

The Metamorphosis of Faustus Steinberg

This recollection focuses on my friend, or what used to be my friend, and is what I hope to be a cautionary tale about combining religion and science, for so my best friend tried, and his fate was sealed irreversibly.

On the 4th of January, 1903, Faustus and I were conversing over a cup of tea on a Saturday morning, watching the people go by as we looked at Stephansdom. Our discussion that morning was focused around theology, and certainly one can remark that in his top-hat and monocle he may have actually struck me as more than just a pontificating rambler at the time. "Just look at the moths in England! Within a few decades they all turned black! Such a change in species in so short a time!" elated Faustus.

"There could a number of reasons for such an accelerated evolutionary process, my friend; you speculate more than you study," I replied in a manner of polite candor. In vain, I tried to counter the arguments of my friend; he became somewhat agitated and, in the end, swore that he would prove to me and to the world, how his theory of evolution was superior to all others.

"There is a force in our world, one which controls all that is and all that can and will be, it is nothing short of divine power! Animals are being steered towards favourable evolution! We are scientists, but we are also men of God; I'll show you that one does not have to draw a distinction." And with that my good friend left.

I thought him mad of course, but his preposterous ideas amused me, and I enjoyed our talks, though rarely did the conversations with the short heavy-set man lead to anything conclusive. This time he really did seem rather out of sorts, for I noted in his appearance that morning that his suit was not as well-kept as usual, and his eyes had faint black circles around them; his manner was that of a man who worked nights engaged in intellectual labour.

About a month went by until I heard anything from Mr Steinberg. I had missed him several times for our weekly discussion, and out of concern stopped by his apartment on Marienhilfstrasse to check on him, only to be sent away by the housekeeper, who I now realize looked rather disturbed. Her face was thin and pale, the bags under her eyes were ever present and she had aged a year into weeks, for her hair had begun to grey, and her eyes bore wrinkles around them. All this I saw from a crack in the door, for on my request to enter the flat she refused even to let the chain down and peered out at me from inside the locked apartment. The letter I had received contained a summons to that very same apartment, and I would certainly be a liar if I had said that I was not curious about its contents, for in it was instructed: "My good friend, come at once to my residence for I have something spectacular to show you. I have discovered something revolutionary, something wondrous and beautiful!" It seemed strange that after a month of no contact he would contact me in so friendly and inviting a manner, and so my interest was piqued.

And so on the morning of the 12th of February, I approached the door of Faustus' apartment. I knocked on the dark oak door, and several long minutes later, the old door creaked open. A dim light peered out from the inside, an unnatural and peculiar yellow. A face showed from the opening, a frightened and disheveled face, a horrible face scarred by time. The skin of the creature was wrinkled, the eyes were cold and frightened and there seemed to be touch of black seeping into the white: the iris was unnervingly dark. I suddenly came to a terrible realization: the thing that stood before me was Mr. Steinberg's housekeeper! Shaken, I relayed to her, or rather to it, my invitation to the residence, and after a brief and awkward silence, during which her gaze scrutinized my appearance, I heard the chain slide open, followed by the creaking of the un-oiled door hinge. The thing I used to know as the housekeeper stood at least 30 centimeters shorter

than I last saw her; her back had hunched significantly; and she wore a stained white shirt that stretched to the floor. She gestured for me to enter the flat, and I obeyed, stepping cautiously through the doorway, noting how the woman's hair had greyed completely, and strung from her head in an unclean mess.

Walking through the flat, I noted there seemed to be a radiant glow of yellow everywhere, however the source of it I could not identify. There was also a disturbing lack of cleanliness in the apartment. Books occupied the majority of the living room into which I entered from the hall, and white drapes had been put over all the furniture. The windows were covered by red curtains. The keeper turned right to the hall containing the study and bedroom of my friend. We walked along the wooden corridor, and then turned into the study of Mr. Steinberg.

The small room had books scattered over the floor and the desk, which stood nobly in the middle, and all round me shone the yellow light, at which point I remarked that it did not seem electric.

"John!, how good of you to come! Come into my study at once, I must show you my work!" came the voice of a man, remarkably deep. From under the desk emerged a humanoid figure. Slowly the huge thing stretched out into full height, standing at an imposing 2,5 metres tall and carrying a set of broad shoulders. At first the thing stood with its back to me, and I observed on its broad bare back an obvious skeletal deformation: it was as if the ribcage wanted to stretch out and become wings; the skin itself was traumatized and burnt in many places. The figure turned slowly to face me and in that moment I realized that this humanoid was none other than my good friend Faustus.

"Dear God Faustus, what's happened to you!" I yelled in fright.

The short plump man I knew a month before was now a massive stature of, well I can't quite say of what, as to this day I am not yet sure. He looked at me, his lips stretched into a smile, and I noticed his teeth were that of ancient African sharpened warrior style, and his eyes had no white in them, only black, terrifyingly empty of all feeling: it was like staring into two black holes, each an abyss, an abyss of all that was nothing. He triumphantly raised his huge arms up by his sides, then, focusing with a fearful intensity on me, spoke aloud: "My dear friend, why do I note such concern on your face?"

Taken aback by the question I became flustered and stood rooted in my place.

"Ah, I see, you cannot yet conceive my change: you believe that but a month has passed since our last seeing one another".

Still in shock, I did not answer.

"I was right you know" he professed enigmatically. "The distinction between religion and science is non-existent: I have found the force that powers all that is and all that will be – the divine! I have studied every text produced by every religion and have grasped what it means to draw life into myself, to advance my own evolution. See for yourself: I have been to hell and back! I have conquered demons, angels. Their gross desire to curb my growing power, their attempts to stop my usage of power divine, has resulted in me growing ever more powerful: I have metamorphosed into the very apotheosis of human evolution! I have conquered land and the sea of the divine, and now my friend, I will show you," he said as he reached for something below the desk, "divinity in its purest form". Fear gripped me as the huge creature began to draw something glowing unnaturally bright of that yellow hue I noted earlier. "The sword of Archangel Michael" he said as he pulled out a beautifully ornamented sword of fire that seemed to burn with no heat. With the coming to light of such a relic panic seized me, and in my fear I sprinted from the apartment, pushing the keeper out of my way. The divine was real!

"Stop, I command this!" I heard a roar behind me, accompanied by the sound of breaking timber, right after which my vision began to darken as I felt the emptiness that I saw in Faustus' eyes creep into me. God, the hollowness that I felt: for a moment, my soul was ripped out of me, and life went dark: but then the being took pity and I came to. In the same instant, I scrambled for the door, and heard behind me: "Coward, you are afraid harnessing power divine, go, run! You are

unworthy, all of humanity is!”

I fled to my house then, and hid for hours after, until I realized that the incident was over, and finally began to calm my panic and push out the awful hollowness.

I have not seen the man, or whatever he is since then, it has been three years, and I have not dared to revisit that infernal palace. Upon reflection, I believe that indeed he discovered divinity and its power, but much like Lucifer did: the truth, in fact, was that the power grasped him, and he was subject to its chaotic will. I am still curious however, if the sword was really the true weapon of the archangel; in the moment, I had no doubt, and to this point I still mostly believe that indeed it was as, even now, a part of me is missing. I lost a part of my soul in that encounter, the hollowness never left me. I believe that the sword carved a part of me out forever, and what it did to Faustus was, I believe, a transformation into an infernal creature, a demon perhaps.
