

Little Killers

A Fine and Most Profound, Perspicacious and Almost Entirely Edifying *Nathan le Shadon* Mystery, by Mr D.R. Stone

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From the journals of L.M. Hassanali MD:

In these journals concerning my adventures with that renowned detective, Mr le Shadon, I believe that I have none so strange to relate as that which I now pen, and have tentatively entitled “The Little Killers”. Which most unfortunate affair began, for my own part, one early summer’s Sunday afternoon; I was in the first-floor apartments I share with Mrs Flatchlock, freeholder of lodgings, 57, Highbury Square EC15. We were taking what might most propitiously be called high tea, and had indeed enjoyed several highly stimulating and invigorating cups of coffee in the Wellsian manner, when there came a staccato and impatient ringing upon the galvanistic doorbell.

“Another visitor for our Mr le Shadon, no doubt.” Mrs Flatchlock threw on a silken William Morris robe – which I personally felt to be a trifle revealing; but then, Mrs Flatchlock has always been a little forward in that way, rather more so than myself – and descended the stairs to attend to the door. Mr le Shadon receives a steady stream of outlandish visitors, from clients for his services, to members of his network of informants in the criminal underworld, to the occasional *fiendish assassin* hoping to find the Great Detective off his guard. Strangely, for one with so keen an intellect and of such observational powers, Mr le Shadon seems to remain utterly oblivious to these visitors’ very existence until somebody else, other than himself, has answered the door and shown them to his rooms. His lapse in this area is quite unaccountable.

Thus, I thought, was the nature of this interruption, but I was mistaken. From down below, Mrs Flatchlock exclaimed: “A Detective Inspector Bullstradd for you. I shall take him up the passage to the downstairs parlour.” Which was, of course, the height of bad manners, but allowed degree of much-needed respite to attend to my

state of dress, and thus spare any possible tarnish to the reputation of Mrs Flatchlock, or indeed myself.

I tend to affect a rough tweed jacket and plus-fours for my professional duties, for purely practical reasons, since medicine is at the best of times a messy business, and the practice of Pathological Medicine even moreso. This form of attire offers something of an attraction to several impressionable young ladies of my general acquaintance (I particularly recall a child, a Miss Victoria Sackville-West if I remember correctly, who was most taken by it), but there are certain other persons who find it offensive in the extreme.

Detective Inspector Bullstradd was one of those persons – but this was merely a part and parcel of his other dislikes. I believe that a woman – and especially a *foreign* woman – in the possession of medical qualifications struck him as an offence against nature itself. I suspect that it was only the sheer lack of qualified personnel, concomitant to the general depopulation of the *Sojourner* invasion, that restrained him from stating this outright, or even assaying the prospect of physical violence – as I am given to understand that the Metropolitan Police are noted for, in certain underprivileged quarters. (It was the fact of this that had me thinking long and hard on my decision to remain in London after completing my medical studies, and to assist with the rebuilding, rather than return by the swiftest available means to the mission in Tobago from whence I came.)

Inspector Bullstradd glowered at me when I entered the parlour – I gather, from what others have said, that he was under the quite erroneous impression that Mr Le Shadon and myself were conducting an illicit affair.

“We have a body for you,” he said. “We need a postmortem right away.”

“Oh yes?” I said, regarding him coolly. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Inspector, but are there not more than enough mortuary staff who are actually *on* duty at the moment?”

“They’re needed to work on other cases,” Bullstradd said, ‘and this one’s a slimy. “Big noise in the *emigré* community, so they say, and the people up top want us to show a bit of willing. They want results. Should be right up your alley.”

That explained my being disturbed on a Sunday afternoon. Negroes, women, Maryannes, Uranians, anarchists and *Sojourners* were all the same in Inspector Bullstradd’s slim cerebral *livre de poche*.

“And what,” I inquired, “would have you think that *I* would know more about *Sojourner* physiogamy than anybody else? What do you think that *I* can possibly do?”

“I don’t know.” Bullstradd sneered at me. “Maybe you could rattle the bones over him or something.”

* * *

The *Sojourners* are not, of course, exactly Martians – though I understand that they have a small way-station colony on that planet. If one can believe them, they are a polymorphic quasi-*gestalt* entity hailing from what they call the Proximan Chain Rafts, whatever those in fact may be.

Be that as it may; the marked similarity between these creatures’ conveyances and munitions during the initial stages of their invasion has led to their inextricable linking in the public mind with the *War of the Worlds* of Mr Wells. Few will forget the sight of their great stilt-walking ‘walking’ machines stalking the skylines of London and the Home Counties, laying waste to everything in their path, with contrivances that might as well have been heat rays for all the resistance mortal man could offer.

And then suddenly, without warning, after several decisive victories, the *Sojourners* simply stopped their killing and surrendered *en masse*. It appears that they were, by their lights, a small and lightly-armed exploration party, sent to establish diplomatic contact, and had been forced to defend themselves in the wake of Earth’s own violent reaction. It appears that violence of any kind distressed them deeply, and that their one wish in using it themselves was to establish a position from which they could not be eradicated in their entirety, once peace had been established.

Whether or not to actually *believe* them was and is still hotly debated, not least by the surviving friends and relatives of the dead – but it cannot be argued that the subsequent presence of the *Sojourners* has not benefited mankind in any way at all. No-one knows better than I how badly a technologically superior, if not necessarily a spiritually superior culture can behave when confronted by a lesser – and the *Sojourners* have been more than generous in the sharing of their expertise, precipitating the most burgeoning development in the fields of communication, transportation and arithmetical devices since the Industrial Revolution.

Those that now remain on Earth seem for the most part inoffensive souls, refusing to defend themselves against even the worst of the animosity still directed against them and relying, within England at least, for their protection upon English Law. A protection which is, sadly, upon occasion all too slight. (I must admit here and now that my opinions on the *Sojourners* are markedly more sympathetic than the general, perhaps because of my own situation, perhaps for the simple fact that none close to me were ever killed by them, directly.)

A sympathetic attitude, however, does not confer much expertise in dealing with their mortal remains, and I returned to 57 Highbury Square, that night, from the mortuaries beneath Scotland Yard, with the feeling that I had spent the evening in a fruitless pursuit.

The *Sojourner* – who had, with what seemed to be their innate inability to comprehend proper names, named himself *Queegvogel Duck Duck Duck Duck Duck Duck Seven* for human ears – had been found in the workshop in which he constructed prototype automata for sale to human business concerns. So far as one could tell from a bodily form which, even under ordinary circumstances, had the aspect of a large frog after a train disaster, there had been no signs of violence perpetrated upon the body; it had simply died.

And there the matter would have rested, save that the man who discovered him was the noted industrialist, Mr Simon Deed – who had struck up something of a friendly relationship with the deceased and was swearing blind that the door had been locked from the *outside*, the key still in the lock, when he had come upon it. Someone, it seemed, had been with the unfortunate Queegvogel (I trust the reader shall permit me to discard the multiple *Anatidae* and the numeric for the sake of clarity, and not to mention brevity) and that person, Mr Deed maintained, had been with him when he died.

Foul play, in short, was suspected.

As I have mentioned, there is no lack of animosity directed toward the *Sojourner* community. If murder there was, the most surprising thing about it was that a human had taken such an active part on behalf of the victim. I was mulling this aspect over as I reached my doorway, when into the square turned a liveried handsome, of the sort pulled by the miniature steam engines that operate upon distilled water superheated by passing it across radium. Highbury Square is one of the better

addresses, so I thought nothing of it 'til it came smoothly to a halt beside me and a polarised window slid down by way of some concealed galvanistical contrivance.

“Miss Hassanali!” a voice called to me. “I’m sure I recognize you. You’re quite the celebrity, I think, about town.”

Any small celebrity I possess is entirely due to my connexion with the fame of Mr Le Shadon, and I must confess to little more than anger so far as reaction to my *distinctiveness* is concerned. I turned to point out as much, and found myself looking into the very face of the man I had been thinking of scant seconds before: Mr Simon Deed.

Who has not heard of Mr Deed, or seen his image in the zoematic motion pictorials? The man who built the network of jet-propulsion airship pylons that cut intercontinental travel to a matter of days, and reconsolidated the Empire once and for all and to within an inch of its life. The man who built the majestic suspension bridge that even now spans the Irish Sea, and the hydraulic catapult that even now lobs cargo in its tons across the gap 'twixt Dover and Calais. The man who, so it is said, has designed vehicular mechanisms capable of ploughing through the very earth itself with the same ease that a submersible travels through the ocean!

Mr Deed was one of the few people who wholeheartedly and publicly welcomed the *Sojourners* amongst us, and I believe that his success in utilising their technologies had something to do with this. Now, as I looked at his pale face, it broke into a friendly smile.

“Forgive me, please, Miss Hassanali,” he said. “One sometimes tends to forget that patronization unasked for is seldom required. I was in fact hoping to find your friend le Shadon at home.” He waved an airy and dismissive hand. “I have never, I admit, had the greatest of faith in our Constabulary, and I believe I have a commission for his services.”

* * *

I had a mind to confer with le Shadon myself, so we repaired to his rooms together. We found him in his shirt-sleeves, absentmindedly puffing on a pipe of opiates, tinkering with a contraption as large as a wardrobe and reminiscent of the abortive counting machines of Mr Babbage, though the respective components for this seemed entirely uniform and were obviously machine-turned.

“It’s an attempt to emulate the principles of a *Sojourner* timing device,” he explained without turning around, aware of our presence even though I was certain we had entered silently. “The common folk think the damned things operate on *magic*, and I’m attempting to demonstrate the same general effect by purely mechanical means.”

“That would certainly foster interspecies relations enormously,” Mr Deed said thoughtfully, glancing toward the tiny, snuffbox-like device which le Shadon seemed to be using as a model.

“It certainly would,” le Shadon said, turning at last and wiping his hands on an oily rag. “If I could get the bugger to work.” He nodded to me. “Miss Hassanali.”

I must say that I find it a strange pleasure to look upon the features of Mr le Shadon. He is a large, still youngish man; his face is blunt and blocky and would seem almost loutish save for the fierce intelligence blazing behind his eyes, which are of variegated hue. He is capable of formidable and even phenomenal feats of strength, and his self-assured demeanour puts me in the mind of nothing so much as the nobility of a lion - indeed, indoors, it always seems to be as if he is prowling around the confines of a cage.

In the years of our acquaintance he has become renowned as possibly the greatest consulting detective in the world, not least due to certain exploits which I in my own, small, unofficial capacity as biographer have attempted to relate. Le Shadon holds a degree in Scientific Criminology, honorary degrees in several unrelated areas and was at one point a Fellow of the Royal Society before being shown the door for hurling, so he says, a sharp retort. For some reason Mr le Shadon finds this amusing, though for the life of me I cannot discern why.

During the *Sojourner* incursion he fought valiantly on the side of humanity, and while he has no love for the aliens he now devotes much of his time to learning what he can about them. He has expressed mistrust, particularly as to the social effects of degree of technology for which we as a race are not ready – but it is the mistrust of one determined to discover the truth and its implications before forming ultimate judgment, rather than an expression of automatic bigotry.

Now he sat myself and Mr Deed down, poured us glasses of the intemperate and intoxicating spirits from which, I fear, I have acquired a taste from him, and listened to my vague musings upon the death of the *Sojourner* Queegvogel. I hoped that the

small elements of mystery surrounding it might serve to pique his interest, and to a certain extent it did.

“I gather you have more to add,” he said to Mr Deed, who had courteously waited ‘til I had finished before speaking himself. “And I rather think that it would be something you would rather not take to the police.”

The face of Mr Deed assumed an aspect I have seen before amongst those dealing with Mr le Shadon. part startlement, part pique; the face of one preparing to deliver a surprise and finding himself preempted.

“I must confess that I do,” he said. “Though I would like to know how you suspected so.”

Without a word Mr Le Shadon crossed to one of the televisual screens that have become so popular of late, and switched it on with a rattle of its pinboard surface. From a cabinet he took a roll of punch-paper that is used to permanently record televisual images, and threaded it through the replaying mechanism, which he wound up and activated with a clatter of keys.

On the screen, in monochrome, appeared a news broadcast showing several possibly human forms draped in bloodstained sheets.

“A Mr Marcus Thead and a Mr Leviticus Carter,” le Shadon said. “Found outside of a certain establishment in Cleveland Street. The reports, broadcast earlier today, told us that they had been ripped to pieces in a manner so inhuman as to make the accurate reporting of it abhorrent to delicate sensibilities.”

With a small start, and a little shame, I realised that while I had been in the pathological surgery working upon the late Queegvogel, several of my esteemed colleagues had been working upon two other cases, and I had paid not the slightest heed. These, evidently, were they.

Mr Deed was looking at the screen, ashen-faced. It was as if he had been struck a physical blow.

“Well?” said le Shadon, sharply. “I seem to recall that Messrs Thead and Carter were fellow – or one might say *rival* engineers in your area of expertise. It strikes me a little odd that on the day of their murders you should have nothing to say about it, no matter with *what* other pressing matters you have to contend.”

“I ...” Mr Deed’s voice failed him for a moment. Then he nodded slowly. “I had no idea this had happened ‘til you told me. I had hoped I might have been in time to do some good – but it appears I am too late.

“I had come to tell you something of our *Sojourner* friends. I’m sure you recall, as do I, how that during the battles with them they would occasionally, at some point, drop down dead?”

Le Shadon nodded, scowling. “Go on.”

“At the time,’ said Mr Deed, “this was put down to some mere bacteriological infection – the mighty laid low by the smallest and most insignificant creatures on God’s earth. In fact, as I learnt through talking with my friend Queegvogel over the course of years, it was that the *Sojourners* found the act of killing quite *inimical*. And to a far, far greater extent than is commonly known. You’ve heard, of course, the expression to die of shame? It appears that, due to their alien neurologies, that this was the actual, physical and literal truth. They died of shame.

“This only came to light, to they themselves, when they were actively involved in the War, when they found themselves dropping dead themselves after committing a certain number of murders, causing a certain number of deaths. That is the *real* reason they stopped, and why they are known, now, throughout the world, as the very epitome of nonviolence – not out of a sense of goodness or nobility, but out of sheer self-preservation.”

Mr Deed looked from le Shadon to myself dispiritedly. “When I found Queegvogel dead, with no marks on him whatsoever, I could only assume that it was because he *himself* had plotted the murder of some unfortunate individual. I came to you in the hope that you could help me discover whom, and why, and if there was any humanly possible way to prevent it. And I see that I have failed.”

Le Shadon regarded him levelly. “You seem so sure that this Queegvogel committed these murders.”

“As you said yourself,” said Mr Deed. “They were rivals to my own small concerns, and I have gone on record for wishing them ill. Queegvogel was an associate, and extremely loyal – and since I found his body I have been dreading something of this nature.” He sighed. “He must have done this out of some hideous alien expression of loyalty. I feel as if I myself am responsible.”

Mr Deed rose and walked sorrowfully toward the door. I joined him and led him out through the passage to the front door.

“Be assured, Miss Hassanali, that I shall return upon the instant should I recall anything pertinent,” he said.

I opened the door for him - and three bussing shapes streaked toward us from the street outside.

* * *

With a quite remarkable presence of mind, Mr Deed slammed the door upon the approaching projectiles and all but dragged me back to Mr Le Shadon's apartments.

"They are robotic simulata!" he cried, piling heavy items against the door. "Such as are used to pacify the heathen aboriginals that live near airship staging-posts on the Dark Continent! Queegvogel's work. Fiendish robotic hunter-killers. I recognize them instantly."

Mr le Shadon, meanwhile, had dived for his writing desk, and from a secret compartment had taken the clockwork-operated machine-pistola that he had once used to some effect during the *Sojourner* wars. "Queegvogel?"

From outside there came a high-pitched and mechanistic whine, and a rapidly accelerating hammering.

"Yes!" cried Mr Deed. "He must have sent them after Thead and Carter – but why should he want to send them after *me*? But why?"

"Hunter-killers?" I said. "That hardly sits well with what you said about *Sojourners* refusing to kill."

"They are only used on heathen savages," Mr Deed said. "Those whose race has been scientifically and phrenologically proven to be brutish and subhuman and ..."

He trailed off somewhat when he noticed my expression. He turned his desperate attention to le Shadon. "But that is neither here nor there! You must save me. You must *destroy* them!"

It was at that point that the door of the apartments burst into splinters, knocking over an occasional table and a tallboy, and into the room came the projectiles we had encountered so previously before.

They were each the size of a large cat, or possibly a small dog, but of insectoid instruction, hovering on bussing wings like mosquitoes constructed from copper and brass. Each had a barbed and glassy proboscis, each had several sets of jagged claws, and each was slathered with blood that I noted to be a dried residue rather than clotted – the discharge of extremely rapid, catastrophic blood-loss.

These things had clearly one purpose and one purpose alone: to rip all living matter to shreds. They advanced inexorably upon the now almost frantic Deed as he backed, stumbling, away.

“Destroy them, le Shadon!” he screeched.

Mr Le Shadon brought up his clockwork machine-pistola ... and then lowered it again.

Unaccountably, he seemed utterly unconcerned. “I’d suggest you stop them now,” he remarked, mildly, to Mr Deed.

Unaccountably, again, Deed became calm himself. Calmly, he put a hand into his jacket, and pulled out a small contrivance reminiscent of a small radiophonic receiver.

He depressed a switch set into its face, and the insectoid automata halted, hovering in mid-air on their whining wings.

“I see you have detected my small subterfuge, Mr le Shadon,” he said, still perfectly and unaccountably calm.

I must admit that I was nonplussed, dumbfounded and not to mention a little taken-aback. “What?” I said. “What is this?”

“It’s perfectly simple,” le Shadon said, raising his gun again, but this time aiming it directly at Mr Deed. “He has contrived to murder his business rivals, while establishing for himself an unshakeable alibi – namely myself.

“I believe that, like the best of liars,” – this directly to Mr Deed – “you have told something of the perfect truth, especially in the manner of how *Sojourners* might die of shame. The *Sojourners* are quite capable of constructing the most horrifying of weapons; it is their actual *use* that disturbs and debilitates them. I believe that you yourself were in the unfortunate Queegvogel’s home, that you told him of the use you had made of his automata and thus caused his death – what better way to implicate him in actual *responsibility* for the murders of which he was the unwitting progenitor? You then came to me, knowing that with the backing of such impeccable witnesses as Miss Hassanali and myself, you would be thought of as another intended victim of the plot rather than the fiendish mastermind behind it.

“Your mistake, sir, was to contrive too *elegantly*. You came here, delivered an absolutely specific amount of necessary information, and all-but instantly arranged its demonstration. That might be permissible in a work of fiction, where superfluous

matter must be cut, but it is hardly true of real life. It was the very *artificiality* of recent events that had be thinking that they could not be entirely natural.”

“Ah, Mr le Shadon,’ said Mr Deed, airily, “I fear I am quite undone. But I cannot, in all conscience, allow you your moment of triumph ...”

All this time, I had been gazing bemusedly upon the little radiophonic contrivance in Deed’s hand, wondering at these revelations and inwardly kicking myself for not having suspected them from the start. Thus it was that I saw Deed’s finger almost imperceptibly depress a switch.

I slapped the object from his hand. Simultaneously there was a rattle of Mr le Shadon’s pistola and a small spray of blood as its discharge hit Mr Deed in the arm, knocking him away from me and spinning him around with a cry. Such was le Shadon’s expertise that I felt the bullets’ passing but was not hit myself.

But it was too late. The insectoid automata were even now swooping for le Shadon, their probosci extending telescopically, their claws clenching and unclenching with a sound like rapidly snipping scissors.

All of this I registered in an instant. The control device was still falling from the bloody remains of Mr Deed’s hand, and I snatched it out of the air, feeling several of its switches moving under my hand.

I can only thank God that by some lucky chance they were the correct switches. The automata paused, briefly, and then changed their course toward Mr Deed, who had been moaning with shock and pain, and who now began screaming in pure and, though it pains me to admit it, considering his crimes, heart-rending terror.

The demands of writing for a general publication must now force me to draw a discrete veil over the subsequent scene – save that it seemed an eternity before I found a way to switch the little automata off, and by the time I had done so both myself and le Shadon, and extensive areas of his apartments, had been befouled by what had previously been Mr Deed.

The little assassins furlled their respective winds with a clash, and fell to the carpet.

For a while we looked down, and up, and indeed around at the mortal remains of Mr Deed.

“Well” said le Shadon. “I think the first thing we must have, should the decanter not be tainted, is a bracing glass of madeira. And then, if you could be so kind, would

you telephone Detective Inspector Bullstradd, and have our Mrs Flatchlock come in with a mop and bucket?”

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