

Science Fantasy

No. 60
VOLUME 20

2/6

★
A Nova Publication

★
12th Year
of Publication

MERVYN PEAKE

An Appreciation by Michael Moorcock



The Dolphin and the Deep

THOMAS BURNETT SWANN

Editorial

For the second successive year I am delighted to see that *Science Fantasy* has appeared on the short list of 'possibles' for the Best Professional Magazine of the year in U.S.A., where the final voting will take place at the 21st World Science Fiction Convention, August 30th to September 2nd, at the Statler Hilton Hotel, Washington, D.C. There is obviously something very special about this magazine to prompt a lot of readers to place it amongst the best—a factor which continues to surprise me, although I do not think it is at all possible for a 'foreign' magazine to pick up a 'best' trophy at an American convention; by the very nature of the final vote-casting I would imagine that at least half the delegates at such a convention would never have seen a copy of this magazine.

These thoughts to one side, I am just as pleased at the placing of *Science Fantasy* on the short list—but pride of place goes to the fact that one of our long novelettes, Thomas Burnett Swann's "Where Is the Bird of Fire?" which appeared in No. 52, is on the short list of five titles for the 'best short fiction' of 1962. This is as much an honour for the magazine as it is for the author—even though Mr. Swann happens to be an American, although unhonoured and unsung in his own country!

By a happy coincidence, this month sees the publication of another long novelette from Mr. Swann, which has the same kind of quality and magic about it as his

Science Fantasy

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1963

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

Cover Illustration by GERARD QUINN from "Same Time, Same Place"

TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

Sole distributors in Australia : Gordon & Gotch (Australia) Ltd.

In New Zealand : Messrs. P. B. Fisher, 564 Colombo Street, Christchurch, N.Z.

Great Britain and the Commonwealth 6 issues 17/- post free

United States of America 6 issues \$3.00 post free

Published Bi-Monthly by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.

7 Grape Street, Holborn, London, W.C.2.

Telephone : TEMple Bar 3373

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There is something nostalgically poetic in the world of mythology, especially when it is written by such a competent writer as Thomas Burnett Swann. This month, the author of "Where is the Bird of Fire," (No. 52) and "The Sudden Wings," (No. 55) turns his thoughts to the search for Circe and her carefully guarded island.

The Dolphin and the Deep

By THOMAS BURNETT SWANN

"Hide it if you must, deep as the deepest trireme crusted with coral, but beauty will burn into light."

Old Dolphin Proverb.

o n e

From the time I was a small child I have liked to wander. Once, at the age of five, I ran away from my parents' villa in Caere and followed the road to the necropolis. But the burial mounds frightened me. Carved out of red tufa stone and heaped with soil, they crouched like demons from Avernus. I peered through their narrow entrances and thought of Tuchulcha, the monster, with the face of a vulture and the ears of a donkey. Wild roses scratched my legs and a blue-eyed owl cried eerily from a cypress tree. I hid in a nest of cyclamen and fell asleep. My father came in his chariot to find me. "You wander furiously," he said, "then, like a cub, fall asleep. I will call you Bear."

In spite of the mishap I soon ran away again, and my coming to manhood served only to legitimize what, for a child, was forbidden. I visited Veii with its cyclopean walls, and proud, drab little Rome, where Tarquin the Proud was ruling a restless people. I visited the Sybarites, who cover their highways with canvas to shade their delicate complexions. I studied the Mysteries at Borsippa, near Babylon, and navigation at Carthage. But wherever I went I dreamed of somewhere else, another city, another sea, and being a young man of wealth and leisure, with parents who humoured if not encouraged him, I was able to go where I chose.

Thus it was that I began the last of all my voyages, the longest and by far the most perilous, in search of love. It began, like the other voyages, with a simple wish to explore. My people, the Etruscans, had founded a colony at Adria, on the eastern coast of Hesperia. It was young, it was menaced, I heard, by the roving yellow-haired Gauls, it piqued my sense of adventure. I bought passage on a small merchantman, the *Turan*, and skirting the hostile cities of Magna Graecia, sailed up the coast to Adria. Three days sufficed to show me the town, a mere hamlet of sickly cattle and plain women, with never a sign of Gauls. The real adventure began when I returned south with the *Turan*. A sudden shore wind swept us away from land and, dead in our path, a jagged island stabbed from the sea. A palace in the style of the old Cretan sea-kings, with white walls, blue pediments, and red columns swelling into bulbous capitals, descended in rooms and courtyards toward the water, and stairways circled down to the lapping waves. Feathery tamarisk trees leaned against the walls and a forest of cedars flanked the lowest stairs.

"I would like to go ashore," I said. Vel, the captain, looked doubtful.

"These are still Greek waters," he muttered, fingering his pointed beard. Greeks and Etruscans, I knew, raided each other's shipping without scruple and then raised cries of piracy.

"If a ship comes, leave me." I brandished a leather pouch of assis or gold and silver coins.

"You want the dinghy?" He pointed to the small boat attached to our stern.

"No, I'll swim." Already I was stripping off my tunic.

"Watch yourself. Our Lady *Turan* was struck by lightning last night." I saw that the ship's figurehead, the goddess whom the Greeks called Aphrodite, was charred and cracked.

I shuddered. Only a fool ignores an omen. Was the goddess protesting my notorious indifference to love by striking her own statue, as if to say, "The next bolt will not strike wood!" Unmarried at twenty-five, I was not such a man as Turan took to her heart.

Nonsense, I told myself. The captain has offended her—such a greedy man!—or one of the crew has forsaken a girl in a port. I dove in the water and, skirting a school of dolphins which brazenly barred my path, drew myself on to the stairs at the foot of the palace. Turquoise lizards, bright as Egyptian scarabs, scurried over my feet. Sand lay heavy on stone. There were no human footprints; only the tracks of an animal, a deer's perhaps. I climbed the stairs, my bare feet crunching the sand, and entered the palace beneath a lintel of blue gypsum. At once I stepped into an audience chamber dominated by a tall throne of porphyry. On the painted walls leaped dolphins, bluer than skies after storm, and anemones flowered in submarine meadows. Sunlight from clerestory windows lit motes of dust into tiny embers and kindled the red tile floor into burning coals. The hooves of an animal echoed in a distant corridor.

True to my nickname, Bear, I like to prowl, and room by room I explored the palace. In the highest chamber, swallows had built a nest from mud and leaves. A couch with the feet of a lion hunched in the rear. Vials of brilliant glass—amethyst, red, and amber—littered the floor like a burst of mushrooms in a temple garden. On one wall, a slim-waisted athlete vaulted a charging bull; on another, a bare-breasted woman, with coiling black curls, sang to a warrior as he boarded his ship. Her eyes were loving and very sad.

Her sadness—indeed, that of the entire palace, with its air of age and neglect—depressed me. I hurried from the room and the palace and down the great stairway to the sea. I paused on the lowest step to feel the sun on my body and catch its rays in the serpent ring I wore. But shadows, not sun, still held me. I lowered myself in the water and swam for the figurehead of the Lady Turan, whose wooden arms looked warm and hospitable. This time the dolphins, one of them a rare albino, parted to let me pass.

Something grasped my ankle. I kicked vigorously, and freed myself. The opaque waters hid my attacker. Warily I

resumed my swim. Again the grappling, gentle but insistent. I turned, lunged below the surface, and rose with a prisoner. He struggled at first, then lay still and looked at me with neither fear nor anger—as if to say, “What now?” It was a boy. His hair, the green of seaweed, was fine and silken; long like mine, but loose instead of bound in the usual fillet. I tried to hide my surprise.

“I was playing that you were my father,” he said.

At twenty-five I could hardly imagine myself the father of a boy who looked about twelve, though with current marriage customs, a bride at twelve, a groom at fourteen, it was not unthinkable.

“You don’t mind, do you?” he said. “I followed you when you swam ashore—and waited.”

I released him and treaded water. “No, I don’t mind. But what is my part in the game?”

He showed not the slightest fear of me. “Oh,” he said. “To give chase, which you did splendidly. And then to talk.” He pointed to the island. “Over there. You will be more comfortable.”

I drew myself on to the steps and gave him a hand. He hesitated. “I want to stay in the water.”

“Nonsense. Then I will have to talk down to you.”

He took my hand and thumped beside me. I understood his hesitation. His boy’s body ended with the tail of a fish, green, sparkling and sinuous. In the waters around Hesperia, Tritons were as rare as hippocampi and indeed, almost extinct. Thus, I had not suspected his identity even when I had seen his hair.

He looked uncomfortable and shyly edged toward the water.

I touched his shoulder. “We haven’t talked yet. I think we have a great deal to tell each other. Do you know, I have always wanted to be a Triton. I love to swim, but my legs get tangled in the water.” To show what I meant, I twisted my legs and floundered over the stairs.

He laughed for the first time. “Yes, I see what you mean. But on land my *tail* gets tangled!”

“We’ll trade sometime. But now you must tell me your name.”

“Astyanax. I got it out of Homer. A sailor once told me about Prince Hector and how he had a son, Astyanax, whom he loved dearly. Hector hated to go to war because he had to

leave his son. He tried not to frighten him with his flashing armour. I thought, 'If I name myself Astyanax, perhaps I will find a Hector.' ”

“ You have no parents ? ”

“ I lost them in a storm and never found them again. That was three years ago. ”

“ You've been alone since then ? ”

“ Sometimes I follow ships, and the sailors toss me grapes. I have to be careful, though. Some of them want to catch me to show in the ports. What's *your* name ? ”

“ Arnth, ” I said, “ though often I am called Bear. ”

“ Ah, ” he said. “ You like to rummage—in palaces and such. Like a bear on the prowl. ”

“ And then I curl up and sleep. ”

“ Indeed, you have sleepy eyes. I will certainly call you Bear. ” He paused. “ Were you looking for Circe ? ”

“ Circe, the enchantress ? ” I cried. “ Is that who lived in the palace ? ”

“ Yes, but you are much too late. A hundred years ago—so the dolphins say—a galley came for her, rowed by pygmies. Bears and rabbits gathered to say good-bye. She smiled at them and spoke a few words—multiply, don't eat each other, and that kind of thing. When she boarded the galley, a black boy fanned her with ostrich feathers, and a crimson canopy shielded her from the sun. One of the bears—you will love this part—jumped into the water and swam after her, but she waved him back and disappeared into the misty south. ”

“ Did the bear get back to shore ? ”

“ Oh, yes. His friends helped him up the stairs. He became, in fact, something of a hero. ” He hesitated and smiled sheepishly. “ I made up the bear because I thought he would please you. ”

“ It was a charming touch. But tell me more about Circe. Was she still beautiful ? Odysseus knew her many centuries ago. ”

“ The dolphins say she was like the sun, white and burning. When she left it was the sun sinking into the sea. ”

“ Do you know where she went ? ”

“ Beyond the Pillars of Hercules. ”

“ North to the Isles of Tin ? ”

“ South along the coast of Libya. ”

“ How far ? ”

“ Who knows ? To the land of the Gorillae, perhaps. ”

My senses reeled. Libya, the continent of mist and jungles, pygmies and giants, griffins and sphinxes, and yes, the hairy, horrible Gorillae. The Phoenicians claim that a Tyrian captain once sailed through the Red Sea and around the continent from east to west, but who can believe such a boast? Whether, as Homer thought, the earth is flat and surrounded by the stream of ocean, or whether, as the Ionians think, it is shaped like a cone or a sphere, a voyage around Libya is like searching for the Golden Fleece—without the help of Jason.

He looked at me wisely. "You will go to find her?"

"To look for her, perhaps."

He shook his head. "I wish you were Greek instead of Etruscan."

"Why?"

"Because I would like to go with you, but you are too sad. Like most Etruscans."

"Etruscans sad?" I protested. "Our robes are as gay as flowers. We dance and sing even at funerals and paint our tombs with banquets and chariots."

"Ah," he said, "but your eyes are sad. They give you away."

It was true, of course. In the polished bronze of a mirror, the eyes which met my stare were dark and slanted, like those of my ancestors, the Lydians, and old with accumulated sorrows, with the weight of dead cities, buried and smouldering, of battles and tortures and beautiful shameless queens who smiled and shook poison from rings like golden spiders.

He saw that the truth had hurt me. "Except for your eyes," he added, "you look like"—he searched for words—"a well kept farm! There is plenty of meat to hide your bones, and your cheeks are as red as apples. Your eyes, of course, don't belong to the farm. They belong to the woods." His tail sparkled greenly with drops of sea-water, but his chest and shoulders were as pale as foam. Translucent skin traced the delicate bones of his face, and his green, deep-set eyes looked faintly shadowed, as if he were tired or a little hungry.

I ran my hand through his hair. "Astyanax," I said. "I must leave you soon. But first come aboard my ship and dine with me."

He hesitated.

"I am not going to steal you."

"Perhaps you should." He plunged in the water. "Hold to my tail," he called. "I will give you a ride!"

When we reached the side of the ship, the crew and the captain crowded the bulwarks. They threw us a rope and Astyanax, using his tail for propulsion, clambered up the side. When I reached the deck, I found him surrounded by sailors. Three of them, adolescent brothers who swaggered like old salts and went by the name of the Black Rats, eyed him with open rudeness.

"You may touch my tail," he said with dignity. "Everyone wants to."

The Black Rats snickered in unison and one of them said: "Not us, boy. We can look." White, thin, with soiled black hair and dirty faces, they resembled unwashed turnips.

"You are wise not to touch him," I snapped. "Your dirt might rub off." Vanishing into the cabin, I returned with a bunch of grapes and a rhyton of mild red wine. Astyanax emptied the vessel with a single rapid gulp.

"Drinks like a fish," the one-eared sailor muttered, but Astyanax ignored the remark and crammed his mouth so full of grapes that he looked like a field mouse gorging himself on grain. All the while, he peered around him at the fixtures of the ship, its furled yellow sail, its wicker cabin, and its deck of Etruscan cypress.

"The goats of Amphitrite are starting to kick," said the captain impatiently, pointing to the white-capped waves which had begun to slap the bow. "It is time to sail."

Astyanax ate more slowly. "I would like more grapes," he said when he had finished the first bunch.

I handed him another bunch. "You must take these with you."

"I want to join your crew," he announced.

"It isn't my crew. I am just a passenger."

He turned to the captain. "Is there room for another passenger? I can fish and mend sails to pay my passage."

"Can you stay out of water for days at a time?"

"No," he admitted. "I dehydrate."

"Well then, you can't be a passenger. Over the side now. The goats are impatient." Indeed, the ship was rocking from side to side as if she were being slapped by a Cyclops.

He wriggled across the deck. I knelt to lift him over the bulwark. He shook his head. "My tail is adequate."

Poised on the bulwark, he turned and looked at me. "Thank you for the conversation," he said, and before I could tell him good-bye, he hit the water.

I helped the men lower the sail (I felt a need to keep busy), and the *Turan* cut through the goats like a wolf through a flock. I will not look back, I thought. If I mean to find Circe, how can I encumber myself with a fish-tailed boy who eats like a whale?

However, I did look back, sneakily, like a fox which has stolen a pullet. The island had dwindled until the red columns of the palace seemed slender wounds in the white immaculate walls, and yes, Astyanax followed a few hundred feet in our wake. He raised his hand and called, "Bear, good-bye!"

"Lower the sweeps!" I shouted. The sailors looked at the captain and the captain looked at me.

"Has the moon possessed you?" he growled. "There is nothing to stop for here."

"You can double my fare," I said. "I am taking on a friend." I seized a sweep, a long wooden oar with a blade of double width, and thrust it into the sea. The ship veered sharply to the right.

"Oh, very well," grumbled Vel. He lowered a sweep on the starboard and returned the ship to its course, with speed considerably reduced.

Astyanax soon overtook us. I threw him a rope and he climbed, laughing, into my arms. I heard him mumble a name.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"Hungry," he said. "I lost my grapes." I think he really said "Hector."

I did not suspect the difficulties—dangers, I should say—which hunched like sphinxes along the road to Circe. The trouble started almost at once (not Circe's part in it; not yet, anyway). I had paid the captain for Astyanax's passage and the Triton had kept his promise to fish for the crew. But Vel was not appreciative. First he complained that the fish were small and bony. "Fit for *him*, perhaps. Not for me." Then he said: "Tritons are Greek, not Etruscan. How do we know he isn't spying for pirates?" The mood of the captain soon infected his crew. The Black Rats, petulant as well as soiled, began to grow insufferable. When Astyanax stretched on the deck to take a sunbath, one of them stepped on his tail and then made the limp apology, "Mistook him for a hawser."

"It looks," I said to Astyanax, when the Rat had crossed the deck, "as if we may have trouble before Agylla." Located close

to Caere, my home, Agylla was the port where we hoped to find a ship and crew to begin our search.

"Don't worry," said Astyanax, pointing to a rare white dolphin in the wake of the *Turan*. "Her name is Atthis. She has been following us ever since Aeaea. A ship with a white dolphin enjoys good luck."

The luck it seemed, belonged to the ship and crew but not her passengers. A week after our departure from Aeaea, Astyanax woke me in the middle of the night. I heard him thump noisily on to the floor of our cabin (cabin? It was little more than canvas stretched over timbers, but at least it gave shelter and privacy).

"Are you going for a swim?" I asked.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he said.

I was well aware that the thump had been deliberate. When he woke in the night, he liked conversation. "Can't you wait till morning?"

"By then my tail will be stiff."

I climbed out of bed and threw a cloak across my shoulders. "I'd better go with you and ask Vel to lower our speed. You might lose us in the night." The vessel was dark except for the fitful burning of a torch enclosed in a dried bladder. It was not usual for ships to sail at night; much more often they dropped anchor in convenient coves and waited for the coming of Thesan, the Lady of the Dawn (whom the Greeks call Eos) but the weather was clear and Vel preferred the sea to the doubtful refuge of a coast which belonged to the Greeks.

With Astyanax in my arms, I stepped from the cabin. Most of the crew were asleep beneath a thick tarpaulin, but Vel and the one-eared sailor, huddled at the prow, were talking and motioning. I waited in the doorway. Something in their tone, a hushed excitement, a hint of conspiracy, warned me to pause and listen. The wind brought words in ominous snatches.

"In Graviscae," said the one-eared sailor, "... slave market . . . sell him on the block . . . tritons are rare . . . good price."

"What about his friend? . . . can't sell freeborn Etruscan . . ."

"Brand him . . . pass him off as criminal condemned to slavery . . ."

At first I wanted to laugh. Sell us into slavery? Incredible! My second thought was less reassuring. My travels had never led me to Graviscae, but the captain, no doubt, was known in

the port. If he wished to sell us into slavery, who would believe that the Triton did not belong to him, and that I myself had begun the voyage as a passenger? In truth Astyanax would bring a handsome price. I had seen a centaur, trapped in the hills, sell to a troop of travelling acrobats, who wanted him in their show. As for myself (sleek rather than brawny), I was hardly fit to become an acrobat, field hand, or gladiator, but I knew that Etruscan ladies, bored with their husbands, sometimes bought slaves for purposes other than work. After I was sold, I might convince my master (or mistress) of my true identity, but Astyanax by then would have gone to a different master and I might have lost him for good. The thought of that sea-loving boy as a slave appalled me.

The wind rose to a whistling howl. I did not hear when they meant to take us captive. I stepped back into the cabin and sat on the couch to think.

Astyanax spoke with more excitement than fear. "We shall have to swim for it, Bear!"

"We're a good ten miles from shore. I can't swim that far."

"Not even if I push?"

"Not even then." I deliberated. "But there's always the dinghy moored to the stern."

"Isn't it a bit—well, undignified? As if one were *skulking* to safety."

"Skulking or not, the dinghy is our best chance." Once ashore, we might fall prey to the Greeks, but even they were preferable to Vel and his Black Rats. I secreted a dagger in my loin cloth. Everything else—my chest, my sandals, my sword, even my money pouch—I would have to leave them in the cabin.

"What shall we do for provisions?" asked Astyanax, eyeing a bunch of grapes on a table beside the couch.

"Go hungry until we reach the shore."

He crammed his mouth with grapes.

I lifted the canvas and peered on deck.

"All clear?" he whispered.

"All clear."

The sides of the cabin hid us from Vel and his friend at the prow and also the navigator manning the sweep at the stern. I gave Astyanax my knife. A strong swimmer, he could match the speed of the *Turan* and cut the cord which held the dinghy. He clung to my back as I crept under the canvas. At the edge

of the ship, I held him over the bulwark and let him slide from my hands. The wind and the waves muffled the sound of his dive. I dove after him. The hull diminished like a black, retreating whale and left me in foam and the almost-darkness of a sickle moon.

By now Astyanax had cut the rope which held the dinghy. Still in the water, he thrust the little boat in my direction. I clambered over the edge and gave him a hand. The vanishing ship had left a faint white trail, as if the Lady Moon had walked with phosphorescent sandals.

I slid my fingers along the bottom of the boat. The boards were moist with sea-slime. "There's no paddle," I sighed. "We'll have to trust to the current."

"Why don't I push?" He readied himself to dive.

I reached to stop him. "No!" I cried, sensing danger. Perhaps I had seen a movement under the waves.

"But I live in the water," he protested. "I'm not afraid—"

The sea exploded beside us and a white shape arched above our heads. I ducked and shivered as water showered my neck.

"Atthis!" shouted Astyanax. "I'll ask her to give us a shove."

I peered at the water. Low, choppy waves tossed in the feeble moonlight. "Are you sure she's friendly?" I asked.

As if to answer my question with a resounding "No," the end of our dinghy shot into the air and Astyanax and I rolled like peas from a pod. The boat slid under the surface and reappeared, capsized and low in the water.

We clung to the keel. Atthis circled us with rapid, lessening loops. It was hard to tell her intention: if she meant to attack or wished to atone for throwing us into the sea. I felt her smooth white snout brush against the soles of my feet, inquisitive, exploratory, as if to examine my skin, feel my pulse, fathom my thoughts. My thoughts at the moment were not charitable. I will kick her, I told myself, if she touches me again. Then I remembered the shark-killing teeth behind her impassive face.

The men on the *Turan* had seen our accident. The ship had turned and now she bore down on us like a great black Harpy.

"Swim for it," I pleaded with Astyanax. "They'll never catch you."

"Bear," he reproved. "You don't expect me to leave you?"

"They won't hurt me. It's you they want."

"We will think of a way to outwit them."

I gave him a shove from the boat. "Astyanax, go!" He clung to my hand with thin, tenacious fingers. Defeated, I drew him beside me and cradled him with my arm. "Well then, we shall face them together."

Vel shouted from the deck. "We'll run you down unless you surrender peaceably. Both of you."

Astyanax swore under his breath: "Nethuns, god of the deep, feed him to sharks and cuttlefish!" But he wisely restrained his utterances when the captain threw us a rope. Hand over hand, he followed me on to the deck. Silent, inscrutable, the white dolphin watched us from the water.

The captain bound our hands. He removed his signet ring, a gold shark with gaping jaws. "Heat it in the torch," he said to the one-eared sailor. "It will serve as a brand."

t w o

To the north lay Elba, the island of iron and copper; to the east, the port of Graviscae, with quays and canals and red-tile houses laid in terraced rows. Behind the port the twin ridges of Tarquinia jutted against the sky: one a necropolis; one the capital city of Etruria, with walls of mortarless stone and battlemented towers, arched entrances and basalt thoroughfares. Olive groves flanked the ridges, and cypress trees, like bronze inverted cones, shaded the highways which joined Tarquinia to her port.

We moored near the mouth of a canal roofed by a massive barrel vault. Preceded and followed by Black Rats, I descended the ship's ladder and received Astyanax from the arms of the one-eared sailor. Like the other male slaves in Etruscan cities, I was stripped and barefoot. Nakedness in itself did not embarrass me; Etruscans, used to a climate which discourages excessive clothing, are not a modest people. But nakedness as now, in the heart of a town, signified shame and the loss of liberty. What was more, I carried on my forearm a brand in the shape of a shark. If I called for help, the entire crew of the *Turan* would point to the scar and insist that I belonged to Vel, who had the right to sell me. Astyanax, fortunately, had not been branded. Vel did not want to mar him as a curiosity.

Beyond the vault a midday sun blazed on a forest of sails. There was no real harbour, but a network of moles and jetties buttressed the small indentations of the coast, and a multitude of ships lay moored or anchored : Sardinian cargo boats in the shape of ploughshares ; Tyrian traders redolent of cedar ; Greek penteconters, ironically berthed beside the same Etruscan merchantmen which, on the high seas, sometimes fell prey to their speed and their vicious beaked prows. The Etruscan ships, both merchant and war, were broader and taller than the Greek, slower but far more seaworthy in rough waters. Some looked battered, with rent sails and crusted hulls, and I guessed that they must have returned from the stream of Ocean, where the waves were as tall as palaces. I looked frantically for someone I knew—a captain with whom I had sailed, a visitor from Caere. I looked in vain.

Away from the ships, the highways rumbled with chariots hammered from bronze and wooden carts on ponderous wheels of stone. Pedestrians walked the footpaths beside the highways, and, bright as coquina shells, paraded their coloured robes—Tyrian purple, red of cinnabar, yellow of saffron crocuses—or their silken loin cloths, trimmed with gilt and artfully tapered to flatter the wearer's hips. I had walked with such crowds in most Etruscan cities ; I had worn robes whose colour rivalled the halcyon, and carried a sword at my side. Women had stared at me, and I had returned their stares indifferently, sleepily, if at all, confident that she whom I sought did not inhabit the city, but waited, patient and dreaming, at the end of my furthest voyage. Today I walked as a slave, and the women looked over or through me or at the Triton I carried in my arms. I heard them whisper.

“ A Triton ! ”

“ A boy with a tail ! ”

“ And hair to match ! ”

But no one said, “ Look at the man who carries him ! ”

The Mart of the Slaves was a square in the middle of that larger square, the town marketplace : a small paved island surrounded by the canvas-roofed stalls of farmers selling their grapes and fishermen their tunny and herrings. A low platform set against a wooden backdrop, rose like the stage of a theatre and allowed the slaves to parade or be prodded like actors. We had to wait our turn. Vel, the three Black Rats, and the one-eared sailor shoved me into a circle beside the platform.

A young woman with cinnamon hair, probably a Greek, stood on the block. Nude, she turned at her owner's prompting to display her full, perfect breasts and the bold flare of her thighs. She looked supremely bored and her eyes seemed to say : " You needn't expect me to cringe like a pale little virgin. I have been sold before." Several young gallants were bidding against each other in excited voices. Finally she went for five hundred assis to a youth who stepped forward to claim her with great eagerness and promptly lost his tongue. Embarrassed and diffident, he covered her shoulders with a fine embroidered cloak and led her down from the block. She shook her head, rippling the cinnamon hair, and allowed the cloak to reveal her handsome breasts.

Astyanax, however, did not have eyes for the Greek. He pointed to a lady of fashion whose small leather moccasins tilted up at the toes like the bow of a boat. " Does she grow that way or is it just her shoes ?"

Before I could answer his question, a Black Rat jerked him out of my arms and on to the block. I saw with dismay that Astyanax planned to bite him. But he seemed to change his mind, hesitant, no doubt, to risk a fall on his tail. Flanked by two Black Rats, I had to keep my place. Restless daggers jiggled in their hands.

Etruscan aristocrats, both men and women, dominated the audience ; poor men could not afford to bid for slaves. Sandwiched among the Etruscans, a party of visiting Romans, in spite of their solemnity and their dignified white togas, ogled Astyanax like red-faced farmers. Rome, after all, is an overgrown village, and villagers gape when they come to the city. Astyanax did not let their rudeness disconcert him. He rocked his tail rhythmically, as a walker swings his arms, and met their stares.

In addition to Etruscans and Romans there were two boys, fifteen and sixteen I judged, whose wheat-coloured hair marked them as Gauls or Scandians and probably also as brothers. Their loin cloths were grey and tattered ; they wore neither rings nor bracelets and their hair, far from the flowing elegance of the wealthy, was short and wind-blown. It was clear that they could not bid, but they looked at Astyanax eagerly, as if they hoped to make friends. He returned their smiles. In spite of his predicament, he had not lost his sense of adventure.

At last Vel himself ascended the block, his pointed beard glittering in the sun, his signet ring flashing sinister fires, and accepted Astyanax from the Black Rat. He turned to face the audience.

"As you see," he began, "I offer more than a slave to till the fields or carry a lady's litter. I offer a Triton fresh from the sea!"

"You make me sound like a mullet," Astyanax snapped. Vel ignored him. "Fresh from the sea and free of barnacles."

"But what does he *do*?" cried one of the Romans. "He can't even walk. Could he help me on my farm?"

A practical people the Romans. They demand that everything have a specific purpose.

Vel stammered. "He—he—"

Astyanax could not contain himself. Glaring at Vel, he took command of the sale. "Do?" he cried. "I fish, swim, boat, and dive for sponges. I mend nets, caulk hulls, and milk sea-cows. I can narrate stories to make a sailor blush. And what is more," he added with emphasis, "I supply—and provoke—sparkling conversation."

The Romans craned their necks, arguing among themselves in the ponderous tongue called Latin. The lady with the curved slippers stepped forward demurely and bid in an ear-splitting voice:

"Two hundred assis!"

She explained to the friend beside her, a lady with large bosoms and orange curls: "I want him for the pool in my atrium. Think of the sensation when I have guests! They can make him dive for coins. Besides, he's so *decorative*. The green tail, don't you know. At banquets, I can drape him over a platter to garnish the oysters."

"Nude?" asked her friend with ill-concealed shock.

"What should he wear, a tunic?" the tilt-toed lady snapped.

"Nude," muttered her friend. "And telling those salty stories."

"Three hundred assis," cried one of the Romans, the one who had asked for the Triton's accomplishments. When his friends looked at him in consternation, he growled, "You heard him. Says he can milk."

"Four hundred," said the lady, stamping her up-turned toes.

"Four hundred and fifty," said the Roman, hunching his shoulders as if he were about to be charged by the Calydonian Boar.

Astyanax looked indignant. "But the wench brought *five* hundred."

"Five hundred then!" cried the lady. Victory shone in her eyes and flushed her cheeks, as if, I thought, she had tippled unmixed wine. With relentless steps she mounted the stairs on to the block. "Baby," she simpered and held out her braceleted arms. Astyanax, for the first time, looked frankly terrified.

But the lady was not, after all, to have him. One of the yellow-haired boys emerged from the crowd, mounted the block in a single muscular leap and snatched Astyanax from the threatening jewelled embrace. Tossing him into the crowd where his blond brother waited with outstretched hands, he spun from the block and both brothers, Astyanax between them vanished as if through the conjurations of Circe. The Black Rats forgot to watch me. Like everyone else, they were dazed by the sudden daring of the theft. Easing rather than springing, I, too, made my escape.

My first problem was to find a robe; even before I found Astyanax. The mere fact of my being nude and branded like a slave did not in itself endanger me. On the business of their masters, slaves moved freely throughout the town. But if Vel sent his men to search for me, they would look for a slave and not for a man in a cloak. I passed a stall where cloaks were hung on hooks and shoes were laid beneath them—moccasins of kid, sandals with wooden soles, high yellow boots. The shopkeeper was fastening a sword to the side of an elderly aristocrat. The old gentleman threw back his shoulders and attempted to swagger like a conquering general. No one was watching me. Without compunction, almost without fear, in one continuous motion, I lifted a cloak from a hook—red, with a border of yellow griffins poised for flight—and stepped in a pair of moccasins. To tell the truth, I rather enjoyed the theft. I was tired of behaving. I must have caught Astyanax' sense of adventure.

The moccasins were nondescript, but the cloak identified me as a gentleman and also concealed my brand. Now I could look for Astyanax. Though the town was both large and strange, I could make inquiries. The passage of two boys and a Triton could not have gone unnoticed. The fact remained, however, that Vel and his men could also inquire; that they, too, were searching and sooner or later were sure to cross my path.

I found Astyanax sooner than I dared to hope. The brothers, one of them holding the Triton, stood on a pier and stared at a round-built ship between two galleys of war. A new ship. Blue of hull, sleek as a dolphin, freshly painted, and fragrant with cedar and cypress, she loomed like a cabin boy's dream. A ship for wandering; for uncharted seas and fabulous monsters; for finding Circe. But now was hardly the time to admire a ship. Bounding on to the pier, I snatched Astyanax from the arms of the taller brother.

"Bear!" he cried, delighted. "Where have you been?"

"We didn't want him to be sold," said the taller brother with a slight Scandian accent. His name, I learned, was Balder, his brother was Frey. Their father had come from frozen Scandia, the land of Odin and Thor, the Thunderer. "That lady might have *stuffed* him."

"We wanted him for ourselves," confessed the lesser brother.

I looked nervously down the pier. "Explanations can wait. Now we must take cover."

But the brothers had more to say. "Wanted him for our Animal," Frey explained. "The Woodpeckers have a goat and the Griffins a Molossian hound." He seemed to refer to rival street gangs. "I don't suppose you would lend him."

Astyanax brightened with pleasure, like a discus thrower coveted by rival teams. It suddenly occurred to me that he might prefer the company of boys to that of a wanderer like myself.

"Do you want to be their Animal?" I asked with a catch in my throat.

He shook his head and turned to the boys. "I'm travelling with Bear."

"But he's so elderly," cried Frey. "He must be—twenty-six!"

"Yes, but he has experience."

"Twenty-five," I muttered.

The boys looked at him and then at me. "Be good to him, Sir," said Balder.

"First we must hide him—and us," I said.

Already it was too late. The Black Rats charged us from the street. Quick as a snake, I flicked out a foot and tripped the first of them. He spun toward the ground, recovered himself like a cat, and kicked me in the shin. I swayed on a single leg and balanced Astyanax in front of me. All this time the Triton was swearing and waving his arms. I had not suspected the

eloquence of his oaths—I should have, sailors had helped to educate him.

“Zeus, Hera, Ares, Artemis and Hades,” he swore at the hapless Rat, “blast you with thunderbolts, drown you in whirlpools, feed you to Scylla and Charybdis.” Then, remembering that he was in Etruscan territory, he added Tinia, Uni, Mantus, Vanth, and even a Roman god, Janus. “And may Charun roast your liver in burning asphalt.”

When the Rat charged us again, Astyanax swung from my arms and swatted him with his tail. The Rat reeled to the edge of the pier and, helped on his way by the sudden thrust of my foot, fell into the water. Together, it seemed, Astyanax and I made a formidable combination, a self-propelled battering ram. Flushed with victory, we rolled to help the brothers.

We found that they did not need us. Four young heads, two blond, two black, their hues as opposite as salt and pepper, bobbed in a tempest of limbs. Balder and Frey, at first, fought back to back but soon they took the offensive and surged like catapults sweeping to storm a battlement. When Frey tottered beneath the blows of a Rat, the resourceful Balder, hurling his own assailant into a heap of over-curious spectators, leaped to succour him, and seconds later the brothers stood in monumental grandeur, crossing their arms like victorious gladiators. Meanwhile, the Rat I had kicked from the pier had clambered out of the water and, looking for a change like a well-washed turnip, slunk into the crowd, where he joined his battered brothers.

“They will go for Vel,” I said. “Now we must really hide.” I looked at the ship and thought: Why not buy her? At the moment I had no money, but a few days’ sailing would bring us to Agylla, the port of Caere, my home. If I could convince the owner of my credit, Astyanax and I could sail on our voyage for Circe, and while we bargained the ship would hide us from Vel.

Followed by the brothers and still carrying Astyanax, I climbed on to the deck, which sparkled with fresh-hewn timbers of cypress wood.

“Look,” said Astyanax, pointing to the figurehead. “He is just my age!” The figure of a boy, cunningly carved from wood, strained from the prow with his arms outstretched to the wind. “Come,” he seemed to say. “I will lead you to Circe.” I recognized Tages, the boy with an old man’s wisdom, who

had stepped from a clod of earth and given Tarchon, our national hero, the sacred books of Etruria.

A young man emerged from the cabin and looked at us with more sadness than surprise, though we must have appeared disreputable, a Triton, two young ruffians with bloodied faces, and a doubtful gentleman with a rich cloak but no other signs of status.

"Is she for sale?" I asked.

"Yes," he sighed, as if he were putting his wife on the auction block.

A good trader conceals his eagerness—shows himself interested but not avid—and Etruscans, with merchant ships in every sea, are the best of traders. But I had no time in which to dissimulate.

"Your ship has bewitched me," I said. "I would like to buy her."

"She is right out of the shipyards at Cosa—built to my own design. But I can't afford to keep her." He wore a domed hat and trim red boots which gave him, from a distance, an air of jauntiness. But his large black eyes were mournful even for an Etruscan.

Just then I spied the one-eared sailor, the three Black Rats, and Vel himself advancing down the street. They paused to question a merchant in a lilac-coloured cloak.

"Will you show us the cabin?" I asked quickly. We followed the owner into the cabin. The entire vessel, he told me, was fifty feet long and twelve in width. The cabin, though cramped into eight square feet, held a couch with the legs of a bear, a three-legged brazier, a bronze mirror with a curving handle and a cabinet of citrus wood from Carthage. Above my head a small clay lamp, owl-shaped and painted black, hung from the wicker ceiling.

I sat on the couch and the young man, whose name was Aruns, sat beside me, or rather slumped, for he seemed on the verge of tears. Lovingly he caressed a cushion.

"Goose feathers sewn in silk," he said. "You will sleep like a lotus eater. As you may have guessed, I'm rather fond of my ship—everything about her. But Greek pirates have preyed on my other ships, and now I must sell the queen."

I touched his shoulder. "If you sell your queen to me, I will treat her royally." Now came the awkward moment to discuss the terms of payment. "I can't pay you at once," I explained, and told him my story without evasion. Finally I threw back

my cloak and exposed the brand on my forearm. "If you sail me to Agylla, I can pay you in gold and silver—generously."

"Of course I believe you," he said. "Your story is much too preposterous to be invented and no swindler would travel about with a Triton and two ragamuffins. Besides, I know an Etruscan aristocrat when I see one, brand or no brand. It's something about your eyes. Their hunger is not for possessions—silks and gems, gardens and tall stone houses. They are used to such things. But what will you do for a crew? I have let mine go, and as for myself, I've never been more than a passenger on my ships, though I might help out with a captain to give me orders."

"I think I can settle that now," I said. I whispered to Astyanax. Jubilantly he turned to Frey and Balder. "Bear would like you to join our crew."

"On *this* ship?" cried Balder. "It has been our dream!" They both hugged me at once, and the four of us, Astyanax in the middle, spun dizzily over the floor.

"Get your things," I gasped. "If it suits Aruns, we'll sail with the tide. We won't even wait to load supplies."

"We haven't any things."

"Tell your parents then."

"They died last year—swamp fever."

I spoke quickly to hide my emotion. "Do you know ships at all?"

"We have sailed as cabin boys around Hesperia."

"Where are you going?" asked Aruns.

"Beyond the Pillars of Hercules. Around Libya."

"In search of a wicked enchantress," Astyanax added.

"Who changes men into animals." I expected the boldness of our venture to discourage him. If anything it made up his mind.

"May I come with you? I know the *Halcyon* like a daughter. On such a voyage, I think she will need a father."

I engaged him at once and promised myself that, after we had found Circe, I would give him back his ship.

"Now I will show you the rest of the *Halcyon*," he said.

Aruns stepped from the cabin and, assured that Vel and his men were nowhere in evidence, called us after him. To rest my arms, I deposited Astyanax in a coil of rope and followed Aruns' finger as he pointed to the red linen sail, heaped at the foot of the mast.

"The tide is with us," he said. "We have only to raise the sail and man the sweeps."

"All we need now," I said, "is a woman for luck. The Argonauts had Atalanta."

"We have one," called Astyanax from the bulwark. He pointed to the water. The snowy beak of a dolphin broke the surface. It was Atthis.

"I have just engaged her to be our pilot."

"Atthis?" I cried. "But she is the one who capsized and got us captured!"

"She is terribly ashamed, she says. The whole thing was an accident. She meant to surface beside us instead of under us. She has followed all this way to ask our pardon."

I studied her in the water, remorseful, pleading, and yet without obsequiousness, a proud being humbled to ask forgiveness. If she told the truth, she had done her best to atone for the blunder.

I leaned over the bulwark. "Nice girl," I said in the tone of a man coaxing his favourite dog. "Would you like to lead us?"

Astyanax whispered in my ear: "You mustn't call her girl. She is five years old—for a dolphin, as old as *you* are. Call her Atthis."

I looked into her face and saw, for the first time, the dignity of a beak and an airhole. I had treated her like a child or a pet. She was neither, she was indefinably yet incontestably a woman, with pride and high intelligence.

"Atthis," I said. "You will honour us by becoming our pilot."

She opened her mouth and uttered a series of barks.

"She says yes," Astyanax interpreted.

"What else?"

"She says, 'I will pilot Bear and serve him as he deserves.'"

The words were ambiguous, but I took them to be a compliment. "She actually called me Bear?"

"There isn't a word for 'bear' in her language. She had to improvise. She called you 'The Furry Prowler'—two barks and a trailing squeak."

"Now," I began, "we shall—"

"Go to find Circe," cried the brothers.

"And supplies," said Astyanax. "And dinner."

Our escape, after all, had not been difficult. It was only men who had tried to stop us. The women—and the woman—were still to come. Except Atthis.

t h r e e

In Agylla we took on supplies and I paid Aruns for the purchase of his ship.

"Remember," I said, "she still belongs to you."

We sailed north, hugging the coast of Hesperia. Fishermen rose in their skiffs and stared enviously at our red sail, which caught the sun like a net, and our blue, unbarnacled hull. They saw that a luck-bringing white dolphin not only accompanied but led us, and to share in our luck they shouted the blessings of the sea-god, Nethuns (whom the Romans call Neptune). Astyanax manned the sweeps to hold us on course, and carefully scanned the waves, hoping to find his parents or other Tritons. The brothers tended the sail, a square of canvas divided into smaller squares by leather webbing and secured by forestays and afterstays; they set the yards with braces and reefed when a squall blew up, and we came about, tacked or ran with the wind. Aruns was lookout and I, as captain, moved freely about the ship and coordinated my crew. At this of course was pilot. With a skill beyond any man's, she kept us from hidden shoals which the Greeks call "Ants" and nosed out currents which might increase our speed.

Late every afternoon we moored in a river mouth or a cove, triced the sail, and sent the brothers to bargain with local farmers for the produce of the land—figs, pomegranates, goat's milk, eggs, chickens—or, in the wilder country, to hunt for boars and gather chestnuts. We built a fire on shore to cook our dinner, ate like seasoned adventurers and afterwards returned to the ship. While a pine-knot torch blazed above our heads, Aruns played double-pipes and the brothers danced, throwing their chins back, curving their hands and in spite of their size, brushing the deck as lightly as deer or conies. At this who listened to the pipes through her tiny earholes, rolled on the surface in rapture. Sometimes Astyanax dove in the water and clung to her dorsal fin. More often he stayed on deck and, with touching wistfulness, watched the feet of the brothers. One of the boys might lift him and leap to the music and Astyanax would sway his arms with the grace of a practiced dancer.

One night, when Aruns had tired of playing the pipes, he bowed his head in thought. We quickly fell silent and hoped for a story, for he knew both Homer and Hesiod, the lore of

Tages, the legends of Isis and Set. He had told us how Tarchon, the Lydian prince, had sailed to Hesperia and built a city with roads of basalt and temples raised on platforms ; how Charun, the demon, waited for souls in Hades, and grey-winged Vanth, goddess of fate, brooded above a world she did not love. Tonight he sang about Circe, and his rich, musical voice surged like the wine-dark sea :

“ Round that place lay the beasts of the mountain, lions and grey wolves

Whom with evil drugs administered Circe had enchanted . . .”
Then the words of Odysseus’ friend, Polites, before he is metamorphosed :

“ Listen, O friends. One sings within as she weaves at her great loom.

Lovely the song she sings—the whole house throbs with the music—

Goddess it may be she is, or a woman . . .”

Lit by the torch, the mast seemed a burning tree ; somewhere ashore a wolf cub howled in hunger and, very close, a lamb bleated in terror. I thought of Circe, the end of all my voyages, the last and the loveliest of the will-o-the-wisps I had chased through twenty-five years. A hyacinth over the hill, a murex at the bottom of the sea : the distant and the perilous. I had sometimes loved in the past, for a week or a month ; one girl had tired me with tears, another with laughter ; I had tired of red hair and dark and hair the colour of barley when the harvesters come with their scythes ; and most of all, of the waiting which love demands, the standing still while the moon curves up the sky and the birds fly south. But who could weary of Circe ? Only Odysseus had left her, because of home.

“ Do you think she will turn us into pigs ?” asked Balder with shattering suddenness.

“ Nonsense,” cried his brother. “ Nobody knows such secrets.”

“ The Egyptians knew them,” said Aruns. “ Hence, their fondness for gods with the heads of jackals or cats. They are said to have taught them to the Cretans, and Circe, of course, is Cretan.”

“ You won’t become a pig, Balder,” Astyanax reassured. “ A mountain lion, perhaps, with tawny hair and powerful legs.”

Balder did not look consoled. “ And Bar will be a bar ?”

He and Frey, with their Scandian accents, could not pronounce my name.

"Bear will be a prince and Circe will take him for her lover."

"Husband, you mean?" asked Balder, shocked.

"Lover," Astyanax repeated. "Bear is too experienced to tie himself down. Like Odysseus, he will dally and depart."

I concealed a yawn. Every evening, regardless of the conversation, an urge to sleep possessed me.

"Bear is sleepy," Astyanax announced. "It is time for bed."

Aruns and I shared the cabin, he on a reed mat, I on the couch with Astyanax at my feet. When the weather was clear Balder and Frey slept on deck; when it rained they descended to the hold among our supplies, the skins of wine, the great yellow cheeses, the jars of olive oil. In the morning they would smell of cheese and hurry to take a dip before Astyanax could threaten to eat them for breakfast. Atthis dozed on the surface beside the ship, opening her eyes several times a minute to avoid attack by sharks or other killers. The heavy sighs of her airhole, like thunderous snores, were noisily reassuring. I had almost forgotten my early doubts about her.

I stretched on the couch and, before I could fall asleep, felt Astyanax snuggle against my feet. I shivered. As usual he had taken a swim and forgotten to dry himself.

"Bear, what do you think Circe will change me into?"

"What do you want to be?"

"It has nothing to do with what I want. Odysseus' men didn't want to be pigs."

"Maybe you deserve what you want."

"No," he said. "Nobody deserves that much."

Then I fell asleep.

We skirted the coast of Liguria, keeping far from the shore to avoid the bushy-haired natives who kidnap sailors and sacrifice them to a bloodthirsty god on Mt. Begos. The brothers grew daily taller, or so it looked, and their pale fair skin became brown with the sun. Aruns forgot to be sad. He persisted in wearing his red domed cap, since his hair was thinning on top, but otherwise he was hardly recognizable. When he scrubbed the *Halcyon's* decks or mended her sail, his wistful eyes brightened like those of a parent. He loved her himself and knew her loved by us.

Twenty-six days after our departure from Graviscae, we docked at Massilia, the city of Artemis, and received a warm welcome from the Etruscan garrison, which had recently expelled the Greeks and captured the lucrative wine trade of the interior. Our stores replenished, our hold bulging with wine skins and our deck garlanded with acanthus leaves by the friendly inhabitants, we sailed for the Pillars of Hercules, a month's voyage from Massilia.

The western Pillar, like nothing human or animal, sprawled to the starboard ; a thing of rock only, dry, barren, harsh, its limestone face pitted with caves. A single rock, it was said, had barred the access to Ocean till Hercules, bound for Erythea to fetch the cattle of Geryon, had burst it in two and mingled the waters of Ocean with the Inner Sea. But our way was nonetheless blocked. A formidable warship rounded the base of the rock ; the lower deck bristled with oars ; the upper deck, hung with shields, glittered with helmeted warriors. Its vicious beak and glaring pointed eyes lunged at us through the waves.

"It's Carthaginian," I said with a show of relief I did not entirely feel. "We have nothing to fear." For many years Carthage and Etruria had joined their might by a treaty. While the powerful galleys of Carthage patrolled the Pillars and refused egress to the Greeks, they allowed Etruscans free passage to the Islands of Tin and to frozen Scandia. They had, however, to assure themselves of our identity ; Greeks might sail in round-built Etruscan ships.

The galley snaked beside us. Sweat and leather, acrid and sweet at once, assaulted our nostrils. Armour winked in the sun. The shields on the gunwale burned like mirrors of polished bronze. Etruscans take pride in their armour ; horsehair plumes wave proudly above their heads. The Carthaginians opposite us, bearded and heavy-browed, wore low plumeless helmets which thoroughly protected their skulls but seemed to say : war is an occupation and not an honour, a duty and not a glory. Where Etruscans temper their melancholy with a passionate zest for the moment, on the battlefield or at the banquet, Carthaginians seem always to walk in darkness, as if the black immensities of their continent have imbued their blood with shadows. They are morbid and humourless, though brilliant warriors and loyal friends.

The ships swayed together in the current. The Carthaginian oarsmen, not slaves but warriors like the men in armour, forestalled a collision with their blades. For a moment I feared that they would use their massive grappling hooks on the spotless decks of the *Halcyon* and Aruns clutched a sweep as if to say: "Grapple at your risk!" But the captain was not so heartless. Standing on the upper deck, he called down to us. By now he had assured himself that Aruns and I, at least, were Etruscans. Robes could be borrowed or imitated but our almond eyes assured him of our lineage. The Scandians he seemed to take for slaves and Astyanax he ignored.

"Bound for the Isles of Tin?" he boomed in a funereal but not unfriendly voice.

"Around Libya to the south," I replied. It was pointless to tell him that we were following a woman who had preceded us by a hundred years. "A voyage of exploration."

"Ah," he said. "Etruria grows cramped at home. New colonies in the offing, eh? But you will find little to interest you in the south. Though I have never sailed there myself, the Numidians say there is nothing but monsters—pygmies and giants and," he added ominously, "fabulous beasts. Monoce-roses, Camelopards,"—he eyed Astyanax and lowered his voice—"Tritons, Hippogriffs and Sphinxes."

Aruns shuddered, and even the redoubtable brothers, who had snatched Astyanax out of the arms of Vel and fought the Black Rats without flinching, moved very close to each other.

"Don't sail near the jungle," the captain continued. "Hippogriffs lurk in the branches and might mistake your mast for a tree. I urge you to turn back at once—or sail northward, where the men are human even if they paint themselves blue. Why, half your crew are children!"

Frey and Balder looked offended. I hurried to add, "They're experienced seamen."

"What is experience against Camelopards? It doesn't keep you from getting eaten, and your slaves, if I may say so, look particularly edible." To a dark Carthaginian, yellow hair was a marvel. "May Tanit go with you!"

The galley receded; dwindled to a far seabird skimming the waves. An alien wind puffed our sail and bore us, foolish, frightened, and adventuresome, out of the Inner Sea which, though large, held friendly ports and courteous captains, and into the Stream of Ocean.

After the warning of the Carthaginian captain, we had looked for beasts in the shape of monsters. Thus, we were not prepared for a creature so beautiful that Frey, staring, almost fell into the sea and Balder had to catch him by his feet. Then they stood side by side, arms on each other's shoulders, and stared at the marvel with all the mute wonder of boys whose world had been a narrow peninsula ; and I, the experienced traveller, pressed beside them with Aruns and Astyanax.

A forest of sun-drenched cedar trees, like tall green torches, flared into the sky, and the creature—I hesitate to call her a bird—trembled down from the treetops and strutted ostentatiously along a rock-strewn beach, as if to flaunt her orange, incredible fires against the dusky forest.

"It must be a phoenix," I said. "The rarest bird in the world. Yet she isn't even trying to hide." I should have suspected a reason behind such boldness. "There's a cove ahead. Shall we go ashore for a look?"

"I'll stay aboard," said Astyanax. "I would hold you back." He wriggled across the deck and collected a rope which lay at the foot of the mast. "Here," he said to Balder. "Capture the phoenix. Or else bring me a feather."

Aruns agreed to stay on the ship with Astyanax. They watched from the deck as we paddled ashore in our dinghy, while Atthis swam in our wake and called good-bye with a whistle. I hated to exclude them from our promised adventure.

Hushed in our boat we watched the phoenix strut like a queen of Carthage, decked in the barbarous colours of the south. The long graceful legs, black as onyx, the curving, swan-like neck, the plumage billowing a fountain of orange fire : here in truth was the fabled bird of the poets, the bird, so they sang, who ignited her own nest and, perishing among the spicy leaves, arose reborn from the ashes.

We stepped ashore on crumbling coral and broken shells.

"Ah," sighed Frey. "She is going."

A brazen queen to the last, unhurried and unembarrassed, she turned from the beach and stalked among the trees. Well, we had not expected her to wait for us.

A few hundred feet ahead of us, beyond the beach and a range of grassy hillocks, the cedar trees chattered with sunbirds, iridescent blue, purple, and green ; and little oval nests, with porchlike roofs projecting above their entrances, hung from the branches. The birds were not singing; curious, expectant,

altogether fearless, they seemed to be watching us. There was something malevolent about their watchfulness. Perhaps, I thought, they want us to capture the phoenix, whose brilliant plumage eclipses their lesser fires.

We entered the woods where the orange feathers had flickered into green shadows. Fallen needles crunched beneath our sandals and patches of undergrowth pricked us with thorns and burrs. The wide-spreading cedars, clustering needles and cones, broke the sunlight into pools and rivers and aromatic fragrances tingled in our nostrils. A long-nosed fennec peered at us from a thicket and wriggled his snout in patent mistrust. A gazelle skittered across our path. Where was the phoenix?

"Ve sound like an army," said Frey. "Ve ought to split up." Without waiting for approval, he veered away from our path.

Balder called after him. "Vait, Frey. You can't go alone. There may be beasts."

"I am fifteen! I don't need my bruder everywhere."

Balder shrugged helplessly. "It is no good to go after him."

"We have to go after him," I said. "He may get lost. And the birds—"

The sunbirds were following us. Their reptile eyes smouldered with hatred. They were avid for something to happen, and not, I guessed, to the phoenix.

Balder caught my concern and charged ahead of me, calling his brother's name: "FREY, Frey, Frey-y-y-y."

Echoes and silence and then the shrill mockery of the birds. Again: "FREY, Frey, Frey-y-y-y."

At last the answer: "Balder! Bar!" Urgent, desperate. A cry for help.

We found him in a clearing where the sun on the grass seemed a pool of fire and we drew up sharply to keep from burning our feet. There were two birds in the clearing, neither of them the phoenix; larger than eagles, large as men, with the breasts and faces of women. Their black, mottled wings resembled the skin of a snake. Their armless bodies curved into talons and oily feathers. Harpies.

Centuries ago they had plagued the Black Sea and harassed Jason and the Argonauts. Like thieves with a bag of gold, roughly yet greedily, they were lifting the now unconscious body of Frey. Balder ran at them and snatched, too late, at his brother's feet. They circled over his head and cackled harshly,

flaunting their capture. The sunbirds piped approval. Eyes, mouth, nostrils : the features of women, but joined together as if by a child modelling with clay, the eyes unmatched, the mouths twisted, agape, the nostrils projecting into horny beaks. Twisted. That was the word for them. Neither women nor birds, but—Harpies, horrors. Circling a last time, showering us with the fetid oil from their wings, they rose among the treetops, jerkily, and disappeared. The landscape, blackened by their presence, flickered back into greenery.

Except that a Harpy remained ; concealed, no doubt, to cover her friends' retreat. I did not see her until she flew at my head. The first time she brushed me with her wings, caressed, I should say, wetly, intimately. The bare skin of my shoulders crawled with the slime of her. I heard her laugh. The second time she came at my face, talons lowered like hooks from a fishing boat. I stood my ground until she was almost upon me. Ducking under the talons, I whirled and seized her by the back of her legs. She dragged me after her ; my sandals skidded along the ground. But I kept my grip until Balder came to my help. He seized my waist, and together we bore her to earth. She writhed fiercely, then, realizing her helplessness, relaxed and looked at us with the arch, simpering smile of an old woman who thinks herself young and beautiful.

"Where have they taken him?" I cried. "Where is your nest?"

Grinning she remained silent. Balder struck her across the mouth. "I will kill you unless you tell us."

The simper became a pout.

"Perhaps she doesn't understand," said Balder, eyeing her doubtfully.

"She understands," I said. "If not the words, the meaning. Kill her, Balder. We'll find the nest ourselves."

I had only meant to frighten her, but he took me at my word. He grasped her scrawny neck between his hands—big hands, those of a man, not a boy of sixteen—and began to choke her. By the time I had stopped him, she was ready to show us the nest.

She spoke in a kind of whistling, archaic Greek. "It is not far. I will show you."

We bound her wings with the cord we had brought for the phoenix. Since she had no arms and needed her legs to stand or walk, she could not attack us with her talons. Pausing to

scatter the sunbirds with a few well-aimed rocks, we set off through the forest. Out of the air, the Harpy was slow and clumsy; her vicious power was reduced to a ducklike waddle.

She lost no chance to brush against our bodies. Her grin revealed yellow, rotted teeth. "My name is Podarge," she whistled. She spoke the name with emphasis, as if she were saying "Helen" or "Aphrodite." "If you let me go, I will tell my sisters you come as guests. We will give you our favours and send you on your way—your friend as well."

"Favours?" whispered Balder, "What does she mean?"

"Er, kisses," I replied, as discreetly as possible.

Balder jerked on her rope. "The favour ve vant is to find my bruder unharmed."

She walked quietly between us the rest of the way.

The nest of the Harpies, obviously patterned after those of the sunbirds, was a large, flat-topped oval, about the size of a cowshed, suspended from a branch by a thick, knotted cord. The walls were built of twigs and cemented with clay, and the roof which projected above the entrance was woven of rushes. It was not a graceful house. Where the nests of the sunbirds enjoyed the charm of smallness, this outsize counterpart bristled with twigs and bulged with excessive clay. Clumsy hands, it was obvious (or feet, I should say) had done the building. They had not neglected, however, to strip the supporting tree of all its branches except the one which held the nest. Without wings, it would not be easy to reach the nest, seventy feet or more above our heads.

"Call your friends," I said.

Podarge gave a sharp, sustained whistle, birdlike and yet with the high keening of a she-wolf. The nest swayed, the single limb groaned in its wooden socket. Two Harpies appeared in the entrance-way.

"Return my bruder," cried Balder. "If you don't ve vill kill your friend."

Podarge strained toward her sisters. Her bloodshot eyes widened in supplication. "Listen to them," she shrilled. "They mean to kill me!"

"Kill her," screamed the first. "The nest is too small for her now."

"Kill her," echoed the sister. Her look was anticipatory.

Podarge's wings strained at their fetters. Her talons quivered as if they were rending flesh. Her face—well, it was the face of an old evil woman, who has collected crimes as some women collect intaglios and others, bronzes ; a woman who, for once, had become the victim instead of the victimizer. She bared the stumps which served her for teeth. Like tree roots torn from a brackish pond, they oozed a yellow liquid.

"You don't even have him," cried Balder, running to the foot of the tree and shaking his dagger at the Harpies. Anger became him. I thought of the god for whom he was named, Balder, the Sun, stalwart and beautiful. He was still a boy, but his rage was titanic and timeless. "If you've killed him, I will burn your tree !"

The Harpies vanished and reappeared with Frey between them. Bruised and semi-conscious, he had to lean on their wings to support himself. He stared down dazedly and saw his brother. Recognition, like the sudden flaring of a lamp, lit his face. He held out his hand with infinite trustfulness, as if he expected his brother to reach across air and draw him to safety.

A Harpy spoke : "Burn us, burn your brother. Why not join him instead ?"

"If you set him free, you can take me in his place."

They seemed to deliberate, to view his beauty and measure him against his brother.

"I am taller," he said. "Stronger. My arms are like hammered bronze."

A Harpy screamed in triumph. "Pretty boy ! Why should we not have both ? Throw down your dagger and wait at the foot of the tree. Otherwise we will cast your brother to the ground."

Balder looked at me with anguished indecision. "What must I do ?" he seemed to ask.

The sly phoenix. The forest of watchful birds. The yellow-haired boy beside the mammoth tree. The black abortions screaming over his head, Frey between them. Were these things real, or the hellish figments of a mind which, nourished on dreams, had darkened to nightmares ?

They were real. I shook off my lethargy of horror and ran toward Balder. "No," I cried. "You must not do what they say !"

Podarge screamed behind me. "Let me go. I will stop them !"

I had to trust her. Trust to her hatred. I struck off her fetters. The air groaned with the massive sweep of wings.

Her sisters shot to meet her like javelins to a stag. The three Harpies met in mid-air and whirled, screaming, over the tree-tops, a black thundercloud of wings and gashing talons. I ran to Balder, who had started to circle the tree.

"Here," I said. There were stumps of limbs and hollows left by lightning.

We climbed the tree. I was hardly aware of the bark which scraped my skin, of my fingers clawing the bark. Soon we were inching along the limb which held the nest. Balder followed me down the rope to the roof; the twigs and clay sagged beneath our feet. The nest swayed like a wave-tossed ship and we could not move until it rocked to stillness. We crept down the side like mice across a cheese, around and under the roof and into the door.

I saw that the nest held a single room, circular, divided by a low partition of stakes. A ladder led from the doorway into a small compartment, where beds of moss surrounded a slab of stone, putrid with rotting meat. Light from cracks in the wall revealed a clay bowl heaped with gems and gold ornaments. I looked in vain for Balder.

Then I saw him, across the nest in the shadows beyond the partition. He must have fallen from the ladder. Two young Harpies, about the size of sea-gulls, were trying to claw him. He crouched on his knees and fended off their talons.

I did not wait to descend the ladder. I jumped. A Harpy had fixed her talons in Frey's arm. I choked her until she released him. Ignoring her claws, I raised her above my head and dashed her to the clay floor. Green blood oozed from both of her ears. Balder, I saw, had disposed of the second Harpy. I did not feel like a murderer.

Balder embraced his brother. For a long moment he held him in his powerful arms.

"I was very stubborn," Frey said. "You had to come and get me."

"You knew we would come. Bar and I."

"Yes. I wasn't afraid." He paused. "Much!"

"We must get you out of here," I said. "Quickly."

Frey's strength had begun to return. The sight of his brother was better than healing herbs. We climbed the ladder. The

clean air struck us like spray from the sea and cleansed our lungs. I toiled up the porous side of the nest. Secure on the roof, I leaned to give Frey my hand, while Balder remained in the doorway and lifted his brother toward me.

It was then that the Harpies returned. Two of them, one pursued and one—Podarge—pursuing, while blood ran in rivulets from her out-thrust claws. The threatened victim, in spite of her imminent peril, flew at Frey. I held him ; then I held air. Balder cried his name : “ Frey !”

I watched him fall ; I wanted to take his place.

Only Podarge could help him.

Her talons caught him, but not to wound. She could not sustain his weight. She could, however, break his fall. In a wide arc, she curved toward earth and released him before she struck. He fell in a clump of bushes, limply but lightly. At once she mounted the sky and, hissing like a cat, grappled again with her sister.

By the time that Balder and I reached his side, Frey was trying to stand.

“ Falling was easier than climbing down the tree,” he grinned, but a dozen wounds had streaked his body. He looked as if he had run through brambles.

“ Where do you hurt ?” I asked.

“ Vone big ache.”

Before I could test him for broken bones, the Harpies fell to the ground with a crackle of undergrowth. I picked up a stick and ran to help Podarge. There was no need. The fall had finished her sister and she herself seemed dying. She lay on her back, blinking, her talons thrust in the air.

“ Can we help you ?” I asked.

Like a stricken bat she breathed in whistling gasps. “ Is she dead ?”

“ Yes.”

“ Both of them then.”

“ You saved my friend.”

“ Not for his sake.” The shrill voice had fallen to a whisper.

“ I did not want to waste him.”

“ Waste him ?”

The old lust flickered across her face. “ Harpies are women. Women need males in order to propogate.” Her eyelids drooped. “ Leave me now.”

Frey insisted that he be allowed to walk, but Balder, inflexible, scooped him into his arms. "My bruder for vonce vill do as I say."

Frey smiled at us. "Bar," he said. "Ve lost the phoenix but ve vill find your Circe."

"Vill you?" mocked the Harpy.

I looked back at her. "You know about Circe?" I thought of the jewels and gold we had seen in the nest. How had the Harpies come to own them? Why had the phoenix lured us from our ship?

"You know about Circe?" I repeated.

She was dead, smiling evilly.

f o u r

For several days the coast was mountainous, with arc-shaped bays where we moored in the late afternoons and fished for our supper; then it was low and sandy, with dunes like giant turtles scattered at the edge of the sea. On the fifth day after the Harpies, we rounded a promontory beetling with trees, and Astyanax, who had taken Aruns' place as lookout, called to us from the bow.

"Pygmies," he pointed. "Swinging in the branches."

"That's not pygmies," Balder snorted. "It's monkeys! I saw vone in Graviscae vonce. He came on a ship from Egypt."

"Pygmies," the Triton repeated. "Monkeys have longer tails."

"Not all of them," I explained. "This is the stub-tailed macaque. Notice their puffy cheeks and—"

"Monkeys then," he said with composure and continued his observation.

On the sixth day we came to a marsh of corn-brakes beside a river. Elephants fed on low, scrubby trees and birds hopped from back to back with, apparently, the entire approval of their hosts. Frey and Balder, who had never seen an elephant, were terrified.

"Fabulous beasts," Frey muttered. "Do you think they will eat us?"

"You and Balder perhaps," said Astyanax. "I am not edible. At least the captain didn't think so."

I had to explain that an elephant's trunk was not, as it looked, a serpent appended to his head, but a sort of elongated nose used like an extra limb.

Near the mouth of the river we anchored for the night. When I reassured the brothers that the elephants would not swim out and throttle them with their trunks, they stripped and went for a swim. Astyanax darted between them, catching prawns with his hands. Some he swallowed and others he flipped on deck for Aruns to clean. I myself withdrew to the cabin.

The couch looked irresistible. Succumbing, I fell asleep and dreamed of Circe. Redolent of myrrh and pine-needles, she leaned above me : " I have waited, my love." Then she called my name : " Bear." And again. " Bear."

I awoke with a start. Astyanax, not Circe, was calling me. Annoyed, I walked on deck. He was still in the water, with Atthis beside him.

" You have been asleep," he accused.

" No," I snapped. " Thinking."

" Atthis has brought you a present."

He took a bronze-bladed sword from her beak and lifted it into my hands. In the black niello and gold of the hilt, youths and maidens whirled over charging bulls : a Cretan scene. The old seakings, a thousand years ago, had explored this very coast, but the sword did not look ancient.

" Where did she find it ?" I cried.

" In a sunken galley beyond the mouth of the river."

" Is the water very deep there ?"

" Less than twenty feet, she says."

" Ask her to show me."

I straddled her back and held to her dorsal fin. Her tail flashed up and down, and we foamed toward the sunken ship while Astyanax trailed in our wake. Elephants along the bank, lifting water in their sinuous trunks, stared at us with lordly indolence. Beyond the mouth of the river we paused and circled. Directly below us a galley wavered in the lucid depths. Then she dove. On the floor of the sea, anemones pulsed their tentacles in a purple twilight. Diminutive lantern fish, with rows of luminescent spots, twinkled from our path. In a forest of rockweed a blood starfish curled its crimson legs. Redbeard sponges clung to the planks of the ship, which rested as lightly on the bottom as if it had settled at anchor. We circled the deck and found the cabin, whose roof lay open to the water. Hurriedly we searched the room.

The furnishings were Cretan : a terra cotta priestess with snakes in her hands ; a tiny gold frog embedded with pearls ; a

tall-backed chair in the shape of a throne. I opened a chest and lifted a woman's robe, with a bell-like skirt, puffing sleeves, and a tight bodice cut low to expose the breasts. For an instant, as the gown unfolded, Circe herself seemed to rise, a ghost, to greet me. Atthis shared my discovery. She caught the skirt in her beak and wrapped it around her flanks, as if to savour its richness and regret its inevitable destruction by the sea. Yes, this was Circe's ship. It had sunk not hundreds of years ago but less than a hundred and, since there were no skeletons, Circe and her crew had presumably escaped.

My lungs felt like burning asphalt. I mounted Atthis and rose with her to the surface. We dove again. Astyanax retrieved the frog and I found a pair of daggers for Frey and Balder. Then we returned to the *Halcyon*. Our friends were waiting on deck. Because of the elephants, the boys had hesitated to cook ashore and gathered stones from the river to make a little oven, where Aruns was baking prawns. Excitedly I told them what we had found.

"It's unlikely that she turned inland. The land seems too marshy for travel. Probably she built another ship and continued down the coast. We'll keep on our course." I gave the brothers their daggers. "For elephants."

Astyanax gulped and a tear rolled down his cheek. Had he expected a gift?

I laid my hand on his shoulder. "But you came with me. Balder and Frey stayed behind. That's why I brought them the daggers."

"It isn't daggers," he said. "It's Atthis. She's gone."

"Gone?"

"For good." He pointed to the river which smouldered like copper in the dying sun; hushed and unmoving.

"She told you?"

"She didn't have to. I saw it in her eyes when she brought you back to the ship. You have broken her heart."

"But how? I don't understand."

"She brought you a gift. What did you do? Hurried off to the wreck without a thank you. That was all right, she understood your eagerness. But when you came back to the *Halcyon*, you brought the boys daggers and *still* gave her nothing. A ring, a lamp, a sandal with antelope straps—anything would have done."

“ But what could she do with such things ? ”

“ Hide them in a sea-cave. Dolphins have caches, you know, where they keep their treasures—pearls and amber and coral from the floor of the sea, objects fallen from ships or lost in the sand and carried out by the tide. In their journeys from coast to coast, they visit their caves and show them to their friends. You made Atthis feel unwanted—like a Greek wife. She’s always been a little jealous of you anyway.”

“ Why should she be jealous ? I’m terribly fond of her.”

“ Still, you treat her like an animal. Did you know that dolphins have a literature, passed down by word of beak ? ‘ Hide it if you must, deep as the deepest trireme crusted with coral, but beauty will burn into light.’ Atthis can quote such lines for hours.”

“ Find her and bring her back ! ”

“ I don’t know where she is,” he sighed. “ She’s probably gone up the coast. Forgive me for saying this, Bear. People grow terribly fond of you—you’re sleepy and warm and *lovable*—but sometimes you seem to look right through them. You are always searching for things or going somewhere—if you aren’t asleep. What I’m saying is, you won’t stand still to be loved.”

“ But that’s because of my faith,” I protested. “ Etruscans, you see, have a terrible fear of death. Most of us go, we believe, to a region of fire and demons. That’s why we hurry so much—one man gives banquets, another races a chariot, another wanders. We want to forget the demons.”

“ Forget the demons,” he said, “ but not Atthis.”

I looked at the river and the sea. Somewhere a woman waited for me to find her, a sorceress and a queen. Was she worth the dream and the long wandering, the loss of Atthis ? Perhaps. But now I was with my friends, the best of whom I had hurt by hurting Atthis. I lifted him into the bulwark and, with my arm, shielded him against the gathering twilight and the darkness in my own heart.

We sailed southward along a coast of forest-steppes, where spiny trees, a little like the olive, sparsely strewed the sand. In the small protection of trees, antelopes sought concealment from lions with tangled manes and rawboned bodies. Luck, or at least high spirits, had left us. We sailed slowly, fearful of hidden shoals ; we counted dolphins, frolicking in the water, and wished for Atthis. Once, at a great distance, I saw a white-

ness on the horizon. Atthis? No, I was seeing what I wished to see. It was foam or a trick of light. No one mentioned her name, but Astyanax looked wistful and Aruns stared at the waves, and I knew what was in their hearts. We had lost our friend.

At night we heard drums and wondered if the natives, who never showed themselves, were signalling our approach to Circe. Or perhaps they beat us a warning: strangers, beware. In desperation we questioned the will of the gods. Aruns, like many Etruscans, knew the arts of augury: reading the liver of a sheep and interpreting the flight of birds or the colour, shape, and direction of lightning. In a fringed robe and pointed cap, with a curved stick in his hand, he faced the south and looked for a sign. We had no sheep to yield us its liver; we had seen no birds for several days; but the gods, if indeed they had not forsaken us, might speak through lightning. We waited. The drip of our water clock measured the passage of time. Seconds. Minutes. An hour.

Aruns shook his head. "The gods are sil—"

Blood-red lightning flashed to the right, three times in quick succession.

"Ah," he groaned. "The triple lightning of Tinia. Danger awaits us."

The forrest steppes became desert, humping into the sea like the yellow Nile at flood time. We lived on cheese and a few bony fish (for even the waters were barren). The parties we sent ashore saw nothing but horned vipers and scorpions. There was no rain; we drank our wine unmixed. The sand, blowing from shore, covered our deck with dry coarse grains and scratched our eyes until they reddened and watered. Heat drained us like fever. In the shade we stripped to the skin; in the sun we covered our heads and bodies to prevent exposure.

One morning a vessel barred our path: a dugout canoe with a square sail set on sprits. Twenty paddles flashed in rapid unison and the captain, hurling commands, stood in the bow. The rowers were black and very short—three feet or less, I judged—with enormous heads and negroid features. I thought of the pygmies in Homer, the little black men who warred with the iron-billed cranes. But these were women, even the captain; bare of breast, long of hair, with blue paint on their faces. I raised my hand in the universal salutation of good will.

But the pygmies called no greeting. At their sides they wore wooden tubes which looked like blowguns and they never looked up from their oars.

"Change course," I shouted to Aruns. "Head for the deep!"

We jibed and ran with the wind. The dugout changed its course. The pygmies strained at their oars and began a savage chant and their captain lashed them with shrill, hissing commands. Balder and Frey seized sweeps and used them for oars, but the dugout, with sail and twenty rowers, rapidly overtook us. Like large black spiders, the pygmies could scale our hull and kill us with darts before we could use our swords. Then I saw Atthis between our ships. I thought with horror : it is she who has led them to us.

Thank Nethuns I was wrong. The sea around her erupted with dolphins. They rose behind us with a great thrashing and thrust their beaks against our stern. Scores of them, sleek and glistening, spouting through air holes as if to shout encouragement. The stern rose high in the water, we poised and the timbers shuddered ; the mast, like a pine in a storm, creaked and swayed. Then we moved. Swifter than pirate pentecosters driven by Boreas ; swifter by far than dugouts with pygmy rowers. We clung to the bulwarks to keep our balance. We sucked in air and laughed it out of our lungs. Astyanax held to Tages and caught the spray in his face.

And the dolphins ! They were saving our lives but also playing a game. They squealed like children, they plunged and whirled and somersaulted and one leaped over the vessel, showering foam in his wake. They tried to take turns at pushing but some grew impatient and nosed their friends out of place. And Atthis led them. I wanted to hug her.

The captain of the dugout, waving a blowgun, shouted a final threat. It was strange to hear Greek spat from the lips of a pygmy.

"Seek her at your peril."

"Tell her to wait for us !" I called.

She crossed her arms and glared at us balefully as the dugout altered course and returned to hug the coast.

Except for Atthis, the dolphins followed the pygmies, no doubt to make sure that they did not change their minds and return to give us chase. Grey-backed gods, they seemed swift, powerful and lordly. We lined the deck and cheered them as they went.

Atthis remained. Astyanax swam to meet her and threw his arms around her neck : " Atthis, you've come back to us !" I wanted to go to her myself, but my going must not, like my parting, seem thoughtless and crude. I must go to her partly as suppliant and partly as friend ; indebted but not obsequious ; grateful and gracious. With love and a gift which betokened love. I searched my mind for something which, even though belated, should not seem too late. I remembered the gown she had fondled in the sunken galley. I had no gowns or women's cloaks, I had no jewels, no bracelets of amber stars nor necklaces of hammered gold. But I owned one object more precious to women than pearls : a bronze mirror with a handle like the neck of a swan.

Mirror in hand, I called to Atthis from the deck. She did not move ; she waited on the surface, watchful, poised for flight (and also, no doubt, appraising the mirror). Guessing my intention, Astyanax left her and returned to the ship. I swam to her side.

Treading water, I held the mirror in front of her. She looked at the bronze and, seeing her image, recoiled ; returned, and this time lingered. She tilted her head, she opened her beak, she rolled on her side with an artless and touching vanity. Then, having shown her delight, she spoke her gratitude—and her forgiveness—with a simple and eloquent gesture : she rested her beak on my shoulder.

At last she took the mirror from my hand and dove below the surface—to a seacave, no doubt, to hide her treasure. I returned to the ship and waited for her. Hardly had I settled on deck when she reappeared. My crew welcomed her, Balder and Frey with tears. Astyanax offered her a yellow cheese which she took from his hands and swallowed in one large gulp. Aruns was grave, courtly, and yet affectionate. He recited a verse well known to sailors, " Follow the dolphin, fly the shark," and commended her people for having inspired such a tribute. For me, it was not enough to call to her from the deck. I entered the water and, like Astyanax, threw my arms around her neck.

" Atthis," I said. " I am often unworthy of my friends. I have been unworthy of you. But you have forgiven me. Dear friend, do you know that I love you ?"

I felt the throbbing of her noble heart.

We came at dusk to a bay which enclosed a small island. Around the bay stretched yellow arms of the desert, but the island lay green and living, with grassy rocks tumbled along its beaches, with tamarisk trees and oleanders and date palms clustering fruit. Giant cranes, trailing their legs, looped above the trees or plunged after fish in the water. Though we badly needed supplies, we dared not land till morning for fear of the pygmies, whose deadly darts we had glimpsed if not felt. Atthis and two of her friends kept watch around the ship. If a dugout tried to surprise us, the pygmies would find themselves capsized and possibly drowned. We dined meagrely on cheese and wine, but happily, because Atthis had returned to us.

After we had eaten, I made a little speech. I thanked my friends for their loyalty and counted the dangers we had faced : Harpies, pygmies with blowguns, thirst and near starvation.

"Shall we end our search?" I asked. "Circe, it seems, doesn't want us." Of course I could guess their answer.

"We never expected an invitation," said Aruns. "Which is the sweetest apple on the tree? The one on the topmost branch, defended by angry bees. As Sappho put it,

'At the end of the bough—its uttermost end,
Missed by the harvesters, ripens the apple,
Nay, not overlooked, but far out of their reach,
So with all best things.'

"It's the difference between a wife and courtesan. The wife is there ; the courtesan, a good one anyway, has to be fetched."

Frey and Balder looked scandalized at this talk of courtesans. Their Scandian heritage had not prepared them for the realities of Etruscan and Greek society. But Astyanax, without hesitation, agreed with Aruns : "The apple at the end of the bough."

Then we heard the singing, blown to us from the island ; soft, intimate, intimating. Women or goddesses singing in an unknown tongue which somehow spoke to us. To me, they sang of Circe. A powerful enchantress, she climbed, the path to her palace. Her robes were like woven sunlight, and malachite moons twinkled above her breasts. A large, sleepy-eyed bear prowled at her heels. To the others, who can say? Of onyx and lapis lazuli ; of sandarac heaped on altars ; of wings and wind and star giants tall in the sky. What each of them wanted most, a place he had been, a place he was going, a person he loved or wished to love. For a long time we

listened in silence. When the voices stopped we had no wish to speak. With nodded goodnights we went to our quarters—Aruns to sleep on deck with Balder and Frey. Astyanax took a swim and afterwards stretched at my feet. I pressed his hand ; it was chill—from his swim, I thought. I fell asleep.

I awoke to singing. I felt as if wild honey were trickling into my ears. By the light of the owl-shaped lamp above my couch, I saw that Astyanax had gone. Had the music called him ? I hurried on deck and circled the ship, scanning the moon-bleached waters. Atthis and two of her friends dozed fitfully on the surface. I roused Aruns. No, he had not seen Astyanax. The singing grew loud and almost fierce ; surged instead of oozed. I thought : he has gone ashore to find the singers. I lowered myself from the gunwale and swam to Atthis.

“Astyanax is gone,” I said. “Will you take me to the island ?” Her heart beat wildly ; she sensed my fear and throbbed it back to me. With desperate speed we broke the moon’s white mirror.

At last I trailed through the soft sand of the beach, skirted a pool like the rounded pad of a water lily, and climbed over rocks which greened me with their moss. I found the singers. They sat beside an arm of the sea, their long tails coiled in the moonlight like silver cornucopias. Hair—or was it seaweed ?—entangled their white shoulders, a forest spilling on marble. One of them held Astyanax in her arms and sang as if to her child. But something trembled behind the coaxing tones : the hint of a scream. I thought of the Cretan arena and athletes gored as they spun above the bulls ; of women shrieking with terror and ecstasy.

“Astyanax,” I called. He did not answer. The singers looked at me without expression and then, in a wash of moonlight, I saw their faces. It is true that they were beautiful, with foreheads of perfect alabaster and lips like cinnabar. But their eyes revealed them, a fish’s eyes, cold and lidless. They might have been sharks staring at me through smoky depths ; as alien and as evil.

The one with Astyanax raised an object above his head. At first I took it for ivory ; no, it was bone, and sharpened into a blade. I lunged and struck her hand. I caught Astyanax in my arms and hurled him, with rough desperation, out of her reach. Her tail, like a coiling asp, entangled my legs and brought me to

the ground. Her shark's eyes held me motionless ; her breath smelled of scales and sea-slime, flesh decayed and corrupted. She was strong but clumsy ; the sea, not the shore, was her element. I wrenched myself from her paralyzing eyes. I flailed with my arms and my fingers fell on an object, hard and cold. I grasped it and beat at her face. She gasped, like a fish sucking air and released me. The object, a human skull, rolled between us. Her sisters tore at my legs but I kicked them viciously—their scales cut my feet—and reached Astyanax. He crouched full-length on the ground, still dazed by the roughness of my thrust. I caught him in my arms and, stumbling over the rocks, reeled toward the beach.

Breathless and spent, we fell on to sand which stretched like a cool moist coverlet. They had not followed us. Beside their pool, they laughed and then they sang. Their song was red like blood.

Astyanax shook in my arms. I held him until he could speak.

"I went for a swim and heard them singing. One of them called my name. 'Astyanax, my son,' she said. I swam ashore and wriggled over the rocks. She took me in her arms. I thought she was my mother."

"They are Sirens," I said. "A different race from yours. Fish with human faces. She didn't call your name, she bewitched you to think she had." I rose to my feet. "Now we must swim to the ship."

The pygmies levelled their blowguns.

five

I awoke to darkness. Pains knifed me like poison darts. I heard, far away (or close but muffled) the howl of animals—the high, feminine wail of a cat, the baying of dogs, the deep-throated roar of a lion. I groped in the dark for Astyanax. The emptiness seemed a palpable enemy.

"What have you done with my friend?" I shouted.

The darkness had no answer. The cold possessed me with damp, enfolding wings . . . I slept or fainted.

I opened my eyes in a sun-dappled arbour, where trellises rose into jungles of swelling grapes. The scent of the fruit, wounded by insects and oozing purple juices, cloyed my nostrils. I lay on a mat of rushes, and when I sat, the grapes seemed to

fly at my face like swarms of hornets. My head cleared slowly; I did not yet trust my feet. Beyond the harbour a three-storey house, with a portico of crimson columns, climbed in lavender walls and oblong windows. Rows of brick-coloured moons divided the floors and a date palm leaned like a lintel across the doorway.

At last I struggled to my feet and grasped a trellis. Grape juice moistened my fingers and bees assaulted the stains. Gently I flicked them away—they are valiant creatures and bringers of luck—and steadied my swaying body. Last night I had swum ashore nude; this morning, it seemed, I wore a loin cloth, with a large metal ring like a belt which squeezed my waist and cramped my lungs.

Cranes with tufted heads wheeled and slanted above me. Then, with raucous cries, they dropped toward the grass and lowered their long stilt legs. I saw what had drawn them: she came toward me from the house, a girl with a lavender tunic falling above her knees and held at the waist by a girdle of antelope leather. Her hair was like tumbling hyacinths, and yellow crocuses mingled with the flower-like folds. Persephone, I thought, whom the Greeks call Maiden. The corn girl, who walks the fields, invisible, and touches the barley into blending gold.

She approached me with the familiarity of long friendship. Her fingers, like the feelers of a snail, whispered over my cheeks.

“Dear guest,” she said, “dear Arnth, are you well? I fear my pygmies were rough. When you charged them like a bear, what could they do but defend themselves?” She spoke the same tongue as the Harpies and pygmies—archaic Greek. Perhaps Odysseus had taught her and she had taught her friends.

Her face and manner said: “I am your host and equal.” But a great enchantress, however smiling, might blast me with thunderbolts if I failed in respect. I fell to my knees.

“Circe,” I said, “queen and enchantress. What have you done with my friend?”

She touched my shoulders. “He is well and happy,” she smiled. “And you mustn’t kneel. If anything, I should kneel to you, who have come so far to find me.” She sat on the grass and, sweet with spikenard, drew me down beside her. “I think you are surprised. You expected—another kind of Circe?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

"A temptress with beasts at her side. A woman like the sun who glittered when she walked and burned your eyes. You expected a queen and found—"

"A girl in a lavender tunic with hair like hyacinths."

"And you are justly disappointed. Your dream is broken. Like an eagle fallen from the sky."

"No, I am happy. The temptress I could have worshipped. The girl I can love."

"Love," she sighed. "Love is a banquet, no? Thrushes and tongues of flamingoes, wine dipped from silver kraters and roses to garland the head. I am not such a banquet, Arnth."

"Love is also a picnic, where the hills run down to the sea like racing deer. Grape juice in place of wine, grass for a couch, and yellow gagea to garland our brows."

"Bear," she said, caressing the word with her lips. "I talked with Astyanax while he ate his breakfast (do you never feed him? He ate like a colt!) He told me your secret name. Prowling, sleepy-eyed Bear. Perhaps you will fall asleep in my arms. I should like that, I think. It would mean you trusted me. Do you trust me, Bear?"

The cranes circled us in the grass and their lank shadows fell across our faces. "I am not sure," I said.

She clapped her hands; a pygmy scuttled from the house with vessels of wine. "Drink," she said, handing me a silver cup with dancers in raised relief. "The wine will refresh you."

Phrases whirred in my brain: "with evil drugs administered" . . . "round that place lay the beasts of the mountain" . . . "Goddess it may be she is or a woman."

"I am not thirsty."

She laughed, artlessly, playfully, and drank from both of the cups. "Did you think I was giving you poison — the milk of oleanders or the venom of adders? Take your choice. It is wine from my own grapes sweetened with the manna of tamarisk trees."

"But the pygmies in the dugout," I cried. "They came to attack us. The captain shouted: 'Seek her at your peril.' And the Sirens last night—"

She answered with patient assurance. "The man who cannot meet obstacles does not deserve my love. I sent the pygmies to test your courage. And the sirens, you ask? I never meant you to fall into their hands. I tolerate them

because they help to defend my island. There are hostile tribes along the coast. My pygmies, you see, are doubtful protectors. I keep their enemies, the cranes, from attacking them. In return they serve me—for the moment.”

I drank the wine and a sudden coolness, like a breeze from the ocean, seemed to blow along my limbs.

“Why did you come here, Bear?”

“To love you.”

“No,” she sighed. “Because I was distant. Because in your heart you believed you would never find me. It is easy to love a dream.”

“But now I have found you.”

“You will tire of me, as you have of others.”

“The others were ghosts.”

“I will try to be more than a ghost. I will build you a house of oleanders and sunbirds will nest in the walls. I will spin you robes as soft as a spider’s silk. I will give you tamarisk flowers like falling snowflakes and the hyacinths of my own hair for your fingers to weave into meadows. You shall call me Kora, the Maiden, and forget that other one, Circe. Shall these things hold you, Bear?”

I held her in my arms and her maiden’s slenderness stabbed me with sweet bewilderment, and her hands, like searching swallows, fluttered at my face. I held her, and in my heart summer trembled to spring, but a spring without wandering or need to wander, where boughs of quince put forth their quivering leaves. I buried my face in her tumbled hyacinths and sobbed that beauty and brevity must be inseparable.

Laughing, she drew me into the palace, under the high-held lintel, from room to courtyard, garden to corridor, from shadows to shadows, fragrance to fragrance . . . tapestries blue as waves and the smell of salt and dunes . . . sunbirds wheeling in roofless chambers and rushes under our feet . . . the orange embers of a phoenix throbbing in green dusk (or did I dream, remembering cedar woods?) . . . She held my hand, but always she seemed immeasurably far ahead of me, elusive, irrecoverable. She moved to a deep-toned music, neither lyres nor flutes, but drums like a giant heartbeat and the sighing of many waters. It seemed to have no source; it welled from the red tiles of the floor and breathed from the doorways as if from the throats of beasts. I fell among cushions sweet

with spikenard and palm-oil, marjoram and essence of thyme. I lay on my back, and her face, like a distant moon, laughed in the sky.

"You have bewitched me," I said.

Her voice broke the silence like the rasp of an arrow. "I will send supplies and water to your crew. Then you may tell them good-bye."

I looked at her, astonished. "But I want them to stay with me. They have no home, except Aruns. I am their friend and you must be."

Surprise flickered in her eyes. "I like Astyanax. I think I would like your other friends—the white dolphin, Aruns, and the brothers. But they cannot stay with us, Bear. I came here to lose the world. Would you thrust it upon me again? You I have welcomed and loved. Not the others."

"They are friends," I said stubbornly. "How can I send them away?"

"Love for a friend," she shrugged, "need not be eternal. Give it a season, a year, and then forget it. But the love of a man and a woman—Have you seen an island erupt from the sea, with thunder and foam and lashing waves? So love erupts in the heart. Does the sea protest? Does it say to the island, 'Return to the ocean floor?'"

"Indeed," I said, springing to my feet, "you have thrust an island into my heart. I reel with the beauty and suddenness of it. But I have other islands and I will not let you sink them."

She stood and faced me. "You have made your choice?"

"I chose or was chosen—I am not sure which—before I found you."

In a sudden burst of sunlight I saw the tightness around her lips, as if laughter were alien to them. And the eyes, were they young after all? In their violet labyrinths, what minotaurs crouched, what captives groped for the light?

"I would have killed you," she said, "if you had forsaken your friends." Lightly she pointed to the cranes which watched and circled us. "My birds would have crushed your skull. Their strength is formidable. I have seen them kill pygmies with a single blow of their beaks."

I stared at her with disbelief. "But you said you loved me—"

"Listen," she said. "I will tell you why I came here. Before your people sailed to Hesperia, when Egypt straddled the Nile

like a golden sphinx, I lived, a queen, in Knossos. It was a time for queens, and for the Goddess they served, the Great Mother. On Crete itself and in her far-flung colonies, it was the king who died to make the fields grow fertile, the queen who raised the sacrificial knife.

“Then came the men from the north, the yellow-haired conquerors, scornful of women, scorning the Goddess, bringing gods of their own, Zeus and Poseidon, Hades and haughty Apollo. Knossos itself fell to their ragged fleet. With the women of my court, I fled to Aea. Years passed. Tranquil years. Then, they began to find us—lusting captains and swinish mariners, warriors and wanderers—and each in turn, except Odysseus, I met and charmed and enchanted as he deserved.

“Still they came and once again I fled—this time to Libya. I lost one ship in a storm—the wreck you found—and built another and sailed at last to the Island of Oleanders. Men have tried to follow me. No man has found me—till now. My friends saw to that, the Harpies, the Sirens, the pygmies. Cruel and misshapen, yes, but loyal to me, loyal to the Goddess. Then you came. My pygmies watched you from the time you met the Harpies. Their jungle drums signalled your approach. At last you reached this island. I will show him his dream, I thought. I will show him death. But first, as I told you, I spoke with the boy.

“I wish you no harm,” I said. “You may return to the sea.” He looked at me, frightened, but not for himself. I wanted to hold him, that helpless, motherless boy not yet a man, not yet a conquerer, with sea-green eyes and courage beyond his years.

“Have you hurt my friend?” he asked.

“Friend? He will leave you, my dear. He will come to me.”

“No,” he said with absolute certainty. “No. He is Bear!”

“Were you really his friend, I asked myself, and therefore worthy to live? I came to you not as your dream but as in your heart you secretly wished me to be. The Corn Maiden. Most men dream of temptresses—and marry maidens. I thought: ‘For me, he will scorn his friends.’ You have proven me wrong and I am glad.”

“The house of oleanders,” I said wistfully. “You never meant to build it at all.”

“ I am much too late for love. And so were you, dear Bear—I thought. All your life you have steered for the Isles of the Blest. But now, at last, you have chosen the dolphin and not the deep. Go to your friends and never regret your choice. I will send Astyanax after you.”

“ Circe,” I asked, “ what are you really like ? Maiden or enchantress ?”

“ Let that be my secret. Think of me as the Maiden.”

She clapped her hands. Pygmies sprang from the house and, silent as hunters stalking a lion, led me from the garden.

“ Bear,” she called.

I turned and faced her. She smiled ; hardly a woman she seemed ; a girl, no more, with crocuses in her hair.

“ I could have loved you—once.”

Above my head the palm trees swelled with dates and under my bare feet, crumbled sea-shells made a path which was somehow soft. At the edge of the bay the pygmies bowed and left me. My ship rode at anchor : bird of loss and bird of finding, of perilous ports and a memorable voyage. I loved the blue of her hull and her red furled sail ; the cut of her timbers, the deck house, warm with wicker, and Tages, her wooden god ; not because she went but because she was and for those she carried with her.

Then I heard tears. A young woman crouched on the sand at the edge of the water. Her bare body was whiter than amaranth. Circe's hair was hyacinths ; hers was sunflowers, rippling yellow petals. She cried hopelessly and did not hear me approach.

I knelt beside her. “ Why are you crying ?” I asked.

She looked at me, appalled, and covered her breasts with her arms. “ Bear, Bear,” she sobbed. “ She has shrunk me to ugliness and cast me on to the shore. My lovely flanks are hollowed and cupped till I scarcely know myself.”

“ Atthis,” I cried, with stunned recognition. “ You are changed, not shrunk ! You must see yourself as a whole.”

I took her hand and led her, shaken and cowering, to the pool like a lily pad.

She looked at her face in the water, the pillared neck, the limbs and the ivory thighs, and understanding suffused her features, a roseate shadow on snow.

“ I—I am one of you,” she said. “ A woman ?”

“ You were always a woman. But now your body matches your heart. Enfolds it like marble ramparts.”

“ I am one of you,” she repeated, “ and—”

“ Beautiful.”

She shook her head. “ You say my body matches my heart. But my heart is evil. I tried to harm you, Bear. When I overturned your boat and Vel took you captive.”

“ Why did you do that, Atthis ?”

“ Astyanax had told me you were going to look for Circe. Long before I was born, she was loved by the dolphins. She called them her Nereids, her Maids of the Deep, and to them she was always The Lady. A white dolphin led her to Libya and then returned to Aeaea to keep it safe from strangers. Ever since, my people have swum those waters. Guarding. Waiting for her return. As one of the guardians, I did not want you to go and trouble her.”

“ And when you had wrecked our boat ?”

“ I felt ashamed when I saw you in the water. I touched you and knew your heart, gentle and kind. No longer did I wish you harm. But I still did not want you to look for Circe. I followed the *Turan* to Graviscae.”

“ And waited in the harbour until I found a ship ?”

“ Yes. And joined you, still divided. Perhaps, I thought, he will never find her. I can be his friend and then lead him home again. But after we found the wreck, I knew we were close to Circe—knew I would have to choose. Loving you both, I kept out of sight until I saw the pygmies. Then I made my choice. Was it too late ?”

“ Late ?” I said. “ Time is not hostile, Atthis. At the last minute, the last second, he will turn and smile : ‘ Love. Forgive. Accept. It is not too late.’ Circe has taught me that. Friendship divided your heart. Not hatred, not anger. I honour you for serving Circe, and love you for choosing me.”

“ Bear !” The cry whirred like a discus. He ran toward us on stalwart legs, he raced, he leaped, he kicked his heels in the air. Milkweed whirling in wind-pools ; leaves in a river’s eddy ; a deer, a rabbit, a boy with wings on his heels. He turned a somersault ; laughing, fell in my arms and called my name.

“ And Atthis,” he cried, knowing her at once. “ She has changed you too. She has given us legs like Bear. Now he will never leave us !”

Behind us someone laughed, kindly, a little sadly, and an old woman, her face as weathered as tree trunks near the sea, leaned on a cane and waved a slow farewell.

And we went on together.

—Thomas Burnett Swann

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge with thanks a considerable debt to the following books :

The Life and Times of Tarquin the Etruscan by Carlo Mario Franzero

The Etruscans by M. Pallottino

Ancient Greek Mariners by Walter Woodburn Hyde

The Cruise of the Dolphin by Ferdinand Lallemand

‘Gone Away—No known address’

Subscribers are reminded to keep us informed of any change of address to ensure the safe delivery of their copies as far too many issues are returned by the Post Office marked as above. Overseas subscribers are particularly requested to let us known in good time.

Outside the fantasy field, much has been written concerning Mervyn Peake, as Michael Moorcock points out in this appreciation of the man and his works, but within the genre little or nothing has ever been expressed. It is with great pleasure that we rectify this omission.

MERVYN PEAKE : An Appreciation

By MICHAEL MOORCOCK

In writing this short appreciation of Mervyn Peake, an artist who has so dominated my own work, I find myself faced with a difficult task. How can I be objective? How can I be cool? I love his work in the same way as a vampire loves his prey—I feed off it, devour the stuff of it, delight in it, whether it is a novel like *Titus Groan*, an illustration from *The Ancient Mariner*, or a poem or a painting. I'm greedy for Peake, unsatiated, questing for more and, when I can find no more, turn back to *Gormenghast* or *The Glassblowers* (a collection of his poetry) to sink into the pages and drink again.

When I first met him five years ago I was not disappointed. He has the face and the tongue of a devil with his arresting, penetrating artist's eyes, his strange mouth and his ironical presence. He is a sick man now—he has exhausted himself for us; poured himself out for people like you and me, in thousands of marvellous words, in dozens of paintings and scores of illustrations, in plays and poems; he has flung his spirit about to every grasping, gasping man, woman and child who wanted it. This valuable Peake is *ours*!

I know I should be embarrassed by my own enthusiasm, should write in a level, literary tone, weighing and judging. But who am I to weigh and judge, say, *Titus Groan*, his first novel, of which Charles Morgan in the Sunday Times said: 'It is not timid; it does not safeguard itself against attack by the desiccated anti-romantics; it does not sneer or hedge . . . Mr. Peake throws in all his forces of dream, vision and language.'

The *Titus Groan* trilogy is still in print (*Titus Groan*, 1946, *Gormenghast*, 1950, *Titus Alone*, 1959, published by Eyre and Spottiswoode). It has a profusion of images and characters, a richness of language unsurpassed in modern literature. Here is the English language used as it should be used, and rarely is; a remarkable vocabulary describing a wealth of everything in the sprawling confines of the ancient castle of Gormenghast which has no time or place in our future, past or present.

Of course, not everyone likes him. Mean spirits don't like him, the literal-minded don't like him, the pickers of literary bones don't like him. But if you like him, then you *like* him, and he leaves you breathless, excited and happy.

Peake isn't, in the strict sense, a fantasy writer—he is a *writer*. In seeking to classify his unclassifiable work some critics have labelled it 'Gothic (albeit 'Gothic masterpiece') and have done it a disservice. The books stand as what they are—novels. They tell a story. Peake is a story-teller and his taste runs to the grotesque, the macabre and the bizarre, not to mention the purely comic (for there is zest, joy and humour in these books, a keen observation of the ridiculous in human types). But his images are not there for their own sake (as Bradbury's sometimes are, or Lovecraft's often are)—they are there to push the stories along—the stories of bewildered Titus, scheming Steerpike, ironical Prunesquallor, vague Countess Gertrude, tormented Sepulchrave (these descriptions don't do them justice) and, quite literally, a host of others.

And these are only the creations of one aspect of Peake, the novelist. His vigorous drawings and thoughtful, moving verse (see his latest *Rhyme of the Flying Bomb* for a taste) are others.

At 52, Mervyn Peake has produced more books, paintings, plays, poems and illustrations than most men could produce in two lifetimes, and his reputation is assured.

And now we have found yet another aspect of Peake, drifting, as it were, in his turbulent wake—the short story writer of the

macabre with a flavour of Poe and an affinity with Bradbury at his best. Two stories. As far as he knows, his only two short stories of this type. They have never before been published. "Dance of Death," not done in his usual style, was originally written as a Christmas story to be read to his family. "Same Time, Same Place" (in my own opinion the better story) is closer to his other work.

Born in China in 1911, his family returned to England when he was young, and he studied here, soon achieving a sound reputation as a painter and illustrator. Science fiction readers will be interested to know that he designed the stage-sets for Capek's *Insect Play*. He turned up at the theatre with other artists who had been asked to submit designs but, growing impatient with the hemming and hawing, flung his drawings down and left the theatre, convinced that he would get nowhere. Next day he received an urgent summons from the producer—his designs had been discovered, they wanted to use them !

About this time, before the war, he was living in a converted warehouse on the Battersea side of Chelsea Bridge. He got home one night to discover that the floor was heaving and undulating, so he prised up a floorboard to investigate what was causing the disturbance beneath him. He discovered an elephant ! Perturbed that the beast's restless movement would shake the whole place down he found that it could be calmed if scratched on its back with a walking stick. He scratched the elephant all night, until Bertram Mills's Circus, who had been forced, for want of a better place, to lodge their elephant there for the night, came to take it away.

Peake married Maeve Gilmore in 1937. A charming and beautiful woman, she was also a talented painter and her work equals that of her husband. Nearly all his books are dedicated to his wife and, one feels, he did not do this out of mere courtesy for, if Peake is a remarkable man, his wife is a remarkable woman. One of their sons is also a painter, and looks like becoming a good one.

During the early part of the war a full-page cartoon appeared in *Lilliput*. It showed an officer marching ahead of his men carrying piggy-back a slightly bewildered-looking soldier. The caption read 'You realise, Mervyn, that I can't do this all the time' ! The army, as armies will, had put Peake in the Engineers ! As a soldier, Peake didn't exactly excel (at one

time he accidentally burned down his barracks) and it was only at the close of the war that the army suddenly realised who he was and commissioned him as a war-artist.

Captain Peake was one of the first Britons to witness the horror of Belsen. He has described this experience in a series of sketches and a particularly good poem *The Consumptive. Belsen*, 1945 (published in *The Glassblowers*, 1950). Some of the sketches have also been published in the Gray Walls edition of *Drawings by Mervyn Peake*.

While in the Army he conceived and began *Titus Groan*—at one time, whilst changing camps, losing his kit-bag containing the manuscript.

Luckily, both kit-bag and Ms., were eventually recovered and the novel's publication in 1946 was acclaimed by the critics. In the words of one of them, Maurice Collis, it was 'an authentic work of art.' The book added to Peake's already solid reputation as an artist and in 1950 *Gormenghast*, its sequel, and *The Glassblowers* won the Royal Society of Literature's Heinemann Award. Heinemann later published his amusing fantasy *Mr. Pye* (1953), showing a lighter aspect of Peake.

Peake and his family now live in Kensington, in a treasure-house of fine paintings by himself and his wife—they festoon the walls. And in his studio is the overflow—unfinished manuscripts, a finished play with its last Act set in an H-bomb shelter, drawings and paintings. On the wall, tantalisingly, is pinned the plan for the fourth Titus book which he feels he will never write, now. Because of ill-health he can only work for very short periods at best, but his studio still contains much that has not been published or exhibited. Perhaps, if we're lucky, we'll be seeing some more of it in future.

Meanwhile we have *Same Time, Same Place* and *Dance of Death*. If you have never read Peake, you are in for a treat. If you already know him, then here is a bonus . . .

—Michael Moorcock

With pride as well as pleasure we present the first of two unpublished stories by Mervyn Peake. Beautifully macabre in its slow build-up, the story which follows would do credit to any of the masters of the genre.

SAME TIME, SAME PLACE

By MERVYN PEAKE

That night, I hated father. He smelt of cabbage. There was cigarette ash all over his trousers. His untidy moustache was yellower and viler than ever with nicotine, and he took no notice of me. He simply sat there in his ugly armchair, his eyes half closed, brooding on the Lord knows what. I hated him. I hated his moustache. I even hated the smoke that drifted from his mouth and hung in the stale air above his head.

And when my mother came through the door and asked me whether I had seen her spectacles, I hated her too. I hated the clothes she wore ; tasteless and fussy. I hated them deeply. I hated something I had never noticed before ; it was the way the heels of her shoes were worn away on their outside edges—not badly, but appreciably. It looked mean to me, slatternly, and horribly human. I hated her for being human—like father.

She began to nag me about her glasses and the thread-bare condition of the elbows of my jacket, and suddenly I threw my book down. The room was unbearable. I felt suffocated. I suddenly realised that I must get away. I had lived with these two people for nearly twenty-three years. I had been born in the room immediately overhead. Was this the life for a young man ? To spend his evenings watching the smoke drift out of

his father's mouth and stain that decrepit old moustache, year after year—to watch the worn away edges of my mother's heels—the dark brown furniture and the familiar stains on the chocolate coloured carpet? I would go away; I would shake off the dark, smug mortality of the place. I would forgo my birthright. What of my father's business into which I would step at his death? What of it? To hell with it.

I began to make my way to the door but at the third step I caught my foot in a ruck of the chocolate coloured carpet and in reaching out my hand for support, I sent a pink vase flying.

Suddenly I felt very small and very angry. I saw my mother's mouth opening and it reminded me of the front door and the front door reminded me of my urge to escape—to where? To where?

I did not wait to find an answer to my own question, but, hardly knowing what I was doing, ran from the house.

The accumulated boredom of the last twenty-three years was at my back and it seemed that I was propelled through the garden gate from its pressure against my shoulder blades.

The road was wet with rain, black and shiny like oilskin. The reflection of the streetlamps wallowed like yellow jellyfish. A bus was approaching—a bus to Piccadilly, a bus to the never-never land—a bus to death or glory.

I found neither. I found something which haunts me still.

The great bus swayed as it sped. The black street gleamed. Through the window a hundred faces fluttered by as though the leaves of a dark book were being flicked over. And I sat there, with a sixpenny ticket in my hand. What was I doing! Where was I going?

To the centre of the world, I told myself. To Piccadilly Circus, where anything might happen. What did I *want* to happen?

I wanted life to happen! I wanted adventure; but already I was afraid. I wanted to find a beautiful woman. Bending my elbow I felt for the swelling of my biceps. There wasn't much to feel. 'O hell,' I said to myself, 'O damnable hell: this is awful.'

I stared out of the window, and there before me was the Circus. The lights were like a challenge. When the bus had curved its way from Regent Street and into Shaftesbury Avenue, I alighted. Here was the jungle all about me and I was lonely. The wild beasts prowled around me. The wolf

packs surged and shuffled. Where was I to go? How wonderful it would have been to have known of some apartment, dimly lighted; of a door that opened to the secret knock, three short ones and one long one—where a strawberry blonde was waiting—or perhaps, better still, some wise old lady with a cup of tea, an old lady, august and hallowed, and whose heels were not worn down on their outside edges.

But I knew nowhere to go either for glamour or sympathy. Nowhere except The Corner House.

I made my way there. It was less congested than usual. I had only to queue for a few minutes before being allowed into the great eating-palace on the first floor. Oh, the marble and the gold of it all! The waiters coming and going, the band in the distance—how different all this was from an hour ago, when I stared at my father's moustache.

For some while I could find no table and it was only when moving down the third of the long corridors between tables that I saw an old man leaving a table for two. The lady who had been sitting opposite him remained where she was. Had she left, I would have had no tale to tell. Unsuspectingly I took the place of the old man and in reaching for the menu lifted my head and found myself gazing into the midnight pools of her eyes.

My hand hung poised over the menu. I could not move for the head in front of me was magnificent. It was big and pale and indescribably proud—and what I would now call a greedy look, seemed to me then to be an expression of rich assurance; of majestic beauty.

I knew at once that it was not the strawberry blonde of my callow fancy that I desired for glamour's sake, nor the comfort of the tea-tray lady—but this glorious creature before me who combined the mystery and exoticism of the former with the latter's mellow wisdom.

Was this not love at first sight? Why else should my heart have hammered like a foundry? Why should my hand have trembled above the menu? Why should my mouth have gone dry?

Words were quite impossible. It was clear to me that she knew everything that was going on in my breast and in my brain. The look of love which flooded from her eyes all but unhinged me. Taking my hand in hers she returned it to my side of the table where it lay like a dead thing on a plate. Then

she passed me the menu. It meant nothing to me. The hors d'oeuvres and the sweets were all mixed together in a dance of letters.

What I told the waiter when he came, I cannot remember, nor what he brought me. I know that I could not eat it. For an hour we sat there. We spoke with our eyes, with the pulse and stress of our excited breathing—and towards the end of this, our first meeting, with the tips of our fingers that in touching each other in the shadow of the teapot, seemed to speak a language richer, subtler and more vibrant than words.

At last we were asked to go—and as I rose I spoke for the first time. “Tomorrow?” I whispered. “Tomorrow?” She nodded her magnificent head slowly. “Same place? Same time?” She nodded again.

I waited for her to rise, but with a gentle yet authoritative gesture she signalled me away.

It seemed strange, but I knew I must go. I turned at the door and saw her sitting there, very still, very upright. Then I descended to the street and made my way to Shaftesbury Avenue, my head in a whirl of stars, my legs weak and trembling, my heart on fire.

I had not decided to return home, but found nevertheless that I was on my way back—back to the chocolate coloured carpet, to my father in the ugly arm chair—to my mother with her worn shoe heels.

When at last I turned the key it was near midnight. My mother had been crying. My father was angry. There were words, threats and entreaties on all sides. At last I got to bed.

The next day seemed endless but at long last my excited fretting found some relief in action. Soon after tea I boarded the west-bound bus. It was already dark but I was far too early when I arrived at the Circus.

I wandered restlessly here and there, adjusting my tie at shop windows and filing my nails for the hundredth time.

At last, when waking from a day dream as I sat for the fifth time in Leicester Square, I glanced at my watch and found I was three minutes late for our tryst.

I ran all the way panting with anxiety but when I arrived at the table on the first floor I found my fear was baseless. She was there, more regal than ever, a monument of womanhood. Her large, pale face relaxed into an expression of such deep pleasure at the sight of me that I almost shouted for joy.

I will not speak of the tenderness of that evening. It was magic. It is enough to say that we determined that our destinies were inextricably joined.

When the time came for us to go I was surprised to find that the procedure of the previous night was once more expected of me. I could in no way make out the reason for it. Again I left her sitting alone at the table by the marble pillar. Again I vanished into the night alone, with those intoxicating words still on my lips. "Tomorrow . . . tomorrow . . . same time . . . same place . . ."

The certainty of my love for her and hers for me was quite intoxicating. I slept little that night and my restlessness on the following day was an agony both for me and my parents.

Before I left that night for our third meeting, I crept into my mother's bedroom and opening her jewel box I chose a ring from among her few trinkets. God knows it was not worthy to sit upon my loved-one's finger, but it would symbolise our love.

Again she was waiting for me although on this occasion I arrived a full quarter of an hour before our appointed time. It was as though, when we were together, we were hidden in a veil of love—as though we were alone. We heard nothing else but the sound of our voices, we saw nothing else but one another's eyes.

She put the ring upon her finger as soon as I had given it to her. Her hand that was holding mine tightened its grip. I was surprised at its power. My whole body trembled. I moved my foot beneath the table to touch hers. I could find it nowhere.

When once more the dreaded moment arrived, I left her sitting upright, the strong and tender smile of her farewell remaining in my mind like some fantastic sunrise.

For eight days we met thus, and parted thus, and with every meeting we knew more firmly than ever, that whatever the difficulties that would result, whatever the forces against us, yet it was now that we must marry, now, while the magic was upon us.

On the eighth evening it was all decided. She knew that for my part it must be a secret wedding. My parents would never countenance so rapid an arrangement. She understood perfectly. For her part she wished a few of her friends to be present at the ceremony.

"I have a few colleagues," she had said. I did not know what she meant, but her instructions as to where we should

meet on the following afternoon put the remark out of my mind.

There was a registry office in Cambridge Circus, she told me, on the first floor of a certain building. I was to be there at four o'clock. She would arrange everything.

"Ah, my love," she had murmured, shaking her large head slowly from side to side, "how can I wait until then?" And with a smile unutterably bewitching, she gestured for me to go, for the great memorial hall was all but empty.

For the eighth time I left her there. I knew that women must have their secrets and must be in no way thwarted in regard to them, and so, once again I swallowed the question that I so longed to put to her. Why, O why had I always to leave her there—and why, when I arrived to meet her—was she always there to meet me?

On the following day, after a careful search. I found a gold ring in a box in my father's dressing table. Soon after three, having brushed my hair until it shone like sealskin I set forth with a flower in my buttonhole and a suitcase of belongings. It was a beautiful day with no wind and a clear sky.

The bus fled on like a fabulous beast, bearing me with it to a magic land.

But alas, as we approached Mayfair we were held up more than once for long stretches of time. I began to get restless. By the time the bus had reached Shaftesbury Avenue I had but three minutes in which to reach the Office.

It seemed strange that when the sunlight shone in sympathy with my marriage, the traffic should choose to frustrate me. I was on the top of the bus and having been given a very clear description of the building, was able, as we rounded at last in Cambridge Circus, to recognise it at once. When we came alongside my destination the traffic was held up again and I was offered the perfect opportunity of dis-embarking immediately beneath the building.

My suitcase was at my feet and as I stooped to pick it up I glanced at the windows on the first floor—for it was in one of those rooms that I was so soon to become a husband.

I was exactly on a level with the windows in question and commanded an unbroken view of the interior of a first floor room. It could not have been more than a dozen feet away from where I sat.

I remember that our bus was hooting away, but there was no movement in the traffic ahead. The hooting came to me as through a dream for I had become lost in another world.

My hand was clenched upon the handle of the suitcase. Through my eyes and into my brain an image was pouring. The image of the first floor room.

I knew at once that it was in that particular room that I was expected. I cannot tell you why, for during those first few moments I had not seen her.

To the right of the stage (for I had the sensation of being in a theatre) was a table loaded with flowers. Behind the flowers sat a small pin-striped registrar. There were four others in the room, three of whom kept walking to and fro. The fourth, an enormous bearded lady, sat on a chair by the window. As I stared, one of the men bent over to speak to her. He had the longest neck on earth. His starched collar was the length of a walking stick, and his small bony head protruded from its extremity like the skull of a bird. The other two gentlemen who kept crossing and re-crossing were very different. One was bald. His face and cranium were blue with the most intricate tattooing. His teeth were gold and they shone like fire in his mouth. The other was a well-dressed young man, and seemed normal enough until, as he came for a moment closer to the window I saw that instead of a hand, the cloven hoof of a goat protruded from the left sleeve.

And then suddenly it all happened. A door of their room must have opened for all at once all the heads in the room were turned in one direction and a moment later a something in white trotted like a dog across the room.

But it was no dog. It was vertical as it ran. I thought at first that it was a mechanical doll, so close was it to the floor. I could not observe its face, but I was amazed to see the long train of satin that was being dragged along the carpet behind it.

It stopped when it reached the flower-laden table and there was a good deal of smiling and bowing and then the man with the longest neck in the world placed a high stool in front of the table and, with the help of the young man with the goat-foot, lifted the white thing so that it stood upon the high stool. The long satin dress was carefully draped over the stool so that it reached to the floor on every side. It seemed as though a tall dignified woman was standing at the civic altar.

And still I had not seen its face, although I knew what it would be like. A sense of nausea overwhelmed me and I sank back on the seat, hiding my face in my hands.

I cannot remember when the bus began to move. I know that I went on and on and on and that finally I was told that I had reached the terminus. There was nothing for it but to board another bus of the same number and make the return journey. A strange sense of relief had by now begun to blunt the edge of my disappointment. That this bus would take me to the door of the house where I was born gave me a twinge of homesick pleasure. But stronger was my sense of fear. I prayed that there would be no reason for the bus to be held up again in Cambridge Circus.

I had taken one of the downstairs seats for I had no wish to be on an eyelevel with someone I had deserted. I had no sense of having wronged her but she had been deserted nevertheless.

When at last the bus approached the Circus, I peered into the half darkness. A street lamp stood immediately below the registry office. I saw at once that there was no light in the office and as the bus moved past I turned my eyes to a group beneath the street lamp. My heart went cold in my breast.

— Standing there, ossified as it were into a malignant mass—standing there as though they never intended to move until justice was done—were the five. It was only for a second that I saw them but every lamp-lit head is for ever with me—the long necked man with his bird skull head, his eyes glinting like chips of glass ; to his right the small bald man, his tattooed scalp thrust forward, the lamplight gloating on the blue markings. To the left of the long-necked man stood the youth, his elegant body relaxed, but a snarl on his face that I still sweat to remember. His hands were in his pockets but I could see the shape of the hoof through the cloth. A little ahead of these three stood the bearded woman, a bulk of evil—and in the shadow that she cast before her I saw in that last fraction of a second, as the bus rolled me past, a big whitish head, very close to the ground.

In the dusk it appeared to be suspended above the kerb like a pale balloon with a red mouth painted upon it—a mouth that, taking a single diabolical curve, was more like the mouth of a wild beast than of a woman.

Long after I had left the group behind me—set as it were for ever under the lamp, like something made of wax, like something monstrous, long after I had left it I yet saw it all. It filled the bus. They filled my brain. They fill it still.

When at last I arrived home I fell weeping upon my bed. My father and mother had no idea what it was all about but they did not ask me. They never asked me.

That evening, after supper, I sat there, I remember, six years ago in my own chair on the chocolate coloured carpet. I remember how I stared with love at the ash on my father's waistcoat, at his stained moustache, at my mother's worn away shoe heels. I stared at it all and I loved it all. I needed it all.

Since then I have never left the house. I know what is best for me.

—Mervyn Peake

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While we often receive material from would-be young writers, we seldom find a story from one of them which merits publication—remembering, however, that writers like Ray Bradbury and our own John Brunner first broke into print at the age of 17, we are always on the lookout—hence, Terry Pratchett this month, who is even younger and shows great promise for the future.

THE HADES BUSINESS

By TERRY PRATCHETT

Crucible opened his front door and stood rooted to the doormat.

Imagine the interior of a storm cloud. Sprinkle liberally with ash and garnish with sulphur to taste. You now have a rough idea as to what Crucible's front hall resembled.

The smoke was coming from under the study door. Dimly remembering a film he had once seen, Crucible clapped a handkerchief to his nose and staggered to the kitchen. One bucket of water later, he returned. The door would not budge. The phone was in the study, so as to be handy in an emergency. Putting down the pail, Crucible applied his shoulder to the door, which remained closed. He retreated to the opposite wall of the hall, his eyes streaming. Gritting his teeth, he charged.

The door opened of its own accord. Crucible described a graceful arc across the room, ending in the fireplace, then everything went black, literally and figuratively and he knew no more.

A herd of elephants were doing the square dance, in clogs, on Crucible's head. He could see a hazy figure kneeling over him.

"Here, drink this."

Ah, health-giving joy-juice ! Ah, invigorating stagger-soup ! The elephants, having changed into slippers, were now dancing

a sedate waltz ; the whisky was having the desired effect. Crucible opened his eyes again and regarded the visitor.

“ Who the devil are you ? ”

“ That’s right ! ”

Crucible’s head hit the grate with a hollow ‘ clang ! ’

The Devil picked him up and sat him in an arm-chair. Crucible opened one eye.

The Devil was wearing a sober black suit, with a red carnation in the buttonhole. His thin waxed moustachios, combined with the minute beard, gave him a dignified air. A cloak and collapsible top hat were on the table.

Crucible had known it would happen. After ten years of prising cash from the unsuspecting businessman, one was bound to be caught by Nemesis. He rose to his feet, brushing the soot from his clothes.

“ Shall we be going ? ” he asked mournfully.

“ Going ? Where to ? ”

“ The Other Place, I suppose. ”

“ The Other Pl—? Oh, you mean home ! Good Heav—oops ! pardon me—Hell ! no ! No one’s come down There for nearly two thousand years. Can’t think why. No, I have come to you because I need some help down there ; the Hell business is just not paying—no more lost souls. Only chap that’s come down There for the last two thousand years was a raving nit called Dante ; went away with quite the wrong impression. You ought to have heard what he said about me ! ”

“ I did read something about it somewhere. ”

“ Indeed ? Bad publicity for me, that. That’s where you come in. ”

“ Oh ? ” Crucible pricked up his ears.

“ Yes, I want you to advertise Hell. Clumsy ! You’ve split your drink all over the carpet. ”

“ W-why me ? ” croaked Crucible.

“ You are the owner of the Square Deal Advertising Company, are you not ? We want you to make the public conscious, Hell-wise. Not for eternal damnation, of course. Just day trips, etcetera, Grand Tour of Hell, and all that. ”

“ And if I refuse ? ”

“ What would you say to ten thousand pounds ? ”

“ Goodbye. ”

“ Twenty thousand ? ”

“ Hmm. Aren’t I supposed to give you some tasks ; sand-ropes and all that ? ”

The Devil looked angry.

"Forty thousand and that's my last offer. Besides," the Devil pressed the tips of his fingers together and smiled at the ceiling, "there are some rather incriminating facts about the Payne-Smith Products case, which we could make public?"

"Now you're speaking my language. Forty thousand pounds and hush about the P and S case?"

"Yes."

"Done."

"I'm so glad you see it my way," said the Devil. Crucible seated himself behind his mahogany desk and took out a pad. He indicated a polished silver box.

"Cigarette?"

"Thanks."

Crucible took a cigarette himself and felt for his lighter. Suddenly, a thought struck him.

"How do I know you are Old Nick?" The Devil shuddered.

"Please! Nicholas Lucifer to you. Well, I know about the P and S case, don't I."

Crucible's eyes gleamed.

"You may be some smart-alec Dick. Convince me. Go on, convince me!"

"Okay, you asked for it. By the way, that gun in your left-hand pocket would be useless against me." The Devil leaned nonchalantly, extending a finger towards Crucible.

"See? You're a phoney, a low do—"

Crack!

A bolt of lightning shot across the room. The end of Crucible's cigarette glowed.

"I—I—I'm convinced!"

"So glad."

Crucible became his old self.

"Let's get down to business. I take it you want Hell to be exploited in every possible way?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm afraid I can't do much until I have seen the Place—from the living point of view, you understand."

"Quite. Well, I could take you back with me, but that might be a hair-raising experience for you. Tell you what, if you wait at the corner of this street, at—shall we say, eight-o'clock this evening?—I could pick you up and we could walk there. Okay?"

“ Right.”

“ I’ll be seeing you then. Cheerio !”

Poomf !

He was gone. The room was again filled with sulphurous smoke. Crucible opened the windows and then closed them again. If some busy-body saw the smoke, he would have a hard time explaining to the Fire Brigade just why there was no fire. He strolled into the kitchen and sat down thoughtfully ; he wished he had read more fantasy.

In wishing the Devil would mind his own business, Crucible was thinking along the same lines as certain other beings. Where they differed was the reason. Crucible opened the ’fridge and took out a can of beer.

Having someone running around loose, who knows about things one would prefer to keep to oneself, is dangerous. Crucible’s love of money warred with his love of freedom. He wanted that forty thousand pounds, but he did not want Lucifer running around loose.

Suddenly, the perfect solution struck him. Of course ! why not ? He grabbed his hat, and hurried out to the local church.

Crucible stood in the pouring rain at the corner of the street. A small stream of water was coursing down his back and flooding his ‘ suedes.’ He looked at his watch. One minute to eight o’clock. He shivered.

“ Psst !”

Crucible looked round.

“ Down here.”

He saw that a man-hole in the middle of the pavement was raised. The Devil poked his head out.

“ Come on !”

“ Through there ?”

“ Yes.”

He edged himself through the narrow hole.

Splash !

He would have to put his shoes on ‘ Expenses.’

“ Well, let’s be off,” said the devil.

“ I didn’t know one could get to “ Down There ” along the sewers !”

“ Easiest thing there is, old man. Left here.”

There was no sound but the echoes of their footsteps ; Crucible’s suedes and the Devil’s hooves.

“ How much further ?”

They had been walking for several hours. Crucible's feet were damp and he was sneezing.

"We're there, old man."

They had come to the end of the tunnel. Before them stretched a dark valley. In the distance, Crucible could see a giant wall, with a tiny door. Across the valley ran a black river; the air was tainted with sulphur.

The Devil removed a tarpaulin from a hump by the tunnel mouth.

"May I present Geryon II!"

Crucible blinked. Geryon II was a Model-T Ford crossed with an Austin 7, tastefully decorated in sulphurous yellow.

The Devil wrenched at the offside door, which fell off.

They climbed in. Surprisingly, the car started after only a few swings of the starting handle.

They chugged across the sulphur plain.

"Nice car."

"Isn't it! Forty dragon-power. Built her myself from a few bits and pieces from Earth. Trouble with springing out of the floor near a junk-yard," said the Devil, gritting his fangs as they cornered at speed in a cloud of sulphur, "is the fact one often surfaces under a pile of old iron." He rubbed his head. Crucible noticed that one of his horns was bandaged.

They skidded to a halt by the river. The car emitted clouds of steam.

A battered punt was moored by the river. The Devil helped Crucible in and picked up the skulls—pardon me—skulls.

"What happened to what's-his-name—Charon?"

"We don't like to talk about it."

"Oh."

Silence, except for the creaking of the oars.

"Of course, you'll have to replace this by a bridge."

"Oh, yes."

Crucible looked thoughtful.

"A ha'penny for them."

"I am thinking," said Crucible, "about the water that is lapping about my ankles."

The Devil did not look up.

"Here."

He handed Crucible a battered mug, on which the initials "B.R." were just discernible. And so they continued.

They stood in front of the gate. Crucible looked up and read the inscription:

' *All hope abandon, ye who enter here.*'

"No good."

"No?"

"Neon lights."

"Oh, yes?"

"Red ones."

"Oh, yes?"

"Flashing."

"Oh, yes?"

They entered.

"Down, boy; get off Crucible."

Three tongues licked Crucible simultaneously.

"Back to your kennel, boy."

Whining, Cerberus slunk off.

"You must excuse him," said the Devil, as he picked Crucible up and dusted him down, "he has never been the same since he took a lump out of Orpheus's leg."

"It didn't say that in the story."

"I know. Pity, because the real story was much more—er interesting. But that's neither here nor there."

Crucible took stock of his surroundings. They appeared to be standing in a hotel lobby. In one wall was a small alcove containing a desk, on which a huge Residents' book, covered in dust, lay open.

The Devil opened a small wooden door.

"This way."

"What?"

"My office."

Crucible followed him up the narrow stairway, the boards creaking under his feet.

The Devil's office, perched precariously on the walls of Hell, was rather dilapidated. There was a patch of damp in one corner, where the Styx had overflowed and the paper was peeling off the wooden walls. A rusty stove in the corner glowed red hot. Crucible noticed that the floor seemed to be covered with old newspapers, bills and recipes for various spells.

The Devil dropped into a commodious arm-chair while Crucible sat down in a tortuous cane chair, which all but collapsed under his weight.

"Drink?" said the Devil.

"Don't mind if I do," said Crucible.

"Very nice drink, this," said Crucible, "your own recipe?"

"Yes. Quite simple—two pints bats' blood, one—I say ! you've gone a funny colour ! Feel all right ?"

"Ulp ! Ghack ! Um—quite all right, thanks. Er—shall we get down to business ?"

"Okay."

"Well, as I see it our main difficulty will be to make the public take Hell—and you for that matter—seriously. I mean, the generally accepted theory of Hell is a sort of fiery furnace, with you prodding lost souls with a pitchfork and hordes of demons and what-not running around yelling—Hey, that reminds me, where is everybody—er, soul ?"

"Who ?"

"Lost souls and demons and banshees and what-not ?"

"Oh, them. Well, like I said, no-one has been down here for two thousand years, except that nit, Dante. And all the souls down here gradually worked their way up to Purgatory, and thence to—yes, well, the demons all got jobs elsewhere."

"Tax collectors," murmured Crucible.

"Quite so. As for fiery furnaces, the only one still in working order is the Mark IV, over there in the corner. Very useful for my culinary efforts but not for much else."

"Hm. I see. Have you a map of Hell handy ?"

"I think so." The Devil rummaged in an old oak desk behind him and produced a roll of yellow parchment.

"This is the newest map I have."

"It'll do. Now let me see. Hum. I take it this is where we came in."

"Yes ! That shading is the Sulphur Plain."

"That's good. I'm sure the 'Acme Mining Company' would give a lot to have the mining rights—"

"Oh, yes ?"

"Of course, we would have to build a proper road over it for the increased transport—"

"Oh, yes ?"

"Get a large tunnel dug down from Earth—"

"Coffee bar here. Dance Hall there. Race track at the far end. Bowling Alley over—"

"We could put a Fun-fair here—"

"Leaving room for a restaurant there—"

"Put some ice-cream stalls here and here, and here—"

"All night Jazz band there. Get in touch with your demons and offer them higher wages to come back to help run the place—"

“ Get Orpheus to organize a Jazz band—I’m sure Apollo would oblige—”

And so it continued. Soon the map was covered in symbols representing everything from a dance hall to a cycle-track. Then they sat back and discussed Stage One : putting Hell in the public eye.

Of course, there were difficulties at first. The time when the Devil materialized in the middle of the pitch on Cup-Final day springs to mind. Still, he got a front page splash in all the popular newspapers. A famous Brewery sued him for loss of custom, since most of the Cup Final spectators signed the pledge after seeing him.

Telephone lines all over the world smouldered, melted, and slowly fused together as Crucible was plagued with offers from the big financial magnates. Advertising firms fought for the Devil’s patronage. Work on the London - Hell tunnel was progressing fast under Crucible’s supervision. The Devil moved in with him saying that all the cranes and bulldozers and what-not were making Hell hell.

“ See how Cerberus loves his ‘ Yummy-Doggy !’ Your dog can have that glossy coat, those glistening fangs, those three heads, if you feed him ‘ Yummy-Doggy !’ ‘ Yummy-Doggy ’ in the handy two-ounce tin ! Cerberus says ‘ Yummy-Doggy ’ is scr-r-rumptious ! Ask for ‘ Yummy-Doggy ’ ! !”

“ Men of distinction smoke ‘ Coffin-Nales ’ !”

“ Tell me, Lucifer, why do you smoke ‘ Coffin-Nales ’ ?”

“ I like that cool, fresh feeling ; the flavour of the superb tobacco ; the fifty pounds your firm’s paying me for these corny adverts—”

“ Tell me, sir, what are your views on the Colour Bar ?”

“ Well, I—er—I mean to say—um—er well—er that is—”

“ What do you think of the younger generation ?”

“ Well—er—um—ah—yes ! Definitely !”

“ Do you agree that violence on television is responsible for the deplorable increase in the Nation’s crime statistics ?”

“ Well, ah—um—no. That is to say, er—yes. I mean, er—no—ah—um.”

“ Thank you very much, sir, for coming here tonight and giving us your views on topics of immediate concern. Thank you. Well, ladies and gentlemen, tune in next week for another—”

Crucible surveyed the company dispassionately. There was the usual bevy of disgruntled back-benchers, would-be starlets, bored reporters, and of course, the usual fatigue party of Guards, all sipping themselves horizontal on third-rate champagne. A motley and mottled crowd. Crucible, who was becoming quite an expert on crowded atmospheres of late, diagnosed this one as a particularly fruity blend of stale smoke, Fleurs de Mal and methane, not to mention the occasional waft of carbon monoxide. He turned to the Devil who was performing wonders with the cocktail shaker.

“This, my friend, is what is laughingly called a party; a ritual still found in the better parts of Belgravia. It seems to consist of a—”

“Oh, lay off it, Cru. This is the besteshed jag I’ve hadsh in five hundred yearsh, and I’m gonna make the besht of itsh—”

A muffled “crump !” indicated that the Devil had “made the besht of itsh,” to the best of his ability.

It was a crisp November morning, and in the secluded throughfare that was Cranberry Avenue the birds were singing, the leaves were falling and Crucible was having his breakfast. Between mouthfuls of bacon and mushrooms, he gave the newspapers the swift port-to-starboard. The gossip column caught his eye and he remembered the Devil.

Throwing the paper in the waste-bin, he wiped his mouth on his napkin and padded in the spare bedroom.

Chaotic was the scene that met his eye. Paper hats, balloons and streamers were lying around the room and there were of bottles not a few. The Devil himself, still clad in Crucible’s second best dress-suit, was sprawled across the bed, snoring loudly.

“Wakey-Wakey !” shouted Crucible, heartlessly. The effect was impressive. The Devil shot a clear two feet in the air and came down clutching his head; the language he used turned Crucible’s ears bright red.

Crucible busied himself in the kitchen, and returned with a cup of black coffee.

“Here.”

“Ouch ! Not so loud,” slurp ! “Oh, that’s better. What happened last night ?”

“You tried the effect of vodka and Green Chartreuse.”

“Ouch !”

“Quite. Now, best foot—er hoof, forward. Hell’s opening ceremony is at twelve.”

“I can’t go like this—ouch !”

“Sorry. You’ll just have to drink gallons of black coffee and bear it. Now, come on.”

Jazz resounded around the walls of Hell. ‘Pop’ music echoed along the dark corridors, mingling with the click of slot machines. ‘Espresso’ coffee flowed in rivers. The scream of ‘hotted-up’ motor cycles mingled with the screams of banshees both ghostly and human (guitar strumming, for the use of). The growth of Hell’s popularity only equalled the growth of the Devil’s bank account.

Up high in his balcony, on the wall of Hell, the Devil poured himself a drink of water and took three tranquilizer pills.

The storm raged. For the last month the Northern Hemisphere had been beset by thunderstorms unequalled in the records of mankind. The weather-men spent all their working days testing their corns, seaweed and other oracles but had to confess themselves at a loss.

In the large study of his new country house, Crucible threw another log on the fire and settled himself deeper into his arm-chair. The storm continued.

His conscience, perforce the most robust and untroubled in Europe, was troubling him. Something was wrong with this Hades business. Certainly not on the monetary side, for his commission over the last three weeks had been exceedingly generous, as his country house, two cars, five race-horses and one yacht plainly stated.

Hell had been a great success. The ‘Top’ people were going to flock there and it had had the approvement of the Establishment.

But something was wrong. Something to do with those heavy storms.

Somewhere in his mind, the inner Crucible, equipped with wings, halo and harp, was bouncing up and down on Crucible’s conscience. The thunder murmured.

Poomb !

The Devil appeared, looking very agitated and ran to Crucible’s cocktail cabinet. He poured himself a Belladonna, and whirled round to Crucible.

“I can’t stand any more of it !” he screamed. His hand was shaking.

“ More of what ? ”

“ Your lot ! They’ve turned my home into Bedlam ! Noise ! Noise ! Noise ! I can’t get a good night’s rest ! Do you realize I haven’t slept for over two weeks ? Nothing but yelling teen— ! ”

“ One moment. You say they disturb you ? ”

“ Very funny ! ”

“ Why not close Hell for a while and take a holiday ? ”

“ I’ve tried. Heaven knows— ! ”

Rumble !

“ I’ve tried ! Will they leave ? No ! A bunch of thugs threatened to ‘ get ’ me if I tried to close their noisy, blaring paradise— ”

RUMBLE !

“ I can’t move without being mobbed by savage hordes of autograph hunters ! I’m famous ! I can’t get a bit of peace ! It’s Hell down there ! ” The Devil was now kneeling on the floor, tears streaming down his face. “ You’ve got to help me ! Hide me ! Do something ! Oh God, I wish— ”

The thunder split the Heavens in twain. The sky echoed and re-echoed with the sound. Crucible slumped in his chair, his hand clapped over his bursting ear-drums.

Then there was silence.

The Devil lay in the middle of the floor, surrounded by light. Then the thunder spoke.

“ *DO YOU WISH TO RETURN ?* ”

“ Oh, yes sir ! Please ! I’m sorry ! I apologise for everything ! I’m sorry about that apple, truly I am ! ”

On the bookshelf, a bust of Charles Darwin shattered to fragments.

“ I’m sorry ! Please take me back, please— ”

“ *COME.* ”

The Devil vanished. Outside, the storm subsided.

Crucible rose, shaken, from the chair. Staggering over to the window, he looked into the fast-clearing evening sky.

Then out of the sunset came a Hand and Arm of light, raised in salute.

Crucible smiled.

“ Don’t mention it, Sir. It was a pleasure. ”

He closed the window.

When the Midnight Club were entertained by an illusionist none of the members was quite sure whether his disappearing act was a trick or not.

PARTY PIECE

BY STEVE HALL

The five and twenty members of the Midnight Club were in a suitably festive frame of mind when they congregated for their Winter session. With his flair for something different, President Vance Seaton had suggested that their last meeting of the year might be held at the usual venue mid-way between the twin convivialities of Christmas and New Year. He had further opined that the normal routine of having a guest speaker be replaced by a programme of suitable entertainment. The proposal had been accepted with acclamation by the entire membership who, having exercised their franchise, left Seaton with the unenviable task of arranging the whole function.

Once again, a newsletter had been concocted which instead of giving everyone concerned the anticipated blow-by-blow forecast for the evening, had been tantalising in its vagueness—it had confirmed that the dinner would commence at the usual hour, and the entertainment at the witching hour, but who the artistes would be was to remain a secret which the President vouchsafed to no-one. ‘This,’ he had written, ‘will be *my* little surprise packet.’

Who could resist such an intriguing lure and still pretend to be human? Certainly not the masters and mistresses of the macabre, the soothsayers of science-fiction, the intrepid investigators of imagination, and the foretellers of fantasy who

were the Midnight Club. And accordingly, they had made their way singly and in groups to the large country house which was now an hotel of the old school ; a *haute école* where the chef was a creative artist in his own right, where the waiters did not consider themselves demeaned by serving others, and where comfort, good food, and a well-stocked cellar were avowed to be among the best things in life.

Outside, brilliant stars and a resplendent silver moon decorated the clear, ebon vault of the late December sky. The air was crisp with the promise of snow for the New Year, and the ground was brittle and exploded underfoot with the verve of party crackers.

Inside, all was comfort and warmth. A seasonable meal was almost finished, and the company was contentedly replete with roast turkey, plum pudding drenched in brandy sauce, and other traditional fare. The last few liqueurs had been dispensed and the blue incense of tobacco twined its languorous way ceilingwards.

Male and female heads dipped confidentially closer as they speculated about what was to come. A low hum of interwoven voices permeated the room.

As always, the first chime of twelve o'clock stilled all other sounds. The last magic stroke took the assembled writers to the unseen brink where anticipation joined hands with the beginnings of realisation and all mysteries would be explained.

Seaton's tall, distinguished form stood erect, the flickering candle-light glinting back from his silvery hair.

"Fellow tellers of tall tales," he began, yielding once more to his penchant for alliteration, "you have, no doubt, been wondering who will appear before you when I have finished speaking. What, you may have asked, will be our President's idea of suitable entertainment? You, who have mystified millions in your time, deserve I think, to be mystified and mesmerised in your turn. To demonstrate their arts before you, first, I call upon Levito and Gloria."

Golden curtains swished sibilantly apart on cue at the front of the small stage which had been especially provided at one end of the room. Their mutual retreat exposed a man whose medium height was made to look less by the breadth of his shoulders. His evening dress was formal in cut only—the material was of the glittering variety sometimes affected by

stage magicians, and ripples of light came and went across its surface with his every movement. At his side stood a slender, fair-haired girl whose dress was made of the same scintillating cloth. Together, they made a striking couple, accentuated as their presence was, by the black drapes around the entire stage.

Levito and Gloria acknowledged the patter of applause which greeted their appearance and immediately went into a slick routine where chromium-plated rings of steel linked and separated with astonishing ease, and a miscellany of objects came and went as if true magic had at last been conquered.

The audience which had, at first, nodded sagely to its collective self, and prepared to attribute everything to the masking effect of the black back-cloth, found itself imperceptibly enjoying the whole act however it was done, and the applause became markedly more enthusiastic at each new feat of legerdemain.

The broad-shouldered exponent of the magic art drew towards his *piece de resistance*. From a flat case, deftly brought forward by Gloria, he produced three shining scimitars and inserted their handles into sockets in the flooring of the stage. Their wicked-looking, curving blades thrust upwards like so many imprisoned, crescent moons. The couple stood facing each other, and Levito made a few mystic passes before Gloria's face. Her eyes quickly became glazed then closed, and her expression froze. The man who was also her father swept her off her feet and gently lowered her rigid form towards the sharp points of metal. One seemed to impale the slender neck, while the other two appeared to embed themselves into waist and ankles.

Levito made some esoteric passes in the air about Gloria, then took away the scimitar from her ankles.

The audience stared fixedly—it could see nothing but the remaining swords supporting the girl.

Again Levito made his deft movements, and again another weapon was taken away, this time from the waist position. The fair-haired girl maintained her unmoving posture, and the magician swiftly drove home the fact that there were no hidden wires by passing a steel hoop horizontally along her rigid body.

Spontaneous applause broke forth from the watching authors, and the broad-shouldered performer prepared to bring his act to a triumphant conclusion. Under cover of more

sweeping passes, he intended to slip his hands under the almost invisible loops of a harness worn by Gloria. Then he would raise his out-thrust arms, and by sheer strength lift her aloft. The effect, of course, would be as if she were floating in mid-air. After maintaining the position for a few seconds, the curtains would blink momentarily together, then apart, and the performers would take their final bow with both on their feet. That was the intention—the actuality was something entirely different and quite bizarre.

Levito bent slightly over Gloria's prone form, conscious that the audience was his. He swept his arms far apart, executing a complex rolling and twisting movement during which his arms seemed to melt one through the other like a Charleston dancer's—and Gloria's body winked out of sight like a snuffed candle-flame! Only Levito's crouching figure and the solitary scimitar were visible on the stage.

While the members of the Midnight Club exploded into unstinted admiration of his efforts, the magician remained motionless. The professional smile slowly faded from his face, leaving a fixed, ghastly expression of disbelief for all to see. Like a man frightened out of his wits, he cautiously attempted to explore the vacant space where seconds before his daughter had been.

The audience waited entranced for another visual miracle. It did not come. Levito's hands slipped and slithered helplessly over an unseen surface, but could not penetrate the weird space which it enclosed, no matter how he tried. With a slight motion of his head he signalled to the stage-hand concealed in the wings, and the curtains closed and remained together.

Somehow aware that things had gone wrong, Vance Seaton joined the magician on stage. Outside the curtains, the hand-clapping dribbled away uncertainly.

"What's the matter?" the President asked.

Levito motioned to the front of the stage dazedly. "Gloria's disappeared—that wasn't part of the act."

Seaton's composure slipped a few notches. "Come now," he said irritably, "people just don't disappear in reality, stop leg-pulling, I want to get the next artiste under way."

"This is no joke," replied the broad-shouldered man, his stage attire looking rather more tawdry at close quarters.

“Come and see for yourself.” He led the President to the point at which he had stood when the disappearance had taken place. “Feel here.”

Suspiciously Seaton extended exploratory hands. He could feel an ineffably smooth, constantly varying curve—but *he could see nothing*. Closing his eyes and traversing the whole mind-twisting surface, he had a fleeting impression that it vaguely resembled a three-dimensional figure eight on its side, a closed symbol of infinity. When his hands refused to pass through the peculiarly bounded volume of air, he knew that the magician wasn't fooling. Momentarily baffled he said: “I'll introduce Oscar Carson while we think this over.”

The hypnotist, who was the second and final act on the programme, agreed after a little discussion, that he could present a modified version of his routine from outside the curtains while Seaton and Levito tried to sort out the static mystery on the inside. When Carson had been successfully launched, the President and the magician consulted again.

“I'm baffled by whatever it is you've got there,” commented the head of the Midnight Club, “but I'd like to try an experiment.”

“Anything, if it'll get Gloria back again,” answered a distraught Levito. “What do you want to do?”

Seaton brought out a cigarette lighter and snapped its flame into life. “Pass this around the space where Gloria was while I watch.”

Mystified, but compliant nonetheless, the performer did as he was told. Under Seaton's directions, he gradually lowered the lighter from a point well above the warped space, where it was clearly visible to Seaton on the other side, until it moved into eclipse behind it. For a moment the flame seemed to wink out of existence, then it abruptly re-appeared and extended itself into a flaring, flickering curtain, as if distorted by some grotesque lens.

“Walk behind it yourself,” instructed the tall man.

As Levito traversed the full length of the uncanny region, which was about waist high, the mid-section of his body seemed to expand and contract in an eye-wrenching fashion; at times it disappeared altogether, leaving his torso and legs to continue, apparently unconnected.

"Light doesn't go through it," muttered Seaton clinically, "it goes around it. I think I know what we've got here."

"What is it?"

"It's something like a *Klein Bottle*."

"What in God's name is that?" asked the suddenly apprehensive magician.

Swiftly, with staccato, lucid sentences Vance Seaton explained the unusual properties of the Moebius Strip, the Klein Bottle, and the Tesseract. "I think you've swept out, by sheer accident, a peculiar, closed volume of space, the edges of which have united and become impenetrable," he finished.

Levito paled. "And Gloria's inside that thing?"

The distinguished looking man was at pains to reassure him. "Don't worry—for the moment she's in no danger."

"What'll it be like in there?" persisted the illusionist.

Seaton considered. "I believe it will be completely dark and soundless—nothing can get in or out."

A cold sweat formed on Levito's brow. "Do you realise what you're saying?" he croaked.

"What exactly d'you mean?"

"Nothing can get in or out," repeated the harassed man.

"*Gloria's trapped in that damned bottle thing, with only a limited amount of air, and the temperature in there will rise with trapped body heat. She'll suffocate!*"

A horrid comprehension furrowed Seaton's brow, and he, in his turn, blanched. "We've got to do something, and quick," he rasped. With sudden decisiveness he flung aside the curtains and interrupted Carson's performance.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "you all saw Gloria disappear a few minutes ago. Believe me, it wasn't an illusion—she really did vanish—but we know where she is." His rapid explanation of what he thought had happened swept swiftly to a conclusion. "Has anyone the faintest idea of what we might do to prevent a tragedy?"

Silence and unbelieving smiles spread among his listeners. With a sinking feeling of despair he realised that some of them, at least, thought his speech was still part of the act.

Suddenly the diminutive figure of Claire Martell stood up, her auburn hair glowing with a coppery aureole. "If what you say is true," she said, "the solution is obvious."

The President gave her an agonised look. The answer to the problem was anything but apparent to him, and he could see

that Levito felt the same way. "What do you suggest?" he whispered.

The petite red-head spread her hands and gave a Gallic shrug. "The completion of one set of movements produced a sealed space," she explained, "*surely if you do it in reverse, the closure will be destroyed.*"

Seaton was suddenly galvanised with hope. "Of course," he said, "Claire you're a genius." To Levito, he became commanding. "Get back into the same position as you were when it happened."

The illusionist leapt to obey the lash of abrupt authority in the President's voice, and then paused with his arms outstretched.

"What's wrong," rasped the tall men. "*Get on with it.*"

"I can't remember just what I did," mumbled Levito helplessly.

"Try anyway," coaxed Seaton, although he realised with a growing feeling of pessimism that to expect an exact reversal of the unlikely miracle which had produced the dilemma, was remote in the extreme.

Levito made vague swimming motions as if attempting to unravel a monstrous ball of wool. He was conspicuously unsuccessful in his attempt to destroy the simulated Klein bottle.

Just then Oscar Carson strode forward. "Perhaps I can help," he said. "Sit down here and relax, and do exactly as I say."

Without protest, Levito sat down in the chair which the hypnotist pulled forward. The hands resting in his lap were twitching nervously though.

"Absolute silence, *please*," said Carson imperiously, taking up his stance behind the magician's chair.

The members of the Midnight Club were still of more than one mind; some thought it was all a gag; others had believed Seaton's words; and there was a small percentage who sat neutrally astride a mental fence and reserved their judgment. But all watched and listened intently.

The hypnotist placed the tips of his fingers lightly on the magician's temples and said in a low, reassuring tone: "Relax and breathe as I tell you . . . in . . . out . . . in . . . out." His voice droned persuasively onwards. There was none of the pseudo-meaningful passes employed by Levito during *his*

performance, and no staring eyes or dilated pupils, only an all-pervading suggestion to surrender to Carson's wishes.

Gradually, the seated man became calmer and his fingers stopped their futile interlocking as he concentrated on the hypnotist's commands.

Gently and insidiously Carson suggested the idea of sleep and rest to his willing subject, and the eyes slowly closed in compliance. The hypnotist finally dropped his hands and spoke to Levito. "You can hear *me* and no-one else. Do you understand?"

"Yes," replied the seated man tonelessly.

"Open your eyes and resume the position you were in when Gloria disappeared—*the exact position.*"

Levito got up like a zombie and walked to the front of the stage. His staring eyes looked at the floor, he moved his feet slightly, then bent over as he had been earlier.

"I want you to recall the movements which you made before," ordered the hypnotist. "See them clearly in your mind."

The hypnotised illusionist crouched *and remembered.*

"Can you picture every detail?"

"I can," said the flat voice.

"Now carry them out in reverse."

Levito's hands moved upwards and over the uncanny volume of space in which his daughter lay entrapped, the arms arched slightly. Then they moved apart with blurring speed, twisting through the reverse convolutions as instructed. There was a slight crackling, as if the paper was being rudely torn from a parcel, and Gloria re-appeared from the strange Limbo in which she had spent fifteen minutes of her life.

Thunderous applause broke the silence, and she opened one eye curiously.

"Close the curtains," ordered Carson.

They swished together, cutting off the audience's view of what followed.

"Lift her down and finish your curtain call as you had intended to do," whispered Carson to Levito.

Acting normally now, the illusionist released his daughter from the apparatus which had made her impossible-seeming horizontal position possible, and together they bowed and smiled at the watchers out front. The curtains closed for the last time.

“What happened, Dad?” queried Gloria. “We’ve never finished that way before.”

Her father was still in the trance induced by Oscar Carson and did not answer.

“Just a moment, my dear,” said the hypnotist, and turned to the man who could hear him alone. “Can you still remember all the details of the movements which made Gloria disappear?”

“I can.”

“Then I command you to forget them—they are gone from your memory forever. Now wake up.”

Levito’s eyes brightened with a new awareness, and he saw his daughter with his conscious mind for the first time since her envelopment in the strange space which he had brought into being. “Thank God you’re back,” he said fervently, and embraced her in a bear-like hug. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Of course I’m all right—why all the fuss, and why didn’t you complete our act in the usual way?”

“I did something . . . I can’t remember what, then you disappeared for a while.

She stared at him incredulously. “For how long?”

“About fifteen minutes or so.”

“Now Dad, you don’t *really* expect *me* to swallow that, do you? I closed my eyes as usual when you lowered me on to the swords, and although I know you didn’t pick me up by the loops, I was only lying there a second or two before the audience started clapping, then I opened one eye to see when you were going to finish things off.”

“It only seemed like *seconds* to you?” queried Levito.

“It *was* only seconds,” answered Gloria positively. “It’s no good trying to fool me that I disappeared for a quarter of an hour—I know differently—I’m your daughter, remember?”

Vance Seaton made a comment at that point, almost to himself. “I suppose one can’t distort Space without affecting Time also.”

“Just imagine,” said Levito with an equal degree of introspection, “I do my finest vanishing act ever, a one-night stand only, and my own daughter doesn’t believe it happened.”

“She’s in good company,” remarked the President, “half of my club members don’t believe it either; and don’t forget, *they saw it all with their own eyes.*”

—Steve Hall

If this story seems rather slow and not quite in keeping with the type of stories we have published in the past—read on. Apart from the theosophical aspects, there is quite a fire-cracker in the tail.

WITH CLEAN HANDS

By JOHN RACKHAM

Ingersoll looked across the snowy white table-cloth at his newly returned guests and had an immediate sense of keen pleasure. Moments such as this had become increasingly rare, these past years.

“You consider it was a good trip, then. Worth the trouble?” he asked, watching their sun-browned faces.

“Oh, absolutely first-class,” Andrew Walker nodded and his sister Olga smiled her agreement. The pair of them were a breath of new and vivid life in a somewhat tedious existence, Ingersoll thought, watching the way they reached for the civilised delicacies with which his wife, Martha, had laden the table in their honour. He had taken an immediate liking to them at first meeting, about a year ago, when they had arrived on Malin and presented their credentials, seeking his approval and assistance. As Governor of the province, his approval had been essential and he had given it with confidence. His offers of assistance had been graciously received, but largely declined. He could hear the echo of Walker’s explanation, even now.

“If we are to have any real hope of finding out how the Malinese think, and what they believe in—to really get to know

something valid—then we must go out and live with them, be accepted by them as just ordinary people, like they are. I hope you can tell us the best places to go, the minimum warnings of what *not* to do and some advice on survival. But, for the rest, we intend to get by on our own two feet . . .”

And they had got by splendidly. Olga giggled, reminiscently, now.

“We had a few bad moments, of course. You remember, Andrew, when you asked that old weaver just what that design was meant to be, to him?”

“My own fault, entirely,” Walker admitted. “I had forgotten what you told us, Ingersoll about their insistence on weaving in semi-darkness. The old chap was quite upset. A strange twist, that. They actually believe that the designs are prompted by their spiritual overlord, and that it is dangerous to investigate too closely into the pattern. Odd, how the idea of taboo is so common, to all sorts of cultures, everywhere.”

“Fear of the unknown—it’s possibly selective evolution,” Ingersoll suggested and Martha snorted in a lady-like manner.

“Don’t try to air your limited knowledge, Robert,” she said, gently acid, “the Walkers know what they are talking about. They’re specialists. You’re just an amateur at such things. Miss Walker, do have some more of that fruit spread. The toxic content is very low. I boil it especially to remove it . . .”

Ingersoll allowed the conversation to become general for a moment or two. He ignored his wife’s pointed remark with the facility of long practice. Of late he had somehow grown removed from himself, as if he was a spectator watching this puppet-figure, Robert Ingersoll, Governor of Malin, proceeding through ritual motions and gradually losing more and more of his unique identity, fading away into just a name and a function.

There was a danger here, he suspected, and the return of the travellers had sharpened that sense. He had begun to like this life on Malin. In the ninth year of a ten-year ‘tour,’ he should have been looking forward to the moment when he would turn over the office to his successor. He should have been thinking about returning to Earth, to possible retirement and ease, safely provided for by savings out of a generous salary.

Instead, he was finding it more and more of an effort to break out of the mould of habit. He was settling down, tending to regard this place as ‘home,’ considering volunteering for another term of office ! Ten years was a long time. A slice out

of life. Martha had aged, but had adjusted happily. Their two small children had been born here, had known no other life than this, the quite comfortable luxury of the Governor's residence and the companionship of the children of the other Earth officials and assistants. Had he been asked the question point-blank, Ingersoll would have been forced to confess that there was nothing inherently wrong or unpleasant about Malin. In this area, at least, it would compare very favourably with the Italian Riviera, back on Earth.

"You had quite a few tight moments," he said, suddenly bringing the table-talk back to his train of thought. "Didn't you?"

"We did," Walker admitted, cheerfully, "but we're here, safe and sound. No point in dwelling on what might have been, you know. We've made anthropological expeditions before, many times. One gets to accept the risk as part of the life. But—how did you know?"

"I've had you watched, of course," Ingersoll smiled. "Not guarded, but I have 'eyes' all over this territory. Part of my function, to know what is going on—so there was no especial difficulty in keeping track of your whereabouts. And, I assure you, there was no interference," he added, firmly, as he saw Olga Walker's face cloud over just a little. "My only instruction was to keep observation and to let me know if ever you stirred up anything too big for you to cope with alone. After all, your safety was my responsibility and you are much too attractive to be allowed to take unnecessary risks with yourself!"

That deliberate flattery was aimed at Olga. It was no effort. She was attractive enough to merit it in any company, but never more so than now. Her dark hair gleamed, her skin was richly bronzed and showed to advantage against the pastel blue of the loose fabric she had draped around herself. Besides, he told himself, wryly, Martha would expect him to flirt a little with a pretty unattached woman. She had a pedestrian, common-place mind, in which everything was neatly categorised by 'common-sense' labels. In rare moments, he regretted Martha. He dared to dream what life might have been like had he found himself a wife like Olga, for instance, a keen alert mind and a brilliantly alive personality. But such rebellions were swiftly crushed.

"You weren't really worried about us," Olga retorted, accepting and over-looking the innuendo easily. "You were thinking about internal problems and the peace and quiet of the territory."

"That too, of course," he admitted. "For all we humans have been settled on Malin some thirty years, our relationships are still highly uneasy. Maintaining concord, here, is very like walking a tight-rope."

"Don't you believe it, my dear," Martha put in. "This job is a rest-cure. He doesn't really do anything except apply the rules and the constitution. All the problems were worked out long ago. It's all part of the pose, you know, that being a Governor is *such* a responsible post." Ingersoll had to hide his wry smile again, as the open sarcasm in her tone made the Walkers mildly uncomfortable. He chose to be kind, to rescue them from an awkward silence.

"A good trip, anyway," he said. "You got lots of data—useful, I hope—and now you'll want time to study it?"

"It will take months, just to codify it," Andrew agreed, gratefully. "You know, of course, that what we were most interested in was the religious side, the traditions and divisions of beliefs, the differences and the similarities, too."

"I imagine our results would interest you," Olga said. "In fact, I would say you already have quite a few observations of your own and they might help us with ours."

"That's true," Ingersoll nodded, "and you are, of course, very welcome to anything I have . . ."

"If you're going to try to talk shop, Robert, take them into your study," Martha got up. "I've got work to do, as always. Stay single, my dear," she shook her head archly at Olga. "Once you marry, well, you can't really do anything else, afterwards. Children, housework, meals—it's never ending . . ." and she went to the door to ring a hand-bell for servants.

Ingersoll ushered his guests through another door into his own spacious room. Facing away from the hot afternoon sun and looking out on a cool courtyard, in the Roman fashion, it was a pleasant, yet functional room. He remained standing a moment, while the Walkers found seats.

"I don't say this to everyone," he murmured, "but you mustn't mind Martha. She is rude, grossly tactless, and sometimes offensive, but without intention. She is an almost perfect example of a 'good' person, a good mother, a good wife, and

a good manager—all skills, but no talents. No vision, either. To her, all people are on her own prosaic level. She just cannot comprehend that anyone else can really think, can see visions, think huge thoughts. She classes all that as posturing and pretence.”

“You’re very frank,” Andrew got out a pipe, puffed through it, fumbled out a pouch. “If I may make equally candid reply, why on Earth did you marry her?”

“Because she is good for me,” Ingersoll said, smiling. “She keeps me from getting above myself, as they say. Part of the function of medicine is that it has a nasty taste, you know.”

“I had no idea you were a religious man,” Olga murmured and Ingersoll gave her a sharp look.

“I’m not.”

“Not in the orthodox sense, perhaps. But it is functional in all religions that one does what must be done, what one thinks is the right thing, regardless of whether it is pleasant or not. The pattern of belief is more important than the person.”

“I suppose you’re right,” he said, intrigued by this new angle on his own thought patterns. “I’d not thought of it in quite that way before. Now, let me see what I can do to help you with your researches.” He went to a tall file-cabinet behind his desk and brought out a large scale map of the territory, spread it out on a low table in the middle of the room.

“Where we are, now? Nex, the major town, soon to be our capital city, was deliberately chosen because it stands in the accessible centre for all the principal products.” He pointed. “The rare metals—here, here and here. Fruit crops all over these two areas, here and here. They are minor but important. The metals are easy to extract and refine and the Malinese don’t use them to any degree themselves. The fruit, as you know, is of half a dozen types, all of which ferment to make exotic wines. Malinese wine is becoming quite a delicacy throughout the Solarian territories but the native population won’t touch it and do not appreciate it. I mention this just to show you that, up to this point, there is no difficulty and no suggestion of exploitation. We are not robbing them of anything they want, or need.”

“That’s not the case with the gleez, though,” Andrew said, through smoke.

“Quite so,” Ingersoll left the map, and sat, thoughtfully. “Gleez—a scrub plant, tremendously tenacious, useless for anything else but the fibre made from its leaves and stem. Making the fibre is a long, slow, tedious process that we cannot

duplicate by machinery, nor can it be woven the way the people do it, and, according to the ladies, nothing we can make, synthetically, comes within speaking distance of the genuine article."

"In defence of my sex," Olga spoke warmly, "that's absolutely true. That silky texture, the colours, the feel of the stuff—and it wears, it washes—it's a dream to work with. It just *is* marvellous, that's all. You've no idea how I was almost drooling at the sight, in there, of gleez used for curtains, for furniture covers, even for a tablecloth, when, back home on Earth, only the wealthiest of women can afford enough to have one extra special dress made of it. I never quite appreciated why, but now I know. Having seen it being made, I can also appreciate why it costs so much."

"Quite. I'm not arguing with established facts," Ingersoll laughed. "It's precious, so Malin is important. And it is my job to see that nothing happens to upset that. But gleez is intimately the concern of the people. It is their only cloth, the only thing they wear. Garments are passed on, inherited, like wealth is with us. The raw cloth is money to them. And there is a strong religious tie-up, too. The fabric is semi-sacred, not worshipped in itself, but it figures importantly in all their ceremonies, no matter which cult-unit you inspect. You spoke of similarities—you found that one, surely?"

"That's right," Andrew nodded. "I can see what you're getting at, now. Gleez is integral to Malin, as a territorial matter, so you have to be interested in their religions, like it or not. I'm sorry, I had been assuming that, like most Governors, your function was civil and military and that you left the religious side strictly alone. I thought *we* were the experts, being social anthropologists."

"Don't change that," Ingersoll warned, smiling. "All I've done, following my predecessors in this office, is to interfere as little as possible—except for one thing, which I'm rather proud about. It was an idea I had when I first came here nine years ago. The set-up, then, was that the nine major religious tribes all had to be invited for consultation on any matter of difference that came up. Naturally, they were all suspicious of each other and of me and it was tedious. I invited the chief priest of each denomination to attend me, arranged it so they all turned up together and put it to them. Here they were, a group, all in the presence of each other, nothing secret, no treachery possible.

So why not make this a regular thing? A council of nine, to argue among themselves and act as a body in dealing with me. Why not?"

"They accepted?"

"Not without some heart-searching at first. But, yes, they did. It has been fun, in a way, watching the growth of a kind of unitarianism. They are all clever enough to realise that their combined opinion carries more weight, smart enough to do their disagreeing before they come to me and organised enough, by this time, to elect a Chief Priest as their head. I've learned a lot but I'll bet they have learned some, too. Would you care for shukti?"

With their acceptance, he moved to touch a button on his desk and turned to grin at Walker who had laid his pipe aside.

"We needn't have done that trek," the anthropologist complained. "We could have stayed right here in Nex and learned more, just talking to your council."

"I wouldn't say that, at all. You've seen the basic non-modified versions. You can now compare those with the way the council have modified their ideas in committee. The changes should interest you."

"Isn't that unwise?" Olga wondered, as the door opened and a Malinese came shuffling in with a tray and the glittering equipment for shukti. Almost, but not quite, like Earth-style coffee.

"You mean, interfering with their religious beliefs?"

"Yes. I thought it was a cardinal rule that one didn't?"

"That's the copy-book theory, yes," Ingersoll nodded. "Thank you, Abil. You must serve Miss Walker first, just as you do Milady."

"Yes, sir," Abil nodded and took the tray to Olga. Like all Malinese, he was lean, wiry, and almost indistinguishable from Earth-human. Only his vivid lemon-yellow skin and green eyes were alien. And his elaborately crimped and lacquered hair. Hair-styles went by cult-groups, were a language and a sign-manual in themselves. His scanty loin-cloth of gleez indicated his low status and told why he was a servant in the Governor's place, but his hair-style was his mark of belonging.

"I'm glad to see your cough is all gone, Abil," Ingersoll said, as it came to his turn. "We must have been mistaken, eh?"

"Oh no, sir. It was 'the cough,' sure enough."

“ For which there is no hope, and no cure ? ”

“ Yes, sir,” Abil shrugged uncomfortably, and Ingersoll was intrigued.

“ Well ? Come on, out with it. No secrets from me, now. And you can be sure the others will not talk. They are friends of the people, like myself, as you have seen. Come on—what ? ”

“ I went to the ‘ Healer ’ sir, and he touched me. ”

“ The Healer, eh ? I’ve been hearing a lot about him, lately. And I can’t say I like all of what I hear. He touched you—that’s all ? ”

“ Yes, sir, and the pain and the cough stopped, at once, sir. ”

“ We heard stories about this Healer, too,” Andrew Walker leaned forward, interestedly. “ Can you tell us something about him, Abil ? Where we might run into him, what his teachings are, what he says ? ” Abil was very uncomfortable now.

“ I know very little,” he confessed. “ He tells us not to talk, but to think for ourselves. Also that it is not right for one person to have domination over another person, except by agreement. ”

“ I wonder whether you mean ‘ domination ’ or ‘ dominion,’ Abil ? ” Ingersoll murmured, but it was idle criticism, leaving his mind free to consider the sense of what he had just heard. “ That is quite a sophisticated theory, all right in its way, but rather dangerous food for naive minds. And then he touched you ? ”

“ Yes, sir. He asked me if I believed that he had the power to heal me—and I did—and he touched me, and I was healed. We do not see him often—it is dangerous,” he added, hurriedly, and went out with the tray.

“ Faith-healing ! ” Olga breathed. “ That doesn’t fit in with anything we saw. The way it looked to us, all the tribes are alike in that each has its traditional observances, its sacred ‘ book ’ as you might say and they live accordingly. There was plenty of aura of supernatural, but very little ‘ demonstration ’ of it. Bad fortune, sickness and death seem to be regarded as inevitables that you can’t do anything about, but we saw no signs of that kind of healing faith, at all. ”

“ I would have said the same,” Ingersoll frowned. “ This chap must be a sport, in more ways than one. Obedience to ancestral authority is also a basic tenet of all the cults. I’m not sure that I like this . . . ” he went to his desk, touched a different button, elevated a visor-screen out of the flat surface.

"Daniels? You busy, just now? All right, make it later. Look, join us for dinner, won't you? You'd enjoy meeting the Walkers, I'm sure. You know a bit about them, already. You will—good! And, look here, dig up everything you may have about this Healer chap. I want to know what he's up to."

Coming back from the desk, he caught the enquiring look in Andrew Walker's eyes.

"Chief of Police," he explained. "Good steady man, Daniels. We understand each other very well. We have only a token force of police, but they are all on their toes, all the time. Our attitude is constant but unobtrusive vigilance. We don't go in much for shows of force, threats, that kind of thing, but when we do have to act, we do it swift and thorough and no messing about. If it should become necessary, we can ship this Healer out from under their noses and they'll never know what happened."

"You wouldn't do that, surely?" Olga cried and he shrugged.

"I hope it won't be necessary. If it is, I'll do it."

"But he heals people!"

"Does he, actually?" her brother questioned. "This cough that Abil had, is it—as you said—hopeless and incurable?"

"Beyond a certain stage, yes. It is, or seems to be, one of the hazards of gleez weaving. Something to do with the fibres. Not a direct cause, but it will aggravate a tendency, very much like lung-cancer used to be with tobacco-smoke. Mortality in children is very high. With adults it isn't so common. Presumably, if you survive it young, you're immune, or nearly. At any rate, it has stages. First a cough and difficulty in breathing for a day or two and then you recover. Or you don't, and you begin spitting blood and there's a characteristic puffiness about the eyes—and they start singing the preliminary funeral rites, because you've had it. We have a very good hospital and they've done everything they can think of, but, well, they haven't succeeded once."

"So the man definitely *is* a Healer?" Olga persisted. Ingersoll nodded.

"Definitely, in Abil's case, anyway."

"Then you can't—you mustn't destroy him . . ."

"It need not necessarily be 'destroy'." Ingersoll smothered a mild irritation. "Our laws are against execution on general principles. I could confine him until the fuss dies down, or ship him out to some other territory. But, if it became necessary, I would have to act and swiftly. That is part of my job. Now, could we talk about something else, please."

The hot sun had settled and the evening showed Malin at its warm and scented best as they dined on the marble-floored balcony outside the main living room.

"This was always the part we enjoyed," Olga murmured, the starlight bright on her skin, picking up brilliance from the synthetic fabric she wore. "All the tribes have a strong music sense. Not as formal as ours, but beautiful just the same. Singing at eventide seems to be a part of life to them and there is a tremendous amount of information in their songs, too."

"I like the singing," Ingersoll admitted. "Martha can't bear it, unfortunately. She has had a difficult time training our house-staff to keep quiet of an evening. I think that's one of the reasons why we find it difficult to keep staff."

"Blame it on me, of course," Martha retorted, readily. "Really, Robert, I can't think why you need to drag up kitchen-gossip for our guests. Rex, do sit still and behave. Don't fidget so!"

Ingersoll glanced down at his small son, smilingly. The boy and his sister, Anne, by his side, had been very quiet and proper, respecting the treat of being allowed to sit up with guests. Now he was red-faced and obviously in distress. Ingersoll bent down, read the signs aright and guessed Rex was trying to strangle a cough.

Guessing again, he whispered, "What's up, lad—forgot your hankie?"

Rex nodded, twitching. Ingersoll grinned, fumbled in his pocket, passed his own across under cover of the table and the boy took it, clutched it to his face and coughed several times. Then he passed it back, managed a grin.

"That's an odd instrument, too, that they have," Andrew said. "Sound being what it is, one expects the usual variations on strings, reeds and percussion, but I can't recall ever seeing a variable flute before."

"That's the catta," Daniels nodded, from across the table. "You know, each tribe has its own style of making and playing that thing? Shocking hard to learn how to spot the differences, but we have to do it if we hope to be able to identify an encampment in the dark."

"I expect it's because you keep listening for a tune," Andrew laughed. "I know I did. Fascinating stuff—you feel sure it's going to break into a melody any moment, but it never does."

"You'll excuse me," Martha rose. "I'll just see the children off to bed. Abil will bring you shukti in the study, it's getting rather cool now. Come along, you two—say goodnight!"

In the study again, with its mellow diffused lighting, Daniels settled himself in a deep chair, swapped tobaccos with Walker, filled his pipe carefully and waited for the others to get comfortable. A heavy, thick-set man, with red hair and a strong face, he was the type to keep his emotions inside and put his job first.

"You wanted to know about the Healer man," he said, abruptly. "As it happens, that suits me. I've been debating whether to come to you about him, anyway."

"Real trouble?" Ingersoll wondered. "An agitator?"

"Not the usual type, no. Shaves his head, belongs to no one group, goes where and as he likes and his origin seems to be something of a mystery. We have managed to plant spy-mikes inside some of his meetings and he has quite a line of propaganda, one way and another."

"Any followers—a gang?"

"No, not in the regular sense. There are people who follow him about, but that's natural, because of his healing. That, now, is something I'd like to see investigated by the medical branch. He's good, all right. But no followers. He makes a point of saying that he is not a leader, not telling anyone else how to live, just advising everybody to think, to come to their own decisions, to do what they think is right regardless of what dead tradition might say. 'All is change,' that's one of his sayings. 'Life is growth and progress, yesterday is dead, tomorrow is not yet come, living is for today,' is another. 'All men are brothers. No man is lord over any other man' Stuff like that."

"Nothing much to worry about," Ingersoll shrugged, "so long as he isn't recruiting a gang. That kind of talk never gets far, true though it may be. It sounds like a cross between Christianity and Socialism—wonder where he got it from? Not that it matters very much."

"I wouldn't write it off too quickly," Daniels disagreed. "This chap has a gift. Apparently his words go home and stick. People take them away and think over them. The priests are already objecting and trying to lay him by the heels. We would like to catch him, too, just to warn him that he mustn't shout too loudly against authority. After all, we have a job to do and it's rough enough as it is, without incitement to passive resistance."

"They are doing that?"

"They are. It's growing, too. I've had word from several places that it is getting harder to buy labour for the fruit harvest, for the mines, and the weavers are getting the scent of it, too. Why should we weave for you? That sort of question. It's nothing big, yet, but straws in the wind are important, in this kind of thing."

"I quite agree," Ingersoll frowned, leaning forward. "I'm glad you've told me, Daniels. This kind of thing is cumulative. We shall have to nip it off in good time."

"But the man's a Healer," Olga protested, angrily. "He's doing good. You can't just . . ."

"We can't even catch him, Miss," Daniels confessed. "That's another thing, sir, that has had me bothered. He comes and goes and we can't get a line on him in between at all. You'd think we ought to get some report of his movements—after all, we have this city pretty well sewed up—but he flits like a ghost, just as and where he likes."

"You'll just have to sharpen up a bit, Daniels. Get him as soon as you can and bring him in. Just for questioning and a bit of friendly advice, my dear," Ingersoll added, at Olga's gesture of protest. "Believe me, I like the sound of him and I'm all in favour of 'All men are brothers' and the rest of it."

"Robert," Martha bustled in at the door, nodding to the others. "Give me your handkerchief. I saw you pass it to Rex, don't think I didn't. I'm sure, if I didn't keep a sharp eye on things there'd be no such thing as hygiene in this house." Ingersoll caught back the words which came to his tongue, reached for the offending linen, held it out and then drew it back staring. There were reddish brown stains on it. His heart gave a great leap in his chest, catching his breath for a moment. Then, in a voice which he hardly recognised as his own, he asked, "How long has Rex had that cough?"

"Three or four days. It's nothing much, really. He makes far too much of it, trying to dodge—all children do."

"There's blood on this handkerchief, see?"

"You think . . ." she stared at the white, frowning, ". . . you think it's the 'cough'? Oh, it can't be! You said yourself that it's a Malinese thing, that we can't catch it. You said!"

"I said none of the humans here has caught it, so far. Rex has lived all his life here." Ingersoll shut his eyes, striving to recall exactly his son's face as he had seen it last. Was there a puffiness about the eyes?

“Stop it, Robert!” Martha cried. “You’re trying to frighten me. I won’t believe it. Rex can’t have the ‘cough’—he can’t. You know he never mixes with the native children!”

“Call the Medical Centre,” Ingersoll ordered, harshly. “Ask for Piffard—ask him to come over, at once.” She stood, staring at him, all her cynical competence shattered in a moment. He grew suddenly very angry. “Go, at once, and call the Medical Centre. Go!” She seemed to crumple, then turned and ran out unsteadily. Ingersoll realised that he had never before used that tone of voice to Martha, not in the years they had been married. But that thought came and went in a moment. What lingered was the cold dreadfulness that Rex was dying and there was nothing he, or anyone else, could do about it.

Much later that same evening, he sat on the balcony alone, with a wine-jar and glass and fought his own battle with his emotions, so lost to the outside world that it was a distinct shock to find someone standing close by his side. Looking up, he saw that she was very lovely in the starlight and the breath of a quite inappropriate emotion put a sharp edge on his tongue.

“How long have you been there?”

“Only a moment or two. I couldn’t sleep. I felt you might want someone to talk to, someone who would listen and try to understand. Send me away if I’m wrong, but let me help, if I can.”

“You’re very good,” he said softly, after a long pause. “I ought to send you away. It’s the proper thing to do in the circumstances. But I don’t want to. I want you to stay and I think you understand.”

“Of course I do,” her voice was very quiet. “One does what one thinks is right but when there is no real rule that helps, one does what one *feels* to be right. Thinking is what you do about ‘things’ and it can be explained so neatly and trimly. But feeling is awfully personal, so that we tend to forget that other people feel things, too. Without thinking about it at all, I feel I ought to sit on your knee and put my arm round you, and comfort you . . .”

“I wish you would . . .” he muttered. She was warm and soft and strong at the same time. Her arm encircled him and his head rested on her bosom as if it belonged there. Quite inexplicably, he wept. She kept absolutely still until he was

calm again. Then, brushing his hair gently with her fingertips, she whispered,

"Life isn't unfair, really. It's just big, much much bigger than us. We tend to think of life as centring in ourselves, each one of us, but it doesn't. We are just parts of a whole."

"I suppose you're right. Rex is only nine and hardly begun his life. In one more year we will all be away from here. It could have waited until then. I'd begun to like this place, to get the feel of it, and I was worried about that, you know."

"Why? Why worry about liking a place?"

"Because my job is to administer efficiently—and you can't do that if you become emotionally involved. You have to stand aside, apart. I shall be able to do that, all right, now."

"I think you're wrong, again, Robert," she stroked his hair softly. "One can be just, and efficient, *and* emotionally involved. It's harder, that's all. This isn't a thing to be blamed on to anyone, or anything. It's part of a pattern that merely includes us as a minor item. Think of the thousands of little flowers which push up too quickly and are caught in a frost and die. For them, it must seem terribly unfair, but flowers, as a whole, go on. And life is like that. Dying is a part of living. You can't have one without the other."

"That's a strange religion," he said, tilting his head back and looking up at her. "There doesn't seem to be any pattern to it."

"But there is. As your Healer-man says, 'All men are brothers.' For me, that means all life is interdependent, all part of the great scheme of things. I have to think of myself as an individual of course, a separate part of the whole thing for the moment. You, too—and everyone else. We all have our own bit to play. But we are all linked, we're all in this together. No life is ever useless, or wasted, or unimportant, or alone. Living is now, this moment, because all life is change. And each individual must make his own decisions. But one cannot do that properly unless one takes into account life itself. You know that. You told me it's part of your job to decide, regardless of your own selfish feelings. That's the test of life, to be able to rise above the 'me' point of view and act for the better good of all, even if it is just helping one other person."

"Thank you, Olga," he said. "You have helped. It was good of you. I needed help, just then. You're a strong person."

"It wasn't duty on my part," she whispered. "I wanted to come. You may think me strong, but I, too, know what it is like to be alone. We have that much in common, that we can help each other at a time like this. And we do understand each other so well." He looked up again, to see her glowing face bowing down to meet his, her mouth a gentle invitation.

By habit he was awake and about with the first brightness of dawn and in his study to deal with the endless stream of official trivia. Events of the day and evening before had been relentlessly locked away at the back of his mind—all of them. His attention was channeled on to shipment reports, quantities, arrival times, cargo-space planning, supply replenishment orders, material allocations for new buildings and works—and it took Abil three tries to catch his attention.

"The Council of the Elders, they wish to see you, sir," Abil shrugged, in response to his irritated challenge. "I told them it was the wrong time, but they will not go away."

"Is the Chief Elder with them? Oh, all right. I suppose I'd better see what they want. Damn it, old Kanshin ought to know better. I thought he was beginning to get the idea of routine and order, but apparently not." He snatched a glance at the clock on his desk, calculated rapidly. "Look here, you tell old Kanshin from me, that I'll see him and the Council in half an hour from now and not before. That's final. And then call Mr. Walker—and Miss Walker—and bring breakfast in here. Breakfast for three. Off you go."

As he had hoped, the Walkers were sensible enough to realise that he would not have called them without good reason and they were quickly in evidence. Abil was just quick enough to have a teapot on the table as they came through the door.

"Good morning," he said, briskly. "Tea is a great luxury, we have to import it from Earth, so sit and make the best of it. Sorry to disturb your rest, but I thought you'd want to be in on this. I have the Council of Elders camped on my doorstep, demanding a conference. No idea what it's about, but it will be a wordy affair, or I miss my guess and I thought this was something you'd be interested in. I've put them off for half-an-hour, so tuck in."

"What's the usual run of problem?" Andrew asked, reaching for the pot. "Criminal, civil, or social?"

“ Oh, civil, I suppose. Due allocation of road-ways, market places and trading rights to various tribe-members, that sort of thing. There’s very little crime as such, except petty stuff which they settle themselves. And I don’t touch any of their social problems at all. There are schools where we teach them our language, some elementary calculation and how to estimate the values of their goods against ours, but that’s all. For the rest they can and do use the schools to spread their own teachings. We don’t interfere. The only thing we draw the line at is ritual execution. My predecessor barred that—it was a common feature of all their socio-religious beliefs and barbaric in the extreme. It was stopped. Public executions are very rare now and only by my express order.”

Ten minutes later the table had been cleared, the Walkers had taken seats discreetly to one side, and Ingersoll had had time to take a really good look at Olga, half-afraid that she would seem different to him now. She did, but not in the way he had feared. She met his eye frankly and with just the ghost of a smile, but it was like a warm handclasp across the room. A truly wonderful woman, he thought. A real friend. Then he was caught up in wonderment at such an unusual word, one that he very seldom used of anyone and had never expected to use about a woman. Then Abil threw open the big double doors, used only on such ceremonious occasions, and the Council entered.

Kanshin, Chief Elder, was tall, lean and with a curtained face that told little or nothing of what went on underneath. Where all the other Elders sported extra elaborate hair-creations, marking their tribal groups and their eminence within them, Kanshin hid his beneath a high hat, elaborately embroidered. This had been Ingersoll’s suggestion, of which he was secretly proud. The Elders took it in turns to elect one of their number to be spokesman, or Chief of Chiefs, and there had been squabbles over the suggestion that one tribe could dominate the others. Now, wearing the hat, Kanshin was marked as being above faction—a man apart—and it suited his conceit well.

For the rest, they were all swathed in robes to a degree that represented a tidy fortune in gleez, here or on Earth. Ingersoll could hear Olga gasp, quite audibly, across the room. Irrationally, it pleased him that she could be learned, intelligent, mature and yet still retain that feminine weakness for lovely wearables.

“ Chief of Elders, Kanshin, I see you and the sight gladdens me as the sun warms the day.”

“ Great Lord, Ingersoll, I am in your shadow, always.” Kanshin’s voice was drily unctuous. Ingersoll settled in his chair. This was to be no small matter, obviously. He waited for the elaborate bowing of the Council to subside.

“ What great question does Kanshin bring to me, now ?”

“ Lord Ingersoll there is a blasphemer in the city of Nex and his sayings offend us greatly. All of us.”

“ Indeed. This is a strange matter to bring to me, Kanshin. I grieve for your offence, but you well know that I do not deal with such matters. This is for you to judge and deal with, not me.”

“ But, Lord, this man speaks great evil against all of us, who are the fathers of our peoples. The peoples are angry, as we are angry and they ask that he be put to death, as a lesson to all who speak against the holy words of the Old Ones.”

“ This is forbidden, as you also know,” Ingersoll replied, flatly. “ Those who were before me grew sick of so much killing and decreed that it was to cease. That decree is not changed. Punish the blasphemer as you will, that is your affair. But no killing.” Kanshin’s face altered not a muscle. He had obviously expected just this. Ingersoll realised his tenseness, forced himself to relax.

“ Lord . . .” Kanshin said, musingly, as if he considered a problem in games, “ this is a dilemma. Our peoples speak with one voice . . .” ‘ That wants a bit of believing ’ Ingersoll thought. “ They ask the death of this man. They ask it of us, who stand above them. But you say we must not kill. What can we do ?”

“ Kanshin is old, and of great wisdom. He will discover an answer, if he considers long and is patient.” Ingersoll kept his face expressionless, because he was well accustomed to this trick of the old man’s, of passing on the responsibility. But Kanshin shook him this time.

“ We have already deliberated long, Lord. We have the answer. The man must die. We may not kill him by your order. So you must do it !”

“ You are advising me to execute one of your people ?”

“ Nay, he is not of our people. He is a renegade, a shaven one.” Now the room was taut and still. Ingersoll chose his words with care.

“It is not for you to tell me what I must do, Kanshin. Truly, in the past I have decided that this one, and that one, should die. Indeed, to be a great lesson and a warning to those who would do foolish things, as you well know. But these decisions were mine and the finding was mine. These were people who did bad things in my sight and against the well-being of all. I cannot order the death of any man simply because you tell me he has blasphemed against your beliefs. This does not concern me, although it may well be true.”

Kanshin nodded impassively, put the tips of his index fingers together and blinked his eyes.

“With your indulgence, I withdraw, to talk with my fellows . . .” and he paced backwards twice, turned and went into a close huddle with the eight who had attended him. The Walkers left their viewpoint, came across to Ingersoll’s desk.

“They must mean the Healer,” Olga whispered. “What will you do?”

“Nothing much I can do. Precedent holds good, so far. In any case, if Daniels and his men can’t lay the chap by the heels, there’s nothing to fear from these old fogeys—and you can’t execute a man until you catch him. Back up, here he comes again.” He sat up, sternly, as Kanshin returned, impassive as ever.

“Lord, this is a great problem, but we have thought deeply. To us the evil spoken is unforgiveable, but it means nothing to you and this we understand. But this man also speaks out against yourself, saying, ‘It is wrong that one man should have power, or greatness, over another. No man is greater than any other man, but all are brothers and equal.’ And when he was questioned, cunningly, by Tatra—who is here and will speak, if you desire—whether this was also true of the white lords, who come from the other side of the stars, the blasphemer answered and said ‘Are these, also, not men, like us? Then are they also equal, not better.’ This is a true report, Lord.”

‘Crafty old beggar,’ Ingersoll thought, and with a straight face decided to play his strongest card.

“Among your people, Kanshin, there is a saying ‘Speak evil of me, yet I show no bruise, for no other mouth but my own can speak truth about me.’ Therefore I cannot accept what you say as true until I myself hear it from the man. Bring him before me, let me hear this saying from his own mouth, and I will judge what is to be done with him. Until then, the

matter rests," and he allowed his voice to fall in a tone of finality. But Kanshin had another trick.

"That is a good saying, Lord. We have the man outside and will bring him here at once." He turned his head to make a curt gesture, then swung back, his bright green eyes hard on Ingersoll, a suspicion of a smirk tugging at his lip. Ingersoll caught at his wits sternly. Trumped and trumped again, but this was not the end. He was not to be hustled into the brutality of a public execution as easily as that and certainly not the kind of execution Kanshin would insist on.

He felt for the button that would fetch Daniels and shot a quick glance across the room to the Walkers. Andrew was grave and grim, Olga met his eyes with a mute appeal. He gave her a brief, tense smile, then a shuffle at the door announced the arrival of the prisoner. The priests and Elders on either side of him stepped clear, seeming to dwarf him by their size and their obvious contempt for his chances of making a bid for escape.

Ingersoll saw a small man and so lean as to be almost scrawny. The clean-shaven head gave him an oddly wild look, but once the eye got over that, it was obvious that this man was at the point of collapse from exhaustion and fatigue. There were sullen bruises on his face, his thin shoulders and arms. And more, under that robe, Ingersoll reasoned. The Elders had done quite a bit of punishing already, by the look of it. The voluminous robe was the only touch of relief in the picture of utter destitution. Ingersoll had heard of men like this, of no tribe or clan, footloose, carrying great wealth in the form of patient handiwork as a drape. A man had to weave long patient hours in semi-gloom to make a robe like this. The story was that men saw great visions at such times. What visions had this frail derelict seen?

What was it about the stance, the quiet poise, of that humble figure that made Ingersoll want to stand in his presence? Battered, bruised, worn and exhausted he might be, but there was an oddly compelling dignity about him. Even now, as he came forward limping a little, that 'presence' came with him, until Ingersoll caught the full impact of those darkly shadowed eyes. And it was the same feeling that he had sensed when he crossed glances with Olga a few minutes earlier, only magnified a thousand times. Friendship, no, not quite that, more a meeting of equals. All at once Ingersoll felt absurdly humble.

"You are that one they call the Healer, I think," he said.

"I am Emen . . ." the word was no name, but Kusht dialect for 'anybody,' yet this man clearly meant it as a name. "They think I heal them, but I do not. They heal themselves, because they believe it will be so."

"Do you tell them this?"

"I tell them they will be cured, if they believe. It is no more than that."

Ingersoll caught the sound of clicking boots and drew his eyes away from that compelling stare, to see Captain Daniels come hurrying into the room and then stare, wide-eyed, at the Healer.

"How did you get *him*?"

"I didn't. The Council got him, brought him here. You must be slipping, old man, if Kanshin's boys can beat you to the draw."

"I was betrayed," Emen said, quietly and without bitterness. "One of those who follow me against my wish, informed the priests where I was to be found. I knew it had to happen sooner or later." Ingersoll shafted a keen glance at the watching Chief Elder, who nodded slowly.

"It was the only way, Lord," he said. Ingersoll took a deep, shaky breath. This was beginning to assume a pattern he didn't care for at all. And it had come on him too quickly. He needed time to think, to regain control of the situation.

"You must leave this man with me. Wait outside while I question him . . ." This didn't suit Kanshin at all and he was about to protest at the top of his cold dignity when a side-door burst open and Rex came charging in, his thin pyjamas flapping with the rush of his movement. Ingersoll snapped his head round in brisk irritation before he had really seen the cause of the noise, then something inside him hardened at the sight of Rex, at the savage reminder of something he would rather have left unthought just then. A rebuke hovered on his lips, but went unsaid as the boy came to an aghast halt.

"I'm sorry!" he gasped, going scarlet with embarrassment and turning to go as abruptly as he had come. Then, in the doorway, a spasm of coughing caught him, staggered him against the upright door-post. Ingersoll felt the racking chest-pains as if they had been his own, but clamped his lips shut. What good would it do to protest against the inevitable?

Rex fought against the spasm, pushed away from the doorpost and would have gone out, but Emen made a gesture.

"Come, little one," he said, very softly. "Come to me . . ."

And Rex, who was shy of adults and tongue-tied with strangers, looked and went to the strange little man unhesitatingly.

"I'm sorry I coughed," he said. "I couldn't help it. My chest hurts."

"Yes, I know. But you *can* help it. You can make it well, if *you* truly want to. Do you wish to be well?" Emen asked the question quite seriously and Rex nodded. The little man put his hand out, touched the boy on the head and smiled just for a moment. "So be it," he said. "You are well." The boy stood as still as death for a moment, then he turned and Ingersoll saw his face and his heart turned over at the look of stunned surprise and happiness there.

"Dad! It's true, it's true! It doesn't hurt any more and there's no tickle in my throat like there was. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yes, Rex, it is. Wonderful. Thank Mr. Emen nicely and run and tell your Mother. She'll be pleased."

"That was a bad thing, Lord," Kanshin protested darkly, as the door shut after Rex. "Not only is it evil to say that a thing is so, when it is not—all who have the 'cough' die, everybody knows this—but it was a wrong thing to do before your face, for now you will not judge fairly."

"To save the life of a child cannot be an evil. To try to save such a life, even should it fail, cannot be a bad thing. This is a strange word, from the Chief of Elders. You will go now, please. I will speak again with you when I have questioned this man." The Council withdrew unwillingly and Daniels shut the big doors after them.

"The boy is well. I have said it." Emen spoke quietly, almost sadly. "At times I grow weary of this healing, because when people see what they think are great marvels, their ears are closed to the simple things. Yet the healing is also a simple thing. All good things are simple."

"I am told that you speak against my law, against the ruling of white people, against one man who must give orders and another man who must obey. That you say all men are brothers and no one is greater than another . . ." Ingersoll made his voice as steady as possible, to sound impartial.

“It is true, so what does it matter whether I say it, or another?”

“True? What is true?” Ingersoll retorted and no sooner had he said it than he wished it unsaid, because he had a frightening sense of repeating something old, of being in the grip of events greater than himself.

“The true,” Emen said, slowly, “is in here . . .” and he touched his chest with a brief gesture. “It is for every man to find for himself. To discover what he must do and then to do it. Life is now . . .” Ingersoll caught Olga’s gasp again. “A man must do what he believes to be right at each moment, and always, not abide by old sayings just because they are old.”

“This kind of talk, to those of little understanding, could stir up your people against me, Emen. Is this what you want?”

“Foolish people go this way and that, like the leaves in the wind. I do not urge them, either way. I speak to those who will take my words inside and dwell on them. I am not your enemy. There are those who order and those who obey, and if this is by agreement, all is well. But there are some who say ‘You must do this, and you must do that, because I have said it, because I am greater, and more wise than you.’ This is evil.” Emen fell silent, seeming to withdraw into a world of his own.

There was no harm in this little man, of that Ingersoll felt certain. His preaching, crude and forthright though it was, echoed the very unity and growth among the Malinese that the Solarian Government wanted. But it was far too naive, too brutally direct. The thinking habits of generations could not be overthrown in a day. The man was all right, but he was going the wrong way about it.

“I find no crime in you,” he said, carefully, “except arrogance.” Emen gave him a steady stare, then the wisp of a smile and a nod.

“Your understanding is great. You are a good man. You think that I am just one humble person against many, against those who would stop me and this is true, in a way. But I am—everyman.”

“You are—only one,” Ingersoll chose his words with difficulty. “I can help you. I want to help you. I can tell the Chief of Elders that I have judged, that I will punish you—and the punishment will be slight—if you will give your word to cease this teaching. No, hear me out. I will arrange for you to enter one of our schools and there teach the same lessons, but

in more gradual form, little by little. Your way is asking men to be born again, and that . . ." the words died in his throat. Where had *they* come from? Emen shook his head.

"It must be thus. There is no easy way."

"But it will mean—your life! I must speak as I find—true, just as you do. I must judge you a danger to my authority. I have no choice, Kanshin will see to that. He is determined on your execution. You understand this? It is not my wish, but it is beyond my power to change. Only you can choose."

"I had expected it. I am ready. Life and death are at each end of the one road."

"You could—escape . . ." Ingersoll suggested, desperately.

"If I wished, yes. But no man can escape himself. I am ready!"

"This has happened before," Ingersoll said, heavily. "I think you are a good man, but foolish. I cannot save you, but I can help your cause and I will. It is the least I can do because of my son and because I believe in what you are trying to do." He stood up, motioned to Daniels. "Call back the Council."

Then he made a gesture to Abil. "Bring a bowl of water and a towel, Abil, quickly." From across the room he heard Walker start up and come quick-stepping in protest.

"See here, Ingersoll—I don't stress my beliefs as a rule—but I must protest against this. Who do you think you're mocking—Pilate?"

"You don't understand, Walker, but wait a moment, and you will."

The Elders filed in, slowly and with dignity. Ingersoll faced up to Kanshin.

"Chief of Elders, Kanshin, hear my words. I find no evil in this man. He has been punished enough. Set him free and cease persecuting him."

"Ingersoll speaks without thought," Kanshin said, flatly. "For his blasphemy, alone, we will punish this man. This is our right. For his offences against the white rule, Ingersoll must punish, for the people are angry. Hear them!" and the old man made a gesture towards the window. Unnoticed by any, there had grown a surf-roar of sound out there. Daniels stepped quickly to the window and Ingersoll moved to join him. The metal frame swung back and the room was filled with a roar that was unmistakeable.

"They're out for blood," Daniels muttered. "No two ways about that sound. I've heard it before. Organised, too. That's old Kanshin's doing, you can bet."

"Walker!" Ingersoll turned, beckoned the anthropologist. "Come and see for yourself. You should know the bay of a blood-hungry mob well enough."

"What's that they're shouting?" The three men listened a moment, to the rise and fall of a chanting sound. 'Jah—reel!' over and over again.

"Crucify him," Olga whispered, coming close. "That's what they want . . ."

"You see, Walker? What can I do? They will have their way, whatever I do. So it is left for me to acknowledge the fact, but I'm going to wash my hands of the responsibility, whether you like it or not. I'm not mocking anything. I mean it and I want these bastards to know it, too." He swung back to the room, called Kanshin's attention, swept the rest of the Elders into the matter with a hard eye. Then he used the bowl and the towel carefully.

"See now, all of you. My hands are clean. The blood of this man is on your hands, not mine. Take him, do with him what you will."

No sooner had the double doors clashed behind them than he hooked Daniels with an urgent finger.

"Work for you and extra special stuff. Lay on guards, just to see they don't get too brutal. See that one of your men slips him something to ease the worst of the agony. I want him guarded until sundown, then buried—and then his body must disappear—you follow me?"

"Robert! Is that absolutely necessary?" Olga's face was crumpled in disbelief. "Is nothing sacred to you?"

"Oh yes—many things. I thought you would understand this. Look, this man has power and the right idea—the sort of reform movement we would all like to see—but he's never going to make it by himself. All I'm going to do is add just that touch of the supernatural that will impress the people, make them think, so that they will remember his words. That's all. Damn it, I owe him that much—and I must do what I think is right."

Ingersoll couldn't remember a day that had dragged out more slowly. The sun crawled across the sky as if reluctant to leave. Olga spent most of the time in her room. Walker had

tried to flog up interest in various tribal customs with Ingersoll, but the going was thick with unspoken thoughts. A blight seemed to have settled on the whole household and even Martha forgot to be her usual acid-tongued self. Daniels briefly reported half-way through the afternoon to say the ceremony had been carried out in its gruesome entirety, that the crowd were milling, sweating in the hot sun and waiting for the prisoner to show dead.

"He was a tough one, sir, but we managed to slip him something in a drink. Makes you think of vinegar on a sponge, doesn't it? He hasn't felt a thing this past hour and I reckon he's dead. Yes, I've just had the sign from the guards. It's a matter of waiting, now."

"What have you done about the grave?"

"Bit of luck there, sir. Kanshin admitted the man was an outcast, so he couldn't object to us taking care of the remains. Especially when we reckon to put him away in one of those little caves on the hillside. As old Kanshin said, he will keep there for two days and then they'll burn him, after their custom. Only—well, I have that fixed, too. I'll call you again."

With a few minutes to go for sunset, Olga came down to find Ingersoll in his study, deep in thought.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you," she said, "and for doubting you. It is very difficult, sometimes, to do the right thing."

"Difficult to trust ourselves to know right from wrong, I think. To know that one is merely picking the lesser of two evils, most of the time."

"I suppose you'll be glad when your time is up and you can retire . . ."

"No. I've changed my mind about that." He got up, went to the window. "I shall apply to serve again if they'll have me. Martha and the kids can go home and I think they will. They'll be better off there. I'm not much of a husband to Martha—and she doesn't really need me, never has. I'm not much of a father, either. I scarcely know my children. I can't forget what Emen said. 'No man can escape himself.' I've been trying to do that all the time, to keep aloof from life, to rule these people like a machine. But now—well, I've started something and I'm going to stay and see it through. This is my job, here."

"Would you let me help you?"

"I can't ask that. I have no right."

"Don't ask. Consider it an offer. You have only to say yes, or no."

"But I will have work to do. This is an all-day every day job. I have little time for the personal things."

"Silly man. I would work too. I would help you and be here, whenever you needed to think about yourself. Choose the lesser of two evils, Robert. Say—yes, or no." He turned to the window again and they were silent. The wailing, meandering chants of the Malinese, began to come ever stronger to them in the quick dusk.

"Gone sundown," he muttered. "I wonder how Daniels has managed. Olga, my dear, let me postpone this. I have too much at stake just now. It will make all the difference, whether this thing has gone through or not."

Daniels came to dinner again that evening. He was efficiently happy with the course of events.

"We got him away a trifle before sundown. Dead all right. Then to that cave and half a dozen Kanshin men tagging along with us, so we co-opted them into manhandling a huge boulder to block the entrance, once we'd put him inside. And then they insisted on standing watch and watch with my men. Creepy, in a way—as if they knew something."

"Hardly," Ingersoll grunted. "Suspicious men act in the same way anywhere. Will it bother you?"

"Not a bit. Bright and early, we'll knock them all out with a gas-capsule, roll back the stone and have his remains out and away before they know what's happened. No after-effects, either. They'll never know."

Ingersoll's dreams were troubled that night and he was awake long before dawn. Restless and impatient, he went to his study, to be at hand for the first news. There must be no hitch, now. Detection would ruin everything hopelessly. Olga came within a few minutes of his own arrival, came and sat by him without a word. He was surprised, for all his preoccupation, at the way he had so quickly learned to accept her presence and her understanding, as if they had known each other for a lifetime. There was a click and a faint ting from his desk-visor. He moved the switch hastily and saw the face of his Police Captain, a little unsteady and blurred, indicating that he was using a small portable talker. But the unsteadiness was not all in the transmission.

“ Speaking from the hillside, sir. We’ve just rolled the stone back—and, I don’t know how to say it—but, well, he’s gone !”

“ Somebody there before you ?”

“ Positively not. My men have been on duty all the time. The natives are fast away, of course, but they couldn’t have done it anyway. He’s just gone—that’s all. Nothing there at all, except that robe of his.”

“ So . . .” Ingersoll said, feeling a strange glow. “ He didn’t need my help after all, but I’m glad I tried. Daniels, put that rock back and say nothing of this to anyone, you understand ?”

“ Got you, sir. Makes you think, doesn’t it ?”

“ It does, indeed. And Daniels, when the time comes—that robe, it’s worth quite a bit—you know what to do ?”

“ Yes, sir. My men will cast lots for it—draw straws, anyway.”

“ That’s it. Good man. Daniels, I’m going to stay on here, for another term, if they’ll have me.”

“ I’ll be glad to see that, sir. Between us—and Emen—we’ll make something decent out of this place yet. I’ll be getting on with it, now.”

The screen faded into grey and Ingersoll switched off, sat still for quite a while. So deep was his musing that he started when Olga spoke.

“ Now will you answer me, Robert ? Now that you know you did the right thing. Will you say—yes or no ?”

“ I’m going to need help, the right kind of help, more than ever now,” he said. “ And understanding. Please stay and help me.”

“ We will help each other,” she said softly and they went, hand in hand, to the window to watch the first sunrise of a new era on Malin.

—John Rackham

Editorial

continued

earlier successful story. Added to this the acquisition of an hitherto unpublished short story by Mervyn Peake, which has reminiscent overtones of some of Ray Bradbury's earlier stories—and this month's issue bids fair to being another winner. I hope that we shall be able to include the second Mervyn Peake story in the next issue. Certainly, the discovery of these two MSS warranted an appreciation of Peake's work and I felt that there could be no finer person to produce such an article than Michael Moorcock, who was directly responsible for the two stories reaching our editorial desk.

Adding Terry Pratchett's little satire about "The Hades Business" was one of those little touches an editor seldom gets the opportunity of doing—while it is not a perfectly written story by any means, for a fourteen-year old it is outstanding; seventy-five per cent of all the stories we receive are not so well written!

Finally, some further good news. At the moment we are planning on making *Science Fantasy* a monthly publication just as soon as possible. Exactly when will depend entirely upon how soon I get sufficient good material in hand to make this step a successful one. You can rest assured that you will be informed well in advance.

John Carnell

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