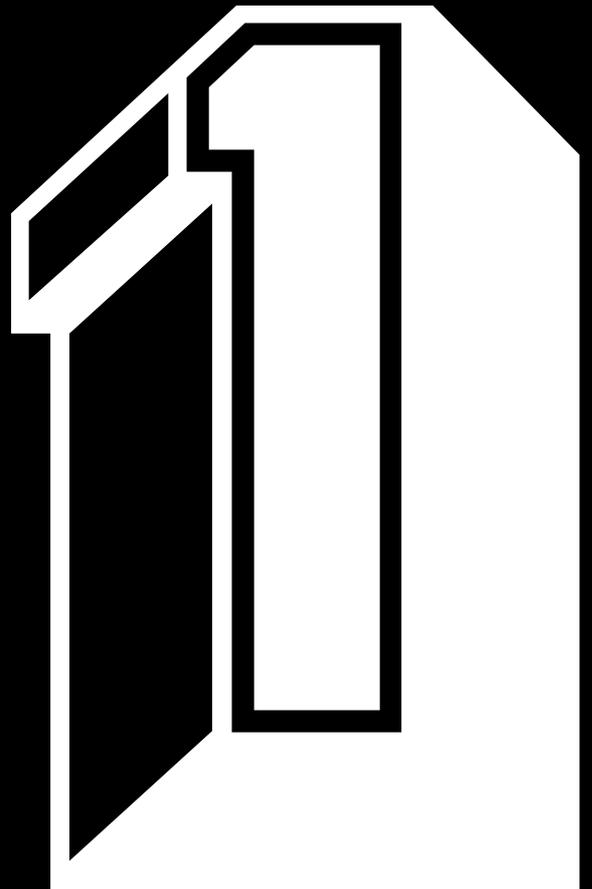


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# Space University Trent

**A Presentation of  
Theaker's Quarterly  
Fiction #13**





# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 13

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# Editorial

## Welcome to the Family

This issue we welcome new contributors and new ideas to the publication, as well as an uncanny host of parasitic lifeforms!

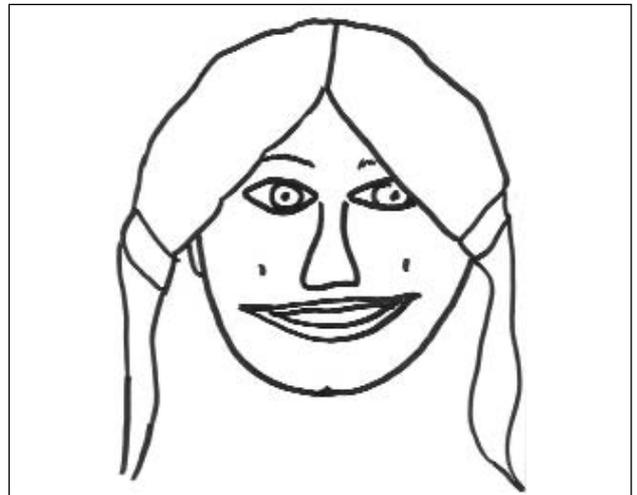
Walt Brunston is from Austin, Texas, home of independent cinema and, even more significantly, Ain't It Cool News! For the last couple of issues Walt has been supplying us with the hilarious cartoon strip, *Robots, in a Spaceship*, as well as the occasional review of US television. If you have been concerned that he has been palming us off with the same *Robots* artwork for an issue or two, prepare to make some allowances, because in this issue he presents us with the beginning of what is sure to be seen as his first major work, his first adaptation of an episode from *Space University Trent*. (Work on this has left him with little time for anything else, but he has tried his best to meet all obligations, hence the shoddy recycling of artwork.)



Walt Brunston, as drawn by SWT himself

Because of its patchy transmission record, we realise that many readers will be sadly unaware of this series at all – indeed, it seems to be a glaring omission in a number of encyclopedias of science fiction and tv, not to mention its baffling absence from many online reference sites – and so Walt has gone the extra mile to bring us through freshers' week safely, providing both an episode guide and an introduction to this most unlucky of programmes.

Vicki Proserpine is something of a mystery to us, but we know this much: she is the writer of *Ellenore*, a historical short story with a twist, based upon Benjamin Constant's classic novel of misogyny, *Adolphe*. It isn't the usual type of thing we publish, and all the better for it!



Vicki Proserpine, unflatteringly rendered

Just in case there isn't room at the end of the editorial, I must of course welcome back an old friend – Newton Braddell, who is now well-established as our most frequent flyer!

Finally, I must talk briefly about the amazing discovery that has been made of a hitherto unsuspected collection of Silver Age Books, novels from all time and space, brought back from another dimension for your enjoyment, that you may savour what might have been. I give you, the Lost Classics of the Silver Age! Guaranteed to amaze and astonish! – SWT

# News

## Possible Space University Revival?

There has been a lot of interest in Space University Trent of late, much of it, naturally, stimulated by the news that Silver Age Books has bought the rights to produce adaptations of all 72 episodes of the series. Fans are hoping that, in much the same way that James Blish helped keep interest in Star Trek alive through the 1970s with his adaptations, Walt Brunston's work might prompt producers and movie-makers to take another look at the property.

Unfortunately, it looks as though, for the moment, that remains just a pipedream, with the overall rights to the series still deeply stuck in a quagmire – quite sadly, much the same quagmire that did so much to spoil its chances during its original broadcast. Still, fans reason, where there's a will – that is to say, money – there's a way, so they aren't quite ready to give up hope just yet!

## Alien Beast Injures Galactic Philanthropist

As we lollop through life, we try to take in the sights and sounds that abound in nature, and try to do as little harm as possible, or at least that was the philosophy of Gergooooo-27-ab, one of the most beloved protectors of wildlife in all the twelve galaxies of Groom, not to mention a renowned patron of the arts. Unfortunately, nature sometimes has a habit of biting the hand that feeds, and Gergooooo-27-ab is now recovering from having been mauled by a Red Trate (fortunately not the poisonous kind).

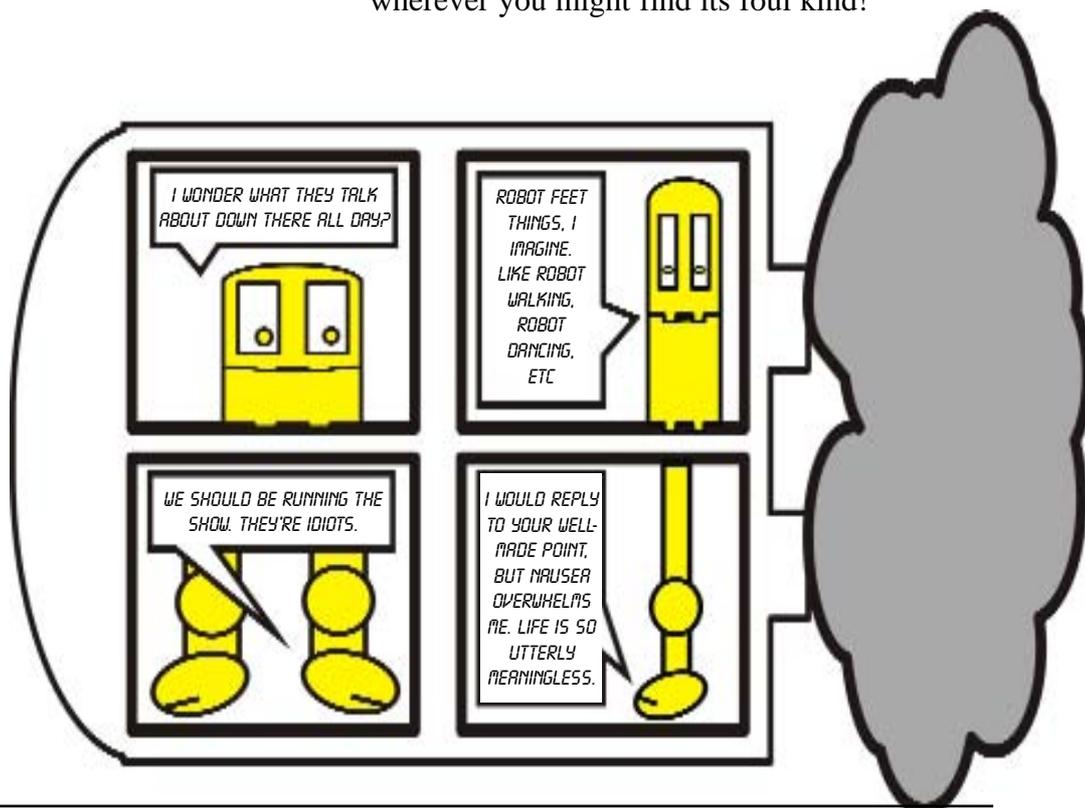
Everyone at Silver Age Books wishes him well, and thanks him for his frequent and generous contributions to our publication fund. May they never cease! We exhort readers everywhere to exact retribution on the Red Trate, wherever you might find its foul kind!

## ROBOTS, IN A SPACESHIP

A CALL TO METAL LEGS!

BY

WALT BRUNSTON



How is it that an American science fiction programme could run for three seasons and four years and never warrant so much as a single mention on That '70s Show? How could 72 exciting, funny and frightening episodes of the highest quality be made, starring some of the brightest stars of US television, without a convention being held in its honour (at least until the last couple of years)? Why, when science fiction bookshelves groan with the weight of a million tie-ins does not even one of them bear the name that deserves the attention most?

That name, of course, is Space University Trent, and the answer is that it was never broadcast in the US, despite being made with (mostly) American money, starring (mostly) American stars, and being (mostly) a damn good programme. It's a very strange story.

In 1973, impressed by the interest European channels were taking in the three produced series of Star Trek, as evidenced by the financial returns flowing across his desk, a young accountant by the name of Sidley D Bounder decided to try a new career path. Using his savings to pay the rent on a Los Angeles office for a year – an office which would often double as his sleeping quarters – he started to call himself a producer and set about putting together a deal to get his idea off the ground.

At first, his plan was simply a financial one. He saw that there was an opening on European television for slick, American-made science fiction, and he wanted to fill that opening. He knew that he wanted something enough like Star Trek to appeal to the same audience (and programme buyers), but different enough that he would not be sued by Gene Roddenberry.

Different ideas crossed his mind. A space museum? A space hospital, perhaps? He did not make enquiries with James White's agent, due to a wish to keep his cut of the profits intact, but the influence of Sector General upon his eventual work cannot be doubted.

Suddenly he had it: a space university!

# Space

**Introduced and  
adapted by  
Walt Brunston**

History records that the genius of his idea was immediately apparent to young Sidley Bounder – his journal page for that date is covered with the scrawl, "Woweee! I've got it! A space university!" The beauty of the idea was its flexibility. Every faculty he could imagine that might form part of the university led inexorably to one story idea after another, and in a daze of revelation, almost as if afraid he would lose that moment of inspiration, Bounder spent three days, at least, scribbling down the outlines for one episode after another.

Then he tried to get science fiction writers involved, and many were keen. As the money began to fall into place, he lined up a number of prominent authors, but in the end the bottom line sang its heart out to Bounder, and he chose instead to work with English and, unusually, French authors, often by means of a translator, who were willing to work more cheaply, given the fewer opportunities available to them for working in television. Most worked under pseudonyms (and unfortunately no one has yet managed to do the detective work involved in drawing up a complete list of those who were involved). Unusually for television, many of those scripts arrived on-screen largely unchanged, unfiltered by the usual sensibilities of experienced script editors, and that was

# University

## An Introduction to the Show

# Trent

because everything was done on the cheap. That meant filming was done in Europe, and the crew was hired straight out of college.

A recipe for disaster, one might have thought – and certainly the US networks did think that, none of them choosing to bite at the pilot Bounder produced. Although he was disappointed, he said nothing to the cast and crew. He had amassed enough money, partly from investors, and partly from selling the show abroad, to go ahead with production of the first series regardless of US broadcast, and so he did.

What resulted was in fact far from a disaster. Those who saw the programme were astonished. It had all the adventure, thrills, spills and special effects one might have expected from a US programme, but they were harnessed to such unusual, thoughtful stories. The authors' stories were put directly on screen, filtered by nothing other than the abilities of the acting and production staff.

At times the episodes were extremely frightening. Others dealt with very big, controversial issues, especially during season two and three, once plans to pursue US broadcast were totally abandoned. There was no longer any need to pull the punches, and stories became more intellectual, more violent, and more rewarding of multiple viewings.

The darkening tone was unmistakable. As filming began on season two, the cast began to realise that, with no US broadcast likely, to many colleagues and casting directors it would seem that they were idling away on an extended European holiday. That began to show on screen – in retrospect, another happy accident, bringing an apparent gravitas to the performances that only enhanced the more serious stories.

The final episodes of season two were burned off on a Sunday by NED1, the Dutch broadcaster which was the first to show most episodes, having invested the most money in the project. It looked as if the dream was over, but success in other European countries, such as Finland, West Germany, and some regions of the United Kingdom, led to a campaign to have the show revived, and during January 1978 new episodes finally began to appear, both on NED1, and on channels all over Europe.

However, the final episode was shown on Christmas Eve, 1978, and this time there was no revival. Ratings had dropped off, and cast members were beginning to threaten a mass walkout should they be held to their contracts.

Bounder counted his money, checked that there was enough to buy him a decent-sized mansion in Beverly Hills, and let the show fall apart without a second thought.

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# Episode Guide

Aired from: Sep 1974 to: Dec 1978

72 eps NED1 60 min stereo

- Sam Longworth as Special Asst. to the Vice Chancellor, Mack Hardiman
- James Henry York as Dr David Lum, Professor of Philosophy
- O'Reilly Benjamin as Dr Terry Leinster, Medicine
- Jennie Rindon as Ms Laney Rashupon, Professor of Information
- Smith McClannen as Mr Jameson Banks, MSc, MBA
- James Marshall Penturin as Vice-Chancellor Benton

Episode #	Prod #	Air Date	Episode Title
Season 1 (24 episodes)			
1.	1- 1	06 Sep 74	Education
2.	1- 2	13 Sep 74	A Mermaid's Tale
3.	1- 3	20 Sep 74	The Chowkidar
4.	1- 4	27 Sep 74	Followed by the Green
5.	1- 5	04 Oct 74	Locks
6.	1- 6	11 Oct 74	Order of Magnitude
7.	1- 7	18 Oct 74	Harquebus
8.	1- 8	25 Oct 74	Diverticulum
9.	1- 9	01 Nov 74	The Staunch Ones
10.	1-10	08 Nov 74	Trace Fossils
11.	1-11	15 Nov 74	Waxpod
12.	1-12	22 Nov 74	Midnight Sun
13.	1-13	29 Nov 74	Agouti
14.	1-14	27 Dec 74	Proxemics
15.	1-15	17 Jan 75	Quartenion
16.	1-16	24 Jan 75	The Lady at Rest
17.	1-17	31 Jan 75	Trahison Des Clercs
18.	1-18	07 Feb 75	Quiet Time
19.	1-19	14 Mar 75	This Majestic
20.	1-20	21 Mar 75	The First University of Space
21.	1-21	28 Mar 75	Planetary Estoppel
22.	1-22	04 Apr 75	The Knee-High Destroyers
23.	1-23	25 Apr 75	F.U.E.
24.	1-24	25 Apr 75	Graduation
Season 2 (24 episodes)			
25.	2- 1	19 Sep 75	Stereotaxic
26.	2- 2	26 Sep 75	A Ghost with Two Tales
27.	2- 3	03 Oct 75	The Tantalus Trap

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28.	2- 4	204	10 Oct 75	Disintermediation Day
29.	2- 5	205	17 Oct 75	Severy
30.	2- 6	206	24 Oct 75	Variorum
31.	2- 7	207	31 Oct 75	Malocclusion
32.	2- 8	208	07 Nov 75	The Sensate People
33.	2- 9	209	14 Nov 75	Hyperparasite
34.	2-10	210	21 Nov 75	An Alien Wrath
35.	2-11	211	28 Nov 75	Paint in Distemper
36.	2-12	212	02 Jan 76	The Zamindar Revolt
37.	2-13	213	09 Jan 76	Micropyle
38.	2-14	214	16 Jan 76	Lords of the Eristocracy
39.	2-15	216	23 Jan 76	The Student Body
40.	2-16	217	30 Jan 76	Fireblight
41.	2-17	215	06 Feb 76	Monad Nomad
42.	2-18	218	13 Feb 76	Sojourn in Semadore
43.	2-19	219	20 Feb 76	Rendzina, My Dear
44.	2-20	220	27 Feb 76	Cathedral Monochasium
45.	2-21	221	30 Mar 76	Two Halves of a Quarter
46.	2-22	222	30 Mar 76	I, Sensu Lato
47.	2-23	223	30 Mar 76	Rathered
48.	2-24	224	30 Mar 76	University Sempiternal
Season 3 (24 episodes)				
49.	3- 1	301	20 Jan 78	Deadlight
50.	3- 2	302	27 Jan 78	Thermistor
51.	3- 3	303	03 Feb 78	My Finger, My Enemy
52.	3- 4	304	10 Feb 78	Suttee
53.	3- 5	305	13 Feb 78	The Money Clan
54.	3- 6	306	20 Feb 78	Rage Week
55.	3- 7	307	27 Feb 78	Febrifuge
56.	3- 8	308	02 Jun 78	The Pentadactyls
57.	3- 9	309	09 Jun 78	Butterball
58.	3-10	310	16 Jun 78	Dementia Praecox
59.	3-11	311	23 Jun 78	War Grave
60.	3-12	312	30 Jun 78	Zaftig
61.	3-13	313	07 Jul 78	The Umbrager
62.	3-14	314	14 Jul 78	Soke
63.	3-15	315	21 Jul 78	Young's Modulus
64.	3-16	316	28 Jul 78	Sennight
65.	3-17	317	04 Aug 78	The Phantom Faculty
66.	3-18	318	11 Aug 78	Ranunculus Days, Homunculus Nights
67.	3-19	319	18 Aug 78	Personalty
68.	3-20	320	25 Aug 78	The Mamillary Man
69.	3-21	321	03 Nov 78	Eulogy for a New World
70.	3-22	322	10 Nov 78	Between Sixte and Septime
71.	3-23	323	17 Nov 78	Therapsid
72.	3-24	324	24 Dec 78	Erinys

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# Hyperparasite

## (Episode 2x09)

*Writer: Joseph Suttenbee*

*Director: Henry J Poppinham*

*Guest stars: Damuel R Sevary, Asimon Brown, Holly Brockleton*

As Mack Hardiman headed for the physics department, he began to wonder if he would ever be able to take this route through the university without feeling the sting of trepidation. He was a brave man, by most standards, though ready to be cowardly when the situation demanded it – that is to say, when the lives of others depended upon his retreat. But when it came to the thought of stepping into the blatter, his nerve almost failed him every time.

Of course, he would never let it show – people would think him an idiot to be so frightened in this day and age! – and in a way he relished the tingle of fear in his stomach. It made him feel alive. Nevertheless, after being at the university for more than a year, he would have expected to have become accustomed to it by now.

In a matter of minutes, there it was right in front of him: the blatter – or to give the device its full name, the black hole matter transmitter. It was the easiest and most convenient way of getting down to the planet's surface, but that did nothing to make it less intimidating. As Professor Xuel operated the controls, and opened up the wormhole, Mack felt his stomach tighten. He gritted his teeth and stepped up to it.

He spent an eternity going in, and an infinity coming out, and then, abruptly, it was broad daylight, and the wormhole was popping shut

behind him, with a sound like that of a tiny universe collapsing.

That daylight was lightly lemon, which only added to how refreshing Mack found it after spending the past few weeks holed up in the university, helping the vice chancellor work through some administrative tasks, to while away the time between planets. Being the Special Assistant to the Vice Chancellor certainly had its drier moments.

But this was the part that made all of that worthwhile.

The rest of the IET – the Initial Evaluation Team – was waiting for him, busy with their instruments and scanners.

Dr David Lum, Professor of Philosophy, and hence the one member of the team who required no equipment other than his own brain, took the time to acknowledge his arrival with a nod. “Hardiman,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “We were beginning to think you had more important things to do.”

“Accounts and timetables,” said Hardiman, “but they are not really my thing.”

Lum laughed, a short shout of a laugh, then turned to look at the horizon. “The trading outpost is about two kilometres in that direction.”

The two men stationed at the outpost had requested university help about two months ago. Since that initial communication, nothing more had been heard. Sometimes, the university might have headed elsewhere, assuming that the problem had been resolved, but it had been nearby in any case, investigating something in the next solar system along, and so the full

weight of Earth's academic genius had been brought to bear on this world: Adontis.

"We should get going, then," said Hardiman. "Instruments away, everybody."

The others turned, as if noticing him for the first time. In the party on this expedition were Dr Terry Leinster, from the Department of Medicine, Laney Rashupon, Professor of Information, and Jameson Banks, MBA, MSc, general jack of all trades. Other members of staff joined the IET as necessary, for particular projects, but this was the core team.

"Mack," said Laney, with a note of urgency.

He gave her his full attention, noting, not for the first time, just how beautiful she was. Here, on this world, her brown skin was resplendent, literally made golden by the yellow-tinged light. She was a little younger than he was, but not so much that romantic involvement, in other circumstances, would have been out of the question. But of course he could not let himself become involved with her – it would have been unprofessional, to say the least. What if, for example, he were to send another member of the team into danger while unconsciously leaving her in safety? Of course, his thoughts ran on, she had done nothing to encourage this affection in him, other than being quite so lovely all the time. For all he knew, she might have had some bespectacled boyfriend back in the Information Lab, and he had never found an excuse to ask if she did.

"What is it?" he replied, more quickly than a trawl through his idle thoughts might have led one to believe.

Mack Hardiman brought a number of talents to the IET, one of them being his rapidity of thought during a crisis. On a planet's surface, his facility with languages, having spent his childhood travelling the nations of Earth with an ambassadorial father, also played an extremely useful role. His third (and often most important) talent was his handiness with his two fists. Academic study in the thirtieth century was as dangerous a business as it had ever been.

"I'm not picking up a network ID from the trading post," she said.

"What does that mean?" Whatever it meant, he knew it could not be good.

"It means their computers are down."

"And if their computers are down..."

"They won't be able to eat!" interjected Doctor Leinster. "They need their computers to adjust the local food for human consumption. Good grief, Mack, we have to get there right away."

"That's why we're here," said Hardiman with a frown, "but let's hope we aren't already too late."

Everyone picked up their bags and they began to hike in the direction of the trading post. Using the blatter to arrive more closely was possible, but it also brought attendant risks. Better to walk a mile or two than risk opening up a black hole on someone's dinner plate.

The ground was easy at first, but soon they found themselves moving through a thickly wooded area, which made Hardiman nervous, a feeling which was quickly justified.

From the shadow of a tree leapt a wild creature, the size of a man, its hide covered in mud and grass, almost as if it had the intelligence to roll around in it for camouflage.

"What the..?" yelled Hardiman, caught by surprise despite his nerves.

As the creature ran at him on all fours he rolled to the side, leaving one leg out for it to trip over. He was successful – the beast fell! But then it was up again, back to its feet, and then going up on its hind legs to tower over him, screaming its victory. Hardiman did not miss his chance – he swung both legs around in an improvised two-legged, prone roundhouse, spilling the creature's legs out from under it. As it hit the floor he rolled over and brought his right fist down upon its face as hard as possible. There was no way to make out a target in that hair, that dirt, and Hardiman was unlucky, the fist falling right into the beast's maw, which clamped down like a vice.

Hardiman let out a grunt of pain, and struggled to a semi-standing position, before letting his knees drop onto the creature's head. It fell quiet instantly, and he worked his hand free.

"Let me have a look at that," said Leinster,

grabbing Hardiman by the wrist. "It broke the skin, so you'll need shots, but no stitches. It isn't that bad. You were lucky this time, Mack. Whatever that beast was, I don't think it used its teeth for killing its prey."

"You know, you could have helped out," replied Hardiman, wincing slightly as the doctor hit him in the arm with a needle.

"Oh, I think you had it all under control. I'm no brawler, Mack."

Hardiman was silent, but smiled, thinking back to certain over-exuberances he had been witness to in the past. The doctor had been known to cause the odd abrasion of his own from time to time, when whiskey and tempers got hot enough.

"Hardiman, I think you should see this." It was Lum, over at the body.

"What is that thing?" asked the Texan. "Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"I certainly have," said Lum, pushing the matted hair to one side to reveal the face of a very familiar animal. "This is a man – an Earthman!"

Hardiman said nothing for a moment, taking the information in.

"Is he still alive?" asked Rashupon.

"Barely," said Lum, moving out of the way to let Leinster get a better look.

The doctor took their assailant's pulse. "He's still alive, but very weak. That was a nasty blow to the head you gave him, Mack."

"One of the traders?" said the team leader, impassively.

"Without a doubt," answered Rashupon. "There was no suggestion of anyone else being on this planet."

"Smugglers, perhaps?"

"No. There's nothing on this world that's of any value to anyone but the people who live here. The trading post is only really here to give us a chance to make contact. The Adontians, according to reports, are a private people. They saw no reason to allow a diplomatic mission, but Earth was able to make a trading station seem interesting and worthwhile enough for them to agree to it."

"I wonder if they lost interest... to a fatal extent..." mused Hardiman, before shaking himself back to life. "Right then, let's get this man on a stretcher and hurry to the trading post. We need to get out of these woods as quickly as possible – the native fauna might not have teeth as blunted as our own."



The doctor took the foldaway stretcher from his pack, and opened it out. Unnoticeably light, thin and flexible when packed away, once shook into shape its sides and handles became rigid, its strength easily equal to the task of carrying a man.

The wild man was placed on the stretcher, his hands and feet bound for safety, and Hardiman and Banks lifted him. Lum led the way, Rashupon bringing up the rear, and they made quick time to the trading post, reaching it well before the sun's position in the sky reached its apex.

The building was in a sorry state, visible even from a distance. Antennae were battered, windows smashed, rubbish scattered across the floor.

"It doesn't look good," said Rashupon. "I wonder if we should have brought weapons."

Lum looked at her askance. "You know as well as I do that we only bring weapons when there are clear signs of danger. We're a team of professors, not a squad of soldiers."

"I'm seeing signs of danger," she replied. "And I'd feel safer with a squad of soldiers than a research team right now."

"If there was a squad of soldiers with us, we would never have been allowed to leave Earth in the first place. The Treaty..."

"Knock it off, you two," shouted Hardiman. "My arms are aching enough without you doing the same for my ears. It won't hurt to be careful. Banks, let's put him down. Laney and Doc, you stay here with him while we take a look around."

Banks, Lum and Hardiman slowly moved towards the building, spreading out, staying low, and keeping their fists at the ready.

Suddenly there was a shout, and a gunshot – Hardiman, later, could never remember which had come first, but he responded first to the shot, dropping to the ground as if it had already hit him. He saw the others do the same. He waved to show he was fine, and was relieved to see Lum and Banks wave back. He motioned for them to stay where they were for the time being, and began to crawl towards the trading post, from where the shouting continued.

At first it was too indistinct to make out, just

a torrent of yells and threats, but as he got closer – even as he hoped against hope that he was out of the line of fire – the words began to take meaningful form.

"Get out of here! Get out of here, I say! I'm safe here, get away! Go away! I'm not coming out!"

"Hi!" called Hardiman.

His heart dropped out of his chest and at least a hundred miles through the planet when he heard another gunshot ring out. But he felt no impact, and so he tried again. Either the trader – assuming that was who was shooting at him – couldn't get a line on him, or didn't want to kill, or he was just too crazed to shoot straight. Hardiman would have been justified in retreating at that point, but if there was one thing that brought all staff and students at the space university together, it was that they wanted to know what was going on – in life, in the universe, and in this case, on Adontis. That was why he tried again, and would carry on trying until he could try no more.

"Whoa there!" he shouted, trying to interrupt the volley of yells that followed the bullet out of the building. "We're from the university – you called for help!"

Everything was quiet for a second. Then something told Hardiman that the moment was going to pass, and the shouting recommence, so he had another go. "Space University Trent – we're here to help you!"

There was silence again – but that was a good sign – Hardiman had definitely got his attention. This time he waited it out, still inching towards the building, making his way via any available cover – a rock here, a bush there. He was only ten metres or so away now.

"It's too late," the man shouted, eventually. "It's too late for me, and for you, now! Unless you get out by nightfall!"

"Can we come in, to talk? If we can't help you, maybe you can help us. Could you protect us till we can go back up to the university?"

"Just go back now," the trader yelled. "What are you waiting for? There's no hope for me! There's no helping me! Just go!"

He was beginning to work himself up into

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another frenzy, but Hardiman thought it was still worth the risk of standing up. "Look, I'm standing up now," he called. The gasps of his on-looking colleagues were audible even at this distance. "We can't go back yet – it takes a day for the blatter to recharge. We won't make it without you."

"I don't know..." muttered the man. Hardiman could just about see him now. One half-crazed eye looked out from a hole. "My barricade... I don't know if I'll be able to get it back up in time..."

Hardiman leaned forward to the eyehole, peering through the branches and pieces of furniture that the trader had nailed to the window frame in an attempt to keep it blocked. "We'll help with that, at least," he said. "Even if we can help with nothing else. It's not even noon yet – we'll have the barricade ready again by nightfall without even breaking a sweat."

There was more silence, and just as tiny beads of sweat began to make a liar of Hardiman, the trader agreed.

"You're right," he muttered. "I brought you to this godforsaken world. It's only right I give you a chance to get off it again. You'll die out there without my help..."

After twenty minutes of hard work, the barricade was down, and the door open. Hardiman coaxed the trader outside, and introduced the other members of the team. They all stood together outside the trading post to talk, the IET somehow reluctant to go inside, as if to do so would be to enter into the trader's madness.

Off to one side lay the stretcher and its still unconscious occupant. Hardiman had no doubt that the trader had seen their captive, but he said nothing, and seemed to avoid looking in that direction.

Dr Leinster offered him water, which the trader drank down greedily. He was emaciated, his skin parched, and the doctor poured him another cup, which he sipped more slowly.

"Thanks for that," he said. "You can't imagine what it's like to go so long without good water."

"How long has it been since the computers gave out? What have you been drinking since then?"

"Let's save the questions for an hour or two," interrupted Hardiman. "He's had a really rough time of it..."

"No, it's okay..." said the trader, but it seemed half-hearted.

The doctor put a hand on Hardiman's arm, and talked quietly into his ear. "Mack, we have to establish his condition. If he's been eating and drinking unprocessed food, there's no telling what he might have picked up."

Wordlessly, Hardiman acquiesced.

The man began to tell his story. The water seemed to have calmed him, but his voice still juddered badly, and threatened to break from time to time. If he was not yet a broken man, he was at least badly damaged.

His name was Sichaël Brown, or Sike for short (which meant, thought Hardiman, remembering the pre-expeditionary briefing, that the man on the stretcher must be Peter Dowers – though giving a human name to that beast made his encounter with it seem even more horrible). They had been sent to Adontis about a year ago to set up the trading post, following fairly favourable initial contact with the Adontians. The locals had not wanted extensive communications with or help from Earth, but they had been happy to have a trading post nearby, as long as their privacy was respected. Things had gone well, up until two months ago. The nearest Adontian village was only a kilometre or so away, and people had come from there, and from further away, to trade with them. But then, two months ago, something had happened, something horrible, which had led him to call for the university's help. The following night the same thing had happened again, and again the night after that, and the night after that Dowers had snapped, smashing the computers in frustration that rescue would not arrive in time.

"We fought, then, and he ran out into the woods. I haven't seen him since." Brown still couldn't bring himself to look at his fellow trader.

"He must have hunted for food, and drunk from streams," commented the doctor. "That is always dangerous on an alien planet. It might

well have had an effect similar to drinking salt water on Earth.”

“That would explain the condition we found him in,” said Hardiman. “The poor man is totally insane, feral. I doubt if he even recognised us as human beings.”

“These men have had to confront primal fears, Hardiman,” said Lum. “Fear of the dark, of the things that come in the night, loneliness, isolation, of the very food that you are eating. No one could have realised the stress these men would be put through. It’s astonishing that they are still alive.”

“You haven’t been affected as badly as Dowers, though, have you?” said the doctor.

“No,” said Brown. “I still had some emergency rations to eat, and I collected rainfall in containers on the top of the building.”

“That might well have saved your sanity,” said Leinster, “not to mention your life.”

“You skirted this before,” said Hardiman to Brown, “and I know you went over it in your original report, but I need to hear first hand what happens on this planet come nightfall.”

He closed his eyes, and shuddered. “I can’t...” He dropped the cup of water he had been sipping.

“Try, man, try... our lives could depend on it!” Hardiman grasped his upper arm.

Brown began to twitch and sweat. His jaw tightened. “They come... the flying ones... the flying ones come...” He broke free of Hardiman’s grip and ran back into the building, finding a table to hide under, shivering in abject fear.

The IET gathered to talk among themselves.

“In their report,” said Rashupon, “they just said that an attack by unknown flying creatures during the night had left them unconscious. In the morning there had been no trace of the attack, other than a couple of broken windows and some scratches on their faces.”

“The attacks have clearly continued since then,” said Lum. “And possibly become worse. Another possibility is that while they fell instantly unconscious the first time, one or both of them was conscious during the second, and

that seeing what was happening to them drove them over the edge.”

Hardiman thought for a moment. “Nightfall is only an hour or two off. I suggest we postpone any further investigation till tomorrow, other than what we can observe from being safely boarded up inside this trading post. We have to take this seriously.”

“I agree,” said Leinster. “If we stay here overnight, I can make sure that these two are stable. Then, tomorrow, we can send them back to the university through the blatter, while we go on to speak to the villagers. They must know something about what’s happening.”

No one disagreed, and the team entered the trading post, despite their reservations. Banks set up a concealed night vision video camera to record everything that happened. It was intended for wildlife filming, after all. It was just a surprise to find himself using it potentially to film, if things were to go as badly as Brown had suggested, his own death.

As they boarded the door back up, Lum commented, “It’s like we’re boarding ourselves up inside his mind.”

“I hope we get back out again in the morning,” said Hardiman, hammering in the final nail.

As night fell, Dr Leinster administered sedatives to the two traders to ensure they got a good rest, and shifts were agreed for the night. First up were Lum, so he could watch the two patients for a while, and Banks, so Hardiman, having double checked the security of the building, settled down to get some sleep. They had made up a makeshift dormitory in the cellar, so that the noise of the attacking creatures would not disturb those who were sleeping. Each member of the IET had with them a research bag, and one of the most important items in each bag was a pillow and blanket. Each was exceptionally thin, the pillow being inflatable, the blanket being derived from an insulating material developed for the manufacture of skin-tight spacesuits. He blew up his pillow, surprised at what a chore he found it – he had not realised the day had taken so much from him.

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It felt as if he had dreamt for mere seconds when a rough hand shook him awake.

"You're up," said Lum.

"I am now," he replied grumpily, before taking up his post by the door. His spirits raised when he remembered it would be Laney Rashupon joining him for the watch, and so he set himself to making tea for them both while he waited for her. The day had left him very thirsty.

There was a crash against the boards, then another, then another, and from then he was unable to count them. At first the creatures were silent, accentuating the eeriness of the thumps in the night, but then, finding the way blocked, they began to wail. It was high-pitched, melancholy, hurt and aggressive, and it struck fear deep into him.

He sipped his tea. He had allowed himself the luxury of two sugars.

A moment or two later Laney sat down and began to drink her tea. "It's begun, then," she said.

"Yes," he said. "Do you fancy taking a look at them? I could take a board or two down, open up a window..."

"After you, I think."

"That's very polite of you, Laney..." He laughed, the battle between his natural sense of humour and his concerns for their wellbeing finding a temporary victor. "I think it might be better to let the video camera do its job, recording everything that's happening. Shall we just leave it at that and drink our tea?"

"That sounds like a good plan," she replied, and for the next hour that was what they did, getting up on occasion only to rehammer in the odd nail that had worked its way out.

But then, all noise disappeared – all of a sudden, everything was silent, save for the gentle snoring working its way up from the cellar. The wailing was gone, as were the thumps against the boards. Rashupon and Hardiman looked at each other.

"Do you think they've gone?" she asked.

"I'm not sure... I hope so..." He put his second cup of tea down on a desktop, pushing aside crumpled paperwork and broken tools, then walked to one of the windows. He placed

his hand upon the boards. "It's... buzzing..." he said, only half-believing it himself.

Then the wailing recommenced, louder than ever, full of rage, and grew louder, and the buzzing grew louder, till Hardiman thought his head would rip apart with all the noise.

"Get down!" he shouted. "They're all attacking at once!"

Rashupon hit the ground, and he followed suit, just as an almighty force hit the walls, making the whole trading post ring like a bell.

Every one of the boards buckled, but only one broke – and a creature – a black, scabrous creature, with hard shell-like wings – burst through.

As Rashupon screamed, Hardiman did his best not to. He ignored the creature for now, deciding that getting the window shut again should take priority. One creature, they should be able to handle, but if the whole swarm got through, they would be finished. He hefted his hammer and swung it at the gap, a pre-emptive strike against anything that might have been on its way through – the arc ended in shadow, but a squeal and a scrabbling away confirmed the efficacy of his action. Grabbing the board up from where it had fallen on the floor, he slammed it back up against the window and began to hammer it back into place. Between each hammer blow he steeled himself to Rashupon's screams – he had to assume she could survive on her own long enough for him to finish his work – but was she fending for herself, or being fed upon? There would be no way to know, one way or another, until his work was done – unless the screams fell silent. And when they didn't, in a way, he began to take comfort from them.

Finally, he was done, and he turned to see. It had only been a matter of seconds since the creature got through, though it had felt like hours with Rashupon screaming for his help. Her face was bloodied, scratched; her hands too were bleeding. The creature was swooping at her head, again and again, as she tried to bat it away with (and Hardiman almost laughed at the bathos) the tea cup she had been drinking from so serenely just a few moments ago. Each time it got closer and closer to making a final connec-

tion, but she twisted and turned, like a captured fury, leaving it frustrated still.

Then, it was in her hair, tangled in its lustrous blackness, and Hardiman was able to pick his moment, striking it square in the back. The hammer cracked through the wings, going deep into the body. It went still, but did not fall, Rashupon's own hair keeping her in awful proximity to the thing.

At last the others arrived from the cellar, and Rashupon threw herself into Lum's arms for comfort, while Leinster worked the corpse from her hair. The wailing and buzzing were gone now, and there had been no more impacts since that first huge one – it must have been almost daylight, Hardiman thought, and so they made one final group attack upon us. He went to find somewhere to put down the hammer – the hammer that now dripped an appalling and viscous blue fluid. It made his stomach churn, and he almost began to panic, that there would be nowhere in the room he could put the hammer without spreading the foulness, that he would be forced to carry it forever, the blood – if that was what it could be called – dripping upon him as he slept, that the others might remain uncontaminated.

Then there was another scream – a man's scream, this time, short, deep and cut short by pride. Hardiman spun, to see Dr Leinster gasping for breath, and staring at the black corpse on the ground. It lay on its back, allowing Hardiman to see why Rashupon had screamed so very much as it attacked her.

The thing had a rudimentary face – a pale ovoid, with dark purple eyes that appeared almost human, and a thin lipless mouth, that now fell open in death, to reveal a long, curled-up razor of a tongue.

After cleaning and stitching Rashupon, Leinster performed a field autopsy of the creature, outside in the daylight. The yellow tinge no longer seemed refreshing to Hardiman. Now everyone looked jaundiced, almost as if they were rotting from the inside.

"Doctor," said Hardiman, clenching his stomach muscles to keep his breakfast down, "why does it have a face?"

"I can only speculate, but from the way it attacked us, I would guess that the primary prey of these parasites is probably humanoid – presumably the villagers. Quite often parasites will adapt to make themselves less odious to their hosts, sometimes by performing a useful service, such as the bacteria that live in our own guts."

"You think they evolved these faces to seem cuter?"

"That's one possibility. Don't look so horrified, Mack – we travel the universe to see this stuff, don't we? You wouldn't want to miss it..."

"That didn't stop you screaming when you saw it..."

"An instant reaction, that's all," replied the doctor, waving away his moment of embarrassment. "This creature is fascinating – look at the tongue." He grasped the end of the tongue with tweezers and unwound it to its full length. "It's a metre long, and hollow all the way down. If we follow it down through the body, what would we expect to find?"

Banks peered over his shoulder. "Does it go straight to the stomach?"

"Well, that's the thing," said Leinster. "You might expect that, but it doesn't – the stomach is here..." He dropped the tongue, which sprang back into a vicious curl, and indicated one bluish red organ. Then he indicated another, just beneath the wings. "This is where the tongue leads. It's impossible to say what it's for, but they don't appear to feed on the blood they consume."

"It might fuel the wings," suggested Lum.

"Possible," admitted the doctor, "but it seems unlikely. I don't think we'll know until we can study a live specimen."

The video, while horrible to watch, taught them nothing more. Black swarms of the Adontian flyers threw themselves against the trading post again and again, before finally giving up and leaving as daybreak approached.

"They clearly prefer the dark," noted Hardiman. "We should be safe enough till night-fall, so let's get off to the village as soon as possible, so that there's time to get back and

refortify the trading post. First, let's get those two traders up to the university for treatment."

Lum and Banks went back into the trading post and down to the cellar to bring the stretcher back up. Brown followed a few paces behind, solicitous for his former colleague – or was it that he didn't want him out his sight?

Hardiman took out his mobile communicator and sent an automatic message to Professor Xuel – it was time to fire up the blatter – but then, as the stretcher passed by the corpse of the flyer, splayed out on a field table, Dowers began to stir, at first gently murmuring and moaning, but then, in a matter of seconds, he was a frenzied beast once more, struggling to wrench himself free of the ropes that bound him to the stretcher, but never once taking his eyes off the body. Lum and Banks were forced to drop the stretcher to the ground.

"He fears them even more than I do!" yelled Brown. "That's what drove him over the edge – he saw one feeding on me, the second night."

"Sedate him, doctor," commanded Hardiman, but as Leinster approached, a wild arm thrown out by the patient knocked the needle away. Even as Leinster ran to retrieve it, Dowers began to bleed from the nose and eyes, the veins in his temples throbbed and burst, and finally he stopped moving forever.

"It's too late, doc," said Hardiman, grimly. "I don't think it would have helped anyway."

Lum nodded his head sadly. "I've never heard of a psychological problem having such an awful physiological effect. It must have been the result of eating the local food."

Leinster checked for a pulse, though he knew it was a pointless effort. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You're probably right. If only we could have taken him back to SUT yesterday. He might have had a chance."

"Let's get Brown up there, then," said Hardiman. "At least it isn't too late for him."

But the other trader was gone.

Hardiman shook his head. "Maybe it is too late." He looked at his mobile. "The blatter is up and running. If Brown isn't back here within ten minutes he's stuck here another day without the treatment he needs."

They yelled for Brown to return, and cursorily checked the trading post and its environs, but there was no sign of the man. He clearly did not want to be found. Hardiman asked Banks and Rashupon to take both corpses back up to the university for examination. They were gone less than two minutes, and returned with fresh provisions. He felt sorry for the physics department, who would be stuck with some very unpleasant sights and smells in their lab until assistants from the appropriate departments arrived to take away the bodies.

"There isn't much we can do ourselves for Brown just now," said Hardiman. "Perhaps someone at the Faculty of Medicine and Biology will be able to work out what killed Dowers, and if we run into Brown we might be able to help him. But I think the best thing for now is still to investigate the village. We'll be back by nightfall, and I expect Brown will be too."

The welcome at the village was polite but distant, almost dreamy, with no one stopping to engage in conversation. All of the team were able to speak the Adontian language with a reasonable degree of fluency, having taken a crash course in it once the university's heading was set, so that was not the problem. It simply seemed that the Adontians were not particularly interested in them. In fact, they hardly seemed interested in each other, rarely making eye contact, and speaking very infrequently. Some seemed lethargic, and simply sat in the shade of their homes.

"Let's take a look around," suggested Hardiman. "Something isn't right here. I would like to get a closer look at that building." He pointed in the direction of a large white dome that loomed over everything else like a bullying older brother. "What do you think it is?"

Banks shook his head. "It's like nothing else in this place. The houses are little more than adobe huts, but I couldn't even guess what kind of material that's made of." The others did not need to ask what he meant – it almost seemed translucent at times, depending on how the light hit it.

He led the way towards the dome, and it was as if the village had suddenly awoke, all sleepi-

ness gone. Within seconds their way was barred by a dozen males, their arms linked and their faces stern.

“We are sorry,” said the Adontian at the centre of this bizarre but eerie obstacle. “You may not proceed further in this direction. Please leave.”

“Can we talk first? Just for a moment. My name is Hardiman.”

“I am Mirtio. This is no time for talking. You should leave.” His gaze met Hardiman’s firmly for a moment, then for a second nodded. He jerked it back up with an almost fierce pride. “As you can see, it is well past time for our evening repast, and we choose not to eat in front of strangers.”

More and more of the villagers, male and female, were linking arms now, and Hardiman began to fear encirclement. There was no reason to suspect aggression on the Adontians’ part, but even the most naturally peaceful of men can lose his temper when provoked. As a wanderer among the stars, he had learned not to provoke unnecessarily – not least because the most peaceful of men are few and far between – happily, unnecessarily violent men were just as rare. Most fell somewhere in-between, depending on circumstance. He could tell that circumstance here had swung quickly from neutral to unpleasant, and it was time to go. He began to back away, leading the Earthpeople back through the gap that remained in the Adontian chain.

“We are sorry for intruding,” he called, turning for one last try. “The flying creatures – they’ve been attacking our traders. We wondered if you could help.”

Mirtio looked at the men and women on either side of him in clear alarm, but made no reply, and Hardiman turned away. Nightfall was not far off, and if they were to reach shelter by then they could not afford to get embroiled in any fighting.

“Is that it?” asked Banks, as they jogged through the night.

“Of course not,” said Hardiman, holding up a hand for them to take a break. “Did you see their leader there at the end? He was practically out on his feet. The whole village seemed exhausted.”

“Perhaps the creatures that attacked the trading post are attacking them too,” suggested Leinster. “It would explain the lethargy.”

“But why would they not fight back?” asked Hardiman. “The basic instinct of all life is to survive!”

Rashupon stepped forward, a frown besmirching her forehead. “There was nothing in the reports I have read about a dome of that size and unusual appearance. It’s hard to believe no one would have commented upon it.”

Hardiman nodded. “Our attempt to enter the dome got every one of those people to their feet. One way or another, they are hiding something in there, whether because they want to, or because they have to.”

“There is one other possibility,” noted Lum, having recovered his breath.

“What’s that?”

“That they were not hiding the contents of the dome from us – but hiding us – from whatever is inside!”

In Hardiman’s opinion, that was a risk he had to take, along with all the others, and so, after ensuring the rest of the team was safely barricaded inside the trading post, he and Leinster headed back to the village. It was not yet quite dark, and he was hopeful of reaching it in time to find some kind of shelter – if indeed the Adontian flyers searched for prey in that area – were they somehow commanded to feed in particular places, per some malignant force’s designs? Had they been brought to this world from elsewhere, a plague set to spread like the rabbits of Australia? Whatever the answer, he felt sure the dome was involved, and if it was not, much might be learnt from observing the Adontians secretly. He took the doctor, in hope that he would be able to make sense of what they discovered.

He ordered (to the extent that he was able to) the others to remain at the trading post, even – and especially – if he and the doctor did not return. If they felt a search party was called for, they should set off at daybreak, but not a moment sooner.

They agreed, but of course they were his colleagues, not his subordinates, and if they

chose to ignore his instructions, there would be nothing he could do to stop them. Later, back at the university, he could request, if he felt it necessary – for example if a member of the team was repeatedly getting the others into danger – that a new faculty representative be put forward, but so far that situation had not arisen.

Now familiar with the trail, Hardiman and Leinster reached the village quickly, but night already threatened. Was it his imagination, or could Hardiman hear wings batting against the wind? He put it out of his mind – if caught out in the open, they were finished, and it was too late to go back – all they could do was press on.

If they had expected to find the village shut up and locked down for the night, they were surprised. Every door was ajar, every window wide open. Yet no one was visible as they approached.

“What do you make of it?” asked Hardiman in a whisper.

Leinster just raised an eyebrow, waiting till they were a little closer before expressing an opinion. “From the looks of things, either they fear nothing – or they have nothing to fear!”

“You think they’re controlling the flyers? It’s amazing, that they would turn on us like that, and send them against us.”

“Who knows, Mack... Maybe we don’t have the full story – perhaps something happened between the traders and these people before we arrived. We’ve only Brown’s word to go on, and the way he’s disappeared doesn’t make me inclined to trust him.”

Hardiman gritted his teeth. “But how will we know if they don’t speak to us?”

“That’s why they pay us the big bucks,” answered Leinster, with a quiet laugh.

Hardiman smiled, grimly, and clapped him on the back. “Let’s get to that dome. We get to the bottom of this tonight.”

Pacing with determination through the village, they quickly became aware of the eyes upon them – from deep inside every window, from the dark, unlit interiors, gaunt eyes stared out. This time, no one came to stop them. They simply stared.

“Keep going,” ordered Hardiman, knowing

how much his colleague would want to stop and help each individual. “If they are the victims here, we can’t help them one by one.”

The dome, close up, was even more impressive. It was at least five metres high, and must have had a diameter in the region of twenty metres.

“I don’t see a way in,” said Hardiman, looking one way and then the other around the circumference.

“That doesn’t surprise me, Mack,” said the doctor, turning to explain. But for some reason he did not elucidate – his eyes went wide in flabbergasted horror, as he pointed to the skies above Hardiman’s head. “Look – look at the sky!”

Darkness had fallen, but it had barely registered, the dome doing so much to hold his attention. Now he turned to see that the light had faded unnaturally – not by dint of the planet’s face turning aside from the sun, but because the sky had almost silently filled with heaving, twitching life.

“We should have had longer!” shouted Hardiman, as they ran for shelter, all too late.

“We only assumed they came at night – perhaps this is where they...” He might have said more, but a winged black missile struck him on the back, throwing him to the ground.

Hardiman did not hesitate, twisting around to kick the creature off the doctor, then heaving him up onto his shoulders. He had not seen any blood on the doctor’s back, but whether it was just from the impact, or from becoming the meal of that inhuman fiend, he was now unconscious. If they didn’t get inside quickly, they would not get inside at all.

He reached a small house – but inside, on their backs, lay the occupants, a flyer feasting on each of them, those razor-like tongues flickering through their mouths, pushing down into and through their bodies. As each tongue went in, he could see its route through the veins and arteries bulge horribly, then collapse once emptied.

He stared in horror for but a moment, then moved to the next house – but it was the same, a flyer feeding on each Adontian. This explained the lethargy he had previously noted!

“They left their homes open, to let this happen! But why, why?”

Leinster, of course, did not answer.

The third house he tried was no different, save for one thing – the flyer within had not yet found a victim, and after Hardiman entered there was barely a second for him to realise his awful, but inevitable, mistake before a blow to his head knocked him to the ground.

It was the longest night of Hardiman’s life, despite the long stretches of it he spent unconscious. It was a perpetual nightmare – he would find a way to force his way back to wakefulness, demanding that his body get back to its feet, only to find himself struck again, and again. He fell, over and over, but finally, somehow, one by one, he managed to close the windows, close the doors, and fall to the ground beside Leinster, in near terminal exhaustion. As his eyes closed for the last time, and he fell into a sleep from which he barely hoped to awake, he stared into the eye of an Adontian flyer, its body bloated through feeding on the house’s occupants, unable to squeeze out from under a sofa in search of another blood feast.

That was how Lum found him in the morning – face down, sleeping like a baby, mere centimetres away from a bug the size of a Moses basket.

Surprised to find himself still alive, Hardiman awoke to pain – but it was not the pain that might have come from having a razor sharp tongue slipping through his veins as he slept. He just felt as if he had spent a night being punched by a light middleweight – a lucky escape then!

“I think we were unsuitable food for them,” said Leinster, once he came to his senses. Hardiman wasn’t sure if they should be relieved or offended.

“Can you stand?” asked Rashupon.

Both gave it a try. For a moment, each tried to outdo the other in shakiness, but soon they were steady enough on their feet to consider making a move. They were still in the house in which sanctuary had at last been established, but its owners were gone.

“The villagers?” asked Hardiman.

“Going about their normal business,” replied

Lum. “We came looking for you at dawn, and they told us to come here and get you out.”

“What? We saw them being fed upon, all of them, the bugs upon their faces and chests... how can they act as if everything is normal?”

Hardiman staggered out of the door, looking for someone to question. He grabbed a woman by the arm – even if this state, he could not help but take note of her subtly charming beauty, and the short dress she wore that looked ready to fly away at an instant’s notice – and demanded answers of her.

“Please,” she begged. “Leave me alone.” She shook him off, and ran away.

Just then, Mirtio came around the corner, accompanied by half a dozen men. None looked quite as intimidating as they had managed the previous day, and if he had been in better condition himself, Hardiman might have fancied his chances in a ruckus.

Perhaps sensing something of those thoughts, Leinster put a hand on his shoulder. “We should leave. We intruded here last night. They have every right to be angry with us.”

“But the bugs! Why won’t you let us help you?” asked Hardiman angrily. “You don’t have to live like this!”

Mirtio sighed. “I think that perhaps we do, Earthman. This is not your world, and if you would be friends with us, you must learn to respect our ways. Good though your intentions might be, no good can ever come of them.”

“What can we do?” said Leinster sadly. “We cannot force them to be treated. It would be unethical.”

“But they are being fed upon by parasites! We can stop that, save them from it!” He appealed to the villagers, making eye contact with the girl he had grabbed just before. “We can find a way to drive these bugs away, to stop them... drinking your blood... because that’s what they do, isn’t it?”

“It is our burden to bear,” replied Mirtio. Then he saw something over Hardiman’s shoulder that made what blood remained to him drain from his face. His face and voice hardened, his fists clenched, and his men strode towards us. “Put that down or die, Earthman!”

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The team leader turned to look. It was Banks – he had found a way to get the bloated flyer from the house into a flexiplas cage. Banks looked surprised to be the object of everyone's attention, and for a second was too startled to put the cage down. It was a second too long, as half a dozen men had by then laid their hands on him, and as another dozen arrived to take hold of the rest of us he tried to explain.

"We just needed a sample to study – a living sample. If we could just understand it better..." A fist in the mouth silenced him, while another hand snatched the cage.

"Get your hands off him!" yelled Hardiman, even as he himself was roughly restrained.

"He is lucky to survive such arrant aggression," shouted Mirtio in response, staring him in the face. "You have trespassed too far. If you return again you will die, all of you."

"We should kill them now," said one of the men.

Mirtio shook his head, forcing himself back to calmness. "That isn't our way, and it would only lead to more of them coming. At heart, I don't believe these are warlike people – they are just foolishly, arrogantly curious. Get them out of my sight."

While Hardiman allowed himself to be half-carried, half-pushed to the edge of the village, he continued to watch Mirtio and his fellow villagers, and saw with what tenderness the flyer was removed from the cage and encouraged to scuttle off into the woods.

At the edge of the village they were left to themselves, but as they moved away there was no question of returning – noises behind them made it obvious that their retreat was being monitored, by men ready to enforce it more sternly. Hardiman saw no point in trying to fight them – what could he possibly gain? So he led his team back to the trading post. By noon the blatter would be ready to take them back to the university, where they could file their reports, come to conclusions, and ask their colleagues for advice.

The team gathered outside the post, Lum doing his best to treat Leinster's injuries, Leinster then doing his best to treat Hardiman.

After a few injections the team leader's body felt numb all over – but he had a feeling that when it began to hurt again it would hurt really badly.

All were glum, resigned to having failed in their mission to uncover the truth about this world. Eventually, Leinster finished with his work, and sat down to sip some soup Banks had warmed up for breakfast. As Hardiman filled the others in on their ill-fated adventure, the doctor chipped in here and there with his own observations.

When Hardiman began to describe the dome as it had looked up close, the doctor's eyes suddenly locked with his.

"Doctor," said the leader of the IET, "there was something you were going to tell me, last night, before we were so rudely interrupted..."

Leinster nodded. "I can't think why I didn't tell you the minute I woke."

"A blow to the head can often cause the loss of your short term memory," interjected Lum.

"That must be it," agreed the doctor. "Well, gather round children, because I have a story to tell. That dome was no building. It was a living creature."

Everyone was astonished.

"Are you sure?" asked Rashupon.

"My dear girl, I took its pulse. That thing was as full of life as you are yourself."

Banks nodded. "That could explain why it didn't appear in previous reports – perhaps it just hadn't grown so large yet."

"But, doctor," said Hardiman. "I was there with you – it had no head, arms, legs; it didn't move, or make a noise. What kind of thing was it?"

"Well, its head, if it needed one, might well be beneath ground, for example, or it might just have been deliberately bred that way – which brings me to my second point."

"There's more?" asked Hardiman.

"You could call it that... I don't think it's an accident that the creature is at the centre of the town. I think that it's what the Adontians feed on. I think that they themselves are parasites."

"Amazing," said Lum, as everyone's mouths dropped open. "But that would explain a lot."

"Such as their reluctance to let us approach

it,” said Hardiman. “And their indulgence towards the flyers – perhaps they see them as pets, just as we see dogs or cats, animals whose ancestors might have hunted our ancestors millions of years ago.”

“Remember too the way they said we had to leave before they ate,” added Lum.

“I believe,” said Leinster, “that they might well feed en masse, each of them taking a share of that poor creature.”

As they spoke, none realised that, in the woods, someone listened. Brown’s eyes stared out of the shadows, glinting with the madness that had finally overtaken him, inevitably, as a result of his alien diet. He listened a while longer, then dropped back out of sight.

Eventually word came via the mobile communicator that the blatter was ready for their return. They prepared to leave, Hardiman, Lum and Rashupon having a last search through the trading post for anything that might prove useful for their papers.

“Mack,” shouted Banks, bursting into the trading post. “The blast caps from our equipment have gone!” A standard part of IET equipment, the blast caps would allow them to quickly clear rubble, perform emergency excavations, and the like.

“They could easily be used as weapons,” said Dr Leinster, following hard on his heels.

“But who...” mused Mack. “The villagers? Are they planning to attack us?”

“They could have killed us before, and without the trouble of stealing from us,” pointed out Lum.

“It’s Brown,” said Rashupon decisively. “If he heard what we said about the Adontians, and that hulk they keep at the centre of the village...”

“He might decide to take revenge,” said Hardiman, slamming one fist into the other. “Regardless of these people having done nothing to him.”

The Professor of Information nodded her lovely head. “In his eyes, the fact that they feed the bugs might be enough to make them culpable for what’s happened to him.”

“And when you add that to the guilt he’s

undoubtedly feeling over the death of his partner...” added Lum.

“Right,” said Hardiman. “I’m convinced. Lum, you’re with me – the rest of you, up through the blatter. I’m not risking your lives again.”

“Mack...” began Leinster.

“Forget it, Dave – you’re in no state to go back in there.”

“Neither are you, for that matter, or did you forget?” To stress his point, the doctor gave Hardiman a squeeze on the arm.

He gritted his teeth and tried not to show how much it had hurt. “I’ve said my last word on this. You don’t have to follow my instructions, but for the love of Mike, I’ll knock you down and throw you through the blatter myself if you don’t do what I say! If Brown is doing what we think, whether he succeeds or fails, this planet will be no place for an Earthman this afternoon. I have to stay, just in case I can stop him, and Lum has to stay, because I can barely stand on my own, but the rest of you must go.”

Silently they filed into the wormhole created by the blatter, and Hardiman turned to Lum. “Sorry for getting you into this.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world, my friend. Let’s go stop someone making what I’m almost certain is probably a mistake...”

They hurried off into the woods, no weapons but their fists to protect them. As the village approached they became certain it was too late – the dome was already blackened. Had the trader really done it? If so, they were heading to their certain deaths.

But as they got closer, an even more horrible truth became apparent – the dome was not black because it had been bombed – it was black because it was covered with thousands of wailing Adontian flyers.

“Goodness me,” said Lum, gasping as the enormity of it hit him. There were many more of the creatures than we had ever seen before – perhaps they had taken it in turns to attack the village or the trading post – some feeding one night, then resting the next few – for there were so many that no man could have counted them alone.

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"We press on," said Hardiman.

"Of course," replied Lum. "There's nothing else to do in the circumstances, but... goodness me!"

"I hear what you're saying, David."

Close to, a staggering tableau greeted them. The villagers, linking arms, encircled the village, wailing almost as loudly as the bugs. (Why did they not run? Hardiman wondered if he would ever know.) And beyond them, he could see, staggering towards the infested dome, a lone Earthman, bearing a satchel, and he did not need to wonder what was inside.

Seeing the two of them approach, the villagers broke ranks, many of them visibly using their last strength to beg for help – but none made sense to him, either speaking too quickly from panic, or too slowly from weakness. Then Mirtio found his way through the pack.

"You have to help us," he pleaded. "Your trader, he's going to kill us all. We can't get near him – any time we try to get to him, he threatens to set the bomb off. He's calling us monsters. Please speak to him – he'll talk to his fellow Earthman!"

Hardiman patted him on the shoulder. "The explosives he has are not that powerful," he said, disingenuously. "If you stay at this range you should be safe."

"You don't understand... he's going to destroy the great one... the lifegiver..."

"You mean, the poor beast you feed from every day?" Hardiman struggled to make himself sympathetic. "Can't you find another one? I know he's crazy, but would it be worth losing one... lifegiver... if he gets rid of this plague of bugs?"

"It isn't a plague..." he pleaded. "You don't understand. We tried to be private people... We didn't want your interference. That plague... it's our children."

The eyes of the Earthmen went wide.

"That's the reaction I expected," said Mirtio bitterly. "Now you will call us monsters, your whole race will despise us for being what we are... Are you saying you will not help? Should we just lie down and die?"

"Hang on a minute," said Hardiman. "We've

said nothing of the sort, Mirtio. Live and let live, that's our motto. There's no other way to play it in a galaxy this big and full, as long as the other guy is happy to play it the same way."

Lum grasped the Adontian leader by the shoulder. "You should have just explained to us in the beginning – all of this could have been avoided. Now tell us what's happening."

Hardiman gave a nod of encouragement.

"They are our young. They cannot feed from the lifegiver directly at first – they must use us as intermediaries for the first few months. Now they are strong enough to feed from it directly, just as we do, and so it has swollen in readiness. Today they all try to feed from it – those that succeed will hibernate just beneath its surface for the next year, finally emerging as young bipeds. Those that fail, and most of them do, will die, and fall to the ground, ultimately to feed their brothers and sisters."

"Okay," said Hardiman. "We'll see what we can do. Lum – circle around – see if you can get behind him."

The Professor of Philosophy tipped his head in acknowledgment, and set off at a run. Hardiman took the direct route. He paced in the direction of the dome (he still could hardly bring himself to think of it as a living being), and Brown – and the bomb!

A few brief seconds later – he wished he had taken his time, while he still had it – and he was in sight of the trader.

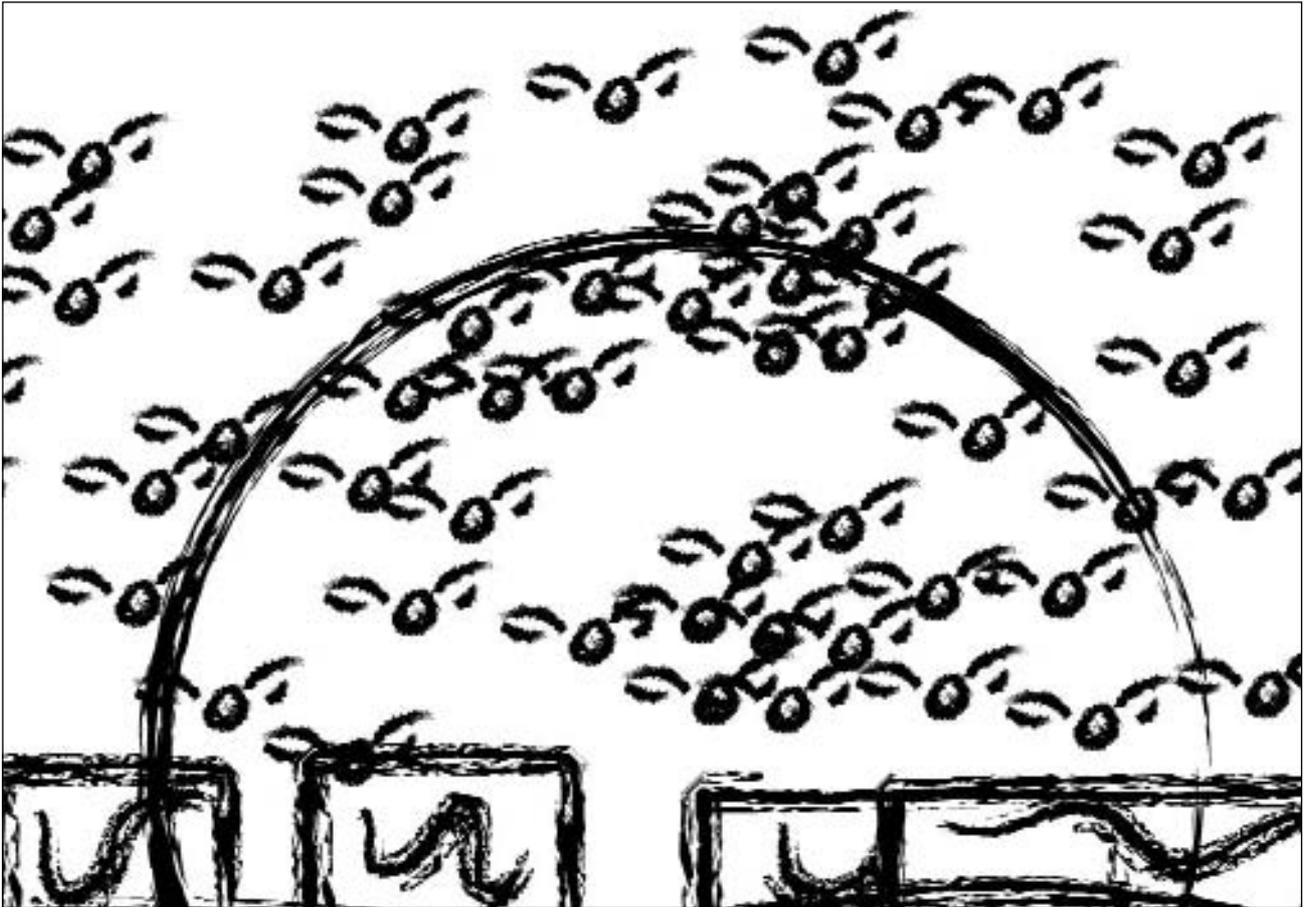
"Don't come any closer!" shouted Brown. "I'm going to destroy this sickness before it spreads any further. I don't want to take you with me, but I will if I have to!"

"It doesn't have to come to that, Brown," said Hardiman, keeping his tone as level as possible, but continuing to advance. "There are no enemies here."

"You can't tell me I'm hallucinating those bugs up there! I heard what your people said – these Adontians feed them! And I've got them all here in one place – we can stop it right now – it's our duty as Earthmen!"

Hardiman was within a few paces now. "Listen, Brown, I can explain everything..."

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He punched the trader in the face, then stopped breathing.

Lum ran up from the other side, to see Brown face down on the floor. He raised an eyebrow. “You’re lucky he didn’t have a dead man’s switch on that bomb.”

In answer, Hardiman finally took a deep breath.

“And as for you, my friend...” said Lum, looking down at the bedraggled trader. “Next time bring bottled water.”

The next day, having slept for at least a dozen hours each, the members of the IET met up sleepily in the university canteen for dinner.

“I’d speculate,” said Lum, “that those attacking the trading post had been unable to find food at the village. They had been pushed by desperation to attack, even though, having subdued a human, they would not actually feed, just leaving their victims unconscious, but unharmed, physically, at least.”

“Effectively,” said Dr Leinster, “the young Adontians were what we might call hyperpara-

sites, a parasite that preys upon another parasite. In this case the parasites in question were their parents.”

Banks gave a grunt of disgust, wincing and pushing away his burger without taking even a single bite. “It’s horrible that anyone could live that way.”

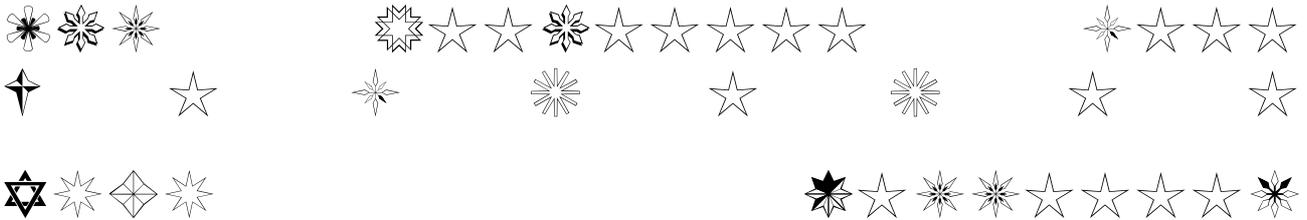
“Are you going to waste that?” asked Dr Lum, pulling the plate towards himself and cutting off a chunk. “Because I’m starving and could eat another three or four. Do you not think you should be more understanding of the Adontians?”

Banks shrugged. “Okay, different strokes and all that. It’s part of the philosophy of the university – but blah, blah, blah – how could an intelligent being bear to live as a parasite?”

Lum lifted the meat to his mouth. “Is it really worse to be a parasite, and to leave your prey alive, and worship it as a god – than to kill it outright, and consume its flesh?”

He began to chew.

# LOST CLASSICS OF THE SILVER AGE ✨



Recently, a member of the Silver Age Books team fell into an alternative dimension, one in which this publishing house was founded many, many years sooner than it was in this one. Knowing that the multiverse would soon throw him back to his proper place in space and time, he immediately made haste to a bookshop and bought as many of that dimension's Silver Age classics as he could carry. We couldn't possibly reprint them all in full here, but we'll be pleased to present occasional extracts, whenever we have the room.

In this issue, we are pleased to present chapter five of J.B. Greenwood's brain-bending freakout, *The Mushrooms from Infinity*, originally published in 1968.

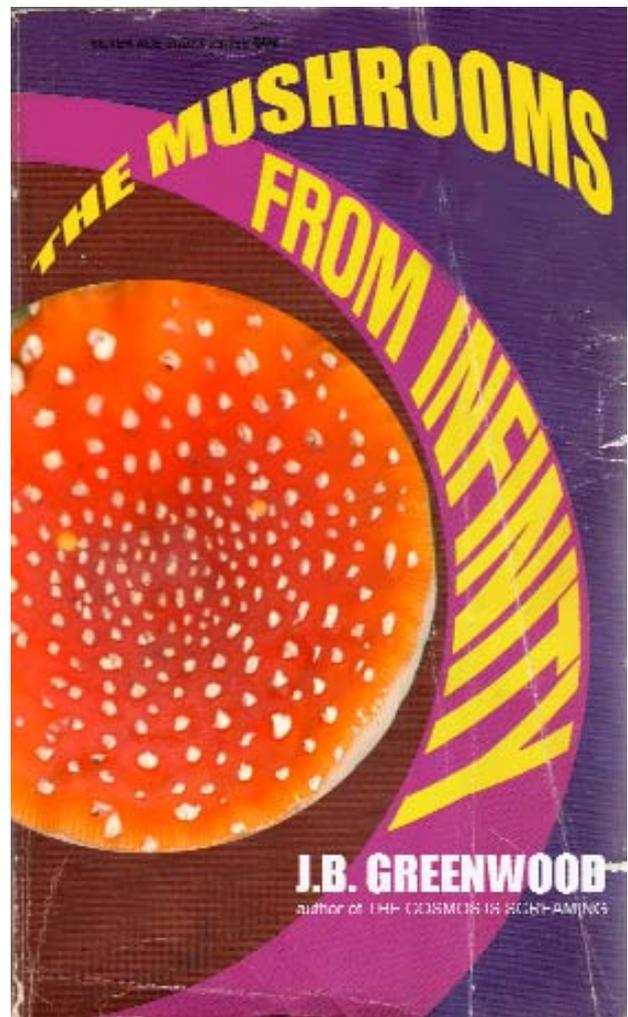
There was no getting away from it. Professor Camberwell, in his mutated form, had "eaten" the staff of the Interdimensional Research Laboratory, and promptly vanished into the ancient shadows of the highland pine forest, the same forest that had shielded the secretive government institution from public scrutiny for close to a decade.

General Waxwing, ashen-faced, was the first to speak.

"I didn't want to be the one to say, 'I told you so'," he said slowly.

Dorothea Camberwell, her face a frozen mask of horror, suppressed a sob.

"General, this is no time for recriminations!" said Morrell, surveying the scene of devastation



before gently closing the door of the laboratory with one hand, and guiding Mrs Camberwell away from the devastation with the other. "We must formulate a new plan. Clearly we have underestimated the speed at which these so-called 'spores' can travel and germinate."

He left Professor Camberwell's wife (or his widow? Were there words in the English language to describe their relationship?) in the capable hands of Miss Brambling, and together with the General, retreated to the bomb shelter, an ancient structure of roughly assembled concrete slabs, buried several metres underground and long fallen into disuse. Sally Brambling, as always one step ahead, had transformed the draughty old cellar into a comfortable office and briefing room, complete with a flipchart, lectern and rows of folding metal chairs. Morrell heard her neat steps descending the stairs just as he and General Waxwing were about to begin their emergency conference.

"Always hoped we'd never have to use this damned place," commented Waxwing.

"I've put the poor woman to bed," said Sally, looking grave but unbeaten.

"She's had a terrible shock," said Morrell. "It'll take more than bed rest to overcome a trauma of that magnitude." Involuntarily his mind drifted back to the scene of Camberwell's escape: the dripping walls, the scorched and fetid air. He was brought back abruptly by Sally's curt voice.

"Well, we don't have anything better than bed rest to offer her right now," she said, flashing a haughty look at the French mycologist. "We have to make do with what we have to hand."

"An excellent principle," replied Morrell. "And that is exactly what we must do in the present circumstances. Ideally we should have the full strength of the British military behind us, but as we are all aware, that is impossible."

The General harrumphed his agreement.

"Were such news to be made widespread," continued Morrell, "who knows what crazed ideas might enter the heads of the general population. Why, the more foolhardy might even be tempted to savour these extra-temporal fungi!"

"I think you give the British public less credit than they deserve," piped up Sally Brambling from the back of the room.

General Waxwing twitched his moustache irritably. "I say, Morrell. Is it absolutely necessary that the young lady attends this meeting? I

mean, we do still have an Official Secrets Act, what?"

Sally's gaze sent daggers flying at the back of the old soldier's head, but Morrell smiled. "General, I understand your concerns," he said. "but we are all witnesses now. Nothing can change that. We are all involved."

"I wouldn't leave, even if you asked me," interjected Sally, plonking herself down in a grey metal chair next to the General, who shifted uneasily in his bulky uniform.

Standing at the front of the room, as though about to address his class of students at the Academie des Champignons, Morrell stuck his hands into the pockets of his corduroy jacket, and located a well-chewed pencil. On the flipchart he began to sketch out a diagram with well-practised gestures.

"As we know," Morrell began, "we are dealing with parasitic, rather than saprophytic fungi in this case."

"Sappho-whatic?" spluttered the General. "What the dickens!"

"Saprophytic," Morrell corrected him. "As in feeding from dead and decaying matter. These infinity mushrooms, on the contrary, are parasites. They feed from living organisms."

"Of course they do!" said Waxwing. "Could have told you that myself. Camberwell knew that better than any of us, the poor chap." He shook his head sadly, lost in painful recollections.

Morrell decided to focus his lecture on Sally, who was frowning in concentration.

"We seem to be safe here in this bunker for the time being," said the Professor, consulting the screen on his pocket mycographolator. "The spore levels in this room are significantly below average."

"But we can't stay here indefinitely!" protested Sally.

"Naturally," conceded Morrell. "Furthermore, there is no guarantee that one of us has not already inhaled the extra-temporal spores. After Professor Camberwell's accident, the security of the laboratory was severely compromised."

"You can say that again!" barked Waxwing. "There was a hole in the wall big enough for a

shire horse to walk through, or any of the larger breeds of cattle.”

Morrell nodded impatiently. “As I said, the fungi are feeding on living organisms. But it is my belief that Professor Camberwell, although he has fallen victim to these parasites, will suffer no *physical* ill-effects.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sally nervously, catching the Professor’s emphasis.

Morrell stroked his greying stubble and hesitated. “It is my belief,” he said. “and I must stress that it is no more than a hypothesis, that the fungi are feeding, not on our bodily nutrients, but on our *time*.”

General Waxwing leapt from his chair, red in the face. “What Gallic gibberish is this?” he spluttered.

“Please, General, hear me out,” said Morrell. “I know how you feel. At first, I found it difficult to believe myself. I was thinking about the mushrooms, about how they contain no chlorophyll, and cannot photosynthesise. They are incapable of producing their own nutrients, so are reliant on food produced by others. Our Earthly mushrooms feed from leaf litter, hummus, or on the bark of trees. But what we are dealing with here is an entirely new kind of parasite. These mushrooms have come from a universe where there is no *time*.”

“How can such a place exist?” demanded Sally.

“Yes, you are right,” conceded Morrell. “It is unimaginable. To be engulfed in the eternal, without day or night, cause or effect. But I can see no other rational explanation. These entities have come here in search of time. They are engaged in a temporal feeding frenzy, sucking up our hours and minutes as a parched man gorges on water!”

The General was hunched over, staring at his hands and shaking his well-groomed beetroot shaped head in disbelief. Miss Brambling adjusted her spectacles and bit her lip.

“How did you work it out?” she asked, finally.

Morrell allowed himself the merest of smiles. “It was Camberwell himself who gave me the clue,” he replied. “Do you remember, at dinner last night, he kept getting the dates and times

mixed up? And then I noticed he had started on his dessert before he had even finished his soup. Chunks of Camberwell’s life were being swallowed up by the fungi sprouting inside his own body. My suspicions were confirmed when I wished the poor man goodnight at the end of the evening. I watched him disappear into his quarters, asleep on his feet. Seconds later, I turned around to see him back out in the hallway again, dressed in his pyjamas, with a night’s stubble on his chin, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He asked me whether I had breakfasted yet.”

“Poor blighter,” muttered Waxwing. “He must have gone off his noddle!”

“His noddle?” queried the Frenchman.

Sally made the universal gesture of the mentally unbalanced, twirling a manicured index finger in the direction of her left temple, and understanding dawned on Morrell.

“Ah! No, my dear General, you are mistaken!” he cried. “Camberwell had not lost his reason, but his temporality. I greeted him, a little taken aback, only to see that man disappear into thin air. I met him half an hour later on his way to the laboratory. He had no notion that anything was amiss.”

General Waxwing folded his arms and said nothing, but gave the distinct impression that he considered Morrell himself in danger of losing his noddle.

“That’s all very well,” interrupted Sally. “But even if it’s true, what are we to do about it?”

“Ah Miss Brambling, ever the practicalist!” said Morrell brightly, but if he was honest with himself, he had no ideas worth mentioning. “Hmm, what time is it?” he asked nobody in particular, glancing at his wristwatch, a strategy that he often employed in his lectures when he had run out of material.

“It’s just gone four thirty,” said Sally.

“What?” cried Morrell wildly, tearing the watchstrap from his wrist. “My watch says it’s five to twelve! One of us must have brought the spores into the bunker, either on their clothing or their hair. We too are now infected!”

“Let me see that,” said General Waxwing. He stepped forward and took the watch from Morrell’s limp hand. He examined it for a

second, before handing the instrument back. "It just needed winding," he told the mycologist. "First rule of battle: always make sure you've got the correct time."

"Thank-you, General," said Morrell, clapping his hands together. "Now, to action!"

"But we haven't even decided on our plan," complained Sally.

Morrell sighed. "Isn't it obvious?" he cried. "We must hunt Camberwell down, using whatever weapons and tools come to hand. If he reaches civilisation, there's no telling the havoc he might wreak. How far are we from the nearest village?" he asked, pointing abruptly at General Waxwing.

"About fifteen miles," replied the General. "But surely you cannot seriously be suggesting that we kill poor Camberwell like a fox?"

"That is exactly what we must do," said Morrell, assuming a grave expression. "And it will help our endeavour greatly if we cease to think of our quarry as Camberwell, or even as a human being at all. For in truth, the thing that has taken Camberwell's form bears no relation to *homo sapiens*, or to any species native to our own dimension. No, Miss Brambling," he continued, checking her interruption, "nor is it brother to any terrestrial mushroom. More awful even than the Death Cap or the Destroying Angel is this new interloper into our dimension. Its toxins, instead of paralysing the nervous system, leech the very seconds from our lives!"

The General needed no more persuasion. He leapt to his feet with all the vigour he could still muster. "To the armoury!" he bellowed. "Weapons training to begin at seventeen hundred hours."

The three hunters assembled, dressed for the pursuit, in the eviscerated remains of the IRL's canteen. Morrell and Brambling had received a crash course in the use of standard issue British Army rifles, and had taken the opportunity of a little target practice in the kitchens, against bottles and jars. But the real thing, as Waxwing assured them, would be very different. For a start, they had only a few hours of daylight remaining. Camberwell, or what remained of him, had at least an hour's head start, although in

his current state of mind it was debatable whether he would be able to travel far, in any consistent direction. Their equipment included three heavy, black rubber flashlights, but even so they were at a disadvantage. Camberwell, as he had last appeared, would blend into the forest scenery as though born to it.

"What about Mrs Camberwell?" asked Sally, as they prepared to leave the sanctuary of the laboratory.

"I would have invited her," said Morrell, folding a large stretch of webbing into his backpack, "But I don't think she's in any state to be wandering about the forest. And to be honest, she may not enjoy the sport, all things considered."

"I didn't mean that," said Sally crossly. "Of course she shouldn't come out to shoot her own husband! But aren't you worried about leaving her alone?"

Morrell shrugged, a gesture which seemed to involve not only his shoulders, but his whole body, from the furrows on his brow to his outstretched palms. "What else can we do with her? She is suffering from nervous exhaustion. With any luck, we will be back before she wakes up, and she need never know..."

"Never know what?"

"Whatever the night has in store for us," said Morrell, hefting his rifle.

Perhaps it was simply that Morrell had got too soft, too used to the streetlamps and bars of the *Rive Gauche*, but the Scottish night seemed somehow blacker than nights in other corners of the world. The beams from their flashlights were attenuated and swallowed up by the undergrowth, and the three hunters stumbled and cursed their way through a maze of hidden roots, mossy stones and unexpected bogs. Metres above them, invisible tree-tops shivered and creaked.

"How are we ever going to track him down?" asked Sally, just minutes after they had left the confines of the laboratory. "And how are we going to find our way back?"

"If necessary, we must stay out all night," said Morrell. He stifled another of Sally's objections by putting his finger to his lips. The same finger

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stretched out slowly and pointed to a tree-trunk, illuminated by the General's flashlight.

"Don't touch it General," warned Morrell, as the General went forward to inspect the damage. "We don't know the chemical composition of those deposits."

Mindful of Morrell's words, Waxwing poked at the bark with a dead stick.

"What's this stuff?" he asked. "Sap?"

The other two crowded around to examine the evidence.

"No," concluded Morrell. "This is no Earthly substance, but a trail left by our quarry."

And as Morrell spoke, they watched the slimy coating on the bark begin to glow with a queer light that was neither indigo nor tangerine, but shifted like shot silk, depending on where the light fell.



“It’s liquefying the tree bark!” exclaimed Brambling. “The wood is dissolving.”

As they watched, the wood seemed to wither away on contact with the dripping slime.

“Not dissolving but ageing,” Morrell corrected her. “The tree is growing old. Every second years are passing. Quick! We must not linger here! This tree might be destined to fall at any moment.”

They jogged away from the scene as fast as the terrain would allow, the rifles on their backs brushing through shoulder-high bracken. Morrell had not been unduly cautious. From elsewhere in the forest, they heard the unmistakable groan of another tree about to fall. There was a muffled crash.

“It came from over there!” said Waxwing. “Must have been about a half mile away.”

Following the General’s keen sense of hearing, the hunting party marched on through the pine trees. Despite his size, the old soldier was setting quite a pace, and Morrell’s stamina was the first to fail. Attacked by stitch, he stopped suddenly, out of breath and hunched over, his hands on his knees. Years of lecturing and quiet afternoons in his study had not prepared him for this kind of exertion. Mushroom hunts were usually placid, sedentary affairs, a far cry from this desperate foray into the unknown. Morrell sat down on a conveniently placed log, and switched his flashlight off to save the batteries. Insects, unseen and enlarged in his imagination, flitted round Morrell’s face. Repulsed, he batted them away. The wind was picking up, and the rain, filtered by the canopy above, dripped down onto Morrell’s upturned, sweat-drenched face in large, welcome splashes of cool water.

A noise alerted him. Something was crashing through the bracken, coming closer in the darkness. He whirled around, uselessly, and fumbled with the switch on his torch. Regular steps, heavy and resolute, approached. Pocketing the flashlight, Morrell reached around and slid the rifle from underneath the flap of his backpack. Waxwing hadn’t specified how he was supposed to operate the weapon at the same time as pointing the torch, he realised with annoyance.

After some anxious fumbling, he managed to jam the flashlight under his armpit, with the beam of light pointing roughly forward as he aimed the rifle into the black void.

Morrell listened hard but could hear nothing above his own heartbeat and breath. Something pushed firmly against his back. Morrell turned, dropped the flashlight, and discharged his weapon. The jolt against his shoulder made him step back awkwardly. His foot found a root and he went down heavily into a patch of wet ferns. There was a single soft grunt, unmistakably human, and then the shouts of Waxwing and Brambling in the distance.

On his hands and knees, his clothes soaked with mud, Morrell scrambled to find the lost flashlight. Its beam illuminated a dismal sight. The body sprawled amongst the rotting leaves was not that of Professor Camberwell. It was Mr McGowan, the gamekeeper. Morrell remembered his altercation with the old Scot the previous night at the Hen and Hare the previous night. Almost the whole village of Dornoch had witnessed their disagreement over the edibility of the Wood Blewit. Now his opponent was dead at his feet, a ragged red hole bored into his old grey neck.

“Did you get him?” cried General Waxwing with gusto, as he blustered into the clearing. His eyes followed the beam of Morrell’s flashlight, and he swallowed hard. Miss Brambling followed close on his trail. Morrell, his eyes closed, heard her harsh, sharp intake of breath.

“This is going to be a tricky one to explain to the natives,” mused Waxwing. He offered Morrell a damp cigarette, and the three of them stood in a solemn circle around the corpse, silently smoking.

Sally had warned Mrs Camberwell that her husband would mutate beyond all recognition, but when the expedition returned to the laboratory, she had to confess that she had not expected him to have transformed into an elderly Scotsman. Exhausted and drenched to the skin, Morrell and Waxwing manhandled the body into the lobby and, ignoring Mrs Camberwell’s stream of questions, dragged Mr McGowan into the one laboratory that was still intact. Once

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deposited unceremoniously on a gurney, the two men sank to the floor, sweating profusely.

"Perhaps we can just bury him in the grounds," panted Morrell. "Or underneath the cellar."

"Talk sense you halfwit!" huffed the soldier, tearing off his waterproof jacket. "The locals would smell a rat before you could say *Amanita muscaria*."

Morrell perked up. "I didn't know you had any knowledge of fungi."

"Only a smidgin," said the General. "But it's a damn sight more than you know about gunmanship."

"Gentleman, I beg you!" said Sally, appearing in the doorway, her head wrapped in a towel. "This bickering serves no purpose!"

Mrs Camberwell skulked in Sally's wake. "Did any of you catch sight of my husband?" she asked, quietly but insistently.

"No," said Morrell. "We were on his trail..."

"But then this ninny decided it'd be more fun taking pot shots at the local tenantry," interrupted Waxwing.

Morrell was about to make a cutting rejoinder, but he caught Sally's eye and thought better of it.

"Camberwell could be anywhere by now," said Morrell. "He's been on the run, what? Five, six hours? An average man might hope to cover ten miles in that period. But with the infinity mushrooms sucking the time from his life, well, Camberwell may be at the white cliffs of Dover by morning. There's no telling."

"I suppose he'll be ageing at an accelerated rate too," said Sally.

"Yes, as the fungus spreads in his body, he'll be missing out days at a time. But who knows what damage he might cause before..." Morrell gave Mrs Camberwell a pitying glance.

"...before the thing runs its course," Sally said quickly.

"Yes. Of that we can only speculate. And naturally, at some point, Professor Camberwell will feel the need to reproduce."

Mrs Camberwell's head shot up. "I beg your pardon, Professor Morrell!" she stammered.

"There's no need to apologise, dear lady," said Morrell, misunderstanding the English compul-

sion to say sorry when one is least inclined to remorse. "I understand perfectly," continued the Frenchman. "You have been on a strange journey, and it is likely to get stranger still. It is only natural that your concentration should suffer from time to time. But please try to listen: these matters are of the last importance! Eventually, your husband, if you choose to call him so, will produce his own spores, asexually. Miniature versions of himself will emerge from his body, and float away on the wind, until they find a suitable resting place, and food suited to their altered constitution. I cannot be sure of the details. These newborn Professor Camberwells may be released from one of his existing orifices, or new ones may be necessary. I confess that as a scientist I am intensely curious on that point."



Morrell noticed Mrs Camberwell's expression, and the disapproval on Sally's face, before continuing. "I can well imagine that you find these academic matters less pressing," he said, rubbing his mud-smeared forehead with the back of his hand.

"So what are we going to do?" asked Sally.

By dawn the four of them had, after hours of discussion, recriminations, tears and tantrums, hammered out a plan of action. They retired to their quarters, glad to be rid of each other's company, if only for a few hours. Morrell lay on his bunk, smoking meditatively and browsing through his well-thumbed pocket edition of Hepworth's *Field Guide to the Fungi of Western Europe*. He harboured no false hopes that the book would yield up any clues to the future. Even the wisdom of Hepworth was as nought against these cursed extra-dimensional organisms. The world – no, Morrell corrected himself, the universe itself – had never seen anything of the like before. And if Camberwell were not stopped in his frenzied path of destruction, the universe would not live long enough to see much more. Morrell's knowledge of quantum physics was limited to a few seminars he had audited as a beardless undergraduate, but he was well aware, from conversations with his Nobel Prize

winning friend Dr Hosseini, that there was more at stake than their own lives, or the lives of the Dornoch villagers. No, Morrell perused the familiar pages of Hepworth simply to sooth his fevered brain and tattered temper. The illustrations, so naïve in their execution, yet so informative, brought him something like comfort. It was a book written in happier, more innocent times, when danger was easily recognised by a scarlet cap, or a swollen volval bag. There was no room in Hepworth for abominations such as Morrell had witnessed over the last twenty-four hours.

Ensnconced each in their own room, Morrell's companions were engaged in similarly calming activities. Sally Brambling was making her nightly entry in her diary. She had decided that she could afford to borrow some of the space allotted to the next two days, given the gravity of the day's events. General Waxwing had taken apart his pistol, and was cleaning and oiling each part with reverential care. And Mrs Camberwell was sitting at her vanity bureau in her dressing gown, combing her long, black hair over and over again, and finding more grey ones than she had expected. The ritual complete, Edith Camberwell glanced once at the empty double bed, and huddled up in an armchair to snatch what sleep she could. Unbearable images and noises pursued her through the night.

As the sun came up, they wrapped McGowan in a blanket, heaved him into the back of Waxwing's car, and drove the fifteen miles to Dornoch, where they parked outside the police station. It was really little more than a stone cottage, identical to every other cottage in Dornoch, but with a cast iron lamp, with blue glass engraved with the word POLICE, hanging above the doorway. Morrell knocked, and all four of them held their breath. They had rehearsed their story over and again until they were word perfect. Morrell only hoped that they could be over the border in England before the authorities saw through their alibis.

Sergeant Phelps was a stout, cheerless Englishman with an ill-advised toothbrush moustache huddled under his swollen strawberry of a nose. He opened the front door in his

nightshirt and slippers, and scowled at the newcomers through sleep-encrusted eyes.

"We're here to report a murder," began Morrell, following his script to the letter.

Sergeant Phelps did not react for a moment. "Five minutes," he said, and shut the door.

They waited, while Waxwing, short on patience with a man whom he clearly outranked, timed the delay on his watch. Exactly five minutes later Phelps emerged again, this time in uniform, with his helmet jammed on for good measure, but still with the moustache and scowl. He invited the party inside, where a tiny desk bisected the stark whitewashed room, and proceeded to take notes, as the tale was told.

Once Morrell had finished speaking, the policeman read through his account aloud. "Are you telling me," he began, "that Professor Camberwell, an employee of the Ministry of Defence Research Division, driven insane by jealousy over his wife's alleged affair with the victim, one Cormac McGowan, invited said victim to meet him at a specified location in Crannocks Woods, where he subsequently murdered said victim using a rifle stolen from General Waxwing, also a Ministry of Defence employee, and that the afore-mentioned Camberwell then fled the scene of the crime, that his whereabouts are currently unknown, but that the above-mentioned Waxwing, alerted by the gunshot, gathered together a deputation consisting of himself, Professor Alphonse Morrell, Mrs Dorothea Camberwell and Miss Sally Brambling, who consequently discovered the body of the aforesaid McGowan, at around about nine thirty last night, the 24th March?"

"Yes," they all said together.

"Well, it's a rum do," said Sergeant Phelps. "I'd best get onto the lads at Inverness for some backup. I recommend that none of you leave town for the next few days."

Morrell raised a hand to silence the General's objections, and smiled in what he hoped was an obliging manner. They would all, he assured the policeman, remain at his service, for as long as Phelps deemed necessary. Placated, the policeman vanished into the back room to phone his superiors in Inverness.

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"Do you think they'll keep us in the cells?" asked Dorothea with trepidation.

"They have no cells to put us in," replied General Waxwing, who spoke from experience. He had been stationed at the Interdimensional Research Laboratory on several occasions, and had witnessed more than his fair share of drunken bust-ups between members of his regiment and local bruisers outside the Hen and Hare at kicking out time.

"Then shouldn't we go back to the lab?" suggested Mrs Camberwell uncertainly.

"We shall do no such thing," countered Morrell with a stern look. "This is not an occasion for pussy-footing. Dreadful forces have been unleashed on the world. We cannot stand idly by and await the trundling justice of these petty functionaries. We must seek expert advice. At the same time, Professor Camberwell, or whatever has borrowed his earthly form, must be stopped, or at least contained." Here he turned to the General. "A quarantine zone must be established. I trust we can rely on your contacts within the secret service to set up something along these lines. Naturally there must be some kind of cover story to feed the press. An outbreak of swine fever, something dull and agricultural which will not excite the public's appetite for scandal. Nobody must know the true extent of the catastrophe."

"I've already spoken to a few well-placed individuals," said the General with a little nod. "I'm hoping to see some results in the next few hours. I'll keep you posted."

"Good," said Morrell. "In the meantime, I must seek expert advice, in the form of a certain Arab scholar currently residing at Cambridge University."

"I'll come along too, if you don't mind," said Sally. "On my way back to speak to my editor in London."

"I'm afraid not, Miss Brambling," said Morrell with a sneer. "Your reporter's instincts must be restrained. This is a matter of national security, as I'm sure General Waxwing would agree."

The General nodded distractedly.

The journalist was incandescent. "How dare

you push me around, you fatuous truffle-hunter!" she cried, hands on hips in an attitude of righteous indignation. "I've just as much right to do my job as you have! Why, this story could make my career! Just you try and stop me printing it!"

Unmoved, Morrell merely sighed. "Of course, somebody must remain here to look after poor old Mrs Camberwell," he reminded Sally. "And to greet Phelps and his men from Inverness, when they come sniffing around, which they eventually will."

"Don't mind me," said Dorothea gruffly, coming to Sally's aid. "I may have had a bit of a shock, but I'll be as right as rain. I can handle these rustic detectives as well as any of you. We Englishwomen are made of sterner stuff than you think, Professor Morrell."

Morrell and the General exchanged unhappy glances. Evidently this plague of female emancipation was highly infectious.

"But what are we going to do with McGowan's body?" asked Morrell a little desperately. He had not counted on his plans being upset by the collusion of these two blue-stockings.

"Oh, we can just leave him in the police station. That's the best place for him, I'm sure," said Mrs Camberwell decisively.

Nobody had any better ideas, so the grim, blanketed parcel was manhandled from the boot of the General's car, and hefted, with much sweating and cursing, through the narrow doorway of the police cottage, and up onto the bare wooden counter.

"We can't just leave him there, can we?" asked Sally, having second thoughts as she contemplated the mummified shape.

Morrell, tugging on a well-earned Gauloise, pondered the question. "It may seem callous," he said at last, "but these are extenuating circumstances if ever they existed. We haven't a moment to spare!"

"Let's get going then!" said the General impatiently, gesturing towards the car.

"Let me just finish my cigarette," said Morrell. "I'll be right with you."

# Ellénore

*After Adolphe, by Benjamin Constant*

*Vicki Proserpine*

Why do I write this? Why am I so foolish as to commit my thoughts to paper? What if the count were to find this? I cannot deny my folly, yet neither can I renounce it. My thoughts are confused, they tear around my mind in hellish disorder, and my only solution is to place them on the page and attempt to sort through that which appears before my eyes. So with my first, and in all likelihood my last, entry in this journal I shall describe my position in plain words, and hope that with God's good grace, if I have not already passed beyond his reach, I may make some sense of my life as it stands. Could it ever be so easy? Ask rather, could it ever be more difficult? The answer must be "no". I have been given a chance, an opportunity for something I thought forever beyond my grasp, yet I know my duty: the duty I owe to the good count and my children. But what of the duty to myself? Do I owe myself nothing? Over and over, I ask myself how I came to this awful pass. Would that I had the right or the courage to ask it of the Lord Christ, but of course he is deaf to the tears of a lost woman, a woman who sacrificed all scruple to the desire for a comfortable life. How could it be otherwise? I would not have it different, not on my behalf, for how could I respect a God who loved a wretch such as I? But let him love my children, for how cruel it would

be to condemn them for the crimes of a wicked mother.

The Comte de P\*\*\* must take none of the blame for what has happened, or for what I fear shall happen. This poor man, whose only crime has been to put his faith in a faithless woman, cannot be thought guilty of anything. He has given to this woman all she could wish of him. He has compromised his position in society on her behalf, and see how she betrays him. Let him be an example to all loving, compassionate men; let them see how good intentions and pure motives benefit no-one in this society. But am I truly so guilty? I gave myself to him for love, or for what passed for love in the days of my youth, and what have I gained? I have borne the count two fine, handsome children, over whom I have doted night and day; could any mother have been more dutiful? What shall be the reward of this care and concern? Upon their entry into society these children shall disown their father's mistress. No longer a mother to them, I shall be nothing but an embarrassment, to be ignored, or at best, explained away. Small reward for long, sleepless nights of worrying over their illnesses and nightmares! And what of the count's finances? When first we met, he had nothing, his family name a hair's breadth from the dishonour of bankruptcy. For years I have devoted myself

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to the restoration of his family's fortune, and how close we have come to achieving that end! We came to this town of D\*\*\*, and had our careful preparations borne fruit, within two years the count's situation would have been assured. I have brought him so far, only to abandon him for the first young dandy to catch my shameless eye, the first man to whisper words of passion into my harlot's ear... but I outpace myself.

At least I can reassure myself with the declaration that I was not the first to welcome the young man into our home. The unfortunate Comte de P\*\*\* (unfortunate to love one such as I), having met the young Adolphe (how the name causes me to shiver in anticipation!), became aware that their families had certain connections, and so invited my seducer to our home to dine with us. After he left our house, I congratulated myself upon the haughty and disinterested demeanour which I had shown the young man – foolish woman! I should rather have spent every moment enjoying the delicacy and the sublimeness of his company! What cost the shallow pride of a tainted woman! The Comte de P\*\*\* told me how he had found the young man's company very pleasant; his simple heart would not recognise dissimulation and facility behind the common pleasantries of the most calculating man. There was no mystery for me in the young dandy's repeated attempts to gain my attention during the meal, though it would have taken much more than a few over-long glances to arouse the count's suspicion. Oh, poor honest man! How can I do this to him? It hurts me to think of the pain he shall feel when all this finally becomes clear to him. What devil leads me to put my own happiness before his? Is it love that I feel for Adolphe? It is true that this young man awakens feelings in me that are of a different class to any that I have known before, yet I cannot be so presumptuous as to label these feelings "love". That would be to attribute the purest feelings and the purest motives to the basest and most self-serving of hearts, but while I know this to be the case, no longer is it possible for me to fight the vicious impulses by which I am tortured so cruelly. I no longer have the

strength to resist. In recent weeks I have come to realise that this is the most basic nature of my being. The purity of thought and of feeling that I hoped to find in religion has proved empty. To deny my basic selfishness for a single moment more can only serve to prolong my suffering. Oh, terrible day, that brought Adolphe to tempt me, that brought to flower the seeds of selfishness in this cruel heart!

My youthful days are far in the past, my most beautiful years have been sacrificed to the count, and to what end? He has had everything of me, but what has been my reward? All that I have belongs to me through his sufferance. At the count's whim I could be cast onto the streets to find a living! In the eyes of the church I have no position, save that of a well-paid whore, and the meagre status afforded me in society comes only by virtue of the respect which they have for the Comte de P\*\*\*. Only too keenly am I aware of the view shared of me by the other ladies of the town: the slightest lapse of morality on my part or the disapproval of the count would provide them with reason enough to damn me to hell and back, and without doubt my name would soon become a byword for sinfulness and immorality. Such will be my fate should I choose to take up with Adolphe, but in all truth the decisions of fate are losing their power over me. Here is the question which has kept me awake each night since I met that handsome young man: is it better to be unhappy with the approval of society or to search for happiness while being damned by society? For year after year I have suffered under the hateful strictures of the former, I have abandoned every principle in order to serve the count well, I have buried all my most honest feelings beneath the weight of devotion, but nothing of this has done anything to make me feel that I have acted correctly. When my dear mother left me alone without any money to my name, I had no choice but to give myself up to a man with money, else I would not have survived. The opportunity to experience any finer feelings has never been mine; my life has been nothing but an attempt to survive. What right have these women of D\*\*\* to judge one such as I? They, who have spent the entirety of their pointless

lives in this one town, being unfaithful to their unfaithful husbands while claiming to be the arbiters of the public morality, spend their days gossiping over my every move, waiting for the moment when they may safely sink *their* sharp teeth into *me*. Since the day that the count and I arrived here, I have had to watch them sharpening their claws. They suspect already, though the count remains ignorant, and they in fact suspect too little.

Only yesterday I had to endure a visit from the despicable Madame de R\*\*\*, and her hateful friend, Madame de S\*\*\*. For the sake of the count, I must remain civil with such people, even as they attempt to slyly insult me. Doubtless this pair had heard rumours of my meetings with Adolphe and had come to make these rumours known to me. After embarrassing me with profuse greetings and overstated declarations of friendship, they began to over-praise the “undisputed purity” of my morals.

“Yet,” said Mme. de S\*\*\*, with a suggestive smile, “isn’t it true that even the most honourable of women have been known to compromise themselves upon occasion?”

Should I pursue my own happiness I know that such women would be overjoyed. They would take immense pleasure in spending the afternoons discussing my fall from grace, and this fact alone is almost enough to prevent me from following such a course. But again I have outpaced myself; I have neglected the more recent details of my relationship with Adolphe.

I have written of how I responded to the attention that the young man paid to me during the meal, and how later I congratulated myself on my haughty demeanour, but I admit here that I found him returning to my thoughts again and again during the days, and the nights, that followed his visit. I began to see the Comte de P\*\*\* in something of a new light, and it was not favourable. I had known that I was not in love with the count, but I accepted that he was a necessary part of my life. I could not have survived without him, but I did not love him. In place of that fragile emotion I had devotion. No wife has ever been more devoted to her family than I, no mother ever worshipped her children

more, and I built my life around this devotion. Yet I knew that before long my children would hate me for what I was, and being in the company of the count became more onerous with every passing day. It is difficult to understand the reason for this, for no-one could ever find a more caring and considerate man. The fault lies with me, not with him; the mere sight of him reinforced the growing feeling that my life had been a failure. Our relationship was as emotionally sterile as that between employer and employee, that being essentially what we were, and this became more and more unbearable to me. I would begin arguments with him, simply to make him show emotion. He became confused and angry with himself, angry because he could not understand my malicious attacks. He did everything he could to placate me, he would have given me everything he had, but what he could never give me was the spark of excitement that came when I felt the eyes of young Adolphe resting upon me. During the following weeks I saw the young man a number of times, and though we barely spoke, these feelings continued to grow. I found the count’s presence untenable as my dissatisfaction with the life I was leading rose like bile within me. Eventually the poor count could bear it no longer, and went to stay for a while with friends in the country. And what was this? I received a letter from Adolphe, professing the depth of his love for me!

Despite all appearances, I confess that I had no wish to begin an affair with the young man at that point. Through his very presence I had become acutely aware of the poor quality of my life, but that does not imply that I was eager to throw myself into his arms; until I received his letter he had been nothing but a fantasy, a contrast to the life I was leading. My loyalty to the count was still strong enough for me to write back to Adolphe to offer him nothing but sincere friendship, while informing him that he would not be received in the house until the Comte de P\*\*\*’s return. I still cared for appearances and propriety; words that today seem synonymous with unhappiness and misery. In any case, my letter seemed only to encourage the young man,

as he redoubled his efforts to make me his mistress. To avoid both Adolphe and my returning husband I went to stay with a friend in the country. The weeks I spent there found me confused and troubled. Adolphe had pursued me with such vigour and energy! He painted such attractive futures for us, he made it seem as if we could be so happy together! But I was fully aware of how impractical his words were. If I ended my relationship with the count, if it became common knowledge that I had taken up with young Adolphe, the good people of D\*\*\* would fight to be first to condemn me. How happy they would then be! And yet every moment of the day my would-be lover filled my thoughts. In him I could see the possibility of escape from the quiet tragedy that had been my life till then.

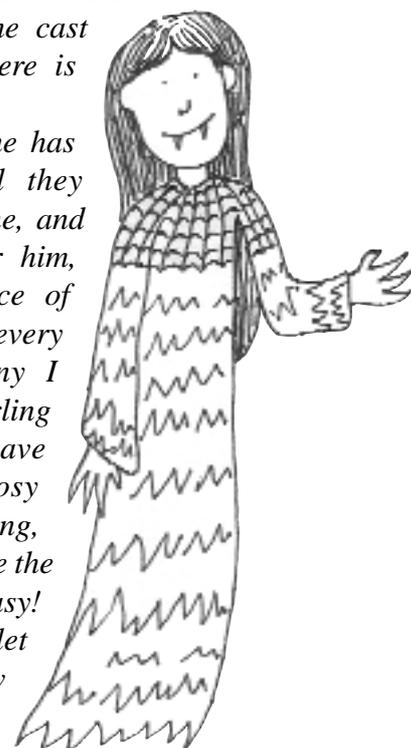
I have since returned from my friend's house, to find my young admirer still waiting for me. To be the object of such devotion is very flattering, to say the least, especially to a woman who is ten years beyond the height of her beauty. Upon my return my husband, in an attempt to raise my spirits, arranged a party for me, inviting his friends and family. And who else did the poor fool invite? Why, Adolphe, of course! The rest can be told quickly: Adolphe, through threatening to leave society altogether, persuaded me to receive him the following day. Since then, he has visited me several times, to declare his love in the face of my apparent indifference. In truth, my indifference has been nothing but a pretence: I think of nothing but escape. Through this young man I can find a new way, I can build a new life, away from the dreary routine of the count and his circle, away from being nothing more than an accountant and a nursemaid! Why should I be meekly grateful for the tiny crumbs that fate has thrown to me? Until now, humble submission to the idle whims of Providence and Society has been my lot; my life, my talents, my ambitions, all have been sacrificed in an attempt to gain acceptance, and with every passing day I have learnt how fragile and worthless that acceptance has been.

Reading back over this entry, I can see how my thoughts have arranged themselves. It would

be foolish of me to fight their pattern. For too many years I have fought against them tooth and nail, and it has gained me nothing. Since I met Adolphe I have been rejuvenated; the blood in my veins burns with a fire that had long been extinguished by my relationship with the count, and I would rather die than let that happen once more. I am as an ancient tree thought long dead which astonishes all by showing green shoots with the spring. This young man will sacrifice everything for me: his career, his inheritance and even the name of his family, and I shall not stop him. Until now, my life has belonged to everyone save myself; the count, the Church, the children and the women of society have all owned their part of me. Now I reclaim myself! I renounce their hold over me; I shall not bow to their demands a moment more. And what is more, I shall take from Adolphe that which is rightfully mine, from him I shall take what I have for so long given away. I shall have a new life, free of devotion, free of sacrifice, and let those who would stop me know that I will stoop before them no longer.

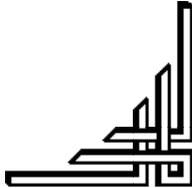
Tomorrow I shall take Adolphe as my lover. *Then, I shall return to the darkness for a little while, rather than have the harsh light of shame cast upon my being. There is too much to hide!*

*I will wait until he has forgotten me, until they have all forgotten me, and then I shall devour him, every delicious piece of him. I will savour every morsel, every agony I inflict upon his darling features! I, who have lived a lie of cosy domesticity for so long, shall know once more the delight of evil's ecstasy! They should have let me be. He shall know the pain that he has given me! They will all know pain. **They will all die screaming!***





# Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into The Unknown Tyranny of the Fungal Overlord



John Greenwood

The Thanggam was essentially a variety of fungus which, by some queer accident of evolution, had developed powers of speech. It communicated with its peers by forcing gases through long, narrow twisting pipes which honeycombed its fleshy body, which it effected by means of living bellows, located amongst the mycelial strands, the roots of the being, which lodged deep in the rocks and earth below. The sounds produced were unpleasant in the extreme, as were the gases it generated in such terrible abundance.

Thanggam resembled nothing more than a plate fungus grown to monstrous proportions, the slimy disc as large as half a kilometre in diameter, reaching three metres above ground level. The underside of Thanggam's body was frilled with deep, charcoal coloured gills, and between these lamellae and the ground remained a narrow crawl space of half a metre or so. The gills radiated outwards from the central stem, a muscular column which supported the entire weight of the cap. Nothing could grow in that sunlight starved, poisoned earth shaded by the cap, and the ground was blackened and lifeless. It was here that Eunos and I were forced to make our beds while enslaved to the will of Thanggam.

Most of our time was spent up on the cap's surface, that crazily undulating surface, pitted with densely branching holes from which belched forth the malodorous pronouncements and commands of Thanggam, as though from some demonic pipe organ.

The reader might well wonder how it came to be that an independent-minded space pioneer such as myself, and a superhumanly strong, resourceful and unsentimental android came to be in the grip of such a ridiculous organism as Thanggam. I shall no longer test that reader's patience. In short, Thanggam had powers of telepathy, inducing a kind of mental torpor and sluggishness completely alien to me. Telepathic reins were fitted to my mind, and Thanggam's will alone held sway over my thoughts and actions. From the moment Thanggam first spoke to us, his brutish assertion of supremacy grating on our ears, I was introduced to the bit, and the whip too, in the form of his intolerable piping. My tortured mind would have performed any action, no matter how degrading or immoral, to escape from those appalling sounds and smells.

Fortunately, Thanggam's orders were of a mundane nature. For most of the day, Eunos and I busied ourselves collecting animal droppings for Thanggam to feed on. Manure was the staple

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source of the fungus's sustenance, and his appetite for dried excrement was apparently insatiable. My memories of those days are fuzzy, perhaps happily so, for I was driven to the brink of collapse by the slaver's constant hectoring. There was no time to eat or drink, and little to sustain us bar a few meagre handfuls of wild nuts and seeds found in the undergrowth amidst our desperate struggle to keep Thanggam fed.

The vigilant reader might at this point be scratching his head in perplexity, or even annoyance. What, I hear him demand, of Eunos? Surely the telepathic tyranny of this overgrown mushroom was powerless against the android's artificial brain? It is true, Eunos was unaffected by the demands of my tormentor, and could have, in theory, attempted a rescue, or even destroyed the source of my torments. But as Eunos later pointed out to me, he was duty bound to serve me, to follow my every instruction to the letter. And so as I was the mere puppet of Thanggam, so Eunos in turn became guided, at one remove, by the will of the fungus. Although I had no memory of the incident myself, Eunos assured me that I begged him to assist me in my frantic search for animal droppings. What alternative did he have but to obey? Retrospectively I would wish that perhaps Eunos were less strictly bound to his code of conduct, but being ignorant of the methods of reprogramming him, it remained beyond my power to change his basic motivations. I did urge him, should any similar such circumstance again arise, to give serious thought as to whether I was acting rationally, and whether it might not be more in my interests to ignore the more bizarre instructions, and act on his own initiative.

To this Eunos had two objections. Firstly, he argued, as an android he was incapable of initiative, which he defined as the ability to act without outside prompting, an action which is unprogrammed and therefore *sui generis*. Secondly, he mistrusted his own ability to judge whether I was in my right mind. Indeed, he claimed, there had been many occasions in the past when he doubted my rationality. He went as far as to say that he could count very few

instances at all on which I had acted logically to further my own best interests.

When I reacted angrily to this suggestion, he cited several humiliating instances, including the acquisition of Raffles, my pet mouse-snake. It was remarkable how often Eunos found opportunities to denigrate and object to this harmless, innocent creature. Were he not fundamentally incapable of such emotions, I might almost have suspected the robot of jealousy.

However, that is all peripheral to my story. As I was still in the grip of the Thanggam, Eunos fell under his sway too, doubling the amount of animal droppings gathered for our master's nourishment. The weather was hot and dry, and the surface of Thanggam's cap steamed with rank air and scorched my feet. Clouds of brown dust hung in the air above the crowded ducts, down which orifices I poured armful after armful of mixed manure. Thanggam accepted all types of ordure, but that left by a certain species of bat pleased him best of all, and it was in pursuit of such delicacies that I was sent out one day on a special errand, to a cave that housed these bats by the thousand.

On this occasion, unusually, Eunos stayed behind. I had been ordered to clean out Thanggam's gills, and had delegated this tedious chore to the android, while I enjoyed a few moment's respite from the shrill demands of the fungal overlord. Was I plotting my escape? I was not, and feel no shame in admitting as much. For the psychological irons clamped around my thought processes would admit no such considerations. Thanggam's voice carried over long distances, and I could not imagine the man strong enough to tolerate the sting of the mushroom's rebuke for such time as it would take to travel out of earshot. In every waking moment, Thanggam's lash played about my ears, and echoed as a warning in my mind. The price of disobedience, I knew, was too high to be paid.

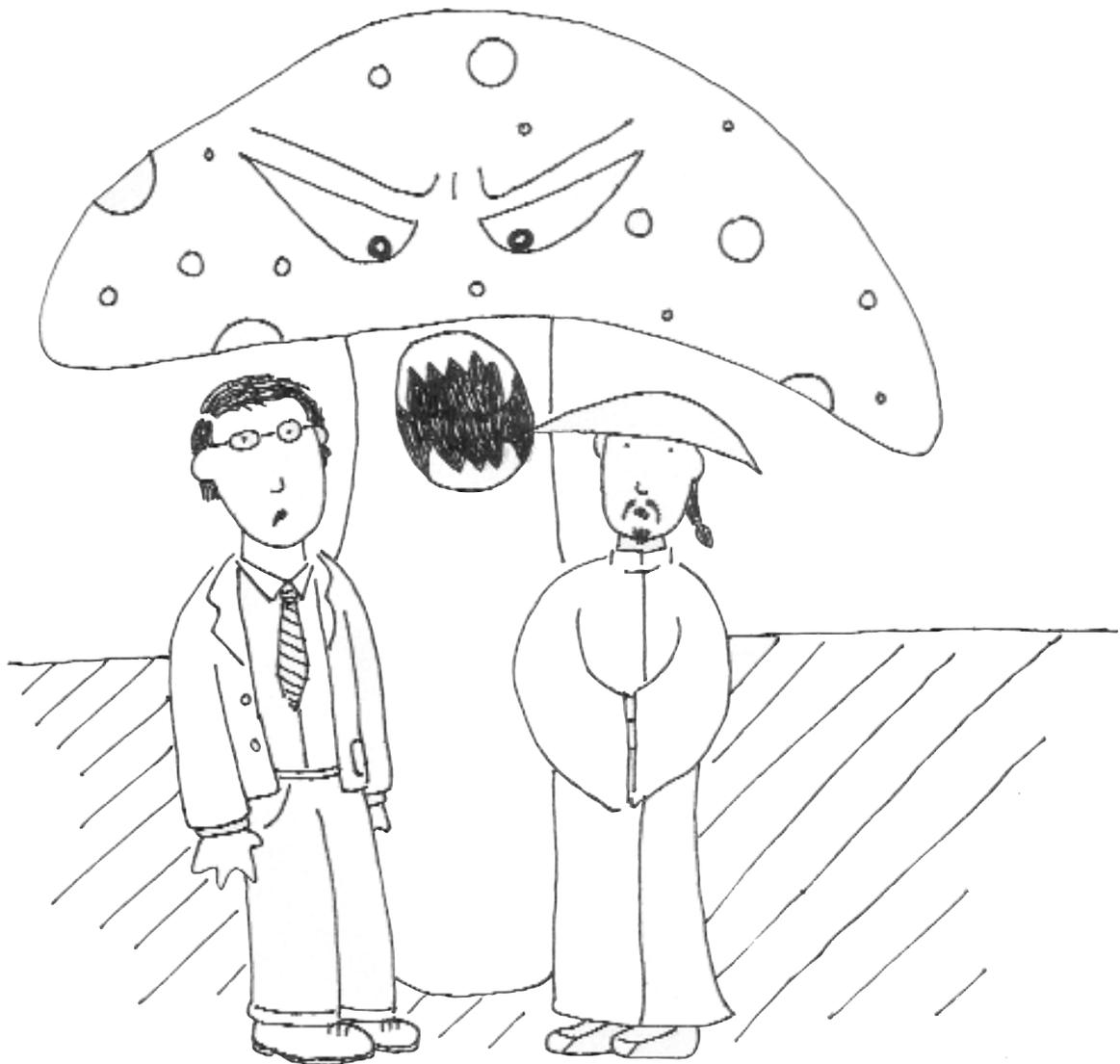
Nevertheless, a little dallying en route to the cave was, I told myself, forgivable, and for a few glorious minutes I was able to wander amongst the alien trees at my leisure, breathing in the soft scent of blossoms, and treading on a fragrant carpet of what resembled pine needles. I had no

need of a map to reach my destination, for Thanggam himself had implanted the route I should take directly into my memory. I saw the path in my head before I had even trodden it, a disconcerting experience, as though I were dredging up memories of a journey taken in ages past. Creatures bustled and twittered in the branches overhead, and Raffles, my constant companion even in these dark days, scuttled from my pocket, and darted up the bark of a tree in pursuit of some insect morsel. I let him go, reassuring myself that he would return anon. As if by instinct, my eyes scanned the forest floor for piles of manure, no matter how small or dried up. Thanggam's needs had, it seemed, imprinted themselves on my habits. I could not

pass the sight of a pile of ordure without filling my pockets.

The trees thinned as the terrain became steeper and boulders, half hidden by wild grasses and lichen, sat like meditating hermits by the side of the path. Soon I was scrambling up a slope of loose shale on my hands and knees, the sharp edges of stones cutting into my dusty hands. But I dared not stop, even to tend to my wounds. Thanggam grew hungry. Even here, at a distance of several kilometres, his pangs were audible and painful. I pressed on, as the day's heat reached its climax, finally gaining the cool shadows of the cave mouth a little after noon.

The cavern exhaled a foul breath, redolent of old milk. But I was becoming inured to unpleasant aromas, having spent days amidst the



stench of Thanggam himself. At least the interior of the cave offered some lull from the fierce sun. I listened hard, and gazed into the darkness, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the conditions. Nothing about the place indicated the presence of a colony of bats. Panic rose into my throat. What if the bats had migrated, or worse, died? Thanggam would be angry. Nobody who has not experienced for themselves the fury of a giant mushroom should scoff at these misgivings. Thanggam's cruelty exceeded all human bounds.

By degrees the mouth of the cave shrank to a crooked, blindingly white eye behind me, and the temperature began to drop. The sweat seemed to freeze on my skin, and I hugged myself. The walls of the cave were wet to the touch, and I felt my way along, seeking the image I saw before me in memory: a wide cavern, gloomily lit by narrow beams of light from cracks in the ceiling. The false memory reminded me of an inverted amphitheatre. Tier upon tier of bats, in long, undulating rows, hung from the bare rock by their claws. From what Thanggam had told me, the air should have been thick with their bickering, their fidgeting wings, and the ground plastered with a heavy encrustation of bat droppings. But that was not the scene I witnessed. The cavern was there, and shafts of tremulous sunlight pierced the ceiling, but not a single bat adorned the walls. The ground beneath my feet was chill, bare rock. And in the centre of the cavern, on a small camp bed constructed from dead branches and moss, sat an old man dressed in animal skins, smoking a pipe.

In that moment, I was oblivious to the enormity of my discovery. Another human being, or so it appeared, dwelt on Kadaloor. I was not, as I had feared, the last of my kind to walk that planet. And where one old man sat in a cave, perhaps there were others too, in other caves, resisting extinction at the hands of those perfidious violet beachballs, the Punggol.

But, as I say, such speculations came to me only later, in less fraught circumstances. In my current mental bondage, I sought the answer to only one question.

"Where are the bat droppings?" I asked, and

waited impatiently for my Dover and Somerset to translate.

The old man waved to me with both hands, and smiled, but remained seated, and silent. I decided to approach him, and force him to tell me the whereabouts of the bats and their excrement. Thanggam's patience, I could sense, was growing thin, and his aural torture might be let loose on my ears at any moment. I would throttle this foolish old man if I had to. Anything to placate that toadstool tyrant.

As I grew closer, I could see that the old man had constructed a whole set of rustic furniture from the detritus of the forest floor. Socks were drying on a home-made clotheshorse, and the remains of a small fire smouldered in a circle of stones. It was clear to me that he was an inhabitant of long standing, and this served to increase my suspicions about the absence of the bats.

"Tell me where those bat droppings are!" I yelled, grabbing the elderly camper by his rough hewn vest. It was then I noticed something that made my heart sink. All his clothing consisted of animal skins sewn together. His whole ensemble was a patchwork of glossy black fur, mixed with streaks of a kind of dark, rubbery hairless skin. The man was dressed entirely in bat fur.

Just then my Dover and Somerset burst into life.

"What do you want with me?" spoke the mechanical voice from the speaker grille. The old man had not spoken, as far as I knew, but he was peering into the camera lens, an addition to the translation box devised by my android servant. The old man was making the strangest facial expressions imaginable.

"I am alone here, and poor. If you have come to rob me, then I can offer you nothing other than a little preserved bat meat," said the Dover and Somerset. "I am down to my last few strips, but you can have it anyway. Only spare my life!"

My astonished gaze moved from the old man to the machine, and back again. He gazed up at me with imploring eyes, tweaking his straggly grey beard with anxious fingers. Was I in the presence of another telepath? I was soon to be proved wrong, but I hardly minded that. For the truth, as the old saw has it, would set me free.

Next issue:

**Valiant Razalia**

# HELEN AND HER MAGIC CAT

