

Short Story 75*: The Doctor of Death Island

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Marc Aramini — 04 Sep 2014, 18:01

THE DOCTOR OF DEATH ISLAND

"The Doctor of Death Island" first appeared in **Immortal** in 1978 and is reprinted in **The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories.**

SUMMARY:

After an opening quote from **Oliver Twist** which states that in some cases the outside covers are far better than the contents of books themselves, prison orderlies halt to discuss Alan Alvard, who "used to be a big blond guy" (and killed his business partner). One named Stan indicates that Alvard got "the long string" and rode it all the way, clear out the gate. The other asks if he is out now, and we flash back to the start of Alvard's story. Each section begins in a brief, relative present tense before reverting to past tense.

"The beginning-end of the string, when it comes, is not readily recognizable. It is cancer of the stomach; and it begins as a long bellyache that hurts even when he and dark Jessica, no longer jealous, tumble over one another on the big bed." Alvard writes of shadows in his journal as winter approaches and says he would like to read Dickens' **Christmas Carol** again, and mentions how his stomach hurts terribly as it never did when he and Barry were partners. He is incarcerated, serving a life sentence for the murder of Barry Seigle, but wants his attorney Glazer to do something for him or lose him as a client.

The next section describes the gray blankets over inmates' faces as the orderlies and prison workers go about their business night and day. Alvard works in the hospital by day. That night Dr. Baldwin, the night shift physician, sees Dr. Margotte, the day physician. Baldwin asks if he ever sleeps, and Margotte says "All the time. I nap. This is my excuse." Yet Margotte does not snooze. One of the prison orderlies comments that someone must be dying, for Margotte is always there and knows when the time comes. "They'll take somebody off the top floor with a sheet on his face tonight. You watch and see if I'm not right," the orderly says.

Once again, the next part starts with a sheet over Alvard's face, who dreams of tinkering with his Genre Jinn invention and imagines himself inside the box, dead (this merely presages Alvard in his cryogenic sleep — and perhaps after the story ends). It flashes back slightly to a conversation with his cellmate Riemer before he was frozen, when he talks of his dream: he was working and Margotte was the boss. In his dream, the boss was coming to see if he had done what he was supposed to do; he could not breathe, and even though he was facing away, he could see Margotte's hand on the knob, with its two fingers gone. (This scene seems to describe Alvard's murder of Barry, doing the work of Margotte, whose hand creeps on the knob to watch him, though it might also invoke working on his invention.) Riemer changes his voice and says that, "It was Karajan. I trust you know how it was done?" Then he laughs.

A newspaper clipping reveals that Alvard has been frozen at his own cost since he was suffering a terminal illness. He was given a life sentence two years before his freezing.

He awakes far into the future, and the woman briefing him says, "All your life has been spent in a remote country — the past. Now you have to live here." She reveals doctors have used cell therapy to alter DNA, which hastens the death of old body cells and stimulates new ones. There was a revolution when the government tried to keep the treatment from people, and now even clones are possible.

Alvard asks, "You mean I'll live forever?" Words in his mind became fleeting pictures of a hillside covered with long, sweet grass. A hillside smiling in the sun. Day always. No night ever.

She warns that he is like a vase that can be broken at any time, but will endure interminably otherwise. He has only been gone forty years, and wanders at the thought of ten thousand years of existence. Then he realizes that his orderly and the woman briefing him are inmates, and she says she has been there for 18 years. When the orderly bumps into her, she shoves him. After she leaves, he tells the orderly in the old days there were no women in the prison. When he receives his food much of it is tasteless and like sour milk made of straw, but some of it pleases him. He imagines himself like Miss Havisham in bed from **Great Expectations.**

Alvard considers the top floor of the hospital and thinks of it as an abode of death whose wind carries men away. (He perhaps wonders what the seventh floor is used for with no need for a ward for incurables and hears another voice yelling a question before he collapses below the window — though later he considers that the United States and Kingdoms has adopted a British floor labeling scheme). A woman named Megan Carstensen brings him a Bible — when he opens it, a voice asks "Who is the Son of Man?" and Alvard reveals the speaking book was his invention. She is impatient and offers to leave his file with him and asks about his state under the window.

Megan leaves, and his file talks to him in his own voice, revealing he is a patient in room 617 (at first he thinks that is a floor below Death Island, the seventh floor). He asks what time it is and realizes that even though it is only 6:30, there is no sun in the window. He interrogates his file and tries to determine why Megan wanted to learn nothing about him. When an orderly brings dinner, he questions him about the lack of sun in the window, but notices that the artificial lights are brighter than he thought. The file tells him his invention has been a great success, but the patent is broken. An orderly offers to "dial" him down for the night.

The next day Megan tells him he will have three visitors (Jessica Alvard, Lisa Stewart, and Jerome Glazer) after responding to his complement on her looks with, "I poisoned a young man who was much prettier than I am — So how do you like having me sit beside you while you eat?" He opens the Bible and it says, "He makes his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire." (This, from Hebrews 1:7, is a passage which highlights the power and importance of Christ over the angels).

An orderly takes Alvard up on the rooftop after he sleeps through his guests' visit, to see the sun. Their dialogue allows us to assume the action takes place circa 2040 and that a life sentence will still last for life. The United States is now called The United States and Kingdoms. The birth rate has gone down as women are unwilling to risk their lives to have children. He sees that the prison has grown immensely, and the walls actually keep him from seeing the setting sun in his room. He ruminates, "Now there was no longer that urge to achieve immortality through children. Real immortality was at hand. Possibly that was why Catholic priests and nuns, for so many hundreds of years, had not cared about having children — they

had felt immortality already, believing in the survival of the soul after death.”

Jessica returns to visit him, and speaks of what has happened to her, revealing that there have been men over the years (though his partner Barry was before him), and that she will not be jealous of Lisa, her clone. Alvard has a vision of Margotte outside his door when he pushes the call button for the nurse — this vision of Margotte is juxtaposed next to Jessica's presence in the prison, connecting the concept of death with Jessica.

Alvard steals a knife from a meal and manages to conceal it from the guard's search in order to tamper with his books. It does not take long for him to infect other talking books with Dickens' characters. Soon, Thomas Wolfe's **You Can't Go Home Again* displays dialogue from Dickens' **Bleak House*. The female warden and a man named Lon Matluck who serves on the Advisory Commission on Technological Development offer him a chance to work in his old field again, and he says he won't help them for anything less than total freedom. He reveals that his murder of Barry Siegle was inspired by Barry's belief that a useless suggestion actually made the Genre Jinn work — that Barry saw himself as the creator when he understood nothing about the work involved. Merely intending to smash Barry's head against the wall, when the window on the 83rd floor broke, Alvard picked him up and tossed him into the abyss, using the large belt buckle that represented nostalgia for the 1980s.

Alvard is transferred to the main prison and is accepted by Megan Cartensen as one of her lovers. While there, he discusses the increasingly hostile relationships between men and women with a worker, a hostility which has replaced the class strife between blacks and whites. Alvard receives a letter from Jessica stating that she hears he has a lover, but implores her not to tell him, and states that she looks forward to his freedom. The letter includes an introduction to her clone Lisa Stewart, who tries to sell herself as a model or for part time employment (before the voice of Miss Snevellicci from **Nicholas Nickleby* interrupts her, asking, “I beg your pardon, but did you ever play at Canterbury?”) When he asks to speak to Snevellicci, knowing that his infestation of Dickens' characters has been a success, instead the dying voice of William Dorritt from **Little Dorritt** calls out for Bob, remembering his days in debtor's prison.

Alvard is called to the Presidential Center, floating six kilometers above the city, where he meets Dr. Edith Pomme and Brenda Yarwood, a physicist. Dr. Pomme is the chair of modern English Literature at Yale and says that both minor and major Dickens characters have been infiltrating the talking books of all manner, and the President is concerned that there will be no way to return to true literacy — the plague of Dickens must be stopped.

Alvard uses this opportunity to secure his freedom, and on the way down he flirts with Brenda Yarwood, who resembles Megan Cartensen. On his way to liberty, pressed close to Brenda, he encounters Dr. Margotte, who exclaims that he has been waiting for him, and was frozen for a time. When he introduces Brenda to Margotte, Alvard “only then, despite all his aversion to Margotte, learns why he fears him. His eyes are precisely the protuberant eyes of Barry Seigle, going over the edge, going down to the pavement eighty-three floors below.” He sees Jessica steadying a gun on the top of a nearby car and drops the book from his arm, where he hears the voice of a peddler pursuing the murderer Bill Sikes from **Oliver Twist**.

Alvard thinks that it must be a camera rather than a gun, for he saw the flash, the book at his head, calling out ?Mud-stain or blood-stain--?

COMMENTARY:

The fragmentary nature of the text is not intentionally obfuscating. The first feature we should note about the short sections is of course that the start of each is in present tense, and this is

mirrored in the entire set up — the first section is in the “present”, the rest of the story in the past. In many ways, the story does play with its first in text Dickens reference quite a bit, with the ghosts of past, present and future — we have a man from the past brought into the future world, and the occasional sections written in present tense as if they were still occurring.

It is quite easy to establish that the entire beginning section, when the orderlies talk, actually occurs after the final scene of the novella (symbolically mirroring the present tense transitioning to past tense of every section), though this placement is somewhat ambiguous and perhaps on a first reading we are tempted to place it during Alvard’s cryogenic sleep, but it is clearly after Alvard has coerced the government into freeing him. Orderlies discuss Alvard, the older asking if the younger knew him, and the younger asks “What were they doing?” The older orderly, Stan, doesn’t know and discusses an “it”? He got it — the long string — and he rode it all the way. Clear out the gate. Only a couple years ago, I think it was. The question “Is he out now?” isn’t answered — because Alvard is dead. [Borski erroneously sees Margotte’s presence at the end as hopeful for mankind here and also astonishingly tries to, in effect, link Little Nell with Helen of Troy onomastically — see Resources below.]

We are immediately reintroduced to the older man, Stan, as 19 year old Stanley Johnson in the very next section, in Greyhame for killing a little girl during a robbery, though he wants to be called Snake there, to show how much time has passed.

All of Alvard’s hopes are crushed when he “awakens”, and the symbols of death are unrelenting. Even when he thinks he has made it off the seventh floor, the island of death, because of his room number (617), it is just a temporary illusion — the British numbering system for floors assures us he is still on the American seventh floor. Just as he thinks he is walking out of his prison, he is only going to his own death.

Alvard’s writings of shadows in the opening section after his conjugal visit with Jessica eventually culminates in stating they are “like tall and beautiful women, drawing an old gray blanket over the dead.” This presages not only the stillness of his cryogenic sleep, but also the stagnation of the culture that has finally received immortality and lost all vitality (and the final scene, where the “dark Jessica” will be jealous once again and end Alvard’s immortal life.)

Several other images contribute to the overwhelming impression that even though mankind is immortal, it is also dead: the repetition of shadows like dark women covering a dead body, the idea that Alvard’s cryogenic sleep was a kind of death, and the lack of joy and art in the new world, where the art has returned to haunt humanity like a malevolent spirit (no coincidence, as already stated, that the first Dickens referenced is “A Christmas Carol” with its visiting ghosts — though the opening quote of the entire story emphasizes that sometimes the covers can be the very best parts of books.)

All creation has become vile — women and men are at war, jealousy will kill Alvard and resentful pride prompted him to murder his own partner — all the advancements have led to total stagnation and a death-like life, so even though we end the book with Alvard still technically alive, his death, and the eventual death of everything that was human is all but assured thematically. The “cover” of the society is far better than its actuality — immortality for man, while everything worthwhile is dead.

Even early in the story, the idea of a sheet over Alvard’s head is already there: “Alan Alvard lies sweating in his bed. The sheet has gotten over his face somehow, and perhaps it has lent his dream a character of suffocation.”

There are several passages in the story which state the main ideas of the text far more

powerfully and effectively than I ever could:

“Not frozen, not sleeping, not hibernating. Dead. — What was death” The cessation of breath? They had waited for that. The end of heart action? They had that too. The termination of cellular processes? That had occurred on freezing. Where had he been then? Or was he only a wind-up toy, equipped now with the near miraculous battery (originally intended for wristwatches) with which he had equipped his books. If only a toy did it matter — even to him — if he was wound up or not, if there was no child to see? A book then. He was a book, of course. — And this, this was a bookcase. This prison. How could it have taken so long for him to understand?

These are the themes — his life is a colorless and repetitive drive, with no new creation, simply reliving the same pages, stored up in an unchanging prison without color. The story posits the idea that if a person doesn’t end, all new creation and meaningful change becomes impossible. Alvard is already dead, going through the motions of life in this world, and the world is doing exactly the same thing.

Having said that, we should note that the figure of death, looming Dr. Margotte with his three fingered hands, has not been physically tangible in the text for some time, but will return when needed to bring an end to life. An orderly says that when someone is passing over, “Doc Margotte knows. He comes in to see them go — or maybe they go when he comes in. They’ll take somebody off the top floor with a sheet on his face tonight.” This is made even more explicit later, when Alvard thinks of a mountain inside a gold fish tank that he and Jessica had — its bottom part submerged and imprisoned, its peak an island of death, and compares it to Grayham prison:

There was no difference between the ornament and the hospital in which he had worked but size. Like the ornament, the hospital had its lower six-sevenths thrust in the teeming life of the prison. Only its highest floor, Margotte’s ward, higher than all the surrounding buildings, was free to look out over the countryside — but the highest floor was the abode of Death, and the wind that breathed through its open windows carried away men.

The equation of Margotte and Death could not be more overt. Indeed, when Alvard is transferred to the general prison, the mail man there says, “Up at the hospital, everybody’s askin’ if we killed you yet. Especially one guy, the brain surgeon”, at which point he makes a hand with three fingers extended. Three fingered Margotte knows that Alvard is soon doomed to be killed by the people. Here, Alvard speculates that Margotte must be dead, and thinks, “Maybe there are a whole line of them, the doctors with blasted hands. Maybe they don’t know themselves.” Here, he cries — something even a life sentence and cancer could not prompt.

In this future, the only freedom from a stultifying existence is the release of death. Indeed, the young woman who brings him a Bible comments that he was frozen before a work called **The Death of Love** by Kinglake. Love has died — the text dismisses class differences between white and black constituents of society and says that the new struggle is between men and women.

Indeed, this struggle is what kills Alvard at the end, when Jessica’s jealousy (Alvard remarked that she once pulled a gun on his partner, Barry) comes to the fore, even though the blond beside him is not the one she should be jealous of. (The metaphor of the books passing their diseases cover to cover “socially” expands this idea as well — just as Megan Cartensen says she poisoned a young man, when Yarwood and Alvard descend next to a woman named Dr. Pomme (which means apple), we see the fall through temptation repeated once again — the relationships between men and women in this novella are fatal and poisonous.)

One of the most inexplicable sections comes early in the text, when Alvard is talking to another

inmate and says he is sure that he sees a hand on the door (during his murder of his partner transposed with the creation of the Genre Jinn in a dream). His cell mate changes his voice and says it was Karajan. This is a rather odd non sequitur and can perhaps be explained by the identity of Herbert von Karajan, a prominent master conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic. The text hints that all of this is masterminded and orchestrated by someone, in this case, the hand on the door — that of the titular character, almost never seen in the story: the doctor of Death Island. (There is another possible reason for the allusion to Karajan — he was related to the Slovene composer Hugo Wolf.)

What of the “beginning end of the string” mentioned in the start of the novella, which is cancer? It seems likely that this is an association with the idea of the string of a man's life (despite the orderlies' opening conversation) — Alvard's is about to be cut, and the cancer the disease that propels him into the future of unchanging destitution, which will lead to his own demise and a rather problematic horde of Dickens' characters set free after his death. Perhaps no one else will be able to stop them from infiltrating the world of knowledge, science, and all attempts to communicate - given the widespread illiteracy and the attitude towards actual reading even those in important positions maintain.

NAMES:

The Genre Jinn that Alvard creates works almost exactly like a genie or djinn would in granting an impossible wish — talking to our favorite books and living with them, but in a backhanded way — killing the need for literacy, without which new creations are impossible. Alvard will also use the powers of his creation to corrupt the other books of the world and gain his freedom. Like most wishes granted by the djinn, stepping outside of the prison walls will have immediate negative consequences.

Alan Alvard: Borski notes that the word alvary implies “womb”, and that the alliterative qualities of his name would be typical of Dickens. Alan means “fair or handsome.”

Brenda Yarwood: The name Brenda means “sword”, Yarwood is a combination of “eagle” and “wood?”. A mistaken resemblance to Megan Cartensen costs Alan his life.

Margotte: He is the titular character, though he only appears in a few scenes, briefly. His metaphorical association with death becomes literal — there doesn't seem a way for him to have survived long enough for the immortality process to have been administered to him. As a first name it implies “Pearl”.

Dr. Edith Pomme: As previously stated, Pomme implies “apple” - the future of humanity seems to have eaten fully of the apple of temptation. Edith can imply “rich”, “happy?”, and even “war”.

Lon Matluck: The chairman for advancing technology, his first name Lon implies “fierce”, though the family name is more difficult to identify. Perhaps it signifies fierce luck.

Barry Seigle: Barry means “spear”. The last name is an occupational name for a maker of seals or signets.

Jessica and Lisa Stewart: Jessica means “rich” or “God beholds” - when she sees Alvard's behavior, she strikes. Lisa means “devoted to God” - Alvard never gets to meet her face to face. Stewart can mean “guardian” or “warden” of a hall. When the prison releases Alvard, she serves as his warden.

Megan Cartensen: Megan also means “Pearl”, as does Margotte. Becoming involved with her is

the death of Alvard — thus the association through a pearl. (The story also argues that death is perhaps the agency which grants life meaning — a pearl of infinite value). Her last name may imply that she is the descendent of a carton or container (a coffin?), unless the last name is a derivative of Carstensen.

Greyhame: In addition to meaning a home, hame can imply a covering, which matches the imagery of the grey sheet covering everything in this bleak dead but immortal future.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

The most powerful and allusive Dickens reference occurs at the very end when the explosively tempered murderer Bill Sikes, from **Oliver Twist**, who brutally kills his girlfriend Nancy when he thinks she has betrayed him in one of the most graphic scenes in Dickens, is being pursued by the peddler calling out, “mud-stains and blood-stains”. If this isn’t enough to let us know Jessica has murder on her mind, the presence of death, Margotte, certainly is.

Otherwise, the Dickens references serve to set the tone for plot throughout: when Alvard is first awakened to the future, he thinks of being Miss Havisham — he has great expectations of the future. Before that, when he is dying of cancer, we see “A Christmas Carol” with its evocation of ghosts, for he is something of the past about to be thrust into the future. At the very start, the quote from **Oliver Twist** indicates that the covers are sometimes the best parts of books, and so it is in the future: the idea of eternal life so much better than its bleak reality. When Dr. Porter is looking him over after Jessica sees him for the first time in the future, he quotes **Martin Chuzzlewit**: “What we’ve got to do, is to keep up our spirits, and be neighborly — We shall come out right in the end, never fear.” Unfortunately, he fails in this and seeks revenge on his neighbors for stealing his patent, unleashing his hordes of Dickens upon them.

Thomas Wolfe’s **You Can’t go Home Again** is already invaded by Dickens when it begins speaking — from **Bleak House**: Mr. Bagnet says of Mrs. Bagnet “She’s color sergeant of the Nonpareil battalion, and there’s not such another.” The titles of these two works of course illustrate what has occurred to Alvard — he has arrived at a place of unrelenting bleakness, with no possible return to a living and vital world.

Alvard associates Little Nell from **The Old Curiosity* Shop* with his mother, since she died when he was very young. In the Dickens novel, Nell lives in poverty with her grandfather, who gambles to attempt to give her a better life but loses everything. During the course of the novel, Nell dies, and her grandfather refuses to recognize that she is gone forever, waiting for her return until his own death.

After Alvard awakens and begins to see the emptiness of immortal life, he thinks of his own mother’s absence, something he has always associated with Little Nell because of his father’s love of Dickens. Perhaps the refusal to recognize that the society is truly dead in its immortal holding pattern reflects this allusion to Nell — it merely believes, as the grandfather does, that there is some vitality left, when in fact it is long gone.

Jessica’s clone Lisa’s introduction and self-promotion have been invaded by Miss Snevellicci from **Nicholas Nickleby**, and this makes Alvard “feel like Mephistopheles”, with his army of Dickens (another word for devils). He asks to speak to Miss Snevellicci (someone Nicholas Nickleby flirted with heavily, from which nothing materialized — just like Alvard’s fateful flirting with Brenda Yarwood and the promise of meeting Lisa herself come to nothing). Instead, he gets “Will you go and see if Bob is on the lock” Send for Bob, which is from **Little Dorritt** — the dying hallucinations of William Dorritt, who was sent to debtor’s prison and then wound up inheriting wealth to free himself from the prison, only to die while touring Europe. The plot of

*Little Dorritt *intersects the Wolfe story quite effectively, as it involves imprisonment, a struggling inventor, and William Dorritt's new found freedom curtailed by an early death. No coincidence that his dying pleas accompany the presence of Lisa and Jessica's letter, where she indicates she has heard he has been having an affair with a female prisoner and begs him not to tell her if it is true.

The second to last Dickens character mentioned is Augustus Minns from Dickens' first published story. In that story, those seeking to ingratiate themselves to Augustus so that he will write them into his will so effectively alienate them that he shuns them. In this scene, Alvard makes his deal for freedom in agreeing to cure the world of the Dickens' plague, but in reality he has only assured his destruction.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

While it seems to be fairly straightforward SF, the ominous and ubiquitous presence of Dr. Margotte at the time of death invokes at least one fantastic and supernatural element. Is the novella in some ways a fantasy?

Besides the hubris of both Alvard and his partner, is jealousy over Barry's old relationship with Jessica one of Alvard's motives for committing murder? That doesn't seem likely.

Why does Margotte have only three fingers on one hand? Does this resonate with any story or myth? (Three heads of Cerberus, etc).

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

For all that this novella seems allusive and tricky, the third person narration has not yet achieved a significant level of destabilization and uncertainty — we KNOW both Jessica is jealous and Alvard proud, and their characters as well as the implications of this immortality for mankind are about as clear as we can get. The technical stylistic innovation in this novella is the transition from present tense to past tense in each fragmented section. Isolation, mental sickness, and treatment are of course under study here as they are in the other Archipelago stories, and for all the pathos of Alvard's affection for Dickens and Little Nell, this is perhaps the least sympathetic and kind of the Island stories — everyone deserves what they get.

We also see, as I have mentioned, some of the strain between genders that a world without children brings: the tension between blacks and whites is here overtly stated as being replaced by that between men and women, with gangs of women abducting and bending men to their will. "In Looking Glass Castle", "Many Mansions", "A Criminal Proceeding" with its female president, and the feminine authority figures in "The Eyeflash Miracles" all seem ideologically related to this gender gap, which flared up strongly but actually quite briefly in Wolfe's career. Before this point, the hobgoblin seemed to be socialized monetary distributions and unjust declassification in society leading to even more prejudice, but towards the late 70s the redistribution of gender power is overtly explored (there is even a line in "The Woman the Unicorn Loved" where Julie stands to greet Anderson in his office, and the narrative states that it is as if the gender roles had reversed).

Wolfe was supposedly working on a novel, *In Greyhame Prison*, which became this novella — in a strange inversion, another novella that he began sprung up into *The Shadow of the Torturer*, most fortuitously.

RESOURCES

Borski, Robert. ? ? Urth.net Mailing List.

<*http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0017/0056.shtml

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