

The Book of Commandments

By Dante Harker

This story really isn't set on Earth, honest! The story that's about to unfold happened a long time ago.

It's hard to say exactly when as all evidence that the following events ever took place has long since been erased.

If I had to guess, and I will because I'm the narrator and it makes the story flow smoother if I offer the odd piece of unsubstantiated information, then I would say the story is set around 1600 years ago.

I would say it took place around 400AD but that would be silly because this story did not take place on earth so would have had different dates.

The story is set on a distant planet, in a universe that's yet to, or in fact may never, be discovered by humans.

The place looks like the Earth of 1600 years ago, the people behave the same and, if you were looking in from above, you might even think that it was Earth, or if not our Earth, maybe a parallel one.

But you will see as the story goes on that although this Earth may share similarities with our Earth.

There is bound to be the odd fact here and there that makes you say 'no, that didn't happen on my planet, or if it did, it happened 50 years earlier!' And if nothing else, it will be these out of place facts that stop you getting upset, or screaming, 'blasphemy!' and help you see that this story, as many stories that happened a long time ago or in other places are best read, laughed at, and then either thrown away or, if the story is crammed in with lots of other stories and thus forms a thick, often leather-bound book, used as a doorstop.

Anyway, my disclaimer, sorry introduction is out the way; let's move on with the story.

No, actually, just before the story gets under way, there is one last thing, all the characters you're about to read about are white and talk in English (Yorkshire English at that, which is kind of odd, as the story takes place in one of the hottest countries on this far-off world).

It is a country so hot that the people would surely be dark brown, their skins tanned and hardened by the sun.

Plus, it's highly unlikely that they would ever have spoken English, but still, this isn't Earth as you know it.

If anything it more resembles one of those "historical" programmes that still get aired once in a while.

So, with that in mind, all the characters are white, English speakers.

*** 'Report!' screamed King Barkus, as always living up to his name.

Dent, the King's advisor, knelt in front of him.

Sweat poured down Dent's face; he could feel trickles running down his chest and over his over-fed but, today, empty stomach.

It felt like he hadn't eaten in days.

In reality it had only been around twelve hours.

He had just been so busy.

Plus he had seen what his master had done to his last advisor when he had caught him eating, rather than working.

The idea of being roasted alive and then served undercooked and, sadly, still alive, to the hounds, was enough to take away anyone's appetite.

'The battle's won my lord.' Dent knew that the day he had to tell his master they'd lost would be his last day.

But given what he had to tell his master next, today might well still see his end.

Dent told his master the casualty figures, they were bad, very bad.

Then through gritted teeth he began to explain facts that he knew his master would probably be already holding clearly in his head.

But he was the advisor and there were things that he had to vocalise in case the King, was choosing a head-in-the-sand approach to leadership – something common in these dark times.

'This is our fifth battle in less than three months, my lord.

We won, but the casualties this time added to those from previous battles means it's unlikely we will win again in the next few months or even years.

We have to do something, if nothing else, my lord, we need more men.' Dent knew they needed something.

They had been defending their homeland for centuries.

This feat would have been easier if the kings, who had ruled over the kingdom, had not had such fetish for conquering other lands.

Each successive king had felt the need to extend the kingdom – to strike out into other lands, to take what wasn't theirs.

But this had all come at a price.

Their lands were now so expansive that at any one time at least one of their borders was under threat.

And, in recent times, the battles had barely been won.

The men didn't want to fight anymore, they'd had enough.

Land was just land; it wasn't even theirs it belonged to the King.

Dissent had flooded the ranks, the soldiers wanted to be at home with their families, they didn't want to fight for a cause that hadn't felt like their own.

King Barkus glared down at his servant.

They were in the war room at the middle of the King's glorious and, in these times of devastating poverty, expensive palace.

The King's last advisor had sealed his own fate, not so much by eating, though that was the final straw, but by suggesting to the King that he should perhaps hold off building a new palace until they had stabilised their lands and renewed control over the King's people.

But King Barkus hadn't been in power long, the last two kings having been killed within the last year.

The first king was stupid enough to go into battle, feeling that his presence would rally the men.

It didn't.

His men, like those manning the armies today, wanted to stop fighting, and hearing their king tell them they must fight and even die so that he might have more land was more than they could bear.

So, rumours abound, it was actually his own men who took advantage of a battle and killed the king.

The second, King Ovulatus, had been stabbed in the back by King Barkus.

That wasn't the official line of course; the people had been told an assassin had crept in during the night and seen off the sleeping monarch.

It seemed the people of the time would believe anything they were told, at least they would if the story was laden with either blood or woe.

King Barkus wanted a palace and as king he got as he ordered.

The king, who was far wiser than his 21 years, perhaps having the wisdom of a 24 or even 25-year-old, chose to have the palace built during the harvest.

He knew that with enough slaves he could get the majority of the building work done while everyone was out bringing in the crop, thus limiting the chances of his new home being attacked.

And as the King had enough food and wealth, he didn't bother thinking his plan through far enough to realise that by using thousands of slaves to build the palace, there would be fewer slaves where they were needed at that time of year – working in the fields.

Now as he looked out from his war room he knew that his palace might have been a mistake.

His people were starving and the men he had protecting his borders were threatening to abandon their posts and come home.

Nevertheless, his palace was glorious.

There were 200 rooms in total, though to reclaim space in the centre of the city he'd needed to order a little clearing.

Still, sending out death squads in the middle of the night, to kill everyone who lived on the land he needed, if nothing else had given a few hundred men work.

From the sky, the palace looked like a round piece of bread with a hole poked in the middle – a food that would later be called a doughnut.

Around the outside of the palace there was a fashionable moat, which the King had ordered be filled with crocodiles.

This was a request that had yet to be fulfilled as the soldiers he had sent to carry out the order were poor wrestlers and kept getting eaten.

In the hole in the centre of the palace was a garden open to the sky.

Great palms grew up and spread throughout the space.

Caged exotic birds, given as gifts to the King from rulers of distant lands in the hope of staving off an invasion, filled the garden with song.

And in the middle of the lush green haven, a marquee had been erected to house the king's entertainment.

Young men and women, if fourteen and fifteen-year-olds could be counted as men and women, spent the day prettying themselves in the hope of attracting the king's attention.

They were seldom lucky.

The king, a creature of habit, had, since puberty, picked one man and one woman as his entertainment.

He wasn't an overly sexual man; he left the raping and pillaging to his generals.

But he had needs, and his boy and girl of the moment were more than enough.

He was still young, and as yet he hadn't felt the need for children, so his chosen girl served only to accompany him on official engagements.

His recent choice of girl, and he only tended to change them every couple of years, preferring his entertainment no older than sixteen, had been a gift from a distant king, and spoke very little English.

This was something he'd found a bonus, as he had no need of her conversation he just wanted her to look good on his arm.

Boy, was the name he imaginatively used for his current male companion – it wouldn't do for a king to waste his time

learning the names of all his slaves, and it certainly wasn't worth him learning the names of his entertainment slaves as he went through them so freely.

Boy provided his nightly and sometimes afternoon entertainment.

'Mmmm, afternoon entertainment!' the king muttered.

'What's that my lord?' asked Dent, glad that the king's mind had drifted off; he didn't like the glare he'd been receiving.

'Would you like me to fetch Boy?' he asked after working out the king's mutterings.

'Yes, errr, no, I have serious things to deal with.

You're right, we have to do something.

I think the days of fighting to protect land are gone; at least fighting to protect distant lands.

It was different before; the men were fighting to protect their lands, their families but now we are asking them to fight for their king, and as much as that should be enough, those times have passed.' King Barkus slumped in his throne.

He wished he'd been born a few hundred years earlier.

Back then the world was a different place.

The kings in those times were adventurous; they sought out distant lands, though not so distant that they couldn't send back the spoils of war.

But soon enough distant meant distant and the spoils stopped and soon after so did much of the support for the king.

'Booooooy!' the king yelled, and before the king had fully pronounced the 'y', a strapping adolescent boy, no older than sixteen ran from the shadows of the war room and stood at the king's side.

'Bring me food, and come back with your fan!' the king ordered and, after forcing lustful thoughts out of his mind as he watched the scantily clad teen rush away, he looked at Dent and in a deep tone, edged with venom, he said 'you're my advisor, advise'.

Before Dent had time to stutter and spurt out his best, and he knew, unacceptable, advice, Boy returned with a large silver platter of food and a palm-shaped fan on the end of a long pole.

Boy hesitated for a second before handing his master the platter of food.

He first waited to see if the king looked at him and opened his mouth, a sign that indicated that he was too busy to feed himself and needed Boy's help.

There was no look, so Boy handed over the food and then went about fanning down his lord.

'Bring a bowl,' Barkus said to Dent, adding, 'I know a man thinks better on a full stomach.' Dent, a rotund man in his late forties, did indeed like his food.

Having been up most of the night, waiting for any news of the battle, and in that time having missed all his meals, Dent's head was pounding.

And as he bit into a chunk of chicken that the king had scraped into his bowl, he felt queasy at the sudden intake of food.

Both men ate without speaking.

The only noise that filled the thirty-by-twenty foot war room was the whoosh of the fan powered by Boy and a faint

chirping that crept in through the open door that faced onto the garden.

The king ate, over-filling his mouth with a mixture of meats and bread and then doing his best to chew it all down without choking.

If his mother had still been alive, he was sure she would have chastised him over his eating habits.

But then she wasn't alive, so he could eat how he wanted.

Barkus had ordered his mother killed after she wouldn't stop bleating on about him stabbing her husband, his father.

As he chewed he watched Boy work.

All of his entertainment dressed in the least possible clothing needed to cover their dignity – not that slaves were actually entitled to dignity, but the king wanted to ensure that his slave's assets were only seen by him.

In the case of his current boy, he had a white cotton loincloth wrapped around his assets.

The king watched as Boy's labour caused beads of sweat to break over his tight body.

Barkus wanted entertaining; he wanted an easy life where the kingdom didn't look upon him for all the answers.

He had only killed the previous king because if he hadn't someone else would have, and if that had of happened, he would surely have been the next one put to death to quash any claim to the throne.

Dent did his best to will the king to go off with Boy; they were heading for late afternoon, some of the heat of the day had passed and now was often the time the king found for his daily pleasures.

Dent prayed to one god after another, but none seemed to be answering.

After he'd tried a god on his reserve list, the god of water – he thought that the king might at least have to leave to go to the toilet if this god answered his prayers – he gave up and decided that he would have to, for once, live up to his job title.

'I think, my lord that you need to find a way to control the masses.

And the only way to do that is give them something to believe in, something to fight for.

In years gone by ... ' Dent continued, with each word his confidence grew, he could feel he was on a roll, and though he knew he was making everything up on the fly, he knew from the look on the king's face that he at least had his master's attention.

' ... men fought to protect their home, and then they fought for glory by conquering lands, and for a time they fought for their king.

But we both know that's not enough anymore, we need to give the men something else to fight for.

We need something that allows you to control the people, rally your forces as needed and give us a reason to attack whomever we please, rather than always having to wait until they have attacked us first.' The king listened.

Everything Dent said made sense, and all he wanted to hear now was his advisor's conclusion, what one thing could bring him all these things? Before Dent had got anywhere near finishing speaking he realised that he only knew what the king needed, he didn't actually know how to achieve what he was confidently advocating.

In fact, as Dent stood up and almost bounced around in front of his master to add power to his words, he knew that the

flaw in his speech might just see him killed.

‘You’re right, I agree,’ cried Barkus, as he got up from his chair to join his advisor.

Thankfully for Dent, the king was tall, over six feet tall and he was short, only an inch over five feet.

This saved him having to fall to his knees, or have the pain of keeping his head bowed for fear of having it removed – the penalty for having your head above the king’s.

That was unless of course you were a slave with a fan standing to the king’s side, but then laws made by kings were free to be broken by kings.

‘So, what is this great thing I need, what can I use to control my people, rally my men and squash my enemies? Come on, advisor, don’t keep your king waiting!’.