

Chapter Seventeen
Apples of Sodom

... But when the sun of the mountain struck on the people of illusion it struck on all their past lives and they lived at last in the starvation they had sought. Religion or art, civic sense or sensual desire, or whatever had drugged the spirit with its own deceit, had been drawn from them; they stared famished at the dry breasts of the ancient witch.

— Charles Williams, *Descent into Hell*

The din gradually separated into distinguishable sounds: voices, loud and boisterous, raucous laughter, howling music to mask the empty, heartless sounds of human indulgence. A filmy smoke hovered close to the ceiling and thickened as I drew closer to the depth of the cavern where the men and women had gathered themselves together. At last I came upon the entrance. Dim lamps flickered giving off just enough light to make the oily, perspiring faces shine. Their eyes shone also, but not with light from within; it was as if their sick and troubled souls had seeped out their pores and covered their skins with a shallow depth of feeling; what little they had was now exposed on the surface of their bodies. All were caught up in movement; a song, a beat, a cheer -- any sound I chose to concentrate on had the same vibration as the others. I moved apart from the sound, and so felt

conspicuous, but no one showed me any regard, unless it was of casual disdain.

Bare-breasted women in high-heeled shoes served drinks from trays, winding their way through the milling crowds, occasionally squealing from a pinch or slap. I searched among them for Elphahaz, but could not see him. The drink flowed liberally, glasses clinked, and speech and laughter abounded even more than before. In snatches of conversation I often heard the name Lyola repeated. "She is coming tonight," they would say in whispered anticipation, then gulp another drink as if in preparation.

I didn't notice when she entered the room. She was well into the crowd when I heard a voice call her name, then another voice called, and another. Soon her name became a chant, a worshipful chant: "Lyola, Lyola, Lyola!" they cried. All eyes were on her. She was tall, nearly a head taller than anyone there, and robed elegantly in scarlet. She walked gracefully, aloof from her worshipers. When the chant reached a near frenzy she stopped, threw back her head and laughed a full, sensuous, womanly laugh.

Raising her arms above their heads she slowly pirouetted before them. "My people, do you desire me tonight?" The clamor became deafening.

"Lyola! Lyola!" they shouted. She laughed again, beholding them as children upon whom she was about to confer a gift.

“You shall have to wait for me then; I shall take a few minutes to prepare.” She ascended some stairs to a stage and disappeared behind a curtain.

No one resumed their previous conversation; all now spoke of Lyola -- how beautiful and kind she was -- how her merest glance filled them with wonder and warmth. I took time to notice her worshipers. Some were peasants, some were servants; I could see some who I thought must be stewards hiding themselves in the shadows at the back of the room.

Strangely eerie, yet beautiful music preceded her; a rhythmic caressing of taut strings, slowly, gently unwinding to produce a low, luxuriant rhapsody of sensual sounds. I was suddenly aware my attention had wavered, drifting into a wistful daydream. Lyola stood fresh and sparkling above us on the stage -- the music had stopped. She dropped her chin and smiled, pressing her hands flat against her abdomen, pushing them down and out as if to smooth any wrinkles in her flawless, red, glittering gown. She began to speak. Her speech was like poetry. It flowed and produced a distinct mood, but seemed to possess no contrived semblance of form whatsoever. The music resumed and followed her every step. Her dance-like movements were like her poetry: incomparable in grace, indefinable in structure. It was as if she danced and spoke for me alone, and confided in me her secret longings for love. I realized she affected all in the room the same way; notwithstanding, my face flushed.

She was calling someone to her. "A small man, I must have a small man. Do not be afraid, I only ask for what I desire." She smiled coyly. Her eyes fixed on a young peasant close to the stage. Whether he wanted to or no didn't matter; she desired him, and the crowd perceiving this pushed him forward as a sacrifice, a demonstration of their devotion. He was less than average in height with a lean muscular build.

Lyola took his hands and led him into her dance. At first they spoke together as they danced, but then only Lyola spoke, and the man gazed into her eyes silently. As they danced Lyola removed his clothes, leaving him naked before us. If he was aware of it he gave no sign, but continued staring into her eyes. She turned his back to us and kissed him long on the lips, then down his neck and shoulders, her hands caressing up and down his back. Suddenly, she furtively searched for the slit in her gown with one hand, and with the other around his waist she pulled him to her. He stiffened, convulsed a few moments, then relaxed in her hold. Her eyes ablaze, she kissed his face and neck repeatedly. Then, seeing he was spent, she looked out into the crowd. "I must lay him down. Wait for me. I shall only be a moment."

The youth lay limp in her arms. I shuddered when I saw the whites of his eyes through open lids -- he had a look of death -- only a spark of life remained in him. She carried him behind the curtain. My mouth was dry, my mind confused -- what am I seeing? The crowd

was quiet, scarcely breathing; I wondered if they were as disturbed as I was. The music began again.

Lyola threw back the curtain, stepping forward with great energy; electricity seemed to flow through her limbs, and it was easily perceptible to all she had derived strength from her encounter with the young peasant. She was livid with color, bright with laughter and gaiety, and she held in her hand a glass full of rose-colored wine.

“I have long been preparing a special wine for you, my people, and at last I have finished! I have given orders everyone should be given a glass so we may drink together, for this is a special, special occasion.”

Already the barmaids had set before nearly everyone a glass of the special wine. I looked dubiously at the red fluid.

“To my people!” she shouted.

“To our beloved Lyola!” cried the people.

“To our great kingdom!” cried Lyola.

“To the Princess Lyola!” they shouted. With each toast they downed another gulp of her special wine. I held the glass before me, tipping it to observe its color and motion. I smelled the glass. Instantly I was transported. The odor of fertile earth invaded my nostrils, and the scents of growing things, of flowers, and a sense of blowing winds and swaying grasses, and finally a woman -- the Princess Lyola -- woman beyond compass, lover beyond imagination. I did not taste the wine -- I dared not!

“Now another!” she cried.

“Name him, name him!” they responded in fervor of obedient devotion.

“Let him be a man of stature, a man of substance.” Her eyes canvassed the room; they rested on a cloaked, hooded man in the shadows at the back of the room. A rousing cheer broke the suspense, and the man was grabbed by many hands and transported overhead to the stage. The man did not rise, but remained kneeling clasping the brooch of his cloak, lest it be torn from him, and his identity revealed. It was Elphahaz -- though I could not see his face, I knew it was him.

“You need not fear, your secret is safe with me,” she cooed, kneeling before him, spreading her garments on the floor in front of her. “You needn't be unmasked; I find our secrecy exciting.”

She reached inside his hood to touch his face, then kissed him. He groped for her with his hands seeking to embrace her, but she caught his hands, turned him, and laid him down. She lowered her head over him, draping him with her hair. We heard sounds of pleasure as she rose and fell on him in time with the music. She raised up on her knees throwing back her hair, and, beaming with pleasure, she drew apart her gown to reveal her nakedness. The crowd gasped.

“Do you not find me beautiful, my people?” she asked.

Her question met with a roar of approval. Voices held by fascination and wonder were suddenly unleashed in a torrent. She smiled and held her hand out to them beseechingly.

“Then let me feel your lust! I must feel your desire, for tonight I have much need of it!”

Scores of people, men and women, reached out to her. “Take us! Take us all, Princess!” they shouted.

“I shall! I shall!” cried the Princess. The crowd worshipped her in a frenzy. The energy of desire became solid, tangible, something real to be grasped and taken, and Lyola took it.

In a moment it was over. Elphahaz was spent. She cradled his limp body in her arms and carried him off the stage. The people now sat silently, fatigued, drained.

But one youth remained bright and alert, his eyes on the curtain. “She is a goddess!” I heard him proclaim.

At length a beautiful voice rang out in melancholy ballad from behind the curtain. She sang of lost love, of unrequited love, of love without passion, of fleeing youth, of sorrow and longing, and of love betrayed. Such a dirge I had never heard, such notes which pierced the soul with sympathy and compassion.

Suddenly, the youth cried out, “Mayn't a man worthy of your love be yet found, Princess? Might you find a man whose passion for you would fill you and satisfy you forever? Might not that man be me?” At this he climbed the stairs of the stage.

The curtain opened tentatively just a crack. Seeing the youth at the edge of the stage, Lyola stepped forward, now in stately nakedness. She presented herself before him, her entire form without fault, the

features of her face perfect in every detail. The youth tore off his clothes and ran to her. They locked in whirling embrace, each striving for the supremacy. As they whirled and twined with savage passion, I beheld the man's face as his expression changed from passion, to bewilderment, to fear, to desperation, to surrender.

Lyola threw him to the floor and mounted him. It was the same as with the other two; the man was consumed. This I witnessed in horror and fascination, unable to speak or move. When she had finished, she wiped her brow, grinning and dancing about the stage in exultation. It was then I noticed that her audience had departed -- she had so drained them that they lay all about the place in dreamless, catatonic sleep. She did not bother to carry away the last youth, but dashed behind the curtain herself.

In a few moments she returned dragging what looked like a heavy iron pedestal standing about waist high with short ropes affixed to the top. She worked the ropes with her hands then became frustrated. A slight movement on my part drew her attention.

"Hurry! Come quickly and bind my hands," she said. I stood up, and, though feeling no compulsion, went to her.

"Why do you wish to be bound?"

"My lover comes, and I fear I must for he demands it."

"Are not these your lovers?" I asked looking at the scattered worshipers. She laughed scornfully.

“Certainly not; I despise them! You must hurry or he will be here! Now, bind my hands to this post, and hide yourself quickly!”

I did as she desired, for, despite her great vigor, she seemed anxious and fearful. In a few moments I had secured her hands to the post and hid myself in the shadows. Before long a cold gust entered the room, but I could see no visible being. Lyola's hair blew wildly for a moment and she shuddered.

“Must you be so cold?” she cried. Suddenly, she bent over, her hands grasping the post, legs apart. “Oh, you're so cold! You're taking all my warmth!” she cried. She moaned and complained of great pain. Her body shook with a rhythmic pounding. “Stop, stop!” she cried out in mounting fear, “You're going too far! I will die!” Her lover disregarded her entreaties. She began a long series of low moaning screams -- a horrifying mixture of fear and pain succumbing to the twisted pleasure of one who seeks death, finds it, and teeters on its brink. She stopped screaming, but her lover continued, increasing his tempo. She now seemed unconscious, but her lover's savagery only increased. Suddenly, she fell as if dead. I felt a cold gust and her lover was no more. For a few moments, her upper body continued swaying from the ropes that bound her hands.

I remained frozen in my place. What is this place where desire is rooted in deception and ends in murder? What is meant by this savage struggle for life and power where the strong prey on the weak, and the

unwitting take poison like candy? In time, the shock wore off, and I became incensed, angry such a condition should prevail among a civilized people. How might they be awakened to their condition? How might they be saved from their depravity? Might I not proclaim it to them openly, and tell them the truth when they awake? This thought filled me with foreboding, for I realized they would not believe me, or, if they did, and retained their consciences, they would hate me for telling them the truth while they still loved the lie. Even so, a few might believe. I would leave Lyola as she was, and explain to them her fate as they awoke -- but no! They would think I was her murderer! And how would I vindicate myself? I certainly could not produce her killer! I could not even give a satisfactory account of her death!

But, was she dead? Perhaps not. Before devising further plans, this I must discern. I went to her. I listened for her breath, but heard none. I felt her neck for a pulse, and found none. Seeing her bound and ravaged so, awoke in me pity, and I wondered if she herself was evil, or only deceived like her followers. Perhaps if she had known the cruelty and evil of her lover she would have forsaken him. I quickly loosed her hands, and laid her on her back. Surely she was not evil through and through -- such a lovely form must compass a measure of goodness -- perhaps a great good seeking to be set free from a horrible bondage. Her body was cold to the touch; I threw over her my cloak, and as I did so my compassion for her aroused;

indeed it seemed a welling up, a flowing force much greater than lust or pride or greed.

“Lyola,” I whispered, “Lyola... Lyola come back.” Momentarily her eyelids fluttered, and then opened revealing a dull, indolent, nearly absent gaze.

“Why did you call me back, thou son of The Nameless One?” she spoke in dreary voice.

“I feared you dead,” I responded. She forced a laconic grin.

“What do you know of death? I was wandering in the region of the seven dimensions.”

“Had you not yet found your home?”

“No. I was in the pull of the descending spiral... on my way to blissful oblivion.”

“Say rather the grip of Hell! Seeing you have been granted a reprieve, will you not repent? Will you not free those you have enslaved and serve The Nameless One?”

“I serve no one but myself! As for the others, they may serve whom they will.” Defiance was even now her greatest passion, and it rose up in strength despite her weak condition.

“That is not so, for I saw the horrid specter rape you by your leave! In truth you are his slave!”

“Nay, not a slave for I do it freely.”

“Then you are wretched above all women!”

“Call me not a wretch for I am the Princess Lyola, by the power of the Dark Lord!”

“Is it he then who panders you as a whore, then rapes you?”

“Speak to me no more! You are not a prince, but a fool; you know not what you say. You only think you are wise; you have never met the Dark Lord nor the Queen of Heaven! You are but a simple man echoing simple thoughts in your stupid head. Now, slay me or leave me, but I will not repent!”

I could not fathom the heart of such a one. If goodness did lie beneath her beauty I could not discern it, save its suggestion by her form. Nevertheless, I was certain I had done all I could do -- perhaps too much by restoring this weaver of deception to those who worshipped her. (I was never quite certain I had really done anything at all by my presence or my actions, excepting, perhaps, what I do now by way of witness and testimony).

I remained quiet before her, wanting to respond to her, to convict her, but it was not in me to do it. I searched my heart and found nothing for her, and, sensing the error of speaking to one of such power out of the mind only, I left her in silence.