C. S. FORESTER

★

The Sky and The Forest

London
MICHAEL JOSEPH

THE SKY
AND THE FOREST

Books by

C. S. FORESTER

★

Novels

PAYMENT DEFERRED
BROWN ON RESOLUTION
PLAIN MURDER
DEATH TO THE FRENCH
THE GUN
THE PEACEMAKER
THE GENERAL
THE HAPPY RETURN
A SHIP OF THE LINE
FLYING COLOURS
THE EARTHLY PARADISE
THE CAPTAIN FROM CONNECTICUT
THE SHIP
THE COMMODORE
LORD HORNBLOWER

Omnibus

CAPTAIN HORNBLOWER, R.N.

★

Travel

THE VOYAGE OF THE 'ANNIE MARBLE'
THE 'ANNIE MARBLE' IN GERMANY

★

Biography

NELSON

★

Plays

U.97
NURSE CAVELL
(with C. E. Bechofer Roberts)

★

Miscellaneous

MARIONETTES AT HOME

C. S. FORESTER

★

The Sky and The Forest

London
MICHAEL JOSEPH

First published by
MICHAEL JOSEPH LTD.
26 *Bloomsbury Street*
*London W.C.*1
1948

Set and Printed in Great Britain by Tonbridge Printers, Ltd., Peach Hall Works, Tonbridge, in Times nine on eleven point, and bound by James Burn.

CHAPTER

1

THERE HAD BEEN MUCH RAIN DURING THE NIGHT, AND THE MORNING air was still saturated with moisture, heavy and oppressive, and yet with a suspicion of chill about it, enough to make flies sluggish and men and women slow in their movements. But now the sun was able to look over the tops of the trees into the town, calling out the wreaths of steam from the puddles, and shining down upon Loa's woolly head as he walked out into the west end of the street. Four women, not yet gone to the banana groves, ceased their chattering at his appearance and fell on their knees and elbows, pressing their noses against the muddy soil. Loa ran his eye over them as he walked past them; he was more used to seeing the backs of men and of women than to looking into their faces. A little boy came running round the corner of a house—he was of an age when running was still something of a new experience for him—and stopped at sight of the crouching women and of Loa's passing majesty. His finger went to his mouth, but it had hardly reached it when his mother put out her arm, without lifting her face from the earth, and seized him and flung him down, face downwards as was proper, holding him there despite his struggles, and when he had recovered his surprise sufficiently to wail in protest, she managed to get her hand over his mouth and moderate the noise. That was right.

The distraction was sufficient to turn Loa from continuing his way down the street. He stood and looked idly along to the far end. The crouching women, conscious that he was remaining near them, writhed in troubled ecstasy, the bunched muscles along their backs standing out tensely, while their concern communicated itself to the little boy so that he ceased to struggle and wail, and instead lay limp and submissive. The sun was shining brightly into Loa's eyes, but the sun was Loa's brother and did not need to avert his face

and grovel in his presence. Loa raised his left hand—the one that held his leafy fan—to shade his eyes as he gazed down the street. He did not know what he was looking for nor why he was doing this, and the realization did not come to him even when he had made certain that nothing was different from usual; actually it was an unrecognized feeling of unrest which had stirred a faint desire that to-day something should be different. Loa could not analyse nor recognize his emotions. He was a god, and always had been.

His brother the sun had now come tardily to recognize the fact, as he sometimes did, and had drawn a veil of dilatory cloud over his face. The tribute was gratifying, and Loa did not need to shade his eyes any longer.

'Ha!' he said, pleased with his power, and he turned, immense in his dignity, and walked back to his house at the end of the street.

Indeharu and Vira made a half circle so as to keep behind him and followed him back, as they had followed him out. Indeharu's back was bent with age, but even if it had not been he would have bent it and walked with a stoop, just as did young Vira; it was right and proper to walk with humility when attending upon the god. Loa was free for the moment of the unrest which had manifested itself earlier. His right hand swung his iron battle-axe, and his iron collars and bracelets jangled as he strode along, his naked toes gripping the thin and drying mud of the street. Lanu was playing in the small open space in front of Loa's house and came running up with a smile; Lanu could face the god, for Lanu was a god too, Loa's child. There were other children, with their mothers in the banana groves or behind the house, but they were not gods. Lanu was the firstborn. Although that was not why he was a god, it was probably the reason why Loa had been fond of him at his birth, before the birth of children became a commonplace, and had played with him and petted him and treated him with so much condescension and fondness that clearly he could not be a mortal who must abase himself in the god's presence, and consequently he had never been trained into abasement.

Loa dropped his battle-axe and fan, and caught Lanu under the armpits and swung him up into the air kicking and squealing with delight, holding him there for long pleasurable seconds before setting him on his feet again. Loa unclasped his leopard skin from about

his throat and put it over the boy's shoulders, to Lanu's immense pleasure. The boy clasped the forelegs round his neck with the brooch, draped the skin over his left shoulder, and strutted off, very pleased with himself, while Loa followed him fondly with his gaze. Even a god could love his son.

Loa picked up his battle-axe and fan, and seated himself on his stool; the latter was made merely of three curving branches, polished, and bound together with cane fibre into a distorted tripod. To sit on it at all called for a careful placing of the fleshy parts; to sit on it for long called for constant shifting of them, but it was more dignified than squatting on one's heels—that was what men and women did—and the stool by raising the body above the ground kept it out of the way of ants and other creeping creatures. Indeharu and Vira squatted before him, and Loa swept the flies from himself with his fan and prepared himself to listen to their morning report.

'Uledi dies,' said Vira; as much the younger man it was his place to speak first.

'She dies?' asked Loa.

'She does indeed. Now her head is drawn back. There is foam on her lips. Every hour the poison shakes her. Her arms and legs go stiff as she struggles with it, stiff like tree trunks, although she tosses about in her battle with the poison, and she cries out with words that mean nothing. Then once more she ceases to struggle, and lies sleeping again. She has slept since last there was yellow water in the river.'

'I know that,' said Loa.

'There is no flesh on her bones, and now there are sores on her skin.'

'Yes,' said Loa, rubbing his chin.

This trouble was not infrequent in the town. For no apparent reason some individual, man, woman, or child, would suddenly become somnolent, sleeping continuously except when roused to take food. Sometimes they slept themselves straight into death; sometimes, as in Uledi's case, they died more violently, but whichever way it was they died once they began to sleep, sometimes in a short time, sometimes in a long time.

'It is a deadly poison,' commented Indeharu.

'Yes,' said Loa again.

Life could not end except by human agency. Somebody must be poisoning Uledi, and Loa's heavy face was contorted into a frown as he wrestled with the problem. Face after face flitted across the field of his mental vision, but not one seemed to be connected with the poisoning of Uledi. Soon he abandoned his review of the population of the town. Seven hundred people lived in it; he did not know how many, nor did his language contain words for the numeral, but he knew it would take too long to think about every one of them. The bones, the five slender rib bones which lay in his house, would tell him if he asked them.

'Soli is her mother's brother's son,' said Vira.

That was a very special relationship, conferring particular privileges in the matter of inheritance, and might supply a motive. Loa for a moment thought the problem solved, but Vira and Indeharu were not looking at each other, and his instincts, the sensitive instincts of an uneducated man, told him there was something suspicious in the atmosphere. He did not have to follow along the path of deduction and logic, from the fact that Indeharu and Vira were carefully refraining from exchanging glances, to the fact that their expressions were unnaturally composed, and then on to the fact that Vira bore an old grudge against Soli—something to do with a haunch of goat over which they had quarrelled—and from that to his knowledge of Indeharu's enmity towards Soli. It had never even occurred to him that this enmity issued from the old man's fear of a possible young rival. Loa's instincts leaped all the gaps, without any painful building of bridges, and warned him that he, he, the god, was being subjected to influence, an indirect influence and therefore one to be suspected.

'Soli is Uledi's mother's brother's son,' he said, his voice as expressionless as the other's features. 'We know that, then.'

The slight discomposure apparent in the faces of his two councillors told him that his instincts had been right; Indeharu and Vira were disappointed. He was confirmed in his decision to take no immediate action against Soli.

'The men are felling more trees,' said Indeharu, changing the subject, and pointing into the forest towards the area where the tree felling was in progress.

'They may do so,' said Loa. As far back as his memory could go—

Loa had been king and god since he was a little boy younger than Lanu—Indeharu had managed the economic details of the town's life satisfactorily. A forest tract had to be cleared two years in advance of the time when the plantain crop sown in the clearing began to fruit, and it was a prodigious effort to make such plans. Loa never troubled himself with them. Yet thinking about the plantain crop reminded him he was hungry, and he raised his voice.

'Musini!' he called. 'Bring me food.'

'I hear you,' replied Musini from behind the house; she had a shrill voice with an edge to it.

'When the trees are down,' went on Indeharu, 'Tolo will build a house. His father Linisinu and his father's brothers will help him.'

'Where will the house be?' asked Loa, and as Indeharu began to reply Musini came with her wooden bowl of food.

Loa looked at the contents with disappointment.

'Baked plantain!' he said, disgustedly.

'Baked plantain with oil. Precious oil,' said Musini, sharply. There was never enough oil in the town, the oil palms being too sparing of their produce. 'I have eaten no oil since the moon was full last. The oil is all for you.'

Loa put down his battle-axe and fan, took the bowl, and transferred a handful of the plantain soaked in oil to his mouth.

'Is it not good?' demanded Musini, aggressively. 'What better food can I provide for you than baked plantain and oil? Is it the heart of an elephant you would like? Or a savoury dish of the tripe of a young goat? When last was an elephant killed? No goat has borne a kid for two months.'

'Say no more,' said Loa, irritated. He had eaten elephant only three or four times in his twenty-five years of life; goat's tripe was perhaps his favourite dish, and Musini touched him on the raw by mentioning it—which was what she planned to do, being a bad-tempered shrew.

'Say no more!' she quoted back at him. 'Say no more! Then say no more when I bring you rich red oil upon your baked plantains. Say no more until an antelope is caught and we eat the roast flesh!'

'Be silent, woman!' shouted Loa, beside himself with rage. The thought of roast antelope was almost more than he could bear. He was on his feet now, brandishing the wooden bowl and actually

dancing with passion. Musini saw the look in his face and was frightened.

'Your servant is silent,' she said hastily, and turned to go. Yet even then before she was out of earshot she was grumbling again.

Musini was Lanu's mother, Loa's first and chief wife, and had been associated with Loa since his childhood. She did not prostrate herself before him except on occasions of high ceremonial, because little by little through the years ceremony between the two of them had lapsed as a matter of practical convenience. But her habit of scolding at Loa, of goading him to exasperation, had another origin. She wanted to assert herself, and she felt as if she did not want to live if she did not. She infuriated Loa as a means of self-expression, as an artist paints or a musician composes. Besides, she was drawn to this course of action by a subtle lure, by the indescribable temptation of danger. She risked her life every time she angered Loa. There was a fearful pleasure in coming as near to destruction as possible and then withdrawing just in time. Shuddering fear tempted her like a drug.

Loa took another mouthful of baked plantain with growing distaste, his mind running on devious tracks. That unrest which had set him gazing down the street, which had brought him to his feet at Musini's gibes, was a symptom—although he did not express it so to himself—of his hunger for meat, rich meat, full of proteins and fats and mineral salts. The African forest was niggardly of its meat supply; of all the animals domesticated by man the goat was the only one able to live there, and even the goat did not thrive; a high mortality among the town's herd made goat's flesh a rarity. The plantain was the staple food, which ironically the forest allowed to be produced in utter abundance with almost no effort. A space had only to be cleared in the forest, the suckers planted, and eighteen months later there was a dense grove of plantain trees, each bearing its huge hand of fruit. The crop was never known to fail and there was no known limit to its production. Manioc was almost as easily grown; the work of clearing had to be rather more thorough, the planting was rather more arduous, but with ample virgin soil for the growth a crop was assured in return for small labour. Manioc and plantains; the forest gave these generously, so that there were always bananas and tapioca, tapioca and bananas, on which a man

could live. Tapioca and bananas meant a continuous diet of starch; the oil palm lived only scantily and precariously here on the verge of the inner plateau of Africa, and its rich orange-coloured oil, so generous of fat, was almost as great a rarity as goat's flesh.

The forest provided almost no meat. The rare forest antelope sometimes fell into a pitfall or succumbed to a fortunate arrow to provide an ounce or two of meat for each of those entitled to a share; at intervals of years an elephant fell into a similar trap. That was an occasion always to be remembered, when every man, woman and child in the town would have five or ten pounds of meat apiece, to be eaten in a wild orgy that same day before corruption could set in. Monkeys lived in the tree tops two hundred feet overhead; it was more unusual to hit a monkey with an arrow than an antelope, and it was just as rare for an arrow to find its way through the tangled branches and creepers to hit a parrot. The leopard lived among the tree tops, and was almost as exclusively arboreal as the monkeys which were its prey; its meat had an unpleasant taste even for a meat-starved man, and it was so ferocious a fighter when wounded that its skin was the one fit garment for Loa the god. Snakes could be eaten, and frogs could sometimes be caught in the streams, but never in sufficient quantity to be taken into consideration in the problem of meat supply. The best meat the forest afforded walked on two legs; the African forest was one of the few places in the world where cannibalism was an economic necessity, where it was indulged in to appease an irresistible, an insatiable hunger for meat.

Loa was thinking that his late father, Nasa (whose name, seeing that he was dead, could be pronounced by Loa alone), was in need of a new attendant. It was some considerable time since anyone had been sent to serve Nasa, and it might be fitting that Musini the mother of Lanu should be dispatched on that mission; certainly it would convey honour to Nasa. Musini could be put in a wooden pen for three days; inactivity for that length of time was desirable to make sure that the meat would be in good condition. Then she could be sent to attend upon Nasa, either by quiet strangulation or by a more ceremonial beheading with Loa's battle-axe—either way would do, for it was not a point of great importance—and then there would be smoking joints to eat, meat in which a man could

set his teeth, meat to distend a belly that starved on bananas and tapioca. And the irritation of Musini's constant scolding would cease then, too.

Loa was not thinking about this logically for two very good reasons. He had never been under the necessity of thinking logically, and he was handicapped by his language, which with its clumsy complexities of construction and its total want of abstract terms was not an instrument adapted to argument or for the conveyance of more than the simplest ideas. His mind was much more a meeting ground for conveying impulses, which were checked just then by what Indeharu had to say.

'Last night the moon was dark,' said Indeharu. 'The river waits for you.'

Loa stuffed the last handful of baked plantain into his mouth and swallowed it down. He put the bowl to his lips and tilted it to allow the last of the rich oil to trickle between them. He set down the bowl and called to Lanu, who came running from behind the house, trailing the leopard skin behind him.

'Will you come to the river?' asked Loa.

'The river! The river!' said Lanu, delighted.

He was ready to start at once, with all the eager impetuosity of childhood, but first there were preparations to be made. Indeharu and Vira turned to shout down the street, proclaiming the fact that Loa was about to go to the river. A few people came out from the houses, women with children dragging at them, Litti the worker in iron, an old man or two, some marriageable girls. Indeharu counted them on his fingers. There had to be four hands of people present for the ceremony to be valid, and it took a few moments to complete the necessary total, as some young men came in from the outskirts of the town, while Loa coaxed Lanu into returning the leopard skin cloak and clasped it about his neck again. Indeharu counted up on his fingers again, and shot a significant look at Loa.

'We go,' said Loa.

Towards the river lay the abandoned clearings of the past centuries; at the present time the manioc and banana gardens of the town lay on the side of the town away from the river. So at first the path lay through a thick belt of felled trees, only now beginning to crumble into their native earth again. In the forest there was

always going on a silent life and death struggle for light and air, even for rain. Every plant dependent on these three—as was every one except the funguses—pushed and aspired and strove to out-top its neighbours, to gain elbow room where it could spread out in the life-giving light and air. In the virgin forest the victors in the struggle were the trees, the vast kings of the vegetable kingdom, two hundred feet tall, each ruling the little area around it so completely that nothing could grow beneath them save the funguses which flourished in the deep bed of rotting vegetable matter out of which they rose. The kings had their hangers-on, their parasites, the creepers and vines which the trees themselves lifted towards the sky. These shamelessly made use of the trees in their dignity; rooted in the earth below they swarmed up the unresisting trunks in long slender ropes, up to the topmost branches, by which they leaped from tree to tree, renewing with each other at this height the same struggle for light and air; the successful ones, hundreds of yards long, intertwining in a wild cat's cradle of loops and festoons which bound the tallest trees together and repressed the aspirations of the smaller trees striving to push through.

But where there was a clearing the scene changed. If a big tree paid the penalty for its very success by being selected to be struck by lightning, or if it had died of old age, or if a forest fire had killed trees over a larger area, and more especially where man had cut down trees for his own purposes, light and air could penetrate to earth level, and the lowly plants had their opportunity which they grasped with feverish abandon. The clearing became a battle-ground of vegetation, a free-for-all wherein every green thing competed for the sunlight, until in a short time, measured in days rather than in weeks, the earth was covered shoulder-high by a tangle of vegetation through which no man could force his way without cutting a path with axe or sword. For months, for years, the lowly plants had their way, dominating the clearing; but steadily the sapling trees forced their way through to climb above and to pre-empt for themselves the vital light. It would be a long struggle, but as the years passed the trees would assert their mastery more and more forcibly; the undergrowth would die away, the fallen trees would rot to powder, and in the end the clearing would be indistinguishable from the rest of the forest, silent and dark.

The abandoned clearings through which led the path to the river were some years old now in their present existence, and at their densest in consequence. The felled trees lay in a frightful tangle, and over them and about them grew the undergrowth; in the four weeks since last that path had been trodden the feverish growth had covered it completely, so that Vira and the young men had to hack and slash their way through. Sometimes the path lay along fallen tree trunks, slippery with lichens; it wound about between jagged branches whose solidity was disguised by greenery as a trap for an unwary person who might try to push through. Old Indeharu toiled and stumbled along on his stiff legs behind the advanced party, and immediately in front of Loa; his whitening head was on a level with Loa's chin. On the dark bronze of his back the sweat ran in great drops like a small cascade of those incredibly rare and precious glass beads of which the town possessed a dozen or two. The sweat drops coursed down Indeharu's bony back until they lost themselves in his loin girdle; the latter was of bark cloth and was as wet as if it had been dipped in water, so that what with the sweat and Indeharu's exertions it bade fair to disintegrate. Loa himself, half Indeharu's age and twice his strength, felt the burden of his leopard-skin cloak; in this undergrowth, with the sun blazing down upon it, the heat and the humidity were intensified, and the flies bit and annoyed with unusual vigour, while bare feet, however horny and insensitive, were inevitably scratched and cut as they were dragged through the tangled vegetation.

Loa was conscious of all these irritations—no one could not be—but he endured them without debate, for debate was something he was unused to. This was the world as it had always been and as it always would be. His erring sister was wandering again, and when she wandered she had to be recalled, in the same way as an itch had to be scratched.

Now they were through the overgrown clearing, and into the forest, the undisturbed forest, into the twilight and the silence. Huge tree trunks emerged from the spongy leafmould, spaced out with almost mathematical regularity by the relentless laws of nature. They soared upwards without change or relief (save for the leafless stems of the vines) until two hundred feet overhead they burst suddenly into branches and foliage, making a thick roof through

which no direct light could penetrate. Up there lived the monkeys and the birds, and the sun shone, and the rain fell. To be down here in the darkness—for inevitably here it was too dark for any vegetation to grow—was to be inside the crust of the world, cut off from the exterior. Yet within the forest Loa could relax and feel at home. The forest was his brother, just as the sun was his brother and the moon was his sister, and Loa had a feeling that the forest was a kindly, friendly brother. The forest suited his temperament or his physique, and he lengthened his stride until he trod on the heels of Indeharu hobbling along in front of him. Loa poked him in the ribs with the end of his battle-axe as a further reminder to quicken his step. Indeharu was very old, with stores of knowledge as a representative of an almost obliterated generation, but he was just an old man, and Loa had no regard for his feelings.

In the forest here there was no hindrance to travel save for the bogginess underfoot; the broad spaces between the tree trunks allowed of easy walking in any direction. So much so that it was the easiest thing in the world to lose oneself in the forest. Without any landmarks, without any sight of the sun, the moment a man lost his sense of direction in the forest he lost everything. He might wander for days, for weeks and months, seeing nothing but tree trunks around him and the sombre green roof overhead. There were one or two people in the town who had actually had this experience, and who had been guided home again after a vast passage of time by blind chance and great good fortune. There had been plenty of others who had gone forth on some trifling expedition and who had never returned. They had been lost in the forest. Or they had been trapped by the little men.

This route to the river was as clearly defined as anything could be in the forest. Through the soggy leafmould there wound a faint depression, which a keen eye could detect as a footpath, and the trees on either side displayed frequent cuts and wounds—Loa made a few new ones himself as he walked along, casual chops with his battle-axe that sliced into the bark of the trees, making a mark that would endure for several months until the insects altered its shape so that it did not reveal the human agency that caused it, and until the moss and lichens grew over it and concealed it again.

The disadvantage about a well-marked path was that the little

men would make use of it for their own purposes. They would place poisoned skewers of wood under the leafmould, on which a man might tread; if he did then very probably he would be dead in half an hour, for the little men to feast on him. And they would dig pits and place poisoned stakes in them, roofing the pits over with a frail covering disguised by leafmould, which would give way under the foot either of an antelope or a man. Vira and the young men ahead were scanning carefully every yard of the path, and two of them had strung their bows and fitted broad-headed arrows to the strings, ready to draw and loose at a moment's notice should a little man or a little woman, or any other game, expose itself within range.

And now the trees suddenly began to be farther apart, the leaf-mould underfoot suddenly became firmer, and the path took a steeply upward slope. For a few moments it was a steep climb. The forest ended abruptly here, where the soil changed to naked rock on which even in that lush atmosphere nothing could grow. They were out of the forest and under the sky, and a few more strides took them to the top of the rock, looking over the vast river. Loa did not like this. He was inclined to flinch a little as he emerged from the forest. The sky was his brother, just as was the forest, but an unfriendly brother, a frightening brother. He did not like great spaces; they affected him as some people are affected by great heights. Except here on the river bank, he never looked out over great distances. The town street was less than a hundred yards long, and that was the next widest horizon he knew; in the forest the trees were close on every hand, and that was where he felt at home. Here on this pinnacle of rock the sky was enormous and incredibly distant.

And the river! A full mile it stretched from bank to bank, the pinnacle of rock, constituting the bluff at the outside curve of a shallow beach, commanded views of five and ten miles upstream and down—terrifying distances. Except at this outcrop of rock the forest came to the water's very edge; indeed, so great was the pressure for light and air that on the river banks the trees grew out almost horizontally, straining out over the water to escape from the shadow of their mightier neighbours, leading a brief precarious life until flood and erosion cut the soil from their roots and they fell into the water. One could never look at the river for long without