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A Vision of Sacrifice

Mary Hansen

November 1907

We selected the tallest of the bluffs, and climbed to its edge to view the sunrise. The air about us was thick and moist, the gaunt old trees stood out like ragged giants, while the bluff itself on which we stood seemed but one of the many vapouring clouds which floated about its edge.

Suddenly from the east there swept upon us a white light, and we sprang to our feet, all but one, who, exhausted by the long climb, lay stretched full length on the trunk of a fallen tree. The light swept up and about us, casting the shadows of all things white, so that we three became six, the shadows gaunt and distorted as to seem three others facing us.

We gazed on the shadows, then at each other, and laughed nervously, while one remarked that we might be the spirits of some ancient priests about to offer sacrifice, "And I the victim," chimed the frail one, who indeed was one of the many victims of a disordered social system. It was all too appropriate. The fallen tree might easily be the altar-stone at Stonehenge, the greater gaunt old tree on the edge of the bluff, whose branches were long since rotted away or shattered by lightning, which had likewise struck out a knot-hole near its top, through which the sun could strike the heart of one lying prostrate on the tree.

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And those clouds below the edge—are they vapour or human forms, the figures of people gathered to witness the offering?

Slowly along the heaven the sun creeps up until it lies aslant of the knot-hole, and one of the ghostly, white-robed things has raised its arm, the sun glints along a knife in its hand, the victim's eyes widen with terror and suspense, the silence is laden with an ominous chill, closer and closer creeps the tiny ray of light, the face of the victim whitens with suffering under the eyes of the priest narrowing with fanaticism, while from below comes the chant of the multitude, low and uncertain at first, but gathering in volume until it drowns all else, then ceases. The stillness is unbearable; the spot of sun rests on the heart of the victim, the priest's arm descends; I close my eyes, to open them suddenly, for a thick blackness envelopes everything, and the false dawn has passed.

The voices of my companions complaining of the thickness of the fog seem faint and far off as I all unconsciously voice my thanksgiving that we no longer demand human sacrifice. "Do we not?" I turn sharply and face one of the figures; but this is a man, and there were no men in our party. This, too, is smaller than the shadows and unlike them, having wide cheekbones, square chin, and straight, determined lips. "Do we not?" he repeated: "Perhaps not in just that form, but look you!" He pointed to the mass of vapour below, which seemed to separate and take form.

The great walls of a prison loomed before us; groups of roughly-clad; men and women clustered here and there about the walls, while others, uniformed and swinging clubs, went from group to group dispersing them. About the gates through which we passed more uniforms clustered, and a greater number still in the open court. But in the long corridors leading to the cells a stillness as of death pervaded; down these corridors we passed, and before us went a group of black-robed figures, one bearing a crucifix, one a book, and one with its

face masked. Cell-doors open and more uniformed men bring forth three others, and the procession moves onward, turning now to right, now to left, until they reach the door leading to the back courtyard.

“These are the high priests and their victims!” my guide murmured.

“And their god,” I asked, “who is he?”

“Their god is Mammon,” he answered, “and in his name many are maimed and more murdered. See!”

I looked through the doorway; the place of sacrifice with gallows, its arm stretched over the crowd below, as though all too willing to welcome all; while the black-robed figure with masked face fondled the rope, whose free end dangled a noose.

But the procession stops, the uniformed figures rush forward, the prisoners are pushed back, the priests’ faces whiten with quick concern, for to our ears is borne the sound of struggle and sharp blows, the courtyard fills with rough-clad figures, the same I saw within the walls.

Men, women, and children fill the yard, men with crippled limbs or limbs entirely missing, crooked and distorted bodies, scarred faces, and some blind; the women with wide, hungry eyes, carrying pinched little babies, while wolf-like children cling to their skirts. And they fill the courtyard, blocking the way to the gallows, and deny the victims demanded; and at length the judges are forced to close the heavy doors lest they fill the corridors too. And while they clamor outside, the high priests face each other and decide to return the victims to their cells and wait, for they say: “Some of this rabble will die off, others will forget, and we can then hand these three!”

“Dare they do it?” I asked of the figure beside me.

“They have done it,” he answered. “Look!”

The courtyard had cleared; we walked forth; the rope on the gallows swung as though it had been well occupied. Men in couples crossed and recrossed the yard, each time bearing

heavy burdens, which they laid in a row near the wall and covered with a canvas cloth.

“What are they?”

“See!” answered my guide, and raised the cloth. Beneath lay four men, their visages purple and distorted, but still bearing the likeness to those I have seen on the picture of a monument at Waldheim—and memory flashed a fifth who should have been there, he who had died of his own hand and was now of the dead who cannot rest.

I turned to speak to the guide, but he had vanished, and even as I gazed the others melted away and the prison crumbled, for over the edge of the bluff the sun was rising white and clear, while before it hurried the misshapen clouds, even as the superstitions of a dead civilisation shall one day scurry before the clear light of reason in a world based on human justice.