

THE ELECTRIC SILENCE

[This parable is a synopsis of The Temple of Solomon the King, with which it may be collated.—Ed.].

I WAITED for news that my heart beat. The severing night was between me and my love. There was no god of sleep; sleep were traitor. I sought to praise my love, and to lament the hours that divided us; and I could not. Therefore I wrote down the story of my life.

And it is this:

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Gilded and painted to hide its worm-eaten planks, my pleasure-boat was foundering. I cursed the treachery of the workmen, and resolved to trust myself to my own arms rather than to abide any longer therein.

No sooner had I taken off my clothes and plunged into the river than I perceived that it was now become dark. On the one hand glowed a star, curious indeed, but of no great brightness, and promising but little; while on the other was a sombre and fantastic lamp, whose fascination was its horror.

If I swam lazily towards either of these, it was because their light, confused and difficult on the one part, and tenebrous on the other, was yet light in comparison with that aimless and abiding gloom which had now settled upon the bosom of the river. And these lamps were above the river, children of a nobler element. And in the river is the great Leviathan that devours men.

But before I had come within the sphere of attraction of either of these, suddenly mine eyes were gladdened with a marvellous vision. Infinitely far off, as it seemed, a ray of sunlight shot through the Saturnine gloom of the skies, and lit the surface of the water. And then I perceived that upon the river there floated, within that small circle of light, an ark, or as it might be, a coffin. Then looking up into that pierced cloud I saw within the light a certain house surrounded by a grove. Within, all was dark; yet from it proceeded a ray as silvery as the first ray was golden.

And I desired ardently to enter that house. Yet, having no wings, the task appeared beyond my human force. Then the heavens closed as suddenly as they had opened, and I was left darkling. Yet I had this candle of hope, that within the ark, could I reach it, might be some help of knowledge or power whereby that house might be attained.

So I swam steadily toward, though with some fear, for the eddies in that great stream were numerous, and my sole guide was a slender snake of light that moved upon the water.

Or so it appeared; for I have since discovered that I had an interior sense of direction as trusty as the mariner's compass; so that, though I knew it not, it was never possible for me to go astray.

Now as I swam I came upon one floundering and spluttering in the stream, who with mighty puffings urged me to continue.

For but a little way beyond us (quoth he) is a mighty and a dexterous swimmer.

So with a mighty effort my comrade put forth all his strength, and we gained upon this one, and greeted him.

Thereupon he (and he was a goodly man, and fair) did most heartily welcome me as a fellow-traveller to that house, and confirmed me in my belief that the ark did indeed hold the secret of the way thereto. And as for the guide that might convey us through the darkness and the tumult of the stream, he spoke (something darkly) of one appointed, and more clearly that he was aware of divers marks upon the way; for, said he, to them that view it from above this trackless waste of water is mapped out and charted with a perfect science.

Behold! quoth he. And at that moment was there a glimmer just before me of a white shining triangle, and what was most strange, rather an impression than a vision of a man that hung upon a gibbet by one heel. This, said the fair man, is a most notable sign that we travel the right road.

Now by the light of the triangle I perceived another wonder; for my friend was not swimming as I

was in the stream, but was borne by a boat, frail indeed, yet sufficient. Within this shallop or cockleshell he pulled me, and set me at the bench. Then (still by the light of the triangle) I saw a dark man at the thwart, rowing a strong stroke. We pulled on almost in silence; for when I asked of the fair man his name he answered me only "I wish to know," and of the dark man "I wish it were light," the first clearly a confession of ignorance, the second a patent evasion; which things discomfited me much.

Yet we progressed evenly and rapidly, and were mightily cheered after a while to see just a flash of lightning sundering two dark clouds; next a pale crescent, heavy and slow, yet silvered; next, as if it had dropped from the stars, an unicorn galloped past us and was gone ere we could fix it; next a tall light-house upon the water.

"Here," said the dark man my comrade, "is a pleasant place for refreshment before we turn to the further journey." As he spoke, although no sun was visible, a mighty rainbow appeared, and crowned the tower. I cried out joyfully, "The bow of promise," but they answered nothing. And at that I understood that they had travelled further already, and were but returned for an hour to succour me who had no boat.

Seven days then we remained in the tower, eating and drinking. Also in my sleep I had many marvellous dreams, of greater sustenance than sleep itself. And there was given unto me by my fair brother (for so I may now call him) a little book, wherein it was written how a man might build himself a shallop, and have for steersman one appointed thereunto.

This then I laboured to build, and the toil was great. Moreover, certain vile fish rose from the water, and with their fins beat upon the planks of my boat, that I might not end it.

However, at last I had it perfect, and was about to set sail at dawn. But first the dark man my brother departed from us, and went his way. And then the old man of the tower took me aside and offered me a seat at the funeral feast of his master. And although I verily believe that this old man was a rogue, a very knavish fellow, and a sot, yet in that funeral I took great pleasure. For the gentlest perfume was borne upon the breeze, and the air was lit with faint electric flames that gathered themselves into a hill of light. So I, being lifted up, and my heart overflowing, came into the funeral chamber that was exceeding bright, and there was the table for the feast, and beneath it the coffin wherein lay the body of the master. There too I saw barren wood bear roses, and I heard the voice of the master. After that I was shewn all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and many other things of great use and beauty.

Then I took my leave of the old man of the tower, and boarded the shallop that I had made, when he cried out piteously that he feared earthquake, and asked me for my aid.

So with a heart both heavy and light I abandoned my shallop and the dreadful labour of its fashioning, and came back to him.

Then came earthquake as he had foreseen; and he and the boats also were swallowed up. In the tidal wave of the earthquake I was borne far away, even from the fair man my brother; and in the darkness he was lost to me. I knew not even whether he had perished.

But fashioning a raft from the loose planks of the wreckage, I made shift to paddle. The ark was invisible, and I had no more memory thereof, so turned away was I and absorbed in the bright signs upon the way. And now my raft was like to sink, and my arms were exceeding weary, when a voice sounded but a little above me: "Enter the ark!"

And I looked up and beheld a bearded man, mighty, with the signs of labour and long journeying writ upon him. I knew him; and for this reason was I much amazed, for I had believed him far from that place. But taking my hand he drew me not without pain into the ark. Here (quoth he) forget all that thou hast seen and heard; for in this ark they are not lawful.

So I obeyed him, else I had drawn after me the raft that had brought me hither.

Then he questioned me, saying:

What lieth above the ark?

And I answered him:

The house of the silver ray, that is lighted by the ray of gold.

He: How many roofs hath the ark?

I: One.

He: Thou must pass through this one. Yet thou lookest eagerly upon the four walls of the ark.

I: I seek a door.

He: The door is in the roof.

I: Lead me to it, I pray thee!

He: Fix thine eyes upon it.

I: Sir, I will. Yet I pray thee to tell me thy name.

He: Thou didst know it of old, didst thou not?

I: The son of the mountain?

He: The Stone of the Crossways.

I: It is enough. Let me fix mine eye upon the door.

He: It is well.

Then I obeyed him, and in that obedience forgot him. For though mine eye wandered often, and although once the planks beneath me threatened to give way and plunge me once more into the stream, yet I strove as a man may.

Then, mine eye being accustomed to the gloom, I beheld by my side, yet a little above me, the dark man my brother. Him I greeted most gladly, and told him of the earthquake. Whereat he sighed heavily.

Brother, quoth I, canst thou now tell me thy name? But he only answered me: "It is a pity!"

And with that I returned to my task, and he guided me therein with his counsel and example. Yet in the ark the gloom is fierce; the river without is but twilight, wherein shadows are free; within is darkness itself, and the essence and quintessence of darkness.

In this terrific silence I abode for very long; then for an instant that seemed longer than many lives the sun of heaven broke in and smote mine eye, so that I fell backward nigh fainting. But he bade me be of good cheer and return to the task. I obeyed; and behold! again the sun, and behind the sun a glimpse of one appointed equally to be hidden and to be seen, each as may be fitting.

But the brightness of the sun and its heat dazzled me and scorched me. My members refused to obey; and I slid backward into the great stream that was here so icy cold, and it refreshed me and comforted me.

Now then I was minded to enter again the ark when there flew unto me, I wot not whence, a dove, and perched upon my shoulder. And thus I swam for a while, and the waters of the stream were soft and warm, caressing me.

Yet I felt that this aimless drifting was enervating my limbs; so I gathered some stray planks of my raft—for they still floated round the ark—and began half playfully to paddle, with what purpose I cannot tell.

And so it was ordered that the dove flew to me with an oak-leaf in its beak.

Thereat I was silent. But gazing eagerly thereon, I beheld one appointed, and I understood that the oak-leaf was sent from the House.

Then I took counsel of him who is to this end appointed, and with his own hand he brought to me a champak-blossom, a mustard-seed, and again an oak-leaf.

And these I treasured in my bosom, though I hardly knew wherefore. Nor could I understand what purpose they should serve, save darkly. And seeing this, the dove came to me again bearing an olive-branch; and with this I was so mightily pleased that for awhile I forgot all else, and swam lustily in the stream for my pleasure.

But now came a current of ice-cold water and enwrapped me; and when I looked, it bore spots of blood upon it. Then I went hastily into the ark that was ever near by; and, climbing to the roof by the ladder that I had before made, looked through. And all the sky was a hurricane, a madness of storm.

Now in my eagerness I had approached closely to the roof, so that the storm whirled me away into itself. One might say that I was the storm. And when I came to myself I was floating upon the bosom of the river, borne by that very bark that once I had built myself in the lighthouse. And in the storm I had lost my hair and beard; for the wind had torn all out by the root. So that I heard a voice saying, "It is a babe upon the waters." And looking at the bark, I found it refashioned by him that is appointed to refashion. For it had planks of my old shallop, and planks also of the ark, and it was shaped like a cradle rather than like a boat. And I heard the voice of one appointed to speak saying: "Behold thou me!" And I could not. Nevertheless I gazed earnestly, and paddled in the direction of the sound.

While this was a-doing suddenly the river fell in a cataract. And I looked for the olive-branch, and it

was withered, and sunk beneath the stream. And I looked for the dove, and it was wrapped round with a most hideous serpent. And I was helpless. In the end he devoured that rose-winged companion of my journey, and went seeking a new prey.

Now in this cataract I had most surely been wrecked but that I clung tightly to the boat. This indeed floated as serenely as if it had been upon the still waters of a lake; and when I had a little plucked up courage, I saw sitting at the helm him that is appointed to steer; I saw him face to face.

This then endured for a space; and with his aid I began ship-building. "For" (said he) "there are many that swim, and find no boats. Be it thy task to aid them." Of my journey to the House he spake nothing. But in the ship-building came the fair man my brother to my help; and one evening as we sate at meat he said: May it please you to enter the House; for there is prepared for you a goodly bedchamber. But I would not at that time; for I was ashamed, being unclothed; not understanding that in the House robes are provided by him that is appointed to provide them.

Thus we laboured, and built many fair shallops upon the model of that wherein we sailed. In all these there was not one splinter of wood too much, or too little; and there was no ornament; and neither paint nor varnish covered the planks, for they were planks of a tree that cometh neither from the East nor from the West. But the sails were of gold tissue, very brave, with figures inwoven.

Now at last the time being come, did I take my chamber in the House. And upon the secret things that were there shown to me I ponder yet; so that in this place I shall make no mention of them. But this treasure will I give out, that everything noble in that House seemeth vile to them that are swimming in the stream; and everything vile to them appeareth noble. Thus they endure not the delicate stuffs with rough and impure handling; and the rubbish they carry away with them, and devour. Thus wisely hath the master of the House ordained.

Now of the silver radiance that issueth from the darkness of the House I will say nothing; nor of the golden ray that illuminateth the darkness of the House.

But for the sake of one that may come to share my bedchamber will I speak of the last adventure.

Upon the breast of the river came a wild swan, singing, and for a moment rested upon mine image reflected in the water. And I said: "Come up hither."

And the wild swan said: "How shall I come up thither?"

I: I will guide thee.

The Swan: Who art thou?

I: My Father is the keeper of the King's Cup: I have prepared a little ship wherein I may go my journeys upon the great river.

Who will draw it?

The Swan: I will draw it.

So we set forth together; and of the horrible tempests that arose it is unworthy discourse. And of what followed after is discourse unprofitable; but the wild swan still guides my ship.

And the end shall be as is appointed by the master of the House; but this I know, that this ship is the King's ship. And in my bosom are the champak-blossom, and the mustard seed, and the oak-leaf, more lovely than before.

And upon us watcheth ever he that is appointed to watch.

And the wild swan sings ever; and my heart sings ever.

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Now then I had laid aside the pen, and a voice cried: Write!

Fear not!

Turn not aside!

Is it not written that Sorrow may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning?

Sleep therefore in peace and in faith: shall he not watch whose eye hath no eyelid, who to this end is appointed?

And my heart answered: Amen!