

Fantasy and Science Fiction

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(*illustrating "A Deskful of Girls"*)

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Victoria Endicott Lincoln was born in Fall River, Mass., and has contributed her own bit to the Fall River Legend. When her mother forbade little Victoria to visit with the solitary spinster next door, the child wanted to know why. "Miss Borden," said Mrs. Lincoln firmly, "was not kind to her parents." As a writer, Miss Lincoln has been far from prolific since the sensational success of FEBRUARY HILL in 1934; but her words have been as faultlessly chosen as her mother's on that occasion. I'm indebted to William Lurie, of Silver Spring, Maryland, for directing my attention to this (I believe) sole Lincoln fantasy—a fine fresh variation on the doubleganger theme, which has never appeared in any magazine.

No Evidence

by VICTORIA LINCOLN

THE FUNNY THING IS THAT FOR SOME twenty years after the night he sat there and watched himself walk away, in fact right up to the summer that the nightmares and the coughing began, the whole thing bothered Charley Johnson less than you would have believed possible.

To begin with, he had of course assumed that the whole business was itself a dream, a drunken hallucination. It is easy, after all, to disbelieve the impossible. And then, after the shock when he got his first letter from himself, the letter in his own hand, posted from Ireland and asking for money, somehow or other, he had just accepted it.

He couldn't have told you why he took it like that; it was surprising, in a way it was fully as surprising as the event itself: but that was how it was. After the first jolt, his mind just clicked and said quietly, "Be damned, it was so then"; and that was all there was to it.

Besides, there hadn't been many of those letters anyway. Not more than four or five in the past twenty years, and none of them striking him for more than what you could consider a modest, reasonable touch, under the circumstances.

Settled down, too, apparently, with no intention of ever coming back or making trouble for himself. They all came from Leith. The

Emerald Isle. That was one hell of a place for any part of me to have gone back to, he thought, remembering a childhood of draughts and smoky fires and quarrelsome women and not enough to eat. Many was the time, even in the orphanage in Chicago, that he'd blessed poor Aunt Belle's soul for dragging him out of it, when his mother died of drink.

Well, that was the way it was. At first he didn't believe it. And then, freely granted that it was a damned queer thing to get used to, there was no getting around it that he'd felt fine all the time since it happened—the hell of a lot better than he'd ever felt before the event. And he was better, too. People noticed. He'd sure fooled them, they'd say, the way he'd panned out, a crazy kid like him. And he'd laugh it off, with, "Oh, well, prohibition, all of us back then..." It didn't even bother him when his wife would say, "I wish you didn't work so hard, Charley. You know, you're getting to be a terribly one-sided person." Because, in point of fact, that had always been the hell of it, before that night. Being, that is to say, such a thoroughly two-sided person.

Not that it had ever been really out of hand since the time when he was four and drowned the cat. He'd never forgot that, how he was crying all the time and trying to tell himself right up to its last meow and gulp that it was just a

game and he'd pull it out in the end, poor thing; and knowing that the part of him that wanted it to drown had his mind made up and wouldn't be stopped, for once.

No, it had never been out of hand that way again. There were only the black rages ("Sure the kid gets just out of himself, sometimes...") and the spells when he'd have a roomful in tempests of laughter, never knowing what he'd say next. And there were the fits of drawing pictures. He could always draw, neat, draughtsman's sketches of whatever was set before him; he could even catch a fair likeness of a face; but these pictures were different. One way they were a lot better, you might say, and one way worse; half the lines left out and the rest all sharp and jagged, and still something to them, if it was only something that made you crumple them up sharp and throw them in the trash.

But the worst of it hadn't been the rages, or the laughing fits, or the queer pictures, but simply the way he'd always had such a time making up his mind.

"Oh, come off it, Charley," he had once said to himself aloud, "you and I both know better than that."

It struck the friends who heard him very funny. It was years before they would let it die. Years, indeed, after the night when the thing happened that changed it all.

It was during prohibition.

Charley had his first job with the company whose general manager he ultimately became, the pressed-wood people in Urbana. Marie had her eye on him, even then. She wore glasses, and had the greatest scorn for people who split an infinitive; but she had a handsome bosom, and her father was first cousin to the boss. But the night it happened she had a cold, so he went along stag; and God knows what they used to pass off for gin, back then.

He had a stick of charcoal in his pocket that he'd been using up at the plant that afternoon, marking off lengths of lumber, and the first thing he knew he was drawing on the wall. Hardly more than a mess of jagged lines, and still you saw that it was a crowd of wild horses running, with a fire behind them. The man who owned the joint had just paid good money to have it redecorated, and he was as sore as a boil. He'd thrown them all out. Only, on the way, Charley managed to swipe a quart of his damned bathtub gin and hide it under his overcoat.

He meant to split it with the bunch, but outside they'd got to fighting among themselves, and the next thing he remembered he'd walked off alone and ended up behind a signboard out on the edge of town. There was a light snow on the ground, and it was a cold night.

He sat down and settled himself

to serious drinking. When he looked up and saw himself first, he took it quite easy.

God, he thought, now I'm seeing double.

It was sometime later, and after another pull, that it occurred to him that when you see double you don't generally include yourself in the view.

The first faint light of dawn was around him. He let himself lean back against the signboard and stared up at himself.

God, he thought oddly, it's the short little feller I am.

And at once he was sober, deathly sick, but sober.

"Go away," he had said.

And his self had looked at him.

"I'm going," the other one said. "Do you think I need coaxing? I've waited for this minute long enough."

And he walked away, swaying a little, clearly the worse for several over the line, and still with a kind of swagger.

When Charley woke, an hour or so later, he saw footprints in the snow. There were his own, coming in to the spot where he still huddled; and then there were his own again, but beginning at an easy stride from him, circling and blurring themselves as if he had stood around waiting for something, and then making a straight line for the road. Charley looked at them.

"I'm not drunk now," he said.

Then he vomited and fell asleep again.

When he woke, the snow had melted.

He took the next bus back to town and had himself admitted to the hospital with something that went down on the books as virus pneumonia. He was unconscious for the better part of a week, but when he came to, he felt fine. And by the end of the year, he had not only married Marie, but come to respect and even to begin to emulate her grammar.

His advancement with the company was slow but steady. When the first letter came he had been more than able to meet its request.

Still, it was curious how quietly he had accepted its coming.

"What's the self-addressed envelope from Ireland?" asked his wife, handing it to him. He had always written an oddly distinctive hand, half printed, with marked breaks between the syllables. And though he had known at once what the thing was, his mind had not revolted at the knowledge, nor had he found it hard to control his voice as he thrust the letter, unopened, into an inner pocket.

"Just a wholesaler's list for the firm," he said, and waited for her to ask where he got the funny, thin envelope. But she did not ask. She was a highly incurious and unobservant woman.

He went to the bathroom and locked himself in. The letter was

brief and to the point. He wished to inform himself that the woman he lived with was pregnant and had been fired from her job. He could only get work by the day, himself, and not enough of that, having a bad name as a drunk. Besides, his chest had never been right since they parted company. Two hundred and fifty bucks would take care of food and rent until the old lady could get back into circulation.

That was all. No apologies, no threats. Only the letter, there in his hands, proof that a thing that could not have happened had happened. He tore it across and started to flush it down the toilet, thought better of it, and replaced it in his coat pocket. The next day he took it to the bank and hired a separate safe-deposit box. For he might need legal help, sometime, you couldn't tell what the other one might do; and it would be the hell of a note if he tried to get it and ended up in the nut-house. The letter was proof, wasn't it? Surely any good graphologist would know it was proof.

The caution, however, had been excessive. In twenty years he received only four letters more, and none of them offered any trouble at all. He, the other one, was poor, but he seemed to take it for granted, back in Leith. His old woman's husband died, and they got married. The kid was stillborn. From time to time he sold a cartoon to a local paper. He went to

night classes at an art school and learned how to make woodcuts. The last letter was all about them.

"It's my whole work and everything to me now, Charley. It was hard getting rid of you and hard living like I have, but now I know what it was all about, I got no complaints. These woodcuts, they're on the order of an old dance of death and they show all the ways that we take to kill ourselves and each other. From booze to war, it's all there. I never was one to find words, but I sure as hell can cut it into wood.

"If only my chest will hold out for me till they're done, it's already got me spitting blood. If you could see your way to send something so I and the old woman could spend the winter warm and dry. Do you remember that picture we drew on the wall, the fire and the horses running? That's the way this will be. How can I say it, Charley, so you'll get it, the way this thing is turning out, the way it shows up the hopelessness? Well, do you remember how you felt the day the two of us drowned the cat?"

The request was unfortunately put. Charley Johnson had never, on the conscious level at least, been an imaginative man, and he had a short memory; but he had always remembered that cat. He had *liked* that damned cat.

"The hell with him," he said aloud. "I can't make head or tail of this mess, but if that's what his

pictures are like, the sooner his chest gives out on him, the better."

He did not put the letter in the safe-deposit box with the others. He carried it around with him all day, and that night, when he was alone, he drew a line through the address and wrote across the envelope in an unsteady, feminine hand: *Deceased, return to sender.* Then he resealed it with sticking tape and carried it down to the mailbox at the corner. He felt a weight drop from him as he heard the box click. When he came back to his house, he was laughing.

His wife was in the hall.

"What's the joke, Charley?"

He gave her a friendly slap. "I feel good. I just put over a deal."

"You," she said fondly.

Ten days later, for the first time, he cried out in his sleep. And after that, there was not a night that the dream did not come.

It was always the same. The room was cold, the fire smoked. The chisel was heavier and heavier in his hand; his arm ached, way up deep into the shoulder. And the woman with the white face and the black, stringy hair was always standing over him, begging him to stop, to put it by, to get into bed.

"Ah, God forgive ye," she'd say, over and over. "Can't ye see that it's no better than a sin to God, the thing you're killing yourself for? Ah. God help ye, the terrible things that's in your head."

Charley had never remembered his dreams before, and even these he remembered only dimly. He went about his business with his usual even cheer, he played his daily round of golf after work, though now, toward the end of it, he tired and had a disproportionate ache in his arms and chest.

"Slowing up," he said. "The old boy ain't what he used to be."

And then he began to cough in his sleep. He had a doctor look him over, but he could find nothing wrong. He tried sleeping on pillows, but it made no difference. He moved into the guest room so that Marie could get her sleep, but even there he wakened her and kept her awake. It frightened her, too, because she could not waken him from that nightmare coughing, not even with a cold, wet washrag on his face.

And one morning, at breakfast, she began to cry.

"You were so terrible, last night," she said.

He looked at her, the neat, hair-dresser-dressed head, the face so childlike and disorganized. Through the years he had grown very fond of her.

"Poor kid, the coughing again?"

"You talked in your sleep."

He smiled, kidding her, but kindly.

"Was that worse?"

She spoke very slowly and remotely, as if she were remembering a story that someone had told

her, a story of the utmost terror and still, somehow, a thing that did not concern her personally.

"Your voice was more Irish," she said, "the way it used to be when you were a kid, I guess. And it sounded sort of drunk, too, and weak... as if you were sick. And your eyes were open, but they didn't see. Like dead eyes."

"Well? What did I say?"

"You said, 'I can't die before it's done. It's got to be in the world after me, for evidence.'"

He laughed again, still trying to kid her out of it.

"Is that all? I thought from your face I'd been giving my love-life away."

She did not even seem to hear him. She took off her glasses and polished them slowly with her napkin as she spoke. Her voice was unchanged, low and remote and still charged with that same impersonal terror.

"I said, 'Evidence of what, Charley?' and you said, 'Hopeless, hopeless... We are the horses stampeding, but we're the fire, too. This is the evidence. I was turned loose from that fool, I was sent into this world, to save it from the confusion of hope. Let nothing happen to these things, do you hear? They will be found in time. They will do their work. They will destroy human hope.'"

He stared at her.

"How in the world do you remember a mess like that?"

And she looked into his face.

"Charley, listen. I know you were kind of a wild kid. Look, if there's anything you ever did, anything terrible, anything you feel you could never tell anybody... I'd still love you, Charley."

It was ridiculous, but it was touching. He teased her only because he could think of nothing else to do.

"Well, once when I was a kid I drowned a cat."

"Oh, Charley, don't laugh at me." But she had snapped out of it, she had begun to laugh a little herself. "Of course it doesn't make sense, here in the morning, the sun shining... that stuff about horses. Oh, Charley, when I just look at your nice *plain* face..."

But when he was alone, he felt the dream, or something of it, begin to come to him. And that day, at lunch time, he went to the bank and cashed a check, and then to the post office, where he made out a money order and sent it to Ireland. And that afternoon, when a friend asked him why he was looking so down in the mouth, he made his first original joke in twenty years.

"I don't know," he said, "I was just feeling sort of sorry for myself."

That night he dreamed again, and for the last time.

He was lying on the bed in the draughty, smoky room, and the

woman was looking down at him.

"He's gone," she said. "With the poor eyes staring wide open in his head, he's gone, God pity him."

He tried to speak. He tried to say, "I'm alive, I see you, I hear you, I'm not dead."

But his lips, his eyes would not move. By no terrible effort could he change that look of still, deep pity on the haggard face that bent above him.

She turned from him and went to the grate. She stirred the fire.

"The poor soul," she was whispering. "The poor, tormented soul. God rest him, wherever he is now. And he was good to me, too, even when the poor brains had gone back on him entirely."

She shook her head. There was no grief in her face, only relief and tenderness. She looked at him as a mother might look at a sick child who has fallen, at last, into healing sleep.

"At least I stuck by him to the end," she said, "even when he never said a word that made sense from one day to the next, only to be digging at that wood."

Once more he made a terrible, a superhuman effort to stir his lips, his eyes.

Her own lips smiled.

"Ah," she whispered, "it's a strange thing with some people, how there's no sense to love. Like he was my own kid that I had to take care of, it was. And he's gone."

And quietly, almost absently, as

if the thing she was doing were of no moment, she began to throw the chips and the woodblocks, together, on the fire.

"I may as well make the place halfway decent before they come for him," she said. "Tidy it up a bit. He won't care any more now, the poor soul. Not any more."

But though the dream had ended, Charley Johnson did not wake until morning.

"You had a good night," Marie said at breakfast. "You didn't cough, or anything."

He answered, "Glad of that." But his voice was flat, without vitality.

He saw no reason to doubt the truth of the dream as he so perfectly, minutely, dreadfully remembered it. He drove not to the office but to the bank, where he opened the safe-deposit box and took out the letters. He went to the edge of town, stopped the car, and burned them, without reading them once again, by the roadside.

Then he got back into the car.

He looked directly before him, through the windshield, and spoke aloud.

"It shouldn't have happened," he said quietly, "any of it. And now it did not happen. Now, if it should ever begin to get to me, if I should ever be crazy enough to try and tell about it, I'll land where someone that crazy belongs, and no harm will be done."

He started the car and headed back toward the office. He was surprised to notice that he felt good, better, actually, than he had felt for months. The aching fatigue was entirely gone from his arm and shoulder, the pain from his chest. But while he was conscious of a vast relief, a profound sense of physical well-being, his face remained serious; his rather vapid, good-natured smile had not yet come back to it.

It is always a rather sobering experience to realize that one is half dead.