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The Birds and the Bees

BY DAVE E. FISHER

Which goes to prove that, in some instances, being heroic is easy!

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I was wandering among the tall grass of the slopes, listening to the soft whistling of the wind; allowing the grass to caress my toga and thighs. It was a day soft and clear; a day accepted by the young, cherished by we old. Across the gently undulating hills stood the magnificent Melopolis, encradling the Oracle of Delni. I do not, of course, believe in the gods per se; still there is a grandeur in the very stones that transcends their human sculptors, and it is no wonder to me that many cling tenaciously, and ignorantly, to the old religion. Cling to the gods of old, who drew man upward from wherever he began. In whose names Man killed and plundered, while struggling up. In whose names Man finally left this earth, to seek his cousins among the stars.

But of course there were no cousins. There was nothing. And Man returned, and settled down to live. Saddened, but resigned and content to live in peace with his knowledge and his power. Gone now are all the ancient evils, wars, emergencies.

"Sias! Sias—" And they were upon me.

That is, Xeon was upon me. But I knew that where Xeon is, Melia must soon appear. And indeed it was

but a moment before Melia slipped through the high grass to stand at his side. Their youthful voices were babbling in excitement.

Melia was a She, with the swelling breasts that were, so tradition states, quite prevalent among members of the race long ago, and are seldom seen today. Indeed, Melia was on this account made the butt of many jokes and, I fear, would have had a lonely life of it had it not been for the friendship of Xeon.

"Sias," they were saying, "the Maternite's gone."

I stared in amazement.

"Gone? It cannot be gone. It has always been—"

"Oh my gods!" Xeon shouted. "I tell you it's gone! Will you—"

Melia interrupted him quietly. "Xeon, will you lose all respect for the Elder?" Then turned to me, and said calmly, "The watcher at the Maternite Machine, it appears, has been drunk. The heat rose above the warning, continued to rise, and then—poof. Everything has evaporated in Maternite. All the Pre-life is gone."

"All of it?" I asked.

"There is nothing left," Melia insisted. "Can more be made? And if not, what will happen with no more children?"

"That is for the priests to say, not I," I replied. In moments of emergency, it is wise to speak with caution. That is, I suppose so. I have never before been in a real emergency.

A man my age does not hurry in the heat of the midday sun—maddugs nenglishmin go out in the midday sun, as the ancients say, although I often wonder why—but Xeon and Melia ran all the way down to the city. They are of an age to enter manhood, and have all the energy such young men do.

As we entered the city, we were surrounded by confusion and consternation. And can the simple people be blamed? They were aware that they stood in the midst of an unprecedented happening; indeed, an emergency. For a machine had failed!

Not in the memory of the eldest among us has a machine failed. They were created so long ago, indeed, that the ignorant believe them to have been constructed by the gods themselves. And never, so far as I know, has one failed. Small wonder that the watcher had been negligent. Indeed, the watcher is more a tradition than a necessity. Besides, had he been sober, he would not have known what to do.

For who knows the mysterious workings of the machines?

I hastened to the City Hall and found the Conclave assembled, waiting for me to bring them to order. Xeon and Melia stopped as I mounted the steps, but I smiled and motioned them in. They accompanied me past the marble pillars into the cool recesses of the Hall, then seated themselves on the floor as I took my place by the great table.

Well, you know how these things are. At such a time, many men feel impelled to make speeches, and one must not be disrespectful. Prayers and supplications were offered to the gods, priests were sent to sacrifice, and finally, as the light of the sun was falling between the pillars, the High Priest of the Maternite Machine was heard.

He rambled through the customary opening remarks and then, continually smoothing his white beard—of which he is excessively proud—approached the crux of the matter and the Conclave finally heard the facts it had assembled to hear. By this time, unfortunately, many of the Conclave had departed for home and supper. Yet perhaps it is for the best, for those left were the most earnest and intelligent.

"I would not bore you," he said, "with details of which only the gods are sure. Know, then, that once granted a few cells of Prelife, it is an easy matter for the Maternite Machine to add more and more; thus assuring us, as has always been, a continuous source of Prelife to be born by the Generating Machine as children. The machines bear the exact number of children each year to balance the number of us whom the gods claim. Such it has always been from time immemorial."

A murmur of assent and approval of these virtuous words whispered around the Hall.

"But now," he continued, however, with less assurance and indeed with even a stutter here and there, "an unprecedented situation has arisen. Indeed, I might call it an emergency. For the M-Maternite Machine has actually failed."

Cries of "Treason" sprang up, and I fear it might have gone hard for the priest had I not been able to insure order.

"That is not the worst," he cried, as if in defiance. "All the Prelife has been dried up. It will not function. There is no more. And there will be no more children!"

At this I feared the Conclave was about to riot. It is at such times that I most revere the wisdom of the

ancients, who decreed seventy years the minimum age for a member of the Conclave. They shouted and began to beat their fists, but for how long can a man of seventy years roar like a youngster? They quieted, breathing heavily, and I asked,

"Is there no way, then, to produce more Prelife in order that the machines may produce more children for us?"

"As I have said," he replied, "give the machines but a bit of Prelife and they will produce more. But take away that least bit, and they are helpless."

Such heresy could have brought a sad end to the priest had not the Conclave been so exhausted by the events of the day. We leaned back to think.

Rocsates leaned forward and asked, "Must there not—must there not have been a beginning to Prelife? For the Machine, it seems, cannot make it; and yet it came from somewhere."

"Riddles are not called for," I answered severely.

"Are not riddles often the beginning of knowledge?" he asked, in that irritating dumber-than-thou attitude of his. "Must there not, long ago, have been a source of Prelife: a source now forgotten? And may it not even now—should we discover it—be available to us? I am reminded of the story of the animals of old —"

"I fear your mind is wandering, Rocsates," I was forced to interrupt. "I know well the legend of the animals, but what does it have to do—" The heads of the Conclave were turning to me, quizzically. I hastened to explain the legend of the animals. "It is said that many thousands of years ago, time without reckoning, there existed on the earth creatures who were alive like us, and yet not like us. It is said they had four legs or more, and no arms, were covered with hair, and although not mute, they could not speak."

Rocsates' voice made itself heard. "It is true. Such creatures did indeed exist. It is recorded most scientifically in the films."

"If it be so," I said, quieting the hub-bub that followed, "and I would not doubt your word, Rocsates, for all know you are the wisest of men—if it were so, then, what of it?"

"May it not be," Rocsates put in, "that these animals had no machines to reproduce their kind? For surely the gods would not grant machines to such creatures. And indeed, if they had Maternite Machines, why then we would yet have these animals among us."

"And how, then, did these animals reproduce?" I asked.

"How, indeed? And is there not a legend—admitted only a legend—that says there was a time before the machines, and before the Maternite Machine, and that at such a time both the animals and Men reproduced from within their own bodies?"

At this two members of the Conclave fell immediately into a faint, and I would gladly have joined them. I hoped that the youngsters, Xeon and Melia, had not heard, but as I turned they were listening most attentively to Rocsates, who, amid cries of "Heresy" and "Treason", went on:

"I should like to ask the Conclave for permission to search the ancient records, in the hope of finding some such knowledge that would prove or disprove my words."

"You wish to search the films—" I began.

"Not the films, Sias, but the books."

Gods, this Rocsates! The books, as well he knows, are so ancient, and so delicate, that they are kept in an air-tight tomb; lest, being handled, they be destroyed and all knowledge within them lost. Therefore, they have not been read in the known history of our race. And Rocsates has been anxious for an excuse—

"Sias," he went on, "if there exists such knowledge as I seek, is it not indeed lost to the memory of Man?"

And if so, are not the books the only place where it may be found?"

Rocsates, it is suspected, will never ask a question unless he knows the answer beforehand. And so I acquiesced, and agreed, and granted permission. And with much misgiving and foreboding of evil, the Conclave adjourned.

Several weeks elapsed before Rocsates requested that the Conclave meet. I called the meeting at dawn and so it was yet early in the afternoon when formalities were concluded and Rocsates granted leave to speak.

"Some of those among you are She's," he began. "And you know you are different from the rest of us. To the advantage, your skin is fairer and your features more often handsomer than ours. To the disadvantage, your excretory system is not so mechanically dextrous as ours. And, you may say, why should this not be so? There is, indeed, no reason why we should all be identical. Perforce you have the advantage, perforce we do. Yet there is one other distinction.

"Some among you She's have the swelling of the breasts. And does there exist no reason for this? Was there not, perhaps in ancient times, a cause for this? Do you not wonder, She's, whence you come and for what reason?"

"Rocsates," I interrupted. "All this is fascinating, of course. But if you could be quick—"

"Of course," he replied. "In the course of my reading I have read many books, and while they are all vague on the subject, this I have discovered:

"That there was indeed a time before the machines, in fact the books were created in that time, for not one of them mentions the machines. Then reproduction was carried on by individuals, without help of the then nonexistent machines. The She's are not wanderers from another land, but they have lived with us for all time; they are not another race, but we are all types of one race. And the fact of reproduction is somehow intimately related to the physical distinctions of the She's!"

These last sentences were shouted to be heard above the roar of the crowd. Yet when Rocsates stopped, so also did the noise, so shocked and amazed at his words were they. And I confess, myself also.

"In fact," Rocsates added, sitting down, "this process of reproduction seems to have been so simple that there was once a problem of over-population."

Order was lost among the Conclave as each man turned to speak to his neighbor, and for some time I could not restore order. I realized that something had to be done to save Rocsates before the outrage of the assembled overwhelmed him.

"It seems," I shouted, "that there is a flaw in your logic." For if such there was, I was hopeful of dismissing the entire affair with no harm done. "For if people reproduced too often, why then this reproduction must have been a pleasant thing to do; otherwise they would not have done so to excess. And if it was a pleasant thing to do, where is the necessity for the machines, and why were they created?"

Rocsates seemed perplexed by this problem, whereupon Xeon, who together with Melia were at the Conclave without permission, shouted, "Perhaps the process of reproduction was of *such* a pleasure that the Conclave ruled it to be a sin? And therefore the machines were necessary!"

At this impudence the Conclave dissolved in an uproar, and I was beyond power to restrain them from placing Xeon under arrest. Privately, however, I had to admit that his supposition was a possibility,

and thus I authorized Rocsates to continue his search.

Now indeed I was sorely worried concerning Xeon, for he must languish in the dungeon until the Conclave is satisfied to release him, and this they cannot do until they meet again.

I needed a sufficient excuse to call a meeting of the Conclave, whereupon I might argue for the lad. When I heard that Rocsates again desired audience, I immediately proclaimed a meeting of the Conclave to be held the next day at dawn, and so that night slept well.

The Conclave had come to order and formalities had been initiated when Rocsates entered and took his place. He clutched under one shoulder a thin, rectangular object, but that is not what impressed me. His appearance—he looked as if he had not slept of late, nor eaten either. His eyes were sunken, and his features had doubled in age. He was bent and tired. But it was his eyes. There was a horror in them.

I was shocked, and could not help staring at him. And then the formalities were over. I intended to

speak for Xeon, but Rocstates was on his feet and I gave way.

"I have indeed discovered the secret of reproduction," he began. "After many searchings, I came upon this—" and he held forth the object he had carried in. "It is a book. It is entitled, 'Living a Normal Sex Life.' It seems to be some sort of a do-it-yourself pamphlet." He dropped the book on the table and rubbed his hands over his eyes.

There was something in the man's behavior that commanded everyone's attention. He went on, speaking low. "The word 'Sex' is not defined, but it seems to mean...." His words trailed off. He was obviously unsure of how to continue. "I had better start at the beginning, I suppose," he said. "You see, once upon a time there were birds and bees...."

When he finished the Conclave sat in horrified silence. His words, with all their horror, had the ring of truth and there were no cries of 'Heresy'. There was only stunned disbelief and the beginnings of nausea.

It is the mark of honor that a leader shall carry on when others fear to move. I cleared my throat.

"Shall not these organs which you mention have atrophied by now? With no use throughout all these generations, will they not have evolved into nothingness?"

"I do not think so," Rocsates replied after a while. "What to us is an eon, to evolution is but an instant. And then the swelling of the breasts, I believe, proves that there is still reproductive activity in some, at least, of the She's."

We sat shaking our heads, bowed under terrible reality.

"Then we must experiment," I said. "But whom could we ask to submit to such horror?"

"I have already taken the liberty of asking for volunteers," Rocsates replied. "The She, of course, must be one with the swelling of the breasts. Melia has volunteered, on condition that Xeon be released from dungeon. Are there any objections?"

There were none, of course. Who would refuse a boon to one who would undergo such an ordeal for the City?

"And who will be the partner?" I asked.

"In all honor, could Xeon allow Melia to surpass him in courage? It shall be he," Rocsates said. And with his word the two entered the Hall and stood, noble and naked.

Rocsates gestured to the table, and Melia started to climb upon it, but Xeon stepped forward.

"My lords," he said, "would not better results be obtained were we to conduct the experiment in the fields before the Oracle of Delni, that the gods may help us?"

His glance reached into my soul, and I was proud of Xeon. A true friend, he thought even now of the comfort of Melia. The marble table was indeed hard, and from Rocsates' description it seemed that Melia's position would be as uncomfortable as it would be undignified. The soft fields might be some slight help.

I voiced my assent, and the entire Conclave adjourned to the fields.

It was nearly dark when we walked home, Rocsates and I, arm in arm. It had been a horrible day. The inhuman indignity, the cries—

We tarried before my home, leaned on the stone, stared at the first stars.

"They seemed finally to accomplish all the book described," I muttered.

"They may indeed have succeeded," Rocsates replied. "There is mentioned a time lapse which is necessary. The child does not appear immediately."

"It doesn't matter," I said disconsolately. "Who could ask them to go through such an ordeal again?"

And then I looked down to earth again, and saw them standing before me. Melia cast her eyes down, and would not raise them. Xeon held his arm about her shoulders, as if to protect her, but I know not from whom.

"Sias," he said. Then stopped, embarrassed.

I waited, and Rocsates was silent, and he continued.

"Sias, we come to tell.... We will...." He raised his eyes to mine and said manfully, "We shall try again."

I am afraid that tears came to my eyes. Such sacrifice—

"We beg one favor," Xeon went on. "We are agreed that—Well, we should like to be left alone, in private, to try."

"Of course," I replied. Anything they might want they could have. My relief and gratitude must have showed, for Xeon took a deep breath and spoke again.

"We do not deserve praise, Sias," he said. "The truth is, we ... we sort of enjoy it."

I watched them turn and wander off together under the stars.

My heart has a warmth in it, and I no longer fear for the future of our race when our young people can show such nobility and sacrifice.

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