

From *Handbook of the Inhabited Worlds*:

Big Planet: the innermost planet of the yellow star Phaedra, a world twenty-five thousand miles in diameter with a mean density slightly less than 2 and a surface gravity slightly in excess of Earth Standard.

The core of Big Planet, a glassy coalescence of calcium, silicon, aluminum, carbon, boron and various oxides, seems to have cooled and formed a crust, and later accumulated by accretion from space the present surface layers, which like the core are notably deficient in heavy elements. It may be noted that the three outer planets of the system are all extremely dense.

The surface of Big Planet is approximately half land and half water; the climate is generally similar to that of Earth. . . Deposits of metal ore are almost non-existent; metal of any sort is rare and valuable.

Big Planet lies beyond the frontier of terrestrial law, and has been settled by groups impatient with restraint, or determined to live by unorthodox tenets of conduct: non-conformists, anarchists, fugitives, religious dissidents, misanthropes, deviants, freaks. The tremendous expanses of Big Planet indifferently absorb them all.

In a few isolated districts something like civilization exists, though always in some more or less unusual variant. Elsewhere, beyond the environs of small communities, law is only as strong as local custom, or, as often, non-existent. . . The habits of life are infinitely varied, as over the centuries the heterogeneous groups, isolated and inbred, have diversified to florid extremes.

The savants of Earth have long pondered and analyzed and argued the circumstances of Big Planet. A hundred zealots have urged the imposition of terrestrial discipline, that law and order be brought to Big Planet, but those who defend the *status quo* have always had the final pronouncement: "Big Planet represents for us that tantalizing vision of the land beyond the frontier where bravery, resource and daring are more important than mastery of urban abstractions. The original settlers made great sacrifices to win freedom for themselves. In the process they willy-nilly determined the destiny of their descendants, so now the new generations share the idiosyncrasies of the old, or indeed extend them to new limits. Who can deem this good or bad? Who can define justice or correctness or truth? If law is brought to Big Planet, if this glorious diversity is stifled, the dissidents are once again disenfranchised; once again they must move on, to havens even more remote. Big Planet is a wild world, and many dark deeds are done, but enforced uniformity only transfers the dilemma elsewhere. Big Planet in essence is a problem to which there exists no general solution."

Chapter I

Where the river Vissel entered Surmise Bay was Coble, a port for both sea-cogs and river barges, and terminus for the famous showboats of the region, such as *Fironzelle's Golden Conceit*, the *Pamellissa*, the *Melodious Hour*, *Miraldra's Enchantment*, the *Fireglass Prism*, the *Two Varmnies*, and others of equal repute.

Up and down the Vissel roamed the showboats, as far north as Glassblower's Point or farther: to Skivaree or even Garken. The proprietors of the showboats, by the very nature of their trade, were a special sort, distinguished by vanity, avarice, and a peculiar sort of crafty resource difficult to define except in terms of deeds. Such qualities aside, these men differed sharply. Lemuriel Boke wore striped garments of black, red and brown, and adorned his head with the triple-tiered bonnet of an Ultimate Pantologist; he blanched his skin stark white and spoke in a cellar-deep voice. Umber Stroon was as effusive as Boke was saturnine. He used terms of grandiloquent vainglory in connection with himself and equally striking figures of disparagement in regard to his competitors. Darik Dankzy carried a rapier and a brace of snapples in his sash and was quick to rebuff all discourtesies, while Garth Ashgale affected an elegant languor. Eleusis Munt wore vests and pantaloons of perfumed silk; his language was rich in sentiment and the fervor of his nature flowed forth in love for man, woman and child alike, sometimes to embarrassing excess. Fring the Fantast

was shrewd, patient and frugal; Apollon Zamp swaggered his decks like a hero of legend and spent as fast as he earned; and so it went along the Vissel.

As for the showboats themselves, *Fironzelle's Golden Conceit* and *Miraldra's Enchantment* were reckoned the finest, and the rivalry between the shipmasters, Garth Ashgale and Apollon Zamp respectively, was of long standing. Zamp's entertainments were characterized by brisk pace, flair, sudden shocks and impacts; he emphasized farce, mummery, prestidigitation, eccentric dances and re-enactments of notorious atrocities. Garth Ashgale preferred to present extravaganzas rather more leisurely and elaborate. Zamp, in spite of his casual and swaggering semblance, was an exacting taskmaster who demanded both virtuosity and versatility from his troupe, whereas Ashgale built his spectacles upon the talents of proved specialists. Zamp's productions were supple and vivacious; Ashgale specialized in tragic drama: *Emphyrio*; *Lucas and Portmena*; *The Blue Pomegranate*; *The Reign of the Iron King*. Ashgale's costumes were sumptuous; his sets fascinated the eye; his dedication to verisimilitude, notably in scenes of erotic ardor and the imposition of justice, far transcended the efforts of those who sought to satisfy their customers with simulations and off-stage outcries.

Ashgale ranged far and wide, up the Vissel to Lanteen and beyond, out along tributaries such as the Suanol, the Wergence, the Murne. Zamp preferred to play the towns of the Lower Vissel, with an occasional sortie up the Murne, where the prejudices of the people were familiar and their commodities* of known value.

* The basic standard of value everywhere across Big Planet is iron, the least scarce of the metals. An iron groat, to the mass of about half a gram, represents the ordinary wage for a day of common toil.

On one occasion while the boat lay at anchor off the town Ratwick, a red-haired mime-girl twitted him for his discretion. "Poof!" she said, giving his trim blond goatee a tug. "Must we prowl the same old shores forever? Up, down, up, down, from Thamet to Wigtown to Badburg, and only a pause at Coble to iron* your money."

Zamp laughed without rancor, and drained his goblet of wine; the two had just taken a meal in Zamp's stern cabin. "And if by this means I dine on the best with a charming companion, why should I change?"

The girl, who called herself Lael-Rosza, gave a shrug and a little wry grimace. "Do you really want reasons?"

"Naturally! If reasons exist!"

"There are no reasons, except to see different faces and different scenery. But is it not a strange mystery that Apollon Zamp, the most zestful bravo of the showboats, plies the most cautious routes?"

"No strange mystery whatever! I am gallant and zestful because circumstances permit these qualities; otherwise I might be as dull as a Ratwick clam-digger. I will tell you my secret." Zamp made a significant gesture and leaned forward. "I make no demands upon my good friend Destiny. I never put him to the test, and hence we stride happily in step together through life."

"Perhaps your good friend Destiny is merely too modest and too polite to differ with you," suggested Lael-Rosza. "Let us test his real opinion. Ahead of us is that dreary little group of hovels Badburg, where the folk pay their way in pickled fish. Notice my talisman: one side bears my birth-sign, the

* Colloquialism: the process of exchanging miscellaneous tokens, gems and commodities into iron.

other depicts the nymph Korakis. I will toss up the talisman. If Korakis appears we sail on, past Badburg, up to Fudurth, or Euvis, or even Lanteen at Glassblower's Point. If not: Badburg. Do you agree?"

Zamp shook his head. "Destiny admittedly has his little quirks; for instance he never troubles to control the twirl of a talisman."

"Still, I will twirl." Lael-Rosza spun the ivory disk into the air; it fell to the table, rolled across the waxed wood to lean on edge against the wine flask.

Zamp looked down in annoyance. "So then—what am I expected to understand from this?"

"You must ask someone else; I have no skill with omens."

Zamp raised his eyebrows. "Omens?"

"You would know better than I: you who walk arm in arm, like a brother, with Destiny."

"We walk together," said Apollon Zamp, "but we do not necessarily confide in each other."

The night was well-advanced. Lael-Rosza had slipped quietly back to her cubicle on the deck below, and Apollon Zamp, who had taken perhaps a draught or two more than necessary, sat back in his massive chair of carved pfalax wood. The night was warm; the casements were open; a breeze caused the flame in the lamps to flicker, and shadows danced around the walls. Zamp rose to his feet and surveyed the cabin: a chamber which any man might envy, with furniture of massive pfalax, a cabinet of glass flagons twinkling in the lamplight, a good bed with a green coverlet in the alcove. The tamarack knees supporting the overhead beams were carved in scrolls; the oak deck below his feet shone dark and glossy

with wax, one great lamp hung above the table, another over the desk. At this late hour the various levels of Zamp's mind lay open to each other. Images surged and spun; portents and meanings were everywhere, if only he were clever enough to grasp them. The casements reflected a distorted semblance of himself; Zamp peered close to see a recognizable person, one dear and familiar, yet somehow awful and strange and remote. The figure was squat, with bulging buttocks, garments hanging all askew. The fair curls flapped foppishly long; blue eyes looked vacuously past a long pale nose. Zamp straightened himself in indignation; the creature in the casement blinked and rippled and stared back with an indignant life of its own, as if it found Zamp's appearance as revolting as Zamp found its own. . . . Zamp turned away. If these were presages or messages, or insights, he wanted no more of them.

He stepped out into the night and climbed to the quarter-deck. The dark stream slid past without haste, aware that its course was inexorable. From Ratwick a few late lamps glimmered yellow on the water.

Zamp looked about the vessel with automatic vigilance. All seemed in order. He went to lean on the taff-rail. In the light from the stern lantern he noted on the bulge of the rudder a small squat bulwig, the lamplight reflecting stars in its three eyes. Zamp and the bulwig stared at each other. Zamp willed the creature to jump into the water. It hunched itself down more obdurately than ever. Zamp projected the full force of his personality. "Go!" he muttered. "Depart the rudder, mud-scut! Back to the slime!"

The bulwig's gaze seemed to become more intense, and it occurred to Zamp that the bulwig in its turn might be willing Zamp back from the rail. "Bah," muttered Zamp. "What

nonsense! I am turning away only because I have business elsewhere!”

On his way below he paused to consider Ratwick once more. Today he had presented a farce, *The Drunken Fishmonger and the Talking Eel*, together with a ‘Ballet of the Flowers’, featuring his eight mime-girls in flounced robes; a wrestling match between the ship’s professional and the local champion; and a finale which included the eight girls, the orchestra, two jugglers, three sword dancers, six grotesques. The program had been carefully adapted to the prejudices of the town, which like most communities of Big Planet considered itself the single oasis of sanity upon all the vast surface of the planet. He had played to three hundred and twelve men, women and children; he had collected in payment over four thousand ounces of driftwood resin, convertible at Coble—so Zamp had determined from his Transactional Bulletin—into ninety-five groats of iron. A fair day’s take, neither good nor bad. Tomorrow he had planned to hoist anchor and drift back down-river, and why not? What was up-river save a few dingy little villages too poor even to tempt the robber nomads from Tinsitala Steppe? Lanteen at Glassblower’s Point was prosperous enough, and his own few visits had yielded adequate returns. He was growing no younger . . . Odd! What had propelled that totally irrelevant idea into his mind? He turned one last thoughtful look around the river, then descended to his cabin and went to bed.