

THE SIREN'S CALL

A short story by Kit Thornton

It is but a few months since that delightfully warm and pleasant summer day when I first began to lose control of my mind and my destiny. Now, as I sit uncomfortably on the broken armchair in my dingy lodgings, I know that I must endeavour to write my story while I still have the ability and sufficient strength to lift my pen. And all the time, every waking moment, I am waiting, alert, ears sharply tuned for the sound of my mobile. Desperately, passionately, I am willing the instrument to ring, and yet I am terrified that it might do so.

Where should I begin? Orphaned before I was six years old and brought up by indifferent foster parents, I suppose I had a less than ideal childhood. I could tell you how I bluffed my way through school, how I learned to augment my meagre pocket-money by relieving innocent shoppers of their wallets and purses, how I first experienced the delights of the female sex, but none of these is relevant to my story and none would be likely to win me your sympathy. Perhaps I should relate the finding of a more honest path to success and fortune, for this I did achieve (surprisingly, you would be entitled to think) during my meteoric rise from tea-boy to junior executive in a well-known merchant bank.

But truthfully this tale can only begin on that fateful day in July when I responded to the ringing of my mobile telephone.

I had slipped out of the bank for a brief coffee break and was walking quickly through one of the little lanes just off Threadneedle Street, in the City of London, when I felt against my thigh the familiar vibration that preceded the ringing of the mobile in my trouser pocket. Naturally I flipped open the phone to take the call. Instantly I was mesmerised, stopping so abruptly that the woman following cannoned into me, swearing eloquently as she rearranged herself before hurrying on.

Keeping the phone clamped to my ear I moved to the side of the lane and huddled in an alcove out of the hot sun and away from the bustle of the morning crowds. The sound that had so caught my attention was like nothing I had ever heard before. Although I have listened to that same sound on several occasions since, I still find it impossible to describe. I could not tell if it was music or song, or speech, or perhaps some miraculous, melodic blend of all three. I was transfixed, hypnotised, enraptured, as I absorbed the cascading cadences of those bewitching notes. I have little notion of how long I stood in the alcove, for just as the sound had no beginning, so it had no end; it held me under its spell and somehow the sound reached into me. Deeper and deeper it went until it seemed to be in communion with my very soul. And then I began to detect the voice, the soft sibilants and seductive, secret accents delivering to my inner being a message that I knew I would be powerless to ignore.

“My name is Parthenope,” the voice seemed to be saying, “I am your controller.” I did not understand, and at that time I had no fear; or if I did have a fear it was only that the wondrous sound might cease. Already I was aware that I had been hooked and, like an addict craving for nicotine, alcohol or heroin, I would not be able to survive without the stimulant that only the siren’s call could bring me.

Parthenope told me that she would call later that day and then, like the muted swish of receding waves on the shore as the tide goes out, the mysterious sound drifted away. Bewildered, I slowly closed the phone and replaced it in my pocket.

I was unable to return to my work, and after wandering aimlessly through the lanes and alleyways of the city for an hour or two I rang the bank to explain that I had been taken ill and would not be in for the rest of the day. I had no idea what the following days and nights might have in store for me, and indeed, if I had known, I would there and then have walked down to the river and thrown myself in.

It was not easy for me to accept that silence could be so powerful a weapon against me, but as the hours passed by I found it almost impossible to bear the pain of that silence. Yes, of course there was a constant cacophony of noise all around, but I was like a drunk bound hand and foot in a wine cellar. When my phone did ring I would snatch it from my pocket, only to snap it shut again as soon as I recognised someone from work or a friend wanting me to join him in a round of golf. I craved the siren’s call and yet I was in dread of it.

Eventually I returned to my luxury apartment in London’s West End. I was hungry but with no desire to eat, exhausted but with no desire to sleep. I longed to hear again the mystical, soothing, terrifying voice from my mobile. What was happening to me? I had found the strength to raise myself from the ranks of streetwise thugs to a position of some respect and significance; yet now, quite suddenly, I was helpless, hopeless, and already beginning to fear for my sanity.

No sooner had I taken the phone from my pocket and tossed it onto the bed, and then lain down beside it, than it vibrated and rang. I flipped it open. It was the sound I craved and instantly I was transported into that other world.

Once again, as I lay there alone in my room, I felt the tender voice of Parthenope reaching into me, searching for my soul. It was then she softly whispered that I was the chosen one, specially selected for research into the very latest, most advanced techniques for direct communication. I wanted to ask who was behind this work - the government, secret services, private industry, some foreign power – but I dare not interrupt the exquisite sound that so entranced me. And Parthenope continued to speak to me, sweetly warning me that I must share the secret with no one, that I must take direction only from her and that I must follow, to the letter, whatever instruction she would give me. At this point I could hold myself in check no longer and I began to speak... Instantly the precious voice stopped, the ethereal tones dispersed in my empty room. Parthenope was gone; the beautiful, mystical sound had ceased and I was left desolate in the silence. Desperately I pressed the buttons on my phone - calls received, numbers stored, ring-back – but there was no hope. The connection was broken and I was alone again. There was nothing I could do but lie there waiting only for the siren’s call.

It was almost two weeks before I next heard the voice of Parthenope. I found it increasingly difficult to eat, to sleep, even to think. I became unkempt, careless of my appearance. On the rare occasions when I ventured out of my apartment I could only meander listlessly about the local streets and parks. I received the expected letter from my employer; it began sympathetically enough but ended with the warning that if I failed to get in touch I would be facing dismissal. I received a letter from my landlord reminding me that the rent needed to be paid. But I could not escape the invisible bonds that held me firm; abandoned, I could do nothing except try to survive on the barest necessities of life as the craving intensified.

The call came one evening as I was trying to rest in my West End apartment. I knew it would be Parthenope because all of my friends had given up on me, so often had they been rejected or ignored. Once again I was becharmed, powerless to resist as her tender words entangled my spirit. My inner sense had already made me aware of what would happen next, so I can scarcely have been surprised at what Parthenope now told me. The organisation needed more funds for their research; they knew that during my rise as a successful young bank executive I had put by a substantial nest egg, which was now earning interest in a private savings account, and they suggested that I might like to contribute this to their research effort. (*Suggested!* A nice selection of word, I had thought, for what choice did I have?) I was instructed to make immediate arrangements to withdraw the full amount from my savings account, in cash, and take it, in a black bag, to a specified location in Green Park; there I would be given further directions.

The next day, as a man in a trance, which I suppose I was, I called at the head office of my savings bank in the city. Of course, the nature of my request coupled with my dishevelled appearance caused some consternation amongst the bank staff. I was getting increasingly desperate as I spoke in turn to the desk clerk, the senior teller, the assistant manager and the chief general manager, but eventually I convinced them that I was indeed just who I said I was. Very reluctantly they packed all the cash into my black holdall and I walked from the bank carrying my life savings; a short life, but a lot of savings. I made my way to Green Park and sat down on a bench, my filled black bag beside me, to await the siren's call.

This time I did not have long to wait. Bemused, confused, bewitched, I listened to the voice of Parthenope as she told me what a success I had been and how much I had helped their research to move forward. Now that I had laid this groundwork there would be others to ensure that the programme continued to make progress towards the ultimate goal. Parthenope did not enlighten me as to the nature of this ultimate goal and I still did not know who 'they' might be. I was getting the feeling that I had outlived my usefulness and with growing horror I realised that I might never again hear the wondrous, mystical voice of Parthenope. Gently, tenderly, that voice now breathed into me the irresistible desire to rest, and there on the park bench I closed my eyes as my head fell forward on my chest and I slept a deep and dreamless sleep.

How long did I sleep on that park bench? Darkness had fallen when I was shaken into wakefulness by a policeman who told me sternly to move along. The black bag containing what was left of my life was gone, as I had known it would be. There was nothing I could do except return to my apartment, which would be my home for only a short while more.

More letters from my employers and my landlord; visits from the police, bailiffs, social security officials; eviction – thrown out onto the street. The vicious downward spiral of self-destruction did not take long, and still I clung forlornly to the hope that I would one day hear again the haunting, celestial sound of the siren's call.

And that is how I come to be in this hellhole, this grimy garret in a rat-infested council hostel where I sit in a broken armchair and occasionally try to sleep on a flea-ridden mattress. Plaster dust sprinkles down from the ceiling whenever someone moves in the attic room next to mine and the stench from the drains below comes crawling under my door.

It is many weeks since I heard the voice of Parthenope. She has taken everything from me; I have nothing and I am nothing. I am struggling to dredge my mind for the memories that I now share with you in defiance of my controller. I believe that, at last, I have found a way to defeat the sorcery of Parthenope, to block out the lure of the siren's call. For me it is too late, but I need to write down the secret I have discovered in the hope that it might be read by others before they too fall victim. It is this -

But wait! My phone is ringing; I have to answer it...

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*The Siren's Call was first published in Scribble magazine, Summer 2010.
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