

# *The Recorded Adventures Of Major Jack Union*

*part 1*



*Kit Cox*



## Foreword

During the later years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Queen Victoria had a unit of crack monster hunters to look after the Empire. They were known as the Royal Order of Dragons. Their exploits were revealed with the publication of a hunting guide "How to bag a Jabberwock" by Major Jack Union, a concerned hunter who put pen to paper after the disbanding of the order, following Victoria's death.

Historians have debated the validity of this guide which suggested the existence, and suppression of, monsters amongst us.

The number of historians against the book were always higher than those who defended the information within.

However those defenders were always keen to find proof of the books worth.

No one is entirely sure where or when the mechanical bird was found but it certainly proved to be the breakthrough the defenders were after.

The bird was a decorative desk toy in bronze and at first appeared to just be an amusing device for two mechanical birds to sing to each other. However when the mechanism was examined more closely, it was revealed the desk toy was actually a recording device that had many accounts of monster hunting stored upon it, recorded by the elusive Major Jack Union.

The tweets of the mechanical birds were studied and catalogued and when all involved were agreed, turned into the tales that are now included within.

Some of the tales may have been embellished from the sketchy notes and some may contain holes or even abrupt endings. The chronological order may be correct or may be jumbled. But what is certain is that they are all further proof of the adventures of Major Jack Union and the Royal Order of Dragons.

(When Jack first acquired his Mechanical Recorder it would appear he did not quite have the hang of it. The following tweets seemed disjointed and sketchy but have been included to show how the hunter got to grips with his recording device.)

"It's about time my story was told. I will share with you all my memories and the bizarre world I have come across in my travels."

"I'm drinking tea trying to sort out this infernal machine. I have the instructions but they all seem to be from a different world, I'm not even sure if this is the button that turns it \*Click\*"

"Has this thing been on all day\*Click\*"

"I wasn't aware it was so portable. I can record messages when we're out hunting."

"Today I will mostly be hunting the Snark. Best bring a lot of guns and big nets, so many of the damned things. Will we never see their end?"

(After awhile he got the hang of the device and soon enough information was received to compile a story from the tweets.)

## **Dinosaur Hunt**

“Going on a dinosaur hunt today. It is an event organised by Professor Challenger and although he won't be joining the team we will be hunting on territory he has mapped out. Challenger sees the hunt more as a cull to keep numbers down, to avoid conflicts over the limited food supplies and therefore keep as many of the unique species alive as possible in this protected area. I have been on several of these hunts and we have a list of the animals that need culling. Scientists from the British museum study these creatures in depth and after their findings on the various bite strengths of the predators I am happy to say none have ever had the chance to take a nibble on me.

The day started quite cold and so I took care to wrap up as warm as convention would dictate and, following Challengers notes, found a good place to set up for the day.

After a while I had the joy of watching one of the resident Allosauruses sniffing the air and prowling its territory for food. It was far out of my range and these creatures have a thick hide so it was better to rely on the virtue of patience and hope it came closer. Out of the tree I would be at a distinct disadvantage.

The wait was long and the cold weather soon turned into a storm; the wind whipped up bringing with it a cold rain and a brilliant lighting display that illuminated the darkening clouds. The great lizard approached my tree, I'm guessing as a form of shelter, its action bringing it into range of my rifle and as he was clearly on my issued list I let him have it, proving once and for all you should never approach trees in a storm.

The carcass has to be left where it falls as the meat will feed many of the smaller dinosaurs for weeks. Trophy taking is not allowed as Challenger believes trophies would soon bring the wrong kind of attention and indiscriminate hunters.

Later on that evening, with the weather cleared, I am sat on the hunting lodge veranda with a Hendrick's and tonic to hand and an evening meal of Pterodactyl wishing I had taken some of the Allosaurus meat to eat instead and wondering how it would taste.

Pterodactyl is the only plentiful meat on the plateau but it is a tough, oily, fishy meat with a bitter aftertaste. It fills you up but you need a good cigar to remove the more lingering flavours.

The next day we all had to stay at camp as reports of the rogue T-rex started to be collated. The natives, so Challenger would lead us to believe, are the Troglodyte descendants from whom some people are stating we have evolved but the girls are so naturally beautiful it is quite hard to see them as any type of throwback. However we only have a day to spend with them before we head out on the long journey to the hunting ground wherein we expect to find the elusive beast.

The going does not go well and we endure several days of nothing. Except a pack of Compys that I scare away from the camp by throwing at them what turned out to be the fossilised vertebra of the beast we were actually after.

The next few days brought humidity and colourful butterflies, whilst the night brought heavy rain and we found our shelter was often occupied by a pride of sleeping lions. However we left each well alone as we were all well aware neither lion nor man was king of the beasts in the world of the T-rex.

I found my mind wandering in the days that followed and often turning to my parentage, my lovely mother in her warm safe rooms in London and my father still unknown to me and I wondered how much I have to credit to the man who got his officers stripes in the wars of Afghanistan.

The mood of everyone lifts however when we share a water hole with a flock of geese and are soon supplied with fresh meat and a discussion on the best way to cook goose on an open fire.

The final annoyance came when we found the T-rex we were trailing had somehow left the plateau and made its way to a civilised area, causing a stir when it took a riding princess clean from her horse before being brought down by her bodyguards, although not in time to save the monarch.

The Dragons and Challenger will have problems keeping that quiet from the papers but I'm sure money will change hands.

Our problems, however, are simpler. We have a sea of grasping beggars to get through at the train station before overcoming some awful tropical disease my batman had picked up on route before we are home again.

(The next tale appears to occur directly on Jack's return to London from the dinosaur hunt, though the severity of the event does not relate to any public records)

### **Flotsam and Jetsam**

On returning to London, Kent and I find the city appears to be overrun with revenants, the walking dead, often referred to as zombies.

The streets where the outbreak is present have been sealed off but the authorities certainly don't know what their next step should be.

On assessing the numbers we have and the location within the city, I work out we have very little work to do to move the hoard on. I visit a slaughterhouse and with a few raised eyebrows I load a cart with offal on the turn. The smell is certainly something to be avoided but I have shared tents with soldiers after several days' heavy march and no running water.

A powerful shire horse called Hercules, borrowed from the rag and bone men, pulls the cart and we enter the sealed streets. We had planned our route so we wouldn't be trapped on our journey but the smell of rotting meat and offal certainly brought the revenants out from hiding until we led the whole horde in our wake. We take them down to the fetid water of the Thames and with some careful planning send them and the offal beneath the cloying waters. Just call me the Pied Piper.

You learn a lot in this line of work and everyday seems to hold a new surprise. Today is the revelation that revenants float.

Kent and I have to walk the length of the Thames on opposite banks, taking out any of the creatures that drift towards the shore with a well placed head shot. I have to admit I only planned to follow the strange undead flotsam until they reached open water and had drifted far enough out to sea that I was happy they wouldn't be washing up on the oyster beds of Whitgate.

It was a clear day when we reached the coast and you could easily see the distant French countryside as a shadow on the far side of the channel.

Not wanting an Anglo/French incident as a result of my plans, Kent and I hired a boat and followed the writhing island out to sea to despatch in the more traditional manner. By the time we reached it, seagulls had started to peck at the ready available flesh and easy meal. Our despatching shots scattered the birds and gave us enough time to finish the job. However the free feast had not passed without effect on the hovering flock and the birds were now clearly suffering the early signs of zombification.

Kent had picked up a blunderbuss. We waited until the illness seized the whole flock and they dived like a vengeful cloud before we opened fire.

Kent believes he will be spitting feathers for a week but the blunderbuss certainly gets my approval as weapon of choice against Zombie seagulls.

(The next adventure appears to come a few months later following a series of garbled messages about quality gin, Bandersnatch and more perils of the numerous rodent-like Snark)

### **Birds of a feather**

On returning from Lincoln, having fulfilled my duties to instruct newer members of the order, I fell into one of those glorious deep and dreamless sleeps that refresh both your body and your mind.

I was however awoken to the smiling face of my bearded batman Kent, warm toast and a steaming pot of tea. I thought he was pleased with himself because he had finally learnt how to properly fulfil his duties as batman. I should have known his childlike glee came from the fact he had worked out a trip away to some foreign land. Of course my tea and toast were soon eagerly taken away (toast mid bite) to be replaced by a selection of notes on JubJub birds and a map of the Amazon.

Planning takes longer than one would hope, but we have friends with technologies that would be handy to us now and easily hidden in the vast jungles of South America.

Our ability to fly through the heavens has been available for many years and the Black Bat Squadron use flying machines designed skilfully by the old sage Da Vinci. The squadron exist somewhat out of our timeline and have taken those technologies to levels of beauty only our future will share, however the aircraft can only pass above the canopies under which our quarry hunt so I fear their help may only be in getting us to the jungle in quicker time than a boat could travel.

With this in mind we drag out my flying machine and I spend a leisurely morning watching the shapely form of Hastings, my female mechanic, trying to get her back into an airworthy state. Last time I took her up I flew like a fool through a flailing Air Kraken and the craft hasn't flown right since.

Kent's impatience to see birds over the craft repairs means we end up taking the dirigible with the plane strapped beneath and my mechanic along for the ride, to hopefully fix the vehicle on route.

The slow journey to Brazil is made more fun by the presence of Hastings and I must admit to being somewhat unhappy on waking up one morning in a warm bed with the calm, glistening sea beneath me and the shape of land on the horizon. Next stop Brazil.

We have landed just outside of Calçoene in a fairly heavy shower. Locals are certainly surprised by our descent and have scattered into the forest. It seems unwise to try to get them back and instead we make our own camp and hope they will soon be drawn back by hunger and curiosity rather than anger and warlike tendencies.

Kent and I use the time to service the rifles, whilst our grease monkey, Hastings, whistles happily and continues repairs to my plane.

I believe our work, non-aggressive demeanour and the heavy rain eventually helps bring the natives out from the trees and curiously to our sides. Soon the plane is repaired, the clouds have parted and we are laughing happily with our new hosts as we eat around the sizable fire and gain useful information about JubJub nesting sites. The laughter comes from the chiefs' impression of how foul the flesh of the birds taste but how glorious he believes the eggs are.

Early the next morning I set off in a hunting party of ten individuals. Myself and Kent, as well as eight hunters from the village, all excited to help. I am the only one who has seen fit to wear a pith helmet which is why I am also the only one not perspiring heavily and banging my head on the many low hanging branches.

However this appears to be the least of their worries as the hunters are more concerned about the creature that has followed us all morning. I have already worked out it is a solitary predator. It is extremely well camouflaged and biding its time, waiting to pick off the weakest as is the way with most predators. The hunters are referring to it as Olhos do Diabo, a name I do not know.

As we settle down for the evening by a makeshift fire, the constant presence of the thing watching us from the trees is starting to irritate me. I listen as a storm rolls up. The early patter of the rain begins on the canopy before the heavens open and our fire flares. I had been watching the only branch capable of supporting a great weight and the moment the rain gives me an outline I fire twice into it.

The satisfying crash and death rattle on the forest floor means I sleep a lot easier, knowing our invisible predator has been despatched.

The next day we fire up Monty, a great jungle clearing device, and take a route that will shave at least a fortnight off our journey time although we certainly have to come to terms with the journey ahead of us and the slow progress.

I take the time every night, as we camp, to add sketches and notes to my journal. I haven't realised how tough the journey has been until one night I get around to a headcount and find there are now only six of us, but as Kent and I are still present I don't see too much of a problem and besides we are now so close to the JubJub nesting site you can hear their booming calls echoing through the canopy as they settle into roost.

The night is a lot more restless than I would have hoped for and there are now only four of us. The tracks suggest Puma.

The restless night means we set off early and reach the nesting site with the sun still low in the sky. These things are huge - they look like Phorusrhacids but with an impressive wingspan. The skill alone needed to just fly through the trees is impressive, let alone with the quiet style in which these birds achieve it.

The hunt begins. We have several martini henrys primed and ready to go plus our well-polished elephant gun, one Empire pistol and two radium pistols. Within minutes the air around me is full of feathers, leaves and gun smoke. We already have one body hung from a branch nearby, unfortunately not a Jubjub, so now we are three. They come at us like giant silent shadows through the trees and scoop. Flying above the canopy before simply letting go, gravity does the rest. It was then I made a schoolboy error. I ran to push Kent out of harms way and for that act alone am sent soaring through the trees, in the grip of one of the monstrous birds. I waste not a second and lash myself to the powerful leg with my Sam Brown. Following good advice when in this situation, I swing up with my rifle butt to the underside of the beak and hear a healthy crack. Instantly we start to spiral down. It's at times like this a casual observer may have thought my action was rash and set to

doom me to a painful death or crippling injury but on breaking the canopies cover I had first heard, and then seen, Hastings circling in my biplane. My actions had been calculated on that alone and as she matched our descent I simply stepped from bird to plane.

Later on the edge of a clearing we all sat enjoying a meal of JubJub egg and I vowed to take some back to the chief of the village, with our apologies for the villages losses.



(The next very brief tale seems to be Jack's only ever run-in with the fabled Huaca, a creature he has never listed fighting tactics for, although as the story suggests he could purely be putting the Huaca as a form of construct. The story takes place in South America whilst with the airship so certainly follows the previous story.)

### **Carved in stone**

We touched down early this morning in Cuzco, didn't really fancy taking the airship up over the Andes. One of the radium pistols had broken and become unstable so we were frantically tinkering with it, hoping to contain the chemicals within even if we didn't get it working again.

The repair took up more time than we had hoped for and the area we had chosen to land in had become truly dark so no hunting tonight, despite reports of a Huaca in the area. Not wishing to light a fire on such a warm night, we chose to illuminate the area around us with the lamps from the airship's gondola and enjoy the warmth of the night alone.

I couldn't see it but I felt the presence of the creature just beyond our circle of lights, watching. Over the years I have attuned my senses to notice when things get unnaturally quiet; they can only ever be because something else is being unnaturally quiet and making every other sound feel uncomfortable enough to move on. Sometimes things can be so quiet they end up shouting their presence. I fire at the quietest spot and am happy at the sudden spark created in the gloom, like an iron hitting a flint.

I was certainly sure I had hit something but waited until the morning light before going to check; there was nothing to show for my shot save for a lot of tracks. Curiosity got the better of me so I took the time to follow the tracks back to a narrow fissure in the rocky ground, which opened up into a large underground hollow with tree roots breaking artistically through the roof to create a natural dome. I took a look around the cavern, impressed how human hands had added to a natural space until it became a temple created by nature. It felt defiled by the corpse lying at its centre. At first glance it appeared to be a badly cracked and damaged statue of an ugly monkey, except it had my bullet embedded in it.

I made the mistake of assuming because it wasn't breathing that I had killed it. It was a mistake that secured me a deep gash across my arm as the creature leapt up, knocking me back, before disappearing amongst the sculpted roots.

I followed it through into another naturally occurring, but sculpted, room. The floor and walls were covered in detailed mosaics leading up towards a shrine decorated with many identical statues of the ugly monkey variety. I gather one of them is the animate creature I shot last night but blood running down my arm halts my desire to investigate for my embedded bullet. From the room's entrance I aim at the first statue and fire, exploding the stone head into shards. I try this tactic two more times before I flush out my prey. The creature breaks from its hiding place amongst the sculpted statues and charges me shrieking. A mistake as my gun is still very much loaded and certainly the last mistake the creature ever makes.

Kent laughs when I return with the pieces, joking I have gained myself less of a trophy kill and more of an interesting rockery. I take this as our cue to leave for home.

(Jack has certainly spoken of trips to Mars many times and the people who live there. The following accounts both come from one expedition and feature the Black Bat Squadron again. Amongst historians no record can be found of this aeronautical group, beyond an aeroplane display team in much later years. As they appear to have planes from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it has to be concluded they somehow fall through the fissure in time to protect the common man throughout history.)

### **The Martian Base**

It is often I find myself travelling to the Red planet, a terrible misnomer as when you are up close most of the landscape is closer to that of the state of Texas, and that is as multicoloured as any place I have visited.

The BBS have advised we should be ready for another of the frequent Martian invaders attempts on Earth. The invaders, who are not native to the planet, often erect launching sites on the desert-like planet and try to head for our greener fields. Not wanting to be sat around a cooling cylinder in some wood I recommended this time we take the fight to them and destroy the factory that launches the projectiles.

We formulate a three pronged attack. Brigadier Broom will attack openly with his biplanes, whilst a Russian fella called Rostov takes my airship for a sweep attack, leaving me space to come in with some clockwork drones for a sneak attack.

I secure the help of Dr Joseph Walker, who owns a Well's crystal egg that can open passage between our world and any other just by clever manipulation of vibrations and we take our whole squad through to execute the plan.

The Martian factory is well protected with an armoured dome and heat rays. The attack is well orchestrated and although the more foolhardy drones take a lot of damage and casualties they also serve to draw a lot of the heavier fire away from the planes.

It's an exhilarating feeling to have the Martian wind beneath your wings with the pale sunset lighting your instruments as you try to find chinks in the armour of a foe.

The drones gain some kind of strange place in your heart and after awhile you feel a pang of loss each time one bursts into flames and falls spiralling to the unforgiving landscape below.

We are soon engaging the little-spoken-of Martian flyers (all eye witness accounts seem to favour talks of the tripod) and a fight in the sky rages. The BBS excel at this type of combat but I am more of a leg man and I am sad to say a flyer skilfully takes me from the heavens.

Now grounded, I have to get my charges onto the dome and break the fortifications so the Brig can deploy the main weapon.

Needing a distraction I am happy to see Rostov arrive in my airship, drawing attention and fire. The charges are placed and I use the last of the drones to set off the detonation.

Success! Success! We have blown a bloody big hole in the dome. It is now down to the flyboys and the bio weapon.

Martian walkers move in from all sides as planes and my airship flank and protect the larger aircraft with its deadly cargo.

Calamity however befalls us, the dome is fully operational. It is a trap and a great heat ray engulfs my airship. The carcass falls like the skeleton of some great whale to the desert sand as the ray readjusts to target our bomber.

Taking the opportunity of my insignificant presence I sprint, stumbling up the dome until I am before the barrel of the mighty heat ray itself and with regret and a final swig I pitch my (supposedly celebratory) bottle of gin inside. Heat, alcohol and enclosed spaces do not combine well and the barrel is torn apart in an impressive inner explosion.

I tumble down the dome, stunned, not sure if I have done enough. However I recover in time to see the payload delivered through the gaping hole.

As gas, full of simple bacteria we on Earth have gained immunity to, fills the enclosed space I know we have ended this attempt from the parasitic Martian Invaders.

## Exploration Mars

After the successful mission I decide to stay on the distant planet and have a break from Earth worries and instead enjoy a hunt for the sport of it.

Our Hitherian allies (the true natives of Mars, so much more like us than the cephalopod invaders we fight with) tell us of great vicious apes that prowl the ruins. The distant sun means they are not dark like our apes but pale in colour, the weaker gravity has given them greater size {also} and an evolution history from insects rather than fish affords them more limbs than we may be used to back home. All this just makes me more excited. Add to that we would be doing our allies a favour (despatching an aggressive menace) and I am good to go.

So alone I find myself studying a great troop of the brutes in a nearby ruined city. I discovered them after following a flock of colourful birds that went to roost in the area and was alerted to the presence of primates by the pungent musk on the air.

Finding a good place to observe them, I wait. They are fantastically aggressive even with each other. If I want to have any chance of a hunt I need to split one from the group.

Occasionally after a territorial squabble the defeated ape will run off into the dunes to beat its chest, lick its wounds and bathe in the dust. As this appears to be their only moment alone I take this as my chance.

A particularly large, ugly, male thunders off into the dunes and I track it easily from the great plumes of red dust it kicks up until I have it in my sights.

My radium rifle misfires, clogged from the detritus of the dry earth. It does no damage just gives the brute enough of an idea as to my location.

It doesn't seem to know what to make of me at first and circling about we end up on a rocky outcrop. It tries a couple of fake charges and I stand my ground hoping it will be deterred and leave me alone but the final charge, that seems to start as did the others, ends in a blow that takes me from my feet, breaking a rib.

I am lucky to land by a small gap and painfully slide inside as the beast reaches in trying to dislodge me.

Not born to cower I pull my sabre and with a couple of deterring thrusts, burst back out for the fight, broken rib or not.

The creature is agile, but its great size leaves a lot of exposed areas and with every pass I duck beneath its blows slashing out to leave a thin red line on its white torso. After what seems an age it collapses, spent and bleeding out. We watch each other for awhile, our laboured breath matching, however by the morning I awake from a surprise slumber to find the beast cold and dead.

Stood over the corpse I am alerted to the approach of voices. Hitherians, come out to see the spectacle of a man who can hold his own against the monsters. The Hitherians are neither hunters

nor soldiers. They favour a limited amount of apparel and carry no weapons. Their numbers alarmingly dwindle as they travel further afield to find food and water. These naked natives of Mars before me are however of the lower order, travelling out for their higher level masters and facing the challenges that brings. They look at the dead ape and with little conversation I join them to help protect them from the ferocious predators they will meet today.

The day goes uneventfully and I return with the group to their camp. I am happy to find the Hitherian's were not getting food for a higher caste but were in fact travelling with two Earth ladies of my acquaintance - Miss Ladybird and her friend Lady B (the wife of the BBS brigadier). As is the case with Miss Ladybird, they were after trinkets for her employers.

I took a couple of days rest on my rib and then upon fixing my rifle and cleaning a bolt action spare, offered by the ladies, I joined them for their expedition.

We set off on a hovering metal raft, natural magnetics keeping it aloft, about ten feet above the dunes and propelled by poles skilfully wielded by the two female Hitherians I had met on the outcrop. There was a humorous moment when my female hosts had tried to dress the ladies as they were now in the presence of a gentleman but they were having none of it and for a moment I thought the Hitherians were actually going to succeed in undressing my Earth friends. I think my laughter stopped the fashion show dead.

On the second day we come to a juddering halt by some ruins, a sandstorm moving in has robbed our raft of its magnetic propulsion and we must wait out the storm. I feel uneasy at our choice of shelter but the moment must have passed as I fell into a deep healing sleep. I awoke with a start covered in a heavy blanket of sand. The women are all gone and the raft is overturned. I recognise the tracks in the new piles of sand and grabbing my bolt action rifle, checking it is functioning, follow the tracks at speed.

I find the nest of the great albino apes and the women are hung by their feet inside. I know at once they are to be food and try to formulate a plan. I am mid-thought when the pungent aromas of a sneaking ape fill my senses. Waiting for the pounce, with a deft blow of my rifles butt I floor the beast. I had noticed whilst studying my last foe of this species that they had a severe weakness of the solar plexus which you would need a club to utilise properly and this time I was not lacking a club.

The pounce however had not been silent so with no time to waste I rushed forward firing. The apes may be big many-limbed monsters but they are certainly skittish. With two dead from my initial charge the others bolted for cover.

Freeing the ladies took time and the apes returned but sensibly surrounded rather than attacked the ruins. I did a quick head count and noted at least twenty beasts circling us cautiously in the dunes. It wouldn't be long until courage rose and they attacked and I was down to my last eight bullets.

Looking about for inspiration I found some small clay urns and, as quickly as I could, I filled them with some of my gin supply and strips of torn bloomers.

It turns out that Lady B does not throw too badly. Her aim was spot-on with our makeshift bombs and with a path clear we make it back to the air raft. Whilst the ladies got it back up and hovering, I

despatched the more curious apes and soon we were off on our way. Seems Miss Ladybird can get a fair pace out of this raft when she wants to and I was reminded of one heart racing lift she once gave me on Earth in her pony and trap.

We make good time once we are clear of the apes and are soon heading into predator country in search of the elusive trinket.

The area we have arrived in reminds me of the African savannah as striped herbivores graze and the rumbling bellows of the native predators roll around the herds. That night we sleep on the platform beneath the stars and my mind wanders to the strange thought of how much I need a haircut on my return home.

The next morning I wake before the ladies and with the two Hitherian woman as my trackers we find a pride of the native predators. Up on a warm bluff we overlook the great multi-limbed lion-like creatures, with the wide mouths of basking sharks and the endless rows of ragged teeth. I take my spear rather than my rifle and sneak off through the coarse grass until I have an impressive male before me. My heart beats faster as I creep, hand over hand, towards the waiting beast. It notices me too late as I leap forward, spear in hand, the primal joy rising within me as we tussle but the fight is short and soon I stand over my kill with only a few scratches to my person. The pride circles me, not sure what the next move should be, growling gently but keeping their distance. The wind however changes and the scent of the hidden Hitherian women blows over. I may be a worry but the women in the grass are simply food and attention turns their direction.

The creatures are far faster than me and the women on seeing their approach start to run for higher ground. One is brought down and like a banshee her friend turns and they struggle with the beasts. I reach my discarded rifle and fire. The single shot scatters the pride and leaves one cooling besides my still very much alive guides.

The pride turns my way but fragments instead and for a moment I kid myself it is my new alpha male status, before I am knocked fully to the ground by an even larger predator. Huge paws pinned me to the floor and fetid jaws with white shining teeth snap inches from my face. A shot rings out and I am sprayed with warm blood as the weight lifts.

I roll to see the shadow of Lady B a smoking rifle in her hands.

I have to accept the many light hearted jests at my foolhardy machismo and the fact I clearly need a good lady by my side to keep me out of trouble.

I vow I will return one day to Mars but right now I just have to marvel at all the strange places the red sand gets into.

(Jack certainly has his fair share of enemies. He is the weapon arm of what many consider a vast, corrupt and expanding Empire and for others he is simply a decimating force of the natural world. One enemy that harbours both of these reasons to despise Jack is the Indian born, aquatic terrorist known as Dakkar.)

### **Blood on the water**

The news that Dakkar is back in British waters does not come as a shock and this time he has harnessed the natural world to do his bidding...again. Kraken are a hazard to shipping at the best of times but they are solitary creatures and easily controlled. However Dakkar had a way of training the beasts and releasing them en masse into the British sea lanes.

I have had a call for the sea in my blood all my life and I have certainly managed to scratch that itch on more than one occasion. However it isn't an easy beast to tame alone so I needed to assemble a team and secure some kind of submersible device.

This being the case, I had travelled to the docks to look at a few of the vessels on offer. As we searched for something appropriate it didn't take long to realise we were in turn being watched ourselves.

I acted as nonchalantly as I could but was soon in pursuit of our spy over the slippery tile rooftops of the docks, pistol blazing. It seemed the chap hadn't had the same experience of the welsh slate under foot and, although I honestly tried to catch him, he fell to a skull-crushing doom.

The writer Conan Doyle had once told me even the dead aren't quiet - you just need to know how to use your eyes. With this advice I studied the unfortunate spy as he lay cooling on the cobbles for some clue. The cut of his clothes certainly said seaman and the reek of vodka on them led to the discovery of a smashed bottle in his jacket pocket, its label clearly Russian. Now Doyle, I've no doubt, would have gained a lot more from this than I. However I don't like jumping to conclusions so I dragged the harbour master from his office and asked simply, "Do you recognise this man?"

Within a few moments I was at the foot of the gang plank of a Russian ship called the Demeter, the vessel the dead fellow served on. Although the ship was unmanned I went aboard as I feel being shot at is invitation enough.

The crew had handily left out the ships log and manifesto, giving me something to read whilst I awaited their return. The revelation is startling. Dakkar has been shipping in Kraken eggs and young to breed in great numbers in British waters. I would have continued reading but a Russian captain entered the bridge, demanding angrily in his native tongue for me to explain myself. I calmly shut the heavy ships log and pick it up to show the captain, before I swing hard and knock him out with it. I'll let the port authorities' deal with his trafficking and besides my Russian is far too rusty to have explained fully.

Later that day aboard my vessel (I am conscripted to serve at least a month at sea each year as part of my Royal Order of Dragon commands) I am sat opposite a rather serious William Gladstone as he



reads the log book of the Demeter. With little ceremony he sanctions all costs to stop the little enterprise and I bid him farewell.

Another task I have to partake of as a Dragon is the training of our recruits who may not be up on hunting techniques and I had planned to go to Whitby to do just that. A happy coincidence meant Whitby was one of the Demeters regular ports of call so I could kill two birds with one stone.

I find little of interest in the port town regarding the ship but am happy to have met a skilled group of female vampire hunters to leave the town in the capable hands of. Miss Day, Munroe, Beswick and Booth will more than easily deal with the annual migration of ghouls who arrive in the small port around October and with this securely in mind I feel I can concentrate on the shipping problem.

I decide to test my theory about being watched, so purchase a whaling harpoon and charter a small tramp steamer to take me down the coast.

The journey appears uneventful but the rolling waves this close to shore occasionally brings to the surface a submersible vessel that is clearly following us, a large lobsterpot-like cage trailing in its wake. As night falls I notice the trailing boat has vanished and its cage is floating empty against the shoreline.

Something is left behind us, thrashing in the water. The boat's captain examines it for but a second before running to the helm and pushing the engines to their top speed. The night on the water becomes a desperate chase. Every time we think we have lost the beast it comes thrashing out of the waves, tentacles reaching forward to snatch away loose items from the deck or in most cases to lock around a part of the boat itself, turning us or slowing our speed. I hack at each incursion and severed tentacles writhe on the boat's deck. We head to shallower waters, sand banks guiding and tipping us alarmingly. However the creature is soon beached and lies on the sand, writhing. Exposed in such a way I take the harpoon and finish the creature off with a strike to its monstrous eye.

Stood on the sandbank, salt water lapping at my boots, I sketch the brute. Certainly a form of squid rather than Kraken but the beak is lined with sharp pin-like teeth and the severed limbs already show signs of re-growth. I name my sketch "Dakkar variant" and hop back on board the steamer to return to the London port.

Although tired I am glad to see my Ironclad is crewed, ready and a small submersible has been acquired, hanging from the side like a life boat. I take the time to show the sketches to the crew and apart from its size we are all in agreement that it is a Vampyroteuthis or Vampire squid, which ties in with the information we took from the Russian log book so we have our destination.

Submersible training has certainly taken away from time to report so I pick up the story from our present location on the African coast. Kent, Blincoe and I were crewing the small submersible and we have had a lot of success. The hot sun and calm sea did nothing for sightings so we decided to only search at night and allow phosphorescence to show up our quarry. The tactic worked and soon we were slowly gliding through a mass of sleeping, glowing vampire squid.

When we are finally below them and rested on the bottom, we plan tactics as they slumber in the sea above like a star-lit heaven. We count about thirty of the creatures and shudder every time a

curious tentacle brushes the hull. Kent's hand hovers over the crank that temporarily electrifies the hull but we have no real cause to use it. I understand his concern.

The morning light brightens the sea and although we know the glow of the squid is still there we can finally no longer see it, only their dark shadows above us like rain clouds. Kent is the first to notice them. A group of pole holding divers walking towards the creatures along the bottom of the sea like strange farmers. They are pointing towards us, our shape certainly not unknown to the eyes of men and we take the cue to leave. The poles they have glow like masts bathed in Saint Elmo's fire and with jabs up into the marine mass above they stir the creatures into a storm.

As we are now moving we become the target of the squids anger and we are snared in writhing tentacles. Kent furiously cranks the handle and discourages the first few attacks but soon we have no defence and we are spun and flipped like a terrier with a rat. The barbed tentacles tear and break our hull apart. Small leaks spray the interior with salt brine as we struggle for the surface.

The feeding frenzy, for that is certainly what it is, could be moved if we gave a more appetising treat.

Marine predators will always turn on the stench of blood. Without aiming I fire one of the two mounted harpoons. It seems to miss everything, so with a silent, spinning, prayer I fire the other.

I miss the squid but the great spear finds the glass fronted mask of one of the divers. A rich red cloud oozes into the water and we are free as the frenzy turns. The panicked squid farmers try to run but become are ensnared and torn apart with ease. We break surface surprisingly close to the Ironclad and remove the hatch.

As Kent and Blincoe move onto the deck the frenzy finds us again, a whipping tentacle breaking the water, casting our crew mate Ishmael into the sea as he reaches over to help me on board.

I hear his cries as he is dragged away, followed by a host of other loose detritus from the decks.

I don't think and dive into the swarming waters. So full of creatures I am as often thrown through the air as I am swimming. Ishmael had been dropped so I grab him and set back but we are a distance from the ship, although the submersible is close. I head for that and drop Ishmael inside, planning to join him but instead am seized and thrown back to the deeper water.

I am now exhausted and even a curious tentacle gets the better of me lifting me high into the air. The spectacle below is a feeding frenzy, squid has turned on squid and broken barrels and crates of provisions from our deck litter the scene. I am lowered towards an opening beak, the smell of rum heavy on the water's surface. I see the flaming arrow strike the beast below me and almost shrug at how pointless a flame seems in the sea but the rum catches and in pain the squid convulses. Once more I am sent flying to hit the waves as the plume of heat rises behind me.

The next entanglement is the strong grip of arms and I am hauled from the water.

It seems we suffered no casualties in the melee and only two of the squid escaped if our thirty strong headcount is to be believed. I thank Kent heartily and inform him he can now always bring his bow on missions.

(The moon missions are numerous as one failed colonisation of the moon follows another and Jack regularly recounts the disasters as ill equipped and poor numbers try to repel the ever-present hoards of the moons current inhabitants, the antlike Selenites.)

## **Moon**

I stand beneath the impressive sphere creation of Herr Doktor. We have been to the moon so often now we have designated troop carriers and you certainly can't blame the Dragons for investing in our German Doctor friend when it comes to space exploration. The Cavorite spheres were handy but they were also small and inaccurate. The vessel I now stand beneath is a proper troop carrier with the same accurate guidance as a waterborne ship.

The journey is comfortable and fast. We have to remain seated the entire time due to numbers on board, but as well as a garrison of red tunic wearing soldiers I also have the company of James Kent and Ben Blincoe.

We sit close to the pilot and I instruct my friends to watch and learn in case we have to pilot this thing back to earth. Pessimism is frequently the brother of experience, after all.

On seeing the pale glow of the lunar surface I feel a horrible pull on my heart as I recount past expeditions here. We land perfectly placed outside the Kwajimu moon base and even before disembarking I can see the mass of human bodies that litter the grey dust. Since we have tried to colonise the moon the Selenites have become more and more warlike and aggressive against us and I fear we will soon have to forget all about settling on our closest heavenly body.

We bury the dead and I feel an unease rising within me. I instruct half our number to start working on fortifications and digging in against what I believe is soon to befall us.

We don't have to wait long. Selenites breed into different castes; the worker, the breeder, the scout and the soldier. What spills down the ridge towards us is, unfortunately, a thousand plus of the latter.

We far outmatch the creatures on warfare - we have sonic cannons, they merely fight with mandibles and thrown spears that they grow from their backs, breaking them off to use as projectiles. It is however weight of numbers, speed and aggression that are their strengths. The boys on the sonic cannons carve swathes through the hoard but we still have to engage them hand to hand as some slip through. If they get to the canon crews we are doomed.

I stand on a barricade, resplendent in my deep blue moon suit, rayvolver and sabre in hand, engaging all that try to get through.

We cause enough destruction to their ranks to precipitate a route and we have time to inspect our damage.

One of the sonic cannons stopped working partway into the initial charge and we find two of the hard organic spears buried deep in the electronics of the thing. The other canon is fine but if they try to outflank we will have no fall back position.

What we do have, on board the sphere, are seven war automaton. Humanoid soldiers that just don't stop unless destroyed. It has always been accepted how useless they are against other human soldiers who simply use guns or cannon but against the Selenite they will be highly effective.

We power them up. Each one has the quirks of their designer present, giving them personalities present in their unique appearance. However even when fully functional, they are still simply tools.

As we notice the next wave gather we send the robot warriors forth. Surprisingly the Selenites are fooled and converge on the automatons. The battle appears epic as the robot soldiers fight like Vikings of old but soon they too fall and we are left with a thin line approaching at speed. This gives the sonic cannon guys a good concentration to aim at and shortly thereafter we have caused our second route.

It is Ben who starts the famous welsh anthem up, blasting his powerful singing voice into the air to reverberate inside the globe of his helmet, the tune soaring over the grey sands as it was taken up by others around him.

You could be forgiven for thinking it was the hymn that turned the Selenites away that day rather than the cannons roar and I am happy to let the poetry of the situation stand.

I gave an inspection of the base, deemed we had done our best and commanded a retreat with no rescued survivors of the colony.

We will one day give up on the moon but until then we shall keep returning to bury our dead.

(Jack's enemies, as we have said, are numerous and in one instance they appeared to unite in a plot to rid the world of their mutual foe)

## **The Island**

I could have written the voice off as a dream. I could certainly have written the whole experience off as a dream if I hadn't woken up on the shore of a white sand beach feeling groggy and drunk and wearing my blue uniform. On the strange sands I felt as alien as I could ever feel in my formal dress and yet I also felt naked as I was devoid of all weaponry, with the feeling still strongly inside me that I had heard the voice of my enemy, Dakkar, giving orders. The jungle reaches almost down to the sea itself, leaving a slim strip of sand and the occasional skittering of coconut crabs. The noises and roars that come from the island's interior are Jurassic in nature and I know I have been put here as a way to be hoisted by my own petard.

I was suddenly buoyed up by the thought I was to have dinner with Miss Ladybird and her friend Ryder but I am soon reminded it does not matter how missed you are when you are yourself lost.

I decide there is no point in being in a game if you don't know the rules or have the right pieces, so I used what few things I had on me to fashion a flint spear. The coast I am on could not accommodate a rescue so after a hearty meal of crab meat and a good night's rest I ventured inland. I have picked out several recognisable roars and calls and wonder if the beasts would be more silent if they were aware of my presence.

Before I had gone more than a few steps I was pounced upon but the creature's smell was so strong I think I could have fought it blindfold. The creature cooling in the sand was a twisted experiment of man and lion and, unfortunately for it, it had got the worst characteristics of both making it an easy kill despite its attack. Having seen such creatures before I was becoming aware this island either once, or still was, the haunt of Doctor Moreau. I was reminded of both Dakkar's rescue of the scientist from the justice of the Empire and the mutated giant vampire squid. At once I saw the team forming before me.

Please do not judge me but I skinned the lion man there on the beach and without waiting for the hide to cure (although I did wash it well with salt water) I put it on, gaining the protection of the thicker hide and the clawed limbs. Suitably attired I entered the jungle like Hercules.

It seems a call had somehow gone out to the humanoid inhabitants of the island as I was soon desperately trying to shake off the attentions of a group I can only refer to as dinosapians.

I thought I had found a safe river to hide in and throw off their tracking but just before I plunged in I became aware of the oily film on the surface, alerting me to the presence of the highly poisonous Snark, their numbers somewhere upstream unconsciously affecting the water supply. I took the initiative and tracked them down. They are unusually skittish but I still killed one, soaking the claws of my lion pelt in the poisonous goo and removing the quills. Nightfall found me sneaking, getting as close to my trackers' camp as I dared. As hoped, one of the number broke off to find food and we are face to reptilian face. He laughed at the scratch that barely breaks his tough skin but the laughter stops dead as the deadly venom bites and he fell noisily. I take quickly to the trees, pulling forth a

now hollowed reed found by the river and as the others investigated I fired the deadly quills with accuracy.

I dropped amongst the slain and searched for weapons. Finding none, I instead butchered a couple of steaks from the carcass. Not to eat as they would already be tainted with the toxins of the Snark but I took them with me, disappearing into the trees.

For several days I survived on my wits alone, trying to find a suitable coastal landing place and all the time fearful of the strange primal roar that echoed over the trees. Only after about a week did I find the bay of wrecked ships. They were from all eras but I believed I could salvage enough to make an escape. The roar emanated behind me and curiosity now emboldened by the chance of a getaway meant I headed back to investigate the unknown yet chilling bellow.

The journey lead me to a well-worn path and I followed it discreetly until I overlooked human habitation behind an impressive fence. The gathering dusk brought a surprise when the windows flared with electric light, casting an unnatural yellow glow and strange buzz. I jumped onto the fence to scale it and was thrown back, my muscles on fire, my lion skin pelt charred to the elbows. The fence it appears has many tricks to keep out the jungle inhabitants. However I have an understanding of electricity and scale a tree to throw my hide over the wire. {and} As it smoked I hurdled the fence, a mild charge sending a tingle through my bones and I was inside the compound.

It has the egotism of Moreau all over it but a recurring swan motif shows it to also be funded by the Bavarian king Ludwig, the mad old fool. I try to ignore this but when I leave the island I shall ensure this information finds the right ambassadors so they can advise where money is better spent to avoid a war.

I crept over to the windows encrusted with grime and looked into a lab that would turn a man's stomach as cages of sedated creatures and bottles of body parts lined the wall. A series of bottles marked "Herakleophobia IV" caused me concern too, as they can only be part of an experiment on the islands fauna and I know from experience they likely contain a growth hormone. The quiet of the room is disturbed by the entrance of a heavyset man with white hair who retrieved a book and left. So it appears Moreau is here.

I entered the lab through its exterior door and shuffle through papers, uncovering a revolver. Smiling happily, I checked it for bullets and walked into the adjoining room. I shoot the mutated retainer who stands up and place the gun on the back of Moreau's fat neck. He doesn't even turn, just says my name.

The man is happily chatty; he likes that I survived "his" island. He confirms they have royal funding and that he was already working on this island before Dakkar "saved" him from court and prison. I tied him up and left to find out what project he has been working on. It's possible I may have left the electric fence off and gate open but I'm sure Moreau can cope.

I have respect for the island and even with a gun I keep to cover, especially as when passing by a great valley rich with dinosaurs. At the head of the valley lay an imposing mountain and at its peak I could see many caves alive with the movement of great, agile, beasts. I will tell everyone not to hunt alone but needs must and I approached the peak to discover Moreau's Giants. A family of some species of gorilla - giant in size and so much more aggressive than their mountain cousins as the

constant fights and rendered body parts testify. They brought to mind the pale gorillas of Mars, although with the size of these brutes, just one could decimate London. Dakkar is too canny to not use them soon so I must do something about them now.

Dakkar would not have commissioned the monsters without a way to get them off the island and I realised a heavily worn path leads from the mountain to the sea. Following it, I find containers and a sheltered harbour. I had not been there long when several great bells rang and a large ball of fat dropped into each container. Soon the gorillas were on the site, they fought briefly with each other before feasting on the fat. It was clearly drugged and the great apes all fell into a deep sleep. I had no idea of the time they would sleep, so waited patiently to see what unfolded. They awoke about an hour later, refreshed, and returned to their mountain home. I had to admire the genius, train the apes to take their own medicine each day and also sleep so you could administer any additional care. With the apes gone I studied the delivery system. They were all sealed tight but the release door I could tamper with.

Having carried the poisoned meat with me now for close on eight days, I was more than pleased to add its rancid mass to each door. I knew the potency of Snark venom and also knew in the presence of flesh it just became stronger. The next day, I hoped, would be a very simple case of genocide.

That next day I waited, the bells rang and the apes appeared. Like before they were asleep in minutes, however unlike before, an hour passed and they did not wake. These threats to the Empire were dead and I felt sorry for the creatures that had been taken to a level that made them a threat by the hand of man alone. Moving in to check on the creatures vital signs, I noticed the baby on the tree edge. It watched me - not yet aggressive but still a size to be concerned over. I raised my revolver and fired over its head. It ran off back to the mountain alone. It may not survive on this island but it certainly would not return here to the crates where its family died.

It seems I was just in time. The following day the bell rang and when the live apes failed to appear other island inhabitants start to pluck up courage. I hid and watched them sniff the air, tentatively approaching, but they scatter back into the undergrowth when a loud noise broke the peace of the harbour. I looked up to watch several men descend from the heavens. Rocket packs on their backs and strange uniforms with a black sun motif. They walked about, confused, checking the dead primates and started a conversation between themselves. It's a rookie error on such a strange island to believe you are top of the food chain just because of some misplaced right of birth. The gathered predators have certainly got enough courage to take on tiny men and they descend fast and hungry.

I waited, feeling somewhat detached from the human race, before scaring off the smaller predators with a killing shot. I took what was salvageable from the bodies and strapped on one of the rocket packs. I can only assume they had enough return fuel or else they wouldn't be here.

Taking to the skies, the greater height meant I could see ships anchored some way off shore. It seems the island was attracting attention because in one location the ship was marked with the same black sun, whilst another ship was marked with the coat of arms of my Russian friend Count Rostov. I flew to that one and landed unceremoniously on the deck to be surrounded at first by gunmen and then by smiling faces and the welcoming shout of my name.

Being greeted by friends, even ones who recoil at your smell when they embrace you, is a heart warming feeling. I was practically frogmarched to the captains quarters, where a warm bath was poured for me and the ships surgeon paid attention to my wounds as I washed off my island aroma.

Rostov talking excitedly about things as I ate the meal he brought and I found he was there to rescue me as Kent and Miss Ladybird had worked out where I must be. I asked where they were now and on hearing they had gone to the island I was up and dressing in fresh clothes laid out by Rostov's valet. The poor Russian tried to stop me but I was rapidly strapped back into the rocket pack and back to the island. I know Emilly will be drawn to Moreau's lab to save the caged animals but once in the air I spotted a lot larger dwelling and realise I should investigate.

Landing at the door it's immediately obvious that Kent must be here as I am greeted by a man with a fresh black eye. Without asking unnecessary questions, I balanced the fellow up by adding a blow to the other eye and watched him slide down the door frame. The guard just inside the door wasn't so lucky and the man who rounded the corner holding Kent's cowboy hat just cursed, knowing it's a terrible way to seal your doom.

Three down and I'm only just inside the door, although now I'm wearing Kent's hat. I'm aware the house will take a lot of searching when a rabbit I recognise hopped from a side room and looked at me. First Kent's hat, now Emilly's companion - my luck appeared to be in. Following the rabbit as it hopped away, leading me with purpose, somehow made me feel like Alice.

The room I entered had a bound and bruised Kent on a chair, his bearded head bowed to his chest. I place his hat upon it and his eyes snap open and sparkle as they find mine. He nodded at a wall and I tapped it with my gun butt, unsurprised when it slid aside. Inside stood Dakkar and a few men around the prone body of Emilly in just her underclothes. Dakkar doesn't even raise an eyebrow, he simply checks his watch and walks from a door opposite, allowing his men to square off for a fight. I can hear the ticking even if they can't.

Kent appears beside me, the rabbit in his arms spitting bits of hemp rope. I'm not sure who fought hardest out of the two of them on seeing Emilly but my money almost goes to the rabbit. Not risking a head count, I grabbed Emilly around the waist and dived through the window as Kent wrapped his arms around my neck. The rocket pack struggled to get us away from the house with so much weight on board and Kent swinging to keep his feet from the rocket flame.

Fortunately however, I spotted our airship repaired and coming to help and grabbing the ladder we are pulled further clear. The explosion is still close and masonry and heat fills the air around us as we climb.

Strong arms help us inside and soon we are looking into the handsome face of the BBS Brigadier and Lady B. A cape is wrapped around Miss Ladybirds shoulders and a Hendricks and tonic is placed in my hand. Seems we did good.



(Jack is certainly an explorer of many worlds but he also transcends planes)

### **The Wild Hunt**

Come All Hallows Eve the Unseelie court take over the reign of their world for half of the year. As we approach winter, the veil between our worlds thins and the Unseelie court indulge in a passion known as the Wild Hunt. As the Vikings once sailed to our shores to rape and pillage the Dark fae ride on majestic horses and magnificent stags across the divide between world with their glowing eyed hunting dogs to steal away the fairest of our men and maidens.

There are ways to cross the divide before the veil thins and I chose to take some folk with me to halt this years Wild Hunt before it began. To this end in my London apartments sat myself, Kent, The Brig, Benjamin Blincoe, my old friend Doyle and a young artist by the name of Rackham, by each of our seats rest an antique iron sword.

We, of course, have confidence in our mutual friend Emily Ladybird whom we all believe straddles the veil at all times, although she is quiet about it. She places before us glasses full of a bright green liquid and with a raising of glasses we drink.

Down the rabbit hole.

We stand side by side in a winter wonderland, clothed in our own dreams. Armed and armoured we are all barely recognizable. My eyes burn with a cold white fire.

The Brig unfolds majestic wings and takes to the air as Kent brushes down buckskins and straightens his rig. Meanwhile Ben stares at a tightly wrapped parcel in his hands.

I look through the skeleton branches of the winter trees as my colleague circles above. The hunt will be a long way from here and our journey will be harsh and full of peril.

We soon break the forest and an undisturbed blanket of white lays before us. Doyle bursts forth onto the virgin snow and in an explosion of white powder he disappears from view. As a green stain spreads across the snow I know an inspiring and talented writer has woken up in a London apartment in a very cold sweat, with the knowledge he can never cross the veil again. To have seen his promised land only to be expelled at the gate.

Ben unwraps his parcel, and pulling forth a rope that sparkles with magic and frost, he ties a great noose, throwing it out onto the snow. For a second the Brig lands at its centre then launches back to the clouds. The beast that springs forth is all teeth and tail, a great striped serpent that thrashes and writhes as the noose tightens. I bring my iron blade in a great arc and sever the creature head - it disappears in a mist of steam and bubbles. Caution dictates we should skirt the field of snow but we are British and caution is for the weak.

Another rears before us but the Brig descends like Michael himself and slays the beast, allowing us to continue unmolested to the trees where great stags stand in billowing clouds of their own making, bringing a heavy musk to the air and bellowing calls that echoed through the trees. As we approach the creatures I hear young Arthur state how sweet the berries taste. I look at him with

sadness in my eyes and explain he is of here now and cannot proceed with us further. In my apartments a leather chair now sits empty, he never stood and walked away but shall remain for one year and a day.

The stags make good mounts and we ride on the wild yet accommodating beasts through the dark trees until we can hear the horns of the Hunt in the distance. Cresting a hill, the snow whipped into eddies, we watch whilst in the valley below many riders circling impatiently, churning the ground into mud as dark hounds cavort and howl.

I smell the streets of London as the veil thins and as the excited riders move towards the breach. We ride hard to intercept, the image of Britannia burning bright in the sky above us. Kent opens fire with his revolvers and the hounds turn on us to be speared on the sharpened antlers and tossed aside. The Brig dives from the heavens, spying the hunt master and a devastating volley of arrows sees us ride through a heavy green rain.

In my apartments, Miss Ladybirds game of cards with Mr Doyle is disturbed by the sudden gasp from the Brig as he frantically checks himself for arrows.

A hound the size of a bear takes Ben from his mount and as he is circled by other beasts I see him no more. Kent, surrounded, resorts to his fists and I ride on seeing the hunt master sat proud and unmoving upon a great shadow of a beast.

A hail of arrows takes my stag from beneath me and I lose my blade in the body of a vicious toothed beast as I am ringed by hounds. Devoid of my sword I am helpless until Ben wades in out of nowhere, covered in blood and ichor, a formidable wall of muscle and iron and the path to the hunt master is open. He sees me before him, a weapon-less foe, and raising his great sword above his head he offers me my last words.

"I don't believe in faeries..,"

And before me the mound now stands empty. Flanked by Ben and Kent we turn on the gathered huntsmen with knowing smiles... I have to admit the route is impressive.

Stood in the blood drenched landscape we have no way home until I am nudged by Kent who points to our feet, revealing a very smug looking rabbit.

We blink open our eyes to the warmth of my London home, a hearty fire burning in the hearth. Doyle hands me a large Hendrick's and tonic and I wash the taste of the green liquid from my mouth.

(Jack is always flanked by his batman Kent but a harrowing story explains why that constant companionship lessens)

## **Deep**

It is on the birthday of my friend Charles that I meet his friend, Miss Lovelace, and by degrees she introduces me to her friends, Volk and Perry.

This introduction is what led me to stand in a deep quarry beside a great burrowing machine as Volk and Perry spoke the language of mechanics. Our would-be travelling companions, Percy Fawcett and Miss Tanner, flirted happily together. These interactions have driven Kent and I inside the machine where we check our kit (happy at last to be wearing Khakis and a pith helmet), oil up the elephant gun and stow the provisions.

Neither of us can be sure who pressed what button or started what system but we become locked inside and on trying to free ourselves we start a series of events that send us tunnelling down. Kent laments the loss of enthusiasm and beauty in Fawcett and Tanner, whilst I am more concerned with the loss of Perry - our way back home.

The discussions of helplessness end when we breach an underground river and start moving at speed as the hull cools, surrounded by the turbulence of rushing water. I cannot remember when I passed out but the last thing I remember was a great and sudden heat. Awakening I discover we are no longer moving.

We unlock the craft and emerge into a prehistoric jungle; hot, humid, leaves as big as umbrellas and dragonflies as big as your hand.

Finding that we are being watched by a pack of monkeys high in the trees, Kent shoots one so it falls to the ground for easy identification. I put away my telescope with a slow shake of the head. However the other monkeys take to the air like a flock of great birds and I turn the corpse over to expose the creatures wings. I suddenly can't help picturing the poor thing in a fez.

I notice the monkeys take a time to land and work out predators also keep to the trees in search of food. I expect snakes but am surprised to find a strange form of tree cephalopod. It's colours pulse through the delicate shades of the leaves and bark as it approaches a sitting monkey before it turns a sudden shocking yellow and strikes out a lightning fast tentacle plucking it's chattering food from the branch, before biting down with a silencing crunch. I have to say I'm impressed.

After a day or so we break free of the jungle to verdant tundra that rises up before us. A small sun glows in the sky above our heads.

We pause to observe a herd of hairless mastodon drinking and bathing at a vast stretch of water, whilst a large pride of sabre-toothed tigers prowl through the grass. Fascinated, we watch them single out a female and bring her down to feast upon after a great battle. I decide travelling on would be madness and we should return to the tunnelling machine and hope we can plan a route home.

We stand by the hole in the ground where the tunnelling machine should be, kicking stones down the deep tunnel. After many moments of silence Kent asks if I picked up the gin.

We were starting to get a better understanding of the flora and fauna of our new domain when we discovered a settlement by the coastline we had been following. Carved into the very rock itself the settlement looked deserted but it was exceptionally defensible so we had to assume the residents would return. Being so close to the coast we also had to ascertain they were to return from the water.

Taking it in turns to rest, as Kent slept I surveyed the inner sun. It was too bright to really understand it's workings but it certainly paled to a gentler bluish light every thirty-two hours according to my calculations and as it became cooler this paler light signalled a return from the residents of the settlement. I watched as boats appeared on the horizon.

We remained armed but the natives (who resembled the islanders of Polynesia) surround us with friendly faces and curiosity. Without a common language we are happily taken into the tribe and we are soon eating a fish supper. We are given a place to sleep without question and feel like true, invited guests.

Kent retires to bed whilst I spend the night hours trying to gain some understanding of the land we are in. I had gained a lot of information about some of the creatures and near areas but it appears our hosts are not travellers. We are, however, disturbed by a scream and loud roar. The villagers head for the safety of their boats whilst I grab my rifle and fire at the tiger that stands over a cowering child. Kent emerges shirtless from his hut, guns blazing at a saber-tooth I had not noticed dragging away a full grown man. Seems a pack has descended on the easy prey. Seems too that we got their attention as we are now surrounded and I will since question anyone who tells me tigers are solo predators. I can see the alpha of the pack with ease so I aim and fire. It has the desired effect and the pack scatter, with Kent and I firing to wound as many as we can.

The action, it would appear, has risen us up from guests to gods. The rising up changes the conversation and we are soon aware they believe all gods come from a deep abyss in the snowy wastes of the north, a wide circular pit with stars at the bottom. The Eureka moment comes when we work out our way home has been revealed to us.

It is several days later that we head off across the inner sea with provisions and a few of the villagers who wish to take the gods on their final journey. We are out of sight of any visible coast when the boat is bumped from the bottom and a dark shape drifts beneath us. The fishermen seem prepared and unfurl a huge weighted net and, biding their time, cast it into the waves. Contented with the simple action they return to rowing the boat. I on the other hand load the elephant gun, the only weapon I believe can penetrate the water for it appears I alone saw the net miss. I steady myself on the side and aim at the calm waters. The shadow drifts beneath us again and when I see the dark smudge of the giant eye, I fire. Even Kent jumps.

In the resulting fury as the beast dies I believe we lost two of the villagers. Drifting off, the carcass floats behind us until a gnarled tentacle slowly reaches up and pulls it beneath the surface.

I'm glad to say we take the hint to move along the shallower waters of the coast. Where giant sharks are replaced by pteradons diving into the water to surface with brightly coloured fish.

Soon we find the place to put in for our journey to continue on foot. The natives make camp with us for the night whilst Kent assembles our strange arm Gatlings - not sporting but we may need an edge when the others leave us. I'm amused that here the trees seem to be full of larger winged primates eating smaller tree octopi; there's your natural selection at work, Darwin.

The next morning we realise the air has a colder bite to it as the villagers leave in the boat. Setting off, we are amused as the larger winged monkeys start following us curiously in small groups. We get quite used to their presence so when they all suddenly scatter we realise they are aware of something we are not. We swing our weapons about awaiting an attack.

We look to the sky and see the predator circling above, a great winged reptile. I feel a sudden thrill at the thought of an actual dragon. It stands to reason in a country of flying food there would also be flying predators as we watch the reptile snap snacks from the air.

Crocodiles have a taste for primates on the earth's surface so it seems appropriate that the same stands on the Earth's interior. The creature lands when its belly is full, six meters of reptile gliding down onto the rocks.

As it is no threat to the Empire I decide to sketch it. After a while of quiet sitting I realise the creature is watching me. The charge is sudden and I have my empire pistol in my hand as quick as a gunslinger, firing into the creatures flank as it sails over my head taking to the air.

I hear Kent shout behind me and realise he is down. I fire into the beast's wing and bring it out of the sky. I'm not sure how the wound happened but Kent has a wound to his leg that is spilling blood across the rocks. The creature with the broken wing turns and charges, dragging the wing behind.

I know I said the arm Gatling was not sporting but with an unconscious bleeding friend in my arms I don't feel very sportsmanlike. The beast lies ravaged by the constant fire and I turn my attention to tourniquet and bandage Kent's leg. For a moment I consider turning back but knowing true help lies before me, I remove the creature's good wing to make a dragable stretcher. As I start to pull some of the monkeys fly over and surround the stretcher. Kicking them away it takes me a few moments to realise they keep returning and are trying to help. Surprisingly it does help so I let them. The journey is rough and becoming steadily colder. Having wrapped Kent in my jacket, I am feeling the cold even more. The snow underfoot has turned away all but three monkeys and only one is now helping, so at my next stop one of the least helpful monkeys becomes stew to help me keep up my strength and try to feed some to the still unconscious Kent.

I realise Kent's leg is dying of gangrene and that could take my friend with it so I pack up my camp and set off again, time not being on my side.

Tiredness and snow blindness means I don't notice the bear until it is too late and it is upon me, pinning me heavily to the ground. I swing my foot as hard as I can into its body and it rears, allowing me enough time to discharge the Gatling gun for a second time. The action gets me food for myself and the remaining monkeys and a warm wrap for Kent, allowing me to regain my jacket and some warmth.

I have no idea how long I travelled through that frozen waste. Rousing once from my ceaseless trudging by the sound of simian chattering I turned to find one of the remaining two monkey's dead

in the snow from cold and exhaustion. In my tired brain I spoke with so many phantoms that I had no concept of time or purpose. On reaching the abyss, the great yawning tunnel that lead from this inner kingdom to my home, I would have cried with joy as I looked down upon the myriad of stars at its depths, the canopy of my own heaven, but sense and frustration stole any elation from my heart. There was no way down the unscaleable cliffs, thick with smooth ice and buffeted by constant wind.

I can't get this far without trying one last plan so I write an indepth note and, attaching it to the final monkey, I throw him out into the eye of the vortex. He stretches his cold wings before diving out into the world I crave so much. My winged message in a bottle - and last hope.

I make a shelter, ignoring the burning cold in my bones and the fact I haven't seen Kent's breath for hours. Holding my friend close beneath the bear fur I lapse into the embrace of a dreamless sleep.

I awake - I've no idea how many days later - to the steady throb of an airships engine, warm sheets beneath me and the face of my Russian friend grinning beside me.

For all those who believe I should have died, never to be found, you are right. I did indeed fail to return from the centre of the Earth. I always knew that would be the case but I have powerful friends and the Russian grinning at me was confirmation of this. The flying monkey never made it further than the abyss from which it emerged, to be found preserved so many years later as a curiosity by later trips to the Pole. You have not heard that story either but my Russian traveller in time did and he read that note, addressed personally to him and he moved the stars to be at the very point in time when a small monkey flew from a chasm and followed its flight path back to his stranded friends, long before they were both entirely lost to the ice-cold fingers of death.

I enquired after Kent although I was in no state to go see him. He would pull through but he lost the leg. Rostov knew a man who could fix him but my friend would never be the same again.

(We end this first volume with Jack reminiscing over his first ever encounter with Dakkar)

### **Choppy waters**

I had not long returned from my first ever Martian campaign where the world of monsters was opened to me. I had been a Private with the Royal Horse Artillery when I left earth and gained on the field of battle my first ever stripes as I attained the position of Lance Bombardier.

On returning to Earth I found that news was full of talk of Count Dakkar, an Indian prince who had taken to the sea and like a pirate had risen up against the fleets of the British Empire causing our current prime minister, William Gladstone, quite a headache.

Gladstone wanted recruits to infiltrate the organisation and sabotage from the inside at some personal risk. I saw it as an easy moment to volunteer and was soon in a covered carriage heading to the docks. Upon disembarking at the harbour I found myself with my first ever submarines, not one but two of the beasts and as I passed muster I was soon a crew member on board the Teuthida (slips of the tongue doesn't it). My job was clear from both sides. I had to do as much damage as I could to the enemy without being caught.

For several months I must engage in the heart-sinking destruction of the British fleet but soon the vessel and its crew are summoned to Dakkar's mysterious island and safe port. I have bidden my time well and now will reap the rewards, being able to take my acts of sabotage to the heart.

Within the bay we are surrounded by peaceful cephalopods of a gigantic nature. Like attack dogs they await the command to strike and I feel my bile rising at the audacity of using nature against progress. I have of course come prepared as stories of the Kraken guard were legendary amongst the crew. I uncork and empty a pheromone on the submersible of which I have served so many months. The response is instant, the primitive mind taking over as the creatures fight the submersible that is trying to claim dominance over the bay territory. Taking advantage of the confusion, I slip into the writhing waters and head for the base, vowing if I had the chance I would end the lives of all these unholy creatures so they cannot terrify the Empire again.

I know I will be considered a casualty of the territorial beasts and therefore given time to devise a plan. I lay on the rocks of the shore, drying in the sun as I think of how one young soldier can damage the main operation of such a man. The occasional movement of the ground beneath me reminds me of other tales of how Dakkar had harnessed the power of a volcano to run his operation and I am suddenly aware we are on an unstable geological outcrop - a man-made atoll atop an active volcanic vent. My plans for sabotage are cemented in a moment and I can even turn the weapons I have so often employed against the British back upon the terrorists I have infiltrated.

Under the cover of night I sneak into the stores to purloin breathing apparatus and clockwork bombs, the same devices we have used to sink so many British ships.

I swim deep and find the capped vent, its stored natural energy used to heat, fuel and run the base above. Within moments I have located the weak points of the structure and planted and primed my

bombs. If only I had been astute enough to look for monsters in the depths I possibly would have been away, but the silent unseen creature wrapped me in its electrical coils and I was knocked cold.

I awake strapped to a chair (my clothes still wet so not much time has passed) to be faced by Dakkar flanked by two guards. He chuckles at me. Listing a long line of oversights he feels the British Empire have made in sending a young man to bring down a champion of right. He marvels at how much damage I must have done for him whilst awaiting my chance and he smiles and laughs aloud as he tells me he must give me a raise

His laughter stops when the first bomb detonates and we lean towards the water. Screaming at me “What have you done?!” he flees the room, taking a guard with him.

I nod at the lone guard in the room and knock him out with the chair I was previously tied too.

Running for the corridor, more explosions rock the base and sulphurous steam fills the rooms as the whole structure is pitched beneath the boiling waves.

I swim through the rapidly heating water as the base behind me bursts into great balls of flame. Pulling myself up on the rocks I find myself face to face with Dakkar. I am unarmed and yet he holds a powerful electric charged rifle. I can see the look on his face as he wrestles with inner turmoil and then he is gone through the steam and yellow foul smelling clouds of the volcano.

I often wonder if he knew me then as well as he knows me now if that inner argument would still go the same way. Well, would you still your hand from disposing of your enemy simply on a matter of honour at not shooting an unarmed foe?



## **After words**

Of course the works you have just read are fiction (if you care to believe that) and appeared on twitter over a period of four years. Twitter in its design allows a writer 140 characters only, per post. Kit Cox, the author, wrote the posts of Jack Union under the twitter account @Jackunion1885 whilst honing his writing skills for his first book "How to bag a Jabberwock" which was released with the author being Major Jack Union and his subsequent adventures of Benjamin Gaul, the first being "The Monster Hunter" which were released under his own name but set in the same Union-verse.

Not wishing the works to be lost Kit has taken it upon himself to collated them into two free volumes (after all the works were free to begin with on Twitter) and release them for the enjoyment of anyone who just wishes to read ripping yarns. Of course for a longer read, you can always purchase Kit's other works.

Happy hunting and don't look under the bed.

The cover art is courtesy of Claire Peacey who's an epic genius and deserves tea and crumpets (and edited this work, to make sure I hadn't made mistakes and added the last statement, hoping I wouldn't see it.).

Additional characters (used here with permission)

Emilly Lady (C) Jema Hewitt. "Steampunk emporium, Steampunk Apothecary and Steampunk Teaparty" available from all good bookshops

The Black bat squadron (C) Matt Broom

