

A TROLL'S PHANTASMAGORIA

BY Ronald J. Willis

Chapter Three

Princeton Day Trippin'

LUCY TOOLED the Alfa-Mozzarella down the Turnpike at her typically zealous speed even though it was still early morning. She had somehow gotten Iranian plates for the car. At least she still had the convertible's top up, although she insisted on keeping the windows all the way down. Garn felt himself flinching at times, even though as a troll he was used to periods of near destruction. To him, this toying with self-destruction, either on his own or at the hands of others, seemed to be the nature of trolls as well as humans.

Garn sat meditating as the hells of the Jersey refineries belched their noxious vapors into the skies. He thought about the guy at the party talking about Texas and her golden glow. Yeah, Garn understood very well how many golden glows there are in this world. He could make a list: morphine, graduate degrees, fame, silence, wanderlust, speed—all just sitting there for the taking. And how many people take them up and press them to their bosoms knowing full well what lies imbedded in that golden glow? And how few realize that we can never know whether the glow is worth the cost until it comes time to pay?

But Jesus—the car nearly ran under a tractor-trailer! The Alfa was so low the damned thing might even have made it. “Lucy, damn, you’re driving like a bat out of Hades. What’s the rush?”

“I’m sensing busy days ahead, Garn. Some people think best when they pace the floor. I think best when I’m tooling along.”

Lucy must be thinking up a storm if her driving reflects it, he thought. Oh God—that bus! He gritted his teeth. But what the shit, they had at least three—well, maybe two and half inches—to spare.

Lucy never mentioned where she got this super-engine of destruction with Iranian plates, but nothing about Lucy really surprised him. Now, with a screech, they were decelerating down a ramp. Lucy reached out and paid the toll. Jeez, thought Garn, the kind of job he might have had in the good old days. Cross the bridge, pay the troll the toll. Or get eaten. Well, erotic fantasies aside—

Whoops! There they went again. Just two-lane roads now and still going about 70. Lucy should enter a couple of cross-country races if she really needed so much thought. Across Mexico, or across Africa—Christ, across the world. The trees whipped past and suddenly almost out of nowhere the streets of Princeton appeared.

“It’s Commencement Day, Garn,” Lucy said, slowing the car down a bit as traffic got in the way. Then, even over the roar of the bomb Lucy called a car, Garn heard a strange cacophony, a ree-ree-ree that went on and on. By God, the locusts! Well if you wanted to get technical, cicadas. He had read in the *Times* about their emergence, or re-emergence, what was it every 10 years? 20 years? It had been so long since he’s been out of the city he had almost forgotten that parts of the world still had all these signs of creation—bugs and trees and grass and all that stuff. Man, they really had a lot of locusts here. He hoped they’d have at least one street vendor offering them fried in butter, but he doubted it.

Instead they ran into Nassau Street and had to slow down even more because there was some sort of march going on. Students, maybe more than just the graduates, wore white

armbands either over their graduation gowns or just over regular clothes. Four of them carried a large banner that said, "End the Draft."

"Seems to me this protest is appropriate for the day Mrs. King is getting an honorary doctorate in humanities," Lucy said. "I'm sure the Rev. Dr. Martin is looking down and blessing this—and her, too, of course."

Garn was glad to be accompanying Lucy, though the locusts and the march were more than he planned for.

"I wonder why they don't set me up as some kind of prize for the kids with the highest averages," Lucy went on, "including the few women they finally let into this male bastard, I mean bastion." She smirked. "Two days with Lucy in a motel in New Brunswick. Man, baby Garn, would the work lights burn late at night!"

"Swedes—that's what I remember most about this place," Garn said. "There's a whole shit-pot of Swedish girls who work here as mother's helpers—and maybe as daddy's helpers when mommy is away, for all I know. And I remember a party..."

But before he could finish this thought, Lucy miraculously found a parking space. They crossed the street and walked onto the university campus, which Garn considered a jumble of architectures, including collegiate gothic, renaissance revival, and modern.

They stopped at the Library so Lucy could look up a reference while they were here. A gruff guy in the rare book room didn't welcome a black chick and an apparently white troll very nicely, but when Lucy showed him a card, he melted into obsequiousness. Soon Lucy was puttering over an ancient tome. She made a couple of notes and they left. The librarian was fawning over them by then and said he hoped they'd be back to use the facilities any time.

"What the hell was that all about, Lucy?"

"Just checking something, baby Garn, about an Aramaic manuscript that only exists in two copies. I didn't feel like flying to Buenos Aires to see the other copy today." She became quiet again, walking slowly, her mind elsewhere. Garn respected this next stage in her thinking for in these silences he felt deep inside himself the vibrations of great cogs turning on each other. Maybe of planets bumping into each another. Maybe of matter being created and disseminated. Maybe of universes flip-flopping like pancakes to fry themselves on the other side.

Advancing further into the campus, they found a crowd assembled before a platform set up in front of Nassau Hall. Lucy showed their tickets and they got seats towards the back.

"See that new science building back there, Garn? What's it remind you of?"

"Jeez, Lucy, it's like a huge modernistic commode."

"Right, baby Garn. Just testing you. In architecture, veritas and all that crap. Maybe that's what it really is, but it reminded me at once also of Bertie Russell's philosophy."

"Huh? Yeah, I mean, he was a cool cat, but what does a scientific shit have to do with it?"

"You've no doubt read *Principia Mathematica* that he wrote with Whitehead—or at least intended to." She looked at him slyly out of the corner of her eye. "But you have probably never run across his real summation of all his work. He put it so clearly when he said, 'I do not believe that science per se is an adequate source of happiness, nor do I think that my own scientific outlook has contributed very greatly to my own happiness, which I attribute to defecating twice a day with unfailing regularity'."

"Cool, Lucy, cool." He'd have to remember that bit by Russell. While his stream of consciousness was deflected to thinking on great turds, the university president stepped out on the platform. Yes, consciousness! You always come through with the metaphor when it's most called for.

Soon there were some more people in robes on the platform. Apparently they were giving out the honorary degrees. It sounded like Norman Sailor got one for being arrested—but that couldn't be right. Then Mrs. King came forward. She had a few things to say but Garn couldn't hear exactly what over the locusts.

After a few more honoraries, Lucy said, "Hey, there's Bobby! You know, the singer. Folk, then rock." Garn didn't really know. There were so many singers around these days, but he didn't let Lucy in on his ignorance. The kids were going wild clapping for Bobby, and Lucy was clapping too. Bobby looked grumpy as he let them confer his honorary degree in music. He didn't say a word. Maybe he didn't like the locust noise.

After Bobby sat his grumpy self down, the ceremony continued and Lucy whispered, "This is getting to be a drag. Let's head out. I'm getting hungry. I know a good restaurant but we need to beat this crowd."

They walked across the campus, passing a rickety psychology building where three white rats ran out the door followed by an irate student. The rats wisely ran in three different directions, confounding their pursuer who cursed and gave up the chase. At a safe distance, all three rodents turned and stuck out their tongues at the psychology building. Lucy laughed. It sounded good to hear her laugh.

They continued past the Mortuary Science building, then off campus.

The Brooklyn Book of the Dead prescribes shards to be put over the eyes of the corpse, the placing of a subway map in the hands of the deceased, and a token up the anus, so that the soul can pay the Black Subwayman who will take the deceased across the river through the tunnel to a final resting place. Then the bankbook of the deceased is to be weighed against a basket of ulcers and if found wanting, it will be thrown to the dogs of the Internal Revenue Service. If it balances, the deceased may have his soul encased in a canister of strontium-90, which will be enshrined forever in the beatitudinous Caverns of Holiness deep under the Catskills, somewhere just south of Grossingers.

Garn and Lucy made it to the restaurant before the crowd and had lobster at a little table with a sign on the wall above it informing them that Albert Einstein had once eaten lobster there. They could care less. Lobster was lobster, and this lobster was very good.

After lunch they were feeling too full to start driving back to the city right away, so they walked over to Lake Moebius. On the banks of the lake, they found an older man sitting and weeping.

"Why are you crying?" Lucy asked.

"Ah, my dear, I'm ruined. Here I am a philosopher, with 48 major publications and three in press, and I'm..." he broke off, sobbing and gurgling.

"What's the matter, old boy?" asked Garn. "Did you make a mistake in epistemology or something like that?"

Great tears welled out of the old fellow's eyes as he turned them on Garn. "Oh, fool that you are, who could ever make a mistake in epistemology? The thought is sacrilegious. It's just that I—was caught—"

They sat down next to him and Lucy took his trembling hand. She was very soothing when she wanted to be.

"Come professor, would you like to tell us about it? That helps sometimes. Your troubles aren't so bad when you verbalize them."

"Oh, Miss—I've been caught! And in the library too! Oh, the shame of it all. What can I do? I came down here planning to jump in and end it all, but the shame of that, too. A suicide.

What will my biographers say? It could obliterate everything else I've done all my life. Oh even these..." and his sobs cut off his verbalizing again.

"We're the emergency philosopher-saver crew, fella," Garn said. "Come on, tell us all about it."

"I guess I might as well," he said after he had controlled himself to the point that he was letting out only occasional sighs and gurgles. "Since I came down here meaning to end it all, what does it matter if you two know?" I am Professor Phaestus, and my field of expertise is recent phenomenological Gnostic ontology. I don't know if you've ever run across my work, since it appears only in German. My evil critics say that I publish only in German because the German language makes anything sound learned, and that my work in English would simply be so much twaddle. It's true that one can sometimes let oneself go in German linguistically and present complexities much better than in English, but the main reason is that the Germans appreciate and publish me. English-speakers don't. But confound them, they'll see—oh no, they won't, will they? They'll all be so happy at what happened to me."

The professor went through a sobbing spell again before he could continue. "Friends, it was so awful. I'm not really so old. Just fifty-six. And I never had a family, you know. I lecture at times at some of the girls' schools around here. This one girl at a lecture seemed so interested in my views on Alfred Jarry and Pataphysics she wanted to write a paper on him. So I gave her references and yesterday—oh, yesterday—I met her down in the philosophy stacks—the real dusty ones on A level, you know—and she was looking for one of the references so I helped her. Then it just happened. . . . I had no idea that it would all happen like that. She was so cute with her little puckery lips—and so well developed if you know what I mean—and before I knew it she was in my arms panting, 'Oh professor, oh professor, how I admire your mind. You're so great. Oh, I'd do anything for you.' Believe me, my friends, it happened so fast I was dumbfounded. I had no idea of ever toying with the affections of one whom I considered a pupil. Ah, but these young people today, they apparently are brought up so differently. So differently. She kissed me savagely, trying to get her tongue into my mouth—oh my—would you believe it? And she made the lowliest proposition to me, about having sex, but I stammered so much from my surprise I believe she thought I was reticent. The actual reason, though, was that I had no prophylactic device with me and I was afraid of getting her pregnant. However, I didn't get a chance to tell her of this because in a trice she had my pants off my protesting body and was slipping off her jeans and panties. She pushed me over onto one of the dusty tables, assuring me that hardly anyone but we two ever came down to this deserted part of the building. She arranged her body on top of mine in some sort of disgusting position she called sixty-seven or ninety-six or some such thing. It was unbelievable....But then it was terrible—some devil got into me and I did what she wanted. And just as we were both experiencing orgasm, someone came by and saw us. Her ecstasy was so great that she held me down on the table even though I tried to get out of the compromising position. To tell the truth, my own orgasm left me quite weak. So now they will know the truth about me. I'm a dirty old man. The word will go all over the campus shortly. Oh, the shame, oh..." and he began sobbing again.

"Professor," said Lucy, "you shouldn't let yourself go on so. One, you've learned a few things before it's too late, so thank God for that. Some men go through their whole lives and never get eaten by such a young girl. Two, you don't know who it was that saw you and they may not have known who you were. After all, you were largely hidden by her nubile body, I take it. Three, assuming the worst and someone did recognize you—what of it? They may blab, but these are different times, professor. My advice is to go back to your home and carry on as normally. Should the subject ever come up, admit it, and if anyone gets sticky tell the truth and

say you've been forgiven. Though why you should be forgiven for giving that girl what she wanted—which may turn out to be the experience of her life—I really don't know. . . .”

“Oh my, these things you're telling me,” said the professor. “I suppose I've led a sheltered life with my books and writing. You make the world sound like one big brothel. Oh, I find this idea so disconcerting.”

“Honey, maybe it always was just one big brothel,” purred Lucy. “Maybe you've got the wrong idea about brothels. You've just never appreciated that putting taboos on things lends a bit of spice to doing them. Why in Babylonia, the nicest virgins would come at the proper age to the Temple and their mothers would set up tents and any man, young, old, rich, or the dirtiest beggar—anyone with a piece of silver—could go to the tents and celebrate the joy of the gods. And the priests made a nice piece of change on the side. Our trouble today is that somewhere along the line the priests got side-tracked somehow, and decided that instead of celebrating the joys of the body—and thereby the gods—they'd celebrate the joys of cold showers and abstinence. Man, what a fucked up world going unfucked turned into. And here we are. But listen Garn baby, why don't you go for a walk and the professor and I will amble down to that thicket of trees by the railroad bridge and, um, talk some more.”

An hour later Lucy came back, assuring Garn that the professor was alive and well. . . . They walked slowly back up the road from the lake.

“Lucy, you know it's sort of funny that you screw anything alive but me. I don't entirely understand that.”

“Oh Garn, if you were hard up I'd screw you, you know that. But there's some special feeling and significance to our relationship. It'll work itself out in time—soon, in fact, I feel. But until then, you've got Gloria and God knows who else. They'll suffice for now.”

When they reached the car, Lucy said, “I'm hungry again after that physical activity,” so they drove out to the Queen's Inn Road House and had pizza and lots of black beer. Garn was happy to get boozed up because tonight was folk dance night at Madame Mieux's School for Young Ladies, and he liked to do kolos and other circle dances.

“Young babes and the kolo is one of the ultimate releases for the human—and troll—soul,” he told Lucy. They headed over to the school and joined the Balkan wildness ringing through the auditorium as the dancers swirled to steps three thousand years old.

*Slavic scion on
a Roman root—
our souls live on
the river Oltul
sweet wood of
an ancient Europe
Roman-ticize me
my love—
dark eyes and
golden hair of
Drăgășani
An eon of suffering
made me love you
hot blood of the tribes
rolling in your
veins
hot wine of the hills
rolling on our tongues*

*warm spring nights
roll on where East
met West in an amalgam
of super-sense-ability
There is no God but
Sursagona
and wine is his prophet
under the Cypress limbs
entwine me in your ancient limbs of fire
Roumania
Roumania
Balai nene
Balai nene
into the moonlit
mountains of
forever let us
flee and forget ourselves
in the ever-time
dancing under the black
cypresses—
silvered by the
moon
our
ecstasy
is
forever*

The rich black draft beer had worked its way through the skins of their souls as they whirled in the dancing, and that happy sadness of a thing well done but over, came upon them like the time of quiet after orgasm. They sat in the car with the top down, the black canopy of the sky pierced by a million pin pricks of light to cover their joy.

"Garn, there'll be hard times ahead. I know it," Lucy said. "I know that as a troll you can see more than most humans, but even you can't see as much as I can. Up there in the stars, I see something moving. Even I'm not sure what it all means, but I hope it will have a good outcome. Garn," she took his hand tenderly, "always stick by me, whatever happens, okay?"

"Lucy baby, come hell or high water or whatever, you can always depend on me."

She squeezed his and hard. It made Garn feel good.

Then Lucy slashed the night and the locusts and the mood with cones of bright light and soon Princeton was fleeing behind them—the car maintaining its place in the Universe as the Earth rolled along under them.

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