The red stars touch our bones

by psychomachia

Summary

I had not planned for the tentacles.

I must confess that I had not quite intended this outcome.

It is aggravating in the justice system when things that are meant to a logical progression of cause and effect fall apart, e.g. a crime occurs and yet a murderer escapes punishment, but I have grown accustomed to it. A judge would go mad if he did not account for human frailty, for the passions that overcome logic, for his own fallibilities that lead to both an inhuman bloodlust and the confines of civilization that must temper it, redirect it towards more acceptable outlets.

Perhaps, I am mad, but it is a madness that I am aware of, one that I have kept at bay for many years.

I had calculated that I would not be able to entirely control the scheme I had designed. There was room for error and should the key players not behave as predicted, improvisation was allowable within certain confines. Still, I knew with a certainty that all would fall into place and the only thing that would give it away would be a certain penchant for the dramatic or perhaps my own desire to not go U.N. Owen, as it were.

I had not planned for the tentacles.

It had been a pure fluke. I had not accounted for the wire come loose from Mr. Marston's drunken flailings, and as a result, he had gotten quite a nasty shock. It had been a bit disconcerting as I wondered if he would die from that before the poison, which would be most inappropriate and unpoetic, but he had the constitution of the young and reckless, so I contented myself that he would be fine.
But instead, there were limbs bursting forth and flailing and a most piteous and terrible howl that seemed to emanate from everywhere in the room. The thing burst through a window and took off towards the beach, leaving a trail of viscera, broken glass, and a thoroughly ruined dinner party in its wake. True, I had intended that the evening would end in death, but it would have been far more civilized than whatever... that was.

Naturally, we fell to bickering and mayhem. The general immediately wanted to take charge, pursue after the creature and murder it, but he was persuaded by cooler heads that perhaps he might wish to consider that we were not dealing with an enemy soldier, but with a terrifying creature of a strange origin and we did not have recourse to call in for more troops.

Dr. Armstrong was already examining the remnants upon the floor, accompanied by the now revealed Blore. Both men spoke in hushed tones, and I supposed I could have joined them, had I wished, but I was too overcome with a curious sense of frustration and thwarted rage that everything had gone completely off the rails.

I suppose I should have been more relieved. I was on an island of known murderers, so I knew at least they were capable of killing should the need arise. Mr Lombard and Miss Claythorne were already ransacking the rooms for weapons, working together in a perfect unity that would have been more touching to me had I not known to be cold-blooded monsters like myself.

This sent me into another paroxysm of fury that I hid behind a calm facade. How would I ever encourage Miss Claythorne to kill herself, if her thoughts were more on survival and saving humanity, rather than suicidal hysteria and depression? And Mr. Lombard – he may have been quite capable of leaving random tribesmen to perish, but a winsome young lady who would most likely be a crack shot? I knew his sort. He'd fight to the end for her.

Damn it all.

I am a rational man, however, and I quickly reworked my plan. The poem would have to go. It was clear that whatever meticulously crafted and appropriate deaths I had planned were now completely ruined. This creature, should it wish to murder us all, would do so most inelegantly.

But of course, I suspected it went far beyond that – if it was capable of taking on Marston's form, it could take on others, I theorized. The original Marston was no doubt long dead and I suspected that at least half this island could be as well before long.

Marvelously, it was as if a ray of sunlight had dawned in my thoughts. My plan was still possible here. What if anyone could be this creature? We had an island full of overly emotional, violent people armed with whatever weaponry they could find. All it would take was a few words, a piece of ripped clothing here or there, perhaps even a falsified medical test I could persuade Dr. Armstrong to administer and reveal the “true” creature or creatures.

I did not laugh, but I wished to.

“Blore,” I said to the policeman. “Have you considered that there may be others that are harboring this creature? We must investigate and make sure it isn't hiding in plain sight.”

“General MacArthur, make sure you keep a close eye on the Rogers. If they've been on this island, it is possible that they were also infected by it.”

“Miss Brent, you should watch out for Miss Claythorne. Such impertinent behavior from a young woman may be more than just moral failings.”
So many words dropped like poison into waiting ears. I went to sleep, knowing that even if I were to be taken in the middle of the night, my seeds of paranoia would bear fruit.

And indeed, when I awoke and went to find the others, it was most glorious. The Rogers were quite gone, as was MacArthur and Brent. Brent had killed herself, believing this to be God's judgment upon her, while the General had taken out the Rogers with an axe before being shot by Blore.

Lovely, I thought. We would kill each other long before the creature could.

I had no clue where Lombard and Claythorne had gone off to, so I resolved to find Armstrong and plant another idea – that the two of them were clearly working together to finish off everyone else.

I walked in on something that resembled Blore, but with far more appendages than he was probably accustomed to. He was currently in the process of absorbing Armstrong, who was inexplicably naked.

All in all, a thoroughly distasteful sight.

The creature turned and dropped Armstrong, no doubt saving him for later, and at once, there was a mass of tentacles and a miasma that choked me. I briefly passed out, and I realized that indeed, I would not be waking up from it.

I was correct. We woke up from it.

And we were perfect together. Whereas the old Wargrave might have felt guilt, shame at his desire to murder and rend, this Wargrave saw no judgment in it. It was a natural evolution of our true self, a drive to thrive and multiply until we all share the same goal, the same values.

Is that not why I gathered everyone in the first place? I wished them to experience the same form of justice that had been so denied? Perhaps, I had been too short-sighted in wishing them all destroyed, for was there not value in forcing them to change, to learn to work together?

That meant there was only one impediment left in my path. A boat would arrive before too long—and they would find survivors. But all would have to agree on the same story, and there was only one way to ensure that.

And once again, it seemed that fate had once again played into my hands.

“He's dead,” Miss Claythorne said, when I had arrived at the house. Her voice was choked with tears and she was swaying back and forth. “Philip—oh, God, I thought he was one of them and...”

It was not surprising. She was the stronger of the two.

“It's all right,” I told her. “You did what you had to do. But you need to calm down. There's just the two of us now.”

That sent her into another fit of crying and her eyes closed.

It would be too easy. “You need to sleep,” I said soothingly, already shifting one of my limbs out. “Just take a little rest and everything will be over before you know it.”

“Yes,” the man's voice said. “It will be. Vera?”

Miss Claythorne's head popped up. Her red-rimmed eyes were steely and I wondered how I had
forgotten that she was quite capable of playing the victim when it suited her. “You were right, Philip. It was him all along.”

“Not all along,” I told her. Justice Wargrave knew there was no used in pretending. Others might have tried, but he—I---we had always known that judgment comes sooner or later. “And you'll never be able to explain this to anyone. They'll think you mad.”

I smiled coolly at her. “They'll call you a murderer.”

“I know,” she said. “But I'm used to that.”

The flames, when they come licking at my back, make me explode in a mass of flesh, trying to escape, to find a way to avoid my retribution, but I know I will not be able to.

They are the fires of Hell.

Exactly where I planned to be.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!