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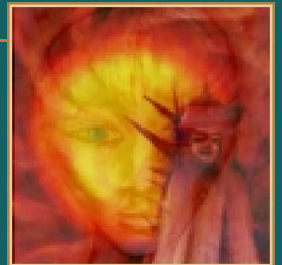
june 2002

speculative fiction

science fiction

Life-Force!

Joseph Green



fantasy

Tech Support

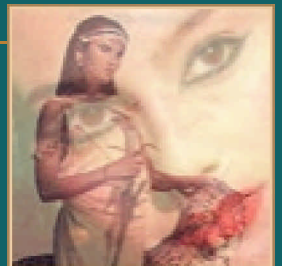
Megan Powell



flash

Pharoah

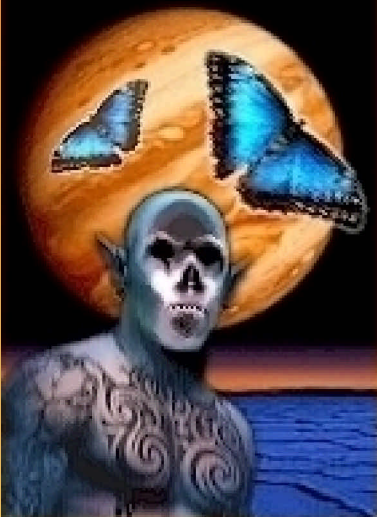
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classic

The Truth About Pyecraft

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s p e c u l a t i v e f i c t i o n

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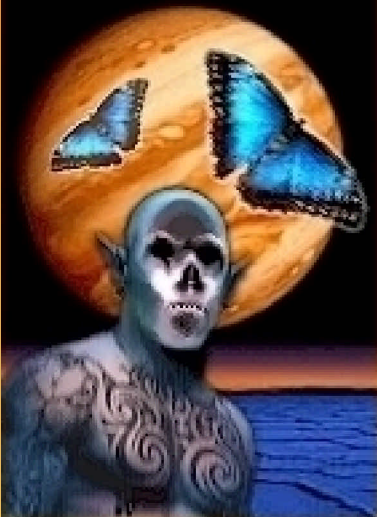
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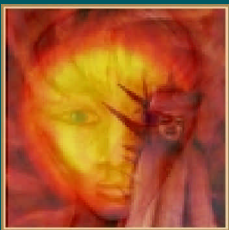


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"Most interesting extraterrestrial life form I've ever examined. So absolutely humanoid, excepting the lack of hair and slightly smaller skeletal structure, and yet so incredibly different a metabolism."

Life-Force!

Joe Green worked for 37 years in the American space program, six building missile bases, 31 at the Kennedy Space Center. At the latter he was a tech writer in Unmanned Launch Operations, worked in the Apollo program to its end, then settled into the Space Shuttle program. He retired from NASA as Deputy Chief of the Education Office at KSC. Somewhere along the way he found time to write five SF novels (DAW, Doubleday, ACE, Gollancz) and about 70 shorter works (*Analog*, *F&SF*, original anthologies).

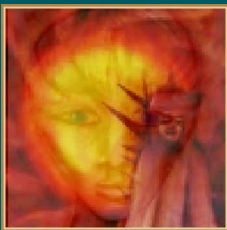
Whether you admire or despise the human species, it's hard to deny that they are a tough bunch. Humans have a tremendous will to live — almost, it seems, an independent "Life-Force!" And to survive, the latter will do what it must.... The story first appeared in *New Worlds Science Fiction*, November 1962.

Yoachim Haralaqure looked skyward when he heard the low, vibrant hum of the approaching flitter, and his narrow young face grew angry. Around him the laughing, chattering crowd of juvenile Hued Ones fell silent as the small craft landed. When they saw Scott at the stick they broke into yells of welcome and surrounded the stubby, stalwart old diplomat as he emerged. He greeted them in friendly fashion, speaking their language with an ease Yoachim could only envy, and made his way through the jostling throng of bright naked bodies to the other Earthman.

"Is something wrong?" asked Yoachim frostily. Scott was the head of the small Earth Legation on this planet and carried the title of Minister. There were just two other Earthmen in the Legation, and at the moment Yoachim was the only visitor. His student's permit stated that he reported to, and accepted the authority of, the resident Minister. Scott's first action, unfortunately, had been an attempt to persuade him to accept a position in government service and join the staff here, an offer Yoachim declined with noticeable asperity. Relations between them had been barely cordial since the refusal.

"Not a thing," answered Scott, taking no notice of the cold tone. "It's just that you came over here for a four-day stay, and it's been two weeks. I wouldn't have bothered you even so, but this is the night of the Pageant and I think you should see it."

"I've never heard of this joyous celebration, and do not anticipate that any primitive poetry these isolated people have worked into their little ceremonies will be worth



recording. I have found my interest here. Why, already I've outlined their segment in my epic; and composed a few trial stanzas. I think I have the-the *feel* of the Hued Ones already. Their gorgeous colour tones I will translate into sparkling words, recreating for the reader—"

"I thought you were a planetary biologist," interrupted Scott, leading the way to the small house where Joachim was staying. The slender young man followed without protest, and once inside began to gather his belongings.

"I seem to recall explaining previously that my profession is that of *poet*, and while it may be true my graduate degree is in extraterrestrial biology, this in no way places it first among my interests."

"I've heard of this new fad on Earth, calling your job your hobby and vice-versa," said Scott, waiting impatiently while Joachim packed.

"Oh, please don't think I'm contemptuous of planetary biology," Joachim hastened to say. "After all, it is the variety and multitude of life on all the explored planets which prompted me to begin my epic, and the P.B. Research Foundation which provided the funds for this graduate's field trip. My love, though, will always be the verse. *Life-force!*, when completed, will be the most original poem since Sargin's *Nebulose*."

"Never heard of it."

Joachim spluttered in indignation a moment, then consigned the old diplomat to the realms of poetic ignorance and changed the subject. "What can you tell me of the history of these wonderful people? That briefing by your before I left was very sketchy."

"Quite a bit. They were here when the colonization ship crashed on landing, a thousand Eryears ago. Very primitive types, then. They slept in caves, ate fruit, drank water and lay around in the sunshine. They had no fire, no weapons. Climbed trees when in danger. They had a long lifespan, maybe three-hundred Eryears, but at that time a very low fertility rate."

"Why, that's amazing ! I assume they attained their present state, then, through help from the settlers?"

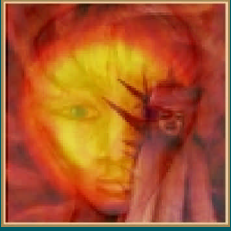
"I suppose you could say that. The Pageant will explain more fully. What do you think of them from the viewpoint of a planetary biologist?"

"Most interesting extraterrestrial life form I've ever examined. So absolutely humanoid, excepting the lack of hair and slightly smaller skeletal structure, and yet so incredibly different a metabolism. Has anyone made a serious effort to analyze this ability to produce energy directly from sunlight? The bright skin is the receiving mechanism, obviously, but receiving is the smallest part of the marvel. How is this energy transformed into usable form and passed through the circulatory system? And why is their blood red when it's half chlorophyll?"

"I can't answer specific questions. When the ship crashed, lost, all contact with Earth was broken. Settlers and crewmen had a tough time staying alive. All the scientific and technical skills available were needed to find or produce food. There was neither time nor energy to spare for research. About a hundred years after landing the Earth people decided to separate the species. They rounded up all the Hued Ones and brought them to Newland. There was no further open contact between them until I arrived."

"I'm no biologist," the old man went on after a moment, "nor an anthropologist. You don't have to be to appreciate the Hued Ones. During the nine-hundred Eryears since they were expelled from their original home they've progressed roughly fifty

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thousand years. They now have gunpowder and are starting on steampower. They have a strongly organized central government that rules well and fairly. They found their conception problem and solved it. Multiplying like flies. They'll soon be too big for Newland and need to get back on Hope. War then, probably."

Yoachim closed the last bag with the sealing strip and Scott picked up two of them. When they emerged from the house they were again surrounded by the friendly children, who formed a small procession behind them as they walked to the flitter. Waiting there were Yo-san and Jinna, Yoachim's host and hostess, and an older Hued One whom he recognized as the town leader. Scott and the elder held a brief, intense conversation as the young Earthman was thanking the two small, sparkling red people for their hospitality. Then they were in the flitter and Scott sent it vaulting skyward in a swift, steep climb.

Below them the scattered town of the Hued Ones dropped rapidly away, the odd little wooden houses with the sliding roofs fading swiftly into the general brown of the rocky hills. The beautiful humanoids used their dwellings largely for protection during the night and in bad weather, spending most of their time in the open. If home in good weather for some reason, they opened the roof to let in the strong Barren sunlight.

Yoachim, despite the protection of clothes and a hat, had already burned and was now starting to tan.

The young Earthman had stayed with Yo-san and Jinna because Scott knew them well and had persuaded them to accept him. It had been one of the most unusual and rewarding experiences of his life. It had taken him several days to grow accustomed to the family's nudity — especially that of the nubile young females — and the fact that everyone in the house slept in the same room, but after a few days it no longer bothered him. And in return the bright-skinned humanoids, after an initial period of coolness, accepted him as a member of the family and revealed themselves to be warm and friendly people.

The flitter, which was Earthmade and fast, was already flying over ocean water white with lime, and behind them the small continent of Newland was fading in the distance. The planet Barren's second and larger continent, Hope, was four-hundred Ermiles away.

"I can tell you a little about their insides," resumed Scott, after he had the course set and the controls on automatic. "They have a few unknown glands, but also most large human ones. The heart and lungs are almost Earthnormal. Reproductive organs are virtually identical. Body tissue is different, but in a way so subtle it's defied our amateurish efforts at analysis. All skins are white to red, with all possible shades between, and as you've seen, they sparkle in sunlight. Apparently only their energy comes from the sun; they must have fruits and water for building material. A full-grown adult can go for months without food if he has plenty of water."

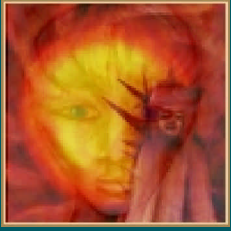
"What I would give for laboratory facilities and the corpse of a recently deceased Hued One," said Yoachim softly, staring out the viewglass at the endless reaches of the white sea.

"The lab we don't have, but you might be surprised to find how easy it is to get a fresh corpse," said Scott, with no particular emphasis.

Yoachim turned and stared at the old man in mild surprise. "Would you explain that somewhat cryptic remark?"

"I could, but the Pageant will do it much better. There's Hope ahead now, on the horizon."

"Most interesting extraterrestrial life form I've ever examined. So absolutely humanoid, excepting the lack of hair and slightly smaller skeletal structure, and yet so incredibly different a metabolism."



The dim, faint line in the far distance solidified into land as the fast aircraft ate up the miles. In a very few minutes they were settling toward the planet's single airport, in the city of Hope. There was no traffic but themselves, and no Controller, there being only two of the Earthmade flying craft on the planet. The population had increased to about four-hundred thousand since its small start a thousand Eryears back, but almost everyone lived within fifty miles of the main settlement. Very little effort had been expended on fast transportation.

It was growing dark as they landed and got out of the flitter, the mountains of Barren casting long shadows over the city. Scott had a land vehicle waiting. Moments later they were bouncing down the unpaved road to the amphitheatre in a wagon pulled by a Barren draft animal, the old diplomat handling the reins as skillfully as he handled the stick on the flitter. All around them other vehicles, some powered by steam-engines but most drawn by animals, were hurrying along the same route. Hundreds of people were on foot. There was a sense of excitement in the air, the anticipation of hardworking people seeking a holiday from care.

The crowd grew steadily more dense, the walkers becoming so numerous the vehicles were slowed to a crawl. They passed one group of young people, their tanned skins shining in the last of the light, their arms around each other, who were singing in good voice and excellent rhythm a song forgotten on Earth a thousand years ago. Here and there throughout the crowd the slender student heard gay voices calling like windblown echoes, saw bright eyes flashing in the fading light, young arms clasped, radiant faces uplifted to a light-spangled sky. "Hey, Joe" "Waltzing--" "Sing softly, my-" the strong voices blended and rose and fell behind them, a patchwork quilt of vibrant sound. They sang of joy in life and belief in love, of youth and need and purpose.

"Son, if you're really writing a poem about life-force in the universe, and you're going to make something of it, you're on the right planet but you're studying the wrong people," said Scott as he manoeuvred the awkward cart among a swarm of laughing, chattering teenagers. "The Hued Ones are an interesting subject, true, but the real life-force you're seeking is in these youngsters you see right around you."

Yoachim stared at the old man with patent disbelief on his sensitive features. "I fail to see any comparison," he said stiffly.

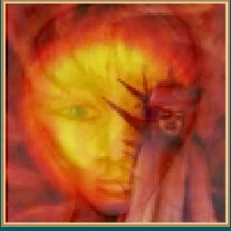
"Now you do, but the Pageant will change that."

The old diplomat turned off the main road, following the steady procession of walkers and vehicles along a much more narrow street to a rock wall at its end. He hitched the animal to a convenient rail, and they joined the hurrying throngs passing through an open archway and hunted seats.

The amphitheatre was a huge affair, a natural formation that seemed to be an extinct volcano crater, with rising, sloping walls surrounding a central flat interior over two-hundred feet wide. One half of the wall had been converted into seats. In some places the rock had been chipped into tiers, in others heavy tree halves attached with the flat side up. The whole arrangement was crude but massive, with seats for at least seventy-thousand people. Heat-lights blazed above the flat field, supplying fair illumination, but the seats were lost in flickering shadows. The stands were already approaching capacity, a small crowd collecting on the flat land at their feet.

Without warning the brilliance of the heat-lights dimmed, fading to a smoky red, like predatory eyes in the gloom of the moonless Barren night. A hush fell over the huge audience. A feeling of strain, of breathless waiting, filled the crowd. Then from somewhere in the centre of the darkened field a clear soprano voice lifted in song,

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soaring effortlessly through a high introduction. A baritone joined it. One of the dim lights in the centre brightened again, showing the two singers standing together, facing the side where the audience sat.

The slender young man listened, impressed; there was a faint but haunting familiarity about the song that tugged hard at his memory. As he sat musing, the people around him began singing, a few at first, then more and more, until everyone in the audience had joined the performers.

"A childhood nursery prayer," said Scott quietly. "These people adopted it as their anthem."

The song ended, the lights flared brightly and the Pageant began. A crumpled and twisted structure now stood in the middle of the field. It was a transport in miniature, a model of the huge carriers that had left Earth by the thousands before the Solar War. In front of it were perhaps fifty actors, of whom twenty were lying rigid on the ground. There were almost twice as many men as women among the standing ones.

"Symbolic representation of the crash landing," the old diplomat muttered, low-voiced. "Over a third of the people killed, including a large group of pregnant women."

On the field the living people picked up shovels and began to cover the prostrate bodies with imaginary soil. The strains of a mighty funeral march swelled from a hidden orchestra, flowing over the audience in a river of sound. When it was over the survivors gathered in council, talked a moment, then set out to explore their surroundings.

"You're seeing the actual history of these people condensed from days into minutes. Everything is symbolic, but it's all reasonably plain. Those scouts are coming back now, for instance, with a few pieces of fruit, to show that food is very hard to find here."

The proffered fruit was examined under a huge fake microscope, then passed out to the group of actors and eaten. Two of them lay down and died.

The remainder began to erect temporary housing, using poles and leaves waiting unobtrusively on the ground. In a few minutes a tiny model village sprang up. Everyone was working at some task, the entire scene resembling a busy antbed. The scouts who had brought the first food continued to move in and out of the colony, each time bringing in smaller and smaller portions.

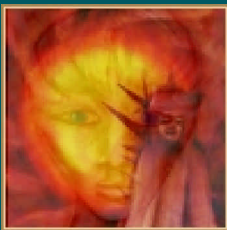
The settlement was finished. People were sitting about in the streets, apparently too weak to work. And then scouts came in holding two upright creatures by the arms. Their beautiful pink skins sparkled like jewels in the flaring lights.

There was a concerted gasp from the mass audience and Yoachim gasped with them, leaning forward in his seat.

"Done this way for dramatic effect," said Scott. "They knew about the Hued Ones the day they landed here, and they'd already caught some and let them go."

The shorter Hued One was a female, a very pretty one, standing nude as usual in the midst of her captors. The men were poking and pinching her with eager fingers. Hairless head erect, her face expressionless, she ignored the ceremony, doing her part by the compulsion of rough hands. Her companion was so securely trussed he could do nothing but glare at his tormentors.

There was a swirl of movement on the field, people gathering into groups and swiftly dissolving again, and then the women formed into a determined band, waved their arms and shouted, and advanced on the Hued Girl. The scouts holding her ran backwards in symbolic retreat, made a half-circle and brought her near the centre



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again in a different place. The men who were married pacified their wives and led them off to their huts, while those who remained adopted a furtive manner of walking and went in a group to the girl. The scouts held her immovable while each man went through a mock rape. When it was over, the men returned to their huts. One scout bound the girl thoroughly and stayed with her.

"Symbolic again, of course," said Scott in his quiet voice. "Most of the men who were keeping sex-slaves had one apiece. There were untold thousands of Hued Ones here, and each family lived to itself. Easy prey for two or three determined men working together."

"But *why*?" asked Yoachim, his voice strained. "You said the Hued Ones were primitives then, living like animals —"

"Why? The ratio of men to women in the colonists was over two to one. They voted against polyandry, thinking jealousy would prevent it working properly. The Hued Ones were the only women available to the bachelors. Back then, they spent most of their time lying about in the sunshine, soaking up energy. They enjoyed sex whenever the mood struck them, regardless of possible audience. Can you imagine the effect on the lonely, unhappy men watching? Can you find it in your heart to blame them when I tell you most of the females were willing companions after they were captured? At that time the Hued males acquired mates in virtually the same fashion."

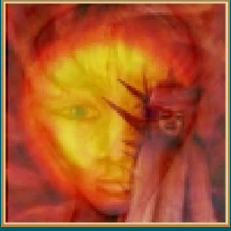
Yoachim did not answer. Below them the huts were stirring to life again. A new day was breaking and there was work to be done. The people emerged and began attending to various tasks. One woman started to play with a group of dolls, feeding them bits of fruit and water. Others cooked leaves from the hillside trees and dumped the product on the ground after a single taste. The scouts continued to move in and out of the settlement every few minutes, carrying their loads of fruit, and now on their return trips they brought in more Hued Ones. The rape ceremony was repeated several times, and the securely tied females left alone at the fringes of the action when their men were not with them. The males, all carefully trussed, were herded together until there were six in their group.

The heartbeat of the Pageant speeded up, the events coming faster and faster. The slender young man glanced at his timepiece, and was amazed to see that two Erhours had passed.

Now the scouts were returning empty-handed, trip after trip. Some of the dolls were buried with hasty honours, and mothers stood weeping by the graves. At last a conference was called and the entire colony gathered together, shouting and waving their arms. Fights broke out. Strong men walked away from the group, waving their fists and shouting. Women wept, then stood silent and waited. And in the end some strong faction won, and the rest agreed with the majority. The people as a whole approached the six male Hued Ones.

"The question under discussion: 'Resolved, that the Hued Ones are animals.' Resolution of debate: 'Affirmative,' " said the old man's quiet voice.

Some of the men in the main group broke away, ran to their captive girls, freed them of their bonds and left the lighted area with them, running swiftly into the darkness. Most of the men found their slaves and brought them over to the group. When they were all assembled by the tail of the wrecked ship there were six men and six women of the Hued Ones captive, with the entire colony gathered around them. As the audience watched in breathless anticipation, a large man with a hammer walked around the group of Hued Ones, striking each a blow on the head that was



not symbolic. The males fought as best they could, but none got away. A moment later all were lying unconscious on the ground.

The young poet rose to his feet, a cry of protest on his lips, as he sensed the inevitable climax swiftly approaching. Scott pulled him back to his seat, holding him firmly with one wrinkled hand. "Quiet! There's nothing you can do to stop them."

Yoachim turned away and hid his face. He could not hide from the low, intense voice of the old diplomat.

"Can you imagine how it was for those first survivors? Can you picture a man watching his new-born baby shrivel and grow thin, watch its mother's breasts dry up from lack of food, feel his own stomach clinging to his backbone, and look around him and see on all sides the idle, carefree, idiotic Hued Ones, leading lives of ease and plenty on water and a few fruits? And can you picture the emotions of those men who had the strength to take their captive sex-partners, when the decision was reached, and turn them in for the community meal? Many couldn't, and so took their girls and left the colony, to die in the interior. Those who surrendered their slaves lived. No, my young friend, the progress of the Hued Ones is as nothing compared to the power and drive of our own people. Selfish, yes, as life is always selfish, being dedicated wholly to its own survival — but at least a force, not an accident of nature. The Hued Ones were the greatest sybarites in the known universe, having little to do but eat fruit, drink water and make love in the sunshine. A thousand years ago, they were indeed animals."

"But the Wilson Declaration of Humanoid recognition —"

"Hadn't even been postulated, much less adopted, when these people left Earth."

On the field the twelve unconscious Hued Ones were being hoisted by their feet and hung head downward on hooks protruding from the sides of the mock spaceship. Two men with knives went down the line of unconscious humanoids, leaving bright gushes of red behind them.

"That which is animal can be eaten," said the old diplomat heavily. At his side Yoachim had begun to cry uncontrollably, the tears flowing down his smooth cheeks. His eyes now closed, he was muttering indistinguishable words in an unbroken stream, and his tanned face had faded to a deathly white. He had not been able to look away during the slaughter.

"And there," the calm, emotionless voice went on relentlessly, "is *Life-force!*"

As the butcher-actors began to dismember the bodies, a host of men emerged from a hidden door and advanced on the field, carrying huge pots of uncooked food. Portable tables appeared as if by magic, the pots were set over fires, the meat was distributed so that each pot had a small share, and a feast was prepared for the multitude.

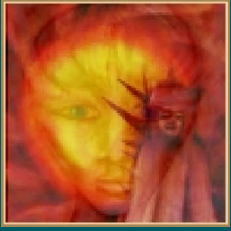
Most of the crowd rose to its feet and started descending to the tables. The Pageant was over.

The old diplomat angrily brushed the tears from his own eyes — who was he to weep, who had seen this twice before? — and led the sobbing youth away.

Yoachim accepted the glass of relax with a hand that still shook slightly. His colour was better, though, and his head had cleared. He had managed to at least partially recover his sense of objectivity.

"I suppose it's possible to understand how they could, in their desire to live, turn

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to cannibalism. But why, when you tell me the two races have been separated for nine-hundred Eryears, do they still persist in this orgiastic ceremony? These people have regained their cultural standing to the point where they are at least nineteenth century in outlook, and the Hued Ones speed of development has brought them to the point of fifteenth. Both are thoroughly civilized, completely human races."

Scott rose and began to pace the floor. "To stop is to acknowledge that it has been wrong all along; to admit that the native humanoids are not animals. That is why these people still eat, at least in ritual form, the flesh of Hued Ones. They cannot admit the survival of their ancestors, for most of a hundred years, depended on cannibalism. The practice stopped, incidentally, only when the Hued Ones were decimated to the point where they were no longer an important source of food."

"And the Hued Ones' progress since — the arousal of the survival instinct on a species scale?"

"Yes, this being brought about by the individual recognition of each member that they must band together and fight, or perish. All the fighting instincts were there, but held in abeyance by a complete lack of need. The colonists gave them one."

There was silence for a moment. Then Yoachim asked, "What part do I play in your plans? I don't think you took me there just to shock me."

"Hardly. I need a good planetary biologist. I'm organizing a team here, our purpose being to get these people back on track. I've already requested an extres-psychologist from Earth, preferably a graduate student like yourself, and I've received a grant of funds. Before I can present Barren to Earth Central as a civilized planet, ready for recognition and admission into the Union, I must stamp out the cannibalism and force the colonists to recognize the humanity of the Hued Ones. To do so will create a national trauma of no mean proportions, but it must be done, and the effects faced. Your part calls for a buildup of the economy here by importation of edible animals capable of surviving and reproducing on these rocky hills. Meat is still a luxury in Hope, and food always at a premium."

"May I ask why it is important that these people join the Union?"

"Certainly. This is a comparatively new planet, and these rocks contain thick deposits of uranium. Earth is in desperate need of new sources. Within five Eryears there will be a mining colony here, whether established in peace or by force. I'm trying to make it in peace. Underneath your somewhat brittle exterior, I thought I saw the makings of a man. I'd like to know if I was right."

"I hope you are. We'll have the chance to find out — together."

"And your epic poem, *Life-force*, which was to be the greatest thing since *Nebulose*?"

"I've no intention of giving up my hobby of writing poetry," said Yoachim. His voice was growing dull with sleepiness, his head sagging to his chest.

"Write all the poetry you like. I still think I just hired myself a good biologist," said Scott softly, and rose to call his servant to put the younger man to bed.

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Tech Support

Megan Powell lives in suburban Philadelphia with her husband and requisite feline writing aids. She has sold short fiction to various markets, including *Underworlds*, *Kinships*, *HandHeldCrime*, *Rogue Worlds* and *Aoife's Kiss*. Her fantasy novel *Vocation* is available from Double Dragon eBooks and she edits the speculative fiction webzine *Fables*.

"Tech Support" is part of a series that is either cross-genre or schizophrenic — it's too soon to be sure, but they're fun stories to write. Unfortunately for the characters, the author's idea of 'fun' often involves relatives and other sorts of havoc. This particular story was also influenced by the fact that the author is surrounded by geeks.

*"Unfortunately
— or perhaps
fortunately,
since I've been
known to jam
my foot in my
mouth up to
the knee — my
younger
brother swept
into the room,
wearing his
godawful
orange buba. It
was mostly the
orange that
was godawful
— some colors
should be
reserved for
emergencies."*

So, you're a private eye?" Lota Anyanike said from under my desk. "I'm very specifically not. I don't own a fedora, and I don't have a license." "Oh. Why don't you get one?"

"I'm not a hat person." I couldn't see her face, but I was pretty sure she grinned. "I don't want to bother. I'd have to work for somebody else for a few years." And, considering that the daily frustrations of working for someone else had contributed to my desire for a career change, that would seem to defeat the purpose. "Besides, I've got moral objections to jumping through hoops."

"Eh. Bill Gates is the devil but I still got my Microsoft certification."

I might have met the devil a few weeks earlier. Bill Gates's cutthroat business tactics and dubiously designed software no longer impressed me as particularly evil. Lota emerged from under the desk and booted up the computer.

The new office was Abby's idea. She'd gone from disapproving sister-in-law to enthusiastic business manager in record time. I hadn't planned on having an office, but Abby'd insisted it would lend legitimacy to the business. Legitimacy hadn't been high on my list of priorities, but I didn't have the heart to discourage her.

I'd at least managed to convince her that a large office wasn't necessary, though I didn't bother trying to veto her design decisions. And I had to admit Abby did have pretty good taste, even for such inherently boring objects as office furniture. The place looked perfectly respectable, which would last until I started leaving junk mail and fast food wrappers strewn on the floor.



"Unfortunately — or perhaps fortunately, since I've been known to jam my foot in my mouth up to the knee — my younger brother swept into the room, wearing his godawful orange buba. It was mostly the orange that was godawful — some colors should be reserved for emergencies."

Lota settled herself behind the desk to set up my internet connection. I'm a competent enough computer user, but part of that competence stems from a conservative assessment of my abilities. If I don't recognize a file extension, I assume that I shouldn't mess with it; I respect System directories and give them wide berth.

"So if you're not a private investigator, what are you?" Lota asked.

"A consultant. At least, that's what it'll say on the business cards." Abby'd designed them. Now she was working on letterhead.

"Nicely vague. How's business?"

"It's been all right." I'd had a string of small cases — practically favors — for people in my neighborhood. And then there was Dante Principe who, regardless of whether or not he was literally the devil, had provided a chunk of startup capital. "And Abby's already talking about advertising."

"She's being pushy?" Lota's company had provided the hardware, software and training for the last upgrade at Abby's company, which was how Abby knew her and why she'd recommended her to set up my system. So Lota had probably seen Abby in corporate maternal mode, protective of her co-workers' rights and feelings.

"A little," I confessed. "But it's kind of nice to have somebody in my family who doesn't disapprove." That wasn't quite accurate. Abby still disapproved, she'd just been distracted. My parents were reasonably tolerant of Ogundana Consulting, as they'd been reasonably tolerant of other brilliant ideas I'd had in the past. My younger brother didn't disapprove of my new career choice, but I've got little respect for his opinions so that was actually sort of a bad thing.

"Have you ever been shot at?"

"Uh, no."

"My brother's a cop," she explained. "I think about things like that."

"It's sort of refreshing."

"That I'm morbid?"

I shook my head. "Usually people look disappointed when I say no." She smiled, which was a pretty charming expression.

"I hope it's not me," I added, and it dawned on me that I was flirting and relatively out of practice.

"Their bad taste," Lota assured me. "If it helps, know that there's at least one person who hopes you don't get shot at."

And then she was all business, sorting through licensing agreements and other forms of documentation. I vowed that I'd be careful with those pieces of paper, I'd put them somewhere safe where they wouldn't get anything spilled on them, someplace where I wouldn't forget I'd put them. Just in case she ever needed to see that pile of papers again.

"And I won't give you the idiot advice," Lota said. "You seem like a reasonably intelligent man, one who knows that a computer needs to be plugged in to work."

I returned her smile. There was a gap between her front teeth. Normally I don't find that particularly attractive — maybe it's a generational thing, but I think Arnold Schwarzenegger, not sex kitten — yet somehow she made it work. I realized that this wasn't just empty flirting: it was genuinely nice to meet someone who didn't think I was an idiot.

"But if you've got any problems, don't hesitate to call," she added. Maybe I was flattering myself, but I didn't think she was just talking about tech support.

Unfortunately — or perhaps fortunately, since I've been known to jam my foot in my mouth up to the knee — my younger brother swept into the room, wearing



his godawful orange buba. It was mostly the orange that was godawful — some colors should be reserved for emergencies. I usually felt neutral about bubas, except my brother's donning of traditional African garb had been accompanied by much spouting of crap about motherlands and roots and upholding traditions. I might have been able to take him more seriously if he'd ever set foot in Nigeria, but even then I'm not sure.

Annoying though he is, Ekundayo can also be endearing, and a wide grin split his face. He had a wrapped package under his arm, which he presented to me. I introduced him and Lota, and she made good her escape. Well, perhaps that's an unfair characterization. She didn't seem in any particular hurry to escape me or Ekundayo, but her work was done and I suppose she guessed we wanted a chance to chat.

"Very cute," he commented.

"I guess." I didn't add that she'd still be here if he hadn't come barging in.

Ekundayo gave me a brotherly nudge in the ribs that wasn't quite justified by our actual relationship. "Come on. How long's it been? You can't tell me you weren't looking."

"I don't recall saying that." I consoled myself that I'd at least gotten a good look at Lota's ass on the way out. And I did have a way to contact her, so it wasn't as though I could blame my occasionally idiotic brother for really spoiling anything. I turned my attention to the package I held. "What's this?"

"It's an office-warming present. Go on, open it." He looked like an excited six-year-old.

I tore off the wrapping paper and stared into the large eyes of a stylized statue. I supposed I should have expected Ekundayo to start forcing African art on me at some point. But I had to admit that, even though I'm not much of an art person, there was something appealing about the statue.

"We're named for Ogun, so clearly there's some connection," Ekundayo said. "And you're embarking on a warrior's path, so it's doubly appropriate."

I really hoped that "warrior's path" prediction didn't come to pass; I'm not excessively cowardly, but neither am I a fan of gratuitous pain. "Or maybe I'll become a blacksmith," I smiled. He wasn't the only one who knew a bit of mythology.

I half expected him to be offended, but he smiled back. Maybe he thought his enthusiasm for all things African was rubbing off on me.

"And computers are technology, so I suppose they fall into Ogun's purview," Ekundayo added. "So Lota might be a good match for you."

"I wasn't planning on asking Ogun's permission. I wasn't planning anything," I quickly added, but not before that silly grin reappeared. I expected him to start singing *Iyapo and Lota, sitting in a tree...* but he refrained. I set the statue down on the desk and decided that I definitely liked its looks. Not that I could infer much about the figure's expression, but it seemed like Ogun belonged on my desk, master of all he approvingly surveyed. "Thanks. It lends the place a certain style."

Ekundayo glanced about the room. "And a bit of something other than Abebi."

Or Abby, as she's known to everyone else in the world. I shrugged noncommittally. I am pretty much a coward when it comes to family tiffs, and there'd definitely been some friction between Abby and Ekundayo lately. I suppose there'd always been some, but it got worse after my older brother Jimmy died. People deal with grief in different ways. Abby went into a sort of passive-aggressive autopilot, and Ekundayo's never been good at dealing with silence or picking up nonverbal cues. He *had* gotten good at coming up with rationalizations for Jimmy's death, and for some reason he

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couldn't quite understand that Abby didn't appreciate widowhood being explained in terms of some deity's whim.

"Well, the computer's all Lota," I said to distract him, because juvenile commentary was better than thinking about family problems.

"Yeah, I guess it is." He gave the machine an appreciative look, which was pretty ridiculous. Ekundayo's less technically inclined than I am, though I would have expected him to know that the interesting parts of the computer are all inside the tower. Or maybe he'd just never seen a decent sized monitor before. "So, when are you going to call her?"

"None of your business." I settled down behind my desk and swiveled around in my chair. Abby'd insisted I try a couple dozen before buying one; after a while, office chairs all start to feel the same, or maybe my butt had just gone numb. But I was happy with my final choice.

"Well, for what it's worth, good luck," Ekundayo said.

Business was relatively boring over the next few days, and I decided I liked boring. I still had a fairly sizable amount of money in the bank, so I wasn't particularly worried. I probably wouldn't have worried too much even if I'd been going broke; you've got to keep things in perspective, and there are worse fates than declaring bankruptcy. The business cards were delivered, then the letterhead. I thought they looked fine and, more importantly, so did Abby. She noticed the statue of Ogun when she dropped by — it was kind of hard to miss — and doubtless guessed where I'd gotten it. But she didn't say anything. I was fine with that; passive-aggressive silences and my ostrich approach to family issues compliment each other fairly well. Ekundayo dropped by a couple more times; I suspected he was checking to see that neither I nor Abby had gotten rid of the statue.

After about a week in my new office, I noticed two things. One was a funny odor, and the second was a frequent occurrence of blue screen. I didn't really give the odor much thought; I'm a bit of a slob, and I assumed it would go away the next time I swept the crap out from under my desk and took the trash out. The blue screen was more annoying. I take computer crashes in stride, and get only moderately offended when the machine chides me for not properly shutting down Windows when it was Windows that locked up in the first place. However, a dozen crashes an hour was a little excessive.

It had been a few days since Lota had set up the computer. I'd intended to call her, though I hadn't quite figured out how to finesse the timing. I wanted to come off nonchalant but honestly interested; striking a balance between desperate and disinterested seemed very challenging. The computer crashes were yet another variable I wasn't sure how to deal with. In the end, I copped out and called her for tech support.

Lota smiled when she dropped by my office, and I took it as a good sign that she'd correctly interpreted my call as more than a desire for help with the computer. She didn't seem offended or embarrassed that the system she'd set up wasn't functioning perfectly. For a moment, I wondered if she'd sabotaged something just to ensure that I'd call, but after a couple of minutes I dismissed that idea. Lota was too much of a professional for that sort of game. I could tell based on the crease in her forehead as she attempted to diagnose the problem.

I juggled Ogun, doing my best to suppress disappointed sighs and other signs of mooning. The computer crashes had been a great way to get her here, but now she

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was utterly engrossed in her work and barely knew I was in the room. I tried to content myself with admiring her from afar, or at least across the desk, and telling myself that competent, talented women were very sexy.

At one point she sniffed, her nose bunching up in a very cute manner. I cast an embarrassed glance at the overfull garbage. I'd made a quick cleaning pass through the office, clearing stuff off the floor and other flat surfaces, but I hadn't actually removed any of it so the mystery smell persisted. Lota was too polite to say anything, and probably hadn't realized she'd sniffed. I probably wouldn't have noticed if I'd been less enamored.

"I've fooled around a bit," she said eventually. "I don't know if this will work, but try it for a few days."

"And it hasn't crashed in the past five minutes, so you must have done something right."

Lota grinned. "Laying On of Hands is part of the Microsoft certification."

By the next day, my computer had started crashing again. This was upsetting, because a temperamental computer always annoys me. Even worse, my technical woes were monopolizing my conversations with Lota. I couldn't pretend the computer was fine, and I couldn't suggest that she just forget about it.

This time, she looked grimly determined. "I'll get it up long enough to back up your files, then I'm going to reformat the hard drive and reinstall everything."

That sounded fine to me. It took about an hour to get everything backed up between crashes. I didn't have much of anything, but Lota wouldn't listen when I told her she could go ahead and wipe it. I recognized a matter of pride when I saw one, and shut up and let her work.

It was almost five when she finished. I decided that could be a good thing. It was close to dinner time, and surely her heroic efforts deserved an extra reward. We'd have a chance to talk, and the computer wouldn't be our central concern, since it wouldn't have a chance to crash again before we went out....

My phone rang, and I decided to be diligent and answer. "He's with his slut secretary again," one of my least favorite clients announced. "Get your camera."

I tried to think of an excuse. I didn't mind the thought of blowing off my client; even if she took her business elsewhere, it was no great loss since I wasn't charging her nearly enough to make up for her abrasive personality. But Lota was sitting right there, Lota the consummate professional, and I didn't want to look like a dilettante. "What's the address?" I asked, resigned to an evening chasing wild geese. By this point I'd decided that the husband probably wasn't actually having an affair, though I couldn't for the life of me figure out why not. "I'll get over there as soon as I can."

"Irregular hours suck, huh?" Lota commented, and I shrugged. "I did support for this law firm when I was just out of school. The late shift, mostly to cover overseas offices. I got a lot of calls from Phil."

"Who was Phil?"

"Phil was the Djakarta office. I liked him," she mused. "Always polite, didn't tend to panic even though he always had problems with his laptop."

"Are my woes at Phil level yet?"

"Nowhere close. We're talking about loss of lots of data — lawyer data, no less. And finding out that his regularly scheduled backups hadn't been backing anything up." She shook her head. "This I can just blame on Bill Gates and his horde of



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demonic servants."

She finished the reinstallation, which seemed to work, and within a half hour we left the office and headed off in different directions.

I was not in a good mood the next morning. There had been no husband, let alone a slut secretary, and I didn't know where my client was getting her information. I was beginning to suspect that she was just making things up to torment me for some unknown reason. While I had the vague suspicion that dumping a client was an unprofessional thing to do, I reminded myself that I wasn't really concerned about my professional reputation and in any case the woman was driving me nuts.

Before I called, I tried to boot up the computer. I swore creatively when it refused to respond, and went through my idiot's checklist. Building electricity working? Check. Computer plugged in? Check. Monitor connected? Check.

So instead of calling my annoying client, I called Lota again. Rather, I called the receptionist and told her about my problems, since Lota wasn't available at the moment. The receptionist sounded sympathetic, or maybe she was just relieved that I wasn't blaming her, and promised Lota would return my call.

I didn't have anything better to do, so I amused myself by turning the computer on and off a few times. Then I noticed that the mystery smell was still present, and I took out the trash. While doing so, I decided that I really must have a thing for Lota if I was going to such lengths to impress her.

I attempted not to stare at the phone, but I ended up doing so for a fair part of the next hour. Then I was distracted by Ekundayo. "How's it going?"

I shrugged. Graduate school agrees with Ekundayo. He gets a lot of free time, and even when he's in classes or working he's really just bullshitting. I suppose that fosters a fascination with the working world.

"How about Lota?"

As far as I know, Ekundayo's social life is nothing special; Jimmy apparently got all the luck in the romance department. I almost countered by asking if he had a girlfriend, but decided there was too great a risk he'd tell me. "Lota's fine, aside from the fact that my computer's cursed."

His ears perked up at the word "cursed." I will admit to being slightly superstitious, carrying more than a few good luck charms in my life, and until I have convincing evidence to disbelieve in gods I see no harm in assuming that they're there. I wasn't sure about Ekundayo, but I suspected that he was taking his studies of folk beliefs to heart. I rolled my eyes.

"I've been reading up on African religions in the American south and Marie Laveau. The Voodoo Queen." He shrugged, a little too quick with an explanation. I got a little suspicious, what with my finely honed sense of human nature.

"I thought Voodoo had Caribbean origins," I said, mainly to annoy him but partially to remind him I wasn't completely ignorant.

"Only because that's where the African slaves were taken."

By that reasoning, I could make an argument that all humans were Africans by way of the Great Rift Valley, but I decided to be diplomatic.

"The names change, but the important things remain constant," Ekundayo said, and patted the Ogun statue. "Saint George or Saint Peter, if that appeased the Catholics...and if the association stuck, who are we to mock Santería or Voudun? Religions have to start somewhere, after all."

"Yeah." And if I were an orisha, would I care what name mortals used to address



me? Would I even listen to their petty concerns? Ogun dealt in war and paradigm-shifting technological advances, not everyday annoyances. "I'm looking into man's interaction with the supernatural in modern society," Ekundayo added. "It's really interesting."

"I bet." People who attempted to interact with the supernatural make me nervous. I didn't count myself in that category; good luck charms are a pretty passive thing. As far as I'm concerned, they're more an appeal to be ignored than a call for special favors.

"Yeah, well, give her a call," Ekundayo urged, somewhat irrelevantly. "I already did."

He grinned, misinterpreting my statement as intended. I endured another brotherly elbow to the ribs before he left. I gave Ogun a soothing pat, not that a god of war needed my sympathy for Ekundayo's silliness.

Lota called, which brightened my morning considerably. Even better, she was already en route. "Third time's a charm," she promised.

"Of course, I'm seriously considering an exorcism," Lota said from my doorway.

"Was that part of your Microsoft certification?"

"No, but it should have been."

I relinquished my seat, and she spent a few minutes staring at the computer and switching it on and off. Her nose wrinkled again, and she seemed to realize she'd sniffed. "I'm sorry. Do you know what that is?"

I shook my head. "I've just been assuming it's a new place smell," I lied.

"It's weird." She sniffed again and ducked down under the desk. I was glad that I'd taken out the trash. Lota's head popped back up, and she turned to the tower like a bloodhound. She whipped out a tiny screwdriver and began to open the case. "And it smells like it's coming from your computer." A few moments and she had the case open. "Hah!"

I looked over her shoulder as she drew out a smelly bag of...something. "I'm guessing that's not up to factory spec."

"Uh-uh." She opened the bag and stuck a finger in, which I liked. I've never been a fan of overly delicate women. Maybe it's because of my slobbier tendencies; a delicate woman would never put up with my bathroom. "What *is* this stuff?"

And how the hell did it get in the computer? By all rights, Lota should have leapt to the top of my list of suspects. She had built the box, so she'd certainly had the opportunity to plant the bag inside. But I believed her surprise and triumph at finding the source of the mystery smell.

She hadn't put the bag in there, and I knew I hadn't. Which left three options: an unknown perpetrator who'd broken in without being detected, Abby or Ekundayo. They'd both been in the office alone in the past several days.

"Bastard," I muttered.

"Who?"

"My brother. I bet this is his idea of a practical joke. He thinks whoopie cushions are hilarious."

Ekundayo, studying Marie Laveau, Voudun and who knew what else. He probably thought whipping up *gris-gris* was a great lab project.

"I sympathize. My brother's got similarly appalling taste." Lota sighed. "But that doesn't explain why your computer's been crashing."

"Unfortunately — or perhaps fortunately, since I've been known to jam my foot in my mouth up to the knee — my younger brother swept into the room, wearing his godawful orange buba. It was mostly the orange that was godawful — some colors should be reserved for emergencies."



Ekundayo, so concerned about my love life. To be charitable, much of that concern probably stemmed from a genuine desire for me to be happy. So if he wanted to experiment with *gris-gris*, why not a love charm to benefit his brother?

Give him credit, it might have worked. The blue screen had prompted me to call Lota when I might have procrastinated indefinitely if left to my own devices.

"Or maybe it does." I shrugged. "Let's see how it does without that stuff inside."

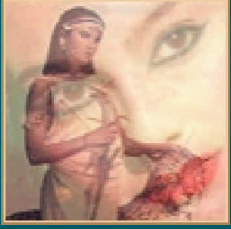
Lota looked dubious, which was only fair. She was thinking of this in terms of a technical problem, not voodoo.

I'd have words with Ekundayo later. I did not appreciate being the subject of his little experiment. Regardless of the efficacy of his *gris-gris*, he'd screwed up my new computer. I didn't want to think about the implications of believing he *had* successfully worked magic on me, or Lota, or both of us.

But that could wait. I glanced at my watch. "It's almost noon. Do you want to get some lunch?"

Lota looked up from the *gris-gris* and smiled. "I'd like that."

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known to jam
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Pharoah

Mark Budman was born and raised in the former Soviet Union. His fiction and poetry have appeared in the *Mississippi Review*, *Virginia Quarterly*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Web Del Sol's In Posse* and *La Petite Zine*, and *Talebones*, among many others. He edits and publishes the quarterly flash fiction magazine *Vestal Review*.

Cleopatra by Michael Grant supplied the inspiration for this tale of the young queen as a teenager, trapped in a vise of politics, fantasy and her budding sexuality.

*"She pushes his
hand aside.
She's a virgin.
She's the
Pharaoh. She's
goddess Isis.
She can order
him dead. She
can wish him
dead."*

Cleopatra watches Helios-Ra sinking like a common sailor into the Western sea. Her bracelets with dreadfully expensive Red Sea pearls coil around her wrists. She's eighteen, a virgin. Her father just died. Her brother hates her and plots for the throne.

Two guards in short tunics, wide-brimmed felt hats, and high boots of Macedonian country gentlemen stay behind her bench of Corinthian marble. She feels their putrid breath on her neck. Can't be, they are too far. That's probably the smell of decaying fish brought by the breeze.

She watches a man wading through the water toward her. Leather skirt, muscular legs, breastplate, receding golden hair.

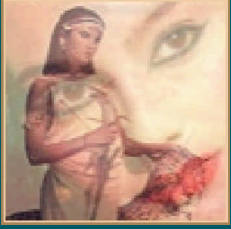
"Julius," he says, "my name is Julius." He speaks Greek with an accent.

Did he come to help? Gods know, she needs help. But then he's gone. She sighs. She's the ruler of Egypt. She has more important things to do than to think about aging strangers.

She gets up to return to the palace. The guards follow her. They tower above her like the Lighthouse of Alexandria, their hands thick like marble columns. She climbs on her throne. Her eyes are closed. Her legs are parted under her floor-length robe clasped at her shoulder with an emerald brooch. She feels the stranger's hand on her thigh.

"Julius. My name is Julius."

She pushes his hand aside. She's a virgin. She's the Pharaoh. She's goddess Isis.



She can order him dead. She can wish him dead.

She sees Achilles, the captain of her guard, stabbing the stranger in the back. Just like he did with that Roman Pompey. Achilles chops the man's head off and throws it at her feet. The fading blue eyes watch her from under the arching eyebrows.

She opens her eyes.

"Go away," she says aloud. The guards stare at her. Their eyes are heavy on her breasts. Their spears are thick.

She closes her eyes again. There. They all are gone now. By the will of the Pharaoh.

"Julius. My name is Julius."

*"She pushes his
hand aside.*

She's a virgin.

*She's the
Pharaoh. She's
goddess Isis.*

*She can order
him dead. She
can wish him
dead."*

The Truth About Pyecraft



*"Poor old
Pyecraft!
Great, uneasy
jelly of
substance! The
fattest
clubman in
London. He sits
at one of the
little club tables
in the huge bay
by the fire,
stuffing. What
is he stuffing? I
glance
judiciously and
catch him
biting a round
of hot buttered
teacake, with
his eyes on me.
Confound him!
— with his eyes
on me!"*

H.G. Wells (1866-1946) stands out as one of the most important early writers of science fiction, much in the way that Poe dominates in the horror field. Well's novels (including *The Time Machine*, *War of the Worlds*, and *The Invisible Man*) are still widely read, and Hollywood dips back into his pool of works frequently.

Wells also wrote many short stories, though, and not everything he put on paper contained the gravitas of his novels. "The Truth About Pyecraft" for example, written in 1903, has a much 'lighter' tone.

He sits not a dozen yards away. If I glance over my shoulder I can see him. And if I catch his eye — and usually I catch his eye — it meets me with an expression —

It is mainly an imploring look — and yet with suspicion in it.

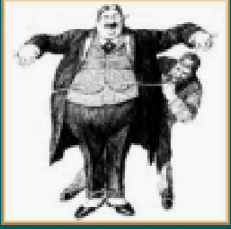
Confound his suspicion! If I wanted to tell on him I should have told long ago. I don't tell and I don't tell, and he ought to feel at his ease. As if anything so gross and fat as he could feel at ease! Who would believe me if I did tell?

Poor old Pyecraft! Great, uneasy jelly of substance! The fattest clubman in London.

He sits at one of the little club tables in the huge bay by the fire, stuffing. What is he stuffing? I glance judiciously and catch him biting a round of hot buttered teacake, with his eyes on me. Confound him! — with his eyes on me!

That settles it, Pyecraft! Since you will be abject, since you will behave as though I was not a man of honour, here, right under your embedded eyes, I write the thing down — the plain truth about Pyecraft. The man I helped, the man I shielded, and who has requited me by making my club unendurable, absolutely unendurable, with his liquid appeal, with the perpetual "don't tell" of his looks. And, besides, why does he keep on eternally eating?

Well, here goes for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! Pyecraft —. I made the acquaintance of Pyecraft in this very smoking-room. I was a young, nervous new member, and he saw it. I was sitting all alone, wishing I knew more of the members, and suddenly he came, a great rolling front of chins and abdomina,



towards me, and grunted and sat down in a chair close by me and wheezed for a space, and scraped for a space with a match and lit a cigar, and then addressed me. I forget what he said — something about the matches not lighting properly, and afterwards as he talked he kept stopping the waiters one by one as they went by, and telling them about the matches in that thin, fluty voice he has. But, anyhow, it was in some such way we began talking.

He talked about various things and came round to games. And then to my figure and complexion. "You ought to be a good cricketer," he said. I suppose I am slender, slender to what some people would call lean, and I suppose I am rather dark, still — I am not ashamed of having a Hindu great-grandmother, but, for that, I don't want casual strangers to see through me at a glance to her. So that I was set against Pyecraft from the beginning.

But he only talked about me in order to get to himself.

"I expect," he said, "you take no more exercise than I do, and probably you eat no less." (Like all excessively obese people he fancied he ate nothing.) "Yet" — and he smiled an oblique smile — "we differ."

And then he began to talk about his fatness and his fatness; all he did for his fatness and all he was going to do for his fatness; what people had advised him to do for his fatness and what he had heard of people doing for fatness similar to his. "A priori," he said, "one would think a question of nutrition could be answered by dietary and a question of assimilation by drugs." It was stifling. It was dumpling talk. It made me feel swelled to hear him.

One stands that sort of thing once in a way at a club, but a time came when I fancied I was standing too much. He took to me altogether too conspicuously. I could never go into the smoking-room but he would come wallowing towards me, and sometimes he came and gormandised round and about me while I had my lunch. He seemed at times almost to be clinging to me. He was a bore, but not so fearful a bore as to be limited to me; and from the first there was something in his manner — almost as though he knew, almost as though he penetrated to the fact that I might — that there was a remote, exceptional chance in me that no one else presented.

"I'd give anything to get it down," he would say — "anything," and peer at me over his vast cheeks and pant.

Poor old Pyecraft! He has just gonged, no doubt to order another buttered teacake!

He came to the actual thing one day. "Our Pharmacopoeia," he said, "our Western Pharmacopoeia, is anything but the last word of medical science. In the East, I've been told —"

He stopped and stared at me. It was like being at an aquarium.

I was quite suddenly angry with him. "Look here," I said, "who told you about my great-grandmother's recipes?"

"Well," he fenced.

"Every time we've met for a week," I said — "and we've met pretty often — you've given me a broad hint or so about that little secret of mine."

"Well," he said, "now the cat's out of the bag, I'll admit, yes, it is so. I had it —"

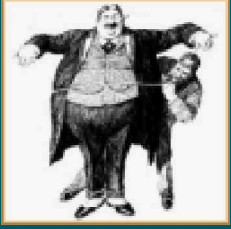
"From Pattison?"

"Indirectly," he said, which I believe was lying, "yes."

"Pattison," I said, "took that stuff at his own risk."

He pursed his mouth and bowed.

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"My great-grandmother's recipes," I said, "are queer things to handle. My father was near making me promise — "

"He didn't?"

"No, but he warned me. He himself used one — once."

"Ah! . . . But do you think — ? Suppose — suppose there did happen to be one — "

"The things are curious documents," I said. "Even the smell of 'em . . . No!"

But after going so far Pyecraft was resolved I should go farther. I was always a little afraid if I tried his patience too much he would fall on me suddenly and smother me. I own I was weak. But I was also annoyed with Pyecraft. I had got to that state of feeling for him that disposed me to say, "Well, take the risk!" The little affair of Pattison to which I have alluded was a different matter altogether. What it was doesn't concern us now, but I knew, anyhow, that the particular recipe I used then was safe. The rest I didn't know so much about, and, on the whole, I was inclined to doubt their safety pretty completely.

Yet even if Pyecraft got poisoned —

I must confess the poisoning of Pyecraft struck me as an immense undertaking.

That evening I took that queer, odd-scented sandalwood box out of my safe and turned the rustling skins over. The gentleman who wrote the recipes for my great-grandmother evidently had a weakness for skins of a miscellaneous origin, and his handwriting was cramped to the last degree. Some of the things are quite unreadable to me — though my family, with its Indian Civil Service associations, has kept up a knowledge of Hindustani from generation to generation — and none are absolutely plain sailing. But I found the one that I knew was there soon enough, and sat on the floor by my safe for some time looking at it.

"Look here," said I to Pyecraft next day, and snatched the slip away from his eager grasp.

"So far as I can make it out, this is a recipe for Loss of Weight. ("Ah!" said Pyecraft.) I'm not absolutely sure, but I think it's that. And if you take my advice you'll leave it alone. Because, you know — I blacken my blood in your interest, Pyecraft — my ancestors on that side were, so far as I can gather, a jolly queer lot. See?"

"Let me try it," said Pyecraft.

I leant back in my chair. My imagination made one mighty effort and fell flat within me.

"What in Heaven's name, Pyecraft," I asked, "do you think you'll look like when you get thin?"

He was impervious to reason. I made him promise never to say a word to me about his disgusting fatness again whatever happened — never, and then I handed him that little piece of skin.

"It's nasty stuff," I said.

"No matter," he said, and took it.

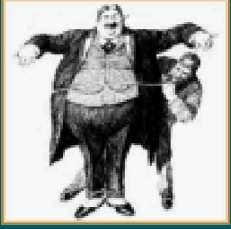
He goggled at it. "But — but — " he said.

He had just discovered that it wasn't English.

"To the best of my ability," I said, "I will do you a translation."

I did my best. After that we didn't speak for a fortnight. Whenever he approached me I frowned and motioned him away, and he respected our compact, but at the end of the fortnight he was as fat as ever. And then he got a word in. "I must speak," he said. "It isn't fair. There's something wrong. It's done me no good. You're not doing

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your great-grandmother justice — "

"Where's the recipe?"

He produced it gingerly from his pocket-book.

I ran my eye over the items. "Was the egg addled?" I asked.

"No. Ought it have been?"

"That," I said, "goes without saying in all my poor dear great-grandmother's recipes. When condition or quality is not specified you must get the worst. She was drastic or nothing. . . . And there's one or two possible alternatives to some of these other things. You've got fresh rattlesnake venom?"

"I got a rattlesnake from Jamrach's. It cost — it cost — "

"That's your affair, anyhow. This last item — "

"I know a man who — "

"Yes. H'm. Well, I'll write the alternatives down. So far as I know the language, the spelling of this recipe is particularly atrocious. By-the-bye, dog here probably means pariah dog."

For a month after that I saw Pyecraft constantly at the club as fat and anxious as ever. He kept our treaty, but at times broke the spirit of it by shaking his head despondently. Then one day in the cloakroom he said, "Your great-grandmother — "

"Not a word against her," I said; and he held his peace.

I could have fancied he had desisted, and I saw him one day talking to three new members about his fatness as though he was in search of other recipes.

And then, quite unexpectedly, his telegram came.

"Mr Formalyn!" bawled a page-boy under my nose, and I took the telegram and opened it at once.

"For Heaven's sake come. — Pyecraft."

"H'm," said I, and to tell the truth I was so pleased at the rehabilitation of my great-grandmother's reputation this evidently promised that I made a most excellent lunch.

I got Pyecraft's address from the hall porter. Pyecraft inhabited the upper half of a house in Bloomsbury, and I went there so soon as I had done my coffee and Trappistine. I did not wait to finish my cigar.

"Mr Pyecraft?" said I, at the front door.

They believed he was ill; he hadn't been out for two days.

"He expects me," said I, and they sent me up.

I rang the bell at the lattice-door upon the landing.

"He shouldn't have tried it, anyhow," I said to myself. "A man who eats like a pig ought to look like a pig."

An obviously worthy woman, with an anxious face and a carelessly placed cap, came and surveyed me through the lattice.

I gave my name and she let me in a dubious fashion.

"Well," said I, as we stood together inside Pyecraft's piece of the landing.

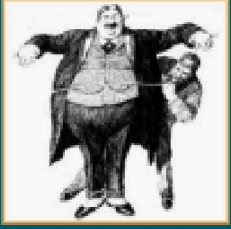
"'E said you was to come in if you came," she said, and regarded me, making no motion to show me anywhere. And then, confidentially, "'E's locked in, sir."

"Locked in?"

"Locked himself in yesterday morning and 'asn't let any one in since, sir. And ever and again swearing. Oh, my!"

I stared at the door she indicated by her glances. "In there?" I said.

"Yes, sir."



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"What's up?"

She shook her head sadly. "'E keeps on calling for vittles, sir. 'Eavy vittle 'e wants. I get 'em what I can. Pork 'e's 'ad, sooit puddin', sossiges, noo bread. Everythink like that. Left outside, if you please, and me go away. 'E's eatin', sir, somethink awful."

Then came a piping bawl from inside the door: "That Formalyn?"

"That you, Pyecraft," I shouted, and went and banged the door.

"Tell her to go away."

I did.

Then I could hear a curious pattering upon the door, almost like some one feeling for the handle in the dark, and Pyecraft's familiar grunts.

"It's all right," I said, "she's gone."

But for a long time the door didn't open.

I heard the key turn. Then Pyecraft's voice said, "Come in."

I turned the handle and opened the door. Naturally I expected to see Pyecraft.

Well, you know, he wasn't there!

I never had such a shock in my life. There was his sitting-room in a state of untidy disorder, plates and dishes among the books and writing things, and several chairs overturned, but Pyecraft —

"It's all right, o' man; shut the door," he said, and then I discovered him.

There he was right up close to the cornice in the corner by the door, as though some one had glued him to the ceiling. His face was anxious and angry. He panted and gesticulated. "Shut the door," he said. "If that woman gets hold of it — "

I shut the door, and went and stood away from him and stared.

"If anything gives way and you tumble down," I said, "you'll break your neck, Pyecraft."

"I wish I could," he wheezed.

"A man of your age and weight getting up to kiddish gymnastics — "

"Don't," he said, and looked agonized.

"I'll tell you," he said, and gesticulated.

"How the deuce," I said, "are you holding on up there?"

And then abruptly I realized that he was not holding on at all, that he was floating up there — just as a gas-filled bladder might have floated in the same position. He began a struggle to thrust himself away from the ceiling and to clamber down the wall to me. "It's that prescription," he panted, as he did so. "Your great-gran — "

He took hold of a framed engraving rather carelessly as he spoke and it gave way, and he flew back to the ceiling again, while the picture smashed on to the sofa. Bump he went against the ceiling, and I knew then why he was all over white on the more salient curves and angles of his person. He tried again more carefully, coming down by way of the mantel.

It was really a most extraordinary spectacle, that great, fat, apoplectic-looking man upside down and trying to get from the ceiling to the floor. "That prescription," he said. "Too successful."

"How?"

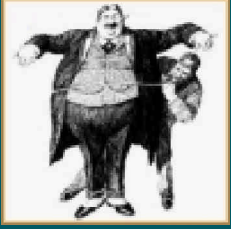
"Loss of weight — almost complete."

And then, of course, I understood.

"By Jove, Pyecraft," said I, "what you wanted was a cure for fatness! But you always called it weight. You would call it weight."

Somehow I was extremely delighted. I quite liked Pyecraft for the time.

"Let me help you!" I said, and took his hand and pulled him down. He kicked



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about, trying to get a foothold somewhere. It was very like holding a flag on a windy day.

"That table," he said, pointing, "is solid mahogany and very heavy. If you can put me under that — "

I did, and there he wallowed about like a captive balloon, while I stood on his hearthrug and talked to him.

I lit a cigar. "Tell me," I said, "what happened?"

"I took it," he said.

"How did it taste?"

"Oh, beastly!"

I should fancy they all did. Whether one regards the ingredients or the probable compound or the possible results, almost all my great-grandmother's remedies appear to me at least to be extraordinary uninviting. For my own part —

"I took a little sip first."

"Yes?"

"And as I felt lighter and better after an hour, I decided to take the draught."

"My dear Pyecraft!"

"I held my nose," he explained. "And then I kept on getting lighter and lighter — and helpless, you know."

He gave way suddenly to a burst of passion.

"What the goodness am I to do?" he said.

"There's one thing pretty evident," I said, "that you mustn't do. If you go out of doors you'll go up and up." I waved an arm upward.

"They'd have to send Santos-Dumont after you to bring you down again."

"I suppose it will wear off?"

I shook my head. "I don't think you can count on that," I said.

And then there was another burst of passion, and he kicked out at adjacent chairs and banged the floor. He behaved just as I should have expected a great, fat, self-indulgent man to behave under trying circumstances — that is to say, very badly. He spoke of me and of my great-grandmother with an utter want of discretion.

"I never asked you to take the stuff," I said.

And generously disregarding the insults he was putting upon me, I sat down in his armchair and began to talk to him in a sober, friendly fashion. I pointed out to him that this was a trouble he had brought upon himself, and that it had almost an air of poetical justice. He had eaten too much. This he disputed, and for a time we argued the point.

He became noisy and violent, so I desisted from this aspect of his lesson.

"And then," said I, "you committed the sin of euphemism. You called it, not Fat, which is inglorious, but Weight. You — "

He interrupted to say that he recognized all that. What was he to do?

I suggested he should adapt himself to his new conditions. So we came to the really sensible part of the business. I suggested that it would not be difficult for him to learn to walk about on the ceiling on his hands —

"I can't sleep," he said.

But that was no great difficulty. It was quite possible, I pointed out, to make a shake-up under a wire mattress, fasten the under things on with tapes, and have a blanket, sheet, and coverlet to button at the side. He would have to confide in his housekeeper, I said; and after some squabbling he agreed to that. (Afterwards it was quite delightful to see the beautifully matter-of-fact way which which the good lady



took all these amazing inversions.) He could have a library ladder in in his room, and all his meals would be laid on the top of his bookcase. We also hit on an ingenious device by which he could get to the floor whenever he wanted, which was simply to put the British Encyclopaedia (tenth edition) on the top of his open shelves. He just pulled out a couple of volumes and held on, and down he came. And we agreed there must be iron staples along the skirting, so that he could cling to those whenever he wanted to get about the room on the lower level.

As we got on with the thing I found myself almost keenly interested. It was I who called in the housekeeper and broke matters to her, and it was I chiefly who fixed up the inverted bed. In fact, I spent whole days at his flat. I am a handy, interfering sort of man with a screwdriver, and I made all sorts of ingenious adaptations for him — ran a wire to bring his bells within reach, turned all his electric lights up instead of down, and so on. The whole affair was extremely curious and interesting to me, and it was delightful to think of Pyecraft like some great, fat blow-fly, crawling about on his ceiling and clambering round the lintel of his doors from one room to another, and never, never, never coming to the club any more . . .

Then, you know, my fatal ingenuity got the better of me. I was sitting by his fire drinking his whisky, and he was up in his favourite corner by the cornice, tacking a Turkey carpet to the ceiling, when the idea struck me. "By Jove, Pyecraft!" I said, "all this is totally unnecessary."

And before I could calculate the complete consequences of my notion I blurted it out. 'Lead underclothing,' said I, and the mischief was done.

Pyecraft received the thing almost in tears. "To be right ways up again — " he said.

I gave him the whole secret before I saw where it would take me. "Buy sheet lead," I said, "stamp it to discs. Sew 'em all over your underclothes until you have enough. Have lead-soled boots, carry a bag of solid lead, and the thing is done! Instead of being a prisoner here you may go abroad again, Pyecraft; you may travel — "

A still happier idea came to me. "You need never fear a shipwreck. All you need do is just slip off some or all of your clothes, take the necessary amount of luggage in your hand, and float up in the air — "

In his emotion he dropped the tack-hammer within an ace of my head. "By Jove!" he said, "I shall be able to come back to the club again."

The thing pulled me up short. "By Jove!" I said, faintly. "Yes. Of course — you will."

He did. He does. There he sits behind me now, stuffing — as I live! — a third go of buttered tea-cake. And no one in the whole world knows — except his housekeeper and me — that he weighs practically nothing; that he is a mere boring mass of assimilatory matter, mere clouds in clothing, niente, nefas, the most inconsiderable of men.

There he sits watching until I have done this writing. Then, if he can, he will waylay me. He will come billowing up to me . . .

He will tell me over again all about it, how it feels, how it doesn't feel, how he sometimes hopes it is passing off a little. And always somewhere in that fat, abundant discourse he will say, "The secret's keeping, eh? If any one knew of it — I should be so ashamed . . . Makes a fellow look such a fool, you know. Crawling about on a ceiling and all that . . . "

And now to elude Pyecraft, occupying, as he does, an admirable strategic position between me and the door.

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