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The Towers of Trebizond

Written by Rose Macaulay

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MODERN CLASSIC

ROSE MACAULAY

**The Towers of
Trebizond**



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To Susan Lister

"The sheening of that strange bright city on the hill, barred by its high gates . . ."

"Barred from all, Phrastes?"

"From all, Eroton, who do not desire to enter it more strongly than they desire all other cities."

"Then it is barred indeed, and most men must let it go."

"Those who have once desired it cannot let it go, for its light flickers always on the roads they tread, to plague them like marsh fires. Even though they flee from it, it may drag them towards it as a magnet drags steel, and, though they may never enter its gates, its light will burn them as with fire, for that is its nature."

"Who then were the builders of this dangerous city?"

"Gods and men, Eroton; men seeking after gods, and gods who seek after men. Does it not appear to you that such a fabric, part artifact and part deifact, reared out of divine intimations and demands, and out of the mortal longings and imaginings that climb to meet these, must perpetually haunt the minds of men, wielding over them a strange wild power, intermittent indeed, but without end? So, anyhow, it has always proved."

Dialogues of Mortality

**THE
TOWERS OF TREBIZOND**

"TAKE MY camel, dear," said my aunt Dot, as she climbed down from this animal on her return from High Mass. The camel, a white Arabian Dhalur (single hump) from the famous herd of the Ruola tribe, had been a parting present, its saddle-bags stuffed with low-carat gold and flashy orient gems, from a rich desert tycoon who owned a Levantine hotel near Palmyra. I always thought it to my aunt's credit that, in view of the camel's provenance, she had not named it Zenobia, Longinus, or Aurelian, as lesser women would have done; she had, instead, always called it, in a distant voice, my camel, or the camel. I did not care for the camel, nor the camel for me, but, as I was staying with aunt Dot, I did what she bade me, and dragged the camel by its bridle to the shed which it shared with my little Austin and, till lately, with my aunt's Morris, but this car had been stolen from her by some Anglican bishop from outside the Athenæum annexe while she was dining there one evening with Professor Gilbert Murray and Archbishop David Mathew. On camel and car, Gothic gargoyles looked down, on account of the shed being enclosed by the walls of an eighteenth-century folly built out of stones from the restored Perp. and Dec. village church. Of this folly, a few perp. arches remained, and the gargoyle faces ofimps and

monks. The camel, an unconverted Moslem, seemed to look at them with a sneer. I gave it a mangel-wurzel for its luncheon (though it seemed to be still chewing the cud of the one it had for breakfast) and locked it in.

The camel took aunt Dot to church, but not the Austin me. My aunt was a regular church-goer, which I was not. She was a high Anglican, not belonging, therefore, to that great middle section of the Church of England which is said to be the religious backbone (so far as it has one) of our nation. I too am high, even extreme, but somewhat lapsed, which is a sound position, as you belong to the best section of the best branch of the Christian Church, but seldom attend its services.

Perhaps I had better explain why we are so firmly Church, since part of this story stems from our somewhat unusual attitude, or rather from my aunt Dot's. We belong to an old Anglican family, which suffered under the penal laws of Henry VIII, Mary I, and Oliver P. Under Henry VIII we did indeed acquire and domesticate a dissolved abbey in Sussex, but were burned, some of us, for refusing to accept the Six Points; under Mary we were again burned, naturally, for heresy; under Elizabeth we dug ourselves firmly into Anglican life, compelling our Puritan tenants to dance round maypoles and revel at Christmas, and informing the magistrates that Jesuit priests had concealed themselves in the chimney-pieces of our Popish neighbours. Under Charles I we looked with disapprobation on the damned crop-eared Puritans whom Archbishop Laud so rightly stood in the pillory, and, until the great Interregnum, approved the Laudian embellishments of churches and services, the altar crosses, candles and pictures, the improvements in the chapel of St. John's College, Cambridge under Dr. Beale and in Christ's under Dr. Cosin (for Cambridge was our university). During the suppression, we privately kept outed vicars as chaplains and at-

tended secret Anglican services, at which we were interrupted each Christmas Day by the military, who, speaking very spitefully of Our Lord's Nativity, dragged us before the Major-Generals. After the Glorious Restoration, we got back our impoverished estates, and, until the Glorious Revolution, there followed palmier days, when we persecuted Papists, conventiclers and Quakers with great impartiality, and, as clerical status rose, began placing our younger sons in fat livings, of which, in 1690, they were deprived as Non-Jurors, and for the next half century or so carried on an independent ecclesiastical existence, very devout, high-flying, schismatic, and eccentrically ordained, directing the devotions and hearing the confessions of pious ladies and gentlemen, and advising them as to the furnishing of their private oratories, conducting services with ritualistic ceremony and schismatic prayer-books, absorbing the teachings of William Law on the sacramental devotional life, and forming part of the stream of High Church piety that has flowed through the centuries down the broad Anglican river, quietly preparing the way for the vociferous Tractarians. These clergymen ancestors of ours were watched with dubious impatience by their relations in the manor houses, who soon discreetly came to terms with the detestable Hanoverians, and did not waste their fortunes and lives chasing after royal pretenders, who were not, after all, at all Anglican.

It is not, therefore, strange that we should have inherited a firm and tenacious adherence to the Church of our country. With it has come down to most of us a great enthusiasm for catching fish. Aunt Dot maintains that this propensity is peculiarly Church of England; she has perhaps made a slight confusion between the words Anglican and angling. To be sure the French fish even more, as I sometimes point out, and, to be sure, the pre-Reformation

monks fished greatly. "Mostly in fish-ponds," said aunt Dot. "Very unsporting, and only for food."

However this may be, our family have been much given to this pursuit. Inheriting the fish-ponds of the Sussex abbey which they so warily angled for and hooked in 1539, they took for their crest three pikes couchant, with the motto "*Semper pesco*", (it was as masters of trawling-fleets that they had acquired their wealth in the fifteenth century) and proceeded to stock the abbey ponds with excellent carp, which they fished for by way of recreation and ate for dinner in the fasting seasons. Those of the family who took Holy Orders, brought up from infancy to this pastime, continued to practise it assiduously in the various pleasant livings which came their way. One of them, rector of East Harting in the late eighteenth century, wrote in his journal (published in 1810) that he prepared most of his sermons while thus engaged; he thought that his vocation as fisher of men was assisted by miming it out on the river banks, and each fish that he landed caused him to exult greatly, as if he had captured a soul. When they nibbled at the bait, he prayed; when they got away, he repented of his own unworthiness that caused his hand to fail, and took it as divine correction. Subsequently he became a bishop, but did not cease to fish.

The occupation had, of course, its snares. At times the thoughts of these clergymen, angling away in their beautiful and tranquil surroundings, would ramble over speculative theological ground, and encounter, like a dragon in the path, some heresy or doubt. This dragon they would sometimes step over without injury, saved perhaps at the moment of encountering it by a gentle tug at the line: at other times they would grapple with it, perhaps defeat and slay it, or perhaps suffer defeat themselves. Or they would not give battle at all, but would let it slide into their souls, an uninvited guest, not to be dislodged.

Some of them were thus vanquished by the assaults of manicheism, others by the innocent theories of Pelagius, others again by that kind of pantheism which is apt to occur in meadows and woods, others by the difficulties of thus thinking of the Trinity, and still more by plain Doubt. Many became increasingly latitudinarian, some almost Deist, and, as the nineteenth century advanced, they began joining the Modern Churchmen's Union.

But, by and large, the more they fished, the Higher they grew. And the more tenaciously and unswervingly Anglican they were, the better they fished. One of the family, my great grandfather, a keen Tractarian and angler, apt to get into trouble over the Eastward Position, caught, on a holiday in Argyllshire, the largest salmon ever captured in the waters of the Add. But presently, led by his piscatorial musings into another tributary of the great Church stream, he renounced his Orders and became a Roman Catholic. During his Lapse, as the family always called it, he caught only inconsiderable fish, including the smallest trout ever not put back, for my great grandfather put nothing back. At last, wearying of so many small fishes, he poached a large-size salmon in a Devonshire stream, was caught, and appeared before a magistrate, who rightly paid no attention to his false plea that he had supposed his catch to be a wild fish. For this crime he spent a week in Bideford jail; during his detention it came to seem to him that successful angling must be, for him, an Anglican pursuit, and, weary now not only of catching such small fishes but of poaching large ones, lying, and doing time, and wearying too of so many difficult matters that he now found himself expected to believe, he ejaculated, as George Tyrrell was later to do, "Church of my baptism! Why did I ever leave you?" returned to his spiritual home, and was presently rewarded by a miraculous draft of fishes in Loch Tay. Which, as my

aunt Dot said, just showed. His son, aunt Dot's father, was of a more steadfast mind; he left his curacy to go up the Amazon with his young wife, preaching to Brazilian Indians and fishing for the delicious *trutta Amazonia*; he met death at the jaws of a crocodile; aunt Dot's mother just escaped this dreadful fate, and soon afterwards bore aunt Dot.

My aunt, therefore, had inherited a firm and missionary Anglicanism, with strong prejudices against Roman Catholicism, continental Protestantism, Scotch Presbyterianism, British Dissent, and all American religious bodies except Protestant Episcopalianism; she had also inherited a tendency to hunt fish.

She was now a widow. Comparatively early in her married life she and her husband, a zealous missionary, had, while travelling in the more inhospitable parts of central Africa, been surprised by ferocious savages, equipped with the most horrible weapons. My uncle by marriage had been told by the British Resident Officer at Nwabo that he had better not fall alive, or let aunt Dot so fall, into the hands of this unamiable tribe, who were inclined to cook their captives alive in boiling water, as we do lobsters, to improve their flavour, so my uncle and aunt took poison tablets with them. Feeling for these tablets, my uncle discovered that he had lost them, on account of a hole in his pocket. So he said to aunt Dot, as the frightful savages appeared, "I think I had better shoot you first, then myself." Aunt Dot was definitely against this plan; but there was little time for argument, so my uncle, after commending both their souls and pronouncing an absolution, aimed his gun at her and fired. Fortunately he was not a good shot, and the bullet whizzed through aunt Dot's topee. Lest he should have another shot, aunt Dot, full of presence of mind, fell to the ground as if dead; my uncle then turned his gun on himself, and this time

met with more success; he fell, shot through the head. The savages, being by now arrived close to them, were about to carry off the bodies to the pot, but aunt Dot sprang to her feet and told them in their own language, having prudently learned the appropriate phrases beforehand, that she was a goddess, whose flesh was poisonous to those who consumed it, but that she would confer many favours on them if spared. So they conducted her to the hut of their chief, and, as he was away on a hunting expedition, put her in the haarem to await his return. She was small and plump, which was the shape he preferred; though, as they regretfully said, she would also have done very nicely for the pot.

She found the other haarem women rather boring: they seemed, she said, to know little about anything but sweets and love. She shewed them the Book of Common Prayer, translated into central African, and said compline every evening aloud in the same tongue, for she had an office book in it, but they did not think much of either. The wives used to go down to the river half a mile away to wash their clothes and their children; aunt Dot went too, and took her fishing rod, and caught several of a small and distasteful fish called kepsi. Once they met a lioness, who stood in the path and stared at them and waved her tail.

"The wives all ran away," said aunt Dot. "Nice little women, but they ran away. I stayed and stared back, and presently the creature slid off. Then *I* ran away."

"How did you escape from the haarem?" I would ask her, when she told me this story in my childhood.

"One of the wives, who didn't want me to wait till the chief came back, bribed one of the tribe to take me away into the jungle and kill me. But he was afraid to do this, as I was a goddess, so he showed me a path out of the forest that led to a Baptist missionary settlement. I had

never cared much for Baptists, but they were really most kind. You must never forget, Laurie, that dissenters are often excellent Christian people. You must never be narrow minded."

I promised that I never would.

"Though of course," my aunt added, "you must always remember that *we* are *right*."

I promised that I always would.

I now stayed mostly with aunt Dot when I was not in my London flat. Her children are either deceased, or following some profession abroad. I too follow professions, but at some distance behind, and seldom catch up with them. My favourite one is painting water-colour sketches to illustrate travel books, which is a good way to get abroad, a thing I like doing better than anything else, for I agree with those who have said that travel is the chief end of life.

My aunt looked very pleasant. She was at this time in her early sixties, small and plump, with a round, fair, smooth face and shrewd merry blue eyes. She enjoyed life, and got about, sharing my views on the chief end of life, and was a cheerful and romantic adventuress.