

**the
BARBARIAN
LIBRARIAN**

Philip Lemon

Published in conjunction with Vivid Publishing Australia
A Division of Fontaine Press Pty Ltd
www.vividpublishing.com.au

For sales information visit www.barbarianlibrarian.com

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Lemon, Philip, 1971-

Title: The barbarian librarian / Philip Lemon.

Edition: 1st ed.

ISBN: 9780980638165 (pbk.)

Subjects: Librarians--Juvenile fiction.

Dewey Number: A823.4

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1 - FAREWELL

Petra flashed down the school corridor, her bag jostling on her back. The class bell blared in the background, warning all latecomers to hurry up. She could hear Declan panting behind her as he struggled to keep up. He was small for an eleven-year-old, and had never been much of a runner. It didn't help that he carried so much junk in his bag.

Both children rounded a corner and stopped dead. Warily, they scanned the corridor that lay between them and their destination, the library. Petra loved to read, and library class with Mrs. Benson was her favourite time. The trip to the library was another matter entirely. With saucer-sized eyes, Petra took a tentative step forward.

"I don't see them," whispered Declan.

"You never do until it's too late," replied Petra.

The small boy swallowed and nodded. The few children in the corridor looked at Petra and Declan, and then hurried on their way with nervous backward glances. Soon, the hallway was empty except for the two of them. Declan was frozen with fear, so Petra knew she had to take the lead. Hitching her bag higher up her back, she sucked down a deep breath. Declan required a shove in the back to get him moving.

"Go, go, go," she shouted, and bolted towards the safety of the library.

Declan stumbled after her, but quickly fell behind. Petra could hear his footsteps slapping on the lino floor, along with his laboured breathing.

Man, this corridor is long, thought Petra.

It felt like forever before they reached the janitor's door, which marked the halfway point to their destination. Only two doors remained. On they ran, hearts pounding like drums, both children puffing like steam trains. They flew by the sick bay. Petra's heart was now in her throat. They had only to pass the toilet door and they would be safe. They were just coming up to it when, without warning, the door flew open and the moment they had dreaded was upon them.

Out lumbered two towering figures. Geoff and Josh! Geoff was big and stocky. His body was a huge square block, upon which sat an enormous square head. To Petra, he resembled a stack of boxes with arms and legs. Spiky red hair sprouted from his head like wildfire. Josh was tall, lanky and had pasty white skin. Black hair hung limply from his head, like seaweed adorning a monster from the deep. They were big for their age, with a meanness to match their size. Both boys wore nasty smiles that promised pain and humiliation.

Time seemed to slow down for Petra, as if she were caught in a slow motion replay on TV. She knew the last thing she wanted was to be dragged into the toilets by these two. Without slowing, she ducked under the bony grasp of Josh and dodged around

Geoff's bear-like lunge.

Yes, I made it! thought Petra as she sprinted away.

She felt giddy with relief, and it took her a moment to realise that Declan was no longer with her. This realisation was followed by a strangled cry behind her. It took all her willpower to make herself stop running. Slowly, she turned around, dreading what she would see. Declan had been nabbed by the two bigger boys, and now they were dragging him into the toilet. His hands were clasped tightly to the door jamb, his knuckles white with the strain.

"Help," yelled Declan. He looked at Petra with terrified eyes. She took a step towards him.

"Yeah Petra, come and help your friend," jeered Geoff.

"We'd love you to come with us," jibed Josh.

There was a part of Petra that was brave, and wanted to shout and charge and drag Declan from the grasp of those horrible boys. Unfortunately, that part was smaller than the part that was afraid of being hurt and embarrassed, so she stood by helplessly and watched her best friend being dragged into the toilets to be tortured. Declan locked eyes with her one last time before being yanked from view. The toilet door slammed shut. Soon the sound of a toilet flushing was heard, followed by cruel laughter. Petra turned away, her face burning red with shame. She trudged sadly to the library.

4 - A VISION OF EVIL

Petra met Declan after school. They were off to her house to hang out together that afternoon. “What did Mr. Cromwell want?” Declan asked.

“He wanted to see the picture I drew of the red-eyed guy in the cloak. He thinks it means something,” she replied.

“Yeah, it means you’re crazy,” he laughed.

“Very funny. He said I could be a seer,” Petra retorted, puffing herself up as if she was important.

“He probably said that you’re queer,” Declan teased.

Petra gave him a playful punch in the arm, with just that extra bit of edge to ensure he got a well-deserved bruise. Then they noticed a commotion in the playground. The two children stopped their banter and wandered over to investigate.

What Petra saw made her blood boil.

Three children stood next to the monkey bars. Geoff and Josh were pushing a smaller boy named Joseph back and forth between them. Geoff snatched Joseph’s sunhat off his head and held it just out of reach. The smaller boy was clearly trying to hold it together and not burst into tears.

“Let’s just go,” said Declan, who looked frightened.

“Someone’s got to do something,” Petra said angrily.

She was so mad she couldn’t think straight. Her

chest felt tight, and every breath was drawn in with effort.

You aren't big enough Petra; just walk away, the little voice in her head screamed.

But she couldn't walk away. Visions of all the times when she had been bullied leapt up from her subconscious. Those memories compelled her to do something.

No, no, no, no, no! the little voice of self-preservation screamed, but it was too late. She had already stomped her way over to the playground.

"Petra, don't!" Declan yelled after her.

Petra's body tingled with rage. The memory of her shame at abandoning Declan was fresh in her mind, and propelling her forward.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!" she shouted as she stepped onto the tanbark of the playground.

The two big boys froze and stared at Petra in shock. Geoff lowered his hand. Joseph snatched back his hat and quickly disappeared. Neither of the bullies made an attempt to stop him escaping. The children who had been evacuating from the playground now stopped on the fringes to watch, making sure they kept their distance.

Oh, what have I got myself into? Petra thought in despair.

She had to force herself to breathe. Anger had brought her into the playground, but now it had disappeared, along with little Joseph, leaving her alone and afraid. She knew she should run, but her

legs had turned to jelly, and refused to assist her. Geoff and Josh had now recovered from their initial shock, and were staring at the children gathering around the playground. Their eyes turned to Petra. Geoff spoke, his voice full of menace.

"So, you want to fight, do you?" he snarled.

"N...n...n...no," stammered Petra, "I...I...I just want you to leave us alone."

"I...I...I just w...w...want y...y...you to weave us awone," Josh mimicked.

Both boys took a step towards her.

Thank goodness I didn't have anything to drink today, or I'd probably wet myself, she thought. Petra felt giddy, and expected to faint at any moment.

"If you didn't want to fight, you shouldn't have spoiled our fun," Geoff spat.

Josh's hand flashed out and snatched Petra's hat off her head. She made a half-hearted jump to retrieve it, but when she landed, she stumbled into Geoff. It was like falling against a wall.

"Whoa, she's having a go at me," Geoff shouted.

"Let her have it," Josh jeered.

Geoff gave Petra a ferocious shove, and she felt herself flying backwards through the air. *Here comes the pain,* was the only thought she had time for before her world turned upside down and she slammed into the tanbark. Blackness descended upon her as Petra was knocked unconscious.

Petra woke in darkness, lying on her back. She was

groggy at first, but little by little the fog that obscured her vision cleared. It took her a moment to realise that she had opened her eyes, because everything was still black.

It must be night time, she thought. I've been unconscious all day!

Instinctively, she was aware that she was no longer outside. She was also completely alone.

Slowly, she sat up. When she moved, the floor around her rustled. Feeling around with her hands, she discovered that she was lying on a pile of paper, as if someone had dropped a writing pad. Further exploration revealed something short and soft, with a pointy end. Picking it up and examining it with her fingers, she discovered that it was a feather.

A feather and some paper? How strange.

Cautiously, Petra got to her feet. Holding out her hands, she took a couple of tentative steps to her right, and made contact with a cold stone wall. Taking a few steps to her left, she bumped into another stone wall.

This is what it must be like being blind, she thought.

Petra shuffled forward, one hand on the wall and the other stretched out in front of her. After a few steps without running into anything, she turned around and walked in the opposite direction.

I must be in some sort of tunnel. How did I get here?

"Declan?" she called softly.

"Eclan, eclan, eclan..." Her voice echoed off into the distance.

“Declan, are you there?” she shouted.

“You there, you there, you there...,” was the only response.

Petra became alarmed.

Where am I? Am I dreaming? she thought.

An awful idea occurred to her.

What if I'm in a coma, and my body is in a bed in the hospital with machines helping me breathe through tubes. I must have hit my head on a rock or a piece of play equipment.

Petra was seized by panic. She didn't know what to do. If she was in a coma, she had to wake herself up. But how? An image came to her of her parents standing over her in hospital with tears in their eyes. They were talking to her, trying to wake her up. Petra gave herself a hard shake.

“Get a grip girl,” she said. “This is no time to fall apart.”

She thought long and hard about what to do. It was during this moment of contemplation that she realised she could see the walls around her. There was light coming from somewhere! Her eyes must have adjusted to the dark. Now, instead of it being pitch black, it was more like being in a corridor on a dark night. There was no doubt she was in a tunnel. The walls and ceiling were smooth stone. The tunnel disappeared into complete darkness to her left, but to her right the blackness appeared less dense. Petra decided to go right. She bent down and collected the feather and paper. *Seeing as this is my dream, this stuff*

must be here for a reason, she thought. "Go into the light, Petra," she chirped aloud, and started walking.

Petra walked and walked and walked. The tunnel seemed to stretch on forever. It didn't change, either, but just kept going in a straight line of unchanging smooth stone. Petra's legs ached terribly, which was strange considering it was all a dream. It had to be a dream; there was no other explanation. *I wonder if my legs will be sore when I wake up*, she thought. She *would* wake up; she was positive about that, even if she had to walk a thousand miles in this stupid dream tunnel.

Little by little, the passage brightened. For Petra, it was like watching the world's slowest, and most boring sunrise. After what seemed like hours, a faint green glow appeared in the distance. Over time, the glow became a pinprick of light. On and on Petra walked, and the pinprick grew in size until it became an exit from the tunnel! Ignoring her fatigue and her aching legs, Petra started running.

She was puffing furiously by the time she reached the end of the tunnel. Her legs were on fire, and threatening to collapse. Positive that once she raced into that light, she would wake up in her own body, she flung herself out of the tunnel.

Petra didn't wake up in her own body, however, but instead stumbled into a room, nearly colliding with a large boulder. Sliding to a halt, she gawked at her surroundings in amazement. She was standing in a huge cavern, easily the size of a football field.

It was flooded with an eerie green light. Stalactites hung from the ceiling like enormous candles of snot, and lifeless pools of black water dotted the floor, reflecting the ceiling above like mirrors. The source of the green light was a large egg-shaped globe that was resting in the middle of the cavern. Petra tread warily across the rocky floor and stood before it. The thing was the size of a car. It reminded her of a force field from a kids sci-fi show on TV. She reached out a hand to touch it, but before her fingers could make contact, the ground beneath Petra's feet began to tremble.

Earthquake! Petra thought, panicking.

She looked up at the stalactites. They were wobbling slightly, but did not look to be in danger of falling. If they did, she could end up as a kiddy kebab.

The trembling was not continuous, but was more an intermittent pounding.

Like giant footsteps, she thought, and gulped. Her dream was taking a turn for the worse. *Great. Why can't I have a happy dream?*

Then she heard the beast. Its roar blasted through the cavern on the back of a foul wind, and froze her heart. It was the cry of a thousand tortured wild animals baying for blood. Petra whipped around and spied another entrance to the cavern, opposite the tunnel she had exited. It was from this black hole that the terrible sound emerged.

Run, idiot! a little voice inside her shouted, but she couldn't. Terror had nailed her feet to the ground.

The tremble in the earth became a quake that rattled the teeth in Petra's head. Her eyes were fixed on the entrance the beast was emerging from. The foul wind now became a gale, buffeting Petra, and with the wind came the blackness. It was a storm front of evil, and in its midst, a humongous black form now trundled into the chamber. Its very presence dimmed the light. The massive creature made its way towards the globe, and Petra. Its great yellow eyes widened, and it grunted in surprise when it discovered the girl. The monster's eyes narrowed and it opened its great mouth, revealing two terrible tusks and row upon row of razor-sharp teeth. A disgusting, pillow-sized tongue flopped out of its mouth and performed a sloppy lip-licking, which left a trail of grey slobber dribbling down its jowls. Then the creature lowered its head and charged. Its thundering approach caused the smaller boulders in the room to bounce. Petra could barely keep her footing on the heaving ground. A high-pitched scream pierced the air. Petra wasn't even aware that it was hers. The beast's shadow fell upon her, and finally her paralysis was broken. She turned to run, but tripped on a stone. With arms flailing, she toppled into the glowing green globe, the feather and paper falling from her hands. Instantly, both cavern and monster were obliterated in a blaze of emerald light.

"Petra? Petra?" Declan's voice called to her from off in the distance. Someone was shaking her. With an effort, she opened her eyes. She was lying face-down

on the ground. Tanbark was in her hair, in her mouth, and stuck to her face. Her head hurt, and her jaw felt a bit loose. Slowly and painfully, she sat up. Petra stared around in relief. It had all been a dream after all. Declan was crouching next to her, a concerned expression on his face.

“You okay?” he asked.

“That is quite possibly the most stupid thing you have ever asked,” she said.

Petra wiggled her jaw from side to side. Relief blossomed on Declan’s face.

“Stupid? I’m not the one who took on those bullies,” he said. “By the way, that was the best summersault and bellyflop onto the ground I have ever seen.”

Petra looked around the playground. The other children had fled the scene once they had witnessed what had happened to her. Geoff and Josh were nowhere to be seen.

“Where are those two creeps?” she asked.

“After you hit the ground and didn’t get up, I think they thought they’d hurt you really badly, so they ran off,” Declan replied.

He helped Petra to her feet, and started wiping tanbark off her jumper.

“I see you had no trouble saving Joseph, but not me,” he teased.

“I’m sorry, Declan. If it makes you feel any better, it was because I didn’t help you that I tried today,” she said.

“Promise me you will never do that again. Not even to help me,” said Declan.

Petra could see that he meant it. At that moment, it seemed the most sensible idea. “Okay. I promise that should you ever be in trouble again, I will run as fast as I can in the opposite direction,” she said with a smile.

“Good. Now let’s get out of here,” he said.

Petra limped slowly home, with her best friend at her side.