

## **The First Two Pages: “The Prometheus Effect”**

By Teel James Glenn

From *The New Adventures of Lynn Lash* (Pro Se Productions/Altus Press)

Inspiration for writers comes from many places, but there is always a first spark, a moment that someone says, “I could do that...I *have* to do that.” For a nine-year-old boy in 1964 it was when I picked up *The Man of Bronze* by Kenneth Robeson. It was the first of the series of reprints of the old Doc Savage pulp magazine by Bantam. I gobbled them up as fast as they were put out and that led me down the rabbit hole to other pulp properties and inspirations like Hammett, Chandler, and Burroughs.

Robeson was, in fact, pulp writer Lester Dent, who also wrote the much-anthologized Oscar Sails stories for *The Black Mask* detective magazine. The man could write. He even published a much vaunted “Dent formula for writing a short story” in the 30s. Many a writer (including myself) has given a nod to it as a frame for exciting prose.

Skip ahead to when I had been writing for a bit, and I found myself offered the chance to write the Lester Dent character Lynn Lash for the Pulp Obscura line for Pro Se Productions/Altus Press. Lash was the proto-Doc Savage character that got Dent the job of writing Doc!

Not a lot of time for internalizing in this style, as the very rationale of pulp was forward-moving action, but it was a dream to be able to step into the shoes of my hero and to take a trip back in time.

I read the three existing Lash stories to prepare, but frankly his early work was not that good (he developed as a writer exponentially) so I wasn't bound to ape his early style—just echo it. Here's how I start out:

### **Prologue: Horror in the Harbor**

There are those that say the Staten Island Ferry is the biggest bargain in New York City. There tourists and visitors can see the whole of the city laid out before them in a panoramic sweep for only a nickel.

The ferry departs Manhattan from the Staten Island Ferry Whitehall Terminal at the very southern tip of Manhattan to arc across the harbor, turning to glide past the majestic Statue of Liberty and dock at the St. George Ferry Terminal on Richmond Terrace on Staten Island. The trip takes about twenty minutes. Service is provided 24 hours a day, 365 days a year as reliable and on time as a Swiss watch or the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Considering the thousands and thousands of trips it made, the ferry had a remarkable record of safety, until a warm summer afternoon in 1933 when hell came to New York Harbor in the form of a cloud.

There were only a few fluffy clouds hanging lazily in the clear blue when the ferry Grant Stockbridge pulled out of the slip at Battery Park headed across the calm waters. There were 800 passengers and 25 crew on board and twenty cars in the lower deck, one of which was a private ambulance.

It is a novella-length story so I had the luxury to be a little slow from the start to establish time and place and a sense of normalcy but, as it is pulp, it has to have a little jolt of foreshadowing as well—accomplished here by the ambulance.

Having established the “normal,” I immediately injected a little hint of something more:

On the passenger decks the locals much ignored the passing spectacle of the panoramic view in favor of reading newspapers and pulp magazines or nodding off for a little afternoon shut-eye. The tourists were at the rails, ogling at the splendor of the big apple.

One person who fit into neither group was Professor Arron Alters. He was a grey-haired figure in an ill-fitting suit that stood nervously near the stern of the ship on the car deck, looking back toward Manhattan. Pacing with him were two men in tailored suits who kept glancing around at the other passengers. One of them carried a brown leather briefcase, a silvered handcuff bracelet securing it to his left wrist.

Now we see that there is something ominous to these men—mystery introduced right away.

“Professor,” one of the men, a clean-cut man in his twenties, said. “There is nothing to worry about; we have secret service agents on each deck. You are perfectly safe.”

“Easy for you to say, young man,” the professor said. “The papers your friend has in that case are the result of several colleagues’ sacrifices. It could be the key to making my discovery a viable deterrent weapon for our government.”

“I understand, Sir,” the man said, “which is why we were all assigned to you and will stay with you when you return to your laboratory at Sailor Snug Harbor until you finish your work and are ready to move it to Washington.”

The stakes are raised right away—people have died and for something that these men have in that briefcase. I’ve seeded the name of an important location that will figure later and given the reader a reason to remember that ominous cloud from earlier.

The elder man seemed to sag inside a little bit. “Yes, moving to Washington. I suppose that will be best; but I have become quite a creature of habit; I like my little refuge on the island.” He leaned against the stern railing and looked out. His face lit in a ghost of a smile.

“It was all so much simpler when my work was theoretical, you know, Agent Hancock? Before your friend Mister Fortier had to carry my secrets in that case chained to his wrist. Then it was like looking at clouds as a child, seeing shapes in them, dragons and such.” He shielded his eyes from the glare of the afternoon sun off the water and glanced up at a full cloud.

We have touched into the personality of the professor now and brought it back to that cloud.

“That one, for instance,” he continued. “So dark and ominous on this clear day; but its shape could be a battleship or perhaps an ancient fortress with its dark protrusions.” He scratched his wrist. It was suddenly itchy. “Yes,” he continued, “it was all so much simpler when the world was still horrified by the Great War and thoughts of another were too terrible to contemplate. Now, it seems the mind of man which thirsts for struggle is reasserting itself.”

We have now brought in the specter of war, talked of death and a deadly weapon. And there is that itching...

The clean-cut Agent Hancock moved to stand beside the scientist. “I agree, Sir, that it would be a better world if cloud gazing only brought on elephants and castles, but you yourself saw a battleship in that one. Men’s minds are not the problem; great minds like yours will always dream and improve the world. It is men’s hearts that are flawed and turn them to evil.” He rubbed his neck in a self-conscious gesture that became more insistent until he placed both hands to rub.

A little philosophy, a little character development and that darn itching...

“Your words are kind, young man,” the professor said. “But my guilt for conceiving this thing I have is only assuaged by knowing our government would never—” He rubbed his wrist again and now found himself scratching up his forearm. He looked up at the agent with a look of astonishment on his face.

“What is it, Professor?” Hancock asked. He was now almost clawing at his neck where the skin itched.

The scientist in answer pointed back toward the car deck of the boat. People were exiting their vehicles and each one of them seemed to be preoccupied with scratching or rubbing some part of their anatomy. Some were frantic in their movements, twisting and writhing with the desperation of a person fighting off a swarm of bees.

The weapon has been deployed in just the first two pages—classic pulp style—and then things get much, much worse which leads to a ferry disaster and brings Lynn Lash into the case. Sailor Snug Harbor and the Professor figure prominently in the tale. To see how diabolical it all becomes you’ll have to read the rest of the tale in the book *The New Adventures of Lynn Lash*. Inspiration plus perspiration—the writer’s journey never ends!

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Teel James Glenn has killed hundreds of people—and been killed hundreds of times—on screen, in a forty-year career as a stuntman, fight choreographer, swordmaster, jouster, illustrator, storyteller, bodyguard, actor and haunted house barker. He has two dozen books in print in a number of different genres and has stories in over a hundred magazines from *Weird Tales*, *Spinetingler*, *SciFan*, *Mad*, and *Fantasy Tales*, to *Sherlock Holmes Mystery* as well as tales in close to a hundred anthologies in many genres. He was also the winner of the 2012 Pulp Ark Award for Best Author, and his short story “The Clockwork Nutcracker” won best steampunk story for 2013 and has been expanded into a novel. His latest book is *Year of Shadows* from Pro Se Productions.

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