

RICHARD BOWES

THE MASK OF THE REX

PRELUDE

THE LAST DAYS OF SUMMER have always been a sweet season on the Maine coast. There's still warmth in the sun, the cricket's song is mellow and the vacationers are mostly gone. Nowhere is that time more golden than on Mount Airey Island.

Late one afternoon in September of 1954, Julia Garde Macauley drove north through the white-shingled coastal towns. In the wake of a terrible loss, she felt abandoned by the gods and had made this journey to confront them.

Then, as she crossed Wenlock Sound Bridge which connects the island with the world, she had a vision. In a fast montage, a man, his face familiar yet changed, stood on crutches in a cottage doorway, plunged into an excited crowd of kids, spoke defiantly on the stairs of a plane.

The images flickered like a TV with a bad picture and Julia thought she saw her husband. When it was over, she realized who it had been. And understood even better the questions she had come to ask.

The village of Penquoct Landing on Mount Airey was all carefully preserved clapboard and widow's walks. Few yachts were still in evidence. Fishing boats and lobster trawlers had full use of the wharves. Baxter's Grande Hotel on Front Street was in hibernation until next summer. In Baxter's parlors and pavilions over the decades, the legends of this resort and Julia's own family had been woven.

Driving through the gathering dusk, Julia could almost hear drawling voices discussing her recent loss in the same way they did everything having to do with Mount Airey and the rest of the world.

"Great public commotion about that fly-boy she married."

"The day their wedding was announced marked the end of High Society."

"In a single-engine plane in bad weather. As if he never got over the war."

"Or knew he didn't belong where he was."

Robert Macauley, thirty-four years old, had been the junior Senator from New York for a little more than a year and a half.

Beyond the village, Julia turned onto the road her grandfather and Rockefeller had planned and built.

"Olympia Drive, where spectacular views of the mighty Atlantic and piney mainland compete for our attention with the palaces of the great," rhapsodized a writer of the prior century. "Like a necklace of diamonds bestowed upon this island."

The mansions were largely shut until next year. Some hadn't been opened at all that summer. The Sears Estate had just been sold to the Carmelites as a home for retired nuns.

Where the road swept between the mountain and the sea, Julia turned onto a long driveway and stopped at the locked gates. Atop a rise stood Joyous Garde, all Doric columns and marble terraces. Built at the dawn of America's century, its hundred rooms overlooked the ocean, "One of the crown jewels of Olympia Drive."

Joyous Garde had been closed and was, in any case, not planned for convenience or comfort. Julia was expected. She beeped and waited.

Welcoming lights were on in Old Cottage just inside the gates. Itself a substantial affair, the Cottage was built on a human scale. Henry and Martha Eder were the permanent caretakers of the estate and lived here year-round. Henry emerged with a ring of keys and nodded to Julia.

Just then, she caught flickering images of this driveway and what looked at first like a hostile, milling mob. A familiar voice intoned. "Beyond these wrought iron gates and granite pillars, the most famous private entryway in the United States, and possibly the world, the Macauley family and friends gather in moments of trial and tragedy."

Julia recognized the speaker as Walter Cronkite and realized that what she saw was the press waiting for

a story.

Then the gates clanged open. The grainy vision was gone. As Julia rolled through, she glanced up at Mount Airey. It rose behind Joyous Garde covered with dark pines and bright foliage. Martha Eder came out to greet her and Julia found herself lulled by the old woman's Down East voice.

Julia had brought very little luggage. When it was stowed inside, she stood on the front porch of Old Cottage and felt she had come home. The place was wooden-shingled and hung with vines and honeysuckle. Her great-grandfather, George Lowell Stoneham, had built it seventy-five years before. It remained as a guest house and gate house and as an example of a fleeting New England simplicity.

ONE

George Lowell Stoneham was always referred to as one of the discoverers of Mount Airey. The Island, of course, had been found many times. By seals and gulls and migratory birds, by native hunters, by Hudson and Champlain and Scotch-Irish fishermen. But not until after the Civil War was it found by just the right people: wealthy and respectable Bostonians.

Gentlemen, such as the painter Brooks Carr looking for proper subjects, or the Harvard naturalist George Lowell Stoneham trying to lose memories of Antietam, came up the coast by steamer, stayed in the little hotels built for salesmen and schooner captains. They roamed north until they hit Mount Airey. At first, a few took rooms above Baxter's General Provisions and Boarding House in Penquoct Landing. They painted, explored, captured bugs in specimen bottles. They told their friends, the nicely wealthy of Boston, about it. Brooks Carr rented a house in the village one summer and brought his young family. To Professor Stoneham went the honor of being the first of these founders to build on the island. In 1875, he bought (after hard bargaining) a chunk of land on the seaward side of Mount Airey and constructed a cabin in a grove of giant white pine that overlooked Mirror Lake.

In the following decades, others also built: plain cabins and studios at first, then cottages, in those days, men and boys swam naked and out of sight at Bachelors' Point on the north end of the island. The women, in sweeping summer hats and dresses that reached to the ground, stopped for tea and scones at Baxter's, which now offered a shady patio in fine weather. There they gossiped about the Saltonstall boy who had married the Pierce girl, then moved to France, and about George Stoneham's daughter Helen and a certain New York financier.

This fillet of land in this cream of a season did not long escape the notice of the truly wealthy. From New York they came, and Philadelphia. They acquired large chunks of property. The structures they caused to rise were still called studios and cottages. But they were mansions on substantial estates. By the 1890s those who could have been anywhere in the world chose to come in August to Mount Airey.

Trails and bridle paths were blazed through the forests and up the slopes of the mountain. In 1892 John D. Rockefeller and Simon Garde constructed a paved road, Olympia Drive, around the twenty-five-mile perimeter of the island.

Hiking parties into the hills, to the quiet glens at the heart of the island, always seemed to find themselves at Mirror Lake with its utterly smooth surface and unfathomable depths. The only work of man visible from the shore, and that just barely, was Stoneham Cabin atop a sheer granite cliff. Julia Garde Macauley didn't know what caused her great-grandfather to build on that exact spot. But she knew it wasn't whim or happenstance. The old tintypes showed a tall man with a beard like a wizard's and eyes that had gazed on Pickett's Charge.

Maybe the decision was like the one Professor Stoneham himself described in his magisterial *Wasps of the Eastern United States*: "In the magic silence of a summer's afternoon, the mud wasp builds her nest. Instinct, honed through the eons, guides her choice."

Perhaps, though, it was something more. A glimpse. A sign. Julia knew for certain that once drawn to the grove, George Stoneham had discovered that it contained one of the twelve portals to an ancient shrine. And that the priest, or the Rex as the priest was called, was an old soldier, Lucius, a Roman centurion who worshipped Lord Apollo.

Lucius had been captured and enslaved during Crassus's invasion of Parthia in the century before Christ.

He escaped with the help of his god who then led him to one of the portals of the shrine. The reigning priest at that time was a devoted follower of Dionysius. Lucius found and killed the man, put on the silver mask and became Rex in his place.

Shortly after he built the cabin, George Lowell Stoneham built a cottage for his family at the foot of the mountain. But he spent much time up in the grove. After the death of his wife, he even stayed there, snowbound, for several winters, researching, he said, insect hibernation.

In warmer seasons, ladies in the comfortable new parlors at Baxter's Hotel alluded to the professor's loneliness. Conversation over brandy in the clubrooms of the recently built Bachelors' Point Aquaphiliacs Society dwelt on the "fog of war" that sometimes befell a hero.

There was some truth in all that. But what only Stoneham's daughter Helen knew was that beyond the locked door of the snowbound cabin, two old soldiers talked their days away in Latin. They sat on marble benches overlooking a cypress grove above a still lake in second-century Italy.

Lucius would look out into the summer haze, and come to attention each time a figure appeared, wondering, the professor knew, if this was the agent of his death.

Then on a morning one May, George Lowell Stoneham was discovered sitting in his cabin with a look of peace on his face. A shrapnel splinter, planted in a young soldier's arm during the Wilderness campaign thirty-five years before, had worked its way loose and found his heart.

Professor Stoneham's daughter and only child, Helen, inherited the Mount Airey property. Talk at the Thursday Cotillions in the splendid summer ballroom of Baxter's Grande Hotel had long spun around the daughter, "with old Stoneham's eyes and Simon Garde's millions."

For Helen was the first of the Boston girls to marry New York money. And such money and such a New York man! Garde's hands were on all the late nineteenth-century levers: steel, railroads, shipping. His origins were obscure. Not quite, a few hinted, Anglo Saxon. The euphemism used around the Aquaphiliacs Society was "Eastern."

In the great age of buying and building on Mount Airey, none built better or on a grander scale than Mr. and Mrs. Garde. The old Stoneham property expanded, stretched down to the sea. The new "cottage," Joyous Garde, was sweeping, almost Mediterranean, with its Doric columns and marble terraces, its hundred windows that flamed in the rising sun.

With all this, Helen did not neglect Stoneham Cabin up on the mountain. Over the years, it became quite a rambling affair. The slope on which it was built, the pine grove in which it sat, made its size and shape hard to calculate.

In the earliest years of the century, after the birth of her son, George, it was remarked that Helen Stoneham Garde came up long before the season and stayed well afterwards. And that she was interested in things Chinese. Not the collections of vases and fans that so many clipper-captain ancestors had brought home, but earthenware jugs, wooden sandals, bows and arrows. And she studied the language. Not high Mandarin, apparently, but some guttural peasant dialect.

Relations with her husband were also a subject for discussion. They were rarely seen together. In 1906, the demented millionaire Harry Thaw shot the philandering architect Stanford White on the rooftop of Madison Square Garden in New York. And the men taking part in the Bachelors' Point Grand Regatta that year joked about how Simon Garde had been sitting two tables away. "As easily it might have been some other irate cuckold with a gun and Stanford White might be building our new yacht club right now."

At the 1912 Charity Ball for the Penquoct Landing Fisherfolk Relief Fund in Baxter's Grande Pavilion, the Gardes made a joint entrance. This was an event rare enough to upstage former President Teddy Roosevelt about to campaign as a Bull Moose.

Simon Garde, famously, mysteriously, died when the French liner Marseilles was sunk by a U-boat in 1916. Speculation flourished as to where he was bound and the nature of his mission. When his affairs, financial and otherwise, were untangled, his widow was said to be one of the wealthiest women in the nation.

A true child of New England, Helen Stoneham Garde never took her attention far from the money.

Horses were her other interest besides chinoiserie. She bred them and raced them. And they won. Much of her time was spent on the Mount Airey estates. Stories of her reclusivity abounded.

The truth, her granddaughter Julia knew, would have stunned even the most avid of the gossips. For around the turn of the century, Lucius had been replaced. A single arrow in the eye had left the old Rex sprawling on the stone threshold of the shrine. His helmet, his sword, and the matched pair of Colt Naval Revolvers which had been a gift from George Stoneham lay scattered like toys.

A new Rex, or more accurately a Regina, picked the silver mask out of the dust and put it on. This was Ki Mien from north China, a servant of the goddess of forests and woods and a huntress of huge ability. From a few allusions her grandmother dropped, Julia deduced that Helen Garde and the priestess had, over the next two decades, forged a union. Unknown to any mortal on the Island or in the world, they formed what was called in those days a Boston marriage.

In the years that Helen was occupied with Ki Mien, motorcars came to Mount Airey. Their staunchest supporter was George "Flash" Garde, Simon and Helen's son and only child. "A damned fine looking piece of American beef," as a visiting Englishman remarked.

Whether boy or man, Flash Garde could never drive fast enough. His custom-built Locomobile, all brass and polish and exhaust, was one of the hazards of Olympia Drive. "Racing to the next highball and low lady," it was said at Bachelors' Point. "Such a disappointment to his mother," they sighed at Baxter's. In fact, his mother seemed unbothered. Perhaps this was because she had, quite early on, arranged his marriage to Cissy Custis, the brightest of the famous Custis sisters. The birth of her granddaughter Julia guaranteed the only succession that really mattered to her.

TWO

In 1954, on the evening of the last day of summer, Julia had supper in Old Cottage kitchen with the Eders. Mrs. Eder made the same comforting chicken pie she remembered.

The nursery up at Joyous Garde was vast. On its walls were murals of the cat playing the fiddle and the cow jumping the Moon. It contained a puppet theater and a playhouse big enough to walk around in if you were small enough. But some of Julia's strongest memories of Mount Airey centered on Old Cottage.

The most vivid of all began one high summer day in the early 1920s. Her grandmother, as she sometimes did, had taken Julia out of the care of her English nurse and her French governess.

When it was just the two of them, Helen Stoneham Garde raised her right hand and asked, "Do you swear on the head of Ruggles The One-Eared Rabbit not to tell anybody what we will see today?"

Time with her grandmother was always a great adventure. Julia held up the stuffed animal worn featureless with love and promised. Then they went for a walk.

Julia was in a pinafore and sandals and held Ruggles by his remaining ear. The woman of incalculable wealth wore sensible shoes and a plain skirt and carried a picnic basket. Their walk was a long one for somebody with short legs. But finches sang, fledglings chirped on oak branches. Invisible through the leaves, a woodpecker drilled a maple trunk. Red squirrels and jays spread news of their passage.

Up the side of Mount Airey Helen led her grandchild, to the silent white pine grove that overlooked deep, still waters. The Cabin itself was all odd angles, gray shingles and stone under a red roof. It was Julia's first visit to the place.

Years later, when she was able to calculate such things, she realized that the dimensions of Stoneham Cabin did not quite pan out. But only a very persistent visitor would note that something was missing, that one room always remained unexplored.

That first time, on a sunny porch visible from no angle outside the Cabin, Helen Garde set down the basket, unpacked wine and sandwiches along with milk and a pudding for Julia.

Then she stood behind her granddaughter and put her hands on the child's shoulders.

"Julia, I should like you to meet Alcier, whom we call the Rex."

The man in the doorway was big and square-built with dark skin and curly black hair. His voice was low, and, like Mademoiselle Martine, he spoke French, though his was different. He wore sandals and a white shirt and trousers. The priest bowed and said, "I am happy to meet the tiny lady."

He was not frightening at all. On the contrary, morning doves fed out of his hand and he admired Ruggles

very much. When they had finished lunch, the Rex asked her grandmother if he could show Julia what lay inside.

The two of them passed through a curtain which the child could feel but couldn't see. She found herself in a round room with doors open in all directions. It was more than a small child could encompass. That first time, she was aware only of a cave opening onto a snowy winter morning and an avenue of trees with the moon above them.

Then Alcier faced her across a fire which flickered in the center of the room even on this warm day. He put on a silver mask that covered his face, with openings for his eyes, nostrils and mouth, and said, "Just as your grandmother welcomed me to her house, so, as servant of the gods, I welcome you to the Shrine of the Twelve Portals."

But even as gods spoke through him, Julia could see that Alcier smiled and that his eyes were kind. So she wasn't a bit afraid.

When it was time to say good-bye, the Rex stood on the porch and bowed slightly. A red-tailed hawk came down and sat on his wrist. Because of Alcier's manners, Julia was never frightened of the Rex. Even later when she had seen him wiping his machete clean.

As a small child, Julia didn't know why her grandmother made her promise not to tell anyone about the hawk and the invisible curtain and the nice black man who lived up in the cabin. But she didn't.

Children who tell adults everything are trying to make them as wise as they. Just as children who ask questions already know why the sky is blue and where the lost kitten has gone. What they need is the confirmation that the odd and frightening magic which has turned adults into giants has not completely addled their brains. That Julia didn't need such reassurance she attributed to her grandmother and to Alcier.

On her next visit, she learned to call the place with the flame the Still Room. She found out that it was a shrine, a place of the gods, and that Alcier was a priest, though much different from the ones in the Episcopal church. On the second visit she noticed Alcier's slight limp.

Her grandmother never went inside with them. On Julia's next few visits over several summers, she and Alcier sat on stools in the Still Room and looked out through the twelve doors. The Rex patrolled each of these entrances every day. He had a wife and, over the years, several children whom Julia met. Though she never was told exactly where they lived.

Soon, she had learned the name of what lay beyond each portal: jungle, cypress grove, dark forest, tundra, desert, rock-bound island, marsh, river valley, mountain, cave, plains, sandy shore.

At first she was accompanied up the mountain by her grandmother. Then, in the summer she turned twelve, Julia was allowed to go by herself. By that time, she and Alcier had gone through each of the doors and explored what lay beyond.

The hour of the day, the climate, even, Julia came to realize, the continent varied beyond each portal. All but one, in those years, had a shrine of some kind. This might be a grove or a cave, or a rocky cavern, with a fire burning and, somewhere nearby, a body of water still as a mirror.

The plains, even then, had become a wasteland of slag heaps and railroad sidings. Julia did not remember ever having seen it otherwise.

If she loved Alcier, and she did, it was not because he spared her the truth in his quiet voice and French from the Green Antilles. Early on he showed her the fascinating scar on his left leg and explained that he was an escaped slave, "Like each Rex past and to be."

He told her how he had been brought over the wide waters when he was younger than she, how he had grown up on a plantation in the Sugar Islands. How he had been a house servant, how he had run away and been brought back in chains with his leg torn open.

Julia already knew how one Rex succeeded another. But on that first summer she visited the cabin alone, she and Alcier had a picnic on the wide, empty beach on the Indochina Sea and she finally asked how it had happened.

Before he answered, Alcier drew the silver mask out of the satchel he always carried. Julia noticed that he hardly had to guide it. The mask moved by itself to his face. Then he spoke.

Where I lived, we had a public name for the bringer of wisdom. And a private name known only by

those to whom She spoke. When I was very young, She sent me dreams. But after I was taken beyond the sea, it was as if I was lost and She couldn't find me.

Then, after I had escaped and been recaptured and brought back to my owner, She appeared again and told me what to do. When I awoke, I followed Her command.

With the chains that bound my hands, I broke the neck of one who came to feed me. With that one's knife, I killed him who bore the keys. With the machete he dropped, I made the others flee. My left leg carried me well. My right was weak. I did not run as I once had.

In the forest, hunters chased me. But the goddess drew me into a mist and they passed by. Beside a stream, a hare came down to drink. I killed her and drank her blood. That morning, hunters went to my left and to my right. I slipped past them as before.

Then it was past midday. I stood in shadows on the edge of a glade. And all was silent and still. No leaf moved. In the sky directly above me, the sun and a hawk stood still. And I knew gods were at work here. I heard no sounds of hunters. For I was at the heart of the forest.

I saw the lodge made of wood and stone and I knew it was mine for the taking. If I killed the King of this place. I said a prayer to the goddess and let her guide me.

Not a leaf moved, not a bird sang. Then I saw the silver mask and knew the Rex was looking for me. My heart thumped. I commanded it to be still. The head turned one way then another. But slowly. The Rex was complacent, maybe, expecting to find and kill me easily. Or old and tired.

My goddess protected me. Made me invisible. Balanced on my good leg and my bad, I stood still as the Rex crossed the glade. I studied the wrinkled throat that hung below the mask. And knew I would have one chance. Just out of range of my knife, the priest hesitated for an instant. And I lunged. One great stride. I stumbled on my bad leg. But my arm carried true. The knife went into the throat. And I found it was a woman and that I was King in her place.

The shrine has existed as long as the gods. Along one of the paths someday will come the one who succeeds me, he told her. When the gods wish, that one will do away with me.

The Rex could speak of his own death the same way he might about a change of the seasons. But sometime after that, on a visit to the Still Room, Julia noticed derricks and steel tanks on the rocky island. When she asked Alcier about the destruction of another shrine, he seemed to wince, shook his head and said nothing.

THREE

At night in Old Cottage, years later, Julia looked out the windows into the dark. And saw Mount Airey by daylight. The cabin and the grove were gone. The bare ground they had stood on was cracked and eroded. She told Mrs. Eder that she was going to visit Stoneham Cabin next morning.

Falling asleep, Julia remembered the resort as it had been. As a child, she had learned to swim at Bachelors' Point and heard the story of Mount Airey being spun. Men tamed and in trunks, women liberated in one-piece suits, swam together now and talked of the useful Mr. Coolidge and, later, the traitorous Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

When she was fifteen, her father died in an accident. Nothing but the kindest condolences were offered. But Julia, outside an open door, heard someone say, "Ironic, Flash Garde's being cut down by a speeding taxi."

"In front of the Stork Club, though, accompanied by a young lady described as a 'hostess.' He would have wanted it that way." She heard them all laugh.

By then, cocktail hour had replaced afternoon tea at Baxter's. In tennis whites, men sat with their legs crossed, women with their feet planted firmly on the ground. Scandal was no longer whispered. Julia knew that her mother's remarriage less than two months after her father's death would have been fully discussed. As would the decision of this mother she hardly ever saw to stay in Europe.

Julia's grandmother attended her son's funeral and shed not a tear. Her attitude was called stoic by some. Unfeeling by others. No one at Baxter's or Bachelors' Point had the slightest idea that the greatest love of Helen Garde's life had, over their twenty years together, given her hints of these events yet to come.

After her father's death and her mother's remarriage, Julia visited the Rex. From behind the silver mask, Alcier spoke. "The gods find you well. You will wed happily with their blessings," he said. "The divine ones will shield your children."

Much as she adored Alcier, Julia thought of this as fortuneteller stuff. She began, in the way of the young, to consider the Rex and the Shrine of the Twelve Portals as being among the toys of childhood.

That fall, she went to Radcliffe as her grandmother wished. There, the thousand and one things of a wealthy young woman's life drove thoughts of the gods to the back of her mind. They didn't even reemerge on a sunny day on Brattle Street in her senior year.

Julia and her friend Grace Shipton were headed for tennis lessons. At the curb, a young man helped a co-ed from Vassar into the seat of an MG Midget. He looked up and smiled what would become a well-known smile. And looked again, surprised. It was the first time he had laid eyes on the woman he would marry.

Before this moment, Julia had experienced a girl's tender thoughts and serious flirtations. Then her eyes met those of the young man in the camel hair jacket. She didn't notice the boy who watched them, so she didn't see his mischievous smile or feel the arrow. But in a moment of radiance her heart was riven.

When Julia asked Grace who the young man was, something in her voice made the Shipton heiress look at her. "That's Robert Macauley," came the answer. "The son of that lace curtain thug who's governor of New York."

Julia Garde and the young Macauley were locked in each other's hearts. All that afternoon she could think of nothing else. Then came the telegram that read, "Sorry to intrude. But I can't live without you."

"Until this happened, I never believed in this," she told him the next afternoon when they were alone and wrapped in each others' arms.

Robert proposed a few days later. "The neighbors will burn shamrocks on your front lawn," he said when Julia accepted.

She laughed, but knew that might be true. And didn't care.

Polite society studied Helen Stoneham Garde's face for the anger and outrage she must feel. The heiress to her fortune had met and proposed to marry an Irishman, a Catholic, A DEMOCRAT!

But when Julia approached her grandmother in the study at Joyous Garde and broke the news, Helen betrayed nothing. Her eyes were as blue as the wide Atlantic that lay beyond the French doors. And as unknowable.

"You will make a fine-looking couple," she said. "And you will be very happy."

"You knew."

"Indirectly. You will come to understand. The wedding should be small and private. Making it more public would serve no immediate purpose."

"Best political instincts I've encountered in a Republican," the governor of the Empire State remarked on hearing this. "Be seen at Mass," he told his son. "Raise the children in the Church. With the Garde money behind you, there'll be no need to muck about with concrete contracts."

"There will be a war and he will be a fighter pilot," Helen told Julia after she had met Robert. Before her granddaughter could ask how she knew, she said impatiently, "All but the fools know a war is coming. And young men who drive sports cars always become pilots."

It was as she said. Robert was in Naval Flight Training at Pensacola a month after Pearl Harbor. The couple's song was, "They Can't Take that Away from Me."

Their son Timothy was not three and their daughter Helen was just born when Robert Macauley sailed from San Francisco on the aircraft carrier Constellation. Julia saw him off, then found herself part of the great, shifting mass of soldiers and sailors home on leave, women returning after saying good-bye to husbands, sons, boyfriends.

On a crowded train, with sailors sleeping in the luggage racks, she and a Filipino nurse cried about their men in the South Pacific. She talked with a woman, barely forty, who had four sons in the army.

Julia felt lost and empty. She reread *The Metamorphoses* and *The Odyssey* and thought a lot about Alcier and the Still Room. It had been two years since she had visited Mount Airey. She felt herself drawn there all that winter.

Early in spring, she left her children in the care of nurses and her grandmother and went by train from New York to Boston and from Boston to Bangor. She arrived in the morning and Mr. Eder met her at the station. They drove past houses with victory gardens and V's in the windows if family members were in the service.

A sentry post had been established on the mainland end of Wenlock Sound Bridge. The Army Signal Corps had taken over Bachelors' Point for the duration of the war.

The bar at Baxter's was an officers' club. On Olympia Drive, some of the great houses had been taken for the duration. Staff cars, jeeps, canvas-topped trucks stood in the circular drives.

It was just after the thaw. Joyous Garde stood empty. Patches of snow survived on shady corners of the terraces. The statues looked as if they still regretted their lack of clothes.

Julia found a pair of rubber boots that fit and set off immediately for Stoneham Cabin. In summer, Mount Airey was nature in harness, all bicycle paths and hiking parties. In Mud Time, dry beds ran with icy water, flights of birds decorated a gray sky, lake-sized puddles had appeared, the slopes lay leafless and open.

Julia saw the stranger as she approached the cabin. But this was her land and she did not hesitate.

Sallow-faced, clean-shaven with the shadow of a beard, he was expecting her. When she stepped onto the porch, he came to attention. She knew that sometime in the recent past he had murdered Alcier.

"Corporal John Smalley, Her Britannic Majesty's London Fusiliers," he said. "Anxious to serve you, my lady."

In the Still Room, when they entered, Julia looked around, saw wreckage in the desert shrine, smashed tanks on the sand. Dead animals lay around the oasis and she guessed the water was poisoned.

The murderer put on the silver mask and spoke. His voice rang. Julia felt a chill.

"It's by the will of the gods that I'm here today. By way of a nasty scrap in the hills. Caught dead to rights and every one of us to die. Officers down. No great moment. But the sergeant major was gone. A spent round ricocheted off my Worsley helmet and I was on me back looking up.

I lay still but I could hear screams and thought it was up and done with and I would dance on hot coals for as long as it took. For cheating and philandering and the cove I stabbed in Cheapside. And I prayed as I'd never done.

Then He appeared. Old Jehovah as I thought, all fiery eyes and smoke behind his head. Then He spoke and it seems it was Mars himself. I noticed he wore a helmet and carried a flaming sword. He told me I was under His protection and nothing would happen to me.

Good as His word. No one saw when I rose up and took my Enfield. He led the way all through the night, talking in my ear. About the shrine and the priest that lives here.

A runaway slave it always is who kills the old priest and takes over. And I choked at that. Not the killing, But Britains never will be slaves and all.

Lord Mars told me enlistment in Her Majesty's Army came close enough. New thinking, new blood was what was needed. Led me to a hill shrine before dawn. Left me to my own devices.

The shrine's that one through that portal behind your ladyship. A grove with the trees all cut short by the wind and a circle of stone and a deep pool. When I was past the circle and beside the pool, the wind's sound was cut off and it was dead still.

A path led down to the pool and on it was a couple of stones and a twig resting on them. And I knew not to disturb that. So I went to ground. Oiled my Enfield. Waited. Took a day or two. But I was patient.

Ate my iron rations and drank water from the pool.

When he came, it was at dusk and he knew something was up. A formidable old bugger he was. But He trailed off. Removed the mask. "You knew him. Since you were a little girl, I hear."

Julia's eyes burned. "He had a wife and children."

"I've kept them safe. He'd put a sum aside for them from shrine offerings and I saw they had that. Got my own bit of bother and strife tucked away. We know in this job we aren't the first. And won't be the last. Living on a loan of time so to speak."

He pointed to the ruined shrines. "The gods have gotten wise that things will not always go their way."

The corporal told her about defense works and traps he was building. Like a tenant telling the landlady

about improvements he is making, thought Julia. She knew that was the way it would be between them and that she would always miss her noble Alcier.

Just before she left, Smalley asked, "I wonder if I could see your son, m'lady. Sometime when it's convenient."

Julia said nothing. She visited her grandmother, eighty and erect, living in Taos in a spare and beautiful house. Her companion was a woman from the Pueblo, small, silent and observant.

"Timothy is the whole point of our involvement," said the old woman. She sat at a table covered with breeding charts and photos of colts. "You and I are the precursors."

"He's just a child."

"As were you when you were taken to the shrine. Think of how you loved Alcier. He would have wanted you to do this. And you shall have your rewards. Just as I have."

"And they are?"

"At this point in your life, you would despise them if I told you. In time, they will seem more than sufficient."

Julia knew that she would do as the Rex had asked. But that summer Robert was stationed in Hawaii. So she went out to be with him instead of going to Mount Airey. The next August, she gave birth to Cecilia, her second daughter.

The year after that, Robert was in a naval hospital in California, injured in a crash landing on a carrier flight deck. His shoulder was smashed but healed nicely. A three-inch gash ran from his left ear to his jaw. It threw his smile slightly off-kilter.

He seemed distant, even in bed. Tempered like a knife. And daring. As if he too sensed death and destiny and the will of the gods.

When the war was over Robert had a Navy Cross, a trademark smile, and a scar worth, as he put it, "Fifty thousand votes while they still remember."

Over his own father's objections, the young Macauley ran for Congress from the West Side of Manhattan. The incumbent, one of the old man's allies, was enmeshed in a corruption scandal. Robert won the primary and the election. His lovely wife and three young children were features of his campaign. Julia paid a couple of fast visits to the cabin. On one of them the Corporal told her, "I know it's a kid will be my undoing. But it will be a little girl." On another he said, "The gods would take it as a great favor if you let me speak to your son."

Thus it was that one lovely morning the following summer, Julia left her two little daughters in the huge nursery at Joyous Garde and brought Timothy to Stoneham Cabin. As if it were part of a ritual, she had Mrs. Eder pack lunch. Julia stuck a carton of the Luckies she knew the Corporal favored into the basket and started up the hill. Her son, age seven and startlingly like the father he rarely saw, darted around, firing a toy gun at imaginary enemies.

The corporal, tanned and wiry, sat on the back porch, smoking and cleaning his rifle. Tim stared at him, wide-eyed. "Are you a commando?" he asked after the introductions were made and he'd learned that their guest was English.

"Them's Navy," Smalley said. "And I'm a soldier of the Queen. Or King as it is."

Julia stared down at Mirror Lake. Except when Smalley spoke, she could imagine that Alcier was still there. Something even more intense than this must have happened to her grandmother after the death of Ki Mien.

"Have you killed anybody?"

"Killing's never a nice thing, lad. Sometimes a necessity. But never nice," Smalley said. "Now what do you say that we ask your mother if I can show you around?"

Later, on their way back to the cottage, Timothy was awestruck. "He showed me traps he had set! In a jungle! He told me I was going to be a great leader!"

As her grandmother had with her, Julia demanded his silence. Timothy agreed and kept his word. In fact, he rarely mentioned the cabin and the shrine. Julia wondered if Smalley had warned him not to. Then and later, she was struck by how easily her son accepted being the chosen of the gods.

Fashion had passed Mount Airey by. That summer, the aging bucks at Bachelors' Point drawled on

about how Dewey was about to thrash Truman. And how the Rockefellers had donated their estate to the National Parks Service.

"What else now that the Irish have gotten onto the island?"

"And not even through the back door."

That summer, Helen Stoneham Garde stayed in New Mexico. But Joyous Garde jumped. "Prominent Democrats from the four corners of the nation come to be bedazzled," as Congressman Macauley murmured to his wife.

Labor leaders smoked cigars in the oak and leather splendor of Simon Garde's study. Glowing young Prairie Populists drank with entrenched Carolina Dixiecrats. The talk swirled around money and influence, around next year's national elections and Joe Kennedy's boy down in Massachusetts.

Above them, young Macauley with his lovely wife stood on the curve of the pink and marble stairs. Julia had grown interested in this game. It reminded her of her grandmother's breeding charts and racehorses. The following summer, Helen Stoneham Garde returned to her estate. Afternoons at Baxter's were drowsy now and dowager-ridden.

"Carried in a litter like royalty."

"Up the mountain to the cabin."

"Returned there to die it seems."

"Her granddaughter and grandson-in-law will have everything." Shudders ran around the room.

On an afternoon of warm August sun and a gentle sea breeze, Julia sat opposite her grandmother on the back porch of Stoneham Cabin. "Only the rich can keep fragments of the past alive," Helen told her. "To the uneducated eye, great wealth can be mistaken for magic."

Below them, a party had picnicked next to Mirror Lake a bit earlier. Hikers had passed though. But at the moment, the shore was deserted, the surface undisturbed. The Rex was not in evidence.

Helen's eye remained penetrating, her speech clear. "A peaceful death," she said, "is one of the gifts of the gods."

Julia wished she had thought to ask her grandmother more questions about how their lives had been altered by the shrine. She realized that her own introduction to it at so young an age had occurred because Helen could not stand dealing with the man who had murdered the one closest to her.

The two sat in a long silence. Then the old woman said, "My dearest child, I thought these might be of interest," and indicated a leather folder on the table.

Julia opened it and found several photos. She stared, amazed at the tree-lined Cambridge Street and the young couple agape at their first glimpse of each other. She couldn't take in all the details at once: the deliveryman hopping from his cart, the elderly gent out for a stroll, the boy who walked slightly behind what must have been his parents. Small, perhaps foreign in his sandals, he alone saw the tall, dark-haired young man, the tall blond young woman, stare at each other in wonder.

"You knew before....," Julia said, looking up. She didn't dare breathe. Her grandmother still smiled slightly. Her eyes were wide. Beside her stood a figure in a silver mask. Tall and graceful. Not Corporal Smalley. Not at all. He wore only a winged helmet and sandals. Hermes, Lord Mercury, touched Helen with the silver caduceus staff he carried.

Julia caught her breath. Her grandmother slumped slightly. Helen Stoneham Garde's eyes were blank. Her life was over. The figure was gone.

FOUR

"First day of Autumn," Martha Eder said when Julia came down the Old Cottage stairs the morning after her return. A picnic basket had been packed. Julia had not brought cigarettes for Smalley, had reason to think they weren't necessary.

The air was crisp but the sun was warm enough that all Julia needed was a light jacket. As she set out, Henry Eder interrupted his repair of a window frame. "I can go with you, see if anything needs doing." When she declined, he nodded and went back to his work.

Grief was a private matter to Mainers. Besides, even after three quarters of a century, Julia's family were

still "summer folk" and thus unfathomable.

The walk up Mount Airey was magnificent. Julia had rarely seen it this late in the year. Red and gold leaves framed green pine. Activity in the trees and undergrowth was almost frantic. A fox, intent on the hunt, crossed her path.

After her grandmother's death, she had returned to the cabin only on the occasions when she brought Tim. In the last few years, she hadn't been back at all.

She remembered a day when she and Robert sat in the study of their Georgetown mansion and Timothy knocked on the door. Just shy of twelve, he wore his Saint Anthony's Priory uniform of blazer and short pants. In 1951, the American upper class kept its boys in shorts for as long as possible. A subtle means of segregating them from the masses.

Representative Robert Macauley (D-NY) was maneuvering for a Senate nomination in what promised to be a tough year for Democrats. He looked up from the speech he was reviewing. Julia, busy with a guest list, watched them both.

Timothy said, "What I would like for my birthday this year is a crewcut. Lots of the kids have them. And I want long pants when I'm not in this stupid monkey suit. And this summer I want to be allowed to go up to the cabin on Mount Airey by myself."

Julia caught the amusement and look of calculation in her husband's eyes. Did his kid in short pants gain him more votes from women who thought it was adorable than he lost from men who thought it was snooty?

"In matters like this, we defer to the upper chamber," he said with a quick, lopsided smile and nodded to Julia.

She felt all the pangs of a mother whose child is growing up. But she negotiated briskly. The first demand was a throwaway as she and her son both knew.

"No crewcut. None of the boys at your school have them. The brothers don't approve." The brothers made her Protestant skin crawl. But they were most useful at times like this.

"Long pants outside school? Please!" he asked. "Billy Chervot and his brothers all get to wear blue jeans!" Next year would be Timothy's last with the brothers. Then he'd be at Choate and out in the world.

"Perhaps. For informal occasions."

"Jeans!"

"We shall see." He would be wearing them, she knew, obviously beloved, worn ones. On a drizzly morning in Maine. His hair would be short. He'd have spent that summer in a crewcut.

Julia had studied every detail of a certain photo. She estimated Tim's age at around fifteen. The shot showed him as he approached Stoneham Cabin. He wore his father's old naval flight jacket, still too big for him, though he had already gotten tall.

"Mount Airey?" the eleven-year-old Tim asked.

She heard herself saying. "Yes. That should be fine. Check in with Mrs. Eder when you're going. And tell her when you come back. Be sure to let me know if anything up there needs to be done."

Her son left the room smiling. "What's the big deal about that damned cabin?" her husband asked.

Julia shrugged. "The Wasps of the Eastern United States," she said and they both laughed. The title of her grandfather's tome was a joke between them. It referred to things no outsider could ever understand or would want to.

Julia returned to her list. She had memorized every detail of the photo of their son. He had tears in his eyes. The sight made her afraid for them all.

Her husband held out a page of notes. "Take a look. I'm extending an olive branch to Mrs. Roosevelt. Her husband and my dad disagreed." He grinned. Franklin Roosevelt, patrician reformer and Timothy Macauley, machine politician, had famously loathed each other.

Julia stared at her husband's handwriting. Whatever the words said would work. The third photo in the leather folder her grandmother had given her showed FDR's widow on a platform with Robert. Julia recognized a victory night.

She could trace a kind of tale with the photos. She met her husband. He triumphed. Their son went for

comfort to the Rex. A story was told. Or, as in The Iliad, part of one.

That day in the study in Georgetown, she looked at Robert Macauley, in the reading glasses he never wore publicly, and felt overwhelming tenderness. Julia could call up every detail of the photo of their meeting.

Only the boy in the background looked directly at the couple who stared into each other's eyes. He smiled. His hand was raised. Something gold caught the sun. A ring? A tiny bow? Had Robert and she been hit with Eros's arrow? All she knew was that the love she felt was very real.

How clever they were, the gods, to give mortals just enough of a glimpse of their workings to fascinate. But never to let them know everything.

That summer, her son went up Mount Airey alone. It bothered Julia as one more sign he was passing out of her control. "The gods won't want to lose this one, m'lady," Smalley had told her.

Over the next few years, Timothy entered puberty, went away to school, had secrets. His distance increased. When the family spent time at Joyous Garde, Tim would go to the cabin often and report to her in privacy. Mundane matters like "Smalley says the back eaves need to be reshingled." Or vast, disturbing ones like, "That jungle portal is unpassable now. Smalley says soon ours will be the only one left."

Then came a lovely day in late August 1954. Sun streamed through the windows of Joyous Garde, sailboats bounced on the water. In the ballroom, staff moved furniture. A distant phone rang. A reception was to be held that evening. Senator Macauley would be flying in from Buffalo that afternoon.

Julia's secretary, her face frozen and wide-eyed, held out a telephone and couldn't speak. Against all advice, trusting in the good fortune which had carried him so far, her husband had taken off in the face of a sudden Great Lakes storm. Thunder, lightning, and hail had swept the region. Radio contact with Robert Macauley's one-engine plane had been lost.

The crash site wasn't found until late that night. The death wasn't confirmed until the next morning. When Julia looked for him, Timothy was gone. The day was cloudy with a chill drizzle. She stood on the porch of Old Cottage a bit later when he returned. His eyes red. Dressed as he was in the photo.

As they fell into each others' arms, Julia caught a glimpse that was gone in an instant. Her son, as in the photo she had studied so often, approached Stoneham Cabin. This time, she saw his grief turn to surprise and a look of stunned betrayal. Timothy didn't notice.

The two hugged and sobbed in private sorrow before they turned toward Joyous Garde and the round of public mourning. As they did, he said, "You go up there from now on. I never want to go back."

FINALE

Julia approached the grove and cabin on that first morning of Fall. She was aware that it lay within her power to destroy this place. Julia had left a sealed letter to be shown to Timothy if she failed to return. Though she knew that was most unlikely to happen.

A young woman, casual in slacks and a blouse, stood on the porch. In one hand she held the silver mask. "I'm Linda Martin," she said. "Here by the will of the gods."

Julia recognized Linda as contemporary and smart. "An escaped slave?" she asked.

"In a modern sense, perhaps." The other woman shrugged and smiled. "A slave of circumstances."

"I've had what seem to be visions." Julia said as she stepped onto the porch. "About my son and about this property."

"Those are my daughter's doing, I'm afraid. Sally is nine," Linda was apologetic yet proud. "I've asked her not to. They aren't prophecy. More like possibility."

"They felt like a promise. And a threat."

"Please forgive her. She has a major crush on your son. Knows everything he has done. Or might ever do. He was very disappointed last month when he was in pain and wanted to talk to the corporal. And found US."

"Please forgive Tim. One's first Rex makes a lasting impression." Julia was surprised at how much she sounded like her grandmother.

The living room of Stoneham Cabin still smelled of pine. The scent reminded Julia of Alcier and her first visit. As before, a door opened where no door had been. She and Linda passed through an invisible veil and the light from the twelve portals mingled and blended in the Still Room.

"Sally, this is Julia Garde Macauley. Timothy's mother."

The child who sat beyond the flame was beautiful. She wore a blue tunic adorned with a silver boy riding a dolphin. She bowed slightly. "Hello, Mrs. Macauley. Please explain to Timothy that the Corporal knew what happened was Fate and not me."

Julia remembered Smalley saying, "It's a child will be my undoing." She smiled and nodded.

Linda held out the mask which found its way to Sally's face.

"This is something I dreamed about your son."

What Julia saw was outdoors and in winter. It was men mostly. White mostly. Solemn. Formally dressed. A funeral? No. A man in judicial robes held a book. He was older, but Julia recognized an ally of her husband's, a young Congressman from Oregon. This was the future.

"A future," said the voice from behind the mask. Julia froze. The child was uncanny.

Another man, seen from behind, had his hand raised as he took the oath of office. An inauguration. Even with his back turned, she knew her son.

"And I've seen this. Like a nightmare." Flames rose. The cabin and the grove burned.

"I don't want that. This is our home." She was a child and afraid.

Later, Linda and Julia sat across a table on the rear porch and sipped wine. The foliage below made Mirror Lake appear to be ringed with fire.

"It seems that the gods stood aside and let my husband die. Now they want Tim."

"Even the gods can't escape Destiny," Linda said. "They struggle to change it by degrees."

She looked deep into her glass. "I have Sally half the year. At the cusps of the four seasons. The rest of the time she is with the Great Mother. Once her abilities were understood, that was as good an arrangement as I could manage. Each time she's changed a little more."

Another mother who must share her child, Julia thought. We have much to talk about. How well the Immortals know how to bind us to their plans. She would always resent that. But she was too deeply involved not to comply. Foreknowledge was an addiction.

A voice sang, clear as mountain air. At first Julia thought the words were in English and that the song came from indoors. Then she realized the language was ancient Greek and that she heard it inside her head.

The song was about Persephone, carried off to the Underworld, about Ganymede abducted by Zeus. The voice had an impossible purity. Hypnotic, heartbreaking, it sang about Time flowing like a stream and children taken by the gods.