

GREEN MARS BLUES

Philip Purser-Hallard

On Sundays when she was little, Marcie Thackrall went with her mummy and daddy to St Joseph's, the church nestled in the wooded crater above their town. The Thackralls were Unifying Humanists, and would as happily have attended a mosque or temple if one had been conveniently to hand, but Remittance was a small town and what it had was St Joseph's, so they went there.

Young Marcie found the praying and reading boring, enjoyed the singing but hated the Sunday school, whose leader, an infinitely patronising woman named Ms Bexley, was fond of saying "Now, children," and asking questions expecting the answer "Jesus". What she loved, though, was the church itself, an ancient redstone building in the Rededicationist style. Its high, vaulted ceilings absorbed sound, and its tall russet pillars provided ideal cover for concealing a small child: all Marcie had to do was step behind one and the rest of the congregation would vanish, their voices muffling, so that she could believe she was alone in her own ruby palace.

Like many of their contemporaries, the earliest townfolk of Remittance had been exhilarated by the novelty of building tall, and St Joseph's spire rose a full hundred metres above the church, dwarfing the high, slender oak and ash trees lining the crater-bowl. Sometimes, usually when Fr Craig was on a fundraising drive, tour parties would be allowed to climb the tower, and very rarely Marcie's mummy would take her up there (her daddy was afraid of heights). From the steepletop, Marcie could see the houses, shops, parks and offices of her town spread out along the river-fossa like tiny toys, like the model village her parents had taken her to see once on their holidays.

She loved to pick out her house, her school, the town hall flying its fingernail-sized tricolour of red, blue and green. Beyond Remittance, freight barges floated like bath toys on the silvery Usk, which trickled westwards between processing plants and spoil-heaps to join the Sequana, a broader torrent ambling down to Kasei South Lough and the docks at Firestar.

The other way, the treetops climbed towards the crater lip, where they stopped abruptly, giving onto the uplands of Sacrament Moor. That long, bleak view of scrubby highland, spattered with bracken and purple heather and flocks of woolly sheep, stretching more than a hundred kilometres to Kasei North Lough, was broken only by the old oxygen factory – an ancient, ugly ruin which stood just on the rim of St Joseph's crater and which Marcie and all the children of Remittance were always being warned never to enter.

Despite this, the steeple wasn't Marcie's favourite thing about the church, any more than the pillars. Her favourite was the carvings.

Protected by its sheltered bowl from the worst of the dry summer winds, St Joseph's had weathered well for a building of its antiquity. Down south in Marineris, as Marcie would learn as a grown-up, it wasn't unusual to see civic statues sculpted from the same stone whose faces had been scraped space-helmet-smooth by the dust which billowed yearly down from Pavonis and Ascraeus. In Remittance, though, the carvings of St Joseph and the Virgin Mary which flanked the old oaken doors were still quite recognisable.

Better yet, inside the church the long-dead stonemasons had allowed their imaginations a freer rein. Dotted about the building, on walls and pillars and flagstones, were half-hidden bas-reliefs of cats and birds, trees and towers, ships and spaceships, most of them in out-of-the-way, unlooked-at corners which made for an ideal treasure-hunt for the Sunday-school children on rainy days.

Marcie's favourite of them all, carved on the sill of a mullioned window which you had to climb up into a recess to see out of, was the church's Green Man. Every Sunday she'd run to say hello to him when they arrived, and kiss him goodbye after the service. She found his funny, ugly face paradoxically friendly and welcoming.

She'd later learn that many places of worship from that era – not just churches, but synagogues and even mosques – had such ornamental grotesques hidden away in unexpected places. The Green Man had been a popular motif in the old days, it seemed, for stonemasons with imaginative yearnings. They were also found in civic buildings, so it seemed unlikely that they represented the devil, as some architectural historians speculated. Indeed, it seemed unlikely

that they had any religious import at all, except perhaps to offer a subversive alternative to the certainties of faith, and of secular life as well.

The one in Remittance was fairly typical: the details varied widely depending on artistic interpretation, but some characteristics were common to them all. Since most were carved from the near-ubiquitous redstone, it was unclear why they'd been given the name "Green Man" at all.

The Thackralls left Remittance for Rincon in Xanthe when Marcie was four, and started attending an atheist assembly there. Six years later, when studying cultural history at Hecates Tholus University, Marcie remembered St Joseph's vividly enough to write her dissertation on "The 'Green Man' Motif in Post-Terraform Architectural Ornamentation", and to spend eight weeks touring significant examples from Tempe to Sirenum until she was sick of looking at the things.

"I'm Martia Thackrall," Marcie tells the receptionist at the Camiri Crashpad. "I made a reservation."

"Just a moment please, Ms Thackeray," the receptionist begrudges, poking at her screen.

"That's Thackrall," Marcie repeats. "T-H-A-C-K-R-A-L-L. And it's Dr, in fact." She's aware it's a touch pompous, but after all the work she put into that damn thesis, there's no way she's going to let the world forget about it.

Camiri Campus is an outpost of the University of Argyre at Smilie, and the venue for the conference Marcie's attending. Situated on the range of low hills between Podor Cove on Hooke's Basin and Camiri Bay on the Argyrean Sea, it offers excellent views of the nearer parts of the Hookwall, the semicircular ridged peninsula which almost completely separates the shallow waters of the Argyrean from the Basin's midnight-blue depths. The Hookwall itself is wholly given over to ruinously expensive seaside resorts, luxury retirement villages and holiday homes for trillionaires: there's little chance of any research institution getting a foot in the door there, but the fascinating marine ecology of the Boyle Straits, which connect the two bodies of water, means it's worth their while maintaining a presence here at Camiri – especially given the venue's cosmetic attractiveness to conference-goers.

Marcie, by contrast, is staying in Camiri town, a suburban dullsville of the kind you might find anywhere, mostly devoted to affordable housing for the tour-boat operators, diving instructors, cruise agents, caterers, bar staff, maintenance workers, security people and cleaners who the wealthy tourists and homeowners of the Hookwall need to keep their communities afloat. Its branch of the Crashpad hotel chain is austere compared with the accommodation offered at the campus conference centre, let alone the Hookwall's legendary opulence; it does, however, have the crucial advantage from Marcie's point of view of being cheap.

A secondary advantage – that it saves her from unwanted socialising with her fellow delegates – is shattered as the person standing behind her at reception asks, "Oh my God – are you Dr MV Thackrall, the folklorist? Thackrall of *The Angels of Pavonis Mons*? You must be here for the conference!"

Marcie suppresses a groan, composes her face instead into a guarded smile, then turns. "Yes, I suppose I must. And you are...?"

A tall, muscular young woman stands in front of her. Her eyes are the blue of the Basin's waters, ink-black hair bursts from her scalp in a positive mane, and her cheekbones are chiselled to a perfection which the departed stonemasons of Remittance would have admired. She wears a T-shirt and sawn-off jeans, which respectively show off a set of intricate metal bracelets and extremely good legs. She carries a bulky leather holdall.

"Oh – sorry," the woman says, extending her hand. "I'm Jenna Farris." Her voice is warm and slightly husky. Marcie, whose last relationship ended some months ago and who's been too busy with work since then to think about such things, finds her own legs tingling pleasantly in response to their handshake. "I'm at Wynn-Williamsport University," Jenna says. "Still doing my doctorate, I'm afraid. I'm giving a paper tomorrow."

Wynn-Williamsport's a recent foundation, Marcie recalls: until recently the sparsely-populated southern coast of the Hellas Ocean got by with sending its young people north to Harrisville or Saheki for their studies. Others go further afield: Marcie knew a few at Hecates Tholus. Hellanders have a reputation for dourness, talking mostly about the weather and fish – and for all

she knows that's true of the ones who stay at home. The ones she's met, though, were twenty-four-hour-and-change party people.

She smiles involuntarily at the memory, and – recognising perhaps that this time it's genuine – Jenna smiles back. “Well,” the younger woman says, “I’ll let you get up to your room. I’m heading out soon, in any case. See you at the welcome session tomorrow morning?”

“See you then,” Marcie smiles, and takes her key from the receptionist. With more reluctance than she expected, she takes the lift up to her room, where she spends a while wondering whether she might not want to socialise with certain of the other delegates after all.

CONTINUED IN IRIS WILD'THYME OF MARS...