The Light that Blinds, the Claws that Catch

by Mike Resnick

"And when my heart's dearest died, the light went from my life for ever."

-- Theodore Roosevelt

In Memory of my Darling Wife (1884)

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!

The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!"

-- Lewis Carroll

Through the Looking-Glass (1872)

* * * *

The date is February 14, 1884.

Theodore Roosevelt holds Alice in his arms, cradling her head against his massive chest. The house is cursed, no doubt about it, and he resolves to sell it as soon as Death has claimed yet another victim.

His mother lies in her bed down the hall. She has been dead for almost eight hours. Three rooms away his two-day-old daughter wails mournfully. The doctors have done all they can for Alice, and now they sit in the parlor and wait while the 26-year-old State Assemblyman spends his last few moments with his wife, tears running down his cheeks and falling onto her honey-colored hair.

The undertaker arrives for his mother, and looks into the room. He decides that perhaps he should stay, and he joins the doctors downstairs.

How can this be happening, wonders Roosevelt. Have I come this far, accomplished this much, triumphed over so many obstacles, only to lose you both on the same day?

He shakes his head furiously. _No!_, he screams silently. _I will not allow it! I have looked Death in the eye before and stared him down. Draw your strength from me, for I have strength to spare!_

And, miraculously, she _does_ draw strength from him. Her breathing becomes more regular, and some thirty minutes later he sees her eyelids flutter. He yells for the doctors, who come up the stairs, expecting to find him holding a corpse in his arms. What they find is a semi-conscious young woman who, for no earthly reason, is fighting to live. It is touch and go for three days and three nights, but finally, on February 17, she is pronounced on the road to recovery, and for the first time in almost four days, Roosevelt sleeps.

* * * *

And as he sleeps, strange images come to him in his dreams. He sees a hill in a strange, sun-baked land, and himself riding up it, pistols blazing. He sees a vast savannah, filled with more beasts than he ever knew existed. He sees a mansion, painted white. He sees many things and many events, a pageant he is unable to interpret, and then the pageant ends and he seems to see a life filled with the face and the scent and the touch of the only woman he has ever loved, and he is content.

* * * *

New York is too small for him, and he longs for the wide open spaces of his beloved Dakota Badlands. He buys a ranch near Medora, names it Elkhorn, and moves Alice and his daughter out in the summer.

The air is too dry for Alice, the dust and pollen too much for her, and he offers to take her back to the city, but she waves his arguments away with a delicate white hand. If this is where he wants to be, she will adjust; she wants only to be a good wife to him, never a burden.

Ranching and hunting, ornithology and taxidermy, being a husband to Alice and a father to young Alice, writing a history of the West for Scribner's and a series of monographs for the scientific journals are not enough to keep him busy, and he takes on the added burden of Deputy Marshall, a sign of permanence, for he has agreed to a two-year term.

But then comes the Winter of the Blue Snow, the worst blizzard ever to hit the Badlands, and Alice contracts pneumonia. He tries to nurse her himself, but the condition worsens, her breathing becomes labored, the child's wet nurse threatens to leave if they remain, and finally Roosevelt puts Elkhorn up for sale and moves back to New York.

Alice recovers, slowly to be sure, but by February she is once again able to resume a social life and Roosevelt feels a great burden lifted from his shoulders. Never again will he make the mistake of forcing the vigorous outdoor life upon a frail flower that cannot be taken from its hothouse.

* * * *

He sleeps, more restlessly than usual, and the images return. He is alone, on horseback, in the Blue Snow. The drifts are piled higher than his head, and ahead of him he can see the three desperadoes he is chasing. He has no weapons, not even a knife, but he feels confident. The guns they used to kill so many others will not work in this weather; the triggers and hammers will be frozen solid, and if even if they should manage to get off a shot, the wind and the lack of visibility will protect him.

He pulls a piece of beef jerky from his pocket and chews it thoughtfully. They may have the guns, but he has the food, and within a day or two the advantage will be his. He is in no hurry. He knows where he will confront them, he knows how he will take them if they offer any resistance, he even knows the route by which he will return with them to Medora.

He studies the tracks in the snow. One of their horses is already lame, another exhausted. He dismounts, opens one of the sacks of oats he is carrying, and holds it for his own horse to eat.

There is a cave two miles ahead, large enough for both him and the horse, and if no one has found it there is a supply of firewood he laid in during his last grizzly-hunting trip.

In his dream, Roosevelt sees himself mount up again and watch the three fleeing figures. He cannot hear the words, but his lips seem to be saying: _Tomorrow you're mine..._

* * * *

He runs for mayor of New York in 1886, and loses -- and immediately begins planning to run for Governor, but Alice cannot bear the rigors of campaigning, or the humiliation of defeat. _Please_, she begs him, _please don't give the rabble another chance to reject you_. And because he loves her, he accedes to her wishes, and loses himself in his writing. He begins work on a history of the opening of the American West, then stops after the first volume when he realizes that he will have to actually return to the frontier to gather more material if the series is to go on, and he cannot bear to be away from her. Instead, he writes the definitive treatise on taxidermy, for which he is paid a modest stipend. The book is well received by the scientific community, and Roosevelt is justifiably proud.

* * * *

This dream is more disturbing than most, because his Alice is not in it. Instead an old childhood friend, Edith Carow, firm of body and bold of spirit, seems to have taken her place. They are surrounded by six children, his own daughter and five more whom he does not recognize, and live in a huge house somewhere beyond the city. Their life is idyllic. He rough-houses with both the boys and the girls, writes of the West, takes a number of governmental positions.

But there is no Alice, and eventually he wakes up, sweating profusely, trembling with fear. He reaches out and touches her, sighs deeply, and lies back uncomfortably on the bed. It was a frightening dream, this dream of a life without Alice, and he is afraid to go back to sleep, afraid the dream might resume.

Eventually he can no longer keep his eyes open, and he falls into a restless, dreamless sleep.

* * * *

It is amazing, he thinks, staring at her: _she is almost 40, and I am still blinded by her delicate beauty, I still thrill to the sound of her laughter._

True, he admits, she could take more of an interest in the affairs of the nation, or even in the affairs of the city in which she lives, a city that has desperately needed a good police commissioner for years (he has never told her that he was once offered the office); but it is not just her health, he knows, that is delicate -- it is Alice herself, and in truth he would not have her any other way. She could read more, he acknowledges, but he enjoys reading aloud to her, and she has never objected; he sits in his easy chair every night and reads from the classics, and she sits opposite him, sewing or knitting or sometimes just watching him and smiling at him, her face aglow with the love she bears for him.

So what if she will not allow talk of this newest war in the house? Why should such a perfect creature care for war, anyway? She exists to be protected and cherished, and he will continue to dedicate his life to doing both.

* * * *

He has seen this image in a dream once before, but tonight it is clearer, more defined. His men are pinned down by machine gun fire from atop a hill, and finally he climbs onto his horse and races up the hill, pistols drawn and firing. He expects to be shot out of the saddle at any instant, but miraculously he remains untouched while his own bullets hit their targets again and again, and finally he is atop the hill and his men are charging up it, screaming their battle cry, while the enemy races away in defeat and confusion.

It is the most thrilling, the most triumphant moment of his life, and he wants desperately for the dream to last a little longer so that he may revel in it for just a few more minutes, but then he awakens and he is back in the city. There is a garden show to be visited tomorrow, and in the evening he would like to attend a speech on the plight of New York's immigrants. As a good citizen, he will do both.

* * * *

On the way home from the theater, two drunks get into a fight and he wades in to break it up. He receives a bloody nose for his trouble, and Alice castigates him all the way home for getting involved in a dispute that was none of his business to begin with.

The next morning she has forgiven him, and he remarks to her that, according to what he has read in the paper, the trusts are getting out of hand. Someone should stop them, but McKinley doesn't seem to have

the gumption for it.

She asks him what a trust is, and after he patiently explains it to her, he sits down, as he seems to be doing more and more often, to write a letter to the _Times_. Alice approaches him just as he is finishing it and urges him not to send it. The last time the _Times_ ran one of his letters they printed his address, and while he was out she had to cope with three different radical reformers who found their way to her door to ask him to run for office again.

He is about to protest, but he looks into her delicate face and pleading eyes and realizes that even at this late date he can refuse her nothing.

* * * *

It is a presumptuous dream this time. He strides through the White House with the energy of a caged lion. This morning he attacked J. P. Morgan and the trusts, this afternoon he will make peace between Russia and Japan, tonight he will send the fleet around the world, and tomorrow ... tomorrow he will do what God Himself forgot to do and give American ships a passage through the Isthmus of Panama.

It seems to him that he has grown to be twenty feet tall, that every challenge, far from beating him down, makes him larger, and he looks forward to the next one as eagerly as a lion looks forward to its prey. It is a bully dream, just bully, and he hopes it will go on forever, but of course it doesn't.

* * * *

Alice's health has begun deteriorating once again. It is the dust, the pollution, the noise, just the incredible _pace_ of living in the city, a pace he has never noticed but which seems to be breaking down her body, and finally he decides they must move out to the country. He passes a house on Sagamore Hill, a house that fills him with certain vague longings, but it is far too large and far too expensive, and eventually he finds a small cottage that is suitable for their needs. It backs up to a forest, and while Alice lays in bed and tries to regain her strength, he secretly buys a rifle -- she won't allow firearms in the house -- and spends a happy morning hunting rabbits.

* * * *

In this dream he is standing at the edge of a clearing, rifle poised and aimed, as two bull elephants charge down upon him. He drops the first one at 40 yards, and though his gunbearer breaks and runs, he waits patiently and drops the second at ten yards. It falls so close to him that he can reach out and touch its trunk with the toe of his boot.

It has been a good day for elephant. Tomorrow he will go out after rhino.

* * * *

Alice hears the gunshots and scolds him severely. He feels terribly guilty about deceiving her and vows that he will never touch a firearm again. He is in a state of utter despair until she relents -- as she always relents -- and forgives him.

Why, he wonders as he walks through the woods, following a small winding stream to its source, does he always disappoint her when he wants nothing more than to make her happy?

* * * *

He sleeps sitting down with his back propped against a tree, and dreams not of a stream but a wild, raging river. He is on an expedition, and his leg has abscessed and he is burning with fever, and he is a

thousand miles from the nearest city. Tapirs come down to drink, and through the haze of his fever he thinks he can see a jaguar approaching him. He yells at the jaguar, sends it skulking back into the thick undergrowth. He will die someday, he knows, but it won't be here in this forsaken wilderness. Finally he takes a step, then another. The pain is excruciating, but he has borne pain before, and slowly, step by step, he begins walking along the wild river.

When he awakens it is almost dark, and he realizes that the exploration of the winding stream will have to wait for another day, that he must hurry back to his Alice before she begins to worry.

* * * *

Within a year she dies. It is not a disease or an illness, just the fading away of a fragile spirit in an even more fragile body. Roosevelt is disconsolate. He stops reading, stops walking, stops eating. Before long he, too, is on his deathbed, and he looks back on his life, the books he's written, the birds he's discovered, the taxidermy he's performed. There was a promise of something different in his youth, a hint of the outdoor life, a brief burst of political glory, but it was a road he would have had to walk alone, and he knows now, as he knew that day back when he almost lost her for the first time, that without his Alice it would have been meaningless.

_No,_ thinks Roosevelt, _I made the right choices, I walked the right road. It hasn't been a bad or an unproductive life, some of my books will live, some of my monographs will still be read -- and I was privileged to spend every moment that I could with my Alice. I am content; I would have had it no other way._

* * * *

And History weeps.

-- The End --