

PEACE: the haunted Mr. Tilly

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 25 Oct 2000

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 25 Oct 2000, 10:22

Oh dear, here we are again. Get it over with fast, get back on track.

Julius Smart tells the tale of Mr. Tilly, who is haunted by a ghost that is trying to poison him with a chemical that will turn him to stone. Tilly himself is a pharmaceutical chemist running a sideline in manufacturing circus freaks through voluntary chemistry. Tilly finally dies. In the end (one view, at least), it is his freakified wife who has been haunting/poisoning him.

This is not presented as a fairy tale, but as a true story that was witnessed by the teller (as opposed to urban legends, which usually have a degree of further separation: "This happened to a friend of a friend"). So I shouldn't be talking about it now, except for the fact that I've mentioned it before.

Yes, as I've alluded, "Man partially turned to stone by wife" is the motif of "The Ensorcelled Prince" of nights one and two in Burton's ARABIAN NIGHTS. Furthermore, that story has the wife turning citizens into fish (which seems not too far from Tilly's fake freaks). In the end, the prince kills the wife (he had already killed her politically incorrect black stereotype of a lover).

For his own part, Smart himself later has to deal with a cheating wife. Olivia's rapid gain in size might be a sign of involuntary freakification (but maybe not: there are indications that it might be a genetic trait that Den has, too). Smart's wife dies (killed by one of her lovers).

Tilly as a word can mean "clay" (it can also mean "gift from the vendor"). Litho is the stone man (created by Tilly), and Den writes a lot of weird stuff about stone men, new races, artificial stags, and similar stuff.

(I think the idea of the voluntary freaks is a sly jab by Gene Wolfe at the participants of the drug culture in the 60s and 70s.)

So this ARABIAN NIGHTS tale is (or seems to be) a central story to the novel, and it is disguised as something else, even though the frametale ("The Fisherman and the Jinni") remains intact as the frame to "ben Yahya and the Marid."

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Now then, Julius tells this tale and Olivia apparently hears: "I am a great wizard. I hold the secrets of tranformation and transmutation." She selects him to be her husband.

We know that Den has told this story to people twice: the second try is with Bill Baton, the ad agency man. But the first time was to Margaret Lorn, on that seemingly fateful picnic they had, alone together on the banks of the river.

Ah, Margaret Lorn! When she puts down the "Life" magazine in the doctor's office during Den's

astral visit, she does so with contempt against Den. What ever happened?

Here is a possibility, perhaps too simple for consideration. We know that young Den is a bit of an anti-social geek, for example his use of the Napoleon factoid to test people through making them uncomfortable. He relishes quirky, disturbing things.

Since Den seems to think that he will marry Margaret, perhaps he thinks he is following a sure-fire plan by using upon her the same courtship song with which his brilliant uncle won his beautiful aunt: the story of Mr. Tilly.

Here's the punchline: I'll bet Margaret heard a ghoulish, disturbing story, with a message of misogyny and double-murder. Where Olivia the adventuress heard "power," perhaps ("good girl"?) Margie hears "wife torturer, wife killer."

Just a thought.

Next story.

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