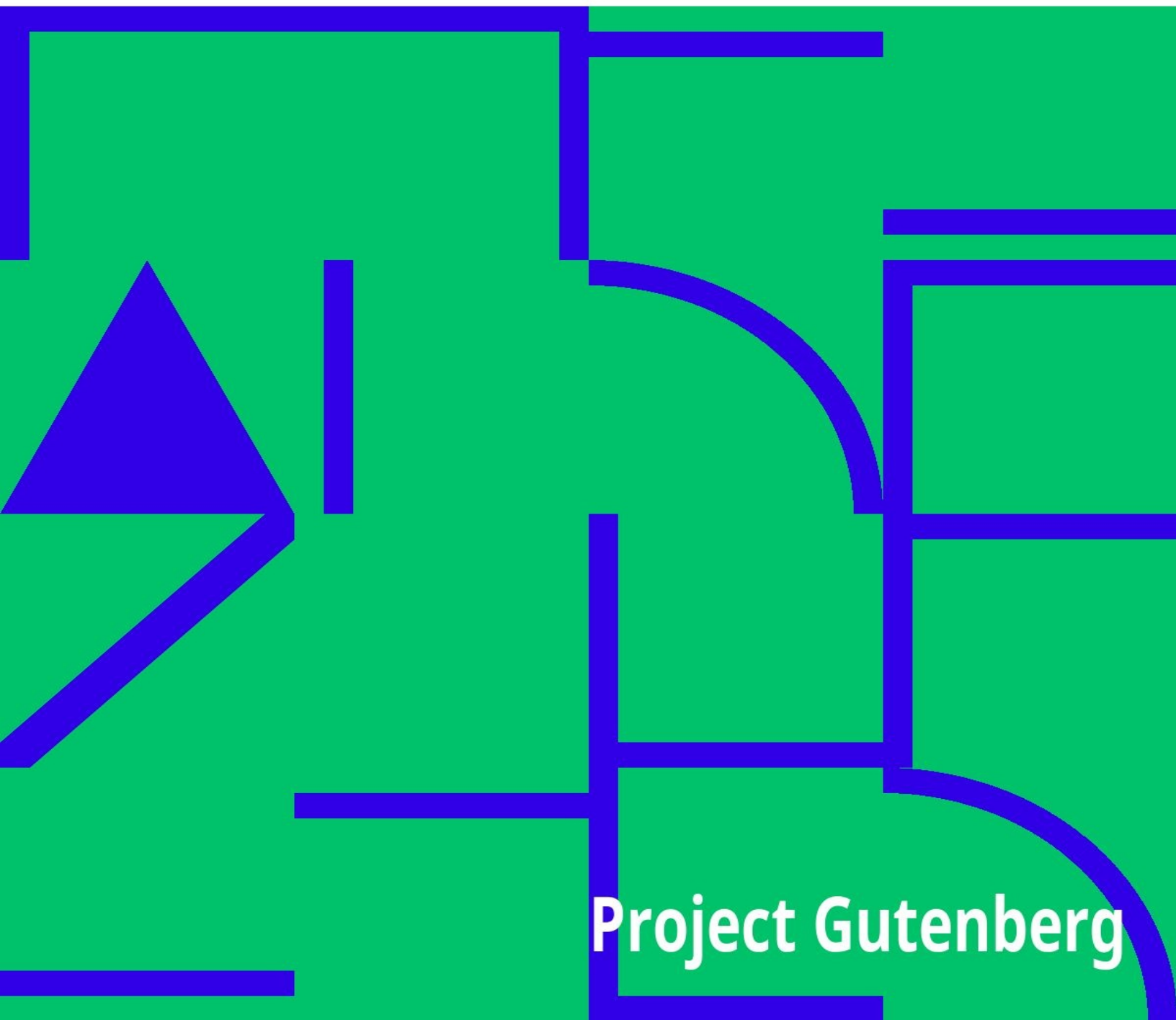


Operation Lorelie

William P. Salton



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Title: Operation Lorelie

Author: William P. Salton

Illustrator: William Ashman

Release Date: June 19, 2009 [EBook #29160]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OPERATION LORELIE ***

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Illustrator: Wm. Ashman



OPERATION LORELIE



BY WILLIAM P. SALTON

It was a new time and a vast new war of complete and awful annihilation. Yet, some things never change, and, as in ancient times, Ulysses walked again—brave and unconquerable—and again, the sirens wove their deadly spell with a smile and a song.

THEY came like monsters, rather than men, into the vast ruin of what had once been a great city. They walked carefully, side by side, speaking to each other by radio as though they were in deep space rather than upon solid ground.

The winding way they followed through the ruins was marked by blurred footsteps in the dust and the two men, clumsy in their bulky suits, found the going difficult.

They stopped, and one of them held out an instrument. He studied the dial. "All clear," and both men removed their helmets. They wiped sweat from their faces and glanced at each other.

The blonde man said, "The air's okay, Jarvis. Everything seems all right. I don't get it."

Jarvis, his dark eyes wary, scowled as he looked about. "It seems all right. But we know it isn't. It can't be."

"I'm shucking this suit."

"Don't be a fool, Mark!"

"But the dial read *clear*, man! And we know nobody is going to shoot us. All life *had* to be wiped out."

"How about minor power installations?"

Jarvis took a chocolate bar from his pocket, sat down on a piece of broken rubble and began to eat. "You're too careless—far too careless, Mark."

Mark laughed. "You've always been cautious enough for both of us. Got me out of plenty of scrapes back in school, too. Don't think I've forgotten." Affection warmed his blue eyes as they rested on the face of his friend.

"Okay! Okay! But what happened to them? Where did they go?" Jarvis took nervous bites from his second chocolate bar. Then he, too, peeled off his suit. He sniffed the air distrustfully, as he wiggled his shoulders to free them from the clinging, damp shirt. Then he took a few experimental steps forward.

"Seems all right, Mark. But how do you explain about Hank and Garland? Never were two more careful guys."

"Probably a simple miscalculation. Or an accident. We know it couldn't have been enemy action. Tests prove conclusively that we wiped them out—to a man." He took deep gulps of air into his lungs, and stretched like a cat. "We'll find out soon enough. Boy, I feel great!"

They deflated and folded their safety suits and added the bundles to the other equipment on their backs. Then, with their instruments held before them, they probed their way into the twisted wreckage, still following the faint, dust-filled footprints.

Bent and rusted girders rose on all sides like the bones of prehistoric monsters. Nothing stirred. The dust lay ages-thick on everything.

"Gives you the spooks, doesn't it?" Jarvis was still tense, poised to respond to the first signal of danger. "Feels like we're the last men alive!"

"Funny about Hank and Garland. There's nothing here to harm anyone."

Jarvis looked at his watch. "Better contact HQ for instructions."

The two stepped off the path, into the shade of a grotesque chunk of broken masonry. Mark set up the radio and twirled the dials. "Team Four, calling HQ. Team Four, reporting!"

"HQ here." The voice from the radio blared loud in the stillness. "Give your report, Team Four."

"Looks like nothing's moved here in a thousand years. Safe as a baby's dream. Rock-solid, air morning-pure. But—" He hesitated, trying not to sound like a scared school boy. "No sign of Team Three. Or of Teams One and Two, either. Over."

"Look here, Team Four. It's your job to find out. The earth didn't just swallow them. Final report from each team placed them well within the city. It's been ten days since the last contact. Probe every inch of the place."

"Right!"

"But be careful. We can't afford to lose any more men! Roger!"

"Roger!"

There was only one way now—ahead. It lay clearly marked. The dim footsteps never strayed or faltered. Three hours of search revealed no

pitfalls, no dangers, and no trace of the missing men. Then night was upon them and they bedded down gratefully.

"Strange, isn't it? The war over. The invaders blasted from the earth. All peril gone. And yet—men disappear."

Jarvis stared at the ruins around them. "I can't take much more, Mark. Twelve years of war is enough. Are we never to have a life—have our home and women back, and—*peace*?"

"Sure, it's been tough. But think of the women and children isolated on that sub-satellite. It's tougher for them—just waiting." Stretched on his back, Mark stared at the cloudless, evening sky. "But pretty soon we'll get this planet cleaned up and bring them in. Christ! Four years without even seeing a woman. I remember the last time—"

"Okay!" Jarvis interrupted impatiently. "Let's get to sleep."

"Sure, pal. Goodnight."

They fell asleep to dream of green hills, corn ripening, apples roasting over an open fire. Peace, and home, and girls, their firm legs flashing in the sun.

Soldierlike, Mark was suddenly awake. He lay without motion, sensitive to some subtle change in the surroundings. From the corner of his eye he could see Jarvis wrapped in sleep. The silence seemed eternal.

Then, whisper-soft, came a murmur, a sound, a voice. A girl's voice, sighing and singing, from deep in that devastated spot.

A woman!

Instantly, Mark was on his feet. No need to wake Jarvis. Plenty of

time for Jarvis to find out—afterwards. But not yet! A miracle that a girl had survived in all that wreckage. But a miracle he wanted to savour alone!

Ahead, the path turned and Mark followed it as it went forward again, downhill, between the massed walls of rubble. Now the voice swelled, a melancholy song. Well, she won't be melancholy for long, Mark thought. Her solitary ordeal was over.

"Mark!" Jarvis stood on an upturned lintel, ten feet above Mark's head. As Mark jerked to a stop at the cry, Jarvis jumped into his path. "You fool! Don't you know it's a trap?"

"So that's how you want to play it? The noble friend, protecting me from myself!" He slammed a fist into the side of Jarvis' head. "Well, I won't bite! She's mine! I found her!"

In silence, in the narrow passage between the rocks, the two fought. Suddenly, above the sound of fist on flesh, came the voice of the girl again, clear, young. "She *is* there," thought Jarvis. He could almost taste her lips on his. The sensation came as a shock. How did he know? He'd never had a woman. That's what came from listening to the tales of Mark's exploits with women. Now he had to have that girl!

The mounting tension of the fighting snapped something in Jarvis' seething mind. Danger, friendship, duty, all meant nothing. Only one thing mattered. The girl! Mark had had more than his share of girls. He, Jarvis, was the one who should have her! He'd been deprived of his manhood long enough! His frenzied brain hunted a trick to gain his ends.

Mark's superior strength began to force Jarvis to give ground. Then a final blow sent him reeling, he reached out to break his fall, his hand closed on a rock. He threw it. Mark crashed to the ground, his knee

smashed, his leg useless. Then the tomb stillness of the dead city took over. The dust settled slowly. Mark came to his feet.

Jarvis was gone.

Dragging his useless leg, Mark forced himself to crawl forward. Jarvis had to be stopped.

Ahead, a shadow moved, and for a moment the moon threw the silhouette of a man against a cavernous opening in the debris.

"Jarvis!"

An electric flash shattered the darkness. The jagged teeth of the bolt spit tongues of fire. Cordite mingled with the raw, nauseant, revolting smell of scorched flesh and hair. The figure tottered and fell into the black mouth of the cave. Then, as the flame faded, it lit up small bundles of charred bones near the fallen body.

There was a whir and a click of a mechanism. Fifteen feet away, Mark watched as the arm of a phonograph rose, moved slowly back to the starting point. Then the record began once more to grind out its death-trap melody.

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