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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter II- A Business Transaction

Frequently, when one is relating a humorous or fascinating anecdote, the rapt audience will remark, "Oh, to have been a fly upon the wall!" This phrasing, of course, indicates a desire to be an unseen and inactive observer of the unique scenario. And occasionally, one is even afforded that rare opportunity to play the role of "the fly upon the wall" if he is able to witness one of these strange set-pieces from a considerable remove, or perhaps listen through a thin and poorly-insulated wall. At times, however, these situations will take an unfortunate turn, and the "fly," realizing a need for swift and immediate action, must transform himself into an animal capable of interacting with his surroundings in a more direct way, such as a dog or perhaps an ape of some sort.

I found myself in the situation of being "the ape upon the wall" almost immediately after leaving the aquarium. I was in the process of heaving myself upon my vehicle (while most have already made the transition to that species of modern bicycle featuring two wheels of the same diameter, I, due to a recent lack of funding, still locomote about on

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a penny-farthing, that dangerous old "bone-shaker" of yore) when I heard a most strange conversation unfolding on the eastward wall of the aquarium pentangle. I leaned my bicycle against a tree, approached the source of the voices, and, peering through an overlarge bush, took stock of the situation.

Five men stood in the shadows of the east wall. The first man to catch my eye was a quite robust fellow, with full beard (a bit grey at the chin) and ruddy cheeks. He was large, clearly more gourmand than gourmet, yet even from a distance I could detect that his paunch belied a certain rugged strength. Though his posture indicated that he was a confident man, a leader of men, even, his eyes denoted a weariness with the world around him. A blue watch-cap was tight upon his head, and his pea-coat resembled a less tattered version of that worn by the troubled Cyclops.

His companion could not have been more different. A small man he was, though portlier than the first and without that accompanying musculature. His bald head gleamed in the afternoon sun, a thin scrim of dark hair surrounding that shining dome. A goatee offered him an impish appearance, made more dramatic by his fine hounds-tooth suit and walking cane. He grinned confidently and

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spoke avuncularly, though whether or not those emotions were genuine I could not say at the time.

The remaining three men were of some Middle Eastern descent and clad in the traditional white robes, headwear, and beards of those desert people, and should some visible difference have existed between the three, it was undetectable to my eye. It appeared to me that the three Arabs were conducting a little business with the two Americans.

"Tell us, Sahib," the middle Arab said, "Where did you obtain the substance?"

"Why gentlemen," the little fellow said, tightly gripping the brass knob of his cane, "There are but three methods of obtaining red mercury. The first is to obtain it directly from the caldera of Caiaphas Mountain, a feat made difficult since the Singer Sewing Machine Corporation owns the mountain and guards it twenty-four hours a day. The second is to obtain it from the needle assembly of a genuine Singer Sewing Machine, an expensive and time-consuming task akin to filling the Heidelberg tun by squeezing each grape individually. The third method—our patented method—involves mining the substance from a Siberian mineral quarry whose longitude and latitude we'd prefer not to disclose."

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The Arab nodded thoughtfully. "Let us see it and sample it then."

The little man chuckled amiably. "Oh, friend, would that I could. You see, what we offer to you is no mere sample of the substance; a full pint of red mercury or nothing! But the substance is so efficacious, sir, that a sample would render the pint moot! A mere taste, and you three would feel fit as fiddles, begin cart-wheeling about, and experience such child-like joy in your hearts that the remainder of the jar and the transaction required for it would be but a distant memory! You'd best believe; I've seen it happen! As a result, there are certain business precepts that my partner and I abide by, the most important of which is to complete the exchange prior to any sampling."

"Give us the money first," the large man said.

The middle Arab nodded. "Allow me to remove my purse," he said.

The three Arabs reached deep into the folds of their robes and, after a brief moment, each removed a pistol and aimed it in the general direction of the two honest businessmen!

"Is the amount acceptable, Sahib?" the middle Arab asked.

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"S'wounds!" the little man cried.

"Ah, shit," the large man muttered.

I could abide no more! This pair of affable merchants was in a tight spot, out-numbered and out-gunned as they were. To avoid action out of fear for my own life would be a cowardly act, and I knew that if I were to merely hide inside a bush and watch those two become perforated by gunfire from the comfort of my leafy vantage, I would carry the burden of my cowardice for many days, possibly a week. And so I reached inside my coat and removed my bottle of brandy, empty now, owing no doubt to some small unseen leak. I burst from the bush, contorted myself into a simulacrum of the pitching stance of the great "Pud" Galvin, and heaved the bottle at the middle Arab's head with every ounce of my force, all while bellowing the most frightening war-cry I could muster!

It is surprisingly difficult to gauge distance and Kentucky Windage while simultaneously translating that information into an accurate pitch, particularly if the pitcher is not inclined to athletics and is also somewhat inebriated. As a result, the brandy bottle landed about fifteen feet shy and five feet leftward of the head of the intended target. Worse still, my fearsome war-cry had the effect of drawing all attention towards myself, including

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the snouts of three rather fearsome pistols. But all was not lost! My momentary distraction afforded the large man an opportunity to spring into action and sweep a blackjack across the skulls of two of the Arabs, and his smaller companion quickly followed suit, bashing the third with the brass knob of his cane! The three dropped like meal-sacks, unconscious I assume. The large man knelt, collected their pistols, and began rifling through their robes, while the small man approached me, a zealous smile playing on his lips, the very picture of joy!

"My young friend!" he chortled, "What is your name?"

"Isaac Laquedem," I said, "And it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure is all mine! And I," he said, wrapping my hand in both of his own, "Am Stanley Pincus, attorney, book-keeper, merchant, and argonaut! The man busying himself behind me is my friend and associate, Mr. Gus Mulligan."

"Hello," Gus said, shucking an unconscious Arab from his robe, his eyes never leaving his work. Pincus threw an arm about my shoulders and led me into the shadows behind the east wall.

"Isaac," he said, suddenly concerned, "Were you injured?"

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"In the fracas? Nay, I didn't even hear the report of a pistol, much less feel the tug of its bullet."

"Not then, my friend. I ask if you were injured when you fell from Heaven, you arch-angel! Such a show of bravery! Such a selfless act! My God, the fat was in the fire, and our geese were to be cooked in't!"

From behind, I heard a low groan followed by a dull thud, as Mulligan once more relieved a rousing Arab of the burden of consciousness.

"Our gratitude is immense," Pincus said, gripping my shoulders tightly. "You must join us for a bit, allow us time and opportunity to repay your kindness."

"No payment is necessary," I said, "Though I admit, I have no immediate destination and would not be averse to joining you gentlemen for a bit of pleasant conversation; so rare to find such interesting company in this modern age!"

Mulligan rose from his dog-pile of naked unconscious Arabs, tucking a small wad of bills into his pants-pocket. "Let's go," he said, "Act natural."

And so we strolled along a small stone path leading away from the Manteo aquarium, Mulligan with his hands pressed deep in his pockets, Pincus clip-clopping along with his walking stick, and I swinging my arms in a very

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gay fashion. It was March, as I recall, and though a cool breeze still rattled the budding trees, it found no purchase on my heart; the air was too brisk and wholesome, the company too genial. As often happens, our pleasant perambulation led way to pleasant discourse.

"Say Pincus," I said, "What was that substance you gentlemen were attempting to sell to those sons of the desert?"

"Ah, a fine question, lad, of the sort requiring two answers, both equally correct. In the literal sense, we were selling them a substance called 'red mercury,' an element that many of the more refined and wealthy denizens of the Middle East have a particular affinity for. It is a rare element; so rare, in fact, that it does not strictly 'exist,' in the conventional sense. Oh, but would that it did! It is said to cure disease, lift the spirits, and even give a man... strength, shall we say. A sort of strength unique to males. And should a woman sample the red mercury, it will make her more willing to accept that strength. If you follow."

"Not at all. But how do you sell that which does not exist? Does that not make you a charlatan?"

Pincus laughed boisterously. "Ho, no, no. What we sell, young Isaac, is the *concept* of red mercury. If I sell

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you a handful of beans, normal beans of the lima variety, perhaps, and you believe these beans to have magical powers, your beliefs are not my burden. The onus is on you alone. And if the substance we sell cannot do what you believe it to do—if it does not even exist—surely we're merchants in very august company! Why, would you take umbrage at the insurance salesman? He sells you the concept of security, but like all concepts, it is intangible. It may allow you to sleep well at night, but you cannot cradle it in your arms as you drift to slumber-land. A real estate broker sells you a tract of land; who is to say that you truly own it? A piece of paper? I'll sell you the world on a piece of paper! A haberdasher tells you his derby will transform you into a dapper raconteur; do you buy the hat to insulate your crown, or do you buy the concept of the hat's transformative effect? Ah, if we be charlatans, then the whole wide world is filled with charlatans exclusive!"

"So what, then, did you intend to sell the Arabs?"

Mulligan produced a small jar of faintly red liquid with a metallic sort of shine. "Quicksilver and brick dust," he said.

"Is that not deadly poisonous?"

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"I wouldn't try it," Mulligan said, then, with a quick snap of the wrist, pitched the jar into the woods lining the stone path.

Pincus rapped his cane sharply upon a flagstone, signaling us to pause. "We're not of a bad sort, friend Isaac. I'd hate for you to gain that impression. We are, in fact, on a very noble mission, a secular mission that requires vast amounts of funding, and if we must occasionally bend the unspoken rules of commerce, we do so in the name of a greater good."

Mulligan scratched at his bushy beard, deep in thought. "Pincus," he said, "We could take this guy into town. We'd be able to do the Cipher Island routine."

"What, sirs, is the Cipher Island routine?"

Pincus gently and affectionately prodded my midsection with the head of his walking stick. "My friend, if you'll join us in town for a few libations and a bit of supper—on Mr. Mulligan and me, of course—I'll gladly tell you all about it!"

Of course I agreed to the terms. How could I not? Ah, friendship! There is a balm in Gilead!