

A MATTER OF DEATH AND LIFE

But let me tell you the most peculiar circumstance of our expedition to the dark mountains of Dis. I have already described the thick dark forest through which we hacked our way for seven long sunless days, and of the howling and banshee screeches of those seven long nights which barely interspersed them.

We came at last, on the eighth day towards evening, to the bank of a wide and deep river, whose calm surface belied the swift current which carried to the edge of the mountains. Because the river was so deep and uncluttered by any rocks or overhanging trees, and seemingly devoid of any wildlife, it made no sound as it flowed past. We stumbled out of the dark dark forest and suddenly - there it was, without warning, inkily black and threatening.

To the west there was a region which evidently saw the sun, for it had recently disappeared behind the line of trees before us, and all was in a deep shade, lightened only by the bronze light reflected far above in the clouds. As leader of the expedition, I called a halt, and

we pitched camp at the edge of the river. We had no idea what river it was, save that it seemed to emerge from the forest to our right, like a great slick of oil, and vanish into the forest to our right, ignorant of us, and totally unaffected by our arrival.

Since our guides had abandoned us, on the third morning - as I have previously related - we pitched our own three tents and our companion, Mr Morpheus of Leith, made a fire of cedar-wood, which was soon crackling cheerfully. Night had fallen with its customary lack of ceremony, and above us was a sky filled to overflowing with the stars and planets. Now and then, we could hear a night-bird skip over the trees. Every so often, a small and almost silent splash came from out on the river. But otherwise there was scarcely a sound to be heard.

We retired to our tents, exhausted from the day spent hacking our way through the impenetrable forests of Dis. We had come perhaps eight miles from our last camp, scarcely more than that; but the journey had taken twelve hours, with barely a moment's rest. We hoped, on the following day, to reach the area of which our guides had advised us, where we might find the ruins of the ancient city.

In the middle of the night, we were all awoken by the sound of sobbing. It was at such a low pitch, but of such intensity, that I awoke barely and could not imagine why; then the sound came into my mind, and I realised what it was. I awoke some more and listened, imagining perhaps that Morpheus was having another bad dream. And then the sobbing gave way to a rhythmic thumping of wood on wood, and I knew this was not one of my fellow-explorers.

I unzipped my tent and peered out into the pitch black. The sky was clouded over, and there was in any case no moon. It was impossible to see anything, beyond the peripheral glow of embers from our fire. I called out: “Mr Morpheus? Dr Thanatos? What is that noise?”

My two companions had also been awakened, and Morpheus was already creeping about, nervously handling his rifle, startling me when his face suddenly appeared barely six inches from mine. In the background, Dr Thanatos was stirring up the embers and heaping wood on the fire; sparks rose like a column of flies into the night.

“Professor Charon,” whispered Morpheus, “We thought it was perhaps yourself. But -“, he nodded out over the river, “It seems to be coming from the far side.”

I clambered out to join my fellows. Sure enough, when my head was free of the tent, I could hear that the

sound of wood on wood, accompanied by the low humming of a human voice, came from that direction. Somewhere on the far side of the river, perhaps even on the river. But Dr Thanatos reassured us that the source of the sound did not move, either sideways, or towards us.

After several minutes, we decided that it would be best to retire to our tents again and wait until morning. There seemed to be no present danger.

When dawn found us, we had barely slept, for the haunting sound of that human voice, humming to its own patterns, and the steady tock-tock of the wood, had kept us awake, wondering. When I perceived that the sky was lightening, I crept out of my tent and peered into the still-gloomy forest on the far side of the unchanging river. At first there was nothing to be seen. Dr Thanatos, with his usual Greek efficiency, peered through his eye-glass and at last made out a figure on the opposite bank. We each peered into the gloom and made out something, a man perhaps, squatting on the bank, apparently staring back at us.

When the sun had risen enough to lighten the scene, we could see that there was indeed one man, some member of an unknown people. He stood up and gazed at us, then waved and hallooed. Mindful that we should not

frighten him, I signalled back to him that we had seen him. Morpheus and Dr Thanatos prepared our canoe. This was no simple task, since we had had to transport it in small pieces, which, although light-weight, were cumbersome to carry and to connect back together.

By about mid-morning, the canoe seemed ready, and we decided who was to go. It was a two-man canoe only; I, as expedition leader, would obviously cross the river; Dr Thanatos should come with me. Morpheus would wait on our shore and observe our first meeting with this man from an unknown tribe.

When we pushed out from the bank, we realised just how powerful the current was. We were initially swept several hundred yards downstream, and we had to paddle furiously to complete our crossing at a point opposite our camp. We noticed, as we paddled fiercely, that the wild-man on the far side kept abreast of our movement, first down the riverside, then back up again as we regained our position. He seemed more anxious than anything else.

When we managed to clamber out on the far bank, we could observe this man at close quarters. He was short, but powerfully-built. He also seemed dressed with the simplest ceremony - with circle of laurel-leaves on his

forehead, a pure white toga or voluminous cloak, and a strange pair of trews, made from the blue cloth. His eyes shone brightly, almost feverishly. His tongue protruded and we could see on his tongue lay a large gold coin, not attached, simply resting. When he closed his mouth, the coin vanished again. His ceremonial dress led us initially to believe that he was accompanied by others, and we looked questioningly into the dark forest behind him. But he smiled and grinned and talked in his language, and gave to understand by signs that he was alone. All alone.

We sat together and tried to speak. Dr Thanatos was our language-expert, but he could understand not one word of the strange dialect which this man used. And it was obvious that the man had not been exposed to any other white peoples, since he understood no word of any of our languages. Eventually, we reached some kind of tacit agreement that we would communicate by signs. He bowed frequently to us and pointed admiringly at our canoe. "Styx, styx!" he seemed to say, nodding enthusiastically. We understood nothing of this - perhaps the word "styx" was his word for a floating craft. We shook our heads and got back to basics. After a few minutes, we had exchanged our names; we now knew that this man's name was "Ded`n". Both Thanatos and myself had the most inexplicable feeling

that the man was already aware of our names, though we had obviously never met. After a further hour or so, we knew he came from a kingdom which he named "H`Arcadia". But his most urgent desire was to cross the river to the far side. It became clear to us that his word "Styx" referred to the river, and that he had no clear idea of what the canoe could do - perhaps he considered it to be some magic, for he touched it nervously and muttered "bo`tah" to himself, anxiously peering at us from under his circlet of laurel. Frequently he pointed to our camp on the far side of the river, where Mr Morpheus patiently observed our historic meeting. "Bo`tah", he said, in a pleading voice; "Bo`tah Styx Ha`ades". We simply could not accede to his desire to cross the river, and could only smile at him, and turn our hands palm upwards to show helplessness.. We had decided, even in the days when our expedition was still being planned, that we would not expose any native wildlife or native tribes to the grand accoutrements of our civilisation: we must not affect the course of natural development in the wild lands. Late in the afternoon, I decided that we must return to our camp. Ded`un seemed devastated: he how moaned and wailed, and fell to his knees, clutching after our cloaks. It was with some difficulty that we managed to clamber aboard our canoe and push off from the

bank, where our new friend seemed about to leap into the black waters.

All that evening, and far into the night, we heard again the relentless humming of Ded`n, as he sang and pounded a piece of wood. I began to feel the utmost pity for him, and had to repeat to myself that he could not - must not - come over to this side of the river.

On the second day, Dr Thanatos and Morpheus crossed over, and spent the entire day in conversation with Ded`n. Morpheus was something of a genius at acting, and his skills in communicating by facial expression and hands alone now became immensely useful to the expedition. I spent the day sitting in my camp-stool, writing up my notes, and observing the occasional bird or small rodent which passed our camp-site.

In the late afternoon, my companions returned; I observed again the difficulty they had in restraining poor Ded`un as they left.

Dr Thanatos and Morpheus were greatly excited at the day they had spent, and it was some time before I could get any coherent statements from them.

It seemed that Ded`n, from "H`Arcadia", was on a long journey. He sought a land named Ha`ades - we speculated that this might be another name for Dis, but that name had meant nothing to Ded`n. It appeared

that our man had expected to find three guides to this land, three spirits. His people had a legend that three spirits would guide a man to this fabled land, where all was peace and harmony and where a man could lie down and sleep a long sleep.

This was, we realised, some primitive but typical death-myth: a man dies and goes to another world, guided there by the guardian spirits. Ded`un had come out into the forest to die, and, by a most unfortunate accident, he had encountered us, imagining that we were his guides into the realm of death. It was going to be difficult to persuade him otherwise. But that would be my onerous task on the following day - I had only to determine how best to do this.

Another night was spent listening to Ded`un singing and thumping, relentless in his desire to find peace. By the time morning came, I had barely slept at all, and I confess that I had two conflicting plans in my head, as Dr Thanatos and I once more crossed the river in our canoe.

Three sleepless nights had evidently taken their toll on Ded`un as well: his eyes, previously bright, were red and dull, spittle was dried in the corners of his mouth, his laurel-wreath was gone and his toga was much the worse for wear. He remained seated as we pulled our canoe up

against the bank, looking somewhat into the middle distance. We sat down and tried to converse with him. His voice was low and tired, and we barely made out any of his words, and none of what we heard meant anything to us. What were we to make of the repeated word “Ded-ti`ird”, which he mumbled over and over, as if in a trance. Thanatos tried his best to penetrate Ded`n’s barriers, but to no avail. It seemed the man was to die on this side of the river, through sheer exhaustion.

We tried for several hours to converse with him.

At last, I confess, I took pity on him: I reasoned that if he were to die, he might as well die happy.

Knowing that Dr Thanatos would scarcely agree to the plan which I now hatched, I suggested to him that he search in the surrounding forest for any evidence of a track or trail leading back to the village from which Ded`un had come. Thanatos always had a great boyish enthusiasm for exploration, and he sprang immediately to my bidding. I had noticed the Mr Morpheus had fallen asleep beside the fire: I seized my chance. Beckoning to Ded`n, I climbed back in the canoe, and signed that he should follow me.

He was as if transfigured: he sprang to his feet, his eyes burning brightly once more, and sprang into the canoe, almost overturning it in his eagerness. I passed him a paddle and together we swung out into the current and across the river to “our” bank. Our passage was scarcely five minutes, for Ded`un was evidently strong of muscle. Behind us, Thanatos was still merrily trampling about in the forest; ahead of us Morpheus slumbered peacefully.

When we arrived at the far bank, my companion leaped from the canoe on to dry land and ran towards the encroaching trees and impenetrable undergrowth.

What happened in an instant I now find hard to describe, far less to explain. As he ran across the river-bank, Ded`un seemed momentarily transformed into something less primitive, something more akin to our own civilised form, a man whom we might pass in our own city street and not think twice. And then, equally swiftly, his figure transformed from this almost-familiar shape into ... nothing. He simply vanished into thin air, like the last smoke from a candle. He was gone. Death, I can only suppose, had claimed him at last.

All that remained on the ground was the silver coin he had stored all this while in his mouth.

Thanatos had emerged from the forest on the far side of the eternally-flowing river, just in time to see Ded'un vanish. His angry and startled shouts awoke Mr Morpheus, who stood up and looked around in bafflement. He helped me out of the canoe. My eyes were fixed on the coin which lay on the ground some ten yards away. Morpheus walked over and picked it up; when he recognised what it was, he asked me angrily what had happened.

I said nothing. And, without understanding why, I held out my hand for the coin. Morpheus gave it to me, and I slipped it into the bag which hangs around my neck, where I keep all the strange coins I have gathered over the years.