

Panther Books

ALL THINGS
BETRAY THEE

by

GWYN THOMAS

PAUL LIST



EDITION

BRIEFLY,
ABOUT THE BOOK

"... as vivid and tearing a story as I'll ever think of, located roughly in the '30's of the last century..." Such is the way in which Gwyn Thomas describes his novel, *ALL THINGS BETRAY THEE*.

The reader will agree that the story is vivid and tearing – so vivid in fact, that the urge persists to keep reading from front cover to back.

No reader of *ALL THINGS BETRAY THEE* will soon forget Alan Leigh, the Harpist who is the "I" of this tale; or John Simon, his friend, who is its hero; or Katherine who loves John but is pledged to the care of Davy, loving and maimed; or Helen whose beauty is warped by greed and by ambition; or Lemuel, seeking his Floss, his May, his Violet and the thirty pieces of silver that are his as the Judas of Moonlea.

THE BOOK
OF THE

ALL THINGS BETRAY THEE

BY

GWYN THOMAS

PAUL LIST VERLAG LEIPZIG

PANTHER BOOKS
are published by
PAUL LIST VERLAG LEIPZIG
Leipzig C 1 • Paul-List-Straße 22

This book is not to be introduced
into Great Britain, Canada, and USA

Published as a Panther Book, 1956
Printed by VEB Offizin Andersen Nexö in Leipzig III/18/38
License Number 375-290/33/55

"I don't know," said Jeremy Longridge. "Men like John Simon Adams and myself, we are not much more than leaves in the wind, bits of painful feeling that gripe the guts of the masses. From the cottages, the hovels, the drink shops and sweat mills, anger rises and we are moved. No choice, Mr. Connor, save perhaps the last-minute privilege of adjusting the key of the scream we utter."

LATE SUMMER

1835

CHAPTER ONE

FACING ME was the last mountain I would have to cross before reaching the valley at the head of which was the township which I sought, Moonlea. It was my tenth day of walking and my legs still moved swiftly strong over the soft grassy path that led towards the wooded upper slopes. Arthur's Crown they called that mountain, for some brooding eye had seen a serene, sad majesty in its rounded peak.

They called me "the harpist." For years I had roamed the land, a small harp attached to my shoulders with cutting thongs of leather when I was on the move. On that harp I played at evening to any group of people who wanted to listen. I had never in all my life been a good player. My senses had always been too passionately attracted to the things and people about me ever to have achieved even a hint of glory in the mechanical sweep of hand on strings. And when I played, my desire was only to drag the hearts of those who heard me out into the shadowed orbit of my own thoughtfulness, to tempt their voices into a dusk-softness of melancholy sound. Around my harp, in all the villages of all the hills and valleys where I had stayed for a brief night or day, had crystallized whole layers of expressed longings and regret. Then, after each session of playing and singing, I had felt the layers peel away under the aseptic brush of wind and sun for there was that within me which set a fence around my pity and bade all other men and women let me be and pass.

Now my harp was gone. My shoulders, as I moved, were itchily light and alien. Two days before, I had landed at an inn near Lindum. The inn's front windows had looked out upon a lake whose calm loveliness had called my whole being to a total halt. The cool magic of that lake laid a kiss upon me that made my limbs and mind surrender all movement, all desire. I laid my harp aside and enjoyed the kind of high-grade death of a fed, fretless tranquillity. The sum of even my most inveterate griefs yielded to and was dissolved by a cleansing wisdom of acceptance. My dark hollows vanished and I gave not a damn whether my feet ever came to Moonlea or not. Then a drover arrived, a prosperous yeoman in charge of his own herd, and a giant. He stood at least two feet and a fortified stomach above average peasant level. He was solid and broad as a hillock and as dense. He was on his way to a market center in one of the border counties where the new industrial towns had created a legion of lean bodies begging for his stock. I drank my ale and watched this man, the sight of whom ruined my whole wonderland of quiet forgiveness. I spoke to him of the places I had been, of the far hamlets where singing clustered groups had dipped their slab of squalid wants for a short forgetting into the liquid of my music. I told him of the ironmasters whose dark little towns I had glanced at and fled from in my wanderings, who laid their black fingers on the heads of the field folk, tensing their neck muscles for the laying of a clumsy knife. I whispered to him as the ale pool grew deeper and the crazy malice of my ruined mood spread wing and gained fast in fury and power, I whispered to him all I knew of hunger on earth, its fruition and flow, for all the world as if hunger were my sister, a dearly familiar slut. Then a hurled pot came within an inch of taking off my ear and I saw that this drover to whom life was clearly good was viewing me as he would a toad, a mad, purposeful toad. He rose from his chair, his head

down and eager to butt, and if I had not had as much speed as lyric impulse and had not run around the table of that inn so often the man became giddy and helpless, I would have left the broken remnants of my neck and all my teeth on the borders of that lovely lake. My prattle of unease among mankind had fished deep down into the great bulk of that drover, and brought up on the hook his last feeling nerve and had scoured hell out of the thing.

When he recovered from his giddiness he went into the corner where my harp stood and he kicked it, as deliberately as I will ever see anything done, into splinters. He turned around to stare at me, gasping and malevolent, seeming to ask what my next move would be. There was no next move. I had felt, in the quiescence of will that had marked my mood on arriving at that spot, that some profound transformative antic might be in course of execution, and I felt no strangeness as I witnessed my harp's death and my own wondering survival. My meekness impressed the drover. He paid me for the damage and I left at dawn the next morning. And all that day, as I walked, my body at the sight of some tree or stream, some shaft of sun or thought, would come to a violent pause as the bitter shudder of the smashed strings came ripping between my mind and ears. But by the end of the day the shuddering echo was faint and nearly gone. I no longer cared. The harp's death left me free. My life of wandering was at an end anyway and I would need it no longer. At first its going would leave traces of desolation, but I had always been a great sampler of the desolate in folk and things and had learned to digest even its stoniest particles of anguish. My journey to Moonlea would mark the induction of a brand-new type of tomorrow into my days, a tomorrow resting on a diligent security and assurance, purged of my ancient vagabondage and sorrowful bardry.

I took a track westward which skirted the mountain. Two or three miles along the plateau would bring me to

the slope down into Moonlea. My stomach was empty and now and then giddiness made me swerve off the narrow path. In my pocket I had a lump of bread but it was harder than the thigh bone it rested on and I made up my mind that I would have to swerve a lot more dramatically than I had done so far before I would bother my teeth with it. My hunger gave the smell of the ferns a deep relish. The sun was becoming fierce.

I made towards a dingle where trees and bushes grew thickly and I knew that among them there would be a cold stream in which I could steep my legs. In the dingle's middle was a broad clearing, enclosed on one side by a curve of stream. I sang with joy at the sound of water and ran towards it. Then I stopped dead, for before me was such a sight as I had never before seen in this land. A woman, a young woman whose bright beauty matched the press of sun through the surrounding leaves, sat by the stream's side, before a small easel, painting. She wore a light blue cape whose hood hung away from her hair, long, gently tended hair, black as mine. The woman did not turn at my approach for my years in solitary places had made me quiet in my movements as a fox. I could see her canvas. It was neither good nor bad, a vivid bubble of greens and yellows that said everything and nothing. Her fingers were darkened with colors, as if her hands were inexpert in the handling of the brush. As I came nearer she turned her face to stare at an old willow that dragged a scurvy cripple of a branch across the surface of the stream and I could see that her skin and expression were not as those of the village girls and mountain women I had known who grow rough as files and fierce as fire through their toilsome lives. This woman had been bred at great cost and care; there was a pride and aloofness about her that disturbed, then angered me.

On the side of the clearing opposite the stream was an embankment soft with whin bushes and lichen. I lay full stretch upon it. My breathing grew louder with content-

ment and my teeth ran noisily over the bread lump which I had drawn from my pocket, to be played with, aired and dented if not eaten. It was then she became conscious of me. There was no shout, no gasp, no tremor. I could have been an odd mountain pony, a poor specimen of pony at a time when their value was low, for all the significance I seemed to have for this woman. Her calmness grated on me. I had been alone for many days, counting out the interlude with the conservative drover, and under the suggestion of my long inner dialogues the private cosmos of my meaning had swelled enormously. Before her, I felt no diffidence, only curiosity. She was emblematic of many things I knew little of. In my roamings I had seen the increase of wealth and power in the hands of the great landowners as the large estates broke their fences and drove out the small field-tillers. I had seen the empty cottages and quiet fields that had contributed their drop to the stream that was now flowing into the new noisy centers where cloth, iron, coal were creating new patterns of effort, reward, unease. The personal forces, the men of gold, the mighty, whose brains and hands directed these changes, I had kept well outside my private acre and as long as I could keep my moving, undisciplined hide free from their manipulative frenzies I had cared nothing about them. Strong and fast they might be, I would always be too swift for them. I would never be found squirming in the life traps they were creating in the new centers of power. I had never thought to meet one of their number face to face. Yet there I was nibbling a bread crust within three yards of that pouting woman who had upon her the marks of knowing brands of thinking and feeling that would be as deadly to me as the plague. She had known not even the shadow of comradeship, I could see that. Her own impulse to create and mold had become the dominant motive of her universe. It was probably the lack of food and the strain of too much walking that caused this

twitter in my mind at the sight of her, but whatever the way of it was, I was sick and disturbed as I looked at her. For a moment, I was tempted to edge my way out of the clearing and away from her presence. Then she saw me.

"What do you want?" she asked and she was still as without ripples as the face of that lake on whose shore I had left my mutilated harp. There was a sharp, plucked quality in her voice that brought the harp to my mind.

"Nothing I need ask anybody for."

"You're impertinent."

I had nothing to say to that. I had not realized that people were instructed with great pains to pass statements as pointless as that on to other people. I had expected words and notions as straight and sensible as sunlight. So I sat up, shrugged, looked directly at her, then at her painting.

"No shape on that," I said, letting my eyes wander around the clearing. "Frankly, you don't get the pattern of this beauty. Ten to one you think it's a pretty dingy show compared with you."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Alan Leigh, Alan Hugh Leigh."

"Are you a vagrant?"

"At the moment I'm nothing at all; only tired."

"Why does your hand shake?"

"I told you. Dog-tired. I've come from north to south on foot and fast as a whippet."

"Does your hand shake because you're nervous of me?"

"Nervous of you? What kind of a menace do you represent?"

"It isn't every day you discover ladies in glades, painting."

"So that's a novelty? I didn't know. Of life above the level of goats I'm very ignorant and likely to get more so. No, I'm not nervous of you. Your cloak's very lovely. I'd say it was one of the loveliest things I had ever seen.

I saw a lake that color once and I lingered too long by the side of it. But you, no, you wouldn't make me shake unless you hired somebody to stand behind me and start the movement off."

"What's that horrible thing you have in your hand?"

"A bit of a loaf. I've been carrying it so long it's worked to my shape. I haven't the heart to eat it or throw it away."

"Are you a harpist?"

"Used to be. How did you know?"

"The way your fingers bend from time to time. An expectant sort of curve as if they are already listening to the note. It's easy to see. And there's a stupid look in your eyes that I've seen in those of harpists, too."

"You've a cunning fancy."

"I paint badly but I watch well. One day I'll see something so clearly it'll tell my brush what to do."

"I hope so. There's a lot of joy even in that messy splash you've done there."

"Where are you going?"

"Moonlea."

"You going to work in the foundries?"

"God, no."

"What's wrong with them?"

"What's wrong with chaining a bear and paying him a few pence per hobble? That foundry work's a pen for the idiot and the life-sick. Some men put on a coat of dirt and servility too swiftly for my taste. When a man accepts a master's hand or a rented hovel he's fit for the boneyard."

"You're a savage or a radical. You ought to say those things to my father. He'd have you sitting over a furnace learning elementary logic in less than a minute."

"Who's he, when he's not roasting the backward?"

"Richard Penbury."

"I've heard of him. He started Moonlea. The strongest and cleverest of all the ironmasters."

"My grandfather founded the place. But my father would be glad to hear you say those things."

"Not the way I'd say them. I don't like ironmasters in the main. Clean air, movement, music. I live for these. Withdraw them and I beckon the sexton."

"Where's your harp?"

"Smashed. Two days ago. A man put his foot through it, left it shivered and useless."

"If you have no harp and no love for the ovens, what do you plan to do in Moonlea? It has no place for drones."

"I have a friend. He and I were very close. We wandered all the mountains of the North and the plains of the Middle Country together. We always said that when our feet grew tired we would find some sweet solitude just right for the joint root of us to rest in. He heard his father was at Moonlea, feeble, rickety and playing the fool around the puddling yards of Penbury, your father. He left me, came down here, watched his father off the earth and stayed. It puzzled me. That was two years ago. Now I'm going to fetch him."

"How do you know your journey won't be wasted? He might not want to return to your wilderness. There may be more in towns and steady useful labor than meets your eye."

"There's nothing in steady useful labor that hasn't met my eye. I've looked it up and down like a doctor and the way your father and his helpers dress it up it's a leper. He'll come back with me."

"Perhaps he's married. And Moonlea is a place where children fall like rain."

"He's all alone on the earth, like I am. No one, no woman anyway, would get near him. He's like me, quiet, sufficient and a bit too far away for the average run of heart to get close enough to fiddle with him."

"Even without your harp you make quite a twang, don't you?"