

There was once a seafaring man, a Captain Jones by name, who was imprisoned by a tribe of cannibals; mutineers, it is said, from the Royal Navy.

These savages inhabited a remote region of the South Pacific, a place of the most unsavoury character, where they had been marooned many years before. Captain Jones had fallen among them at a time when food had become scarce and rationing was in force. The wretches had eaten the inhabitants of all the neighbouring villages, and despite the wealth of provender available in the surrounding jungle – mangoes, bananas, vine leaves, not to mention the ghastly durian fruit– they could only be satisfied by the consumption of their own kind. Captain Jones was confined in a small and unhygienic wattle cell to await his fate.

Among the Captain's qualities was an extreme fondness for animals, no species of which was too outlandish or repulsive to excite his compassion and curiosity. During the course of his travels he had discovered in himself a remarkable capacity to entice the fauna of every locality to approach him. In his presence even the most ferocious and volatile of creatures became a model of docility. Captain Jones achieved this effect by singing; not that he was particularly accomplished in that field, nor had he a vast repertoire from which to draw, but he did his best: Hearts Of Oak, selections from Gilbert and Sullivan, the occasional Steven Foster song, supplemented by the poetry of Robert Service, all of which he delivered in a dark, stentorian baritone.

It is a well known fact that animals enjoy a particular sensitivity to human music. The snake, for example, is easily bewitched by the bagpipe, and the wrath of the tiger may often be subdued by the playing of the harmonica. So it was that Captain Jones whiled away his leisure hours, for there were many, in this manner, and he had soon struck up a peculiar rapport with the various insects and animals which abounded in that melancholy place.

The head man of the tribe, a former medical officer, and graduate in medicine from the University of Edinburgh, boasted a knowledge of anatomy and physiology both uncanny and arcane.

He determined that due to the imposition of rationing, Captain Jones would be eaten piecemeal, over a number of weeks. He knew how this might be accomplished without killing the Captain until the very last moment, when all that would remain of him would be his head and vital organs, connected only by a few essential veins and nerves. Unpalatable as it might be to be consumed in toto by cannibals, there is often the consolation of a quick death by machete, or some other such implement. Nevertheless, this was not to be the lot of Captain Jones.

They began with his right arm. After drawing lots, two of the senior tribesmen climbed into the cage with him one evening and, without warning, began to gnaw at the flesh of his arm. Within moments they had consumed it all, from shoulder to fingertips, leaving only the bones, shining like white marble in the eerie jungle night.

It would be difficult to describe the grave impression this experience made on the Captain. Nevertheless, he was a man of mettle. He did not respond by crying out, cursing his ill-fortune, or pleading for mercy. Instead, he sang. In fact, he sang as he had never sung before, a great rhapsodic outpouring of sonorous vocalising, such as had never been heard previously in those parts. As the natives ate, and his discomfort increased, the more vigorous and tuneful his singing became; before long a strange hush descended over the jungle, so overwhelming was the impression his song made in that godforsaken place. And when the natives retired replete and contented to their squalid, litter-strewn hut, it was hours before the silence abated. Captain Jones lay down on the floor of his cell, rested his head on his good arm, and continued to sing softly to himself, while out of the dark the lizards and insects he had previously befriended came to lie beside him, or sit in clusters upon his exposed body, as if attempting, in their own primitive fashion, to solace and comfort him after this terrible ordeal.

The head man, who, as I have indicated, was a veritable paradigm of low cunning and cruelty, determined that Captain Jones would need time to recover from this first assault against his person. So it was, he was allowed to lie unmolested for several days to regain his strength. In fact, the women of the tribe, hideous creatures with long, painted fingernails and beehive hairdos, dressed in the ghastly fashions peculiar to naval wives, brought him items of vegetation to consume during this period of respite. But one sultry evening, as the sun set between the palm trees, two more men of the tribe climbed into his cage and began to dine on the Captain's left leg with the same scant regard for his comfort as that shown by those who had disposed of his arm.

Once again the extraordinary song erupted from his lips, and seemed to glide up into the sky like a huge, colourful bird, with a voice like a chorus of angels, and vast wings that cast a shade of euphonious profundity over the countryside. Soon the gruesome repast was completed and the men left him, exhausted, on the floor of his cage. From the silent jungle the reptilian and lepidopterous inhabitants crept out to join him, wrapping themselves around him to prevent the onset of shock.

It goes without saying that this horrible sequence of events was repeated a number of times, until there was nothing much left of Captain Jones but half of his torso and his head. However, the songs that now emanated from his diminished frame had assumed a grandeur to which few of us are likely to bear witness. The

lizards and insects were joined by a veritable Noah's Ark of animals, wild cats with big spots and elegant tails encircled his cell, warming his flesh with their fur; tropical birds perched on the roof above his head and sang sweetly as he slept. Ironically, these prodigious occurrences only encouraged the anthropophagi in their filthy practices, believing as they did that the consumption of a man of such extraordinary qualities could only enhance their own paltry attributes.

As time passed a strange thing began to happen. From the moment two of their number entered the cage for another meal at Captain Jones's expense the remaining members of the tribe sang along with him, their voices rising together in a chorus of such harmonious magnificence that you would have believed it could be heard on the moon.

Within a month, however, they finished him off. There was no rescue, no miraculous intervention, nor had Captain Jones anticipated there would be. But on the very last day, as the headman himself devoured Captain Jones's heart, the song of the village rose to a great crescendo and hovered briefly over the jungle like the very first raincloud at the beginning of time. Then, suddenly, it vanished; dissipating among the hills and streams and valleys, like morning mist in the first rays of the sun. As Captain Jones breathed his last, all the people of the village fell dead where they stood. A great legion of animals emerged from the forest to devour their remains, and never again was that place troubled by their barbarous presence.

Melibee Robertson

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Chapter thirty-seven

Once upon a time, beloved reader, from the weighty darkness which precedes us and to which we return, I, Robertson appeared, a flash of flame, to dance over the floating world, a star born of love.

I had the piper's fingers and the tinker's eyes, so my parents were told, and I grew to adolescence among the great brotherhood of sea, sky and land; my kin were the bridge dancing people, the village killers and the holy men of the iron kirk, howling their great sorrows over the windy sea wracks at their implacable god.

As a boy I was instructed by Mr McRitchie, the nimble fingered one, in the operation of the two rowed button accordion, whence I graduated to the piano accordion. I showed dexterity and aptitude, and a prodigious memory for the repertoire of that noble instrument, and while still a youth I was frequently called upon to display my prowess at feichs and village functions from one side of our island to the other. I will tell you that my spirit would dance within me with the thrill of the little music. And my sportive heart was much lifted by the sight of my meteoric sister Alberta dancing to my tunes, and the sound of her sweet soprano casting its spell upon these assemblies.

I was in my thirteenth year when, much to my father's chagrin, we decamped to the torpid metropolis of Edinburgh. I well remember our long journey south. It was winter time, the hills barricades of ice. Ruddy clouds swirled through restless, grey skies. The lochs were frozen, gathering tribes of sleeping birds in a grip of ice; death cries echoed like hammers on a steel drumskin as they awoke, their helpless wings flapping in the empty air. My sister turned to me and said: 'Scotland is a Sunday.' and we played a game of which day of the week was the best, and which countries most resembled them.

Once settled in the capital I was commanded to learn the pianoforte, and proved myself more than equal to the works composed for that instrument by the Romantics, the Pedantics, the Baroquians and others besides. Despite this, and to my father's sorrow, I was drawn always to the frivolous and unimportant musics of the so-called Ordinary People.

I was not in my maturity before a baleful hatred crept to life in my brain, like a worm emerging from a sleep, and the fires of divers passions blazed at the windows of my soul's house. I looked upon the world with the eyes of an interloper, a constant bidding of farewell at my lips. A humourless rigidity took possession of my faculties, and within a few short years I emerged from youth as a man I did not know.

I attended the university without enthusiasm, and embarked on a Bohemian career performing the compositions of American Negroes for the begrudging applause of the student population in a small hotel. During the course of my clandestine activities I encountered a purveyor of anodynes, and within a short period of time had become one of his 'most trusted

customers'. Thanks to the consumption of prodigious quantities of his goods, the malicious voice of the worm was subdued, the conflagration in my heart appeased, and I became briefly happy, gregarious, optimistic.

Unfortunately, my complacency was of brief duration. A fellow student, known to my father, brought my activities to his attention. As a consequence, my academic career was abruptly terminated and through the good offices of a business acquaintance, my father secured me a position on a ship of the Donaldson line, bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia. At the age of twenty on a clear day in late April, I watched from a ship's deck, the shores of Scotland slip beneath the waves. I recall my sister standing on the jetty, her dark eyes as imperturbable as a compass hand piercing the long sky between us.

The years passed. Despite my unsuitability for the physical work I was employed to do, I was treated with kindness and consideration. In truth, I believe my role on the ships on which I served, resembled that of a household deity such as Orientals employ to ward away evil, or of an object of charity whose presence brings divine benediction to his patrons. I was rarely the object of ridicule, and whenever I did succeed in performing some task satisfactorily was heaped with a disproportionate amount of praise, so remarkable and uncharacteristic was my acumen deemed to be.

One evening we were lying off Grand Bank awaiting entry to the St Lawrence Waterway. I had been passing an hour on deck discussing culinary matters with the ship's cook. In the distance, becalmed icebergs shone like great sailing ships in the merciless moonlit sea, and far below us placid waves lapped at the ship's side. At last, tiring of our pleasantries, the cook returned below and I was left alone. I pulled my heavy jacket around me and my scarf up over my face, and leaning against the rail peered through frost encrusted eyelids up into a vast black night, illuminated by the suns of worlds beyond numbering.

I was relatively undismayed when I heard a woman's voice rising from the waves below, somewhere at the ship's side. At first I believed that the apparition was an hallucination. However, the coherence of the creature's utterances soon aroused my suspicions. Whereas all my previous communications with phantasmal beings had swiftly degenerated into meaningless fatuities, in this case there seemed to be a definite cogency in the creature's words.

'Oh Man,' she declaimed, 'Poor exile from the world of marvellous Waters. We, your kinfolk still await your return. Do you not hear our song in your body, the cry of life swirling in your bones? Do you not dream of abandoning your habitats of stone and dancing with us again in the deep waters?'

I leaned over the rail and scanned the darkness and the quicksilver water for the author of this strange oration.

'On this star of waters, why be estranged? Your blood, your body, your mind, your thoughts and dreams, are they not those of a watery creature? Is it not curious that you search always for the fixed, the solid, the unchanging, when our world is a flux, a tide, an ocean, a drop of rain, gathering itself together, disintegrating, insinuating itself into form, abandoning form, freezing to ice or vanishing into air in the sun's embrace?'

At last, beneath me I located a pair of glittering, prescient eyes staring up at me from a rippling circle of reflected moonlight. As our eyes met, the creature, a halicore I believe it was, concluded its discourse with the following words:

'You are not alone. You will unite with us again, live again as rain, as ocean, as a creature of land, of sea, of air, unlocked forever from the cage of life. We are your memory, as you are ours.'

'Don't go!' I shouted, as a swell rose beside the ship and dark water closed in around the animal's head.

'Do not forget . . . 'the animal replied.

I stared into the widening ripple left by her departure, then looked about me to see if any other member of the crew had witnessed this strange event. The deck, however, was empty. Above my head I heard the tapping of a rope against the mast as a light breeze wafted from the night, but there was no one to be seen.

As I reflected on the creature's observations, my entire being swarmed with such tumultuous thoughts and emotions that I succumbed to unconsciousness. Several hours passed before my absence was noticed. When I was discovered I was carried to the sick bay. I had been badly frostbitten. My heavy scarf had protected most of my face, but my hands were naked. Two left fingers were amputated below the last knuckle, and the entirety of the right index finger. As I came to, I wept helplessly and heard as if from a great distance the sound of a button accordion and my sister's feet tapping out the rhythm of a ghostly slip jig on the bare floor of an empty house.

Our ship continued its voyage to Montreal and returned once more to Scotland. My father had become ill, and needed my companionship. With my small savings I opened an institute in my father's house where individuals with interests similar to my own could meet, and converse on the very questions which now exercised my own mind.

Alas, how flimsy has been my resolve, and how great my reliance on the encouragement of others. How vulnerable one is, to that strange amnesia which vitiates all youthful faith and passion. As time passed, the clarity of my questions dulled, the need I had to answer them, undermined. My inspiration had departed. Worse than this, however, were the strange ideas that began to fester in my mind. I would find myself watching a sunset from the window of my study, when the room would become unbearably hot – so much so, that I