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The Japanese Devil Fish and Other Unnatural Attractions

Written by Robert Rankin

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The Japanese Devil Fish Girl and Other Unnatural Attractions

Robert Rankin FVSS*

* Fellow of the Victorian Steampunk Society

with illustrations by the author



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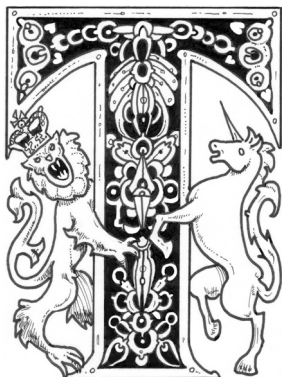
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1895

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he Grand Salon of the *Empress of Mars* was furnished to exquisite nicety.

The overstuffed couches, thoughtfully arranged before the tall Gothic viewing windows, were royally upholstered in the palest of Japanese silks. Tables for every occasion rose upon fluted cabriole legs to bear silver trays of

sweetmeats, petits fours and fruits of exotic origin. On walls made beautiful by the fabrics of Sir William Morris, ornate crystal mirrors glittered in the light of electric candelabra. Octagonal carpets of the Jovian persuasion smothered the maple floor and orchids from the forests of Venus, rising from elegant French porcelain cache-pots, perfumed the rarefied air.

The Grand Salon was abuzz with conversation.

The very cream of London society, aristocrats of noble blood, rubbed suave and braided shoulders with potentates from other worlds. Champagne twinkled, amorous glances were exchanged. Military gentlemen, high-ranking officers of the Queen's Own Electric Fusiliers, their uniforms of blue displaying many campaign

medals, shared jokes with portly princelings from the royal houses of Jupiter.

The men were debonair and dandified, the women pale and enchanting, their tiny waists encircled by corselets of filigreed brass, offset by flaring skirts and bustles prettied with embellishments of peacock feathers, ostrich plumes, waxen roses, jewels and further jewels. Upon their heads, nestling midst the coiffured, pampered curls, they wore the very latest thing: tiny silk top hats adorned with inlaid evening goggles.

Beyond the Grand Salon, upon the promenade deck, ladies and gentlemen strolled and took in the views. For on the warm and tender evening of this maiden flight, the views were well worth taking in.

Above, a clear night sky all draped with stars, and planets that might be viewed through one of the many astronomical telescopes arranged at regular intervals along the handrail.

Beneath, the City of London.

The *Empress of Mars* drifted silently over the great metropolis, a sleek silver air-form, one-third of a mile in length. The first of its kind, an aerial pleasure ship.

Sadly, upon this night of nights the capital was wreathed in fog. Another industrial pea-souper. The dome of St Paul's peeked above the murk, as did the tessellated tower of the Babbage Institute for the Advancement of Science. And towards the south, a golden glow as of some rich and royal treasure could be discerned atop the hill at Sydenham. From the destination of this wondrous aircraft. The Crystal Palace.

For tonight a concert of celebration was to be held for the exalted company aboard the *Empress of Mars*. Titurel de Schentefleur would conduct Mazael's

Mechanical Orchestra in the performance of a cosmic operetta, created by Messrs William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan:

Of Mars and Mankind

(A stirring and exemplary tale as characterised by
this Age of Moral Rectitude)

This stirring and exemplary tale had been expressly commissioned by the Prime Minister, Mr Gladstone. This stirring and exemplary pillar of society had taken it unto himself to oversee and vet the libretto, in order to ensure that the story of how British Forces defeated the Martians and extended the British Empire to the Red Planet be told in a manner that was altogether favourable to all involved. A manner that laid great emphasis upon the selfless, loyal bravery of the victorious Queen's Own Electric Fusiliers and the callous cruelty and innate cowardice of the denizens of Mars.

That such a victory might in any way have a 'tainted' quality about it would appear outrageous to the all and sundry who had consumed the ongoing details of this singular interplanetary campaign via the pages of *The Times* newspaper. But nevertheless . . .

There were those who knew all of the truth. And others who wished to keep all of the truth from those who did not know it.

War of any kind is never less than ugly and an inter-species war, as of Mars against Earth and the subsequent genocidal retaliation, entered realms of ugliness previously only inhabited by certain debauched human exhibits in the Celebrated Professor Coffin's Cabinet of Human Curiosities.

In brief, the true tale is as follows.

It has been well recorded by the pen of Mr Herbert Wells and set down in his episodic chronicle, *The War of the Worlds*, all that came to pass when soldiers of Mars descended to British soil in their machines of war and wrought a terrible carnage.

This appalling circumstance, which resulted in the loss of many lives and the destruction of much property, was luckily, if such a word can indeed be suitably applied, confined to the southern counties of England alone. As will be known and understood by those who have read the work of Mr Wells, the Martians were defeated not by selfless, loyal bravery, but by falling prey to Earthly bacteria against which their unearthly bodies held no natural resistance. The invaders drooped and died. Their three-legged chariots of death rocked and tumbled.

Earth and the British Empire survived. Triumphed.

Celebrations followed and folk danced gaily in garlanded streets and cheered for Queen and for country.

In Westminster, however, behind closed doors, ministers took stock . . .

A secret conclave met in a secret room . . . The year was 1885.

At the table's head sat Mr Gladstone, flanked by two fellows of funereal aspect. These two fellows' names remain unrecorded and a matter of ongoing speculation. To the right of Gladstone and seated next to one of the anonymous fellows was to be found that eminent scientist and mathematician Charles Babbage, a jolly red-faced man, well swaddled in a great abundance of tweed. And directly opposite him, a gaunt but dapper personage of foreign extraction who answered to the

name of Nikola Tesla. A surname the future would know as ‘the derived SI unit of magnetic flux density equal to a flux of one weber in an area of one square metre’. Beside him was an empty chair. And opposite this chair, next to Mr Babbage, sat Silas Faircloud, newly appointed Astronomer Royal, tubercular and frail.

The secret conclave was called to order, and Mr Gladstone spoke.

‘Gentlemen,’ he began, ‘we meet here under what we must all consider to be the gravest of circumstances: the concern that further enemy forces might even now be amassing upon Mars, readying themselves for attack. Mr Faircloud, what think you of this?’

‘Ahem,’ went Mr Faircloud, a-clearing of his throat. ‘The possibility must be appORTioned strong. Astronomers around the country, indeed throughout the civilised world, have their instruments trained upon that planet. As yet there are no signs of further martial activity, but—’

‘Pardon me,’ said Mr Babbage*, ‘but I am unaware of the existence of optical systems capable of observing the face of Mars to the degree that space-going vessels might be clearly discerned.’

‘I am working on such matters even now,’ claimed Mr Tesla, ‘although mine are not optics of glass, but of a more metaphysical disemblemment that will penetrate the ether of space via the medium of radionic waves.’

‘Quite so.’ Mr Gladstone struck the table with a folded fist. ‘But we must all agree that the possibility of another attack is strong.’

* History records that Charles Babbage died in 1871 – but history, as Henry Ford so aptly observed, ‘is bunk’.

Silas Faircloud made so-so motions with the bobbing of his head. ‘We can only speculate as to whether further forces of a Martian military nature even exist. It is possible that they flung their entire might against us. That we took all they had and triumphed, as it were.’

‘What think you of this, Mr Babbage?’ asked the Prime Minister. ‘Would this adhere to your mathematical principles?’

‘Oh, very much so, sir.’ And Mr Babbage smiled. A big broad beamer bringing warmth to all. ‘Although the modes of thought employed by Martians have few echoes amongst we folk of Earth – and I have here the autopsy reports on the examinations of Martian bodies carried out at the London Hospital by the noted surgeon, and Her Majesty’s physician, Sir Frederick Treves, which suggest that the Martian brain has more in common with the shark or the porpoise than with that of the human being – regardless of these differences, logic of any kind surely dictates that if you choose to wage war upon another planet, you would do well to overwhelm your enemy as speedily and judiciously as possible. To wit, fling all you have in a great big all-out attack.’

Mr Gladstone nodded thoughtfully. ‘Which might be to say,’ said he, ‘that should the fight be carried to Mars, an all-over British victory might be accomplished.’

‘Carried to Mars?’ asked Silas Faircloud. ‘How so might this be?’

‘Mr Babbage once more,’ said the PM, indicating same.

‘Through a process of what Mr Tesla here has named “back-engineering”. To put it simply, we repair and restore the Martian ships of space. Convert their controls for human piloting. Fly to Mars and wreak—’

‘Revenge,’ said Mr Gladstone. ‘An ugly word, I know, but war is an ugly business. It would be my proposal that regiments of the Queen’s Own Electric Fusiliers be put on standby. Your comments please, Mr Faircloud.’

‘Well,’ puffed the Astronomer Royal, ‘if it is to be done then it had best be done speedily. At this time, Mars is at its closest for some years to come. The opportunity presents itself, but fearful consequences might result.’

‘Specifically?’ asked Mr Gladstone.

‘One might only speculate. Perhaps a virulence exists upon Mars to which its inhabitants are immune, but which might well lay waste to soldiers from Earth.’

‘Unlikely,’ said Nikola Tesla. ‘My own researches suggest that the Martian atmosphere is thinner than our own, perhaps equivalent to that upon a mountain peak. As such, solar radiation cleanses the planet of bacteria. Mars, I believe, is a totally sterile environment. I would stake my reputation upon this.’

‘And such a reputation it is,’ said Mr Gladstone. ‘I understand that you have recently made great strides forward in the field of, what is it – teletalkation?’

‘Telecommunications,’ said Mr Tesla, nodding modestly. ‘The ability to communicate verbally, across great distances, without recourse to wires, cables or suchlike mediums of transmission.’

‘Extraordinary,’ wheezed the Astronomer Royal. ‘Would that I will live to see such wonders. But I still have fear for our soldier boys. These Martian vessels must be stocked with compressed air and sufficient rations. Much planning will be necessary. And who

knows what awaits on Mars? Mighty armaments trained upon the sky? Who can say?’

‘Who can say, indeed.’ Mr Gladstone took out his cigar case and relieved it of a smoke. This he cut with a clipper on his watch fob and placed between his lips. ‘Speed and force,’ said he, though slightly mumbled. ‘Speed and force must be of the essence, and to this end I propose that we engage the services of a young gentleman who has lately distinguished himself in the African troubles. I am putting him in command of the strike force. Mr Babbage, you are nearest – would you open up the door and bid him enter?’

Charles Babbage rose, pushed back his chair, took himself to the door and opened it. A slight young man with the face of a baby grinned into the room.

‘Gentlemen,’ said the Prime Minister, ‘allow me to introduce you to Mr Winston Churchill.’