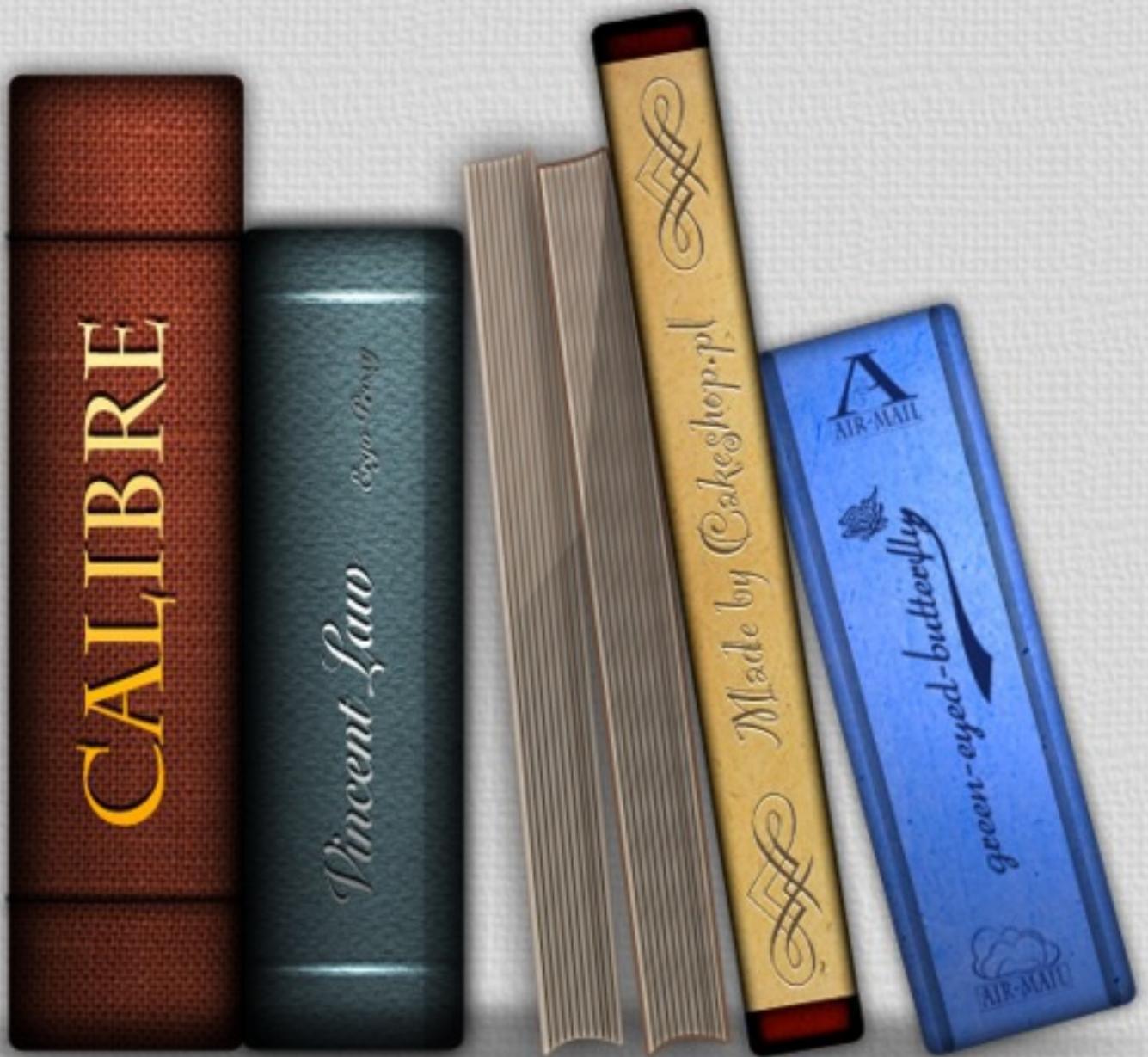


TMB Part 12

Jonathan Waite



calibre 1.44.0

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I don't believe it," Varnak said. "She has to be making it up. I mean, Maranni?"

"Even a sword may be garlanded with daisies, highness," Mordecai said.

"Oh, never mind all that Master Alonso folderol, Mordecai, we're alone in here." Varnak was irritable.

Mordecai looked hurt. "That was a genuine Sinjari proverb, my prince, and had a genuine meaning. An helpless, ineffectual exterior may hide a fell and deadly purpose."

"Like yours, you mean?" Varnak said with a grin.

"If it is true," Mordecai said, ignoring the dig, "it could mean one of a number of things. She might have been carrying it for her sister. It might be a present for their uncle. It might simply be a tool for cutting the pages of books. On its own it means nothing, but if we can confirm its truth, and perhaps connect it to another fact, we shall have a beginning."

"And if it isn't true?"

"Then we shall still have a fact to add to our store," Mordecai said, "the fact that the lady Lonira, as well as the lady Maranni and possibly the lady Idyla, lied to us."

"Why would they do that?" Varnak shook his head. "This would be so much simpler if people told the truth."

"As would many other things, highness," Mordecai said, "but this is not that kind of world. People lie for all kinds of reasons, good and bad; because they are busy, because they are afraid, because they are kind, because they are angry. To prevent them from lying, we would have to remove all the reasons, and then the world would become a very different, and probably a far less interesting place."

"True," Varnak admitted. "It just makes everything so much harder."

"Who is next?" Mordecai said. "They seem to be taking their time."

"Well—" Somebody knocked at the door. "Come in," Varnak called.

Aldro Stychel opened the door and pushed a protesting Driskil inside.

"How apropos," Mordecai murmured.

*

"How's he doing?" King Bran asked.

They were standing in the palace's kitchen garden, a location chosen by the king for its lack of visibility from the magery and the plentiful supply of bean canes and other tall features behind which to hide. Three disgruntled under-gardeners who had been peacefully occupying the spot prior to their arrival were now being noisily busy elsewhere.

"He seems to be on his best behaviour," Gisel said tiredly. "He's seen eight clients this morning, and dealt very fairly with each one. I fancy that's how he means to go on."

"To be the perfect Magus and so make it harder for Mordecai when he comes back," Bran said. "Yes, I thought so. Has he tried anything with the—the thingy?"

"He said it was starting to spin out of balance, so he's applied a corrective spell, but that without being linked to it there's only so much he can do," Gisel said. "As far as I know that's all, though of course there's no way I could know if it wasn't."

"Of course," the king agreed, a little absently. "I didn't know it span. Spun. Spinned?"

"It didn't use to," Gisel said. "It's changed shape. It was this little grey pyramid, if you remember. Now it's round, with a scintillating glowing ball in the middle, and metal bands going round it with some sort of decoration on them. That's what does the spinning."

"Strange," Bran said. "It changed shape once before, when Mordecai linked to it. Do you suppose..."

"I have no idea, your majesty," Gisel said.

"No, no, of course you don't. I wish we had someone else who was magically trained around here. Me and my procrastination. When this is over—"

His voice trailed away. They looked at a broad bean pod without enthusiasm. It ignored them.

"Oh well," Bran said, stirring himself. "Keep an eye on him for me, Gisel. You'd better be getting back, or he'll start to wonder what's going on."

"I have no doubt he does already," Gisel said dryly. "It comes naturally to him. What's going on, and what advantage he can gain from it. Who's doing what and can he get some hold over them. He's a man utterly without conscience, Bran, you know that."

"I know," the king said heavily. "That's why I need you there, Gisel. More than I ever have before."

Gisel bowed. "I serve at the king's pleasure, always."

"Oh, get on with you," Bran said.

*

“Oy.”

Zorn turned to regard the prisoner, who was toying listlessly with her food. Her face looked even thinner and more sharply pointed than usual, and her eyes flickered restlessly from his face to the plate to the walls and back to him.

“Did I not say that you were not to speak?” he said.

She nodded.

“I have no doubt that you are feeling...unwell, so you need not tell me that. And you need not hope that by disobedience you can obtain more of the spores. That will not happen.” Zorn paused. “You may speak.”

“How about if...” Her voice failed her. “How about if I’m good?” She shook her head, tried to summon strength from somewhere. “Nay, forget it. I’ll not ask.”

“If you are obedient,” Zorn said, “and respectful as a woman should be, then yes, I may grant you a short spell of spore-dreaming. But not as long as you resist.”

“Want me to beg, dost tha?”

“Oh, you will,” Zorn said. “In time, you will beg. But not yet. You still cling to the ridiculous illusion that you can overcome the need. When you recognise at last that it has already conquered you, then you will beg, and we will be generous.”

“Had much experience wi’ maids from other lands, hast tha?”

“Women are women everywhere,” Zorn said, “as men are men. It would be unreasonable to think otherwise.”

“Well, think again, cully,” the prisoner said, her voice suddenly stronger. “Cause I be Tseneshi, and we breed our women hard. Aye, yon spore stuff be nice enough, but I’ve had worse, and better. Tha’ll find me still kickin’ when us gets to Freeport.”

“You are from Zenej?” Zorn regarded the prisoner with renewed interest. “That is news. I wonder, then, why a proud woman of Zenej would consent to be a mere servant in the palace of a foreign king?”

“Oh bugger,” the woman said softly.

“My prince will be most interested. It seems there are more layers to this *kepak* than we realised. Thank you.” Zorn raised the spore-gun, and the woman’s eyes widened, half in desire and half in fear.

“Nay...” she croaked.

“Oh, but honesty must be rewarded,” Zorn said, and squeezed the bulb.

*

“I’m not telling you anything,” Driskil said.

“Really?” Varnak raised his eyebrows. “But you were so talkative back in the salon. Throwing accusations right and left. Are you telling me you have nothing more to say?”

“Not to you,” Driskil spat the word.

“Why’s that?” Varnak said. “Because I am a noble of Tamland, or because I’m not? Because I represent authority, or because I’m the murderer? You must make up your mind, Master Driskil.”

“Why?” Driskil demanded. “Whatever you are, it’s nothing to do with me. None of this is anything to do with me. I don’t have to talk to you. I’m a free citizen of Hyrcassos.”

“Not till your twentieth year you are not,” Mordecai said ungrammatically. “Till then you are a youth under the supervision of your teacher, Master Stychel. What did he instruct you to do?”

Driskil muttered something.

“I didn’t hear that,” Varnak said loudly. “Should I ask my clerk to go and fetch Master Stychel so that we can ask him?”

“He told me to answer all your stupid questions and tell the truth,” Driskil blurted out.

“And what are you going to do?” The threat hung in the air between them as clearly as if Varnak had spoken it aloud.

“Answer all your stupid questions and tell the stupid truth,” the boy muttered. His right hand went to his pocket and fiddled with something inside it.

“Good,” Varnak said. “And my first question is; in what way did your family become acquainted with Master Hudge?”

“That’s none of your—” Driskil stopped as Varnak wagged a finger slowly to and fro. He finally produced from his pocket a small green object that looked like something wrapped in a leaf and lifted it to his mouth.

“What’s that?” Varnak asked.

“Catterfoil chew,” Driskil said quickly.

“All right,” Varnak said, and Driskil popped the small leaf parcel into his mouth and began to chew.

Some people, Mordecai knew, did not like the flavour of catterfoil when dried and made into tea, and so preferred to pick the fresh leaves of the ubiquitous herb, make small parcels of them and chew them. It was also a common practice among people on long walks without tea-making equipment. He had never seen the attraction in it himself, and Driskil chewed in an offensively noisy, open-mouthed fashion that turned his stomach, but he stifled his disgust beneath layers of clerkly decorum.

“My da,” Driskil began indistinctly, spraying little bits of leaf, “my da lost his job.”

These were murky waters for Mordecai. Gisel, who had actually lived in Briom for a while, had tried her best to explain to him how artisans and tradesmen there, rather than passing their trade on to their children or talented apprentices and leaving it at that, tried to buy out as many other tradesmen in their field as they could, so that they were supplying whatever it was they made to entire towns or areas of countryside, and so had to pay other people to do the work for them, which meant that the other people were not working to feed their families, which meant...

Mordecai had given up, and simply took it on faith that there were things called jobs and that if you lived in Briom (or, it appeared, Hyrcassos) you had to have one or you would starve.

“Am he coum pay the remp—” Driskil shifted the mass of leaves from one side of his mouth to the other. “Fo he went out with my uncle and a couple of their mates one night and a shop got robbed, and the shopkeeper said it was Da and Nunk who did it.” He seemed to be relaxing a little. “Paid him back in the end. Anyway, the constable was going to arrest Da and Nunk, so they went to see Hudge. He was passing through town at the time. He took on the case, and the constable arrested someone else. ’S all I know.” He grinned at them. His teeth were green.

“How did you pay back the shopkeeper?” Varnak asked.

Driskil sniggered. “Got in there one night, din’t I. Piddled in all his sacks, voided on his counter an’ wrote dirty words on the walls in my own doings. An’ I may have broken a window round the back. Not sure.” His eyelids were drooping.

Mordecai leaned forward. “Did you know Master Parrunz also?”

Driskil focussed on him with an effort. “You’re Sinjaro,” he said. “Dirty little Sinjaro.” He sniggered again.

“What’s the matter with him?” Varnak said.

"I do not know, my lord," Mordecai said, rising from his seat and rounding the desk. He leaned over Driskil, pushing the boy's head back and staring into a pair of eyes that seemed to be all pupil.

"That was no catterfoil chew," Varnak said. "Can you get it out of his mouth?"

Mordecai spared Varnak a look that should have blown him through the back wall of the tiny room, and then gingerly inserted his forefinger and thumb between Driskil's slack lips. He managed to extract a portion of the soggy mass, but the rest slid inexorably down the gullet.

"Never ask me to do that again," he said, flinging the deliquescing lump down on the desk and wiping his fingers on Varnak's coat.

"Give that back!" Driskil whined, reaching for it. Mordecai slapped his hand away.

"Where did you get it?" he snapped.

"Not telling," Driskil crooned, rolling his head from side to side. "Dirty little Sinjaro, dirty little Sinjaro..."

Mordecai snorted in disgust.

"What kind of drug works that quickly?" Varnak wondered.

"I do not know," Mordecai said. "I have never seen a reaction like this." But even as he said it he thought back to a rooftop in Tamland, and a flock of pigeons feasting on the innocent-looking candies he had brought out of the Tseneshi royal coach. Of course, human beings, on the whole, tended not to be pigeons. "I think we may have to show this to Mistress Elouyne," he said. "She may have some knowledge of these things."

"That's all very well," Varnak said, "but what do we do about him?" Driskil was now singing softly to himself, a children's song about a Sinjaro who tried to perform a number of simple tasks and invariably came to grief, usually involving excrement of some kind. Mordecai had heard it many times.

"Leave that to me," Mordecai said. He leaned close to Driskil's ear and spoke three words that hurt his tongue. The boy stiffened and uttered a rasping cry as whatever it was he had ingested burned itself out of his system all at once. Mordecai relaxed slightly. He hadn't been entirely sure that spell would work on anything other than alcohol, or that Driskil would survive it.

He hadn't cared all that much, of course, but it was nice to know.

"Now, Master Driskil," Varnak said, "where were we?"

*

By the time the boat docked at Mattockhay, in the early afternoon, they had got as much out of Driskil as they felt they were going to. He had no suspicion as to the reason why his drug-induced euphoria had so suddenly ended, as far as they could tell, but the fact of it had broken down much of his resistance.

It seemed that Driskil's family had been cursed for some time. From being respectable merchants of Hyrcassos, they had lurched from one disaster to the next, trying vainly to recover ground and almost making it time and again. A grandfather's unwise investments had destroyed the family business; an uncle had been taken to the Sable Chamber for speaking out against usury; a great-aunt had been run over by a runaway cart and had been left partially paralysed, requiring expensive care which had wiped out the family's savings. The incident for which the services of the Extricator had been required was merely the latest; and the only visible remnant of the family's former status was their elder son's tuition (paid for in advance in happier times) at the exclusive academy where Aldro Stychel taught.

He had never met Dardash Parrunz, but had learned how to recognise officers of the law by instinct. He felt that one less in the world was a blessing, and that even the loss of Master Hudge was an improvement. He had spent the entire voyage so far in the company of his fellow students, either studying, drinking or sleeping, and had not noticed whether any of them had gone anywhere at any point.

At the boatmaster's call, Varnak released Driskil, who hesitated and then bolted without bothering to close the door after him.

"We had better resume this later," Mordecai said, just as the boatmaster knocked timidly on his own door.

"I have to use the room, good sirs," he said, as shamefacedly as if it had been a privy.

"That's quite all right, Master Flood," Varnak said, gathering up his notes. "It was very kind of you to allow us to—" He caught sight of the soggy lump on the desk, moved in front of it and mugged furiously at Mordecai. "To allow us to use it," he continued, as Mordecai dealt with the problem, sliding the disgusting thing on to a piece of paper and folding it over into a complicated knot. "Once we resume our journey, if we might...?"

"Oh, certain sure, my lord," said Hurnig Flood cheerfully. "Only I 'spect with the

weather we probably won't be moving on till the morrow now. I don't know what can be causing all this thunderation, I really don't, but the rivermen report blockages up ahead, fallen trees and the like, that won't be cleared away till after sunset, and I'd as soon not risk such a passage at night."

"Very wise," Varnak said heartily. "Though I doubt many of your passengers will be pleased."

Flood looked unhappy. "Truth, I don't know why she's so sluggish," he confessed. "We were a touch slow early on, but it's just got worse. By rights we should have made Gerenna on the Tsenesh bank by tonight and be on course for Brokenbowes tomorrow noon. Them ladies in the fancy gowns—" He broke off. "I can't understand it."

"Perhaps it is your magical engine," Mordecai said. "Would you like me to have a look at it?"

Flood looked at him dubiously, and Varnak made a horrible face at him behind the man's back. "My *clerk*," he said, through his teeth, "has made some small study of Tamlandish magic, and if the fault be an obvious one, it is possible he may be able to suggest a remedy."

Mordecai cursed himself inwardly, but Flood's honest face cleared.

"I should give thanks for any such help, my lord," he said, "small though it be. We don't pick up old Anglebones—that's the horse, my lord—till Brokenbowes, and if the engine gives out before we get there it'll be man-hauling."

"I shall do it at once," Mordecai said, "if my lord permits."

"Feel free, Master Alonso," Varnak said. "I shall go ashore, I think, and see what there is to be seen."

"There's a good inn, my lord," Flood said, anxious to be helpful. "Toller's is the name. They're used to catering for all kinds and qualities there. We're moored at the bottom of their garden."

"I shall seek it out," Varnak said with a smile. "Are we picking up or dropping off?"

"Picking up, my lord," Flood said readily. "A lady from the Royal Court, and a Master Gudge. And now if you'll excuse me..."

"How do I find the engine room?" Mordecai asked. He did not need to—he could feel the thrumming of the engine in his bones—but a merchant's clerk would have had to ask.

Flood furnished him with directions, and he and Varnak stepped out into the rain, which had slackened considerably, though further angry clouds still loomed over the river ahead.

“Join me in Toller’s when you’ve finished,” Varnak said. “I’ll let the other passengers know they’re off the hook. And don’t make a slip like that again, *Master Alonso*.”

“The anvil of indiscretion has made a deep impression upon the toe of incautiousness, my lord,” Mordecai assured him gloomily; and on that note they went their separate ways.

*

“Gisel.”

Gisel froze.

“Could you spare me a moment, please?”

That hated voice, smooth as marble and as cold. Gisel got up from her desk and looked into the inner office. Zivano was sitting behind Mordecai’s desk, looking as if he belonged there.

“What can I do for you, Magus?” Gisel said crisply. There were no clients in the outer office; it was too early in the afternoon. There would be a rush in about half an hour’s time, probably; she fancied there were still some who had been waiting for days to bring their problems to the magery, but they would take time to get here after their midday meal. She had done all the routine paperwork. She could not think of any excuse to put the man off.

“Come in, Gisel,” Zivano said genially. “Close the door and sit down.”

Slowly, reluctantly, Gisel obeyed.

“How was the king?” Zivano said. “Well, I trust?”

“Concerned, Magus,” Gisel said, “as we all should be.”

“Ah, Gisel, Gisel,” Zivano said. “How transparent you are. I find your honest hatred almost refreshing. If only you had some magic of your own, enough to whisk del Aguila back from his journey and put me in his place, or better still in some fiery hell of your choosing, how quickly, how eagerly you would do it, and be damned to the consequences.”

Gisel said nothing, regarding him stonily.

“But hard as it may be for you to grasp, and despite what I said to you when you

came to beg me to take up this post—did you speak? I thought not—I am, meanly as this land has treated me, a loyal citizen of Tamland. Folly misgoverned though it be, I respect its right to govern itself in its own way. And so I propose to try to be of some assistance to you in resolving this problem.”

“Which particular problem would that be, Magus?” Gisel asked, her tone quite neutral.

Zivano smiled. “There are so many, are there not? The disappearance of that disgusting hedge-wizard of del Aguila’s, the absence of the man himself, and of course the impending trade negotiations with the Chotani which King Bran has for some idiotic reason entrusted to his meat-headed son and a Sinjaro fop who claims to be a magician. How did that start, I wonder?”

“I have no idea, Magus.”

“And if you had you would scarcely tell me. I can practically fill in your responses beforehand, Gisel. You really should try and cultivate some spontaneity. It is the most piquant of the spices of life.”

Gisel considered spontaneously ripping the stuffed lizard or whatever it was out of its mounting and stuffing it down the man’s throat, or whichever bodily orifice seemed handiest.

“It would be worth finding out,” Zivano went on. “I doubt if even King Brainless knows. ‘Well, I heard it from a chap who knows a fellow who says a bird told him—’” His imitation of Bran’s voice was really rather good. “But it must have started from somewhere. If you trust me on nothing else, Gisel, trust me on this. It would be well worth finding out. There is more to this situation than any of you realise.”

“I’ll bear that in mind, Magus,” Gisel said. “Will that be all?”

“For the moment,” Zivano said, smiling again. “Unless you are perhaps in the mood for some catterfoil tea. I know I am. Oh, and close the door on your way out.”