

## A Black and White Affair

By T. E. Stazyk

“We’ve got a real bad one here, sir,” Communications Officer Adam Depp reported to Captain Jeffery Godson, commander of the PanGalactic Corporation peacekeeper ship *Moloch*.

“You always say that, Depp. Any time I send you down to investigate a non-member planet your first words are always, ‘We’ve got a real bad one here.’”

“Well, then maybe I should get a new phrase. Like something that means ‘Help! I’ve never seen anything as bad as this.’”

“Then get your team back up here right away and tell me what’s going on,” said Godson, suddenly serious. He was known as a relaxed commander who thought that rules were made for bending, but when his ship or crew were in danger he was strictly business.

Godson was one of the true elite of the planet Zeta Ori – a senior commander in the Exploration Division of PanGalactic Corporation. Centuries ago, the Zeta Ori population had expanded beyond the limits of its resources, and ever since, PanGalactic, the mega-conglomerate that owned and operated the Zeta system, had been exploring the universe to identify new planets where Zeta Orians could live. Godson and his crew were part of that exploration effort. He had been chosen for his leadership and judgement and was known as one of the best commanders in the fleet.

PanGalactic Corporation was really too complex for anyone to fully understand, but it basically had three big divisions. The largest one operated the governmental, military and administrative functions of the Zeta system, the second was called Exploration and the third was called Settlement. The Exploration Division sent out deep space probes to identify potential planets that could be made habitable for settlers from the home planet. Uninhabited planets

were not a problem. If, after a feasibility study, they met corporate return on investment criteria, Zetaform, Ltd., would prepare the gravity, atmosphere and weather parameters and Zetastruct & Associates would install the living and working buildings and the utility and transport grids and the planet would be ready for habitation.

It was when otherwise desirable planets already had an indigenous civilization that Godson and his crew got involved. Their job was to study the civilization and make recommendations to the PanGalactic executive board as to alternative courses of action. Sometimes the civilization had features that made it a desirable trading partner for Zeta Ori. They may have particular raw materials, business processes, or competencies that would be useful to the Zeta Orians. In such cases, Godson would notify the PanGalactic Acquisitions Group who would further assess the value of the newly discovered civilization as a merger partner and, if appropriate, negotiate its terms of entry into the PanGalactic family. The diplomat-attorneys would determine whether the transaction would be simply an acquisition of assets, in which the raw materials, equipment, human resources or technology of the world would be taken over, or whether it should be a merger in which the leaders of the new world, as proxies for the inhabitants, would become restricted shareholders of PanGalactic and have some of the rights of the Zeta Orians.

In most cases, however, the civilizations they found had nothing to offer other than the living space their planet provided. In those cases, the settlement work would be outsourced to Zetaclear, Ltd., a joint venture of PanGalactic's military subsidiary; and once the planet was cleared, normal settlement procedures would be followed.

Because of the Freedom of Procreation laws, which every Zeta Orian would fight to the death to protect, there were something like  $10^{23}$  Zeta Orians clamoring for more space and resources; and the Exploration and Settlement Divisions were very busy.

Godson's job was to make the call as to which way PanGalactic should proceed with each new planet it discovered. It was a delicate job requiring good business sense. Godson and his crew had to be able to quickly assess a planet from a strategic, technological, cultural, social and economic perspective. And they had to get it right. They didn't want to destroy potentially good merger candidates; but they also couldn't run the risk of attempting a merger with an unsuitable partner.

Godson's crew consisted of subject matter experts in many areas to help him. Adam Depp had been Godson's communications officer for years and he trusted him completely. If Depp was worried, Godson was worried.

As soon as they returned from the planet surface, Depp and his team assembled in the *Moloch's* executive conference room. They jumped to their feet as Godson entered the room.

"At ease," said Godson. "Is everyone all right?"

"Yes sir," responded Depp, glancing at the other officers who had entered with Godson. He wasn't surprised to see them. Ev Burke was Godson's second in command. Depp liked and respected Burke even though a lot of the crew thought that he was unreasonable and difficult to deal with and that Godson relied too much on his judgement.

Even Godson secretly admitted that the best thing about being commander was that Ev was working for him and not the other way around. Ev had a temper and wasn't afraid to show it. But he was the perfect person for the job. He knew everything about everything when it came to running the ship and operating its complex systems, and if they ever got into a dangerous spot, he always was able to come up with a move that no one had ever thought of and was theoretically impossible, but it always worked.

Sitting as far apart as possible were Des Weston, Science Officer and Sam Lambert, Cultural Officer. It made sense for the two of them to be there. After all, at this point in the discovery of a new civilization they didn't know if the

issues presented would be scientific or cultural. Probably both. So Godson wanted both of his experts to be there from the beginning. But everyone in the room knew that Des and Sam hated each other and put their own career advancement ahead of science, culture and good judgement.

Although technically, Godson had absolute authority on board the *Moloch*, because of the complex issues they had to deal with, he had two additional advisors who considered themselves outside the chain of command.

Darren Connors, the Ship's Economist, had no official rank, but his role was to evaluate the worlds they encountered during their mission and to assess the utility of their economies to the PanGalactic system. On a normal ship, Godson and Connors would have had virtually no contact, except perhaps socially. However, Connors was related to a member of the PanGalactic board of directors, and as a result, Connors felt that he outranked Godson. He didn't know anything about exploration operations or running the ship but felt the need to continually pressure Godson about things. "You should be spending more time on maintenance;" "You aren't mixing enough with the crew;" "My library access is very slow, why aren't you upgrading the database software?" Normally Godson would have ignored Connors, but Connors always managed to say things in a tone that conveyed a mixture of disappointment, sadness and disgust over Godson's shortcomings. Connor also usually dropped not-so-subtle hints that all of his observations were being passed on to anxious listeners at Corporate and that they were glad that there was someone like him aboard to keep an eye on Godson.

"Just tell him to go to hell," Ev would say to Godson.

"I'd love to but I don't know who he would report that to."

Darren Larkin, the Ship's Attorney, was a different problem. Godson found him too detail oriented and methodical. Sometimes a captain had to make snap decisions and Larkin always stood in the way with admonitions that something would go wrong. It drove Godson crazy, but the good news was that

the rest of the crew sided with him when it came to Larkin. The bad news was that in many respects the legal officer was the most powerful person on the ship. If you didn't follow his advice and something went wrong, you could be in big trouble.

One of Godson's biggest frustrations was having to manage the diverse egos and personalities of his crew and he was grateful for Ev, who was happy to be the bad guy when it came to making hard decisions and instilling discipline. As Ev had once told him, "You can't be a pushover. If an asteroid comes screaming out of nowhere and we have to take evasive action, I'm not going to suggest we have a team huddle and cuddle to discuss our best approach. I'm going to save our asses. And anyway, last time I looked, we're not out here to make everyone feel good. Don't they realize what happens to our client worlds after we leave?"

Godson took his seat at the head of the table and called the group to order. "OK, people, Depp and his team don't like what they see down there on, what is it, MW Sol-III. I want all of you to hear his report first hand so we can all start from the same point of departure."

Ev twisted uncomfortably in his seat, Godson could tell that Ev thought that this was a 'team huddle and cuddle.' But rather than protest, Ev simply said, "Do you have any data recordings?"

"Yes," said Depp, "and I'll show you what we have in a bit. I think you'll find it interesting. To put it simply, the situation down there is a disaster. As far as we can tell, they've been fighting a civil war for about a hundred standard years. It's been a huge war of attrition and there is no clear leader right now."

"Why are we having this meeting?" demanded Ev. "PanGalactic regulations are pretty clear in these cases. Commander, I recommend that we prepare the planet for Zetaclear at once."

Godson turned to Depp, "He's right, Adam. And you've seen dozens of these before. Did you over react?"

“Let me finish. It’s different this time.”

Justin Larkin, the attorney leaned forward, “Commander, as we talk, the record will show that we are not reacting to this black and white situation in a timely matter, as required by section 876.56 of the corporate exploration guidelines. As your attorney, I advise you not to waste time on idle speculation. One civil war is the same as any other. Invoke the Zetaclear clause and let’s leave the system.”

Depp, obviously irritated, continued, “Let me finish. As I was saying, this one is different. The civil war is between two races. They are implacable enemies and each has sworn to destroy the other. What complicates the situation is that there is a third race.”

“So?” asked Larkin.

Sam timidly spoke up, “I think Mr. Depp is right. Section 879 requires that non-combatants in such cases be assessed to determine their potential value.”

“That’s correct,” said Godson.

“And that’s the problem,” said Depp. I couldn’t contact any representative of the third race. All I can tell you for sure is that both sides fear and respect them, but they don’t seem to have any ability to alter conditions on the planet. They live underground and try to stay out of the way.”

“You’re sure they aren’t observing, and maybe participating in some fashion?”

“Who can say? We weren’t down there long enough to find out. Neither side wanted to talk to us. They are completely distrustful and hostile and threatened to kill us if we didn’t leave immediately.”

“That *is* downright inhospitable,” said Ev sarcastically.

“I know. Usually they will at least want to talk long enough to see if there is anything we can do to help them.”

“How did you find out about the third race?” asked Des.

“Because that was the first question both sides asked us when we met the combatants. ‘Are you Old Ones?’ We asked enough questions to get satisfied that these ‘Old Ones’ do exist and exert some sort of power, at least over the imaginations of the combatants.”

“Well that’s just wonderful,” said Larkin with a note of panic in his voice. “I’m not sure there are any regulations to tell us what to do in a case like this. Commander, I recommend that you authorize me to obtain a ruling from corporate.”

“Not just yet, Justin. The reason we are all here is to figure out what our course of action should be. We don’t even know enough to give corporate an exact idea of what it is we are up against.”

He turned to Des, “Science officer. I’d like deep scans of the planet. I want to know where the pockets of civilization are. If there is a third race living apart, I want to know where it is so we can try to communicate with them.”

“No problem, sir.”

“Depp. I want you and Sam to debrief on what you’ve learned about these folks, you know, why they are at war, how they fight, form of leadership and government organization, the usual. What we are working toward is a profile of what’s going on down there, how and if the third race is involved and then we can make a decision. Any questions?”

Darren Connors, the Economist asked, “Depp, what sort of weaponry was in evidence?”

“Nothing unusual that we could see. Remember, though, we haven’t done in depth studies. Fairly typical particle, sound, and light anti- personnel weapons. We didn’t see evidence of large-scale weapons or battles. It seemed more like guerrilla type warfare.”

“Thank you. Commander, you might want to note that. It may not be worth looking further. They have nothing to offer us.”

“Yes, I’ve noted it. But it’s just a bit of data right now. We need more information before we can determine what it means. If there are no more questions, let’s meet back here same time tomorrow. Let me know immediately if anything big comes up. Depp, stick around.”

After everyone filed out of the room, Godson asked Depp, “Do you think you might have over reacted?”

“No sir. If anyone over reacted it was you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. I would have much preferred just telling you what happened down there and not getting lectured by the lawyer. You didn’t have to call everyone in.”

“But you made it sound serious.”

“It is serious. I can’t describe it. If I thought those people down there were just slugging it out over territory, right now the plasma would be condensing and the Zetaclear team would already be on its way. But there’s something more going on.”

“Wish you could be more specific.”

“It’s sort of like that time when we were on the *Delphos* and we found that planet where the science guys decided that the natives had contagious diseases of the mind. Like I can catch a cold from you, they could catch self-destructive ideas?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“It’s sort of like that down there. It’s like the natives don’t think individually. It’s like they are all ants in a colony and someone else does the thinking. When I started picking up hints of a third race, I thought we might be dealing with an overmind or something like that and thought it was worth investigating before we pull the plug. I didn’t want to bring it up in front of everyone, but that’s what’s bothering me.”

“You really think it could be something like that?”

“I don’t know, but I’m glad we’re taking the time to find out. I can’t describe it. You had to be down there to feel it.”

“Well, let the scientists see if they pick it up. Good thing you kept quiet about this overmind. If you had said something in the meeting they would all be off on different tangents right now.”

“Well, that’s probably going to happen anyway.”

“True. Let me see your recordings. And then I want to see you and Ev in my quarters in an hour.”

## II

Over the next day, the team worked on their assigned areas and gave Godson periodic updates. Shortly before their scheduled team meeting, he called Des and Sam in together and told them, “Look, you two, a lot has happened in the past few hours and I’ve never seen so much important data come in so fast. You’ve both done a great job of analyzing it so I want both of you to make the presentation to the larger group. Remember, this is a status report so we don’t need any conclusions or recommendations. Just tell everyone what you’ve found out. Can you handle that?”

“Yes,” said Sam.

“I would point out, Commander,” said Des, “that so far there appears to be no cultural aspect to our findings. It seems fairly straightforward to me. You won’t need to recommend zapping the planet. The data speaks for itself and no decisions need to be made. We’ll just invoke policy and the clear team will do the rest.”

When Des left Godson rubbed his eyes. *How did we get so insensitive? In a few hours I have to decide whether to wipe out a civilization and they act like it’s a mathematical game. And what is taking Depp and Ev so long?*

As soon as the third race had sensed the ship's deep wave scans, they contacted the ship asking for help. They were much more sophisticated than the beings on the surface and were in fact a separate group, living underground, protected from the battles raging on the surface. That is why they had been initially so hard to detect. As communications officer, Depp had taken the call and Godson decided to send Depp and Ev down to the planet to meet with them. He didn't tell anyone else about the call or the mission to the surface. He didn't want to distract the rest of the crew from their research.

The communication from the third race made it clear that they were peaceful and intelligent and Godson hoped that Depp and Ev would be back by the time of the on board meeting. But he hadn't heard from them and was starting to worry. He couldn't postpone the meeting without explaining why to the rest of his team and he wasn't prepared to answer their questions. For one thing, they would all demand to know why they hadn't been consulted or included in the ground team.

So he went ahead and convened the meeting as planned. No one questioned the absence of Depp and Ev. In fact, they seemed glad that Ev was absent.

Des began by briefing the group about the surveys he had performed. "Based on all of our observations and tests, the two warring races are without question two branches of the same race. Some sort of mutational process has occurred in a homogenous race to produce to separate and distinct genotypes. Here are holo images of each. You can see the vaguely anthropoidal physiognomy of both specimens and the general tendency toward bilateral symmetry, even in the specimen on the left, which we will call A. That's B on the right, for lack of better nomenclature at this point. To anything other than gross observation, these creatures are identical. They have the same biology and genetic material. Yet for some reason they each possess a hatred for each other that can only be called irrational. I can't explain it."

“No one can, Des, but you can’t say we haven’t seen it before.”

“Anyway, what is particularly interesting, if you’ll forgive the use of the term, about the whole thing is that whether these creatures kill each other off as a result of their savage war or do nothing, the outcome is basically the same.”

Justin Larkin laughed, “It usually is when Zetaclear gets called in!”

“Please, Justin,” said Godson.

“That’s not what I meant. From our scans we have determined that everyone on the planet surface is suffering from the effects of cumulative radiation exposure and both races are dying out. We do not understand why because we cannot find the source of the radiation. Sam thinks that it may be residual, you know, carried forward from past generations and, unbelievable as it seems, there is some credibility to that hypothesis. It’s been known to happen in other species. Sam, why don’t you take over?”

“Thank you Des. What we think may have happened is that at one time on this planet there was a single homogeneous race. At some point, for reasons we do not yet understand, they were subjected to massive doses of an as yet undetermined form of radiation which resulted in profound mutations. We hypothesize that there were two different radiation sources because of the two clearly different paths of mutation. Based on what is similar in the makeup of both creatures, we believe that the original organisms looked something like this.”

He displayed a holo of a bipedal anthropoid with opposable thumbs.

“This is a dramatization of the mutation process into each form at speed six.”

Two holos of the original creature appeared and then in slow motion they morphed into the grotesque monstrosities they were today. The head of A tilted to one side and the area between the shoulder and the head filled in with fatty tissue. The mouth had moved across to the point that it was practically touching the shoulder and a third eye had evolved. One eye looked up, the second down

and the third was next to the mouth. The legs had shortened considerably and the left arm had atrophied while the right arm had almost doubled in length. For creature B, instead of moving to the side, the head moved forward and the entire backbone had curved in on itself so that the creature appeared bent over. The hands revealed the greatest amount of mutation, the fingers had fused together and created something like a pocket while the thumb had become extremely elongated and narrow, like a prehensile with a hard tip.

“As I say,” Sam continued, “We can’t be sure of exactly what triggered these mutations, but there is no question that they are in fact mutations. There is also no doubt that in no more than two generations these two creatures will be extinct. They are losing the ability to reproduce and their life expectancy has dropped with each new generation. Currently, they are dying before sexual maturity, and any spark of intelligence they may have had is now virtually extinct. Their behaviour is largely reactive. It makes the fact that they are trying to kill each other even more sad.”

Godson was impressed by the professionalism and teamwork that Des and Sam had shown in their presentations. He assumed that their usual desire to show each other up had been dampened by the sobering nature of the findings. “I thank you both. That was clear and concise. I’m not sure exactly what to make of it all. Any suggestions.”

“I think my comments yesterday have been validated, Commander,” said Larkin. One, policy requires that we terminate this civilization. Two, they are in the process of trying to do that for us. And three, even if we do nothing, the civilization is terminating. So I say we just accelerate the inevitable, call in Zetaclear and move on.”

“I agree,” said Darren Connors. “We’ve wasted enough time here.”

Ever since Sam had finished his briefing, the urgent communications light on Godson’s panel had been illuminated. It meant that Depp and Ev were back on board. Considering the mood of the group, he decided to talk to them alone

before bringing them into the meeting and springing the existence of the third race on everyone.

“Thank you everyone,” said Godson. “Ev and Depp have been following up on some other data and I’d like to get their input before making a decision. Let’s reconvene in two hours for an update.”

Godson was in a hurry to hear from Depp and quickly got up to leave. Sam and Des immediately assailed him with a chorus, “Why weren’t we informed of additional data? What are they doing?”

Godson wasted valuable minutes convincing them that theirs was the primary line of research and that their work and findings had been invaluable before he was able to break away.

“What do we have?” he said as he burst into Ev’s office. Ev and Depp were seated at a table with an alien anthropoid who looked disturbingly like Sam’s speculative model of an MW Sol-III native before the mutation process began. The three of them were drinking a violet liquid from tall glasses.

“Come on in, Commander. Meet Nok Ya IV, chairman pro tempore of MW Sol-III and titular head of its government in exile.”

The alien rose and bowed solemnly. “The honor is mine, Commander. And may I thank you and congratulate you on the perspicacity and enlightenment of your officers. They have quickly grasped the situation on our unhappy planet.”

Ev continued, “We’ve learned a lot, Captain, and the situation is more complicated than we thought. Why don’t you join us for a glass of this excellent Sol-III wine and hear what the chairman has to say?”

“Make it quick,” Godson whispered to Ev so that only he could hear, “The rest of the crew are waiting for the zap order. Everything Des and Sam have found points that way.”

Ev shook his head vigorously and turned to the chairman. “We’d like you to brief the Commander and show him what you showed us.”

“With pleasure,” the Chairman began. “Ours is not an ancient civilization by your standards, but in the past two thousand of our years, we began to experience tremendous technological change. We developed communication and data manipulation devices faster than we could assimilate them. There were cultural, economic and worst of all, psychological impacts. That was our downfall. New products made old products obsolete in weeks. We lost the ability to distinguish meaning and quality of data. Whether it was precious historical or cultural information or the rantings of an ideologue we began to see it all as simply data to be manipulated, shared and commoditized. Some of us saw it coming and tried to warn the others, but the lure of the new technologies was too great. Let me show you.”

The Chairman showed holos of an advanced and enviable civilization where information was freely available and exchanged. The availability of cheap data and communication management tools had led to efficient, well-educated societies. Unfortunately, as new developments emerged with increasing rapidity, a consumerist philosophy took over the markets. People insisted on having the most current products, whether they needed them or not. The possession of the ability to store, communicate and manipulate data became more important than the underlying information. This resulted in uncontrolled price increases and when vendors refused to support older technologies, led to a condition of technological haves and have-nots. This disparity, which was felt even more keenly than earlier wealth distribution inequities, led to revolutions and civil wars in which the current “owners” of the best technology invariably were successful. All information, whether it represented history, culture or popular entertainment was controlled by warring cartels. Not only the information, but also the underlying technology was subject to the economic decisions of the cartels.

“It is a black page in our history, but fortunately passed quickly enough and our population was stabilized at a level that could easily be supported by

our raw materials and production facilities. But what we didn't know was that the technology that we had fought and died for was the basis of our undoing. First, many of our people seemed to lose the ability for independent reasoning. They would listen to and believe anything the technology manufacturers said about their products and felt that they couldn't function without the products. Face to face communication became practically unheard of. It soon wasn't limited to technology. In everything it was as if we had a single brain. We didn't make decisions based on what we needed, but rather on what we wanted. And market forces and consumer trends dictated our wants. Once again, some of us raised warnings but they were unheeded. The other problem was physical. Our most popular personal communication device emitted deadly rays which very quickly poisoned the people who made most use of them and within a few generations massive and horrible mutations began. No one knew. Some suspected it, but the technology companies suppressed the evidence. Depending on whether the device was held to the ear, which was the usual method when we used the device to speak, or whether it was held in the lap, dangerously close to the reproductive system, it created one of two basic mutational forms. In no time our world was polarized between the two groups. We call them Voicers or Texters, no one is sure why, and they hate each other with a passion. You yourselves have seen the result."

"But what about you?" asked Godson.

"Not everyone was seduced by technology. Some of us did not make such great use of it and were not affected by the mutations. We kept our ability for independent thought. The Voicers and Texters think that we are the remnants of the have nots who were mostly destroyed in the first Techno Wars and call us the Old Ones. Who knows? We stay out of sight and try where we can to bring about peace. And that is the biggest tragedy."

"What is that?"

“Whatever caused the mutations has introduced a permanent genetic flaw in the Voicers and Texters. Their life expectancy has halved in the past few years and we predict that the last of them will die out within the next two hundred years.”

“So they are fighting for nothing.”

“Yes, they are accelerating the forces of biology. But we Old Ones have developed a cure.”

“What?”

“Yes, because we haven’t squandered our meagre resources on warfare we have been able to study the problem and have found a way to reverse the process. Even the mutation process. If only we could bring about peace and start everyone on the cure. Our world would be a paradise again. That is why we contacted you when we became aware of your probes. With your technology and superior weaponry we hope you might be able to negotiate a peace. Will you help us Commander?”

Ev looked at Godson and Depp shook his head. “What are you going to do, Jeff?”

### III

“I’m glad that’s over,” said Ev to Godson and Depp as the shuttle blasted off from the giant artificial planet that housed PanGalactic’s corporate headquarters. Ev hated ceremonies at corporate.

“Me too,” said Godson as he fingered the Galactic Cross the Vice President of Corporate Development had very recently hung around his neck.

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The Galactic Cross was PanGalactic's highest award for bravery and distinguished service to the Company. Ev and Depp had also received the award. Although Godson had tried to downplay his actions, when corporate heard about what had happened on MW Sol-III, the complete public relations apparatus went into full swing. The official press release read in part: "... in the face of hostilities unlike any before experienced, and which cost the lives of his ship's Science and Social officers as well as the Ship's Attorney and Economist, Captain Godson managed to salvage his ship and neutralize a threat to PanGalactic operations . . . "

When the shuttle had returned them to the *Moloch*, Depp showed Godson and Ev a broadcast message that had come in while they were gone. It was a Navigation Warning and it had gone out to all PanGalactic fleet commanders and engineers and it stated, "As a result of deep space radiation bands resulting from the recent destruction of enemy alien fleets in the area, travel to or passage through the MW sector is now permanently restricted."

"Looks like our subterfuge worked," said Ev. "Nice job of doctoring and resynching the logs, Depp."

"There's also this," said Depp, displaying another message.

*Noble Commander—*

*Many thanks again for your enlightened assistance. Peace accords are now fully in place and medical intervention on our people is proceeding. I am sorry your four colleagues were harder to convince than the Voicers and Texters. Their remains have been disposed of respectfully as you requested.*

*Your role and that of Lieutenant Ev Burke and Ensign Adam Depp in the restoration of peace and prosperity on our world will never be forgotten and the names Godson, Ev and Adam and even your mighty ship *Moloch* will become part of our world's heritage.*

*With peace,*

*Nok Ya IV*

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*(for)*

*The People of Sol-III.*

Godson poured each of them a glass of the excellent wine Nok Ya had left on board. "What else could we do?" he asked.

"Well," said Ev, "as Larkin pointed out, company policy was quite clear. We should have scrubbed the planet. But then we wouldn't have gotten these medals and promotions."

"Yeah, and Larkin wouldn't have gotten a decent burial."