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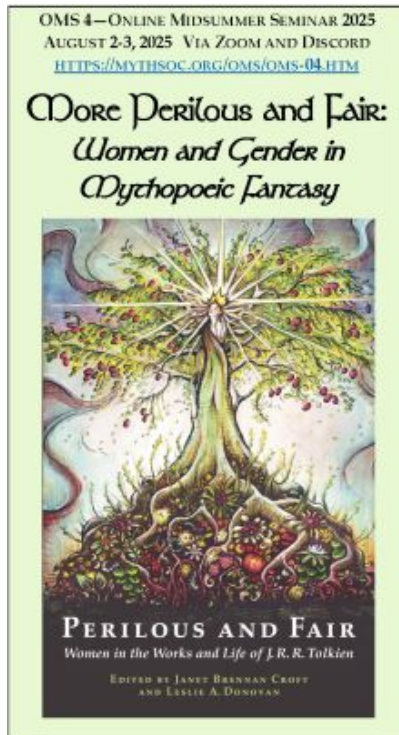
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Abstract

Oh, bother this, thought Jack Lewis with but a small portion of his mind. He was taken up just now with bigger things, being squandered on an enormous pain radiating from his center up into his neck and jaw; pain like lightning along his arms, through to his back, and down into his gut.

Additional Keywords

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Talking Things over in Hospital

By S. Dorman

Oh, bother this, thought Jack Lewis with but a small portion of his mind. He was taken up just now with bigger things, being squandered on an enormous pain radiating from his center up into his neck and jaw; pain like lightning along his arms, through to his back, and down into his gut. He was pouring sweat and could not breathe. And they had taken hold of his arms, two strong men apparently, and were laying him out. *But I was going to Ireland today*, he thought.

Then he seemed to be coming out of it as though leaving behind tendrils of pain and drawing back into his core, his being no longer radiating a massive thrombosis. He could feel the great pain unleashing him... a bit more.... There. It was gone. Eyes still closed, he thought about sitting up. He smelled smoke. A nurse—it must've been—said with prompt irritation, "Who is smoking? There is no smoking in here! You will send us sky-high!"

There was silence. After a bit he opened his eyes and looked about in the dark. Yes, someone was smoking, though the nurse was apparently gone. The smoker stood there against the open window, backlit by the moon. Haloed, especially his silvery hair. Whoever it was did not so much block the moon's light as give it a certain form. As though the man in it, meaning the shadow upon its bright face, had come down to stand in Lewis's room, its brightness yet surrounding him. Lewis moved his head a bit and saw the great disc shining beyond the light-limned dark form. But again now both were clouded with prodigious puffs of smoke.

Oh, bother this, he thought. But, surprised, he smiled a bit and said in his highly cultured voice, "Hullo! haven't seen you in a while." Surely it was Mark Twain on one of his inconvenient visits again. "Been some time since." He thought, I was *happy* ...very happily married to Joy and working on the Queen of Glome's book.

The man-in-the-moon turned, and the moonlight fell directly across his white front. And Lewis saw it was so. Mark Twain was dressed in his habitual white serge suit, his shaggy hair gleaming, his gaze glimmering on his friend in a not unfriendly but decidedly considering fashion. He said something in a low voice from beneath his brush of a mustache, something that Lewis, lying there, scarcely heard.

"What's that?" Lewis said. "I-beg-your-pardon?"

"I said, 'I think you are dead.'"

Jack Lewis sat up. He said, "Preposterous. And, anyway, the only time you come is when I am dreaming." He had swung his legs over the edge of the hospital bed. He was wearing only a hospital gown. It felt drafty but he did not want to ask for the lattice closed now nor go past his friend to do it himself. He liked fresh air—moon-shining air, he thought it. He sat there a moment, feet and legs a-dangle.

"Is that so?" asked Twain, the midwestern twang of his American accent gentled just a bit by a soft southern quality.

"What do you mean? Of course, I was dreaming—How else could those visitations and conversations have occurred? —I mean, I *am* dreaming. *You* are the one who is dead. I'll wake up soon and go to Ireland with Douglas and meet Warnie. In the meantime, what do you want?"

"Oh, now," said the other with a slight smile. He drew a moment on his cigar. "Is that any way to start a conversation after all this time, 'What do you want?' Especially as profound a

conversation as we are about to have?" The smoke drifted out the opening, reflecting a moment off the divided panes in the casement at an oblique angle to the open windowsill.

The bags under his brown eyes apiece with his somewhat pudgy face, Lewis gazed at him, resisting the impulse to rub both face and eyes in hope of dispelling the apparition.

"Well, Clemens, or Mark Twain, or the Mysterious Stranger or whoever it is, if I were dead!..." He stopped. "Firstly, if I remember my catechism, I would not be seeing—...and I would be *like*—well. I would be seeing the One I'm to be like when I pass from this body and world. Right now I am decidedly *not like* that One. —And secondly, distinctly, *you* do not look a'tall like Him." He tried eyeing the other pointedly, then gave it up. He gazed at him. "Say something," he said.

But the other seemed in no hurry, just stood, quietly smoking his cigar in the moonlight and looking at Jack Lewis. "Well," he said at last, "maybe you are only sort of dead."

"Sort of! *Sort of* dead?!"

He had got off the bed and come near Twain in the moonlight. Perhaps he thought of testing this... this... this situation by reaching out to touch him. But Samuel Clemens stood back just a bit, as though in subtle warning. And Lewis, ever polite, took the hint and stood still. Instead, he gazed out onto the moonlit surface of treetops, just past the car park, thinking.

Clemens made a small gesture with his lit cigar, its tip redly glowing, and Lewis turned back to see what was pointed to. He stood stock still. "What's that?" he said.

There in his bed a man was lying. It was the oddest thing.... How could there be a man in the bed he'd only just vacated? But another odd thing: The man was slightly reclining, and his head was shrouded in, in.... "What is that?" he said again. But he was thinking, I'm not really capable of such dreams... *unless... inspired...?* The man's head was transparently veiled, in some sort of plastic cylinder with pointy top (somehow Lewis's own head, he saw). A long slim flexible tube was attached to the veil's top. From a tank nearby. Yes, he knew now what it was.

"An oxygen tent, it's called," said Twain.

"Of course. Is he dead?" asked Lewis.

"That's what I think," said the other. "Sort of."

How odd. That is me? That is me.

"Your hands were clasped across your middle a moment ago. But now, you see, they are fallen away at your sides. They could not hold together after you left."

Lewis went near and gazed at the man—at himself. "But," he could not take away his gaze. "Why am I out—here? *What* am I, then? He felt strange, he felt queer looking at himself lying there. And...he felt a simple unwonted fondness for the creature.

"Well, I don't know. A sort of gas, I guess."

"Sort—sort! What do you mean by that word? Define it. Define your use of *sort* for me." He looked at Twain and then back at the man again. "Either I am a gas or I am not."

"Ah," said Mark Twain. "Your old master comes to aid you, the logical one, the rational—what was his name—who gave your mind its rigorous training? The 'Great Knock', he was?"

"William T. Kirkpatrick," said Lewis crisply. "And gas cannot speak."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've never heard—." But he stopped, gazing still at the man in the oxygen tent. That was no good. Never having heard of it does not make a thing impossible. "It has no mechanism, no medium whereby.... —This is preposterous."

Twain drew on his cigar, its ash glowing very brightly now, a spot of orange reflecting off the plastic veil. He said, "Why not check yourself for gas?"

Lewis turned away from himself to stare back at Twain. Then he gazed again on the man in the bed and moved nearer. Jack Lewis, it seemed, lay there in the moonlight, inert. He did not need

to check it for gas, did not bend near for that, because somehow he knew. But he leaned over himself anyway. He wanted to experience this, this strange thing of spreading oneself, one's attention, over one's form. In this hovering he did indeed confirm that there was very little gas, if any, in him. He said, "I don't think he's quite... quite... breathing."

"You mean he's sort of not breathing? Or he sort of is."

Now Lewis stood back off himself and glanced sharply at Clemens. "Aren't you—weren't you *younger* the last time I saw you? A lot younger? Where is your younger version? He was somehow kinder." Samuel Clemens seemed, as ever, too able to touch upon his irascibility, as though pulling levers or pushing buttons.

There was silence as Clemens looked at him. The silence lengthened. The silence grew distinct, profound. As Lewis gazed toward the moonlit Twain unmoving, the silence itself seemed somehow moving, swelling; somehow as though a breath he could not feel was slowly clearing away the smoke and sending it out the open window. But then, rapidly, a change overtook the straight white old man standing before him in the moonlight. A transformation gathering his frame into the compact likeness of a child, smoothing its body smaller, fresher, crisper; his wrinkled shaggy features swiftly modeling, in vivid brightness, extravagance of relish and joy. Boyishly elastic, a bright high laughter shot out his mouth, his red hair shining above the face of his childish glee. But, swiftly then, he lengthened out, standing a straight old whitened man again. And somehow the cigar was back in his hand, though Lewis was quite certain he'd not had it in the state of a child (now gone). It happened so quickly and so completely. Jack Lewis was stunned by this transfiguring power.

Oh no, he thought, *I am not capable of dreaming that. In no way capable.*

And he was weeping. Weeping.

"There, there," said Twain. He seemed at a lost, just a little. "Perhaps I should not—."

"Oh, don't you see?! Oh, *don't* you?! Why couldn't it be Joy? *Joy!*" It came out with vehemence. But he had to stop this violence. He turned away and wiped his eyes.

Clemens looked down, sorry. Then he whispered, "No, I guess you're not so dead after all." And more softly still, considering, "...Some of you is still left in there."

He raised his moon-shining head.



SunMoon by Phillip Fitzsimmons