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Issue Number Two

MAGAZINE



ARE YOU READY FOR THE
SECRET OF THE AMAZON QUEEN?

LOST CONTINENT LIBRARY Magazine

“Where Adventure Lives Forever!”

VOLUME ONE Issue Number 2

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ON THE HORIZON

A woman stands in a jungle, wearing a beaded bikini and a feathered headdress. The background is filled with dense foliage and sunlight filtering through the trees.

NO CELL PHONES
NO GPS
NO COMMANDOS
IN HELICOPTERS
TO SAVE YOUR ASS

CAN YOU HANDLE IT?

ADVENTURE.
PURE...
AND SIMPLY
DANGEROUS

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CHIEF'S LOG

Wow! The response to our premier issue was unexpected but much appreciated!

It was very important to me to get this issue out on a rather quick turnaround, since the first issue took so long. I am quite pleased with how well this issue has come together. Of course, it helps when there are a lot of great writers out there and so much in the genre that has gone forgotten or unnoticed, in the case of the younger fans. It's a lot of fun knowing that many readers will find the movies we review and the writers we revisit new and fresh.

With this issue, I wanted to present more of the truly classic elements of a particular era of our beloved genre. Talbot Mundy is considered by many to be the master of the genre as we know it, yet many have never even heard of him; or if they have, they haven't actually read his works. *GUNGA DIN* is another of those icons known by name but not actually seen, amazingly enough. Of course, there is more new fiction, and another installment of our popular treat of the graphic novel *WONDER OF THE WORLDS* by Sesh Heri (who also wrote the internationally known novel it's based upon). I am especially excited to present our first serialization! *SECRET OF THE AMAZON QUEEN* by E.A. Guest kicks off our serialized novel series. There is also the real-life adventure article by soon-to-be a popular name among modern explorers, Craig Guggolz; plus our movie reviews and the lovely LCL adventure girls.

Once again, we offer a whole treasure chest of adventure entertainment.

Welcome back!

-- *Editor-in-Chief*

FIELD CABLES

Our premier issue did quite well and we received the following:

RON HANNAH of **Wildcat Books** says of our premier issue:

"WOW... I am truly impressed with this! It's top-notch from cover to cover, and the lavish use of color really makes this e-zine stand out. Kudos to everyone involved with this... It's REALLY GREAT..."

KEN HOGLAND writes:

"OUTSTANDING! Thank you for all the obvious hard work you have put into this."

SPENCER MABRY of **Benbrook, TX**, writes:

"This is absolutely worth waiting for. And I loved the article on "The Secret of the Incas". I wish, like you, that it could be released on DVD - - maybe with the new Indiana Jones movie coming out in May, there could be a release of those "influential" movies."

Send in those letters or emails for the upcoming issues!

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DOUBLE-BARRELLED PIRATE ACTION!

Two Classics You Must Have in Your Collection



CAPTAIN BLOOD (1935)

"Marvelous action sequences, extremely intelligent dialogue, and spirited direction" are what Danny Peary says in the *GUIDE FOR THE FILM FANATIC* – and it's not about Disney's film series. Peary was commenting upon the 1935 classic *CAPTAIN BLOOD* starring Errol Flynn and Olivia DeHavilland. And while Mr. Depp's well-crafted character may be popular, you simply cannot deny Basil Rathbone's masterful depiction of a rogue at sea.

CAPTAIN BLOOD is the film that rocketed Flynn to stardom and I have yet to watch it with any female who did not swoon at the then-young star at his youthful peak. Fortunately for us guys, Flynn displays that rare quality in male movie stars that makes him OK to watch a movie for, and in *CAPTAIN BLOOD*, Flynn is worthy of the praise.

The film is based upon Rafael Sabatini's novel and depicts the unjust political imprisonment of a successful English doctor who aids a wounded insurgent. Banished to a penal colony on Jamaica, Peter Blood gets his bellyful of tyrannical oppression, and his eye-ful of the lovely governor's niece, captivated by the speech and movements of the characters as they lead you through the story. It's not surprising that the film was based on a book,

portrayed by a young Olivia DeHavilland, also at the peak of her charms. Blood leads an escape of prisoners and they all band together to become one of the most feared and successful pirate crews to sail the Caribbean. No pirate is more fair than Captain Peter Blood, and no crew more loyal, and this is proven as Blood is contrasted against the colorful and treacherous Capitaine Levasseur, portrayed by Rathbone in his youthful glory, and when Blood and crew receive vindication by political upheavals in England.

What I love most about this movie is its measured visual texture and captivating performances. Contemporary films tend to overload the visual detail to compensate for weak story and routine acting. *CAPTAIN BLOOD* blends the right amount of detail with an enjoyable photographic style to capture that wonderful realistic fantasy atmosphere as opposed to overdone realism. I don't know about you, but I don't watch movies to experience reality. The scenes in the beginning are almost Germanic in their impressionistic cinema look, and the casual opulence of the pirate lair backdrops inspires images of great pulp era art. What's most important is that you find yourself

and even more satisfying because this film is a product before the era of produce-according-to-market-research. The action sequences inspired all

pirate movies that followed, and this film still stands as the great pirate classic among serious adventure film nuts. Last time I watched it, I had hair below my shoulders and was tempted to grow a thin moustache to emulate that Basil Rathbone/Levasseur look - that's how cool he is in this great movie. The DVD is currently available

including a documentary look at the making of the film. Directed by Michael Curtiz, *CAPTAIN BLOOD* (1935) is one you must not let sail away!

CAPTAIN BLOOD, B&W available from Warner Bros Video.



THE BLACK SWAN (1942)

For a great visual journey through the high seas of literary piracy, you have got to see this film. Based upon yet another novel by Rafael Sabatini, author of *Captain Blood*. The opening shots are living Wyeth paintings, with the rich colors and deeply textured sets and costuming. Although wartime regulations prevented filming in even coastal waters (forcing the seagoing scenes to be shot on 12-acre Lake Powers at the Fox back lot!), the producers insisted on using the lush jungle beauty of Cuba, Jamaica, Mexico and British Honduras for the actual backdrops for many scenes. "No sets or camera illusions could ever duplicate the beauty of the actual country," comments director Henry King in the film notes of the Fox Studio Classics DVD release. It paid off, because this picture won the Academy Award in 1942 for Best Cinematography and it shows gloriously on screen.

The Black Swan depicts the exploits of buccaneer Henry Morgan, who led pirate raids

for years in the Caribbean, now serving as governor of Jamaica and tasked with eradicating piracy. Tyrone Power stars as a reformed pirate himself who gives up aiding the governor to kidnap the beautiful and feisty Lady Margaret and return to the high seas adventures - or does he? Looking as beautiful as ever, Maureen O'Hara is a delight, especially in Technicolor - a cinematic technology made for women of her palette, in my opinion. Two more great reasons to see this film are George Sanders, who is as iconic a movie pirate as Rathbone was in *Captain Blood*, and Anthony Quinn. Ultimately, adapted for the screen by the great Ben Hecht, you'll be glad you saw this one.

The Los Angeles Times called this film "The archetypal Technicolor swashbuckler - a timeless pleasure!"

If you're a Tyrone Power fan (and it's hard not to be if you love adventure cinema), or even if you simply love pirate movies, don't miss the boat on *The Black Swan*.

The Black Swan, Technicolor, available from Fox Home Entertainment

-- WALTER BOSLEY

ALEC BALDWIN

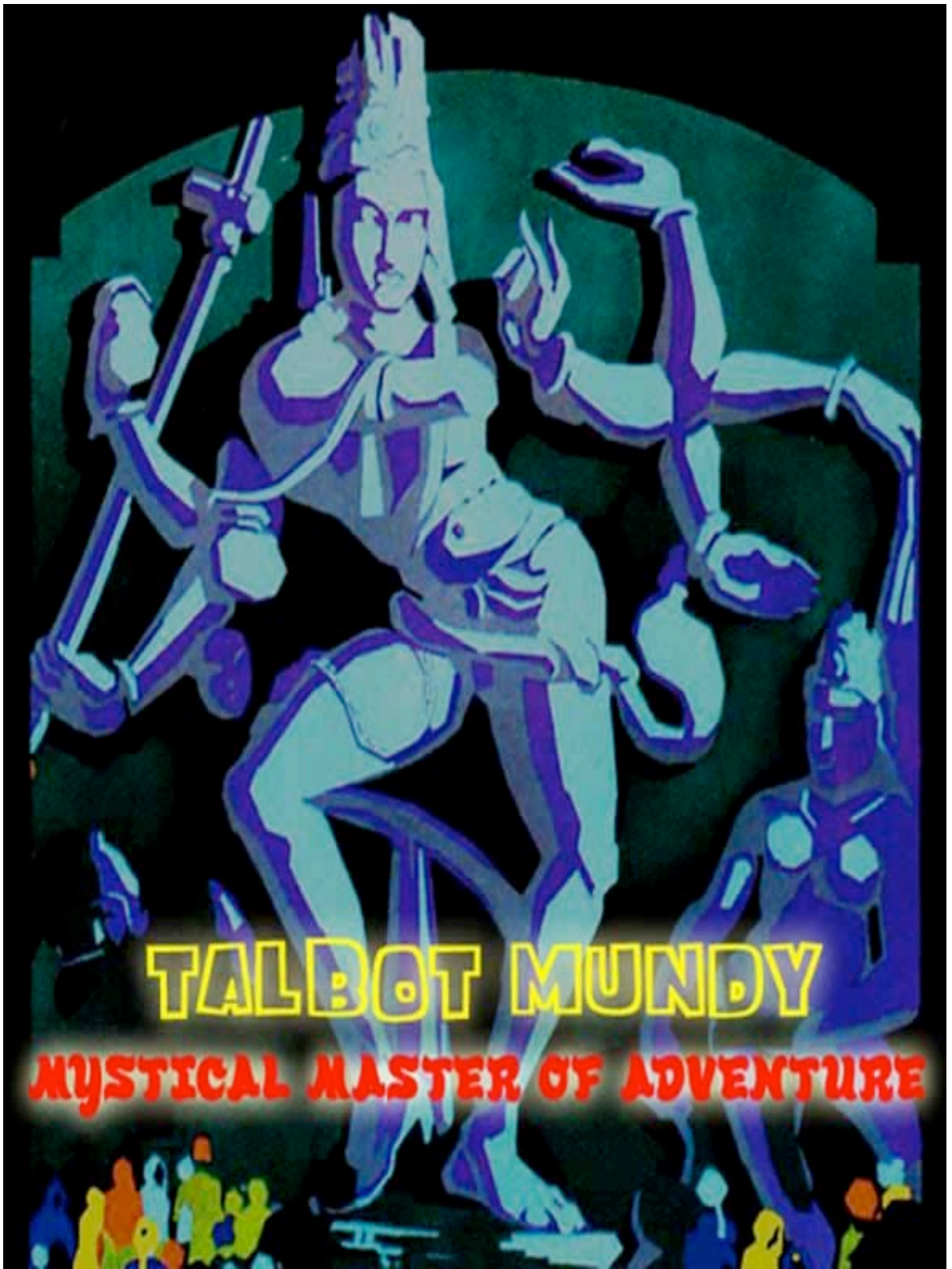
La Fascination

Le Mystère

Le Danger

The Shadow

DIRECTED BY JAMES WATSON
ALEC BALDWIN JEREMY IRONS JESSICA HENNER
CASTING BY GUY HEDDERLEY COSTUME DESIGNER JAMES HAYES
EDITED BY JIM HAYES PRODUCTION DESIGNER JAMES HAYES
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JAMES HAYES JAMES WATSON PRODUCED BY JAMES WATSON
WRITTEN BY JAMES WATSON DIRECTED BY JAMES WATSON
DISTRIBUTED BY WARNER BROS. PICTURES
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TALBOT MUNDY

MYSTICAL MASTER OF ADVENTURE



Cover art for Donald Grant's 'Talbot Mundy: Messenger of Destiny' credited to Malcolm Henderson.

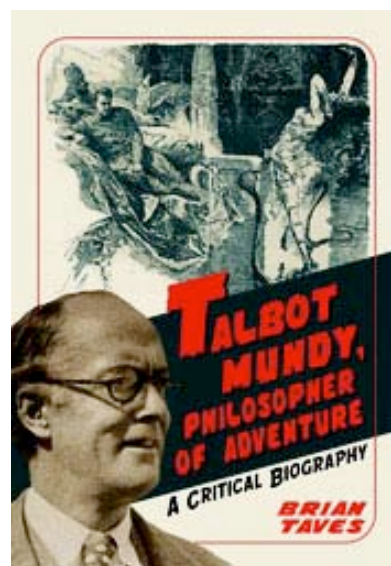
It is a curious phenomenon that sometimes the most influential people go greatly unknown to the general population of that individual's very field of endeavor. One of the masters of our beloved genre of adventure is very well known to the dedicated rank and file of fans, yet draws blank stares from the majority of folks who dearly love the descendants of his works, like everything Indiana Jones. These are the fans to whom this article is primarily dedicated as an introduction to the great Talbot Mundy.

Much has been written on Mundy in the past few years, and I could not possibly cover it all here, nor do I intend to. Instead, I'll refer to these informative and entertaining works of research and strongly urge you to seek out the source material for further and much-to-be-enjoyed immersion.

Talbot Mundy was born William

Lancaster Gribbon in London on 23 April 1879.

Brian Taves, author of Mundy bio *Philosopher of Adventure*, writes of the author's early life, "He and his parents were incompatible even before he first ran away from home; they were traditional bourgeois high-church Tories who supported British imperialism. On every one of those counts, young William Lancaster Gribbon was opposed to their beliefs."



Gribbon ran away from home at age 16 to travel India, Africa, and the Near and Far East.

In 1900, Mundy was a government official in Africa and India. Bradford Day writes, "While in India, he wandered all over the sub-continent on horseback, and even into Tibet. Eastern occult lore first attracted, then fascinated, his active and unorthodox mind. Mundy absorbed all he could learn of the Indian beliefs."



Government service landed the author in Africa and there he studied tribal nature magic of East Africa. His thirst for more led to travel extensively through Egypt, the Near East and Arabia. "This was truly adventurous at the time," writes Day, "But only in character with the man who killed dozens of lions and successfully hunted for ivory."

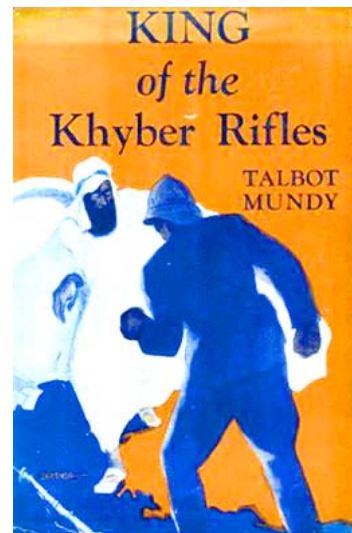
Mundy's travels continued. He went to Australia, but in 1911 his trail led to the United States (by way of the Yucatan), and the author decided to stay and become a citizen. He was 29 then and had been using the name 'Talbot Mundy' for a year. It was at that time he began his writing career.

Taves writes, "For an individual, especially an adventurer in Mundy's time, a transformation was typical; it allowed a fundamental change in identity, to begin life anew, to sever ties with the past, to place mistakes behind. William Lancaster Gribbon found that his ability to begin anew as Talbot Mundy was part of his own belief in death and rebirth, the reincarnation of the soul, for his own new identity allowed him to come to America and become the writer whose fame has so long outlasted his own death..."

During the 1920's Mundy lived in Point Loma, California, for several years and became a member of the Theosophical Society, which clearly influenced what some consider to be his greatest work *Om: The Secret of Ahbor Valley*.

Where did the name come from? During the difficult years of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the author and his wife stayed with cousins he had known years before. It was these Mundys from whom he took his nom de plume, and much more, it appears.

Taves writes, "The Mundys were fascinated by Oriental traditions, and intrigued by theosophy--just the opposite of his own childhood. It was no accident that young Gribbon chose the name."



This influence definitely appears in Mundy's writing. *King -- of The Khyber Rifles* is set in India under British Occupation, an era when that part of the world was seen as a mystical shadowland. This novel, twice made as a film starring Victor McLaglen under the title *The Black Watch*(1929) and then with Tyrone Power under the book's title, features

his great exotic character Princess Yasmini and influenced the works of Leigh Brackett and Robert E. Howard. The *Jim Grim* stories are also woven with mystical overtones. Mundy eventually became associated with the Theosophy movement and helped popularize the legend of the 'Nine Unknown Men' in the West.



Mundy's first story was "The Phantom Battery" and for years Adventure magazine featured his novels, short stories, and serials. The exotic locales and themes of the stories were usually the places Mundy had traveled through and occult knowledge he had obtained, mixed with rugged heroics of his manly characters. *Rung Ho* was published in 1914, followed a couple of years later by *King--of the Khyber Rifles* and *The Winds of the World*, two of his greatest successes. Mundy went on to write for Adventure and many other magazines and his books were reprinted many times, though re-titled in England. Among his most popular titles is *Tros of Samothrace*, about a Greek hero who aids the Britons against Rome.

Though most readers and movie fans are more familiar with Edgar Rice Burroughs, H. Rider Haggard, and Rudyard Kipling, the adventure genre as we have known it for decades is

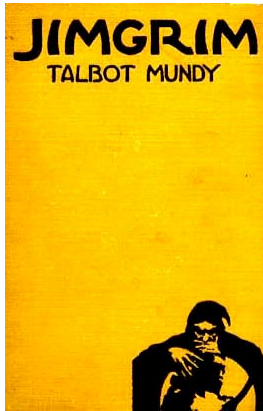
greatly the product of Mundy's influence, including adventures of the most popular character of our times, Indiana Jones, but also Lara Croft, television shows like *Relic Hunter* and old serials like *Ramar of the Jungle* and *Terry and the Pirates*. Even the great film *Gunga Din*, though based upon the verse of Rudyard Kipling, was fashioned mostly Mundy-style. Dragon Lady of *Terry and the Pirates*, Ilsa of *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade*. and many beautiful fatales are somewhat derived from the exotic Yasmini, Mundy's exotic and empowered female character. The rugged explorer with the mystical curiosity is a Mundy standard that has appeared in adventure fiction resembling Jim Grim and other Mundy heroes for almost a century. While not necessarily the originator of the type, Mundy can be credited with the style of this adventure archetype most often emulated since.

If you've never read any of Mundy's works, you may find the following titles interesting:

The Caves of Terror – In an attempt to overthrow India, agents Athelstan King and Greg Ramsden to pursue a powerful mahatma--and face the Princess Yasmini. They pursue this goal through an intricate series of underground caves, encountering all kinds of supernatural phenomena--along with crocodiles, panthers, and the like. This work also features the 'Nine Unknown', a group of powerful adepts who control the wealth of the world and possess the key to the secrets of life.

The Thunder Dragon Gate is a monastery in Tibet, thought to be the portal to Shambala, revered as a symbol for the threshold to higher levels of spiritual awareness. Smuggling the keeper of the gate,

back into Tibet, American Tom Grayne and his wife Elsa, try to learn what they can about the path to Shambala. Only a power-mad rajah, Japanese agents, the Tibetan and Indian governments, and a huge man-eating spider called a shang-shang stand in their way.



You can't really approach Mundy's works without taking in the stories featuring Jim Grim, aka 'Jimgrim'. According to Brian Taves, "Mundy asserted that all of his Jimgrim stories were founded on fact, and Grim was based on a real person who had fought behind Lawrence and twice made the pilgrimage to Mecca, 'on one occasion overland, and once by train'. Jimgrim may have been based on actual individuals Mundy met or heard about while he lived in Jerusalem."

Besides the Jim Grim books and *Tros of Samothrace*, there are *Black Light*, *The Eye of Zeitoon*, *The Ivory Trail*, *Guns of the Gods*, *Rung Ho!* and the classic *OM: The Secret of Ahbor Valley*, among others. Many of these you can find for free online at Gutenberg (Gutenberg.org), and you should take a look at TalbotMundy.com.

So why is Talbot Mundy greatly unknown to most readers today? It's mostly because his works are

generally out of print, and somewhat because some might claim a lack of political correctness, that overused and abusive club of our times. It is unfortunate when our society makes the assumption that the public is too illiterate to take into consideration the era in which works of literature were created, so the works of Talbot Mundy number among other works that must be searched out like the jewels and precious secrets adventure heroes often endure perils to find.

Let the true adventure fan be assured, the quest is worth it. Seek out the works of Talbot Mundy – you will be glad you did.

(For an in-depth read on the life and works of Talbot Mundy, look for BRIAN TAVES' *'Talbot Mundy Philosopher of Adventure'*; and be sure to visit: WWW.TALBOTMUNDY.COM)

By WALTER BOSLEY

SOURCES:

Brian Taves. *How William Lancaster Gribbon Became Talbot Mundy*
Bradford Day, TalbotMundy.com
Wikipedia



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Background color photo by WOLFGANG STAUDT

CINEMATIC JOURNEY

On the Trail of An Adventure Film Icon

Among the very best classic adventure films of all time, *Gunga Din* must be in the top five, and some consider it the best. Released by RKO in that golden year of 1939, this film is a beloved must-have in any film collector's catalogue. Admittedly, I did not see this film until a few years ago, after my friend Doug Nason illuminated the error of my ways during a trip through Peru. A few weeks later, David Hatcher Childress sent a taped copy to me. I was truly impressed and instantly convinced why this great movie ranks so highly. The moment I saw the DVD release, I had to buy it, for there were also special features featuring interviews of some of the folks associated with making the film.

For those who have not seen this great icon of adventure film, *Gunga Din* is

based upon a poem by Rudyard Kipling, though the story for the film was written by Ben Hecht, writer of the film *Captain Blood*.

In the Northwest Frontier of India, the British Army is being terrorized by the ruthless Thugee cult, worshipers of Kali (the same goddess worshipped by the villains of *Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom*). Din, the title character, is a water carrier who dreams of being a soldier himself. He is befriended by Sgt Cutter (Cary Grant), a soldier who dreams of finding ancient treasure and returning to England a wealthy man. Cutter's friends, Ballantine (Douglas Fairbanks Jr.) and McChesney (Victor McLaglen) start the film off in a fistfight over a fake treasure map Cutter was swindled into buying. They are quickly

deployed to an outpost and Din is along for the ride, as the three soldiers lead a patrol to the abandoned village and soon find themselves in battle with a Thugee army. Naturally, they escape and return to the main camp, but it isn't long before Cutter is off on another treasure hunt. Din leads Cutter to an ancient temple with a solid gold dome. Unfortunately, Cutter ends up in the heart of the Thugee lair and gets himself captured by the villainous cult, so Din can flee back to camp and warn the army. Though Ballantine is on his last days in the army before getting married and become a tea importer, he is convinced by McChesney to go on one last mission to rescue their friend. Naturally, McChesney, Ballantine and Din are captured also, and soon learn that the Thugees plan to ambush the army as they enter the pass into the foot of the mountains.

You'll have to watch the movie yourself, if you haven't seen it. I won't spoil the end here.



Cary Grant expresses his opinion of near beer.

Having been to Afghanistan a few times, I can vouch for the authenticity of using this California location for Central Asia. It's a near-perfect match, and in the movie *Gunga Din*, one is hard-pressed not to believe that they could have filmed it in that far-off spot of the globe. In fact, on the special features of the DVD, Douglas Fairbanks Jr. recalls many times when Indian friends and associates would insist the film had been shot in their native country.

The best source for information on the making of the film is to watch the excellent special features on the DVD. It features great anecdotes from the director's son, from star Douglas Fairbanks Jr, and producer Pandro Berman. In these, you learn how George

Stevens, the director, played a cat and mouse game whenever the studio watchdogs arrived in Lone Pine to observe why the film was taking so long. Stevens had a reputation for bringing films in on time and under budget, but *Gunga Din* had already gone twice as long as scheduled and way over budget.



The production company had built a tent city in the Alabama Hills outside the town, where they shipped in food and whatever amenities they needed. In order to keep order, alcohol was limited to near-beer, but cast and crew smuggled in the harder stuff for their secret stashes. Toward the end of shooting, Victor McLaglen had showed up for work one morning with a black eye he got in a bar fight in town the night before. Cary Grant and director Stevens figured out that shooting McLaglen from the other side for the first part of the day would give the shiner a chance to fade a bit.



Another unexpected monkeyshine on the set was the day they were shooting one of the scenes atop the temple. It was a scorcher and the cold beer was provided aplenty to keep the stars refreshed between takes. They weren't about to get drunk on near-beer, but

another problem arose. In the middle of a shot, someone noticed that Victor McLaglen was taking a piss off to the side, his back to the camera! Maybe it was early 'method acting' and McLaglen was merely portraying his character's ire onto the villainous Thugees down below. There seemed no end to the fun cast and crew must have had filming this adventure yarn, especially with the freedom of being so far away from it all.



The stars show their concern for extras who did not appreciate McLaglen's improvisation in the temple roof scene.

I certainly enjoyed my brief visit to the locations. After passing the must-see Beverly and Jim Rogers' Museum of Lone Pine Film History, you continue on up the road straight to the unmistakable rocky terrain that those who've seen *Gunga Din* will immediately recognize. There is a plaque at the intersection of two dirt roads, commemorating the shoot, and the views are quite photogenic. You can see why this location was so popular with Hollywood. I look forward to going back

when I can spend more time and do my own quest for the temple set, the remains of which many people have claimed to see still standing after all these the years.

If you find that temple, 'you're a better than me, Gunga Din'!



Gunga Din and Sgt Cutter inside the forgotten temple.

The city of Lone Pine, California, has every amenity you'd need and is a popular stop-over for tourists on their way to skiing, camping and hiking, and whatever else brings people to Lake Tahoe or Reno, Nevada. When you visit, be sure to tour the Rogers' museum, as they have a costume and other items from *Gunga Din*, as well as the several westerns filmed in Lone Pine over the decades.

Make the pilgrimage.

-- Walter Bosley

SOURCES: Warner Bros. DVD special features and the Rogers' Museum of Lone Pine Film History



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E.A.GUEST'S

SECRET of
The Amazon Queen

FROM THE ADVENTURES OF JULIUS CORBIN

CHAPTER ONE

The reader of Special United States Army Report Number 918 may recall that the researches of Carlo Vicci and Algernon Cooper were prematurely terminated due to the disappearance of the distinguished Italian cartographer, and the mortal severity of Lieutenant Cooper's malaria, in the late summer of 1867. During their short expedition into the Matto Grosso jungle forest of Brasilia, we received a limited amount of intelligence reports on the existence of numerous desolated and ancient cities, convincing the various science offices of the government that the academically agreed upon antiquity of the Americas was in need of readjustment. Under the circumstances of the severe hardship, much of the account of events went unrecorded and the office of scientific intelligence assigned to the investigation was forced to abandon research until further resources or need reactivated it. It was determined, however, that to resume the investigation into this unknown and mysterious region would be beneficial to the government of the United States; therefore a future expedition would be approved to make a thorough exploration both into the geographical and geological aspects, as well as into the details of the fate of Senor Vicci, the cartographer hired by the US Army Corps of Engineers. In the five years passed since official termination of that expedition, careful consideration by members of the intelligence company assigned, as well as special review by members of congress attached to the War Department Committee, resulted in reactivation of the investigation. On 27 April 1872, a new expedition put aboard the small sail-steamer Dogwood Stella and embarked from Charleston for the port in Venezuela to which Cooper and Vicci's expedition had sailed six years prior.

The Dogwood Stella was of the new class of steamships, equipped with big paddles port and starboard, powered by a main steam engine amidships. Her sails were cutter rigged, her hull painted white to the water line, black below. She was well manned and modestly appointed. Stella's cargo included iron for a Caracas railroad concern, cotton and rifles for Honduras, and mining equipment for Vera Cruz. All of which would be delivered following the delivery of her most important cargo: the men selected for the mission into the Matto Grosso. Aside from the crew, this small contingency was the only human passengers; the US government compensating the owners for the full fares of the usual thirty passengers the boat transported regularly on its course.

The men selected for the expedition numbered three. Lieutenant Colonel Julius T. Corbin, US Army Intelligence and the man responsible for the details of this report; Claude Toussaint, linguist and an amateur historian, who was considered a most valuable choice; and Kurtis Howell, surveyor and field medical specialist. These three would hire guides and bearers upon arrival in Venezuela, and penetrate the jungle forest along the same trailhead as that used by Vicci and Cooper. The two civilians had instructions from Colonel Corbin that their services were required for confidential reporting of findings and were compensated handsomely for their silence regarding any and all details concerning their sojourn. Colonel Corbin had his orders from Washington regarding the more exact nature of the expedition, and understood well the identification of details to be collected without knowledge of his respected companions. This is where the officer ran into difficulty, for one of his distinguished colleagues had taken an action without knowledge of his companions, as well, and brought with him on board his handmaiden, name of Mahia, born of an East Asian island people.

With this new addition undiscovered until the first evening afloat, the Dogwood Stella and her compliment set sail from Charleston Harbor.

On the fourth day under way, the expedition encountered a severe thunderstorm. Tremendous bolts of lightning crashed about the water all around the ship, and waves of heavy rain washed across her decks, yet the sea itself was relatively calm. The storm and the night did pass, though, and morning brought pleasant waters and the renewed willingness in the small band of explorers to continue across the bounding sea.

On the fifth day, Colonel Corbin determined to approach the subject of the unexpected guest, Mahia the handmaiden. For the five days they had been at sea, Mahia had exhibited a quiet presence, mostly visible only near Toussaint's cabin, but once briefly every day on deck to look at the sea. Corbin had not heard her speak until he requested to meet with Toussaint and the girl to discuss the issue at hand. Mahia appeared in a pale yellow silk robe tautly bound at the waist with a red sash. Her black hair was pulled up and held in place behind her head with a large black stick. Corbin noticed upon inspection of her features that she was a very comely girl, with big almond shaped black eyes, a pleasantly sculpted face, and a most engaging smile. Put simply, she was a pretty girl with cinnamon skin. Her master, Toussaint, a rotund and masculine figure with a flair for stylish wardrobe and an aristocratic style of movement, towered over and engulfed the girl in his immense presence. The possibility that Toussaint acquired the pretty Mahia for her sensual, as well as domestic talents naturally occurred to Corbin, though he deigned imagine the scene. Toussaint had just finished his toilet, arriving at the meeting with freshly trimmed beard and moustaches, and the cleaned and pressed light brown field suit that was his daily uniform, complete with British-style pith helmet.

"Mister Toussaint, good morning, sir," Corbin began, "Mahia. I appreciate your cooperation."

Toussaint displayed the good-natured smile Corbin had become accustomed to every day with this man. "Colonel Corbin, your graciousness is most commendable. Perhaps, we can come to agreeable terms that will prevent my dispatching Mahia to metropolitan quarters in my absence?"

Corbin had led enough parties of men to know what not to deprive them of, and understood that deprivation of comforts affected civilians exponentially, "Actually, sir, I would not think of sending Mahia away." He immediately saw the relief in Toussaint's big chest as the man breathed easier. He also saw real exuberance on Mahia's face for the first time and her beauty shone.

"Colonel, you are a gentleman!" Toussaint gave a slight bow of appreciation.

"We must define terms, however," Corbin continued, "This is a dangerous territory we're heading into. As you know, we're looking for the trail of two men whom this place bested. That's not to be taken lightly."

Toussaint's demeanor immediately reflected an understanding of the gravity of the situation. Brow furrowed, he said, "Certainly, Colonel. Understood. And you will have the utmost cooperation from myself, and Mahia, for the entire course of this journey. As you know, I have traveled extensively. Mahia has accompanied me into surprising hazards much of the past five years. We are at your command."

Corbin did know well the record of Claude Toussaint, and it was impressive. Two African treks, six months in India, and countless recorded penetrations into the East Asian jungles. Toussaint's stylish appearance betrayed a rather adaptable affinity as an outdoorsman. Yet the big man still impressed him as a bit of a lovable dandy, or bon vivant, to be fairer. Even so, Corbin had faith that the man was up to the challenge, so he would not even think of depriving Toussaint of whatever Mahia contributed to his needs. "I have no reservations about that, Mister Toussaint. Let's just define some boundaries, should anything happen – and I expect the unexpected will happen – that way we'll keep the men who review my report later from indicating any association of those events to Miss Mahia's presence. Government clerks and congressmen love to send employees away with less money than promised, if they can get away with it. Let's not give them a nickel of doubt."

Toussaint gave a curt nod of agreement, "Absolutely not, Colonel."

Corbin addressed Mahia, "I gather your English is good." He had observed her responses to Toussaint's daily instructions, all in English.

Mahia acknowledged, "Yes, Colonel Corbin. I learned your language from missionaries during my childhood. They were en route to Australia and ran aground on one of our smaller islands. Their presence also explains my ability to read and write, as well as do uncomplicated figures." Her voice was pleasant and soft, but sounded older than she appeared in years.

"Excellent," Corbin felt better already, "That will also make things easier in general. What I need from you, Mahia, is to basically do what you've been doing all along. Perform your services for Mister Toussaint quietly and out of the way of his contracted business. There will be times he will be required to accompany me without you, and you will remain in the secured camp. During certain discussions, you cannot be present. For that matter, I have to ask complete confidentiality regarding this entire expedition." It was at that moment Corbin first wondered just what compelled this girl to follow Toussaint on his strenuous adventures. She was most attractive and could easily find a man who would provide her with a more civilized environment in which to display her charms.

Nothing in her response enlightened Corbin. Mahia nodded and said, "Yes, Colonel, I understand."

Toussaint interjected, "Colonel, we're going to be spending a lot of time together in intimate conditions. I must insist you address me as 'Claude'."

Corbin preferred the less formal, "Certainly, Claude." With that, Corbin left the big man and his handmaiden alone and he proceeded to the quarter-deck to speak with the captain. As he walked along the deck, Corbin admired the beauty of the Caribbean all around him. Clear sky, no clouds, and deep blue waters. Up ahead was the green coast of Venezuela creeping over the land's edge to the water. They would be leaving the confined beauty of the sea and embarking into the expansive hazards of that jungle very soon. Then Corbin would have a lot more on his mind than the aggravation caused by the problems that brought him here, rather forced him to accept this mission. *Of course, we know the true source of my aggravation, don't we?*

Approaching the quarter-deck, Corbin saw his other associate, Kurt Howell, standing portside and looking out to the approaching shore. Howell appeared tense, and over the days at sea Corbin observed this to be the wiry man's usual demeanor. Howell was a fastidious and precise dresser. Whereas Toussaint apparently had the money for an ever-appropriate wardrobe, the large man was earthy enough to look ruffled if he was ruffled. Howell, however, had the knack to appear just-dressed and fresh no matter the hour of the day. For the visible level of his inner intensity, the man appeared to never sweat, it seemed. He stood on the deck wearing a creamy white linen suit with a perfectly appointed string tie of white silk and a shockingly white shirt, spotless buckskin boots, and a new wide-brimmed white straw hat of the style worn on plantations in the southern states. His blonde hair was cut short and perfectly neat everywhere except where it was luxuriously wavy and full on top. The hat, of course, covered it now. Howell also wore a Van Dyke, which he obsessed over, his attempt to give a youthful face some maturity. He was not much on small talk, so Corbin was comfortable with not forcing the issue out of politeness, and he continued on to speak to the captain. He did make a mental note, though, to speak with Howell later regarding equipment issues. *God, please do not tell me I'm to be burdened with an anal retentive shrew.*

Corbin's conversation with the grizzled skipper was short and to the point. The old salt in the dark blue waistcoat and red shirt would spit tobacco into a cup before every response to Corbin's questions, but he assured the army officer that everything was in order as contracted. They would put into port every two weeks to retrieve any dispatches to be forwarded to Washington via the US Army representative in Charleston. In spite of the lackadaisical nature of the captain's demeanor, Corbin felt confident the man would keep his word. That

contractual point reiterated, Corbin could focus on the unloading of equipment and supplies once they reached port.

The Dogwood Stella slid up to the dock, the biggest boat there by far. Shore men were waiting and ready for work and when all was secure, they got to it. The offloading went swiftly and without incident. While this proceeded, the members of the expedition busied themselves with going ashore, making certain their personal effects were in good order. Momentarily, they stood watching the shore men work, or peering into the jungle in which they would be spending the next several weeks of their lives. Finally, the crew was released for two hours shore leave, and Colonel Corbin stood before his associates.

Howell appeared typically comfortable in a suit in jungle humidity, yet the pursed lips and furrowed brow betrayed an inner intensity. His slender, narrow face with pointed nose and chin gave him a hawkish appearance to begin with, and his tense demeanor did nothing to soften that description. The gentle tone of his voice was a surprise when compared to the facial expression, “Colonel, where shall we bivouac for the night?”

When the surveyor spoke, Corbin was wondering how this man could not be sweating when he was already soaked under his own clothes, a cream cotton version of his field cavalry uniform, without insignia of any kind, and buckskin leather boots. His sleeves were already rolled up and the front of the shirt half unbuttoned. It reminded him how much he actually disliked the Washington area because of humidity – and this was going to be far worse. *Dislike Washington? I hate the fucking place and just about all the people there. A herd of men whose entire concept of the world barely crosses the Potomac, obsessed with their own stations and interested only in whatever will keep or place them in favor of another idiot who will most likely use their heads as stepping stones. These are the men who have infested the young country with European notions of society, and who have begun to ruin the good relations between the folks on the frontier and the natives – all to win the favor of railroad barons and their wives. Christ, the wives! The fucking women in Washington are even worse than the men! The insipid birds could not stand five minutes in the shoes of a red woman, nor survive a day in the life of a frontier wife and mother. The east is going to be the undoing of America. Lincoln could have prevented a lot of it, if the bastards hadn't killed him...*

Corbin longed for the southwest frontier of the United States. “Mister Howell, you'll be happy to know we'll be staying here two nights, in rather comfortable accommodations. Private rooms with plenty of ventilation, feather beds, and the luxury of daily tub baths. Enjoy it now, because it's tents and sweat for some time after this.”

Toussaint and Howell both acknowledged the coming discomfort with good humor, though naturally to differing degrees. The large man put his beefy hand on his handmaiden's shoulder, “Mahia has seen worse days, is that not correct, my dear?”

Mahia's eyes met Corbin's as she responded, “Having only been to India and East Asia, it remains to be seen. However, I have faith Colonel Corbin and the government of Washington will provide more for our comfort than we could imagine.”

Corbin could not deny Mahia's physical beauty, though some not yet identifiable aspect about it vexed his intuition. He had traveled extensively, and there was the adventure to the Philippines just before the war, years ago. Did he know her? More probable, did he know someone relative to her? It would eventually come to him. “Thank you for the vote of confidence, Mahia,” Corbin said as he took the lead from the dock onto the path leading through the trees toward the village, a small gathering of structures made of plaster and wood housing a cantina hotel, a station for Venezuelan soldiers to conduct immigration functions, a dry goods store, stables, and a small church. It could be assumed the inhabitants lived somewhere deeper in the trees. Corbin handled the visa issues while the others were admitted to the hotel and found their rooms.

The remainder of the day was spent securing the porters who would bear their burden into the jungle, and ended with a dinner of chicken and rice and platanos in the cantina. The evening brought cool air, and the men enjoyed very good local cigars and even better scotch brought from Baltimore. Sleep came easily.

With the crowing of a far-off rooster, the explorers awoke the following morning and more clearly realized that they were in a different world.

CHAPTER TWO

During the whole of a dull and slowly passing day, with the clouds hung oppressively low and occasionally precipitous, Corbin and the others passed the dreary hours in meditative repose and, at length, each found themselves within reach of the melancholy truth of their commitment. As the shades of evening drew on, each looked upon their view of the darkening jungle with an utter depression of soul incomparable to the lowest moment of any of their lives. What was it that so unnerved them during their contemplation of that most tangled forest known to man? Perhaps it was the sorrowful embrace of truth that this very place lured and swallowed two men who did not emerge alive. Such analysis of mortality led these pensive souls into emotional straits beyond the boundaries of rationalized comfort, to the precipitous brink of black and lurid terror of their own undecided fate. Nevertheless, each of these souls bore witness to their personal accountability for the sojourn of unpredictable weeks that lay ahead of them in this potentially last terrain they may ever experience, for--with the exception of the leader-- they voluntarily accepted this presently indiscernible condition of destiny or fate.

The second and final night in the village was spent quietly and without much interaction save superficial commentary on what a cool night the sea had afforded them, and how much they were certain to miss the beds in the forthcoming days. But during that hour or so after a meal of chuletas and papas and good red wine, Corbin quietly observed Mahia from across the room. *Damn, she couldn't be a homely spinster...*

Her skin was clear and sultry, a cinnamon brown. Her hair was as black as her big, alluring almond-shaped eyes. The delicate sculpture of her face was perfect, and her pretty mouth became stunning when she smiled. She wore the yellow kimono-style wrap with the red sash that night. Her black hair was shorter, he noticed, for she had cut it for comfort in the heat. It now framed her cheekbones and delicate chin, yet stopped just below her ears. No matter. Her face needed no assistance from luxurious hair to captivate. Mahia was a pretty girl, but there was something about her which piqued interest in the back of Corbin's mind. He could see why Toussaint, a large middle-aged man, was so attracted to her; but what drew Mahia to him? She was young and certainly collected much attention from men wherever she went. Even Howell had begun to take quiet interest in her appearance, Corbin noticed. Yet, Mahia clung to Toussaint and responded to his every word like a command. How interesting her culture must be that a pretty girl like her would commit her best years to servitude so apparently happily.

Corbin laughed at himself. Young ladies did that all the time in western society. No, there was more to Mahia and Toussaint than merely a younger girl with an older man. There was something about her that had his curiosity in motion. As he sipped his eighteen-year-old single malt, Corbin continued to discreetly eye Mahia from across the room. *What is it about you that I can't quite place...?*

That was when Mahia looked right at him. She was seated in her simple wooden chair at a small green wooden table with Toussaint, who was smoking his pipe and quietly telling her a story. He did not notice as she turned her face toward Corbin, who suddenly felt embarrassed to be caught looking at her. Still, Corbin looked her in the eyes, nodding slightly. Mahia let a slight smile creep onto her lips, then turned her attention back to

Toussaint's tale. Corbin smiled, with a gentle reminder to himself that he was usually more adept at spying on a lady. He turned his attention briefly to Howell in another corner of the room. *Let's see how tight our friend's ass will be a week into this jungle...*

Howell was particularly quiet this evening. He had traded his crisp suit for tan pants and coat, and a brown shirt and string tie. His hair was combed and he was clean-shaven. But it wasn't the uncanny coolness of this man wearing a suit in a steamy jungle; it was his intense gaze at Mahia. It was an expression Corbin did not want to see, particularly so early in this venture. Howell was clearly attracted to Mahia, and just as clearly disdainful of her relationship to Toussaint. Had he noticed her smiling at Corbin?

Within half an hour, everyone had retired for the night, Corbin the last. He drank down his final taste of scotch and departed upstairs to his room. The journey began in earnest the next morning; they needed their rest.

As often was the case, Corbin dreamed of the rugged California coast.

A cool morning breeze flew in from the sea to be halted by the wall of oppressive heat generated by the steamy breath of the jungle. This was to be a dreary, overcast day, setting the mood of all. It certainly was the sort of heavy day that accentuated the drama of the surroundings. Fog all around made the trail that much more foreboding, the jungle that much deeper and darker. Corbin, in his khaki uniform without insignia, wiped the sweat from his brow under the straw high crowned hat and turned to address the others. *I thought these goddamned straw hats were supposed to be cooler!*

Howell stood uncannily dry, neatly field attired, and impeccably groomed nearest Corbin. Toussaint took position to the rear of them both, with Mahia riding atop a donkey behind him. Nine porters were in single file, all short natives of the Matto Grosso and variously tattooed and bedecked with colorful feathers, yet naked otherwise. They bore the burden of trunks filled with the provisions, tools, weapons and ammo, and water and shelter for the expedition. The three white men were armed with the latest 44-caliber Winchester lever action rifles, and pistols of personal preference. Corbin carried an 1854 model Army Colt, his sturdy favorite 45. Toussaint shared this preference, but Howell preferred an Italian revolver of the same caliber. Each carried a bandoleer of rifle cartridges, a full belt for the pistol, and a Bowie knife. Mahia was armed with her personal derringer Toussaint had presented as a gift on a past adventure, and a small dagger, both tucked into her green sash. Usually, Corbin carried his army saber, but it was impractical here, so he substituted a machete. Thus equipped, the small band of intrepid explorers stood poised to begin their journey into the unknown.

Corbin addressed his companions, "I can make no promises regarding the other end of this excursion. We all signed on, accepting the conditions of this employment. This is your last chance, if you have any reservations. I, of course, am bound by a tighter contract; but you are civilians. Are you still up to this?"

Howell answered first, "The compensation is entirely too generous for me to refuse, even at this late moment. I'm in. I am an American and my economy needs gold. Best we find it before the damned Europeans do."

Toussaint threw in, "Speaking for myself and Mahia, we have ventured into far more dire straits for much less. It would not be in good taste – and entirely out of character – if we turned our backs on this adventure. Lead on, Colonel Corbin. I relish what we shall find."

Corbin was reassured that these were hearty men, in spite of whatever vices they would all discover about each other in the coming weeks of certain strife and struggle. He took a deep breath and turned back to the trail. Ahead of him was only one man, the native hired to guide them, mostly to shield them from potentially

hostile natives they would certainly encounter. Glad to be here rather than among the vipers in Washington, Corbin instructed the guide to proceed, and the expedition took its first steps onto the misty jungle trail. Thus, their odyssey was about to begin.

For two days they moved along the trail in the fullness of tropical vegetation. Colors they had only dreamed of blossomed all around, trees were in their deepest green, and all this flora was even more brilliant with plumage and voices of birds entirely unknown in their own lands.

The party would stop during the worst heat of the day and try to rest, but not one among them had accurately anticipated the oppressive weight of the humidity. "My God!" exclaimed Toussaint in his sweaty bigness, upon the discovery that even fanning himself made it worse, "Not even India was so damnably uncomfortable! Surely the tics on my balls are drowning in sweat."

The mental picture elicited laughter from Corbin, "On top of the heat, we must now suffer that knowledge!"

Nights were barely better than the days. Sleep came mostly from exhaustion and was essentially restless. Darkness did not bring quiet to the jungle and the intrepid band grappled with the thought of the worst sorts of death waiting and watching from any tree: the puma and the giant serpent. Corbin tasked two native bearers each night to stand watch over the camp, enticing the various rotations with sleep during the day. However, he still felt compelled to check on them every couple of hours himself.

It was on the second night, during his second check of the watch, when Corbin encountered once again the phenomenon, that had entered his life a few months prior – and haunted him since. This haunt came closer than anything else to frightening him, yet was lovely to his eyes.

A woman.

She appeared to him in the jungle, while the others slept and the watch was occupied with another view. Her hair was long and dark and full. Her figure was on the slender side of voluptuous. Her face bore an expression of lips as full and red as they had been in life, and brown eyes beaming with life. Appearing as alive and of flesh and bone as when he had last seen her alive, he knew it was not so. Startled with cold fright by her unnaturally sudden appearance, he wanted to run. The hold her gaze held upon him locked his legs from motion.

Emotions followed. Chest flooding with joy and longing, Corbin felt his knees weakening. Ignoring the certainty that she would be gone as swiftly as she had appeared, Corbin tried to absorb the limit of content the moment of her presence allowed. Though he knew the rest of his night would be spent in misery, he let hope flood his soul, hope that she would never leave him again.

She stood inches from the tangled vines of ground, hovering in the air. She again wore the worried expression as when he saw her hovering over the snowy walk in Baltimore months ago. Something in her manner beseeched him, but to what he did not know. Visibly less distraught than she had appeared to him then, the haunting lady's expression was still less than peaceful. Her journey from the other side was surely prompted by grave circumstances. Whatever the reason, Corbin was distracted from the message of her appearance by the degree to which she looked solid and his intense desire to reach out and touch the most lovely hands he had ever known.

But as before, as Corbin coaxed his body to move and stretched his hand out to her fingers, surely to be lifted from the hell his life had become and live in the simple bliss that eternity with her would truly be, she faded from sight like the light of a firefly.

Alone did not describe the depth of his anguish from the hammer's blow that he would be without her for the rest of his days.

Corbin dropped to his knees. The tears flowed like rain.

It was a horrible night.

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning, Corbin woke late. The sun was already rising and the humidity was in tow. Howell was combing his hair, finally greasy with sweat yet still properly coifed. He took to meticulous trimming of his beard and moustache. Corbin was catching the scent of coffee in the air as he gazed upon Toussaint also trimming his own moustache, and humming a jaunty tune. Impressed with their stubborn civility, Corbin helped himself to a cup of the strong black brew prepared by Mahia. She had already groomed herself, looking refreshed and rather pretty in a loosely woven cotton sarong of white, bound in a knot at one of her slender hips. She had given in to the jungle and now wore a blouse of white cotton tied just under her small breasts, thus exposing her flat midriff and navel. Corbin noticed the darkness of her small nipples through the light fabric, as he sipped his coffee. *OK, that settles it. I need one good night in the first cathouse we find.*

“My god,” Corbin commented, “This coffee is perfect.” And then he bit his lip, which thoroughly aggravated him, because he was highly susceptible to canker sores. *Shit! Just perfect! God damn it, now I get to deal with this for two weeks! You couldn’t just cut me some slack, could you, God?*

Mahia’s pleasure at the positive critique of her coffee beamed through her beautiful eyes and she grinned like a smitten girl, “Thank you, Colonel. It is from a part of the world not far from my home. A very black bean, ground into fine powder, and brewed strong.”

Toussaint’s eyes narrowed and his lips formed a thin smile of pride, “Colonel, you will find Mahia brings many pleasures to a man’s life. Coffee is yet the least of them.” Toussaint returned to his grooming, after a very appreciative look at his lovely young companion.

Corbin recognized the look as one he had seen on many a man’s face after a hearty night of debauchery. He turned his attention to Howell, “Kurtis, you win my admiration. I have never traveled with a man so dedicated to being civilized so deep in the field.”

“Yes,” Toussaint chimed in, “Mister Howell is an inspiration!”

Corbin suddenly recalled waking up under a mosquito net, “Oh, thanks and appreciation to whoever covered me last night.” His lip was throbbing. *This one’s gonna be a real fuckin’ joy!*

Howell spoke up, “You have our native friends to thank for that. I was long asleep by the time you came back to camp, and Claude here was also in for the night.”

“By the way,” Corbin wondered, “Where are our guides?”

“They have already prepared everything but our personal gear and are assessing the perimeter, I believe,” Howell reported, and returned to his beard.

Corbin sighed and took another long sip of the wonderful coffee. For some reason, Mahia’s beauty nagged him this morning. She was a natural. The perfect eyebrows arched above the big almond-shaped brown eyes. Her nose was small and flawlessly symmetrical, poised above a mouth of sensual lips and unusually white and unblemished teeth. All of this was an exponentially powerful force when seasoned with the guileless manner in which she stared back at him, as if assessing him in return. He had to look away, for he felt she was staring

right through to his soul, and her beauty emanated a merciful salve for his tortured soul. "Thank you for this exquisite brew, Mahia," he managed to say as an excuse for having looked at her.

Mahia was used to the stares of men, "My pleasure, Colonel."

She was certainly alluring, even if slight in figure. Corbin found himself wondering what she looked like under the sarong, as his gaze slid down her chest and abdomen to her legs and feet. He liked her cinnamon skin and imagined it to feel quite smooth and smell of sweet spices. Then he checked himself, for he remembered Mahia was here with another man, and Corbin was honorable. Still, Mahia was an attraction, in spite of whatever he did not know about her.

They moved on.

Corbin had never experienced anything quite like this expedition. Days ran together, the trail reliably revealed little glimpses into character, yet it was all unusual in one regard: they seemed to make little to no progress. This was the largest jungle known to man, to be sure, but would it best them? Would it best him?

They passed the hours walking through the humid mist, awed by the sheer size of the trees and vines and mountains. Howell said very little, mostly focusing on his notes and compass readings. Toussaint expressed frustration over not yet encountering any culture for him to explain. The guides grew progressively more superstitious as each day wore on. The nights were anxious. Sleep became more difficult to obtain, and less restful. No one dreamed.

Corbin, who could usually sleep on broken glass in a hurricane, found himself unable to turn his mind off the minute it hit his makeshift pillow. *You would think a man could be left alone to sleep! Why doesn't this shit haunt me during the dragging hours of the day? All sorts of time during the day to agonize over the shithole my life has become, and you have to prod me when I'm in need of sleep. Thank you.*

They soon began to lose their bearings.

After eighteen days, Corbin decided they needed a good rest.

"Eighteen days?!" Toussaint wondered aloud, as he settled his large frame onto a fallen tree, Mahia dutifully at his side, "Has it really been so long?"

Corbin sighed deeply and sipped water from his canteen. The water seemed to help the pain in his lip, easing the task of talking. "Eighteen days is usually about where these things get started. This feels damned worn out already."

Howell agreed, "It is a fascinating phenomenon. All three of us are used to the trail, in many parts of the world. Yet this particular jungle is proving a strenuous vexation on our nerves." Howell had begun to show more sweat and less cool. "Colonel, have you noticed anything particularly odd?"

Corbin suspected where the cartographer was going, "It has been quite uneventful."

"Just a bit," Howell added. Then he looked all around at the jungle, "Eighteen days, and we have not encountered a single snake. Neither a jaguar, nor a spider, nor any of the other thousand ways to die each day in this wretched place."

Corbin spoke in a calm tone, "Except one. The thing that kills entire expeditions, in some cases: monotony."

A heavy sigh blew from Toussaint, "Are you saying we're all going to die from the madness of boredom? I rather think this oppressive heat will do us in. I must have already sweated out fifty pounds!"

Howell jibed, "I think that's more the result of your strenuous nocturnal activity."

Corbin chimed in before Toussaint could take offense, “Gentlemen, a good rest will revive our determination and soften the hard edge of awe of this place. Let’s get back to what we know. This is the largest jungle in the world. Two good, experienced men were lost here, and we seek evidence of the details of their fates.”

Toussaint corrected him, “One lost... one dead.”

“Yes,” Corbin conceded, “So, we are lucky. Our medic can vouch for that.”

Howell reluctantly agreed, “Yes, Colonel, we all remain healthy, so far. But it is luck, you know. My other specialty testifies that we may ourselves be lost. There is a feature here which I have rarely encountered, and never to this degree.”

“What is that?” Toussaint queried, taking Mahia’s slender hand into his own. He caressed it lovingly.

Pulling the compass from his vest pocket, Howell explained, “Magnetic anomaly. In only a few places in this world have I encountered the needle behaving so abnormally. Cornwall in England. Cairo, Egypt. Capadoccia in Turkey. Western Virginia. In those places I have personally witnessed a very slight disturbance of the compass needle and only as I moved through specific positions of the terrain. I have heard reports of more pronounced dipping of the needle in places I have yet to venture to. One might expect this to happen in the northern polar extreme, but reports do come in from elsewhere.”

Corbin wiped the sweat from his brow, “What is the needle doing here?”

Howell looked him in the eye and coolly responded, “The needle has dipped, you could say.” Then he handed the compass to Corbin, whose expression went stone when he saw with his own eyes.

The needle was indeed dipped down. It was stuck to the face of the compass and did not budge even as Corbin shook it. “Damn.” *Now, how do I pretend I did not expect this...?*

“Damn, indeed,” Howell agreed.

Toussaint gripped Mahia’s hand even tighter, “Oh Christ. Without that compass in good working order...”

Corbin had to keep them diverted from panic, “All right. We have another fact. The compass registers an anomalous reading. What does that really tell us? Either the compass is damaged or has become dysfunctional – or we have entered a region that’s merely in excess of magnetic elements. Elements. Like dirt, air and water. All natural.”

Howell appreciated the realistic approach, but Toussaint was a philosopher and therefore more imaginative to the detriment of his nerve.

Corbin pushed a new tack, “Claude... remind us of the history of this region.” Corbin knew more actual details than any of them could, but was not at liberty to reveal them. He wanted to distract the big man. *Funny how a man with a record for adventure like Toussaint’s can still suffer anxiety from the unexpected.*

Toussaint took a deep breath as he thought. “Well, I have told you of the most interesting incident here in the Matto Grosso. That of the Spaniards separated from their comrades a few centuries ago. They reported finding a city of gigantic stone architecture and a very unique statue in black stone of a man in odd costume, arm extended and pointing to the north.”

What Corbin knew further was the detail of the lights. The Spaniards reported illumination, without flame, that never seemed to burn out. This part of the intelligence reports truly intrigued him.

Toussaint added a fact Corbin also knew, “Once departed, they never were able to locate it again.”

Not wanting that fact to turn the mood desperate, Corbin pressed on, “Good. An ancient city. What else?”

“Amazons,” Toussaint did not miss a beat, “The legendary kingdom of females, fierce in battle and extant through the centuries without men.”

“What do we know about them?” Corbin pressed.

It was working. Toussaint laughed and seemed to be shrugging off his fear, “There has been so much said about them. But what we believe we know about them may not be flush with the truth.”

“What is the truth?” Howell queried. “They could not do entirely without men, surely.”

Toussaint nodded concession, “True. It is said they occasionally traveled to a nearby village for the purpose of mating with the men, to maintain their population. Much to the disapproval of the men’s wives, I might add; and, we must remember, this part of the legend relates only to their history in the Black Sea region.”

“That is quite a distance from the Americas,” Howell noted, “What is currently said about them here? What happens to the male children? Surely some of the babies are male?”

Toussaint shrugged, “Perhaps they became slaves. Some sources claim their tongues were cut out, should they escape to tell the tale.”

This did not impress Howell, “Hmph! They could simply write it down.”

“I should clarify that no man was ever reported to have escaped from the Amazons,” Toussaint explained, “Therefore, there are no real reports that men were enslaved by them. It seems to not be mentioned in any detail, save for the Black Sea era, and then only that they were used for the purpose.”

Corbin attempted levity, “Maybe the village of the Amazons isn’t such a bad place to be, and they just stay, rather than let other men know what an amenable situation they enjoy.” *I could see it. A land of healthy women and a minority of men. Depends upon what sort of women they are, I suppose...*

Toussaint smiled and his eyes sparkled, “Oh, Colonel, if only we could be certain of that!”

“Sounds acceptable to me,” Howell commented. “But you seem to have doubts, Toussaint.”

Toussaint’s jollity turned to sudden melancholy, “Perhaps to be a man surrounded by women is not such an enviable state. The female can be so cruel. So cold.”

Corbin glanced at Mahia because he felt the impact of whatever inside Toussaint inspired such a point of view. Mahia betrayed no reaction whatsoever. Corbin interpreted her lack of response as a credit to her understanding and mercy of the man she loved, for it was an odd thing to hear such an opinion from a man who so apparently needed the companionship of a woman. When Toussaint suddenly leaned over and gently touched Mahia’s chin, Corbin thought he saw contrition.

“Fortunately,” the big man said, “There are many facets to female companionship.”

Howell shook his head in incredulity, “You are a strange one, Mister Toussaint.”

A distant focus glassed Toussaint’s eyes, “We are all strange, Mister Howell. Some are merely more strange than others.” That said, the big man stood and excused himself to go pee in the jungle. Mahia sat still, looking at Corbin.

Corbin asked, “Mahia, I’m sure you have an opinion...?”

Mahia spoke evenly, as if the past eighteen days had not affected her morale. “I have heard of the females who live outside the world of men. Rather than a village, my world believes the Amazons to live in a magnificent city in a jungle, ruled by a queen. Some of my people dread this kingdom. Others regard it a paradise to be sought. The world of men appears very strange to those whom the world of men find very strange.”

Howell rolled his eyes, “Back to the strange again! Tell me, Colonel, how strange are you?”

Corbin humored Howell, “I would call my behavior more depraved than strange.”

“I’ll drink to that!” exclaimed Howell, then he more calmly added, “When it is time for drinking again, I, for one, feel left out. I am neither strange nor depraved. Rather, I feel irritated.”

“By what?” Corbin wanted him to get it off his mind.

“By all this talk,” Howell clarified, “We’re here for two reasons: To find the Italian cartographer, and gold for our government. Neither of which do I believe have any association with lost cities nor Amazon queens. So what do you say we get moving, Colonel?”

Howell had a point. Corbin knew that, but it was another detail he was ordered to keep close to vest. Toussaint returned at that moment, refreshed, so Corbin pursued the theme intellectually. “Claude, what do you know about South American gold?”

Toussaint gathered his thoughts just long enough for Howell to interject, “Don’t be coy, Colonel. The government of the United States has sent us in search of El Dorado!”

Corbin could not deny that, but neither could he confirm it.

Howell had more to say, “I’m an American and my nation’s economy needs gold. Better we find it before the damned Europeans! I say we dispense with this philosophical and mythological hoo-hah, and press on with this endeavor.”

“But what about the compass?” Toussaint countered better than Corbin hoped.

Howell shrugged it off, “What about it? Let us agree it’s dysfunctional and move on.”

“There are many stories of anomalous positions on the globe,” Toussaint argued, “And often a lack of respect for these places results in disaster, Colonel.”

Howell responded with a condescending smirk, “Please, Toussaint. No fairy tales.”

“I’m merely suggesting we consider a degree of practicality to these legends,” Toussaint offered. “Fairy tale or not, the compass is not working here. We could wander in circles for days; become hopelessly lost. Dead within weeks.”

Corbin had wished to avoid such a statement.

Howell was firing up, “Like Vicci, the Italian cartographer?”

“He has a point, Kurt,” Corbin sighed. *A bit damned paranoid, but a good point nonetheless.*

Toussaint clapped his hands together, “But young Mister Howell also has a point. We have a job to do. No one said it would be easy. I, too, vote that we proceed.”

Appreciative of the nod to morale, Corbin still had a practical concern, “The sun has gotten the better of the day. The heat has taken hold of the jungle. Hitting the trail when we need rest will be as useful as hen shit on a pump handle. So break out the nets and the bedrolls because we’re staying right here for the night.”

Howell raised his eyebrows in resignation. Toussaint nodded, and stood, offering a hand to Mahia.

Corbin actually looked forward to a respite from the trail to clear his mind of aggravation. “We’ll have a good hearty meal cooked up. I’ll ration out some extra water so we can all bathe somewhat. After chuck, we’ll have some fine scotch and a good cigar. We’ll sleep like babies.”

Morale suddenly seemed spurred. The plan was communicated to the mildly relieved native guides who set about setting camp. As the rucksacks were opened, Corbin shared a thought with Howell, “Kurt, have you considered the possibility that this area of the jungle is heavy in magnetic ore? Maybe the same effect dipping the compass needle is what’s keeping the wildlife away...?”

This suggestion from the army officer surprised Howell, “Yes. I suppose it could be that simple. Simply scientific.”

Pleased with himself, Corbin continued unpacking his gear for the night, and that was when he noticed Mahia staring at him. He tried to ignore it, but he feared there would come a moment he would rather avoid. During this thought, Corbin was instantly struck with another: for some reason looking into Mahia’s eyes, he had the thought that the truth about the compass anomaly and the absence of animals was more complicated than merely the presence of iron ore. Had she communicated this idea to him?

Mahia then did what Corbin thought was the worst possible thing. She approached him, her little figure slender and feline in her cotton kimono. In a respectful yet passively demanding tone, Mahia laid her thoughts before him, “I see a man running in two directions. Howell, the surveyor, is running from the very thing he believes the treasure he is running to will drown: hatred of self. My dear Claude is running from a life without having been any woman’s great love, to a world of his favorite colors. Ironically, this wins him hearts he no longer desires. I also see a man of simple virtues and values running from something he cannot explain – much less combat – and running to the simple virtue of the perilous unknown.

“The first man has deluded himself. The second man has recreated himself. The third man has never doubted himself nor pretended to be anything he is not.” Mahia spoke with such gentle conviction that she surprised Corbin when a genuine expression of difficulty appeared on her pretty face, “Yet, I still do not know why you are here. That is, I cannot identify the specific reasons.” She was very perceptive in spite of this.

Corbin was silent. *Lady, I am here because the gods find it entertaining.*

Mahia addressed him more personally, “There is no telling how long we will share the same path. In eighteen days, I have grasped an understanding of Mister Kurt. And I know Claude Toussaint better than anyone. But you – the simplest man here – have not revealed anything, except that you are a man in love with something you can no longer hold.”

Corbin felt naked.

Mahia threw a dash of kindness in her eyes, “You can tell me what you want to tell me when it suits you. But I hear you talking to her in your sleep, and I see the way you look at me...”

“Pardon me?” That one ambushed Corbin.

Mahia clarified, “You find me pretty, but that is the limit of your interest. This is the behavior of a man in love with one woman.”

Corbin breathed easier, “Oh.”

“Colonel,” Mahia bowed her head once slightly, then aimed her gaze at him again, “Pardon my intrusion, but you are the leader of this expedition. Our lives depend greatly upon that. You must divest yourself of that which troubles your mind, in order that your mind remain clear for the process of decisions. I merely offer an ear in support of this end.”

Jesus, she’s accommodating. Corbin sighed, “Mahia, you are a light in the darkness.”

Mahia smiled and said, “Not as bright as that which you already follow.”

Perplexity must have escaped Corbin’s steely cool exterior.

Mahia continued, “I can tell you that the light she guides you with far outshines anything I could ignite in you.”

Hmph. He never imagined she could be so wise. “I see why Claude keeps you close.”

Her eyebrows raised incredulously, “Oh... I do not think you clearly see what lives between Master Toussaint and myself.”

Corbin felt intrusive. He prudently switched tacks, “So, you want to know why I took this mission? It all reduces to politics. You see, I’m a certain type of man who is not favored within a particular circle of Washington men. I remind them of what they once were or could have been, but now could not hope to be. Naturally, they despise me for it. These sort of men traded their manhood for husbandry because they were led to believe they had to. Their choice simply proves they didn’t understand manhood in the first place. When that sort of man is in a position of power, characters of a truly treacherous nature surround them. Men like me threaten those people. They recognize right away that we’d dispatch with them pretty easily. So, you see? A man like me must be moved against swiftly.”

Mahia understood, “You were selected for character assassination.”

“That’s it,” Corbin nodded, “Every action bearing my signature was brought under scrutiny with a jaundiced eye. The solution started with giving me the opportunity to get out of town until the whole situation blows over like a bad hurricane.”

Considering that, Mahia dug deeper, “That is merely the device of your being here. The actual cause predates the storm. In the cause, you will find the reason.”

Corbin was perplexed, “What are you saying?”

She was looking far away, inside herself. “The reason you are here is because of the love in your past, and something you have done because of losing that love.”

The words rendered him speechless.

Mahia continued, “In due time, you will feel better about telling me.” She smiled and touched his arm. She was radiant whenever she chose, and it comforted him.

He found himself admitting, “You are one of the most insightful and understanding women I have ever met.”

Mahia looked away, stifling a giggle, “There is irony there, Colonel.” She hurried off, giggling, to assist Toussaint with raising their shelter for the night.

Corbin stood there, simply breathing, for several minutes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Later that night, following a meal of roasted pollo, the explorers sat around the campfire. Toussaint loaded his pipe with a sweet black Cavendish and it soon filled the air with a pleasurable scent. Corbin puffed a long cigar he had purchased from the quartermaster post in Venezuela, and kept a cool eye on Howell, who sat tight jawed and nursing a small touch of scotch. Just as Mahia returned from the latrine and curled up beside Toussaint, Howell’s eyes lightened up and he posed his words to Corbin. “I have a question regarding the contract.”

Corbin had wondered how long it was going to take Howell to bring this up, especially since the issue of gold had been opened. “What is it?”

Howell spoke in a calm tone betrayed by his tense demeanor, “Should we find gold, do we civilians receive a fair portion? And if we actually find this ‘City of Gold’, what then?”

Corbin sighed, “Kurt, I assure you: any gold found by this expedition will certainly be divided accordingly.” *Christ! Here it comes... the inevitable gold fever.*

“Accordingly to whom?” Howell pressed. His lips were pursing tighter, and his eyes did not blink.

Toussaint gave the man a long look, then looked at Corbin.

Corbin remained cool headed, “According to the percentage in the spoils clause of your contract. And should the legendary source of this coveted element be discovered by this expedition, each of us shall receive triple that stated percentage. Not a penny more.”

This ran through Howell’s mind.

A dash of levity was needed. Corbin lightened up the topic, “But since we’re talking gold, any percentage should be right suitable. Don’t you think, Claude?”

Toussaint threw in agreement, “Absolutely! I, for one, have all the wealth I need right here with this delightful gem in my arms every night. Gold pales in comparison.” Toussaint squeezed Mahia’s little body closer and kissed her forehead.

Corbin changed the subject, "It's late. We really should start early in the morning. Let's get some sleep." He stood up and tossed the remaining stub of his cigar into the fire. He departed to check that the watch was in place before retiring to his shelter. Howell seemed sated by the last swallow of his scotch. He, too, ambled to bed, with Toussaint and Mahia not far behind, making their way like smitten lovers, arms around each other.

An hour later, Corbin was awakened by noises that were not indigenous to the jungle. It was Toussaint whispering to Mahia, followed by the careful rustlings of covers and clothes. This preceded a deep and heavy breathing, and a rhythm of heroically subdued moans of pleasure. Finding the noises much too depressing to listen to further, Corbin quietly got out of bed and wandered to the opposite side of camp. He stood just at the edge of the glow of the dying fire. *I really don't want to imagine her little body on his big naked girth.*

Looking out into the dark jungle, Corbin wondered about many things to get his mind off what was emanating from Mahia and Toussaint's tent. What had happened to Vicci? Why truly had they not encountered a single animal in several days? What exactly had the guides so spooked? Where was this trail leading?

Where was his trail leading? He was so angry with God, and it had little abated since starting this expedition. Back in Washington, he had felt murky at best from the day he arrived, and things grew worse with each week, it seemed. Particularly during the recent months preceding this journey – months of vicious attack on his reputation – the black clouds rolled in and stormed rain and thunder all over his life. It was a relentless stream leading him into greater frustration, seemingly without end. *What exactly did I do to be so persistently fucked with by You? I am beginning to believe in two gods, because the one of merciful love cannot be the same entity as the relentless bastard hell-bent on breaking me down.*

It had all started in early winter, when the first aspersions were cast regarding his robust bachelor explorations. Questions regarding his suitability for position in the capital grew into very specific allegations of possible misconduct on duty. A series of slanderous lies multiplied daily, so that by the last days of November, he was left in agonizing quandary over what he had done exactly and who specifically had he offended. *What lesson is this? I'll change what You want me to change, just fucking tell me what that is!*

Now, as he strolled aimlessly along the jungle trail, wondering if he would lose his career as he had lost his truest love, this vexing trail of his life quickly had him off the path and lost. His mind clouded with worry, Corbin had not paid attention to where he was going and soon found himself several yards from camp and the trail.

And that was when it happened again. An odd sensation enveloped Corbin as static electricity popped in the air all about, snapping him from his troubled mind. Immediately, he realized what he had done. Unable to see the glow of the dying campfire, the darkness of the jungle all around and over his head was sobering. Instinctively, he slid his hand to his hip.

Oh hell...

He had actually wandered from camp without his gun. As he was about to curse his luck, the static crackling in the air concentrated in one spot before him and a dull glow soon materialized. Within seconds of Corbin's consciousness realizing what was happening, he was faced with that which he longed for most.

The woman who danced on the air.

Esmeralda! Just as he needed help! Her dark hair flying around her pretty face, she looked as solid as the trees and vines around her. Corbin reached out to touch her, but Esmeralda was moving away, beckoning him to follow with the gentle gesture of the loveliest hands he had ever known. Of course he would follow. He wondered as he went, Was this it? Was it time for him to go to the other side? He ran to keep up with her image, wrapped in colorful raiment and rippled by an otherworldly wind, as she floated deeper into the jungle, even farther from the trail. Still, Corbin followed her, and would have marched at her command right into Satan's parlor. She was even more beautiful than she had been in life, even with her solemn expression. As

she beckoned, he trudged through ground foliage to his knees and disregarded hanging vines and whipping branches. There was only Esmeralda and the salve her presence brought to the wound of his emotional agony. Corbin followed, hands out, striving to merely touch her once. If only he could reach her.

Then she stopped.

Awed by her presence, Corbin barely acknowledged that he now stood in a tight clearing. He was too taken by her creamed coffee skin, and the way her breasts rose and fell with her breathing. He remembered the touch of her fingers and the feel of her lips and wanted to know them again. She looked so real, floating there just inches above the twisted ferns and wildflowers, her hair surrounded in a corona of dim light, her eyes beaming out with pity on him. He just wanted to touch her and hold her again.

Corbin leaped forward.

Esmeralda disappeared instantly, Corbin passing through the air where she had been. He hit the floor of the jungle with a rough thud.

“Colonel!”

A gentle voice. Feminine. *Mahia*? Corbin got to his knees and shook off the fall.

Then Toussaint’s voice bellowed closer, “Good God, man! What is that?!”

Corbin looked up and saw the source of Toussaint’s wonder.

A stone column, flat and wide, its face carved with elaborate relief designs. Atop this wondrous monolith glowed a perfectly spherical crystal emitting a bluish-white light. It was the light, Corbin realized, that allowed his eyes to see the images on the stone column. In fact, the crystal’s glow was illuminating the small clearing quite well. Corbin realized then that Esmeralda had led him here, to this relic. Toussaint helped Corbin to his feet and asked, “What have you found?”

Corbin was not certain, yet. “How did you know I was gone?”

“One of the watchmen was looking for you,” Toussaint reported, a displeased expression on his face, “I have bad news, ole boy. Our guides have deserted us. We’ve only the two watchmen remaining, and Howell is not having much success convincing them to stay.”

Corbin sighed deeply. “Damn it.”

Toussaint nodded toward the column before them. “But perhaps you’ve found what we came here for...”

Corbin noticed Mahia standing beside Toussaint, her dark eyes silently pondering the object presently fascinating her man. Corbin turned his attention back to the monolith. He and Toussaint assessed it to be about nine feet in actual height from the ground under the foliated floor of the jungle. The large round globe atop the thing truly impressed them. It was decided that two would stay while the third returned to camp for Howell and whichever of the natives may still be dedicated. Toussaint insisted it be himself, and Mahia remain with Corbin. “I will bring your pack and weapons,” Toussaint turned back toward the trail.

Corbin called out his suggestion, “Food for three days, water for five.”

“Right!” Toussaint was quickly gone in the darkness.

Corbin turned back to the column. “I believe we’ll follow this.”

“Follow what?” Mahia wondered, “How?”

Corbin shrugged, “My hunch. Only for a day and a half. If it leads to nothing, we’ll come back here and attempt to decipher this. By the way, how did you know where to find me?”

Mahia did not take her gaze off the relic. “The watchmen said they saw you head up the trail. We followed until we saw the breaking of your steps in the foliage. Then we saw you falling before this... whatever it is.”

Corbin figured he had been gone a few minutes. “You couldn’t have been searching long. I didn’t hear anyone behind me.”

Mahia looked at him curiously, “The watchmen did not wake us until the guides had deserted. You were gone an hour by then.”

An hour? He had left just several minutes ago! “How long have you been searching for me?”

“About an hour, as well,” Mahia answered.

Corbin could not grasp it. Over two hours had passed, yet he could have left camp only less than thirty minutes before. Then, he wondered. “What all did you see here?”

Mahia was not very good at feigning ignorance. “What do you mean?”

Corbin looked her in the eyes.

Mahia confessed. “I saw the woman.”

Suddenly, Corbin felt flush with excitement. “You saw her?!”

Mahia looked at the column without emotion, “Yes, Colonel. I saw the spirit woman.”

Corbin suddenly felt not so crazy. “I’m not losing my mind.”

“This was not the first time you have seen her,” Mahia said. She was not going to let his silent response stand. “Who was she?”

Corbin sighed. “This was not the first time I have seen her. I saw her our second day in the Matto Grosso. The first time was in Baltimore. Her name... was Esmeralda.”

Mahia’s tone was respectful, “You loved this woman.”

Corbin clarified, “More than any other.”

The silence that followed was broken by Corbin. “Claude will need nearly an hour to get back to camp, and at least fifteen minutes to gather Howell and our gear. Then another hour to return here. Since you have seen her, too, I suppose I should tell you about Esmeralda. And about why I left Washington. Maybe you can help me find the real reason all this led me here.”

Mahia politely responded, “Only if you truly want to talk about it.”

Corbin felt determined. “I think I do.” He went to an old tree that had fallen long ago and sat down. Mahia sat a few feet from him. Corbin proceeded to tell her the story. “It was back in ‘Sixty. Shortly before the war started...”

CHAPTER FIVE

“And I was in love. Trapped, you might say, by the folly of my heart, ever since I had met the coveted and beautiful Helene Dellacapri. Oh, she was beautiful—and painfully so, to remember. To attempt a description would do no justice. To describe her vibrant red hair so full and aflame around her exquisitely featured face would conjure images of fantasy seen only on the artists’ canvas. You would not believe any woman could be so lovely, unless you saw her with your own eyes. When not in her presence, you may even doubt what you saw.

“You would have to see how her perfect cheekbones highlighted the width of her eyes, and look upon the narrow angle of her delicate jawline coming to the gentle, small dimpled chin under the full red lips of a wide mouth. You have never seen such perfect, white teeth, my friend. Oh, the supple seduction of those lips! She ran feverish under amorous stress, and your own mouth could barely handle the literal heat from her own.

“You would have to see exactly how her top lip curled ever so slightly upward under her long nose, to know what desire for her would do to any man. And, you would have to look into her wide open, almond-shaped and treacherously haunting blue eyes to understand how any man could have been driven mad with longing, once he fell into her gaze.

“To describe the perfection of her beauty would have you telling me it’s impossible for a woman to be so lovely.

“But she was, I tell you! She was an otherworldly beauty, head to toe; her womanly delights the stuff of dreams. No, you would yourself have to see the statuesque, breathtakingly bosomed, slender waisted and delectable Helene Dellacabri before I could ever ask you to believe me.

“It was with Helene that I spun recklessly into love and lost my head for the last time.

“Our affair began in Baltimore. Helene was a friend of my sister, who had for several months designed our introduction. I first laid eyes upon Helene at a tea party and was infatuated at that very moment. She was seated at a small table which I recall was decorated with tubule roses. Her white lacy dress displayed her much noticed bosom dangerously similar in fashion to certain New Orleans ladies I had previously encountered. Her indescribably red hair she wore up and swept back, merely magnifying the power of her beauty.

“You must understand that I do not exaggerate. She was of an appearance beyond the grasp of any man.

“As stated earlier, I was immediately taken with Helene. Following an introduction, Helene and I enjoyed tea and conversation for an hour. She told me of an engagement to an artist who wanted to paint her. In the course of the endeavor, they had fallen in love. The romance lasted a few months, during which time passion drove her to give herself to him. I thought this an astonishing revelation for an introductory chat, but I found myself listening with fascination. It was the first time I had truly listened to a woman. Her voice was pleasant to an eerie degree. It spoke directly to my heart, flowing into my ears and pouring sweet magic into my thirsty soul. The remainder of what consciousness I held was drawn into the heavenly maelstrom of her gaze. By the time she finished her tale of woe about the artist who couldn’t handle his love for her, I was trapped. When she told me the artist had broken the engagement abruptly, I did not retain an ounce of my wits for consideration of possible validity of his motive. No, I merely reacted as any enamored man would, by thinking him a ‘cad’ and a ‘scoundrel’. How could a man cast off such an angel? What sort of fool was this man?

“I did not realize that I would soon find out.

“From that moment, it all happened so swiftly. The army had me in Baltimore, preparing to go west. That would not happen for two months yet, so I spent my afternoons walking with Helene; sharing tea and supper with Helene. Not a day passed that I did not spend with Helene. It was only natural when, one splendidly cool and clear December afternoon, I leaned over as we sat beneath a maple and kissed the goddess for the first time.

“Her lips were on fire, as if she suffered a fever, yet also hesitant. Something held her back. At the time, I was convinced it was past heartbreak, as that hesitates a woman most. I believed the heated quiver could be stoked aflame with passion, in love’s own time. That kiss led, two days later, to another, and to kisses every day, with much hand holding. Thus was my head filled with sweet visions of blissful life with this muse at my side and in my bed. These lips, I told myself, tasted of the love I had suffered the loss of others for. These lips, I let myself believe, God had reserved for me.

“I was happy.

“It seemed only logical to me to ask for her hand in marriage, and when she gave her affirmation, the joy was unfathomable. I planned everything, at her request. A garden ceremony followed by a seaside reception. We would honeymoon in Italy. I felt happier than I’d felt in a long time, perhaps ever; for I truly

believed I had been blessed with this woman. I would never spend another terrible hour in my life, for, with Helene in it, nothing could ever be so bad.

“Until she deserted me.

“One afternoon, about a week before I departed west, Helene and I took a carriage to the studio where the artist had painted her portrait months before. She had left a few personal items there and now wanted to retrieve them. We were en route to a café for lunch with friends and she requested I leave her to gather her things, while I picked up our associates, then return for her. With a chaste kiss, I left her there, and there my miseries began.

“The artist was in town, unknown to me. Having heard of our engagement, he had sent a letter requesting to see her. Not wanting to alarm me, she decided to spare me knowledge of this meeting. Until, of course, it was too late. When I returned with the carriage and our friends in it, she and the artist were gone. The studio was locked tight, not a soul present. They had simply vanished. As quietly as he had appeared in town, she and any feelings she harbored for me had disappeared with him.

“To this day, I cannot describe my reaction. No woman’s actions would cause such extravagantly morose shock in my system ever again. It was the last drop of hurt anyone would squeeze from my heart, I vowed. In the three days which would pass before word came from Helene, I’d suffered mind-numbing emotional agony, certain that my life’s love had run off and married the fickle artist. I could not sleep, I could not eat, I could not concentrate upon anything but Helene and the shattered ruins of my soul. Longing for death, I felt no better when a note from her finally did arrive.

“She wrote that she was so sorry to hurt me, but she had never stopped loving him. She admonished herself for ever having let herself go so far with me, so soon after their affair ended. They now planned to marry in the spring, and she again apologized for hurting me. Of course, I comprehended all this mostly on the second reading, for in the first, the words were meaningless characters in ink which, wetted by my tears, ran down the page.

“Three days later, I boarded a train for St.Louis, from where I would set out by coach, westward. I left Helene behind with her artist, but the torment accompanied me. Though a steamer down to Panama, then another up to California would have carried me more swiftly, I chose the aggravation and danger of overland passage across a rough continent. Not one hazardous mile could deign compare to the depth of emotional agony I suffered over the cruel loss of Helene Dellacapri.

“Only death could triumph over that...”

CHAPTER SIX

“Onward to California I went, not knowing what I would find in that wild adventurous land. Through miles and days on the train to St.Louis, I could not recall, even this moment, what I ate nor how many days it was. My mind was that preoccupied with hurt. By the time I reached that city, I was suitable enough for duty. With no hesitation, and an astonishing depth of concentration, I took command of my small traveling company. Within hours of the first day, we were outfitted and ready for the wagoneers. The curative powers of enterprise on the damaging symptoms of the folly that is love are not to be scoffed.

“Within three days on the trail, I had traded a seat in the coach for a saddle. I was leading a group of men with single-minded purpose. There was a war in the east, and we had a mission. At my first sight of mesas in the arid desert of the New Mexico territory—somewhere north of Las Cruces – I remembered that one’s own

destiny is bigger than the meandering of the heart. By the time we came to a dusty stop late in the day, I was angry – wondering why I had ever let go of my wits over Helene Dellacabri in the first place. Convinced then that one night with a cantina whore would refresh my spirits, I felt myself again.

“Never criticize nor underestimate the value of a prostitute to the life of the unmarried soldier or sailor, or any wandering man, for that matter.

“In that land of enchanting vistas of red, orange and brown mesas, and deep blue sky with hot blazing sun, I found my soul again. I was happy, on that trail, in the dust and heat. The farther away from the cobbled streets and brick towers of the eastern cities, the better. Likewise with Helene Dellacabri.

“Each day my strength grew, the men under my command responded enthusiastically to every order. The edge which heartbreak had honed into me cut through all pretense of doubt with which those men may have embarked. My self-directed fury against personal weakness seemed only to draw excellence from them, as that same fury propelled me to lead from the front. They could readily see that I displayed not one moment’s concern over an arrow or bullet to my heart. For this, they handed me their loyalty.

“Never doubt this, young lady: there are passions every bit as consuming as love. To lead brave men in a desperate cause is one of them. For me, riding through uncertain territory, in my frame of mind, was desperate enough. But our mission was desperate enough, for the Union, at that time, saw little hope to survive the dread army of the South without the crucial resources of California. That was far more important than Helene Dellacabri ever was, and it was enough for me.

“On to California, with a hardening heart, I led my men. Six days after entering and exiting the Arizona territory, we approached a Spanish mission on a hill near the original army outpost and I beheld my first view of San Diego and the Pacific Ocean. I have since set foot in many wondrous and exotic lands, but none so embraced my spirit as that western city by the sea. Is it not fitting that I would find there the truest love I would ever know?

“In San Diego, I first laid eyes upon Esmerelda Soliz, a daughter of California, eleven years my senior. Widowed from a man who did not appreciate her, Esmerelda was blamed for his inability to produce a child. Her best stroke of luck came when this man died of cholera contracted while mining silver deep in Mexico. He left her with a small house and an unexpected cache of silver and gold which Esmerelda used sparingly and guarded well. When I met her, Esmerelda was working in her father’s cantina near that original army camp, on the western hill below the mission.

“Esmerelda possessed beauty. Her mother came from a Pacific island. Fernando, her father, was of Inca descent, raised in California by a Spanish uncle. As a young man, Fernando worked on a merchant vessel, meeting Esmerelda’s mother while on furlough somewhere in Malaysia. The girl was sixteen with a lovely and slight figure, and skin the color of brown-sugared cinnamon. The girl’s big almond eyes and full lips mixed well with Fernando’s handsome Spanish Indian features, creating the beauty that was their daughter Esmerelda. Black shining hair, wide nose, sensuously full lips. Blessed with her Spanish Indian grandmother’s genetics, Esmerelda grew into a more bountiful figure than her slender mother. Esmerelda’s beauty was not otherworldly, like Helene’s. Esmerelda was most definitely of this Earth, more real. Even the years had not decimated her comely face and figure, as life in the west did to most women. She did not immediately catch your full attention, rather it crept up on you in surreptitious fashion. By the time I consciously realized how lovely Esmerelda was, there was no escape from her allure.

“At least, it seemed so. But perhaps I was already falling in love by the time I entered the cantina that first day and she caught me staring. She was the centerpiece of the room, in her colorful skirt and white blouse, unbuttoned just enough for one to see the slight sheen of sweat across her swelled cleavage. In an instant, Esmerelda possessed me, and her reaction to my assessment made it clear. The slight smile, the gentle backward

tilt of her head, the narrowing eyelids as she withstood my gaze with her own beautiful dark eyes—gesture of her approval, signposts to invitation.

“I could go on about how I eventually spoke to her that afternoon, but what was said was quite mundane. Our eyes and bodies were conducting the essential conversation. That night, and every night after for nine days, she danced with no other man; and I noticed no other woman. I shall never forget following her outside the cantina, to the shadows beneath a large tree, where she pulled me close and I kissed her hungry mouth for the first time. My eyes were closed and my heart swirled, as the emotion of music between us accompanied the gentle strains of guitar in the cantina. We became lovers that night, and every day with her melted the years between us. I never knew such serenity with any woman before I sat under the stars, looking across the bay, with Esmerelda’s fingers entwined with my own.

“Did I tell you of her hands? Something to behold, her hands. Not the featureless, stubby appendages of a young girl, hers were lean and seasoned, sculpted by the years. Somewhere between mocha and brown sugar, their color was as rich as the rest of her. I was never so enamored of a woman’s hands, and no jewels ever shone brighter, no gold ever glowed more like the sun than when adorning those blessed vessels of her touch. If all the words of worship ever written could be rightfully applied to the lovely appearance of her hands, they could not begin to describe Esmerelda’s touch.

“Oh, to feel those hands again, once more, before I die...

“For several weeks I carried out my mission through meetings with local men of power, all in an effort to secure California for the Union. Every spare hour was spent with Esmerelda as she showed me the beauty of the state here in this corner called San Diego. She even traveled with me on one occasion, to Santa Barbara, where I held a discreet meeting with Russian military attaches whose role in our War Between the States will not be fully known to our people for quite some time. Esmerelda rode beside me and made our nights there eternally memorable. In the west, social conventions of the east are judged as silly as they seem to be, and are generally ignored. Up to that point in my career, I was never more persuasive as an officer. No woman so happily engaged me as did Esmerelda. Her love was complete and generous and exclusively mine. That was the indispensable key to my success in Santa Barbara. When we returned to San Diego, I with triumphant news for the war office, she was truly as happy as I, and as in love.

“It was then, I believe, that I knew Esmerelda had healed my broken heart. I was prepared to spend the remainder of my days there in San Diego with her. Sharing dreams, we were of one mind and heart. Together, we would see all the wonders of the world, craving the journey itself as much as the destination. She wanted to see those rumored ancient ruins in South America, then cross the Pacific waters to the land of her mother’s birth. This gave me joy that Esmerelda suffered the same wanderlust I had known since I was a little boy. At last, we both had each other to suffer the rewarding affliction. This brought us even closer, charging our intimacy with profound depth and emotion.

“Naturally, as a man begins to fool himself into believing God will allow him happiness in his mortal lifetime, a rude awakening comes. Mine in the form of a goddess.

“One afternoon, a young private came calling with a letter from Helene Dellacapri. Reading it in the back of the garrison office, her own words told me things had gone terribly wrong with the artist. It seemed his temperament nurtured an insecurity, manifesting itself in occasional histrionic fits of jealousy, most recently risen in the matter of a past paramour of hers who had decided he might regain her affections. This element was news to me, for never did anyone other than the artist come up in our conversations concerning her history. Her description of this artist led me to conclude he was a mere ne’er-do-well who could easily be dispatched with by a man of stalwart character. However, character being the main deficiency in this individual, the old

haunt from the past was more than could be handled by him. In the end, Helene Dellacapri was releasing herself of the burdens of her affair with the artist, and was asking to return to me.

“You could imagine my surprise at this turn of events. A most splendid and beautiful creature whom I had loved and lost was now wanting to come back to my arms. Helene practically begged to return to my graces, and I reacted rather than responded. I sent a telegram as swiftly as I could, with an affirmative invitation for her to come to California so we could evaluate our feelings after a visit.

“How I felt during this is most notable, for there was no excitement nor elation in me. The whole thing took me by surprise and my response had actually been extended in a mood of hospitality more than passion. Later, I would reflect upon what I did *not* feel when I made that fateful decision to take Helene back.

“But take her back, I eventually did. I sent for her via steamship. Her journey to the Gulf of Mexico and the Yucatan gave me the time to break the news to Esmerelda.

“What had progressed between Esmerelda and I was an affair of two like minds and spirits, wherein love was never openly discussed. It just never seemed to come up in that way. We were two friends who enjoyed each other as lovers. Esmerelda knew everything I knew of Helene, and she also knew far more about me than I would ever tell to Helene in a lifetime. The mistress friend often knows a man better than his own wife. Perhaps the mistress loves him more?

“Even though I explained Helene’s visit as simply that – for it was just a visit at that time – I sensed the distance in Esmerelda’s demeanor the instant she learned of Helene’s return to my life. She knew before I did that I was in a state of denial of where my heart truly lay. She remained my friend and lover, in spite of the sadness I sensed weighing upon her heart. At night, she lay in my bed as we stared at the stars together. Through the open shutters, we heard the sounds of the harbor, and the beatings of our hearts. She was my Esmerelda. But during the days, when she thought I wasn’t looking, I saw her despondent eyes.

“I was so wrong for what I did to her.

“Eventually, the steamship arrived. I kissed Esmerelda before heading down to the port. It was the strangest feeling I ever knew. I felt I was leaving behind something integral to my soul, but I went anyway. The beautiful Helene awaited me. What other choice had I?

CHAPTER SEVEN

“It was under an overcast sky which I greeted Helene back into my life. All the beauty of San Diego that I had come to know was dimmed. Helene’s demeanor was more akin to polite neutrality, as she was never one to appreciate the details which make a place memorable. Such affectations of atmosphere were lost on her. She more or less tolerated the enthusiasms of those around her. Not maliciously nor with cold disregard, but without empathy. Her kiss, while nice, lacked conviction. Surprisingly, so did mine. Helene’s trunks loaded onto the coach, I escorted her to one of the finer hotels in town.

“It did not take long for Helene to express a desire to travel north, specifically a clear interest in San Francisco. I realized then that San Diego apparently would not suit her needs, whatever they turned out to be. I explained that I could travel with her to assist in establishment of a residence, but important work remained here for me. In fact, as I told her, I was bound by orders to concentrate my efforts on the southern regions of the state. My requirement to stay in San Diego seemed to not please Helene at all. The significance escaped me until events developed further.

“After two weeks, Helene and I still had not drawn any closer. Her kisses remained tentative, her pleasant demeanor suspiciously hollow. Her only enthusiasm – not comparable to the word as you and I know it

– was how soon we would make the journey to San Francisco. None of the social gatherings, nor the historical and natural treasures of San Diego seemed to impress her sufficiently. I eventually found the time to make this desire come to fruition and arranged a trip north.

“During that initial fortnight with Helene, I would see Esmerelda and we’d talk about everything but Helene. I could relax only when with Esmerelda. I longed for the touch of her hands every minute away from her, and could not untie the knots in my stomach until I heard her voice every day. I spent two weeks with Helene on my arm and Esmerelda in my heart.

“In spite of the misery it caused within me, I departed for San Francisco with Helene aboard a private coach to Santa Barbara. The coastal trail afforded a lovely view of the cool Pacific Ocean during those longest of days. Of the night we spent in that peaceful town, I remember nothing of significance. Neither did I experience anything remotely akin to happiness during the trek to Monterey, nor the night spent there, much of which I spent wandering the docks in the fog, thinking of another place. It was a relief to arrive in San Francisco eventually, where I put Helene in a hotel for a night, while I met appointments with supply and logistics officers at the presidio. Work was my only escape from the shallow torment Helene’s detached presence had become.

“Imagine my surprise. Here was the goddess whom I worshipped less than a year before; the woman whose hasty departure had shattered my spirit. Now, Helene was back with me, and I was miserable! I missed simple dialogue; I missed enthusiasms. I missed sharing dreams and ideas with another kindred soul. I missed desperately the woman whose heart beat with adventure, and who marveled at the mysterious wonders of the world at large. In short, I missed Esmerelda.

“I began that moment to question my feelings for Helene. Another week would pass before I’d embrace the truth; a week and a most interesting series of events that would bring to light how Helene felt about me.

“On the second Friday evening since our arrival, I escorted Helene to dinner at a colorful, classy restaurant not far from Nob Hill. As we disembarked from our carriage, I noticed a group of a half-dozen rough-looking men of bohemian appearance, all with eyes on Helene. Not that I wasn’t accustomed long ago to the attention she drew from men, but this time the prurient depth of their stares concerned me. Among these men stood a large Irishman whom I would shortly learn was one Mungo McShane. He had an enormous chest, wide shoulders and a big square chin. Mungo was a size or two too large for his brown suit, a comical appearance, were it not for his mean drunken gaze aimed at Helene. His eyes turned even meaner when they met mine. Some would have called me foolish for standing my ground, staring back, until Helene appeared visibly disturbed upon noticing Mungo herself. She bade us go inside with due haste.

“Once inside, Helene calmed by the time we were met in the parlor by a couple I knew from Baltimore. Navy Lieutenant Rogers and his wife, Sada. At the dinner table we enjoyed shallow conversation on Washington society, and continued with the same polite lack of depth throughout dessert and brandy. Finally, Rogers and I retired to an adjoining chamber for cigars and masculine dialogue, leaving Helene and Sada to their own wits in the ladies’ parlor. I had to acknowledge that Helene would make a suitable society wife, after all. But I still longed for a woman with whom I could share a cigar and a tequila. More specifically, I would trade chateau briande and merlot for pollo and sangria with my favorite Spanish Californio lady.

“My reverie was interrupted when I saw a waiter deliver a note to Helene across the hall in the ladies’ parlor. Rather than immediately present my curiosity to her, I watched as she hastily opened the small envelope and removed the card for a quick read. Whatever was written there widened her big blue eyes for a tell-tale instant, and a flush to her cheeks followed. It pleased her. Calmly extinguishing my cigar, I finished my scotch and excused myself from Lieutenant Rogers’ company.

“Helene was still smiling as I approached, glowing with her preoccupation. I had already decided to let her tell me of the note before revealing my knowledge of it. When she merely asked that we depart, I caught Sada’s momentary expression of quiet surprise as she realized Helene intended to hide the note from me – ostensibly her fiancée. Courteously, as any gentleman should, I took Helene by the hand and bid our friends a good evening. Helene still seemed charmed by her secret, even as we departed the restaurant and went to our waiting cabriolet.

“As we rode away, Mungo and his gang noticeably absent, Helene asked if we could walk along the seaside. I instructed the driver to proceed toward the presidio, where I knew it was safe, but Helene insisted upon seeing the wharf at night. She wanted color, so to the wharf we went. I touched my sword hilt for the comfort it provided, and remembered the dagger secreted inside my coat. We traveled the cobbled streets to the destiny or fate of our relationship.

“The wharf in those days was no different than it is today, this late in our century – not a place one feels comfortable taking a lady after sunset. It was near ten o’clock as it was. Fortunately, there were several soldiers and sailors about, many with whom I had made prior acquaintance, but I was still on my guard. If there was to be trouble – and I was certain there would be – I would have several witnesses to my actions, whatever was required.

“Someone was bound to die that night, along with any semblance of nonsense between Helene and I.

“In the spirit of my weariness with her preoccupation, I managed to direct the conversation, as we strolled along the boardwalk plentiful with shadowed corners and knaves and thugs to fill them. Helene seemed to notice only the shellfish peddlers and hucksters, leaving any hazards to my perusal, but she could not avoid the dialogue through which I projected a nonchalant interest in what seemed to be on her mind. That was the moment which she chose to tell me the note was from the aforementioned Mungo McShane. Getting somewhere, finally, I urged her to tell me more of this man, and she did so, with a blend of weariness and worry in her gentle voice.

“Mungo McShane had long craved to repossess Helene after a brief courtship in New Orleans where they had met. When his marriage proposals went refused, Mungo nearly raped her – foiled by a hat pin she swiftly applied to his cheek, just below his right eye. She escaped that dastardly attempt, but was constantly haunted by the lovelorn Mungo all over that city until she could bear it no longer and left for Charleston. By a stroke of bad luck for Helene, Mungo found work on a merchant vessel and happened to cross her path one day while the ship was reloading supplies en route to the West Indies. He terrorized her for three days in Charleston, returning every six weeks, driving Helene to pull stakes again, this time for Baltimore. But Mungo was determined and eventually found her there. His determination was to have Helene, regardless of her new relationship with the artist.

“At this point in her story, Helene betrayed her disappointment with the artist’s lack of fortitude in key situations. I saw it in her eyes as they shot downward, and I heard momentary weakening in her voice as she related the artist’s first confrontation with Mungo in a Baltimore park. Her curt attempt at hiding the truth merely confirmed what I already suspected: the artist had stood petrified in fear in the presence of the larger, threatening man. Only a group of sailors passing by interrupted what was sure to be a humiliating scene, saving Helene from a certain distasteful horror at the hands of McShane. Certainly, the humiliation her beau experienced from other men rescuing him and his lady was not as devastating to him as the alternative would have been. However, Helene was humiliated, in spite of herself, that this man whom she loved lacked the simple courage with which the conviction of love fills most men. After this incident, Helene wondered how she herself could solve the problem of Mungo McShane.

“I did not, unfortunately for Mungo, understand her solution until it had been carried out. By the time we turned a corner into an uncomfortably empty alley, I was already occupied in that solution. The infamous man himself stepped out from the shadows, looking every bit the mad and furious giant that he was. Making extremely unsuitable comments regarding his plans for Helene that night, Mungo made clear his plan for me, no doubt involving the large and razor-sharp ice hook he held in one raised hand. I, however, was ready for him, confident of his fate, even as he revealed the large knife in his other beefy hand.

“As if rehearsed, we were no longer alone in the alley. I honestly cannot say whether I let him swipe the hook across my chest, for bonafides, or not; but the blood soaking my shirt was sufficient for the witnesses present. They watched as I fended the attack of a much larger and menacing opponent, with the skill and disciplined moves of a professional man-of-arms. My saber sliced through the air once to warn him, my dagger’s point was applied to disarm his knife hand. But the gorilla grew mortally insistent with the ice hook, and I was once more forced to employ the long blade. I thrust the unforgiving steel deep into Mungo’s big meaty chest all the way until my hilt met his lapel, and his warm heart’s blood sprayed as I pulled my saber out of him. It was over for Mungo McShane. He was eternally relieved of haunting Helene Dellacapri. As the big man died in a pool of his own blood in that alley, my gaze caught the face of Helene’s artist beau watching from the safety of the crowd.

“And he saw mine.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“In that moment, I understood the truth. Helene had used me. Mungo McShane had to be removed. Helene would not allow herself to love any man but the artist, in spite of his shortcomings. She knew he could not handle Mungo’s threat, and she concluded that the problem could only be solved by a man with unblemished character. Helene decided that Mungo would best be dispatched by a reputable man, preferably a soldier – even better, an officer. I was the best candidate, Helene realized during our first interlude, so she manipulated me in order to remove the biggest obstacle to happiness with her true lover.

“You may ask yourself why anyone would cross a continent for a scheme so minor in the great course of things? I can only credit that intense passion which many call love with the power to drive one to such treachery. Helene was not impervious to the forces of emotion. She was in love with the artist, in spite of the degree to which his lack of character cheapened hers, and she was determined they would be together. California was as good a place as any, particularly for an artist and his lover. Her turn of fortune found me in the appropriate place, at the opportune time. Once Mungo was eliminated, she and her beau could simply remain in San Francisco. It is ironic that her determined actions made her not much different from Mungo himself.

“I was saddened to see her oblivious to the inevitability of further obstacles to come, but reflection upon being used left me as relieved as I was perturbed. Relieved because, not an hour after the fight with Mungo and seeing the artist was in town (and undoubtedly the true author of the note delivered in the restaurant), I came to the startling realization that I was in deep and irrevocable love with another woman. My heart and soul were freed of any emotional or moral obligation to Helene, due to the unexpected events there in San Francisco. I could, with all good conscience, part company with Helene in finality and return to the arms of the woman who lived in my heart.

“I was in love with Esmerelda and wanted to be with her for the rest of my life.

“It was almost midnight by the time I escorted Helene to her hotel, but I requested she remain awake for just a short while longer. I explained that I wished to present her with a gift, and her expression immediately told me that she expected something she truly did not want. Leaving her momentarily with this misperception so dreadful to her, I hurriedly departed for a saloon in the wharf area, where I knew a few silver pieces would secure the services of some trusty sailors. They would receive more if they found the artist and delivered him to the hotel, with haste. For three quarters of an hour, Helene waited for a marriage proposal I had no intention of delivering to her, and I had my minor wound tended, while waiting for the sailors to arrive. When they did, they had in their custody the wide-eyed and obviously terrified object of her desire.

“You could imagine Helene’s surprise when she answered the knock on her door, and was faced with her lover – the artist. They had ten minutes alone to worry and tremble in each others’ arms before I entered the room. Helene noticed that I had changed my clothes, now wearing my trail uniform. I had also paid the bellhop to gather my belongings and have them shipped out on the first vessel for San Diego the next morning. I would embark shortly on horseback for Santa Cruz, from where I knew a naval cutter was departing before dawn. But there was this final business with my former flame.

“I told Helene that I knew she was not in love with me, and that I harbored no grudge. She deserved a small, but sincere admonishment regarding manipulation of people’s feelings, and she took this with a solemn stare to the floor. Fortunately for her conscience, I told her, this deception did not devastate me. I was, after all, in love with someone else. I told her that I’d only wished I had realized it before all this foolishness. Wishing her much needed luck with the artist, I departed, leaving them alone together at last.

“Departure from San Francisco found me with but one purpose of mind, body and spirit – to reach the loving arms of my amorcito, Esmerelda.

“I rode south through San Jose, pushing two horses as though I were mad, making Santa Cruz just in time to board the cutter before she weighed anchor. As the swift ship cut the waters all the way down the coastline, I experienced not one calm moment, all the while worried if Esmerelda no longer felt as much love for me as I did for her. The thought that she may have taken another lover frightened me. To be in her presence was my greatest desire; to hold her and taste her scarlet lips again, my only wish. No ship could have sailed fast enough for me. I was oblivious to the cool spray of the sea and to the beautiful rosy dawn rising over the land. My eyes were satisfied by only the sight of the buoy marking the entrance to San Diego harbor. As we moored, I was the first off the ship.

“A fresh horse awaited me, as I was an army officer and had my choice of horses in the navy stable. I chose a fine mount and rode at wild speed to the old town just below the mission. Everything along the streets of San Diego was a blur, until dismounted in the dust of my arrival. I reigned my horse outside the cantina and ran through the swinging doors, anxious for the sight of Esmerelda’s dark eyes.

“But there was only the wrinkled astonished eyes of the old cook, surprised to see me. ‘She is gone, amigo,’ he said to me with sadness, ‘Packed her things and sailed away on a big ship.’

“I asked the old man where she had gone, and he told me, ‘To find her heart again.’

“I could not move, this stunned me so. Esmerelda was gone and God only knew how far she had traveled already. My heart sank and my legs collapsed as I reached a bench. For nearly an hour I sat there, staring at the dust on the floor. Anguish deluged my soul. She had been the one who truly loved me, and I let the folly for a pretty face lead me down a fool’s path.

“I wanted death, the only antidote to the pain that is love.

“But God had far more misery in mind for me. This was quite clear, since I was suddenly filled with belief that I could find her and I knew where to search. Esmerelda’s desire to see her mother’s world, and the

legendary ruins of South America – which were closer – flooded back into my memory. She could only have been two weeks ahead of me. Certainly I could catch up to her!

“Finding Esmerelda became the purpose of my life. Granted leave of absence for six months, I headed south through Mexico City and then east to the Yucatan, but no one there recalled seeing her. From there I journeyed further south, through Central America – Honduras and Panama – and even deeper, into the rain forests and Brazil. I journeyed to all the places Esmerelda dreamed of seeing, all the old cities and ports of call she talked about visiting with me. Eventually I met an old man who sold dry goods in Santiago. He recalled Esmerelda, and that she was traveling dressed as a man, for safety. She had come to him looking for something for her skin and shared her secret. He also remembered her plan to board a ship bound for Malaysia.

“I was now certain where I would find Esmerelda: she was going to find her mother’s birthplace.

“The quest through South America and the journey getting there took longer than I had anticipated. I had to secure more leave, approved only because of the value of my explorations to the government of the United States. That it was a time of war – the darkest war in our short history – made it all the more astonishing that I was granted approval. Someone in the war department must have been thinking of potential resources, so I got my wish. Following a most extensive report on South America, I was soon following Esmerelda’s trail across the Pacific aboard a whaler much of the way, then a Russian naval vessel. Finally, I reached the islands west of Malaysia.

“I searched every village and every island, and soon began to fear I had missed her again.

“Then, I found her.

“Esmerelda had reached the land of her mother’s birth. She had even found the village and met some of her mother’s kinfolk – a withered, toothless aunt with white hair. By this time, however, she had been suffering through malaria for weeks. Her old aunt did the best she could as a nurse, for nine days and nights. That was just a month ago, the old woman told me in the simplest Spanish I could understand.

“I asked excitedly if Esmerelda was still on the island – and my heart leapt at the answer.

“The old woman nodded her slow white-haired head in the affirmative.

“So many months had led me to this reunion with the truest love of my life. Trial and tribulation had no doubt led to triumph. My spirit soared as I followed the old woman to an even older Spanish-built church, and it occurred to me that my Esmerelda had forsaken all other men for the nunnery. Oh, I was certain she would be joyful that I had come so far to find her, full of remorse for ever having left and ready to spend eternity providing her with the love she so richly deserved. I started like a bolt of lightning for the heavy wooden doors, when her old aunt touched my arm and gave me the most pitiful look. Then, she pointed to a courtyard where grew red roses so vibrant in their shade that I swore I’d never seen red before nor since, as if my journey had been to see them.

“I propelled myself under the arched entry and paused before the elegant trickling fountain where the scent of tropical flowers gently invaded my senses like Esmerelda’s perfume from so long ago. Birds gently whistled and sang, and somewhere far off, someone gently strummed a guitar. The beauty of this garden stopped me in my tracks, as if soothing my soul, long enough for the old woman to catch up. She entered the courtyard and continued solemnly all the way to the back. My feet found their motive force again and I was swiftly beside her.

“In the moonlight, I saw what I never expected and did not ever want to see. All color drained from the world, never more than faded hints of what colors are when they did return.

“A single cross, carved from dark wood, and all too freshly painted letters across it:

“ESMERELDA...

“My tears broke like a downpour and flowed until dawn. The old woman stayed there with me through it all, not saying a word. Once the sun was a glowing ball above the horizon, the tears continued. I could not stop crying for days. Every night found me laid out atop her grave, tears lost in the warm tropical rains crying from the heavens. Life’s brightest fire was doused in the anguish of my crying heart, and let it dim to a mere tip of an ember. Since those nights of laying in agony on her grave, the pain has not diminished – even after all the years. I begged God to end my life right there and was, naturally, ignored by Him on that mad desire. Not a day has passed that I don’t imagine her slender fingers entwined with mine, and the tears flow again...

CHAPTER NINE

“So, I gave up on love – romantic love, of course. It had led me to indescribable joys, only to leave me empty, alone, and emotionally wrung out to horrifying depths. I had true love in my hands and the devil would not tolerate that. Since God can’t tolerate happiness on Earth, He concurred with his foe that my heart and Esmerelda’s be tormented – because we dared love each other, I suppose. At least, I felt that way about Him for a long time.

“I have spent years exploring the world on behalf of my government. Some remote corners of this globe I have reached, staring into ladies’ eyes – hoping to find Esmerelda looking back. But she is not there. I have never felt her touch in any other woman’s hands. In all those places, through all those years, I have never fallen in love again.

“But I have accomplished a hell of a lot otherwise,” Corbin’s sad eyes betrayed the sudden smile. His tale was at an end, as much as he wanted to tell of it. His eyes were focused somewhere in a distant past.

Mahia said nothing, neither with voice nor expression. Only the welling of tears betrayed her inner thoughts. “You must be the loneliest man I have ever encountered.”

Corbin ran his gaze across the various details on the stelae. “Oh, probably not. I dare not think so, anyway. That would be pathetic. Besides, with all the whoring I’ve done, most people would say I’ve just rationalized my ill fortunes into an excuse for irresponsible behavior.”

Mahia stepped beside Corbin and placed her small hand on his shoulder, which he had enough sense to recognize as a gesture leading to something more than a sympathetic ear. But as pretty as she was, and as much as he had found himself acknowledging that fact of her appearance, there was something about her which kept him from being attracted to her to a physical degree. It did perplex him, however. “Mahia, the years and the petticoats I’ve explored in them have greatly diminished the effect any woman can have on the fact that I am in love with a dead woman. But I do appreciate the sentiment. I truly do.”

Mahia suppressed a smile. “The very reason you are a desirable man is the same reason I see you will never alter your definition of feminine companionship.”

Once again, Corbin was confounded by what he did not know about her. He smiled gently, “Before this is all over, you’re going to have to explain yourself.”

Mahia’s smile was radiant. “I simply mean that you are a man who knows what he desires. Into this, you need not explore. Perhaps it is best I remain an enigma to you.”

Corbin liked Mahia. She was accessible, if odd and slightly indefinable. As they sat examining the stone relic together, the voices and steps of their comrades could be heard approaching. Corbin was a bit disappointed that it was only Toussaint and Howell, laden with rucksacks and rifles. They had made

remarkable time, though. Toussaint called out, “Ah! Still here, I see! I’m afraid it’s only us. The watchmen took their leave.”

“We could have used them,” Corbin commented. Toussaint and Howell approached the relic and relieved themselves of their burden. Corbin took his rifle, then his gun belt. “I guess I should not be surprised they bugged out, though.”

Howell reported the state of supplies. “Food for three days, water for five. Two extra belts of rifle cartridges, two extra boxes of pistol. I have the medical kit, and we hid everything else the best we could in the undergrowth. Oh yes, my survey equipment is here, too. Now, what have we here?” He really looked at the stelae for the first time.

Toussaint added, “We also marked trees for the return.”

Corbin noticed a sweet spot inside his lower lip. “Kurt, I must have bitten my lip when I fell. I’m prone to canker sores. Got anything?”

Howell nodded, “Just the thing. I’ll mix up some borax powder for you. What do you think this thing here is?” He nodded at the stelae.

“I’m not certain,” Corbin said, “I have a hunch of my own, but I was hoping you might have an idea.”

Howell considered, “A grave marker?”

Toussaint was impressed. “Not a bad guess, actually; but I cannot think so. The illumination of the globe was meant to be seen in the thick of the jungle.”

“So are gravestones,” Howell pointed out.

“Yes,” Toussaint conceded, then clarified, “But the absence of other markers or edifice of any kind tells me this is something else.”

They all quietly regarded the stelae for a long silent moment, then Howell stood up. He was putting something together. “That is it.”

The other three looked at him as if to ask the same question: What?

Howell nodded. “Yes. I should have known. It’s a marker, all right. Colonel, your hunch, I take it, has been a good one. To follow this, that is. It’s a geographical marker. This thing is giving us directions!”

Corbin felt relieved. “Kurt, you just earned your pay. The question is, which direction is this pointing? And to what?”

“I believe I can work out the direction,” Howell looked at Toussaint, “But to what might be the professor’s department here.”

Corbin also deferred to the big man, “Well, Claude? What do you think it’s telling us?”

Toussaint stepped close to the stelae and ran his fingertips across the carved surface. “Hmmm. It certainly was carved in antiquity. Farther back than I care to guess. It does not appear to be the product of any known cultures, no matter the similarity to Mayan work. In fact, I might say the Mayans were derivative of the culture that left this here. It could take years – decades – to decipher what the carvings are telling us.”

Howell stepped in, “I’d say we’re looking in the right direction. A marker would have instructions on the side seen from approach. Probably also on the side suggesting the continued direction. In other words, if we’re facing this direction to read it, we continue in that direction.”

“Unless,” Corbin interjected, “the destination was meant to be found only by those who could read this.”

Howell nodded, “I see your point. But until we can read it, we have to deduce the physical. Because only one side is marked, and I would look for some feature leading around to another side if a change in direction was intended, my best advice right now is to continue in the direction we are faced to read this. That way.” Howell pointed beyond the stelae, into the dark jungle.

They all realized they could wander for days in the wrong direction. No one was enthused with that option, but they were here to explore. Toussaint was not thrilled. "To decipher this is momentarily out of the question. We must proceed with Howell's recommendation, Colonel."

Mahia posed a question, "Mister Howell... How would a survey find a companion marker of this sort?"

Howell filtered the question through his experience. "Well, outside the jungle or forest, it is a simpler task. You first consider the nature of the marker. This one has a unique feature: the illuminated globe. Assuming this really is a marker, it's most noticeable feature would be shared with its companions. In the case of illumination, I am becoming even more convinced now that it is a directional marker. Colonel...?"

Corbin nodded, "Yes. I see it. A surveyor does what a military man would do. Look for the most visible feature. Fire is most frequently used because it can be seen across valleys and mountaintops."

"And amid trees in forests," Toussaint was getting the picture.

"Or jungles," Howell was even more convinced now. It was a directional marker. "We have to find the next one. Before sunup."

Corbin agreed, "To see the glow. We need to get to high ground."

Looking up and around, Howell commented, "I hope we all remember how to climb trees..."

Toussaint laughed nervously, "Let us hope our luck with the wildlife holds up. Five hundred of those thousand ways to die here can be found in the trees of the Matto Grosso."

Corbin turned to Mahia. "You have a good mind for this work, Mahia. You shall be compensated well for your contribution. It might have taken us another hour before we figured it out. By then, the sun would be up and we'd lose a day. Feel free to chime in any time!"

Mahia blushed and smiled like a schoolgirl. The men set about selecting trees. Howell and Corbin found theirs, using the vines to expedite their progress as they ascended. Toussaint prepared his ascent as well, but was clearly not as limber as the other two men. Mahia stepped over to him, and laid her gentle hands on his. "Claude, I feel I need to contribute more. I can climb like a monkey. Let me do this for you, my darling."

Toussaint looked up into the dark tangled mass of vines and branches. He sighed deeply. "A prudent offer. All right. But hurry, there isn't much night remaining. Be careful." He stepped aside and Mahia moved forward, stepping up three feet with her first bound. Before ascending, Mahia leaned into Toussaint and kissed him. Then she reached down and quickly tucked her sarong up into the waist, revealing her cinnamon brown legs to the thighs. A moment later, she was scrambling high into the tree, truly as swift as a monkey. Toussaint looked over to the other men and marked their slow, cautious ascent. Looking back to his little Mahia, he was amazed by her agility and speedy progress. She was already twice as high as Corbin and Howell. Toussaint's chest swelled with pride, "Yes, my little monkey! Go!"

Howell and Corbin both noticed Mahia. They looked at each other, feeling useless.

Mahia reached forty feet in no time and paused to scan the jungle. The darkness was daunting, but she scanned every visible shadow and distance. And then she saw a dim glow about a hundred yards beyond, just slightly casting an outline of a tree against the illumination. "I see it!"

Toussaint exclaimed proudly, "Good show, my girl!"

Corbin called out, "Very good! Kurt, get down and establish some sort of fix on the direction. Mahia, stay where you are until he's sure where we're going."

Mahia was in her element. "The jungle appears to dip then rise again where the glow comes up."

Corbin understood, "Indicates a valley or rolling terrain. Good description."

As soon as Howell reached ground, he hurriedly retrieved his compass, but the needle was still holding fast. He called up to Mahia, "Point to it! Colonel, you can see her better than I can."

Mahia stretched her arm straight out into the direction of the glow. Corbin had ascended several more feet. He looked where she pointed and finally saw the dim glow. "It's about a hundred yards away. From this angle, it looks like she's pointing in the direction opposite the carved side of the stela!"

"Just as I said," Howell commented, "The direction we face to read the thing. The opposite side of the carving is the back of the marker. The direction we face to read it is the direction we go."

"Thank God!" Toussaint felt encouraged.

Howell set about stuffing his compass into the rucksack. "Yes, thank whatever you believe in, Professor. I'm sure that poor bastard Vicci thanked and praised God all the way to his doom."

Toussaint looked solemnly at Howell, "You sound like a faithless man."

Howell grunted and shrugged. "Realistic is all. I doubt any god will get us out of this. They leave us to pull ourselves out of the dung piles of our own construction."

Toussaint turned his attention to Mahia and Corbin as they descended from their trees. "Come along carefully, Mahia! You've done a hell of a job!"

Corbin reached the ground first and agreed, "I'll say she has." He watched as she climbed down, noticing as she drew near her shapely brown legs. When she reached ground, her eyes smiled and she tugged the sarong from the waist and it fell, covering her legs again. Toussaint hugged her close. Mahia's eyes seemed to taunt him playfully and he turned away smiling and shaking his head. *The little sweetheart could be a vixen when she wanted to.*

They all turned their attention to gathering the gear, and then they faced the jungle together.

"It is very dark still," Toussaint commented rather sheepishly.

Corbin agreed. "Yes. Seems darker, actually. But dawn is fast approaching."

"Probably by the time we reach the other marker," Howell said, emphasizing the nervous hope in his tone. "Maybe sooner."

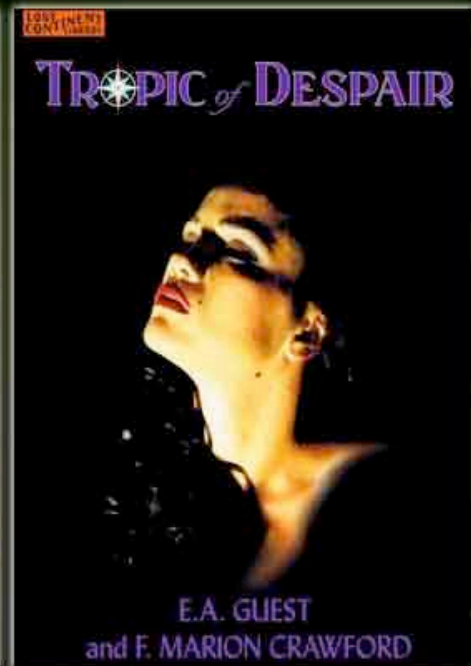
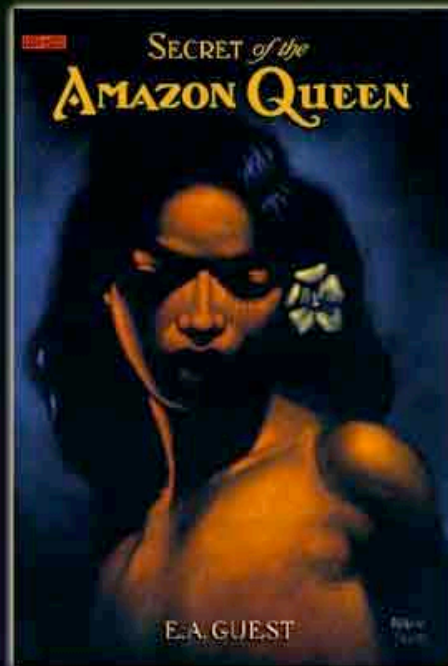
After a silent moment, Corbin took the first step. As he proceeded in the general direction they intended to go, the others followed his lead. And as they moved forward into the shadowy unknown, an unseen observer scrutinized them through the vines of a treetop, watching until they became enveloped by the darkness of the Matto Grosso...

END OF PART ONE

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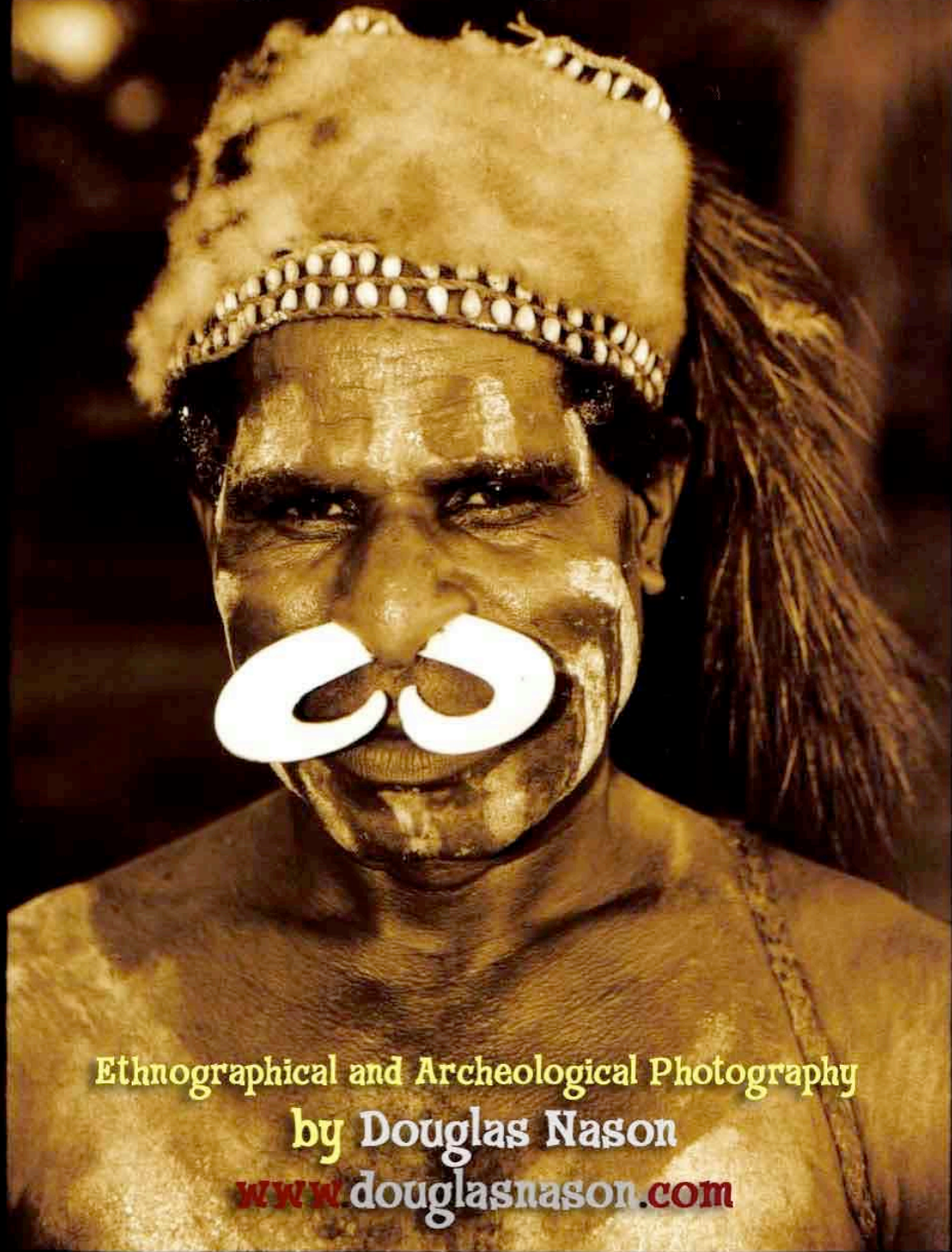
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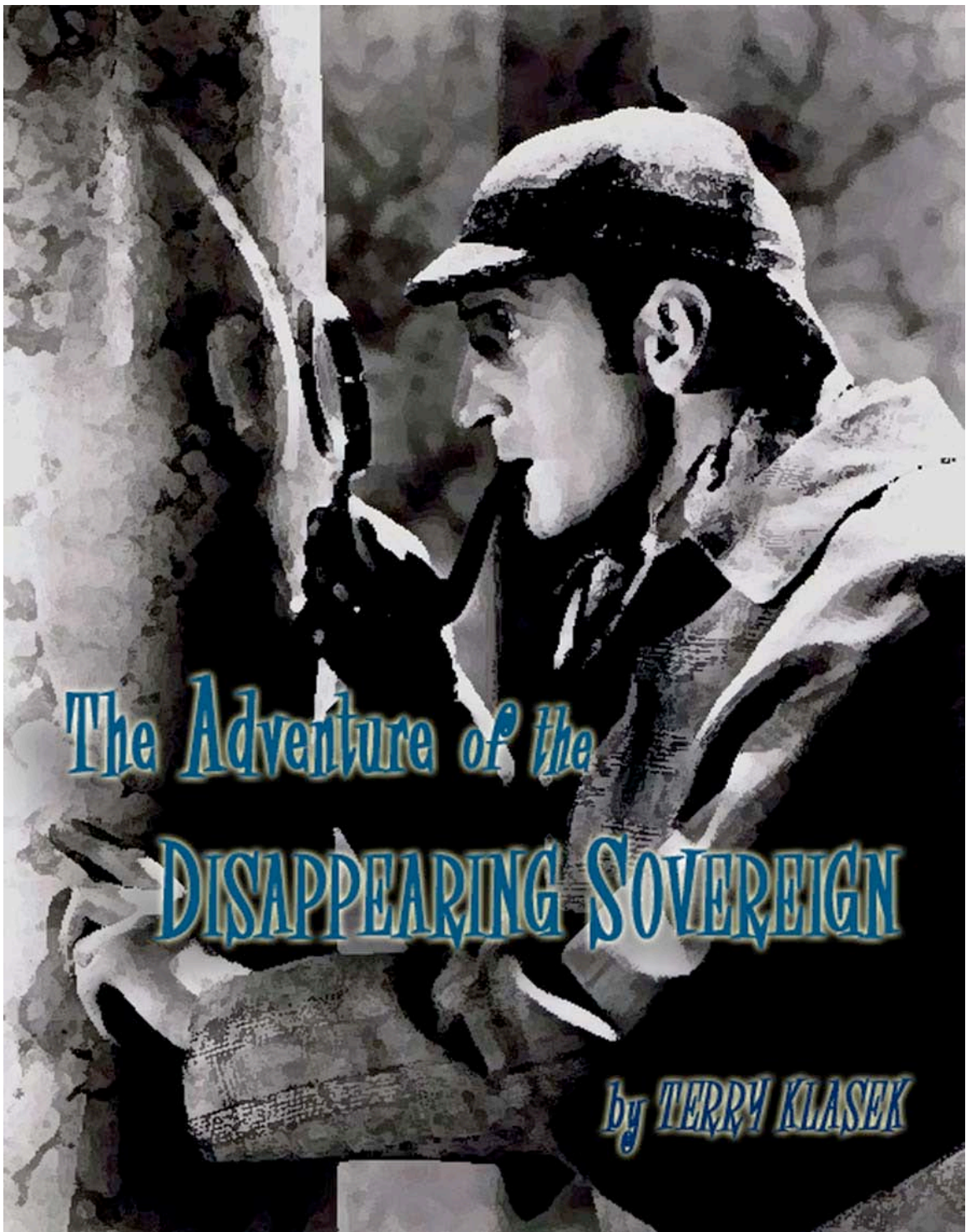
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The Adventure of the
DISAPPEARING SOVEREIGN

by **TERRY KLASEK**

Prologue

My name is Dr. John H. Watson, medically retired from the 5th Northumberland Fusiliers. It was my very great honour to have enjoyed a close association with Mr. Sherlock Holmes for these many years since our first meeting. I had considered for a time not to set upon paper before the public the startling events that chronicle "The Adventure of the Disappearing Sovereign." No record of the doings of Mr. Sherlock Holmes would be complete which did not include an account of this highly unusual affair. This matter is so extremely delicate that its publication would severely threaten the lives of those involved. Hence, I have had this memoir safely hidden away until all of the participants had gone to their reward. Although this narrative is of the service of Mr. Sherlock Holmes during The Great War, its beginning can be traced to late November, 1894 in "The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez."

Professor Coram escaped from Russia after informing on his fellow Nihilists including his wife, Anna. This occurred after a time of trouble during which a policeman was killed and many being arrested and some executed. Anna's fellow comrade whom she loved, named Alexis, was sent to Siberia. Anna's term was not for life, and she was trying to get letters and a diary that would free Alexis from his unjust imprisonment. My good friend Mr. Sherlock Holmes and I took those articles to the Russian Embassy as Anna requested when she died from swallowing a phial of poison by her own hand to atone for Willoughby Smith's murder. The time of trouble, that she referred to in that chronicle, was the period of time following the assassination of Czar Alexander Romanov II, Russia's highest ranking policeman. The incident took place on March 1, 1881 when a group of Nihilists rolled a bomb under the Czar's carriage killing him and the others within.

The Case:

The early morning was a sultry time of constant drizzle that was enveloped in stygian blackness. Everything was warm, clammy, and dark, with our nightshirts clinging to our bodies like a second skin. Even with our windows open the air was hot and beastly humid, and the movement of air was stagnated as I surmised by noticing a thick cloud of tobacco smoke that so filled our sitting room that my eyes were unable to see clearly the outside wall. My good friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, had been in a depressed state for the past two days due to the persistent dreary weather, and the continuous rain. The year of 1918 was beginning with the promise of a possible end of the Great War that was rapidly eliminating the flower of many nations' manhood.

The weather itself was not the sole cause of my friend's dark and somber mood, rather it seemed that all of the criminals in London had fled to take the King's Shilling in the Royal Army or Navy. It is possible that even the lowest criminals have their national pride and honour to aid their country to defeat the Hun. Time and time again Holmes would bemoan the fact that, "Life has become commonplace and the newspapers are sterile!" Holmes' mind was craving action and problems to aid the Crown like the infamous von Bork affair early on in the war.

"Watson! It appears that the world has taken the human element out of war, and replaced it with machinery," he repeatedly expressed sadly.

This particular day, early in the month of May in 1918, I was consuming my breakfast while Holmes forsook his in favour of his first pipe of the day. In it he would save all the plugs and dottles from all the previous day's pipes to fill his first pipe of the day with. This had, I fear, a frighteningly disagreeable odour with what must be a much more repulsive taste somewhat like charred straw. He was curled up in a chair

near the window overlooking Baker Street contentedly puffing away as if his mind were elsewhere, and his countenance was, as usual, dreamy and expressionless. I had finished my eggs and bacon when I arose lighting a cigar, and strode over to the window to feel the fresh, although clammy and repressive, air upon my face. I had no sooner settled myself in the chair opposite Holmes when my ears detected the noise of wheels clattering over cobblestones close to our rooms. I surmised that a vehicle was coming towards us down Baker Street as the noise was increasing to a clamour.

The ruckus came to termination abruptly as a four-wheeler came to a stop directly in front of the entry door to our lodgings at 221-B Baker Street. The carriage was a plain and austere black carriage with absolutely no ornamentation of identifying signs.

"That sounds like brother Mycroft's four-wheeler," Holmes suddenly announced in an excited whisper.

"Holmes," said I in amazement. "How could you possibly know who was in a carriage without having seen them descend from it?"

"O pshaw," retorted Holmes. "I really had hoped for better from you Watson after all these years. It is nothing supernatural, as you fear, my good fellow," said he.

"Then how can you possibly know that it is your brother in the carriage as we've seen nobody descend from it," I remonstrated?

"I was sitting here waiting and listening," Holmes explained. "As you know it takes some event of an extremely drastic nature to dislodge brother Mycroft out of his inflexible routine. He operates within the limits of his lodgings, Whitehall, and the Diogenes Club as a matter of regimen. Whenever something occurs to alter this cycle, brother Mycroft, always calls for the same nondescript carriage with the loud grating wheels to keep his

association with the government a secret," he elucidated.

"I had no idea that Mycroft was such a creature of habit even when his routine was disrupted, Holmes. My apologies, to you for doubting your observations," I vouchsafed.

"That is hardly necessary, my dear Watson," said he. "In point of fact Mycroft informed me of his arrival today, and at this very hour by sealed letter from a government messenger yesterday," chortled Holmes.

I noticed that Holmes had that all too familiar mischievous twinkle in his eyes as he stunned me with the messenger news that felt like a clap from a thunderbolt. I wanted to get angry, but I felt the look of astonishment on my face must truly be funny to look upon. Hence, I let it go until I could somehow find a way to properly repay him. Finally, there came to our hearing a much louder commotion from below.

Upon our looking downwards we discovered Mycroft Holmes' considerable bulk descending from the carriage. He moved rapidly to our door to be met by Mrs. Hudson who appeared to be waiting there expressly for his arrival. A few moments passed as we heard Mycroft's heavy tread upon the stairs, which terminated at our door with a loud but weary knock.

"Come in, dear brother Mycroft, the door is unlocked," Holmes sang out! He was basically the same robust and bulky size as when we saw him last in August of 1914, but his face seemed more haggard and surmounted by very much white hair. He gave the appearance of bearing a great weight or under some form of tremendous pressure. He walked across the room with slow heavy determined steps, and all but fell heavily into our most commodious sitting chairs.

"Really, Sherlock, I am so glad you have at last forsaken the Bees of Sussex for your lodgings here in London, but you really need to install

a lift that your clients, and especially myself, may have easier access," advised Mycroft in place of a greeting. He fell heavily into the easy chair across from Holmes, that I had recently vacated for the sofa, and sank back into the deep recesses of the plush chair gathering his composure.

"Pray elucidate the significance of your most ambiguous and secretive telegram," inquired Holmes as he fluidly moved to the edge of his chair? "I am completely at your disposal, and all attention" he added with a flurry of arms.

Mycroft Holmes took in a slow deep breath as he scanned the rooms as well as the areas outside the windows. He exhaled in a wheezing manner as he leaned forward sitting on the edge of the chair whispering to his younger brother, "Sherlock, I regret giving you no information regarding this extremely delicate matter which has been placed before me to implement; however, the matter requires extreme secrecy and incredible precautions. I dared not put anything in the messenger entrusted envelope save that I would be calling upon you this morning to consult you on a sensitive matter.

The stakes in this game are very high, and the other players are totally ruthless. It is the Crown's desire that our opponents do not know that we are in the game until it is over successfully in our favour."

Sherlock Holmes sprang to his feet, and paced about the room methodically while producing immense quantities of smoke from the Cherrywood pipe that he had but recently lighted. After a few minutes thus, he paused abruptly, and suddenly rushed back to his chair and lighted gracefully therein. Looking more composed Holmes addressed Mycroft in a faster than normal delivery, "My dear Mycroft, I deduced that much by your lack of particulars in the telegram. Now, what's afoot," he queried

"Sherlock, you really must keep hidden your excitement and hunger for details. It surely gives the game away as well as the advantage of being seemingly bored to learn more information in the process," Mycroft rebuked.

"Now I must ask you both to solemnly swear that what you hear will never be repeated while any of the parties involved remain living," Mycroft demanded!

Sherlock Holmes and I both swore in the affirmative. My mind was awlirl attempting to ascertain the secrecy of this unusual case that Mycroft had not put us through in previous cases. It was, as far as I was concerned, a definite conundrum! I suddenly came to my senses realizing that I had been daydreaming for how many minutes I knew not, but in point of fact it turned out to be mere seconds.

Mycroft once again whispered, "Sherlock, I have brought with me a person higher in the government than I who will lay the full particulars before you, and I hope most earnestly that you accept the commission to be offered you. When they are made known to you the reason for secrecy will be as plain as the proverbial pikestaff!"

Mycroft then arose slowly, walked to the window where he held up his right hand as if taking an oath, and then placing his hand over his heart. A rapid commotion was heard out in the street that was closely followed by the opening and closing of the outer door. A flurry of rapid steps echoed from the stairs as my excitement and apprehension mounted. I hoped that all this cloak and dagger business would be worth the outcome of this case to be set before us. The door suddenly launched open when a large and totally muffled figure swished into our room in but a twinkling of an eye. The figure turned and slammed the door shut with breathtaking speed as Holmes and I rose to voice our outrage.

Our new guest stood now just within the door still totally muffled by wrapping a large floor length cloak around the now still figure. The head obscured by a large black hat with a thick veil that was impenetrable to the eyes. All that could be seen was the tips of highly polished boots protruding from beneath the folds of the cloak. The four figures stood motionless facing each other. The room was pregnant with silence, and my pounding heart sounded like a bass drum brought on by my intense apprehension. This tableau seemed frozen in place as we stood gazing at each other for what seemed to be an indeterminable length of time, which, in point of fact, was actually less than a minute. My nerves were now very strained. What could all this secrecy be for to give the case validity? This thought went round and round within my mind unable to arrive at a solution.

My thought processes were becoming dulled by the increasing pain from my shoulder, where I was wounded by that Jezail bullet during the long past Second Afghan Campaign. I was about to demand an immediate disclosure of the case to ease my pulsating nerves when a most unexpected event happened. Sherlock Holmes straightened up to his full height while grasping the bowl of his Cherrywood pipe removing it from his lips. After setting it down post haste he strode three steps in the direction of the muffled figure who was recoiling from his advance.

Sherlock Holmes then stopped dead still, and with an elaborate sweep of his right arm he bowed deeply from the waist stating almost reverently, "I most graciously welcome your Imperial Majesty, and I am humbly honoured by your august presence to my humble lodgings."

I was stunned into inaction by Holmes' action. I must confess that my wits had fled from me. The muffled figure discarded the cloak as he unwound it, and removing the hat and veil with august dignity to reveal our sovereign King George the fifth. He was attired

in his blue military uniform richly emblazoned with many medals, badges, and trappings. He promulgated royal authority.

"I request your indulgence for the disguise, and the inordinate secrecy of my mission," vouchsafed the King drawing nearer to us. He then added, "I implore you draw the curtains as we must preserve the secrecy of this meeting, and also of your hopefully soon involvement in the commission I would like for you to undertake for the Crown."

Holmes quickly drew the curtains on both sets of windows, and turned up the gas jet to lighten the room as we had been eating by the cloud diffused sunlight prior to Mycroft's arrival. Holmes gestured to a chair with his arm for the King to be seated. As Holmes and I sat down on the edge of our chairs he asked of the King, "If your majesty please pray elucidate the full particulars of the matter at hand."

The King took a deep breath and sighed, "This case is a highly irregular one, which can not be handled by official sources due to it's most delicate and most sensitive nature."

The King reached into his tunic and withdrew a photograph, which he offered to Holmes. Sherlock Holmes arose and reached for the photograph. He showed it to me as he was studying it. The King inquired, "Do you recognize the 'gentleman' in the photograph?"

"But your majesty," said I, "it surely is a photograph of yourself in rustic hunting apparel!"

A slow smile spread across the King's visage at my rapid deduction. "A most natural misjudgment, Watson," interjected Holmes.

"Holmes, it is the King as you can plainly compare before your very eyes," protested I.

The King held up his hand, and a silent hush permeated the room. "The photograph is not myself," the King

smilingly explained, "rather it is my cousin, Czar Nicholas the Second of Russia."

Amazement seized my countenance at the shock of the statement. My mind was so numbed as I slid deeper into my chair.

"I need not relate to you the events that have occurred in Russia during the past year," said the King sadly. "You see, 'Nicky' is my cousin, as is Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, but he is very dear to me, because he looks enough like me to be the twin brother I rather think I would have liked to have had. It is my deep concern for him that draws me to Mr. Sherlock Holmes."

Holmes was on the edge of his seat with anticipation as his eyes sparkled with the glitter I at once recognized as the evidence the game was afoot. So commanding was the King's presence that we never noticed when the rain had stopped, and the parting of the clouds to admit the life awakening sunlight with the refracted light painting a lustrous rainbow in the sky.

"Nicholas having abdicated last year is now a mere citizen under house arrest at a summer house outside of St. Petersburg at his Tsarkoe Selo villa," continued the King. "The concern now is that he has disappeared from this residence, and there is no trace of him to be found anywhere. Our agents have looked all over the area and the major cities with but failure to report. Mr. Sherlock Holmes I do hereby commission you to go with all dispatch to Russia, with Dr. Watson, on the 'Hunt for, my favourite cousin, the Czar.'"

"The recent Brest-Litovsk treaty had a secret codicil in which the Bolsheviks agreed to the German Kaiser's, demand that 'safe passage' be granted to the Imperial Russian family, however many believe the Bolsheviks mean to murder them sometime in the near future," said the King.

Holmes arose with a dignity and bearing that I had not heretofore seen.

He executed a perfect accolade of a bow and proffered, "It would be my extreme honour to undertake this hunt for the Czar to its successful conclusion; however, I am not at liberty to answer for Dr. Watson's involvement in this dangerous venture."

I must confess that I had been rightly mesmerized by these proceedings that Holmes' remark somewhat caught me somewhat off guard. At last, after a tense moment or two, I arose stiffly, and bowed as graciously as I possibly could with my wounded hip flaring with flashes of pain caused by that Jezail bullet so long ago. "I am so honoured that your majesty would have me accompany my good friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, on this grave matter of Imperial concern, and that I have another opportunity to serve my vountry again" said I.

Holmes was knocking the ash out of his pipe as Mycroft said, "Sherlock, I have exhausted all available channels of official inquiry with but emptiness to show for it. It's deucedly depressing, that the unmitigated gall of these new Bolsheviks coupled with their intense lack of honour towards non-socialist nations makes communication nearly impossible. The fact is, dear Sherlock, the Bolsheviks have not responded to a single inquiry from any nation regarding the Czar and his family. Even though we are all involved in this war there is not one nation seeking harm for the Czar. We are, as you have probably guessed, halted at a standstill."

The King slowly stood to his feet while smoothing out the creases in his uniform. "Mr. Holmes, if you and Dr. Watson would be good enough to honour the Diogones Club with your presence tonight at eight o'clock Mycroft will be in full possession of the details regarding your journey to Russia, and hopeful return, with the latest intelligence regarding "Nicky," and they will be promulgated to you at that time," said the King with sadness in his eyes. "I fear I must withhold further knowledge until later tonight

to preserve as much secrecy of our endeavours!" the king firmly stated.

"That will be quite satisfactory, your majesty," announced Holmes rising.

"Then gentlemen," said the King as he replaced his disguise, "please find Nicky and his family, and help them to escape the horror that I fear will otherwise surely befall them. Godspeed to you gentlemen, and I salute you," and the King snapped a slow salute, covered himself, and departed hurriedly down the stair and out the door into the waiting carriage.

"Well Watson, what do you make of that? This case surely presents many features of interest that we have not previously experienced, asked Holmes as he escorted Mycroft to the door to the stairs bidding him a farewell. Holmes crossed to the mantle where he picked up the Persian Slipper commencing to fill his full-bend briar pipe with the strong tobacco contents within. He applied a match just above the pipe's bowl as he drew the fire down to the tobacco, and he began puffing strong blue-grey smoke as the tobacco took fire. Holmes turned towards me finally with his eyebrow raised in query again.

As speech returned to my lips I responded, "Holmes, this is indeed a most dangerous undertaking, but think of it, the King here in our lodgings. I can hardly wait to write about it, and it should sell quite well," said I.

"Watson, I fear that you will be unable to write of this mission for quite some time, if at all, if it is brought to a successful conclusion," Holmes solemnly warned. "If the Czar is rescued and you write one of your overly melodramatic narratives about it then the Czar, his family, and all involved including us will be in constant danger of losing our lives," he explained.

"Just the same, Holmes, while it is fresh I do intend to write down the account, which will be put away until

none of the participants can be harmed," rejoined I. "Further, Holmes, I believe that a record does need to be left to the following generations, and it will touch the 'Romantic' in many hearts, and encourage them in affairs of honour," I vouchsafed mistily.

Holmes all the while was puffing his pipe reflectively with a far away dreamy look in his eyes. He took the Persian Slipper with him to his window chair, and curled up in an all too familiar position. He turned towards me and said, "Be a good fellow, Watson, and please do not speak to me for the next four hours for this is quite a five-pipe problem, and I need to put all this data to the test and sort it out."

His voice just trailed off as he stared out into the sultry morning sky. "I believe that I will visit The Strand Magazine to see if they would be publishing my last set of stories soon," offered I to excuse myself.

I exited the room, and limped down the stairs. Mrs. Hudson was just coming in from visiting the market with the delivery boy in tow. She dispatched the lad to the kitchen, and he apparently knew the way from many previous visits as he hardly stopped for her commands.

"Good Morning, Dr. Watson," said she cheerily.

"Good Morning to you, Mrs. Hudson," replied I. "Mr. Holmes is curled upstairs with his pipe, and he probably would not notice if you went in to gather up the breakfast settings," I added as I tipped my hat to her.

"Did that four-wheeler bring an important case Doctor," she inquired?

"Yes, Mrs. Hudson, and a very remarkable one I might add. It might take us abroad for a fortnight as well to the warring continent," I explained as I exited the door to walk towards the Strand.

I must confess that my heart was torn between being happy to be in the game once again, and the unpleasant task of going abroad during wartime, with my wounded knee giving me fits whenever humidity came 'round. The rest of the morning and afternoon proved to be rather uneventful compared to the challenge looming before us. The Strand magazine was considering the publication of my recent submission of narratives about some of Sherlock Holmes' remaining cases that were too delicate to put before the public previously. They hopefully would publish some by the end of next year. I enjoyed a leisurely luncheon with my editor on the Strand following which I completed some errands for some needed personal articles.

I returned to Baker Street as the chimes were striking Four of the clock, which is tea time. As I entered the street door I encountered Mrs. Hudson starting up those familiar stairs taking a Tea Service up to our old rooms. I followed her up the stairs, and opened the door for her entry into our lodgings. She thanked me as she set the service on the table. She turned and bustled out of the room rapidly closing the door behind her. Holmes was still curled up in the chair where I had left him earlier that morning. He was veiled in an all enveloping cloud of blue - gray smoke that hung in the air as if it were painted there.

All of a sudden Holmes came to instant life in a flurry of activity springing from his chair to open the window, setting aside his pipe while walking briskly over to the table saying, "Ah Watson, you have returned just in time to take Tea with me."

"Really Holmes, I thought you were oblivious to everything going on in this room by your pallid expression," I returned.

"Surely by now you must know that the best way to observe is to act like you are not the least bit interested or actually intent upon observation," said he.

"Has your sorting out the case given you a clearer idea of what we have before us," I asked hopefully. "Why yes," said Holmes as he drank down his cup of tea, "there are quite a number of facets that are clearer now, but I feel that any theories should wait until we visit brother Mycroft tonight."

The rest of the afternoon was leisurely spent pursuing the newspapers of the day's news and the war events. We took our time in dressing for dinner into our evening attire since we've intended to dine at the Diogenes Club prior to the arrival of Mycroft Holmes. The evening was sufficiently cool that we decided to enjoy a slow walk to the club. Holmes did appear to really enjoy being outdoors instead of being cooped up in a cab. We arrived at the Diogenes Club at 6:30, and we were seated directly in the restaurant. All that could be heard was the clatter and tinkle of glasses and silverware as talking was strictly forbidden within the Diogenes Club save in the Strangers Room.

We pointed out our selections on the menu to our waiter, and afterward ate our sumptuous meal in an unnatural silence. It was unnerving, that eerie silence, and it made my skin crawl. I did not enjoy this meal immensely. Promptly at Eight o'clock found Holmes and I safely entrenched in the comfortable leather covered lounging chairs in the Stranger's Room. As the clock struck the last gong of eight, Mycroft Holmes entered the room with stately, though fluid, dignity. Mycroft was always an extremely punctual person, and he seemed to have gotten more punctual as years advanced. He walked over to us, and we rose to greet him. Mycroft held up a hand cautioning silence, and motioned us to follow him undoubtedly to a private room where we could converse freely without the fear of being overheard.

We followed Mycroft upstairs to the third floor to a room located at a corner of the building. Four men came out of the room and signaled with a nod of their head that all was secure

within. We entered a richly furnished room with tapestries on the walls and well made costly furniture. We moved to the centre of the room where three large commodious chairs were set facing each other. As we settled into our chairs Holmes took out his slate coloured clay pipe, and proceeded to fill it from a black seal skin tobacco pouch, a souvenir from a previous case. As he lit the tobacco in his usual manner of one inch above the top of the bowl he spoke to Mycroft.

"Well brother Mycroft, pray tell us what has eventuated since this morning regarding this case," Holmes inquired. Mycroft reclined into the recesses of his chair and lighted a cigar. As he was contemplating the flavour of the smoke he spoke. "Sherlock, there is still no word as to the Czar's whereabouts, and there is no telling what drastic measures the Bolsheviks may undertake on an impulse. The situation is so unstable and volatile that we must think in terms of prompt action only," stated Mycroft.

"I had deduced as much this afternoon," yawned Sherlock Holmes.

"Your passage to Russia has been arranged in minute detail. You both shall leave on the thirty-first of May from the Police Landing under the Tower Bridge at exactly eight-thirty in the evening. You must pack only your essentials in an inexpensive cloth overnight bag, and one that preferably is old and battered I might add," explained Mycroft.

"Obviously, we should dress in the attire of poor sailors seeking gainful employment," said Holmes interrupting.

"Actually, Sherlock, the poorer the better as it will help you to blend in, and not to be at all conspicuous. I have implicit faith still in your ability at disguise, and I am certain that you will assist Dr. Watson in his new identity too," added Mycroft respectfully.

"Mycroft, what is to be the method of transport and itinerary to Russia -er- the Soviet Union," inquired Holmes languidly.

"That is to remain a secret until you are afloat upon the Thames. What I can tell you is that there is help for you when you get to Russia. The help is in the form of two very effective secret agents. The first is an American secret agent named Charles James Fox, whose code name is "The Fox." He is a tall, dark, and distinguished gentleman with a bushy mustache and pince-nez glasses. He speaks English, French, German, and some Russian and Chinese. You will discover that he is athletic, adventurous by nature, with a military background.

He will be working with a partner, one William Rutledge McGarry. McGarry, likewise, is tall and very distinguished appearing, but has a neatly trimmed mustache with short hair parted in the centre. He is a man possessing a whole galaxy of talents, and that will prove invaluable to our cause. He is a remarkably learned man whose tireless energy and studies have taken him all over the globe. He has the ability to put what he learns into action quickly. He is the foremost intelligence agent in the world currently, and has worked as a lawyer, writer, linguist, corporation executive, and foreign trade expert. He fluently speaks English, French, German, Russian, and others.

Further, he is a close friend with David Roland Francis, the American Ambassador to Czarist Russia, and has additional help in those areas. There is also another assistant who is somewhat ambiguous. He is an aviator who is a double-agent for the Allies, but the Germans believe he works for them alone. We believe that he may be an American, but we really do not know his nationality. He came over early in the war to fly in the flying corps. It seems he likes to live life on the edge, and often takes the most unreasonable death-defying risks. His code name is 'The Eagle,' which, of course, in German is 'Der Adler' essentially meaning the same thing. It

should also be noted that Mr. Eagle believes firmly in a shoot first, and ask questions afterwards attitude! In short he kills, without compunction" promulgated Mycroft.

"The man sounds somewhat like a modern version of 'Jack The Ripper' lrather unto a homicidal maniac," I observed!

"Well, it actually matters little as he is a highly successful agent in a time of war when the services of undesirable people are needed for disagreeable assignments. Be certain of this fact, which is that you are totally safe from harm with him nearby," Mycroft explained.

"There is also another factor in your favour. There is currently another counter revolution going on now within Russia at this very minute. The White Russians are challenging the Red Russians for the governmental control. The Reds, as you know, are called Bolsheviks, and the Whites are the Byelorussians. The main activity of hostilities is from Poland eastward to the Caucasus Mountains, and from the Black Sea northward to a point 100 miles south of Moscow. If you are successful you can escape easily if you can gain the White Russian lines. You see, they are still fiercely loyal to the Romanov Czars. Does that sound suitable to you, Sherlock," queried Mycroft?

"I do believe we will be able to search better with two extra pairs of eyes in a country that large," Holmes replied.

"Well, Sherlock, that brings you up to date, and I advise you spend the remaining days in pursuit of learning a working knowledge of the Russian language, and a study of their customs and extensive knowledge of maps will prove useful. The time is short, and we must accomplish much to be ready for the challenge of the Hunt for the Czar," announced Mycroft.

"You may reach me at Baker Street," said Holmes, "I will be checking in there more often than anywhere else," he added.

"Very well, Sherlock, I will be sending you periodic reports to keep you up to date on things. His Imperial Majesty, King George, gave me this for your use," vouchsafed Mycroft as he gave Sherlock Holmes a leather pouch containing 1,000 Gold Sovereigns.

We extravasated the room to descend downstairs to the main floor. Mycroft took a different staircase from the second floor so as not we should all be seen together. We gathered our wraps and made our way outside into a lightly falling rain rather like a mist. There was a row of Hansoms close by behind the motor car cabs so Holmes led the way to the Hansoms as he preferred them for the sake of familiarity. We were lulled by the steady grind of the wheels upon the wet cobblestones harmonizing with the rain and horses hoofs echoing through the night.

Ah, but it was 1895 once again if but for only a few moments. Holmes awakened me from my reverie when we reached our lodgings. We entered and climbed the familiar 17 stairs to our room. We found that all was in order, and I prepared to go to sleep, with Holmes curling up in his chair with his pipe and Persian slipper of tobacco. I knew it was useless for any further talk. The following three weeks were extremely busy ones, and I saw little of

my friend save those rare meals we attended together. I learned a smattering of the Russian language as well as it's customs and recent history. My mind was aw whirl at this intense ingestion of foreign material, and at times it seemed to overwhelm me.

The evening of the 31st May found us deposited at the Police landing underneath the Tower Bridge a full hour before our stated arrival time. Holmes was obviously chomping at the bit for one last romantic adventure. He seemed to sense forthcoming excitement and intrigue by the sparkle in his blue-grey eyes. I must confess that I too had the butterflies of urgency in my stomach. We sat in silence on the bench by the

river's edge casually observing the river traffic, and my mind traveled back in time to that wild chase down the Stygian dark Thames after the Great Agra Treasure, Johnathan Small and his gruesome companion!

I felt the same menacing danger once again. Punctually at the stroke of eight o'clock a Police launch drew up to the landing, and to my astonishment I perceived Mycroft Holmes at the rail. We scrambled aboard as the launch did not tie up, but was moving down the river at a very uncomfortable stomach churning pace. The launch showed neither light nor sounded the horn, and only the muffled throb of the engines with the rushing of the water past the hull being all that came to our ears. The air grew murky and thick as we sped along with frightful smells of brackish water and mildew assailing our sense of smell. I knew we were nearing the mouth of the mighty river with anticipation wrapping her cold hand around my heart at the unknown step that lay ahead. Mycroft was perfecting his imitation of a clam.

To our ears came a deep hoot of a ship's horn from close at hand. A shape suddenly separated itself from the surrounding gloomy blackness, and took form as a Royal Navy Battle Cruiser. As we came closer I noticed some severe structural damage, and the evidence of recent repairs. It probably saw service at the Battle of Jutland, and had not yet had the availability to go to the yards for extensive repairs. A gangplank was in place as the launch tied up to it. Mycroft gave Holmes a sealed packet as he shook our hands, and wished us Godspeed as he waved us a farewell as we ascended the gangplank to the main deck.

The captain saluted us as we stepped on deck and said, "Welcome aboard The Invincible, gentlemen will you please follow me," in a crisp dignified manner. As we followed, baggage in hand, we heard the gangplank being raised along with the anchor chain, and then we felt a shuddering movement beneath our feet realizing that we were already underway. There

seemed to be no loss of time on the beginning of our trip. We walked to the front of the ship and into a hatchway to come to an abrupt stop at the first door. The captain opened the door for us and we entered. It was roomy for a ship, and I believe that it may be reserved for visiting admirals or other dignitaries.

"You will keep to this cabin, and do not leave it for any reason as our trip is not a very long one," ordered the captain as he saluted and quitted the room locking the door behind him. "Holmes this is all deucedly queer behaviour, and all this not knowing what is going on quite upsets me," I complained.

"Evidently this is all designed to keep our leaving England a secret, which can only aid us in our task," Holmes replied.

Within minutes the door opened with an enlisted man entering carrying a large tray of covered dishes. "With the captain's complements, gentlemen, I hope you enjoy your meal," announced the server.

He set the tray down on the table in the centre of the room and departed locking the door behind him.

"Brother Mycroft apparently has thought of everything for our voyage and mission," pondered Holmes aloud.

"We may as well try these dishes set before us," said I.

As we consumed the delicious steak dinner Holmes opened the packet given him by Mycroft as we boarded the vessel. It was full of identity papers for the both of us. One set had us representatives of the Red Cross in Switzerland, and the other as Ukrainian farmers. There was a considerable amount of Russian money, and two red armbands of a crude nature with the Bolshevik emblem sewed on it. It must be for our disguises in Russia I thought. Shortly after we finished our meal the door opened to admit our server who

removed the evidence of our repast. After a most comforting pipe we retired to give our strained nerves a respite. Even with the strange surroundings I was soon fast asleep.

"Sirs, quick, wake up!" Thus spoke enlisted man as he was shaking me. I stirred and sat up. "What is it my good man," I inquired as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

"We are approaching your place of departure, sirs. Hurry up and get ready as the captain must get this done bloody quick," said he.

We dressed as fast as we possibly could without giving proper attention to our toilet. We arrived on deck in less than twenty minutes, and I stared in horror to see that it still was pitch dark outside. I looked at my watch for the time only to discover to my dismay that it was gone! The captain approached hurriedly.

"There is no time to explain, but all that you miss will be returned to you upon your return to Baker Street," said the Captain as he led us to a boat davit. "Gentlemen, if you please would be so kind as to enter the boat, and we will lower it to the surface, disengage the hooks, and leave you temporarily adrift here," explained the Captain.

"Captain, where exactly are we being left," asked Holmes coolly?

"You are currently outside of Heligoland Bay, , but your journey will continue in short order so fear not," clipped the saluting Captain.

As the boat touched the water we unhooked the 'monkey lines,' and they were hauled up quickly while three long moans came from the ship's foghorn. The ship started moving with an incredible wake trailing behind as if the hounds of hell were on her trail.

"Holmes, where or what is this Heligoland Bay," asked I.

"Heligoland Bay lies between the Elbe and Weser Rivers near the port of Bremen, and it is the anchorage of the

Imperial German High Seas Fleet!" said Holmes grimly.

I was struck dumb, and I fear my mouth gaped open at this revelation. Holmes just sat there as if expecting some imminent event. It came momentarily as a loud foghorn three times sounded. A loud slow churning sounded to be approaching us from the opposite direction that the H.M.S. Invincible departed towards. Rapidly a shape loomed, and soon became defined as a large battle cruiser. As it neared I noted a shield bearing a black eagle at the top of the bow. It was a German ship! It slowed to come alongside us so I could read a name on the bow as "Derfflinger." My mind raced.

It was the German's greatest success at Jutland. This ship reeked honour, but it still was a dangerous enemy. Hooks came down with German sailors attached. They secured the hooks in place with grim silence and cold efficiency, and we were soon on the deck of the ship after scrambling down the boat in chocks set in the deck. The ship's captain was standing there, and snapped a perfect salute accompanied by the traditional European heel click. His uniform was immaculate, and bristling with many decorations. I noticed that he wore the Knight's Cross around his neck underneath the Blue Max. This officer obviously was a brave man.

He gestured for us to follow, and with baggage in hand we did. This time our way led to the very back of the ship. We entered a hatch right before the large rotating guns. There was a sentry on guard in front of the first door on the right just inside the hatch. The sentry saluted smartly and opened the door. The captain preceded Holmes and I through the entry way and I closed the door. The room was positively sterile or Spartan, to say the least, as there was nothing on the walls save a small black curtain over the porthole. The room consisted of two chairs, two beds, and a table with a washroom in a recess. Everything was simple and

plain so that the captain's uniform looked extremely out of place.

"Welcome gentlemen, aboard the Battle Cruiser Derfflinger, and I will endeavor to make this journey as pleasant as humanly possible considering current conditions. You will be our guests for about two weeks," announced the Captain.

Holmes and I had placed our bags on the bed of our choosing, and we sat down on the chairs provided. "You are no doubt wondering at my excellent English? After my studies in Germany I studied for about eight years at Oxford and Cambridge. I have since kept up with my fluency with your language as it is a great asset during the current hostilities," he added.

"I assume this ship will sail eventually around Denmark, through the Baltic Sea to somewhere near East Prussia," inquired Holmes.?

"Your reputation has preceded you, Herr Holmes, and I perceive that it is justly deserved," retorted the captain in awe.

Holmes merely bowed curtly to acknowledge the captain's promulgated accolades without uttering a word. "You have deduced correctly, Herr Holmes, that is the plan that has been worked out secretly between our respective sovereigns. You will be met in Koenigsberg on the coast of East Prussia, and from there will your journey continue," vouchsafed the captain.

"Would you be permitted to inform us as to what magic lands us on board Germany's most battled honoured ship while our nation's are still engaged in hostilities," questioned Holmes?

"Yes, but you are curious. That tells me you have not been informed of the entire chain of events. Very well, I can elucidate to you what little of the facts that I know. The Kaiser did not want to see his cousin, the Czar, murdered by the bestial Bolsheviks even though he wanted to defeat the Czar in the

war. The Czar was defeated, and has abdicated his throne to become a private citizen. The fear is that the Bolsheviks want to murder the Czar and his family so that there can be no counter-revolution like the one currently in progress. I was personally assigned the duty of getting you to Russia without any Russians knowing that you are near or even involved. We must preserve secrecy if we are to catch those maniacs off guard, and rescue the Czar so he may live out his days in exile, but alive without fear of attack," explained the Captain rapidly.

"You have confirmed what I have long ago surmised," answered Holmes sadly. The captain then retired to leave us to our thoughts, and the door, as usual was secured.

I turned and asked Holmes, "I believe that the captain was talking as if he already knew you, Holmes.?"

"Watson! I am surprised that you did not recognize him. The facial features are unmistakable to show him to be an exact look-a-like of his father, The King of Bohemia," announced Holmes in a triumphant manner!

"How blind I have become Holmes," spoke I in quizzically? "It is, of course, an easy deduction since you drew my attention to it," I sighed.

There would be no interest in a German warship steaming in the waters bordering upon Germany. I still find it hard to believe, but we were here on a mission of international stature. The rest of the voyage was passed in an uneventful manner excluding the fact that I was resigned to my bed due to a severe period of sea sickness. I suppose that it was fortunate that I had not joined the Royal Navy out of Medical School.

We spent 10 days at sea steaming in a routine patrolling pattern at a slower pace not to excite interest in our movements. We were awakened early on the morning of the 11th of June while it was yet dark. The captain came in just as our breakfast arrived

in the cook's hands. He set the tray down, and left the cabin as we sat down to eat clad in our shirtsleeves as we had not time to finish our toilet, and dress properly in our coats,

"Good morning, gentlemen, I am pleased to announce that we have anchored just inside the harbour of Koenigsberg in East Prussia, which is as close as we can possibly get you to Russia," said the captain proudly! "You will please accompany me ashore dressed as Imperial German Navy junior officers in the in the captain's launch. Your uniforms are being readied, and they will be here presently. You will attire yourselves in them, and place your other belongings into the sea bags that will come to give the impression that you are going home on leave. That will help us pass through the city to where your transportation to Saint Petersburg is secured. Now, gentlemen, if you will excuse me I have preparations to prepare," he added as he left us to our meal!

Our meal consumed we changed into the uniforms provided us. I had the uniform of a Captain in the Medical service and Holmes had that of a Korvetten Kapitän on the Admiralty Staff resplendent with medals and badges. I feared that Holmes' uniform would draw undue interest, but I held my tongue for the nonce. We were staring at each other at how odd we both appeared when there sounded knocking upon our door. The door was immediately opened to admit four sailors to escort us to the launch, two of whom carried our sea bags. We were assisted into the launch followed by the Captain and his four escorts who became the boat crew. With the shrill

accompaniment of B'son's pipes our launch was swung out smartly, and lowered into the water's surface. The engine sputtered to a start as we turned our bow towards the city across the harbour.

Following a thirty minute ride meandering around many anchored vessels of war and commerce, we came upon the Naval Pier where we

tied up. The sailors made the boat fast, and we gingerly stepped on to the dock followed by our four 'friends' carrying our sea bags. The captain led the way up a long sloping ramp to the exit to the town. There was a flurry of commotion just outside the gate to the naval base as everybody moved aside and the double gate opened wide. The air was suddenly assailed by the high, shrill notes of many fifes being played in unison. Our captain got us aside quickly.

"They are changing the guard, and performing Zapfenstreich or the flag raising ceremony so stand stiffly at attention, and both of you hold a right hand salute until they are all past," the captain warned in a rapid whisper! Drums thundered suddenly in unison beating out a sprightly marching rhythm, and a wall of noise nearly knocked me over as an entire Naval band suddenly broke forth in a very stirring march accompanied by a squad of shrieking fifes and thundering drums. I confess that I was impressed to promptly salute as I felt my military blood racing. Holmes whispered to me, "that the march was titled "Prussians Gloria," and it was one of the German Military's favourites."

It took over twenty minutes for the little parade to pass following the flag raising ceremony, and the only thought I had during the concert was how much I now hate the shrill squeal of fifes! We dropped our salute as they passed, and once more followed the captain. Just outside the closing gates a new model Touring car was waiting for us with a driver who snapped to attention as we approached. The captain preceded us into the rear seats of the automobile as the driver closed the door behind us. The car lurched into gear, and we rolled speedily forward. Our way wound through the city, and out into the beautiful and luxuriant green countryside. After a brief thirty minute drive we turned into a military depot that boarded upon a railroad line. We came to a stop before the depot proper, and we dismounted the machine to the ground after our driver hurriedly opened the

door and snapped to attention. Together with the Captain we walked up the stairs into the depot waiting room. The Captain led us over to a corner as if we were watching the train tracks.

"In the next train you will board the fourth carriage to compartment seven, and another helper will contact you there. The compartment has only the two of you booked as occupants. The train will go through Kauna, the capital of the newly independent Lithuania; Riga, the capital of The newly independent Latvia; and through Tallinn, the capital of the newly independent Estonia to St. Petersburg. Your new contact will escort you through Moscow to other friends to try to locate Nicholas," hastily whispered by the Captain loudly under his breath. Holmes leaned towards the Captain whispering, "A pleasure to meet you, and please send my regards to your illustrious father! "Is he well, " Holmes asked?

"Herr Holmes, my father have never forgotten how you have assisted in him the affair of the Adler papers! He was quite well when last I was home on leave before Jutland," he replied. "I fear, however, that Europe will not be anything as it was before this Great war began," he stated!

We thanked him heartily and saluted him with our best attempt at the European 'Heel Click,' and he returned the salute smartly followed by a crisp about face and he marched back to the waiting car and driver. As he was leaving the train to the east was just pulling into the station. As it ground to a skidding, jerking stop we walked slowly out onto the boarding platform with our sea bags, this time, in hand. We counted four carriages from the locomotive, and entered the coach from the forward entrance. We followed the numbered compartments until we stood before number seven, which Holmes slid open and we entered. The room was draped with shadows

and gloom as the window curtains were drawn shut when Holmes reached to open the curtains a crack to admit at least some light to dispel the murkiness of our surroundings. I was in the process of drawing the curtains over the doorway when the darkness spoke!

"I really would prefer that the curtains not be opened, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," said the darkness in a sepulchral voice.

The effect this had upon us was instantaneous in nature and cataleptic in response. We had both observed the room to be empty of everything excepting shadows that we were attempting to dispel. It felt like forever that

we were galvanized to inaction; however, it must have been seconds in relation to how fast we jumped backwards after the darkness spoke to us. I am ashamed to confess that with all the tense situations I shared with Sherlock Holmes I experienced a control lapse, and subsequently moistened slightly the front of my trousers. All of this took place within just a few moments during the great amount of time it has taken to relate its happening.

"Pray, who is this who speaks English perfectly in a German train," asked Holmes haltingly as he gained his composure. Holmes left the curtains as they were and sat down on the seat facing forward. I fell heavily down next to him still too unnerved to vocalize anything coherent.

"I am here to assist you and Dr. Watson in finding Czar Nicholas, his family and effecting their escape. You have been told to expect help from a spy named 'The Eagle' or 'Der Adler,'" I assume? That, honoured sirs is exactly who I am," spoke the nebulous voice from the shadowy recesses of the corner seat before us.

"Sir, it would help a great deal if we could see your face that we may recognize you in the future as a friend," asked I.

" Pray forgive me, Dr. Watson, your request can not be granted. It is not a reflection upon neither you nor Mr. Sherlock Holmes here, but it is something I find necessary and priceless in my profession. You see, I am able to assume many faces and identities so that my enemies can never know my true identity to convey harm or death upon me, hence, it is my policy that anyone who sees my true face and knowing my identity will die then and there," explained this type of living shadow!

"That is quite satisfactory with me," returned Holmes to my amazement. "If we knew your identity we may inadvertently give you away by some means, which is counter productive with our mission," he asserted.

"My point exactly," replied the darkness.

Holmes, seemingly satisfied to converse with a voice out of the ethereal blackness, proceeded to narrate our entire involvement thus far in the case. We were pulling into the station at Kauna, the capital of newly independent state of Lithuania as Holmes was finishing his discourse. Holmes receded into the friendly confines of the deeply comfortable seat cushions as he refilled his short traveling briar pipe lighting it with a match that he extinguished in a sand pail on the wall underneath the window.

"I shall be leaving you both at Riga, our next stop, to precede you to Saint Petersburg on a scouting mission as I have, er- shall we say, borrowed the identity of a Colonel in the Russian Air Forces. I have a modern rapid pursuit airplane hidden, though ready and waiting, just outside of Riga where the Colonel unfortunately lost most of his head. I was forced to shoot him as he was attempting to prevent me from borrowing his airplane," explained our ally's sibilant voice.

This was followed by a soft sardonic laugh that froze my blood in their veins, and visibly affecting Holmes with quite a start as well. Our unseen

ally gave the impression of approving of the use of violence and murder to achieve his aims. This living darkness now terrified me greatly.

Some of the darkness in the corner seemed to separate itself from the surrounding gloom, which grew to a height of slightly over six feet and took a human form shrouded within the folds of a black floor length opera cloak. He wore a shapeless black hat with a wide turned down brim that obscured his countenance effectively. The detached darkness moved to the door of our compartment, and with a swish he disappeared outside. I instinctively shivered uncontrollably as he exited the compartment. I noticed that Holmes was unruffled by our recent guest's departure as he was meditatively smoking his full bend briar pipe with his brows knit together in serious thought. I went over to the window to crack the curtains for a little of the light that remained outside, and proceeded to roll down the window half way for fresh air to steady my overwrought nerves.

Our train arrived at the Riga railway station on time, and as I watched out the window I could see no one to fit the Eagle's appearance of height nor was there anyone in a Russian uniform. I gave up on trying to figure out who and what he was for the time being.

Our trip from Riga to Tallinn was dull and uneventful. All the while Holmes stared into the ceiling gently puffing on his pipe in contentment. Regarding conversation Holmes did his best impression of a clam much to my extreme frustration.

"Who was this 'Eagle' chap," I mused? "Why was he so mysterious? Why was my wounded ankle acting up in pain now?"

That long ago Jezail bullet still caused me extreme hurt. We had just lurched forward out of the station in Tallinn when we opened our sea bags to lay out a fresh change of clothing for our soon arrival in Saint Petersburg. The firm rap of knuckles upon our door halted our ideas of changing as we

both froze in place straining our ears for a voice.

"Tickets Please," demanded the conductor in Russian, German, and French!

Holmes motioned to me quickly to give our tickets to the conductor as I was in the uniform of the lower rank. After all, this was how the German Army operated, and we were in the uniforms of said army. So I picked up the tickets from the seat between Holmes' place and mine, and in one motion swerved the towards the door with the tickets in my left hand and pulling the door aside with my right. The conductor's bulk was framed by the doorway, and he was a rugged looking elderly man in a loose fitting uniform. I gave him the tickets as I stood there reflecting that the Great War had already deflowered the virile manhood of many nations in staggering numbers. After looking the tickets over he tore off a portion of each ticket, and then returned them to me with a half-hearted salute, which I for some unknown reason returned snappily with a European 'Heel Click.' He then moved down to the next compartment which was number eight. I slid the door shut and reentered the compartment sitting down heavily with a sigh in my former place.

"I thought that you might have forgotten that you were a German officer and give us away. I congratulate you for ensuring the secrecy of our mission," vouchsafed Holmes.

"Holmes I acted out of reflex, and I totally forgot who was supposed to be," bemoaned I.

"The matter is rendered academic. Nevertheless I suggest that we change our attire before we arrive in Saint Petersburg," Holmes said energetically!

We laid out the fresh clothing on the seat opposite, and secured the door latch and drew all the curtains so that

we were able to select the proper articles. My attire was that of a Doctor of Medicine in the International Red Cross, and Holmes had become a retired sea captain, named Captain Basil, acting as my traveling companion and official Red Cross inspector. Holmes had packed his make-up kit, and had made himself a new person with wind browned leathery skin that was wrinkled and haggard looking with long grizzled white hair wig topped by a most repulsive looking, greasy, and age tattered Captain's hat. 'Pon my word Holmes, I would have sworn that I did not know him had I not seen the transformation right before my eyes, and I'm still skeptical about it.

We stowed the uniforms in the sea bags with the false identity papers not yet needed and the leather pouch of gold sovereigns we received from the king for emergencies. Holmes wisely stuffed it with socks so that it would not jingle thus tempting some person to a rash act. Holmes produced two old pipes that I thought he had disposed of long ago, but he evidently saved them for such an occasion as this. The briars had cracked bowls, and both had been recently repaired. Two traveling tobacco pouches followed as Holmes began filling his pipe, and I secured my articles filling my bowl as well.

"We will arrive in Saint Petersburg about two in the morning at the rate we are traveling," mused Holmes aloud.

The rest of the train ride was uneventful, and we consumed a bag of sandwiches that the 'Eagle' had left in the corner of the opposite seat. The conductor came round once with a coffee cart from which we both drank two large cups of extremely strong coffee. We would be awake for a while now. The train finally pulled into Saint Petersburg at two forty in the morning with grinding noise and one final solid jolt! As we were disembarking I noticed that there were many younger looking men standing around. This seemed rather peculiar during a time of hostilities.

"The new Soviet Secret Police," Holmes cautioned under his breath.

We sauntered through the massive railroad station looking in all directions at everything like tourists, and I know that Holmes was noting the location of everything for future reference. As we exited the main entry way there were only two open carriages acting as cabs. We entered the second of these as Holmes told the driver in French, "drive us to the Swiss Legation, please."

We were deposited at the legation after a short, but remarkably refreshing ride through the cool dark morning breezes. We knocked upon the door, and to our surprise it was opened post haste. It did appear that we were expected. A short slender man with a waxed complexion closed the door behind us as we stepped through into a large foyer.

"Welcome Mr. Holmes and Dr. Watson, and pray accept the hospitality of the Swiss legation, and you may channel many inquiries through me as it will avail you faster replies. My name by the way is Count Rudolf von Liechtenstein from Zurich, and I am the Council-General of the legation; however, our new ambassador has not yet arrived from Switzerland," explained the Count in a very concerned manner. "The American Ambassador, the Honourable David Roland Francis, a former mayor of the City of Saint Louis and governor of the State of Missouri, has telephoned several times requesting news of you or the American agents," he said.

"Was he not in charge of the World's Fair in Saint Louis in '04" asked Holmes?

"You are well informed about matters beyond your borders, gentlemen, von Liechtenstein replied

When I awoke just after dawn the next morning I discovered that Holmes had breakfasted and departed some two hours hence. Our host, the Count, had

set a delightful table despite the current conditions in Russia. After a hearty breakfast of bacon, eggs, and biscuits I sat down in the entry parlour to enjoy smoking a good cigar, and sipping fine coffee. While I contemplated the aromatic aroma, and taste of my recent meal with this cigar I could not help but compare them to the irritating quality of the German gastronomic offerings. I was completing jotting down my notes of the case thus far in the library as the noon chimes were sounding. Suddenly this was followed by a loud knocking at the main door, and I arose moving to the vestibule door in hopes of seeing a familiar face. I was disappointed as a slovenly old man in filthy tattered clothes sporting a crumpled plain red armband strode behind the secretary who opened the door. The bewhiskered old man took hold of the door and gently closed it as I gaped in astonishment at the audacity of the villain.

"Watson, you really should have more control of your self than to stand there with your mouth agape," spoke Sherlock Holmes.

My eyes grew wide in amazement at the shock that you could have slapped them off my face with a paddle. "Holmes," cried I!

"I am frightfully sorry my good fellow, but I have just returned from a most informative scouting mission into the countryside," explained Holmes as he was taking off his facial make-up.

"Gentlemen, the noon meal is awaiting our pleasure in the study, and we can converse there over our repast," announced the Count.

"That is an excellent suggestion, and I'll be there directly," said Holmes advisedly.

The staff was beginning to serve our dinner as Holmes walked into the room as a cleaned up looking Captain Basil. He seated himself across from me to the Count's right as he sat at the end of the table. Without even so much as a word Holmes sat down and ate

the meal set before him with relish and silence. After the meal was completed we adjourned to the library for Brandy and cigars. Holmes was lighting his Perfecto the Count and sat forward eagerly in expectation of new information regarding the case.

"It was, as I said before, a very profitable morning's work," said Holmes after blowing out his match with smoke.

"Have you discovered the Czar's whereabouts as yet," inquired the Count?

"Yes, he and his family are in Tobolsk, which is about eight hundred miles to the east of Moscow, and there appears to be no indication of impending harm in the foreseeable future at least," elucidated Holmes.

"How did you find out all that in a few hours when I have learned nothing in over a month," demanded the Count!

"It is really quite elementary, my dear Count, if you knew where and how to look," retorted Holmes coolly.

"In the guise of a poor revolutionary worker looking for work and food I rode out to the Czar's country villa just outside the city with a wagon driver who was assigned to remove the food from the villa, and to bring it into Saint Petersburg for distribution. I merely offered to help him for something to eat. He agreed readily as he was assigned no help. We chatted about the new government being helpful to the common worker instead of the wealthy, and he is looking forward to the utopian existence that, I fear, will never arrive."

He went on further, "We arrived at the lodge, and carried out all the food nearly filling the large wagon we rode on. It was brisk, but still hard work. There were many tins of foods of all types. When we finished we opened a few tins of sausage and cheese to satisfy our hunger. He then took me on a little tour of the place, which was luxuriously furnished on a smaller scale than the palaces. He left me in

the main hall while he was off checking all the rooms for more food, but I suspect that he was trying to find something he could steal and sell for money. Be that as it may, I found a shield on the wall upon which was a emblazoned a seven pointed star. I knew this was a clue so I took it down from the wall," stated Holmes in explanation.

"How could that shield tell you that it was a clue," asked the Count puzzled?

"O yes, I forgot that you would not know about that," mused Holmes.

"In the latter part of the last century I took a case to successful conclusion for the Romanov family, which Watson has not yet published in the magazines. The Czar gave me, as a token of honour, a signet ring with a girasol or fire opal set in it. When a secret button is pressed, the ring setting springs up on a hinge to display a seven pointed star engraved in the ring base. This is the identification of the Czar's most loyal and trusted followers, friends, and trusted agents It is known as the 'Order of the Seventh Star.' If any message was left it would be near a seven pointed star as it would literally draw the attention of those wishing to help the Czar. The clues were there, and the shield had not been disturbed by enemy eyes or hands. Etched with a pin was a short message, 'Czar moved to Tobolsk surveillance continuing there, signed 'Fox.'" This message was followed by a seven pointed star as an identifying mark. I rode back on the wagon, and was let off just outside town as he feared his superiors would frown upon his private enlisting of help," explained Holmes eagerly.

"What then is our next move, Holmes," I asked?

"We must take the Trans-Siberian Railway at noon tomorrow for Tobolsk, and to meet the American agent called, 'The Fox,'" said Holmes.

The rest of the day was passed studying maps of the route of the Trans-Siberian Railway from St.

Petersburg to Moscow to Ekaterinburg to Tymen, and the overland routes to Tobolsk. Each map was minutely examined by Holmes and committed to memory. We passed our evening meal in grim silence contemplating our foray into unfriendly regions.

We all retired early due to mental exhaustion, and the arms of Morpheus claimed us quickly.

We awoke late the following morning. It was nearly ten o'clock as we hurriedly dressed in our Red Cross attire. We were provided with packages of sandwiches, rolls, and cakes for the long trip. Our German uniforms were left at the Swiss legation under the custodial care of the Count who promptly burned them in the cellar after retrieving the medals and badges for his private collection.

We piled into the legation's proud automobile, which transported us to the railway station speedily. We arrived thirty minutes before the train was to depart for the interior. We thanked the Count profusely, yet with quiet dignity in our official guise's, as he wished us good fortune in our mission. He drove off as we walked through the main entrance of the station. Holmes went to the ticket counter for the Trans-Siberian Railway, and purchased our round trip tickets so as to not arouse suspicion in purchasing one-way tickets. We hurried through the cavernous building to the departure tracks where we found our train getting up steam on Track #7.

We slowly strolled along the carriages to the front of the train where the passenger cars were located. We found our car, which was #5, and entered it by the rear entry door. Our compartment was third from the front of the coach. Holmes slid the door aside as we entered the compartment, which had one but occupant seated in the gloomy semi-darkness.

We sat down on the forward facing seat as we naturally did each time we rode trains. As we settled into a comfortable position in the seat we raised our hats slightly as a gesture of greeting to our fellow traveler. To my surprise he raised his hat in return, while he got up and locked the door drawing the curtains in one swift and smooth motion. He turned around withdrawing his hand from his trouser pocket, which, when opened, revealed a large gold signet ring featuring a bright blue gem that took on a blood red hue when he held it before the light-filled window curtain crack.

"Agent Fox, I presume," inquired Holmes?

The tones of the replied blood chilling sardonic laugh echoed softly within our compartment, and I knew instantly that it was the spy known as "The Eagle" who stood before us.

"Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, I bid you greeting once again," said he.

"It is now the Fourteenth of June have you any news regarding our mutual mission," asked Holmes politely.

"Yes, the Czar and his family will be moved from Tobolsk to Ekaterinberg before the first of August. The fanatical members of the Ural Soviet have set into motion a plan to insure that the Royal Family will have to experience for sinister reasons known only to them. I believe than they mean to murder the entire family there to demoralize the counter-revolution by the White Russians. I suggest that we wait in Ekaterinburg for the Royal Family's train to arrive, and hopefully 'The Fox' will be in close proximity to the train as he is already in Tobolsk watching over the Czar and his family," related The Eagle.

"How long will it take us to reach this city of Ekaterinburg," questioned Holmes?

"We will arrive on the morning of the Sixteenth of June as this train makes

far too many stopovers along the route," said he impatiently.

"Further, I have set in motion a plan to be used if the necessity arises, but the success of it fully depends upon security and timing," added 'The Eagle.'

We shared the food that the Count had furnished us after which we all enjoyed a smoke. Holmes smoked his cracked briar, and our companion and I smoked cigars. The Eagle produced a flask of Brandy from beneath his tattered gray coat, which he shared with us. I confess that I certainly felt braver and warmer after that.

We each then curled up into different corners lapsed in and out of sleep during the next two days. When we felt hungry we helped ourselves to the bag of food, and the refill obtained by our companion during one of our periods of sleep by some means he never explained.

The train rocked and jolted into Ekaterinburg a little after eleven o'clock in the morning of the sixteenth of June, and it was late, as is the custom with most Russian Railroads. We detrained after nearly everyone else had departed. The living darkness had adopted a new disguise that neither of us saw, but he was wearing a Russian Officer's uniform with the telltale red armband of the Bolsheviks. He told us that he would be scouting the situation while Holmes and I registered at a nearby hotel as Red Cross observers. He was gone in a blink of an eye, and we followed him a few minutes after that we would not be associated together.

Holmes inquired of the guard posted at the station entry where the nearest hotel was in French, with only a negative nod of understanding from the guard in reply. However, a man seeing our dilemma from across the street came over to introduce himself as Thomas H. Preston, the British Consul, speaking in the French language. He motioned for us to follow him as he led us to the British

legation, which had an international hotel located next to it.

We all entered the hotel together as Holmes and I registered, while the manager, and a Bolshevik guard closely examined our papers. They must have been in order as we were led up to our room on the second level right at the head of the stairs. Mr. Preston escorted us into our room, and he made a barely perceptible motion with his hand prompting silence. He wrote upon a tablet that he removed from his jacket that the Reds were listening in on all rooms occupied by foreigners. He then suggested on the tablet that we converse in normal tones in French suggesting we dine together next door at the British legation after our long journey citing our delicate stomachs and the rough Russian fare we were unused to. This we did convincingly, and we departed thence in grim silence.

As we entered the legation, our bags still with us, Mr. Preston gave the order for three dinners to be sent to his office. We kept on towards the office where we seated ourselves around a dinning table breathing somewhat easier in a fellow countryman's presence.

"Mr. Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Watson, I consider it an honour and a privilege to finally meet you both," said Mr. Preston addressing us with his outstretched hand.

"Thank you," Holmes blushed shaking Preston's hand warmly.

"A veritable plethora of nobility and representatives have been imploring my aid to get the Royal Family released from their imprisonment, which they now endure here," Preston bemoaned.

"Preston, are you positive that the Czar and his family are held here in Ekaterinburg," asked Holmes quickly?

"Yes, all the indications are pointing that direction," he replied.

"Can you give the possible location of their holding place," requested Holmes?

"The Ipatiev House, which is known among the local soviets as the 'House of Special Purpose,'" Preston replied.

"We will have to find 'The Eagle and the Fox as soon as possible to make our plans, and getting them into effect as soon as humanly possible," stated Holmes uneasily.

Just then the curtained gloom in the far corner of the room spoke sibilantly in perfect English. "Fear not for 'The Eagle' is here, and 'The Fox' is watching the house in question," said the sepulchral voice of the living darkness.

Preston and I jumped with a start with Holmes displaying no emotion or surprise.

"I surmised that you would be there awaiting our arrival," Holmes stated. "I, too, have a slight flare for the dramatic," he added grimly.

"Tonight is the night for freedom, retribution, and honour," our shrouded ally said. "I have talked with 'The Fox,' and he reports that three plans are ready with three possible escape routes. The Czar and his family are at the Ipatiev House, which as things stand is too well guarded by day thus we must move by night. Mr. Holmes, would you and Dr. Watson kindly engage in a leisurely walk about town as Red Cross representatives for the next two hours," he asked.

A knock at the door drove our ally into the darkness from whence he had appeared. Preston opened the door to admit a kitchen aide pushing a food service cart. He set the dishes before us and retired closing the door behind him. Once again, 'The Eagle' separated himself, once again, from the darkness.

"Mr. Holmes kindly walk from two to four, and again from seven to eight-

thirty as I believe that the Soviets are holding you both under intense surveillance. If you distract their spies then that would give the others uninhibited movement to make the best possible preparations," the 'Eagle' requested!

"We have been shadowed ever since we arrived in Saint Petersburg, but I do concur that a diversion can accomplish much," Holmes affirmed.

We turned our attention again to our repast as the spy of darkness exited the room behind the heavy curtains and via a window hidden by a large bush. We expeditiously consumed our meal with relish and without further interruption.

At precisely two we started a stroll about the town looking over the buildings, and people as if we had been a long time used to it. We enjoyed a leisurely smoke of good cigars as we kept our pace steady returning to the legation just before four. A man was waiting with Preston, and finally we were to meet 'Agent Fox.'

"Mr. Holmes, I need to ask you if you have any hard finances with you as we seem to be in need of extra bribe money," asked the tall rugged, but haggard, looking man.

Holmes went over to the bag he had brought into the Consul's office, and withdrew the leather bag containing the gold coins.

"In this bag are 1,000 English Gold Sovereigns, and I give them to you for the express use of rescuing the Czar and his entire family," said Holmes handing the bag to 'The Fox.'

"This is more than enough to complete our plans, and the remainder will be returned to you," he stated thankfully.

He hid the pouch inside his light coat, and departed with a short salute of farewell. After an uneventful next couple of hours we enjoyed a good supper, and were soon on our second

tour of the town. It was close unto seven-fifteen

that we were passing behind the Ipatiev house near a warehouse when an elderly man holding a large pistol stepped from a warehouse doorway blocking our path. A dim light was shining on the man's face and I could swear that there was something familiar about it, however, I just could not seem to place it in my mind.

"You seek the Romanov traitors to assist them do you not," jeered the man in halting English?

"Why should you, Alexis, seek to harm those responsible for obtaining your freedom," rejoined Holmes.

This struck the man like a blow as he clearly staggered back a few steps recomposing himself in the process.

"I would never hurt Anna, but just how do you know my name," questioned Alexis?

"I hesitate to tell you, but Anna died by her own hand in England during November of 1894. I was investigating a murder case, and discovered her hiding place in Professor Coram's room, who you may have known as one 'Sergius' when you were all nihilists involved in the assassination of Czar Alexander II in March of 1881," stated Holmes flatly.

"My Anna did get to the beast Sergius as she had promised? But how did she free me if, as you claim, she did indeed die," he asked?

"She had letters and a diary that she had recovered from 'Sergius,' which she implored us to take to the Russian Embassy in London that would secure your release from false imprisonment," explained Holmes further.

"I do believe that you speak the truth as I note the sincerity in your eyes, face, and voice, but who are you - another policeman," he asked waving his pistol in our direction?

"My name is Sherlock Holmes," he stated flatly.

The gunman, Alexis, straightened up, with surprise marring his visage. "I am indebted to you sir for my release from that Czarist Hell Hole, but I am the leader of the Bolsheviks in this city, and I cannot allow you to take my prisoners. I am torn between either shooting you now or with the Czar and his family," he said slowly cocking his pistol.

Suddenly the darkness on the ground began to move growing upwards in size, and taking the shape of a shrouded man. He was wearing a shapeless

black hat with a full length black cloak enveloping him. As he materialized from the ground a haunting and terrifying sardonic laugh grew from a whisper into a defiant mocking laugh. The Living Shadow was intervening between us and death. The Shadow spoke in a sibilant and mocking voice to the stunned Alexis.

"You seek the death of two people who have done you only good and no evil. You also desire the death of a family to purge your frustrations of false imprisonment. Virulent poison is flowing through your veins, which will end right here. Your life is herewith forfeit," hissed the Shadow as two automatic pistols belched forth flame and noise and spat death six times.

Alexis was dead long before he touched the ground. I was stunned that anyone could kill a person in such a fashion, but I am sincerely grateful for my life being saved. That Living Shadow sounded forth his hollow mocking laugh of triumph, and he then swiftly wheeled in our direction.

"The guards will think the royal family is being murdered now. Hurry into the house as the way is clear. The stair from the kitchen will get you to the Royal Family on the second floor, and bring them out that way as a truck is coming now. Make haste," he hissed.

Holmes and I went in the back door to find no one about, and we scrambled up the stairs to the second floor. We found the Czar and his family in the first room all huddled together, and dressed in cheap peasant's clothing. They had all recoiled behind the Czar, Nicholas, who I would still swear was our good King George. The room was pregnant with silence and fear, but the Czar smiled in recognition upon seeing Holmes.

"My name is Sherlock Holmes, and I am here to assist you in your escape," said Holmes rapidly in English.

Everything changed in an instant as fear was dispelled by the Czar's acceptance of Holmes as a friend. They all moved silently down to the kitchen waiting for the truck. I noticed that the Czar's fingers seemed to be bleeding I began motioning that I was a Doctor and would tend to it.

"It is a small cut where I had to cut off a sapphire ring that was un-removable to protect our identity," Nicholas replied in English.

Holmes showed the Czar his ring opening it to expose the seven pointed star to which Nicholas smiled gently remembering his father, Alexander III, bestowing that honor to Holmes.

Our reverie ended abruptly enough when a truck screeched to a halt right outside the door, with our black robed friend driving. The brake set, he dismounted and rushed to the door. Opening it, he displayed to the Czar his ring exposing the hidden seven pointed star. The Czar called him what seemed a friendly name in Russian in smiling tones, and they all scrambled into the back of the truck with the Czar helping his wife, daughters, and especially his hemophiliac son carefully into the truck. Holmes and I squeezed into the cab, and with a jolting lurch we set off at a dizzying pace on the road leading out of town to the south towards the White Russian lines.

After a brief respite of a few minutes and several miles our ears detected the frightening sounds of pursuit, and the shouting of many angry voices. The truck sped on ever faster as the black robed driver did not seem intent on not stopping for man nor beast under any circumstances. As Holmes and I briefly glanced around we did see that we were being pursued by two trucks seemingly full of Bolsheviks. As we approached a point about twenty miles south of Ekaterinburg we swerved suddenly as we left the road plunging down a side dirt road with increasing speed of the hair raising variety. The man in black pushed the accelerator to the floor as our speed increased until our truck bounced all over the road, and the passing trees were but a blur. The hair on the back of my head was standing on end, and I was too terrified to move or speak.

The other trucks were also flying down the road at breakneck speed. The man in black laughed mirthlessly as he headed the truck between two rock outcroppings in our wild dash for freedom. We slid, rather than drove, at a sickening speed down a long gently sloping embankment, and crossing a long level field that was surrounded all around by thick hilly forests. We skidded to a stop less than one hundred yards from the sloping hill covered with thick forest. That Living Shadow laughed mirthlessly as he scrambled out of the cab running to the rear of the truck. He said something to the Czar and his family hidden there in fluent Russian that caused everyone to fall down flat very quickly behind the folding steel tailgate.

The other two trucks skidded to an abrupt stop as soon as they saw we were stationary, and the trucks vomited out numerous men drawing weapons of all sizes and types as they walked purposefully towards us confident that we had made a tragic mistake. They covered about one third of the distance between their truck and ours when a metallic scraping sound softly pierced the air and

descended to our ears from the trees above. The Living Shadow pulled two .45 automatic pistols from beneath the folds of his sable cloak, and fired one shot into the air. This was answered by a rumbling noise resembling thunder yet somehow different. The trees suddenly spewed forth

men on horseback with drawn cavalry sabers poised in great numbers all around the summit of the little valley of death. Each of these riders wore a black hairy busby hat, with the silver Romanov double-headed eagle emblazoned on the front.

It was the Czar's ever faithful Cossack Calvary who were poised for what seemed an eternity on the encircling ridge. Suddenly, the stillness was shattered by terrifying screams and thundering hoofs. The Cossacks as one entity broke forth into a wild tumultuous charge halfway down the slope yelling and screaming in Russian as they bore down upon our pursuers. The Czar's devoted Cossack Calvary was murderously intent on the Czar's safety, and the painful deaths of all the Bolsheviks. Suddenly the Cossacks like an envelope closed over the fleeing cowards with a deafening crash. Sabers flashed and guns roared in the moonlight as men screamed and died.

Many of the dying and wounded Bolsheviks were trampled into pulp under the horses' hooves in the Cossack's eagerness to defend their beloved Czar. It was not a pretty sight, however, it was a just one. It was mere quick minutes until it was all over as the victorious Cossacks rode slowly toward the truck. They stopped about twenty-five feet behind us waiting, and then the Czar stood up to face them.

"My children, I, and my family, owe you my life and thanks," said the Czar as he jumped down from the truck.

All of the riders dismounted and lowered their bloody sabers to the ground in salute to their beloved leader. Noise echoed from the mouth of the valley as a car came rapidly down the little valley screeching to a halt by the Cossacks. 'The Fox' got

out, and advanced to the back of the truck. He spoke rapidly spoke to the Czar who spoke a command that his family descended from the truck gathering close about him. Nicholas moved towards the Cossacks addressing them lovingly in Russian after which he prayed a blessing on the rescuers and the devoted ambushing Cossacks.

The Czar's family piled into the commodious rear of the newly arrived vehicle while the Czar opened the passenger side front door. He saluted all of us by the truck, and seated himself in the front seat next to 'The Fox' as they sped away across the valley of death, and off into the of exile. Holmes, 'The Eagle,' and I stood watching the departing Royal family as they disappeared across the valley, while my heart was beating proudly accompanied by misting eyes at the honourable service that we had performed that day. The Cossacks remounted and dashed off to the south up through the trees ringing the valley.

"We had best be departing ourselves," advised 'The Eagle' as he surveyed the grisly spectacle before us.

"Quite so, my good fellow," said Holmes.

"Get in the front of the truck, and I'll drive you to your escape route," exhorted 'The Eagle' in motion.

I got in first with Holmes following, and the truck once more lurched into motion accelerating rapidly. We swiftly crossed the little valley, and rocketed out of the narrow entry. We circled around the little valley pursuing a generally southern course. We were close to Chellybinsk after several hours of wantonly reckless driving when we turned off the road up a pair of ruts that masqueraded for a road towards a farm complex. We pulled up along side of a very large barn. As we disembarked the 'Eagle' told us that 'The Fox' was taking the Czar and his family south to Afghanistan then east across Northern India into China to eventually arrive in

France, which had a large Russian colony near Paris. The Czar's appearance would be altered to thus provide safety during the long dangerous journey and exiled life.

'The Eagle' opened the large folding doors of the barn to disclose an airplane of a long distance nature that seated three easily. It was designed to carry bombs, but instead sported extra cans of gasoline for longer range. It was a German 'Gotha' long-range bomber. 'The Eagle' clambered into a flying suit, and nimbly mounted into the cockpit. We quickly scrambled into the rear compartment after we spun the propellers to catch the ignition as 'The Eagle' started the plane moving. We taxied out of the barn onto the level field as we faced into the wind, the plane gathered speed, and finally took flight turning to a South Southwest heading 'The Eagle' appeared most at home here in the clouds, but I felt my stomach rising into my throat. We were drawing near a considerable body of water as we banked for a landing near the northern end of the lake.

As the reserve gas cans were emptied into the plane our pilot told us we were on the northern edge of the Caspian Sea, the largest lake in the world. Our task completed we took off again holding a more southerly route over the sea. A short time after crossing land we descended through mountains to alanding in Teheran, Persia. We secured a full cargo of petrol and were soon airbourne West Southwest to eventually land in Cairo. The British authorities were waiting there for us, and quickly took Holmes and I to the harbour to board the battle cruiser, Invincible, once again. As we stepped on board the Captain greeted us warmly telling us that we were on a direct course for London as the ship started chugging out of the harbour.

It was a speedy race home, and inside of four days we were once again standing before the door to 221B Baker Street. We entered and wearily climbed the stairs stiffly to our rooms, which, upon entering, saw us folded

into our lounging chairs as each of us lighting a cigar. We found the relaxing smoke in familiar surroundings a refreshing tonic for our strung out nerves. As we were extinguishing our cigars there sounded a wild peal of the bell at the door downstairs. We heard Mrs. Hudson admit someone, which was followed by heavy footsteps upon the stair. A knock sounded to be immediately followed by the opening of our door.

"By all means, Mycroft, do come in," invited Holmes.

The bulky form of Mycroft Holmes appeared in the doorway after Holmes finished his invite, and he held the door that King George preceded him into our room. Mycroft crossed to Homes shaking his hand, and then turned to me extending congratulations also.

Stepping forward the King honoured us each with a handclasp. "Mr. Holmes , and you as well, Doctor Watson, I desired to convey to you both that our friend and his family are safely beyond the powers that sought them harm, and they send their sincerest thanks. I also thank you both from the bottom of my heart, and I ask you both to kneel. I have an honour for you," said the king as we knelt on one knee. This will be enacted again at Buckingham castle at a latter date publicly.

The King slowly extracted his sword, and touched each of us on the shoulder thrice saying, "For honourable service to the throne, I George, do hereby confer upon you the rank of knighthood." After this he stated "Arise Sir

Knights to receive your honours." We were bestowed with the appropriate badge of rank. Mycroft presented me with a gold signet ring surmounted by a fire opal that opened to reveal a seven pointed star engraved into the ring as a gift from a friend he said. We both bowed as Mycroft looked on in an approving manner. The King again thanked us warning us not to say anything of this case, and not to

believe any reports from Moscow regarding the Czar as they were indeed quite safe. Mycroft then led the King to the waiting carriage, and they departed.

"Holmes, I confess that I feel so much more secure now that we are safely within our own domicile. Nothing can reach us now," said I.

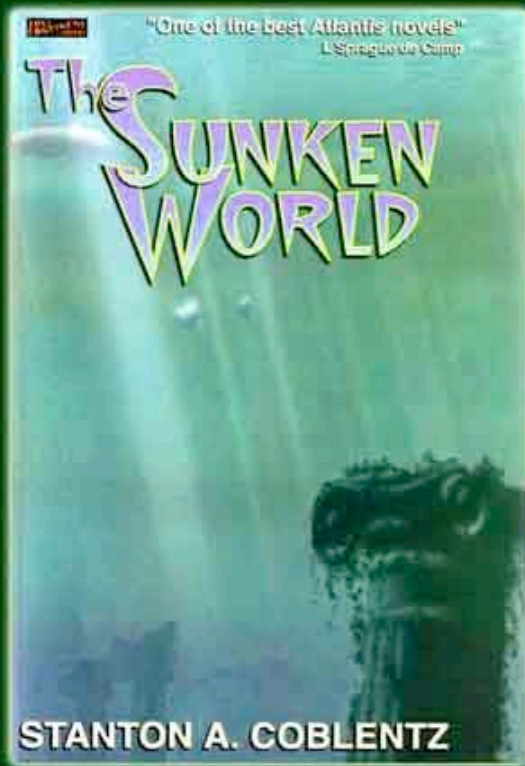
"By the way Watson, I heard that William Rutledge McGarry mention that he too planned to author a novel about 'Rescuing the Czar,' Holmes said offhandedly.

I was flattened, but I remembered that he was an American and would be published in America. I felt much better at that comforting thought. Now, I felt, we were safe and secure amid our familiar lodgings.

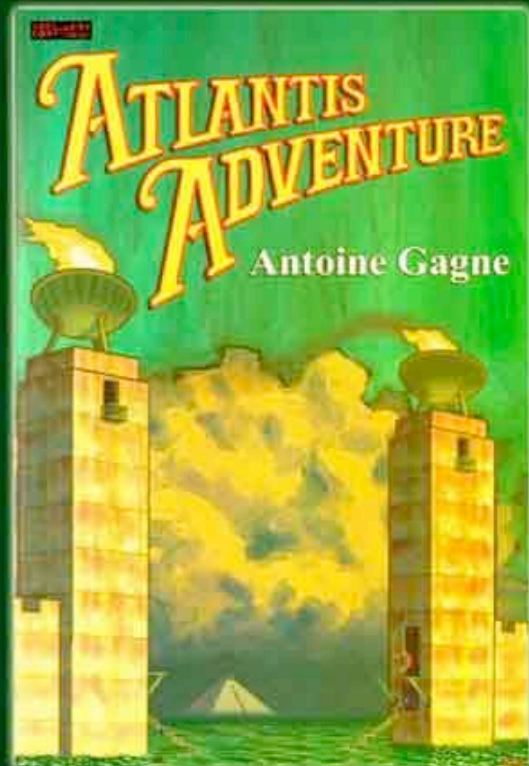
Then when from the street there drifted up to our ears rising from a softly whispered sardonic mirth to a loud mocking peal came the triumphant laugh of the frightening agent in Black, The Shadow!

The End

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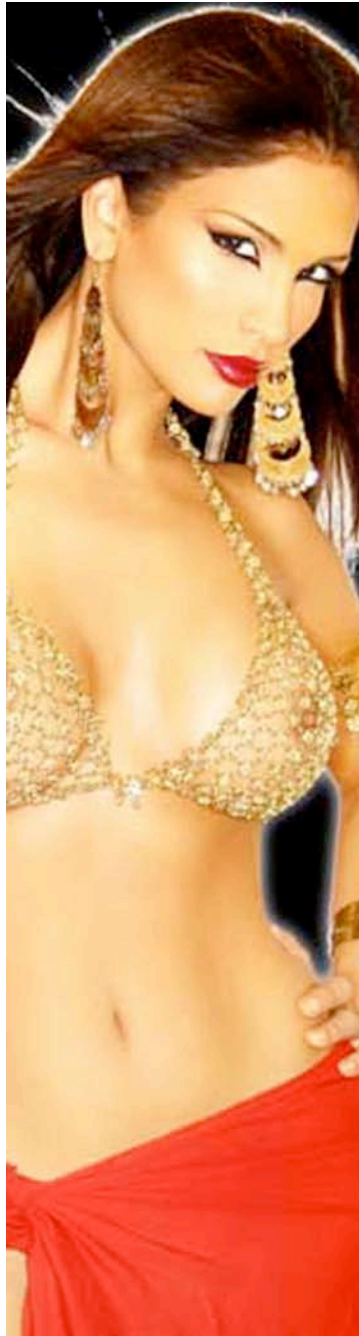
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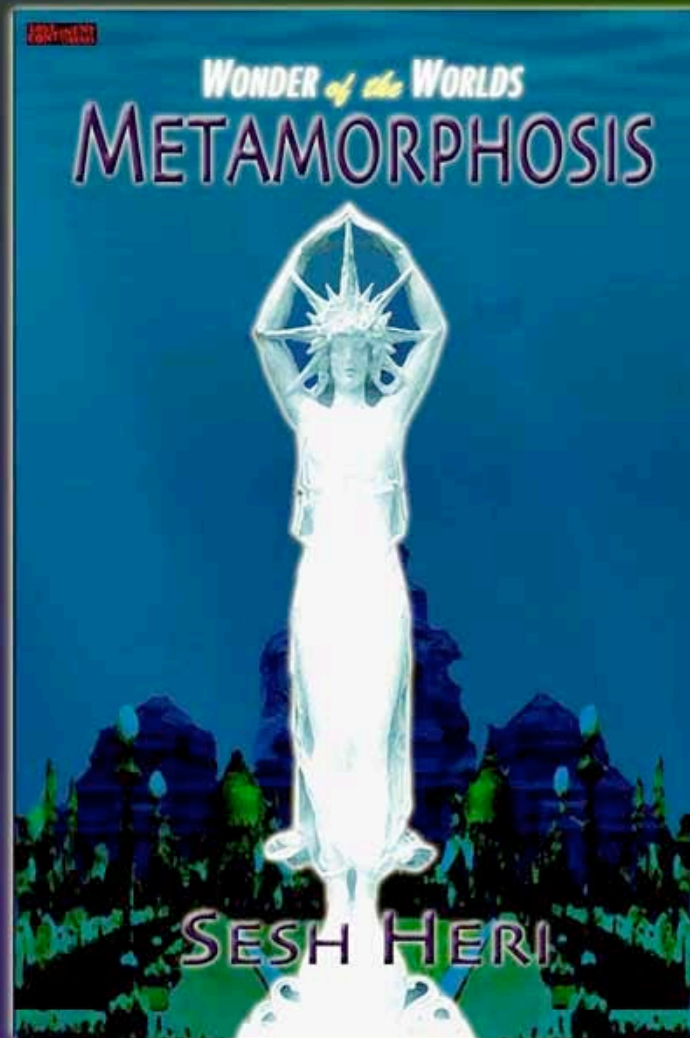


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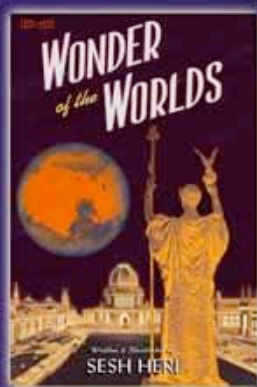


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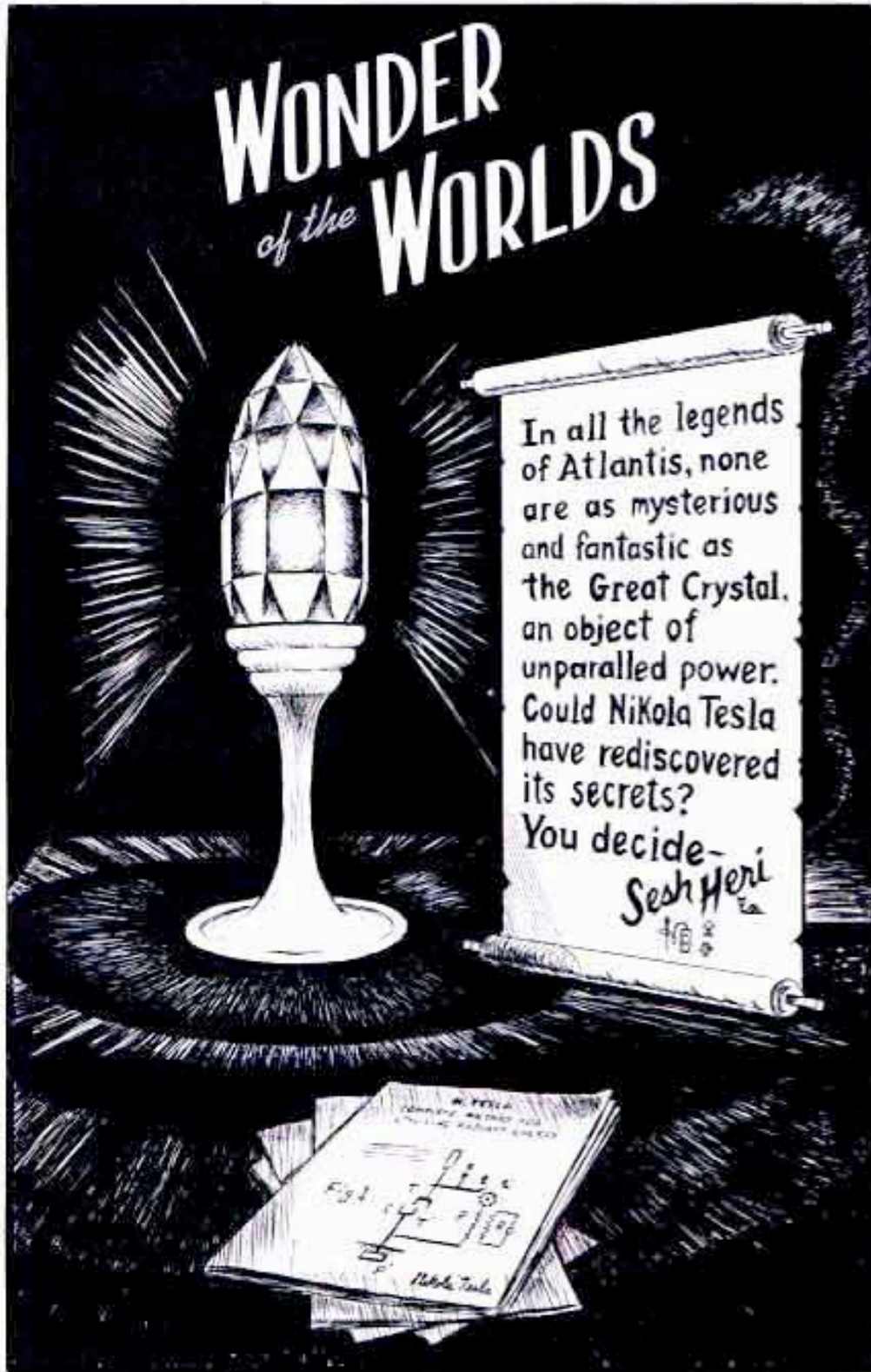


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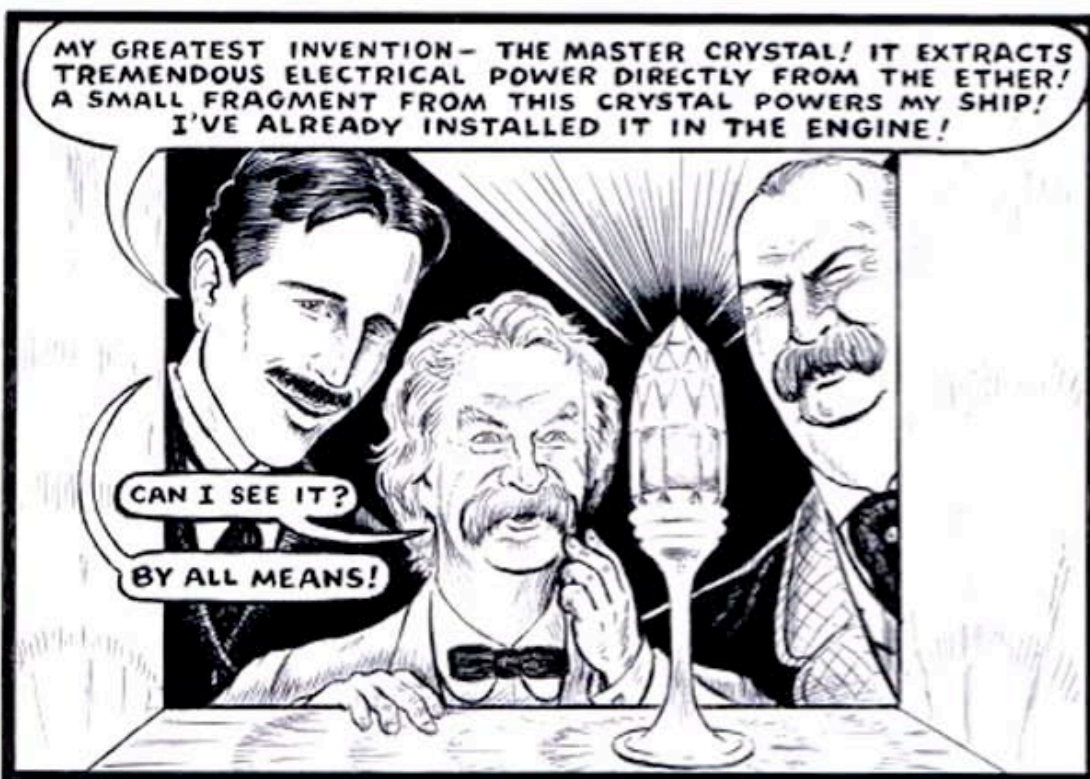
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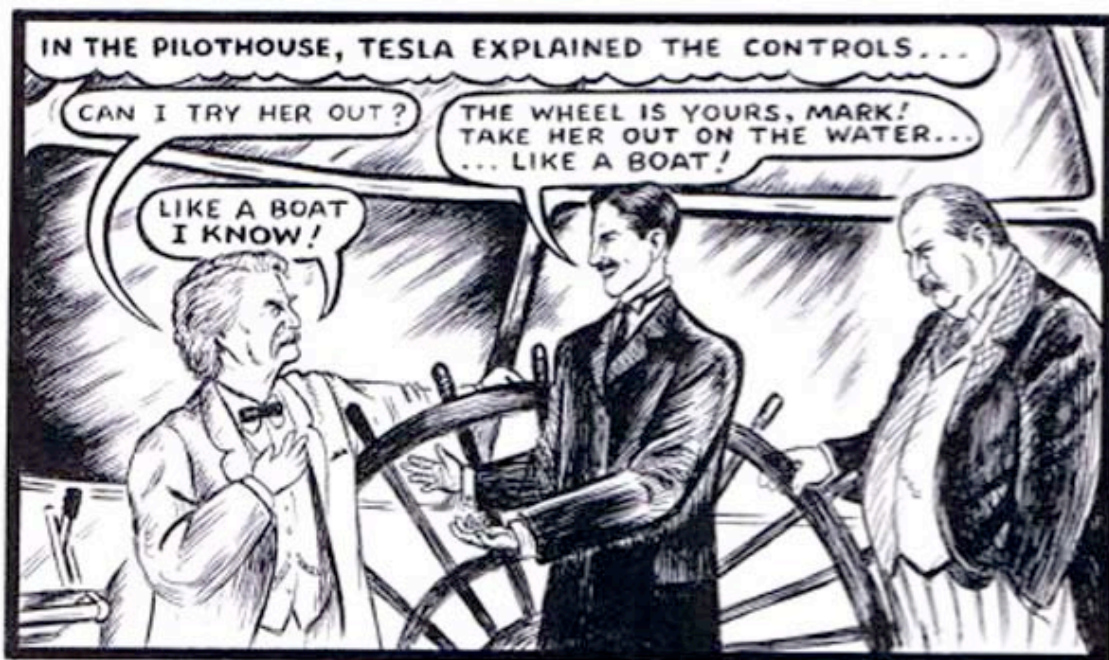
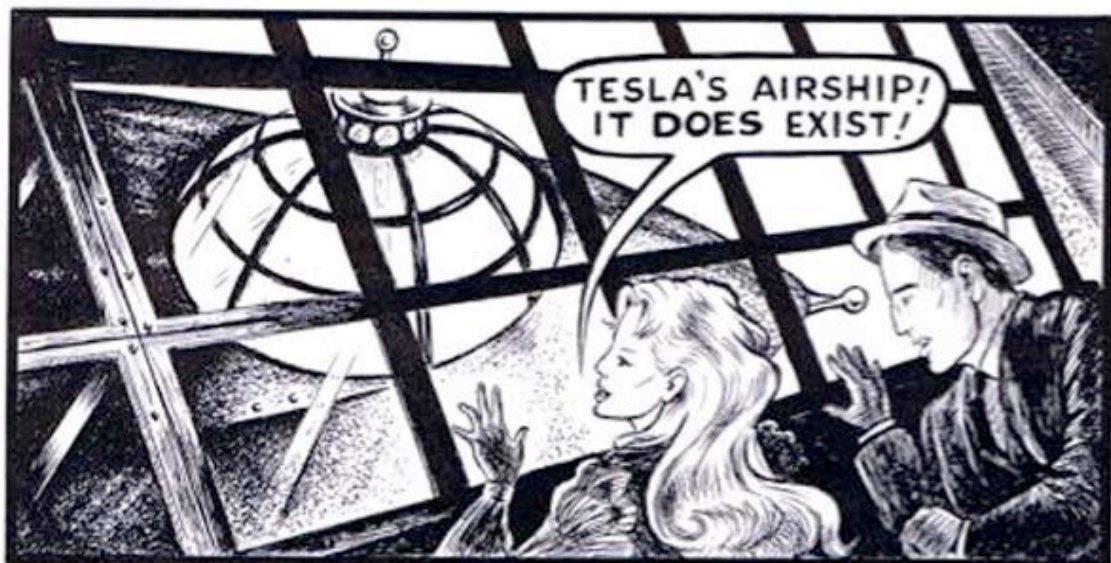
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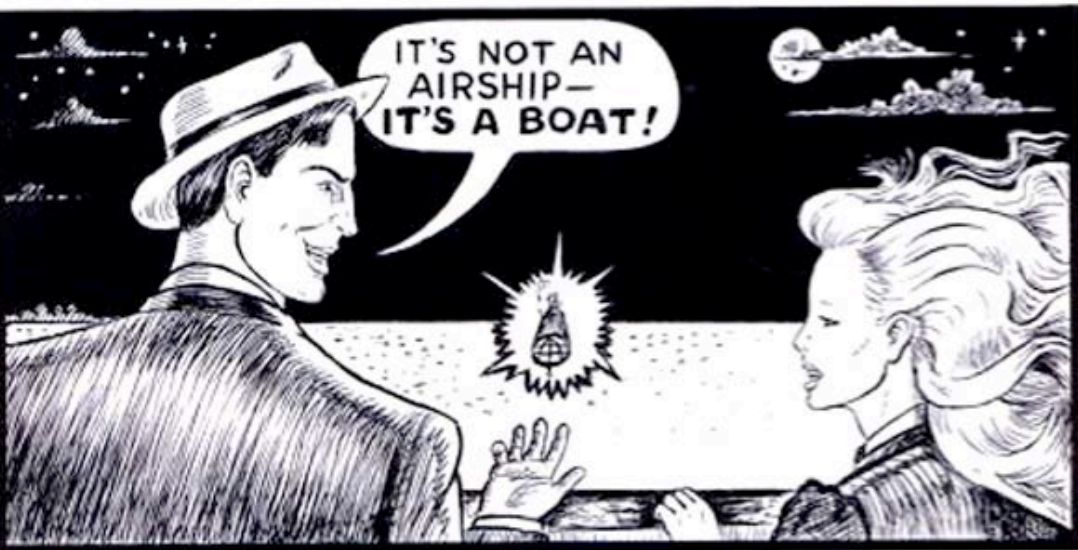
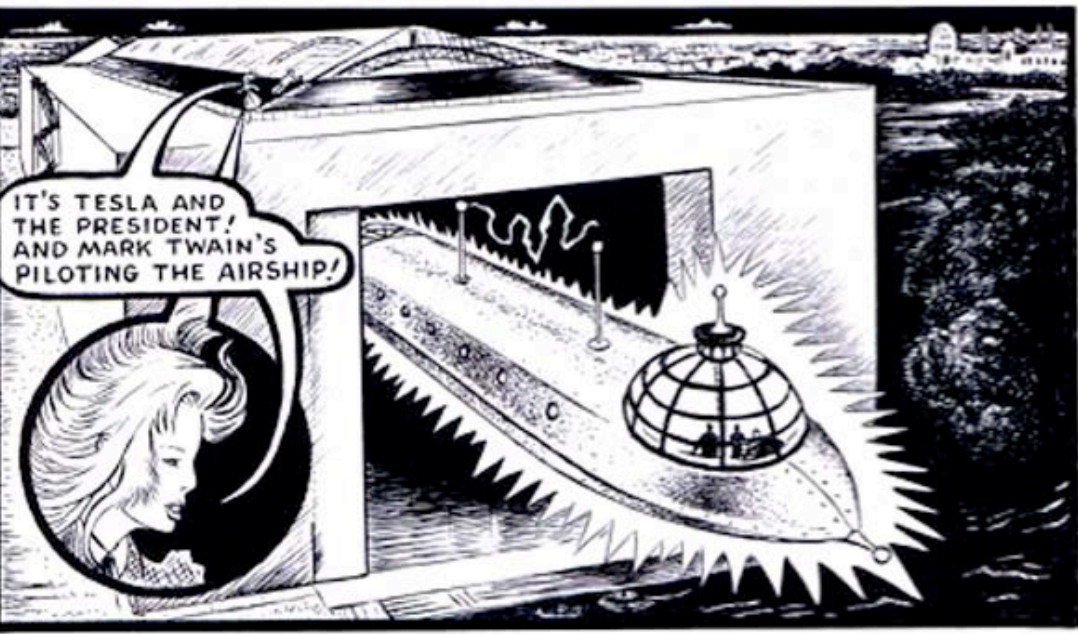








I CLOSED THE STARTER SWITCH, TILTED THE PILOT'S WHEEL A FRACTION OF AN INCH, TAPPED THE ACCELERATOR PEDAL WITH MY FOOT, AND WE ROSE UP IN THE AIR AND SAILED OUT OF THE OPEN DOORS OF THE WAREHOUSE!







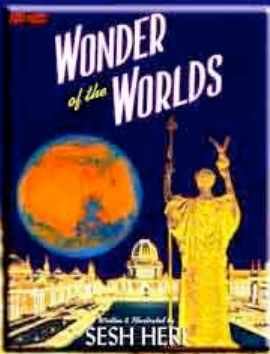
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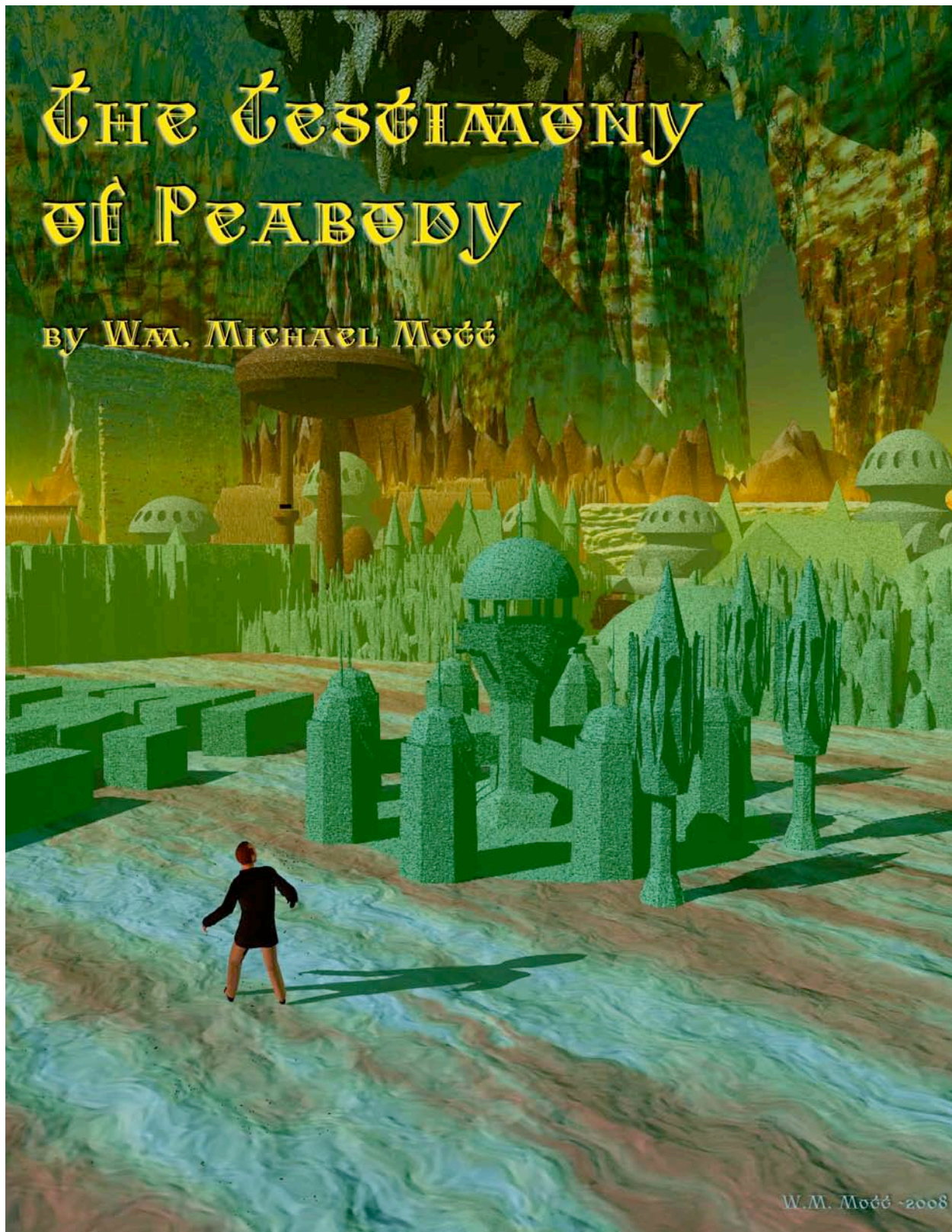
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Two stylized, metallic-looking alien heads with large, expressive eyes. The heads are rendered in a dark, textured style, possibly representing a character from a comic book or movie. They are positioned on either side of a central graphic element that looks like a stylized flame or a symbol with three circles.

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THE TESTIMONY OF PEABODY

BY W.M. MICHAEL MOSE



W.M. Mose -2008

THE FINAL TESTIMONY OF T. MONROE PEABODY
Professor of Archeology and Ancient Languages,
Pawnee Institute of North American Studies

August 28, 1921

Dear Fellow Scholars of a Future Age,

As I write this, I have plenty of light by which to see the page before me. While my handwriting may shiver at times, it is due to excitement, even though I suspect that I am doomed to die buried alive, rather than it is to fear or deprivation of any kind! The source of this excitement I will presently reveal, and can only hope that someday, someone will find what I have written!

Food is plentiful, and now light and some sort of fantastic energy are, as well. The cave-in entombed me with the food and water supplies for an expedition of twenty, enough for thirty days; I calculate that, if I eat and drink frugally, I can survive for two years or longer, as long as the air remains good. As long as food, water, and sanity hold out, I am a prisoner in a gilded cage...since I will eventually die surrounded by the most awe-inspiring archeological discovery in recorded history! At first I was worried about the batteries in the lights giving out, along with the carbide for the headlamps and the oil for the lanterns; but since finding this most incredible source of seemingly endless luminescence, created by an ancient race the genius of whom makes modern man look like an imbecile, I fear only that I will run out of pen and paper! But that will take months as well, as the expeditionary supplies contained ample writing materials for a dozen scholars.

But to the beginning of my story! I've no idea if it is day or night in the world outside, and already my concept of time seems distorted. Keeping my watch wound

is essential if I'm to retain my sense of reality in relation to the rest of the world! Time seems to both drag and to pass more quickly—I stay awake longer and sleep longer as well, for my circadian rhythms appear to be stretching in duration, after two weeks in this underground world. And still, I've heard no sound of a rescue attempt from above. For all I know, they may all be dead, killed in the fall of the cliff-face which locked me in here like a beetle in amber.

When the Pawnee Institute was first contacted by Dr. Demetrius Foley of the Sanbourne Institute for Pacific Antiquities in the fall of 1919, it raised a few eyebrows, including my own. Dr. Foley had at one time been the foremost graduate student of the famous (or infamous) Professor Copeland, author of *The Prehistoric Pacific in the Light of the Ponape Scripture (1911)*, a work generally scoffed at in most learned circles. Dr. Copeland disappeared with ill rumor during a trip to Central Asia in 1913, following the track of his theoretical "ancient worldwide civilization", a hypothetical world of pre-human beings that had once ruled this earth before man arose. Foley's missive nearly went into the trash bin, had not I noticed that he had written that he was working closely with famed subterranean explorer and linguist R.S. Chauviere, whose work on reconstructing the proto-language of mankind has intrigued me for many years.

Foley claimed that Chauviere had discovered clues which might lead to a cave similar or related to the one discovered in the Grand Canyon in 1909 by G. E. Kinkaid

and Prof. S. A. Jordan, of the Smithsonian Institution. As most scholars on this topic know, that particular cavern was "lost" in a cave-in as well, or else was secured by some mysterious cabal and covered up for purposes or reasons unknown! Or so the stories run in rumor-circles, at least. Chauviere claimed that his findings indicated evidence of a cliff-face dwelling or habitation of great antiquity, much older than the earlier Grand Canyon find, and perhaps much richer in terms of content. If we had only realized how correct he was....Well, better preparations could certainly have been made.

To make a long story short, The Pawnee Institute, the Sanbourne Institute, and several smaller sources of funding (including some help from the venerable Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts), put together a cursory expedition. We decided to avoid the usual bureaucratic circles and large funding sources, such as those connected with major government-funded organizations; we definitely did not want a repetition of what had happened in 1909! Following the legends of Native American traditions, along with inscriptions in certain very old and forbidden books, Chauviere indicated that the cavern or tunnel we sought would lead to a hidden settlement, perhaps a survival of the "Old Fire Land" of the Apaches or the actual, original Sipapu of the Hopi!

Chauviere was correct. Not only did we find the cavern entrance, suspended over a thousand feet down in the sheer wall of a minor off-shoot chasm of the Grand Canyon—we found a miracle! Since those who find my words will no doubt find the wonders here as well, I will only say that the artifacts discovered, the level of civilization indicated, the sophistication of advanced and unknown scientific principles, indicates that the human race has indeed elapsed into a doddering senility, a dim shadowy mockery of a prior greatness. I say this, of course, making the assumption that the builders of this "Sipapu", whom the

Hopi called the "Ant People" and whom Mon. Chauviere called the "Atlans", "Titans", and "Underpeople", were at one time human beings.... There seem to be sad indications that their race may not have ended up as such.

I have studied their records at length—and what records they are! In the form of indestructible yet flexible metal tablets, in friezes, frescoes, statuary, and other forms, the size of their record-keeping is prodigious beyond belief! And I have discovered their other form of record-keeping, which displays an advanced technology, and a race or races of people, so at odds with our modern, "scientific" and "educated" beliefs and sensibilities, that it seems like the stuff of a dream or nightmare! But more of that, in due course.

Similar, in their final days, to the proto-pygmyes of the Java region, or even the diminutive pre-Pictish people of the British Isles, the mysterious creators of this civilization seem to have diminished in size over the passage of vast epochs of time, from a size once heroic or even gigantic in proportions. Taking up a subterranean existence may have led to this, and who knows what strange radiations come from deep within the earth itself, to bombard living flesh and heredity with ominous changes?

Due to long habitation at this site, a gradual degeneration of the culture can be seen, evident in their art and records; from a high level of civilization, the "Atlans" apparently devolved into a brutal and cruel society obsessed with violent and perverse titillation of a most disturbing nature. Even as their stature decreased, so, apparently, did their minds and sense of morality, until they were left with the ethical standards of syphilitic madmen....

I do not concern myself with their final records, or, more accurately, recordings...they are too disturbing and generally self-indulgent and empty of all knowledge and meaning. Instead I have

discovered their earliest recorded stories, in a format which defies all modern scientific knowledge! For these ancients had discovered the secret of transcribing, or recording, ACTUAL HISTORICAL EVENTS, in the form of IMMERSIVE SOUND AND IMAGE PANTOMIMES THAT MIMIC REALITY!

Some of these "plays" take place above the ground, some below. Others take place in what appears to be the distant past, even back to an age before the existence of humanity as we know it! While still others seem to be actual GLIMPSES AND RECORDINGS OF FUTURE AGES. The movements of whole nations, peoples, races, civilizations, from dust to grandeur and back to dust, are recorded here, as if, somehow, the Atlans had managed to tap into the Akashic records of the Theosophists, or perhaps the powerful electromagnetic memory of the Planet Earth herself, which may somehow transcend space and time as we know it!

I know this all sounds insane, and it may have been this ability to see their own fate, their own future, which led to the eventual self-destruction, the apathy and pathos of the Atlan race; for no person or race of people should be allowed to glimpse their own ultimate degeneration and demise, lest hope and free-will itself be abandoned, along with all ethical considerations for themselves and other sentient beings....

So now I sit here in the dim yet pleasant twilight of this golden city, ready to yet again immerse myself into one of what I have termed the "play-back stones" of the Atlans, and record events from the world before the flood, from an even older cataclysmic age or ages than that one, and from a future so distant as to leave the Earth without oceans and reverted to a savagery to rival her infancy.....

I will transcribe these tales until I die of starvation or fatigue. I have nothing else to do, and I do not expect a rescue after the millions of tons of rock which descended on the entrance to the city, several miles back toward the surface....Had I not lingered to gaze at a fresco, I, too, would be either dead or eternally locked out of this paradise of knowledge! For paradise it is, and I will die happily lost in my studies and transcriptions, in the hope that some future scholar or explorer will find my writings and be able to decipher them.

As I am engulfed in their moving, breathing, shouting images and recordings of all of our planetary history, sometimes I am an observer, sometimes a participant—it does not matter. I will transcribe these tales of forgotten history, and history yet to come.

I will die here, yet I am home at last.

T. Monroe Peabody
August 28, 1921

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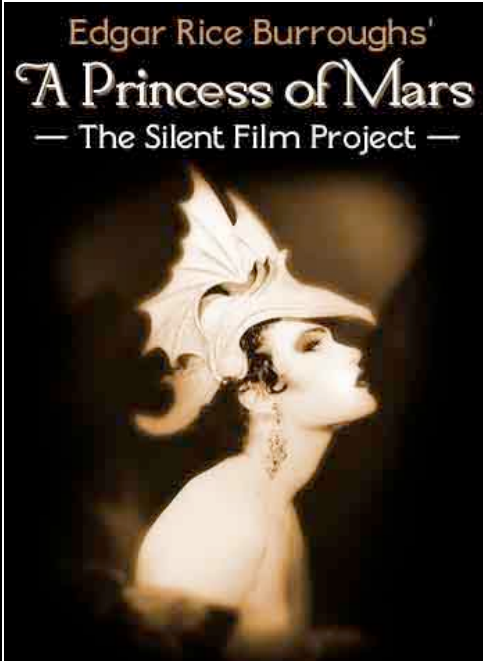


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THE LEGENDARY CRYSTAL SKULLS



You've heard about them.

In the late 1990s, Billy Zane starred as The Phantom in an adventure film that featured the skulls, and Harrison Ford is bringing the beloved Indiana Jones back to the big screen this summer in "Indiana Jones and The Kingdom of The Crystal Skulls".

Are they real?

It just so happens that they are, indeed!

The most famous crystal skull is usually reported to have been found in 1926 by the daughter of explorer-adventurer F. A. Mitchell-Hedges (author of 'Danger My Ally') during an archeological dig in Central America. The skull was made from clear quartz with a detachable jaw. It is about the size of a small human cranium, 5 inches high, 7 inches long and 5 inches wide with near perfect detail.

Some believe the crystal skulls radiate psychic energy and have the power to improve people's lives just by being held and spoken to. It's been said that the crystal skulls can be used like crystal balls for divination and healing.

Art restorer Frank Dorland claimed that the skull featured some anomalies. According to Dorland, the skull had been carved with total disregard to the natural crystal axis and no metal tools were used. Dorland also claimed that the skull's origin was Atlantis and that it had been carried around by the Knights Templar during the Crusades. Hewlett-Packard technicians submerged the crystal skull in benzyl alcohol, and it became invisible inside the tank, showing that it was indeed pure crystalline quartz.

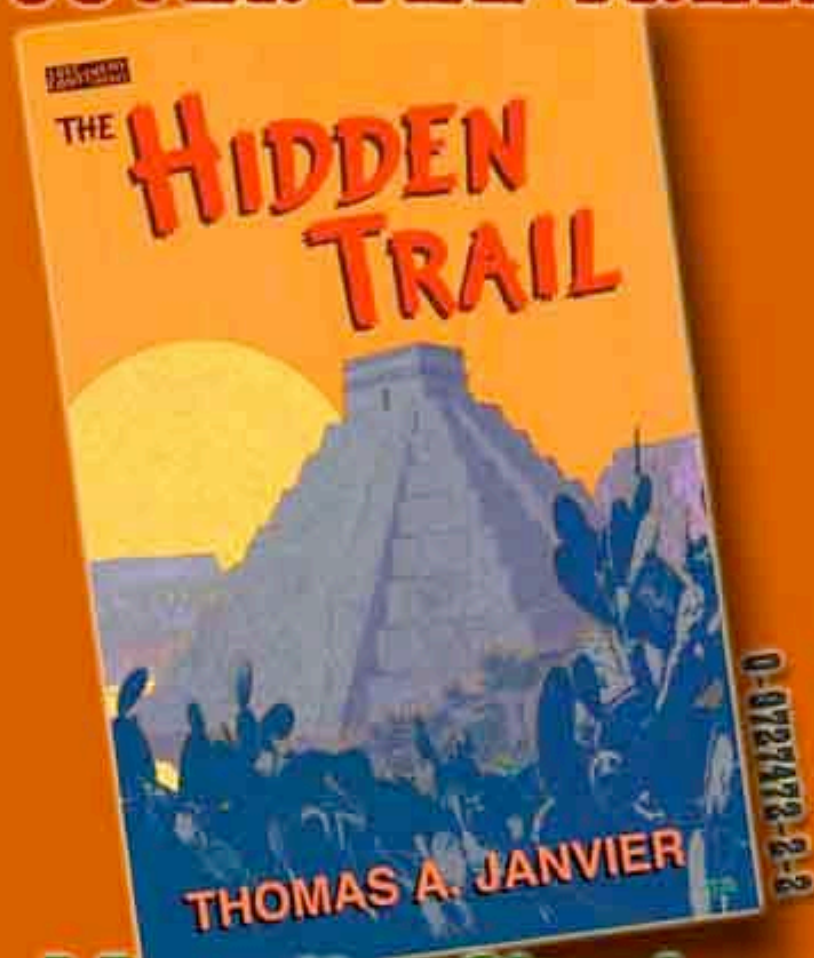
Max McCoy's Indiana Jones books involved Indy's search for a crystal skull: Indiana Jones and the Philosopher's Stone, Indiana Jones and the Dinosaur Eggs, Indiana Jones and the Hollow Earth, Indiana Jones and the Secret of the Sphinx.

The various skulls have been found near the ancient ruins of Mayan and Aztec and are believed to be between 5,000 and 36,000 years old.

That's quite a history.

-- Monty Greylock

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SLUMBERERS

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Upon the Earth in elder days
The rebel host descended,
To corrupt the world and all its ways
With natural plan upended.

With women fair of ebon hair
and skin like alabaster
The rebels sought to claim a share
Of an age to come thereafter.

Then they did sin 'gainst beasts
and men,
Foul offspring filled with rage--
Enormous in size and appetites
Who quickly ruled that age.

And some come down in story books
In epic tales of glory,
Which overlook the paths they took:
Violent, dark, and gory.

The Nephilim sired Naphidim,
and Eljoim, and others,
Who took the spirit of their fathers,
And little from their mothers.

When giants staggered 'cross the world
And hybrid beasts ranged wild
Demonic banners were unfurled
And mounds of victims piled.

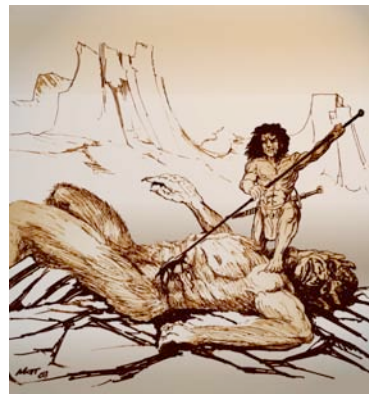
The world then rang with cries of pain
And terror, torment, bleeding
And heroes strove in sacred groves
With monsters at their feeding.

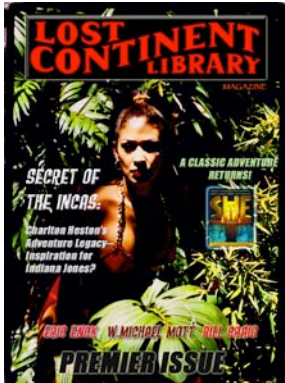
Cries went up to heaven's vault--
Tumult and consternation
Filled the world and all its flesh,
Caught up in condemnation.

Judgement came like iron rain
To smother the unholy,
And few remained to then regain
A world meant for them, solely.

Beneath the seas, and hills, and leas,
The tyrants lie imprisoned
Dreaming of those nightmare days,
When giants had a-risen.

Never again, O sons of men
Shall titans rule your daughters--
And now the damned, in stony dens
Slumber 'neath the waters.





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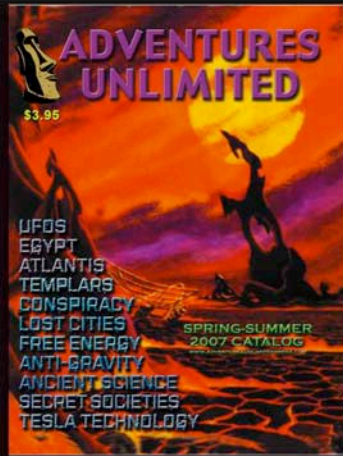
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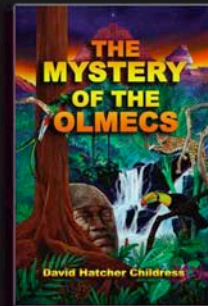
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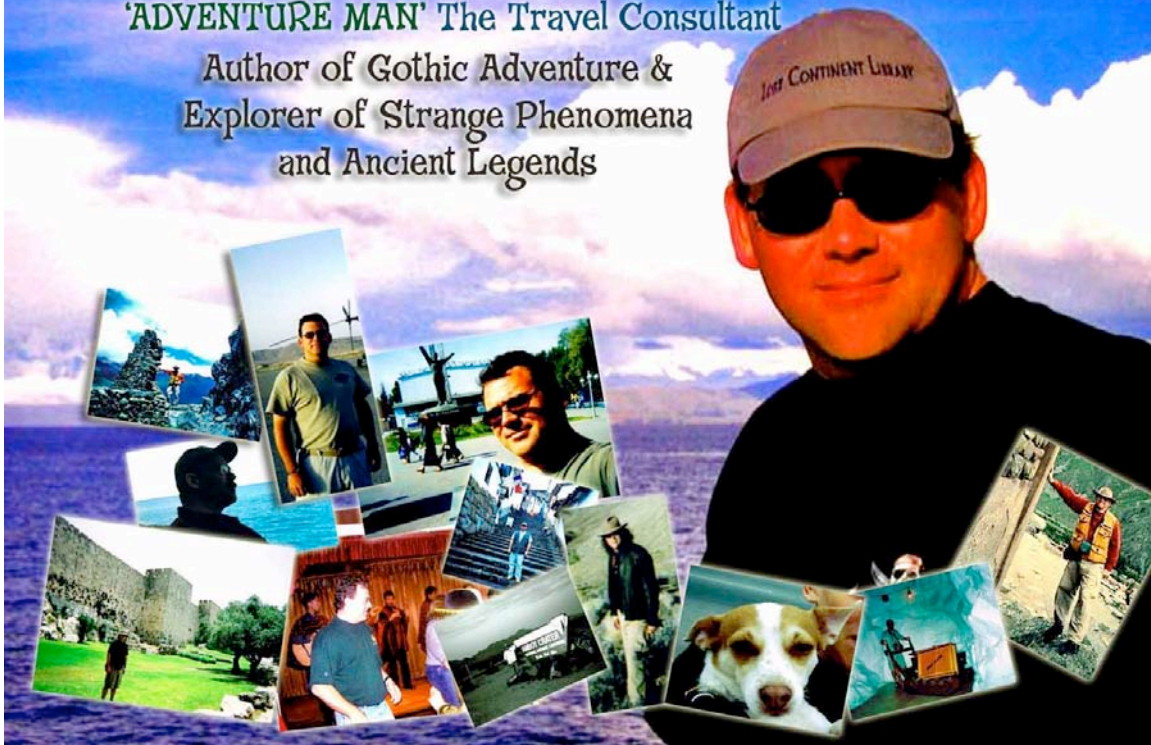
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ON THE HORIZON

This was a really exciting issue to put together!

Reviewing the films and literature discussed in this issue reminded me why this genre is my personal favorite. It also reminds me of how much there remains out there to enjoy and share with the readers. Believe me, this is a labor of love, as I throw a log in the fireplace and pour a fine nip of scotch to settle in and watch a great old movie, or read a chapter or two of some finely crafted novel from days gone by.

The next time we meet, there will be more movie reviews, more great new fiction, and another master adventure author showcased – because it all started with the writers and will live on because of the writers. You can count on finding exciting new names in adventure right here in the next issue.

Look for the next issue in March!

-- Editor

Marianna Vaha

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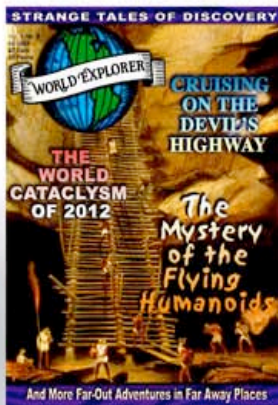
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