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ABOVE PARADISE

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

IT began when Palnatoki rode forth and made his brag. "I am the champion of the Ænseis. In the Northland there is nobody mightier than I; and if a mightier person live elsewhere, it is not yet proven. Who is there in this place will try a fall with me?"

Behind him the pagan army waited, innumerable, and terrible, and deplorably ill-mannered. These shouted now: "We cry a holmgang. Who will fight with Red Palnatoki, that is overlord of the Swan's bath, and that slew the giants in Noenhir?"

Then from the opposed ranks came clanking and shining in full armor the most notably religious of the Christian lords, Donander of Évre. And he said: "I, howsoever unworthy, messire, am the person who will withstand you. I also have fought before this morning. Under Count Manuel's banner of the Silver Stallion I have done what I might. That much I will again do here today, and upon every day between this day and the holy Morrow of Judgment."

After that the Christian army shouted: "There is none mightier than Donander! Also, he is very gratifyingly modest."

But Palnatoki cried out scornfully: "Your utmost will not avail this morning. Behind me musters all the might of the Ænseis, that are the most high of gods above Lærath, and their strength shall be shown here through me."

"Behind the endeavors of every loyal son of the Church," Donander said, "are the blessed saints and the bright arch-angels."

"Indeed, Donander, that may very well be the truth," replied Red Palnatoki. "The

old gods and the gods of Rome have met to-day; and we are their swords."

"Your gods confess their weakness, Messire Palnatoki, by picking the better weapon," Donander answered him, courteously.

With these amenities discharged, they fought. Nowhere upon earth could have been found a pair of more stalwart warriors: each had no equal anywhere existent between seas and mountains save in his adversary: so neatly were they matched indeed that, after a half-hour of incredible battling, it was natural enough they should kill each other simultaneously. And then the unfortunate error occurred, just as each naked soul escaped from the dying body.

For now from the North came Kjalar, who guides the souls of pagan heroes to eternal delights in the Hall of the Chosen: and from the zenith sped, like a shining plummet, Ithuriel to fetch the soul of the brave champion of Christendom to the felicities of the golden city walled about with jasper of the Lord God of Sabaoth. Both emissaries had been attending the combat until the arrival of their part therein; both, as seasoned virtuosi of warfare, had been delighted by this uncommonly fine fight: and in their pleased excitement they somehow made the error of retrieving each the other's appointed prey. It happened thus that the soul of Donander of Évre fared northward, asleep in the palm of Kjalar's hand, while Ithuriel conveyed the soul of Red Palnatoki to the heaven of Jahveh.

Ithuriel's blunder, it is gratifying to record, did not in the outcome really matter.

For Christendom just then was at heated odds over points of theology not very clearly understood in Jahveh's heaven, where in consequence no pronouncements were hazarded upon the merits of the debate; and the daily invoices of Christian champions and martyrs of all sects were being admitted to blessedness without particular inspection, as fast as they murdered one another. Moreover, Red Palnatoki was, by the articles of his stern Nordic creed, a fatalist. When he discovered what had happened, and the strange salvation which had been put upon him, his religion therefore assured him that this too had been predestined by the wayward Norns, and he piously made no complaining. The eternal life he had inherited, with no fighting in it and no stronger drink than milk, was not up to human expectation, but the tall sea-rover had long ago found out that few things are. So, without any sulking under his halo, he bent resolutely to his first harp lesson, and in place of protests civilly voiced alleluias. In Jahveh's heaven, therefore, all went agreeably, and as smoothly as Red Palnatoki at just this point goes out of this story.

II

And when Donander of Évre awoke in the Northern paradise, he also was content enough. It was a strange and not what you could call a cosy place, this gold-roofed hall with its five hundred and forty mile-wide doors: and the monsters, in the likeness of a stag and of a she-goat, which straddled above the building perpetually feeding upon the lower leaves of the great tree called Lærath, seemed to Donander preëminently outlandish creatures, animals under whose bellies no really considerate person would have erected a residence. Yet, like Palnatoki, Donander of Évre was an old campaigner, who could be tolerably comfortable anywhere. Nor was to discover himself among pagans a novel experience, for in his mortal life the knight had ridden at adventure in most corners of

the world, and rather more than half of his particular intimates had been infidels.

"Excepting always their unfortunate religious heresies," he was used to concede, "I have no fault to pick with heathen persons, whom in the daily and nocturnal affairs of life I have found quite as friendly and companionable as properly baptized ladies."

In fine, he got on well enough with the flaxen-haired spirits of these Northern kings and skalds and jarls and vikingar. They stared, and some guffawed, when he fitted out a little shrine, in which Donander prayed decorously, every day, at the correct hours, for the welfare of Donander's soul upon the holy Morrow of Judgment. Yet, after all, these boreal ghosts conceded, in paradise if anywhere a man should be permitted utterly to follow his own tastes, even in heresy. And when they talked their really pathetic nonsense about being the guests of Sidvvar the Weaver and Constrainer, and about living forever through his bounty thus happily in the Hall of the Chosen, it was Donander's turn to shrug. Even had there been no other discrepancies, everybody knew that heaven had, not five hundred and forty golden gates, but only twelve entrances, each carved from a single pearl and engraved with the name of a tribe of Israel.

"Besides," Donander asked, "who is this Weaver and Constrainer? Certainly, I never heard of him before."

"He is the King and Father of the Ænseis," they told him. "He is overlord of that unimaginable folk who dwell in Ydalir; and who do not kill their deformed and weakling children, as we were used to do, but instead cast from the ivory ramparts of Ydalir all such degenerate offspring, to be the gods of races who are not blond and Nordic."

Donander, as a loyal son of the Church, could only shake his head over such nonsense, and the innumerable other errors by which these heathen were being misled to everlasting ruin. Aloud, Donander repeated his final verdict as to the pretensions of

this Sidvrrar, by saying again, "I never heard of him."

Nevertheless, Donander went without real discontent among the pleasures of paradise, and he joined in all the local sports. In common with the other dead, he ate the flesh of the inexhaustible boar, and with them he drank of the strong mead which sustained them in perpetual tipsiness. And he sedately rode out with the others every morning into the meadows where these blessed pagan lords fought joyously among themselves until midday. At noon a peal of thunder would sound, the slain and wounded warriors were of a sudden revived and wholly cured of their hurts, and reunited to whatsoever arms and heads and legs the contestants had lost in their gaming: and the company would return fraternally to the gold-roofed hall, where they ate and drank and made their brags until they slept.

"Yet perhaps our banquets might, messieurs," Donander had suggested, after a century or so of these rough-and-ready pleasures, "be not unadvantageously seasoned with the delights of feminine companionship, if only for dessert?"

"But it is one of our appointed blessings to have done with women and their silly ways," cried out the vikingar, "now that we have entered paradise."

And Donander, who had always been notable for his affectionate nature, and who had served vigorously so many ladies *par amours*, seemed grieved to hear a saying so unchivalrous. Still, he said nothing.

Thus much time passed; and the worlds were changed: but in the eyes of Donander of Évre, as in the eyes of all who feasted in the Hall of the Chosen, there was no knowledge nor any fear of time, because these blessed dead lived now in perpetual tipsiness. And, as befitted a loyal son of the Church, Donander awaited without any complaining, in the surroundings which Heaven out of Heaven's wisdom had selected for him, the holy Morrow of Judgment.

Then from the highest part of this para-

side, and from the unimaginable dew-vales of Ydalir which rise above the topmost branches of the tree called Lærath, descended radiant Vanadis, the lady of Reginlief, dear to the gods. She had disposed of five inefficient husbands, in impetuous mythological manners, but still a loneliness and a desire were upon her, and with the eternal optimism of widowhood she came to look for a sixth husband among these great-thewed heroes who jeered at women and their wives. But Donander of Évre was the person who for two reasons found instant favor in her eyes when she came upon Donander refreshing himself after the pleasant fatigues of that morning's combat, and about his daily bath in the shining waters of the river Gipul. So do the dead call that stream which flows from the antlers of the monstrous stag who stands eternally nibbling and munching above the Hall of the Chosen.

"Here is an eminently suitable person," Vanadis reflected. Aloud, she said, "Hail, friend! and do you go seeking work or shunning work?"

Stalwart Donander climbed out of the clear stream of Gipul. He came, smilingly and with a great exaltation, toward the first woman whom he had seen in seven hundred years. He said, "What is your meaning, madame?"

Vanadis, with god-like candor, made plain her meaning. And since Donander's nature was affectionate, he assented readily enough to the proposals of this somewhat ardent but remarkably handsome young woman, who went abroad thus unconventionally in a car drawn by two cats, and who, in her heathenish and figurative way, described herself as a goddess. He stipulated only that, so soon as he was dressed, they be respectably united according to whatever might be the marriage laws of her country and diocese.

The Ænseis were not used in such matters to stand upon ceremony. Nevertheless, they conferred together,—Aduna and Ord and Hleifner and Rönn and Giermivul, and the other radiant sons of Sidvrrar. It was

they who good-humoredly devised a ceremony, with candles and promises and music and a gold ring, and all the other features which seemed expected by the husband whom their dear Vanadis had fetched up from the Hall of the Chosen. But her sisters took no part in the ceremony, upon the ground that they considered such public preliminaries to be unheard of and brazen. Thus was Donander made free of Ydalir, the heaven that is above Lærath; and after his seven hundred years of celibacy, he and his bride lived together in her celestial palace lovingly enough.

III

Now, the one change that Donander made an explicit point of was to fit out in this palace of Reginlief a chapel. There he worshipped daily at the correct hours, so near as one could estimate them in an endless day; and there he prayed for the welfare of Donander's soul upon the holy Morrow of Judgment.

"But, really, my heart," his Vanadis would say, ineffectually, "you have been dead for so long now! and, just looking at it sensibly, it does seem such a waste of eternity!"

"Have done, my darling, with your heathen nonsense!" Donander would reply. "Do I not know that in heaven there is no marrying or giving in marriage? How then can heaven be this place in which two live so friendlily and happily?"

Meanwhile to the pagan priests wherever the Ænseis were adored had been revealed the sixth and wholly successful marriage of Vanadis: her spouse had been duly deified: and new temples had been builded in honor of the bright lady of Reginlief and of the Man-God, Donander Veratyr, her tireless savior from vain desire and bodily affliction. And time went stealthily as a stream flowing about and over the worlds, and changing them, and wearing all away. But to Donander it was as if he yet lived in the thrice-lucky afternoon on which he married his Vanadis.

For, since whatever any of the Ænseis desires must happen instantly, thus Ydalir knows but one endless day; and immeasurably beneath its radiance, very much as sullen and rain-swollen waters go under a bridge upon which young lovers have met in the sunlight of April, so passes wholly unnoted by any in Ydalir the flowing and all the jumbled wreckage of time.

But it befell, too, after a great many of those æons which the gods ignore and men cannot imagine, that Donander saw one of the half-grown Ænseis about a droll looking sport. Donander asked questions, and he learned this was a game at which the younger Ænseis had long used to play, but which had become among them rather old-fashioned.

"And how does one set about it?" Donander asked then.

"Why, thus and thus, my heart," his wife replied. Fond Vanadis was glad enough to find for him some outdoor diversion which would woo him from that stuffy chapel and its depressing pictures of tortured persons and its unwholesome fogs of stifling incense.

Then Donander broke away a bough from the tree called Lærath, saying meanwhile the proper word of power. Sitting beside the fifth river of Ydalir, he cut strips of bark from this bough, with the green-handled knife which Vanadis had given him, and he cast these strips about at random. He found it perfectly true that those scraps of bark which touched the water became fish, those which he flung into the air became birds, and those which fell upon the ground became animals and men. He almost instantly, indeed, had enough creatures to populate a world, but no world of course for them to animate and diversify. So Donander destroyed these creatures, and placed one of the lighter geasa upon the beetle Karu. That huge good-tempered insect fell at once to shaping a ball of mud, and to carving it with mountains and plains and valleys. Then Karu burrowed his way into the centre of this ball of mud: and from the hole into

which Karu had entered came all kinds of living creatures needful for the animating and diversifying of a world; and these began to breed and to kill one another and to build their appropriate lairs, in nests and dens and cities. That was the second demiurgy of Donander Veratyr. Then with a golden egg he made another world; and from the entrails of a spider he drew another; and with the aid of the raven Yetl Donander made yet one more, and so went on in turn attempting each method that any Ans had ever practiced.

These sports amused Donander for a long while and yet another while. And Vanadis, apart from her natural pleasure in the augmented vigor he got from so much open-air exercise, bright Vanadis smiled at his playing, in the way of any wife who finds her husband occupied upon the whole less reprehensibly than you would expect of the creature. And the sons of Sidvrrar also were used, as yet, to smile not unfriendlyly when they passed where Donander was busy with his toys. Even her sisters only said that really of all things, and that of course they had expected it from the very first. Thus everybody was content enough for a long while and yet another while.

And throughout both these whiles Donander was pottering with his worlds, keeping them bright with thunderbolts and volcanic eruptions, diligently cleansing them of parasites with one or another pestilence, scouring them with whirlwinds, and perpetually washing them with cloud-bursts and deluges. His toys had constantly such loving care to keep them in perfect condition. Meanwhile, his skill increased abreast with his indulgence in demiurgy, and Donander thought of little else. He needed now no aid from ravens and beetles. He had but, he found, to desire a world, and at once his desire took form; its light was divided from its darkness, the waters gathered into one place, the dry land appeared and pullulated with living creatures, all in one dexterous complacent moment of self-admiration. And his earlier made stars and comets and suns and aster-

oids Donander Veratyr began destroying one by one, half vexedly, half in real amusement at the archaic, bungling methods he had outgrown. In their places he would set spinning, and glittering, and popping, quite other planetary systems which, for the moment in any event, appeared to him remarkably adroit craftsmanship. And everywhere upon the worlds he had made, and had not yet annihilated, men worshipped Donander Veratyr: and in his pleasant home at Reginlief, high over Lærath, Donander worshipped the god of the fathers and of all the reputable neighbors of Donander of Évre; and in such pagan surroundings as Heaven out of Heaven's wisdom had selected for him, awaited the holy Morrow of Judgment.

IV

Then of a sudden gleaming Sidvrrar Vafudir, the Weaver and Constrainer, came with his wolves frisking about him. He came with his broad-brimmed hat pulled down about his eyes decisively. He came thus to his daughter Vanadis, and stated that, while patience was a virtue, there was such a thing as overdoing it, no matter how little he himself might care for the talking of idle busybodies, because, however long she might argue, and always had done from childhood, being in this and in many other undesirable respects precisely like her mother, even so, no sensible Ans could ever deny her husband's conduct was ridiculous; and that, said Sidvrrar Vafudir, was all there was to it.

"Do not bluster so, my heart," replied Vanadis, "about the facts of nature. All husbands are ridiculous. Who should be surer of this than I, who have had six husbands, unless it be you, who as goat and titmouse and laurel tree have been the husband of six hundred?"

"That is all very well," said Sidvrrar, "in addition to not being what we were discussing. This Donander of yours is now one of the Ænseis, he is an Ans of mature standing, and it is not right for him to be

making worlds. That is what we were discussing."

"Yet what divine hands anywhere," asked Vanadis, "are clean of demiurgy?"

"When we were children we had our toys," said Sidvrrar Vafudir, "and we played with and smashed our toys. That was natural, besides keeping the young out of grave mischief, now and then. Though, to be sure, nothing does that very long nor very often, as I tell you plainly, my Vanadis, for do you look, as a most grievous example, at the wasteful and untidy way you destroy your husbands!"

"Donander Veratyr I shall not ever destroy," replied Vanadis, smiling, "because of the loving human heart and the maddening human ways he has brought out of his Poictesme, and for two other reasons."

"Then it is I who will put an end, if not to him, at least to his nonsense. For this Donander of yours is still playing with stars and planets, and setting off his comets, and exploding his suns, and that is unbecoming."

"Well, well, do you, who are the Father and Master of All, have your own will with him, so far as you can get it," Vanadis returned, still with that rather reminiscent smile. She had now lived for a great while with this sixth husband of hers, who had a human heart in him and human ways.

Sidvrrar went then from her to Donander. But the Constrainer found there was no instant manner of constraining Donander Veratyr into a conviction that Donander of Évre had died long ago, and had become a god. People, Donander stated, did not do such things: and further reasoning with him seemed to accomplish no good whatever. For Donander, as a loyal son of the Church, now shrugged pityingly at the heathen nonsense talked by his father-in-law. He stroked the heads of Sidvrrar's attendant wolves, he listened to the Weaver and Constrainer with an indulgence more properly reserved for the feeble-minded; and he said, a little relishingly, that Messire Sidvrrar would be wiser on the Morrow of Judgment.

Then Sidvrrar Vafudir became Sidvrrar Yggr, the Meditating and Terrible. Then Sidvrrar fell about such magicking as he had not needed to use ~~since~~ he first entered into the eternal dew-vales of Ydalir. Then, in a word, Sidvrrar unclosed the oval window in Reginlief that opened upon space and time and upon the frozen cinders which once had been worlds and suns and stars, and which their various creators had annihilated, as one by one the Ænseis had put away their childhood and its playing.

Among such wreckage sped pretentiously the yet living worlds which Donander had made. These toys, when seen thus closely, were abristle with the spires of the temples and the cathedrals in which they that lived, as yet, upon these worlds were used to worship. In all these churches men invoked Donander Veratyr. Through that charmed window now, for the first time, came to his ears the outcry of his clergy and laity: and nowhere in space was there any talk of any other god, not even where from many worlds arose the lecturing of those who explained away their ancestors' quaint notions about Donander the Man-God, the Savior from Vain Desire, the Preserver from Bodily Affliction, and proved there could not be any such person. And to Donander, looking out of the window at Reginlief, all these things showed as a swarming of ants or as a writhing of very small maggots about the worlds which he had made to divert him, and in the face as in the heart of Donander awoke inquietation.

"If this be a true showing," Donander said, by and by, "show now that Earth which is my home."

After a while of searching, Sidvrrar found for him the drifting clinker which had once been Earth. Upon its glistening nakedness was left no living plant nor any breathing creature, for the Morrow of Judgment was long past, and Earth's affairs had been wound up. Upon no planet did anyone remember the god whom Donander worshipped, now that Jahveh had ended playing, and his toys were broken

or put away. Upon many planets were the temples of Donander Veratyr, and the rising smoke of his sacrifice, and the cries of his worshippers as they murdered one another in their disputing over points of theology which Donander could not clearly understand. Nor did he think about these things. Instead, Donander Veratyr, who was the last of the *Ænseis* to play at this unprofitable sport of demiurgy, was now remembering the days and the moonlighted nights of his youth, and the dear trivial persons whom he had then loved and revered. He thought of, for no reason at all, the shabby little village priest who had confirmed him, and of the father and mother who had been all-wise and able to defend one from every evil, and of the tall girl whose lips had, once, and before any other lips, been sweeter than were the paradisaic joys of Ydalir. And he thought of many other futile things, all now attested always to have been futile, which long ago had seemed so very important to the boy that, in serving famous Manuel of Poictesme, had postured so high-heartedly in one of the smallest provinces of an extinct planet.

And Donander wrung immortal hands, saying, "If this be a true showing, what thing have I become, who can no longer love or reverence anything! who can have no care for any Morrow of Judgment! and to whom space reveals only the living of these indistinguishable and unclean and demented insects!"

The cry of his worshippers came up to him. "Thou art God, the Creator and Preserver of all us Thy children! Thou art Donander Veratyr, in Whom is our firm hope! Thou art the Man-God, That wilt grant unto us justice and salvation upon the holy Morrow of Judgment!"

He said, like one a little frightened, "Is God thus?"

They answered him, "How can God be otherwise than Thou art?"

At that Donander shuddered. But in the same moment he said: "If this be a true showing, and if I be indeed a god, and the

master of all things, the human heart which survives in me wills now to create that tomorrow for which these weaklings and I too have so long waited."

Then Sidvrrar pointed out, as patiently as outraged common-sense permitted: "Still, still, you are talking nonsense! How can an *Ans* create tomorrow?"

Donander asked, in turn, "Why not, if you be omnipotent?"

"It is because we are omnipotent. Thus in Ydalir there is but one day, from which not even in imagination can any *Ans* escape. For whatever any of the *Ænseis* desires, even if it be a tomorrow, must instantly happen and exist; and so must be today. That ought to be plain enough."

"It is not plain," Donander answered, "although, the way you put it, I admit, it does sound logical. Therefore, if this indeed be the way of omnipotence, and if no *Ans* may escape his day, and if I be a trapped and meagre god, and the master only of those things which are today, then now let all things end! For my heart stays human. Today does not know the runes of my heart's contentment. My heart will not be satisfied unless it enter into that morrow of justice and salvation which the overlords of men, as you now tell me, cannot desire nor plan. So now, if this be a true showing, now let all things end!"

Within the moment Donander saw that, while he was yet speaking, space was emptied of life. Down yonder now were no more men and women anywhere. None any longer awaited an oncoming day which was to content one utterly with an assured bright heritage, divined in the dreams which allured and derided all human living endlessly, and condemned the heart of every man to be a stranger to contentment upon this side of tomorrow. That ageless dream about tomorrow had passed, as the smoke of a little incense passes, and with it had gone out of being, too, those whom it had nourished and sustained. There were no more men or women anywhere. Donander could see only many cinders adrift

in a bleak loneliness: and Donander of Évre must endure eternally as Donander Veratyr, a lonely and uncomprehended god, among his many peers.

"So do you be sensible about it, my son-in-law," said Sidvrrar Vafudir, when he had spoken the word of power which closed forever that cheerless window, out of which no god was ever to look any more,—"be sensible, if there indeed stay any root of intelligence in you. And do you henceforward live more fittingly, as a credit to your wife's family. And do you put out of mind those cinders and those ashes and those clinkers that were the proper sport of your youth. Such is the end of every wise person's saga."

Thereafter the King and Father of the Ænseis departed, well pleased with the lesson which he had taught that whisper-snapper. And Donander also smiled, and looked contentedly enough about his pleas-

ant quarters in the untroubled and everlasting paradise of Ydalir.

"Still, not for a great deal," Donander reflected, "would I be treading in that old sorcerer's sandals; and it is a fair shame that I should have such a person for a father-in-law."

For, as a loyal son of the Church, Donander knew very well that the wonders which Sidvrrar had just shown to him could only be an illusion planned with some evil spirit's aid to tempt Donander away from respectability and the true faith. In consequence Donander Veratyr, that had been the Creator and Destroyer of all things except the human heart which survived in him, went now into the chapel of Reginliel. There he decorously said the prayers to which Donander was accustomed, and he duly prayed for the welfare of Donander's soul upon the holy Morrow of Judgment.