

THE NOBLE PURSUIT

by

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ACT ONE -- SCENE ONE

The stage is black.

NOBLE HARMSWORTH

Attend, children ...

NOBLE HARMSWORTH appears, his head dramatically spotlit in the darkness. He looks to be into his 70's -- with a large white beard, flowing locks, A striking figure with great presence, at once distinguished, and slightly eccentric. And his voice -- it's resonant, compelling.

This is, in fact, a literary reading, a literary performance really, although this may not instantly be clear. Harmsworth is slightly elevated, almost glowing in the darkness, words dropping from his tongue as if from an oracle.

NOBLE (contd.)

... Attend, said the ageless one, the gnarled and gnostic one they called the Dwarf -- attend to this my old, old story -- and laugh -- or weep, as is your wont ... There was a certain kingdom, a kingdom blessed by the gods, but through the very heart of this kingdom, slicing it in half, there raged a fast-flowing river -- much too fast for most of the creatures of the kingdom to cross. But there was an old bullfrog -- a giant frog filled with strength and wisdom and great amphibianity -- the frogly equivalent of humanity -- and he kept vigil by the stream. And when his fellow creatures came, the frog would take them on his back, and bear them across to the safe and distant shore. And thus he bound the kingdom together ... And then one day there came to the river's edge a scorpion. And he asked the frog to bear him across. But the wise old frog refused. "If I do, you will sting me -- and your sting is ever fatal." "True," replied the scorpion, "but if I sting you, we both will drown, and therefore you have nothing to fear." Whereupon the frog took the scorpion on his back, but no sooner had he reached the deepest part of the river, when -- when, children, he felt the deadly stinger plunge into his back, the deadly poison paralyze his limbs. "Why?" cried the frog, as they both sank beneath the waves. "Why?" he cried, weeping for himself, and his beloved kingdom, now forever rent asunder. "I couldn't help myself," said the scorpion. "You were getting too big for your boots. You were starting to believe your press clippings, you were in danger of becoming a star -- and we'd rather die than see that sort of thing in this kingdom."

Laughter and applause -- which HARMSWORTH accepts with a hint of a twinkle in his eye.

Pool of LIGHT expands to reveal one side of the stage -- a couple of chairs, a black backdrop.

PERCY FAWCETT, a fulsome, fawning literary type, bustles onto the stage, leading the applause.

FAWCETT

Mr. Noble Harmsworth, ladies and gentlemen. Simply splendid -- and apt as always. And now, a treat for all of us. Mr. Harmsworth has graciously agreed to submit to a brief --

NOBLE

Inquisition.

FAWCETT

(chuckles)

Interlocution --

(as they sit)

Let me plunge right in with the matter which I'm sure is uppermost in everyone's mind -- This Thursday morning in Stockholm the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature will be announced. Rumours are rife that you, sir, are very much one of the favorites --

NOBLE

The Noble Nobel rumble -- yes -- I pay such nonsense precisely the heed it deserves. None. Nil. Nullus.

PERCY

Yes, but surely --

NOBLE

I am a writer, Percy. Not a racehorse. Not some spavined nag puffing madly around the track of public opinion, chomping at the bit for prizes and approbation -- I leave that to Norman Mailer.

FAWCETT

(laughs)

Yes, but you understand our interest, Mr. Harmsworth. A Canadian author has never won the Nobel -- of course -- and there hasn't been this much excitement surrounding a literary event in this country since, well --

NOBLE

Irving Layton's circumcision.

FAWCETT

Ah, the famous Harmsworthian wit.

MAN'S VOICE
(suddenly, out of the darkness)
Wit? You call that wit?!

Neither HARMSWORTH nor FAWCETT reacts to this --

FAWCETT
You make light of it, but you must find it gratifying -

MAN'S VOICE
(out of the darkness)
Oh, ask him a real question, you snivelling dink!!!

NOBLE
My dear Percy, gratification is for animals in heat.
Surely I need not tell you that the true writer's quest
is not for temporal prizes --

-- as we now reveal, across the stage, LYLE
LEMMERMAN, fortyish and fuming -- listening to
the interview on a radio. He directs acerbic
comments at the radio -- comments to which
Harmsworth and Fawcett are oblivious.

LYLE
Oh, God. Here we go --

NOBLE
-- but for the ever elusive temptress --

LYLE
The Holy Grail --

NOBLE
-- the Holy Grail --

LYLE
The golden fleece --

NOBLE
-- the golden fleece -- of a single perfect sentence.

LYLE
It's a sacred quest --

NOBLE
It's a goal which I have yet to achieve I hasten to add

LYLE
You forgot sacred quest! You're slipping, pal!

NOBLE
But it's a sacred quest, and I labour on in hope --

LYLE

-- and hypocrisy.

NOBLE

-- and humility. An artist is like Sisyphus, you see --

LYLE

Oh, him again!

NOBLE

-- condemned to push a stone up an insurmountable hill
-- forever. He puts his shoulder to the stone -- and
he pushes. And he fails. And he pushes. And he fails
-- until he dies. That is the simple nobility of the
artist's task.

LYLE

Pretentious gobbledygook!

FAWCETT

Well, we can only be grateful -- as readers, indeed as
a nation, that you've kept your shoulder to the stone
with such distinction and vigour.

LYLE

Oh, fawn, fawn, fawn!!

FAWCETT

Many of your colleagues only manage to produce a new
novel every three, four -- even ten years --

NOBLE

Alas, poor Ondaatje, I knew him well.

FAWCETT

(chuckles)

But in your case you remain remarkably --

NOBLE

The earth shakes. I sense the approach of the dread
word -- prolific.

FAWCETT

Fecund.

NOBLE

Fecund?

LYLE

Fecund?!!

FAWCETT

Still bursting with creative juices.

NOBLE

Ah, yes -- the writer as grapefruit.

FAWCETT

(laughs)

But is there a secret to it? --

NOBLE

My juiciness? Oh, indubitably. And at the risk of offending delicate sensibilities -- it can be summed up in two good, old-fashioned Anglo Saxon four-letter words ...

LYLE

Bull. Shit.

NOBLE

Hard. Work.

FAWCETT

May one ask if your hard work will result in a new Harmsworth in our bookstores any time soon?

NOBLE

Ah, the curse of being a famous author. Your hungering legions expect you to actually write a book every now and then.

FAWCETT

Yes --?

NOBLE

Hunger no more, dear Percy. I expect to deliver my new novel "False Gods" into the hands of my agent person in the next day or two.

FAWCETT

(slightly surprised)

Really? So soon? -- But that's wonderful news.

LYLE also seems surprised. His agitation rises a notch. He starts to pace around the radio --

NOBLE

Provided, of course, that you release me from this inquisitorial glare -- upon which I shall hie myself posthaste to my little cabin in the woods, put my shoulder to the stone --

LYLE

And drink.

NOBLE

-- and write.

LYLE

Just don't tell him it's your holy place.

NOBLE

It's my wellspring -- my holy place.

LYLE

Aaaaaaagggghhhh!!!!

(turns and leaves abruptly.)

That's it. That's it.

NOBLE

I allow only two visitors --

FAWCETT

Oh?

NOBLE

Words -- and blank pages.

FAWCETT

Aah.

LYLE (OFF)

Aaaagh!!!

FAWCETT

Well, I'm sure I speak for those here, and many more listening on radio...

LYLE

(reappears, pulling on a jacket.)

You don't.

FAWCETT

-- when I say that you are a true artist --

NOBLE

True artist? An oxymoron, my dear Percy. All artists are liars. Some manage it more artfully than others. But lying it is -- elegant lies, compelling lies, seductive lies -- but lies, all lies.

FAWCETT

Thank you, Mr. Harmsworth. This poor beleaguered nation of ours desperately needs something to celebrate, and we very much hope you win the Nobel -- for your sake -- and for ours.

A burst of applause from the unseen audience. Harmsworth stands, soaking it up, acknowledging it with regal little nods.

LYLE is worked up, seething -- as if he's
summoning up his courage to do -- something. He
angrily punches off the radio, exits

LYLE

Fecund fools!!!

BLACKOUT.