

The Gioconda of the Twilight Noon

'Those confounded gulls!' Richard Maitland complained to his wife. 'Can't you drive them away?'

Judith hovered behind the wheelchair, her hands glancing around his bandaged eyes like nervous doves. She peered across the lawn to the river bank. 'Try not to think about them, darling. They're just sitting there.'

'Just? That's the trouble!' Maitland raised his cane and struck the air vigorously. 'I can feel them all out there, watching me !'

They had taken his mother's house for his convalescence, partly on the assumption that the rich store of visual memories would in some way compensate for Maitland's temporary blindness - a trivial eye injury had become infected, eventually requiring surgery and a month's bandaged darkness. However, they had failed to reckon with the huge extension of his other senses. The house was five miles from the coast, but at low tide a flock of the greedy estuarine birds would fly up the river and alight on the exposed mud fifty yards from where Maitland sat in his wheelchair in the centre of the lawn. Judith could barely hear the gulls, but to Maitland their ravenous pecking filled the warm air like the cries of some savage Dionysian chorus. He had a vivid image of the wet banks streaming with the blood of thousands of dismembered fish.

Fretting impotently to himself, he listened as their voices suddenly fell away. Then, with a sharp sound like tearing cloth, the entire flock rose into the air. Maitland sat up stiffly in the wheel chair, the cane clasped like a cudgel in his right hand, half-expecting the gulls to swerve down on to the placid lawn, their fierce beaks tearing at the bandages over his eyes.

As if to conjure them away, he chanted aloud:

The nightingales are singing near
The Convent of the Sacred Heart,

And sang within the bloody wood
When Agamemnon cried aloud . . . !

During the fortnight since his return from the hospital Judith had read most of the early Eliot aloud to him. The flock of unseen gulls seemed to come straight out of that grim archaic landscape.

The birds settled again, and Judith took a few hesitant steps across the lawn, her dim form interrupting the even circle of light within his eyes. 'They sound like a shoal of piranha,' he said with a forced laugh. 'What are they doing - stripping a bull?'

'Nothing, dear, as far as I can see. . . . ' Judith's voice dipped on this last word. Even though Maitland's blindness was only temporary - in fact, by twisting the bandages he could see a blurred but coherent image of the garden with its willows screening the river - she still treated him to all the traditional circumlocutions, hedging him with the elaborate taboos erected by the seeing to hide them from the blind. The only real cripples, Maitland reflected, were the perfect in limb.

'Dick, I have to drive into town to collect the groceries. You'll be all right for half an hour?'

'Of course. Just sound the horn when you come back.'

The task of looking after the rambling country house single-handed - Maitland's widowed mother was on a steamer cruise in the Mediterranean - limited the time Judith could spend with him. Fortunately his long familiarity with the house saved her from having to guide him around it. A few rope hand-rails and one or two buffers of cotton wool taped to dangerous table corners had been enough. Indeed, once upstairs Maitland moved about the winding corridors and dark back staircases with more ease than Judith, and certainly with far more willingness - often in the evening she would go in search of Maitland and be startled to see her blind husband step soundlessly from a doorway two or three feet from her as he wandered among the old attics and dusty lofts. His rapt expression, as he hunted some memory of childhood, reminded her in a curious way of his mother, a

tall, handsome woman whose bland smile always seemed to conceal some potent private world.

To begin with, when Maitland had chafed under the bandages, Judith had spent all morning and afternoon reading the newspapers aloud to him, then a volume of poems and even, heroically, the start of a novel, *Moby Dick*. Within a few days, however, Maitland had come to terms with his blindness, and the constant need for some sort of external stimulation faded. He discovered what every blind person soon finds out - that its external optical input is only part of the mind's immense visual activity. He had expected to be plunged into a profound Stygian darkness, but instead his brain was filled with a ceaseless play of light and colour. At times, as he lay back in the morning sunlight, he would see exquisite revolving patterns of orange light, like huge solar discs. These would gradually recede to brilliant pin-points, shining above a veiled landscape across which dim forms moved like animals over an African veldt at dusk.

At other times forgotten memories would impinge themselves on this screen, what he assumed to be visual relics of his childhood long buried in his mind.

It was these images, with all their tantalizing associations, that most intrigued Maitland. By letting his mind drift into reverie he could almost summon them at will, watching passively as these elusive landscapes materialized like visiting spectres before his inner eye. One in particular, composed of fleeting glimpses of steep cliffs, a dark corridor of mirrors and a tall, high-gabled house within a wall, recurred persistently, although its unrelated details owed nothing to his memory. Maitland tried to explore it, fixing the blue cliffs or the tall house in his mind and waiting for their associations to gather. But the noise of the gulls and Judith's to and fro movements across the garden distracted him.

'Bye, darling! See you later !'

Maitland raised his cane in reply. He listened to the car move off down the drive, its departure subtly altering the auditory profile of the house. Wasps buzzed among the ivy below the kitchen windows, hovering over the oil stains in the gravel. A line of trees swayed in the warm air, muffling

Judith's last surge of acceleration. For once the gulls were silent. Usually this would have roused Maitland's suspicions, but he lay back, turning the wheels of the chair so that he faced the sun.

Thinking of nothing, he watched the aureoles of light mushroom soundlessly within his mind. Occasionally the shifting of the willows or the sounds of a bee bumping around the glass water jug on the table beside him would end the sequence. This extreme sensitivity to the faintest noise or movement reminded him of the hypersensitivity of epileptics, or of rabies victims in their grim terminal convulsions. It was almost as if the barriers between the deepest levels of the nervous system and the external world had been removed, those muffling layers of blood and bone, reflex and convention. . . .

With a barely perceptible pause in his breathing, Maitland relaxed carefully in the chair. Projected on to the screen within his mind was the image he had glimpsed before, of a rocky coastline whose dark cliffs loomed through an off-shore mist. The whole scene was drab and colourless. Overhead low clouds reflected the pewter surface of the water. As the mist cleared he moved nearer the shore, and watched the waves breaking on the rocks. The plumes of foam searched like white serpents among the pools and crevices for the caves that ran deep into the base of the cliff.

Desolate and unfrequented, the coast reminded Maitland only of the cold shores of Tierra del Fuego and the ships' graveyards of Gape Horn, rather than of any memories of his own. Yet the cliffs drew nearer, rising into the air above him, as if their identity reflected some image deep within Maitland's mind.

Still separated from them by the interval of grey water, Maitland followed the shoreline, until the cliffs divided at the mouth of a small estuary. Instantly the light cleared. The water within the estuary glowed with an almost spectral vibrancy. The blue rocks of the surrounding cliffs, penetrated by small grottoes and caverns, emitted a soft prismatic light, as if illuminated by some subterranean lantern.

Holding this scene before him, Maitland searched the

shores of the estuary. The caverns were deserted, but as he neared them the luminous archways began to reflect the light like a hall of mirrors. At the same time he found himself entering the dark, high-gabled house he had seen previously, and which had now superimposed itself on his dream. Somewhere within it, masked by the mirrors, a tall, green-robed figure watched him, receding through the caves and groins. . . .

A motor-car horn sounded, a gay succession of toots. The gravel grating beneath its tyres, a car swung into the drive.

'Judith here, darling,' his wife called. 'Everything all right?'

Cursing under his breath, Maitland fumbled for his cane. The image of the dark coast and the estuary with its spectral caves had gone. Like a blind worm, he turned his blunted head at the unfamiliar sounds and shapes in the garden.

'Are you all right?' Judith's footsteps crossed the lawn. 'What's the matter, you're all hunched up - have those birds been annoying you?'

'No, leave them.' Maitland lowered his cane, realizing that although not visibly present in his inward vision, the gulls had played an oblique role in its creation. The foam-white sea-birds, hunters of the albatross. . . .

With an effort he said: 'I was asleep.'

Judith knelt down and took his hands. 'I'm sorry. I'll ask one of the men to build a scare-crow. That should - '

'No!' Maitland pulled his hands away. 'They're not worrying me at all.' Levelling his voice, he said: 'Did you see anyone in the town?'

'Dr Phillips. He said you should be able to take off the bandages in about ten days.'

'Good. There's no hurry, though. I want the job done properly.'

After Judith had walked back to the house Maitland tried to return to his reverie, but the image remained sealed behind the screen of his consciousness.

At breakfast the next morning Judith read him the mail.

'There's a postcard from your mother. They're near Malta, somewhere called Gozo.'

'Give it to me.' Maitland felt the card in his hands. 'Gozo - that was Calypso's island. She kept Ulysses there for seven years, promised him eternal youth if he'd stay with her forever.'

'I'm not surprised.' Judith inclined the card towards her. 'If we could spare the time you and I should go there for a holiday. Wine-dark seas, a sky like heaven, blue rocks. Bliss.'

'Blue?'

'Yes. I suppose it's the bad printing. They can't really be like that.'

'They are, actually.' Still holding the card, Maitland went out into the garden, feeling his way along the string guide-rail. As he settled himself in the wheelchair he reflected that there were other correspondences in the graphic arts. The same blue rocks and spectral grottoes could be seen in Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*, one of the most forbidding and most enigmatic of his paintings. The madonna sitting on a bare ledge by the water beneath the dark overhang of the cavern's mouth was like the presiding spirit of some enchanted marine realm, waiting for those cast on to the rocky shores of this world's end. As in so many of Leonardo's paintings, all its unique longings and terrors were to be found in the landscape in the background. Here, through an archway among the rocks, could be seen the crystal blue cliffs that Maitland had glimpsed in his reverie.

'Shall I read it out to you?' Judith had crossed the lawn.

'What?'

'Your mother's postcard. You're holding it in your hand.'

'Sorry. Please do.'

As he listened to the brief message, Maitland waited for Judith to return to the house. When she had gone he sat quietly for a few minutes. The distant sounds of the river came to him through the trees, and the faint cry of gulls swooping on to the banks further down the estuary.

This time, almost as if recognizing Maitland's need, the vision came to him quickly. He passed the dark cliffs, and the waves vaulting into the cave mouths, and then entered the twilight world of the grottoes beside the river. Outside,

through the stone galleries, he could see the surface of the water glittering like a sheet of prisms, the soft blue light reflected in the vitreous mirrors which formed the cavern walls. At the same time he sensed that he was entering the high-gabled house, whose surrounding wall was the cliff face he had seen from the sea. The rock-like vaults of the house glowed with the olive-black colours of the marine deeps, and curtains of old lace-work hung from the doors and windows like ancient nets.

A staircase ran through the grotto, its familiar turnings leading to the inner reaches of the cavern. Looking upwards, he saw the green-robed figure watching him from an archway. Her face was hidden from him, veiled by the light reflected off the damp mirrors on the walls. Impelled forward up the steps, Maitland reached towards her, and for an instant the face of the figure cleared. . . .

'Judith!' Rocking forward in his chair, Maitland searched helplessly for the water jug on the table, his left hand drumming at his forehead in an attempt to drive away the vision and its terrifying lamia.

'Richard! What is it?'

He heard his wife's hurried footsteps across the lawn, and then felt her hands steadying his own.

'Darling, what on earth's going on? You're pouring with perspiration!'

That afternoon, when he was left alone again, Maitland approached the dark labyrinth more cautiously. At low tide the gulls returned to the mud flats below the garden, and their archaic cries carried his mind back into its deeps like mortuary birds bearing away the body of Tristan. Guarding himself and his own fears, he moved slowly through the luminous chambers of the subterranean house, averting his eyes from the green-robed enchantress who watched him from the staircase.

Later, when Judith brought his tea to him on a tray, he ate carefully, talking to her in measured tones.

'What did you see in your nightmare?' she asked.

'A house of mirrors under the sea, and a deep cavern,' he

told her. 'I could see everything, but in a strange way, like the dreams of people who have been blind for a long time.'

Throughout the afternoon and evening he returned to the grotto at intervals, moving circumspectly through the outer chambers, always aware of the robed figure waiting for him in the doorway to its innermost sanctum.

The next morning Dr Phillips called to change his dressing.

'Excellent, excellent,' he commented, holding his torch in one hand as he retaped Maitland's eyelids to his cheeks. 'Another week and you'll be out of this for good. At least you know what it's like for the blind.'

'One can envy them,' Maitland said.

'Really?'

'They see with an inner eye, you know. In a sense everything there is more real.'

'That's a point of view.' Dr Phillips replaced the bandages. He drew the curtains. 'What have you seen with yours?'

Maitland made no reply. Dr Phillips had examined him in the darkened study, but the thin torch beam and the few needles of light around the curtains had filled his brain like arc lights. He waited for the glare to subside, realizing that his inner world, the grotto, the house of mirrors and the enchantress, had been burned out of his mind by the sunlight.

'They're hypnagogic images,' Dr Phillips remarked, fastening his bag. 'You've been living in an unusual zone, sitting around doing nothing but with your optic nerves alert, a no-man's land between sleep and consciousness. I'd expect all sorts of strange things.'

After he had gone Maitland said to the unseen walls, his lips whispering below the bandages: 'Doctor, give me back my eyes.'

It took him two full days to recover from this brief interval of external sight. Laboriously, rock by rock, he re-explored the hidden coastline, willing himself through the enveloping sea-mists, searching for the lost estuary.

At last the luminous beaches appeared again.

'I think I'd better sleep alone tonight,' he told Judith. 'I'll use mother's room.'

'Of course, Richard. What's the matter?'

'I suppose I'm restless. I'm not getting much exercise and there are only three days to go. I don't want to disturb you.'

He found his own way into his mother's bedroom, glimpsed only occasionally during the years since his marriage. The high bed, the deep rustle of silks and the echoes of forgotten scents carried him back to his earliest childhood. He lay awake all night, listening to the sounds of the river reflected off the cut-glass ornaments over the fireplace.

At dawn, when the gulls flew up from the estuary, he visited the blue grottoes again, and the tall house in the cliff. Knowing its tenant now, the green-robed watcher on the staircase, he decided to wait for the morning light. Her beckoning eyes, the pale lantern of her smile, floated before him.

However, after breakfast Dr Phillips returned.

'Right,' he told Maitland briskly, leading him in from the lawn. 'Let's have those bandages off.'

'For the last time, Doctor?' Judith asked. 'Are you sure?'

'Certainly. We don't want this to go on for ever, do we?' He steered Maitland into the study. 'Sit down here, Richard. You draw the curtains, Judith.'

Maitland stood up, feeling for the desk. 'But you said it would take three more days, Doctor.'

'I dare say. But I didn't want you to get over-excited. What's the matter? You're hovering about there like an old woman. Don't you want to see again?'

'See?' Maitland repeated numbly. 'Of course.' He subsided limply into a chair as Dr Phillips' hands unfastened the bandages. A profound sense of loss had come over him. 'Doctor, could I put it off for - '

'Nonsense. You can see perfectly. Don't worry, I'm not going to fling back the curtains. It'll be a full day before you can see freely. I'll give you a set of filters to wear. Any-

way, these dressings let through more light than you imagine.'

At eleven o'clock the next morning, his eyes shielded only by a pair of sunglasses, Maitland walked out on to the lawn. Judith stood on the terrace, and watched him make his way around the wheelchair. When he reached the willows she called: 'All right, darling? Can you see me?'

Without replying, Maitland looked back at the house. He removed the sunglasses and threw them aside on to the grass. He gazed through the trees at the estuary, at the blue surface of the water stretching to the opposite bank. Hundreds of the gulls stood by the water, their heads turned in profile to reveal the full curve of their beaks. He looked over his shoulder at the high-gabled house, recognizing the one he had seen in his dream. Everything about it, like the bright river which slid past him, seemed dead.

Suddenly the gulls rose into the air, their cries drowning the sounds of Judith's voice as she called again from the terrace. In a dense spiral, gathering itself off the ground like an immense scythe, the gulls wheeled into the air over his head and swirled over the house.

Quickly Maitland pushed back the branches of the willows and walked down on to the bank.

A moment later, Judith heard his shout above the cries of the gulls. The sound came half in pain and half in triumph, and she ran down to the trees uncertain whether he had injured himself or discovered something pleasing.

Then she saw him standing on the bank, his head raised to the sunlight, the bright carmine on his cheeks and hands, an eager, unrepentant Oedipus.