

## THE LOTUS-EATERS

Now, at this time, the shore of Libya was known as "the land where Morpheus plays."

Who was Morpheus? He was a young god, son of Hypnos, God of Sleep, and nephew of Hades. It was his task to fly around the world, from nightfall to dawn, scattering sleep. His father, Hypnos, mixed the colors of sleep for him, making them dark and thick and sad.

"For," he said, "it is a little death you lay upon man each night, my son, to prepare him for the kingdom of death."

But his aunt, Persephone, sewed him a secret pocket, full of bright things, and said: "It is not death you scatter, but repose. Hang the walls of sleep with bright pictures, so that man may not know death before he dies."

These bright pictures were called dreams. And Morpheus became fascinated by the way a little corner of man's mind remained awake in sleep, and played with the colors he had hung, mixing them, pulling them apart, making new pictures. It seemed to him that these fantastic colored shadows the sleepers painted were the most beautiful, most puzzling things he had ever seen. And he wanted

to know more about how they came to be.

He went to Persephone, and said, "I need a flower that makes sleep. It must be purple and black. But there should be one petal streaked with fire-red, the petal to make dreams."

Persephone smiled and moved her long white hand in the air. Between her fingers a flower blossomed. She gave it to him.

"Here it is, Morpheus. Black and purple like sleep, with one petal of fire-red for dreams. We will call it lotus."

Morpheus took the flower and planted it in Libya, where it is always summer. The flower grew in clusters, smelling deliciously of honey. The people ate nothing else. They slept all the time, except when they were gathering flowers. Morpheus watched over them, reading their dreams.

It was toward Lotusland that Ulysses and his men were blown by the gale. The wind fell while they were still offshore. The sky cleared, the sea calmed, a hot sun beat down. To Ulysses, dizzy with fatigue, weak with hunger, the sky and the water and the air between seemed to flow together in one hot blueness.

He shook his head, trying to shake away the hot blue haze, and growled to his men to unship the oars, and row toward land. The exhausted men bent to the oars, and the ships crawled over the fire-blue water. With their last strength they pulled the ships up on the beach, past the high-tide mark, and then lay down and went to sleep.

As they slept, the Lotus-eaters came out of

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2. *ship the mast*. The mast was short and could be *shipped*, or *unstepped*—that is, taken down—and sometimes was even carried off the ship for security.



The palm trees of the Lotus-eaters. The island of Djerba off the coast of Tunis was already regarded in ancient times as the dwelling place of the Lotus-eaters of the legend.  
Photo by Erich Lessing

the forest. Their arms were heaped with flowers, which they piled about the sleeping men in great blue and purple bouquets, so that they might have flowers to eat when they awoke, for these people were very gentle and hospitable.

The men awoke and smelled the warm honey smell of the flowers, and ate them in great handfuls—like honeycomb—and fell asleep again. Morpheus hovered over the sleeping men and read their dreams.

“These men have done terrible things,” the god whispered to himself. “Their dreams are full of gold and blood and fire. Such sleep will not rest them.”

And he mixed them some cool green and silver dreams of home. The nightmares

faded. Wounded Trojans stopped screaming, Troy stopped burning; they saw their wives smile, heard their children laugh, saw the green wheat growing in their own fields. They dreamed of home, awoke and were hungry, ate the honeyed lotus flowers and fell into a deeper sleep.

Then Morpheus came to Ulysses who was stretched on the sand, a little apart from the rest. He studied his face—the wide grooved brow, the sunken eyes, the red hair, the jutting chin. And he said to himself, “This man is a hero. Terrible are his needs, sudden his deeds, and his dreams must be his own. I cannot help him.”

So Morpheus mixed no colors for Ulysses’ sleep, but let him dream his own dreams, and

read them as they came. He hovered above the sleeping king and could not leave.

"What monsters he makes," he said to himself. "Look at that giant with the single eye in the middle of his forehead. And that terrible spider-woman with all those legs. . . . Ah, the things he dreams, this angry sleeper. What bloody mouths, what masts falling, sails ripping, what rocks and reefs, what shipwrecks . . . how many deaths?"

Ulysses awoke, choking, out of a terrible nightmare. It seemed to him that in his sleep he had seen the whole voyage laid out before him, had seen his ships sinking, his men drowning. Monsters had crowded about him, clutching, writhing. He sat up and looked about. His men lay asleep among heaped flowers. As he watched, one opened his eyes, raised himself on an elbow, took a handful of flowers, stuffed them into his mouth, and immediately fell asleep again.

Ulysses smelled the honey sweetness, and felt an overpowering hunger. He took some of the flowers and raised them to his mouth. As their fragrance grew stronger, he felt his eyelids drooping, and his arms grew heavy, and he thought, "It is these flowers that are making us sleep. Their scent alone brings sleep. I must not eat them."

But he could not put them down; his hand would not obey him. Exerting all the bleak force of his will, he grasped his right hand with his left—as if it belonged to someone else—and one by one forced open his fingers and let the flowers fall.

Then he dragged himself to his feet and walked slowly into the sea. He went under and arose snorting. His head had cleared. But when he went up on the beach, the sweet fra-

grance rose like an ether and made him dizzy again.

"I must work swiftly," he said.

One by one he carried the sleeping men to the ships, and propped them on their benches. His strength was going. The honey smell was invading him, making him droop with sleep. He took his knife and, cutting sharp splinters of wood to prop open his eyelids, staggered back among the men. He worked furiously now, lifting them on his shoulders, carrying them two at a time, throwing them into the ships.

Finally, the beach was cleared. The men lolled sleeping upon the benches. Then, all by himself, using his last strength, he pushed the ships into the water. When the ships were afloat in the shallow water, he lashed one to another with rawhide line, his own ship in front. Then he raised his sail and took the helm.

The wind was blowing from the southwest. It filled his sail. The line grew taut; the file of ships moved away from Lotusland.

The men began to awake from their dreams of home, and found themselves upon the empty sea again. But the long sleep had rested them, and they took up their tasks with new strength.

Ulysses kept the helm, grim and unsmiling. For he knew that what he had seen painted on the walls of his sleep was meant to come true, and that he was sailing straight into a nightmare.