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On the Surface
by Robert J. Sawyer
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For once, at least, I grasped the mental operations of the Morlocks. Suppressing a strong inclination to laugh, I stepped through the bronze frame and up to the Time Machine. I was surprised to find it had been carefully oiled and cleaned. I have suspected since that the Morlocks had even partially taken it to pieces while trying in their dim way to grasp its purpose.

-- H. G. Wells, _The Time Machine_, 1895
* * * *

The Morlock named Grach had heard from others of his kind what the journey through time was like, but those words hadn't prepared him for the reality. As he moved forward, the ghostly world around him flashed, now night, now day, a flapping wing. The strobing light was painful, the darkness a bandage too soon ripped away. But Grach endured it; although he could have thrown his pale-white arm in front of his lidless eyes, the spectacle was too incredible not to watch.

Grach held the left-hand lever steadily, meaning the skimming through tomorrows should have happened at a constant rate. But the apparent time it took for each day-to-night cycle was clearly growing longer. Grach knew what was happening of course; the others had told him. Earth's own day was lengthening as the planet in its senescence settled in to be tidally locked, the same face always toward the sun.

Such perpetual day would have been intolerable for Grach, or any Morlock, except that the sun itself was growing much, much dimmer, even as it grew larger or as Earth spiraled closer to it; debate still raged among the Morlocks about which phenomenon accounted for the solar disk now dominating so much of the sky. The giant red sphere that bobbed about the western horizon -- never fully rising, never completely setting -- was a dying coal whose wan light was all concentrated in the red end of the spectrum, the one color that did not sting the eyes.

Eventually, as Grach continued his headlong rush into futurity, the bloated sun came to rest, moving not at all in the sky, half its vast bulk below the horizon where the still water of the ocean touched the dark firmament. Grach consulted the gauges on the console in front of him and began to operate the right-hand lever, the one that retarded progress, until at last all about him lost the ghostly insubstantiality it had hitherto been imbued with and coalesced into solid form. His time machine had stopped; he had arrived at his destination.

Of course, the invasion had been carefully planned. Other time machines

that had already traveled here were arrayed about him in a grid, precise rows and columns, with every one of the squat saddle-seated contraptions, puzzles of nickel and ivory and brass and translucent glimmering quartz, packed close to each of its neighbors.

The grid, Grach knew, measured twelve spaces by ten: room for a hundred and twenty time machines, one for each adult member of the Morlock population. It had always seemed unfair that there were ten Eloi for every Morlock, but that was the ratio by which vegetarians typically outnumbered carnivores, by which prey had to accumulate in order to satisfy the appetites of predators.

There were still vacant spots in the grid, scattered here and there, where time machines hadn't yet come forward, or had perhaps overshot their targets slightly and would materialize an hour or two hence.

Grach took a moment to regain his bearings; this hurtling through time was unsettling. And then he dismounted, letting his narrow, curved feet sink into the moist sand of the great beach that spread out in front of him.

A leash of Morlocks shuffled over to greet Grach: it took him a moment in the odd red light to recognize Bilt and Morbon, females both, and the male Nalk.

Grach and his companions walked sideways, making their way out of the maze of time machines, moving out onto the great sandy beach. Grach found himself inhaling deeply; the air was thin. No wind stirred; no waves lapped the shore, although the vast expanse of water did heave slowly up and down, almost like a giant's heart.

And -- now that giants were in his mind -- Grach thought briefly of the giant who had come to them, apparently from an ancient past. Assuming the counting of years reckoned by the gauges on his machine had started with a "1" near his own departure date, the giant man had come forward some eight thousand centuries. And yet that gulf was tiny compared to the amount Grach and the others had now leapt forward; millions of years separated him from the world of the Eloi and of the white marble sphinx and of the access portals to the Morlock's underground domain, each protected from the elements by a cupola.

Grach's reverie was quickly broken as Morbon shouted, "Look!" She was pointing, her arm appearing nauseatingly pink in the dim, ruddy sun. Grach followed her gaze, and --

There they were.

Three of them, off in the distance.

Three of the giant crablike creatures that by this time had dethroned Morlocks from their dominion over the world.

Three of the enemy they had come to kill.

* * * *

The crabs were each as wide as Grach's armspan, and looked as though they might weigh double what he did. They had massive pincers; supple, whiplike antennae; eyes atop stalks; complex multi-palped mandibles; and corrugated backs partially covered by ugly knobs. Their many legs moved slowly, tentatively, more as if each creature were feeling its way along rather than seeing the ground in front of it.

And they were sentient, these crabs. That hadn't been apparent initially. Drayt, the Morlock who had mounted the first copy of the giant's contraption, who had originally traveled forth to this time, had returned only with wondrous tales of a world in which the surface was perpetually dim, a world in which Morlocks could leave their dismal subterranean existence behind and reclaim the day. Oh, yes, Drayt had seen the crabs, but he'd thought them dumb brutes and suggested that they might provide a superior substitute for the scrawny meat of Eloi haunches that had been the Morlock staple.

Others had come forward, though, and seen the cities of the crabs; their vile, ever-working mouths secreted a compound that caused sand to adhere to itself, forming structures as strong as those of carved stone. They communicated, too, apparently through sounds too high-pitched for Morlocks to hear supplemented by expressive waving of their antennae.

And although they had tolerated the occasional Morlock visitor at first, when Drayt's proposal had been put to the test -- when one of the ruddy crustaceans had had its carapace staved, when the white flesh within was sampled and found delicious -- the crabs had behaved utterly unlike Eloi, for, unaccountable though it might seem, they attacked the Morlocks, decapitating several with neat snaps of their giants claws.

The crabs, then, had to be subdued, just as the Eloi had perhaps been centuries before Grach had been born. They had to learn to accept the honor of being fodder for Morlocks. It was, after all, the natural way of things.

Grach hoped the war would be short. If the crabs were sentient, then they should understand that the Morlocks would never take more than a few of them at a time, that the odds of any particular crab being that day's meal were slim, that there could be a mostly uneventful coexistence between the small population of subjugators and the multitudes of subjugated.

But if the war were long, if they had to slaughter every last crab, well, so be it. Grach and the other Morlocks had no desire to bring Eloi forward; they were tolerable as a foodstuff, but to share a reclaimed surface with those weak, laughing things would be unthinkable. Fortunately, this distant time had other lifeforms that were agreeable to the Morlock palate: Grach had already tried samples of the giant white butterfly-like creatures that occasionally took to the dark skies here, wings beating against attenuated air. And there were other things that swam beneath the sea or made occasional forays onto the beach; many of these had also already been tasted and found most satisfying.

Grach looked behind him. Another time machine was flickering into existence, leaving only two unoccupied spots in the 120-position grid. Soon, the assault would begin.

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There was little possibility for a sneak attack in this offensive, said Postan, the leader of the Morlocks. Day and night meant nothing here -- one hour, or one year, was precisely like the others; there was no cover of total darkness under which to launch themselves against their foes.

And so once all hundred and twenty Morlocks were ready, they simply charged onto the beach, each one brandishing an iron club almost as long as a Morlock body.

The crabs either heard the attackers coming, despite attempts to restrain the normal cooing sounds of Morlock breathing, or else the crabs felt the footfalls conveyed through the moist sand. Either way, the crustaceans -- twenty of them were visible, although more could easily be hidden in undulations of the geography -- turned as one to face the charging Morlocks.

Grach had known battle once before; he had been part of the group pursuing the time-traveling giant through the woods outside the ancient palace of green porcelain. He remembered the huge fire blazing through the forest -- and remembered the excitement, the thrill that went with battle. That night, they had been unsuccessful. But this time, Grach felt sure, they would triumph.

Morlocks learned quickly. They'd never thought of using clubs to attack other life forms; it hadn't been necessary with the Eloi, after all. But that night -- a few years ago, now, and a few million -- when the Morlocks had fought the ancient giant, they'd seen him use a metal club, a large lever apparently broken off some old machine, to stave in skulls. And so the subterranean workshops weren't only set to the task of duplicating the giant's strange machine, its workings still not fully grasped but its parts easy enough to turn on a lathe or hammer out on an anvil. No, the factories were also set to making sturdy iron rods. Grach held his own rod over his head as he ran, looking forward to hearing the cracking sound of exoskeletons shattering under its impact.

The crabs's claws were each as long as a Morlock's forearm. They snapped open and closed, the sound oddly mechanical in this strange world of the far future. Grach knew to hold his rod out in front of him, and, indeed,

it wasn't long before the nearest crab had set upon him. The creature's pincer tried to close tight on the rod, which rang in Grach's hands. But although the claws were strong, they weren't strong enough to cut through iron. Another Morlock, to Grach's right, was waving his own rod, trying to get the crustacean to clamp onto it with its other claw. And a third Morlock -- Bilt, it was -- had climbed atop the crab from the rear and was now straddling its carapace while pounding down again and again with his own metal rod. The crab's antennae whipped frantically, and Grach caught a glimpse of one of them bringing up a welt as it lashed Bilt's face. But soon Bilt managed a killing blow, a great _crack!_ sounding as his rod smashed in the chitinous roof between the thing's two eyestalks. The stalks went absolutely straight for a moment, then collapsed, one atop the other, lying motionless on the broken carapace, liquid from within the animal welling up and washing over them.

The creature's many legs folded up one by one, and its lenticular body collapsed to the sandy beach. Bilt let out a whoop of excitement, and Grach followed suit.

It had been good to aid in the kill -- but Grach wanted one of his own. Several of the crabs were scurrying away now, trying to retreat from the onslaught of Morlocks, but Grach set his eyes on a particularly ugly one, its carapace especially rich with the greenish encrustation that marred the shells of some of the others.

Grach wondered if there was another way to defeat a crab. Yes, having his own kill to tell of would be good -- but even better would be to have killed one in a way that had occurred to no one else.

There was but a moment to collect his thoughts: fifty or so Morlocks had veered off to pursue retreating crabs; the others were in close combat with the remaining giant crustaceans. But, so far, no one had engaged the crab that had caught Grach's attention.

Grach ran towards his target; there was plenty of noise now to cover his approach -- cracking chitin, whooping Morlocks, the harsh screams of the giant white butterfly-like beasts swooping overhead. The crab's rear was to Grach, and it did not turn around as he came closer and closer still.

When at last he'd reached the hideous creature, Grach planted his rod in the moist ground, then reached out with his hands. He got his flat palms underneath the left edge of the crab's carapace. With all the strength he could muster, he lifted the side of the crab.

The segmented legs on that side began to move frantically as they lost contact with the ground. As Grach tipped the creature more and more he could see the complex workings of its underbelly. For its part, the crab couldn't observe what Grach was doing; its eyestalks lacked the reach to see underneath. Still, its claws were snapping in panicky spasms. Grach continued to lift, more, more, more still, until at last the thing's body was vertical rather than horizontal. A final mighty shove toppled the crab over sideways onto its back. Legs worked rapidly, trying to find purchase; the forward claws attempted to right the crab, but they weren't succeeding.

After retrieving his metal rod, Grach jumped onto the thing's underbelly, landing on his knees, the hideous articulations of the limbs shifting and sliding beneath him. He then took his rod in both hands, held it high over his head, and drove it down with all his strength. The rod poked through the creature's underside and soon was slipping easily through its soft innards. Grach felt it resist again as it reached the far side of the shell, but he leaned now with both hands and all of his body's weight on the end of his pole, and at last the exoskeleton gave way. The crab convulsed for a time, but eventually it expired, impaled on the sandy beach.

The battle continued for much of -- well, it felt to Grach the length of an afternoon, but there was no way to tell. When it was done, though, a dozen crabs were dead, and the others had fled, abandoning not just the beach but their fused-sand buildings, which were to become the initial surface dwellings of the Morlock race.

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Of course, there had to be two great battles. The first -- or second; the order of events was so hard to keep straight when time travel was involved -- was the one that had already taken place here on the beach. And, naturally, no one would undertake the second battle (or was it the first?) until after the Morlocks had safely secured the far future for themselves.

It had taken Grach and the others quite some time -- that word again -- to comprehend it all, and perhaps their understanding of such matters was still faulty. But the reasoning they came up with seemed to make sense: first, ensure that the crabs could be routed in the far future, clearing the way for all the Morlocks to travel forward and live again on the surface.

But, with the battle in the future over, the Morlocks couldn't simply leave the Eloi to make their own way in the past. After all, once the Morlocks had traveled forward, the Eloi would venture underground. Oh, surely not at first -- months or even years might elapse before the Eloi decided the Morlocks really were gone before any of those timid, frail creatures would dare to climb down the ladders on the inside of the access wells, thereby entering the underworld. But eventually they would -- perhaps, Grach thought, led by that bold female who had narrowly survived accompanying the giant during so much of his visit -- and just as the Morlocks were now about to regain the surface, so the Eloi would regain what had once been theirs, as well: equipment and tools, technology and power.

Simple experiments with the time machines had proven that changes made in the past would eventually catch up with the future. The time machines, because of their temporal alacrity, allowed one to arrive in the future ahead of the wave of change barreling through the fourth dimension at a less speedy rate. But eventually effect caught up with cause, and the world was remade to conform to its modified past. And so though the beach might now appear as Grach and the others wished it to, there was still a chance that reality would be further modified.

And that could not be allowed; the meek could not be permitted to inherit the Earth. For although Morlocks enjoyed violence, Grach and the others couldn't imagine the Eloi ever fighting amongst themselves or with anyone else. No, with all aggression long ago bred out of them, their new technological culture might endure for millions of years -- meaning they could still be alive, and hideously advanced, by this time, the time of the beach, the time of the crabs. If the Morlocks didn't take care of that loose end, that dangling thread in the tapestry of time, before permanently moving to the perpetual ruddy twilight of the future, then the Morlocks might find that future becoming a world dominated by Eloi with millions of years of new technology in their hands.

No, now that the crabs were dealt with, it was time to return to the past, time to launch the second offensive of this war.

* * * *

Grach and the other Morlocks returned to the distant past, to the year that, according to the display they'd all seen on the original Time Traveler's machine, had been reckoned by him to be some 800,000 years after his point of origin.

Their fleet of time machines re-appeared from whence it had been launched, one after the other flicking into existence inside the giant hollow bronze pedestal of the great marble sphinx, still arrayed in their orderly rows and columns, for although the journey through the fourth dimension had been prodigious, there had been no movement at all in the other three. Of course, there were only 117, instead of 120, machines reappearing. The others were sitting undamaged in the far future, but their riders had been casualties in the battle with the crabs.

There was barely enough room for all the time machines and their passengers within the sphinx's base, but although little air slipped in through the cracks around the upper edges of the vertical door panels, it still seemed richer than the thin atmosphere of the far future.

Naturally, they didn't have to wait until dark. Rather, they had timed

their arrival to occur at night. No sooner had the last of the Morlocks returned back here than the great bronze panels on either side slid down, opening the interior of the giant pedestal to the elements. The Morlocks spilled out into the night. Grach allowed himself a brief look back over his rounded shoulder; in the starlight he could see the white face of the great sphinx smiling on their venture.

Brandishing clubs, they clambered through the circular portals into the large houses in which the Eloi slept. The Eloi were used to the nighttime raids, to a handful of them being plucked each time to be food for the Morlocks. Those selected did not resist; those not selected did nothing to help the others.

But tonight, the Morlocks didn't want to carry off just a few. Tonight they wished to eradicate the Eloi. The weaklings' skulls yielded juicily to pummeling rods. To that, some Eloi did react, did try to defend themselves or get away -- the brighter of these creatures clearly understood that all previous patterns were to be discarded this night.

But even the strongest of the Eloi was no match for the slightest Morlock. Those that had to be chased down were chased down; those that had to be hit with hands were hit with hands; those that had to be strangled had their larynxes crushed.

It didn't take long to dispatch the thousand or so Eloi, and Grach himself happened to be the one to come across that female who had associated herself with the original Time Traveler.

She, at least, had the backbone to look defiant as Grach's rod descended upon her.

* * * *

The return to the far future had gone well. Many Morlocks had clutched infants or children of their kind as they'd rode forward on the copies of the giant's machine. Others had carried supplies and goods salvaged from the deep prison that bright light had trapped them in.

As time wore on, Grach got used to the thinner air and to the red glow of the now-ancient sun. Mankind, the Morlocks had always known, had started on the surface, and only well into its tenure on Earth had one faction moved underground. Now the Morlocks had reclaimed their birthright, their proper station in the world.

Grach looked out over the beach. Morlocks had feasted on crabs legs and the meat from the invertebrates' rounded bodies. But after that bounty had been exhausted, the broken carapaces were gathered together, making a monument to that glorious battle, and a reminder to any of the crab-beings who might consider reclaiming this beach what fate would await them if they tried.

Of course, Grach knew the world was eventually doomed. He had not made the journey himself, but others had told him of trips to the very end of time, when the sea would freeze and the sun, although bigger even than it was now, would give off almost no light and even less heat.

But that future was far, far beyond even this advanced time. For the remainder of the habitable span of the world, generation after generation of Morlocks would live here. Yes, there might have been an interregnum during which the crabs had been dominant, but that was over now. Morlocks ruled again, and, until the sun's red light finally faded for good, they would continue to do so.

Still, new changes were propagating forward. The large white butterfly-like creatures were now gone. Perhaps, mused Grach, just as the giant's kind had once metamorphosed into Morlocks and Eloi, so the Eloi themselves, flighty creatures at the best of times, had here in the far, far future, literally taken wing. But with no more Eloi in the past, of course no descendants of them could exist. A pity: the flying things had been delicious.

Grach looked out again at the blood-red beach, and he thought about the original Time Traveler, that giant from ages past. Had he found whatever it was he'd been seeking when he came forward from his time? Perhaps not in that year he'd numbered about 800,000. The injustice, after all, of the best of

mankind being damned to a subterranean existence surely must have disappointed him. But, Grach thought, if the Time Traveler knew what his machine had ultimately made possible -- this wondrous moment, with the very essence of humanity on the surface -- surely he would be pleased.

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