

from Charles Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao* (NY: Viking, 1935), illustrations by Boris Artzybasheff

And youth may come and age may go;
But no more circuses like this show!"

The little yellow wrinkled dancing man hopped about on the platform sing-songing his slipshod dactyls and iambs; and the crowd of black, red, and white men stared up at him and marveled at his ecstasy.

The ballyhoo ceased. The old Chinaman disappeared. From all the tents banners were flung advertising that which they concealed and would reveal for a price. The crowd lost its identity; the individual regained his, each seeking what he thought would please him most. Mr. Etaoin wondered just where to go first. Over him fluttered a pennant crying, *FORTUNES TOLD*. "I shall have my fortune told," Mr. Etaoin confided to himself; and he scuttled into the tent.

Miss Agnes Birdsong, high-school English teacher, arrived at the circus grounds ten minutes after two. She neatly parked her neat little coupé alongside the curb on the opposite side of the street, raised the windows, got out, locked the doors, and walked across the street to the multitude of tents.

On a platform in front of one of the tents the old bearded man who had been wool-gathering while he drove in the parade that morning was doing the ballyhooing. It was the poorest ballyhoo speech Miss Agnes had ever heard in all her life, and she had heard some terrible ones. The old man spoke in a thin, weak voice, apparently extemporaneously, for he often had to stop and think what to say next. He was talking about the sideshows:

". . . 'nd in that tent over there, the third one after the big one, you people will see the chimera, a very curious beast. I don't suppose any of you people know what a chimera is, but it doesn't matter; go and look at him anyway. He can't hurt you, of course; being penned up that way for so long has gentled his nature. I think he's shedding now, that is, the lion part of him is shedding, so he won't look so glossy, but you can still tell what he is, of course. And Doctor Lao will be around there somewhere to answer any questions you may want to ask regarding the chimera. A very curious beast. I understand they are very nearly extinct. I can't think where the doctor got this one. In the next tent is the werewolf, I believe; yes, the werewolf is in the next tent to the chimera. You all know what a werewolf is, I assume. Very interesting beast, indeed. Later on, in the month of October, it becomes a woman for six weeks. Period of metamorphosis is curious to watch. Too bad it isn't changing form now. Know you people would like to see a wolf change into a woman. We feed it lamb chops as a rule. However, Doctor Lao will tell you all about it over in the tent. He has a very interesting lecture on the werewolf, I understand. Really must listen to it myself sometime. I don't know a great deal about the beast, to be perfectly frank. Then, in another tent is the medusa. I myself perform magic tricks in the tent across the way. And, let me see, I'm sure you people would be interested in seeing the mermaid, because in this desert country away from the sea, these ocean-dwelling creatures are bound to be unusual. Then, too, there is the hound of the hedges, which probably you have never seen, because it is indigenous to grasslands

and weed patches and hedgerows and the like. The show for men only is in the last tent. I imagine the fertility dance of the Negro priests will start presently. Of course, that tent is for men only.

"So glad to see so many of you people here this afternoon, and I am sure that Doctor Lao is likewise pleased. He went to a great deal of trouble to collect all these animals, and I know you will all be interested in the strange animals. Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you about the roc's egg. It's in another tent back there, I'm not sure just which one. It's a great big egg, big as a house almost, and sweats salt water. I'm sure you good people will be interested in seeing the roc's egg. Doctor Lao will give a lecture on it in the tent. I think it's the third tent there, but I'm not sure. I really must, I suppose, familiarize myself more with the position of the various exhibits. Well, I suppose you are all tired of hearing me talk and want to go look at the shows. Remember, I perform my magic in the tent just across the way."

The old man climbed painfully and slowly off the platform and pushed his way through the crowd to the tent where he did his magic. A few people followed in after him. Miss Agnes Birdsong stood undecided. Then out of the corner of her right eye she saw the old Chinaman scuttling along with a pot of tea in his hand and a pipe of opium in his mouth. She halted him.

"Doctor Lao?"

"Yes, lady."

"Where is the tent with Pan?"

"We do not have Pan in this circus, lady. What you are thinking of, no doubt, is the satyr who drove for us in the parade this morning. He is in that tent over there.

Admission is ten cents. If you wish to see him, just pay me here and go right in. We are a little short-handed on ticket-takers at present."

Miss Agnes gave the Chinaman two nickels and, assuring herself she was a calm, intelligent girl, entered the tent to see the satyr.

He lay scratching himself on a rack of grapevines, his thin, wispy beard all messy with wine lees. His hoofs were incrustated with manure, and his hands were bony, gnarled and twisted, brown and rough and long-nailed. Between his horns was a bald spot surrounded by greying curly hair. His ears were sharp-pointed, and lean, thin muscles crawled over his arms. The goat hair hid the muscles of his legs. His ribs stuck out. His shoulders hunched about his ears.

He grinned at Miss Agnes, took up his syrinx, and started to play. Thin reedy piping music danced in the dull air in the dark tent. He arose and danced to his own music, his goat tail jerking shortly, prodding stiffly, wagging and snapping. His feet did a jig, the clicking hoofs keeping time to his piping, pounding the dirt floor. clacking, clicking, clucking. The goaty smell grew stronger.

Miss Agnes stood there assuring herself she was a calm, intelligent girl. The satyr capered around her, tossing his pipes, tossing his head, wriggling his hips, wagging his elbows. The syrinx peep, peep, peepled. The door of the tent fell shut. Around Miss Agnes the aged goat man galloped. His petulant piping screeched in her ears like the beating of tinny bells; it brought a nervousness that shook her and made her blood pump. Her veins jumping with racing blood, she trembled as

Grecian nymphs had trembled when the same satyr, twenty centuries younger, had danced and played for them. She shook and watched him. And the syrinx peep, peep, peeped.

He danced closer, his whirling elbows touching with their points her fair bare arms, his shaggy thighs brushing against her dress. Behind his horns little musk sacs swelled and opened, thick oily scented stuff oozing out—a prelude to the rut. He trod on her toe with one hoof; the pain welled up to her eyes, and tears came. He pinched her thigh as he scampered around her. The pinch hurt, but she found that pain and passion were akin. The smell of him was maddening. The tent reeked with his musk. She knew that she was sweating, that globules of sweat ran down from under her arms and dampened her bodice. She knew that her legs were shiny with sweat. The satyr danced on stiff legs about her, his bony chest swelling and collapsing with his blowing. He bounded on stiff legs; he threw the syrinx away in a far corner; and then he seized her. He bit her shoulders, and his nails dug into her thighs. The spittle on his lips mingled with the perspiration around her mouth, and she felt that she was yielding, dropping, swooning, that the world was spinning slower and slower, that gravity was weakening, that life was beginning.

Then the door of the tent opened and Doctor Lao came in.

“The satyr,” he said, “is perhaps the most charming figure in the old Greek polytheistic mythology. Combining the forms of both man and goat, its make-up suggests fertility, inasmuch as both men and goats are ani-

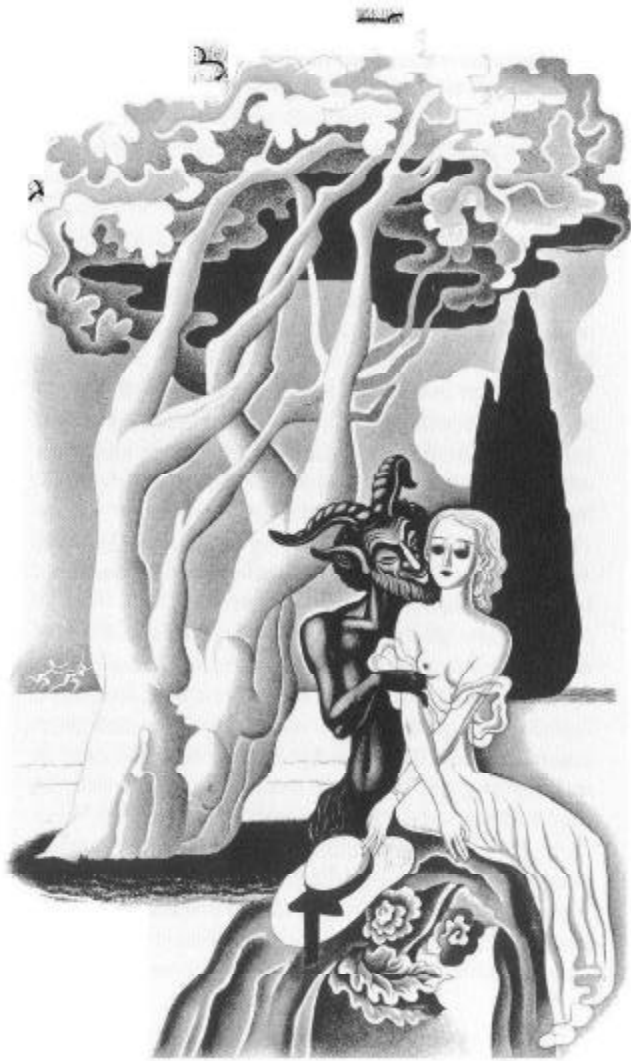
mals outstanding in concupiscent activities. To the Greeks satyrs were, indeed, a sort of deification of lust, woodland deities, sylvan demigods. And, as a matter of fact, groves and woodlots are today favorite trysting places for lovers intent on escaping censorious eyes.

“We caught this fellow near the town of Tu-jeng in North China close to the Great Wall. We caught him in a net by a little waterfall, a net which we had set for a chimera. Incidentally, although we did not know it at that time, it is impossible to catch a chimera in a net by reason of its fiery breath, which burns up the meshes. But more of that later.

“Satyrs are not omnivorous like man, but rather herbivorous like the goat. We feed this fellow nuts and berries and herbs. He will also eat lettuces and some cabbage. He has always refused onions and garlic seed, however. And he drinks nothing but wine.

“Notice that he has a gold ring in his nose. I cannot account for it. It was there when we first captured him, but I do not know how it got there.

“Note also that this satyr is a very old one. I doubt not that he is one of the original satyrs of ancient Hellas. Obviously, being half-gods, satyrs live a long, long time. I place this fellow’s age at nearly two thousand three hundred years, although Apollonius, my colleague, is inclined to grant him even more. If he could talk, he might tell us some very curious things about his existence. How the encroachment of the hostile Christian deity drove him and his kind out of the Hellenic hills to seek refuge in unamiable lands. How some of his relatives went north into Europe to become strange gods, like Adonis becoming Balder, or Circe becoming one



of the Lorelei, or the Lares Domestici becoming cuckoo clocks and mantel statuettes. Yes, he could tell much, I fancy.

"But most interesting of all would be the narration of his own journey into China, his bewilderment at the lacquer temples and prayer wheels, his disgust at the hot spiced Chinese wines, and his sadness at the foot-bound Chinese maidens who could not dance to his piping. Hey, the forlorn, lost demigod.

"Satyrs originated, I fancy, back in the old pastoral days when men stayed out in the hills with their flocks for long periods of time. Among other things, to amuse themselves and soothe their flocks, the shepherds would play on pipes such as this fellow has here with him. And, doubtless too, on the hills at night by their fires the shepherds would dream of love. Men do dream of love, you know; lonely men do. Well, they would dream of love, and their dreams would be of such potency that their very flocks would be colored by them. In the moonlight's magic, perhaps, a she-goat would be transformed into a charming girl. . . . And then in lambing time a strange, wee fellow would be seen cavorting among the woolly babies. On his brow he bears his mother's horns; his feet are hooped like hers; but for the rest he is a man. He grows up to become scornful of the stodgy sheep and goats and shy of man. He steals his father's lute and skips away. Simple folk see him at dusk by a lakeside, and a new pastoral god is born. . . .

"The satyr sits by some mirrored lake and plays, and even the little fishes swarm about and mimic a dance, for the music of the satyr's pipes is irresistible. He plays on his pipes, and the leaves on the trees dance, and the

worms stick their heads out of their holes and writhe, and under the rocks scorpion hugs scorpion in hot, orgasmic bliss. . . . And, by and by, a nymph comes shyly to peep through the vines. . . .

"But that was a long time ago, and this is an old, old satyr. I doubt if he could do anything like that now. Let us go on to the next tent and see the sea serpent. This way, please."

The whole Rogers family came to the circus grounds a little after two that afternoon. The children were excited because they were about to see the circus; the mother was buoyant because her husband had a job again.

"Now I aint got a heck of a lot of money," said papa, "but we can see a sideshow or two, I reckon, and then go on into the main show. What sideshow do you kids want to see first?"

Unable to make up their minds, the children wrangled peevishly among themselves.

"Tell you what," said Mrs. Rogers after listening to them for a while; "let's go see that bear or man or Russian or whatever it is. I really would like to see it just to find out why it causes so many arguments."

Plumber John agreed; the family went in search of the bear tent. They couldn't find it. Then Doctor Lao came out on the platform again, recited his poem again, and started to talk about the show again.

John Rogers went up beside the platform and called to him: "Say, doc, where do you all keep the big bear at? We want to see it again. The one that was in the parade this morning."

"Me no savvee bear business," said the doctor and plunged on in his speech:

"In the tent to the right, ladies and gentlemen, you will find that world-famous thaumaturgist, Apollonius of Tyana, born contemporary with Christ. 'Socrates,' they used to say, 'leaves men on the earth, Apollonius transports them to heaven; Socrates is but a sage. Apollonius is a god.' Well, he's over there in the next tent ready to perform a miracle or two for your edification. You will find him an old, old man. He has been alive since the Christian era began, and his years are beginning to show on him. Also, he has but recently learned English; bear with him there and do not laugh at his mistakes. Remember, he is the man who remained silent for five whole years listening to the counsel of his heart, the man who conversed with the astrologers of Chaldea and told them things they had never dreamed, the man who prophesied the death of the Emperor Domitian, the man who underwent the eighty tests of Mithra. In the tent to the right, ladies and gentlemen. Ten cents admission. Children in arms free."

"Hey, doc," said Plumber Rogers again, "whereabouts is the big bear? We all wanta see it again."

"Me no savvee bear business," said Doctor Lao and continued:

"In this tent to my left, good people, is one of those startling women, a medusa. One look out of her eyes and you turn to stone."

The doctor opened the tent door behind him and revealed a stone figure.

"This is what is left of a person in the last town where we showed. He would not heed my warning to look