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CONFUSIONS OF THE GOLDEN TRAVEL

A Chapter from "Something About Eve"

By James Branch Cabell

(Gerald Musgrave, in his adventuring from his native Lichfield toward his appointed kingdom in Antan, passes through the land of Dersam, and in that country restores to the sacred Mirror of Caer Omn its vanished magic. He then observes this giant mirror to shine everywhere with a clear golden glowing, and in its depths he perceives a throng of living beings such as he had not known in Lichfield.)

BUT when three huge men beckoned to him, and Gerald had moved forward, he found, with wholly tolerant surprise, that this mirror was in reality a warmish golden mist, through which he entered into the power of these three giant blacksmiths, and into the shackles of adamant with which they bound him fast to a gray lichen-crusting crag, the topmost crag above a very wide ravine, among a desert waste of mountain tops; and he entered, too, into that noble indignation which now possessed Gerald utterly. For it was Heaven he was defying, he who was an apostate god, a god unfrightened by the animosity of his divine fellows. He had preserved, somehow, — in ways which he could not very clearly recall, but of which he stayed wholly proud, — all men and women from destruction by the harshness and injustice of Heaven. He only of the gods had pitied that futile, naked, cowering race which lived, because of their defencelessness among so many other stronger animals, in dark and shallow caverns, like ants in an ant-hill. He had made those timid, scatter-brained, two-legged animals human: he had taught them to build houses and boats; to make and to employ strong knives and far-smiting arrows against the fangs and claws with which Heaven had equipped the other animals; and to tame horses and dogs to serve them in their hunting for food. He

had taught them to write and to figure and to compound salves and medicines for their hurts, and even to foresee the future more or less. All arts that were among the human race had come from Prometheus, and all these benefits were now preserved for his so inadequate, dear puppets, through the nineteen Books in which Prometheus had set down the secrets of all knowledge and all beauty and all contentment, — he who after he had discovered to mortals so many inventions had no invention to preserve himself. Prometheus, in brief, had created and had preserved men and women, in defiance of Heaven's fixed will. For that sacrilege Prometheus atoned, among the ends of earth, upon this lichen-crusting gray crag. He suffered for the eternal redemption of mankind, the first of all poets, of those makers who delight to shape and to play with puppets, and the first of men's Saviors. And his was a splendid martyrdom, for the winged daughters of old Ocean fluttered everywhere about him in the golden Scythian air, like wailing sea-gulls, and a grief-crazed woman with the horns of a cow emerging from her discolored yellow hair paused to cherish him, and then went toward the rising place of the sun to endure her allotted share of Heaven's injustice.

But he who was the first of poets burst Heaven's shackles like packthread, ridding himself of all ties save the little red band which yet clung about one finger, and rising, passed to his throne between the bronze lions which guarded each of its six steps, and so sat beneath a golden disk. All wisdom now belonged to the rebel against Heaven, and his was all earthly power: the fame of the fine poetry and the comeliness and the grandeur of Solomon was known in Assyria and Yamen, in both Egypts and in Persepolis, in Karnak

and in Chalcedon, and among all the isles of the Mediterranean. He sported with genii and with monsters of the air and of the waters; the Elementals served King Solomon when he began to build, as a bribe to Heaven, a superb temple which was engraved and carved and inlaid everywhere with cherubim and lions and pineapples and oxen and the two triangles. There was no power like Solomon's: his ships returned to him three times each year with the tribute of Nineveh and Tyre and Parvaam and Mesopotamia and Katuar; the kings of all the world were the servants of King Solomon: the spirits of fire and the lords of the air brought tribute to him, too, from behind the Pleiades. His temple now was half completed. But upon his ring finger stayed always the band of blood-colored asteria upon which was written, "All things pass away". These glittering and soft and sweet-smelling things about him, as he knew always, were only loans which by and by would be taken away from him by Heaven. He turned from these transient things to drunkenness and to the embraces of women, he hunted forgetfulness upon the breasts of nine hundred women, he quested after oblivion among the most beautiful women of Judea and Israel, of Moab and of Ammon and of Bactria, of Baalbec and of Babylon. These madresses enraptured the flesh of Solomon, but always the undrugged vision of his mind regarded the fixed will of Heaven, "These things shall pass away". The temple which he had been building lacked now only one log to be completed. He cast that gray and lichen-cruste'd cedar log into the Pool of Bethesda: it sank as though it had been a stone: and Solomon bade his Israelites set fire to the temple which all these years he had been building as a bribe to Heaven.

But when the temple burned, it became more than a temple, for not only the flanks of Mt. Moriah were ablaze, a whole city was burning there, and its name was Ilioupolis. He aided in the pillaging of it: the golden armor of Achilles fell to his share. In such heroic gear, he, like a fox hidden in a slain lion's skin, took ship to Ismaurus, which city he treacherously laid waste and robbed: thence he passed to the land of the Lotophagi, where he viewed with mildly curious, cool

scorn the men who fed upon oblivion. He was captured by a very bad smelling, one-eyed giant, from whom he through his wiles escaped. There was no one anywhere more quick in wiles than was Odysseus, Laertes' son. He toiled unhurt through a nightmare of pitfalls and buffetings, among never-tranquil seas, outwitting the murderous Laestrigonians, and hoodwinking Circe and the feathery-legged Sirens and fond Calypso: he evaded the man-eating ogress with six heads: he passed among the fluttering, gray, squeaking dead, and got the better of Hades' sullen overlords and ugly spectres, through his un-failing wiliness, — he who was still a poet, making the supreme poem of each man's journeying through an everywhere inimical and betraying world, he who was pursued by the wrath of Heaven which Poseidon had stirred up against Odysseus. But always the wiles of much enduring Odysseus evaded the full force of Heaven's buffetings, so that in the end he won home to Ithaca and to his notorious wife; and then, when the suitors of Penelope had been killed, he went, as dead Tiresias had commanded, into a mountainous country carrying upon his shoulder an oar, and leading a tethered ram, for it was yet necessary to placate Heaven. Beyond Epirus, among the high hills of the Thesproteans, he sat the oar upright in the stony ground, and turning toward the ram which he now meant to sacrifice to Poseidon, he found Heaven's amiability to remain unpurchased, because the offering of Odysseus, who was a rebel against Heaven's will to destroy him, had been refused, and the ram had vanished.

But in his hand was still the rope with which he had led this ram, and in his other hand was a bag containing silver money, and in his heart, now that he had again turned northerly, to find in place of the oar an elder-tree in flower, now in his heart was the knowledge that no man could travel beyond him in hopelessness and in infamy. He remembered all that he had put away, all of which he had denied and betrayed, all the kindly wonders which he had witnessed between Galilee and Jerusalem, where the carpenters of the Sanhedrin were now fashioning, from a great lichen-cruste'd cedar log found float-

ing in the pool of Bethesda, that cross which would be set up to-morrow morning upon Mt. Calvary. Then Judas flung down the accursed silver and the rope with which he had come thither to destroy himself, because an infamy so complete as his must first be expressed with fitting words. It was a supreme infamy, it was man's masterpiece in the way of iniquity, it was the reply of a very fine poet to Heaven's proffered truce after so many æons of tormenting men causelessly: it was a thing not to be spoken of but sung. He heaped great sheets of lead upon his chest, he slit the cord beneath his tongue, he tormented himself with clysters and with purges and in all other needful ways, so that his voice might be at its most effective when he sang toward Heaven about his infamy.

But when he sang of his offense against Heaven, he likened his hatefulness to that of very horrible offenders in yet elder times, he compared his sin to that of Œdipus who sinned inexpiably with his mother, and to that of Orestes whom Furies pursued forever because he had murdered his mother. But it was not of any Jocasta or of any Clytemnestra he was thinking, rather it was of his own mother, of that imperious, so beautiful Agrippina whom he had feared and had loved with a greater passion than anyone ought to arouse in an emperor, and whom he had murdered. Nothing could put Agrippina out of his thoughts. It availed no whit that he was lord of all known lands, and the owner of the one house in the world fit for so fine a poet to live in, a house entirely overlaid with gold and adorned everywhere with jewels and with mother of pearl, a house that quite dwarfed the tawdry little Oriental hovel which Solomon had builded as a bribe to Heaven, because this was a house so rich and ample that it had three-storied porticos a mile in length, and displayed upon its front portico not any such trumpery as an Ark of the Covenant but a colossal statue of that Nero Claudius Cæsar who was the supreme poet the world had ever known. Yet nothing could put Agrippina out of Nero's thoughts. From the satiating of no lust, howsoever delicate or brutal, and from the committing of no enormity, and from the loveliness of none of his poems, could he get happiness and

real peace of mind. He hungered only for Agrippina, he wanted back her detested scoldings and intermeddlings, he reviled the will of Heaven which had thwarted the desires of a fine poet by making this so beautiful, proud woman his mother, and he practised those magical rites which would summon Agrippina from the dead.

But when she returned to him, incredibly beautiful, and pale and proud, then the divine Augusta drew him implacably downward among the dead, and so into the corridors of a hollow mountain. This place was thronged with all high-hearted worshippers of the frightening, discrowned, imperious, so beautiful woman who had drawn him thither resistlessly, and in this Hörselberg he lived in continued splendor and in a more dear lewdness, and he still made songs, only now it was as Tannhäuser that the damned acclaimed him as supreme among poets. But Heaven would not let him rest even among these folk who had put away all thought of Heaven. Heaven troubled Tannhäuser with doubts, with premonitions, even with repentance, Heaven with such instruments lured this fine poet from the scented Hörselberg into a bleak snow-wrapped world: and presently he shivered too under the cold wrath of Pope Urban, bells rang, a great book was cast down upon the pavement of white and blue slabs, and the candles were being snuffed out, as the now formally excommunicated poet fled westerly from Rome pursued by the ever-present malignity of Heaven.

But from afar he saw the sapless dry rod break miraculously into blossom, and he saw the messengers of a frightened Bishop of Rome (with whom also Heaven was having its malicious sport) riding every whither in search of him, bearing Heaven's pardon to the sinner whom they could not find. For the poet sat snug in a thieves' kitchen, regaling himself with its sour but very potent wines and with its frank, light-fingered girls. Yet a gibbet stood uncomfortably near to the place: upon bright days the shadow of this gallows fell across the threshold of the room in which they rather squalidly made merry. Death seemed to wait always within arm's reach, pilfering all, with fingers more

light and nimble than those which a girl runs furtively through the pockets of the put-by clothing of her client in amour. Death nipped the throats of ragged poor fellows high in the air yonder, and death very lightly drew out of the sun's light and made at one with Charlemagne all the proud kings of Aragon and Cyprus and Bohemia, and death casually tossed aside the tender sweet flesh which had been as white as the snows of last winter, and was as little regarded now, of such famous tits as Héloïse and Thaïs and Queen Bertha Broadfoot. Time was a wind which carried all away. Time was preparing by and by (still at the instigation of ruthless Heaven) to make an end even to François Villon, who was still so fine a poet, for all that time had made of him a wine-soaked, rickety, hairless, lice-ridden and diseased sneakthief whose food was paid for by the professional earnings of a stale and flatulent harlot. For time ruined all: time was man's eternal strong ravager, time was the flail with which Heaven pursued all men whom Heaven had not yet destroyed, ruthlessly.

But time might yet be confounded: and it was about that task he set. For Mephistophilus had allotted him twenty-four years of wholly untrammelled living, and into that period might be heaped the spoilage of centuries. He took unto himself eagle's wings and strove to fathom all the causes of the misery which was upon earth and of the enviousness of Heaven. That which time had destroyed, Johan Faustus brought back into being: he was a poet who worked in necromancy, his puppets were the most admirable and lovely of the dead. Presently he was restoring through art magic even those lost nineteen books in which were the secrets of all beauty and all knowledge and all contentment, the secrets for which Prometheus had paid. But the professors at the university would have nothing to do with these nineteen books. It was feared that into these books restored by the devil's aid, the devil might slyly have inserted something pernicious: and besides, the professors said, there were already enough books from which the students could learn Greek and Hebrew and Latin. So they let perish again all those

secrets of beauty and knowledge and contentment which the world had long lost. Now Johan Faustus laughed at the ineradicable folly with which Heaven had smitten all men, a folly against which the clear-sighted poet fought in vain. But Johan Faustus at least was wise, and there had never been any other beauty like this which now stood before him within arm's reach (as surely as did death), now that with a yet stronger conjuration he had wrested from all-devouring time even the beauty of Argive Helen.

But when he would have touched the Swan's daughter, the delight of gods and men, she vanished, precisely as a touched bubble is shattered into innumerable sparkling bits, and over three thousand of them he pursued and captured in all quarters of the earth, for, as he said of himself, Don Juan Tenorio had the heart of a poet, which is big enough to be in love with the whole world, and like Alexander he could but wish for other spheres to which he might extend his conquests, and each one of these sparkling bits of womanhood glittered with something of that lost Helen's loveliness, yet, howsoever various and resistless were their charms, and howsoever gaily he pursued them, singing ever-new songs, and swaggeringly gallant, in his fair, curly wig and his gold-laced coat adorned with flame-colored ribbons, yet he, the eternal pursuer, was in turn pursued by the malevolence of Heaven, in, as it seemed, the shape of an avenging horseman who drew ever nearer unhurriedly, until at last the clash of rapiers and the pleasant strumming of mandolins were not any longer to be heard in that golden and oleander-scented twilight, — because of those ponderous, unhurried hoof beats, which had made every other noise inaudible, — and until at last he perceived that both the rider and the steed were of moving stone, of an unforgotten stone which was gray and lichen-crustled.

But when fearlessly he encountered the over-towering statue, and had grasped the horse about its round cold neck, he saw that the stone rider was lifeless, and was but the dumb and staring effigy of a big man in armour which was inset with tinsel and with bits of colored glass. It was the bungled copy and the parody of a magnanimous,

great-hearted dream that he was grasping, and yet it was a part of him, who had been a poet once, but was now a battered old pawnbroker, for in some way, as he incommunicably knew, this parodied and not ever comprehended Redeemer and he were blended, and they were, somehow, laboring in unison to serve a shared purpose. He derided and he came too near to a mystery which he distrusted, and which yet (without his preference having been consulted in the affair) remained a part of him, as it was a part of all poets, even of a cashiered poet, and a part very vitally necessary to the existence of a Jurgen. A Jurgen had best not meddle with

such matters one half-second sooner than that dimly foreseen, inevitable need arose for a Jurgen also to be utilized in the service of this mystery, without having his preference in the affair consulted. The aging pawnbroker was a little afraid. He climbed gingerly down from the tall pedestal of Manuel the Redeemer, he descended from that ambiguous tomb upon which he was trampling, he stepped rather hastily backward from that carved fragment of the crag of Prometheus. He stepped backward, treading beyond the confines of the golden mirror which was worshipped at Caer Omn; and he was thus released from its magic.

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