

another fragment from a work in progress

*working title: **Clouds Without Water***

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[...]

Strictly speaking, the prognostication engine was a resounding success. Hillard Millrawney was less than completely satisfied, however, and this was why: He was stuck. And abandoned.

The chief source of Millrawney's misfortune depended from the fact that since he was stuck inside--sweaty and horizontal on his back on the enclosed and padded bench with uncomfortably bent knees--there was no way, effectively, to screen the supplicants for the engine's assistance. This was, in Millrawney's opinion, rather worse than merely being stuck.

Lacking cues from Dr. Anselm, who has abandoned him and the Automatic Orgonic Prognostication Engine for Ladies (Also a Documented Preventative for the Ailment of Hysteria) shortly before ten o'clock, Master Millrawney's vivid imagination worked, alternately, both for and against him--trying to guess if the woman on the seat was a woman of his acquaintance, conjecturing which woman of his acquaintance might be astride the probe, and--in a couple of notable instances--wondering if the supplicant were actually a woman after all and not a man or some kind of animal hijacked from the fair's livestock pens!

However, there was a steady stream of shillings sliding down the brass track into the hydraulic counter/sorter, and the good Doctor Anselm's orgone refluxor was, quite emphatically, replenishing Millrawney's supply of essential fluids and humours, as was evidenced by the lack of flaccidity in the membrane-covered "probe" upright in the supplicant's seat.

Sometime just shy of noon the supplicants had ceased to bother with entering their questions by stacking the

magnetized type in the input tray. The supplicants now simply dropped a shilling in the slot, placed the secondary orgone collector mask over her (his? its?!) nose and mouth, and bounced up and down on the probe for a number of minutes until the bell sounded and the seat raised itself over the level of the probe. Dr. Anselm's primary collector distilled the sexual secretions from both sides of the probe's membrane into etheric spirits that wafted, by way of tiny tubes and a spring-powered bellows in the supplicant's seat, back into Millrawney's mask.

Perhaps the popularity of Dr. Anselm's Automatic Orgonic Prognostication Engine for Ladies (Also a Documented Preventative for the Ailment of Hysteria) was simply for the rental of the mask, Millrawney contemplated. He was certainly grateful for his own mask. While the orgonic vapours were musky, they had a pleasant tang and completely obscured the scent of the nearby livestock pens.

Except for the time he was certain someone had brought a goat into the booth, that is. The question had been, "What is the nature of the ailment in my udder?" Millrawney's orgone-inspired response had been rapid, consciousness heavily influenced by etheric spirits: "After the gibbous moon has risen, take by nostril four drams of the powdered distillate of the coca-leaf and half a dram of scrapings from the roasted skin of the leopard frog and a quarter-dram of inexpensive tobacco snuff. The swelling and inflammation should abate before the moon is full."

Millrawney could tell from the sounds of indelicate giggling that the canvas-draped and enclosed booth was no longer limited--as the expensive signery emphatically suggested--to one person at a time. (The crew had also been less than gentle with Millrawney's "probe".) Yet still, at the ringing of the bell, he did his best to use his clever assembly of levers and magnets to drop type into the output box, forming coherent responses each time to the last question asked, prior to the noontime chimes: "Will my husband ever find me out?"

His last ventured response, "Run like Hell! As of this very minute he is on to you and is buying a whip four stalls down!" set off three simultaneous high-pitched squeals and a mass-exodus from the tent's front area.

Perhaps a whole five minutes would pass before the next coin would drop.

Millrawney--less a full partner of Dr. Anselm's in this affair and more of an assistant recruited from among the hired help at Anselm's estate for the shape and size of his "probe" and his willingness to keep quiet about the nature of the Prognostication Engine's workings--had already, mentally, spent a portion of his meager share of the shillings on new signs that would read, "For the Love of God, Please Refrain from Bringing your Livestock into the Booth," and "Notice: Gentleman Supplicants are Welcome in Our Other Booth at the Rear of This Tent."

[more to come...]