



LAND

OF THE

HEADLESS

A D A M

R O B E R T S

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On  
The Snow  
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# Land Of The Headless

ADAM ROBERTS

Orion

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# PART ONE

## What Happened on the Way to Cainon

On Tuesday a genetic materials test confirmed my guilt (but of course this confirmation was only formality) and on Wednesday I was beheaded. My crime was adultery.

There is a traditional belief, which many still share, that adultery is the least of the three offenses which our penal code punishes by decapitation. For it consists of injuring another's life, whereas *murder* is a crime that fully deprives another of their life; and *blasphemy* is a crime against the divine principle, which is clearly a wholly other affair. But I do not say this in self-exculpation. The punishment is the same whichever of the three you commit. Holy law sanctions no legalistic evasion or hairsplittings. How could it be holy if it did?

On the Wednesday morning the maior, Bil Charis, came to see me in my cell. He was there to oversee the fitting of the ordinator. Two security employees lay me naked on my front and strapped me down. The strap was not necessary, as I assured them, but they applied it nevertheless. 'It is,' said Bil, as the surgeons started about their surgical work, 'the usual procedure.'

'And let us not,' I replied bitterly, 'ever depart from the *usual*. Let us never *reform*, or *improve*, the ancient barbarities.'

'Boh, Jon Cavala,' Bil replied. 'For you cannot deny that these beheadings have indeed been thoroughly reformed and improved since the old days!'

I said nothing.

The surgeons touched the base of my spine with an analgesic proboscis. They spliced swiftly and precisely into my spine, affixing the primary and secondary node and embedding the ordinator. The analgesic meant that I felt none of this, except for the butterfly pressure of the machines moving over my back. I could hear only the whizz and click of their tools. I could see nothing but the portion of the grey bench immediately in front of my eyes. This, by a chain of association, brought into my mind the thought of my impending blindness, and my dissatisfactions found voice. I will admit that I spoiled peevishly.

'You will shortly be blinding me,' I pointed out to Bil. 'Taking my sight, and my hearing and taste and smell, as well as my head. The latter necessarily includes all the former.'

'By no means,' returned Bil, in an easy voice. 'There are many forms of prosthetic sight on the



market, even for somebody with funds as limited as, perhaps, are yours. Only last month Medico released a new design: fashioned as a webbed cloak worn around the shoulders and granting one hundred and eighty degrees of vision behind the wearer. Or you may choose to wear the cloak on your front and enable forward vision.'

'By repute,' I complained, 'the visual input from this new device is grainy and has a limited range of colours.'

'Then choose another,' said Bil. 'Your ordinator has multiple compatibilities. Cameras on stalks, pods for the wrist or palm, bio-devices, all can be connected to your new brain.'

'Any such device I must furnish for myself, at my own expense,' I said.

'Naturally. The same is true of your future clothes, food, housing. You do not expect the State to provide you with such things freely? Such charity would be demeaning.'

'I do not *expect*,' I said, becoming heated, 'the State to decapitate me for a so-called crime that—' But Bil stopped me.

'Come come, no sermonising here,' he said. 'It is fruitless to harangue me. Besides, the surgeons have completed their work.'

And so they had.

I was taken to a separate room for the download, which was accomplished in a matter of minutes, mapping all cortices and lobes of my brain and copying all their patterns and potential synaptic arrangements electronically into the ordinator at the base of my spine. Then I was dressed in loose pants, but no other clothing. The surgical analgesia was beginning to wear off by this time, and I was conscious of a vague ache on my back where the incisions had been made. And I was aware of the weight of the wallet-sized metal ordinator under my skin, at the base of my back, just above the top of my buttocks. I have heard stories that condemned men and women experience oddly doubled and near-hallucinogenic sensations whilst possessing both head and ordinator. I cannot confirm these stories. I felt no doubleness of consciousness. I felt nothing but anxiety at my approaching execution.

After that everything happened quickly. I was hurried up a dozen steps and through a door onto the outside platform. It was a hot afternoon. The air smelt strongly of a city summer. The sunlight was sharp on my face, like a zest. Floettes of white cloud were arranged with a perfect aesthetic harmony across a blue sky, and there were neither too many nor too few of these clouds. It was a beautiful arrangement. The colour of this sky, a delicate and exquisite blue, was the last I saw with my flesh.

eyes.

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Beyond the yellow walls of the execution yard I could see the city of Doué baking in the sun, and very beautiful it seemed to me there, at that time, before my beheading. How often I had walked around it and never noticed anything about it! Alleys of lime trees flanked the straight roads: scores of silver trunks nearly phosphorescent in the sunlight, each topped with a foam of tiny leaves. Pavement of tessellated brick deserted in the afternoon heat. A muddle of tiled roofs, most of them the colour of carrots or pumpkin and all of them textured like pineapple skin. In every direction white walls, and every wall white-shuttered windows, giving the city a blank face, perfectly uninterested in me or my execution. To my right the river ran cyan with dyes from the fabric factory. Behind the river stood the metal stalks of the telecommunications park. The moon was very skinny in the afternoon sky, a curve of scalpel silver against the blue. Above it the tiny hieroglyph of an airliner moved slowly, hurdling the moon in slow motion.

That sky-blue! That colour!

I said, 'The weather is hot.' This was merely stating the obvious, of course, and a poor bid for last words; but witnesses at executions will confirm that only very rarely do the condemned utter profundities. You should not expect wisdom from people in such a position. Their minds, after all, will tend to be elsewhere.

I walked forward, and sweat started dotting my skin.

There were no more than five people lolling in the execution yard. A century ago, of course, the public executions drew swarms of eager spectators. Our modern, high-tech tastes are less bloody, I suppose. Or perhaps the spectacle is less entertaining nowadays, since the human headsman has been replaced by the flawless mechanics of the Clapper.

The herald read my crime, declaring me, in the whole world's hearing, an adulterer and a rapist. My panic at the impending event took a sudden, hyperbolic swerve upwards. I was blinking, and I was sweating in the heat. I felt as if I were choking on my hump-pumping heart, as if the heart were somehow lodged in my gullet and grown four times its normal size. Its throb was restricting my breathing and clogging my whole chest with palpitating grossness. I could not command my own legs. I was told to walk forward, but I could not do so. I was shoved.

The herald muttered in my ear - these were the last words my fleshly ear would ever hear - 'Drop your shoulders, lad.' He spoke kindly, I believe. It is of course better if the cut does not pass through the shoulders as well as the neck. But it was hard for me to comply: every muscle in my frame had tensed taut as hardwood. This was something beyond my conscious control.

I heard the hum of the Clapper behind me, floating up and positioning itself. I almost called out, but I did not, and then the blade spun and bit, and my world went instantly dark and silent.

I did not feel any pain.

This is what I felt: I was conscious of a sudden forceful pressure, as if I had been punched firmly on the back of my neck. The loss of sight and sound was as if a capacious lead helmet had landed on my head with abrupt force. I'm sure I staggered. My ordinator was routing my autonomies now. I registered that I had leaned from the vertical, and I put my right foot to steady myself, and then I shimmied my left foot to stop myself toppling that way. Then I felt the Clapper clamp itself onto the stump of my neck, and only with that sensation did I become aware that my shoulders, my chest and my back were wet, slick with my own blood. At that realisation I felt a giddiness, doubtless more a matter of intellectual shock than physical distress. I suppose I lost no more than a pint of blood before the Clapper sealed the wound. But the understanding that what had happened to me had actually happened to me was- I don't know. I was going to write *disorienting*, but that does not capture it at all.

It is difficult to convey the sensation.

I felt the stomatic valve being slid into the severed opening of my throat, its biprong separating the oesophagus and trachea. But I did not feel the machine knit artery to artery, or feel it polyseal the plastic cap to my skin. Or, it would be more accurate to say, I could not determine which of the many pricking, pressing, crimping, penetrating, wrenching and tickling sensations of which I was aware were related to these processes.

Then, as is common in decapitation autobiographies, I must report a hiatus. This, I understand, is known as the *aporia*. With no visual or aural inputs, only a close darkness, the sensory deprivation plays games with one's apprehension of the passage of time. I have no memory of Bil Charis standing beside me on the platform, or of him saying, 'As Mayor of Doué I declare you punished for your crime. Go now and live a good life.' He must have said this, because the law requires it, but I had no way of hearing the words, deaf to the world, blind to world, the world tasteless and odourless to me now.

My family had disowned me, and no friend of mine from my former life cared to offer me aid in this extremity. I had been, in former life, a successful man: a poet, a musician, to some degree even a scholar. But that life had been struck as clean away from me as my head.

It fell to a philanthropic group named the Friends of the Headless to lead me, blind and deaf, from the platform and away through the city. These people perform such duties out of charity and religious piety. I cared nothing for this. All I cared for was the sense of heat on my torso, and my awareness of those places on my skin where my blood had become sticky and dry. I could feel, because the sensor inside my ordinator told me, that I was moving, that my legs were working. But I was sealed away from the cosmos in darkness. Eventually the walking stopped, and my guides encouraged me to sit, lie down. I slept, fitfully at first, then coma-like. It had been a stressful day.

The next day, or the one afterwards, I am not sure, I heard a voice. It came as a direct input into my ordinator, through its port at the base of my spine - a synthetic voice asking if I wished the senses of sight and hearing returned to my consciousness. Some decapitees, I have heard, opt for complete deprivation as their decreed punishment. Not the majority, of course, but perhaps those few who are more devoutly religious. I replied that I wanted both, but that I had very little money left from my funds, after paying prison fees and legal subventions. I had just enough for three mid-range prostheses; after which I would depend wholly upon the charity of others, or upon such work as I could obtain in my newly denuded physical condition.

But, meagre though my funds were, the thought of remaining in the silent dark was intolerable to me. So, and even though it cost me almost everything I had, I asked for epaulette eyes, for ears, and a torso-mounted microphone, on my front between my nipples; and for these I authorised payment. The spoke with the somewhat uninflected voice broadcast out of the ordinator itself. It is possible to buy software that gives the headless person's voice more heft and resonance, but I could not afford this. It is sometimes said that it is not the ordinator's voice itself that offends decapitees' sensibilities, but rather than fact that, after a lifetime of having one's ears located close to one's own mouth, it is a disconcertingly alienating thing to hear one's own voice coming from a completely different part of the body. It sounds, even as one formulates and speaks one's own words, as if somebody else were speaking. A schizophrenic circumstance.

My ears were fitted, and wired in to my ordinator. This was a simple matter. My eyes were inserted into my shoulders and connected to my new brain. These devices gave me a rabbit-like vision, two wide arcs from opposite sides of my neck stump. The effect was to distort objects in my visual field according to an elongated oval pattern, making things thinner and longer and slightly curved as they moved in front or behind me. I could not see things that were behind me, for my ordinator could not

process two contradictory fields of view simultaneously. Even as it was, with forward-only vision, objects acquired a double aspect when they moved, for although my ordinator could integrate the two visual fields as long as things were still, any movement confused the programming and single objects split into two, overlapping shadows, like projections on a screen, until they were still again. This took getting-used-to. In addition to this limitation, the eyes had a much-reduced colour range: I saw many blues, some greens, a single hue of red, a single shade of yellow. Many things that I would have recognised immediately with my old eyes were puzzles to my new eyes. It was a while before I became accustomed to all this.

I spent a dizzy day. Merely getting off my pallet bed caused my senses to spill, and often I was compelled to sit down again. I experimented with walking around my room. A volunteer from the Friends had agreed to help me move towards rehabilitation-in-the-world, and her name was Siuzan Delage. 'This will soon be second nature for you,' she assured me.

'It is hard to believe so,' I replied.

'I have come,' she told me, 'to accompany you to church. Assuming you want company.' And by this I knew that it was Sunday.

I went to church with Siuzan Delage, and prayed for the first time since my punishment, though clattering and rattling about my new metal brain. I joined in the singing of antiphonal hymns. The congregation was more or less evenly divided between headless individuals such as myself, scraping the air with their metal voices, and the headed zealots and enthusiasts of the Friends organisation.

Afterwards Siuzan Delage walked back with me to my room, her hand on my elbow to stop me from walking into one or other of the double-visioned shimmying obstacles I came across. Wall. Door. Chair. Person. 'So many of the headless,' I said. 'The church was crowded with them. Have so many people been decapitated recently?'

'Only a small number,' said Siuzan. 'Most of those in church today are headless volunteers who work now for the Friends, helping us rehabilitate people such as yourself.'

'I suppose,' I said, 'that there are few enough employment opportunities for such folk. Perhaps volunteer work for your philanthropic organisation is the best they can manage.' My thoughts were sour and sarcastic, but the words emerged as blandly synthetic as all my other statements.

'It is more likely,' she replied blithely, 'that they work from a sense of remorse, of duty, and belief in the importance of making the mercy of the All'God prevail, even to murderers, heretics and adulterers.'

We were back at my room. I sat upon my cot, surprisingly exhausted by the short walk. 'From your words,' I said, 'you are a zealot.'

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I saw her nod, her features blurring between two vertically bouncing faces momentarily, before recomposing into a single item. She was a beautiful young woman, with straight, plump nose and lips, and fat-lidded wide-set eyes of pronounced clarity and blueness, although perhaps the vivid shine of the blue was a function more of my visual software than her eyes. Her dark hair was webbed into plaits and tied behind her head. Her skin seemed sunshine-white to my new eyes, and was blemishless and smooth. She wore modest but expensive clothes: a mauve droho with white stripes, and expensive-looking meadhres. She was smiling at me.

'Indeed,' she said. 'I have been a zealot for seven years.' She could not have been more than twenty years old. 'I confess I cannot understand how one can worship the Divine and not do so with zeal. A frank, heretical denial of the All'God seems more logical to me, in a way, than any half-hearted adherence to the church.'

'Some people are by nature half-hearted in their lives,' I said. 'It is the minority who are enthusiasts.'

'And which are you?'

I considered. 'It may offend you,' I said, 'and indeed may approach heresy, but I suppose that I have lost much of my confidence in the church. Until this affliction,' and I put my hands up to wave in the air over my neck stump, 'I thought little of the headless. Of course, I saw them from time to time working at their menial jobs, or shuffling along the streets, but I was too caught up in my own business and my own thoughts to pay them much attention. But now that I have become what I did not used to notice, I am shaken by the extremity of the condition.'

'Many amongst the newly headless speak as you speak,' she said. She was still smiling. 'It can take time for a person to overcome the injury to their pride.'

'I speak of the general, not of my particular. I ask, is this the way to organise our society? The penal code, this penal code; it is from a medieval past, from a time when life was brutal. But life is no longer brutal. We are a space-faring, technologically advanced civilisation. We have a sophisticated and liberal culture. No other inhabited world still abides by so barbaric a practice.'

'But every world,' she said, 'must have a legal code, and must punish wrongdoing. All worlds have punishments, and some are more barbaric than ours. What of Oudart, for instance, where murder and treason are punishable by death?'

‘Our own code calls for death!’ I said. ‘For centuries our criminals were decapitated and buried in criminal graves.’

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‘But no longer,’ she said, still calm. ‘Because we understand the central points of our scriptures to be *compassion* and *mercy*, and so we are merciful and compassionate. Because the All’God has enabled us to develop new technologies, so it is that we can mitigate the necessity of death.’

‘It remains a monstrously antiquated creed,’ I insisted, ‘for a modern society.’

‘On the contrary. It is precisely modernity that enables you to speak to me, even though your head has been struck from your body.’

‘For crimes that other worlds view as pastimes! As hobbies!’

For the first time her expression cooled. ‘Murder and blasphemy cannot be described as hobbies!’

‘I was not beheaded for either.’

‘Nor,’ she said, ‘are there civilised worlds where rape is a pastime.’

This deflated me, and took the conviction from my statements. My torso sagged a little on the bench. ‘But,’ I continued in a quieter voice, ‘I speak of the principles behind the punishment. Anybody committing adultery faces the same punishment that I have faced, regardless of the benignity of the offence, adultery being defined as any illicit sexual activity whatsoever. Two teenagers committing fornication, an unhappy wife seeking solace with a lover, a man—’

But she stopped me, holding up her hand like a traffic policeman. ‘The All’God’s law is the All’God’s law,’ she said sternly. Then, in a kinder tone, ‘The divine We is who we are. Our religion is the spinal cord of our civilisation. Without the All’God all its richness would crumble.’

‘It seems to me,’ I said, after a silence, ‘that the worship of God evolves over time, as cultures evolve. Is it heresy to say so?’

‘Many scholars,’ said Siuzan, ‘and many theologians have argued the point. It can hardly be called heresy to discuss it. The All’God is duality, and relishes discussion.’

‘Yet a man was beheaded last year for insisting the practice of decapitation be discontinued!’ I said.

'It is heresy to oppose the beheadings, and heresy results in beheading. Is it surprising that the practice has never been reformed?'

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'The All'God's law,' she said again, 'is the All'God's law.'

'A circular statement,' I said.

This animated her. 'Is our world not harmonious, ordered, beautiful? Is ours not a complex and satisfying culture in which to live, to grow, to love and be loved, to study, to work, to grow old and die? Are our cities not free of crime, almost wholly so, and the people well mannered, polite, engaged, selfless and pure? Would you truly prefer a world like Rivy, where the populace carry guns and dozer die in street brawls every day? Would you prefer to live on Hoffmanwelt, where suicide outnumber all other manners of death, and half the population live bleakly secular and alcoholic lives?'

'These,' I said shortly, 'are merely rhetorical questions.'

'Religion gives shape and meaning to our existences,' she said. 'Empirically this cannot be denied. The people of our world benefit from that. We are happy with a profound happiness. Would you jeopardise this, for the right to fornicate and kill at your pleasure?'

'Though we speak to one another, you and I, perhaps,' I said, 'are having different conversations.'



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## Three

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I stayed in the House of the Friends of the Headless for two weeks, and during that time the two of us had many similar discussions, Siuzan Delage and I. To begin with I assumed that all newly beheaded individuals received such devoted attention from the zealots of this organisation. But it dawned on me that Siuzan Delage held a special place for me in her heart. She wanted, perhaps, to return me to the path of the Divine. The conversion mania is common to many zealots.

‘I know the work you used to do,’ she told me. ‘The poetry you composed before your execution. It is beautiful.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, surprised.

‘Your music, your lyricism.’

‘Yes.’

‘It is spiritual,’ she said.

‘Thank you again,’ I said. ‘I tried to celebrate the spiritual within the ordinary.’

‘Precisely,’ she said with energy, as if I had pressed a button that released all her agitation. ‘Precisely! The church is not for Sundays and high days, but for every day! God is not the *decoration* of our lives, God *is* our lives!’

‘I am not sure,’ I said tentatively, ‘that this is what my poetry expresses - not exactly this.’

It seemed to depress her that I said so, and she became surly. After a while she brightened. ‘But what can I say? Music can be interpreted in many ways, after all. Not even the artist can encompass every resonance of his or her art.’

‘Musical poetry can be interpreted many ways,’ I conceded. ‘More so than conventional narrative, more so than the visuals. And yet music is not open to every interpretation. Happy music is happy after all. Sad music is sad.’ I had no need to add that my poetry had been sad. But my poetry was a long way behind me now, struck away with my old life.

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‘These are only the broadest criteria of interpretation,’ she said. ‘Within that, we may find a spectrum of meanings.’

‘Is the same not true,’ I hazarded, ‘of Scripture also?’

It upset her, I believe, that I returned to this topic. ‘Scripture is precise where it needs to be precise,’ she said stiffly, ‘and general when it needs to be general. The All’God lays down specific rules we must follow, but also general principles we must interpret for ourselves in our actions - the principle of mercy, for instance, which is core to the Divine being.’

I replied that I had had little sense of that mercy.

This annoyed Siuzan further. ‘That you have not perceived All’God’s mercy tells me much about you, and little about Him,’ she snapped.

At mealtimes I fed little parcels of vegetable or meat pulp into the valve at my neck stump, and swallowed them down into my stomach. This food of course lacked any flavour or quality. Whatever drink I poured into the same valve slid down into my stomach the same way, tastelessly, distinguished only by subtle variations in viscosity and texture of flow. There was one exception, namely wine, which of course entails certain aftereffects which other drinks would not. But in general no savour remained to the business of eating and drinking. I took no pleasure in it any more. When my stomach creased with hunger, I fed myself. That was all.

I became acquainted with the other recent headless. A dozen had been received into the house from execution over the month, ten men and two women. I spoke to most of them, and two of them left the house in my company, joining me on my travels, and I shall say something more about this pair.

I sat in the courtyard, in the white heat of the summer sun, trying to read a book, or more exactly experimenting with different positions of holding the text so that my eyes could absorb it. The best way, I discovered, was to cover one eye, and position the book beside the other shoulder.

Two headless came out of the refectory into the courtyard and sat on the hot marble of the bench. They were wearing white meadhres and yellow shifts: one, like me, had epaulette eyes; and his shift was cut open about the shoulders to facilitate their vision. The other had stalk eyes placed on his neck stump, like antennae; a more expensive prosthesis.

We introduced ourselves. ‘My name is Jon Cavala,’ said I.

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‘Mine,’ said the stalk-eye, ‘is Mark Pol Treherne.’

‘Gymnaste Peri,’ said the second.

‘You are the Cavala,’ said Mark Pol, ‘famous for his poetry? I know your poetry. I have heard some of your music.’ His voice emerged from some device in his neck stump rather than from his oratorical mouth and it had a more melodious timbre than mine, although it was nevertheless unmistakably synthetic. Such a device must have been expensive.

‘I am flattered,’ I replied.

‘I enjoy music,’ said Mark Pol. ‘Why were you beheaded?’

‘You are direct,’ I said, ‘in your questions. I was beheaded for adultery.’

‘Aha! Adultery, is it? But that covers several crimes, that word. What form of adultery?’

I angled my shoulders away from him a little, to express my discomfort. ‘Rape,’ I said shortly.

‘It is always rape, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘In our so-exacting legal definition. Adultery always means rape, doesn’t it?’

‘Not so,’ I contradicted. ‘Last year in this very city, in Doué, a young couple were both beheaded for adulterous fornication. There was no rape in that instance. This was a mutually consensual sexual relationship.’

‘I remember the case,’ said Mark Pol. ‘Although I insist it was an exceptional affair, and that “adultery” almost always does mean rape. But they were a fine couple, were they not? A handsome couple they were, both of them very good-looking. Neither of them older than twenty-four. But she was married to somebody else, as I recall. She shouldn’t have married the other man if she wanted the first fellow, I would say.’

‘They could not,’ said Gymnaste, ‘live without each other.’ He paused. ‘So they said.’

‘Indeed,’ said the more garrulous Mark Pol. ‘And so they faced execution together. Is it romantic?’

don't know. I heard that her husband has put her aside. He will divorce her, it seems, although the legal process takes seven years. So, in six years they will be together, a headless couple, enjoying legally sanctioned sexual congress in wedlock. Headless parents giving birth to headed children! How droll that thought is!

'There is no reason,' I said, my thoughts on my own possible future, 'that one of the headless might not marry and have children.'

'Indeed not,' said Mark Pol. 'But would a beautiful woman marry one of our sort? Perhaps beauty only on the surface, as the saying says, but who could fall in love with somebody in our poor truncated condition? Yourself, *Sieur Cavala*, you are - I see it - amuscular individual. You have a good body, a strong torso, two strong arms, well-proportioned legs. You have exercised assiduously.'

'I have,' I said. 'And fortune has given me a robust constitution.'

'Yours was a pretty face, I suppose?' Mark Pol asked, seemingly offhand.

'It is no vanity,' I said, 'to admit that I was handsome.'

'And now that handsome visage is rotting in a ditch! So the world turns.' He laughed his ersatz laugh, a tinnily mechanical noise, very grating to hear.

'And why,' I asked, encouraged by his boldness, 'were *you* executed?'

'For murder,' he said, turning his torso flat to face mine, so that his stalk eyes were looking directly at me.

'Indeed?' I said, uncertain how to respond.

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, murder. They say that blasphemy is the worst of the three crimes, don't they? A crime against the All'God rather than man, which makes it worse. I can't believe so. Surely murder is the worse, for heresy is just words, where murder is deeds, and deeds against flesh. Ask *Gymnaste* here - he lost his head for heresy. Didn't you, *Gymnaste*?'

'So I did,' said *Gymnaste*, after a pause.

'And a milder mannered individual you'll not find amongst all the headless,' declared Mark Pol.

Treherne loudly. ‘And yet I am *far* from mild mannered. I am quarrelsome and prone to anger.’

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‘You killed a man?’ I asked.

‘I did.’

‘Under what circumstances?’

‘Oh,’ he said, giving his hands alternately a rub and a squeeze, ‘you’d like to know, would you? The violence and the death intrigue you, do they? Well, I have no objection to telling you. I was drinking in a bar here in Doué, and I became involved in a discussion with the person sitting next to me—a man I had never before met. Our discussion became more animated, until it would be accurate to describe it as an argument. The heat increased under the pressure applied to it by our two personalities, and before long we were fighting. I struck him with one of the long-necked bottles of wine for which the region of Brignol, far to the east of here, is so famous. The bottle was full, and accordingly heavy. It broke his skull, and he died inside an ambulance on the road to hospital. There.’ He held his hands before himself, showing the palms. ‘My whole story. I blamed what I had drunk. I said the wine had killed him and not I. But the court thought differently. They thought, fantastically, that the blame was mine.’

‘An engrossing story,’ I said.

‘Doué is full of such stories,’ he replied. ‘And now my victim is in one of Doué’s many graveyards and my own head is rotting like yours on a rubbish heap, and the world turns again.’

We three sat together, and the heat and the faint pressure of the sunlight squeezed our skins. I had an itch at my neck stump, which was a frequent occurrence, although it was not always possible to reach the itching area with my fingernails. I scratched as well as I could at the place near the broad cap of the stump-fitting.

‘Where,’ said Gymnaste shortly, ‘will you go, *Sieur Cavala*?’

‘I am no *sieur*,’ I said. ‘My name is Jon. And I will travel into the countryside, hoping to find work on a farm or factory.’

‘I have thought a great deal about this very question,’ said Mark Pol, stretching himself on the bench. ‘The family of my victim are resident in Doué, and it would be uncomfortable to encounter them on the street. Unlikely, I suppose, in a city so large, but certainly possible. Perhaps it would be

best to travel to the country. But at the same time, there is much to be said for city life, particularly from a headless perspective. After all, there are many hundred headless individuals in the city. Citizens are used to seeing them coming and going about their business. This is not so in the country where villages may not see one of the headless from year's end to year's end. In such places one runs the risk of ridicule, of persecution, fingers pointed and doors slammed in one's - face, I was going to say. Neck, I suppose I should say instead.'

'There is Montmorillon,' said Gymnaste slowly. 'They call it the Land of the Headless.'

'Yes,' said Mark Pol impatiently. 'I have heard of this place. But is it truly a Land of the Headless? Or is it merely a province where many of the headless have gone, such that they form a high proportion of the general population? There they go to work the mines, isn't it so? Perhaps you would be happy in the mines, Gymnaste: in those low-ceilinged tunnels, with light-amplifiers fitted to your epaulettes, servicing the mining machines and lugging cargo. Perhaps that would suit you. But it would not suit me. Even though I no longer have a face upon which to feel the sunlight, I would prefer to live above ground. Are you of the same mind, Jon?'

'I have no strong feelings on the subject of working subterraneously,' I said. 'It is merely my wish to travel to the country. My' - and I hesitated, but it was necessary that I become used to the locution 'my *victim* also lives in Doué, and I do not wish to encounter her. It would distress her, and discommode me. Better to leave the city altogether, and continue life in a new environment.'

'I see,' said Mark Pol. 'I see.'

But this was the direct opposite of the truth. In truth my victim no longer lived in Doué, for she had moved to her family's estate in Cainon. Her family name was Benet. My only wish (and I had nothing else with which to give purpose to my life) was to see her again. And so I planned to travel to Cainon. I had been revolving possibilities in my mind ever since coming to the House of Friends: perhaps to travel incognito, to apply to the Estate of Benets as a labourer under a false identity. Without my head I was virtually unrecognisable as the person I had once been. It could be that the Estate of Benets hired headless workers for menial chores; such was a common charity amongst the more devout families. Then, working on the estate, I might contrive a chance to see Bernardise. For this was the name of the woman for whose sake I had been decapitated. But, naturally, I could tell nobody this, since if it became clear that I was travelling specifically to see Bernardise I would be prevented, by law. A headless man can be imprisoned, as can any other person. A headless man can suffer any penalty under the law except decapitation- and the law says that should he commit a second crime for which that is the punishment there is only the final execution, and burial in a criminal's grave.

I did not tell Siuzan Delage that this was my plan; and nor did I tell these two other headless men. 'I have some experience of working on farms,' I told them, 'from my youth. The work agrees with me. Besides, one of the headless can hardly pick and choose which work he wants to do. I will be lucky

earn the merest labourer's wage.'

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'True,' said Mark Pol. 'Too true.'

'How will you travel?' asked the taciturn Gymnaste.

'My friend means to ask,' interrupted Mark Pol, 'how much money you possess. He means to ask will you fly? Or take the overland? Or will you, perhaps, walk?' He laughed again his artificial laugh. 'Of course, you must know where you are going before you can buy a ticket.'

'I have no particular plans,' I said disingenuously. 'Besides, my funds are very limited. I spent most of my monies on the law, and what little was left paid for my prostheses. I have, perhaps, fifteen totales, and some odd divizos.' I thought about the overland fare to Cainon, a hundred or more miles distant: it would be at least ten totales. I did not like the thought of arriving at Cainon with only five totales in my account.

'I will walk,' I said expansively.

'I shall accompany you,' said Mark Pol. 'If you have no objections?'

'None,' I said.

'Will you come too,' Mark Pol asked Gymnaste, as if on the spur of the moment. 'Or do you have other plans?'

Gymnaste was silent for a while, and then said: 'I will walk.'

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## Four

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Our walk to Cainon lasted four days and three nights. My account of it need not detain the reader any longer than twenty pages of this text; but I must tell you about it because so much of what followed was shaped by it. From this walk so much else, both evil and good, flowed. These few days have proved to be the dominant event of my life.

That Siuzan declared her intention to accompany us upon this walk did not, perhaps, surprise me much as it ought to have done. She talked of her desire to go to Cainon and explore the possibilities of mission work in that city. The walk, she said, would be a pilgrimage. We were all pilgrims.

We were, but in ways neither she nor I could anticipate. I fear I flattered myself that Siuzan accompanied us because of some indefinable magnetism of mine. Headless as I was, infatuated as I was becoming, I could not see clearly, alas. But then again: why might not a woman love a man though he lacks a head? Why does any woman fall in love with any man? Not for the outsides, but insides, of their heads, surely. For their *hearts*, surely.

We set out early one day, walking through the streets of Doué before most of the population were awake. Eager to be out of the city and away from the judgemental eyes of so many citizens, we agreed to take a central bus to the northern outskirts of the city. This cost us seventy divizos each, and Mark Pol grumbled at the expense, even so little an outgoing as this. ‘I see no reason why we should not have walked proudly through the city,’ he said, ‘holding our—’ And he stopped, with an electronic snickering sound. ‘I was going to say,’ he added, ‘*holding our heads high*, but that is not the best expression, perhaps.’

‘Can you not afford seventy divizos?’ Siuzan Defarge asked him, earnestly. It may have been that she was thinking of gifting him some money. Here I intervened crossly.

‘Do not pity him his lack of money,’ I said. ‘He spent more on his prostheses than either of us - the very best in visual and auditory augmentation. Nothing but the best was good enough for—’

Mark Pol laughed. ‘Are you envious?’ he demanded.

‘—good enough for the luxurious Mark Pol—’

‘Envious?’ he repeated. ‘Are you envious, *Sieur Cavala*?’



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