

In this story about faith, miracles, and alcoholism, a down-at-the-heels urban alcoholic is contrasted with a dying goddess, giving a modern, twilight-zone twist to the mythic story of the mortal who falls tragically in love with one of the immortals. MARGARET ST. CLAIR flourished in the 1950s as a fantasy writer for the post-WWII, digest-size magazines, particularly The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. This story, however, is from Beyond, one of the short-lived but distinguished competitors of F&SF in the early 1950s.

The Goddess on the Street Corner **BY MARGARET ST. CLAIR**

She spoke to him on the street corner in the late afternoon, when Paul was only a little drunk. Afterwards, he wondered how he could have thought even for a moment that she was a human being. Womanhood was a mask that she wore insecurely. Behind it was a divinity that though old, worn, thin as a thread, was inescapably real. But in that first encounter he thought she was a woman, and he yielded to an imperative that rarely touched him. He took her with him past the liquor store, the grocery, the hock shop, and up to his room.

She stumbled a little as she went over the narrow threshold. Paul put out his hand to steady her, against her white arm. And then he knew.

It was as if he had touched something finer and more subtle than human flesh, something that thrilled with a cold, glowing, radiant life. No woman's arm could feel like that. He stared at her, his heart shaking with tenderness and reverential fear. His conviction was absolute. It was all he could do to keep from throwing himself at her feet.

There was silence. She smiled faintly. He did not know how to address her, by what name to call her. At last he said, "What has happened to you?"

"We get old. Even the gods get old," she answered gravely. She was very pale, and her voice was different from what it had been in the street. He saw under her clothing her silver body was old, old beyond imagining, but still ineffably beautiful. He didn't know what to do. She was so pale he feared she would faint. But do you ask a goddess to please sit down?

Mutely he drew the room's one chair from the wall for her. As she

seated herself, he went to the cupboard and got out the sherry jug hesitantly. He put it back. He couldn't ask her to drink what he drank. At last he got brandy, from a pint he had bought last month when he was flush, and brought it to her in a glass.

She sipped at it. The blood-no, some diviner fluid-came back to her cheeks. He began to walk up and down the room, turning to look at her.

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She was sitting back in the chair, her lips curved in that faint smile. He thought: "She's like a silver lamp, like having the evening star itself, in my room." Once she raised the glass to her lips and drank. The room seemed full of the reflections of her wrists and hands.

At last he said, "Where are you going to go? What's going to become of you?"

"I don't know."

Her words gave him courage. He said, in a rush, "Stay with me. Let me take care of you. You're—you make me feel that I belong to somebody. I never felt that before. Perhaps your power will come back. Why, you're immortal! You can't get old and—you'll be young again. Won't you please stay?"

She looked at him, and he thought there was gratitude in her bright brow. Slowly she inclined her head. For an instant he felt dizzy, sickened with incredulity as he realized that the foam-born daughter of Zeus had come to live with him.

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Those were strange days. In the morning Paul would go to the liquor store and buy brandy for her, the best he could afford. It was the only human thing he had found that she could eat or drink. When he got back she would be sitting in the armchair, bathed and dressed, but quite exhausted. He would open the brandy. He never drank any of it himself; it was for her.

As the day wore on, her cheeks would be less white. He would sit on the floor beside her, quietly, in a voiceless communion. Now and again she would stretch out her divine hand and lay it on his human head. Then vast shining shapes would move through his mind. Once she told him a story, with long pauses between the words, about Achilles and the fighting around

Troy. It was as if she unfolded some bright embroidered tapestry.

At night she slept in his bed and he on a blanket on the floor beside it. He would wake two or three times during the night to make sure that she was covered and sleeping quietly. In the darkness her body gave out a faint, pale, lovely silver light. He would kneel beside the bed watching, trembling with awe. Once he thought, "She owns me. Whether she wants to or not. I'm her dog."

He hoped she was getting better. He didn't know. He wanted it too much to trust his own hope.

On the sixth day his money ran out. The brandy he had been buying cost more than the sherry he was accustomed to drink, and his pension check would not come until the end of the month. He stood shivering in front of the liquor store, thinking of cheaper brandy and looking up absently at the sky. It was a dull slate blue; he thought it would snow before night. Then he turned and walked four blocks to the Blucher Laboratories and sold them a pint of his blood.

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The nurse who took the blood was doubtful about him. She weighed him, and then said he was too thin. But Paul stood looking at her silently, and at last she pursed her lips and shrugged. He was permitted to lie down on the padded bench and have a vein in his upper arm opened. He went out with eight dollars in his hand.

He bought the bottle of brandy at the package goods store and started home with it. His footsteps were slow. He was feeling, not nauseated (the nurse had insisted on his swallowing coffee and a doughnut before she would dismiss him), but remote from himself and weak. His heart seemed to pound lightly and hollowly. The nurse had been right to be dubious over him.

It took him five minutes or so to get up the stairs. He had to stop often to rest. When he opened the door, she was sitting in the armchair. He looked at her with the objectivity induced by his feeling of exhaustion and remoteness. She was very pale. Paler, he thought, than she had been yesterday.

He opened the brandy and brought it to her in a glass. As she took it, she said, "You look tired, Paul. Do you have a girl somewhere? You were gone a long time."

For a moment he could only stare at her. A sudden bright indignation cut through the fog in his mind. Did she think, could she possibly think, that he, who sat by her feet in the day, who slept on the floor beside her in the night, could... could... ? Then the tenderness and benignity in her face reached him, and he saw the concern for him that had made her ask.

He looked away from her. "No, nothing like that. I'm... not so young any more," he answered, half in apology.

"Young!" For the first time he heard her laugh. The sound was like the sudden flash of sunlight on a wave. "Why, you're nothing but a boy. You don't know how young you are. Sit down by me on the floor, Paul."

As he obeyed, she put out one hand and tipped his face up to her. He shuddered all over at the touch. She studied him with her translucent golden eyes. Then she nodded and smiled.

"No, you're not handsome," she said, almost teasingly. "But... I cannot have lost all my power." For a moment her face changed. He saw that she was afraid. "I'll take care of you, oh, I know I can. Paul, the girls are going to be nice to you."

"That's good," he said awkwardly. In a flash of wry humor he thought, "She's optimistic because she has succeeded with even more unpromising human material than I am." Then the gentleness in her face shook him to the heart, and he repeated more warmly, "That's good."

She put her white hand over her eyes. "I never scorned human needs. Or human love."

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On the next day she questioned him lightly, trying to hide her disappointment when he replied with negatives. The day after that she asked him more doubtfully; he saw that her self-confidence was going.

On the third day he excused himself at twilight and went out to walk in the street. Shivering, he paced up and down before the liquor store, the hock shop, the grocery (his overcoat had gone long ago), and invented the details of an amorous adventure. When his imagination was satisfied, he looked at the clock in the window of the second liquor store, and was dismayed to find that less than half an hour had passed. What he was going to say had happened couldn't have happened in under an hour; he had

some forty minutes to kill. He walked back and forth, rehearsing his story and shivering. Then he ran up the stairs to her.

The light had not been turned on. Except for the pale, pale radiance from her body, the room was in darkness. He knelt by her feet, glad to be invisible, and told her his lies.

Once or twice she interrupted to put a question. He could feel that she was smiling. "So," she said, when he had come to the limits of his invention, "isn't it as I told you? Paul, didn't I tell you I'd take care of you?" There was a triumph in her voice.

"Yes. Thank you for it."

"And did you please *her*?" she asked after a moment, more gravely. "So that she gave you that final pleasure, of seeing a woman turned into more than a woman in your arms? I hope it was like that."

"It was like that."

The faint light of her body had grown stronger; he could perceive even in the dark that pleasure was making her smile. He was glad that he had lied to her. When he got to his feet and switched on the room's one weak bulb, he saw that her face was alive with her delight.

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After that he told her many lies. He would walk up and down in the dusk, shivering uncontrollably as the year advanced and the winter grew more cold, and contrive stories of warm, perfumed rooms, wide couches, and girls with satin thighs. He got to know every watch and camera behind the metal lattice of the hock shop, every bottle in the window of the liquor stores. He thought none of the merchants in his street changed their displays often enough.

Once or twice he took twenty cents from the change in his pockets and went to the picture house on the corner, out of the cold, to sit through banging westerns and dramas of wealthy society, but usually he could not afford them, and after the third time he came the nurse at the Blucher Laboratories had refused to take any more blood from him, saying scoldingly, "What you need is less sherry to drink and more to eat. Why is it that you people don't ever want to eat?"—so he no longer had that source of revenue.

He bought freesias with two dollars of the money he got for the last pint of blood. He took the flowers in their green wrapper up the stairs to her, telling her he'd had a windfall, things were looking up for him. She received his story as yet another evidence of her success in taking care of him. The room was no more full of the delicate perfume of the flowers than it was of the silver reflections of her smiling lips and the movements of her hands.

He was always afraid that she would see past his lies to the cold, dirty reality, but somehow—whether because she had lost most of her power, or because it had not ever extended in that direction—she never did. She accepted his stories unquestioningly.

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Yet, as the days passed and her body grew always lighter and more tenuous, it came to him that she was dying. His lies and his care could not help her. There were times when he thought she rallied, when he would permit himself to hope.

On Thursday he had no money left at all. He went to the laboratories. The nurse frowned at him through the window and shook her head menacingly. He went to the liquor store nearest the corner and stood about, fingering bottles, until the proprietor's back was turned. Then he put a pint of brandy in his pocket and walked out with it. She drank it slowly, growing a little less bloodless. Thursday was a good day.

Friday was bright and clear. Last night the moon had been full; it had snowed all night. The room had been full of the snow's cold radiance. He had wakened several times to look at her in the night. Now, in the hard light of morning, he could hardly see her. She was like a pale flame in the sun.

"How are you?" he asked anxiously as he prepared to leave her.

"Oh, I'm much better this morning, Paul. I almost think my power is coming back." She smiled at him. She seemed to believe it; he felt a tiny jet of hope as he went down the stair.

He had decided to try it again. He entered the liquor store and walked toward the back, where the brandy was. He waited carefully; then his hand went out. With shattering abruptness the proprietor spoke to him.

"Look here, Minton, you can't get away with this," he said sternly. "I saw you take that bottle yesterday, and I didn't say anything. You've been a good customer, and there are times when a man has to have a pint. But I'm

not going to let you do it today too. A whole pint of brandy—what did you do with it?”

“I—” Paul’s body had begun to shake.

“Well, I guess I know. You ought to’ve stuck to that sherry wine. Brandy costs too much. And there’s no use your trying to lift a pint from Jake, at the other store. I told him about you”

Paul went out. The snow had been cleared from the sidewalks, but it still lay in the street. He bit his fingers desperately. Then he went to the laboratories and, despite the nurse’s hostile frown, went in.

“Please,” he said, “I’ve just got to—please—”

She looked at him for a long time, frowning and shaking her head. But at last she shrugged her shoulders, saying angrily, “Well, if you want to kill yourself!” and let him lie down on the bench. He thought she did not take quite the full pint.

He was slow getting back to his room. He had the brandy in his pocket, but he was dizzy, lightheaded, sick. The stairs had never seemed so long.

When he opened the door, she was standing beside the bed. He looked at her foolishly. “Did you see it?” she asked.

“See what?” he answered stupidly. Her voice, for all its excitement, had sounded remote and very weak.

“Why, what I made happen in the street. Didn’t I tell you, Paul, that my power was coming back?” She smiled at him in triumph, but her body seemed to waver in the air.

“Oh. Yes, I—

“This morning I felt so much better. I thought I would try. And I succeeded. Surely you must have seen the masses of flowers near the window? Go over to the window and look out.”

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She was growing frightened. He obeyed her. He raised the sash and peered out dizzily.

For a moment he could see nothing. His eyes blurred; he had to blink them again and again. Then he made out, in the snow beneath the window, a tiny, tiny pale pink flower.

“Yes, you are right. Your power has come back to you. It is—a miracle. The whole street is full of flowers.”

Her face grew devine with laughter. She held out her hands toward him, laughing, and he reached out for them. But the unearthly, beautiful body had grown as tenuous as smoke; he could not touch her. Still she smiled at him. For a moment a most wonderful perfume hovered in the air. There was a rainbow iridescence. Then she disappeared.

He stared stupidly at the spot where she had been. It was impossible; he would not believe it. But, as the moments passed and the room remained empty and silent, he realized that it had happened. He was alone now. She was gone; she had left him. Aphrodite was dead.

She had left him. He was all alone. And now—he tried to laugh as the irony came to him, but weeping choked him—and now, whose dog was he? The brandy was in his pocket, unopened. He would not have to sell any more blood for her. Who was going to take care of him?