



Fairwood Ferro-Carol

a ghost story

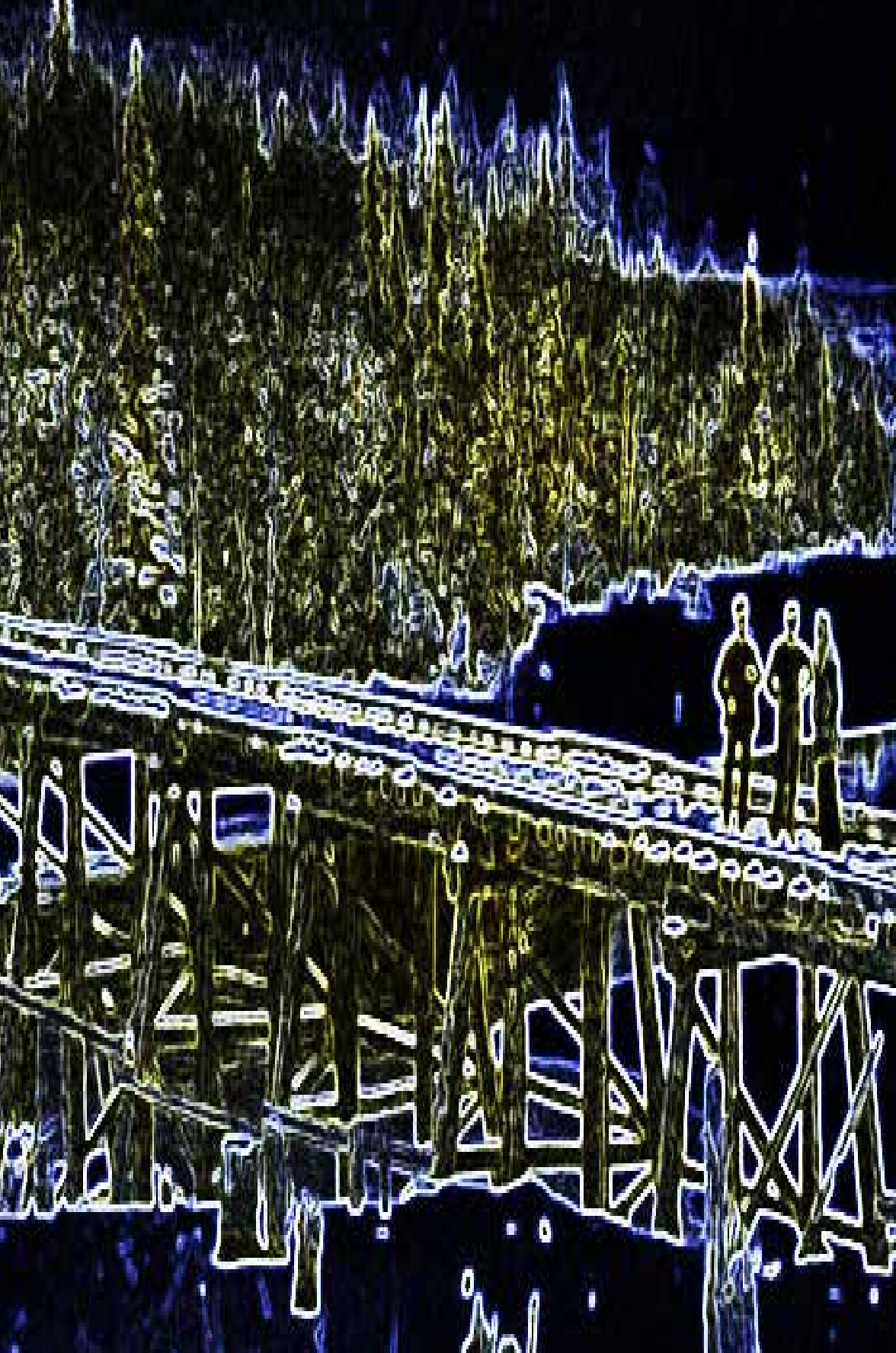
Tam Fairlie

Fl@ubert Duck Series



for:

Mavis
Sarah
Johnny
Andrew
Ariane
& Stuart



A ragged growth of stunted pines, scrub sumac and blighted wild cherry lapped up against the thin line of brown dust snaking across the landscape. Beyond the verges of this gravel sideroad, so buffeted by the natural topography, lay a network of slick, oily lakes of impenetrable black waters fringed with sedge and connected by boggy rivulets creased between domes of shattered skull-like rock.

Occasionally their labouring truck would pass a cemetery of blackened tree stumps standing forlornly where the road had thoughtlessly closed off some drainage system and a wide expanse of forest had turned silently to swamp. The pioneers who had laid out this road, so intent on forgetting the painful distances between destinations, had attempted to subjugate the intervening space with the most direct route achievable.

Though it now seemed an empty and unconsidered wilderness, every inch of the land had been explored years earlier, inspected, and the marketable timber ransacked, pulled out on sledges over ice roads and piled onto the frozen waterways to await the spring break up. Now the regrowth, adhered like a patchy skin disease to the land face. Trees sent their desperate roots through tiny crevices between the layers of rock, seeking residual moisture, insurance against frequent drought, and a refuge against the occasional forest fire.

Such a fire had raged almost unremarked a mere century earlier. Perhaps set off by a slash of lightning, it had burnt itself to exhaustion in the ensuing rain. Within a few years the landscape was unrecognizably different from how it had looked since the last ice age. Perhaps the new growth was of a hue more feverishly green.

The pioneers' road had brought new plant species with it, golden rod, loosestrife and daisies. These invaders had spread out like waves on either side, little billows of joyful defiance against the ancient sea of tangled rooting beyond.

Occasionally the road intersected a graceful arc of steel rail track raised on a gravel embankment, a bed of coarse stone bleached white with poisons, which cut like a tiny filament across the land's face. Whereas the earlier corduroy road had wound about avoiding obstacles and depressions in the landscape, its course depending on the manpower and the willpower available, the rail track had with an engineer's disdain, skimmed over these impediments thrown up by the ancient terrain. The railway had brought with it a new attitude to the landscape and a new potential for erasing its impediments.

Before their battered truck had turned off the main highway into this tangled wilderness, it had rumbled along a heavily used highway corridor where the illusion of human command and purpose had been sustained through carefully choreographed driving at high speed.

But the carrion crows floating ominously overhead knew much better, being able to scan the fragility of this fragile vein connecting little nodes of defiance in the wilderness, those communities set down by exhaustion or boredom in defiance of a terrain so rough and threatening.

Only a few miles distant, the tangle stopped abruptly at the edge of a serene sea of blue water. The Georgian Bay offered all of the miracles that the land seemed to have withheld, access, bounty, a firm edge held on the edge of chaos – or at least this was so when the weather was fine.

On the main highway the two boys and Mavis in the open back of the truck had kept their heads down. They liked to lie on their backs nestled in the soft-packed gear watching the birds soaring in the cloudless sky, protected from the windstream overhead. Johnny, Sarah and Ariane in the front cabin had kept a wary eye open for highway patrols determined to impose unnecessary authority over behaviour in this landscape. Rules must be adhered to even if they seemed utterly irrelevant in this context.

The truck had bounced along the paved road in confident fourth gear. But when it had turned off onto the dusty sideroad it had had to labour along in first gear due to longstanding deficiencies in the second and third. Sarah kept her eye nervously on the dashboard, half expecting an obscure light to blink on portending doom for their expedition.

Occasionally along the road they would encounter a patch of fragged land that had obviously been cleared for agricultural purposes a century earlier, maintained far longer than productive and was now rapidly overgrowing with scrub species. With diminished expectations of productivity the land became a weary stretch of meaningless desert between the highway and the few summer cottages that had been built in that section of the Bay. Admittedly, new and improbable ventures had sprung up, all of them aimed at summer season visitors or perhaps a few autumn hunters. The dust caked truck had pulled in at one of these little oases of optimism a few miles back with a faded yellow sign, *Gary's Char Pit - Laundry*. Here the road crossed the railway line junction. Though the rail line was disused it still imposed its order on an invisible network of human activity.

Gary, however, had found something better to do with his time that day and had left only an unwelcoming Doberman to offer uncertain

hospitality. Both laundry and charring were over at least until the tourist season returned next spring.

Andrew was wedged in the back of the cab behind the passenger seat, engrossed in a game of reflex and skill. His box emitted a sudden explosive whooshing sound followed by a peal of demonic laughter.

“If I hear another Venusian being vaporised, I think I’ll just get out and walk,” moaned Sarah. “It’s a game that creates its own compulsion. There is no real need to solve the ‘Mystery of some god-forsaken Ark’ or blow up Venusians en route. But just because the wholly unnecessary problem is presented some people feel themselves driven to solve it.”

“It seems that every machine that is ever invented, every tool that is provided contains within it the seeds of how that problem was posed, and how it’s addressed becomes almost inevitable. Why, look at our expedition, if we didn’t have a truck we would probably not need to be on this road now. We would probably be doing something else entirely.”

“Like mending Mum’s fences.”

“Or hanging out morosely in caves.”

“But how quickly the new tool becomes commonplace. How quickly it becomes the only possible solution to a problem that it has defined itself. But of course it is not really inevitable at all,” piped up Mavis through the rear cab window.

The jeep was struggling to ascend a steep embankment, the gravel surface ricocheting out from under its wheels.



Suddenly and without warning, the engine ceased in mid stroke bringing the vehicle to an abrupt halt squarely between the tracks. The sudden sensation of silence was invaded by a banshee buzz of the insect life around them.

Johnny muttered something about Sarah's wish to walk coming true. He let down the tailgate and dangled his foot out over the rail.

"It's a good thing that this spur rail line hasn't been in use for donkey's years. You can always tell by the layer of rust on the tracks," he said knowledgeably as he scuffed his shoe over the top.

No sooner had these words been uttered than a haunting whistle echoed through the lonely landscape. The rocks, lakes, still leaves on the trees seemed to tremble under the eerie distant blast. The insects buzzing by the roadside on this late September afternoon seemed to be momentarily stilled in their relentless self-advertisement. Again the distant whistle sounded, this time galvanizing the little party into frantic concerted action.

The six passengers leapt out of the cab and threw their weight against the heavy doors, rocking the truck slowly backwards and forwards. Straining with her foot against the track Sarah felt it quiver as the vibrations were transmitted up the line. Mavis and Stuart pushed from the rear. With one final concerted heave the moribund truck lurched forward. Johnny, half out of the cab and guiding the steering wheel, snagged his jacket on the gearshift. In one of the few majestic moments of the truck's long history, it described a graceful arc across the road top and came to rest nose down in the ditch opposite, its pale faced driver still tangled in the gearshift.

“Why did you do that?”

“What do you mean why? ...” Johnny’s irritated answer was drowned by the explosive throbbing of the approaching train. The group parted speechless, as a great black hulk, belching steam rounded the bend and bore down upon them. The ground shook underfoot like a jelly. The massive locomotive with its long prow in front divided the astonished onlookers into two groups. A cloud of black smoke and steam enveloped them, as if they had been invaded by an alien spirit. All hearts were brought into unison beating rhythmically with the throbbing engine. Like an artillery barrage pebbles showered down the embankment. Andrew shouted in alarm as he felt a hiss of searing steam pass across his bare thigh. Eyes watered in the acrid smoke and flakes of ash seemed to scrape their way under the eyelids. Great wheels connected by rods presented a divisive wall of movement, the sky was engulfed in billows of black smoke. The whistle gave a further angry, deafening blast, demanding the respect of one of mankind’s most impressive inventions. As it passed the whistle tone suddenly changed to a hollow, haunting wail.

The locomotive and its two cars rattled on down the track and passed round a bend out of sight in seconds leaving the group shrouded in steam and smoke.

“Did you see that?” Sarah gaped.

“I had no idea that there were steam locomotives still in operation anywhere in the country or that they would be allowed to burn such appallingly polluting fuel.” Sarah always saw herself as a protector of the environment.

“Perhaps it was on its way to one of those steam rallies for train spotters.”

“Driven by a maniac”, Johnny added, almost wistfully. “No one should go through level crossings at such a speed.” Ari added authoritatively.

“ Well at least he doesn’t have a problem with missing gears.”

“Well, as you said, no one uses this road much. He wasn’t expecting us.”

“Did anyone see the driver on your side?”

Strangely no one recalled seeing the driver or anyone peering out of one of the passenger cars. It was as if the whole machine was thundering through the landscape without any human purpose.

Andrew inspected the rusty track at his feet. “So much for Johnny’s theory about rusty tracks” he added smugly.

The embankment was surreal and silent now. Were it not for the lingering smell of sulphurous burning, it might have seemed as if they all had hallucinated the whole experience. But the deafening roar of the engine still throbbed in all ears. The insects tentatively resumed, building up confidence. The long drone of the cicadas returned in earnest.

The group gathered despondently around the truck, face down in the ditch. They peered up and down the dirt road. No one could be expected for hours, if not days. In the distance a final haunting blast from the whistle echoed across the landscape, a harbinger of menace.



Johnny proposed that the nearest help might be found at *Gary's Char Pit - Laundry*, the sigh that they had passed a few miles back on the road. At least perhaps Gary would have a telephone.

The rail line seemed a more direct route than the meandering dirt road. He, Andrew and Stuart decided to set off down the track in the direction that the train had come.

In the heat of the afternoon the creosote saturated rail ties gave off a strong odour. The clinker between the rails was covered with ancient, dark grease that shone ahead of them in the slanting late season sun. They came upon an old timber trestle, with its heavy logs driven into the swamp bed below and crossed it carefully, peering through the ties into the murky water as they stepped from log to log.

“It’s amazing that anything is permitted to run along this line at all these days, especially at the speed of that steam loco.” Johnny paused to pick up an old spike in a discarded pile by the railside and then broke into a run with a loping stride picking up every fourth crosstie. The others tripped along following behind. They were all brought up short by the sound of a gunshot, which reverberated across the lonely landscape ahead.



“It’s not hunting season yet. Must be someone scaring away bears,” suggested Stuart authoritatively. The others looked unconvinced. The group proceeded more carefully.

They came to a dirt track that intersected the line. On a little spur siding nearby was a quaint three-wheeled tricycle device with its third wheel spanning over onto the other track. On the back of the upright bank seat the words ‘*Velocipede - with THE LITTLE RUNNING OIL BATH*’ were set out in a jaunty yellow script.

The boys clustered around Andrew as he positioned himself in the driver’s seat and pumped the pedals. The tricycle moved forward with stately purpose.

The same idea flashed into the three minds simultaneously. No one could possibly miss the Velocipede for the few minutes it was required to help out in an emergency. The three boys lifted it up and set it on the main track. Stuart pulled out a scrumpled receipt from his pocket and left a hurried note explaining their predicament to anyone who might come along. The three boys set off down the track with Stuart standing over Andrew’s shoulders clutching the seat back. The little vehicle sailed off down the track with a pleasingly bone-shaking rattle.

The had only gone a few hundred yards when they rounded a gentle bend and Stuart pointed out a railway carriage on a siding up ahead.

“Look at that! It’s just like in the olden day photos.” The carriage stood proudly isolated in the wilderness. Splendid polished hinges highlighted its deep emerald green cladding and ribbing of polished brass. The curved line of its roof pulled down at the corners into graceful

arcs spoke of an era when such vehicles were seen as little chalets or pavilions, a dream of escape upon wheels into a wilderness of adventure.

In front of one of the carriage doors was a brightly painted red box providing a step up from the track level. Emblazoned on its front in gilt letters were the initials C.R. composed as if out of horseshoes.

Johnny felt a little self-conscious as he stepped up onto it to peer into the widow.

“Can’t see anything inside, the windows are curtained off and blinds pulled as well,” he reported.

He tapped lightly on the door and cleared his throat before trying the handle. The door opened noiselessly and he pushed his head into the cab.

A long corridor stretched the length of the carriage. The blinds had been pulled so that the only light filtered through from the glass walls along the compartment side.

He tiptoed up the corridor and peered into one of the compartments on the other side and then gestured to the others to come and take a look at an astonishing sight. The compartment was appointed with an extraordinary opulence. The finely grain-matched hardwood paneling was bound with gilded clamps that glittered in the dim light. On the end wall was an armoire filled with crystal goblets, each one carefully secured in a felted hanging bracket. The windows on the far side were curtained with great swags of heavy red velvet and the gold tasseled blinds were pulled down secretively to exclude all stray sunlight. Two large comfortable sofas were arranged around a marquetry table and a

newspaper dropped negligently on the floor alongside one of them.

“Gosh, It’s like walking into a movie set,” murmured Johnny pushing his way in to explore. “Look, even the newspaper is old, September 15th 1898. A hundred years ago to the day! What do you think all of this is doing here?”

“It couldn’t have been forgotten when they laid out the track. Not even a railroad company could be that inefficient,” Stuart added.

Andrew moved down the corridor and slid the door open into the next compartment, which seemed to be set up as a kind of drawing office. There were rolls of survey plans stacked in neat cubicles at the end of the space. A large drawing table was covered with a canvas dustcover, which extended to the plush carpeted floor. There was a black-stained silver spittoon alongside. The space smelled heavily of cigar smoke. The window had been rolled up a fraction to allow the merest thread of fresh air into the space.

Just then a door at the far end of the carriage burst open explosively and banged violently against the side of the carriage. There was a shout and a bundle was hurled out onto the trackside. In their separate compartments the three interlopers moved silently to the window and crouched down to see what was happening.

A man had been thrown out of the car and two heavy set men had jumped down and set upon him, kicking and beating him violently.

The victim was pulled to his feet by the two ruffians who turned him to face the car. Blood ran down his face from his temples, he was

sobbing audibly.

“I’ll sign it, I promise I will,” he wailed. “Just let me go home and we’ll forget all about this!” he pleaded.

From his squint vantage point Johnny saw a thick hand waving a cigar extend from the door. A pen and paper were passed to one of the bullies who oversaw the laborious signature of the man whose face was almost pressed into the gravel. The paper was passed up into the car. Not a word was spoken. Perhaps there had been a silent signal before the door pulled closed with a contemptuous slam and the window slid up with a definitive click in damning response to the man’s anguished pleas.

The two men bundled the man off some distance from the train. The concealed onlookers heard him being dragged along through the trees and watched as he clung desperately onto every passing trunk within reach.

They watched, immobile, unable to decide what exactly they should do or how they could intervene.

“I think that we had better follow them and check that the guy’s going to be okay.” Johnny whispered.

“Perhaps he deserved what’s happening but we should at least make sure that he is going to be all right if only from a distance,” Stuart suggested. But before they could move, they heard a door slide open with an ill-tempered snap at the end of the carriage and heavy footsteps approaching down the corridor. Swiftly Johnny crossed the compartment and pressed up against the low dado out of sight. Stuart hid behind one

of the sofas. The heavy footsteps clumped past the door and were heard entering the next compartment, where Andrew had been examining the elaborate drawing equipment.

Johnny and Stuart awaited an angry shout of discovery of the trespasser. None came. Johnny silently slid the door of the compartment open a crack to hear what was happening next door.

From his vantagepoint under the cover of the drafting table Andrew could see two gold tasseled slippers padding about the room over the thick carpet. There was a sharp knock on the communicating door with the next compartment, which opened swiftly, and a man wearing black trousers and shiny leather shoes shuffled in. Andrew could see that he was wearing no socks. His ankles looked pale, blue veined and thin.

“Colonel Reckkon?” a reedy voice enquired.

The big-footed man responded. “Jeb, tidy up the deeds for the Slaney farm. The usual touches, lots of fancy words like ‘chattels’. It has just been bequeathed ...er ‘granted’ to us.”

“Oh and by the way, I have arranged for a courier to take our stash downline later this morning for the Board to peruse.”

“Imagine! he came all the way from Ireland to establish his own personal peat bog. We’ve done the man a service, or at least his family. It was time for them to move on!”

“Oh and see to it that Webber moves Slaney’s livestock up to the camp, and his family too if you locate them. They may come in handy in

the camp kitchen I expect.”

The gravel voice terminated with a plosive ‘pop’, which was echoed by the mirthless tittering of the sockless clerk.

“Yes, Colonel Reckkon.”

Half muttering to himself, red tassels ripped a drawing off the board and tossed it on the floor in an apparent fit of pique. At the same time his cigar rolled off its perch and onto the floor under the drawing table beside Andrew’s crouching form.

“There’s not enough lumber in the whole country to build to Hogtown engineers’ specs,” he muttered. They sit around in their fancy city drawing offices picturing stands of mighty forest trees growing conveniently alongside the track, sized, dressed, ready for construction. I’d like to see one of them up here facing the practicalities of getting the job done.”

Andrew gingerly rolled the cigar out and propped it on a claw foot of the drawing table. A second later the man paused and scooped it up. Andrew let out a slow breath in relief. The room began to fill up with acrid smoke. Neither man seemed to think to open the window.

“Well, they’re all going to have to reckon with Cyrus Reckkon, that what I always say and no one comes out of that reckoning lightly, look at old Slaney.” Another plosive pop terminated his musings.

“Oh, by the way Jeb, the agreed code word for the messenger this afternoon is ‘Genghiz’. Got that. The last one was some kind of inside

joke - completely lost on me. This mealy mouthed little tyke comes up, all smiles, and spouts out ‘Xenophon’ I ask you - who dreams these things up in the Company headquarters. I suppose some shifty little clerk who has nothing better to do but sit on his stool all day. What am I supposed to make of ‘Xenophon’? Do you know what it means.”

“Don’t know’s I do, Colonel.” Jeb replied meekly.

“Anyway add the Slaney document to the pile and get my little coffer out of the safe. *Coffer?* my little *coffin* more like. Yes I like to think of it as a little coffin, the last restin’ place of so many unnecessary dreams. Unnecessary I say! Nope they can’t stop progress... and they’re not going to stop Cyrus Reckkon.”

“Yes Colonel Reckkon.”



While Andrew was being held unwitting captive, hidden under the table, trying to make sense of the conversation overhead, Johnny motioned to Stuart to follow him down the corridor. Stooped over they crept silently peering into each of the cabins as they passed. They entered a dining compartment, a splendid space at the centre of the carriage with a long table covered with an opulent embroidered table cloth. Beyond that was a little galley kitchen with walls covered in racks of polished brass pots and a tiny kerosene stove to place them over. Two further bed compartments had their blinds drawn.

In the next compartment Johnny popped his head above the dado to peer in and ducked back in horror. He pulled Stuart down.

“There’s a woman in there,” he whispered and he edged an eye into the corner of the beveled glass decorated with fancy flourishes.

He looked again and his grip on Stuart’s shoulder tightened.

“There is something very wrong about this.” To Stuart’s astonishment Johnny brazenly slid the door silently aside and entered the compartment.

“Are you all right miss?” he enquired uncertainly.

The room was dimly lit and smelled of perfume mixed with another slightly medicinal, narcotic smell.

Johnny approached the draped figure on a chaise long by the window, a woman with her face upturned into the single ray of light that had penetrated into the carriage under the blind. Her eyes were vacuuous,

lustreless, staring blankly into space, her jaw slack and mouth open.

“Is she dead?” Stuart asked nervously. Johnny touched her arm tentatively. “Sorry m’am, are you okay?”

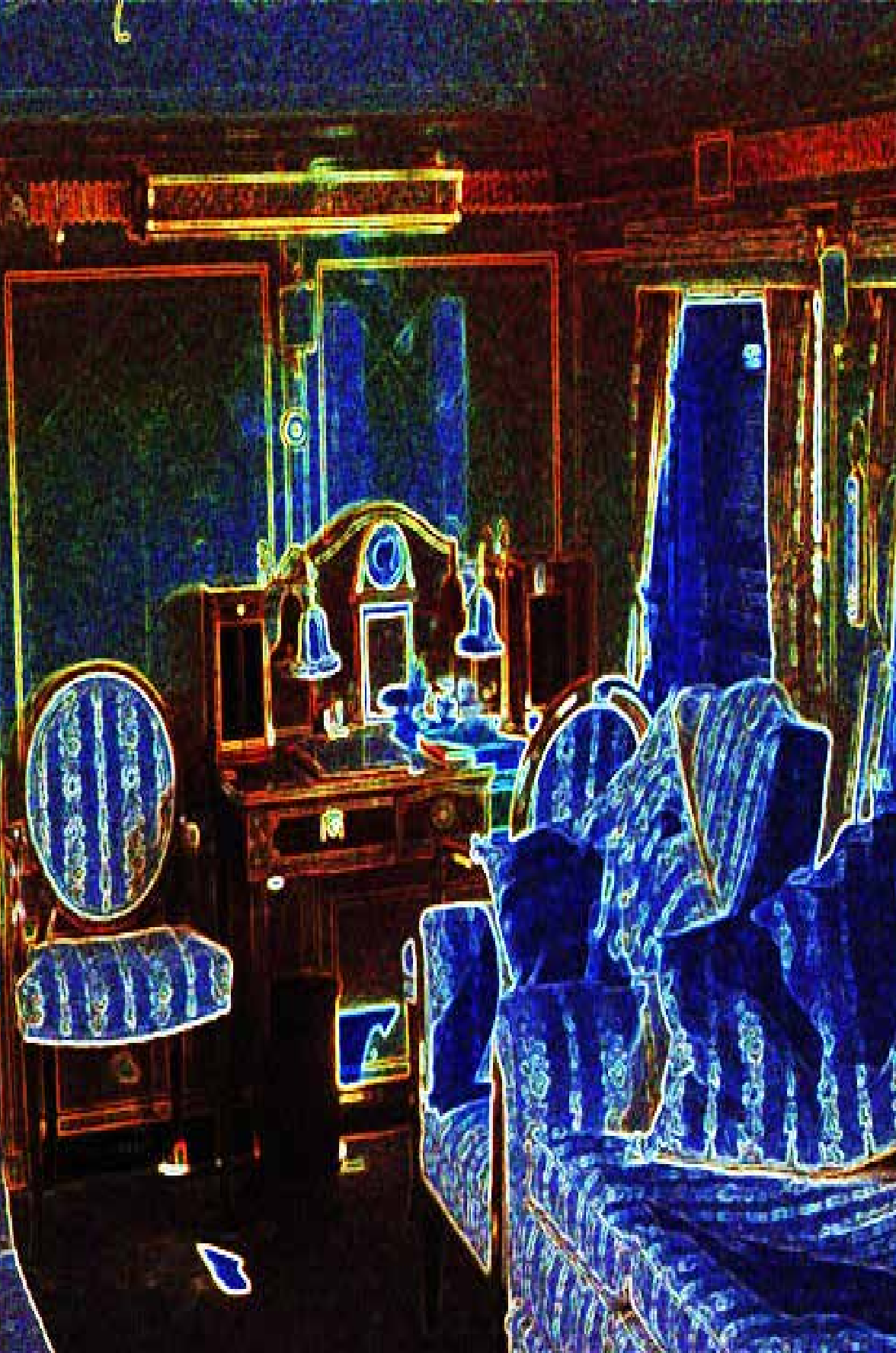
Her arm seemed to radiate reassuring warmth. Beside her on the floor a framed photograph had slipped from her grasp. Stuart stooped to pick it up, an silver framed photo of a young girl holding a small kitten. He showed it to Johnny. The little girl was laughing uproariously at the pleasure of their two young lives. He placed it on a dressing table nearby and noticed that it was covered with cosmetics and a dainty glass tray full of broken glass vials and syringe needles.

Stuart pointed out the needles and did a screwball gesture around his ear pointing at the woman. Johnny felt that they should be getting her some kind of help and kept asking her whether there was anything they could do.

Suddenly the woman’s dilated eyes narrowed to sharp points and focused on the face peering at hers. She convulsed violently and burst into a long, hysterical scream.

“Well, at least she’s not dead. Yes I’d say very much not dead.” They bolted for the door.

The two boys burst headlong from the cabin sliding the door shut to bar pursuit and entered the long salon at the end. Quickly surveying the situation ... three chairs around a table, one overturned on the floor, one of the curtains had been torn from the window and was lying in a crumpled mass by the door ... they ran to the rear door and looked out.



To their horror the two ruffians had returned from their foray into the woods and were chatting outside. Escape from the end door was blocked.

A door slid open down the carriage, probably the men in Andrew's compartment. In a trice the two boys tried a small storage locker door and bundled into a dark compartment smelling of smoke saturated clothing. They waited.

Cooled up under the table Andrew had had time to consider his options. A devious plan had begun to take shape in his mind. When the two men heard the scream down the carriage, Andrew had some notion of what might have happened.

Cyrus sighed loudly and muttered, "Lord preserve us. More of the horrors. Sometimes I wish I could do a Slaney on her. If life were only that simple! Anyway I don't want her to have any more of her medicine now, you know how she gets with people around when she's coming out of her spin. And this is one time when everything's gotta run smoothly with the Board. I want to fix her up nice and sound with a strong sedative just before the reception, put her out for the duration and that will keep all our lives a whole lot simpler."

"Well life seems a lot simpler for you than it is for most people!" was the terse retort from Jeb once Cyrus was safely out of earshot.

Cyrus called back, "C'm here, Jeb, lend us a hand, she'll only get

worked up into a state if she gets me alone.” The two men stomped off up the carriage corridor.

Andrew was out of his hiding spot in a flash, crossed the corridor and dropped out the side door, which he closed silently behind him. He peered around the carriage and could see that the two ruffians had returned from their expedition into the woods. He dropped out of sight into the ditch on the other side and skirted around the group emerging down the track beyond siding junction.



Meanwhile Sarah, Mavis and Ariane had been unloading the truck and stowing all the provisions under a tent pitched alongside the track. In the distance they could hear the rumble of thunder. The air was charged with electricity. The throbbing insects seemed to be gloating over the desolation of the track that divided their wilderness.

Sarah had just settled back and pulled out her sketchbook when an earsplitting crash occurred up the line that sent shock waves rattling up and down the track.

“What was that? It sounded like an explosion.”

It had seemed very close by and they set off upline to investigate. They had only rounded the first bend when they came across an area where the landscape opened out into a wide open plain. Here the main track fanned out into parallel sidings most of which seemed to be of temporary construction with unevenly spaced cross ties secured by bent and rusty rails. Set up on these tracks was an astonishing range of different types of vehicles, flatcars laden with logs, and hopper cars for transporting gravel and fill. Some of the flatcars seemed to be surmounted with primitive mechanical equipment, housings for large radial saws and flat tables. There was a group of strange boxcars that were double the height of normal boxcars and punctured with four or five rows of tiny dolls house windows.

Beyond the fan of tracks the land level fell off sharply into a broad river valley. A wandering strip of black water was flanked by a broad meadow of swaying wild rice and reeds.

A single track extended out at high level defiantly arcing across the deep gulch and passed over a slab-like rocky island that divided the river into two courses. Like a sinister black millipede tethered from shore to shore, the trestle was supported upon a forest of black timber piles spliced together and braced with innumerable cross struts. The island midway had shear cliff like shores and seemed to be composed of a type of black basalt rock, deeply fissured and criss-crossed with protruding quartz veins, an very alien feature in a dun coloured vegetal landscape.

A mechanical puffing sound, blended with the clanking of chains and punctuated with regular thuds drew the girls' eyes to a black bird-

like contraption mounted over the edge of a flatcar near the far side of the trestle. The device was cranked up with a series of pulleys only to be cut loose at its summit and come crashing down on the head of a heavy timber pile being driven towards bedrock. The steam engine expelled puffs of smoke that filled the deep gorge with drifts of dense cloud.

On the far side of the valley, where the track rejoined the high land, the trestle was crawling ant-like with workmen clambering up and down the construction. Ranged out onto the trestle were a series of flatcars piled high with logs drenched in black creosote.

They approached one of the multi-storey boxcars and Mavis found a ladder at the rear.

“Look, this is how you can get in. Hold on I’ll just check it out inside” she shouted back gaily as she scampered up the ladder.

“But Maeve! You can’t just...” Sarah’s voice drifted off as Mavis disappeared. Ariane clambered part way up a ladder on the side of a boxcar and peered into a window. “It’s all bunks in there” she reported, lined up in long rows in open dorms. These people must be midgets and not very tidy midgets at that. It’s almost looks like the interior of a slave ship inside, minus the shackles. There is personal junk strewn everywhere, and some pretty nasty looking magazines. Shee-eesh, what a mess!”

Attempting to distance herself a little from the brazen trespassing of the other two girls Sarah wandered off around behind the boxcars.

Meanwhile Mavis and Ariane had discovered catwalks that linked

one high-rise railway gallery to another. From their high vantagepoint they could make out a large work camp of simple folded sheet tents draped over ridge strings connecting guyed end posts. The crude tents were grouped around several fire pits, some of which were still smoldering fragrantly in the cool autumn air. The camp seemed to have been abandoned for the day, though clearly there were provisions and utensils strewn around everywhere. Beyond the siding there was a large field which had been cleared and had little blue flags on poles set out in a regular pattern of squares. In some of these squares a few rudimentary timber clapboard buildings were under construction. There were large quantities of building materials amassed along the track edge.

“It looks as if they’re building some sort of depot or little village over there. It certainly doesn’t look like a very successful resort concept.” Ariane suggested. “A bit holus-bolus for my taste.”

As they surveyed the scene a solitary man in filthy black overalls emerged from the bushes and looked furtively up and down the track. His behavior seemed so curious that Mavis and Ariane ducked down with little inclination to go down and ask for help. His unkempt bushy beard and ragged hat gave him a very disreputable aspect. It might also be awkward to attempt to explain their own trespassing.

From their high viewpoints they watched silently as he fell to work. From his baggy overall he pulled out a spool of wire and began to run a line discreetly from a timber platform on an adjacent siding along the track line. He carefully fixed it to the underside of the rail with a malleable black pitch, which he deftly kneaded with his filthy hands. He put a blackened finger into his mouth and made a curious bird-like signal whistle. Two other men emerged from the bush carrying a heavy metal

box between them. They pulled away a portion of the platform facing and slid the box carefully underneath. Then they vanished mysteriously into the bush and the wire layer returned and worked for some minutes out of sight in the crawl space under the platform. He emerged and carefully replaced the facing that had been prised away. Then he skulked off.

The girls realised that what they had been witnessing looked very sinister indeed.

“None of this makes any sense at all to me” whispered Mavis, “but I think that to be on the safe side we had better go and snip that wire... whatever this is all about, those men were clearly up to no good.” She fingered the little Swiss army knife in her pocket.

The two girls crept down the ladder and crouching out of sight of anyone watching from the ditch, Ariane felt under the rail and located the wire. She pulled it down while Mavis cut a short section of wire out of it out. Wrapping the wire around the handle of her penknife she slipped it all back into her pocket.

“I hope that we are doing the right thing! It all looked so fishy to me!”

With a clickety clack what appeared to be a foot powered track bicycle clattered up the track behind the two girls. They stood their ground defiantly. Two men got down and the man who had been doing the pedaling shook out his legs to acclimatise himself to stable ground.

“What are you two girls doing here?” the other enquired brusquely. “This is the men’s compound and you’re not allowed in this area. Where

have you come from anyway?”

Mavis tried to explain to them about their accident down track and suggest that they were looking for some help.

“Oh, so you are another load of Reckkon’s widows are ye? Well you had better come with us and we’ll get you fixed up with some paying work.”

The other piped in, “There’s plenty of it for such as you down the line a bit.”

Mavis and Ariane looked at each other in total incomprehension at what these men was talking about. They did not like the sound of it at all.

The guard was dressed in very rough clothes and his dusty black trousers with coarse stitched seams had worn out at both knees. In one hand he carried an antique shot gun with a battered stock, but the barrel was a lustrous, oiled black. Curiously he wore a well-tailored vest over his greasy, tattered shirt and from his watch pocket a chain draped across his front and was clipped to the middle buttonhole. Were it not for the gun, which he handled in a ostentatious but careful way, Maeve would have pulled Ariane away and walked off purposefully.

“Or perhaps you were going to some sort of illegal meeting are you then?” insinuated the gaunt, ragged-looking man in an unpleasantly threatening voice. The two girls shook their heads in incomprehension.

“Safer with us. Here, anything might happen, especially if youse are spying. Colonel Reckkon has no time for spies.” There was menace in

his voice.

“Oh, no! We’re just passing by,” returned Ariane. “We just happened to hear that big explosion and came to investigate. What are you doing here and what are all these buildings for? And who is this Colonel Reckkon?”

“He’s the boss. That all you’ll need to know in these parts. Everything you see here is Reckkon territory, including you now, sweethearts.”

“Well I don’t reckon so, if you’ll pardon the pun!” burst Ariane a little too defiantly.

Mavis and Ariane were extremely apprehensive about their treatment at the hands of the two ruffians who propelled them forward roughly by the shoulders. They glanced around looking for Sarah but felt that it would be better not to give away her presence, in that she might be instrumental in sorting out this terrible misunderstanding. As they set out Ariane nudged Mavis to create a distraction. Mavis leapt forward to pick up a rusty spike from the trackside.

“Hey, whatcha doing! Put that down!” Mavis dropped the spike obediently. But with all attention fixed on Mavis, Ariane discreetly dropped her sweater as a signal to Sarah, carefully pulling out one sleeve to indicate the direction that they were being taken.

They walked some distance up the siding alongside a huge campground of ragged, folded canvas tents.



Sarah had wandered along the siding towards the edge of the valley. The unmistakable sound and smells of horses drew her towards a crudely fenced corral screened from view by a cordon of ragged brush. She pushed up against a rail to survey the corral. Her face froze in absolute horror. Gathered in one area a knot of ponies stood dejectedly. They had been cruelly tied together at the bridle so that they could not forage freely for what little edible food was available. They had obviously been severely abused. Scraggly and undernourished so that their bones showed through the hide, their backs were lacerated with deep wounds where draught hawsers had cut deeply into the flesh and had become infected. Abandoned, tethered, they were now quietly starving to death. One pony had collapsed nearby and had been cut loose from his tether. The other horses, indecisive, kept a distance from its fate and tried to avert their eyes. Sarah slipped under the fence and went over to the dying horse attempting to comfort it, showing the others that she meant them no harm. The others shied away, looking on suspiciously as if they expected only pain and abuse from human beings. Sarah started to approach the group reassuring them, intending to loosen their tether.

“So you’re into horses, are you?” A quiet voice addressed her from the bush alongside the coral. Sarah wheeled around to discern the outline of a crouching black clad figure concealed in the underbrush.

“I can tell that you’re not part of Cyrus’ stable,” he smiled reassuringly.

“What is happening here. I’ve never seen animals so badly treated. It’s totally against the law,” she added fiercely.

“Well he got them all gratis in the first place, ... only paid in other men’s blood, and now with winter coming on he has no further use for them. They don’t count for much. They’re not strong enough for the winter logging, so he’s just going to send them south as carcasses, take what little value there is left in them. But better live when they arrive at the glue factory!”

Something in Sarah’s mind suddenly exploded. She resolved to get back to authorities and organize a rescue mission immediately. She mistrusted the half-concealed voice in the bush despite his ingratiating smile. She edged back to the path to make a run for it, turned quickly on her heel and found her way barred by a tall native who grabbed her firmly by the wrists. The native winced as she let out a scream and tried to kic out. He clapped a hand over her mouth and dragged her quickly into the brush.

The two men made silencing gestures to her. Sarah was slightly surprised to discover that the voice that had first addressed her belonged to a priest, a tall gaunt man in a black soutane that had been cut short to expose practical high laced boots and leather leggings underneath. The native was dressed in carefully cross-stitched leather jacket and leggings. Embroidered on the front in stitching and quillwork were two interlocked birds wings.

“We don’t mean you no harm’ the priest whispered. “I suspect we share some sympathy for those poor critters. In fact we thought that perhaps you might be able to help us when we saw how you wanted to help the horses. You see, we want to help them too, and not just these ones, because there are many more ... horses and people who have fallen into Reckkon’s clutches.”

The native added in a gently voice, “Colonel Reckkon has brought a lot of suffering with him and not just for horses. He has invaded our landscape and thrown everything into chaos.”

The natives grip on Sarah’s wrist began to loosen as he could tell that she was listening to the priest.

“Come, we would like to show you something important. It will explain a lot.”

“But I’ve left some of my friends up on the railway siding. They will be getting worried about me.”

“I’m afraid that they’ve already been apprehended. They are already his prisoners now. Just like these horses, and probably no better treated. Let me tell you, nobody gets away from Reckkon. But you can help us to change that and maybe even rescue your friends. Come with us.”

Reluctantly Sarah followed as they led her down a steep path towards the river.

They passed through the tall reeds on a path of compacted earthwork that appeared to be the work of beavers that had laboriously closed off the lesser path of the river. They approached the black rocky shore of the island.

At close range the geology of the island appeared even more peculiar, a colossal alien stone harder than anything else in the riverbed which had been scoured away on either side by ancient glaciation. The black basalt glistened with strands of quartz that seemed to pick up a mysterious radiant

light under the lowering purple cloudscape overhead.

Their path approached a deep fissure which had a floor that ramped up to the tabletop plane. When they emerged on top Sarah could see that here the surface of the rock had been scraped level, almost devoid of vegetation. Ringed around the centre were mounds of neatly dressed stone cairns ranged in a huge circle. At the far end of the island the massive middle stanchion of the railroad trestle loomed up, sinister black and skeletal, half a forest of timbers had been spliced and cross-braced into this complex edifice.

Her guides turned away directing her towards the north end of the island passing over cross-bandings of quartz that seemed to have been squeezed proud of the rock surface. Then they dropped down into a deep cleft surrounded with the black shattered rock and overshadowed with dense tree branches. The whole place seemed unnaturally gloomy for the time of day. The priest pointed to a rock ledge and motioned Sarah to sit down. They were not alone. In the shadows Sarah could make out silent forms crouching around the clearing on all sides. In the distant background up on the stanchion a flat car laden with men and pulled by a tiny puffing steam engine chugged from the work camp out onto the viaduct.

Sarah started to enquire, but the native alongside motioned her to hush and listen.

From a deep crevice at the end of the clearing a wizened old man emerged. Arthritic and deformed, he was barely able to hobble to a position at the end of the clearing. A young man followed and placed a lamp encased in glowing translucent skins in front of him so that it shed

an eerie red light upwards onto his face. The young man offered him a pipe and then retired as the elder smoked contemplatively in silence. Then, carefully placing the pipe to one side, he raised his head and slowly looked around at the huddled, attentive forms. From deep within his chest a rumbling voice emerged. Suddenly, like a storm, it grew into a torrent of words in a language that Sarah had never heard. Not a person moved and only the lamp flickered and cast a wavering shadow onto the black rocky backdrop.

The impassioned speech ended as it began, trailing off into a deep personal reverie. The old man rose to his feet and aided by his assistant, he tottered back into the fissure.

The attentive audience stirred into action. Various people got up and formed little groups of whispered discussion.

Sarah turned to address the priest. “What was he saying and what part do you expect me to play in all this?”

“Only that we must all try to do good and follow the heart.”

“He was describing how the souls of the ancestors were rising on the landscape, how they were being pulled out of their resting places to fight these invaders. You see this is a holy island to these people. It is called *Black Rock*, the isle of the dead where so many of the spirits of their forefathers once buried here still live on. They see this place as a miracle, a holy place that has been set here by the gods as a reminder that there are greater and inexplicable forces at work, far greater than our own lives. They know that they are part of this greater destiny. *Black Rock* is unique. There are smaller samples of it everywhere in the Silver Ocean,

small stones, rounded reminders, that have been carried by the Unseen Hand and scattered throughout the landscape as remembrances of this holy place. Wherever you travel you can seek out one of these stones and seek solace in the power of the *Unseen Hand*.”

“You may think it strange that a priest such as I am should be talking in this way. Yes, even a priest who has been trained never to question authority, who has been to Rome. I have indeed seen the amassed wealth of the Church in all its true insignificance. Yet long ago I realized that the Church that I witnessed there was so much less than what I knew it should be in my heart. I have subsequently spent my lifetime searching. I finally found what I have been searching for in the words of an old man, which I admit I only imperfectly understand. Strangely, I came here to transform this world and now I have found myself transformed by it.”

“The lives of these people have been invaded by Colonel Reckkon and the railway that you see under construction. He has pillaged their land. They feel that they have lost everything to a malevolent spirit that has been let loose, a spirit that is of a greater evil than even the men who have brought it. It is that black machine that is relentlessly subduing the landscape and all harmony of the creation. It is that black machine that has plunged its sharpened stakes deep into the heart of Black Rock, disturbing the spirits of the ancestors. They are only now beginning to glimpse the overall pattern of their own defeat ... no, their annihilation.”

“First it brought the poisons that soon became indispensable needs. Then it brought strange new types of labour that allowed them to earn money to spend on more of the poisons to which they had become addicted.”

“When I first came to this community almost twenty years ago there were no tools. The community had only two or three tools fashioned of metal and an odd assortment of artifacts gleaned from the approaching world. Now we have tools and axeheads everywhere, but they sit unused. Everyone is planning to go somewhere else, some mythical place they will find at the end of this line.”

“When I first came here, I had the dream of building a white church in the wilderness, a beacon of defiance. Now I am content to see my dream fused with the spirit of *Black Rock*. I have realised that here and with these people, I have found a true common purpose.

“That old chieftain, *One Heart*, has counseled his family that they should not react in anger. They will never overcome with violence. There are some here who believe that they must destroy the demon machine that has invaded their world.”

“But he foretells that this machine carries within it the seeds of its own destruction, that one day it will simply be seen for what it is, impressive but utterly Evil. It is only a matter of time, and we must wait. He says that there are already too many Ghosts imprisoned in that machine.”

“The man they call the Invader, Colonel Reckkon, is hurrying to complete his work. A great Evil Spirit drives him on. But he is racing against time. Failure is nipping at his heels.”

“There was an accident earlier yesterday in which four men who were dismantling the construction spur over the end of Black Rock fell onto the rocks below. We could see two of them still clinging to

their timber scaffold. We watched as the foreman came out to inspect the damage to his platform. He gave many orders. He seemed to be proving a point to the others, the point that he had no personal fear because he was the servant of something greater than himself. Caged flatcars laden with men passed to and fro all day. They did nothing to retrieve their fallen comrades.”

“It was only at nightfall when men came down to retrieve their colleagues that they discovered that the bodies had disappeared. You will understand. Such souls could not be allowed to rest on the sacred lands of their fathers.”

“But soon the souls of these men too will rise up to destroy the man who has destroyed their futures. It was only an act of purification of our own land but Colonel Reckkon will make much of it.”

“One Heart sees all this as a portent of doom for Colonel Reckkon. He speaks with authority.”

“He believes that the evil resides not in the man but in the machine itself. Men make tools to solve problems, but those very tools tend to restrict the solution to the problem and shape the next set of problems to be solved. They become necessary and create their own inflexibility. They tend to fetter the soul to the society that gave them birth.”

Sarah looked around bewildered. “But what do you want from me?”

“Come, and we will show you.”

Having made good his escape, with the sinister words of the conversation that he had overheard still ringing in his ears, an shaken but determinedly confident Andrew was to be seen strolling down the middle of the siding track returning to the emerald green carriage. He approached the end door and knocked sharply, waited only a few seconds and knocked importunately again. The window slid down.

“Is there a Mr Cyrus there? I’ve got a pickup scheduled here from a Mr Cyrus?”

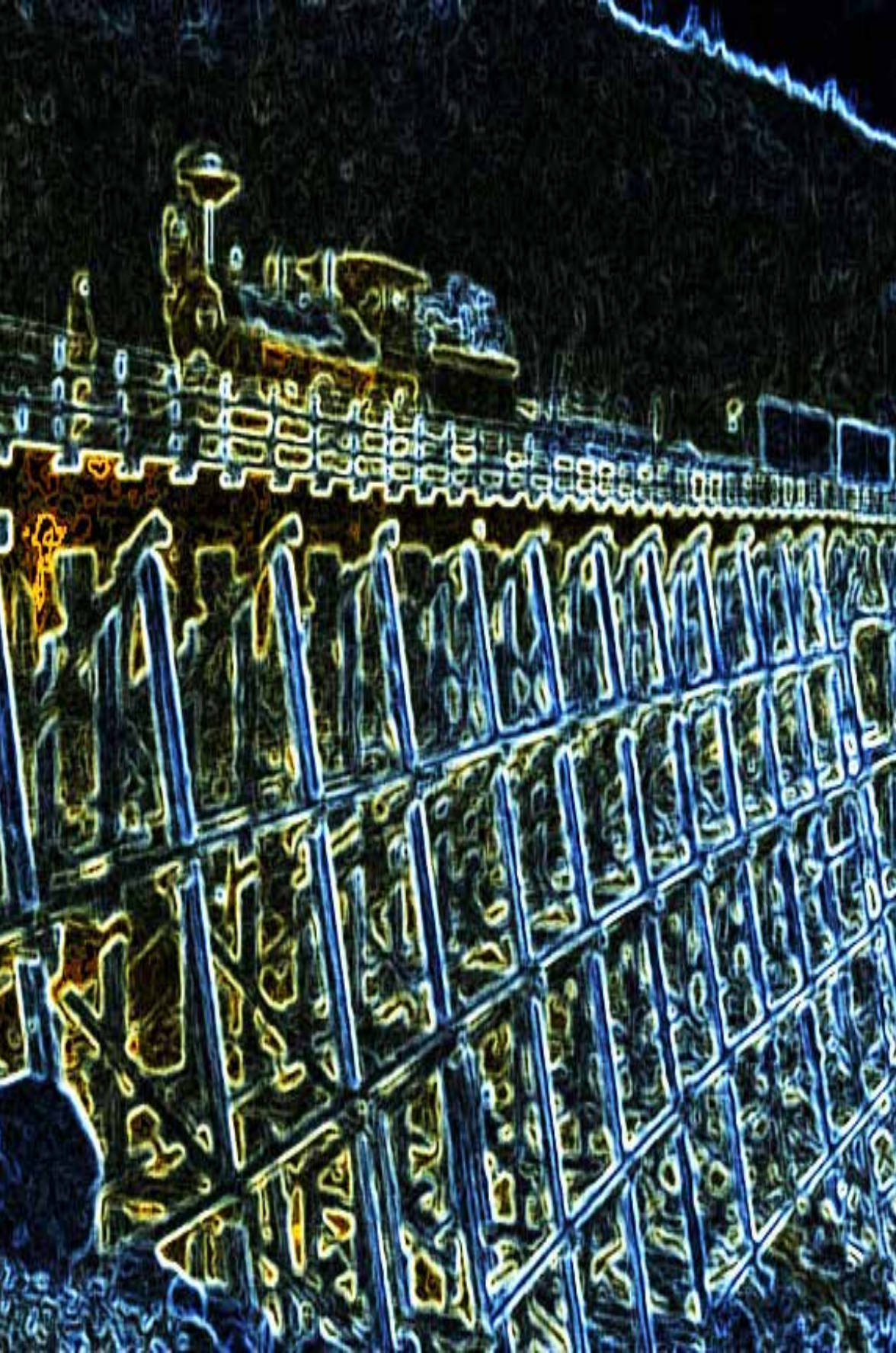
Cyrus looked down doubtfully at the boy with the large number ‘6’ emblazoned on his T-shirt.

“I am Colonel Reckkon to you. And I haven’t seen you before...and what kind of a uniform is that? You look like some sort of denizen of the Don Jail, and from the wrong side of the bars at that.”

He looked down at Andrew’s footwear with some surprise. “And what on earth have you got on your feet?”

“Look, sir. They told me that you had a package to pick up, not that you wanted a fashion show. All they said was that you needed to know about was ‘Genghiz’”

“How’s that?”



“Genghiz”

Cyrus Reckkon paused a moment and then seemed to relent. “Oh well, in that case, come in. I suppose that this is somebody’s idea of a disguise.”

Andrew entered the little drawing office where he had been hidden only moments earlier. Cyrus asked him to sign a receipt for the goods and then unlocked a desk drawer and pulled out a small metal box which Andrew received and ceremoniously zipped into his satchel. Cyrus was clearly curious about all this latest livery equipment and inspected the black nylon zipper with ill-disguised interest. He seemed somewhat mollified by the finality with which Andrew zipped up the bag and slipped it over his shoulders.

“At your service, Colonel.” Andrew saluted reassuringly, turned brusquely on his heel and stepped down onto the track, slammed the door a little too loudly and walked off purposefully. He proceeded to the spot where they had left the Velocipede derailed.

But it was gone.

Assuming that Johnny and Stuart had decided that he had escaped as well and gone on for help, he carried on up the track returning to the scene of the accident and the girls.

Meanwhile from their vantage point within the storage locker Johnny and Stuart pressed their ears against the wall to hear what was happening in the adjacent compartment. The two men seemed to have convinced the woman that she had merely had another hallucination. They heard the man who had been addressed as Colonel Reckkon dismiss Jeb to get back to his clerical duties. Then he rolled down a window and called out to the men outside who, shortly afterwards, clambered up into the carriage and fell heavily into the lounge seats. In passing someone flung open the armoire door and, without looking tossed a bundle of smokey laundry over the two boys crouching in the shadows. Johnny presumed this to be the curtains that had been wrenched from their rods in the scuffle with the beaten man. Then the man returned and flopped himself down onto the seat with his back to the locker door which remained slightly ajar. Unlike the subservient clerk, Jeb, these men seemed to address their boss on more equal terms, alternating between ‘Boss’ and ‘Cyrus’.

Cyrus was concerned with arranging a visit for important dignitaries. His slightly whining, nasal voice droned, “Everything has gotta go smooth, and I’m counting on you boys to make sure that what they see is exactly what they expect. The Company isn’t interested in complications and side issues. There is only one objective, recognising that we have the only viable route and we are going to come up with the goods before the *Conti* even gets to the starting line. That’s what old man Booth wants to hear. There is no alternative! I don’t want even one hint of controversy. Everything just clear, smooth sailing - or should that be steaming?”

His chuckle ended with a sinister ‘pop!’ choking sound.

“We’re going to whisk them through the camp, have the ribbon cutting and then straight out on to the viaduct, give them a view of the ambitious extent of our operation and just where their cash is going. It’s going to look sharp everywhere.”

“And I want all the men shipped out of the camp to the other side of the gorge to cheer their arrival. Give ‘em lots of incentive. Get ‘em well liquored up but be sure to keep them at a distance. Ole man Booth is completely teetotal you know! A legend!”

“Everybody is building lines these days. Funny how they all seem to want to build them in the same place,” he mused. “But my vision is different. This is also all about opening up a frontier. There was nothing here before, just a lot of swamp and rock. But next year the first steamboats on the Bay are going to pull into our new dock at Reckkon Landing and the vital connection will be made to our line which will be pumping in new lifeblood. That way we are going to create so much wealth ... you wouldn’t believe. We’ll be the distribution point for this whole end of the Bay, the fish, the timber. It’s like unlocking the door of a goldmine. And I hold all the titles on all of the land between here and the Sound.”

“Old man Booth has got the citizens of the Sound over a barrel. If they don’t deliver their land on a silver platter, then he’ll build his terminus ten miles up line and turn the Sound into a ghost town within five years. He’ll do it too. He’s seen it all and he always gets what he wants. Kinda like me!”

pop!

“The *Grand Conti* may have chosen the route with fewer obstacles but I’m not interested in their small inland communities. In a years time small towns like Piney Rapids and Swampsville, or whatever its called, will be moldering into irrelevance. They’ll have to come to me cap in hand because our line is the one that’s going to be finished first. That’s all that matters ... first! In two years everyone will have forgotten about the *Grand Conti*’s pipe dreams and their engineers and surveyors will be standing in tatters outside my drafting room door begging for a little jobwork.”

“The key to it all at the moment is absolute control over everyone and everything that goes into or comes out of Reckkon Landing. We don’t want outside ideas messing with people’s heads. Remember, everyone who works for Reckkon is indentured from day one. Money up front. They’ve got their contracts, if they care to read ‘em. If they break any law, well then it’s my law they’ve broken and they come up against me in my own courts.”

“But what about that priest?” Through the door ajar, Johnny could see the long black handle-bar mustachios of the man backed to him wobble as he spoke. For a man that they had seen behave so violently he had a deceptively gentle voice which contrasted favorably with Cyrus’ bullying nasal whine.

“Well as for his Mission, if that’s what you call it, it’s toast. You boys have my permission to get to work on that ‘priest’, as he calls himself. He’s a renegade and his Church doesn’t know half of what he’s up to. He’s a complete embarrassment to them. So they won’t back ‘im. in the long run. So you’re just going to help them out by doing the right thing. Doing us all a little favour.”

pop!

“Well it’s a long established community, and there are some signs that they might be willing to work with us. Wouldn’t that be easier, whatever the Bishops think in god forsaken Hogtown.”

“I don’t want them working *with* me, I want them working *for* me. There’s a big difference you know. Most of the natives are working for me now anyway. By this time next year they’ll be working hundreds of miles up line and like everyone else they’ll be dreaming about moving on to the end of the line. But we’re gonna make sure it our end that their working towards!”

“Under any circumstances the Reckkon Viaduct will have to cross their little chunk of real estate. It’s the only deep water available for our little port. Even the frigging priest should be able to see that the spot is God-given to be a docking facility.”

pop!

“Well I’m a-thinking that there are some others that aren’t just going to let it happen your way, and that priest is just one of them.”

“Don’t worry about the priest. I’ve got a little conversion project for his flock in mind. With a little help from the Holy Spirit, or should I say the holy spirits.”

pop!

There was a long silence as the three men considered the implications

of these words. Swathed in the dusty curtain. Stuart felt the irrepressible urge to cough and tried to clear his throat discreetly. Both Johnny and Stuart realized that this was a very dangerous conversation to be overhearing.

They were also wondering what Andrew was up to and were half expecting that he might create some kind of distraction to help cover their escape.

Silence ensued. Cyrus seemed to be reading something and muttering occasional words under his breath.

“The ribbon cutting is gonna be late this afternoon followed by our sight-seeing excursion and then dinner. Iron Lizzie has gone down to pick up the Directors and Lady Lydia. She’s the neice of the Countess of Dufferin.”

“They are going to get one helluva reception at Reckkon Landing. Tomorrow it will be in all the Toronto newspapers, yep even that Grit trasher. Next year we will score on all the maps. Even back in jolly old England Lady What-not will be tracing her delicate finger over a map in some refined drawing room and breathlessly recalling her diary.”

“I expect that the ladies are looking for a little soupcon, shall we say, of life in the wilds. It’s going to be a regular outing, exceeding their expectations! Then there will be no turning back.” Cyrus’ voice terminated in his recognizable mirthless ‘pop’.

“And Murdo, above all keep those damn ponies outa sight. You know how ladies are when the get around horses. All bleeding hearts and

recriminations. I emphasise, we do not want controversy!”

“Well Cyrus, you know how close to the deadline we’re working. In fact we lost four of our men yesterday. Went down with the scaffolding.”

“That, Murdo, is just the kind of runour I just don’t want to hear about. Specially not just before the Booth visit.”

“Sorry. Well we’ve got the men working double shifts and setting the last rails today. The first rolling stock should be able to make the connection over the next leg of track any time now.”

“There’s nothing that appeals to ladies like a little ribbon cutting and polite applause. Yes and a few genteel words about taming the wilderness to be recalled in their diaries.”

“This time next year...”

“This time next year. The question is how do we actually get to this time next year?”

“First step, see to the priest. Somewhere deep is my suggestion. Remember God is *not* on his side, so don’t be squeamish!”

pop!

There was a puffing sound in the distance followed by a long wailing whistle.

“Well! Here comes old man Booth himself. Remember who we’re

dealing with. He's the richest man in the Canadas. He styles himself the owner of longest railway line in the world. So he's our ticket to travel a long, long way. Turn on the charm you two. Preen those mustachios Murdo!"

"Though I hear he's an ornery old cus." he added with a plosive 'pop'.

The door was thrown open and the three men stepped down onto the tracks.

Stealthily Johnny and Stuart disengaged themselves from the curtain and crept out of the storage locker and over to the window. A black engine pulling a sleek, ebony carriage and belching black smoke was reversing onto the siding to pick up the green carriage.

Johnny was just nudging Stuart pointing towards the culvert while the mens' backs were turned suggesting possible escape when...

"I didn't think that I was dreaming." A fluting voice sounded behind them.

They wheeled around in alarm to confront the woman from the next compartment, now bundled up like a sausage in her stained blue dressing gown.

"What are you two boys doing here? Oh nevermind prevaricating, I'm guessing that you work for the *Conti*."

Johnny nudged Stuart to make a dash down the corridor but the

woman stood in the way.

“Don’t do that. I’m not going to blow the whistle, and maybe I can help you ... that is maybe we can help each other.”

She glanced down the corridor then closed the door quietly behind them shrugging her shoulders like a sneaky child.

“What I have in mind is a kind of a deal. Fair and square. You see my husband is trying to get rid of me, just finish me off ... like some kind of embarrassment. He’s bundled me off into this isolated wasteland crawling with snakes and dangerous wildlife so that I daren’t set foot out of the carriage ... and now he’s withholding my medicine. I may be dead by the morning!”

At the thought of her plight thus expressed her manner began to teeter on the verge of hysterics, wringing her hands. As she spoke a disconcerting dribble of saliva appeared in the corner of her mouth, which she kept wiping off with the edge of her soiled sleeve. Her forehead was feverish and glistening.

“Cyrus keeps my medicine locked up in his desk drawer so that I can always be counted on to do exactly his bidding ... just like one of his many slaves. Jeb, his clerk, keeps the keys hanging on a hook under the pen ledge on his work desk. One of you is going to get the key to that drawer. Meanwhile,” and her eyes narrowed, “the other is going to stay here in the lock-up, just a little precaution, while I use my acting talents to draw Jeb away from his relentless rounds of daily drudgery screwing up other people’s lives. I’m a trained actress you know. So when I interrupt him I want you,” she pointed to Johnny, “to scoop up

two ampoules like this”, she extended one of the broken glass bottles that they had seen in the tray on the dressing table. “Take more than that and the old cus will figure it out double quick and then we’ll all be in big trouble. God help us!”

Stuart was obliged to return to the storage locker and had the door locked on him while Johnny accompanied her down the office to the drawing office and hid himself under the drafting table. He almost expected to find Andrew still hidden there. The woman knocked on the communicating door, kicked it desperately and then fell into a fit of hysterics for the benefit of the unsuspecting Jeb. She seemed to be playing all of the parts of some half remembered melodrama simultaneously. Jeb reacted with a soothing voice, trying to calm her and led her down the corridor back to her dayroom. His warbling voice trailed off out of earshot.

“Andrew?” whispered Johnny as he scrambled out from under the drawing table and carefully opened the door into the adjoining room. “Andrew?”

He found himself in a small office with a paper-covered desk. His eyes had become so accustomed to the half-light in the rest of the carriage that he blinked wildly as he entered a dazzling cabin lit by curtainless windows on all three sides. The keys were found hanging under the table exactly as the woman had described. Returning to Cyrus’ massive brass bound desk, he unlocked the top right hand drawer to reveal boxes of ampoules in a grey pasteboard emblazoned with *Maison Caran de Paris* and a very sophisticated looking woman in silhouette. It didn’t exactly look like medicine. He selected two from the opened top package and was sliding the door closed when an idea crossed his mind. He pulled out



a whole carton from underneath and slipped it carefully into his pocket substituting a book from the shelf above to make up the lost volume. He locked the drawer, returned the key and then went back to his hiding spot under the drafting table cover. Suddenly he felt very shaky about the knees.

Only seconds later Jeb returned and spent some time pottering about the office, sighing regularly, and humming an aimless tune under his breath.

Jeb went back into his office and Johnny waited a second in silence, then crept stealthily to the corridor and returned to present the two ampoules to Cyrus' wife. She snatched them from him with shaking hands and turned to her dressing table without saying a word.

"Aren't you forgetting something ... m'am ... your part of the bargain ... er ... the key?" She looked blankly at him, then her eyes focussed into fiery points. Johnny thought that she was on the verge of raising the alarm, but then she simply said "Oh, I left it in the door, Silly me!" and returned preoccupied to her table.

Johnny liberated Stuart and they both peered out the window at the men still talking outside. There was still no apparent escape.

"Well, we may be trapped in a sort of prison, but at least we now know where some of the jailors's keys are kept."

At these words they were both almost knocked off their feet with a sudden lurch sideways as the locomotive made contact with the carriage.

The door at the far end of the carriage slid open and Jeb's footsteps were approaching. The two boys leapt once again into the familiar compartment, locking it from the inside this time.



The two men led Mavis and Ariane to a remote part of the camp. Here the smell of roasting meat, suffused with a resinous pine smoke was overpowering. They found themselves amidst a group of women who were preparing vast quantities of unappetising lumpy food on large open tables. Despite the late season there were flies everywhere, crawling over the food. No one looked up to engage the eyes of the men who now pushed ahead but Mavis and Ariane were aware of being discreetly scrutinised by the women as they passed. The men looked around coldly then left the girls by a central table and departed without a word.

All eyes had now turned directly onto the two girls. Mavis took one defiant look around then grabbed Ariane by the hand and began to move off purposefully in an opposite direction.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. No one makes it out of here. Out there you are just fair game for any loon who comes along.”

The huge woman who spoke had a grimy red bandanna knotted over her hair. Her face was shiny with a thick varnish perhaps intended to repel insects.

“This is ridiculous! Are we supposed to be your prisoners?” Ariane glared back at the woman.

“We’re all prisoners here. But what other options do we have?” a weedy woman with thick greasy smeared spectacles added.

“Well haven’t you heard of women’s rights? It seems like you’re virtually slaves here.” said Mavis.

“It’s not that we’re slaves. At least we has a choice, even if we ain’t got no options. There’s food and a little money to set aside.”

“Yes, if we’re lucky we get paid, even if it is into the Reckkon Bank,” another added as if it would explain something.

Her large hand touched Ariane’s shoulder solicitously.

“I suppose that you are just another of Reckkon’s widows,” she said. “Well, you’ve got company, you’re not alone here.”

“You see none of us knows what happened to our menfolk. One moment we was working ourselves ragged on the land. Next thing we hears, our men have sold up and deserted us for jobs on the railway, then

disappeared without a trace, sold out their miserable dreams and left their families behind. Just signed away their farms.”

“But when it happens to so many people, you begin to get suspicious, you begin to see a bigger pattern - you begin to believe stories.”

“What kind of stories? What pattern?” Mavis asked.

“Stories that everything that happens around here suits Colonel Cyrus Reckkon. That’s why we call him *the Day of Reckoning* ... not to his face mind you... that he’s behind it all... that perhaps our men aren’t really working uptrack at all but were just found to be inconvenient for Cyrus.”

“But that’s terrible.”

The other woman added, “The only problem is that we’ve been warned on the grapevine that it’s not going to be good for anybody’s health to be at the reception that we’re cooking for.”

“I think that I know what you mean.” Mavis fingered the little length of wire wrapped around the penknife in her pocket.

“You’re not from the *Conti* are you?” The red bandanna’s eyes narrowed to evil slits. “We don’t need any more troubles than we already got.”

“What do mean by the *Conti*?”

“Where did they dig you up? That’s what this is all about. It’s either us or the *Continental Railroad* and who gets there first wins the lot. Next

year the government agents are going to make some people's fortunes and decide who is gonna be ruined."

Mavis went over to a large pot over the fire and peered in. "It sounds as if that pattern ought to change pretty soon. Perhaps we could come up with a particularly memorable house specialty for your next meal that would make these people appreciate the feminine touch and the fine job you're doing in the cooking department. In fact I think that we could come up with a pretty scintillating dish or two. Let's see ... what ingredients are available...?"

Their eyes strayed over the scrubland beyond the cooking encampment over a field of nasty looking shrubbery and a diabolical look came into Mavis' eyes as she hearkened back to some of frontiers of culinary art that she had previously assailed.

"I'd be tempted to throw in a little *Poison Ivy* but I suppose that that would be overdoing it."

"Oh, you don't think so, Mavis dear?"

Mavis and Ariane set to work.

C clutching his metal box full of deeds, Cyrus' 'coffin', and pondering over exactly how it fitted into the second part of his grand plan, Andrew walked back up the track some distance. He thought that he recognised ahead the twist in the track where their truck had foundered but could find no trace of the cross road or abandoned vehicle. He realized that they must have covered much more distance on the Velocipede than he had imagined.

He continued on until suddenly the single track fanned out into a number of sidings, which he certainly did not remember passing before. He was perplexed in that there seemed to have been no alternative route. How could he have missed this?

He was just about to retrace his steps when he found Ariane's red sweater beside the track. At first he thought that she must have dropped it but when he stooped to pick it up he noticed that the outstretched arm looked very contrived, folded so deliberately across the front. She could not possibly have dropped it like that. He had an uneasy feeling that this was a signal that the rest of the group was in trouble.

Over his shoulder he heard the light rattle of a vehicle approaching and had just time to slip behind the wheel of a nearby boxcar, concealed from view.

Downline a man with a steel rod appeared and adjusted a track switch.

A tiny engine with an exaggeratedly high funnel stack puffing billows of black smoke hove into view pulling two jaunty, canary yellow open

carriages decorated with painted scallops and swagged with red and blue striped material. The train with these cheerful carriages trundled up to the little timber platform on the adjacent siding. A great cloud of steam burst from its undercarriage as the boiler steam valve was opened.

Immediately the side gate of the carriage snapped open and an impetuous woman, hobbled by an improbably long dress, that made her resemble a trussed crayfish, stepped down just as the switch man was placing the box step for her to alight on. She appeared to tread upon his hand as he winced visibly. Andrew could see instantly that she had perfected the role of overbearing, querulous and assuredly foreign, grande dame.

A wispy bearded, and shiny-pated man in a frock coat poked his head out and looked around before stepping down tentatively. He smiled apologetically at the switchman massaging his injured knuckles.

The woman crossed the platform and surveyed the marshy shore of the river with a sneer of contempt and a hissing sound that complemented the discharging steam from the locomotive.

In a high fluting voice she complained, “I thought that there were going to be mountains, snow capped peaks, roaming bears, and all I have seen has been mile after mile of god-forsaken scrub and shattered rock... and exposed to that relentless banality of conversation to which the colonial mind will slump. Can they talk of nothing but the clothes back in London?” She glared with hostility at the little man who was polishing his eyeglasses as if in expectation of some redeeming great sight.

Although they had been disparaged in such an overt manner, the group of elaborately dressed ladies, which had descended from the carriage clustered around their querulous companion making sycophantic, placating noises. The little group stood on the platform like a dejected group of sea birds huddled on a deserted shoal, only a short distance from Andrew's hidden vantage-point.

From the first carriage four elaborately costumed men in waistcoats, draped with important looking gold chains, joined the ladies on the platform. Andrew was particularly astonished by the exuberant varieties of facial hair these gentlemen affected. Three had bushy beards and the other displayed a handle-bar mustache that probed the air far beyond his mean pinched features.

"I suppose that Cyrus is planning to make an entrance in style. He always makes the most of any occasion." The tall and heavily mustachioed man, whom Andrew now recognized as one of the ruffians dressed up in a better suit, examined his pocket timepiece and clicked it shut with precision, throwing a suggestive glance at the lady.

The lady returned a gaze of transparent but reptilian flirtation while her husband, still polishing his glasses, avoided confronting the situation with any clarity.

In the distance a haunting whistle wailed across the landscape

"On time to the minute" exclaimed mustachios. "That's what it's all about. Timing is everything. And that's what we're about to prove to the *Conti*."

The steam and smoke billowing from the high funnel was visible over the trees before the locomotive burst into view. Even Andrew, hidden in the undercarriage of the high boxcar could not help but be impressed by the majesty of such power pushing its way defiantly through the empty landscape. The ground shook under the approaching wheels.

The locomotive drawing a sombre black coach as well as the familiar emerald green car emblazoned with the jaunty CR monogram behind pulled into the platform opposite the canary cockle shell open carriages. There was polite admiring applause as the massive engine stopped in a cloud of steam. The tremors in the ground seemed to rebound in the bystanders legs for some time after.

Their greeting was terminated by a further explosive release of steam which made the ladies recoil in fright.

The green carriage had been decked in festive banners, swagged from its eaves. The blinds were up now and the centre of the carriage, which Andrew saw to be a dining lounge lit with dazzling chandeliers and inviting in the fading light.

A man whom he recognized as the Colonel stepped down onto the platform. He was resplendent in a long black frock coat, stove pipe hat and white tie with wing collar. Andrew clutched the little box of deeds more tightly under his arm. Cyrus stepped forward and welcomed the ladies graciously. He clapped the gentlemen on their backs drawing their eyes to the viaduct with a proud sweeping gesture.

A group of porters descended from the rear of the carriage and began to set up lights attached to tall poles around the perimeter of the platform.



As a final touch another man began to string bunting from one pole to another creating an interweave in the middle.

Then to Andrew's utter astonishment Mavis and Ariane stepped down lightly out of the carriage. They were dressed in black uniforms, which they had pulled over their jeans, nevertheless clearly visible underneath. They had white bandanas over their hair and white, lacy aprons. They seemed to have altered their complexions to a darker, more sun-exposed hue yet remained recognizably Mavis and Ariane.

Andrew wished he had his camera to capture such an extraordinary turn of events. The girls seemed curiously purposeful in their actions as they began to pass around platters of colourful delicacies. Andrew tried discreetly to attract their attention. He picked up some pebbles for the purpose should a discreet moment arrive. He noticed that both Mavis and Ariane had a tendency to furtively glance up the track as if expecting to see someone in the bushes. He suspected that Sarah must be hiding there somewhere.

The regal woman suddenly seemed to have warmed in attitude with Cyrus' presence. But Andrew had the sense that she was playing mustachios and Cyrus off against each other.

"Oh how exquisite! Colonel Reckkon you do think of everything to charm the ladies. All prepared by industrious brown little digits, no doubt!" Her effusion may have chilled a little as she inspected Mavis mottled skin colour at closer range."

"What delightful little delicacies. What are these delectables, this flavour of the wild?"

“Leaves” answered Mavis truthfully but somewhat flatly, looking at her directly as if issuing a challenge.

A pause ensued as the grandee considered this pronouncement. “Terse, but to the point, as always these Canadians.” She burst out gaily. The woman fingered the greenish square proffered and raised it to her lips.

“What kind of leaf? she asked engagingly yet her voice sounded slightly constricted in her throat.

“Doesn’t matter much.” returned Mavis. Another pause. “It’s a native delicacy m’am, takes our industrious little brown digits hours to prepare”. Mavis’ eyes continued to issue their challenge.

The woman choked slightly, aware that all eyes had come to rest on her as she fingered the unattractive green lump. The conversation had dropped off in polite expectation. The pupils of her eyes narrowed as she steeled herself to assume yet again the white mam’s burden. But nothing was going to faze an aristocrat among these colonials and savages. Darting a glance at Cyrus as if to say that love hath no greater sacrifice and with a decisive flourish she placed the whole square in her mouth. Her throat froze instantly into a high relief worthy of a great anatomical sculptor and her complexion drained to an appropriate marmoreal hue. She waved with feigned gaiety at the assembled folk on the platform and then retired with indecorous haste behind a boxcar, no longer concerned about keeping her dress clear of the polluting soil. Mavis watched her departure with equanimity and then turned to the other guests who shrank back visibly from the proffered platter of delicacies.

Suddenly another woman burst out of the side of the emerald green carriage. Clearly Elvira Reckkon felt fully restored from her period of oblivion, rejuvenated by Johnny's offering and ready to undertake a little creative sparring with her husband. Feeling quite feisty in the brief interval before the return of her irrepressible cravings she went over to the group of ladies and introduced herself.

Cyrus looked on aghast but tried to put a brave face on it and signal to Jeb for help.

"Why Elvie, I thought that you said you were indisposed," he choked.

"Oh no, just unwilling to be disposed of perhaps", she said winking knowingly at the assembled women.

As Andrew observed the proceedings, one of the funereal grey window coverings of the black carriage seemed to flutter momentarily as if someone had been watching discreetly from behind the blind. Andrew took a closer look at the black car between the locomotive and Cyrus Reckkon's jaunty emerald and gilt carriage. It was painted with a lustreless finish and had small blank windows covered in a funereal grey blinds. At one end the inscription in a pale grey paint, 'The Booth Line' and in small lettering underneath 'No.1'

Andrew observed as the handle on the rear door seemed to lower imperceptibly. Perhaps someone was summoning the resolve to open it. Then noiselessly the door advanced a crack. Long bony fingers with swollen white knuckles displaying a colossal gold ring massaged the stile of the door with apparent indecision. Then the door was suddenly flung open to reveal an old man who stepped down onto the platform

with arthritic dignity. He closed the door behind him with a decisive click.

Cyrus Reckkon was first to acknowledge his arrival clearing his throat. He seemed momentarily flustered and stammered, “Mr Boo Boo ... ahem Mr Booth! ... John Rodulphus Booth, it is my pleasure, indeed my great honour to be able to welcome you to Reckkon Landing and present you to our assembled group of notables, ... all here to honour your visit. May I present Lydie Laydia, ahem, I mean, *Lady Lydia*, a niece of our revered Lady Dufferin.”

There was a round of applause.

Rodulphus Booth seemed a sinister presence. He was dressed in ink black clothes, a great cloak that flared out and waistcoat with innumerable buttons that hearkened back to a distant era. He appeared as perhaps some cutthroat on the high seas, decked out in another men’s purloined finery. His black shorn beaver hat resembled the turban of a merchant prince and seemed to absorb all peripheral light, almost a negative devil’s halo. In contrast his bleached white skin and pale grey eyes were so transparent that a skeleton seemed visible within. An unruly white beard was combed out into a vast display under his chin. He looked frail, tentative, a walking ghost.

The little group of dignitaries seemed somewhat daunted by this spectral presence. Cyrus Reckkon approached, and beckoned him over to the greenish-tinged Lady Lydia.

“I would like to ask Lady Lydia to do us the honour of cutting our ribbon to throw open the gates and inaugurate the future good fortune of

Reckkon Landing.” Cyrus Reckkon continued and began to get into his stride.

“We stand today on the frontier of an empire, the empire of the richest man in the Canada’s ... *John Rodulphus Booth* ... whose vision it has been to create the shortest route from the Great Lakes heartland to the Atlantic. Throughout a lifetime of thrift and astute business practice rising from a childhood of penury, he should be a lesson to us all. John Rodulphus Booth has amassed unprecedented wealth and power, the greatest in the land.”

“I think of it this way. We stand here in Reckkon Landing which will become the gateway to Europe. Within a year the bounty of our Great Lakes and the harvest of the Western dominions will be pouring, literally pouring, across our threshold on its way to Europe.”

Elvira Reckkon too seemed to be getting into stride and she suddenly piped up from the sideline. “Well if this is the way to Europe, I’m all for it. From Parry Sound to Gay Paree ... that’s the road for me...ee...eee!” she intoned harmoniously. “Just think of it! ‘Boo-Boo’ and I can hop the next train, that is if we can get anything decent in these parts. What about it, Boo-Boo? ”

The others in the company continued to look askance at her maunderings. Cyrus looked imploringly at Jeb and lifted his hand up to his throat squeezing it delicately. Jeb understood the signal and sidled discreetly over to help guide Mrs Reckkon back to more secure territory. Rodulphus Booth’s pale eyes glaciated almost perceptibly as he stared fixedly at Cyrus Reckkon.



Making light of the last comment Cyrus beckoned the group towards the triumphal arch with gestures of excessive bonhomie.

The group of dignitaries moved down the platform to inspect a red ribbon that had been gaily stretched across the track between the two posts of the triumphal arch. Elvie Reckkon broke free and dashed ahead trailing a gauzy scarf with a gaily-executed rendition of the dance of the Seven Veils. In a solemn voice Cyrus read out the inscription over the arch, “Reckkon Junction, Gateway to the Continent Welcomes J. Rodulphus Booth.”

All eyes turned to the Lady Lydia who had been handed a pair of scissors that she snipped into the air officiously ready to cut the ribbon on Cyrus’ instruction. She still looked extremely jaded from her encounter with Mavis’ delicacies as she tottered into position.

Meanwhile observing the proceedings from under the carriage, Andrew had at last formulated part B of his plan. With a wedge of stone he prised open the lock on the metal box he had been carrying. The lid of Cyrus’ ‘coffin’ flipped back to reveal a stack of documents set out in an elegant handwriting. Carefully selecting one of the more substantial deeds, which apparently transferred 230 acres of land at Shawanaga landing, he folded it neatly and stashed the box containing the rest onto a ledge under the chassis of the boxcar.

Carefully ensuring that all eyes were fixed on the ribbon cutting he tiptoed to the place set out at the end of the long dining table where he assumed that Cyrus would be sitting and slipped the folded document into the white napkin. Then he carefully folded Ariane’s sweater again with one sleeve pointing towards his hiding place as a signal to the girls

when they returned from the ribbon cutting. He dashed back to conceal himself again under the boxcar to await developments.



When the railway carriage had at last come to a rest Johnny and Stuart, locked securely in their cabinet, heard the voices of the two men trail off down the corridor and a door slam. Mrs Reckkon had made an hysterical appearance and Cyrus had called out to Jeb to conduct her back to her room for sedation. Her performance had seemed excessive and suspiciously contrived. On the other side of the partition they could also hear her bundling about her compartment clearly without the slightest intention of retiring to bed as her husband had insisted.

Emerging gingerly from the storage locker Johnny and Stuart stretched their legs and peered out the window at the group of people gathered on the platform below. Everyone was wearing elaborate costumes as if on a film set. The new carriage that had joined them at the siding was visible beyond the back door breezeway. Since escape from the far end of the

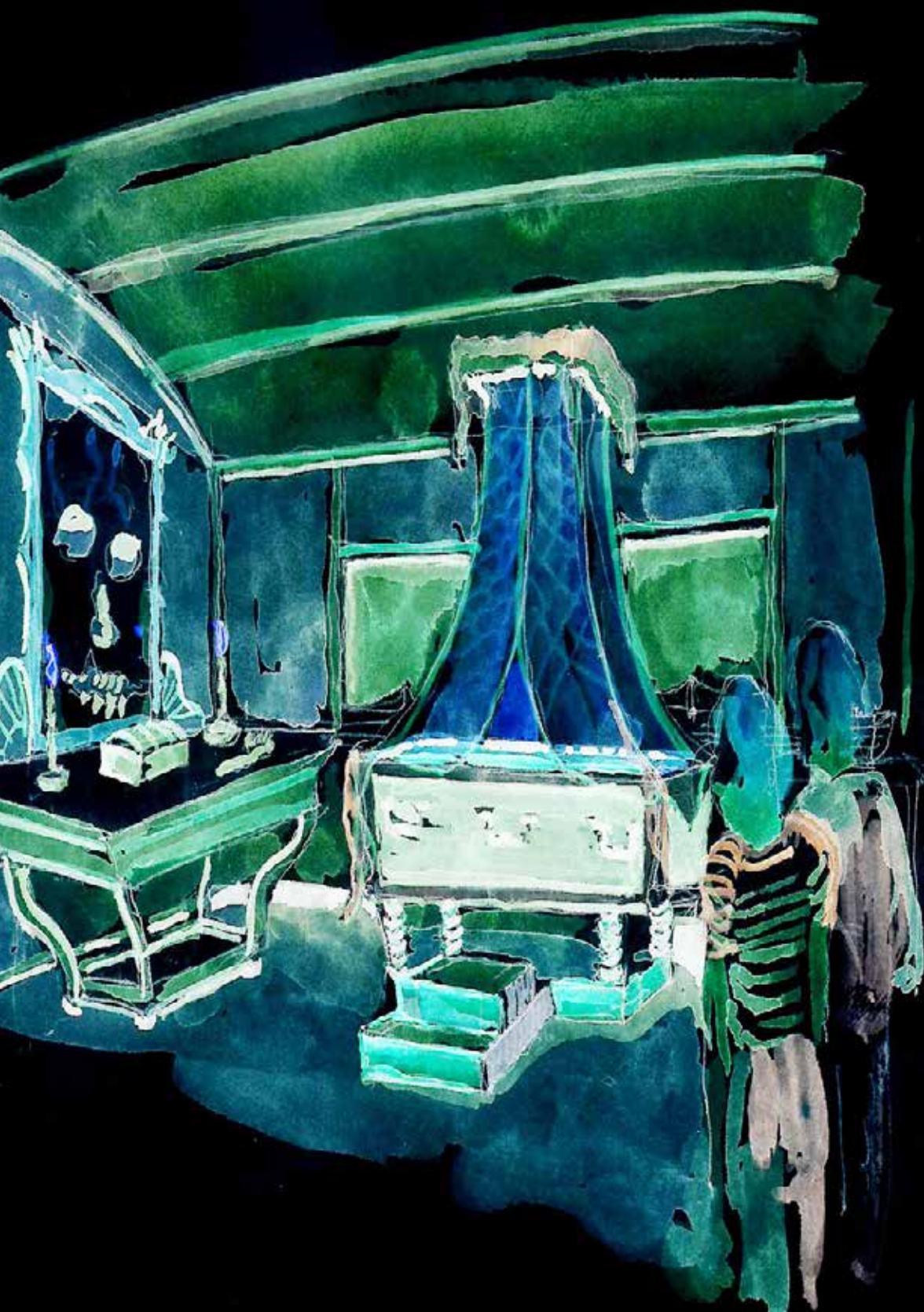
carriage would have been in full public view they considered a route through into the newly added carriage. Stuart tried the door gingerly. It swung open and they passed silently into a dimly lit room. Though it was still daylight outside two candles burned on a table alongside a silver mirror and a coarse toothed silver comb.

“I don’t know about these people! Nobody seems to be very keen on bright lights,” whispered Johnny. Stuart started to say something but then clutched Johnny’s arm in horror. To one side in the obscurity raised on a curious contraption of four springs fixed to the corners was a raised four sided box upholstered in black velvet and lined with a scarlet satin. Over the top a lacy canopy was draped over the edges.

“What on earth is that? Stuart stammered. “Do you suppose it is a ... c c ... coffin?”

“Not with springs like that. I think that it must be someone’s macabre idea of a travelling bed.” Visions of vampires flitted through his uneasy mind.

Shuffling footsteps were heard approaching in the next compartment. The two boys dashed back into Cyrus’ carriage and shut the door a trifle too loudly. Johnny held onto the handle. Seconds later he could feel a pressure applied from the other side. Someone was trying to follow them. He held onto it with all his might refusing to allow it to engage the mechanism. The person on the other side suddenly relented and relaxed his grip, but Johnny wisely held on. Sure enough a split second later there was a further sharp wrench on the handle from the other side, but Johnny was prepared for it.



As soon as the pressure was released a second time, he and Stuart dashed across the compartment and into the corridor. Ducking low as they passed Mrs Reckkon's compartment, Johnny glanced in to see her still seated in front of her dressing table applying colour to her cheeks with extravagant flourishes.

Abandoning her to the supposed vampire, they entered the central dining car again. Since they last passed through the long mahogany table had been covered with delicacies laid out on silver platters, a magnificent banquet ready to be transported outdoors to the assembled guests. At the end of the table was a voluminous silver tureen with two ring nosed lions on either side. Johnny peered in. It was filled with a rosy coloured fruit punch. Someone had recently dumped a load of ice around the periphery.

A diabolical plan entered Johnny's mind. "Stuart what do you think if we ..."

He fingered the little box of vials in his pocket.

Decisively he pulled out the box and began breaking the vials into the tureen while Stuart stirred the liquid with a long spoon.

He slipped the final one into his pocket. "For future reference... you never know."

"It seems to have done wonders for Mrs Reckkon, what do you reckon it would do for the rest of them, if you'll pardon the pun. And it may be our only way out of this crazy house."

"You mean by wreckin' the party," added Stuart, thoughtfully.



At the end of the platform Lady Lydia cut the ribbon with surprising dispatch and hardly a word to the apparent disappointment of the other ladies who clearly craved a fuller glimpse of the conduct within her elevated circles on the Continent. Then the lady retired yet again behind the carriage with indecorous haste.

Cyrus conducted the group back to the dining table where Mavis and Ariane were busily setting out platters of their tasty delicacies.

Rodulphus Booth was seated at one end of the table overlooking the splendid arch that framed Cyrus at the other end. Mavis could not help but notice that there was a tendency to compete for the seats furthest from the austere, humourless presence of John Rodulphus Booth.

With an exaggerated flourish Cyrus whipped open his napkin to signal the beginning of dinner. The deed secreted by Andrew fell heavily to the ground. Cyrus picked it up, at first a little puzzled. Then his features contorted into a knot of suppressed fury. He glared down the table at Murdo who was busily trying to engage the somewhat distant Lady Lydia.

“Ah Murdo, I see that you are entertaining a little flirtation with another camp. *The Conti* perhaps?”

Murdo, who had clearly misunderstood his reference, blushed incriminatingly thinking only that Cyrus must have been referring to his failing flirtations with Lady Lydia.

Cyrus unfolded and displayed the deed that Andrew had left hidden as if that would explain what was on his mind. Murdo, somewhat perplexed, smiled and lifted his glass totally unaware that in that brief moment his doom was sealed. Then his eyes grew round in astonishment.

Looming over Cyrus shoulders and passing through the triumphal arch a tall horse mounted by a fair-haired rider in outlandish costume approached the rear of the table.

Behind her Sarah trailed all of the broken dejected specimens that she had liberated from the corral. They came with her willingly, sensing that freedom and happiness lay in the directions of the farms from which they had been abducted.

Sarah brought the lead horse up to the end of the platform glared accusingly at Cyrus and then passed on behind the carriages without a word. The other horses hobbled by one by one, each one exposing evidence of desperate abuse to the horrified audience. One horse jostled the stage knocking off the face boards before collapsing in a heap behind Cyrus’ shoulders groaning loudly.

Following in the train of the display of woebegone horses a group of natives flanking a priest took up position in a semi circle on the other

side of the triumphal arch. They stared in silent protest at the proceedings refusing to pass through or speak a word.

However the proceedings around the table seemed to have taken an unexpected turn. Buoyed by Mavis and Ariane's constant plying of the fruit punch the guests were rapidly overcoming their inhibitions under the lowering presence of Rodolphus Booth. The punch also seemed to create an appetite for the 'leaf' delicacies, which Mavis plied assiduously. Even Lady Lydia seemed to cheer up following a few tipples. She and Elvie developed a surprising sudden rapport, which included practicing high kicks and provocative sashays in the background behind J. Rodolphus Booth. Others of the elevated company slid silently under the table. Murdo tilted forward and fell face first into the platter of Leaf delicacies.

Mavis considered a taste of the punch herself to discover what all of the fuss was about, but Ariane prudently stayed her hand.

Meanwhile throughout the mayhem, the natives looked on with growing surprise, their worst suspicions about the dubious benefits of firewater clearly confirmed.



Cyrus who under the circumstances had less and less interest in the proffered food and drink stared the length of the table into the cold grey countenance of Rodolphus Booth. Mavis had not succeeded in interesting this spectral presence in any of the popular punch.

“You’re not much of a party animal!” she joked as she approached with another tray of the punch drinks.

The two men ignoring the girls, faced each other over the now comatose party. The old man’s countenance did not mask his utter contempt for the direction of the proceedings.

Cyrus glanced back over his shoulder at the silent native protesters. Something within him snapped as he confronted the impassive stare of the priest. In a scalding rage he rose overturning his seat.

“Stoke up the boilers! I declare the Reckkon viaduct now open! Where are my engineers?” The engineers had been stoking up the boilers of the locomotive in preparation for the inaugural journey over the viaduct. But with democratic goodwill Mavis had ensured that both had had a fair taste of the punch, which they took to gratefully, though they had politely declined the proffered leaf delicacies. Cyrus found them stretched out on the track lying in each other’s arms oblivious to the world.

“Nevermind, I’ll do it myself.” He mounted the engineer’s cabin and gave two mighty blasts to the whistle. Slowly the massive engine

advanced on the natives who defiantly held their ground. A demonic look of hatred filled Cyrus' eyes as the engine picked up speed and thundered through the triumphal arch. At the last moment, before bearing down on the silent protesters, they merely stepped nimbly aside. As the locomotive rumbled out onto the viaduct, the natives turned impassively to watch it pass.

From his vantagepoint, Andrew observed the eyes of Rodolphus Booth still seated silently at the end of the table. Flecks of hellfire seemed to burst into his cold grey pupils and his skin and white hair took on a surprisingly ruddy hue as if the man were being transformed into the devil himself. Mavis and Ariane returned to the platform with a fresh batch of leaf delicacies. They stared down the track at the departing train, and their jaws dropped in astonishment.

The red reflections in Booth's eyes were perhaps of a more mundane origin. The great central stanchion of the viaduct had burst into a gigantic plume of fire. The creosote soaked logs sizzled and ripped apart under the greedy flames. Though two hundred yards distant already the blast of the inferno could be felt baking their faces.

Andrew rushed out onto the platform to complete the surprise of Ariane and Mavis. "What are you doing here?"

"Well I might ask the same of you two. And what on earth are you wearing?"

Given the behaviour of everyone around him, John Rodolphus Booth seemed not at all surprised at this unexpected new arrival in outlandish dress. Silently he rose from his seat, surveying the scene of carnage with



an expression of contempt, then he shrugged, dissociating himself from the disaster. Stepping over the recumbent bodies of Lady Lydia and Elvie, both now snoring lustily, he ascended once more into his coach and closed the faceless door with a definitive click.

At this moment Sarah emerged from behind the boxcar.

“Well typically the horses all seem to know the way home. I just hope that there will be someone to take care of them properly at the other end,” she announced. On closer inspection she saw that nothing could be done for the horse that had collapsed at the corner of the platform. Its flanks were moving only imperceptibly with its departing breath.

Silence reigned for a moment as the four of them turned to stare at the crackling conflagration. The locomotive had been stranded just short of the central stanchion. They could make out the silhouette of Cyrus Reckkon climbing frantically back over the coal wagon amidst the licking flames.

The black timbers of the trestle were silhouetted against the raging inferno. Flames seemed to run up and down them like messages of doom telegraphed from the foundations. The gaunt geometry burned itself into their transfixed eyes.

With an mighty crack the whole trestle seemed to shudder, lurch sideways and then in a splintering crash the central section collapsed into the river dragging the stranded locomotive and the jaunty yellow carriages with it. As the boiler hit the water there was a further sizzling explosion and a plume of steam shot up and enveloped the carnage reddened by the inferno within.

“Well I suppose we had better go and see if we can get help,” suggested Stuart.

At that moment the door of the Reckkon Carriage swung open. The group turned apprehensively to confront further arrivals.

Johnny and Stuart stepped nimbly down onto the platform and surveyed the carnage bathed in ruddy light from the flames.

“Well ... my plan seems to have worked.”

“What do you mean ‘your plan’?” was the surprising chorus of response.



I suppose that this was your idea of going off to get help... Now I think we'll need a lot more." Andrew approached the black carriage with the Booth Line monogram on the door.

"I don't think that you'll want to try that quarter." suggested Johnny. "Some people have rather odd lifestyle choices."

"And all the men in the camp are stranded over on the other side as part of the big celebration to welcome the first crossing. We were helping the cooks put together the feast. They told us all about it."

"Well I suppose that we could revert to 'Plan A', Gary's Char Pit Laundry," suggested Ariane helpfully.

As they surveyed the scene of carnage, no one seemed to come up with a better idea. The flames of the conflagration were now becoming lost in the clouds of vapour. A spectacular sunset of red and purple strands had begun to cast its glow onto the billowing steam.

The group set off down the track to discover what had happened to the truck. "It's not very far from here Mavis reassured them." The others looked more than skeptical.

Daylight was fading.

As they rounded the bend they encountered two men in plaid shirts hovering over their abandoned vehicle in a rather possessive manner.



“Oh no! More trouble,” muttered Ariane.

The men turned to confront the group, disappointment visible in their faces. “It’s a good thing you guys decided to come back when you did. We were about to treat this old truck as abandoned and get a trace on her licence.”

“Nevermind the truck! Sarah interjected breathlessly. “There is a huge disaster taking place just up the line. Has anyone got a mobile phone to call for help? We need the fire services ... there is certainly danger of a forest fire ...”

“the police... and probably the whole army.”

“Yes and helicopters too, fire bombers!” suggested Andrew.

“It’s an absolute disaster.”

“You’re sure that you’re not overreacting, Miss?”

Reluctantly the men agreed to accompany up the track around the bend before they radioed for help on such a massive scale.

They parked their vehicle on the line despite the chorus of warnings from the group.

“Nonsense. A train hasn’t been this way in years.”

Andrew seemed to be looking at the man uncommonly carefully. He nudged Johnny and whispered. “Have you noticed a resemblance? Minus

the beard and mustachios he's the spitting image of that guy Murdo."

"Yeah, and probably in the same line of business."

As they broke upon the open field the sunset had reached a spectacular climax. But before them an uninterrupted expanse of grass danced softly in the evening breeze. Strips of cinderbed remained exposed through the growth, but all of the siding rails had been removed. A single derelict clapboard building with boarded windows stood moldering in a stand of goldenrod that seemed aflame in the sunset glow.

"But I don't understand," stammered Johnny. "Where's it all gone?"

Rolling their eyes heavenwards and tapping their foreheads the two men turned back towards their vehicle.

"Well, if you need access to a phone, if you want to call up the whole army to admire the sunset, for instance, you can find me at Gary's Char Pit, a mile down the road. Gary MacMurdo's the name. It's not too far to walk."

Sarah was incredulous. "But the sidings have all gone... and look the viaduct had has been replaced as well."

Down below them the black rock of the island seemed strangely overgrown and insignificant. Standing on its tip a colossal concrete abutment stood in the position of the original timber stanchion, the jerry built folly that they had seen in flames only a short time before. Rusty stain lines dripped down the concrete faces as if it had been wounded and was dripping blood.

“This couldn’t possibly be the right place.”

Sarah led the group down the path that the priest and native guide had showed her. The beaver dam connection to the island was still intact and they picked their way across to the island. They clambered along the shore down to the end of the island, passing the decaying remains of a dock, two huge cribs that had burst apart and were spilling their rocks into the deep water.

“That must be all that remains of Reckkon Landing. It now seems a long lost dream.”

They went to examine the great concrete pier supporting the centre of the viaduct. Its massiveness seemed to overwhelm the tip of the island. Sarah remembered the priest’s story about the four workmen who had died working on the timber structure. At its base the concrete had eroded slightly. They walked around it to find the plaque that they had all seen on the door of the Reckkon carriage, embossed with the initials C.R. It was embedded slightly crooked into the concrete. Alongside a long dead hand had impressed into the concrete while it was still wet in ill formed letters,

"May we all rest in Peace."

Mavis reached down deep into her pocket. Her hand closed around the little penknife. But there was something odd about the feel of it. Then she remembered. She pulled it out to reveal a length of copper wire carefully wrapped around the handle.

Johnny fingered a little glass vial in his pocket, pulled it out and with

a shudder impulsively flung it far out into the channel.

“It’s almost as if all of this history has been left here encoded to reveal something that happened so long ago. But something that we are supposed to know.’

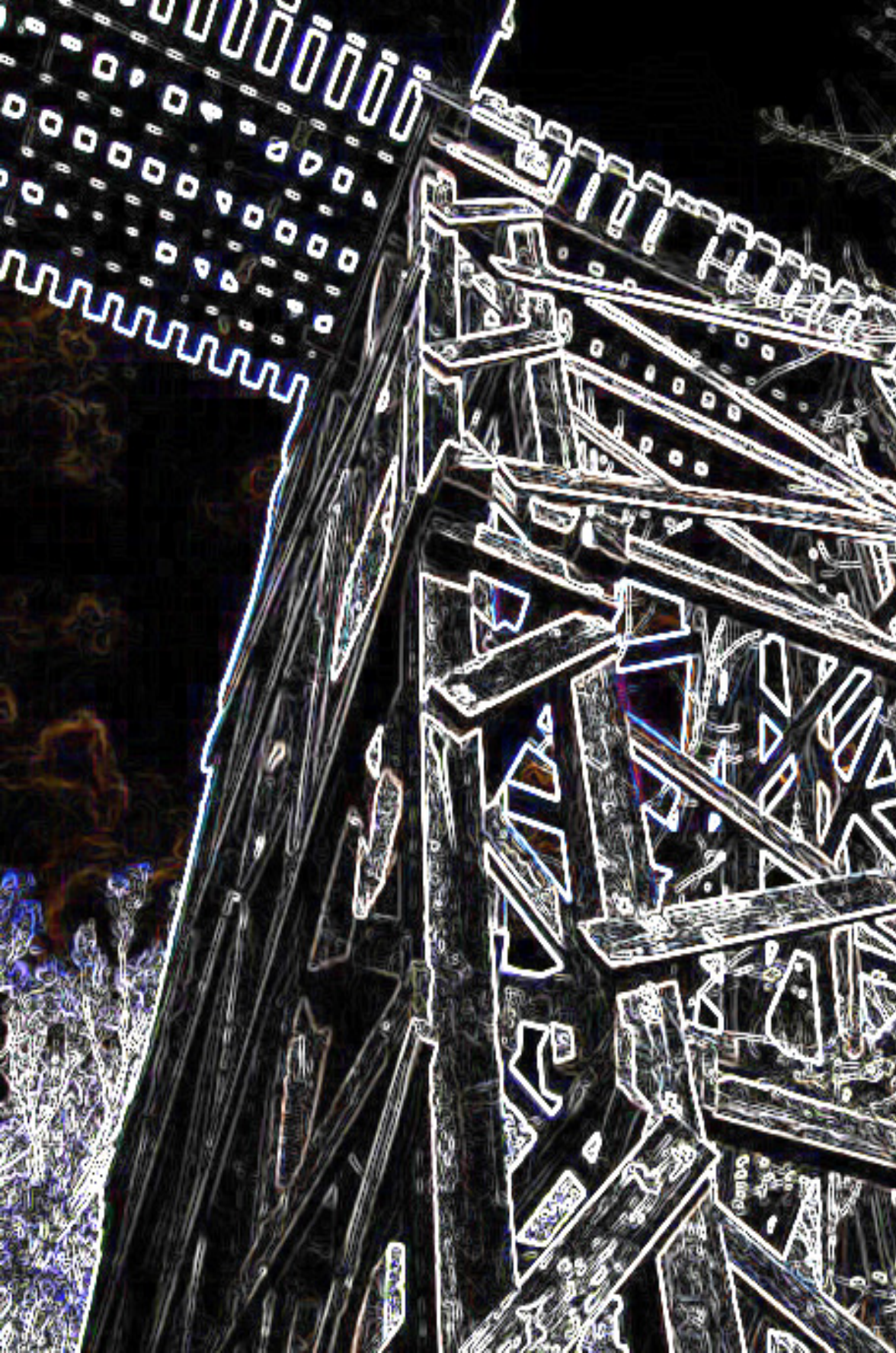
“As if we’re in the midst of ghosts of the past, all folded up into the spirit of this place.”

“Everyone has been drawn in from different angles but all have produced the same effect.”

“The machine intended to serve a certain purpose, became an end in itself. It created its own power and ultimately its own path of self-destruction.”

Echoing across the landscape resounded the long, forlorn blast of a distant train.





Yours Truly,



Fl@uberT

