

*The Eighth  
Acolyte Reader*



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# Island of the Blest

by J. Darling

Professor Gowers watched the February rain drip from the red brick of the University. Rebelling against the northern English winter, his mind conjured up a sudden vision of a shining isle set in the Cyclades. He reached for the kettle on the gas ring to resuscitate the dying leaves in the pot and turned to face the pallid, owl-faced young man embedded in an armchair before the fireplace.

"You know, Smearsdon, you might consider actually going to Greece this summer." Proto-Geometric pottery would make a rather dry dissertation, he thought. Surely classical archeology had more dramatic subjects to offer a young man. "It might boost your morale if you were to view the landscape whence it came."

"But summer, sir, is the worst time to go: it's too hot and the country's overrun with ghastly package tourists. Besides, I can't afford it."

"You could if you offered yourself as guide-lecturer on one of these Aegean theme cruises. They always like to use fresh young graduates who might welcome the chance to see Greece on the cheap. It just so happens I have a brochure...."

Before Smearsdon departed for Piraeus, Professor Gowers gave him a small volume he had picked up in an antiquarian bookseller's: *Lore of the Islands: Folk tales of the Aegean as recorded by a Gentleman*. It had been published in Edinburgh in 1831.

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"Arthur – are you listening to me? Gladys and Ben were greatly sublimated by Dudsworth Polytechnic's cruise last year. It's a pity you started snoring when they showed their slides."

"What's wrong with Torremolinos again? At least you meet Brits there, and you can get fish and chips."

Beryl Jones turned on her husband. "I think it's time you and I got sublimated too. Gladys said the tour-guide was very young and personable – blond hair waving in the breeze, she said, like one of those Greek gods... Arthur?"

Arthur Jones had been apprenticed to the gas works as a lad. Then he had been called up for National Service in the Army. His wife's mention of blond hair waving in the breeze had suddenly snapped his mind back to his youth. There had been a curious comradeship with his fellow conscripts, some of them still boys, a kind of love. And Rick Gracie, he'd had hair that color, golden really. Their sergeant used to leave Rick alone, not go on about a 'short back and sides'. In 1956, at the time of the Suez crisis, they'd been sent to Egypt. He and Rick had shared a tent, until the day Rick had gotten clobbered by a 'gippo' grenade.

After that Arthur Jones had started frequenting the docks at Port Said – there were those urchins, with their shoe-shine boxes. He didn't kick them away like the others did. He'd sit smoking his ration of Woodbines and let the little lads fuss about his boots, let them laugh and look up at him with the glitter of their eyes, watch the dusky smoothness of their flesh beneath the rags. He sensed they were trying to say something to him, by the way they moved and kept glancing at him, smiling, the way they spread wide their tender legs between his black, bright boots.

"All right, Beryl," he said, "I don't mind if I do."

"Don't mind if you do what?"

"The cruise."

"You really want to go, then?"

"Yes," whispered Arthur Jones.

The *Lerna* had been at sea for ten days and was approaching the island of Thera on its way to Heraklion in Crete where the passengers would disembark to visit the ruins at Knossos. Smearsdon was lecturing on Minoan archeology in the ship's cinema.

It was hot, and the air-conditioning system had broken down, and Smearsdon was having difficulty holding everyone's attention. What was this incomprehensible jargon about 'Middle Helladic IV and 'Early Minoan IIA'? Beryl Jones thought. Far from being the glamorous, well-spoken guide her friend had described from last year's cruise, she found herself deeply affronted by this gangling drip and his adenoidal speech. She could not hide her disappointment and fanned her sweaty face vigorously with a crinkling copy of her husband's *Daily Mail*.

Smearsdon, too, was not content. He cursed Gowers for inflicting this

fate upon him. He was no better than a whore, prostituting his fine scholarship, and for what? Not one of these clodhoppers was younger than forty-five; not one possessed a fine Hellenic profile. That dreadful Jones woman had remonstrated publicly with him for not injecting more 'spice' into his carefully reasoned accounts of the foundation of Greek civilization.

"What about all those affairs the gods were supposed to be having?" she wanted to know. "What about the woman getting it off with a bull?"

Smearsdon winced.

"And what about that nancy-boy and the eagle?"

Now he blushed deeply, for the myth of Ganymede was uncomfortably close to his own private, reclusive fantasies.

Smearsdon withdrew to his cabin. What could he tell these people about Thera? Would they really be at all interested in the volcanic theory of the demise of Minoan civilization? And those paederastic inscriptions on Thera associated with the annual *gymnopaideia*? Carved by nancy-boys, they'd think, and smirk.

It was then that he remembered the book given him by Gowers. He thumbed the pages, wondering if the anonymous 'Gentleman' had anything to say about Thera, or Santorini, as the island had been known to the Venetians.

When His Britannic Majesty's frigate *Tartarus* was becalmed off Santorini, I requested of Captain Smyth to avail me of the jolly-boat that I might go ashore. Although a barque of the Mussulmans earlier in the day had been sighted to leeward, Smyth stoutly averred that since Navarino no Turk would dare traverse the trajectory of British guns. With half-a-dozen tars and a Midshipman I disembarked at the old Venetian jetty, about which were huddled the pumice hovels of several fisher families. Of so primitive an aspect were these folk that I would venture that the manner of their lives remained unchanged since the age of the Heroes. Although it had been my intention to garner knowledge of the volcanic construction of the island, and make inquiry of its antiquities, I found myself bemused, enchanted even, by an old fisherman who, drunk, was singing a curious song at the small tavern by the jetty, where we had stopped to sample the local vintage. I set down below the import of his words, for they seemed to me not

distant from such syntax familiar to the poet of the *Iliad* himself. If the matter of it might appear distasteful to delicate sensibilities, especially to members of the fairer sex, I must beg, however, the indulgence of the serious antiquarian....

Smearsdon continued his study. He had nowhere known of any hint of the tale that followed in the extant literature of Ancient Greece. It gripped him, as if he himself was transported to the fabled Age of Gold, when the gods, indeed, walked upon the earth. Smearsdon made an impetuous resolve. He would summon the passengers back to the ship's cinema and read them the fisherman's tale. If it was spice they wanted, spice they'd get!

"Another dreary lecture," thought Arthur Jones as he sat waiting for Smearsdon's appearance at the podium. His thoughts returned to Port Said, as they had so often on this trip. It was not so far to the south of here, he reflected.

They'd been half way down the Canal. The 'gippos' were already licked. Then, inexplicably, had come the order to retreat, to cease fire. There had been the chaos of re-embarkation. Discipline had frayed. Jones had found himself wandering in the *souk* of Port Said. He had lost his sense of direction.

"You want young girl?" a fat, palm-wringing Egyptian accosted him.

"No," Jones said angrily.

"Then, perhaps..." – and the man looked furtively around him – "...a boy?" Jones was silent, made inarticulate by a rush of hot blood to his temples, a paralysis of the throat. "You come this way, sir," said the Egyptian peremptorily. Jones followed.

He found himself in a stuffy, first-floor bedroom. The noise from the *souk* was hardly muffled by the battered wooden blinds. An ancient fan creaked overhead, the flies taking free rides on the blades. A framed portrait of King Farouk, which no one had bothered to remove, hung above an ewer and a basin. On the floor was a cracked, stained chamber-pot containing an half-dead cockroach. From the mattress emanated the smell of stale fish. The Egyptian returned with a small boy. The oppressive squalidness of the surroundings seemed to dissipate as Jones looked into the dark, lustrous eyes of the pretty child.

"Half an hour – no more," the Egyptian said as he left. The boy turned the key after him.

Jones sat on the bed, not knowing what to do, but his young companion put his arms around him and kissed him, then stood back and shrugged himself out of his single garment. Naked, the boy knelt to undo the laces of Jones's boots. The reek of unwashed socks permeated the air as the boy drew off the soldier's footwear, but he gave no indication of disgust. He gestured to the man to stand up, and he undid the buttons of the khaki shorts which he then drew down with the underwear. Jones's cock dangled limply but there was already moisture at the tip. The boy stooped to engorge his client's penis. Jones looked down in wonder at his hideous blue-veined shaft embedded in the luscious, flower-like face of the child. He saw that his cock had swollen to an obscene proportion. Embarrassed, he attempted to withdraw, but the suction afforded by the boy's indented cheeks, and the clutch of the small hand upon his testicles, impeded the movement.

"You are ready, master?" The child had taken that alien member from his mouth and was holding it indifferently to the side.

When Jones did not reply, the boy arranged himself on the old mattress so that his buttocks were poised upwards. His hands reached back to prize apart the dusky globes.

"Now, sir, now!" the boy said with urgency. Trembling, Jones undid his shirt and lay on top of the boy, placing his weight on his elbows. He felt the hairs of his lower belly rub against the smooth mounds beneath him. He felt the sudden warmth as his organ rested within the proffered flesh. By swiveling his bottom, the boy further impaled himself, as the man's first liquids oozed into the soft, tight cavity. Jones's groin and guts bucked and writhed as if spliced with tapeworm.

There was a hammering on the door. "Time's up," called the Egyptian, and the handle rattled as he attempted entry. The knocking seemed to be a part of the pounding in Jones's inner being, aiding the final surge. Jones knelt agape, and watched his member slide like a birth from the sphinctered cleft, smeared with amniotic sperm. The glutinous stuff was everywhere – on his thighs, the boy's buttocks, the coverlets. The door shook on its hinges. Jones's lust was replaced by a panic, a neurotic fussiness about the mess. Boy and man wiped themselves off on a filthy rag. Jones blushed as he struggled into his clothes. The Egyptian was shouting. Jones thrust some soiled, low-value notes into the boy's palm and opened the door.

The Egyptian composed his face into a smile and said, "That will be five pounds, sir – sterling."

"Not bloody likely, mate." Jones attempted to push past the man.

"No, you pay, imperialist pig!"

"Take this one for Nasser," and Jones's fist drove into the Egyptian's face.

Jones awoke from his memories to the sound of a sing-song drone. It was Smearsdon reading the tale of the fisherman 'as recorded by a Gentleman':

There was a king of Lydia, rich in gold. Yet for this man such wealth was dim when compared with the aureate curls of his beloved son, a child of thirteen years. Lavishly he indulged the boy, laboring to build about him a rampart of happiness. The finest Thracian steeds were not enough for the man to bestow; he sent to India for a chariot inlaid with mother-of-pearl, with hubs of silver. He plied the child with exotic delicacies, and if the object of his affection had no appetite, he would summon the most learned and expensive physicians.

The child, however, if he wished to disappoint his father, would have told him that he was happiest when he was wandering upon the seashore, there in the company of fisherlads, sharing with them the excitement of each day's adventure. Often he would not be seen in his father's citadel, but would be found amid nets and boats by the strand. At evening, he would gambol in the surge of vermilion seas, aplay with others of his age. In that concourse of young limbs, amid the surf-licked bronze of entwined torsos, he was but one in that tracery of boys, called by a name not his own, one of endearment.

One boy, older by a year, sought him in the surf, tussled with him especially, and wrestled him to the shore, splaying out the laughing catch, for all to gaze upon the limbs of beauty.

"Look what a mullet I've netted! We'll have to gut him soon!"

The elder boy thus found excuse to stretch apart the younger's thighs, flay the body with caresses, and feast upon the nipples that stood out like cockles from the spray-brilliant breast.

It was thus that the prince was observed by Poseidon, god of



oceans. The ever-coming waves beat out in changeless rhythm the yearning of the god. As in primordial times Poseidon had made with his brother Zeus an inviolable treaty, to the one dominion of the sea, to the other the land, each wave that broke upon the beach broke, too, his hope of gaining the boy. For the child, ever in his play halcyon-humored, would start towards the sand, there run and skip, just as Poseidon, plotting, had all but enveloped him with the snare of eddy or current, to draw him to marine depths.

In his torment the god retired to the watery cave where the nymph Thetis reclined. He laid his great head, entangled with seaweed and crustaceans, upon her delicate lap. To her he bemoaned his misfortune, of being besotted with a boy always just out of reach. She, with female guile, observed that though a treaty may not be broken its spirit could be evaded. Thus taking her sense, Poseidon disguised himself as an old fisherman, and, one bright morning, he spread out his nets to dry upon that very strand where the prince was wont to roam.

Soon he saw the boy who, pensive and alone, paced the shore, on occasion stooping to marvel at some gleaming conch-shell.

"I beg you, child," called the god, "to spare me a moment. I am old and cannot now direct my limbs with the agility of yore. Would you be so kind as to stand in the center of this net while I unravel the edges?"

Gladly the prince did as he was bid, saying, "Aged sir, I have not before seen your hoary head upon these gilded sands. Whence have you come?"

The ancient did not at once reply, but, as he circled about the net, entwined the fancy of the boy with extraordinary tales; such were they of remote lands and long-past empires, of magicians, lotus-eaters, and monsters of the deep. Nor did he omit to tell of the Islands of the Blest, far out in Ocean, where dwelt the souls of those whose lives had been unblemished, and who had never failed in reverence for the gods. There each one was given that which in life he had most desired, but never attained.

The boy's face was suffused with zeal, a hunger to learn more. "And if I were there," said he, "would I be allowed to

have a friend? A true friend is all I want." As he said this, tears fell upon his cheeks.

The god, with measured voice, replied, "I'll tell you this, though I would that none know of it. I hail from an island set within that fabled archipelago. If you were to accompany me, you might see for yourself, though the voyage be long."

"Oh please take me with you," cried the boy, "for I'll follow you to the farthest shore of the western sea!"

At that instant a majestic chariot, surf-borne, rose from the waves. White horses, their manes ascurry with foam, flung themselves upon the shore. Triton was the charioteer, while all about cavorted Nereids in joyful escort. The boy, startled, ran, but in a trice he was enmeshed in Poseidon's net. The god heaved his squirming catch aboard, took the reins himself, and urged a white-waked course toward the open sea.

Poseidon bore the boy to a blue-lost isle set, not in Ocean, but in the circling Cyclades. He placed him in a porticoed palace, its terraces descending to the sea. Amid the heaped luxury of littoral empires – the silvered fabrics of Sidon, the purple plumpness of Tyrian cushions piled upon couches of Nubian ivory – the god taught the boy the contrivances of love.

The child was wooed, seduced, and debauched. Adept he became in the manipulation of the pods pendulous between the god's thighs, fondling them with no less care than might some shepherd lad in Arcadia distend the udders of a milk-rich ewe. With no less abandon than that with which the rustic imbibes his labor's reward did the boy quaff the god-drawn cream. Neither did the boy neglect to offer that vale between his own buttocks, where his burning lover might seek sweet relief in the shadowed divide.

In the extravagance of Poseidon's passion, the prince knew not what was desire, what adoration, what friendship. Too soon the divine excitation flagged. The boy met reality. The god's realm was large; one small island could not hold him; other lads caressed their naked bodies with the spume of Ocean. Vowing a quick return, Poseidon secretly set adrift the isle and left. Through Time would it wander, hid from the sight of men by a sacred mist. One last gift, however, a

gift immeasurable, had he bequeathed the boy. It was that of immortality. Forever would that child once cherished by a god keep as he was then; neither dawn nor Hesperus' star would outshine him.

As day followed day, the prince realized that he had been abandoned. Alone he roamed the arcades in the company of the breezes, ever looking out to sea, imagining a return. At length he explored the solitude of his kingdom, questing its bounds of columned marble. He ventured into the water and rode the backs of dolphins, and the gulls he tamed with morsels stretched out by his hand.

Now, there was a fisherman living on the island of Thera. Many were the children that climbed his knees begging for food. Further and further he voyaged, seeking larger catches to feed his family. One day, when he had sailed a greater distance than ever before, he caught sight of what seemed a white cloud upon the sea. At his approach it lifted to reveal a mysterious isle, verdant, surmounted by palms and aerial terraces.

He moored his battered craft at a quay of marble. Astounded he was when he observed approaching a child, ashimmer in a robe of gold-bordered purple. The beautiful boy smiled and took the man by the wrist, leading him to where, amid fountains, a banquet was spread with delicacies of the sea. The boy himself poured for him the wine.

"But this is nectar!" exclaimed the humble fisherman.

"And this?" said the boy, as of a sudden he kissed the man's lips.

Then the young servitor lay upon the couch, in the crook of his guest's arm, held as is honey by a vessel of earthenware. The man's gnarled hands began to stroke the sheen of the skin-taut breast of the boy, his fingers playing upon the ribs, lightly as a poet upon his lyre. Overcome, he bent his head to cover with kisses the child's body, seeking the salty hollows, the nether creases moist with boy dew. Intertwined they lay, as upon Pelion a winter-worn oak is wound with ivy. Then, while the fisherman appraised the fruits borne by a tazza of green serpentine, the boy bent low to sample rarer gourds.

As might a lowly plowman laboring on the Troad plain

glimpse in the furrow some gleaming relic of great Priam's treasure, and, awestruck, find his hands ablaze with brilliant gold, so now the fisherman grasped the curl-gilt head which nuzzled at his loins. The god-abandoned boy drank at last from the horn of friendship, sated his yearning with the milky draft that flecked his lips. The fisherman, astonished at an ecstasy before unknown, vowed never to desert the isle, as, apart from it, no man could again be happy.

Yet on a day, uncounted from the rest, he awoke from a deep sleep to say that he must return awhile to his own children, that they might not starve. He insisted he would come back. Weeping, the boy loaded him with gifts, all such as at Delphi the priests would not reject, but begging still that his lover not leave him.

"These presents," said the fisherman, "will make me rich on Thera. Never again will my family be in want. Then I can return and live with you until I die."

Upon reaching home, the fisherman told of his adventure and displayed his glittering cargo. The populace, a brutish folk, jeered and called him a pirate.

"Why, I'll bring the boy back, if you don't believe me."

He set out once again for the fabled isle, yet never could find it. For ten years he voyaged, until, worn and bent, he returned to Thera. His grown-up children did not recognize him; his wife had married another man. Thereafter, he spent his days at a dock-side tavern, where people took him for an idiot, as he mumbled into his wine, seeming to converse with one unseen.

When Smearsdon fell silent, Jones impulsively clapped; from around him came embarrassed coughing.

Beryl rose to her feet. "Well, I never, Mr. Smearsdon," she began. Imagine that mousy little man throwing such child-abuse filth at his passengers. "I thought this was to be an educational cruise!"

She had much more to say on the subject, and from the mutterings about her of 'scandalous', 'obscene' – someone even piously breathed 'Esther Rantzen' – it seemed the rest of the listeners were as disgusted as she, but at that moment the rising cacophony of indignation was overridden by the loudspeaker summoning Smearsdon to the bridge.

"I can't understand it," said Captain Papakyroudīs to the young

scholar. "That fog just started forming out of nowhere, while you were in the cinema."

Smearsdon watched the dark ramparts of Thera grow hazy as a mist rose from the sky-mirroring sea. "Perhaps some sub-marine volcanic exhalation is heating the water."

"We have contact, sir," interjected the radar operator, and he gave the bearing.

"What! But that's right in the middle of that... that cloud. Stop engines!" shouted the captain.

The ship slowed. Passengers, alerted by the sudden loss of speed, were coming on deck, exclaiming at the reduced visibility. The captain took the bridge microphone and addressed them. "Is there anyone among you with radar or radio experience? If so, please come to the bridge."

Without giving it a second thought, Arthur Jones elbowed his way through the passengers along the deck and presented himself in the bridge. "I was in Signals," Arthur said. "National Service...."

"Look at that!" shouted a crew member. All turned in the direction of the pointing finger. A space of clarity opened up in the thickest of the haze. It revealed what appeared to be a floating palace – there were hanging gardens, terraces with palm trees, columned arcades agleam with enamels and faience, and roofs of gilded tiles.

"I didn't know Niarchos had anything like that," said the captain.

Smearsdon was trembling. He knew what it was. This would be the greatest archaeological find since the Tomb of Tutankhamen; he would go down in history as the Discoverer of the Palace of Poseidon and the Lost Boy; his fame would eclipse that of Howard Carter, of Schliemann. There would be a Chair at Stanford, with a salary of \$100,000 a year; Berkeley beckoned. He looked at the balding, pot-bellied, fiftyish Arthur Jones gazing in some sort of dumb trance at the apparition. No threat there, he decided.

"Only you and I," said Smearsdon, "will go to the island."

Jones handled the launch and docked it at the marble quay as directed by Smearsdon. Together they ascended stairs flanked on either side by columns surmounted by winged Victories. At the head of the steps rose a triumphal arch which supported the massive six-horsed chariot of Poseidon wrought in gold. Beneath the central archway there stood a being, a slim form sheathed in a purple robe, a boy haloed in the gleam of his hair, beautiful in the polish of his pelt. Intangible, from this lone figure came a power of yearning, a silent calling to them. Jones quickened his pace, and Smearsdon struggled to keep up. The boy now

held his arm straight out and let the palm of his hand rest by the man's neck, as Jones reached him.

Smearsdon felt a sudden lurch, like a blow, a transfer of reality. He sat upon the steps, stunned. Looking back at the *Lerna* he observed its silhouette begin to blur. In panic, he realized Time itself was breaking up, that the Palace of Poseidon once more was joining with the mythic stream of Eternity.

At some distance, he saw Jones and the boy enter a pavilion, pillared in chryselephantine. Panting, he followed, but paused at the scene before him. Man and boy, naked, were reclining upon a couch of ebony, the boy's head lying like a garland of hyacinths in the man's lap. Jones was drinking from a cup of translucent fluorspar. The boy turned to put his hand against his new lover's cheek, saying, in an archaic Greek only half-hinted at in Homer,

*"To a boy sea-lost upon loneliness  
Came at last the friend long desired. Sailing  
the boundaries of the aeons  
I found in your arms safe haven."*

Jones would not understand those words, Smearsdon bitterly reflected, while he who could – Smearsdon the unchosen, the unwanted – watched the beauty of a love which would never be his.

He staggered away, sobbing. Startled by another of those sickening jolts of temporal dislocation, the creaks and groans of the present time foundering in Eternity's ocean, he ran to the quay. The launch was there, but of the *Lerna* he could only discern the dim outline. He hurled himself onto the boat and struggled with the engine, gave up, seized the oars.

The crowd on the deck of the *Lerna* watched with awe as the fog suddenly lifted. In the clarity of an Hellenic noon, Thera's cliffs rose sheer from the azure of the Aegean. And in the middle of that ocean they could see the launch, still far away, with one figure only in it, rowing frantically toward them.

"Where's my husband?" Beryl Jones demanded of the exhausted young scholar as he was helped aboard the *Lerna*. Bewildered, groggy, he stared at what to him was simply a large source of strident incomprehensibility. "Where's my husband? How many times do I have to say it?"

"Who?"

"My husband, you nincompoop. The man who went with you. Where's Arthur?"

"Oh, yes." Faced with the appalling visage of Mrs. Jones, Smearsdon groped for an explanation. "Your husband was... was lost at sea."

Beryl looked at him for a moment in silence, to see if he was joking. He was not. She took him by the collar and said, "Well, get back in that boat and start a search!" But already she was beginning to reflect that Arthur was probably of more use gone than present. Already she was composing in her mind just what she would tell the insurance adjuster when she returned to England.