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THE ORDEAL OF
DOCTOR TRIFULGAS
By

**JULES
VERNE**



GORDON DICKSON . AUGUST DERLETH . IRVING COX

SATURN

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THE ORDEAL OF DOCTOR TRIFULGAS

Here is an astonishing discovery—a Jules Verne story never seen before in American books or magazines. It's a weird story, a real spooky tale, and, true to the master's imaginative genius, different from the standard patterns of fantasy. It was specially translated for SATURN by Willis T. Bradley.

by JULES VERNE

(translated by Willis T. Bradley)

WHOO-OO-OO... The wind is on the rampage. SH-SH-SH... The rain is falling in torrents.

The roaring gale bends the trees of the Volsinian coast and smashes against the slopes of the mountains of Crimma. Along the shore, the rocks are ceaselessly battered by the waves of the vast Megalocride Sea.

Whoo-oo-oo... Sh-sh-sh...

At the inner end of the harbor snuggles the little town of Luktrop. A few hundred houses, with weathered balconies that provide indifferent shelter against the winds from the sea. Four or five steep streets, gul-

lies rather than streets, paved with cobblestones, cluttered with dross thrown out by the eruptive cones of Mount Vanglor in the background. The volcano is not far distant. During the day, interior pressure escapes in the form of sulfurous vapors; during the night, at one minute intervals, there are great belching flames. Mount Vanglor is the beacon, with a range of a hundred and fifty *kertses*, that marks the harbor of Luktrop for the coasting vessels—the *felzanes*, *verliches*, and *balanzes* whose stems cleave the waters of the Megalocride.

Behind the town huddle

ruins of the Crimmurian era. Beyond these is a shabby district of Arabian aspect, a *casbah*, with white walls, domed roofs, and sun-parched terraces. A heap of stone cubes tossed at a venture, like so many dice with spots covered by the patina of time.

Conspicuous in the town is the so-called "Four-and-Six," a strange corner building with square roof and four windows on one facade and six on the other.

A belfry dominates the town, the square belfry of Saint Phililene, with bells hanging in slits in the walls. These are sometimes set to ringing by the wind. A bad omen; when this happens, fear spreads through the countryside.

Such is Luktrop. In the outskirts are random dwellings, wretched hovels, scattered amidst the broom and the heather, as in Brittany. But we are not in Brittany. Are we in France? I do not know. In Europe? I cannot say.

And it is useless to search for Luktrop on any map.

TAP! A TIMID knock has sounded on the narrow, arched door of the house called Four-and-Six, on the corner of Messagliere Street. It is one

of the most comfortable houses (if this word should ever have currency in Luktrop), and one of the wealthiest (if, year in, year out, to reap a few thousands of *fretzers* constitutes wealth).

The knock has been answered by frenzied barking, with baying overtones that suggest the howling of a wolf. And now a window above the entrance to the Four-and-Six is raised.

"The devil take all nuisances!" calls out an irritated and disagreeable voice.

A young girl, wrapped in a tattered cloak, is shivering in the rain. She asks if Doctor Trifulgas is at home.

"Whether he is or is not—that depends."

"I have come in behalf of my father. He is dying."

"Where is he dying?"

"Up in Karniou Valley, four *kertses* from here."

"And his name?"

"Vort Kartif."

A HARD MAN, this Doctor Trifulgas. Almost devoid of compassion, he never takes a case unless solid coin is handed over in advance. His dog Hurzof—half bulldog, half spaniel—would prove to have more heart than he. The house

of the Four-and-Six does not receive poor folk kindly; it is opened only for the rich. And there is a fixed price list: so much for typhoid, so much for congestion, so much for pericarditis and other ailments that doctors devise by the dozens. Now Vort Kartif, the biscuit maker, is a poor man, a man of miserable circumstance. Why should Doctor Trifulgas trouble to visit him, especially on a night like this?

"The mere fact of having got me out of bed," he growls as he lies down, "should be worth ten *fretzers*!"

Scarcely twenty minutes later the iron knocker of the Four-and-Six clanks again.

Fretting and fuming, the doctor leaves his bed and leans out the window.

"Who is there?" he cries.

"I am the wife of Vort Kartif."

"The biscuit maker of Karniou Valley?"

"Yes. And if you refuse to come, he will die!"

"Very well, then you will be a widow!"

"Here are twenty *fretzers*—"

"Twenty *fretzers* to go four *kertses* up into Karniou Valley!"

"In the name of mercy..."

"Go to the devil!"

And the window is closed again. Twenty *fretzers*! What a fine windfall! To risk a rheum or lumbago for twenty *fretzers*—particularly when next day he must go to Kiltreno to treat wealthy old Edzingov, whose gout can be exploited at fifty *fretzers* a visit.

With this agreeable prospect, Doctor Trifulgas falls asleep more deeply than before.

WHOO-OO-OO...! Sh-sh-sh... And then, *knock, knock, knock*.

Three blows of the knocker, struck this time by a more determined hand, are cutting through the fury of the storm. The doctor has been asleep. He wakes, and in what a humor! The window opens, and the storm comes in like a burst of grapeshot.

"I am here for the biscuit maker—"

"That wretch again!"

"I am his mother."

"Let his mother, his wife, and his daughter be buried with him!"

"He has had an attack—"

"Then let him defend himself!"

"We have collected some money," persists the grandmother, "an advance on our home, which we have sold to

Camondeur Dontrup of Mes-sagliere Street. If you do not come, my granddaughter shall have no father, my daughter-in-law shall have no husband, and I shall no longer have a son!"

It is pitiful, terrible, to hear the voice of this old woman, to think that the wind is freezing the blood in her veins and that the rain is soaking the bones under her wrinkled skin.

"A stroke is two hundred *fretzers*," replies the heartless Trifulgas.

"We have only a hundred and twenty."

"Good night."

And again the window is closed.

But, upon reflection, a hundred and twenty *fretzers*, for a round trip of an hour and a half, plus a half-hour visit, means all of sixty *fretzers* an hour—a *fretzer* a minute. Small profit, but still not to be despised.

Instead of going back to bed, the doctor dons his corduroy suit, draws on his huge hip boots, struggles into his heavy wool greatcoat, and, with an oilskin hat on his head and mittens on his hands, goes down, leaving the lighted lamp near his pharmacopoeia, which lies open at page 197. Unlatch-

ing the door, he stands on the threshold of the Four-and-Six.

The old woman is waiting there, leaning on her staff, emaciated by her eighty years of deprivation.

"The hundred and twenty *fretzers*?"

"Here, and may God reward you a hundredfold!"

Without replying, the doctor whistles for Hurzof, offers him a tiny lantern, which he grips with his jaws, and sets out along the road by the sea.

The old woman follows.

WHAT ROARING wind! What driving rain! The bells of Saint Phililene are set swinging by the gale. Bad omen, bah! Doctor Trifulgas is not superstitious. He believes in nothing, not even in his own science... except for the profit it yields him.

What weather indeed! But likewise what a road! Pebbles and dross; the pebbles slippery with sea wrack, the dross crackling under foot like clinkers. No other light but that of the lantern carried by dog, uncertain and flickering. Periodically a burst of flames from Vanglor, in the midst of which grotesque silhouettes seem to be writhing. No one knows for sure what might be found at

the bottom of its unfathomed craters. Perhaps souls of the Underworld, which volatilize as they emerge.

The doctor and the old woman follow the indentations of the shore. The sea is a leaden white, a mourner's white. It sparkles as it tosses off the phosphorescent crests of the surf, and it spills glittering streamers over the strand.

The two proceed in this way to the turn of the road into the dune country, where the broom and rushes knock together with the clatter of bayonets.

Now the dog draws near his master and seems to say:

"Well, not so bad! A hundred and twenty *fretzers* to put in the strongbox! This is the way to make a fortune! This is the way to enlarge our vineyard! One more dish at the evening meal. More scraps for faithful Hurzof. Let's take care of the wealthy sick, and bleed their purses!"

At this point the old woman stops. With a palsied finger she indicates a reddish glow in the darkness. It is the house of Vort Kartif, the biscuit maker.

"Over there?" says the doctor.

"Yes," replies the old woman.

"Harraouah!" howls the dog.

An unexpected explosion rocks Mount Vanglor, and a shudder runs down through its buttresses. A sheaf of smoky flames mounts into the sky, boring through the clouds. Doctor Trifulgas is toppled over by the blast.

With an oath he gets up and looks around.

The old woman is no longer behind him. Has she disappeared into some cleft in the ground, or has she flown off like a witch on a wisp of fog?

As for the dog, he is still there, rearing on his hind legs, his jaws agape, his lantern extinguished.

"Let's keep on!" mutters Doctor Trifulgas.

The honest man has accepted his hundred and twenty *fretzers*. Now he must earn them.

ONLY ONE point of light, half a *kertse* away. It is the lamp of the dying—perhaps of the dead. For that is surely the house of the biscuit maker. The grandmother has pointed it out. It cannot be anything else.

Through the whistling wind, the splashing rain, all the hubbub of the tempest, Doctor Trifulgas hurries forward.

As he approaches the house, it more and more clearly takes

shape. It is isolated in the middle of the heath. And it is singular to observe how much it resembles the doctor's own house, the Four-and-Six in Luktrop. Same distribution of windows in the facade, same little arched doorway.

Doctor Trifulgas moves as rapidly as the gale will permit. The door is ajar, and he has only to push it open. He enters, and the draught rudely slams it shut behind him.

Left outside, the dog Hurzof howls, with intervals of silence, like those observed by choristers between verses of a Psalm during the Forty Hours.

This is very odd. You would say that Doctor Trifulgas has returned home. But he has not lost his way. He has not wandered in a circle. Surely he is in the Karniou Valley, not back in Luktrop. And yet here is the same passageway, low and vaulted, the same winding wooden staircase, with a wide bannister worn down by the friction of many hands.

He mounts the stairs and reaches the landing. A feeble light filters beneath the door, as in the Four-and-Six.

Is this a hallucination? In the vague light he recognizes his own bedroom. There is the yellow sofa, the old pear-wood

dresser, the ironbound strong-box in which he has intended to deposit his hundred and twenty *fretzers*. Here is his armchair, with leather head-rest; here is his table with spiral legs, and on it, near the failing lamp, his pharmacopoeia, open at page 197.

"What is the matter with me?" he whispers.

What is the matter with him? He is afraid. His pupils are dilated. His body feels drawn in, shrunken. A cold sweat chills his skin, and he is covered with gooseflesh.

But come now! Hurry! For lack of oil, the lamp is going out—and with it the dying man.

Yes, there is the bed—his own bed, four-posted, canopied, as wide as it is long, drawn with flowered curtains. Could this possibly be the pallet of a miserable biscuit maker?

With trembling hand, Doctor Trifulgas grasps the curtain. He draws it aside and looks within.

The dying man, his head free of the coverlet, is motionless, as if he has just drawn his last breath.

The doctor leans over him. Ah, what a cry! And it is answered from without by the dismal baying of the dog.

The dying man is not the biscuit maker Vort Kartif—he is Doctor Trifulgas! It is he who has suffered a stroke, he himself!

Yes, it is for his own sake that they came to summon him, and in whose behalf they paid a hundred and twenty *fretzers*! He who, by his hardness of heart, refused to go out to care for the poor biscuit maker. It is he himself who is going to die!

Doctor Trifulgas is like a man possessed. He knows that he is lost. The symptoms are growing more exaggerated from moment to moment. Not only is all coordination failing him, but the beating of his heart and his breathing are slow.

What ought he to do? Lower his blood pressure by letting some blood? (Yes, blood is still let these days, and, as always, doctors can cure of apoplexy all who are not doomed to die of it.) If he hesitates, Doctor Trifulgas is a dead man....

The doctor seizes his instrument case, snatches his lancet, and cuts a vein in the arm of his other self. But blood does not flow from the arm. He desperately massages the other's chest; his own is no longer throbbing. He warms the feet with hot stones; his own are

cold.

Then his other self sits up, struggles, utters a final death rattle....

And Doctor Trifulgas, in spite of all his learning and experience, *dies under his own hands*.

Whoo-oo-oo....

Sh-sh-sh....

NEXT MORNING, in the house of the Four-and-Six, only one body was found—that of Doctor Trifulgas. It was put in a coffin, and it was conducted with great ceremony to the Luktrop cemetery, in the wake of so many others that, as the people whispered, he had sent on ahead.

As for old Hurzof, it is said that ever since that day he has been running about the countryside, with his lantern relit, baying like a moonstruck dog.

I do not know whether this is true; but so many strange things happen in Volsinia, and especially in the vicinity of Luktrop....

At any rate, I repeat, do not look for this town on the map. Since its latitude, and even its longitude, continue to remain a matter of dispute among the best cartographers, it simply is not there.

THE END