



THE BOY WHO WAS



GRACE TABER HALLOCK



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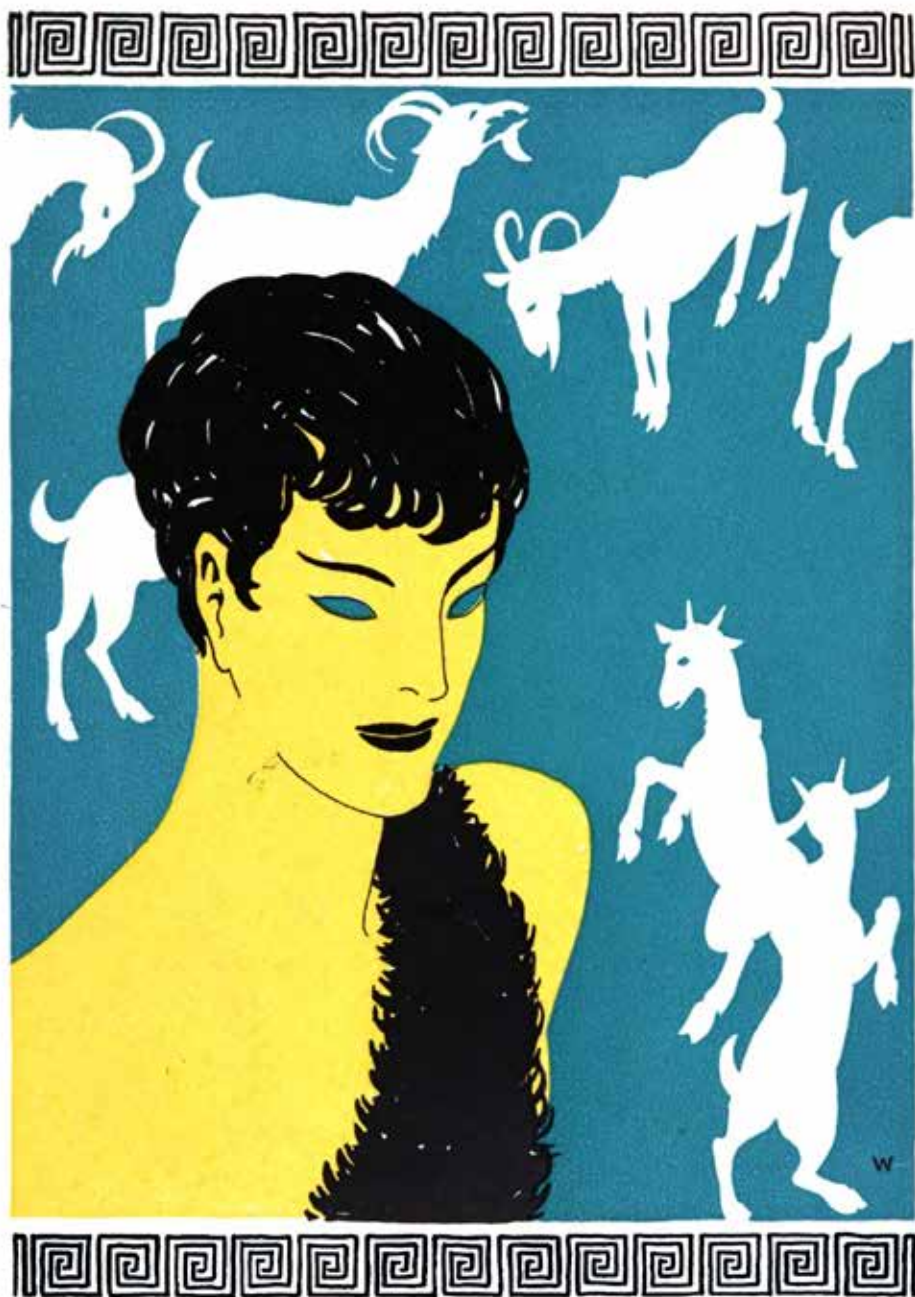
THE * BOY WHO * WAS

STORIES
TOLD BY
GRACE
TABER
HALLOCK



PICTURES
MADE BY
HARRIE
WOOD





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PROLOGUE:

THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI



THESE stories are about that part of Italy which sticks its tongue out at a little island in the blue-green sea. The island is Capri and the tongue is called the peninsula of Sorrento. On the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday in the year of our Lord, 1927, the people of the peninsula were celebrating the Feast of Corpus Christi. Early on that morning an artist had gone climbing up to Ravello from the little town of Amalfi which sits like a bather on the shore of the Mediterranean dabbling her white feet in the transparent water. The path up which he climbed through the Valley of the Dragons was a staircase of stones. In the town the staircase was dark, for white, red-roofed houses rising

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one above the other leaned out over it as if they were trying to peer down the street. A baby giant, with one push, could tumble them all into the sea. Further on, the steps were cut in the solid rock, and on either side were vineyards staggering up the terraced slopes. Girls and women were working in the vineyards. Their red and orange kerchiefs twinkled over the lettuces and broccoli and beans and tomatoes and peppers and little green onions which were planted among the grape vines.

Lemon trees hung with pale yellow fruit and tiny waxen flowers grew in the sunny corners of the terraces. Cutting through their sleepy scent came the piercing sweetness of the blossoming grape. In the terrace walls grew maiden-hair fern and starry rock flowers and tufts of gray-green sage.

Far up the rocky gorge the staircase cut in the limestone reached a landing. This landing is really a flat place on the top of a high cliff, and on it long ago people had built a little town which today is called Ravello. In the center of the town square is an ancient fountain over which a winged lion and a winged bull stand on guard. The artist was thirsty after his long climb and he stopped for a drink from the lion's mouth.

The procession in honor of the Feast of Corpus Christi had just left the cathedral of San Pantaleone which had stood facing its own small platform-like square for over six hundred years. The priests and altar boys in their bright-colored vestments flowed down the narrow, high-walled streets like a mountain brook dyed with the green and red and blue and

white of all the flowers which had ever bloomed on its banks. High above the crowds through which the procession made its way, the figure of the crucified Christ was lifted, and before and after came the altar boys in their long white gowns and tasseled shoulder capes and huge incongruous black boots, carrying tall flambeaux and banners.

The artist entered the church to examine the magnificent mosaic pulpit and the chapels which the Rufolos and the Frezzes and the La Marras and the other merchant princes of Ravello had built long ago for their salvation. But what his eye lit on first was a little scene which looked as if it might have fallen to the floor from one of the stained glass windows. An old woman, apple-cheeked, in a blue and white print dress covered with a voluminous white apron, and with a black shawl over her head and shoulders, was “making” the stations of the cross. At each station she knelt and a boy standing by her side read out the prayers from a little book. The boy was dressed in a goat-skin, and on his feet were sandals bound to his ankles with thongs of leather, an unusual sight in the crowd of townspeople gathered there. In the dim light of the church the artist could not be sure, but it seemed to him that the boy’s skin was the color of honey, of the texture and tint that is sometimes found in old marbles which have lain a long time in the earth.

The artist followed the old woman and the boy when they left the church, and spoke to them as they stood on the terrace before the great bronze doors. The old woman started at the sound of his voice and the artist saw that she was blind.

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“Pardon,” said the artist to the boy, “will you allow me to make a picture of you?”

The boy gave him a charming smile and his black eyes twinkled. “But certainly, Signor,” he said. “I am Nino. I live up in the mountains with my goats. If the Signor will wait while I guide old Lucia home, I will take him to my cabin. I must not leave my goats too long.”

“I will wait,” said the artist eagerly.

“*Si, Signor,*” said the boy. He helped the old woman carefully down the steps of the terrace and guided her across the square with one hand under the crook of her elbow.

While he waited the artist idly examined the little bronze pictures set in the great doors. They had seen many things, those doors, since they were cast back in 1179, he thought.

A voice spoke at his elbow, “Yes, Signor, they have seen many things. Shall we go?”

The artist turned with a start. It was Nino. The boy looked, at that moment, as if he had played with the sirens and talked to the gods of Greece and Rome. He might be a little step-son of Pan, one of those half-gods, who once sat with mortals on their doorsteps and drank milk and ate bread and honey and talked celestial gossip of the gods on Olympus.

Nino piloted the artist through the streets. The black shirts of the Fascisti were everywhere adding shadows to the bright-hued festival crowds. On the street corners were the booths of the macaroni sellers, about which ragged street gamins loitered, and with the tail of their eyes on the black shirts,

begged plaintively. “Mister, gimme a soldo for macaroni. Oh, I’m dying of hunger.” It was fascinating to watch them eat the macaroni, quite worth the price of a soldo, thought the artist. With their fingers they picked up long sticky masses of it from the plates on which it was served, and swallowed them as neatly as a robin swallows a worm. Other groups hovered about the charcoal braziers from which the toasty smell of roasting chestnuts curled up to make the mouth water.

Little mouse-colored donkeys trotted along, piled high with fagots of wood from Scala, or with long narrow casks of wine, or wicker baskets. Here and there an itinerant street vendor carried a whole hardware store about with him. You could hear him coming half the town away. Pretty, soft-eyed girls bore casks of wine, or graceful earthenware amphorae of water on their heads. One child with her right hand held a basket with a baby in it on her head, and with her left, she led a little pig harnessed with a bit of string.

Firecrackers flung by shouting boys popped everywhere, under the hoofs of the patient donkeys, in the doorways of the fruit and bread shops, under the very feet of the passersby. The natives smiled their soft, wide-eyed smiles and shrugged when an indignant tourist became mixed up with a firecracker. It was a feast day, and why should the boys not make the noises and the smells they adored since they were doing it “to the glory of God.”

The artist felt like a ripple slipping along in the wake of a dolphin, so smoothly did the goat boy clear a way for him

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through all the noise and confusion. Before long the town was left behind and the two were climbing a steep path over which a tangle of glossy-leaved myrtle and pale yellow coronilla hung. The broom was in flower and the bushes looked as if they were hung with clouds of tiny golden butterflies.

Suddenly the boy swung off from the main path. What they followed now was the merest ribbon of a trail through locust and chestnut trees. Sometimes the ribbon looped up over a boulder which blocked the way, or curled down into a little green dell where gay flowers - pink cyclamen and bluebells lit on slender stalks and tiny flame-colored gladioli and pink and red snapdragons - bloomed in the short wiry grass.

And now the path edged around a high cliff from which the artist could see the island of Capri kneeling like a two-humped camel in a desert of blue. Rounding the cliff the artist gasped with surprise. He had stepped out on a broad natural platform on which a small cottage stood. Ivy grew over the walls and the tiled roof was green with moss. From an enclosure at the back, penned in with a hedge of close-set brush, came the bleating and the stamping of goats.

“My little house,” said Nino proudly. He led the way to the door and flung it open. The tall artist had to stoop to enter the doorway. It was rather dark inside after the glare of the sunlight on the sea, but he could see that it was very neat and clean. Pots of flowers were set in the windows and there were shelves all about the room covered with lace paper of various colors.

A shrine was set in the wall at the left. In this stood a little plaster Madonna with a rosy scalloped shell of holy water at her feet and a yellow palm branch over her head. She held her little boy in her arms.

Opposite the door was a huge fireplace and next to it a pipeless tile stove. Nino was very proud of this stove. He went to stand by it so that the Signor would notice it. The holes in the top were full of charcoal and over them hung copper pots suspended from a beam in the ceiling. Other things hung from the ceiling too - bunches of red peppers and garlic, strings of chestnuts and dried mushrooms, a whole ham, and wicker baskets of cheeses and bread.

A ladder led through a hole in the ceiling. "I sleep up there," said Nino, following the artist's glance. "Would you like to see my bedroom?"

"No," said the artist laughing. The ladder looked tottery to him and the hole in the ceiling very small. Then he saw some little carved wooden figures lying on the rough hand-made table. "What are these?" he asked, picking up one and turning it over idly in his fingers.

Nino reddened. Without replying he asked, "May I pose for the Signor on the mountain? I must drive my goats to pasture now."

"Of course," said the artist. "I will help you."

"That is not necessary, Signor," said Nino smiling. He went to the door and whistled. A great black dog rose from the spot where he had been dozing in the sun. He yawned widely and

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then came trotting to his master's side. Nino went out and opened the pens. The goats came streaming past the doorway where the artist stood, led by a very old patriarch whose silky black beard was parted by the wind. The dog brought up the rear nipping at the heels of the laggards.

Nino ran into the cottage and caught up a wallet into which he thrust some bread and cheese. He hesitated and then swept in the little figures as well, looking at the artist slyly as he did so to see if he had noticed. "Come Signor," he said.

The goats picked their way delicately over the narrow ledge of rock along the face of the cliff. Nino encouraged them and the artist as well by blowing a merry tune on his pipes. Beyond the cliff they struck into a path which led to the tip-top of Mount Cetara.

When they reached the bare poll of the mountain top, the man threw himself down on the warm rock. Nino sat composedly beside him and watched the goats wander off in search of the tender green shoots of sage brush.

In the bright sunlight the artist saw that without doubt the boy's skin was the color of honey. Now one kind of honey is clear pale yellow and that is clover honey. The other kind is a clear tawny yellow and that is buckwheat honey. This boy's skin was like buckwheat honey. He looked as if he had always been sitting there, and as if he would sit there forever and ever.

You remember those old witches who by one turn of the head could summon a storm, by another calm? Each turn of this boy's head was an enchantment too. When he turned his

head the man turned his. He couldn't help it. Nino looked to the right and there was Naples by the fire-blue sea, held safe in the crook of one arm of the shore. He looked to the left and there was Salerno, held safe in the crook of the other arm of the shore. He looked behind and there were mountains and hills and valleys shutting off the wide world of which it is best not to know too much. Straight ahead, and thousands of feet below, were the islands, Capri and the Galli, flowers dropped from the mouth of the mainland. A good mainland it must have been in the old days to have been given the power to drop flowers from its mouth and not toads. These were the "Siren Isles" where the sirens, Parthenope and her sister, dwelt and sang to the men of the sea in the days when the world was young.

As Nino looked down the painter opened his sketch box. "Stay just as you are," he said. "You look as if you were listening to the sirens sing."

Nino smiled.

For half an hour he sketched. Then he threw down his pencil and stretched his arms over his head. "Aren't you tired?" he asked.

"No," said Nino, "but I'm hungry. I had only a piece of bread for breakfast. Will you share my lunch?"

"Yes," said the artist. "I'm hungry too." Nino opened his wallet and drew out a loaf of black bread, a large piece of cheese and a flask of milk. As he did so, the little wooden figures fell sprawling from the open wallet to the ground.

“You must tell me what these are,” said the artist pointing to the tumbled pile. “If it’s a secret, I promise to keep it.”

“Yes, I meant to tell you from the beginning,” said Nino gravely. “You are an artist and you can help me. A silversmith’s apprentice taught me how to carve wood and I made the figures, but I haven’t any colors. I should like to have them colored,” he said wistfully. He took out a sharp knife and carefully divided the bread and cheese into two equal parts.

“We’ll have to drink out of the flask turn about,” he said. “Do you mind?”

“No,” said the artist, reaching for his share of the bread and cheese. “But what about the puppets?”

“You see, it’s dull here now,” said Nino. “Nothing much happens and I like to think about all the people who once made this coast an exciting place to be. So I carved their pictures in wood. Will you color them for me?”

“Yes,” said the artist as he picked up the figures. “Let’s make a pageant.”

“Oh, yes,” said Nino eagerly, “that’s what I do. I’ll help you. See, the sirens go first. They should have pale green faces and blue hair.” He set the sirens on the rock above a little puddle of rainwater. “This can be the sea,” said Nino, pointing to the water. He launched a little wooden ship on the sea. Peering over the bulwarks were several fierce-looking faces. “This is a ship of the Phoenicians,” he said. “I have made a sail of scarlet cloth for it, but the sides should be painted and the men’s

faces should be brown.” The little ship floated gaily on the water toward the siren rock.

“Odysseus comes next,” said Nino. “His ship has a purple sail and Odysseus is tied to the mast so that the sirens cannot lure him into the sea with their songs. He must have black hair and a blue cloak.”

“This must be the god of the sea,” said the artist fishing up a puppet which held a trident in one hand and a conch shell in the other.

“Yes, that is Poseidon,” said Nino. “He should be green all over except for a black beard and black hair. The Greeks called him the god of the dark locks. He comes next. We’ll put him on the seashore. “Poseidon was planted at the brink of the puddle.

“Who in the world is this?” asked the artist, holding up a rather lumpish-looking figure.

“Oh, that is Tiberius, the Roman emperor who lived on Capri. The people over there call him Timberio now and tell horrible tales of him. They say he used to throw prisoners over the cliffs and that the sailors stationed below beat the life out of any who were still breathing when they hit the rocks. But it isn’t true. The Roman nobles hated Tiberius and made up all sorts of stories about him. He should have a purple toga to show that he was a Roman emperor.” Nino set Tiberius on the rock overlooking the puddle and he really looked quite magnificent standing there with his arms folded.

“This is a little Jewish slave girl,” said Nino, holding up a

small figure. "She once lived in Pompeii." Nino looked at the figure lovingly. "Her shift must be green and her hair black, and see I have carved a little wreath of flowers in her hair." He looked at the Signor to see if he were laughing at him, but the artist's face was grave.

"And this is a Byzantine soldier," said Nino. "I hope you have some silver paint, for his armor must be all shiny." He looked at the artist anxiously.

"Oh, I imagine we can find some silver paint somewhere," said the artist. "Perhaps tin-foil will do. Who is this magnificent creature?" He held up a tall puppet with broad shoulders.

"He's a Goth," said Nino. "Isn't he splendid? He fought in the army of the Goths against the Byzantines. He must have a red tunic and his hair is yellow and his eyes blue."

"Here's another soldier," said the artist.

"Yes, that is Robert the Wise," said Nino. "He's a Norman, you know. When he and his brothers conquered this coast he was as full of tricks as a fox. He must have a yellow beard and a ruddy face. And these are Saracens." He picked up two fierce-looking puppets. "Saracens are brown." Nino lined up the soldiers as if they were on parade and set the Saracens behind them.

Then he picked up a small puppet gently. "This is a little boy crusader. His hair is to be buttercup yellow and his eyes periwinkle blue, and you must paint a red cross on his shoulder."

"I will," promised the artist.

“This is the Emperor Frederick the Second of the House of Hohenstaufen,” said Nino. “He went on a crusade too, but he didn’t like it in the Holy Land. When he came back he said, ‘If God had seen my beautiful Sicily, He would not have chosen that beggarly Palestine for His Kingdom.’ The Pope didn’t like the Hohenstaufen. He called them a brood of vipers, and when Frederick died he sent the French to drive them out of the Kingdoms of Naples and Sicily.”

“You know your history, don’t you?” said the artist.

“Yes,” said Nino simply. “This is Charles of Anjou. He has a crown on his head. It must be gold and he must have purple clothes, for he is the French knight who drove out the Hohenstaufen and became King of Naples and Sicily. The people around here didn’t like the French much. See, this is Lord John of Procida who loved the Hohenstaufen and plotted against the French. I have carved him in the dress of a monk, for he was always going about in disguise. The monk’s frock should be gray.”

“Who is the pirate with the long beard?” asked the artist as he set Lord John of Procida beside the Emperor Frederick whom he loved.

“Oh, that is Barbarossa, the Turk. You must make his beard *very* red. He was wicked; he tried to sack Amalfi.”

“And these are bandits, I know,” said the artist. “You have managed to make them look very fierce.”

“Yes, they are bandits,” said Nino. “They are to have red sashes and green breeches and black hats. I am carving one

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more figure now,” he went on, taking out his knife and a piece of soft wood. “It is to be Garibaldi. He fought the French and Austrians near here, and helped to make Italy free.”

The artist took out his paint-box. “I may as well start in,” he said. “Shall I begin with the sirens?”

“Of course,” said Nino, lifting his face from his carving. “It all began with the sirens.”





SIREN SONGS



SIREN SONGS



ABOUT 3,000 years ago, more or less, a boy with black hair and black eyes and a face the color of buckwheat honey sat on a rock by the seashore. He had gathered together a little store of bright-colored pebbles and shells and was throwing them, one by one, out toward some islands clumped in the blue-green watery meadows of the sea.

“Wake up, wake up, lazy one,” he called as he threw the pebbles. “Wake up, Parthenope, and sing me a song.”

A head lifted above the top of the island. The face of it was pale green. It was the sort of face of which one doesn’t say, “the nose was thus and so, and the mouth was so and thus.” It was the sort of face that is remembered but never

talked about. The hair above it was blue. It was exactly the right color for the face.

“Ho, Parthenope,” called the boy, “sing me a song.”

“You are a bold boy,” said the siren and rubbed her eyes as if she were only half awake. “What shall I sing about?” she called.

“Sing me a song about the ships that go where the sun drops over the edge of the sea. What do the brown men in the ships want at the end of the world?” The boy pointed to the West.

“The Phoenicians? Why, they go to find the gray stuff for their spear-heads. The people of the island where they buy it call it by a quick little name”—she put a finger to her forehead—“tin.”

“Sing about it,” demanded the boy.

“Very well,” said the siren, “but don’t blame me for what happens.”

The siren began to sing, and as she sang she combed her long blue hair with a comb of red coral. Had the boy been able to see her, he would have liked to watch the red sliding down through the blue, but when she sang he saw only the pictures of her song, moving across the sky like colored clouds at sunset.

SONG OF THE PHOENICIANS

A ship came beating up from where the sun rises and went sailing into the sea where the sun disappears. This was not so strange. Often and often the boy had seen other ships like this,

with their carved sides and scarlet sails. Many and many a one he had watched until some interfering headland or mist of the sea had blotted it out of sight. How he had longed to be on one of those ships sailing into the unknown, monster-haunted land of the dying sun.

But this time the ship did not disappear. It sailed on and on. It passed between two rocky pillars out into a gray and angry sea. At last white cliffs rose up to meet it. The sailors on the boat deck pointed to the shore and brandished their weapons. The clash of cymbals floated out over the water. Close in to a curve of the shore swerved the ship and the sail came flapping down.

Now the boy saw a road, a long road dipping and rising like a white band over the dry turf of the chalkland. On the road were strange, blue-painted men with big mustaches who rode astride of shaggy little ponies. Some ponies were loaded with heavy lumpish-looking sacks.

The scene changed again to a cove where the ship lay drawn up on the beach. A band of the blue men came riding down to the shore. They unloaded their sacks and the brown men of the ship crowded around them, holding out rings and necklaces of orange metal. The blue men shook their heads. They sat their ponies and flung their spears into the air. The spears were fastened to their wrists with long straps and on each one a rattle was tied. When a man flung his spear and jerked it back by the strap the rattle made a fearful noise. The brown men flung down their trinkets and made a rush toward the sacks, but the blue men rode into the thick of them. The ponies stood stock still until