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Science vs. faith. Medicine vs. prayer. Whichever wins, the world will be forever changed.

THE DAY THE MAGIC CAME BACK

BY JAMES GUNN

Illustration by Michael Gibbs

DR. KNOWLAND LOOKED AROUND THE ISOLATION room at the masked faces of the nurse and of Susan Grinnell, his resident physician in internal medicine, and then back to the face of the child on the hospital bed. Her name was Linda Constant. She was seven years old. With her red cheeks and her long, golden hair spread out upon the pillow, she looked like an angel, but the color in her cheeks came from fever, not good health. Her eyes were closed. Knowland thought they might never reopen. If she were awake to see the three of them standing over her he wondered if she might think they were apparitions from the past, witch doctors come to drive the demons from the body they had possessed.

But the powers of medicine were more limited. Knowland's gaze went to the two bottles of antibiotics hanging inverted from their stands, one on each side of the bed, each with a tube leading to a pump on the IV pole and from there to a needle inserted into a vein at the inner elbow of each small arm. All their medical knowledge, all their armamentarium, were failing before the onslaught of this child's illness, and he was dreading the moment when he would face her parents and tell them that science had been defeated by a simple bacterium, *mycobacterium tuberculosis*.

Knowland turned and walked from the room. He was a man of



beginning

medium height and graying hair and a slight paunch. He walked on his heels with his feet turned out, like a duck, as he made his way down the hall. But no one smiled. He was a man of great dignity, and his patients, and many of his coworkers, thought he was the next thing to God.

He went to the nearest lavatory, washed his hands, and removed his mask. When he emerged Susan was waiting for him.

"Isn't there something else we can try?" she asked. Ordinarily she was a plain woman, but when concern transformed her face Knowland thought she was beautiful and that even though her husband was frequently neglected, he was luckier than he knew.

Knowland shook his head. "The strain is antibiotic-resistant. We've tried the whole spectrum."

She looked at him as if willing him to work a miracle. Knowland shook his head again, this time as if trying to rid himself of a heavy burden. "I'm going to have to tell them."

"The Constants? Do you want me to do it?"

"You'd be better at it," Knowland said, "but they need to hear it from me."

"They've asked if they could bring in someone to see Linda."

"What kind of someone?"

"Someone to pray for her, or something like that."

Knowland folded his arms across his chest. "They've lost faith in me—I can understand that—but they might have asked me."

"They belong to a sect that believes in healers. They feel that they sinned by bringing Linda to a hospital. They were too afraid to go with their own beliefs. Now they're afraid again. Afraid to ask you."

"If they can bring in a healer?"

She nodded.

"Why not?" Knowland said.

"You're going to let them?"

"We've failed. Why shouldn't they try what they believe in? I've never understood why medicine should deny people the comfort of alternatives."

"You think there's a chance—?"

Knowland looked at her like a teacher disappointed in a promising student. "Faith healers and snake oils don't work. Medicine doesn't oppose them because of that but because they keep the ill from seeking effective treatment. Well, the Constants have tried that and it's failed. Now they can make peace with their daughter's dying in their own way."

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS KNOWLAND GOT ACCUSTOMED TO SEEING THE tall, thin man sitting next to the bed of the tubercular child. He was of that indeterminate age reached by some men between the middle years and the old. He had dark eyes and a beak of a nose like an owl. His hair, though thin, was still black and his skin was unlined, but his face reflected the serenity obtained through long years of experience with the world's tragedies. He said nothing. When he was offered a mask, he shook his head. He held the child's hand and stared at her as if the power of his will was enough to force open her eyes, to turn on her smile, to make her well again.

Linda's parents, one at a time or together, often were present as well, but they stood on the other side of the bed, smoothing their daughter's hair or cooling her fever with a wet cloth. They asked Susan and then Knowland to stop the antibiotics. They pointed at the places on the child's arms and hands where the needles had left ugly hematomas on their daughter's delicate skin and agonized over the nurses' struggles to find new places to insert heparin locks.

"I can't," Knowland said. "If you want the treatment to stop, you'll have to remove her from my care."

"You said you can't help her," the mother said. She was a sturdy woman with freckles and a sunburned nose. Her hair had once been yellow, like her daughter's, but now was an indeterminate brown.

"I know," Knowland conceded, "but I can't stop trying. Just as you can't." They were standing outside the isolation room. He nodded toward the door where their healer sat with the sick child.

The Constants gave up their efforts to stop the medical treatment. They feared removing her from the antiseptic and the round-the-clock attentions of the hospital, and their healer seemed not to care. He did not care, either, about the activities of the hospital staff around

him. He kept his vigil and ignored everything else, leaving only, Knowland presumed, to take care of his physical needs. It was a presumption on Knowland's part: The healer was always there when the doctor opened the door on his rounds.

On the fourth day, the healer was gone and Linda looked better. Her temperature had dropped, and the false flush of fever in her cheeks had faded. She had not opened her eyes, but she had summoned the strength to cough again.

On the fifth day she was awake and recognizing her parents. On the sixth day she was sitting up and talking to everyone, her parents, the nurses, Susan, even Knowland. She had been everyone's favorite patient in the hospital and they all celebrated the normality of her temperature and pulse. Her cough had disappeared, and her chest sounded better. A few rales and cracks, but even they seemed to be diminishing. The sputum samples came back negative.

"When are you going to release her?" Susan asked.

"Tomorrow."

"Shouldn't we continue the antibiotics for a few more days?"

Knowland did not like questions about his judgment, and sometimes he snapped at students. But this time he seemed distracted. "Look at the record," he said mildly. He had admitted to himself, although he had not yet come to the point of admitting it to his resident, that the antibiotics had done nothing.

"If it wasn't the antibiotics," Susan said, "then what was it?"

Knowland shook his head. Next day, as the Constants checked their daughter out of the hospital, Knowland asked them the name of their healer.

"Mr. Alma," Constant said. He was a sturdy man, a farmer, with weathered hands, a pale forehead, and a brown face from the cheeks down.

"That's his real name?"

"That's his name," Constant said.

"Why didn't you call him in sooner?"

"He was on another mission," Mrs. Constant said. And then she added, as if admitting a lapse of faith, "We were afraid."

"And where can I find Mr. Alma?"

"Why do you want to?" Constant asked.

Knowland shrugged. "I don't know. We might have something to talk about." He didn't know what it might be, yet.

A WEEK LATER HE HAD FIGURED IT OUT. THE ADDRESS THE CONSTANTS had given him turned out to be a storefront in a part of the city that had completed a good part of the cycle from decent housing to slum to restoration. The storefront, however, was still in the slum stage. It had once been a hardware store, but the glass had been broken out of the front windows and replaced by plywood. The plywood had been painted green at one time, scrawled with graffiti, and then painted pink, graffitied, painted blue and later other colors so that now words, drawings, and colors came through indistinctly like palimpsests from the beginning of the world. Where a sign had once said "Hardware," other words had been neatly lettered: "All Souls Chapel."

The first time Knowland knocked at the battered wooden door he got no answer. The second time, a service of some kind was in progress—he could hear someone speaking and the mumble of an audience—and Knowland couldn't wait. The third time, late in the afternoon, he heard a voice asking him to enter. The interior of the room was gloomy after the sunshine outside, and a few moments elapsed while his vision was adjusting. The room was neat and clean but shabby. Folding chairs were arranged carefully across the floor, eight across and eight deep. Beyond them was an old wooden desk. Behind the desk was the dark-haired man the Constants had called Alma.

"I'm Dr. Knowland," he said.

"I know you." The man's voice was thin and reedy, and Knowland realized it was the first time he had heard it.

"I wanted to ask you about Linda Constant."

Alma nodded.

Knowland approached the desk that perhaps also served as a rostrum or pulpit or maybe even an altar. "How is she?"

"She's well," Alma said, "but you don't need me to tell you that."

"No," Knowland said. He sat down in one of the folding chairs, sud-

denly feeling as if his knees were unable to support him. He looked down at his soft, white hands and then up at Alma waiting patiently behind the desk. "How did you do it?"

"It weren't you and your medicines?"

"You know it wasn't."

"Most doctors take credit for what happens in their hospitals," Alma said.

"I'd failed. I know that. I want to know why you succeeded. Was it faith? Some kind of supernatural intervention? God?"

The tall, thin man stood up, towering now above the seated physician.

"None of them. You may use it agin me, but I'll give you the truth—"

Knowland waved his hand impatiently. "I just want to know one thing. All my life have I been wrong about the world and the way it works?"

"Once upon a time people would have called me shaman and honored me," Alma said. "Later folks'd call me a witch and burn me at the stake. Today I'm called a faith healer and scorned." His soft voice was without passion. "All I do is put sick people right with the way things is, underneath, where the real stuff is."

Knowland's hands tightened and he was sorry he had come, but he could think of no easy way to leave, and as he listened to Alma's soft voice he began to realize that what the man was talking about in his inadequate vocabulary was physics and biology.

LATER, HE WAS SEATED IN HIS OFFICE WHEN SUSAN ARRIVED FOR THEIR daily conference. His desk was broad and polished, and he had an oriental rug on the floor, a broad window behind him opening on trees and a carefully tended green lawn dotted with flower beds, and book-cases filled with medical texts on either side. For several minutes he stared without speaking at a medical file in front of him. Finally Susan asked if something was bothering him.

"The healer's name is Alma," Knowland said without looking up. "That isn't his real name, of course, but he wouldn't tell me that. He told me other things. It is easier to be considered a preacher than a healer, he said. Preachers are unregulated; anybody else can be prosecuted for practicing medicine without a license."

Susan looked at him with concern. "Why did you go to see him?"

"Something happened in that hospital room with Linda Constant, and I wanted to know what it was. No, that's wrong—I had to know what it was."

"The antibiotics finally took effect," Susan said.

"You know that isn't true," he said. "It was something else, something frightening."

People have always understood, Knowland said, that the mind could influence the body. Even medical science conceded the reality of psychosomatic illnesses and sometimes the fact that recovery was aided by a positive attitude. It could be called psychosomatic healing. But medical science had no mechanism for the operation of psyche on the soma, and it denied the ability of someone else's mind to heal another person's sickness.

Alma had come up with a mechanism, and as Knowland had listened to Alma's thin voice only able to hint at the abstractions the healer was attempting to describe, Knowland had come to understand it, too. The underlying reality of the universe, Alma had said, lies far beneath the perceptions of the creatures that live within it. "In the beginning was the word," said an astronomer named Harlow Shapley, Knowland thought, "and the word was hydrogen."

Humanity cannot see or hear or touch or smell or taste the basic reality, because it is atomic and molecular and cellular. The only thing humanity has that can compare with that intangible micro-stuff from which all the macro-stuff is built is the mind. Thought, like atoms and molecules and cells, exists without being tangible, and thought not only can encompass the basic reality, it can influence it. Alma could persuade the body's cells and the bacteria and the viruses to work together rather than like selfish individuals.

That is what Alma had told the physician. In spite of the evidence provided by Linda's recovery, Knowland could not accept such far-fetched claims, but he also could not deny the bare possibility that Alma might not be a charlatan.

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Once, Alma said, magic had worked because people believed in it. It wasn't a case of ignorant people trying to explain a world filled with uncontrollable forces and inexplicable events by peopling it with spirits and demons and gods. A few of them, the shamans, perceived a deeper truth than the deceptive world of everyday reality.

It wasn't a case of ignorant people trying to explain a world filled with uncontrollable forces and inexplicable events by peopling it with spirits and demons and gods. A few of them, the shamans, perceived a deeper truth than the deceptive world of everyday reality. And their perceptions enabled some of them to shape that deeper truth to the needs of the people around them. Of course, it was easy to make a mistake or, as such positions brought honor and privilege, to pretend to a power that one didn't possess. Sometimes the truths also became confused and became visions that were interpreted differently by prophets and messiahs, becoming religions and superstitions, but all were reflections of the underlying reality that is and always has been unified and available. It was nature, not the supernatural. And then science came along, with its objective reality and demonstrable power over nature, and faith weakened and shamans forgot and were forgotten. The magic was lost.

"And you believed this?" Susan asked.

Knowland could tell she was concerned about his mental stability. Had the experience with Linda unhinged his mind? "What's remarkable about it is that this man of almost no education has come up with a theory about the nature of the universe that is not much different from that of our most learned physicists."

Susan frowned. "That sort of thing is out there in the popular press and on science programs. If it worked, that would be remarkable."

"Yes," Knowland said. "It seemed to work in the case of Linda Constant."

"Medical literature is filled with spontaneous cures."

"Do you know how weak that sounds? What we cannot explain, we call spontaneous, as if that explains anything."

"What are you going to do?"

"I've asked Alma to let me go along on a few of his healing sessions. You may have to cover for me."

"Of course. But aren't you concerned about being too—?"

"Gullible?" He knew his expression reflected an inner turmoil, and he knew Susan was watching him for signs of a mental breakdown. But he could not conceal the doubts that were eating away at a lifetime of belief. "Of course I am. My reputation would be ruined if anyone found out I was taking Alma seriously. But I'm also concerned, as a man of science, about denying the existence of phenomena that I can see in front of me."

THEY FORMED AN ODD TEAM, THE TALL, THIN HEALER AND THE SHORTER, plumper physician. Their visits never took them to hospitals. Instead, they met in bedrooms of decaying houses and apartments. Sometimes the bedroom was the only room or the only one presentable enough for visitors, and the ailing person had been moved into it. Many were neat, but whether the rooms were clean or filthy, Alma went about his business without a glance or a word.

He allowed Knowland to check the ailing person's pulse, temperature, and blood pressure, and to make a routine physical examination, listening to the heart and the lungs and feeling the lymph glands. Knowland would take a blood sample and come to a tentative diagnosis that he later checked, as best he could, in the laboratory. Then the vigil began. Knowland could not take time away from his normal practice and teaching to monitor the entire process of healing, but he checked on each person at the beginning of the vigil, in the middle, and at the end. Over a period of four weeks, Alma had recorded a remarkable string of successes.

As nearly as Knowland could tell without full clinical examinations, one elderly woman had a blood infection, an old man had kidney failure, a middle-aged woman had pancreatic cancer, a middle-aged man had pneumonia, and a ten-year-old boy had leukemia. All were poor and some were virtually without means. Two lived in the country on small plots; one was a squatter, and the other lived on land that had been reduced from a more extensive farm. Three lived in the inner city. The rural residents, at least, had gardens and neighbors. Those in the inner city subsisted on welfare and food stamps and junk food.

Knowland resisted the urge to get them into a hospital where their conditions could be treated. He tried to tell himself that this was a scientific experiment, but he could not shake the feeling that he had vio-

lated his Hippocratic Oath and, more important, his personal principles. He thought about the studies in syphilis allowed to continue in Alabama and the experiments conducted in Nazi Germany under the guise of science. He felt that way, that is, until the ailing individuals began to show improvement. All but the old man with the renal condition were out of their beds and back to normal activities after a week. They seemed, as far as Knowland could discern, to be cured, although if his original diagnoses had been correct, the pancreatic cancer at least had been terminal. The leukemia might have gone into remission, but the rapidity and the extent of recovery were uncharacteristic. Without proper diagnoses and data, the cases were without scientific standing and would be worthless as anything but anecdote, but Knowland knew that with the best of luck he might have been successful with only two of the illnesses.

At the end of the month, Knowland congratulated Alma on his healings. They were standing outside one of the tenements surrounded by litter and uncollected garbage. The odor was strong, but Knowland did not notice. "If anybody had told me about these cases, I wouldn't have believed him."

"They'll not believe you, either," Alma said.

"What about the man with the renal condition?"

"The what?"

"The old man with the kidney problem. The one who died."

"He'd much to overcome," Alma said. "And I couldn't reach his—I know not what to call it."

"How many do you lose?"

"A few. Here and there. Sometimes I can't touch their will to live. Sometimes my power fails. Sometimes they fight me."

"Skepticism?"

"I give it no name," Alma said. "Some cling too strong to the world of the senses; some won't hold with the unseen."

"Have you ever tried to teach someone else to do what you do?" Knowland asked.

"People can be shown how to heal if they can see the hidden truth and if they has the power. I was taught as a boy and have taught some others the same; many cannot learn. But those that can, they spread far and wide. Beyond the seas, there may be many, I sense. Maybe some places never lost the truth."

Knowland thought for a moment and then asked, "If I could set up some controlled experiments, would you participate? While you worked, could we check your pulse, your blood pressure, your brain waves?"

"No," Alma said.

"No?" Knowland said. "And yet you allowed me—"

"You cared about Linda. You let me help her. But this other would not work. Even with evidence, people would doubt, and I would be shamed. My people would wonder. Maybe question my power." Alma looked at Knowland. "This troubles you."

When Knowland spoke, his voice was uneven. "How can we control this power, turn it into a science, if we cannot study it?"

"Some things science ain't never going to control," Alma said.

SUSAN FOUND KNOWLAND IN THE DOCTOR'S LOUNGE, A CLEAN, STERILE room with shiny chromium furniture, a coffee maker, a small refrigerator with soft drinks, and no humanizing touches, not even curtains at the windows. "Look who I've got," Susan said, too brightly. She was holding Linda Constant's hand, and the seven-year-old was hanging back, the other hand to her mouth, looking overwhelmed by the building and its official-looking occupants. "Her mother brought her to say hello."

"Hello, Linda," Knowland said gently, holding out his hand.

The child hesitated for a moment and then reached for his hand with the hand that had been at her mouth and put it trustingly in his. It felt wet, but Knowland shook it and said, "How are you feeling, Linda?"

"I'm fine," Linda said. "You don't have a mask."

"No, it isn't necessary now, is it?"

The little girl shook her head. "I feel all well," she said.

"That's good," Knowland said. "Stay that way."

"I will," she said with conviction, and turned toward the door. She looked back. "My mother said to tell you 'thanks,'" she said.

"You're welcome," Knowland said.

When Susan returned, Knowland was looking at his stethoscope, turning it over and over in his hands as if he had never seen one before and was trying to figure out what it was good for. He looked up. "De nada," he said.

"She's well again," Susan said. "That's what counts."

"Is it?" Knowland looked toward the window where the afternoon sunshine was struggling through the leaves of the giant pin oak that shielded this side of the hospital.

"You can't blame yourself for someone else's success. If that is what it was."

"That would be mean-spirited, wouldn't it," Knowland said. "Alma's method works. He heals people."

"Even if that's true," Susan said, "there has always been room in the world for the people of faith and the people of science. You'll have plenty of work to do."

Knowland turned on the bench seat of the couch. "You think I'm concerned because Alma and his kind will put me and you out of business?" Susan looked surprised at Knowland's question.

Knowland looked back toward the window. "I suppose there's some of that. Some jealousy is hard to avoid. But more than that is at stake here."

"What is at stake?" she asked.

"It's not just the healing. It's science itself. The ability to manipulate the basic reality of the universe may start with restoring people to health, but what is to stop it from working miracles of other kinds?"

"Like what?" Susan asked.

Knowland shrugged. "Creating food. Loaves and fishes, say. Or gold. Or death for our enemies and good fortune for our friends. Energy for free if our supplications are proper; atomic explosions if they are not. Once magic is let loose upon the world again, there is no place it cannot touch."

"I didn't have your experience with Alma. But even if magic worked," Susan said, catching her breath in the middle, "surely there would be rules and controls."

"The very essence of magic is that there are no controls," Knowland said. "Only other magic."

Susan raised her chin stubbornly. "Then you'll just have to learn how to do it yourself."

"That's just it," Knowland said. "I can't. I'm too tied to the sensory world I perceive around me, that I have lived with all my life. I'm too committed to science, to ways of understanding that have nothing in common with faith. I'm bound by the physical laws I learned long ago."

"Is that why you're upset?"

"No," Knowland said. "That isn't it. The important thing is not who does it but that it can be done only by those chosen by some unseen power to possess this unique ability. Like the princess and the pea or King Arthur and the sword in the stone. Not earned but given. The image of the future is the Middle Ages. That's Camelot under another name. The divine right of kings and the magical rites of the Elect."

"Even so," Susan said, "isn't it worth a great deal to have something to fall back on? Something that can help when medical science can't?"

"To everybody seeking mercy, the appeal of magic is irresistible," Knowland said. "But it means that medicine and science are finished. All science can offer is justice. Science has much to answer for, including its neglect of mercy, but it transformed the world into something egalitarian instead of hierarchical. Science created democracy and affluence and individual choice. Now the magic has come back and the world is going to be changed beyond recognition, and it is not going to be in the hands of those who work hard and study and understand but of the Elect. They may do good, they may do evil, but science is ended, and with it any possibility of getting ahead, and of pulling the rest of humanity along, by anything but good fortune or the blessings of the Chosen."

"I don't think I ever told you," Susan said, "that my brother is HIV positive."

Something snapped. As Susan watched, Knowland walked to the wastebasket beside the coffee machine and dropped into it his broken stethoscope. □