
Weird Tales

September
1953

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

P A R T H E N O P E

by Menly Wade Wellman



"... there were so many lies in the Odyssey!"

TO HIS brine-deadened ears came soft, clear music. Had he been able to think after swimming so long, with salt water dashing into his sagging mouth, with his arms turned to dull stone, he might have pondered that this was the singing

of death, a prelude to sleep under the waves of the Mediterranean.

But next instant he stirred, as though by another will, to a final effort. His hands, that had all but ceased flailing, framed once more a stroke-rhythm. His feet

Heading by W. H. Silvey

fluttered and kicked. His head came up out of the water, so that he saw what he had despaired of—a white beach with a face of dark rock behind, and at the blue water's edge a tall, waiting figure. The music rang its way into him, coursing through his blood like an elixir violently infused. He dared to bob upright, and solid bottom met his downward-groping toes. A few struggling strides, a scramble in foamy shallows, and he sprawled in the sand at the feet of the singer.

It was blessed to lie there, then it was painful. He made shift to gasp and pant, then to moan. Gentle laughter slid down from above, and a questing pressure came upon his sodden shoulder. With the last of his strength, he turned over upon his back.

She must have bent to touch him, but now she stood straight again. She towered, almost as tall as himself, with a figure both full and fine. Her garment was a plain dark drapery, so caught around her as to line out her strongly smooth curves from chin to ankle, leaving bare one round shoulder and one smooth, slender arm. Above this tilted her brown face, framed between winglike sweeps of black hair, with bright inky eyes under wise lids, a regally chiselled nose and full

red lips that smiled but did not part. She'd be lovely, he thought, if he were in any condition to appreciate loveliness.

"I was almost food for fishes," he muttered in Italian.

"No, you're too soaked in salt," she replied, and her speech was as musical as her song had been. "Not even a crab would eat you."

"Who are you?" he croaked, and sat up. "A siren?"

"*Seiren*," she repeated after him, in the Greek manner, as though to cheer him by falling in with the feeble pleasantry. And the rescued swimmer had recovered enough to look up at her with admiration. This was beauty, classic but living, and only a mannerless clod would sprawl at its feet.

He tried to rise, swaying, and she caught his arm to steady him. The quick grasp of her fingers was as strong as steel, and her nails dug into his water-sodden skin. He smiled thanks, trying to brush the drenched blond hair from his young face. He knew what a sorry sight he must be—naked except for his dripping white trousers, pallid and shrunken from his long immersion. But she smiled her slight smile—like the Mona Lisa, like the Empress Josephine—and asked his name and country.

"George Colby," he supplied. "I'm an American student. This

morning I was out in a fishing boat with some friends from Sicily. The boat sprang a leak, went down under us. Maybe they drowned. I just swam—kept swimming—got here—”

His head began to ring and whirl and, for all his efforts, he crumpled down to sit on the sand.

“You’re weak,” she said above his head. “Weak and famished. Wait.”

HE WAITED, in a sort of dreamy blur. Then an arm slid around his shoulders. She knelt to support him, and held to his mouth a sort of big plum.

“Eat,” she urged him.

He nibbled at the pulpy thing. The first bite refreshed him enormously, the sweet juice cleared his head like wine. “Eat,” she said again, turning the fruit against his hungry mouth, as a mother feeds a child.

After a moment, he could stand again. His shadow was long on the sand. The sun was sinking—he had been swimming most of the day.

“I don’t know how to reward you,” he said.

“I will be rewarded when I see you well and strong,” she made the gravest of answers.

“You’re being good,” he half babbled. “Now, may I impose further? May I go to a house,

will you help me there to spend the night? Tomorrow—”

“My house?” she echoed, as though the word and idea came strangely. “You mean, a place where men live. There is none on this beach.”

George Colby was far too weary and grateful to digest this amazing information. He only gazed into her steady black eyes.

“You may sleep on the sand,” she told him. “It’s soft and warm. I’ll keep watch.”

“Don’t bother,” he began to say, but she smiled compellingly. She put one hand on his shoulder, and with the other offered him a bunch of grapes.

“I don’t want to eat up your fruit,” he protested.

“I do not care for them. Eat.”

He did so, thankfully, sitting on the sand. She watched with a sort of happy relish as he devoured the grapes.

“Now sleep,” she directed as he cast away the stem. “Grow strong. Let the bitter salt seawater flow from your body.”

There was nothing he wanted to do more. He let her hands apply pressure, he stretched out on the sand. “Sleep,” she said. “Sleep.” Her musical voice was hypnosis.

He wakened once, shivering under a high-prowling moon. At once she was there, moving to sit beside him. Taking him in her

arms, she held him close to her. She handled his considerable weight as easily and gently as though he were a baby. Colby mumbled a sleepy protest, but she began to croon a song, a soft memory of the music that had seemed to draw him out of the sea. Now it comforted him, it weighed upon his eyelids. His face drooped against her soft, warm bosom, and he slept again.

He wakened to daylight, and a sensation as of stroking. Starting violently, he looked up into her serene black eyes. She was washing his body with palmfuls of fresh water. Her tight lips smiled.

"I did not want to clean away the salt when it was dark and cold," she said. "But now you are better. Your flesh was ridged by the brine, and I have washed it away. Are you hungry?"

He was, and got up. He moved easily after the night's rest. His rescuer offered him a new fruit, that had a thick, thorny rind.

"Aren't you going to have breakfast?" he asked her.

"Later," she said, and watched while he peeled the fruit. Its flesh was firm, like a yam, but more delicate in texture. As he bit into it, she offered a great fluted sea shell, full of fresh water.

Now the sun had risen, and

Colby could be aware, for the first time, of the place where he had come to land.

IT WAS not an island, really; rather a reef or a bar, with a tall central spire of rock, like a monolithic dolman reared with determined toil by some ancient cult. The sandy beach that surrounded this fragment was no larger than a ballroom floor, and almost as smooth and flat. Several small trees grew, in a scrubby clump, at one side of the stone pillar, and there were a few wisps of grass. Colby could see no house, nor any trees or vines that might have produced the fruit he had eaten.

"Don't tell me you live here alone," he cried protestingly.

"I've always lived here," she assured him. "Always." And her eyes looked at him critically. "Do you feel well? Healthy?"

"Perfect, thank you." He walked toward the foot of the rocky pillar. It towered above him like a gigantic domino set on end. Colby studied its substance. It defied what little he knew of geology—smooth and gray as whetstone, with dark veins that looked metallic. And there were cracks—no, carved lines, an inscription. Slowly he pondered the letters in his head, translating them in his classroom Greek. They spelled a word. Yes.

Parthenope.

"It is my name," murmured her voice at his shoulder.

"I've heard it before," said Colby, without turning. It's lovely—strange. Wait, I remember. Wasn't it the name of somebody in the Odyssey? Didn't Odysseus say—"

"Oh," she said gently, "Odysseus lied about so much. He said that, when he escaped me, I jumped into the sea and was drowned."

"Parthenope," Colby said again. "She was one of the three sisters, the—"

"My sisters perished, long ago. But I have stayed."

He turned and stared, wondering what joke she made. But she

did not smile. She stood straight and tense inside her loose robe.

Her right arm crept toward him, the fingers crooked like talons.

"My song drew you," she said. "Odysseus got away, but you came. You were too ill and faint when you reached the shore. But now the salt is drained out of your flesh and blood, and it is sweet."

Colby drew back against the rock as she closed in on him.

"Who are you?" he screamed.

Her lips parted in a smile, and at last he saw her teeth, narrow and keen and widely spaced, the teeth of a flesh-eater.

"I am a *seiren*," she told him again.

