



Saint George

Original title	Sint Joris, 1983
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Translation	Ronald Langereis, 2013
Illustration	Martin Schöngauer, ca. 1480

By way of introduction – 'Belcampo'

"When the Roman Empire had reached its greatest expansion, it lost its fancy for further growth."

This is the first sentence of a short story, "Sint Joris" [Saint George], by a maverick Dutch writer from the previous century. He called himself 'Belcampo', Italian for his surname, and he was an eccentric indeed. Being born in 1902, he studied law to become a notary after his father, but he never practised the profession, as the times - the thirties - were difficult. Instead of going on the dole, and feel miserable, he hitch-hiked to Italy, and made it to the north of Sicily, providing for his livelihood and lodging by making pencil portraits of the people he met, wisening up quite a lot on the subject of the human psyche along the road.

After the war [WWII] he studied medicine, and settled as a village GP, and after a decade became a students' physician at Groningen University, until his retirement in 1967.

He was a lifelong philosopher. Coming home from his Italian adventure, in his mid-thirties, he had his mind already made up about the great picture of the natural world and that of men and their passions, but it took him till after his retirement to put it to paper. As an individualist, he developed his personal philosophy, and called it '*belcampism*', for, of course, none of the other philosophies to date fitted his idiosyncratic sense of life and humour. According to his '*The Philosophy of belcampism*' [1972], the essence of human life, in extension of the old adage 'to live, and let live', is the attempt 'to live pleasantly, and let live pleasantly'. The rest he considered hot air. Though, possibly, something is lost in this translation, and his motto should rather be read: 'To thrive, and let thrive'.



Belcampo died in 1990. He left an oeuvre of scores of short stories and tales of a mostly quirky nature, written in a peculiar, rather antiquated style, but always intriguing and entertaining for the sake of their slightly ironic, seemingly self-evident, but mind-twisting narrative.



St George

Take the sentence on top of this page. At first sight, it seems little short of ludicrous, and if so, it is meant to be. How would the Empire have fathomed, that it had reached its greatest expanse, when it did?

But before you decide, read Belcampo's tongue-in-cheek rendering of 'Saint George' in this English translation, a first and one true to the spirit of his literary style and capers.

1. The Oasis

When the Roman Empire had reached its greatest expansion, it lost its fancy for further growth.

Every area that promised gains had been conquered and incorporated. The rest of the world consisted of desolate waste lands not worth development, nor conquest. Still, people were living there and as no one coveted their territory, they enjoyed long stretches of peaceful existence and it showed. Unencumbered by political passions, hubris and self-assertion, characteristic of natives of great, powerful states, they took for granted that the only sense of life was to be merry and love each other much.

Of course, even they needed some level of organisation, but it never amounted to very much, because without high roads a more extended domain would readily prove hard to control and roads in those days were a monopoly of the Romans.

So, on the fringes of the Roman Empire, there existed a lot of small nations. For the greater part they were led by a headman, sometimes called a king, within the confines of natural borders, be they mountain ranges, swamps, primeval forests, tracts of water or of sand.

In the Libyan desert, which stretches west from Egypt, there was another such little realm. It all but occupied one of the larger oases and was named Silenia after its capital and only city, Silene, where also resided its king. That it was surrounded by walls recalled the days when at times a band of Bedouin savages or Berbers would pass by, but ever since Egypt had become a Roman province this didn't happen anymore.



The only foreigners still around were Roman border patrols and these were always welcomed with hospitality and in peace.

Any isolated, tiny realm must be able to provide for its own wants, of course, as was the case here also. Beyond the oasis' natural yields a thriving trade of sheep-farming produced meat, milk and clothing, and besides, near the capital there happened to be a big, rich fish pond, the depth of which was still for any one to guess. As it was highly valued for its contribution to the food supply, the whole population felt a magical reverence for it as well, because they believed this pond to be the ancient origin of the oasis itself.

How much time had since passed and how many royal dynasties had ruled Silenia from its earliest days nobody knew. History books were unknown, and indeed, what else could have been on record but that they were happy and loved each other much.

That's exactly why every one did remember so well the events that will be the subject of this story and which pulled off this whole affair.

2. The Pond

It all began when the catch of fish from the big pond started to decline, on the cause of which nobody was any the wiser. Mortality it couldn't be, for dead fish were nowhere afloat. Climate and water level had remained the very same and to the appearance or taste of the fish caught there wasn't anything of note either.

People were left completely in the dark and the worse part of it was, the decline didn't halt. After some time the catch had dropped to half its former size and later on to only a quarter.

Now, there were fishermen who thought they noticed, at times, strange whirlings in the water, stirring the surface from below. Musing on its unfathomable depth, some fancied their pond might have become connected to wide, underground water areas; that the mighty currents in them could sometimes be seen at the upper side, and that by these same currents the greater part of their fish had been sucked into the subterranean. Until one day, at just such a whirling, a couple of fishermen saw a crest of giant fins rising from the water. This, at once, explained the enigma. There lived in the pond a formidable fish that was devouring all the other fish, fattening itself more and more by this action.

All efforts to catch the 'Convivant', as before long it was commonly called, proved useless.

It must have been lying low or hiding in a cave and it appeared to be very watchful, for every time the men went after it, the pond was still as death. Eventually, their catch of normal fish ran down to such a trifle, that the fishermen might as well stay home to attend to different chores, to mind the sheep, for instance. Having fish for dinner grew into a memory, even in the royal family.

This plight, to which they had somewhat resigned themselves, suddenly changed as another sensational event befell them.

One day a few shepherds, setting out for their flocks early in the morning, happened on the remnants of a freshly devoured sheep. Slivers of bone, bloody tufts of wool, and the extremities: ears, tail, and hooflets were found scattered on the turf, testifying both silently and eloquently of the accomplished fact. From that frightful spot led a peculiar track, a furrow in the turf, as if a heavy sack had been dragged along the ground, and on either side of it the regular imprint of a huge, crooked claw.

After swift deliberation the shepherds decided to follow the trail and how amazed they were and how alarmed when they saw it headed straight for the pond and disappeared into it.

In hot haste they returned to the town, reported their findings, and great was the consternation they engendered by their tale.

The voracious dweller of the pond had never been a mere fish, but rather a beast that could move on land as well and by all means nimbly enough to grab a sheep. Now that, apparently, no more fish was left to satisfy it, they should live in dread for their sheep. A vital common interest was at stake.

New efforts to catch the monster, executed with ampler means and manpower, again proved futile. The pond stayed stock-still. In its unreachable refuge the creature, obviously, lay digesting its prize.

3. The Siege

Exactly one week after it had plucked a first sheep from the flock, another fell a victim, also during the night, and judging from the remains, mauled in the selfsame manner as the first. So, though this be a monster, there was method in it.

In consequence, a decision was taken to lay a full-scale siege to the pond. Never again this brute should be given a chance to put a paw ashore. Around the pond a ring of guard posts was set up to be manned night and day by armed bands of the strongest and bravest men.

For a full week nothing happened. The guardsmen were growing weary. Already some of them, in the rash supposition that their mere presence sufficed to scare the beast, brought dice to their post.

Until, on the morning of the seventh day, the beast raised its head above the water. And some head it was!

A head that was all jaws. When they opened wide - as the beast was doing - they showed double rows of fangs in both the upper and lower part, so horrific that whoever saw them, presently realized that whatever was caught between them would be successively crushed, shattered and pulverized.

The palate resembled red plush. The eyes were placed in the upper lip, as were the nostrils. From the latter spurted two jets of brown smoke. Evidently, the beast could aim them, for now they spouted straight up and then they skimmed the water. All there was to be seen of the body was covered in scales shining like armour plates with high, razor-edged crests in between.

In dead silence, the men stood gaping at the apparition while it too kept silent. But once it made its sound roll across the water, the whole body took to flight. That sound lacked anything human or animal, neither shrieking nor roaring; it rang like the laughing of a collapsing house.

No man, not even the bravest, remained behind, dared to wait for the beast - if it would approach the bank - to raise more of itself from the water. Its head alone had nipped any thought of resistance in the bud. Panic was raging, a unanimous save-who-can behind the walls of their town. Here their excited stories were causing a major alarm. Drums were rolled and the council was summoned with all speed.

4. The Councillor

The most eloquent of the guardsmen acted as their spokesman and from his words the entire council turned an ever whiter shade of pale. In the ensuing spell of total bewilderment a turmoil erupted of disorderly and tumultuous discussions, which the king as the council's chair attempted to stem in vain. Until, eventually, the junior councillor, a bright mind who had been admitted to the council for his strong level-headedness, raised his voice and succeeded in dampening the raging feelings by the following address.

Brothers, let us be reasonable. We all must eat, and so must every animal. Being alive, not one escapes the need of having to eat. That the beast observed by our guardsmen was getting hungry after it gradually had disposed of all the fish in the pond, and that it looked out for an alternative, in this it obeyed the Law of Nature. We can't cast this in its teeth.

If we are to believe the description of it rendered to us, it appears to be a beast that may do us great harm, yea, that can turn our entire community destitute. But, as yet, it hasn't done anything of the kind at all. It never did as much as crook a hair of anybody, let alone pull one. By all means, it may as well be a benignant creature whose horrific appearance and dreadful voice are but defensive expedients. Such are the ways of the animal world. Well, even amongst men there are those who hide a too tender heart behind stern looks and a gruff attitude.

If this be our starting-point - and indeed, why shall we, at once, suppose anything more evil - we may reason along the following lines.

Over the last period, the beast apparently felt a need for stepping ashore at three consecutive Saturdays. In between it was lying low. From this, we may infer that one sheep can appease its appetite for a whole week. When we offer it a sheep at every Saturday we will not be bothered by it.

Fifty-two sheep in a year, it's something, together, we can afford easily. There are many nations having deities to whom they are obliged to sacrifice quite a lot more animals to propitiate them.

Let's see it this way. One sheep a week for disaster to be averted. We may fare even better. Suppose, in this way, the mysterious creature is won over and becomes a boon to the whole of our community. It may even be a god assuming an ever so horrible shape only to try our mettle. Who knows, by his doing an era of unprecedented happiness may dawn upon us. Therefore, beware, lest we make him loathe us by grudging him his food or by panicking.

This speech had the intended effect. The council decided to abstain from immediate action and to prudently reconnoitre the pond's surroundings on the following morning.

5. Rumbblings of discord

The junior councillor seemed to have been spot-on, for further developments complied to his very words. The following Saturday scouts found the remnants of a newly-eaten sheep. A fixed spot was chosen, not far from the pond, where henceforth the victim would be tethered firmly to a pole. This marked the beginning of new circumstances to which they accustomed themselves rather quickly and in which they acquiesced. The more so as there was no sign of the monster for the rest of the week, as had been predicted. So, everything seemed much the same as before and everyone carried on his usual activities. Each time the sheep's value was made good on its owner from the common means.

Whether they had entered upon an era of greater happiness, for the present, there was no sign of this. What did happen, however, was a faint anxiety and awe entering their minds, and above all, curiosity. Although nobody, after that first encounter, had ever seen it again, the mysterious pond dweller still took part of people's thoughts. Its appearance was greatly embellished. The trail from the pond to the sacrificial spot, standing out ever starker, inspired them with a certain respect that kept them from crossing it. Everyone was giving a wide berth to the offering place.

Whereas nobody could muster the courage to spy on its feasting, yet a desire just to see the monster was ever gaining in strength, especially amongst youngsters. For as the day of the first fright was receding into the past, so doubts were mounting about the particulars of its appearance. Voices were heard saying that the beast probably would underwhelm expectations, that its description had been a product rather of shock and imagination than of observation - some even hinting at mass suggestion and mass hysteria - and that this beast to which the whole community was rendering honours all but divine, after all might be anything but a plain and simple crocodile. For the first time in the history of this society graffiti showed on its walls as the bearers of what still was deemed unfit for uttering openly.

The former sentries, those who at the time had manned the guarding posts, the eye-witnesses and reporters, together with their constituencies felt deeply disgraced by these slurs and defended themselves vigorously.

"As you are so much bolder than we are, go and look for yourself," they retorted. But nobody dared.

6. The Rift

And now the improbable happened. This nation, where peace and love had reigned supreme since time immemorial, split up into two fiercely warring factions; those who believed the official reports unconditionally and their opponents who, indeed, derided those ever more. The anxiety for the monster they considered all but hype and found it nothing short of ridiculous therefore to part with a precious sheep once every week.

A community that has never experienced a disturbance of its harmony and is completely unprepared for it, feels utterly inconvenienced and powerless when it, nevertheless, occurs. There were clashes. Some blood was spilled. Already, all kinds of material were gathered in sundry places for raising barricades, if push came to shove.

For the first time ever there were people who used the general confusion as a cover for mischief. Chaos is always the well head to crime. As yet, the Silenians hadn't come so far as to be blind to the difference between a factious row and a crime, and though they failed to restore their former unity, evil-doers were run in and locked up, just as was known to be the case in other towns.

What was indeed remarkable of this whole tumult was that it never raised the question as to the nature of the beast at all. It was all and only about its appearance. Whether it possessed a spirit benevolent or evil, nobody seemed to care about, nor did anyone feel so much as concern.

Subject to the rules of polarization and escalation, the contrary opinions diverged ever wider and their partisans attacked each other ever more fiercely and brutally. A mutual crippling of trade was looming and society teetered on the brink of civil war.

Who saw this most clearly, and therefore deplored the state of affairs the more deeply, was the junior councillor, and just like he had warded off the earlier menace, so, by his words, he brought deliverance from this perilous plight.

At the council - where dissension ran rampant to such a degree that, aside from crime equally hated by all, decision-making had come to a complete standstill - his reasoning went as follows.

7. The Scheme

Brothers, let us be reasonable. Instead of making life a burden to each other, we'd better scrutinize calmly the bone of contention that is dividing our nation. On the point at issue we are of one mind, the sheer looks of our pond squatter. Here lies no cause for drawing knives. It is not this that's driving us apart. But if not this, what then?

*One faction - and on this he turned to the right wing of the council - implicitly believes what the guards told us about the monster's appearance. In consequence, let us call them **'Believers'**. The other faction - and now he turned to the left wing - refuses to accept the reports on good faith, yea, deems it not overly improbable that they don't answer to reality. Therefore, let them be baptized 'Disbelievers', or rather **'Unbelievers'**, and rightly so.*

Now, my fellow councillors, you will agree with me, that pounding each other's skulls for the sheer image of a creature that one faction saw only in part and the other faction not at all, would be utter foolishness. And, if even possible, the more foolish, indeed, because the solution is so obvious. We should examine the truth of the matter, we should arrange for the beast to be observed. To see for yourself, indeed, compares to nothing.

So, let us consider how we can make this happen.

It will not be easy. The Believers are still terror-stricken. They're constantly living in fear. And the Unbelievers, they too, dare not venture out of town at the hour of offering. Maybe, they fear to be counted as sheep?" he added with a mischievous smile.

"Well, brothers," he went on, "I have reflected on this question beforehand, and I'm here to propound to you my plan.

We should move the place where the victim is offered in the direction of our town, gradually. When we do so with care, without giving him the impression it's done on purpose, so that the beast may come to suspect us of luring him into a trap, we may succeed in bringing him under our walls close enough for us to watch him in action safely and at ease.

Forthwith, it will be clear which of both factions is in the right and thereby harmony will be restored to our people. What is more, we shall know at once how to behave toward it, whether we'll be able to rid ourselves of it, or - when its looks prove so dreadful as to deny our human powers any chance of success - whether we'd better get used to it living in our presence. In case of the latter we can remove the offering back to its present place as to spare us the weekly fright of so ghastly a spectacle.

But whatever the result of this investigation, the perilous discord from which we at present are suffering will be healed. And that, in my opinion, is the most important of all."

8. Revelation

Fortunately, the leaders of the factions didn't cling to their convictions yet as rigidly as to miss the appeal to reason in this speech and so the proposition was passed unanimously. And chances of success looked promising, for over the next few weeks the ever shifted victim was promptly devoured. Utter care, as had been recommended, was observed in the arrangements. No suspicion should be aroused in the beast, none whatsoever.

In consequence, it was strictly forbidden to anyone to be on the ramparts or walls during the feeding. Just one man - and the scheme's promoter was a natural choice - was allowed to follow the course of the experiment from a hidden observation post and only when its goal of 'right under the wall' was achieved, the people would be given permission to fill the walls, roofs and towers in due silence to be confronted at once with the solution in all its clarity. If granted prematurely, chances were the old feud would flare anew by lack of substantial evidence. Also for this reason our observer wrapped himself in deep silence on what he had seen.

At last, after months, the proper day arrived. Word came that on the next Saturday every one would see from close by the creature that for so long had engrossed their thoughts, and that it would reveal itself in its entirety and in one of its essential acts. It would be a day of revelation.

In this same week, a long gallery was built on top of the section of the town wall that offered a view of the sensational action. Moreover, protruding balconies and upper windows, roofs and even towers were reshaped to such a fashion that spectators could watch the arrival and proceedings of the monster without being seen by it themselves. Every one claimed his share in the sighting.

Thus, on that Saturday morning, the whole of Silene had mounted their posts, camouflaged so well that someone unfamiliar with the town wouldn't have noticed anything special on its outside. There was nobody but had rested his gaze for a while on the little sheep below. On its tether it was grazing peacefully. That it never showed a sign of foreboding was what gave people a special thrill.

The mandatory silence was not observed, emotions were too highly strung for that. Silence did fall, however, at the appearance of the terrible beast from the distance and persisted as long as it remained within view. Even during the calm and ruthless quelling of the desperate struggle and the deliberate shattering of the prey no groan, no cough was heard, not even a sigh. Only when the monster with bulging belly had disappeared from the scene, people drew breath again. Its frightening appearance had pre-empted the bid for silence.

9. The Event

The goal of the enterprise had been definitely achieved. The whole left wing as well, went home in the belief: *'against this monster there's no avail.'* On all sides, its body and limbs were shielded by scales as if by steel armour and these, in their turn, were protected by a system of blades and spikes. And those tremendous nostrils, who knows what deadly venom might belch from them when it mattered. Its movements in general were sluggish but, if necessary, it could swipe with lightning speed. A sudden jump by the poor little sheep had revealed as much.

'We'd better learn to live with it,' was the unanimous conclusion. There followed an overall reconciliation and thereby unity was restored. In line with the junior councillor's opinion, to many of them this seemed what mattered most.

Now, at all ease, the second part of the plan could be implemented, to gradually remove the offering place back to the pond's vicinity. Unexpectedly, this met with strong resistance of the population. Were the lookout facilities, constructed with so much effort and at such cost, just to be demolished forthwith?

This argument was proffered foremost but behind it some deeper motives emerged. There were such as to frankly confess that they simply loved the horrors. Artists considered the beast highly inspiring. Painters, going a step further, declared it to be of exceptional beauty, a knight amongst animals. Never had they observed reflections of light thus enticing. To the Surrealists among them it was nothing short of *'gefundenes Fressen'*, a godsend.

Scientists joined in the protest as well. They wished to have a closer look into this phenomenon, as they preferred to call the beast. The ethically inclined couldn't stop pointing at the beneficial consequences of its first contemplation and considered it quite possible the effects might be lasting.

In short, resistance became so overwhelming that the council decided to leave things as they actually were and thus, the offering just under Silene's wall became a weekly event. Not during deliberations, nor at the final decision was any word breathed on the perpetual agony of the sheep.

10. Facing the Music

Nothing in this world remains stationary, nor so did standing arrangements. The sheer horror that on first encounter had struck people dumb, steadily subsided each time and in consequence, silence was observed ever less. What had been feared, that the monster would balk at so many staring eyes and turn back in fright, it didn't happen. On the contrary, it seemed rather to like it. At times, while proceeding, it raised its head to the gallery as if to say, *'stop hiding, will you. I do still see you!'* and at once distorted its terrible jaws into something that might pass for a grin.

The public took this for a challenge and it wasn't long ere the boldest - youngsters, of course - dared from their hiding places and as they stood watching openly it didn't in the least seem to bother the monster. Also, when shouted at by a foolhardy lad, it only raised its grinning head.

'He knows we are here, already. We need not hide from him anymore!' became the new watchword and those in authority weren't slow to act on the consequences. Mandatory silence was abolished and instead of the covert gallery, they built open tiers rising to considerable height. Watching on the sly was over. Overnight, visibility became a matter of national importance and every tall building with a view, either public or private, was adapted accordingly.

Following the authorities, which from now on were levying entrance fees on their tiers, the owners of well situated premises started to rent their rooftops to spectators and were doing nicely by it. From this instant, financial interests were attached to the monster. The cost of the sheep became a side issue.

Now, one would think the eagerness of watching an ever repeating event might dwindle with time, but nothing was more beside the truth. Though all it came to was ought but the eating of a sheep, still, in the totality of events there was a mounting degree of suspense. Every next time the spectacle was enriched, at least by expectation itself. As soon as opinion prevailed that the beast seemed to appreciate the presence of a large audience, it received a boisterous welcome on arrival and still today, no one can tell whether it were hooting or cheering.

From this, someone got the idea to grace the offering fest - for this aspect gained in prominence ever more strongly - with music. A small orchestra was quickly composed and now, it so happened that the beast synchronized its appearance with the starting of the music as if listening for the tune of the orchestra rather than for the rumbling of its stomach. In this way, its arrival could be timed at will and of course, this proved a major boon to the whole enterprise.

11. The Breath of the Beast

Strange as it may sound, between the monster and the crowd a bond evolved as between an actor and his audience. The at first altogether guileless behaviour of the animal developed into a genuine performance. At times, it played straight to the gallery, just showing off, making inane leaps, snapping in the air as if to crunch a bird in flight and playing cat-and-mouse with its prey for a while.

This latter quirk engendered a novelty. It was decided to extend the tether. In that way, the sheep would be given ampler dodging space so that it could put up a more interesting resistance. And this, in its turn, brought about another escalation, a revolution almost, to wit, it appeared that one sheep reacted completely different than the other. One of a flock a sheep may be, in these moments each animal was on its individual mettle.

For the first time now, the victim's behaviour and emotions became involved in the spectacle. It wasn't all about the strange and bewildering beast anymore, the plain little sheep became an object of fascination as well.

And the next time, the tether would be eased off some more.

In this way they learned to live with the beast and there was no one to feel unhappy for it. On the contrary. The weekly show - if it be allowed to call it such - introduced to their minds and conversations a liveliness so far unknown and was both surprising and exciting each and every time to such an extent that everyone was longing for it the whole week over.

On going home, often people were heard saying *'Oh, how marvellous he was, never better'* and *'But the sheep wasn't so bad either.'*

This seemed the more remarkable as through the week daily life continued in the same old rut. Supposedly, the beast needed this whole time span to digest its meal. It was imagined as lying contentedly or sleeping perchance, in its subaqueous hidey-hole. So, it was with a tinge of amazement indeed, when in the twilight of a late evening a shepherd who had been looking for a stray lamb for quite a while, heading for home along the pond, became aware of the monster's head in the centre of it, or rather only its skull, or rather still, the part of its head where its nostrils were. And what besides he saw was that from these openings jets of dark steam were spurting forth with great force.

The man quickly absconded and once home, didn't fail to realize that at the prevailing wind this steam was bound for the town straightaway and possibly, would be dispersed all over it. Although it upset him in no small way, he durst not mention it to anyone, afraid to make a fool out of himself.

Now, it is written in the chronicles of the monks that the breath of the beast was lethal. This can't be true, for during this entire stretch no one in the town died. Only to us, who know the sequel of the story, the true effect of the breath is apparent, namely, it didn't so much as kill people, it was corrupting their character.

We must assume that time and again, with favourable winds the monster let its breath drift across the town and had taken this up long before the shepherd had witnessed it. The continuation of this tale unmistakably points in this direction.

12. The Turn

People get used to everything. With time, everything loses its lustre, as happened here. Despite the monster's best effort to keep the audience spellbound, after the umpteenth sheep, interest really started to wane. Concourse to the stands kept decreasing to the great displeasure of those who were pocketing fat rents and of the sellers of lemonade and sweets there as well. Together, they reflected on new gimmicks. One day, their faction - for in the council they had formed their own faction - brought in the following proposition.

'Why,' thus asked their spokesman,

'why are we to offer a precious sheep every single week, an innocent creature that is providing us food, whereas inside our prisons we keep a number of creatures not as innocent whom we ourselves must feed, whose very misdoings we remunerate with free board and lodging.

Whatever prevents us from exchanging them for the sheep! Thus, we'll dispose of them in a honourable fashion. As in each case they'll spare us a sheep, we enable them to wholly or partly square their due.

What we propose is a simple act of justice. Thereafter, our town will be free again of crime, even as before, and their empty lodgings we can put to a different use.'

Upon the real motive - to raise the yield from stands to former levels and, if possible, even to increase it - no words were wasted. On giving it away, they expected to meet with strong, moral opposition. However, this proved a gross miscalculation. By the magistrate who, as mentioned before, possessed a major share in the stands the plan was welcomed with approval and others as well, disguised their real motives. The welfare of the state was all they cared for, or so they said. In reality, their motive was lust after a spectacle even more sensational by far.

Thus, the proposition of the stand-owners' faction was passed with a large majority of votes. Only the junior councillor, seeing with dread which way his own two proposals were leading, still tried to raise his voice in disapproval but this time, nobody was inclined to hear him out. The proclamation of the council's decision caused a general rebound and the next Saturday no stand was left empty though fees had doubled.

To the slaughtering of sheep everybody was used from childhood but now, a man was at stake, a human being just like oneself, whose anxiety and pain were all but empathetic, which made the horrors all the more exciting and the excitement all the more lustful.

When the monster, on that very Saturday, encountered a tied man instead of its usual sheep, there wasn't the slightest trace of amazement in its bearing, nor of hesitation. Rather, it seemed to have anticipated this turn.

It put on quite a show, alternating bites with growls and grins and at times, by a coarse laugh at which it raised its head heavenward and widely distended its jaws.

13. Curtain-call

Don't ask for the scenes among the prisoners at drawing lots. The emotions of their relatives simply got lost in the entire community's mammoth shudder that reduced everything else to sheer insignificance. Should this be called a mass hysteria?

Nor ask for details of the performance itself. Their fleeing, the attempts at resistance, their injuries and when at last they were crunched, what was to be heard thereof.

As of today, this would only evoke disgust.

Incidentally, there had been one who didn't flee at all, who didn't resist and never uttered a sound. He just stayed down, without a stir, as if saying '*come and eat me,*' like a bread roll.

A hoot of scorn went up from the audience. For a moment the monster stood undecided and by its next move captivated all hearts. It looked around, went to a coppice nearby, broke off a bough and sharpened the torn end with its fangs. It then returned to the crouching figure and laid the weapon down within his reach. Quick as lightning the man now jumped at his last opportunity, or whatever he thought it to be, seized the stick and stormed the dragon, aiming at its eye. Poor soul, to the other he meant nothing but a sparring partner. However, it all but saved the show.

When the last prisoner had been consumed, though, a new decision had to be made. How to proceed from here on? To fall back on sheep was doomed from the start. Not a living soul would turn up at such a turn off. To let it starve then or, even worse, to insidiously waylay the beast and seek its destruction by joint assault? This also, was out of the question. For at present the monster had become a popular figure, it procured the top entertainment of the week and if merely properly fed it wouldn't harm anyone.

And wasn't it even beautiful! The bright colours of its head, the sheen on its claws and scales, the agile movement of its armoured body. It should be kept safe, this much was settled too.

Besides, it appeared that people no longer felt ashamed of their feelings, that they dared openly confess to how luscious they found these shivers running down their spine, men as much as women. During an offering, it sometimes happened that by their common mood the population as a whole was elevated to a state of unity, which a pious congregation may now and then reach under influence of an inspiring pastor.

They even went so far as to grant the beast a curtain-call for acts of striking cruelty. From pure elation, they couldn't forgo exchanging glances often still radiant, while on their way home.

14. The Dragon's Bride

Who knows how many times the corrupting breath had been drifting across the town already, saturating its alleys and invading its dwelling-places. In any case, the sad fact must be told that everybody craved an escalation of suspense.

And so it came to pass that the Council took a decision even more monstrous than the monster itself. As it was providing the public with so much pleasure, they decided to treat the beast from now on to the tenderest titbit they could procure, a virgin of between twelve and eighteen. All of these should presently be registered and every time, whom it had to be would be chosen by lot.

This decision engendered a festive mood all over town. It promised a world of new, impetuous sensations. Not only because disposing of a girl - the more so, when she was pretty - would have a far more smashing impact but besides, the erotic element was to enter the scene. Shudders wouldn't be merely running down the spine, henceforth, the entire body would be involved. The deepest layer of feelings was burrowed.

And imagine the possibilities!

Would the beast be sensitive to feminine beauty? Would it approach its meal in the manner of a suitor?

For the first time, there was an opportunity to descry something of the inner beast, that it might give away a glimpse of its soul.

And the girls, how might they proceed? Would they play nice to him to soften his mood? And would he let them have their way, at least for a while? Or would they be screaming their heart out?

The prisoners always had been offered naked. With girls, this wouldn't be suitable. But how then? In their plain clothes? Or in a festive gown? Like a bride?

And would he peel it off beforehand? He could hardly eat them dress and all. Some remembered calling him 'the Convivant', in the early days. In this context, that would obtain a different meaning entirely. What an opportunity for the beast to put on a great show!

And there was another side to it as well. For the first time, sensations were no longer restricted to the mere protagonists. To the dragon's bride, as she was presently called, there was also her family. Her father and mother, the brothers and sisters and possibly, a fiancé. How would they bear themselves? To spy on their demeanour, wouldn't that be a special sensation? All that was happening within such a family now became a public affair to which the whole community was setting its heart on.

It was further decided that lots would be drawn on Sundays so that the family appointed by fate could spend six full days on preparations and the amplest of partings. It goes without saying that during these days such a family would be for ever in the public eye and that a fiancé, if any, would be under constant scrutiny from every perspective conceivable.

For these closest relatives the most outstanding places were reserved on the grandstand and by this arrangement, not only were they procured the best view of the spectacle below but also could they themselves be watched even better by everybody else.

15. Sacrifice

Families with daughters subject to the lottery were no less festally disposed than others. And in the girls who might fall a victim no trace of fear or depression ever showed either. They were so many, the chance of being picked by lot looked negligible and hardly counted against the pleasures in store.

Actually, it was a lottery with one single blank.

And even if you became the chosen one, at any rate, you still had a week in which the whole community's attentions would focus on only you and it would end in a show of your own sacrifice with its excess of suspense. Suspense already had mingled with lust to such degree that, somehow, terror gave way to temptation.

A motion, to surcharge stands and seats to the benefit of bereaved families, a kind of blood money, therefore, was turned down haughtily by all families combined.

After registrations had been completed, computations proved that this weekly sacrifice would hardly burden the population. The birthrate needed to be raised only slightly to compensate for the loss.

But let's not mar this story by extensive descriptions of what to this nation, then, meant its greatest amusement, the highlights of life.

How was the dragon doing?

It manifested itself as a perfect mime, went the whole way, exploited every opportunity it was offered by the varying behaviour of its victims. It demonstrated its mastery by the way it knew, even in this macabre game, this awkward poise on the edge between caress and laceration, how to draw on humour, how, sometimes by the subtlest of gestures, to make the spectators roar with laughter.

Besides, time and again, it showed a perfect feeling for when the audience started to grow impatient and found it should now indeed come to business.

And what with the girls?

For a whole week they deported themselves as prima donnas. They could take their pick from the most precious of clothes, the finest of delicacies and wherever they came they were held in high esteem.

One of them got an idea of a game of '*dragon*' by way of rehearsal. A good friend of hers was '*dragon*'. It didn't take long for this game to come into vogue. Soon, men took up the dragon part as well. In those cases, endings became genuinely erotic. People of all ages could hardly wait to play along.

Usually, the week induced into them such a daze of wellbeing that they entered the arena still in its thrall.

And the relatives?

Those felt entitled to partake in the prima-donna status of their daughter or sister and reluctant to spoil her finest hour they, too, rendered themselves up to the daze, more or less.

Even so, an outburst of grief now and then, on the grandstand mostly, in plain sight of everyone.

And the fiancés?

They were proud all week and on the grandstand they fell, willy-nilly, into so ardent a state of excitement that most of the time they were unable to contain it.

16. The Princess

Into this state the nation had now come and one is to wonder what would jolt this already over-excited people with a still heavier excitation. What on earth might thereto still happen?

And yet it happened. One day, the whole nation was immersed into a daze of great rejoicing. All around was singing, dancing, drinking and kissing. What could be the cause of this common bliss?

The lot had befallen the king's daughter!

It was as if everyone had hit the jackpot; as if the envy of ages, at once, had met with full satisfaction.

For the whole week, the revelling never ended.

The king who had presided at every council meeting where decisions to this end had been taken, including this latest one, now could hit himself over it. Never for a single moment, had he considered his little daughter and even if he had, he would have brushed aside the very thought, instantly, in the firm conviction that the people would never allow his princess to be eaten.

In this, how wrong he would have been. Every street had been festooned. From every dwelling, there was music and singing. Nobody was working. The stands had been turned into the likeness of flower gardens.

And the young princess herself?

To her, the role of a prima donna had nothing special to offer. The most gorgeous dresses and the most sumptuous meals, they had been her birthright. And the attention, everywhere, had been more of a nuisance to her than a joy.

She felt utterly miserable. Although she and her family were as much moved by the emotions on the stands as everybody else, never had she, like her father, entertained the idea that it could happen to her personally.

Aside from being highest in station, she also was one of the most beautiful girls in the land. To think of these slender arms, this slim neck, these newly budded breasts, soon to become feed for that horrible monster; that by next week, it would be lying at the bottom of its lake digesting them, she couldn't bear it. But she was unable to think of anything else; she simply had to, caressing every part of her young body as if bidding them a farewell and giving them solace for what lay in store for them.

The daze got no hold on her. On the contrary, she was all but overwhelmed with sorrow, onto the brink of insanity.

Her family was crying all the time.

17. The Dragon's Dance

But history must take its course and after six days the moment had come when all of the people, in great excitement, had taken their places on the now flower-decked stands and other equally adorned lookouts.

Down there, the princess, fettered to her stake, deadly pale and trembling with fear.

That did not bode well.

The people felt disappointed.

Had they been doing their utmost to brighten the place to this end? Had they enjoyed themselves so much, all week, in anticipation of this? Of a spectacle this poor?

Was that, supposedly, the bloom of the royal blood? They recalled others who had stayed the course magnificently unto the bitter end, daughters of shepherds, bakers and butchers. And how their families on the grandstand had sympathized, an example for all. And now, behold this family sitting over there. Heads all down. Bet they will not even watch, presently.

The people were getting annoyed. The start of the music and, within moments, the monster's appearance in the distance were barely able to dent their irritation.

How is it ever going to engage with such a bundle of nerves? they wondered.

On its approach, however, it became apparent that to him this offering was indeed something special. It had preened itself to perfection, its colours brighter and its shine more radiant than ever.

Coming closer, it raised itself, standing erect, and was now walking on its hind legs like a human. Once in front of the princess it made a courtly bow, almost to the ground.

By doing so, was it bent on teaching the people a lesson? That they should continue to respect their royal family?

After its bow, which failed to stir any reaction from the princess, the monster cast a searching glance around and then it did something it had never done before. Raised on its hind legs it made a couple of dancing-steps. At once, any remaining vestiges of annoyance disappeared. Expectation had been roused afresh.

And it went on. In the direction of the orchestra it made the telling gesture of gladiators which was promptly understood. A slowly stepping melody commenced and what the people were now to watch was the Dizzy Dance of the Dragon. Its tail it draped on its left foreleg to give an impression of a partner, the grin never leaving its jaws. Back and forth and then around it went. Gradually, it increased the pace - or was it on the director's behalf? - and lo, now it was even making figures! It let go of its tail and reeling around, it made it whirl about him in a wide circle. Now and then, it curled it over its head and danced right underneath. And how its colours sparkled with all its scales ashine.

When, at last, it blew the final whistle, the exalted public gave it a standing ovation.

Only the princess and the VIP box for whom this performance was apparently meant, too, remained still.

The beast, now again on all fours, seemed unprepared for this, shook its head dejectedly and slowly approached the girl. No shrinking away or resistance was to come from her, paralysed as she was by fear and terror.

Once upon her, it began to undress her with ever so soft a claw. A modiste couldn't have taken off a garment from a noble client more carefully than it was disrobing her now.

18. Single Combat

Suddenly, a great sigh went up from the crowd, a sigh of dismay. For, at a brisk trot, there approached a Roman horseman in full armour.

For all but an instant the dragon could have owed the consternation to the royal blood, once it picked up the sound of hooves, not any longer.

That it was akin to scorpions was now plainly to be seen, for as fast as these can curve their body to inflict a deadly sting with their tail, in a flash, the monster swung its bulk around to take the spoilsport head-on.

And now, to their great delight, the people were treated to a duel between the armour-plated rider and the panzer-scaled dragon.

Once more suspense reigned supreme. This was quite a different victim than that pathetic wench at the pole - about his ending up a victim the people had no doubt whatsoever, a foregone conclusion. Now, at the least, there would be resistance. His helmet was an officer's and in the Roman armies the only way to become one was by gallantry.

At first, there was exploratory skirmishing, seeking out the opponent's weaknesses. It gave the impression of a mock battle but it was well understood: this was a fight to the death.

The armour of both was equally heavy, never to be penetrated by either claw or sword. The beast's sole vulnerable spot was its beak. Therefore, biting was precluded, its fangs being no match for steel.

The beast was evidently stronger than the man and his horse but the Arab was nimbler. It was going to be a battle of force against speed.

Soon it became a matter of pricking and teasing, prying between plates or scales, trying to wriggle or tear them loose, preferably at a joint. Now and then, they made a scratch, drawing some blood. This only enhanced their fierceness.

The people were watching breathlessly, as were the princess and her family. The end came by surprise.

During a breathing-spell, the monster curved its body scorpion-fashion and treacherously, with the end of its tail, knocked the other from the saddle and to the ground where he was left for dead. Dazedly, the horse remained at his side.

The beast had triumphed and as a sign thereof, it raised its head heavenward, gaped its beak wide open and filled the air with its house-shattering laughter.

19. Rage

But what was that?! Quicker even than lightning the rider had jumped to his feet and into the saddle, snatched the lance from its special casing and ere the monster realised what was afoot had driven it deep down its throat. It had been a ruse, one often used by Roman soldiers. The horses were especially trained for it.

Still, the people couldn't believe their hero had been slain; still, they clung to their conviction that it would keep laughing and, shortly, crunch the Roman spear to smithereens, but when a wide stream of yellow goo started gushing from its jaws and its limbs slackened one after another, there was little space left for doubt. The cheering turned into a roar of rage, of boundless rage.

The game was over, forever it was. What a dirty trick of that guy! Such a special animal that's never hurt a soul, ever. What a bastard! What a jerk!

A flare like this was never to be quenched by words alone. There, someone already threw a stone to the rider, dislodged from a wall. Then it took but an instant for stones and roof tiles to rain down on him. Poles and shelves, too. Tearing down the now useless stands offered another outlet for their anger.

Through skilful maneuvering of horse and shield our officer succeeded in dodging the greater part of the avalanche and whatever hit him couldn't do much harm because of his helmet and body armour. That he still defied them drove the crowd's rage to a head.

'Now for that wench', the mother of a dragon bride shrieked, *'that witch child'* and she cast her stone in the direction of the half-naked princess. This was a signal of sorts and the girl would have been stoned to death without fail but for the immediate intervention of the officer who slashed her ropes with his sword, hoisted her onto the horse in front of him and raced in full gallop beyond the range of the projectiles, all under protection of his unerring shield.

If ever there was a baffled man it must have been this Roman officer. During the fight, shouts of encouragement were meant for him, the torrents of abuse and imprecations for his adversary, or so he'd assumed. All at once, the very opposite proved true, he himself being the bad guy.

For their next target the people sought out the royal family but in the general uproar they had slipped away unobserved.

With venting their rage the crowd had made hardly any start. They pulled down literally everything related to the show. Even the dead dragon didn't escape their attentions. How stupid of him to let himself be fooled. Why hadn't he just blown some flames from his nostrils! A petty dragon could have done that! A travesty of a dragon it had been, a mock dragon from an operetta.

That they'd been in such awe of it. Pathetic!

There, with a dull thud the first stone landed on the dead beast. This was another signal and soon it lay buried under a heap of rubble.

Even then, the people still remained restive.

Now they raised the cry: *'We'll seek him out, the bastard, him and that witch child. He shall die!'* Therewith the people streamed to the gate in dense throngs.

It was still closed as it used to during the festivities but no sooner the gatekeepers learned of the will of the people than they hastened to open it.

'We're gonna find him, the scoundrel!'

20. The Miracle

It was no longer necessary. He was already there. As if waiting for them. Sitting his stationary horse, the princess riding pillion.

The people were dumbstruck. Nobody moved. Face to face at ground level is something quite different than from high upon the wall. He was a dragon slayer, after all.

Now he slowly approached them. The people backed away. Through the open gate he entered the town. In the square he halted and, for a while, they stood facing each other, the people grimly.

Someone in the crowd dared hurl an abuse. The officer drew his sword and what the people expected, that he would hit out with it, didn't happen. Instead, he turned its point downward and raised it high, right in front of him. Like a priest the Host. Here it was an image of the Cross.

Then the miracle happened.

From this cross a radiance sprang forth that all but dispelled from the town the brown breath of the monster, from its streets and from its dwellings and from the people, also. All of a sudden, every single one of them came to realise the full extent of the pitiful state of wickedness to which they had stooped, recalled how gay they had been before, how much they'd loved each other and they burst into tears of shame of themselves. And these same people, who only moments ago had been out to stone them, now wrung their hands in agony and sank to their knees in horror of what they had taken for profit and pleasure and their shameful tears melted into tears of joy because now they had been redeemed from it. They looked up to him as their saviour and to their eyes it seemed as if his whole armour was taking part in the radiance emitting from the cross.

One of the elders came forward and reverently kissed his stirrup.

The rider thereupon raised his voice and spoke, *'Not to me thou ought to be grateful but to Jesus Christ, my Lord. His servant I am and in His name I have done this. Convert to His teachings of love and nevermore wilt thou fall into the state in which I have found thee.'*

Everyone became a convert. Nobody stayed behind.

When the officer and his soldiers – he was in command of a border patrol that had pitched camp a little farther up the oasis and had been completely ignorant of the whole event – moved on, he left behind a penitent but happy people.

The royal family was reunited.

The prisons were turned into chapels.

21. Epilogue

In some ancient chronicles it is told that afterwards the officer, presumably, rode to the pond, raised his sword over it and told the fishermen to cast their nets, which shortly thereafter they hauled onto the bank brimming with fish. This Miraculous-Draught-of-Fish redux is in serious doubt. One miracle suffices. With the monster out of the way the fish stock will have recovered by itself soon enough.

That the border patrol was passing by that very day was not exactly coincidental, of course. For the benefit of men of science God simply loves to make His miracles appear as inconspicuous as possible, in accordance with the laws of nature and probability if only He can help it.

After his defeat in the council the junior councillor had retired to his study and abstained from any involvement in subsequent events. When by and by the dust had settled he noted with heartfelt pleasure that once again there was as much joy and love in the land as before the dragon's advent.

