

"VAN HUNKS & THE DEVIL"

OF

"THE TABLECLOTH"

An ancient legend about Table Mountain states that a certain Dutchman by name Van Hunks periodically holds a smoking contest with the Devil on top of the Mountain, thus causing the cloud which spreads over the top like a vast tablecloth. This is usually accompanied by a violent wind which often prevents ships from entering the harbour and sometimes causes havoc in the city below. This legend is the theme of Albert Coates's "Fantasy Folk Opera".

ACT 1.

In the year 1752 a Dutch privateer of chivalrous inclinations, Hendrik Van Hunks, saves from capture by pirates an English ship whose master, Captain Fitzroy, confides to his rescuer that he has on board a lady of high rank, the Lady Isabella of the Court of Holland, who is roaming the world in search of her lost husband, a nobleman named Hendrik Van Hunks who some 20 years earlier had quarrelled with the Prince of the Netherlands through having secretly married Isabella. In a duel Van Hunks had wounded the Prince to whom he owed allegiance; he had then disappeared and had not been heard of since. Van Hunks the privateer, who had not disclosed his identity to Captain Fitzroy, recognises himself in the story. He dons his former Dutch uniform, in which he is at once recognised by the Lady Isabella who throws herself into his arms. But her son who is accompanying her is horrified to discover that his father is a "buccaneer" and drags his mother away. At this moment a seaman enters with a message that a storm is brewing, and Van Hunks suggests that Captain Fitzroy should

regain his ship, leaving the wounded in the care of Isabella.

In the storm both ships are in distress. Weird voices seem to emerge from the winds, and Van Hunks suspects that they must be near the Cape, and in a zone reputed to be haunted by evil creatures capable of wreaking dire ill on voyagers. Gravely perturbed for the fate of the ships he exclaims to his first officer: "I would gladly wager a pipe with the Devil himself if thereby I could bring both ships safely into port." To this an unknown voice replies: "Would you indeed?" - and a figure of strange mien appears out of the pitch darkness, promising to guide the vessels into port for conditions that shall be agreed upon later. The ships thus arrive in Table Bay, their crews joyfully singing the sea shanty of Van Hunks.

#### ACT. II.

SCENE 1. Three years have passed, and the wedding celebrations of "Johanna" and Van Hunks' son, long reconciled to his father, are about to begin. Captain Fitzroy brings precious gifts, the Dominee conducts the ceremony, and the scene ends with dancing and merry-making.

SCENE II At the end of the day Isabella and Van Hunks are left alone. Their happiness is complete. The strange manner of their rescue from the storm is an almost forgotten episode of the past, and they look forward to a life of peace and contentment in this delightful land. Van Hunks sings to himself as he works on a model of his ship. But from the shadows emerges the mysterious Stranger, who has waited until this moment to claim his part of the bargain. Van Hunks wagered to smoke a pipe with the Devil? - Good, that shall be the price for the Stranger's intervention. Van Hunks shall hold a smoking contest with the Devil on the top of Table Mountain, and the loser shall remain for ever the guest of the victor!

ACT III.

The top of Table Mountain is weird and desolate in the moonlight. Van Hunks finds the Stranger himself standing mockingly before him. A table and chairs are borne in by imps, pipes are produced, the contest begins. Van Hunks is resolved not to lose hope - he will strive to defeat this sinister adversary with the same courage as he has defeated many a foe at sea. Smoke swirls from their pipes and engulfs them, spreading over the surface of the mountain. Disconcerted by Van Hunks' perseverance, the Stranger seeks means by which to undermine his resolution. Evil forces come into play, rocks move, trolls gyrate, the winds rage, but Van Hunks continues to smoke. Other apparitions loom in the mist, fair women dance, Isabella herself appears as she was long ago. For a moment Van Hunks is taken aback, he drops his pipe to seize his telescope. The Stranger, overjoyed, cannot resist looking through the other end of the telescope and Van Hunks is brought to his senses. He quickly picks up his pipe and continues to smoke. The mountain is now almost covered. The sinister Stranger loses his head, the apparitions he has conjured up change shape, the beautiful women become ghastly hags, frightful monsters converge upon Van Hunks as if to tear him to pieces. Van Hunks jumps up abruptly and fires his pistol at the horde of demons. They vanish, leaving the defeated Stranger grovelling and feeling very sick and a moment later he is hauled off to the Devil's Peak by imps who mockingly tell him that there he will remain imprisoned until the next contest. A voice from the direction of the Lion's Head cries that the Stranger deserves his fate for trying to steal from Van Hunks his merited victory. In the light of early dawn other voices - human voices - are heard calling Van Hunks; Young Hendrik (his son) the Dominoo and his friends

have climbed the mountain in search of him and are overjoyed to find him alive. As they start to descend there is a plaintive cry from the Devil's Peak, "When the Crescent Moon shines in the evening sky we will renew our contest." But an answering voice resounds from Lion's Head: "Fear nothing, I will see fair play." Van Hunks, leaving the mountain top last of all, bows in gratitude to Lion's Head, waves his hat gaily towards Devil's Peak and steps forth joyfully singing his old "sea-shanty" fully prepared for his next encounter with the Devil.

And so periodically they meet to this day, the Devil striving desperately to out-smoke Van Hunks, Van Hunks as regularly out-smoking the Devil. Thus the winds rage and "the Tablecloth" is frequently spread, but it as surely vanishes with Van Hunks's victory, and so the city at the foot of the Mountain is spared the fate that would befall it by being totally engulfed if ever the Devil succeeded in having his way.

P.D.