

Gift from the sea

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GIFT FROM THE SEA

by Marsh Haris

I had been in Greece no more than hours when Thanos came to me, rising god-like out of the sea.

For years Mother had insisted on her annual journey to Greece; nowhere else would do. «There one finds a magic, a lingering magnificence everywhere, all the way from the haze-enshrouded peaks of Mt. Olympus down to the sea. It gleams within the eyes of the people. They know about it; it is theirs. But if you mention it they will laugh and thank you, then deny it. But it is theirs, some wondrous, impenetrable secret. You see it, breathe it, walk amongst it, yet no one speaks its name.»

Thus I could not help but see for myself. And so we went together, Mother and I, in the very zenith of summer. There, in that small, nameless town, I looked out our hotel window, down the roof-scattered slope and out across the sea.

«It's very beautiful,» I said.

«Greece must not be seen through a window, my dear. If you really want to see it, to *feel* it, start from here and walk down through the entire length of the town until you come to the sea-shore. Before you have returned you will understand what I mean.»

I dressed myself in white trousers, white shoes, a pale blue shirt open at the neck, and went out alone. Alone? Perhaps yes, but as I strolled through the narrow, angular streets flanked by white stone houses with their orange tile roofs and their profusion of flowers spilling, tumbling from every ledge, every wall, I did not feel alone. It were as though I had all my life been merely roaming, searching for the one place where I belonged, and had suddenly, miraculously found it. There was a peace, an indescribable contentment, a *rightness* somehow, and I welcomed it, though I did not altogether understand it.

I ambled along, strolling one minute, skipping another, and bolting into a euphoric, dead run the next. Down I went over the seemingly interminable stone and brick steps that led throughout the town, though which always ended at the sea. Eventually, I came to the bottom and walked out across the white sand with what might have been an infinity of the bluest, indeed almost purple water I had ever seen, stretching out before me. For a long moment I stood awe-struck as the vibrant blue turned to ripples some distance out, then skimmed capriciously up onto the sand.

To the right and left of me the white ribbon of sand extended, the immaculate little town rising steeply to contrast with a clear, perfect sky the same colour as the sea. And yet there was no living soul in sight.

After my long walk I had grown tired and so dropped onto the sand and lay back. There were only two sounds, an occasional bird gliding peacefully overhead, and the steady, gentle waves coming up almost timidly onto the ivory beach.

After a while I must have dropped off into a kind of half-sleep because I found myself suddenly becoming aware of where I was, of a third sound. It too was the sound of water, and yet it was agitated somehow, churning. With my shoulders still on the sand I lifted my head

and looked straight out across the water and was all but blinded by the low-hanging sun. There silhouetted against the very core of its brilliance was a Triton rising from the sea.

Without taking my eyes from him I saw him churn thunderously from the surf, then come to a bounding halt. I suddenly felt uncomfortable about staring and so dropped my head back down on the sand and closed my eyes. The sun was so bright I could almost see through my eyelids, a pinkish hue enshrouding my sight. I heard no further sound, and yet quite suddenly the pink of my eyelids darkened as a shadow fell across me. I opened my eyes curiously and beheld a tall silhouette looming over me.

He spoke, his voice rich and friendly, though I understood only the simplest words.

«I'm sorry,» I said quickly, struggling with his language, «I speak almost no Greek.» It was a rehearsed phrase.

«In that case, I will try to speak English,» he said with a strong accent. «I said you will burn lying there like that.»

He sat down quickly beside me, almost in front of me, and I beheld the most amazingly beautiful animal ever created. His blue-black hair caught in the sunlight, bending into half-curls. His phosphorous blue eyes glittered out at me through thick, matted lashes that were as black as plovers' wings. The golden bronze face was adorned with an occasional jewel drop of water, and the broad, red mouth was more exquisite than any I had ever so much as imagined, chiselled as though by a master sculptor of his own country.

A small pair of swim trunks was all that kept him from total nakedness. They covered a small, svelt mid-region, with the rest of his body full and strong. The fine hirsute cross on his chest had already begun to dry.

«I have found many things along the seashore before,» he said, smiling marvelously at me, «but never an Englishman. Are you all right?»

«Yes, I think so—under the circumstances. I'm Adam Carleton.»

«I am Thanos,» he said, still smiling though making no effort to shake hands. How beautiful he was, outrageously desirable, and there was a music in his voice fit for angels. «Are you a tourist? If so, you are far from their usual route.»

«I'm afraid I classify as a tourist, yes, but I don't feel like one. I feel as though I should spend the rest of my life here.»

«Perhaps you will.»

«Oh no. No, I'm afraid that's not possible. I've come with my mother, you see, and we have only a month to stay in all of Greece. And probably no more than a couple of days in your exquisite little town.»

«And what will you do, you and your mother, while you are here?»

«Oh, explore the entire place. Every square foot! We shall climb into the hills to the temples and the amphitheatre near-by; we shall walk through your bright, clean little streets, and then perhaps spend a day on that incredible water out there.»

«You sound as though you like it here.»

«Like it? I should like never to leave it.»

«I wish that were so.»

«Do you mean that?»

«Yes. I wish that you would never leave here.»

«What extraordinarily hospitable people you Greeks are!»

«Is that what it is, hospitality?» He seemed oddly amused and smiled his unbelievable smile.

«What is down that way?» I asked, pointing off to my right.

«Would you like to see? Come, I will show you.» He had already stood up, his muscular, brown legs arching backward before me. Then he reached down and took me by the hand, pulling me up. «I know every inch of our coast for a great distance in both directions. And of course the town also, but as you have said, it is such a small town. Still, there is such a lot to know about the smallest places here. Here we have more history per square inch than anywhere else on earth.»

Together, we strolled off down the beach, I in my dazzling white trousers, he in his scanty swim trunks which came up onto his stomach only as far as was absolutely necessary.

«Do you see those rocks? Poseidon and his court used to come there to play. You can still see faint marks left by his trident. And over there,» he pointed, suddenly stopping and putting a hand on my shoulder, «there, just before the bend, was once a favourite spot for naiads, what you call ondines, I believe. They would gather there and preen themselves, combing their long golden hair that had become tangled by seaweed.»

«If only we could believe such things today.»

«Why not? If we must believe things of which we have no proof, why not choose the beautiful ones? It is a beautiful story to believe, don't you think?»

«Living in such a wonderful place you must be very conscious of beauty. There is so much of it everywhere one turns.»

«Yes,» he said, a tinge of sadness seeming to come into his voice, «but the beauty that is here does not always stay. Sometimes it goes away.»

«I don't quite understand.»

«Like the sea. Sometimes it brings lovely shells up onto the beach, then soon carries them back again, almost as if it were taunting us, teasing us. We are allowed to see them, but we cannot have them. And when the rains come they make all the town erupt with the colour of thousands of magnificent flowers, blossoms everywhere—then soon reclaims them. Do you suppose everything is that way?»

«I hope not. I don't think so. I believe some beautiful things come and remain for us to enjoy. Perhaps the thing to do is to scoop up the shells quickly from the beach before the sea can take them away.»

«I wish—I wish I could choose from all others the most beautiful thing of all and ask the gods to give it to me, to let me have it for always.»

«You sound almost as though you know what you would choose.»

«Yes, I believe I do know. One should know that much about one's self.»

The edges of the rocks pushing up from the white sand glowed red from the disappearing sun, an unwelcome reminder of how long I had been gone.

«I'm afraid it's getting late, Thanos; I must be getting back to the hotel.» I turned around and began to stroll back to the steps that led down to the sea.

«And what will you do tomorrow, Adam?»

«The temples. Tomorrow we climb to the temples.»

We had come to the base of the steps. The beautiful Thanos stopped and looked at me.

«High among them all there is a small temple of Aphrodite. Above all you must go there; she was the goddess of love, you know.»

«Above all, I shall go there,» I said, nearly repeating his own words. I turned away, unable to hold his gaze, so penetrating and intense were his startling, crystallite eyes.

As I began to ascend the steps I realised that he had not moved. Turning, I looked down on the marvelous body. «Aren't you coming?»

«No,» he said in his gentle, musical voice, smiling up at me. «No, I shall remain here at the bottom of the steps. You will not get lost?»

«No, I'm sure not. Thank you, Thanos, for Poseidon, and for the naiads. But thank you especially for the beautiful Triton.»

«The Triton?»

«He was the loveliest of them all.»

I turned quickly and sped up the steps and when I had reached the landing where the first turn came I stopped and looked back at him. He was still standing there in the crepuscular light, as unaltered as a statue. I smiled and waved. Far below me I saw his arm lift and my gesture was returned, though somehow there was a sadness in it.

I returned to the hotel not daring to believe what had happened. It could not be; no such creature existed. Such magnificence vanished from the face of the earth centuries ago. I stood once again at the window and looked out into the darkness where I knew the sea stretched. Where was he? Was my beautiful Thanos out there somewhere? Did he lie alone below on the white sand that had lost its gleam? Or had my Triton perhaps returned forever to the sea? «No, he is wrong,» I thought to myself. «Aphrodite is not the deity of love; she has been deposed. Not Aphrodite, but Thanos.» Tha-nos, two brief, exquisite syllables that caressed the throat and parted the lips like a tiny kiss endowed with wings. *Thanos, Thanos!*

«Was I right?» Mother suddenly called across the room to me. «Did you see?»

Still staring into the dark cavity beyond the window, almost as though I were searching, I answered her.

«Yes, you were right. I have looked upon the glory of Greece; I have seen it—face to face.»

That night I slept but little, though when at last I entered into the Realm of Morpheus the dreams that came were made of miracles, wondrous beyond imagination.

Next day the Greek sun rose white hot over the Aegean Sea and Mother and I went into the rock-strewn hills. There sprawled across the mountain top were the remains of History's finest hour, a disorganized profusion of toppled columns, facades, amphitheatres, temples—among them the promised Temple of Aphrodite still in the distance. We walked

among them, some mere scattered blocks and cylinders of stone, some piled up in what was assumed to be their original spots, and others marvelously reconstructed.

«I'm afraid,» Mother confessed with mock irritation, «that I have become too accustomed to the services of a guide. I want to know about the place; I want to ask questions.»

«Perhaps we could ask the people here,» I suggested, looking about at the few scattered visitors. «Find someone who looks native; they should be able to tell us.»

«Good idea,» she said, and posthaste struck out across a mosaic flooring that resembled an enormous slice of fruitcake to an old woman dressed all in black. But no luck. She returned almost immediately, explaining that the old woman was Greek, yes, but too much so as she seemed to understand no English whatever.

«If only you had continued with your Greek studies, darling, how much simpler all this would have been. However, be that as it may, let us press on.»

Higher up we climbed until at last we reached the very summit, where the sole structure was the small, elegant Temple of Aphrodite. I stopped before entering and looked at it. I had promised and now that promise was being kept—(«Above all you must go there.»)

«How lovely it is,» Mother exclaimed, «unusually so. It's not just another Greek building, but so obviously a temple to the goddess of love. What a passionate people the ancient Greeks must have been!»

«What,» I wondered to myself, «about the Greeks of today?»

As I stood regarding its exquisite workmanship, Mother went in ahead of me and then almost immediately called for me to come in and see something. I stepped just inside the small doorway and found her in a near corner examining an extraordinarily well-preserved bas-relief.

She was enrapt. «It's magnificent! I've never seen a relief so exciting. But why do you suppose Aphrodite is carrying those amphorae?»

Quite unexpectedly, before I could speak, a voice cut through the cool interior of the chamber.

«She carries the elixir of life. Her amphorae are filled with love.»

We turned quickly to discover the source of such information, and expressed in such fluent English. Within that instant my lungs filled with ice, my poor heart nearly ceased to beat.

«Young man,» Mother spoke up happily, «you are just what we have been looking for. We're in desperate need of a guide. Could we hire you?»

«No, madam, I am not for hire. But it would be my great pleasure to be of any assistance possible.» He smiled, his head dropping into a slight bow, though I noticed his eyes hold upward and focus on me.

«Ah, only a true Greek could have said that! I am Mrs. Agatha Carleton. What shall we call you?»

«Thanos. I am called Thanos.»

«Thanos, you are a god-send. And this is my son, Adam.»

A golden hand came forth immediately, took my own inside it, then another closed sensitively about it.

«Hello, Adam,» he said in his fascinating, personal voice.

«Thanos,» I pronounced, the very word causing me to grow weak.

«Now come,» Mother commanded. «You must show and tell us everything! And for your services, I promise you a reward.»

For hours then, we wandered among the ancient structures, the nocturnal playground of oreads, and were saturated with information that no professional guide would ever have offered. Mother kept up a steady barrage of questions, while I, barely hearing, bathed my soul in the presence of my beloved Thanos.

By mid-afternoon we had all grown hungry and not a little exhausted and so Thanos suggested we all go to a small restaurant not too far away. It sat canopied on the very edge of a bluff overlooking the Aegean.

«Thanos,» Mother continued on relentlessly, «how is it that you speak such good English? Where did you learn our language?»

«From books, madam.»

«But why? Why did you wish to speak English?»

«I don't really know the answer to that. I know only that years ago it occurred to me that I must learn, that someday it would be very important that I speak English. I felt an urgency to learn, as fast as possible. Someday, I felt, someday if you cannot speak English you will lose something extremely important to you; there will be someone, one single person, to whom you must speak English. Adam, can you understand that?»

It would have been almost impossible to have missed his message. «Yes,» I said reluctantly, «yes, I think perhaps I can.»

«Thanos,» Mother put in, «I like you very much. You have so many delightful things to tell about Greece's past. How would you like to have dinner with us this evening?»

His lovely face turned quickly to her, almost embarrassed. «Oh no—I mean, you are very kind, Mrs. Carleton, but I could not do that.»

«But why not? Why shouldn't you? Adam, tell him to come.»

His large, ice-blue eyes turned to me.

My mind became a churning maelstrom, a conflict between desire and reason. Oh how I wanted to scream yes, yes, a hundred times yes, but I was afraid, dreadfully afraid. All during the afternoon a fear had been mounting steadily within me, until it had now approached the point of terror.

«Do you want me to come?» he asked gently.

For a long moment I could not speak, but merely gaze enrapt at the glorious creature so near me.

«Adam, tell him to come.»

«Yes—please come. Dine with us this evening.»

He came at eight, his supple, sensuous body filling a dark blue suit that set his jet hair to blazing onyx fire and his rose-red lips aflame. All during the meal I watched his hands resting atop the table, aching to reach out and take them within my own. I watched his live, moist lips as they moved and wanted to touch mine to them, to feed savagely upon them. I watched his chest rise and fall beneath his shirt, picturing the dark line of hair that grew down across his stomach and plunged

beneath his belt. I watched—I watched the all of him, craving, desiring, worshipping. Finally, I could not endure it longer,

«Excuse me!» I rose quickly from the table and fled to the balcony where a cooling breeze came in from the sea and caught me startingly in the face.

«Adam!» I heard Mother call out to me.

«No, please,» Thanos spoke up quickly. «Let me go. There are some things a stranger does best.»

Within seconds he had come through the open doors and was alone on the balcony with me. Silently, he came to the balustrade and stopped with his body just faintly touching mine.

«What is it?» he asked tenderly. «Tell me what's wrong.»

«I hurt. There is a pain—.»

His hand came over and rested upon my own, kindling a terrible fire within my loins and my mind. «Please tell me—please. Why do you hurt?»

«Oh God!» I said almost under my breath, my throat binding like a vice.

«Adam—.»

«The Triton—the lovely Triton, he should not have come out of the sea.» My voice broke as tears began to grow somewhere inside me.

«Adam, listen to me. Look at me,» he almost whispered, taking my face in his hands and turning me to see his distraught, glorious eyes. «My wonderful, precious Adam. I love you; more than words can tell, I love you. You're mine; I found you. I came out of the sea and found you as though the gods had left you there for me—.»

«No, no, Thanos! No! I must leave; I can't stay here. Don't you understand, everything is completely impossible. I must destroy what I feel; I can't love you and live so far away from you.»

I stood so very close to him now, so painfully close. Every fibre of my body cried out to seize him, to pull him into my arms and hold him ecstatically to my body. «No, Thanos, no—!»

«Adam—I will not lose you, I will not. You're my very life—!»

«Please go. Go, Thanos, go quickly. I cannot endure looking at you—.»

Silently, he moved away and went back inside. What explanation he offered to Mother I do not know, but I was left alone. There I stood for a long while, weeping silently as though I could not live a moment more. But at length I went inside and found Mother alone. My beloved Thanos had gone.

«Adam,» she said in a kindly voice, «I'm extremely fond of him; he's an unusually gentle, intelligent young man. I don't understand how you could dislike him so much.»

The following day we were to leave for Mykonos late in the evening. The greater part of the day, however, we were to spend on a small chartered boat, drifting aimlessly out on the Aegean, but I could not bring myself to leave the hotel. The chalk-white houses, the narrow, descending streets, all leading to where I had found him, they were all lovely, terrifying reminders; I could not face them. I would remain inside until darkness came and then slip out like a hunted fugitive. Then on the

morrow we would be in Mykonos and perhaps I could find distraction.

«Adam,» Mother asked, coming to my bedroom door, »will you come out here for a moment?»

Listlessly, I rose and followed her. There in the living room sat Thanos, quiet and radiant.

«We have been talking, Thanos and I,» she went on. «Sit down, darling, you will want to hear this. Our faithful young guide here has come back to remind me that I promised him a reward yesterday. It seems he has come to collect.»

«I don't understand.»

Then let me explain. Of course, if you had been able to speak Greek I should never have had to make the promise of a reward in the first place. You know how much I have wanted you to learn. Thanos here has learnt English through books, and very well I might add, but that is the long, difficult method. And he is very interested in learning even better English. Therefore, he has named his reward. He has asked if you might teach him English, and in turn he will teach you Greek, both classic and modern. I have agreed, with one stipulation—that the two of you live here together; you must be inseparable.»

That was three years ago;—I now speak excellent Greek.

FORT WAHID

by Chick Weston

The oppressive mid-summer heat and the monotonous droning of the engine of our Jeep merely increased my feeling of depression. When I had accepted this job of equipment inspection officer, it appeared to offer a pleasant change from the monotony of sitting «on my tail» at the supply base, but I was starting to question the wisdom of my actions. My main duty necessitated my travelling every few days to various units of the advance regiments to check and report on their equipment. In any other place but the Libyan desert it might have been enjoyable, but here it was nothing but heat and dust and bumping across the desert in a Jeep. My driver was a pleasant lad of 25, not particularly bright but good natured, and we made up quite a happy team.

We were travelling westward from Tobruk to one of the forward units of the Brigade. It was getting on towards midday when I suggested that we might stop for lunch. I told my driver to turn off towards the coast where we might find a spot where we could enjoy a swim before proceeding further. We turned off and ten minutes later reached the cliffs overhanging the sea—there was no real beach at this particular spot, but some three-hundred yards further along I saw what appeared to be the wall of some ancient building. We drove over and were amazed to find an old ruin. We got out and stretched our aching limbs, then proceeded to inspect the site. There was a square stone structure, some twenty feet in diameter with a doorway facing the desert. At the far end was an opening with steps leading down to a lower level. We descended and found ourselves in a room of similar size with an opening which led onto a small terrace surrounded by a low wall along the cliff edge. At the far end of this terrace was what appeared to be a pool of clear water. On closer inspection it turned out to be the remains of a pier, the sides of which had long since collapsed, forming this natural pool of clear water. As far as we could judge, the water at high tide would flood into this pool, and then slowly empty again as the tide went out.