

Behind the Mask

The trapeze artists performed another breathtaking flip, drawing an awed gasp from the audience. It all seemed perfectly calculated and graceful.

Charlotte sat in the circus stands next to her Grandfather, watching from between her fingers. She yelped with fright as one of the men let go of his bar and plummeted, five, ten, fifteen feet, before being grasped securely at the wrist by his partner.

‘Grandpa, what if they fall?’

The old man pointed below the flying men.

‘You see the net? It’s to catch them, and stop them hurting themselves,’ he said, with a smile that drew the corners of his mouth into the folds of bristled wrinkles at either side.

Charlotte seemed satisfied with this explanation, so her Grandfather turned his attention back to the performers, now leaving to a shower of applause from the audience.

The portly little showman appeared, in his red waistcoat and jet black top hat.

‘Well how about that, folks!’ he boomed. ‘Trapeze artists from Transylvania!’ There was another scatter of applause. The tent fell quiet. ‘But now, I must introduce to you the most feared creature ever to appear in this town. Some call it the human torch, others just scream and flee...all the way from Bulgaria...Levovski, the fire conjurer!’

The audience broke into another round of applause, as a huge man walked into the middle of the ring. He wore a crimson mask, the colour of blood, and his few clothes revealed muscles bulging his whole body over. He was carrying two wooden poles, stained dark red at the ends.

The tent was thick with silence now. Charlotte peered down at him, terrified. He looked around imperiously, instantly creating an atmosphere. The lights dimmed, almost to blackness. And then...

An explosion of sound and red light assaulted Charlotte’s senses, boring straight through into her skull. She shielded herself with a skinny forearm, groped for her Grandfather’s hand, found it, squeezed it. She could hear the music now, a chaotic, rapid sequence of percussion, very dramatic and foreign.

As she lowered her arm, she could see that Levovski had erupted into life. His two poles seemed to ignite spontaneously, like struck matches, only with a deep, red glow. He twirled then now, around his body and head, extremely quickly. She could see the lines that the red flames carved into the air, before they faded, and were replaced by new, ever brighter blood red lines, in beautiful motion.

She watched in awe as he performed more and more dangerous tricks. His legs swung from beneath him as he sprang into a back flip, spat out a jet of fire, and landed, still twirling the sticks, always in time with the music. It was a satanic ballet; every move was one of grace and smoothness, and those red flames...

Levovski's huge presence, and the bloodstained light from his flames filled the entire tent, casting exaggerated shadows onto the walls and ceiling. The music got faster, and more urgent, and so did Levovski, flipping, twirling, dancing, with ease. The flames now exploded into a venomous green colour, throwing the act into a completely different mood. They sliced into the air, acid green circles arched gracefully around him. The flickering quality of the light made everything appear to be on fire, even Charlotte's captivated, admiring face.

Finally, he threw his sticks into the air, and regurgitated a blast of green flame, which instantly extinguished, along with the sticks, and music, throwing the cavernous room into total darkness and silence.

There was a moment of shocked silence, and the crowd exploded into applause, different from the trapeze artists' almost polite reception. The auditorium became clear as the lights came up. Charlotte stood as Levovski ambled back down the performers' tunnel at the far end of the tent. The ringmaster hurried into view, sweating, with an astounded look on his face.

'Well WHAT ABOUT THAT, folks!'

Charlotte and her Grandfather were leaving the tent, along the dim tunnel among the slow, progressive trudging of the crowd. The sharp air from outside exploded into Charlotte's eyes, sharply reducing her pupil size, as she adjusted from the dim interior of the musty circus tent, the harsh, cold light intrusive after Levovski's warm red glow.

She looked around, taking in her surroundings, seeing the circus performers despondently heaving themselves into the cabs and backs of battered pick-up trucks, ready to set off for the next show.

She could not stop thinking about Levovski, the majesty of his coloured, spinning lights. She really wanted to meet him, if only to shake his hand. His graceful, yet erratic dancing had moved her.

Just as Charlotte and her Grandfather approached their car, she caught sight of him climbing into an ancient pick-up truck, throwing in a bundle of belongings in before him. Without thinking, and despite her Grandfather's protests, she ran over to the truck. Levovski heard her, and turned around, surprised. He was still wearing the mask, and as she looked into his blazing eyes, she wondered if his acts were just an outward manifestation of the fire burning within him. She spoke.

‘Excuse me, Mr Levovski, I just want to congratulate you on your performance,’ she said, the formality of her words far exceeding her ten years. Levovski looked down at her for a moment, as if contemplating something inside his head, then pulled his mask off.

Charlotte gasped. Standing before her was — a woman! A woman with shoulder length, auburn hair. Levovski began to speak, placing her hand on Charlotte’s shoulder.

‘You are... uh... good child,’ she struggled in a heavy Eastern Europe accent. She looked into the middle distance again, as if considering something, then extended the muscular arm holding the mask. ‘Keep,’ she said decisively, patting Charlotte’s head. Charlotte was stunned. She looked down at the mask in her hand, peered into the eyeholes.

‘Thank you,’ she said, looking up, but Levovski, was already in the truck, moving away.

‘Goodbye!’ she called, in that gruff voice.

Charlotte watched the truck disappear past a clump of trees at the edge of the circus plot. She ran back to the car, where her Grandfather was waiting, thankfully, the familiar smile on his face. She held up the mask, also smiling.