

The Sword of Purity

By J.M. Stephens

“Well?” said Aria.

“Well what?”

“Are you coming Saturday or not?”

Purity looked doubtful. “I don’t know” she winced. “I don’t know if parties are my thing.”

“Jimmy will be there. You know he’s hot for you, right?”

Purity blushed as she rolled her eyes. “Oh yeah, right.”

“Hey, don’t take my word for it,” said Aria, “come Saturday night.”

“And what makes you think I’m interested in him, anyway?” replied Purity.

“Because... what girl wouldn’t be?”

Purity had no answer to that. She did think Jimmy was hot, and she often noticed him checking her out.

Purity didn’t realise it, but she was the most popular girl in school. She just turned 17 and she stood out from the rest of the girls for what should, by all accounts, be the wrong reasons. Her shoulder length blonde hair hung in ringlets like Alice in Wonderland. She wore knee-length dresses, usually pink or white, some with polka dots, and sensible, low-heel, slip-on shoes. Other girls just couldn’t figure out what it was that boys saw in her. At the same time, they knew exactly what it was because they could see it too. It was everything about her. Purity had an aura. She radiated love and it touched everyone around her. She should have been a prime target for bullies, but bullies saw no reason to pick on her. She was admired and liked by everyone.

“Yeah,” she said. “Well, maybe I’ll stop by and have a ginger beer or something.”

Aria looked incredulous. “Ginger beer? We’re having real beer, Purity. It’s a real party. Come on, we’re 17 years old. Let your blonde ringlets down, girl.”

“Exactly, Aria. We’re 17 years old. We’re not allowed to drink, yet.”

Aria shook her head and smiled. “What am I going to do with you? You’re a hopeless case, Purity, you know that?”

“How do I look?” asked Purity.

Her mother turned and smiled as she surveyed Purity’s outfit; her favourite pink dress and white shoes and headband.

“Beautiful, as always,” replied her mother as she wiped her hands on her apron.

“What time will you be home?”

“Won’t be late. Probably around 9.00. You know, I don’t really like parties all that much. I’m really only going to spend time with Aria.”

“Ok, sweetie, see you soon.”

Purity took a step and then turned.

“Mom, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why am I so different from other girls? Why do I dress like this? I mean, I like dressing this way, but why am I the only one? And where did my name, Purity, come from? It’s such an odd name.”

“You answered your own question, Purity. You are your own person and you dress the way you want. A lot of other girls probably wish they were so confident. As for your name, well, your father and I decided on your name as soon as I knew I was pregnant, but it wasn’t Purity. We were going to name you Karla. I knew you’d be a girl.”

“Karla? Why did you change your mind?”

“We don’t know. When the nurse handed you to me, she asked if we had a name yet. Your father and I both said at the same time; ‘Purity’. It was the strangest thing.”

Purity looked curiously at her mother. “Wow. Anyway, Gotta go. Bye Mom.”

“Bye, sweetheart.”

Purity brought her bicycle out from the garage and put on her pink helmet, which matched her dress perfectly.

Purity felt a slight tremor beneath her. ‘An earthquake?’ she thought. ‘We don’t have earthquakes in this part of the country.’ In the distance, she saw storm clouds developing but wasn’t concerned; they were far away on the horizon and it was only a twenty-minute ride to Aria’s house. She set off on her short journey.

Purity always liked to take the shortcut through the park—even though she realised it actually took longer to get to Aria’s house,--because she loved the park so much. She rode much slower through the park than she did on the road and often stopped to watch the ducks in the lagoon or admire the flower gardens.

Purity turned into the park entrance from the road, and stopped to admire the pink carnations and white roses just inside the gate. There weren’t many people in the park, and Purity felt as one with nature. She again felt the tremor from below, which lasted almost a minute.

Purity saw the fountain ahead, but there was something wrong. Her vision seemed a little blurry. The view seemed to shimmer, like heat waves rising from hot asphalt. Purity’s bike felt sluggish, hard to pedal, as if she was riding into a strong headwind. She pedalled harder, struggling against the resistance, and suddenly had the sensation of breaking through a barrier. She was thrown off balance. In the split second between falling off the bike and hitting the ground, Purity caught just a glimpse of another world.

Purity opened her eyes and looked up from the ground to find three teenage girls staring down at her. Her bicycle helmet lay beside her.

“Where am I?” asked Purity groggily. “Who are you?”

The three girls replied in turn.

“My name is Grace.”

“My name is Hope.”

“I am Faith.”

The girls appeared to be around the same age as Purity. They looked so similar that they could have been triplets, but Grace had black hair, Faith’s was brown and Hope’s was red. Standing at around five foot tall, slightly shorter than Purity, they were pretty things with small pixie-like features. Their ears were not quite pointy, but not quite normal, either. They were slightly built, and all wore white ankle-length gowns. Their feet were bare.

“You are still in the place you call Central Park,” said Hope.

Purity looked around her. It was Central Park, but it was different. There were hardly any colours, as if they had been washed out. There were no flowers and the ground was barely covered by dead grass. The trees appeared to be stripped of their foliage. The path leading to the fountain was riddled with dead grass and weeds and the stone fountain was dry.

“But, it’s changed. How can that be?”

“What is your name?” asked Grace.

“Purity,” she answered.

The three girls looked at each other in astonishment.

“It is her,” said Hope.

“No,” said Faith, “it cannot be.”

“But her name is Purity,” said Grace, “she must be.”

“Must be what?” asked Purity.

The girls looked at one another.

“The chosen one, of course,” Faith replied.

“Chosen for what? I don’t understand.”

“Do you not know?” asked Faith.

Purity didn’t answer. She studied the faces of the three girls.

“Hope?” said Faith, “If she is the chosen one, she would know, would she not?”

“We do not know that,” replied Hope.

“I think you need to come with us,” said Grace. “We must talk.”

They helped Purity to her feet.

“Come this way,” said Grace, and she and Hope put their arms around Purity’s waist to assist her.

“My bike,” said Purity, looking over her shoulder as she was led away.

“Your bike will be fine. Come with us.”

They led her a short distance to two small wooden huts with thatched roofs. Grace opened the door of one and beckoned Purity inside. The room was bare except for a single bed and three chairs.

“I need to sit down,” said Purity, and sat on the edge of the bed. Grace remained standing and the other girls sat down.

‘What is this place?’ asked Purity. ‘You said it is Central Park, but how can that be?’

“Yes,” replied Grace. ‘It is Central Park, but we are on another plane--another dimension. We exist here on Earth just as you do, but you cannot see us from your plane.’

Purity looked around her. “This is just a dream,” she said. “This is such a ridiculous dream that even in my dream I know that it's a dream.”

The other girls looked at each other, then back to Purity.

“It is no dream, Purity,” said Hope.

“Why am I here?” asked Purity. “Why did you bring me here?”

“We did not bring you here; you were chosen. On the day you were born you were chosen for this day.”

“Chosen? Chosen for what? Chosen by who?”

“Chosen by God,” answered Faith.

Purity was speechless at first, but then she laughed. ‘Wake up, Purity,’ she said aloud. “Ok,” she said. “What was I chosen for? Why am I here?”

“Look around, Purity; this park was once even more beautiful than on your plane. The grass was greener and the flowers more colourful, but there are forces at work.”

“What forces?” asked Purity.

“The forces of good and the forces of evil. Until now, there has been a balance. The universe has been in balance since the beginning of time.--even before time. There is an invisible barrier between what you call heaven and what you call hell, but over the eons that barrier has grown weak from the forces of darkness. Where we stand is a buffer zone between the two dimensions, between heaven and hell. This dying land that you see is worsening day by day. It will soon be an uninhabitable wasteland. The energy is being drawn to the other side, reducing our strength and increasing theirs. There is a gate near here. Not a gate as such, but a weak point in the barrier. It can only be opened from this side. We know where it is.”

“But you still haven’t explained why I’m here,” said Purity.

Grace continued. “If the barrier is broken, and the inhabitants from the other side enter this plane, it is much easier to cross into yours. Once there, all is lost. Your world, as

you know it, will no longer be. It will become a wasteland like this. As for your people, we do not know what their fate will be.”

Purity gasped. “Oh my god.”

“There is another chosen one in your world,” continued Grace, “but he was chosen by the forces of Hell. We know his name is Luccio. He is powerful and he will soon be here to open the gate. He must be stopped, Purity. That is why you are here.”

“What?? Look at me! I’m not a fighter! How could I possibly stop him?”

“We have a sword; it has power, more than enough power to defeat him.”

Hope ran from the hut and quickly returned, struggling to carry a sword. She offered it to Purity.

“Take it,” said Grace. “It has an inscription on it.”

“No,” said Purity. “I can’t. You have to find someone else.”

“There is no one else,” said Grace. “There is only you. We have waited here for you, Purity. We have waited for you since the beginning of time.”

“To give you the sword,” said Hope.

“Yes,” said Grace. “To give you the sword. It is you who was born for this task. It is you who must wield the power of God.”

Hesitantly, Purity took the sword. It was heavy. She read aloud the words on the side. “‘Love will conquer evil’.”

“There is more on the other side,” said Faith.

Purity turned the sword over.

“‘The light will dispel the darkness’. What does it mean?”

“We were hoping you would know,” said Grace.

“I can’t do it,” repeated Purity. “I can’t. I can barely hold the sword up.”

“Perhaps your strength will come when needed,” said Grace.

“Perhaps?? Is that it? Is that what I’m gambling my life on?”

Grace nodded. “Yes. I am sorry. We have told you all we know.”

“We will leave you alone now to rest,” said Faith. “In the morning, Luccio will come, and you must be ready.”

The girls left the room, and Faith closed the door softly behind them.

A few seconds later, there was a knock. Purity opened the door.

“What is it, Faith?” she asked.

Faith hesitated. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course” replied Purity. “Come in.”

Faith entered and Purity closed the door.

“What is it?” asked Purity.

Faith hesitated again.

“There is only us girls here”, she said.

“Yes, I gathered that”, said Purity.

Faith lowered her gaze and fidgeted. “What are boys like?” she asked.

“Well,” said Purity, “boys are different than girls. They’re opposite in many ways. They’re more physical. They think about different things. Probably not as smart as us girls either.” She laughed.

“No,” said faith, still looking down at her fidgeting hands. “I mean what is it like being with a boy? What is it like to kiss one? Have you ever kissed a boy?”

“Well,” said Purity after giving it some thought. “Speaking for myself, I get a warm feeling and a tingle of excitement. I feel as if we are one. I get a feeling of being wanted and safe. It’s very hard to explain, but it’s such a wonderful feeling.”

“I wish I could be with a boy”, said Faith with a tinge of sadness in her eyes.

They exchanged looks, and said no more. Faith left the room, leaving Purity alone with her thoughts.

Purity sat on the bed. She tried to make sense of it all, but it made no sense. Why her? Why choose a seventeen-year-old, five-foot-two girl who would never hurt a living thing? She started to cry. She should be at a party with her friends. All that seemed a world away.

Sleep didn't come easy for Purity that night, and when it did, it was riddled with dreams and nightmares, visions of monsters and demons, breaking her body like a twig, tearing her to pieces, dragging her to an unimaginable hell. She cried aloud, even in her sleep.

She woke at dawn, although it was still a little dark. She looked out the window and saw that storm clouds were approaching. The sky lit up intermittently with sheets of lightning which penetrated the dark clouds, revealing what looked like networks of arteries and veins, giving the appearance of living, breathing entities. Less than twenty feet in front of her was a shimmering shape, about twelve feet wide and fifteen feet high. Purity couldn't see clearly, but she could make out the moving shapes of creatures behind it. They were constantly passing or pushing against it. She saw grotesquely large hands touching and clawing at it. She heard muffled moaning and screaming.

Grace, Faith, and Hope joined her and the four girls looked on in amazement and fear.

"The gate!" exclaimed Faith. "Luccio must be close by."

"He is already here," said Grace. "I can sense his presence."

The dead grass crackled behind them.

"Well, what have we here?"

The girls turned to see a man a few yards away. He stood about six foot tall and about forty years old, an ordinary looking man with a balding scalp. He was well built, but not powerful as the girls had imagined. He had a look of meanness and cunning about him, and Grace suspected his appearance belied his true strength and power.

"This is not what I had expected," he said. "I expected some kind of resistance. Where is your warrior? Call him out."

The girls stood silently, their back to the gate.

Grace, Faith, and Hope moved to the side, leaving Purity alone to face Luccio. Luccio looked at them questioningly, and then realisation dawned on him. He looked Purity up and down, taking in the small teenager; her pink party dress, her blonde ringlets, her white headband and her look of fear.

Grace ran back to Purity's hut.

"You?" said Luccio incredulously. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"It is no joke," said Hope with her head raised defiantly.

Luccio shot an angry glance at Hope and her eyes widened in panic as she scurried behind Faith for protection.

Grace returned, struggling with the sword.

She took it to Purity and offered it to her. Purity hesitated.

"Take it, Purity. The time is here."

"I can't, Grace," she said. "I'm afraid."

"You must!" said Grace. "You are the only thing standing between the world you know and eternal Hell! Please! You have the power of God behind you. You have the sword. With it you cannot be defeated!"

Purity thought of her friends, of her family, of her world, and of the wasteland she now stood on.

Her hand trembled as she slowly reached for the sword.

As she took hold of it, she winced at the weight of the heavy weapon.

Grace moved aside and joined her two companions.

Luccio grinned. "Sword too heavy for you? Move aside, little girl."

Seconds passed. The air was heavy with tension and fear.

"No," said Purity meekly, her voice cracking. She looked around at the other three girls. They nodded excitedly.

"Yes! Keep going, Purity!"

She hesitated before turning back to Luccio, and she said the first thing that came into her head. "You shall not pass," she said with unconvincing defiance.

"Yes! Yes!" whispered Grace excitedly.

Luccio laughed. "What? I shall not pass? Did you learn that from a comic book?"

Luccio's grin faded and his face contorted into an angry glare. He tilted his head menacingly. "I said get out of my way, little girl. I don't have time for this."

Grunting, Purity managed to raise the sword using both hands. Her lower lip trembled. "No!" she repeated. "You shall not pass."

Luccio's eyes narrowed. "Hmm," he said. "I don't trust your God. Why would he send a little girl to fight me? Perhaps there is more to this than meets the eye. A schoolgirl...a sword...perhaps this combination is more powerful than it appears."

Luccio turned to walk away. "Oh, well. I can take a hint. I'll just walk away and-" he suddenly turned and lunged toward her. "BOO!" he shouted, and Purity squealed. The sword fell from her hand as she retreated a few steps. The three girls gasped in unison. Luccio looked to the sky and burst into laughter. "So this is your mighty warrior! Your saviour! This is the one chosen to stop me--to stop us!" He picked up the sword and turned it over in his hand, studying it. He looked along the gleaming, razor edged blade. He saw the inscription.

"Love will conquer evil," he read aloud.

He turned it over to read the other side.

"Light will dispel the darkness."

He laughed again, a hearty laugh that turned into a crazed, mocking giggle, and then his expression instantly turned serious as he took two steps toward Purity. He raised the sword to her stomach and stared unemotionally into her wide, frightened eyes. "Looks like love won't be conquering anything today. Now...get out of my way."

Grace and the others began to cry softly. With Luccio in possession of the sword everything was lost. He held in his hands the greatest power in the universe.

"No," repeated Purity, trying to stand taller. "You shall not pass me."

"You're a feisty one, aren't you?" Luccio said. "I like that. I'll tell you what. Obey me now and I will allow you to live. You would make a fine slave for my personal pleasure. If not, you will die now on the spot where you stand."

"No," said Purity.

Luccio shrugged his shoulders.

"So be it," he said.

Her three companions screamed as Luccio plunged the sword into Purity's body. The point exited through her back. Her eyes widened in utter shock and terror. She looked numbly down at the protruding metal and moaned in agony as Luccio slowly withdrew it. She covered the wound with her hands and her pink dress began to turn crimson red.

She looked up at a grinning Luccio. He slowly raised the sword to his lips, teasing her, mocking all four of them. Grinning cruelly and staring unblinkingly into her eyes, he ran his tongue along the side of the blade and closed his eyes as he savoured the taste of her warm blood.

"The mighty warrior of Earth," he said, still grinning. "The great saviour. You're a joke. Now you will move aside."

“No!” cried Faith. “It cannot be! She had the sword! She held God’s power in her hands!”

Still clutching her stomach, Purity collapsed to her knees and looked up at Luccio.

“No,” she winced. A tear appeared in her eye and trickled down her cheek. “You shall... not....p...pa...”

With both hands, Luccio raised the sword above Purity’s head.

Showing no fear, Purity looked up at the point of the bloodied sword, the sword that was given to her to save the world and the people she loved. She sat back on her heels, barely able to remain upright as her life steadily ebbed away.

Purity looked over at her three companions huddled together, crying. They were witnessing the beginning of the end.

“I’ve... failed you. I’m... so sorry” said a panting Purity, pale and exhausted. “So sorry.”

The sky turned darker and the thunder increased in volume and intensity. Intermittent cracks appeared in the blackness between the storm clouds, revealing glimpses of huge black flying creatures silhouetted by intense flames. Luccio put his foot to Purity’s shoulder and pushed her to the ground. He stepped over her, her face sickly white as the blood drained from her body. Still clutching the sword, he took three steps toward the gate and then stopped, his body doubling over as if convulsing. He straightened and took another step before doubling over again and stumbling, almost falling. He turned to Purity, who was taking her last laboured breaths.

Luccio’s eyes were wide and terrified. “What did you do to me? What did you do, you scheming witch?”

She summoned the strength to turn her eyes to her assassin. He raised the sword and took a step toward Purity but fell to his knees and the sword dropped from his hand to the ground.

The thunder was deafening, and the ground trembled violently beneath them. The whites of Luccio’s eyes contrasted against his now dark red complexion, and the grotesque bulging veins in his neck and face seemed ready to burst. He began to shake.

“Love,” shouted Grace above the booming of the thunder as her two friends looked on in amazement. “Love will conquer evil!”

“She is pure love!” shouted Faith. “Her mind, her soul, her flesh, her...”

“...her blood!” finished Hope.

Frantic hands were pushing and clawing against the other side of the gate. Unintelligible shouting and screeching filtered through the weakened but still intact barrier. A faint glow emanated from Purity. The sky thundered, and bolts of lightning threatened to split open the blackened sky. The glow around Purity grew in intensity, illuminating the ground as far as the eye could see. Her motionless body slowly rose, her arms hung down limply by her side, and her blonde ringlets remained unmoving, even in the swirling wind.

Luccio fell face-first into the dirt. His body began to decay and quickly turned to dust. The dust blew away in the winds and left his empty clothes.

The light surrounding Purity was almost blinding, and even brighter rays shot from her body in every direction, so bright that the storm clouds were transparent.

“And the light will dispel the darkness!” shouted Faith as she shielded her eyes with her forearm, but her words were lost in the deafening storm.

As Purity’s dying eyes grew dull, she could see everything, feel everything; the planets, the moons, and the stars near and far; all at once, all as one. Her mind and her love permeated the very fabric of the universe. Time and space ceased to exist. She felt no pain, no physical sensation of any kind and no sound. There was only that blinding light of love. In her mind, she heard every thought and saw every face of every person who had ever lived.

She felt the love of every mother for her child and she felt every lover's emotions. She understood the beautiful minds of every artist, every musician, and every dreamer there ever was.

The wind swirled and howled, the sound increasing, the pitch steadily rising, until it became a continuous, ear-piercing scream. Faith, Hope and Grace cowered together in the eye of the developing hurricane, their eyes tightly shut against the blinding light. Their hands covered their ears, their eardrums close to bursting. Yet, even above the howling wind, they heard the tortured, dying screams of the unimaginable creatures of Hell above and below.

The pitch of the shrill wind continued to increase until it was so high that it was almost inaudible, but its effects were felt by the three girls, who writhed and rolled about in agony on the ground, desperate to block it out. Their excruciating screams to God were no more than pleading whispers, lost in his cyclonic fury. Dust and tree branches swirled high in the circling winds. Still, Purity floated serenely, and her shooting rays of white light pierced the darkness of Hell and all that resided there.

The blue sky expanded and pushed back the blackness until all was blue and the darkness disappeared. Only then did the deafening sirens of Heaven begin to quiet, slowly dissipating until there was only silence and stillness and freshness, as is felt after a violent, summer thunderstorm.

The three young girls still writhed about until their pain subsided and they opened their eyes slowly, blinking until their vision once again adjusted to the normal light of day.

Grace, Hope, and Faith watched in awe as the world around them morphed into a paradise of green grass, shady, leafy trees and azure blue skies. Everywhere, flowers bloomed. The thunder and lightning had gone, replaced by the sounds of birds chirping. A soft, cool breeze rustled the leaves of the trees. Purity descended to the ground and lay motionless on the soft grass, her light extinguished and her skin pale. Her three friends knelt by her side and rested their hands on her lifeless body, and they wept.

"You were the chosen one after all," said Grace.

"You were so brave," whispered Hope.

Faith looked at her companions. She began to sob.

"God brought her here to die, didn't he?" she said. "We gave her the sword in order that her blood be spilled."

Grace frowned and bowed her head. "Yes, it would appear so", she said.

Faith kissed Purity gently on her forehead. "Goodbye, Purity."

"Purity! Purity!"

A distant voice echoed in Purity's head, stirring her.

Purity felt a hand on her shoulder, shaking her. Her eyelids fluttered and she squinted to see Aria looking down at her.

"Aria?"

"Purity, are you alright? What happened?" Aria put her hand on Purity's forehead. "Are you ok?"

"I think so," she answered. She looked around. It was dark. "Are you ok, Aria? Is everyone else ok?"

"What are you talking about? Of course we're ok. I think we need to get you to a doctor. You must have bumped your head or something."

"What are you doing here, anyway? How did you know I was here?" asked Purity.

"You weren't at the party. We phoned your mother and she said you left hours ago. I knew something must be wrong, so I asked Jimmy to drive me here. I knew you would take the shortcut through the park. I was so worried about you, Purity. There was a huge storm

brewing. The sky turned totally black. It was the biggest storm I've ever seen, but it's cleared up now. It just seemed to disappear. Strangest thing I've ever seen. Oh, thank God you're alright." She leaned down and hugged her. "Come on, let's get you to the hospital."

Purity tried to stand, but she was too weak. Jimmy picked her up, carried her to the car, and helped her into the back seat. Aria put the bike in the trunk. It didn't quite fit, so she left it half hanging out, and Jimmy found a rag to tie the lid down. They headed off toward the hospital.

Purity gazed out the window as they drove through the city. She looked up at the tall buildings and the bright neon lights. She listened to the sound of the traffic, the beeping of horns. All those people, going about their lives, laughing, having fun, walking hand in hand, finding love. Just living. She wondered if it was Heaven.

They stopped at a red light and Purity saw a hobo, an old, scruffy haired, bearded man in rags on the sidewalk surrounded by a makeshift bed and homemade cardboard signs with messages scrawled on them. She wearily leaned her head against her window and read the signs.

"Sinners repent!" one said.

"The end is nigh!" said another.

"The light will dispel the darkness!" said a third.

Purity's jaw dropped and she sat bolt upright.

The old man was accosting passers-by, who tried to take a wide berth around him. He was shouting, babbling, and warning people of judgment day, of an eternity in Hell for non-believers, of the coming of Satan.

The man suddenly rushed to Jimmy's car and put his crazed face to the windshield.

"Love!" he shouted. "Love will conquer evil! The light will..." his eyes darted to Purity, and his expression changed to one of disbelief, as if he was looking at a ghost. His lips twitched but no words came. The light turned green and Jimmy drove off. The old man's jaw hung open and his wide eyes followed Purity's as they passed. As they sped away, Purity turned and looked out the back window to see the old man still standing on the road, staring at her, his face frozen in astonishment. He dropped to his knees and, bowing his head, raised his hands into the air.