



Mercenaries

‘I didn’t pray,’ he says: ‘Usually, I pray to the horses, but though they run fast, they’ve always disappointed me.’

‘So, you spite them? With no prayer?’ I ask: ‘I don’t understand. You have work and cash. Why do you bet, resent the losers? You don’t need a fortune: but those accumulators would bring you millions, if they ever worked.’

‘I have debts,’ he says.

‘Your make debts so that wanting millions seems less mad,’ I say: ‘Anyway, you’ve no time to spend on anything but the gamble. You know how the system works: – you worked for bookies. You don’t need horses, dogs, or anything – it’s calculating odds with all the cash that’s coming in, to leave the book with secure profits. It isn’t racing – it’s mathematics.’

‘Exactly,’ he says: ‘It’s the beauty. Beauty of the horses, beauty of the odds, beauty of winning: – winning more than anyone has ever done ... Like finding all the keys to the great pyramid, intuiting the right order, opening every door: – and there’s the pharaohs, every one, all alive and waiting for me.’

‘You’re not mad,’ I say: ‘Obsessive. An aesthete. Creating – or expecting – the symphony of symphonies, the painting of all paint ...’

‘The one god,’ he says: ‘All the other gods’ skulls in a necklace round His neck.’

‘The Senmurgh,’ I say – ‘The bird that is a hundred birds. Whatever anyone seeks, one of everything, one macedonia, one book of books, would be enough.’

‘I have company,’ he says: ‘Comrades. Seekers. Shadows, history; those don’t talk, and if we spoke, we’d know we hate each other. Being alive – there is profusion: there’s lots are mad and lots who aren’t.’

‘You’re my best friend,’ I say: ‘We all must have best friends, who don’t stand in our world. You drift further, further away: – still and always my best friend.’

‘Yes,’ he says: ‘You’re lucky to have me. I’m not lucky – as you’ve said. It’s true, there’s mathematics to show it all rests on a solid base: – but in the end, it’s all down to the unknown, the one horse who’s quite unaware and changes everything’

‘By winning, if it does. But also – by not winning. Every time – it is identical,’ I say: ‘Win, lose – it’s all up to the horse, but it’s the only one involved who doesn’t know ... And does it care?’

‘Oh yes,’ he says: ‘But not about me, naturally. That horse is God: – at least, His progeny. I’m the benefactor the horse is ignorant, but loves to win, like meto gratify: life is good, people and horses, they’re good too. And happy. Horse and God, He thinks like that.’

‘Two independent wills ... and yet, you hope; you cannot will,’ I say. He’s not interested: ‘You’re impotent in this – the horse is not. It’s up to the animal, who doesn’t have a clue what is at stake ...’

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At dawn, a rider comes – on an Electra Glide – bringing the first news: – the horses unloaded at the track. Stable gossip. Weather. Gossip by the sages. All morning, messages arrive – weights, diets, fancies. Who’s sick, who’s medicated: shoes, who was cast in their box....

‘I’ll be immortal, if it comes off today,’ he says: ‘The capital, to keep the wager doubling up – is quite immense. But if I quit and start again, the level will be so low ... It’ll be a coincidence, not a strategy, project, victory’

‘You’d win a huge amount,’ I say: ‘Maybe a mention. In print. Not immortality. Going through the card – it is banal – off-days, tracks remote, the weather clement, quite exceptional ... the time of year ... That’s nothing: yours is the coup. But – one miracle, one immortality – confirms the certainty of death.’

‘No,’ he says: ‘Since Gilgamesh, we know that even in a dream, immortality’s not possible. But Gilgamesh shows us – something exceptional can last and last. There must be an arithmetic that registers – the odds, the unconnected runners – and my intuition’

‘Your guessing.’ I say: ‘It’s true, your win would be the coincidence that justifies the record ... Nothing more. The punters, ordinary horses, your choice The same thing works on fruit machines ... works at Verdun, at Nagasaki: against the odds, someone survives, their number’s up, or not. They win. Maybe later, disturbed – they suicide There’s someone who seems touched by miracles, but it’s in a world without a miracle ... there’s exceptions for the ordinary, the totally banal ... surviving, not an immortality It’s like us two, alive upon a spinning rock that mostly can’t support a life as complicated as ours The window of our opportunity is opened – we survive – and then we don’t. Our brothers, lookalikes: – the same for them. It never happens that by chance a person is immortal, without trying, or being special, charmed, or somehow magicked. In every million, one lives a little longer than the rest it has to be. It isn’t fun ...’

‘Well,’ he says: ‘There’s a lot of things you’ve said. They open up a lot of lives to have, to try to live. There may be a key. Most things – we don’t know why they happen, then, we investigate: – there’s a key. A box is opened to a bigger box, and so, and so’

‘It’s different,’ I tell him, though I’m not sure how.

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