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From "Phosphor in Dreamland: Chapter 5"

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from Phosphor in Dreamland—Chapter 5 *Rikki Ducornet*

ONE EVENING Señor Fantasma was walking down Calle *Luna y Estrella* on his way to the brothel. Nuño Alpha y Omega, dit Phosphor, had a laboratory that opened out onto the street, and that evening he was experimenting with air. He wanted to prove its elasticity. He believed that air was ‘particulated,’ and that these particles were suspended in ‘quantities and quantities of emptiness.’ He wanted to prove that the particles could be compressed—he wanted to make compressed air.

Imagine Phosphor in his little laboratory as cluttered as his stepfather’s own, blowing air, more and more air, into a globe through a siphon, and then plugging the orifice with his thumb. Just as Señor Fantasma passed by, Phosphor lifted his thumb, and the compressed air rushed out of the globe with the sound of thunder. Breaking wind on Mount Olympus, Zeus could not have made a more startling noise.

Nearly knocked off his feet, Señor Fantasma, fearful and curious altogether, peered in at the laboratory’s one window and saw all manner of fascinating objects he could not fathom—for example a thing I have myself examined with perplexity (no small number of artifacts from Phosphor’s laboratory may be seen in the municipal museum on Tuesdays) which may be the universe’s first periscope—retorts, distorting mirrors, a reflecting microscope, various meteorological instruments, two conquistador’s metal helmets soldered together in such a way as to form a species of pressure-cooker, the inventor’s laundry and stew pot—the whole illuminated by two filthy oil lamps and gleaming in the shadows.

Because of the semi-darkness and the noise, and the unrecognizable smells—for Phosphor was also experimenting with various collodion techniques—Señor Fantasma thought he had stumbled upon the laboratory of a puissant magician. He had heard that magicians speak to demons by means of brass pipes or tubes of glass, and a great many of these were lying about.

Fantasma was fascinated by the experiment with the glass globe and asked Phosphor to repeat it several times. He was curious about everything he saw—the bottles of Etruscan wax and fossil salts, the laxatives and

bituminous trefoil, the stone magnets and, above all, a rudimentary camera which perplexed him utterly—and frightened him, too, so that he did not dare ask its purpose.

Soon his gaze fell upon a large blue bottle filled to the brim with a granulous black gum. The gum was a concoction of burned bees boiled in olive oil and Athenian honey sixty-six times. The stuff had been made to be worn as a poultice on the head and was proven, already by the Greeks, to prevent loss of hair. In fact the stuff in the bottle had been prepared by Fogginius, and when Phosphor had abandoned his stepfather, he took it with him as a reminder of the old man's foolishness. But he did not tell this to Señor Fantasma, who, he could see—by the quantity of silver he wore, his lace cuffs and perfumed beard—was both a very rich and a very vain man whose brow was precipitously receding.

Phosphor was living in acute poverty, and when his visitor asked the bottle's price, he sold it to him. As Señor Fantasma left the laboratory with the bottle clutched to his heart, the street resounded once again to the cosmical retort.

The second time Fantasma visited Phosphor's laboratory, a thick tuft of red hair—much like a cock's comb—had taken root in his skull. Convinced now of Phosphor's fantastical powers, Fantasma asked to see what other marvels he had to offer up for sale. Phosphor unwrapped those magicked images he had freshly seized with his black box and showed his visitor a small portrait of his landlady, Señora Portaequipajes, wearing a white lace collar and produced on photo-sensitized silver-plated copper—'a procedure,' Phosphor did not fail to impress upon Fantasma, 'ruinously expensive.'

Frankly astonished, Fantasma turned the little boxed image this way and that before the laboratory's one window. He had never seen such a thing before. No one had. His mouth dropped, and a mosquito explored that black hole briefly.

As within the magic mirror of a necromancer—which is exactly what Fantasma believed he held in his hand—Señora Portaequipajes' bristling face broke forth only to vanish, breathed and then expired, flared up and faded out, materialized and went up in smoke. Señor Fantasma held his breath. A monkey with a looking glass could not have been more startled. 'It is,' he

said, amazed, '*alive!*' And he brayed with cruel laughter. Ever after, Fantasma would think of Phosphor's ability to produce images as a miraculous ability.

'Have you others?' Phosphor handed him another. This time Señora Portaequipajes' mouth was open as if she would speak. Phosphor had kept her sitting far too long, and she had lost patience. Her sharp teeth flashed and leapt from the enchanted surface like tiny candle flames.

As Fantasma looked with admiration upon Señora Portaequipajes' unpleasant face, Phosphor explained that he wished to produce a set of scientific portraits illustrating the multiple aspects of human emotion: grief, terror, delight, envy, ecstasy and so on. One supposes that Fantasma, a cold and indifferent man, at once realized that he might hugely benefit from Phosphor's project, and so proposed to finance it. Thus, thanks to the inventor's multitudinous study, Fantasma learned to read the faces of his fellow men as in a book: line by line. (And to reflect with his own those emotions he did not feel.)

Fantasma gave Phosphor more money than he had ever seen to buy the copper, the silver, the glass and other things he needed, including the equipment to build a portable black box containing a separate dark chamber wherein the negative process, from start to finish, could be performed anywhere. Phosphor threw himself into this work, and soon the walls of his little laboratory were orbited by faces collapsed in terror, condensed in pain, distorted by anxiety, centrifugal with desire.

At first, Phosphor continued to use Señora Portaequipajes as a model, but her face was really too fat and she too agitated; she suffered from a chronic inflammation of the gums and other disorders. (Like Phosphor, she had a lazy eye with a tendency to lodge itself with fixity to the left of the bridge of her large nose.) Phosphor looked for models elsewhere. A mere infant at the time, Señora Portaequipajes' own son is stuck forever behind glass howling for his supper.

Next Phosphor hired Resendo Cosme—a once famous actor with a face of rubber who, down and out, sat for the black box with renewed pride in his profession. As it turned out, Cosme had a fourteen-year-old daughter, Cosima, whose beautiful face was mobile, too. Cosima posed pouting, smiling, weeping, languishing; there are portraits of her determined, unsure, indignant; portraits of Cosima clenching her pretty teeth, uncov-

ering one canine in a sneer; her eyes hooked to Heaven in prayer; Cosima shrinking in disgust; Cosima eating a mango, a green lemon; smoking a cigar.

Señor Fantasma was delighted with the pictures and more: he desired the infant actress from the instant he saw the perfect planet of her little face screwed up in mock despair. More than once, while her father sat counting coins in his filthy kitchen, Señor Fantasma had his way with her.

‘God has secret cabinets of precious things that he keeps far from the eyes of men,’ Señor Fantasma said to Phosphor. He was thinking, perhaps, of those fabulous mines his grandfather, the Old Fantasma, had sucked dry. ‘And so shall I have a secret cabinet of images unlike any in the world. You will come with me the next time I visit Cosima in her hovel, and bring the black box.’

And for the sake of Art and Science (and frankly, because he was famished) Phosphor went. Included in the arrangement was all the material he needed to continue and more—for he was conducting new experiments in the attempt to photosensitize other surfaces—such as zinc. Already he was dreaming of the ocularscope, and even in his dreams continued on his quest to discover the secrets of bifocal vision.

The first three-dimensional image Phosphor produced was of Cosima sitting navel-deep in a tub of water. Around her slender neck she wears a silver cross—a gift from Señor Fantasma—and the tub, and her knees and elbows (as her shoulder blades) are all revealed in luminous and dramatic relief. Her great head of hair appears to be burning.

What is curious about this picture, extraordinary, in fact, is Cosima’s face. She is gazing at the photographer with an expression I can only describe as a cross between ferocious complicity and defiance. Cosima’s eyes appear to say: ‘Yes—I am his hireling *for now!* But the slave shall outsmart the master—*wait and see!*’

Until then, Cosima had seen herself in her father’s mirror: a large oval of polished steel, it had offered her an infinite stage and an interminable sequence of dramatic situations. A passionate dreamer, a little tigress, in fact, she dreamed of pirates, of performing in scarlet skirts in a sailing ship the size of a small country; dreamed of dancing under a rain of gold and silver money. The mirror delivered to Cosima her essence—that of a creature of the instant who appeared to be there but who was always

elsewhere. Whatever Cosima did, she did because her mirror had told her that she looked beautiful doing it. It taught her to weep with an unfurrowed brow, to laugh in such a way that her brown throat, softly pulsing, was heartbreakingly visible.

Like Petronius' silver doll, she was a gorgeous automaton—and this should come as no surprise: when Cosima was but an infant, her father had, with the help of a switch, harsh words and harsher threats, with stays and pins and a clever use of rouge, transformed his daughter into a mechanical toy. Each Saturday Cosima performed in the marketplace from dawn to dusk until she dropped.

And the mirror gave Cosima the power not only to leave the confines of her room and body, but to double those few meager treasures she had found in the street after a performance, when, for example, she had played the monkey to her father's organ. These she kept hidden from Cosme's avaricious eye: a large pearl earring, a bracelet of blue and gold Venetian glass, a bent silver cat's eye brooch, and one brass ring.

Phosphor hated the way Fantasma had reduced Cosima far more than fate had done. He gave her an image of herself which she could carry everywhere. Whenever Cosme's threats and Fantasma's fucking threatened to submerge her in wretchedness, she took hold of the image of a blossoming child contained within its little hinged box—so like a reliquary—and felt powerful again, fearless too; somehow secure. This image was more than a mirror, it was the hearth by which she warmed herself, a miniature altar at which she could worship her own inviolable soul. For, if badly bruised, Cosima was not broken. Curiously, her capacity to seem rather than be had protected her.

Cosima's eyes were so like her own mother's eyes—eyes that had once gazed upon her with delight—that the certitude she had once been loved, and deeply, was hers each time she opened the little box. And, no matter how miserable she was, how tattered, the image always showed a girl combed and scrubbed, and wearing a precious lace shawl draped and pinned in such a way that one could not see it was full of holes.

Cosima's face is illumined by the moon of a solitary pearl—although, gazing at it now, I could say that it is the pearl that is illumined by Cosima's beautiful face! (Yes! The image exists: catalog #444.) Clearly, the photographer had not stolen his subject's soul, but instead, secured it—a tangible kernel of shadow and light.

Interestingly, Phosphor never thought of his invention as more than a toy. 'My black box seizes reality,' he wrote somewhere, 'it does not *reveal* anything.' It seemed to him that words evoked more than images. 'In the beginning was the word,' he later would joke with Tardanza; 'light came later.' Knowing this about him, we may now move on into the next chapter.