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Kirth Gersen: The Other Demon Prince

By Terry Dowling

"When I was small, my home was destroyed, and all my kin – except for my grandfather. Even then I knew the course of my life was arranged. I knew that I would one by one kill the five men who had conducted the raid. This has been my life, I have no other. I am not evil; I'm beyond good and evil."

– Kirth Gersen, *The Killing Machine* (p.116)

He was no more "wrong" than a shark approaching a school of cod. Life's nature is to live, and he had been nurtured to live as he had to live – by seeking prey.

– Cordwainer Smith, "Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons"

"I am often described as an evil man, and while I do not dispute the label, I have not taken the stricture to heart. Evil is a vector quality, operative only in the direction of the vector, and often acts which incur the most censure do singularly small harm, and often benefit, to the people concerned"

– Viole Falushe, *The Palace of Love* (p.67)

"Do you know how you caught me, Will?"

"Goodbye, Dr Lecter, you can leave messages for me at the number on the file." Graham walked away.

"Do you know how you caught me?"

Graham was out of Lecter's sight now and he walked faster towards the far steel door.

"The reason you caught me is that we are just alike," was the last thing Graham heard as the steel door closed behind him.

– Thomas Harris, *Red Dragon*

The five novels of Jack Vance's Demon Princes cycle are possibly unique, not only in science fiction but in literature in the mainstream as well. Rarely do we find such a sustained treatment of one man's revenge against a number of masterful and dynamic enemies – a revenge taken well after the emotional drive for such a vendetta has waned and the quest has become one governed by the abstracts and the principles of the cause.

Kirth Gersen has to work at being an avenger. Much of his often unnerving ruthlessness comes from the nature of his training; the conditioning and automatic disciplines encouraged by his grandfather, Rolf. When he speaks, he sounds formidable and obsessed, though the sensitive reader quickly realises that most of the statements of purpose are for Gersen's own benefit, reminders of intent. Often we see other sides to Gersen's nature, his humanitarianism, his compassion, his generosity, but come to recognise how much easier it is for Gersen to slip into the single-minded routines of his training than to contend with impulses that would invariably sway him from his task.

Well acquainted with the results of too much deliberation and analysis, the ineffectiveness that comes from the most well-meaning of communities attempting to organise a practical judicial system, Gersen does not try to defend the morality of his position. He means to act, not merely debate the issues. Thus, when Alusz Iphigenia derides his seeming callousness and obsessive behaviour, asking for reasonable justifications, Gersen can only reply: "If I involve myself with words and harangues, I trap myself; I become futile" (PL/7).*

He must also harden himself against his own more humane qualities, and – more significantly – against what is clearly a grudging admiration for the Demon Princes themselves, each of whom is an individual who has aspired beyond and transcended the commonalty.

We can assume, though we do not have a clear date for the events in *The Book of Dreams*, that the effective "hunt" phase of Kirth Gersen's vendetta spans approximately five years. Gersen is 34 years old when he actively begins his campaign against the Demon Princes. Following the new date reckoning that has the year 2000 A.D. as the year "0" he gains his first lead on Attel Malagate the Woe at Smade's Tavern in July 1524 (3524 by our reckoning), when the most remarkable coincidence of his being on Smade's planet at just the right time embroils him in one of the key schemes of Malagate. (Though this is not as much of a coincidence as one might at first think. The Demon Princes previously used Smade's Tavern as neutral ground for their momentous meeting in 1500 – the year following their collaboration for the fateful Mount Pleasant raid – at which they defined the various areas of interest. It is not unlikely that at least one of them should use its secluded facilities again.)

Gersen's quest after Kokor Hekkus begins in the April of the following year, 1525, from a clue furnished by the IPCC. His pursuit of Viole Falushe commences in July of 1526 (from information in a newspaper article), and his search for Lens Larque takes place later that year when he makes use of a piece of information possibly available to him since his boyhood, the name of the spaceship used by Larque at the Mount Pleasant raid. It seems most likely that the hunt for Howard Alan Treesong occurs within the next year, with Gersen again utilising information passed on to him by an official of the IPCC, and another piece of good luck – the

chance arrival of a photograph of Treesong, a not so unlikely event given that Gersen works through a large circulation publication which would, by its nature, invite such items.

Now that Jack Vance has brought the Demon Princes saga to its close, it is possible to discover in the – we can assume – deliberate structuring of the series a number of fascinating facts. It is no coincidence that Attel Malagate is the first Demon Prince to fall prey to the avenging Gersen; no coincidence that Howard Alan Treesong is the last. The order in which the five Princes are tracked down and dispatched (and indeed the natures of the Princes themselves) are part of a carefully arranged progression designed to confront the sensitive reader with the moral dilemma facing Gersen in his search for vengeance. What the alert reader will notice is that Gersen begins to identify more and more with the motivations and drives of his foes. Across the five books we see a subtle transformation as his ruthless and unswerving quest brings out the hidden depths of his personality and reveals that he is more akin to the Demon Princes than he can afford to acknowledge. We as readers can see the resemblance; Vance gives ample clues in Gersen's vacillations and self-doubts, his moments of reflection and self-reproach.

With each normal, the pattern firms up – the avenger is being changed by his quest. The despatch of the first two Princes makes detachment comparatively easy, for Attel Malagate is a nonhuman and Kokor Hekkus has become unhuman. We feel twinges of sympathy, even admiration, for these two, but we can keep sufficient distance for Gersen's self-appointed vocation to remain acceptable. With Viole Falushe, however, Gersen meets an individual who has overcome childhood vicissitudes and deprivations as great (subjectively) as his own, and who is an attractive, dynamic and well-disciplined personality – a peer as much as an enemy.

The portrayal of Falushe confirms the views of some of Gersen's contemporaries that these individuals are "typified by grandeur"; we can even accept that they may be "constructive geniuses motivated not by malice, perversity, greed or misanthropy, but by violent inner purposes, which are for the most part shrouded and obscure". (KM/18). Such a glowing description is no less true than the outright condemnation of these men as mere criminals. One man's "perversity", after all, can be another's "violent inner purpose." Conceivably, had Gersen not suffered personally at the hands of the five, he may have grown to manhood finding these "evil men" to be to be a "source of fascination" (F/51), individuals to be feared but also admired and even envied.

It can be said, then, that Gersen's involvement with Viole Falushe marks a crossover point in the series. Two novels lie before, two yet remain; this is the key central novel in which the counter-movement at work in the cycle is fully revealed. The most cold and detached of the Princes have been dealt with, the most accessible and conventional (in terms of their schemes) yet remain. To be sure, Howard Alan Treesong's paramount scheme – to rule the civilised universe – is the most conventional design of the lot (megalomania being least an orthodox compulsion) but his amazing and tantalisingly unexplained multiple personality shows him to be as bizarre as the nonhuman Malagate and unhuman Hekkus.

This is an interesting ploy used by Vance; it makes Treesong both sad and beautiful, a possibly psychotic individual blessed and cursed with an incredible schizophrenic condition reminiscent of known clinical cases (such as that chronicled

in the book *Sybil*). If Treesong is insane then he deserves treatment and Gersen is wrong to press for his death; if he is sane, then he has one of the most curious power bases ever devised – a corporate self which recalls Herbert's God Emperor, Leto II, and whose various personality strands brook no vacillation, no departure from the task chosen by and for the whole. It makes for a most tragic figure, and yet all of the Princes become tragic figures, as we shall see. Perhaps there are few things more compellingly tragic than dynamic individuals who have risen from the position of underdog and outsider and who are thwarted before their dreams are fulfilled.

It is in this third adventure that there occurs a retrospective sympathy for all the Princes. With the thoroughly human Falushe, it is as if a floodgate has broken and the reader can suddenly feel free to cast aside his cautious detachment (an echo of Gersen's own) and realign his earlier sentiments. Vance has used Falushe as a foil for Gersen, a better reflecting glass than any of the others could have been.

Then, with the fourth Prince, we find Gersen actually carrying out Lens Larque's amazing project for reasons that are precisely the same as Larque's – a desire for revenge against the effete aristocracy of a neighbouring world. The pursuit of the final Prince brings Gersen to appreciate to what extent he has diminished the universe by eliminating individuals such as these. What an unexpected and alarming impasse it is to be in, to destroy these five individuals of style and imagination, these overreachers and transcendents, and to be left surrounded by decent respectable folk with infinite hypocrisies and double standards, their indecisiveness, their humdrum longings and the lack of cosmopolitan imagination.

Once the signs have been translated correctly by the reader, it is interesting to consider the separate hunts again and trace this shift of attitude across the five novels.

STAR KING: 1964

...the career of Malagate is not one which the folk of Ghnarumen would care to emulate. They may be right, they may be wrong. It is my prerogative to organise my own style of life. As you know, the Star Kings are strongly competitive...I plan to bring here folk of my race, to father a world and a people superior to both men and the people of Ghnarumen. This was my hope, which you will not understand, for there can be no such understanding between your race and mine."

– Attel Malagate (*Star King*, p.155)

In *Star King*, the establishing novel of the series, the trend is not yet altogether clear, though clues can be found. By making Malagate a member of a highly competitive race of nonhuman mimics whose main racial imperative is to excel and outdo, Vance is able to keep his hero at a classic remove from his quarry. This distancing is made easier by giving us a continual stream of reports of Malagate's black deeds (another standard technique: the reported evil), and by surrounding the Star King with an entourage of vicious grotesques and heavies – Beauty Dasce, Sivij Suthiro, and Tristano, though in Suthiro's case we are cautioned by the very realisation which exacerbates Gersen's dilemma. Suthiro is a Sarkoy, following the ethos of his vicious

and highly-specialised planetary sub-type on Sarkovy. He answers Gersen's charge of being an evil man with: "I am a man; I am a Sarkoy" (SK/98), a comment tantamount to saying: Do not judge; this is normal conduct for me!

It is this relativity of outlook that tempers Gersen's absolute justice from the start. He kills Suthiro because this man has taken his cruel kind of "normal" beyond Sarkovy and become one of Malagate's instruments against him, not simply because of Suthiro's "evil" racial dispositions. Later, in *The Palace of Love*, we see Gersen on Sarkovy, passively abiding by its ways as a visitor, not interfering in matters of local justice (at least not directly), however horrific and reprehensible.

Thus, we learn that Gersen is an ethical pragmatist: he does not support some all-embracing moral position and has never sought to do so. (This, of course, makes the single-minded morality of his quest for vengeance all the more contradictory.) Furthermore, Gersen is soon to discover that it is impossible to seek a justice for every wrong; in the third Demon Princes novel, he contemplates buying the Sabran tapestry factories to free the female slaves, then realises the futility of such a gesture:

What then? he asked himself. Sabra tapestries were in demand. New factories would be established, new slaves imported. A year later all would be as before. (PL/40)

Star King also provides insight into Kirth Gersen's training and into the formidable moral parameters with which he has been conditioned and by which he will generally strive to operate in the succeeding books. His grandfather and mentor, Rolf Marr Gersen, tells Kirth: "You will have useful work: the destruction of evil men" (SK/27), and this mission is later re-affirmed in a letter left for Kirth on the old man's death. In this letter, the fundamental dilemma of the whole cycle is presented:

What is an evil man? The man is evil who coerces obedience to his private ends, destroys beauty, produces pain, extinguishes life.... Five pirate captains destroyed certain lives and enslaved others who were precious to us. Revenge is not an ignoble motive when it works to a productive end. (SK/29)

This is almost some latter-day restatement of Francis Bacon's dictum that "revenge is a kind of wild justice." In the essentially lawless universe of the Oikumene, where the spaceship has made crime such an easy and lucrative pastime, and law-enforcement agencies are at a severe disadvantage, Bacon's saying takes on a new immediacy, becoming a simple and direct guideline which recalls the ruthlessness of "an eye for an eye." While enlightened law-codes and humanitarian corrective techniques (such as personality modification) do exist, one cannot afford too many niceties of conscience when at any time pirates and slavers can drop from space and wipe out entire communities. Given the isolated and diverse nature of the settled worlds, there must be many precedents for "individual" justice, lynch-law, and vigilante self-righteousness.

Once this demographic background is understood, Gersen's position becomes more than just an allowable expedient: it becomes the only appropriate response to

a difficult and insoluble problem. Gersen sets out to prey on the predator, hunting the hunter on his own terms.

But to what extent is Gersen doing this merely because it is the easiest and least complicated course of action? When Gersen catches up with Malagate's ex-lieutenant, Parsifal Pankarow, and finds him to be a respectable family man (by local standards), we cannot expect Gersen to be immune to Pankarow's pleas, neither should we be surprised when he finally disregards them. Pankarow may be correct when he says: "Now I lead a blameless life; I injure no-one" (SK/31), but it is expedient that Gersen kill him lest Pankarow alert Malagate that someone is on his trail. Personality modification is probably not available at Brinktown, though Gersen does not think to consider taking Pankarow with him, or drugging him. Gersen is still very much the product of his training, the determined simplistic avenger who does not yet have enough individual cases to temper his justice. It is chilling, nonetheless, when Gersen announces his reasons for slaying the man, more so because the words somehow lack conviction, a formula uttered to whitewash his deed:

"I will kill you.... I have made you my enemy; furthermore, you deserve to die a hundred times over." (SK/31)

At least there is compassion from Gersen when he pretends that the fatal dose of poison is merely a soporific, saying: "You will sleep until you see me again" (SK/31).

This means that the groundwork for undercutting his grandfather's training is there from the beginning. It requires great effort for Gersen to play out his chosen role. He can see how relative, circumstantial and unwitting an individual's involvement in evil deeds can be, frequently a matter of chance and upbringing rather than choice or malice. In a universe where one can be born like Sivij Suthiro or Husse Bugold into a cruel and violent social ethos, one must watch the inclination to seek moral absolutes.

Later, in the final novel of the series, the ubiquitous Baron Bodissey encapsulates a truth well known to Gersen even in this first book:

There is no single or supreme morality; there are many, each defining the mode by which a system of entities optimally interacts.... The ordinary man, during a day's time, may be obliged to act by the terms of a half dozen different moralities. Some of these acts, appropriate at one moment, may the next moment be considered obscene or opprobrious in terms of another morality. (BD/27)

Not only do these words help sanction Gersen's position (and such remarks are to be found in many of Vance's stories) but they also tend to excuse the behaviour of the Princes themselves.

What has to be remembered (something that cannot readily be made clear unless the reader is steeped in the nature of the universe being presented) is that these Demon Princes are creatures of their time, living in and near the lawless Beyond (as opposed to the civilised Oikumene) with all the self-serving ruthlessness and easy self-justification that the psychological profile of such a demographical condition has to generate. When these "evil men" prey on the civilised worlds of the

Oikumene, they are responding to a strong cultural tradition that must permeate the general consciousness of humanity among the stars at this time, something akin to the glamorisation of pirates and highwaymen by contemporaries well acquainted with the suffering and hardship these people have caused.

In absolute terms, it excuses nothing. But given the importance of a prevailing ethos, it explains much, for to a huge section of the interstellar population beyond the Pale, and even within the Oikumene itself, this is appropriate, familiar, and even sanctioned conduct. Their depredations amount to "free enterprise" thinking taken to the extreme; these individuals exist in a social framework which does not have the means to convince them they are wrong in imposing their wills on others, while, paradoxically, everything about that framework reaffirms their superiority.

The reason for making this point is to show that while Gersen is following an abstract course of retribution that is a praiseworthy act of practical justice (however harsh), he is also conforming to a precedent established (or at least developed and exploited) by the Demon Princes themselves. In being answerable to his own conscience, whether in killing a member of an alien humanity like Sivij Suthiro, or tricking the wily Darsh out of their Kotzash shares, Gersen is playing by their rules. He has no hesitation in telling Violen Falushe: "You are a monomaniac. I am the same" (PL/186), acknowledging at one level a basic affinity, but suggesting others even greater.

The crucial difference, of course, is that Gersen, though outside the law (above the law, his obsession would have him insist) is still working for the general good. Our quandary persists when we realise that as an intelligent man Gersen knows that other "arch-fiends and overlords of evil" (KM/18) will only rise to take the place of those he has eliminated; he has ultimately changed nothing but these particular manifestations of a prevailing status quo.

Moreover, this is part of a recurring observation made by Vance: that we cannot hope to achieve a wholly lawful society; that there must always be dissidents and predators existing outside the law, preying on the law-abiding elements, thereby helping to define and strengthen the values of that society.

Vance has created similar "beyond the Pale" situations in his early novel *Big Planet* and its sequel, *Showboat World*, and with his ready introduction of predatory elements such as the Starmenters in *Trullion: Alastor 2262* and ego-motivated opportunists like Byrrhis in *The Dogtown Tourist Agency*, Faurence Dacre in *Freitzke's Turn*, or Ramus Ymph in *Maske: Thaery*. Vance's villains are often stylish, dynamic individuals nursing the grandest schemes.

Since Gersen has trained with the Institute for five years, he must be aware that, in the overview, the actions of individuals like the Demon Princes have a beneficial effect upon society, bringing about the moral reactions and communal solidarity which are necessary to maintain a healthy cultural profile. When such views are made generally known (as they are in Gersen's day, coming as they do from the socially respectable Institute), Gersen's transformation is not so surprising an event at all. In a sense, it is only a matter of time, of exposure to the logic of day-to-day realities.

THE KILLING MACHINE: 1964

Kokor Hekkus was the most mercurial, fantastic, and inaccessible, the most daring and inventive. A few folk had reported their impressions: uniformly they found him affable, restless, unpredictable, and infected with what might have seemed utter madness, except for his demonstrable control and strength.

– *The Killing Machine*, p.6

The abiding irony, that with each Prince killed, Gersen comes more and more to operate at the level of self-fulfilment and individual purpose which typifies the five, emerges clearly in the second novel. It is in this book that Gersen outwits Hekkus brilliantly, taking both his vast fortune and his woman, then trapping the Prince with one of his own fiendish toys. Since this is still an early stage in our evolving picture of Gersen, the allusions to similarities between Hekkus and Gersen are presented at the humorous level as bittersweet irony. Alusz Iphigenia remarks after her release from Interchange, "You are almost as frightening as Kokor Hekkus" (KM/116), and Gersen himself later quips "I'm more the Kokor Hekkus type" (KM/115) in response to Alusz Iphigenia's allusion to Gersen's criminal nature in robbing Interchange.

When Hekkus is snared by the intricacies of his own game-playing, Gersen's summation displays a sympathetic awareness of Hekkus's position. He is able to grasp the nature of the subtle trap in which this long-lived creature has found himself.

He was blessed and cursed with his imagination. A single life was insufficient for him; he must drink at every spring, know every experience, live to all extremes. (KM/158)

This is not the One down, three to go! exultation of the self-righteous victor; these are the thoughts of a sensitive individual who can appreciate something of the compulsive world of the complex personality he has just destroyed.

Gersen has spoken to Hekkus in his various guises, has heard him refer to himself as "a much-maligned man, daring, enterprising, even reckless and certainly the most imaginative man alive, but in all aspects reasonable" (KM/77). Gersen would know, too, of Caril Carphen's book, *The Demon Princes*, which, since it refers to the five Princes in the present tense, must predate their deaths at Gersen's hands. He would be familiar with Carphen's remark that "each (Prince) considers the relationship between himself and the balance of humanity as no more than a confrontation of equals" (KM/18) – a comment which must have an interesting effect upon a personality as conditioned and competitive as Gersen's.

There is no doubting that after the spectacular events at Interchange, Gersen is well on the way to regarding his campaign against the Princes as being such a "confrontation of equals." For example, there is that moment after being trapped by Kokor Hekkus and taken to Interchange himself when we are told that:

He had all too long considered himself invulnerable, protected by destiny merely because of the force of his motivations. It was perhaps his single superstition: the solipsistic conviction that, one after

another, those five individuals who had destroyed Mount Pleasant must die at his hands. Persuaded by his faith, Gersen had neglected the common-sense act of killing Seuman Otwal and had suffered the consequences.

He must rearrange his patterns of thinking. He had been complacent, doctrinaire, didactic in his approach. He had conducted himself as if the success of his ambitions were preordained; as if he were endowed with supernatural capabilities. All quite wrong, Gersen told himself...And Gersen's self-esteem was further mortified. He had not previously appreciated the full extent of his vanity. Very well, then, he told himself: if absolute resourcefulness, absolute indomitability were the basic elements of his nature, it was now time to put these attributes to work. (KM/89-90)

As well as being the book in which Gersen's egotism is revealed to us, *The Killing Machine* also points up the lapses and inconsistencies in Gersen's role as a dispassionate instrument of justice. There are times when morally facile reactions take him, such as when he watches Kokor Hekkus's carrier landing to pick up the mobile fortress: "The carrier was presumably manned by men in the service of Kokor Hekkus; the galaxy would profit by their deaths" (KM/85). (This recalls a similar lapse in the final novel when Gersen contemplates the reckless assumption that "Alice Wroke, were she intimately associated with Howard Alan Treesong, must be a wicked woman indeed" (BD/47). Such simplistic, overzealous extremes help to humanise Gersen and to guarantee that he is more than just the cardboard avenger of so much space opera.

THE PALACE OF LOVE: 1967

"All of us are slaves in some wise."

"How are you a slave?"

"I am a victim to a terrible obsession. I was a sensitive boy, cruelly thwarted.... Rather than submit, I was forced, by my sense of justice, to seek compensation which I am still seeking. I am a man much maligned. The public considers me a voluptuous sybarite, an erotic glutton. The reverse is true. I am – why mince matters? – absolutely ascetic. I must remain so until my obsession is relieved. I am a man cursed."

– ViOLE Falushe (*The Palace of Love*, pp.157-158)

It is in the pivotal third book, arguably the finest of the series and the first to draw many readers to the point of opposing Gersen's actions, that Gersen must confront the ambiguities of his chosen role. It has a bleak ending, for Falushe has such style and charisma that his crimes seem almost idiosyncrasies, the results of mere foibles in his nature, and his elimination therefore smacks of nihilism. In purging a turgid interstellar society of some of its liveliest individuals, Gersen could be seen as working against growth. (However, such a judgement must be qualified by the action-reaction idea that whatever he does must also lead to a wholesome situation,

if only for the precedent that any wrong-doer, regardless of how powerful, can be brought to justice for his crimes.)

Furthermore, rather than undercutting the ethos that the dynamic enterprising individual commands the scene, Gersen's outwitting of the Princes *reinforces* it. Now, instead of competing with one of the Demon Princes, one must compete with Kirth Gersen, the single man who defeated the five arch-criminals of his day. It is no use crying morality and justice at this point, claiming that Gersen operated in the cause of good against evil. Anyone making a close study of Gersen's methods and motives (and he is not as tight-lipped about such things as his practical in-hunt lip-service desire for anonymity would have us think) would soon discover him to be an obsessed and often unscrupulous man. He will make a fascinating study for the Institute, especially at the level of discovering motivation.

Gersen acknowledged his ego's role in *The Killing Machine*. Now, in this third book, he sees the serious qualifications he has placed on his quest for justice. The realisation noted earlier (that there would be little point in buying out the Sabran slave-factories) is quite a development in the moral thinking of a man sworn to seek justice according to his grandfather's code. The words "whenever practicable" now seem to be added. The simple justice motive is becoming less and less tenable; less a valid excuse for acting against the Princes. Gersen has used justice as a cause to lend a semblance of decency to his raw passion for vengeance. To extend Bacon's words for Gersen: "Justice is a kind of urbane revenge," and naturally this more dignified stance, with abstracts and absolutes rather than individual cases based on grim realities, is the armour with which Gersen begins his campaign. We excuse the naivete; we see the need for it.

Given poor obsessed Falushe, we are glad to see the last of such self-deception. It gives us Gersen on a level we can accept – selfish, human, driven. It is interesting that with this emerging sympathetic pro-Prince counter-movement at work in the novel, Falushe is one of the three Princes Gersen does not actually kill directly. Such matters may seem niceties since Gersen brings about the situations in which they meet their deaths, but in this novel, it is especially significant and most welcome.

THE FACE: 1979

"He is our local bugbear.... Of course, he is Darsh of the deepest dye and rachepal to boot."

– *The Face*, P.105

With the resumption of the cycle after a lapse of twelve years, Gersen's steady transformation into a Prince-type is made even more clear. He is at his peak as far as resourcefulness and self-acceptance is concerned, and in an ending in which he carries out the melodramatic lifework of his adversary, Lens Larque, it is Gersen who becomes magnificent, producing his triumph over the Methlen out of the preparations of a rather brutish, pathetic and unworthy opponent.

In spite of the build-up to Gersen's final meeting with him, Larque fails to live up to the usual expectations we have of the Demon Princes. He is the more interesting for this, of course, simply out of contrast to the others whose appearance and behaviour is often attractive, but at the point where Gersen despatches him, he has forfeited our interest. He becomes a sorry figure, without wit and cunning; Gersen seems more of a Prince than Larque is.

Supporting this notion is the way in which Larque's elimination is almost cursory. We are far more interested in what Gersen will do about his "natural" enemy in this book, not Larque but the sanctimonious aristocracy of Methlen. What Larque does do for the cycle, however, is to exist marvellously by the "evocative evasion" of what is sensed and hinted about him. He becomes a presence, an imminence, capitalising on the anonymity we have been told characterises a Demon Prince. He is a welcome change from the others.

THE BOOK OF DREAMS: 1981

"Howard Alan Treesong is inscrutable, devious, and very likely insane, if the concept is at all applicable to such folk as these."

– *The Face*, p.34

At one point in the last Kirth Gersen adventure, *The Book of Dreams*, the *vistgeist* of Howard Alan Treesong (that "idealised version of one's self" (BD/171) commanding the other six aspects of the Treesong personality-complex, says: "Let all advance and clasp hands and may the bond be broken only by sorry death" (BD/171).

The deaths of the Princes are all "sorry deaths", for, as we have already noted, all five are deprived of their life's ambition, all are thwarted, often on the verge of triumph. Only Lens Larque's project is brought to its intended conclusion, but this, we must remember, is to satisfy Gersen's vanity, and Larque dies without knowledge of its coming to pass. In fact, depriving Larque of that knowledge was the actual substance of Gersen's vengeance against him, more cruel than death itself.

The sorriest death is probably that of Treesong, since that melancholy philosophical parting from life is imbued with the added sadness of the cycle coming to its conclusion; of Gersen being taken from us for the last time, his life's-task done.

As with Viole Falushe, it is the record of childhood adversities that makes this final Prince so accessible and so sympathetic. We are told how as a child he "always fell short, by just so much" (BD/135), and we are given Gersen's thoughts "of young Howard Hardoah, frail, tentative, sensitive, of Howard Alan Treesong, strong, radiant with confidence, pulsing with vitality" (BD/170), words that could apply to Gersen as well, this other outcast who has discovered himself in the process of pursuing a grand scheme.

It is easy to overlook one very important fact in the rush of events at the conclusion of the fifth book, and that is that Gersen decides *not* to kill Treesong. This is quite a departure from the avenger who began his quest as an angel of death, keeping strictly to the letter of his simple uncomplicated code of vengeance. Gersen asks the semi-embalmed Treesong if he remembers the Mount Pleasant raid:

"I saw you for the first time on that occasion, and I have devoted my life to arranging this confrontation."

"Indeed? You are a fanatic."

"You have the faculty for creating fanatics."

Howard Alan Treesong made an easy gesture. "So now I am at your mercy. How will you deal with me?"

Gersen laughed sourly. "What more could I do to you?"

"Well, there is always torture. Or you might take pleasure in killing me."

"I have destroyed you as a man. That is enough." (BD/233)

In a sense, Gersen is saying: I have nullified you; I have de-Princed you.

After his rigorous pursuit of Malagata and Hekkus, his hesitations over Falushe, and his easy identification with the plans of Larque, it is an important and inevitable stage for Gersen to reach. It marks the close of the rising action that has had him relating more and more to the Princes as his equals.

To conclude, then, we can note the following similarities between Gersen and his five adversaries. He cuts across local law; he murders men and expects to be answerable to no-one in doing so; he manipulates individuals and organisations to do his will. He brings about the death and suffering of innocents by his actions (the Chief Clerk of the Estremont, Bugardoig, Ian Kelly, Pallis Atwrode); impersonates public officials (a Vegan circuit judge, an I.P.C.C. official); he is involved in counterfeiting, grand larceny (Interchange), and sabotage. After the manner of the Princes, he prefers anonymity but has a vanity that astonishes even himself when he realises its existence.

At one level, the self-contempt that he feels after his abduction to Interchange by Hekkus does much to remind us how fallible and "human" Gersen is. He does make mistakes, sometimes failing to foresee outcomes, to monitor correctly the repercussions of his actions (Ian Kelly is killed on Falushe's orders because he resembles Gersen after Gersen has thwarted the Prince at a masquerade; IPCC agents suffer because Gersen mismanages his ambush of Kokor Hekkus on Bissom's End, and so on).

But in Gersen's reflections after the ambush fiasco there is something more. We should note the extent of his egotism and competitiveness and compare it to the "absolute pride, absolute self-sufficiency" (KM/18) said to characterise the Princes. It may represent a lapse, a moment of self-recrimination when Gersen is reacting at a gut level, but it also masks poorly the personal ego-level at which Gersen's contest is being conducted. It helps substantiate a less and less incredible charge that Kirth Gersen is a Demon Prince whose quirk is justice, a charge we must take seriously since Vance has deliberately courted it.

This is not to say that Gersen is no better than a Demon Prince. By the standards of the universe of 1524 he is an exceptionally moral and humanitarian man, though hardly the pillar of any one community. He does not seek to harm others, to impose his will on them, or to cause suffering; he seeks none of these

things *as ends in themselves*. Yet sometimes they inadvertently become the means to his ends, because Gersen, like the five Princes, has a personal set of rules and a personal code of justice. Like the five, he claims to be "beyond good and evil" (KM/116). Many of his "crimes", though carried out in the name of the higher good, have bad consequences, just as the Princes' activities, conducted for selfish and evil ends (so we are told), have positive repercussions on the interstellar society of this future time. (One Institute member comments, regarding Kokor Hekkus: "He is an inventive and imaginative man, a constant source of wonder. The Institute finds him remarkable and regards certain by-products of his evil rewarding" (KM/42)).

It is interesting, too, to compare Gersen's personal and not general application of the "eye for an eye" form of justice to Viole Falushe's own, expressed in that Prince's claim that: "I subscribe to a doctrine of general equity, that he who commits a grievance must repair the effects of his act" (PL/155), or that of Howard Alan Treesong: "I subscribe to the doctrine of Cosmic Equilibrium: in simple terms, for every "tit" there must be a "tat"." (BD/158). In these terms, by their own codes, they give Gersen leave to act against them.

There are other similarities in the backgrounds of all six men, too. Our farm-boy protagonist is the native of a small agrarian community, Mount Pleasant, on the planet Providence, but destiny and circumstance have forced him to transcend these lowly beginnings. The same is true of Vogel Filschner on Earth, Howard Hardoah on Moudervelt, and Husse Bugold on Dar Sai: before they became Viole Falushe, Howard Alan Treesong, and Lens Larque, these three were humble, parochial types. Alone and striving in a human universe, the outcast Star King, Malagate, has been forced to transcend his plight, and so too has the incredible Kokor Hekkus, whose schemes against the same universe, while geared to maintain his transformation into a hormagaunt, are always governed by the medieval conditions of his chosen homeworld, his cherished and preferred reality.

Like the Princes, Gersen's obsession to avenge the Mount Pleasant raid has made him a cosmopolitan in an interstellar society where many are clearly hampered by a local and limited view of things. He is a better "citizen of the galaxy" than even the Princes, as it turns out. Malagate is limited by the nonhuman bias that compels him to outdo all humans; Larque, so much a product of his own intense racial conditioning, is cosmopolitan enough to do what? – settle a deep-felt social rebuff in an astonishingly grandiose manner; poor ascetic Falushe and Treesong are creatures handicapped by injuries to self-esteem experienced in their crucial adolescent years. Hekkus's cosmopolitan overview is coloured by his vested interests in one medieval frame of reference (he never seems to be free from it) and by his unique biological condition.

At an ungenerous level, Gersen is driven to excel over the five greatest overreachers of his day. His "quirk" is to do this without forgetting the nobler human qualities, though sometimes his justice is of the obnoxiously Draconian kind. Remember, this is a universe in which personality modification for criminals *is* possible – a perfectly acceptable and effective alternative to capital punishment – but not once does Gersen ever consider it, not even for the more likely candidates (Larque, Falushe, Treesong).

We certainly find ourselves realising how fortunate it is that Gersen's energy has been directed to a more conventional moral purpose. His conditioning, the

stimulus to which his response is made, has led him to prey on the predators. We know Gersen's overt motives; they do seem to adhere to a classic and simple justice, but what of the covert ones? Knowing that other "overlords of evil" must appear to replace the Princes (since the situation fostering such individuals remains unchanged at the cycle's close), we really should consider how strictly personal Gersen's justice is, and what this means.

Gersen is perplexed and distressed by the difficult choices he has to make, and, as we have noted, it is sometimes much easier to circumvent such problems by acting automatically rather than meditating upon a course of action which might establish dangerous precedents and lead to ineffectiveness. This is why it is fascinating to watch the process of how Gersen, across the five books, steadily abandons his rigid code of vengeance and discovers in himself a growing sympathy for his remaining enemies.

To prey this way may be the response of the just to the unjust, but it is also the response of a rival, a newcomer to the "establishment" of predators that has happened to trigger the predator in him. The cycle, from where the Princes are concerned, is one long story of poetic justice: they have unwittingly raised up their own nemesis. So too is it poetic justice for Gersen: to outwit the Princes, he must become more and more like them. He must function beyond law and custom, until the stage is reached where, by the ultimate of ironies, he conforms to his grandfather's precepts for what constitutes an evil man. He "coerces obedience to his private ends" (persuading the mad poet Navarth to assist him in locating *Viola Falushe* by scuttling his houseboat and by his treatment of *Myron Patch* and *Bugardoig*). He also "destroys beauty", unwittingly when he brings about *Pallis Atwrode's* loss of innocence or conveys humans to *Teehalt's* paradise planet; intentionally when he causes the dismantling of the *Palace of Love* after engineering *Falushe's* death, or even (to consider the sentimental lovers of *Methlen*) when he changes the topography of the moon, *Shanitra*; and ironically, in the removal of the *Demon Princes* themselves, these "criminals of personal force and flamboyance" (F/21), who are arguably of a terrible beauty themselves. Though he avoids doing so whenever he can, Gersen also "produces pain", and, as we know too well, he "extinguishes life", often without compunction.

I once suggested that Vance abandoned the *Demon Princes* stories for a time (1967 to 1979) out of a discovery that his Princes, especially *Viola Falushe* (of the three then presented to us), were too sympathetic as characters. Though patently evil, they had all the charisma of *Milton's Satan* or *Shakespeare's Macbeth*, and there seemed a real danger that Gersen's justification for taking revenge would appear inadequate in the face of their "evil magnificence" (F/34). I referred to this difficult situation as the villainy paradox (See *Science Fiction #6*, Vol.2, No.3, August 1980) and wondered to what extent this impasse, and not just Vance's growing weary of the series for a while, was responsible for the long delay in the completion of the cycle.

I now believe that Vance was in better control of his material than I had thought. Gersen's elevation to the functional status of a Prince, characterised by the same love of anonymity, the same belief in the need to excel, was occurring from the outset. In retrospect, it is a marvellous and intriguing transformation, one both consistent to the material and elegant in its rising action and superb irony. When the

five Princes are finally despatched, Gersen, with his ingenuity, his characteristic resourcefulness and the vast financial power-base he has established in the guise of Henry Lucas, has no rivals. There are institutions like the Institute and the IPCC, but no individuals, certainly none capable of achieving what Gersen has accomplished in tracking down his victims.

Going beyond this resolution, there is the attractive ambivalence of the ending. In view of the trend towards Princehood, what will happen to Gersen now? The thought comes to him quite early in the series that he might end up as a mere reflex machine, unable to desist from avenging evil:

What if, by some fantastic set of circumstances, he succeeded in avenging the Mount Pleasant cataclysm upon all five of the Demon Princes, what then? Would he be able to retire, to buy country land, to woo and wed, to breed children? Or would the role of nemesis have become such an ingrained element in his nature that never could he draw back, never could he know of evil men without wanting to take their lives. (KM/60).

Whether by design or merely as the end-point naturally reached, Vance does not resolve this question for Gersen or for us as readers. Regardless of Alice Wroke's charms, we have no confidence in Gersen's final words: "'Treesong is dead. The affair is over. I am done.'" (BD/235). He has had attachments before, with Pallis Atwrode, with Alusz Iphigenia, and with Jerdian Chanseth, each more intense than the last. None of them swayed him from his purpose. Still, we cannot know if Gersen's fondness for Alice can overcome the natural qualities of the man, or even if it is anything more than a needed distraction, planned for and desperately seized upon. We are given no proof.

Of far more significance than the awful anticlimax of Gersen's closing remarks and the hinted promise of a quiet life to follow, is the emphasis contained in the words preceding, when Alice asks if he is well. Gersen's answer, more than anything, eloquently conveys the crucial shift in sentiments that has been steadily taking place since our first meeting with Kirth. He replies: "'Quite well. Deflated perhaps. I have been deserted by my enemies.'" (BD/235). This choice of words is important. Deserted? Abandoned by his peers, perhaps?

There will probably never be another Kirth Gersen adventure. The series is finished. In that telling ambivalence of Gersen's last words, Vance has probably said all he needs to say. The hint, the phrasing, is enough, the suggestion that there may never be such a simple resolution for our avenger, the man who earlier saw himself as "doomed to a lifetime of dark deeds" (KM/146).

This, surely, is the final irony of the series, that its present ending makes the ideal starting-point for what could be one of Vance's most powerful and insightful sagas: the story of an avenger whose work is done, a man whose dedication to the quest has left him alone and unrivalled, resembling the magnificent quarry he has hunted for so long, himself a final Demon Prince, the final tragic overreacher who has reached too far.

*All page references are to the DAW editions, coded as follows;

SK: Star King (1964: DAW, 1978)

KM: The Killing Machine (1964: DAW, 1978)

PL: The Palace of Love (1967: DAW, 1979)

F: The Face (1979: DAW, 1979)

BD: The Book of Dreams (1981: DAW, 1981)