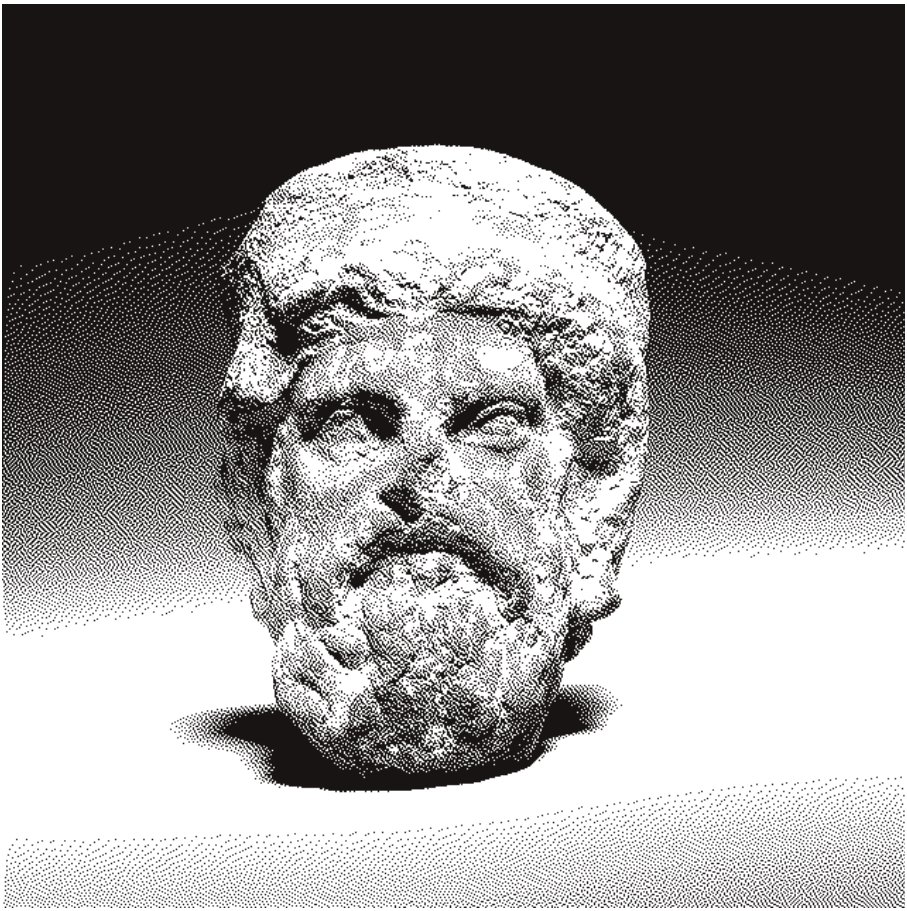

The Fates

By John Dwight

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THE FATES

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Cover: Terracotta head of a bearded god, perhaps Zeus, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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A Gaslight zine from HOUDINI Magazine.

"No, sorry, sir, but I can't go to the British Museum with you—there's a tradition in our family against it."

One foot was on the step of a bus, the other on the curb of Oxford Circus as I stopped and looked at my companion, my jaw hanging open.

"H'are you comin' or h'aren't you?" snapped the conductor as a whistle blew and the bus began to roll forward.

I replaced my left foot on the Oxford Circus curb and faced around squarely. As long as I had known him, for some twenty-five years, I had never known Foster Kenmore to be anything but the most ordinary young American. To hear of a family tradition against the British Museum was preposterous.

"My boy," I took his arm firmly in mine, "you're crazy. Will you please tell me what you mean?"

It was several minutes before he could tell me. Oxford Street at Oxford Circus is not one of the more simple streets to cross, and that particular afternoon the traffic was occupying the efficient attention of three white-helmeted bobbies. A break finally came and we crossed to stroll slowly down Regent Street.

"Will you please tell me what you mean?" I repeated.

For one of the few times in his self-possessed young life I saw him embarrassed.

"It—it really isn't anything. It's—well—just that I'd rather not go." I took his arm still more firmly. "Foster, I am not entirely a fool. One of the reasons I brought you abroad as my companion was so that I could have one to whom I could pour out my emotions over the Elgin Marbles or the Mona Lisa. Here at the very outset you fail me. There is more to this than appears. In about five minutes, Foster, if we can successfully negotiate this scaffolding farther down the street, we will reach the Piccadilly Hotel. The Piccadilly bar is as comfortable as any other place to pass the afternoon and the Piccadilly sweet Martinis are not to be despised, even in this land of plenty. So, Foster, my boy, you

have just five minutes to compose your thoughts and arrange facts and events in their chronological order."

To tell the truth, I was rather annoyed at this notion of Foster Kenmore's. As I had said, I had brought him with me half as a companion and half as a pupil; for there is nothing I enjoy so much as showing the wonders of Europe to some young and intelligent American. I had known Foster since he was born and had never found him anything other than an average lad, though perhaps a bit above the average in brains and sensitiveness. In fact, I had known his father, and my father had known his grandfather. They had both moved into the new, Middle-Western town at about the same time; and while my father had gone into real estate, Foster's grandfather had opened a corner store. Well, you know, in America to know about anyone's grandfather is usually a guaranty of both lineage and respectability. I come abroad about every other summer and always bring some young fellow as a companion who would probably never get across any other way. I had always liked Foster Kenmore and was much pleased when he had been able to come this time. So far he had been more than satisfactory—but now this sudden vagary! Was he going to object to all museums on the ground of a family tradition? I had to admit, however, the excuse was original.

The Piccadilly bar was cool, dark, and deserted, the leather chairs were comfortable, and the sweet Martinis reached expectation. After the second I motioned the waiter away and turned to Foster.

"Now, Foster, tell me. I am an old friend of your family's, you know; anything you say will be confidential, of course. I really think you owe me an explanation."

He sank a bit lower in his chair. His blue eyes were troubled and his cheeks were flushed, whether from the Martinis or embarrassment I could not tell. Even his usually sleek hair was

mussed. I don't remember what I was prepared for, but it certainly was not for what I heard.

"It really isn't anything much, sir, but I'll tell you all I know about it from the very beginning. My family is really Italian ——"

At that I jumped. For three generations at least they had been Americans. No one ever had thought to go farther back than that. They certainly did not look foreign. But Foster Kenmore was continuing.

"Of course we've been in America for a long time, so we really are Americans and have lost any Italian traits we may have had. You see, we first came over about 1697. I'll start as far back as I can.

"Our family originally came from Venice and our name was Conmorroni. We were probably very poor, for we were just common people and most common people were poor. In fact it is thought that my seven greats grandfather worked as an apprentice in an iron foundry. His name was Lippo. It all really starts in 1687. Venice was still fighting Turkey, you know. Francesco Morosini had been appointed commander of the fleet again in 1684. In March, 1687, he was back in Venice fitting out another expedition, this time against Athens, a Turkish stronghold. Somehow my grandfather joined the fleet. Whether he enlisted in youthful enthusiasm (he was about twenty), or whether he was conscripted, we do not know. Anyway, in May, 1687, he became a gunner on the flagship. The fact that he became a gunner so soon after his joining is the only foundation for the theory that he had worked in a foundry —and it isn't a very good one, is it? Well, the fleet sailed away (I'm most awful anxious to see Venice, sir, it's what I really want to see most in Europe) and my grandfather with it.

"Apparently nothing much happened until it came to September and the bombardment of Athens. Of course you know all about the Greek who escaped from the city, came to

Morosini and told him of the powder magazine in the Parthenon. Morosini ordered the guns of his ship trained on the Parthenon. Guns weren't all they might have been in the way of accuracy in those days, and it was a long shot; so he offered ten ducats to the gunner who blew up the magazine. I don't believe he ever thought of the fact that he was also blowing up the Parthenon, and I know Lippo never did. He just wanted the ten ducats. For perhaps an hour the shots were unsuccessful, fairly close, but nothing remarkable. It was my grandfather's third turn—apparently everyone took turns. As he aimed, something told him not to fire, but he did. Rather calmly he watched the shot go. He knew what would happen. His shot landed squarely in the middle of the Parthenon. There was a blaze and a roar, and the Turkish powder magazine was no more. He was led before the great Morosini, who with his own hand gave him the ten ducats and praised his aim. But Lippo had a feeling it would have been just as well if he hadn't earned those ten ducats.

"A few days later the Venetians invested Athens, and Lippo was with the landing party. When the Turks had been finally cleaned out the men were free to do pretty much as they wanted. But instead of looking for a wine-shop or a pretty girl with the others, my grandfather was drawn up to the Acropolis—it seemed the only place for him to go.

"It was late afternoon and the sun was nearly setting. The air seemed brighter and clearer than ever. He could easily pick out the red lion of St. Mark on the flags of the Venetian ships in the harbor, and down below in a little square he could even see the blood on the blades of four Italians who were still going about the enjoyable business of hunting Turks. It was curiously still on the Acropolis. The sun tinted all the marble temples to a hot gold. He picked his way around shellholes and over marble columns until he reached the Parthenon. He seemed to be the

only person there; at least he heard no one and felt appallingly alone.

"He stopped to look at the Parthenon. Even though he was used to the beauties of Venice, the gorgeousness of St. Mark's, the stately palazzos, there was something in this severe loveliness which quite took his breath away. The northwest façade was only partially injured, so he saw much more of the pillars, the metopes, the frieze, the pediment, than has ever been seen since. Then he walked around to the southwest side to see what damage his shot had done. It had blown out a great section of that wall, you know, utterly destroying it, as well as part of the other. No one knows what was on that particular part of the frieze, too. He was rather dismayed at the damage; if he had known what it was he was destroying he would never have fired the shot. But he was a bit impressed at the size of the hole.

"'And my shot did all that!' He didn't realize he was speaking aloud.

"'You are the man who fired the shot which destroyed the Parthenon.'

"He had thought he was alone. Half-frightened, he wheeled around. Standing among the debris of the pillars and roof were three old women. They each carried something in their hands besides a cane, he thought, but he was so terrified by their look of age as well as the hatred in their little black eyes that he could notice nothing else. They were the oldest things he had ever seen. The thought of how old they must be and what they must have seen and known made him shudder. Their hair was gray, straggling, and lifeless; their skins were a dull gray and as full of wrinkles as a cracked marble tile; their hoods and cloaks were gray and moldy. But their eyes were black, alive, and filled with a very intense hatred. And they were standing between him and the path to the town where lay safety. He tried to back away, but a drum of one of the great pillars was behind him and

he could only stand with his hands pressed against the cold marble, which had suddenly become clammy to his moist hands. The sunset light was turning from gold to orange.

"It was the first one, the one nearest him, who had spoken. The second one took up her words: 'You are a Venetian. It was your shot which blew up the powder, blew up the roof, and blew out the walls.'

"The third went on: 'You are the man who destroyed the frieze, and the figures on the frieze.'

"Their voices sounded like dried leaves rubbing together, quite faint, now crisp, now soft as though there were mold on them.

"Lippo could not speak; he did not even try. He could only nod. He hadn't meant to nod, but it was a physical impossibility to lie to these three horrible old women.

"The first one began again: 'You have destroyed the Parthenon. The Parthenon shall destroy you.'

"The second merely stated: 'You shall be destroyed.'

"But the third was more explicit: 'You destroyed the many figures of the Parthenon frieze. The remaining figures of the Parthenon frieze shall have revenge. They shall destroy you.'

"The light turned from orange to blood-red. The marble fragments looked dipped in blood. Even the deathly gray skin of the old women took on a ghastly pink.

"The third one repeated in a deeper tone: 'They shall destroy you.'

"With a shriek Lippo broke away from their baleful glare, rushed between them and down the path toward the city. As he reached the edge of the Acropolis he looked over his shoulder to the Parthenon. The light had faded to a dull gray, and there was no one to be seen. That seemed to terrify him all the more, and he didn't stop running until he reached the shore and a boat to take him back to his ship.

"He never set foot in Athens again. He was afraid of the three old women and their curse. In fact, he never even went back to Venice; he seemed to hate blue skies and bright sunlight—anything that might remind him of Athens. He went north and settled in Holland. That was different enough, but he felt as though he were still too near the Parthenon and the old women. He took ship to America and landed at New York. There he married and settled down. He told his wife all about it, quite frankly, and later his children. He took to reading Greek mythology and became convinced that the three women were the Parcæ, the three Fates. He had outwitted them, but he was not so certain for his children. He warned them never to go to Athens, never to go near the Parthenon or anything that had anything to do with the Parthenon.

"His son changed the name from Conmorroni to Kenmore, for business reasons, and his son moved west. The children were always told the story; no one else ever knew, but it was told them over and over again."

"Is that all?" I asked as Foster Kenmore paused in his narration.

"Not quite," he answered slowly. "Of course I don't believe it all; my respected grandfather was probably suffering from a case of nerves or land-sickness. But then, there is the story of my great-uncle John. It's quite short; I won't bore you much longer."

He squirmed a bit in his chair as though he didn't enjoy having the family curse brought so near to him. The dusk in the room was steadily deepening, and behind me I could hear two men discussing Cowes and the regatta.

Kenmore went on: "He was a sailor; in fact he ran away from home to be one. Eventually he rose to be captain and went down with his ship off Hatteras in '88. But when he was quite young, about twenty-five, he was just an ordinary third mate. On one trip his ship docked at London. My uncle was fairly

well educated and so was the second mate, and while the others were drinking up their shore leave, John and the second mate would go sight-seeing.

"One afternoon they entered the British Museum. He knew nothing about the Elgin Marbles—had never heard of them. As soon as they went in, John felt that he ought not to have come; but while he was still wondering why, he turned to the left, and without knowing what he was doing, led the way straight to the Elgin Marbles. He reached the door of the room and stopped. His brain and his heart were telling him to go away as fast as he could, but something stronger, more intangible, was calling him in. He took one step inside, turned, and tore past the second mate, past the guardians, and out into the street.

"The mate followed. 'What's the matter, John?' he asked. 'Why are you acting so queerly?'

"John caught his breath. 'Those things—in that room—come—from the—Parthenon—at Athens.'

"'They don't. You're crazy.'

"'They do. I know. I could feel it.'

"'You're getting crazier. I'll go and ask the man in there; he ought to know.'

"He returned in five minutes, his face sober. 'You're right; the things in that room do come from the Parthenon; they're part of the frieze Lord Elgin brought to England. How'd you know?'

"'I could feel it,' answered my uncle weakly. 'They would kill me if they had a chance. It's death to go near them. Let's go back to the ship.'

"After that my uncle would never go to London or even to England. He said he was drawn toward that room by a blind, implacable hatred which was like a black blanket enveloping him. It caught him so off his guard that it could very nearly do as it liked with him. He didn't mind dying, but he didn't like the idea of being killed by those statues without heads or hands.

One thing he never understood: it was how he escaped. If fate, or whatever it was, was strong enough to draw him there it was strong enough to kill him; yet he had escaped. He decided it must have meant that the time for vengeance had not yet come. Before that he hadn't believed the family legend, but after that he did believe it.

"That's all there is to tell, sir. It isn't so much, you see. When you said 'British Museum' I just automatically said I couldn't go. But now I think perhaps I'd better. I don't believe all this tale, really, and it wouldn't be right to have a few broken marbles get the better of you in any way. I'll go any time you want, sir."

I laid a hand on his arm. "No, you won't. The story has been very interesting and I thank you for telling me. I can't say I believe it all; but anyway, it's just as well to let sleeping dogs lie. As long as you're with me you won't go to the British Museum. It doesn't pay to mix up with things you don't understand. I was getting tired of town anyway. We leave for the Lakes tonight, then to the Trossachs, and perhaps up to Strathpeffer for a bit of fishing. Come on, let's pack." And I led him out to a 66 bus and the Hotel Cecil.

You see, I didn't want to run any risks with this lad. As far as I knew he was the last of his family. I owed it to his parents to bring him home safely. As I had said, I didn't believe it all; but there's no use running risks.

We spent only a few days at Keswick; the scenery was too tame and too tourist-spotted. Fishing wasn't very good in the Trossachs—too many tourists lumbering about; but up by Strathpeffer it was great and we spent a week there. We stopped a few days at Edinburgh and came down leisurely through the cathedral towns to Cambridge. It was somewhere between Cambridge and London that Kenmore first referred to the family curse again.

"Do you know, I've been thinking I ought to go and see the Elgin Marbles, sir. If it's a curse, why, it's time it was removed;

and the only way to remove it is by going to the Parcæ, or whatever it is, and proving that it's all bunkum. If there isn't a curse, why, I ought not to miss seeing them. I think I'll go tomorrow."

"Foster," my tone was very definite, "I don't want any more of this foolishness. Of course I can't forbid your going, but I advise strongly against it. In fact I ask you not to, as a favor to me. Besides, you won't have much time; we have to go to the Tower again, and the Abbey; you haven't seen Hampton Court, and there are several churches you ought to see, such as St. Bartholomew the Great, just because the average tourist doesn't. We fly to Paris next week, so your time is short. Don't think anything more about it."

But I could see he was thinking about it. It was becoming a kind of obsession with him: it was up to him to go and remove the family curse.

I kept him pretty busy for three days, then he came to me again.

"Really, I think I must go and see those marbles. It's so foolish not to. Besides, I want to see the Rosetta Stone and the Portland Vase. I don't like being cheated out of them by a grandfather's attack of conscience or an uncle's attack of D. T.'s. How about this afternoon?"

"Impossible! We are going to Oxford, and as it's a full half-hour to Paddington Station we'll have to hurry. I want to walk in John's Gardens and see Magdalene Cloisters again and see if the ivy has quite hidden Pembroke. Sorry, but there's no time for the British Museum."

The next day was Sunday and Lord Lanfield had asked me to tea. He was only a casual acquaintance or I would most certainly have taken Kenmore with me. As it was, I left him absorbed in the Meissoniers at the Wallace Collection and under strict promise to return to the hotel at 5 and attend to some correspondence for me.

It was a dreary day, dismal and gray as only a rainy Sunday in London can be. The tea was comforting, the fire friendly, Lord Lanfield more charming than ever; and we discovered a common passion for Italian stilettos. His collection was truly remarkable, and it was nearly 7 when I hurried into the hotel. Kenmore was not there. According to the elevator boy he had not been in all afternoon. For a moment I could not think where he could be. The museums close at 6. He might have gone to the Trocadero for tea, but 7 was late even for the Troc. And then I remembered the British Museum.

There was a cab-stand near the hotel, but it took us ten minutes to get to the museum because of a traffic jam at Holborn Circus where a bus had skidded. The front entrance was closed, but I hurried around to a little side door I knew the guardians used. As I reached it a taxi drove up, and a doctor with the usual bag got out.

"What's the matter?" I grabbed his arm. "Who is hurt?"

He was rather surprized to see an elderly American with no hat speaking to him in this agitated manner over something that did not concern him, but he answered courteously, "I do not know. A call was sent to me from the museum about 6:30, but I only reached home five minutes ago. They did not say what was the matter."

The vagueness disturbed me further. "May I come, too? I have lost a young friend and I fear he is in the museum—and—ill."

He looked at me, then agreed even more courteously. The side door opened and an under curator, torch in hand, ushered us in.

"It's a young fellow, sir," he said in answer to the doctor's query. "He came in about 4:30. Tom was at the gate and he says the fellow asked the way to the Rosetta Stone and the Portland Vase, same as everyone else. Tom told him how to go, and he went upstairs to the Vase. Milburn, the special guard in the

Gold Room, says he came in sometime about a quarter to 5 and spent quite a bit of time there looking at the Vase and the cameos and cut gems. He went out through the Greek vases toward the Egyptian section. No one else remembers seeing him. There have only been a few people in this afternoon, which is probably the only reason why he was noticed at all. You could have spent nearly half an hour alone in some rooms without being interrupted, which is very unusual.

"We cleared all the people out at 6, and except for a woman who said she didn't get her own umbrella, everything was as usual. At 6:30 Upson, one of the night guards, was going through the Elgin Room when he thought he saw something behind the piece of the northwest pediment in the center of the room. He went to see, and it was this young man. He sent for me and we 'phoned you. I think he's fainted."

We had been hurrying down dark corridors, past gloomy, unfamiliar shapes and forms, up steps, until I was quite lost. And all the time my brain was saying, "You should have kept him with you. You should have kept him with you." At last we saw a light and I recognized the sunken room with the fragments of the great quadrata. And we came to the door of the Elgin Room.

The lights were on and three guardians were grouped around a figure lying on the floor. Of course it was Kenmore. I had known so all along. One of the men was trying to pour whisky into his mouth and another was rubbing his wrists.

"Here's the doctor, men," came the curator's low voice.

They moved aside, and the doctor knelt by Kenmore. I leaned against the wall: I knew what he was going to say.

"He's dead," muttered the doctor finally.

"But it's impossible!" The curator knelt beside him. "What did he die of?"

"Well—I suppose it's really heart failure; his heart must have been far from strong. But see, there's a mark on his temple as

though he'd been struck by something. Something blunt but hard, it must have been, but I haven't seen any weapon."

"Could this have done it, sir?" One of the guards came forward carrying something in his hand. It was a piece of marble, a little larger than my fist, jagged on two sides and smooth on two sides. It looked as if it might have been part of an arm from some frieze. The doctor looked at it thoughtfully.

"Yes, that might have done it, if it was thrown with a good deal of strength. Where'd you find it?"

"Right here on the floor, sir. I don't think it was thrown, sir. It must have just fallen on the young fellow's head. See up there—you can see where it came from."

True enough, right over Kenmore's body was a section of the Parthenon frieze, and beside one of the mutilated figures was a fresh mark in the time-dimmed marble as though a piece had just been wrenched away. I looked up from Kenmore's white face to the line of still figures marching eternally around the room. I thought of the three old women, and the curse, and I wondered. But of course it was merely a coincidence.

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