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Cyril Gansdt just happened to be around that night when the earthquake released the strange being who called himself Mik'l. But Mik'l thought that Cyril had helped him, so he gave him—

The OMINOUS BEQUEST

by WARREN KASTEL



From the depths of the hole came a weird creature, and Cyril backed up in alarm . . .

THERE were fleecy white clouds in the sky, and they scudded along like little lambs.

A warm breeze was blowing, rustling the leaves of a large oak tree which stood tall and stately on the slope of a small hill. The Moon was shining brightly, and its rays, filtering through the leaves of the tree threw mottled patterns of silver on the grass.

The hill made a pretty picture in the moonlight, thought Cyril Gansdt, Ph.D., as he sat with his back to the tree, arms clasped loosely around his knees. It was a nice little hill—an innocent little hill—not at all the kind of hill one would suspect of hiding a great secret, especially on a beautiful night like this.

But that secret, hidden beneath tons of earth for untold centuries, was soon to be divulged. For in a few moments, the hill would cease to be.

Cyril loved the night, much more so than the day. And he loved to sit against that oak tree and look up over the hill at the Moon. It was such a beautiful Moon, smiling down upon the Earth, a prize among the treasures of the sky.

Cyril would have given half his life to travel to the Moon, and though he hated the hypocrisy of the thought, he sometimes told himself he would gladly sell his soul to the devil for such an experience.

The Man in the Moon always intrigued Cyril. He often wondered if there was such a being—then he chided himself for wondering about such an impossible thing. And yet, the Man in the Moon always smiled when Cyril looked up at him—as if he knew a great secret and took pleasure in the fact that he alone knew it.

The night was always so peaceful around that hill. That was why Cyril always came there. After a trying day

at the University of Florence, in sunny Italy, the soft cool breezes that played around the little hill were a restorant to his worn nerves. Not that Cyril detested lecturing, especially to Astronomy classes, it just seemed that the day was long, because he looked forward so much to the night.

Somewhere overhead came the soft song of a nightbird. Cyril leaned back against the tree and sighed. He was content.

Deep within the hill—so little in comparison to the mountains that lifted sleepy peaks skyward at the horizon's end, titanic forces were stirring. They yawned, and the yawn was a dull rumbling roar. Cyril suddenly felt a tremor in the earth beneath him. Then the forces became a thundering voice whose vibrations shook the very ground.

The clouds still resembled little white lambs, and the Moon continued to shine. But the wind had died away as if expectant of some terrible thing to come. And then that something came.

The hill rose, hopped, and then erupted. Huge pieces of rock and earth slid down on all sides. The lone oak tree at its base swayed, and Cyril clambered to his feet in fright and dashed to safety. Behind him the tree suddenly crashed to the ground.

The hill was no longer a hill, it was a nearly level mound. And the forlorn remains of the tree lay buried in scattered heaps of dirt and rock. The desolate roots pointed to the heavens, and the wind was blowing again.

The Moon shone brightly into a large hole which the tree had covered. Cyril stared at that hole, and suddenly began to tremble.

FROM the shadowy depths came a strange being. The strangest being Cyril had ever seen. It remotely resembled some huge ungainly bat—and

yet Cyril instinctively knew it was not a bat. It had wings that were leathery, as all bats have, and its mouth hid sharp little teeth. But though it looked ungainly, it was not. It skipped gracefully over the heaps of rock and dirt, and spreading its wings, flew over the remains of the oak tree, to land not twenty feet from where Cyril was standing—not knowing whether to run, cross himself, or faint.

Cyril was a very broadminded person, though he had never actually believed in the supernatural sciences. And yet, at that moment, his senses told him that this creature could not possibly be any product of the material world he knew so well. Just as he began to experience the first vague evidences of fear, it saw him.

"Oh! So it was you who freed me!"

Cyril knew the words had not been spoken in the way he and his kind spoke, but nevertheless he heard them. The voice came from nowhere in particular, and yet seemed to come from all directions. How the creature did it Cyril could not tell.

"Well, it was you—wasn't it?" The being tucked one leathery wing beneath its head and gazed at Cyril questioningly.

"I—I don't know—who are you!" Cyril stepped back and prepared to run.

"Me? Why my name's Mik-I, I'm an angel."

"An angel!" Courage flowed back into Cyril's veins. "You—you're crazy, an angel has wings, and—"

"Well, I have wings."

Cyril had to admit that it did, but he was not daunted.

"But angels are beautiful—and you, you're—"

"Who says they are?"

"Why, why everyone!"

"Have you ever seen one before?"

"No, but—"

"Has anyone you know ever seen one?"

"No—"

"Well then, how do you know they're beautiful?"

Cyril was stumped. He didn't know just what to say. It was so preposterous—that this creature had the audacity to claim that it was an angel! And, yet. . . .

"Come, let's not dabble over personalities. I'm indebted to you, you know, for freeing me from that dreadful tomb. You did a nice job of it, I must say."

"But I—"

"Tut, now, don't try to deny it. It was a marvelous job. Lucifer himself couldn't have done better." The angel spread his wings and inhaled the crisp night air. "Ah, but it's good to taste an atmosphere again—not that I need it of course, but good just the same."

"This is too ridiculous!" stormed Cyril, his indignation getting the better of his astonishment.

"What is?"

"You!"

The angel shrugged and sighed. "And to think I once laughed at Puck for calling you mortals fools!" He leaned against the torn tree roots and gazed at Cyril in disapproval. "But I must not forget that I owe you a debt of gratitude. Come now, I must do something for you in return. What'll it be?"

"Leave me alone and get out of here. You've spoiled enough of my night as it is." Cyril felt that he should be angry, and was almost succeeding in making himself believe he was.

"Is that any way to talk when I offer you something in return for your services?" The angel's voice took on an offended note. Cyril suddenly felt ashamed of himself and hung his head.

"Oh, that's all right," soothed the angel, noting Cyril's penitence, "per-

haps I have been a bit hasty, but come now, what can I give you? Isn't there anything you want?"

CYRIL thought swiftly. The whole thing was obviously a joke, but he might as well humor the thing, whatever it was, along. What had he to lose? He thought hard for something to ask for, but for the first time in his life, couldn't find anything he especially wanted. He was about to give the whole thing up in disgust when he suddenly recalled an old saying which ran: "Give him the Earth and he'd wish for the Moon." Cyril looked up at the bat-like being and got an idea.

"Very well, if you mean what you say, then give me the Moon!" He puffed his chest up in triumph. That would call the creature's bluff.

"The Moon. Yes—hmm. You are an ambitious mortal aren't you!"

"Well," retorted Cyril, beginning to feel angry again as he saw his bluff working, "you said I could have anything I wanted!"

"Oh, you can have it if you want it, but you really don't know what you're getting into. Are you sure there's nothing else you might want instead?"

"No! It's the Moon or nothing!" Cyril folded his arms impatiently and glared across at the angel.

"Very well, since you want it, it's yours—but don't say I didn't warn you!" He spread his wings wide as if to wash any blame from his conscience. Cyril began to feel uneasy.

"Now that I've got it, how am I going to get there?"

"Oh, that's no trick at all. I'll take you. But here, you better put this on, it'll save you a lot of trouble out in space." He drew a small diamond shaped ring from some hidden source about him, and handed it to Cyril.

"Slip it on, you'll need it."

Cyril took the proffered ring and examined it suspiciously. There was a curious jewel set in the center of a metal casement. It emanated a soft blue radiance, but outside of that, seemed perfectly harmless. He slipped it on and immediately felt a tingling sensation shoot up his arm and over him. He almost pulled it off, in apprehension, but then the tingling stopped.

Cyril had never felt so good in all his life. He didn't notice the wind, and he could hold his breath as long as he wanted to. He tried taking a deep breath to see how great his powers were, but nothing happened. True, his chest expanded all right, but that was all. Then it dawned on him that he really wasn't breathing. For a moment he became frightened, but the angel reassured him.

"It's quite alright. That's why I gave it to you. There's no air in space, or on the Moon, you know, and too, it's dreadfully cold up there. But you won't notice it as long as you keep the ring on. Of course you'll have to have a new one every half an eon, but that's too far away to worry about now. I always said Otto deserved a vacation for thinking that one up!"

"Who's Otto?" demanded Cyril, new respect for the angel in his voice.

"Oh, you'll meet him in due time. He'll probably welcome you with open arms, which is more than Lucifer will do. But that's your lookout, not mine. Well, are you ready to go?"

Cyril was ready all right—ready to make tracks home. But he knew that if he did that he would profess himself a coward, and Cyril was not a coward.

There were a lot of things he would have liked to ask the angel beforehand—the whole business was too mysterious. But the angel was impatient, so Cyril decided to take the gamble. After

all, he'd always wanted a chance to go to the Moon, hadn't he? Cyril wasn't so sure, now that the moment was at hand, that he did.

THE angel pulled his wings together, and Cyril climbed on his back. His heart was in his mouth as they rose into the air—higher, and higher. He was almost afraid to look down, and when he found the courage to do so, was astounded to find the Earth no larger than a good-sized medicine ball. The Moon on the other had grown immense.

Space was cold and dark, but Cyril didn't notice it. In fact he was quite warm. It was a weird void they journeyed through, soundless, oppressive. And the immensity of the Moon kept creeping closer. Cyril could make out the myriad towering peaks that stretched towards the heavens. He could see the desolate waste that was the Sea of Serenity. And then Cyril saw something that made him gasp.

A gigantic face peered at him from the side of a huge mountain. A face so immense its size staggered him. But it was not a human face, it was a face of stone. And as they drew close to the desolate surface, Cyril made out a figure clinging to the side of that mountain. It was the figure of a man.

He was straddled on the pinnacle surface of a stone ear, a massive steel chisel in one hand, and an enormous sledge in the other. He swung the hammer in powerful strokes against the chisel and flakes of stone flew in all directions, floating leisurely downward in the slight gravity.

He resembled some herculean wrestler, and the massive hammer, though its weight was minimized in the Moon's feeble attraction, was like a toy in his hand. His hair was the brightest red Cyril had ever seen, and his eyes were

a sparkling blue. He stopped his labors as they approached and stared up at them in surprise. Then:

"Well speak of the devil! Ho there! Mik-I! And where have you been keeping yourself these past centuries? By the wrath of Lucifer but I'm glad to see you!"

The angel alighted softly on the scarred surface of the Moon, and Cyril slid from his back to sway uncertainly in the light gravity. The angel spread a leathery wing skyward to where the giant sat on the great stone ear, and waved a greeting.

"Hello there, Otto! Come down, I've got someone I want you to meet. He's come to relieve you of your duties, though he doesn't as yet know it!"

"What's that?" bellowed Otto from atop the mountain, though he really said nothing at all. To Cyril, the voices seemed to come from somewhere in his brain—as if he didn't need ears to hear them. "What did you say about someone relieving me? Wait—I'll be right down!"

Caching his sledge and chisel against a bulwark of stone, the giant suddenly leaped into space and floated slowly, like a bloated sack of feathers, to the ground. He landed almost directly in front of Cyril.

Well now, let me get a good look at you Mik-I. It's been many years since you've visited the Moon. Tell me, where've you been keeping yourself?"

Mik-I tucked a wing beneath his head and glanced aside at Cyril.

"To tell you the truth, Otto, I've spent the last few centuries beneath a couple tons of dirt and rock on Earth. I was chasing one of Lucifer's imps when I got caught in a landslide. And I'd be there yet if this mortal here hadn't freed me. I don't know how he did it and can't say that I care, but, owing him a debt of gratitude, I offered

him anything he wanted," he sighed before continuing. "And the poor fool asked for the Moon."

"The Moon!" roared Otto in surprise. "He can bloody well have it if he wants it—but does he know—?" Mik-l shook his head. Otto looked at Cyril, and Cyril looked at Otto.

"Will somebody please tell me what this is all about?" pleaded Cyril in complete dismay. "I don't understand this at all."

MIK-L shifted his wings, kicked up a little sand, and gazed sorrowfully at Cyril.

"I suppose I might as well break the news to you now as ever. You see, the Moon isn't exactly a healthy place for mortals. At least not since Lucifer has been in exile here." He kicked up some more sand and continued. "You see, a few hundred centuries ago—before you and your kind were in existence, we angels had a little trouble amongst us. A minority were discontent and tried to change our living conditions, and these few, with Lucifer at their head were exiled into the exterior darkness of the Moon. And they've been here ever since."

"As immortals they couldn't be punished in any other way, and so, with his wings clipped, Lucifer, along with his rebel band was put up here to serve his punishment. Of course, we had to consult Father Time with the matter, and he set the sentence at a hundred eons."

"A keeper had to be appointed, and as none of us wanted the job, Otto here was created for the task. After a few centuries or so, he showed such good sense and intelligence that we decided it wouldn't be a bad idea to have a whole race like him inhabiting the Earth. So. . . Anyway, Otto's job has been to see that Lucifer keeps to his

own side of the Moon—and when he doesn't, to call for reinforcements.

"It's regrettable that Lucifer won't take his punishment peacefully. He usually makes a break once a year, and at that time, Otto has his hands full. When these attempts are made, a few imps usually manage to slip by our guard in the confusion and escape to Earth. Then we have to spend some time rounding them up and bringing them back here."

"These breaks are usually made around the end of the Earth year—Halloween I believe you call it, when goblins and such are supposed to flit around the atmosphere. I'll admit that those imps can be rather annoying at times. So there you have the story. Now you see what you have to contend with."

Cyril stood there with open mouth. He was positively stunned, and though he would have liked to say something, he couldn't. Otto kicked up a flurry of sand and clapped Cyril on the back.

"I don't mind saying that I'm glad someone else is to finally take over this business. I've had enough trouble these past centuries, and I need a vacation. Of course, my time has been used up by other things too—for example my stone head." He turned towards the towering human image of rock, and gazed at it fondly.

"I've been working on that for many years. I had hoped to complete it soon, and would have done so long ago if it hadn't had those blasted meteors to contend with. Every time I think I've carved some detail to perfection, a slab of junk from space is sure to smack into it and spoil my work. Then I've got to do it all over again." He sighed and shook his head.

"Of course, now that you're here to take over my duties, I won't be able to finish it—but how I am going to enjoy

that vacation!"

"Well," said Mik-l, ruffling his wings about him, "if you're ready Otto, lets get going. I've got some business of my own to attend to, but I'll drop you off at Earth first."

"Wait!" croaked Cyril, "you're not going to leave me alone here—are you?"

"Why not?" queried the angel in surprise, "you wanted the Moon, didn't you? Now that you've got it, there's no sense in us hanging around."

"But I don't want it—I've changed my mind!" Cyril suddenly became angry. "Besides, you played a dirty trick on me by not telling me about this place before you got me up here, and I won't have it—it's all your fault!"

"A fine thing!" roared Otto in disgust, "a fine thing! Just because you're afraid to face the music, I'm to get gypped out of a rest I earned a couple thousand years ago! It seems to me that I'm the one who should do the hollering around here! By Lucifer—you're not going to get away with it—you picked your bed, now lay in it!"

Mik-l tucked a wing unconcernedly under his head and surveyed the two of them.

"This is a pretty predicament, I must say. I confess that I don't know just what to do. Otto deserves his rest—and after all, you did ask for the Moon—I gave you a fair chance to back out."

"But you're forgetting a lot of important things," protested Cyril desperately, calling his every wit into play.

"Am I?" asked the angel in surprise, "what!"

"For one thing," argued Cyril, "you forget that I'm only a human—and humans don't live for centuries like you do. Too, if you left me alone up here, Lucifer would probably kill me and then he'd escape to Earth and you'd

have to spend the next hundred years or so trying to catch him. And in the meantime he'd be spreading terror on us mortals—damn it! It's not fair!"

"Hmm," muttered Mik-l, shifting his wings thoughtfully, "I hadn't thought of that angle, now that you mention it. There's something in what you say. I suppose Otto and I would get the long end of the job anyway. Well? What do you say Otto—is it worth the risk?"

THE Moon Keeper sighed and shrugged his shoulders in resignation. "I knew there'd be a catch in it somewhere. I suppose he's right—we'd only have more trouble on our hands after while. I guess we'd better let him go back—and I'll have to stay until Lucifer's sentence is up." He sighed again, and then brightened. "At any rate I'll be able to finish my face!"

Cyril wanted to shout for joy, and might have if something had not happened just at that moment. The Lunar terrain began to tremble beneath his feet. And far off at the edge of the eternal twilight belt, Cyril made out shadowy wraiths gathering like storm clouds in a threatening sky. Otto let out a bellow.

"It's Lucifer! He's up to his old tricks again. I might have expected something like this just when I'm not prepared! Mik-l—you better get this mortal out of here before it's too late. Put him on a moonbeam and then get back—I'll need your help!"

Cyril wasn't aware that his teeth were chattering. He wasn't even aware of climbing on the angel's back and being suddenly whisked skyward. All he knew was that something terrible was about to take place on the Moon—something he didn't want any part of.

Away from the desolate surface they flew, towards a silver shaft of light that spanned across space towards Earth.

Mik-I sidled up to the silver shaft and motioned Cyril to get off his back.

"But you can't leave me out here!" protested Cyril in fright, "I'll fall!"

"No you won't," Mik-I said impatiently, "you'll just slide down it—like you would a barber pole."

"But there's nothing there—it's just a shaft of light, how can I hang on to nothing!"

The angel shifted his wings in agitation. "How trying you mortals can be some times. Do as I say, you won't fall, it's solid enough all right. Why shouldn't it be? It's a beam—and beams are solid masses that support weight. Come now, I've got to get back to Otto—you're wasting time."

Much against his will, Cyril left the protection of the angel's back and clutched at the misty looking moonbeam. To his surprise and thankfulness, he didn't fall through as he had half suspected. It was actually solid.

"Well, good-bye, and good luck," waved Mik-I, moving away from Cyril and the beam of silver light, "maybe I'll see you again sometime!" With that he was gone, and though Cyril felt no sensation to assert it as fact, he knew he was falling.

Down—down—down he slid, his arms entwined around the moonbeam in a grip of death. But he couldn't stop himself from sliding, and when he dared to look towards Earth, he found himself rapidly approaching the very spot from which he had taken off on that mad journey. Cyril thought he would be crushed to a pulp when he reached the ground, but he wasn't. As lightly as a feather his feet touched

the Earth, and he uttered a prayer of thanksgiving.

Stark and empty stood the ominous hole from which Cyril had first seen the angel appear. The twisted roots of the old oak lifted torn arms skyward. And Cyril was so happy to be back he almost sang. He inhaled deeply of the night air, but nothing happened. Then he remembered the ring he still had on his finger.

Cyril wanted to be as free as was humanly possible from the memory of what had happened that night, and it was with little hesitation that he tore the ring from his finger and threw it into the hole by the tree. Immediately he felt the cool night air upon his face, and his lungs took in great gulps of it.

It was wonderful to feel the wind again, and Cyril wouldn't have traded all the Moons in the Universe for that feeling. He glanced towards the heavens, but a mist overcast the Lunar surface. Cyril could guess what that mist might be. But he preferred not to.

With a tune echoing softly from his lips, Cyril headed Homeward, and his gait was long and free.

A meadowlark warbled in a distant field, and its song was a herald of dawn. Little white clouds scudded along overhead, and they resembled little lambs seeking a haven in the night. The wind hummed merrily and it rustled the grass into waves like a rippling sea.

At the door to his cottage, Cyril paused and glanced heavenward. The mist had passed from the sky, and though he couldn't be sure, as he stood there and watched, it seemed as if the Man in the Moon was smiling. . . .

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