

Zeitschrift: Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle
Band: 31 (1963)
Heft: 5

Artikel: The lover
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-569750>

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THE LOVER

The blackness was intense, a true stygian darkness. It devoured the feeble greenish glow that came from the lower caves which he had just left; it ate into his eyes and was heavy against his face and naked body. And the path was granite and unpleasant against his unshod feet—the surfaces covered with a cold and slippery ooze which did not ease the rough edges of the rocks that bit into his skin.

The path, he could tell as he slowly put down each foot, his toes feeling for a surface that would not unbalance him, led upwards slowly, by an almost unnoticed degree. There was no sound of the dread tribunal he had just left, where the three dark-cowled figures, bending in tears over a bowl of fire, had finally granted his plea for freedom. The cries of the tortured ones had faded long ago, as the light reflected on the cave walls had changed from red to pale green, and then vanished. There was no sound at all, save for the faint echo of another footstep just behind him, or a small sharp sob as another foot trod on a rocky edge, or a dislodged pebble clattered and fell bounding into an unseen chasm far below. But there was a drip of water from the horrid walls, a small sound that fell into other water. He had passed several pools, darkly luminous, and seen a pale phosphor flicker from the bones of some dread beast lying in the puddles of decay.

In the bending of his left arm, he cradled a golden lyre. And now, feeling its quiet strings, he played a five-note chord, to comfort himself, and the one who followed him. The notes rebounded from the walls, and died, echoing in the lost caves.

Then suddenly, he remembered the last voyage with his shipmates. Against the frightful dark there flashed an image of their ship-bright and brave, with green sail bellied to the strong fresh sea-wind. He saw the brown strong backs of his friends bending to the yellowgrained oars, dipping to the strong beat of his own music and song, flashing golden as they sank into the blue foam-flecked water, rising to pause—just an instant!—while the silver drops glittered in the strong sunlight, falling from the tip ends, and then sank again.

He remembered the nights of danger and peril, the exhaustions of their comradeship, the bodies pressed close to his in sleep or love, the meals in common, the drinking of the red wine, the golden mead . . .

To lose all this, to give it all over, for love of the pallid one who followed. Could he be brave enough? Was this his true desire?

In despair, his fingers groped and found a minor chord, which wailed through the darkened caves. And then, as if to comfort his grief, he turned an abrupt corner. There, but still a great distance ahead, gleamed a tiny patch of light. The cold radiance from it reached into the cave towards him, and illuminated the shining wet of the walls, the pool of decay on his left, and its clutter of whitened bones.

Just at that moment, a small sound came from behind him—a muffled shriek, a misplaced foot, a slipping and sliding, and the air full of a movement of arms trying vainly for balance—and then a splash. And after, wordlessly, he felt a hand—soft and cold and trembling, reaching, touching him high upon the thigh.

«You must not look behind,» they said. He looked ahead towards the light, and closed his eyes; behind them sprang once more into being the handsome bodies, in bronze and copper, of his fellow argonauts. He heard again the rousing timbre of their voices raised in song.

Then, with an enigmatic smile visible to none, he half-turned and reached out his hand. He touched the wrist, and looked downwards towards her.

There was a faint white spark, a sobbing cry—and his finger closed on nothing. A vapor swirled upwards towards the roof, passed him, and vanished in a mist-cloud of dancing sparks. Then . . . silence.

He sighed and turned, and walked onwards to the golden years that lay ahead.

Donald Bishop