

THE HEAD AND THE HAND

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

Bless you, Mike Moorcock, and thank you for New Worlds. This magazine, now being published as an original anthology, has been the consistent showplace of more new and better science fiction writers than any other in the last decade. Christopher Priest's story appeared there, and very chilling and remarkable it is. Priest's growing reputation centres round two novels, Indoctrinaire and Fugue for a Darkening Island, the latter being the first British novel to win a John W. Campbell Award.

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On that morning at Racine House we were taking exercise in the grounds. There had been a frost overnight, and the grass lay white and brittle. The sky was unclouded, and the sun threw long blue shadows. Our breath cast clouds of vapour behind us. There was no sound, no wind, no movement. The park was ours, and we were alone.

Our walks in the mornings had a clearly defined route, and as we came to the eastern end of the path at the bottom of the long sloping lawn I prepared for the turn, pressing down hard on the controlling handles at the back of the carriage. I am a large man, and well-muscled, but the combined weight of the invalid carriage and the master was almost beyond the limit of my strength.

That day the master was in a difficult mood. Though before we set out he had clearly stated that I was to wheel him as far as the disused summer lodge, as I tried to lift him round he waved his head from side to side.

"No, Lasken!" he said irritably. "To the lake today. I want to see the swans."

I said to him: "Of course, sir."

I swung the carriage back into the direction in which we had been travelling, and continued with our walk. I waited for him to say something to me, for it was unusual that he would give me untempered instructions without qualifying them a few moments later with some more intimate

remark. Our relationship was a formal one, but memories of what had once existed between us still affected our behaviour and attitudes. Though we were of a similar age and social background, Todd's career had affected us considerably. Never again could there be any kind of equality between us.

I waited, and in the end he turned his head and said: "The park is beautiful today, Edward. This afternoon we must ride through it with Elizabeth, before the weather gets warmer. The trees are so stark, so black."

"Yes sir." I said, glancing at the woods to our right. When he bought the house, the first action he had taken was to have all the evergreen trees felled, and the remainder sprayed so that their greenery would be inhibited. With the passage of years they had regained their growth, and now the master would spend the summer months inside the house, the windows shuttered and the curtains drawn. Only with the coming of autumn would he return to the open air, obsessively watching the orange and brown leaves dropping to the ground and swirling across the lawns.

The lake appeared before us as we rounded the edge of the wood. The grounds dropped down to it in a shallow and undulating incline from the house, which was above us and to our left.

A hundred yards from the water's edge I turned my head and looked towards the house, and saw the tall figure of Elizabeth moving down towards us, her long maroon dress sweeping across the grass.

Knowing he would not see her, I said nothing to Todd.

We stopped at the edge of the lake. In the night a crust of ice had formed on its surface.

"The swans, Edward. Where are they?"

He moved his head to the right, and placed his lips on one of the switches there. At once, the batteries built into the base of the carriage turned the motors of the servos, and the backrest slid upwards, bringing him into a position that was almost upright.

He moved his head from side to side, a frown creasing his eyebrow-less face.

"Go and find their nests, Lasken. I must see them today."

“It’s the ice, sir,” I said. “It has probably driven them from the water.”

I heard the rustle of silk on frosted grass, and turned. Elizabeth stood a few yards behind us, holding an envelope in her hands.

She held it up, and looked at me with her eyebrows raised. I nodded silently: that is the one. She smiled at me quickly. The master would not yet know that she was there. The outer membrane of his ears had been removed, rendering his hearing unfocused and undirectional.

She swept past me in the peremptory manner she knew he approved of, and stood before him. He appeared unsurprised to see her.

“There’s a letter, Todd,” she said.

“Later,” he said without looking at it. “Lasken can deal with it. I have no time now.”

“It’s from Gaston I think. It looks like his stationery.”

“Read it to me.”

He swung his head backwards sharply. It was his instruction to me: move out of earshot. Obediently I stepped away to a place where I knew he could not see me or hear me.

Elizabeth bent down and kissed him on his lips.

“Todd, whatever it is, please don’t do it.”

“Read it to me,” he said again.

She slit the envelope with her thumb and pulled out a sheet of thin white paper, folded in three. I knew what the letter contained; Gaston had read it to me over the telephone the day before. He and I had arranged the details and we knew that no higher price could be obtained, even for Todd. There had been difficulties with the television concessions, and for a while it had looked as if the French government was going to intervene.

Gaston’s letter was a short one. It said that Todd’s popularity had never been higher, and that the Theatre Alhambra and its consortium had offered eight million francs for another appearance. I listened to Elizabeth’s voice as she read, marvelling at the emotionless monotone of her

articulation. She had warned me earlier that she did not think she was going to be able to read the letter to him.

When she'd finished, Todd asked her to read it again. She did this, then placed the open letter in front of him, brushed her lips against his face and walked away from him. As she passed me she laid a hand on my arm for a moment, then continued on up towards the house. I watched her for a few seconds, seeing her slim beauty accentuated by the sunlight that fell sideways across her face, and strands of her hair blown behind by the wind.

The master waved his head from side to side.

"Lasken! Lasken!"

I went back to him.

"Do you see this?"

I picked it up and glanced at it.

"I shall write to him of course," I said. "It is out of the question."

"No, no, I must consider. We must always consider. I have so much at stake."

I kept my expression steady.

"But it is impossible. You can give no more performances!"

"There is a way, Edward," he said, in as gentle a voice as I had ever heard him use. "I must find that way."

I caught sight of a water-fowl a few yards from us, in the reeds at the edge of the lake. It waddled out on to the ice, confused by the frozen surface. I took one of the long poles from the side of the carriage and broke a section of the ice. The bird slithered across the ice and flew away, terrified by the noise.

I walked back to Todd.

"There. If there is some open water, the swans will return."

The expression on his face was agitated.

“The Theatre Alhambra,” he said. “What shall we do?”

“I will speak to your solicitor. It is an outrage that the theatre should approach you. They know that you cannot go back.”

“But eight million francs.”

“The money does not matter. You said that yourself once.”

“No, it is not the money. Nor the public. It is everything.”

We waited by the lake for the swans, as the sun rose higher in the sky. I was exhilarated by the pale colours of the park, by the quiet and the calm. It was an aesthetic, sterile reaction for the house and its grounds had oppressed me from the start. Only the transient beauty of the morning - a frozen, fragile countenance - stirred something in me.

The master had lapsed into silence, and had returned the backrest to the horizontal position he found most relaxing. Though his eyes were closed I knew he would not be asleep.

I walked away from him, out of his earshot, and strolled around the perimeter of the lake, always keeping a watch for movement on the carriage. I wondered if he would be able to resist the offer from the Theatre Alhambra, fearing that if he did there would be no greater attraction.

The time was right... he had not been seen in public for nearly four and a half years. The mood of the public was right... for the media had recently returned their interest to him, criticizing his many imitators and demanding his return. None of this was lost on the master. There was only one Todd Alborne, and only he could have gone so far. No one could compete with him. Everything was right, and only the participation of the master was needed to complete it.

The electric klaxon I had fitted to the carriage sounded. Looking back at him across the ice I saw that he had moved his face to the switch. I turned back, and went to him.

“I want to see Elizabeth,” he said.

“You know what she will say.”

“Yes. But I must speak to her.”

I turned the carriage round, and began the long and difficult return up the slope to the house.

As we left the side of the lake I saw white birds flying low in the distance, headed away from the house. I hoped that Todd had not seen them.

He looked from side to side as we moved past the wood. I saw on the branches the new buds that would burst in the next few weeks; I think he saw only the bare black twigs, the stark geometry of the naked trees.

In the house I took him to his study, and lifted his body from the carriage he used for outside expeditions to the motorized one in which he moved about the house. He spent the rest of the day with Elizabeth, and I saw her only when she came down to collect for him the meals I prepared. In those moments we had time only to exchange glances, to intertwine fingers, to kiss lightly. She would say nothing of what he was thinking.

He retired early and Elizabeth with him, going to the room next to his, sleeping alone as she had done for five years.

When she was sure he was asleep, she left her bed and came to mine. We made love at once. Afterwards we lay together in the dark, our hands clasped possessively; only then would she tell me what she thought his decision would be.

“He’s going to do it,” she said. “I haven’t seen him as excited as this for years.”

* * * *

I have known Todd Alborne since we were both eighteen. Our families had known one another, and chance brought us together one year during a European holiday. Though we did not become friends immediately, I found his company fascinating and on our return to England we stayed in touch with each other.

The fascination he held over me was not one I admired, but neither could I resist it: he possessed a fanatical and passionate dedication to what he was doing, and once started he would be deterred by nothing. He conducted several disastrous love-affairs, and twice lost most of his money in unsuccessful business ventures. But he had a general aimlessness that disturbed me; I felt that once pressed into a direction he could control, he would be able to exploit his unusual talents.

It was his sudden and unexpected fame that separated us. No one had anticipated it, least of all Todd. Yet when he recognized its potential, he embraced it readily.

I was not with him when it began, though I saw him soon after. He told me what happened, and though it differs from the popular anecdote I believe it.

He was drinking with some friends when an accident with a knife occurred. One of his companions had been cut badly, and had fainted. During the commotion that followed, a stranger made a wager with Todd that he would not voluntarily inflict a wound on his own body.

Todd slashed the skin of his forearm, and collected his money. The stranger offered to double the stake if Todd would amputate a finger.

Placing his left hand on the table in front of him, Todd removed his index finger. A few minutes later, with no further encouragement from the stranger - who by this time had left - Todd cut off another finger. The following day a television company had picked up the story, and Todd was invited to the studio to relate what had happened. During the live transmission, and against the wishes of the interviewer, Todd repeated the operation.

It was the reaction to this first broadcast - a wave of prurient shock from the public, and an hysterical condemnation in the media - that revealed to Todd the potential in such a display of self-mutilation.

Finding a promoter, he commenced a tour of Europe, performing his act to paying audiences only.

It was at this point - seeing his arrangements for publicity, and learning of the sums of money he was confident of earning - that I made the effort of dissociating myself from him. Purposely, I isolated myself from news of his exploits and would take no interest in the various public stunts he performed. It was the element of ritual in what he did that sickened me, and his native flair for showmanship only made him the more offensive to me.

It was a year after this alienation that we met again. It was he who sought me out, and though I resisted him at first I was unable to maintain the distance I desired.

I learned that in the intervening period he had married.

At first I was repelled by Elizabeth, for I thought that she loved Todd for his obsession, in the way the blood-hungry public loved him. But as I grew to know her better I realized that she saw herself in some messianic role. It was then that I understood her to be as vulnerable as Todd - though in an entirely different way - and I found myself agreeing to work for Todd and to do for him whatever he requested. At first I refused to assist him with the mutilations, but later did as he asked. My change of mind in this instance was initiated by Elizabeth.

The condition of his body when I started to work for him was so bad that he was almost entirely crippled. Though at first he had had several organs grafted back on to his body after mutilation, such operations could be carried out only a limited number of times, and while healing, prevented further performances.

His left arm below the elbow had been removed; his left leg was almost intact beyond the two removed toes. His right leg was intact. One of his ears had been removed, and he had been scalped. All fingers but the thumb and index on his right hand had been removed.

As a result of these injuries he was incapable of administering the amputations himself, and in addition to the various assistants he employed for his act he required me to operate the mutilating apparatus during the actual performances.

He attested a disclaimer form for the injuries to which I was to be an accessory, and his career continued.

And it went on, between spells for recovery, for another two years. In spite of the apparent contempt he had for his body, Todd bought the most expensive medical supervision he could find, and the recovery from each amputation was strictly observed before another performance.

But the human body is finite and his eventual retirement was inevitable.

At his final performance, his genital organs were removed amid the greatest storm of publicity and outrage he had known. Afterwards, he made no further public appearance, and spent a long spell of convalescence in a private nursing-home. Elizabeth and I stayed with him, and when he bought Racine House fifty miles from Paris, we went there with him.

And from that day we had played out the masque; each pretending to the others that his career had reached its climax, each knowing that inside the limbless, earless, hairless, castrated man there was a flame burning still for its final extinguishment.

And outside the gates of Racine House, Todd's private world waited for him. And he knew they waited, and Elizabeth and I knew they waited.

Meanwhile our life went on, and he was the master.

* * * *

There was an interval of three weeks between my confirming to Gaston that Todd was to make another appearance and the actual night itself. There was much to be done.

While we left the publicity arrangements to Gaston, Todd and I began the job of designing and building the equipment for the show. This was a process that in the past had been one of extreme distaste to me. It wrought an unpleasant tension between Elizabeth and myself, for she would not allow me to tell her about the equipment.

This time, though, there was no such strain between us. Halfway through the work she asked me about the apparatus I was building, and that night, after Todd had fallen asleep, I took her down to the workshop. For ten minutes she walked from one instrument to another, testing the smoothness of the mechanism and the sharpness of the blades.

Finally, she looked at me without expression, then nodded.

I contacted Todd's former assistants, and confirmed with them that they would be present at the performance. Once or twice I telephoned Gaston, and learned of the wave of speculation that was anticipating Todd's return.

As for the master himself, he was taken with a burst of energy and excitement that stretched to its limits the prosthetic machinery which surrounded him. He seemed unable to sleep, and several nights would call for Elizabeth. For this period she did not come to my room, though I often visited her for an hour or two. One night Todd called her while I was there, and I lay in bed listening to him talk to her, his voice unnaturally high-pitched, though never uncontrolled or over-excited.

When the day of the performance arrived I asked him if he wanted to

drive to the Alhambra in our specially built car, or to use the carriage and horses that I knew he preferred for public appearances. He chose the latter.

We departed early, knowing that in addition to the distance we had to cover there would be several delays caused by admirers.

We placed Todd at the front of the carriage, next to the driver, sitting him up in the seat I had built for him. Elizabeth and I sat behind, her hand resting lightly on my leg. Every so often, Todd would half turn his head and speak to us. On these occasions, either she or I would lean forward to acknowledge him and reply.

Once we were on the main road into Paris we encountered many large groups of admirers. Some cheered or called; some stood in silence. Todd acknowledged them all, but when one woman tried to scramble up into the carriage he became agitated and nervous and screamed at me to get her away from him.

The only place where he came into close contact with any of his admirers was during our stop to change horses. Then he spoke volubly and amiably, though afterwards he was noticeably tired.

Our arrival at the Theatre Alhambra had been planned in great detail, and the police had cordoned off the crowd. There was a broad channel left free through which Todd could be wheeled. As the carriage halted the crowd began to cheer, and the horses became nervous.

I wheeled Todd in through the stage door, responding in spite of myself to the hysteria of the crowds. Elizabeth was close behind us. Todd took the reception well and professionally, smiling round from side to side, unable to acknowledge the acclaim in any other way. He appeared not to notice the small but determined and vociferous section of the crowd chanting the slogans that they bore on placards.

Once inside his dressing-room we were able to relax for a while. The show was not scheduled to start for another two and a half hours. After a short nap, Todd was bathed by Elizabeth, and then dressed in his stage costume.

Twenty minutes before he was due to give his performance, one of the female staff of the theatre came into the dressing-room and presented him with a bouquet of flowers. Elizabeth took them from the woman and laid them uncertainly before him, knowing well his dislike of flowers.

“Thank you,” he said to the woman. “Flowers. What beautiful colours.”

Gaston came in fifteen minutes later, accompanied by the manager of the Alhambra. Both men shook hands with me, Gaston kissed Elizabeth on her cheek, and the manager tried to strike up a conversation with Todd. Todd did not reply, and a little later I noticed that the manager was weeping silently. Todd stared at us all.

It had been decided by Todd that there was to be no special ceremony surrounding this performance. There were to be no speeches, no public remarks from Todd. No interviews to be granted. The act on the stage would follow carefully the instructions he had dictated to me, and the rehearsals that the other assistants had been following for the last week.

He turned to Elizabeth, and put his face up towards her. She kissed him tenderly, and I turned away.

After nearly a minute he said: “All right, Lasken. I’m ready.”

I took the handle of his carriage and wheeled him out of the dressing-room and down the corridor towards the wings of the stage.

We heard a man’s voice talking in French of Todd, and a great roar of applause from the audience. The muscles of my stomach contracted. The expression on Todd’s face did not change.

Two assistants came forward, and lifted Todd into his harness. This was connected by two thin wires to a pulley in the flies, and when operated by one of the assistants in the wings would move Todd around the stage. When he was secure, his four false limbs were strapped in place.

He nodded to me, and I prepared myself. For a second, I saw the expression in Elizabeth’s eyes. Todd was not looking in our direction, but I made no response to her.

I stepped on to the stage. A woman screamed, then the whole audience rose to its feet. My heart raced.

The equipment was already on the stage, covered with heavy velvet curtains. I walked to the centre of the stage, and bowed to the audience. Then I walked from one piece of apparatus to another, removing the curtains.

As each piece was revealed the audience roared its approval. The voice of the manager crackled over the P.A. system, imploring them to return to their seats. As I had done at previous performances, I stood still until the audience was seated once more. Each movement was provocative.

I finished revealing the equipment. To my eye it was ugly and utilitarian, but the audience relished the appearance of the razor-sharp blades.

I walked to the footlights.

"Mesdames. Messieurs." Silence fell abruptly. *"Le maitre."*

I moved downstage, holding out my hand in the direction of Todd. I tried purposely to disregard the audience. I could see Todd in the wings, hanging in his harness beside Elizabeth. He was not talking to her or looking at her. His head was bent forward, and he was concentrating on the sound from the audience.

They were still in silence... the anticipatory motionlessness of the voyeur.

Seconds passed, and still Todd waited. Somewhere in the audience a voice spoke quietly. Abruptly, the audience roared.

It was Todd's moment. He nodded to the assistant, who wound the pulley ropes and propelled Todd out on to the stage.

The movement was eerie and unnatural. He floated on the wire so that his false legs just scraped the canvas of the stage. His false arms hung limply at his side. Only his head was alert, greeting and acknowledging the audience.

I had expected them to applaud... but at his appearance they subsided again into silence. I had forgotten about that in the intervening years. It was the silences that had always appalled me.

The pulley-assistant propelled Todd to a couch standing to the right of the stage. I helped him lie down on it. Another assistant - who was a qualified medical doctor - came on to the stage, and carried out a brief examination.

He wrote something on a piece of paper, and handed it to me. Then

he went to the front of the stage and made his statement to the audience.

“I have examined the master. He is fit. He is sane. He is in full possession of his senses, and knows what he is about to undertake. I have signed a statement to this effect.”

The pulley-assistant raised Todd once more, and propelled him around the stage, from one piece of equipment to another. When he had inspected them all, he nodded his agreement.

At the front of the stage, in the centre, I unstrapped his false legs. As they fell away from his body, one or two men in the audience gasped.

Todd's arms were removed.

I then pulled forward one of the pieces of equipment: a long, white-covered table with a large mirror above it.

I swung Todd's torso on to the table, then removed the harness and signalled for it to be lifted away. I positioned Todd so that as he was lying with his head towards the audience, and with his whole body visible to them in the mirror. I was working amidst silence. I did not look towards the audience, I did not look towards the wings, I was perspiring. Todd said nothing to me.

When Todd was in the position he required, he nodded to me and I turned towards the audience, bowing and indicating that the performance was about to commence. There was a ripple of applause, soon finished.

I stood back, and watched Todd without reaction. He was feeling the audience again. In a performance consisting of one solitary action, and a mute one at that, for best effect his timing had to be accurate. There was only one piece of apparatus on the stage which was to be used this evening; the others were there for the effect of their presence.

Todd and I both knew which one it was to be: I would wheel it over at the appropriate time.

The audience was silent again, but restless. I felt that it was poised critically; one movement would explode it into reaction. Todd nodded to me.

I walked again from one piece of apparatus to the next. On each one I put my hand to the blade, as if feeling its sharpness. By the time I had been

to each one, the audience was ready. I could feel it, and I knew Todd could.

I went back to the apparatus Todd had selected: a guillotine made from tubular aluminium and with a blade of finest stainless steel. I trundled it over to his table, and connected it with the brackets for that purpose. I tested its solidity, and made a visual check that the release mechanism would work properly.

Todd was positioned now so that his head overhung the edge of the table, and was directly underneath the blade. The guillotine was so constructed that it did not obscure the view of his body in the mirror.

I removed his costume.

He was naked. The audience gasped when they saw his scars, but returned to silence.

I took the wire loop of the release mechanism and, as Todd had instructed me, tied it tightly around the thick meat of his tongue. To take up the slack of the wire, I adjusted it at the side of the apparatus.

I leaned over him, and asked if he was ready. He nodded.

“Edward,” he said indistinctly. “Come closer.”

I leaned forward so that my face was near his. To do this I had to pass my own neck under the guillotine blade. The audience approved of this action.

“What is it?” I said.

“I know, Edward. About you and Elizabeth.”

I looked into the wings, where she was still standing.

I said: “And you still want to... ?”

He nodded again, this time more violently. The wire release on his tongue tightened and the mechanism clicked open. He nearly caught me in the apparatus. I jumped away as the blade plummeted down. I turned from him, looking desperately into the wings at Elizabeth as the first screams from the audience filled the theatre.

Elizabeth stepped out on to the stage. She was looking at Todd. I

went to her.

Todd's torso lay on the table. His heart was still beating, for blood spurted rhythmically in thick gouts from his severed neck. His hairless head swung from the apparatus. Where the wire gripped his tongue, it had wrenched it nearly from his throat. His eyes were still open.

We turned and faced the audience. The change that had come over them was total; in under five seconds they had panicked. A few people had fainted; the rest were standing. The noise of their shouting was unbelievable. They moved towards the doors. None looked at the stage. One man swung his fist at another; was knocked down from behind. A woman was having hysterics, tearing at her clothes. No one paid her any attention. I heard a shot, and ducked instinctively, pulling Elizabeth down with me. Women screamed; men shouted. I heard the P.A. click on, but no voice came through. Abruptly, the doors of the auditorium swung open simultaneously on all sides, and armed riot-police burst in. It had been planned carefully. As the police attacked them, the crowd fought back. I heard another shot, then several more in rapid succession.

I took Elizabeth by the hand, and led her from the stage.

In the dressing-room we watched through a window as the police attacked the crowds in the street. Many people were shot. Tear-gas was released, a helicopter hovered overhead.

We stood together in silence, Elizabeth crying. We were obliged to stay within the safety of the theatre building for another twelve hours. The next day we returned to Racine House, and the first leaves were spreading.