The Third Labour

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The Third Labour

Abstract
And a third time I was taken into a dream, and again the woman's face in the water laughed at me, my farmers-boy boots, my sullen accent. I put up with the laughter. She told me again to look into the pool, and this time it seemed to become a map. I didn't understand the map; it was made of many colours sparsely and formally lined and patterned, like a Navajo sand painting. She told me to look for the land called Emteil Coverts, but no part of the map seemed at all like a part of a landscape. Then she said that I must gather the honey of the wild bees that lived there, and feed the Sleepers with it. I saw the faces, the bloodless lips of the Sleepers, again, in the water and superimposed on the map, and again I was one of them.
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them. Then I understood the map, and I saw that there was no road to
Emteil Coverts that did not lead through a red desert land called
Coverleyt. On the map there were little white knots or patterns of rope all
about the borders of Coverleyt, and I understood from this that although
this was hot and featureless and most barren, yet it had defenders, who
would be implacable in defiance of anyone who entered it.

Once I understood this I was walking a flinty little road down towards
the russet sand of Coverleyt. The sudden edge of that desert was a
deeper, purplestained loose sand. The low hills of Emteil Covert lay
bluish across the silver eastern sky.

As I stepped onto the sand it shivered, and the shiver ran rapidly away
under the sand. It was blazing midday, and speeding from right and left
came several tall lancers, riding huge yellowish desert mice. The mice
leapt across the dunes and light splintered under their feet in the spurs
of sand-grains. Every time they landed, their long hind feet made a
booming noise like summer thunder. The Coverleytish warriors wore
white robes, and their white-painted faces were set in masks of despair,
or some mockery of despair, like cruel mimes or misanthropic clowns.
Their long thin lances were tipped with bone, and they shook them
towards me, telling me to go back.

I said, ‘I am dreaming, I am dreaming you, so your weapons can’t hurt
me.’ This was, it seems, incorrect, because the lances hurt intensely, but
in a few strides I was beyond the whole country of Coverleyt, among the
low furze of the hills of Emteil Covert. The air was full of flower-scents
and the fluctuating drones and whines of dusty-coloured bees. The
bushes, you see, had clusters of pale yellow flowers all over them (not a
hairy sandy yellow, like the mice, but a soft whiter yellow). The white
clover between the bushes shook pollen over my boots at every step. Later
on, the valleys became a little deeper and steeper. This is where the
emteil grew, twisted greyish trees like olives, but with thick tassels of
yellow flowers like laburnum. The emteil were alive with sharp-beaked
little birds that kept leaping out into the air, swerving, and hovering to
catch bees on the wing. Unlike the bees, the birds were fairly quiet, their
songs almost whispered down into emteil branches. The bees struggled, heavy with nectar and pollen, from flower to flower, but I wasn't able to catch even one. Soon they seemed to give up their collecting. The flowers waited for the evening moths. The bees murmured back through the cool sweet-smelling evening to their mud nests under the eaves of the town.

The biggest building in the little town was the theatre, though it was built of mud bricks too. The bees' nests were thicker there, inside and out. No wonder it was called the Bee Tower. I dared not tell anyone what I was there for (though the townspeople looked sleepy enough, I knew they wouldn't let me take honey) so I pretended I wanted to see the play. The play had only one actor, a huge, sad, cumbersome whiteface clown. He entered spectacularly, by falling in and out down the rungs of a huge ladder at stage centre. The plot was without interest, but his slow and pathetic mime brought sobs of sympathy and admiration from the audience. He peopled his stage with human incompetence, cynicism and bewilderment wonderfully, I had to admit. At the climax he took on the hesitant droning and erratic wing movements of a dying bee, so realistically that scores of bees woke up and swarmed above the stage in great concern. He died. So to speak.

Then he leapt to his feet and shook a small bell to signal the end of the performance, laughing in delight at the delight of the audience; everyone was laughing, weeping, tossing flowers. Then as the applause died down, a single bee, white or mealy in colour, was seen over the actor's head, flying slowly round him. He looked up, and the bee let fall a single drop of amber honey into his laughing mouth. He fell dead.

No one was surprised. This must be the way these performances always ended. No one noticed, either, when I lifted his loose, untidy body from the stage and carried it out among the press of stirred and chattering theatre-goers in the doorways. At first I went by the stars, but soon they were hard to see because of the clouds of bees that filled the night above me. They left his body alone when I held it across my shoulders, but when I held it out in front of me on my arms they seemed to think I was offering it. They began to settle on it in great numbers. I felt my burden getting lighter as I jogged down the slopes towards the red desert.

By the time I got to the Sleepers in the pool there were only six sweet, sticky amber objects, like statues of bones in honey, amid all the ecstatic, dead or semi-conscious bees. Still, I slipped each carefully into the water above a sleeping face. One was a head, another a spine; the others, who knows? Perhaps bones from upper arms and legs? I was pretty sure the Sleeper who ended up without one would be me. The pool laughed.