

THE CLOUD OF DOOM

by Jack Loscutoff

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Jacob's Ladder

The sun hung above a blanket of smog. It lit the blacktop road winding up six- thousand-foot Mount Palomar. On either side the gray granite boulders, the olive clumps of manzanita brush and the patches of bleached blond hay glowed orange. Gone were the winter rains. Gone were the apple green of the new grasses and the butter yellow of the poppies which had followed them. It was early summer in Southern California in the year 2035.

At the mountain's top the two-lane highway widened into a loop before continuing through the gate in a chain link fence. A city block beyond the entrance, a domed structure towered above the pine trees. It cast its shadow over the turnaround, where a white SUV was parked next to a "No Parking" sign. A tall, thin woman in a tailored suit pulled a microphone on a boom out of the truck's open door. She was joined by a bearded man with a tam-o'-shanter on his head and a camcorder on his shoulder. Black letters on the slammed door read "KGAB-TV Pomona."

Before the closed gate a battered, green, commercial-type minivan with a crumpled white front fender chugged to a halt. The caravan of ill-sorted vehicles behind it did also. A slender man in a tan uniform emerged from the guard shack on the other side. He unlocked the gate, passed through and closed it behind him. He stood before it with his hand raised.

A man with a beefy red face, stubbled with white, stuck his head out the driver's window. "What's the problem, officer?"

A smile widened the guard's gray mustache. "I'm sorry, sir. The public is not allowed on the Observatory grounds after four PM. We have to allow the astronomers time to do their work."

Steel-rimmed glasses glittered as the other nodded. Long strands of brown hair were plastered across his bald spot. "Well, I'm sorry, too. I'm the Reverend Bob Summers of the Universal Church of the Redeemer. We have some important business with a man named Smythe. We have come all the way from Pomona to talk with him. We shall not leave until we do so."

The door groaned open, and that side of the van bounced up as he stepped out onto the blacktop. The guard's eyes opened wide. The minister wore a white robe. People emerged from the other vehicles and walked toward his bulky form. They all wore white robes. The gatekeeper fumbled with the left side of

his belt and brought a small black radiophone to his mouth. “Yeah, Alice. Can you find Dr. Smythe and ask him to come to the front entrance?”

By the time the guard unlocked the gate for the astronomer, the congregation of thirty people filled most of the turnaround space. While they sang, “We are climbing Jacob’s Ladder, soldiers of the Cross,” he and the guard conferred. The newcomer was a few inches shorter than the visitor, pudgy with bushy orange hair, a pale, freckled face and a broad, flat nose. He wore dirty white jogging shoes, red sweat pants and a light blue nylon windbreaker. The pair from the TV station stood at the perimeter. He filmed and she dangled the microphone over the heads of the crowd. Summers raised his hand and the singing stopped.

Smythe turned to the minister. “Do I know you, sir?”

The other shook his head. “No, but I know you. I saw you last night on the TV. They said you was an astronomer. You said the Lord’s chariot was just some ‘natural phenomenon.’ You said it could be explained once we have all the facts.”

The other’s broad pale brow wrinkled. “Are you talking about the glowing white cloud that’s appeared in the sky the last two nights?”

Summers nodded. “Yeah, but it’s not just a cloud. It’s the cloud, a sign of the end times. And there are others.” He pulled a black book out of a slit in the side of his robe and waved it in the air. “The Book of Mark says, ‘the sun shall be darkened and the moon shall not give her light.’”

Smythe pulled on the flesh below his chin. “We did have an eclipse of the sun a few weeks ago. It was impressive, but, like the cloud, it’s just a natural happening.”

The minister shook his head. “Saint Mark also says, ‘Then shall they see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and glory.’” He pointed to the east, where streaks of pink cirrus clouds floated high above the dark valley. “And there shall the cloud be.” Before the astronomer could reply, Summers raised his hands and bellowed, “Swing low, sweet chariot.”

The congregation joined in. “Comin’ for to carry me home.”

While they sang, Smythe whispered to the guard, “Harry, I think you should call the police.”

The other nodded. “I checked with Alice. She already done so. But the sheriff’s at the other end of the county. It’ll be a while before he gets here.”

After the last verse, the minister turned around and looked over the valley again. The cirrus clouds were only faint gray shapes against the deep purple. Among a few twinkling points of light, between them and the horizon, a fuzzy pale blob appeared. Summers fell to his knees and clasped his hands together. The other white-robed figures followed suit. “Oh, Lord,” he cried, “come, lift us up. Change us. Make us perfect, as You are perfect.”

Others behind him yelled, “Hosanna!” “Hallelujah!” “Oh, come, Lord Immanuel!”

He stood up. The rest did also. He turned to a stout, white-haired woman next to him. “Mildred, the palm branches. Get the palm branches outta my van.”

When she returned, two or three of the congregation shined flashlights on the box she brought. He opened it and they passed green branches out to the others. They waved them and yelled, “Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna to our King.”

A floodlight atop the SUV bathed the group in harsh light. The minister raised his hand again. The singing trailed off and stopped. “Let us pray,” he boomed. They all knelt. “Oh, Lord, we know we are sinners and not worthy of You. Nonetheless, come down to us as You promised. We have prayed and fasted and disposed of our worldly goods as You commanded. What more do You require of us?”

The wind moaned through the pines.

Smythe looked around. The road down the mountain was empty except for the line of vehicles parked bumper-to-bumper on the uphill side. The TV people still filmed and recorded. Harry stood pale and grim-faced at his post. One hand rested on the gate lock. The other was at his gun holster.

Summers groaned. He bent forward and touched his forehead to the pavement. Rising to his feet, he clasped his hands before him. He looked down and shook his head. “Oh children, my heart is sorely troubled.” He looked up. “You recall I begged you to sell all you had and leave the proceeds at the church. Remember Jesus said, ‘Lay not up treasure upon the earth, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.’ Our hearts and souls must be free and light as birds to soar up to the clouds and join our Lord. But verily, verily, I say unto you: money weighs the heart and the soul down. It pulls them back to earth like a millstone around the neck of a drowning man.”

A few of those nearest him said, “Verily, verily.”

He spread his hands wide. “Oh children, the Lord tells me that one or two or three of you have held back. Perhaps you gave some of your wealth to a relative, a friend or even a worthy charity. But know that here at the end of days, it will benefit them not. And it is keeping us bound to the earth.”

Some in the audience groaned.

Summers raised his hand. “However, do not despair. There may be another way.” He dropped to his knees again, pressed his palms together and closed his eyes. “What is Thy will of us, Lord?” The wind whispered through the pines. The minister shook his head. “Would that this cup be taken from us. Nevertheless, not our will but Thine be done.”

He rose again and raised his arms in the air. “Yes, Lord! Yes, Lord, we shall obey Your command.” The others also stood. The light, which someone nearby played over his face, made his eyes into black holes. He smiled, but tears streamed down his red cheeks. He lifted his glasses, wiped his eyes with a tissue and blew his nose. He gestured with the soggy tissue. “Oh, beloved. Of those to whom much

is given, much is also asked. The Lord requires us to come to Him. We must drink of the nectar of paradise.”

From the crowd came cries of “Hallelujah!” “Oh, Lord!” “Oh, God!” “We shall be changed! Indeed, we shall be changed!” “The nectar! The nectar!”

The temperature had dropped, but that was not the only reason Smythe shivered. “Nectar of paradise?” Could it be what he thought it was? He looked down the empty road. “Come on, sheriff,” he said under his breath, “earn your salary.” He zipped up the windbreaker and turned up its narrow collar. Walking around the edge of the crowd, he came to a woman standing next to a blond, curly haired boy in a wheelchair. He was behind them; they hadn’t noticed his approach.

The boy looked up at her. Through blue lips he said, “Mama, I’m cold and I’m afraid.”

She grabbed his hand. “Don’t be afraid, Sonny. Soon we’ll be in a warm and sunny place where you can walk and run and jump just like other boys. Won’t that be good?”

He nodded. “Yes, Mama, but I’m scared of what’s gonna happen between here and there.”

“You mean drinking the nectar?”

He nodded. “I think it’s gonna hurt.”

“The Reverend Bob says if it does, it’ll only be for a little while. Do you think you can stand it for a little while? You’ve been such a brave boy through all the operations. Can you do it for me? That way we will always be together.”

Through chattering teeth, he smiled up at her. “Okay, Mama, I’ll do it for you. So we’ll always be together.”

“Do you want me to go and get your sweater out of the car?”

He grabbed her arm with his free hand. “No, don’t go away!”

She bent down and kissed him.

“Lady,” Smythe said.

She started and looked behind her. Her hand went to her heart. “Goodness! You startled me.”

He shrugged. “Sorry, ma’am, but I needed to get your attention. I don’t believe it’s right, what you’re thinking of doing to your boy.”

Her lips were set in a grim line. “Mister, this world has been hell for us. Until you’ve walked a mile in our moccasins, I’ll thank you to mind your own business.”

Smythe blushed and swallowed. He thrust his hands into his jacket pockets and shivered again. He resumed walking until he came to another couple. A tall gray-haired man stood next to a bent, white-haired woman in another wheelchair. There was light on them, but here at the side of the crowd farthest away from the SUV, the astronomer had stopped in deep shadow. The tall man wasn’t wearing a white robe. He

had on dark slacks and a long-sleeved striped shirt with an open collar. A too large men's tweed sport coat was draped over the woman's shoulders. White cloth showed between its unbuttoned front and over her knees.

She looked up. "Father, I know you don't believe. You're not even a church member. You know, you didn't have to come. Someone else could have brought me."

Smythe leaned closer; her last few words were barely audible, her face increasingly contorted. It turned progressively redder while she coughed. The gray-haired man squatted down beside her. A green cylinder perched on the back of the chair. Clear plastic tubing ran from a gauge at its top to a pair of colorless outlets in her nostrils. When the coughing stopped he withdrew the outlets. He held a tissue over her nose. While she blew, he wiped.

He reinserted the outlets and smiled. "Don't be silly, Mother. We've been over this a dozen times. You know I couldn't go on without you." He reached for her hand. The wrist was swollen, misshapen and discolored. The fingers were gnarled and bent into a claw. He cradled it in his open palm. "Remember," he said, "those words from 'The Book of Ruth'? The ones we spoke to each other on our golden wedding anniversary?"

She smiled. "'Whither thou goest, I will go.'"

He nodded. "'And where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people.'"

Together they concluded, "'And thy God, my God.'"

A distant noise made Smythe look over their heads toward the minister's van. On its floor, between the open rear doors, sat a large, silver-colored water cooler. Mildred held a cup under the spigot. Summers pull a card table from inside. He unfolded the legs and set it down on the pavement. He raised his hands. "All right, brothers and sisters," he boomed, "get in line, please. Single file. There's enough for all."

Individually and in small groups, the congregation trailed back down the road to form a line. The TV couple walked along with them.

The astronomer trotted up to the woman. He tapped her on the shoulder. "Excuse me," he puffed.

She stopped and looked him up and down.

"Aren't you," he gasped, "one of the anchors at the station?"

She nodded. "Marliss McKenzie. So what?" She set the microphone boom down on the ground. She massaged the muscles between her neck and shoulder. She glanced at the cameraman, who was far away and getting farther.

Smythe pulled the loose flesh under his chin. "I thought that since your station talks about broadcasting 'the news people trust,' that, well, you might . . ."

She scowled at him. "You thought I might what?"

Smythe looked away. The card table was now topped with a white cloth under rows of paper cups imprinted with the smiling face of Mickey Mouse. The cloth was stained in spots with a red liquid. Summers handed a cup to the first person in line. Mildred filled more of them as the white-robed figures filed by.

The astronomer shivered. He looked back at the woman. "I, uh, I thought these folks might listen to you. Maybe you could talk them out of this."

She shook her head. "That's not my job. My job is just to report what I see and hear. Like a scientist, I'm an impartial observer. If they wanna kill themselves, that's their business. It's sad, but I could get in trouble if I got involved."

Just above the van, the former faint blob now glowed blue-white against a black sky. Though its edges were still ragged and ill-defined, the object had a roughly oval outline. In its light the first communicants carried their cups down the road. They walked, like indistinct ghosts, back to their vehicles.

The minister cupped his hands around his mouth. "Don't drink until you're sitting down. Don't litter. Be sure you put your empty cup in the trash."

From somewhere in that direction came the sound of vomiting, followed by a groan and a scream.

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The sheriff arrived an hour later. His flashlight showed white-robed bodies hanging out of the windows of cars, vans and pickup trucks over puddles of vomit and blood. Below open vehicle doors, they lay contorted in similar puddles. They littered both the gravel shoulder and the blacktop. He brought his light close to a pair of bare, hairy calves ending in men's dress shoes and socks. Tan stains glistened at the back of the robe. Feces oozed from under the hem. "I wonder," he said, "if he's got anything on underneath." He took a pen out of his breast pocket and inserted the end of it under the hem. "Nope." Beyond the reach of his light, the scene was repeated, though less distinctly.

The stench made Smythe hold a tissue to his face. With the other hand he gestured. "I had a hunch about what they were gonna do. But I kept hoping they wouldn't go through with it."

Beneath a broad-brimmed hat, the officer nodded his head. "Yeah, but there was probably nothing you, or anyone else, could've done." He shined his flashlight toward the TV truck. Its interior light was on, but the flood had been turned off. "I wish those folks had stayed home. They only encourage these kinds of shenanigans." He switched the flashlight off and bent down. He inserted his pen into a paper cup at his feet, straightened up and sniffed. "Artificial strawberry drink. And, if I'm not mistaken, arsenic." He turned it upside down and then looked at Smythe. "Must be the altitude. The moon is so bright I can read the small print around the bottom."

The other looked up and shivered. "It's not the moon."