

Written in the Stars: A Jo Westermann Tale

by David J. Hitchcock

I – Idiosyncrasies

I had been unable to locate Uanu and Rachael at the agreed meeting place in the district of London known as Seven Dials. The area had suffered greatly from both man and Martian. What buildings had not been razed by the Heat-Ray had been looted. One shop I remember in particular, a curiosities shop, had had its large front window smashed and the contents scattered across the roadway. As I stepped gingerly through the shards of plate glass, I marvelled at the detritus that had once made up the commodities of a man's livelihood – broken furniture, a smattering of false, glass eyes and even the odd mange-ridden, stuffed monkey or two. Prompted by a sudden thought, I stepped from the roadway and peered into the darkness of the shop. The insides had been gutted of all objects, both useful and useless, and lying upon the floor in the centre of the shop was the body of a woman – large, middle-aged, her black dress covered in dust and her face and the floor around her caked in blood. The right-hand side of her head had suffered a terrible trauma so that the eye had become partially dislodged from its orbit. She had been dead many days and her skin was a mottled yellowish-grey. I stood regarding this for a time, and then resumed my passage along the road.

Heading west, I left Seven Dials and the parish of St. Giles-in-the-Fields, and made my way towards our second rendezvous point in Holland Park. Soho and Mayfair had, if it were at all possible, fared worse than Seven Dials, but this time it was all the handiwork of the Martians. Few if any buildings had been untouched by the Heat-Ray and the squares were now nothing more than patches of dead and blackened grass.

Some may consider my actions strange and many, I wager, would question my sanity to walk so freely and openly through the

streets of London whilst it was under Martian occupation. True, they were powerful by virtue of their advanced technology, most notably their weaponry. I however, have lived and experienced a great deal during my life, more than enough with which to counter supposed higher intelligences such as these. I have faced death many times before, and from foes infinitely greater than these invaders from Mars.

Ahead of me was the great open space of Hyde Park, and tempted as I was, even I had to admit to the folly of crossing the park to get to my ultimate destination. This decision was confirmed when, a few minutes later, a Fighting Machine appeared from the south and walked towards the Serpentine. The river itself had been choked by the Red Weed and this alien growth had gained a substantial foothold across large swathes of the park.

Deciding to skirt around the park, I turned north and headed towards Paddington. Upon reaching Paddington however, it was apparent that the area was impassable. The entire district was burning and it seemed to have been set alight quite recently. It was now quicker for me to pass around Paddington by way of St. John's Wood to the north than to walk back the way I had come alongside Hyde Park and head west through Brompton.

II – Fertility

Upon reaching St. John's Wood, I noticed away in the direction of the Zoological Gardens in the northern part of Regent's Park, a Fighting Machine. It stood motionless and the high summer sun glinted and reflected off of the polished chrome of the hood making constant surveillance of it impossible. Keeping the stationary Fighting Machine within sight, I skirted around various streets and made my way towards the Edgware Road. From across the desolate rooftops and through those grey, silent streets came the peal of a clock chiming noon. All of my attention however, was upon the Fighting Machine, watching, waiting for the first indication of movement. I advanced along the roadway, barely noticed my approaching the end of the street, was oblivious to the soft, musical sounds of metal upon stone.

Turning the corner, I saw it. A great metallic spider of jointed legs and flailing tentacles, and sitting within its compartment was the Martian driver. With a precise and regimented determination, the machine was systematically pulling apart a house, rifling through the building, floor by floor, room by room. Searching. For food. A sharp feeling of contempt crept across my being and before I could halt myself, I had unslung Julianna from my shoulder and was striding forcefully towards the alien device.

They say that the Martian hearing is dulled by the atmosphere of the Earth. That as maybe. This Martian heard my approach. Heard the sound of my footfalls echo and reverberate off of the bare, blank walls of the tall houses that lined either side of the street. The machine turned with astonishing alacrity to face me, two of its metal tentacular appendages extended and flailing towards my person.

Taken aback somewhat by this incredible rapidity, I raised the Lee-Enfield and fired a wild shot. So wild that it missed the Handling Machine completely, and ricocheted off of a wall to its left. A second shot sheared off of the port side of the device and created a metallic ringing that rebounded from one side of the street to the other, and remained still strangely audible over the rhythmic clanking and jangling of the machine's jointed legs.

The cold, dark eyes of the Martian regarded me with a malevolence that was palpable. Great globules of saliva dribbled and ran from its quivering, panting mouth. If the Handling Machine had been equipped of a Heat-Ray projector, I would have been struck down before I had loosed my second shot. Fortunately, She¹ in her benevolence, was watching over me that day and, in spite of my foolish impetuousness, kept me from the fate that I so richly deserved.

The Handling Machine was almost upon me when my attention was drawn to the smooth, organic movements, the almost animal-like quality of its gait. Only...the movements. The legs were out of kilter with each other. It was as if the machine were falling forward rather than advancing of its own free will. Something was wrong, either with the machine or its driver. For the first time in its advance, the machine slowed. Its actions became thoughtful, considered, as opposed to the instinctiveness I had witnessed just

seconds before. The eyes, those baleful, hate-filled eyes lost their edge as realisation crept across the twisted visage of the Martian.

With one final twist of providence, the Martian deflected my third shot with a metallic tentacle and resumed in its career toward me. My fourth however, rang true. The .303 calibre bullet found its mark – the centrepoint of that small expanse of skin between those all-encompassing eyes.

The machine continued its trajectory towards me, causing me to take one step back too many with the result of my falling onto my rear, before veering off to my right and colliding with a house. The building collapsed in upon itself, scattering rubble and timber across the roadway. The tentacular extensions flailed aimlessly, continuing for a short while that melodious serenade. The rear leg stamped repeatedly upon the remains of a, what was just a couple of minutes before, well kept living room floor. The momentum of the leg began to slow and within the minute was forever stilled.

I picked myself up off of the tarmacadam and, checking to assure myself that I had one round remaining in the rifle, walked slowly and deliberately toward the remains of the Handling Machine. As I approached, I raised Julianna to my eyeline, but there was no need. Whether it had been the rifle bullet or the tons of masonry that had completed the task, I did not know, and to be brutally honest, I did not care. The Martian was dead. I lowered the rifle and, for the first time that had been afforded me, studied and scrutinised the cadaver. The oily, brown skin was marked and scarred with reddening wheals and pustules, inflammations. Wounds that could not have been caused solely by the collapse of the building. The Martians were dying!

III – Deliverance

I looked towards the form of the Martian tripod in the distance with a renewed, and somewhat hopeful, vigour. Maybe it was the excitement of the encounter with the Handling Machine that had dulled my senses. Maybe it was the aching tiredness that crept through my bones. Whatever was the cause, the realisation that the Fighting Machine had remained motionless took longer than it

should have. The sounds of the rifle shots, the collapse of the house and the destruction of the Handling Machine should have been enough to alert the Martian to my presence. Yet, still it stood where it had been before the conflagration.

And now for the first time, I heard the mournful cry. It must have begun whilst I had been battling the Handling Machine. It wailed and sobbed, alternating between two notes – ‘Ooll_laa, ooll_laa, ooll_laa’. This was no cry of supremacy, no triumphant exultation. This was pain. Raw, nerve shredding agony. The Martian within the Fighting Machine knew that death was upon it. With the last of its energy, the Martian announced to London the passing of the brief dominion of Mars.

Shouldering the Lee-Enfield once more, I cast aside my plan of reaching Holland Park and set off instead towards the Fighting Machine. I believed that the Martians were dying, but I had to make certain. Besides, their machines, their technologies had to be guarded from others of a, shall we say, certain repute.

IV – Providence

Confidence has never been remiss with my good self and because of this, I strode defiantly through the Zoological Gardens and into full view of the Fighting Machine. After what I had discovered from the Martian in the Handling Machine, I was convinced that the invaders were no longer a credible threat. The Fighting Machine remained where it stood, the hood moved not, the pitiful cry became louder. Walking up to one of its great feet, I strained back my neck to look up at this metallic Goliath. The cry of the Martian this close was so loud that I had to cover my ears to prevent permanent damage. The hood of the Fighting Machine faced south towards the Regent’s Park. I also noticed for the first time, the mischief that had been wrought upon the Zoo itself. The buildings were blackened shells and various contorted shapes were discernable within the ruins. Directly to the north was Primrose Hill and upon the crest, I could see another of these unearthly giants. The last and greatest of the Martian encampments lay before me.

After crossing the Albert Road, which had filled with water, I reached the bottom of Primrose Hill. The great battle-machine stood facing me, but made no move as I emerged into the sunlight from the Red Weed that grew next to the roadway. From the Fighting Machine standing atop the hill, emanated the same hideous, banshee wail.

The report of a gunshot made me start, and just for a second I looked with trepidation at the machine. Martians however, do not use revolvers. I heard another gunshot followed by the sharp yelp of a dog, and realised that both sounds had come from the summit of the hill. As I broke into a run, a third shot rang out and was again accompanied by a fitful yelp. The sharp, stinging tang of cordite wafted down the hillside along with the growls and barks of numerous dogs.

Coming under the shadow of the Fighting Machine and approaching the peak, I readily identified the source of the gunfire. Standing with her back to the great maw of the pit was Rachael, revolver in hand, aiming expertly at the slaving hounds that skirted around her. The sun, glinting off of the deep red of her hair, created the illusion of a halo of fire. She muttered something under her breath that I did not catch and fired once more, hitting one of the dogs square in the temple, killing it instantly.

I made a move towards her and she turned swiftly to face me, the muzzle of the gun pointing directly at my forehead. Recognising that it was me, she smiled, but took a little longer than I would have liked to lower the revolver.

“You’re late!” lilted the soft, Welsh accent.

V – Stratagems

For a second, we stood facing each other, waiting for the other to speak. Rachael it was, that broke the silence.

“I had to keep the dogs away,” she explained, looking back at the bodies of the strays, “They were becoming frisky!” The remaining dogs, realising that they now had two well armed adversaries to contend with, ran barking and yelping down the incline into the Martian pit from whence came sounds of growling

and of scuffles as they fought over the still as yet, living Martians. The Martian wail had subsided to a quiet sob, the most immediate now barely audible.

“How did I guess that you would appear here?” asked Rachael rhetorically, “Always have to be in at the kill, don’t you?” Ignoring her attempt to bait me, I answered her enquiry with a question.

“Where’s Uanu?”

“Waiting. Hiding. The Martians were everywhere forcing us to leave Seven Dials. We decided to head north and around Regent’s Park to get to Holland Park. But when we reached St. Pancras, we came across a Handling Machine with its Martian driver close to death. As I realised that the Martians were dying, I wanted to make our way here, but Uanu was too scared. I left him in the General Post Office at St. Martin’s-le-Grand.”

Rachael’s eyes narrowed,

“He was of absolutely no use to me, jumping at shadows or the slightest sound, and when the Martians began to cry...”

She rolled her eyes heavenwards,

“...he almost had a nervous breakdown!”

The two were not what one would call ‘the best of friends’.

“I told him to try to telegraph Cardiff or Birmingham. Failing that, to send a message to the continent and relay the news of the Martian defeat.”

Rachael turned and stared into the dark mass of the pit behind us. The sun was now very low, and dusk was upon us. Most of the Martian camp was enveloped in shadow, the exception being the far wall of the enormous crater that lay away down the slope of Primrose Hill. We could see the dogs scabbling about and fighting with one another over the Martian cadavers. Those that were not already dead were now too weak to defend themselves, let alone retaliate, and I had not the slightest inclination to descend and protect them. Now and again, the odd whimper or sob trailed up from the confines of the pit.

“Oh, great irony,” I proclaimed in a whisper, “They came to the Earth to conquer and subdue, killing thousands and bringing the world’s greatest empire to its knees. Now they are nothing more than fodder for the dogs!”

“And the birds,” said Rachael as she looked down the hill to a third Martian machine that stood in the centre of the park. Flocking around the hood of the great tripod was an endless variety of birds, black, brown, white, all with the express intent of tearing as much as they were able off of the body of the Martian inside.

“I left Uanu in possession of the item,” Rachael continued as I watched the birds, “For once, he was not exaggerating. Like him, I truly believe that it is the Looking Glass of Prester John.”²

At this, I turned from the sight of the feeding frenzy and looked into her crystal blue eyes. Rachael was not accustomed to embellishing her accounts. Indeed, she was the most honest person that I had ever met. Persisting in regarding my face, her eyes unwavering, she elaborated,

“It’s not a kaleidoscope or prism. One can see...images. Moving images of men and machines.”

“The other looking glasses,” I replied thoughtfully, “According to the legends, Prester John had a looking glass at each of the destinations he observed. A two way optical channel of sorts.”

I gave a wry smile,

“If we can identify those other locations by studying the images, we will be able to determine the whereabouts of the other looking glasses!”

The sun had now set and the stars were becoming visible in the deep, blue sky above us. Away in the distance near to the horizon, lay a small star that twinkled a translucent red and vermilion. Mars seemed the paragon of innocence as she hung in the night sky reflecting her reddish hue. My attention was diverted from the sky to the opposite side of the pit. There, crouching and silent, lay the great flying mechanism that the Martians had used to terrify the populace with. Now it sat impotent and alone. Vulnerable. Turning back to Rachael, who had noticed my examination of the device, I made the following pronouncement.

“First, we’ll go and rejoin with Uanu and see if he has been able to contact the outside world.”

Rachael raised an eyebrow.

“Then...”

I turned my attentions to the sky for one final time and let the

sentence fade and die. Rachael gave a little smile, walked over to me and, taking my hand in hers, led us down the slope of Primrose Hill towards Clerkenwell and St. Martin's-le-Grand.

Footnotes:

1. 'She' refers to the higher feminine power.
Not to be mistaken with Ayesha of Kor – 'She Who Must Be Obeyed'.
2. Prester John (a contraction of Presbyter) ruled the great Christian empire that stretched from Africa to the borders of India in the Middle Ages.
He held sway by use of a looking glass that enabled him to see into every corner of his dominion.