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# THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 6

Edited by  
LIN CARTER

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Year in Fantasy: AN INTRODUCTION .....	vii
<i>Garden of Blood</i> BY ROGER ZELAZNY .....	9
<i>The Character Assassin</i> BY PAUL H. COOK .....	21
<i>The Things That Are Gods</i> BY JOHN BRUNNER ....	31
<i>Zurvan's Saint</i> BY GRAIL UNDWIN .....	68
<i>Perfidious Amber</i> BY TANITH LEE .....	73
<i>The Mer She</i> BY FRITZ LEIBER .....	85
<i>Demon of the Snows</i> BY LIN CARTER .....	114
<i>The Pavilion Where All Times Meet</i> BY JAYGE CARR .....	129
<i>Cryptically Yours</i> BY BRIAN LUMLEY .....	145
<i>Red As Blood</i> BY TANITH LEE .....	160
<i>Sandmagic</i> BY ORSON SCOTT CARD .....	171
The Year's Best Fantasy Books: AN APPENDIX ....	189



## THE YEAR IN FANTASY

The worst thing about the demise of Ted White's *Fantastic* is that it was the best and liveliest market around for short fantasy fiction these days. While the magazine has been continued under other hands, it just isn't the same: in fact, I can't tell it apart from *Amazing*. And so passes the only fiction magazine in America devoted to fantastic fiction. . . . Ted has landed on his feet, as good editors always do, and is now editing *Heavy Metal*. But we, the readers, are left dangling. . . .

On the other hand, there has recently been a remarkable upsurge of new paperback anthologies dedicated to printing original fantasy stories. Andy Offutt's *Swords Against Darkness*, for instance, which is now in its fifth volume, and Roy Torgeson's new *Other Worlds* series . . . these will, of course, help a lot in filling the gap left by the demise-of-sorts of *Fantastic*.

1979 was one of those years when not very much happened to speak of. We were surprised at the appearance of a new Cija of Atlan novel by Jane Gaskell, which came out of nowhere, and E. Hoffmann Price, one of the great fantasists from the *Weird Tales* era, surfaced with his first work of new fiction in very many years—and a *novel*, by golly!

There were new novels from Roger Zelazny and Tanith Lee and Andre Norton to keep us fantasy-lovers going, the usual promising debut or two, and a dozen or so other novels and anthologies. The recent boom in fantasy, prompted in large part by the tremendous success and popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien and the astonishing revival of interest in the work of Robert E. Howard, and in smaller part, I would modestly assume, by the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series which I edited, seems to be continuing, having leveled off. It would appear that there is a steady, and an enthusiastic, readership for fantasy in general and heroic fantasy in particular. It will probably not challenge science fiction for the height of popularity, but neither is it likely to diminish in its appeal.

This being true, and it seems to be true, the advance news of the forthcoming revival of *Weird Tales* as a "paperback periodical" of new stories in the old tradition (and, as much as is possible, with the old authors) has many of us excited.

It could be a huge shot in the arm for writers of short fantasy and weird fiction who lack a publishing outlet. And it could lead to a new revival of interest in the old authors who made *Weird Tales* the golden legend it has become in the quarter of a century since the magazine suspended regular publication.

Nobody is more excited about the revival of *Weird Tales* than I am, by the way, since I am going to be editing it. . . .

The 1979 World Science Fiction Convention was held over the Labor Day weekend in Brighton, England. And, as always, I had the honor of handing out a nifty bronze statuette called the "Gandalf"—or, more formally, The J. R. R. Tolkien Memorial Award for Achievement in Fantasy. This past year, I gave out two Gandalfs, one of them the Grand Master award for an author's lifetime contribution to the field, which went to Ursula K. LeGuin, who wrote the superb Earthsea Trilogy. The second, which was for the best new book-length work of original fiction, was given to Anne McCaffrey for her fine novel, *The White Dragon*.

Fantasy *per se* has its own convention, too, you know. The 1979 World Fantasy Convention returned to its original home—Providence, Rhode Island, which was H. P. Lovecraft's hometown—and featured two Guests of Honor this time, one of the original *Weird Tales* writers, Frank Belknap Long, and that recent newcomer to the national best-seller lists, Stephen King, author of such books as *Salem's Lot* and *Carrie* and *The Shining*.

Well, listen . . . all in all, it wasn't the worst of years; no, not by a long shot!

—Happy Magic!

LIN CARTER



*Roger Zelazny*

## GARDEN OF BLOOD

*What is there to say about Roger Zelazny that hasn't already been said, in light of all those Hugos and Nebulae . . . except to point out that, while he quickly became very famous and very successful as a writer of excellent science fiction, his first love seems to have been fantasy. His own rather odd and quirky blend of heroic fantasy, of course, nobody else's. But back in the '60's we first noticed him as the author of some unusual short stories about a warrior named Dilvish. They were, to put it mildly, thoroughly unlike anything else in the canon of Sword & Sorcery. Today, a good twenty years later, he has happily returned to chronicling the adventures of Dilvish with extraordinary new tales like the one which follows.*

—L.C.

Earning his passage and pay as a scout, Dilvish rode on ahead of the caravan that day, checking the pass-worthiness of mountain trails and investigating side ways for possible hazards. The sun had reached midday when he descended the far side of the low Kalgani range and moved through the foothills into the widening valley opening into the wood, beyond which lay the plains.

"A singularly uneventful passage," Black commented, as they paused upon a hilltop to regard the twisting of the trail toward the distant trees.

"In my day," said Dilvish, "things would probably have been different. This area was full of robber bands. They followed the sun. They preyed upon travelers. Occasionally, they would even join together to raid one of the small towns hereabout."

"Towns?" said his great, dark mount whose skin shimmered like metal. "I have seen no towns."

Dilvish shook his head.

"Who knows what might have happened in two hundred years?" He gestured downward. "I believe there was one right below us. Not large. It was called Tregli. I stayed at its inn on several occasions."

Black looked in that direction.

"Are we going down there?"

Dilvish glanced at the sun.

"It is lunchtime," he observed, "and the winds are strong here. Let's go a little farther. I'll eat down below."

Black leaned forward and began descending the slope, picking up speed as the land leveled, making his way back onto the trail. Dilvish looked about him as they went, as if seeking landmarks.

"What are those flashes of color?" Black asked him. "Some distance ahead."

Dilvish regarded a small area of blue, yellow, white—with an occasional flash of red—which had just come into view around a far-off bend.

"I don't know," he said. "We might take a look."

Several minutes later, they passed the vine-covered remains of a low stone wall. Ahead lay strewn stones in patterns vaguely reminiscent of the outline of a building's foundation. Here and there, as they advanced, they noted depressions at either hand, disposed in such fashion as to indicate that here might have been cellars, now rubble-filled and overgrown.

"Hold," Dilvish said, pointing ahead and to his left to a place where a section of wall still stood. "That is the front of the inn I mentioned. I'm sure of it. I think we are on the main street."

"Really?"

Black began to dig at the turf with one sharp, cloven foot. Moments later, a spark flashed as he struck a cobblestone. He widened the hole, to reveal more cobbles adjoining it.



"This does appear to have been a street," he said.

Dilvish dismounted and walked to the crumbling section of wall, passed it, moved about in the area behind it.

After several minutes, he returned.

"The old well is still in sight out back," he said. "But its canopy's collapsed and rotted, and it's covered over with vines now."

"Might I suggest you save your thirst for that stream we passed in the hills?"

Dilvish held up a spoon.

"... And I found this part-buried where the kitchen used to be. I might have eaten with it myself, years ago. Yes, this is the inn."

"Was," Black suggested.

Dilvish's smile vanished and he nodded.

"True."

He tossed the spoon back over his shoulder and mounted.

"So much has changed . . ."

"You liked it here?" Black asked as they moved forward again.

"It was a pleasant stopping-place. The people were friendly. I had some good meals."

"What do you think might have happened? Those robbers you mentioned?"

"Seems a good guess," Dilvish replied. "Unless it was some disease."

They moved along the overgrown trail, a rabbit starting before them as they passed toward the far end of the town.

"Where did you want to take your meal?" Black inquired.

"Away from this dead place," Dilvish said. "Perhaps in that field ahead." He drew a deep breath. "It seems to have a pleasant smell to it."

"It's the flowers," Black said. "Full of them. It was their colors we saw from above. Weren't they there—in the old days?"

Dilvish shook his head.

"No. There was something . . . I don't quite recall what. Sort of a park-like little area out this way."

They passed through a grove of trees, came into the clearing. Large, poppy-like blossoms, blue, white, yellow—the occasional red—moved almost as high as Black's shoulder, swaying on hairy, finger-thick stalks. They faced the sun. Their heavy perfumes hung in the air.

"There is a clear, shaded area at the foot of that large

tree—to the left,” Black observed. “There even seems to be a table you could use.”

Dilvish looked in that direction.

“Aha!” he said. “Now I remember. That stone slab isn’t a table. Well . . . In a way, it is. It’s an altar. The people of Tregli worshiped out here in the open—Manata, goddess of growing things. They left her cakes and honey and such on the altar. Danced here. Sang here, of an evening. I even came to one of the services. They had a priestess . . . I forget her name.”

They came up beneath the tree, where Dilvish dismounted.

“The tree has grown and the altar’s sunk,” he remarked, brushing debris from the stone.

He began to hum as he rummaged in a saddlebag after a meal—a simple, repetitive tune.

“I’ve never before heard you sing, whistle or hum,” Black commented.

Dilvish yawned.

“I was just trying to recall the tune I heard that evening I was here. I believe that’s how it went.”

He seated himself with his back against the bole of the tree and began to eat.

“Dilvish, there is something strange about this place . . .”

“It seems strange to me just by virtue of its having changed so,” he replied, breaking off a piece of bread.

The wind shifted. The odors of the flowers came to them more strongly.

“That is not what I mean.”

Dilvish swallowed and smothered another yawn.

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I.”

Black lowered his head and ceased all movement.

Dilvish looked about him and listened for a long while. The only sounds, however, were the rustling of the grasses, the flowers, the leaves in the tree above him, stirred by a passing wind.

“There does not seem to be anything unusual about,” he said softly.

Black did not reply.

Dilvish regarded his mount.

“Black?”

Carefully, he loosened his blade and gathered his feet beneath him. He moved the balance of his lunch over to the slab.



"Black!"

The creature stood unmoving, unspeaking, like a great, dark statue.

Dilvish rose to his feet, stumbled, leaned back against the tree. His breathing came heavy.

"Is it you, my enemy?" he asked. "Why don't you show yourself?"

There came no reply. He looked out across the field again, breathing the heady perfume of the flowers. His vision began to waver as he stared, smearing the colors, distorting the outlines.

"What is happening?"

He took a step forward, and another, staggering in Black's direction. When he reached him, he threw an arm about his neck and leaned heavily. Suddenly, he drew his shirt upward with his left hand and pressed his face into it.

"Is it a narcotic . . . ?" he said, and then he sagged, slipping partway to the ground.

Black still did not move.

There were cries in the darkness and loud voices shouting orders. Dilvish stood in the shadow of the trees; a giant, heavily built man with a curly beard stood motionless nearby. The two of them peered in the direction of the flickering lights.

"The whole town seems to be burning," came the deep voice of the larger man.

"Yes, and it sounds as if those who follow the sun are butchering the inhabitants."

"We can do no good here. There are too many of them. We would only get ourselves hacked to bits also."

"True, and I had looked forward to a quiet evening. Let us skirt the place and be on our way."

They drew back farther into the shadows and made their way past the scene of carnage. The screams were fewer now, as the number of dead increased. Many of the men were stacking loot and drinking from bottles taken from the flaming inn. A few still stood in line where the remaining women lay disheveled, eyes wide, garments rent. Across the way, a roof suddenly collapsed, sending a fountain of sparks into the night air.

"If a few should stagger our way, though," the curly-haired man remarked as they passed, "let's hang them by

their heels and gut them, to square accounts somewhat with the gods."

"Keep your eyes open. You may get lucky."

The other chuckled.

"I never know when you're joking," he said after a time. "Maybe you never are. That can be funny, too—for others."

They moved along a rocky, brush-strewn declivity paralleling the town. At their left, the cries grew fainter. An occasional burst of flame still sent shadows dancing about them.

"I wasn't joking," Dilvish said a little later. "Maybe I've forgotten how."

The other touched his shoulder.

"Up ahead. The clearing . . ." he said.

They halted.

"Yes, I remember. . . ."

"There is someone there."

They began to move again, more slowly. A regular flickering of light, as from a number of torches, came from the farther end of the field in the vicinity of a large, heavy-limbed tree.

Drawing nearer, they saw a knot of men at the small stone altar. One of them sat upon it, drinking from a wine bottle. Two others were bringing a blonde-haired girl in a green garment across the field, her hands bound behind her back. She spoke, but her words were indistinguishable. She struggled, and they pushed her. She fell, and they drew her to her feet again.

"I recognize that girl," Dilvish said. "It's Sanya, their priestess. But—"

He raised his hands to his head, pressed them to his temples.

"But—What happened? How did I come to be here? It seems that I saw Sanya long, long ago . . ."

He turned and stared into his companion's face, taking hold of his arm.

"You," he said, "my friend . . . It seems I have known you for ages, yet—Forgive me . . . I cannot recall your name."

The other's brow tightened as his eyes narrowed.

"I—You call me Black," he said suddenly. "Yes—and this is not my customary form! I begin to remember . . . It was daytime, and this field was full of flowers. I believe that we slept . . . And the village! It was but a bare remnant—"

He shook his head.



"I do not know what happened—what spell, what power brought us to this place."

"Yet, you have powers of your own," Dilvish said. "Can they help us? Can you still use them?"

"I—I don't know. I seem to have forgotten—some things."

"If we die here—in this dream, or whatever it is—do we truly die? Can you divine that?"

"We—It is coming clearer now . . . The flowers of the field sought our lives. The red ones are those that have slain travelers. They drug you with their perfumes, then twine about you and draw out your life. Yet something has interfered with their attempt on us. This is not a dream. We are witnessing what actually occurred. I do not know whether we can change what has already happened. Yet, we must be here for a reason."

"And can we die here?" Dilvish repeated.

"I am sure of it. Even I, if I fall in this place—though I can foresee all sorts of intriguing theological problems."

"Bugger them!" Dilvish said, and he began to move forward, making his way through the shadows around the edge of the clearing, heading toward the far end. "I believe they mean to sacrifice the priestess on the altar of her own goddess."

"Yes," Black said, moving silently behind him. "I don't like them, and we are both armed. What do you say? There's quite a number at the stone and two with the girl . . . But we should be able to get very close without being seen."

"I agree. Can you use that blade—this being an unfamiliar form and all?"

Black chuckled.

"It is not totally unfamiliar," he replied. "The two on the right will never know how they got to Hell. I suggest that you deal with the one on the end while I'm sending them on their way. Then dispatch that one to the left." He drew a long, double-handed blade soundlessly, holding it with one hand. "They may all be a bit drunk, too," he added. "That should help."

Dilvish drew his blade. They moved nearer.

"Say when," he whispered.

Black raised his weapon.

"Now!"

Black was little more than a blur in the flickering light. Even as Dilvish fell upon his man to slay him, a gory head

bounced near his foot, and Black's second victim was already falling.

A great cry went up from the others as Dilvish tore his blade free from the body of the man he had slain and turned to face another. Black's blade descended again, hacking off a man's sword-arm at the elbow, and his left foot flew forward, catching the man on the slab in the small of the back. Dilvish thought that he heard his spine snap as the man was hurled to the ground.

But now there were blades in the hands of the remaining men, and from across the field in the direction of the burning town there came a series of cries. From the side of his eye, Dilvish saw a number of figures rushing toward them, weapons in their hands.

He drove his second man several paces backward, beat his guard aside, kicked him in the kneecap and cut halfway through his neck with a heavy blow.

He turned to cut at another who was coming fast upon him, noting that Black had brained one man against the side of the altar and skewered another with his long blade, raising him up off the ground with the force of his thrust. By now, there were cries all around them.

He got inside his opponent's reach and used the guard of his weapon as a knuckle-duster against the man's jaw. He kicked him as he fell and ran the point of his blade into another's guard, severing fingers as he drew it back. The man screamed and dropped his weapon. Ducking a head cut, Dilvish swung low and cut another behind the knee, hamstringing him. He backed away from two more then and circled quickly, getting one into the other's way, beating and thrusting, being parried, parrying himself, thrusting again, slipping around a parry and slashing a wrist. From somewhere, he heard Black bellow—a half-human, half-animal sound—followed moments later by a series of different voices screaming.

Dilvish tripped the injured man and stamped on him, caught the other in the stomach with his blade, felt a stinging in his shoulder, saw his own blood, turned to face a new attacker . . .

He dispatched this man in an almost dream-like series of movements. Another, who was rushing toward him, slipped on a patch of freshly spilled blood and Dilvish finished him before he could rise again.

A club struck him on the side. He doubled for a moment and backed away, swinging wide parries. He saw Black



nearby, still felling his attackers with almost reckless sword-play. He was about to call out to him, that they might get back to back for a more complete defense—

A sharp cry rang out and the attackers hesitated. Heads turned in the direction of the altar, and motion was frozen for a moment.

The priestess Sanya lay across the stone, bleeding. A tall, fair-haired man had just withdrawn a blade from her breast. Her lips were still moving, either in curse or prayer, but the words were inaudible. The man's lips were moving, too. Across the field, a fresh group of men was advancing from the direction of the town. A red trickle began at the left corner of Sanya's mouth and her head suddenly slumped to the side, eyes still open, unseeing. The blond man raised his head.

"Now bring me those two!" he cried, raising his blade once more and pointing it toward Dilvish and Black.

As he did this, the man's sleeve fell back, revealing a series of bluish tattoos along his right forearm. Dilvish had seen such markings before. Various hill-tribe shamans scored themselves in this fashion, each marking representing a victory over some neighbor and adding to the wearer's power. What was such a man doing with this band of ragged cutthroats—obviously their leader? Had his tribe been destroyed? Or—?

Dilvish drew a deep breath.

"Don't bother!" he shouted. "I'm coming!"

He sprang forward.

His blade engaged the other's across the altar, was beaten back. He began to circle. So did the shaman.

"Did your own people drive you away?" Dilvish asked. "For what crimes?"

The man glared for but a moment, then smiled and with a sweeping gesture halted the men who were now rushing to his aid.

"This one is mine," he stated. "You deal with the other."

He moved his left forearm, which was also covered with tattoos, across his body and touched it to his blade.

"You recognize what I am," he said, "and still you challenge me. That is rash."

Flames sprang up along the length of the blade that he held. Dilvish narrowed his eyes against the sudden glare.

The weapon traced confusing lines of fire as the other moved it. Still, Dilvish parried its first thrust, feeling a momentary warmth upon his hand as he did so. From over his

shoulder, he heard Black's battle cry and a resumed clashing of arms. A man screamed.

Dilvish swung into an attack which was parried by the blazing blade, feeling the increasing heat of that weapon across his wrist as he parried in turn and sought an opening.

They drew away from the altar and the tree, testing one another's defenses upon the open field. From the sounds, somewhere behind him now, Dilvish knew that Black was still holding his own. How long could that continue, though, he wondered. Despite his great strength and speed, there were so many moving against him . . .

His sleeve began to smolder as they swaggered blades. The shaman, he realized, was a good swordsman. Unlike his men, he was also cold sober—and he was not as winded as Dilvish.

What was the meaning of all this, he wondered, throwing a head cut that he knew would not get through the other's guard, backing away and parrying the riposting chest cut which arrived with great force, pretending to stumble and recovering, hoping to make the other overconfident. Why were they here? Why had Black been transformed, and the two of them set upon the scene of this ancient massacre?

He continued to back away, giving only half-feigned indications of fatigue, studying the other's style, blinking against the glare of that blade, his right hand now feeling as if it had been in a furnace. Why had he rushed to the aid of an already doomed girl, and against such odds?

A vision suddenly crossed his mind, of another night long ago, of another girl about to be sacrificed by another magician, of the consequences of his act. . . . He smiled as he realized that he had done it again and knew that he would do it yet again if the situation recurred—for this was something he had often wondered about through long days of pain. In that fleeting instant, he saw something of himself—the fear that his trials had broken a thing within him, a thing which he now saw to have remained unchanged.

He tried another head cut. There had been something about the shaman's return on the last one. . . .

Had some kindly disposed deity anticipated his action, seen some incomprehensible use for it in this battle, granted him this small insight into his own character as a death-boon? Or—?

Yes! The riposte came too strong again! If he were to back away and flash his blade beneath and around. . . .



He began to plan the maneuver as he gave ground and pretended once again to stumble.

He heard Black shout an oath, from somewhere off to his right, and another man screamed. Even if he slew the shaman, Dilvish wondered, how long would the two of them last against the men remaining on the field and the men still on their way from the burning town?

But then—and Dilvish could not be certain that it might not be an effect of the blazing blade upon his watering eyes—the entire prospect before him seemed to ripple and waver for a moment. Everything appeared frozen in that instant—his own parry, the grimace on the shaman's sweat-stained face . . . In that splinter of timelessness, he saw his opportunity.

He threw a head cut.

The other parried, and the flaming arc of the riposte came flashing toward his chest.

He moved back, whipping his blade clockwise beneath and around and up. The point of the flaming blade tore through the sleeve of his jacket above his right biceps as it passed.

Twisting, he caught hold of his burnt right wrist with his left hand, blade straight ahead and pointing at the other's breast. Already off-balance from the movement, he threw himself forward and saw his weapon pierce the shaman as they both fell, feeling for a moment the other's hot blade upon his right thigh.

Then again, the wavering, the timeless pulse, prolonged. . . .

He pulled himself back, withdrawing his blade. Colors—flame, brown, green, bright red—began to smear about him. The burning blade flickered, dimmed, went out, where it lay upon the ground. Then it, too, was but a dark smudge upon a changing canvas. The sounds of conflict grew still in Black's quarter.

Dilvish got to his feet, his blade at guard, his arm tensed to swing it. But nothing more approached.

From the end of the field, in the direction of the altar where the dead priestess lay, a voice seemed to be speaking—feminine, and a trifle strident. Dilvish looked in that direction and immediately averted his still-watering eyes, for there was only light, brightening from heartbeat to heartbeat.

"I heard my hymn, Deliverer," came the words, "and when I looked, I saw that within you which I might trust. An old

wrong cannot be undone, but long have I awaited this cleansing, of those who follow the sun!"

About him, as through a frosted glass, Dilvish saw the standing forms of many of the men who had come to attack them. They wavered and their outlines blurred even as he looked. Yet, one of them seemed to have come up, soundlessly, upon his left . . .

The voice softened:

" . . . And to you, who cared for this place—if but for a brief while—my blessing!"

The man seemed so near now, blade upraised, swaying from side to side in slow motion. The other men had all become smears of color in a brightening light—and this one, too, seemed to be changing even as Dilvish swung his blade—

The flower fell.

Dilvish put forth his hand for something to lean upon, found nothing, used his blade as a cane.

He heard a single stamping sound, then silence. About him, the place was filled with the sunlight of an afternoon. Amid the long grasses there were cut and trampled flowers, near and far. Those which yet stood still faced the sun, swaying.

"Black?"

"Yes?"

Dilvish turned his head. Black was shaking his.

"Strange visions . . ." he began.

"But no dream," Black finished, and Dilvish knew by the throbbing of his reddened hand and the blood that still came from numerous cuts that this was true.

"Manata," he said, "I will finish the work, for that which you have shown me."

As they mounted into the foothills, Black remarked, "It was good to fight beside you that way. I wonder whether I might learn that spell?"

"It was good to have you there," Dilvish replied as they headed into their lengthening shadows. "Very good."

"Now you can tell the carayan chiefs that their way is clear."

"Yes. Did you hear it, too?"

Black was silent for a time. Then, "Flowers do not scream," he said.

Below and behind them, the smoke still rose and drifted across the shortening day.



*Paul H. Cook*

## THE CHARACTER ASSASSIN

*I don't know much about Paul Cook except that he gets the damndest ideas for stories! When this next yarn was published last year, its editor, Roy Torgeson, remarked, rather helplessly: "To use Theodore Sturgeon's terminology, it is an unique story. That is, it is a story which will always stand alone, which cannot be duplicated, which cannot be copied—not even by its author." Strong words, eh? Well, read it for yourself, and if you can figure out a way to "do" the story again, tell me first!*

—L.C.

Lately, Crossland's apprehension has increased due to what Faraday had euphemistically called his "vendetta." Crossland understands just how colorful Faraday is, and what he is truly capable of. And he fears that Faraday's damage might yet be uncovered. It's a very real fear, and knowing Faraday as well as he does, Crossland worries constantly.

Crossland would describe Faraday like this: of average height and such nondescript build as to become nearly invisible in a crowd. Except for the aquiline nose and those eyes like cold interstellar fire. As well as the rather large, powerful hands that are almost like mitts. The blue veins running

along their backs are the maps of a sinister landscape. Crossland knows just how many individuals have been throttled or beaten by those hands. But what he knows comes only through whatever Faraday chooses to tell him.

It is Faraday's habit to appear at the most inconvenient of moments. It's as if Faraday has Crossland's apartment wired for sound just so he can interrupt Crossland at his work. At least, this is what Crossland suspects. And has suspected for years.

Crossland's novel, *The Prairie Occasion*, is long overdue. It has been in the works for eight years now. Faraday, as usual, arrives when the writing approaches its zenith. As today, in the midst of Sarah's wedding celebration, the music stops and the dancers fan themselves under a balmy Kansas sun. It is an open-air ceremony. The fiddler steps over to a stand of splayed magnolias to tighten his bow and taste a bit of lemonade. As he does this, Faraday enters the scene.

He wears a long sable coat, not common to Manhattan at all. Snow, like a scattered galaxy of stars, is sprinkled across his shoulders, melting quickly. His boots have just tracked black soil onto Crossland's fading carpet. Although it is the middle of May deep in Manhattan, Faraday had been up on the tundra somewhere. Crossland, looking up, notices this immediately.

He has momentarily forgotten the deft fingers of Josiah Blake that skillfully tune his instrument. The church matrons pass out a light refreshment to the guests. The guests at Sarah's wedding—which is being held just outside of town beside a small creek—wait patiently.

Through a thin, sandy beard, Faraday grins.

"So he finally bagged Sarah, our prairie virgin, I see. Nice place to have the wedding, too. Right out in the open beneath that old cottonwood. I've always been fond of that tree." He begins to draw off his long gloves, doing so with a touch of flourish.

Crossland considers Faraday's apparel. Quite authentic, and no doubt stolen. He would place the costume in Russia. And, he thinks, Siberia, if it was winter, or late spring. Its crude tailoring makes it of peasant origin and might go back to 1860 give or take a few years.

And so he thinks—as Faraday goes through his theatrical motions to make himself comfortable—that it might have been Chekov this time. Or Pushkin. Even Blok or Tolstoi. But, thinking back, it was Tolstoi a couple of years ago. So it



is possible that it could be Dostoyevski. The two gloves drop to the carpet like slabs of meat. *Yes*, he thinks, *Dostoyevski*.

So he ventures: "Ivan Karamazov."

Faraday looks at him with genuine disappointment. "Really, Doctor. That one seems a trifle obvious, Ivan being possibly the most disagreeable of them all. No, it was our old boy, Raskolnikov. I'm saving Ivan for a rainy day." He laughs at his private joke, as Crossland remembers the unrecorded death of Helen of Troy one frightening afternoon in the rain when a blue-eyed assailant tore her throat open from ear to ear. A stranger who appeared out of nowhere.

Crossland leans back in his chair, eyes his dusty copy of *Crime and Punishment* on the shelf, and forages among his memories for the ending. The proper ending its author gave. He recalls Raskolnikov's dark crime; his capture and subsequent imprisonment. That he suffers, that he changes. That Sonia, the whore-Christian, follows him into Siberia, and waits. Waits for life, *their life*, to begin anew.

Faraday lowers himself regally onto the divan.

"You got it," he says simply.

Crossland knows this game, having gone through it often enough before. He tries, instead, to play cagey.

"Raskolnikov must've been a tough customer," recalling Raskolnikov's cruel, analytical decisions: The ax whistling into the old woman's brittle skull. The strength and resolve it must have taken to accomplish it.

"Not really. Those seven years in the labor camp broke him. I was just another peasant at the train depot."

"There was no station, as I recall." But Crossland can see the line of argument: The novel has ended, but the world of it still remains, intact. And Faraday goes back to mete out the justice that fiction rarely does.

"Actually there was," Faraday continues. "The train came into the country station, and I was there to meet it. As was Sonia, beautiful Sonia. And a close relative of hers, I believe."

Faraday maintains his secretive smile as he helps himself to some bourbon and ice. The smile is for Sonia.

"Dostoyevski was stretching things a bit about her, I'm sad to report."

Crossland fidgets slightly, not knowing if he wants to hear this. "What do you mean?"

"Sonia. You know, all Russians are ugly, potato-faced farmers. Jesus! And when one of them gets labeled 'pretty'

by a novelist, the reader naturally assumes his own version of beauty. God, she looked like several miles of bad road."

"I don't like that word."

"Which word?"

"Potato-faced. They deserve a bit more respect than that."

Faraday only stares at him, then after a pause, smiles. Crossland nods to himself. Sarah comes to mind, smiling coyly among her bridesmaids. She holds a fragrant bouquet of yellow roses. Josiah Blake has finished tuning his fiddle. He draws a soiled handkerchief across his brow. He is a farmer as well. And Crossland considers these people, people he has lived with for eight years now. Is Sarah just another potato-faced peasant as well?

He recalls the faded daguerreotype of his maternal grandparents. The grim, God-fearing, and yes, ugly people perched like statues carved from Kansas dirt in front of their prairie homestead.

Faraday swirls the ice; looks very much at home.

Crossland returns from the plains. "And Raskolnikov?" But he can easily guess, knowing that mind and those hands.

"Well, I waited for the train, and thought I'd try something different this time. And that train! Christ, you should've seen it. All the noise it made, and the rattling! It's a wonder it didn't fall apart. And the crowd of peasants. They all smelled like vomit and sweat, or a herd of sheep after a rainstorm. But I got him, the bastard, I got him."

Faraday pauses with a touch of drama, absorbed, no doubt, with the myriad fictional worlds he has come to inhabit. A vacuousness fills his eyes.

"I'm afraid the explosive did more damage than I had intended. I fled out into a wide field pursued by a constable. It was snowing."

He upends the tumbler and swallows slowly, distantly.

Though expressionless, Crossland understands completely. He knows of the manner in which he has often been cheated by fiction, knowing the erosion or sheer lack of justice in the true world outside.

Faraday, though, doesn't possess Crossland's inertia. He's a man of action, owning that kind of will often touted as heroic in times of crisis, but psychopathic at any other time. You can see something of the fragile grasp of the world Faraday has when you consider those eyes. Crossland can barely recall Faraday's other features when he is away. But



those eyes, like binary suns ready to explode, always remain in mind.

Josiah Blake, whose eyes are also blue, but hardly as volatile, glances over at young Sarah, whom he has known since birth, and, like Crossland, considers her beauty. The only beautiful girl in the whole county is today—as soon as Crossland can manage it—to be taken away on her honeymoon by the only handsome man in the county, Charles Wilson, farmer, son of wealthy land-owner Jedidiah Wilson. Josiah Blake, beneath the cool shade of the cottonwood, considers them both.

As Crossland considers Faraday.

"And so you think justice is served," he says to the leering grin opposite him.

Faraday smiles, undaunted. "And Dostoyevski didn't know a thing. Not a goddamn thing."

Crossland rises from his swivel chair, moving to the hot-plate and tea kettle. *Just like the others didn't know a goddamn thing*, he thinks to himself, recalling the hawk-nosed, blue-eyed Venetian captain who keelhauled the villain Iago somewhere in the Adriatic, then let the ropes go slack in the waters that boiled with the fins of sharks.

Or the rape and subsequent strangling of one Mrs. Macomber when the gun-bearers and guide tacitly slipped away across the veldt in the ivory moonlight, and Faraday eased into the single, glowing tent.

"Justice," Crossland snorts, avoiding those eyes. "So now who's next?" He badly wants to change the subject, if he can.

Faraday creases his brow in mock earnestness.

"American, I'd say. We have the most perverse sense of justice. I was too long on the Continent cleaning up after Kafka. I'll have to save Mann for later. And I really cannot stand Victorian England any longer."

"You and Fagin make a lovely pair."

"Why, Doctor, your humor has improved, considering what I've done to your heroes."

Crossland stares at him with annoyance. "They are decidedly *not* my heroes."

"True, I suppose, but you do wish the world had its tidy ends. Little yellow ribbons to wrap things up. With enough beautiful women like your Sarah Wilson to go around. Perhaps a Daisy Buchanan in every lonely bedroom. Say, now that's a thought. I can get Huxley to clone her, Fitzgerald won't mind, even though it isn't 1984 yet."

"Wrong story, Faraday. Orwell wrote 1984, not Huxley." His quickness to correct him betrayed his own vendetta, that of trying to diminish Faraday any way he could. "Besides, 1984 had absolutely nothing to do with cloning. And I doubt that you can get into *that* future anyway."

Faraday resurrects his devilish grin. His eyes sparkle almost in the same fashion young Charles Wilson's eyes flash as he flirts with his new wife, who is standing among a gaggle of female well-wishers off to one side.

"No, Doctor. You're wrong here. Anything written is a world conceived." And he laughs. "No matter how unpleasant."

"Like this world?" Crossland tries to make it sound like the question he intended, but knew it for the fact it was.

The apartment creaks with Faraday's increasing mirth.

"Long Island, Doctor. Your retreat from your scholarly disappointments. Next time you're in Queens—good old smelly downtown Queens—check out any and all similarities to . . . what do you call it?—Buzzard's Hole, Kansas."

"Salina."

"Whatever. Compare it to Queens, Doctor. Just how much do you deny *that* reality? Here." Faraday reaches over to hold up the gloves made from what appears to be oxbide. "Smell this!"

Crossland turns away in disgust.

"You're damn right it stinks. And it stinks because it's real. It's goddamn Russia and goat's milk and borscht and rotten potatoes. It's mud and slime, Siberia!"

"You still don't have the right . . ."

Faraday rises, obviously destined for another jigger of bourbon. "Like Jason Compson chasing a twelve-year-old slut. Like murderous Ahab."

Crossland gestures. "Ahab was consumed by the whale. Melville killed him. Or his whale—or God." And as if there ever could be any doubt to the matter, Crossland adds, "Either that, or Ishmael lied."

"Oh, no, the story, at least its end, is accurate," Faraday happily informs him. "You might be pleased to know it was I who flagged down the sorrowful captain of the *Rachel*. Unbeknownst to Ishmael, or anyone else, for all that."

*This is getting out of hand*, Crossland muses to himself as the copper teakettle comes to a fevered boil. He must get on with the wedding. Sarah begins to think that something has



gone wrong. She feels slightly uneasy, as if the leaves stopped fluttering above her, presaging disaster.

"I will not believe that. Ever."

"Suit yourself. I'm only accounting for your misapprehensions and mistakes, friends that we are."

"My mistakes have nothing to do with literature, or what you claim you are capable of doing."

Faraday sips his second bourbon rather daintily, acting out some inner scene in his mind.

"Not true, Doc. You might've kept your chair at State if you had understood more. About literature, I mean. And people," and, for a final touch, "and about yourself."

Crossland faces away. He knows this attack, and how it is meant to give Faraday his psychopathic boost, just enough impetus to send him away. *To send him back.*

But he says, "I am an old man now. And if literature weren't so important to me, if it weren't my home, I wouldn't be so devoted to my work."

"Your eternal novel. Three generations of hopelessly ordinary dirt farmers. You actually believe that this story will account for all those bitter years?"

A vague scent of jasmine tea filters upward from the teapot. Suddenly, Crossland is very tired of this. The warmth of the tea soothes him.

"Please leave me now. I'm no longer interested in your horror stories."

Then for some reason, Crossland imagines dust on the horizon that neither the farmers nor the townfolk see. He himself hadn't anticipated much that afternoon in the way of action, certainly not a duststorm, for the wedding scene was not all that vital to the impending dénouement of the novel.

"Please go," he begs. "Go and pester Napoleon or Achilles."

"They have already been attended to."

"Then for God's sake get the hell out of here and leave me alone!"

Faraday lifts his frame slowly out of the comfortable divan, setting the empty glass on the floor, its jewels of ice twinkling.

"Careful, Doctor. You might unnerve your world. It's hard to be a god. You never know what it might do to Sarah."

"You leave her out of this. There'll be no villains in my piece."

For the first time, Faraday considers him seriously. "Then

your world is totally unbelievable, totally unreal. Both this very moment, and the one in front of you." He gestures casually over at the open manuscript, loose-leafed and disheveled, lying next to *The Farmer's Almanac* and a large book on the Plains Indians.

But Crossland is visibly shaken. This is the way it always is after one of Faraday's nasty little visits. Now his attention is drawn to those deep Nordic eyes, that aquiline nose. Faraday stares with rapt fascination at the desk and the incomplete manuscript.

"Yes, well," he suddenly announces, preluding his exit with a touch of mock decorum. "It's been a pleasure, as usual, Doc. Always like to let you know what I'm up to." He slaps both gloves ceremoniously into one of those large hands of his. "But tell me—and I do need your counsel on this—what are your thoughts on something American?"

Crossland shudders, thinking, *it's like sampling a menu*. He then sees a small banner of dust to the west and imagines a kind of muted thunder, as the tremulous cottonwood leaves begin murmuring.

The sky, though, is as clear over Kansas as it is over Manhattan. He does not answer Faraday's question.

"Doctor, please now, don't be rude. As you can see I'm trying to do this as gracefully as possible."

"There is nothing graceful about it." But Crossland, now more frustrated than angry, feels drained. He sees the fretful expression on Sarah's face as they both realize that the wedding celebration must be postponed—which would inevitably change things.

Faraday, always one not to worry, slaps him once again on the shoulder, like a coach at half-time.

"Well, don't give up, buckaroo. It'll all work out in the end. Always does." His laughter cracks, like a glacier pulling apart on its plunge into Arctic seas: It is something less than jocular, completely without humor, as if there is something very private lurking about, like a banana peel that just might be under Crossland's heel. *An Achilles' heel*, Faraday is no doubt thinking, knowing that the clever literary jokes can go on forever. The puns, the double entendres, the "in" jokes, all the snappy allusions and clichés reduced to punch lines.

The innuendo in Faraday's laughter settles like dust in the closeted air of the apartment. Like dust. Dust and thunder. As Crossland wonders why he can't conclude his novel. Several hundred thousand words. Three generations of



people, real or otherwise. He has been like a monk illuminating the brittle pages of a sacred text rather than a novel of real people in the real world. A world of red and black earth, furrowed and fenced off, carved into ranges; sheep ranges separate from the cattle ranges, and those separate from the farmlands. Dust rising in a world inhabited with the likes of Faraday, who are like buzzards waiting to pick apart the pieces. A world composed of lives. A life, perhaps Sarah's life, nearer to the beginning than the end. *Why?* Why the dust. Why the thunder.

And Faraday is gone. Vanished along with the sodden clumsy gloves, the long, foul-smelling coat and the boots encrusted with mud from a Siberia freshly emerging from a long winter. Crossland doesn't hear him leave, just as he didn't hear him enter. But like the calamity lurking on the horizon, Faraday is always there, or at least the threat of him.

Which is how Crossland knows how Faraday's story ends, the only way it can. And it is in much the same way Sarah's story ends. *Or begins*, he now realizes. Crossland sets the cup of tea aside, seeing it like this:

A man with piercing blue eyes and a rather prominent nose stumbles out of nowhere amid the gathered wedding guests. The small band of musicians, led by Josiah Blake, is just about to whittle up "Turkey in the Straw." But they stop, for Josiah, from his perch on a wooden crate, is the first to see the clouds of dust just over a nearby ridge.

"Good Lord!" he says pointing beyond a group of civic leaders, among whom Jedidiah Wilson stands quite mayorally. This diverts their attention from the stranger, who glances around in sudden terror. A woman screams. Then the rest of the women panic.

Comanches on horseback, dappled and feathered, brandishing Winchesters, are herding an enormous swell of bison in their direction. The stampede, unheard because of the low ridge to the west, is suddenly upon the settlers, none of whom is effectively armed, today being a day of peace and calm, a holiday. The herd sweeps over the rise like a bilious flood tide. A wall of muscle, hoof and anger.

Crossland broods upon this kind of territorial justice. Just whose territory, and just whose justice, is now perfectly evident.

The farmers explode in panic, ignoring the newcomer who spins around desperately, trying to understand. In the cries

and shots from the painted savages, Faraday looks upward into the blank sky.

But it is only for a moment. A bullet catches him painfully in the hipbone, and he is wrenched to the ground by its startling impact, far from the safety of the large cottonwood tree, where young Charles Wilson has just shoved Sarah.

The herd of frightened buffalo—each animal nearly twice the height of an average man—crashes mercilessly across the small clearing where the wedding was being held. Chairs, flower stands, the pinewood pulpit and several small benches erupt like broken bones in the crushing thunder and dust. A wagon with its brace of horses goes under as well, wheels pin-wheeling madly for a moment above the mountainous forms.

Crossland studies the Manhattan skyline. He knows that a few settlers will survive, to rebuild their lives, stay back the Indian menace. Just as he knows it is now time for another cup of tea, as Sarah weeps over the pulped remains of her family and friends, cursing God under a yellow Kansas sun.



*John Brunner*

## THE THINGS THAT ARE GODS

*John is one of the most famous science fiction writers alive and has written more good books than you can shake a stick at. To my peculiar taste, the one I like best is The Traveler in Black. I've always had a hunch John was under the influence of James Branch Cabell when he wrote that one, and when we met last year in England, he confirmed it. And he told me he had just published a brand new Traveler in Black story, which excited me about as much as the story will please you, for it follows next.*

—L.C.

*Lo how smothe and curvit be these rocks that in the creation weren jaggit, for that they haf ben straikit by myriades of thickheidit folk hither ycommen in peregrinage, beggarlie criand after Miracula. And I say one at the leste wis granted 'em. Was't not a marvel and a wonder, passand credence, that they helden dull ston for more puisaunt than your quicke man, the which mought brethe and dreame and soffre and fede wormes?*

—A Lytel Boke Againste Folie

## I

Tipping back the hood of his black cloak, leaning on his staff of curdled light, the traveler contemplated the land where he had incarcerated the elemental called Litorgos. That being hated both salt and silt; accordingly, here had been a most appropriate choice.

Half a day's walk from the edge of the sea the land reared up to form a monstrous irregular battlemented cliff twenty times the height of a tall man, notched where a river cascaded over the rim of the plateau above. Thence it spilled across a wedge-shaped plain of its own making and developed into a narrow delta, following sometimes this and sometimes that main channel. In principle such land should have been fertile. Opposite the river's multiple mouths, however, a dragon-backed island created a swinge, such that at spring tide ocean water flooded ankle-deep over the soil, permeating it with salt. Therefore, only hardy and resistant crops could be grown there, and in a bad year they might be overtaken by the salty inundation before they were ready to harvest.

This had not prevented the establishment of cities. One had been founded close to the waterfall, and flourished awhile on trade with the plateau above. A crude staircase had been carved out of the living rock, up which slaves daily toiled bearing salt, dried fish and baskets of edible seaweed, to return with grain and fruit and sunflower oil. Then the elemental slumbering below stretched to test the firmness of his intangible bonds; they held him, but the staircase crumbled and the city disappeared.

More recently a port had been built on wooden piles at the mouth of the main channel; the island opposite was thickly forested. With the clearance of the woodland, marble was discovered. Cutting and polishing it, exporting it on rafts poled along the coastal shallows, the inhabitants grew rich enough to deck their own homes with marble and with colorful tiles in patterns, each of which constituted a charm against ill fortune. But now the marble was exhausted, and so was most of the timber, and the city Stanguray, which had once been famous, was reduced to a village. Its present occupants lived in



the attics and lofts of the old town, and as they lay down to sleep could listen to the chuckle of water rippling within the lower part of their homes. To get from one surviving building to another even toddlers deftly walked along flimsy rope bridges, while the needs of the elderly and better-off—for there were still rich and poor in Stanguray—were met by bearers of reed-mat palankeens, adept at striding down the waterways and across the mudflats on stilts taller than themselves. This mode of transport had no counterpart elsewhere.

And it was entirely fitting, the traveler reflected, that this should be so. For once the river, which here met the ocean, had run under the ramparts of Acromel, and was known as Metamorphia. No longer did it instantly change whatever fell or swam in its waters, it having been decreed that after a certain span of altering the nature of other things, it must amend its own. Yet and still a trace of what had gone before remained, and would forever in the work of all rivers: they would erode mountains, create plains, cause the foundation and destruction of countless cities.

Moreover, in all the settlements along it, including those around Lake Taxhling on the plateau above—the first earnest of the inevitable change in the river's nature, for there it spread out and grew sluggish and reed-fringed before it ultimately spilled over the cliffs and became the opposite, violent and fast and sparkling—the residual magic of Metamorphia had led to schools of enchantment. Of no very great import, admittedly, nothing to compare with the traditions of Ryo-vora or Barbizond or the Notorious Magisters of Alken Cromlech, but dowered nonetheless with a certain potency.

Such matters being of the keenest interest to him, the traveler set forth along riverside paths toward this paradoxical village of marble columns and tiled pilasters. It was dawn; the clouds in the east were flushing scarlet and rose and vermillion, and fisherfolk were chanting melodiously as they carried their night's catch ashore in reed baskets and spilled them into marble troughs, once destined for the watering of noblemen's horses, where women and children busily gutted them. The smell of blood carried on the wind. It was acute in the traveler's nostrils when he was still a quarter-hour's walk distant.

And then it occurred to him that in fact there was only a slight breeze, and that it was at his back: blowing off the land, toward the sea.

Moreover he perceived of a sudden that it was not just the

light of dawn which was tinting pink the water in the channels at either side of the crude causeway he was following.

There must have been an astonishing slaughter.

The traveler sighed. Last time he had seen a river literally running red in this manner, it had been because of a battle: one of dozens, all indecisive, in the constant war between Kanishmen and Kulyamen. But that matter was regulated pretty well to his satisfaction, and in any case this was not human blood.

If it were a precedented event, the inhabitants of Stanguray would presumably be able to inform him concerning this tainting of their river. The ground being impregnated with salt, one could not sink a sweet-water well; rainfall, moreover, was exiguous and seasonal hereabouts. Consequently folk were much dependent on the river's cleanliness.

More disturbed by the situation than seemed reasonable, the traveler lengthened his strides.

## II

When the fish guts had been thrown to the gulls, the people of Stanguray went their various ways: the poorest to the beach, where they made fires of twigs and scorched a few of the smaller fish, sardines and pilchards, and gobbled them down with a crust of bread left over from yesterday's baking; the most prosperous, including naturally all those who owned an entire fishing smack with a reliable charm on it, to their homes where breakfast awaited them; and the middling sort to the town's only cookshop, where they handed over a coin or a portion of their catch against the privilege of having their repast grilled on the public fire. Fuel was very short in Stanguray.

The said cookshop was the upper part of what had formerly been a temple, extended under the sky by a platform of creaky scantlings, water-worn and boreworm-pierced, salvaged from a wreck or a building long submerged.

Here a thin-faced, sharp-nosed, sharp-tongued young woman in a russet gown and a long apron supervised a fire on a block of slate whose visible sides were engraved with curlicues and runes. It would have been the altar when the temple's cult still thrived. Presiding over it like any priestess, she deigned to dispense hunks of griddle cake and char or



stew vegetables brought by those lucky enough to own a farmable patch of ground, as well as cooking fish, while a hunchbacked boy who never moved fast enough to please her meted out rations of pickled onions, vinegar and verjuice to add a quicker relish to the oily food.

A public fire, plainly, was a profitable operation, for everything about the shop was better appointed than one might have predicted. Though the external platform was fragile, though the variety of the food was wholly dependent on who brought what, nonetheless the woman's gown was of excellent quality, and the walls were ornamented with numerous precious relics, such as one would rather have expected to find in the homes of wealthy fishing-boat owners. Also, at least for those who paid in money, not only beer but even wine was to be had. The hunchback, lashed on by the woman's shouted order, rushed them by the mugful to the customers.

It was clear that at least one more waiter was not only affordable, but urgently needed.

However, that—to the traveler's way of thinking—was not the most curious aspect of this cookshop.

Having sated their bellies, the homeless poor plodded up from the beach carrying clay jars, which they had filled at the point where the estuary water turned from brackish to drinkable . . . or should have. Not long after, a string of children bearing by ones and twos full leathern buckets they could scarcely stand under the weight of also assembled.

The woman in charge seemed not to notice them for a long while. The delay grated on the patience of one girl, some twelve or thirteen years old, and finally she called out:

"Crancina, don't you know it's a foul-water day?"

"What of it?" the woman retorted, rescuing a roasted turnip from the flames, not quite in time.

"We had salt eels this morning, and we're clemmed!"

"Tell your mother to learn better," was the brusque reply, and Crancina went on serving her other customers.

Finally, several minutes later, she stood back from the fire and dusted her hands. Instantly the people waiting rushed toward her. The poorer got there first, being adult and desperate; nonetheless they contrived to offer at least a copper coin, which she took, bit, and dropped in the pocket of her apron, while pronouncing a cantrip over their water jugs. Forced to the rear by those larger and stronger, the children from wealthier homes had no lack of cash, but they cau-

tiously tasted the water after the spell had been spoken, as though fearing that much repetition might weaken it. All satisfied, they wended homeward.

"Are you curious concerning what you see, sir?" a thin voice said at the traveler's elbow. He had taken pains, as ever, not to be conspicuous, but it was time now to make more direct inquiries.

Turning, he found the hunchbacked boy perched on a table, for all the world like a giant frog about to take a leap. His sly dark eyes peered from under a fringe of black hair.

"I own that I'm intrigued," the traveler said.

"I thought you would be, seeing as I don't recall noticing you before. A pilgrim, are you? Cast ashore by some rascally sea captain because contrary winds made it too expensive to carry you all the way to the shrine you booked your passage for?" The boy grinned hugely, making his face as well as his body resemble a frog.

"Do you meet many castaway pilgrims here, then?"

A crooked shrug. "Never! But even that would vary the monotony of my existence. Every day is more or less the same for all of us. Why otherwise would this enchanting of water be so remarkable?"

"Ah, then magic is at work."

"What else? Crancina has a sweet-water spell from granny, all she left when she died, and so whenever the water pinkens they all come here. It's making a nice little pile for her, naturally."

"She charges everybody?"

"Indeed, yes! She claims that performing the rite tires her out, so she must be recompensed."

"What of those—for there must be some such—who have no money to pay for her services?"

"Why, she says they may wait for rain!" The boy essayed a laugh, which became more of a croak immediately.

"I deduce you are Crancina's brother," the traveler said after a pause.

"How so?" The boy blinked.

"You spoke of 'granny,' as though you shared her."

A grimace. "Well, half-brother. I often wonder whether it was granny's curse that twisted me, for I know she disapproved of our mother's second marriage. . . . However that may be!" His tone took on sudden urgency. "Will not you instruct me to bring you something, if only a hunk of bread? For I should by now have cooked and brought her the



choicest of last night's catch, rich with oil and fragrant with herbs, and grilled to perfection on the best of our scant supply of logs. Any moment now she will tongue-lash me until it stings like a physical castigation—at which, I may say, she is even more adept! Would you inspect my bruises?"

"There seems to be little love lost between you," the traveler observed.

"Love?" The hunchback cackled. "She wouldn't know the meaning of the word! So long as my father survived, and before our mother became bedridden, I made the most of life despite my deformity. Now that she's my sole commander, mine's a weary lot! I wish with all my heart that someday I may find means to break free of her tyranny and make my own way in the world, against all odds!"

Prompt to his prediction, Crancina shouted, "Jospil, why have you not set my breakfast on the embers? There's costly wood going up in smoke and all the customers are served!"

Her shrill reprimand quite drowned out the traveler's reflexive murmur: "As you wish, so be it."

Cringing, the boy regained the floor and scurried toward her. "Not so, sister!" he pleaded. "One remains unfed, and I did but inquire what he would order."

Abruptly noticing the traveler, Crancina changed her tone to one of wheedling deference. "Sir, what's your pleasure? Boy, make him room and bring clean dishes and a mug at once!"

"Oh, I'll not trouble you to cook for me," the traveler answered, "seeing as how your brother explained your spell leaves you fatigued, and you must need sustenance yourself. I'll take a bit of fish from pickle, bread and beer."

"You're courteous, sir," Crancina sighed, dropping on a nearby bench. "Yes, in truth these foul-water days are an accursed nuisance. Over and over I've proposed that a band of well-armed men be sent out, to trace the trouble to its source, but it's on the high plateau, seemingly, and these fainthearts hold that to be a place of sorcerers none can oppose. Monsters, too, if you believe them."

"Maybe it's the one slaughtering the other," Jospil offered as he set mug and platter before the traveler. "There must come an end of that, when all expire!"

"It's not a joking matter!" snapped Crancina, raising her fist—and then reluctantly unballing it, as though belatedly aware she was being watched by a stranger. But she continued, "By all the powers, I wish I knew what use there is in

spilling so much blood! Maybe then I could turn it to my own account for a change, instead of having to pander to the wants of these cajoling idiots, fool enough—you heard the girl, sir, I'll warrant!—fool enough to eat salt eels for breakfast when their noses must advise 'em there'll be nothing sweet to quench their thirst. Would you not imagine they could keep a day or two's supply that's fit to drink? If they can't afford a coopered barrel, surely there are enough old marble urns to be had for the trouble of dragging them to the surface. But they can't or won't be bothered. They're so accustomed to leaning out the window and dipping in the stream—and sending their ordures the same way, to the discomfort of us who live closer to the sea—they regard it as a change in the proper order of the world, never to be resisted, which will come right of itself."

"They pay you for performing your spell," the traveler said, munching a mouthful of the pickled fish Jospil had brought and finding it savory. "There's a compensation."

"I admit it," said Crancina. "In time I may grow rich, as wealth is counted in this miserable place. Already two widowers and two middle-aged bachelors are suing for my hand, and half a share in this cookshop, of course. . . . But that is not what I want!"—with sudden fierceness. "I've told you what I want! I'm accustomed to being in charge, and I want that with all my heart and soul, and I'm seeking a way to secure my fate while this dismal half-ruined town crumbles about me!"

So long ago there was not means to measure it, the traveler had accepted conditions pertaining to his sundry and various journeys through the land, imposed on him when a quartet of crucial planets cycled to a particular configuration in the sky.

The granting of certain wishes formed an essential element in the conditions circumscribing him . . . though it was true that the consequences of former wishes were gradually limiting the previous totality of possibilities. Some now were categorically unimplementable.

But even as he muttered formal confirmation—"As you wish, so be it!"—he knew one thing beyond a peradventure, This was not one of those.



## III

Once it had been permitted him to hasten the seasons of the year and even alter their sequence. But that power belonged to the ages when the elementals still roved abroad, their random frenzy entraining far worse divagations of the course of nature. Tamed and pent—like Litorgos under the delta of the river which no longer merited the name of Metamorphia—they were little able to affect the world. Events were tending, in the prescribed manner, toward that end which Manuus the enchanter had once defined as “desirable, perhaps, but appallingly dull.” The day would break when all things would have but one nature, and time would have a stop, for the last randomness of the chaos existing in Eternity would have been eliminated.

To make way for a new beginning? Possibly. If not, then—in the very strictest sense—*no matter, never mind. . . .*

Until then, however, the elementals did still exist and fretted away with their enfeebled force, like Fegrim beating at the cap of cold lava which closed the crater of the volcano wherein perforce he now dwelt. Not a few had discovered that human practitioners of magic were, without having chosen to be, their allies. But there was a penalty attached to such collaboration, and the most minor of them had paid it long ago; they were reduced to activating hearth charms. No doubt this was the fate which had overtaken Litorgos—no doubt it was he who drew the blood from the foul water, though he was in no position to benefit thereby. Blood had its place in magic, but it could never free an elemental.

But the traveler did not want so much as to think about Litorgos, or Stanguray, until the remainder of his business was completed. Nonetheless he did wish—and withal wished he could grant himself that wish, as he must grant those of others—that he could whirl the planets around to the conformation which would mark the conclusion of his journey, and thereby enable a return to that place which, with every pace he took, seemed more and more likely to become the focus of terrible and inexplicable events.

Making haste was pointless. The orderly succession of time which he himself had been responsible for, as river silt had

created land at Stanguray, now held him tight in its grip. Some relief from his apprehension might be obtained, however, by over-occupying himself. Accordingly on this journey he made a point of visiting not only those places familiar to him from aforetime—and sometimes from before time—but also newer locations.

One such was known by the name of Clurm. Here in the shadow of great oaks a lordling who held his birthright to have been usurped planned with a group of fanatical followers to create such a city as would lure anyone to remove thither on hearing news of it. Now they shivered in tents and ate half-raw game and wild mushrooms, but this new city was to have towers that touched the clouds, and streets wide enough for a hundred to march abreast, and brothels with the fairest of women to attract spirited youths, and a treasury overflowing with gold and gems to pay their fee, and an army would be forged from them to overthrow the usurper, and magicians would be hired to make them unquestioningly loyal, and all in the upshot would be as this wild dreamer pictured it.

Except that after a year of exile his little band had not erected so much as a log cabin, deeming manual labor beneath their dignity.

"But the new Clurm will be of such magnificence!" asserted the lordling, seated as ever closest to the warmth of their tiny campfire; they dared not build a larger one, for fear of being spotted by the usurper's forces, who roamed free in the countryside, while they hid among trees, being less beloved of the common folk. "It will be—it will be. . . . Oh, I can see it now! Would you too could see its wonders! Would I could make you believe in its existence!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, who stood a little apart, leaning on his staff.

Next day the inevitable happened. In the morning they awoke convinced that their city was real, for they saw it all about them. Joyful, bent on their leader's errand, they set out for all points of the compass, and returned with eager young followers, just as he had predicted.

Who thereupon, not finding the grand city which members of the band believed they could see, set about them with cudgels and bound them hand and foot and committed them for lunatics. The lordling was not exempted from this treatment.



But the traveler, departing, found himself unable to avoid thinking about Stanguray.

Therefore he turned aside from the road which led to Wocrahin, and made his way to a green thicket in the midst of a perfectly circular expanse of hard clay, which neither rain nor thawing after snow could turn to mud. Here was imprisoned Tarambole, with sway over dryness, as Karth formerly over cold in the land called Eyneran: a being to whom the gift had not been granted to tell lies.

Within the thicket, concealed from sight of passersby—which was as well, since lately the people of the region had taken much against magic—the traveler resigned himself to the performance of a ceremony none but he and Tarambole recalled. It gained him the answer to a single question, and it was not what he had looked forward to.

No, it was not, so Tarambole declared, an elemental ranged against him which drew his mind back and back, and back again to thoughts of Stanguray.

“Would that I might consult with Wolpec,” murmured the traveler. But he knew not where that strange coy harmless spirit bided now; he had yielded too early to the blandishments of humans, and by his own volition had wasted his power to the point where it was needless to imprison him. He chose his own captivity. Much the same might be said for Farchgrind, who once or twice had provided intelligence for the traveler, and indeed for countless others.

There remained, of course, those whom he had only banished: Tuprid and Caschalanva, Quorril and Lry. . . . Oh, indubitably they would know what was happening! It was quite likely they had set this train of events in motion. But to call on them, the most ancient and powerful of his enemies, when he was in this plight, weakened by puzzlement. . . .

Had they set out to undermine him, knowing they could not meet him in fair fight?

Yet Tarambole, who could not lie, had said his disquiet was not due to the opposition of an elemental.

The gravely disturbing suspicion burgeoned in the traveler's mind that for the first (and the next word might be taken literally in both its senses) *time* a new enemy had arrayed against him.

New.

Not an opponent such as he had vanquished over and over, but something original, foreign to his vast experience. And if

it were not the Four Great Ones who had contrived so potent a device. . . .

Then only one explanation seemed conceivable, and if it was correct, then he was doomed.

But his nature remained single, and it was not in him to rail against necessity. Necessarily he must continue on his way. He retrieved his staff and with its tip scattered the somewhat disgusting remains of what he had been obliged to use in conjuring Tarambole, and headed once more toward Wocrahin.

Where, in a tumbledown alley, a smith whose forge blazed and roared and stank yelled curses at his neighbors as he hammered bar iron into complex shapes. His only audience was his son, a boy of ten, who hauled on the chain of the great leather bellows which blew his fire.

"Hah! They want me out of here because they don't like the noise, they don't like the smell, they don't like me. That's what it boils down to, they don't like me because my occupation's not genteel! But they buy my wares, don't they? Boy, answer when you're spoken to!"

But the boy had been at his work three years, and the noise had made him deaf and inhalation of foul smokes had affected his brain, so he could only either nod or shake his head by way of answer. Fortuitously this time he did the proper thing; he nodded.

Thus assuaged, his father resumed his complaining.

"If they don't care to live hard by a forge, let 'em club together and buy me a house outside the town, with a stream beside it to turn a trip-hammer! Let 'em do something to help me, as I help them! After all, a forge must be built somewhere, right? They should see what it's like to live without iron, shouldn't they, boy?"

This time, by alternation, the youngster shook his head. Infuriated, the smith flung down his tools and bunched his fists.

"I'll teach you and the rest of 'em to make mock of me!" he roared. "Oh, that they could see what life is like without iron!"

"As you wish," the traveler said from a smoky corner, "so be it."

Whereupon the iron in the smithy rusted all at once: the anvil, the hammerheads, the tongs, the nails, the cramps that held the massy wooden portion of the bellows, even the horseshoes waiting on the wall. The smith let out a great cry, and the neighbors came running. Such was their laughter that



shortly the phrase, "like a smith without iron," entered the common parlance of Wocrahin. Indeed, he taught them to make mock. . . .

But the traveler was ill pleased. This was not like his customary regulation of affairs. It was clumsy. It was more like the rough-and-ready improvisations of the times before Time.

And he could not cure himself of thinking about Stanguray.

In Teq they still gambled to the point of insanity, and might supplanted right among its decadent people.

"No, you may not waste time in playing!" a woman scolded her son, dragging him back from a sandpit where a score of children were amusing themselves. "You're to be the greatest winner since Fellian, and support me in my old age. Ah, would I knew how to make you understand what I plan for you!"

"As you wish," sighed the traveler, who had taken station in the square where formerly the statue of Lady Luck upreared—where now greedy unscrupulous landlords sold a night's lodging in squalid hovels to those who believed sleeping here would bring good fortune.

The boy's eyes grew round and a look of horror spread across his face. Then he sank his teeth in his mother's arm, deep enough to draw blood, and took to his heels screaming, to scrape a living as best he could among the other outcasts of this now dismal city, the better for his freedom.

Yet that also was unbecoming, in the traveler's view, and still he could not rid his mind of thoughts of Stanguray.

In Segrimond folk no longer tended a grove of ash trees. They had been felled to make a fence and grandstand around an arena of pounded rocks, where for the entertainment of the wealthy savage beasts were matched with one another and against condemned criminals, armed or unarmed according to the gravity of their offense and the certainty of the jury which had heard the evidence. Today witnessed the bloody demise of a girl who had charged her respectable uncle with raping her.

"Now this," the traveler said under his breath, "is not as it should be. It smacks more of chaos, this indecision, than of the proper unfolding of Time. When all things have but a single nature, there will be no room for the doubt which requires settlement in this manner."

He waited. In a little the dead girl's uncle, resplendent in

satin trimmed with fur, came weeping from the vantage point reserved for privileged onlookers. "Ah, if you but knew," he cried to fawning hangers-on, "how much it cost me to accuse my darling niece!"

"So be it," said the traveler, and by nightfall the people did indeed know what it had cost him, in bribes to perjured witnesses. On the morrow he was kicked to death by a wild onager.

Yet and still the traveler felt himself infected with the foulness of the world, and could not release his mind from thinking about Stanguray.

Like Teq, Gryte was no longer rich, and on the marches of its land a new town had grown up called Amberlode. To it had removed the more enterprising of the old families from Gryte; against it the less enterprising were mouthing curses.

But the powers on which they called were petty compared to those which had carried Ys back across the boundary of Time and into Eternity—albeit briefly—so their impact on Amberlode was minimal. Realizing this, a man who hated his younger brother for seizing an opportunity he had rejected cried aloud, and said, "Would it were I rather than he who enjoyed that fine new house in the new city!"

"As you wish," murmured the traveler, who had accepted the hospitality this man accorded grudgingly to travelers in order to acquire virtue against some misty hereafter.

And it was so; and because the younger brother under any circumstances was the more enterprising and talented, and moreover understood how to hate, his cursing was efficacious, and the fine new house collapsed to its occupants' vast discomfiture.

And that was wrong!

The realization brought the traveler up short. There should have lain neither blame nor suffering on the brother who had chosen aright, yet here it came, and with brutal force. For as far back as he could recall it had been his intention that the literal interpretation he placed on the wishes he granted should be a means of insuring justice. The suffering must be confined to those who had richly earned it. What was awry?

The constellations had not yet wheeled to the configuration marking the conclusion of his journey. By rights he should have continued in prescribed sequence from one stage of it to the next, to the next, to the next. . . .



But he found he could not. If it were true that some hitherto unencountered foe, neither human nor elemental, now ranged against him, that implied a fundamental shift in the nature of all the realities. Beyond that, it hinted at something so appalling that he might as well abandon his task at once. He had believed his assignment binding, forever and forever, within and outside Time. But it was possible, to the One for Whom all things were possible—

He canceled that thought on the instant. Completion of it would of itself wipe him from the record of what was, what might be, and what was as though it had never been. His status was, as he well knew, at best precarious.

Which made him think of the rope-walking children at Stanguray.

Which made him think on what he had said and done there.

Which made him take the most direct route thither, and immediately.

Which taught him the most painful lesson of his existence.

## IV

Initially around Lake Taxhling there had been only reed huts wherein dwelt fisherfolk who well understood how to charm their way safely across its waters, and distinguish by simple conjuration those natural fishes which were safe to eat from those which had been transformed by the river Metamorphia and on which a geas lay.

Certain onerous duties bought them this privilege, but in general they regarded their prime deity Frah Frah as being exigent but not unkind.

Time wore on, though, and by degrees they quit performance of the rituals which had purchased their livelihood; in particular, they no longer ceremonially burnt down and rebuilt their homes twice annually.

By then it was no longer so essential to tell the nature of one's catch; the river's power was waning. Now and then someone died through carelessness, generally a child or an oldster, but the survivors shrugged it off.

Then, as the river's magic diminished further, certain nomads followed it downstream: traders and pilgrims and people who had so ill-used their former farms that the topsoil

blew away and criminal fugitives as well. Finding that on the far side of Lake Taxhling there was a sheer enormous drop, they decided to remain, and the original inhabitants—being peaceable—suffered them to do so.

Henceforward the reed huts were not burned because there were none; the newcomers preferred substantial homes of timber, clay and stone. Henceforward the shrines dedicated to Frah Frah were increasingly neglected. Henceforward meat figured largely in the local diet, as fish had formerly; herds of swine were established in the nearby woodlands, and grew fat in autumn on acorns and beechmast, while sheep and goats were let loose on the more distant slopes, though the grazing was too poor for cattle. The way of life around Lake Taxhling was transformed.

There followed a succession of three relatively gentle invasions, by ambitious conquerors, each of which endowed the area with a new religion not excessively dissimilar from the old one. It was a reason for children to form gangs and stage mock battles on summer evenings, rather than a cause for adult strife, that some families adhered to Yelb the Comforter and others to Ts-graeb the Everlasting or Honest Blunk. They coexisted with fair mutual tolerance.

Altogether, even for someone like Orrish, whose stock was unalloyed pre-conquest, and whose parents maintained a dignified pride in their seniority of residence, life on the edge of Taxhling was not unpleasant.

Or rather, it had not been until lately. Oh, in his teens—he had just turned twenty—he had been mocked because he confessed to believing in the fables told to children about a town below the waterfall with which there had once been trade, but he was strong and supple and could prove his point by scaling the ruined stairs both ways, demonstrating that the idea was not wholly out of the question.

That, therefore, was endurable. So too was the military service imposed by the region's current overlord, Count Lashgar, on all between eighteen and twenty-one. It was a nuisance, but it was imperative if one wished to marry, and it enabled youngsters to break free of their parents, which could not be bad. Because the count had no territorial ambitions, and spent his time poring over ancient tomes, the most dangerous duties assigned to his troops consisted of keeping track of goats on hilly pastures, and the most unpleasant in the monthly shambles. There were too many people now for fish to feed them all, so the latest invader, Count Lashgar's grand-



father, had exhibited a neat sense of household economy by decreeing that the slaughter of animals should henceforth be an army monopoly, thereby tidily combining weapons training (they were killed with sword and spear) with tax collection (there was a fixed charge based on weight and species, which might be commuted by ceding one sheep of seven, one goat of six and one hog of five), with religious duty (the hearts were saved to be offered on the altar of his preferred deity, Ts-graeb the Everlasting), and with—as he naïvely imagined—an increase in the fish supply. It seemed reasonable to expect that by establishing a shambles in the shallows of the lake one could contrive to give them extra nourishment.

The lake being sluggish, however, the stench grew appalling; moreover, it was the only source of drinking and cooking water. His son peremptorily removed the shambles to the very edge of the plateau, and his grandson Lashgar saw no grounds for disturbing this arrangement. Now and then in the old days one had seen, on the delta below, people shaking fists and shouting insults, but they were too far away to be heard, and none had the temerity to climb the ancient stairs and argue. Not since before Orrish was born had it been deemed advisable to maintain double guards along the rim of the cliffs.

Maybe if that old custom had been kept up. . . .

Perhaps, yes, things would not have taken such a horrifying turn around Taxhling. He would naturally not have been able to do what he was doing—deserting his post by night—without killing his companion or persuading him to come along; on the other hand, the necessity would not have arisen. . . .

Too late for speculation. Here he was, scrambling down the cliff, repeating under cover of darkness his climb of five years ago, wincing at every pebble he dislodged, for the steps rocked and tilted and some had vanished for five or ten feet together. His muscles ached abominably, and though the night was frosty, rivulets of perspiration made him itch all over. However, there was no turning back. He must gain the safety of the level ground below. He must let the people of Stanguray know what enormities one of their number was perpetrating, rouse them to anger and to action!

Under his cold-numbered feet a ledge of friable rock abruptly crumbled. Against his will he cried out as he tumbled into blackness. His memory of the climb he had

made when he was fifteen was not so exact that he knew how high he was, but he guessed he fell no more than twenty feet.

But he landed on a heap of small boulders, frost-fractured from the cliff, and felt muscles and sinews tearing like wet rags.

How now was he to bear a warning to Stanguray?

And if not he, then who?

There was nothing else for it. Despite his agony, he must crawl onward. Even though the witch Crancina had been spawned among them, the people of Stanguray did not deserve the fate she planned. They had at least, presumably, had the sense to drive her out, instead of—like that damned fool Count Lashgar!—welcoming her and giving in to every one of her foul demands.

## V

Autumn had begun to bite when the traveler returned to Stanguray. It was a clear though moonless night. Mist writhed over the marshes. The mud was stiff with cold and here and there a shallow puddle was sufficiently free from salt to have formed a skin of ice.

Despite the chill, the reek of blood was dense in the air.

But in the village of marble pillars and gaudy tilework there was no sign of life, save for suspicious birds and rats.

Unable at first to credit that the place was totally deserted, the traveler slacked the grip of the forces which held together his staff of curdled light. A radiance bright as the full moon's revealed it was only too true. Everywhere doors and shutters stood ajar. No chimney, even on the wealthiest homes, uttered smoke. The boats were gone from the quay, and some few poor household items lay on it, abandoned.

Yet this did not smack of a raid. There was no sign of violence—no fires had been started, no dead bodies lay untidy on the ground. This had been a planned and voluntary departure.

Moreover, as he abruptly realized, something else was wrong. He was immune to the night's freezing air, but not to the chill of dismay which this discovery evoked in him.

Litorgos was no longer penned between salt and silt. The elemental too was absent from this place.



Until this moment he had believed that in all of space and all of time none save he had been granted the power to bind and loose the elemental spirits. Could it be that to another the inverse of his gift had been assigned? Surely the One Who—

But if that were so, then Tarambole had lied. And if that were so, then the universe would become like the pieces on a game board, to be tipped randomly back into their box and played again with different rules. There was no sign of such a catastrophe: no comets, no eruptions, no dancing stars.

A new enemy.

More at a loss than ever before, he pondered and reviewed his knowledge, standing so still that hoarfrost had the chance to form on the hem of his black cloak. With all his powers of reasoning he was still far from an answer when he heard a thin cry, weak as a child's but far too bass.

"Help! Help! I can go no further!"

Half in, half out of a muddy channel, some three or four hundred paces toward the escarpment, he came upon the one who had shouted: a young man in leather jerkin, breeches and boots, whimpering against his will for the pain of torn ligaments in his leg.

"Who are you?" the traveler challenged.

"Orrish of Taxhling," came the faint reply.

"And your mission?"

"To warn the folk of Stanguray what doom's upon them! I never dreamed such horrors could be hatched in a human brain, but—Ow, ow! Curses on my hurt leg! But for it, I'd have been there long ere now!"

"To small avail," the traveler said, bending to haul the man clear of the icy water. "They're gone. All of them."

"Then my errand of mercy was in vain?" Orrish said blankly. And of a sudden he began to laugh hysterically.

"Not so," the traveler returned, touching with his staff the injured leg. At every contact a light shone forth, the color of which humans had no name for. "There, how does it feel?"

Sobered by astonishment, Orrish rose incredulously to his feet, testing the damaged limb. "Why—why, it's a miracle!" he whispered. "Who are you, that you can work such magic?"

"I have many names, but a single nature. If that means aught to you, so be it; if not, and increasingly I find it does

not, well and good. . . . With a name like Orrish, I take you to be of ancient Taxhling stock."

"You know our people?"

"I daresay I've known them longer than you," the traveler admitted. "What's amiss that sent you on your desperate mission?"

"They've gone insane! A witch has come among us, dedicated to the service of Ts-graeb—or so she says—claiming to know how to make our lord Count Lashgar live forever! Now me, I hold no brief against the worshipers of Ts-graeb, or anyone else, although in truth. . . ." Orrish's tongue faltered.

With a hint of his customary dry humor the traveler said, "In truth you adhere to the cult of Frah Frah, and you wear his amulet in the ancient and invariable place, and because your belt has come adrift from your breeches the fact is plainly discernible. I am pleased to learn Frah Frah is not wholly devoid of followers; his ceremonies were often very funny, in a coarse way, and among his favorite offerings was a hearty laugh. Am I not right?"

Frantically making good the deficiencies in his garb, Orrish said in awe, "But that was in my grandfather's day!"

"More like your three-times-great-grandfather's day," the traveler said matter-of-factly. "But you still haven't told me why you were so desperate to warn the folk of Stanguray."

Piecemeal, then, he extracted the whole story, and thereby learned that Tarambole, while of course he could not lie, had access to the power of ambiguity.

That discovery was a vast relief. But it still left a wholly unprecedented situation to resolve.

"This witch is called Crancina," Orrish said. "She came among us recently—last spring—and brought with her a familiar in the guise of a hunchbacked boy. They hailed from Stanguray, and at once everybody was prepared to accept them as marvel-workers, for in living memory none but I has attempted to scale the face of yon escarpment.

"We'd always regarded Count Lashgar as a harmless, bookish fellow. In shops and taverns one might hear people say with knowing nods and winks, 'One could do worse than live under such an overlord!' Confessedly, I've said and believed the same.

"Little did we know that he plotted with his books and incantations to find a means of outliving us all! But *she* did, the witch Crancina, and she came to him and said she knew what



use could be made of the blood spilled from the beasts we kill each month at the dark of the moon. She said that once there was enough blood in the water of the lake. . . . Sir, are you well?"

For the traveler had fallen silent and stock-still, gazing into the past.

In a little he roused himself enough to answer. "No! No, my friend, I am not well, nor is anything well! But at least I now comprehend what is the nature of my unprecedented enemy."

"Explain, then!" pleaded Orrish.

"She made out that once enough blood was in the water, it would turn to an elixir of long life, is that the case?"

"Why, yes! Moreover she declared it should be ample for all to drink, giving each of us an extra span of years!"

"In that she lied," the traveler said, flat-voiced.

"I have suspected so." Orrish bit his lip. "I won't presume to ask how you know—that you're a strange and powerful personage, my well-healed leg declares. . . . Would, though, I might give her the lie direct, on your authority! For what they propose up yonder, in my name, is so ghastly, so awful, so disgusting . . . !"

"It was this that drove you to desert your post?"

The young man gave a miserable nod. "Indeed, indeed. For, lacking as much blood as she maintained was requisite, they began to say, 'Are there not those who bleed at Stanguray? Did not Orrish clamber down and up the cliffs? And must not human blood be more effective? Let us set forth and capture them, and drag them hither, and cut their throats to make the magic work!'"

"And what said Count Lashgar to this mad scheme?"

"Unless Crancina's rites succeed today, he'll give his soldiers orders for the mission."

"Who's making rope?"

The question took Orrish aback for a second; then he caught on and burst out laughing, not as before—halfway to hysteria—but with honest mirth, making an offering to Frah Frah.

"Why, I'm as dumb and blind as they! Surely it will call for miles of rope to fetch hundreds of unwilling captives over level ground, let alone drag them up the cliffs!"

"Such work is not in hand?"

"Why, no! Drunk on promises, the people care only for butchery. Now it's at such a stage that those who set snares

by night are ordered to bring their catch, still living, to be included in the daily ceremony. And woe betide those whose rabbits and hares and badgers are already dead!"

"I understand," the traveler said somberly, and thought on an ancient ceremony, practiced when the forces of chaos were more biddable than now. Then, one had taken a shallow bowl, ideally of silver, incised with the character harst, midmost of those in the Yuvallian script, and filled it with water, and laid therein the germ of a homunculus, and cut one's finger and let three drops fall to mingle with the water, and thereupon the homunculus set forth to do one's bidding. Kingdoms had been overthrown that way.

What would betide when the ceremony was expanded to a whole great lake?

And particularly and essentially: this lake of all . . . !

"Sir," Orrish ventured anxiously, "you spoke just now of some enemy of yours. Is that the witch—is your enemy the same as ours? May we count you for an ally?"

The traveler parried the question. "What drove you to climb down the cliff by night? Fear that you, not worshipping Ts-graeb, would be excluded from the universal benefit of immortality?"

"No—no, I swear on my father's honor!" Orrish was sweating; the faint light of the false dawn glistened on his forehead. "But—well, in the cult of the god I have been raised to worship, it is said that pleasure bought at the cost of another's suffering is no pleasure at all. So it seems to me with this pretended immortality—even given that that is the goal of those cruel ceremonies, which you contest. How can a life worth living be purchased at the expense of so much viciousness?"

"Then let us return together to Taxhling," the traveler said with decision. "Your wish is granted. You shall give the witch the lie direct."

"But *is* she your enemy?" Orrish persisted.

"No, my friend. No more than you are."

"Then—who . . . ?"

Because the question was posed with an honest need to know, the traveler was constrained to answer, after long reluctance.

"That which is against me is within me."

"You speak in riddles!"

"So be it! I had rather not let it be noised abroad that I



overlooked so crude a truth: this is my fault. For the first time, I set forth to fight *myself*."

## VI

Blessedly warm in the room assigned to her at Count Lashgar's residence—for here on the plateau they could afford to be prodigal with fuel, and a log fire had burned all night two steps away from her bed—Crancina woke with a sudden sense of excitement such as she had only felt once before: back in the spring, when it had suddenly dawned on her what use could be made of all that blood fouling Stanguray's river.

A serving maid drowsed on a stool in the chimney corner. Shouting to rouse her, Crancina threw aside the thick warm coverlet of her bed.

Today, yes today, her efforts were sure to be rewarded! Then let that slimy Count go whistle for his dreamed-of immortality! He was on all fours with the greedy men who had demanded her hand in marriage back at Stanguray, when what they wanted was not her, but the profits of her cook-shop and her sweet-water spell.

Today would teach him, and tomorrow would teach the world, a lesson never to be forgotten.

Humming a merry tune, she wrapped herself snug in a sheepskin cape against the chill early-morning air.

"My lord! My lord! Wake up!" whispered the serving man whose duty it was to rouse Count Lashgar. "Mistress Crancina is certain of success today, and sent her girl to tell me so!"

Muzzily peering from among high-piled pillows, the Count demanded, "What's worked the trick, then? The extra animals I ordered to be brought in from snares and traps?"

"My lord, I'm not party to your high councils," was the reproachful answer. "But surely in one of your books the secret's explained?"

"If it had been," Lashgar sighed, forcing himself to sit up, "I'd not have waited this long for the fulfillment of my lifetime dreams."

Through the mists which haunted the edges of the lake a

band of shivering soldiers marched with drums and gongs, and on hearing them people turned out enthusiastically, forgoing breakfast save for a hasty crust and a mouthful of strong liquor. In the old days the morning of a shambles was one to be avoided; now, miraculously, it had been transformed into the signal event of the month . . . today more than ever, for the rumors had already taken rise.

"Today's the day! Crancina told the Count—it's bound to work today! Just think! Maybe some of us, maybe all of us, will be deathless by tonight!"

Only a few cynical souls were heard to wonder aloud what would happen if it proved there was power enough in the bloody water to make one person live forever, and no more. Who would get it, if it weren't the witch?

But those were generally of the aboriginal lakeside stock, whose ancestors had had their fill of magic long ago. Those who worshiped Ts-graeb the Everlasting, as Lashgar did—and his adorers had grown vastly more numerous since the witch arrived—clamored loudly for the favor of their deity, and arrived at the lake's shore singing and clapping their hands.

They raised a vast cheer when Lashgar and Crancina appeared, preceded by the image of Ts-graeb in the guise of an old and bearded wiseacre, which was borne on the shoulders of six men-at-arms. The procession was flanked by the priests and priestesses of Yelb the Comforter, protrayed as having nipples all over her naked bulk from toes to hairline, and the handful who still adhered to Honest Blunk, whose image and symbol was a plain white sphere. No believers in Frah Frah were bold enough to parade their creed, and indeed scarcely any remained.

But, bringing up the very tail, here came a hunchbacked boy in jester's garb, with bells on hat and heels, capering and grimacing as he feigned to strike the onlookers with his wand of office: a pig's bladder on a rod tied with gaudy ribbons. Even the followers of Honest Blunk were glad to crack a smile at sight of him, for a bitter wind soughed over the plateau.

"And where," the traveler murmured as he contrived to fall in beside the jester, "did you get that particolored finery?"

"It's not stolen, if that's what you're thinking!" came the sharp reply. "It belonged to the jester whom Count Lashgar's grandfather kept, and I have been given it by one of the



Count's retainers. Who are you that you put such a question to me? Why, I recall *you*, and only too well." At once the boy ceased his awkward parody of a dance. "It was the very day after you spoke with her that my sister took this crazy notion into her head, and forced me hither up the cliffs! More than once I thought I would die, but my deformity has luckily left my torso light enough for my arms to bear the weight of, and where she almost fell I could cling on for us both. . . . But often I feel I'd rather have let her fall than be condemned to my present lot!"

"Is it no better than at Stanguray?"

"Perhaps by a hair's breadth, now I've appropriated these clothes and wand." Jospil struck the traveler with it, scowling. "But they made me out to be Crancina's familiar at first, and wanted to feed me on hot coals and *aqua regia*. Besides, they have no sense of humor, these people! If they did, would they not long ago have laughed Crancina out of countenance?"

"You are absolutely correct," the traveler agreed solemnly. "And therein lies the key to fulfillment of a wish you made in my hearing. Do you recall it?"

The hunchback gave his usual crooked shrug. "It would have been the same as what I say to everybody, except of course my sister: that one day I should find a means of freeing myself from her."

"And making your way in the world against all odds?"

"Yes, I've said that over and over, and doubtless to you."

"Meaning it?"

Jospil's eyes flashed fire. "Every word!"

"Today, then, is your chance to make the most of your jester's role and achieve your ambition simultaneously."

Jospil blinked. "You speak so strangely," he muttered. "Yet you came to the hearth like anybody, and you were politer to my sister than she deserved, and—yes, it was precisely from the moment of your visit that she took these crazy notions into her head, and . . . I don't know what to make of you, I swear I don't."

"Count yourself fortunate," the traveler said dryly, "that you are not called on to do so. But remember that there is magic abroad today, if not the kind Count Lashgar is expecting, and that you are a crux and focus of it. Sir Jester, I bid you good morning!"

And with a deep-dipping bow, and an inclination of his staff, and a great flapping swirl of his black cape, the traveler was gone about his business.

## VII

How it was that he was back at his guard post in time to reclaim his spear and shield and greet his dawn relief before his absence was noticed, Orrish could afterward never quite recall—nor what had become of his mysterious companion once they were on the plateau.

But he did remember one thing with perfect clarity. He had been promised the chance to give the witch the lie direct. Anxious, he awaited his opportunity. There seemed little chance of it happening, though, for immediately on returning to barracks he had been cornered by a sergeant with a squad lacking one man, to collect the night's trapped animals and bring them to the lakeside to have their life's blood let. In all their various tones they squeaked and whimpered, and their cries made a hideous cacophony along with the bleating and grunting of the few remaining domestic animals, pent in folds of hurdles within scent of the bloody water. At this rate of slaughter, though there would be more pickled meat than their barrels could hold, and more smoked meat than hooks to hang it on, which would see the community through the winter, there would be no breeding stock to start again in the summer. Orrish shook his head dolefully, detesting the assignment he had been given almost as much as he loathed the notion of kidnapping and killing the people of Stanguray.

That at least, if the traveler was to be trusted, was no longer a possibility.

But where was the traveler? Orrish searched the vicinity with worried eyes. Like all those who came of the ancient Taxhling stock, he had been raised to distrust magic and its practitioners, and the way his leg had been healed left no room for doubt that the man in the black cloak trafficked in such arts. Was he—like the witch Crancina—deceitful and self-serving? . . .

Orrish started a little. How did he know the witch was defrauding the people? Why, because the traveler in black had told him so. Maybe he should believe what the rest of his folk believed, rather than take the word of a stranger?

Biting his lip in terrible confusion, he was distracted by a shout from the sergeant, calling the soldiers to attention at the appearance of Count Lashgar. Numbly obeying, Orrish



wished desperately that the traveler would come back; everything had seemed so simple in his company.

Along with the other young conscripts, he awaited the order to butcher the pitiable beasts.

There were obligatory cheers and shouts; they did not last long, however, because everybody was too eager to hear what Crancina proposed to do today. Graciously bowing from side to side as he took station on a kind of dais erected over the water, Lashgar addressed his subjects in a voice surprisingly large for so slim and short a man.

"We are promised marvels!" he declared. "You want to see them as much as I do! I'll waste no time on speechifying, therefore, but let Mistress Crancina have her way!"

Everybody brightened at the brevity of his introduction. And then quieted, and shivered. Even while Lashgar was speaking, Crancina had thrown aside her thick sheepskin cape and begun to make passes in the air, muttering to herself the while. The words could not be made out even at close quarters, yet there was such a resonance to them that if one caught their slightest echo it could send a tremor down the spine.

Now and then she felt in a pouch hung at her girdle and tossed a pinch of powder into the water, rather as though she were seasoning a soup.

Along with all the rest the traveler was mightily impressed. This was the first occasion in more of his visits to this world than he cared to try to count when he had witnessed a genuinely new magic rite. Even though the change might be classed as more quantitative than qualitative, the purpose Crancina was putting her work to was radically different from anything he could recall.

Now and then in the past he had wondered whether cookery, where the practitioner might begin with something not only unpalatable but actually poisonous and conclude with something not only digestible but delicious, might not be the ultimate destiny of temperaments which in earlier ages would have led people to meddle in magic. He made a firm resolve to keep a careful eye on cooks in future.

For this recipe, at least, was working fine.

Much as though it were milk being curdled by rennet, the water of Lake Taxhling was solidifying. Instead of the ran-

dom patterns made by wind and wave, shapes were discernible on the surface, and though they jostled and shifted, they did not break up any longer. The onlookers oohed and aahed, while Count Lashgar, barely disguising his incredulity, tried not to jump up and down for joy.

The shapes were not altogether comfortable to look at; however, they were visible, and little by little they were beginning to stand up from the surface, first as shallowly as ripples, they with more and more protuberance. Also they enlarged. Somewhat separated from each other, they numbered altogether a thousand or two, and their forms were strange beyond description. If this one was reminiscent of a claw-tipped fern frond, its neighbor hinted at a dishmop with vastly enlarged tentacles; if another called to mind a hog's head with holes in it, the next resembled a mouse with twenty legs.

The only thing they had in common, barring their present almost stillness, was their coloration. They were the gray of common pumice stone, and bobbed on the now oily surface of the lake, which had congealed to form them, with a motion as sluggish as though time had slowed to a twentieth of its regular rate.

"Magic!" murmured the onlookers, delighted. "Magic indeed!"

"But she is a liar—she *is*!" came a sudden cry from the direction of the stock pens, where soldiers were dutifully readying the last of the animals to be killed. "*The witch Crancina is a liar!*"

Everyone reacted, especially Lashgar and Crancina herself; the Count shouted an order to the sergeant to quiet the man who had called out, while she shot one nervous glance in that direction and kept on with her recital of cantrips, faster and faster. The images forming on the lake wavered, but grew firm again.

"Silence that man!" the sergeant bellowed, and two of his companions tried to take Orrish by the arms. He shoved his shield in the face of one, breaking his nose, and winded the other with the butt end of his spear, on his way to the nearest point of vantage, the shambles stone—formerly at the far end of the lake near the waterfall, but lately brought back to this spot in the interests of conserving the spilled blood. It was a block of granite with channels cut in the upper face for the blood to drain from. Taking a stance on it, Orrish waved his spear across the waters of the lake.



"How did she expect to get away with it?" he roared. "We know what these apparitions are!"

They wavered again, but remained solid, and were now stock still, as rigid as glass, and as fragile.

Suddenly, cautiously, a few of the watchers—mostly elderly—nodded. Realizing they were not alone, they drew themselves proudly upright and did it again more vigorously.

"And *we* know they have nothing to do with immortality!" Orrish yelled at the top of his lungs. "*Get* away!"—kicking out at the sergeant who was trying to snare him by the ankles. "I don't mean *you* or your blockhead of a master the Count! I mean *us*, who've been here long enough not to be cheated by the witch! Look at her! Look at her! Can't you read fear and terror on every line of her face?"

Crancina was wildly shouting something, but the wind had risen in the past minute or two, and the words were carried away. Beside her, paling, Count Lashgar was signaling to his bodyguard to close in; the priests of Blunk and Yelb and Ts-graeb were likewise huddling together for comfort.

Meantime the images formed on the lake remained unmoving.

"And for the benefit of you who weren't lucky enough to be brought up like me in a household where they still know about this kind of thing," Orrish blasted, "I'll explain! In the remote and distant past our superstitious ancestors believed that the weird and unique objects which came down the river—those which had been of a sinking nature floated, obviously!—all these objects were divine and deserving of worship. So they set up shrines, and made offerings, and called on them when reciting hearth spells, and the rest of it. But at last a sensible teacher arose among us and asked why we had so many petty deities when we could contrive one with all their best attributes and none of their worst. The people marveled and wondered and agreed, and that was how we came to worship Frah Frah! And when we had all consented to the change, the old gods were carried to the lake and thrown back in, to lie on the bottom until the end of the world. And so would they have done, but for Crancina! Ask her now what they have to do with immortality for us, or even her and Lashgar!"

"This is all a falsehood!" Crancina gasped. "I know nothing of ancient gods such as you describe!"

"But do you know anything of immortality?" Lashgar de-

manded. Seizing a sword from the nearest of his guardsmen, he leveled it at her breast.

"Of course she doesn't!" came a crowing voice. "She's fit to run a cookshop, and no more, and that's what she did in Stanguray! Hee-hee-hee-hee-haw!"

And Jospil in his jester's guise frog-hopped toward his sister with a donkey-loud bray of laughter.

Startled, about to launch another broadside of invective, Orrish high on his rock checked, and looked toward Jospil, and against all his best intentions had to grin. The grin turned to a chuckle; the chuckle became a roar of merriment, and he had to lean on his spear for support as he rocked back and forth with tears streaming from his eyes. The mirth was so contagious that, without knowing what was funny, small children echoed it, and tending them their parents could not help but giggle, at the least, and that also spread. While Lashgar and Crancina and the more pompous of the attendant priests—of whichever denomination—looked scandalized and shouted orders which went disregarded by their subordinates, the entire crowd was caught up in one monstrous eruption of hilarity. The eldest of the onlookers, hobbling and toothless, who were as much at a loss about the proceedings as the babes in arms, cackled along with the rest, until the welkin seemed to ring with the sound.

And it did.

Echoed, re-echoed, amplified, the laughter started to resonate. There was a sort of buzzing which filled the air, making it denser than was normal. The vibrations fed on one another; they became painful to the ears; they set the teeth on edge; they shrilled and rasped and ground. Here and there among the throng people looked frightened and cast about for a way of escape. But there was none. The whole huge bowl which constituted the plateau of Lake Taxhling had become a valley of echoes, where sound—instead of dying away—increased in volume, and intensity, and harshness.

All this while the accidental creations of the river once known as Metamorphia, conjured back to the surface of the lake, stood utterly still . . . until they began to tremble under the impact of the noise.

Suddenly a thing like a walrus with a flower for a head cracked sharply across. A sprinkling of fine powder drifted into the air, dancing in time with the vibrations.

Then a curiously convoluted object, half slender and half bulky as though a giant dragonfly had miscegenated with a



carthorse, shattered into tiny fragments. At once there was a rush into the vacancy from either side. Something not unlike a colossal fist, with feathery excrescences, collided with a great hollow structure and reduced it to tinkling shards.

The laughter took on a rhythmical pattern. Now it could be discerned that whenever it reached a certain pitch of intensity another of the objects Crancina had conjured forth broke apart; each such breaking entailed another, and then others. The watchers, who for a moment had been frightened, found this also very amusing, and their mirth redoubled until all were gasping for breath.

Into dust vanished the last relics of articles cast long ago from the citadel of Acromel; into sparkling crystals and jagged fragments dissolved what had once been sacrifices, and weapons, and the bodies of sad drunken fools, and those of condemned criminals, and the carcasses of careless animals, and the husks of insects, and luck-offerings, and deodands, and stolen treasure abandoned by thieves, and fish which had swum from higher reaches of the river, and all sorts of casual rubbish, and leaves and twigs and branches tossed into the water by children at their play, and accidental conformations created by the perversity of the river itself out of lumps of mud which tumbled from its banks.

Instead of a horde of weird fantastical solid objects there was for a moment a silvery shimmering expanse. Precisely then the laughter reached its peak, and every gust was like a blow from a gigantic hammer, descending so fast that the very air grew solid at the impact.

On the third blow, the plateau split. Those who were closest to the cliff fell back from it, shouting, all thought of amusement forgotten. The earth trembled underfoot, and a jagged cleft appeared across the bed of the lake, beginning where the river had tumbled down the escarpment.

In one—two—three violent shifts of colossal mass, Lake Taxhling disappeared: first in a torrent, carving a gash down the face of the steep rocks a dozen times as wide as formerly; then in a steady flood as more and more of the cliff face fell away and the water could spill over as from a tilted basin; lastly as a dribbling ooze, which bared the mud of its bottom. . . .

And in the middle of the new flat dry expanse, a statue: a little awry from the vertical, and draped moreover with garlands of gray-green weed, but the solitary object not affected by the pounding of the laughter which had smashed all of

Crancina's evocations into rubble, and intact enough after its long submersion for it to be instantly recognizable.

The first to identify it was Orrish, regaining his feet after having been knocked down by the earth tremors. For a long moment he gazed at it in disbelief. Then, in sudden frantic haste, he clawed open the belt holding his leather breeches and produced the amulet he secretly wore.

Holding it aloft, he shouted, "Frah Frah! Have we not at last given you the offering you most desire? Laughter has been scant since you departed! And there's a bigger joke than all the rest!"

Lifting his spear, he pointed at Lashgar and Crancina. The pattern of the rift breaching the lake floor was such that the little promontory where they had taken up their positions was isolated between two crevasses.

As though the spear had been a signal, the turfed surface tipped, and with a sighing noise subsided. The Count, and the witch, and the priests, and the idols, and all their hangers-on were abruptly floundering waist-deep in the foulest possible kind of muck. With every frantic move they sprayed it over themselves, until they were unrecognizable.

"A satisfactory outcome, after all," the traveler said, putting by the staff which had dislodged the promontory. "But it was a near squeak. Still, this time the amusement I hear is unforced."

Indeed, there had been one person agile enough to escape the general muddying of the Count's party, and now in his gaudy clothes of red and yellow he was leaping up and down on safe dry land, waving his bladder-tipped wand as if to conduct the orchestra of laughs emanating from the crowd.

One final touch. . . .

The traveler waited for precisely the correct instant; then, with a tap of his staff on the ground, he insured that just as Jospil pointed toward it, the statue of Frah Frah bowed forward, overbalanced, fell smack on its face and disappeared into the yielding mud, over which already the clear stream of the river was coursing in search of its future channel.

Now the laughter rang out again, and the people dispersed good-humoredly enough despite the problem—to be solved on the morrow—of what they would do to gain their livings now. A few daring boys hurled lumps of mud at Lashgar and Crancina and the priests, but the pastime staled rapidly and they too made for their shattered homes.



Apart from those stuck in the mud, and the traveler himself, after a few minutes the only ones left were Jospil and Orrish. Despondent, gripped by a sense of anticlimax, they made their way around the edge of the lake and halted where they could watch the struggles of those who were entrapped.

Shortly they grew aware of another beside them.

## VIII

"It is not given to many to enjoy their hearts' desire," murmured the traveler. "Did you enjoy it?"

"I . . . ." Not knowing quite whether he was speaking, nor whether he was speaking to somebody, Orrish licked his lips. "I guess I'm glad to have made the proper offering to Frah Frah. But as for tomorrow. . . ." He shrugged. "Things can never be the same."

"Interesting," said the traveler. "One might say the same about Chaos, yet here we are at a point where its forces so much wane that laughter serves to defeat them. . . . Nonetheless, in times to come you will be remembered, and even honored, as the man who gave the witch the lie direct. And you, Jospil, even though you are not likely to be revered, you may henceforward pride yourself on having broken free of the witch's tyranny to make your way in the world against all odds."

"If that be so," answered the hunchback sharply, "I reckon little of it. Was my sister a witch before you came to us at Stanguray?"

The traveler perforce was discreetly silent for a while; then said at last, "I should like you to know: it is an earnest of the fulfillment of my task that you relish my aid so much less than what you have previously accomplished on your own."

"Oh, it's not that," sighed Jospil. "It's. . . . Well, I don't honestly understand! What was Crancina up to when she forced me to quit our home in search of Count Lashgar?"

"She had made a wish, and I was bound to grant it."

"A wish? . . ." Jospil's eyes grew round. "Of course! I'd half-forgotten! To know what use might be made of all the blood being spilled up here!"

"Your memory is exact."

"And she discovered, or worked out, that it could be used

to revive those strange and ancient things from the bottom of the lake. . . . How?"

"Yes, how?" chimed in Orrish. "And to what end?"

"Jospil knows the answer to half that question," said the traveler with a wry smile.

"You mean? . . ." The hunchback bit his thumb, pondering. "Ah! We only spoke of half her wish just now. The other part concerned her being in charge."

"As you say."

"But if part was granted, why is the other part not? Why is she not in charge completely, of everything, which I'm sure would suit her perfectly?"

"Because you wished to break free of her against all odds," the traveler answered. "And it so happens that those conflicting wishes which I grant tend to be loaded in favor of whoever cares less for himself, or herself, in the upshot."

He added sternly, "But in your case, boy, it was a close call!"

Jospil gave his sly frog's grin. "Well, at least I have a trade now!"—he slapped the traveler with his bauble—"and there will be a great dispersion from Taxhling, in all directions. From Lashgar's retainer who gave me this jester's outfit I've learned that a comedian at court may be a man of influence; certainly my involuntary benefactor was, who served Lashgar's grandfather until he was beheaded."

"You're prepared to run that risk?" Orrish demanded, aghast.

"Why not?" Jospil said, spreading his hands. "It's better than some risks we take for granted, isn't it? A moment of glory redeems an age of suffering. . . . But one more thing, sir, if I may trespass on your patience. What did my sister hope to achieve, if it was not to make herself immortal?"

"To reenact a certain ceremony formerly involving a homunculus."

Jospil blinked. "That means nothing to me!" he objected. "Nor would it have to her when you called at our cookshop that time! But for your intrusion, we might still be there, and—"

"And she might still be pronouncing her sweet-water cantrip at every dark of the moon."

"Exactly!" Jospil rose awkwardly to his feet. "Sir, I hold you entirely to blame for the predicament we're all cast into!"



"Even though you so much desired to be rid of your sister's tyranny, and you are?"

"Yes—yes!"

"Ah, well"—with a sigh. "I deserve these reproaches, I admit. Since but for me your sister would never have known how reviving the strange creations of Metamorphia and imbuing them with blood could have made her mistress of the world."

Orrish's jaw dropped; a second later, Jospil clutched the hem of the traveler's cloak.

"She could have done *that*?"

"Why, beyond a peradventure! What magic is left nowadays is residual, by and large, and the bed of Lake Taxhling was the repository of an enchantment such as few contemporary wizards would dare risk."

"I could have been half-brother to the ruler of the world?" Jospil whispered, having paid no attention to the last statement.

"Indeed you could," the traveler said calmly, "if you genuinely believed that a moment of glory redeems an age of suffering—and, I assure you, had she become ruler of the world she would have understood how to inflict suffering."

Frowning terribly, Jospil fell silent to reflect on what had been said, and Orrish ventured, "Sir, will you stay with us to rectify the consequences of your actions?"

There was a long, dead pause; the traveler hunched gradually further and further into the concealment of his hood and cloak.

Finally he said, as from a vast distance, "The consequences of my actions? Yes! But never the consequences of yours."

There followed a sudden sense of absence, and in a little while Jospil and Orrish felt impelled to go and join the rest of the people, clearing the debris left by the earthquake.

Which, of course, was all that had really happened . . . wasn't it?

## IX

"Litorgos!" said the traveler in the privacy of his mind, as he stood on a rocky outcrop overlooking the salt-and-silt delta being transformed by the outgush of water from on

high. Already the pillars of Stanguray were tilting at mad angles; marble slabs and tiled façades were splashing into the swollen river. "Litorgos, you came closer to deceiving me than any elemental in uncounted eons!"

Faint as wind sighing in dry branches, the answer came as though from far away.

"But you knew. You knew very well."

And that was true. Silent awhile, the traveler reflected on it. Yes indeed, he had known, though he had not paid attention to the knowledge, that when he granted Crancina her wish he was opening the bonds which held Litorgos. For the sole and solitary and unique fashion by which the blood spilled into the river at Taxhling might be turned to the purpose Crancina had in view was by the intervention of an elemental. So much blood had been spilled the world over, another few thousand gallons of it was trivial, except. . . .

And therefore Tarambole had told the truth. It was not an elemental working against the traveler which called him back to Stanguray.

It was an elemental working with him.

For otherwise the wish could never have been granted.

"There was a time," the traveler said in this confessional, "when I was ready to believe that the One Who—"

"She does not change Her mind," came the sharp retort.

"She has not done so," the traveler corrected. "But as the One to Whom all things are possible. . . ."

"Then if that may prove to be the case, reward me straight away, before the unthinkable occurs!"

"Reward you? For deceiving me?"

"For working with you, instead of against you!"

The traveler considered awhile; then he said, "I find that while I am not constrained to grant the wish of an elemental, I have done it in the past and am therefore not debarred from doing so. Besides, I am inclined to favor you, inasmuch as you foresaw the need for the people of Stanguray to evacuate their homes and contrived that they should do so before the flood came pouring down from Taxhling. What then is your wish?"

"I would cease!"

The fury behind the message made the ruined plateau tremble one more time, and people rescuing their belongings from half-wrecked houses redoubled their efforts.

"Once I and all were free and we could play with the total-



ity of the cosmos! Once we could roam at large and transform galaxies at our whim, breaking the rope of time and making it crack like a whip! Then we were caught and bound, and pent as you pent me, and I know, in the very core and center of my being, this imprisonment will never cease.

"So let *me* cease!"

For a long, long moment the traveler remained impassive, reflecting on what a change Litorgos had just wrought. Now the balance had been tipped; now the triumph he looked forward to was certain—always excepting the intervention of the Four Great Ones whom he could only banish, who might return.

But who would be insane enough to open a door for Tuprid and Caschalanva, Quorril and Lry—even if anybody remembered their existence?

With a great sigh of contentment the traveler said aloud, "In Eternity the vagaries of chaos permit even death to be reversed. In Time the certainties of reason insist that even elementals may be—*dead*."

For another hour the flood continued to wash away both sand and silt from the area where Litorgos had been and was no longer.

Later, the settlements which had surrounded Lake Taxhling were overthrown by further earth movements, and at last there was a vast slumping of the escarpment, such that half the old delta was hidden under scree and mud.

And in due time, when people came and settled thereabouts, ignorant of what cities had stood on the same site before—though not wholly the same, for the coastline also changed—it was held to be a pleasant and fortunate ground, where generations prospered who knew nothing about magic, or elemental spirits, or rivers running stinking red with blood.

# Grail Undwin

## ZURVAN'S SAINT

*Grail Undwin excites me, too. She writes fairy tales for grown-ups like nobody else ever wrote fairy tales, and I find her meticulously invented version of the halfworld of Faërie a fascinating place to explore . . . although I'm not sure I'd like to live there. How Ms. Undwin can pack so much emotion into a story as lean and sinewy and unpadding as this bewilders me. And in that respect, if in no other, she reminds me of the late Leigh Brackett. But even Leigh (bless her!) never wrote anything like "Zurvan's Saint."*

—L.C.

Eochan had traveled far and wide in his time, but now he was content to live alone on one of the little islands of Faërie which dot the misty expanse of what I will call Maeldun's Sea—although the elves, of course, know it by a different name.

The island which he had taken for his home was called the Island of the Stone Door. Maeldun himself had seen it and described it in his poem: it was a great, high island, although not of any particular size, and its principal and most intriguing feature was a house upon it, built at the shore. The door of this house was of stone, as the name of the island suggests, and seemed set in such a position so that the waves



drove through the portal into the hall. No one lived there when Maeldun came, centuries ago, as mortals measure time, and only Eochan lived there now. The roof kept away the rain, and there was a great bed within the house on which he slept. Food and drink appeared daily beside this bed, and it was upon this that Eochan lived; this, and occasionally the fresh salmon which the sea from time to time drove into the hall.

He did not mind living all alone, for he was a man of solitary habits. He could easily have sailed his boat to another island, such as Sorchá or Tirnanóg, where there were folk living. But the Island of the Stone Door pleased him, and he did not mind that it was seven days' sailing to the next island.

He seldom had visitors.

The interesting thing about Eochan was that he had once been a priest of the Christian God. Indeed, for all he knew, he was one still. He had sailed out of Galway Bay long ago, driven by a vision and trusting to find St. Brendan's Isle; but he had not found it.

He had known at once he was in Faërie. For one thing, no sun shone in the sky; there was only a dim, pervasive brilliance almost, but not quite, as bright as day. Shuddering, he had crossed himself and prayed, wishing he had brought a stoup of holy water with him so that he might have broken the spell that bound him. But he had not, and he remained in Faërie, and traveled widely, before settling down.

First he visited Sorchá, an elf kingdom made up of many islands, of which the largest was called Falga, where Queen Fand rules. Once, he knew, Manannán had been King of these parts of Faërie, but no more. He had been Fand's husband, but they had a falling out and he went away to visit his kin among the Sidhe of Annwyn, an elf kingdom in Wales. While Manannán was off sulking in Wales, the Irish hero, Cúchulainn had come a-roving and stayed as the Queen's lover before returning to his own wife in Ireland; after that, no reconciliation was possible, and now Fand ruled alone, and was much the happier for it, all things considered.

Eochan knew all about these matters because he belonged to a time long after Cúchulainn, and had heard the tale sung by a bard of Ulster. Fand was hospitable and treated him well (for the elves respect guest-right as much as do mortal men), but she paid no attention when he tried to convert her. When Eochan finally got up enough courage to ask the

Queen why she didn't want him to save her soul, she explained, quite politely, that she didn't have one.

The elves (Fand told him) had never fallen from Grace in the first place; and, in the second place, they had been given immortality in the body, rather than immortal souls. The Irish priest was quite scandalized and left the kingdom soon afterward.

That had been a long time ago—Eochan wasn't exactly certain just how long, because the elves did not measure time; at any rate, he had been young and foolish then, and very easily upset to encounter anyone whose beliefs differed from what the monks had taught him.

By now he had lived in Faërie long enough to realize that the Sidhe, who worshiped no gods at all and could not reasonably be expected to worship themselves, worshiped the only thing that was important to them, which was their own immortality. They called it *Zurvan*, which meant Infinite Time, a term which they had borrowed from the Zoroastrians—although Eochan knew nothing at all about Zoroastrians.

And so it was that, although it would have made him a lot happier to have been fortunate enough to make a few converts among the elves of Sorcha, Eochan was contented enough with his lot so that he no longer dreamed of Ireland. If he must live among the heathen (it seemed to him), at least the heathen were faithful to their own outlandish religion. Eochan could imagine no grimmer fate than to have been exiled among pure, unadulterated atheists, and considered himself relatively blessed to have escaped *that* fate.

He spent his time praying and counting his beads, although as time went on he performed these duties less and less, and finally lapsed from the habit entirely. He roamed the shore and strolled through the woods which grew thick about the higher parts of his island, and talked to the huge fowl which sometimes flew here from the Island of the Great Birds.

His robes had worn away to rags, but before he left Sorcha the Queen gave him new robes of elvish-weave, which could never wear out. They seemed to him unspeakably gaudy, all blue and silver and gold and gray-green, like a prince's gown; but he wore them and endured looking more like a peacock than a priest.

With no one else to talk to except the Great Birds sometimes, he talked to himself and frequently to God. God never answered, of course, not that Eochan really expected Him to;



but this made him wonder if, after all, God ruled over the realms of Faërie. On the whole, it seemed unlikely. So, in time, Eochan found himself talking to Zurvan, who never answered either, but was presumably kept quite busy running this world while God ran the world of mortal men.

"How is it this mornin', Yer Holiness?" he would inquire of the luminous skies after breakfast. "And are all of the Little Folk fit and happy as larks, on so foine a day?" (He knew perfectly well that the elves were as large, if not larger, than men like himself, but his nurse had called them that when he had been a child, and old habits are hard to break.)

Very often he engaged in one-sided arguments of a theological nature with Zurvan, explaining to the elvish deity the nature of Sin, the doctrine of Redemption, and the dogma of Rebirth. It would have astounded the good priest had he known that, during the years he had lived in Faërie, his theology had become quite antiquated and was now, in fact, thoroughly heretical.

But this he was never to know.

One morning, having forgotten to pray for a very long time, he remembered, and was kneeling when a visitor arrived—a sprite named Ariel. And Ariel overheard him at his devotions, during which the mischievous immortal was quite surprised to hear the name of Zurvan substituted for God's name in Eochan's prayers. Remaining within earshot for the next few days, the sprite heard the good father pray to Jesus and to Mary on successive mornings. And in every case, it was Zurvan that he named, rather than his own divinities.

Ariel said nothing to the priest of this, for no reason that he could give, even to himself. The elves are cold-hearted, although they can be kind, and lack anything remotely resembling a conscience; theoretically, Ariel should have taken a cruel delight in pointing out the old man's error. But this he did not do, and flew off to Broceliande soon after in a peculiarly thoughtful and pensive mood.

As he grew older—for even in Faërie he was only a mortal and thus remained vulnerable to age—the old priest grew forgetful and more than a little mad, it may be. He took to blessing things, the rocks along the shore, the birds, the waves of the sea, even the trees.

He forgot to eat, and he forgot to sleep.

In time he died.

When next Ariel came to visit the Island of the Stone Door, he found the old man's body lying at the edge of the

wood, his limbs composed as if for slumber, his thin hands folded on his breast, his lined face peaceful. The sprite felt unusually somber and uneasy. And he tried to ignore the fact that the body was whole and uncorrupted, and, on the whole, smelled of roses.

These things were easy enough to do. But it was very hard to pretend not to see the Light that shone about his brows like a crown of dimly glorious stars.

Ariel buried him behind the house, raising a cairn to mark the spot. He could not have said exactly why he did this, but in his way he had grown fond of the harmless old Irishman—perhaps he had reminded him of Prospero, who knows?—and he knew enough of the curious ways of mortals to know they prize what they call “a decent grave.”

Then he returned home to the groves of Elysium, where the elves of Greece still linger. And, although Ariel said nothing, word got about, and the island became a place of pilgrimage and, it is said, of miracles.

I have no explanation for this; but perhaps it matters little which god you worship, or whether you worship any god at all, so long as you worship.

And if you worship long and hard enough, for all I know, even Zurvan can make a saint of you.



## PERFIDIOUS AMBER

*Four of the authors represented in this book are British, which may or may not mean anything, although Britain has produced several of the greatest fantasy writers ever—Dunsany, Eddison, White, Tolkien, Lewis. And three of the authors represented here are women, which also probably means nothing, except that (as I've bewilderedly pointed out a time or two before) it's odd that so many of the best recent fantasy writers—Evangelina Walton, Leigh Brackett, C. L. Moore, Andre Norton, Tanith Lee, Grail Undwin, Ursula K. LeGuin, and so on—happen to be women.*

*Well, Tanith Lee is both a woman and British, so she has two reasons to be among the best fantasy writers alive. Which is exactly where she is. . . .*

—L.C.

"It is true they say the ring is cursed," the young man said quietly. "But for myself, I discount such things. I do not believe in demons."

"The more unsanguine for you, should you ever meet one," said Cyrion, with a melancholy smile.

"Well, then, what should I do? My family fortune was lost

to me in stupid excesses of my adolescence. Scurrilous acquaintances led me astray. Bitterly regretting these faults, I strove to rebuild my vanished wealth. In the midst of this struggle, walking one morning through the city, I beheld an angel carried in a litter, the most lovely maiden in Andriok: Berdice, Sarmur the silk merchant's daughter. Sarmur is rich; I, at that time, penniless. But, for the sake of my lineage, he permitted me to wed his child, and settled on her an excellent dowry. What can I offer in return? Nothing? Naturally, I thought of this ring, the one possession I never squandered. My family has owned it, seven generations. Should it lie in a box, or jewel the hand of my exquisite wife?"

Blond, handsome and apparently just a touch politely bored, Cyrion observed the ring in question.

It lay in a nest of azure velvet that made it, by contrast, all the bloodier and more rich; an amber intaglio, set in heavy gold, its surface engraved with the design of a lily, a swallow in flight, and a rayed sunburst. Certainly, it was splendid. Certainly, Cyrion had heard of it. It had a nickname: *Farewell*.

"What do you say, Cyrion? How do you advise me? I admit the *legend* of the curse, but no one has died because of it for a hundred years."

"Neither has anyone worn it during that time."

The young man sighed. He had a strong, attractive face, augmented by bright blue eyes, betrayed by a dissipated mouth. Volf, he was called. He came from the west, though his bride and his ring were eastern in their origins. He had met Cyrion at an expensive tavern on the Street of Heaven. The meeting had been casual, but Volf had seemed to recognize Cyrion's person and cognomen. It was possible he had sought Cyrion out purposely for counsel for, here and there, Cyrion had a reputation for ruthless wisdom.

"I am interested by the engraving," said Cyrion.

"Oh, yes. The lily, symbol of the soul; the flying swallow, symbol of freedom; the sun, symbol of the sky."

"I see you have pondered the matter," said Cyrion blandly. "But now, tell me what you know about the curse itself."

Volf grinned. "What I know proves the legend to be merely that, a tale to scare off thieves, no more. Allegedly, an eastern queen had the ring made as a token of her passion for her husband. But, in order to attain the best, she required a demon to fashion it. Hence the symbols, each connected with the power of Good—lily, swallow, sun—which she had



the demon incise in the amber to negate any evil it might be planning. The demon paid no heed to these symbols, however. The queen gave the ring to her husband as he rode out to battle, hoping it would guard him. But no sooner had he raised his sword and spurred his horse to meet the enemy than the king fell dead from the saddle. There was no wound upon him, but his countenance was fixed in a grimace of extreme horror.

"The battle was lost, and the ring passed to the conqueror, who dismissed the event. He wore the ring successfully for three years, though he was an irreligious scoundrel. Then one day he went hunting lions in the desert. No one was near him, but suddenly his horse stumbled. Next moment he was dead. Again no visible assailant, no wound, and a grimace of horror. But this is patently absurd. It offends our reason. Must I go on?"

"If it tires you, there is no need." Cyrion rose.

"No, no. Wait. I rely upon your advice, dear sir. I will continue. The ring was inherited by the son of the conqueror, but the son was afraid to wear it. A century later, the ring was stolen from his treasury by a mage, intrigued by its magic properties. He wore it without harm for some months. Then an earthquake destroyed his house and he perished. The ring was extracted from the ruin by bandits. The leader of these wore the ring only a day. He was captured by warriors of the prince of those parts, but dropped lifeless on the way to his execution. The ring was appropriated by one of the warriors, who gifted it to his pregnant wife. During childbirth she died—her face fixed in horror, of course, and the child was stillborn. Thereafter, the ring was buried with her, and came into my family as loot from the rifled tomb. Three of my ancestors reputedly died through it, but I would credit their deaths to mischance. One met his end by falling from a wall when the parapet gave way. One died during a storm at sea. One died of a fit during an eclipse of the sun. Since then, the ring has gone unworn."

"And have you never worn it?" Cyrion inquired innocently.

"I never thought to, in my penury. But I am not afraid to do so. Mark." Volf drew the amber ring from its velvet and slid it onto the small finger of his left hand. He laughed, decidedly without nervousness. "If a malign fate resides in the ring, let it mow me down. But I do not believe in it. Men have always been prone to death. The termini of my fore-

bears are explicable without recourse to a curse. Even the deaths recounted in the legend are explicable."

"Nevertheless," said Cyrion, "death and the ring go hand in hand."

"But without a pattern—men who died after three years, three months, a day, or less! And such variable deaths. Some without apparent cause, some by earthquake, water—and one a woman in labor. No. Coincidence, Cyrion. If not, I, too, will die. I mean to wear this ring one day and no longer. If we are to credit that all who wear the intaglio are slain by it, the demon has no choice but to kill me during this period. Do you agree?"

"It seems," said Cyrion, "feasible."

"At midnight tonight," said Volf, his eyes shining, "I will remove the ring. At that hour I will give it to my wife. Will you visit us tonight? Eat with us, and remain till midnight. I do not reckon on any danger, but even so, they say you have mastered demons, or what passed for such. In your company, Berdice will be doubly protected."

Cyrion moved toward the door.

"Until tonight, then. Providing you are happy to linger alone with the demon of the ring."

"More than happy," said Volf, and laughed again. Cyrion took his leave.

The house of Volf, a portion of the dowry Sarmur's daughter had brought him, was an opulent one. Gates of wrought iron led from the street into a courtyard of flowers and fountains. Two stories of white and pink washed stone followed, palm-wood pillars and suitable silken hangings.

Nowhere was there more silk than in the apartment of Berdice herself. Hangings fine as smoke and heavy as syrup gleamed on their rings, draped by silken ropes, blue, green and purple. Mirrors of real glass stood in silver frames. Rainbow birds twittered in ornate wicker cages. In the middle of the bower, Berdice herself, twittering too.

Undoubtedly, she was beautiful. Jet black hair poured unbound to her tiny waist. A flawless complexion of most delicate olive flushed into faint rose at her cheeks and lips. Gazelle eyes, dainty hands, full breasts, gave further evidence of perfection. Beauty and to spare she had. She had also, from the age of thirteen, been paralyzed from the tiny waist down.

Regardless of the disposition of Berdice, her physical



attributes and her wealth, the affliction had proved a bar in the matter of husbands. Then handsome Volf, poor, but of honorable name and useful western blood, had been smitten by Berdice, and, finding out the truth, had simply wept on Sarmur's shoulder, saying it made her but the dearer to him, that eventually his adoration might cure her of her trouble, that even if it did not, she was the only woman he could ever love.

Luckily, Berdice was empty-headed. It had helped her to brush aside her grievances. She twittered, and twittered. She hardly ever stopped. It could have been irritating, despite her grace and her bravery. It *was* irritating.

Now there was a brief pause. A maid had entered and said: "There is a woman at the gate. She asks to read your hand. I never saw anyone like her before, nor so grand. Shall I tell her to be off?"

"Tell her to come in wight away," twittered Berdice.

She liked to be occupied during the long hours when her husband was absent, at a tavern or similar resort. All manner of charlatans came and went through the house. Now one came who was not like the others.

She was a very tall woman, with imperious chiseled features. These she had plastered skillfully but heavily with paint and powder, which did not hide that her face was far too masculine for beauty, though somehow she was still as beautiful as Berdice, and probably more so. Her head was bound by a black scarf stitched with pearls, her figure swathed in a sack-like robe. Enameled bracelets clanked on her wrists. Her large but well-shaped hands blazed with rings. She bowed herself almost to the ground before Sarmur's daughter, with the flamboyant courtesy of one who secretly rules the kingdom.

"Ethereal mistress," she whispered in a hoarse yet strangely musical voice, "will you allow me to unlock for you the occult lore of the universe?"

"Pwobably," said Berdice. "But what is your pwice?"

"I will inform you presently, maiden mistress." The tall charlatan seated herself at Berdice's feet, and took up the girl's hand in a thrilling, ringed clasp. "You suffer," pronounced the charlatan.

"No." Berdice looked surprised.

"Yes," said the charlatan. "You are unable to walk."

"How clever," said Berdice. For a moment her gazelle eyes

were naked and wretched. Then they glazed, and she twittered again: "How ever did you know?"

Most of Andriok knew about Sarmur's daughter.

"My talent for divination," murmured the charlatan modestly. "But," she hissed, "what can have instigated this tragedy? An accident—"

"It was a—*cat*," Berdice blurted, blanching.

"I see in your hand a cat," swiftly interrupted the charlatan. "You are afraid of cats. The cat frightened you."

"I was asleep," Berdice confided. "I woke to discover the—*cat*—sleeping across my lap. I scweamed and scweamed, but it only stared with its evil fiery stare. Then it bit me and wan away. Since then I have not walked. I never could bear—*cats*." Berdice shivered and closed her eyes. "God deliver me," she moaned.

"Does your husband know your fear?" asked the charlatan.

"Oh, yes," said Berdice. She cheered up. She twittered: "What will happen tomowwow?"

"Night will come before day," said the charlatan. "Understand, maiden, I have read your stars. You are in danger's jaws, at the brink of your grave."

The maids, but not Berdice, uttered outraged shrieks. The charlatan silenced them with one glare of her brilliant, kohl-caked eyes. "Send out these bats," commanded the charlatan.

The bats were sent out.

"I speak to save your life," said the charlatan to Berdice.

"God deliver me," said Berdice again.

"Here are amulets to protect you," said the charlatan. "Wear them, and do not reveal their source or their nature. By their efficacy you will live."

Berdice looked at the amulets and tried to twitter. The twitter faded.

"But—" said Berdice.

"Do as you are told," said the charlatan, "or I cannot be responsible."

Kissing Berdice on the forehead, and adorning it thus with the likeness of two carmined lips, the charlatan rose.

"Am I to pay you?" gasped Berdice.

"I will take this," and plucking carelessly undid the purple silken cord from one of the drapes; the charlatan stalked from the chamber, ignoring the resultant gallon of loosed silk which plummeted upon Berdice's head.

Night clothed Andriok soberly. Andriok retaliated by gaud-



ily bejeweling itself with lights. Volf's house was no exception. Scented resins flared and perfumed the air, golden filigree lamps smoldered.

Volf welcomed Cyrion like a long-lost brother he had not seen in ten years but for whose company he had continuously pined. In the satin of Askandris and the silver of Daskiriom, not to mention his own impeccable glamour, Cyrion was fair set to outshine the house.

Entering the dining chamber, Volf displayed his left hand. On the small finger, the amber intaglio lay like a great bead of rufus honey.

"Again, mark, my Cyrion. It and I are yet together, and I thrive. Only two hours remain to midnight."

"My congratulations," said Cyrion. "This far."

"Pardon me," said Volf. "I assume, from your appearance, you never lacked for money. I have now only what my wife has brought me. And I am sick with wanting to give her something of my own."

Just then, two servants came in, carrying Volf's wife in an ornate chair, which they put beside the open window. She was prettily (if over) dressed. A gown embroidered with good omens, gold chains—oddly impressed—at her throat, bracelets hung with small medallions of jade and malachite, sapphire earrings in the shape of charms, a girdle of striped silk pinned with a lucky golden snake, a rose in her hair pinned with another, and a pair of thin silk gloves, rather stiff.

"Here is my light of love, Berdice, my beloved wife," enthused Volf.

"Madam," said Cyrion bowing. "You seem to be in fear of something. I trust it is not of me?"

Berdice, who had been rather pale, regained her color violently. Her eyes widened in alarm on Cyrion.

"My dove must fear nothing," said Volf. "At midnight I shall give her this amber ring, which will thereafter safeguard her from all ills. You see, Cyrion, I believe in Fortune's smiling face, if not her frown."

Berdice viewed the ring and paled once more.

"This is the wing they call '*Farewell*.' Oh, Volf—It will harm you!"

Volf laughed loudly, and explained his scheme.

Berdice recoiled.

"God deliver me!" she wailed.

At that, Volf laughed even more loudly.

"Have faith in me, beloved," he sang. "Let us prove to the world that superstition is idiocy and all the demons are dust. Besides, we have Cyrion here to insure our health. Cyrion is a hero of unsurpassable wit and gallantry."

"You will cause me to blush," opined Cyrion.

Berdice gazed at him in confused suspicion.

Dinner was served.

They ate the several courses, Berdice mute, Volf voluble. Through the open window, framing Berdice in spangles, stars shone. The scents of night-blooming flowers also wandered in from that direction, and the trilling of a sulky nightingale. In a corner of the room, meanwhile, a gilded clepsydra dripped away the minutes, quarters, a half hour, an hour. And then began to waste a fresh hour, by minutes, quarters, halves. . . .

It was almost midnight.

Suddenly Berdice started frantically to twitter.

"This afternoon, Volf—such a peculiar thing. A huge tall woman, a palm-weader and astwologer, she said. She burst into my apartment and told me I should die—"

Volf jumped, and dropped his winecup. The wine spilled across the napkins, the mosaic table, sinking in its crevices.

"But the silliest item of all," piercingly twittered Berdice, with a maniacal glance at Cyrion, "is that I wealize the woman to have been—"

"Forgive me, madam," smoothly interposed Cyrion. "But I fancy your water-clock is slow. Is that not the midnight bell from the citadel?"

Volf and his wife froze. Sure enough, the bell was being rung.

As the bell finished, Volf leaped up and clasped Berdice's gloved right hand.

"My darling, I wear the ring and live. And now—" he drew the amber from his finger—"I no longer wear the ring. The demons are defeated. These demons who never existed. Here, my angel. The ring is innocuous. Take it, with my heart." And with these words, Volf slid the amber intaglio onto her index finger. Then, raising his arms aloft in an ecstasy, Volf roared: "Heaven be praised!"

Somewhere in the dark courtyard outside, there was a muffled oath, and a scuffling.

Something hurtled through the window.

It flailed and revolved and kicked and spat and yowled.

In the midst of flailing, revolving, kicking, spitting, yowl-



ing, it landed in the lap of Berdice, and to the symphony of noises was added a sound of ripping claws and a single awful scream.

"A—cat!" cried Berdice in maddened terror. "A—cat—a—cat! Oh—God deliver me!"

"Berdice" Volf shouted, ecstasy replaced by agony. He flung himself on her and gathered her limp form into his arms. He wept uncontrollably. "Cyrion, even you could not save her. I was a fool. The curse is true. The demon of the ring has struck her down, and it is my fault. I am to blame, in my stupidity. You warned me. Demons exist. Now I am left with nothing."

"Not quite," said Cyrion mildly. "Her fortune will be yours upon her death."

Volf shot him a livid, tear-spattered glare.

"What use are riches to me, when my love is slain? I am a broken man."

Cyrion in turn was nursing the cat. Initially furious at its propelled entry through the window, it had now relapsed into a purring drapery for his shoulder. Thoughtfully, Cyrion spoke. "Your grief is premature, Volf. Your wife is not dead."

"Foul mockery. She is."

"No. She has fainted, and will presently revive. Much to your chagrin, dear Volf."

Volf tremblingly peered into Berdice's face, and gasped.

"You are correct—she lives. But—"

The cat kissed Cyrion on the lips.

"Your scurrilous acquaintance, by the way," said Cyrion, "the man you paid to throw a cat in upon your wife, has probably already been apprehended. I gave a warning to the night-watch, earlier this evening."

Volf set Berdice back in her chair, and straightened. His look was currently one of wary incredulity.

"What are you saying?"

"What am I saying?" Cyrion asked the cat.

"You impugn I paid a man to shock my wife to her death?"

"Frankly, my dear," Cyrion reproved him, "if you were clever enough to solve the secret of the intaglio, you should have been capable of a better plot than this."

"Explain yourself."

"Shall I? Why not. It will fill the time until the watch proceed to your gate."

"To begin with, despite your protestations, Berdice was a burden you never intended to shoulder very long. Having married her, you would next get rid of her, so inheriting all her wealth, not to mention her father's, after his demise. Your only problem was method, some tool which would leave you, ostensibly, blameless. It was easy. Sarmur and his daughter are both highly superstitious, while you have been at pains to show yourself an unbeliever in all things intangible. Hence, the amber intaglio, which you knew could kill anyone, given the relevant circumstance.

"The legend of the ring is precise, for it was written up in the woman's tomb, was it not, from which your family pilfered it? The deaths among your forebears are also well documented. Though there appeared to be no pattern, nevertheless, unfailingly, deaths occurred. How long did it take you to answer the riddle? Let me reiterate the fatalities. A king spurring toward a battle. A conqueror on a stumbling horse. A mage in an earthquake. A bandit en route to the gallows. A woman in childbirth. And in your own family, a man falling from a wall, a man in a storm at sea, a man throwing a fit during an eclipse of the sun. And what is the common denominator? How long did you say it took you to unravel the mystery?"

Volf snarled: "*Two years.*"

Cyrion diluted a smile. It had taken him two minutes, a little less.

"Danger is the key," said Cyrion. "Danger and its complement, fear. And one further thing, dependent upon danger and fear."

Cyrion was silent.

"Say the rest."

"Must I?"

"I want to hear . . . if you have it right. You owe me that."

"I owe you nothing. It shall be a gift. That further thing, then. I remember how swiftly you named the symbols engraved in the amber—a lily was the soul, a swallow was freedom, the sun was the sky. But, like most symbols of picture-writing, the meaning can be accepted as slightly more exact. The soul-lily may also represent the ego, thus 'I' or 'me.' The swallow does not only signify freedom, but freedom from bondage—deliverance. As for the sun, it is the ancient cipher, not only for the sky, but for God. So the lily, the swallow, the sun offer us, you agree, a sentence of picture-



writing to be translated as *God deliver me*. An established religious phrase in most languages, then or now. The king riding to battle whispering a last prayer. The man on the stumbling horse calling out in alarm. The mage, feeling the house shake with the earth-tremor—who could guess him slain before the walls buried him? The bandit uttering the traditional orison on the road to the gallows. The woman in the pain of childbirth, shrieking. And your ancestor tumbling from the broken parapet, dead before he hit the ground. The second dead before the water closed over his head. The third, appalled by the darkness of the eclipse—*God deliver me* they each cried. And the ring killed them instantly, as its engraving warns it will. Those words, spoken by the wearer, activate a device under the stone. A hair-fine sliver darts into the skin of the finger. Poison runs. A demon poison, so virulent it can dispatch in seconds. The victim sinks prostrate, with a look of horror and no visible wound.

"Knowing all this, you could wear the ring and avoid death. But when a cat descended on your cat-fearing wife, you knew she would exclaim the fatal phrase and die immediately. And I, with what you foolishly deduce to be an heroic reputation, was to attend the scene as your witness to inescapable Fate."

"But Berdice has not died," Volf said. He looked drained, no longer angry or malevolent. His weak mouth wobbled, and his feigned tears for his wife had altered to genuine tears spilled for himself.

"Luckily for the lady," said Cyrion, "a witch-woman happened to visit her this afternoon, and persuaded her to wear two amulets. These." He pointed to the silken gloves on Berdice's hands, the fingers of which gloves were all internally lined with thin but impregnable jointed steel of Daskiriom—unpierceable by any venomous sliver, no matter how fine.

Berdice was stirring. Cyrion gently divested himself of the cat, leaned over the girl and took her by the elbows. He pulled her suddenly to her feet.

"The shock of the second cat has cured you," said Cyrion sternly. "Now you can walk. Do so."

Berdice gaped at him, then took a faltering step.

She screamed, and took another.

Still screaming and still walking, she permitted Cyrion to aid her from the room. On the threshold he placed in her grasp a purple silken cord, but she barely noticed. She

seemed to have forgotten Volf, too, which forgetfulness would presently stand her in good stead.

When Cyrion returned to the dining chamber, the watch were already hammering at the gate.

Volf huddled in a chair.

Cyrion set beside him, on the mosaic, the ring.

"To hang is a prolonged and unpleasing business," Cyrion murmured, fastidiously.

When they reached the dining chamber, the watch found one man alone in it, and he was quite dead. Volf lay across the table, with the amber intaligo on his hand, a look of horror on his face, and no visible wound.



## THE MER SHE

*Fritz is a man and an American, unlike Tanith. But I believe most readers would agree with me that he is probably the finest single fantasy writer living. For more years than I (or, probably, he) care to remember, he has been busy chronicling the adventures of that delightful duo of rogues, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. And here's the latest story in a sequence of brilliant and inimitable yarns that seems to be, and hopefully is, endless.*

—L.C.

The ripening newrisen moon of the world of Nehwon shone yellowly down on the marching swells of the Outer sea, flecking with gold their low lacy crests and softly gliding the taut triangular sail of the slim galley hurrying northwest. Ahead, the last sunset reds were fading, while black night engulfed the craggy coast behind, shrouding its severe outlines.

At *Seahawk's* stern, beside Old Ourph, who had the tiller, stood the Gray Mouser with arms folded across his chest and a satisfied smile linking his cheeks, his short stalwart body swaying as the ship slowly rocked, moving from shallow trough to low crest and to trough again with the steady southwest wind on her loadside beam, her best point of sailing. Occasionally he stole a glance back at the fading lonely lights of

No-ombrulsk, but mainly he looked straight ahead where lay, five nights and days away, Rime Isle and sweet Cif, and poor one-hand Fafhrd and the most of their men and Fafhrd's Afreyt, whom the Mouser found rather austere.

Ah, by Mog and by Loki, he thought, what satisfaction equals that of the captain who at last heads home with ship well ballasted with the get of monstrosly clever trading? None! he'd warrant. Youth's erotic capturings and young manhood's slayings—yea, even the masterworks and life-scrolls of scholar and artist—were the merest baubles by compare, callow fevers all.

In his self-enthusiasm the Mouser couldn't resist going over in his mind each last item of merchant plunder—and also to assure himself that each was stowed to best advantage and stoutly secured, in case of storm or other ill-hap.

First, lashed to the sides, in captain's cabin beneath his feet, were the casks of wine, mostly fortified, and the small kegs of bitter brandy that were Fafhrd's favorite tippie—those assuredly could not be stored elsewhere or entrusted to another's overwatching (except perhaps yellow old Ourph's here), he reminded himself as he lifted a small leather flask from his belt to his lips and took a measured sup of elixir of Ool Hrupan grape; he had strained his throat bellowing orders for *Seahawk's* stowing and swift departure and its raw membranes wanted healing before winter air came to try them further.

And amongst the wine in his cabin was also stored, in as many equally stout, tight barrels, their seams tarred, the wheaten flour—plebeian stuff to the thoughtless but all-important for an isle that could grow no grain except a little summer barley.

Forward of captain's cabin—and now with his self-enthusiasm at glow point, the Mouser's mused listing-over turned to actual tour of inspection, first speaking word to Ourph and then moving prow-wards catlike along the moonlit ship—forward of captain's cabin was chiefest prize, the planks and beams and mastworthy rounds of seasoned timber such as Fafhrd had dreamed of getting at Ool Plerns, south where trees grew, when his stump was healed and could carry hook, such same timber won by cunningest bargaining maneuvers at No-ombrulsk, where no more trees were than at Rime Isle (which got most of its gray wood from wrecks and nothing much bigger than bushes grew) and where they (the 'Brulskers) would sooner sell their wives than lumber! Yes, rounds



and squares and planks of the precious stuff, all lashed down lengthwise to the rowers' benches from poop to forecastle beneath the boom of the great single sail, each layer lashed down separately and canvased and tarred over against the salt spray and wet, with a precious long vellum-thin sheet of beaten copper between layers for further protection and firming, the layers going all the way from one side of *Seahawk* to the other, and all the way up, tied-down timber and thin copper alternating, until the topmost layer was a tightly lashed, canvased deck, its seams tarred, level with the bulwarks—a miracle of stowage. (Of course, this would make rowing difficult if such became needful, but oars were rarely required on voyages such as the remainder of this one promised to be, and there were always some risks that had to be run by even the most prudent sea commander.)

Yes, it was a great timber-bounty that *Seahawk* was bearing to wood-starved Rime Isle, the Mouser congratulated himself as he moved slowly forward alongside the humming, moonlit sail, his softly shod feet avoiding the tarred seams of the taut canvas deck, while his nostrils twitched at an odd faint goaty musky scent he caught, but it (the timber) never would have been won except for his knowledge of the great lust of Lord Logben of No-ombrulsk for rare strange ivories to complete his White Throne. The 'Brulskers would sooner part with their girl concubines than their timber, true enough, but the lust of Lord Logben for strange ivories was a greater desire than either of those. Thus, when with low drummings the Kleshite trading scow had put into 'Brulsk's black harbor and the Mouser had been among the first to board her and had spotted the behemoth tusk among the Kleshite trading treasures, he had bought it at once in exchange for a double-fist lump of musk-odorous ambergris, common stuff in Rime Isle but more precious than rubies in Klesh, and they were unable to resist it.

Thereafter the Kleshites had proffered their lesser ivories in vain to Lord Logben's majordomo, wailing for the mast-long gaint snow serpent's white-furred skin, that was *their* dearest desire, procured by Lord Logben's hunters in the frigid mountains known as the Bones of the Old Ones, and in vain had Lord Logben offered the Mouser its weight in electrum for the tusk. Only when the Kleshites had added their pleas to the Mouser's demands that the 'Brulskers sell him timber, offering for the unique snow serpent skin not only their lesser ivories but half their spices, and the Mouser had threatened

to sink the tusk in the bottomless bay rather than sell it for less than wood, had the 'Brulskers been forced by their Lord to yield up a quarter shipload of seasoned straight timber, as grudgingly as the Mouser had seemed to part with the tusk—whereafter all the trading (even in timber) had gone more easily.

Ah, that had been most cunningly done, a master stroke! the Mouser assured himself soberly.

As these most pleasant recollections were sorting themselves to best advantage within the Mouser's wide, many-shelved skull, his noiseless feet had carried him to the thick foot of the mast, where the false deck made by the timber cargo ended. Three yards farther on began the decking of the forecastle, beneath which the rest of the cargo was stowed and secured: ingots of bronze and little chests of dyes and spices and a larger chest of silken fabrics and linens for Cif and Afreyt—that was to show his crew he trusted them with all things except mind-fuddling, duty-betraying wine—but mostly the forward cargo was tawny grain and white and purple beans and sun-dried fruit, all bagged in wool against the sea-damp: food for the hungry Isle. There was your real thinking-man's treasure, he told himself, beside which gold and twinkling jewels were merest trinkets, or the pointy breasts of young love or words of poets or the pointed stars themselves that astrologers cherished and that made men drunk with distance and expanse.

In the three yards between false deck and true, their upper bodies in the shadow of the latter and their feet in a greater patch of moonlight, on which his own body cast its supervisory shadow, his crew slept soundly while the sea cradle-rocked 'em: four wiry Mingols, three of his short, nimble sailor-thieves with their lieutenant Mikkidu, and Fafhrd's tall lieutenant Skor, borrowed for this voyage. Aye, they slept soundly enough! he told himself with relish (he could clearly distinguish the bird-twittering snores of ever-apprehensive Mikkidu and the lion-growling ones of Skor), for he had kept tight rein on them all the time in No-ombrulsk and then deliberately worked them mercilessly loading and lashing the timber at the end, so that they'd fallen asleep in their tracks after the ship had sailed and they had supped (just as he'd cruelly disciplined himself and permitted himself no freedom all the time in port, no slightest recreation, even such as was desirable for hygienic reasons), for he knew well the appetites of sailors and the dubious, debilitating attractions of



'Brulsk's dark alleys—why, the whores had paraded daily before *Seahawk* to distract his crew. He remembered in particular one hardly-more-than-child among them, an insolent, skinny girl in tattered tunic faded silver-gray, same shade as her precociously silver hair, who had moved a little apart from the other whores and had seemed to be forever flaunting herself and peering up at *Seahawk* wistfully yet somehow tauntingly with great dark waifish eyes of deepest green.

Yes, by fiery Loki and by eight-limbed Mog, he told himself, in the discharge of his captain's duties he'd disciplined himself most rigorously of all, expending every last ounce of strength, wisdom, cunning (and voice!) and asking no reward at all except for the knowledge of responsibilities manfully shouldered—that, and gifts for his friends. Suddenly the Mouser felt nigh to bursting with his virtues and somehow a shade sorry about it, especially the "no reward at all" bit, which now seemed manifestly unfair.

Keeping careful watch upon his wearied-out men and with his ears attuned to catch any cessation of, or the slightest variation in their snorings, he lifted his leathern pottle to his lips and let a generous, slow, healthful swallow soothe his raw throat.

As he thrust the lightened pottle back into his belt, securely hooking it there, his gaze fastened on one item of cargo stored forward that seemed to have strayed from its appointed place—either his concentrated watching or else some faint unidentified sound had called it to his attention. (At the same instant he got another whiff of the musky, goaty, strangely attractive sea odor. Ambergris?) It was the chest of silks and thick ribbons and linens and other costly fabrics intended chiefly for his gift to Cif. It was standing out a little way from the ship's side, almost entirely in the moonlight, as if its lashings had loosened, and now as he studied it more closely he saw that it wasn't lashed at all and that its top was wedged open a finger's breadth by a twist of pale orange fabric protruding near a hinge.

What monstrous indiscipline did this signify?

He dropped noiselessly down and approached the chest, his nostrils wrinkling. Was unsold ambergris cached inside it? Then, carefully keeping his shadow off it, he gripped the top and silently threw it wide open on its hinges.

The topmost silk was a thick, lustrous, copper-colored one chosen to match the glints in Cif's dark hair.

Upon this rich bedding, like a kitten stolen in to nap on

fresh-laundered linens, reposed, with arms and legs somewhat drawn in but mostly on her back, and with one long-fingered hand twisting down through her touseled silvery hair so as to shadow further her lidded eyes—repose that self-same wharf waif he'd but now been recalling. The picture of innocence, but the odor (he knew it now) all sex. Her slender chest rose and fell gently and slowly with her sleeping inhalations, her small breasts and rather larger nipples outdenting the flimsy fabric of her ragged tunic, while her narrow lips smiled faintly. Her hair was somewhat the same shade as that of silver-blonde, thirteen-year-old Gale back on Rime Isle, who'd been one of Odin's maidens. And she was, apparently, not a great deal older.

Why, this was worse than monstrous, the Mouser told himself as he wordlessly stared. That one or two or more or all of his crew should conspire to smuggle this girl aboard for his or their hot pleasure, tempting her with silver or feeling her pimp or owner (or else kidnapping her, though that was most unlikely in view of her unbound state) was bad enough, but that they should presume to do this not only without their captain's knowledge but also in complete disregard of the fact that *he* enjoyed no such erotic solacing, but rather worked himself to the bone on their behalf and *Seahawk's*, solicitous only of their health and welfare and the success of the voyage—why, this was not only wantonest indiscipline but also rankest ingratitude!

At this dark point of disillusionment with his fellow man, the Mouser's one satisfaction was his knowledge that his crew slept deeply from exhaustion he'd inflicted on them. The chorus of their unaltering snores was music to his ears, for it told him that although they'd managed to smuggle the girl aboard successfully, not one of them had yet enjoyed her (at least since the loading and business of getting under way was done). No, they'd been smote senseless by fatigue, and would not now wake for a hurricane. And that thought in turn pointed out to him the way to their most appropriate and condign punishment.

Smiling widely, he reached his left hand toward the sleeping girl, and, where it made a small peak in her worn silver-faded tunic, delicately yet somewhat sharply tweaked her right nipple. As she came shuddering awake with a suck of indrawn breath, her eyes opening and her parted lips forming an exclamation, he swooped his face toward hers, frowning



most sternly and laying his finger across his now disapprovingly set lips, enjoining silence.

She shrank away, staring at him in wonder and dread and keeping obediently still. He drew back a little in turn, noting the twin reflections of the misshapen moon in her wide dark eyes and how strangely the lustrous coppery silk on which she cowered contrasted with her hair tangled upon it, fine and silver pale as a ghost's.

From around them the chorus of snores continued unchanged as the crew slept on.

From beside her slender naked feet the Mouser plucked up a black roll of thick silken ribbon and unsheating his dirk, Cat's Claw, proceeded to cut three hanks from it, staring broodingly at the shrinking girl all the while. Then he motioned to her and crossed his wrists to indicate what was wanted of her.

Her chest lifting in a silent sigh and shrugging her shoulders a little, she crossed her slender wrists in front of her. He shook his head and pointed behind her.

Again divining his command, she crossed them there, turning upon her side a little to do so.

He bound her wrists together crosswise and tightly, then bound her elbows together also, noting that they met without undue strain upon her slender shoulders. He used the third hank to tie her legs together firmly just above the knees. Ah, discipline! he thought—good for one and all, but in particular the young!

In the end she lay supine upon her bound arms, gazing up at him. He noted that there seemed to be more curiosity and speculation in that gaze than dread and that the twin reflections of the gibbous moon did not waver with any eye-blinking or -watering.

How very pleasant this all was, he mused: his crew asleep, his ship driving home full-laden, the slim girl docile to his binding of her, he meting out justice as silently and secretly as does a god. The taste of undiluted power was so satisfying to him that it did not trouble him that the girl's silken-smooth flesh glowed a little more silvery pale than even moonlight would easily account for.

Without any warning or change in his own brooding expression, he flicked inside the protruding twist of fabric and closed the lid of the chest upon her.

Let the confident minx worry a bit, he thought, as to whether I intend to suffocate her or perchance cast the chest

overboard, she being in it. Such incidents were common enough, he told himself, at least in myth and story.

Tiny wavelets gently slapped *Seahawk's* side, the moonlit sail hummed as softly, and the crew snored on.

The Mouser wakened the two brawniest Mingols by twisting a big toe of each and silently indicated that they should take up the chest without disturbing comrades and bear it back to his cabin. He did not want to risk waking the crew with sound of words. Also, using gestures spared his strained throat.

If the Mingols were privy to the secret of the girl, their blank expressions did not show it, although he watched them narrowly. Nor did old Ourph betray any surprise. As they came nigh him, the ancient Mingol's gaze slipped over them and roved serenely ahead and his gnarled hands rested lightly on the tiller, as though the shifting about of the chest were a matter of no consequence whatever.

The Mouser directed the younger Mingols in their setting of the chest between the lashed cases that narrowed the cabin and beneath the brass lamp that swung on a short chain from the low ceiling. Laying finger to compressed lips, he signed them to keep strict silence about the chest's midnight remove. Then he dismissed them with a curt wave. He rummaged about, found a small brass cup, filled it from a tiny key of Fafhrd's bitter brandy, drank off half, and opened the chest.

The smuggled girl gazed up at him with a composure he told himself was creditable. She had courage, yes. He noted that she took three deep breaths, though, as if the chest had indeed been a bit stuffy. The silver glow of her pale skin and hair pleased him. He motioned her to sit up and when she did so set the cup against her lips, tilting it as she drank the other half. He unsheathed his dirk, inserted it carefully between her knees, and drawing it upward cut the ribbon confining them. He turned, moved away aft, and settled himself on a low stool that stood before Fafhrd's wide bunk. Then with crooked forefinger he summoned her to him.

When she stood close before him, chin high, slender shoulders thrown back by virtue of the ribbons binding her arms, he eyed her significantly and formed the words, "What is your name?"

"Ississi," she responded in a lisping whisper that was like the ghosts of wavelets kissing the hull. She smiled.

On deck, Ourph had directed one of the younger Mingols



to take the tiller, the other to heat him gahveh. He was sheltered from the wind behind the false deck of the timber cargo, looking toward the cabin and shaking his head wonderingly. The rest of the crew snored in the forecastle's shadow. While on Rime Isle in her low-ceilinged yellow bedroom Cif woke with the thought that the Gray Mouser was in peril. As she tried to recollect her nightmare, moonlight creeping along the wall reminded her of the mer-ghost which had murdered Zwaaken and lured off Fafhrd from sister Afreyt for a space, and she wondered how Mouser would react to such a dangerous challenge.

Bright and early the next morning the Mouser threw on a short gray robe, belted it, and rapped sharply on the cabin's ceiling. Speaking in a somewhat hoarse whisper, he told the impassive Mingol thus summoned that he desired the instant presence of Master Mikkidu. He had cast a disguising drape across the transported chest that stood between the crowding casks that narrowed further the none-too-wide cabin, and now sat behind it on the stool, as though it were a captain's flat desk. Behind him on the crosswise bunk that occupied the cabin's end Ississi reposed and either slept or shut-eyed waked, he knew not which, blanket-covered except for her streaming silver hair and unconfined save for the thick black ribbon tying one ankle securely to the bunk's foot beneath the blanket.

*(I'm no egregious fool, he told himself, to think that one night's love brings loyalty.)*

He nursed his throat with a cuplet of bitter brandy, gargled and slowly swallowed.

*(And yet she'd make a good maid for Cif, I do believe, when I have done with disciplining her. Or perchance I'll pass her on to poor maimed and isle-locked Fafhrd.)*

He impatiently finger-drummed the shrouded chest, wondering what could be keeping Mikkidu. A guilty conscience? Very likely!

Save for a glimmer of pale dawn filtering through the curtained hatchway and the two narrow side ports glazed with mica, which the lashed casks further obscured, the oil-replenished swaying lamp still provided the only light.

There was a flurry of running footsteps coming closer and then Mikkidu simultaneously rapped at the hatchway and thrust tousle-pated head and distracted eyes between the curtains. The Mouser beckoned him in, saying in a soft, brandy-

smoothed voice, "Ah, Master Mikkidu, I'm glad your duties, which no doubt must be pressing, at last permit you to visit me, because I do believe I ordered that you come at once."

"Oh, Captain, sir," the latter replied rapidly, "there's a chest missing from the storage forward. I saw that it was gone as soon as Trenchi wakened me and gave me your command. I only paused to rouse my mates and question them before I hurried here."

*(Ah-ha, the Mouser thought, he knows about Ississi, I'm sure of it, he's much too agitated, he had a hand in smuggling her aboard. But he doesn't know what's happened to her now—suspects everything and everyone, no doubt—and seeks to clear himself with me of all suspicion by reporting to me the missing chest, the wretch!)*

"A chest? Which chest?" the Mouser meanwhile asked blandly. "What did it contain? Spices? Spicy things?"

"Fabrics for Lady Cif, I do believe," Mikkidu answered.

"Just fabrics for the Lady Cif and nothing else?" the Mouser inquired, eyeing him keenly. "Weren't there some other things? Something of *yours*, perhaps?"

"No, sir, nothing of mine," Mikkidu denied quickly.

"Are you sure of that?" the Mouser pressed. "Sometimes one will tuck something of one's own inside another's chest—for safekeeping, as it were, or perchance to smuggle it across a border."

"Nothing of mine at all," Mikkidu maintained. "Perhaps there were some fabrics also for the other lady . . . and, well, just fabrics, sir and—oh, yes—some rolls of ribbon."

"Nothing but fabrics and ribbon?" the Mouser went on prodding him. "No fabrics made into garments, eh?—such as a short silvery tunic of some lacy stuff, for instance?"

Mikkidu shook his head, his eyebrows rising.

"Well, well," the Mouser said smoothly, "what's happened to this chest, do you suppose? It must be still on the ship—unless someone has dropped it overboard. Or was it perhaps stolen back in 'Brulsk?"

"I'm sure it was safe aboard when we sailed," Mikkidu asserted. Then he frowned. "I *think* it was, that is." His brow cleared. "Its lashings lay beside it, loose on the deck!"

"Well, I'm glad you found something of it," the Mouser said. "Where on the ship do you suppose it can be? Think, man, where can it be?" For emphasis, he pounded the muffled chest he sat at.



Mikkidu shook his head helplessly, his gaze wandered about, past the Mouser.

*(Oh-ho, the latter thought, does he begin to get a glimmering at last of what has happened to his smuggled girl? Whose plaything she is now? This might become rather amusing.)*

He recalled his lieutenant's attention by asking, "What were your men able to tell you about the runaway chest?"

"Nothing, sir. They were as puzzled as I am. I'm sure they know nothing. I *think*."

"Hmn. What did the Mingols have to say about it?"

"They're on watch, sir. Besides, they answer only to Ourph—or yourself, of course, sir."

*(You can trust a Mingol, the Mouser thought, at least where it's a matter of keeping silent.)*

"What about Skor then?" he asked. "Did Captain Fafhrd's man know anything about the chest's vanishment?"

Mikkidu's expression became a shade sulky. "Lieutenant Skor is not under my command," he said. "Besides that, he sleeps very soundly."

There was a thuddingly loud double knock at the hatchway.

"Come in," the Mouser called testily, "and next time don't try to pound the ship to pieces."

Fafhrd's chief lieutenant thrust bent head with receding reddish hair through the curtains and followed after. He had to bend both back and knees to keep from bumping his naked pate on the beams. *(So Fafhrd too would have had to go about stooping when occupying his own cabin, the Mouser thought. Ah, the discomforts of size.)*

Skor eyed the Mouser coolly and took note of Mikkidu's presence. He had trimmed his russet beard, which gave it a patchy appearance. Save for his broken nose he rather resembled a Fafhrd five years younger.

"Well?" the Mouser said peremptorily.

"Your pardon, Captain Mouser," the other said, "but you asked me to keep particular watch on the stowage of cargo, since I was the only one who had done any long voyaging on *Seahawk* before this faring and knew her behavior in different weathers. So I believe that I should report to you that there is a chest of fabrics—you know the one, I think—missing from the fore steerside storage. Its lashings lie all about, both those which roped it shut and those which tied it securely in place."

*(Ah-ha, the Mouser thought, he's guilty too and seeks to*

*cover it by making swift report, however late. Never trust a bland expression. The lascivious villain!)*

With his lips he said, "Ah yes, the missing chest—we were just speaking of it. When do you suppose it became so?—I mean missing. In 'Brulsk?"

Skor shook his head. "I saw to its lashing myself—and noted it still tied fast to the side as my eyes closed in sleep a league outside that port. I'm sure it's still on *Seahawk*."

*(He admits it, the effrontrous rogue! the Mouser thought. I wonder he doesn't accuse Mikkidu of stealing it. Perhaps there's a little honor left 'mongst thieves and berserks.)*

Meanwhile the Mouser said, "Unless it has been dropped overboard—that is a distinct possibility, do you not think? Or mayhap we were boarded last night by soundless and invisible pirates while you both snored, who raped the chest away and nothing else. Or perchance a crafty and shipwise octopus, desirous of going richly clad and with arms skillful at tying and untying knots—"

He broke off when he noted that both tall Skor and short Mikkidu were peering wide-eyed beyond him. He turned on his stool. A little more of Ississi showed above the blanket—to wit, a small patch of pale forehead and one large green silver-lashed eye peering unwinking through her long silvery hair.

He turned back very deliberately and after a sharp "Well?" to get their attention asked in his blandest voice, "whatever are you looking at so engrossedly?"

"Uh—nothing at all," Mikkidu stammered, while Skor only shifted gaze to look at the Mouser steadily.

"Nothing at all?" the Mouser questioned. "You don't perhaps see the chest somewhere in this cabin? Or perceive some clue to its present disposition?"

Mikkidu shook his head, while after a moment Skor shrugged, eyeing the Mouser strangely.

"Well, gentlemen," the Mouser said cheerily, "that sums it up. The chest must be aboard this ship, as you both say. So hunt for it! Scour *Seahawk* high and low—a chest that large can't be hid in a seaman's bag. And use your eyes, both of you!" He thumped the shrouded box once more for good measure. "And now—dismiss!"

*(They both knew all about it, I'll be bound. The deceiving dogs! the Mouser thought. And yet . . . I am not altogether satisfied of that.)*

When they were gone (after several hesitant, uncertain



backward glances), the Mouser stepped back to the bunk and, planting his hands to either side of the girl, stared down at her green eye, supporting himself on stiff arms. She rocked her head up and down a little and to either side, and so worked her entire face free of the blanket and her eyes of the silken hair veiling them and stared up at him expectantly.

He put on an inquiring look and flirled his head toward the hatchway through which the men had departed, then directed the same look more particularly at her. It was strange, he mused how he avoided speaking to her whenever he could except with pointings and gestured commands. Perhaps it was that the essence of power lay in getting your wishes gratified without ever having to speak them out, to put another through all his paces in utter silence, so that no god might overhear and know. Yes, that was part of it at least.

He formed with his lips and barely breathed the question, "How did you *really* come aboard *Seahawk*?"

Her eyes widened and after a while her peach-down lips began to move, but he had to turn his head and lower it until they moistly and silkily brushed his best ear as they enunciated, before he could clearly hear what she was saying—in the same Low Lankhmarese as he and Mikkidu and Skor had spoken, but with a delicious lisping accent that was all little hisses and gasps and warblings. He recalled how her scent had seemed all sex in the chest, but now infinitely flowery, dainty and innocent.

"I was a princess and lived with the prince Mordroog, my brother, in a far country where it was always spring," she began. "There a watery influence filtered all harshness from the sun's beams, so that he shone no more bright than the silvery moon, and winter's rages and summer's drouths were tamed, and the roaring winds moderated to eternal balmy breezes, and even fire was cool—in that far country."

*Every whore tells the same tale*, the Mouser thought. *They were all princesses before they took to the trade*. Yet he listened on.

"We had golden treasure beyond all dreaming," she continued. "Unicorns that flew and kittens that flowed were my pets, and we were served by nimble companies silent servitors and guarded by soft-voiced monsters—great Slasher and vasty All-Gripper, and Deep Rusher who was greatest of all.

"But then came ill times. One night while our guardians slept, our treasure was stolen away and our realm became lonely, farther off and more secret still. My brother and I went

searching for our treasure and for allies, and in that search I was raped away by bold scoundrels and taken to vile, vile 'Brulsk where I came to know all the evil there is under the hateful sun."

*This too is a familiar part of each harlot's story, the Mouser told himself, the raping away, the loss of innocence, instruction in every vice.* Yet he went on listening to her ticklesome whispering.

"But I knew that one day *that one* would come who would be king over me and carry me back to my realm and dwell with me in power and silvery glory, our treasures being restored. And then *you* came."

*Ah, now the personal appeal, the Mouser thought. Very familiar indeed. Still, let's hear her out. I like her tongue in my ear. It's like being a flower and having a bee suck your nectar.*

"I went to your ship each day and stared at you. I could do naught else at all, however I tried. And you would never look at me for long and yet I knew that our paths lay together. I knew you were a masterful man and that you'd visit upon me rigors and inflictions besides which those I'd suffered in dreadful 'Brulsk would be nothing, and yet I could not turn aside for an instant, or take my eyes away from you and your dark ship. And when it was clear you would not notice me, or act upon your true feelings, or any of your men provide a means for me to follow you, I stole aboard unseen while they were all stowing and lashing and you were commanding them."

*(Lies, lies, all lies, the Mouser thought—and continued to listen.)*

"I managed to conceal myself by moving about amid the cargo. But when at last you'd sailed from harbor and your men slept, I grew cold, the deck was hard, I suffered keenly. And yet I dared not seek your cabin yet, or otherwise disclose myself, for fear you would put back to 'Brulsk to put me off. So I gradually freed of its lashings a chest of fabrics I'd marked, working and working like a mouse or shrew—the knots were hard, but my fingers are clever and nimble, and strong whenever the need is—until I could creep inside and slumber warm and soft. And then you came for me, and here I am."

The Mouser turned his head and looked down into her large green eyes, across which golden gleams moved rhythmically with the lamp's measured swinging. Then he briefly



pressed a finger across her soft lips and drew down the blanket until her ribbon-fettered ankle was revealed and he admired her beautiful small body. It was well, he told himself, for a man to have always a beautiful young woman close by him—like a beautiful cat, yes, a young cat, independent but with kitten ways still. It was well when such a one talked, speaking lies much as any cat would (*'Twas crystal clear she must have had help getting aboard—Skor and Mikkidu both, likely enough*), but best not to talk to her too much, and wisest to keep her well bound. You could trust folk when they were secured—indeed, trussed!—and not otherwise, no, not at all. And that was the essence of power—binding all others, binding all else! Keeping his eyes hypnotically upon hers, he reached across her for the loose hanks of black ribbon. It would be well to fetter her three other limbs to foot and head of bunk, not tightly, yet not so loosely that she could reach either wrist with other hand or with her pearly teeth—so he could take a turn on deck, confident that she'd be here when he returned.

On Rime Isle Cif, strolling alone across the heath beyond Salthaven, plucked from the slender pouch at her girdle a small male figure of sewn cloth stuffed with lint. He was tall as her hand was long and his waist was constricted by a plain gold ring which would have fitted that one of her fingers—and that was a measure of the figure's other dimensions. He was dressed in a gray tunic and gray, gray-hooded cloak. She regarded his featureless linen face and for a space she meditated on the mystery of woven cloth—one set of threads or lines tying or at least restraining another such set with a uniquely protective pervious surface the result. Then some odd hint of expression in the faintly brown, blank linen face suggested to her that the Gray Mouser might be in need of more golden protection than the ring afforded, and thrusting the doll feet-first back into her pouch, she strode back toward Salthaven, the council hall, and the recently ghost-raped treasury. The north wind coming unevenly rippled the heather.

His throat burning from the last swallow of bitter brandy he'd taken, the Mouser slipped through the hatchway curtains and stole silently on deck. His purpose was to check on his crew (surprise 'em if need be!) and see if they were all properly occupied with sailorly duties (tied to their tasks, as

it were!), including the fool's search for the missing chest he'd sent them on in partial punishment for smuggling Ississi aboard. (She was secure below, the minx, he'd seen to that!)

The wind had freshened a little and *Seahawk* leaned to steerside a bit farther as she dashed ahead, lead-weighted keel balancing the straining sail. The Mingol steersman leaned on the tiller while his mate and old Ourph scanned with sailorly prudence the southwest for signs of approaching squalls. At this rate they might reach Rime Isle in three more days instead of four. The Mouser felt uneasy at that, rather than pleased. He looked over the steerside apprehensively, but the rushing white water was still safely below the oarholes, each of which had a belaying pin laid across it around which the ropes lashing down the middle tier of the midship cargo had been passed. This reminder of the security of the ship unaccountably did not please him either.

Where was the rest of the crew? he asked himself. A search forward below for the missing chest? Or otherwise busy? Or merely skulking? He'd see for himself! But as he strode forward across the taut canvas sheathing the timber treasure, the reason for his sudden depression struck him, and his steps slowed.

He did not like the thought of soon arrival or of the great gifts he was bringing (in fact, *Seahawk's* cargo had now become hateful to him) because all that represented ties binding him and his future to Cif and crippled Fafhrd and haughty Afreyt too and all his men and every last inhabitant of Rime Isle. Endless responsibility—that was what he was sailing back to. Responsibility as husband (or some equivalent) of Cif, old friend to Fafhrd (who was already tied to Afreyt, no longer comrade), captain (and guardian) of his men, father to all. Provider and protector!—and first thing you knew they, or at least one of them, would be protecting *him*, confining and constraining him for his own good in tyranny of love or fellowship.

Oh, he'd be a hero for an hour or two, praised for his sumptuous get. But next day? Go out and do it again! Or (worse yet) stay at home and do it. And so on, *ad infinitum*. Such a future ill besorted with the sense of power he'd had since last night's sailing and which the girl-whore Ississi had strangely fed. Himself bound instead of binding others and adventuring on to bind the universe mayhap and put it through its paces, enslave the very gods. Not free to adventure, discover, and to play with life, tame it by all-piercing



knowledge and by shrewd commands and put it through its paces, search out each dizzy height and darksome depth. The Mouser bound? No, no, no, no!

As his feelings marched with that great repeated negation, his inching footsteps had carried him forward almost to the mast, and through the sail's augmented hum and the wind's and the water's racket against the hull, he became aware of two voices contending vehemently in strident whispers.

He instantly and silently dropped on his belly and crawled on very cautiously until the top half of his face overlooked the gap between timber cargo and forecandle.

His three sailor-thieves and the two other Mingols sprawled higgledy-piggledy, lazily napping, while immediately below him Skor and Mikkidu argued in what might be called loud undertones. He could have reached down and patted their heads—or rapped them with fisted knuckles.

"There you go bringing in the chest again," Mikkidu was whispering hotly, utterly absorbed in the point he was making. "There is no longer any chest on *Seahawk*! We've searched every place on the ship and not found it, so it has to have been cast overboard—that's the only explanation!—but only after (most like) the rich fabrics it contained were taken out and hid deviously in any number of ways and places. And there I must, with all respect, suspect old Ourph. He was awake while we slept, you can't trust Mingols (or get a word out of them, for that matter), he's got merchant's blood and can't resist snatching any rich thing, he's also got the cunning of age, and—"

Mikkidu perforce paused to draw breath, and Skor, who seemed to have been patiently waiting for just that, cut in with, "Searched every place *except* the Captain's cabin. And we searched that pretty well with our eyes. So the chest had to be the draped oblong thing he sat behind and even thumped on. It was exactly the right size and shape—"

"That was the Captain's desk," Mikkidu asserted in outraged tones.

"There was no desk," Skor rejoined, "when Captain Fafhrd occupied the cabin, or on our voyage down. Stick to the facts, little man. Next you'll be denying again he had a girl with him."

"There was no girl!" Mikkidu exploded, using up at once all the breath he'd managed to draw, for Skor was able to continue without raising his voice, "There was indeed a girl, as any fool could see who was not oversunk in doggish loy-

alty—a dainty delicate piece just the right size for him with long, long silvery hair and a great green eye casting out lustful gleams—”

“That wasn’t a girl’s long hair you saw, you great lewd oaf,” Mikkidu cut in, his lungs replenished at last. “That was a large dried frond of fine silvery seaweed with a shining, sea-rounded green pebble caught up in it—such a curio as many a captain’s cabin accumulates—and your woman-starved fancy transformed it to a wench, you lickish idiot—

“Or else,” he recommended rapidly, cutting in on himself as it were, “it was a lacy silver dress with a silver-set green gem at’s neck—the Captain question me closely about just such a dress when he was quizzing me about the chest before you came.”

*My, my, the Mouser thought, I never dreamed Mikkidu had such a quick fancy or would spring to my defense so loyally. But it does now appear, I must admit, that I have falsely suspected these two men and that Ississi somehow did board Seahawk solo. Unless one of the others—no, that’s unlikely. Truth from a whore—there’s a puzzler for you.*

Skor said triumphantly, “But if it was the dress you saw on’s bunk and the dress had been in the chest, doesn’t that prove the chest too was in the cabin? Yes, it may well have been a filmy silver dress we saw, now that I think of it, which the girl slipped teasingly and lasciviously out of before leaping between the sheets, or else your Captain Mouser ripped it off her (it looked torn), for he’s as hot and lusty as a mink and ever boasting of his dirksmanship—I’ve heard Captain Fafhrd say so again and again, or at least imply it.”

*What infamy was this now?* the Mouser asked himself, suddenly indignant, glaring down at Skor’s balding head from his vantage point. *It was his own place to chide Fafhrd for his womanizing, not hear himself so chided for the same fault (and boastfulness to boot) by this bogus Fafhrd, this insolent, lofty, jumped-up underling.* He involuntarily whipped up his fist to smite.

“Yes, boastful, devious, a martinet, and mean,” Skor continued while Mikkidu spluttered. “What think you of a captain who drives his crew hard in port, holds back their pay, puritanically forbids shore leave, denies ’em all discharge of their natural urges—and then brings a girl aboard for his own use and flaunts her in their faces? And *then* plays games with them about her, sends them on idiot’s hunt. Petty—



that's what I've heard Captain Fafhrd call it—or at least show he thought so by his looks."

The Mouser, furious, could barely restrain himself from striking out. *Defend me, Mikkidu*, he inwardly implored. *Oh the monstrosity of it—to invoke Fafhrd. Had Fafhrd really—*

"Do you really think so?" he heard Mikkidu say, only a little doubtfully. "You really think he's got a girl in there? Well, if that's the case I must admit he is a very devil!"

The cry of pure rage that traitorous utterance drew from the sprung-up Mouser made the two lieutenants throw back their heads and stare and brought the nappers fully awake and almost to their feet.

He opened his mouth to utter rebuke that would skin them alive—and then paused, wondering just what form that rebuke could take. After all, there *was* a naked girl in his cabin with her legs tied wide—in face, spread-eagled. His glance lit on the lashings of the chest of fabrics still lying loose on the deck.

"Clear up that strewage!" he roared, pointing it out. "Use it to tie down doubly those grain sacks there." He pointed again. "And while you're at it—" (he took a deep breath) double lash the entire cargo! I am not satisfied that it won't shift if hurricane strikes." He directed that last remark chiefly at the two lieutenants, who peered puzzledly at the blue sky as they moved to organize the work.

"Yes, double lash it all down tight as eelskin," he averred, beginning to pace back and forth as he warmed to his task. "Pass the timber's extra ropings around belaying pins set *inside* the oarholes and then draw them tight across the deck. See that those wool sacks of grain and fruit are lashed really tight—imagine you're corseting a fat woman, put your foot in her back and really pull those laces. For I'm not convinced those bags would stay in place if we had green water aboard and dragging at them. And when all that is done, bring a gang aft to further firm the casks and barrels in my cabin, marry them indissolubly to *Seahawk's* deck and sides. Remember, all of you," he finished as he danced off aft, "if you tie things up carefully enough—your purse, your produce, or your enemies, and eke your lights of love—nothing can ever surprise you, or escape from you or harm you!"

Cif untied the massive silver key from the neck of her soft leather tunic, where it had hung warm inside, unlocked the

heavy oaken door of the treasury, opened it cautiously and suspiciously, inspected the room from the threshold—she'd been uneasy about the place ever since the sea ghost's depredations. Then she went in and relocked the door behind her. A small window with thumb-thick bars of bronze illumined not too well the small wooden room. On a shelf reposed two ingots of pale silver, three short stacks of silver coins, and a single golden stack still shorter. The walls of the room crowded in on a low circular table, in the gray surface of which a pentacle had been darkly burnt. She named over to herself the five golden objects standing at the points: the Arrow of Truth, kinked from Fafhrd's tugging of it from the demoness; the Rule of Prudence, a short rod circled by ridges; the Cup of Measured Hospitality, hardly larger than a thimble; the Circles of Unity, so linked that if any one were taken away the other two fell apart; and the strange skeletal globe that Fafhrd had recovered with the rest and suggested might be the Cube of Square Dealing smoothly deformed (something she rather doubted). She took the Mouser doll from her pouch and laid it in their midst, at pentalpha's center. She sighed with relief, sat down on one of the three stools there were, and gazed pensively at the doll's blank face.

As the Mouser approved the last cask's double lashings and then dismissed as curtly his still-baffled lieutenants and their weary work gang—fairly drove 'em from his cabin!—he felt a surge of power inside, as if he'd just stepped or been otherwise carried over an invisible boundary into a realm where each last object was plainly labeled "Mine Alone!"

Ah, that had been sport of the best, he told himself—closely supervising the gang's toil while standing all the while in their midst atop the draped chest he'd had them hunting all day long, and while the girl Ississi lay naked and securely spread-eagled beneath the blanket spread across his bunk—and they all somehow conscious of her delectable presence yet never quite daring to refer to it. Power sport indeed!

In a transport of self-satisfaction he whipped the drape from the chest, threw back its top, and admired the expanse of coppery silk so revealed and the bolts of black ribbon. Now *there* was a bed fit for a princess's nuptials, he told himself as he filled and downed a brass cup of brandy, a couch somewhat small but sufficient and soft all the way down to the bottom.

His mind and his feet both dancing with all manner of



imaginings and impulses, he moved to the bunk and whirled off *its* coverings and—

The bunk's coarse gray single sheeting was covered by a veritable black snow-sprinkle of ribbon scraps and shreds. Of Ississi there was no sign.

After a long moment's searching of it with his astounded eyes, he fairly dove across the bunk and fumbled frantically all away around the thin mattress's edges and under them, searching for the razor-keen knife or scissors that had done this or (who knew?) some sharp-toothed, ribbon-shredding small animal secretly attendant on the girl whore and obedient to her command.

A trilling sigh of blissful contentment made him switch convulsively around. In the midst of the new-opened chest, got there by sleights he could scarce dream of, Ississi sat cross-legged facing him. Her arms were lifted while her nimble hands were swiftly braiding her long straight silvery hair, an action which showed off her slender waist and dainty small breasts to best advantage, while her green eyes flashed and her lips smiled at him, "Am I not exceedingly clever? Surpassingly clever and wholly delightful?"

The Mouser frowned at her terribly, then sent the same expression roving to either side, as if spying for a route by which she could have got unseen from bunk to chest past the double-lashed and closely abutting casks—and mayhap for her confederates, animal, human, or demonic. Next he got off the bunk and approaching her, edged his way around the chest and back, eyeing her up and down as though searching for concealed weapons, even so little as a sharpened fingernail, and turning his own body so that his frown was always fixed on her and he never lost sight of her for an instant, until he faced her once more.

His nostrils flared with his deep breathing, while the lamp's yellow beams and shadows swayed measuredly across his dark angry presence and her moon-pale skin.

She continued to braid her hair and to smile and to warble and trill, and after a short while her trillings and warblings became a sort of rough song of recitation, one shot with seeming improvisations, as though she were translating it into Low Lankhmarese from another language:

"Oh, the golden gifts of my land are six, and round you now they've straitly fixed. The Golden Shaft of Death and Desire, The Rod of Command whose smart's like fire, The Cup of Close Confinement and Minding, The Circles of Fate

whose ways are winding. The Cubical Prison of god and of elf, The Many-Barred Globe of Simorgya and Self. Deep, oh deep is my far country, Where gold will carry us, me and thee."

The Mouser shook his finger before her face in dark challenge and dire warning. Then he slashed lengths of ribbed black silk ribbon from a roll, twisting and tugging it to test its strength, continuing to eye her all the while, and he bound her legs together as they were, slender ankle to calf, just below the knees, and slender calf to ankle. Then he held out his hands for hers imperiously. She rapidly finished plaiting her hair, whipped the braid round her head and tucked it in, so that it became a sort of silvery coronet. Then with a sigh and an aversion of her somewhat narrow face, she held out her wrists to him close together, the palms of her hands face upward.

He seized them contemptuously and drew them behind her and bound them there as he had on the previous night, and her elbows too, drawing her shoulders backwards. And then he tipped her over, forward so that her face was buried in the coppery silk intended for Cif (how long ago?) and led a double ribbon from her bound wrists down her spine to her crosswise bound lower legs, and drew it tight as he could, so that her back was perforce arched and her face lifted free of the silk.

But despite his mounting excitement, the thought nagged him that there had been something in her warbled ditty which he had not liked. Ah yes, the mention of Simorgya. What place had that sunken kingdom in a whore's never-never lands? And all her earlier babble of moist and watery influences in the imagined land where she queened, or rather princess'd it—There, she was at it again!

"Come, Brother Mordroog, to royally escort us," she warbled over the orangey silk, seemingly unmindful of her acute discomforts. "Come with our guardians, Deep Rusher your horse—your behemoth, rather, and you in his castle. Come also with Slasher and vasty All-Gripper, to shatter our prison and ferry us home. And send all your spirits coursing before you, so our minds are engulfed—"

The shadows steadied unnaturally as the lamp's swing shortened quiveringly, then stopped.

On the deck immediately above their heads, there was consternation. The wind had unaccountably faded and the sea grown oily calm. The tiller in Skor's grip was lifeless, the



sheet that Mikkidu fingered slack. The sky did not appear to be overcast, yet there was a shadowed, spectral quality to the sunlight, as though an unpredicted eclipse or other ominous event impended. Then without warning the dark sea mounded up boiling scarce a spear's cast off steerside—and subsided again without any diminishment in the feeling of foreboding. The spreading wave jogged *Seahawk*. The two lieutenants and Ourph stared about wonderingly and then at each other. None of them marked the trail of bubbles leading from the place of the mounding toward the becalmed sailing galley.

In the treasury Cif had the sudden feeling that the Mouser stood in need of more protection. The doll looked lonely there at pentagram's center. Perhaps he was too far from the ikons. She gathered the ikons together and after a moment's hesitation thrust the doll, doubled up, into the barred globe. Then she poked the ruler and the crooked arrow in along with him, transfixing the globe (more gold close to him!), almost as an afterthought clapped the tiny cup like a helmet on the protruding doll's head, and set all down on the linked rings. Then she seated herself again, staring doubtfully at what she had done.

In the cabin the Gray Mouser rolled the bound Ississi over on her back and regarded the silvery girl opened up for his enjoyment. The blood pounded in his head and he felt an increasing pressure there, as if his brain had grown too large for his skull. The motionless cabin grew spectral, there was a sense of thronging presences, and then it was as if part of him only remained there while another part whirled away into a realm where he was a giant coursing through rushing darkness, uncertain of his humanity, while the pressure inside his skull grew and grew.

But the part of him in the cabin still was capable of sensation, though hardly of action, and this one watched helpless and aghast, through air that seemed to thicken and become more like water, the silvery, smiling, trussed-up Ississi writhe and writhe yet again while her skin grew more silvery still—scaly silvery—and her elfin face narrowed and her green eyes swam apart, while from her head and back and shoulders, and along the backs of her legs and her hands and arms, razor-sharp spines erected themselves in crests and, as she writhed once more again mightily, cut through all the black ribbons at once so they floated in shreds about her. Then

through the curtained hatchway there swam a face like her own new one, and she came up from the coppery silk in a great forward undulation and reached the palms of her back-crested hands out toward the Mouser's cheeks lovingly on arms that seemed to grow longer and longer, saying in a strange deep voice that seemed to bubble from her, "In moments this prison will be broken, Deep Rusher will smash it and we will be free."

At those words the other part of the Mouser realized that the darkness through which he was now couising upward was the deep sea, that he was engulfed in the whale body and great-foreheaded brain of Deep Rusher, her monster, that it was the tiny hull of *Seahawk* far above him that his massive forehead was aimed at, and that he could no more evade that collision than his other self in the cabin could avoid the arms of Ississi.

In the treasury Cif could not bear the woeful expression with which the blank linen face of the doll appeared to gaze out at her from under the jammed-down golden helmet, nor the sudden thought of that the sea demoness had recently fondled all that gold hemming in the doll. She grabbed it up with its prison, withdrew it from the barred globe and snatched off its helmet, and while the ikons chinked down on the table she clutched the stuffed cloth to her bosom and bent her lips to it and cherished and kissed it, breathing it words of endearment.

In the cabin the Mouser was able to dodge aside from those questing silvery spined hands, which went past him, while in the dark realm his giant self was able to veer aside from *Seahawk's* hull at the last moment and burst out of the darkness, so that his two selves were once again and both back in the cabin—which now lurched as though *Seahawk* were capsizing.

On deck all gaped, flinching, as a black shape thicker than *Seahawk* burst resoundingly from the dark water beside them, so close it tickled the ship's hull and shook it and they might have reached out and touched it. The shape erected itself like a windowless tower built all of streaming black boot leather, down which sheets of water cascaded. It shot up higher and higher, dragging their gazes skyward, then it narrowed and with a sweep of its great flukes left the water altogether and for a long moment they watched the dark dripping underbelly



of black leviathan pass over *Seahawk*, vast as a stormcloud, lacking lightning perhaps but not thunder, as he breached entire from ocean. But then they were all snatching for handholds as *Seahawk* lurched down violently sideways, as though trying to shake them from her back. At least there was no shortage of lashings to grab onto as she slid with the collapsing waters into the great chasm left by leviathan. There came the numbing shock of that same beast smiting the sea beyond them as he returned to his element. Then salt ocean closed over them as they sank down, down, and down.

Afterward the Mouser could never determine how much of what next happened in the cabin transpired under water and how much in a great bubble of air constrained by that other element so that it became more akin to it. (No question, he was wholly under water toward the end.) There was a somewhat slow or, rather, measured, dreamlike quality to all their subsequent movements there—his, the transformed Ississi's and the creature he took to be her brother—as if they were made against great pressures. It had elements both of a savage struggle—a fierce, life-and-death fight—and of a ceremonial dance with beasts. Certainly his position during it was always in the center, beside or a little above the open chest of fabrics, and certainly the transformed Ississi and her brother circled him like sharks and darted in alternately to attack, their narrow jaws gaping to show razorlike teeth and closing like great scissors snipping. And always there was that sense of steadily increasing pressure, though not now within his skull particularly but over his entire body and centering if anywhere upon his lungs.

It began, of course, with his evading of Ississi's initial loving and murderous lunge at him, and his moving past her to the chest she had just quitted. Then, as she turned back to assault him a second time (all jaws now, arms merged into her silver-scaled sides and her crested legs merged, but eyes still great and green) and as he, in turn, turned to oppose her, he was inspired to grab up with both hands from the chest the topmost fabric and, letting it unfold sequentially and spread as he did so, whirl it between him and her in a great lustrous, baffling coppery sheet, or pale rosy-orange cloud. And she was indeed distracted from her main purpose by this timely interposition, although her silvery jaws came through it more than once, shedding and shearing and altogether making sorry work of Cif's intended cloak or dress of state or treasurer's robes, or whatever.

Then, as the Mouser completed his whirling turn, he found himself confronting the in-rushing silver-crested Mordroog, and to hold *him* off snatched up and whirlingly interposed the next rich silken fabric in the chest, which happened to be a violet one, his reluctant gift for Afreyt, so now it became a great pale purple cloud-wall soon slashed to lavender streaks and streamers, through which Mordroog's silver and jaw-snapping visage showed like a monstrous moon.

This maneuver brought the Mouser back in turn to face Ississi, who was closing in again through coppery shreds, and this attack was in turn thwarted by the extensive billowing out of a sheet of bold scarlet silk, which he had meant to present to the capable whore-turned-fisherwoman, Hilsa, but now was as effectively reduced to scraps and tatters as any incarnadined sunset is by conquering night.

And so it went, by turns, each charming or at least clever fabric-gift in turn sacrificed—brazzy yellow satin for Hilsa's comrade Rill, a rich brown worked with gold for Fafhrd, lovely seagreen and salmon pink sheets (also for Cif), a sky blue one (still another for Afreyt—to appease Fafhrd), a royal purple one for Pshawri (in honor of his first lieutenancy), and even one for Groniger (soberest black)—but each sheet successively defeating a dire attack by silvery sea demon or demoness, until the cabin had been filled with a most expensive sort of confetti and the bottom of the chest had been reached.

But by then, mercifully, the demonic attacks had begun to lessen in speed and fury, grow weaker and weaker, until they were but surly and almost aimless switchings-about (even floppings-about, like those of fish dying), while (*most* mercifully—almost miraculously) the dreadful suffocating pressure instead of increasing or even holding steady had started to fall off, to lessen, and now was continuing to do so, more and more swiftly.

What had happened was that when *Seahawk* had slid into the hole left by leviathan, the lead in her keel (which made her seaworthy) had tended to drag her down still farther, abetted by the mass of her great cargo, especially the bronze ingots and copper sheetings in it. But on the other hand, the greater part of her cargo by far consisted of items that were *lighter than water*—the long stack of dry, well-seasoned timber, the tight barrels of flour, and the woollen sacks of grain, all of these additionally having considerable amounts of air trapped in them (the timber by virtue of the tarred canvas



sheathing it, the grain because of the greasy raw wool of the sacks, so they acted as so many floats). So long as these items were above the water they tended to press the ship more deeply into it, but once they were under water, their effect was to drag *Seahawk* upward, toward the surface.

Now under ordinary conditions of stowage—safe, adequate stowage, even—all these items might well have broken loose and floated up to the surface individually, the timber stack emerging like a great disintegrating raft, the sacks bobbing up like so many balloons, while *Seahawk* continued on down to a watery grave carrying along with it those trapped below decks and any desperately clinging seamen too shocked and terror-frozen to loosen their panic-grips.

But the imaginative planning and finicky overseeing the Mouser had given the stowage of the cargo at 'Brulsk, so that Fafhrd or Cif or (Mog forbid!) Skor should never have cause to criticize him, and also in line with his determination, now he had taken up merchanting, to be the cleverest and most foresighted merchant of them all, taken in conjunction with the mildly sadistic fury with which he had driven the men at their stowage work, insured that the wedgings and lashings down of this cargo were something exceptional. And then when, earlier today and seemingly on an insane whim, he had insisted that all those more-than-adequate lashings be doubled, and then driven the men to that work with even greater fury, he had unknowingly guaranteed *Seahawk's* survival.

To be sure, the lashings were strained, they creaked and boomed underwater (they were lifting a whole sailing galley) but not a single one of them parted, not a single air-swollen sack escaped before *Seahawk* reached the surface.

And so it was that the Mouser was able to swim through the hatchway and see untainted blue sky again and blessedly fill his lungs with their proper element and weakly congratulate Mikkidu and a Mingol paddling and gasping beside him on their most fortunate escape. True, *Seahawk* was water-filled and awash, but she floated upright, her tall mast and bedraggled sail were intact, the sea was calm and windless still, and (as was soon determined) her entire crew had survived, so the Mouser knew there was no insurmountable obstacle in the way of their clearing her of water first by bailing, then by pumping (the oarholes could be plugged, if need be), and continuing their voyage. And if in the course of that clearing, a few fish, even a couple of big ones, should

flop overside after a desultory snap or two (best be wary of all fish!) and then dive deep into *their* proper element and return to their own rightful kingdom—why, that was all in the Nehwonian nature of things.

A fortnight later, being a week after *Seahawk's* safe arrival in Salthaven, Fafhrd and Afreyt rented the Sea Wrack and gave Captain Mouser and his crew a party, which Cif and the Mouser had to help pay for from the profits of the latter's trading voyage. To it were invited numerous Isler friends. It coincided with the year's first blizzard, for the winter gales had held off and been providentially late coming. No matter, the salty tavern was snug and the food and drink all that could be asked for—with perhaps one exception.

"There was a faint taste of wool fat in the fruit soup," Hilsa observed. "Nothing particularly unpleasant, but noticeable."

"That'll have been from the grease in the sacking," Mikkidu enlightened her, "which kept the salt sea out of 'em, so they buoyed us up powerfully when we sank. Captain Mouser thinks of everything."

"Just the same," Skor reminded him *sotto voce*, "it turned out he did have a girl in the cabin all the while—and that damned chest of fabrics, too! You can't deny he's a great liar whenever he chooses."

"Ah, but the girl turned out to be a sea demon and he needed the fabrics to defend himself from her, and that makes all the difference," Mikkidu rejoined loyally.

"I never saw her as aught but a ghostly and silver-crested sea demon," old Ourph put in. "The first night out from No-ombrulsk I saw her rise from the cabin through the deck and stand at the taffrail, invoking and communing with sea monsters."

"Why didn't you report that to the Mouser?" Fafhrd asked, gesturing toward the venerable Mingol with his new bronze hook.

"One never speaks of a ghost in its presence," the latter explained, "or while there is a chance of its reappearance. It only gives it strength. As always, silence is silver."

"Yes, and speech is golden," Fafhrd maintained.

Rill boldly asked the Mouser across the table, "But just how did you deal with the sea demoness while she was in her girl-guise? I gather you kept her tied up a lot, or tried to?"

"Yes," Cif put in from beside him. "You were even planning at one point to train her to be a maid for me, weren't



you?" She smiled curiously. "Just think, I lost that as well as all those lovely materials."

"I attempted a number of things that were rather beyond my powers," the Gray One admitted manfully, the edges of his ears turning red. "Actually, I was lucky to escape with my life." He turned toward Cif. "Which I couldn't have done if you hadn't snatched me from the tainted gold in the nick of time."

"Never mind, it was I put you amongst the tainted gold in the first place," she told him, laying her hand on his on the table, "but now it's been hopefully purified." (She had directed that ceremony of exorcism of the ikons herself, with the assistance of Mother Grum, to free them of all baleful Simorgyan influence got from their handling by the demoness. The old witch was somewhat dubious of the complete efficacy of the ceremony).

Later Skor described the leviathan arching over *Seahawk*. Afreyt nodded appreciatively, saying, "I was once in a dory when a whale breached close alongside. It is not a sight to be forgotten."

"Nor is it when viewed from the other side of the gunnel," the Mouser observed reflectively. Then he winced. "Mog, what a head thump that would have been!"

*Lin Carter*

## DEMON OF THE SNOWS

*I've been recording the adventurous saga of Thongor the Mighty, barbarian warrior-king of Lost Lemuria, for something like sixteen years now. His saga began with my first published novel, The Wizard of Lemuria, back in 1965. There have been six novels in the saga published by this time, and as many short stories or novellettes, of which this is the most recent. It was going to appear in Ted White's Fantastic, but we all know what happened to Ted White's Fantastic, don't we? So it appears here in print for the first time.*

—L.C.

### *1. Out of the Shadows*

All day the lone traveler had trudged down the great Jomsgard Pass that cleft the mighty wall of mountains in twain, and now, as the day died in crimson athwart the western horizon, he had come within sight of his goal.

From east to west across the world the wall of mountains strode like marching giants struck to stone by some dark enchantment. And, in very truth, they walled the world, divid-



ing the wintry wastes of the bleak and barren Northlands from the golden cities of the jungle-girt Dakshina, as the Southlands were called. Tall they were and snowy-crested, these Mountains of Mommur, but the Pass of Jomsgard broke their frowning battlements and gave an avenue to the weary traveler, such as he who stood with strong arms folded upon his breast as he viewed the awesome scene.

Here at this point the mountain pass narrowed until it was but little more than a footpath between towering walls of sheer, unbroken stone. They soared high aloft, those cliffy walls of granite, sloping to ice-clad peaks. Above the argent horns of the twin peaks the crimson of sunset faded to dim purple, whereupon the first sharp stars now ventured, one by one.

The taller of the twin mountains thrust forth a spur of rock above the pass, and upon that spur a high-walled keep was built. This was Jomsgard Keep, the hold of Barak Redwolf, the Lord of the Pass. For a dozen generations of men the Northlander baron and his warlike ancestors had held the narrow way beneath the shadow of the sword, the spear and the arrow, exacting a toll of heavy gold from merchant caravan, homeless mercenary and wandering peddler.

Unassailable by the skills of war were the high walls of Jomsgard Keep; commanding the head of the pass as it did, the old castle could not be taken by surprise, or storm, or even stealth. If ever there had been in all the annals of ancient Lemuria a castle unconquerable, it was the keep of Barak Redwolf.

And to his gates the lone traveler had come. The last of his savage tribe, in all the Northlands no hand was held out to him in comradeship, no kin had he in all the North, nor had he anywhere found a friend.

But the high walls of Jomsgard require many warriors to man them, and the tall towers need sentinels to watch by day and by night. Here, from of old, flocked renegades and outlaws, men with blood on their hands and prices on their heads. Here, if anywhere, the traveler thought to find a safe haven against the hostile clans and nations of the North. And if not, then southwards he would fare, down to the golden cities basking beside the summery sea.

Cut from the hard stone of the granite wall, a wide stair rose from the level of the pass to the barbican-gate of Barak's keep. Guessing himself watched from aloft, the traveler mounted the stair and stood before the mighty portal—

And beheld a marvel!

For the great gate guarding Jomsgard castle was unbolted and—*ajar!*

Baffled, the youth—for he was scarce more than that—regarded the half-open gate with puzzlement.

Had some enemy crept into the citadel of Barak Redwolf? Had some force of warriors smote their way into the keep? Had some sly traitor bribed with a satrap's ransom, left the door ajar?

Across his bronzed young shoulders, in a worn leather scabbard strapped to a baldric, the youth bore a great broadsword that his fathers and his fathers' fathers had wielded in battle for many generations. Now, wary as some great cat, the youth slid the glittering blade from its leathern sheath.

Bearing the great sword Sarkozan before him, the youth stepped within the portal.

And the blackness swallowed him up.

The guardian of the gate had not, after all, deserted his post. For the youth found him just within the shadow of the barbican, face-down in a puddle of congealing gore.

The youth dropped to his knees, dabbling his fingers in the dead man's blood. Then he raised his wet fingers to his nostrils and sniffed keenly. At this height, and in this cold, dry air, fresh-shed blood cools swiftly and soon dries to brown scum. But the blood of the corpse was still damp. The man had been murdered, the boy guessed, a little more than two hours before.

On swift, silent feet the youth prowled the gloomy halls and chambers of the citadel, finding, here and there, more bodies, but naught that lived. Neither did he find any evidence of battle—no signs which would have indicated that the castle of Barak Redwolf had been attacked by a force of warriors.

The men of Jomsgard Keep had been struck down one by one by something that had come upon them in silence and in stealth, out of the black shadows—

These thoughts were passing through the mind of the youth as he entered the inner hall of the keep.

He stepped through the gateposts and froze motionless, scarce daring to breathe.

For the blade of the knife which a small but firm hand held at his naked throat was sharp and cold as the kiss of death!



## 2. Terror in the Night

Flames still flickered upon the hearthstone of Barak Redwolf. Not yet had they slumped to glowing coals.

By their orange light the youth was able to perceive the foeman who held him at bay.

Or—*foewoman*.

His eyes widened incredulously, and he uttered a short laugh. For a slim, long-legged girl held the knife at his throat—a girl younger, if anything, than himself.

Her skin was clear bronze, tanned by the sun and her cheeks were reddened by the icy winds. Her tresses, which lay in twin thick braids across her slender shoulders, were sun-golden. Her huge, long-lashed eyes were blue as sapphires. She wore rude garments of tanned leather, belted around her with chains of silver, and her feet were shod with buskins of supple hide. Clapsed about her slim throat she wore gleaming amber beads, warm against her clear skin. She was very young—breathtakingly lovely—and very, very frightened.

The last was discernible from the way her firm young breasts rose and fell beneath her tunic, panting with quick, short, shallow breaths.

"Come, girl," the youth growled shortly, "take your sting away before you slice my gullet. I am no enemy to such as you. What in the name of All Gods has befallen here?"

The knife did not move from his throat; neither did the girl take her eyes from his face.

"Who are you, and why are you here?" she demanded, panting breathlessly. "Swift, now! And speak true, or my blade will drink your blood—"

"My name is Thongor, the son of Thumithar," the youth said.

"Where do you hail from?" the girl demanded fiercely.

Thongor took a breath to steady himself. The girl's knife just touched his skin, and the blade lay along the great artery of the throat. One false word, one twitch of her hand, and his heart's blood would encrimson the rushes which lay strewn about the stone-paved floor beneath his feet.

"I am a Valkarthan, of the Black Hawk people," he said.

"How did you enter here?"

He arched his black brows. "The door was open; the captain of the gate lay dead in a pool of his own blood. I walked in to discover what thing had slain the man and left the gates ajar. Come: put away your knife; I am newly come to Jomsgard, and had naught to do with whatever has struck here. . . ."

The girl took her knife away from his throat, although she did not put it away. Thongor rubbed his throat, wincing. Then he walked over to the fire and threw off his cloak of furs. The firelight gleamed on the thews of his bare, muscular torso. The girl followed him with her eyes.

"I am Ylala, the daughter of Thogar the Smith, of the White River people," she said at length, in a listless voice. He said nothing, rubbing his palms together briskly before the burning logs. He was a lean, wolfish boy of perhaps seventeen with sturdy shoulders and strong arms: the corded muscles that rippled beneath his bronzed hide gave just a hint of the massive strength that would be his with manhood.

"My people pay tribute to Barak Redwolf, that our hides and furs and ivory may pass to the Southlander tradesmen," the girl said. "When times are hard, and there is no gold wherewith to pay, we pay in tribute of slaves. This year, the times were hard. I am the tribute," she said simply.

Thongor lifted his head and stared at her. His own people would have starved to the last babe rather than give a daughter of the tribe into slavery to such as the Baron of Jomsgard. Her limpid eyes fell before his stare, and her cheeks crimsoned. He said nothing, and after a moment he turned his scowling eyes from her.

By the glow shed by the leaping flames he could see the full length of the hall. Great benches of rough wood lined the walls; a rack near the door held spears; bows and quivers full of arrows hung on iron hooks between brackets which held guttering torches.

There was only one dead body in the hall, and it lay at the foot of the low dais whereon stood the chair of Barak Redwolf. It had been too dark in the antechamber beyond the half-open gate for Thongor to have made out the manner in which the gate captain had been murdered. Now, examining the figure which lay sprawled at the foot of the dais, he felt faintly sick.

He had seen men die in a variety of ways, but never a corpse like this.



The man had been *crushed* to death.

He nudged the corpse with his foot.

"Barak?"

The girl glanced over, then shuddered. "No; he was a bigger man, with a narrow head, amber eyes like a beast, and red hair. I think that man was Bothon, one of the chieftains."

"Where are all the rest of them?"

The girl shrugged.

"Where were you when these men died?"

The girl gestured to the back of the hall. "There is a room back there where they put me. I was brought here this day with dawn. Barak looked me over and liked what he saw. This . . . was to have been my . . . my bridal night. . . ."

"Well, you were spared that, at least," the youth grunted. "But—you heard nothing, saw nothing?"

"The walls are thick, the doors were shut, and I was sick with dread," she whispered. "Sometime before sunfall I heard men yelling and the clump of their boots in the hall. I thought they were all drunk, or at some game or other. Then, when no one came for me, I ventured out. I found a man's body back there, behind the hall, and then this one here. I—I thought the keep had been attacked, and you, one of the attackers!"

The youth shook his head, long straight black hair brushing his square-jawed face.

"Not I," he said shortly. "Come—let us explore."

The girl cast a fearful glance into the deep shadows in the far corners of the hall. From such dark places, perchance, nameless and unknown terror had struck through all this mighty keep, slaughtering men by dozens. And perhaps it lingered, even yet, in the gloom beyond the fire's glow. She felt the cold breath of that terror against her nape.

Then she looked up into the boy's clear, steady gaze. There was grim purpose in that gaze, and curiosity, too. But there was no fear. And suddenly she felt less fearful herself.

She rose to stand beside him. He took down one of the oil-soaked torches from a wall bracket.

Then he took her hand in his.

And they went forward into the darkness together.

### 3. *Dead Man, Laughing*

They came at length to a chamber decorated more sumptuously than the rest. The walls were hung with woven cloth in such colors and patterns as the weaver-women of Eobar prefer, and there were small tables of black wood here and there about, carven and set with ivory. There was a carpet that had come from the looms of Cadorna, perhaps.

Ylala said that this was the room Barak Redwolf used for his—amusements.

One of the things he used to amuse himself still hung from the ceiling in iron chains.

It was, or it had been, a man. An old man with a long thin beard and long thin arms and legs, and not much meat on the rest of him, either. He had been stripped naked and hung by his wrists while Barak did unpleasant things with heated irons to him. The irons still lay in a copper bowl brimful of hot coals which still glowed amid pink ashes.

Ylala took one look at what the heated irons had done to the old man, then turned aside. Thongor put his arm around her until she stopped shuddering.

"Did you know him?"

She nodded.

"Was he of your tribe?"

"No. He was an old wizard, named Zoran Zar, lived in a tower in the hills. They brought him in this morning. I heard Barak boasting that he would soon have the secret of his gold out of him. He thought the wizard had a hidden treasure trove. Is he—is he dead?"

"Quite dead," said Thongor somberly. "There is one thing about him that bothers me."

"What is that?"

"Look again at his face," the youth advised.

Steeling herself, the girl looked. Then she paled incredulously and looked away quickly.

Thongor nodded. "I agree," he grunted.

Instead of being drawn with pain, the wizard's face wore a most peculiar expression, considering how he had died.

He was *smiling*.

His lips were drawn back, exposing the rotted yellowish



stumps of his teeth. His mouth grinned open. It was as if he had been just about to laugh when death took him.

Thongor said nothing. Men do not smile—much less break into laughter—under the caress of red-hot iron. Only the bravest of warriors, the noblest of heroes, can endure such torment with stoicism. And Zoran Zar, surely, had been neither.

It was strange, even uncanny. But there was much about this black castle that struck Thongor as uncanny, and he liked none of it. The gloomy castle, devoid of living inhabitants save for himself and the girl, its dark corridors weird with whispering echoes and crawling shadows, stank to him of magic.

He did not like magic, nor did he like magicians. Young as he was, he had encountered both during his wanderings, to his discomfort. Give him a foe of flesh and blood, and put naked steel in his hand, and he would do battle as bravely as might any full-grown man. But how can you fight ghosts or curses or enchantments with naked steel?

They went on, searching for some sign of life.

Behind them, dangling limply in the iron chains, the dead man hung, turning idly this way and that as a gust of wind moved down the draughty halls. The skull-like face of the old man still bore the rictus of silent laughter.

Thongor wished he knew what had made the old man smile.

Within the span of an hour they had searched the keep from cellar to attic and found nothing that lived.

One more corpse, crushed to death as if in the embrace of a giant, they found at the head of the stairs leading up to the watch-tower, but that was all they found, or almost all.

Nowhere was there the slightest sign of battle, nor any token that men had fought against men in the dark halls and empty rooms. No discarded weapons or smashed furniture or spilled blood. Nor had there been any looting, for casks of gems and gold lay in the cellars untouched.

It was inexplicable and frightening.

Returning to the main hall, they stirred up the fire again, piled on fresh logs. Then, while the flames roared up, and Thongor went to close and bar the great gate, Ylala made herself useful in the kitchens.

They ate before the flames, making a good meal from cold fruit, hot meat, fresh bread and rich, succulent gravy. They

sampled, at first cautiously, then with enthusiasm, the thin gold wine of the Southlands, made from fermented fruit called the *sarn*. Thongor had tasted wine but once before, while a prisoner in the enchanted city of Ithomaar; it had been too heady and exhilarating for one raised on the thin, sour ale of Valkarth. But this wine he liked, as did the girl.

They exchanged few words, feeling uncomfortable with each other. Girls and boys in their tribes were rigidly excluded from each other's company until of marriageable age. Only in the pits of Ithomaar had Thongor been alone with a girl before, and he did not quite know how to behave. As for Ylala, she kept a demure silence, her eyes downcast, except when he was not looking at her: then she lifted her eyes to his face, which she thought very handsome. To her, he seemed much more manly and serious and responsible than a boy his age should have been.

They slept for what remained of that night to either side of the fire pit, rolled in furs. But neither slept well or deeply; Thongor, because he was disturbed by the nearness of the girl, and by her loveliness; and Ylala, because she could not put out of her mind the thing they had found on the second floor of the castle.

It was a man's boot. With the foot still in it.

#### *4. Barak Redwolf*

When the great golden sun of old Lemuria lifted up over the edges of the world to flood the land with its light and drive away the darkness, the youth and the girl also rose.

They made their ablutions and broke their fast with a light meal, saving most of the meat against a future hour of need. Then they robed themselves in furs against the cold wind and the numb snow of the heights, and fared forth into the mountain country.

Thongor had decided that there was nothing else for him to do but to escort Ylala home to the caves where her tribe dwelt. He could not very well abandon her here in the empty castle; neither did he deem it proper that she should accompany him down the great Jomsgard Pass into the southern country. So he must take her home.

They left at midmorn, and struck out for the plateau



beside the Whiteriver glacier, where her people made their winter encampment. Besides a supply of food and drink, sleeping-furs and weapons, they bore with them a thick earthenware pot stuffed full of live coals, so that if need be on the way they could at least build a fire.

But they carried off from the castle of Barak Redwolf neither gold nor gems from the robber baron's treasure. Neither of them had any particular use for such loot, as there was nothing to buy in the waste; and Thongor, at least, had an uneasy suspicion that the wealth of Jomsgard Keep might somehow be tainted by the curse of invisible doom that had slain the baron's warriors to the last man.

Ylala, however, did not scruple to bear away with her a cruse of valuable lamp oil for her mother. Such civilized luxuries were hard to come by in the cave country.

**They struck overland, Thongor going ahead to test the snowbanks carefully with the long spear he had borne away from Barak's armory.** It was well into Panchand, the second month of spring, and the thaws were eating into the thick-banked snow. Runnels of dirty water trickled down the cliff walls, and the footing underneath was loose and treacherous.

All that day they kept moving, pausing only occasionally to rest and refresh themselves. Toward late afternoon they surprised an elphodon drinking from a stream, which Thongor brought down with a single arrow. That night they sought refuge in an empty cave, built a fire, and roasted fresh meat from the carcass of Thongor's kill. They slept near together that night for warmth, achingly conscious of each other. With dawn they went forward.

They found Barak Redwolf near the mid of day. Or what was left of him.

The baron must have left the castle at the height of the terror, creeping forth into the waste by a secret way. They had no way of telling where he might have been going, but he had not gotten far. Something had come upon him while he had rested, a little after dawn, by the ashes of a fire not long cold.

He had been crushed as if by some titan's hand. Only his lower parts were mangled; from the waist up he had not been touched.

The expression upon his face was one of sheer, unbelieving terror. Thongor regarded the dead man's face grimly. The baron had been a knave, a bully, and a tyrant. But he could not for long have held supremacy over his band of ruffians if

he had not been a brave man, and a seasoned and veteran warrior. Hard-bitten men of such breeding do not die before the fangs of a beast or the spears of an enemy with such an expression of blood-curdling horror on their faces.

They went on, for there was nothing else to be done.

After a while Thongor cleared his throat and spoke.

"Was this Zoran Zar a powerful wizard?" he asked.

"So the old men of my tribe said," the girl replied. "They say he had tamed to his will, and pent up, the Demon of the Snows."

"What manner of creature is that?"

"I really do not know. The old men said it was a thing of utter cold that dwelt beneath the roots of the ice mountain," Ylala said.

Thongor grunted, and spat, but said nothing. He was not entirely sure that he believed in demons; on the other hand, he was not entirely sure that he didn't.

He wondered if Barak Redwolf had.

They spent the second night under a low, shelf-like rock that afforded them some shelter from the wind and from whatever beasts might be roaming the snowy wilderness.

They slept in each other's arms.

Thongor had not intended this to happen, but it had. No sooner had he put the furs about them than the girl had come into his arms, pressing herself against him, burrowing her face into his shoulder. He was fumbling and inexperienced at first, and they were clumsy in their eagerness. But the instincts lay deep in the blood of both, and soon they moved together, helping each other. When it was done they lay gasping, and her face was wet with tears.

The second time it was easier, and much better. He was gentle when she needed him to be gentle, and fierce when she wanted his fierceness. This time there were sleepy, satiated smiles, and many warm kisses, but no tears.

They slept deeply and well that night, and woke with dawn rested and fresh. And never again was there to be any strangeness or restraint between them, for as long as they were to be together.

Later that morning they came to the caves of Ylala's people. But there were none to greet them and the fires in the caves were dead and cold. Ylala had long borne the cruse of precious oil to pleasure her mother.

But nothing would ever pleasure her mother again, nor



would anything ever again cause her pain. For she was beyond both pain and pleasure, when they found her remains on the outskirts of the caves, crushed as if by some immense hand.

### *5. That Which Kills in the Night*

They found three other bodies besides that of Ylala's mother, and Thongor scratched holes in the snowy earth and buried them with their weapons and belongings beside them. Then he covered them over and piled high cairns of rocks atop the rude graves to keep the beasts away.

Then they rested beside a roaring fire, and took food, the girl dry-eyed and unspeaking, the boy grim and somber. There was nothing more to be done by them here.

The marks in the snow were clear and easy to follow, although they were unlike the tracks of any beast which Thongor had ever seen or heard of. It was more like the path made by a crawling worm or a serpent than anything else, he thought to himself, that shallow, wriggling, smooth depression in the snow. But if worm indeed it were, then the thing was twice as long as a tree is tall.

They followed it up into the hills, reaching the crest by early afternoon. Here they found the tower of the dead wizard, Zoran Zar; it was more of a house than a tower, a four-sided stone building only a little taller than it was long.

Inside, they found nothing. Barak Redwolf's men had been thorough, if not neat. Old books written in languages Thongor could not understand lay cast about, scattering the stone-paved floor with paper. Crockery was smashed in the fireplace, which stank of queer chemicals for which Thongor had no name. Curious small idols of lead and clay and brown stone lay toppled over or smashed. The furniture, what there had been of it, was broken or overturned.

Here and there, Barak's men had pried up stone slabs from the flooring, hoping to find gold buried beneath them, somewhere. There was no sign that they had found any.

Outside the stone house, holes had been dug in the earth. Neither was there here any sign that treasure had been found, such as empty sacks or broken chests.

Here on the heights the wind had blown away most of the

snow and the earth was raw and muddy. It was easier to track the devil-thing.

The tracks led to a hole in the earth, like a covered well. The cover, a rounded slab of mountain granite, had been pried away and there were signs in the mud that men had knelt here as if to probe the depths of the pit with long poles or spears.

Thongor examined the stone lid curiously. It had carefully and painstakingly been carved with cryptic symbols in a language he could neither speak nor read, but which he had seen before, once or twice, in his travels. It was the charactery used in the secret language of magicians. The weird runes were potent and powerful, he knew: it stung the eyes until they watered just to look upon them.

Bidding the girl stand back, he unwrapped their store of fresh meat, tied a thong about it, and dangled it over the lip of the well. The odor of meat was rich and tantalizing on the fresh air.

They heard, both of them, a slithering in the depths of the earth, as of some ponderous and mighty thing—*stirring*.

Then a blast of frigid air smote them. So unearthly was the cold that breathed up suddenly from the pit that ice crystals formed in their hair and upon exposed portions of their bodies.

At the sight of that which came pouring forth out of the pit the girl screamed—horribly. Even Thongor felt his skin crawl and his nape-hairs stir.

It was like a worm grown unthinkably immense—mountainous in its hugeness—soft and pulpy and obscenely naked.

White it was, with the unhealthy pallid whiteness of a thing that has never, or seldom, been exposed to the glare of the golden sun.

It had no eyes, no nostrils, no features of any kind. Except for a wet, squirming, repulsive, toothless orifice that should have been a mouth. This obscenely working hole closed over the dangling meat. Oozing a fetid slime, the orifice gaped open again, hungry for more flesh.

Thongor flung his spear into the white thing, but it did no harm, merely slicing a path through stinking, colorless pulp. Then he put an arrow or two into it, which it did not seem even to feel.

The gaping maw of the thing, dripping slime, veered suddenly toward Ylala, where she stood frozen with horror as if rooted to the spot. The blast of arctic cold that breathed from



the wriggling length of the worm-thing chilled her flesh, made her blood flow sluggishly. In a sudden spasm of revulsion, the girl flung that which she held, for some reason, in her hand.

It was the cruse of oil.

The stopper came loose when the container thudded against the monstrous worm. In seconds pale yellowish oil ran all over the head and upper portion of the thing, dripping into the gaping, wetly-working maw.

Thongor whirled, caught up the pot of coals and flung it.

Hot coals spilled out and besplattered the worm from its blind head to the upper portion which extended out of the mouth of the well. Mindlessly, the worm chomped down on the live coals.

Then it recoiled suddenly, uttering a shrill, ear-splitting hiss of pain. Steam swirled up, obscuring the thing as it whipped its pulpy head to and fro.

Flame shot up as the coals caught fire in the spilled lamp oil. Writhing tendrils of flame meshed the white worm, bit in cruelly. For perhaps the first time in the measureless eons of its monstrous life, the Demon of the Snows felt the unendurable searing touch of pure flame upon its soft, cold flesh.

Wriggling in spasms of agony, the worm-thing oozed back into its pit.

It vanished from view, but they could hear its shrill, squealing cry; and the earth shook to the fury of its torment.

Oily black smoke, mingled with live steam, seeped from the yawning mouth of the pit.

Thonger rolled the stone lid back into place until it once again covered the well. Sunlight gleamed on the deep runes cut in the smooth stone. They blazed with wrathful warning, strong with power.

"Is it—dead?" Ylala panted, shivering in his arms.

"Crom knows," he grunted. "But, dead or alive, it cannot pry the lidstone away of its own strength. Those signs were cut there to keep it prisoned safely far below. Let us hope that never again men come this way, hungry enough for gold to lift the stone and set loose that which was never meant to be seen by the light of day."

All day the travelers had trudged down the great Jomsgard Pass that cleaved the mighty wall of mountains in twain, and now, as the day died in crimson athwart the western horizon, they had come within sight of their goal.

The Mountains of Mommur bestrode the horizon like a

great wall of stone, shutting away behind them the icy kingdoms of the bleak Northlands—Eobar and Valkarth, and the many tribes and clans that wrung a meager sustenance from the wintry wild.

Below them the pass sloped down into the warm and summery lands of the Dakshina. There a curtain of morning mist lay over the grassy meadows and the dense jungles. Far to the south, and farther still, morning smote to gold the towers of Kathool and Patanga, and the seacoast cities. Sunlight glittered in the waters of the great gulf, and gleamed on the curving ribbons that were the jungle rivers feeding into that gulf.

For Thongor of Valkarth it had been a long and wearisome road, down from the cold vales of the ultimate north, down across the snowy valleys, across the great plateau, and the mighty glaciers, and the sky-tall mountains. But he had reached the golden Southlands at last: surely here, among the wharves and shipping, in the barracks of the soldiers or the palaces of the kings, among the green farmlands or in the noisy marketplaces, he could find employment with his keen eye and steady hand, strong arm and brave heart. For a man who is not afraid to face death at sword's point, the southland with its wars and golden cities is the place to seek his fortune.

For the girl at his side, he felt willing to try. Together they would face whatever might come. Thongor was no longer alone, and his heart swelled within him at the realization. The girl, perhaps sensing his thought, smiled up at him, and her hand crept into his.

Hand in hand, side by side, they went down into the Southland together.



*Jayge Carr*

## THE PAVILION WHERE ALL TIMES MEET

*This young lady is an author new to me, but she certainly knows how to spin an interesting, very original piece of storytelling. It's about a man without a past and a woman without a future . . . stop and think about that for just a moment. I did. And I assumed it was just a phrase, a gimmick designed to grab the reader's attention on the first page. Boy, was I ever wrong!*

—L.C.

They met in Pheadra, that blood-dyed city twice as old as time.

The man without a past sat with his back to a sturdy corner, idly tossing the tetrahedral dice. Sable they were, a hue so deep and dark and dull that they seemed to suck light within themselves, as though each face were a hole into limitless vastnesses, instead of mere solid matter; for dots they had carvings of fearsome beasts, with some silvery metal rubbed into the reliefs, as dull and lightless a gray as their sable background. There were those who claimed that the evil carvings changed, so that a throw of three horned beasts might, later in the evening, show three flying serpents. But most dis-

missed such foolish tales, for it is well-known how many monsters lurk in the bottom of a goatskin flask.

The man without a past watched the dice fall, again and again, in mostly stolid silence; but now and then he frowned, and once laughed, a short harsh bark with no humor in it.

The woman with no future was not beautiful, but the sum of the lifetime earnings of every man in the bar would not have paid for as much as the sandals on her arrogant feet. Only the man without a past failed to look up as she swept through the portal from the dingy street outside. A single imperious gesture gave her an open path until she was standing over the table in the corner, watching the whirl and spin of the tetrahedral dice.

"I've no need for such as you," he said matter-of-factly, when her shadow darkened the table. "Go away."

"But I have need for such as you," she said, seating herself, with a disdainful flick of her cloak at the grimy seat, on the bench opposite his.

He scooped the dice off the table, whirled, threw. She leaned over the table, and again her shadow covered the dice. "Let the bartender serve you elsewhere," he said, not looking up at her, but down at the dice. "He can supply you with anything you crave—for a price."

"Only you can supply what I crave, you and no other."

Again he laughed without humor. "If you would pay and not be paid, there are many other men within these walls tonight. Pick two, if you doubt one can satisfy you."

Her long slender fingers, clad in gloves that glowed opalescently from her body heat, covered the dice and pulled them toward her. "I repeat, it is you—"

His hand reached out, palm up. "Those are mine."

Her other hand caught his wrist. "I want you to—"

"Don't touch me." Again, his tones were matter-of-fact, but he pulled his hand away with a vicious jerk. "Go away," he repeated, in those monotonous tones. His hands made an automatic sweeping-in-the-dice gesture, but froze when it encountered nothing. She waved the dice before his downcast eyes, pulled back when he reached for them. "I have searched long and far for you—" she began.

"Just leave me alone," he said. "Take the dice if you must have them—just leave me alone."

She shoved the dice toward him, and mechanically he picked them up, shook, threw. She stared at him through the dimness and smoke, nose wrinkling at the sour smell of burn-



ing pitch, tight-packed human animal, and ancient filth. "There are other ways I could do this," she said slowly, "but I prefer your willing aid to that given under duress."

His hand froze over the dice in the act of scooping them up again. Then with a weary sigh, he scooped, threw, studied.

She watched the rhythmic, ritualistic play, lip caught tight between teeth gleaming with jeweled insets, watched the sable, light-sucking dice whirling on the tabletop so tarnished with grime and use that the carvings on it were mere weary ghosts.

At last her patience ebbed away, and she asked sharply, "Well, come you with me willingly or no?"

He jerked slightly, but neither looked up nor answered.

"I offer you wealth beyond your wildest dreams!"

"I have no dreams—leave me alone."

"Wealth, power, women . . . the choice is yours."

The dice made faint clicking sounds on the worn table.

"What must I do to make you answer me!"

He looked up, eyes wide and lost before they returned to patient blankness. "Were you speaking to me, woman? Go away, I don't want your services now."

"I asked you a question, I must and will have an answer!"

"Answer? I—answer? Yes, no, choose your own answer, I care not. Only leave me be—" Hand poised over the dice, he frowned. "Is it coin you wish, I may have some . . ." As she watched, frowning, he fumbled with his clothing, found a worn pouch, and emptied it on the table. Several small coins spilled out and rolled about. He caught them, and placed them in a small pile in front of her.

"I don't want your pitiful hoard," she bit out, shoving the pile across the table toward him. He hesitated, and she snapped impatiently, "Go on, take them, they're yours!"

"Thank you, generous one," he muttered and picked up the pile. He reached down toward himself, couldn't find the pouch. His eyes searched, spotted it, limp, on the table. His hand hovered, he picked it up with an oddly hesitant air, as though he expected her to claim it. When she only watched, narrow-eyed, he put the money in the pouch, and with a sigh tied it to his frayed belt.

"You begged today," she said. "Begging is forbidden, unless you are a member of the Beggars' Guild, which you are not. Sooner or later the Imperial's men will catch you, and toss you into a dungeon to rot. Or the real Beggars will corner you in an alley and beat you half to death, or maybe

more than half. I offer you wealth to keep you in luxury through ten lifetimes, and yet you prefer to beg."

"I don't beg." His hair was dark and thick around his face, falling slightly forward so that his features were blurred under its heaviness.

"You may not whine aloud, like other beggars; but you live by what charity is thrust into your hands. I call that begging. Yesterday and the day before, and the day before that, you wandered about the square, and lived by—"

"I—*live*," a short bark. The dice whirled and fell, sable depths on a dun-colored table. Then she made an impatient gesture, and his eyes flickered toward her and back down at the table with its freight of sable significance. "I want no woman, I have not asked for a woman to share my table. Go away."

"So be it," she spat, a dozen generations of "Off with his head!" in voice and movements.. "So be it! You *have* chosen. And when your usefulness to me is ended, and I have taken what I must have from you, then will I exact sweet revenge from your insults!"

"Lady . . ." The voice was soft yet firm, and she looked up into the antique eyes of the younger bartender. Hard they were, over a sweetly modeled mouth, eyes that had seen everything, were surprised by nothing, and yet retained some compassion for human fools. "Lady," he repeated, "he meant no insult. He is—watch." Louder, "Outlander, I brought the meat you ordered. Pay me." He set the brimming goblet down beside the empty left hand with a gurgling thump.

The man without a past fumbled in his belt, and handed the pouch to the bartender, who extracted two small coins, and returned the pouch, which was then retied to the belt.

The woman stirred and started to speak, but was stopped by the bartender's quick hushing gesture. "No, wait. Wait and watch."

The dice whirled and spun.

Again the woman started to speak, but the bartender frowned her silent, and picked up the goblet while the man's attention was focused on the dice.

Again he thumped the goblet on the table. "Outlander, I have brought the meat you ordered. Pay me now."

The woman watched, while they played the little farce through again, although this time the bartender took nothing from the flaccid pouch.

And a third time, waiting until his attention was off the



glass, thumping it down, demanding to be paid. When he had returned the ragged pouch for the third time, the bartender smiled sadly at the woman, and murmured, "As you see, lady, he is not to blame."

"I had heard, but until one sees . . . I had not realized he forgot—so—so quickly . . ."

"A little less quickly, if he is talking to you, and looking at you, but let his attention be broken, even the slightest bit . . . any distraction . . . You see why he hides away in a corner, why he snarls people away from him . . ." A shrug. Then, even more softly, so that she had to strain to hear. "Leave him, lady. Ill fortune has brushed him, and it may rub off on those who come too close or linger too long."

"Yet you serve him, even number yourself among his protectors."

"He comes, he goes, a customer, with coins—sometimes—in his pouch." A smile that twisted the sweetly molded mouth into terrible cynicism. "And—I have less to lose than you, lady."

She chewed a perfumed lip. "This will make it all the more difficult, if he has not the capacity to help. . . ." To the bartender. "Can I use him for mine own ends, I will see he never wants—and *you* would not go unrewarded."

"He is as you have seen, lady. I have never known him other. Best to leave him as he is."

With a scornful toss of her head, she dismissed him.

Her guards were tall and muscular and mindless, bought brawn. Only their leader, looking sometimes at his mistress, was occasionally reminded that he was a man.

They had the man without a past out of the booth, gagged, bound, wrapped in a cloak, and draped over a sturdy shoulder before most of the other patrons had even turned to see what the slight disturbance was about.

The soft-voiced bartender watched them go, and then, with a shrug, he wiped out the goblets with a soiled rag, and like the man without a past, forgot.

For the first few days, the man without a past was docile enough, eating or drinking what was placed in his hands, dozing on the back of his beast while they moved, endlessly throwing his dark dice while they camped.

The only problem with him was that he tended to wander away, but whenever he did, he could be easily herded back.

The brawn quickly fell into the habit of treating him as they might a spare packbeast, caring for his physical needs,

ignoring him otherwise. The woman watched, lip caught between the jeweled flashing teeth, and noted that even the mindless brawn tended to look down at the man's ragged clothing or to one side, or over his head. Never would they meet the eyes shrouded in the dark waves of hair.

Yet he appeared ordinary enough. A body that might be muscular and well-proportioned if it was properly fed, beard and hair unkempt, uncared for, ragged beggar's clothing, face—simply a face, with eyes and nose and cheeks and mouth. Yet—somehow—the face . . . *lacked*.

She ordered him sent to her tent on the fourth evening, and a few minutes later a high, wordless keening exploded from within.

The brawncaptain was only a few paces from the tent flap, running, sword in hand, when the man without a past was thrust out. Behind him, she stood, coldly furious. Inside, he saw one of the lady's slavemaids, the one with the alabaster skin, naked, curled up in a tight, still shrilling ball. "Take him, and settle him for the night," the lady ordered. "And take this one," her finger speared the quivering slavemaids, "and have two of your men *punish* her. She dared to disobey a direct order."

The man stumbled to a stop, and the captain sheathed his sword and laid a hand on the raggedly clad shoulder. "You wish the slave *killed*, lady?" he asked, puzzled.

"Killed, fool? How can she serve me dead? No—your men have the crops for the beasts, have they not? I want her disobedience punished, not her usefulness marred. Tell whoever wields the crop that her screams are to be louder than those that have already insulted my ears, or his own voice will be added to the tally." Fiercely. "Take her, I said, I'll not have disobedient insolent servants about me!" And as he knelt to sling his shrieking, shrinking burden over his shoulder, she added thinly, "Send Sharmion to attend me now. And, captain, that one is to attend me in the morning, the punishment should not prevent that. But until morning, if you or any of your men—or all of your men . . ." The thin, pink tongue licked the perfumed lips. "All of your men, captain. So long as she is capable of attending me—in the morning . . ."

Two nights later, they were attacked by bandits, yelling and screaming and trying for the beasts, the packs, the women.

One of them charged the man, knife slashing brutally, but the man dodged, defending himself with a trained fighter's



ease, though the flashing weapon drove him backward until he was caught by a tent pole. The bandit closed in, and the two men struggled face-to-face—until suddenly the bandit pulled free, to run screaming from the campsite. He was lucky—the brawn made short enough work of the others.

And when the last bandit expired with a gurgle as life gushed from his cut throat, the brawn turned to find the man seated crosslegged before the tent, absorbed in his endless tossing of the dice.

One of the bandits had penetrated the woman's own tent, and when the slave girl within resisted, had cut her throat.

"My faithful Sharmion," the lady said. "She shall be cremated with all honors, just as though she were—aiiii! What is this?" She grabbed a scarf from under the stiffening corpse. "My gauze scarf! How dared she filthy it so! Bloodstains can be gotten out with only the greatest difficulty! Captain," she kicked the body viciously, "remove this carrion from my tent!"

He obeyed, adding, as the bloody corpse was dragged away to be tossed on the pile with the bandits, "Lady, I would have some of my men search the surrounding area. Where there is one group of bandits there may be others."

She nodded. "As long as you leave the camp well-guarded."

When he left, she was cursing the remaining maid and telling her to find the third, who had evidently fled some time during the attack.

It was the guards who found her, she of the alabaster skin, waiting patiently, unhurt and unbound, in the bandit camp, waiting for the bandits who would never return.

"Her usefulness to me is ended," the lady declared, when they told her where the sullen slave had been found, "but perhaps she can amuse your men—for the rest of tonight." The girl screamed, the high keen that was all her tongueless mouth could produce; the lady smiled. "In the morning, or when your men tire of her—" She gestured to the gory pile of dead.

The girl screamed again, and the woman made a pushing away gesture, her mouth screwed up in distaste. "Away, away, I don't want to have to listen to that."

"Madam," he started to protest, but when she turned to him, eyebrows high in affronted amazement, he knew it was no use, and changed his protest. "Madam, two of my men are in that pile."

"You were well-paid," she shrugged, turning to reenter the tent.

"Madam," he plunged on, regardless, "look at him." He pointed to the man, sitting, heedless, eyes caught in the whirl and spin of the sable dice. "He has ridden the wings of ill omen, lady. How long before we hear the ill fortune rustling in the night?"

"Are you affrighted by dead bandit scum?" She shrugged, turned, settled herself before her polished silver mirror, and with a gesture ordered her remaining slave to take down her elaborate braided coils of hair.

He dared to follow to the inside of the tent opening. "Not they, mistress, but what they represent. Heed it, and all may yet be well. Ignore it—"

"I paid you to fight." Her attention was on the jewels that the slave was removing from her hair; each had its own slot in a musky smelling carved box. "And not to bore my ears with childish tales . . ."

He sighed, broad shoulders drooping. "You have paid, true, lady. And you are one of the powerful ones. But there are those far more powerful than any mortal, and that one out there is their playtoy. They might punish hardly those who meddle with what they have claimed . . ."

The last jewel tinkled into the case, and she twisted to face him. "Let them, then! What can they do to me, crueller than they have already. I defy them, whoever or whatever they be. I—defy them all!" The pink tongue flicked over her full, scented lips. Then, sharply, "You may go, Deween. I shan't need you any more tonight." To the brawncaptain. "Not you. Don't go yet. Drop the tent flap. I would present to you—further arguments—in privacy."

More days passed, a-journeying, and the man without a past grew restless. He had to be tied to his beast, fed almost by force, watched every second, and still he writhed in his bonds, twisting, struggling, begging, over and over, "Let me go, LET ME GO, LET ME GO!"

And whatever it was that made him forget, grew worse and worse. Until none of them could talk to him and expect any answer, except, "Go away," or, "Leave me alone!" or, inevitably, "Let me go!"

In the city he had been, if pathetic, at least minimally functional: a man. Now he deteriorated to mere animal, a begging, pleading or sullenly silent animal who had to be restrained continuously.



They forced him onward, faces averted, as though instinct warned of the danger of meeting the eyes so often shrouded by hair.

Until one day they crested a rise—and he went completely berserk. Tied to his beast, he screamed, writhed, struggled, until it took the strength of all the brawn to keep his beast—and theirs—from bolting.

Still he kept it up, despite all they could do to hold him, until the woman broke something under his nose, and he breathed deeply and went limp. The others got tantalizing wisps of an infinitely sweet fragrance and had to shake their heads to clear them.

"We grow close to our goal," the woman said, with satisfaction.

"This land we travel through," the brawncaptain dared to ask, "it is new to me. Of whose domain is it?"

"No king or warlord has claimed it," she replied. "It is called the Waste, and our goal lies somewhere near its heart."

He looked, down and away. It was a land like any other, green, slightly rolling plains stretching away to distant mauve mountains.

But then he looked again, and the green was a dead green, a dread, pestilent, threatening hue, like scum scraped from a skull—no, the land itself was the skull, grinning at him through a dead man's eyes.

On his back, the afternoon sun was warm—but his face was chilled.

He turned, and the man was sagging in his saddle, held up only by the bonds that held him.

"And that," he muttered between his teeth, "is to be our guide."

She heard, and smiled. "He will. I have a plan. He *will*."

They started down, into the land called the Waste. In it, even the sun was cold, and there were no animals, though somehow shadows flickered at the corners of men's eyes—then when they whirled, there was nothing to see.

There was no sound, except the beasts' paws on the rocks, and their own small comments, swallowed into the vast reaches. As they penetrated deeper, the mountains disappeared, so that they seemed to be moving futilely over a limitless stretch of green. Even the air seemed almost green, thick and chill and still and scentless, except for the faintest tang of graveyard mold.

And the plants themselves were wrong, no honest trees and

shrubs, but thick green blankets covering the rocks like living fleece. The rocks themselves seemed to rear out of the ground like strange monsters frozen into sleep. Even the most stolid of the brawn stared nervously about, and more than one muttered that the rocks shifted position if you took your eyes off them.

They rode onward, shivering, until nightfall. They built fires and huddled about them, and the fires burned the same deathly green as the strange fleecy plants.

In the morning they broke camp, and the woman chose a flattish open place where they laid the man down and stood around him in a waiting circle. She held something under his nose for a few seconds, then stepped back. Soon he began to stir and mutter.

"Be ready," she warned.

He rolled over onto his face, then shook his head, and rose to hands and knees, head swinging like a wild animal tasting the wind.

His eyes opened, and he looked around—and he screamed, loud and terrified. For seconds he swayed on hands and knees, still screaming, then he scrambled to his feet and broke into a shambling run. The first few steps were wavering, random, almost falling. But then his movements straightened out, became more purposeful, and he began to run in a straight line—burst between two of the brawn in a desperate, animal flight.

"Stop him, or I'll have your ears!" the woman screamed.

It didn't look as if they'd be able to, but then one managed to catch up with him, trip him, and all of them landed on top of him. Yet still he struggled, heaving the whole cursing pile upward, until someone managed to get a cord around his ankles, and someone else forced his face into the thick plants, and held it there until he went limp.

The woman smiled. "That is the way we go," she told the brawncaptain.

"The way he was running?"

"No, fool! We go toward what he was running *from*!"

The man regained consciousness as he was being tied to the beast. In seconds, he had realized where he was, and he began screaming and struggling with a ferocity that made his previous efforts seem but a puling babe's.

"Hit him," the woman ordered. "Knock him unconscious!" When the man was once again limp, she condescended to explain. "I've only so many of the mindstilling eggs, and they



will be needed as we draw closer, and his struggles greater."

When the sun that gave light but no heat was high in the sky (and that sky pale, and somehow overwashed with the sickly green), they stopped again and ate, quick nervous bites that had to be forced through dry throats.

Again they laid the man on a flat curve of greenfleece ground, and the brawncaptain emptied a small canteen of water over him.

At first he didn't seem to be rousing, but soon he began to shiver. He lay, curled up in a ball, shivering, until suddenly his head jerked up, the long hair flowing around his face, that face swinging about, searching—

This time he couldn't break through their circle, he fought, howling, between two, among four, under all eight, until the sheer weight of their bodies smothered him silent, stifled his desperate thrashings, and the brawncaptain with a careful measured blow gave him surcease.

At night they huddled again about their greenly burning fires, and the brawncaptain stared down at the man, his face gray and shrunken, twitching and moaning, and shook his head. *How long can he last under this treatment?* he thought.

"As long as is necessary," the woman answered his thought aloud. "He will show us the way—he will—he must!"

The brawncaptain shook his head. A man who couldn't eat—or drink—who had to be continually forced into unconsciousness—

"He will *last*," the woman repeated fiercely, glittering feral eyes reflecting the green of the fire. "He will!"

The man curled and tossed, a restless sleeper in the grip of nightmare.

"You wonder," the woman said, still looking down, "what treasure could be the goal of this quest of mine, what reward could tear me from palace and luxury for this—this—" Her hand gestured out into the green dark night. "I will tell you. Once, not many moons ago, I walked in a sunbright garden. Countless slaves had labored ceaselessly that every bloom be exquisite, that every scent tantalize the nostrils, that even the thorns be stripped away, that nothing be of less than godlike perfection. My garden of subtle delights, it was. And beside me, in it, was one who was also nothing less than perfect. But even perfection must come to an end, and at sunset, as was my custom, I left the garden.

"At its outermost rim, there was a crossroads. Left was my path, but at the joining I . . . hesitated. I can't remember

why now, a fresh scent to savor, a vagrant memory, perhaps merely to stroke a soft petal. I can't remember now, and it matters not.

"But while I lingered, an assassin came, and killed, killed the flesh of my flesh, killed my future, my power to be, killed all that I had left, my child, the Heir to the Crimson and the Gold, killed—he died slowly, that killer, that assassin, more slowly even than those who failed their duty to guard him. But the child, my child, my future, was dead.

"Had I not lingered, had I not delayed, had I been there—I have some of the old powers, I can send death from afar. I could have prevented, or at least hindered, given the guards more time, more time. But—I—*lingered!* Who would have thought such a small body could spill so much blood?

"But I lingered, and the child is dead, even as he who sired the child is dead. I could not accept this, loss of all, and I am of the old blood, as I said, and have some of the old powers. I searched long and diligently, and presently I learned of a pavilion where time might be turned back, and of a man who had been there and returned."

"Time turned back," the brawncaptain muttered.

"How can that be?"

"I care not how it can be, only that it *will* be. It will be, because I will have it so!" A pause. "Come into my tent—I would give you orders for the morn."

That first day set the pattern, and day followed day, and they moved over the vast greenness, until no two of the party could agree on how many days they had traveled. Their packs grew light, and the man worsened, sleeping restlessly even under the eggs of stillness.

Even the sun seemed tinted green.

And then one day, when the heatless green-tinged sun was high in the sky, they saw before them a building. They had been traversing the endless green, and at first it seemed merely another rock, but as they drew closer it was a building of some sort, seeming green only because it reflected its surroundings.

Close to, it seemed to have no outline; it simply curved away on all sides, shimmering, like a giant waterdrop pulsing in the sun.

"The Pavilion Where All Times Meet," the woman declared.

The brawncaptain loosened his sword in its sheath.

"I will need you and two others to carry the man," the



woman ordered. "The others may wait without, until we return." To the captain, "It couldn't have been better timed." She opened her palm to show a single milky ball held within. "My last egg of stillness—they are all that has kept him alive, I think. I will give him this much mercy: I will send him deep into stillness ere we take him within."

And she walked close to the shimmering building, to commune with herself while the others dropped wearily from their beasts, and untied the twitching, barely conscious man, who had grown so light it didn't take but one husky guard to carry him.

"We are ready to follow you, lady." The brawncaptain's burly voice was swallowed by the stillness. She turned, and he stood, sword in hand, and behind him two more brawn with the man without a past held between them, one arm draped over each broad set of shoulders.

"Turn your faces away," she ordered, as she had so often before; and she gave the twitching man the mercy she had promised.

She turned, her green and blue and gold cloak swirling around her, its colors muted in the cold sun.

The captain strode behind her, his heavy boots soundless on the thick green, and wondered how one entered a building with no visible doors or windows—or even definite edges.

She paused at the shimmer, and made a gesture he couldn't follow, and pushed aside the shimmer as though drawing back curtains. "Follow," she repeated, and stepped inside.

He obeyed, and passed through the shimmer into—  
Chaos.

The peacock cloak swirled before him as though winds blew it, but there was no wind. The very floor changed, became ceiling, wall, floor again. She was in front of him, beside him, hanging upside down, facing him. The two behind with their limp burden, before him, to one side, separate, together. He moved, with nightmare slowness, his sword in his hand, sheathed, upraised, down, a fluid, alive, shifting thing, that was here, and there, and everywhere, all at the same time. The very air was clear, was shimmer, was dark, was rainbow coruscation.

There was no form within, all was constantly changing—and at the same time, changeless.

He took a step somehow, and he was above looking down.

The other two had dropped their burden, and were struggling in this bright/dark slow essence of nightmares.

Only the woman moved surely, fearlessly, compulsively toward some goal only she knew.

He tried to shout, to tell the men to stay still, not to panic, but what came out of his mouth was only noise, all words, jammed together into a dull roaring murmur that continued even after he stopped.

He was above, below, within.

He was the pavilion, the woman, the other men.

The woman stood at the center, peacock swirl of color in the midst of fluidity that had no color and was all colors, and spoke.

The man with no past stood, legs straddled, swaying like a mariner bucking high seas and higher winds, and laughed, his hair and beard streaming about him.

The woman pointed at him, and he jerked and hung limp.

She spoke again, hard and demanding.

The man with no past straightened up, and his laughter was all about them and through them and colored them. His laughter was the pavilion, and them, and everything, past and future, was and is and is to be.

And all of them—*were*.

They lived countless lives, suffered joy and pain, gave birth and death and finally succumbed, over and again and together. They were killer and sacrifice, hunter and hunted, emperor and slave, rapist and victim, butterflies blinking on the wind, aged cunning creatures from the ocean's depths; that flicker of a child's life going out, was that the lady's babe, or a thousand thousand others?

They lived, and lived, and lived, and died, and lived, and died—and lived.

"Let me go!" one/some/all of them shouted/screamed/pleaded/whispered into the Pavilion Where All Times Meet.

"Go, go, go!" echoed back.

"Go!" roared the starter, and the chariots were off.

"Go," bellowed the general, and they charged.

"Go," urged the woman, and they coupled fiercely.

Go—go—go, countless goes, countless lives, over and together, birth to death, until birth was death, and worlds died and were born, and life on them was born and died.

Until the myriad lives they lived were colored by the lady's will.

I

A high priestess, a woman worn down by too many birthings, an oracle made manic by the sacred fumes . . .



BROUGHT

A vixen, a mustang wild and free, a farmer sowing peacefully until the tides of war engulf him . . .

YOU

A crippled fawn, a tiny fish in a school, a blinded man . . .

THE

A toiling ant, a warrior dying in a welter of blood, a weaver of tales . . .

DESPOILER

A bejeweled pirate, a brigand chief who followed dark dice into sacrilege, and was punished by Eternal Now, a child dying of lungrot . . .

I

A woman ravished, a shaggy predator, a flea . . .

DEMAND

A fish dying in its dried-out rivulet, a darting mayfly, a seeker after truth, his quest ended by a bloody sword greedy for the patched cloak he wore . . .

MY

A blind grubber in the ground, the sharp clawed digger pursuing him, a barren woman . . .

BOON!

A world of laughing crystals, of living flames, of purest sentience . . .

And the Universe rocked and echoed a Word.

Perhaps it was, "Your request is granted," or perhaps, "Let the punishment fit the crime," or even, "So be it!"

Or—perhaps—it was simply universal laughter.

The Pavilion pulsed, and those waiting outside went out like blown candle flames, their life forces taken to feed the Pavilion's power.

Within, four men were ripped off the Wheel—and disappeared.

The woman, as she had Demanded, went Back.

In the waste, four men, trapped in Always-Now, groaned and stirred, and stared at each other without recognition.

And then they were on their feet and running, mindless animal flight, each in a different direction, but all away, away, away! from the Pavilion Where All Times Meet.

The woman stood, dizzy, eyes shut, having to lean on something hard for balance—but triumphant.

Her will had conquered.

She knew why the man without a past had gone mad. His mind hadn't been able to hold, it had crumbled under the

weight of so many lives. But she was a daughter of rulers, of power-mistresses, of half-gods. She was formed of stronger fiber—and she had won.

She had turned back time, and now she would be able to prevent what had happened, to undo what had been done the first time.

Now she had time. . . .

Time.

She opened her eyes, saw sunset tinting a pure white blossom, smelt tantalizing sweetness, recognized her own garden of subtle delights—and heard the slaves, screaming.

And time passed, until—

They met in Pheadra, that blood-dyed city twice as old as time.

And—again.

And *again*. . . .

And. . . .



## CRYPTICALLY YOURS

*My friend Brian Lumley is a noncommissioned officer in the British Army, and he writes Cthulhu Mythos stories on the side. Some of his stories please me a lot and some annoy me a lot, which is probably about the way he feels toward my own stories. Anyway, here's an odd and delicious little item that's not exactly a Cthulhu Mythos story, and yet it kind of is, at the same time. It's also a story told through an exchange of correspondence—something that isn't done very much these days. Come to think of it, the damned thing could also qualify as being a murder mystery!*

*In short, it's a wacky little yarn—one that pleases me a lot. As I think it will please you.*

—L.C.

*Note:*

*The following letters, numbered one to eight, between Hatr-ad and Teh Atht—sorcerers of Theem'hdra, the Primal Continent at the Dawn of Time—are in the main self-explanatory. They will serve admirably to illustrate some of the many perils facing professional wizards in that bygone age, when the world was very young and magic was not merely a word in books for small children. . . .*

## I

Domed Turret of Hreen Castle,  
 Eleventh Day of the Season of Mists,  
 Hour of the First Fluttering of Bats.

Esteemed Teh Atht—

You will doubtless recall that we were apprenticed together (along with Dhor Nen, Tarth Soquallin, Yenamat & Druth of Thandopolis) under Imhlat the Great; also how we vied, each against the others, in aspiring to greatness in our chosen profession. Though we were mere lads then (how many, many years ago?), still I remember being impressed by your own industry. Aye, even I, Hatr-ad of Thinhla, whose peer is not known east of the Inner Isles, was *most* impressed by the sorcerous industry of Teh Atht. You were a likable lad—friendly despite the ceaseless competition & bantering & occasional bickering—for which reason I now call upon you, in the name of the comradeship we shared in Imhlat's tutelage, for assistance in a matter of extreme urgency.

Mayhap it has come to your attention that of the six apprentices mentioned above only we two & one other, Tarth Soquallin, remain alive? The others are recently fallen foul of ill-omened, indeed *evil* fates, for all three have met with strange & terrible deaths! Not only Dhor, Ye-namat & Druth, but Imhlat the Teacher, too! Even Imhlat the Great—whose gnarled old hands instructed us in our first passes, weaving weird designs of power in the air—he, too, is gone, wasted away in a gray rot that descended upon him from the moon (they say) & took him all in the space of a single night.

Now I know not your thoughts in this matter, or even if you've considered it at all, but it seems to me that certain dark forces roam free & rapacious in Theem'hdra, & that their fell purpose is the destruction of her wizards one by one, thus plunging the entire continent into an age of



darkness, when the light of sorcery will be extinguished forever! If I am correct then our lives, too, are in peril . . . for which reason I have set up every possible magickal barrier against these unknown agents of evil. This of course is the reason for my letter: to beg of you a certain rune (which I am given to believe may recently have come down to you from your long dead ancestor, Mylakhrión of Tharamoon?), that I might finalize the security of Hreen Castle.

I refer specifically to the Ninth Sathlatta, which—or so I am informed—is a protective device efficacious over all other magicks in the whole of Theem'hdra. Were it indeed your good fortune to be in possession of this spell, I would count myself ever in your debt upon safely receiving a copy of the same.

Take care, Teh Atht, & beware the nameless terror that surely lurks in Theem'hdra's shadows, threatening us all—

Yrs. for the Numberless  
Rites of Lythatroll—  
Hatr-ad the Adept.

In addition—

Perhaps you know the whereabouts of that inveterate wanderer, Tarth Soquallin? If so, be so good as to advise me of the same that I may also warn him of the hovering horror . . .

Hatr-ad.

## II

Topmost Tower of Klühn,  
Eighteenth Night, Hour of  
Clouds Wisping across the  
Full Moon . . .

High-born Hierophant, O Hatr-ad!—

Honored was I, Teh Atht, to receive your correspondence, even though it cost me the services of a most faithful retainer—& him his life! As to how this came about: I am myself at a loss to explain it.

I can only assume that those same dark forces of which your note so eloquently warns entrapped the bat to which you doubtless entrusted the missive, replacing that messenger with the great & winged Gaunt which assaulted my apartments

over Klühn in the hour before dawn of the 12th day. Mercifully I myself was not to house, & so the monster took a manservant in my stead, almost obscuring with his blood the words you so carefully inscribed in cipher upon the parchment which I later found clenched in his lifeless fingers.

Thus it would seem that your warning was indeed most timely, & I thank you for it. . . . As to your request for a copy of the 9th S., please find the same enclosed. Note that, remembering well your penchant for ciphers, I have couched the rune in just such a frame—albeit a simple one—the better to amuse & entertain you, however briefly, during your leisure hours.

Alas, I have no knowledge of Tarth Soquallin's whereabouts, but be sure I myself shall now take all precautions to avoid whichever evils befell our former colleagues, & that I remain, in eager anticipation of your next—

Yrs. for the Exorcism of Org the Awful—  
Teh Atht of Klühn.

### III

Hidden Vault beneath Hreen Castle;  
Twenty-first Night; Hour of the  
Tittering Without the Pentagonam.

Brother in Blessed Sorceries, O Teh Atht—

A thousand thanks for your letter—& for the cipher-inscribed 9th S., which I shall duly translate as soon as I get five minutes to spare—both safely arrived yester-evening in their silver cylinder affixed to the leg of a great eagle. The bird itself, alas, fell prey to an over-zealous archer in my employ, whom I shall punish fittingly. Still & all, it were not entirely the man's fault, for he had strict instructions with regard to any alien invader of my keep, & was not to know that the bird was but a messenger of your esteemed self.

It was indeed a mercy, brother, that you were away upon the advent of the Gaunt which killed your retainer, & I shudder in contemplation of what might have taken place had you been present to receive so monstrous a visitor! My condolences at the loss of a faithful servant, & my joy that you yourself were spared so terrible an ordeal. Indeed you were correct in assuming that my messenger was but a bat, & I am



filled with rage at the vileness of that agency which could so readily turn dumb, harmless minion into ravenous beast!

Now to a matter of even darker import: for we two are now the sole survivors of Imhlat's school for sorcerers, Tarth Soquallin having recently succumbed to the unknown doom! Aye, even Tarth the Hermit, gone forever from the world of men, for I have it on good authority that he is, alas, no more. It would seem that in the midst of magickal meditations he vanished from a cave—a hole in the face of a granite cliff, with no windows & only one stout door—after uttering but a single piercing scream. When finally his disciples broke down the door, they found only his wand & seven rings of gold & silver . . . those things, & a number of tiny golden nuggets which may once have filled certain of his teeth . . .

Oh, my brother, what is to be done? The very thought of the evils that surround us & the perils which daily press closer fills me with a nameless dread—or would, if I did not know that my old friend, Teh Atht, is at hand to assist me & offer his sound & unimpeachable advice in these darkest hours—

Yrs. for the Moaning Menhir,  
Hatr-ad.

On afterthought—

Since I really have very little time to waste on riddles—however entertaining they may be—would you be so good as to forward with your next the key to the enciphered 9th S.?

Gratefully—  
Hatr-ad.

## IV

Sepulcher of Syphtar VI;  
Thirty-eight Evening;  
Hour of the Unseen Howler.

Master of Mysteries, O Hatr-ad—

Confirmation of Tarth Soquallin's demise reached me almost simultaneous with your own doom-fraught epistle (I envy you your informants!), & not only his demise but those of several other sorcerers, too, though lesser known & further flung. Ikrish Sarn of Hubriss was one such, & Khrissa's Lord-High Ice-Priest another. Thus have I come down into

the tomb of Syphtar VI to seek out his spirit & inquire of it, but lo—Syphtar answers not my call!

Indeed strangeness is abroad, Hatr'ad, even *great* strangeness! It would seem that some dark spell of thaumaturgic impotence is upon me, so that my sorceries are utterly without effect. Can I doubt that the source of this new infamy is that same secret center of evil whence ooze the poisonous spells which, one by one, drag down our fellow sorcerers to dreadful doom & death? Nay, I cannot doubt it; it must surely be so.

But with regard to these measures of yours for the protection of Hreen Castle against whichever evils threaten: I may be able to offer the very ultimate in protections, beside which even the Ninth Sathlatta pales to insignificance! You were indeed correct in deducing that my ancestor Mylakh里昂 bequeathed to me certain of his secrets, & that these have recently come down to me across the centuries. Aye, & one of them is a rune of the greatest power, of which I would freely advise you if only I could be sure that my letter would not be intercepted!

Obviously a spell of this magnitude must never fall into the wrong hands, for. . . .

My friend—I *have it!*

Upon a skin which I shall enclose, please peruse the characters of an unbreakable cipher to which I alone possess the key. When next you write, enclose some proof positive by which I may know that our correspondence is completely confidential & secure, & by return I shall forward the key to the cipher, thus placing the greatest of all protective runes in your hands.

Rest assured that I have already used the spell in my own defense—indeed, this very morning—wherefore I fear no evil in the length & breadth of Theem'hdra. (It dawns on me that this near-stultification of my other magicks, of which I have already made mention, must be a side effect of the greater power, whose task is after all to dampen dangerous sorceries! This is a mere inconvenience as compared with my very life's safety, & doubtless the effect will soon wear off.)

But a warning: the only man who may break down the wall of this protection is one who understands its construction; & once this is done even the smallest spell will work against the one thus betrayed. Naturally I fear no such betrayal from my brother Hatr-ad the Illustrious, else I should not offer this information in the first instance. Be certain, too,



that I have not studied the rune sufficiently to understand its reversal; & I trust you will likewise refrain from deliberately discovering the means by which the protection may be canceled?

In all such matters I have the greatest faith in my brother sorcerer, Hatr-ad, & thus, in eager anticipation of your next letter, I remain—

Yrs. for Enduring Enchantments,  
Teh Atht of Klühn.

On Afterthought—

With regard to the enciphered 9th S.: It seems I've lost the key! I wrote the thing down on a scrap of parchment which I've since mislaid. There are several such ciphers I use but I have neither the time nor the inclination to divulge all of them. However, this should no longer present a problem, since the new rune supercedes & is far more powerful than the 9th S. In any case, your own devices have been adequately efficacious to date, as witness (happily) your continued existence!

Sorcerously—Teh Atht.

One other matter—

My fears over the confidentiality of our correspondence are not unfounded, I assure you, & I warn you to examine such carriers as we use most carefully. The pigeon that brought me your last missive had no sooner delivered up its cylinder than it flew asunder in a thousand searing fragments! I conjecture that it had been fed pellets of some agent which, reacting with the bird's inner juices, produced this monstrous effect. Certainly the body fluids of the poor creature were become so mordant that the walls of the tower in which it exploded are now pitted & blackened most severely! Mercifully, I was not harmed, nor any retainer of mine.

Will this vileness never end?

Yrs.—Teh Atht.

## V

Aeries of Hreen Castle;  
Nest of the Fanged Hawk;  
First Day of the Season  
of the Sun; Dawn—

Illustrious Engineer of Illusions,

Most happily I report my continued good health, despite all the spells doubtless cast against me by those unknown agencies of which every sorcerer in all Theem'hdra now goes in dread fear & loathing. Without a shadow of a doubt I owe my well-being in great part to you . . . for which reason I trust that you, too, are well & that no evil has befallen you?

Your tomb-bat messenger from Syphtar's sepulcher reached me safely, carrying its precious rune, & in the tenth day following my receipt of the same I at last translated the thing from the glyphs in which you had so cleverly enciphered it. Aye, for I am now familiar with your system, Teh Atht, & I marvel at the magnitude of a mind that could devise so mazy a cryptogram! It was not so very difficult, however, once I had broken the code that hid from my eager eyes the 9th S., for it would appear that all your codes are cast in pretty much the same mold. You may now rest easy in the knowledge that your spell shall not fall into alien hands, & that the need to supply me with a key to the code no longer exists . . .

Moreover, before I commenced the inscribing of this letter here in this high place, I made the necessary signs as the sun came up & I said the words of the rune, & lo!—now I am protected against all evils. All thanks to you, Teh Atht, who succored me in my hour of greatest need.

Meanwhile . . . I fear that the curse is still abroad, for rumors continue to reach me from far & wide in respect of fellow sorcerers fallen foul of the horror. Thus I shall go down into Hreen Castle proper & put the finishing touches to my protections, aye, & offer up a few powerful prayers to the Gods of Old, that all my beleaguered friends across the land shall know of my compassion.

Yrs. in the Discovery of Mysteries—  
Hatr-ad

## VI

Chamber of Infirmary—  
Third Day of the Sun—  
Hour of the Tide's Turning.

Honorable Hatr-ad,

Overjoyed as I am to hear of your own continuing good



health, alas, I cannot report a similar condition in myself. Indeed no, for I am the victim of several severe disorders—which by their very nature I know to be most *unnatural*! Unnecessary to go into details, but sufficient to say that I am unwell. Even unto death am I, Teh Atht, unwell . . .

Only the most powerful of unguents & nostrums keep me alive (for my spells no longer work & I am obliged to rely upon merely common cures) so that even the writing of this letter is an ordeal to one whose hands tremble & jerk in unendurable agony as his body festers & rots! If you could see me, Hatr-ad, I believe you would shriek & run from the horror I am become—and I am completely at a loss to remedy the matter of my own free will.

Thus my letter is a plea, that you put aside whatever else engages you at this time & weave your most beneficent sorceries on my behalf—else I am done for! For without a shadow of a doubt those same fell forces of which you forewarned are upon me, & lo—I am at their mercy!

My decline commenced almost immediately upon receipt of your last—which, bat-borne & innocent in itself, was nevertheless like some harbinger of doom—and as it progresses so it accelerates. It would seem as though a combination of plagues, cancrs & contagions are upon me, & without outside help I am doomed to an hideous death even within the space of ten days, possibly less. How this can possibly be when I am protected by the Rune of Power I am again at a loss to say. The evil which is abroad in Theem'hdra is powerful indeed!

I can write no longer. The pus that seeps from my body's pores threatens to foul the vellum upon which I scrawl this final plea: that you spare no single second but come immediately to the assistance of—

Thine in Ultimate Torment,  
Teh Atht . . .

## VII

Hreen Castle—  
Imperial Residence of:  
Hatr-ad, Mightiest Magician in all Theem'hdra  
—First Night of the

Full Moon; Hour of  
Gleeth's Blind Smiling  
on the Eastern Range.

Doom-destined Teh Atht—

Not without a modicum of remorse do I, Highborn Hatrad, inscribe this final epistle—the last you shall ever read! Indeed, of all other sorcerers in Theem'hdra, you were the one I most respected; for if ever a man were sufficiently gifted to oppose me in my great ambition—of which I was often wont to boast during our apprenticeship in old Imhlat, the Idiot's tutelage—then you were that man. Or so I thought.

Perhaps my words recall to your obviously age-enfeebled mind that ambition of mine? Aye, I'm sure they do, for oft & again I swore that one day I would make of myself the most powerful sorcerer in all the land. That day is now at hand, Teh Atht, & you above all other men have assisted me in the realization of my dream.

Now, too, it is plain to me that I ranked you o'er high among magicians, for who but a fool would give away a spell of ultimate protection?—& in so doing *rob himself of that very protection!* Aye, Teh Atht, for surely you have guessed by now that I am the origin & the source of the terror over Theem'hdra? Surely you are now aware whose spells they are that bring down the land's sorcerers in their prime, that rot you yourself in your bed, where even now you lie impotently awaiting death? Nor can that death be so very far away now; indeed, it amazes me that you survive, *if you survive*, to read this letter!

Even now I would not openly betray myself thus had not word reached me of your confinement, & of the fact that your throat has rotted so that you speak not, & that your body is so wasted that you are barely capable of the feeblest stirrings. Yet, if your very eyes are not utterly dissolved away, you will be able to read this, for I have written it in one of your own codes that no other may know of my triumph.

But what pleasure is there in an empty victory, Teh Atht? For surely my triumph would be empty if in the end none remained to know of it? Thus I now reveal all to you, that before you die you may know of Hatrad's victory, of his ambition fulfilled. For surely now I am indeed the greatest sorcerer in all Theem'hdra!

My thanks, Teh Atht, for your inestimable aid in this mat-



ter, without which I might yet be sorely pressed to bring about the desired result. Now you may rest your festering eyes, my old & foolish friend, in the final sleep. Go, & find peace in the arms of Shoosh, Goddness of the Still Slumbers . . .

Yrs. for the Dream of a New Age  
of Magickal Empire,  
Hatr-ad the Mighty.

## VIII

Room of Red Revenge;  
Apartments over Klühn;  
Day of Reckoning,  
Hour of Truth!

O Most Misguided, Miserable Hatr-ad—

Heartless one, I fear that your odious ambitions are come to an end—& better for Theem'hdra & all her more worthy wizards were that ending not protracted. Therefore let me linger not over the matter but get to its root with all dispatch.

For you were unmasked, o murderer, long before you chose to show your true face. Nathless it was deemed only fair & just that the truth be heard from your own lips before sentence was passed. The truth is now known . . . & I have been chosen to pass sentence.

Even now I can hardly ponder the enormity of your crimes without feeling within myself a gnawing nausea, that so vile & monstrous a man could guise himself as "friend" in order to go about his death-dealing devilments!

Murderer! I say it again, & the punishment shall fit the crime . . .

As to why I bother to write this when your fate will speak volumes of its own, there are reasons. Mayhap among your retainers, cronies & familiars there are those who, lusting after similar lordly stations, would carry on your fiendish business in your wake? To them I, Teh Atht, address this warning—mazed in no cipher but writ in the clear, clean glyphs of Theem'hdra—that it suffice to set their feet upon more enlightened paths.

As for enlightenment: allow me now to unravel for you the more tangled threads of this skein, that you may see

yourself as we see you, whose sorceries are deemed white (or at worst gray) against your black!

To begin:

Throughout all Theem'hdra I have my informants, who work under no duress but are all beholden to me in one way or another. From them, barely in advance of your first letter, I learned of the dissolution of Druth, the demise of devil-diseased Dhor, the eerie examination of Ye-namat, & even the terrible termination of old Imhlat the Teacher.

Now, it were perhaps no surprise had but one or even two of these old comrades gone the way of all flesh (it is not uncommon for sorcerous experiments to go sadly amiss, & the dead men were crafty sorcerers all) . . . but *four* of them?

Moreover I found it a singularly suspicious circumstance that Hatr-ad—who never found reason to communicate with me before, & of whom I had heard precious little of merit in the long years since our mutual apprenticeship—should be so quick off the mark to recognize the advent of malevolent powers & warn me of them.

Then, when I gave thought to all you had written, it dawned on me that indeed I had suffered certain discomforts of late; nothing serious but . . . headaches & creaking joints & bouts of dizziness now & then. Could they have been the residue of malicious spells sent against me & deflected by the protections which are ever present about my apartments?

If so, who had sent these spells & why? To my knowledge I had no dire enemies, though certain acquaintances might be trifling jealous of me. Indeed, such was my mode of life, & my days so free of troubles, that I had often thought me to relax the magickal barriers that surrounded me—it were such a bother to keep them renewed. Now I was glad I had not done so!

Then my thoughts returned to you, Hatr-ad; even to Hatr-ad, whose boasting in the Halls of Nirhath, where Imhlat the Teacher instructed us, was not forgotten but sounded suddenly loud & ominous in the ears of memory. Your boasting, & your oft-stated ambition. . . .

Years by the score had gone by since then, but do ambitions such as yours ever really die?

Now Tarth Soquallin, even Tarth the Hermit, wandering wizard of the deserts & mountains, had always been a great & true friend of mine, & if it were true that some nameless terror was bent upon the destruction of Theem'hdra's sorcer-



ers—particularly those who had studied under Imhlat—then how had Tarth fared in this monstrous coup?

Well, he & I had long since devised a means by which I might know of his approximate whereabouts at any given moment. In a cupboard unopened for seven years, after much searching, I found the device: a pebble, not unlike a North-stone which, when dangled at the end of a thread, would always point out Tarth's direction. Discovering him to be in the West, & by the agitation of the pebble knowing him to be not too far removed, I reasoned he must be upon the Mount of the Ancients & to that region sent one of my eagles with a hastily inscribed message. (It seemed to me both easier & speedier to contact him direct than to inform you of his location that you yourself might then "warn" him of the so-called "nameless terror.")

Lo, the answer came back within a day & a night, saying that indeed he, too, had suffered minor pains & irritations, but pointing out that while he was not properly protected, as I was, nathless an evil agency would find it hard going to do him lasting harm, since he was so constantly on the move. A spell let loose to find its own way is far less potent than one directed to the known haunts of its recipient!

Furthermore, Tarth agreed to a little necessary deception. This was simply to let it be known that he was dead of strange sorceries, & to assist me in the speedy dissemination of this information by use of his disciples. Ah!—& how swiftly indeed word of Tarth's "demise" reached you, Hatr-ad (whose agents were doubtless on the lookout for just such news?) & how graphic the details of his disappearance, all bar his wand & rings & his teeth of gold!

Aye, & that was the end of Tarth's aches & pains—though this was not to be discovered for awhile—for what use to send out death-dealing spells against a man already dead? Eh, Hatr-ad?

In the meanwhile I did several things. I worked swiftly, for I did not wish to delay o'erlong in answering your letter, but in the end my plan worked well enow. First, I sent off a request to an informant of mine in Thinhla, that he employ a certain system (in the use of which I also instructed him) to detect any hurtful magickal emanations from Hreen Castle. Second, I sent further messages of warning to Ikrish Sarn of Hubriss, to Khrissa's nameless Lord-High Ice-Priest, & to many another sorcerer, advising all to quietly disengage from their normal affairs & "disappear," & also to put about soft-

muted tales of doom, disease & death. Third, I answered your letter, sending you an addled version of the Ninth Sathlatta & couching it in ciphers which I knew you would eventually break—but not too soon...

Still & all, my suspicions were as yet unfounded, the evidence against you all circumstantial—though I did deem it strange that the unknown Agency of Doom had not yet taken you yourself, when it had already accounted for men who were by far your sorcerous superiors!—& so I refrained from taking any premature action against you. After all, why should you write to me in the first place—& possibly alert me to your own dark hand in the horror—if indeed you yourself went not in mortal fear of the nameless thing? . . . Unless you were simply seeking some other way to do away with me, since patently the initial attack had done nothing more than discomfort me. Aye, & word had come to me by then that there were certain strangers in Klühn who daily made discreet inquiries in respect of my health. (Men of Thinla, as it later became known!)

But then, simultaneous with your second letter, word arrived from Thinla in respect of Hreen Castle, your own abode, & the *veritable miasma of morbid magicks emanating from it!* No protective thaumaturgies these, Hatr-ad, but lethal spells of the very blackest natures, & so at last I recognized beyond any further doubt that direful agency whose hand was set against Theem'hdra's wizards...

Had any such doubt remained in my mind, however, then were it most certainly removed by the mode of messenger you employed: the great Gaunt, the pyrotechnic pigeon &, with your third, my own bat whose wings I now found dusted with potent poisons. You may well have written the last in the aeries of your castle, but surely was it sent to me from some foul crypt beneath Thinla's deepest foundations.

By then, though, I had already supplied you with Mylakhrión's most powerful protective spell & a means by which its code might be deciphered & its reversal discovered. Just so, Hatr-ad—& lo, you sent just such a vilely reversed spell against me, thus to weaken me & leave me defenseless in the face of your sly sorceries!

Well, evil one, the spell could not work against me, for contrary to what you were made to believe, I myself had not used Mylakhrión's magick! Thus your casting was most easily deflected & *turned back upon its very author!*

. . . Aye, & you are utterly defenseless, Hatr-ad, while



even now those sorcerers whose doom you plotted conjure spells to send against you; & no use to try Mylakhriion's tune a second time, for it will only work once for any single person. So you see, o wretch, that there is no avenue of escape from the sentence I now pass—which is: That you shall suffer, even unto death, all of the black magicks you yourself have used or attempted to use in your hideous reign of terror! The list is long:

From Tarth Soquallin & myself: the Skin-Cracks, Temple-Throbs & multiple Joint Seizures; from Ikrish Sarn & Khrissa's Ice-Priest: the Inverted Eyes & the dreaded Bone-Dissolve; & from many another wizard various castings of greater or lesser measure. Moreover, we have not forgotten the dead. On behalf of Imhlat, Dhor Nen, Ye-namat & Druth of Thandopolis, we send you the Green Growths, the Evaporating Membranes &, last but not least, the Gray Rot!

Sentence is passed. You are granted one full day upon receipt of this in which to put your affairs in order, but thereafter until you are no more you shall suffer, in ever-increasing doses, the aforementioned afflictions. Waste not your remaining hours in further fruitless malevolencies; spells from all quarters have been cast about you that any such emanations shall only rebound upon you.

However, I am authorized to remind you that there is one way in which you may yet cheat us all, Hatr-ad; but if you do, at least do it gloriously! The towers of Hreen Castle are high, I am told—indeed, they are almost as high as your frustrated, evil aspirations—& gravity is swifter & surer than the knife or pellet of poison . . .

The choice is yours.

Cryptically—Teh Atht.

## RED AS BLOOD

*It must be significant when a work of pure fantasy such as the following—veritably a variation on a classic fairy tale—was so well liked that members of the Science Fiction Writers of America voted it one of the six outstanding stories of the year. It was indeed a Nebula Nominee—though it didn't win. But then surely who could claim this to be science fiction? Fantasy—the very best—that's what it is.*

The beautiful Witch Queen flung open the ivory case of the magic mirror. Of dark gold the mirror was, dark gold as the hair of the Witch Queen that poured down her back. Dark gold the mirror was, and ancient as the seven stunted black trees growing beyond the pale blue glass of the window.

"*Speculum, speculum,*" said the Witch Queen to the magic mirror. "*Dei gratia.*"

"*Volente Deo. Audio.*"

"Mirror," said the Witch Queen. "Whom do you see?"

"I see you, mistress," replied the mirror. "And all in the land. But one."

"Mirror, mirror, who is it you do not see?"

"I do not see Bianca."

The Witch Queen crossed herself. She shut the case of the



mirror, and walking slowly to the window, looked out at the old trees through the panes of pale blue glass.

Fourteen years ago, another woman had stood at this window, but she was not like the Witch Queen. The woman had black hair that fell to her ankles; she had a crimson gown, the girdle worn high beneath her breasts, for she was far gone with child. And this woman had thrust open the glass casement on the winter garden, where the old trees crouched in the snow. Then, taking a sharp bone needle, she had thrust it into her finger and shaken three bright drops on the ground. "Let my daughter have," said the woman, "hair black as mine, black as the wood of these warped and arcane trees. Let her have skin like mine, white as this snow. And let her have my mouth, red as my blood." And the woman had smiled, and licked at her finger. She had a crown on her head; it shone in the dusk like a star. She never came to the window before dusk; she did not like the day. She was the first Queen, and she did not possess a mirror.

The second Queen, the Witch Queen, knew all this. She knew how, in giving birth, the first Queen had died. Her coffin had been carried into the cathedral and masses had been said. There was an ugly rumor—that a splash of holy water had fallen on the corpse and the dead flesh had smoked. But the first Queen had been reckoned unlucky for the kingdom. There had been a strange plague in the land since she came there, a wasting disease for which there was no cure.

Seven years went by. The King married the second Queen, as unlike the first as frankincense to myrrh.

"And this is my daughter," said the King to his second Queen.

There stood a little girl child, nearly seven years of age. Her black hair hung to her ankles, her skin was white as snow. Her mouth was red as blood, and she smiled with it.

"Bianca," said the King, "you must love your new mother."

Bianca smiled radiantly. Her teeth were bright as sharp bone needles.

"Come," said the Witch Queen, "come, Bianca. I will show you my magic mirror."

"Please, Mama," said Bianca softly, "I do not like mirrors."

"She is modest," said the King. "And delicate. She never goes out by day. The sun distresses her."

That night, the Witch Queen opened the case of her mirror.

"Mirror, whom do you see?"

"I see you, mistress. And all in the land. But one."

"Mirror, mirror, who it is you do not see?"

"I do not see Bianca."

The second Queen gave Bianca a tiny crucifix of golden filigree. Bianca would not accept it. She ran to her father and whispered: "I am afraid. I do not like to think of Our Lord dying in agony on His cross. She means to frighten me. Tell her to take it away."

The second Queen grew wild white roses in her garden and invited Bianca to walk there after sundown. But Bianca shrank away. She whispered to her father: "The thorns will tear me. She means me to be hurt."

When Bianca was twelve years old, the Witch Queen said to the King, "Bianca should be confirmed so that she may take Communion with us."

"This may not be," said the King. "I will tell you, she has not even been christened, for the dying word of my first wife was against it. She begged me, for her religion was different from ours. The wishes of the dying must be respected."

"Should you not like to be blessed by the church," said the Witch Queen to Bianca. "To kneel at the golden rail before the marble altar. To sing to God, to taste the ritual bread and sip the ritual wine."

"She means me to betray my true mother," said Bianca to the King. "When will she cease tormenting me?"

The day she was thirteen, Bianca rose from her bed, and there was a red stain there, like a red, red flower.

"Now you are a woman," said her nurse.

"Yes," said Bianca. And she went to her true mother's jewel box, and out of it she took her mother's crown and set it on her head.

When she walked under the old black trees in the dusk, the crown shone like a star.

The wasting sickness, which had left the land in peace for thirteen years, suddenly began again, and there was no cure.

The Witch Queen sat in a tall chair before a window of pale green and dark white glass, and in her hands she held a Bible bound in rosy silk.

"Majesty," said the huntsman, bowing very low.

He was a man, forty years old, strong and handsome, and



wise in the hidden lore of the forests, the occult lore of the earth. He would kill too, for it was his trade, without faltering. The slender fragile deer he could kill, and the moon-winged birds, and the velvet hares with their sad, foreknowing eyes. He pitied them, but pitying, he killed them. Pity could not stop him. It was his trade.

"Look in the garden," said the Witch Queen.

The hunter looked through a dark white pane. The sun had sunk, and a maiden walked under a tree.

"The Princess Bianca," said the huntsman.

"What else?" asked the Witch Queen.

The huntsman crossed himself.

"By Our Lord, Madam, I will not say."

"But you know."

"Who does not?"

"The King does not."

"Nor he does."

"Are you a brave man?" asked the Witch Queen.

"In the summer, I have hunted and slain boar. I have slaughtered wolves in winter."

"But are you brave enough?"

"If you command it, Lady," said the huntsman, "I will try my best."

The Witch Queen opened the Bible at a certain place, and out of it she drew a flat silver crucifix, which had been resting against the words: *Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night. . . . Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness.*

The huntsman kissed the crucifix and put it about his neck beneath his shirt.

"Approach," said the Witch Queen, "and I will instruct you in what to say."

Presently, the huntsman entered the garden, as the stars were burning up in the sky. He strode to where Bianca stood under a stunted dwarf tree, and he kneeled down.

"Princess," he said. "Pardon me, but I must give you ill tidings."

"Give them then," said the girl, toying with the long stem of a wan, night-growing flower which she had plucked.

"Your stepmother, that accursed, jealous witch, means to have you slain. There is no help for it but you must fly the palace this very night. If you permit, I will guide you to the forest. There are those who will care for you until it may be safe for you to return."

Bianca watched him, but gently, trustingly.

"I will go with you, then," she said.

They went by a secret way out of the garden, through a passage under the ground, through a tangled orchard, by a broken road between great overgrown hedges.

Night was a pulse of deep, flickering blue when they came to the forest. The branches of the forest overlapped and intertwined like leading in a window, and the sky gleamed dimly through like panes of blue-colored glass.

"I am weary," sighed Bianca. "May I rest a moment?"

"By all means," said the huntsman. "In the clearing there, foxes come to play by night. Look in that direction, and you will see them."

"How clever you are," said Bianca. "And how handsome."

She sat on the turf, and gazed at the clearing.

The huntsman drew his knife silently and concealed it in the folds of his cloak. He stopped above the maiden.

"What are you whispering?" demanded the huntsman, laying his hand on her wood-black hair.

"Only a rhyme my mother taught me."

The huntsman seized her by the hair and swung her about so her white throat was before him, stretched ready for the knife. But he did not strike, for there in his hand he held the dark golden locks of the Witch Queen, and her face laughed up at him and she flung her arms about him, laughing.

"Good man, sweet man, it was only a test of you. Am I not a witch? And do you not love me?"

The huntsman trembled, for he did love her, and she was pressed so close her heart seemed to beat within his own body.

"Put away the knife. Throw away the silly crucifix. We have no need of these things. The King is not one half the man you are."

And the huntsman obeyed her, throwing the knife and the crucifix far off among the roots of the trees. He gripped her to him and she buried her face in his neck, and the pain of her kiss was the last thing he felt in this world.

The sky was black now. The forest was blacker. No foxes played in the clearing. The moon rose and made white lace through the boughs, and through the backs of the huntsman's empty eyes. Bianca wiped her mouth on a dead flower.

"Seven asleep, seven awake," said Bianca. "Wood to wood. Blood to blood. Thee to me."



There came a sound like seven huge rendings, distant by the length of several trees, a broken road, an orchard, an underground passage. Then a sound like seven huge single foot-falls. Nearer. And nearer.

Hop, hop, hop, hop. Hop, hop, hop.

In the orchard, seven black shudderings.

On the broken road, between the high hedges, seven black creepings.

Brush crackled, branches snapped.

Through the forest, into the clearing, pushed seven warped, misshapen, hunched-over, stunted things. Woody-black mossy fur, woody-black bald masks. Eyes like glittering cracks, mouths like moist caverns. Lichen beards. Fingers of twiggy gristle. Grinning. Kneeling. Faces pressed to the earth.

"Welcome," said Bianca.

The Witch Queen stood before a window of glass like diluted wine. She looked at the magic mirror.

"Mirror. Whom do you see?"

"I see you, mistress. I see a man in the forest. He went hunting, but not for deer. His eyes are open, but he is dead. I see all in the land. But one."

The Witch Queen pressed her palms to her ears.

Outside the window the garden lay, empty of its seven black and stunted dwarf trees.

"Bianca," said the Queen.

The windows had been draped and gave no light. The light spilled from a shallow vessel, light in a sheaf, like the pastel wheat. It glowed upon four swords that pointed east and west, that pointed north and south.

Four winds had burst through the chamber, and three arch-winds. Cool fires had risen, and parched oceans, and the gray-silver powders of Time.

The hands of the Witch Queen floated like folded leaves on the air, and through dry lips the Witch Queen chanted.

*"Pater omnipotens, mitere digneris sanctum Angelum tuum de Infernis."*

The light faded, and grew brighter.

There, between the hilts of the four swords, stood the Angel Lucefiel, somberly gilded, his face in shadow, his golden wings spread and blazing at his back.

"Since you have called me, I know your desire. It is a comfortless wish. You ask for pain."

"You speak of pain, Lord Lucefiel, who suffer the most merciless pain of all. Worse than the nails in the feet and wrists. Worse than the thorns and the bitter cup and the blade in the side. To be called upon for evil's sake, which I do not, comprehending your true nature, son of God, brother of The Son."

"You recognize me, then. I will grant what you ask."

And Lucefiel (by some named Satan, Rex Mundi, but nevertheless the left hand, the sinister hand of God's design) wrenched lightning from the ether and cast it at the Witch Queen.

It caught her in the breast. She fell.

The sheaf of light towered and lit the golden eyes of the Angel, which were terrible, yet luminous with compassion, as the swords shattered and he vanished.

The Witch Queen pulled herself from the floor of the chamber, no longer beautiful, a withered, slobbering hag.

Into the core of the forest, even at noon, the sun never shone. Flowers propagated in the grass, but they were colorless. Above, the black-green roof hung down nets of thick green twilight through which albino butterflies and moths feverishly drizzled. The trunks of the trees were smooth as the stalks of underwater weeds. Bats flew in the daytime, and birds who believed themselves to be bats.

There was a sepulcher, dripped with moss. The bones had been rolled out, had rolled around the feet of seven twisted dwarf trees. They looked like trees. Sometimes they moved. Sometimes something like an eye glittered, or a tooth, in the wet shadows.

In the shade of the sepulcher door sat Bianca, combing her hair.

A lurch of motion disturbed the thick twilight.

The seven trees turned their heads.

A hag emerged from the forest. She was crook-backed and her head was poked forward, predatory, withered and almost hairless, like a vulture's.

"Here we are at last," grated the hag, in a vulture's voice.

She came closer, and cranked herself down on her knees and bowed her face into the turf and the colorless flowers.

Bianca sat and gazed at her. The hag lifted herself. Her teeth were yellow palings.



"I bring you the homage of witches, and three gifts," said the hag.

"Why should you do that?"

"Such a quick child, and only fourteen years. Why? Because we fear you. I bring you gifts to curry favor."

Bianca laughed. "Show me."

The hag made a pass in the green air. She held a silken cord worked curiously with plaited human hair.

"Here is a girdle which will protect you from the devices of priests, from crucifix and chalice and the accursed holy water. In it are knotted the tresses of a virgin, and of a woman no better than she should be, and of a woman dead. And here—" a second pass and a comb was in her hand, lacquered blue over green—"a comb from the deep sea, a mermaid's trinket, to charm and subdue. Part your locks with this, and the scent of ocean will fill men's nostrils and the rhythm of the tides their ears, the tides that bind men like chains. Last," added the hag, "that old symbol of wickedness, the scarlet fruit of Eve, the apple red as blood. Bite, and the understanding of sin, which the serpent boasted of, will be made known to you." And the hag made her last pass in the air and extended the apple, with the girdle and the comb, toward Bianca.

Bianca glanced at the seven stunted trees.

"I like her gifts, but I do not quite trust her."

The bald masks peered from their shaggy beardings. Eyelets glinted. Twiggy claws clacked.

"All the same," said Bianca. "I will let her tie the girdle on me, and comb my hair herself."

The hag obeyed, simpering. Like a toad she waddled to Bianca. She tied on the girdle. She parted the ebony hair. Sparks sizzled, white from the girdle, peacock's eye from the comb.

"And now, hag, take a little bite of the apple."

"It will be my pride," said the hag, "to tell my sisters I shared this fruit with you." And the hag bit into the apple, and mumbled the bite noisily, and swallowed, smacking her lips.

Then Bianca took the apple and bit into it.

Bianca screamed—and choked.

She jumped to her feet. Her hair whirled about her like a storm cloud. Her face turned blue, then slate, then white

again. She lay on the pallid flowers, neither stirring nor breathing.

The seven dwarf trees rattled their limbs and their bear-shaggy heads, to no avail. Without Bianca's art they could not hop. They strained their claws and ripped at the hag's sparse hair and her mantle. She fled between them. She fled into the sunlit acres of the forest, along the broken road, through the orchard, into a hidden passage.

The hag reentered the palace by the hidden way, and the Queen's chamber by a hidden stair. She was bent almost double. She held her ribs. With one skinny hand she opened the ivory case of the magic mirror.

"*Speculum, speculum. Dei gratia.* Whom do you see?"

"I see you, mistress. And all in the land. And I see a coffin."

"Whose corpse lies in the coffin?"

"That I cannot see. It must be Bianca."

The hag, who had been the beautiful Witch Queen, sank into her tall chair before the window of pale cucumber green and dark white glass. Her drugs and potions waited ready to reverse the dreadful conjuring of age the Angel Lucefiel had placed on her, but she did not touch them yet.

The apple had contained a fragment of the flesh of Christ, the sacred wafer, the Eucharist.

The Witch Queen drew her Bible to her and opened it randomly.

And read, with fear, the word: *Resurcat.*

It appeared like glass, the coffin, milky glass. It had formed this way. A thin white smoke had risen from the skin of Bianca. She smoked as a fire smokes when a drop of quenching water falls on it. The piece of Eucharist had stuck in her throat. The Eucharist, quenching water to her fire, caused her to smoke.

Then the cold dews of night gathered, and the colder atmospheres of midnight. The smoke of Bianca's quenching froze about her. Frost formed in exquisite silver scroll-work all over the block of misty ice which contained Bianca.

Bianca's frigid heart could not warm the ice. Nor the sunless green twilight of the day.

You could just see her, stretched in the coffin, through the glass. How lovely she looked, Bianca. Black as ebony, white as snow, red as blood.



The trees hung over the coffin. Years passed. The trees sprawled about the coffin, cradling it in their arms. Their eyes wept fungus and green resin. Green amber drops hardened like jewels in the coffin of glass.

"Who is that lying under the trees?" the Prince asked, as he rode into the clearing.

He seemed to bring a golden moon with him, shining about his golden head, on the golden armor and the cloak of white satin blazoned with gold and blood and ink and sapphire. The white horse trod on the colorless flowers, but the flowers sprang up again when the hoofs had passed. A shield hung from the saddle-bow, a strange shield. From one side it had a lion's face, but from the other, a lamb's face.

The trees groaned and their heads split on huge mouths.

"Is this Bianca's coffin?" asked the Prince.

"Leave her with us," said the seven trees. They hauled at their roots. The ground shivered. The coffin of ice-glass gave a great jolt, and a crack bisected it.

Bianca coughed.

The jolt had precipitated the piece of Eucharist from her throat.

In a thousand shards the coffin shattered, and Bianca sat up. She stared at the Prince, and she smiled.

"Welcome, beloved," said Bianca.

She got to her feet and shook out her hair, and began to walk toward the Prince on the pale horse.

But she seemed to walk into a shadow, into a purple room; then into a crimson room whose emanations lanced her like knives. Next she walked into a yellow room where she heard the sound of crying which tore her ears. All her body seemed stripped away; she was a beating heart. The beats of her heart became two wings. She flew. She was a raven, then an owl. She flew into a sparkling pane. It scorched her white. Snow white. She was a dove.

She settled on the shoulder of the Prince and hid her head under her wing. She had no longer anything black about her, and nothing red.

"Begin again now, Bianca," said the Prince. He raised her from his shoulder. On his wrist there was a mark. It was like a star. Once a nail had been driven in there.

Bianca flew away, up through the roof of the forest. She flew in at a delicate wine window. She was in the palace. She was seven years old.

The Witch Queen, her new mother, hung a filigree crucifix around her neck.

"Mirror," said the Witch Queen, "whom do you see?"

"I see you, mistress," replied the mirror. "And all in the land. I see Bianca."



# Orson Scott Card

## SANDMAGIC

*Whenever this series of yearly anthologies is criticized in the fan press, which is frequently, the one factor most often singled out for condemnation is that "most" of the stories are Sword & Sorcery. I suppose they are, but this doesn't necessarily reflect the bias of the editor. After all, I am slightly limited in my Year's Best series to printing what came out each year. Now, #6, the book you are holding in your little hot hands, is certainly loaded with Sword & Sorcery—six out of the eleven stories here are S&S—and when it came down to the line, I debated long and hard over including this story, which is also Sword & Sorcery.*

*It's here because I simply couldn't leave it out; after all, it is one of the year's best fantasy stories. Read it and see.*

—L.C.

The great domes of the city of Gyree dazzled blue and red when the sun shone through a break in the clouds, and for a moment Cer Cemreet thought he saw some of the glory the uncles talked about in the late-night tales of the old days of Greet. But the capital did not look dazzling up close, Cer

remembered bitterly. Now dogs ran in the streets and rats lived in the wreckage of the palace, and the King of Greet lived in New Gyree in the hills far to the north, where the armies of the enemy could not go. Yet.

The sun went back behind a cloud and the city looked dark again. A Nefyr patrol was riding briskly on the Hetterwee Road far to the north. Cer turned his gaze to the lush grass on the hill where he sat. The clouds meant rain, but probably not here, he thought. He always thought of something else when he saw a Nefyr patrol. Yes, it was too early in Hrickan for rains to fall here. This rain would fall in the north, perhaps in the land of the King of the High Mountains, or on the vast plain of Westwold where they said horses ran free but were tame for any man to ride at need. But no rain would fall in Greet until Doonse, three weeks from now. By then the wheat would all be stored and the hay would be piled in vast ricks as tall as the hill Cer sat on.

In the old days, they said, all during Doonse the great wagons from Westwold would come and carry off the hay to last them through the snow season. But not now, Cer remembered. This year and last year and the year before the wagons had come from the south and east, two-wheeled wagons with drivers who spoke, not High Westil, but the barbarian Fyrd language. Fyrd or firt, thought Cer, and laughed, for first was a word he could not say in front of his parents. They spoke firt.

Cer looked out over the plain again. The Nefyr patrol had turned from the highway and was on the road to the hills.

The road to the hills. Cer leaped to his feet and raced down the track leading home. A patrol heading for the hills could only mean trouble.

He stopped to rest only once, when the pain in his side was too bad to bear. But the patrol had horses, and he arrived home only to see the horses of the Nefyrre gathered at his father's gate.

Where are the uncles? Cer thought. The uncles must come.

But the uncles were not there, and Cer heard a terrible scream from inside the garden walls. He had never heard his mother scream before, but somehow he knew it was his mother, and he ran to the gate. A Nefyr soldier seized him and called out, "Here's the boy!" in a thick accent of High Westil, so that Cer's parents could understand. Cer's mother screamed again, and now Cer saw why.

His father had been stripped naked, his arms and legs held



by two tall Nefyrre. The Nefyr captain held his viciously curved short-sword, point up, pressing against Cer's father's hard-muscled stomach. As Cer and his mother watched, the sword drew blood, and the captain pushed it in to the hilt, then pulled it up to the ribs. Blood gushed. The captain had been careful not to touch the heart, and now they thrust a spear into the huge wound, and lifted it high, Cer's father dangling from the end. They lashed the spear to the gatepost, and the blood and bowels stained the gates and the walls.

For five minutes more Cer's father lived, his chest heaving in the agony of breath. He may have died of pain, but Cer did not think so, for his father was not the kind to give in to pain. He may have died of suffocation, for one lung was gone and every breath was excruciating, but Cer did not think so, for his father kept breathing to the end. It was loss of blood, Cer decided, weeks later. It was when his body was dry, when the veins collapsed, that Cer's father died.

He never uttered a sound. Cer's father would never let the Nefyrre hear him so much as sigh in pain.

Cer's mother screamed and screamed until blood came from her mouth and she fainted.

Cer stood in silence until his father died. Then when the captain, a smirk on his face, walked near Cer and looked in his face, Cer kicked him in the groin.

They cut off Cer's great toes, but like his father, Cer made no sound.

Then the Nefyrre left and the uncles came.

Uncle Forwin vomited. Uncle Erwin wept. Uncle Crune put his arm around Cer's shoulder as the servants bound his maimed feet and said, "Your father was a great, a brave man. He killed many Nefyrre and burned many wagons. But the Nefyrre are strong."

Uncle Crune squeezed Cer's shoulder. "Your father was stronger. But he was one, and they were many."

Cer looked away.

"Will you not look at your uncle?" Uncle Crune asked.

"My father," Cer said, "did not think that he was alone."

Uncle Crune got up and walked away. Cer never saw the uncles again.

He and his mother had to leave the house and the fields, for a Nefyr farmer had been given the land to farm for the King of Nefyryd. With no money, they had to move south, across the River Greebeck into the dry lands near the desert, where no rivers flowed and so only the hardiest plants lived.

They lived the winter on the charity of the desperately poor. In the summer, when the heat came, so did the Poor Plague which swept the drylands. The cure was fresh fruits, but fresh fruits came from Yffyrd and Suffyrd and only the rich could buy them, and the poor died by the thousands. Cer's mother was one of them.

They took her out on the sand to burn her body and free her spirit. As they painted her with tar (tar, at least, cost nothing, if a man had a bucket), five horsemen came to the brow of a dune to watch. At first Cer thought they were Nefyrre, but no. The poor people looked up and saluted the strangers, which Greetmen never do the enemy. These, then, were desert men, the Abadapnur nomads, who raided the rich farms of Greet during dry years, but who never harmed the poor.

We hated them, Cer thought, when we were rich. But now we are poor, and they are our friends.

His mother burned as the sun set.

Cer watched until the flames went out. The moon was high for the second time that night. Cer said a prayer to the moonlady over his mother's bones and ashes and then he turned and left.

He stopped at their hut and gathered the little food they had, and put on his father's tin ring, which the Nefyrre had thought was valueless, but which Cer knew was the sign of the Cemreet family's authority since forever ago.

Then Cer walked north.

He lived by killing rats in barns and cooking them. He lived by begging at poor farmers' doors, for the rich farmers had servants to turn away beggars. That, at least, Cer remembered, his father had never done. Beggars always had a meal at his father's house.

Cer also lived by stealing when he could hunt or beg no food. He stole handfuls of raw wheat. He stole carrots from gardens. He stole water from wells, for which he could have lost his life in the rainless season. He stole, one time, a fruit from a rich man's food wagon.

It burned his mouth, it was so cold and the acid so strong. It dribbled down his chin. As a poor man and a thief, Cer thought, I now eat a thing so dear that even my father, who was called wealthy, could never buy it.

And at last he saw the mountains in the north. He walked on, and in a week the mountains were great cliffs and steep



slopes of shale—the Mitherkame, where the king of the High Mountains reigned, and Cer began to climb.

He climbed all one day and slept in a cleft of a rock. He moved slowly, for climbing in sandals was clumsy, and without his great toes Cer could not climb barefoot. The next morning he climbed more. Though he nearly fell one time when falling would have meant crashing a mile down onto the distant plain, at last he reached the knifelike top of the Mitherkame, and heaven.

For of a sudden the stone gave way to soil. Not the pale sandy soil of the drylands, nor the red soil of Greet, but the dark black soil of the old songs from the north, the soil that could not be left alone for a day or it would sprout plants that in a week would be a forest.

And there *was* a forest, and the ground was thick with grass. Cer had seen only a few trees in his life, and they had been olive trees, short and gnarled, and fig sycamores, that were three times the height of a man. These were twenty times the height of a man and ten steps around, and the young trees shot up straight and tall so that not a sapling was as small as Cer, who for twelve years old was not considered small.

To Cer, who had known only wheat and hay and olive orchards, the forest was more magnificent than the mountain or the city or the river or the moon.

He slept under a huge tree. He was very cold that night. And in the morning he realized that in a forest he would find no farms, and where there were no farms there was no food for him. He got up and walked deeper into the forest. There were people in the High Mountains, else there would be no king, and Cer would find them. If he didn't, he would die. But at least he would not die in the realms of the Nefyrre.

He passed many bushes with edible berries, but he did not know they could be eaten so he did not eat. He passed many streams with slow stupid fish that he could have caught, but in Greet fish was never eaten, because it always carried disease, and so Cer caught no fish.

And on the third day, when he began to feel so weak from hunger that he could walk no longer, he met the treemage.

He met him because it was the coldest night yet, and at last Cer tore branches from a tree to make a fire. But the wood did not light, and when Cer looked up he saw that the trees had moved. They were coming closer, surrounding him tightly. He watched them, and they did not move as he

watched, but when he turned around the ones he had not been watching were closer yet. He tried to run, but the low branches made a tight fence he could not get through. He couldn't climb, either, because the branches all stabbed downward. Bleeding from the twigs he had scraped, Cer went back to his camping place and watched as the trees at last made a solid wall around him.

And he waited. What else could he do in his wooden prison?

In the morning he heard a man singing, and he called for help.

"Oh ho," he heard a voice say in a strange accent. "Oh ho, a tree cutter and a firemaker, a branch killer and a forest hater."

"I'm none of those," Cer said. "It was cold, and I tried to build a fire only to keep warm."

"A fire, a fire," the voice said. "In this small part of the world there are no fires of wood. But that's a young voice I hear, and I doubt there's a beard beneath the words."

"I have no beard," Cer answered. "I have no weapon, except a knife too small to harm you."

"A knife? A knife that tears sap from living limbs, Redwood says. A knife that cuts twigs like soft manfingers, says Elm. A knife that stabs bark till it bleeds, says Sweet Aspen. Break your knife," said the voice outside the trees, "and I will open your prison."

"But it's my only knife," Cer protested, "and I need it."

"You need it here like you need fog on a dark night. Break it or you'll die before these trees move again."

Cer broke his knife.

Behind him he heard a sound, and he turned to see a fat old man standing in a clear space between the trees. A moment before there had been no clear space.

"A child," said the man.

"A fat old man," said Cer, angry at being considered as young as his years.

"An ill-bred child at that," said the man. "But perhaps he knows no better, for from the accent of his speech I would say he comes from Greetland, and from his clothing I would say he is poor, and it's well known in Mitherwee that there are no manners in Greet."

Cer snatched up the blade of his knife and ran at the man. Somehow there were many sharp-pointed branches in the



way, and his hand ran into a hard limb, knocking the blade to the ground.

"Oh, my child," said the man kindly, "there is death in your heart."

The branches were gone, and the man reached out his hands and touched Cer's face. Cer jerked away.

"And the touch of a man brings pain to you." The man sighed. "How inside out your world must be."

Cer looked at the man coldly. He could endure taunting. But was that kindness in the old man's eyes?

"You look hungry," said the old man.

Cer said nothing.

"If you care to follow me, you may. I have food for you, if you like."

Cer followed him.

They went through the forest, and Cer noticed that the old man stopped to touch many of the trees. And a few he pointedly snubbed, turning his back or taking a wider route around them. Once he stopped and spoke to a tree that had lost a large limb—recently, too, Cer thought, because the tar on the stump was still soft. "Soon there'll be no pain at all," the old man said to the tree. Then the old man sighed again. "Ah, yes, I know. And many a walnut in the falling season."

Then they reached a house. If it could be called a house, Cer thought. Stones were the walls, which was common enough in Greet, but the roof was living wood—thick branches from nine tall trees, interwoven and heavily leaved, so that Cer was sure no drop of rain could ever come inside.

"You admire my roof?" the old man asked. "So tight that even in the winter, when the leaves are gone, the snow cannot come in. But *we* can," he said, and led the way through a low door into a single room.

The old man kept up a constant chatter as he fixed breakfast: berries and cream, stewed acorns, and thick slices of cornbread. The old man named all the foods for Cer, because except for the cream it was all strange to him. But it was good, and it filled him.

"Acorn from the Oaks," said the old man. "Walnuts from the trees of that name. And berries from the bushes, the neartrees. Corn, of course, comes from an untree, a weak plant with no wood, which dies every year."

"The trees don't die every year, then, even though it snows?" Cer asked, for he had heard of snow.

"Their leaves turn bright colors, and then they fall, and

perhaps that's a kind of death," said the old man. "But in Eanan the snow melts and by Blowan there are leaves again on all the trees."

Cer did not believe him, but he didn't disbelieve him either. Trees were strange things.

"I never knew that trees in the High Mountains could move."

"Oh ho," laughed the old man. "And neither can they, except here, and other woods that a treemage tends."

"A treemage? Is there magic then?"

"Magic. Oh ho," the man laughed again. "Ah yes, magic, many magics, and mine is the magic of trees."

Cer squinted. The man did not look like a man of power, and yet the trees had penned an intruder in. "You rule the trees here?"

"Rule?" the old man asked, startled, "What a thought. Indeed no. I serve them. I protect them. I give them the power in me, and they give me the power in them, and it makes us all a good deal more powerful. But rule? That just doesn't enter into magic. What a thought."

Then the old man chattered about the doings of the silly squirrels this year, and when Cer was through eating the old man gave him a bucket and they spent the morning gathering berries. "Leave a berry on the bush for every one you pick," the old man said. "They're for the birds in the fall and for the soil in the Kamesun, when new bushes grow."

And so Cer, quite accidentally, began his life with the treemage, and it was as happy a time as Cer ever had in his life, except when he was a child and his mother sang to him and except for the time his father took him hunting deer in the hills of Wetfell.

And after the autumn when Cer marveled at the colors of the leaves, and after the winter when Cer tramped through the snow with the treemage to tend to ice-splintered branches, and after the spring when Cer thinned the new plants so the forest did not become overgrown, the treemage began to think that the dark places in Cer's heart were filled with light, or at least put away where they could not be found.

He was wrong.

For as he gathered leaves for the winter's fires Cer dreamed he was gathering the bones of his enemies. And as he tramped the snow he dreamed he was marching into battle to wreak death on the Nefyrre. And as he thinned the treestarts Cer dreamed of slaying each of the uncles as his fa-



ther had been slain, because none of them had stood by him in his danger.

Cer dreamed of vengeance, and his heart grew darker even as the wood was filled with the bright light of the summer sun.

One day he said to the treemage, "I want to learn magic."

The treemage smiled with hope. "You're learning it," he said, "and I'll gladly teach you more."

"I want to learn things of power."

"Ah," said the treemage, disappointed. "Ah, then, you can have no magic."

"You have power," said Cer. "I want it also."

"Oh, indeed," said the treemage. "I have the power of two legs and two arms, the power to heat tar over a peat fire to stop the sap flow from broken limbs, the power to cut off diseased branches to save the tree, the power to teach the trees how and when to protect themselves. All the rest is the power of the trees, and none of it is mine."

"But they do your bidding," said Cer.

"Because I do theirs!" the treemage said, suddenly angry. "Do you think that there is slavery in this wood? Do you think I am a king? Only men allow men to rule them. Here in this wood there is only love, and on that love and by that love the trees and I have the magic of the wood."

Cer looked down, disappointed. The treemage misunderstood and thought that Cer was contrite.

"Ah, my boy," said the treemage. "You haven't learned it, I see. The root of magic is love, the trunk is service. The treemages love the trees and serve them and then they share treemagic with the trees. Lightmages love the sun and make fires at night, and the fires served them as they serve the fire. Horsemages love and serve horses, and they ride freely whither they will because of the magic in the herd. There is field magic and plain magic, and the magic of rocks and metals, songs and dances, the magic of winds and weathers. All built on love, all growing through service."

"I must have magic," said Cer.

"Must you?" asked the treemage. "Must you have magic? There are kinds of magic, then, that you might have. But I can't teach them to you."

"What are they?"

"No," said the treemage, and he wouldn't speak again.

Cer thought and thought. What magic could be demanded against one's will?

And at last, when he had badgered and nagged the treemage for weeks, the treemage angrily gave in. "Will you know then?" the treemage snapped. "I will tell you. There is seamagic, where the wicked sailors serve the monsters of the deep by feeding them living flesh. Would you do that?" But Cer only waited for more.

"So that appeals to you," said the treemage. "Then you will be delighted at desert magic."

And now Cer saw a magic he might use. "How is that performed?"

"I know not," said the treemage icily. "It is the blackest of the magics to men of *my* kind, though your dark heart might leap to it. There's only one magic darker."

"And what is that?" asked Cer.

"What a fool I was to take you in," said the treemage. "The wounds in your heart, you don't want them to heal; you love to pick at them and let them fester."

"What is the darkest magic?" demanded Cer.

"The darkest magic," said the treemage, "is one, thank the moon, that you can never practice. For to do it you have to love men and love the love of men more than your own life. And love is as far from you as the sea is from the mountains, as the earth is from the sky."

"The sky touches the earth," said Cer.

"Touches, but never do they meet," said the treemage.

Then the treemage handed Cer a basket, which he had just filled with bread and berries and a flagon of stream water. "Now go."

"Go?" asked Cer.

"I hoped to cure you, but you won't have a cure. You clutch at your suffering too much to be healed."

Cer reached out his foot toward the treemage, the crusty scars still a deep red where his great toe had been.

"As well you might try to restore my foot."

"Restore?" asked the treemage. "I restore nothing. But I stanch, and heal, and I help the trees forget their lost limbs. For if they insist on rushing sap to the limbs as if it were still there, they lose all their sap; they dry, they wither, they die."

Cer took the basket.

"Thank you for your kindness," said Cer. "I'm sorry that you don't understand. But just as the tree can never forgive the ax or the flame, there are those that must die before I can truly live again."



"Get out of my wood," said the treemage. "Such darkness has no place here."

And Cer left, and in three days came to the edge of the Mitherkame, and in two days reached the bottom of the cliffs, and in a few weeks reached the desert. For he would learn desertmagic. He would serve the sand, and the sand would serve him.

On the way the soldiers of Nefyryd stopped him and searched him. When they saw that he had no great toes, they beat him and shaved off his young and scraggly beard and sent him on his way with a kick.

Cer even stopped where his father's farm had been. Now all the farms were farmed by Nefyrre, men of the south who had never owned land before. They drove him away, afraid that he might steal. So he snuck back in the night and from his father's storehouse stole meat and from his father's barn stole a chicken.

He crossed the Greebeck to the drylands and gave the meat and the chicken to the poor people there. He lived with them for a few days. Then he went out into the desert.

He wandered in the desert for a week before he ran out of food and water. He tried everything to find the desert magic. He spoke to the hot sand and the burning rocks as the treemage had spoken to the trees. But the sand was never injured and did not need a healing touch, and the rocks could not be harmed and so they needed no protection. There was no answer when Cer talked, except the wind which cast sand in his eyes. At last Cer lay dying on the sand, his skin caked and chafed and burnt, his clothing long since tattered away into nothing, his flagon burning hot and filled with sand, his eyes blind from the whiteness of the desert.

He could neither love nor serve the desert, for the desert needed nothing from him and there was neither beauty nor kindness to love.

But he refused to die without having vengeance. Refused to die so long that he was still alive when the Abadapnu tribesmen found him. They gave him water and nursed him back to health. It took weeks, and they had to carry him on a sledge from waterhole to waterhole.

As they traveled with their herds and their horses, the Abadapnur carried Cer farther and farther away from the Nefyrre and the land of Greet.

Cer regained his senses slowly, and learned the Abadapnu language even more slowly. But at last, as the clouds began

to gather for the winter rains, Cer was one of the tribe, considered a man because he had a beard, considered wise because of the dark look on his face that remained even on those rare times when he laughed.

He never spoke of his past, though the Abadapnur knew well enough what the tin ring on his finger meant and why he had only eight toes. And they, with the perfect courtesy of the incurious, asked him nothing.

He learned their ways. He learned that starving on the desert was foolish, that dying of thirst was unnecessary. He learned how to trick the desert into yielding up life. "For," said the tribemaster, "the desert is never willing that anything should live."

Cer remembered that. The desert wanted nothing to live. And he wondered if that was a key to desert magic. Or was it merely a locked door that he could never open? How can you serve and be served by the sand that wants only your death? How could he get vengeance if he was dead? "Though I would gladly die if my dying could kill my father's killers," he said to his horse one day. The horse hung her head, and would only walk for the rest of the day, though Cer kicked her to try to make her run.

Finally one day, impatient that he was doing nothing to achieve his revenge, Cer went to the tribemaster and asked him how one learned the magic of sand.

"Sandmagic? You're mad," said the tribemaster. For days the tribemaster refused to look at him, let alone answer his questions, and Cer realized that here on the desert the sandmagic was hated as much as the treemage hated it. Why? Wouldn't such power make the Abadapnur great?

Or did the tribemaster refuse to speak because the Abadapnur did not know the sandmagic?

But they knew it.

And one day the tribemaster came to Cer and told him to mount and follow.

They rode in the early morning before the sun was high, then slept in a cave in a rocky hill during the heat of the day. In the dusk they rode again, and at night they came to the city.

"Ettuie," whispered the tribemaster, and then they rode their horses to the edge of the ruins.

The sand had buried the buildings up to half their height, inside and out, and even now the breezes of evening stirred the sand and built little dunes against the walls. The buildings



were made of stone, rising not to domes like the great cities of the Greetmen but to spires, tall towers that seemed to pierce the sky.

"Ikikietar," whispered the tribemaster. "Ikikiaiai re dapii. O ikikiai etetur o abadapnur, ikikiai re dapii."

"What are the 'knives'?" asked Cer. "And how could the sand kill them?"

"The knives are these towers, but they are also the stars of power."

"What power?" asked Cer eagerly.

"No power for you. Only power for the Etetur, for they were wise. They had the manmagic."

Manmagic. Was that the darkest magic spoken of by the treemage?

"Is there a magic more powerful than manmagic?" Cer asked.

"In the mountains, no," said the tribemaster. "On the well-watered plain, in the forest, on the sea, no."

"But in the desert?"

"A huu par eiti ununura," muttered the tribemaster, making the sign against death. "Only the desert power. Only the magic of the sand."

"I want to know," said Cer.

"Once," the tribemaster said, "once there was a mighty empire here. Once a great river flowed here, and rain fell, and the soil was rich and red like the soil of Greet, and a million people lived under the rule of the King of Ettue Dappa. But not all, for far to the west there lived a few who hated Ettue and the manmagic of the kings, and they forged the tool that undid this icty.

"They made the wind blow from the desert. They made the rains run off the earth. By their power the river sank into the desert sand, and the fields bore no fruit, and at last the King of Ettue surrendered, and half his kingdom was given to the sandmages. To the dapinur. That western kingdom became Dapnu Dap."

"A kingdom?" said Cer, surprised. "But now the great desert bears that name."

"And once the great desert was no desert, but a land of grasses and grains like your homeland to the north. The sandmages weren't content with half a kingdom, and they used their sandmagic to make a desert of Ettue, and they covered the lands of rebels with sand, until at last the victory of the desert was complete, and Ettue fell to the armies of Greet

and Nefyryd—they were allies then—and we of Dapnu Dap became nomads, living off that tiny bit of life that even the harshest desert cannot help but yield.”

“And what of the sandmages?” asked Cer.

“We killed them.”

“All?”

“All,” said the tribemaster. “And if any man will practice sandmagic today, we will kill him. For what happened to us we will let happen to no other people.”

Cer saw the knife in the tribemaster’s hand.

“I will have your vow,” said the tribemaster. “Swear before these stars and this sand and the ghosts of all who lived in this city that you will seek no sandmagic.”

“I swear,” said Cer, and the tribemaster put his knife away.

The next day Cer took his horse and a bow and arrows and all the food he could steal and in the heat of the day when everyone slept he went out into the desert. They followed him, but he slew two with arrows and the survivors lost his trail.

Word spread through the tribes of the Abadapnur that a would-be sandmage was loose in the desert, and all were ready to kill him if he came. But he did not come.

For he knew now how to serve the desert, and how to make the desert serve him. For the desert loved death, and hated grasses and trees and water and the things of life.

So in service of the sand Cer went to the edge of the land of the Nefyrre, east of the desert. There he fouled wells with the bodies of diseased animals. He burned fields when the wind was blowing off the desert, a dry wind that pushed the flames into the cities. He cut down trees. He killed sheep and cattle. And when the Nefyrre patrols chased him he fled into the desert where they could not follow.

His destruction was annoying, and impoverished many a farmer, but alone it would have done little to hurt the Nefyrre. Except that Cer felt his power over the desert growing. For he was feeding the desert the only things it hungered for: death and dryness.

He began to speak to the sand again, not kindly, but of land to the east that the sand could cover. And the wind followed his words, whipping the sand, moving the dunes. Where he stood the wind did not touch him, but all around him the dunes moved like waves of the sea.

Moving eastward.



Moving onto the lands of the Nefyrre.

And now the hungry desert could do in a night a hundred times more than Cer could do alone with a torch or a knife. It ate olive groves in an hour. The sand borne on the wind filled houses in a night, buried cities in a week, and in only three months had driven the Nefyrre across the Greebeck and the Nefyr River, where they thought the terrible sandstorms could not follow.

But the storms followed. Cer taught the desert almost to fill the river, so that the water spread out a foot deep and miles wide, flooding some lands that had been dry, but also leaving more water surface for the sun to drink from; and before the river reached the sea it was dry, and the desert swept across into the heart of Nefyryd.

The Nefyrre had always fought with the force of arms, and cruelty was their companion in war. But against the desert they were helpless. They could not fight the sand. If Cer could have known it, he would have gloried in the fact that, untaught, he was the most powerful sandmage who had ever lived. For hate was a greater teacher than any of the books of dark lore, and Cer lived on hate.

And on hate alone, for now he ate and drank nothing, sustaining his body through the power of the wind and the heat of the sun. He was utterly dry, and the blood no longer coursed through his veins. He lived on the energy of the storms he unleashed. The desert eagerly fed him, because he was feeding the desert.

He followed his storms, and walked through the deserted towns of the Nefyrre. He saw the refugees rushing north and east to the high ground. He saw the corpses of those caught in the storm. And he sang at night the old songs of Greet, the war songs. He wrote his father's name with chalk on the wall of every city he destroyed. He wrote his mother's name in the sand, and where he had written her name the wind did not blow and the sand did not shift, but preserved the writing as if it had been incised on rock.

Then one day, in a lull between his storms, Cer saw a man coming toward him from the east. Abadapnu, he wondered, or Nefyrre? Either way he drew his knife, and fit the nock of an arrow on his bowstring.

But the man came with his hands extended, and he called out, "Cer Cemreet."

It had never occurred to Cer that anyone knew his name.

"Sandmage Cer Cemreet," said the man when he was close. "We have found who you are."

Cer said nothing, but only watched the man's eyes.

"I have come to tell you that your vengeance is full. Ne-fyryd is at its knees. We have signed a treaty with Greet and we no longer raid into Hetterwee. Driplin has seized our westernmost lands."

Cer smiled. "I care nothing for your empire."

"Then for our people. The deaths of your father and mother have been avenged a hundred thousand times, for over two hundred thousand people have died at your hands."

Cer chuckled. "I care nothing for your people."

"Then for the soldiers who did the deed. Though they acted under orders, they have been arrested and killed, as have the men who gave them those orders, even our first general, all at the command of the king so that your vengeance will be complete. I have brought you their ears as proof of it," said the man, and he took a pouch from his waist.

"I care nothing for soldiers, nor for proof of vengeance," said Cer.

"Then what do you care for?" asked the man quietly.

"Death," said Cer.

"Then I bring you that, too," said the man, and a knife was in his hand, and he plunged the knife into Cer's breast where his heart should have been. But when the man pulled the knife out no blood followed, and Cer only smiled.

"Indeed you brought it to me," said Cer, and he stabbed the man where his father had been stabbed, and drew the knife up as it had been drawn through his father's body, except that he touched the man's heart, and he died.

As Cer watched the blood soaking into the sand, he heard in his ears his mother's screams, which he had silenced for these years. He heard her screams and now, remembering his father and his mother and himself as a child he began to cry, and he held the body of the man he had killed and rocked back and forth on the sand as the blood clotted on his clothing and his skin. His tears mixed with the blood and poured into the sand and Cer realized that this was the first time since his father's death that he had shed any tears at all.

I am not dry, thought Cer. There is water under me still for the desert to drink.

He looked at his dry hands, covered with the man's blood, and tried to scrub off the clotted blood with sand. But the blood stayed, and the sand could not clean him.



He wept again. And then he stood and faced the desert to the west, and he said, "Come."

A breeze began.

"Come," he said to the desert. "Come and dry my eyes."

And the wind came up, and the sand came, and Cer Cemreet was buried in the sand, and his eyes became dry, and the last life passed from his body, and the last sandmage passed from the world.

Then came the winter rains, and the refugees of Nefyryd returned to their land. The soldiers were called home, for the wars were over, and now their weapons were the shovel and the plow. They redug the trench of the Nefyr and the Greebeck, and the river soon flowed deep again to the sea. They scattered grass seed and cleaned their houses of sand. They carried water into the ruined fields with ditches and aqueducts.

Slowly life returned to Nefyryd.

The desert, having lost its mage, retreated quietly to its old borders, never again to seek death where there was life. Plenty of death already where nothing lived, plenty of dryness to drink where there was no water.

In a wood a little way from the crest of the Mitherkame, a treemage heard the news from a wandering tinker.

The treemage went out into the forest and spoke softly to the Elm, to the Oak, to the Redwood, to the Sween Aspen. When all had heard the news, the forest wept for Cer Cemreet, and each tree gave a twig to be burned in his memory, and shed sap to sink into the ground in his name.





## Appendix

### THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY BOOKS

#### I. ORIGINAL FICTION

1. *The Courts of Chaos*, by Roger Zelazny. Novel, 142 p., \$1.75, Avon Books. Fifth and, probably, last volume in the popular Amber series.
2. *Death's Master*, by Tanith Lee. Novel, 348 p., \$1.95, DAW Books. S'help me, this lady can write.
3. *The Devil Wives of Li Fong*, by E. Hoffmann Price. Novel, 216 p., \$1.95, Del Key Books. Novel of Chinese sorcery; the first piece of new fiction in too many years by the old *Weird Tales* master.
4. *The Golden Gryphon Feather*, by Richard Purtill. Novel, 160 p., \$1.75, DAW Books. Introduction by C. J. Cherryh, illustrations by George Barr. Interesting debut of a new writer, with a novel of ancient Crete in the Mythological Age that will appeal to Thomas Burnett Swann's fans.
5. *The Last Enchantment*, by Mary Stewart. Novel, 540 p., \$11.95, William Morrow. Third volume in this author's highly original series about Merlin the Magician. The best fantasy novel of the year.
6. *The Merman's Children*, by Poul Anderson. Novel, 319 p., \$11.95, Putnam's. Novel version of the yarns Poul was writing for the early volumes of my *Flashing Swords!* series. Solid work.
7. *Quag Keep*, by Andre Norton. Novel, 192 p., \$1.95,

DAW books. Fantasy novel of heroic quest, based on the Dungeons and Dragons war game.

8. *Some Summer Lands*, by Jane Gaskell. Novel, 360 p., \$1.95, Pocket Books, Inc. A real surprise . . . after all these years, a brand new novel about Cija of Atlan!
9. *Tales of Neveryon*, by Samuel R. Delaney. Novel, 264 p., \$2.25, Bantam Books. Rich, very readable sequence of linked episodes, exploring an invented world.

## II. ANTHOLOGIES & COLLECTIONS

10. *Heroes and Horrors*, by Fritz Leiber. Collection, XV + 227 p., \$12.00, Whispers Press. Introduction by John Jakes, illustrations by Tim Kirk. Tales of heroic fantasy and weird fiction, new and old. A handsome book.
11. *Heroic Fantasy*, edited by Gerald W. Page and Hank Reinhardt. Anthology, 320 p., \$1.95, DAW Books. Fourteen new stories by the likes of Andre Norton, Tanith Lee, H. Warner Munn, etc.
12. *Other Worlds I*, edited by Roy Torgeson. Anthology, 282 p., \$2.25, Zebra Books. Promising debut of a new anthology series; thirteen stories by Poul Anderson, Elizabeth A. Lynn, Orson Scott Card, others.
13. *Swords Against Darkness IV*, edited by Andrew J. Offutt. Anthology, 272 p., \$2.25, Zebra Books. Twelve stories by Poul Anderson, Brian Lumley, Tanith Lee, Manly Wade Wellman.
14. *The Year's Finest Fantasy, Vol. 2*, edited by Terry Carr. Anthology, 277 p., \$12.50, Putnam's. Stories by Ray Bradbury, Avram Davidson, R. A. Lafferty, etc.

## III. IMPORTANT REPRINTS

15. *A Dreamer's Tales*, by Lord Dunsany. Collection, XVI



+ 157 p., \$12.75, Owlswick Press. Introduction by Martin Gardner, illustrated by Tim Kirk. First new edition in thirty years or more of one of the greatest collections of short fantasies ever written—in a sumptuously illustrated, handsomely bound volume. Not to be missed!

16. *Wall of Serpents*, by L. Spague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt. Novel of sorts, 173 p., \$1.95, Dell Books. A fabulous rarity revived at last—the two last, extremely hard-to-find tales of Harold Shea. Good work, Dell!

#### IV. NONFICTION AND RELATED

17. *The Black Book of Clark Ashton Smith*. XV + 141 p., \$10.00 Arkham House. Illustrated by Andrew Smith. The legendary notebook kept by this great fantasy master for thirty years, now in print at last, meticulously edited. An unbelievable treasure for fans of Klarkash-ton, packed with fascinating notes and insights into his working methods.

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