

Sample Chapter

'A Heretic in New Babylon'

(Book 2 of The Far Country trilogy)

The men's faces showed they were unhappy with this sort of hairy-fairy talk from Manu. It was becoming more frequent as he became more frustrated with them. It may have even been the other way around. More likely both.

'I don't get it,' Petcher said, angry with himself as much as the thing that eluded him at this critical moment. 'And I don't think I'm alone.' The men murmured rhubarb fashion.

'You're making it more complicated than it is,' Manu said. 'Do you know that?'

'But this stuff ... this high philosophy you're talking to us, with all this Self stuff and whatnot ...'

'Philosophy, Petch, is just a fancy name for thinking. You can think can't you?' Petcher just glared back. 'Well do you feel like an animal, half animal and half man, or a Man?'

'You can ask me that? After all we've been through?'
Manu thought for a moment then tried a different tack.

'You remember the young man I told you about, who left home with his inheritance?'

'The waster? Yep. The idiot who conned his old man into taking him back—after he wasted a fortune. How could I forget?'

'You don't approve of him then?'

'Something tells me you think I'm supposed to. What about him?'

'At the worst point in the experiences he had in that far country, when he got to the bottom of the barrel, he was put in charge of swine.'

'Ah! So he did find his proper station in life.' Manu ignored him, not even stopping for breath.

'All the swine expected of him was that he feed them and protect them from danger, round the clock. It's likely that after falling so low, and being at the bottom of the proverbial barrel, he'd have thought about himself in relation to his charges.'

'How do you mean?'

'You know. Compared situations, rank, that sort of thing. Had he regarded himself as just a pig like them, he wouldn't have even considered going home to his father. Would he? If he felt no different about his station than the swine did?'

'I suppose not. Even if the swill wasn't to his taste.'

'Oh, he ate that before he started to think, you can be sure of that. But in the doing, something told him he

wasn't just animal; that men were *different* to swine in some way—a way he'd never thought too much about before. They have something pigs don't have.'

'What?' Petcher asked innocently.

'You're kidding?'

'Where's all this gab heading?' Petcher looked wounded. 'Anywhere worth knowing? Is there a point?'

'A point? Ah. The Prodigal *thought* about it ... as he could never've done had he stayed at home with his very sensible and responsible brother, the vegetable. He knew he was an animal, sure. But he also realized he was a special animal, if he wanted to be. A man; not just a pig. The man in him won out over the animal. He could leave those pigs to themselves and return to his father.'

'And claim part of the inheritance he didn't get a chance to waste. I see,' Petcher added. 'A double-dipper.'

'I'm glad to have your full attention here, Petch. But the real change in him was yet to come ... where the man was able to rise above mere man to become Man. The welcome he got from his exultant father was that reserved for a Man—not just an animal-man or mere pig attendant. He found his true nature, by that rocky road away from home and back again.' Peter had trouble losing that wounded look he got when he was floundering, as he was now. 'We have to do it too, you know. This, my dear fellows, is the far country. We're all away from home, eating swill, under the mistaken impression we're just swine.'

'You've gone full circle,' Petcher said, disgusted. '—back to where we left off with the Self stuff.'

'Right,' Manu said. 'I'm hoping—possibly against hope—that you don't have to go through the mincer like him. It's possible to be happy not knowing ... I don't deny that. Most men get through life in that state of innocent ignorance. They take the images they see outside themselves as what's real and never get to hear from within themselves, where the real Man lurks, waiting to be discovered; waiting to be celebrated with great joy. It's the only thing of them that is real. The young waster found it; his whining vegetable of a brother didn't. Their father knew what was what, and the fatted calf was the least he could offer in thanks for a father's delight in a son who became a Man.' Manu could tell Petcher hadn't grasped his meaning and decided not to make him suffer any more. The penny would drop at some time, maybe it wouldn't.

When the others left for the tavern with Petcher, Judas and Magda stayed on, sitting silent in the corner of the room. Manu opened a new bottle of Scotch, poured three glasses and sat down heavily. The others watched him weather the backdraft of his first greedy mouthful. Petcher had tired him. He looked at them with glistening eyes, expectant.

'Well, what do you think? Is Petch going to make it?'

'You need to be patient, Emm,' Magda said. 'For three decades and more he's been told he's nobody. Not even an animal.'

'As you all have.'

'As we all have. This man thing with a capital M isn't going to be apparent to him. I'm not even sure it is to us.'

'You're too modest. I know what's apparent to you and what isn't. You two are my brightest stars. Don't disappoint me, I beg you. Please.'

'Alright, we won't. But when you tell us that Man—not just animal-man—that Man is a being whose immortal Self has always been, don't be surprised if we balk at that. It defies everything we've ever experienced or been conditioned to believe. When I heard you say it, I knew what you meant. But something in me fought it; didn't want to believe.'

'In each of us, there's a little voice that is determined to get us to act in our worst possible interest. Why didn't you want to believe, Mag?' Manu asked. Magda put her glass down and thought for a moment.

'It's ...' She struggled with thoughts bigger than herself.

'It's what?' Manu insisted, hopeful.

'It's ...' She looked down at her glass and fell silent. Manu got up and walked a few paces away before turning toward them.

'I was talked to this way before I came on this mission. To be honest, I think I gave some grounds for concern, as you're doing now. I know I did. Not as blatant as Petch, perhaps, but I struggled. I was used to accepting that death was an illusion entertained by young spirits caught in this Earthly mire. I knew there was no begin-

ning or end of life. Life is life, not a story that ends—or a matchbox that can be emptied by use.'

'So where did you give cause for concern?' Judas asked.

'I didn't know whether I could handle it. My confidence wavered.'

'Handle what?' Magda asked.

'I had to become animal-man again; to travel back down the evolutionary line. For a short while.'

'Where's the problem?' Judas asked.

'Think about it. It's not a kid's game. Just as Petch never regained memory of his original station, the risk was even greater for me. I was asked to do a job that required me to be born as a man confused about his status as animal or man. A being who'd have to think carefully whether he was a pig or a man, like the young man in my story.'

'Why?' Magda chimed, aghast.

'Why? ... Isn't it obvious?'

'No. No, it's not. Not to me at least. What on Earth are you talking about?'

'Messengers are of necessity hybrid.'

'Hybrid?'

'From both worlds. Neither fully human nor extra-terrestrial.'

'We figured as much,' Judas said. 'And we thought you weren't doing too badly. That right Mags?' Magda nodded.

'I know what Petch is going through,' Manu murmured.

'Will he make it, do you think?' Magda asked.

'No. None of them will.'

'How can you say that?'

'I ask myself that same question. Believe me.'