THE HEADS OF CERBERUS

GERTRUDE BARROWS BENNETT

Uproar Books

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FOREWORD

Quick, what book am I describing?

A seventeen-year-old girl is forced to compete in a deadly game for the amusement of the vacuous, idle ruling class in the brutal, dystopian dictatorship that arises from the ruins of America.

Yes, the plot screams "*Hunger Games*!"

To be honest, it was this very comparison that first attracted *The Heads of Cerberus* to my attention. And I am so glad it did, because this book is a blast. But in truth, the similarities between the two novels remain mostly in the background, to be teased out by interested readers rather than made plain on the page.

For example, there's much to be said about the fact that the competitors in both books can only hope to win the games by making themselves popular with their oppressors. You could write an excellent essay on the topic if some teacher or professor required it of you. But only Suzanne Collins (whose satire is focused on the cultural) would make it easy on you by exploring the idea and its consequences in depth. Gertrude Barrows Bennett (with her focus on political commentary) only derides it in passing.

In fact, if you go into this novel expecting something like *The Hunger Games*, you're likely to be surprised and disappointed how little time Bennett spends on the games

themselves. They are not the centerpiece of her satire. She's far more interested in serving as tour guide of her future Philadelphia (especially its forms and mechanisms of government) than being your play-by-play announcer for the contest. And unlike Collins, who wants you to feel the sweat and mud on the faces of her underclass, Bennett presents everything to the reader from 20,000 feet, giving a wide overview of life two hundred years in the future without allowing any details of individual lives to come into focus.

Of course, this is a feature of early science fiction, not a bug. The age of the trilogy had not yet arrived, and even individual books were shorter—routinely 60,000 words rather than 90,000. Bennett is content to show off her future, make her point, and type "The End."

Therefore, as initially intriguing as the similarities may be, I found that my attempts to compare *The Heads of Cerberus* to *The Hunger Games* were more of an enjoyable intellectual exercise than genuinely illuminating.

In fact, if you're looking for direct descendants of Bennett's groundbreaking narrative, you'd find the best hunting among the novellas and short stories of mid-century madmen like H.P. Lovecraft and Philip K. Dick. It's for this reason that I ultimately decided upon *The Heads of Cerberus* as the second novel in the Uproar Books Classics Series.

Gertrude Barrows Bennett—and *The Heads of Cerberus* in particular—is easily recognized as a midpoint along the evolutionary chain of dystopian fiction from H.G. Wells's straightforward cautionary tale *The Time Machine* (where the facts are clear and the moral is obvious) to Dick's various existential-crises-in-paperback-form such as *Ubik*, *Time Out of Joint*, and *We Can Remember It for You Wholesale* (where harrowing new technologies put reality itself into question). Bennett's characters are often bewildered to the point of

questioning their own sanity, never knowing what's real; then, just when the reader thinks it's all been explained, much of that explanation goes up in smoke.

Bennett's book is also influential as an early example of genre-bending—mixing a few chapters of phantasmagorical horror on the astral plane of Ulithia into its time-travel adventure. This innovative blending of horror into speculative fiction—especially in her first novella *The Nightmare* and her most famous work *The Citadel of Fear*—earned Bennett the title of "the Woman who Invented Dark Fantasy."

Bennett has another distinction to her name, as well. In the pages of *The Heads of Cerberus*, she became the first author to physically cast her characters into parallel worlds rather than settling for visions and dreams of what might be or might have been.

(Without *The Heads of Cerberus*, the man in the high castle might have an empty library and Mr. Spock may never have sported his goatee.)

Alternate realities—not just time travel—are key to this narrative, giving early twentieth century readers more than they bargained for and keeping them guessing until the end. *The Heads of Cerberus* goes forward two hundred years, but also up into a higher plane of existence and then sideways into a parallel universe—only to have every detail and experience in that universe called into question.

Very Philip K. Dick, indeed. (Nine years before he was born.)

With all of Bennett's contributions to the dystopian and science fiction genres, this is certainly a book worthy of attention. At the same time, it's also unabashed pulp, with all of the glorious one-dimensional characters and melodrama that goes with it.

The Heads of Cerberus was originally serialized in the pulp magazine The Thrill Book in 1919 (roughly half-

way between *The Time Machine* and Philip K. Dick chronologically as well as in themes and complexity). Why The Thrill Book's cover illustration presents the story's protagonist—who is a wealthy world traveler living in Philadelphia two years after the conclusion of World War I—as a Robin Hood-esque rogue in a medieval castle is a mystery lost to time. (You can find the cover and an interior page of The Thrill Book following this foreword on pages vi and vii.)

Bennett used the pen name "Francis Stephens" for the publication of this story and all of her other writing, knowing the public appetite for women authors of science fiction (particularly with a political bent) was very low. She began writing for the extra paycheck, being a young widow with a daughter and a disabled mother to care for. It was not until four years after her death that the public discovered that the beloved and influential author was a member of the fairer sex (in fact, it was widely believed for decades that Francis Stephens was a *nom de plume* of none other than A. Merritt). Thus, she died in undeserved anonymity in 1948, sadly estranged from her daughter for more than a decade.

Today's readers are now halfway between Bennett's real-world of 1919 and her imaginary 2118. And so, the story's political warnings seem relevant to us in only a vague and generalized way, but they were much more pointed and poignant in their own era. For example, future Philadelphia's fall into totalitarianism is the result of runaway isolationism—an issue of intense public debate in the aftermath of World War I. Likewise, the characters' abrupt and virulent defense of the gold standard for monetary policy may leave modern readers scratching their heads, but this was a ripped-from-the-headlines argument in 1919, the year America returned to the gold standard after temporarily suspending it during the war.

Fortunately, even if the immediacy of the political commentary is lost, the fun of the story remains intact and accessible. And though there's no shortage of dated language and poetic allusions, these are—to me, at least—charming rather than tedious, as can be the case. Parts of the story remain hopelessly sexist, which sadly can't be avoided in classic science fiction, but at least the writing mostly avoids being cringe-worthy to modern ears. (Except, perhaps, the inappropriate but inevitable romance between a lawyer and a high school student!)

Even so, Bennett's *The Heads of Cerberus* remains entertaining and, indeed, politically relevant to modern audiences. New readers continue to discover it and enjoy it now 101 years later.

I am proud to help continue that tradition.

Rick Lewis
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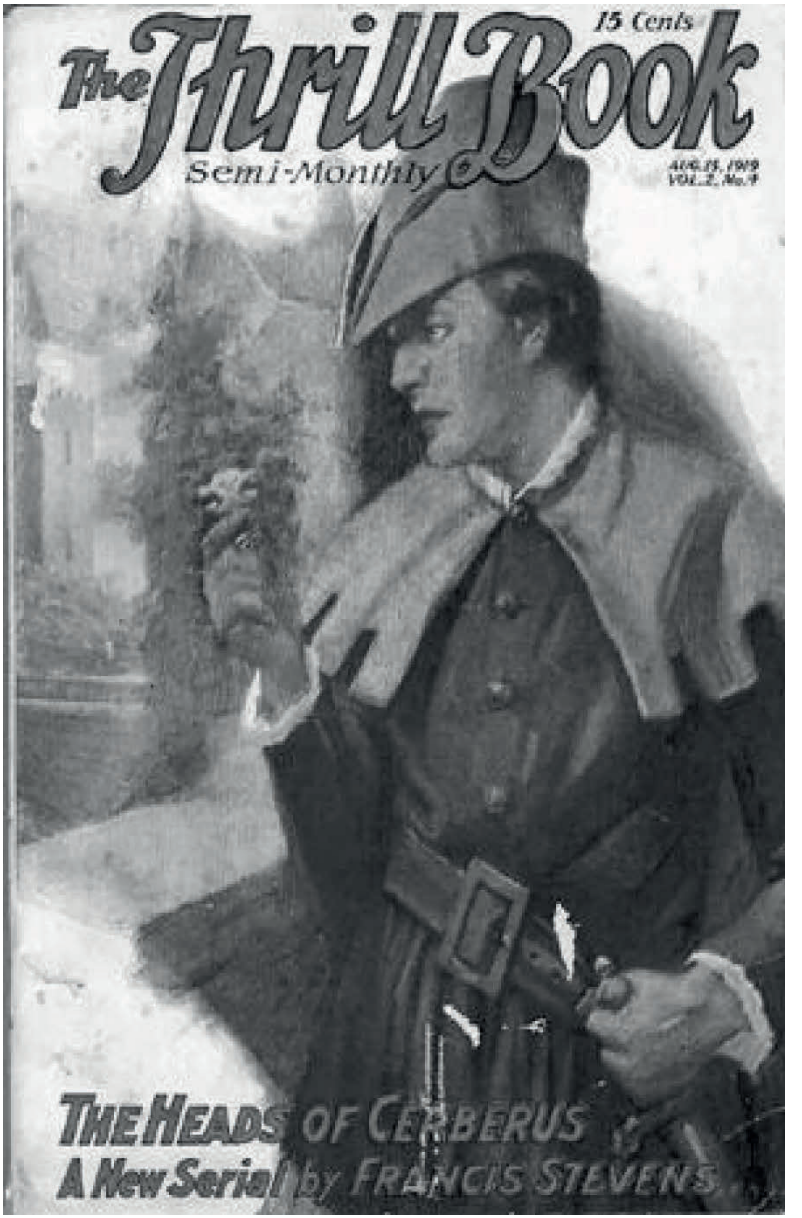
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A New Serial by FRANCIS STEVENS

The Heads of Cerberus

by Francis Stevens

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Robert Drayton, a young lawyer, reduced to poverty by the persecution of a dishonest corporation, arrives penniless in Philadelphia, where, at the end of all honest resources, he determines to turn criminal. He breaks into a house with the purpose of robbery, and is attacked by a cracksman who is pilfering a safe. Drayton regains consciousness the next morning. Then he finds that the occupant of the house is his friend, Trenmore, a rich Irishman and soldier of fortune, whom he has not seen in several years. Trenmore, a huge, powerful fellow, is still very fond of Drayton. Trenmore tells him that the cracksman had broken into the safe, looking for a mysterious antique which Trenmore has recently bought at an auction. This is a silver phial carved in the likeness of three snarling dogs' heads—the legendary "HEADS OF CEREBUS." Since Trenmore has owned it, several unsuccessful attempts have been made to rob him of it, but he has hidden it securely. An unknown who claims to know the power of the phial makes these attempted thefts. The phial is said to have been carved by Benvenuto Cellini for the Duke of Florence, and its contents have never been examined. The legend runs that the gray dust which can be seen through the glass of the phial is the dust gathered by the poet Dante at the gates of Purgatory. Trenmore and Drayton pry the top from the phial and pour out the dust. Trenmore stirs the dust with his fingers, and from it arises a puff of thin smoke. Then Trenmore vanishes from view. A few minutes later Viola, Trenmore's sister, comes to the house to see him. She grasps up some of the dust; then she, too, vanishes. Drayton next takes the fateful step. Trenmore's house is now empty. A thief enters and steals the now powerless phial, leaving the precious dust unnoticed. Trenmore's servant comes in to straighten up the library, and wraps up the dust to save it for his master. Meanwhile, without any sense of time, place, or transition, Drayton finds himself on a wide green plain. It is a strange, silent, desolate world. He sees the ruins of a medieval castle on a hill. He goes toward it, and comes to a mound overgrown with grass. A premonition moves him to tear away the grass, and under it he finds the still living body of Viola Trenmore. Going to the other side of the wall, he is face to face with Trenmore. The men and the girl wander on through this strange world, encountering many fantastic beings. They see phantoms dancing, and Drayton goes forward too near them, but the Voice of Illusion warns him that there are strange things in this land of Ulithia. The three chance upon the White Weaver, spinning the web of years. She tells them Ulithia is the phantom borderland of life, and to go onward, deeper into the unknown. Drayton's feet are tangled now in the silver web the Weaver has spun around them. "Go forward—go deeper," says the Weaver, and Drayton is borne outward upon a wide white sea.

CHAPTER VI.

A MATTER OF BUTTONS.

WHEN Drayton and his friends walked through the Ulithian "moon," they were none of them either quite unconscious nor entirely devoid of sense. Drayton, for instance, knew that Viola extended her hand to him; that he took it and that her other hand was held by some one else, an indistinct personality whose identity was of not the slightest interest or importance.

They all knew that with the dizzying fragrance of a million blossoms in their nostrils; with blinding radiance before them; with behind them only si-