

THE WISE FUR



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From "THE DARK MOUNTAIN",
A. Leader Carrol (1902) -- Illustrated by Taral Wayne

Synopsis

The story is told first person, by the lone survivor of Lord Taines-Leighton's ill-fated Victorian expedition to the source of darkest Africa's Ocellolo River. Long said to spring from a grotto high in the mysterious "Dark Mountain", the river's waters are held by natives to have miraculous powers, and to cause many unexplained marvels along its banks. Lord Taines-Leighton, a Fellow of the Explorer's Club of London, mounts a lavish expedition, encountering the obstacles usual to this sort of fiction.

A rival Fellow blocks the expedition and mounts his own. A tropical storm blows them off course and threatens to dash the ship to finders against the rocky African coast. A colonial governor of the Col. Blimp type forbids the party travel to the interior. The natives are surly and restive. A German missionary they take with them is secretly in the pay of the Kaiser to spy on the British. Arab traders lay a curse on the expedition. But it is the ensorcered country itself far up the Ocellolo, that finally brings the expedition to a halt. Ominous and unnatural miracles begin to unhinge the minds of its members

It was only after entering the Ocellolo country that the expedition hears for the first time of a beautiful woman, a white woman, who live alone in the forest at the foot of the Dark Mountain. She's said to have magic -- "Man no can his hand lay on her, B'wana, or her heart take." More than that, no native will say. Except... that whoever is blessed or misfortunate enough to view the wild woman will be marked forever. According to the nature of his soul, he will he overcome with fear, confusion, loathing... or love.

The novel is nearly half through when the explorers see the wild girl for the first time. For some, it is a miracle. For the Kaiser's spy, it's his doom. Eaten by hatred, his attempts to kill the others one by one engineer his own eventual death. The rival Fellow of the Explorer's Club, Dr. Nigel Osbourne, succumbs to mortal fear. Lord Taines-Leighton himself becomes a victim of unsuspected avarice and ambition.

The girl is not a malevolent figure, however. Time and time again she appears in animal form to warn or guide the party from physical danger. The danger she presents is to the soul, and arises from one's own flawed character.

Three of the men, including the lone unnamed survivor of the expedition, fall deeply, passionately in love with the apparition. It is the very strength of their love that destroys them, as Ralph and the American, Newton, literally murder one another. Only the narrator of the novel lives to return. But has even he been spared? Love of the elusive vision, glimpsed only once in human form, blights all the rest of his life. He can love no other woman, and lives out his days in hopeless longing. In closing, he gives a warning to all those who seek the transcendent experience, but, like he, must ultimately live in the mundane world.

THE LIFE OF A. LEADER CARROL (1879-1962)

Abel Leader Carrol was born in 1879 near Shelbourne, Nova Scotia. At the age of fourteen his family returned to England. His father's elder brother had died suddenly, leaving the family estate to the younger Carrol. For the next six years Abel led the life of the minor rural gentry in Berkshire. He had little to do, and filled the empty hours of the day by reading. When reading palled, he experimented with putting his own idle fantasies to paper. At this stage of his life, of course, it was self-indulgent, unoriginal, and unreadable – as well Carrol knew.

In 1899, Carrol's father died. As a younger brother himself, the twenty year old Abel decided to return to Nova Scotia. With a small cash inheritance, he planned to capitalize on his literary ambitions by entering business as a small publisher. Unfortunately, his taste in literature was old-fashioned, even for the turn of the century, and much too expensive for his slender means.

Carrol published several lavish editions of hopelessly out-of-date gothic fantasy. He generously overpaid the authors what he believed their genius was worth. The books sold poorly, and Carrol lost a very considerable sum. To pay his creditors, Carrol began to publish short works of his own, under pseudonyms. They cost him nothing in royalties. Even so, they sold as poorly as the other books, and cleared little if any profit. Soon he was dangerously in debt.

To his surprise, Carrol found that instead of losing money by publishing his stories, he could earn trifling sums by selling them to other publishers. Gradually, the dilettante writer grew into a professional.

It was unfortunately too late to help his foundering business. In 1902 his creditors sued and Carrol fled Nova Scotia, settling again in Canada. It was while living in Ft. Duquesne, working as a catalog copy-writer, that "Abe" Carrol finished writing "The Dark Mountain". The publishers (Small, Maynard & Co.) received the novel enthusiastically, and sales were moderately good. Carrol wrote his second novel, "The White Witch" the year after. While it was a less satisfying novel at all levels, "The White Witch" was a more modern work than "The Dark Mountain". It sold an encouraging number of copies, and led Carrol to writing deliberately for the popular audience.

"The Erstwhile King of the Land" was published in 1905 and was an immediate hit. It was unquestionably the most widely read of Carrol's books during most of his career. Although not often reprinted since the last war, "The Erstwhile King" reached a wider audience at one time, with its tongue-in-cheek humour, than the grimmer tone of Carrol's later novels. Hoping to build on his success with a new, even more precious novel, Carrol wrote "A Snow-Child at Play" in 1907. Self-consciously literary and saccharine, the book is nothing more than a loose collection of vignettes about a waif who brings Winter wherever she goes. Usually where it isn't wanted; leaving behind frost-bitten flowers, ruined buffets, and snow-bound bathing-beauties. Over-sentimental for good taste, it was ignored by the public.

Disappointed, Carrol returned to his familiar voice in 1909, when he wrote "Magic For the Left Hand". This book immediately won him back his original Weird-Fantasy readership, and laid the ground for later classics "The Philosopher's Stone" (1910) "King Midas's Daughter" (1913),

and "The Orange and the Black" (1916) were all written in Ft. Duquesne, while working as a copy writer still. He left his job in 1916, at Tecumseh College's invitation to fill the position of resident lecturer in fantasy literature. For eighteen months he lives by himself off campus, in the small nearby town of Willow Run.

Up until this time he had been a confirmed bachelor -- but then he met and began dating one of the undergraduates. If he wrote less after that, he was at least a man discovering love for the first time in his life. A few months later he and Margory Waukenup tied the knot. Newly married, and expecting to become a father in nine months' time, Carrol wrote the first of three children's novels. "The Queen of Autumn" (1917), was published a few weeks after their first child miscarried.

Carrol threw himself into the second book as though by his effort he could share and support Marg through her second pregnancy. Even before "A Doll Named Marion" (1918) was finished, the couple began to fear the worst. The second pregnancy ended in miscarriage as well.

Although up until then they had lived very happily in Willow Run, Carrol and his wife decided to make a fresh start. Upon her graduation they left not only the Run, but that part of the country, relocating in De Troit Carrol regretted leaving behind his position as a lecturer at Tecumseh college, but by this time he earned enough through writing that other work was unnecessary. He would write full time in future.

"Teknotopia", his third and last children's novel was begun in De Troit in 1919. Still hoping to become a father, he began the book as a continuation and finish to the first two novels. Margory was pregnant and this time all seemed well. But the child died in birth, threatening the life of Margory as well. The attending physician sadly told them it was unfortunate, but unwise, to try again. Thereafter the work on "Teknotopia" took a turn for the dark, ending on an ambiguous note about the future of "Werld". Carrol never wrote another children's novel.

In the years after, the author created some of his most mature work. "The House That Whispered" (1922), "A Woman Not Heard" (1933), "Ill Winds and Moon" (1940), an unlikely throw-back to earlier literary fashion, and his strange masterpiece, "The Forget-Me-Knot" (1941). A collection of shorter works, called "Corridors No-One Walks", appeared in 1946 under the Arkham House imprint. Although sophisticated novels, Carrol's later work hadn't the fresh or spirited quality of his early work. Well received in Europe, they were never as popular with his dark-fantasy readers.

During the war, Carrol was quite a few years too old for active service. He volunteered instead to script-write for army training and propaganda films. Some of the later -- archly told stories linking the SS with demonic forces opposed to decent Germans fighting for the Wehrmacht -- are highly regarded by collectors of the macabre for their curiosity value.

One result of the war on the author was the beginnings of a novel about an alternate history. The book never advanced much beyond an outline and two chapters, but surviving bits describe a German war effort never divided by civil war, in which the Nazi party nearly subdues all of Europe. A frightening prospect which, perhaps, not even Carrol could adequately imagine.

By 1948 it was clear his powers as a writer were failing. He wrote only three, virtually unknown novels after that date, of which arguably only "The Clay Kingdom", reminiscent of his fantasies from the teens, is worth mention. Carrol stopped writing finally in 1957. The next five years of his life he spent in retirement activities -- chiefly playing his collection of 78 RPM recordings of maritime fiddle music, bicycling, and wood carving. Some of the later -- whimsical or grotesque heads, and entwined metamorphs -command high prices from cognoscenti. Carrol also undertook to arrange his papers and books for donation to Tecumseh College upon his death. In early September 1962, shortly after a testimonial dinner in his honour at L'ilCon in Willow Run, A. Leader Carrol died quietly. He had been reading in a lawn chair in the garden. The book; "The Queen of Autumn".

After his death, Margory Carrol authorized an important collection called "Once Wished...", that brought together for the first time all his short stories on the theme of wishes gone bad. Another posthumous collection appeared in 1968, reprinting all the "Sunken Silver" stories that were based on an a curse laid on pirate treasure. Carrol himself once collected coins of the Spanish Main.

Although Abe and Marg had left Willow Run in anguish, A. Leader Carrol cherished a deep love for this small, picturesque town. It was, in a way, the bright morning of his career. During the three years he lived there, he wrote the books he loved best; and his most enduringly popular novels he wrote in the years immediately before. By entering the tranquil world of academia, he was able to leave behind a job that Carrol found tiresome at beat. Most important, it was in Willow Run that his bachelorhood ended and his life opened up to the unexpected frontier of marriage. The tragic miscarriages ended an idyllic time, but were not of it. Instead, they became the he ginning of a wiser hut sadder chapter or his life.

Because of his social attachment to Willow Run, Carrol vacationed in the area for a number of years after the war. In this way he came a friend to some of the members of the local science fiction and fantasy club, The Off-Worlders. Even after the writer ceased to visit, he continued a lively correspondence with the Off-Worlders for years to come. After his death in 1962 the members voted to name the clubhouse library in his honour -- a formality to be sure, but the deepest gesture of respect they could make as a body. In regard to Abe s wishes, his widow Marg donated many first editions of Carrol's books, as well as volumes of his favourite fantasy reading to the memorial. His other books and the edited papers repose in the library of the nearby Tecumseh College Literature department.

Margory Carrol herself died in 1979, leaving the literary estate in the public domain. In the years following the writer's death there had been only one or two revivals of A. Leader Carrol's work, as well as several unauthorized sequels to the children's books. In spite of periodic interest, "The Dark Mountain" has not been published as often as it should have been. After it's original edition, it all but disappeared until it's rediscovery by fans in the 1960's. It's re-publication as part of Ballantine Books' Adult Fantasy series was the first time the book had been readily available in more than forty years. Paperback reprints have regularly found "The Dark Mountain" new readers ever since. A particularly rich contribution to it's legacy is the current illustrated edition by artist and writer, Taral Wayne. If any book does, this first novel by one of the field s formative authors deserves to never again go forty years unread.

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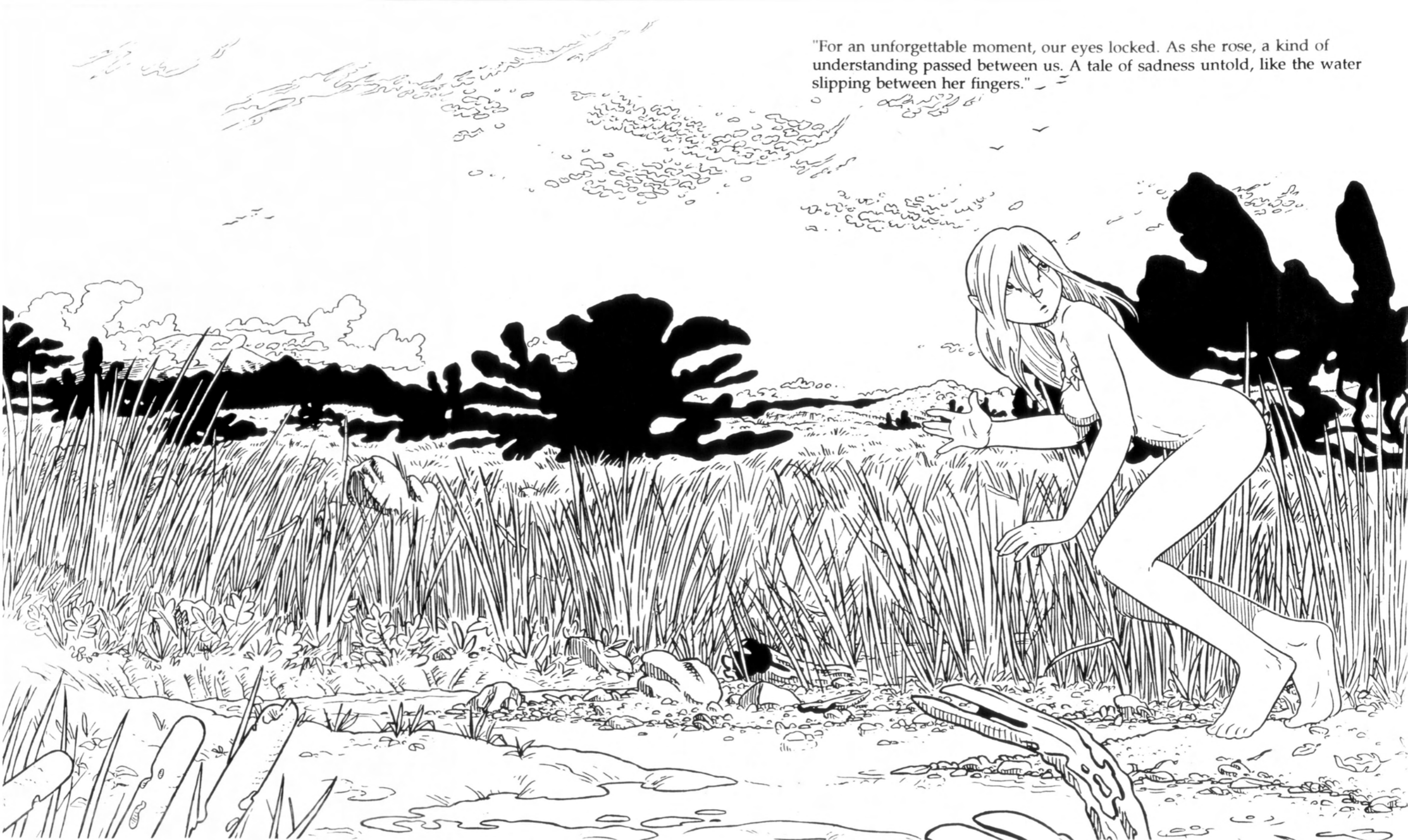
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"We caught up with her that morning, hunkered down to sip at a watering hole. A pale brown girl, long hair so blonde it was almost white, wearing no stitch of clothing. Around her neck we glimpsed a necklace of what may have been tiger's teeth. But as we saw her, she turned and saw us."



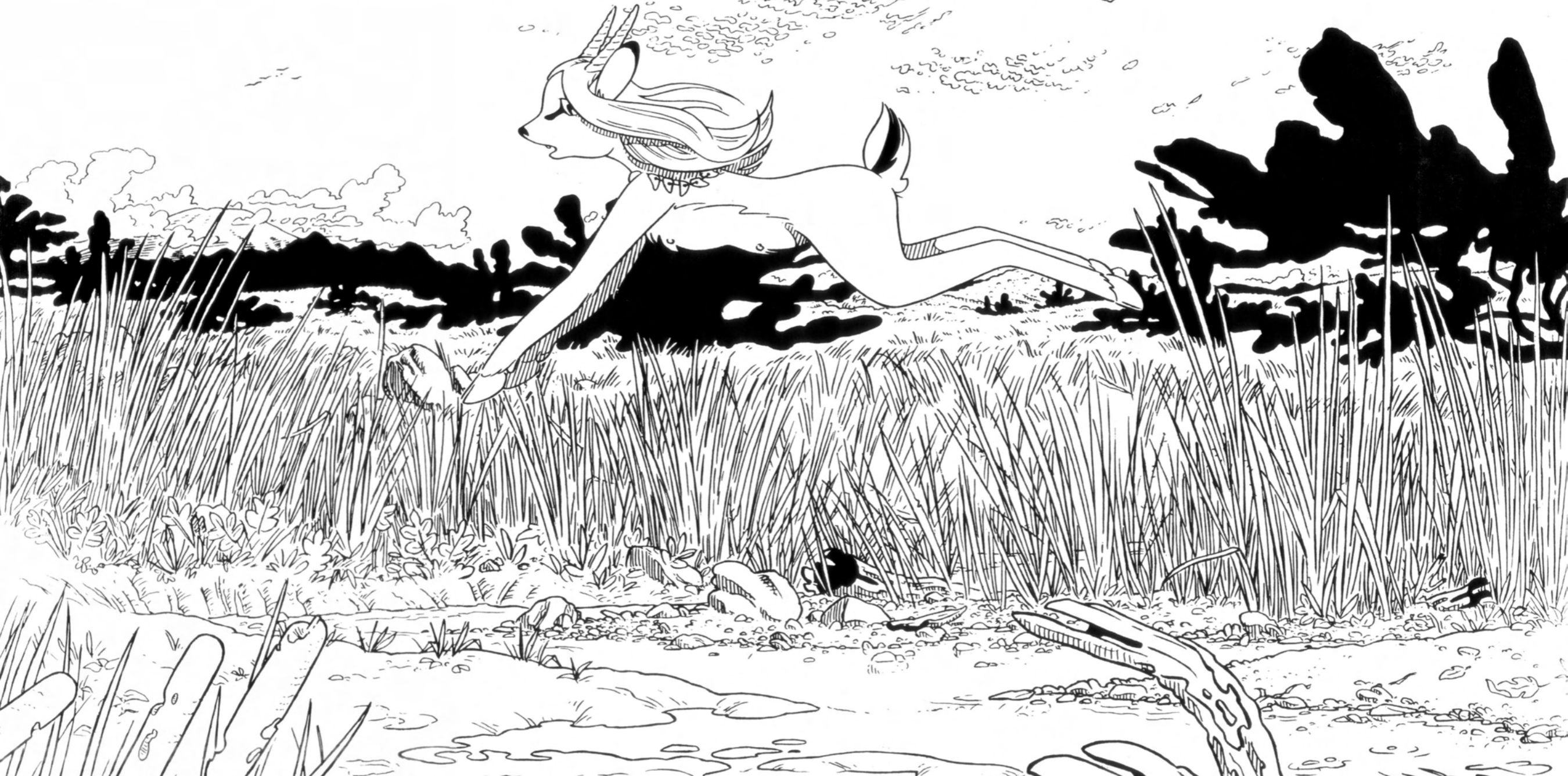
"For an unforgettable moment, our eyes locked. As she rose, a kind of understanding passed between us. A tale of sadness untold, like the water slipping between her fingers."



"She took flight all of a sudden, leaping the spring. In the split second that she was in the air, the girl began to change!"



"Body shrank, arms and legs lengthened, brown fur drew itself over skin even as nacreous horn and white flashing tail rose up."



"She hit the ground on four hooves, running. Cloven prints fled across the wet earth behind her."



"She was a girl no longer, but a gazelle of unknown type. Did those large doe-eyes contain a spark of humanity still? We were never certain. The gazelle-girl was through the reeds in an instant, and gone. We never saw her like again.

