

Ludvik Švab

Humor in Dreams (II)

A special case of the connection between a dream and a joke is when we tell a joke in a dream, and usually embarrass ourselves by doing so.

In a dream I had last year (and which I did not record) I assert myself in a society with an anecdote that is always a roaring success. I am not allowed to speak for a long time, and when I'm finally given the chance, in the course of my speech I find that I have forgotten the punch line. Out of desperation I resort to vulgarity to achieve raciness, and end with "they fucked the handle," and I can already see what a disgusting fool I have made of myself.

In this case, one of the decisive factors undoubtedly was a "diurnal residue"; the day before I was telling a good, but rather crude anecdote. When I was about a halfway through, I realised there was a physically disabled person among the audience who would be hurt by the punch line. On the spot, I decided to save the day by deliberately spoiling the punch line, but I was unable to get rid of embarrassing feeling even later.

Are there, however, dreams, whose wit and humorous situations do not disappear even after waking up? It is not quite clear. If so, such dreams are, as a rule, lucid ones, i.e., dreams during which we are aware that we are dreaming and start acting "daringly." Such dreams, which tend to occur during half-sleep before waking, retain an oneiric lightness and absurdity to which the approaching waking state also lends a certain wittiness that we no longer experience as an extraneous element. As an example of such witty punch line, I can mention one from the 1960s, which I may have recorded, but don't have the record at hand at the moment. (It would be interesting to compare my current account with the possibly existing original record.)

I went to a film screening at the Flora Cinema, which I often visit both in dream and waking state, and where I am always enchanted by the obvious pointlessness of the way the staircase—a very pompous one—runs to the balcony and to the ground floor. The film is over, I am leaving the movie theater and while on the steps of the staircase it occurs to me that all this is right now only happening in a dream. And since it implies that anything is allowed, I boldly enter the manager's office and ask him to screen for me some of the pornographic films that he certainly has at his disposal. The manager defends himself by saying that such a thing is absurd, that he would get into trouble, and so on. I interrupt him boldly telling him all this is just a dream, so what trouble is he afraid of? To which the manager promptly responds: "Yeah, but you're going to wake up from the dream, while we're going to be in trouble because of you".

Both in the dream and after I woke up suddenly, I was astonished by the punch line,

the structure of which resembles the oneiric logic of a passage from *Alice in Wonderland*. Actually, I was more pleased by the manager's answer than I would have been by watching pornographic films; even in the waking state I am not interested in realistic recordings of sexual acts and various perversions, and the few I have already seen are enough for me. My request, then, was motivated more by a need to be daring and an intention to take

advantage of the freedom given to me by the possibility to control my dream rather than an actual desire for the requested erotica, and that Lewis Carroll-like response excited me more than anything else. If I were to accept an explanation in this case by the intervention of a dream censor, I would accredit the representative of this suppressive institution more wit than he deserves.

It seems that the brevity which Freud values so much in jokes is quite obvious in such lucid dreams just before waking, can prevent longer development of the comic situations which, in my opinion, characterize humor, because of the very lack of dreamtime for such an endeavor. And yet I had such a dream, which I recorded immediately upon waking. It was a long dream, and the humour became only manifested in its last, and by no means short, phase.

Karol Baron, *Discussion*, 1972

(November 19, 1981) ... I am going on a tram in the city. From the windows I can see large signboards on the marquees of the movie theaters, advertising the latest films to be shown. I am surprised that those are American high-budget films. The one that catches my attention is a Marx Brothers movie called "Brass." The Czech translation, however, doesn't correspond to the original American title—which I forgot. On the other hand, "Brass" is not a bad title at all, considering the plot. I realize that, with the three starring Marx brothers being already dead, this must be one of their older films, but I cannot recall any one like this. And suddenly, I can see the story unfolding: Chico goes door to door offering brass, old brass objects, in other words trash,

that, of course, nobody wants to buy. Presently, we can see Chico's finger pushing the doorbell buttons. The keys are being turned inside as the tenants of the skyscraper lock out the uninvited door-to-door peddler. (Actually, it is only an old hundred-story tenement building.) But the door opens to one of the apartments on the upper floor. Its tenant is Groucho, who lets Chico in only to explain to him in great detail that he does not need anything and is not going to buy anything from him. Chico is persistent, so Groucho calls the building manager to kick out the uninvited visitor. The building manager is no one else but Harpo, who must laboriously climb up all the stairs, since the elevators have stopped working. Before Harpo reaches the apartment, the situation has changed. Chico convinced Groucho to play cards, which doesn't prove helpful since Groucho wins all the brass

(Continued on page 4)



Karol Baron, *Mutants at the fence*, 1970

H. P. Lovecraft

Dreams (II)

When I was 6 or 7 I used to be tormented constantly with a peculiar type of recurrent nightmare in which a monstrous race of entities (called by me “Night-Gaunts”—don’t know where I got hold of the name) used to snatch me up by the stomach (bad digestion?) & carry me off through infinite leagues of back air over the towers of dead & horrible cities. They would finally get me into a grey void where I could see the needlelike pinnacles of enormous mountains miles below. Then they would let me drop—& as I gained momentum in my Icarus-like plunge I would start awake in such a panic that I hated to think of sleeping again. The “night-gaunts” were black, lean, rubbery things with bared, barbed tails, bat-wings, & *no faces at all*. Undoubtedly I derived the image from the jumbled memory of Doré’s drawings (largely the illustrations to “Paradise Lost”) which fascinated me in waking hours. They had no voices & their only form of real torture was their habit of tickling my stomach (digestion again) before snatching me up & swooping away with me. I sometimes had the vague notion that they lived in the black burrows honeycombing the pinnacle of some incredibly high mountains somewhere. They seemed to come in flocks of 25 or 50, & would sometimes fling me one to the other. Night after night I dreamed the same horror with only minor variants—but I never struck those hideous mountain peaks before waking. If I had . . . well, the point is that these things decreased rapidly as I grew older. Each year I believed less & less of the supernatural, & when I was 8 I began to be interested in science & cast off my last shred of religious & other superstitious belief. I do not recall many “night-gaunt” dreams after I was 8—or *any* after I was 10 or 11. But Yuggoth, what an impression they made on me! 34 years later I chose them as the theme of one of my “Fungi.”

(From a letter to Virgil Finlay, dated October 24, 1936)



Gustave Doré, illustration for John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, 1866

(...) I have lately had another odd dream—especially singular because in it I possessed another personality—a personality as definite & vivid as the Lovecraft personality which characterises my waking hours.

My name was Dr. Eben Spencer, & I was dressing before a mirror in my own room, in the house where I was born, in a small village (name missing) of northern New York State. It was the first time I had donned civilian clothes in three years, for I was an army surgeon with the rank of 1st Lieut. I seemed to be home on a furlough—slightly wounded. On the wall was a calendar reading “FRIDAY, JULY 7, 1864.” I was very glad to be in regular attire again, though my suit was not a new one, but one left over from 1861. After carefully tying my stock, I donned my coat & hat, took a cane from a rack downstairs, & sallied forth upon the village street. Soon a very young man of my acquaintance came up to me with an air of anxiety & began to speak in guarded accents. He wished me to go with him to his brother—my professional colleague Dr. Chester—whose actions were greatly alarming him. I, having been his best friend, might have some influence in getting him to speak freely—for surely he had much to tell. The doctor had for the past two years been conducting secret experiments in a laboratory in the attic of his home, & beyond that locked door he would admit no one but himself. Sickening odours were often detected near that door . . . & odd sounds were at times not absent. The doctor was aging rapidly; lines of care—& of something else—were creeping into his dark thin face, & his hair was rapidly going grey. He would remain in that locked room for dangerously long intervals

without food, & seemed uncannily saturnine. All questioning from the younger brother was met with scorn & rage—with perhaps a little uneasiness; so the brother was much worried, & stopped me on the street for advice & aid. I went with him to the Chester house—a white structure of two stories & attic in a pretty yard with a picket fence. It was in a quiet side street, where peace seemed to abide despite the trying nature of the times. In the darkened parlour, where I waited for some time, was a marble-topped table, much haircloth furniture, & several pleasing whatnots covered with pebbles, curios, & bric-a-brac. Soon Dr. Chester came down—& he had aged. He greeted me with a saturnine smile, & I began to question him, as tactfully as I could, about his strange actions. At first he was rather defiant & insulting—he said with a sort of leer, “Better not ask, Spencer! Better not ask!” Then when I grew persistent (for by this time I was interested on my own account) he changed abruptly & snapped out, “Well, if you must know, come up!” Up two flights of stairs we plodded, & stood before the locked door. Dr. Chester opened it, & *there was an odour*. I entered after him, young Chester bringing up the rear. The room was low but spacious in area, & had been divided into two parts by an oddly incongruous red plush portiere. In the half next the door was a dissecting table, many bookcases, & several imposing cabinets of chemical & surgical instruments. Young Chester & I remained here, whilst the doctor went behind the curtain. Soon he emerged, bearing on a large glass swab what appeared to be a human

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

arm, neatly severed just below the elbow. It was damp, gelatinous, & bluish-white, & the fingers were without nails. "Well, Spencer," said Dr. Chester sneeringly, "I suppose you've had a good deal of amputation practice in the army. What do you think, professionally, of this job?" I had seen clearly that this was not a human arm, & said sarcastically, "You are a better sculptor than doctor, Chester. This is not the arm of any living thing." And Chester replied in a tone that made my blood congeal. "*Not yet, Spencer, not yet!*" Then he disappeared again behind the portiere & emerged once more, bringing another & slightly larger arm. Both were left arms. I felt sure that I was on the brink of a great revelation, & awaited with impatience the tantalisingly deliberate motions of my sinister colleague. "This is only the beginning, Spencer," he said as he went behind the curtain for a third time. "Watch the curtain!" And now ends the fictionally available part of my dream, for the residue is grotesque anticlimax. I have said that I was in civilian clothes for the first time since '61—& naturally I was rather self-conscious. As I waited for the final revelation I caught sight of my reflection in the glass door of an instrument case, & discovered that my very carefully tied stock was awry. Moving to a long mirror, I sought the adjust it, but the black bow proved hard to fashion artistically. And then the whole scene began to fade—& damn the luck! I awaked in the distressful year of 1920, with the personality of H.P. Lovecraft restored! I have never seen Dr. Chester, or his young brother, or that village, since. I do not know what village it was. I never heard the name of Eben Spencer before or since. Some dream!

(...)

I was walking or rather wading through a seemingly interminable and treeless marsh, under a leaden sky. My companion was an old man—a man so old that he frightened me, although I felt that I knew, or had once known him. His white hair streamed about his shoulders, and his beard nearly trailed the ground. Despite his age, he was stronger than I, for he set a pace that fatigued me. Then suddenly I saw a lonely house upon the horizon ahead. It was a very ancient house—a New-England farmhouse of the type built from 1640 to 1680, with a peaked and exceedingly steep roof, and shingled over all its surface. It appeared to be rotten—in the last stages of decay. As we approached the house, the old man said to me, "It has not changed." I did not reply. Then he said, "For two hundred years it has not changed." I remained silent. Then he said, "You were foolish to wait and be re-born; I am wise, and have lived all along." As he said this, I fancied I remembered him. He was now clad in a garment so discoloured and nondescript that I could not analyse it—it may have been a mere robe made of old burlap sacks sewed together—but as I have remembered him he was young, clad in high boots and red coat, and having a black full-bottomed wig and three-cornered hat. His face in this vague memory was smooth, although bluish from the shaven roots of a prodigious growth of beard. Then I said, "It has not changed." We approached and entered the house, finding the interior a mass of fallen plaster and general ruin. Up a rotting staircase we began to climb, and the old man said, "We shall find it just as before." And I said, "The thing is still the same after two centuries, we shall find it above." Still we climbed. The house had but two stories, but the top of the ancient staircase seemed no nearer. Up, up, up—until the walls about us melted into mist and swirling cloud—yet ever on and up—on and up—"We shall find it as of yore—it has not changed." On and up—on and up—and there ended the dream!

(...)

I was in an ancient castle at the foot of a damp stone staircase. All about me were men-at-arms—every churl of them fast asleep! I seemed enraged, and shook several of them, yet could not rouse them. The castle seemed to be my own. I then clanked interminably up the staircase—for I had on armour and a heavy sword—until sounds from the plain

below arrested my attention. Peering down through a narrow window I beheld our men of England, mounted, and with red tabards bearing the golden lions of Britain over their armour, in mortal combat with an unknown foe. The foe was also mounted and armoured, and wore tabards of yellow with red dragons depicted thereon. The fight grew daemionically furious, and I experienced a wild desire to get into it. Then the leader of our men rode out before the army and challenged the leader of the foe to single combat. The challenge was accepted and the two armies drew back, leaving an open space between. The leader of the foe was a mighty figure in his heavy armour, and the fight was fierce. Finally, the foeman was unhelmeted by our leader—but *beneath that helm there was no head*. At this moment the whole force of the enemy seemed to melt from sight, and I also felt a change. No longer was I at the window, but on a horse before the ranks of our men, a gigantic sword unsheathed in my hand. At this point I remembered the window on the staircase, and recalled with a start the face of our leader had been the exact replica of my own. I glanced about, and on my left saw the form of a vast and interminable castle whose turrets reached up into the clouds beyond visibility. Then the dream abruptly changed, and though I did not awake, was conscious of drifting down some hideous stagnant river in a rotting boat, between terrible overhanging cliffs of basalt. There was no wind, and I wondered why I moved down so still a stream. The insects were of strange form, and made me shudder as their numbers increased and they began to light all over me. Then I really did awake—I had been sleeping at my table, my head resting on my arm.

(...)

(From a letter to Alfred Galpin and Maurice W. Moe, dated [January] 1920)

Last night I had a brief but typical dream. I was standing on the East Providence shore of the Seekonk River, about three quarters of a mile south of the foot of Angell Street, at some unearthly nocturnal hour. The tide was flowing out *horribly*—exposing parts of the river-bed never before exposed to human sight. Many persons lined the banks, looking at the receding waters & occasionally glancing at the sky. Suddenly a blinding flare—reddish in hue—appeared high in the southwestern sky; & something descended to earth in a cloud of smoke, striking the Providence shore near the Red Bridge—about an eighth of a mile south of Angell Street. The watchers on the banks screamed in horror "It has come—It has come at last!—& fled away into the deserted streets. But I ran toward the bridge instead of away; for I was more curious than afraid. When I reached it I saw hordes of terror-stricken people in hastily donned clothing fleeing across from the Providence side as from a city accursed by the gods. There were pedestrians, many of them falling by the way, & vehicles of all sorts. Electric cars—the old small cars unused in Providence for six years—were running in close procession—eastward away from the city on both of the double tracks. Their motormen were frantic, & small collisions were numerous. By this time the river-bed was fully exposed—only the deep channel filled with water like a serpentine stream of death flowing through a pestilential plain in Tartarus. Suddenly a glare appeared in the West, & I saw the dominant landmark of the Providence horizon—the dome of the Central Congregational Church, silhouetted weirdly against a background of red. And then, silently, that dome abruptly caved in & fell out of sight in a thousand fragments. And from the fleeing populace arose such a cry as only the damn'd utter—& I waked up, confound the luck, with the very deuce of a headache!

(From a letter to Reinhart Kleiner, dated May 21, 1920)

"Nyarlahotep"* is a nightmare—an actual phantasm of my own, with the first paragraph written *before I fully awaked*. I have been feeling execrably of late—whole weeks have passed without relief from

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 1)

goods that Chico has brought to sell. Harpo, not knowing what or who he is supposed to kick out, sits down and joins the other two in the game of cards. In the next game, Groucho, a wealthy man, loses to Harpo not only all the brass, but also all his property. Harpo wants to take with him everything he has won, but the other two players do not want to let him leave. Eventually, Chico proposes that all three of them become partners in the brass business. (Here the dream ends; perhaps it ended earlier and I, while half-asleep, completed the opening scenes of the movie, which I then considered as one of the best by the famous trio—and, actually, I still do.)

The postscript I jotted down upon waking suggests a noticeable intervention by the already more freely controllable state of semi-sleep, in which the convergence of dream and joke proclaimed by Freud—avoiding the unpleasurable and obtaining the pleasurable—seems to thrive. (...) After all, not only humor, but also the most pleasurable erotic dreams from which we wake up as if intoxicated seem to take place in a state governed by these mental forces.

Finally, what would also be worth mentioning is the role of a dream in jokes. Quite recently I have heard this anecdote—of course, a Jewish one:



Karol Baron, *Mutant*, 1972

Mr. Kohn tells his friend what a terrible dream he had. He spent all night on a tram going up and down Wenceslas Square. He was unable to get off because the tram did not stop and open its doors. Mr. Roubitchek trumps him saying that his dream was much worse. Brigitte Bardot rings the bell at his door at midnight and asks him to make love to her immediately because it is her life's desire. "What's so horrible about that?" Kohn asks. "Only that when that's about to happen, there's another ring at the door. It's Sofia Loren asking the very same thing. So, I've got these two women on my hands and... don't know who to start with." "You idiot, you could have called me and ask to come and help you!" Kohn shouts. To which

Roubitchek resignedly responds: "How could I have while you were still riding on that tram!"

Whoever analyses this dream from the perspective of its aggressive tendencies and latent homoerotic desire, will certainly find very few opponents. And yet, it's marked with far a more substantial trait of the desire to share a dream, which we know—in its romantic form—from the film *Peter Ibbetson* and which due to nowadays people's shyness can manifest itself only through a sarcastic grin.

August 1982

(Translated from the Czech by Dagmar Štěpánková)

(Continued from page 3)

headache & dizziness, & for a long time three hours was my utmost limit for continuous work. (I seem better now.) Added to my steady ills was an unaccustomed ocular trouble which prevented me from reading fine print—a curious tugging of nerves & muscles which rather startled me during the weeks it persisted. Amidst this gloom came the nightmare of nightmares—the most realistic & horrible I have experienced since the age of ten—whose stark hideousness & ghastly oppressiveness I could but feebly mirror in my written phantasy. . . . The first phase was a general sense of undefined apprehension—vague terror which appeared universal. I seemed to be seated in my chair clad in my old grey dressing-gown, reading a letter from Samuel Loveman. The letter was unbelievably realistic—thin, 8½ x 13 paper, violet ink signature, & all—& its contents seemed portentous. The dream-Loveman wrote:

"Don't fail to see NYARLATHOTEP if he comes to Providence. He is horrible—horrible beyond anything you can imagine—but wonderful. He haunts one for hours afterward. I am still shuddering at what he showed."

I had never heard the name NYARLATHOTEP before, but seemed to understand the allusion. Nyarlathotep was a kind of itinerant showman or lecturer who held forth in public halls & aroused widespread fear & discussion with his exhibitions. These exhibitions consisted of two parts—first, a horrible—possibly prophetic—cinema reel; & later some extraordinary experiments with scientific & electrical apparatus. As I received the letter, I seemed to recall that Nyarlathotep was already in Providence; & that he was the cause of the shocking fear which brooded over all people. I seemed to remember that persons had whispered to me in awe of his horrors, & warned me not to go near him. But Loveman's dream-letter decided me, & I began to dress for a trip down town to see Nyarlathotep. The details are quite vivid—I had trouble tying my cravat—but the indescribable terror overshadowed all else. As I left the house I saw thongs of men plodding through the night, all whispering affrightedly & bound in one direction. I fell in with them, afraid yet eager to see & hear the freat, the obscure, the unutterable Nyarlathotep. After that the dream followed the course of the enclosed story almost exactly,

save that it did not go quite so far. It ended a moment after I was drawn into the black yawning abyss between the snows, & whirled tempestuously about in a vortex with shadows that once were men! (...) As I was drawn into the abyss I emitted a resounding shriek (I thought it must have been audible, but my aunt says it was not) & the picture ceased.

(From a letter to Rheinart Kleiner, dated December 14, 1920)

* A reference to the prose-poem written in late 1920. "Nyarlathotep" is also the title of sonnet XXI of *Fungi* from *Yuggoth*.



Sidney Herbert Sime, *The City of Never*, 1912

(...) My dream of the black cat city was very fragmentary. The place was built of stone & clung to the side of a cliff like some of the towns drawn by Sime for Dunsany's stories. There are towns more or less like it in Spain. The place seemed to have been built by & for human beings aeons ago, but its present feline inhabitants had evidently lived there for ages. Nothing actually happened in this dream—it was just an isolated picture of the place, with the cats moving about in a rational & orderly manner, evidently in the performance of definite duties.

(From a letter to William Lumley, dated June 20, 1936)

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