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ROMANCE



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JAMES BRANCH CABELL
KONRAD BERCOVICI
EDGAR LEE MASTERS
NEVIL G. HENSHAW
MELLA RUSSELL MCCALLUM
J. STORER CLOUSTON
EDGAR YOUNG
RAMSEY BENSON
NELL HANSON
BEATRICE GRIMSHAW
CARL CLAUSEN
DALE BROWN



The Image of Sespbra

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

THEY of Poictesme narrate that in the old days Count Manuel married, and so fell into disfavor with King Raymond. They tell how it was Raymond's daughter, the Princess Alianora, whom Manuel had loved and loved no longer, who prompted this disfavor, and thereby set Dom Manuel a problem which stays unsolved.

For Manuel fled oversea with his wife, Dame Niafer, and they came in their distress to Sargyll where Freydis, the high sorceress, received them hospitably. Queen Freydis also, they relate, had loved Dom Manuel, in a sped time wherein these two had practised queer necromancies. Now Manuel had long ago forsaken these arts, and he had forsaken Freydis too; but he remembered very pleasantly the fallen old ancient gods and the droll monsters and the instructive ghosts which he and Queen Freydis had been used to evoke; and most pleasurable of all, and with a glow of pride, he remembered the image which he had made and to which they had given life, because in doing that, Dom Manuel felt, he had really accomplished a masterpiece of artistic conjury.

He hoped to find Freydis, the gray witch, more philosophic than Alianora, the princess: and in this hope he did not err.

"For all passes in this world," said Freydis, "and the young Manuel whom I loved in a Summer that is gone is nowadays as perished as that Summer's gay leaves. What, grizzled fighting man, have you to do with that young Manuel who had comeliness and youth and courage, but no human pity and no constant love? And why should I be harboring his light-hearted mischiefs against you?"

"Ah, no, gray Manuel, you are quite certain no woman would do that; and people say that you are shrewd. So I bid you very welcome to Sargyll, where my will is the only law."

"You at least have not changed," Dom



Manuel replied with utter truth, "for you seem today as fair and young as you were that first night upon Morven when you loaned life to the image I had made. Yet that was a great while ago, and I make no more images."

"Your wife would be considering it a waste of time," Queen Freydis estimated.

"No, that is not quite the way it is. For Niafer is the dearest and most dutiful of women, and she never crosses my wishes in anything."

Freydis smiled a little, for she saw that Manuel believed he was speaking veraciously.

"Well," said Freydis, "it is a queer thing surely that in the month which is to come your wife should be bearing your second child under my roof and in my golden bed. Yet it is a queerer thing that your first child, whom no woman bore nor had any say in shaping, but whom you made of clay to the will of your proud youth and in your proud youth's likeness, should be limping about the world somewhere in the appearance of a strapping tall young fellow, and that you should know nothing about his doings."

"And what do you know about him, Freydis?"

"Eh, I suspicion many things, gray Manuel, by virtue of my dabblings in that gray art, which makes neither for good nor evil."

"Yes," said Manuel practically, "but what do you know?"

"I know that in Sargyll where my will is the only law you are welcome, false friend and very faithless lover," she said.

He could get no more out of her.

So Manuel and Niafer remained at Sargyll until Niafer should be delivered. Glittering messengers came from King Ferdinand and from King Hoel and from the Duke-Regent Sigurd, each proffering this or that alliance, now these princes knew Dom Manuel was at outs with Raymond Bérenger; but Manuel considered only Niafer and let statecraft bide. Two other ships that were laden with King Raymond's men came also in an attempt to capture Manuel; so Freydis dispatched a sending which caused these soldiers to run about the decks howling like wolves and to fling away their weapons and to fight one against the other with hands and teeth until all were slain.

There was never a more decorous hostess than Queen Freydis, and nobody would have suspected that sorcery underlay the running of her household. It was only through Manuel's happening to arise very early one morning that he chanced to see the night-porter turn into an orange-colored rat and creep into the wainscoting when the sun rose; and Manuel of course said nothing about this to Niafer.

So the month passed prosperously and uneventfully, while the servitors of Queen Freydis behaved in every respect as if they were human beings; and at the month's end Niafer was duly delivered of a girl child. It was Freydis who tended Niafer and Freydis who brought the news to Manuel and Freydis who bade him rejoice now that all peril was over, if Freydis was to be trusted.

"And we shall celebrate the happy event," said Freydis, "with a gay feast this night in honor of your child."

"That is well," said Manuel. "But I suppose you will be wanting me to make a speech, and I was never a great hand at such matters."

"No, for your place is with your wife. No, Manuel, you are not bidden to this feast, for all that it is to do honor to your child. No, no, gray Manuel, you must remain up-stairs this evening and throughout the night, because this feast is for them that serve me; and you do not serve me any longer, and the ways of them that serve me are not your ways."

"Ah, ah!" says Manuel. "So there is sorcery afoot! Yes, Freydis, I have quite given over that sort of thing. And while not for a moment would I seem to be criticizing anybody, I hope before long to see you settling down with some fine, solid fellow and forsaking these empty frivolities for the higher and real pleasures of life."

"And what are these delights, gray Manuel?"

"The joy that is in the sight of your children, playing happily about your hearth and developing into honorable men and gracious women and bringing their children in turn to cluster about your tired old knees, as the Winter evenings draw in, and in the cosy firelight you smile across the curly heads of these children's children at the dear wrinkled white-haired face of your beloved and time-tested helpmate



and are satisfied, all in all, with your life and know that, by and large, Heaven has been rather undeservedly kind to you," said Manuel, sighing.

"Yes, Freydis, you may believe me that such are the real joys of life and that such pleasures are more profitably pursued than are the idle gaieties of sorcery and witchcraft, which indeed at our age, if you will permit me to speak thus frankly, dear friend, are hardly dignified."

FREYDIS shook her proud dark head. Her smiling was grim.

"Decidedly I shall not ever understand you. Doddering patriarch, do you not comprehend you are already discoursing about a score or two of grandchildren on the ground of having a half-hour-old daughter, whom you have not yet seen? Nor is that child's future, it may be, yours to settle. Well, go to your wife, for this is Niafer's man who is talking, and not mine. Go up, Methuselah, and behold the new life which you have created and can not control at all."

So Manuel went to where Niafer lay pale and glad in the golden bed of Freydis, and he duly looked at the contents of the small heaving bundle at Niafer's side; and whether or no he scaled the traditional peaks of emotion was no one's concern save Manuel's. He began, in any event, to talk in the vein which, he felt, this high occasion demanded.

But Niafer, who was never romantic nowadays, merely said that, anyhow, it was a blessing it was all over, and that she hoped now they would soon be leaving Sargyll.

"But Freydis is so kind, my dear," said Manuel, "and so fond of you."

"I never in my life," declared Niafer, "knew anybody to go off so terribly in her looks as that two-faced cat has done. As for being fond of me, I trust her exactly as far as I can see her."

"Yet, Niafer, I have heard you declare time and again——"

"Well, and if you did, Manuel, one has to be civil."

"You women!" he observed discreetly.

"As if it were not as plain as the nose on her face—and I do not suppose that even you, Manuel, will be contending she has a really good nose—that the woman is simply itching to make a fool of you

again. Manuel, I declare I have no patience with you when you keep arguing about such unarguable facts.

Manuel, exercising augmented discretion, said nothing whatever.

"And you may talk yourself black in the face, Manuel, but nevertheless I am going to call the child Melicent, after my own mother, as soon as a priest can be fetched from the mainland to christen her. No, Manuel, it is all very well for your dear friend to call herself a gray witch, but I do not notice any priests coming to this house unless they are especially sent for, and I draw my own conclusions."

"Well, well, let us not argue about it, my dear."

"Yes, but who started all this arguing and fault-finding, I would like to know?"

"Why, to be sure I did. But I spoke without thinking. I was wrong. I admit it. So do not excite yourself, my darling."

"And as if I could help the child's not being a boy."

"But I never said——"

"No, but you keep thinking it, and sulking is the one thing I can not stand. No, Manuel, no, I do not complain; but I do think that after all I have been through with——" Niafer whimpered sleepily.

"Yes, yes," said Manuel, stroking her soft crinkly hair.

"And with that silky hell-cat watching me all the time—and looking ten years younger than I do now—and planning I do not know what——"

"Yes, to be sure," said Manuel soothingly; "you are quite right, my dear."

So a silence fell, and presently Niafer slept. Manuel sat watching her with a perplexed, fond smile. For Niafer was the dearest and cleverest woman in the world, of course, but it did not seem to Manuel that she was rising to properly exalted zones of sentiment over the advent of the small heaving bundle at Niafer's side.

Nor did this Niafer appear to be quite the girl he had married a twelvemonth back. But even so, this Niafer was his wife, by his own choice; and whatever else she was, or was not, he could not now control at all.

SOME while after Niafer was asleep, and when the night was fairly advanced, Manuel heard a whizzing and

snorting in the air. He went to the window and lifted the scarlet curtain figured with ramping gold dragons, and he looked out to find a vast number of tiny bluish lights skipping about confusedly and agilely in the darkness like shining fleas. These approached the river-bank and gathered there.

Then the assembled lights began to come toward the house. Manuel could now see that these lights were carried by dwarfs who had the eyes of owls and the long beaks of cranes. These dwarfs were jumping and dancing about Freydis like an insane body-guard.

Freydis walked among them very remarkably attired. Upon her head shone the uraeus crown surmounted by two crested snakes, and she carried a long rod of cedar-wood topped with an apple carved in bluestone, and at her side came the appearance of a tall young man.

So they all approached the house, and the young man looked up fixedly at the unlighted window as if he were looking at Manuel. The young man smiled; his teeth gleamed in the blue glare. Then the whole company entered the house, and Manuel could see no more, but he could hear small prancing hoof-beats downstairs and the clattering of plates and much whinnying laughter. Manuel was wondering what he must do, for he had perfectly recognized the strapping tall young fellow.

Presently Manuel heard music; it was, he knew, the ravishing Nis air, which charms the mind into sweet confusion and oblivion, and Manuel did not attempt to withstand its wooing. He hastily undressed, said a staid prayer or two, and he slept dreamlessly.

In the morning Dom Manuel arose early and left Niafer still sleeping with the baby. Manuel came down through the lower hall, where the table was as the revelers had left it. In the middle of the disordered room stood a huge copper vessel half-full of liquor, and beside it was a drinking-horn of gold.

Manuel paused here and drank of the sweet heather wine to hearten him. Then he went out into the bright windy morning and to the river-bank, where that which he loved and dreaded awaited Manuel. Manuel knew that he went to meet the image which he had made of

clay, and to which through unholy arts he had given life.

The thing came up out of the glistening ripples of brown water, and the thing embraced Manuel and kissed him.

"I am pagan," the thing said in a sweet mournful voice, "and so I could not come to you until your love was given to the unchristened. For I was not ever christened, and so my true name is not known to anybody. But in the far lands where I am worshiped as a god I am called Sesptra of the Dreams."

"That name has the ring of an anagram," said Manuel.

"It is, if you insist, an anagram," the thing replied.

"I did not give you any such name," said Manuel; and then he said, "Sesptra, how beautiful you are!"

"Is that why you are trembling, Manuel?"

I tremble because the depths of my being have been shaken. I have lived for a great quiet while through days made up of small mishaps and little pleasures and only half-earnest desires which moved about upon the surface of my being like minnows in the shoals of a still lake.

"But now that I have seen and heard and touched you, Sesptra of the Dreams, a passion moves in me that possesses all of me, and I am frightened."

"It is the passion which informs those who make images. It is the master you denied, poor foolish Manuel, and the master who will take no denial."

"Sesptra, what is your will with me?"

"It is my will that you go hence with me on a long journey into the far lands where I am worshiped as a god. For I love you, my creator, who gave life to me, and you love me more than aught else, and it is not right that we be parted."

"I can not go on any journey, just now, for I have my lands and castles to regain, and my wife and my new-born child to protect."

Sesptra began to smile adorably.

"What are these things to me and you, or to any one that makes images?"

Then Sesptra began to speak adorably, as he walked on the river-bank, with one arm about Dom Manuel. Always Sesptra limped as he walked. A stiff and obdurate wind was ruffling the broad brown shining water, and as they walked, this wind buf-

feted them and tore at their clothing. Manuel clung to his hat with one hand and with the other held to lame Sespbra of the Dreams. Sespbra talked of matters not to be recorded.

"That is a handsome ring you have there," said Sespbra, by and by.

"It is the ring my wife gave me when we were married," Manuel replied.

"Then you must give it to me, dear Manuel."

"No, no. I can not part with it."

"But it is beautiful, and I want it," Sespbra said.

So Manuel gave him the ring.

Now Sespbra began again to talk of matters not to be recorded. And Manuel saw that Manuel's imperiled lands made such a part of earth as one grain of sand contributed to the long narrow beach they were treading.

He saw his wife Niafer as a plain-featured and dull woman, not in any way remarkable among the millions of such women as were at that moment preparing breakfast or fretting over other small tasks. He saw his new-born child as a mewling lump of flesh. And he saw Sespbra, whom he had made so strong and strange and beautiful, and it was as in a half-daze he heard that obdurate wind commingled with the sweet voice of Sespbra as Sespbra talked of matters not to be recorded.

"Now then let us go into the house," said Sespbra, presently, "and write droll letters to King Hoel and King Ferdinand and Duke Sigurd, in reply to the fine offers they have been making you."

WHEN they had come into the disordered banquet-hall, Manuel cleared away the silver plates from one corner of the table, and he took pen and ink and he wrote as Sespbra dictated.

"But these are very insulting replies," observed Dom Manuel, "and they will make their recipients furious. These princes, Sespbra, are my good friends, and they are powerful friends, upon whose favor I am dependent."

"Yes, but how beautifully these replies are worded! See now, dear Manuel, how divertingly you have described King Hoel's hideous nose in your letter to King Hoel; and in your letter to the pious Duke Sigurd that which you say about the ab-

surdity of religion here is a masterpiece of paradox and very exquisite prose. So I must see to it that these replies are sent, to make people admire you everywhere. But you and I will not bother about these stupid princes any more, nor will you need any friends save me, for we will go to this and that remote strange place, and our manner of living will be such and such, and we will do so and so. And we will not ever be parted until you die."

"What will you do then, dear Sespbra?"

"I shall survive you, as all gods outlive their creators. And I must depute the building of your monument to men of feeble minds which have been properly impaired by futile studies and senility. That is the way in which all gods are doomed to deal with their creators; but that need not trouble us as yet."

"No," Manuel said, "I can not go with you."

The hand of Sespbra closed on the hand of Manuel caressingly.

Manuel said:

"I will go with you. But what will become of the woman and the child whom I leave behind me unfriended?"

"That is true," Sespbra replied; "there will be nobody to look out for them, and they will perish miserably. That is not important, but perhaps upon the whole it would be better for you to kill them before we depart from Sargyll."

"Very well, then," said Manuel. "I will do that, but you must come up into the room with me, for I cannot bear to lose sight of you."

Sespbra said—

"I shall not ever leave you now."

They went up-stairs together into the room where Manuel's wife Niafer lay asleep. Manuel drew his dagger. Niafer turned in her sleep, so that she seemed to offer her round small throat to the raised knife. Manuel saw that on the other side of the golden bed sat Queen Freydis, making a rich glow of color there, and in her lap was the naked new-born child.

Freydis rose now, holding the child to her breast and smiling. A devil might smile thus upon contriving some new torment for lost souls, but Manuel had not known a fair woman's face could be so cruel.

Then this evil joy passed from the face

of Freydis. She dipped her fingers into the bowl of water with which she had been bathing the child, and with her fingertips she made upon the child's forehead the sign of a cross.

Said Freydis—

"Melicent, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

Sesphra passed wildly toward the fireplace, crying—

"A penny, a penny, twopence, a penny and a half, and a half-penny!"

At his call the fire shot forth tall flames, and Sesphra entered these flames as a man goes between parted curtains, and instantly the fire collapsed and was as it had been.

Already the hands of Freydis were moving deftly in the sleep charm, so that Niafer did not move. Freydis today was resplendently robed in flame-colored silk, and about her dark hair was a circlet of burnished copper.

Manuel had dropped his dagger so that the point of it pierced the floor, and the weapon stood erect and quivering. But Manuel was shaken more horribly than shook the dagger, with horror and self-loathing. So he waited, looking at his dear wife Niafer, who slept untroubled, and at fiery-colored Freydis, who was smiling rather queerly.

"Come now," said Freydis. "I must tell you that Sesphra is pagan, and can not thrive except among those whose love is given to the unchristened. Thus he could not come to Sargyll until the arrival of this little heathen whom I have just made Christian. Now we have only Christian terrors here, and your fate again is in my hands."

Dom Manuel groaned.

"Freydis," he said, "you have rescued me from unspeakable wickedness. A moment more and I would have slain my wife and child because of Sesphra's resistless magic."

Said Freydis, still smiling a queer secret smile:

"Indeed, there is no telling into what folly and misery Sesphra would not have led you. For you fashioned his legs unevenly, and he has not ever pardoned you his lameness."

"The thing is a devil," Manuel groaned again. "Oh, I have loosed among man-

kind a blighting misery which I can not control at all!"

"The thing is you as you were once, gray Manuel. You had comeliness and wit and youth and courage, and these you gave the image, shaping it boldly to your proud youth's will and in your proud youth's likeness. But human pity and any constant love you did not then have to give, either to your fellows or to the image or to me. So you amused yourself by making Sesphra and me that which we are today."

Now again showed subtly evil thoughts in the bright-colored, shrewd face of Freydis, and Dom Manuel of a sudden was frightened. It occurred to him for the first time that he and his loved wife and child were in this sorcerous place at the mercy of the whims and the unwholesome servitors of this not very friendly looking witch-woman. Dom Manuel thought of that discomfortable night-porter and of the madness that had smitten King Raymond's men and of the clattering, vicious little hoofs of the shrill dwarfs, and this room seemed chilly.

SO MANUEL said, with jovial laughter: "You speak as if you had not grown more adorable each year, dear Freydis, and as if I would not be vastly flattered to think I had any hand in the improvement. You should not fish thus unblushingly for compliments. Yet much of what you assert is true, for I would that I had not ever meddled in this mischancy business of creating things I can not manage."

Queen Freydis moved in shimmering splendor toward the fireplace, and she paused there, considerately looking down at the small contention of flames.

"Did you not, though, again create much misery when for your pleasure you gave life to this girl child? Certainly you must know that there will be in her life—if life indeed be long spared to her," said Freydis reflectively—"far less of joy than of sorrow, for that is the way it is with the life of everybody. But all this likewise is out of your hands, for in Sesphra and in the child and in me you have lightly created that which you can not control. No, it is I who control the outcome."

"Why, to be sure," says Manuel heartily, but in a cold sweat, "and I am sure, too, that nobody is better qualified to



handle it. Come now, Freydis. Just as you say, this is a serious situation, and something really ought to be done about this situation. Come now, dear friend, in what way can we take back the life we gave this lovely fiend?"

"And would I be wanting to kill my husband?" Queen Freydis asked, and she smiled wonderfully. "Why, but yes, this fair lame child of yours is my husband today, and I love him, for Sespbra is all that you were when I loved you, Manuel. No, Manuel, Sespbra must live for a great while, long after you have been turned to graveyard-dust; and he will limp about wherever pagans are to be found, and he will always win much love from the high-hearted pagans because of his comeliness and his unfading jaunty youth. And whether he will do any good anywhere is doubtful, but it is certain he will do harm, and it is equally certain that already he weighs my happiness as carelessly as you once weighed it."

"Well, Freydis, but, to be sure, this puts a new complexion upon matters, and not for worlds would I be coming between husband and wife——"

Queen Freydis looked up from the flames toward Dom Manuel, very sadly. Freydis shrugged, flinging out her hands.

"And at the last I can not do that, either. So do you two dreary unimportant well-mated people remain unhurt, now that I go to seek my husband, and now I endeavor to win my pardon for not letting him torment you. Eh, I was tempted, gray Manuel, to let my masterful, fine husband have his pleasure of you, and of this lean, ugly woman and her brat, too, as formerly you had your pleasure of me.

"But women are so queerly fashioned that at the last I can not consent to harm this gray, staid, tedious fellow or any of his chattels. For all passes in this world save one thing only; and though the young Manuel whom I loved in a Summer that is gone be nowadays as perished as that Summer's gay leaves, it is certain a woman's folly does not ever perish."

"Indeed, I did not merit that you should care for me," said Manuel unhappily.

But internally he felt much more cheerful, for it appeared that Freydis was not going to do anything violent and irreparable and such as her better nature would afterward regret.

Queen Freydis went to the window and lifted the scarlet curtain figured with ramping gold dragons.

"Look you now, that ship which shows at the river-bend, with lions and castles painted on her brown sails, is King Ferdinand's ship, which he has sent to fetch you from Sargyll; and all your troubles are over, for Ferdinand will give you new wealth and ferts and meadowlands. So I may now depart, to look for Sespbra, and for my pardon, if I can get it."

"But whither do you go, dear Freydis?"

"What does that matter," she answered, looking long and queerly at him, "now that Count Manuel has no further need of me?"

Then Freydis looked at Niafer, lying there in a charmed sleep.

"I neither love nor entirely hate you, ugly and lean and fretful Niafer, but assuredly I do not envy you. You are welcome to your fidgeting gray husband. My husband does not grow old and tender-hearted and subservient to me, and he never will."

Thereafter Freydis bent down, and she kissed the child she had christened.

"Some day you will be a woman, Melicent, and then you will be loving some man or another man. I could hope that you will then love the man who will make you happy, but that sort of man has not yet been found."

THEN Freydis went away, and her castle went with her as a smoke passes. Manuel was thus left sitting out-of-doors in a reaped field, alone with his wife and child, while Ferdinand's ship came about.

Niafer slept. But now the child awoke to regard the world into which she had been summoned willy-nilly, and the child began to whimper.

Dom Manuel patted this intimidating small creature gingerly with a strong comely hand, from which his wedding ring was missing. That would require explanation.

So Manuel devoted this brief waiting in a reaped field to wondering just how much about the past he might judiciously tell his wife when she awoke to question him. This problem, they relate, was set Dom Manuel in the old days, and they say, too, that it remains unsolved.