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The Finest Jest

Abstract

Begin Transmission The scientist in me could not help but admire the elegance of your plan. It was simple, logical, pitiless. If everything went smoothly, only one of us would die.

The Finest Jest

by

William H. Wandless

---Begin Transmission---

The scientist in me could not help but admire the elegance of your plan. It was simple, logical, pitiless. If everything went smoothly, only one of us would die.

As the intended sacrifice, I of course could not help but harbor some small resentment for my seven traveling companions. Even so, from where I now recline I can pity and forgive them, as I hope you will forgive me for allowing you to persist so long in your many errors.

If I take pride in having outmaneuvered you, Oskar, I think we might both forgive my vanity as well. Although you chose me, I coaxed and at last compelled you to make that choice. There are perhaps a dozen living men with the requisite expertise in the ancient alchemies and hydraulics of the Koppa, men eligible to lead such an expedition, but none so plainly...expendable. The others have families, protégés, ties to universities and learned societies. Who better to send to the altar than the notorious Harrison King, recluse and widower, the eccentric whose fussy archaeological and archival work had earned nothing but the disdain of his peers?

It took me two decades to cultivate that

reputation, Oskar. If you knew how often I leafed through the journals and laughed myself breathless at your mangled translations and so-called research you would know how much such undeserved disparagement pained me. I imagine you now in your study, surrounded by your unread books, staring dully out the window as you try to decide how to proceed.

Forgive yourself as well, Oskar. You are a man of action, not thought. You have ambition but lack vision. You command vast resources and thus have purchased what you could never earn. You are a slave to facts you scarcely understand. I am a man of faith.

Will you be surprised to learn I knew of your machinations from the very start? All the practiced lies of your emissaries could not conceal your clumsy attempt to play the puppeteer. Who else could or would fund a search for the lost temple of Mynjaya but the great Oskar Svavarsson? What other "scholar" would be content to send mercenaries to attempt the inner sanctum of the Queen of Dreams, a site untouched for 1500 years? And who else would be bloody- and simple-minded enough --to believe he was doing nothing more unsavory than trading flesh for treasure?

Believe me, Oskar, no other fool would do.

For your folly I forgive you. The hour of my trial has nearly arrived, and if I am to be numbered among the chosen of the Goddess I must cultivate magnanimity.

You were, after all, most useful to me. Never before have I traveled so comfortably; never before have I been so coddled, fattened like a lamb meant for a rich man's table. We passed so readily from the capital through the territories of the Tamil Tigers that a less worldly man would never guess Sri Lanka was at war. Your agents were lavish in their bribes and judicious in their threats, and I drowsed all the way from Katunayake to Anuradhapura.

Our overland path from the village will be easy to retrace, even for one such as you, though I fear you may struggle to find the entrance to the cavern. It is well hidden and skillfully sealed. I took the liberty of removing the battery from the transmitter your men left in the grotto beyond the ebony forest, and I led them on a convoluted march, though I of course knew precisely where to go. I could not afford to have the second team you will certainly send find us too quickly. The seven attendants you sent were more than enough for my needs.

Please offer my condolences to the family of Kirtland (I doubt you know him by his Christian name). I was really quite fond of the boy. He alone seemed somewhat reluctant to lead an old man to his doom, and he treated me with especial kindness.

He lost his footing as he helped me make the treacherous descent to the cavern floor, I'm afraid; his loss was a lamentable necessity. You see, our company was one too many in number. Had you been able to produce a more sensitive translation of *Mynjaya's Finest Jest*, you might have known that.

When we reached the bottom I

abandoned all pretense and raced to the tunnel that would bring us to the temple. Your men could scarcely keep up! I was obliged to loop back and guide them, unnerved and confused as they were. I would like to believe they were overawed with genuine reverence, that they knew they neared something sacred, but doubtless they were merely disoriented by the massive stalagmites that rise up from the cavern floor, a host of stony growths so similar in size and shape that they are all but indistinguishable from one another. It is no wonder the Koppa called this place "Mynjaya's garden."

I broke bread with your men near the entrance, knowing the privation that awaited me, knowing what awaited them. There I indulged in a rare pleasure, for which I offer you my thanks.

I drew from my pack the golden cylinder from the Akaragama dig, the one you bought at auction and tried to play like a recorder at the Stockholm symposium, and I treated my audience to an impromptu rendition of your performance, your red-faced, tuneless tooting. Your men all laughed, just as I laughed all those years ago.

Who but you could believe the Koppa would squander their gold on such a trifle? And who but you could believe I would not recognize such a singular artifact--a once in a lifetime find--when your emissary presented it to me as a relic from a newly-discovered site? I have seen that cylinder in my dreams for years, Oskar, and the thought of it steeled me for the work to come. What to your eyes was an ill-made musical instrument was to me the confirmation of Mynjaya's intricate design.

I hope you will concede my superior appreciation of the Koppa when you read the inscriptions flanking the passage that leads to the sanctum. The characters will look identical to the untrained eye (and to

your eyes especially, which have long been satisfied by rubbings, transcripts, and facsimiles), but they epitomize everything the Koppa believed of our Goddess. To the left, etched in acid with tapering downward strokes, we see the six characters that identify Mynjaya as the “Fountain of All Falsehood.” To the right, etched with tapering upward strokes, we see the selfsame characters identify Mynjaya as the “Fountain of All Truth.”

I will leave behind my own translation of Mynjaya’s Finest Jest for you, Oskar, and I urge you to remember this lesson. It will unriddle this paradox and the mystery of what’s to come.

Along the sides of the tunnel leading to the sanctum you will see a line of interlocked golden cylinders embedded in the walls, all more perfectly tooled than the discarded one found at Akaragama. I hope in years to come the Koppa will be given due credit for their alchemical advances, which will correct countless errors in our understanding. They were centuries ahead of their time.

I fear I have not spoken kindly enough of my escort in this account. I believe they were all good men in their way.

They gave me ample time to explore the temple by the light of our halogen lanterns, marveling at the artistry of the Koppa and the sublime beauty of Mynjaya, bright, benign, and billowing in all the frescoes that surrounded us. They were more patient still as I subjected them to a lecture on the design of the sanctum--its flawless geometry, the ingenious ventilation, the incredible smoothness of the concave altar basin, the ornate etched faces of “Mynjaya’s choir,” which encircled the chamber and murmured eerily through their gaping mouths. They were good-natured auditors, mindful of the little life I had left.

I wish you could have seen the chamber

in its original state, Oskar: the imposing altar of polished jet in the center, the golden shackles that dangled from it, the six low golden pedestals that flanked it, and of course the golden downspout that pierces the ceiling above it, emerging from the painted urn held aloft by the bas-relief arms of the smiling Goddess. I’m afraid you will find it in the same condition as the temples in Kuwait and Kenya: cleansed, spent, and empty.

I showed your men the subtle differences in the etchings to each side of the altar, the text of Mynjaya’s long, duplicitous poem. I showed them the halo of hammered silver plinths that ring the chamber, topped with sculptures depicting the phases of the moon, celestial reflections of the Goddess. And at last, knowing their forbearance was not without limits, I showed them the star-shaped aperture at the head of the altar and the fabled silver scepter, an artifact made by the hierophant’s own hands, a T-shaped stave that ends in a matching hexagram quite like an asterisk, the linchpin of the shrine’s design.

They were far more interested in the enormous doors symbolically barred by the scepter, however, which they surely guessed was the entrance to the vault of the Koppa, a legendary reliquary. I opted not to clarify. Doing so seemed cruel.

I did not correct their understanding of the ritual, either, even as they shackled me to the altar. They knew that the high priest was to be gifted to the Goddess, and they knew how the hidden hydraulics activated by the pedestals would lift him up to her. They believed the great doors would open. That was enough.

I offered no resistance; though the shackles closed loosely around my wrists, I remained in place. I asked them to leave me my pack and a lantern, in case they were needed in the next world, and they were



kind enough to humor me, doomed as they believed me to be.

Tell me, Oskar, did you ever wonder why a high priest of Mynjaya, an initiate into her deepest mysteries, would document so minutely the manner of his own horrific execution? Did the readiness of the celebrant to sacrifice his life so that six acolytes might be exalted by the Goddess never give you pause? I would like to think you were persuaded by Patel's tenuous conjecture, that the words "sleep" and

"death" were cognate to the Koppa, that there could be no greater gift for her chosen priest than an eternity of disembodied slumber. I am convinced, however, that the absurdity of such altruism never even occurred to you, avaricious as you are.

Remember, Oskar: Mynjaya is the divinity who at the dawn of creation lulled the Six Gods to sleep and snatched all that we know of the world from their dreams. When Father Sky and Sister Sea planned to flood the earth by sealing the opening

through which the ocean empties into the underworld, it was she who fashioned for them a stopper made of salt. Above all else, the Goddess is a trickster. Those who are dear to her do not yield up their lives needlessly. They emulate her methods.

One of my attendants retrieved the silver scepter, cradled it in his arms, and carried it to the head of the altar. He matched the asterisked end to the star-shaped aperture, eased it carefully downward, and turned it like a carpenter's auger until it would turn no more. A purring, gurgling sound emanated from the mouths of Mynjaya's choir as hidden valves opened and fluids flowed.

One by one your men mounted the golden pedestals. When all six had taken their places the altar rumbled upward, propelled like a piston, and I ascended with it, perhaps fifteen feet above the temple floor. I could hear the members of my escort calling out to one another, no doubt steadying themselves as their pedestals trembled, shaken by the waters coursing beneath them, but my attention was engrossed by the bas-relief carving I could now almost touch. In the frescoes Mynjaya's smile is kind, beatific; the lips of the graven face above me, however, discernibly smirk.

Most versions of the *Jest* (your own included) preserve the Latin translation of Trithemius and indicate that the uplifted priest will be "anointed with strong water"--that he will be doused and dissolved in *aqua fortis*. A ghastly, terrible fate! Had Trithemius understood the pivotal significance of upward strokes in Koppa character, however, he would have known that, at least in the relevant passage, the author wrote "weak water." A critical difference, don't you think? I was, to be plain, anointed with a trickle of rosewater, and as it drained from the altar basin the

remaining hydraulics of the shrine came alive.

All other references to "strong water" in the *Jest* involve the telltale downward strokes, and nitric acid indeed issued from the gaping mouths of Mynjaya's choir. Your men, to their credit, did not panic then, seemingly safe on their perches, though one cried out when a stone slab slid into position and sealed the chamber.

I concede that the enterprise staggers the imagination: all that gold, gold the Koppa might have traded with their neighbors, hammered into pipes and used as plumbing to carry their acids. We moderns, to whom Stonehenge and Giza are now tourist attractions, remnants of benighted times, too often fail to fathom the lengths to which genuine reverence might drive a pious people.

I would like to think that better scholars understood the piping properly--that they recognized the nature of the rite and the volume of acid needed to complete it--and opted to remain silent, content to rifle your pockets while you persisted in your folly, explaining away the use of the golden cylinder in a manner entirely inconsistent with all we know of the culture. Surely the fact that the Koppa compounded their acids centuries before the Mesopotamians put many off the scent, but only the most dimwitted among us could fail to correlate their obsession with alchemy and their mania for hoarding gold.

The Koppa naturally knew that correlation; therein we find the transcendent genius of Mynjaya's truest priests revealed.

To dupe an inept archaeologist and his underlings is one thing. I have no doubt you assured your men they would be safe on their golden pedestals, that they would only need to see the ritual through, that they would be handsomely rewarded when the strong water dissolved the silver scepter and

drained from the chamber through the star-shaped aperture, opening the vault of the Koppa as it ate away locks beneath the temple floor. I have no doubt you convinced them that performance of the sacrifice was obligatory, that to attempt the vault by any other means might destroy the artifacts within. Given such assumptions, which required me to do no more than anticipate the deductions of an orthodox, unfeeling intellect, my mission was simple.

Imagine, in contrast, the challenge faced by those devious priests. They would need to induce an enlightened, established people to seek out a remote sacred site, to abandon hard-earned worldly comfort at the prompting of their Goddess. They would need to persuade an entire society that an enormous expenditure of manpower and rare resources would be requited by Mynjaya. They would need to convince engineers and alchemists to suspend their work and their researches to build a buried temple only seven men were meant to enter for a single ceremony. And they would need to tempt six initiates--earnest, learned worshippers versed in the doctrines and mysteries of Mynjaya--to sanction and witness the suicide of their hierophant. My modest betrayal pales in comparison to such magnificent treachery.

Positioned as I was, I must speculate about most of what happened next. The rupture of the silver plinths, however--hammered thin and hollow, as I guessed they must be--suggests how the priest introduced hydrochloric acid into the chamber.

The resultant mixture of nitric and hydrochloric acid, what Pseudo-Geber called *aqua regia*, was apparently unknown to the Koppa. Evidence suggests they all but abandoned hydrochloric acid when they began synthesizing nitric acid, a far more useful solution for their etching, dyes, and fertilizer. That the high priests of Mynjaya

fathomed its singular purpose, however, is beyond question: the complete disappearance of the golden pedestals attests to its presence.

I am sorry to say your men did not perish quickly or well. Most inhaled caustic fumes before the ventilation system could whisk them away; all screamed hoarsely as their golden perches disintegrated beneath them. I heard splashes as they fell or leapt, one by one, into the acid below. When at last the waters that had buoyed the altar retreated and my own perch returned to its original position, all were gone.

I am convinced the Koppa acolytes who entered the chamber believed themselves safe, just as your minions did. They were to serve as proxies for the Six Gods, and their perches were proof against the action of the acid. They would bear witness as the chamber filled below them, watching as the strong water washed away a selfless sacrifice--a scapegoat standing in for all the corruption in creation--then wait for the silver scepter to dissolve and the waters to recede. They would reenact Mynjaya's deliverance of mankind from the Flood, the doors would open, and they would return to their people with divine gifts and wisdom granted by the Goddess, prepared to usher in a new age. They ran only symbolic risks in a drama of devotion.

If you read *Mynjaya's Finest Jest* as attentively as I have, however (the stone tablets, of course, and not the transcripts), you will find in it a peculiarity. The author makes a seemingly careless error: in one instance, and in one instance only, the characters signifying "silver" appear to be written entirely with downward strokes. The silver scepter, the key fashioned by the high priest, is not made of silver but its opposite. It did not dissolve as the acolytes imagined it would. Should you have it examined, I believe you will find it is made

of tantalum, a silvery metal resistant to acids of all kinds--a splendid jest indeed.

The enormous doors at last unlocked, but not until the pedestals and their passengers were gone. I have fasted and meditated five days, stranded on my little island, sipping the water I kept in my pack. At dawn on the sixth day those doors will be thrown open, and—if she finds my devotion and sacrifice acceptable--Mynjaya will claim me as one of her own.

Before I lay down my pen, let me do you

a kindness. There are six temples, three more in addition to the three you know. One is in Yemen, another in Cyprus; I have paid visits to both, and you will find them as you find this site: wrecked and empty. The final shrine to Mynjaya, however? You'll just have to see for yourself.

---End Transmission---

OS: Doors are open. King nowhere to be found. Please advise.

SIREN'S CALL

by

Chelsi Robichaud

I cry my grief out to the sky,
the grief that Aphrodite would not calm.
The Siren's call that lured him
now sings me to my death.

If only I sang so sweetly,
in my arms he would lay.
Now I am alone,
in this abyss of a sea.

How sweetly he sang to me,
before his voice was silenced.
His words would have woken me
as I drifted towards Elysium.

How will I survive
in this solitude?
I see the Siren's yellow eyes
and clutch my driftwood
tighter.