



*Painting by Howard Pyle*

Illustration for "The Soul of Mervisaunt"

**JOCELIN, WITH MANY ENCOMIUMS, DISPLAYED HIS EMERALDS**



**HARPER'S MAGAZINE**  
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# The Soul of Mervisaunt

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

IT is a tale which they narrate in Poictesme, telling how love began between Perion of the Forest, that was a captain of mercenaries, and young Mervisaunt, who was a king's sister. They tell also how these two parted, since there was no remedy, and policy demanded she should wed the Earl of Dyvuiant.

Then Perion fitted out a ship and sailed with his retainers to seek desperate service under the harried Kaiser of the Romans.

This venture was ill-fated, since, as the Free Companions were passing not far from Masillia, their vessel being at the time becalmed, they were attacked by three pagan galleys under the admiralty of the proconsul Demetrios. For Perion's men, who fought so hardily on land, were novices at sea. They were powerless against an adversary who, from a great distance, showered liquid fire upon their vessel.

In such fashion Demetrios took some thirty prisoners, and made slaves of all save Ahasuerus the Jew, whom he released on being informed of the lean man's religion. It was a customary boast of this Demetrios that he made war on Christians only.

And presently, as Perion had commanded, Ahasuerus came to Mervisaunt.

The princess sat in a high chair, the back of which was capped with a big lion's head in brass. It gleamed above her head, but was less glorious than her bright hair.

Ahasuerus made dispassionate report. "Thus painfully I have delivered, as my task was, these fine messages concerning Faith and Love and Death and so on. Touching their rationality I may reserve my own opinion. I am merely Perion's echo. Do I echo madness?— This madman was my loved and honored master once, a lord without any peer in the fields where men contend in battle.

To-day those sinews which preserved a throne are dedicated to the transportation of luggage. Grant it is laughable. I do not laugh."

"And I lack time to weep," said Mervisaunt.

So, when the Jew had told his tale and gone, young Mervisaunt arose and went into a chamber painted with the histories of Jason and Medea, where her brother the King Urieyns hid many jewels, such as had not their fellows in Christendom.

She did not hesitate. She knew that Perion was in captivity and might not look for aid from any person living save herself.

She gathered in a blue napkin such emeralds as would ransom a pope. She cut short her marvellous hair and disguised herself in all things as a man, and under cover of the ensuing night slipped from the castle. At Manneville she found a Venetian ship bound homeward with a cargo of swords and armor.

She hired herself to the captain of this vessel as a servant, calling herself Jocelin Gaignars. She found no time wherein to be afraid or grieve for the estate she was relinquishing so long as Perion lay in danger.

Thus the young Jocelin, though not without much hardship and odd by-ends of adventure here irrelevant, came with time's course into a land of sunlight and much wickedness where Perion was.

There the boy found in what fashion Perion was living and won the dearly purchased misery of seeing him, from afar, in his deplorable condition, as Perion went through the outer yard of Nacumera laden with chains and carrying great logs toward the kitchen. This befell when Jocelin had come into the hill country, where the cry of Demetrios blocked a crag-hung valley as snugly as a stone chokes a gutter-pipe.

Young Jocelin had begged an audience of this heathen lord and had obtained

it—though he did not know as much—with ominous facility.

Demetrios lay on a divan within the Court of Stars, through which you passed from the fortress into the Women's Garden and the luxurious prison where he kept his wives. He was of burly person, which he by ordinary, as to-day, adorned resplendently; of a stature little above the common size and disproportionately broad as to his chest and shoulders. His eyes were large and insolent, colored like onyxes; and for the rest, he had a handsome surly face which was disfigured by pimples.

He did not speak at all while Jocelin explained his errand was to ransom Perion. Then, "At what price?" Demetrios said, without any sign of interest; and Jocelin, with many encomiums, displayed his emeralds.

"Ay, they are well enough," Demetrios agreed. "But then I have a superfluity of jewels." He leisurely unfastened the great chrysoberyl, big as a hen's egg, which adorned his fillet. "Look you, this is of a far more beautiful green than any of your trinkets. I think it is as valuable also, because of its huge size. Moreover, it turns red by lamplight—red as blood. That is an admirable color. And yet I do not value it. I think I do not value anything. So I will make you a gift of this big colored pebble if you desire it, because your ignorance amuses me. Most people know Demetrios is not a merchant. He does not buy and sell. That which he has he keeps, and that which he desires he takes."

The boy was all despair. He did not speak. He was very handsome as he stood in that still place where everything excepting him was red and gold.

"You do not value my poor chrysoberyl? You value your friend more? It is a page out of Theocritus—when there were golden men of old, when friends gave love for love. And yet I could have sworn—Come now, a wager," purred Demetrios. "Show your contempt of this bauble to be as great as mine by throwing it, say, into the gallery, for the next passer-by to pick it up—and I will credit your sincerity. Do that and I will even name my price for Perion."

The boy obeyed him without hesitation. Turning, he saw the horrid change in the intent eyes of Demetrios, and he quailed before it. But instantly that flare of passion flickered out.

Demetrios gently said: "A bargain is a bargain. My wives are beautiful, but their caresses annoy me as much as formerly they pleased me. I have long thought it would perhaps amuse me if I had a Christian wife with eyes like violets and hair like gold and of a plump white person. One tires so soon of ebony and amber. Procure me such a wife and I will willingly release this Perion and all his fellows who are yet alive."

"But, seignor"—and the boy was shaken now—"you demand of me an impossibility."

"I am so hardy as to think not. And my reason is that a man throws from the elbow only, but a woman with her whole arm."

There fell a silence now.

"Why, look you, I deal fairly, though. Were such a woman here—Demetrios of Anatolia's guest—I verily believe I would not hinder her departure, as I might easily do. For there is not a person within many miles of this place who considers it wholesome to withstand me. Yet were this woman purchasable, I would purchase. And—if she refused—I would not hinder her departure; but very certainly I would put Perion to the Torment of the Water-drops. It is so droll to see a man go mad beneath your eyes, I think that I would laugh and quite forget the woman."

She said, "O God, I cry to You for justice!"

He answered: "My good girl, in Nacumera the wishes of Demetrios are justice. But we waste time. You desire to purchase one of my belongings? So be it. I will hear your offer."

Just once her hands had gripped each other. Her arms fell now as if they had been drained of life. She spoke in a dull voice. "I offer Mervisaunt that was a princess. I cry a price for red lips and bright eyes and a fair woman's tender body without any blemish. I cry a price for youth and happiness and honor. These you may have for playthings, seignor, with everything which I possess, except my heart, for that is dead."

Demetrios asked, "Is this true speech?"

She answered: "It is as sure as Love and Death. I know that nothing is more sure than these, and I praise God for it."

He chuckled, saying, "Platitudes break no bones."

On the next day were the chains filed from Perion de la Forêt and all his fellows, save the nine unfortunates whom Demetrios had appointed to fight with lions a month before this, when he had entertained the Soldan of Bacharia. These men were bathed and perfumed and richly clad. A galley of the proconsul's fleet conveyed them toward Italy and set the twoscore slaves of yesterday ashore not far from Naples. The captain of the galley on departure left with Perion a blue napkin, wherein were wrapped large emeralds and a bit of parchment as well.

It read:

*"Not these, but the body of Mervisaunt, that was once a princess, purchased your bodies. Yet these will buy you ships and men and swords with which to storm my house where Mervisaunt now is. Come if you will and fight with Demetrios of Anatolia for that brave girl who loved a porter as all loyal men should love their Maker and customarily do not. I think it would amuse us."*

Then Perion stood by the languid sea which severed him from Mervisaunt and cried: "O God, that has permitted this hard bargain, trade now with me! now barter with me, O Father of us all! That which a man has I will give."

He stood in the clear sunlight with no more wavering in his face than you may find in the next statue's. Both hands strained toward the blue sky, as though he made a vow. If so, he did not break it.

And now no more of Perion. At the same hour young Mervisaunt, wrapped all about with a flame-colored veil and crowned with marjoram, was led by a spruce boy toward a threshold, over which Demetrios lifted her, while many people sang in a strange tongue. And then she paid her pitiable ransom.

Now Mervisaunt abode in the house of Demetrios, whom she had not seen

since the morning after he had wedded her. A month had passed. As yet she could not understand the language of her fellow prisoners, but Halaon, a eunuch who had once served a cardinal in Tuscany, informed her the proconsul was in the west provinces, where an invading force had landed under Ayrart de Montors.

A month had passed. She woke one night from dreams of Perion—what else should women dream of?—and found the same Ahasuerus that had brought her news of Perion's captivity, so long ago, attendant at her bedside.

He seemed a prey to some half-scornful mirth. In speech, at least, the man was of entire discretion. "The Splendor of the World desires your presence, madame." Thus the Jew blandly spoke.

She cried, aghast at so much treachery, "You had planned this!"

He answered: "I plan always. Oh, certainly I must weave always as the spider does. Meanwhile time passes. I, like you, am now the servitor of Demetrios. I am his factor now at Calonak. I buy and sell. I estimate ounces. I earn my wages. Who forbids it?" Here the Jew shrugged. "And to conclude, the Splendor of the World desires your presence, madame."

He seemed to get much joy of this mouth-filling periphrasis as sneeringly he spoke of their common master.

Now Mervisaunt, in a loose robe of green Coan stuff shot through and through with a radiancy like that of copper, followed the thin, smiling man. She came thus with bare feet into the Court of Stars, where the proconsul lay on the divan as though he had not ever moved from there.

Real stars were overhead, so brilliant and (it seemed) so near they turned the fountain's jet into a spurt of melting silver. The moon was set, but there was a flaring lamp of iron high as a man's shoulder yonder where Demetrios lay.

"Stand close to it, my wife," said the proconsul, "in order I may see my newest purchase very clearly." And she obeyed him; and esteemed the sacrifice, however unendurable, which bought for Perion the chance to serve God and his love for her by valorous and commendable actions to be no cause for grief.

"I think with those old men who sat upon the walls of Troy," he said, and laughed because his voice had shaken so. "Meanwhile I have returned from crucifying a hundred of your fellow worshippers," Demetrios continued. His speech had an odd sweetness. "Ey yes, I conquered at Yroga. It was a good fight. My horse's hoofs were red at its conclusion. My surviving opponents I consider to have been deplorable fools when they surrendered, for people die less painfully in battle. There was one fellow, who hung six hours upon a palm tree, always turning his head from one side to the other. It was amusing."

She answered nothing.

"And I was wondering always how I would feel were you nailed in his place. It was curious I should have thought of you. But your white flesh is like the petals of a flower. I suppose it is as readily destructible. I think you would not long endure."

"I pray God hourly that I may not!" said tense Mervisaunt.

He was a little pleased to have wrung even one cry of anguish from this lovely effigy. He motioned her to him and laid one hand upon her. He gave a gesture of distaste. "No, you are not afraid. However, you are very beautiful. I thought that you would please me more when your gold hair had grown a trifle longer. There is nothing in the world so beautiful as golden hair. Its beauty weathers even the commendation of poets."

No power of motion seemed to be in this white girl, but certainly you could detect no fear. The prospect was alluring. The gross man began to chuckle as water pours from a jar.

"Decidedly I shall get much mirth of you. Go back to your own rooms. I had thought the world afforded no adversary and no game worthy of Demetrios. I have found both. Therefore, go back to your own rooms," he gently said.

On the next day was Mervisaunt installed in more magnificent apartments, and thereafter lived to all appearances the favorite among the proconsul's wives. It must be recorded of Demetrios that thenceforth he scrupulously avoided even to touch her hand. "I have purchased

your body," he proudly said, "and I have taken seizin. I find I do not care for anything which can be purchased."

It may be that the man was never sane; it is indisputable that the mainspring of his least action was an inordinate pride. Here he had stumbled upon something which made of Demetrios of Anatolia a temporary discomfort, which bedwarfed the utmost reach of his ill-doing into the teasings of a gnat; and perception of this fact worked in him like a poisonous ferment. To beg or once again to pillage he thought equally unworthy of himself. "Let us have patience." It was not easily said so long as this fair Frankish woman dared to entertain a passion which Demetrios could not comprehend, and of which Demetrios was—and knew himself to be—incapable.

He had his proven theories, his cunning, and, chief of all, an appreciation of her beauty as his henchwomen. She had her memories and her clean heart. They duelled thus accoutred.

Meanwhile his other wives peered from screened alcoves at these two and duly hated Mervisaunt; thrice had Callistion—the first wife of the proconsul and the mother of his elder son—attempted the life of Mervisaunt; and thrice had Demetrios spared the woman at Mervisaunt's entreaty. For Mervisaunt (out of her own experience very soon) could understand that it was love of Demetrios, rather than hate of her, which drove the Dacian virago to extremities.

Ahasuerus came and went at will. Nothing was known concerning this soft-treading furtive man except by the proconsul, who had no confidants. By his decree Ahasuerus was an honored guest at Nacumera. And always the Jew's eyes when Mervisaunt was near him were as expressionless as the eyes of a snake, which do not ever change.

Once she had told Demetrios that she feared Ahasuerus.

"But I do not fear him, though I have larger reason. For I alone of all men living know the truth concerning this same Jew. Therefore, it amuses me to think he is my factor and ciphers over my accounts." And Demetrios laughed, but told her nothing more.

So Mervisaunt abode among these odi-

ous persons as a lily which is rooted in mire. She was a prisoner always, and when Demetrios came to Nacumera—which fell about irregularly, for now arose much fighting between the Christians and the pagans—a gem which he uncased, admired, curtly exulted in, and then, jeering at those hot wishes in his heart, locked up untouched when he went back to warfare. To her the man was uniformly kind, if with a sort of sneer she could not understand. Pride spurred him on as witches ride their dupes to a foreknown destruction. “Let us have patience,” he would say.

Demetrios often brought her news of Perion in that locked palace where no echo of the outer world might penetrate except at the proconsul’s will. He told her, with an unfeigned admiration, of how Perion had gathered another company of Free Companions, and had ridden through many kingdoms, at adventure, serving many lords, and always fighting applaudably; and of how in time this Perion of the Forest had wedded a fair Veronese lady, and had begotten two lusty children, and now lived blessed with wealth in his far barony.

“He has forgot you, Mervisaunt, as a wise man will always put aside the dreams of his youth. Yet you do not forget.”

“I know not of this Perion you tell me of. I only know the Perion I loved has not forgotten,” answered Mervisaunt.

And Demetrios, evincing a twinge like that of gout, demanded her reasons. It was a May morning, very hot and still, and they sat, as was Demetrios’s self-tormenting custom, in the Court of Stars.

Said Mervisaunt:

“It is very likely that the Perion men know to-day has forgotten me and one slight service which I joyed to render him. I pray for old sake’s sake he and his lady may taste of every prosperity. Indeed, I do not envy her. Rather I pity her, because last night I wandered through a certain forest hand in hand with a young Perion, whose excellencies she will never know as I know them in our own woods.”

Said Demetrios, “Do you console yourself with dreams?” The swart man grinned.

“Nay, but our woods are very beauti-

ful. For it is always twilight in these woods, and the light there is neither green nor gold, but both intermingled. It is like a friendly cloak for all who have been unhappy, even very long ago. Iseult is there, and Thisbe, too, and many others, and they never weep, because they are not severed from their lovers now.”

Said Demetrios, “Do you console yourself with madness?” He showed no sign of mirth.

“Ah no, the Perion she knows is but a man—a very happy man, I pray of God and all His saints. I am the luckier, who may not ever lose the Perion that to-day is mine alone. I may not grieve so long as no one else dares enter into our own woods.”

“Now go,” said the proconsul when she had done, and he had noted her soft, deep, devoted gaze at one who was not there; “now go before I slay you!” And this new Demetrios whom she then saw was featured like a devil in sore torment.

Wonderingly Mervisaunt obeyed him.

Thought Mervisaunt, who was too proud to show her anguish:

“I could have borne aught else, but this I am too cowardly to bear without complaint. I can only weep that I, robbed of all joy and with no children to bewail me, must travel very tediously toward death, a maiden cursed by fate, while she laughs with her children. She has two children, as Demetrios reports. I think the boy must be the more like Perion. I think she must be very happy when she lifts that boy into her lap.”

Thus Mervisaunt; and her full-blooded husband was not much the more light-hearted. He went away from Nacumera shortly, in a shaking rage which robbed him of his hands’ control, intent to kill and pillage, and, in fine, to make all other persons share his misery.

And then one day, when the proconsul had been absent some six weeks, Ahasuerus fetched Dame Mervisaunt into the Court of Stars. Demetrios lay upon the divan supported by many pillows, as though he had not ever moved since that first day when an unfettered Mervisaunt, who was a princess then, exulted in her youth and comeliness.

“Stand there,” he said, and did not

move at all, "that I may see my purchase."

And presently he smiled, though wryly. "Of my own will I purchased misery. Yea, and death also. It is amusing. Two days ago, in a brief skirmish, a league north of Calonak, the Frankish leader met me for the first time hand to hand. He has endeavored to bring this about for a long while. I also wished it. Nothing would be sweeter than to feel the horse beneath me wading in his blood, I thought. Ey well, he dismounted me at the first encounter, though I am no weakling. In fine, it would appear he broke my backbone as one snaps a straw, since I cannot move a limb of me below the shoulders."

"Seignior," said Mervisaunt, "you mean that you are dying!"

He answered: "It is a trivial discomfort, now I see that it grieves you a little."

She spoke his name some three times, sobbing. It was in her mind even then how strange that she should grieve for Demetrios.

"O Mervisaunt," he harshly said, "let us have done with lies. That Frankish captain who has brought about my death is Perion de la Forêt. For years this duel has endured. Your emeralds paid for his first armament.—Why, yes, I lied. I always hoped the man would do as in his place I would have done. I hoped in vain. For many long and hard-fought years this handsome maniac has been assailing Nacumera, and tirelessly."

"And why?" said Mervisaunt. A glorious change had come into her lovely face.

"Because of you. Oh, I had taken pains that you should never know. The love this man bears for you," snarled Demetrios, "is sprung of the High God whom we diversely worship. The love I bear you is only human, since I, too, am only human." And Demetrios chuckled. "Talk, and talk, and talk! There is no bird in any last year's nest."

She laid her hand upon his unmoved hand, and found it cold and swollen. She wept to see the broken tyrant, who to her at least had been not all unkind.

He said, with a great hunger in his eyes: "And so likewise ends the long duel which was fought between us two.

I would salute the victor if I might. Ey, Mervisaunt, I still consider you and Perion are fools. We have a not intolerable world to live in, and common sense demands we make the most of every tidbit it affords. Yet you dare find in it only an exercising-ground for an infatuation, and in all its contents—pleasures and pains alike—so many obstacles for rapt insanity to override. I cannot understand this mania; I would I might have known it, none the less. Always I envied you more than I loved you. Always my desire was less to win the love of Mervisaunt than to love Mervisaunt as Mervisaunt loved Perion. I was incapable of this. Yet I have loved you. That was the reason, I believe, I put aside my purchased toy." It seemed to puzzle him.

"Fair friend, it is the most honorable of reasons. You have done knightly. In this, at least, you have done that which would be not unworthy of Perion de la Forêt." A woman never avid of strained subtleties, it may be that she never understood, quite, why he laughed.

He said: "I mean to serve you now, as I had always meant to serve you some day. But to see, and writhe at, your perfection has meant so much to me that I could not—" The man grimaced. "My son Orestes, who will presently succeed me, has been summoned. I will order that he conduct you forthwith into Perion's camp—yonder by Quesiton. I think I shall not live three days."

"I would not leave you, friend, until—"

His grin was commentary and completion equally. "A dead dog has no teeth wherewith to serve even virtue. Nay, but my women hate you far too greatly. You must go straightway—to this Perion—while Demetrios of Anatolia is alive, or else not ever go."

She had no words. She wept, and less for joy of winning home to Perion at last than for her grief that Demetrios was dying. And, woman-like, she could remember only that the man had loved her. And, woman-like, she could but wonder at the strength of Perion.

Then Demetrios said: "I must depart into a doubtful exile. I have been powerful and valiant, I have laughed loud, I have drunk deep, but Heaven no longer wishes Demetrios to exist.



"Chiefly I grieve because I must leave Mervisaunt behind me, in a perilous land, abandoned to the mercy of all those who wish her ill. I was a noted warrior, I was mighty of muscle, and stoutly could I have defended her. But I lie broken in the hand of Destiny. It is necessary I depart into the place where sinners, whether crowned or ragged, must seek for unearned mercy. I bid farewell to all that I have loved; and so in chief of you, dear Mervisaunt, I crave farewell and pardon.

"O eyes and hair and lips of Mervisaunt, that I have loved so long, I do not hunger for you now. Yet, as a dying man, I cry to the clean soul of Mervisaunt—the only adversary that in all my lifetime I who was once Demetrios could never conquer. Conquered and impotent, I cry to you, O soul of Mervisaunt, for pity and for pardon."

She gave him both—she who was prodigal of charity. Orestes came, Ahasuerus smiling at his heels, and Demetrios sent Mervisaunt into the Women's Garden, so that father and son might talk together. She waited in this place for a half-hour, just as the proconsul had commanded her, and consciously obeying him for the last time.

It was not gladness which she knew in this brief while. Rather, it was a strange new comprehension of the world. Here was a world created by Eternal Love that people might serve love in it not all unworthily.

She did not dare to think of seeing Perion again. She only made a little song in her clean heart because of him, which had not any words to it, so that I cannot here retail this song.

Thus Mervisaunt, who knew that Perion loved her. Then Mervisaunt went back into the Court of Stars.

And as she entered, Orestes lifted one of the red cushions from Demetrios's face. The eyes of Ahasuerus, who stood negligently by, were as expressionless as the eyes of a snake.

"The great proconsul laid an inconvenient mandate upon me," said Orestes. "The great proconsul has been removed from us in order that his splendor might enhance the glories of Elysium."

She saw that the young man had

smothered his own father in the flesh as he lay helpless; and knew thereby he was indeed the son of Demetrios.

"Go," this Orestes said thereafter, "go, and remember I am master here."

Said Mervisaunt: "And by which door?" A little hope there was as yet.

But he, as half in shame, had pointed to the entrance of the Women's Garden. "I have no enmity against you, outlander. Yet my mother desires to talk with you. Also there is some bargaining to be completed with Ahasuerus here."

Then Mervisaunt knew what had prompted the proconsul's murder. It seemed unfair Callistion should hate her with such bitterness; yet she remembered certain thoughts concerning Perion's wife; and did not wonder at Callistion's mania half so much as did Callistion's son.

"I must endure discomfort and it may be torture for a little longer," said Mervisaunt, and laughed whole-heartedly. "Oh, but to-day I find a cure for every ill," said Mervisaunt; and thereupon she left Orestes as a princess should.

But first she knelt by that which yesterday had been her master. "I have no word of praise or blame to give you in farewell. You were not admirable, O my husband. But you depart alone upon a fearful journey, and in my heart there is just memory of the long years wherein according to your fashion you were kind to me. A bargain is a bargain. I sold with open eyes that which you purchased. I may not reproach you.

"Only I pray that you may know I am the happiest woman in the world, because I think this knowledge would now gladden you. I go to slavery where I was queen, I go to hardship, and it may be that I go to death. But I know this assuredly—that love endures, that the strong knot which unites my heart and Perion's can never be untied. Oh, living is a higher thing than you or I had dreamed! And I have in my heart just pity, O Demetrios, for you who never found the love I must endeavor to be worthy of. A curse was I to you unwillingly, as you—I now believe—have been to me. So at the last I turn anew to bargaining and cry—in your deaf ears—*Pardon for pardon, O Demetrios!*"

Then Mervisaunt kissed pitiable lips, which would not ever sneer again, and, rising, passed into the Women's Garden, proudly and unafraid.

Ahasuerus shrugged so patiently that she was half afraid. Then, as a cloud passes, she saw clearly that all further buffetings would of necessity be trivial. For Perion, as she now knew, was very near to her—single of purpose, clean of hands, and filled with such a love as thrilled her with delicious fears of her own poor unworthiness.

Dame Mervisaunt walked proudly through the Women's Garden, and presently entered a grove of orange trees, the most of which were at this season about their flowering. In this place was an artificial pool by which the trees were nourished. On its embankment sprawled the body of young Diophantus, a child of some ten years, Demetrios's son by Tryphera. Orestes had strangled him in order there might be no rival to Orestes's claims. The lad lay on his back, and his left arm hung elbow-deep in the water, which swayed it gently.

Callistion sat beside the corpse and stroked its limp right hand. She had hated the boy throughout his brief and merry life. She thought now of his likeness to Demetrios.

She raised the dilated eyes of one who has just come from a dark place. "And so Demetrios is dead. I thought I would be glad when I said that. Hah, it is strange I am not glad." She rose, as with hard effort, as a decrepit person might have done. "Now, through my son, I reign in Nacumera. There is no person who dares disobey me. Therefore, come close to me that I may see the beauty which besotted this Demetrios whom, I think now, I must have loved."

"Oh, gaze your fill," said Mervisaunt, "and know that had you possessed a tithe of it you might have held the heart of Demetrios." For it was in her mind to provoke the woman into killing her ere worse befell.

But Callistion only studied the proud face for a long while and knew there was no lovelier person between two seas. "No, I was not ever as beautiful as you. Yet this Demetrios loved me when I, too, was young. You never saw the man in

battle. I saw him single-handed fight with Abradas and the three other knaves who stole me from my mother's home—oh, very long ago! He killed all four of them. He was like a horrible unconquerable god when he turned from that finished fight to me. He kissed me then—blood-smeared, just as he was. I like to think of how he laughed and of how strong he was."

The woman turned and crouched by the dead boy and seemed painstakingly to appraise her own reflection on the water's surface. "It is gone now, the comeliness Demetrios was pleased to like. I would have entered hell—and singing—rather than let his little finger ache. He knew as much. Only it seemed a trifle because your eyes were bright and your fair skin unwrinkled. In consequence the man is dead. Oh, Mervisaunt, I wonder why I am so sad!"

Her meditative eyes were dry, but those of Mervisaunt were not. The girl came to the Dacian woman and put one arm about her in that dim sweet-scented place. "I never meant to wrong you."

Callistion did not seem to heed. "See now! Do you not see the difference between us!" These two knelt side to side by this, and either looked into the water.

Callistion said: "I do not wonder that Demetrios loved you. He loved at odd times many women. He loved the mother of this carrion here. But afterward he would come back to me, and lie all sprawling at my feet with his big crafty head between my knees; and I would stroke his hair, and we would talk of the old days when we were young. He never spoke of you. I cannot pardon that."

"I know," said Mervisaunt. Their cheeks touched now.

"There is one master who could teach you that drear knowledge—"

"There is but one, Callistion."

"He would be tall, I think. He would, I know, have thick, brown, curling hair. His face would be all pink and white like yours—"

"Nay, tanned like yours, Callistion. Oh, he is like an eagle, very resolute. His glance bedwarfs you. I used to be afraid to look at him, even when I saw how foolishly he loved me—"

"I know," Callistion said. "All women know. Ah, we know many things—"

She reached with her free arm across the body of Diophantus and presently dropped a stone into the pool. "See how the water ripples. There is not any trace now either of my poor face or of your beauty. All is as wavering as a man's heart. And now your beauty is regathering like colored mists. Yet I have other stones."

"Oh, and the will to use them!" said Dame Mervisaunt.

"For this bright thieving beauty is not any longer yours. It is mine now, to do with as I will—as yesterday it was the plaything of Demetrios. Why, no! I think I will not kill you. I have at hand three very cunning Cheylas—the men who carve and reshape children into such droll monsters. They cannot change your eyes, they tell me. It is a pity, but I can have one plucked out. Then I will watch them as they widen your mouth from ear to ear, take out the cartilage from your nose, wither your hair till it will always be like rotted hay, and turn your skin—which is like velvet now—the color of baked mud. They will as deftly strip you of that beauty which has robbed me as I pluck up this blade of grass! Oh, they will make you the most hideous of living things, they assure me. Otherwise, as they agree, I shall kill them. This done, you may go freely to your lover. I fear, though, lest you may not love him as I loved Demetrios."

And Mervisaunt said nothing.

"For all we women know, my sister, our appointed curse. To love the man and know the man loves just the lips and eyes Youth lends to us—oho for such a little while! Yes, it is cruel. And therefore we are cruel—always in thought and, when occasion offers, in the deed."

And Mervisaunt said nothing. For of that mutual love she shared with Perion, so high and splendid that it made of grief a music, and wrung a new sustenance out of every cross, as men get cordials of bitter herbs, she knew there was no comprehension here.

Orestes came into the garden with Ahasuerus and nine other attendants. The master of Nacumera did not speak a syllable while his retainers seized Callistion, gagged her, and tied her hands with cords. They silently removed

her. One among them bore on his shoulders the slim corpse of Diophantus, which was burned on the same afternoon (with every appropriate ceremony) in company with that of his father. Orestes had the nicest sense of etiquette.

This series of swift actions was performed with such a glib precipitancy it was as though the deed had been rehearsed a score of times. The garden was all drowsy peace now that Orestes spread his palms. A little distance from him Ahasuerus with his forefinger drew designs upon the water's surface which appeared to amuse him.

"She would have killed you, Mervisaunt," Orestes said, "though all Olympus had marshalled in interdiction. That would have been irreligious. Moreover, by Hercules! I have not time to choose sides between snarling women. He who hunts with cats will catch mice. I aim more highly. And besides, by an incredible forced march, this Perion of the Forest and all his Free Companions are battering at the gates of Nacumera—"

Hope blazed. "You know that were I harmed he would spare no one. Your troops are all at Calonak. Oh, God is very good!" said Mervisaunt.

"I do not asperse the deities of any nation. It is unlucky. Yet your desires outpace your reason. For grant that I have not more than fifty men to defend the garrison, yet Nacumera is impregnable except by starvation. We can sit snug a month. Meanwhile our main force is at Calonak undoubtedly. Yet my infatuated father has already recalled these troops in order they might escort you into Perion's camp. Now I shall use these knaves quite otherwise. They will arrive within two days, and to the rear of Perion, who is encamped before an impregnable fortress. To the front unscalable walls, and behind him at a moderate computation three swords to his one. All this in a valley from which Dædalus might possibly escape, but certainly no other man. I count this Perion of the Forest as already dead."

It was a lumbering Orestes who had proclaimed each step in his enchained deductions by the descent of a blunt forefinger upon the palm of his left hand. Demetrios had left a son but not an heir.

Yet the chain held. She tested every

link and found each obdurate. She foresaw it all. Her Perion would necessarily be surrounded and overpowered. "And these troops come from Calonak because of me!"

"Things fall about with an odd patness, as you say. It should teach you not to talk about divinities lightly. Also, by this Jew's advice, I mean to further their indisputable work. For you will appear upon the walls of Nacumera at dawn tomorrow in such a garb as you wore in your native country when Perion first saw you. Ahasuerus estimates he will not readily leave pursuit of you in that event, whatever his lieutenants urge, for you are very beautiful."

Mervisaunt cried aloud: "A bitter curse this beauty has been to me! ay, and to all men who have desired it."

"But I do not desire it," said Orestes. "Else I would not have sold it to Ahasuerus. I desire only the governorship of some province on the frontier where I may fight daily with stalwart adversaries and ride past the homes of conquered persons who hate me. Ahasuerus here assures me that the Emperor will not deny me such employment when I bring him the head of Perion. The raids of Perion have irreligiously annoyed our Emperor for a long while."

She muttered, "Thou that once wore a woman's body—!"

"And I take Ahasuerus to be shrewd in all respects save one. For he desires trivialities. A wise man knows that women are the sauce and not the meat of life; Ahasuerus, therefore, is not wise."

Here Orestes laughed. And thus the young man left them.

When he had gone the Jew remained unmoved. Only he continued to dabble his finger-tips in the water as one who meditates. Presently he dried them on either sleeve so that he seemed to embrace himself. "What instruments we use at need!"

She said: "So you have purchased me, Ahasuerus?"

"Ay, for a hundred and two minæ. It was a great sum. You are not as the run of women, though."

She did not speak. She was considering the beauty of this cloistered place wherein so many infamies writhed and contended like a nest of little serpents.

"Mervisaunt," the Jew harshly said, "I make no songs. My deeds must speak for me. Concede that I have labored patiently." He paused, and his lips smiled. His eyes were mirthless. "This mad Callistion's hate of you and of the Demetrios who had abandoned her was my first stepping-stone. By my advice a little wire was fastened very tightly around the fetlock of a certain horse, between the foot and the heel, and the hair was smoothed over it. Demetrios rode that horse in his last battle. It stumbled, and our terrible proconsul was thus brought to death. Callistion managed it. Thus I betrayed Demetrios."

She said, "You are too foul for hell to swallow." And he manifested indifference to this imputed defect.

"Thus far I had gone hand in hand with an insane Callistion. Now our ways parted. She desired only to be avenged on you, and very crudely. That did not suit my plan. I fell to bargaining. I purchased—O rarity of rarities!—with a little rational advice and much gold as well. Thus in due season I betrayed Callistion. Well! who forbids it?"

She said: "God is asleep. Therefore you live and I—alas!—must live for a while longer."

He returned: "There is a venerable adage concerning the buttering of parsnips. So I content myself with bidding you remember that I have not ever faltered. I shall not falter now. You loathe me. Who forbids it? I have known from the first you detested me, and have always considered your verdict to err upon the side of charity. Believe me, you will never loathe Ahasuerus as I do. And yet I coddle this poor knave sometimes—oh, as I do to-day!" he cried.

And thus they parted.

The manner of the torment of Mervisaunt was this: a little before dawn she was conducted by Ahasuerus and Orestes to the outermost turrets of Nacumera, which were now beginning to take form. Very suddenly a flash of light had flooded the valley, the big crimson sun was instantaneously apparent as though he had leaped over the bleeding night-mists.

Now Mervisaunt could see the long and narrow plain so far beneath her. It was overgrown with a coarse rippling grass,

which mimicked rising waters from this distance, save where clumps of palm trees showed like islands. Farther off the tents of Perion were as the white, sharp teeth of a lion. Also she could see—and did not recognize—the helmet-covered head of Perion as he knelt in the wavering grass just out of bow-shot.

Now Perion could see a woman standing in the new-born sunlight under many gayly colored banners. The maiden was attired in a robe of sea-green silk, and around her neck was a collar of gold wherein were set large emeralds and pearls. Her hair blazed in the light, bright as the sunflower glows; her skin was whiter than milk, the down of a fledgling bird was not more grateful to the touch than were her hands. Whoso beheld her was fulfilled with love. This much could Perion know.

Thus Perion, who knelt in adoration of that listless girl, all green and silver, and gold, too, where her blown hair showed like a halo. Desirable and lovelier than words may express was Mervisaunt as she stood thus in lonely exaltation, and behind her glorious banners fluttered and the blue sky took on a deeper color. What Perion saw was like a church window when the sun shines through it. Ahasuerus perfectly understood the baiting of a trap.

Perion came unarmed into the open plain before the castle and called on her dear name three times. Then Perion, thus naked to his enemies, sung cheerily a song such as they term an aubade, which he had made in honor of Dame Mervisaunt when they were young and ignorant of misery. The song was no great matter, since the man excelled at sword-work rather than at rhyming; but the splendid futility of its performance amid such touch-and-go surroundings she considered to be august. And consciousness of his words' poverty, as Perion thus lightly played with death in order to accord her reverence, was to Dame Mervisaunt in her high martyrdom as is the twist of a dagger in an already fatal wound; and made her love augment.

Orestes spoke beside her. His voice disturbed her rapture, thinly, as that of a ghost, and she remembered now the bustling world was her antagonist.

"Assuredly," Orestes said, "this man

is crazed. I will forthwith command my archers to despatch him in the middle of his caterwauling. For at this distance they cannot miss him."

But Ahasuerus said: "Nay, seignior, not by my advice. Slay Perion now, and his retainers will speedily abandon this desperate siege. But they will not retreat so long as the man lives and sways them, and we hold Mervisaunt, for, as you plainly see, this abominable reprobate is quite besotted with love of her. His death would win you praise; but the destruction of his armament will purchase you your province. Now in two days at most our troops will come, and then we will slay all the Free Companions."

So Orestes was ruled by him, and Perion, through no merit of his own, departed unharmed.

Then Mervisaunt was conducted to her own apartments; and eunuchs guarded her, while the battle was, and men she had not ever seen died by the score because her beauty was so great.

Now about sunset Mervisaunt knelt in her oratory and laid all her grief before the Virgin, imploring counsel.

This place was in reality a chapel which Demetrios had builded for her in exquisite enjoyment.

The sunlight shone on Mervisaunt through a richly colored window wherein were shown the sufferings of Christ and the two thieves. This siftage made a welter of glowing and intermingling colors all about her, above which her head shone with a clear halo.

This much Ahasuerus noted.

"You offer tears to Mary of Bethlehem. Yonder they are sacrificing a bull to Mithras. But I do not make either offering or prayer to any god. Yet of all persons in Nacumera I alone am sure of this day's outcome." Thus spoke the Jew Ahasuerus.

The woman rose. "What of the day, Ahasuerus?"

"It has been much like other days that I have seen. The sun rose without any perturbation. And now it sinks as usual. Oh, true, there has been fighting. The sky has been clouded with arrows, and horses, nicer than their masters, have screamed because they were appalled by so much blood."

She said, "Is Perion hurt?"

"Is the dog quickly hurt that has driven a cat into a tree? Such I estimate to be the position of Orestes and Perion. Ah no, this Perion who was my captain once is as yet a lord without any peer in the fields where men contend in battle. But love has thrust him into a bag's end, and his fate is certain."

She spoke her steadfast resolution. "And my fate, too. For when this Perion is trapped and slain I mean to kill myself."

"I am aware of that," he said. "Oh, women have these notions! Yet at a pinch I think you would not dare. For I know your beliefs—"

Then Mervisaunt waited for a while. She spoke without any modulation. "And how should I fear hell who crave a bitterer fate! Nay, for this too is an old tale. I know that you desire me as a plaything very greatly. The infamy in which you wade attests as much. Yet you have schemed to no purpose if Perion dies, because the ways of death are always open. I would die many times rather than endure the touch of your finger. Ahasuerus, I have not any words wherewith to tell you of my loathing—"

"Turn then to bargaining," he said, and seemed aware of all her thoughts.

"Oh, to a hideous bargain. Let Perion be warned of those troops that will tomorrow outflank him. Let him escape. There is yet time. Do this, O hungry man, and I will live." She shuddered here. "Yes, I will live and be in all things obedient to you, my purchaser, until you shall have wearied of me, or at the least until God has remembered."

His careful eyes were narrowed. "You would bribe me as once you bribed Demetrios? and to the same purpose? I think that fate excels less in invention than in cruelty."

She bitterly said, "Heaven help me, and what other wares have I to vend!"

He answered: "None. No woman has in this black age; and therefore comfort you, my girl."

She hurried on. "Therefore anew I offer Mervisaunt that was a princess. I cry a price for red lips and bright eyes and a fair woman's tender body without any blemish. I have no longer youth and happiness and honor to afford you as your

toys. These three have long been strangers to me. Oh, very long! Yet all I have I offer for one charitable deed. See now how near you are to victory. Think now how gloriously one honest act would show in you who have betrayed each overlord you ever served. Oh, judge how laughable the thing would seem, since laughter is your only god!"

He said: "I am suspicious of strange paths. My plan is fixed. I think I shall not alter it."

"Ah no! nay, think instead how beautiful I am. There is no comelier animal in all this big lewd world. Indeed, I cannot count how many men have died because I was a comely animal—" She smiled as one who is too tired to weep. "That, too, is an old tale. Now I—I that am Mervisaunt—abate my price, and very lamentably. For I am purchasable now just by one honest deed."

He returned: "You forget that a freed Perion would have a sonorous word or two to say. Demetrios was a dread lord. It cost him daily warfare to retain you. I who lack swords and castles—I who dare love you much as did Demetrios—why, in that event, I would retain neither Mervisaunt nor, very possibly, my own existence for an unconscionable while. Ah no! I bear my former general no grudge. I merely recognize that while Perion lives he will not ever leave pursuit of you. I would readily concede the potency of his spurs, even were there need to look on you a second time— It happens that there is no need! Meanwhile I am a quiet man and I abhor disension. And for the rest, I do not think that you will kill yourself, and so I think I shall not alter my fixed plan."

He left her, and Mervisaunt prayed no more. To what end should she pray when there was no hope for Perion?

Into Mervisaunt's bedroom, about two o'clock in the morning, came Ahasuerus the Jew. She sat erect in bed and saw him cowering over a lamp which his long glistening fingers shielded, so that the lean face of the man floated upon a little golden pool in the darkness. She marvelled that this detestable countenance had not aged at all since her first sight of it.

He smoothly said: "Now let us talk.

I have loved you for a great while, fair Mervisaunt."

"You have desired me," she replied.

"Faith, I am but as other men. Why, what the devil! man may have Javeh's breath in him, but even Scripture proves that he was made of clay." He now puffed out his jaws as if in recollection. "You are a handsome piece of flesh, I thought once in Poictesme. I thought no more than this. And presently, because of an odd reason which I had, I served Demetrios willingly enough. He paid me well. So I arranged the bungling snare Demetrios proposed—too gross, I thought it, to trap any woman living. Ohé, and why should I not lay an open and frank springe for you?" he snarled. "Who else was a king's daughter, young, and blessed with wealth and honor and every other comfort which the world affords?" Now the Jew made as if to fling away a robe from his gaunt person. "And you cast this, all this, aside as nothing. I saw it done."

"Ah, but I did it to save Perion," she wisely said.

"Unfathomable liar," he returned, "you boldly bought of life the thing which you most earnestly desired. Nor Solomon nor Periander has won more. And thus I saw that which no other man has seen. I saw the wise and naked soul of Mervisaunt. And so I loved you, and I laid my plan—"

She said, "You do not know of love—"

"Yet I have builded him a temple!" the Jew sharply cried. He continued, with that old abhorrent acquiescence: "Now, a temple is admirable, but it is not builded until many laborers have dug and toiled waist-deep in dirt. Here, too, such spatterment seemed necessary. For you and Perion—oh, children lost upon a battle-field! I played, in fine. The high pride of Demetrios, the hatred of Callistion, and the ambition of Orestes—these were so many stops of that dire flute on which I played a deadly music. Who forbids it?"

She motioned him, "Go on." Now she was not afraid.

"Come then to the last note. You offer me a bargain: Save Perion and have my body as your chattel. I answer *Click!* The turning of a key solves all. Accordingly I have betrayed the castle

of Nacumera. I have this night admitted Perion and his broad-shouldered men. They are killing Orestes yonder in the Court of Stars even while I talk with you." Ahasuerus laughed. "Oh, vanity! I needs must do the thing with some magnificence. Therefore I do not give this Perion a paltry life, I give him also victory and much throat-cutting and an impregnable rich castle. Have I not paid the price, fair Mervisaunt? Have I not demonstrably won God's masterpiece through a small wire, a purse, and a big key?"

She answered, "You have paid."

He said: "You will hold to your bargain? Ah, you have but to cry aloud, and you are rid of me. For this is Perion's castle."

She said: "Christ help me! You have paid the price."

And now the Jew raised his two hands in very horrible mirth. "Oh, I am almost tempted to praise God. Because of a word said you would arise and follow me on my dark ways if I commanded it. You will not weight the dice, not even at this pinch, when it would be so easy! For Perion is safe, and nothing matters any more. Again I see my Mervisaunt who is not just a pair of purple eyes and so much lovely flesh."

His face was as she had not ever known it now, and very tender.

"My way to victory is plain enough. And yet there is an obstacle! For I love Mervisaunt and not that handsome piece of flesh which all men—oh, and even Perion, I think!—have loved so long with laughable infatuation. Accordingly I had not ever designed that the edifice on which I labored should be the stable of my desire. Accordingly I played—and accordingly I give you Perion. I that am Ahasuerus win for you all which righteousness and honor had denied. I give you Perion— He would be about his butchery, I think, in the Court of Stars. I have retained my right to laugh."

Ahasuerus knelt, kissing her hand.

"Fair Mervisaunt, such abominable persons as Demetrios and I are fatally alike. We may deny, deride, deplore, or even hate, the sanctity of any noble lady accordingly as we elect; but there is for us no possible escape from worshipping it. Your wind-fed Perions, who will not

ever acknowledge what sort of world we live in, are less quick to recognize the soul of Mervisaunt. Such is our sorry consolation. Oh, you do not believe me yet. You will believe. Meanwhile, O all-enduring and all-conquering! go now to your last labor; and—if my Brother dare concede as much—now conquer even Perion.”

Then he had vanished. She never saw him any more.

She lifted the Jew's lamp. She bore it through the Women's Garden, wherein were many discomfortable shadows and no living being. She came to its outer entrance. Men were fighting there. She skirted a hideous conflict, and ascended an enclosed stairway which led toward the balcony about the Court of Stars.

Below her men were fighting. To the farther end of the court Orestes sprawled upon the red and yellow slabs—which now for the most part were red—and above him towered Perion of the Forest. The conqueror had turned to cleanse his sword upon the same divan Demetrios had occupied when Mervisaunt first saw the dead proconsul; and midway in the act he had perceived the common denizen of all his dreams. A tiny lamp glowed in her hand quite steadily.

“O Mervisaunt,” said Perion, with a great voice, “my task is done. Come now to me.”

She instantly obeyed whose only joy was to please Perion. Descending the enclosed stairway, she thought how like its gloom was to the fleet unhappiness she had passed through in serving Perion.

He stood a dripping statue, for he had fought horribly. She came to him, picking her way among the slain. He trembled who was fresh from slaying. A flood of torchlight surged and swirled about them, and within a stone's cast shouting men killed one another.

These two stood face to face and did not speak at all.

I think that they knew disappointment first. He looked to find a girl, and she a boy.

He found a woman, the possessor still

of a compelling beauty. Oh yes, past doubt. She was a stranger to him, though, as he now knew with an odd sense of sickness. Thus, then, would end the lifelong quest of Mervisaunt. Their love had flouted Time and Fate. These had revenged this insolence, it seemed to Perion, by a ironical conversion of either rebel into another person. For this was not the girl whom he had loved in far red-roofed Poictesme; and he—as Perion for the first time perceived—was not and never could be any more the boy who had so magnanimously loved her.

Then Perion understood that their love was so great as to bedwarf consideration of the man and woman whom it swayed. He saw that this was reasonable. I cannot justify this knowledge. I cannot even word just what it was that Perion was made aware of in this while. For many men have seen the sunrise, but the serenity and awe and sweetness of this daily miracle, the huge assurance which it emanates that the beholder is both impotent and greatly loved, is not entirely an affair of the sky's color. And thus it was with Perion; he knew what he could not explain, he knew such joy and terror as he could not ever word.

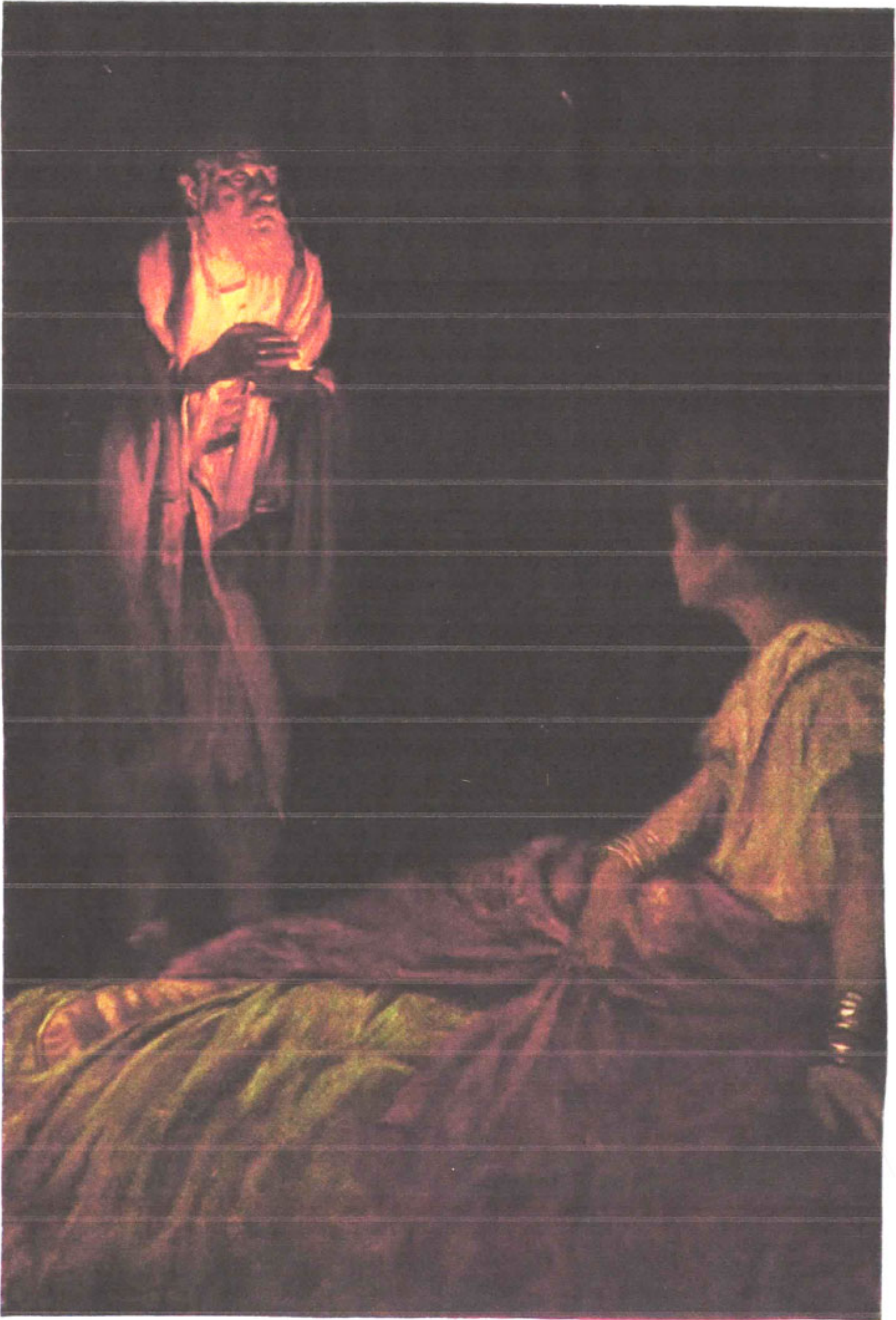
Now he saw Mervisaunt for the first time.

I think he saw the lines already forming in her face, and knew that, but for him, this woman, naked now of gear and friends, had been to-night a queen among her own acclaiming people. I think he worshipped where he did not dare to love. The pity and the beauty of that world wherein High God had—scornfully?—thrust a smug Perion, seemed to the man, I think, unbearable. I think a new and higher love smote Perion as a sword strikes.

I think they did not speak because there was no scope for words. I know he knelt (incurious for once of even victory) before this stranger who both was and was not the fair Mervisaunt whom he had loved so long, and that all consideration of this lost young Mervisaunt had instantly departed from him, as mists leave our world when the sun rises.

I think that this was her high hour of triumph.





*Painting by Howard Pyle*

"I HAVE LOVED YOU FOR A GREAT WHILE, FAIR MERVISAUNT"