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LIN CARTER
presents
The YEAR'S BEST
FANTASY
STORIES:4

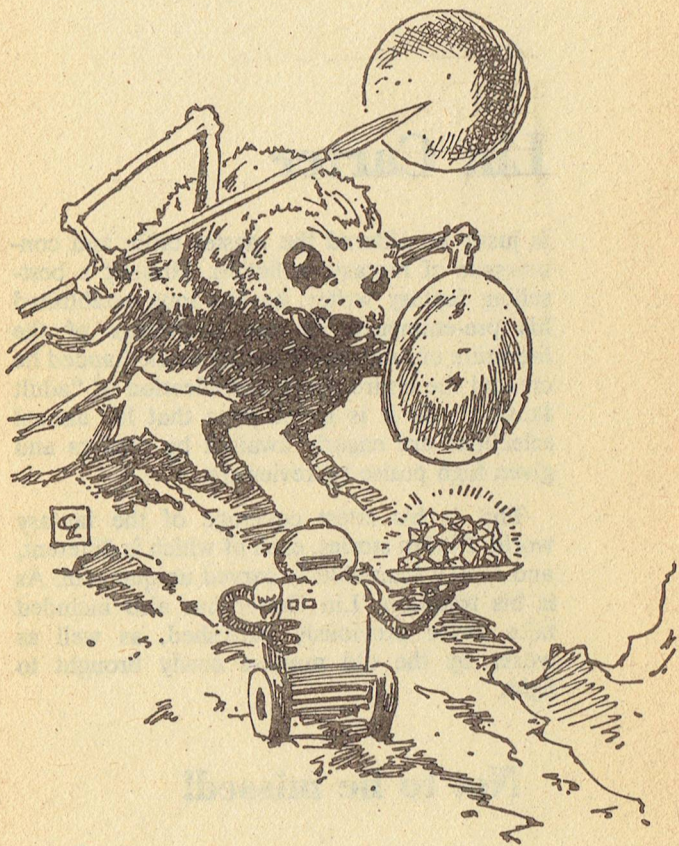


Lin Carter

is justly considered the master critic and connoisseur of fantasy in fiction. Himself a best-selling fantasy writer, he has long established his pre-eminence for his knowledge of the literature of fantasia. Virtually single-handed he created the entire genre classification of "adult fantasy." So it is no surprise that his annual selections are eagerly awaited by readers and given high praise by reviewers.

This is his latest coverage of the fantasy world. Eleven stories, each of which is different, and each a marvelously carved unique gem. As is his tradition, Lin Carter has also included tales never previously published, as well as works by the old masters newly brought to light.

Not to be missed!



THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 4

Edited by
LIN CARTER

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DEDICATION

To the memory of
Edmond Hamilton

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Introduction:

THE YEAR IN FANTASY

As years go (which isn't far enough, usually), 1977 was one we are all going to remember fondly. It was the year that saw the long-awaited publication of two of the most "wanted" books in recent memory: the first of these was, of course, *The Silmarillion*, Professor Tolkien's prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*. The Professor was reportedly at work on the book at least since the 1950's, when *LOTR* was first published, but he died before the several different revisions of the book could be collated; his son, Christopher Tolkien, took up the work and, at long last, *The Silmarillion* was published.

We all knew it was going to be interesting to see what Middle-earth was like before Frodo's time; what we did not anticipate was that the book would mushroom into an overnight sensation, and sit at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list for the better part of a year. So, at last, a work of high fantasy made it to the best-seller list, something that never happened to Merritt or Cabell or Lewis or White or just about anybody else you care to name. Even *The Lord of the Rings* never became a hardcover best seller: only Richard Adams made it before this.

The second eagerly awaited book that finally got into print after years of shelf-sitting, was *Conan of Aquilonia*, the twelfth and last (?) volume of the saga, by L. Sprague de Camp and one of his collaborators. Several years ago the book was written and was handed in to Lancer just weeks before the firm went bankrupt; publication was held up by litigation and lawsuits until finally Lancer concluded an arrangement with Ace Books to take over the entire twelve-

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volume set, including *Aquilonia*. It was about time something happened.

And, as always, there were a few surprises: I had long known about *The Book of Merlyn* which T. H. White planned as the fifth book of his Arthurian epic, *The Once and Future King*. I knew that White intended writing it because he discussed it in his letters to David Garnett; what I had *not* known (and apparently nobody else knew it either) was that White actually wrote the whole book which his publisher, for flimsy reasons, declined to include in the one-volume edition of the tetralogy. The novel languished in manuscript for years, and finally turned up in (of all places!) the manuscripts collection of a Texas college. Quite deservedly, *Merlyn* became a best seller, too.

An extra treat last year was the appearance of *Swords & Ice Magic*, the sixth volume of Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser series, and the first new book about his two beloved rogues we've had to read in seven years. With all these excellent new books, the year's big surprise to me was *Kingdoms of Elfin*, a collection of leanly written, emotionally charged, poignant and completely beautiful "adult fairy tales" written by White's biographer, Sylvia Townsend Warner.

In a year filled with good new books, I think hers was the single best.

Last year we lost Edmond Hamilton. He had been with us from the beginning: his first story appeared in *Weird Tales* in 1926, the year *Amazing Stories* began and Hamilton was twenty-two. Most people think of him more as a science fiction writer than a fantasy author, but over the fifty years of his fiction-writing career, during which he produced over three hundred stories and novels, there were more than a few fantasies.

I think folks tend to forget that Ed was one of the most popular and prolific of all the contributors to *Weird Tales*. After all, eighty-three of those three-hundred-plus works of fiction first appeared in that greatest of all of the fantasy magazines.

Ed Hamilton's fantasies varied widely in style and mood, from the Merrittesque prose-poetry of "Monster-God of Mamurth" (1926) to the delicate mood-filigree of "Child of the Winds" (1936) all the way to the swashbucklin' *Sword &*

Introduction

Sorcery of "Dreamer's Worlds" (1941). I personally remember most fondly his innovative use of myth and legend in such yarns as "Priestess of the Labyrinth" and "The Shining Land" (both 1945) or "The Valley of the Gods" (1946). Along with the short stuff there were two fantasy novels serialized in *WT*, both of them richly evocative Talbot Mundy type adventure yarns: "The Lake of Life" (1936) and "The Fire Princess" (1938).

I last saw Ed and his wife, Leigh Brackett, at the Second World Fantasy Convention at the Statler Hilton Hotel in New York City over the Halloween weekend of 1976. They were just returning from a visit to England and dropped by, surprising us all. I will always prize that last conversation I had with him there, for three months later he was dead.

Edmond Hamilton died on February 1, 1977. Few of fans of my generation will ever be able to forget him or the marvelously entertaining and imagination-stretching yarns he wrote, which beguiled our teens.

I can still reread those fine old yarns with pleasure. Bless him.

At the 1977 World Science Fiction Convention in Miami Beach I had the honor of bestowing the J. R. R. Tolkien Memorial Award for Achievement in Fantasy, popularly known as "the Gandalf," to Andre Norton. She joins the previous winners (Professor Tolkien himself, Fritz Leiber, and L. Sprague de Camp) as Grand Master of Fantasy. Over the Labor Day weekend, at the 1978 World Science Fiction Convention in Phoenix, Arizona, not one but *two* Gandalfs were voted on and awarded: the annual Grand Master statuette, and, this, this year, a new Gandalf for best book-length work of fantasy fiction.

Perhaps I will have met you there. If not, Happy Magic till we meet again!

—LIN CARTER

Hollis, Long Island, New York

Poul Anderson

THE TALE OF HAUK

There are almost as many kinds of fantasy as there are writers of fantasy. I know that's a truism; but truisms are sometimes true. The reason for this immense diversity within a genre so small is, probably, that different writers draw from different sources of storytelling style and tradition.

Poul Anderson, for instance, draws from the Icelandic Edda and the Norse sagas, as anyone who has read his brilliant and powerful Hrolf Kraki's Saga knows full well.

Here he is in a shorter length, telling a saga no less compelling, and demonstrating yet again that . . . nobody does it better!

—L.C.

A man called Geirolf dwelt on the Great Fjord in Raumsdal. His father was Bui Hardhand, who owned a farm inland near the Dofra Fell. One year Bui went in viking to Finnmark and brought back a woman he dubbed Gydha. She became the mother of Geirolf. But because Bui already had children by his wife, there would be small inheritance for this by-blow.

Folk said uncanny things about Gydha. She was fair to see, but spoke little, did no more work than she must, dwelt by herself in a shack out of sight of the garth, and often went

The Tale of Hauk

for long stridings alone on the upland heaths, heedless of cold, rain, and rovers. Bui did not visit her often. Her son Geirolf did. He too was a moody sort, not much given to playing with others, quick and harsh of temper. Big and strong, he went abroad with his father already when he was twelve, and in the next few years won the name of a mighty though ruthless fighter.

Then Gydha died. They buried her near her shack, and it was whispered that she spooked around it of nights. Soon after, walking home with some men by moonlight from a feast at a neighbor's, Bui clutched his breast and fell dead. They wondered if Gydha had called him, maybe to accompany her home to Finnmark, for there was no more sight of her.

Geirolf bargained with his kin and got the price of a ship for himself. Thereafter he gathered a crew, mostly younger sons and a wild lot, and fared west. For a long while he harried Scotland, Ireland, and the coasts south of the Channel, and won much booty. With some of this he bought his farm on the Great Fjord. Meanwhile he courted Thyra, a daughter of the yeoman Sigtryg Einarsson, and got her.

They had one son early on, Hauk, a bright and lively lad. But thereafter five years went by until they had a daughter who lived, Unn, and two years later a boy they called Einar. Geirolf was a viking every summer, and sometimes wintered over in the Westlands. Yet he was a kindly father, whose children were always glad to see him come roaring home. Very tall and broad in the shoulders, he had long red-brown hair and a full beard around a broad blunt-nosed face whose eyes were ice-blue and slanted. He liked fine clothes and heavy gold rings, which he also lavished on Thyra.

Then the time came when Geirolf said he felt poorly and would not fare elsewhere that season. Hauk was fourteen years old and had been wild to go. "I'll keep my promise to you as well as may be," Geirolf said, and sent men asking around. The best he could do was get his son a bench on a ship belonging to Ottar the Wide-Faring from Haalogaland in the north, who was trading along the coast and meant to do likewise overseas.

Hauk and Ottar took well to each other. In England, the man got the boy prime-signed so he could deal with Christians. Though neither was baptized, what he heard while they wintered there made Hauk thoughtful. Next spring they fared

south to trade among the Moors, and did not come home until late fall.

Ottar was Geirolf's guest for a while, though he scowled to himself when his host broke into fits of deep coughing. He offered to take Hauk along on his voyages from now on and start the youth toward a good livelihood.

"You a chapman—the son of a viking?" Geirolf sneered. He had grown surly of late.

Hauk flushed. "You've heard what we did to those vikings who set on *us*," he answered.

"Give our son his head," was Thyra's smiling rede, "or he'll take the bit between his teeth."

The upshot was that Geirolf grumbled agreement, and Hauk fared off. He did not come back for five years.

Long were the journeys he took with Ottar. By ship and horse, they made their way to Uppsala in Svithjodh, thence into the wilderness of the Keel after pelts; amber they got on the windy strands of Jutland, salt herring along the Sound; seeking beeswax, honey, and tallow, they pushed beyond Holmgard to the fair at Kiev; walrus ivory lured them past North Cape, through bergs and floes to the land of the fur-clad Biarmians; and they bore many goods west. They did not hide that the wish to see what was new to them drove them as hard as any hope of gain.

In those days King Harald Fairhair went widely about in Norway, bringing all the land under himself. Lesser kings and chieftains must either plight faith to him or meet his wrath; it crushed whomever would stand fast. When he entered Raumsdal, he sent men from garth to garth as was his wont, to say he wanted oaths and warriors.

"My older son is abroad," Geirolf told these, "and my younger still a stripling. As for myself—" He coughed, and blood flecked his beard. The king's men did not press the matter.

But now Geirolf's moods grew ever worse. He snarled at everybody, cuffed his children and housefolk, once drew a dagger and stabbed to death a thrall who chanced to spill some soup on him. When Thyra reproached him for this, he said only, "Let them know I am not yet altogether hollowed out. I can still wield blade." And he looked at her so threateningly from beneath his shaggy brows that she, no coward, withdrew in silence.

The Tale of Hawk

A year later, Hawk Geirolfsson returned to visit his parents.

That was on a chill fall noontide. Whitecaps chopped beneath a whistling wind and cast spindrift salty onto lips. Clifftops on either side of the fjord were lost in mist. Above blew cloud wrack like smoke. Hawk's ship, a wide-beamed knorr, rolled, pitched, and creaked as it beat its way under sail. The owner stood in the bows, wrapped in a flame-red cloak, an uncommonly big young man, yellow hair tossing around a face akin to his father's, weatherbeaten though still scant of beard. When he saw the arm of the fjord that he wanted to enter, he pointed with a spear at whose head he had bound a silk pennon. When he saw Disafoss pouring in a white stream down the blue-gray stone wall to larboard, and beyond the waterfall at the end of that arm lay his old home, he shouted for happiness.

Geirolf had rich holdings. The hall bulked over all else, heavy-timbered, brightly painted, dragon heads arching from rafters and gables. Elsewhere around the yard were cook-house, smokehouse, bathhouse, storehouses, workshop, stables, barns, women's bower. Several cabins for hirelings and their families were strewn beyond. Fishing boats lay on the strand near a shed which held the master's dragonship. Behind the steading, land sloped sharply upward through a narrow dale, where fields were walled with stones grubbed out of them and now stubbled after harvest. A bronze-leaved oaken-shaw stood untouched not far from the buildings; and a mile inland, where hills humped themselves toward the mountains, rose a darkling wall of pinewood.

Spearheads and helmets glimmered ashore. But men saw it was a single craft bound their way, white shield on the mast. As the hull slipped alongside the little wharf, they lowered their weapons. Hawk sprang from bow to dock in a single leap and whooped.

Geirolf trod forth. "Is that you, my son?" he called. His voice was hoarse from coughing; he had grown gaunt and sunken-eyed; the ax that he bore shivered in his hand.

"Yes, father, yes, home again," Hawk stammered. He could not hide his shock.

Maybe this drove Geirolf to anger. Nobody knew; he had become impossible to get along with. "I could well-nigh have

hoped otherwise," he rasped. "An unfriend would give me something better than strawdeath."

The rest of the men, housecarls and thralls alike, flocked about Hauk to bid him welcome. Among them was a burly, grizzled yeoman whom he knew from aforetime, Leif Egilsson, a neighbor come to dicker for a horse. When he was small, Hauk had often wended his way over a woodland trail to Leif's garth to play with the children there.

He called his crew to him. They were not just Norse, but had among them Danes, Swedes, and English, gathered together over the years as he found them trustworthy. "You brought a mickle for me to feed," Geirolf said. Luckily, the wind bore his words from all but Hauk. "Where's your master Ottar?"

The young man stiffened. "He's my friend, never my master," he answered. "This is my own ship, bought with my own earnings. Ottar abides in England this year. The West Saxons have a new king, one Alfred, whom he wants to get to know."

"Time was when it was enough to know how to get sword past a Westman's shield," Geirolf grumbled.

Seeing peace down by the water, women and children hastened from the hall to meet the newcomers. At their head went Thyra. She was tall and deep-bosomed; her gown blew around a form still straight and freely striding. But as she neared, Hauk saw that the gold of her braids was dimmed and sorrow had furrowed her face. Nonetheless she kindled when she knew him. "Oh, thrice welcome, Hauk!" she said low. "How long can you bide with us?"

After his father's greeting, it had been in his mind to say he must soon be off. But when he spied who walked behind his mother, he said, "We thought we might be guests here the winter through, if that's not too much of a burden."

"Never—" began Thyra. Then she saw where his gaze had gone, and suddenly she smiled.

Alfhild Leifsdottir had joined her widowed father on this visit. She was two years younger than Hauk, but they had been glad of each other as playmates. Today she stood a maiden grown, lissome in a blue wadmal gown, heavily crowned with red locks above great green eyes, straight nose, and gently curved mouth. Though he had known many a woman, none struck him as being so fair.

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He grinned at her and let his cloak flap open to show his finery of brodered, fur-lined tunic, linen shirt and breeks, chased leather boots, gold on arms and neck and sword-hilt. She paid them less heed than she did him when they spoke.

Thus Hawk and his men moved to Geirolf's hall. He brought plentiful gifts, there was ample food and drink, and their tales of strange lands—their songs, dances, games, jests, manners—made them good housefellows in these lengthening nights.

Already on the next morning, he walked out with Alfild. Rain had cleared the air, heaven and fjord sparkled, wavelets chuckled beneath a cool breeze from the woods. Nobody else was on the strand where they went.

"So you grow mighty as a chapman, Hawk," Alfild teased. "Have you never gone in viking . . . only once, only to please your father?"

"No," he answered gravely. "I fail to see what manliness lies in falling on those too weak to defend themselves. We traders must be stronger and more warskilled than any who may seek to plunder us." A thick branch of driftwood, bleached and hardened, lay nearby. Hawk picked it up and snapped it between his hands. Two other men would have had trouble doing that. It gladdened him to see Alfild glow at the sight. "Nobody has tried us twice," he said.

They passed the shed where Geirolf's dragon lay on rollers. Hawk opened the door for a peek at the remembered slim shape. A sharp whiff from the gloom within brought his nose wrinkling. "Whew!" he snorted. "Dry rot."

"Poor *Fireworm* has long lain idle," Alfild sighed. "In later years, your father's illness has gnawed him till he doesn't even see to the care of his ship. He knows he will never take it a-roving again."

"I feared that," Hawk murmured.

"We grieve for him on our own garth too," she said. "In former days, he was a staunch friend to us. Now we bear with his ways, yes, insults that would make my father draw blade on anybody else."

"That is dear of you," Hawk said, staring straight before him. "I'm very thankful."

"You have not much cause for that, have you?" she asked. "I mean, you've been away so long . . . Of course, you have

your mother. She's borne the brunt, stood like a shield before your siblings—" She touched her lips. "I talk too much."

"You talk as a friend," he blurted. "May we always be friends."

They wandered on, along a path from shore to fields. It went by the shaw. Through boles and boughs and falling leaves, they saw Thor's image and altar among the trees. "I'll make offering here for my father's health," Hauk said, "though truth to tell, I've more faith in my own strength than in any gods."

"You have seen lands where strange gods rule," she nodded.

"Yes, and there too, they do not steer things well," he said. "It was in a Christian realm that a huge wolf came raiding flocks, on which no iron would bite. When it took a baby from a hamlet near our camp, I thought I'd be less than a man did I not put an end to it."

"What happened?" she asked breathlessly, and caught his arm.

"I wrestled it barehanded—no foe of mine was ever more fell—and at last broke its neck." He pulled back a sleeve to show scars of terrible bites. "Dead, it changed into a man they had outlawed that year for his evil deeds. We burned the lich to make sure it would not walk again, and thereafter the folk had peace. And . . . we had friends, in a country otherwise wary of us."

She looked on him in the wonder he had hoped for.

Erelong she must return with her father. But the way between the garths was just a few miles, and Hauk often rode or skied through the woods. At home, he and his men helped do what work there was, and gave merriment where it had long been little known.

Thyra owned this to her son, on a snowy day when they were by themselves. They were in the women's bower, whither they had gone to see a tapestry she was weaving. She wanted to know how it showed against those of the Westlands; he had brought one such, which hung above the benches in the hall. Here, in the wide quiet room, was dusk, for the day outside had become a tumbling whiteness. Breath steamed from lips as the two of them spoke. It smelled sweet; both had drunk mead until they could talk freely.

"You did better than you knew when you came back,"

The Tale of Hawk

Thyra said. "You blew like spring into this winter of ours. Einar and Unn were withering; they blossom again in your nearness."

"Strangely has our father changed," Hawk answered sadly. "I remember once when I was small, how he took me by the hand on a frost-clear night, led me forth under the stars, and named for me the pictures in them, Thor's Wain, Freyja's Spindle—how wonderful he made them, how his deep slow laughterful voice filled the dark."

"A wasting illness draws the soul inward," his mother said. "He . . . has no more manhood . . . and it tears him like fangs that he will die helpless in bed. He must strike out at someone, and here we are."

She was silent a while before she added: "He will not live out the year. Then you must take over."

"I must be gone when weather allows," Hawk warned. "I promised Ottar."

"Return as soon as may be," Thyra said. "We have need of a strong man, the more so now when yonder King Harald would reave their freehold rights from yeomen."

"It would be well to have a hearth of my own," Hawk stared past her, toward the unseen woods. Her worn face creased in a smile.

Suddenly they heard yells from the yard below. Hawk ran out onto the gallery and looked down. Geirolf was shambling after an aged carl named Atli. He had a whip in his hand and was lashing it across the white locks and wrinkled cheeks of the man, who could not run fast either and who sobbed.

"What is this?" broke from Hawk. He swung himself over the rail, hung, and let go. The drop would at least have jarred the wind out of most. He, though, bounced from where he landed, ran behind his father, caught hold of the whip and wrenched it from Geirolf's grasp. "What are you doing?"

Geirolf howled and struck his son with a doubled fist. Blood trickled from Hawk's mouth. He stood fast. Atli sank to hands and knees and fought not to weep.

"Are you also a heelbiter of mine?" Geirolf bawled.

"I'd save you from your madness, father," Hawk said in pain. "Atli followed you to battle ere I was born—he dandled me on his knee—and he's a free man. What has he done, that you'd bring down on us the anger of his kinfolk?"

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"Harm not the skipper, young man," Atli begged. "I fled because I'd sooner die than lift hand against my skipper."

"Hell swallow you both!" Geirolf would have cursed further, but the coughing came on him. Blood drops flew through the snowflakes, down onto the white earth, where they mingled with the drip from the heads of Hauk and Atli. Doubled over, Geirolf let them half lead, half carry him to his shut-bed. There he closed the panel and lay alone in darkness.

"What happened between you and him?" Hauk asked.

"I was fixing to shoe a horse," Atli said into a ring of gaping onlookers. "He came in and wanted to know why I'd not asked his leave. I told him 'twas plain Kilfaxi needed new shoes. Then he hollered, 'I'll show you I'm no log in the woodpile!' and snatched yon whip off the wall and took after me." The old man squared his shoulders. "We'll speak no more of this, you hear?" he ordered the household.

Nor did Geirolf, when next day he let them bring him some broth.

For more reasons than this, Hauk came to spend much of his time at Leif's garth. He would return in such a glow that even the reproachful looks of his young sister and brother, even the sullen or the weary greeting of his father, could not dampen it.

At last, when lengthening days and quickening blood bespoke seafarings soon to come, that happened which surprised nobody. Hauk told them in the hall that he wanted to marry Alfild Leifsdottir, and prayed Geirolf press the suit for him. "What must be, will be," said his father, a better grace than awaited. Union of the families was clearly good for both.

Leif Egilsson agreed, and Alfild had nothing but aye to say. The betrothal feast crowded the whole neighborhood together in cheer. Thyra hid the trouble within her, and Geirolf himself was calm if not blithe.

Right after, Hauk and his men were busking themselves to fare. Regardless of his doubts about gods, he led in offering for a safe voyage to Thor, Aegir, and St. Michael. But Alfild found herself a quiet place alone, to cut runes on an ash tree in the name of Freyja.

When all was ready, she was there with the folk of Geirolf's stead to see the sailors off. That morning was keen, wind roared in trees and skirled between cliffs, waves ran green

The Tale of Hawk

and white beneath small flying clouds. Unn could not but hug her brother who was going, while Einar gave him a handclasp that shook. Thyra said, "Come home hale and early, my son." Alfild mostly stored away the sight of Hawk. Atli and others of the household mumbled this and that.

Geirolf shuffled forward. The cane on which he leaned rattled among the stones of the beach. He was hunched in a hairy cloak against the sharp air. His locks fell tangled almost to the coal-smoldering eyes. "Father, farewell," Hawk said, taking his free hand.

"You mean 'fare far,' don't you?" Geirolf grated. "'Fare far and never come back.' You'd like that, wouldn't you? But we will meet again. Oh, yes, we will meet again."

Hawk dropped the hand. Geirolf turned and sought the house. The rest behaved as if they had not heard, speaking loudly, amidst yelps of laughter, to overcome those words of foreboding. Soon Hawk called his orders to be gone.

Men scrambled aboard the laden ship. Its sail slatted aloft and filled, the mooring lines were cast loose, the hull stood out to sea. Alfild waved until it was gone from sight behind the bend where Disafoss fell.

The summer passed—plowing, sowing, lambing, calving, farrowing, hoeing, reaping, flailing, butchering—rain, hail, sun, stars, loves, quarrels, births, deaths—and the season wore toward fall. Alfild was seldom at Geirolf's garth, nor was Leif; for Hawk's father grew steadily worse. After mid-summer he could no longer leave his bed. But often he whispered, between lung-tearing coughs, to those who tended him, "I would kill you if I could."

On a dark day late in the season, when rain roared about the hall and folk and hounds huddled close to fires that hardly lit the gloom around, Geirolf awoke from a heavy sleep. Thyra marked it and came to him. Cold and dankness gnawed their way through her clothes. The fever was in him like a brand. He plucked restlessly at his blanket, where he half sat in his short shut-bed. Though flesh had wasted from the great bones, his fingers still had strength to tear the wool. The mattress rustled under him. "Straw-death, straw-death," he muttered.

Thyra laid a palm on his brow. "Be at ease," she said.

It dragged from him: "You'll not be rid . . . of me . . . so

fast . . . by straw-death." An icy sweat broke forth and the last struggle began.

Long it was, Geirolf's gasps and the sputtering flames the only noises within that room, while rain and wind ramped outside and night drew in. Thyra stood by the bedside to wipe the sweat off her man, blood and spittle from his beard. A while after sunset, he rolled his eyes back and died.

Thyra called for water and lamps. She cleansed him, clad him in his best, and laid him out. A drawn sword was on his breast.

In the morning, thralls and carls alike went forth under her orders. A hillock stood in the fields about half a mile inland from the house. They dug a grave chamber in the top of this, lining it well with timber. "Won't you bury him in his ship?" asked Atli.

"It is rotten, unworthy of him," Thyra said. Yet she made them haul it to the barrow, around which she had stones to outline a hull. Meanwhile folk readied a grave-ale, and messengers bade neighbors come.

When all were there, men of Geirolf's carried him on a litter to his resting place and put him in, together with weapons and a jar of Southland coins. After beams had roofed the chamber, his friends from aforetime took shovels and covered it well. They replaced the turfs of sere grass, leaving the hillock as it had been save that it was now bigger. Einar Thorolfsson kindled his father's ship. It burned till dusk, when the horns of the new moon stood over the fjord. Meanwhile folk had gone back down to the garth to feast and drink. Riding home next day, well gifted by Thyra, they told each other that this had been an honorable burial.

The moon waxed. On the first night that it rose full, Geirolf came again.

A thrall named Kark had been late in the woods, seeking a strayed sheep. Coming home, he passed near the howe. The moon was barely above the pines; long shivery glades of light ran on the water, lost themselves in shadows ashore, glinted wanly anew where a bedewed stone wall snaked along a stubblefield. Stars were few. A great stillness lay on the land; not even an owl hooted, until all at once dogs down in the garth began howling. It was not the way they howled at the moon; across the mile between, it sounded ragged and terrified.

The Tale of Hawk

Kark felt the chill close in around him, and hastened toward home.

Something heavy trod the earth. He looked around and saw the bulk of a huge man coming across the field from the barrow. "Who's that?" he called uneasily. No voice replied, but the weight of those footfalls shivered through the ground into his bones. Kark swallowed, gripped his staff, and stood where he was. But then the shape came so near that moonlight picked out the head of Geirolf. Kark screamed, dropped his weapon, and ran.

Geirolf followed slowly, clumsily behind.

Down in the garth, light glimmered red as doors opened. Folk saw Kark running, gasping for breath. Atli and Einar led the way out, each with a torch in one hand, a sword in the other. Little could they see beyond the wild flame-gleam. Kark reached them, fell, writhed on the hard-beaten clay of the yard, and wailed.

"What is it, you lackwit?" Atli snapped, and kicked him. Then Einar pointed his blade.

"A stranger—" Atli began.

Geirolf rocked into sight. The mould of the grave clung to him. His eyes stared unblinking, unmoving, blank in the moonlight, out of a gray face whereon the skin crawled. The teeth in his tangled beard were dry. No breath smoked from his nostrils. He held out his arms, crook-fingered.

"Father!" Einar cried. The torch hissed from his grip, flickered weakly at his feet, and went out. The men at his back jammed the doorway of the hall as they sought its shelter.

"The skipper's come again," Atli quavered. He sheathed his sword, though that was hard when his hand shook, and made himself step forward. "Skipper, d'you know your old shipmate Atli?"

The dead man grabbed him, lifted him, and dashed him to earth. Einar heard bones break. Atli jerked once and lay still. Geirolf trod him and Kark underfoot. There was a sound of cracking and rending. Blood spurted forth.

Blindly, Einar swung blade. The edge smote but would not bite. A wave of grave-chill passed over him. He whirled and bounded back inside.

Thyra had seen. "Bar the door," she bade. The windows were already shuttered against frost. "Men, stand fast. Women, stoke up the fires."

They heard the lich groping about the yard. Walls creaked where Geirolf blundered into them. Thyra called through the door, "Why do you wish us ill, your own household?" But only those noises gave answer. The hounds cringed and whined.

"Lay iron at the doors and under every window," Thyra commanded. "If it will not cut him, it may keep him out."

All that night, then, folk huddled in the hall. Geirolf climbed onto the roof and rode the ridgepole, drumming his heels on the shakes till the whole building boomed. A little before sunrise, it stopped. Peering out by the first dull dawnlight, Thyra saw no mark of her husband but his deep-sunken footprints and the wrecked bodies he had left.

"He grew so horrible before he died," Unn wept. "Now he can't rest, can he?"

"We'll make him an offering," Thyra said through her weariness. "It may be we did not give him enough when we buried him."

Few would follow her to the howe. Those who dared, brought along the best horse on the farm. Einar, as the son of the house when Hauk was gone, himself cut its throat after a sturdy man had given the hammer-blow. Carls and wenches butchered the carcass, which Thyra and Unn cooked over a fire in whose wood was blent the charred rest of the dragon-ship. Nobody cared to eat much of the flesh or broth. Thyra poured what was left over the bones, upon the grave.

Two ravens circled in sight, waiting for folk to go so they could take the food. "Is that a good sign?" Thyra sighed. "Will Odin fetch Geirolf home?"

That night everybody who had not fled to neighboring steads gathered in the hall. Soon after the moon rose, they heard the footfalls come nearer and nearer. They heard Geirolf break into the storehouse and worry the laid-out bodies of Atli and Kark. They heard him kill cows in the barn. Again he rode the roof.

In the morning Leif Egilsson arrived, having gotten the news. He found Thyra too tired and shaken to do anything further. "The ghost did not take your offering," he said, "but maybe the gods will."

In the oakenshaw, he led the giving of more beasts. There was talk of a thrall for Odin, but he said that would not help if this did not. Instead, he saw to the proper burial of the

slain, and of those kine which nobody would dare eat. That night he abode there.

And Geirolf came back. Throughout the darkness, he tormented the home which had been his.

"I will bide here one more day," Leif said next sunrise. "We all need rest—though ill is it that we must sleep during daylight when we've so much readying for winter to do."

By that time, some other neighborhood men were also on hand. They spoke loudly of how they would hew the lich asunder.

"You know not what you boast of," said aged Grim the Wise. "Einar smote, and he strikes well for a lad, but the iron would not bite. It never will. Ghost-strength is in Geirolf, and all the wrath he could not set free during his life."

That night folk waited breathless for moonrise. But when the gnawed shield climbed over the pines, nothing stirred. The dogs, too, no longer seemed cowed. About midnight, Grim murmured into the shadows, "Yes, I thought so. Geirolf walks only when the moon is full."

"Then tomorrow we'll dig him up and burn him!" Leif said.

"No," Grim told them. "That would spell the worst of luck for everybody here. Don't you see, the anger and unpeace which will not let him rest, those could be forever unslaked? They could not but bring doom on the burners."

"What then can we do?" Thyra asked dully.

"Leave this stead," Grim counselled, "at least when the moon is full."

"Hard will that be," Einar sighed. "Would that my brother Hauk were here."

"He should have returned erenow," Thyra said. "May we in our woe never know that he has come to grief himself."

In truth, Hauk had not. His wares proved welcome in Flanders, where he bartered for cloth that he took across to England. There Ottar greeted him, and he met the young King Alfred. At that time there was no war going on with the Danes, who were settling into the Danelaw and thus in need of household goods. Hauk and Ottar did a thriving business among them. This led them to think they might do as well in Iceland, whither Norse folk were moving who liked not King Harald Fairhair. They made a voyage to see, Foul winds

hampered them on the way home. Hence fall was well along when Hauk's ship returned.

The day was still and cold. Low overcast turned sky and water the hue of iron. A few gulls cruised and mewed, while under them sounded creak and splash of oars, swearing of men, as the knorr was rowed. At the end of the fjord-branch, garth and leaves were tiny splashes of color, lost against rearing cliffs, brown fields, murky wildwood. Straining ahead from afar, Hauk saw that a bare handful of men came down to the shore, moving listlessly more than watchfully. When his craft was unmistakable, though, a few women—no youngsters—sped from the hall as if they could not wait. Their cries came to him more thin than the gulls'.

Hauk lay alongside the dock. Springing forth, he cried merrily, "Where is everybody? How fares Alfild?" His words lost themselves in silence. Fear touched him, "What's wrong?"

Thyra trod forth. Years might have gone by during his summer abroad, so changed was she. "You are barely in time," she said in an unsteady tone. Taking his hands, she told him how things stood.

Hauk stared long into emptiness. At last, "Oh, no," he whispered. "What's to be done?"

"We hoped you might know that, my son," Thyra answered. "The moon will be full tomorrow night."

His voice stumbled. "I am no wizard. If the gods themselves would not lay this ghost, what can I do?"

Einar spoke, in the brashness of youth: "We thought you might deal with him as you did with the werewolf."

"But that was—No, I cannot!" Hauk croaked. "Never ask me."

"Then I fear we must leave," Thyra said. "For aye. You see how many have already fled, thrall and free alike, though nobody else has a place for them. We've not enough left to farm these acres. And who would buy them of us? Poor must we go, helpless as the poor ever are."

"Iceland—" Hauk wet his lips. "Well, you shall not want while I live." Yet he had counted on this homestead, whether to dwell on or sell.

"Tomorrow we move over to Leif's garth, for the next three days and nights," Thyra said.

Unn shuddered. "I know not if I can come back," she said.

The Tale of Hauk

"This whole past month here, I could hardly ever sleep." Dulled skin and sunken eyes bore her out.

"What else would you do?" Hauk asked.

"Whatever I can," she stammered, and broke into tears. He knew: wedding herself too young to whoever would have her dowryless, poor though the match would be—or making her way to some town to turn whore, his little sister.

"Let me think on this," Hauk begged. "Maybe I can hit on something."

His crew were also daunted when they heard. At eventide they sat in the hall and gave only a few curt words about what they had done in foreign parts. Everyone lay down early on bed, bench, or floor, but none slept well.

Before sunset, Hauk had walked forth alone. First he sought the grave of Atli. "I'm sorry, dear old friend," he said. Afterward he went to Geirolf's howe. It loomed yellow-gray with withered grass wherein grinned the skull of the slaughtered horse. At its foot were strewn the charred bits of the ship, inside stones that outlined a greater but unreal hull. Around reached stubblefields and walls, hemmed in by woods on one side and water on the other, rock lifting sheer beyond. The chill and the quiet had deepened.

Hauk climbed to the top of the barrow and stood there a while, head bent downward. "Oh, father," he said, "I learned doubt in Christian lands. What's right for me to do?" There was no answer. He made a slow way back to the dwelling.

All were up betimes next day. It went slowly over the woodland path to Leif's, for animals must be herded along. The swine gave more trouble than most. Hauk chuckled once, not very merrily, and remarked that at least this took folk's minds off their sorrows. He raised no mirth.

But he had Alfild ahead of him. At the end of the way, he sprinted into the yard. Leif owned less land than Geirolf, his buildings were smaller and fewer, most of his guests must house outdoors in sleeping bags. Hauk paid no heed. "Alfild!" he called. "I'm here!"

She left the dough she was kneading and sped to him. They hugged each other hard and long, in sight of the whole world. None thought that shame, as things were. At last she said, striving not to weep, "How we've longed for you! Now the nightmare can end."

THE WORLD'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 4

He stepped back. "What mean you?" he uttered slowly, knowing full well.

"Why—" She was bewildered. "Won't you give him his second death?"

Hauk gazed past her for some heartbeats before he said: "Come aside with me."

Hand in hand, they wandered off. A meadow lay hidden from the garth by a stand of aspen. Elsewhere around, pines speared into a sky that today was bright. Clouds drifted on a nipping breeze. Far off, a stag bugled.

Hauk spread feet apart, hooked thumbs in belt, and made himself meet her eyes. "You think over-highly of my strength," he said.

"Who has more?" she asked. "We kept ourselves going by saying you would come home and make things good again."

"What if the drow is too much for me?" His words sounded raw through the hush. Leaves dropped yellow from their boughs.

She flushed. "Then your name will live."

"Yes—" Softly he spoke the words of the High One:

*"Kine die, kinfolk die,
and so at last oneself.*

This I know that never dies:

how dead men's deeds are deemed."

"You will do it!" she cried gladly.

His head shook before it drooped. "No. I will not, I dare not."

She stood as if he had clubbed her.

"Won't you understand?" he began.

The wound he had dealt her hopes went too deep. "So you show yourself a nothing!"

"Hear me," he said, shaken. "Were the lich anybody else's—"

Overwrought beyond reason, she slapped him and choked, "The gods bear witness, I give them my holiest oath, never will I wed you unless you do this thing. See, by my blood I swear." She whipped out her dagger and gashed her wrists. Red rills coursed out and fell in drops on the fallen leaves.

He was aghast. "You know not what you say. You're too young, you've been too sheltered. *Listen.*"

She would have fled from him, but he gripped her shoulders and made her stand. "Listen," went between his teeth.

The Tale of Hawk

"Geirolf is still my father—my father who begot me, reared me, named the stars for me, weaponed me to make my way in the world. How can I fight him? Did I slay him, what horror would come upon me and mine?"

"O-o-oh," broke from Alfild. She sank to the ground and wept as if to tear loose her ribs.

He knelt, held her, gave what soothing he could. "Now I know," she mourned. "Too late."

"Never," he murmured. "We'll fare abroad if we must, take new land, make new lives together."

"No," she gasped. "Did I not swear? What doom awaits an oathbreaker?"

Then he was long still. Heedlessly though she had spoken, her blood lay in the earth, which would remember.

He too was young. He straightened. "I will fight," he said.

Now she clung to him and pleaded that he must not. But an iron calm had come over him. "Maybe I will not be cursed," he said. "Or maybe the curse will be no more than I can bear."

"It will be mine too, I who brought it on you," she plighted herself.

Hand in hand again, they went back to the garth. Leif spied the haggard look on them and half guessed what had happened. "Will you fare to meet the drow, Hawk?" he asked. "Wait till I can have Grim the Wise brought here. His knowledge may help you."

"No," said Hawk. "Waiting would weaken me. I go this night."

Wide eyes stared at him—all but Thyra's; she was too torn.

Toward evening he busked himself. He took no helm, shield, or byrnie, for the dead man bore no weapons. Some said they would come along, armored themselves well, and offered to be at his side. He told them to follow him, but no farther than to watch what happened. Their iron would be of no help, and he thought they would only get in each other's way, and his, when he met the overhuman might of the drow. He kissed Alfild, his mother, and his sister, and clasped hands with his brother, bidding them stay behind if they loved him.

Long did the few miles of path seem, and gloomy under the pines. The sun was on the world's rim when men came out in the open. They looked past fields and barrow down to

the empty garth, the fjordside cliffs, the water where the sun lay as half an ember behind a trail of blood. Clouds hurried on a wailing wind through a greenish sky. Cold struck deep. A wolf howled.

"Wait here," Hauk said.

"The gods be with you," Leif breathed.

"I've naught tonight but my own strength," Hauk said.

"Belike none of us ever had more."

His tall form, clad in leather and wadmal, showed black athwart the sunset as he walked from the edge of the woods, out across plowland toward the crouching howe. The wind fluttered his locks, a last brightness until the sun went below. Then for a while the evenstar alone had light.

Hauk reached the mound. He drew sword and leaned on it, waiting. Dusk deepened. Star after star came forth, small and strange. Clouds blowing across them picked up a glow from the still unseen moon.

It rose at last above the treetops. Its ashen sheen stretched gashes of shadow across earth. The wind loudened.

The grave groaned. Turfs, stones, timbers swung aside. Geirolf shambled out beneath the sky. Hauk felt the ground shudder under his weight. There came a carrion stench, though the only sign of rotting was on the dead man's clothes. His eyes peered dim, his teeth gnashed dry in a face at once well remembered and hideously changed. When he saw the living one who waited, he veered and lumbered thitherward.

"Father," Hauk called. "It's I, your eldest son."

The drow drew nearer.

"Halt, I beg you," Hauk said unsteadily. "What can I do to bring you peace?"

A cloud passed over the moon. It seemed to be hurtling through heaven. Geirolf reached for his son with fingers that were ready to clutch and tear. "Hold," Hauk shrilled. "No step farther."

He could not see if the gaping mouth grinned. In another stride, the great shape came well-nigh upon him. He lifted his sword and brought it singing down. The edge struck truly, but slid aside. Geirolf's skin heaved, as if to push the blade away. In one more step, he laid grave-cold hands around Hauk's neck.

Before that grip could close, Hauk dropped his useless

The Tale of Hawk

weapon, brought his wrists up between Geirolf's, and mightily snapped them apart. Nails left furrows, but he was free. He sprang back, into a wrestler's stance.

Geirolf moved in, reaching. Hawk hunched under those arms and himself grabbed waist and thigh. He threw his shoulder against a belly like rock. Any live man would have gone over, but the lich was too heavy.

Geirolf smote Hawk on the side. The blows drove him to his knees and thundered on his back. A foot lifted to crush him. He rolled off and found his own feet again. Geirolf lurched after him. The hastening moon linked their shadows. The wolf howled anew, but in fear. Watching men gripped spearshafts till their knuckles stood bloodless.

Hawk braced his legs and snatched for the first hold, around both of Geirolf's wrists. The drow strained to break loose and could not; but neither could Hawk bring him down. Sweat ran moon-bright over the son's cheeks and darkened his shirt. The reek of it was at least a living smell in his nostrils. Breath tore at his gullet. Suddenly Geirolf wrenched so hard that his right arm tore from between his foe's fingers. He brought that hand against Hawk's throat. Hawk let go and slammed himself backward before he was throttled.

Geirolf stalked after him. The drow did not move fast. Hawk sped behind and pounced on the broad back. He seized an arm of Geirolf's and twisted it around. But the dead cannot feel pain. Geirolf stood fast. His other hand groped about, got Hawk by the hair, and yanked. Live men can hurt. Hawk stumbled away. Blood ran from his scalp into his eyes and mouth, hot and salt.

Geirolf turned and followed. He would not tire. Hawk had no long while before strength ebbed. Almost, he fled. Then the moon broke through to shine full on his father.

"You . . . shall not . . . go on . . . like that," Hawk mumbled while he snapped after air.

The drow reached him. They closed, grappled, swayed, stamped to and fro, in wind and flickery moonlight. Then Hawk hooked an ankle behind Geirolf's and pushed. With a huge thud, the drow crashed to earth. He dragged Hawk along.

Hawk's bones felt how terrible was the grip upon him. He let go his own hold. Instead, he arched his back and pushed

himself away. His clothes ripped. But he burst free and reeled to his feet.

Geirolf turned over and began to crawl up. His back was once more to Hauk. The young man sprang. He got a knee hard in between the shoulderblades, while both his arms closed on the frosty head before him.

He hauled. With the last and greatest might that was in him, he hauled. Blackness went in tatters before his eyes.

There came a loud snapping sound. Geirolf ceased pawing behind him. He sprawled limp. His neck was broken, his jawbone wrenched from the skull. Hauk climbed slowly off him, shuddering. Geirolf stirred, rolled, half rose. He lifted a hand toward Hauk. It traced a line through the air and a line growing from beneath that. Then he slumped and lay still.

Hauk crumpled too.

"Follow me who dare!" Leif roared, and went forth across the field. One by one, as they saw nothing move ahead of them, the men came after. At last they stood hushed around Geirolf—who was only a harmless dead man now, though the moon shone bright in his eyes—and on Hauk, who had begun to stir.

"Bear him carefully down to the hall," Leif said. "Start a fire and tend him well. Most of you, take from the woodpile and come back here. I'll stand guard meanwhile . . . though I think there is no need."

And so they burned Geirolf there in the field. He walked no more.

In the morning, they brought Hauk back to Leif's garth. He moved as if in dreams. The others were too awestruck to speak much. Even when Alfhild ran to meet him, he could only say, "Hold clear of me. I may be under a doom."

"Did the drow lay a weird on you?" she asked, spear-stricken.

"I know not," he answered. "I think I fell into the dark before he was wholly dead."

"What?" Leif well-nigh shouted. "You did not see the sign he drew?"

"Why, no," Hauk said. "How did it go?"

"Thus. Even afar and by moonlight, I knew." Leif drew it.

"That is no ill-wishing!" Grim cried. "That's naught but the Hammer."

Life rushed back into Hauk. "Do you mean what I hope?"

The Tale of Hauk

"He blessed you," Grim said. "You freed him from what he had most dreaded and hated—his strawdeath. The madness in him is gone, and he has wended hence to the world beyond."

Then Hauk was glad again. He led them all in heaping earth over the ashes of his father, and in setting things right on the farm. That winter, at the feast of Thor, he and Alfild were wedded. Afterward he became well thought of by King Harald, and rose to great wealth. From him and Alfild stem many men whose names are still remembered. Here ends the tale of Hauk the Ghost Slayer.

Grail Undwin

A FARMER ON THE CLYDE

Our next story draws from the French classical fairy tales as its ultimate source: but it is a fairy tale of a new sort, mature, poignant, emotionally honest, written in plain, unadorned English.

Miss Undwin I may modestly claim as my own discovery, for the tale is one of a set of three I received in manuscript. The author writes that she lives in an old stone house in Cornwall which has belonged to her family since the days of Queen Anne. When her husband was killed in the Battle of Britain, she was left with three small children to support. At first she published some of the bedtime stories she had been making up to entertain the youngsters; later, she began writing full-length children's books (under a pen name, or names, I believe).

This is her first attempt at writing fantasy for adults. May Zurvan grant it is very, very far from being her last!

—L.C.

Fuatha was lord of all the elves who inhabited the woods of Celidon, a region of Faërie contiguous to the southern parts of Scotland, and although his demesne lay far beyond the

borders of any of the Seven Kingdoms, he was bound by ties of blood to the elves of Sorchu and of Tirnanog, and owed allegiance to the Queen of Logres, whose name was Tanaquil.

This situation was not precisely pleasing to the elf-earl: for, while Logres was larger and more important than his earldom, Celidon was itself larger than Annwyn, an elf-kingdom in Wales, and much larger than Avalon, which was, after all, a duchy. Fuatha saw no clear reason why, if the ruler of Avalon was a duchess, he should not be at least a duke. Or, better yet, a king.

In a word, he was ambitious. He was also proud, cunning, and clever. And he was scrupulously cautious, as well: for instance, his True Name he kept secret so that it could not be used against him by magic. "Fuatha"—which meant "The Shaggy One"—was the assumed name by which he permitted his subjects to call him.

He was called this for reason of his long mane of dark red hair, which fell nearly to his waist, and which had not been cut in recent centuries. Before a crucial battle against the Fomorians, he had made an oath to Zurvan that, if the victory was given him, he would foreswear the barber's shears forever. The battle, of course, he had won, and with it, all of Celidon.

The dim, ambiguous realm of Faërie interpenetrates the lands of mortal men in a way difficult to understand or to explain. At times we share the same geography with the elves; at other times, we do not. The Wood of Celidon was a case in point: anciently it had stood in mortal lands; but very anciently. The wizard Merlin had lived here once; King Arthur had fought the Saxons in these glens; and certain knights of the Table Round (going almost exactly in the wrong direction) had searched through this Wood for the Sangraal. Now, although no longer part of the lands of men, it *adjoined* them, in a vague and imprecise manner hard to describe. Cities of men had grown up in the space once occupied by the old forest, and farms and villages.

Of such things, Fuatha knew little and cared even less. Peroccupied with his own affairs, the elf-earl meddled little in the doings of mortal men. And both races are perhaps the happier for it.

The reason why Celidon, despite its vast extent and numerous elvish inhabitants, remained an earldom rather than

having become a duchy or a Kingdom, lies, I think, in the very nature of the elves. While mortals worship progress and look ahead to a Utopian future, the greatness of the *Sidhe* lie behind them, and they regard the past with much the interest and veneration with which we regard the future. Darwyd, the earl's archivist and librarian, once explained it succinctly: since the elves left Alfheim after the fall of Asgard to the giants, and the seven tribes became seven clans, then seven nations, and (finally) the Seven Kingdoms, there had always been Seven Kingdoms; and Seven only. The very idea of an Eighth was repugnant and alien to them; they could scarcely even imagine it.

"We are, in all things, my lord, governed by Tradition," Darwyd had summed it up.

This did nothing to assuage Fuatha's feelings of the injustice of it all. Brooding on the inequities he saw to every side, he reiterated these injustices with unassailable logic. Avalon, though a small isle in Maeldun's Sea, was a duchy. Broceliande—a wood like Celidon, contiguous to the coasts of Brittany—was also a duchy, although its duke, Huon, considered himself a king! There was no justice among the *Sidhe*, he concluded savagely, and without knowing it, he echoed a complaint as frequently voiced mortals as by immortals.

Although unsatisfied with his condition, Fuatha possessed in abundance the virtue of patience. This is among the noblest virtues of the elves: indeed, it is difficult not to be patient, when the span of your existence is measured in centuries, even millennia. Any situation, however, discomfiting, is impermanent when considered from the viewpoint of thousands of years. And, in the centuries ahead, anything might happen: one of the Seven Kingdoms might fall to an enemy, requiring its reconquest or—just possibly—its replacement by another monarchy, *perhaps* a former earldom.

Ambitious—and patient—Fuatha also displayed a less common virtue, in that he could be honest with himself. He could admit that which Darwyd was too polite—or too politic—to put into words: that he was not of royal descent. His father had been of a tribe of Welsh elves called the Cochion, while his mother came from a modest and unpretentious family of Danaans in Tirnanog; neither were even remotely related to the royalties of their respective homelands. Fua-

tha's lineage, therefor, however noble, was very far from being royal.

This fact—it is to his credit—did not in the least discountenance the earl. Whatever else might be said of him, Fuatha was in no wise a snob. He had won his earldom of Celion by the sweat of his brow, and by the shedding of considerable quantities of what, in elvish terminology, is analagous to human blood—of which his veins contained, by the way, no single drop. He had come into these northerly and wilderness regions of Faërie, leading a band of disaffected or outcast elves from the south; had overthrown the primitive and savage Fomorian who had formerly possessed this region; had driven them forth into the Orkneys or wherever; and had claimed the demesne for himself and his heirs. A claim which Queen Tanaquil, the daughter of King Oberon, had been pleased to acknowledge and confirm.

But that had been centuries ago (as mortals measure time), and still he was no more than he had been then: an earl. What mattered it to the Elf-Queen of Logres that he had welded the elves of Scotland into a nation, the Sleagh Maith, had tamed the rough and simple Urisks, had allied himself by marriage to the Tylwyth Teg, the royal elves of Wales, taking to wife a daughter of King Gwyn himself (although she was fallow of complexion and had given him only daughters)? He was still only an earl; and it fretted him.

One morning in early fall, from uneasy and tormenting dreams of crowns and coronets, Fuatha woke with a desire to ride forth through his dominions. From the nearest loch he called up the Kelpie which dwelt therein, bade it assume an equine form (which it obediently did, becoming horselike in shape, although transparent, faintly greenish, and with a stiff ridge of spiny fin down its arched neck where the mane should have been), and rode forth into the morning.

The lochs and glens were veiled in floating webs of mist; the leaves upon the trees were turning red and yellow; the bracken and the heather wore misty shades of rust and purple; the air was crisp and cool. Riding at times across the treetops as across a grassy field, Fuatha let the brisk wind comb out his long, thick hair like a banner, and cool his thoughts until he found a measure of tranquillity.

By the Clyde he rested, letting the Kelpie splash and frolic in the shallows. Looking about, he saw a small and humble

farmhouse, ringed about with neat fields, and by the stoop, an old man sitting on a bench. Something about the mortal caught Fuatha's attention: he could not say why. His clothes were simple homespun, rough and none too clean. His hands, knotted with toil, were folded about a knobbed stick. An old dog lay at his feet, panting, tongue lolling flannel-pink, from a morning of rabbit-chasing in the fields. Nothing about the old farmer seemed exceptional, and Fuatha, who seldom even noticed mortals, did not know what there was about this specimen that caught the eye.

Unless it was his face. For his features were, although lined as if by suffering and certainly weathered with age, of a certain nobility and breeding. The brow was high and spacious, the eyes deeply set, and the mouth and nose were finely carven. It was the eyes that held Fuatha's gaze: there was sadness in them, and melancholy, and old, forgotten dreams, and hard-earned wisdom. But above all there was joy.

"Who is that mortal, who seems so content with his miserable lot?" murmured Fuatha, half to himself. But the Kelpie heard; and, being of an inquisitive nature, and widely traveled, was able to reply.

"He is the grandson of a king," the Kelpie said.

"Then mortals, too, have kings? I had not known," mused the elf-earl.

"They do; but sometimes they get rid of the ones they do not want to keep," grinned the Kelpie. "This man spent his youth trying to win back his grandfather's crown, which rightfully was his own. After Culloden, however, there was no more hope left."

Fuatha looked long into the old man's leathery face, finding there peace and serenity, as well as the joy that lived in his eyes. From within the house he heard a woman singing, and the bright laughter of a child.

Fuatha said nothing. The Kelpie shook the water from its glassy flanks and came up on the bank beside him.

"He went back to France, when all was lost, but they would not let him stay. So he vanished from men's knowledge. Some say he reappeared again after a time, and wandered Europe. But others know better, and say he returned to Scotland to seek his beloved Flora and to live out his years peacefully as a farmer on the Clyde."

A Farmer on the Clyde

There was something in Fuatha's cold, proud, beautiful face that had not been there before.

"If mortal men, who are like the blowfly, creatures of the morning, perishing with the day, can live without a crown," he said slowly, "cannot I, who shall live for ages?"

The Kelpie made no answer, but again it grinned.

"Come, take me back to the castle," said Fuatha, swinging himself upon the Kelpie's back. And they rode away, leaving Bonny Prince Charlie dreaming in the sun beside the door of his kingdom.

Clark Ashton Smith

PRINCE ALCOUZ AND THE MAGICIAN

Smith, on the other hand, was more excited by the Arabian Nights and imitations such as Beckford's astonishing novel, Vathek, than by the Norse myths; as he ably demonstrates in the tale which follows.

Only recently discovered in manuscript and published by Roy Squires, this brief fable is considered one of the very earliest of Smith's experiments in fiction to have survived. Squires is of the opinion that it was written around 1910-12, about the same time as his very first tales. It may indeed be his very first fantasy—who knows? Anyway, in its brevity and extreme, almost poetic, precision of phrase, it seems to demonstrate that Smith was feeling his way from verse to prose narrative.

A minor work, obviously. But even the minor work of a major fantasist is of interest.

—L.C.

Alcouz Khan was the only son of Yakoob Ullah, Sultan of Balkh. Unruly and vicious by nature, he was anything but improved by the luxury and power of his position. He grew up overbearing, cruel, and dissolute, and with mature years his faults and vices only became more pronounced. He was

Prince Alcouz and the Magician

exactly the opposite of his father, who was a wise and just ruler and had endeared himself to the people.

The prince spent his time in reprehensible sports and dissipation and kept evil companions. His father often remonstrated with him, but without effect. He sighed when he thought of the day not far distant, for he was growing old, when Alcouz would come to the throne. The prince's succession, indeed, was universally dreaded, for well the people knew what manner of Sultan the cruel, dissipated youth would make.

There came to Balkh from Hindustan a noted magician, by name Amaroo. He soon became famous for his skill in foretelling the future. His patrons were many and of all stations in life, for the desire to tear aside the veil of the future is universal.

Alcouz, actuated by the common impulse, visited him. The magician, a small man with fiery, gleaming eyes, who wore flowing robes, arose from the couch whereon he had been sitting wrapped in meditation, and salaamed low.

"I have come to thee," said Alcouz, "that thou mayest read for me the hidden and inscrutable decrees of fate."

"In so far as lies my ability, I will serve thee," replied the Hindu. He motioned his visitor to be seated and proceeded with his preparations. He spoke a few words in a tongue Alcouz could not understand and the room became darkened except for the dim, flickering light from a brazier of burning coals. Into this Amaroo cast various perfumed woods, which he had at hand. A thick black smoke arose, and standing in it, his figure half-hidden and seemingly grown taller and more impressive, he recited incantations in the strange and unknown tongue.

The room lightened and seemed to widen out indefinitely, with it the black vapor. Alcouz could no longer see the walls and the room seemed some vast cavern shut in at a distance by darkness. The smoke formed itself into curling, fantastic shapes which took on rapidly the semblance of human beings. At the same time the walls of darkness contracted till they limited a space as large as the Sultan's throne room. More smoke arose from the brazier and grew to long rows of pillars and to a dais and throne. A shadowy figure sat upon the throne before which the other figures assembled and knelt.

THE WORLD'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 4

They rapidly became clearer, more distinct, and Alcouz recognized them.

The place was the royal throne room, and the seated figure was himself. The others were officers of the court and his personal friends. A crown was placed on Alcouz's head and his courtiers knelt down in homage. The scene was maintained awhile and then the shapes re-dissolved into black vapor.

Amaroo stood at the prince's side. "What thou hast beheld will in time come to pass," he said. "Now thou shalt look upon another event."

Again he stood in the whirling smoke and chanted incantations, and again the vapor grew to pillars and a throne occupied by the solitary figure of Alcouz. He was sitting with unseeing eyes, absorbed in meditation. Anon a slave entered and seemed to speak to him, then withdrew.

Then came a figure which Alcouz recognized as that of Amaroo, the Hindu magician. He knelt before the throne and seemed to present some petition. The seated shape was apparently about to reply, when the Hindu, springing suddenly to his feet, drew a long knife from his bosom and stabbed him.

Almost at the same instant, Alcouz, who was watching horror-stricken, gave a wild cry and fell dead, stabbed to the heart by the magician, who had crept up behind him unobserved.

Robert E. Howard and Andrew J. Offutt

NEKHT SEMERKEHT

It seems appropriate to follow what may be Clark Ashton Smith's first fantasy with what is definitely Robert E. Howard's last. He was still working on it when, depressed by the news that his dying mother had fallen into a coma from which she would never wake, he committed suicide.

All these years the unfinished story has lain in manuscript. Just recently, Andy Offutt completed it—perfectly, I think, for the seams certainly don't show, and the moody, somber coloring throughout is Howard's own.

—L.C.

"And what I am sure of is that there is not any gold or any other metal in that country."—Coronado

The snap of a bowstring broke the stillness, and was followed by the shrill scream of a horse death-stricken. The Spanish animal reared, the feathered end of the arrow quivering high behind its foreleg, and went down in a headlong plunge. Its rider sprang free as it fell, to alight on his feet with a dry clang of steel. He staggered, empty hands flung wide, fighting to regain his balance. His matchlock had fallen several feet away and the match had gone out.

THE WORLD'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 4

He drew his broadsword and looked about him, trying to locate the beady black eyes he knew glittered at him from somewhere in the close-set greasewood bushes that edged the rim of the dry wash to his left. Even as he sought the slayer of his steed, the man appeared—he rose erect and sprang over a low shrub almost in one movement. A vengeful yell of triumph quivered in the late afternoon stillness.

An instant they faced one another, separated by more than the fifty foot stretch of tawny sand—the New World and the Old personified in the two men.

About them, from horizon to horizon, the naked plains swept away and away to mingle in the faint ocean-like haze that hovered along the turquoise rim of the sky. No bird cried, no beast moved. The dead horse lay motionless. In all that vast expanse these two men were the only living, sentient beings; the tall, gray-bearded man in tarnished steel and the copper-skinned brave naked in his beaded loin-clout, black eyes burning redly under the square-cut bang of his black mane.

Those fierce eyes flickered toward the matchlock, lying out of reach and useless, and the red glints grew more lurid. The Chiricahua—known to the Spaniards as *llanero*, plainsmen, had learned the deadliness of the “white” men’s guns. But now he was sure the advantage was with him. His left hand gripped a short, stout bow of bois d’arc, backed with sinew; in his right was the flint-headed arrow of dogwood. The stone-headed hatchet remained at his girdle; he had no intention of coming within the sweep of the long sword that glimmered dully in the rays of the westering sun.

For an instant the tableau held motionless, while he swept his fierce gaze over his enemy. He knew flint darts would splinter on the white man’s armour—but no vizor covered the bearded face. Yet, he was unwilling to waste a single arrow, each of which represented hours of tedious toil.

Cat-like he glided toward his prey, not in a straight line but springing lightly from side to side, to confuse the other, to make him shift his position and so catch him at the end of a motion, where he could not dodge the leap of winged death at him. The brave did not fear a sudden sword-swinging rush. The steel-clad man could never match his own fleetness of foot. The white was at his mercy and he could kill in his own way, without risk.

With a short fierce cry he stopped short, whipped up the bow and jerked back the arrow—just as the white man plucked a pistol from his belt and fired point-blank.

The arrow whined erratically skyward. The bow slipped from the warrior's hands as he went to his knees, choking. Blood gushed between the fingers that clutched at his muscular breast. He sank down in the sand, still glaring his hate. Glazing eyes fixed on his slayer in a last spasm of despairing hatred. The white man had always something in reserve, something unknown and unguessed. The warrior saw the armored man looming above him like a grim god of steel, implacable and unconquerable, with bleak and pitiless eyes. In that gleaming figure the brave read the ultimate doom of his entire race.

Weakly, as a dying snake hisses, he reared his head, spat at his slayer, and slid back dead.

Hernando de Guzman sheathed his sword. He reloaded the clumsy wheel-lock pistol and replaced it beside its mate, reflecting briefly that it was well for him that this particular *llanero* had not been familiar with the shorter arms.

The Spaniard sighed as he looked down at his dead horse. Like many of his race, he had a fondness for fine horses and displayed toward them a kindliness he seldom showed to human beings—if ever. He made no move to secure the ornately decorated saddle and bridle. In the miles he must cover, afoot now, he would find exhaustion enough without further burdening himself. The matchlock he secured. With it resting on his shoulder he stood motionless, seeking to orient himself.

A feeling that he was already lost had been tugging at him for the last hour, even with his horse under him. Veteran though he was, Hernando de Guzman had wandered farther afield than was wise, in vain pursuit of an antelope whose flaring white scud, gleaming in the sunlight, had led him like a will-o'-the-wisp over sand hills and prairie. He had tried to keep the location of the camp in his mind. He feared that he had failed; no landmarks interrupted these plains that swept without break from sunrise to sunset. An expedition, driving its own sustenance on the hoof, was like a ship groping its way across an unknown sea, its only chance of survival resting in its self-sufficiency. A lone rider was like a man

adrift in an open boat, without food or water or compass. And a man *afoot* . . .

A man alone and afoot was as good as dead, unless he could swiftly reach his companions. Briefly exploring the shallow gully in hopes of finding a horse, de Guzman knew he could not. The Chiricahua had not taken to horse-riding. Steeds strayed or stolen from the Spaniards were used as food, though Hernando had heard of a terrible tribe to the north whose warriors were already horsemen.

Choosing the direction he hoped was right, he took up his march. Lifting his morion, he ran his fingers through damp, graying locks, but the heat of the sun made him replace it. Years of wearing armor had accustomed him to the weight and heat of the steel that encased him. Later it would add to his weariness, but it might stand him in good stead if he met other roaming warriors of the plains. The presence of the lone brave he had slain proved that a whole clan abode somewhere in the vicinity.

The sun dipped toward the western horizon. Across its staring red eye he moved, a pigmy in the midst of the illimitable plain that mocked him in its grim vastness and silence. De Guzman walked.

The sun seemed to poise on the desert rim before it rushed from sight and sent a thin streamer of crimson running north and south around the horizon. The sky seemed to expand, to deepen with the sunset. Already in the east the hot volcanic blue was paling to the steel of Toledo swords.

De Guzman stopped and dropped the butt of his matchlock to the earth. It rang on that hard ground, and left no imprint. When he looked back the way he'd come, he was unable to trace his own route over the short springy grass. He had left no footprints. He might have been a phantom, drifting futilely across a sleeping, indifferent land. The plains were impervious to human efforts. Man left no trace on them; he marched, fought, struggled and died cursing the gods that betrayed him—but the plains dreamed on, with no more trace of his passing than he left on the surface of the sea.

"Gold," muttered de Guzman, and he laughed sardonically.

He had come a long way since his horse fell. If he were going in the right direction, he'd have approached the camp near enough to hear the shots the men would be firing to

guide him back. He heard nothing. He was lost. He knew not in which direction to turn. The plains had claimed him for their own. His bones, bred of the wheat and oil and wind of Old Spain, would bleach on the dreary expanse with the bones of the Chiricahua and horse, coyote and rattlesnake.

I am dead.

The thought stirred in him no religious or sentimental horror. Spain was far away, a dream-like memory, a land of Cockaigne that had once been real, in the golden glow of youth and desire, but now had no more reality than a ghost-continent lost in a sea of mist.

"Spanish blood's no more sacred than any other," he muttered.

Aye. Blood was only blood, and he had seen oceans of it spilled: Spanish blood, English blood, Huguenot blood, Inca blood and Aztec, the royal but hardly purple blood of Montezuma dripping from the parapets of Tenochtitlan . . . blood running ankle-deep in the plaza of Cajamarca, about the slipping, frantic feet of doomed Atahualpa.

But the will to live burned fiercely in de Guzman's breast, the blind black instinct toward life that had no relation to intellect or reason. As such, de Guzman recognized and obeyed it. He had taken many lives; he strove to keep his own, this man who had no illusions concerning existence. He knew what all men knew who had bared its core, and he licked his lips and said it now, for no ears save his own:

"The game is not worth the candle."

We men rationalize the blind instinct of self-preservation and we build glib air-castles to explain why it is better to live than to die, while our boasted—but ignored!—intellect is in every phase a negation of life! Ah, but how we civilized men hate and fear our "animal" instincts! As we hate and fear every heritage from the blind, squalling pit of primordial beginnings that bred us.

Dogs, apes, even elephants, he knew, obeyed instincts and lived only because instinct bade them. De Guzman had kept to himself what he had long since decided: Man's urge toward life was no less blind and reasonless. But, abhorring his kinship with those creatures that had the misfortune not to be made in the Deity's image—having no prophets to declare it!—he fondled his favorite delusion.

Oh, of course we are guided solely by reason, even when reason tells us it is better to die than to live! It is not the intellect we boast that bids us live—and kill to live—but the blind unreasoning beast-instinct.

Hernando de Guzman did not try to deceive himself into believing there was some intellectual reason, then, why he should not give up the agonizing struggle and place the muzzle of his pistol to his head; quit an existence whose savor had long ago become less than its pain. *Mother of God, if by some miracle I find my way back to Coronado's camp and even at last to Mexico or fabled Quivira . . . there is no reason, none, to believe life would be any less sordid or more desirable than it was before I came tramping northward in search of the Seven Cities of Gold.*

"Gold," he muttered again, with a satiric twist of lip. A scar writhed on his sun-darkened face. "The gold we seek is death!"

But . . . that blind instinct bade him fight for life, strive on to its last gagging gasp, to live in spite of hell or the actions of his fellow men. It burned as strongly in this man's powerful body now as it had in that long-past youth when he'd fought shoulder-to-shoulder with black-hearted Cortez and saw the plumed hordes of Montezuma roll in like a wave to engulf the desperate handful that defied them—and stole their lives.

"To live!" de Guzman challenged, lifting a fist whose bony knuckles were accustomed to jutting about a weapon for the slaying of men. "To live! Not for love, not for profit, or ambition, or a *cause*!" He spat, for all those noble concepts were wisps of mist, phantoms conjured up by men to explain the unexplainable. To *live*, because in his being there was implanted (too deeply) a blind dark urge to live, and he knew that it was in itself question and answer, desire and goal, beginning and end, and the answer to all the riddles of the universe.

"The game's not worth the candle! Ah . . . but to keep it lit . . ."

The Conquistador laughed sardonically, and shouldered his matchlock, and prepared to take up his futile march—into ultimate oblivion and silence.

It was then that he heard the drum.

Even, deliberate, unhurried, the drum's hollow voice rolled across the plain, mellow as the booming of waves of wine on a golden coast.

De Guzman paused, poised, an image of steel as he strained his ears. The sound came from the east, he decided—and it was no *llanero* drum! No, this was exotic, *alien*, like a drum he had heard that night he'd stood on a flat roof in Cajamarca and watched the myriad fires that were the great Inca army, twinkling through the night—while nearby the passionless voice of Bastard Pizarro spun black webs of treachery and infamy.

He closed his eyes, rubbed a hand across them; opened them. Listened with his head tilted sidewise, wondering if the heat and silence were already melting his brain and giving birth to phantasies . . .

No! This was no mirage framed in sound. Steady as the pulse in his own temple it throbbed and throbbed. The sound touched obscure chords in his brain until his whole being thrummed with that call of mystery. For a moment dead ashes flickered into flame, as if his youth were for the moment revived. Encompassed in that mellow sound were allure and . . . magic. For the moment he felt again as he had so long ago when with hot eager hands he gripped a ship's rail and watched the fabled golden coast of Mexico loom out of the morning mist, calling him with a lure of adventure and plunder that was like the blast of a trumpet of gold, ringing down the wind.

The moment passed, but a pulse in his temple beat swift staccato so that Hernando laughed at himself. Without pausing to argue the matter inwardly, he turned and strode eastward, toward the sound of the drum.

The sun had set; the brief twilight of the plains glowed and faded. The stars blinked forth, great white, cold stars, indifferent to the tiny shining figure plodding across the shadowless vastness. The sparse bushes crouched like nameless beasts waiting for the wanderer to stumble and fall. The drum pulsed steadily on and on, booming golden wavelets of sound across the wasteland. It roused memories, long faded and alien, of exotic flaming gardens of great blossoms, steaming jungles, tinkling fountains . . . and always an undertone of golden drops tinkling on an aureate paving.

Gold!

Again he was following its siren call; the same old threadbare quest that had led him around the world over resentful seas, through worse jungles, and through the smoke and flame of butchered cities. Like Coronado, sleeping somewhere on this endless plain and wrapped in fantastic dreams, de Guzman was following the call of gold—and one as tangible as that which maddened Francisco's dreams.

Mad Francisco! Seeking vainly for the cities of Cibolo, with lofty manses and glittering treasures, where even the slaves eat from golden dishes! De Guzman's parched, thirst-swollen lips smiled bitterly. In future years, he reflected, Coronado must become a symbol for the chasing of will-o'-the-wisps. Historians yet unborn, wise with the arrogant wisdom of hindsight, would mock him for a visionary and a fool. *His name will become a taunt for treasure-seekers.*

Why? With what reason? Why should we Spaniards not search for gold in this land north of the Rio Grande? Why refuse to credit the story of Cibolo? They are no more incredible than the tales of Mexico were, less than a generation ago. As much reason to believe in Cibolo as there was to believe that Peru existed, before Pizarro sailed! But . . . the world judges by failure or success. Coronado is of that same hardheaded breed as Pizarro and Cortez . . . and me. But they found gold, and will go down in history as—what? Robbers and plunderers? Coronado has found no gold and will be remembered as a credulous visionary and believer in myths, a chaser of nonexistent rainbows.

Unless he finds it!

De Guzman laughed, laughed as he strode, and his laughter was not pleasant, for it embodied his personal opinion of the human race, which was not flattering.

Through the night he walked, following the mellow booming of the drum that should not have been. It grew subtly louder as he paced on.

The small hours of morning found his feet weighted not with steel but with lead and sleep filling his eyes like dust so that he must blink constantly. But he was aware of a vague bulk looming among the stars on the eastern horizon. Lights twinkled that might have been stars, but that he believed to be fires. Nor was the drum far off now; he caught minor notes and undertones he had not heard before. Too there were strange soft rustlings and murmurings, like the swish of

the skirts of the cacao-eyed Aztec women, or the low soft gurglings of their laughter that tinkled among the silvery fountains in the gardens of Tenochtitlan before Spanish swords reddened those gardens with fountains of blood. Why should a drum speak with such voices in this naked, northern land, bringing the lures and mysteries of the faraway south?

On either hand now he could make out the faint outlines of a long ridge. He had made a slow gradual descent, barely aware. He knew that he had entered a broad and shallow valley, probably one marking the course of a sunken river. The ridges drew nearer as he advanced, and their height increased.

Just before dawn he stumbled upon a small stream that ran southeastward as all streams seemed to run, in this land. Willows and cottonwoods among straggling bushes grew thick along the banks. The weary Spaniard drank deeply and lay there near the water's edge, waiting for dawn. Once more the drum pulsed—and ceased. A single watch-fire now twinkled amid the dark bulk before him. Silence lay over this ancient unknown land north of the Rio Grande.

With the first streak of milky light in the east, de Guzman stared up at the towers and flat roofs of a walled city. Though he had roamed too far and seen too many incredible sights to be greatly surprised at anything, he lay there wondering at the fantastic sight. A *walled . . . city!*

It was built of adobe, like the pueblos far to the west, but there the resemblance ended. These walls were sheathed in an enamel-like glaze that was decorated with intricate designs in blue and purple and crimson. Though the city was not large in extent, the houses, three or four stories in height, did not resemble the beehive huts of the pueblos. The whole city was dominated by a towering structure that gleamed in the dawn-light. Atop it a truly enormous gong imitated the sun while reflecting its rays in a blaze of yellow fire. That structure was similar to a teocalla, save that it was topped by a dome.

De Guzman blinked at that. He had seen nothing like it, in Peru or Yucatan or Mexico. The architecture of the whole city was baffling, obviously allied to that of the Aztecs and yet curiously unlike, as if Aztec hands had reared what an alien brain conceived.

The incredible city rose in a broad fan-shaped valley,

which narrowed and deepened to the east—or rather the cliffs reared higher, for the valley floor remained level. Thousands and perhaps millions of years ago a great river had sliced its channel through the plain and plunged out of sight to leave the V-shaped valley. Cliffs walled it on three sides and towered steeply at their apex. The city faced eastward, toward the valley's broad mouth, where the ridges diminished until they vanished.

Wondering, de Guzman studied the whole of city and valley with a soldier's gaze. Any enemy must approach from the west—but there was no barrier to guard the city in that direction, where the dwindling ridges were more than a mile apart. The stream entered the broad mouth and wound past the walls at a distance of a few hundred yards before it plunged into a cavern in the cliff. Beyond the city, to the southeast, it wriggled through a checkerboard of irrigated fields in which he recognized maize, grapes, berries, melons, and nut trees. The soil of these barren plains was fertile, needing only water to produce food in abundance. And here there was water.

His gaze swerved when a small gate opened in the city's southeast wall. Smallish brown people emerged to enter the fields for the day's work, well-formed men clad in loincloths and women whose short sleeveless tunics left bare the left breast and fell scarcely below mid-thigh.

As he lay watching, the Spaniard heard a rumbling to the west. It was a sound he knew. Jerking his head about to peer through the intertwining willows, he saw a cloud of dust rising in the valley's mouth. Within the dust, a long low black line grew rapidly as it advanced. The line became a swiftly rolling mass that he soon saw was formed of shaggy dark animals with huge, horned heads. It was a stampede of the plains cattle, buffalo! The fieldworkers ran for the gate, which swung open to receive them. The beasts plunged on blindly, perhaps a thousand of them. Heads appeared along the walls of the city. A trumpet blared brazenly. De Guzman frowned. He had seen buffalo stampede—but never charge so blindly toward rearing walls!

Three hundred yards from those walls, the animal horde split as on an unseen barrier to flow away to the north and south. Some crashed through the willows and splashed madly across the stream, though not near the unseen watcher. And then he saw the cause of the stampede. Man!

The beasts' dividing unmasked Chiricahua, *llaneros*; surely they numbered three hundred in their warpaint, all bearing bows or lances in addition to knives and a few war clubs. These fleet barbarians had driven the bison before them and, running behind and among them fleet-footed and untiring as wolves, had used the galloping herd as their cover to come within bow-shot of the city.

De Guzman was very glad he had kept his cover in the bushes among the willows.

Yelling barbarically the nigh-naked men raced for the gate, with a recklessness he did not associate with their clan. *Drugged with* *tizwin*, *sure*, he mused, watching the ferocious attack through narrowed eyes hard as black diamonds. But . . . why was there no shower of arrows from the wall, no shouted alarums? Not so much as one arrow keened to meet the shrieking plainmen.

Then . . . from those shining walls . . . *something* came, and a cold hand seemed to trail its fingers up de Guzman's spine. A shifting, writhing cloud of some eerie bluish *mist* rolled over the wall's top. It lowered at once, like a great bird swooping on prey. As if possessed of eyes and some impossible intelligence, it floated out and down over the charging Chiricahua. Pale blue mist settled over the warriors as if the sky descended in a pale shroud.

Where there had been the shrieking of warcries, silence closed like a fist. The sudden quiet was no less eerie than the mist itself. De Guzman gritted his teeth and did not realize he was holding his breath in the absolute funereal silence. He stared, nape prickling, seeing naught but the eddying, roiling, pale blue . . .

The azure mist dispersed. He saw them again. Fifteen score ruddy-skinned men of the plains, seconds ago war-yelling and blood-mad, lay now where they had fallen almost instantly under the cloud. Naked bodies gleamed like copper in the rising sun; feathers stirred forlornly in a slight breeze.

The mist returned to the city like a heeling dog once the hunt was done.

The flesh of Hernando de Guzman crawled. Sweat was a clammy chill within his armor. A *mist* . . . three hundred men . . . three hundred corpses. *This was necromancy!*

Now, stately men came calmly from the city's gate onto that plain of silent death. Tall and sinewy they were, with

plumes nodding above their helmets. Loincloths that were oddly *pleated* stirred as the men walked so that beadwork caught the sunlight in constant flashes. Staring, de Guzman felt the old blood-stir of the Conquistador, for those strange helms gleamed in the sun, too . . . shining as only pure gold could glint!

With businesslike efficiency, the tall warriors fastened ropes to the heels of the fallen braves. All were dragged into the city, a process that consumed two hours or more. De Guzman's stomach rumbled as the great gates closed. The small one opened. Again the workers entered the fields. Hernando de Guzman lay among the willows, pondering.

Necromancy.

And gold.

He had slaked his thirst, aye—but he was ravenously hungry. Yet he hesitated to reveal himself to these people, who were manifestly possessed of some gift of the devil. Though the Spaniard had long doubted the existence of a Lord of Evil, he recognized diabolatry when he saw it. He lay still, pondering.

Despite all, he was still weary from yesterday's travails. He slept.

He awoke with a start.

A girl or young woman had parted the willows and was gazing down at him from wide eyes the color of that drink wealthier Aztecs had made of the shiny brown cacao beans. Though she was clad only in the scanty white tunic of the field hands, it seemed *wrong* on her; she seemed not the sort of woman who should be wearing so lowly a garment. Surely rustly silks and scintillant jewels were more appropriate to her tallish, well formed body. The scanty tunic she wore left few of her generous contours wholly concealed. About her was an Aztec look . . . *Aztec? Here?*

De Guzman felt a quickening of his pulse as he had when he saw the gold helmets of her strange city. The gray in his beard was no indication of the fire that burned in the Conquistador's veins. This vision from the unknown city of sorcerous death was not unlike the strange, exotic women who had intoxicated him in his youth, when he first followed the iron captains to hot, unknown lands.

Stammering in her surprise, she spoke: "Wh- who are you?"

She spoke in the language of the people of Quetzlcoatl, of people well south of here, though he only just recognized it in its alien enunciations. Splinter city of the Aztecs? The mother city of the Aztecs?

The gray in de Guzman's beard was also no indication of his reflexes or swiftness. He was on his feet in an instant, armor and all, and his hand closed on her wrist even as she began to recoil. Her water jar dropped. The young woman stared up at him, wide dark eyes mirroring amazement more than fear.

A subtle perfume filled his nostrils and his head reeled—momentarily, for de Guzman controlled de Guzman. "How is it such a woman as you labors in the fields?"

Either his faulty, badly-pronounced Aztec was not clear to her or she ignored his question. "I know what manner of man you are! You are of those who slew Montezuma and destroyed his kingdom . . . one of those who ride beasts called . . . horses, and make thunder and red flame of death flash out of a metal war-club!"

Eager fingers traced over his dented breastplate. Her touch on his bearded face sent tingles of pleasure through his iron frame. But he smiled a sardonic smile. *What new thing is there for me to learn about women, who cannot remember how many these arms have held?* Yet his instincts drew him to her, and he neither resisted nor questioned them.

"Word came here," she said, in the soft voice of recollection, staring at his cuirass. "Word of the slaughter south, in Mexico . . . I was but a baby then. Men doubted . . . but no more tribute came from Montezuma, and—"

"*Tribute!*" The word was startled from him. "Tribute? From Montezuma, the emperor of all Mexico?"

"Aye. He and his fathers paid tribute to *Nekht Semerkeht* for long centuries . . . slaves, gold, pelts."

"*Nekht Semerkeht?*"

It had a strange, alien ring, this name that was not Aztec. Surely he had heard it afore . . . where? When? Dimly, its echo reverberated in the shadowy halls and recesses of de Guzman's mind. An association flickered: the harsh odor of gunpowder and the reek of spilt blood.

"I have seen men like you!" she was saying, "When I was ten, I wandered outside the city and the Chiricahua captured me." She heaved a pensive sigh and her left breast shuddered.

De Guzman gritted his teeth. "They sold me to the Lipans, who traded me to the Karankawas—they dwelt on the coast far to the south, and are cannibals. Once a great war-canoe with wings came gliding along the coast, and the Karankawa braves went forth in their dugouts and loosed arrows at it. There were men on deck, like you. I remember! They turned great hollow logs of metal toward the canoes and thundered them into pieces. I was confused and terrified, and I ran away. I came to a camp of the Tonkewas, who brought me home again—for they are our servants." She gazed into his eyes. "What—is your name, man of metal? Now I see you are not *all* metal, as I thought then . . ."

He told her and listened to her turn his name about her tongue, lisping in her attempts at pronouncing the words.

"And who are you?" he demanded. He had not released her wrist; now his steel-sheathed arm slipped about her supple waist. She started and made to draw away, but could not without a struggle; she did not struggle. *A clever girl*, he mused.

"My name is Nezahualca," she said, and with hauteur, "I am a princess."

"Oh?" He covered his amusement. "What are you doing in slave's clothing?" he asked, plucking at the garment as if to call her attention to it. Having thus lifted the tiny skirt, he held back his smile—and left his hand where it was.

Fine dark eyes filled suddenly with tears, and she spoke to his chest. "I forgot. I am a slave, a toiler in the fields—I bear the marks of the overseer's whip!" She turned lithely and wriggled, as if to show him. "I, the daughter of kings, whipped like a common slave!"

Staring at the flesh she exhibited, de Guzman saw no weals. *She knows what she's about*, he mused, *and a boy would be taken in*. Good! Perhaps this clever slave-princess was as much the opportunist as he was.

She swung back to speak rapidly, passionately. "Listen, Ernano d'goozm. I, Nezahualca, am daughter of a line of kings. Nekht Semerkeht rules in Tlascaltec, and below him reigns the governor—the *tlacatecatl*, Lord of the Fighting Men. My lover Acampichtli was an officer in his command. It was my desire that Acampichtli become governor, naturally."

De Guzman nodded. *Naturally. So you schemed . . .*

"We intrigued. I have—I *had* power here in Tlascaltec. But

Nekht Semerkeht learned, and was not pleased; *he* must choose who rules, *under* him. My lover was given to the Feeders From The Sky. I was degraded thus, to the status of a public slave, like the Totonacs my ancestors brought with them centuries ago when they came northward."

Ah. Her people were Aztecs, then. They came up here, long ago—centuries!

"*Nekht Semerkeht* came to Tenochtitlan centuries and centuries ago. He reigned there for a space, then gathered together many of the recently wedded young people and brought them far north, here to found this city."

"About which those left in Tenochtitlan were far from happy!"

"At the loss of fighting men, aye. But the king was again king in Tenochtitlan, Ernano d'goozm. For *Nekht Semerkeht* ruled there—he is powerful."

"Call me Hernan-Do . . ." He trailed off. Now he remembered where he'd heard that strangely alien name!

Nekht Semerkeht! A cry from the blood-bubbling lips of an Aztec priest as he fell in the darkness during the terrible battle on *noche triste*. It was as if in his last extremity, desperate, he invoked a demon or devil rather than a god. De Guzman remembered, too, the vague references far to the north . . . here! He'd assumed it was from such tales had grown the stories of Cibolo. And he had thought it mere legend! But . . . the name was not Aztec.

"Who is *Nekht Semerkeht*?" He added "Princess Neza-hualca" to please and win her.

She gestured vaguely, eastward. "He came from the blue ocean, long ago. He is mighty mage, mightier than the priest of the Toltecs. Alone he came, but soon he was ruler of Mexico! Yet he wanted his own city, and he came north to—ah! Listen to me, iron man!" Very excitedly:

"*Nekht Semerkeht* does not know of your race! Even his magic cannot prevail against the thunder of your war-club. Help me to slay him, him who has ruled *generations*. I am who I . . . was, and warriors there are who will still follow me. I can gather a few in a chamber of the temple, and open a gate to you in the night, and lead you into the temple. The suboverseer who guards the slaves at night is a young man, and he loves me. He will do anything I ask. Together, you and I . . ."

He nodded. De Guzman recognized the loud knock of opportunity, and he knew when to open wide the door to it. If he took time to give it thought, his head would swim. "Aye," he said. "But bring me food." It was a brief test, his peremptory "command." *The iron war-club will hold a princess in line as well as a mage . . . little girl!*

She blinked, stiffened slightly—and nodded. "I will leave food among the bushes. Now I must get water and return to the gardens before I am missed."

"And does Nezahualca love this young man who loves her?" he asked, tugging her a bit closer. *A daughter of kings, eh . . . and golden helmets!*

She spoke evenly, gazing into his eyes, her bosom against his armor. "Nezahualca would be princess again . . . no! *Queen*, of Tlascaltec! And beside her will be the most powerful man in Tlascaltec; he who rides the city of *Nekht Semerkeht*."

He gave her wrist a final squeeze. "Aye. Bring the food, Queen-to-be. And show me which gate."

"It must be the slave gate," she said, and when he sighed, she gave him a slow, level-eyed smile. "Once, Hernando, you shall enter by the Gate of Slaves. And so shall I, *once* more!"

All that day he lay hidden among the bushes beneath the willows, and he had much to think on, while he saw to his weapons. For two reasons he waited until well after dark to be sure he was not seen, and to give her time to grow apprehensive lest he not come. Nezahualca needed him, as he needed her, for once the mage met his belated end she would by the symbol of power here . . . *the power I will hold!*

He watched cloud and moon approach each other with the patience of a warrior with much scarlet past, and—now—a golden future. Then the moon swam in a cloud across the silent gardens ghosted one lone man until he came to the Gate of Slaves. Little more than a door in the wall, it opened at once to his tap. He smiled inwardly at that—but noted her control too. Limned in the faint flow of a tiny hand-cresset, dressed for the last time in her scanty garment, she made no mention of her long wait. Beside her was a young man, little more than a boy, and de Guzman recognized the trappings of a sub-overseer.

Nezahualca caught his hand in slim fingers; his armored

gloves were in his belt. "Come! My warriors wait!" She gave him the briefest of introductions to Chaculcun.

Our *warriors wait*, de Guzman mused, but said nothing. She led him through narrow streets and shadowy courtyards to a side door in the great temple that gleamed in the moonlight like the outer walls. Along a dark corridor they moved then, until they came to a dim-lit chamber. Ten men waited—in complete silence.

Nezahualca's sharp cry broke the stillness. De Guzman saw, too; each of the ten warriors of Tlascaltec sat rigid in his chair, staring at nothing . . . with unseeing eyes. "They're—"

The glim was extinguished by a puff of air from no visible source. Dim as the room had been, now it was in total darkness. De Guzman heard Chaculcun's gasp just before Nezahualca shrieked. The Spaniard reached for her—and a strong jerk tore his matchlock from his hand. A curse escaped the startled man but like a cat he flowed aside, at the same time unsheathing his sword with a steely scrape in the blackness. He stood tense and waiting in complete silence and darkness.

Those ten men are dead, Hernando thought, striving to be trebly alert in all senses. *I've seen enough dead men to know. But . . . I saw no marks . . .*

A small hand touched his. Instantly his other arm rose, but he arrested the automatic sword-slash; this was a woman's slim hand. The fingers closed supplely about his. He followed their gentle tug, gliding as noiselessly as possible in his armor. His guide made no sound, not even the whisper of feet on stone. The Spaniard kept his sword ready, but close to his body that it might noisily strike no wall. Through a doorway he was led; along a corridor in which his own *clink-clink* sounds seemed ghostly and thunderous. On he was conducted, and on . . .

From well behind him, a woman screamed out a stricken cry that echoed along stone-lined corridors. The voice was Nezahualca's.

Smitten by a grisly thought, de Guzman turned his wrist and ran his fingers along the wrist of his guide's hand. Soft, smooth womanly wrist . . . gave way a few inches above to a hairy, wiry arm! Even as he shuddered the treacherous fingers tightened on his, with terrible strength. A peal of demoniac

laughter clove the air and ululated along the corridor. De Guzman's hair stirred beneath his helm.

Gagging with horror, he swept his blade around to smite blindly with all his strength. Instinct guided the blade, and the horrid guffaw broke off into an agonized gurgle. The fingers leaped reflexively from his wrist and *something* thrashed and flopped in the darkness at his feet.

The Spaniard turned hurriedly back, his flesh crawling. That nameless abomination with the delicately slim hands of a woman had not been leading him anywhere he wished to be. His sword scraping the wall to his right and his hand trailing along it on the left, he moved back along the pitch-black corridor. His sword found space; he turned that way. Soon his hand slipped from stone onto what felt like metal, and he found a door. It opened easily. The faintest glimmer of far-off light led him to his left.

Realizing he'd be able to see any approach, he sheathed his sword as he walked. He drew both pistols. Into growing illumination he strode, until he emerged onto a sort of gallery overlooking a large chamber at a lower level. At a wooden rail, he looked down to where a voice rose, dry and passionless as mummy's dust.

A canopy and back hid the occupant of a throne of deepest midnight ebony, but he knew someone—or something—sat there, speaking. His or its minions had worked swiftly, for here too were Chaculcun and Nezahualca. Stark naked, the young man hung suspended from a golden chain that was attached to the ceiling and to gyves on his ankles. Immediately beneath him, a gold brazier huffed up clouds of azure mist that from time to time obscured him to the waist.

De Guzman's teeth grated; he knew that mist, and thought he knew now why Nezahualca's warriors were dead, without marks.

She lay face up on a gem-encrusted altar of gold, spreadeagled in a supine X, and she was as naked as the youth who had loved her. Slender gold chains confined her wrists and ankles. Dilated with fear, her lovely eyes stared wildly upward. The Spaniard saw that directly above her a circular opening holed the great chamber's dome to reveal a disk of blue-black night sky besprent with stars.

From the black throne the voice spoke without passion; calm it was, and merciless its words. "You were a fool to

place trust in some outlander with his little thunder-stave. Its power is less than mine by many times, silly little slave who was a princess. He was easily bereft of his thunder-club, and a child of darkness has by now led him to the pit of the rattlesnakes. All for naught, silly little Neza. You had your life, and easy work in the fields; now your flesh will provide a delicacy for the Feeders From The Sky."

An awful cry of despair and fear broke from the young woman's throat.

De Guzman glanced about, backed from the rail, and hurried to the stairway down. He descended with each hand clamped around a pistol. As he reached the lower landing, he heard Nezahualca's awful cry, and a sound like that of a sail in the wind—or the dry rustle of great wings. The Conquistador hurried to an arched doorway.

Mother of God! He was staring at a nightmare shape that had descended through the orifice in the dome. This awful dragon-like monster from the air's upper reaches was too obviously the source, in its millennia of raids on these lower levels, of the grisly tales of vampires and harpies. Aye, it was as Coronado insisted: all legends have their roots in fact.

It looks mortal enough, de Guzman thought. He stepped through the archway and took aim, using the pistol in his left hand, since there was time: the darkling bloodsucker with its fifteen-foot wings was staring down at its intended victim, as a man looks upon a particularly fine cut of meat set before him. The pistol's roar was as of ten in the stone-walled chamber . . . and as effective. Its head blasted, the monster reeled. One claw tore the naked skin of the young woman's upper thigh. Then the Feeder From The Sky slipped, shuddered, and tumbled to the floor,

Without pausing, De Guzman half-wheeled to face the canopied ebony throne.

A man had risen from the seat of blackness. Though the Conquistador had slain two grotesque monstrosities this night and fully expected to see another, his flesh crawled. The man was *old* . . . but de Guzman's shudder and swallow were in reaction to the sheer ages-old but ageless *evil* in the luminous dark eyes.

"Well-done," the robed man said calmly, "*fool!* Soon others will come flapping from the sky—to find your pulsing jugular awaiting them!"

De Guzman knew this man was many centuries old, and evil by nature and desire, and possessed furthermore of arcane power—and his long bony hand was rising . . .

"This fool has two pistols," de Guzman said, and fired point-blank.

Nekht Semerkeht reeled with a choking cry and the rising hand ceased its gesture to clutch at his chest. As he staggered back, dread eyes staring in shock at the Spaniard, the latter marveled at the ease of his quest and his chore. Then Nekht Semerkeht vanished, *into the wall*.

While De Guzman stared at the blank wall that had swallowed his enemy, Nezahualca called out weakly. Instantly the Spaniard gave his head a jerk and sprang to the altar. A glance upward showed him more than one shape wheeling downward betwixt him and the stars. His hands trembled while he loosed chains of solid gold, noting that her thigh's blood had crusted already; the claw-cut was not deep.

"What makes that mist?" he demanded, as she sat up.

"Hurry! He's escaped through his private passage, and others come!" she said in the voice of a frightened child, and only after he had shaken her violently did she point at a great hamper. "The dust, in that—a handful slays an army!"

"Move, girl," he bade her, and moments later he was upending the hamper into the golden brazier beneath Chaculcun's corpse. "Those bloodsucking devils will find a fine surprise this time, rather than a feast. Now—lead me to him!"

"This way," she called, taking up a cresset. "Hurry!"

Without a backward glance at the man who had loved her and was dead amid a vast new cloud of azure mist, she led de Guzman from the chamber. He paused to slam a huge brazen door before following through strange corridors that were Aztec and yet not *quite* Aztec. Their emergence into a long, broad hall brought him to a halt. He stared.

The long walls were lined with the upright bodies of men, not statues, though they were surely of stone. Toltecs there were, Aztecs, Totonacs, Tonkewas and Lipans and the Chiricahua of the plains, as well as warriors of tribes unfamiliar to the Spaniard; plumed men he knew instinctively had lived and died before the father of the father of Montezuma, perhaps earlier than the days of the Cid.

Presiding over them all in this eerie place was the huge seated statue of a man whose head seemed to combine the

features and shape of both pig and donkey. And before and beneath the statue was a smooth stone table, and behind it sat Nekht Semerkeht. Staring at de Guzman were those eyes that reflected evil that had endured across untold centuries. On the thin lips of the wizened face was a slight smile of seeming self-mockery. His red-stained hand pressed against his breast. With his other hand, the ancient ruler of Tlascaltec gestured.

"Come; join me, join Nekht Semerkeht of Egypt, in whom Sethis has resided these tens and tens of centuries. And you, hairy-faced barbarian, have conquered. I am dying, of a weapon that ends prowess and cleverness and will harden man all the more."

"Better to join you than *those*," de Guzman said, and plucked the cresset from Nezahualca's hand. She stood still, gazing at the man who'd made her a slave. De Guzman set the glim on the stone table. "Attempt to wreak aught of your evil necromancy on me, Nekht Semerkeht, and you die the sooner."

"A few more moments are important to me, now the millennia of life end. Sit in peace, and tell me of the world you've seen."

"Nekht Semerkeht of Egypt . . . an Egypt long dead, I'll wager!"

"And win the wager. It was the Ptolemies that drove me from Thebes and Egypt itself. Though I taught these simple people how to measure and record time, I have lost track of the centuries. My galley was wrecked off the coast of Mexico. My arts were strong then, as many in my own land had learned—but they grew stronger still. Making myself Lord of Mexico was not difficult . . . but I wearied of ruling silly tribesmen, and came northward to create my own city here. As I have done. I have heard how your race slew Montezuma, in greed." His chuckle became a cough; he clutched his chest. "Here in this city are greater treasures than ever Cortez thefted from Tenochtitlan."

"I have come for them."

"To take oversea to your thrice-greedy rulers?"

De Guzman's smile was not reflected in the eyes that remained fastened coldly on the Egyptian godman. "I have had enough of that. *I* have come for Tlascaltec's treasure . . . and its princess who shall sit its throne . . . and for Tlascaltec itself!"

"Ah, a *worthy* man then, who like me—and Neza there, make no mistake—thinks first of himself. Good!" Nekht Semerkeht coughed, spoke with effort. "At least it is no mercenary bought with money or that false foolishness called 'patriotism' that has slain me, who has lived so many lifetimes. But come, tell me of the world unknown to these children."

And so Hernando de Guzman sat and conversed with a man who had lived uncounted centuries, a man in whose spirit was incorporated that of a god of ancient Egypt. The cresseted glim between them flickered lower—and almost de Guzman succumbed to unseen, unspoken sorcery. It was when he moved a leg he realized a web of magic was rising about him; the leg felt immersed in thick honey.

"Monster!" he snarled suddenly, interrupting the other in mid-sentence. "Ye do sorcery on me!" Lurching forward as though in quicksand, de Guzman struck Nekht Semerkeht's hand—the reddened hand pressed against his bulletholed chest.

Instantly the sensation of being caught in cloying, sticky honey left the Conquistador's limbs—but as instantly the Egyptian was rising to reveal that beneath the table he had held a curved sword.

"Silly child!" he cried, coming round the table in a rush and hiss of dark robes. "Fool who's lived perhaps twoscore years! Ye broke my hold on ye, but not me—think ye that pellet of metal could slay *Nekht Semerkeht*?"

Only by allowing himself to fall backward off his backless chair did de Guzman save himself from a lunging stab—and only by slamming a foot into a robed leg did he stop the Egyptian from carving him where he lay. Armor clanged and screeched on stone as he rolled desperately. Then the Conquistador was on his feet with sword in hand. He wished now he had had the sense to reload his pistols!

The curving blade of the other was white flame about the Spaniard's guard, and with every desperate parry of clanging sword he felt the awful heat of a blade of magic. No lunge he made found flesh, though he was able to keep that other sword from him. Once it struck his chestplate, and he groaned at the terrible heat.

Nekht Semerkeht's back was to the cresset when it guttered. In the instant the flame went out, de Guzman made a

mighty sideward leap and then another forward, smiting desperately to strike down this dark fiend before the blackness betrayed him to the sword of fire. Blade rang on blade and sparks danced. Both men cried out, de Guzman at the searing heat that nearly forced open his fingers. But the man from the past staggered back—and a long diminishing cry apprised de Guzman of the trap set for him: it was to have been he hurtling through that trapdoor, not Nekht Semerkeht! Before the door crashed shut, de Guzman heard the angry rattling of many vicious serpents, far below.

Panting, sweating, the Conquistador found Nezahualca in the dark. "Surely he is not impervious to the bites of a dozen rattlesnakes!"

"I—hope not," she said, and clutched at him.

De Guzman smiled in the dark, for he held the new ruler of Tlascaltec—and thus he held Tlascaltec!

Out of that accursed hall of the dead they hurried, and enormous doors crashed ringingly shut behind them. They fled through dark corridors that were no longer ruled by Nekht Semerkeht and his creatures.

On the morrow, Nezahualca, who strangely had been known by no man before de Guzman, announced to the people of that long accursed city that Nekht Semerkeht was at last no more, and that she was their rightful sovereign, and that the savior of them all would be her viceroy. As she turned to gesture to him, de Guzman smiled and pushed into his belt the pistol that had been his insurance, lest she suffer a last-instant change of mind about making that announcement.

These people had never seen or heard the flash and roar of gunpowder; the governor provided a marvelous opportunity for de Guzman to display his power. The governor had been comfortable, ruling under Nekht Semerkeht's direction, and was hardly prepared simply to yield to an outlander and the mere girl who but yesterday had been a slave in the fields.

De Guzman fired once. The governor and his sword slid and tumbled down the steps of the temple. A thousand knees bent to the man beside the princess who had just become a queen.

Hernando de Guzman looked down to find her gazing at him. He smiled. "Give them my title," the soldier ordered the daughter of kings. "I am to be called . . . *Conquistador!*"

And so it was done. None knew, a few days later, that the "indisposition" that kept their ruler from their sight was a split lip and a great bruise on her cheek, in addition to de Guzman's other marks on less visible portions of her anatomy, for never had he been a patient man or a gentle lover.

When she again emerged it was to announce that the army would begin training, and that there were certain substances in the earth the Conquistador wanted found and mined. He had no doubts that charcoal and sulfur and potash were obtainable hereabouts. If Coronado or more Chiricahua arrived before Tlascaltec's walls, they would find no easily murdered primitives but gunpowder aplenty and men who knew how to use it. Nor did her people know that beneath her queenly robes she wore a slave's shift, and it torn, though belted tightly enough to remind her constantly that she was the woman of the Conquistador, who ruled in Tlascaltec.

De Guzman's life had just begun; Nezahualca's slavery had not ended.

Yet that same night the Conquistador saw a man approaching him, in his sleep. The eyes of that dark-robed man were full of naught but malice and evil and the knowledge of centuries. Desperately de Guzman essayed to draw sword; then in that weirdness of the dream state he recognized that he was dreaming, and sought to awake. He could not.

"No outlander rules *my* city," Nekht Semerkeht told him. "The red men of the plains come upon you, murderer, power-greedy fool, and you shall not escape their knives and axes!"

In the dream, de Guzman watched the ancient mage, a patch of brown on the chest of his robe. Laboriously he climbed into the temple's tower. There he took up a great mallet and, staggering, began to smite again and again the huge gong suspended there. The reverberations were as brazen thunder that boomed again and again at de Guzmans' head like a physical force—and at the walls of the city. He saw cracks appear, saw a section crumble, topple. And he watched the shrieking, naked men of the plains come bounding copper-skinned into *his* city. His city, whose rule was the culmination of his life of opportunism and greed and slaying.

He awoke, sweating and gasping . . . to the sound of shrieking and screaming and, over all, the repeated booming notes of the enormous bronze gong.

It must be said of Hernando de Guzman that he slew over

Nekht Semerkeht

a dozen of the yelling attackers even as he fell, and too that he drove his sword up into the belly of the man whose club jellied his head against the bottom step of the temple of Tlascaltec.

Only when every man and woman and child had been butchered, so that naked and moccasin-clad feet slipped in gore, did the azure mist come billowing from the temple. Every attacker soon joined those he had slain, in swift death. The last of them saw the robed man atop the temple steps, gesturing at the skies, and sought to loose an arrow at him. But the mist was too swift, and Tlascaltec became a city of the dead—save for Nekht Semerkeht.

Still he gestured and muttered, uttering incantations that were more ancient than the tongue in which he unleashed them, a tongue no longer spoken.

At last he ceased. Reeling, he slipped to his knees. "In a city of the dead, I die. But . . . in dying . . . I take my slayer with me . . . and my city!"

Nor did Coronado nor anyone else find the fabled city of Cibolo, which was in truth Tlascaltec north of Mexico, placed on the bosom of the earth by Nekht Semerkeht—who, in passing, took it with him.

Lin Carter

THE PILLARS OF HELL

Let me follow Howard's story with one of my own recent attempts to "do a Howard." This is the second of my "People of the Dragon" stories, which derive, I suppose, from my fondness for such of Howard's yarns as "The Valley of the Worm" and "The Garden of Fear."

In this series, I follow the peregrinations of a wandering tribe down across an imaginary world as they progress through the generations, growing from savagery toward civilization.

—L.C.

I hope you like it.

1. In the Land of Silence

For many a long and weary year have we wandered down across the world, following a red star with a trail of flame like a crimson dragon of the skies. It was in the time of my great-grandsire, Zorm, that we rose up from the land of our fathers amidst the great mountains of the north, and took the first step on the endless trail which has led us ever south. Down from the wintry peaks of the Roof of the World we came, fleeing before the chill breath of the Great Ice, follow-

ing the Dragon Star like a burning beacon, and the vision of a warm and golden land of fruit-burdened boughs and eternal summer.

Hard has been the trail we followed, and many the fellow-tribesman who has fallen by the wayside, prey to the strange and uncanny perils of these new lands unknown to us. I, Jugrid, the son of Junga the Light-Bringer, have seen many fall, to rise no more. Thom-Ra, our stalwart chief, fell in my childhood before the thunderous hooves of the great mastodon, while we traversed the trackless Plains of Thune; and his son, Zuruk, who was chief after him, I saw die before the assault of the Brown Men of the Plains. Now it is Charn, brother of Zuruk, who leads us on—Charn, the boyhood friend of my own father, Junga.

My grandsire, Gomar the Hunter, was a boy when our tribe rose up and left the valley of our ancestors; my father, Junga, was born during the long trek through the snow-bound mountains; and I, Jugrid, first saw the light of day on the Plains of Thune. Long, I say, long has been our journeying, and the end is not yet.

When I was just entered into my sixteenth year we came at last out of the measureless Plains and left the wind-swept tundra behind us forever. We crossed a range of wooded hills, forded a rushing river, and entered upon a land strange and new to us, a land where sparse patches of scrubby grass withered and died before the hot breath of the panting wind. A land of sere and desert sand which Zorm the Ancient, who yet lived, named the Land of Silence.

Yes, the aged seer, Zorm, yet lived. One hundred and eleven summers had he seen, the oldest of men, although now he was but skin and bones and could not walk but must be carried in a litter of skins. Blind he was, but as his outer sight faded, his gaze turned inwards, the better to read the visions sent him by the gods.

This land we were entered upon now was a strange, dead land of crimson sand and rolling dunes, with never a green leaf or a spear of living grass to rest the eyes upon. Truly was it called the Land of Silence, for the air was motionless here: no winds blew, storms never came, and no birds sang. Silent as the grave was this weird, rolling land of crimson sands, and our hearts grew faint within our breasts that we must cross this drear and desert waste. But cross it we must

and we would, for ever the Dragon Star burned like a bearded flame in the southern skies, beckoning us on, and we were the People of the Dragon.

But the men of the tribe muttered and grumbled, and the women whispered of night terrors and Things that gibbered from the shadows of the sands—as women will always whisper, while the world lasts. Charn, the chief, they said, was young and inexperienced . . . a wiser man, they hinted, would have sought a way around the wastes of crimson sand, rather than plunging into this uncanny Land of Silence, where the people would perish of thirst.

But Junga, my father, spoke up for Charn the chief, and bade the People obey his behest; and Junga, my father, commanded the respect of all, for it was he who had slain the dreadful Slime-beast amidst the marshes of Thune; and he, the Lightbringer, who had brought the gift of fire back to the camping place of the People. And Zorm, like a ghost, whispered from his litter that the Way of the Dragon lay across the crimson sands of the Land of Silence, not around them. And so we went on as Charn the chief had commanded, though there were still those who grumbled and were unconvinced. Among these, the loudest was Kugar the Cunning the scrawny and ill-kempt son of Tuma the Limping.

From of old had there been enmity between Kugar and myself, for that ever on the hunt he hung back and was never to be found in the forefront of the chase, where danger was, preferring the rear, where men such as he were safe. And I think he envied me my swelling thews and rippling muscles, the square cut of my jaw and the fearless glint of my blue eyes. For he was hunched and flabby and ill-favored; especially was he not favored by the women, although he found many an excuse to be with them. And oftentimes he made my blood seethe when he cast his oily, smirking eyes upon the dark-haired girl, Athala . . . Athala of the green cat's eyes and the lissom body . . . Athala, whom I hungered to make my own.

But that is another story . . .

2. *Men who Vanish in the Night*

For nearly a moon had we trudged ever south across the silent sands of this accursed land, and no living thing had we

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seen in all this time, save for high-flying carrion-birds, who circled lazily against the blue zenith, and, once, a hissing reptile as crimson as the sands which hid him.

We had fallen upon this lizard-beast, hacking with our stone axes and thrusting our long spears, for our supplies of game were nigh exhausted, and fresh meat, even the meat of monster lizards, would not be ill fare. But the thing was hard to slay, and long in the dying, as are all its cold-blooded kind. And there was some nameless venom in its claws and long fangs that gave a dire illness to men, that they fell ill of the sweating sickness and were long in the dying.

Charn the chief, who had ever gone in the first rank of our warriors in time of battle, was one of those the venomous claws of the giant lizard-thing had raked ere it died. Now he lay lashed to a litter, raving of a burning fever, shielded from the rays of the sun by tattered skins draped over poles, and tended by the sharp-tongued Thora, his unwed sister. And, until the chief perished, or grew well enough to lead us on, we could go no farther, and must camp in this place of naked red rocks, where a scant trickle of sour water ran through a parched gully.

And ever Kugar and his cronies muttered dire things about our lingering in this accursed place . . . that we should all die here under the fangs of the lizard-things, or of the fever, or of thirst, when the trickle of water dried up. But we paid little attention to Kugar's premonitions of doom, dismissing them as we dismiss the croakings of old women.

Until dawn broke and four men of the tribe were missing from their sleeping skins.

They had not been carried off by maurauding beasts or by men, nor had they wandered singly away, as men will sometimes wander in the spell of an evil dream. This we knew because the prints of their feet could clearly be seen in the smooth red sand: one by one, they had risen up from their pallets and gone striding off into the desert, into the east. But where, and for what purpose? And why did they not return? None could answer these questions, not even blind Zorm the Ancient, to whom the gods gave counsel in dreams.

We were troubled and fearful and kept close to our camp in the rocky gorge all that day, save for my father, Junga, and the most skillful and tireless of our huntsmen. They ranged far to the west, but found no sign of the missing men

... found nothing at all, save for a kind of ruin to the west, where pillars or columns rose from the shifting sands, pillars such as might have once borne up the roof of an ancient temple in time gone by.

By that point, said my father, the slow sifting of the sands had blurred the footprints of our missing tribesmen beyond the following.

Kugar muttered grim omens, and said that were it not for the sickness of our chief, we could be swiftly gone from this accursed place where men rise up from their beds and walk in their dreams to an unknown death. And one of his cronies, Nuba the One-Eyed, grinned suggestively, and added:

"If Charn, our chief, is too ill to lead us, let us give the chieftainship to wise and clever Kugar. Only until Charn the chief has recovered his strength, of course . . ."

Junga my father grunted, and spat in the sand between his feet. "If ever the chieftainship is given to Kugar, I think me Charn shall die swiftly, and in the night, of a strange malady," he growled, one massive hand closing about the haft of his mighty axe. "Here we stay until our chief recovers his strength and can lead us forth."

"And if more of our people wander off in the night, O Junga? What then?" leered Nuba, while Kugar stood and glared unspeakingly nearby. My father shrugged.

"We shall set guards about the camp, so that none may pass into the sands unseen," he said. "If Nuba is so concerned with the well-being of the tribe, he may take the first watch himself."

Nuba snarled, heavy lips peeling back to show rotting yellow teeth, his one squint-eye glancing fearfully about, bright as the gaze of a cornered rat. But his bluff was taken, and the watch was his.

3. *Death Strikes from the Shadows*

None of us went easy to our sleeping-skins that night, and even those who did slept a troubled sleep, roiled with horrible dreams. My father had set four guards to patrol the edges of the camp, with Nuba to the western side thereof, and Khomar, my boyhood friend and brother to Athala, the dark-

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haired girl who filled my dreams, to the southern border of the gulley.

At the mid of night he roused me from my sleep and bade me go to the relief of Khomar. I rose sleepily, donned my tunic and buskins of rawhide, cinched my girdle of woven thongs about my waist and took up my spear.

From where he lay, huddled beneath his furs near the fire, the gaunt and wasted form of my great-grandsire, Zorm, stirred and rose on one fleshless arm, supported by Azad, the fatherless and orphaned boy who tended to his needs whenever I or my father was not there. "Grandson Junga," the aged man whispered, "give the child the great axe . . ."

My father hesitated, then bent to obey. Slowly he unwrapped the mighty war axe of polished stone which had gone ever at the side of his own father, Gomar the Hunter. Great was the massy stone, bound by rawhide thongs to a five-foot wooden haft, and so terrible was the weight thereof that it could crush even the skull of the great horned bison of the Plains like an egg-shell with a single blow. For a moment my father stood, frowning, chewing on his thick ruff of yellow beard, weighing the great axe in his hands. He had borne it from beside the bones of his father, who had died under the Slime-beast twenty summers ago.

"Give him the Axe of Zar of the Flame," crooned the eerie voice of blind Zorm from his cradle of skins, "that wast born in war by Kuma the son of Zar, and by Tugar, Kuma's son, and by the first five chieftains of the People."

"I shall obey your words, Ancient One," said my father, bowing his head. "But this is the Axe of war—"

"This is war, my grandson," came that eerie whisper, "when death strikes from the shadows, and men walk in their sleep to a nameless doom!"

My blood chilled in my veins at that weird whisper, and the flesh crept on my forearms. But I took up the Axe of my family, and went to join the guards.

And found them gone.

When I reached the place whereat Junga my father had posted Khomar the brother of Athala, I found no one there. For a moment I stood baffled, but unafraid, thinking he had perchance gone a ways apart to relieve nature behind a rock. But then my breath caught in my throat and my heart froze in my breast: for there amidst the sands some little distance

off, caught in the rays of the rising moon, I saw his long spear with its glinting blade in the cold light.

There was no mistaking it, that spear, for it was one of the new spears fashioned by the clever craft of old Tuma, with its blade of beaten copper. Only a few of these did we have as yet, for Tuma had mastered the secret of copper metal after our brush with the Brown Men of the Plain, who went so-armed with the soft metal, which cut cleaner and deeper than did our old spears with blades of chipped flint.

I picked up the spear, turning it over and over in my hands, then bent to search the crimson sands with keen, quick eyes. There had been no struggle here, that much was plain to see, for the sand was undisturbed. Only the prints of Khomar's buskins in a straight row, leading off from this place step by step into the east.

From the shadows of night, at moon-rising, the unknown death had struck again. And this time the victim had been Khomar, Khomar the laughing, the merry-of-heart, the friend of my boyhood . . .

With my heart heavy in my breast, I ran back to the pallet of Junga my father, to give the alarm and to rouse the camp. And when all were roused and counted, it was seen that of the four guards whom Junga had set to watch the perimeter of the camp, three were missing. All had dropped their weapons and strode off into the east, as if summoned by a Call they could not withstand or refuse. Only Nuba had escaped the doom which had befallen the other guards. Shamefacedly, he snarled that he had stepped aside to relieve himself in the shadow of a rock and must have been thus disposed when the fatal moment fell.

"At least," smiled Kugar the son of Tuma, "let us rejoice and give thanks that the Doom of the Silent Land has not taken from us the brave and valiant Nuba, as it has three other men—whose deaths be upon the spirit of Junga, and none other. For had we done as I, Kugar, suggested, we should be gone far from this evil place where men die in the night!"

"Another hath died in the night, O Kugar," whispered a thin voice from beside the fire. Slowly and painfully the gaunt and wasted figure of Zorm the Ancient lifted itself with one bony arm wrapped about the slender shoulders of the

boy Azad. A face white and fleshless as a skull, with milky and sightless eyes, rose into the firelight.

"What means the Ancient One?" murmured Kugar uneasily.

"Look to Charn the chief," said my great-grandsire. And Junga my father cried out as one stricken by an arrow and turned pale as death.

4. The Fangs of Gorah

In truth he was not dead, was Charn the chief; but he was not far from it. Some unknown hand had thrown his sleeping furs over his face, muffling his nostrils from the life-giving air, and he was very near to death when the swift feet of my father came to the lean-to, and threw aside the hides, and found him thus.

Thora, his sharp-tongued shrew of a sister who had tended him in his illness, set up a shrill wailing clamor. She had slept deeply and heard nothing in the night, she whimpered, tearing her hair and beating her breast. Kugar made a great show of comforting the distraught woman.

Swiftly, my father Junga bore the wasted body of his friend out into the open air and laid him down close to the fire so that he might take comfort from the warmth thereof. Pale and spent and gasping for breath was our chief, and the death-sweat glistened wetly on his drawn, suffering face. Frail and thin were the strong arms, once mighty of thew and tireless in battle, and strengthless and feeble were the long legs of Charn, which one had outpaced the very wind. Glorious in his manhood had been Charn, the son of Thom-Ra. But that was in the splendor of his youth, long ere the venom of the crimson sand-lizard had crept into his veins to waste his heavy limbs and drink his strength away to feebleness.

Old Tuma the Lame One, Kugar's sire, was clever in the ways of healing. He laid one ear against the panting breast of Charn the chieftain, then rose, shaking his head, his white locks brilliant in the moonlight.

"He is far gone," muttered the old man, "Almost has his spirit set forth on the ghost-road, bound for the second life."

Yes, in truth he was very near death. The suffocation he had known under the heavy skins had goaded his laboring heart into a desperate racing. And every throb of his pulse, it

seemed, drew the lizard's poison closer to his heart. His life was to be measured but in minutes: and Charn the chieftain had no son of his loins to wear the fang-necklace of the leaders of the People after he was gone to join his fathers.

"My time is short," gasped Charn. "Lift me up, so that all of the People may hear. And clasp my hand, Junga, friend and companion of my youth!" Tears streaming from his blue eyes to mingle with the yellow bristle of his beard, my father knelt to support with his arms the failing strength of Charn.

"I have no son to follow me," he said. "Take, therefore, for your chief after I am gone, Junga the Light-bringer, he who slew the Father of Slime amidst the Plains, he who brought back to you the gift of fire."

A murmur of approval ran through the People, for my mighty sire was liked and respected by all. Or almost all . . .

For Nuba—he who was absent from his guard-post at the time the Doom came for the other guards, he who was absent at about the same time some unknown hand had muffled the face of the stricken Charn in thick furs, seeking to snuff out his feeble life—spoke up scornfully from the shadows:

"Why Junga, who is past his prime, rather than the clever-witted Kugar, here, who is young, and who speaks for many?" he interposed.

"Be silent of tongue, you yelping cur—for all that Kugar be my own flesh and blood," snapped the white-haired Tuma where he knelt. And Nuba grumbled into silence.

"First," panted Charn, in his slow voice, struggling for every breath, "because it is my will, and because I am your chief, the son of Thom-Ra, the son of Zorm the Ancient. And secondly, because Junga is second only to me in claim of blood-lineage, for that he, too, is the son of a son of Zorm, the wise and ancient chief who ruled the People ere we departed out of the valley of our ancestors. Take, then, O Junga, my brother, the seven-stranded necklace from about my throat—"

And Junga my father did so. And with his own hands, with the last of his strength, Charn fastened the necklace of the chieftainship about my father's throat. And I became the son of a chief.

Then he sank back lifelessly in my father's arms. Yet still his white lips worked as if striving to speak. My father bent close to catch the words.

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"We will . . . hunt together . . . side by side . . . O my brother . . . in the country beyond the clouds . . . some-day—"

And thus he died in my father's arms.

Gently my father laid him out and crossed his hands upon his breast, clasping his copper-bladed spear. And the women set his war-axe beside him, and put his flint knife in his girdle. Then they heaped dry grasses about him, and sticks of wood, and with his own hands my father took up a burning branch from the fire and touched to flame the pyre of Charn. The flames roared up about his body, to cleanse his spirit of its crimes, that it might drift up with the rising smoke, stainless and pure from the purifying flames, to rise up to the country beyond the clouds to reside with the spirits of his fathers forever.

And about the strong throat of Junga hung the seven-stranded necklace of the fangs of Gorah, the white tiger of the snows.

The warriors of our race, when they are come to the age of manhood, were wont in the olden time to go forth alone and bare-handedly upon the mountain to trap and slay the great cave-bear, returning with the claws of their kill threaded on a thong about their neck, as men and full-fledged warriors. Today, as there are no cave-bears in this strange southern clime, the young men thread colored stones upon a thong. But the chieftains of our race, the first of whom was Zar of the Flame, must fight the dreaded snow-tiger. Seven chiefs in our line, from Zar himself to Thom-Ra, the father of Zuruk and Charn, slew the Terror of the Snows, and returned with the Fangs of Gorah about their throat.

That seven-stranded necklace was my father's now, and I would wear it in my time.

If any of us came alive out of the Land of Silence!

5. The Watcher in the Night

Day was upon us before the body of Charn had fallen to ash. We broke our fast on meagre fare, and after I had seen to the comfort of my great-grandsire, I repaired to the place where Niora, the widowed mother of Athala and the vanished Khomar had slept. They had no man of their kin to hunt for them and I had ranged far into the desert at dawn,

and had been fortunate enough to bring down one of the lumbering carrion-birds with my spear.

This I cast down before the knees of the woman, Niora, where she knelt dry-eyed before her fire, "Here is meat for the living, mother of the friend of my boyhood," I said somberly. She looked up at me through the coils of her hair, and her face, still beautiful although drawn with pain and toil, was weary.

"My thanks to you, Jugrid, chief's son," she said dully. "But I have no belly for it. I, whose son lies somewhere amidst the sands, his flesh unburnt in the sacred fire, his spirit earthbound forever, never to join his fathers beyond the clouds. But thank you, chief's son, for your kindness."

I bowed, and went to where Athala stood not far off, listlessly rolling up the sleeping-furs. Even in her sorrow she was more lovely than a springtide morning. I touched her arm.

"He was my brother, too," I said awkwardly. She nodded, saying nothing, too weary for tears.

"If but one might live," she sighed, "why must it be Nuba the One-Eyed skulker, rather than tall Khomar, the swift, the bold, the laughing—" Then she choked back a sob and I let my arm gently encircle her shaking shoulders.

"This very night," I swore, "Khomar shall be avenged!"

She flashed me a look of scorn, green eyes flashing.

"You boast like a raw boy, not a warrior and a chief's son," she said fiercely. "Come to me again when you have deeds to show, not empty words!" And with that she turned on her heel and went to tend her mother.

Even in her anger, she was more beautiful than the dawn.

That night the chief, my father, posted his guards. He would have set me among them, but I pled a gashed foot and showed him my heel red with blood. He gave me a puzzled look, but held his tongue; although I think he doubted me, and was surprised and hurt at my cowardice.

The blood on my heel was from the bird I slew at dawn, a bit of whose gore I had scraped up in a hollow bit of stone.

That night, before the moon's rising, I crept from my sleeping furs and did on my leather tunic and buskins, and armed myself. At the last, remembering the words which Zorm the Ancient had spake the night before, I took from amongst its wrappings the great Axe of Zar and bound it

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across my back. Then I crept into the darkness, as stealthily as ever crept forth the tiger of the snows.

At the head of the stony gulch in which the People camped was a tall rock went rising up into the stars. This rock I reached and none there were that saw me go. Then did I scale it carefully, unto the top, where the stone was flat and smooth. There I stretched out so that I could watch the guards who watched the camp, without myself being seen by any.

For a long while naught befell and I caught myself falling into a doze, wherefrom I jerked awake, cursing the weakness of the flesh. To keep myself awake thereafter, I closed my fingers into a fist about the sharp blade of my flint knife until the keen, whetted stone bit into my palm. The sting of the cut kept me wakeful, and whenever drowsiness came over me, I but clenched the knife tighter until the bite of the blade into my flesh stung me to wakefulness again.

And then, about the mid of night, just as the moon rose up over the far edge of the world to flood the Land of Silence with its sheen of light, I was witness to a strange and awful thing.

For the moon rose . . . and as it rose there rose as well a weird and distant *singing* . . . a faërie song, such as perchance the spirits hearken to in the country beyond the clouds . . . a thin and eerie song, seductive and languid, promising unheard-of pleasures, strange bliss, unholy raptures such as the flesh has seldom known . . .

As I watched, myself enrapt as they, the guards turned their heads to listen, and let fall their spears from nerveless hands, and turned to stride away into the desert. And I with them, no less ensorcelled than were they . . .

I was brought up short, with a stinging shock, at the brink of the huge stone whereon I had crouched. One step more and I would have toppled to the rock-strewn sands far below. Cold globules of sweat burst from my brow and my hands felt clammy as I realized how nearly had I come to succumbing to the same weird enchantment as had beguiled my fellow tribesmen.

Thinking of their peril made me search the moonlit wastes for a glimpse of them. And there they were, striding like sleep-walkers out into the east.

And then my heart froze. *For striding along in their wake was Athala, my beloved, as drugged in dreams as they!*

6. *At Moon's-Rising*

I knew not how it came to be that Athala was wakeful at this hour and chanced to have heard the singing of that siren song. Mayhap, sorrowing for her brother, she had not been able to sleep, and, tossing and turning wakefully, had heard the haunting music in the night.

But, whatever the why and how of it, there she was, stumbling along in the rear of the dreaming guards as they went blindly to meet their mysterious Doom.

I half-climbed, half-fell down the sheer side of the great rock until my feet crunched into high-strewn sand at its base. Then I ran after the sleepwalkers, no longer fearful of being seen. A few swift strides had brought me up to where Athala walked. I caught her by one arm and called her name, but she did not seem to hear me or to feel my touch, but pulled away and continued walking into the east, into the rising moon.

Again I caught up to her and seized her two arms in the iron grip of my hands and shook her, and called her name, striving to waken her from this tranced slumber. She woke not, but writhed and fought like a wildcat in my grip until she had torn free, whereupon she continued stumbling along, like one deep in dreams.

And so I followed close upon her heels, filled with a dreadful desire to see the thing that called to her in the night, the unseen singer of that weird, elfin song that lured men to their death amidst the crimson sands, under the risen moon.

Ever and anon the dreamful spell wove itself about my own brain, till, benumbed, it sank toward slumber. But when that chanced I clenched my fist ever and again about the flint knife whose naked blade I clasped still in my fist.

As we drew farther and farther from the camp of the People, and nearer and nearer to the singer of that uncanny song, I was forced to clench my fist again and again on that knife, now black with blood, tighter and tighter until the hot blood ran down my hand and dribbled from my fingers into the parched and silent sands.

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But the bitter kiss of the blade drove the fogs of enchantment from my brain and kept me wakeful and wary.

Now we drew nigh unto the place of the ruins whereof my father had spoken. And when I saw the columns thrusting up as if to impale the round orb of the moon, I saw a weird and wondrous thing—”

By the sunlight of day, my father had told us, the pillars of the ruin were like dully-polished stone, heavy and opaque as any other kind of rock.

But, by night, and the moonfire streaming *through* them, they were glittering shafts of scarlet crystal, with smoky and vaporish whorls moving slowly within them, coiling and uncoiling, and threaded through with glinting motes like fiery and evil stars.

And I bethought me, then and there, of the burning pillars that hold up the roof of hell in one of the dire myths related of old by Chonda the Teller-of-Tales, the fourth of our ancient chiefs, who was the very father of Zorm himself.

The Pillars of Hell! . . . aye, such, indeed, they might well prove to be. . . .

One by one, the ensorcelled guards stumbled like sleep-walkers, blank of face and empty of eye, into the smoky red glare of those crystal columns; and all the time that seductive faërie music sang in our ears its sweet and deathly song . . . and I, alone of us six, was able to resist the siren-call of that hellish singing!

Now the foremost of the guards came stumbling up to press his face against the cold glassy surface of the nearer of the glowing crystal columns.

As he did so there came coiling in slow and heavy whorls a dense vapor from the dry sands which were heaped about the base of the Pillars, a thick, oily vapor that flowed and coiled and glided like running fluid or slithering serpents. The tentacles rose to twine about him as he stood, spread-eagled against the lucency of the Pillar—in whose glimmering depths, now, the uncanny witch-fires burned bright and ever brighter, till their crimson flames flared like the dawnward sun itself, and his form was silhouetted blackly against the scarlet blaze.

Then he shrieked.

And I stood, frozen and trembling, whimpering curses between gritted teeth, as the oily vapor coiled about him *and*

ate the leathern tunic from his body and the flesh from his bones and crumbled the very bones themselves into a powdery ash!

Until there was nothing of the pitiful wretch left at all, but the flint-bladed knife he had worn at his waist and the necklace of smooth stones clasped about his throat. These dropped into the soft sands at the base of the column and sank from sight as the thick smoke-serpent sank back into the sands, replete.

And the coiling, smoky whorls within that Pillar churned violently; and the glinting motes blazed up like mad stars; and the singing of the Pillars rose to an unearthly pitch.

Guard after guard went stumbling forward to clasp the cold glassy column to his breast, as one crazed with some unholy lust, and to be consumed utterly, to a thin sifting of ash, as in an invisible bath of flames—and, may the gods forgive me!—I stood by, rooted to the spot, like one frozen stiff with unbelieving horror, and did naught to save them.

And then it was Athala who glided on swaying feet into that cold, unholy embrace—

7. *The Madness of Jugrid*

Then it was as if the spell which had held me fixed to that spot as if rooted there—*snapped*.

I sprang forward, roaring. I was half-mad with terror, I am not ashamed to say it, for in my youth we were a simple tribe, ignorant and superstitious, our brains stuffed full of old wives' tales of night devils and mist demons and black spirits of the killing frost. Thus it was that the thick hair of my mane lifted from my scalp and my eyeballs nigh started from their sockets and my lips were drawn back in a tigerish snarl of berserk rage and I foamed at the mouth like a madman.

But the red murk of fury which rose roaring within my brain broke the chains of numb inaction which had held me ensorcelled, and I leaped forward like a charging cave-bear. One hand reached out to snatch Athala back from the brink of doom. And so terrific was the strength that rose within my maddened thews that I hurled the girl a dozen strides away with a single thrust.

Then straight and true I hurled my long spear with its keen blade of beaten copper against the column and its whirling

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witch-fires. It glanced away, not even scarring the tough crystal.

I ripped my flint knife from my waist, snarling like a mad wolf, the foam dripping from my bared teeth. Again and again, roaring with mingled rage and loathing, fury and terror, I drove my knife into the column until the blunted blade broke to flying shards.

Baffled, I slunk back, growling deep in my chest, my eyes glaring like coals under the tangle of my shaggy mane.

And then, in the red murk of my madness, I bethought me of the Axe, the great stone Axe of Zar, which I wore strapped across my broad young shoulders. With trembling, fumbling fingers I pawed and tore at the thongs that bound it, snapping and snarling . . . and now Athala, numb and bedazzled, came staggering to her feet again, and went stumbling into the evil embrace of that Pillar of Hell, an unnatural passion smiling in her face and gleaming from her dark eyes!

Flat against the slick crystal of the hellish column she pressed her lissom body, her warm white breasts flattened against the cold, lucent stone. I reached out and tore her away and struck her across the face with the back of my hand. Before the shock of that stinging buffet the panting lust faded from her eyes and the tender Athala of old peered forth therefrom again, bewildered and fearful. I shouted something at her, and never afterwards could I recall the words I spake; but she sank to her knees in the red sand and buried her sobbing face in her hands, slim shoulders shaking as she wept.

The uncanny music sang in my ears, benumbing my brain, weaving its web of witchery to ensnare my soul. I howled aloud like a maddened wolf, seeking to drown out that eerie song. And I wrapped the fingers of both hands about the long haft of the great Axe, and took my stand, and swung the Axe back over my shoulders. Then, with all the steely strength in arms and back and shoulders, I swung the whistling blade of Zar's Axe against the scarlet thing of singing crystal.

The music broke abruptly into a shrill keening, as of dread! For black cracks ran here and there through the shining stuff of the Pillar, and my blow had gouged out a jagged chunk of the glistening, lucent stone.

Again and again I swung the great Axe against the shud-

dering column of crumbling glass, and now it screamed and moaned, like the wailing of tortured women. Red fury possessed me utterly; I growled deep in my breast, and Athala tells that my eyes glared forth from the tangle of my wet locks like the red glare of a beast in the bloodlust of the kill.

Shard after shard I cut away, and ever the black and jagged cracks tore through the tottering column until it fell, smashed to shivering fragments, at my feet.

And as the broken column fell to bestrew the crimson sands with its glittering shards, Lo! the witch-fires died within it, and its wail fell to a keening, then a whimper, then—naught but silence.

But I fought on.

And, after an eternity, my roaring berserker madness ebbed and my wits returned to me again. I found myself prone on the dry desert sands, every trembling and exhausted and aching limb bedewed with cold perspiration. My head was pillowed on the lap of the girl, Athala. Her warm tears were like rain on my face. But softer still were her sobbing kisses.

I came lurching and stumbling to my feet, swaying with weariness, feeling the pull and drag of strained and quivering sinews. My head swam with tiredness and my brain felt dull and numb and every inch of my body ached abominably.

But the four tall Pillars of Hell lay in shattered ruin amidst the sands, and already their slick and glassy substance was worn and pitted as they flaked away, crumbling to dust, no longer embued with the uncanny force of their devilish magic.

They would sing no more, those grisly relics of a forgotten race. No longer would they lure to their cold embrace the children of men.

Wearily I bent to retrieve the great Axe where it had fallen from my exhausted hands. Then, with one arm about the trembling shoulders of Athala, I turned my staggering feet toward the encampment of my people and the tent of the chief, my father; and I bore with me a tale of such strange and chilling horror that never would it fade from the memory of the People of the Dragon. Never, while the world lasts!

Philip Coakley

LOK THE DEPRESSOR

There is no replacing such talents as Smith or Howard. Once departed they are gone forever, and leave a permanent gap which no other can fill.

But new writers emerge forever to swell the ranks of fantasy. Only a few stories back I introduced you to Grail Undwin; now, meet the Phil Coakley, who comes as close to writing like Jack Vance as anyone I have ever read.

And that, to my taste, is very high praise, indeed.

—L.C.

Lok the Depressor lived by himself in a stone cot on the edge of the Great Fokmah Waste. Because demands for his services remained ever constant, no day passed without an accompaniment of visitors. But deep night drew cacodemons, wasted spirits, and ghouls out of the fens, and travelers seldom ventured near.

Thus it was with surprise that Lok turned from his hearth one gale-ridden winter evening to attend a frantic pounding on his door.

"Lok the Depressor!" a frenzied voice exclaimed. "Open at once! I am pursued by fiends!"

Lok ran his fingers through his beard, pondering. A trick?

Scarcely a year had passed since the cottage had been besieged by a pride of savage Volescien Implacables. Best approach the request with caution.

"Lok, I beseech you, mercy!"

"I must know your name and errand," Lok called.

The reply was unhesitant: "Gron of Six Hills. I seek Depression of three revolutions to requite a personal injustice."

"Come, come," Lok answered. "The name is unfamiliar and your mission vague."

"Aiye! Lok! The fiends approach!"

From a distance, a new voice called, deep and hungry: "What need have we for the old wizard's carrion when this morsel lies at his doorstep!" Lok recognized an Implacable.

He was decided. Wrapping thrice about his wrist an amulet of domestic longanimity, Lok threw back the bolt and cracked open the door.

A slight creature wrapped in wet gray traveling robes squeezed inside.

"Quickly, Lok, rebar the entrance!"

Lok had scarcely complied when heavy bodies threw themselves against the door. They pounded, cursed, brayed, and howled; but, having had previous experience with the Depressor, they knew their efforts would avail little.

They soon departed.

The traveler stood by the fire, a dark shadow with the shape of a man. Lok fingered the amulet. Its potency had never been tested.

"I am thankful for your sanctuary," the stranger said.

"You must also be grateful for your own good fortune. The imps which had claimed you are among the least perilous of the Waste. There are creatures here endowed—"

The stranger made an impatient gesture. "I will offer a sheep's head then to luck for the hospitality of Lok. This, of course, when I return to Six Hills, after I have availed myself of your services. Do you wish to know why I sought you?"

"Indeed," said Lok. It was a fifty-day journey from Gron's home. "You spoke of injustice?"

The stranger cast back his hood. Gron was a dark-haired youth, delicate of feature, hollow of cheek. His eyes were recessed and set close together, the planes of his face high. The combinations imparted a suggestion of hauteur, a hint of the calculating.

Lok the Depressor

"Why have you not offered me a chair?" he said. Without ceremony he settled himself onto a footstool, sliding to be within the compass of the fire's warmth. "My story will amaze you, Lok," he began. "Three revolutions ago I chanced upon a thing of incredible value. A book."

Gron reached through a slit in the side of his cloak. "Have you a Reader?" He held in his outstretched palm an opaque cube.

Here was a relic of the unguessable past.

Lok took the book between his thumb and forefinger, turning it gingerly to inspect all its facets. "We have no need of Readers here," he said, returning it. "Where was it obtained?"

Conflicting impulses played on Gron's face. Hesitancy and distrust of the Depressor, rapidly overcome by the desire to boast. "It was in a hollowed pavement from an ancient cenotaph," he said. "The rock fell from a ledge, shattered at my feet. I found this book inside."

Lok lifted an eyebrow. "There is no more to impart?" Gron flushed. "If you wish Depression," Lok said, "you must have my full confidence. What do you withhold?"

"There was no lie! If you must know, I entered a tabu ruin to plunder. The spirits of the place threw pieces of the battlement down on my head. One of the old stones split."

Lok studied him. He was barely past majority. A lean, arrogant, and now seemingly quick-tempered youth. His ragged clothing had been frayed more by the rigors of impecuniosity than by those of the arduous journey to the Fokmah Waste. The tale of thievery seemed plausible.

"Very well," Lok said. "You spoke of injustice done you. Why do you require my services?"

Gron turned to gaze into the fire. "I wish to return to the location and moment when I discovered the book. For as I retrieved this relic, an apparition prevented me from obtaining additional artifacts. I have since secured protection against the spirit. I only ask that you aid my further exploration. The book is but one part of a set. It is unfair that I could not gather the companion volumes."

Lok laughed. "You desire to make me your accomplice. Please recall that I will not abet crimes. Go elsewhere if you intend to loot the dead."

Gron turned his gray eyes to Lok. "You misconstrue my

motives. I desire only good. You have not read the book." He placed the cube on the soot-stained mantel.

Lok scowled and tugged protectively on the wrist amulet. "I will command the object," he said.

The room grew suddenly cold. In the hearth, the fire shrank to an ember, then was gone. In a blackness deep as Old Night, Lok spoke a Word.

Splinters of light appeared. Amber and incarnadine spark-lets flicked. Like the slow splash of a hidden waterfall, minute glints of verdigris and teal fell, rebounded, slid, and shattered. The colors swarmed, entwined, re-wove. A skewed spectrum rushed upon them, buckling as it neared, then dissolving like breath on a mirror.

"Lok, I grow weary of this magician's play," Gron's disembodied voice spoke. "Restore reality or bring the book to a more adequate Reader."

"Your book has its origin in ancient time," Lok replied. "My forces must have a few moments to effect their full powers."

The colors drew together. Bends and lines joined. Then, with sudden focus, a pied series of words hung in the blackness.

THE BOOK OF BAL-ARCHERON: VOLUME

The letters grew misty. Pieces of the letters unfastened, drifted. Recombined.

THREE, AVARICE. THIS THIRD

Again, the letters shuffled.

OF MANKIND'S SEVENFOLD PLAGUES

"Is this interminable methodology your only recourse, Lok," Gron protested. "If you proceed in this manner, a whole revolution will pass before you read the book."

"There are other means," Lok responded.

All light faded. There was a brief spinning sensation and both men stood before the fire in the wizard's cottage. Gron opened his mouth to vent additional complaint, but the air was suddenly rent by a loud, strong voice.

"This third of mankind's sevenfold plagues is that of avarice. The most learned authorities I have consulted do not fail to place the malfeasance in the first rank of human kind's multiple curses. In the following treatise I will discuss the bane in all its variations, then establish irrefutable proof of its

undesirability. And, lastly, in my concluding propositions, I shall specify certain remedial actions which I submit will account—"

The voice broke off in mid-syllable. "What nonsense is this?" Lok demanded.

"You must hear the second proposition," said Gron. "There Bal-Archeron defends himself against charges advanced by his contemporaries. They considered him a mad-man."

"Doubtless, with good cause," Lok replied. "Why do you have interest in this trifle?"

Gron avoided his gaze. "It took me an entire revolution to read this tract on Avarice. I infer from the book that the sage Bal-Archeron identified seven innate human traits which contrive to produce unhappiness in our poor race. These are stupidity, lust, avarice, sloth, tastelessness, and lack of physical dexterity. The particular genius of Bal-Archeron led him to the knowledge requisite for their cancellation. Of that knowledge, there is only the barest hint in this tome, the third of the seven-volume set. The other books rest in the place and time three revolutions past when the stone split and I chanced upon their discovery."

Lok knitted his brows in bemusement. "What will you do, assemble the books and effect Bal-Archeron's schemes?"

"No less."

Lok drew back. "You do not think this is egregious eccentricity?"

"I am convinced! Bal-Archeron was a man of the Time of Change. The men who altered the sun could do all. I cannot doubt that Bal-Archeron has the correct knowledge."

"May I remind you," Lok said wearily, "that the men who changed the sun erred. They were driven to heights of desperation and miscalculated the results of their work. We have forgotten what the world was before the Change, but we do retain the knowledge that the ancient savants rued their work. We have forgotten what the world was before the Change, but we do retain the knowledge that the ancient savants rued their work. They destroyed all else but what they sought to keep. Tradition says more was lost than preserved."

Gron grew angry. "The story is well known: the sun was to explode. By grafting this world to its mirror, the wizards thwarted the final agonies of our star."

"They were unsuspecting fools," Lok insisted. "Their actions were too rash."

"Fools!" Gron exclaimed. "Look up, Depressor. See the sky. For half a revolution the sun ages, for half a revolution, it grows young. Without the wisdom of the Time of Change, the sun would detonate. We live because of the past's genius."

Lok grimaced. "I have greater information than you. As the cosmos shrank, madmen abounded. No extravagance was too great, no whim went unfulfilled. Joining this universe with its opposite preserved our world at the expense of all else. Beyond the sky all is chaos. It was not always so."

"Enough," Gron dismissed the debate. "We may live a pendulum existence. But the sun does not expire. And we who benefit should not begrudge. Especially . . . you."

Lok felt a momentary helplessness. It was true that both his talents and office derived from the work of the ancients.

But what did not?

"Will you help me?" Gron asked softly.

For a time Lok sank into thought, watching the silent flames consume the brands on his hearth. On winter nights such as these, he had often seen visions there in the shifting light. Reaching spires of vanished cities. Flashing projectile vehicles big as mountains. A swarm of extinct worlds thick as the dust on eternity.

And sometimes the hiss of the flames whispered to him in the cacophonous hush of vanished billions. Gone, gone, the voices said.

It was indeed as Gron said. Their existence here after the Change was like a pendulum. Nothing new ever came into the world. He looked at the boy. Was there earnest altruism in the return stare? Should he trust Gron of Six Hills?

He was decided.

"I will grant you Depression of three revolutions, on the stipulation that we return to my cottage with these treatises. I will study Bal-Archeron's books before you undertake any implementation of your plans."

Gron hesitated. "Of course," he said.

"Then," Lok whispered, "prepare."

The Depressor threw up his arms. The sides of the room began to rotate. Faster. The glow of the fire blurred, spun about them, then became a solid cherry band. Over their heads the parallel rafters of the cottage elongated and arched

Lok the Depressor

upward to a central node. Glints and twinkles from the shelves of variegated vials of the Depressor stretched sideways, then raced to clasp as slender circlets encompassing them.

"I, Lok the Depressor, invoke the formulas of old. I call upon thee, oh barrier of the Dark. I seek the borders of existence."

Lok chanted a time-old intonation. From his belt he took a flat palm-sized box and lightly touched his fingers upon well-worn points. The device emitted a succession of unintelligible squeaks.

The floor on which they stood became insubstantial. The two hung in space, then gradually tilted. The spinning bands skewered into a mad whirlpool configuration and they seemed to plunge abruptly feet downward into a twisting abyss.

"Help, me, Lok!" Gron shouted.

Lok laughed. "I see this is your first Depression. Hide your eyes. You will find that other sensations are minimal."

Gron complied.

"Now, quickly," Lok ordered. "You have obtained the Depression you sought. We drift. Where in the world do you wish to reach?"

With both hands over his eyes and garments flapping wildly in the vortex, Gron delayed. "Do not fear!" Lok shouted. "Where do you wish to go? Quickly! Do you want to revert back to the Waste and cavort with the Implacables?"

Gron stammered. "The hill."

"Hill? Be more precise before it is too late!"

"The hill of Dorn. The ruins are at its crest."

But the delay had been too lengthy. With a flash of light and a clap of thunder, the earth rushed up to strike their feet. Their knees buckled and they tumbled head over heels into a bed of furze.

Lying on his back, Lok observed the mottled disk of the sun westering near a low ridge of hills. He thrust the box back into his belt for safe-keeping.

Gron stood, shaking. "I did not expect that."

"You are not the first," Lok replied, also gaining his feet. "But you are back three revolutions, as you sought. How close to Dorn have we come?"

Gron surveyed the landscape. To the west was the ridge, opposite was a thick stand of forest. To the north, what could

be seen of the land rolled away in scrub-covered undulation. In the south a single squat hill loomed, perhaps three miles distant. Lok thought he could discern a grouping of structures at the top.

Gron paced off to the south, then halted. He returned to the Depressor. "I know this place," he said. "But I fear there was a miscalculation. The hill of Dorn is six days distant. However," Gron's eyes darted to the side, then locked back on the Depressor's, "rather than re-exert your powers, I have a suggestion."

"Indeed."

"I will retrieve the missing volumes of Bal-Archeron while you bide here. I promise to return in a fortnight. Then, despite your skepticism, the ancient scholar's plans for the advancement of humanity will be enacted."

Lok ran his fingers through his beard. "There is the slight matter of my fee," he said.

Gron bristled. "Can you not rest content with the satisfaction that you have bettered the lot of our entire species?"

"To be truthful, such an opportunity is rare. Nevertheless, eventually I will desire somewhat more tangible compensation."

"Very well," Gron scowled. "Should the location I seek contain items of more than sentimental value, I will secure a certain amount for you."

"You *do* intend to loot the dead!" Lok exclaimed. "I must remind you—"

"Enough of these tricks!" Gron shouted. "I will not tolerate such baseless aspersions against my character. I have too many times explained my mission. Think what you like. I am now off on a difficult journey!"

Gron glanced right and left, as if unsure which direction to choose. But the woods were nearest. He marched off.

Calling over his shoulder, he said. "Should I not return in a reasonable time, do not fear. The ardors of the journey might require I rest several days." He stopped at the edge of the forest. "A thought has just come. I hope you do not entertain the suspicion that I intend to abandon you. Such an idea revolts me to the core! Remember the great goal of Bal-Archeron!"

He vanished into the foliage.

Lok sat down in the furze. At a distance, he heard the

sound of a lizard scuttling through the vegetation. He wondered where he was.

The rim of the sun touched the ridge. It was soon gone. Subtly, the evening chill seeped out of the ground. Minutes slipped by. The sky began to pale. Another hour passed. Lok cleared the scrub, gathered dry scraps, and employed his amulet to start a tiny fire.

It was as all nights following the Time of Change. Black and impenetrable. Overhead, there were no stars. No moon silvered the landscape. The steady lamps of the planets were extinguished, the soaring arch of the Milky Way was no more. Comets, asteroids, streaking stars, exploding nebulae, silently twisting galaxies—all had long vanished. Night was unbridled and ruled all.

Lok watched the sparks of the fire drift upward in the heat convections. After a while he observed that a great many seemed to be lingering at his left.

But, no! He leapt to his feet.

A peculiar phenomenon was taking place far to the south. Lok walked away from the fire to see.

There was a concatenation of tiny green and orchid *pop-pings* apparently originating in the vicinity of the hill he had seen that afternoon. As he squinted for a better view, a number of violent light explosions lit up the night. With scant delay, concussion after concussion thundered in the darkness.

With no warning, a pillar of flame sprang erect on the hill, momentarily splitting the night. As this vanished, a sheet of radiant energy flowed downslope from the crest. After several minutes, its force had not ebbed, and Lok's surroundings were vaguely visible.

Not knowing what to make of the strange activity, Lok returned to the fire and continued to stoke it. It might be best to repress his increasing curiosity until daylight.

With the passage of time, Lok began to weigh the possibility of giving up Gron and returning to his current cycle. He removed the Depressor's box from his belt. His intuition was strong that the likelihood was high of never seeing the youth again. Still, the activity to the south was of interest.

He had always marveled at the weighty heft of the box. Holding it, he often had the impression that the crabbed lore of all the ages had somehow been crammed inside. He considered it in the firelight. Might one pry open a side and have

the compounded wonderment of the eons fly ineluctably out?

As he returned the box, he heard the sounds of a great animal running through the underbrush. His untested amulet would have its power truly assayed if this region contained inhabitants anything similar to those of the Fokmah Waste.

"Retreat vile creature!" he shouted. "Advance farther and be smitten!"

"Aiye!" howled a familiar voice.

"Gron of Six Hills?" Lok called. A figure loomed now at the verge of the firelight.

"Take them!" Gron of Six Hills shouted, his voice rising from a considerable distance away.

Lok strained to see. What was that so near him?

The figure stepped forward into visibility. Eight feet high, with bulging carnadine eyes, naked in its squamous aquamarine skin, its talons spread and ready—a Demon considered Lok.

"The tiaras, rings, necklaces, the bejeweled brooches! All I have I will return. Only grant one minute shred of mercy."

Gron was answered by a sardonic cachination. "Will you deprive us of the just due of the Warders? Deny us the proper fruit of our vigilance? That would be a consummate theft indeed!"

"I am insignificant and have taken nothing of real value. I appeal to your sense of propriety."

The invisible Warder shrieked with mirth.

The Demon which had discovered Lok cocked its head in bemusement. Summoned forth by age-forgotten banns, it seemed to puzzle over Lok's involvement in its ancient commands. Should it disembowel him at once? Why was this man waiting here in the night, unless as an accomplice of the thief?

Thrashing sounds in the underbrush informed Lok that the first Warder had fallen and was rolling from side to side with laughter.

His own Demon scratched its chin with a yellow talon. Weighing matters of ethics was inhibiting. The affair would likely clarify when it had consumed some hot entrails. It crouched, ready to spring.

He had no other expedient. Lok held up the amulet. "Gaze on this power, beast," he spoke. "Here is a force from the age of your creators."

Lok the Depressor

The Demon leapt directly at him.

But it met a barrier at the fire's edge. It fell into the undergrowth and bounded away before Lok could blink an eye.

A second after the beast's disappearance, Gron crawled miserably into the tiny clearing. Lok saw that certain unsuspected pouches under the youth's cloak bulged with substances that clacked and jostled as he moved. Otherwise, the youth had the mussed look of a half-drowned water rat.

"Why do you wait, old fool," he cried. "Return us to our own cycle at once."

Lok stood frozen in the posture he had adopted when the Demon attacked. Beyond the power circle provided by the amulet, the two Warders paced in shadowy, feral movements. "I cannot lose this stone," Lok replied forlornly.

They heard the ugly sound of the Warders' laughter.

"We must return," Gron pleaded.

"If they are to be kept in check, I cannot release the amulet!"

"Hand it to me!"

The laughter of the Demons roared louder.

"Unfortunately that would be useless. Even they understand that you would be helpless."

Gron stifled an involuntary noise of terror. "We are trapped."

"Perhaps the day will disperse them."

This idea struck the Warders as the most amusing of all.

"Why did you rob the tomb? Had you simply taken the books they might not have been aroused."

"The books! The foolish ravings of that idiot." Gron stood and faced the stealthy forms of the Demons. Items in Gron's pouches clacked as he groped for something. "Bal-Archeron, the imbecile of the eons!" He now held a handful of the ancient cubes. "On the oft chance that I might require you to carry me away, I pause too long in the tomb seeking out this worthless tripe. Alas, I woke the Guardians."

In a fury, Gron cast one of the cubes at a bobbing, bestial shadow. It rebounded from the Demon with no visible effect.

"However," said Lok, "your main intention was merely to steal as much as you could and flee from me. Once you were Depressed you had no intention of returning to your current cycle."

Gron hurled another book. "What use now is denial?"

THE WORLD'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 4

"I am indignant that I could be used so!"

"Rubbish. All you really do is mumble nonsense. Your essential power lies in the box." Gron edged closer. "Which at the present moment is tucked rather loosely in your belt."

"You exaggerate," Lok bristled.

"We will see," Gron replied. The youth now held the palm-sized box of the Depressor in his hand. "Instruct me in its use."

"Return that at once. Also discard those possessions which you have dishonestly obtained."

Gron chuckled. "The only objects I will reject are these cubes which have so disordered my fortunes. As to the box, Lok, I repeat: begin your instructions."

"Enough!" Lok dropped the amulet and groped for the box.

Startled at the determination of the Depressor, Gron cast the remaining books of Bal-Archeron at him.

With triumphant howls, the two Demons bounded forward.

Lok clutched the box; Gron attempted to wrench it away.

The world began to rotate.

The talons of one Demon raked the back of Gron's garment.

The less aggressive beast whined and scooped up the books.

About them the world had become a spinning tempest. The vortex intensified as they struggled. Lok pulled the box from Gron's hands; Gron pulled it back.

A dazzling collection of gems, neckwear, and armature tumbled from Gron's clothing and went spinning into the mist.

Gron screamed as a Demon bit deep into his shoulder. Lok pried the creature off. A lucky shove sent it spiraling off into oblivion. The remaining Demon sank to their feet, covered its ears, and crooned softly to the books it had saved.

With a thunderburst they emerged from Depression.

They were in the air, miles above an immense ocean. Curving along the horizon, a great city stood on the shore, its needle towers stretched back across the sky as far as their sight could absorb. "Who could know that so many people ever lived!" cried Gron as he took in the vista. They began to plummet downward.

Lok the Depressor

Lok grabbed the box. They returned to the whorl. Another explosion.

They were on a rolling savannah. The brushes which obscured their sight grew to their shoulders, occasionally higher. In the distance came the rumble of thunder. Gron was about to ask about the possible presence of warring magicians. But Lok pointed.

An expanse of dust came at them like a rolling comber. And behind this was a staggering multitude of animals.

Beyond the imagination of men of their time they spread. A multiplicity of living creatures, stampeding forward, thousands upon thousands, a vast press of life overwhelming their meager comprehension.

The Demon stirred. Lok felt Gron take grip of the box.

They emerged to darkness. But not darkness like that after the Time of Change.

They stood on a mountain. Below, whatever landscape they surveyed was subdued in shadow. Above, they saw the stars.

Here was a sight tens of generations of men had forsaken. A multicolor splattering of countless independent points, infinite upon the reverse dome of the heavens.

Gron craned his neck, gazing here and there upon different sky quadrants. "What is this, Lok?" he asked in a whisper.

"The jewels of existence," Lok replied. "See them. Place whatever value on them you like. None are attainable ever again. This is our true loss."

The Demon moved without warning. It caught Lok by the waist and threw him on the rock. Its claws stretched for the Depressor's face.

Again, they entered the nether world.

Again, they felt the full force of sudden re-emergence.

This time they were inside.

The hall was large and gloomy. Its walls were stone and at various places less grimy patches revealed locations where portraits or sizeable hangings had been removed. The ceiling was high, but spotted with mildew or rain seepage. In places, the plaster had fallen, and lay unswept on the floor beneath.

There was no furniture in the room save a single manuscript-cluttered table at the far end. Three windows spaced at irregular intervals near the ceiling let in a wan daylight glow.

A heavy balding man in a velvet patched scholar's robe stood looking at them from behind the table.

The Demon looked once about the hall, snorted irritably, and shuffled away from Lok.

The man spread his arms. "Far travelers!" His voice had a disquieting familiarity. "Welcome to the abode of Bal-Archeron." On the floor of Lok's feet lay the remains of the set of volumes to which the mad philosopher had devoted his life.

Bal-Archeron made urgent motions. "Gnash, prepare a repast for our friends at once."

Gron's young and calculating face had turned pale white. Lok gently took back the Depression Box.

Hands outstretched, Bal-Archeron hastened to them. "Forgive the humility of these surroundings," he said. "I have transferred all my worldly possessions to my tomb. As you must know, the final confluence is upon us."

Bal-Archeron reached and embraced the Depressor. "Here indeed is a sage worthy of my esteem." He looked to Gron. "No doubt you bring me your son as a pupil." Bal-Archeron was a bear of a man. He took Gron by the shoulders and held him at arm's length. "Truly, sir, you have the look of a man of great promise."

There was a crash at the far end of the hall. The Demon Gnash had upended the table, spilling the manuscripts over the floor. Dusty, minutely-lettered pages flew about like a flock of frightened pigeons.

"Carefully, my pet," Bal-Archeron called.

The Demon stomped to a dim recess.

"Where is Grish?" Bal-Archeron asked.

"Gone," the Demon answered. It emerged with a platter and cracked ewer.

"Well," Bal-Archeron took Lok's hand. "We have much to discuss." He gave the Depressor a knowing look. "Before the End."

Gnash poured a viscous brown liquid containing shapeless lumps from the ewer onto the platter. A waft of repellent mephitic odor immediately suffused the room.

Bal-Archeron's feet ground on one of the cubes. "Aha," he said. "A tome of some antiquity." He retrieved it.

Gnash hefted the platter and greedily slurped the contents.

"Odd," Bal-Archeron said. "A strange presentiment strikes

me. I think I have seen this before." He held the book close to his nose. His thick brows shifted, like crawling caterpillars.

Gron hastily took the book from the scholar's scrutiny. "You must resist impulses whose sources are indeterminate."

Bal-Archeron looked at him in surprise. "Why you quote exactly the nineteenth precept of the fourth volume of my works."

"Inquire," said Gnash, mouth full, "the precise source of his enlightenment."

"Bal-Archeron the Great exudes a superior mental force which transfixes the minds of those receptive," Gron answered quickly.

The mad philosopher considered this a moment. "Quite likely," he agreed.

Gnash gurgled a laugh.

"Your hospitality is most flattering, sir," Gron told Bal-Archeron, "but," looking urgently at Lok, "we must be off."

"So soon," said the scholar. "You are the only disciples to visit me since my *sanity* was voided."

"Depression, Lok," Gron pleaded.

Lok had been studying his box. Had the severe pommeling it lately absorbed altered its ability to discriminate between rotations? He feared any rash trial.

"Why," Bal-Archeron continued, "there were those who locked me in an airless room where they claimed I could do no harm." He laughed suddenly—an erratic, unsettling sound. "It was in those years I constructed my magnificent system.

"Ironic, is it not?" his hand clamped like a vice on Lok's forearm. "I have made it possible to perfect the human race only at the very moment when we are to be consumed." Spittle flecks collected on his lips.

"The youth," said Gnash, "has completely mastered the treatise on Avarice."

"Indeed! How? Where?"

Lok cleared his throat. "You labor under certain misapprehensions. We are not visitors seeking philosophic enlightenment. Nor is the world about to be consumed."

"What? Have you not seen the sun? Hourly more portents of doom manifest themselves."

"But this moment is the great fulcrum of the ages. All the learning of humankind is bent to effect a rescue of the world.

Can you see that we men of later ages can testify to the complete success—”

Bal-Archeron screamed and covered his ears. “No! Lies, lies. This is another trick to slander my sanity.”

Gron tugged Lok’s sleeve. “Why do you delay? We must leave this fool to his delusions.”

“Fool—” Bal-Archeron began. But his glance returned to the cube which Gron retained. A look of pain began to gather on his countenance. With a violent thrust he pulled the book away from the youth.

“THIS IS THE SEVENTH VOLUME OF MY PHILOSOPHY” Bal-Archeron bellowed.

Without warning Gron crashed a silver dish of exquisite filigree down upon the scholar’s bald head. Three star rubies from among those double dozen inlaid on the rim popped loose and rolled into a corner. Gron let the dish fall from his fingers.

Bal-Archeron seemed unaffected.

“Behold,” said Gnash. “An heirloom stolen from the very burial vault that you have so carefully stocked against the ravages of the present.”

“My apologies,” Lok offered. “This lad is a grave robber. Far in your future, he has done you great harm.”

“And has scattered your precious philosophy to the winds,” the Demon added.

Bal-Archeron made a sound like a choking animal.

“Your tomb has been looted, then destroyed. Grish and I had too powerful weapons at our disposal.”

A twisting vein swelled on Bal-Archeron’s forehead. It began to pulse.

A curious effect now took place. From outside, the daylight suddenly dimmed. At the same instant, a strange whisper seemed to seep through the very stones of the building. There was a long mournful sigh, originating from no definite source. A subdued shudder shook the floor.

Bal-Archeron had become rigid. His eyes rolled upward until only the whites were visible. Like an automaton, his arm groped toward Gron.

The youth danced from his grip, spilling more items of value from his garments.

Bal-Archeron stepped forward and was sent flying by a platinum cup.

Lok the Depressor

"All your work for naught," the Demon said. "Release me from your spells."

Another ripple passed through the structure of the house. Before Lok could catch a second breath, his vision began to liquefy. The walls sagged, the floor buckled upward, the forms of his companions started to separate and disperse. Outside a tremendous roaring commenced.

Clearly the risk of activating the Depressor's box was no less than that of standing longer in the hall of the demented scholar.

Lok chanted a silent prayer. The sites he pressed on the box were familiar. His fingers needed no other guidance than touch to activate the message that would bring him home. If the mechanisms which ruled the device were distorted, he had no hope—if not, then—

Lok shut his eyes. The home of the Time of Change madman disappeared from under his feet. The gentle gusts of the winds of the nether world filled his garments.

The next sensation which came to him was the icy chill of the stone flags of his own cottage.

The fire was close to embers. But he was home. Alone.

With trembling fingers, Lok pried loose the stone which concealed his hiding place for his magic box. He guessed that some time would pass before he dared employ it again.

The stool which Gron had dragged to the hearth was unmoved. Lok sat.

Outside, the winter winds swept across the bleak spaces of the Fokmah Waste. Some carried muffled, distant sounds. Perhaps, of laughter.

After a time, the cold compelled Lok to reach for charcoal. He swung around toward the hod.

And there on his floor lay a solid opaque cube.

As paralysis engulfed him, the cube rose off the floor to the level of his eyes.

He had forgotten to cancel his earlier spell of Reading.

The voice of Bal-Archeron sounded in the cottage.

"Stupidity, lust, avarice, sloth, tasteless are set to rest. Never again can these curses bedevil us. But once these defects have been retired, can we assume that our poor species has reached the point of perfection? Never! Yet the pinnacle is in sight! All we now lack is that rare and heavenly attribute of BODILY SKILL."

THE WORLD'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 4

"Yes, how many are the times we seek to cavort with parasol and balancing stick high on a wire, but are irredeemably thwarted by our undeveloped moral perfection? If we were to conduct a brief inventory of those whose sole desire is to contort their bodies in indomitable feats of gymnastic difficulties, would we not find . . ."

The voice droned on. Lok resumed his seat. He would let his fire expire and remain in the darkness until day came back to the Waste.

HARK! WAS THAT THE SQUEAL OF AN ANGRY THOAT?

I know of no other writer alive who can spin a juicy yarn out of less material than Avram. And if that sounds like a backhanded compliment, it really isn't meant to be.

Avram has a rare talent: his surface sparkles, glitters, dazzles with wit and wordplay, lore and levity, fun and fancy. As this small tale (a mere anecdote, actually, and second cousin to a shaggy dog story) splendidly illustrates.

—L.C.

At a time subsequently I was still living back east, we were so many of us then Living Back East, and I was still living on the seventh floor of a seven-floor walk-up in Greenwich Village. Edward lived down the hall: Fox-fire Edward. Fiduciary Debenture III lived downstairs. Gabriel Courland lived around the corner in the hayloft of the Old De Witt Clinton Livery Stable, a location ideally suited and situate—he said—to pour boiling oil down upon unwelcome visitors: bill collectors, indignant fathers of daughters, people with Great Ideas For Stories (“All you got to do is write it down and we’ll split the money, I’d do it myself if I had the time.”), editors with deadlines, men come to turn off the electricity (the gas) (the water) (the whale-oil)—

"Doesn't it *smell* a little in here, Gabe?" asked Edward.

"It smells a *lot*—but look! Look!" here he'd point to the neat trap-door through which hay had once been hauled (and maybe smuggled bombazine and who knows what, poled up Minetta Stream, midnights so long ago). "You can pour boiling *oil* down on people!"

Edward gives me to understand that Gabe never actually *did* pour boiling oil or even *unboiling* oil, down on people; although occasionally; Edward said, G. would allow trickles of water to defoliate the importunate, as who put it? Someone else.

Fiduciary Debenture III lived downstairs, and across the narrow street dwelt Wendell Garrett, in the parlor of a once-huge apartment deftly cut up and furnished by his Great-aunt Ella, relict of his Great-uncle Pat Garrett, yes! The very same Sheriff Pat Garrett Who; Aunt Ella was in the Canary Islands at the time, teaching (I understand) the two-step to the wives of the Spanish officials, to whom, in that not-exactly-then-in-the-beating-heart-of-things archipelago, it—the two-step—represented Modern Culture, if not Flaming Youth in Revolt, and one of the few (very few) occupations or occasions for which their husbands would let them out of the patio.

"The Moors may have been driven out of Spain," Aunt Ella had said, or, rather, written; "but they haven't been driven out of the Spaniards. For God's sake, Wendell, see to it that Mary Teresa empties the pan under the ice-box."

Mary Teresa was the, so to speak, *concièrge*, and refused to allow an electric, gas, or even kerosene fridge to be installed in her own kitchen: slightly larger than a commemorative stamp. This devotion to tradition was much appreciated by the sole remaining Iceman in The Village, whose clientèle by that time consisted of several fish markets and a dozen or so other ladies of the same age and model as Mary Teresa; the Iceman was related by ties of spiritual consanguinity to all the prominent mafiosi—a godfather to godfathers, so to speak—and this in turn enabled her to do as she liked and had been accustomed to do, in a manner which would be tolerated in no one else, no where else.

Wendell lived rent-free in the former parlor of the house in return for his acting as an Influence upon Mary Teresa and curbing in some few important particulars her turn of the century vigor.

Hark! Was That the Squeal of An Angry Throat?

When asked where he lived, he would say, bland as butter, "In a parlor house."

Round the corner in a decayed Federalist Row located behind an equally decayed non-Federalist row (Whig, perhaps, or, as Wendell once suggested, brushing himself, Free Soil), lived the retired Australian sanitary scientist and engineer called Humpty Dumpty. He had indeed once had a lot of cards printed:

Sir Humphrey Dunston
Remittance Man
*Privies Done Cheap Retail and to
the Trade*

But, he had observed, these last phrases had been subject to most gross interpretations by members of one of the Village's non-ethnic minorities; so the only card still in evidence was tacked to his greasy front door. Humpty patronized the Iceman, too, Sangiacomo Bartoldi, but not for ice: Jockum retained the antique art of needling beer, an alchemy otherwise fallen into desuetude since the repeal of the 18th (or Noble Experiment) Amendment, and which—Humpty Dumpty said—alone could raise American lager to the kick of its Australian counterpart ("Bandicoot's Ballocks," or something like that).

If you stood on what had once been the Widow's Walk atop the only one of the Federalists which still had one, you could toss a rubber ball through the back window of the Death House and into the Muniments Room of Calvin M. Knox. This great granite sarcophagus of a building had once, it was said, carried across the front of it the advice that THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH: but only the last of those words remained. Mary Teresa, that repository of local arcane information, sometimes claimed that "The Patriot Boys" had torn off the others to hurl them at the Invalid Corps of the Union Army during what she termed "the Rebellion"—not, indeed, the entire Civil War, but that part of it fought thereabouts and called by others The Draft Riots. Not, of course, by Mary Teresa.

Nor, in fact, did she ever use the name Invalid Corps of the Union Army.

She called them "the Prodisint Bastids."

"I understand that this used to be a House for Fallen

THE WORLD'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 4

Women," Fiduciary Debenture III had once said to Calvin Knox.

"Yes," said C. Knox, gloomily, "and if you're not careful, you're going to fall through the very same place in the floor, too. It quivers when my cat walks across it." It was in consequence of this statutory infirmity of part of the front floor that the back chamber was called the Muniments Room and was heaped high with pulp magazines in neat piles, each bearing some such style and label as (it might be) *Influences of Ned Bunline on Doc Savage*, or *Foreshadowings of Doc Savage in Ned Bunline*, or *Seabury Quinn Type Stories Not Written By Seabury Quinn*, and *J. Sheridan Le Fanu Plot Structures Exemplified in Spicy Detective Stories*.

And, as Mary Teresa so often put it, ecKt, ecKt, ecKt.

"I have reduced," C. Knox said, entirely without boastfulness, "the Basic Short Story to its essential salts."

The last, the very very last of the Hokey Pokey Women practiced in the basement. Edward often patronized her.

Wendell at that time was devoting less time to writing fiction than to his great project of reconciling the Indo-European Exarchate with the Dravidian Rite of the Sanscrit Church (Lapsed Branch) in Exile. Bengali archimandrites in cruciform dhōties and deaconesses in the Proscribed Saffron Sari fluttered round about his doors like exotic butterflies—*could* chrismation be administered in ghee?—*was* the bed of nails a legitimate form of penance?—their collective presence a great perturbation to Mary Teresa, who referred to the entire *kehilla* as Them Gypsies. The only thing which indeed prevented her taking her broom to the lot of them was that a genuine Monsignor of the True Church as recognized by the Police Department had chanced by: whereat the whole ecclesia had knelt as one and collectively kissed his brogans.

"Ah well, nobody is all bad," was her philosophic comment, as she resheathed her besom and, clearing her nasal passages, skillfully swamped a fly in the gutter.

It was to this picturesque scene, as yet unstirred by Beat, Hippy, Freak, Funk, RadLib or LibRad influences (and, indeed, only still faintly tinctured by the froth of the waves which once had beaten ceaselessly upon the Seacoasts of Bohemia) that there came one day clad only in his harness and his sword that strange brave man known, very simply, as John Carter of Mars.

Hark! Was That the Squeal of An Angry Throat?

Some few of the readership may have figured out, all by themselves, that Fiduciary Debenture III (who lived downstairs) was not *really* named Fiduciary Debenture III. His *real* name was in fact A. Cicero Guggenhimer, Jr. He was not related to the *the* Guggenhimers. In fact I do not know, even if there are, or were, any *the* Guggenhimers. The people who peddled lace, smolt copper, leisurely migrated between the State of Colorado, the US Senate, and the Venetian Litoral, now and then pausing to found an art museum or transport a monastery to a choicer location, are *Guggenheims*. With *ei*. Without *er*. However, A. Cicero's grandmother was the last surviving granddaughter of old John Jacob You-Know-Who, and she had left A.C. her half of Manhattan Island, plus the bed of the East River, which Yon Yockoob had bought cheap in between grifting furs from the Redskins and whisking from the Knickerbockers (who had guffawed in Hudson Dutch when thinking how *they* were taking *him* in) those hay meadows and swamp-lots on which now stands *the* most valuable real estatery in the world.

Bar none.

Hence the A.

As for the Cicero, he always claimed his grandmother got it out of a dream-book.

It may not be generally known that every, but I spit you not, *every* commercial vessel which plies or "stands" up and down the East River pays through the hawse-hole for the privilege: because if not, trolls will come up and *eat* them. Naturally, when you got this kind of money, no matter how tied up in trusts and annuities and danegeld it may be, estates mean nothing, penthouses mean nothing, fancy cars and yachts mean nothing: so naturally you come to live in Greenwich Village, where everything is so, well, Interesting.

People would snort when I told them that Edward and I lived on the seventh story of a seven story walk-up: but we did. On the ground floor was the Dante Alighieri Association, the door of which in those days opened only wide enough to admit one small man with well-shined shoes at a time: doubtless to discuss Canto II, or whichever. As to its subsequent career as a coffee-house, of this I know nothing, I say nothing, I've heard nothing, wild horses would drag nothing out of me, so don't even ask.

"Seven stories and no elevator?" people would exclaim, rolling eyes and clutching chests. "That's *got* to be illegal!"

"It does got," I would agree. "But it didn't used to got." Furthermore it was made of cast-iron and not wood, and was not mouldering at all: it was indeed a tenement house, probably one of the last of the Old Law or the first of the New Law tenements, but it was a tenement h. in good condition, I should only be in half such good condition at the same age. I was younger in them days and had more than my memories, and thought nothing of charging up or down the full seven story mountain, heigh ho. Maurice with his Biblical beard used to pass by with his arms full of publications from the four or five quarters of the earth, the sales of which, such as they were, sustained him in scraps of food and the rents on the dozens if not scores of public coin lockers in which he stored the paper memorabilia of decades:

Eheu, Maurice, Maurice! Where are you now?

You were ahead of your time, as well as the wrong age and appearance, these were your only faults: had you lived today, had you been younger, were your beard not white nor your long locks, had you the proper academical affiliations, an academician of the academicians (they should plotz), or a friend or a protégé of a bevy of academicians and critics: see how fast the Guggenfutzes (they should plotz) would bestow upon you Foundlingship after Foundlingship, weevils should only eat their navels: may you au contraire. O Rare Maurice flourish in eternal life.

Amidst the Crash of Matter.

And the Wrack of Worlds.

G. (for Gabriel) Courland . . . the Moriarity Expert? That same. Whom else? G. Courland was then much exercised (if that is not too vigorous a word) in the matter of his trousers: yea cuffs? nea cuffs? He wanted no cuffs, his tailors wanted cuffs. "But they *trip* when you run fast," he would explain. This cut neither ice nor worsted with Morris, Max, and Rocco. "So don't *run* fast," they said.

All very well for *them*: staid old cockers with their wild, wild youths behind them. Gabriel G. was at that time running (there! that *verb* again!) a sort of Consolation Service. For listless wives. And the energy displayed by (now and then, though only now and then) some of them husbands on learning All, would, if devoted on behalf of their wives, have

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left them (the wives) quite listful. And McCourland *ohn* a Consolation Service.

In Bleeker Street the Open Air Market how it flourished! Greens galore. Greens (as Butch Gyrene he put it) up the ass. Flowers in bloom, too. Nearby, the old-established markets, all the names ending in vowels. Wendell Garrett, scarlet vest well-filled, cap of maintenance on his audacious head, would stroll in and out, tweaking the poultry. "Have you any," this he would ask of the Sons of Sicily and the Abruzzi, you or me they would *kill*: "Have you any *guinea fowl*?"

Dandelion greens, fresh-made latticini, lovely reeky old pastafazool, no, had some other name, *cheese*, hm, mm, ah! Provalon! **Smekk**Mussels in icy pools with water always a drip-drip-drip-a-drip, pizza—you let the word pass you by without your lips trembling, your nostrils pirouetting and corvetting, your salivary glands drooling and your eyes rolling? You must be dead, *dead* . . .

Or else, for your sins and your bad karma, you have known nothing but *Protestant* pizza, may God help you. *Not* baked in a stone oven according to the Rules of the Council of Trent. *Not* with the filling so firmly bonded to the crust—and the crust brown and crisp and bubbly round the rim, Marón!, that wild horses could not part filling from crust: *No!* What do you know of pizza, you with your heritage of Drive-ins, and Macdonalds, and the Methodist Church, pizza, you think *that* is pizza, that franchised flop, comes frozen, is thawed, is redone in an ordinary metal quick-a-buck oven, with the cheese from Baptist cows, the tomatoes by Mary Worth, the filling rolling back from off the crust limper than a deacon's dick: *this* you call *pizza*?

Marón.

As for the fruit bread for the Feast of St. Joseph—

"Whats a matta you no shame?" screamed Philomena Rappini, of the Fresh Home-Made Sausage Today Market. "Put A some clothes on! You some kine comuniss? Marón, I no look!" But between her fingers, plump and be-ringed, ahaah, oh ho: she *did* look! And why not? So there he was, dark and well-thewed and imperially slim.

(Well-hung, too.)

"Your pardon, Matron, and a daughter to a Jeddak of Jeddaks. I perceive you must be by your grace and slender

high-arched feet: may I place my sword in pawn? A message to Ed Burroughs? Magnetic telegraph message to muh nevvew Ed Burroughs? Jest tell him it's Uncle John. John Cyarter.

"Of Mars."

As to how he had gotten here, *here*, I mean *there*, in The Village, across the countless leagues and aeons and ions of interstellar freezing space, who knows? Who knows, in fact, what song the sirens sang? Who gives a shit?

When one tired of the coffee-house scene in The Village, there was always The Museum. And by "The Museum" neither I nor any denizen of the Old Village Scene as it then obtained meant one of the sundry establishments displaying genuine old art or artifacts or modern exempla of the Dribble, Splotch, Drool, or Ejaculate, School(s): no. We meant *The Museum*, there on Great Jones Street, *Barnum's Museum*. A mere shadow of itself, you say? May be. May have *been*. Old William Phineas Jr. himself was then alive, great-nephew to the Yankee Showman himself. Billy Finn. The most recently-painted sign was the one reading: *Veterans of the World War, one-Half Price*—and to this had been added by pen a new *s* after *War*, plus the words, in between lines, *And of the Korean Conflict*. These letters had a pronounced wobble, so indicative of the State of the Nation as well as of old Bill Barnum's hand not being quite so firm as it once was. Inside? Jumbo's hayrack. A corset belonging to one of the Dolly Sisters. Anna Held's bathtub plus one of her milk bills for same. Genuine rhinestone replica of the famed Bicycle Set which Diamond Jim had given Lillian Russell. William Jennings Bryan's hat. Calvin *Coolidge's* hat. Old Cool Cal. The oldest wombat in the world, right this way, folks.

And so on.

Across the street the incredible wooden Scotchman, no mere Indian being good enough, was the emblematic figure in front of the establishment of MENDEL MOSSMAN, SNUFF AND SEGARS, *also Plug, Cut-Plug, Apple Twist and Pigtail Twist*. Also (though not openly designated as much, of course), behind the third mahogany door with opaque crystal glass window from the left, an entrance to a station of the Secret Subway System.

Officially, no, it was not officially *called* the Secret Subway

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System, officially it was called Wall Street, Pine Street, Bowling Green and Boulevard Line. The Boulevard, ask any old-timer in them days, was *upper* Broadway. Ask any one or more old-timer as to at what point "upper" Broadway begins: watch them flail at each other with their walking-sticks and ear-trumpets.

There is a Secret Station in the State Bank Notes Registry Room of the old Counting House (Where no state bank notes have been registered since about 1883, owing to a confiscatory Federal Tax on the process).

There is a Secret Station in the marble men's room of the *original* Yale Club.

There is one beneath Trinity Church and one behind the North River Office of the State Canal Authority and one next to the Proving Room (Muskets) of the Mercantile Zouaves and Armory.

There are a few others. Find out for yourself . . . if you can.

The fare is and has been and always will be, one silver dollar each way. *Or*. For a six-day ticket good for round trips, one half-eagle (a five dollar gold piece, to the ignorant).

The ticket agents are the color of those fungi which grow in the basement of old wood-and-stone houses on Benefit Street in Providence, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. It is intimated that these agents once held offices of responsibility above grounds, but Blotted Their Copy Books.

One of them is named Crater.

Crater, if you just think about it a moment, is very much like Carter.

La Belle Belinda lived upstairs over Mossman's, which she insisted had the loveliest smell in the world.

And there are those who say that this distinction belonged to The Fair Belinda herself.

The Sodality of the Decent Dress (a branch of the Legion of Utmost Purity) had just let out into the street after its monthly meeting at Our Lady of Leghorn, and was threatening to cut up rough with John Carter: just then Gabriel C., Wendell G., Edward and myself chanced by; we caught his arcane references at once—although, of course, we did not believe a word of them, still, it was a madness which we not only recognized but respected—and, under pretense of assist-

ing the man to send his message, we spirited him away; after having first clothed his virility under Wendell's naval cloak.

We told the man that it had belonged to the Commanding Officer of the Confederate Ram *Pamunkey*. A faint mist of tears rose in his sparkling eyes, and his protests died away on his lips. His finely-chiseled lips.

"They're after me, boys, you know," he said, simply. "But they mustn't find me. Not till I've obtained a replacement for the wore-out part of the oxygen machine. All Mars depends on that, you know."

Exchanging significant glances, we assured him that we did indeed know.

We further assured him that we would with despatch arrange for sleeping silks and furs; meanwhile he consented to doss down for a muchneeded nap on Gabriel's Murphy bed (for once, not occupied by a listing wife). Edward agreed to stand by. Just In Case.

There we left him, his strong chest rhythmically rising and falling, and stepped down to the courtyard, where we exchanged a few more significant glances, also shaking our lips and pursing our heads. We were thus occupied when Mary Teresa passed by, holding Kevin Mathew Aloysius, her great-grand-nephew, in a grip which would have baffled Houdini.

"Stop tellin them lies," she was adjuring him, "or yez'll born in Hell witt the Prodissint Bastidds."

"No I won't either, because I'm still below the age of reason, nyaa, and anyway, I did *too* seen it, Auntie Mary T'resa, it was as tall as the second-floor window and it looked in at me but I made the sign of the cross, I blessed myself, so it went away," said Kevin Mathew Aloysius, rubbing some more snot on his sleeve.

Wendell, august and benevolent, asked, "What was it that you saw, my man?"

Kevin Mathew Aloysius looked at him, his eyes the same color as the stuff bubbling from his nostrils. "A mawnster," he said. "A real mawnster, cross my heart and hope to die. It was green, Mister Garrett. And it had four arms. And tux growing out of its mouth."

Did some faint echo, some dim adumbration or vibration of this reach the sleeping man? Edward said some had. Edward said that the sleeping man stirred, half-roused himself,

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flung out an arm, and, before falling back into deep slumber, cried out:

"Hark! Was that the squeal of an angry throat? Or the sound of a hunting banth in the hills? *Slave! My harness—and my sword!*"

Pat McIntosh

THE CLOAK OF DREAMS

I have no idea why, but the best new talents to enter fantasy in recent years have mostly been women. Think of Ursula K. LeGuin, Katherine Kurtz, Tanith Lee, Patricia A. McKillip, Joy Chant and C. J. Cherryh, and you'll realize the truth of what I say.

Think also of Pat McIntosh, the Scots girl who has been beguiling us with tales of Thula the war-maid for several years now. Tales like this one, her newest. . . .

—L.C.

I put my hand up to knock on the farmhouse door, but before my knuckles touched wood, clear in a lull in the wind, a voice called "Enter!" I lifted the latch and stepped into the kitchen. The only occupant, her back to me, was seated at the table studying something laid out on a piece of silk; as I leaned back on the door to close it she looked round, and her brows snapped down in a scowl.

"You should be two girls!" she said accusingly.

"The other one's out on my horse," I answered, startled.

"I know that." She straightened, a tall woman in middle age, looking back at me over her shoulder. "You could be

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taken for a boy, in that outfit. Fetch her in, then. This is no weather for her."

Bemused, I obeyed. Out in the farmyard, Iliena was still perched sideways on my horse, hands folded on her belly under the embroidered leather cloak, her face lifted to the storm. I led Dester to the mounting-block, and we got her down.

"Is he here?" she asked.

"I haven't looked," I said truthfully. "Go in before you get wet. I'm going to stable my horse."

"I won't get wet. The cloak protects me, I told you." She moved vaguely toward the house door, and I took Dester's reins again and followed my nose, head down against the rain, to the bawling cowshed.

When I returned to the house, with two big pails of milk, the farmwife was still questioning Iliena. She broke off the midwife's talk to scowl at me again, and say, "So you see to the beasts first, do you? What if your food spoiled?"

"We were taught so," I said. She snorted, and made a sign with her fingers. I set down the milk and answered it; so did Iliena. She made another, with a word, and we both made the response.

"Ha!" she said, pleased by this. "So, we are three initiates, maid, mother and hag. Something will come out of this meeting. Life or death?" she said to me suddenly.

"Life," I said cautiously, uncertain of her meaning.

"Life or death?" she said to Iliena, who looked at her with vague blue eyes and answered,

"Death."

"I have the casting vote. Life it is. Put that milk in the dairy, girl, and eat your soup, and tell us your life while you eat it. Did the brown cow kick you?"

"There's nothing to tell," I objected. But when I had sat down with a bowl of soup she repeated the command.

"I'm just a war-maid," I said. "I've been in the Sanctuary all my life till two years ago. My shield-mate died in the North and I'm going back to the Seven Kingdoms to report and get another partner. That's all."

"Not all," said the farmwife. She uncovered what she had on the table. Slivers of ivory, small enough to fit in the palm of your hand, with incised and painted pictures on them, lay on the colored silk. "The Queen of Cups, I get for you. At

your age!" she added, in disgust. "Queen of Cups, each time, and at her side the Falling Tower. There's more to you than meets the eye." She drew the silk across the ivory tablets again, and looked at Iliena. "And you? What are you doing wandering the borderlands this near your time?"

"Searching," said Iliena. Her hands entwined protectively over her swollen belly, and the heavy cloak slid back round her elbows. "I am seeking the father of my child. Have you seen him? His name is Gansser."

"There's been no child's father here in years," said the farmwife, but suddenly my hands tingled. Magic, I thought, looking round, but nothing was visibly wrong or different.

"Then I must go on searching," said Iliena.

"Not in this weather," said the farmwife. "And what if your time comes?"

"Then the child will die," Iliena answered matter-of-factly. "And I with it. I must find him first; she said so."

"She?"

"My mother. When she cast me out. *She* said the Lady had turned from me."

There was a short silence. I stared at her, absorbing this. Excommunicate . . . Rain rattled on the horn windows.

"Think you *She* has?"

"*She* aids me," Iliena said simply. The farmwife nodded.

"*She* sent help and a horse when you needed it," she said. "The tablets tell me." She drew back the silk and turned one of the pieces, seemingly at random. The figure faced me, not her: a woman in robes-of-ceremony, a moon-diadem on her head. A Priestess of the Lady.

"Your mother is the Priestess," said the farmwife.

"Yes," said Iliena.

"*She* has authority over you, more than a mother's. Were you also in the Temple?"

"Yes."

"Did she demand the child?"

Iliena's hands tightened round her stomach.

"*She* wanted it for the Temple, to be a priestess or a singing-boy. I would not allow it, I want it to be a real child and live in the world, not behind walls the way I did. I was going to marry Gansser." She looked away, mouth trembling. "Oh, my love, I need you!"

The farmwife turned another ivory. A man in a chariot

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faced her. I looked at the hands drawn firm on the reins and wondered if the lover were a charioteer.

"Your man is an adept," said the older woman. "Is he of the Sun-Lord's house?"

Iliena nodded.

"He said he would marry you?"

"He had spoken with Father-in-Charge. I was to go to see him too, with Gansser, but he never came for me. They said he left the Amber Court, but he never came for me." She pulled the cloak up round her shoulders, her eyes unfocused and troubled. The farmwife studied her a moment under dark brows, then turned back to the table and lifted the ivory with the priestess on it, frowning.

"It's upside-down," I pointed out. She glanced at me and nodded.

"Aye. Power misused. I wonder . . . Iliena, what did your mother say to you about Gansser?"

"She said I would find him if I looked in the right place. But I don't know where that is. Then she beat me, and gave me the cloak, and said it again at the gate."

"What did she say about the cloak?"

"She said," Iliena said after a moment, "it would protect me. She said, 'That's all the protection he'll give you, girl. Keep it on your back, and look in the right place, and you might see your precious sun-kisser again.' Do you know," said Iliena, looking at us with clear eyes, "I hope she's dead."

When I crawled out of the musty box-bed I had shared with Iliena, the storm still blustered round the house, rattling the shutters. I dressed, and went out to see to the animals. It was not raining, though the angry, swift sky suggested rain to come, so after I had fed and milked the cows, and fed and groomed Dester, I pulled my cloak tighter round me, opened the field-gate and stepped through, slipping the thong over the latch to prevent it swinging. The in-field was heavily grazed, but it looked like good land.

There was a river down yonder. I made my way across the muddy field with care, down to the tree-lined banks, and stood watching the rough brown water, thinking. The farm was in good heart, as though it had been run by a man, or for that matter a woman, with good servants, until very lately; the cattle I had milked last night had gone unfed and

unmilked for perhaps two days before that, to judge by the evidence. The farmwife, who had not told us her name, had remained seated at the table all evening, directing me to fill the lamps and open up the box-bed in the inner room. I had half expected to find her in the kitchen when I came out this morning.

I turned and looked at the farm, sound and snug on its little knoll. It looked normal enough; even the strange talent I had been given, the sorcerous gift I had rather not have, perceived nothing specifically out of the ordinary. But my hands and the back of my neck tingled with suspicion. Magic—somewhere, there was magic.

It was beginning to rain. I hitched my cloak round me again and made for the farm. Reaching the top of the field at a different point, I found myself beside a small fenced place. Within were grave-mounds. Two were green, their wooden posts weathering, the names on sun-disk and moon-crescent long since illegible. The third was open.

More accurately, it was opened. The turfs, recently laid, were rolled back at the head end, the earth beneath disturbed, like a bed that someone had left, I thought. The post at the head was new, and on the moon-crescent a name was carved in clumsy letters. It said ILIENA.

The farmwife was in the kitchen. I stepped in, kicking the mud off my boots against the doorpost, and she looked round and glared at me again.

"Thought you'd decided to leave," she said.

"Not before breakfast," I answered. "Mother, may we know your name?"

"You'll know it when you need to," she said. "There's porridge in the pot. When you've eaten it, I've tasks for you both. You'll work for your keep while you're here."

We turned out the inner room. There was not, fortunately, a great deal of furniture, but it must all be washed with vinegar and water, the walls rubbed down with stale bread and then brushed with a twig whisk, and the crumbs swept out. The ashes of many fires were removed, the shutters brushed, the bedding taken out and shaken in a dry spell, then set to air before the kitchen hearth, and the floor was mopped with vinegar and water. The gods alone know how many spiders we rendered homeless. I was apprehensive for Iliena, but saw quickly that the farmwife was directing her to the lighter

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tasks, those that could be done sitting down and with little effort.

When we had finished and eaten, the farmwife, who had directed us from her chair all day, reached under the table and brought a small box out from some shelf.

"Here," she said to Iliena. "If you can open that, it's yours."

Iliena took the box, and came to sit at the fireside with it. It was carved and polished oak, with leaves and flowers round the side and a garland of wheat on the lid, and no visible catch or fastening. Iliena turned it in her hands, pressing the carving, looking for some trick to open it. I was about to offer help when the farmwife said,

"And you, girl. Come here and learn how to use that gift of yours."

"How did you know—?" I began, startled.

"These told me." She uncovered the ivory images again. "I had a gift like yours once, but I gave it to my daughter. Poor use she's making of it, these tell me. Much they can tell you, if you learn to read them. Come."

"I'd rather not," I said. She looked hard at me.

"Wisdom has no allegiance," she said at length. "There is no evil in knowledge itself, only in the uses to which you put it."

"The Temple would not agree," I said.

"Is the Temple right in everything?" She scowled at me again. "Come, I'll not argue theology with a child your age! The signs are on ivory, and used to Her greater glory—will that satisfy you?"

Reluctantly I left Iliena, who was still turning the box over, and sat down at the table. The slats of ivory were cool to the touch, but they made my hands tingle as I lifted them.

"Learn their names," said the farmwife. "This is the Magician. This is the Empress, this the Emperor."

After a while, Iliena fell asleep, the box on her lap under the heavy embroidered cloak. She must have been wearing it for consolation, for the room was not cold. Firelight leapt on the metal threads of the embroidery, on her face and untidy hair, and threw my shadow on the other wall. The farmwife went on talking, rehearsing the meanings of the little drawings, making me repeat them after her, over and over until my head ached.

"That will do, for now," she said at length. I pushed back my stool, which grated on the flagged floor.

"Gansser!" exclaimed Iliena, and surged to her feet. The box fell with a clatter, and she stood staring round, the joy fading from her face. "Where—he was here! Where is he?"

"You dreamed," said the farmwife harshly.

"Dreamed," she repeated. "No—surely not! He was here. He opened my box for me. There was a cap for the baby in it. Where is he?"

"You dreamed," said the farmwife again.

"He isn't here," I said, and my palms tingled as if to give me the lie. I stopped and lifted the box. Its lid stood open; inside was another lid with a silken cord. I pulled that, and the inner lid came up, releasing a faint scent of sandalwood. Folds of fine linen lay within. Iliena seized box and linen, and shook out into the firelight a small bonnet with a crumpled frill and long white ribbons.

"Where is he?" she repeated, and burst into tears.

I got her to bed. She lay awkwardly under the feather quilt, still hiccuping with tears, and clutched my wrist when I rose to leave her.

"Thula, he was here, wasn't he? You saw him?"

"No," I said gently. "He wasn't here in the body."

"I saw him so clearly—as clear as you. He smiled at me, and touched my face, the way he does—" Her other hand came up to my cheek. "Then he took the box and opened it for me."

"You dreamed," I said. "Maybe your cloak collar touched your face."

"Oh, Gansser!" she whispered. "Where are you, love? I need you!"

I calmed her again, and when she fell asleep went back to the kitchen. The farmwife was still morosely sliding the ivory slats about on their silk cloth.

"Where is her man, mother?" I asked, sitting opposite her again.

"You tell me," she said. "Turn one." I hesitated, and she glared at me. "What, more scruples? What do you fear from them?"

"That they are not the Lady's," I said.

"So. Let us suppose they are not. Whose are they, then? The Sun Lord's? Do you fear him?"

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"No," I said.

"And quite right, too. He will not harm his Mother's creatures if they do him no harm. Whose might they be else?"

"Miklar," I said, and signed myself. She did likewise.

"The Lord of Twilight. Well, and how would you tell?"

"They will mislead," I said. "They will seem fair, and lead one astray, or misinform when they are most needed. The Lord of—" I met her gimlet eye and changed what I had been about to say. "—of Confusion delights in such—"

"No doubt," she said. "Does your heart tell you this, or your head only?"

"M-my head," I said uncertainly.

"Turn one."

I obeyed. A dog and a wolf bayed at the moon.

"What means it? Intuition," she prompted.

"Follow your heart."

"So," she said. "Go to bed, daughter."

I obeyed. Maybe it was my fervent prayers that kept me free of the attentions of Miklar, Lord of Confusion, Lord of the Unquiet Dead, until I fell asleep; or maybe it was not.

I was not, somehow, surprised when Iliena woke me in the dawn to say she had dreamed again.

"Only it wasn't a dream," she said. "It was stronger than that. He stood there and smiled at me, Thula, and opened a panel in the side of the bed. There was a shirt for the baby behind it."

"Panel?" I said sleepily. "No panels here. I cleaned this bed yesterday."

"Just there," she persisted, "by your shoulder."

I leaned out and peered along the linenfold.

"No panels," I said. "See—"

The carved folds I pressed swung out, like a little door, creaking slightly. The bundle that I found within shook out to a little shirt, smelling faintly of sandalwood, tying at the shoulder with long white ribbons. Iliena took it from me, hitching her cloak about her, and brought the bonnet out from under the pillow. I rolled out of bed and dressed, leaving her comparing the embroidery by the light from the cracks in the shutter. I needed to think about this.

The storm had blown itself out. The ground was wet, and the infield did not look inviting; standing at the field gate I could hear the river's voice arguing with unaccustomed tree-

roots. Early sunlight caught the water lying in the hoofprints in the mud, from between banks of pink clouds above the Mountains. Almost automatically I made the morning prayer one of thanksgiving, and turned to attend to the animals.

I needed to think, but my mind skipped from one thing to another in a series of images, unconnected by any thread of logic. Iliena was protected by someone. We had been led by the storm to this place, where the farmwife—my mind shied away from that one. Three tall women, maid, mother and hag. Where is the farmer? (No, not that way—) Where does the farmwife—no. The ivories, cool and enigmatic on their three-colored silk; dreams that are not sent by Miklar. (How can you be so sure?) Be wary how you name him, the Lord of the Dead. And what was my place in all this? Did I have a place?

The farmwife was in the inner room today. I threw back the shutters, and kindled a fire in the empty grate, as she bade me, and made porridge for Iliena and myself.

"You'll work again today," she said. "I'll teach you both a thing or two, before we're finished."

"I've learned much already," I said. She glared at me, and said,

"Then see you use it. Now up those stairs and tell me what you find."

The upstairs rooms were sparsely furnished, and dull from long disuse, but otherwise simply dusty. Reporting this, I did not mention the dead jackdaw in one of the rooms above the kitchen. The farmwife nodded, and said,

"Then you can clear the dust. Was there a box in the end room?"

"Two," I said. She frowned, then nodded again.

"He will have moved it, before he left. Bring them down. Iliena can sort them for me."

This was easier ordered than done, but I succeeded in getting both heavy boxes downstairs, and set near the hearth. Iliena was readily dissuaded from helping, and paced restlessly from one room to the other until summoned to open the first one. The lid, thrown back, released the inevitable scent of sandalwood; within were folds of cloth and linen-wrapped bundles. Iliena sat down awkwardly beside the box and lifted out a blanket. I collected besom and bucket and went back upstairs.

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Fragments of conversation came to me now and then.

"These are good blankets."

"Aye, and a good age. Well cared for, they'll last another lifetime."

"Harkaenish weave?"

"Aye. Off the downlands. Bonny country."

And, a while later,

"My mother had a dress like this when she was young. She told me. Saffron linen with green smocking and a sash. It must have suited her, with her green eyes."

"Green eyes, had she? I thought they were blue."

"No. I have blue eyes."

"We buried my younger daughter in the neighbor to it."

When I swept out the two rooms above the inner room, their voices came clearly up through the floorboards. Iliena was well into the box now, and every item she lifted out had a story. This the farmwife had worn at her wedding, that had been her mother's, that one of her daughters'. Rarely did she mention her man. Iliena, despite her earlier restlessness, appeared to be concentrating, taking it all in, asking questions.

"Now that was his," said the farmwife suddenly.

"A big man."

"Stocky. Big in the shoulder. Big where it mattered."

"Like Gansser."

"Ten years this month since he went. No, leave the shirt. Put it yonder. That was my first long shift. See how slender I was?"

I moved into the next room; the door creaked, and the bucket rattled. Then the farmwife was saying,

"That was your grandsire's too."

Like tiles in a mosaic, the images fell into place. Staring at the floor boards through which the voices came, I realized I knew the farmwife's name. I knew more than that: I knew more than I cared to. But not, yet, where Gansser was.

Deep in thought, I finished the sweeping, and went back down the stairs as Iliena reached the bottom of that box. She was looking tired; as the thought touched my mind the farmwife said,

"Sit here for a bit and let the cramp out of your legs. Thula can stow the box for us. Have you left the rooms clean, girl?"

"Clean enough even for you," I said. She snorted, but a

gleam of humor lit her eyes. I helped Iliena to the other chair by the fire, and re-packed the box as neatly as I might. There was a small heap of things left over.

"Always more comes out than goes back in," said the farmwife.

"Like holes in the ground," said Iliena. Like graves, I was thinking. I lifted some linen, and a small parcel fell from the pile.

"What was that?" Iliena said. "I don't remember it."

I set the armful I had on top of the box, and handed her the parcel. It was something small and angular, bundled up in linen. She took it on her lap and unwrapped it carefully, and as the last folds fell away she exclaimed sharply,

"It's Megrath! How did she get here?"

"It would take you," said the farmwife, "to call a wooden doll Rags."

"But how did she get here? She vanished—when I was nine, she disappeared. Like Gansser," she said, and her lower lip trembled. The long spell of lucidity seemed to be breaking up.

"Your mother sent her, with the other things. When you were nine."

"Oh," said Iliena, and cradled the angular thing against her shoulder. "I cried for weeks."

"She has waited for you."

"She didn't send him too?"

"No."

I closed the box, with difficulty, and fastened down the lid. I was using some force, and concentrating, so I was taken wholly by surprise when Iliena shrieked,

"Gansser! Where are you?"

I jerked round, and she was on her feet, staring round, the doll on the floor. I scrambled up and caught her hand, and she said wildly,

"He spoke! In my ear, right in my ear, he said, 'Not long now, love. I've a knife to cut the cord with.' He must be here!"

"There's no man here," said the farmwife.

"He isn't here," I said, putting my arm round her.

"I heard him, I tell you! He was beside me! Oh, Thula, where is he?" She clung to me, trembling violently, so close that I felt the sudden spasm that gripped her swollen belly.

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She cried out, and I looked over her shoulder at the farmwife.

"It's started," I said.

"Then let go of her. You'll be more use fetching and carrying. Clear that bed and fetch the hide from the press yonder. Now get the towel—no, the linen ones in the kitchen cupboard. Knot it to the ring in the bedhead. More linen, now. Aye, that will do. Now get the shift off her and put that shirt on. Don't waste your breath screaming, my girl, you'll have worse to scream about before you're much older. Get her in the bed. Aye, so. Now take yourself to the kitchen and set about finding that man of hers."

"But how?" I stammered. "I don't—I can't—"

"The images are there. It's for you to read them. You've read plenty already." The grim stare was positively approving. "Get away, girl, and do as I bid you. Dead woman's sight, live woman's strength. Go, now!"

I fled, trying vainly to stop out Iliena's next scream.

The ivory pictures were on the table, in their cloth. I spread it out and looked at them. Smooth and enigmatic, the plain sides looked back at me. Then one said plainly, "Turn me."

I sat down at the table and turned the picture up. A tower, struck by lightning. For a moment I stared at it; then the farmwife's voice said in my ears,

"Needful destruction. That which is better destroyed."

But what? I turned another: the two beasts bayed at the Moon. No advance: destroy what my heart bade me.

I left the table, and went to the window. White clouds drifted over the blue sky. All was smiling and normal, but in the other room was a girl who could not—or believed she could not—give birth till her man came. Truth and belief, in this, might be one. And where was her man?

"She said I would find him, if I looked in the right place."

"Did she say anything about the cloak?"

"She said, 'That's all the protection he'll give you. Keep it on your back, and look in the right place . . .'"

Huddled in her cloak, she had dreamed her man opened the little box, and it was open. Wrapped in the cloak, she had dreamed he opened the cupboard by the bed, and heard him speak to her.

I turned and crossed the kitchen, and went into the inner

room. The farmwife sat now on the bed by Iliena, not touching her, giving encouragement. They ignored me.

I lifted the cloak gingerly from the settle and returned to the kitchen. There I shook it out and studied it. It was made of a fine-tanned hide I did not recognize, soft and supple, but heavy; it was lined with silk, or something like it, and the outside was embroidered with a long branching pattern in metal thread. Iron and copper and gold glinted in it. Strange mixture, I thought. My hands tingled: there was magic about. Then Iliena groaned, and I could almost swear the cloak twitched in my grasp. I put it hastily by the fire and sat down at the table, trying to think clearly.

Iliena's mother, the farmwife's elder daughter and heir, had a gift like mine. She had no scruples about using it, it seemed, as I had; and yet all she had done, in hiding her daughter's lover, was lose her daughter. I thought about that. The lady's will seemed to be at work here, as the farmwife had remarked, right from the moment I saw Iliena sitting by the roadside in the rising storm. Another slip of ivory demanded to be turned. The sun shone down on two children. Liberation, I thought. Happy reunion.

Iliena cried out again. Distracted, I turned another picture almost at random. Death sowing skulls. Destruction and renewal. Death and the sun, I thought, Destroy the sun. Fight fire with fire. Another piece of ivory: the man hung upside down. Surrender oneself to the higher wisdom. Iliena screamed, fearsomely.

I rose, and moved to the hearth. I stirred the fire up, and when the flames woke I lifted Iliena's cloak, and thrust it on the fire, and stepped back.

I don't know what I expected: a thunderclap, maybe, or a flash of blue smoke. What I got was a terrible smell, a hissing of steam, and between one heartbeat and the next a big muscular man stark naked on the hearth with a knife in his hand.

"Gansser," I said.

"Where is she?" he demanded, staring round. "Where's Iliena?"

They were well matched, I thought. Iliena cried out again.

"There," I said, rather unnecessarily. He crossed the room in two strides and burst through the door, and Iliena's next scream cut off in the middle. Suddenly fearful, I set off after him; then I heard her draw a deep sobbing breath. He was

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muttering something incoherent and loving, and when I looked round the door he was bending over her, hands on her belly, the little knife by his bare foot.

I turned back, and the farmwife sat at the table.

"Just in time," she said.

"Yes," I said. "Will she do now?"

"She'll do now. I can rest easily. Tell them to mind the way the brown cow kicks."

"I will," I said. "Can you not tell them yourself?"

"No. There are reasons." She touched the ivory pictures, lightly. "You take these. The little new one will not need them. She has clearer sight than either of us."

"Grandmother Iliena," I said, "was it love drove you?"

"I thought it was hate," she said, "but you are right. It was love. I must go now. See you mind all I've taught you, my girl."

"Spoken and unspoken" I said. "Are you sure you will rest? You've taught them nothing yet."

Humor gleamed under the dark eyebrows.

"Best they say the words over me nightly," she said. "No. I'll not be there. The Lord of the Dead has no dominion over me now, for I've done what I stayed to do. Farewell, daughter."

"Farewell, Iliena," I said. When I looked up again, I was alone in the darkening kitchen.

Phyllis Eisenstein

THE LAND OF SORROW

Add Phyllis Eisenstein to that list of recent women fantasy writers, will you? She has been charming us with her quite unorthodox Sword & Sorcery tales of Alaric the troubadour since 1971, when the first yarn of her series appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction.

Good yarns they are, too; and here is the most recent of them.

—L.C.

In late spring the mountains were wild and windswept, the passes treacherous with meltwater, the human forage sparse. Beyond the heights, said the peasants of the southern foothills, was land unknown: perhaps a vast, frigid desert, or even the half-legendary Northern Sea, where perpetual ice floated over the graves of hapless sailors. Alaric's curiosity urged him across the peaks, and his talent for traveling to any place he could see with his eyes or his mind saved him from becoming one more pebble in many a landslide. He was careful to take his time, to scrutinize his surroundings with a mapmaker's concern for detail. His knapsack was full of compact—if uninteresting—food, a thousand mountain streams provided his drink, and the scrubby trees of the uplands offered fuel

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for his fire. When he saw lowland birds wheeling overhead, he knew that the worst was behind him.

Through the final pass he descended into a wide fertile valley. Here, greenery was well-sprouted, grasses cloaking the hillsides, flowers waving in the meadows. To the east a series of cascades broke free of the mountains, glittering in the noon sunlight like ribbons of polished silver; below, they joined, settling into a river that flowed north and west until it broadened into a small lake. Beyond the lake lay more mountains, peak upon peak, a barrier to the north as effective as that to the south. During the winter, Alaric thought, the valley must be completely isolated from the rest of the world. He wondered if he were the first visitor of the year.

Peasant cottages, bordered by the varying tints of kitchen gardens, were scattered across the landscape. Near the river stood the fortification—Alaric made that his destination. Now, with the possibility of human witnesses, he eschewed the use of his power and worked his way downward with slow care. His eyes on the ground, on the two paces immediately before his feet, he did not notice the watching goatherd until he was suddenly surrounded by bleating goats.

"Good day," said Alaric, dodging a few butting heads.

The goatherd was a fair-haired boy of ten or eleven, dressed warmly in gray woolen shirt and breeches, with woolen wrappings round his legs and feet. He carried a staff, which he held out before him defensively. He barred Alaric's way.

"Are you guarding the valley?" asked Alaric.

"One of many guards," said the boy. "Stay where you are." From his sash hung a goat's horn; he put it to his lips and blew a long, thin note. From the west came a faint reply.

"I assure you, I am a harmless minstrel," said Alaric.

"I am very good with this quarterstaff," the boy told him. "Do not move."

"Not so much as a finger," said the minstrel.

Briefly, he debated vanishing, but that would mean returning the way he had come, and he was in no mood for retreat. He could hardly blame the folk of the valley for their vigilance. If any people lived in the mountains, they must be bandits, for no man could scratch an honest living in those heights: therefore, any stranger entering the valley must be suspect.

Alaric smiled at the boy, who did not smile back—he took

his guardianship very seriously, that one, and his goats wandered where they would while he held to his post. Soon, a man arrived, and then another, both armed with long knives. They looked at Alaric and then up the mountainside behind him, shading their eyes against the high sun.

"Who are you? Where do you come from?" they demanded. "Who follows you, and what weapons have they?"

"No one follows me," Alaric replied, trying to smile as ingratiatingly as possible. "I am a minstrel, traveling the world, viewing its wonders: The mountains tantalized me, and I crossed them in search of the Northern Sea or some other marvel. I find myself in your lovely valley—a welcome rest stop, a source of fresh bread and meat perhaps, and lively company. I will play for you to prove the truth of my words." Very slowly, he unslung his lute and brought it forward under his arm. He tested the strings lightly, found them well in tune, and when no one made any move to stop him, he sang of mountain-climbing, spring, and a fair damsel waiting on a high-inaccessible peak. The men's arms hung limp at their sides while they listened, their knives pointing to the ground, but the boy did not alter his guardian stance; his goats wandered far up the steep incline, nibbling the fresh young shoots of grass, but he paid them no heed, all his attention on Alaric.

Alaric smiled sadly, in sympathy with the song, with its forlorn youth who could not summon enough courage to dare the heights and win his love. His listeners, however, showed no emotion; unlike the ground, they had not thawed with the arrival of warm weather—winter lay in their souls and on their faces. Alaric was sure of his talent. He had wrung tears from common men, from kings and warriors, from peasants reaping grain under the blazing sun. Yet here was nothing, no reaction, no back of the hand dashing wetness from a cheek, not even a face half-turned away to hide a pitying sigh. Stony silence greeted his song, and he realized with dismay that though he had thought he understood the hearts of men, he was still young in wisdom as in years. Not yet eighteen summers old, he finished the song with a discord and stood uncertain before them.

"I come in peace," he said. "Elsewhere, I have been welcomed."

The men's mouths turned down, and their lips tightened,

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wrinkling like apricots left too long in the hot sun. Their eyes swung sidewise in their heads as they tried to look at each other while still observing him. They had wispy, fair hair, parted in the middle, and their cheeks were hollowed, fringed with pale beard.

"Many a lord has set me at his table of an evening," Alaric said, yearning mightily that they would leave off this silent scrutiny and make some gesture, whether for good or ill. "I was thinking to journey to yonder castle," he told them, indicating the distant fortification with a movement of his lute.

One of the men rubbed at his jaw with his free hand. Then he said, "Come along," and he gestured with the knife as with a naked, beckoning hand.

Alaric followed him, and the other man fell in line behind them. The boy remained, standing on the rough track and watching till the three were well away, and only then did he turn to his goats, flailing with his staff and bawling them into order. Glancing over his shoulder, Alaric saw him scrambling among the rocks like his animals. *Well, with practice enough, I, too, would be so agile*, he thought. He wondered if the goats grazed the very peaks in high summer.

Where valley met mountainside, Alaric could not tell. Gradually, the grass grew thicker and smoother, the rocks less numerous, the incline less extreme, until the three men strode along a level path well-beaten by human and animal feet, a path that wound among sparse trees and between fields tilled dark by the plow and spangled with fresh growth of beans and barley. It looked a prosperous valley, low stone walls shielding the crops from wandering grazers, houses neatly tended, apple and pear and cherry trees crowding out most other kinds. The men guided Alaric to a house that stood in the shade of an ancient, sprawling apple, and they bade him enter. After his journey down the mountainside and the briefer stroll through cultivated grounds, Alaric was grateful for the chance to rest his weary feet.

The two-room house was empty of humans, though there was a very young lamb swaddled in homespun, sleeping in a cradle by the hearth. Alaric assumed it was sickly and being fed by hand—in an isolated valley, all domestic animals were far more valuable than in the wide world.

"Will you have a bowl of porridge after your journey?" asked one of the men.

"I thank you for your kind hospitality, sir," said Alaric, and he accepted the bowl and spoon that were proffered. The porridge was cold and crusty, but not without flavor, for it contained more than a little honey. He had eaten worse fare in his life.

"You'll stay the night with us," said his host, "and in the morn go on to the Red Lord's castle." His friend nodded soberly, as if in agreement with sage advice. "We will go with you and present you to the Red Lord. He will be most generous."

"Very well," said Alaric. "If you wish, I shall sing for my supper here and then sleep well and long before presuming upon his generosity."

The men inclined their heads. "You may stay within," said the host, "and rest upon the straw if you will while we work our fields. My wife will be home soon, and no doubt she will be able to find one or two small tasks you may turn your hands to."

"No doubt," said Alaric dryly, and then he shrugged. He often happened upon cotters who felt that no song could pay for food, who loaned him an ax for splitting rails or a churn for making butter. Only in the great houses were his skills respected as honest recompense for room and board. He resigned himself to these petty cotters and their petty values; upon occasion, he felt guilty enough to agree with them. Just now, he was too tired to trek the final leagues to the fortification; as soon as the men had left, he stretched out upon the straw for a nap. Later, he would pay, with a song or with his strong back—what mattered one single day of labor, he thought, in return for the good will of his host, when tomorrow he would rest in luxury?

He drifted on the edge of sleep, and the voices of toiling men and calling crows and barking dogs intruded pleasantly into his dreams. At last, the soft sound of a woman's long skirt sweeping the floor nearby buoyed him into wakefulness. Without moving, he opened one eye the merest slit. In the late afternoon sunlight that streamed through the room's two windows and open door, he saw a woman moving quietly. She was stoking the fire with split logs, a pot slung over her left arm, ready to set above the flames. Heat had reddened her face and brought forth beads of sweat to dampen her white cap and collar. She was a middle-aged woman, coarse-

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featured, big-boned and fleshy. Damp tendrils of graying hair straggled out from under her cap, and she swept them aside and croon a wordless lullaby. The lamb woke and struggled, from time to time with one plump forearm. After she finished with the fire, she picked the sleeping lamb out of the cradle and, cuddling it close to her ample bosom, began to rock it but the woman held it tight and paced the room, swaying from side to side, as if she soothed a colicky child. She bent her head and nuzzled the lamb's forelock, kissing its curly-haired muzzle and whispering half-audible endearments between snatches of melody.

Alaric stretched, yawning loudly, and he sat up in the straw and scrubbed at his face with both hands. "Good evening," he said to the woman.

"Good evening, minstrel," she replied, and then she returned to her one-sided conversation with the lamb.

"Your husband said you might have some small work for me. I would be most happy to perform whatever task you might set."

She looked at him speculatively, and then, placing the lamb gently in its cradle and tucking the covers round it tightly, she said, "Sing a lullaby for the little one."

He glanced around the room to make certain that there was no human child she might be referring to. No, there was only the cradle by the hearth and the little creature that lay there, bleating feebly now and then but making no attempt to escape its bed.

"If you wish, goodwife, a lullaby." He lay the lute across his knees and strummed softly, feeling a bit foolish. But he sang a lullaby. It was easier than churning butter.

She prepared supper swiftly and laid four places at the table, four bowls, four cups, four pewter spoons. She took a long loaf of bread from a cabinet behind the table and set it in the center of the board. Then she drew an earthen jug from some dark corner in the back of the room, and she placed that on the table, too, and then she began to weep, leaning over the jug, fondling it with her hands; she wept as though her heart would break.

Alaric put the lute aside, not knowing what to do, not knowing what had caused her sudden sorrow. He walked toward her, stopping with the table between them, and he

reached out to touch her arm lightly. "May I be of some service, goodwife?" he asked in a low voice.

She looked up but she did not see him; her eyes were focused on some inner vision, or on nothing at all. Her fingers gripped the jug convulsively, trying to knead the hard clay, or to gouge it. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she lifted the jug in both hands, wrenched herself away from the table and stumbled toward the door. At the threshold, she lifted the jug high, as if consecrating it to some deity, and then she flung it from her, screaming curses. Striking the hard-packed path, the earthenware cracked into several pieces, and the pale fluid within splashed the ground.

The woman sagged against the doorjamb then, as if all the strength had drained from her body with that toss, and Alaric hurried to her side to support her, to help her back to the hearth and a stool. She leaned upon him heavily and would have fallen had he not been her crutch. She slumped forward on the stool, almost falling into the fire, and she wept, she wept, as if the world were coming to an end and she saw her loved ones tumbling into the pit. Alaric fanned her with one hand and held her upright with the other.

The men came in soon after—they must have heard her cries—and the one who had acted host took her in his arms and shook her, calling her name over and over again: "Aramea, Aramea." The other man tended dinner, stirring the pot with a long spoon and tasting the contents frequently. At last the husband took his wife into the rear room of the cottage, and then he returned for the lamb, delivered it into her care, and closed the door between her and the men.

They ate in silence, a stew rich in vegetables, huge chunks of dark bread; they drank water. Afterward, the men asked Alaric to sing, but they seemed hardly to notice his music, lively though it was. He tried to cheer them with bawdy rhymes and gay melody, but they were cheerless, moody, seemed to find the flames in the hearth more interesting than the minstrel. In the back room, he could hear the lamb bleat occasionally.

At full dark, Alaric begged their leave for a stroll around the house, for his digestion's sake, and for the privacy that nature's processes required. The broken jug still lay in the path—full moonlight revealed a sparkle of liquid remaining in its curved bottom. He picked it up, sniffed the contents:

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wine, a fruity, aromatic wine. He set the earthenware fragment back on the ground. He wondered what it meant. He thought it might make a fine song.

The boy arrived shortly, and he penned his goats in a wooden enclosure behind the house before claiming his own late supper. He eyed the lute while he ate, and Alaric smiled and picked the instrument up and sang for him. Of all of them, only he paid heed to the minstrel's performance, and his foot wagged in time to the music.

Here is an acolyte, thought Alaric. *He is like myself at the same age.* "Can you sing, lad?" he asked.

"I can whistle," said the boy. He pursed his lips and blew a brief, lilting tune that Alaric did not recognize.

"Can you whistle this?" the minstrel inquired, and he plucked a melody on the lute. The boy imitated it without difficulty, and Alaric repeated the notes, adding chords and weaving counterpoint among them and finally singing softly, and thus these two amused themselves for quite some time while the two older men huddled together by the fire and said nothing. The boy frowned his concentration as the music waxed complex, and sometimes he closed his eyes as if visualizing his own part, shutting out the distractions of the quiet cottage; he moved his foot, tapped his fingers on his knee to keep the rhythm, and even his head nodded the time as he whistled.

At last the master of the house—Alaric presumed him the goatherd's father—rose from his stool and, poking at the dying embers with a long stick, he said, "Dawn comes early tomorrow."

The boy hung his head a moment, his whistling stilled abruptly in midtune, and he sighed. But then he nodded slowly, not to anyone in particular, and he left his place near the minstrel to fling himself down upon the thick straw in the corner. His father's friend did likewise, and the father himself broke the stick he had used as a poker, cast it into the flames, and went into the other room, closing the door firmly behind him. No one bid Alaric good night, but the boy and the older man left him ample room in the straw, and so he settled himself and his lute and soon passed into sleep.

He was awakened by the heavy sound of boots tramping across the floor. He opened his eyes to pale dawn twilight and a room filled with babbling people. The cotters were all

there, all talking at once, and the lamb was bleating loudly above the melee. Listening silently was a knot of armed men—five of them, in chain mail and dark leather, hands resting on undrawn swords, heads covered by brass-studded caps.

"We would have come," Alaric's host was stammering. "We would have come straight after dawn." His wife wailed wordlessly, standing behind her man as behind a shield, clutching the lamb to her bosom. The other man and the boy pressed close.

The leader of the armed men stared at Alaric, and when he saw that the minstrel was awake, he stretched out one arm and shouted, "You!"

The cotters fell silent as if their throats were cut, and they all turned to look at Alaric.

He rose slowly, brushing straw from his clothing and lute. "Good morn," he said.

"The Red Lord wants you," said the soldiers. "We are your escort."

Alaric smiled slightly. "I thank the Red Lord for his invitation," he said. "I will wait upon him immediately."

"Give him some bread," said the soldiers, and Alaric's erstwhile host scurried to gather a crust and some scraps of cheese, which he thrust into the minstrel's hands. "And a draft of water as well, for the journey." The cotter signaled the boy, who brought a bucket and dipper.

"Thank you," said Alaric, and he bowed to the family and to his escort before dipping up a long, cold drink. Then he shouldered his knapsack and lute and marched out of the cottage munching his breakfast, surrounded by armed and armored men. Behind him, he heard the goatherd whistling a familiar tune.

The soldiers set an easy pace, as if they were in no particular hurry. They had not taken his knife nor searched his baggage for other weapons, nor drawn a blade on him; so he felt safe enough. There was a sword in his knapsack, but he did not think of extracting it for defense; if real danger presented itself, he could always vanish. He understood the Red Lord's interest in newcomers, and belatedly he wondered if he should not have ignored his weariness and extended his journey to the castle instead of stopping the night at the peasants' home. He hoped the Red Lord did not consider his

actions discourteous—there was a poor footing for a cordial relationship. He had noticed in his travels that royalty and nobility tended to be intolerant of faults in lesser mortals, whether such faults were real or fancied. He prepared himself to be as humble and charming as possible. He wondered if the Red Lord had a young daughter or wife; that usually helped in awkward situations. Alaric was fully aware of his own physical attractions.

He smiled at his escort and began to sing along the way, and to strum the lute, a marching tune he had heard among the young warriors of Castle Royale. The men fell into step about him, treading to his meter. They passed a few peasants, who turned to stare at the men marching to music, and Alaric smiled at them and nodded. But they never smiled back.

Had it been such a hard winter? Alaric wondered. Or am I in bad company?

The castle loomed ahead, pennants fluttering on its battlements, pikes visible on the shoulders of pacing guards at the top of the wall. The portcullis was up; Alaric and his escort marched past it, and it did not lower behind them.

Peacetime, he thought, seeing men-at-arms lolling at their ease in the courtyard, some half out of their armor, few practicing their skills against the wooden dummies that waited for mock attack. *Peacetime, but the peasants do not look kindly upon their protectors. High taxes perhaps? A small valley and many soldiers to support . . .*

The keep was a massive tower, dark with age and pitted by weather. They entered. The Red Lord awaited them in the high-ceilinged central room, amid tapestries ancient and faded, amid fine furniture rubbed smooth with the touch of many bodies, upon a flagstone floor grooved by the tread of many feet. They followed that worn path to his chair.

The Red Lord was tall and gaunt and no longer young. His flowing hair and beard were blond—the blond that comes when red hair fades and silver mingles with the darker strands. His eyes were gray and cold like the winter sky, his skin as pale as ice. From throat to ankle he wore crimson cloth—tunic, cloak and hose—and his shoes were of red leather. Upon his right hand, a massive ruby-tinted gemstone shone like the eye of a serpent.

The soldiers knelt before him, and Alaric instantly fol-

lowed suit. The leader took his master's hand and kissed the ring. "This is the man, Lord," he said.

Alaric peered up cautiously as the Red Lord turned to him. A scar, paler even than the white skin, showed above the man's collar—lucky he was, Alaric thought, to be alive after such a wound.

"Your name," said the Red Lord, his voice deep as a drum, carrying throughout the room. Alaric felt his skin prickle. There were other people in the room, men in addition to those who had entered with him, and their utter silence was a sign of respect beyond any he had ever seen. No seneschal needed to call for quiet in that chamber, neither before nor after the master spoke.

"My lord, I am Alaric the minstrel."

"Your home," said the Red Lord.

"I have none, Highness. I travel the wide world, seeking food and shelter where I may, trading my songs for bread."

"Why have you come here?"

Alaric bowed his head. "I wander, Lord. I have no reason for going anywhere, merely fancy. The mountains were there, and I wished to know if I could cross them. I did hear tales of a great Northern Sea beyond them, and I thought it might be an interesting sight. I had no pressing obligations calling me elsewhere."

The Red Lord glanced at his soldiers. "We found no other strangers," said their leader.

"I had no companions, Highness," said Alaric.

The Red Lord extended his right hand toward Alaric's face. "You may kiss my ring."

Alaric touched his lips to the cool gemstone, smelled a faint, sweet perfume on the hand that bore it. The white skin was dry and taut against the bones, an old man's hand, but steady.

The Red Lord nodded. "I will hear your songs at dinner." To his soldiers he said, "See to his comfort." He waved a dismissal.

As a body, they rose, and Alaric also scrambled to his feet. The master of the castle had already turned away to speak to someone else. Relieved, Alaric followed his escort out to the courtyard, where spring sunshine dispelled the chill that had settled on his heart in the chamber. The Red Lord was a forbidding man, a fit match for the mountains that ringed his

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realm, and Alaric could not relish the thought of trying to entertain him.

The soldiers led him to their own barracks, a stone and wooden shelter built against the castle wall. Within, straw pallets made two long rows on either side, each pallet separated narrowly from its neighbor by a naked strip of hard-packed earth. Above the straw hung weapons and armor and bits and pieces of clothing—every man's possessions exposed for all his comrades to see. Upon every bed was a pillow of sorts, either a wooden box or a lumpy bundle, and Alaric guessed that these hid whatever other fancies the soldiers might own. How they kept their valuables secret, he knew not, unless they wore them on their persons at all times. *Or else*, he thought, *they have none*.

The minstrel was assigned a bare spot far from the door, and his escort tramped up and down the rows, collecting a handful of straw from each pallet until they had enough for an extra one. They left Alaric to shape it for himself.

"You'll be called when you're needed," the leader told him.

Alaric nodded and dropped his knapsack where a pillow should have been. Although his own escort marched out of the barracks, he was not left alone; several men sat about, polishing or honing their weapons, mending clothes, or merely lying still upon their straw. Alaric was certain that they all watched him out of the corners of their eyes—he expected no less. When his bed was settled, he sat upon it, his back to the cold stone wall, and let the lute lie across his lap. He plucked idly at the strings. He sang a pair of songs about summer, and presently the sun rose above the castle walls, and a narrow, mote-laden beam laced through the doorway, of the room. The soldiers seemed to listen, though they said nothing. When Alaric went outside to the courtyard, one of them followed him, to sit in the sunlight and sew a fresh seam in his jerkin.

Dust had risen with the sun. The courtyard was dry barren ground except where some horses splashed water from their trough. Alaric joined a group of men there drinking from a bucket. They eyed him incuriously and made no attempt to converse, though he greeted them affably enough. Unlike most folk he had encountered in his travels, they seemed to have no interest at all in the world beyond the mountains. For a time he watched their idleness, their occasional lei-

surely combat, their gambling with knucklebones, and then he returned to the barracks. Upon his pallet, the lute and knapsack still lay close together, but Alaric noted that the sack had shifted a trifle—they had searched it in his absence, as he had presumed they would. Now they knew that he carried a sword, but his unobtrusively probing fingers told him they had not taken it. Why should they? He was outnumbered a thousand to one.

He was not a warrior. He had never drawn blood with that sword. He doubted that he was skilled enough to do so. Sometimes he wondered if he ought not to discard the sword—it would sell for a goodly price in any market—and thus avoid the chance of being put to the test. Yet when his fingers touched it, memory flooded through them to his heart . . . memory of two good friends and of his first love, left far, far behind. And he could not cast himself loose of this last reminder of the past.

He would not wear it into the Red Lord's presence. That would be bad manners for a stranger with peaceful intentions. Nor would it look well with his travel-stained clothing and worn boots, a heavy sword with fine, tooled scabbard. It was not a sword for a poor minstrel. Some would say he was a coward—and perhaps they had, behind his back—but he preferred to think of himself as cautious. He had never worn it.

He had washed at the trough, dusted his boots and cloak and tunic, run wet fingers through his hair. Now he waited. It was full afternoon before he was called to the keep, and he had begun to feel hungry.

The Red Lord's chair had been moved back and a table placed before it and other chairs added all around. He was seated already, as were three more men, and an additional four were crossing the room to join him as Alaric approached. An armed companion guided Alaric to a high stool set some distance from the table.

"When do I eat?" Alaric asked of him in a low voice.

"Afterward," he replied.

Alaric sighed. If he stayed with the Red Lord long, he would have to change that. A growling stomach disturbed his pitch. A light snack before—a slice of beef, a chunk of cheese—and then a fuller repast later were, to his mind, the proper form of payment. Too many patrons treated their

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dogs better than their minstrels, and here was another: several large dogs circled the table and were tossed meaty scraps by the dining men, including the Red Lord himself. Alaric tried to ignore the aroma of warm, fresh-baked bread and juicy roast, and he sang of the wild wind that blew upon the mountains. He began softly, and when no one bade him shut his mouth, he increased his volume till the rich tones of his voice and his lute rose above the clatter of dishes and goblets. The Red Lord looked at him several times during the meal, but he said nothing, only chewed with slow precision and drank deep from the cup that was filled and refilled by hurrying stewards.

There were no young people in the room. Alaric himself was the youngest by twenty years or more: the diners were of an age with the lord himself, and the servitors were only a trifle older or younger. Another nobleman might have a young cupbearer or a lively, brighteyed wench to carry the bread, or he might have his children ranged about the board, listening and learning for the time when they would bear his burdens. *Well, the customs of another land*, he thought, and he wondered if later he would be called to entertain a Red Lady and her children. Or, judging from the Red Lord's apparent age, her grandchildren.

He was fed in the kitchen after the diners left their table, fed with the scraps of a sumptuous meal, and it was more than enough to stay the grumble of his belly. The cooks watched him eat as they scrubbed their pots and polished their cutlery, and they seemed to pass unspoken messages to one another—a lifted eyebrow, a nodding head, a shrug of the shoulders. Alaric tried to engage them in conversation twice or thrice, but they would not speak to him; they pretended to be too busy with their own concerns to hear his banter.

A soldier beckoned for him to return to the hall, and he went back to his stool, now standing in a wide open space twenty paces from the Red Lord's chair—the table and other seats having been removed while he was gone. He climbed atop it, his feet resting comfortably on a brace at knee-height above the floor, and he sang for the Red Lord, who sprawled at ease in his seat. Deep into the afternoon he sang, with none to interrupt him. The silence in the room was like a blanket of snow; even when men passed through, their steps

were light though the floor was hard stone, as if unnecessary sound would call forth some harsh penalty.

Evening came, and as the light from high, slitted windows failed, torches were lit all round the room and flickering shadows brought a semblance of great activity to the chamber. The master of the castle lifted one arm in peremptory gesture, and a bent-backed servitor scuttled forward with wine. The Red Lord took a cup, then pointed at Alaric; the servant bobbed across the intervening space and offered a drink to the minstrel, who took it gratefully and saluted his host with the upraised cup before draining it dry.

"You may go," said the Red Lord.

Alaric slipped off the stool, bowed low, and headed for the kitchen. A light supper was being prepared there, and he snatched a share of it before it was carried out to the hall. The cooks ignored him, but a pair of soldiers hung about the door, clearly waiting for him, and after he had satisfied his craving for supper, he let them escort him back to their barracks.

In the north, spring twilight seemed to last half the night. Before the sky had darkened completely, Alaric was lying upon his straw pallet, dozing, his lute clutched safely beneath his arm. Beyond the nearest window, he could see a small sliver of pale western sky, and the evening star shining brightly in the wake of the setting sun. Few of the soldiers had retired yet; he could hear many men walking about in the courtyard, trading the last tidbits of evening gossip. He fell asleep to those murmurs, his belly full and his heart at ease. They were a dour and silent lot, these Northerners, but at least the Red Lord himself had an appreciation of good music.

He woke to the sound of a woman's scream. At first he thought himself dreaming, for the sky was dark and all about him sleeping men breathed softly. Then the scream came again, a high-pitched, wild shriek, wordless, distant, yet clear. He sat up. Beyond the window, a single torch on the opposite side of the courtyard glittered like a yellow star. Alaric picked his way among the sleepers and stepped out the open door. One pace past the threshold, a guard stopped him.

"Go back to bed, minstrel," said the man. He held a pike against his body, leaning upon the straight shaft as upon a staff.

"A call of nature," said Alaric, and he gestured toward the

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shelter that all the men used in common. The guard let him go, and he relieved himself, and then he heard the scream again. It drifted to him from above, as if blown to his ears by the wind. Tilting his head, he traced the sound to the upper reaches of the keep, where a dim light showed through half-open shutters. Like a tangible thing, then, the scream tumbled from the gap.

He returned to the barracks still looking up, over his shoulder. "What is it?" he asked the guard at the door.

"Nothing," said the man.

Alaric shook his head. "That's not nothing."

"A girl, then. What business is it of yours?"

Alaric looked at the man's grim face and said, "None. None at all." And he went inside.

The next day was much like the first, except that Alaric managed to snatch some food before he was required to sing for the master of the castle. An escort followed him wherever he went—not always the same escort, nor always a formal guard, but still he was carefully watched. His stool awaited him in the hall, and the same silence greeted his songs; he wrung neither tear nor chuckle from any in his audience, though he tried mightily. He received wine from his host and the same curt dismissal afterward; there were no compliments for him and no criticism. He felt as though he were singing to the forest, to the mute trees and the uncaring stones. The food was excellent, but he knew that he could not endure much more of this valley. He had yet to see a single pair of smiling lips. Sorrow hemmed him in at every side; though no one spoke of it, it was nonetheless real, bleak on every face and heavy in every step. For all the green buds and new blooms in the meadows, winter had not left the Red Lord's domain.

That night again, the screams, and as he listened closely, lying on his warm straw bed, he thought he could hear weeping after them, though it was soft and far away. And all around him, strong men slept through someone else's misery. He wondered if perhaps she were a madwoman—perhaps the Red Lord's own wife or daughter—locked in the tower and screaming into the night for some reason known only to her sick brain. A thousand fancies drifted through his thoughts; there was a song here, if only he could persuade someone to tell the tale.

In the morning he attempted to befriend the soldier whose bed was nearest his own. He was a man of middle years, though possibly a few seasons younger than most of his mates. He wore a beard and mustache, blond as his comrades, but above them his cheeks were unlined and his eyes only a trifle crinkled at their corners. Sitting on his straw, he mended a shirt, but Alaric thought his real reason for staying indoors was to guard the stranger. Alaric leaned against the wall and plucked aimlessly at his lute.

"Have you been a soldier for many years?" he asked the man.

"All my life," was the reply.

"I suppose bandits come down from the mountains in the summer."

"Not often."

"They must fear you greatly."

The man nodded. His skill with the needle was limited, and he sewed an awkward patch on an already patchwork woolen shirt. He stabbed himself a few times and swore loudly.

"Is there no woman to do that for you?" Alaric inquired.

"Not for me," muttered the man, and he persevered until the work was done.

"Has the Red Lord a lady?" asked Alaric. "And sons, daughters, grandchildren? I would know something of the man I sing for."

The soldier squinted at him. "Why?"

Alaric shrugged. "For my curiosity's sake, nothing more."

The soldier threw down the mended shirt. "He is a great commander." Having said this, he retired to the far end of the barracks, ending the conversation.

Shortly, Alaric went to the kitchen, knowing that soon he would be called to make music for his host. He ignored the soldier who trailed after him and instead sought out a grandmotherly woman he had seen among the cooks on the previous nights, a woman he had smiled at often in his attempts to win a friend or two, but who, like her countrymen, never smiled back. He found her at the hearth, drawing a spitted bird away from the flames, and she was not so proof against his charm that he could not wheedle a crisp brown wing from her . . . and its mate. "How will the creature balance on the platter with just one wing?" he said, and she gave him the meat on a wooden trencher.

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He seated himself atop an unused table and watched the kitchen workers. At any other castle, in spite of the presence of a stranger, they would be chattering as they moved through their tasks. All the gossip of the tightly knit castle society would float through the kitchen; no one would be spared, from the highest to the lowest. Alaric had seen that often enough that he always repaired to the kitchen to have his curiosity satisfied. Yet here was quiet, save for a few cooking instructions or a curse if someone sliced a finger instead of a carrot. He wondered if they feared foreigners so much that they kept silence rather than reveal their petty secrets to him . . . or if they merely never spoke. A strange, dead kitchen it was, and the blaze on the hearth was cold in spirit if not in essence.

He was called, as he knew he would be, and he found himself reluctant to go into the large cold hall and face the large cold man. He went, of course, in spite of that reluctance, for he owed the Red Lord songs in return for his hospitality, for the very meat he had just eaten. And there was nothing to keep him in that kitchen.

As the afternoon waned, his decision formed itself: no longer would Alaric the minstrel remain in this land of sorrow. He had had enough—enough to last him well into the summer, enough to bring back his own sorrows, which he had hoped to put aside with travel. He sang the better for his decision, to give the Red Lord full measure, to leave him well-satisfied and perhaps a bit wistful for more, to leave behind him the tale of a charming young minstrel with a silver voice. Though he wondered if they saw him so. He wondered if, wrapped in their own private winter, they perceived any breath of spring.

At dusk he saw the Red Lord shift in his chair, and Alaric left his stool to fall to his knees before his host could utter words of dismissal. "My Lord," he murmured.

"What is it, minstrel?"

"Lord, I beg leave to continue my journey with the rising sun."

"Your journey?"

"Lord, I would see lands farther north while the season is fair and then return southward for the winter. As I told you when I came, I seek the Northern Sea and as many other new sights as my life will allow. I never stay long anywhere."

The Red Lord fingered his beard. "The northern passes are scarcely clear. The way is rugged. More mountains bar your path. You would be wise to bide a while with us."

Alaric bowed his head. "Lord, if my songs have pleased you, I am happy; yet the wild wind calls me and I would go."

"Your songs have pleased me, minstrel. I had hopes that you would sing them longer than these few days."

Alaric said nothing but only bowed lower.

The Red Lord rose from his chair. "I would gift you, minstrel, before you leave. Come with me now, if you are bound to go, and receive a fit reward."

Alaric climbed slowly to his feet. "I need no reward beyond your kind hospitality, Lord," he said. "I have eaten and slept well. I ask no more of the world."

"You must come," he said in a voice that brooked no denial.

Alaric slung the lute across his back. "If you insist, Lord, let it be something small, for I prefer to travel light." He wondered: Gold? Jewels? What wealth could this isolated valley boast that would be easily portable?

The Red Lord turned and with a gesture bade the minstrel follow. Behind them the ever-present escort trailed. At one end of the room was the stone stairway that curved upward along the wall of the keep; the Red Lord climbed, and guards on the steps lit torches as he approached, standing aside for his passage. At the top of the steps a guard bowed and opened an iron-bound wooden door for his master, and the party passed through that into the upper chambers of the keep, a ring of small rooms about the central tower.

One of the escort kindled a torch in the first room.

"Here we have silver," the Red Lord said. Chests of every size and shape were heaped upon the floor, wooden, bronze, brass and iron, each with a massive lock upon its face. "Open these containers and you will find dishes and goblets, candelabra and mirrors and ornaments of many kinds. I count silver the least of my treasures."

A soldier strode ahead to open a door at the far end of the chamber and reveal another room. Here were more chests, though not so many by half as in the first.

"More precious by far is gold," said the Red Lord, and he nodded at the coffers as he passed them, as if they were old friends.

The Land of Sorrow

Another door, another room, and a single brass-bound trunk in the center of the floor.

"Jewels," said the Red Lord. "We have few of these, yet their value is above that of all the silver and gold before them." He glanced at Alaric, who made no comment, and then he paused by the door in the far wall of this chamber. From his tunic he drew a key. "And, beyond, the greatest treasure of them all." He turned the key in the lock and pulled the massive panel open with his own hands. The soldiers crowded behind Alaric, as if they, too, wished to see the greatest treasure, and he found himself leaning forward with their pressure, his heart beating expectantly.

A woman.

She was young and might have been comely before her face was bruised. Her skin might have been fair and flawless before it was torn. Her limbs might have been lithe and straight before they were broken. Naked, filthy, smeared and crusted with dried and drying blood, she hung slack in manacles bolted to the stone wall.

Alaric shrank back involuntarily, but the soldiers were there and kept him from going far. *This*, he thought, *this is the woman who screamed.*

The Red Lord approached her till he stood at arm's length, and then he stretched his hand out to stroke her cheek. The gesture would have been a caress in other circumstances; now it was a grotesque parody of affection. At his touch, she moaned and opened her eyes. No, only one eye opened—Alaric felt his stomach rising to his throat as he realized that the other eye was a newly empty socket.

"No more, Lord," she whispered. Her feeble voice was loud in the small room, at least to Alaric's ears. "I beg you, let me die."

He took the jeweled dagger from his belt and, as Alaric watched in horror, scraped the point across her bare shoulder, drawing a deep and ragged gouge. Bright blood welled out of the wound and ran down her arm and breast; on her torso it was quickly lost among the marks of other injuries.

"Please," she moaned, her lips scarcely moving. "Please, my lord."

The Red Lord turned to Alaric, his mouth curved into a cold smile. "Blood," he said. "The greatest treasure."

THE WORLD'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 4

Alaric found his voice after a long moment. "What has she done, my Lord?"

"Nothing."

"Then . . . then why is she here?"

"She is mine," said the Red Lord. "There need be no other reason." He touched the woman's blood-encrusted hair, wound his fingers in the strands and pulled her head sharply upright. A scabbed-over cut on her neck broke open at the jerk, and more crimson flowed across her flesh. When she moaned, he said, "Have you already forgotten how to scream?"

The woman fainted instead of answering.

He turned back to the minstrel. "Do you pity her, boy?"

Alaric could see the soldiers from the corner of his eye. They stood erect, swords and daggers sheathed; they stood between him and the only door. A single, half-shuttered window admitted night air to the room, which now seemed too stuffy for Alaric's taste. A scant arm's length away, the Red Lord toyed with his dagger.

"I would pity any wounded creature," said Alaric.

"You shall have ample time to practice your pity," said the Red Lord. He nodded at the soldiers. "Shackle him."

As they grasped Alaric's arms, snatched the knife from his belt and the lute from his back, he cried out, "My lord, I have done nothing to deserve this!"

"When you entered my valley, you became mine," said the Red Lord. "I do with you as I will."

Alaric let the soldiers chain him to the wall beside the woman, perceiving that they would offer him no violence if he offered none to them. Indeed, they were gentle, as if they fastened bracelets of gold to his wrists instead of iron. Alaric did not watch them lock the manacles; he knew no metal in the world could hold him without his consent. Instead, he looked to the master of the castle.

"My lord, this is a poor reward for one who has done his best to please you."

The Red Lord sheathed his dagger. "Your reward, minstrel, shall be that you will not be touched until this other one is dead." He slapped her face with the back of his hand, but she did not stir. Only her hoarse breathing showed her to be alive. "Tomorrow, perhaps, or the next day." He slapped her again, harder, and she moaned. "Do not sleep," he said to

her. "We have an appointment later tonight." He gestured to his soldiers, and the entire party went out, shutting the door behind them and leaving Alaric and the woman in darkness.

Beyond the window, the moon had already risen high, flooding the courtyard with its pale light, and even sending a shaft through the half-open shutter. Alaric's eyes adapted to the dimness quickly, and then he moved in his special way, only a short distance, leaving empty manacles dangling upon the wall.

Lightly, he touched the woman. "I will take you away from here," he said. As gently as he could, he lifted her free of the floor and pulled her as far from the wall as her shackles allowed. She gasped, "No, please, no," and then he had freed her and journeyed, all in a heartbeat, to a niche on the mountainside. There he laid her on a grassy spot, on the spot where the goatherd had stopped him and he had waited so long for two men to answer the boy's horn. Her body trembled and she clutched feebly at the air. He let her take his hands. Bending low over her face, he said. "He shall not touch you again." He could scarcely discern her ruined features, so softened were they by moonlight, yet they were graven in his memory; he knew that he would see them in his dreams for all the days of his life. *Where can I go?* She could not be taken to her own people, whoever they were—the Red Lord would surely look there first, come midnight and his pleasure spoiled. As a minstrel, Alaric had been welcomed into many houses, of high station and low—in his mind, the years unrolled, and the miles, as he selected among them. There had been kind hearts along the way, and good wishes for his travels; now he would have to bring some well-wisher the true tragedy and not merely the song.

He began to slip his arms beneath her, to lift her for the journey, but she stopped him with a gasp. "Please, don't move me."

Gently, he pulled away. "Rest if you wish, before we travel on. We have a little time."

She turned her head slowly, to fix him with her good eye. "Who are you?" she whispered.

"I am Alaric, a minstrel. A stranger. I was able to free you. You are safe now."

"He will find us. He will take us back."

"He will never find us. I know a way to leave this valley

that none can follow. Trust me. I will take you to a warm bed and kind friends who will nurse you back to health."

For a moment she was silent, then her voice came so soft that he had to bend ever closer to hear her words, and the stink of her festering wounds turned his stomach as he listened. "No one has ever escaped this valley."

"I can."

"Travelers who come out of the mountains. Bandits and merchants alike. Whole caravans." Her breath came fast and shallow, as if the sheer effort of speaking exhausted her. "He takes them to the tower room. None survive."

He touched her hair gently. "But you—you are one of his own people."

"In a long winter . . . he becomes restless. Then we must serve his pleasure."

"What sort of lord is this," cried Alaric, "who destroys those he is bound to protect?"

"He pays for us with wine."

He remembered the cotter woman and the jug of wine she smashed. Was the lamb a feeble replacement for some child lost to her lord? Alaric shivered, though the night air was still warm enough. "Why have you not risen up and killed this man?"

She sighed, a long shuddering sigh. "It is good wine."

He looked back over his shoulder. In the moonlight, he could barely discern the castle, standing dark by the silver glimmer of the river. How long, he wondered, had it been going on? Why had no peasant assassinated this monster? Were his soldiers so fanatically loyal that they could stand by and watch their innocent countrymen—perhaps members of their own families—tortured to death?

"We must not stay here," he said. Once more he slipped his hands beneath her body.

Her arms fluttered weakly against his chest. "No, no," she begged. "Don't move me."

"Good woman, I must move you a little."

"No, no, I cannot . . . I cannot bear it." Her breath came hoarsely now, and it gurgled in her throat. "Stranger, please . . . just one boon."

"I will do whatever I can for you."

Her right hand groped toward him, so he caught it in his own; that seemed to satisfy her, for she let it lie limp in his grasp. "I am broken . . . inside," she whispered. "There is

too much pain. Too much. Stranger, I beg you . . . kill me."

Alaric could feel his heart shrink back in his chest. "Let me take you to friends," he said quickly, "to good and kindly help. You will be well again—"

"No, I will die. Let it be quick."

"No, no, I cannot."

"Please." Her head rocked slowly from side to side. "Please, let it be quick."

He clutched her hand tightly, his whole body trembling. *No*, he told himself. *No. No.*

She moaned. "Would you let a mortally wounded creature suffer? Give me a knife and I will do the deed myself."

"I have no knife!" he cried.

"Then you must do it with your hands. Your strong hands."

Hot tears spilled down his cheeks. His fingers had no strength. How could they lock about her slender neck? How could they squeeze until she breathed no more? He, who had never killed in anger—how could he now kill in compassion?

"Your strong hands," she murmured. "Oh, please . . ."

And then he remembered the sword. Wrapped in his knapsack, it might still lie on his pallet in the barracks. And if not, there were swords a-plenty hanging on the walls. The sky was full dark, the men probably swaddled in their individual blankets and snoring. In the barracks he would be a shadow among shadows. He stepped back among the boulders, that his abrupt disappearance might not frighten her. Then he was within the castle walls once more.

His pallet was gone, the space it had occupied empty, its straw probably redivided among the other beds. But in the corner lay his property, all he owned in the world now; he clutched the bundle and vanished. The noise of his exit, the clap of air rushing to fill the void where his body had been, would probably wake them all, but he cared not—they were too far behind to catch him.

On the mountainside once more, he drew the sword from its scabbard. Moonlight glinted off the polished blade; since he had owned it, the sword had never drunk human blood. He looked down at the woman, saw moisture sparkle in her single eye.

"Strike," she said, and the word was loud as thunder to his ears.

Standing above her, the sword clutched like a great dagger in his two hands, he drove the point into her breast, felt the breastbone cleave beneath his weight, felt the heart yield and the spine snap . . . and then hard earth resisted him. His whole body shuddered for a moment, and he fought to clear his swimming head, his brimming throat; then he lifted the sword, and her whole body rose with it, till only her heels and hands touched the ground, and he had to shake the blade violently to free her from it. He would not touch her flesh with his own.

Blood gushed from the wound, black in the moonlight, Alaric stabbed again, and yet once more, and at last he was satisfied that he had sent her beyond pain. He turned away then, the bloody sword a leaden weight in his grip, weighing down his heart as well as his arm, and he wept into the darkness keening like a new widow. He wept for her and for all her kind that had gone before her, and he wept for himself as well, for the loss of something that he could scarcely name.

After a time, his eyes dried and he began to gather leafy branches to spread over her still form. It was only a gesture of honor for the dead, for leaves would not keep the scavengers away come morning and the warm sun, but he had neither time nor inclination to dig a grave. He had dug a grave once, for his beloved companion Dall, and he could not bring himself to dig another and, by that labor, to resurrect so many painful memories. He covered her, and that would have to be enough.

He rose from his knees, still gazing downward, though her body was now no more than a heap of greenery in the light of the moon. A voice brought him to alert: "Hist! Minstrel!"

He took a step backward, sword upraised, body poised for his own peculiar sort of flight, and then his brain recognized that voice. The goatherd. He saw the boy as a dark shape detaching itself from the darkness of a boulder.

"Where are your goats?" Alaric asked softly.

"Sent home long ago. I have been watching you."

Alaric glanced all around, and he listened carefully to the night noises. He saw nothing but the peaceful, moon-touched landscape, heard nothing but the scratchings of insects. "Will the goats not stray without your guidance?"

"Once down the mountain, they go home happily enough,"

said the boy. He moved closer slowly, and Alaric could soon see that he carried his staff and his horn. There had been no bray of that horn, as far as Alaric knew . . . but he had been gone for a short while. He wondered if the boy had seen him vanish; probably not, from that distance and in the shadow-riddled night.

"So you watched," said Alaric. "Did you know her?"

The boy bent, drew a branch aside to expose her face. He studied her features for some time, and then he nodded. "I know her."

"She was chained in the Red Lord's tower. He was torturing her without reason."

Again the boy nodded.

"She told me that she was not the first innocent to be taken."

The boy stepped nearer to Alaric. "Are you leaving?"

"Yes. I have no wish to die by torture." In the space of a heartbeat, he recalled the boy sitting at his feet, listening and whistling counterpoint to his lute, and he made a decision. "Would you like to come with me?"

"Come with you?"

"You could be my apprentice, learn the minstrel's trade, and see the wonders of the wide world."

"No one leaves this valley," said the boy. "It is the Red Lord's law."

"I leave. Will you come along?"

The boy stood a long moment in thought, fingering the horn at his belt, and then he said, "Yes."

Alaric smiled stiffly—he feared it was more a grimace than a smile, for his face felt rigid, as if made of cold clay—and he stretched his free hand toward the boy. "Give me your pledge."

The boy clasped his hand firmly.

"What is your name?" asked Alaric.

"Valdin."

"Valdin, we shall be friends from this day forward."

"We shall be friends."

"Our journey begins now. Come, walk close beside me." Silently, he added, *And I shall show you a new form of travel.* He half turned away from the boy, to gaze up at the darkly looming mountain slope, and then a tremendous blow struck him across the back of the head, and he fell, rolling,

tumbling, down the grassy path until he struck and wedged among some rocks. The sword slid from his nerveless fingers, clattering away in the darkness, and his arms and legs seemed to float away with it. The moon rocked crazily over his head, and the earth heaved beneath him as he struggled for consciousness. Above him, the horn bayed again and again, its note mingling with the roaring in his ears.

Dizzy and sick, he lay still, denying the call to oblivion with all the strength of his mind, and at last the world steadied about him. Feigning a swoon yet, he looked out upon the landscape through slitted eyes. The boy stood above him, staff raised for another blow. Without moving his head, Alaric could see down the slope some distance; he chose a spot that he thought the boy would have some trouble scrambling to quickly, and he went there.

Behind him, the boy's startled cry was loud. Alaric oriented himself swiftly, then flitted still farther away. From a safe distance, he watched and listened to the boy beating the brush for his vanished quarry. Soon, two men were toiling up the slope to join the youngster—Alaric guessed that he knew those two men well enough. They had not been with the boy long when his cries indicated that they were beating him. Alaric hoped they beat him well.

After they had gone back to their cottage, he returned to the burial site and found his sword and knapsack. He wiped the bloody blade on a clump of grass and sheathed it. The body was still there. He wondered if anyone but himself would ever mourn her.

Down at the river, the castle of the Red Lord sat grim and silent in the moonlight. Briefly, Alaric thought of vengeance, for himself and for her and for all those innocents who had come before—vengeance on behalf of folk too terrified or too resigned to seek it for themselves. Perhaps he was the one person who could wreak that vengeance and escape with his life. He grasped the pommel of the sword, and his hand shook and his head spun and he had to close his eyes against the memory of the black blood gushing out of her heart. *I have killed enough for now.*

He turned away. His head ached horribly, and he needed rest. The next mountain peak would be safe enough.

He did not even tell himself that someday he would return.

Tanith Lee

ODDS AGAINST THE GODS

Speaking of Tanith Lee, as I was a couple stories back, she usually devotes her rather impressive talents to lengthy novels like The Birthgrave and Volkhavar and seldom writes short fiction in the genre.

But when she does, it's usually a humdinger. Like the droll, unpredictable, thoroughly inimitable tale which follows next.

—L.C.

One yellow morning, on the rose-sanded coast of Skorm, three women of the religious sisterhood of Donsar chanced on an abandoned female infant, and accordingly adopted it into the fane. I was this hapless child.

The life of the sisterhood, the Brides of Donsar, was simple, if perverse.

Continual ablutions, prayer and self-chastisement were virtually the only occupations permitted them. For reading material the Brides might relax with the Manuscripts of Ardour—diaries of former initiates, detailing their ecstatically self-inflicted wounds, and love of their god. Suffering was the key to ultimate fulfillment in the fane. Thus, physical ills were reckoned to be help rather than hindrance—toothache,

pains in the belly or a broken limb were occasions for congratulation and rejoicing.

Donsar, a minor deity, manifested himself in the form of a small glowing light above the altar. In keeping with his general feebleness, the light was never particularly bright and sometimes flickered out altogether. Then all were summoned from whatever pastime they were at, washing, wounding or wailing, (or less important, out of their beds) and commenced vociferous prayer and song until the light fluttered back to its original sickly intensity.

In this place I grew and, knowing nothing of myself, still my very blood and bones rebelled against such an immutable, futile existence.

They called me "Truth" so, at an early age, I asked:

"Who am I?"

"Why, a foundling, Truth, whom Donsar, in his illimitable mercy, conducted to our door."

"What then should I do?"

"Do? Why, spend the life Donsar has preserved in giving thanks to Donsar. What else, indeed?"

Indeed. What else?

At twelve, having been beaten vigorously by the Chief Bride for a spot of fish soup discovered on my robe, I ran away. I scrambled up slimy porcelain rocks and among green glass pools, and was eventually caught fast by the ankle in one of the numerous clasp traps laid out by the sisters for this purpose.

I was returned to the fane, the whip was produced, and I was once more corrected. The sisters began an anxious dialogue.

"Poor child. She has not suffered enough and consequently is unaware of the felicity of pain. All her teeth are sound and her limbs strong."

One or two offered to knock out a tooth or break a wrist for me, but these services the Chief Bride sternly refused on my behalf, saying such events were the will of Donsar and must not be anticipated.

"Perhaps the affliction lies in her hair," remarked one. "This orange shade cannot be healthful; it indicates passion and willfulness."

So they shaved my head and left me locked in my cell for three days, after which they found me much changed. In a

delirium of anger and shame, I had formulated the only possible plan, which was to conform. From that day on I was most submissive, and found that by being circumspect and sly, I could achieve a great deal more than through open opposition.

By an adept use of chimney soot under my eyes, I could seem to have spent whole nights in prayer, when I had really slept, and applications of watered red ink—supposedly for use in writing a diary of contrition—could appear very like the marks of the whip to the dim-eyed sisters. I begged time to meditate alone in my cell on my sins and the redeeming glory of Donsar, in preference to the undoubted joy to be obtained by praying in unison with the sisters. These times I spent dreaming, or else scribbling poetry with the red ink. Inescapable rigors I submitted to, having no choice, I had in my mind a nebulous goal, which was my seventeenth birthday—or at least the seventeenth anniversary of that day I had been found. Something, I felt obscurely, would happen on that day to release me.

I wondered on occasion if the emanation of Donsar guessed my mind, but it did not seem to, which increased my spirit of defiance.

However, none of this was to be.

The very evening before my seventeenth anniversary came a dismal glaring magenta resin in the courtyard, and seven or eight figures conducting another unfortunate to the insular doom of the fane.

It was habitual among the sisterhood—myself included—to be hugely curious about these new arrivals. The other Brides of Donsar welcomed them with cries of delight. I stared at them broodingly, thinking of their fate with ironic humor.

But this one, when her conductors had left her at the portal and retreated, walked with a graceful gliding motion into the stone hall.

That vanity will soon be beaten out of you, thought I bitterly and not without spite. Then her cloak was taken and she stood before the Chief Bride.

She was superlatively lovely.

Sulphurous yellow hair, lopped short at her shoulders, milk-white skin, ebony eyes. I took some time studying her, moving slowly behind the scuttling sisters. She seemed neither distressed nor joyful at the prospects before her. Even the

cold refectory and uninteresting food evoked no symptoms of despair.

They called her Meekness.

It was the custom that a new initiate should spend the whole of her first night before the altar, observing and revering the light of Donsar. After Meekness had been despatched thence to take up her vigil, I approached the Chief Bride and begged to be permitted to watch too, alleging that I felt a spiritual need to bathe my psyche in the god's glow.

"Ah, Truth," murmured the Chief Bride sentimentally, "I remember well your turbulent childhood when I despaired for the equanimity of your soul." She patted my head. "Yes, go. My blessing on you. Acquaint our little sister Meekness with the true ecstasy of Donsar."

"Indeed I shall," I avowed earnestly.

In the sanctum of the fane a few tottering candles evolved a smoky, subterranean light. The vague pulse of Donsar was just visible over the altar. I made out Meekness standing before it in an attitude of rapt attention.

"Greetings, sister," I said. "Tell me, what can have brought you to this disgusting pass?"

"Why," she said, looking at me out of her extraordinary eyes, "I thought all here to be devout."

"If I were concluded to be other than devout, I should have my skin ripped off by their whips, doubtless."

She appraised me slowly, and smiled.

"That would be a pity indeed," said she.

"If you are reluctant to reveal your history, at least grant me your name," said I.

"Why, Meekness."

"That is their name, not yours."

"At home I was called Lalmi," she amended, lowering her gaze, "and you?"

"I have no name, being an orphan of the accursed fane."

The emanation over the altar flickered.

"Oh, be still, you unoriginal phosphorescence," I reviled it. Lalmi gave a small cry of startlement and admiration. "One day that erroneous spark will go out, and then this temple of iniquity will sink in the sea," I blustered.

"Indeed," said Lalmi, "I can understand your anger. You are far too beautiful and unique to take to such a life."

I answered her that I was not alone in this.

"Ah, no, I am of small worth. There was a curse upon my house that at a certain season our palace would collapse in rubble unless its only daughter were given to a god. When the first cracks in the masonry appeared, it was thought advisable that I should go; as no particular god had been stipulated, and this fane was but a day's ride, it was here that I was delivered."

"Poor Lalmi. It seems we are both destined to atrophy in this unworthy pit."

So saying, I slipped my arm about her for purposes of comfort, which act she fortunately misconstrued.

All caution had escaped me, and Lalmi, in her excellent vagueness, never thought of it. Near dawn, we were interrupted by the shrill altercation of the Brides, who with their ritual torches had come on us, clasped in a manner as unsisterly as it was ardent.

What need to elaborate on the grisly drama which followed? Both of us were taken to the cold-larders and fettered there among the corpses of smoked fish. Certain sisters, examining my cell, came on poems hidden in my pallet, some of which related to Donsar in an inventive fashion.

Hearing the distant wailing and lamentation, Lalmi asked incuriously:

"I wonder how we will be punished?"

"Since punishment is delicious to them, and they think deprivation the highest of joys, they will be hard put to devise a method," I said acidly. "Perhaps they will give us palatable food and a soft bed, and expect us to expire of misery."

The sisterhood, however, proved ultimately practical. We had dared physical pleasure, the most leaden of all the nine hundred and thirty three sins set forth in the Manuscripts of Ardour, and, far worse, we had profaned the holy shrine. Nothing but unsanctified death, far from the bosom of Donsar, could be our lot.

After a day in the cold-larder, the Chief Bride came to us and read out our fate. It was to be a traditional doom, judging by the antiquity of the scroll. We were to be taken some miles up the coast to a certain infamous bay, there chained to the rock, and left for the sea monster which periodically emerged upon the shore.

I felt considerably disheartened at these tidings.

"Suppose," I postulated, "that the monster does not appear.

Then we shall simply die of exposure to the elements and lack of nourishment—both of which will, of course, be delectable to us.”

“Rest assured that the creature will come,” averred the Chief Bride, “and that both of you will perish in a state of ungrace.”

So saying, she turned her back, spoke an arcane curse, and left us. At midnight, silent sisters bore us into the upper courtyard, where six hooded men bound our hands together and mounted us on thin Skormish horses, and rode away with us into the dark. So I had escaped from the fane at last, but not in the manner I had foreseen.

It occurred to me that perhaps Donsar had had some part in my destiny after all. This thought inspired me to obstinacy rather than fear.

After an hour or so of our dreary ride, a horned moon rose and scattered pale motes on the sea below. We progressed along dismal cliffs, the water to our left hand, great promontories and escarpments lumbering to the right. What lay beyond these inland I neither knew nor cared.

Our escort was obscure. Cloaked and hooded in black, with only slits cut to emit the glints of their eyes, they spoke neither to us nor to each other. If they were captors, executioners or merely guides I did not know.

I turned to the rider on my left.

“Propound to me who or what you are, and why you do the bidding of the Brides of Donsar.”

The rider answered in a deep emotionless voice.

“I am a felon, and have offended, in the Wastes of Sarro, a powerful goddess resembling a felder-cow, when, without thinking her more than she seemed, I attempted to extract milk from her udder. For this discourtesy I am forced to roam for seven years, hiring myself without fee to any religious order which might require my services. Those other five you see about you are similarly under the geas of various deities to do the same.”

“Then you have no specific loyalty to Donsar,” I hazarded. “Must you deliver this maiden and myself to death merely at the whim of the fane?”

“Certainly. And should you attempt flight, I, or one of my brother mercenaries, will cut you down immediately.”

We presently reached a white terrace cut in the chalk which led down to the beach. Here patient Lalmi and I were lifted from the horses and invited courteously to proceed toward the scene of our extermination.

"We are entirely lost," I muttered.

"Indeed, so it would appear," said she, but I detected no great alarm. Only in love had she been ardent, in all else her sensibilities seemed masked in mist.

On the floor of the beach stood a hut built of mud-plastered stone, and encrusted with shells of various shapes, sizes and lustre. Here our escort knocked and out came a tall gaunt man, with a lamp in his hand.

"Tush!" cried he, viewing Lalmi and myself with disfavor, "the land abounds in villainy. Have you brought these miscreant women for the Prince?"

"Just so," said one of the hooded men.

We were all conducted into the hut, which was larger than it appeared from without. Lalmi and I were tied to a post crusted with the caparisons of sand mollusks and other nacreous hardware. The six men and the hut-dweller, whose name they appeared to know to be Grunelt, sat at a stone table and drank out of iron cups.

"You are discourteous," I said, "to offer us no drink."

"You will soon be viands for fish," our host responded cheerfully. "No use in filling up your bellies for that."

After a while fatigue propelled me into a fitful doze, out of which I was roughly awakened in the first chilly intimation of dawn.

"Be swift now," encouraged Grunelt, "the Prince will come with the rising sun, and you must be ready to greet him."

"Who is this Prince you refer to?" Lalmi asked, showing some unexpected curiosity in this hour of our extremity.

"The Prince is the name I have designated the Thing that comes from the sea."

The sands of the beach were lavender, the sea as opaque as jade, but on the eastern horizon hinted the first wan glow of day. Great manacles of gold depended from the rocks into which Lalmi and I were fastened with distressing precision. The six riders waited farther up the beach to see this part of the enterprise completed, then turned and took their leave.

"Dear Grunelt," I wheedled, "surely two of us are an unnecessary banquet for the monster, and may cause it some di-

gestive trouble. Let my companion go. I assure you, she is innocent of all crime." These words were wrung from me partly because she was my first love and I valued her sweetness, partly out of a base desire to win her admiration in these last seconds, or else twist the murderer's heart, and tempt him to see us both at liberty.

But prosaic Grunelt only emitted yelps of mirth, and shortly, with a glance at the sky, departed to his shelter from which presently issued the sounds of drawn bolts.

The savage topaz disc of the sun now burst from the sea.

In its brilliant path came a turbulence of the waves, and, out of the turbulence, a silhouetted shape of unspeakable yet indefinite horror.

"The Prince!" cried Lalmi in a tone of unusual warmth. "It seems after all I shall be given to a god."

Thinking terror had driven her mad, I refrained from argument and gave myself over to desires that the end be swift.

Up the beach the thing came striding against the dazzle of the sky. It seemed to me eight or nine feet tall, a tangle of huge limbs, scalloped scales with seaweed hair. Sand splayed from its webbed toes, and it carried a fishstink of the deep and primordial ocean with it. It struck with a huge paw at Lalmi's chains, which unlocked and cast her at once into its clutch. Paying no heed to me, it then turned, and retraced its obscene progress toward the waves, carrying Lalmi in its embrace. I caught a last glimpse of her sulphurous hair as she flung her arms about its diluvian neck.

"My Prince!" she extolled it.

And for one wild moment it seemed I saw my first love carried into the sea, not by a monster but by a tall and magnificent man in a glittering armour of viridian scales, his green-gold hair hanging in moist ringlets down his powerful back. Then the water had closed over both their heads, and I had been deprived both of hallucination and lover altogether.

Soon Grunelt came slinking back, unchained me and replaced me in his shell hut. He seemed overfamiliar, but he set before me a bread-cake and a cup of watered wine which I gladly accepted.

"Regarding your earlier question," said Grunelt, "which was, if I recollect, whether the Prince could digest two maidens at once—I imagine you are now enlightened?"

Odds Against the Gods

"Imagine nothing," I said.

"Well, then. The Prince, if there be more than one, chooses whom he wishes, and takes her firstly. After an interval of one day he returns invariably for the other. If there be more, as occasionally happens in this wicked land, he will continue reappearances until all the victims have been removed."

"This seems a tidy arrangement. So I have but this one day before I join my unlucky friend."

"Just as you say. Nevertheless, we shall be merry in the interim, never fear."

"I am not inclined to merriment," I cautiously answered.

Grunelt leered.

"The yellow-haired girl was your leman, was she? Well, no matter. You shall be mine."

Whereupon Grunelt advanced upon me, licking his lips. However, I was not of his mind, and cried out warningly:

"Beware of a jealous demon which guards me and will deprive you of life should you touch me."

Grunelt hesitated and considered.

"I am grateful for your council, but perhaps I shall be too quick for the demon since it does not appear at this moment to be about your person."

"Alas, Grunelt, one erotic mannerism and the demon manifests itself out of the air."

"That being the case," said Grunelt, "I will return you to your chains. I cannot afford to feed and shelter criminals without some recompense."

"I see you do not properly understand, dear, Grunelt," I temporized. "The demon is only active by day. At sunset it will depart upon other errands and leave me free to do as I wish. If you will be patient until dusk, we can then enjoy ourselves in whatever fashion you recommend."

Grunelt again licked his lips, and agreed to wait. "I, too, have a demon," he said presently, "though it operates in reverse of yours, being active only at night. It is greatly attracted to light, nevertheless, which it eats for sustenance. It smothered the candles and tore the wick out of the lamp on its arrival. Fortunately, once sated, I was able to impound it in a bottle of thick blue glass provided me for the purpose by a professional demon-catcher from the Wastes of Sarro."

"This is very interesting. Pray, where do you keep the bottle?"

"Securely locked in that stone chest. I am very careful of the key. The demon is particularly fond of gobbling animate light, and aspires, I believe, to ingesting the moon, which, as you know, is a goddess composed of pure white flame. Should this calamity happen, the post-solar world would be plunged into eternal darkness."

I commended Grunelt on his good sense, plied him with his own wine, and so passed the day. Once or twice, when he fell briefly to snoring, I closely examined the locks of the stone chest, and snatched up one of the iron cups which I hid in my robe.

As the sun slid over the cliffs, Grunelt became vivacious.

"The moment is near when the demon departs," I said. "When I so tell you you must avert your eyes, since it may make itself visible during egression, and the sight of it is peculiarly horrible."

Grunelt complied nervously. Whereupon I uttered a warning and a dreadful shriek. Grunelt covered his face with his hands, and I, leaping across the hut, struck him vigorously several times on the head with the iron cup.

My jailor satisfactorily disposed of, I set about the locks of the stone chest with the same implement, and soon had all the drawers open.

In the lower section of the chest lay a welter of masculine clothing, not Grunelt's but once the property of male wrongdoers who, as he had told me, being not to the taste of the monster, were pegged out naked on the flats and left for the returning tide and certain ferocious jellies that came with it. Here I found the black habit of a slender youth that fitted me not ill. Also, a long iron staff. Over all went a voluminous black cloak, whose hood I had fashioned to resemble those of the six riders, after which there was no knowing either me or my gender.

Grunelt had also accrued a small store of gold and gems, stolen from various victims, and this I took, and stored in a bag at my hip. Finally I rummaged for the demon, and at last found a bottle of midnight-blue vitreous, which, held up to the single lamp I had lit, gave evidence of some inner agitation.

So, leaving the door of the hut unlocked, I set out, permitting Grunelt and the sea monster to resolve matters between them as they saw fit.

After a few hours on the cliff path, the sun rose, conquering the sea and the bastion faces with primrose flame.

I came upon an encampment of four or five travellers snoring round a fire with, in a pen, ten tawny damplepads, and a watchman fast asleep. I undid the wicket gate, and led out the nearest beast—leaving the rest to stray—mounted, and encouraged it to a fast smooth loping, its leonine head pointed into the morning wind. It had a fine mane of coal-black curls to which I clung, for I rode it, perforce, without a bit, bridle or saddle-cloth. There was no pursuit.

On the rest of my journey I saw no one and nothing, except for flocks of black sere-gulls screaming overhead.

I reached the fane at twilight and rapped on the door.

"Who is there?" trembled one of the sisters.

"I, who am an honest diviner, benighted on the north road and craving hospitality of the admirable Donsar," said I, putting on a low, hoarse voice.

After some murmuring, the door was opened and I was admitted. Thinking me a man, they hustled me to the tiny hostelry, where I secured my beast and obtained a bowl of fish soup and a meagre candle. In the wall was a grill through which I might question the Chief Bride, if I so wished, without polluting her face with my eyes. As I had thought, the old busybody came rustling up whether I desired her company or not, for she was avid for tattle.

"Pray enlighten me," said she, "what manner of diviner are you?"

"Why, madam, I divine cause, effect and remedy. I have been trained in the School of the White Larch, and could tell you, at a need, why it is the sun rises, what results spring from such an occurrence and how they may be remedied."

"Indeed, indeed. A great weight of knowledge for so green a youth," said she, with some asperity.

"By no means. My wisdom is not mine and I take no credit for it. The genius of an ancient sage possesses my body when I divine, and speaks through my mouth."

"Ah. That is commendable," said the Chief Bride.

After some further chat, I pleaded intense desire to commence my prayers to the god of the fane, and the Chief Bride, torn between vexation and piety, took her leave.

As soon as she was gone, I produced the blue glass bottle, carefully removed the stopper, and shook out the demon into

the room. I saw nothing, but there came a rush of air and a frenzied cry, and at once the flame of my candle vanished. There followed some furious squeakings as the demon squeezed through the grill, followed by an advancing blackness throughout the fane. Leaving the hostelry for the court, I watched the progression of this dark until it was total. Then, from the direction of the sanctum came a loud unhuman scream and a flash of blue luminance. The demon, it seemed, had discovered the animate light of Donsar, and found it entirely digestible.

I hastened back to my room.

In the distance I heard wailing and weeping, succeeded by distracted chants and the monotonous rhythm of many whips. This continued for two hours.

Finally several footsteps came toward my grill, accompanied by guttering torchlight.

I lay down on the pallet and began to snore, but was soon woken from my feigned insensibility by the clamor of the sisters.

"Good sir," came the terrified voice of the Chief Bride at the grill, "are you awake?"

"So I believe," I said.

"You spoke of being a diviner of cause and remedy—we have a most urgent need of your help."

"I shall be delighted to assist you," said I, "naturally. However, I must first acquaint you with my fees."

There ensued some dismay among the sisters, but eventually the Chief Bride said sternly:

"It grieves us to think that you should demand payment of the fane when it has treated you so hospitably. Surely, understanding that you serve the god should be reward in itself?"

"Without doubt it is, madam, but I am bound by the code of my profession to seek a fee, albeit with the great unwillingness. If I failed to do so, various rogues and villains in a similar line of business would accuse me of undercutting them, and have me expelled from my guild."

"Very well, whatever poor means we have shall be put at your disposal."

"Then tell me what is amiss," I said.

"Spirits of darkness extinguish our lamps," cried the Chief Bride, "and the god has abruptly withdrawn himself from the sanctum, and refuses to heed our prayers."

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At that moment, the demon, having partly digested its previous meal, rushed through the corridor and consumed the torches. The sisters screeched. In the darkness I applied the blue vitreous bottle to the grill, which when exerting its magic influence, the bloated elemental was presently sucked inside and stoppered.

"Well, well," I said. "This is grave, and requires some thought. The illustrious god Donsar has abandoned you and will not return, you say?"

I then told the sisters to gather up such valuables of the fane as they felt owing to me, and bring them to my door an hour after dawn, by which time, through cogitation and spell, I shall have some idea of the origin of their predicament. Once they had gone sniveling away, I lay down and slept peacefully until sunrise.

At the appointed time I opened the door and found a pair of small candlesticks of antique silver and a miniature gold censor. These I put into various pockets of my cloak, well aware that no more of their clandestine wealth would be forthcoming.

Just then the Chief Bride made herself known at the grill.

"Have your deliberations borne fruit?" asked she.

"One moment while I activate my mentor." I then lapsed into a trance and fell like the dead on to the floor amid a clatter of candlesticks. Assuming a quavering voice, I declaimed as follows: "The merciful god Donsar has been patient with his Brides a long while, forgiving their misinterpretations of his desires. But now, distressed by their continual transgressions, he has withdrawn to Limbo."

"What transgressions are these?" demanded the Chief Bride. "We have not left off prayer and the whip all night."

"Exactly so. The god does not wish to be worshipped in this manner, but in levity, merriment and passions of the flesh. This, then is the cause. The effect is as you see. The remedy is simple. Give yourselves over at once to carnality, song, strong drink and libidinous exercise, and the god will return to you."

The Chief Bride uttered a scream of horror, and fled from my presence, and soon began again the drone of prayers, the thrashing of whips.

Toward sunset, however, a great silence settled on the fane.

THE WORLD'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 4

Walking in the court, in the afterglow, I was suddenly confronted by the Chief Bride.

"Good sir—all is as you have said. The god declines to return. Thus—" here she ripped open her robe—"I offer myself to you, as the first proof of our devotion to Donsar. Take me—I am yours!"

It is certain that the Chief Bride, aged and scrawny from deprivations, did not appeal to me, besides which, I had not the requisite equipment to fulfil her demand. I therefore bowed humbly and said:

"Madam, I am greatly honoured, but, alas, I am under a vow of chastity and cannot therefore avail myself of your generous offer. Nevertheless, you have only to send word to the neighbouring villages and farms, and no doubt the local men will be delighted to accommodate you."

So it was that, within three hours, the desolate fane was ablaze with light, noisy with liquor and lust, the refectory crammed with roasting meats, and the cells with squeaking panting sisters intent on propitiating Donsar.

To the accompaniment of these strident yet, as they would discover, ineffectual sights and sounds, I mounted my damblepad once again, and rode into the night.

Having escaped the Brides of Donsar, I, Truth, the orphan, had no plans. I was simply alert for such profit and pleasure as might be available to recompense for seventeen years spent in the thrall of a devoured god.

For a day or so I travelled aimlessly, taking a road inland, feeding from trees and bushes, and sleeping by night in deserted huts. All this while, I saw not a soul, human or elemental.

One dusk, however, the road took me on to a desolate plain of rocks.

My mount soon began to evince unease, and I made out strings of red lights keeping watch along the ridges, while optimistic howlings reverberated in the near distance.

The damblepad and I sought refuge in a small cave next the road, and having piled up large stones at the entrance to deter eager visitors, I fell into a troubled sleep.

Just before dawn I woke with a start and stared about in alarm. All appeared peaceful—the stones undisturbed, the damblepad with its head on its paws, a dreaming expression in its eyes. Then I noticed how light my cloak had become

and that the pouch with Grunelt's treasure lay flaccid on the ground. I consequently discovered that I had been robbed of all my wealth—gold, gems, candlesticks and censor, even the blue glass bottle with the expedient demon in it.

I hastened to my barricade and stared out. I could not imagine a thief light-fingered enough to have been able to rob me, without either myself or the damblepad becoming aware of him. Nevertheless the eastern-facing surfaces of the plain were now varnished with sunrise, and I quickly discerned a tall agile figure picking a way over them. It appeared to be heading toward a line of marching stacks outlined on the pale purple of the western horizon, and, fearing I should lose the snatcher of my only recently acquired property, I pushed down the stones, leaped on the damblepad, and was quickly dashing in pursuit.

Rounding a spur of rock, I came upon the malefactor suddenly.

"Abandon flight, degenerate," I admonished him. "Your villainy has been noted. Kindly return to me those articles of mine you filched."

My quarry was revealed at that moment by the rising sun to be a slim yet muscular young man, dressed entirely in black, with a tanned and pensive countenance, slate-green eyes, crow-black hair far longer than my own, and a small sack strapped upon his back.

"Noble sir," said he, "for, despite your masked face and discourteous words, so much I will assume, let me assure you that I am innocent of this crime and have nothing of yours."

"What, then, is in your sack?"

"Certain personal possessions that I carry with me from a sense of nostalgia."

"That being so, you will hardly object to opening the said sack and letting me see for myself."

"Reluctantly, I must decline," said the young man, with an apologetic smile. "The sack holds nothing that could possibly interest you, besides which, I should find it distressing to set on display items of such an intimate emotional nature."

At this, I produced the iron staff, and directed it at him in an unsubtle manner.

"Now," I said, "let us reconsider this matter, bearing in mind that if you do not empty the sack, I shall stove in your skull."

THE WORLD'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 4

"Hm," he said, "I see your resourcefulness exceeds your years. Very well." And searching with lean fingers into the mouth of the sack, he drew out a metal rod some five inches long. "To begin," he said, "here is an artifact of ancient Minoven, known as the Irresistible Transporter. I will demonstrate." At which he touched a nub on the rod, there came a dazzle of light all around me, and I found myself catapulted high into the air. Presently, painfully arriving at the base of a rock, stunned and debilitated, I dimly heard my adversary give a pleasant laugh, and noticed that he was now mounted on my dumblepad.

"Pray do not trouble yourself to rise," he said. "After all your generosity, I should not dream of inconveniencing you further. I would not have taken your animal, but since you press me so forcibly, I can only accept with warm gratitude, and bid you an enjoyable journey."

So saying, and with a polite salute, my tormenter urged my beast to a fast lope, and vanished among the stacks, leaving me writhing and helpless in the dust.

The sun had risen high before I was properly myself again, by which time I was consumed with hunger and thirst. Until now I had lived adequately off the land, but here on the plain no tree or bush grew, no stream ran, and the only shade came from the barren rocks.

I began to walk doggedly toward the west which had seemed to be the direction my attacker had taken. I became in due course very uncomfortable from the sun, and formulated curses with which to mutilate the thief as soon as I should find a seer able enough to effect them.

By afternoon the plain had become lost in low, featureless rock hills, and a line of mountains was faintly inscribed on the distant sky. I had begun to despair of remaining alive, for even if I should survive dehydration, the night would bring forth the wild beasts I had fled from before, and, in my weakness, I would be easily subdued.

Crossing the brow of a hill, I saw then a valley below, containing unexpectedly a square stone building with a beehive roof, and a gliding narrow river the color of wine. With a glad cry, I staggered down at a run toward it, passed the beehive dwelling, and so came finally to the brink. I had long since removed my cloak in the heat of the day, and now

when I cast it aside, a fold dropped in the ruby water. At once came a swirling of unseen presences, and in a second the garment had been dragged swiftly below the surface, to which rose presently small threads and particles. It occurred to me that had I plunged in face or hands to drink, I too would have been pulled bodily after and thereupon dismembered as the cloak had been. Thankful as I was at escaping such a fate, nevertheless the lack of water restored me to depression. Turning my back on the maleficent river, I made my way toward the dwelling on its bank.

The entrance was barred by a stout door which, however, swung open at my touch.

Within was an amazing chamber, windowless, but lit up by floating lamps, and full of a disturbed and gaseous din. The entire space from wall to wall and high into the domed roof, was entwined by silver tubes and crystalline pipes. Through the lower pipes bubbled a fierce red liquor, which grew by stages quieter and paler as it ascended to the channels in the ceiling. Alongside the tubing passed iron walkways, here and there marked by tall marble panels studded with knobs and ornamental silver levers. A flight of steps ran up one wall to a wooden gallery which circled the interior.

Bemused, I climbed the steps.

There, prostrate on a canopied and gorgeous bed, lay an old man with a white scarf bound about his skull, apparently oblivious. By the bed stood an open larder filled with cheeses, meats, pastries and exotic fruit, and, in tall flagons, clear and wholesome water.

I crept closer, but no sooner had my hand closed on the nearest jar, than the old man shot up with a scream, and out from under the bed came tearing two hideous dogs of unnatural appearance and ferocity. These bore me to the floor, and crouched snarling at either side, surveying my vitals with meaningful deliberation.

"What, am I to have no peace?" inquired the old man.

"I beg your pardon, aged sir," said I. "To disturb your peace was not my intention. However, I feel I cannot make adequate recompense while stretched out thus, and if you will call off your dogs—"

"Call off my dogs! Ho Fangfast, ho Bloodlover, keep good watch on the villain."

"I entreat you, sir," said I, "to be lenient. I am only a foot-

sore, weary traveler, in desperate need of a sip or two of water."

"Very likely, and, mark my generosity, for two silver pieces I will give you an entire cup."

"This seems both just and thrifty on your part," said I, "but, alas, I have no money, since a rogue and cut-throat despoiled me of everything I had on the plain, and left me for dead."

"Such an event entitles you to my sympathy," said the old man, "but to nothing else. What you see about you is the ancient distillery of Sath Monnis, a town of repute and splendor some ten or eleven miles to the west. I, Trall the watchman, attend this elegant machinery, which converts the infested water of the river into healthful fluid, and then passes it by means of pumps and pipes into the cisterns of the aforementioned metropolis. This, as you will understand, is a responsible post, and due some remuneration and respect. My own drink I draw from a hidden tap and receive, naturally, gratis. However, since my wage from Sath Monnis is regrettably low, I am forced to extract payment from travelers. Still, I am not unreasonable. If you will watch the levers for three nights in my stead, I will waive the toll, and give you a cup of water on the fourth day."

"Good sir, if I pass three more days without drink, you may use the water to encourage flowers on my grave. If you will give me liquid and food now, I will then watch in your place with great attention."

"Your obstinacy displeases me," muttered the old man. "I do not watch here out of motives of altruism. Besides, you are the second vandal I have been subjected to today. Since the last—a black-haired fellow on a leonine beast—in some manner subdued my animals, thereafter robbing me and raining blows on my head besides, I am not inclined to further discourse. Either depart into the waterless hills, or remain to nourish the dogs."

"Neither of these alternatives conforms with my destiny," I said. "I will therefore muster strength and accept your first offer, namely, to watch three nights in your stead."

The old man assented testily, called off Fangfast and Bloodlover, to their great dejection, and took me about the iron walkways.

"On no account touch the levers of any other instrument,"

he instructed me, "but patrol the walks all night, with careful eye and ear."

He then retired to his couch, devoured a huge meal, quaffed water and wine, and fed the dogs. After which, all three fell to snoring, and I was left to my task with empty belly and burning throat. Nor were my spirits reinforced by knowing that the same felon who had put me in this pass had fared so much the better.

All night I slept on the comfortless iron. A little before dawn I rose and commenced experimenting with the marble panels. Those knobs which were outstanding, I depressed; those levers which angled toward the ceiling I pointed to the floor, and vice versa.

Soon came a strange dissonance in the tubes, while the light in the floating lamps dimmed and gradually went out.

In the dark I felt my way to the foot of the gallery steps, and hid myself behind the bannister.

At this point the perversity of the noises impinged on the old man's sleep. He woke above and began to screech and shout, and the dogs to whine and howl.

"Alas! Alas! The ruffian has ignored the watch and fled, and now disaster has prevailed!"

And shortly he came stumbling and groaning down the steps, and hobbled with shrill exclamations up the walkways in the blackness, the two dogs cowering at his heels. Judging this my only opportunity, I crept to the gallery, seized a stoppered water jar and some food, which I stowed in my sash, and then edged cautiously toward the doorway. When the crack of light appeared, the old man cried:

"There goes the malcontent—after him, Fangfast!"

But I got through and slammed the door shut, and took to my heels.

On the far slope of the valley, I looked back once, and saw the ruby river in boiling ferment, while gouts of steam belched from the beehive roof. I did not stay for more.

Some miles farther on, I sat in the shade of a solitary spear tree to eat my food, and drink the clear water.

In the distance I could now make out, with some clarity, the jagged heliotrope spires of the mountains. At the foot of these was a collection of pinnacles of a different sort which I

concluded to be the towers of Sath Monnis, that reputable and splendid town, whose cisterns I had no doubt poisoned.

Certainly, I thought, the accursed thief of my damblepad and other property had made for the town, therefore I must follow.

So I set out once again on the irksome trail.

On the outskirts of Sath Monnis I came upon cultivated fields of a pleasing yellow and green, groves of tall black poplars, and some marble statuary representing enormous heroic figures, before which wreaths of flowers, corn ears, pink grapes and other flora had been laid. The town itself was of, to me, extraordinary construction. It consisted of countless marble bridges, each looping over and under the others, and connected by flights of steps. All the dwellings of Sath Monnis—some of which were exceedingly ramshackle—perched on these magnificent arches and swoops, while below ran a series of canals containing a wine-red water. I gave this some attention, for it could be nothing else than a continuation of the morbid river.

Walking the stately thoroughfares, I came upon a crowd of men and women and, forced by the press to halt, I was presently observer of a public execution. This took an original yet simple form. A band, apparently of soldiers, and dressed in brass with yellow cloaks, marched the five unfortunates to the perimeter of the bridge, persuaded them by urgent sword points to climb up on the parapet, and then pushed them off into the canal beneath. This action was greeted by a shout from the populace and some applause. In a moment or so, certain proofs of the execution appeared on the waters, after which the crowd cheerfully dispersed.

Curious, I fell into step beside a portly and well-dressed townsman, and inquired as to the misdemeanor the victims had committed.

"In Sath Monnis," he replied, "there is only one crime considered heinous enough to merit death. That is, to utter blasphemy against our gods."

"This is so in many places," I remarked, recalling the fane.

"And no doubt both wise and commendable," he answered. "I divine you are a stranger, young sir, and so I will take it on myself to acquaint you with the history of the town. All this magnificence you see about you was erected by our gods in the days of our ancestors. They it was who set up these

wondrous bridges and excavated this imposing system of canals, they who perfected a distillery to supply us with delicious and health-giving springs, and also laid out pasture and field to provide our sustenance."

"You are undoubtedly most fortunate," I said.

"There is more," said my guide, with a benign smile. "In time of trouble we are assured our gods will come to our aid, and bring retribution upon any who harm us. In return, we have built a temple to their glory, and instigated a sacred guard—those in yellow cloaks—to protect their honour."

"I am most obliged for your assistance," I said. "Purely out of curiosity, might I ask if you would loan me a small sum until this evening, when I expect untold riches to be placed in my keeping."

My new-found friend became aloof.

"I regret I carry no money about me." And then, lowering his tone, "In addition, I should warn you that, while not a mortal offense, begging in a public place is generally penalized by amputation."

So saying, he hurried away.

For an hour or so I traipsed the streets, inquiring occasionally of passersby if any had seen a green-eyed, black-haired fellow riding a damblepad. None had. It was now long past noon, and I was parched. Going to a round marble basin and tap, I attempted to drink, but a yellow-cloaked guard stepped smartly up and demanded payment, so I declined the water and went my way.

Finally, in an evil vein, I came upon a tall white building with a cupola of lemon glass. This I concluded to be the Temple of Sath Monnis, and went inside to implore some priest to send a vile curse upon my elusive assailant, for which work I was prepared to toil day and night for a month, such was my fury.

In the broad nave I made out a single yellow cloak turning over in his hands a small candlestick of antique silver. This I recognized very well as a piece of my fee from the Brides of Donsar. Sauntering to his side, I said:

"What a charming object. It drew my eyes at once."

"This exceeds mere prettiness," he avowed, "I bought it from a traveler who found it, while exploring the mountains, in the hoard of a sorceress. I have only to expose it to the next new moon and words will appear legibly on its sides, in-

dicating the whereabouts of priceless hidden treasure in the earth. More. Any maiden whose name I once inscribe in common ink on the metal will instantly be compelled by an insatiabe lust to enjoy my person."

"A useful article to be sure," I agreed, seized with a reluctant admiration for the villain who had robbed me. "No doubt it proved expensive."

"A matter of twenty gold coins—but, following the new moon, I shall soon recoup my losses." Then, fearing perhaps he had been too hasty in confiding all to me, he added: "I trust you recognize my claim to this item?"

I sternly assured him that I believed the true path of redemption lay through poverty and humbleness, and had no interest in such gew-gaws.

"However," I went on, "I would ask the whereabouts of the traveller who sold it to you, for possibly he has other wares of more value to me—such as old books of prayers."

The yellow cloak then directed me to the Inn of the Bitten Quince, which lay some ten bridges distant, and which it took me until sunset to reach.

At the Bitten Quince all was merriment, eating and drinking, which it grieved my heart to see. No sooner had I set my foot inside the door than the innkeeper came to my side.

"What may I offer you, young sir? Roast pork? Spiced dumplings? Fresh apricots? We stock four matchless wines produced from local vineyards—"

"My thanks. I am on business and require no refreshment," I said briskly, ignoring the lamentations of my inside.

Venomously I looked about, and soon noted the wretch I sought, on the gallery, at a secluded lamplit table, engaged in stuffing himself and gulping matchless wine at my expense.

Since I had been hooded on the plain and he had never seen my face, now revealed, I effected no further disguise, but mounted the gallery and approached him.

"Pardon my intrusion, sir, but it has come to my notice that you possess certain archaic relics which you are inclined to sell."

"This is conceivable," said he, and waved me to a chair.

There I sat, and watched him at his dinner with swimming eyes.

"Will you take some wine?" he courteously asked. I assent-

ed. "It is very strange," he said, "but it seems to me that we have met before."

"That is unlikely."

"Yes. Besides, I am positive I should have recalled you at once," he murmured warmly, filling my cup to the brim, "such a handsome face as yours being entirely memorable."

I thanked him, and begged to see his wares. Whereat, he drew the infamous sack from beneath his chair and set out one well-known silver candlestick, second of the pair, and the chain of the golden censor.

"Are you quite well?" he asked solicitously. "You have turned very pale."

"My pallor need not trouble you. But is this all? I heard that you had other goods. There was some mention of a container of incense, and a blue vitreous bottle . . ."

"Alas, those I have already sold. But mark this candlestick, which has no fellow in the whole of the known world . . . Permit me to inquire again if you are in the best of health?"

"My health is adequate, I thank you. Only tell me, is there not also a bag of jewels?"

The villain appeared surprised.

"It intrigues me to know how you discovered this, since I have told no one in the town."

"I have my sources of information, as is self-evident. Therefore, understand so much—these gems and bits of gold are more valuable to me, for reasons of sentiment, than any other treasure on the earth. Merely let me examine them to ascertain whether they are the store I seek. This proven, I will double, triple, quadruple any value you may set on them, so anxious am I to be repossessed."

He raised his long brows and gave a quizzical smile.

"Well, this being the case, and seeing your agitation, I should not dream of withholding them. Here," and from inside his shirt he drew a small pouch and emptied out the contents before me.

After a brief tally, I said:

"It seems to me there are some garnet buttons missing."

"Just so. A certain lady on Eighth Bridge with whom I spent the afternoon took an unreasonable fancy to them and would settle for nothing else. Now, as to this praiseworthy intention of yours to quintuple the worth of the remainder—"

"One moment," I said, and, thrusting back my chair with a

clatter, I leapt to my feet, and shouted in a loud and terrible voice:

"What? Do you dare assail my ears with such reprehensible filth? Blasphemy! Blasphemy! Summon the guard!"

There was instantaneous uproar throughout the inn. Townsfolk surged on to the gallery, some seizing my companion by the arms; others rushed into the night, clamouring for soldiers.

"We have him fast," declared the innkeeper. "What did the ingrate say?"

"I cannot repeat the foulness. He derided the gods of Sath Monnis, comparing them to pigs, goats, and I know not what besides—in addition, he has sold worthless talismans in the town, even aspiring to swindle a member of the Sacred Guard—I am speechless and faint with horror." Here I sank back into my chair and, with a desolate air, gathered up what was left of Grunelt's hoard, the censor chain and the candle-stick.

Only once did my adversary attempt to utter. Immediately several hands were clamped over his lips, in fear of some further obscenity, and he was shortly bound and gagged and hauled away into the night by the yellow guard.

The innkeeper commiserated with me and bemoaned his loss of revenue. I offered, in order to save him trouble, myself to take on the bedchamber and the dinner, and, I further assured him, since I had purchased the damblepad prior to the disturbance, also the stabling it would require. For these services I paid him in advance with a gold piece or two. He seemed curious about the censor chain and a small emerald discovered near the salt cellar. I explained that these were trifles of my own which I had produced in the line of business, before I discovered the vile nature of my client.

Then, having eaten and drunk my fill, I went above and sank on the first feather-soft mattress of my life.

I was rudely awakened in the hour after dawn by a hammering on my door. In answer to my inquiries, the hammerers announced themselves to be the Sacred Guard. I hastily arose, donned my male attire and admitted the party, thinking I had been summoned as a witness.

However, the soldiers burst upon me and, to my intense

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vexation, contained my wrists with rope and unceremoniously conducted me downstairs, out of the inn and into the street.

"For what am I so shamefully misused?" I demanded.

"For grievous fraud," said one.

"What fraud is this? I have done nothing."

"The prisoner we arrested yesterday for profanity has laid a charge against you, to wit: that he bought certain items from you at great cost, which he then sold in good faith about the town, but which he had since discovered, by your own testimony, to be fakes and worthless."

"And do you take the word of a blasphemer against myself, who piously reported him?"

"It is the custom in Sath Monnis never to level any accusation against another unless it be true, since the penalty for falsehood is partial strangulation and removal of the tongue. Therefore all charges are instantly believed."

I reflected on this, and was moved, unwisely, to ask:

"What then is the penalty for fraud?"

"Subtraction of the left foot and right hand."

Just then we reached a dismal portal, I was delivered into dank darkness and the door securely fastened behind me.

Here I let forth such utterances as my mood inspired, but soon became aware of a low chuckling.

"Who or what is here? Your crimes must be foul indeed and your sorrows crushing, if you are able to derive such enjoyment from another's horrible distress."

"So they are," said a voice unpleasingly familiar and in a bantering tone. "However raw your fate, mine, as you may know, is both painful and conclusive. Therefore expect no condolence of mine, oh traitorous youth."

"Traitorous! I at least delivered you to a doubtless well-deserved doom in order to recover my own property. What had you to gain by falsely incriminating me—save a sop for your deplorable spite?"

"I hoped that by bringing, as it seemed, another wrongdoer to justice, I should have my own sentence mitigated, but this, as it turned out, was not the case. By your outcry I perceive you are the young man I conversed with on the plain."

"You perceive clearly, and since that meeting, my days have not been delightful, neither do I view the prospect before me with ecstasy. Probably there is little time left us,

therefore acquaint me with your name that I may curse you more successfully."

"My name is Nazarn—but, before you commence your maledictions, let me suggest another pastime. Since we have both duped and brought the other to catastrophe, and are now approximately of equal score and desperation, let us pool our talents and effect a means of escape."

I considered this, and said:

"Concerning my own abilities I modestly keep silent. What are yours? I seem to recollect an irresistible transporter . . ."

"Of that, unfortunately, I was relieved at the door, also of the amulet which allowed me to lure the property of others from their clothing without the necessity of touch, or even proximity. However, I retain a certain intrinsic knack to charm into docility even the most nervous and savage of beasts."

"Since we are prisoners of men and not beasts this seems of small value. Nevertheless, you have resolved the mystery as to how you subdued the frenzied hounds of Trall the watchman. You put me to much trouble there, as in all else. Only by means of disrupting the machinery of distillation was I able to snatch a handful of fruit and a mouthful of water."

Nazarn, with courteous interest, asked details of this exploit. These I gave but concluded:

"I am greatly puzzled that the cisterns of Sath Monnis are still wholesome and the canals undisturbed."

"That is easily explained. The tubes run by circuitous routes beneath the earth to avoid the adamantine rock. Both pure and infested water, therefore, take a day and a half to reach the town. Thus," he added pensively, "the change will come about at noon, by my reckoning, which is, I am reminded, the time when all criminals receive justice in Sath Monnis."

"A method of deliverance springs to my mind," I said, "perhaps to yours also."

"Depend upon it."

"And may I also depend upon it that, having assisted you, I shall once more be deceived and abandoned to these barbarians?"

"I am wounded by your lack of trust. Now I have seen you fully, rest assured I intend to make you my companion for as long as it shall be mutually agreeable. Further, I pro-

test, that had you revealed yourself on the plain," he added with some ardour, "I would not have treated you as I did."

So, setting aside enmity, we discussed a plan, until the onerous stride of the guard resounded on the bridge.

The door was suddenly thrown open and we were prodded and pulled into the blinding sunlight of the street.

Here a great crowd had gathered, which followed us to the crest of the bridge with expectant faces.

"Hold!" cried Nazarn, "I have that to say you must attend for fear of your lives."

At once the procession stopped, staring stupidly at this unforeseen audacity.

Up stalked a priest of the Temple in a yellow robe.

"You are permitted speech. Possibly you wish to repent your lunatic folly and ask pardon of the gods, before death and eternal damnation overwhelm you."

"Not so," cried Nazarn, "I fear nothing from the gods since I, and also the young man there, are messengers of the same. He and I were sent to test the moral fibre of Sath Monnis, but have found you all zealous to a fault, for which, be assured, our ethereal masters will reward you."

"Silence, blasphemer!" roared the priest. "Is there no bottom to the well of your iniquity?"

At which the yellow cloaks began to urge Nazarn to climb the parapet, and I heard the sound of the Amputator sharpening his knife for me.

Overhead the sun had reached its apex.

"Be warned!" I shouted, and there came another hush. "Maltreat us and you will anger the gods, who will cause the canals to boil, and the clear water of your springs to run like blood. Either release us promptly, and with honour, or face the consequences."

As was to be expected, there was only a howl of fury for answer.

I was surprised to experience a pang at the sight of Nazarn forced on to the parapet. *Now his calculations will, of course, prove mistaken*, thought I. But at that moment an accomplice gave a joyous shout.

"Witness!" he thundered and pointed below.

A bubbling disagreeable sound filled the air. With yodels of alarm, the crowd rushed to peer down from the bridge. The yodeling turned to wailing and screaming, while out of a

hundred doors came pouring terrified men and women, shrieking of blood running from the taps.

Nazarn and I found ourselves suddenly unbound, and besought by townsfolk kneeling in the street.

"We shall depart to solitude," Nazarn declared bleakly, "and attempt intercession. However, do not expect too much."

So we shouldered through the press, and made our way to the Bitten Quince where all was in uproar since several guests, idling late in the bath at the moment of metamorphosis, had abruptly been dismembered.

"Whither and what now?" I asked.

"Since the construction of the town bridges intimately parallels and incorporates that of the canals and cisterns, I fear Sath Monnis will soon slump in rubble. Accordingly I propose instant flight."

We led out the damplepad, both mounted it, for it was a sturdy animal, and made all speed hence.

Beyond the town to the west lay a wood of spike trees. We emerged from this upon the lower terraces of the mountains, in the copper glare of stormy late afternoon sun, and looked backward at Sath Monnis.

There had been a curious rumbling underfoot as of violent subterranean rivers. Over the unlucky town there now hung a magenta pall from which burst occasional jets of smoke, steam or debris.

"So much for religion," remarked Nazarn.

But I thought I made out something moving on the horizon of the ruined fields. I pointed.

"What can that be?"

"That? But some trick of the light, fair and noble friend."

"To me, it has the appearance of several huge pale figures in motion."

"To me, also. There was some tale in Sath Monnis, was there not, that should any harm befall the people, her gods would seek vengeance on the culprits? But then, we do not know the form of these gods."

"In the poplar groves before the town I passed certain gigantic marble statues, at the feet of which offerings had been laid."

"Yes, I too seem to recall such a thing. Well. This beast

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has many swift miles in him yet. It would be a pity to waste such an excellent chance of exercise in fruitless chat."

So saying we urged the damblepad to a furious gallop and rushed up the mountainside.

We and the beast bounded on over the crags until the sky grew like a pane of cobalt glass, set blazing with multi-colored stars. Behind us always followed a dim yet persistent thunder, that was oddly mindful of the fall of enormous and determined feet.

"I regret, friend Nazarn," I murmured at last, "that our animal is near collapse."

"Up there," said he, "shines an emerald lamp, generally the token of a seeress or witch. She may know some remedy for our plight."

We coaxed the damblepad to a last wild dash, and arrived on a twisted summit by a disreputable cot. The green lamp, nevertheless, burned over the leaning porch, and in answer to Nazarn's halloo, the door creaked open and the owner peered out.

Dramatically lit up by her magic light, she was revealed to be aged, toothless and of surpassing unsightliness, though she turned on Nazarn and myself a look of unmistakable and optimistic libido.

"Well, well, And what can I do for two such handsome gentlemen?"

"Beauteous madam," Nazarn prudently addressed her, "certain lumps of limestone, hewn to resemble gods, are even now pursuing us, intent on our mutilation, In your wisdom, can you suggest how we might elude this unmerited fate?"

Thoughtfully tapping her warts, the beldame advanced to the edge of her eyrie, and looked out over the eastern ridges.

"Do you refer to those?" she inquired.

Nazarn and I stared across the bowl of night, and discerned some thirteen whitely-glowing giants, toiling with massive tread about two miles distant, yet coming nearer by the minute.

"Exactly so," complied Nazarn.

The seeress considered.

"It appears they follow blindly and without caution, intent only on their quarry. This being so, there is a certain thing I have may prove useful."

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"Then, in the name of all things lovely—quantities of which you so exactly imitate—grant us this thing, or we are lost."

"You must understand, " said the witch, "that nothing is to be got for nothing, for such a bargain would contravene the most ancient natural laws. I have in mind a particular exchange, but since the ground already trembles with the advancing nemesis, I fear we should not presently have the time for it. Therefore, I stipulate this: if my device protects you and you survive the giants, you must return at once to my abode, where we will discuss your duties further. Fail to do so, and I will send such perils and horrors against you as I can set hand to. Now. So much settled, tie these gernik feathers to your feet, run to that high spur, and leap off. The quality of the feathers will bear you safely to the opposite crag while, with luck, the marble beings will crash into the chasm between."

Nazarn and I did as we were bid, and the witch, mindful of our enemies, fled back into her hovel.

"Perhaps the hag mistakes the virtue of this plumage, and we also shall plunge to our deaths," I panted as we ran.

"If we remain, we shall be ground to bone-meal and mud by the gods of Sath Monnis, so much is certain," Nazarn shouted.

At which we reached the brink, and leapt.

Out rushed space, infinite and terrible, while overhead the pyrotechnic stars spun extravagantly. Beneath, an abyss of mouths, fangs, gorges, gaped to engulf us, but the miraculous feathers bore us up. We sailed the blue air and safely gained the star-gilded peak beyond. Meanwhile came the boom of the giants' feet and rocks shook out from the mountain face and bounced away.

Shortly, a huge head, chalk white of countenance, blindly staring of eye, crested the peak we had vacated.

"Naturally, it is possible our pursuers, waxing inventive, might leap the gulf as we have done," muttered Nazarn.

Higher rose the monstrous head, and higher. Now a vast torso and knotted arms with upheld club. Next, powerful legs and feet, splashed red from the fall of Sath Monnis. Borne on these gargantuan limbs, the god advanced to the lip of the precipice. Glaring at us with its sightless gaze, it took one step into emptiness and tottered down in to the dark below,

whence presently burst a noisy shattering and a cloud of white dust.

Taking no heed of its fellow, and no more care, the second marble being soon perished similarly. After this, eleven more strode to the brink, unbalanced, descended, and exploded into powder

A while later, the black silence of the night rebuilt itself.

I turned to my companion, who appeared to have lost his senses. When I touched his arm, he opened his eyes with a groan. I asked him, with some tenderness, if he had recovered from his faint.

"Faint?" he asked amazed. "I, faint? Be enlightened. I was but resting after our exertions." So saying, he tottered to his feet.

A moment more, and we heard the witch's voice from the cot, calling in anticipatory tones for us to return to her. Receiving no reply, she presently emerged upon the other side of the chasm, her green lamp in her hand. Seeing us alive and whole, she beamed with joy, and beckoned ardently.

"Alas, fair madam," I said, "no longer are we in a position to repay you for your aid in the interesting fashion which you suggested."

"Come, come," said she, "do not be bashful. I have rubbed myself with the best toad's fat to be had, a most stimulating salve, you will agree."

"Exquisite lady," I persisted, "although we have escaped with our lives, the statue-gods, as they fell, each cursed us with a dreadful malady, none of which may be lifted from us by even the most powerful of sorcerers."

"Just so," added Nazarn decidedly.

The witch frowned

"Thirteen maladies? Pray enumerate them."

"Trembling," I said, "twitching and itching."

"Vertigo," said Nazarn reeling, "lumbago, nausea, debility."

"Ah—" broke in the witch.

"Deafness," I continued firmly, "short-sightedness."

"Headpains," expanded Nazarn, "nits—fits."

"And," I finished, "more agonizing than all the rest: total impotence."

The witch sprang back with a squeal of wrath.

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"Throw over my gernik feathers at once, and begone. Am I to waste time on castrates?"

The shoes thrown, the witch repossessed them, turned on her horny heel, and vanished again into her hovel, slamming the door, at which it tumbled off.

As we crouched that night among the mountains, Nazarn, his strength returned, made certain discoveries about me that surprised but did not necessarily displease him. These matters concluded satisfactorily, he at last inquired my name.

"My name is Truth," I told him. He gravely nodded, and courteously spoke of other things.

Ramsey Campbell

THE CHANGER OF NAMES

Another Britisher, like Tanith Lee and Grail Undwin, Campbell most frequently writes horror fiction. Indeed, all but one of his books were published by Arkham House, and the credit for first digging him out of the slush pile goes to the late August Derleth.

I find it exciting when someone who generally works in one genre switches over to try his hand at Sword & Sorcery. Which may explain why the very unorthodox S&S tale which follows next so captivated me. I think it will fascinate you, too, and let's hope we see more of the adventures of Ryre the swordsman in the near future.

—L.C.

Already Ryre disliked the port of Lipe. The wharf had been crowded with women who gazed at the disembarking men, expertly and hungrily. They hadn't been whores, simply women of the town. The men of Lipe would be even less fond of mercenaries than was generally the case with townsmen. Ignoring the women, Ryre had shouldered his way from the wharf. He'd had enough of battle for one year. The holes in his flesh had not been closed for long.

For the same reason, he'd sought out this obscure tavern.

None of the few drinkers seemed likely to start a fight. They were old men, probably the tavern's faithful customers; they sat alone or in pairs, scattered about the long wooden box of a room. Goblets of flame perched in brackets on the walls, drawing light like a feeble net over the trestle tables. The men muttered, whether or not they were alone. They seemed pinned to the benches by a lifetime of burdens.

The taverner was a squat large-boned man, who must have been strong in battle; something had cost him his right arm. His eyes were underscored by suffering, his ragged hair was thin as grass on a windswept dune, and grey. By the standards of Lipe he had been hospitable; he had even served Ryre ale in a clean mug, while other taverners had scarcely bothered to conceal their hostility beneath a grudging mercantile tolerance. But his words had not been welcoming. He'd pointed out that the town was losing trade to the nearby port of Amuan, and that the young men of Lipe, dissatisfied, were moving on; he'd asked Ryre where he was bound, not whether he wanted a room.

"I warn you, be careful while you're here," he said, bringing Ryre his replenished mug. "Swordsmen seem to be unlucky in Lipe. They've found two in the lanes this summer, dead and mutilated, Swordsmen, mind, not weaklings. They say it's dangerous to be a swordsman here at night." As he gazed at Ryre, something saddened him; it might have been within his own eyes.

Ryre stared at the table. The man's talk wearied and depressed him, the whole place did. He refused to ask who might have killed the swordsmen; the tale was probably a lie. The table was darkened by stains of old ale, like ghosts of islands. He wished he were travelling.

Perhaps he'd leave tonight and forego his rest, though his limbs ached from sleeping on the ship's deck. There were stables nearby, and he should be able to talk the trader's prices down; like the town, the man would prefer to be rid of him. Tomorrow he could be in Amuan. He couldn't bear much more of this, of the hunched senile figures muttering over their ale, the lonely footsteps of the taverner gathering hollow echoes beneath the rafters, his own frustrating lethargy beneath the night's sultry heat.

As though in response to his musings, the tavern door crashed open.

The Changer of Names

Far from interrupting the apathy of the tavern, the intrusion managed only to annoy Ryre. Determined to ignore the intruder, he gazed at the vague clouds unfurling in his ale. But the expectant silence of the tavern, and the taverner's wary stillness, forced him to glance up at last.

In the doorway stood an unkempt young man. His grimy hair sprouted wild above his lopsided face. He took one step and stamped on the tavern floor. Fresh blood glistened on the sword in his hand.

Ryre gazed into the driftings of his ale. Though the man was an apology for a swordsman, he was clearly eager for a fight. His pugnaciousness wearied Ryre, who had no intention of responding. His own sword was hidden by the table from the intruder, and hence no challenge.

He was still gazing, letting his emotions drift easily as the clouds in the ale, when the man shouted "I am Ryre!"

Ryre's teeth clenched within his tight lips. Had he offended the Globes of Hakkthu, had they cast the net of fate over him? He had never felt less willing to be challenged to a name-fight. In his youth, like most men, he'd roamed seeking others whom fate and their parents had given his name, to challenge them to fight for it. But now he and his name were one, secure in the deeds they'd shared; he had no need to defend it. Though his instincts were angered, he continued gazing into the cramped clouds.

But the man hadn't finished. "I am Ryre the hero, whose friend was Glode," he shouted. "I am Ryre who slew the parasite of Hoak, who slew Ghagya the pirate on the Sea of Shouting Islands—"

There was more, but Ryre had risen snarling; his bench toppled, resounding. The young man's name was no trick of fate; he had stolen Ryre's name and his deeds! Already Ryre's spirit felt enfeebled, as though the man's words were draining him. "I am Ryre!" he roared.

As he unsheathed his sword the man rushed screaming down the room at him. Everything about him unnerved Ryre: not so much his wordless scream of challenge as his scrawny frame and the limp that nodded his body sideways at each step. Was he a madman, rather than a swordsman? Ryre had no time to judge, for the bloody sword was scything through the air toward his face.

He sidestepped deftly. The man rushed harmlessly by. Ryre

could have struck him down, but the pointlessness of the fight had begun to dismay him. He'd glimpsed the bulging of the man's eyes, their fanatical gleam. Why couldn't the men of Lipe restrain their madman, gag him to prevent his stealing names, instead of sitting hunched at their tables, gazing and muttering? They were the ones Ryre felt like slaying.

His hesitation almost doomed him. The man had managed to halt, and pivoted on his good leg. His sword-point came whistling thinly and viciously toward Ryre's stomach. Ryre stepped back. Off balance, the man fell against the table; but the table struck Ryre's thighs.

The young man recovered first. He thrust himself away from the table, which thumped Ryre again, and hurled himself forward, aiming the sword-point and all his weight at Ryre's throat. He was too dangerous, both because he was unpredictable and because he believed himself invulnerable. As Ryre sidestepped and parried the sword aside, his instincts moved his own blade in a slash that slit the man's throat.

There was silence except for Ryre's panting and the gurgling on the floor. Eventually, when the gurgling had ceased, the old men carried out the body. They gazed at Ryre in impotent hatred; their eyes gleamed a curse at him from the doorway. "Hakkthu!" he swore at the taverner. "Are they blaming me for their berserker? Is this a town of madmen?"

"They weren't always so," the taverner said, rather ambiguously. He was pouring sawdust on the bloodstains; since the fight he had looked gloomily resigned. "This town is decaying," he said. "The women despise our young men and take bedmates from the wharf. Young men who'd have cared nothing for a woman's glance measure themselves by it now, and go journeying to prove themselves. Younger and younger they go, and fewer return. And that's the least of the threats to them. My own son—" His mutter became private with bitterness or grief.

Ryre waved aside this introspection. "Where did that man find my name?" he demanded.

"Lith the name-changer gave it to him."

Ryre's contempt bordered on fury. Certainly the town was decaying: putrescent would be a better word. He'd heard of name-changers, who by hypnotism or drugs would take a man's name and the whole of his life, then rename him. The practice disgusted Ryre: how could anyone be so disloyal to

himself as to give up his name, whatever he might have done? It was the ultimate weakness. But this hardly explained what had happened tonight. "Changers sell names of their own invention. That man had my name. He had stolen my name!"

"That is what Lith does," the taverner admitted sadly. "He sells the names of heroes."

Nothing was more precious to Ryre than his name; it was everything he was, everything he had done. Now someone was selling it, stealthily weakening him. Perhaps that was why he felt weary. One day he might awaken hollow, emptied of deeds, unable to remember who he was. "Where is this Lith?" he demanded thickly. "Tomorrow his name will be free, if anyone wants it."

"He works in the squares." As Ryre strode toward the door, the man raised his lone arm to detain him. "You won't find him after dark. And remember, the alleys are dangerous at night for swordsmen."

He seemed genuinely anxious; perhaps his story earlier had been an honest warning. "Who killed them?" Ryre said, halting. "Thieves?"

"Our thieves are vengeful. But they are not madmen." Remembered horror gathered in the taverner's eyes. Ryre wondered just what mutilations the swordsmen had suffered. Then the taverner's expression changed; there seemed to be a glint of hope. "Were those deeds the man claimed really yours?"

Ryre drew himself up; his fingers rested on his sword-hilt. "I am Ryre," he said simply.

"I have a vacant room. I would be honoured if you would stay the night." Suddenly the man seemed less resigned. "Tomorrow I will show you Lith," he said.

The nearer Ryre came to Lith, the less he understood the man. It was noon; the tops of the three-story warrens blazed like molten rock. Draughts twirled dust incessantly in the narrow alleys. Underfoot the earth, which the sun rarely touched, was uncomfortably warm; the noon heat weighed down its warmth. Within the warrens, the plaster of the walls was cracked like parched mud. This was the poorest section of the town; what could Lith gain here?

But this was where Thaze the taverner had directed Ryre. Thaze had walked with him part of the way. When the man

had faltered, puffing, Ryre proposed to go on alone; the man would be slow-moving in a fight, and in any case he lacked his sword-arm. Thaze's gratitude had let suppressed dread show through. He'd pointed toward the alleys through which Ryre was striding now.

People stopped to stare, at the predator's mane that broadened down to his shoulders from his shaved head, at his coppery skin, his wiry frame, six and a half feet tall. The people were pale and scrawny; many had eruptions of the skin, some were crippled. Perhaps they needed Lith, but what could they give him?

They stared silently at Ryre's sword and the dull leaves of his armour. Even the children were hushed and still; their eyes were wide, though almost empty. He could feel the people's hatred of him, thick and shapeless as the heat. But at least their silence allowed him to hear what he sought.

It was a hubbub, ahead and to the left: a crowd. He turned several corners, more and more warily, before he saw the square, the first he had seen in this impoverished maze. The square was full of people and harsh sunlight, almost a mass of a single color: clothes had been burned pale by the sun, white dust clung to flesh and the flat undistinguished buildings.

If anything, the man who must be Lith was even less impressive. He stood at the far side of the square, flanked by two burly, rather worn, swordsmen. The crowd had hushed now, gazing at him. His face was small, bland, seedy, the face of a dishonest servile clerk, anxiously humble but sly; his clothes were the color of dust. His belly swelled from his meagre body. When he stepped forward his gait was oddly flinching, as though his joints were loose; he moved more like an underwater creature than a man. Ryre spat.

"Come," Lith said in a thin voice, almost a whine, and beckoned forth a man from the crowd.

Two alleys crossed between Ryre and the square. He needed to maneuver as close to Lith as possible without being seen, and attack from behind. On his way he would listen to make sure this was Lith; his disgust with an ordinary name-changer was not worth slaying for. But he could see the man's wide hypnotic eyes, full of artificial belief in, and secret contempt for, his victim. This man was dangerous. Ryre dodged through the alleys, through dust and sharp hot

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shadows. The murmur of the nearby sea mocked his thirst.

Soon he had reached the far alleys, and padded stealthily toward his prey. Had they looked, the crowd would have seen him; but they were intent on the ceremony. So were two hooded men who stood hidden by the corner of a cross-alley, spying on the name-changer from behind. What men wore hoods in sunlight? Ryre dodged into the communal doorway of a warren behind them, and listened.

A draught carried their whispers to him. "He's a clever man, this Lith," one said. "He's made his fortune, now he pretends to care for the poor, without a thought of gain. But he's outwitted himself."

"Only a rich man can afford to be so charitable," the second thief agreed.

"And only a rich man keeps his home so secret. But this time he'll lead us there."

Ryre shook his head wryly: Lith would do no leading, and precious little living. The changer had cupped his victim's face in his pallid hands, before the tense crowd. The victim's eyes were blank as ice. Lith raised the man to his full height, as though stretching his undernourished frame to heroic stature. "You are Lagarro, hero of Amuan," he said. His voice piped thinly in the breathless square: humbled, awe-struck, idolizing his victim.

As Ryre watched the blank eyes in the victim's thin pimply face, the mouth slack with absolute trust, his rage overcame him. He was skulking like the thieves, letting a man's name be stolen. Roaring his anger, he snatched out his sword and rushed down the alley.

Lith turned, startled. Fear seemed to compress his face; his rodent's eyes flickered glittering above his shrunken mouth. He darted sideways, out of Ryre's view. Again his movements seemed inhuman: crablike.

Ryre's rush had started the thieves from hiding. One ran through the cross-alley, parallel with Lith's flight. The other wavered in Ryre's path, too flustered to decide which way to go.

Ryre cuffed him aside. In the square, the man who was now called Lagarro blocked the way of one of Lith's bodyguards. The man's eyes had not yet cleared; his hand groping convulsively for the sword he imagined he carried. "I am La—" he began, before the bodyguard's sword hacked him down. Both bodyguards ran from the square.

The crowd milled, bewildered and angry. Men stared in growing disillusionment at the body on the ground. Ryre forced his way through, brandishing his sword, in search of Lith. He ran through the maze, between pinched windows. But too many things had hindered him; nothing fled him except dust. At last he had to return through the square, where men grimly watching the corpse as it drained, soaking the dust.

"You'll never find him," When Ryre protested, Thaze said mildly, "What did he look like?"

Though he vividly remembered the scene in the square, Ryre found that Lith's face now looked like a dozen others, two dozen, every face. In his memory, Lith seemed less a presence than an absence. Ryre's eyes bulged with frustration.

"Yes, he can do that," Thaze said. "He may hide in his lair or he may wander the alleys all day: nobody would know. But you have one hope," he said hastily as he sensed Ryre's fury. "His guards are men, whatever he is. He keeps them hidden most of the time, but they can't satisfy each other. I hear—this is only a rumour, mind, and told me by a man too scared to tell anyone else—that they have been seen in the brothel. There is only one."

It was a squat building with few windows, near the wide streets of the merchants' district. For three days Ryre watched it, from an empty house on the far bank of the canal. Many of the glum-faced men who visited the brothel were very young, or slow and old. When at last the lights went out he returned to the tavern and slept until mid-morning. Each day his bench in the empty house was pale with dust again.

The second day, Thaze told him the rumor that Lagarro the swordsman had come from Amuan, seeking his name, and had been found dead and abominably mutilated. That news lurked behind Ryre in the alleys at night, crept shapeless about the empty house, rustling dustily. But whenever he grew uneasy he remembered the slack trustful face of Lith's victim. Was he himself being subtly weakened as his name was leached from him? His frustrated rage bullied away his fears.

It was the third night. The brothel squatted dully. Around Ryre, draughts sifted dust in the empty rooms. In the dim

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canal a foetus floated by. The paths along both banks were deserted. Ryre nodded, dozing; frustration and insomnia stoked his eyes.

A scream jarred him wide awake. He'd heard screams in the alleys: cries of drunken rage, of protest, of fear. But this was different, and frightful. Though it was a man's voice, the intensity of its horror forced it higher than any woman's. It tore at the night.

By the time he ran out of the house it had ceased. Far down the canal, on the opposite bank, he saw limbs writhing in feeble desperation beneath a dark stooped mass. He ran toward the bridge near the struggle, dragging out his sword. The thick canal and its burden of refuse and aborted flesh accompanied him sluggishly, smacking its lips of water and stone.

He had almost reached the bridge when he saw a movement in the water. Something like a swollen hump floated rapidly toward him, rowing itself with sinuous limbs. He flinched away, then realized he'd seen the reflection of whatever had run away from its victim: a hump, hanging bloated between four wobbling limbs as they scuttled away. Surely it had not looked like that, the canal must have distorted it. In any case, it had vanished into the dark alleys.

He forced himself to cross the bridge. The man on the bank had been crushed and torn; much of his flesh was missing. Enough of his face remained for Ryre to recognize the thief who had blocked his way to Lith.

As Ryre stared, sickened and fearful, along the canal, listening for movement among the alleys, a man reached the bridge nearest the brothel. It was one of Lith's bodyguards, the man who had killed in the square. He crossed to the brothel and went in.

At the sight of the man, Ryre's fury surged up. He strode toward the brothel. His fury included the building: it must be full of cowards, none of whom had dared emerge to see what the screams meant. He slipped his blade into its sheath of leaves and pounded on the door.

Behind a small thick grille a wooden lid opened, and an eye peered through at him. Then the door was elaborately unbolted by a hefty muscular woman with almost no forehead between her dwarf eyes and spiky hair. "A wanderer, eh?" she growled, grinning at her own perceptiveness. "We'll

sell you things here you've never seen on your travels."

Behind her a passage, lit dimly by a few multicolored lanterns, led between two ranks of cramped cubicles; through their thin walls Ryre heard sounds of rhythmic laboring. The place smelled of dust and sweat. Lith's bodyguard was half-way down the passage, glancing at the sullen or simpering women who leaned in the doorways of silent cubicles. He turned to see who had come in, and frowned. Recognition struggled to reach his eyes.

"Save your merchandise," Ryre said savagely. "He's what I want tonight."

Recognition filled the man's eyes, then immediately fear. When the woman saw this she lunged at Ryre, her thick fingers clutching for his sword-arm. The hilt of his unsheathed sword struck her hard beneath the chin. As she fell, Ryre rushed down the passage toward the man.

"I am Thagana," the man cried. But the dead mercenary's name helped him not at all. He had hardly drawn his sword when Ryre's struck it from his hand. Ryre dragged him by the throat to the space inside the entrance, out of reach of any intervention from the cubicles.

"I am Thagana," the man repeated dismally, straining his neck away from the point of Ryre's sword.

"Thagana is dead. He died of the pox, and other things. For weeks he couldn't move his limbs, because they were swollen twice their size. After the first week—"

Ryre spoke slowly, relishing his words, and at great length. All of it was true, which showed in his eyes. The man's face struggled wildly, terrified; it seemed almost to transform like a foetus. At last something seemed to free him. "I am Hoggé," he whimpered. "Lith took me from my town of Mallath. He said he would make me a hero."

"Then he was a liar." Ryre traced the man's jugular vein with his sword-point, to chase away his fear of Lith. "Why does he change men's names?" he demanded. "What does he gain from it?"

"We don't know. He tells us nothing." The man's eyes glanced frantically, as though in the hope that the other bodyguard would miraculously intervene. "He used to change the names of rich men," he muttered, almost inaudibly. "But since we've come to Lipe he will change anyone. We think his power is using him."

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Perhaps perversity was in Lith's blood. "Where does he come from?"

The man shivered, as much as he dared at the sword-point. "From Agomobe," he mumbled.

"A cannibal!" Ryre exclaimed, though it seemed to explain nothing.

"No. But his ancestors were." The man's voice tried to hide in his throat. "He knows the name of their god, that must not be spoken," he whispered.

Ryre shook his head, baffled. Was there something about cannibalism he should remember? The man shrank back further from the blade. Ryre stared grimly at him. "You helped a liar cheat men of their names."

"We had to," the man pleaded. "He said our names would fade if we left him."

Stripped of his stolen name, Hoggé was hardly worth slaying. Besides, he could be useful. "Where is he hiding?" Ryre demanded; then, remembering the greater mystery: "What does he look like?"

"He never looks the same." A strange expression glimmered deep in the man's eyes: trapped, incredulous, uneasy. Ryre's question seemed to have made him aware of something. "He never looks the same," he repeated, as though trying to reach past the words, "after—"

"After what?" Ryre said impatiently.

The man's mouth gaped: wider, wider, as though to make way for something. But nothing emerged except a dry choking. His hands jerked up. Ryre raised his sword in warning, but the man's hands were wrenching at his own throat, as though they would tear an entrance for breath. When he fell, no words had escaped from his throat, and none would.

Lith's hypnotism had killed him: not fear, Ryre told himself. Nevertheless he felt uneasy, staring at the wide-locked, suffocated mouth. He left the body beside the unconscious snoring woman, and hurried away as mutterings broke the tense silence of the cubicles. Inverted buildings melted vaguely in the depths of the canal, reflections shifted indefinitely. He was glad to leave behind its dark thick slopping.

"There's more in this than the power of a man's eyes," Thaze said. "It's blacker magic than any I've known." He

gazed sadly at Ryre. At last he said, "You ought to go before it traps you."

"And leave my name for him to play with?" Ryre stared around the tavern, which was empty save for a shabby man drooping over his tankard. "Who will rid you of him then? Will your men?" he shouted beerily at the shabby man.

The man glanced up, smiling hastily to placate him. "Oh no, not them. It needs a hero."

"There speaks a truth-teller. A man you can trust." Ryre began to tell Thaze what he intended to do; the shabby man nodded hurriedly whenever Ryre looked at him. When Ryre had finished speaking he went out to enact his words.

He let it be known in the poorer sections of Lipe that he was seeking Lith, to slay him. He spoke to some of the men he recalled from the square where the man had been killed. Even they were dour, taciturn, unhelpful. At least they were unlikely to warn Lith.

If Lith came looking for him, unrecognizable though the man might be, he would hardly attack without his bodyguard. That would betray him, and Ryre was determined he would not escape this time.

Thaze had been unwilling to have Ryre wait in his tavern for news. Perhaps he had advised Ryre to leave town because he was afraid. Ryre made his vigil in a poorer tavern. The benches and tables were rough with splinters, their wooden legs hobbled unsteadily. He sat by a window through which sunlight hung like a scoop full of whirling dust.

Throughout the day men wandered in. None of them gave Ryre more than a sharp glance. They moped alone, or played call-and-cast, or completed furtive transactions in the darkest corners. The scoop of light shrank, the dust faded. Night shuttered the window.

The tavern was crowded with men, heat, and dust. Some men were fumbling with the words of a song, others were trying to hit each other. Dust swarmed around the cheap lanterns dangling from the rafters. To Ryre, despite its uproar of activity, the place seemed lifeless and stupefying. He sipped at his nug, which he had not replenished all day; the taverner glared at him. He felt on edge, eager yet powerless to act.

A thin man hurried in. He looked bonily famished. He glanced about quickly: for food? Spying Ryre, he hurried to him. His loose robe rustled, its hem swept up dust.

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"Thaze the taverner wants you," he whispered panting. "He has news."

His eyes were wide with hope and admiration. Ryre stared warily at him. Was he the shabby man who had been at Thaze's? He couldn't be sure. Was he Lith? On the middle finger of his left hand he wore a heavy ring. Surely Lith would wear nothing so recognizable. "Take me to him," Ryre ordered, unsure of the shortest route through the alleys.

As they emerged, he glimpsed a hooded figure darting into an alley opposite: probably a thief. His guide flinched back and gestured Ryre to wait. His caution seemed to confirm his trustworthiness. The hooded figure had vanished on its nocturnal business.

If anything, the man's caution seemed excessive. As he led Ryre he sidled along the alley walls, glancing back constantly to see that Ryre was following. No doubt this was the safest way to travel the alleys at night, but it made Ryre irritably nervous.

The alleys seemed more of a maze than ever, and alive with faint sounds: the trembling of shutters, the incessant restlessness of canals—not the scurrying of spidery legs, not the bumping of a hump against the walls. Lanterns hung high on buildings, too high to be damaged or to afford much illumination; light leaked around shutters.

Walls loomed close and dark, giving way only to more walls that cramped the alleys. Sometimes at crossings Ryre saw the distant glint of a canal; once he thought he glimpsed a darting figure. The alleys led deeper into darkness. Shutters hung askew exposing deserted rooms. There was breathless silence except for the enclosed sounds, that seemed flattened and shrunken, of Ryre and his guide.

Gradually Ryre suspected he was being tricked. Surely there weren't so many derelict buildings near Thaze's tavern. As though to hurry him faster than his thoughts could keep up, his guide's pace quickened. The man was almost running, sidling crabwise along the wall, glancing eagerly back at Ryre.

Lith had moved crabwise too. And by Hakkthu, hadn't the man in Thaze's worn a ring? Ryre lunged and grabbing his guide's hand, unbent that finger. Beneath the feeble glow that hung swaying from a lantern, he could just make out the letters etched on the ring, that had been hidden within the man's hand: LITH.

He'd expected nothing so definite. His start of surprise allowed Lith to wrench free. The man fled into the dark. But the walls trapped his sounds; they had no echoes among which to lose themselves. Ryre followed the enclosed scurrying, unsheathing his sword as he strode.

He had almost overtaken Lith when the man dodged into a courtyard. If he thought the shadows had concealed his ruse he'd reckoned without Ryre's keen sight. Ryre strode into the refuge and bore down on him. Stables surrounded the yard, but their doors were blocked by debris; there was no exit save that behind Ryre. Nearby ruined walls allowed a glow to seep into the court from lanterns above a canal. The glow showed Lith's face, pinched even scrawnier by apparent fear. "Ryre!" he screamed.

"You'll give me my name, will you?" Ryre demanded. "It was never yours to take." Lith was grinning viciously; he hadn't been speaking to him.

Many footsteps began in the alley. A man strode into the court, his sword ready. "I am Ryre," he declared proudly. A second man followed at once, and took up his position on the other's left. "I am Ryre," he threatened.

These weren't poor men of Lipe. Nor were they unskilled swordsmen: their poise and the way they bore their swords showed that. Lith must have enticed them into his power on the wharf, as they disembarked. There were six of them.

They glared at Ryre, and closed in, forcing him to retreat into the court. Somehow Lith's power prevented them from quarrelling over the name: they had been given a common enemy. In their eyes, conviction and purpose gleamed harshly as their blades. He could never fight all of them.

The stable wall halted his shoulders. The men advanced. Whichever one he parried, the others would cut him down at once. They were expert: all of them were Ryre.

An idea that seemed insane struggled in his mind. Yet it was his only chance. His beliefs held him back: he couldn't do it, it was more shameful than acquiescing to a name-changer. The men closed in. His name was his own, he shouted at himself, to use as he pleased. And he was more than his name, otherwise the six would already have drained him. His throat squirmed dryly; his choked words tasted like bile. "Ryre," he said at last, thickly.

None of the men faltered, but each thought Ryre was ad-

dressing him. His fury at that blotted out his doubts. "Ryre is a cripple," he roared. "Ryre limps, because he has a swollen groin. Ryre wets his leg before he fights."

All this, and the rest of his speech, made him feel dreadfully uncomfortable. Worse, it seemed to have no effect on the men, although his discomfort crowded any trace of falsehood from his eyes. "Ryre is terrified to strike the first blow, because he always misses," he roared. "All his saga is a lie."

One man stepped forward to defend the name of Ryre. In the midst of his unease, Ryre's instincts took control; they were deaf to his words. He knocked aside the lunge of the sword, and twisted his own blade deep in the man's guts.

That wasted seconds; his rage had delayed him. The others had the advantage now. But one was limping, one was trembling; the rest faltered, trapped bewildered between names. A sweep of Ryre's blade cut the throats of three of them. The fifth man limped rapidly backward, but before he could flee Ryre cut him down. The sixth tried to fight; his sword quivered nervously. Ryre felt his sword impale the man's heart. When he wrenched the blade free, it was as though he had tapped a barrel of blood.

He turned on Lith. The man had perched on the debris in the stable entrance, to watch. He cringed there, glancing desperately about. His lips writhed and parted. Was he going to call himself Ryre? The swordsman waited, grimly amused. Then he saw that Lith could convince his victims of their new names, but never himself.

Nevertheless the man's lips were struggling. His tongue thrust them uneasily apart. In his eyes lurked feelings Ryre could see were not false, a shrinking horror mixed with fearful delight, an uncontrollable compulsion. His mouth gaped, and made a sound like choking, like famished gulping. Yet Ryre knew it was a name. He remembered that Lith knew the name of the god of cannibals.

The man collapsed within his robe. Hidden by the robe, he squirmed as though in agony. Had he called death to himself? Ryre watched the dim writhing suspiciously, then clambered over the debris, sword alert. Something emerged, as though the robe was a cocoon. He fell back gasping as the shape scuttled heavily out.

It was half his height: a lumpy bulge of flesh, almost featureless, that dangled belly-like between four spidery legs. Its

colors and texture were those of entrails. It glistened. As it scuttled down the rattling debris Ryre saw the great mouth gaping in its underside, drooling eagerly over numerous sharp teeth. He remembered the dark shape he'd glimpsed squatting on the thief's body.

As the thing scuttled at him he brought his sword scything down on the hump. It felt as though he'd struck enormously thick leather, but the flesh was more resilient still; the edge of his sword bounced from the unmarked skin. Only his leap backward saved him, for the hump scuttled at him as though he were unarmed. The dangling mouth worked, drooling.

He cut at its legs. It dodged swiftly, crabwise, and blocked his route to the alley. It moved back and forth rapidly, restlessly, on its elaborately jointed legs; it scurried over the corpses that hindered him, like a malformed child playing mountains. Whenever he rushed it, aiming for the legs, it dodged, or nodded forward so that the hump took the blow. Each time it scuttled immediately at him, giving him no time to maneuver, forcing him back into the court.

His sword arm felt swollen with aching. The thing knew that it was tiring him. When he stumbled it came closer; the near edge of the hump tilted up, the mouth rose toward him, parting lips like thick intestines. He tried to slash the mouth, but it clamped shut. The hump pranced back. He hurled fallen swords at it, to break the legs or at least unbalance it, but it dodged easily.

Someone was staggering in the alley. He sounded drunk. He would be no active help, but he might be a distraction, unless he fled at once. "Help!" Ryre shouted. "In Hakkthu's name!" Even his shout endangered him, used up a little more breath. As he sucked in air, the hump clattered forward; one of its legs whipped out, almost dragging him off his feet. If he once fell, the mouth would be on him.

A figure swayed into the courtyard: a young swordsman, who was very drunk. Ryre glanced at him, and at once the horror's limb grasped Ryre's ankle bonily, twitching him off balance. He saved himself by leaning on his sword, but the hump took the chance to rear up, biting at his leg. Only a desperate cut with his sword made the teeth miss, and the thing retreated only a few paces.

The young man seemed hardly able to see. Perhaps he had hung back to drink fearlessness, perhaps he had lost his way

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in the alleys. Certainly he had been meant to take part in Lith's ambush, for he announced thickly "I am Ryre."

The thing rushed at him. He peered blurrily at it, then shrank back retching. As he turned to run, it leapt on his back and wrapped its limbs tight around his body. Screaming, he ran about the courtyard like a decapitated fowl, while the mouth devoured him.

Ryre crept toward the alley. The young man was beyond help; what remained of him was sinking to its knees. Suddenly Ryre noticed the ring that bore Lith's name. Dreadfully incongruous, it gleamed dully behind the first knobby joint of a limb. It must be the only way Lith could bring himself back to his name and his body. Impulsively Ryre lopped off that joint. The ring rolled into the shadows.

As though that were a magical summons, the court was all at once crowded. But the hooded figures were merely sneaking in from the alley, swiftly and purposefully. The hump had fallen on its back and was squirming in pain; the lopped limb writhed. The hooded figures drove pointed poles into its mouth and carried the impaled horror out of the court. As one man saluted Ryre curtly, he glimpsed the face of the thief who had followed Lith from the square. In a minute the courtyard was emptied, and silent again.

Ryre leaned weakly against the entrance to the court, letting the alley's draught snatch away the smell of blood. The thieves had used him as bait. Perhaps the horror had used Lith as bait for its food: him, and his victims, to bring men of power in search of their stolen names, walking into its maw. Ryre remembered at last that cannibals said they ate the power of their victims when they devoured their flesh.

Had Lith always been possessed so? Or had the god's name been the only one that would give him power, a name that had grown stronger in him than his own? Far down the alley Ryre saw a dark bulge carried high on poles, writhing convulsively. He preferred to forget, and quickly. He needed Thaze's tavern, and much ale. But as he hurried toward the lights he felt uneasy. His name was safe, and strong again, since all who had heard him defame it were dead—unless the thieves had been listening.

Appendix:

THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY BOOKS

I. ORIGINAL FICTION

1. *Conan of Aquilonia*, by L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter. Collection of linked novelettes; xii + 171 pp.; \$1.95, Prestige Books, Inc., distributed by Ace Books. Twelfth and last volume in the Saga of Conan (except that there are more to come, actually).
2. *Volkhavaar*, by Tanith Lee. Novel; 192 pp.; \$1.50, DAW. Eerily effective heroic fantasy from the wicked wizard's point of view: I liked it better, even, than *The Birthgrave*.
3. *Swords and Ice Magic*, by Fritz Leiber. Collection of linked tales; 243 pp.; \$1.50, Ace Books. Spectacular new Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser collection, easily best of it a brilliant new short novel, "Rime Isle."
4. *Alien Flesh*, by Seabury Quinn. Novel; xvi + 234 pp. with illustrations by Steven Fabian; \$10.00, Aswald Train, Box 1891, Philadelphia, Pa, 19105. Fascinating "lost" novel by the popular *Weird Tales* master: rich, imaginative tale of a man's soul trapped in the body of a voluptuous Oriental harem girl. It took this powerful, gorgeously written book thirty years to get into print. . . .
5. *Queens Walk in the Dusk*, by Thomas Burnett Swann. Novella; 139 pp. with black-and-white illustrations and color plates by Jeff Jones; no price listed, Heritage Press, Inc., Forest Park GA. Superb, deluxe edition of Swann's retelling of the legend of Dido and Aeneas: a posthumous book, and Swann's first hard-cover novel.

6. *The Silmarillion*, by J. R. R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Novel; 365 pp. with endpaper map; \$10.95, Houghton Mifflin Company. Or, what happened before *The Lord of the Rings*; a book some of us have been waiting twenty-five years to read.
7. *Kingdoms of Elfin*, by Sylvia Townsend Warner. Collection; 222 pp. with endpaper maps; \$8.95, The Viking Press. Sixteen of the gawdamndest fairy tales you ever read: sharp, lean, tough, emotionally rich, thoroughly unforgettable . . . and my personal choice as the best book of fantasy published during this banner year of genuinely good books. Try it!
8. *The Book of Merlyn*, by T. H. White. Novella; xx + 137 pp. with black-and-white illustrations by Trevor Stubbley; \$9.95, University of Texas Press. Sheer, delicious lagniappe from The Gods Who Watch Over Fantasy: the long-lost *fifth* book of *The Once and Future King*. Warm, rich, agonized, honest, funny-and-sad (sometimes on the same page) . . . a magnificent finale to one of the best books ever written (Thanks Thoth, Hypnos, and the rest of You.)

II. FANTASY ANTHOLOGIES

9. *Flashing Swords! #4 Barbarians and Black Magicians*, edited by Lin Carter. Anthology; 272 pp. with black-and-white illustrations by Rich Bryant; \$1.50, Dell Books (with a hard-cover edition by Nelson Doubleday). Brand-new novelettes of heroic fantasy by five of the modern masters: a "Dying Earth" yarn of Cugel by Jack Vance, a Deryni story by Katherine Kurtz, a Viking saga by Poul Anderson, an Elric yarn by Michael Moorcock, and probably the last Brak the Barbarian saga we shall ever see from good ol' John Jakes, since he has hit the Big Time.
10. *Swords Against Darkness*, edited by Andrew J. Offutt. Anthology; 288 pp.; \$1.95, Zebra Books. Offbeat collection of Sword Sorcery by people who usually don't almost hardly ever write Sword & Sorcery. Like Ramsey Campbell and Manly Wade Wellman.

III. FANTASY ART

11. *The Unknown Paintings of Kay Neilsen*, edited by David Larkin. Unpaged; \$7.95, Peacock Press, distributed by Bantam Books. A fantastic and unparalleled treasure: forty-three previously unknown, unpublished paintings and black-and-whites by the immortal Kay Neilsen, done to accompany a deluxe edition of the *Arabian Nights* which foundered and went under before it ever saw print. An incredible hoard of weird and beautiful art, rescued from neglect and oblivion by Ian and Betty Ballantine, bless 'em.

IV. IMPORTANT REPRINTS

12. *Shy Leopardess*, by Leslie Barringer. Novel; ix + 392 pp.; \$4.95, Newcastle Publishing Company. First and only American edition of the third and most rare of Barringer's hard-to-find Neustrian romances. The boys at Newcastle have done it again: I've been wanting to read this beautiful book for fifteen years.
13. *Jurgen*, by James Branch Cabell. Novel; xx + 325 pp. with dozens and dozens of glorious illustrations by Frank C. Pape; \$4.00, Dover Books. For the first time since 1921, Pape's handsome edition of *Jurgen*—itself one of the twenty immortal masterpieces of fantasy—is back in print, lacking only the color frontispiece. Delicious.
14. *She and Allan*, by H. Rider Haggard. Novel; xiii + 308 pp.; \$1.95, Ballantine/Del Rey Books. First paperback edition ever of Haggard's marvelous tour de force: bringing together in one yarn his two most famous characters.
15. *The Fox Woman and Other Stories*, by A. Merritt. Collection; 205 pp.; \$1.50, Avon Books. Nine brilliant stories and interesting fragments by one of the greatest of all the fantastic romancers, back in print for the first time since 1949. It isn't all the short fiction that Merritt wrote, and this printing fails to

mention that the book was originally edited by Don Wolheim, but it's good to have it back with us again.

Now, about that *hard-cover* edition. . . ?

16. *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*, by William Morris. Novel; ix + 218 pp.; \$3.45, Newcastle Publishing Company. Probably the rarest and least known of Morris' great trailblazing imaginative romances. And when I say rare, I mean *rare*: only 612 copies of the novel were printed, and that was back in 1895, gang.
17. *The Eyes of the Overworld*, by Jack Vance. Novel; xvi + 189 pp; no price listed, Gregg Press. First and only hard-cover edition of Vance's companion-piece novel to *The Dying Earth*. Rather a cold and heartless tale, but urgently recommended, anyway.

In my personal opinion, these are the seventeen best, or at least, most important books published in the fantasy genre during 1977. As always, my opinions are strictly mine own, and do not reflect those of my publisher (who would probably wish me to have included C. J. Cherryh's *Well of Shi-uan*). As usual, I have probably missed a couple of good books that should go on this honor roll, but I have tried to read them all.

In most ways, this was a remarkable year; but this record of the year would not be complete without my inclusion here of a special, and probably one-time-only extra category, richly deserved:

V. THE WORST BOOK EVER

18. *The Sword of Shannara*, by Terry Brooks. Novel; 726 pp. with illustrations by the Brothers Hildebrand; \$6.95, Ballantine/Del Rey Books. This atrocity is the single most cold-blooded, complete rip-off of another book that I have ever read, or attempted to read, that is. I am appalled at the insensitivity of its publishers, who ushered it forth into the world with at least as much foofaraw as accompanies the birth of an Heir to the Throne, since it would have slipped harmlessly past us and died a decent death

in obscurity had they not tooted the trumpets and fired off all those fireworks.

Crom knows I have nothing against the fine art of pastiche, or writing in another author's style, since I practice the craft myself. But Terry Brooks wasn't trying to imitate Tolkien's prose, just steal his story line and complete cast of characters, and did it with such clumsiness and so heavy-handedly, that he virtually rubbed your nose in it.

Everyone concerned with this war crime of a novel really ought to be ashamed of themselves. I mean, honestly. . . .

—LIN CARTER

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