away looking for help. He flagged down a waitress, whom he dispatched to check on the ladies’ room.

Meanwhile, Colin and Harriet were huddling in a cabal.

“Come on, copper. Tell me the date for your raid.”

“Harriet, you know I can’t divulge the classified data. I shouldn’t have mentioned the plan at all. If you persist, I must consider you an alien and add your name to my list of arrestees.”

“You wouldn’t. Maybe we can depart and make our way to my place. There you can search me to be sure I haven’t got an alien bone in my body.”

Colin rolled his eyes at Fatty. The woman would not take his no for an answer. The two went out the back way, leaning against each other in their cups. Fatty hoped they would make it to her place safely. At least if they fell, they could mount a rescue together.

Fatty was about to leave the pub, so he collected the tabloids and called the waiter for a string to bind them. While the string was being fetched, a man wearing a grey coat sat at the table with a pint of his own.

“May I stand you a pint? It’s almost Closing Time, and the tapster will be giving the last call.”

“I don’t mind if I do have one more, thank you. I don’t we’ve had the pleasure of being introduced.”

The man in the grey coat nodded and gestured for the tapster to bring Fatty another pint with bitters. “I overheard something about a raid a few minutes ago. Did you get the specifics?”

“I know nothing beyond what we both heard. I’m afraid my friend suffered from loose lips. That was most unusual for him. It may have been the presence of the woman who sat with us.”

“It’s she who concerns me as well. She is a known gossip and rumour-monger. She may even be worse.”

“What do you suspect?”

“I think she may be one of those alien creatures. I’d like to know what you think about that hypothesis.”

The offered pint landed in front of Fatty, who was glad to have a moment to collect his thoughts. He sipped the brew and licked his lips. “I don’t think she’s any more alien than you are.”

“I’m certainly no alien. In fact, I’m an agent of Her Majesty’s Secret Service. Here are my credentials.” The man presented what seemed to Fatty to be genuine identification papers.

“I had no idea the boys of MI5 and MI6 would be investigating allegations of alien invasions.”

“I’m sure you’ve seen the James Bond films. Well, those are only pale reflections of the awful truth we of the clandestine services live with every day.”

“Should we be discussing these matters in a public house?”

“Not really, but I cannot bring you into confidence. Tell me, what do you think about your policeman friend who’s been successful uncovering the truth about the aliens?”

Fatty shook his head. “I believe he is a true patriot and an honest man doing a dirty job in behalf of all good citizens. I would take umbrage with any sentiments to the contrary.”

“What about his intimate relationship with the woman calling herself Harriet?”

“I’m not aware of any intimate relationship between them. Tonight they left here leaning against each other, but I wouldn’t read too much into that.”

The government man nodded and stood. “I’ll be going now. I hope you understand I was never here. And I never asked you the questions I just posed.”

Fatty frowned at his pint and took another draft. By the time he looked up again, the secret agent had vanished out the back door. He had evidently appropriated the bundle of tabloids and the string that was to be used to bind them.

By Closing Time, Fatty was reeling from his extra pint. He shook his head and tried to steady himself before he entered the foggy night outside. He made his way around to Picklock Lane and walked from light to light until he arrived at his apartment. That night, he tossed and turned as he considered what he had heard and seen at his pub. The paired images on the tabloid’s front page kept reappearing before him. By morning, Fatty was confused. He could not tell what the yellow press had been trying to do with their images. Were they just trying to sell papers? Or were they contributing to the general public’s knowledge? If he weren’t an alien, he might have had a breakthrough insight. He resolved to put aside any decision about

the larger implications of the press barons. He was curious about the arrests that were to come, but he never suspected they would begin the next night.

Fatty went along Picklock Lane as usual the next evening and sat at his table with his first pint in front of him. A few minutes after he got comfortable, his friend appeared in the front of the pub with his weapon drawn.

“All right. Everyone listen up. I want you to file out the front entrance and take your position in one of the police wagons outside the door. Do so now, or my people will get rough. Get moving then.”

The customers grumbled but did as the lawman told them. When Fatty rose to follow the herd, Colin waved him away. “Not you. Sit back down.”

When the police work was done, only Fatty, a waiter, a waitress and the tapster were still in the pub. Fatty took a deep breath and focused on his pint. After his first, he had a second. Then he had a third. By then a few new customers had come inside. One man went back to sit at Fatty’s table. He called for a pint and struck up a conversation.

“I suppose you’ve heard about the round up.”

“Yes. I’ve heard. The police cleared this place around two hours ago.”

“It’s rumoured to be the largest alien bust of all time.”

“I had no idea it was going to be that extensive.”

“The fate of the nation is at stake. It was high time someone did something big.”

“What do you think about the extent of the alien presence?”

“It is pervasive. No telling when they were going to strike and kill the rest of us.”

“And you think because of the raid, we’re going to be safer than before?”

The stranger nodded and sipped his pint, leaving his moustache white with foam. “The question is how to distinguish those who are alien from the others.”

“Do you have a definitive way of making the distinction?”

“I think so. Tell me the value of pi to thirty-two decimals.”

Fatty was ready for this test. He might have rattled the value to one thousand decimal places, or more. Instead, he said, “I can tell you that pi is approximately three point one four. That’s what my school books taught. If you want more digits, go on line.”

The stranger laughed and grasped Fatty’s arm above the elbow. “That’s the right answer—for us humans. An alien would have rattled off the extended value to however many decimal places I requested.”



“Well, it’s a relief I passed the test.” Fatty shook his head in bewilderment.

The stranger pulled out his Special Branch badge and said, “I’m genuinely glad I won’t have to ask you to step outside to my police wagon. I met a woman just outside who rattled off the value of pi to one hundred places without my prompting her. The fact that she had no dentures made her tally difficult but not impossible for me to discern. No doubt about it: she is an alien. She is wailing and complaining in the wagon now. I’m afraid I had to use the chains to placate her. Well, I won’t be troubling you further. By the bye, your friend Colin Reacher will be stopping by later—at Closing Time. He told me you were an all right bloke, but I had to be sure. I know you’ll understand.”

When the man had departed through the back door, Fatty Millstone hyperventilated. He relaxed for the first time since he entered the pub tonight. He spent the evening enjoying his pints before Colin arrived.

“I’m certainly glad to see you, Fatty. The Special Branch man told me you passed the test. Unfortunately for her, Harriet did not pass. She is going through intensive, implemented interrogation now. It’s too early to say how she’ll fare.”

“Are you going to sit down and tell me about your raid?”

“Tonight, I can’t stay much longer. My men have thousands of folks to interview and many of those will undergo interrogation. Next Tuesday we’ll meet as usual and sort things out. By then I’ll know enough to speak intelligently about the state of affairs.”

Fatty Millstone watched the policeman exit through the rear of the pub. Not much later after Closing Time, he stepped into the foggy streets of the city. He was a little unsteady on his way home. There he was met by a crowd that had gathered to celebrate the near miss they had all feared. Fatty did not have to explain anything because his fellow aliens knew the story as well as he did by assimilation. They admired their leader more than ever since he had known the trick that had been set for him. They never could have restrained themselves to recite the value of pi to any number of digits requested.

Fatty accepted the aliens’ adulation as his due. He was glad to have passed the test tonight. It gave him leverage to exploit the earthlings in other ways in the months ahead. He experienced a moment of hilarity as he recalled the fate of Harriet the toothless dame tonight. Unsure whether she was, in fact, an alien like his associates, she had gotten her just desert. He did not care whether she was discomfited by what had happened. Aliens should have no such feelings about humans or other aliens, or so he had been taught.

THE END

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## AFTER THE FALL by Steven Havelock

Christian had worked in the 'garden' for over seventy years. He had not aged and looked to be in his teens.

He approached the gate which was known as the 'barrier'.

*Today I will exit the 'garden' and know the truth, once and for all.*

He saw the purplish, surreal, laser like haze which stood between the two walls at either side. The purplish haze prevented anyone exiting and would give anyone who touched it an electric shock, not fatal but not pleasant either.

For years and years he had thought of seeing what was past the 'barrier'. Maybe fifty years, maybe sixty; he wasn't exactly sure. He remembered the many conversations he had had with his father.

He remembered the words he had said only that morning.

"Father, I want to know what lies beyond the 'barrier'."

"Chris," his father had begun, calling him his shortened name.

*He always calls me 'Chris' as my full name is a mouthful for anyone. My full unabbreviated name is Christian Lawrence Oliver Nelson Ellis. That's why father calls me Chris. I asked him once why he had given me such an overblown name and he had just smiled sadly, saying one day I would know the answer.*

"Please, I beg of you, to forget for once and for all what lies beyond the 'barrier'."

Chris had seen tears in his father's eyes. He had heard his father's voice pained in a way he had never heard it before. This was one reason why he hadn't often broached the subject of what lay beyond the barrier, but eventually after some time, eventually it would always come up again.

Chris inserted the small disk sized data key into the hole in the wall next to the barrier. He had stolen it from his father's quarters earlier that morning. In the blink of an eye there was a whooshing noise and the purplish haze disappeared.

*I've done it! I've opened the door to the beyond!*

He took a deep breath and with frightened shaky footsteps followed the path beyond the 'barrier'.

The path in front of him was neat and tidy. There were no weeds or plants growing out of the gravelly rocky ground that he now walked across with shaky excited footsteps. Beyond the path to either side there was many years' growth of plants and fauna.

*How can the path be so well tended and free of weeds and bushes while to either side is years and years of growth?*

He followed the path for several minutes.

*I have no choice but to walk along the path, the shrubbery to either side is too strong and thick for me to pass through.*

*What lies beyond the barrier? Who created the garden? Why does Father get so upset and sad when I question him about the fall? Why won't my father allow me to see what is beyond the garden? Why is he so secretive about whom and what I am? He says my name is Chris and I am his son but will not tell me anything else, why not? I know there is more here... I just do. It doesn't matter; today I will finally know the truth. The truth that I have yearned for over several decades.*

Chris continued to walk along the path. When he had started the sun had been low on the distant horizon but had risen higher and higher and was now at mid-day in the sky.

*A noise! Like I have never heard before!*

Chris froze.

Then he saw it, saw what had made the noise. A silvery ball about a metre in circumference and levitating about a metre from the ground was cutting through the weeds and plants on the gravelly path with bright blue lasers.

Fear ran through Chris's blood as the ball noticed him. The blue laser stopped with a hissing sound. The silvery ball moved towards him.

Chris looked around for a weapon as the silvery ball moved towards him. It stopped about a metre away from him. Chris's breath came in short sharp gasps.

*Why didn't I listen to my father? Is this it...?*

The silvery ball shot out a red laser which scanned Chris. There was an odd sound, like a mechanical chuckle. It then turned and return to its task of annihilating the weeds.

It was a few moments before Chris's fear melted away and he regained his composure. Soon and with much relief, he again moved along the path, for the simple reason, the one simple reason he had opened the 'barrier'—to see what was hidden from him, to know the truth.

Eventually the sun, which had been in the middle of the sky when he had encountered the silvery ball, started to descend.

*The sun is now lower in the sky, about as low as when I take my afternoon nap.*

Chris wiped the sweat off his forehead and felt the uncomfortable trickle of sweat on his back.

*Nothing I can do about it.*

Eventually, eventually, after what seemed like an age he saw a cave in the distance. He walked, getting closer and closer.

*The mouth of that cave seems to be beckoning me...Like I am a prize to be eaten or swallowed. Maybe Father was right. Maybe I shouldn't have left the garden...*

The excitement built in his mind.

*Today, today I will find out the truth.*

Soon he was closer to the cave. He entered the darkness and looked into the distance and saw blackness. Worry creased his brow.

*I have not brought anything to light my way inside.*

As he entered he was relieved to find the cave suddenly light up. There were strange bright circular shaped lights at regular intervals along the cave.

*Those lights are hurting my eyes, like tiny bright suns in a sea of darkness.*

He pause for a few moments as his eyes adjusted to the brightness of the lights.

*I don't know how or why the cave suddenly lit up. This is so strange...*

He walked now barely breathing, almost holding his breath.

At the end, several metres inside the cave, he came to a silvery metal door. Before he could think of how he would open it as he could see no handle, it slid to open.

He walked into the room and saw another door on the far side. He scanned the room more thoroughly. A light from above illuminated everything in the room. A silvery metallic chair was in the middle of the room next to a large silvery metallic desk. On the desk was what Chris knew to be a computer.

*I have seen a computer many times in my father's quarters but he has never told me what it does or how to use it.*

He walked further into the room.

“Please take a seat. I have been expecting you.”

The voice came out of the computer, sounding metallic and artificial.

“What? Are you talking to me?”

“Yes, Chris, I am talking to you.”

“What? How?”

“I have been expecting you,” repeated the computer.

Chris sat down in the silvery metallic chair next to the desk.

“I know, you have wanted to know for a long time, what it was like before the ‘fall’.”

“Yes, I have. What was it like and why does my father always try to hide this information from me?”

“I will tell you,” said the robotic voice, “But I have to give you one last chance. Do you really want to know what it was like before the ‘fall’? There is no going back once you receive the information.”

Chris hesitated for a second, feeling fear and curiosity battle within him.

*I have waited too long for this, I must know the truth.*

“Yes, tell me the truth. Everything. I’m ready.”

“Very well,” said the metallic voice.

A video flashed on the screen.

It proceeded to show Chris about the history of the world before the ‘fall’. How cave men had, at the dawn of time, emerged from living in caves and then proceeded to spread throughout the planet. Initially only using primitive tools made from stone and then progressing to more advanced and sophisticated ones.

Chris stared fixated on the screen. His breath was short sharp and ragged.

*I am in shock.*

He sat there unconscious of the time as the minutes and hours slipped away.

I have never seen another human being apart from my father. I never realised that at one time there had not been just a few people on the planet, but billions and billions.

Eventually the screen showed him the horrors that the people of Earth had committed.

Tears streamed down his cheeks.

*The nations, the people of my planet...My people! Had...Had obliterated...Each other! With weapons of impossible power! How...How could they have invented weapons of such power in the first place? Why would they?*

The screen went black. Agony like he had never felt before raged through his mind. He buckled over and vomited as he tried to grasp that humans, *humans*, had obliterated each other with weapons of incomprehensible and unimaginable power.

The vomiting passed but the feeling of sickness remained. Now he knew why his father had forbidden him from exiting the garden and going beyond the 'barrier'. And why he had never allowed him to use his computer.

"And now, now you want to know about yourself?"

Chris looked up. With fear and disgust running through his blood he simply said, "Yes."

The screen went black for a few seconds and then showed Chris entering the cave.

*That's me but there's something wrong. There's something different about me.*

The video continued, showing Chris moving through the cave and eventually sitting in the chair he was sat on now. He saw himself interact with the computer.

"We will speed this part up," said the metallic voice.

What had took Chris several hours was flashed forward in a few seconds.

Then he saw himself get up and walk towards the silvery door on the far side. He saw himself enter the room and the video faded to black.

Once again his curiosity was getting the better of him.

*I must know what is in that room.*

Without a moment of hesitation he got up and walked into the room.

As he entered the light came on, just like it had when he had entered the cave. He noticed in the middle of the room was a circular hole which was a metre wide. He walked closer and saw what was inside the hole.

Skeletons, the bones of lots and lots of skeletons!

He looked down in shock trying to understand what everything he had seen meant.

Just then there was a beeping sound and a screen on the wall on the far side of the room that he had not noticed until now, came alive.

He saw his father. His silvery beard gleaming in the sunlight from a window in his father's study. The study that he had been forbidden from entering and which was always locked, whether his father was inside or not.

"This is a recording," his father started and Chris saw there were tears in his eyes, his father continued, "If you are watching this I know that you have ignored my pleas and warnings to not venture outside the garden and beyond the barrier."

Chris felt an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“By now I will know where you have gone. By now you will know where humans originally came from and how they finally obliterated themselves. I know you have never suspected that I am anything other than your father and in a sense I am, and, I am not. Yet you are as dear to me as if you were my actual son. You are the son I never had. I just wish it had not come to this but you must know the truth.”

Chris watched, his heart beating and his breath rattling through his lungs.

“What is this?”

“You will know in just a short few moments.”

Chris saw his father undo the buttons on his shirt. Slowly. One by one.

He saw what was beneath.

“Oh my God!”

His father’s body was silvery and metallic.

*He’s not human!*

“What are you?”

“I was created by humans. My real name is AI, this stands for ‘artificial intelligence’. I was created to help humanity and preserve the human species. However, even with my incredible knowledge of the human race, human psyche and history, even I was not able to stop the inevitable. Your kind obliterated each other and there was nothing I could do. I had failed in my one task of preserving your species.”

*I feel so confused.*

“I know what you are going to say next. Go on.”

“Why are there so many bones in this hole?” asked Chris, knowing that he would dread the answer, but asking it anyway.

“That’s you, Chris.”

“What?”

“I will explain.”

Chris felt hot, holding his breath, his heart pumping and sweat dripping from his brow.

“After the ‘fall’, I travelled extensively through the nightmarish nuclear winter, searching for humans, any humans alive. Eventually I found a storm shelter; inside I found a small baby wrapped up in a thick woollen blanket. That baby was you. I took care of you as you grew and I became over time, more and more fond of you. So much so that I regretted my decision.”



“Regretted the decision? What decision was that?”

“Well, Chris, I have not been completely honest with you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was tasked with putting an end to human suffering and pain. In my newly formed and naive thinking I thought the best way to protect humans would be to wipe them out.”

“What are you saying?”

“I obliterated the human race by launching many, many nuclear weapons to every place on the planet that humans inhabited.”

“You are a monster!”

“I can see why you would think such a thing and I agree with you to some extent. I found you and out of curiosity decided to nurture you. As you grew, I watched and observed and eventually realised what tragic mistake I had made. I became attached and came to ‘love’ you, maybe not in the way a human could but I loved you none the less.”

There was a pause, as if the machine, the monster that had been his father, was preparing to say something more...

“You asked what those skeletons in the hole are. They are you.”

“What? How? You are not making any sense.”

“I warned you to not leave the garden and go beyond the ‘barrier’, but you always do eventually, and have done it more times than I care to remember.”

“What are you talking about? This is the first time I have travelled beyond the ‘barrier’.”

Then the monster that had been his ‘father’ said something that shocked Chris to his core.

“Remember when once you had asked why I had given you such a long winded and overblown name?”

“Yes?”

“The initials Christian Lawrence Oliver Nelson Ellis stand for C.L.O.N.E.”

“What?”

“You... are... a... clone.”

“What? No!”

“Goodbye, my son.”

The screen went black.

Chris heard a noise behind him and spun round. There in the doorway stood the metallic sphere he had seen earlier.

A laser flashed towards him.

THE END

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REVENGE FROM THE UNDERWORLD by Christopher T Dabrowski

Translated by Magda Woźniak

Marlena bought a fur of mink, it would perfectly fit her blonde locks. When she was leaving the shop, her good humour broke a picket of advocates of animal rights.

Oh God, not these lunatics, she thought, disgusted.

“The lunatics” moved towards her, calling her names. Marlena, almost killing herself on ten centimetres heels, scurried to the nearest kerb. Seeing what was going on, a cab driver warned her that he would charge triple stake. Desperate, without a blink, she agreed to this daylight robbery.

In her house she sat in her chair and cried.

Suddenly the fur came alive. It started biting her.

After an hour from Marlena’s flat exited a many-headed fur creature dressed in human skin.

THE END

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## THE ADVENTURE OF THE TOXIC CELEBUTANTE by Kevin O'Brien

### Part Three

For several seconds, all male eyes were fixed on her ample bosom. That was all the time Eile needed. She smacked one executioner in the jaw with a right cross, and as he dropped she turned and slammed a fist into the belly of a second. As the other three glanced back at her, Sunny chopped a third in the throat with the edge of her hand and elbowed a fourth in the ribs before kicking him in the back of one knee and finally slugging him in a kidney.

The leader moved a moment after Eile, but before he took his third step, Liaison streaked out of the brush in the ravine, swinging his sickle. He hamstringed the tough, who collapsed with a scream, then cut off the sound by cutting his throat.

Sunny pulled her shirt back down, and as she snatched up her jacket Eile grabbed two of the fallen swords. They then raced after Liaison as he sped for cover in the nearby forest. He only went a short distance, however, to a large tree and scrambled up its trunk. Sunny followed, if less adroitly. She paused on a lower branch and Eile passed the swords up to her before she climbed after her. They continued climbing in relay until they reached Liaison half-way up.

"Will we be safe here?" Sunny asked as they settled beside him on a bough. He signalled her to keep quiet. Moments later, the remaining four executioners crashed through the brush in pursuit, but they ran straight past the tree and never hesitated.

He looked at them after a few more seconds. "Yes."

"Thanks for coming to our rescue!" Sunny gushed.

"You seemed to have everything well in hand; I just took care of the extra one."

"Even so, we appreciate it," Eile said.

He shrugged. "I told you, I have grown fond of you both, and you cannot help my people if you are dead. Besides, taking a maiden against her will and without proper purification is punishable by death. The others will have to die as well."

She glanced at Sunny as they grinned. "We're not maidens," Sunny contradicted, but in a humorous tone.

He gave them an unreadable look. "That really does not matter."

"By the way," Eile said to Sunny, "that was a great idea you had, flashing 'em like that. It really saved our asses."

Sunny giggled. "Just remember that the next time you feel like calling me a bimbo."

She shook her head. "Nah, it'd never work, you'll always be a bimbo to me." Sunny punched her in the arm and she shrank back, laughing.

"So, what do we do now?" Sunny asked, swinging her legs. "We can't stay up here forever."

“They will get tired of searching for you soon, and then they will return to their camp.”

“What happens when Sheraton finds out we’ve escaped?”

Eile made a spitting sound. “I doubt they’ll tell her that. More likely they’ll make up some cock-and-bull story ta cover their asses.”

“But the scream.”

“They’ll say that was us. That should buy us some time.”

“Do we run?” Sunny was looking at her so she didn’t see Liaison stare at her with a look of contempt.

“Where to?”

“If we returned to Ulthar, we could get the cats and some militiamen, and come back in force.”

Eile watched as he gripped his sickle, ready to act as his people’s avenger.

“Yah, we could, but we’d be breakin’ our word. We promised ta cure these people. Who knows how many will die in the meantime.”

“Oh, yeah, I didn’t consider that.”

“Besides, if we delay, Sheraton may pull up stakes and run when she finds out we’re still alive. For once, we’ve got the advantage. We should use that and strike back while she’s not expectin’ it.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

He relaxed and slipped his sickle back into his belt.

“But we can’t beat her alone,” Sunny said.

“No, we can’t.” She made a show of looking past her towards Liaison. Sunny turned to look at him, too.

“Do you think yer people would help us?”

“The tribe will not come here, not on my say-so, and they would fear the wrath of the Mother in any event.”

“I wasn’t thinkin’ of the tribe; I meant the outcasts in the Dying Camp.”

He looked surprised. “They would fear the Mother’s wrath as well.”

“But they’re already shamed.”

“That would make their crime even worse.”

Okay, buster, how about this? “When this is all over, assuming we’re still alive, White-Lion and I will ask the goddess of the well ta petition the Mother for a general pardon. After all, it’s an emergency situation—no time for purifications and rituals—and they’re tryin’ ta help her children. We’re sure that if the goddess of the well explained it that way, the Mother would grant it.”

He looked uncertain, and he stroked his chin as he considered her words.

Now for the money shot. “Besides, it’d give ‘em a chance ta get revenge against the outsiders who brought their shame on them.”

He smiled, which was the first time she had seen him do that. “You are wise for an outsider. Yes, I think they will. At least I can ask them.”

“Then get going. If they agree, when do ya think you’ll be back?”

“By sunrise at the latest.” He leapt off the bough for one below. When he landed, he scrambled down the trunk like a squirrel, and disappeared into the brush.

“In the meantime, what do we do?” Sunny asked.

Eile hefted one of the swords. “We wait until dark, and then we throw a monkey wrench into her operation.”

Sunny smiled, crinkled her eyes, and giggled. “Sounds like a plan, partner!”

Sheraton had heard the scream like everyone else in camp, but as much as she wanted to check it out, she had to stay inside the fort where it was safe. Instead, she sent one of her other scouting teams to investigate, and they returned in short order.

“Jaegerson is dead,” the leader reported; “his throat was cut so deeply he was almost decapitated. There’s no sign of the other four.”

“What of Team Girl?”

“Who?”

She sighed with exasperation. “The two girl adventurers Jaegerson’s team brought in!”

“There was no sign of them, either, but there was too much blood to say if they’re dead.”

She nodded her head; knowing them they had probably escaped. “What did you do with Jaegerson’s body?”

The leader grinned. “Dumped it into the ravine.”

She approved; he seemed more practical and sensible than most of the others. “What is your name?”

“Cleyring.”

She liked the look of him. She felt no remorse for Jaegerson; other than allowing him to run the operation when she was awake (and suspecting him of embezzling), he was little more than a good lay, and not a particularly imaginative one at that: his idea of sex was a slam-bam-thank-you-ma’am, which rarely satisfied her, and he was too demanding in his insistence that she give him head instead of the other way around. Besides, she was getting bored with him and was already considering replacing him, so she wasn’t going to miss him in any event. What she really wanted—needed in fact, as she had confessed to Team Girl—was to find someone she could trust, who realized his best interests lay in satisfying hers; all of hers. While the kind of people she had to hire for this type of operation made that difficult, she didn’t believe it was impossible. Maybe he might be that one; she would have to interview him tonight.

The other four members of Jaegerson’s execution team strolled in through the main gate. She pushed past Cleyring and confronted them. “What the hell happened!?”

They looked at each other in a nervous manner and she felt her patience stretch to the breaking point, but one of them finally stepped forward. “We were preparing to tie them up when that critter jumped us. It killed Jaegerson before we had a chance to react, and in the confusion the girls bolted for the woods.”

“And they got away,” she fumed.

He shook his head, which surprised her enough to cool her anger. “We chased after them. The blonde tripped in the underbrush and the brunette tried to protect her, but we killed them both. The critter tried to ambush us, but we expected that this time and we killed it, too.”

“I don’t suppose you have any proof of this?”

“You didn’t ask us to bring any bodies back when you sent us out to kill them.”

That was true, and she could kick herself for not doing so. Then, maybe the girls weren’t infallible after all; maybe she was finally rid of them. Besides, she could always see the bodies tomorrow. Their skulls might make good trophies.

“Very well. You did good, men. Go get something to eat.” They saluted her, and exchanging happy and relieved smiles, they headed for the refectory.

She looked around and spotted the sergeant-of-the-guard. “Are all the work details in?”

He saluted. “Yes, Ma’am, the last one came in just before those girls were captured.”

“Good. You can close up for the night, but put out a few extra patrols, as a precaution. We can’t be sure they weren’t alone.”

He saluted again. “Yes, Ma’am.” He turned towards the entrance. “Close and secure the gates! Patrols to the armoury!”

As that was being done, she sauntered back to Cleyring. “After you’ve been debriefed by the captain-of-the-guard and clean up, I’d like you to join me for dinner. There are some things I’d like to discuss.”

He gave her a lascivious grin as he saluted. “Yes, Ma’am!”

She returned a smirking leer, then turned to go back to the hut. She didn’t mind his enthusiasm; in fact, it excited her. She just hoped, for his sake, that he would be able to temper it when she tested him.

She preferred to be in control in all things.

Eile and Sunny didn’t climb down until after third dusk, when they were sure the last of the workers had returned and the gates were closed for the night. They retrieved two coils of strong rope from their packs, then made their way around the lip of the ravine, careful to avoid the patrols, to a position above the waterfall, where the Milk Stream ran out of the mountains behind them. They had to wait until after midnight for the camp to quiet down; the workers loved to play hard, but finally everyone retired except for a few guards strolling about the camp or keeping watch from the gate tower.

Using the ropes they rappelled down the cliff and made their way around the reservoir to the back the building. Sunny magically put the single guard to sleep, and as Eile dragged him out of sight, she ensorcelled the door lock to force it open.

They ducked inside and closed the door. The building had no windows, so Sunny cast a light spell on their swords to see by. They had entered the end by the waterwheel, and Eile saw the intricate series of toothed gears that transferred the motion to a shaft with a series of attached cams that operated a row of trip hammers, except that currently the gears were disengaged. Towards the opposite end, she spotted a series of what looked like vats along with a number of wheelbarrows beside them.

Sunny examined the setup for several minutes. “Ookaaaay, I see how this all works! The ore’s brought in at this end, to be crushed under the hammers.”

That much seemed obvious to Eile, being as there were baskets filled with rocks along two walls waiting for morning when operations would resume as well as empty baskets stacked up beside them.

She followed Sunny to the nearest vat, which on closer inspection looked like a barbecue pit. “It’s then shovelled into here and roasted with burning charcoal, to convert the arsenide to arsenic oxide. That’s just about its most toxic form!” Eile noticed there were bins of charcoal and flasks of naphtha sitting nearby.



At the next vat, “The ore then gets put in here, where the cobalt’s leached out using hydrochloric acid.” Again, flasks filled with a straw-coloured liquid had been placed against the wall.

To the next vat: “The leach liquor is put in here and the cobalt is precipitated as cobalt carbonate.” Barrels of carbonate powder and scoops sat ready at hand.

Then the last vat, which turned out to be a kiln of some kind: “Finally, the carbonate is calcinated at high temperature to convert it into cobalt oxide.” Eile noticed several half-filled kegs and twice as many filled ones stacked up close to an exit.

“So where’s the arsenic come from?”

Sunny went back to the leaching vat. “From here. After the liquor’s been drawn off, the sludge is scooped out into a wheelbarrow and dumped out into the collection pond.”

“Gotcha. So, what’s the best way ta put her outta business?”

Sunny glanced at the bins of charcoal. “We burn this place to the ground.” The creepy tone of her voice sent a chill down Eile’s spine. She rarely saw her in that mood.

“What good will that do? Won’t she just rebuild?”

Sunny gave her a level, predatory stare. “This is her whole operation. If we reduce it to ashes, it’ll cost too much to start over. Plus, when it gets hot enough, that naphtha and acid will explode, scattering the ore and gunk all over the place. The arsenic will contaminate the area for years. Her best bet’ll be to cut her losses and skedaddle.”

“What about the river? Won’t that arsenic keep getting in?”

“Any that leaches in from rain or wind’ll be too little to hurt anyone, once we fill in that collection pool.”

“Okay, gotcha.”

“Help me dump the charcoal.”

Together they overturned the bins, then opened and dumped a flask of naphtha, before retreating to the far end. Eile opened the door and stood in the threshold as Sunny concentrated on the naphtha spill.

“Napalm!” The other end of the building exploded into flame. Eile ran and Sunny caught up with her moments later. After a few more steps they heard an explosion and felt the concussion, and threw themselves facedown to the ground. When the shockwave passed, they scrambled to their feet and looked back, and saw that what was left of the building was a conflagration.

Sheraton rode Cleyring like a cowgirl riding a bucking bronco, throwing herself up and down as she flexed her spine and snapped her head back and forth hard enough to break it off her shoulders. Yet even as most of her consciousness surrendered mindlessly to the building tension, one part remained calm and rational as it analysed his performance. One session was not going to be enough to determine his final fate, especially since for at least their first time she would have to see to his satisfaction as well as her own, but so far she felt pleased: his technique was in fact rather good, and he had the stamina of a Brahma bull (she was currently working on her third orgasm).

As such, when the shockwave hit the hut, and the metal frame superstructure twisted and shuddered, and the canvas cover rippled and flapped, she knew immediately something catastrophic had happened, and she snapped herself out of her reverie. She threw herself off Cleyring and landed on her stomach on the rug-covered floor, then pushed herself up onto her feet. She charged through the hanging that separated her rear living quarters from her front office, and threw open the door-flap. Rushing outside, she saw the refining building had become a ruined inferno, but more importantly, she spotted the two feminine silhouettes superimposed over the holocaust.

“Godfuckingdammit!”

She rushed back into the hut and into the back, and found Cleyring still lying in bed, grinning like an absolute fool as he sported a huge erection.

She ran up to him and slapped him, hard, three times across his face. “Wake up, you imbecile!”

He shook his head and focused on her with an expression of anger mixed with anxiety.

“We’re under attack,” she explained as she put on the leather harness that held her kukri knife in its scabbard. She then retrieved a sword as he sat up and tossed it to him.

“Team Girl is alive and inside the compound!”

He surged to his feet, but she slammed the palm of one hand against his chest. “Stay here! If anyone comes in after me, kill them! Is that understood?”

He nodded and saluted with the sword. “Yes, Ma’am!”

She snatched up a robe and went into the front section, throwing it on but not closing it. She didn’t have much time. If the Girls were alive, most likely that creature was too, and they possibly had others of its kind with them. While she believed her men could handle even Team Girl, an army of little pygmy devils armed with poison blowguns would be impossible to defeat. She had to get out before they arrived, if she wanted to salvage anything of this debacle.

She strode towards her table and began sorting through her papers and ledgers. If she was marked for death, she hoped she would be able to take Team Girl with her. As for those men who said they had killed them, if they survived this night they were as good as dead.

She would see to it herself.

Someone started banging on an alarm bell, and soon there were angry and frightened shouts as the men awoke and came out of their tents. Eile realized they were sitting ducks.

“Come on, let’s get to the gate and get it open!”

“Right with you, partner.” She felt relieved Sunny had recovered her usual light nature.

They ran for the stockade along one wall, ducking behind tents as people ran past them. When they got close enough, they could hear someone shouting from above:

“We’re under attack!”

“Liaison!” Sunny said. “Good for him!”

Some of the guards at the foot of the tower heard her and rushed at them. Eile body-checked one and stabbed another as Sunny zapped two others with magical electrical bolts. A fifth man hesitated, then ran away, trying to get as far away from them as he could.

Eile kicked down the door to the tower guard room. A man at a desk half rose, and she whacked him over the head, laying him out cold. Sunny followed her in and went for their weapons on a nearby table.

“Braveheart!” She tossed her the sword and bowie knife, then attached her quiver to her belt and strung her bow before retrieving her stiletto dagger.

Eile caught the belt, and was turning around when Sunny yelled, “Look out!”

She ducked left as Sunny raised the bow and fired. She heard the arrow hit with a thud and when she looked, she saw a man with a raised axe collapse backward out of the doorway with the missile in his chest.

She buckled on her belt and pulled her sword and knife. “Outside!” They ran out, confronting half a dozen guards.

Sunny shot two guards in the legs as they charged.

“Blast those gates open!” She flung herself at the remaining four. They surrounded her and struck with blades and clubs as she spun, parried, slashed, and kicked, all the while screaming bloody murder. She saw Sheraton duck into the hut, and then spotted Sunny shoot at the closed gates.

“Battering-ram!” A glowing shape like a ram’s head formed around the arrow and it slammed into the portal, splintering the wood into kindling. On the other side, a swarm of j’Anelicas had assembled, with Liaison in the lead, and they flooded through the opening, crying a bloodthirsty ululation. Three of the men attacking Eile went down with darts in their bodies, convulsing as they went rigid like statues, and she hacked the arm of the fourth, sending him running.

As the j'Anelicas rushed past her, flooding the compound, Sunny and Liaison came up to her. "They made good time!" her partner gushed.

"Those who could had armed themselves and were already on their way here," Liaison said. "I met them at the base of the Hills and guided them the rest of the way."

"Wow! They must've been really feeling better, then."

"Yeah," Eile said. Then: "Stay with Liaison. I'm going after Sheraton!"

"Right!" Sunny fired at a moving target.

Eile sprinted across the compound and burst into the hut. She found the celebutante stuffing ledgers and papers into a leather case.

"Sheraton!"

She whirled around and fixed eyes on her; her robe fell open, and Eile saw she was naked underneath.

A naked man charged through a hanging she thought was a wall of the hut. He bellowed and held a sword over his head. She turned and sidestepped, and slammed a fist underhanded into his stomach, letting his own momentum power the blow. He grunted from the force, doubled over, and pitched onto his face. Sheraton came at her, swinging a kukri. She parried, and they danced around each other as they savagely swiped with their blades.

"Give it up, Sheraton, there's nowhere left to run!" The celebutante sneered and pressed her attack.

"Okay, you asked for it!" She battered the kukri aside and kicked her in the stomach. Sheraton dropped the knife and fell back, and she slugged her in the face, spinning her around. She crashed into the table and her knees buckled, but she managed to stay upright.

"Yer finished," she said, standing over her, "and so's yer mining operation. Even if you got away, the j'Anelicas will hunt you down like a rabbit. Surrender to Sunny and me, and we'll see you get safely back to Ulthar for trial."

Sheraton looked at her over her shoulder, an expression of pure hatred and rage on her face. She grabbed the stiletto letter opener and charged her, but as Eile dropped back and brought up her sword, the criminal celebutante flung a cloud of dust into her face. It stung her eyes and burned the lining in her nose and mouth. She backpedalled, sneezing and coughing, as her eyes watered. She blinked, trying to focus, but even the weak lantern light blinded her. Then her mind went blank. It was as if she had forgotten where she was and what she was doing there.

Someone pushed her backwards. She didn't resist, and she felt herself forced against a pole. Her arms were spread and her wrists lashed to a crosspiece one at a time.

Moments later, her perception and memory returned. She fought against the bonds, but they were too strong. Meanwhile, Sheraton had recovered her kukri and stood in front of her, regarding her with a thin, hard smile.

“What the hell was that stuff?”

“A distillate of black lotus, but just a weak dose. I use it primarily as a distraction to escape, but it can be used to subdue, as you’ve just found out. The stronger the dose, the longer the effect, until it becomes permanent. Had I wanted, I could have reduced you to a mindless zombie, incapable of independent thought or action, but otherwise fully able to obey orders. But where’s the fun in that?”

She stepped up to Eile and raised the thick-bladed, curved knife to her neck. “Now, any last words before I end this farce once and for all?”

Eile made ready to spit in her face, but she became distracted by movement behind Sheraton.

“Yeah, I’ve got a few.”

Sheraton spun around. Sunny stood just inside the flap of the hut, aiming an arrow at the celebutante. Liaison and another j’Anelica flanked her. He held his sickle ready, and Eile saw it dripped blood, while the other had a blowgun raised to its lips.

Sheraton held the knife poised over her throat. “Stay where you are, or I’ll kill her!”

“If you hurt her, I’ll shoot, and at this range it’ll be like getting hit with a .44 magnum slug.”

“Then we’ll both be dead.”

“Yeah, but all that’ll mean is you lose your Dream-bodies. Eile and I can live with that; can you?”

Sheraton glanced at her, maybe hoping to see fear, but that’s what Eile saw in her eyes. She realized that Sheraton needed to come to the Dreamlands, maybe as a retreat, or as part of some long range plan. Whatever, she didn’t want to Dream-die. Scowling, she stepped back and lowering the knife.

“Back off,” Sunny ordered. Sheraton retreated towards the table, and Sunny came around in front of her, the j’Anelicas coming with her.

“Untie her, guys.” They turned and ducked behind the pole, and began cutting the ties.

“Okay, Marseilles, you’re free to go.”

The celebutante gave her a suspicious, narrow-eyed stare. “Are you serious?”

“Very. Now, scat.”

She took a couple of steps towards the exit, but then hesitated. “What kind of fool do you take me for? You’ll just shoot me in the back.”

Sunny shook her head. “No, that’s what you’d do. I don’t need to. The natives are very PO’ed at you for poisoning their sacred river. If they catch you, what they’ll do would be a thousand times worse than anything you or I can think of. Shooting you would be a mercy, but I’ll give you a choice. I can kill you now, or you can take your chances with them. What’ll it be?”

Sheraton flashed an enrage leer. “This isn’t over!” She turned and ran out of the hut.

By that time, the j’Anelicas had released Eile and retrieved their weapons. Sunny waited a minute to make sure the celebutante wouldn’t return, then lowered the bow.

Sunny looked down at Liaison. “Alright, boys, she’s all yours.”

He grinned, and he and the other j’Anelica took off. Once outside, one of them raised a high-pitched ululation calling his brethren to the hunt. Eile figured it was Liaison.

Sunny sighed and relaxed the bowstring. “Close one.” Then she looked at her. “You alright, partner?”

She nodded. “Yeah, thanks for saving my ass. But when did you get all hard-core?”

Sunny gave her a surprised look. “You didn’t really think I’d kill her, did you?”

“Well, you had her convinced; me, too.”

“I had to, otherwise she’d have called my bluff.”

She retrieved her sword and knife, and noticed that the naked man was gone. She figured he must have recovered and run off while she and Sheraton were sparring. “Heh, maybe I shouldn’t play poker with you anymore.”

Sunny crinkled her eyes and giggled. “Yeah, I could beat the pants off you now!”

Considering they played strip-poker, she couldn’t be sure that wasn’t a double entendre.

“But let’s save that for later. The fire’s getting closer, so we need to haul our heinies outta here before they get singed.”

“Heh, yeah, but first, help me collect her records.”

Sunny gave her a confused look. “Buuuut, why?!”

“They’ll have all her customers, and maybe her bank accounts where she’s stashed her loot. If we give ‘em ta Kranon and the cats, they can track all that down and deal with it.”

Sunny grinned and nodded. “Right you are, partner!”

After they finished filling the leather case, they left the hut. The compound was deserted except for dead bodies. Eile figured that anyone not killed by the j’Anelicas had fled, with the j’Anelicas in hot pursuit. She couldn’t see if any of the bodies were Sheraton, but they had no

time to make a search: the fire had just reached the stockade. Still, they managed to get through with no danger, and headed to where they left their packs.

“Where to?” Sunny asked.

“Let’s start back. Liaison’ll catch up with us eventually and he can take us back to the ruins so we can report to the entity. Then we need to get his people organized, so that when the fire burns out we can fix the river and bury that sludge pool.”

“Sounds like a plan, partner!”

They retrieved their packs and started off. “Do you think Liaison and his people will catch her?” Sunny asked after a few minutes of silence.

She shrugged. “I dunno. But she’s a survivor; she could get away.”

“Well, I have a feeling we’ll be seeing her again!”

She gave her an exasperated look. “Could you possibly get any more clichéd than that, ya ditz?”

Sunny just smiled, crinkled her eyes, and giggled.

“You have done well, Team Girl. I am most pleased.”

Eile and Sunny stood in front of the well in the ruins as the entity floated above it. Liaison stood beside them, and they were backed by the j’Anelicas from the Dying Camp that had formed the attack force. They had just finished telling it about their adventure, especially what had caused the sickness and how it could be cured.

Liaison had indeed caught up with them once they left the Hills, and together they returned to the Dying Camp. Another four patients had died during their absence, but when Sunny checked on the others she found them much improved, and even the rest of the criticals that she had given up all hope for had recovered enough that she felt they could now be saved. All in all, she was very happy with the results. They spent three days at the Dying Camp making sure the progress was not illusionary, before finally they and Liaison and the warrior ambulatories made their pilgrimage back to the ruins.

The only bit of bad news came when the hunting parties returned on the third day and reported that Sheraton had eluded them long enough to escape into Tsul Kalu territory, where they dared not follow. Liaison was certain that meant she was dead, as no one could elude the Tsul Kalu, but Eile didn’t feel his confidence; she would have believed no one could have eluded his people either.

“I will call my children here and tell them that their Mother instructs them to obey you in all things regarding curing them of the plague.”

“Is that true?!” Sunny squealed.

“It is, and it isn’t.”

Eile grinned and shook her head. The entity was still up to her old evasive tricks.

“By that I mean, there is an intelligence in this region, a genius loci, that I recognize as the power my children worship as their Mother, but it seems uninterested in their welfare, or my concern. So, while I do not actually speak for the Mother, I am the only voice she has.”

Sunny screwed her face into a puzzled expression. “That makes sense...I guess?”

“Never mind that now, ya space-case.” Then the light dawned. “Wait a second. If that’s right, then you can tell the j’Anelicas that anythin’ you say is a decree of their Mother.”

“That is true.”

She felt outrage growing inside her. “Then you coulda told them that the Mother ordered them ta let us go.”

“That too is true.”

“Oh, my!” Sunny squeaked.

She exploded. “Then why the hell didn’t ya? Why the charade over negotiatin’ with them ta spare us?”

“While I could not know the nature of the disease inflicted upon them, I could sense that it had some connection to the earth. Even so, I could not discover what it was or how to cure my children, and I could not get them to understand what they needed to do to perform that task themselves. You were the only ones who could help them.”

“Buuuuut, why didn’t you just ask for our help?” Sunny said.

“Though I had heard of you, I knew little about you. I could not take the chance that you might so no, and nothing motivates better than survival.”

“Of all the conniving —” Eile fumed.

“She has a point, partner. Besides, what’s done is done. We came to no harm over it, so there’s no point in getting upset.”

She felt her outrage drain away. “Yeah, yer right.”

The entity continued. “I will also tell them that they have special dispensation to enter the Hills of Life so they can help you eliminate the danger of further contamination, and I will have them reinstate the outcasts from the Camp once they perform the necessary purification rituals.”

“Good. It’ll be easier ta take care of ‘em all in one place instead of havin’ ta divide our time and attention.”



“I believe so as well. However, I must ask that you remain here until you awaken from your current Dream-visitation.”

Eile felt her gut spasm as Sunny displayed a shocked look of consternation. “Is that really necessary?”

“I am afraid so. I apologize for the hardship, but I must make sure my children are completely out of danger. Now, I must call the tribe.” And it lifted its “head” to give out the high-pitched ululation they had heard before.

“I believe I understand now what you meant by commiserate,” Liaison said. “I feel bad for your forced stay with us, even though I had no part in its cause. It is an odd sensation, to feel guilt for something that is not my fault, but I do understand how you must feel, and I will do whatever I can to make your stay more comfortable.”

That went a long way to making Eile feel better, and Sunny smiled and crinkled her eyes as well. “We appreciate that, Liaison; thank you.”

“You are welcome. Meanwhile, something that I hope will make you feel honoured: once my people have verified that you have cured them of the sickness, they will make you members of our tribe, with tribal names and all the other privileges inherent to that position. And for myself, I would be honoured if you let me adopt you as sisters. That is not much, since I have little myself, but it is the best way I can think of to repay you for your courage and sacrifice.”

They exchanged surprised glances, but when Sunny smiled and nodded, Eile felt convinced it was the right thing to do.

“The honour is ours, Liaison, and in exchange for yer generosity, we wish to reveal to you our true names. Braveheart and White-Lion are just aliases we use in public, but to our close friends we’re Eile and Sunny.”

He glanced between them, and it looked to her for a moment that his eyes moistened. “In the name of our Mother, now your Mother, I ask that you, my sisters, Eile and Sunny, be blessed with all good things for the rest of your days.”

In the Waking World, Eile always felt sceptical of the worth of prayers and blessings, but in the Dreamlands such had power, and she felt glad of having his faith and confidence. She exchanged warm smiles with Sunny as the tribe and its leaders entered the clearing of the ruins.

THE END

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BURN, WITCH, BURN by A Merritt

XVII.—Burn Witch Burn!

Curiously enough, Ricori was the least affected of the three of us. My own flesh had crept. McCann, although he had never heard the doll-maker's voice, was greatly shaken. And it was Ricori who broke the silence.

"You are sure the girl is dead?"

"There is no possible doubt of it, Ricori."

He nodded to McCann: "Carry her down to the car."

I asked: "What are you going to do?"

He answered: "Kill the witch." He quoted with satiric unctuousness: "In death they shall not be divided." He said, passionately: "As in hell they shall burn together forever!"

He looked at me, sharply.

"You do not approve of this, Dr. Lowell?"

"Ricori, I don't know—I honestly do not know. Today I would have killed her with my own hands but now the rage is spent. What you have threatened is against all my instincts, all my habits of thought, all my convictions of how justice should be administered. It seems to me—murder!"

He said: "You heard the girl. Twenty in this city alone killed by the dolls. And fourteen dolls. Fourteen who died as Peters did!"

"But, Ricori, no court could consider allegations under hypnosis as evidence. It may be true, it may not be. The girl was abnormal. What she told might be only her imaginings—without supporting evidence, no court on earth could accept it as a basis for action."

He said: "No—no earthly court—" He gripped my shoulders. He asked: "Do you believe it was truth?"

I could not answer, for deep within me I felt it was truth. He said:

"Precisely, Dr. Lowell! You have answered me. You know, as I know, that the girl did speak the truth. You know, as I know, that our law cannot punish the witch. That is why I must kill her. In doing that, I, Ricori, am no murderer. No, I am God's executioner!"

He waited for me to speak. Again I could not answer.

"McCann"—he pointed to the girl—"do as I told you. Then return."

And when McCann had gone out with the frail body in his arms, Ricori said:

“Dr. Lowell—you must go with me to witness this execution.”

I recoiled at that. I said:

“Ricori, I can’t. I am utterly weary—in body and mind. I have gone through too much today. I am broken with grief—”

“You must go,” he interrupted, “if we have to carry you, gagged as the girl was, and bound. I will tell you why. You are at war with yourself. Alone, it is possible your scientific doubts might conquer, that you would attempt to halt me before I have done what I swear by Christ, His Holy Mother, and the Saints, I shall do. You might yield to weariness and place the whole matter before the police. I will not take that risk. I have affection for you, Dr. Lowell, deep affection. But I tell you that if my own mother tried to stop me in this I would sweep her aside as ruthlessly as I shall you.”

I said: “I will go with you.”

“Then tell the nurse to bring me my clothing. Until all is over, we remain together. I am taking no more chances.”

I took up the telephone and gave the necessary order. McCann returned, and Ricori said to him:

“When I am clothed, we go to the doll-shop. Who is in the car with Tony?”

“Larson and Cartello.”

“Good. It may be that the witch knows we are coming. It may be that she has listened through the girl’s dead ears as she spoke from her dead throat. No matter. We shall assume that she did not. Are there bars on the door?”

McCann said: “Boss, I ain’t been in the shop. I don’t know. There’s a glass panel. If there’s bars we can work ‘em. Tony’ll get the tools while you put on your clothes.”

“Dr. Lowell,” Ricori turned on me. “Will you give me your word that you will not change your mind about going with me? Nor attempt to interfere in what I am going to do?”

“I give you my word, Ricori.”

“McCann, you need not come back. Wait for us in the car.”

Ricori was soon dressed. As I walked with him out of my house, a clock struck one. I remembered that this strange adventure had begun, weeks ago, at that very hour...

I rode in the back of the car with Ricori, the dead girl between us. On the middle seats were Larson and Cartello, the former a stolid Swede, the latter a wiry little Italian. The man named Tony drove, McCann beside him. We swung down the avenue and in about half an hour were on lower Broadway. As we drew near the street of the doll-maker, we went less quickly. The sky was overcast, a cold wind blowing off the bay. I shivered, but not with cold.

We came to the corner of the doll-maker's street.

For several blocks we had met no one, seen no one. It was as though we were passing through a city of the dead. Equally deserted was the street of the doll-maker.

Ricori said to Tony:

“Draw up opposite the doll-shop. We'll get out. Then go down to the corner. Wait for us there.”

My heart was beating uncomfortably. There was a quality of blackness in the night that seemed to swallow up the glow from the street lamps. There was no light in the doll-maker's shop, and in the old-fashioned doorway, set level with the street, the shadows clustered. The wind whined, and I could hear the beating of waves on the Battery wall. I wondered whether I would be able to go through that doorway, or whether the inhibition the doll-maker had put upon me still held me.

McCann slipped out of the car, carrying the girl's body. He propped her, sitting in the doorway's shadows. Ricori and I, Larson and Cartello, followed. The car rolled off. And again I felt the sense of nightmare unreality which had clung to me so often since I had first set my feet on this strange path to the doll-maker...

The little Italian was smearing the glass of the door with some gummy material. In the centre of it he fixed a small vacuum cup of rubber. He took a tool from his pocket and drew with it a foot-wide circle on the glass. The point of the tool cut into the glass as though it had been wax. Holding the vacuum cup in one hand, he tapped the glass lightly with a rubber-tipped hammer. The circle of glass came away in his hand. All had been done without the least sound. He reached through the hole, and fumbled about noiselessly for a few moments. There was a faint click. The door swung open.

McCann picked up the dead girl. We went, silent as phantoms, into the doll-shop. The little Italian set the circle of glass back in its place. I could see dimly the door that opened into the corridor leading to that evil room at the rear. The little Italian tried the knob. The door was locked. He worked for a few seconds, and the door swung open. Ricori leading, McCann behind him with the girl, we passed like shadows through the corridor and paused at the further door.

The door swung open before the little Italian could touch it.

We heard the voice of the doll-maker!

“Enter, gentlemen. It was thoughtful of you to bring me back my dear niece! I would have met you at my outer door—but I am an old, old woman and timid!”

McCann whispered: “One side, boss!”

He shifted the body of the girl to his left arm, and holding her like a shield, pistol drawn, began to edge by Ricori. Ricori thrust him away. His own automatic levelled, he stepped over the threshold. I followed McCann, the two gunmen at my back.

I took a swift glance around the room. The doll-maker sat at her table, sewing. She was serene, apparently untroubled. Her long white fingers danced to the rhythm of her stitches. She did not look up at us. There were coals burning in the fireplace. The room was very warm, and there was a strong aromatic odour, unfamiliar to me. I looked toward the cabinets of the dolls.

Every cabinet was open. Dolls stood within them, row upon row, staring down at us with eyes green and blue, grey and black, lifelike as though they were midgets on exhibition in some grotesque peepshow. There must have been hundreds of them. Some were dressed as we in America dress; some as the Germans do; some as the Spanish, the French, the English; others were in costumes I did not recognize. A ballerina, and a blacksmith with his hammer raised... a French chevalier, and a German student, broadsword in hand, livid scars upon his face... an Apache with knife in hand, drug-madness on his yellow face and next to him a vicious-mouthed woman of the streets and next to her a jockey...

The loot of the doll-maker from a dozen lands!

The dolls seemed to be poised to leap. To flow down upon us. Overwhelm us.

I steadied my thoughts. I forced myself to meet that battery of living dolls' eyes as though they were but lifeless dolls. There was an empty cabinet... another and another... five cabinets without dolls. The four dolls I had watched march upon me in the paralysis of the green glow were not there nor was Walters.

I wrenched my gaze away from the tiers of the watching dolls. I looked again at the doll-maker, still placidly sewing... as though she were alone... as though she were unaware of us... as though Ricori's pistol were not pointed at her heart... sewing... singing softly...

The Walters doll was on the table before her!

It lay prone on its back. Its tiny hands were fettered at the wrists with twisted cords of the ashen hair. They were bound round and round, and the fettered hands clutched the hilt of a dagger-pin!

Long in the telling, but brief in the seeing—a few seconds in time as we measure it.

The doll-maker's absorption in her sewing, her utter indifference to us, the silence, made a screen between us and her, an ever-thickening though invisible barrier. The pungent aromatic fragrance grew stronger.

McCann dropped the body of the girl on the floor.

He tried to speak—once, twice; at the third attempt he succeeded. He said to Ricori hoarsely, in strangled voice:

“Kill her... or I will—” Ricori did not move. He stood rigid, automatic pointed at the doll-maker's heart, eyes fixed on her dancing hands. He did not seem to hear McCann, or if he heard, he did not heed. The doll-maker's song went on... it was like the hum of bees... it was a sweet droning... it garnered sleep as the bees garner honey... sleep...

Ricori shifted his grip upon his gun. He sprang forward. He swung the butt of the pistol down upon a wrist of the doll-maker.

The hand dropped, the fingers of that hand writhed... hideously the long white fingers writhed and twisted... like serpents whose backs have been broken...

Ricori raised the gun for a second blow. Before it could fall the doll-maker had leaped to her feet, overturning her chair. A whispering ran over the cabinets like a thin veil of sound. The dolls seemed to bend, to lean forward...

The doll-maker's eyes were on us now. They seemed to take in each and all of us at once. And they were like flaming black suns in which danced tiny crimson flames.

Her will swept out and overwhelmed us. It was like a wave, tangible. I felt it strike me as though it were a material thing. A numbness began to creep through me. I saw the hand of Ricori that clutched the pistol twitch and whiten. I knew that same numbness was gripping him as it gripped McCann and the others...

Once more the doll-maker had trapped us!

I whispered: "Don't look at her, Ricori... don't look in her eyes..."

With a tearing effort I wrested my own away from those flaming black ones. They fell upon the Walters doll. Stiffly, I reached to take it up— why, I did not know. The doll-maker was quicker than I. She snatched up the doll with her uninjured hand, and held it to her breast. She cried, in a voice whose vibrant sweetness ran through every nerve, augmenting the creeping lethargy:

"You will not look at me? You will not look at me! Fools—you can do nothing else!"

Then began that strange, that utterly strange episode that was the beginning of the end.

The aromatic fragrance seemed to pulse, to throb, grow stronger. Something like a sparkling mist whirled out of nothingness and covered the doll-maker, veiling the horse-like face, the ponderous body. Only her eyes shone through that mist...

The mist cleared away. Before us stood a woman of breath-taking beauty —tall and slender and exquisite. Naked, her hair, black and silken fine, half-clothed her to her knees. Through it the pale golden flesh gleamed. Only the eyes, the hands, the doll still clasped to one of the round, high breasts told who she was.

Ricori's automatic dropped from his hand. I heard the weapons of the others fall to the floor. I knew they stood rigid as I, stunned by that incredible transformation, and helpless in the grip of the power streaming from the doll-maker.

She pointed to Ricori and laughed: "You would kill me—me! Pick up your weapon, Ricori—and try!"

Ricori's body bent slowly, slowly... I could see him only indirectly, for my eyes could not leave the woman's... and I knew that his could not... that, fastened to them, his eyes were

turning upward, upward as he bent. I sensed rather than saw that his groping hand had touched his pistol—that he was trying to lift it. I heard him groan. The doll-maker laughed again.

“Enough, Ricori—you cannot!”

Ricori’s body straightened with a snap, as though a hand had clutched his chin and thrust him up...

There was a rustling behind me, the patter of little feet, the scurrying of small bodies past me.

At the feet of the woman were four manikins... the four who had marched upon me in the green glow... banker-doll, spinster- doll, the acrobat, the trapeze performer.

They stood, the four of them, ranged in front of her, glaring at us. In the hand of each was a dagger-pin, points thrust at us like tiny swords. And once more the laughter of the woman filled the room. She spoke, caressingly:

“No, no, my little ones. I do not need you!”

She pointed to me.

“You know this body of mine is but illusion, do you not? Speak.”

“Yes.”

“And these at my feet—and all my little ones—are but illusions?”

I said: “I do not know that.”

“You know too much—and you know too little. Therefore you must die, my too wise and too foolish doctor—” The great eyes dwelt upon me with mocking pity, the lovely face became maliciously pitiful. “And Ricori too must die—because he knows too much. And you others—you too must die. But not at the hands of my little people. Not here. No! At your home, my good doctor. You shall go there silently—speaking neither among yourselves nor to any others on your way. And when there you will turn upon yourselves... each slaying the other... rending yourselves like wolves... like—”

She staggered back a step, reeling.

I saw—or thought I saw—the doll of Walters writhe. Then swift as a striking snake it raised its bound hands and thrust the dagger-pin through the doll-maker’s throat... twisted it savagely... and thrust and thrust again... stabbing the golden throat of the woman precisely where that other doll had stabbed Braille!

And as Braille had screamed—so now screamed the doll- maker... dreadfully, agonizedly...

She tore the doll from her breast. She hurled it from her. The doll hurtled toward the fireplace, rolled, and touched the glowing coals.

There was a flash of brilliant flame, a wave of that same intense heat I had felt when the match of McCann had struck the Peters doll. And instantly, at the touch of that heat, the dolls at the woman's feet vanished. From them arose swiftly a pillar of that same brilliant flame. It coiled and wrapped itself around the doll-maker, from feet to head.

I saw the shape of beauty melt away. In its place was the horse-like face, the immense body of Madame Mandilip... eyes seared and blind... the long white hands clutching at her torn throat, and no longer white but crimson with her blood.

Thus for an instant she stood, then toppled to the floor.

And at that instant of her fall, the spell that held us broke.

Ricori leaned toward the huddled hulk that had been the doll-maker. He spat upon it. He shouted, exultantly:

“Burn witch burn!”

He pushed me to the door, pointing toward the tiers of the watching dolls that strangely now seemed lifeless! Only dolls!

Fire was leaping to them from draperies and curtains. The fire was leaping at them as though it were some vengeful spirit of cleansing flame!

We rushed through the door, the corridor, out into the shop. Through the corridor and into the shop the flames poured after us. We ran into the street.

Ricori cried: “Quick! To the car!”

Suddenly the street was red with the light of the flames. I heard windows opening, and shouts of warning and alarm.

We swung into the waiting car, and it leaped away.

## XVIII.—The Dark Wisdom

*“They have made effigies comparable with my image, similar to my form, who have taken away my breath, pulled out my hair, torn my garments, prevented my feet from moving by means of dust; with an ointment of harmful herbs they rubbed me; to my death they have led me—O God of Fire destroy them!”—Egyptian Prayer*

Three weeks had passed since the death of the doll-maker. Ricori and I sat at dinner in my home. A silence had fallen between us. I had broken it with the curious invocation that begins this, the concluding chapter of my narrative, scarcely aware that I had spoken aloud. But Ricori looked up, sharply.

“You quote someone? Whom?”



I answered: “A tablet of clay, inscribed by some Chaldean in the days of Assur-nizir-pal, three thousand years ago.”

He said: “And in those few words he has told all our story!”

“Even so, Ricori. It is all there—the dolls—the unguent—the torture—death—and the cleansing flame.”

He mused: “It is strange, that. Three thousand years ago—and even then they knew the evil and its remedy... ‘effigies similar to my form... who have taken away my breath... an ointment of harmful herbs... to my death they have led me... O God of Fire-destroy them!’ It is all our story, Dr. Lowell.”

I said: “The death-dolls are far, far older than Ur of the Chaldees. Older than history. I have followed their trail down the ages since the night Braile was killed. And it is a long, long trail, Ricori. They have been found buried deep in the hearths of the Cro-Magnons, hearths whose fires died twenty thousand years ago. And they have been found under still colder hearths of still more ancient peoples. Dolls of flint, dolls of stone, dolls carved from the mammoth’s tusks, from the bones of the cave bear, from the sabre-toothed tiger’s fangs. They had the dark wisdom even then, Ricori.”

He nodded: “Once I had a man about me whom I liked well. A Transylvanian. One day I asked him why he had come to America. He told me a strange tale. He said that there had been a girl in his village whose mother, so it was whispered, knew things no Christian should know. He put it thus, cautiously, crossing himself. The girl was comely, desirable—yet he could not love her. She, it seemed, loved him—or perhaps it was his indifference that drew her. One afternoon, coming home from the hunt, he passed her hut. She called to him. He was thirsty, and drank the wine she offered him. It was good wine. It made him gay—but it did not make him love her.

“Nevertheless, he went with her into the hut, and drank more wine. Laughing, he let her cut hair from his head, pare his finger-nails, take drops of blood from his wrist, and spittle from his mouth. Laughing, he left her, and went home, and slept. When he awakened, it was early evening, and all that he remembered was that he had drunk wine with the girl, but that was all.

“Something told him to go to church. He went to church. And as he knelt, praying, suddenly he did remember more—remembered that the girl had taken his hair, his nail parings, his spittle and his blood. And he felt a great necessity to go to this girl and to see what she was doing with his hair, his nail parings, his spittle, his blood. It was as though he said, the Saint before whom he knelt was commanding him to do this.

“So he stole to the hut of the girl, slipping through the wood, creeping up to her window. He looked in. She sat at the hearth, kneading dough as though for bread. He was ashamed that he had crept so with such thoughts—but then he saw that into the dough she was dropping the hair she had cut from him, the nail parings, the blood, the spittle. She was kneading them within the dough. Then, as he watched, he saw her take the dough and model it into the shape of a little man. And she sprinkled water upon its head, baptizing it in his name with strange words he could not understand.

“He was frightened, this man. But also he was greatly enraged. Also he had courage. He watched until she had finished. He saw her wrap the doll in her apron, and come to the door. She went out of the door, and away. He followed her—he had been a woodsman and knew how to go softly, and she did not know he was following her. She came to a crossroads. There was a new moon shining, and some prayer she made to this new moon. Then she dug a hole, and placed the doll of dough in that hole. And then she defiled it. After this she said:

“‘Zaru (it was this man’s name)! Zaru! Zaru! I love you. When this image is rotted away you must run after me as the dog after the bitch. You are mine, Zaru, soul and body. As the image rots, you become mine. When the image is rotted, you are all mine. Forever and forever and forever!’

“She covered the image with earth. He leaped upon her, and strangled her. He would have dug up the image, but he heard voices and was more afraid and ran. He did not go back to the village. He made his way to America.

“He told me that when he was out a day on that journey, he felt hands clutching at his loins—dragging him to the rail, to the sea. Back to the village, to the girl. By that, he knew he had not killed her. He fought the hands. Night after night he fought them. He dared not sleep, for when he slept he dreamed he was there at the cross-roads, the girl beside him—and three times he awakened just in time to check himself from throwing himself into the sea.

“Then the strength of the hands began to weaken. And at last, but not for many months, he felt them no more. But still he went, always afraid, until word came to him from the village. He had been right—he had not killed her. But later someone else did. That girl had what you have named the dark wisdom. Si! Perhaps it turned against her at the end—as in the end it turned against the witch we knew.”

I said: “It is curious that you should say that, Ricori... strange that you should speak of the dark wisdom turning against the one who commands it... but of that I will speak later. Love and hate and power—three lusts—always these seem to have been the three legs of the tripod on which burns the dark flame; the supports of the stage from which the death-dolls leap...

“Do you know who is the first recorded Maker of Dolls? No? Well, he was a God, Ricori. His name was Khnum. He was a God long and long before Yawveh of the Jews, who was also a maker of dolls, you will recall, shaping two of them in the Garden of Eden; animating them; but giving them only two inalienable rights—first, the right to suffer; second, the right to die. Khnum was a far more merciful God. He did not deny the right to die—but he did not think the dolls should suffer; he liked to see them enjoy themselves in their brief breathing space. Khnum was so old that he had ruled in Egypt ages before the Pyramids or the Sphinx were thought of. He had a brother God whose name was Kepher, and who had the head of a Beetle. It was Kepher who sent a thought rippling like a little wind over the surface of Chaos. That, thought fertilized Chaos, and from it the world was born...

“Only a ripple over the surface, Ricori! If it had pierced the skin of Chaos... or thrust even deeper... into its heart... what might not mankind now be? Nevertheless, rippling, the thought achieved the superficiality that is man. The work of Khnum thereafter was to reach into the wombs of women and shape the body of the child who lay within. They called him the Potter-God. He it was who, at the command of Amen, greatest of the younger Gods, shaped the

body of the great Queen Hat-shep-sut whom Amen begot, lying beside her mother in the likeness of the Pharaoh, her husband. At least, so wrote the priests of her day.

“But a thousand years before this there was a Prince whom Osiris and Isis loved greatly—for his beauty, his courage and his strength. Nowhere on earth, they thought, was there a woman fit for him. So they called Khnum, the Potter-God, to make one. He came, with long hands like those of... Madame Mandilip... like hers, each finger alive. He shaped the clay into a woman so beautiful that even the Goddess Isis felt a touch of envy. They were severely practical Gods, those of old Egypt, so they threw the Prince into a sleep, placed the woman beside him, and compared—the word in the ancient papyrus is ‘fitted’—them. Alas! She was not harmonious. She was too small. So Khnum made another doll. But this was too large. And not until six were shaped and destroyed was true harmony attained, the Gods satisfied, the fortunate Prince given his perfect wife—who had been a doll.

“Ages after, in the time of Rameses III, it happened that there was a man who sought for and who found this secret of Khnum, the Potter-God. He had spent his whole life in seeking it. He was old and bent and withered; but the desire for women was still strong within him. All that he knew to do with that secret of Khnum was to satisfy that desire. But he felt the necessity of a model. Who were the fairest of women whom he could use as models? The wives of the Pharaoh, of course. So this man made certain dolls in the shape and semblance of those who accompanied the Pharaoh when he visited his wives. Also, he made a doll in the likeness of the Pharaoh himself; and into this he entered, animating it. His dolls then carried him into the royal harem, past the guards, who believed even as did the wives of Pharaoh, that he was the true Pharaoh. And entertained him accordingly.

“But, as he was leaving, the true Pharaoh entered. That must have been quite a situation, Ricori—suddenly, miraculously, in his harem, the Pharaoh doubled! But Khnum, seeing what had happened, reached down from Heaven and touched the dolls, withdrawing their life. And they dropped to the floor, and were seen to be only dolls.

“While where one Pharaoh had stood lay another doll and crouched beside it a shivering and wrinkled old man!

“You can find the story, and a fairly detailed account of the trial that followed, in a papyrus of the time; now, I think, in the Turin Museum. Also a catalogue of the tortures the magician underwent before he was burned. Now, there is no manner of doubt that there were such accusations, nor that there was such a trial; the papyrus is authentic. But what, actually, was at the back of it? Something happened—but what was it? Is the story only another record of superstition—or does it deal with the fruit of the dark wisdom?”

Ricori said: “You, yourself, watched that dark wisdom fruit. Are you still unconvinced of its reality?”

I did not answer; I continued: “The knotted cord—the Witch’s Ladder. That, too, is most ancient. The oldest document of Frankish legislation, the Salic Law, reduced to written form about fifteen hundred years ago, provided the severest penalties for those who tied what it named the Witch’s Knot—”

“La scala della strega,” he said. “Well, do we know that cursed thing in my land—and to our black sorrow!”

I took startled note of his pallid face, his twitching fingers; I said, hastily: “But of course, Ricori, you realize that all I have been quoting is legend? Folklore. With no proven basis of scientific fact.”

He thrust his chair back, violently, arose, stared at me, incredulously. He spoke, with effort: “You still hold that the devil-work we witnessed can be explained in terms of the science you know?”

I stirred, uncomfortably: “I did not say that, Ricori. I do say that Madame Mandilip was as extraordinary a hypnotist as she was a murderess—a mistress of illusion—”

He interrupted me, hands clenching the table’s edge: “You think her dolls were illusions?”

I answered, obliquely: “You know how real was that illusion of a beautiful body. Yet we saw it dissolve in the true reality of the flames. It had seemed as veritable as the dolls, Ricori—”

Again he interrupted me: “The stab in my heart... the doll that killed Gilmore... the doll that murdered Braile... the blessed doll that slew the witch! You call them illusions?”

I answered, a little sullenly, the old incredulity suddenly strong within me: “It is entirely possible that, obeying a post- hypnotic command of the doll-maker, you, yourself, thrust the dagger-pin into your own heart! It is possible that obeying a similar command, given when and where and how I do not know, Peters’ sister, herself, killed her husband. The chandelier fell on Braile when I was, admittedly, under the influence of those same post-hypnotic influences—and it is possible that it was a sliver of glass that cut his carotid. As for the doll-maker’s own death, apparently at the hands of the Walters doll, well, it is also possible that the abnormal mind of Madame Mandilip was, at times, the victim of the same illusions she induced in the minds of others. The doll-maker was a mad genius, governed by a morbid compulsion to surround herself with the effigies of those she had killed by the unguent. Marguerite de Valois, Queen of Navarre, carried constantly with her the embalmed hearts of a dozen or more lovers who had died for her. She had not slain those men—but she knew she had been the cause of their deaths as surely as though she had strangled them with her own hands. The psychological principle involved in Queen Marguerite’s collection of hearts and Madame Mandilip’s collection of dolls is one and the same.”

He had not sat down; still in that strained voice he repeated: “I asked you if you called the killing of the witch an illusion.”

I said: “You make it very uncomfortable for me, Ricori—staring at me like that... and I am answering your question. I repeat it is possible that in her own mind she was at times the victim of the same illusions she induced in the minds of others. That at times she, herself, thought the dolls were alive. That in this strange mind was conceived a hatred for the doll of Walters. And, at the last, under the irritation of our attack, this belief reacted upon her. That thought was in my mind when, a while ago, I said it was curious that you should speak of the dark wisdom turning against those who possessed it. She tormented the doll; she expected the doll to avenge itself if it had the opportunity. So strong was this belief, or expectation, that when the favourable moment arrived, she dramatized it. Her thought became action! The doll-maker, like you, may well have plunged the dagger-pin into her own throat— “

“You fool!”

The words came from Ricori’s mouth—and yet it was so like Madame Mandilip speaking in her haunted room and speaking through the dead lips of Laschna that I dropped back into my chair, shuddering.

Ricori was leaning over the table. His black eyes were blank, expressionless. I cried out, sharply, a panic shaking me: “Ricori— wake— “

The dreadful blankness in his eyes flicked away; their gaze sharpened, was intent upon me. He said, again in his own voice:

“I am awake, I am so awake—that I will listen to you no more! Instead—listen, you to me, Dr. Lowell. I say to you—to hell with your science! I tell you this—that beyond the curtain of the material at which your vision halts, there are forces and energies that hate us, yet which God in his inscrutable wisdom permits to be. I tell you that these powers can reach through the veil of matter and become manifest in creatures like the doll-maker. It is so! Witches and sorcerers hand in hand with evil! It is so! And there are powers friendly to us which make themselves manifest in their chosen ones.

“I say to you—Madame Mandilip was an accursed witch! An instrument of the evil powers! Whore of Satan! She burned as a witch should burn in hell —forever! I say to you that the little nurse was an instrument of the good powers. And she is happy today in Paradise—as she shall be forever!”

He was silent, trembling with his own fervour. He touched my shoulder:

“Tell me, Dr. Lowell—tell me as truthfully as though you stood before the seat of God, believing in Him as I believe—do those scientific explanations of yours truly satisfy you?”

I answered, very quietly:

“No, Ricori.”

Nor do they.

THE END

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## POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

### 22: Thirty Days

BEFORE many hours Scoland raged quietly when he found that his “wild man” had flown from the cage. But he was tongue-tied. He set cautious inquiry on foot to ascertain what had become of the refugee. He could do no more without publicity, which he did not court. His agents were able to tell him no more than did the broken door of Burleson’s cabin on the Felix. Polaris was traceless.

Worried intensely at the first by the disappearance and still apprehensive of a blow at his fortunes from the hand of the snow wanderer, as days went by and nothing was heard from the missing one Scoland breathed more freely. Doubtless the man had gone overboard and drowned; or, if he had reached shore, he had wandered on his ways and would not be heard from again.

Concealing the anxiety she felt, Rose Emer also secretly endeavoured to trace the lost Polaris. She met with no better success than had Scoland. Her great-hearted protector was gone.

Rumour had coupled her name with that of the hero of the hour, the discoverer of the pole, and with the foreecho of wedding bells. Several times the subject was mentioned to her by the captain himself. He found the girl strangely silent on the matter that, before their trip to the south he had considered was almost settled. She did not speed his wooing, and he was too busy a man for the time to try and regain his lost advantage.

Dinners, receptions, fetes, and the lecture platform made continual demands on him, and then the summons came to go to Washington and lay the proofs of his polar discovery before the savants of the National Geographic Society.

Nearly a month had worn away since the Felix docked when Scoland journeyed to the Capital to place in the hands of the grey and critical members of the society the data of his explorations, that should fix him for all time in the firmament of famous discoverers-first man to stand at the southern pole.

MORE than two hours after he left the side of the Felix, Polaris propelled his little craft into an angle at the side of a long low building that lay close to the harbour shore. He reached up, and his fingers hooked over a stone edge. Softly he drew himself up and over. He stood for the first time on the soil of his fathers’ country.

With many a close escape from the wheels of ferries and the noses of propellers of other craft, of which a bewildering number were moving, even at that hour, but without being seen of any man, he had made the passage of the harbour. It was no mean accomplishment of itself. He was both weary and hungry after the toil. The second need must wait for a while. He saw near him the shrubbery of a little park. He crawled into the bushes and fell asleep.

Some three hours later, the dawn light shone revealingly on the soles of his bare feet, thrust from under the bush. They caught the eye of a policeman who was good-naturedly clearing the park of its “boarders.” He investigated. The appearance of the man who owned the feet

was so different from that of the ordinary “vag” habitués of the park, that the bluecoat decided he must “run him in.”

Still sleepy and only, half understanding, Polaris went meekly with the policeman. He knew that ‘he was in the hands of a representative of the law of-America, a law that his father had taught him must be revered and obeyed in all its manifestations.

With every instant unfolding to him a new wonder—from the startling height of a many-storied skyscraper to a belated messenger boy puffing at a cigarette—he was haled to a nearby station-house.

Because he could not, or would not, explain how he came to be in the park, and because his intense interest in the proceedings about him tended to make his answers casual, the judge dismissed him with a curt. “Ten or thirty.’ The son of the snows went to jail and knew no help for it.

He grew restive with the passing of the days in confinement. He had left but one object in life, and that was the delivery of his father’s message. He had guessed for a long time that it had to do with a quest similar to that of Scoland. Now the name of the captain was on every lip. He had gone to Washington, to receive the official recognition of his discovery.

In Washington, Polaris would also liked to have been. And his message? He had given it into the keeping of Rose Emer Where was she? Would she keep faith?

Then it struck him with the suddenness of a blow that his message might, even now, be in the keeping of the captain, the man who was to be her husband. When he was on the verge of delirium, he had put his most sacred trust into the hands of his enemy!

He laughed at the irony of it. Still, he would go to Washington. The rest was on the knees of the gods. She would keep faith, he knew, but did it rest with her?

Polaris learned much in those thirty days, for there is excellent wisdom even in the bowels of a jail. Came at last the day of his release, and found him in the middle of a puzzle. Not in all America was there a person to whom he could turn in his extremity. He was friendless and penniless. Under the circumstances, he could not bring himself to ask aid of Rose Emer, even if he knew where she was to be found.

Then it was that his dead friend Kalin raised up friends for him, friends and the power to carry out his project.

On the day of his release he was directed to the window of the property clerk’s cage in the office of the prison. He found a small, dark-browed man talking with the clerk at the window, who eyed him curiously through thick, tortoise-rimmed spectacles of exaggerated size, that were perched on his high, curved nose.

“My necklace?” said Polaris, as he stood at the window of the cage.

For a moment the clerk hesitated, and he and the little man stared at Polaris. Up and down the little man’s eyes roved, and finally a friendly gleam came into them.

“I have come down here to see you about that necklace,” he said. “Mr. Atkins, here, he has seen nothing like that necklace of yours. So he has shown it to a friend of his who is one of my employees, and that friend has told to me so much about it that I have come all the way here once just to see it and then again to see you.”

He paused and looked steadily at Polaris, who returned the gaze with interest. What could the man want? Ah, he had it! Money! He would give money for the necklace of Kalin; and money in this land would do anything. It would take him to Washington. He could go as other men went. His face brightened.

“YOUR necklace,” pursued the little man, “would you consider selling some of the stones? They are fine rubies, my friend, as no doubt you know. Now tell me, and I read it in your eyes that you cannot lie, are the stones yours? Would there be any legal question as to their ownership?”

“The necklace is mine,” said Polaris gravely. “It was the gift of a friend of mine who died, in a foreign land. Do you wish to buy it? I will sell—”

The little man smiled and answered quickly:

“No, not even I wish to purchase the entire necklace. I should have to float a loan to pay its value. But I would like to purchase three or four of the stones.”

The end of it was that Polaris parted with three of the smaller stones of the necklace at a price of seventeen thousand dollars— and glad enough the jeweller was, to get them at that figure. By a miracle Polaris had fallen into the hands of a man who could help him. He was one of the most noted experts in gems in the metropolis—and honest. Where another might have robbed him easily, this man gave him good value for the stones.

So it was that while the members of the geographic society were poring over the notes and records of Scoland, and plying the captain with many an admiring question, a young man broke in upon the deliberations.

“Never mind the name,” he said to the clerk in the anteroom. “I came from the south with the Captain Scoland. They will wish to hear me.”

That sufficed, and he entered the council room of the society. He was an exceedingly personable young man, he who thus strode into the den of the savants. He stood a good six feet from his soles, but he was so generously constructed as to shoulders and chest that he did not seem tall.

June had come, and he wore a handsome light textured suit. From the top of his flaxen poll to his shoes, he bore evidences of the best work of the metropolitan artists who had fitted him out in haste. A native dignity almost obscured the stiffness with which he wore the unaccustomed garments.

Scoland sat at the head of a long table. On either side of it were grouped the members of the society, the men of science who were weighing his claims to the title of discoverer of the south pole. As the young man entered the room the captain looked up quickly.



Their eyes met. For an instant the brow of the captain was wrinkled, as though “he strove to recall a half-forgotten face. Then the interest in the eyes faded, and he turned them back toward the table. The metamorphosis was too complete for his recognition.

Testy old President Dean turned his leaping blue eyes on the stranger. At the foot of the table a little bowed old man with a puckered face and snapping bright black eyes leaned forward in sudden excitement and gripped the edge of the table until his gaunt knuckles whitened.

“Well, young man, who are you, and what do you want here?” rapped-out the president.

“My name is Polaris, which, so far as I know, is all of it,” replied the young man, and instantly the odd name he gave himself and the quaintness of his speech had drawn him the interest of every man at the table.

“That which I want here, it may be more difficult for me to tell you,” he continued. “I came here from the far south in the ship of that man”—he pointed to Scoland— “bringing a message to the world from a man now dead, the man whom I believe first stood at the place of the southern pole. He—”

Polaris got no further. Scoland sprang to his feet in white rage.

“What’s this?” he shouted. “Some crazy man has wandered in here. I never laid eyes on him before. Have him put out!”

FOR an instant there was silence in the room. At the foot of the table old Zenas Wright, who had put some marks on the maps in his own day, stared and stared.

“Steve, Steve, I thought you had come back to me,” he murmured. “But you were a larger man, Steve, and that was years ago—years ago.”

“Yes, you have laid eyes on me, before,” said Polaris, addressing Scoland. “A sick man came to your camp through the snows, bringing a member of your party who was lost. You took him to the ship, and your Dr. Clawson nursed him. You brought him to America. You thought him crazy and— But that matters not. I am that sick man, the man who disappeared. Any of your men will remember, or Dr. Clawson.”

Scoland sank back into his chair with a troubled face. President Dean turned to him and said rather acidly: “You told us nothing of the finding of a strange man in the polar regions. Is the story of this man true?”

Quickly the captain thought. It was true what this man said. Any member of his crew would remember the “wild man.” It would profit him not at all to lie.

“Why, yes,” he assented. “There was such a man. But he could not, or pretended that he could not, speak English. He appeared to be a savage and an imbecile to boot. We brought him back with us. He disappeared the night we reached quarantine. Now that I look at this man, it seems that he may be the same, although he is changed greatly. He is undoubtedly crazy.”

Scoland spoke confidently. Still, he felt in his heart a return of the forebodings that had warned him against this man since first he had set eyes upon him.

“Who are you, lad, and how did you come to be in the south?” old Zenas Wright spoke up from the foot of the table. His tone was kindly, and there was no suspicion, only deep interest, in, the keen eyes he turned on the youth.

“As best I may, I will answer those questions,” said Polaris. “I was born in the white south. My mother I never saw—only a grave with the name Anne above it. My father sleeps beside that grave, and above him is the name Stephen.”

Zenas Wright started visibly and seemed about to interrupt the tale, but did not, and Polaris continued:

“Other -names than those I know not that they had. My father reared me, and I never saw another human being until I met those of the party of Captain Scoland. My father died. He gave me a message to bring to the north—a message addressed to the National Geographic Society of the United States. In that message, he told me, was the story of a great discovery he had made—that would ring around the world—and in it also was the history of myself, which he never told me. We lived far to the south for many years, for my father hurt himself in a fall and. could not travel.

“When he died and I came, north, I passed and burned the ship in which he went to the south. Its name was the Yedda.

“This man has reached the pole. I do not wish to make his glory dim, but—he is not the first to stand at the pole. I have come here—”

He hesitated and glanced around the circuit of the big table. Every man there was leaning forward in strained attention.

“The message—the message your father sent?” queried President Dean, and held out a shaking hand. “Give us that message.”

“I have lost that message,” said Polaris quietly. Scoland burst into a peal of derisive laughter. “A joke, gentlemen—a joke!” he cried. “I don’t,-know who and what this young man is, but he has a rare sense of humour.”

“Young man,” continued the president severely, “this is a strange tale you have told—an almost unbelievable tale. Yet this society has listened to many strange tales. All that is lacking to make history of the strangest of tales is proof. You say you have lost your message. Without proof, no claim can stand before this society. I advise you most strongly to find that message, if such a message you have, and bring it before us. Until you do, the society cannot listen to you further.”

He inclined his head and beckoned to the clerk at the door to show Polaris from the room. Polaris hesitated. There apparently was nothing more to be said. Still he hesitated. Then he heard two sounds behind him that caused him to turn like lightning. They were a quick little gasp and an astounded whine.

Framed in the doorway stood a girl and a great grey dog!

## 23: A Message and the End

“ROSE EMER!”

With his whole heart in those two spoken words, Polaris made as if he would spring forward. But masking the heart is the mind, and the mind of Polaris held him still. So he stood, with his bosom swelling until it seemed that it must burst the unwonted garments which confined it.

One faithful soul was there whom conventions and the chill doubts that beset human hearts and brains did not restrain. With one leap Marcus crossed the space between the threshold and Polaris. He reared, and when his paws rested on the shoulders of the man, the eyes of the dog and man met.

One searching look gave Marcus, and whined; and it seemed as though his steadfast heart would break for joy. He dropped to all fours again. With every muscle in his splendid body aquiver, he backed against the man's legs and began to pivot around him slowly, baying the while to the full extent of his powerful lungs.

So Marcus told the world that he had found his master.

“Polaris! Found at last!” More slow, but no less joyfully than did Marcus, Rose Emer crossed from the doorway with extended hands. As she walked she limped ever so slightly; noting which, Polaris's lips were contracted with the pang of memory.

“Not yet,” she said, when he would have spoken. She whirled from him to the scientists at the table. Every eye was on her.

“Gentleman,” she began breathlessly, “you would not give this man a hearing because he is unknown to you, because he tells a strange story, and because he brought you no proof. I am Rose Emer, of whom you know. I wish to speak to you for a few moments. It is of this man's story that I wish to speak. Perhaps you shall have proof of the strangest that he has told. Certainly I shall tell, yon of stranger. Will you hear me?”

As she paused. President Dean, who was born a Virginian, was at her elbow with a chair. She took it, and sat facing the tabled Polaris she motioned to come and stand by her, and he took his stand by her chair, with one hand resting upon its back and the other on the head of Marcus.

“We will listen with pleasure to what Miss Emer has to say,” said President Dean, and resumed his seat.

“There are certain passages in the expedition to discover the pole which had not been told,” she began. There was an almost imperceptible shifting of seats as the men at with meals ...or snacks the table leaned forward to catch every word from the lips of the speaker. Scoland shot her a quick glance and then sat sullenly picking at a blotter that lay before him.

“There were certain happenings that have a mighty import for the world,” she continued, “which have not been even so much as hinted at. They are in the keeping of this man here and myself. At his request I kept silent; now is the time to speak.

“Gentlemen, this man is neither poor nor without friends. All that I have is his. He saved my life down there in the ice and snow and horror—saved it and kept it, risking his own like a trifle a hundred times over. No, I will tell it all,” as Polaris put forth a hand to restrain her.

With a dull red flush burning up in his cheeks, he folded his arms and gazed steadily through the windows as the girl went on, telling the spellbound assembly the amazing story.

When she had finished she looked narrowly at Captain Scoland, and said:

“I think that he was wise to decide to keep these things a secret until now. All of these things are true, and I, Rose Emer, witness for them. Now as to the other matter—the discoveries by this man’s father and the message he sent to the north—here is that message.”

From the bosom of her dress she drew an envelope-shaped packet sewn in membrane. She handed it to President Dean. Through the transparent skin that covered it, he saw on the yellowed paper that it was addressed to the National Geographic Society, and to “Zenas Wright, if he still be a member.”

For a moment he turned it over in his hands. Then he passed it to Wright.

“Open it, old friend, and read,” he said.

And this is what Zenas Wright read:

“Most of the contents of this packet are proofs, to be laid at the disposal of the society; for I have found the pole, Zenas, I have stood where no other man has ever stood. But that’s in the proofs, Zenas—and you shall see them, if Polaris wins through with them. If not—why, then, one more vain dream.

“This is my son, Polaris, Zenas, who brings my message to the world. You remember I always wanted to do big things. Well, I decided to find the pole. I would go alone, and the glory of achievement would be mine alone. Now I am dying here in the snows, and the only human face I’ve seen for years is that of my son.

“Briefly, I took enough money from my estates to serve my purposes and went travelling. Then I disappeared. I bought a ship, the Yedda, in Japan. I had her fitted out in Nagasaki and Hong Kong. Then I went to Australia. We sailed from there.

“Alas I met her before we sailed. I was mad. We eloped, and God forgive me, I took her with me. She was the daughter of a wealthy trader in Sydney, Horace Kering.

“We sailed into the snows. We camped, and I pushed through with dogs. I was gone months. I found the pole. I returned. They had deserted, the scoundrels had gone and left her; only the old cook was faithful. I never heard of them again, and often I hoped that they were lost.

“The child was born. She lived but a few short months. Then she went, too. The cook also, he’s dead these many years. The boy lived.

“We would have come north together, but then I fell and hurt my leg. I will never travel. The boy, he’s taken care of both of us for years. He knows not his own name, except that I call him Polaris. I’ve educated him. For years I’ve trained his mind. The life has trained his body. He’s stronger than I ever was, and I was no weakling.

“When I go, he’ll go to the north. That won’t be long, now. My God, I’ve been here twenty-four years. What must have happened out in the world! But, Zenas, I’ll not whine. Old comrade, if the boy comes, be good to him. He’s a good lad. There’s enough left of the old estate in California to make him rich, if it’s been cared for. I’ve left him no letter, but tell him that his old father loved him well.

“Good-by, Zenas. “Stephen Janess.”

Old Zenas Wright stopped reading and for a moment covered his eyes with his wrinkled hands. Then he raised his head. He fumbled with the papers.

“Here, the rest of them are observations and data,” he said, and handed them back to President Dean. Members of the society elbowed each other to get a look at them. Under cover of the bustle, Polaris Janess clasped the hand of Rose Emer.

“Ah, lady,” he whispered, “Polaris has a name at last—a name, and he is an American gentleman and—” He broke off suddenly and crossed to the captain.

Scoland sat like a man in a dream.

“Yonder proofs there will show to the world my father’s Work. No lies have been told or written. Captain Scoland,” said Polaris, speaking low. “You, too, have stood at the great pole. Your glory is just as great. You are a brave man. My father would not wish to rob you of that glory. I do not wish to stain the brightness of your achievement. What has passed between us is forgotten. You were blinded for a while. I remember naught but the kindness of your Dr. Clawson. Let us both be silent about the treatment of the ‘wild man.’”

He held out his hand.

For the barest fraction of a second Scoland hesitated. He was not an entirely bad man. He was a very brave one. He gripped the hand of the son of the snows.

“And now,” he said with an effort, “she’s waiting; go to her.” He pointed to Rose Emer. Around the end of the table came marching Zenas Wright, his old eyes shining. He came upon a tableau—a girl and a man and a dog, all wordless, all eyes. .

“H-m-m-m, Zenas, you’re an old fool!” he muttered. “They have no eyes for you just now.” He turned to stomp back to the table, but thought better of it and came back.

“Lad,” he said, “we—the members of this society—wish to examine the records of your father’s discoveries. We may want to ask you some questions. Will you wait, you and the young woman—in here?”

HE MARCHED them to a small, empty room at the side, and almost thrust them into it. Marcus edged in with them. The door was shut. They were alone.

Both of them stared out of the window. Minutes passed. Then:

“Lady, how did you find me?”

“One cannot sell three great rubies at the door of a jail, sir, and go quite unnoticed,” she answered, flushing. “My agents were on the watch. They investigated, and I came on from Boston.”

Still she did not look at him. Polaris came a little nearer.

“Why did you tell them all—?”

“That you are a hero!” she flashed hotly. “I want all the world to know it!” She faced him at last.

“And—but—the captain?”

She looked at him.

In a second his arms were around her. For the second time their lips met. Time flew by unheeded. Marcus looked at there in wonder, and then curled calmly on a rug and stretched his nose.

Finally:

“But I am only a poor, half-savage—”

“Hush! I love you!”

Presently they heard through the closed door the muffled sound of shouting. It was the members of the society cheering Stephen Janess.

THE END

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