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DAWN AT NAPLES

by Raymond Loring

For an instant, as Dan woke, the cloudy monstrous dark was peopled with the dissolving shapes of his dream. He was aware of a desperate sense of urgency and then of his breathing, thick and forced, as if he'd been running. He listened for some following sound or movement. There was none. The silence seemed absolute. It was so complete that listening made his ears roar faintly.

I must have fallen asleep, he thought, unable for the moment to complete the bridge between dream and reality. He moved his head experimentally. It ached furiously. He put a hand up beside him, tentatively, felt wood. It made no connection in his mind. He wasn't in his own berth, that much was certain. He moved his hand, half fearfully, along the somehow menacing smoothness. Maybe he had fallen into an empty wine cask somewhere. An antic thought. But it didn't stop the sweat from coming out on his face. The black darkness about him moved in, thickening; it seemed fearfully difficult to breathe suddenly.

Panic seized him. He moved convulsively, his hands clawing at the weight on his chest. Then horror exploded in all the pores of his body, rose screaming into his throat, but died there. There was an arm lying across him, he felt it — a hairy arm, warm, sprawled across his chest. — —

He slowly lifted it off. The thing fell onto the bed. His hand felt flesh and unwilling, following some familiar neuron trail he himself bore no conscious knowledge of, moved along the unseen shape. The object swam suddenly before him in his memory as the familiar pattern of a naked body reached his exploring fingers.

But he forgot about the body as his head commenced to ache. He sat up and held his head between his palms. The slight, sharp movement set up a murderous throbbing in his head. He sat for a moment with his face screwed up and his shoulders hunched a little, against the pain. God, those drinks! This anvil chorus! When would he learn? Why didn't some protective mechanism inside him sound a warning after the third? Five, he remembered as a fairly conservative estimate.

He slowly climbed out of bed, groping his way to the door. He started for the bathroom knowing subconsciously it was somewhere off the hall, thinking suddenly, I'll never make it. He found the room, but ignoring turning on the light, he stepped into the shower in the half-dark, reached for the faucets, then stood with one hand propping himself up from the wall, his head hanging like a tired horse, splashing ignominiously in the gloom.

He threw back his head and let water run into his mouth until his stomach hurt from the drinking. Then he turned the water off, and shivering in the feeling of the chill (thank god, he was used to cold morning showers) he dried himself slowly with a couple of towels he found on the rack.

Then he treaded his way back into the bedroom. His hands were trembling, he observed with disgust. Fine thing. You're in a great shape, Dan. The headache

—that was always the worst thing. Those who tampered with drink could expect, at the very least, a headache.

A glint of metal caught his eye. He went over to the partly-open metallic air-raised screen through which some light filtered, and slowly raised it completely letting in the early morning air and some more faint pre-dawn light.

Turning towards the bed, he straightened and stopped as he saw the body of the man on the bed, half naked, only partially covered by the sheet. For a moment he studied the likeness of the body, the tapering torso, touched with a sensuality as elusive and piercing as the scent of gardenias.

Wait a minute! Something jogged his memory, gave him a momentary gone feeling, wondering how he could have forgotten. How could it have slipped his mind so completely! He had gone with someone for a final drink . . . with someone . . . The thought went suddenly opaque. The sensation was almost physical, as if a shade had been drawn to shut out the light.

What is this, he thought with a little stab of pain—amnesia all of a sudden?

He approached the bed, which still carried his imprint, studied it with the concentrated attention one pays to a geological exhibit. He faintly remembered another body in bed with him, but how? The rectangle of light where the early glow struck seemed curious. A thought pawed at his mind like a nagging mendicant.

He put his hand to his forehead and made a clinical note of the dampness that met his fingers. Now look here, he said to himself, pull yourself together. He must have slept here, but why? It didn't add up. The whole thing was out of drawing somehow.

He walked back towards the window, trying to reason away the mounting uneasiness in him. A person didn't just get amnesia. It had to come from something. A blow, or shock.

He had reached the window and as he looked out into the gray dawn the feeling of strangeness, disorder, that had clung to him since he'd sprung up from the nightmare congealed suddenly into a cold spider web of dread at the back of his neck. He stood rigid for a moment, feeling it spread up his scalp, gripped by a ghastly sense of derangement. He felt the chill of the retreating night against his naked body and shivered. The muscles of his chest quaked as he heard his own voice, edgy: «A funny religion.»

It's happened, he thought. The thing I said could never happen to me. He felt his headache again. Psychosomatic, no doubt, he thought, shakenly. The light touch of his hand did nothing to quell the tide of sickness rising within him. There could be no doubt about it. I said it yesterday to Jack: «Sir, these Pompeians had a peculiar religion, a funny religion.»

«Perhaps not, Mate.» The officer's grave voice echoing in his mind seemed now to hold an overtone of pity. And in a flash several things went through his mind: Pompey, phallic symbols, drinks, Naples, jeep; more drinks . . .

He pressed his palms against his temples. He would live. The tumult and shouting would die, and in the sickish gray light of shamed recollection he could

begin to retrace his steps. But this new thing, this nausea of the spirit, what was he to do about it?

The memory of the dream, with its strange overtones of terror and loss, returned to his mind. What a crazy hodgepodge—Pompey, phallic symbols, Naples, jeep, drinks—and there was that officer. What was his name? . . . Jack, Jack Young . . . The memory of it came back with a little pang of emotion, like an old remembered tune.

He grimaced wryly. He'd be lucky if he could retrace through the cloudy, dark, past day. He sank down in a chair before the window.

At noon on Saturday he had been free for the rest of the day; and Sunday was all his also. He had made plans with two other sailors to visit Pompey in the afternoon. The short ride on the train from Naples had been interesting, hemmed in as they were by a surging tide of Italians who overloaded the train. But then at Pompey station, the difficulties had commenced. One of his two companions wanted a couple of drinks to ward off the chill of the January day, and he had been outvoted two to one. Then as they walked through the town, towards the excavations, a couple of signorinas had captured their attention and his two companions were detoured. But Dan had been determined to see the ruins and so he had continued on his way, stopping for a few minutes for a cursory examination of the famous Church of Our Lady of Pompey.

And as he had left the church piazza he had thumbed a ride, and a jeep with three American Air-corps officers had given him a lift. He was rather surprised with their lack of formality towards him, considering that they were officers, but attributed it to the branch of service. He had gladly accepted their offer to accompany them with their hired guide through the excavations.

One of the officers paired off with him as they entered the grounds. He it was who did the talking with the old Italian guide whose English was rudimentary. And it was apparent that the officer knew well both the foreign tongue and the excavations. So the two of them walked along.

The sailor, Dan Michael Montgomery, was a tall and handsome young man, and when you said that for him, there was little else to say. His face was strong and well-moulded but the strength was inherent in the bone structure and did not come from any great lustiness of character. When you had known him for a while, you would admit that he had a certain strength of will, but it was in repose. He seemed never to have found anything to be forceful about. Unless he was drunk or loving, he remained perfectly languid—polite, quick to laugh or sympathise, gallant but rarely lacking an odd preoccupied listlessness that showed mainly in his lazy dark eyes. He smiled, and the smile set off his sooty good looks extremely well. He had a mass of thick, heavy, coal-black hair. His eyebrows were also blacker and thicker than ordinary, the left one a trifle higher than the right one and cocked in a permanent and cynical arch. The irises of his eyes were so dark as to be of no determinate color, and the dark ends of whiskers were just beginning to show in the clear tan of his cheeks. His chin was square and he carried it thrust slightly forward.

His lieutenant companion who was called Jack Young, was two or three inches taller, over the six-foot mark, and somewhat thinner and lither than Dan

Michael. He too was clean shaven, with a good-tempered face under dark colored hair cut short, and his eyes were a bright grey. He was thirty-five, an intelligent man: another man would have trusted him on sight, although this faith might not have been extended to the handsomer Dan Michael.

The things Dan noticed then about Jack were the least important to him afterwards; that he was tall, that he had dark hair, that his face was golden-tanned with the gloss of good health and spirits as well as sunshine, that he walked with a strong step, not mincing or gliding or teetering at all, that his eyes were grey and honest; honest-seeming eyes, his smile warm and gracious, a frank-seeming smile.

The officer explained much about the background of Pompey, of the earthquake which partially destroyed the city, and then of the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius which overwhelmed the town, preserving it in ashes for later generations to exhume. Dan asked him various questions regarding numerous points, and was especially interested in how the tidal wave following the eruption left Pompey inland.

The sailor's frankness and boyishness had disarmed the officer completely. His whole demeanour flattered him and, yet, it made him feel old. Dan was talking to him as a boy talks to a middle-aged man. He knew then that he wanted Dan's friendship not only for the pleasure it offered but also for his possible influence on the young sailor. If Dan had guessed at his thoughts, the later events might never have occurred.

The sailor was so entranced with the historical background of Pompey that he stumbled over a rock and almost fell. The officer shook his head knowingly at the antics of his new friend. Jack offered his hand to the sailor and Dan took it and the officer helped him down the amphitheatre steps. They stood there for a few seconds, and the sailor took his hand from the officer's but not his eyes.

Dan might have found him insignificant among many taller men if he had not caught the expression of his eyes. They were of a piercing keen intelligence, the sort of eyes that pluck you here and place you there and will be right about it either way.

To the officer, in his optimistic and volatile view, the first steps toward the sailor presaged a booming brawl later. He walked along with the sailor, playing with the mental picture like a gambler visioning a forth ace coming up in the draw.

Among the sights of Pompey, the party saw several stone phallic symbols and Lt. Young explained the religious significance of the fertility rites practised by the Pompeians. The major points of interest also included the dwellings in which paintings remained of the various coital positions. And then at one of the stone symbols, as a souvenir of the ruins, Jack Young gave Dan a small bronze phallic souvenir which he had bought from one of the Italian vendors.

Dan gazed at the souvenir. He felt a lusty desire for sex rise within him, leaving him so tense that he trembled slightly, and into his bones crept a sensitive, emotional sympathy for the builders and priests and slaves of the city, akin to his feelings for companionship and yet so much more intense that it

forced a shuddering gasp from his mouth. It was like a cold slow knife sinking into his belly. It was so powerful that he turned about for a couple of moments until he had recovered.

Jack put a hand on his shoulder and was explaining about the stone phallus. «The symbol of the creator of all life, Dan, the holy male principle, worshipped long before your gods or mine were dreamt of. That's what they are. A great phallus, a monstrous idol.»

There was a subtle air of suspense about the ruins. He could not believe that all the priests, all the idolaters who had venerated such things, were dead and done with. The place seemed filled with drifting wraiths, speaking their adoration with the voice of living men.

«Despite our modern views, it was not an unclean religion, I think, Dan. It was a groping, a desperate clutching of the sources of life, which they knew to be represented physically by this deity of theirs, but which they could not conceive in any other form. What is any faith, save just such a desperate setting-up of understandable idols to impersonate and be substitutes for the greater power which no man comprehends?»

They left the phallic cone and travelled slowly through the other sections of the ruins. Dan turned his back on it at last, and found himself shivering, full of an awe-struck comprehension of his inseparable ties with time gone by.

He tried to tell something of his feelings to Jack, for this esoteric sympathy with the past was too strange and new to be kept secret.

And then the tour of the excavations was completed, and with the Italian guide they stopped at a house and shared a bottle of vermouth. The drink gave Dan a feeling of comradeship with the officers.

He was as happy as a child from a trip to strange lands. He was always rather subdued around people, but now he felt closer to the officers than to any before. And he was confident too. Jack gave him confidence.

Finishing the vermouth the quartet headed back for Naples by jeep. The officers decided to stop at a place where they could hang out and eat a dinner of omelet, french-fried potatoes, Italian bread, and maybe even a black-market beef steak. After the supper, supplemented by a carafe of red wine, the four strolled into a nearby cafe, and out of the gloom of the early nightfall.

«What do we do now?» Dan asked.

«Drink!» Jack wagged his head. His hair was tousled. «Drink until it runs out of our ears. Or at least out of one ear.»

«Which ear?» Dan asked humorously.

«The left one . . . or the right one. I don't care.»

Dan's memory recalled the scene. He felt the drinks hot inside him and a mood of abandon began to creep over him. Why worry? The hell with everything and everything to hell. «Drink up, Mate,» Jack had said, leaning over and putting his hand on Dan's. His hand was warm. It was a friendly gesture and nothing more.

(To be continued)

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mit allem Nachdruck vor Zufallsbekanntschaften. Die Meldungen von Raubüberfällen und Morden im Ausland reissen nicht ab. Vor einigen Wochen wurde in Wien ein Schweizer ermordet, der einen Zufallsbekannten ins Hotel eingeladen hatte, eine der üblichen Gefahren-Situationen, die sich immer wieder ergeben. Die ständigen Wiederholungen gleichartiger Verbrechen zeigen, dass das menschliche Verhältnis in erschreckend grossem Masse gestört ist und Vertrauen gegen Vertrauen nur noch in den seltensten Fällen existiert. Auslandsfahrten sollten auch nicht dazu benützt werden, um sich auszutoben, damit man zuhause wieder als guter Bürger glänzen und in das übliche Verdammungsgeschrei alles Homoerotischen einstimmen kann, um sich zu maskieren. Man sollte versuchen, sein persönliches Leben auch in den persönlichsten Dingen im eigenen Lande zu einem Beispiel zu gestalten, das den Gegner zum mindesten zum Nachdenken zwingt.

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