

LOUISE COOPER

'One of our finest writers of epic fantasy...'

MICHAEL MOORCOCK



J. Sullivan
97

SACRAMENT OF NIGHT

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Louise Cooper



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FEATURE

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**Remembering the Charn of another name and nature . . .
and remembering, too, that though the moon's light may
be eclipsed from time to time by shadow, it is merely
hidden, and not truly extinguished.**

You meaner beauties of the night
Which poorly satisfy men's eyes
More with your number than your light;
You common people of the skies,
What are you when moon doth rise?

(Michael East, c. 1580–1648)

Prologue

Calling to the stars. Not with words, for she could no longer find the words, not now, not after so many years. But something within her was calling, crying still.

Each evening as the daylight fled she would move to her window and gaze out and up, waiting for darkness to come, watching for the first faint pinpoints to show against the sky's velvet. When that first tiny light appeared, she wept. It was an old, familiar ritual with her now, and in a strange way it brought a little comfort, though she no longer understood why. As more stars began to follow the first harbinger, her tears faded and her vision cleared once more, and she simply gazed, silent, rapt, alone with the thoughts that drifted like ghosts through her damaged mind.

There was never enough time for watching. Never enough *time*, before the other lights, the cruel lights, took the stars away. The lamplighters, moving through the town streets to kindle their small, harsh fires. The hospice angels, crisp and rustling in white linen, bringing lanterns that she didn't want but had no words to refuse. And the moon. She hated the moon's light above all others; when it shone, there was room for nothing else in the sky, and each evening as she saw its bland face rising she would clench her fists and beat them against her own upper arms, railing in silent fury. The lamps; the lanterns; the moon. All to drive the night back, keep it at bay, hold it fast lest *they* should come: the twilight ones, strange and cold and fragile as the stars, who moved in darkness and could not bear the blaze of day. So afraid. Everyone was so *afraid*, and they would not see, and would not learn, and would not give her the darkness that allowed the door to open.

Yet she had closed the door with her own hand. That much she knew, with a terrible certainty that lodged like iron in her and, unlike the stars, did not diminish. She had closed it, turned

her face away and tried to return to the light. But light had nothing to give her, and so she had come to this place and would remain here, where people cared for her and were kind to her and took such pains to ensure that she would never, ever be alone in the dark again. She did not speak to them; there was nothing she could say that they would understand, and she had passed so much time in silence now that they thought she had no voice. But she had a voice. She knew it in . . . ah no; not in her heart, for that was withered, long withered, like the hearts of the willow trees in the garden. She could see the willows from her window, away beyond the lawns which she would not walk on, beyond the beds of flowers which she would not look at; abandoned and forgotten in their own small, overgrown wilderness. By day the willows were like flowing green water under the sun, but by night, if the wind blew, their leaves trembled and shimmered with faint silver. Like the stars. And when the lamps and the lanterns and the moon had dimmed the stars and snuffed them out, then sometimes she would remember that she had a voice, and would whisper the words of the old song that her mother had sung to her, a world and a life ago. *Sad is the willow tree; the willow stands apart: for when life is done, the willow wan must perish from the heart* . . . The willows alone knew her secrets, so she sang the song for them, to let them know that she had not forgotten the debt she owed. It was the only tribute she could give now. But if they, and what they guarded, heard her, they sent her no sign.

So at last she would yield to the light, to the lamps and the lanterns and the moon, and would retreat from her window and return to the wooden table and the wooden stool and the work which was never finished. The angels let her have as much clay as she wanted, and water to soften it, and little wooden spatulas to shape and carve it, and they spoke softly and encouragingly to her, urging her to let them see, let them admire. She acquiesced, because the sculptures she made were never right. They were skilled, they were beautiful, but they were never *right*. When the angels had admired and exclaimed and gone away hoping to leave her contented, she would take the sculpture they had praised and twist it, mutilate it, working it with the heel of her hand until it was nothing again. Once, just once, it had been *right*. But never since then. Never.

For twilight was fragile and darkness elusive, and without the

dark, the memories could not truly return. *Drive the night back, keep it at bay, hold it fast lest they should come . . .* All she could do was call.

But still there was no answer.

Chapter I

Foss Agate had not wanted to make the visit. These occasions had been an unhappy ordeal from the beginning, and in the last year or two he had begun, privately, to feel that they served only to upset all concerned to no good purpose. But tomorrow was Calliope's birthday, and she had taken the notion into her head that it would somehow be fitting for the whole family – that was, Griette's whole family – to go to the hospice together. Foss thought it a futile exercise, but Calliope had pleaded and Philome, his second wife, said that it was surely not asking too much of him to indulge his eldest daughter on the eve of her special day. So Foss had given way, and as the bell in the hospice's central tower rang to announce the afternoon visiting hour he and his three eldest children duly joined the sad little procession of relatives and friends making their way through the iron gates and along the gravel drive towards the imposing building.

The weather was fine and the spring breeze warm, and some of the inmates – those the Hospice Master tactfully termed the 'less troubled' of his flock – had been allowed into the gardens to walk on the lawns or sit by the ornamental pond where they could enjoy the intricate play of the fountains. Not Griette, though. She was not 'troubled' in the way that some were; she was never violent and could have had many freedoms if she had chosen to take them. But she did not choose, and efforts to persuade her met only with a sad, blank look and a turning away of her face. So, as always, an angel, crisp and rustling in her white gown, led the family through the corridors with soothing blue walls, to the little room, one among so many other little rooms, in the east wing.

The door was not locked, for Griette never tried to leave. She

was working at a sculpture when they went in, and although she looked up as the door opened, her face expressed no recognition and she did not acknowledge them, only turned back to the tiny clay shape taking form beneath her hands.

Calliope, who in fifteen years had never become inured to the effect of these first moments, said softly, 'Hello, Mother.' Tears sparkled on her dark lashes; she blinked them away, not wanting the others to see. Her sister Celesta and brother Luthe were already stepping forward to tentatively lay the gifts they had brought on the table where Griette sat. A pot of spring flowers. A shawl, the embroidery kindly and beautifully finished by Philome when Celesta had found it beyond her abilities. Rose and violet sweets – once Griette's favourites – in a box tied with silver ribbon. Griette stared at them all for a few moments, then looked away.

The angel moved soft-footed to the table. 'I'm sorry,' she said and smiled sympathetically at Calliope, at the same time deftly untying the ribbon on the box of sweets. 'She shouldn't have this. We must take the greatest care . . . I'm sure you understand.'

Calliope nodded, taking the ribbon and folding it. Of course. no scarves, no sashes, no belts, no ribbons. Just in case. She had forgotten the rule and the reason for it.

It was time now to enact the familiar ritual once more; to sit on chairs, drink tisane and pretend for a little while that all was as it had been fifteen years ago, before the calamity struck. Calliope alone among Foss's children was old enough to recall that time clearly. She remembered how strange and quiet her mother had become in the moon before the irrevocable blow had fallen. She still dreamed, horribly, of the final two days; Griette in an upstairs room, screaming and screaming and screaming, while her father brought all his medical and alchemical skills to bear and could do nothing for her. Then very early on the third morning the screaming had stopped, and in the shocking aftermath of silence two strangers had come to the house with a litter, and Calliope had stood, with Celesta gripping her hand and Luthe clinging to her skirt, as they put Griette into the litter and closed the doors and bore her away. The expression on her mother's face then was the expression on her face now; a strange, serene yet hopeless emptiness from which all animation had gone. The face of someone who had found a kind of death, but no peace.

Griette's mind, the physicians said, was shattered, and no skill known to mankind could repair such damage. But her body was healthy and there was no reason why she shouldn't live out her natural span. So Foss had placed her in the hospice's care, where she would have kindness and attention and protection. He could afford the best of everything; the best she should have. And since the day she was confined he had never, ever spoken about her madness or its cause.

Now he sat awkwardly holding her hand and trying to make a pretence at conversation, telling her about his patients, the newest town gossip, the progress of his latest ideas for the garden. He even talked of Philome and her two young children, for it did not seem to upset Griette to hear of the woman who, as the law allowed in such cases as these, had taken her former place. Griette appeared to listen and made no effort to pull her hand away, but her eyes looked through Foss and focused somewhere far beyond him, and when she smiled, as she occasionally did, the smiles had no meaning. No matter what was said or who was addressing her, she uttered not a single word.

Even Calliope couldn't help but feel relief when at last the tower bell tolled again. The Hospice Master was flexible about his rules and there would be no hurry to chivy the visitors out, but Foss grasped at the reprieve and rose quickly to his feet.

'Well, my dear, it seems we must go.' He hesitated, looking down at Griette with an expression of helpless bafflement in which just a faint trace of irritation showed. 'The children will come to see you again next quartermoon, as always, and I shall be back in another moon or so.' It was a lie but he always said it as a matter of habit; in the early days his visits had been much more frequent than they were now. He bent to kiss her brow. 'Goodbye, Griette.'

Calliope, Celesta and Luthe all kissed her in turn, Calliope's lips lingering on her cheek as she whispered, 'Goodbye, dear Mother . . . perhaps next time you'll be able to remember me.'

Griette suffered the kisses and farewells impassively and, as her family moved towards the door, turned back to her sculpture and began to work the clay with steady concentration.

The Hospice Master was at the main doors, with an appropriately sympathetic word or two for each visitor as they left. Knowing

what was expected of them, Foss's three children went outside first and waited at a discreet distance while a little conversation ensued and a purse of money changed hands; Foss's regular gift to the hospice to ensure that Griette continued to receive nothing but the best of treatment.

No one had anything to say as they started back down the gravel drive. Foss was frowning uncomfortably; Celesta's face had closed in as she defended herself from her own thoughts, and Luthe simply looked solemn and a little bereft.

Outside the gates a number of carriages were waiting, but as the weather was good and the distance to their home not great, the Agates had elected to walk. The sun was westering now and shadows vastly exaggerated, but although twilight fell quickly at this time of year they would be safely home before dark. They turned down the long, tree-lined slope of Charity Hill and fell into step two by two, Foss and Luthe leading while the girls followed. The spell of silence slowly faded as the hospice and its atmosphere of well-meant but contrived pleasantness fell further behind them, and Foss started to talk about a new piece of scientific equipment that a neighbour had recently acquired and of which he was greatly envious. He was still talking as the hill levelled out and they turned into a broad street that curved round towards the town's main square. Dominating the skyline, the great dome of the Institute of Natural Sciences rose elegant and gleaming against a sky now turning gold and smeared with crimson as the sun touched the horizon. Foss paused in his discourse to squint upwards with a small burst of civic pride – then suddenly Luthe's hand closed on his arm.

'Father. Along Postulants Row – something's to do, by the sound of it.'

Foss turned, blinking in the red afterglare, and looked along the narrow lane leading off the street on the opposite side. There was a noise in the distance, he realised now, faint but distinct; the clamour and shouting of a sizeable crowd. And something else . . . just a flicker at rooftop level, but he would have taken any odds it was more than a trick of the light.

Then a figure appeared at the far end of the lane. A scrawny boy, running fast and banging two metal pots together as he approached them. He was shouting something, but the din of his makeshift alarm drowned out the words.

'Boy!' Foss's bellow eclipsed the clangour and he stepped into the way as the child shot out of the lane. 'What is it, what's afoot?'

The boy's face was flushed with excitement. 'It's another one, sir!' he cried. 'Another one's broken through, and they're after it! It's a big one, sir, and it can fly, so I've to go and rouse everyone I can find!'

Foss's eyes lit eagerly. 'Where, boy? Where's the chase on?'

'Down Verity Street and towards the Public Garden, sir!' The boy wriggled past him. 'Your pardon – got to go!' He was away down the street like a bolting cat.

Foss swung round and saw his family looking at him wide-eyed. 'You heard the child? Come – we'll go and see for ourselves!'

They started to run, the girls picking up their skirts with no thought for dignity in the excitement of the moment. As they hastened down Postulants Row Celesta called out breathlessly, 'Father, how long has it been? One hasn't been caught for moons, surely?'

'Three moons or more,' Foss shouted back.

'The child said it's a big one – what could that mean?'

'Doubtless he's exaggerating, as children do, but we'll see. Hurry, now!'

Word was spreading fast, and as they ran they were joined by other townspeople who spilled from houses, shops, workrooms, swelling the tide now converging on the Public Garden. The Garden was in a smaller square behind the town's main market, flanked on three sides by tall, gracious houses and on the fourth by a parade of small but exclusive shops. It was only two streets from the Agate family home, and as the first of the Garden's clipped specimen trees came into view ahead, so did the vanguard of the crowd – and their quarry.

It burst out of a side lane almost too narrow to contain it, and in the light of the setting sun the silver-grey nacre of its body, twice the length of a man's, had turned to blood-red. The huge head, like a grim marriage of toothless reptile and beakless bird, gaped wide, and a high, thin screaming issued from its throat. There was something piteous in the screams, and as Foss slid to a halt at the square's entrance, spreading his arms to stop the others from rushing on past him, Calliope realised that the creature was in pain; terrible pain, which it could only express with this whistling cry.

Now she could see it clearly. Its body was slender, almost scrawny, and the featherless, membranous wings that beat frantically above it looked no more substantial than cobwebs. One wing was broken, the area around the break scorched and blackened, and the creature could no longer fly; yet still it was struggling to get airborne, lurching and hopping with a clumsy gait as it careered towards the garden.

Behind it came the mob. There were some seventy pursuers and more were joining them with every moment. Some brandished weapons, others blazing flamboys; one individual in the crowd's midst was even carrying a ceremonial flag, which swayed bizarrely on its pole above the bobbing heads. Sober citizens every one, they were yelling and cheering and whooping, throwing stones that flew through the air and ricocheted from walls. Somewhere the sharp music of a window shattering was audible above the cacophony, and Foss swung round and shouted to his children.

'Stay back! They won't be content until they've finished what they've begun, and it's too riotous for safety! Go under that portico' – he pointed – 'and we'll watch from there; we don't want any broken heads!'

They all ran for the shelter of the pillared arcade that fronted a group of shops. Other spectators had already gathered there, people who wanted to see the affray but were reluctant to take part; as the Agates joined them there was a warning cry and several men dodged as another stone thrown at the quarry went dangerously wide of its mark. Then a tearing sound snatched their attention back to the heart of the tumult.

The wounded creature had reached the Garden and crashed through the low ornamental hedge that surrounded it. It lost its footing and stumbled; a tree snapped in half and the damaged wing ripped, causing the monster to shriek anew as it slewed sideways. Its neck twisted into a mad, agonised contortion; for a moment the great head was facing them directly and Calliope saw that its eyes were white, blind, as if the light of the sun had burned them out. The thing struggled to regain its balance, but one thin leg had tangled in the curlicues of a wrought-iron seat and was inextricably trapped. The intact wing flapped desperately but without co-ordination; then the body began to keel over—

And the crowd were on it.

The shrieking rose to such a pitch that Calliope had to block her ears against the frequencies that knifed through her brain. She saw the mob beating, stabbing, hacking, sticks and swords and even a meat-cleaver rising and falling as they launched a concerted onslaught on their prey. Borne down under the tide of attackers the creature threshed wildly, but the second wing was shattering and the writhing body losing strength as a clear, glistening fluid bled from multiple wounds. Calliope had one more glimpse of it as it raised its head and uttered its wailing deathcry, a despairing sound which the crowd answered with a howl of triumph. Then the great head fell back for the last time, the wings crumpled, and the mangled form was finally still.

Shouting fell away to chatter, to mumbling, to a peculiar silence as the crowd lowered their weapons and stood gazing down at what they had accomplished. For all its size there was nothing formidable about the creature, and in death it looked fragile, almost wraithlike, as if the smallest breeze would scatter it to smoke and blow the smoke away.

But its enemies were not done yet and, breaking the hiatus, a lone voice rang out.

‘Burn it, then! Burn it to ash! Make sure!’

The demand was taken up. ‘Yes, burn it!’ ‘Bring a flamboy!’ ‘Make sure nothing remains!’ The excitement which had briefly ebbed was flowing again; a flaring torch was passed from the back to the front of the crowd, hand to hand over ducking heads, and there was a general shuffling backwards and outwards, clearing a circle around the creature’s corpse.

The frail wings caught with a *whoof* of fire as the flamboy was thrust at them, and those closest jumped quickly back. Flames leaped, rivalling the gory afterglow in the sky overhead, and the cheering began again as the body burned. The blaze drove back the gathering dusk, lighting the ring of faces; the crowd had the rapt, eager looks of celebrants at a festive bonfire, and a younger, rowdier element were even starting to sing.

But the fun was soon over. There was, it seemed, little substance in the creature for the fire to consume, and within a few minutes the flames were dying down. As the last golden tongues flickered and went out and the fierce heat faded, the strange hush fell again. The creature was ashes. Someone trod out an ember that threatened to set light to a specimen bush; a few others trampled

and kicked at the ash to ensure that no other sparks remained. A charred remnant, fine as a cobweb and feebly glowing, fluttered on an updraught and disintegrated. Suddenly the exhilaration that had animated the mob was gone, and a creeping shadow of sobriety took its place. Tension ebbed, breathless zeal gave way to calm, and the calm took on a timbre of self-consciousness, almost of shame. Abashed looks were exchanged; one or two groups near the edge of the square began quietly to move away. Close to where Foss and his family stood, a woman was shaking her head censoriously, while the keepers of the shops in the arcade withdrew discreetly through their open doors. A bolt clanked and keys rattled as the first of the emporiums closed to the world for another night.

The main body of the crowd had also started to disperse. It was almost dark, and when the dark fell it was better to be indoors until the lamplighters came at their appointed hour to make the streets safe again. Many stayed close to the flamboy-bearers, though a few carried pocket-tapers which they lit and held before them like charms as they hastened into the lanes.

Foss carried no such tapers, for he despised superstition as the crutch of fools who were either too ignorant or too idle to learn the error of their beliefs. Darkness held no terrors other than those conjured by a rioting imagination, and even when the shops and houses had all closed their shutters against the night, the sky was clear enough for the stars to show their way without risking a turned ankle in the gloom.

He made to gather his family and start for home, but before he could speak a voice called out of the heavy dusk.

‘Foss! Foss, is that you?’

A spare, middle-aged man with a small, neat beard was approaching them along the now otherwise deserted arcade. He nodded courteously though perfunctorily to the others, then took hold of Foss’s arm and drew him a little way off to be out of earshot.

‘Well, Nempson.’ Foss looked towards the dishevelled Public Garden. ‘The townsfolk have been as thorough as ever.’

There was a wry note in his voice, and Nempson Trinity pursed his small mouth. ‘Indeed; and with as little thought as ever for the waste and foolishness. Two of my colleagues are collecting some of the ash, but I have small hope that it will

yield anything of value. Ash never does; it's the *undamaged* corporeal matter we want. Or better still, a live specimen of a size worth the trouble.'

Foss watched the two shadowy figures busy among the creature's burned remains. 'We've little hope of that. One word of a breakthrough and it seems the entire town loses its reason.'

'Quite; and no amount of logical argument will change matters. But there is another possible option.'

Foss looked at him keenly and raised interrogative eyebrows.

'This isn't the time or place for further discussion,' Nempson went on, 'but we – by which I mean a few of the more sober and responsible members of our Society – would like to raise the matter with you in detail.' He paused, and his expression grew just a little sly. 'We have no wish to impose on a family occasion, of course, but I understand that tomorrow is Calliope's twenty-fifth birthday.'

'Ah,' Foss understood and returned a dry smile. 'Yes. Tomorrow, Calliope will come of age.'

'Then I wonder if I, and two or possibly three others from the inner group, might have your permission to call at the house and express our felicitations . . . and perhaps, as the saying runs, to wear two gloves on the one hand?'

'Or,' Foss said, quite gently, 'perhaps three?'

Nempson made a self-deprecating gesture. 'That, my friend, is a matter entirely for your discretion, and any thought of influencing you couldn't be further from my mind. However . . .' He smiled frankly and disarmingly. 'In the matter of the third glove, as it were, I'd be a liar if I tried to pretend that I'm not intensely curious – and more than a little excited.'

Under the portico, the children were growing impatient. Foss could hear Luthe complaining to Celesta; then Calliope's voice broke in, calming both before the complaint could become an argument.

He nodded once, but emphatically. 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, Nempson. Come in the evening. There's to be a small gathering to celebrate the occasion – Philome's idea, of course; I wouldn't trouble with it myself and Calliope's much of the same mind. But with the others distracted I'll be able to speak privately with Calliope and give her the legacy. Your presence will be welcome. In fact I think it will be for the best all round.'

Nempson eyed him shrewdly. 'You've not told her about it, then?'

'No. That was a condition of the undertaking.'

'So you can't yet judge how she might react. Mmm, yes; I quite see. But Calliope's a sensible girl. And dedicated. If the legacy is what we suspect it to be—'

'If it is.'

'Quite so. But on that assumption . . . well, I believe she'll be ready to share our own view of the matter.'

Foss smiled. 'And, we hope, to share a good deal more than that. But the decision must be her own. Legally, we have no other choice.'

'Of course. Our role will be simply to advise.' Nempson clasped his hands together. 'Well then, Foss, until tomorrow evening. I thank you, and wish you goodnight. Please give Calliope my congratulations for her auspicious day.'

His two colleagues were waiting for him; they exchanged a few brief words, then Nempson raised a hand to Foss in a farewell salute and all three walked away across the square.

As Foss turned back to the portico, Celesta's face and pale hair loomed out of the gathering night. 'Are you done, Father? My hands are cold, and Luthe's complaining that he's hungry.'

Luthe was always hungry, but Foss considered that a healthy appetite was a positive virtue in a man, young or old. Philome would have waited dinner for them, and he felt a sudden urge to be comfortable in his favourite chair with the meal set before him and nothing beyond a choice of relishes to trouble his mind.

'Very well.' He clapped his hands to call their attention, an old habit that had persisted since Calliope was small and the other two barely toddling. 'Give Celesta your arm, Luthe. And mind for the broken paving on the other side of the square.'

He held out his own arm to Calliope and they set off, heading towards their home. As they passed the Public Garden, Calliope tried to peer in and see the remains of the burnt creature where they lay scattered, but shops and houses alike had closed their shutters now and the shadows were all one. Then the multiple sounds of their footsteps faded, and the square was left deserted.

Or so it seemed.

He knew the moment when they vanished entirely from view, for in the dark his eyes saw much that theirs could not. But his