



FIRST PRIZE WINNER 2022, CATEGORY 14-18 YEARS, EMMA BRIGHT

The Showman's Curse

The ruby red circus tent glistened under the flickering lamplight. In the freezing winter evening the warmth and richness illuminated the villagers. The ringmaster stood proud at the centre of his circus. The spectacle was undeniable. To the villagers these gilded performers were otherworldly, bringing skills only to be imagined, costumes like flamed jewels, stories of adventure and mystery from far off lands.

The showman pointed his cane at the audience and smiled.

“And now an exotic tale, the story of an ancient curse...”

There was an intake of breath, an atmosphere of intrigue. Staff from the big house on a rare evening off sat together quietly. Iris, the housemaid, felt the room grow colder, an unexpected shiver ran through her.

“...This tale, like many before it, begins with the arrogance of mankind. The curse could have been prevented had it not been for greed...”

The audience shuffled in their seats, curiously unnerved.

“...Ancient artefacts have been unearthed and sold. Too late did they realise these artefacts were cursed. The most famous being Carter's discovery last year of Tutankamun's tomb...”

Even in this simple village stories of curses awoken from ancient times were familiar, to be feared.

“...Artefacts stolen from Egyptian tombs bear curses, waiting to be released.”

“How?” asked a man, as a small boy on his mother’s knee began to cry.

“When taken from their home lands the curse is awoken on the Blood Moon”

“That’s in two nights!” muttered the cook, as the staff exchanged worried glances.

“What happens in the curse?” asked the Lord of the Manor’s valet carefully.

The ringmaster smiled an unpleasant smile as the circus performers laughed.

“Three dreadful instances occur. First, all crows fall down dead. The second, animals rampage through the streets and the third, fires rage and death will follow...”

Horrified gasps from the audience.

“...The only chance to prevent the curse is to place the item on the Bible at midnight and pray over it in the moonlight. Heed our warning. Those who do not do this are certain to pay the price.”

Later that evening when night rested densely over the village, a lantern flickered in the manor. The light was imperceptible, seen only if an individual happened to be crouched beneath the trees in nearby woodland. The valet removed a wood panel from the library wall, it moved, creaking slightly. He stepped backwards revealing a golden scarab necklace the length of his forearm. He held it gently as the gold and sapphires reflected pricelessly around the room. He examined it carefully, although unable to read Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. The valet sighed anxiously, if there really was a curse, his Lordship had brought it down on them all.

Two mornings later the villagers were awoken by a series of piercing shrieks. When they opened their doors they realised why. Over one hundred dead crows lined the streets, their shadows casting double in the early morning glow.

“The curse” wailed a hysterical woman, “it’s upon us!”

“How can it be?” asked another “we haven’t any artefacts”

“Someone must have” insisted the woman “or why would this be happening?”

“Something must be done,” said Iris to the cook. The cook nodded gravely, saying nothing more whilst in the village. Iris knew they had not heard the last of this curse.

Men were sent to the circus performers to find out more about the curse, only to find their camp empty. When this news reached the big house, the cook, Iris and the valet looked at each other with dismay. Iris knew what must be done.

That night the valet, cook, Iris and other maids made their way to the library. The valet produced the scarab necklace from its hiding place. Iris laid the bible on the desk and the cook opened the curtains allowing the moonlight to shine in. The Lord’s Prayer began tentatively as each focused desperately on the necklace hoping to end the curse. With their attention focussed solely on the necklace, the staff didn’t notice eyes watching from underneath a dense patch of shrubbery. If they had, they may have spotted a smile.

As the following afternoon drew to a close, the villagers barely dared to breathe for fear of reawakening the curse. In the eerie evening silence, the hoof beats of horses echoed through the village. The ten horses owned by the Lord of the Manor, his prized possessions, rampaged through the village. The panic was instantaneous. Villagers rushed from their homes. One thing they knew for certain, it had happened again: the curse was upon them.

Early the following morning, the village was covered in thick black smoke. Iris was shaken awake urgently by the cook.

"It's happened again" she moaned

"Where?" asked Iris, sitting bolt upright, worried at the thought of her small cottage and her family. Concern registered on her face. "It was the big oak tree. The fire started in the woodland."

The big house was filled with terror, they knew that death followed. That evening the Lord of the Manor appeared in the servant's hall.

'Something must be done," he said. "Come with me, bring the Bible."

The servants followed the desperate man to the library. Carefully Iris placed the Bible on the desk, the cook opened the curtains and the valet opened the panel.

"Where is it?" asked the valet.

"It should be there." his Lordship replied alarmed.

Silence ensued. Each realising that if it had not been moved there was only one alternative- the necklace had been stolen.

Several weeks later in another village the ringmaster breathed deeply. The villagers waited, gullible as ever. He knew another Egyptian artefact had been sighted in these parts. He would track it down. Then they would again fulfil their mission, returning the artefacts to their homeland.

"Are the taxidermy birds prepared?"

"Yes sir"

“ The thistles ready to spook the horses?”

“Yes sir”

“The almanack consulted?”

“Yes sir”

The ruby red circus tent glistened under the flickering lamplight.

The ringmaster smiled...

“Showtime.”