Mr. Maximillian Bacchus

The Adventures of Mr. Maximillian Bacchus & His Traveling Circus

by Clive Barker, 1952-

Artwork by Richard A.Kirk

Published: 2011

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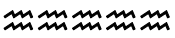
Memories can be treacherous. We all have a hunger to rearrange our histories so as to remember ourselves in the most flattering light. This is not only true of individuals, but of entire areas of human activity; most notably the three human obsessions which are often elevated by the labors of careful historians so as to seem more worthy of our attentions. War, for instance; a very fine subject for carefully crafted censorship, as is Love, whether it be in the particular (our private histories) or the general (our public infamies). But it is with the third of these subjects, Art, that the subtle genius of human self-delusion is most prettily displayed. Where, after all, are we most likely to see fruitful creation than in the re-forging of the facts surrounding that very endeavour?

All this by way of an apology of sorts than for any errors that may have stowed away on this modest little vessel of mine, which intends only to explain how the stories in this volume came into being. In truth the book would have been carrying a larger number of stowaways than of passengers were it not for the irritatingly well-informed Phil and Sarah Stokes, who conspired several times to prevent my bringing of a few fact-free bon-bons on board. As I now know to my cost, Phil and Sarah know a lot more about me than I do, and shamelessly used the Truth to persuade me to throw several harmless fictions overboard. Has it not come to a sad state of things? When a man can't even lie about himself without being called to account? But there we have it.

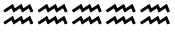
One day, perhaps, The One True Tale concerning how this quartet of little fables came to be written will be gathered together, told by those who experienced them rather than by me. But this is not that time. You instead have before you the labours of a chastised fictioneer, obliged to slaughter his bastard lies to favour far less beguiling truths.



I have one last anarchic card up my sleeve, however. Rather than attempt to trace my own place as Creator I have chosen instead to focus on one of the characters from the stories and use him as a guide. That character is Domingo de Ybarrondo. Domingo is the clown in Mr. Bacchus' Travelling Circus; a creature whose adventures could only take place in a world where the rules of life and death are very different from those of our world.

It was, however, here in this version of the Real, that I first met Domingo. It was a chance encounter. In my teenage years I spent many hours, whatever the season, out on the streets of Liverpool, wandering. It was my second favorite hobby. I always had plenty to think about—paintings I would one day paint, stories I would one day write. On an early spring day in—let's say 1969—I was walking down Aigburth Road when I caught sight of Domingo over a wall. No conversation passed between us. The man was dead and buried. It was simply his name engraved on a 19th Century headstone that had caught my eye. What drew me to the overgrown plot where he lay was simply the music of his name. *Domingo de Ybarrondo*. It has a fine, poetic ring to it. It carries with it, at least to me, the smell of somewhere balmy and strange.

Why I should have decided this wonderful name best belonged to a clown I have no idea. What I do know is that I have never found clowns remotely funny. I am not alone in this, I think. More people find clowns disturbing or distressing rather than raucously amusing. Is it that the nature of human existence has changed so radically in the last century or so that what was funny to our grandparents and great-grandparents is now tragic or terrifying? I don't have a clear answer, I only know that at some point in the writing process the name on the gravestone was born again, as a droll funnyman on a road in my mind's eye.



Until my early twenties my experience of clowns was very limited. I remember going just once to the circus as a child, though we went several times to see the parade as the circus came to town. It was a surreal spectacle in the late fifties, when Liverpool was still a grey, forbidding city. But many of the forms and faces of Domingo's dynasty became available to me once I discovered the work of Federico Fellini. As any Fellini enthusiast will tell you, his movies are filled with clowns of every kind, from the formal duo of the trumpet-playing Silver Clown and the ever-humiliated Auguste, to the countless Clowns Disguised As Human Beings who appear in all of his later movies. Once I had seen clowns through Fellini's eyes I was besotted. Here was a universal figure, upon which all manner of human experience (very little of it funny) could be attached. Inspired by Fellini's explorations I went off to my own stories of foolery and wisdom. Two plays that were written and produced long before THE BOOKS OF BLOOD gave me a

reputation as a purveyor of visceral horrors. These plays are largely concerned with fools. The major piece is CRAZYFACE, which is definitely set in a world close to that of the Bacchus tales.

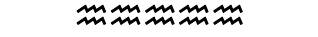
But it isn't only as a clown that Domingo de Ybarrondo appears in my fiction. And it's here that my opening comment about the rewriting of our histories comes round to show a different face. In the late 1980's I wrote a book called CABAL, which concerned itself with a small community of outsiders who are angels to some, demons to others. I decided it would be entertaining to preface each of the parts with a poem or essay which was relevant to the contents, as I had in the last novel I had written, WEAVEWORLD. In WEAVEWORLD the philosopher Francis Bacon and the poets W.B. Yeats and Robert Frost are amongst the writers I quote. By the time I wrote CABAL, however, I was in a more anarchic mood. I decided to invent my own authors and write my own quotes (thus insuring that they would be relevant).

It was immense fun.

Obviously, when I wrote CABAL, I had no thought to publishing the stories of Mr. Maximillian Bacchus and his Travelling Circus. But it seemed sad to leave that beautiful, evocative name on a grimy headstone in an unremarkable Liverpool churchyard. So, at the beginning of the book, in pride of place, I put the name of Domingo de Ybarrondo.

Since his years travelling the invented roads of the stories that follow these pages, however, Domingo had left the circus and turned his hand to writing a book of his own. It was called, I supposed, A BESTIARY OF THE SOUL, and the quote that I had chosen from that learned tome really brings the whole story full circle.

"*We are all imaginary animals...*"



Those, I decided, were the words that Domingo de Ybarrondo had written, and which I chose to introduce the book about the shunned and the outlawed species of which I, as a gay man, felt myself a member.

Domingo's quote, like several others in the book, was accepted without question as a legitimate quote from a legitimate source. Indeed, several critics referred to the book as though they were familiar with it.

I'd like to think that somewhere a clown is laughing.

Clive Barker
January, 2009
Los Angeles

The Wedding of Indigo Murphy to the Duke Lorenzo de Vedici

and how Angelo was discovered in an orchard

"*Tiger, tiger, burning bright*
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Framed thy fearful symmetry?"
—William Blake

This is the first story about Mr. Maximillian Bacchus and his Travelling Circus, and it concerns the wedding of Indigo Murphy to the Duke Lorenzo de Medici, and how Angelo was discovered in an orchard.

It was both a happy day and a sad day, the day that Indigo Murphy, who was the greatest bird-girl west of the Ochre Nile, married the Duke Lorenzo de Medici. It was happy because it was almost like the ending to some unwritten fairy-tale, and yet it was sad because, after all, Indigo had been one of the star attractions of Mr. Bacchus' Travelling Circus ever since it first took to the road. Now she was to be a Duchess, and live in her husband's palace, surrounded as it was by countless gardens laid out geometrically in the Babylonian style, in which stood white marble statues of gods metamorphosing into stags, and of square-bearded heroes in powdered wigs being bound by scorpions. She was even going to set all her performing birds free: her doves, her kittiwakes, the gulls, the humming birds and the kingfishers. Even the scaly Archaeopteryx, who was a gift from Perkin Warbeck (who had practically been King of England), was to have his freedom today.

The wedding feast itself was held, at Indigo's request, in the middle of a field, outside the walls of the palace. It was the middle of September, the sixteenth, a Tuesday, and the weather was still pleasant to sit out in. The deep blue of the late Summer sky was here arid, there veiled with lace clouds, and a light wind washed through the grass like a tide, sighing in the rows of severely-pruned poplars that lined the shadowed walks of the walled gardens. From the palace itself, its roofs crowded with gargoyles, turrets, chimneys and carved gables, processions of servants were continually emerging, carrying silver trays upon which the Medici cooks had laid their most mouth-watering delicacies: Swan in Laburnum, Truffles, Hedge pig, Black pudding and Love-in-Disguise. Lorenzo the Duke had of course invited his many hundreds of friends and relatives to the wedding; his brother Giulano, Poliziano the poet, Botticelli the painter, Savonarola, his Aunts and Uncles, first cousins, second cousins and so on, as far as his most distant relations. There were Arab princes, who had made the journey from their billowing red tents in the livid sands of the burning Kalahari to attend the celebrations. Indigo, however, had only the other members of the Circus to invite, because, as she had always said:

"Friendship is like butter, me darlins; it's no use if you spread it too thinly."

At the longest of the tables sat the bride and bridegroom themselves, with the Duke's relatives on one side, and the members of the Circus on the other.

There was Hero, whose real name was Hieronymous, the strong man, who had painted Mr. Bacchus' caravan with pink fountains and salamanders turning cartwheels. He was wearing his best bow tie and loincloth, and sketching fishes on

the tablecloth with a piece of charcoal. Next to him, perched upon her seat like a willow-leaf on water, sat Ophelia, the trapeze-girl, head to one side, sniffing her posy of mandrake roots. Then came Malachi, the crocodile who sang excerpts from opera at the Circus, his greatest achievement being *Brunnhilde's Immolation* from *Gotterdammerung*, which he had performed before the Dream King in Neuschwanstein. Beside him, cross-legged on his chair, squatted Domingo de Ybarrondo, the Clown, balancing three pieces of priceless Venetian glass, one upon the other, on his aquiline nose, a wide grin on his flour-pale face. Finally, next to Lorenzo himself, sat Mr. Bacchus, a gentleman of considerable girth, with a swollen nose and a large, tightly curled grey beard entwined with dead vine leaves. As usual, he was wearing his much-abused top hat, and was reclining in his ancient wicker chair, sipping red wine and smiling from ear to ear. His wooden stick, which sprouted flowers as the mood took it; wild roses or convolvulus, was beside him. Today it was rosemary.

"For remembrance," said Ophelia.

Nobody knew from where exactly Mr. Bacchus came, nor, if the truth were known, where he was going. He had just appeared one bleak November morning, driving his caravan drawn by the giant Ibis-bird, Thoth. He had, it appeared, travelled the flat earth from one edge to the other. Even Lorenzo's distant cousins, who wandered the bleak Kalahari, where only the griffins rise complaining from their carrion, embraced him as a long-lost brother, and explained that in the past years he had frequently appeared from out of a sand storm upon a tortoise and dined upon marinated sand-eels with them.

At last, when the guests had eaten their way through five courses, and Domingo the Clown had broken two complete sets of priceless Venetian glass, Mr. Bacchus rose from his creaking chair, surveyed the elegant company for a moment, and then with his ringmaster's cough hushed the guests.

"My Lords," he began. "My Lords, Cardinals, Doctors of Divinity, Surgeons, Earls, Ladies and Gentlemen."

"And crocodiles," interjected Malachi.

"—and thou Leviathan," said Mr. Bacchus. "May I propose a toast? To the happy couple, Lorenzo and Indigo de Medici."

"Indigo and Lorenzo!" chorused the guests, raising what remained of the Venetian glass and drinking.

"I have the pleasure," continued Mr. Bacchus before anybody could sit down again, "of having known dear Indigo ever since she first began her professional career, in an act which is now, I'm sure you'll agree, justly acknowledged as the finest in the hemisphere. Why, I recall..."

"Oh Purgatory," said Hero, just beneath his breath, "it is the wedding speech."

Mr. Bacchus had a reputation for talking.

"—I recall," Mr. Bacchus went on, "the slip of a girl I came across down at the Dingle in the port of Liverpool, performing on the dock wall with a budgerigar. Since then she has gone from strength to strength, and has grown, quite frankly, into one of the most exquisite young ladies I have ever set eyes upon."

At this, Indigo smiled and looked down modestly. Botticelli began to clap—but Mr. Bacchus had not yet finished.

"Her act is quite simply the most charming I have ever seen. Why, no less an authority upon miracles than the late King Louis of France was magnanimous enough to invite us to Versailles—into the Hall of Mirrors itself—upon rumours he had heard of Indigo. And now, all too quickly, we must give the dear girl into the hands of her husband, Lorenzo the Magnificent, a poet, a farmer, a man of civilization and of carnival. We wish them both all happiness—"

Mr. Bacchus might have continued, but at this point stood Indigo herself, lifting her veil, brushing her red hair from her eyes, and stubbing out her cigar in her dinner.

"Mr. Bacchus—you're too kind, sure you are," she said, pausing momentarily to look at the other members of the Circus. "I'll never forget any of you, I swear I won't, and if me married life's as happy as me life on the road, sure I'll be as lucky as a frog with five legs. But now—I must be setting all my children free."

With a melancholy look, she left the table and, picking up her skirts in the manner of the elegant lady she was practicing to be, glided through the grass to the white box in which she kept her performing birds. As she approached it, from within there rose a cooing and shrieking, and she softly said:

"Hush, hush, me darlins. Murphy's here."

Then she knelt, unlatched the box and threw open the lid. In a cloud of alabaster and turquoise, the birds flew up out of the box into the sun, and one by one turned in the air and came down to land on Indigo's legs, shoulders and out-stretched fingers.

"It's time you was on your ways, me darlins," said Indigo, and she kissed each one of them lightly on the beak. "Farewell me pretties," she said. "You're free, sure you are! Free as the wind of Liverpool Bay!"

By now the silence from the guests was punctuated by sniffs and blown noses, but Indigo did not seem to notice. She just launched her birds into the air, blowing kisses to them all the time. The curious flock flew high up into the air and then dipped behind the dark poplars in the palace grounds. In the cool silence of the shaded walks, the marble heroes in their powdered wigs ceased to struggle at the sound of their wings, and sunning lizards took fright. The breeze blew a little colder off the ocean. Then suddenly, with a sweep of flickering wings, they appeared once more from over the top of the trees, and, having hovered over the guests' heads for a few moments, returned to Indigo's shoulders, head and fingers.

"No! No!" she snapped. "You're supposed to fly off now! You're free!"

But the birds took no notice. Instead, they flew onto the tables and began to perform their tricks. The kingfishers paddled around in the punch bowls, and the terns picked up bunches of grapes and dropped them in Bacchus' lap, while the scaly Archaeopteryx plucked the hundreds of candles from the candelabras and systematically set fire to the tablecloths. The wine boiled in the chalices, and the roast swan took flight in flames. Screaming, the guests leapt up from their seats, as the fire consumed the wedding feast in their place, while the birds, squawking and cooing insanely, flew up above the flames and danced a wedding jig through the smoke. Except for the crackle of the burning tables and the din of the hysterical birds, there fell a horrid silence. The wedding celebrations were wrecked, the wine evaporated, the food devoured, the guests soaked in punch and filthy with smoke. Never had a Medici wedding been so ill-omened as this. Then,

softly at first, from behind the leaping flames of the table, there began ripples of deep laughter, spreading through the silence. It was Mr. Bacchus. He laughed to see the ridiculous pomp brought low, to see the blue-blooded guests lose their dignity and walk on all fours like Nebuchadnezzar. Gradually, the tight-lipped faces of the guests softened, and the corners of their mouths began to twitch with smiles. Very soon they were all sitting in the tide of the grass, weeping with laughter. All except Indigo. She was furious.

"Stupid birds!" she shouted up at them, her face growing redder than her hair. "Sure you ought to be ashamed of yourselves, spoiling the finale like that! What kind of performers do you think you are then? Where's your sense of propriety?"

"If you ask me," said Malachi to Domingo, in his coolest tones, "she knew they wouldn't fly off. She was always one for sentimentality."

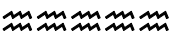
The clown laughed. "Malachi," he said. "You're too suspicious."

"Suspicious? Me?" replied the crocodile, narrowing his eyes to slits. "You take my word for it—it's like a woman, that. Nefertiti was the same."

"Who?"

"A woman who captured me in my youth. A neck like a Nile swan she had, and eyes—eyes the colour of …." He ceased there, gazing wistfully into the smoking ashes of the table.

"He's forgotten," thought Domingo.



That evening, when the time finally came for goodbye, all of Indigo's birds were perched on her shoulders, chirping and screeching contentedly. The Archaeopteryx had even chosen to settle upon Lorenzo's head. It was clear that they intended to stay.

"Well, Indigo," said Mr. Bacchus at the wrought-iron gates of the castle. "It's time we were on our way. There are towns and villages—I can smell the autumn air now—from here to the Edge of the World, waiting for the Circus to appear! There are gaudy posters on mossy walls announcing our imminent arrival! We mustn't get behind schedule. We shall miss you."

"Sure, and that's nonsense," said Indigo, with a sad smile. "Oh no," said Mr. Bacchus. "You are the best bird girl in the world. Where will we ever find another act like yours?"

"Not standing here," yawned Malachi.

Mr. Bacchus looked stern.

"Crocodile," he said, "a most inappropriate remark under the circumstances."

"Well," replied Malachi, "I can't do with sentiment."

"Sure and he's right," said Indigo. "You'll find an act as good as mine any day now. And I think you're a marvelous crocodile, sure I do, Malachi," and she bent down and kissed his scaled nose.

Malachi backed off with a startled look on his face.

"Leave me alone," he said, coughing loudly to mask his embarrassment, and muttered, "Women! Forever slobbering over you. Nefertiti was the same."

When all the good-byes were done, everyone climbed aboard the painted caravan; Hero took the reins of Thoth, and they rattled off down the pink gravel road that led from the city gates. It was now late evening, and by the light of the

sinking sun, the castle might have been built of burning bronze. Slowly, the figures of Indigo and Lorenzo, who were still standing and waving at the iron gates, were swallowed up by the blue twilight, until at last they disappeared altogether. The pink gravel road gave way to a furrowed mud-track. The sun had gone. The wheels of the caravan squealed and thudded through filthy puddles upon which the first frost was forming, drab rain clouds swept over the moon, and from the stubble of a harvest field an owl rose on dank wings, screeching mournfully. The Circus was on the road once more.

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A day or two later, they came to the crossroads. "Which road do we take, Bacchus?" asked Hero.

Mr. Bacchus waved his stick around his head melodramatically.

"Does it matter?" he exploded, leaves spiraling through the air. "Does the vine ask where the sun is summoning it to? Why, there are towns everywhere, my boy! To the North! To the East! To the West! To the South! And everyone who lives loves the Circus. Who could resist it? The lights! The music! The magic! The spectacle! Oh we shall go where e'er the road leads, my boy! Now voyager, seek thou forth and find!"

"But there are three roads to choose from," said Hero.

"Which one shall we take?"

"Why not ask the man sitting on the road side?" suggested Ophelia.

"Why not?" said Mr. Bacchus. "A gentleman of the road, no doubt, like me. A traveller on life's thoroughfares, and familiar with the area."

On the grass, in the shade of a wind-crippled hawthorn bush, sat an old man with a flea-ridden mongrel asleep beside him.

"Excuse me," said Ophelia, climbing down from the caravan, "but could you possibly tell us where these roads lead?"

The old man got up slowly and grimaced.

"Ah!" he said. "That is a question a lot of people ask. Now to the left many say lay the Galapagos, and the road straight ahead—that's said to lead to Glastonbury. The road to the right, however, is a mystery."

"Ah, the Mysteries!" said Mr. Bacchus wistfully. "Tell us more."

"Well, sir, nobody is sure where the road leads," said the old man.

"Nobody?" said Ophelia.

"Except as it happens, myself," replied the old man, with a careful glance behind him, as if he might be overheard. "I know where the road leads because when I was seventeen, I followed it.

"And where does it lead, sir?" asked Mr. Bacchus.

"To the strange and wonderful country, beyond the Himalayas where the Yeti sing, to glorious Cathay."

"Cathay?" said Malachi cynically. "The place is a myth."

"Oh no, wyrm," replied the old man. "There is such a country, and stranger it is than all the myths that are told of it. It lies in Asia the Deep, and there rules a Khan called Kublai, who is the grandchild of the conqueror Genghis Khan, he who overcame Prester John, and he lives in a magnificent palace—nay, city—nay, world—called Xanadu."

"Really?" said Bacchus, his eyes widening. "And do you think that this Khan would enjoy a Circus?"

"I'm sure he would," replied the old man nodding. "For he is a highly civilized Khan, and they have all too few visitors in Xanadu these days to delight him, as it is inaccessible to all but the most fanciful."

"Then we shall go to Cathay," announced Mr. Bacchus. "And entertain this Khan called Kublai. How far is it along the road? Beyond Dogger Bank? Beyond Lincoln?"

"Beyond the Greater Magellanic Cloud, it seems," said the old man. "But you will reach there eventually," and having spoken, he sat down again to stroke his flea-ridden mongrel, who was barking in her sleep.

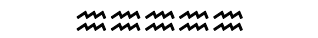
"Thank you kindly, sir," said Mr. Bacchus, bowing deeply and tipping his hat.

"Take the road to the right," he said to Hero, stepping aboard the caravan once more. "We're going to Cathay."

As the caravan turned onto the Cathay road, the old man under the hawthorn bush suddenly got to his feet again and called after Mr. Bacchus.

"Sir!" he cried, his old voice shaking. "Remember me to Xanadu! Remember me to the Khan called Kublai! Tell him I will be there! And tell him Marco Polo thinks of him often!"

"I will," said Mr. Bacchus, at which the old man smiled to himself and went back to lying in the shelter of the hawthorn bush and comforting the mongrel dog with a hand tanned by ocean winds, long since exhausted.



The road to Asia the deep was a long and uneven one, and it was uncomfortable in the small caravan. Although it had been generally agreed at the beginning of the journey that the idea of going to Cathay was a good one, as the days passed, and the road became narrower, it seemed less and less attractive.

They had been travelling on the road for about five or six days when they came to an orchard. There were hundreds of trees laid out in avenues—plum, apple, peach, fig and pomegranate—all heavily laden with ripe fruit. In the evening sky the Plough was rising, so Hero stopped the caravan and everybody climbed out to stretch their legs and to smell the sweet September air. Suddenly, the perfect silence was broken by a loud voice: "Thief! Thief!" it shouted. "Stop thief!" and as its first echoes died, between the trees there ran a young man with long black curls, pursued from the depths of the orchard by the orchard-keeper himself, shouting oaths and accusations. Run as he might, however, the keeper was too short and fat to catch up, until suddenly the beautiful young man tripped over the sprawling roots of a plum tree and fell headlong into the uncut grass. There he lay, quite still, and when the angry keeper at last reached the spot and raised the youth's head by the hair his eyes were closed and his mouth gaped like that of a Lantern Fish. The orchard keeper was too angry to notice, however, and seizing up a dead branch from the ground he cried:

"I shall beat you, boy—within an inch of paradise and back again."

At that moment Mr. Bacchus opened the orchard gate and marched towards the keeper.

"You, sir!" he said, pointing his stick at the panting little man.

"What do you want, Mummer?" growled the keeper.

"That boy is either senseless or dead, sir," replied Mr. Bacchus. "May I suggest you unhand him?"

"What?" exclaimed the orchard-keeper with a horrified look, releasing the youth's hair as if it had become snakes and bitten him. "Dead? What's that? I didn't touch him. Did I strike him? Did the blow fall? No!"

By now Ophelia was kneeling beside the fallen youth, trying to turn him over.

"Let me," said Hero, and with one hand rolled the young man onto his back.

The sight was not a pretty one. The youth's white shirt was entirely stained with blood. Malachi turned pale at the sight.

"Aten!" he muttered. "I can't stand the sight of blood. It makes me feel dizzy," and he scuttled up into one of the apple trees and hid there with only his twitching tail dangling down between the branches. At that moment the young man's eyes opened. It was as if a candle had emerged from behind a veil. "He's not dead," said Hero.

"Of course not," said Domingo, dancing on the spot. "How could he be?"

"But the blood!" said Ophelia.

The young man looked down solemnly at his wounded chest and smiled.

"Squashed fruit," he said. "I hid the fruit inside my shirt." "What's your name, fellow?" demanded Mr. Bacchus. "Angelo, sir," replied the young man, getting to his feet and retrieving the ruined fruit from inside his shirt.

"And you are a thief, are you not?" said Mr. Bacchus sternly.

"I am, sir," replied the youth. "That is the lightest of my sins, and I will admit to it. I had no money, and I was hungry, so…"

"So he stole my fruit," interrupted the orchard keeper, becoming angry again and mopping his forehead with a small lace handkerchief. "And now who'll pay for it?"

"I would gladly, sir," replied Mr. Bacchus. "But unfortunately I have not the price of a glass of wine."

Then another voice was heard in the orchard; a woman's voice, half-begging, half-calling:

"Madeline! Madeline!"

"That's my wife," explained the orchard keeper. "Calling in my daughter for her supper."

The voice approached, still calling, until the keeper's wife appeared through the trees, tears pouring down her cheeks. As soon as she set eyes on her husband she rushed to him, sobbing.

"Madeline is gone," she wept. "She wandered off while I was in the house taking pies out of the oven."

"It will be dark soon," said the orchard-keeper, and as he spoke, a look of fear moved in his eyes. "Do you know where she went, woman?"

The keeper's wife began to sob even louder at this, and pointed to the forest that stood poised at the perimeter of the orchard. The trees were pines, and unlike the well-tended avenues of the fruit trees, they had a look of the wasteland about them, as if their sap might be tar and their cones the eggs of the cockatrice.

"She was playing close to the forest," said the keeper's wife.

"Then she must have wandered in," replied the keeper grimly. "There are peacocks in there with two thousand eyes, tigers and barking mandrills with purple snouts. They will have eaten her by now."

"Oh, don't worry," said Mr. Bacchus. "Malachi will deal with the peacocks and the tigers, and Hero can wrestle the mandrills."

Malachi peered from out of the apple tree when he heard his name being mentioned. "Must I?" he said. "Your peacock is a savage beast when roused."

"We must help the gentleman find his daughter," said Mr. Bacchus. "And if that means wrestling peacocks and tigers—then surely wrestle them we shall."

Now the sun was sinking, and the air that had been sweet with perfume of ripe fruit was cold, and it seemed to stink of peacocks. The dying light of the sun, passing through the rows of trees, striped each of the company like tigers, and from the forest, unnamable sounds drifted. The keeper's wife began to cry once more.

"Madeline," she said. "We'll never see her again."

Angelo interrupted her. "I have stolen your fruit," he said quietly. "And I must make amends. I will go to the forest and find your daughter."

"It's useless, thief," said the keeper bitterly. "The forest is as endless as Mino's maze and the tigers will tear you to pieces before you have taken a step."

But Angelo only smiled, and, with the others following behind, slipped between the trees to the place where the orchard surrendered itself to the pines. It was growing darker and darker every moment, as the sun slipped behind the Himalayas, and now and then, in the depths of the forest it seemed as though they heard the baboons picking their teeth.

Angelo stood on the very edge of the pines and closed his eyes. Utter silence fell. Even the nameless noises ceased. The sun was immersed altogether, and the Himalayas fled up to meet the night. Then, very slowly, Angelo opened his eyes, and a light seemed to flow from them, a light that flickered like a flame in a breath.

Everybody gasped in amazement. "What is it?" hissed Domingo.

"Ssssh!" insisted Ophelia. "It's magic!" "A trick?" said Hero. "That's no trick."

Trick or riot, the light was real, and even as they watched, from the shadows of the pines, and from the grass, from between the patterns of dead pine-needles, and from under the vanes of the cones, moths began to appear. It was the light from Angelo's eyes that they were fluttering towards, and they gathered around his head like so many stars. Now even Malachi stared in disbelief.

Suddenly, something in the forest moved. Everybody slowly took a step back. And another. A baboon screeched hysterically among the high branches, like a Bird of Paradise mad with its beauty.

"Back!" cried the orchard-keeper.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Bacchus.

"A tiger!" the keeper yelled. "It's a tiger!"

"Are you sure?" said Mr. Bacchus, raising his stick.

"Look!" replied the keeper, and pointed into the darkness. Something was emerging from the forest, albino, as if it had been centuries without light. Its pale form was threaded through the trees like a will-o-the-wisp in reeds.

"A tiger!" cried the keeper again. "A white tiger! Run!"

Nobody needed a further warning. Everyone turned and ran like the wind, back to the safety of the orchard. Only Angelo remained at the edge of the pines, still making the moths dance in the light around his head.

"He doesn't see it!" said Hero. "He doesn't see the tiger."

"Don't look!" cried the keeper, expecting the tiger to leap from the darkness on top of Angelo and tear him hand from arm. Ophelia hid her eyes, Domingo stood on his head, and Malachi ran up a tree again. They waited as the living darkness engulfed them, frozen in fear. Long minutes passed. The orchard was silent. Ophelia peered tentatively between her fingers, Domingo turned a somersault to stand on his feet, and Malachi parted the leaves of the apple tree. There was no sign of the tiger. Nor a peacock. Not even a barking baboon.

Instead, from the clutches of the pine forest emerged a little girl in a muddied white dress, laughing to herself as she chased the moths that were fluttering in front of her towards Angelo's eyes.

"Madeline!" cried the orchard-keeper's wife, rushing forward to sweep her daughter up into her arms. "Madeline, my girl, where have you been?"

"In the forest," replied the child, with a grin.

"What about tigers, girl?" said her father, peering into the pines. "Why didn't the tigers eat you? Or have they, and you are an apparition?"

"What are tigers?" said Madeline.

There was a moment's silence. The keeper shook his head.

"Home for you," said the wife to her daughter, and carried her down the avenues of the trees, scolding and kissing her at the same time. The orchard-keeper just looked bewildered.

"She said she saw no tigers," he said. "Yet the forest is full of them."

"Perhaps," said Bacchus knowingly, "it is your heads which are full of tigers."

"Not mine," said Malachi. "They smell."

By this time, the light in Angelo's eyes had faded, and he was walking off towards the road.

"Thief," the orchard-keeper called after him. "You have brought my daughter back to me. Please—will you come home and eat with us?"

"A capital idea," said Mr. Bacchus "Malachi, you may come out of that tree now."

When they had dined on pies and wine, Angelo told them how he had been exiled from his father's house when it was discovered that his eyes glowed like candle-flames.

"They believed I was a changeling," he said. "That I was the son of a satyr."

"No such thing," said Malachi.

"Oh dear me!" said Bacchus. "Why, in Arcady, the times we'd—"

Ophelia interrupted him before he could begin his reminiscing.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked Angelo.

"I don't know," he replied. "I shall just follow the road wherever it goes."

"A splendid philosophy," said Mr. Bacchus. "My own! My own! I'm taking my circus to Cathay, in Asia the Deep, my boy, to delight the Khan called Kublai with tumbling and mumming. I should be charmed if you'd join us, and come along to Xanadu. What an act you have! Angelo and his dancing moths! Extraordinary! Will you come, my dear boy?"

"Thank you," said Angelo. "I should be honoured." "True," said Bacchus.

And so they said goodbye to the orchard-keeper, to his wife, and to Madeline the apparition, and one by one they climbed back into the caravan with a high bright moon turning the road before them to a silver ribbon, and set off once more on their journey to Cathay and to the lichened towers of Xanadu.

The Face of the Flying Lion Fish and Why Doctor Bentham‘s Theatre of Tears

sailed north

This is the second story about Mr. Bacchus and his Travelling Circus, and it concerns the face of the Flying Lion-Fish, and why Doctor Jozabiah Bentham's Theatre of Tears sailed North to battle whales.

A bitter south-easterly wind howled and careened along the open road, and there were ponderous thunderclouds across the star. In the caravan, everyone was listening to the moan of the wind between the spokes of the wheels, unable to get a wink of sleep. Malachi had given up trying to remember the names of the Rameses the Second's dogs, and was lying full-length on the floor with his head on his claws. Angelo was attempting to teach Ophelia to play chess, but if even a pawn were taken she would begin to weep. Posing against the wall, Domingo de Ybarrondo, the Clown, pulled faces at himself in the hand-mirror, first joyful, then rejected, ridiculous, marital, tragic and awful. Hero, meanwhile, was attempting to sketch Malachi, but the creature he had drawn looked extremely odd, so he transformed it into a shattered pillar of a temple lying on its side, with two toads squatting on it. Only Mr. Bacchus himself was asleep, sitting slumped in his wicker chair with his head on his broad chest. With each snore his beard quivered, and occasionally a dead oak or vine leaf would be lifted into the air by his breath, and then drift lazily down to the floor.

Around the caravan the October gale bared its teeth like a pack of Arctic wolves. Had all the members of the Circus not been together it would have been a frightening night to spend there, on the empty road, with clouds across the North Star, directionless in the wilderness. As it was, they thought, what Kraken or Salamander would possibly try to enter the caravan, with Hieronymous the strongman and the fearsome jaws of Malachi to face?

Suddenly there was a thump on the roof, and the world rocked violently from side to side. Something large, it seemed, had flapped out of the icy night and landed on the caravan. Malachi covered his nostrils with his claws, and tried to look as inconspicuous as he possibly could, Domingo hid his face behind the mirror, and Ophelia leapt up from her seat, sending the chess pieces flying. Abruptly, the rocking stopped, and there was a long silence while everyone wondered what to say and do next. Hero was the first to speak:

"Did you hear that?" he said.

"Anything in particular?" said Malachi.

"Yes," said Domingo, peering from behind the mirror. "A bump on the roof."

"I wonder what it was?" said Ophelia.

"Nothing," said Malachi hurriedly. "A trick of the light." "I hope Thoth will be alright out there," said Hero.

Thoth was the giant Ibis-bird who pulled the caravan, and he always slept standing up with his head tucked under his wing.

At precisely that moment, he squawked frantically, and the caravan rocked again.

"He's seen it," said Angelo.

"It was a trick of..." Malachi began, and then, as Thoth's frightened squawks grew louder, thought the better of it. "What should we do?" said Ophelia, beginning to tremble. "We ought to wake Bacchus," said Domingo.

Everyone agreed that this seemed a wise idea, and Mr. Bacchus was stirred. He murmured, "Sybil..." in his sleep, blinked, stretched and yawned. "Morning already?" he said. "Why these nights get shorter! I'm hardly away to Arcady before dawn."

"No," said Hero. "No, it's not morning yet."

"Why have I been woken then?" demanded Bacchus, frowning.

"There's something..." the Clown began, looking up all the time as if whatever it was might fall through the ceiling on top of him. "There's something on the roof."

"Oh really?" said Mr. Bacchus. "What sort of thing, my boy?"

"I, for one, don't wish to look," pronounced Malachi. "It will almost certainly have three heads, two spiked tails, and roar like a fish."

"Fish don't roar," said Domingo.

"You haven't met the fish I've met," replied Malachi. "The ones that lurk in the drowned dhows at the bottom of the Nile and roar like lions."

"Oh really, crocodile," said Hero. "I doubt very much if you have ever seen the Nile, never mind its bottom."

Before Malachi could reply to that accusation, the Ibis-bird squawked again, and the thing on the roof began to jump up and down, screeching and gibbering insanely.

"Listen to that," said Malachi, his eyes rolling. "That is distinctly the roaring of your Lion-Fish! It's flown here all the way from the Nile, and is now perching on our roof."

Ophelia began to sob: "I wish I'd been a nun," she said. "Instead of joining a Circus."

"Fear not, my dear," said Mr. Bacchus, enveloping her in a protective arm.

"Hero is going out to tell the Great Beast to get off of our roof, aren't you, Hero?"

"Am I?" said Hero nervously.

"Indeed you are, my boy, indeed you are. It's no trouble for a fellow with your pectorals, now is it?"

"Isn't it?" replied Hero.

"Of course not," said Bacchus.

"What if it is a Flying Lion-Fish?" said Malachi. "Where will we get another strongman from, at this time of night?"

"If it is a Lion-Fish," said Bacchus, slapping Hero on the back, "Wrestle it! Capture it, my boy, and we shall all be rich! Imagine that, the only Circus in the

world with a flying Lion-Fish! Why, when we go to Cathay, think of the fortune that will await us! Mr. Maximillian Bacchus and his flying Lion-Fish."

"Wait a moment," put in Hero. "If I capture it, then surely it will be my Lion-Fish?"

"Ah, but it's chosen to land on my roof," said Mr. Bacchus. "True," said Hero. "Then we shall share the fortune. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said Mr. Bacchus. "Now, child, get up there and wrestle it, or we shall have it through the ceiling."

Suddenly, Ophelia let out a horrified squeal, and pointed to the window.

"The Fish!" she cried. "It's the Fish."

There was a face at the window. A hideous face. The fanged mouth was upon its forehead, and the pig-like eyes were where the mouth should have been. A scraggly orange beard hung from the wrinkled chin, but there was no sign of either a neck or a body. The nose was flat and pressed against the window, and out of the top of the head grew a hairy shape that might have been the beginnings of a malformed fin.

"Oh, NO," said Malachi. "That's not a Flying Lion-Fish. That's much more horrible."

At the sight of the disembodied head, Mr. Bacchus leapt up and rushed to the window, shouting:

"Remove yourself from my caravan, friend!" and beat upon the glass with his stick.

Immediately, the head disappeared, and the thing began to jump up and down on the roof again, screeching. The caravan rocked, and everyone toppled over onto Malachi.

"Remove yourselves!" demanded the crocodile, "Or undoubtedly I shall consume the first limb I set eyes upon."

"Well," said Angelo, engineering himself out of the pile. "We can't stay here all night, hoping the next gust will blow it back to the Abyss. I'm going out to see what it is."

"Oh, do be careful," said Ophelia.

"Of course," replied Angelo, and picking up the wooden sword Malachi used in his rendering of "Das Rheingold," he opened the caravan door and was enveloped by the darkness. Inside the caravan, everyone waited, straining their ears. But there was silence once more. Even the gibbering stopped.

"I'm going out to help him," said Domingo, and cartwheeled through the door before anyone could stop him.

"We had better assist the poor boy!" said Bacchus, leading the way. "Malachi, you will remain here and protect Ophelia!" "What if it comes in, and we're on our own?" said Malachi.

"Coward!" accused Mr. Bacchus.

"Me?" said Malachi. "Coward? Me? You insult me, sir. My dignity is affronted." He put his nose into the air and climbed into the costume basket.

"You'd better come with me then," said Hero to Ophelia, and they stepped out into the windy night.

Twice or three times around the caravan they stalked, encountering one another in the dark once or twice and seizing hold of each other, yelling:

"I have it! I have it!" until they realized that it was not the disembodied Fish head at all. Hero helped Angelo to climb onto the roof, but there was nothing to be found. Not even a pool of slime where the creature had squatted. As for Thoth the Ibis-bird, he had hidden his head under his wing and was standing frozen on one leg like a statue in the Duke de Medici's gardens. There was nothing to be seen or heard, except the wind and the waste of the darkness.

Suddenly, the caravan rocked more violently than ever, and from within came the sound of Malachi's voice yelling, and the smashing of crockery. Everybody immediately rushed round to the door, but by the time they arrived, the noises had ceased. Cautiously, they peered in. Malachi was on the floor, wrapped up in a bundle of costumes, and the creature was sitting on his back. It was really not so fearsome when viewed the right way up. In fact, it was an orang-outang.

"I'm Bathsheba," she announced.

"Are you the thing?" said Hero suspiciously. "Or it's keeper?"

"What thing?" asked Bathsheba.

"On our roof," said Domingo. "The gibbering Lion-Fish head with no body and a fin growing out of its skull."

"Yes!" replied Bathsheba.

"You can't be," said Ophelia. "It had no neck."

"And an orange beard." said Hero.

So Bathsheba stood on her head, and everyone recognized the monstrosity. When inverted, the orang-outang became something horrid beyond imagining.

"I apologise for the noise," said Bathsheba. "But I really wasn't quite sure where I landed."

"You fly?" said Domingo.

"I was blown," explained the ape. "The wind got under my parasol."

"Where do you come from?" asked Ophelia, breathless with awe.

Bathsheba slowly looked from one person to the next and then said, very quietly: "Have you heard of Doctor Jozabiah Bentham of Houndsditch?"

Bacchus' face became terrible to look upon when that name was spoken. "Bentham, the son of a butcher?" he said, and the ape flinched as he accused her. "You are one of Bentham's menagerie?"

Malachi meanwhile, had disentangled himself from the costumes, and nodded knowingly. "He's a Doctor of Philosophy," he mused. "And they're a dangerous breed."

"I've never heard of him," said Angelo.

"He owns another Travelling Circus," explained Mr. Bacchus grimly. "The Theatre of Tears. And wherever it goes, it leaves melancholy behind it! Every act is neon-lit, so that the audience doesn't miss a tear."

"And Bentham himself plays the cello at every performance," added Bathsheba, "to 'make the audience weep'. The Doctor says he's proved by logic that people want perpetual misery. He put me in a little bird-cage and told me to look as imprisoned as possible."

"And did you?" asked Ophelia.

"I tried," said Bathsheba, "but I used to smirk. He hated that." "Has he still got the rest of his Theatre with him?" said Bacchus.

"Oh yes," replied Bathsheba. "There's Luther the wolf, Mud, Hole and Slug the acrobats, the Silver Clown who juggles broken mirrors with his hook and hand; and of course, the star of the Theatre of Tears, Medea, the bald snake-woman. It sends shivers through me to think of her."

Bathsheba was quiet for a moment, recalling the snake-woman's lidless gaze. Then she said: "I was so unhappy with Bentham's Theatre; all I wanted was to escape. Well, the wind was so strong, and so I opened my parasol this evening, and took off."

"Do you think the Doctor followed you?" asked Ophelia.

"I don't know," said Bathsheba. "I heard him cursing, but by that time, I was in the cloud."

"Well you're safe here," said Hero. "We won't let him take you back. You don't belong to him."

"He'll be wrathful," said Bathsheba.

"Let the fellow try his worst," said Malachi. "I shall deal with him. Just give me a—"

At that moment, there were two loud raps on the door, and a cold, even voice said:

"Whoever's in there, be civil enough to show your faces." Bathsheba turned pale under her orange fur. "It's him," she hissed. "It's Bentham."

Malachi, forgetting his former show of gallantry, slipped under the table as quietly as he could, as Doctor Bentham's voice pierced the door once more, harsh as ice on slate.

"Is there anybody within?" it requested, and then demanded, "Bacchus, are you there?"

"Hide," whispered Bacchus to Bathsheba. "Hide yourself in the costume basket."

The orang-outang promptly tumbled into the large basket and pulled the lid down after her. Then Mr. Bacchus strolled casually to the door and opened it. The drawn face of Doctor Jozabiah Bentham stared into the warmth of the caravan, like so many gargoyles. There was not the flicker of an eyelid, nor the twitch of a tail. Doctor Bentham himself, dressed from head to foot in shades of grey, looked straight at Mr. Bacchus, his eyes glassy. In his long grey-gloved fingers he held a silver cane, polished like a mirror.

"If you're selling stained glass or chains, we've got enough," said Mr. Bacchus, trying to close the door again, but the Doctor already had one foot inside the caravan.

"Bacchus," he said slowly. "Would you close the door on a fellow showman? Perhaps you would be kind enough to help me. I'm looking for a monkey."

"Oh!" said Mr. Bacchus, effecting a surprised expression. "A monkey? Really? Well, we haven't seen a monkey, have we?" Everyone shook their heads.

"Are you sure?" said Dr. Bentham, tapping his cane in the palm of his hand.

"Quite sure," replied Mr. Bacchus. "We haven't seen any monkey."

"Or an orang-outang," put in Ophelia.

"I made no mention of an orang-outang," said Doctor Bentham, his eyes narrowing. "Whatever could have made you think I was in search of such a misbegotten species?"

Ophelia attempted to reply, but her mouth had become completely dry, and Medea's blind cobra had fixed its dead gaze upon her, so that her tongue would not move in her mouth.

"Only guessing," said Bacchus, to cover up the awkward silence. "Who has not heard of the Theatre of Tears?"

"Doubtless you have also heard of my orang-outang," said Bentham, curtly.

"Doubtless...!" said Bacchus. "And now, if you'll excuse—"

"Do you happen to have a glass of wine you might offer me?" said the Doctor, softening his tone somewhat. "The night has quite frozen my blood."

"No," replied Mr. Bacchus, wiping little beads of sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief. "I'm afraid the last of the wine was spilt."

"No, it wasn't," said Domingo helpfully, producing one of the casks of wine from the chest of drawers. "There's some left."

By the time he caught Mr. Bacchus' eye, it was too late. Doctor Bentham was seated in Mr. Bacchus' wicker chair, pouring the wine, saying: "How civilized of you, Bacchus. The world knows that we have been enemies for centuries, yet you invite me into your little caravan and offer me wine." He soothed his silver cane with his fingers and sipped a little of the wine with distaste.

At that moment, a peacock feather lodged up Bathsheba's left nostril, and she sneezed, at the same time kicking a large hole in the side of the costume-basket, with her right leg.

With a sardonic smile the Doctor slowly put on a pair of silver spectacles and pointed a grey-gloved finger at the leg: "What—is that?" he said slowly.

"That?" said Mr. Bacchus. "That's a leg."

"What is more," replied the Doctor, his smile vanishing. "That is undoubtedly the leg of an orang-outang."

"Well—" began Mr. Bacchus, for once in his life rather lost for words. But his sentence was never finished.

"What if it is an orang-outang?" said Hero, stepping forward and flexing his muscles. "You've got no business poking your noses into the caravan of Mr. Maximillian Bacchus."

"I have if you've stolen my monkey," said Doctor Bentham reprovingly.

"We haven't stolen her," said Domingo quickly. "Bathsheba doesn't belong to you!"

"So it is her!" snapped the Doctor with a sneer, and turning to the door he called to the rest of his Circus: "Tears, idle Tears! Seize me the monkey!"

Upon his words, the other members of the Theatre of Tears burst into the caravan. But before Bentham himself could reach the costume-basket and seize Bathsheba's still-protruding leg, Domingo put out his foot and tripped him up. The Doctor's spectacles flew into the air and were promptly trodden upon by the Silver Clown—who picked up the slivers of glass with wild eyes and juggled them. The next moment, the caravan was in chaos! Medea the snake-woman set the blind cobra upon Hero, and it immediately encircled him in ever-tightening coils. The strong-man had to use all his power in his biceps to keep it from crushing the breath out of him.

Meanwhile, Luther, the Doctor's under-fed wolf, who was standing face to face with Malachi, leapt into the air, a deadly growl at the back of his throat. Malachi

took fright and turned to make a diplomatic retreat, and his huge tail knocked the wolf across the caravan.

Mud, Hole and Slug, the acrobatic trio, had pounced upon Ophelia, eating her wild flowers by the handful, and yelling the most wild threats, but Domingo came to her aid with six willow pattern plates, which he promptly smashed over their heads.

By now, Doctor Bentham had retrieved the shattered remains of his spectacles, and his blood-shot eyes had alighted on Mr. Bacchus, who was engrossed in keeping the bald snake-woman from pulling out his beard by the roots. Stealthily, he crept behind Bacchus and raised his silver cane to strike him down. "Oh, how good," he thought. "To have this, my last enemy, finally silenced." Before the blow could land, however, Bacchus caught sight of the attack in the pink eyes of the snake-woman, and turned on his heels to ward off the Doctor's blow with his wooden stick.

A look close to madness flared in Bentham's eyes and the caravan was suddenly still. The two Circus owners stood facing each other. Doctor Bentham's grey lips drawn back from his lead teeth, Mr. Bacchus with half a smile on his face.

Without warning, the Doctor raised his silver cane even higher, and brought it down again, swift as lightning, upon his intended victim. But Bacchus' stick, woven with convolvulus, met the cane in mid-air and as they struck, the wilderness seemed to convulse. There was a sudden flash illuminating Bentham's features in a ghastly yellow, and revealing the darkness behind his eyes.

The next moment his cane fractured, and silver shards spun in all directions, glittering as they fell, over and over. The look on Bentham's face turned to fear, and in a voice that was no longer cold and heavy, but high and hollow, he cried:

"Back, Tears! Back, My Theatre!"

At this, Mud, Hole and Slug scurried like lice through the door, followed by the hooked Silver Clown, the Snake-Woman and Luther. The Doctor himself, still holding the shattered stump of his silver cane, turned at the door and pointed a shaking forefinger at Mr. Bacchus.

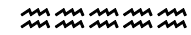
"I warn you, Bacchus," he said, fighting to keep himself from weeping. "This is not the end of our encounter. Oh, dear me, no."

And then, with a grimace that revealed his now-broken teeth, he stepped into the grey gloom that had crept over the empty road as the dawn approached, and was swallowed utterly.

It took a long time to tidy up the caravan after the battle, especially the collecting of all the pieces of Bentham's silver cane, some of which had buried themselves deep in the woodwork, like bright worms. Mr. Bacchus put them into a small bag, and buried them in an empty field. It was henceforth sterile.

When as much of the damage as was possible had been righted, Bathsheba thanked them all for their help. "What would I have done without you?" she said. "I should have been doomed to a life of Tears."

"It was nothing," said Malachi.



That morning, when they set off along the road to Cathay, they knew that they were being followed. Whenever someone happened to glance out of the back

window, he would glimpse another caravan, a black caravan, pulled by a giant armadillo, just appearing around the corner, or waiting behind a beech copse. Bathsheba recognized it as Doctor Bentham's.

"He'll follow us," she said. "Until he finds the right moment—then he'll strike. Perhaps next time he'll bring his knives, and his syllogisms. There was never a man with such dark ideas."

"I'm scared," said Ophelia.

"There's absolutely no need to be, my dear," said Mr. Bacchus. "Good will undoubtedly overcome evil every time. Take my word for it."

"Not always," said Hero, grimly. "There's a tale they tell on the shores of Lake Rudolph—"

Just then, Angelo, who was driving, called:

"Bacchus! Bacchus! We've arrived."

"Good," said Mr. Bacchus.

"Where are we?" asked Domingo.

"Parkgate," replied Mr. Bacchus. "On the shores of the great Dee."

The clown looked out of the window. The caravan was rattling down the cobbled streets of a town. There was the smell of salt in the wind, and the sound of gulls mewing.

"What have we come here for?" asked Hero.

"I have a plan, my boy," replied Mr. Bacchus. "Drive down to the harbour, Angelo."

Very soon, the caravan clattered down to the sea front. There was a solitary ship tied up to the quay, rocking gently on the tide, and as Mr. Bacchus stepped down from the caravan, he pointed to it with a smile of satisfaction.

"Hent," he said mysteriously.

The vessel had an ominous appearance, with its figurehead of a mad dog, its black sails, and the vermilion skull and crossed bones that blew from the masthead.

"But that's a pirate ship," said Hero.

"Pirates!" said Malachi. "A despicable breed. Unkempt. Filthy. Scum of the seas."

"Most, perhaps," said Mr. Bacchus. "But not Hent." And without another word, began to rummage through the costume box. At length he salvaged from it a wooden sword and an old fur fox. He then proceeded to wrap the fur around the blade.

"The window," he said as he worked. "Watch the window."

Ophelia peered out of the back window, watching for any sign of Bentham's caravan, but so far the streets leading down to the harbour were empty. Even the shrimp-sellers hid in the dark of the alleyways.

"Now," said Mr. Bacchus, once he had finished his work. "We are all going out to say our farewell."

"Who to?" asked Domingo.

"To Bathsheba," replied Mr. Bacchus.

"Where's she going?" said Ophelia.

"With Hent, on the next tide," came the answer.

"Oh no!" said Ophelia. "She mustn't."

"Not the real one," replied Bacchus. "The real Bathsheba will be in the caravan, hiding." And he picked up the fox fur effigy, climbed down from the caravan, and walked straight towards the pirate ship.

On the gently swaying deck, a figure stood amid the creaking ropes and flapping canvas. An elegant looking gentleman, with small dark spectacles and a knife-edge in his breeches, his hand on his hip.

"You," Mr. Bacchus called to him. "Hent."

The pirate looked up slowly from his sizeable feet and seemed to half-recognise Mr. Bacchus.

"Do I know you?" he inquired suspiciously.

"Of course," replied Mr. Bacchus.

"From whence?" asked the pirate, with a worried look. Mr. Bacchus smiled knowingly.

"The Tyrrhenian Sea, fellow! Don't you remember?" he said, producing a bunch of grapes from Ophelia's ear. A look of recognition came into Hent's eyes and with it a look of barely suppressed panic.

"You," he said. "You, turning the mast to vines and the oars to serpents—"

"So, you remember," said Mr. Bacchus.

"I could scarcely forget," said Hent. "I never touch wine these days."

"Where are you going?" said Bacchus.

"Why?" demanded the pirate. "You can't come aboard. I forbid it. I know what you can do, you monster."

"I don't want to sail myself," replied Bacchus. "I have some new crew members for you."

"How much?" came the demand.

"Gratis," said Bacchus. "I ask again, Hent, where are you headed?"

"We are sailing for the Arctic," the pirate replied, with a wicked smile. "To steal ice."

"Then you'll need extra crew," said Bacchus. "To hack the 'bergs and to load the blocks. Not a pleasant job, hacking, and freezing, and fighting off whales."

"True," said Hent.

"Here then," said Mr. Bacchus, climbing the gangway and giving the fox-fur mannequin to the pirate. "A little piece of magic. Stand that in the bows, and your crew will come running."

"Magic?" said the pirate, taking the fox-fur from Bacchus at arm's length in case some sudden transformation occurred.

"Trust me," said Bacchus, and he laughed. "After all," he said, "if I wanted to sink you, there are easier ways."

"I know, I know," said the pirate.

"Now do as I say, dear boy," said Mr. Bacchus. "Before the estuary silts."

For a moment the pirate stared at the effigy, and then obediently took it to the bows of the ship, leaning it against the railings. Then he returned to the gangplank.

"If you make a clown out of me—" he threatened, reaching for his cutlass.

"Impossible, impossible," said Mr. Bacchus in a kindly voice. "Could I make the ocean wetter?"

"Then that's settled," said Mr. Bacchus.

Hardly had the words left his lips, when a loud clatter echoed around the empty quayside and Doctor Bentham's caravan came into sight. The doctor himself was driving it, and his face was white with fury.

"Thieves!" he cried. "Thieves! I shall have my monkey and your head, Bacchus! Your head, to turn forests to stone!"

"Set sail!" called Mr. Bacchus to the pirates. "Set sail, Hent, before you lose the tide. Here comes the rest of your crew now!"

Hent shouted an order, and immediately the deck was swarming with swarthy pirates, preparing to set sail. The anchor was raised from the mud, the black sails lowered to swell in the wind. The ominous ship strained at its mooring rope, as its keel seemed to sense the icy currents.

"Wave!" hissed Mr. Bacchus to the others. "Wave to Bathsheba!"

Everyone began to wave furiously at Bathsheba and called: "Bon Voyage!"

It was all extremely convincing. In fact, Ophelia, who always felt downcast at farewells, was moved to tears by the whole scene.

Even as two of the pirates cast off the ropes, and prepared to draw the gangplank aboard the vessel, Bentham's black caravan came to a halt, and the Doctor leapt down from the driving seat, an Italian butcher's knife in each hand.

"Well," he said to Bacchus. "Shall I have your head now or later? Stand aside, Bacchus, and you may live a minute longer." "After you," said Mr. Bacchus, with a smile and a bow. Sneering, Bentham, followed by the rest of the Theatre of

Tears, swept up the gangplank onto the ship.

"Up plank!" yelled Hent, triumphantly. "Cast off!"

The Doctor and his associates were too eager to reach Bathsheba to notice the ship was now moving away from the quay, and turning into the estuary. His howl of wrath, however, when he reached the effigy, and realized he had been deceived, was hideous, and he stabbed at it again until pieces of fur littered the tide. But by now it was all too late. The ship had already reached the mouth of the Dee and was in the grip of the Arctic currents. Even when it was well on its way, however, the Doctor's voice could still be heard, cursing with axiom and syllogism alike.

"The sea is salt," said Mr. Bacchus, half to himself. "And full of fish. The good Doctor wanted his audience swimming in tears...."

Presently, even the Doctor's voice faded, and in Parkgate there was only the sound of the tide lapping against the sloping harbour wall. The Doctor's black caravan still stood on the quayside, however, with the giant armadillo asleep in a ball beside it. Mr. Bacchus tapped its hairy shell gently with his stick, and a small shining eye appeared.

"Excuse me, beast," said Mr. Bacchus. "But the good Doctor has left the continent for a spell."

"Oh?" said the armadillo. "Where?"

"He has gone North," replied Mr. Bacchus.

"Good," said the armadillo contentedly. "I need a long sleep." And he rolled back into a ball again.

Later that year, the people of Parkgate brought milk and shrimps for the armadillo, whom they called Piers. And Hent's ship did not return on the April tides, but remained sailing around the Arctic for fear that the warmer clime might melt the cargo, and bear them to the ocean bed.

And thus, Mr. Bacchus' Travelling Circus left the silting port with the armadillo on the quay, and the black sail disappearing over the horizon into the endless midnight of the Arctic, and set off again along the road that lead to Asia the Deep, to Cathay, and so, at last, to Xanadu, of which the poet had dreamed.

How the Clown Domingo de Ybarrondo Fell Over

the edge of the world

This is another story about Mr. Maximillian Bacchus and his Travelling Circus, and it concerns the Clown, Domingo de Ybarrondo, who had the misfortune to fall off the Edge of the World.

Mr. Bacchus' Travelling Circus had been on the road to Asia the Deep for several weeks, hoping to reach the fabled city of Xanadu, there to entertain the great Khan called Kublai. But since they had been given directions by the old man who sat under the hawthorn bush, the road had twisted and turned North, South, East and West, yet there was no sign of the gleaming towers of Xanadu. In fact everyone in the caravan was becoming tired of the whole business. Several weeks had passed and the Circus had not stopped once on its way, to put on a show. What was the use of being in a Circus that never performed?

In the middle of the lurching caravan stood Hero, the strongman, lifting Ophelia, the sad trapeze-girl, with one hand. Bathsheba the orang-outang was dangling from the light, Domingo the Clown was juggling green oranges, and Malachi the crocodile was snoring under the wardrobe. As always, Mr. Bacchus was sitting in his large wicker chair, but the expression on his face .was far from his familiar smile. His chin was resting on his hands, and the leaves in his beard and his white hair had wilted. To be honest, he was beginning to suspect that the man at the side of the road had been mad, and that Xanadu had been some fancy. Outside, driving the giant Ibis-bird, Thoth, who pulled the caravan, sat Angelo, the young man with the black curly hair and the strange eyes, whistling "This is My Lovely Day."

Inside, Malachi woke from fitful sleep. "If that Angelo doesn't stop whistling, I shall personally have the pleasure of eating him," he said. "What's he got to be happy about?"

"He's always happy," said Bathsheba.

"Why?" said Domingo. "If we're not being thrown about in here, we're out in the drizzle pushing the caravan out of the mud, or trying to light fires in gales. Why don't we give up trying to reach Cathay, Bacchus, and head South where there's a little sun?"

"Because," he said with growing enthusiasm, "once we get there, and perform for the Khan called Kublai, we will be famous. Undoubtedly word of our genius will spread across the world in a matter of weeks. The adulation will be unbounded. Mayan princes will invite us to perform for them!"

"Not if we arrive in this tatty caravan," said Malachi.

"This caravan has been with me ever since I first took to the road, crocodile, and has been places you never guess existed." "That doesn't make it any less tatty," replied Malachi reasonably, "or uncomfortable."

"They'll send sedan chairs for us, anyway, won't they, Mr. Bacchus?" said Ophelia.

"They may very well, my dear," replied Mr. Bacchus. "And a cart for the crocodile."

"Cathay!" exclaimed Hero abruptly. "What if we do reach Cathay? Do you think that the great Khan will let us perform for him?"

"Why not?" replied Mr. Bacchus, with a smile creeping over his face. "We're the greatest show on earth! You painted that on the caravan yourself, Hero!"

"I also painted flying plates and entirely red gardens, but that doesn't mean they exist," said Hero.

"Anyways, Bacchus, you don't really believe all that nonsense, do you?" said Malachi. "We're the most miserable show on earth, perhaps, but we're certainly not the greatest."

At this, Mr. Bacchus rose from his chair, his face growing vermillion with anger, and started at Malachi: "Crocodile," he said. "Teeth or no teeth, I will not tolerate pessimism. Look at us! We have the finest trapeze-girl in the world. Who else can pirouette on a slack wire with an orang-outang on her head? And Hieronymous! There is nobody alive in the hemisphere as strong as he! Why, I once saw him carry six fully-grown bulls on his shoulders, and hardly turn a hair. Then there's that dear boy, Angelo, and his moths; Domingo—the happiest—"

"I'm not happy," said the Clown, dropping two of his oranges. "It's no use saying I am. I'm extremely unhappy. And I have nightmares—"

"Personally," said Malachi, with a fake yawn. "If we don't reach Cathay soon, supposing Cathay exists in the first place, I shall leave this Circus."

"Oh, Malachi," said Ophelia, tears springing to her eyes, which they did with monotonous regularity. "You wouldn't?" "Oh, wouldn't I?" said the crocodile, with a hollow laugh. "Where would you go?" put in Hero.

"I should go back to the Nile," said Malachi with dignity. "where my species is worshipped. They build pyramids for us."

"Go then," said Mr. Bacchus. "I shall find another crocodile."

"Maybe even an alligator," said Hero. "It's well known that alligators are a more intelligent species."

"What?" roared Malachi.

"I said that it's a well know—" began Hero.

Suddenly there was a cry from Bathsheba, who had ceased to dangle from the lamp and was peering out the window.

"A town! A town! There's a signpost, pointing to a town! Stop the caravan! It's a town!"

"Can we put a show on here?" asked Ophelia as the caravan lurched to a stop.

"Please," said Domingo. "I just feel like performing."

"We really ought to be getting along to Cathay," replied Mr. Bacchus. "But who could resist it? A town! An audience! The torches! The flags! The sawdust! The money! The applause! Stop the caravan, Angelo, my boy; we're here! We're here!"

"It has stopped," said Malachi with a pained expression, and opened the door.

The caravan disgorged the members of the Circus into a muddy field, with a light drizzle falling incessantly from the murky November sky.

"Mud!" exclaimed Malachi delightedly, and immediately proceeded to roll in it.

Domingo de Ybarrondo sneezed.

"Bless you, my boy, bless you," said Mr. Bacchus. "Right! Let us erect the stage! And the flags! Don't forget the flags!" Then in a sudden burst of enthusiasm, he began to sing:

"*Bring me my bow of burning gold*
Bring me my arrows of desire!
And dum de da de dum divine
Bring me my chariot of fire,
De dum upon those clouded mills..."

"I wish he'd learn the words," said Bathsheba. "Or better still," said Malachi, "not sing at all."

As they put up the stage, the rain began to come on more heavily, and the somber clouds were occasionally lit by distant lightning.

"Angelo, my boy," said Mr. Bacchus, when the preparations for the performance were nearing completion. "Take the big drum and go into the town! Tell the people that the show will begin half an hour before sunset precisely. Malachi will go with you.

"Oh no, Malachi won't," said the crocodile. "Malachi is staying in the mud where he's happy."

"I'll go," Bathsheba volunteered, picking up the drum and beating it as hard as she could. "We'll have an audience in no time."

Angelo and Bathsheba had just disappeared down the road to the town when Domingo, who had wandered off across the rain-veiled field to practice his juggling, came running back breathlessly.

"Bacchus! Bacchus!" he cried, the rain dripping off the end of his nose. "Do you know where we are?"

"In a field," Mr. Bacchus said.

"But this isn't just any field," said Domingo, and he pointed to the far edge. Everybody followed his finger. Where the dead ground came to an end, there was a signpost, and after that nothing. Only a wall of grey cloud. It looked as if there were a huge hole in the field, with no far side.

"What does the signpost say?" asked Mr. Bacchus, screwing up his eyes, and searching for his glasses, which he had left in Delphi, in his waistcoat pocket. Domingo de Ybarrondo went paler than ever under his makeup.

"It says: This is Where the World Ends," he replied. "What?" said Malachi. "Where the World Ends?"

"Yes," said the Clown. "Look for yourself. The field just stops, and there is nothing but sky and clouds, and an endless drop."

They all crossed the field through the foul mud and rotting nettles, and approached the Edge of the World. The signpost was correct. This was definitely

where the world ended. They all stared blankly at the wall of cloud, and the wall of cloud stared blankly back. Hero broke the silence.

"Where's Cathay?" he said.

"It isn't here," replied Ophelia, and began to cry.

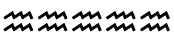
"We've taken the wrong turn somewhere along the way," said Malachi. "I said we shouldn't trust your sense of direction, Bacchus."

"I wouldn't like to fall over there," said Hero. "You never know where you'd end up."

"I agree," said Domingo. "I think we ought to go and camp somewhere else. I mean suppose the caravan rolled off the edge in the middle of the night?"

"It's never rolled anywhere before," said Malachi.

"Of course it hasn't, my boy," said Mr. Bacchus confidently. "I have great faith in the caravan. It's a remarkably sensible caravan. Don't fret yourself. It won't roll away. Take my word for it."



When Angelo and Bathsheba returned from the town, they looked downhearted.

"There's nobody in the streets," said Angelo. "The town looks completely deserted. All the doors are bolted, the windows nailed down, and the curtains drawn. The people must have locked themselves in their houses. It's most peculiar."

"What's this?" exclaimed Mr. Bacchus. "In their houses? When Mr. Maximillian Bacchus' Circus is in town? Never!" And he took the drum from Bathsheba, put the strap around his neck, and, yelling: "Follow me, each and every one of you!" led the way towards the town, beating the drum.

The wind blew paper down the empty streets, and the rainwater gurgled down the gutters. But there were no townspeople to be seen or heard. Mr. Bacchus marched up and down for a while, beating the drum, but had to admit it was useless. Then he spoke to Angelo.

"Dear boy," he said. "Get out your pipe and play."

So Angelo took out his reed pipe from his belt and played a single wavering note on it. Malachi, meanwhile, stood up, closed his eyes, clasped his claws in front of him, and began to sing excerpts from "La Traviata." Domingo balanced on his blue ball, and juggled oranges; Hero lifted Ophelia on one hand where she pirouetted, while Bathsheba performed head-stands on his other palm, then stood on one leg himself, while Mr. Bacchus went from door to door and knocked loudly.

At the windows of some of the houses, dirty curtains were parted an inch or two, and children's faces appeared out, grinning. Then, up and down the street, there came the sound of bolts being slid, and one by one the doors cracked open. One little boy slipped through the half-open door and ran into open air, laughing and clapping. But his mother pursued him, looking up and down the street in fear all the while, and snatched him up in her arms.

"Go away," she said to Mr. Bacchus. "Or they'll come for you.

"Who or what?" said Mr. Bacchus.

"The trolls," the woman replied under her breath. "The trolls."

At the mention of the word "trolls" the doors slammed closed again, and the bolts were driven back into place, and the curtains swiftly drawn. But Mr. Bacchus only laughed.

"Trolls!" he exclaimed to the rest of the Circus. "They're afraid of trolls!" and he laughed until the tears ran down his face and mingled with the rain. Then he began to beat on his drum louder than ever and called down the street: "I'm a magician! A veritable maker of miracles! My magic is laughter! My spells are dances! Come out into the streets, my friends! Come out into the warm rain and dance in the puddles! The Circus is here!"

Cautiously, the faces re-appeared at the windows, and the bolts were drawn again.

"Come out! Come out!" Mr. Bacchus continued. "The show begins in only a few minutes! Spectacle! Danger on High Wire! The strongest man in the world! Grand Opera from Venice! Comedy and juggling from the World's Greatest Clown, Domingo de Ybarrondo, pupil of the Great Grimaldi himself! The dance of moths! Bathsheba the orang-outang taming the great Ibis-bird. Prodigies! Delights!"

Then he began to beat the drum once more and the company danced out of the town. At first, the towns-people were too nervous to follow, but the children slipped through their parents' legs and were away with the wind, screaming and laughing, and the people simply had to follow. Of course, the further they were led from their homes, the more frightened they became, but the music and Bacchus' words overcame their doubts, and the pro-cession made its way along the wet road to the field where the World Ended.

The rain had gone off by now, and the sky was clearing. The flags were drying in the wind, and Thoth the Ibis-bird was preening his feathers.

A few minutes before the sun set over the Edge of the World, the performance commenced. The towns-people loved every moment of it. They clapped, shouted and whistled when Ophelia danced on the wire with a parasol in one hand and a vase of rosemary on her head. They wept with laughter when Malachi sang excerpts from Wagner. They sat in awe-struck silence when the torches were doused and Angelo gathered the moths around his head like stars. They gasped at Hero's strength, and cheered when Bathsheba rode the bucking Ibis-bird.

While the performance was going on, a dark, hunched form appeared from the gloom over the Edge of the World, its deep-set black eyes reflecting the torch-lit stage at the other end of the field. Close to the edge it squatted on its lean haunches, and peered through the twilight until its gaze rested upon the caravan, standing unguarded in the middle of the field. Then it turned, leaned over the Edge of the World once more, and hissed.

"Ullock, Ashur, Solomon, Wind and Weather, there's a Circus, there's a Circus making all this noise. And a caravan, a painted caravan, which we shall drag over the Edge."

At the sound of the Troll's hiss, from their holes in the World's side, the rest of the tribe appeared: foul-looking creatures with boars' tusks and iguanas' tails. There they had been living, in slimy burrows in the Side of the World, since they were exiled from the flat earth before Babylon fell. And though they were forbidden to ever set palm or sole upon the top of the world again, they nevertheless crept out at night and ventured into town, terrorizing people, stealing babies and leaving

their own hideous off-spring in the cots. That was why the towns-people locked themselves in their homes, and kept their children from playing in the streets.

Silent as darkness itself, the trolls crossed the field towards the caravan, squirming in the mud like migrating eels. Domingo, meanwhile, was practising his juggling with two bruised oranges, before his cue to begin his act, and as the trolls knotted their goat-tong rope around the caravan, and heaved, he heard the wheels squeaking and the Troll-King's voice hissing:

"Pull, Ulock! Pull, Ashur! Solomon, bend your back! Wind and Weather! Pull! PULL! Rawhead and Bloody-Bones commands."

In the gloom, Domingo could just see the dark shapes of the trolls, and the caravan's imminent destruction, and without thinking of the danger, he stepped onto his blue ball and rolled towards them. The spindle-limbed creatures were pulling as hard as they could, but the wheels of the caravan spun in the mud, and it was heavy work.

"Put your backs into it!" roared Rawhead and Bloody-Bones, his black, three-forked tongue curling in front of his nose.

"Stop! Stop!" yelled Domingo, rolling towards them. "Bacchus! Malachi! They're stealing the caravan."

Now the caravan was only a few feet from the End of the World, and the trolls were swarming over it like maggots, pushing, pulling, shrieking and grunting.

The next moment, the back wheels slid off the edge into oblivion, and the caravan was balanced precariously between safety and disaster. Laughing now in expectation of their triumph, the trolls prepared for a final push. But as they did so, they found themselves pelted with green oranges by Domingo, who was rolling towards them at a furious rate.

All the commotion had, of course, stopped the show, and the towns-people, seeing the trolls, were scattering in all directions. Mr. Bacchus picked up his ringmaster's whip and strode across the field, cracking it above his head. At the sight and the sound, the trolls fled for their lives, believing the magicians had returned. It was then that Mr. Bacchus spotted Domingo, still on his ball, hurtling towards the Edge of the World.

"Look out! Clown!" he yelled. "Jump off, my boy!" But Domingo was too angry to listen, and by the time he saw the Edge of the World yawning before him, it was too late. The ball spun beneath him and the Edge rushed closer and closer. In a high, frightened voice he cried, "Grimaldi!" and then disappeared. The trolls, clinging to the side of the world, watched him fall past them, and threw clods of earth at him, shrieking with pleasure at his fate.

Mr. Bacchus reached the Edge of the World, and peered over. The Clown was disappearing into the darkness at a tremendous speed, becoming smaller and more indistinct as each moment passed, until only his flour-white face could be seen in the gloom, peering up as if from depths of a bottomless black sea.

"Oh, Sybil," said Mr. Bacchus to himself. "You should have told me. Now the poor boy's gone."

Ophelia, who had followed Mr. Bacchus to the edge, burst into tears. "He said," she wept, "he said we should have camped elsewhere."

"Serves him right," said Malachi coldly. "He should have had more sense. Anyway, we've still got our caravan."

Indeed, the Clown had saved the caravan, which was still balanced on the Edge of the World, its back wheels slowly spinning in space. But, by the time everyone had reached the Edge, there was nothing to be seen of Domingo. Even his face had been consumed by the gloom. And the trolls had crept back into their burrows to quake at the memory of Mr. Bacchus' whip. The night was empty, except for the stars and the rising moon.

All the townspeople had, of course, disappeared into the town, ushering their children before them, so that was the end of the show. Only the blacksmith was left, a burly man with a black beard, who, because he had neither wife nor child, was less frightened of the trolls than the rest.

"I'm sorry about the Clown," he said. "If you like, I'll round up a few of these cowards in the town tomorrow, and help you haul your caravan back over the Edge of the World. You're best away from here, where you can forget what happened tonight. For now, you can sleep in my forge, if that's not beneath you, sirs. It's cold brick and iron, but it's dry."

And as if to give emphasis to his words, black clouds billowed up from over the edge, covering the moon, and it began to rain. The following morning, after having passed an uncomfortable night in the forge, the Circus returned to the field, with those townsmen the blacksmith had been able to rouse. With ropes, levers and pulleys the caravan was at last heaved to safety on the muddy field. It was a long and difficult business, because the vehicle was so delicately balanced that the merest cough would undoubtedly have sent it plummeting over the Edge. It took nearly all day in fact, weighing up the situation, tying the ropes, arranging the pulleys, and so forth, and when it was done everyone was relieved. There were no smiles, however; no congratulations, because the Circus company and the townspeople alike were thinking about Domingo.

"Well," said Mr. Bacchus finally. "You have been most generous with your assistance. What can we offer you in return? Only the Circus. The songs! The Excitement! The laughter! Well, perhaps not the laughter. Still, the least we can do is give you a free performance."

"But the trolls," said one man. "Suppose they return?"

"I have my whip," replied Mr. Bacchus. "Which they cower before. You and your families will be quite safe."

"Yes," said the blacksmith. "What have we to fear from them? They've claimed their victim; they will be sated with their mischief."

This seemed to satisfy the men, and they took the road back to the town to collect their wives and children. It was almost dark by the time the stage, the lights and the flags had been once more prepared for the performance, and the audience had drifted in from the town, their faces nervous and pale.

Ophelia performed once more, although every now and then she looked as if she might cry. Hero lifted Mr. Bacchus single-handedly, which, he said, made the six bulls feel like so many pebbles. Malachi sang some melancholy excerpts from this and that, Angelo summoned his moths, and Bathsheba danced a job on Thoth.

Beyond the small, torch-lit stage, as night fell, the stars rose over the Edge of the World, and began to glimmer in the night sky. They were followed by the moon, like a sliver of peel.

"Well," said Mr. Bacchus, when all the acts were finished. "That's the end of the performance. Bow, everyone." And he sighed heavily. Though each had done his best, the Circus would never quite be the same without the Clown. The company was lined up to take their bows, not a smile on a single face, when quite suddenly the audience gasped, stood on its feet, then cheered, clapped and laughed ecstatically.

"You weren't that good," said Malachi to Hero. "I was, but you weren't."

"They weren't cheering us," said Hero.

"What then?" said the crocodile.

The audience was pointing up into the sky behind the stage. Hardly daring to guess the cause of their emotion, the company turned and looked. The stars had risen. The moon had risen. And finally, Domingo de Ybarrondo the Clown had risen too, standing on his blue ball juggling the green oranges. He was singing, and pulling faces and dancing jubilantly. First he stood on one leg, then on one hand. He followed that by balancing the oranges on his nose, then on one finger, on his elbow and on his toes, and all the time the audience was clapping and cheering and the company was crying with happiness.

It was the most wonderful performance Domingo had ever given, and it was seen for hundreds of miles.

In faraway Cathay, the Astrologer to the Khan called Kublai, suspended in a balloon above the clouds that bailed about Xanadu, peered through his telescope in amazement at the new star that had appeared in the sky. In towns and villages, on the edge of untigered pine forests and in the silent snows of the Himalayas, on the high seas where trade winds roar and in the desert where the sand sings, people looked up at the sky that night, and there, between the stars and the moon, eclipsing Venus, Domingo was standing on his head and dancing and singing and juggling his green oranges. And when he finished and bowed deeply to the moon, stars, mountains, forests, seas and deserts, such a thunder of applause rose into the air that tears came into his eyes and ploughed salt-streams in the flour on his face.

At last Angelo climbed onto the back of Thoth and they flew up into the night sky to bring Domingo down to earth again. Unfortunately in the excitement, he forgot to bring down his blue ball and oranges.

In time they became a constellation.

Peering out of their burrows in the side of the world, the trolls saw the Clown ascend with the moon and stars, and covered their deep-set eyes with their fingers in mortal terror, scurrying deeper into the darkness, vowing never to set a sole on the flat earth again. Thereafter, they kept their hideous children to themselves, and taught them that if any troll were ever to climb on top of the world, they would meet a dreadful creature with a white face and a grin, standing on a blue ball, juggling stars.

Later, when Domingo had related his adventures over the World's Edge a dozen times or more, Mr. Bacchus announced that it was time the Circus was on its way again.

The towns-people were sorry to see them go, and made Bacchus promise he would return.

"Only," said Mr. Bacchus, "if you will plant that dreadful field with trees. A copse would be pleasant, a wood delightful and a forest magnificent."

"It shall be done," said the blacksmith.

"One other little problem," said Bacchus. "Perhaps you could assist us."

"Yes?" said the blacksmith.

"We seem to have mislaid the road to Cathay. Would you know of it?"

"Ah," said the blacksmith. "Cathay. I have ridden to the border, but never beyond. They say it is sinking, and the fields are filling with water."

"Then we better make haste," said Mr. Bacchus. "Before the Flood."

So the blacksmith put them on the road for Cathay, and in the caravan drawn by Thoth the Ibis-bird, Mr. Bacchus and his Travelling Circus set out once more for Xanadu and the court of the Khan called Kublai.

How Mr. Maximillian Bacchus' Travelling Circus Reached Cathay, and Entertained the Court of the Khan Called Kublay, How They Sought the Bearded Bird

and how, at last, Angelo was lost

"*In Xanadu did Kublai Khan*
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to sunless sea."
—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

This is the final story about Mr. Bacchus and his Travelling Circus, and the journey to Cathay in Asia the Deep, and it concerns how they finally reached that fabled country, and entertained the court of the Khan called Kublai in Xanadu, how they sought the bearded bird in the measureless caves, and how, at last, Angelo was lost.

Having left the town perched at the World's Edge far behind them, Mr. Bacchus and his Travelling Circus had crossed the Himalayas, pausing for a day to stand and hear the Yeti sing, and the road to Cathay no longer twisted like a snake on a forked twig, but led, straight as lines on Mr. Bacchus' palm, to another range of mountains. Iron-grey and foreboding, they rose before the tiny caravan as it rattled along the narrow road, their needle points piercing the pale winter sky. To either side of the road the landscape was changing. Through the windows of the caravan misty scenes appeared, one upon another, water-logged rice-fields, with back-clothes of dark trees and mountains; forests of bamboo, masking helmeted warriors on black, snorting horses; smoke-wreathed temples guarded by squatting

stone lions with wide jade eyes; and bridges over somber rivulets that bore the last yellow aspen leaves to the salt sea.

The people who passed the caravan on the road moved slowly, as if in a dream, their robes rising behind them in the wind. Once or twice, a troop of soldiers galloped up the road and past the caravan, on towards Xanadu, their mirror-shields glinting in the December light. But nobody attempted to stop the Circus, and Angelo drove Thoth on past the temples and the bridges and the fields, towards the mountains. Gradually, as they left the flat landscape behind them and drove through a pass leading up to the cloud-draped pinnacles, it became colder, and sharp flakes of snow appeared in the wind.

"Well," commented Malachi, "If this is the kind of weather we can expect in Xanadu, I suggest we turn back."

"Within Xanadu," replied Mr. Bacchus, "there is always light and warmth—even though the clouds that hang about the towers forever hide the sun."

"How's that possible?" said Hero

"Ah," said Mr. Bacchus. "The Khan called Kublai is a man of great wisdom. He devised a rocket, which flew up to the sun and broke a piece off. Now they keep the fragment in the palace of Xanadu, to provide eternal day."

"Rubbish," cried Malachi. "Credulous rubbish!"

"And why is that, crocodile?" asked Mr. Bacchus, testily.

"Because," said Malachi with a grimace, "it was proven by the Pharaoh Akenaten that the sun is a golden eye burning in the Heaven, and if anything were to go near it, it would be reduced to smoking ashes within the space of aria."

"How do you know?" said Ophelia. "Have you been up to the sun?"

"Not personally," said Malachi, "but my predecessors were exceptionally fond of flying."

"Flying?" said Domingo. "Were they birds?"

"They were wyrms, sir!" replied Malachi. "Or as the common vernacular has it, dragons! They had fire behind their teeth, and wings like the kite. They could fly to the moon! To the sun! It is murmured in the Nile that one even flew through a hole in the heavens, where he grew exceptionally thin."

"But your wings. Where are they now?" asked Hero.

"We lost them," said Malachi. "One of my forefathers flew too close to the sun and they caught fire. Down he fell into the sea, and boiled it to a salt desert. Thereafter, wings were forbid-den." He paused, with a look of deadly seriousness on his long face, and then continued. "So you see, I do know how hot the eye of the sun is, and nobody could break off a piece."

"That is what I heard, crocodile," replied Mr. Bacchus. "And I believe stranger things."

"That's half of your trouble," muttered the crocodile. "You believe everything's true."

"That's because everything is," replied Mr. Bacchus, grinning from ear to ear.

There was a brief silence while Malachi pondered whether Bacchus was joking or not, and in that moment the company heard the sound of hooves on the road ahead of them.

"A rider's approaching," said Domingo, peering through the window.

"Oh?" said Mr. Bacchus. "And how does he smell?" "Terrible," replied the Clown.

"We're about to be attacked," said Malachi.

"He has a black helmet and a shark's eyes!" the Clown continued

"I knew we should have played Venice," said Malachi.

"—and a sword as long as a crocodile."

At this moment, Malachi buried himself in the costume basket. The caravan came to a halt, and Mr. Bacchus stepped out, followed by the rest of the company, with the exception of Malachi. By now, the rider was within a few yards of the caravan, and reining-in his horse. He addressed Mr. Bacchus, his breath like smoke in icy air.

"You," he said, directing a gauntleted finger at Bacchus. "Yes?" said Mr. Bacchus, stepping forward, but remaining out of sword's swipe.

"Name?" demanded the rider.

"Bacchus."

"Bac-us," repeated the rider.

"No, no, my dear boy, Maximillian," corrected Bacchus. "Ah," said the rider, and through the slits in his helmet his teeth glinted. "Max-im-illian Bacchus."

"That's right, dear fellow," said Mr. Bacchus, and extended his hand to the rider. "This is my Circus."

The rider's eyes roved the company, until they rested on Domingo.

"Clown," said the rider.

"Do you mean Domingo?" asked Mr. Bacchus.

The rider looked up into the sky and pointed.

"In a sky," said the rider. "Clown in a sky."

"They must have seen you," said Mr. Bacchus. "When you rose."

"Welcome," said the rider. "To Cathay. In Xanadu Kublai Khan awaits you."

"Kublai Khan!" shouted Hero, lifting Ophelia onto the palm of his hand. "Did you hear what he said? Kublai Khan! We're here! We're here!"

There was a great deal of shouting and jubilance, which caused the horse to whinny and stamp, and then, with the rider leading, the caravan began its precarious journey along the mountain road.

High into the mountains, and yet higher they travelled, and the road before them was now but a little wider than the caravan, falling endlessly away to one side. Malachi emerged from the costume basket, took one look through the window at the dizzying height, and fled back to bury himself once more. It was undoubtedly a terrifying journey, but Angelo was an excellent driver and Thoth the Ibis-bird a sure-footed creature, so there was not a great deal of danger. Only once did everyone's heart lose a beat, and that was for quite a different reason. When the caravan had been following the rider for about an hour, everyone became aware of a thundering in the depths below them. The caravan stopped, and Angelo called:

"Look, everybody! Look at this!"

Everybody stepped into the bitter air, and the sight that met their eyes froze the very breath on their lips. Mists of fine spray and ice fell around them, pouring up from a vast fissure in the side of the mountain, from out of which there poured a ponderous flood of shining water, roaring as it cascaded into the depths to burst on the jagged peaks below. Then, even as they watched, awestruck, in the depths a bird screeched. At least it sounded like a bird, yet it had sorrow to it that no

bird's cry could equal. Ophelia looked at Hero, who looked at Bathsheba, who looked at Domingo, who looked at Mr. Bacchus.

"What was that?" everybody asked.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Mr. Bacchus. "Ask the Ibis-bird."

But Thoth had hidden his head under his wing, and was doing his best to shut out the echoes of the screech. Even Angelo could not persuade him to show his beak. The rider, meanwhile, was sitting on his horse a few yards up the road, waiting for them.

"We'd better be on our way," said Mr. Bacchus, and they all returned to the caravan, to find Malachi still in the basket with his claws over his eyes.

On they drove, and the road became so narrow that the caravan could only crawl along, its wheels scraping the edge, sending stones pattering down. Now the air was becoming thinner and thinner. Their limbs began to feel heavy and their heads light. It was as if they had fallen asleep on the mountain road and lost track of how long they had travelled, of where they were going, and why. Then, momentarily, the clouds parted like some great ice-curtain, and high above them, set on the sharpest of pinnacles, towered Xanadu, the domed palace of Kublai Khan. It was vast and beautiful beyond imagining, lit by the fragment of the sun, announced by the thunder of the waterfall, impenetrable clouds boiling about it, obscuring the heavens. Its seven walls were taller, its thousand towers higher, its crystal dome, with the bronze Chimera standing astride it, more perfect than any that Rome could boast. And it was to the braying of unearthly trumpets that Mr. Bacchus and his Travelling Circus entered the City of Xanadu, through the gates of sardonyx.

They were all greeted by the second secretary to the aide-de-camp to the assistant Grand Vizier to Kublai Khan, a man of some authority, with a small greybeard and hands like a bird in a cage, fluttering and trembling. He bowed to each of the company in turn, and Angelo and Mr. Bacchus, Domingo and Hero bowed in return, while Bathsheba and Ophelia curtsied. By the time Malachi realized that they had finally arrived, and, summoning his imperial manner, he emerged from the caravan with his nose in the air, and his eyes closed, fully expecting to be greeted by Kublai Khan himself. Unfortunately, he had one of Ophelia's old tutus wrapped around his back leg, and he fell on his face.

"Such majesty," said Hero dryly, as Malachi untangled the frills.

"Follow," said the second secretary. "The Khan awaits you." The company duly followed the little man through a second gate, even more immense than the first.

"There are seven walls around xanadu," explained the sec-ond secretary as they walked. "And seven gates; each one is more magnificent than the last. This is to accustom the guest to Xanadu's beauties, that when his eyes at last fall upon the domed palace, he shall not be overcome."

Amazed by the splendour of the walls and the gates, the company followed the secretary through the third portal, and the fourth, through the fifth, sixth and seventh, until at length they stood before the perfect dome of Xanadu, above which, set in the Chimera's back, burned the fragment of the sun. A gong was struck, the doors swung open, and they stepped into the throne-room of Kublai Khan.

Within the throne room was a forest. Exquisite trees were planted in the mosaic floor, which was cracking with the ever-spreading network of roots. Beams of light danced through the leaves of these trees from the fragment that burned eternally above the dome, and shimmered on the robes, and the jeweled head-dresses if the courtiers who sat in groups among the branches, like wingless birds pondering their flightlessness.

"Approach," said the second secretary, gesturing down the aisles of the trees to an immense throne upon which reclined the great Khan.

Mr. Bacchus smiled, and led the company through the trees towards the throne. He was not nervous. He had danced before far greater audiences, and the Khan was not a particularly impressive figure. He was a short gentleman with an old sorrowful face, dressed in a robe of red silk embroidered so heavily with thread of gold that it fell about him as stiffly as wood.

The walk to the throne was a long one, and by the time they reached it Bacchus was breathless.

"Your Magnificence," he puffed, and bowed deeply. The Khan spoke.

"We have seen," he declared, "The Clown in a sky. We have heard of your Circus, Mr. Maximillian Bacchus, and welcome you to Xanadu. We trust you will perform for us."

"Delighted," said Bacchus, and bowed again.

"Good," said the great Khan. "Please be seated. I shall introduce my court."

He clapped once, and seats were brought. The company sat down. A second time he clapped, and one by one the courtiers descended from the trees. As they leapt from the branches, the warm air filled their robes like silk balloons, and they slowly drifted to the ground. The first secretary announced their positions and names as their toes touched the floor, and each bowed reservedly before the company.

Mr. Bacchus, for his part, insisted on shaking each of them warmly by the hand, which rather slowed the ceremony down. In fact, two hours later it was still proceeding, the courtiers descending, bowing and shaking hands. Finally, when each had been introduced, and returned to his tree, the Khan stood up, the folds of his robes grating as he did so.

"And now," he said. "The jewel of Xanadu. The greatest mystery. The finest splendour. The daughter."

At this announcement the courtiers began to shake the boughs of their trees, so that leaves cascaded in every direction, and from a silver birch, the Princess leapt. Her silks swelled like a ripe fruit around her as she drifted down to meet the floor. Her naked feet touched the cool mosaic and her rustling robes folded about her like moths' wings. Everyone took a deep breath. It was as if the soul of the silver birch, dislodged in a windless autumn, had fallen from the branches, to walk among men.

"Look at her," whispered Hero, his eyes wide.

The Princess stood before the company and curtsied to each in turn. Mr. Bacchus grinned and shook her hand; Ophelia curtsied and said, "Thank you ma'am," because it was royalty. Hero bowed very low and looked at his feet. Domingo grinned and bowed extravagantly several times, and Bathsheba attempted a curtsey but somehow ended with her hands, legs and tail in a knot.

When the Princess came to Angelo, however, he bowed and looked straight into her eyes. The leaves on the mosaic floor rustled in the breath of her sigh.

Malachi, meanwhile, who was bowing, waiting for the Princess to come to him, coughed loudly, and began to sway. But Angelo and the Princess seemed to not hear. Then the Khan spoke, and they blinked as if waking from a dream within the dream of Xanadu.

"Daughter," said the Khan, his tone less friendly than before. "It is time these good gentlemen prepared their performance for us.“

"Of course, father," said the Princess, without looking at the Khan, and she dutifully took her place next to the throne. The Khan's eyes were on Angelo when he said:

"The Princess will never marry, for, in truth, she is not my daughter, but the daughter of my brother, Kuyuk."

Immediately a whisper ran through the branches of the court, as if some terrible secret was about to be imparted. But the great Khan stood up and the whispers were instantly silenced. His eyes scoured the throne-room and dared anyone to speak.

"My brother," he said deliberately, "is dead. And his daughter is in mourning for him. She will never marry."

Then he turned to Mr. Bacchus.

"Tomorrow night," he commanded. "your Circus will perform. Then you must leave Xanadu, before Death's wings beat the walls to dust." Then the gong struck, to signify that the audience was at an end, and Mr. Bacchus' Circus was escorted in silence out of the throne-room, to the caravan, which had been driven from the first gate, through to the seventh.

That night, though the fragment of the sun burned as bright as day over Xanadu, the company slept quite soundly. With the exception of Angelo. He walked around the seven walls at least three times, head bowed, hands in pockets. Once or twice, he sat in the shadows of a wall's buttress, and played his pipe. In his mind's eye he could see the Princess' face, could see her leaping time and time again from the Birch tree, sighing.

And to her sighs he added his own.

At three in the endless morning the walls were suddenly alive with shouting figures, pointing up at the dome. Astride the Chimera's back stood a bird-headed creature, holding aloft a silver box. And into it he was putting the fragment of the sun. In their panic, the soldiers lining the walls were firing volley after volley of poison arrows at the creature. But they fell far short of his high perch, and the strange bird's head was thrown back in mockery at their futile efforts.

"The sun! He's stealing the sun!" The soldiers wept and fell to their knees in mortal terror.

The next moment, the creature snapped close the box lid and the sun disappeared. Darkness fell upon Xanadu for the first time in half a century, and like people struck blind in their sleep, everyone in the palace rose howling from their beds.

The carved willow-screens in the palace were broken up with axes to be used as torches; branches were hacked from trees in the throne-room and bonfires built, there in the mystical pleasure-dome, to fight off the darkness. But however large it

was built, its light was paltry beside that of the sun. The commotion, of course, woke everybody in the caravan.

"What's going on?" said Hero.

"The dome," said Malachi in prophetic tones, a sheet wrapped around him like a toga. "The dome is architecturally unsound and has cracked like a dropped egg."

"No!" said Mr. Bacchus. "It's not the dome. Look around! We lie in darkness! The sun has gone. I suggest we proceed to the throne-room forthwith."

They made their way through the crowds of panicking people, trying to discover from one fleeing figure or another who had perpetrated the theft of the sun. But none would answer, for the catastrophe had left them dumb with fear, until in his haste, a serving boy tripped over Malachi's tail. Before he could be up and away, Hero had him in a vice-like grip.

"Boy," he said. "What do you know?"

"The Princess," the boy stammered.

"What about her?" said Hero.

"Gone," said the boy. "He stole the sun and in the darkness stole her too."

"Who stole them?" demanded Bacchus.

"Him," said the boy.

"Who? Speak up, boy!" boomed Mr. Bacchus.

"In the caves," the boy replied. "He lives in the caves, and he's half-bird and half-man."

Then he bit Hero's hand, and, having been dropped, darted away between Bathsheba's legs, and was away into the crowd.

"Half-bird, half-man," repeated Malachi, drawing his toga higher around him. "Anthropomorphic nonsense!"

Just then a gong sounded in the great dome, and the crowd ceased their hysterical flight, and began instead to make their way towards the throne-room, murmuring.

There, the Khan addressed them all, his face older and more sorrowful in the flickering torchlight. "Creatures of Xanadu," he said. "The Princess has been stolen from her room in the night, and the sun from the dome. We all know by whom."

"I don't," said Malachi.

"Sssssh," hissed Bacchus.

"It's no use saying I do when I don't," replied the crocodile, and made his way through the crowd to the throne. "I'm new here," he said to Kublai Khan. "You'll have to tell us about it."

"Ah, the leviathan," said the Khan.

"Call me Malachi," said the crocodile.

"This is the truth of the matter," said the Khan. "Some years ago, a woman fell in love with my brother, Kuyuk. But he refused to marry her. She swore, being, she said, a woman of power, to summon her familiars to metamorphose my brother into a bird. She lied of course; she had no such power. So she fashioned a mask in the form of a bird's head, came to my brother in the middle of the night, and placed it upon his sleeping head. That dawn, when he woke and saw himself, he believed himself transformed, and fled into the caves below Xanadu. Tonight, he returned, and stole the sun to light the caves, and his daughter, who believes him dead, to light his heart. We are left doubly in darkness."

"Then we must rescue her," said a voice, and it was Angelo who strode through the crowd towards the throne.

"How?" said Kublai Khan. "The caves are measureless, and the river torrential. There is no way."

"We'll see," said Angelo, and he turned to the rest of the Circus. "Hero, Malachi, Bathsheba, Domingo, Ophelia, Bacchus—are you with me?"

"Of course we are, my dear boy," said Mr. Bacchus. "I was about to suggest the self-same plan myself."

"I salute your bravery," said the Khan. "Though I am sure the task is beyond even my finest generals. To battle, on an open plain, under the sun, that can be done. But in darkness, with only a flame to strike by, all is confusion."

"We have always performed by torchlight," replied Mr. Bacchus. "Darkness has its place, great Khan. It is where we may suppose the Mysteries dwell. Let us have shadow, then, to remind us of home."

The Khan nodded, and clapped twice. Immediately there came a shrieking of ill-oiled chains, and in the floor of the throne-room a trapdoor appeared, revealing a stairway that sank down into the entrails of the earth.

"Fare thee well," said the Khan, and he bowed as deeply as he was able, in recognition of the company's valour. Then the crowd parted, like the Red Sea, and they made their way to the maw of the earth.

Angelo stood for a moment on the top step, until the light came into his eyes, and then led the way down into the caves, illuminating the way before them.

Indeed they were measureless, the caves below Xanadu. Measureless and treacherous. The steps, which had been cut into the ice, were slippery with slime, and the darkness forever danced around Angelo's eyes, threatening to extinguish them. Only Malachi was enjoying the journey, chiefly because of the water that dripped from the roof. For, unknown to the great Khans, the measureless caves were melting, and, in some future age, would collapse, pitching all the glory of Xanadu into the Abyss.

Deeper and deeper Angelo led the heroes, the roar of the river Alph growing louder in their heads all the time, until the air shook with sound. To left and right, like the pillars of ancient temples rose the bones of fabulous beasts, the Mantichora, the Shrike and the Baiste-na-scoghaigh, who had battled to their deaths in the measureless caves. At length, they stepped out into a cavern so large that they could discern no walls, and there, by the dim light of Angelo's eyes, they saw the great river itself, white with the fury of its majesty, as it rushed to throw itself endlessly into the open air, and to fall away into the sunless cavern below. To trespass further into the caves, they would have to cross the river, and the only means was a bridge of rotting wood.

"I'll go first," volunteered Bathsheba. "I'm the lightest and an acrobat," and she began to edge across the rotting bridge. She was only about half way across, however, when, on the other side of the river an awful figure appeared. It was Kuyuk, the Khan's brother, dressed in his filthied ceremonial robes, the bird-mask upon his head. The Princess was beside him, and when her eyes alighted on the company and upon Angelo's especially, she ran to the bridge. But her father was there before her, and with an inhuman screech he seized the rotting planks and began to tear at them.

"Bathsheba," everyone yelled in unison. "Look out!" The orang-outang heeded the warning. In a moment she had bounded back along the bridge to the safety of the bank, just as Kuyuk, with one heave, sent the decaying planks tumbling into the Alph - where they were swiftly carried off by the roaring water. Now there was no way across the river, and with a cry of triumph, the Khan's brother picked up his daughter in his arms and disappeared into the caves once more.

"What do we do?" asked Ophelia.

"Simple," said Malachi, throwing off his sheet. "Ophelia, do you have your trapeze wire with you?"

"Of course," said Ophelia. "How else can I practice?" And she dragged the wire from her pockets with a welter of dead flowers.

"Hero," said Malachi, taking complete command of the situation. "Take one end of the wire and hold on for Aten's sake."

"What are you going to do?" said Domingo.

"The Nile runs far faster than this sluggish trickle," said Malachi. "It will be simplicity itself to swim across." With that he scuttled down the bank into the icy water, the other end of the trapeze wire held fast in his teeth, and disappeared. The river swept on, irrevocably, and for a long while there was no sign of Malachi. After a few minutes everyone began to suspect that the current or the bitter cold had overcome him and that he had been swept down the river to the waterfall. Perhaps, even now, they thought, he is swimming in the sunless sea, lost and boast-less. Then, when it seemed certain he would never be seen in this world again, he appeared on the other side of the river, and scaled the muddy bank. He then proceeded to tie the wire to a vast rib-bone that rose from the ice. Once it was made secure, Hero took the strain and Ophelia walked across, followed by Bathsheba. Both of them were used to heights, and the crossing was quite easy.

"Well, that's three," said Mr. Bacchus. "But I really can't cross myself, because, to be honest, my feet aren't big enough."

"I can cross," said Domingo. "After all, I can balance on my ball with no trouble."

"Go on then, my boy," said Mr. Bacchus, and inch by inch Domingo began to cross the river.

Angelo watched intently. "I must go too," he said when the clown had crossed.

"No heroism, dear boy," said Mr. Bacchus. "You're not a tight rope walker, and it takes years of practice."

"But I love her," said Angelo.

"And will you love her still, as you are swept down-river to your doom?" said Bacchus. "Or when they dredge you from the coral at the bottom of the sunless sea?"

"I shall always love her," said Angelo passionately, and before Mr. Bacchus could prevent him, he had his bare feet on the wire, and was swaying back and forth dramatically. The river seemed to hush in expectancy of a victim, swirling and eddying beneath him, and throwing up columns of spray to snatch him down.

Suddenly, he slipped, and a moment later was dangling, like a droplet from a thread, above the river. All he could do was edge along the wire, hand over hand, though his palms became bloody and the water swelled up to pull at his feet. Every moment it seemed he would slip again and that this time the eager river would claim him for the chasm and the sunless sea beyond. But, after an age of

breathless moments, he reached the other side. Everyone applauded, and he bowed and laughed, despite his bleeding hands.

"Good luck," Mr. Bacchus shouted across the river, as they disappeared into the caves. "And be careful! We shall be waiting for you!"

Once again Angelo led the way as they descended, the light from his eyes flickering eerily on the wet walls of the tunnels they followed. After a few minutes, however, another source of light began to filter through the ice passages.

"What's that?" said Domingo.

"Where? I can't see anything," said Malachi.

"A light," said the Clown. "There's a light ahead."

"Sssh!" said Angelo. "It will be the fragment of the sun that's burning. Bathsheba, when we face him it will be your task to wrench the bird's head off him. Once his mask is removed, perhaps his sanity will be restored."

"Unlikely," said Malachi. "The man is mad and there's an end to it. Like Akhenaton. Now he thought he was the sun."

"Silence, crocodile," said Angelo. "For once be silent."

"Such gratitude," said Malachi. "Were I not a Nile crocodile you would be on the other side of the river with a lovelorn look on your pitiful face."

Angelo was not listening, however, but inching along the tunnel wall towards the light, followed by Bathsheba and Ophelia. Malachi considered turning back for sheer spite, but could not face the journey in the dark, so scuttled after them.

Quite abruptly they turned the corner and found themselves in the most measureless of measureless caverns, vast as a god's cathedral, lit from ice-paved floor to vaulted roof with almost blinding light.

In the middle of the gleaming cavern sat the Princess, her high cheeks tear-stained and her eyes red. A few yards from her lay the silver box, from which the sun's light was pouring.

"The fragment of the sun," breathed Bathsheba in amazement. "It can be no larger than an egg."

"Forget the sun," said Angelo. "It's the Princess we must save."

"Where's the bird-man?" warned Domingo. "We must be careful of him."

But his words were lost on Angelo, who was already running and sliding across the cavern floor towards the Princess, showers of crystal flying into the air as his feet scored the ice. As soon as she saw him she stood up, and a look of love and panic came into her eyes.

"Back!" she screamed. "Go back! Forget me!"

"Never!" said Angelo, grabbing her slender wrists. "Never!" The princess cried out at his roughness, and tears sprang to her eyes. "Leave me! Please!" she begged.

Then the bird-man's shriek of wrath was heard once more in the caves below Xanadu. More inhuman and horrifying than any sound those cold walls had echoed hitherto. From the roof of the cavern, like a gargoyle toppling from its dizzy perch, the bird-man leapt, the air swelling his robes around him as he descended, as if he were floating in a sea of burning light.

"Above you!" cried Domingo. "He's above you!" and he ran towards Angelo. Bathsheba jumped onto Malachi's back and they pursued the Clown.

With another shriek, more horrible, if that were possible, than the last, the birdman fell upon Angelo, his hands becoming claws as they fastened around the youth's bare neck.

"Sing!" shouted Bathsheba.

"What?" said Malachi. "Are you mad too?"

"Oh, what a noble mind" began Ophelia, but her speech was drowned as Malachi burst into the final act of "Gotterdammerung." His voice echoed around and around the great cavern, becoming not one but a thousand voices. The ice walls trembled and stalactites plummeted from the roof like spears, to shatter on the floor. To this cacophony for splintering ice and choir, Ophelia harmonized a melancholy song about St. Valentine's Day and Domingo shouted jokes at the top of his voice.

Living, as he had, in the absolute silence of the caves, the Khan's brother was unused to such a din, and let out another cry, this time of pain and bewilderment. He toppled from Angelo's back, holding his head in his hands. Angelo fell to the floor, wounded, and in the confusion, Kuyuk's eyes alighted upon the silver box. Seizing it, he fled down the tunnel leading back to the river, plunging the others into the radiance of Angelo's eyes.

"Catch him!" yelled Bathsheba. "He has the sun!" and she pushed him down the tunnel upon Malachi's back, with Domingo dancing behind.

In the dim cavern, all was abruptly silent. Angelo lay sprawled on the ice, nursing his clawed and bleeding throat. The Princess sat weeping and shivering beside him. Suddenly everything was desolation in the ice-caves.

On the far side of the river, Mr. Bacchus and Hero saw the figure of the birdman emerge from the tunnel, bearing the silver box.

"Quickly," said Mr. Bacchus. "It's him! It's him! Go and fetch a few soldiers, Hero my boy. He may be dangerous."

As Hero raced up the steps six at a time, Malachi, Bathsheba and Domingo appeared, still shouting and singing.

Kuyuk was trapped.

The bridge had been destroyed by his own hands and the river ran too fast and icy for any man to swim. So the bird-man turned to face his pursuers, still clinging to the precious silver box.

"Tom O'Bedlam!" cried Mr. Bacchus,

"Forth from my sad and darksome cell, "Or from the deep Abyss of Hell,

"Mad Tom is coming to view the world again."

Mr. Bacchus' booming cry was too much for the Khan's brother. Agonized, he drew from his belt an ice dagger, and aimed it at Bacchus. Even as the blade left his hand, Bathsheba, seeing her opportunity, leapt from Malachi's tail onto the bird-man's back. He shrieked horribly as the orang-outang tugged at the mask. With a tearing of hessian and feathers the head came free from the face of the Khan's brother. The dagger, meanwhile, was flying unerringly towards its victim's head. But it did not reach its target. Mr. Bacchus merely stretched out his hand and caught it. At his touch, the ice turned to rain.

By now Kuyuk had fallen to his knees, and as he did so, he let the box and its burning fragment drop into the Alph, where with a great deal of hissing, it was borne away down to the waterfall, to light, at last, the sunless sea beyond. As for

the Khan's brother, he knelt at the edge of the river by the fading light of the sun, sobbing pitifully. The scene was frozen for an instant. Bacchus mopping his brow, the Clown, crocodile and Orang-outang standing gazing at their feet, and the agonized tears of the Khan's brother falling onto the unmelting ice. Then, accompanied by Angelo, his neck bound with silk bandages torn from her robes, the Princess emerged from the tunnel, and though Kuyuk was turned from her he raised his head as if knowing she was there. Though his face was gaunt, and his beard long and filthy, the Princess recognized him immediately.

"Father!" she cried. "Father!"

Kuyuk drew his hands from his face and gazed upon his daughter, as if seeing her for the first time. At that moment the look of madness sank from his eyes and he embraced her. Even as he put his cracked lips upon the Princess' forehead, from down the tunnel there rose a thunder. The great cavern, its walls cracked by the tumult, at last collapsed upon itself, and all Xanadu shook with the violence of its death. Even as the thunder died, Hero returned with a dozen of the Khan's soldiers and a makeshift bridge was hurriedly constructed across the river, by which the company crossed the roaring Alph. Then, amid great celebration, they climbed the stairway up into the throne-room, still lit by bonfires, where Kublai Khan sat in state. The brothers embraced each other with many tears, and Angelo, speechless, now and forever, because of his wounded throat, embraced the Princess.

The Khan spoke, his voice severe. "Youth," he said to Angelo. "She is the daughter of the Khan's brother. She cannot belong to anyone."

"He is not anyone," replied the Princess.

"Are you an Inquisitor then?" demanded the Khan. Angelo shook his head. "An archbishop, perhaps, or a son of an arch-bishop?" Once more Angelo had to shake his head. Then, bowing, he pointed to the door, and walked down the throne-room and out into the cold night air. "What is the youth intending?" said Khan.

"Your Majesty," replied Mr. Bacchus. "The fragment you broke from the sun is now lighting some nether-sea, and Xanadu is in darkness. When you have burned all your willow-screens and felled all the trees in the pleasure dome, the darkness will be eternal."

"Indeed," said the Khan.

"Then follow the youth, Your Magnificence," said Mr. Bacchus. "We may yet see a miracle."

Unsmiling, the Khan rose from his throne, but his heavy robes prevented him from taking a step.

"Allow me," said Hero, lifting the Khan onto his shoulders, and led the way outside, followed by the performers and courtiers.

Out in the bleak night the Khan addressed Angelo from Hero's shoulders.

"Youth," he said. "Your miracle."

So Angelo threw back his head, and from out of his eyes two pillars of light poured into the sky, and as they touched the dismal clouds that seethed above Xanadu, the vapours threw back to reveal the white orb of the moon.

The courtiers hid their eyes, and on the seven walls the guards let out shouts of fear and confusion. But the Khan smiled.

Light fell again on Xanadu, and in place of the dreaming day, there began, at that moment, a perpetual waking night.

The wedding of Angelo to the Princess, daughter of the Khan's brother, was a magnificent affair. In a pavilion built of bamboo, supported by columns of gold, the great wedding feast took place. A wind had sprung up from the Northwest and the pavilion's two hundred silk cords sang as it wove its way between them.

Of course the highlight of the feast was the performance by Mr. Bacchus' Travelling Circus, and when at last it came to Angelo's act, and he gathered about his head the moths from the rice fields and from under the tongues of the great jade lions, everyone believed that there was nobody in the world so worthy of the Princess' hand as Angelo the Silent.

When the performance was finished and one by one the courtiers of Kublai Khan had retired to sleep amid the frost-touched leaves under the moon, the Khan brought from the sleeves of his robes six crystals mined from the caves of ice, and gave one to each of them.

"These are to remind you of Xanadu," he explained. "To remind you to return when I am gone and the silent youth rules in Xanadu. Good luck on your journey, each of you. The love of Kublai Khan goes with you."

They said goodbye, with many tears, to Angelo, to the Princess and her father, and of course to the Khan himself, at the sardonyx gate of Xanadu, and set off down the precarious road, led by the helmeted rider. When finally they came to the great waterfall, Hero stopped the caravan, and they stepped out to look at it. It roared on, silver in the moonlight.

"We must be on our way," said Mr. Bacchus.

"Oh, why?" said Ophelia.

"The untold want," declaimed Mr. Bacchus.

"Of life and land ne'er granted,

"Now voyager, seek thou forth and find."

"More adulation, more applause!" laughed Domingo. "All those people waiting for me! My audience!" and while everybody climbed back into the caravan, he turned ecstatic cartwheels for the moon. Then they rattled on down the road again, Mr. Bacchus sitting in his chair as usual, head bowed. Eventually, the roar of the waterfall faded, and, at the very place where they had first spotted him, the rider turned his horse, and without a word, galloped back along the narrow road to Xanadu.

Its towers were quite lost in the mist.

"Where shall we go now?" called Hero from the driver's seat. "Anywhere you like, my boy," said Bacchus. "Anywhere, I don't know. To the Feast of Fools!"

Then Ophelia gave a cry. "In the crystals," she said. "Look." In each of the six crystals could be seen the seven walls of Xanadu, against the perfect circle of the moon.

"It's all done by mirrors," said Malachi.

"I shall miss Xanadu," said Ophelia wistfully.

"Oh, civilization is a fine place to visit," said Mr. Bacchus. "But who'd want to live there?" and he began to laugh until tears rolled down his cheeks.

And a few months later, early in March of the next year, when the spring sun was melting the frost on the puddles, the six crystals melted, leaving in their place

only pools of murky water. But that was not before, one night in January, when the caravan stood in a hundred mile queue of babbling pilgrims waiting to cross the Sand Bridge into Chaleds, that it seemed as though the company heard, far off, the great fall of the waterfall, and the soft, piping music drifting on the wind from the lunar towers of the fabled Xanadu.

The Worlds and Words Between the Cracks

Afterword by David Niall Wilson

Throughout the ages, storytellers and fantasists have enthralled the world with their tales. At first the bards recorded real events in ways that turned great men into heroes. They converted the world into beautiful verse and compelling song. They passed the words down from generation to generation until their tales grew from the bare bones of reality into the bright plumage of legend.

When things needed to be explained, they created religions and fables. They painted their histories with brushes dipped in otherworldly ink. Though they were tasked with preserving the world around them, they became something much more important. They were the first fantasists. They remade the world into a place that scared them a little less, and that held its shine a bit better against the encroachment of time. They built a cloak of words to keep out the darkness and embellish the light.

Some did a better job of this than others. It's not an exact science, and though a man may become very learned and wise, the ability to write can escape him completely. In early times, a few tried to chronicle their world, the men and women they interacted with, and the events that surrounded them with photographic clarity. They failed. When their memories were com-pared with the accounts of their contemporaries, there were al-ways discrepancies. Reality is a schizophrenic, unstable target. It exists only in the moment; anything after that is suspect. We depend on words, and those who wield them, to weave a tapes-try we can believe in, and to preserve images that give us enough to convince us that what we have is memory, and not fable.

In modern times, fantasy has taken on new dimensions. The ability of readers to suspend their disbelief has been eroded by the ability of the human mind and imagination to raise the bar. What was fantastic fifty years ago is mundane. What was impossible is taken for granted. What was written as fantasy is filmed and served up as the evening news.

We still have our wordsmiths. We have more of them than we need, truth be told, but the ones with the magic have thinned out. There are entertainers aplenty, tricksters who can bend reality a little bit and wrap it around comfortable, familiar stories so that things change just enough to take readers away. For most readers, this is enough.

In every generation we also get a few new masters. These are the men and women who can shift a reader into an alternate existence with such power that the new world becomes more real than the one left behind. It's seldom a very different place on the surface; it's the details and the shadows that change—the things we might otherwise take for granted.

Clive Barker is one of those masters. He takes our world and finds things that have fallen through the cracks. Those are the building blocks. His characters live in a world so closely akin to our own that we recognize the details. We think we are on solid ground, and he lures us in. When we come across something unfamiliar, it is born of things that we are familiar with, created in ways that seem plausible and make the shift from one reality to the next so simple that it happens before we're even fully aware.

When I read *Galilee*, I believed in a family who lived right beside us, with powers we could barely comprehend, hidden and secret. Nothing in what I read was jarring, or implausible within the context of the novel. I wanted to believe it. I wanted to believe in love that transcended everything I know, and that is what I found in Barker's words; a story I was more comfortable with, for a time, than my own world. A story that will stick with me forever, and will crop up now and then with fictional story elements that feel like memories.

In *Sacrament*, the idea of the old man whose job it was to travel the world and destroy the very last of every species rang true. The notion that gods are not infallible, but in fact have limitations and rules and personalities that make sense in the context of history intrigues and attracts. While we have been taught that we are made in the image of God, it is equally true that throughout the years and ages we have created our gods in our own. We personify them; we give them feelings and emotions and flaws that make them believable and give us points of reference that prevent the loss of our sanity.

In his novel *Coldheart Canyon*, Barker peeled back Hollywood's glittering skin to show us what we've known all along—that there is decadence flowing just beneath the surface. We know things are different there, but it's another world, so that makes it something we can justify and tolerate. It's not our world, it's one just off to the left. We get bits and pieces from tabloids and sensational journalists, but beneath it all, we believe there is more. There has to be magic there—how else could normal men and women transform strips of celluloid into moving fantasies? How else could worlds that don't exist come to life?

Barker shows us how, but again he grounds us in the familiar. He starts with a very real story about an aging actor, fighting entropy and drawn into plastic surgery that is supposed to return his withering magic. As the story unfolds, Barker expands the circle. We discover a house, also old and fading. We find that there is a woman clinging desperately to a horrifying version of youth and beauty. As the ghosts and the magic beneath that mansion draw the protagonist in, we follow in his footsteps, amazed, horrified, and absolutely captivated by the world he inhabits. What starts as a path angling slightly off from our own slowly widens the gap as you follow it, only to bend back toward true near the end. Again and again we experience visions and wonders that seem too perfect—too precious to release—and each time we see those wonders crumble to reveal their inner truth.

It may seem that I have strayed off point, so let me begin to wind this back toward Maximillian Bacchus. The book you hold in your hands and have likely just finished reading is a work of magic. It's not the polished spell that binds readers to *Coldheart Canyon*, or the heart-wrenching, powerful thing that *Galilee* represents, but it cannot be taken lightly.

Maximillian Bacchus holds court over a group of fantastical performers such as the world has never known. That is how it seems at first glance. Then you read the words, and the names. *You* feel the threads of mythology and religion weave themselves into the fabric of the story and it happens. Things shift. A character that is essentially an Egyptian crocodile named Malachi who name drops Egyptian royalty from the annals of history becomes believable. Characters named Ophelia and Hero are not jarring. You take for granted the trip to Coleridge's Xanadu, and the arrival at the fabled pleasure dome. It is not difficult to imagine Bacchus' enemies shanghaied by pirates, or a chasm where, when one is dragged over the cliff and ceases to exist, or how the juggler escapes it. A boy with the sun shining from his eyes seems perfectly normal in the person of an apple thief and traveler. The names appear in a long string, and as they pass by your mind's eye, they fling lines into your memory and drag out ghosts from old literature classes and films about mythology.

These stories take you away from our world and lead you down a trail peopled with slightly off-center versions of fables, deities, and ancient powers that itch at your thoughts and taunt you with images that might be memories, or lessons learned in childhood, or something from an article in a long lost magazine—but are not. The thing that it is easiest to forget is that these stories of Maximillian Bacchus aren't the work of a seasoned veteran. They are the first, tentative efforts of an amazing talent coming into its own. They stand against the work of the tricksters and the shysters effortlessly. They are alive with the hint of something wonderful, something amazing that can't quite be defined or explained.

I came away from *The Adventures of Mr. Maximillian Bacchus and His Travelling Circus* with a familiar ache. I've felt that same ache in the past, at the end of works like *The Lord of the Rings*, or Stephen
King's *Dark Tower* books, or when Neil Gaiman's novel *Neverwhere* ended with so much promise of something more. I felt this same ache at the end of the last two or three novels by Mr. Barker that I had the pleasure to read, and I felt it in this book. I want the story to continue. I want to know more, to experience more performances and to meet new characters. I want that other world I visited to remain intact with its own continuing time stream so I can go back to visit. I feel like new rooms have opened up in my mind, and I don't want them to grow old or faded or covered in dust.

In the pages of this book, the seeds of something truly remarkable were sown. Pinhead and his cube, the *Books of Blood*, novel after novel and world after world have unfolded to entertain us, amaze us, and draw us from our tired, drab existence into places that are something more.

In a recent interview, I read something that Clive Barker said, and it stuck with me. I'm paraphrasing—I hope he won't mind. Horror fiction has been growing more and more into an extension of the sensational, graphic depictions of our world that people seem to find so fascinating in the news. When fiction begins to

emulate those types of horrors, and writers spend their time dwelling on things that are happening down the street, embellishing them with bits and pieces of magic to make them shiny and attractive, it's dangerous.

Horror fiction needs a jolt of the supernatural. There needs to be some clear rift between the imagined world, and the horrors we deal with from day to day. Bilbo Baggins wrote *There and Back Again*, and though he was talking about his quest, it applies to fiction—in particular fantastic fiction—as well. If we are to escape, we should go somewhere that offers us something in return, and then we should come back. Violence, torture, graphic dismemberment and endless strings of horrifying events fall short of the goal, particularly when they bear no message, moral, point, or purpose but to shock. They expend creative energy—the magic—and leave that energy with no positive outlet.

We need the supernatural to symbolize what we can't overcome, presented in a way that changes things just enough that we can overcome them. We need a measure of hope in the face of evil. In the movie *Hellraiser*, Frank Cotton is flayed alive by hooked chains. This happens when he encounters the Cenobites on the other side of the *Lament* Configuration puzzle. We can suffer with him, and then, we can return to our world. If you wrote that same scene with some drug dealers in a Manhattan warehouse, it would no longer be escapism in the same sense. It's too close to home, and there's no safe way back from the shadows. They are all around us. Journalists are fantasists too, remember, and for drug dealers with chainsaws, we have them. For the magic, we need the Clive Barkers of the world, young and old.

If there was ever a question whether the best and brightest of artists are made, or born, works like this one come very close to answering it. Here's to Mr. Maximillian Bacchus and his entourage. I hope that we have not seen the last of them, but if we have we can be content in the knowledge that other worlds, and other magic will follow. We only have to turn to the next page.

David Niall Wilson

[Author‘s Note: Clive Barker wishes he had a circus.]
