

The Compromise of the King of the Golden Isles

Dramatis Personae

THE KING OF THE GOLDEN ISLES: KING HAMARAN.
THE KING'S POLITICIAN.
THE AMBASSADOR OF THE EMPEROR.
THE EMPEROR'S SEEKER.
TWO PRIESTS OF THE ORDER OF THE SUN.
THE KING'S QUESTIONERS.
THE AMBASSADOR'S NUBIAN.
THE HERALD OF THE AMBASSADOR.
THE EMPEROR'S DWARF.
THE DEPUTY CUP-BEARER.
THE KING'S DOOM-BEARER.

THE KING'S POLITICIAN—A man has fled from the Emperor, and has taken refuge in your Majesty's Court in that part of it called holy.

THE KING—We must give him up to the Emperor.

POLITICIAN—To-day a spearsman came running from Eng-Bathai seeking the man who fled. He carries the barbed spear of one of the Emperor's seekers.

KING—We must give him up.

POLITICIAN—Moreover he has an edict from the Emperor demanding that the head of the man who fled be sent back to Eng-Bathai.

KING—Let it be sent.

POLITICIAN—Yet your Majesty is no vassal of the Emperor, who dwells at Eng-Bathai.

KING—We may not disobey the Imperial edict.

POLITICIAN—Yet——

KING—None hath dared to do it.

POLITICIAN—It is so long since any dared to do it that the Emperor mocks at kings. If your Majesty disobeyed him the Emperor would tremble.

KING—Ah.

POLITICIAN—The Emperor would say, "There is a great king. He defies me." And he would tremble strangely.

KING—Yet—if——

POLITICIAN—The Emperor would fear you.

KING—I would fain be a great king—yet——

POLITICIAN—You would win honour in his eyes.

KING—Yet is the Emperor terrible in his wrath. He was terrible in his wrath in the olden time.

POLITICIAN—The Emperor is old.

KING—This is a great affront that he places upon a king, to demand a man who has come to sanctuary in that part of my Court called holy.

POLITICIAN—It is a great affront.

[Enter the SEEKER. He abases himself.]

SEEKER—O King, I have come with my spear, seeking for one that fled the Emperor and has found sanctuary in your Court in that part called holy.

KING—It has not been the wont of the kings of my line to turn men from our sanctuary.

SEEKER—It is the Emperor's will.

KING—It is not my will.

SEEKER—Behold the Emperor's edict.

[The KING takes it. The SEEKER goes towards the door.]

SEEKER—I go to sit with my spear by the door of the place called holy.

[Exit SEEKER.]

KING—The edict, the edict. We must obey the edict.

POLITICIAN—The Emperor is old.

KING—True, we will defy him.

POLITICIAN—He will do nothing.

KING—And yet the edict.

POLITICIAN—It is of no importance.

KING—Hark. I will not disobey the Emperor. Yet will I not permit him to abuse the sanctuary of my Court. We will banish the man who fled from Eng-Bathai. [To his DOOM-BEARER.] Hither, the Doom-Bearer; take the black ivory spear, the wand of banishment, that lies on the left of my throne, and point it at the man that shelters in the holy place of my Court. Then show him the privy door behind the horns of the altar, so that he go safely hence and meet not the Emperor's seeker.

[The DOOM-BEARER bows and takes the spear on the flat of both his hands. The shaft is all black, but the head is of white ivory. It is blunt and clearly ceremonial. Exit.]

[To POLITICIAN.

Thus we shall be safe from the wrath of the Emperor, and the holy place of my Court will not be violate.

POLITICIAN—Had your Majesty scorned the Emperor it were better. He is old and durst not take vengeance.

KING—I have decided, and the man is banished.

[A HERALD *marches in and blows his trumpet.*

HERALD—The Ambassador of the Emperor.

[*Enter the AMBASSADOR. He bows to the King from his place near the door.*

KING—For what purpose to my Court from Eng-Bathai comes thus the Ambassador of the Emperor?

AMBASSADOR—I bring to the King's Majesty a gift from the great Emperor [AMBASSADOR *and his men bow*] who reigns in Eng-Bathai, the reward of obedience to his edict, a goblet of inestimable wine.

[*He signs and there enters a page bearing a goblet of glass. He has a pretty complexion and yellow hair falling as low as his chin and curling inwards. He wears a cerise belt round his tunic exactly matching the wine in the goblet he carries.*

He prays you drink it, and to know that it was made by vintners whose skill is lost, and stored in secret cellars over a hundred years; and that the vineyards whence it came have been long since whelmed by war, and only live now in legend and this wine.

KING—A gift, you say, for obedience.

AMBASSADOR—A gift from the old wine-gardens of the sun.

KING—How knew the Emperor that I had thus obeyed him?

AMBASSADOR—It has not been men's wont to disobey the Emperor.

KING—Yet if I have sheltered this man in the holy place of my Court?

AMBASSADOR—If that be so the Emperor bids you drink out of this golden goblet [*he signs and it is brought on by a bent and ugly dwarf*] and wishes you farewell.

KING—Farewell, you say?

AMBASSADOR—Farewell.

KING—What have you in the goblet?

AMBASSADOR—It is no common poison, but a thing so strange and deadly that the serpents of Lebu-tharna go in fear of it. Yea, travellers there hold high a goblet of this poison, at arm's length as they go. The serpents hide their heads for fear of it. Even so the travellers pass the desert safely, and come to Eng-Bathai.

KING—I have not sheltered this man.

AMBASSADOR—There is no need then for this Imperial gift.
[He throws the liquid out of the goblet through the doorway on to the marble. A great steam goes up.]

KING—Neither have I ordered that his head be sent back to Eng-Bathai.

AMBASSADOR—Alas, for so rare a wine.

[He pours it away.]

KING—I have banished him and he is safe. I have neither obeyed nor disobeyed.

AMBASSADOR—The Emperor therefore bids you choose the gift that he honours himself by sending to your Court.

[He signs. Enter a massive NUBIAN with two cups.]

The Emperor bids you drink one of these cups.

[The huge NUBIAN moves up close to the

KING holding up the two cups on a tray.]

[The POLITICIAN slinks off. Exit L.]

KING—The cups are strangely alike.

AMBASSADOR—Only one craftsman in the City of Smiths ever discerned a difference. The Emperor killed him, and now no one knows.

KING—The potions also are alike.

AMBASSADOR—Strangely alike. [*The KING hesitates.*] The Emperor bids you choose his gift and drink.

KING—The Emperor has poisoned the cups!

AMBASSADOR—You greatly wrong the Emperor. Only one cup is poisoned.

KING—You say that one is poisoned?

AMBASSADOR—Only one, O King! Who may say which?

KING—And what if I refuse to do this thing?

AMBASSADOR—There are tortures that the Emperor never names. They are not spoken of where the Emperor is. Yet the Emperor makes a sign and they are accomplished. He makes the sign with a certain one of his fingers.

KING (*half to himself*)—How wonderfully they have the look of wine.

AMBASSADOR—One is a wine scarcely less rare, scarcely less jubilant in the wits of man, than that which alas is lost.

[*He glances towards the spot where he threw the other.*]

KING—And the other?

AMBASSADOR—Who may say? It is the most treasured secret that the Emperor's poisoners guard.

KING—I will send for my butlers that are wise in wine and they shall smell the cups.

AMBASSADOR—Alas, but the Emperor's poisoners have added so wine-like a flavour to their most secret draught, that no man may tell by this means which is their work and which that inestimable wine.

KING—I will send for my tasters and they shall taste of the cups.

AMBASSADOR—Alas, so great a risk may not be run.

KING—Risks are the duty of a king's tasters.

AMBASSADOR—If they chanced to taste of the treasure of the Emperor's poisoners—well. But if they, or *any* man of common birth, were to taste of the wine that the Emperor sends only to kings, and

even to kings but rarely, that were an affront to the Emperor's ancient wine that could not be permitted.

KING—It is surely permitted that I send for my priests, who tell by divination, having burnt strange herbs to the gods that guard the Golden Isles.

AMBASSADOR—It is permitted.

KING—Send for the priests.

KING (*mainly to himself*)—They shall discern. The priests shall make for me this dreadful choice. They shall burn herbs and discern it. (*To AMBASSADOR.*) My priests are very subtle. They worship the gods that guard the Golden Isles.

AMBASSADOR—The Emperor has other gods.

[*Enter L. two priests of the Order of the Sun. Two acolytes follow. One carries a tripod and the other a gong.*

[*The priests abase themselves and the acolytes bow. The AMBASSADOR stands with almost Mongolian calm by the door from which he has not moved since he entered.*

[*The impassive NUBIAN stands motionless near the KING, holding up the cups on a tray.*

KING—The Emperor has honoured me with these two cups of wine that I may drink one of them to the grandeur of his throne. I bid you importune the gods that they may surely tell me which it were well to drink.

FIRST PRIEST—We will importune the gods with the savour of rarest spices. We will send up to them the odour of herbs they love. We will commune with them in silence and they shall answer our thoughts, when they snuff the savour of the smoke of the burning on the tripod that is sacred to the Sun.

[*The calm of the AMBASSADOR and the impassivity of the NUBIAN grow ominous. The two priests hang over the tripod. They cast*

Over the Hills and Far Away

herbs upon it. They pass their hands over it. The herbs begin to smoulder. A smoke goes up. The priests bend over the smoke. Presently they step back from it.

FIRST PRIEST—The gods sleep.

KING—They sleep! The gods that guard the Golden Isles?

FIRST PRIEST—The gods sleep.

KING—Importune them as never before. I will make sacrifice of many sheep. I will give emeralds to the Monks of the Sun.

[The second acolyte moves nearer to the tripod and beats listlessly on his great gong at about the pace of a great clock striking slowly.]

FIRST PRIEST—We will importune the gods as never before.

[They heap up more herbs and spices. The smoke grows thicker and thicker. It streams upwards. They hover about it as before. At a sign the gong ceases.]

The gods have spoken.

KING—What is their message?

FIRST PRIEST—Drink of the cup upon the Nubian's left.

KING—Ah. My gods defend me.

[He seizes the cup boldly. He looks straight at the AMBASSADOR, whose face remains expressionless, merely watching. He lifts the cup upon the Nubian's left a little up from the tray.]

[He glances towards the priests.]

[Suddenly he starts. He has seen a strange expression upon the face of the priest. He puts the cup down. He strides a step nearer and looks at his face.]

PRIEST!—Priest!—What is that look in your eyes?

FIRST PRIEST—O King, I know not. I have given the message of the gods.

[The KING continues to search out his face.]

KING—I mistrust it.

FIRST PRIEST—It is the message of the gods.

KING—I will drink of the other cup!

[The KING steps back to his place in the front of his throne where the Nubian stands beside him. He takes the cup upon the Nubian's right. He gazes at the priest. He looks round at the Ambassador, but sees nothing in that watchful, expressionless face.

[He glances sidelong at the priest, then drinks, draining the cup at some length. He puts it down in silence. The face of the Ambassador and the whole bulk of the Nubian remain motionless.

KING—An inestimable wine!

AMBASSADOR—It is the Emperor's joy.

KING—Send for my Questioners.

[There are weird whistles. Two dark men run on in loin clothes.

Ask these two priests the Seven Questions.

[The QUESTIONERS run nimbly up to the two priests and lead them away by the arm.

THE TWO ACOLYTES—O, O, O. Oh, oh.

[They show extreme horror. The AMBASSADOR bows to the King.

KING—You do not leave us at once?

AMBASSADOR—I go back to the Emperor, whom it is happiness to obey, and length of days.

[He bows and walks away. The HERALD marches out, then the AMBASSADOR; the PAGE, the DWARF and the NUBIAN follow.

[Exeunt.

[The HERALD is heard blowing upon his trumpet the same notes as when he entered, one merry bar of music.

[The tray and two precious cups, one empty and the other full, are left glittering near the KING.

KING (looking at cups)—Those are rare emeralds that glisten there! Yet an evil gift. (To the moaning

acolytes.) Be silent! Your priests sinned strangely.

[*The acolytes continue to moan.*

[*Enter one of the QUESTIONERS. He has sweat on his face and his hair has become damp and unkempt.*

QUESTIONER—We have asked the Seven Questions.

KING—Well?

QUESTIONER—They have not answered.

KING—Not answered!

QUESTIONER—Neither man has confessed.

KING—Oho! Do I keep Questioners that bring me no answers?

QUESTIONER—We questioned them to the uttermost.

KING—And neither man confessed?

QUESTIONER—They would not confess.

KING—Ask them the Supreme Question.

[*The acolytes break out into renewed moaning.*

QUESTIONER—It shall be asked, O King.

[*Exit QUESTIONER. The acolytes moan on.*

KING—They would have made me drink of a poisoned cup.

I say there is poison in that cup. Your priests would have had me drink it. (*The acolytes only answer by moans.*) Bid them confess. Bid them confess their crime and why it was done, and the Supreme Question shall be spared them. (*The acolytes only answer by moans.*) Strange! They have done strangely. (*To acolytes.*) Why has your priest spoken falsely? (*The acolytes only moan.*) Why has he spoken falsely in the name of the gods? (*The acolytes moan on.*) Be silent! Be silent! May I not question whom I will? (*To himself*): They prophesied falsely in the name of the gods.

[*Enter the QUESTIONERS.*

FIRST QUESTIONER—The Supreme Question is asked.

[*The acolytes suddenly cease moaning.*

KING—Well?

FIRST QUESTIONER—They would not answer.

KING—They would not answer the Supreme Question?

FIRST QUESTIONER—They spoke at last, but they would not answer the question. They would not confess.

KING—What said they at last?

FIRST QUESTIONER—O, the King's Majesty, they but spake idly.

KING—What said they?

FIRST QUESTIONER—O, the King's Majesty, they said nought fitting.

KING—They muttered so that no man heard them clearly?

FIRST QUESTIONER—They spake. But it was not fitting.

KING—Did they speak of small things happening long ago?

FIRST QUESTIONER—O, the King's Majesty, it was not fitting.

KING—What said they? Speak!

FIRST QUESTIONER—The man you gave to me, O King, said: "No man that knew the counsels of the gods, who alone see future things would say the gods advised King Hamaran ill when they bade him drink out of a poisoned cup." Then I put the question straightly and he died.

KING—The gods! He said it was the gods! . . . And the other?

SECOND QUESTIONER—He also said the same, O the King's Majesty.

KING—Both said the same. They were questioned in different chambers?

FIRST QUESTIONER—In different chambers, O King. I questioned mine in the Red Chamber.

KING (to SECOND QUESTIONER)—And yours?

SECOND QUESTIONER—In the Chamber of Rats.

KING—Begone!

[*Exeunt* QUESTIONERS.]

So . . . It was the gods.

[*The acolytes are crouched upon the floor. He does not notice them since they ceased to moan.*

The gods! With what dark and dreadful thing have they clouded the future? Well, I will face

it! But what is it? Is it one of those things a strong man can bear? Or is it——?

The future is more terrible than the grave, that has its one secret only.

No man, he said, could say that the gods had advised me ill when they bade me drink out of a poisoned cup.

What have the gods seen? What dreadful work have they overlooked where Destiny sits alone, making evil years?

The gods, he said, who alone see future things. Yes, I have known men who never were warned by the gods, and did not drink poison, and came upon evil days, suddenly like a ship upon rocks no mariner knows.

Yes, poison to some of *them* would have been very precious.

The gods have warned me and I have not hearkened, and must go on alone: must enter that strange country of the future whose paths are so dark to man . . . to meet a doom there that the gods have seen.

The gods have seen it! How shall I thwart the gods? How fight against the shapers of the hills? Would that I had been warned. Would I had heeded when they bade me drink of the cup the Ambassador said was poisoned.

[*Far off is heard that merry bar of music blown by the AMBASSADOR'S HERALD on his horn.*]

Is it too late?

There it stands yet with its green emeralds winking.

[*He clutches it and looks down into it.*

How like to wine it is, which is full of dreams. It is silent and dreamy like the gods, whose dreams we are.

Only a moment in their deathless minds: then the dream passes.

[He lifts up his arm and drinks it seated upon his throne with his head back and the great cup before his face. The audience begin to wonder when he will put it down. Still he remains in the attitude of a drinker. The acolytes begin to peer eagerly. Still he remains upright with the great cup to his lips. The acolytes patter away and the KING is left alone.

[Enter the KING'S POLITICIAN hurriedly. He goes up to the KING and seizes his right arm and tries to drag the cup away from his lips, but the KING is rigid and his arm cannot be moved. He steps back lifting up his hands.

POLITICIAN—Oh-h!

[Exit. You hear him announcing solemnly
King Hamaran . . . is dead!

[A murmur is heard of men, at first mournful.
It grows louder and louder and then breaks
into these clear words.

Zarabardes is King! Zarabardes is King. Rejoice!
Rejoice! Zarabardes is King! Zarabardes! Zarahardes! Zarabardes!

CURTAIN.