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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 21
24TH NOVEMBER 2019

KASSI AND THE DRAGON

BY STE
WHITEHOUSE
—RARE
CREATURE OF
GRACE...

A DRINK OF DJINN

BY HARRIS
COVERLEY—
BE CAREFUL
WHAT YOU
WISH FOR...

THE OTHERS BY LOUIS KASATKIN

SPARKS BY WALTER G ESSELMAN

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Fantasy Gate Arch* by Victoria_Borodinova. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

EDITORIAL

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

KASSI AND THE DRAGON by Ste Whitehouse—*Rare creature of grace...* SWORD AND SORCERY

A DRINK OF DJINN by Harris Coverley—*Be careful what you wish for...* FANTASY

THE OTHERS by Louis Kasatkin—*When winter's cadence sounds...* POETRY

SPARKS by Walter G Esselman—*"You do realize that there're monsters comin' to eat us, right?"* FANTASY

LITTLE CHANGES by Christopher T Dabrowski—*Everyone had horns...* FLASH FICTION

THE LAST TERRAN Part Seven by Blake Rogers—*Place of power...* SPACE OPERA

BURN, WITCH, BURN Chapter Eight by A Merritt—*Nurse Walters' Diary...* HORROR CLASSIC

POLARIS OF THE SNOWS Chapter Thirteen by Charles B Stilson—*Polaris fights the Bear...* SCIENCE FANTASY CLASSIC

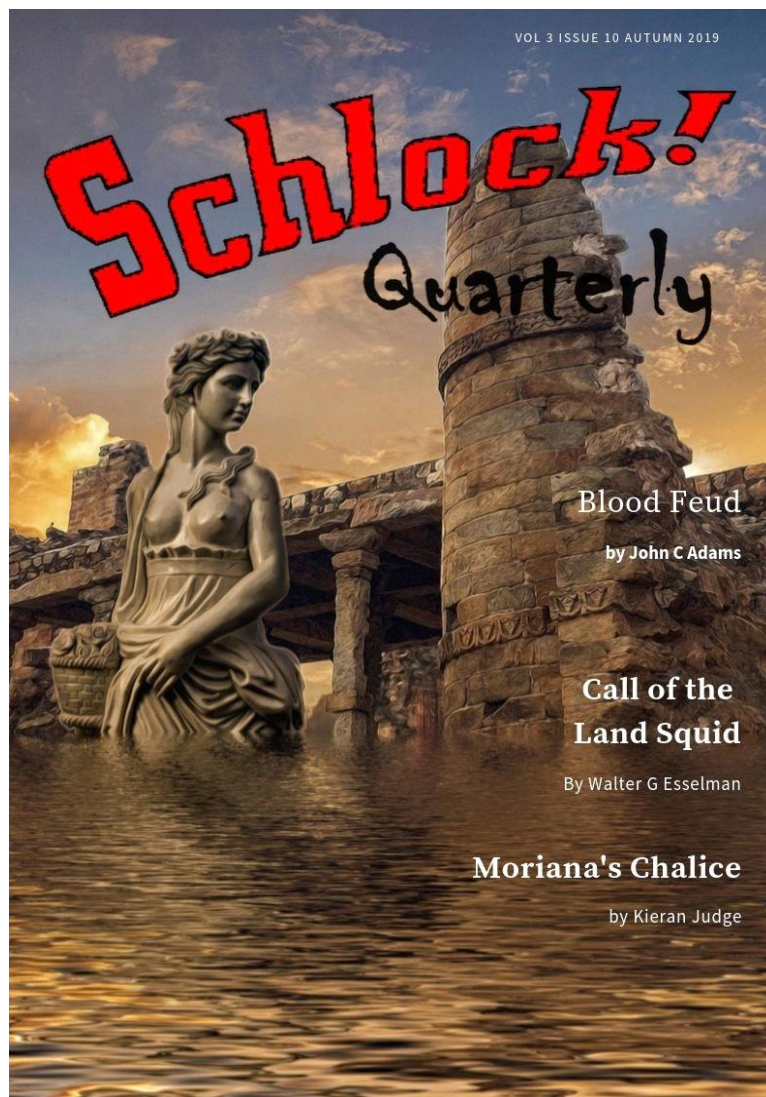
EDITORIAL

This week, Kassi learns the truth behind tales of a terrible dragon. An ISIS militant gets what he wishes for. Winter's cadence sounds. Sara meets a strange man in the park. And the world undergoes little changes.

Lod Jovis is taken to the place of power. Lowell reads Nurse Walters' diary. And Polaris demonstrates his might.

—Gavin Chappell

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[Return to Contents](#)

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



**FOR THE UNEMPLOYED BELL RINGER FROM NOTRE DAME
HANDING OUT FLYERS FOR A SPA NAMED *SANCTUARY* FOR *ONE*
FREE BACK MASSAGE WAS JUST WRONG.**

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

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

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

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

[Return to Contents](#)

KASSI AND THE DRAGON by Ste Whitehouse

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

Kassi stretched her long legs carefully, trying to keep her six foot frame well hidden. The moonline was brightest that night and although her leather armour was dull with age it could still reflect the moonlight well enough. For the third time that night she 'thought'.

{ We should speak with the girls. }

Sebastian, her companion, remained still. His own frame of flexible metal skin and segmented body happily squatting—if a machine can be said to squat—in the brush scanning the scene before them.

He replied haughtily. { We will need more confirmation than your 'gut' instinct. }

{ And when has my instinct ever let us down? } Kassi replied silently.

{ We really do not have that much night time left luv. Perhaps just the highlights? }

The young woman muttered something indistinct even to the mechanoid and thought nothing else.

The valley before them was closed at one end by a sheet of rocks some hundred metres high with the smudge of a cave nestling a third of the way up. On more level ground there was a large rock to which, attached by a long thick chain, sat a young woman at least a decade younger than Kassi. A fairly substantial bag of coin—most of it gold—sat on the hefty boulder. The girl looked as bored as Kassi felt and for a minute the warrior tried to recall what it had been like to be eighteen.

For Kassi that had meant freedom. Travelling Brackenwood and beyond with Sebastian in search of adventure. Her first dungeon. Her first encounter with an angry Troll—most trolls worked the land peacefully taking seasonal work where they could—her first love; or second if you counted Goro, Mataso's grandson and Kaze's best friend. Her brother. Kassi felt emptiness whenever she thought of her brother Kaze. Taken by the red demons just over a year ago. Taken somewhere north. Thus she travelled with Sebastian her only companion.

The machine placed a hand/leg gently over her hand but said nothing. Sometimes the telepathic link they shared spilled out unwittingly and he could sense the young woman's emotional state. She took a deep breath to calm down and looked again at the young girl sitting and waiting.

{ Anything? } she asked at last.

{ Still nothing. As far as I can scan the cave looks to be empty. }

{ And it does not go down forever? }

{ It is not a dungeon, a series of corridors and lift shafts built into the outer wall of the ark, merely a hollow caused by water flow or when Ah'kis was created. Much like the cave system we explored in your youth.¹

{ The night is almost over. } she replied.

{ The dragon may well be nocturnal and returns to its abode near dawn. }

Kassi laughed hollowly. { And I'm a monkey's niece. }

{ The term is monkey's uncle, Kassi luv. }

{ That doesn't make sense. How can I be anyone's UNCLE? And WHY an uncle? Why not an aunt or cousin or sister? }

{ It is an idiom much like 'if pigs could fly'. }

{ Which they obviously can if you use a big enough catapult. } The woman looked pleased with herself.

Somehow the machine emanated a sense of sadness without actually shifting position. { Still I concur that the dragon is most likely a fabrication. }

{ Because of your extensive reasoning powers and ability to sense bullshit when you hear it? }

{ That and the fact that there are no such creatures in existence. }

{ Then we speak to the girls. } she insisted. As he was formulating an answer Kassi stood, stretched noisily and strode off to where the young girl sat examining her nails and flooding the valley with boredom.

"Ho! Becca!" Kassi shouted scaring a family of field mice who scurried away upset at leaving food behind.

The young girl unfolded languidly and muttered. "You must have frightened him away. The dragon. He must have sensed you, or that machine." The girl glared at Sebastian with deep brown eyes, almond in shape set amongst a face just the wrong side of round. The beginnings of a double chin wobbled as she spoke. Still she was comely and made up for a plain face with rather more ample charms. Which she now shuffled into view as though hoping to distract Kassi. Pale moonlight reflected off smooth round skin. Why did men never wear low cut shirts?

Kassi sighed inwardly and began to understand her own mother's series of sighs and silent laments. The girl made Kassi feel so much older than her twenty seven years. It felt as though decades separated them. A period of time so immense that the world was completely different

¹ See [Kassi and the Sword](#).

and Kassi's experiences now irrelevant. What was worst was to see herself in the girl. The indolence. The disdain. The effort made to even communicate with someone so much older. Kassi had deployed them to great effect herself, but knowing did not mean she had a counter to the girl's attitude. In fact Kassi felt worse and was almost tempted to ask Sebastian to speak with the girl, except that he would then obviously never let her forget it.

"It seems so," Kassi replied lamely.

The girl looked away refusing to reply.

Kassi continued almost hesitant. "That is . . . if there were a dragon?"

The girl froze still refusing to make eye contact.

{Her heart rate jumped significantly when you mentioned the spurious nature of the dragon.} Sebastian 'said'.

On firmer ground Kassi said in a flat tone. "We need to talk back in town."

Word had reached them ten days earlier. The town of Jorg required a knight or warrior to defeat a mighty dragon. The townsfolk reached out to Kassi and Sebastian specifically requesting that they travelled to the town and meet with the local Elders. Kassi was reluctant to stop off on her route north but Sebastian was intrigued. As he said it was not often you came across such mythical creatures as dragons. Besides the coin would come in handy and it did not involve killing anyone—as far as they could tell. Kassi had a policy of taking only that work which required no killing. She would never become a sword for hire who assassinated fellow humans. Of course if during the execution of her task someone ran at her with a weapon; well that was altogether different.

So they travelled along the Seam back towards Jorg Town arriving the previous afternoon. The town was on the small side and tired looking. It had originally been a mining town with veins of iron and copper that spiralled into the surrounding mountains. The valley clockwise to the nestling town had seen its fair share of death and trauma over the centuries but no new ore had been mined at Jorg for a generation now and the town slid into disrepair too slowly for the people themselves to notice. Still the once fruitful seams of iron had created a town able to wrought metal in whichever fashion you wished and it was the metalsmiths who now kept the town solvent; bustling even; at least along certain streets.

The edges of the town blended into the landscape giving it a frayed appearance as grasses and bushes sprouted incongruously out of pavements and from half collapsed walls. Silence weighed heavy and oppressive, blanketing the town and subduing the hustle of noise. A few children, all boys, played noisily running around the market square, but the adults carried out their day to day duties with overt solemnity. The women particularly appeared quiet, walking a step or two behind the men their faces shrouded under the wide brims of gaily coloured hats. The riot of colour seemed out of place atop so many sombre faces Kassi thought.

They were far enough north for a machine such as Sebastian to pass with indifference but the whole town was on edge due to the dragon and a new warrior sent ripples ahead of the

companions so that by the time they had entered the large market square a mass of people waited silently for them and the town elders were already massing atop a fine sweep of marble steps before the town hall.

Kassi felt uneasy. She had entered too many towns and villagers such as this where the women were seen as somehow less. Although the women here did not wear white dresses as in other places², she still had the impression that the women were no less caught even if no chains were in sight.

A lackey, obvious by his dull clothing and lack of colourful embroidery resplendent across the rest of the men standing before them, ran forward and greeted them, enquiring if she was indeed the Kassi they had heard of. She nodded and the lad led her up the steps to the men. Casually she wondered if anyone ever had difficulty traversing the ten steps upwards or if such guidance was needed only for her.

An elderly man stepped forward his face a mass of wrinkles set black against a chocolate skin. The wrinkles did NOT add any humour to his face and neither did his pale black eyes. “We welcome you Lord Kassi and thank you for answering our plea with such swiftness.” He bowed almost in two contradicting his age before straightening with some difficulty.

Kassi reciprocated and murmured a greeting of her own. They led her indoors, Sebastian happy to wait outside and explore the area more closely. They offered cold beer and warm breads with cheese, a local delicacy, and sat around their large circular table—inclusive to all Kassi noted, as long as you have a penis, or in her case a VERY large sword.

The old man who had greeted her was Elder Jonz and he spoke for the whole of Jorg explaining why they had need of a warrior. Eighteen months previous a dragon had settled into the caves found in the canyon south of the town. It had made its presence known by burning down two of the old houses on the outskirts of town and then nailing a proclamation onto the wooden doors of the town hall. Said edict demanded a virginal bride and a bag of coin to be left at the cave entrance on the next full moonline three days later.

The elders met and discussed their options eventually deciding to call the dragons bluff. Three nights later two more abandoned homes burst into flames. A note, catapulted into the square around a small rock, ensured the townsfolk that it could burn more houses down and that next time said houses would contain people. Then the dragon reiterated its demands; a girl and a bag of gold.

The very next night the Elder Jonz’s own great granddaughter had volunteered and she, with a hefty bag of silver and gold coin was tied to a rock. Come the morning the coin was gone and the burnt remains of the girl smouldered in the valley. Since then each full moonline the dragon had requested a bag of gold and a young girl. Now it named the girls it wished and each time a burnt pile of bones and flesh sat alongside the rock and the coin gone.

Twice they had paid for mighty knights to defeat the dragon and twice the knights had disappeared without trace. Some of the elders thought that they had perhaps left the girls for the dragon and taken the coin for themselves but no one could truly say what had happened.

² See [Kassi and the Tower of Women Part One](#) and [Part Two](#).

Still the dragon had requested more money after each knight as ‘payment for the extra work’ and so the thought stuck that the knights had abandoned the town and the girls.

They showed Kassi the notes. All neatly written and grammatically correct. Fine penmanship—or plural as there were at least four different hands behind the letters - for a beast alleged to have claws. They brought in the witnesses who all described many fantastical beasts but who never quite agreed on the details. In one account the dragon flew on silvery wings. In another it had thick leathery wings a hundred feet long. It was scaled; it was furred. It stood as tall as the mountains, or slightly higher than a man. It was red or black or yellow even. It gleamed in the moonlight or passed as a shadow. In truth no one had seen the beast—other than the poor abandoned girls obviously.

They brought in the families ‘devastated’ by the loss of a daughter—although almost to a man they did not exhibit much sense of loss. Instead tales of wilful children and times wasted in trying to ‘correct’ such bad behaviours slipped out. More often than not the girls were close to marrying age and had protested at the suitor/choice/cousin picked out for them. One or two had even tried to run away before the dragon came. Surprisingly they had stayed now that the beast was here and eating young girls!

Kassi agreed to stake out the cave later that night and was introduced to the latest girl, Becca Stanton, who appeared above all else bored with the whole proceedings. Afterwards she had a word with Sebastian.

“We need to speak to the girls,” she said bluntly.

“Well I understand why you would say that. The houses that ‘burnt’ down still had faint remains of petrol.”

“The ‘dragon’ sprayed petrol down on the houses?”

“Interestingly no. The interiors of the derelict houses were dosed in petrol and then set alight.”

“And no one has actually SEEN this dragon. Besides it appears to be rather well educated and handy with a pen,” Kassi added.

“But without proof,” her friend said.

“And you don’t consider the missing pigs proof?” she asked sarcastically.

“It is true that they have all occurred around the time that the moonline is brightest, what once was called full moon, but from different farms dotted around the countryside. There is nothing conclusive,” Sebastian said carefully. “We would not have encountered the issue if we had not rode through a number of the farms as we travelled here.

Kassi nodded silently and thought back to their journey through the town. The women huddled away and sheltered from the sunline. It had been explained that the ‘women-folk were delicate and needed extra protection from the sunline’ hence the wide brimmed hats. (Odd, she thought, that I need no such protection; nor any man.) Colourful as they were Kassi still saw them as a means to keep the women apart. The girls were expected to have a lesser

education centring on homecare and embroidery and one of the common complaints about the ‘eaten’ girls was that they were too interested in reading and less so on embroidering. Kassi again thanked the builders that her own parents had allowed her to be just who she was. She saw so much of her own teenage years in the girls that it hurt.

She had reiterated that they needed to talk with the remaining girls but Sebastian again pointed out the lack of anything concrete. So they had followed Becca to the valley and watched as she was tied to the large rock and the bag of coins left. One wasted night later the sunline was coming back to life and there had been—surprise, surprise—no sign of any dragon.

Becca glanced around her eyes hidden beneath a fringe of deep brown hair. Sullen as she was Kassi still wanted to understand what was happening, although she had a fairly good idea, and so to extradite the matter she swung her broad sword around and planted it before the girl saying. “You can use that key of yours to unlock the chains. I’m not letting you out.”

The girl stared up at Kassi.

“What!? Did you think me blind that I can’t see a sleight of hand between friends? Barbrae slipped the key into your palm at your last hug.” Kassi leant heavily on the hilt of her sword and glowered at the girl.

“We may get an answer, Kassi luv. A number of girls are coming in from the town.”

{The cave?} she asked.

{Scans still show it to be empty. I think it is just what it purports to be. An old entrance to an abandoned mine. Most of it has been backfilled. I doubt anything but a mouse sized dragon would be comfortable staying in there.}

Kassi recognised the five girls who accumulated around them nervously. Becca’s sister Targrina, Barbrae, Heathor, Cristine and Gretinne. It was no surprise that these six were the ones mostly seen as troublemakers in Jorg. The swordsmith sheathed her weapon and smiled her warmest smile. “So? Does anyone feel like telling us the truth or do we cut it out of you?”

All six girls stepped back a look of fear on each face. Kassi felt a wave of tutting from Sebastian who stepped forward and said. “My companion is ill-versed in polite society. She often believes that direct—physical—action is required when all she need do is wait and someone will come forward and explain.”

Good bot/bad swordswoman. It worked almost every time.

Barbrae was the eldest and she hesitantly spoke up. “We . . . we meant no harm. We just . . . wanted to be free. Like our friends.” Slowly her voice grew stronger as she continued. “It was Shellennâ Jonz, the Elders great granddaughter who came up with the idea. There is so little we girls can do. What study is allocated to us deals with food and household. Those of us who wish to know more are not allowed to.”

“Except you found a way?” Kassi asked softly.

Barbrae nodded. "Not all the women in Jorg wish us ill. Some reached out and taught us reading and writing. Allowed us to study history and even Sigh." Sigh was the word used for scientist/magician. "There were stories and Shell, Shellennâ, discovered one about a mighty dragon who each year takes a princess. She came up with the idea of creating a dragon who would demand a virgin each month."

"And the bag of coins?" Sebastian asked.

"To pay for a new life away from Jorg and all of its constrictions."

"The knights?" Kassi asked.

"One, Henri, was quite taken with Millicent and so they eloped. The other was easy to pay off. The bag of coins more than equalled the amount of pay given to him by the Elders."

"So why not offer us the coin?" Kassi queried.

"We were unsure if you would accept." She looked at Sebastian. "The machine may not have needed coin."

Becca spoke. "We even considered whether you may . . . like one of us. We would even do that to be free but you showed no interest."

Kassi smiled. "Perhaps in a few years or so. And I am flattered but really you should curtail that sort of thought. There's desperate and then there's DESPERATE! There are some who will take advantage of that."

Barbrae continued. "So we've all come here to plead with you; as a sister."

All six looked at Kassi in desperation and even she felt her heart soften a little.

"So where was this going to end?" she asked finally.

The girls looked at each other in puzzled silence.

She continued. "You have been fortunate thus far not to get caught. But how many more of you would be able to escape? All of you? Perhaps four more or five? How would the last girl collect the key? Are there others in town? What of the men?"

Becca suddenly said. "Don and Anfon. They would wish to escape."

The other five looked at her and she added. "Well they would! Neither wish to be farmers all their life nor do they feel comfortable with the brides their families have chosen."

Gretinne added with a giggle. "Those two would feel uncomfortable with ANY woman!"

"So you would leave these two men to suffer as you did?" Kassi asked.

The girls squirmed uncomfortably.

Sebastian took up Kassi refrain. "You wish for Jorg to be perhaps freer than it is but can you not see that by leaving you rob it of any chance of developing. Each of you takes away a vibrancy that will be missed. Your voices should add to the town."

"But if we stay we HAVE no voice!" Barbrae insisted.

"Then we must find a way to bring not only your voices forward but this situation to a satisfactory conclusion; for all involved," the bot answered.

Kassi said softly. "You cannot continue. Running away solves nothing and yes I understand that staying puts you more at risk. But if we can 'nudge' the elders a little life may become more tolerable."

The sunline was well lit when Kassi returned with Becca. The town lined the streets as the two women walked into the square and stood before the Elders. The old men looked pleased and sent a lackey to collect the bag of coin that Kassi held up triumphantly. The crowd roared its approval and surged forward to better glimpse the swordsmith who had freed the town. The young woman smiled knowing what was about to come.

She raised a hand and lowered it silencing the crowd and then loudly she spoke to the Elders. "The dragon still lives! And she brings news that is at once good yet disquieting."

A ripple went through the crowd as Kassi spoke and one of the elders gasped.

"SHE!? The monster is a woman?"

"Aye!" Kassi continued loudly so that all could hear. "She sensed the fear many women in Jorg felt. Aye and many of the men also. She recoiled at the pain many feel and was drawn here to alleviate what suffering she could."

"Preposterous!" Jonz shouted out in anger. "What fear? What pain? We were free of such until it arrived bringing death in its wake."

"SHE brought no death. Instead she saw how many were treated here. Given menial tasks. Expected to do little more than be serfs for other, older people." Kassi looked directly at the group of Elders and then caught the eye of as many men in the crowd as she could. Many of the men looked away in embarrassment. "She wished only for ALL to live free and so called upon you to bring a young girl to her each month." Kassi waited a beat before carrying on. "People of Jorg I bring news that all your daughters are safe and well. The dragon did NOT eat anyone but instead used the money so freely given by the elders of this town to aid your children."

The square erupted into bedlam at the news and Kassi alongside Becca were jostled.

"BUT!" Kassi shouted above the uproar. "She is pleased that now you have sent me, a woman with whom she can speak for only a woman can hear a dragon such as this." Which wasn't a lie, Kassi conceded. As the dragon didn't exist only she could 'hear' it. "Behold what she could have wrought upon your town."

There was a high pitched roar that echoed emptily in the sky and suddenly a shadow ran across the thin clouds. Beyond the town three empty houses erupted into flames—which died surprisingly easily—and the dragons cry grew loud. The people of Jorg began to cry out in fear and many fell to their knees in prayer to the Builders. Many of the Elders knelt also, Jonz included, and Kassi took the opportunity to climb the steps and call out for calm.

“Do not worry. She will not harm you but only asks that you listen to her as she calls out through me.” Kassi flung herself dramatically to her knees and lifted her head towards the sunline. She opened her mouth and waited.

“People of Jorg.” A deep baritone echoed in the square and—if an observer had been particularly attentive—did not really come from the warrior kneeling before them. “I have answered the pain that many have felt but wish only to aid you all. I had no desire to rob you of your young daughters but had until this time no voice with which to speak to you. IF you change your ways and treat all with equality and brotherly concern then there will be no further need for me to rescue your children. Promise me that and I shall leave.” The voice paused. “Of course I will not travel far and if I see that have turned back to your fallen ways I will have to return and bring desolation once again upon your homes. Only this time I may not care whether they are empty.”

Bad bot/Good Swordsmith. It made a change.

“The girls will know how to contact me and I will pass on to that wonderful machine of delicate beauty and forceful intellect, that rare creature of grace, a way in which the Elders of the town will know that any message will be from me.”

A final empty house exploded into flames. Kassi stood looking very much like she had just recovered from dragon possession and stepped up to Jonz handing him a list of changes the ‘dragon’ expected from the town.

It was five days later after a hearty midmorning snack that Kassi was finally ready to leave. The raft of changes were still sinking in but if Kassi was honest she thought that the whole hatless thing would not last long. It was summer and none of the girls were actually used to the blazing sunline at midday. She gave them a week and their first bout of sunstroke for the hats to return. But in other ways the changes were settling in easily. Schooling for both boys and girls had been implemented—after all the mothers were thankful to have fewer children running around the house—and the oldest woman had been inaugurated into the Elders.

Some of the men, and a surprising number of women, grumbled at the changes, but the idea of a dragon swooping down and frying them kept the most recalcitrant in check. Kassi had refused the bag of gold offered at first but when Sebastian showed how low their own coffers were she finally gave in. She even accepted a basket of their finest cheeses but only because the mechanoid swore that they upset his delicate chemical sensors. She wondered how long she could keep hold of them before the smell got to her also.

As they strolled out in the bright sunshine Kassi asked. “Do you think it will work?”

“Possibly. Definitely at first; but I have my doubts for any long term stability. I mean we have just given a dragon into the hands of six young girls.”

“Do you think they’ll abuse it?”

“I am afraid it is in a human’s nature to ‘slip’ a little,” Sebastian said wearily.

“With great power comes great temptation,” Kassi replied flatly.

“Exactly. Still we have done all we can. If it had been left to the girls then either none of them would be left or someone would have been hurt. Better the ‘dragon’ takes the blame than the girls.”

“And of course, oh he of delicate beauty and forceful intellect, the Elders have a way of knowing if the girls try to bring in something new.”

“Yes. The dragon will never actually reappear but to stop the girls from using ‘her’ I made sure that only with a specific password would the elders be sure.”

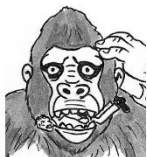
“What was the word?” Kassi asked.

“There was none. The girls will try of course. But whenever they approach the elders with a guessed password the elders will know it to be false. If the dragon ever needs to speak it will do so without recourse to such things.”

They carried on northwards. The cheese lasting for ten days.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)



They're coming to
get you and they
want your funny
bone!

**IT CAME FROM INSIDE
THE INKWELL!**

Delightfully Dreadful
Comics
crawling out of the
pen of
Vincent Davis.



Vincent Davis ©2019.

A DRINK OF DJINN by Harris Coverley

The air strikes had devastated the camp, and in a fit of fear, as the missiles hit, Tarif Chowdari had fled south, deep into the Syrian Desert. His commitment to the cause of a new and pure Islamic caliphate had already been waning. He had left the safety of Britain to be shot at by Kurdish peshmerga and Iranian special forces, bombed by the Western infidels he had hoped to escape, and had been forced to clean toilets rather than die in the honourable martyrdom he desired. The obliteration of the camp had been his opportunity to effect a resignation without literally losing his head, but after walking eight miles into the bone dry steppes with a small piece of shrapnel lodged below his right knee, he wondered if he had made the right decision.

Trying to escape the sun's angry glare, he slipped into a deep gulley formed by a long dead river. His battered canteen, already half-empty at the outset, was nearly drained as he sat on a short rock. He checked his wound: not greening just yet, but maybe soon.

He was only twenty-three, and he had forsaken a lot to just end up here: good credit on an engineering degree at the University of Huddersfield, part ownership of the Atisara Balti and Kebab House on Chelmsford Road in Bradford, and the hand of Rehnah Sarkar in a cordially arranged marriage, a young woman who was no Mawra Hocane, but whom at least could roll a decent naan, and understood the sheer importance of Eazy-E's solo work to the whole gangsta rap genre. He had tried to get her to leave with him, but she had assumed that the whole thing was an elaborate joke, so he just left for Turkey the day after without a goodbye, believing that he could have his pick of the groupies once he got to the caliphate. Unfortunately, jihadi women wanted a warrior, not some glorified janitor as he had become.

He looked up at the mid-afternoon sun: still blazing hot, as it would be for many hours. He missed English rain...he had thought living in the Levant would be like one lifelong beach holiday, but there were no beaches, no seaside, and definitely no fun and games. No grime music allowed either, nor weed, as he had sorely discovered.

Not planning ahead, as always, he drank the last of his water before cursing himself. He threw the canteen down and faced the inevitable: if he didn't burn out in the sun in the next hour, he would freeze to death in the night. And if he did survive the night, either his former comrades or enemy troops would cut him down. His only hope would be to travel in a north-easterly direction and try to surrender to the Kurds, who even amongst jihadis were well-regarded for their relatively lenient treatment of POWs, unlike the forces of the Syrian and Iranian states, not to mention competing jihadi groups. Deciding that this would be his best chance to escape his self-imposed hell—maybe even a ticket back to Blighty, even if it meant a few years of prison and so-called “deradicalisation”—he made to stand, only for the pain of his leg wound to hit him like a shower of knives. He fell onto his right side and nearly passed out, but managed to stop himself when he saw the bottle sticking out of the sand.

The bottle had clearly been there for some time: its shape was still obvious, but it was caked with centuries of dust and its true original colour was indiscernible. It had survived everything from Mongol hordes, to Ottoman cannons, to the rogue Abrams tank blast.

Tarif could make out the cork, and on the verge of choking to death on sand, he reached for the bottle and edged it out of the ground. He didn't care what liquid it was; it was something to sustain his life a little longer. If it was poison, it would at any rate end things that bit

quicker. With his last bit of strength he dug his nails into the petrified cork and pulled it out, the cork crumbling into granules between his fingers.

He raised the bottle upside down above his open mouth, but no fluid trickled down. However, as he made to throw it against the gulley's edge in defeat, a black smoke began to pour from the neck. In terror he dropped it and scrambled back against the rocky slope.

From its new position on the sands the bottle continued to empty smoke until it formed a dark cloud across the gulley, blocking out the sun. As Tarif watched, certain he had died and was now being punished for his sins, the cloud pulsed and began to collapse in on itself, slowly forming into a humanoid shape. Within moments, the large figure of a man, dressed in dark traditional Arabian robes and with a flowing black beard, had materialised, floating two metres in the air, surrounded by a gloomy aura, and still obscuring the sun.

"I am Maaj, Ifrit of Altamaniyat," the figure said in a powerful but velvety voice. "For releasing me from my captivity I am bound to grant you three wishes for anything you desire."

If this is hell, thought Tarif, managing to stand, then this is a very weird way of starting off my eternal punishment.

Tarif and the Ifrit stared at each other for what seemed like an aeon, before the latter demanded, "Make your wishes, boy! I have so many things to attend to that have languished in my absence."

Tarif realised that a childhood trope had strangely come true—this was no hallucination, this really was some genie offering him three wishes. Or if it was an hallucination, there was nothing left to lose from playing along.

Tarif nearly choked on his words as he managed to sound: "Water! Please water!"

The Ifrit replied, "Faealah."

New dark clouds spread out from behind Maaj, and made a roof across the gulley. The rains came softly, and Tarif could hardly believe it. The droplets fell thicker and faster, and soon Tarif was drinking directly from the sky. Thirst quenched, he began to rub the water into his leg wound, and realised what had to be his next wish.

He looked up: "For my second wish, I want my wound healed."

The Ifrit looked at him affronted, before Tarif remembered his manners: "Please, please that is." Tarif smiled awkwardly, and Maaj replied: "Faealah."

Within seconds the shrapnel was sucked out of the wound, the entire injuring played in reverse. It was healed! Tarif could walk in a straight line again.

He thanked the Ifrit profusely, but Maaj responded, "Thank me not, for I am bound, just give me your third and final wish."

Tarif knew immediately what he wanted: to go back to Britain without consequence, to return to life as it was the day before he left. As the rain continued to fall, he began to articulate this wish, but stopped himself. He had perhaps wasted his first two wishes on minor things. Before him was a genie, a being of seemingly infinite power. He could wish for anything, anything at all. He could wish for the World, or he could wish for it to be—

“Well?” asked the Ifrit, hands on his hips. “Please, I cannot convey how strongly I must be getting on with my true responsibilities...”

“The apocalypse,” said Tarif with a self-satisfied grin. It was what the leadership of the caliphate wanted, and he was to be the one to bring it about. To hell with them all! He could be the new Caliph, the next Prophet even, the true imparter of God’s Will.

“The apocalypse?” questioned the Ifrit, his confidence leaving him a little.

“You don’t know what an apocalypse is?” asked Tarif, somewhat surprised. “It’s when the call of the—”

“You insolent fool!” raged Maaj. “I have seen many empires rise and fall! I fought against Humbaba, and the monsters that came after him! I wrote verses with Omar Khayyam, and gave notes to Ibn Sina! I know all there is to know about the world, up to the point of my imprisonment.”

“Then bring about the apocalypse,” said Tarif. “The storms, the thunder, the deluge...all of it.”

The Ifrit thought back through the millennia, and remembered that, when he was still a young spirit, the Tigris had flooded badly enough that a madman by the name of Nürh had built a large boat and loaded it with live animals (who subsequently ate each other), asserting that the end of the entire world was imminent. Maaj thought that this “apocalypse” was as good as any, and began to turn up the volume of the still falling rain.

Tarif was confused as the rain fell harder and fiercer, and he noticed that the base of the gully had begun to fill. He realised what was happening and made to run, only to catch his left foot on a dead branch and fall into the mud. His ankle twisted, he called up to Maaj, now rising into the sky: “No, not this! Apocalypse! The world in Armageddon! Don’t leave me here!”

The Ifrit, finally able to depart to get back to his immaterial matters, called back: “I thought this is what you wanted? Besides, suicide by drowning is not all that bad, or so I’ve been told!”

Tarif damned the laughing Ifrit as he crawled through the mud, trying to climb the slope, but instead he slipped down lower and lower, blinded by the storm, the cruel downpour biting at his skin. As the water rose above his shoulders, he slid into the drink and tried to swim, but only succeeded in twisting his other ankle. He wondered what his Mum was cooking for tea that night, and slipped under the waterline, succumbing to his folly. The water continued filling up to the gully’s edges, some draining away in a temporary stream, before the rains petered out and the clouds dispersed. And so, Lake Tarif was brought into existence, sitting sweetly in a rugged sea of sand, if just for a time.

Two days later, a peshmerga patrol came upon the shrinking lake within the gulley, now barely a pond. They were puzzled at such an unusual sight, although freak rainfalls had been known to occur in the region. They were a little amused however at the sight of a young jihadi floating face down in the middle of the water, recognising his allegiance through his black fatigues, having little sympathy for any foreigner who had come to brutalise their lands, rape their women, and enslave their children.

One of them remarked, knowing the hypocrisy of many jihadi fighters, “He must have been drunk on gin!” He had no idea how close he was to the truth.

They opted just to leave the body for the foxes, the water soon to totally evaporate, and carried on their beat.

Such was the demise of the idiot terrorist Tarif Chowdari.

So, the morals of the story are: be grateful for what you have, don’t talk to strangers, and always try to stay hydrated—but not too much.

THE END

Harris Coverley has short fiction published or forthcoming in Curiosities, Planet Scumm, and The J.J. Outré Review, as well as poetry in Star Line, Scifaikuest, and Jitter. He lives in Manchester, England.

[Return to Contents](#)

THE OTHERS by Louis Kasatkin

When winter's cadence sounds,
burn their pictures
the photographs of the dead
burn them,
so that they shan't
trouble you again
when winter's cadence sounds;
the gardens are shrouded
in snow
upon which no earthly foot
will fall,
and the door chimes dormant
hang suspended by a thread
of your own disbelief;
an imperceptible menace
waiting for a breath,
a snap of cold winter's
air to cut the thread
and send it crashing,
crashing onto the floor,
where you shan't hear it
except in your imagination's
ear firmly fixed on the
sound of winter's cadence.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

SPARKS by Walter G Esselman

Sara walked swiftly, desperate to get out of this freaking cold.

The stupid skirt for her stupid school uniform felt way too short. And Tiffany Saunders had thrown her sweats into the shower after gym. At least Sara suspected it was her by the way she was grinning.

And Sister Esther was no help in finding who did it, as usual.

So Sara's bare legs were nearly frostbitten. Regardless, she was still veering around the park.

Sister Caladose would grumble, "I don't know what happens in that park at night."

But Sara knew exactly what kind of predators hunted there, and she would not go near it at night. For that matter, she would not go near it during the day either.

Suddenly, there was a flash in the woods. That slowed Sara's stride, but the cold kept her feet from stopping completely. She watched the wood, but there was nothing more.

Sara attempted to hitch up her backpack into a more comfortable position. Right now though, it was filled with all her school books, and probably weighed 3.2 metric tons.

Like Sara herself, the pack barely held together.

Part of her wanted to get a new backpack, but she was not going to even try.

First, she would have to ask her foster father for money, and he was pretty strapped for cash right now. And second, she had gotten this backpack with her Mother on their last day together.

Inside the park, a strange lady exploded out of the tree line. The woman fell and hit the ground, but managed to turn it into a roll.

Sara stumbled to a halt as the strange lady came up in a crouch, almost like a martial artist. The lady was wearing a yellow and black outfit that made her look like a pissed off hornet. But now, it was torn, and flecked with blood.

The woman suddenly noticed Sara.

"Run!" said the strange lady quickly. "Run away f..."

While the woman had been distracted, something jumped out of the trees. It picked her up without stopping.

The strange lady gave an involuntary cry.

The thing that had grabbed her ran past a street lamp, and Sara saw it more clearly. It had a mottled reptilian hide and strode on powerful legs. Behind it was a thick tail. Definitely not the everyday creeps from that park.

For a moment, Sara saw that the woman's face was firm, and resigned.

And then they were gone.

Deeper in the park, the strange lady was thrown to the ground. But she scrambled up and stretched out her hand.

However, that thing was faster. Its claws shredded her hand. The creature tried to swipe at her stomach, but she twisted just enough to save herself from being disembowelled. She jumped away from the thing to get some space. Her shredded hand felt like it was on fire.

The thing closed the distance though and backhanded her. She crashed to the ground and her vision went foggy. The creature knelt over her. One clawed hand ready to carve out her throat.

A backpack crashed into the thing's side. It staggered from the blow.

As it turned towards Sara, she was already swinging her heavy backpack again to get some serious velocity. The backpack smashed into the creature's jaw and teeth shattered.

The old pink backpack exploded, sending out books and paper in a cloud of academia.

The thing stumbled sideways, stunned.

Sara looked down at the strange lady, who was trying to stand.

"Hurry," ordered Sara when the thing jumped on her.

It bore her to the ground, but she fought the urge to panic. The thing's claws aimed towards her. Sara grabbed her Calculus book off the ground and held it up like a shield.

Its claws pierced right through to the last chapter, but then they stopped.

Sara was grinning in relief when the claws from the other hand slid into her stomach. Her breath exploded when the creature snatched them out.

The thing drew back its one hand and shook it to dislodge the Calculus book, but it stuck fast. When the creature turned to glare at Sara there was a bright flash, and the girl could not see for a moment.

Slowly, her vision cleared up.

The top of the creature's head was gone. It started to topple on top of her when the strange lady kicked it to one side. Distantly, Sara noticed silvery tattoos on the woman's dark skinned hand. They seemed to glow faintly.

"What was that?" asked Sara.

The strange lady glanced at Sara, but then did a double take.

“Oh no! Are you okay?” asked the strange lady. Her voice was still powerful, despite her many wounds.

“I’ve been better,” admitted Sara.

The girl tried to move, but found her body sluggish to react. Conversely, her mind raced about. On the plus side, she realized that there was no pain. Though she concluded that that was not a good thing. But back to the plus, no gym class with Tiffany tomorrow. Yay, she thought.

The strange lady almost chanted. “No, no, no. I need you to stay with me.” However, her voice was starting to sound distant.

The strange lady suddenly lost her balance. She fell heavily next to Sara in the grass. The girl wanted to reach out and help her, but could not.

“You can’t even be eighteen,” moaned the strange lady.

Then her face hardened. Thoughtfully, she squinted at Sara.

The girl suddenly felt self-conscious. That brought back her mind back into focus. “Um. What? Do I got monster ick on my face?”

The strange lady smiled gently. “Canadahar.”

“What?” asked Sara.

“My name is Canadahar,” explained the woman.

“Oh! Okay, I’m Sara.”

“You saved me with a pink backpack,” smiled the strange lady.

“Um, yeah. *Hello Kitty*.”

Canadahar’s face was very pale. Sara could now tell that the woman was older. Laugh lines brushed gently across the woman’s face.

“*Hello Kitty* no less,” muttered Canadahar with amusement.

The strange lady took a deep breath, as if readying herself. She struggled up to kneel above the girl.

“Careful there,” said Sara worriedly.

“This is the only way,” explained Canadahar, without explaining.

“Umm, what?”

“This is odd—I know!—but it will get better.”

Canadahar shot forward.

The strange lady kissed the girl hard. There was an odd tingle at Sara’s lips, and then her vision became clouded.

In that darkness, the young girl felt a silvery presence brush against her mind that was alien, but not hostile.

And Canadahar’s lips let go.

Sara blinked. Bizarrely, the woman seemed even older now, but there was a sense of peace in her eyes.

Suddenly, it felt like boiling water had been poured into Sara’s veins, and then it circled around, back towards her midsection. She bucked several times, and the strange lady held her hand in support. However, it soon passed.

“Sorry,” whispered Canadahar as she lost the strength to hold Sara’s hand. “Good luck and Thank y...”

The strange lady toppled sideways into the grass.

Sara wanted to reach out to her, and her hand moved this time. She touched Canadahar’s arm and gently shook it. But the strange lady did not respond. Pushing herself up, Sara leaned over.

“Lady?” asked Sara.

With a gentle push, she tipped Canadahar over onto her back. Looking at the woman’s face, Sara started.

Canadahar’s eyes were wide and empty.

Sara forced herself to her feet.

“Help... hel...” slurred Sara.

The young girl tried to form the words, but she was unable to. Still, she had to get help. Her legs wobbled under her, but she managed a half dozen steps towards the edge of the park.

Suddenly, she could go no farther.

Tumbling to the grass, Sara felt like an observer inside her own body. First, her legs stopped responding once again, but then her arms as well.

There was a shout nearby.

Sara tried to talk, but nothing came out. Her head finally lost control and lolled onto the ground. Freshly cut grass stuck in her mouth and tickled her lips.

She thought of dying here in this park. Would anyone—other than Sister Caladose—miss her? Not the girls at school, she thought darkly. Not them.

The voice was getting closer, and a light played across Canadahar.

“Jesus, Joseph and Mary!” cried out a male voice in horror. “Chief! Aw no! Stick with us! You’re not going to get out of this fight that easily.”

A man knelt quickly beside the strange lady. He tried to perform CPR, tried to get Canadahar’s heart pumping.

“Ya shouldn’t have taken on that wee beastie yourself,” said the man. He checked Canadahar’s pulse at her neck. His shoulders slumped.

One last word slipped out. “No.”

After a long moment, he looked up in surprise at Sara.

“Who?” demanded the man, but then his eyes grew wide. He leapt up and ran over to her.

“Bloody hell! Are you Binding?” asked the man, and he dropped down next to her.

“Wha...” tried Sara.

Gently, the man pushed Sara onto her back, and the young girl was grateful to get the grass out of her mouth. He leaned over Sara.

Now, she could see him better. He wore a leather jacket over a white button up shirt, and had a Bowler hat tipped at a jaunty angle. He attempted a smile.

“Hello there,” he said in a working class British accent. “You’re going to be alright! My name’s Dodge, and I’m going to take care of you.”

“Who...” tried Sara

“You’ve been given a Spark,” said the man, Dodge. “Your muscles are all locked up—except for the essential organ-things—which is actually good, ‘cause you could hurt yourself, spazzing about. Unless you have a seizure of course.”

“Huh?” grunted Sara.

“Don’t worry, that’s rare,” assured Dodge. “But when it was me in that spot, I felt like I’d been rolled in bees, and then dipped in lemon juice. Fun times!”

“Ow...” said Sara, and she tried a smile.

“That’s it,” grinned Dodge. “Don’t let the bastards keep you down.”

In the distance, there was a shrill cry.

“Shite, that’s not good,” said Dodge looking up. He looked back at Sara. “Okay, I’m going to call our back-up. It should’ve been right behind us.”

He pulled out his phone and hit a pre-programmed number. “This is Dodge, where are you?”

“We’re still thirty minutes inbound,” replied the plane’s pilot.

“Are you shitting me?” asked Dodge. “We’re in real trouble here.”

“There was a maintenance issue,” said the pilot earnestly. “We kept trying to call you, but this is the first time we’ve gotten through. What’s going on?”

Furious, Dodge ground his teeth, but then he stopped and took a deep breath. “Okay, not your fault. I need you to relay to the office. Ready?”

“Ready,” replied the pilot.

“The Lioness has Fallen, I repeat, the Lioness has Fallen. The city of Cook’s Pass has lit up like a Christmas tree. And I’ve got a Squirrel that’s Binding.”

“Shit! I mean...the Lioness?” said the pilot. “Oh shit.”

“Company’s coming, so we have to move,” said Dodge. “Call me when you’re over town.”

“Can you fly outta there?” asked the pilot.

“Not with a Squirrel,” replied Dodge. “If she has a seizure...well, I’ve seen it go badly.”

“But, if you need to,” insisted the pilot worriedly. “Couldn’t you...”

“You never met Bob,” said Dodge.

“Wasn’t he the guy who blew his arms off?” asked the pilot.

“Yep, that’s the bunny. But before that, he tried to carry a Squirrel, who had a seizure in mid-flight. They smacked right into a building fifteen stories up. Wham. And if there hadn’t been a balcony beneath...well...”

“Okay,” said the pilot. “We’re coming in as fast as we can.”

Dodge put away his phone and looked down at Sara. “Okay love, we’re going for walkies. I’ll have to carry you.”

“I need to go home,” said Sara, suddenly realizing that a strange man was standing over her.

“Too dangerous,” he said with a shake of his head. “There’s more of those beasties out there. And I need to keep you safe.”

“I don’t even...’ said Sara, but then her vision swam.

The howls were getting closer, and the sound scared her, right down to her bones.

“It’s okay that you can’t move,” soothed Dodge.

Sara tried and found that her limbs were starting to respond again, but very sluggishly.

“Are you shitting me?” whispered Dodge. “How’re you doing that?”

“Wha...?” asked Sara, and her teeth were chattering.

“Never mind that, love,” said Dodge, and he took off his jacket. With swift movements, he got it on her while she sat, and then he zipped it up.

“You don’t...” began Sara weakly, but the warmth was wonderful.

“Nonsense,” replied Dodge absently. “Let’s get you outta here.”

Dodge put his arm under her shoulders, and helped prop her up. He started to reach under her legs, which gave her a start. She turned away and got onto her hands and knees.

“The hell?” muttered Dodge.

But then he heard a sound from close by as Sara stood up unsteadily.

“Right, no time for that,” he said.

Dodge grabbed her arm and put it over his shoulder. She started to pull away, but he held her wrist tight.

“It’s a miracle that you can move at all,” he growled. “Now quit fussing, and let Uncle Dodge save you.”

Sara stopped resisting, but then she focused on something at her feet.

“Books,” she said.

“We don’t have time,” said Dodge. He started to propel her away past a tree, but she grabbed a low hanging branch.

“Need...” she slurred.

“You do realize that there’re monsters comin’ to eat us, right?” asked Dodge testily.

“Books,” insisted Sara.

Dodge made a low growl, but then he pushed her against the tree.

“Hold that,” he ordered.

The English man let her go and started grabbing books. Spotting the *Hello Kitty* backpack, he scooped up her books and even pried the Calc book off the monster’s claws. Awkwardly, he held the bag close, and then he grabbed her around the waist.

“These weigh a ton. Can we go now?” he growled.

Sara relented, and she let him steer her away from the fallen woman and the dead monster. When they were over ten feet away, Dodge pushed her against another tree.

“Hold onto the nice tree, love,” he said. She saw him take something off his belt and press a button. But then he hesitated. “Doesn’t seem fair.” He spoke louder. “Sorry Chief, and Thank you.”

Dodge threw a small, rectangular item, which fell neatly between Canadahar and the creature. He grabbed Sara again and quickly propelled her away.

Sara tried to make a noise, and it came out like a squeak.

“Best not to look back,” said Dodge. There was a *whomp* behind them, and the trees lit up all around them. “That was a plasma BBQ bomb. Won’t leave anything left. Not fair to the Chief, but what can you do? I know what her orders would be right now.”

Sara blinked as she tried to process it all.

They turned away from some approaching police sirens, and Sara saw the fire behind them. Where Canadahar and the monster had been—not to mention her homework, she thought muzzily—was a scorched divot with nothing left, not even bones.

“Just over this way,” said Dodge. “Just need to put a few steps between us, and the boys in blue, unless—of course—they’re birds in blue.”

Crossing the street, they stumbled and staggered between two stores into an alley.

“Alley...bad,” mumbled Sara.

“How’re you even able to talk,” wondered Dodge. “Much less backseat drive.”

Dodge steered her down the dingy alley and he made a sharp turn. She tried to keep track of where they were going, but her brain kept swimming away.

“Oh!” she cried out suddenly in concern.

“What?” asked Dodge as he looked around for danger.

“I’m gonna have to restart my Calc homework,” she moaned.

“I think we got more pressing issues,” said Dodge.

“Sister Kaitlyn wouldn’t agree,” sniffed Sara.

The young girl drifted in and out of consciousness. Putting one foot in front of another was taking all her energy.

Soon, they were in a new place surrounded by factories. Two of the creatures were high-tailing it away.

“Hah!” grinned Dodge. He had glowing metal tattoos on his arm now. “That’ll teach ‘em.”

She closed her eyes briefly.

Sara awoke in a room. She was laying down on a semi clean floor beside a desk. Her head hurt and felt oddly crowded. She looked up.

Where am I? she wondered. How did I get there?

Sara remembered someone carrying her. They had not given her much choice.

Was she kidnapped? she wondered in alarm.

A man walked from a door to a window, looking out.

Sara’s heart began to race wildly and she panicked.

Her hand snapped up. A distant part of her brain was pretty sure that she had not had intricate metallic tattoos on her hand yesterday. Sister Agnes would definitely have made a sharp, and derisive, comment about that. Nor did her hands ever glow before, she was sure of that. The bolt of energy that left her hand blew a hole in the wall near the man’s head.

“Whoa!” cried the man. “What’re you doing? It’s me! Dodge! I’m here to help.”

“Help?” asked Sara with a slurred voice.

“Yes! Help!” said Dodge in exasperation. “You’ve got something in you. It may seem weird now—and really, really scary—but you’ll be alright.”

Sara turned to look at her hand. The metal tattoos were disappearing; fading into her skin. What? she wondered.

“A symbiote, a Spark, has attached itself to you. ‘Binding’ is what we call it,” explained Dodge. “One of the things it does is give you the ability to fight, defend yourself by firing energy bolts, fly. I would like to add that Uncle Dodge is not one of the ones you need to defend yourself against. ‘Schoolgirl’ is not my thing. Now, if you could put that arm down...”

Sara blinked at her arm. It was still outstretched towards him, and she could feel the metal tattoos—right under the skin—ready to activate at a moment’s notice.

Slowly, she lowered the arm, and Dodge relaxed.

“You are a wonder,” smiled Dodge in relief. “Most Squirrels can’t even light a candle. But then there’s you, nearly taking my head off, as if you were the Lioness herself.”

Sara squinted in confusion. “Squirrel?”

“Yep, you’re a Squirrel,” said Dodge. “That’s another term you’ll learn. Means you just got a symbiote, but you got no idea what you’re doing.”

Dodge’s head snapped towards the window.

“Looks like the Threshers are not having any luck,” he said with a grin. “Poor little scabby dogs.”

Sara touched her stomach through the jacket, and it was still a little tender. Though she knew—on some level—that puncture wounds from the monster were now all healed.

“That...thing stabbed me with its claws,” said Sara. “I thought I was going to die.”

“You probably were,” said Dodge.

Quickly, he moved back over to Sara. He grabbed a battered canvas bag from Trader Joe’s.

“Come on, break’s over,” he said. “Up and at ‘em.”

“Where’re you taking me?” asked Sara.

“Trying to find a safe patch until our transport arrives,” said Dodge.

Helping her up, Dodge took her out onto the factory floor and they moved across it. He took a door, and they entered into some more alleyways.

Dodge led her in silence. So, when her stomach grumbled, it was loud. He looked at her in concern.

Sara flushed with embarrassment. And then she felt perturbed that she had felt embarrassed.

Still, she automatically muttered. “Sorry.”

“Cripes, that’s really bad,” said Dodge quickly.

“What?” asked Sara in confusion.

“You need food,” insisted Dodge. He steered her towards Main Street and glanced out. “Ah, good, pubs.”

“I can’t drink,” said Sara.

“While I would kill for a pint,” grinned Dodge, “I’m actually looking for something that tags along.” He looked up and down the street. Soon he called out softly. “Ah! There we are!”

Pulling her along, they stumbled over to a hot dog vendor.

“When I was at Uni, we’d get a kebab after having too much,” explained Dodge. “But this’ll do nicely.”

The smell of hot dogs filled Sara’s nose, and she felt as light as a feather.

“Oh! That smells soooooo good,” she moaned.

“That’s the Spark talking,” said Dodge. “We gotta feed it before it eats you from the inside out.”

Sara laughed, but Dodge did not even crack a smile.

They reached the vendor, whose cart read “Diamond Dogs”.

“I’m gonna need a half dozen dogs,” said Dodge.

“Hungry?” asked Sara.

“It’s all for you,” said Dodge. “You need food.”

Dodge brought Sara to lean against the cart. He put down the Trader Joe’s bag, and the young girl looked inside.

“My books?” asked Sara in surprise.

“You practically twisted my arm until I grabbed them, love.”

“Why do you keep calling me ‘love’?” asked Sara.

“Huh? That?” responded Dodge absently. “Don’t mean nothin’ romantic. Just something we say back home—across the pond.”

The first dog was ready. Dodge took it and practically shoved it at her.

“Eat,” he ordered.

Part of her took exception to his tone, but then again, she was hungry. She took a dainty bite.

“Don’t stand on ceremony,” moaned Dodge. “This isn’t tea with the Queen Mum. Wolf It Down!”

Sara went past not caring. Her next bite took half the dog. Dodge pushed another into her hand. As soon as she was done with the first, she started in on the second one.

All the while, the hot dog vendor—Amir—was watching Dodge with weary eyes.

But then Sara noticed something pink in the bag of books. Leaning down, she found the edge of the pink backpack.

“You saved it,” she whispered.

“We already covered the ‘saving of the books’ love,” said Dodge.

“No, my backpack,” she said. “That ...my Mom got it for me on our last day together.”

Sara found herself getting a little *verklemt*.

“Please eat,” said Dodge gently. “Before you eat yourself.”

Sara obliged by having another hot dog.

“Is she okay?” asked Amir suddenly.

“Mind your business,” said Dodge off-handedly.

“She can’t be any older than my second daughter,” said Amir. The vendor looked at Sara. “Are you okay?”

“Apparently ...” started Sara, but then she looked at Dodge.

To the young girl, Dodge shrugged. “I’m not your keeper.”

“I think...I think that he’s trying to help,” said Sara. “And he did save my school books.”

“School is important,” nodded Amir. He handed her a Coke. “Here. On the house.”

They stepped away from the vendor and headed around a corner. Dodge’s phone went off.

“This is transport,” said a voice. “Can you fly up to a rooftop?”

“Still don’t dare,” said Dodge. “But we will be on a roof in a minute. Here is my location.”

Dodge pressed a button on his phone.

“Got it. We’re inbound,” replied the transport, and Dodge shut off the connection.

“Okay, transport’s here, but we need to get to the top of a building,” said Dodge. “Got to be an open door on one of these apartment buildings. Then up we go.”

Dodge tried one doorknob, but found that the front door was securely locked.

“That’s okay,” he said.

They walked down the sidewalk trying doorknobs, but all the apartment buildings were locked.

“Maybe we can find another way...” started Dodge, just as they stepped in front of an alley.

He stilled. Slowly, his eyes slid to peer into the darkness. And there within the alley were a half dozen glowing green eyes.

“Crikey,” muttered Dodge.

Grabbing Sara’s arm, he pushed her towards the next doorway.

“Was that...?” she asked.

“Oh yes!” he replied.

The door was locked. Dodge put out his hand and the silver tattoos appeared along his hand and forearm. A bolt of energy came out of his palm and blew the doorknob to pieces.

“Never was a big fan of subtle,” smirked Dodge.

Pushing Sara along, Dodge and her reached the stairs and started to run up. But she tired so quickly.

“The Chief wasn’t a big fan of subtle, either,” said Dodge wistfully.

Several Threshers appeared in the doorway to the building, and he fired at them. They backed away quickly.

Taking the stairs as fast as they could, Dodge would occasionally fire back to warn off anything that followed. They heard voices inside the apartments, but luckily no one came out to investigate.

Shortly, they reached the door to the roof, but he suddenly stopped.

“What?” asked Sara.

“They must think Uncle Dodge is stupid,” he said. Both hands, with the tattoos, glowed. He fired a shot through the door, but then through the walls on either side.

Kicking open the door, it banged into a dead Thresher.

Putting his shoulder into it, Dodge was able to get the door open, just enough to let them through.

There was an inhuman shriek behind them, inside the building. The Threshers, which had been herding them, now came after them at speed.

“Where the hell is the...?” started Dodge when he saw the transport ship above. The small shuttle swung around and stopped at the edge of the roof. Threshers crashed through the roof door and more appeared from the fire escape.

“Bloody hell,” muttered Dodge.

Firing energy bolts at the oncoming Threshers, he rushed Sara over to the shuttle.

The hatch in the side of the shuttle swung down to form a gangway.

A co-pilot leaned out. “Give me your hand.”

But Sara was still trying to process everything. She hesitated.

“Go on, love,” said Dodge as he nudged her. He tossed her bag of books inside, past the co-pilot.

The co-pilot took Sara’s wrist and pulled her—gently—into the shuttle.

“We got her,” said the co-pilot.

Dodge stepped onto the gangway himself when a Thresher came from his left. It tackled Dodge and they dropped into the dark space between buildings.

“Get us out of here!” called out the co-pilot.

The shuttle immediately rose and pulled away.

Sara gaped at Dodge’s sudden disappearance. She pulled away from the co-pilot, and looked over the edge. But Dodge was not holding on to the roof. And the space between the buildings was like a deep, dark hole.

A Thresher jumped from the edge of the roof and grabbed onto the gangway.

First Tiffany Saunders, and then this thing.

Sara saw red.

The silver tattoos on her arm came back and she fired a bolt right into its face. The creature tipped back and fell away.

With a guttural roar, Sara started firing at the monsters on the roof. Distantly, she saw other bolts hitting them, but she was too absorbed in her own attack. She could feel her body beginning to grow heavy, but still she fired on. However, the strength of the beams were quickly fading.

Finally, she had to lower her arm.

Sara was too exhausted to even cry.

“Now, that was impressive,” said a voice outside. “The lads are never gonna believe it.”

Stepping onto the outstretched gangway, Dodge looked at her with a mischievous grin. Behind him were skeletal wings made of a silvery metal.

“Can’t believe you were able to muster up the energy to fire anything, much less that volley. Mind you, it looked like fireworks at the end,” said Dodge with great amusement. “Hey! We could hire you out for your July Fourth.”

And Sara’s world went dark.

Slowly, Sara opened her eyes. She was in a mostly white room.

“Now, you’re not going to shoot me again, are you?” asked an amused voice.

Blinking, Sara looked over at Dodge who was sitting in a chair reading the Gideon’s Bible.

“Never found out how the Gideons could leave a bible in a hospital that isn’t even supposed to exist, but I’m not complaining,” said Dodge.

“How?” was all that Sara could manage.

“I know, right? The Gideons must be magic,” grinned Dodge.

Sara glared at him.

“I know what you mean,” chuckled Dodge unrepentantly. He stood up and silvery metal came out of his back to form small skeletal wings. “Oh!” he said in surprise. “Did I not mention that we can fly too? Could’ve sworn I did.”

“What?” asked Sara.

“Don’t worry,” said Dodge in a paternal tone as his wings retracted. “I’m going to explain it all.”

“Those monsters were real?” asked Sara tentatively.

“I’m afraid so,” said Dodge. He smiled. “But that is a discussion for another day. Right now, get better. And as for your books...”

Dodge nodded to her left.

Sara turned and saw that her *Hello Kitty* bookbag had been sown back together, and it was packed full of books.

She gave a huge grin.

“Backpack cost me a bottle of scotch,” grinned Dodge. “But I figure it was worth it!”

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

LITTLE CHANGES by Christopher T Dabrowski

Seas became dark, condensed, all looked like tar. Oceans became scarlet, condensed, becoming blood. Rivers spraying flames caught fire. The fresh breeze suddenly became like sulphur making the area stink. Human skin became dark, horny, covered with bristle. Appalled people in disbelief looked at their transformation. Horns, horns everywhere, whether young or old, thin, fat, bald... A boy or a girl, a hermaphrodite, a stranger or family, everyone had horns. And red eyes and tails!

You would think: *The end of the world!*

That's a mistake, it is the beginning of something new!

It was this: One day God's copyright became extinct. He was no longer, however, interested in earth. Satan ransomed earth. A guy of vision. Ransomed and... introduced little changes.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

THE LAST TERRAN by Blake Rogers

7 Place of Power

Arms bound before him, legs tied under the belly of a shaggy albino zymoron, Kroom was escorted across the icy landscape. Pale Sporn rode alongside, crude spears clutched in their leaf like hands. In the distance, the ground was beginning to rise, and through the snow and ice he could see what looked like some kind of building.

But it was still a long way off, and it would be a long ride across the plains of lichen and through the anemone forests. Stoically, Kroom endured the cold and the ache from his bound limbs and the constant rise and fall of the galloping mount.

After his abortive attack ended in his capture, the Sporn had taken him to a squalid native village much like the one belonging to their green cousins on the dayside, and here they had procured mounts for the rest of the journey. Soon they were riding across the plain of lichen.

There was much about this new world that disturbed the galactic warlord. Since his departure from Terra as a youth he had seen much magic wielded by the dwellers amongst the stars, encountered all manner of odd beings, but he had grown accustomed to this. Regardless of the sorcery at their command, the Old Ones were not immune to steel.

He had even learnt to wield sorcery himself, after a fashion, becoming a master of magical weaponry such as the Old Ones used. But now all that was dead and gone. Centuries had passed, the empire had fallen, other magics had taken the place of the sorcery he had known. That avaricious dwarf who had used the new magic to render him captive understood it all. But what had happened to him Kroom did not know. When the berserker rage had cleared, he had been a prisoner and Lod Jovis was gone.

Now he was being taken to the leader of the night side Sporn, or at least their intermediary. The scrying of the green Intermediary had revealed a similar building to her own, and it was here that Kroom guessed was his destination—his ultimate fate he did now know, but he knew that he would meet it with stoicism.

He looked down at the passing snows, and as he did his chin touched against the slave collar that encircled his neck. He was twice a prisoner. The shame burned though his mighty frame. What would his iron cohorts think of him, to fall prisoner not once but twice—to sorcery. They had soon learnt to kill wizards before they could cast their spells, learnt how to counter their sorcery. But in this strange new world, all that Kroom had learnt was gone and he was as abject a slave of the new sorcery as ever he was when first he ventured from Terra.

Riders galloped out from the anemone forests, and two groups of mounted Sporn met in the midst of the snowdrifts. The leaders communicated in a way that Kroom did not understand—doubtless sorcery of some kind, no words were uttered. But then the ranks of new riders parted and a small figure was brought forwards. Bound and thrust over one Sporn's saddlebow was an individual Kroom recognised.

‘Slave master,’ he said in a deep rumble.

Lod Jovis lifted his head painfully, blinking. To his surprise, he saw Kroom sitting astride a white furred zymoron in the middle of a second group of Sporn.

He snarled bitterly. 'So that's it,' he spat. 'You're one of them, are you? I thought that attack was faked.'

Unspeakingly, Kroom lifted up his bound paws, and Lod saw the truth. 'You got yourself captured, wizard?' he asked.

Lod Jovis scowled. What was the barbarian talking about? Taunting him because the Sporn had taken him prisoner? 'You got yourself captured first, lummoX,' he snapped. 'Your foolish attack! What did you expect other than to become their prisoner?'

'And I am their prisoner,' said Kroom placidly. 'Now you are too. They will take us to...'

A Sporn leader raised his hand and the Sporn began to ride.

In the cavalcade Kroom and Lod were separated. Lod was carried at the forefront, Kroom was somewhere behind him. What had the lummoX been trying to say? Did he know where they were to be taken? It had been troubling Lod's mind.

There was no way to talk with these Sporn. They lacked the telepathy of the Intermediary. Whether this was because their species was not able to communicate in such a way, or if the conditions on this side of the planet precluded such communication, Lod did not know. But he had seen that they possessed some means of communication amongst themselves. It did not involve spoken words, but hand gestures were required. Yet surely there was no way their leader could command by gestures alone. There must be something else...

He wished he had some developed telepathic ability himself, more than being able to receive telepathic messages. Not that he felt that he would enjoy a glimpse inside Kroom's mind—it must be a savage, primitive place, full of fears of the supernatural and brutish, violent desires. But if only he could talk to him now, somehow. It seemed that the barbarian knew their fate. Lod could only guess that they would be taken to some place of authority, where they would be, what, interrogated? Sacrificed?

He shuddered. Kroom's superstitious fears were contagious, it seemed. Surely that didn't happen in this modern galaxy. Maybe in the prehistoric empire from which he had come, but not these days. Then again, you heard stories... There were some remote planets where strange things went on. And Sporn was some little way from the main space lanes. If only he had bought passage on a reputable space liner, instead of sneaking aboard a freighter...

As they passed through the anemone forests, the land grew steeper. Lod thought that they were coming to the far edge of the lichen plains beyond the mountains. That theory was borne out by the temperature: it seemed to be growing even colder as they rode. The vegetation, such as it was, was rimed with frost and withered with cold. There was no sign of any animal life. Now numerous settlements rivalled the glittering star field above with their lights.

The land anemones fell away on either hand, and the luminescent snowy plain, and the Sporn and their mounts riding through it, was all that was visible. The wind was bitter, like the cold

of interstellar space. Lod had thought that the hold of the freighter in which he left Protea had been the coldest place he had ever known, but at least there he had been able to derive some warmth from the fuel pipes that ran along the walls, which had yielded some feeble kind of heat. Here on the night side of Sporn, the cold was a palpable thing, pressing down on him.

He felt his body beginning to die, no matter how much he had swathed his flesh in furs. Bound and hung over a saddlebow he had no chance to move, to keep his blood flowing. He was beginning to freeze until it was inevitable that he would wind up like those frozen carcasses of food beasts that had been stored in the freighter hold. The Sporn seemed to be immune at first, but as they rode further into the night side, Lod got the impression that even they were suffering. Where were they going? Somewhere so far into the cold that even the night side Sporn were affected.

At last they came out of the wind into the lea of the great domed building—the Place of Power, as the superstitious lummox called it. Pillars rose heavenward, holding the dome in place. Beneath it gaped an open space where stood a great trilithon of ancient mode. A palisade fenced off the open space, and they saw little more than the trilithon arch. In the palisade stood a hut like the administration centre where they had encountered the Intermediary. When the two prisoners were taken down from the zymorons, it was towards this humble edifice that they were directed at spear point.

Lod was glad to move his limbs, even though the moment he was freed he fell helplessly to the cold ground. Kroom hauled him up, glowering as the Sporn came to prick him to his feet with their spears.

‘Leave him,’ he growled. ‘Let him recover. The wizard is a weakling, for all his sorcerous powers. He needs time.’

Lod resented this, but he was too weak to utter anything more than a low growl. Kroom chafed his limbs, slowly restoring the circulation. Despite himself, Lod had to admire the barbarian’s resilience. Kroom had also been dragged as a prisoner across mile upon mile of dark, snowy terrain, but he showed few ill effects. Lod was convinced that he himself had contracted frostbite at the very least. It would be a surprise if he did not die of exposure; and yet Kroom stayed strong.

The Sporn waited patiently until Lod recovered, then advanced, spears levelled.

‘Come, wizard,’ Kroom rumbled. ‘Time to face our fate.’

‘That’s encouraging, lummox,’ sneered Lod. ‘They’re probably about to sacrifice us to their root mind, but oh yes, we must just face our fate.’ He looked angrily at a Sporn as its flint spear jabbed him in the arm. ‘Careful with that thing!’

The hut doors opened and they were led inside. With a sense of *déjà vu*, Lod saw a willowy female Sporn wearing a golden circlet. He was inevitably reminded of the Intermediary, but this female’s skin was the pale hue of the night side Sporn, not the green of the day-siders. Lod and Kroom were brought up by their guards.

She went to Lod and her circlet glowed. Lod heard the words reverberate in his mind.

Why have you invaded our country? Were you sent by our enemies of the dayside?

Lod coughed. 'He doesn't have any telepathic ability at all,' he said. 'He's mindless. You want to talk, you must address me.'

The night-side Sporn woman turned to scan him.

Before she had a chance, Kroom broke free of his guards, grabbed a spear from one, and ran, yelling a war cry, at the pale intermediary. Several night-side Sporn seized him by his legs and arms. He flung them off but more came, until he was swamped in them. Lod watched in dismay.

Inform your companion that resistance is futile, said the pale Intermediary.

'You prehistoric monstrosity!' Lod barked as the Sporn dragged Kroom away. 'Stop acting the fool! These Sporn are too strong!'

'Tell them that I accept their victory,' Kroom growled. 'What do they want of us?'

The Intermediary turned her featureless head towards Kroom.

We wish to know why you entered our lands. I cannot understand why I am unable to read your mind, barbarian. You cannot be mindless. We must examine you.

Another Sporn went to Kroom and placed his leaf shaped hand on the Terran's face. But the hand shot back involuntarily, as if it had received a shock.

Remarkable, said the Intermediary. *We have never encountered such a phenomenon before. This will require closer study. We must know why we cannot read your mind.*

'He's a boneheaded barbarian, that's all.' Lod laughed nervously. 'He has no mind to read. We're just wanderers, that's all. We blundered over into the dark side by mistake, and we'd really like to go back. In fact, we'd like to leave the planet. You don't have a spaceport here, do you, by any slight chance?'

The pale Intermediary dismissed him with a withering glance of her eyeless face, then spread her arms akimbo. With a humming sound, the wooden walls of the hut folded back, revealing the open space beneath the dome. The Sporn shambled up, urging the two off-worlders forwards.

Scowling at them Lod scurried forwards. Kroom strode into the space confidently. The Intermediary went before them, leading the way across the great echoing space.

Snow was piled up on the spikes of the palisade but not so much as a drift could be seen beneath the dome, and the temperature was entirely different, feeling like a balmy summer's day, much to Lod's surprise. Perhaps that was what had inspired the root mind of the night side Sporn to twine its tendrils around the hewn stones of the trilithon that stood upon the gleaming marble floor, like an intruder from an earlier, barbaric age. The great woody polyp he remembered from the hologram twitched and twisted back and forth, a green glowing light in its midst seeming to peer at them like a cyclopean eye.

The Sporn marched them up to the trilithon. The surrounding area was infested with a tracery of roots and tendrils, all having their origin in the polyp that hung from the capstone. In the shadow of the standing stones stood an altar, a single recumbent stone.

As the Intermediary halted before it, arms raised, Lod eyed it suspiciously. It looked horribly like a stone of sacrifice, the bloody altar of some forgotten cult. And the woody polyp would make a fine god for some stunted aboriginal tribe.

Now the Intermediary's voice rang out in Lod's mind.

At last you are in my presence, came the voice of the root mind. It was louder now, now that they stood before its source, though still it spoke through the crowned Intermediary. *The barbarian warrior and his gutter companion*. The polyp's eye shone green upon Kroom, then turned to Lod. Sweat ran down Lod's face, and his head ached as the green light blazed into his mind.

One of you is mindless, it is true, said the root mind's voice. *Even now, I cannot penetrate the barbarian's thoughts: he must have none. Strange that he can walk and talk, a mindless thing. But this other, this spoiled child of civilisation, has a mind entirely open to me. I see it all now. The plan. The plan of our enemies, the dayside Sporn. How their root mind plotted our destruction. Yet just as the dayside Sporn failed whenever they sent armies into these cold, dark lands, so too will you fail.* The voice rose into a shriek. *Kill them both, my Sporn! Kill them!*

As the Sporn rushed the duo, spears at the ready, Kroom brushed past the Intermediary, and leapt up onto the sacrificial stone. He stamped once on a carving.

The dark stone of the trilithons blazed up so bright they became like crystal, illuminating the entire dome. The Intermediary shrieked in Lod's mind. The polyp twisted wildly back and forth. A light blazed down from the capstone of the trilithon.

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

BURN, WITCH, BURN by A Merritt

VIII.—Nurse Walters' Diary

I TOOK McCann up with me to Ricori's bedside. Confrontation with his chief would be the supreme test, I felt, resolving one way or another all my doubts as to his sincerity. For I realized, almost immediately, that bizarre as had been the occurrences I have just narrated, each and all of them could have been a part of the elaborate hocus-pocus with which I had tentatively charged the gunman. The cutting off of the doll's head could have been a dramatic gesture designed to impress my imagination. It was he who had called my attention to the sinister reputation of the knotted cord. It was McCann who had found the pin. His fascination by the severed head might have been assumed. And the tossing of the match a calculated action designed to destroy evidence. I did not feel that I could trust my own peculiar reactions as valid.

And yet it was difficult to credit McCann with being so consummate an actor, so subtle a plotter. Ah, but he could be following the instructions of another mind capable of such subtleties. I wanted to trust McCann. I hoped that he would pass the test. Very earnestly I hoped it.

The test was ordained to failure. Ricori was fully conscious, wide awake, his mind probably as alert and sane as ever. But the lines of communication were still down. His mind had been freed, but not his body. The paralysis persisted, forbidding any muscular movements except the deep-seated unconscious reflexes essential to the continuance of life. He could not speak. His eyes looked up at me, bright and intelligent, but from an expressionless face... looked up at McCann with the same unchanging stare.

McCann whispered: "Can he hear?"

"I think so, but he has no way of telling us."

The gunman knelt beside the bed and took Ricori's hands in his. He said, clearly: "Everything's all right, boss. We're all on the job."

Not the utterance nor the behaviour of a guilty man—but then I had told him Ricori could not answer. I said to Ricori:

"You're coming through splendidly. You've had a severe shock, and I know the cause. I'd rather you were this way for a day or so than able to move about. I have a perfectly good medical reason for this. Don't worry, don't fret, try not to think of anything unpleasant. Let your mind relax. I'm going to give you a mild hypo. Don't fight it. Let yourself sleep."

I gave him the hypodermic, and watched with satisfaction its quick effect. It convinced me that he had heard.

I returned to my study with McCann. I was doing some hard thinking. There was no knowing how long Ricori would remain in the grip of the paralysis. He might awaken in an hour fully restored, or it might hold him for days. In the meantime there were three things I felt it necessary to ascertain. The first that a thorough watch was being kept upon the place where Ricori had gotten the doll; second, that everything possible be found out about the two

women McCann had described; third, what it was that had made Ricori go there. I had determined to take the gunman's story of the happenings at the store at their face value—for the moment at least. At the same time, I did not want to admit him into my confidence any more than was necessary.

"McCann," I began, "have you arranged to keep the doll store under constant surveillance, as we agreed last night?"

"You bet. A flea couldn't hop in or out without being spotted."

"Any reports?"

"The boys ringed the joint close to midnight. The front's all dark. There's a building in the back an' a space between it an' the rear of the joint. There's a window with a heavy shutter, but a line of light shows under it. About two o'clock this fish-white gal comes slipping up the street and gets in. The boys at the back hear a hell of a squalling, an' then the light goes out. This morning the gal opens the shop. After a while the hag shows up, too. They're covered, all right."

"What have you found out about them?"

"The hag calls herself Madame Mandilip. The gal's her niece. Or so she says. They rode in about eight months since. Nobody knows where from. Pay their bills regular. Seem to have plenty of money. Niece does all the marketing. The old woman never goes out. Keep to themselves like a pair of clams. Have strictly nothing to do with the neighbours. The hag has a bunch of special customers—rich-looking people many of them. Does two kinds of trade, it looks—regular dolls, an' what goes with 'em, an' special dolls which they say the old woman's a wonder at. Neighbours ain't a bit fond of 'em. Some of 'em think she's handling dope. That's all yet."

Special dolls? Rich people?

Rich people like the spinster Bailey, the banker Marshall?

Regular dolls—for people like the acrobat, the bricklayer? But these might have been "special" too, in ways McCann could not know.

"There's the store," he continued. "Back of it two or three rooms. Upstairs a big room like a storeroom. They rent the whole place. The hag an' the wench, they live in the rooms behind the store."

"Good work!" I applauded, and hesitated— "McCann, did the doll remind you of somebody?"

He studied me with narrowed eyes.

"You tell me," he said at last, dryly.

"Well—I thought it resembled Peters."

“Thought it resembled!” he exploded. “Resembled—hell! It was the lick-an’-spit of Peters!”

“Yet you said nothing to me of that. Why?” I asked, suspiciously.

“Well I’m damned-” he began, then caught himself. “I knowed you seen it. I thought you kept quiet account of Shevlin, an’ followed your lead. Afterwards you were so busy putting me through the jumps there wasn’t a chance.”

“Whoever made that doll must have known Peters quite well.” I passed over this dig. “Peters must have sat for the doll as one sits for an artist or a sculptor. Why did he do it? When did he do it? Why did anyone desire to make a doll like him?”

“Let me work on the hag for an hour an’ I’ll tell you,” he answered, grimly.

“No,” I shook my head. “Nothing of that sort until Ricori can talk. But maybe we can get some light in another way. Ricori had a purpose in going to that store. I know what it was. But I do not know what directed his attention to the store. I have reason to believe it was information he gained from Peters’ sister. Do you know her well enough to visit her and to draw from her what it was she told Ricori yesterday? Casually—tactfully—without telling her of Ricori’s illness?”

He said, bluntly: “Not without you give me more of a lead—Mollie’s no fool.”

“Very well. I am not aware whether Ricori told you, but the Darnley woman is dead. We think there is a connection between her death and Peters’ death. We think that it has something to do with the love of both of them for Mollie’s baby. The Darnley woman died precisely as Peters did-”

He whispered— “You mean with the same—trimmings?”

“Yes. We had reason to think that both might have picked up the—the disease—in the same place. Ricori thought that perhaps Mollie might know something which would identify that place. A place where both of them might have gone, not necessarily at the same time, and have been exposed to—the infection. Maybe even a deliberate infection by some ill-disposed person. Quite evidently what Ricori learned from Mollie sent him to the Mandilips. There is one awkward thing, however—unless Ricori told her yesterday, she does not know her brother is dead.”

“That’s right,” he nodded. “He gave orders about that.”

“If he did not tell her, you must not.”

“You’re holding back quite a lot, ain’t you, Doc?” He drew himself up to go.

“Yes,” I said, frankly. “But I’ve told you enough.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe.” He regarded me, sombrely. “Anyway, I’ll soon know if the boss broke the news to Mollie. If he did, it opens up the talk natural. If he didn’t—well, I’ll call you up after I’ve talked to her. *Hasta luego.*”

With this half-mocking adieu he took his departure. I went over to the remains of the doll upon the table. The nauseous puddle had hardened. In hardening it had roughly assumed the aspect of a flattened human body. It had a peculiarly unpleasant appearance, with the miniature ribs and the snapped wire of the spine glinting above it. I was overcoming my reluctance to collect the mess for analysis when Braile came in. I was so full of Ricori's awakening, and of what had occurred, that it was some time before I noticed his pallor and gravity. I stopped short in the recital of my doubts regarding McCann to ask him what was the matter.

"I woke up this morning thinking of Harriet," he said. "I knew the 4-9-1 code, if it was a code, could not have meant Diana. Suddenly it struck me that it might mean Diary. The idea kept haunting me. When I had a chance I took Robbins and went to the apartment. We searched, and found Harriet's diary. Here it is."

He handed me a little red-bound book. He said: "I've gone through it."

I opened the book. I set down the parts of it pertinent to the matter under review.

Nov. 3. Had a queer sort of experience today. Dropped down to Battery Park to look at the new fishes in the Aquarium. Had an hour or so afterwards and went poking around some of the old streets, looking for something to take home to Diana. Found the oddest little shop. Quaint and old looking with some of the loveliest dolls and dolls' clothes in the window I've ever seen. I stood looking at them and peeping into the shop through the window. There was a girl in the shop. Her back was turned to me. She turned suddenly and looked at me. She gave me the queerest kind of shock. Her face was white, without any colour whatever and her eyes were wide and sort of staring and frightened. She had a lot of hair, all ashen blonde and piled up on her head. She was the strangest looking girl I think I've ever seen. She stared at me for a full minute and I at her. Then she shook her head violently and made motions with her hands for me to go away. I was so astonished I could hardly believe my eyes. I was about to go in and ask her what on earth was the matter with her when I looked at my watch and found I had just time to get back to the hospital. I looked into the shop again and saw a door at the back beginning slowly to open. The girl made one last and it seemed almost despairing gesture. There was something about it that suddenly made me want to run. But I didn't. I did walk away though. I've puzzled about the thing all day. Also, besides being curious I'm a bit angry. The dolls and clothes are beautiful. What's wrong with me as a customer? I'm going to find out.

Nov. 5. I went back to the doll shop this afternoon. The mystery deepens. Only I don't think it's much of a mystery. I think the poor thing is a bit crazy. I didn't stop to look in the window but went right in the door. The white girl was at a little counter at the back. When she saw me her eyes looked more frightened than ever and I could see her tremble. I went up to her and she whispered, "Oh, why did you come back? I told you to go away!" I laughed, I couldn't help it, and I said: "You're the queerest shopkeeper I ever met. Don't you want people to buy your things?" She said low and very quickly: "It's too late! You can't go now! But don't touch anything. Don't touch anything she gives you. Don't touch anything she points out to you." And then in the most everyday way she said quite clearly: "Is there anything I can show you? We have everything for dolls." The transition was so abrupt that it was startling.

Then I saw that a door had opened in the back of the shop, the same door I had seen opening before, and that a woman was standing in it looking at me.

I gaped at her I don't know how long. She was so truly extraordinary. She must be almost six feet and heavy, with enormous breasts. Not fat. Powerful. She has a long face and her skin is brown. She has a distinct moustache and a mop of iron- grey hair.

It was her eyes that held me spellbound. They are simply enormous—black and so full of life! She must have a tremendous vitality. Or maybe it is the contrast with the white girl who seems to be drained of life. No, I'm sure she has a most unusual vitality. I had the queerest thrill when she was looking at me. I thought, nonsensically— "What big eyes you have, grandma!"

"The better to see you with, my dear!"

"What big teeth you have, grandma!"

"The better to eat you with, my dear!" (I'm not so sure though that it was all nonsense.) And she really has big teeth, strong and yellow. I said, quite stupidly: "How do you do?" She smiled and touched me with her hand and I felt another queer thrill. Her hands are the most beautiful I ever saw. So beautiful, they are uncanny. Long with tapering fingers and so white. Like the hands El Greco or Botticelli put on their women. I suppose that is what gave me the odd shock. They don't seem to belong to her immense coarse body at all. But neither do the eyes. The hands and the eyes go together. Yes, that's it.

She smiled and said: "You love beautiful things." Her voice belongs to hands and eyes. A deep rich glowing contralto. I could feel it go through me like an organ chord. I nodded. She said: "Then you shall see them, my dear. Come." She paid no attention to the girl. She turned to the door and I followed her. As I went through the door I looked back at the girl. She appeared more frightened than ever and distinctly I saw her lips form the word— "Remember."

The room she led me into was—well, I can't describe it. It was like her eyes and hands and voice. When I went into it I had the strange feeling that I was no longer in New York. Nor in America. Nor anywhere on earth, for that matter. I had the feeling that the only real place that existed was the room. It was frightening. The room was larger than it seemed possible it could be, judging from the size of the store. Perhaps it was the light that made it seem so. A soft mellow, dusky light. It is exquisitely panelled, even the ceiling. On one side there is nothing but these beautiful old dark panellings with carvings in very low relief covering them. There is a fireplace and a fire was burning in it. It was unusually warm but the warmth was not oppressive. There was a faint fragrant odour, probably from the burning wood. The furniture is old and exquisite too, but unfamiliar. There are some tapestries, clearly ancient. It is curious, but I find it difficult to recall clearly just what is in that room. All that is clear is its unfamiliar beauty. I do remember clearly an immense table, and I recall thinking of it as a "baronial board." And I remember intensely the round mirror, and I don't like to think of that.

I found myself telling her all about myself and about Diana, and how she loved beautiful things. She listened, and said in that deep, sweet voice, "She shall have one beautiful thing, my dear." She went to a cabinet and came to me with the loveliest doll I have ever seen. It

made me gasp when I thought how Di would love it. A little baby doll, and so life- like and exquisite.

“Would she like that?” she asked.

I said: “But I could never afford such a treasure. I’m poor.”

And she laughed, and said: “But I am not poor. This shall be yours when I have finished dressing it.”

It was rude, but I could not help saying: “You must be very, very rich to have all these lovely things. I wonder why you keep a doll store.”

And she laughed again and said, “Just to meet nice people like you, my dear.”

It was then I had the peculiar experience, with the mirror. It was round and I had looked and looked at it because it was like, I thought, the half of an immense globule of clearest water. Its frame was brown wood elaborately carved, and now and then the reflection of the carvings seemed to dance in the mirror like vegetation on the edge of a woodland pool when a breeze ruffles it. I had been wanting to look into it, and all at once the desire became irresistible. I walked to the mirror. I could see the whole room reflected in it. Just as though I were looking not at its image or my own image but into another similar room with a similar me peering out. And then there was a wavering and the reflection of the room became misty, although the reflection of myself was perfectly clear. Then I could see only myself, and I seemed to be getting smaller and smaller until I was no bigger than a large doll. I brought my face closer and the little face thrust itself forward. I shook my head and smiled, and it did the same. It was my reflection—but so small! And suddenly I felt frightened and shut my eyes tight. And when I looked in the mirror again everything was as it had been before.

I looked at my watch and was appalled at the time I had spent. I arose to go, still with the panicky feeling at my heart. She said: “Visit me again tomorrow, my dear. I will have the doll ready for you.” I thanked her and said I would. She went with me to the door of the shop. The girl did not look at me as I passed through.

Her name is Madame Mandilip. I am not going to her tomorrow nor ever again. She fascinates me but she makes me afraid. I don’t like the way I felt before the round mirror. And when I first looked into it and saw the whole room reflected, why didn’t I see her image in it? I did not! And although the room was lighted, I can’t remember seeing any windows or lamps. And that girl! And yet—Di would love the doll so!

Nov. 7. Queer how difficult it is to keep to my resolution not to return to Madame Mandilip. It makes me so restless! Last night I had a terrifying dream. I thought I was back in that room. I could see it distinctly. And suddenly I realized I was looking out into it. And that I was inside the mirror. I knew I was little. Like a doll. I was frightened and I beat against it, and fluttered against it like a moth against a windowpane. Then I saw two beautiful long white hands stretching out to me. They opened the mirror and caught me and I struggled and fought and tried to get away. I woke with my heart beating so hard it nigh smothered me. Di says I was crying out: “No! No! I won’t! No, I won’t!” over and over. She threw a pillow at me and I suppose that’s what awakened me.

Today I left the hospital at four, intending to go right home. I don't know what I could have been thinking about, but whatever it was I must have been mighty preoccupied. I woke up to find myself in the Subway station just getting on a Bowling Green train. That would have taken me to the Battery. I suppose absentmindedly I had set out for Madame Mandilip's. It gave me such a start that I almost ran out of the station and up to the street. I think I'm acting very stupidly. I always have prided myself on my common sense. I think I must consult Dr. Braille and see whether I'm becoming neurotic. There's no earthly reason why I shouldn't go to see Madame Mandilip. She is most interesting and certainly showed she liked me. It was so gracious of her to offer me that lovely doll. She must think me ungrateful and rude. And it would please Di so.

When I think of how I've been feeling about the mirror it makes me feel as childish as Alice in Wonderland or Through the Looking Glass, rather. Mirrors or any other reflecting surfaces make you see queer things sometimes. Probably the heat and the fragrance had a lot to do with it. I really don't know that Madame Mandilip wasn't reflected. I was too intent upon looking at myself. It's too absurd to run away and hide like a child from a witch. Yet that's precisely what I'm doing. If it weren't for that girl—but she certainly is a neurotic! I want to go, and I just don't see why I'm behaving so.

Nov. 10. Well, I'm glad I didn't persist in that ridiculous idea. Madame Mandilip is wonderful. Of course, there are some queer things I don't understand, but that's because she is so different from any one I've ever met and because when I get inside her room life becomes so different. When I leave, it's like going out of some enchanted castle into the prosiest kind of world. Yesterday afternoon I determined I'd go to see her straight from the hospital. The moment I made up my mind I felt as though a cloud had lifted from it. Gayer and happier than I've been for a week. When I went in the store the white girl—her name is Laschna—stared at me as though she was going to cry. She said, in the oddest choked voice, "Remember that I tried to save you!"

It seemed so funny that I laughed and laughed. Then Madame Mandilip opened the door, and when I looked at her eyes and heard her voice I knew why I was so light-hearted—it was like coming home after the most awful siege of home-sickness. The lovely room welcomed me. It really did. It's the only way I can describe it. I have the queer feeling that the room is as alive as Madame Mandilip. That it is a part of her—or rather, a part of the part of her that are her eyes and hands and voice. She didn't ask me why I had stayed away. She brought out the doll. It is more wonderful than ever. She has still some work to do on it. We sat and talked, and then she said: "I'd like to make a doll of you, my dear." Those were her exact words, and for just an instant I had a frightened feeling because I remembered my dream and saw myself fluttering inside the mirror and trying to get out. And then I realized it was just her way of speaking, and that she meant she would like to make a doll that looked like me. So I laughed and said, "Of course you can make a doll of me, Madame Mandilip." I wonder what nationality she is.

She laughed with me, her big eyes bigger than ever and very bright. She brought out some wax and began to model my head. Those beautiful long fingers worked rapidly as though each of them was a little artist in itself. I watched them, fascinated. I began to get sleepy, and sleepier and sleepier. She said, "My dear, I do wish you'd take off your clothes and let me model your whole body. Don't be shocked. I'm just an old woman."

I didn't mind at all, and I said sleepily, "Why, of course you can."

And I stood on a little stool and watched the wax taking shape under those white fingers until it had become a small and most perfect copy of me. I knew it was perfect, although I was so sleepy I could hardly see it. I was so sleepy Madame Mandilip had to help me dress, and then I must have gone sound asleep, because I woke up with quite a start to find her patting my hands and saying, "I'm sorry I tired you, child. Stay if you wish. But if you must go, it is growing late."

I looked at my watch and I was still so sleepy I could hardly see it, but I knew it was dreadfully late. Then Madame Mandilip pressed her hands over my eyes and suddenly I was wide awake. She said, "Come tomorrow and take the doll." I said, "I must pay you what I can afford." She said, "You've paid me in full, my dear, by letting me make a doll of you." Then we both laughed and I hurried out. The white girl was busy with someone, but I called "au 'voir" to her. Probably she didn't hear me, for she didn't answer.

Nov. 11. I have the doll and Diana is crazy about it! How glad I am I didn't surrender to that silly morbid feeling. Di has never had anything that has given her such happiness. She adores it! Sat again for Madame Mandilip this afternoon for the finishing touches on my own doll. She is a genius. Truly a genius! I wonder more than ever why she is content to run a little shop. She surely could take her place among the greatest of artists. The doll literally is me. She asked if she could cut some of my hair for its head and of course I let her. She tells me this doll is not the real doll she is going to make of me. That will be much larger. This is just the model from which she will work. I told her I thought this was perfect but she said the other would be of less perishable material. Maybe she will give me this one after she is finished with it. I was so anxious to take the baby doll home to Di that I didn't stay long. I smiled and spoke to Laschna as I went out, and she nodded to me although not very cordially. I wonder if she can be jealous.

Nov. 13. This is the first time I have felt like writing since that dreadful case of Mr. Peters on the morning of the 10th. I had just finished writing about Di's doll when the hospital called to say they wanted me on duty that night. Of course, I said I would come. Oh, but I wish I hadn't. I'll never forget that dreadful death. Never! I don't want to write or think about it.

When I came home that morning I could not sleep, and I tossed and tossed trying to get his face out of my mind. I thought I had schooled myself too well to be affected by any patient. But there was something—Then I thought that if there was anyone who could help me to forget, it would be Madame Mandilip. So about two o'clock I went down to see her. Madame was in the store with Laschna and seemed surprised to see me so early. And not so pleased as usual, or so I thought but perhaps it was my nervousness.

The moment I entered the lovely room I began to feel better. Madame had been doing something with wire on the table but I couldn't see what because she made me sit in a big comfortable chair, saying, "You look tired, child. Sit here and rest until I'm finished and here's an old picture book that will keep you interested."

She gave me a queer old book, long and narrow and it must have been very old because it was on vellum or something and the pictures and their colourings were like some of those

books that have come down from the Middle Ages, the kind the old monks used to paint. They were all scenes in forests or gardens and the flowers and trees were the queerest! There were no people or anything in them but you had the strangest feeling that if you had just a little better eyes you could see people or something behind them. I mean it was as though they were hiding behind the trees and flowers or among them and looking out at you.

I don't know how long I studied the pictures, trying and trying to see those hidden folk, but at last Madame called me. I went to the table with the book still in my hand. She said, "That's for the doll I am making of you. Take it up and see how cleverly it is done."

And she pointed to something made of wire on the table. I reached out to pick it up and then suddenly I saw that it was a skeleton. It was little, like a child's skeleton and all at once the face of Mr. Peters flashed in my mind and I screamed in a moment of perfectly crazy panic and threw out my hands. The book flew out of my hand and dropped on the little wire skeleton and there was a sharp twang and the skeleton seemed to jump.

I recovered myself immediately and I saw that the end of the wire had come loose and had cut the binding of the book and was still stuck in it. For a moment Madame was dreadfully angry. She caught my arm and squeezed it so it hurt and her eyes were furious and she said in the strangest voice, "Why did you do that? Answer me. Why?"

And she actually shook me. I don't blame her now, although then she really did frighten me, because she must have thought I did it deliberately. Then she saw how I was trembling and her eyes and voice became gentle and she said, "Something is troubling you, my dear. Tell me and perhaps I can help you."

She made me lie down upon a divan and sat beside me and stroked my hair and forehead and though I never discuss our cases to others I found myself pouring out the whole story of the Peters case. She asked who was the man who had brought him to the hospital and I said Dr. Lowell called him Ricori and I supposed he was the notorious gangster. Her hands made me feel quiet and nice and sleepy and I told her about Dr. Lowell and how great a doctor he is and how terribly I am in love in secret with Dr. B. I'm sorry I told her about the case. Never have I done such a thing. But I was so shaken and once I had begun I seemed to have to tell her everything.

Everything in my mind was so distorted that once when I had lifted my head to look at her I actually thought she was gloating. That shows how little I was like myself! After I had finished she told me to lie there and sleep and she would waken me when I wished. So I said I must go at four. I went right to sleep and woke up feeling rested and fine.

When I went out the little skeleton and book were still on the table, and I said I was so sorry about the book. She said, "Better the book than your hand, my dear. The wire might have snapped loose while you were handling it and given you a nasty cut." She wants me to bring down my nurse's dress so she can make a little one like it for the new doll.

Nov. 14. I wish I'd never gone to Madame Mandilip's. I wouldn't have had my foot scalded. But that's not the real reason I'm sorry. I couldn't put it in words if I tried. But I do wish I hadn't.

I took the nurse's costume down to her this afternoon. She made a little model of it very quickly. She was gay and sang me some of the most haunting little songs. I couldn't understand the words. She laughed when I asked her what the language was and said, "The language of the people who peeped at you from the pictures of the book, my dear."

That was a strange thing to say. How did she know I thought there were people hidden in the pictures? I do wish I'd never gone there. She brewed some tea and poured cups for us. And then just as she was handing me mine her elbow struck the teapot and overturned it and the scalding tea poured right down over my right foot. It pained atrociously. She took off the shoe and stripped off the stocking and spread salve of some sort over the scald. She said it would take out the pain and heal it immediately. It did stop the pain, and when I came home I could hardly believe my eyes. Job wouldn't believe it had really been scalded.

Madame Mandilip was terribly distressed about it. At least she seemed to be. I wonder why she didn't go to the door with me as usual. She didn't. She stayed in the room. The white girl, Laschna, was close to the door when I went out into the store. She looked at the bandage on my foot and I told her it had been scalded but Madame had dressed it. She didn't even say she was sorry. As I went out I looked at her and said a bit angrily, "Goodbye." Her eyes filled with tears and she looked at me in the strangest way and shook her head and said "Au 'voir!" I looked at her again as I shut the door and the tears were rolling down her cheeks. I wonder—why? (I wish I had never gone to Madame Mandilip!!!)

Nov. 15. Foot all healed. I haven't the slightest desire to return to Madame Mandilip's. I shall never go there again. I wish I could destroy that doll she gave me for Di. But it would break the child's heart.

Nov. 20. Still no desire to see her. I find I'm forgetting all about her. The only time I think of her is when I see Di's doll. I'm glad! So glad I want to dance and sing. I'll never see her again.

But dear God how I wish I never had seen her! And still I don't know why.

This was the last reference to Madame Mandilip in Nurse Walters' diary. She died on the morning of November 25.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

13: Polaris Hunts the Bear

NEITHER Polaris nor the girl was contented to rest all the hours away on the grassy terraces of the gateway, but wandered together through the valley, learning more of its wonders. Everywhere they found industry. Men and women worked in their little farm plots and vineyards, tending the fruits and grains in which the valley was rich; many of them akin to those known in the outside world, and others which would have made a life study for a botanist.

In all Sardanes the work was so apportioned that the products of the soil and of the craftsman supplied evenly the demands of the valley dwellers. In one section lived and laboured the weavers and the dyers of cloths; in another the makers of sandals and articles of leather; and in a roomy stone smithy they found Kard the Smith and his men, the workers in metal, beating 'out buckles and jewellery, daggers, spears, and implements of many other uses.

Not many of the smiths were necessary, for the metal in which they worked was of incredible hardness and durability, and was tempered by the smiths to a fineness beyond any steel. It was that which had first attracted the attention of Polaris in the Hunter's Road, when he found the dagger of Kard gleaming in the snow path. Ilium it was named, and it was mined from the volcanic rock far up in the mountainside.

Other metals were found in the rocks, but none of a quality to compare with ilium, or none that had its iridescent beauty. Gems they also knew, and many an ornament worn by the Sardanian men and maids flashed with bright stones. One variety, of a wonderful rich, red lustre, Rose Emer thought were rubies, but she was not enough versed in gem learning to be sure. If they were rubies, they were of immense value, for they were of large sizes, and most of them were flawless to their depths.

On the wall in the library of Kalin the priest hung a necklace of such, containing a full score of magnificent stones, each of many carats weight, fairly well cut into facets by the Sardanian lapidaries who had fashioned them. Each stone was set in a ring of the glittering ilium, attached one to another with links of the metal.

One innovation the strangers took into the valley that was hailed with acclaim. Until the advent of Polaris and Rose Emer not a button was known in the length of the land. Everything sartorial was fastened with buckles.

Sardanian craftsmen and housewives were quick to note the uses of the perforated disks, and buttons were straightaway the new fashion, and were sewn on all garments. When enough were placed to answer their purpose of holding things together still more were added for ornament, until some of the Sardanian robes bore no distant likeness to the creations of a Parisian *modiste*, with their rows of holeless buttons.

ON THE fifth day after their interview with the Prince Helicon, Kard the Smith came to the gateway to repay the visit, and to bring an invitation to Polaris to go out with a party of the hunters along the Hunters' Road to the edge of the wilderness to hunt the white bear.

Six Sardanians made up the hunting party, of whom two were Kard the Smith and Morolas, one of the tall brothers of Helicon. All were armed with spears tipped with ilium blades, axes, and daggers, and they drove with them a four-pony sledge, with which to take home their game.

Much as Polaris would have liked to take with him the seven dogs, he did not, for he dared not risk the lives of the animals in the fierce sport. With the death of his dogs would die also his last chances of winning back on the way to the North.

Some hours along the snow-path they discovered the first signs of the game which they sought, the white bear. The sledge was halted and the ponies outspanned. One of the Sardanian hunters was left to keep the camp, and the rest of the party set out on the fresh trail.

Less than a mile away across the snow hummocks they came in sight of their quarry, a magnificent specimen of the king of the pole lands, sleek arid fat and powerful from the good feeding he had found in the temperate vicinity of the smoky hills.

“There is the bear. Now, stranger of the snows, how dost thou take him?” said Morolas. “I understand that thou hast taken many of his kind single-handed—unless indeed that necklace of thine was plucked from dead bones.”

Paying no attention whatever to the open sneer in the words of the prince, Polaris made his preparation. He was too much pleased with the prospect of the action before him to be nettled by the peevishness of the Sardanian prince. Smilingly he loosened the long knife in his belt, took a firm grip of his spear, one of his own steel bladed shafts, and crept forward across the snows where the monster awaited the coming of the foe.

For the bear had seen them, and paused, grumbling and sniffing, to discover if these new animals might not be worth his trouble as a meal.

PLENTY of temper had that bear. Before the man was within thirty feet of him he stopped the slow swaying of his massive head, emitted a snarling roar, and charged. Polaris stood at the dip of a slope in the snow, alert and watchful for his chance to leap and thrust.

As the avalanche of angry bear dashed down the incline its claws slipped on an icy crusting, and it rolled, folding its head in almost to its belly, like a huge snowball, scratching furiously at the snow crust to stop itself and regain its footing.

Straight at the man it shot, and as it reached him he sprang aside.

The same mischance that had upset the animal now proved the undoing of the man's well-aimed thrust. As he drew back his arm to strike, Polaris felt his feet flying from under him.

By exercising all of his tigerish agility he prevented himself from rolling right under the ponderous body of his antagonist. Backward he threw himself, struck a softer spot in the snow crust, and disappeared in it up to his shoulders.

Had Bruin stopped to consider his predicament, that would have been a tight situation for Polaris; but the enraged mountain of flesh paid no further attention to him. Instead his scrambled to his feet at the foot of the slope, snarling more viciously than ever because of his downfall, and charged on into the group of Sardanians. Before they could realize what was happening, and that Polaris had failed to wound or turn the animal, he was upon them. They scattered, thrusting their spears as they leaped from the path of the monster.

One of them, Kard the Smith, was not so fortunate as the rest. He stood directly in the path of the charge. As he leaped to one side a huge paw whirled in the air and one of the curved talons caught in the slack of his rough tunic, hurling him down as a mouse is spun from the claw of a cat. Before his companions could return to his aid the bear was tearing at the prostrate body of the smith.

As soon as he fell through the snow crust Polaris threw himself forward on his face along the surface, seeking a spot that would allow him to stand upright. In an instant he was on his feet and forward in the wake of the furious bear. His spear had fallen from his hand when he broke into the soft snow, and had glided away over the glary crust for many feet. There was no time to regain it if he was to aid Kard. Plucking the knife from his belt, he rushed in.

Seeming to sense the new danger, the bear whirled on its haunches, and, holding the body of the Sardanian beneath it with one forepaw, struck out madly at Polaris with the other.

Polaris evaded the sweep of the blow by the smallest margin. He had thrown off his gloves, and he caught the long hair on the flail-like paw with his left hand. As the bear drew in his paw to deliver another buffet, the man came with it.

Never in all his bear fights had he come to grips with one of the antarctic monarchs from the front in this wise; but there was no help for it if he would save the smith. He was swept in against the wide chest of the animal, and its terrible front paws were closed to crush him as it raised one armed hind leg to rip him with its down-stroke, and at the same time strove to bend its head down and tear with its jaws.

Menaced by the triple attack, Polaris threw his left arm over his head and jammed his elbow into the throat of the bear below the angle of its jaw, thrusting upward with all the power of his body. At the same instant, quick as a wrestler, he passed one leg over the rising hind leg of the bear.

For the space of an eye flicker the two stood, statuesque, in the snow. Then the man jerked back his shoulders, raised his right arm, and buried the long knife in the white throat.

Twice he stabbed home, and, feeling the clutching forepaws slacken, let himself go limp, slid from the embrace of the bear, and sprawled in the snow alongside the smith. He seized Kard, and with him rolled from under the toppling, roaring mass of the enemy, which floundered in the snow. It was the end for the bear, however. Tearing in agony at its wounded throat, it reared again and fell backward, struggling terribly in the release of life.

All had happened in a matter of seconds. Kard, snatched from the very jaws of death, stood gaping at the dying bear, unhurt aside from a bad scare. Beside him, Polaris, his white surcoat streaked with blood, stooped and cleaned his knife in the snow. The other Sardanians trooped

back somewhat sheepishly, all of them eyeing Polaris with manifest admiration—all save Morolas, whose face was flushed, and in whose eye was an ugly glint of anger or annoyance.’

“Methinks thou wert somewhat late, stranger,” he growled, “and nearly was Kard gathered to his fathers because of thy clumsiness.”

In the face of the facts, the futility of his remark caused Polaris to laugh aloud.

“In second thought I left him to thee, prince,” he said, “and did but take up the matter again when I saw thee otherwise occupied.”

Morolas framed a hot retort, but thought better of it and swallowed it unsaid. “Methinks thy laughter ill-timed,” he muttered grimly to himself. But Kard without a word seized the hand of Polaris, and bent and kissed it. Morolas frowned the more.

Polaris recovered his spear. With thongs the five men dragged the huge carcass of the bear back to where they had left the pony sledge, and loaded it on the sledge.

ONE more bear they met that day, much smaller than the first. It was dispatched easily by the party, who bore it down with their spears. In that conflict the honours fell more to the share of Morolas, and that seemed partially to restore his temper. In Morolas dwelt a wild and unpleasant spirit, unbridled by the discipline with which Helicon, the prince, controlled himself, and in direct contrast to the sunny soul of his twin brother, Minos, known in Sardanes as the “open-handed.”

Presently they returned to the sledge, packed on it the carcass of the second bear, and made ready for their return to the city. Polaris laid aside his long spear and bent himself to the task of making fast the bulky corpses of their quarry. Where there was work afoot he was never backward. Indeed, in the long, weary years of their lonely life, work and study were all that had kept wholesome the minds and bodies of himself and his father.

While he bent to make fast the last knot the other Sardanians drew away from the sledge. He heard a scuffling in the snow and a sharp cry from Kard the Smith— “It shall not be, Morolas!” followed by a snap like a breaking stick.

Between his left arm and his body a flash of light darted as the sun’s rays glittered on the ilium tip of a hurled spear, and the weapon was buried in the side of the carcass which he had been making fast.

He whirled on his heel. Morolas stood with his body still bowed and outstretched arm as he had cast the spear. Kard had sprung in between, and it was his weapon with which he had struck that of the prince that had sounded like a breaking shaft. He had spoiled the aim of Morolas, and surely saved the life of Polaris.

Back of the prince stood the other four hunters with weapons poised.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)