

Mercury Unbound - 3

by J. Mykell Collinz

I've been mostly positive since joining up with Sister Helen. My previous pessimism involved spiritual degeneration, moral decline and decay, weak and weary instincts. I clung to life, afraid to die. Then I read something by Nietzsche, I'm not sure where but, like a seed, it planted itself in my imagination. It's about taking shelter from yourself, to recover from yourself, to forget yourself in some form of creative activity involving reverence for art and scholarliness and even frivolity. If you can't find what you need, you counterfeit it, you create it poetically. And that's how I decided to dedicate the remainder of my life to the service of humanity.

On the road south to Peru, while passing through Texas, we pick up a hitch hiker, a handsome young man with short blond hair. He's tall, muscular built, on the lanky side.

"Where are you girls headed?" he inquires cheerfully with a pleasant sounding voice while easing a backpack and two shoulder bags onto the rear seat of our leased Land Rover. He's unable to suppress his amusement at seeing two bald headed women dressed alike in gray colored fabric driving a fully outfitted off-the-road vehicle loaded with camping gear.

"We're on our way to save the rainforest," Sister Helen replies: "Care to join us? I'm Sister Hildegard Helen, call me Hilda. I'm both a Catholic nun and a Buddhist nun. But don't let that scare you." Turning to me, she says: "And this is my acolyte, Sister Ursula. You may call her Sue."

"I'm Sandy, Sandy Mann," he says, a broad smile spreading across his face, a twinkle in his brilliant blue eyes: "I'm charmed to meet you ladies. What's your plan for saving the rainforest? You're going to need divine intervention just to stay alive down there."

"We're counting on it," Sister Helen asserts, turning to face the front of the vehicle, putting both hands firmly on the steering wheel for emphasis. As she maneuvers back onto the highway, I can't take my eyes off the new arrival in the back seat but it doesn't seem to

bother him. He's young enough to be my son yet I'm experiencing an unmistakably sexual attraction for him. His presence has changed the atmosphere inside the vehicle.

With perspiration increasing under my arms and between my legs, I wiggle in my seat, and say: "Where are you heading, Sandy?" We make eye contact for an instant before my gaze reflexively drops to his crotch.

"I'm on my way to get lost in the land of the lost," he says: "Can you guess where that is?"

"No, where?" I reply without even trying to guess.

"Where Percy Fawcett disappeared in the nineteen twenties while on an expedition searching for the lost city of Z. Where Arthur Conan Doyle located his famous novel, *The Lost World*."

Sister Helen comments over her shoulder while keeping her eyes on the road: "The movie version with Wallace Beery playing Professor Challenger is one of my favorites."

"The movie's good but not as good as the book," Sandy asserts: "I read the book first and the author's description of Professor Challenger is firmly implanted in my imagination. No actor has ever come close to matching it. I'd love to meet the guy in person."

"Where?" I repeat.

Ignoring my question, Sister Helen responds: "It happened ninety-some years ago, Sandy. You're not expecting to find him there alive, are you?"

He leans forward and eagerly replies: "Percy Fawcett was the real Professor Challenger. He knew the Amazon from exploring, surveying, and mapping it. He came to believe that an ancient civilization once cultivated large areas of the Amazon Basin. He entertained theories about ancient practice of eugenics, attempting to breed a super human race. He founded a secret jungle commune based on these ideas somewhere in the Amazon and it's still there today. That's what I'm hoping to find."

I wonder aloud: "You're planning to search the whole area?"

Again making eye contact, he answers: "Every inch of it, if necessary."

Sister Helen laughs, and says: "The Amazon river system is one of the largest in the world, Sandy, and at no point is the Amazon crossed by bridges. The bulk of it flows through tropical rainforest, with almost no roads or cities."

"Yes, of course, I know all that," he returns: "It's why people can get lost there without leaving a trace and never be found again, including whole civilizations, both old and new. And It's why I'm interested in hearing your plan to save the rainforest from the illegal land-grabs resulting in excessive logging, mining, and plantation farming."

Sister Helen excitedly replies: "Without intelligent maintenance of natural resources like the rainforest we have no hope of a future for the human race, super or otherwise."

In her support, I chime in: "We've already consumed too much of the planet in these past few generations. At this rate, there will soon be nothing left."

"Ladies, that's not a plan," he says: "They shoot people down there for talking like that."

Sandy's cellphone rings before either of us can reply to his comment. I watch as he manipulates the device. It's one of the new smartphones.

He notes my interest, and says:

"I agree with Rick Sanchez. This is the best piece of news equipment ever. It's a satellite phone, a computer, a word processor, a camera, an audio-video recorder with editing. All in one little package. Plus, it's relatively cheap and increasingly accessible, making it possible to capture every shot, every piece of amazing footage and then immediately distribute it to millions of other users around the globe."

"Who's Rick Sanchez?"

"CNN anchor. Ex-anchor, to be precise. Right now he's blogging."

"Isn't everybody?"

"He's an award winning journalist."

"You follow his tweets?" Sister Helen inquires over her shoulder.

"Some," he says: "I'm in the cloud with Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook and so forth but I'm trying to discipline myself for this trip to not be consumed by it, to stay alert to the real world around me, to use the new tools intelligently, to be productive."

A satisfied smile spreads across Sister Helen's face as she turns her attention from the road for just an instant to make eye contact with me.

I look back at Sandy, and say: "All your new tools could be rendered useless by an intense burst of particles and radiation from the sun directed towards the earth, knocking out satellites and electrical power grids, disabling cooling systems in nuclear power plants, possibly signaling the end of civilization as we know it."

He laughs and says: "And under those circumstances, the Amazon rainforest is the perfect place to get lost."

