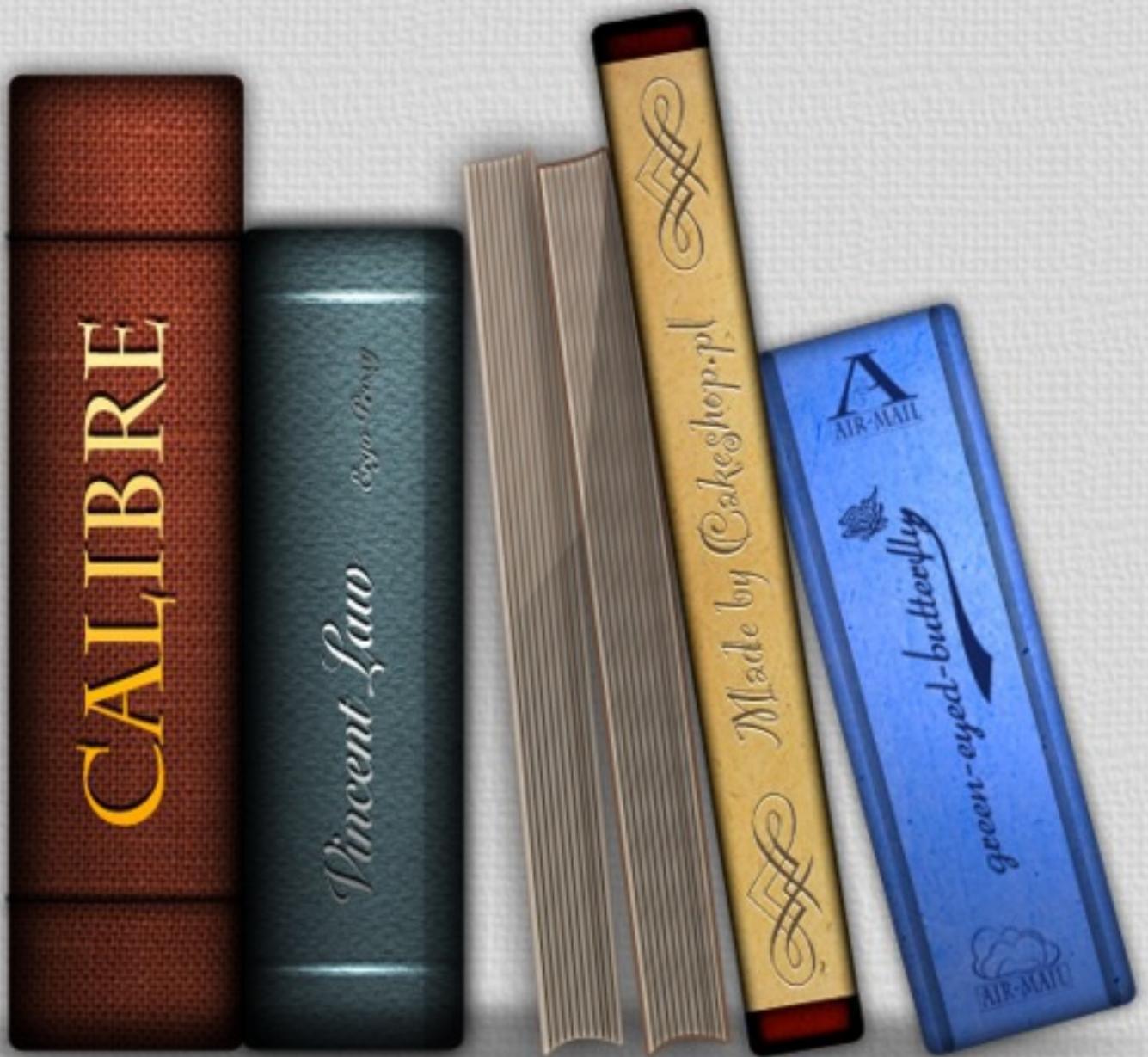


TMB Part 14

Jonathan Waite



calibre 1.46.0

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Lady Andemar,” said Anatta Ralitz, rising from her armchair. “Such a pleasure.” She was still in mourning, even here in her own drawing room, and Gisel wondered how deep her grief truly ran.

“Mistress Ralitz,” Gisel said, crossing the room to take her hands. “Forgive my dilatoriness. I should have come sooner, had I known.”

“We did not spread the news widely.” The widow’s hair was indeed auburn, and the lamps struck fiery highlights from it. “My husband was a very private man, despite his strong commitment to the public good. Would you care for some tea?”

Gisel had been properly brought up, and the next hour passed pleasantly enough in small talk, pleasantries and court gossip, in which Mistress Ralitz took a keen interest. In fact, she herself provided the opening for which Gisel had been hoping.

“And I see we have a new Court Magus,” she said. “I must say I think him a great improvement. Master del Aguila—” She stopped. “Oh, but I was forgetting,” she said with a little laugh. “Of course, you and he are friends. I must guard my tongue.”

“A temporary replacement,” Gisel said, “while Master del Aguila is away on a trade mission for the king. I believe I remember hearing that your husband had something to do with that?”

There was no sudden reaction from the woman opposite, but Gisel thought she felt herself being coolly surveyed for a moment. “Yes,” said Mistress Ralitz at last. “My husband liked to think of himself as a facilitator. He brought the idea to the king, and set up the initial negotiations. But of course it was supposed to be highly confidential. However did you come to hear of it?”

“As Master del Aguila’s assistant, I was of course notified of his impending absence,” Gisel said. “Later the king was good enough to take me into his confidence to a certain extent. I must say I find it all intensely interesting. Were you involved in the negotiations at all?”

“Well, if the king...” Mistress Ralitz hesitated. “I was,” she said. “My husband reposed full confidence in me. I was not allowed to be present at the meetings, because the people with whom he was dealing have certain strict ideas about the role of women in society, but he shared his information with me afterwards, and I fancy I made one or two useful suggestions.” She smiled.

“Who are these people?” Gisel said, as casually as she could. “They sound fascinating.”

“They are called the Chotani, the people of Chotan. They are very pale-skinned, because their island is covered by huge trees that block out the sun, so they live in perpetual semi-darkness. They survive by cultivating various forms of fungus, I believe. They are ruled by a king, who sent his son to conduct the negotiations. I watched one meeting from behind a screen. He seems a very...forceful...young man. My husband had his work cut out for him making a reasonable deal.”

“I’m sure he acquitted himself with his usual flair,” Gisel said, and let the conversation drift into further reminiscences of the late Ralitz’s business acumen, which she was now privately certain had in fact been mostly his wife’s. Some women, she knew, preferred to work behind the scenes; there were many female merchants in Tamland, some very successful, but Mistress Ralitz evidently felt it more suitable to let her husband, that very private man, be the public face of the business.

After a suitable interval had elapsed, she tried another tack.

“I don’t suppose you would know what it is the king has sent Master del Aguila off to obtain?” she ventured. “The king tried to explain it to me, but I’m afraid it all went over my head rather.” She laughed, and Mistress Ralitz joined in.

“Men are so bad at explaining things, are they not?” she said. “Well, as it happens, I do. It is called, I believe, *úllama*. My husband gave the king a sample of it to look at, but I expect he has misplaced it. I think there is some in my husband’s office. Shall I go and fetch it?”

“I should be most interested,” Gisel said. “But can you not tell me first?”

“Well,” said Mistress Ralitz, ringing a small handbell that brought a servant scurrying in, “let us have some more tea. Another pot, please, Corina. Yes. The Chotani derive it from the sap of a tree, and subject it to various processes—they have quite an advanced industry, I am told—and it truly does seem to do just about anything. It is extremely flexible, once it hardens, and repels water to a remarkable degree. They make boots of it so impervious that you can stand in a pool of water for as long as you like, and not only will your feet be quite dry, the boots themselves will be completely undamaged. It is also impervious to air, and they roll it out very thin, make bags of it and fill them with air, and once sealed they make excellent cushions.” She rose. “Allow me to fetch the sample.”

Left alone in the somewhat bare and comfortless drawing room, Gisel looked about her. There was little evidence that either the late Ralitz or his wife had spent much time here. Presumably their time had been spent in the office, discussing business

strategies. She wondered whose the idea had been for the great store, the size of a palace, whose groaning shelves would hold every conceivable good that could be sold and which would drive every other honest tradesperson in the city to ruin. She wondered what kind of person could imagine that would be a good thing.

Anatta Ralitz returned, bearing a swatch of material about five inches square. "Here it is," she said brightly, laying it in Gisel's outstretched hand. It was cold, smooth, and a sort of pale grey that shone dully in the lamplight. "They can colour it with all kinds of dyes. Now, Lady Andemar, what do you think? Can you imagine..." Mistress Ralitz caught her breath. "Can you imagine the sensation of wearing a gown made of such stuff?"

Gisel weighed the scrap of fabric in her palm. "I think I should find it rather disagreeable," she said honestly. She took the piece in both hands and pulled. It stretched readily.

"Do you think so?" Mistress Ralitz seemed surprised. "I intend to commission my seamstresses to make me one as soon as the first consignment arrives."

"But if it is impervious to water as well as to air," Gisel pointed out practically, "what would happen to one's sweat?"

Mistress Ralitz winced. "That is of course something one would have to consider," she said primly, "though I am surprised to hear you mention it, Lady Andemar. Do you often have occasion to...perspire?"

"Every day," Gisel said cheerfully. "Sometimes twice a day in summer. Well, Mistress Ralitz, this has been most interesting, but I see it is getting late and I must be going. Thank you so much for the tea, and I am so glad to see you are keeping yourself busy. It is so important when tragedy strikes one not to allow it to overwhelm one's spirit."

"As my late husband used to say," Mistress Ralitz said, walking Gisel to the door, "one person's tragedy is another person's opportunity. I should not say this, of course, but I became aware toward the end of my husband's life that he had grown somewhat...conservative in his business dealings, somewhat over-cautious. If one is to succeed in this life one must be bold, Lady Andemar. Not all of us have wealth and status handed to us as a birthday gift. I believe that now that my husband is...no longer with us...his business interests will soon be showing a new and quite startling spirit of enterprise and initiative, which can only be of benefit to us all. Did not King Tam himself write in the Tomes 'when the merchants prosper, so prospers the land'?"

Gisel was familiar with the quote; not that she needed to be, for there it was, embroidered on a sampler over the empty hearth, about the only sign of needlework in the room. She also knew the rest of it: "...but never take your eyes off the buggers for a moment." Something like that, anyway. Tam had known about merchants. She contented herself with a murmur that sounded like agreement, handed the sample of *úllama* back to Mistress Ralitz, and fled.

*

Driskil, unsurprisingly, refused to sit and drink with Varnak and Mordecai, though he did not refuse the beer. The other students showed no reluctance, and Driskil took his tankard very pointedly to another table, from which he threw burning glances of suspicion in their direction.

"Well," Varnak said, once everyone was settled and names had been established, "I had intended to interview you all separately, but since we're all here, and I'm sure this is just a formality, we may as well get it over with."

"What did you do to poor old Driskil?" demanded the big one, Burlox.

"I did nothing at all," Varnak said, truthfully enough. "He worked himself up into some sort of state all on his own."

The oldest of the boys, Thavaar, somewhat fussily dressed with fair hair and long eyelashes, spoke in a languid and rather pedantic tone. "Master Driskil," he said, "is gifted with a natural overplus of the exuberant spirits of youth, which, alas, sometimes leads him to cheek his elders and betters. It is a failing on which I have had occasion to speak to him before. Doubtless time will mend it, if nothing else does. I see him in latter years as some grave and reverend pillar of the community, looking back with regret on these turbulent days of rebellion."

"Do you by any chance read the adventures of Lord Clatterack?" Mordecai asked, on a sudden impulse.

Thavaar raised an eyebrow. "It is possible that one or two of the volumes have passed beneath my eye," he admitted. "Somewhat jejune, but good all-round family entertainment. Why do you ask?"

"Just a passing thought," Mordecai said. He had finished "Lord Clatterack Sails To Sinjaran" the previous night. Thavaar's mode of speech was to a nicety that employed

by the noble lord in the pieces before and after the adventure, when he was pretending to be the amiable buffoon that King Glendaleuc's court persisted in believing him. Presumably this was a regular feature of the stories. That none of the court had ever, as far as he could tell, succeeded in piercing the elementary masquerade struck Mordecai as perhaps the most authentic touch in the entire series. "I beg your pardon, my lord. Please continue."

Varnak, as Lord Ildras, embarked on his questioning. Mordecai watched and listened. At one point Master Churidang returned from the garden and went to the bar. As she turned away from it, she saw the little group and rolled her eyes in disgust. Varnak, seeing her in turn, stared back with magnificent *sang-froid*.

Mordecai read the signs. Churidang had pegged Varnak as a bumbling amateur, and so he was going to play the role to the hilt. Doubtless a Master of the Penetrating Light would think it ridiculous to interrogate suspects this way; but there was some merit in it.

Thavaar was clearly the ringleader of this gang. They all deferred to him, even Driskil. Burlox was the draught animal, the muscle, Driskil the dangerous idiot who gave them their edge. That left Gorol. Mordecai was finding him hard to read. He was the one who had bumped into him that day in Imhalca, and the incident seemed to have touched off an intense personal dislike in the boy; that or he simply hated Sinjari. If he got his ideas about Mordecai's people from rubbishy tales like "Lord Clatterack Sails To Sinjara," that was quite understandable.

At any rate, the waves of hostility coming off Gorol were making it very hard for Mordecai to place him in the hierarchy of Thavaar's little group. Was he the plucky sidekick? The wise counsellor? The comic relief? Mordecai had not known many gangs in his younger days, and had never belonged to one, but there had been one at Werness's school of magic where he had begun his studies, and he had seen many such groupings in the adult world since. They tended to follow the same rules, and people tended to drift into the same roles.

He realised that he had not been listening, and mentally kicked himself. The boys were laughing at some remark of Varnak's; they seemed to be getting on quite well. Over at the bar, Churidang caught Mordecai's eye and saluted him ironically with her tankard. *How much beer can that woman drink?* he wondered, and then forced his attention back to the group at the table.

“—and the headmaster said ‘well, if you insist, but I could have sworn it was a turnip!’” Varnak finished, and the boys erupted in laughter. Even Driskil, off at his own table, sniggered.

“So what are the teachers like at your place?” Varnak asked.

“Alas, my lord, their wit is not so highly developed,” Thavaar said. “They lack the lively appreciation of comedy. We try to educate them, but the work is unrewarding.” He sighed theatrically.

“Old Stick’s all right,” Gorol volunteered. “Nothing wrong with Old Stick.”

“He shows distinct promise,” Thavaar admitted.

“That’s why we all signed up for this trip,” Gorol said.

“Really?” Varnak sounded dubious, obviously picturing the dry, scholarly Aldro Stychel and finding the boys’ enthusiasm somewhat incongruous. “What exactly does this trip of yours involve?”

“Well,” said Gorol, after a hesitant glance at Thavaar, who waved him on, “we spent two days in Tamshold, that was after we came over the pass through Klaggen Gorge from home, and we looked at the, er...” He frowned. “We looked at, um...”

“The Temple of None,” Burlox put in. “And the Royal Museum and the Coronation Tree. And we have to write an essay on the history of Tamland based on what we saw.”

Mordecai fancied he knew who would be writing those essays, all four of them. So, the muscle man was also the group swot.

“And while we’re on the boat,” Gorol said, on slightly firmer ground, “we’re supposed to be gathering material for a project on the principal differences between Briom and Tsenesh.”

“How’s that coming?” Varnak asked casually, and Gorol and Burlox both blushed, while Driskil sniggered derisively and Thavaar looked pained.

“Slowly,” Gorol muttered wretchedly.

“I could give you a hand if you like,” Varnak offered. “Strictly unofficially and off the record, of course, but I did quite well at history and geography when I was your age. Shame to disappoint Old Stick, eh?”

The boys were vociferous in their approval of this extremely unethical offer. Mordecai leaned back in his chair, and caught the gimlet gaze of Churidang once more. She moved her head just a fraction in the direction of the garden.

Mordecai broke in on the discussion. "My lord," he said, "I regret to inform you that the waves of repletion are lapping over the edges of the basin of continence."

Varnak looked blank.

"I need to go," Mordecai explained.

"Well, go on then, Master Alonso, you don't need my permission," Varnak said impatiently.

Mordecai rose from the table, bowed to all present, turned and set off towards the garden door.

Churidang was waiting for him outside, in the shadow of a high wall. The sky was cloudy but currently not raining. At the bottom of the garden, the Pride of Tamland rocked gently from side to side.

"I checked out the musicians and the tramontanes," Churidang began without preamble. "Know what I found?"

Mordecai shrugged.

"Nobody," the woman said flatly. "Both rooms, fully paid up according to the boatmaster, stark empty. Nobody there, nobody had ever been there. Now what do you think about that?"

*

"I don't know," King Bran said. "I don't know what to make of it at all."

Gisel and he were sitting, once again, in the small library. Outside, an unseasonable wind set the trees rustling and creaking. The last time the weather in Tamshold had been this unsettled was also the last time Mordecai had been separated from the Panergodyne, the magical artifact whose guardianship had been the first among his duties. Zivano assured her that he had it under control...but how could he, when he had no magical link to it?

"So you think she actually ran the business, and he just played the role? A sort of figurehead?"

"I do," Gisel said. "And I think she was the prime mover behind this deal with the Chotani. Do we know any more about them than what she told me?"

"Well, I looked them up in the Grand Index," Bran said, getting up and going to the desk in the corner of the huge, book-lined room. "Small" was here a courtesy title; the

large library occupied an entire floor of the palace and people had been known to lose themselves for days in it. The Grand Index, theoretically a list of every topic covered in both libraries and the books that touched on it, was eighty years overdue for updating. “The only thing I could find was a copy of the Voyages of Admiral Jadderang, over a hundred years ago.” He rummaged on the cluttered desktop for a moment, and located the volume he wanted. “Here we are...oh!” He picked up something else and brought it back with the book to the chair in which he had been sitting. “I meant to show this to Mordecai before he left, but I couldn’t find it. It’s a sample of the stuff.”

Gisel started to say she had already seen one, but the king handed her a small, smooth, featureless black ball. There was a seam of some kind running round its diameter. Gisel recognised the cold, clammy feel of *úllama*. She weighed it in her hand for a moment.

“Interesting,” she said, and dropped it experimentally on to the floor.

There was a complicated series of percussive noises, including a crash as a lamp broke and a metallic clang as the ball bounced off the breastplate of King Garm’s ceremonial armour, and both Bran and Gisel ducked as it whizzed over their heads, bounced several more times, and eventually holed itself out in a large earthenware urn that stood by the door and was usually used to hold it open in summer.

“I should have mentioned that,” Bran said.

“I am beginning to feel,” Gisel said, a little shakily, “that the Chotani are welcome to this stuff. Is it magical?”

“No,” Bran said absently, leafing through the book. “The Chotani don’t have any truck with magic. Say it’s against reason. It’s all in here...umm....”

“What?”

“Here we are.” The king began to read aloud. “We disembark’d on the First of these *Islandes*, and were met by a most strange Individuall, deadly white of Skin and Haughtie in his Meanour. He inform’d us that the Place was nam’d *Jotahn*, and broght us unto the Presence of his Kynge, with whom I convers’d for nigh upon an Hour. The Jotahnee—so be his Peple call’d—venerate above all else the Principle of *Reason* and Observable Fact, and abhominat the Practyse of Magick in all its Formes. They shared with us a most delectable Repast, compriz’d of Sundry *Fungi*, cooked and sauced most piquantlie. We learn’d that the Jotahnee keep their Womenfolk in complete subjection; they may own no Propertie, nor have no Voyce in the Government, and are Bownd to serve the Men in all Thynges. Despyte this *Retrograde Policie*, the whych all Civiliz’d Men must deplore, we found the men of Jotahn witty and delyghtfulle

Companyons, and thought no Harm to Abide at Table for some Tyme.

“When we return’d to the Shippe, how ever, we found the 1st Mate ly’g upon the Deck, stone dead. The 2nd Mate reported that the dead Man had been casting an elementary weather Spelle, had *on a sudden clapp’d his hand to his Throat*, and had incontinentlie collaps’d, nor could he be rous’d. Besyde his Bodie we found a tiny *Dart* whose point was discolour’d with some stickie Substansse. This we cast at once into the Sea, and made all Haste to depart. I shall advyse my Kynge to have no Deal’gs with these *Folk*, as they are treacherous and murtherous and care naught for the *Common Decencyes*.”

“Poor old Jadderang,” Gisel commented dryly, as Bran closed the book. “He sounds to have been quite upset by the whole experience.”

“He wasn’t the most swashbuckling of Briom’s seafarers,” Bran agreed. “I think he only went to sea to please his father. Anyway, there you have it. That’s what we know about the Chotani.”

“But wait a minute,” Gisel said. “If they abhorminate—I mean, if they hate magic that much, then what earthly point was there in demanding that Mordecai go on this trip in the first place?”

“Well, the story I got from Ralitz was...” Bran frowned. “Memory’s going. Getting old. No, that was it. Story Ralitz told me was that because we didn’t have the industrial processes required to manipulate the stuff into all its forms, he and the Chotani had worked together to develop a suite of spells that would do the same job. Mordecai needed to go down to Freeport to try them out *in situ* and make sure they were compatible with his own magic and with the—you know, the thingy—before bringing them back here. And after that fiasco with the levitation spell from Briom, I quite agreed.”

“But you have no solid evidence that this suite of spells actually exists?”

“Well, no,” Bran admitted.

“Bran,” Gisel said, “far be it from me to say this to a beloved third cousin, but you’re an idiot. Can we get him back?”

“I don’t see how,” the king said unhappily. “By now they’ll be past the Jags and on the way to Brokenbowes. If we had Willibald we might be able to contact him, but even so there’s no quicker way back from there than turning the boat around. It would be another three or four days just to get a messenger to him, and by that time he’ll be in Freeport already.” He struck the arm of his chair with his fist. “Tam’s balls, if we only had a Correspondence Shell.”

“A what?” Gisel said, and the king explained.

“Mind you, it would be useless without another one at the other end. Tam tried to snitch a pair when he left, but Glendaleuc, or his Magus, saw through it and his guards clawed them back at the border. Several of our Court Magi have tried to recreate them. King Vern put a stop to it when his Magus had his ear gnawed off.”

“I suppose,” Gisel said carefully, “there would be no point in my asking our current Court Magus to contact Mordecai on the astral?”

Bran snorted. “What do you think? I wouldn’t trust him even if he agreed to do it.” He got up and walked over to the fireplace, above which hung a big map. “It’s ridiculous,” he said helplessly. “Pick any other direction and we can get a fast horse to the coast in three days—well, we could, assuming Briom or Tsenesh would let us. The one way that doesn’t take huge diplomatic efforts, the one way we can just *go*...takes twice as long any way you do it.”

“Blame King Onderdonk,” Gisel said, “and his brilliant idea of having two Court Magi.”

“Well, to be fair, he couldn’t have known they would declare war on each other,” Bran said.

“Couldn’t he?” Gisel countered. “I’ve only known one magician—two now—and to my mind it’s a foregone conclusion. It must do something to their brains, I think.” She too rose. “I must go home and get some sleep. I’m sure Zivano will have more surprises for me tomorrow. Good night, your majesty.”

She bowed and left the room. Bran remained, staring at the point on the map where the course of the river took it through the area of geographical chaos known as the Jags. Now, alone, he looked all of his years, bowed down with worry and defeat.

“Tam’s bones, Mordecai,” he muttered, “may the gods not notice you tonight.”

*

The man known as Gudge slipped like a shadow down the length of Toller’s garden to the waterside. It was full dark, and the air was heavy with the promise of more rain. Everyone had retired, either to their rooms on the boat or to the inn’s more congenial accommodation.

It would take more than one lousy Penny to scare him off. His persona, the frightened little man with the bulging eyes and the soft, insinuating voice, had served him well many times, and today it had done so again. Master Churidang still had not seen through it.

He slipped on to the boat, blessing the inattentive soul who had not removed the

gangplank—he could have made it, but there might have been noise—and went to the stern. Leaning over the rail, he whistled softly between his teeth.

For a moment nothing happened. Then a bulky shape emerged from the water, secured to the boat in a sort of canvas bag by two stout ropes pegged to the hull somewhere below the waterline.

“Is that you, my good Gudge?” said a familiar husky voice.

Gudge leaned over and reached out a hand. Hudge, throwing away the hollow reed through which he had breathed for two full days, took it and hauled himself, with ghostlike quietness, over the rail. He was soaked to the skin, but in his usual good humour.

“It is a pleasure to see you again, my friend,” he said, “and not merely because you signal an end to my subaqueous sequestration. I fear I was forced to assume it sooner than expected; there are those on this boat already who know me all too well, it seems. Let us adjourn to your chamber and compare notes. I have a matter of singular interest to impart to you. Did you know that there is—”

He stopped, swaying, and his hand flew to his neck. He struggled to speak, face purpling. A little foam emerged from between his working lips. Then the light died out of his eyes, and before the horror-stricken Gudge could catch him, he toppled backwards over the rail and vanished into the black water.