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THE ISLAND UNDER THE EARTH
by AVRAM DAVIDSON

In THE ISLAND UNDER THE EARTH, a master fantasist has created his most fabulous land of imagination, peopled with humans and not-humans who speak with characteristically different voices and pursue goals and philosophies that set them inevitably against one another.

Earthy, hot-tempered Captain Stag followed a simple man's quest; Tabnath Lo the trader was driven by obsession; the enigmatic augurs Castegor and Gortecas maneuvered toward black-secret ends; and around them all the alien Sixlimbed Folk massed in hatred and plotted barbaric vengeance. . . .

"Davidson brings his world to life and shows it rude and strange. Its people have human appetites and make human mistakes because of them. They take monsters and magic as they come. I pity the generation that cannot feel the spell of words like these." —*P. Schuyler Miller*

AVRAM DAVIDSON, a native New Yorker, has been a highly respected figure in both the science fiction and mystery fields for well over a decade, and has won both the Hugo Award for science fiction and the Edgar Award in the mystery field. He was the editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* until turning to full-time writing; his short fiction has appeared in all the major science fiction magazines and his novels include ROGUE DRAGON and CLASH OF STAR-KINGS, both Nebula Award nominees.

THE ISLAND UNDER THE EARTH is conceived as the first novel in a trilogy; the titles of the remaining books will be THE SIXLIMBED FOLK and THE CAP OF GRACE.

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AN ACE BOOK

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FOREWORD

Whoever wishes to learn about the Island Under the Earth must consult THE BOOK BOUND IN BLACK HIDE.
—Todros Podrosi

It is nowadays common enough to take another's words and put one's own name on them. The ancients had other ways, and often delighted (perhaps with the famous and —to us—puzzling "archaic smile" upon their faces) to take their own words and put another's name to them. Particularly if the other had a more famous name: thus the pseudoepigraphers thought to gain attention for conceptions which their own fame might not be enough to forward. That there is "an island beneath the Earth" is indeed a most ancient notion, one which doubtless originated in the days of a different cosmogony, but has not entirely vanished even today. We know at least of Anaximander that he was an Ionian and that the discovery of the obliquity of the ecliptic was attributed to him; of the writer now called Pseudo-Anaximander, nothing is known, and only fragments of his texts remain to tantalize us, but we cannot do without the following quotation from his XIIIth Book:

"As we have observed before [i.e. as the true Anaximander had observed before], *Out of the Primal Chaos grew the Earth, as a reed grows from the mire or a flame from a bed of coals: there clung to this secondary, sundry remnants of the primary. Presently the connection was*

terminated and the remnants fell away like flakes of fiery matter, most of which perished. [Now here observe how adroitly the pseudoepigrapher passes from recapitulation to addition:] *The surviving mass has from that time remained close to and* under the Earth, *from which it cannot be seen in its own form: but its glow can be seen in our own night skies, and this glow some call the Zodiacal Light."*

Modern references are not many, and donnish Dr. Barghardt, whose name is perhaps most often mentioned in connection with the Legend, disposes of the above in a footnote; and the well-known classical concept that the Rivers of Earth pour down into a vast lake on which is found an island and that *there it is light when here it is dark,* he dismisses as "a confused and inchoate adumbration of the Antipodes": a more confused and inchoate line would be hard to find even in the works of Barghardt, who so abounds in them. And there is also the tantalizing reference in one of the Geniza Fragments (those not-quite-Dead-Sea-scrolls found in the Nineties) which Schulman very hesitantly suggests might be a citation from the lost Gemara Aboth of the Jerusalem Talmud, *Whither went the Sheydeem whom Solomon the King did not imprison? To an island under the earth* [here the text is tattered] ba-lishna acharina, *in another language*—and here the Fragment terminates. Then, too, Dr. Ben-Varad's diligence has rescued from the Neo-Cappadocian Text a pertinent comment to the effect that just as the impress of a seal remains upon a tablet even hastily touched by it, so does the outline of the upper world remain upon the island below: and this, with its vivid hint of blurred cuneiforms on wet clay, moves us to enjecture a lesser Libya and a reversed Asia—

Lastly, let us reflect on Professor Ryerson's terse definition of our mystery: It is a place not actually connected to our Earth, but the two are sometimes mutually visible, and it is subject to a different order of the laws of physics, its own being in a state of flux.

—But all this and similar is comparable to reconstructing an anatomy from shreds of broken grammars, or an economy from the single page of an arithmetic. Todros Podrosi has summed the subject up: Whoever wishes to learn of the Helm Wind and of the Cap of Grace, whoever wishes to know what occurred in the Year of Ro between the times of Starflux and Earthflux and where to find the traces of the blood shed then (which is the blood which has never dried), whoever desires to discover why there is seldom true thunder on the land, how the thunder heard upon the sea is really the noise of Rahab roaring forth her love for Leviathan, whoever looks to find the High Far Glades where the centaurs resort in their heats and seasons lest the sons of men mock their lusts or the wild asses envy them, whoever yearns to sit beneath the cedars and listen to the sound of silver and gold growing beneath the soil: the accounts of all these and of all other doings and designs and places and persons of the Island Under the Earth must be sought for in *The Book Bound In Black Hide.*

And this seeking is of certain peril.

THE ISLAND UNDER THE EARTH

The particular ill will between the men of the Household of Hobar and the Sixlimbed Folk was said to date from the time of the Hennan Hobar who was the senior of the cadet line which inherited—for lack of male heir in the elder branch—all the fat lands of the Household, well-girthed in appleyards.

The Hobar used to go up to a stone-built dwelling his late wife had in the Half-Hills, summer by summer, with many kin and guests and serving-sorts: since he was gear-proud (some said, gear-poor) and half-stripped the Main Place each time, the line of onagers stretched a league along behind him, laden down with furnitures and chests and floor-rugs and wall-rugs, kitchen coppers and tableware, and all such things. The distance alleged is not certain. So the word went.

And then the word went that certain Sixlimbs (and the name of Drogorógos was mentioned here), meeting the Hobar in the half-hills, asked a gift of wineskins and bread and were refused. Some said the gift was customary, some said it was not, some said it was after all a gift and hence not bound to be given, others asserted a sort of toll

was taken in quit of centaur-claim to the half-hills. It was variously stated that not the wine and not the loaves were begrudged but that they were demanded in so brute a fashion that the Hobar to save his shame could not have given it then despite anything, and that (another version) —

But such tellings and retellings can occupy and indeed have occupied entire evenings when the snow powder falls thick upon field and tree and the chestnut limbs with their ruddy hearts turn into ruddier flames upon the fire-hearths. A certain thing is that the Sixlimbs with branches of thorn made a sudden attack, stampeding the onagers and driving them off, some for lawful plunder and some for wanton destruction. Several seasons later (or that very season, it is also held) a plague broke out upon whole bands of Sixlimbs who had—or had not: choose—partaken of hospitality at Hobar harvest. Some alleged poison.

So that scene was set, and many acts were played upon it.

Hennan himself had been a long time dead, after a legendary malediction upon Drogorógos and all his stud: *". . . stallion and yearlion and cob and colt and crone, maiden mare and matron mare . . ."*; and Drogorógos himself—but who can say? who can count the centaurs' ages and feel certain he is right?—when no one knows if they live for a beast's span or for man-span. Another Hennan, Hennan Westerdweller, had calculated by certain geometries that a centaur endured for man-span times beast-span, but even advocates of his theory conceded it lacked proof—and Drogorógos himself, scarred and shaggy and foul of mouth beyond common even for a Sixlimbs, had either been picked clean by the kites of the forest and

the rocky scarps or perhaps had gone to eat certain soft herb until his age was healed, but at any rate was no more seen by men than Householder Hennan.

In his youth this Hennan had been of a broad and thick build like a sound keg of seasoned wood, favored by women and admired by men. It was said that he had aged like an apple of his Household's own growing, a metaphor capable of several meanings, though none dispute that he was in his age of a ruddy and shiny face. There is a tale told of his middle son, Harran Hobar, concerning an encounter with a brute golem of the golem-meem who live in the shadows of the satherwood, live (it is said) upon the coarse root called ass-fodder or asphodel which no onager nonetheless will touch unless famished: but the place of that tale is not here.

Hennan himself was but a name, then, and a night-light in the Fathers-niche of the shrine wall, and Harran a whitebeard with great-grandchildren upon his knees: he gave in a dower-gift to the mother of one of these, sundry plats and tracts of lands, and among them was the stone-built dwelling in the hills. The bride's name was Banna and her husband was Tabnath Lo, a merchantman; he let it on a lease of several years for a nominal rent of a fleece and three blackfish, as the custom is, to a partner of his in the sea-venturings, one Captain Stag.

The venturings had been of late uncommonly prosperous and untowardly long, and the captain resolved to tarry on land a while and get the stink of bilge and tar (and, it might be, blood) out of his nose. The hill party consisted of himself, his woman, a man who was his bosun and cook and cabin-servant, and the hired ass-man and his string of asses, this one agreeing to find guides and furnish fuel and fodder. Still, Stag, preferring

to be over- rather than under-cautious in (as it were) strange waters, took along provision enough for extra days, and a glow-stone as well.

The ass-man, or onagerer, was amused. "And sails and oars?" he asked, scratching his pelt.

Stag made a noise in his throat. He was a black-haired, black-bearded man, young, with a ruddy face and a gold ring in his right ear. "Sails—yes! For tent and awning. As for oars, I don't need wood in my fist to punish insolence." The onagerer found sudden tasks to occupy himself, muttered to his beasts and checked the pack-knots. They were sailors' knots, and not all to his style of knotting, but they were all sound, and in the end he stood silent, a shade sullen, but submissive enough and awaiting orders.

It was early dimlight, under the arcade of Tabnath Lo's warehouse, and then out from his counting-room where he had been checking stores against tally-pebbles came the merchantman himself: no older than the boat-captain, but pale, and inclined towards thinning hair and thickening middle.

"You stink of the stale wine, Partner," Stag greeted him, cheerfully enough.

The merchant shrugged. "Money never stinks," he said —as always, placid. His keen eye noted an omission even as he was speaking. "Your boatswain's not here . . ."

"Gone to fetch a doctor-priest." Voices were heard from down the street and around the turning past the warehouse-end. The town-churls had already swept the stones with their besoms. Here and there someone appeared at a doorway to snuff out a link, and the pungent smell overcame the wine scent. "Be them, now."

His eyes passed over his partner, his woman sitting in

her litter and veiled against the cold (a captive, warm-blooded booty of a distant war, legally sold and legally purchased; only sometimes at night she murmured or cried out in strange syllables Stag took to be her native tongue: but not often, not for long), the ass-man and the laden onagers—big, healthy, sandy or reddish-colored beasts: different from the stunty gray asslings of the Northern Capes—and rested at the corner. Automatically he examined the hoisting-tackle of the upper door. It seemed all in order.

" 'A doctor-priest' . . ." Tabnath Lo's mouth quirked a bit. "An augur? Whatever for?"

Stag's black eyebrows folded, met across the dent in his nose. "Call him an augur in land-talk, do you? Makes no difference . . . name . . . 'Whatever for?' Whatever makes you ask? Why, for taking omens, curing them if they need curing, like doctors do cure."

The owner of the pack-beasts exchanged quick glances with the merchant and the corners of this one's mouth quirked, too. "Yes, Captain—I have sent off enough ships to understand the necessity of doing so before weighing anchor," Merchant Tabnath said. "But . . . taking the omens before starting on a trip by land?" There was just a hint of amusement, incredulity, in his tones. "Well, it will of course do no harm. If you wish it . . ."

"Here they are now," Stag muttered, not replying to his partner's questioning voice. "Come up, Bosun, come up, come up, let's not dally and delay more!"

The bosun, with a grunt, set down the table he toted on his head; its slight weight had scarcely set his conical felt cap more than a trifle askew. No one looking had to ask why he now poured sand from a small sack onto the table and spread it out with both his horn-palmed hands.

It was at once clear that here was a simulation of the sandy beach on which omens for sea-journeys were commonly taken. Now, only, Stag gave an explanation—brief, grudging. "Custom I picked up in another country, not long ago," he said. A quick, deep look passed and flashed between the partners, was broken by the augur stepping between them. *One augur does for all augurs,* says the proverb. They came, they went, coasting up and coasting down, voyaging from isle to main and cape to cape, cadging place on any vessel; sometimes tarrying but more often not. *One doctor does for all doctors.* There was always one on hand.

"Troscagac, Troscagac, Troscagac," this one murmured, taking a quick reading on the skies, informing the Elements and Potencies who he was, so that they would take no offense. He yawned on the third repetition, and clearing his throat, with his stick he drew a quick square . . . or four lines which would do for a square . . . another look upward . . . he shifted the table slightly . . . again . . . a tiny bit more . . . enough. A nod of satisfaction. He was a biggish man, fat of face and hands, with his nose a bit splayed at the tip. He took his medicine-case and shook it briskly, then put it down to draw another series of lines, these set within the square: arcs, waves, intersecting angles, stars, ox-horns . . . *scritch-scritch-scratch,* the sound of stick on sand and wood. He stuck the stave into his belt, gave a quick, frankly curious scan of the faces roundabout, then, with a slight grunt and a slight sigh, as of one engaging in a not very interesting necessity, opened the end of his medicine-case and sent its contents sprawling onto the sand. All moved a step closer. The augur leaned over.

His stick in his hand once more, he began to point

and to decipher. "Shell over pebble here . . . something capping something . . . what and what? Cap of Grace, maybe. . . . Noonstone, ox-horn, crone-sign . . . open . . . vocal . . . pointing north, danger. . . . Beware the bull that bellows at noontide. Beware the crone that shrieks at noon. . . ." He scowled. Stag winced. The packtrain-man shifted on one leg, put tongue-tip between cracked lips. Merchant stared, dully. Bosun breathed, noisily. "Danger. Danger. Danger. Earth-Mother and Sky-Father, I never saw such a rotten cast! Danger. Danger. Danger. *Mother!* Six bewares! *Bull* is one, *Crone* is two—but what's the other four?" He peered, frowned, then shrugged and sighed and shook his head.

"Well, makes no difference anyway. 'Bad signs take good cures,' we all know that." He gave one tremendous yawn more, scrapped his medicine-things into a hair-sieve, smoothed the sand with his staff, effacing all the signs, then shook the sieve over the surface, adhering grains of sand dropping all about. "*'Say sooth, smear smooth, ill-things cure, good-things sure,'*" he chanted. He transferred medicine-things into a bowl of the roughest and the cheapest sort; water was added; the shells and pebbles, stones and bones were washed clean of ill-luck and ill-omen and put into their box once more. Then, with a hoot of warning, Troscagac picking up the bowl, simply withdrew his hands and let it drop. Everyone jumped a little bit, then laughed a little bit. The shattered bowl lay in shards between the street-stones. The water trickled away.

There was a silence. "Well," said merchant Tabnath Lo, "you have had your readings and your warnings." A very, very slight note of a something between amusement and scorn still sounded in his voice. "*I* do not urge you

to go." The bosun looked up from the runnel of dirty water, one finger absently musing upon the scar of a kraken-claw along his cheek. He looked at merchant, looked at master, a somewhat brighter expression coming across his seamed and sun-scoured face.

But Captain Stag, with a flush of rage striking all along his countenance, brows compressed, eyes hottened, nostrils widened, mouth a-snarl, then going swift away, like lightning flash—Captain Stag said, "Onward." One look as red as fire he gave to the owner of the packtrain: this one instantly chicked his tongue and smacked his lead-beast. The line moved on at once, the onagerer swung himself onto the lead-onager, captain and bosun followed alongside. The augur nodded and gave a dismissing gesture. His fingers felt his scrip where his fee reposed. The merchant opened his mouth, then he shrugged, said nothing.

In her litter, the captain's woman was silent. She said nothing, she looked nothing. She had prayed, she had shrieked, wept, pleaded . . . all in the past. Now she silently endured a securer present, did nothing to invoke the hastening onrush of a future which might be worse.

A league along the coastal road stood (or lay) the ruins of The Old Queen's Tower: that is, they were not precisely along the road, but in the fork of a Y formed by the road's division—one following the out-thrust of

the land, the other heading in and away and up, league after league after hundredleague, until (so it was said) it reached The Heartlands, and all that was there.

"What do you stop for?" Stag snapped, speaking for the first time. The onagerer squinted, rubbed his bristly jowls and knobby chin, cleared his throat.

"Trying to think. . . . Wasn't nothing in the augur-speech—was there?—warning us to 'ware of the Old Queen's Tower—"

"No! Get on with it."

The man laughed, uneasy, but determined to have his say. "It just come to me . . . maybe . . . The Old Queen . . . and—and that something about . . ." He hesitated, eyed the gaunt white stones of the ruins. ". . . meaning no disrespect—a crone?"

Stag's suppressed feelings burst out; he called the man by sundry sea-names which made him scowl and wince, concluded, "It's hours before noontide, coney-brain! Wit-told! Get on with it! Get on!"

The man swallowed, gave a laugh in which sheepishness and resentment were about equally present. They got on with it. They left the road by and by for a well-marked path winding through the hedgerows like a sunken stream. By and by the rows fell away and they observed—Stag and Bosun and the woman, at least—with surprise how high they had already come. Fat farmlands lay below, common-tilth and state-fields. Now the path wound along through pasture, with here and there the golden fleeces of the flocks shining in the sunlight. Stag heard the Bosun draw in his breath and dive upon a (so it at first seemed) rock, but in a moment he saw it was no rock, but some live creature.

The bosun held it almost fearfully. "What thing is

this I have here?" he exclaimed. The packtrainman dismounted and had only taken a few steps when he gave a grin of surprise. "A gossip! An airsucker!"

Stag made no objection to the halt, but seemed not pleased; still, he came up to look at the thing, lizard forebody, snakefish aftbody, and face like some caricature of an old woman— It seemed as though some awareness of this resemblance just then occurred to the onagerer: Crone? Crone!—and he looked up hastily. But the sun was by no means at meridian.

And the woman looked up, in her litter, and half-turned to see.

It was as though this action for the first time reminded Stag of her presence. He looked at her with some surprise, but she was not looking at him, she was trying to turn in the cramped space so as to see this creature, gossip or airsucker. Stag took the bosun by the wrist and led him to the litter slung between two stout geldings. The hireling followed. To him, as soon as they were next to her, Stag spoke. "Tell about it," he said.

"Some call it wyver," he said. "Wyvern, wyvert, same thing. Another name is gossip, also—look you here—" He reached out a finger terminating in a nailclaw of uncommon dirtiness and began to do a slow stroking under the creature's shallow underjaw, and, after a moment, the mouth pursed and a sucking noise was heard and a slow swelling began to grow beneath his stroking. Something like a bladder puffed and kept puffing. The bosun's feet moved, but he held his hands firm enough. Then the packtrainman gave the swelling a jab with his finger. The air went out, noisily, and a sort of guttural croaking was heard. After a moment, to the astonishment of the three sea-folk and the smirking amusement of their hired man,

the croaking resolved itself into something resembling human talk.

Leave a girl alone won't ye Always abothering of me

All four laughed, then hushed.

You'd like it me coney come on there's a sweet gal Oh suppose someone was to see Who's to see none's about Anyway there's the yan thicket be a sweet gal do

"Now you know why they're called airsuckers and gossips; as for th'other names, I've no notion . . . shall I step on it?"

A cry of sorts from the woman, a movement of her hand, the onagerer surprised, three look at the fourth. Stag asks, "Does it bite or do other harm?" "No—just croaks like such you've heard. Oh, some says she prognosticates, but others say: No, she don't, just creeps to folks's thresholds, listens, talks if you makes her suck air—" Abruptly Stag says, "Give it to her, Bosun. On with it!" But he says it without rage. The woman, perhaps with the feeling of one captive for another, cuddles the wyvern in her own soft lap, leans over and whispers to it. The party starts off again.

The path becomes a bare track, crawling over hills and across downs. The soil is thinner, trees more seldom, huge rocks push up and lean at crazy angles. They meet the woman crying for her children.

Afterwards, Stag was to think: *A fool was I to have yielded, to have listened, plainly she was a spy, a land-siren and lure-lurly.* Afterwards.

But then, all that any of them knew was that she was heard before she was seen, coming at a gait which was half a trot and half a stumble, but heard, first, in the form of a sort of hoarse crooning which set the hair of their napes on edge. At first they thought, when sight and sound came together and came closer, that it was the form of madness: hair disheveled, eyes wild, hands out and groping, and that dreadful and horrifying voice. But finally she seemed to focus on them and the expression of her face quite changed; her voice formed into coherent syllables: names: childer-names.

"Trenny! Darda!" she called. Her feet came faster. She wobbled a ghastly caricature of a smile at them, her eyes roved frantically. *"Tren-ny! Dar-da!"* The sing-song sound was unmistakable; even if one had never heard the names it would have been clear that here was a mother calling for her children. "Tren-*ny?* Dar-*da?*" Voice and face grew frantic, hands pressed to head.

Stag growled, called out, "There's no children with us and none been seen by us at all, goodmother—" He might have saved his breath. She circled round them, the onagers rolling their eyes after her, she moved her dry, cracked lips in silence one fearful moment, then close

up she came and (with a glare which defied them) laid her hands upon every pack on every beast, feeling and squeezing. And all the while she called the names—as though hopeful rather than fearful that her two were somewhere enwrapped and concealed. And so she came to the litter and she reached her hands in and, the while she licked her mouth and gaped and peered, lifted the coverlets and groped beneath the cushions . . .

Then she lifted her face and saw the woman inside and their hands locked and the newcomer's face broke into a thousand lines and she began to wail and she began to weep.

No one ever said, Let her come along with us . . . She came. She told her story, and she told it again. She never ceased the flickering back and forth of her eyes over the land and she told her tale and she told it. By and by it became a conversation, or, rather, an argument: rationality and logic versus fury and raw, hot grief.

She would have done better to have stopped nearer home; doubtless the children were still nearby . . . "They're not! They're not! The dog would have found them, for I had him with me when I looked up and down our valley, and they couldn't have gone past it by themselves before I first missed them: the girl wouldn't leave the boy, and the boy is lame!" But if the children couldn't have gotten out of their home valley, how could they have gotten this far? "They never went by themselves, they never! They were taken! They were taken! *The Sixies took them!*" The packtrainman guffawed and Stag and Bosun made scoffs and shook their heads.

"Grannytales, grannytales! What would the Sixies want with your pair brats?"—the packtrainman.

"Likelier, goodmother, 'twas raiders come up from the coast in the dark of night."—the bosun.

"Yes: and best for you to turn bum and beat a track down to the Town, to tell your tale there, have the Provost sound a hue and hunt, maybe find the raid-vessel hid in a creek, say."—Stag.

"No."—from the litter.

Stag's face went slack, then taut, and dark. His lips drew up, and his hand opened. Then he gave his head a swift, single shake; he said to his woman, "You never said me No before. Why now?"

Her face was pale, but no paler than usual; her voice had been raised to nay-say him, but it was seldom raised at all. "Raiders wouldn't bother with a lame child. There'd be no market." The goodmother squinted at this, said it over soundlessly. No one else said a word. The brute-simple logic of the statement left nothing to be said.

Only the sound of the onagers, hooves chopping down, now and then a whinny, was heard a while. Then the goodmother began her calling once more. Stag brushed his hand at his ear, next said, in a good enough humor, "Well, woman, if we run across centaurs and your kids with them, we'll make them give over—eh, Bosun?"

"Aye, Master," said he, stoutly. Winks were traded, the packsman made a mowe, but the countrywoman saw nothing of this: she, with a cry, fell down before the captain and embraced his knees. Then, before he could move to kick or catch at her, up she got and threw him one look of gratitude which shut his mouth. Then she set herself to walking with a steady pace quite unlike her former hazard caperings, and all the while she looked leftwards and rightwards and only now and then she called

her children's names, but always she kept her hand on that side on the frame of the litter. And always the woman who sat in it held her own hand upon the other one.

Captain and Bosun fell a bit behind, Bosun squinting his blue eye at the packman's back. "When and where was that one to pick up the guide, Captain?" he asked. Captain shrugged, supposed: when he needed to. The track was still clear enough.

"Air about here smells odd . . . dead . . ." he mused. "If we were at sea—well, but we're not."

". . . good thing, too," Bosun muttered. His brown eye met his Captain's. Who guffawed.

"Nervy, are you," Captain asked. "Having second thoughts after not having first ones about *'raiders'*? Forget it. Memories aren't as long as lives, and lives are short . . . some lives, to be sure," Captain Stag said, thoughtfully, "are shorter than others. . . . Just for the present, we'll do better in the hills. Nobody will be nosing around up there. Afterwards, when the ashes are cold . . ." He didn't finish the sentence. Perhaps he had not meant to finish it. At any rate he stopped . . . everyone stopped . . . everything stopped . . .

For quite a few seconds nothing moved, neither men nor women nor beasts. No breath of wind disturbed the hot air and the very grass upon the ground was still. There was nothing different to be seen, only the towering boulders and here and there a twisted tree, as far as eye could reach. And then they began to hear it . . . had, probably, been stopped in the first place by having heard it but so low that the mind had not fully perceived the burden of the ear . . . a low and humming sort of noise . . . low at first . . . like the low, dull, swarming sound

of bees . . . like the high, shrill, piercing sound of gnats . . .

"What—?" They looked at each other, puzzled.

"What—?" They looked at each other, confused.

"What! What!" They shouted at each other, amazed.

The woman who had lost her children began to scream, there were words in the scream, but they could not make them out, for the maddening noise was louder and louder and was all about them now; the woman who had lost her children began to tug and to pull at Stag's woman—A rock came hurtling through the air, and another, and then volleys of rocks. One caught Stag and hurled him half off his feet; one knee and one hand on the ground, he saw his woman come tumbling out of her litter, heard a cry of "Sixies! Sixies! *Sixies—*" the last repetition prolonging itself indefinitely upon the troubled air; and the ground shook to the sound of the hooves of the centaurs.

Around and around they went, now thudding on four legs and now up in the air to thud on only two and menace with the other four, bellowing, beating their shag breasts with the flats of their odd-shaped hands, beards flowing into manes, teeth gleaming, eyes rolling—now and again one or two together of them would sally out of the circling swarm and come dashing forward as though bent on riding down the people who had automatically come close together: the bosun with his cutlass drawn,

the captain with javelin and sword: but though they snarled and shouted, at each feint of the man-weapons they returned once more to the whirling circle.

It was a shout from the bosun which made Stag turn half around to follow look and gesture: a black centaur-stallion with rage-reddened eyes was rushing in upon them with a boulder held aloft in both his hairy hands. He faltered just a moment, as though upset at not being able to hurl and escape unseen whilst (on the other side of the beleaguered humans) two brindle cob-centaurs were capering and clashing their hooves in evident intent to distract—only a moment—then he came on, came on—but in that moment Stag had loosed his javelin. It struck the half-human in the thicket of his upper flank, where man-trunk joined beast-body, and fell to the torn and trampled soil.

The creature's eyes widened, he let the boulder fall and struck one hand to his head and the other to his gashed and bleeding side. One moment only he swayed and trembled. Then, with his chest trembling from the deep and endless roar of rage which issued from it, he came hurtling straight at Stag, who raised the sword, and went hurtling past him . . . but, as he went by, he lifted the hand which had been cupped to his bleeding wound and dashed it at the one who had wounded him: then he followed full among his fellows and was lost from sight.

Stag, meanwhile, saw his own sight obscured by a haze of tears of agony. The centaur's blood had struck him full on the side of his face, it burned him like a thousand fires. He fell to his knees and screamed his agony aloud. He saw his woman and his man standing, stricken and uncertain, saw the centaurs all streaming

away across the rolling landscape, saw the country-dame running as though pursued, and then in the midst of his maddening pain he thought: *She it was who led us into this trap. Her tale was a lie. A fool I was to have yielded, to have listened, plainly she was a spy, a land-siren and lure-lurly . . .*

The poisonous ichor ate at his face like venom. Each breath he forced into his toiling lungs boiled like red-hot acid. Scale formed between his eyes and his eyelids; he forced his fingers in to claw apart the choking scab which grew apace upon his nostrils and across his bubbling lips. The cool hands of death closed upon his heart, and pressed.

There in the Cold Gray Realm he stumbled along with the other stunned and white-faced dead. Blows fell upon their shoulders if they went to the right or to the left of the path: some unseen but not unfelt daemon scourged unwitting disobedience; abruptly the half-darkness vanished and there was the hot sun and there were the white-waved seas beating at the base of some high-built, stout-girt tower keep: blue seas, orange sun, red flames, coffers full of jewels and sewn skin sacks of sand-of-gold. Eyes watched him as he made away, eyes helpless to do more for now than mark the hated and swift-departing faces, eyes filled with hatred and with menace. . . .

The two of them spoke in soft voices as they dipped the cloths and wrung them out and exchanged them for the one upon the side of his face . . . that is, the country-dame was speaking, and the other woman now and then answered with a low-toned word. *I was wrong, then,* Stag thought. *Not the first time.*

" . . . hot water is best, of course," the other one was saying; "ant-amber melts fastest in hot water . . . it was luck that flask of water had been getting the sun all the while and was well warm. So first you put in just a bit and you stir it and stir it until you see the water is 'ginning to turn color, then right away you put in more." She might have been discussing a recipe for sweetmeal cake. "And luck! Hadn't I noted that ant-heap back such a short ways! Where would he be now, your poor lord?" *Still in Hell with the other shades,* the poor lord thought.

"Yes, yes. . . . And not just no ordinary ant-heap, needn't I tell you, dear. Only the great golden ants do make the amber, then right away they bury it, for they don't want folk to find it. Ah, and I don't know why they grudge it, for what else can take the venom out of centaur-blood? Directly saw I that ugly black sixy-brute go fling his filthy hand at your poor lord, off I went, gallop-a-trot, back for to find the ant-heap, yes; what is your own name, dear, for mine is Rary—"

"Spahana." He thought: *Yes, that* is *her name. . . .*

The bosun's voice: "Here, Captain, should you be sitting up? How d'you feel? How's that eye?"

Stag blinked through it before hazarding a reply. "No worse—now—than if it had caught a dash of sea-water. . . . So it's true, then, goodmother, that the blood of the six-limbed folk is deadly venom to humans—yes, *Earth* Mother! what am I saying! don't *I* know now it's true?

I'd completely forgotten that I'd ever heard it and when I had heard it I just laughed and said it was another granny-tale. —So then it's true, too, about the ant-amber?"

She nodded, inclined her head to the few golden granules of it still in her lap. He looked at them, looked at her. She wore the roughspun blouse and plain pantalets of the hill-woman and her hands were almost as calloused as her feet . . . hands which automatically went on wringing the cloth into the basin . . . but her eyes already had begun to rove around and her lips were now once again engaged in forming silent words. Names.

He grunted, took the bosun's hand and jumped to his feet. "All right. I'm healed. Woman—Rary— You gave me my life. I'll give you your children." She nodded, gathered up the ambers and wrapped them in a scrap which she tucked in her broad belt; then she got to her feet.

Stag bellowed. "The packtrain! The onagers! Where are they?"

His bosun shook his head and gestured. "Driven off, driven off—what else? That's what they attacked for, sixlimbed brutes. . . . Well, Captain, what now? We go back?"

Captain Stag stood scowling and considering. Then his brows unfolded and went up and up and he pointed. The other three turned to follow his gesture. There, some hundreds of armslengths off, sitting on top of a tall and angular rock, feet crossed and arms folded, a man was watching them. As he caught their glance he raised a hand as though in greeting. After a moment Stag returned the gesture. The man vanished, appeared a moment later on the ground as he stepped from behind

the rock, and made his way to them with a somewhat mincing manner of walk.

Stag watched, face at first bleak, then blank; then jerked his head in a way which bluntly demanded, if not full explanation, at least immediate speech.

"May the sun never scorch you and the rains never drown you," the newcomer said, in a thin and murmursome voice. "And between Earthflux and Starflux may no sort of ill befall you, so—"

The rigid mask which Stag's face had become now vanished. "Damn all you canting soothsayers!" Lower jaw out-thrust, nostrils wide, ugly in wrath and rage, his fingers worked upon the haft of his spear. "I paid you—deny, deny that I paid you!—I paid you to cure the omens!"

The other's face rippled like a clot of weed in a stream, his head seemed to slide back along a retractable neck and he put his right hand up at right angle to its arm. "*Me,* sealord? Was it *me* you paid?"

Stag made a fist, his lips moved. Then the fist slackened. Once again his brows made the flat black line of intent thought, relaxed again into double arches. He blinked, scowled, looked briefly bewildered. Then: "No. . . . I see now it wasn't you. Damn you all, anyway. One augur does for all augurs, well it's said. Might've been your brother or your bastard son. Stouter . . . Never mind." His hand flew wide and the augur started and flinched. "Had you anything to do with all *this?*" Gesture encompassed the countryside and meaning engrossed the eventful scenes so lately played there: low rolling ground and exposed boulders and stunted trees, hot blood and agony and the ever-recurrent raging struggle between the folk of four limbs and the folk of six.

The omenscanner seemed now to have gained back both professional and personal confidence. He nodded vigorously as the dignity of his craft allowed, and his face indicated just a trace of well-controlled amusement. "Indeed I had, sealord. For I had taken sight myself this morning, as I do (must I say?) every morning. It was revealed to me that many dangers would concur and coincide at this very place and hour, and that only my presence and artful efforts might prevent the occurrence of great tragedy. Therefore I came regardless of the toll it would take of my own concerns, and placed myself aloft on yonder great rock which afforded the better view and— The sealord says? 'The better safety'? Well, indeed, we doctorial augurs are men of science, not of war. It would have been of no help had I stayed upon the ground. And although I called out in warning to you, my voice (as alas I knew, but could not refrain from calling, emotion triumphing over reason and cold fact) my voice could not be heard."

He paused. Stag and the bosun, as though they had rehearsed it, pursed their lips and gave two slow nods. Indeed, no voice from any human throat could have carried over the still-mysterious and inhuman sounds both shrill and deep, and then the gross clamors of the centaurs. All this the augur saw in a glance, immediately next continued: "So I did the best I could, casting a swift spell upon the onagers which made them take flight, knowing that this would make the cursed Sixies follow lest the hoped-for plunder escape them; *feff!* how their stale and dung does stink!"

"And what now?" asked Stag.

It was not merely a question, it was a declaration. No questions about the past, no requests for prophecies of

the future, no recriminations, threats: all were to be set aside and left aside, to be ignored as the stale and dung about and over which the mindless flies were now abuzz.

"And what now?" asked Stag.

Stag was captain here as much as he had been upon the sea. No one gainsayed him . . . openly. But, first the woman Rary, and next the bosun, managed a few clandestine words with the augur Castagor: to each he said, in a confidential murmur, that any augury taken now would be worse than useless: "See me at early dim-light . . . " Neither was content—surely some other form of signscanning must be known to the man, one which depended not upon any particular time, or would be valid for *this* particular time?—but both had perforce to wait, for persistence served only to turn him somewhat sullen. And indeed he had seemed vexed that no one had supported his strong suggestion that they return to the town.

"Or at least in that direction, sealord," he urged. "The onagers' flight will have been arrested, and you shall find them and have your gear again."

Let onagers and gear reverse their flight and follow after them, was Stag's dictum. "That coneyhead was hired to bring his beasts and us to the house in the half-hills, and he'll bring them there or not a pennyweight of pay will he see. If he hasn't wit enough to cypher that for

himself, my partner Lo will cypher it for him. And if they think us dead?—well, they'll come for the bodies. Which way lies the old place, doctor-priest? The one called Stonehouse Hobar? That way? Good. Fall to, then, you and the rest of you, and gather rocks." And he set up an arrow-shaped pile pointing in that direction.

And in that direction they were now bound, with Castagor as guide. Unzealous. But guide. It was in vain that he had pointed out as landmark a cluster of three hills, just past which the true woods of the half-hills began, and through which (he declared upon his priestly honor, binding himself to be sundered and severed if his words were not true) wound a trail so well-marked that a blind man could follow it without a staff.

"All the better," said Stag, trudging on. "You'll have no hard voyage of it finding your own way back afterwards. —And let me hear no more whining and whimpering, now! Your fellow and your friend and likely your kinsman (One augur does for all augurs), if he'd cured the bad omens, damn him, as he was hired to do . . . " His voice died away, slowly his mouth relaxed from its one-sided grimace; then—

"Boats!"

The bosun, who had strayed to bring up the rear, and, not precisely furtive, but circumspect, to study the country wife from that as well as other angles . . . the bosun was suddenly at his captain's side. "What does this remind you of, Boats?" Stag inclined his head. Bosun followed with his eyes, squinted, pursed his lips. "Remind you of anything?" Stag drew the hairy side of an arm over his sweaty face. "Eh?"

Still the bosun said nothing. Then, slowly, almost grudgingly, and with a side glance and a tone as though

he feared a laughter or reproof, said, "Might almost remind you of a beach, like . . . Beaches . . ." And, indeed, the way the ground now shelved, now sloped; the way the thin topsoil showed coarse sand beneath where wind had scoured it; the curving lines of thin and shingly rock heaped up in layers, the tangles of uprooted brambles and twigs wavering along beyond and as dead gray-white as though salted by months or years of sea-spray and cast up on any true coast or shallow shore—all this and all of these did indeed give more than just an air of beaches.

A flash of knowing lit up the bosun's face (ivory-tan to his master's russet) and he cried, "Aye, Captain! Allitu! If so happened I'd been picked up bodily and set down here facing it so swift I didn't know there's no sea at my back, I'd swear by my peril between Starflux and Earthflux that this is the very beach at Allitu, where the *Dolphin* went aground—that rascal pilot—over the side he went, like an oiled eel—"

And Stag, with a reflective air: "Didn't get very far, did he? for all he knew those waters like a babe knows his mother's tit. Oh, aye, it *does* look beachy, doesn't it? And it *does* look like Allitu, doesn't it?—peaceful place, that must have been, before those rascal Mainlanders took it over for their wrecking and pillaging."

"Grew rich at it, they did."

"Didn't stay rich, though, did they? Nay. —You, augur-priest, what are you sniffing and snuffing about for? Want us to squeeze you like an airsucker to hear what you've been overhearing? —Where's my woman?" he asked, abruptly, waving away the soothsayer whose mouth had opened on an unheard protest; and made an almost

complete turn before he saw her: Spahana, coming along quite slowly and her hand on Rary's shoulder.

Who, seeing Stag's scowly look, said, "She's not used to these flinty fields, Water Lord. Her shoes are soft, and her feet even so softer. *My* trotters, now, are hard as—"

But he, indifferent to the comparison, said to the country wife, "Carry her, then, if you like"; and, to Spahana, "Keep up, do you hear?"

"Yes," she said. And thereafter did, though returning no word to him, a moment after, in his saying that likely they'd find oil and old linen to dress sore feet when they fetched up at Stonehouse Hobar. "And other stores as well. Said there were stores there, Lo said, didn't he?"

The bosun nodded. "Rough stores, yes, didn't know how much or just what kind. His wifefather used to keep the place part stocked, he said, but no one'd been there for dolphin's years and he didn't know what might be left, or if the Sixies've broken in on them or the wee-ants carried them out through the key hole."

Stag grunted, fumbled round his neck, drew out a black leather thong, hauled on it and came up with an enormous key; pointing to the far-spaced teeth, he said, "A door that thick, they'd need a ram-tower to break in. Unless . . ." The thought broke out into a scowl: "Unless they've picked the lock."

But Castegor, the augur, in his voice like water running over mossy stones, said that this need give no concern. "A centaur can no more pick a lock than he can sew a seam, Captain. Have you not yourself seen their hands close up? No thumbs, Sealord, no thumbs! Only three full-length digits and a wee-finger on either side. Ah, to be sure, they've strength, they can clutch a branch between two hands or scoop up and hold a rock tight and hurl it—

but something as slight as needle or pick-lock, no, Captain, no. Dexterity is beyond them. Which is one reason why they fall back and we fourlimb folk advance. *One* reason. For another—"

"Shut your gobble," Stag said, not angrily. The augur stopped just the same. When he commenced again, sometime later, it was to reassure some person or persons he did not name, but perhaps including himself . . . perhaps consisting of himself . . . that no further present attack by Sixies need be anticipated. Those Sixies involved in the foray at noontide, he said, must certainly comprise all for leagues around, and once they had (so to speak) shot their bolts and dissipated their resolve, it would take long before they could be once again brought to the pitch for another. No. No. No further present attack need be anticipated, he declared with great assurance; and all the while, as the shadows grew longer and darker, he gazed nervously about him, and his fingers played in agitation about his thin lips and the slightly askew end of his thin nose.

By this time they were in the belt of taller trees marking the commencement of the Half-Hills: beech and larch and oak and flowering acacia gave way grudgingly to the path winding between and always upward, path sometimes becoming a ford across a stream and sometimes sunken into a deep furrow like the bed of a dry canal and sometimes winding along the side of an escarpment affording a view of the way they had come or the way they were going—the one seeming as unfamiliar as the other. Here and there a drone-buzzard lopped its slow dull way across the sky. It was a strange thing, perhaps, how that as they passed deeper and further into the unknown, Stag's spirits seemed to rise and he ceased to

scowl; now and then something almost a smile parted his beard and showed his teeth, and once he cleared his throat and began a song.

Then they saw the house.

What labor and unremitted resolve must have gone into the building of it, from quarrying and transporting and cutting and setting, to the final roofing of it with slates only slightly less heavy than the ashlars of the walls: this thought, in varying degrees and kinds, impressed them all. There, with its back set into the hill and its two shuttered upper windows on the nigh side, like eyes, it looked for the moment and for the world like some staunch gray beast defying any number of lesser creatures . . . and for the world and for the moment they all for very awe felt themselves to be among the latter.

"Come on, then," Stag said, and the spell was broken.

The very shrubs of the vanished garden had grown into trees, and the lilacs now swayed past the rooftop. It was hot and fragrant in the tangled yard, inside—once they had gotten inside, and this was no easy thing, for the massy old key at first refused to turn the ponderous wards; Stag swore and twisted and swore again before he learned the knack: put the key in to its full length and then bear down on it and *then* turn: easy as easy it moved then—inside was dark and cool and musty, as some newly-opened cave might be.

Stag entered defiantly, the bosun followed cautiously, the two women (holding each other) proceeded fearfully; the augur, last of all, hopefully. He, as the windows were made, creaking, to open, looked about with an eager face, and his thin nostrils distended and sniffed the cold, dead air. "Look, look," he exclaimed, "there in the fire-corner, is that not a rack for drying and curing deer-hams? Of a certainty; let us see what luck we have, for, however dry and hard the flesh may be, shave it thin or hack it with an axe if need be, add sufficient water—"

Tightly closed as the house had been, yet the small, sly wild things of the woods had been able to slip in: of the deer's-hams, only bones were left; rags were there, and one small jar of oil unvexed, both enough to bind Spahana's troubled feet: but of the rest of the country stores, in jars or in sacks, in fire-corner or on rafter-beams, in chests or in whatsoever thing or place, only rot and waste and ruin met their eyes. The woman Rary summed it up without words, though at first she had muttered rapidly about cookpots and firewood: now she merely took up an old besom from a corner, beat it free of cobwebs and ages of dust, began to sweep the rubble out of doors.

The augur swallowed his disappointment, swallowed it audibly. But he did not whine. He asked if there were such a thing as a bow-string for him to set snares with; there was not. With a brief nod, and a clap to his long knife as though to make sure it was there, he left the house. They could hear him working at something nearby between intervals of departure and return. Once he came with berries and once he came with an armful of sweet grass which Rary scattered on the floor. Once she followed him with the least broken jar and returned with water

from the spring. Once he brought springy twigs of evergreen which she made into beds. By this time she had gotten into the turn of things and, her work with the besom done, now took a less gloomy view of the spoiled supplies.

"Here is a good sieve," she said, contentedly. "I make no doubt but that I can save enough grain and such to make at least one meal for tonight." Stag growled that the "grain and such" was not fit for human teeth to touch, but she faced him stoutly. The poor, she said, had often worse provender than that to contend with, and had learned how to make do, and how to make the like of it fit for human teeth to touch. "Besides," she added, "the berries will give it savor"—no more she said on the subject, but threw a single and significant look at the sealord's hand, even hovering over the berry pot. He gave one final growl. And withdrew his hand.

Still, he was not pleased. "Lo will hear of this," he said, stormily. "And soon. We can't stay here, without food. One meal for tonight, and a poor enough diet *that* will be, however well sifted, and then what? No. We must go back. House," he said, giving a sweeping glance which encompassed the thick walls and thick shutters; "house is well enough. . . . But we must go back."

Dimlight was soon to be upon them, the signs said, and he made no move to leave, strode back and forth and up and down the solid steps; until at last he found a door leading to one tiny uppermost room under the eaves and commanding a farther view than all. Here he stayed, silent, solitary and alone, and none ventured to disturb him of a purpose.

Though, when the clamor arose below, he came down by himself soon enough . . . more quietly than he had

gone up, and with his javelin in his hand and poised for throw.

What he found, though, was enough for the whole tenor of his muscles to change, and the striker became at once but a staff.

The creature had been and must have been there all along. Only a few feet from it the farmwife had cast her sweepings, only an arm's-length away Castagor the augur had bent to cut his sweet grasses to strew upon the house-floor. Past the thicket even Stag had strode once or twice in his mutterings. Yet what lay there had been silent . . . perhaps in weakness, reviving somewhat in the day's decline as it cooled . . . perhaps simply sizing up the situation and peering cautiously (perhaps fearfully) through the brambles and the branches. Had their coming been known, or at least anticipated? Had the hider made a way there out of memories dim or by no means dim that succor might be had where once it had been had, house equalling human equalling help? without reflection or remembrance that nothing human had long lived there?—there, in the old stone place where generations of Hobars had come, with the regularities of the seasons? Or was it none of these, perhaps, and perhaps nothing more than that thus far he had come, and could go no farther, and only an instinctive caution had made him lay himself down in the covert instead of falling in the broad yard?

Rary it was who had found him, heard his harsh, irregular breathing, she said later, knowing that it was not and could not have been her children, and yet somehow no more fearing than knowing what rough beast might be there behind the wild roses with their open petals, behind the delicate tracery of the fennel and the pale lace of the wild carrot: she stood on her toes and she

peered. And, without word or sound more than quick catch of breath, went on her way again: an act of discipline which ended, as soon as she reached the shelter of the house, in a welter of wild, spasmodic screams, gesticulations, ululations, incoherent words, and attempts to bar the windows: but before she was half done at this task she was roughly bade desist by Stag.

It was the oldest, sickest Sixy that any of them had ever seen.

"Crawled away to die," Stag said, surveying it without passion. Without passion at the thought of either its painful passage hither or the soon approach of death, that is; for in another moment another thought occurred to him and he became passionate enough as he dug the butt end of his javelin into the shabby, scabby flanks which heaved and labored to force air into the sunken lungs. "Damned Sixy!" he cried. "Has it come to spy for more beasts and gear?"

"Dudzn't know," the sixy said, in a broken and weak voice, in which, however, the characteristic sixy buzz was fully prominent. The eyes were fallen in and filmy, the mane was thin and tangled—of itself, evidence he had been long from the society of his own kind, whose eternal combing and grooming and braiding of each other's manes and tails was a byword: one of the few niceties

they used. "Wudzn't . . . where beaztz and gyear . . . were . . . anyi . . ."

The old, bleared eyes rolled in their sunken sockets, focused or half-focused, the withered lips moved, made silly and ugly noises, then said a word, said it again, said another word and repeated that one.

"Sick.

"Sick.

"Wine.

"Wine."

The five humans stared at the dying centaur, then at each other, moved by pity, by anger, annoyance, disgust, by amusement.

"Wine, is it?"—this from the bosun. "What next? Sweet cake and honey, perhaps? Comfits of sesame?"

And Rary, never far from her need, her obsession, the wonder only that it had been for several hours unvoiced by her, voiced it now with, "Wine? *Blood,* you mean—human blood you mean—dirty old beast, *where are my children?*"

The old beast blinked, moved its pendulous lips, blew them out in the sixy emphatic negative. "Dudzn't know . . . dudzn't zee anyi fourlimb childrenz . . . Sick . . . Wine . . ." The last two words coming as, almost, *zick* and *vine.*

Spahana looked down at him, lying there, and no one could tell what her thoughts were. Stag looked down on him, lying there, and anyone could have told what his thoughts were. Scorn was on his face, then bitter anger, then he hefted his javelin, then his free hand passed over his face—miraculously unscarred, and with but a trace of faint redness where it had been burned—he stepped back a pace and his lower lip protruded from the wild black-

ness of his beard and he seemed to calculate if or not he might safely slay the old sixy without its dread blood spurting on him—

And then all this was superceded by a genuine, if exasperated puzzlement, which burst forth into a question: "*Why* does it want wine?" That centaurs should speak caused him no astonishment, for all the world knew they could; still . . . he had never spoken directly to one, nor could he automatically do so, even now, face to face. And it was the augur who told him.

"Water Lord, among we who know the Uplands well it is well-known that certain things of man's obtaining are much fancied by the sixies, such as milk and bread and salt and wine. And as for wine, while they do drink it as the rougher sort of men do drink it, that is, to get drunk—still, they have another use for it, they use it as medicine—"

"Medicine!"

"Medicine, Water Lord. They prize it, in certain ailment, far above such herbal remedies as they are well-known to know, and—"

Stag turned to his bosun. "Get the flask. In the uppermost room. I left it there. What, you are still standing there?" He made a move, but the bosun had gone. And was soon enough back, none meanwhile venturing, in the gathering dimlight, to express any opinion by word or look. None except the old sixy himself, who, slowly, slowly, slowly, dragged himself from the green fennel and propped himself on an elbow, and then lay still, gasping. The flask was made of two pieces of wood, hollowed and curved in the manner of drumwoods, bound together and encased in leather whose pebbled surface had once belonged to some sea-creature. It had been at the captain's

belt and so escaped the loss of all the other wine with the flight of the onagers. No one had seen him drink from it, he had offered none to anyone, perhaps he had forgotten its existence. But, clearly, aloft in the small room with the farthest view, by himself, he had remembered.

"Wine, it wants?" he asked, grimly. "I'll give it wine." He tugged out the stopple with his teeth, swished the flask and watched how the sixy's face opened, how his scalp moved till the ears stood up, how the dry mouth worked. Then he poured a few drops out. They fell upon the ground with the sound of rain. The old sixy lurched on his elbow, tried to crawl, failed, thrust his enpurpled tongue far out, his eyes wide open, thrust out his free hand as though to catch the drops. Bosun laughed. Stag's upper lip curled and the teeth beneath it showed. Then, with a suddenness which surprised them all, he seized the ancient's tangled mane and thrust the flask into the centaur's mouth. Wine ran down upon the beard, wine gurgled, splashed. But the scrannel throat moved. And moved. And moved. Even after Stag had pulled the flask away and held it up and held it over so that all saw that no drop remained, still the throat moved and moved and moved.

"Now, old dung," said Stag, "if you get better, go and spread the word to, how does it go, 'colt and crone and cob, yearlion, and stallion, maiden mare and matron mare,' that for every stolen beast of gear I'll slay and flay one centaur. And if you die, old dung, lie in wait by the Gate of the Centaurs' Hell, and when you see them come through, tell who sent them there." He made for the house, not pausing as he called without a turn of his head, *"And why!"*

Spahana followed him. The others moved where they

stood, but did not walk away, still staring at the old sixy. In the darkening sky of dimlight a thin white line became visible, stretching across the horizon. Then another, parallel to it. A third, crossing both. Absently, the bosun glanced. "Stars," he murmured. The sixy sighed and the sixy stretched. He moved his haunches. He sternutated. That broke the spell. With an almost unanimous noise of disgust, the three turned and walked away. Behind them, they heard the old sixy grunting and sighing and groaning.

Rary hunched by the fire, feeding it with twigs. The old pot of dry grains, roughly pounded in the huge mortar with the pestle large enough to do for a war-mace, was long in cooking. The bosun, used to spending these hours either drinking and trulling or else mending ships' gear, had found numbers of spoiled ropes about the house and was contentedly cutting and braiding and splicing. At one end the orange-rose sparkles of the fire lit the darkness, irregularly; at the other, a log of gleamwood stood, blue-green-white its phosphorlight. Spahana had chosen a carven stool nearer to that end, and there she sat, so still, so smooth, that she seemed a statue which some sept of priests had clothed in robes for a vigil. Between the two sorts of lights Stag sat on the floor, legs crossed upon an ancient and raddled golden fleece, his hands smoothing down again and again the empty wine-

flask, and the augur leaned upon the arm of a bench which had been old in the days when Hennen Hobar had had his use of it.

Castagor was speaking and Stag was listening, now and then asking a question, and then listening again, grave and patient, to the answer. Once, his eyes straying to his woman, as they often did, he caught a glimpse in the polished blue-black lookstone on the yonder wall of himself at the augur's feet: in the accustomed distortion he seemed shrunken small and the seer both broad and tall: and in that fleeting speck of time before both moved and the image changed again he seemed to see himself at his father's feet: a boy, rapt. There had not been many such moments; his father had been likelier, when he found his son at his feet, to give him an order and a kick in the ribs than to play the patriarch's part with sage sayings and grave accounts of this and that.

Stag's father had been a ship's captain, too; narrow of temper and broad of hand; and, besides seamanship, the main lesson his son had learned was to leave his father's deck and hold and strike out on his own (*strike* being the optimum verb), the sooner he might be the liker him. But with never a thought, never any thought, of return. Do the cave-lions' whelps, when they have killed their own meat and mounted their own she, think of return? Big Stag had several sayings he was fond of, and one of them his son had made his own. *Women, waves, and land, all are made to be plowed.* That all should yield to him, that he should yield to none, this to Stag was but the natural order of all things.

Strange, then, perhaps, to see him sitting now so intent as to bypass mere respect . . . not to exceed it, but to go

by another path beyond it. And although Castagor was his senior, and despite the brief-distorted vision of the lookstone, it was not youth sitting at the feet of age. For truth, youth in the Island Beneath the Earth seldom sits so stilly at the feet of age. Perhaps childhood, but seldom youth: and why, by its own fierce lights, should it? That inertia is the tendency of a body, when cold, to stay cold; and when hot, to stay hot—that during Star-flux the thin white lines which cross and crisscross the skies of night tremble and waver and bend and then, for a long, mad moment, tremble and waver and melt and become compressed into tiny, brilliant points of light, and pulse and throb—that on such occasions wise mariners put never out of port, for how can one steer?—that murrain-eels taint the water, which, once drunk of, turns the drinker into a homophage: rogue, mad, a skulker, solitary, incapable of sustaining his brute life on any food but men's-flesh, and that but new-dead—that Earth-flux is when that fixed dark corner of the sky which conceals the Gate of Human Hell changes form and moves— Of such bits of wisdom and of weird do old men discourse when senses fade away one by one and the present becomes a blur and there is no more future and only the past is clear. But young men and young women, to whom the future is endless, the past but brief confusion, and all senses sharp and fierce and hot for the lustful present, are minded to heed the old ones not.

Of these things to any who listen do old men speak, old men and augurs. So see now Stag, a sailor and hence of a race to whom soothsayers are but he-whores, bought for brief necessity alone, sitting and toying with his empty wine-flask and now his head bowed and now his eyes

raised; but with never a word nor a look nor a breath of scorn. For Gortacas the augur was speaking of the Cap of Grace.

Tabnath Lo was at his desk, which meant, at his talley-pebbles. Two galleys had come in that same day from Silverstrand and their captains stood before him with their knotted talley-cords in their hands and porters moved between them, from the wharf to the ware-loft; the block-and-tackle creaked an accompaniment to the accounting. "You took thirty bales of stockfish," he said to the captain who stood one pace foremost; "what did you sell?"

The captain fingered a cord, his lips moving with his fingers. "Sold twenty-eight," he reported; "ate two."

Lo took pebbles from a pocket. "One, with such good weather, was ample," he said. "If you want to engage in private trading you must do it with your own goods; you've never been denied a discount . . . yet." He laid a pebble in a groove and set another one next to it. *Click.* "Bring any passengers?"

"Two. That is—me one and he one."

"Answer for yourself alone. Tree-silk?"

The fingers moved on the cords, the lips moved. "Six sixes." More pebbles. Another groove. *Click. Click. Click-etty-click. Click, click.* Later age was to improve upon the system by boring holes in the talley-pebbles and stringing

them upon wires set into a frame of wood, but no such alteration had yet come to pass: still, the merchants dug grooves into a table-top—or, if upon a trading voyage to a place where no such convenience obtained, simply squatted upon a bale on a beach or a riverbank and scored the grooves in the sand with a stick or forefinger: a groove for ones, a groove for sixes, a groove for twelves —set down his colored pebbles and moved them up and moved them down: *click:* a snowy hind's-skin . . . *click:* a six of skins . . . *click* . . . a dozen. So many sacks of spelt, so many sacks of pelt, such a number of quills of dust-of-gold, such a number of thin-scraped goats-horns full of gold seeds—

Click. Click. Clicket-a-click.

"Sight Leviathan? Hear Rahab?"

"No, Merchant. Didn't neither. Heard a doctor say Star-flux was soonly due, but didn't see, didn't hear. Doctor's'll say anything. Brought some nice aromatic gum this time." He was bow-legged and broadbellied, with a beard like the great-grandfather of all goats. The second captain was little better than a lad, with a line of carefully trimmed pussydown along his jaws.

"How much?"

"Seven kids."

Click. A pause. *Click.* A house-girl passed in with water, and the younger captain's eyes roved and he moved from one leg to another like a boy who has to go behind a bush.

"Your passenger biding, or can we take him south when the *Dolphin* goes?"

"Didn't say."

So it went, a phrase of talk, a click. Here it was common as breath, but afar and afar the savages gaped,

scratched their armpits and their crotches, loosed . . . for whole moments . . . their grips on clubs and spears. *Merchants' magic*—thus, their term for the arithmetic of the talley-stones. But sometimes bemusement turned into an intenser suspicion, particularly if explanation of a fall in the price of their own wares had been insufficiently assimilated. Merchants' magic! What color had this magic? Then a fist with grime set hard into its knuckles might tighten . . . a look . . . a head of goat-tangled locks toss back . . . a grunt . . . a roar of rage . . .

Blood amidst the spilt wine, then, on the barren beach.

Blood upon the talley-pebbles by the riverbank.

The senior captain had finished presenting his accounts and had seen his cargo stowed away and had received his wage and share. The junior captain raised one foot, ready to step forward and get on with it, but still the elder didn't move. First he scratched his head, then he winkled his forefingers in his ears, then he ran them through his beard. "They say the Cap of Grace is on the move again." The merchant looked at him with politely raised eyebrows, but the eyes beneath them strayed to the customary "little gift" which the captain had just laid upon his desk: a small packet of soft leather, bulging at one end. Tabnath Lo was not about to open it yet.

"Ah, wouldn't that be a fine thing, if it came this side?"

"Indeed."

"There wasn't none of this denying and lying and false weights and violences, when the Old Queen was in her tower, you know. ("No, indeed.") Fair weather, good winds, cheap buying and dear selling, seamen knew their place and the sixies stayed where they was meant to; no flux and no pox, and if a man couldn't find justice he only had to go to the Tower and ask for it. Ah . . ."

Tabnath Lo blinked only once. He said, "The wine-house has a few new girls from up south, and the word is that they haven't all been tapped yet."

The stout sea-captain (his name was Clarb something, or something Clarb) pulled his nose. "Wine. . . . Yes. I shouldn't mind a jug or two. Well, then, Merchant, you know where to find me. Good venturing. —See you, sonny."—this to the junior; and left.

Tabnath Lo looked at the junior sea-captain quietly. Just as quietly he asked, "Do you think your passenger will be moving south on the *Dolphin* or will he bide?"

"Didn't say."

This time the look he got was longer. The young man forgot to fidgit. The merchant dropped his hand into his pocket and drew out a handful of talley-stones, but instead of putting them in the now once again empty grooves he began to drop them, one by one, from one hand into the other. *Click. Click . . . Click . . .* After a while he said, "Clarb was captain of a coaster twenty years ago. He's master of a coaster today. Do you want to be coast-master" . . . *click . . . click . . . click . . .*" twenty years from now? or do your ambitions go further?" . . . *click . . .*

The young man may have gulped, but his answer came soon and sturdy enough. "They go further." The mer-

chant's head went slowly up . . . *click* . . . and came slowly down . . . *click* . . . he said nothing.

Young Captain Ramman had noticed the way Clarb had strutted off, trying to suck his stomach in. He regarded the still untold bundle of knotcords in his freckled fists. At this rate it would be dark before he got to the winehouse. Tabnath Lo was a crabfish with a hard shell, that was certain. He thought wistfully of the girls, familiar, and the girls, new, of good wine and good food and afterwards a good bath. What did the merchant mean? What did he want? . . . Old Clarb! . . . Twenty years! . . . Master of a seacrosser! Lo had seacrossers!

"I can tell you this much, Merchant," he said, to his own surprise: "the passenger was heard to say, the subject of *Dolphin* having come up somehow, that rather than ship on her he'd tie a stone around his neck and wade out and drown him*self*. He said it would come cheaper." And heard in his ears, aghast, the echo of his voice.

The merchant smiled, and it was a cheerful smile. "Oh, *Dolphin*'s not that bad," he said. Then, "Let me keep your talley-cords, Captain Ramman. Post a guard aboard your vessel and we'll account the cargo tomorrow. —Early, mind!"

Ramman fairly danced away. He got to the winehouse while old Clarb was still dipping his snout into the first jug, and almost choked into it, seeing his junior there so soon. Ramman had one of the new girls on his lap inside of a minute, and then he showed her some ear-rings he'd brought with him from Silverstrand, and then he took out her old ones and they played a game about putting in the new ones, and then he ordered wine and they shared the mug and then they went upstairs and played another game, and when they sent for more wine, and

afterwards she asked him what he was thinking about and he lied cheerfully and then they played another game.

But he had been thinking about Tabnath Lo, and how interested he'd been in the ships' passengers.

The farmwife dozed and nodded by the fire. Every now and then she by an obvious effort of will got up and put her ear to the chinks of one or another of the windows, and her lips moved; then she stumbled wearily back to the fire. Once and twice she had gone to Spahana and spoken softly, softly to her, gesturing to the piles of springy bed-branches; but the younger woman had merely stroked her hands, let her lips move into the brief-most of smiles. The bosun snored lightly, one hand on his knife, one on his ropes. And Stag sat at the augur's feet.

"There is no reason in logic to assume that either one was first," the augur was saying. One side of his face was lit by the dim ruddy fire, the other by the unwinking phosphorlight of the log of gleamwood. He seemed two people. "We don't ask if riverhorses were before seahorses, or the other way around. We all know the story of the monstrous infatuation with an onager and the monstrous birth it brought forth: perhaps a four-limbed woman *did* give birth to six-limbed twins, one male and one female; if so, it would have been as natural for her to conceal them as it had been unnatural for her to conceive them and as natural for the people to want to destroy them

once their existence was discovered. If the story is true it would certainly account for many things, such as their extreme shyness in times past, their absolute refusal to allow themselves to be seen by man, the inveterate antipathy between our two species . . . But *is* it inveterate?" Stag growled that as far as he was concerned, it was. But the augur brushed that aside.

The Sixlimbed Folk, he reminded Water Lord Stag, had their own accounts of things. If men said that they ate man's-flesh, they accused the Fourlimbed Folk of eating centaurs'-flesh. But Stag would have none of this. "It would poison us . . . who has a better right to say so than I?" Castagor shook his head; again, as the fire-lit side of his face was turned to the gleamwood, as the phosphor-lit side was turned to the fire, he seemed to change faces. Serpent venom, which tainted the blood unto death, might safely be swallowed; hemlock and the curiously-named gentlebane, fatal if swallowed, was of no more danger to the skin than so much milk. He recounted an incident where the severed limb of a centaur, well-washed in a running stream, had been eaten by a pack of dogs: what dogs may eat, so may their masters.

"If we term them wild, they term us cowards. What? Growl, then. But listen. Did I not see you step back when you were considering putting your javelin into that old one's side? Why? You were afraid his blood would sear you again, weren't you? Naturally. Of course. The blood of centaurs is notoriously deadly to the softer skin of man, and this makes man reluctant to engage in hand-to-hand combat with centaurs. If one really wishes ill to a centaur, the shot from ambush is preferred, the rock pushed off a cliff, the hidden snare, the deadfall. . . . Of course the

result is that sixies despise us as thicketlurkers, ambush-slayers.

"That old one lying out there"—he gestured. "In the morning, by which time he will probably be dead, take a look at him. I have no doubt that you'll find many scars on him, and many of man's inflicting: but I doubt if you'll find the mark of a single sword."

Stag muttered that he had not come hereabouts with any hatred towards them, had, in fact, something quite the opposite. . . . "Who were their leaders since the days of Drogorógos?" he asked. "My small sack of knowledge stops there. Or, never mind ancient history, who's their leader now?"

Castagor seemed sworn to gainsay him at every point. Drogorógos had never been their leader. They had no leader. "Keep in mind that the Sixlimbed Folk are not one united people, but passionately untrammeled individuals. Pity rather than hate the Sixlimbed Folk, for they have men minds and brute bodies, and just as much as their men minds strive to direct their brute bodies, so do their brute bodies strive to direct their men minds. If they have treasures, if they have secrets, if they have wisdom, if they have anything of value or of virtue, oh, Water Lord!—never begrudge it them, for they possess whatever they possess at the cost of pains and travails which neither you nor I would ever care to pay!

"Words cannot express, Water Lord, what anguish it can mean to be half-man and half-brute!"

Long was the silence then, till Stag broke it, though softly, with the words, "Now, about the Cap of Grace—"

There was a loud, enormous yawn, which merged into Rary's voice saying something half-smothered, and only the last word clear. ". . . food." Castagor blinked and got

up, his face moving from side to side and changing, changing; in a moment he had oriented himself and was walking towards the fire. "Food, food. . . . Let it not be despised. One must keep body and soul together.

"If one can," he said, a sudden gloomy tone in his voice. "If one can. . . ."

All night long the house had spoken to them, as though eager to make up for years either of silence or talking to itself. It was an old house and it spoke as an old person speaks, sighing and whispering and creaking, muttering and mumbling. It was present in all their dreams, sound though they slept after the labors of that day. Rary whispered endless goodnights to her sleeping children. The bosun whispered and was whispered to by an unseen companion, and he nodded, and he looked about to reassure that no one overheard. Castagor muttered to two others of interpretations and of expectations, and they muttered back, in turn, to him. Stag sighed his near fulfilment at sight of a something glittering with jewels, and there was something else there with it, too; something totally surprising and yet so well familiar.

But at dawnlight no one spoke of dreams.

Stag said the same thing, over and over, in different ways.

"If that rascal onagerer reports back to port, Partner Lo is certain to come out looking for us. But suppose the

rascal doesn't? Suppose he was killed?—not that it wouldn't serve him right! —We might starve here, waiting. Lo must be sent word; well enough to say, *Send word;* but here's the problem: who's to be sent? Not you," he said to Spahana, who was silently combing her hair in a corner with a small horn comb; "your feet are too torn, and I'd not send you alone in any event. Not you, soothsayer, much though you'd be pleased to leave here and never wanted to come at all—you'd see some trifle and mistake it for an omen and fly away in the wrong direction like any ninny-bird. Nor yet you, woman, for you'd be seeing your own sort of omens as well and in the end, I've no doubt, wind up totally lost: no children found, no word delivered. No. No. There's no other choice but that you and I must go, Bosun, go back. Be sure we won't be any longer than we must be, you women. Damned if I like it, though. Damned if I like it."

With some great reluctance he gave Castagor his javelin, and many directions. Though a soothsayer was perhaps but half a man, still that was better than no man at all; and perhaps his arcane gifts might make up for what he lacked elsewise.

Castagor was not so much certain or uncertain as certain of his uncertainties, for as much as he wished to go along, just so much did he desire to stay. In the end, of course, he stayed, not for any uncertainty or certainty of his own, but by reason of the by now certainty of Captain Stag. "So be it, then, Water Lord," he said. "At any rate allow me to take sight for you, for all that I have lost my divining kit, yet we can improvise and—" But Stag would not have it; all his wrath and grievance came bubbling out of the bottle again as he thought and spoke of the

previous day's augurings and of (he roared) the great ill and the little good which had occurred despite. Softly the augur said, "Yet that little good, good Captain, might have been less." He said it very softly, though, and he made no further objections.

Stag's leavetaking of the women was brief and succinct. "You are not to go beyond earshot of the house," he ordered, "and are never to be out of sight of each other. —And do I see but a single sign of your children, farmwife," he declared, forestalling her, "I'll not let it pass ignored." And, perhaps thinking that it was not as rich a promise as it might have been, he added, "Besides, I'll spread word everywhere, and see the bailees and the syndics learn of it."

Mere mention had made her restless once more, but the sight of him seemed to reassure her, the sound of those puissant names as well. And, "Ah . . ." she murmured, having described the children to him for the hundredth time, "if the Old Queen could only learn of it, I'd have them back soon enough."

The last fading lines of starlight were just going as they stood in the yard together. Spahana said something which might have been in her own language, Rary blessed their going, the augur uttered a formulary, Stag and the bosun nodded and then turned and left in silence . . . silence broken in a moment as Stag, with a loud *"Ah!"* stopped short, and with the butt-end of his javelin swept down the fennel and the wild roses where the old sixy had made his lying-place, and bent over to peer. The *huh! huh!* of his astonishment brought them all in an instant to his side. The rank smell of the creature was strong, and the lineaments of his body were plain to be seen in the

crushed grass. A cud of chewed herb of some sort was still there.

But of the old centaur himself, there was nothing more to be seen.

Far down below, in a deep declivity bordering an even deeper stream, the sound of whose rushing came to them faintly now and then with the fickle wind, three aurochs filed along with ponderous grace: red, dun, white. The bosun looked wistful, expectant, doubtful. "We could have a try," he suggested. Stag did not even shake his head.

"No time," he said.

This was not the Bosun's favorite word. "Time. . . ." he repeated. For some several paces now, the aurochs being out of mind were as well out of sight, he had been looking down and watching his footing carefully, for the way just then was rough. But now it became smoother and a long glance showed it to continue so a good while. He allowed his gaze to rise and scan about the country. They were treading along a broad shelf which by an almost imperceptible decline made its way down the side of one of the half-hills, and here the whole range seemed to part and show a section and a sampling of everything lying between the present point and the distant, distant sea: and each peak and each escarpment, as its edge was outlined against the sky, seemed to have not one clear line

marking it but several, distinct yet indistinct, not black alone but gray and pale red and soft violet.

"Time. . . ." the bosun repeated, seeing but not observing this phenomenon, the common thing in his world. "Haste up to these far hills, haste back down to port again, haste back to the hills, and all in quick time. Then to wait. And how much time to wait, Captain Stag?"

For first answer his captain seized up a stone and threw it forcefully into the ravine. The sound of its fall was slow and muted. For second answer he said, "And how in Three Hells should I know? —You gobble too much."

"Not through yet, even now."

"Gobble on, then. Tired of haste, not tired of waste? Waste your breath some more."

"I'll do it. When we've done waiting, then what?"

"That was agreed. We try again." To this the bosun said nothing. But his silence indicated no pleasurable consent. It was not till they were at the bottom of the grade and the path had turned under stands of flowering-yellow acacia that Stag spoke again. "But we mayn't go to port. Why should we, if we needn't? What's there we're hot to see that can only be seen there? It's the gear I want, and it's the gear I'm bound for, and if I find it three steps this side of port, be sure I won't go four. And now if you are still set to talk, talk to yourself, for I've no ears to—"

He had ears to hear the bellow which split the air for all about them. There, ahead, in the open glade, a sixy stood. He held his hands up, palms out. He moved slowly in a circle. Something lay on the ground. But nothing which looked like a weapon. Unless he had a cudgel or stones concealed in the leather sack . . . if it was a leather sack. Automatically, the two men looked quickly behind them. No one and nothing was there. The boles of the

acacias were too slender for any to hide behind. The two men went slowly forward. And then both of them, so close together that, if it had not been simultaneous, neither could have said who was first, cried out their astonishment.

The sixy was the same sixy of the evening before, and yet he was very much not the same sixy at all.

The long hairs of his mane and beard and tail, the shorter hairs of his pelt, were all of the same frosted silvery tone; but whereas before the tone was lifeless and dead, the hair and pelt now glowed and rippled with the sheen of life. Yesterday he had been barely able to crawl; today he ambled and he cantered. The filmed eyes were clear now. He had washed in a stream or pond in the meanwhile, too, but evidently he had washed alone, for his hair, where his hands could not reach it at all or conveniently, was still tangled. He was restored to health; to health, not to youth. The body of old being is not the same as that of a young one, however healthy. But the sounds he made were not the sighs and groans of yesterdimlight. Rumbles of wicked amusement alone made his silvery flanks heave, and flashes of it were in his eyes and on his face. He hooted as they came and he even, for a second or two, stood upright on his hind limbs and imitated their cautious approach; then dropped heavily to his natural stance with a grunt. Then slowly backed off as they came.

"Hyah, Fouries, hyoh, Fouries," he snorted. "Dudzn't bringz wvines?"

The Bosun's voice clicked in his astonished throat. "By Rahab and Leviathan! The wine *did* cure him! But it couldn't! How could it?"

The sixy turned in a slow and ponderous movement

which seemingly had something of mockery in it, lifted his tail at them, then engaged in feinting at a nonexistent other centaur. And all the while he hooted his amusement. "If it wasn't the wine," Stag asked, "what was it? And what's this on the ground?" It was a deer, a small doe, dead; and the sixy gestured them to it, his mouth for a moment too full of acacia pods to talk coherently to them, made motions with his hands; then, spitting out the seeds, he invited them to "make fire and burn meat" —for the sixies have not the word *cook*.

They looked at the deer, turned it over. It seemed unmarked. Stag said, "How did he kill it?" In another instant his hand gripped the sixy's wrist as the sixy's hand was laid in a chopping gesture against his neck. Gripped it, held it hard, knew that if the sixy, old as he was, had meant to crack his neck with that stroke neither his hand nor any man's hand could have stayed and stopped it. And how swift, how sudden—

"Dthat izz hyow!" the sixy said. Then, with a hoot, and a backward kick which tossed bits of turf upon them, he was off. In a moment the sound of his feet had died away.

"Start the fire," said Stag, tossing the flint and tinder pouch. He hung the deer on a broken branch, bled and drew and partly skinned it.

The bosun made the fire, but watched the butchering dubiously. Suppose, he suggested, it was poisoned. Stag's comment, that if the bosun thought it might be he should eat the first bite, did not much reassure him. Afterwards, though, he did say, with a comfortable eructation, "That part of it wasn't, anyway."

Stag wiped greasy hands, mouth and beard on a handful of grass, got up and started off. The bosun, with a half-wistful look at the supposedly still suspect half-car-

cass, followed. In those days, and perhaps as yet, that world was without clocks, and there was no such precise time as midnight. What man could awake and declare it to be such? But midday . . . noon . . . anyone not blind could declare. It was the unnatural hour, for it was the hour without shadows. At that time when all creatures became as those accursed through having had their shadows lost or strayed or stolen, whilest the heat was greatest, all creatures' natural tendency was to seek shelter. Strange things went abroad at noon, when no man's eye could know that they had no shadows, ever; and strange things were known to happen, which did not happen at other times. Had not, in fact, the attack of yesterday been at noon? And had not some curious and still mysterious augurial hints—

Stag stopped short. He looked around. He walked back, ignoring his sweating bosun, looked around again. So perturbed was his manner that the latter copied his glance. "We aren't lost, are we?" he asked.

His captain stamped his foot and softly swore. "Worse than just lost. If we'd taken a wrong turning we could go back and expect to take the right turning. But it isn't we at all who've turned. *The land has turned.*"

His man did not have to ask how it could be, he knew how it could be, for he had heard, as everyone had, of "the gathering-up of the way," and its cognate happening, "the gathering-up of the day." Quickly, he looked about him: no, still no shadows; it was the same time it had been. But the landscape was different—Stag was right, the land had turned. They were much lower down than they should have been, was that it? Or much higher . . . ? And those were reeds over there, and dragonflies, and

there ought by rights to be neither marsh nor bog nor swamp nor fen anywhere around here.

The trees look different, he thought. *The rocks were not that shape nor yet that color.* He glanced at Stag, and his heart thumped to see the man's pallor, the skin under the eyes so dark, the cold drops like grease upon his forehead. Stag gripped him and pointed. Everything seemed to waver and he wanted nothing so much as to walk or run or even drop to all fours and crawl away, anywhere away, out of the shadow-stealing sun, under a fallen tree or beneath a ledge of rock. But he looked where Stag's trembling hand pointed. The air trembled as though it, too, was maze-struck and befeared. The figures seemed to melt a little. But he saw what he saw.

He saw men and he saw centaurs and he saw onagers. The centaurs were attacking the men and the onagers were in flight. "An ambush!" he cried. "They're beset as we were, yesterday! Come on, Captain!" he cried. "Why are we standing here? Let's run, let's help them!"

Stag looked at him with sick and fearful eyes. "I fear we'd never reach that place," he said, his voice breaking. "But even more, I fear we would. . . ." The tiny figures moved madly about. "Go to them? I'd go to my death, sooner. Don't you know yet what has happened? If we go down there we may meet ourselves—they are us—today is yesterday—and they are us—us—*us!*" His voice rose to a scream, he pressed his hands to his head and fled in the other direction. And the bosun screamed and the bosun fled with him.

Dellatindílla moved with step so light that even those whose ears were accustomed to his kitten tread did not always hear him coming: and then it sometimes went very ill with them, for many men called Dellatindílla many things, but few men called him kind. His body was overtall and over-slender for its height, and he seemed to gather up his arms and legs as he walked more like a spider or a longlegs than a man; and those who had an especial fear for those creatures often shuddered as they saw him pass.

From a distance he gave the appearance of being bald, but he was not: his thin hair was the same dim yellow as his face, and clung to his head like a close-fitting cap. His features seemed preternaturally aged, and yet he had not the familiar features of an old man: his face seemed grooved rather than merely wrinkled; a faint show of down showed against a background light, but beard or moustache he had none; and his eyelids were curious in the way they drooped. He was inquisitive and acquisitive, high and clear of voice, rich in many possessions. Yet no one envied him. He was Dellatindílla the comprador, and he was a eunuch.

Some said he had been born so and others said he had been made so. None asked him. If he missed or was even aware of the meaning of the loss of manhood, none knew. There were stories that he burned strange herbs and gums and eagerly inhaled the fumes with nose and mouth and that thereafter he would stagger about or lie upon his couch with so ecstatic an expression as might lead one to believe that he was experiencing in his mind that sweet effusion . . . but no one *knew*. Only Dellatindílla knew. And he never said.

Sometimes he kept his house for days, weeks on end,

never seen. Sometimes he might be observed peeking through a lattice or peering out a barely-opened door. At other times he rode in his chair through the streets with servants bearing gifts, and made visits. Now and then a late stroller or a non-sleeper saw him passing as silent as a mist through the lamp-dim streets, and sometimes he had his little dwarfs with him and sometimes he had not. But of late he walked alone in level daylight and he drank in the inns and winehouse and he cheapened goods in the market and gear in shops and now and then gave orders for this and that.

He seemed especially interested in things not always procurable, for fruits and fabrics and woods and other items which came irregularly from abroad, were not staple; and when he saw them not, he did not pass on without more ado, but made further inquiries. Had no one come lately from such-and-such-a-place, where such-and-such-an-item might have been available? Perhaps such a one had brought stuff or ware with him, or even, if not to trade, for private use or transshipment, yet might in the order of things be persuaded to part with what he had for a good price . . . and who (all agreed with him as he said this) indeed who paid better than Dellatindílla, if he were moved to pay well? And only a few oldwives dared to wag their empty gums at him and ask who paid less than Dellatindílla, if he were moved to pay ill. He laughed his hissing laugh at them, showing all his teeth, as though to taunt them, and passed on.

He spoke these days with many people, but it was by and by observed and commented on that he showed an especial interest in talking to strangers. And though at this time no wagons or porters passed between his place and that of Tabnath Lo, whenever the eunuch passed

this merchant's place his steps seemed to slow and his neck would crane and his pale, pale eyes look all about. Many of the questions he asked, though not of the merchant himself, dealt with him; yet, when they were reviewed in the absence of either man, the many were reducible to a few. Had not Lo a new partner? Was he a partner in general or in a particular voyage or voyages? Where were these voyages to? What cargo had they brought back? What was the new partner like? Where had this new partner gone lately?

Why?

Why?

Why?

Had there been a cliff in the way of their fearful flight they would have gone over it with no more realization or hesitation than a panicked pair of sheep: fortunately for them the first interruption was in the form of a stream. And, equally fortunately, it was neither too deep nor too swift. It washed off the sweat of terror, washed clean their tear-smeared faces; it was cold, and the cold gave them an excuse for still trembling somewhat. And if the water seemed to laugh as they stood there, up to their breasts in the fortuitous pool, it was a cool and not a mocking laugh. The water was not hostile and it was not friendly, it was indifferent, and perhaps an awareness of the meaning of this helped them to put their fears in a better per-

spective. It was after they had climbed out and the bosun was wringing his tunic that he seemed to feel a faint tremor not of his own, and, looking up, saw something which made him reach and cover his master's mouth with one hand while he held the forefinger of the other to his lips. Then he gestured with his eyes and head.

Through a gap in the overhanging branches they saw a stride of onagers galloping along the ridgeback of a hill, and behind them, at least as many centaurs. The glimpse was brief, and for Stag, even briefer than for his bosun. Scarcely had he sighted them when they were gone from sight. But he was sure that the onagers were laden. And he was sure that they must be his own.

Seldom had seamen, untrained to spoorcraft, any easier trace to follow. They followed it cautiously, but with far, far easier minds than they had had the hour before. This, at least, was mere danger. They followed the danger down along the ridgeback and through the borders of the marsh, they followed it under great-bolled trees and through open grassland and through trampled thicket. There were shadows now, and birdsong, and all seemed so natural that almost the two were able to avoid perplexing themselves with a wonder as to what the other *us* were doing on this today which was simultaneously yesterday . . . and, equally perplexing and more than a shade more alarming, if the other *us* were forever bound to live or relive the same lives being lived by the this-*us* . . . only one day behind . . . or . . . or . . .

It was better to let that drift as far as it would drift, and to concentrate on the turfs loosened by driving hooves, the occasional and still-smoking heaps of dung, the fresh-torn branches, here and there flies about drops of leaked wine. It was better, when coming near enough

to hear the braying of the beasts or the hueing of the sixies, to drop behind and seek a concealment, lest one of the asses break away and double back and be pursued —and the four-limbed pursuers be discovered, and themselves pursued . . . or worse. On one such wait-a-bit they diverted themselves with the find of a semi-cave, a sunken ledge beneath an overhang of lichen-spotted rock, the floor conveniently deep in soft moss. Here they lay down a while until the sounds ahead should diminish; meanwhile, the rest was grateful.

Low-voiced, the bosun asked, "How much longer do you think they'll go?" Stag shrugged. "As far as they went yesterday, I suppose. . . ." and winced before finishing, regretting he had given voice to the unhappy and confusing notion. He gave his head a great shake, then shrugged, put a sprig of sweet grass in his mouth, lay on his side. Thus they waited, and, perhaps against their will, dozed a bit. It was warm without being too warm, it was cool without being too cool, and they had come a long, rough way.

They came awake with a start together. The voices of the sixies now predominated, but they seemed neither nearer nor farther away. And the shadows were visibly longer. Stag frowned. He slid out. Circumspectly, they made their way in hopes of seeing without being seen. And found that they might have done this a while earlier.

They found themselves looking down into a great, grassy, bowl-shaped depression. Some of the onagers below had still not been unladen. The sixies—there were about twenty of them—had however unshipped a part of the cargo and piled it together. A few pair were still grooming each other, rubbing haunches with pads of grass, plucking burrs out of tails, and untangling elflocks

in manes. Most of the others had already done with these delicate attentions and some of them began a rough, discordant singing or chanting in the centaurs' language, all buzzes and drones. Now and then they moved in a line and lifted each a foreleg in something like unison.

The chorus stopped abruptly as a chestnut-colored sixy lifted a leather sack and held it up before his mouth in both hands. The next one snatched it from him, and was at once attacked—but not before the wine-skin, rescued in mid-air, had been pressed by another pair of hands, and, in an instant, the wine-stream directed into another mouth. Nor was the victor allowed more than a few swallows, and, even while he was guzzling them, two of his fellows charged straight at him, heads down, fists flying. Eyes wide and mouth still open, throat working hard on the wine, he turned to avoid them. One, he might have managed to drive off with his midlimbs while he danced on his hind ones, but two were too many, and he lost the wine. It was hard to tell, from where the four-limbed one lay concealed, what was wine and what was blood. And so the mad game went on: now they did their rude dance and now they fought for the wine-skin, now they sang and stepped together, now they fought each other, now they drank.

"If they had sense to see," Stag grumbled, after several sundry curses at the sight of his good vintages going down such savage throats, "there are enough wineskins to give them a few each . . . then they'd not have to fight."

Bosun swallowed, thirstily. "Ah, but then there wouldn't be near as good sport," he conceded, a gleam in his eye.

Stag nodded a slow nod. A good fight and a good drunk: two things easy to appreciate, though of late years

he had cared for them increasingly less than before. "They'll kill each other off, at this rate," he mused. "Then we'll have no trouble getting the beasts and gear." But the bosun shook his head. Weren't they accompanying each blow with a draught of wine? And wasn't wine a prime medicine for sixy-ills? Hadn't they had proof of that? And once again Stag swore—to break off and roll over and half to his feet in anger as first one clod of turf and then another thudded softly upon him. Down from the outer rim of the bowl a face peered at them from the bushes. It leered, bared its teeth in a silent laugh. At first they thought it was a man. Then in another moment they saw it was a sixy . . . *the* sixy . . . the old one . . . but with a difference.

" 'Speak of rain, and it thunders,' " he muttered. Then, with a half-doubtful look, he slid down to where the beckoning arm reached from the high grasses' fringe.

"Dthey dztill drinking wvinez?" the sixy asked. Stag nodded. The old centaur lifted his upper lip until the frenum showed. Silent chuckles shook his sides as the man added, "And mashing and bashing each other."

Abruptly the centaur's look changed to one of mock seriousness. He snorted disapprovingly, shook his head. Then his eyebrows shot up and his eyes bulged. The bosun, at whom these mimings were directed, looked down at himself to see what the cause might be. He found out in a moment when the black-palmed hand reached down and patted the ropes wound round his waist, the coil of line he had cobbled together last night back at Stonehouse Hobar. "You gyivez me dthisz," the sixy said. It was not a request, it was a statement.

"Let him have it," said Captain Stag. The command was scarcely a concession, as the old creature already had

it. He didn't bother with more buffoonery, simply vanished into the grass once more. They looked at the place where he had been, then at each other, then returned to their hiding-place of moments ago.

The games below had entered another stage. Two sixies, each armed with an enormous branch, had stationed themselves not far from the diminished stack of wine-skins. Three of them, arms around each other, stood off, howling something in their own language which scarcely bore any semblance to singing by now; and now and then they picked up their feet and stamped them with an irregular regularity. But most of the centaurs were watching the two with the tree-limbs. Now one of them, a big roan, suddenly detached himself from the mass and, with a bellow which echoed all about the grassy bowl, galloped directly for the heaped-up cargo.

The sixies fell silent. Only the thud-thud of the charge was heard. His attack, if attack it was, led him right between the two guardians, if guardians they were. They swung at him. One blow fetched him at the breastbone, one at the back of his head. *Tump. Tump.* His forelimbs collapsed, his hind limbs still galloped, the result spun him around and over, legs kicking, blood gushing from his open mouth. They swung again. *Tump. Tump.* And one final *tump.* One leg of the fallen sixy twitched. The rest of him lay motionless.

The others gave voice in what seemed like one great bray, stamped their four feet each upon the ground, and the ground shook and the air trembled. Stag felt the taste of bile upon his tongue. This was not even his former notion of a good fight. Animals . . . utter animals . . . bucks in rut . . . might maim each other, even kill each other. But not for sport. It was with an effort that he re-

called, and nodded silent assent to, words said to him which might have had just such a scene to call them up when they were first framed. *Pity rather than hate the Sixlimbed Folk, for they have men minds and brute bodies, and just as much as their men minds strive to direct their brute bodies so do their brute bodies strive to direct their men minds.*

Something seemed odd, down there in the grassy bowl below. Something seemed to have changed. Were there fewer sixies than before? They swayed to and fro, heads down and lolling about, their arms sometimes on each others' necks and sometimes hanging loosely; and in that confused mass of them it was hard for him to count them either by heads or hands or legs. He did not know. He did not know. And, along with the confused conviction that *something* was wrong, there began to grow from deep within him a sick fear that that either the day or the way had been "gathered up" again . . . and this time perhaps in another, and, if possible, worse form. He clutched the grass with his hands, and lay his face upon the cool earth. And then he felt a tug upon the back of his tunic.

Once again it was Bosun, and once again he had his fingers to his lips. Stag's sick fears suddenly were overwhelmed by a feeling of intense irritation. By Rahab and Leviathan! Were they to spend all this day and perhaps other days slithering behind bushes and hushing each other like schoolgirls playing pranks behind the back of a nodding nurse? He squirmed quite around and sat bolt upright, angrily brushing an ant from his nostril. The bosun, having fully gained his master's attention and knowing well how to read his moods, now thought it prudent to depart a ways—making, as he did so, an apologetic gesture to his left. There at the foot of the hillock

which formed on this side the outer part of that great natural bowl, under the dogwood trees, stood the element missing from inside and among the sixies—the line of onagers, still laden, still (or once again) cropping the grateful grass, and now linked together by that same rope which the old sixy had summarily taken from around the Bosun's waist.

He and the bosun stared at each other and then, wordlessly, they took the foremost beast by the bridle and led the entire caffle off into the forest.

Behind them the noise of drunkenness and strife did diminish with distance but did not change in tenor. And, gradually, the dimlight deepened.

After a while, when they judged it safe to speak, but still not safe to speak in other low voices, Stag said, "It was well-done, Bosun. But how did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"'Do *what?*' Damn it, don't bandy words with me! Haven't I overheard your bragging often enough to know that you have no more modesty than a fish has navel?"

The bosun said, in a faintly injured tone of voice, "If you mean roping and recovering the asses, I had nothing more to do with it than that I took the old bits of rope and new-fashioned them into one line. Who did do it? Who else could it have been, but the old sixy? *I* don't know how. *I* didn't see him—" "No more did I." "*I* was

looking at the other ones, there in the pit, or whatever it is." "So was I." "And then he flung a turf at me, as he did at you . . . well, it had to be him, but I never saw him . . . and I turned me around, and, dragons take me, but there they were! And, you know, Captain, it's an odd thing—" "What's that?" "Why, in the whole line running from bridle to bridle, it's all just loops, you know. Just loops. I mean, it *was*. I mean, until I put a few in, there wasn't one single knot in the entire line!"

Captain Clarb had a deeply uneasy feeling that he ought not to be in the House of Dellatindílla the comprador, but, damn it, there he was! He searched his mind to think of a legitimate (that is, a commercial) reason why he should be there. At the moment he couldn't think of one, but no doubt it would occur to him by and by. Meanwhile he watched with no small interest as his host's hand, holding a webby old jug of wine, hovered over the goblets. That, in fact, might be the reason for their being here together, and not at the wine-house, where no such famous vintage as this was available. That is, Clarb assumed it was famous. It had to be. It was old, wasn't it? It was in one of those red-glazed jugs which cost so damnably much that a coasting captain would never think of buying one. Besides, the winehouse, now. Here he'd patronized it for all these years. Didn't they know it? Didn't they value his patronage? When they saw him

come in, hadn't they remembered how long he'd been gone? Didn't he always have the nicest of the new girls, if there was one around? Wouldn't you think they'd reserve her for him? And just because he, as any civilized and newly-returned traveler would, had ordered a jug of the house's best to break the back of his thirst upon instead of being bawdy and demanding to see the new wenches the first step inside the door—

"I think you will like this, Captain Clarb," said Dellatindílla. His two dwarfs—odd little bodies, two feet high and dressed in costumes as black and shiny as their huge eyes—nodded and made portentious faces at each other.

"*I* think he'll like it," said Atom, and pursed his mouth at Mote.

"He'll like *that*," said Mote, and put his finger by his nose as he dipped his head to Atom.

Clarb cleared his throat. It was plain who counted *here*, where age and experience found the respect it merited. Was that frecklefaced little foreskin of a junior captain here, sitting on this damned rare tiger's pelt and about to try a famous vintage? No, dragons take the whelp, he was upstairs in the winehouse, tumbling that new girl, and neither of them had the manners that a man had the right to expect of an alley-born orphan. "I'm sure I will," he said, glancing covertly around him. Silk hanging sewn with pearls, was that to be believed? It had to be. "I'm sure I will, Comprador."

Even an alley-born orphan would have the manners to defer to the House's senior captain; but, never mind, never mind. "I'm sure I will."

"*He* knows," said Atom, with a smile of deprecation which modestly belittled his knowing that Clarb knew. "*He* will. Oh, yes."

Mote could scarcely contain his own pleasure in the shared knowledge. "He *will,* he *will!*" said Mote.

Gracefully, Dellatindílla put down the jug and politely wiped the spotless goblet with the sleeve of his rich robe. "I fear my things are scarcely fit for one whose travels will have led him to expect a very high standard," he said. ("Not fit, not *fit,*" echoed Atom. And Mote nodded: "A very high, a *very* high standard.") Again, with the same grace, Dellatindílla took up the jug and poured, and scanned, and sniffed, then poured a drop into his own goblet and tasted it; raised his eyebrows; poured at last a measure of the wine into his guest's cup. The guest drank, then was suddenly beset with a feeling that perhaps he shouldn't have, should have . . . what? . . . waited? . . . poured a libation? . . . let his hosts—? . . . In his confusion he choked.

"Ah, it is bad," Dellatindílla exclaimed, clasping his thin hands together. Their fingers were covered with rings. Mote gave a groan of miniscule anguish, "Oh, bad! It's bad!" and twisted his tiny face. Atom looked aghast. "Bad, ah, too *bad!*" he declared.

But Clarb recovered himself. "It may be bad by your own high standards, Comprador," he said. "But for a rough old sea-serpent such as that I am, it's very good." And, indeed, it was, for wrapped within the thin, clear, tart taste of the wine was an after-taste: richer, sweeter. The two dwarfs smiled with knowing contentment, mouthed at each other that it was good . . . oh yes . . . it *was* . . . it was *good.* . . .

And the eunuch himself sat back in his carven chair and slid his hands into one another and allowed his seamed face to relax. "That's well, then. Yes, that's well. For this is the same wine of which I had set a six aside

for you after a certain transaction not quite three years ago, which you will remember . . . or was it only two? . . . but then, alas, a certain coolness sprang up, I needn't be more specific— I well know and admire your loyalty— But as I did not wish to compromise you with your merchant, I thought it best not to send the six. But neither did I sell it. Nor did I drink it. We are, in fact, drinking of it now. In effect, then, *you* are the host and not I!"

And Atom said, with a deep nod, "*He* is the host." Mote matched him, nod for nod, for, "He is the *host*," said Mote.

Clarb took another sip. *His merchant,* yes. *A certain coolness,* that's right. Again a twinge of uneasiness made itself felt. But not so much as before. After all, that was . . . when was that? A while back, a good while back. Good wine, this. His own? Drink it down, then. Mayn't a man drink his own wine? Without having to pay wine-house prices? Without begging anyone's permission?

"No, I haven't forgotten your favors," said Dellatindílla, unfolding his hands. "I never forget." ("*He* never forgets," Atom informed Mote. And Mote reminded Atom, "He *nev*er for*gets.*") "Ah, well, those were other days. Old faces, old ways. Favors were done and not forgotten. But they have passed. One sees new faces nowadays. One is expected to follow new ways. New partners, new captains, ah yes." ("*Ah,* yes!" "Ah, *yes!*")

Clarb nodded. It was the truth. Would Tabnath Lo, in the old days, have begrudged a senior captain a bale or so of stockfish? Would he have humiliated him like that before a boy with barely a beard on his speckled face? "New captains, Comprador," he said, heavily, "let me tell you about them young new captains. I'll tell you about them. New captains."

Atom and Mote simultaneously began on, *"He—"* but Dellatindílla interrupted them, and, addressing them jointly as "Child," he told them to be quiet. "Our guest, or rather our host, is going to tell us about new partners."

"New partners," Mote repeated, in a muted voice. "New *part*ners," said Atom, in a loud whisper. They moved their mouths into marvels of compression, and snuggled close to each other and raised their eyebrows as though somehow the better to hear.

"That's right, children. Be good now. I got something in my pouch for you, you be good. Listen, now, Comprador. How long have you known Lo? Longer than I've known him, correct or not? Correct or— Correct. Did you ever know him to have a partner? What'd he ever need a partner for? Knowledge? Didn't he have the most knowledgeable captains a merchant ever had? He did. Richness? Why, he was rich to start with; his father had a spring which didn't fail even in the Year of Drought, so his son was rich to start with. Then who did he marry? The old Hobar's daughter's daughter. And got more richnesses with her. Ill-health? Had to depend on another man's soundness? No, Comprador. Oh, no. You are but mistaken there, Comprador." Softly the comprador acknowledged his error and begged that it might be forgiven and replaced by truth. The dwarfs neither moved nor spoke. They did not even roll their eyes. Only the light gleamed and sparkled in them.

Since when did an established merchant take a partner for no given reason, one who appeared out of nowhere, not a seasoned man of business, either, no, but a savage young blood who gave himself all sorts of airs and took all sorts of liberties: and because of why? And all because of why? Because and simply because he was a *seacrosser,*

that was why! Didn't the comprador know well enough the arrogance of seacrossers? And how they looked down upon the coasters, when, when, never mind, it's not the best robe, winestains are good for it, too bad about the wine, ah, very well, a drop more, yes. When, what was it, *oh* yes, when everybody knows that the coastal trade is the backbone of commerce: isn't that so?

"The very vertebrae of it. Who knows that better than you?"

But others didn't seem to know it. What did long and loyal service mean to them? Quibbling about stockfish and complaining about a dribbet and a droppit of private trading. Let a flashy stranger just come in from over the dirty, deep sea and *then,* ho! what consultings and whisperings in corners! What confabulations behind locked doors! What alterations in manners and in looks *that* could make. Changes in schedules which hadn't been changed in years, shufflings of ships, night-time departures, strange bosuns, strange crews, strange voyages. New things. Strange things.

The yellow wine trickled into the goblet. A tray of tiny goodies, spicy and smoking hot, appeared from nowhere at the captain's side of the table. Under the table, Atom and Mote licked their fingers. "There would be none of these dissemblings and discriminatings," the captain said, feeling tears welling in his eyes, "if the Cap of Grace was still with us, Comprador."

The comprador slid his fingers between themselves. "Ah, Captain, the Cap of Grace," he said softly. Underneath the table, in a reflection of the lamplight, there was the gleam of eyes. "Grace," said Atom. And "Grace," said Mote.

The comprador examined his rings. He twisted them

so that they glistened and they sparkled. Captain Clarb's bleared eyes were drawn to them. "Pretty. . . ." he said.

The great, gaunt eunuch nodded. "They are pretty well," he said. "This one—" He turned it to show off the stone: it shimmered and it shone its many colors. "This one, so I was told, oh, long ago, came from a place called Allitu. I don't know where, exactly, that may be. I know only that it is a peninsula."

Captain Clarb's head drew back and went a-cock to one side. The look he turned now upon the comprador was devoid alike of respect, awe, sentimentality or sententiousness. "A peninsula?" he said. "Do none of you landhuggers know aught of the world beyond your city walls? 'Allitu is a peninsula,' you say. Is it, now? Oh, is it? Since when is it a peninsula? A coaster I may be, and proud of it, but I've made my deep-sea journeys in my time far out of sight of land. When did the Shoals of Brazen Stones heave up and dry off and turn Allitu into a peninsula? Tell me *that!*"

Dellatindílla's eyes fell. He made an embarrassed sound or two. "Well, really, Captain," he demurred. "Unlike the Cap of Grace, which goes (so we are told) in search of men, I do not go in search of business. Business comes to me. I was assured by men whom *I* considered eminent seafarers that Allitu *was* a peninsula. No. No. I know they were of wide experience. Consider," he suggested, in his soft and clear and sexless voice; "consider, Captain: is it not possible that *you* may be mistaken?"

The red face of his guest looked at him impassively. Then it puckered. "Listen," said Captain Clarb. "Listen . . ."

It was earliest dawnlight and the white starlines still made a meshwork of the night sky; scarcely had the graymists become visible, creeping along the grounds and unwinding their shrouds around the trees. Stag and Bosun lay wrapped in the blankets taken from the packs, but even had they been wide awake they could not yet have distinguished the colors of the simple country-weave: red warp and blue woof.

They had hobbled the onagers and thought the task well enough done, but they were sailors and not herdsmen. Bosun was also doubling as cook that night, and, having had nothing to eat since the morning's broiled venison (and, by reason of time lack, not much of that), his mind, as he tied the last knot, was on the pot a bit more than it should have been. Consequently, his fingers, left to themselves, automatically manipulated the rope into a certain trick knot which was an especial favorite of his and which he had often practiced—and often performed. This done, and without further reflection, he returned to the cookfire, and thought no more about the matter than he was thinking of it now.

The last onager to have been hobbled was not now thinking about it, either; indeed, it had quite forgotten the rope tied about its legs to enable it to walk about a bit and graze, but not to run. The onager was already partly awake and was faintly disappointed that the warm sun which had been comforting it a moment ago was nowhere to be seen, and that the pile of grain it had been about to discuss was nowhere to be seen. It was, under the circumstances, hardly worth getting up just yet. The onager had a feeling that eventually there would be a warm sun once more. Its assurance that eventually there would be a pile of grain once more was perhaps not

quite so strong. It let its head fall down once more and contemplated a dewy tussock a few feet off quite without reaction or emotion.

The graymists moved slightly in a brief gust of wind. The onager's eyes, which had begun to close again, opened wide, and so did its nostrils. There was another, longer, stronger gust of wind, the graymists danced before it; and the onager, suddenly aware of something off behind and beyond those mists, something which was even more desirable than warm suns and piles of grain, was on its feet in an instant. The graymists whirled, the wind blew flat into the onager's face, it lifted its head, nostrils wide, laid back its ears, and (with a cry between a neigh and a bray) galloped off in the direction of the source of the wind. It was aware for a fast-fleeting second of something entangling and impeding its legs, but the impediment vanished before the first stride to freedom was fully completed, and the onager thought of it no more.

"Which one was it?" asked Stag.

Bosun counted off the other animals, who seemed more indifferent than otherwise to their fellow's flight. "The stallion," he said. "Mares and geldings are all here, seemingly. I suppose we can put his load on another . . . or redistribute it . . . the loads are lighter since the loss of the wine—dragons take those sixies!"

Stag grunted that he supposed so, too. He wasn't going to take any more time to follow it. "Let the poxy owner bear the loss," he said. "It was folly to bring a stallion along, anyway. It's just as well that we've seen the last of it." But they hadn't.

He blew up the fire and added wood which they had prudently covered against the dews, and they waited for their small breakfast to cook whilst the graymists melted

away. After eating they loaded up and unhobbled and started slowly on their way. Or, at any rate, onward. It was a fact that they did not really know where they were. For this reason they gave the onagers their heads in some hopes that they might somehow sniff or sense their way in a homeward direction and that somewhere en route the men would recognize enough of the terrain to be able to retrace their way back to Stonehouse Hobar.

They could not but consider it was possible that the beasts might follow a trail which, though familiar to them, led nowhere that the men wished to go . . . and, conceivably, somewhere that they might very much wish not to go. But although they discussed other alternatives, they could think of none better. And so they passed through fields where the ferny bracken grew, and through glades radiant and fragrant with carpets of tiny golden flowers, under the widespread branches of ancient trees whose boles were as wide as houses. Then the forest began to thin out again and the rocks, the earth's bones, began to heave themselves up through the ground more frequently. And then they heard the onager again. And again and again.

Although they had heard nothing else, still, their voices as they paused to speak went low. Bosun asked, what was going on? Stag said he thought he could guess. "Sniffed a she come into her season and followed her here," he said. The bosun nodded. That was probably the reason, he agreed. But it was not quite as they had thought. There was a waste space they shortly came upon, very open, more gravel than grass upon it. There was the onager and there was the she. He neighed softly and trotted up to her; she turned so that her head faced him, and she backed away. He neighed impatiently and began

to rack around behind her, but she turned and turned so that always she faced him. He brayed his hot desire and reared up towards her flanks, but always she eluded him, always she turned; more than once she turned as though to make swift flight, and always he cut her off and drove her back.

"She doesn't want that *at all,*" the bosun said.

"Who would?—except a she-onager," said Stag.

And the she in question was not. She was a she-centaur, and young, perhaps even a maiden-mare. She made no vocal sound, and, from the heaving of her sweaty sides, she had run or been driven a long way: perhaps she was deliberately saving her breath. Her hair from crown to tail was golden, and the two creatures, so similar and so dissimilar, flashed in the sun together as they whirled and turned, turned and whirled: she all golden, he a sandy, randy red.

"Look at the size of him!" exclaimed Bosun. —Then, amazement giving way to something else: "I don't like this . . . nó . . . I'd like to stop it. . . ."

The hobble-rope was still attached to one of the onager's legs, and whipped about as he danced and stamped and sounded his eagerness and his outrage at that eagerness's not being met: but to dart behind those flashing hooves was to court death and the conclusion of that courtship was more certain than the courtship taking place before their eyes. They were out of their depth, the handling of even ordinary animals—or animals in an ordinary state—was not their field, and as for handling an "entire" onager, never a totally safe beast, in his present state of excitement and outrage— It was as they quickly discussed what they might possibly do that they were attacked.

At first they thought only that rocks had fallen of their own, perhaps loosened by last season's rains, and they were intent only on getting out of the way. In their confusion they moved, first away from the cliff—instinct—then they moved back towards it in joint hopes—reason—of finding another overhang such as the one they had rested in the day before. In doing this they fell, so to speak, between two stools: they collided with each other, and as they struggled to be free to move a rock struck the bosun, and he collapsed in Stag's arms. Hard as the blow was, it was the saving of at least one of them, for as Stag, stumbling beneath the sudden weight, went down with him, something sang past his ear and buried itself in the ground where he had a second ago been standing. It was a spear.

Shouts sounded, he was sure that they were not all his own or his companion's, and, acting upon an unreasoned impulse, he snatched up the spear, tugging at it as he half-lay, half-knelt, the bosun on his other arm. No more rocks fell, but confusion and fear and alarm suddenly coalesced into a rage which overwhelmed him: and he hurled the spear at the only thing resembling an enemy in sight—the onager.

It was hardly, and hardly could have been, the best cast he ever threw. It did not kill the beast, neither did it wound him mortally. It scored his shoulder and fell to the pebbly ground. But the shock of the wound was enough to shake the stallion out of all thoughts of courtship, passion, or any other intention except flight. It gave one great anguished, whinnying cry, skidded around, and charged off to the left, spraying blood, and was gone from sight.

And in that very moment the thickets on the right

parted, and there came leaping out the silvery-haired centaur himself, pounding his frosty breast with the palms of his hands, and uttering loud cries. The maiden-mare, no doubt taking the meaning of them better than any Fourlimbed Folk could, did not pause or tarry, but, with a snap and a shake of her golden mane, was off to the left at a gallop. But this time not silently; whether from fear or from being set loose from fear or perhaps out of the sixy equivalent of hysteria . . . or for another and unknown but perhaps not unknowable reason . . . she now found her voice. As the men, one sitting, one sprawling, one bleeding, one cursing (though still but two of them), looked about them in pain and perplexity, they heard above hoofbeats the hueing and bellowing of the old (though patently still vigorous) sixy and the shrill cries of the female as she fled, echoing.

Presently the bosun said, "It was so safe at sea. Nothing to worry about except storms and dragons and Rahab and Leviathan and corsairs and reefs and rocks and sea-serpents and krakens and shoals." Tenderly he touched his fingers to his bleeding ear and bruised shoulder. "Let's get your woman and go back to sea, eh, Captain? I'll get one for myself, she can keep her company, tend to her . . ." His voice sank into a sigh. With a groan and a grunt he got to his feet.

The laden onagers, as indifferent to their partner's passion as to all the rest of the scene, had drifted off, but not far, and on coming to a division of the trail, without hesitation chose which way they were to go. The two men followed them. Now and then the bosun grimaced. Stag, coming abruptly out of a long silence, said, "Lean on this," handed him the same spear which he had flung at the ass-stallion and picked up before

leaving the scene; at once the two suddenly reflected that it was the same spear which had been flung at *them.*

"Who?"

They had no certain answer. "Those we'd hoped wouldn't find us? The sixy? If the first, why only one spear? Did they dislodge or throw the rocks, too? Was there only one of them? And if the sixy, *why* the sixy? Did he figure he'd repaid the favor of the life-saving wine by restoring the onagers driven off by the younger sixies?—and was now free to follow his natural bent of hating all Fourlimbed Folk?—particularly such as are in some way connected with the house of Hobar? Was it perhaps the coward onagerer, creeping back in hopes of recovering not only his beasts but our gear as well, and loath to miss a chance to close our mouths? And if none of these, who, then?"

So their conjecturings went, back and forth and round about, but never to any conclusion, till at last Bosun said, after divers clearings of his throat and sidelong looks and scannings of the wilderness, "But if it was *them,* you know, Captain, even if they didn't pin us, well, if they know where we are . . ." And Stag not rising to this bait or chum, his man plucked up his boldness and said, "You know what I'm referring to, Captain. That place which the other place, on the way, the one looked like that beach you, me, we . . ." His voice died. "Well, I didn't—"

And Stag, his ruddy face now flushed to the lobes of his ears so that the very ring in the one of them seemed to shine the more, flushed to the thicket of his swart beard and said, "If you weren't afraid to name it then, why the sudden shyness now? There's none to hear us. Allitu, you mean. So say it, then. Allitu."

His man swallowed the reproof. And then, as though obedient to an order, repeated, "Allitu . . . Allitu . . . Allitu. . . . As you say, Captain, rightly, there's none to hear us."

They paced along a grove of beech trees and all was silent. For once there were no birds on wing or in voice. Nothing fluttered or rustled or scuttled. Something with dull eyes lay unmoving and unblinking, half hidden by a bush, half concealed by a stone. It was a creature of the sort which some call wyver or wyvern or wyvert. Some call it airsucker and some call it gossip. But nobody saw it here and so nobody called it anything at all.

The problem of barley much exercised the merchant Tabnath Lo. Usually the amount required for malting and the amount required for baking didn't vary by more than a six of sacks in the course of a year from one year to another. Beer barley and cake barley were doing as usual at this season, he had enough on hand until the new grains came in, and had given out, also as usual, contracts for the crop after that one: and, as usual, had supplied seed and allowed advances—some farmers were still coming in and counting their cords to the click of the tally-stones as they gave their orders against their advances. But a new problem had come up and Lo was closeted in his inmost office, alone with his mute, pacing

the flagged floor, and pondering what he might do about it.

So his wife explained it to the wife of one of the farmers, who, being a cousin's cousin, and hence near kin, had come to visit a while in the kitchen while the man was in the warehouse. "It's all about the pudding barley," said Banna, a well-formed and well-nourished woman, as she sat mixing honey and soft cheese for a cake.

The farmwife, who was so exceedingly well-nourished that one was obliged to accept on faith that she had ever had a form at all, dandled her fat child and said, "Pudding barley. We didn't raise none this year. What we need, we can all a ways trade for."

Banna murmured, "That is what everyone says. It seems that this year hardly anyone raised any. Or plans to. And"—she tried to keep vexation out of her voice to avoid possibly offending the kinswoman—"yet, all so suddenly, that's just what everybody seems to want. And why? Well, my dear, *you* know how to make a barley pudding better than I—"

Her cousin's cousin nodded gravely. "Wash your pudding barley and wash your beans and soak them a good while and get a good piece of fat meat, not lean, Banna, *fat*, for fat gives it half the flavor; brown your meat, then pour off the soak water and add fresh and put your fat meat well into the middle and add your seasoning and seal your pot with paste and put it on your fire and keep it going all of a night and all of a next morning." She gave her head and treble chins a shake of satisfaction at having been able to impart this exceedingly arcane and exceedingly important information.

"Just as I would want it made myself," said Banna. "Well. Haven't you put your finger on the whole prob-

lem!" (The fat woman beamed, looked modestly down at her fat fingers, as though privately wondering which one it was and which the problem.) "Oh, yes, you have. 'And keep the fire going all night and all of a next morning.' Well, it's one thing to bank a fire so it will have hot coals to start a fresh one, come dawnlight. And it's another to keep a fire going all night so as to cook a good barley pudding, without having someone staying up to feed it."

Her cousin's cousin said she'd heard it told, by the blacksmith's daughter who had the wen on her temple and lived past the Old Queen's Tower, that town folks took their puddings and roasts and such to the bakers'. Didn't bake their own bread and cake, sometimes, town folks didn't: got it from one special person called a baker: and took their barley pudding there, too.

Banna sampled the honey and cheese, offered it to be sampled by the fat wife, who courteously licked her finger clean before thrusting it in to the mixture and tasting. She approved it. And she listened to Banna telling her that a new, new bake-shop and cook-shop had been opened in town, with a new great oven, so huge that it could accommodate rows and rows of pudding-pots instead of just a few. "And now everybody wants barley pudding, it's cheap and it's tasty, and they can have it without the bother of staying up a night or staying in all of a morning. The difficulty is, you see, that Lo hadn't anticipated it, he hadn't stored up pudding barley, nor given contracts for it. He tells them that cake barley is just as good—"

"It ain't," said the farmwife, serenely. And serenely listened to the problem of risking loss of trade not only in barley but in all other sorts of ware and goods which

disappointed buyers might buy elsewhere. And where elsewhere? Why, at any of the mercantile houses using the services of that wicked comprador, Dellatindílla, who had the pudding barley market cornered, and evidently would continue to for at least two crops to come. "And that is why Lo is so worried," Banna said, putting cheese and honey into dough. "Because he and Dellatindílla—"

The farmwoman carefully deposited her child in her enormous lap and then raised her hands and rolled her eyes and let her jaw drop. "That one! He's no good for a woman, you know. Is it to be believed? Like an ox or a wether, Banna! *And* all a them wicked things he does! How do you call his name a right? Del-la-tin-*dil*-la? Well no wonder. Haves to be a foreigner."

In his innermost chamber, closeted with his mute, Tabnath Lo was not worrying about which syllable of his rival's name to stress. "But in the long run," he said to his mute, "the money he bids fair to cost me in this matter of the barley—and I haven't any doubt that he's behind the new bake-shop—is a trifle, a trifle . . . in comparison."

The mute, who could hear as well as any man, and understand better than many, gave a sympathetic hiss. He was thin and brown and bald and wrinkled and his ears stuck out like large, coarse shells; some found him unnatural and even a bit fearsome, but Tabnath Lo could not do without him. Every man had the need to unburden himself, and there were limits to what he could tell Banna. When, after all, was he able to be for long alone with her? At night, in their bedchamber, and if they weren't tired and ready for simple slumber when they got there, they soon would be: well, that was well enough,

no ground for grumbling about *that.* But sometimes Lo had problems which weighed upon his chest like the heavy air which only the Helm Wind can (among other things) sweep away. And at such times he would beckon to his mute and walk with him into his innermost office, deep within the warehouse walls, and talk it all out and tell him everything. What better confidant could any man have than a trusted servitor who could hear, listen, understand . . . and yet could never betray? And what is worse than betrayal? For, generally speaking, before betrayal can take place there must first have been trust, and is trust not a sixth part of love? Tabnath Lo had trusted so much to the receptive and seclusive mind of this maimed old man that it seemed to him more than once that he must by now totally love him.

With a deep sigh, the merchant threw up his hands, and the mute made a consolatory hiss. Abruptly his master turned from him and drew a scroll from its hole on a shelf, unrolled it part way . . . with an exclamation of annoyance, let it roll up shut again; pulled out another and another until he found the right one, spread it on his desk and inclined his head for the mute to come see. "Look," he said. "Here is Allitu, once the home of fisherfolk and fruitgrowers. They tended their nets and pruning-hooks and gathered their produce and dried it in the sun and sent it to the Main for trading. None of it came here, it being so far off and its stuff of no vast value, but that's beside the point. Now and for some while since, it's become the haunt of pirates and corsairs and boat-wreckers from the Main. . . ." He flicked his finger as though in that gesture he had flicked the island from the map.

The finger hovered over the chart, came to rest, darted

here and there, came to rest again. "Here *we* are, *thither* went my partner and his woman and his man. They were seen coming, they were seen going, and although I've a plan to have the ass-man stopped before he returns to town again and sent off on another trip which should keep his dirty face and bound-to-babble tongue away for a goodly while, still . . . .You understand, mute?"

"*Sssss* . . ." said the mute.

"Why came he here direct? If he was minded to hide, why not at some secluded cove, messages sent me by dim-light or dawn? Did he think he'd profit by the principle that hidden things are the first found, that those lying out open may be overlooked? No, I doubt it. Such subtle tangents are not his way. Probably it was as he said, that the idea of heading for the Lonelands came into his mind only after he'd gotten here. It wasn't in *my* mind at all to persuade him to settle for the half-hills, instead—no, that is not why, I mean, I mean that it was not in my mind to persuade him to settle *in* the half-hills, but it was a position in which I found myself. Better there than that half-mad trip to the Lonelands which was his first thought. Grrrrhh—" He shivered and he shuddered, and his mute grimaced and followed his movements.

"He's young and he's brave and he's proud and he's bought himself a proud woman, for all that she was bought as a beast is bought, and he thinks or at least he's thought that he can make his way anywhere against anything. Well . . . Well . . . I have been younger than I am and once I had some similar thoughts. . . . Not the same, but similar. . . ." A thin shaft of light like an elongated quill came in through one of the airholes, brightening the merchant's face; it seemed far more tired here, where he could most relax, than in warehouse or

countinghouse; there were pouches and pockets on the still smooth skin. "But I never was rash enough to make light of such as lay along the way to the Lonelands and sometimes prowl the shallow reaches of the Lonelands Sea: sheydeem and golemmeem, the dreadful shadows of the satherwoods—and all the rest," he summed up, abruptly.

The map had curled on release from his pressing fingers. He walked slowly back and forth past the desk on which it lay. "I fear me for them," he muttered. "Though no such perils lie along their present way, still . . . still . . . still . . . They were seen to come. They were seen to go. The best of men may have enviers and enemies, and I am not the best of men. The Syndics suspect my plans and would prevent them, for all that they are full lawful—in fact, I daresay because they *are* full lawful, and hence harder to oppose! I have rivals who hate me no more than I hate them, but who would be glad enough to drop baulks in my way, if they could. And then there is that serpent's egg, that cold and codless creature, Dellatindílla—"

The mute's breath hissed against his teeth, he mimicked the eunuch's walk and his hands, palms down, two feet from the ground, indicated the eunuch's dwarfs; and the mute's face displayed his loathing, his loathing and his fear.

The merchant nodded and the merchant sighed. And he paced and muttered and talked to himself and then, quite suddenly, he stopped. He beckoned to his mute, who came and looked into his face, consolingly. "Go and bring food," said Tabnath Lo. Swiftly his fingers knotted the cords which would authorize the actions, and he

passed them to his servant. "Let them know that we won't come out for some days."

The mute nodded his perfect comprehension, closed the door behind him. The merchant heard the other doors closing, one by one. He stood silent a while. Then he heard and felt the soft concussion of the doors again. In a moment the mute stood before him, the package of rations neatly-bound in his hands.

There was a bed in one corner of the room, and two quilts upon it. A gesture sufficed to have them rolled up. Tabnath Lo watched this as he leaned against the wall. He seemed very tired. He leaned a shade more heavily. And so, slowly, slowly, the wall yielded, and turned upon a pivot and he and the mute entered into the darkness beyond it. Slowly, slowly, the wall returned to be as it had been. In the quill-thin shaft of light in the office-room dustmotes danced a moment. Then gradually they stopped their dance, and once again swam slowly, slowly, slowly.

When one knows the way and knows it to be unchanging, one may travel almost as swiftly in the darkness as in the daytime, and sometimes more swiftly: for there are fewer distractions.

An old, hunchbacked beggarman in a cowled cloak moved slowly through the town. He nattered to himself, and now and then he thrust out a palm which was seamed

with dirty lines. It was at a quiet hour of the day and not many were about and none engaged his company or his thanks. Leaning on his staff, he made his way through the town walls and the slumped and yawning guards didn't even bother to look up. Through the roads where villas and market gardens alternated he mumbled as he passed along, but he took a sidepath as though deliberately avoiding the tumbling huts where the outcasts lived: eaters of carrion and rats, descendants of lepers and whores and criminals: given to such seemly sports as the stoning of beggars: and among whom incest was merely the expression of not so much forgetfulness as family ties.

By and by the beggarman found himself in the woods, and there, for he stooped upon his staff as one fatigued, he sat himself down and whispered and nodded. He could see the quasi-ruin of the Old Queen's Tower and he could see in the rocks of a hill the cleft which led into a shallow cave. He could see, but, sprawling as he was, could not be seen.

Something moved upon the roof of the cave. Perhaps a cluster of sleeping bats, disturbed in their batty slumbers by the sound of a creaking tumbril laden with spoiled hay for the market gardens. There was no further movement till the wagon had quite gone away. Then the shadow moved again, descended from the roof to the floor. A second one followed it. By and by a man emerged from the cave. Then another. They moved off into the woods. Each had a bundle and each had a staff. Presently they were gone.

After an interval the beggarman stood up and stretched. He moved in the same direction. His face was thin and he muttered and he rubbed his finger against the some-

what splayed tip of his nose. His cowl fell back a moment and for that moment he seemed to have two heads: the first one still stooped and whispered, the other nodded and winked and mimed and mowed, and, it seemed, or perhaps it was a trick of the light, that another finger of another hand was laid alongside the nose of the other head's face, and that another eye glittered. Did the beggar reach and pull down the cowl? . . . or did the cowl somehow move down of itself? . . . down, down, hiding the hunchback's head? Or was it only a trick of the light?

Castagor had made traps, though his attempts at snares had (lacking bowlines) failed, and the traps had gotten them small game. Too, his prowlings and nosings around the old stone house had uncovered a pot of something which he declared to be birdlime, and he had contrived to reconstitute it and to bring in doves and woodfowl. Rary was preparing these for the next meal while Castagor himself had gone out again—why, he did not say, but the older woman had her own ideas and was inclined to grumble.

"He may deny it," she said, basting the birds, "but I'm sure that he's casting auguries and doesn't want us to see. It is a shame and a disgrace about those doctors, the way they do want to keep everything a secret from plain people . . ." Her mind and her talk moved on to the inevitable, but she seemed easier in her mind about it.

"Darda would love to nibble one of these wings," she said, fondly. "Every time I'll be cutting up of a fowl she'll snuggle up and she'll whisper, 'Mam . . . Mam . . . Can I have a flitter?'—that's what we call the wings, you know: the flitters—in our country talk. Trenny, though, he isn't one to play favorites; long as it's food, that's fine with Tren. Just let me heap his plate with victuals, and watch his eyes get big." She smiled, and Spahana smiled too, though very faintly.

Occupied with her own thoughts and fears though she was, Rary caught that faint smile, and her own, which had begun to slip, returned. "That's right, my dearling. It's natural that you should miss your man, and a fine man he is, and I know he'll manage to get my youngs back to me, but you mustn't pine and stay as still as you've been doing, *that*'s not natural. My own man's a gruff sort, too, and I don't believe"—her voice trembled slightly—"that he's ever forgiven me for our boy's being lame, though the Cap of Grace itself knows it wasn't my fault; still"—she blinked—"it had to be me that set out to bring them back, for he couldn't be spared . . . the animals . . . the crops . . . woods to be cut if the crop's to be got in . . . work too hard and too much for *me* to do. And when I set off he put his arms around me, which I can't remember him to have done in daylight for I don't know how long, and he said, though I was too distracted then to pay it much mind at the time, he said, 'Take care now, old woman, I don't want to miss you, too.'

"You're a foreigner, dearling, aren't you? By your voice— Yes."

Well though she understood the reason for the abrupt change of subject, Spahana at once withdrew into herself. Indeed, so slight had been her outward motion that she

had but little far to go. And then, with a deep and sighing breath and making a great effort, she said, "I am from Caryavas." After a pause, she said, "It is far from here."

The other woman dipped a wooden spoon into the pot of drippings and basted the birds. Her lips moved in the evidently unfamiliar syllables. "Yes, it must be, I suppose, for I've never heard of it. Is it one of those places which have a king?"

Is it one of those places which have a king?

She said that it was. Did Rary ask her something further? Was she herself totally lost in her own thoughts, thus conjured up, that eventually she began to speak of them aloud? Had a spell been cast, creating Caryavas before her very eyes and drawing her back into it?—so that she seemed to guide her questioner through its streets and parks, to show her the herd of golden deer and the trees who shed (on hearing of injury to anyone) tears which were balm for those same wounds. She showed her the massy yellow walls and the blunt yellow turrets of the palace and she told her the tales and the legends and the laws: how anyone who dared speak ill of anyone within these yellow walls, unless the speaker was the king's remembrancer and charged with just reporting, within those yellow walls had henceforth to veil his mouth and face and to go so veiled all the days of his life: how, so rare were girl twins that the king himself was charged with rearing them, and, the time they came to womanhood, would marry both of them himself: how boy twins, on the other hand, grew up under the most terrible fate which man could ever face, for one of each pair was doomed to leprosy, and it was up to each to decide which would choose to suffer for the other. She led her questioner by the hand and showed her the train of trencher-

bearers whom the king sent twice a week to bring food from his own stores and kitchens to such old women as were childless widows, and the mummers and minnesingers he sent to sing and dance and play before them and to cheer their aged and sorrowed countenances. She showed her the choosing of the councillors of state: first by lot and then by ballot and then by further lot and then by further ballot, until there stood up before the king the Ten Men and the Ten Women whose council and advice he was obliged to ask. And she showed her the rose-red ships with rose-red sails which carried the king's cargoes. Lastly she told her that if any man had been pronounced dead and yet rose to live again, he was dressed in black robes with a white mask and brought before the king to cast dice for the fate of the kingdom—and how on such occasions, since the victory of death was not to be thought of, the king played with loaded dice.

A sudden spurt of fire from a gout of grease snapped the spell. Spahana winced, her face— But in a moment it was as impassive as ever. Rary's attention was all for the spit of birds which she had been slowly turning, turning, without either remembrance of or reflection on her action. Once more again she basted them. Again her lips moved. "So that is how it is, when there is a king," she said, after a while. "Not always wicked, then, are they?"

"Not always."

"And always able to keep the kingdom from death by that cunning way of casting at dice?"

"Not always."

Rary looked at her. Then she took her hands once more, as she had done when first she met her in the litter. "Never fear," she said.

And Spahana answered, "There is nothing left to fear."

"Not much doubt about it, is there?" Stag held the small shoe in his hand and turned it over and around.

"No," said Bosun. His own beard, though of slower growth than his captain's, was gradually blurring the sharp lines of his face, and merging into the once well-defined moustachioes. The shoe was home-cobbled and without ornament. "No . . . That'd be about the right size, and there— You can see how it's all worn down on the side, and that'd be where he dragged it, being lame." He scanned the trail on either side, but it was main rocky there and showed no trace of who might have passed by. With a shrug, he thrust it into his belt.

They went on.

After a while the Bosun said, "All that's happened to us, seems to me, we might just as well have kept to the plan we had before. Wouldn't have been worse, I have been thinking, if we'd gone to the Lonelands."

The face of Captain Stag flooded with color. "The change of plan was mine and you were free to follow or to forge for yourself," he said, fiercely. He doubled his fists. "You can hoist your own sail and leave right now, if it comes to that."

The bosun's face had become whiter. He didn't move. He said, "Thump me, why don't you?" They stood where they were, and long might they have stood there, had they not heard the footfalls. One of the onagers began to bray. The silverhaired stepped slowly along. He saw them, his eyes moved, but he changed neither face nor pace. He might have gone past them altogether if the bosun had not upon a sudden thought pulled the small shoe from his belt and pushed it beneath the sixy's nose. As though performing independently, and even as the rest of the centaur's countenance was still impassive and abstracted,

the nostrils widened and fluttered. Then the eyes seemed to clear.

"Your wvoman'z childz. . . ."

"Not my woman. But the woman where I . . . where we . . ."

The sixy sighed, as though the inexplicable relationships between the fourlimbed male and female were more of a puzzle than he cared to be burdened with. He touched the small shoe with his nose and turned back the way he had come. Men and animals followed. The centaur spoke no words, and although Bosun and Captain, illwill subsided, wondered each what had passed between him and the young maiden-mare of the golden mane and coat . . . or if anything had passed . . . the sixy being as far as imaginable now in his grave and withdrawn mood from the lusty, randy self which had hued and halloed after her. Had he found her? Lost her? Sated himself upon her? But when at last he spoke, it was not of her.

"Here was man-stale," he said, in a low, far-away voice.

"Where?" the men, jerked from their reveries, looked about, saw nothing. He gave a casual gesture towards a vine which snaked along the path, did not complete the gesture.

"And dthere dthe child put down a foot—" They looked, could see nothing. The centaur gave an enormous yawn, shook his massy head till mane and beard flew from side to side, and pointed to a clump of moss on a rock. He had said something, but the words were lost in the yawn, and neither man could see anything unusual about the moss or the rock. Nevertheless, they did not doubt him, nor fear that he might be leading them into another ambush. Presently the old sixie put out both his hands and stopped, then turned around, and gestured down-

wards, off the path. Then he stood, impassive and indifferent. Plainly, the next move was up to them.

Stag took long looks and thought long thoughts. Hills and valleys and crags and glades and finally the far-off sea, below; above, more hills, more crags, the sky, the sun, the clouds, and that obscured, occluded corner of the sky which had in all his lifetime never moved from its place; he could no more conceive what lay behind it than he could conceive what lay behind the sky itself. "I mislike these continued delays," he muttered. "Still . . . that range of hills does look familiar. . . ." He turned to the sixy and opened his mouth and paused a moment, as though wondering how to address him, and as though remembering how he had addressed him on the occasion of giving him the wine. He cleared his throat and looked down and avoided the problem. "Where does our old house lie?" he asked. "The old Stonehouse—" Perhaps a recollection that the name of Hobar might still rankle the centaurs kept him from adding it. And once again the sixy made his indifferent gesture. Stag gave a grunt of satisfaction. "I was right, then. 'Twouldn't be out of our way. Onward, then."

Zorbinand the Thief had long had it in his mind—and not in his mind alone, but in a little scroll which he kept, marked with diurnal, semanal, and mensual signs, as well as tiny pictographs whose meaning was known only to

Zorbinand the Thief—to rob the house of Dellatindílla the eunuch comprador. To this end he had devoted much time and research, such as espying over the walls for several years what went on in the courtyards and counting and noting all the hangings which were taken out to be cleaned and aired and thus estimating, by the several times several sorts of hangings, how many rooms there might be in the eunuch's apartments, and how large each one was. He counted windows and he counted airshafts and when the opportunities occurred (which were not often) he had fascinated the house-churls and whispered in their ears, as they squatted, slack-faced and drooling, "Draw me a sketch of a house," and thrust sharp sticks into their obedient hands: of course they had not always sketched the right house and they had not always sketched correctly, but much of the information fitted into the master plan which Zorbinand the Thief was preparing. He had even overcome his natural fastidiousness and made love to the oldest and ugliest of the eunuch's she-servants, who, by virtue of that very ugliness and age, plus their master's hateful distaste for anything which smacked of ordinary sexuality, did not often find love lurking for them; and afterwards he had simply let them babble of the wonders of the house. And after they had gone he had recorded the data in coded pictures and symbols in his little scroll.

He was aware that the comprador had periods of hyperactivity which were generally followed by periods of non-appearance, and he had made notes of how long each had lasted and how often they had occurred and at what intervals. And so, eventually, he set his date and retired into his rooms and began to fast. It was astonishing how quickly the fat and rufflebearded Zorbinand—Zorbinand

of the curly hair—began to diminish in weight and girth; but then Zorbinand had studied many things in many places for many years, and he knew the secrets of rapid gain as well as those of rapid reducing; he knew which foods merely put on flesh and fat and which added strength without doing so. When he had reached a desired point he took razor and bowl and hot water and saponiferous plants and shaved every hair off his body and plucked out his eyelashes. After this he took neither food nor drink of any kind for one day and then half a day, only sucking on a piece of a certain kind of bark which dulled the pain of hunger without dispelling that degree of sharpening of the senses which a certain degree of hunger produces. And last of all he rubbed himself with oil, from the small depression on the exact center of his shaven head to the long, long toes of his supple feet.

Thus prepared, he glanced at the sky and he sniffed the air. It was not quite yet time, and he spent the interval in performing a set of exercises, some of which he had learned as a lad in the College of Thieves in the Metropolis and some of which he had devised himself—such as hooking his heels into the smallest possible niche and hanging for the longest possible time and standing on one finger in the narrowest possible space without touching the sides.

It must not be thought that Zorbinand had been able to carry out this entire program entirely without distraction. His wife, for example, had at the first been continually interrupting him with demands such as "Zorbinand, steal me a tortoiseshell comb set with precious stones," and "Zorbinand, I haven't a thing to wear; please steal me five ells of green tree-silk and five ells of fine white linen," and "Zorbinand, go down to the market and steal

me five measures of pudding barley, a half a measure of fat meat, and a half a measure of pure oil to brown it in"; until, finally, he was obliged to fascinate her, and left her, slack-faced and drooling, in her corner.

The hour was now late. Zorbinand gave the air one final and all-encompassing sniff and snuff, turned, walked to the opposite wall, ran, thrust out his right hand, turned a tumble on his index finger, and was out the window more lightly than a cat. Once out, he braked his descent and sank slowly to the ground. He landed in the shadow of the great dove-cote, which at this hour had arrived at its most convenient angle, and he followed that shadow, running backwards, lightly, on the balls of his feet, so that he should be facing in the direction from which anyone was likeliest to come, if anyone were to come. In the space of time which it takes a bird to flap a wing he was not only unseen, he was unseeable.

The small brazier glowed like the red eye of a beast in the dimness. A tiny spoonful of gum cashubite fell upon it, melted immediately, and spread over the circumference of the so small bed of coals, dimming it; but before the circle could be completely covered the gum began to crackle and hiss and bubble, burst into flames, immediately ceased to flame, and sent up a dense cloud of thick and reeking bittersweet smoke. Dellatindílla opened his mouth and distended his nostrils and made a sucking,

gasping sound, flapping his hands so that the cuffs of his wide sleeves flapped like the wings of a birdeating bat. Down beneath him one of his dwarfs repeated the gestures over an imaginary brazier. *"SSSsssFFFFffffnnnhhh,"* went Dellatindílla. He held his breath, pinched shut his nostrils, staggered. His eyes rolled. His chest heaved. His cheeks puffed in and out— Finally he gave a shuddering cough, smoke ran out of his mouth and nose in thick coils, and he gasped and drank in air. Two feet from the ground the tiny figure dressed in shining black, huge and shining black eyes, danced and sucked and gasped and pinched and choked and puffed and staggered and coughed.

"Ahhhh . . ." whispered Dellatindílla. And "Ahhhh . . ." whispered the dwarf. "It hurts my throat," said Dellatindílla, in a hoarse croaking voice. "It hurts his *throat,"* said the dwarf, nodding his head and pulling a sympathetic face. Dellatindílla leaned his hands flat on the table where, upon a sheet of beaten bronze, rested the tripod which held the tiny brazier. A few thin fumes still curled up, and these the eunuch inhaled. *"Hhhmmm . . ."* he moaned. And *"Hhhmmm . . ."* moaned his mite.

The comprador sat in his chair, the dwarf sat at his feet. Something moved through the silent house, but they did not hear it. Something slipped through bars, but they did not see it. Something slid through air-vents, but they did not scent it. Something moved through the silent house, but nobody knew it was there. Presently the master of the house arose and charged the brazier with fresh coals and the coals with more gum cashubite. Again the gum melted, crackled, hissed, bubbled, flared, smoked; again the user bent eagerly over the fumes and eagerly took them in. And again the dwarf, his eyes rolling and

glittering, repeated all his movements and gestures and sounds. This second time, however, in that darkened room, rich with thick fabrics encrusted with richer stones, it seemed that the bittersweet smoke went down more easily. The dwarf had scarce an excuse to cough above once or twice, and long he sat before his master's feet, his large eyes closed so that only a slit showed open to glisten in the light of the small lamps. A third time Dellatindílla dipped his small spoon into the small jar of gum cashubite and a third time he let the gum fall upon the glowing coals. This third time he breathed in the thick-rolling fumes as though they were the freshest air and he rolled them upon his tongue as though they were a most delicious vintage.

He sat back in his chair for a hundred thousand years and watched four hundred thousand seasons unfold before him, burgeon and flourish and decay. Then for another hundred thousand years he communed within himself. Then he opened his eyes. "Ah . . . that is good . . ." he murmured in a faraway voice. ". . . *good* . . ." a voice echoed and echoed with the sound of small bronze bells. "That makes everything worthwhile," said the comprador, with a voluptuous sigh. ". . . *worthwhile* . . ." sang the bells.

"I have bales of precious wares . . ."

". . . *precious wares* . . ."

"I have bags of precious stones . . ."

". . . *precious stones* . . ."

"I have silver and have gold . . ."

". . . *have silver and have gold* . . ."

"I own houses, lands, and ships . . ."

". . . *lands, and ships* . . ."

"Men envy me and fear me . . ."

"*. . . envy me and fear me . . .*"
"I do not lack for wealth . . ."
"*Wealth.*"
"I do not lack for power . . ."
"*Power.*"
"I lack but the Cap of Grace . . ."
"*Grace.*"
"Had I but the Cap of Grace . . ."
"*Grace.*"
"If I had the Cap of Grace . . .
"To wear upon my head . . .
"If I had the Cap of Grace to wear upon my head—" The eunuch opened his eyes and they shone red, red, red. "*I would not be as I am now!*" he screamed, leaping to his feet.

"*Nor I!*" screamed the dwarf. "*Nor I! Nor I! Nor I!*"

The eunuch pressed his hands to his head and screamed again, and screamed again, and screamed again. The dwarf pressed his hands to his head and shrilled and shrilled. Howling and howling, the eunuch leaped from wall to wall and from panel to panel and tore at the gem-embroidered hangings and tore them down and trampled on them and spat upon them and kicked at them and spurned the gems beneath his feet. He thrust out a hand and a dread accusing finger and opened his mouth again and then his face changed. The finger trembled, and the lips did, too. "Did I say that?" he asked. "Am I saying it? Have I yet to say it? Was it said to me? What will be said?" Slowly bewilderment was replaced by a slow, shy smile which grew into a look of totally awe-stricken wonder, and, "Grace, grace, grace," he murmured. The dwarf threw back his head and roared with

laughter. "And you are also right!" cried his master, and he laughed and hooted till he held his sides.

Presently the laughter died away into chuckles. Della-tindílla said, "Listen."

He said, "Captain Stag goes into the half-hills; right?"

"Right . . ."

"Tabnath Lo follows after Captain Stag; right?"

"Right . . ."

"And a certain evil augur and a certain little dwarf goes after Tabnath Lo; right?"

"Right . . ."

"Shall we rise and get us ready and go and follow after them?"

"YES!" cried the dwarf. "KNEEL!" cried the dwarf. The eunuch knelt. The dwarf mounted upon his shoulders. "RISE!" The eunuch rose up as though in sections . . . up . . . up . . . up . . . up . . . up . . . The walls of the room slowly faded away. White lines of stars slowly etched across the ceiling and the ceiling itself ebbed and was gone. The folds and hummocks of the drapery upon the floor became hills and valleys, the gems stitched into them began to glow with the thousand eyes of the half a thousand creatures of the night. Up and up they trudged and trudged they up and trudged and up and up and up they trudged and trudged and up and down though up and up . . . *"Where is Captain Stag, Captain Stag?" "At Hobar's House, Hobar's House, Captain Stag!"*

"Where is Tabnath Lo, Tabnath Lo?"

"Far down below! Far down below!"

"And the other dwarf is where?"

"By the homophage's lair! Oh, brother mine, beware! beware, beware!"

Oh, brother mine! Beware . . . beware . . . beware. . . .

"And the choicest precious stones?"

"Where the watchdog keeps his bones."

Oh, brother mine, beware, beware! Beware. . . .

The night seemed to tremble with unease. The white starlines flickered uncertainly. The eunuch lifted his limber legs more slowly and put them down with less assurance. The dwarf rolled his glistering eyes. At length the eunuch said, "Why did you ask about the choicest precious stones?"

The dwarf declared, "I neither asked nor answered."

"You did ask. And I answered."

"I did not ask and certainly I did not answer."

With a gasp his master tore the dwarf from his shoulders and held him at the level of his furious face. "If I did not ask and if you did not ask, then who asked?"

And the dwarf declared, "If it was neither you nor me it then follows that it was not we."

He dropped to the ground, which suddenly ceased to be the soil of either hill or dale but was the tapestry-strewn floor of the room. The stars vanished, the walls returned, the gems were gems again, and by no means the most precious, choicest gems, either, and Dellatindílla seized up the tripod and the circle of bronze beneath it and beat upon the one with the other, crying, "Thief, thief, ho, ho, thief, thief, thief! Rouse the house! Churls, thralls, bondsmen, servants, all who eat my unstinted bread and salt, ho, up! Up! Up! Up! Ware thief, stop thief, catch thief!"

And the round of beaten bronze echoed, echoed, Thief!

Echoed: thief . . . thief . . . thief . . .

Echoed: thief . . .

But the dog, when they found him, was dead.

The dog lay dead upon his bones, where Zorbinand the Thief had killed it with one blow from the inner side of his left foot as it lunged forward at him, mouth open for an alarm it never gave. And Zorbinand was up in the rafters, so deep in the rafters that the spiders never came there, and in one hand he held the sack with the most precious stones and one by one he put them into his mouth and then he took the dish which had contained the dog's water (fortunately it had seemed a cleanly dog, for Zorbinand was naturally fastidious) and he took a mouthful of it and he swallowed. After a while there was no more water. Neither was there any more of the most precious stones. Carefully, Zorbinand the Thief placed the sack in the dish and set them both carefully upon a ledge. He had no use at all for them, and if one thing had been condemned—at the College of Thieves—more than another, it was the wickedness of wanton theft.

Here is a vista which runs like a tunnel through the forest. None has planned it, perhaps no eye has ever regarded it as such. Assume that a regarding eye is at one end of it. At the other, a long, long way off, the details of land- and of woodscape vanish finally into blurs and masses. Now, suddenly, the regarding eye (if there be one) sees something flashing a way off there in the blur of distance and the mass of green, of green-yellow, and

green-blue. It flashes, it vanishes, it comes like a spark and it goes like a spark. Now it comes again into view and now it stays a while in view and now it is larger, a flash of gold, and then it is gone again. Perhaps if it is in the air it has vanished behind intruding trees or hillocks. Or, perhaps, if it is on the ground, it is lost to sight by reason of dips and vales and dales and glades. Now it flashes into sight once more and now it stays in sight and now it grows almost to recognition: it is a rider upon a horse. The rider's hair floats like a streamer, like a banner the rider's long hair whips about in the currents of the air; the horse's four limbs seem as much off the ground as on. Nearer, nearer, larger, larger—where are they going? Are they—? Is it a they? It is not. There is no horse, no rider. It is a centaur, all of gold. And when the figure all at a gallop strikes a beam of light on its swift way through the pillars of the forest, how it blazes in that instant, how it shines and glows and dazzles. It is a female of the Six-limbed Folk, gold and golden from mane to tail, golden eyes and golden pelt. She does not look behind her; is ought pursuing her? She does not look from one side to the other; is she pursuing ought? Larger and larger she grows and now sound is added to sight, as though hidden in the forest a drummer with flashing hands and tautened palms strikes an accompaniment. Whence comes she? Whither does she go?—neither stopping nor slowing nor pausing as she goes—all swift flight and flashing limbs and floating hair and glowing golden eyes. She draws near, she hurls by, a leaf falls from a tree and staggers in the quickened air. The drumbeats diminish. The leaf settles softly on the ground. The shaft of sunlight shines uninterrupted as before. Slowly, the imprinted turf returns. And all is still. All is still.

"Up the tree," said Gortecas, reaching round and pulling Mote from off his back, the cowl and cloak gaping empty and flaccid where the dwarf's body had bulged and shaped it. The dwarf blinked and winked. "*Up the tree. . . .*" he sang. His fingers reached. Then they contracted.

"Up the *tree?*" he demanded. His feet kicked and his arms reached for the augur's shoulders, but the augur held him out and hoisted him towards the branch. "Up," the augur said. "*Up—*"

"But I don't *want* to go up," Mote protested, his eyes rolling fearfully. "I don't *want—*" The augur gave a pinch and a twist. The dwarf cried out. He threshed about. Another pinch and another twist. The dwarf, with a hiss, grasped the branch. His foot missed the augur's eye by an inch. The augur laughed, but his cold eyes and thin lips did not seem the least amused.

"Up, abortion," he said, sneering. "Up and up, as far as you can go, and then espy out the land and tell me what you"—he stepped back hastily, avoiding a huge globble of spit— "can see."

For a while there was no sound save the sissing of the mite's breath and the clip-clip of his shoes striking upon branch and trunk. Then there was a hoop and a slither and a scramble and another hoop: then a grunt. A piece of a limb came down, bouncety-bounce. The dwarf's voice was shrill with fear. "I'm not going up!" he cried. "And I'm not coming down! I'll stay right here and you can just go back and . . . and . . ."

"'*And*'? '*And*'? And whilst I'm going back, ho what? If a tree-tyger or a drone-buzzard comes along, hungry—eh?"

"Don't!"

"Don't what? Don't come back if I hear you crying,

Hellp! hey? If the drone-buzzard or the lion wants some tender little dwarf cutlets for its supper—hey? *Up!*" he cried, so sudden and so savage that the mite Mote gave a convulsive cry and shuttled farther along the bole. "Up, up, confusion's get! And let me hear no further word from you until you have espied somewhat to see!" And with brutal strokes he kicked upon the tree and he cried the word *Up* without cessation or pause.

Hiccupping his indignation, his terror, his dismay, the dwarf gripped each limb and branch tenaciously as he made his way higher; wished that he were sixlimbed, but with all of them hands; whispered to himself his complete disillusionment. "I thought it would be pleasant to take this trip," he complained; "it isn't at *all* pleasant. I thought it would be nice to get away from my brother and my master: it isn't at *all* nice. I was assured I would *enjoy* it in the woods: I'm not enjoying it at *all* in the woods. And I always thought that the augur was so congenial—*and he isn't congenial at* all, *at* all, *at* all! I'm not even sure anymore that he's the same augur . . . he looks the same . . . but he *doesn't* look the same. . . . He seems the same . . . but he *doesn't* seem the same. . . ." The dwarf scowled in bepuzzlement. The tree trembled to the kicks of the man below. The dwarf gasped and clutched the branches.

To himself he thought that he would look out and see if by any chance there were *a very large nut* growing anywhere up here, and if so, might he not cause it to break off and fall upon the hated head beneath. He giggled. "It wouldn't be *my* fault," he said, almost gaily. "*Oh* no! Oh *no!* A heek heek heek!"

An irritated voice said, "Haven't I *told* you children not to come up here and bother me when you're not in-

vited? Who invited you? Where is your invitation? Tell me. Tell me. I am waiting. Well?"

The dwarf's giggles choked into his throat and became a very painful and jagged-edged something which had to be swallowed before he could trust himself to speak. "Uck," he said, after a second. "Ghuck."

"Not Ghruck," said the voice, petulant as before. "Ghreck. *Ghreck*. Say it. Say it. Let me hear you say it. *Well?*"

Despite himself, almost, the dwarf heard his voice saying, "Ghreck. I mean Ghruck. I mean *Ghreck!*" And, almost, despite himself, his eyes now almost out of their sockets, he climbed several branches higher; where, squinting with effort, he upheld his hand for another branch, found none, opened his eyes wide once more, and found himself upon a sort of nest or lair or platform: in the middle of which, blinking at him and muttering at him and making a cyclical series of vexed faces at him, was the oldest and ugliest harpy he had ever seen.

"That's right," said the harpy. "Auntie Ghreck. And to whom," she asked, squinting and twisting her withered features, "have I the honor of addressing, little child?"

"Mote. And—"

"Don't interrupt, please. Mope. . . . I don't know no Mope."

"It's Mote, not Mope, and I'm not a little child, I'm a dwarf."

Auntie Ghreck the Harpy sucked in her lips and chewed upon them, then expelled them with a popping sound, and, "Korf," she said. "I don't know no Korf. Who's your mommyharp?"

Stamping his scuffed shoe, the dwarf said, "I haven't *got* a mommyharp! I hold you, I'm a—"

The ancient auntie clicked her tongue and then explored her palate with it, the while making inarticulate noises and waving one wing at him. "Ah, poor thingy!" she said at last. "No mommyharp! A sorrow and a grief! What? What? Don't tell me. Of course. A dropling. Fell out of its own nest and couldn't find the way back. What? And no one helped you? A scandalous disgrace, sshh, sshh, don't say a word, the Wingless Ones shouldn't be able to ashame us. Never mind, they don't have to know. Believe me, if so much as an *egg* of mine ever fell out of my nest—what? I didn't right away fly down and pick it up if it wasn't cracked? Not like some auntieharps I could mention, if I was so inclined, but no, that's a funny thing about me, I'm not the kind that puts herself forward: listen. You know how many eggs I've hatched? You wouldn't think it to look at me now . . ." She suddenly began preening, as suddenly broke off: looked at him with her eyebrows raised and her face thrust forward. "Well?"

The dwarf was suddenly overwhelmed with curiosity. "How many?" he demanded. "How many? Auntie Ghreck, how many?"

For another moment she held her pose unmoved. Then she lifted her pendulous jaw and looked down at him, blearily. "Eight hundred and twenty-seven," she said, enunciating each syllable. "Seven? Eight? Let be, seven."

Mote said, genuinely impressed, "Oh my!"

" 'Oh my,' he says. 'Oh my.' You think that's good? You think that's a good thing? So then tell me. *You* tell *me.*

"Why don't any of them ever come to visit me?"

Then the nest trembled and shook. Down, down below, Gortecas the Augur had seized a large fallen limb and was striking the tree with all his might, and shouting.

Auntie Ghreck flapped her right wing to her heart. "What's that?" she cried. "An earthflux?"

Inspiration seized the mite. "That's the giant who's pursuing me! He's got an axe—and he's trying to chop down the—" The harpy flew up in a flutter of wings and loose feathers and squawks. She swooped on him as he was saying, "—tree—" and buried her talons in his clothes, dropped off the edge of her eyrie, plummeted, then soared off and aloft and away.

Down below Mote saw, out of the corner of a bulging eye, the angered augur smiting the tree, as, amidst his blows, he cried out again and again and again, "Up! Up! Up! I say, up!" His figure dwindled and was silent and was gone.

Was gone, that is, from the sight and sound of Mote the brother of Atom. Some way off, however, from the site of the harpytree, in a house built of rocks and roofed with grassy turfs, and all so skillfully and cleverly as to make it appear that no house was there at all—there, there, in the cleft of the rocky, grassy clift—someone stirred and someone harkened and someone came slowly out through his bottom scapeway. Someone drifted off from tree to tree and boulder to boulder and boulder to tree to boulder, now slinking, now scampering. Someone whose skin was hot and red, someone whose teeth gleamed white, whose eyes were large and bloodshot, whose lips writhed. Whose tongue licked lips.

Someone who espied out the land and saw the cloaked and cowled figure of Gortecas the Augur.

And somewhere else the figure of Castegor the Augur suddenly stirred and started and looked anxiously, anxiously all around, around, around.

Oh, brother mine, beware! Beware, beware. . . .

Tabnath Lo, enwrapped in his own thoughts and contemplations, noticed nothing out of the ordinary. He had, it is true, stumbled slightly, but men sometimes stumble. He had, it is true, been vaguely aware that the sky had lightened, but sometimes skies do lighten. He plodded on, bemused, but not confused. The mute, however, did notice and did observe and did realize that something very much out of the ordinary had happened. Why had the fens and marshes so suddenly vanished away? Why were the shadows slanting differently? Only a moment ago there had been no such fields of flowers large as faces, stretching away on all sides. The flowers seemed to open wide in astonishment as they approached, then to close, fearfully; then to open shyly, then to deepen in color, and then to turn away entirely from them . . .

. . . only to open once again and stare upon their backs when they went by—as the mute, by a sudden turnabout, discovered. The flowers seemed then all in a confusion and whipped this way and that, as though in a wind; and a soft rustling susurration filled the air, as though the wind had passed again among them: but there was no wind, and all the air was still. White were the flowers, and pale, pale green; and rose-pale and the lightest shade of lilac and of blue, and . . . But how their colors deepened as they closed and opened, opened, closed, as they turned and turned about, as they rustled, as they hustled where they grew.

The mute hissed his confusion and concern, he ran a few steps forward and looked earnestly and uneasily into his master's face. He gestured towards the shadows, towards the sun, towards the curious face-like flowers with their petal-manes and petal-beards, and he hissled and he sissled and he hiss-siss-*hsihssed.* But Tabnath Lo, pacing

along, his lower lip tucked beneath his teeth, did not heed him. He did not see the shadow, the ripple, which of a swift sudden swept over the flowers like a sudden riff of wind (there was no wind) and vanished off into the bluegreen distance. But the mute's persistence at length won its way.

"What?" the merchant asked, suddenly. He stopped. He gazed into his servant's face. "Eh?" His slow, yet startled look, as like a man waked from a dream or even from a dreamless slumber, followed the mute's gesture. But all he saw were fields of furled-closed flowers, flowing over rolling hills, away, away, away. "What is the matter?" The mute hissed and gestured, he mimed and he mowed, but he stopped, quite suddenly. He wiped his mouth, threw up his hands, shrugged. Let his arms drop by his side. "Ah . . ." said Tabnath Lo.

"Let us go on, then," he said.

They went on, and following the trail, followed a diagonal along the downward slope of the land. Someone hereabouts and long ago had planted velvet trees on either side of the path and these had lately shed their bark; it seemed they did but tread some green soft carpet spread for them and rolling out ahead. And then the carpet ceased and then the land ceased. Broad and shallow steps led down to a landing, cut—like the steps—into the soft and rocky face of the precipice; thence, in the opposite direction, steps went down to a jetty protruding out into the waters of a long and vasty lake . . . if it was a lake. What was there, far down yonder, beyond those distant islands?—more lake? sea? But no boats at the jetty.

And across from the jetty was another precipice and another pair of steps: At the top was a castle or a fortress

or a fortified town or—but Tabnath Lo could not conjecture what else it might be, let alone what it was; it was built more into the side of the precipice than on top of it; and banners waved along its walls and there were many walls, and it seemed to him as he stood and gazed and murmured that he could recall no such place at all, nor lake nor sea nor walled place, nor even (now he came to think upon it) any such fields of flowers or lane of velvet trees—it seemed to him as he stood amazed that a strange and muted music drifted across, rising and swelling and falling upon the breeze, if there were a breeze: great gongs and shawms and trumpets and pipes and kettledrums. He saw no menfigures but he saw a long, long dock at the foot of the hillface.

And he watched as something like a bat's wing fluttered up and then another and another and another until a whole line of them all along the wharf or dock and then this moved out upon the water and he saw at last that they were sails and a bridge was moving out upon the water—not a dock at all—a bridge all built upon a floating foundation of small, small boats—a bridge which swung out from the shore and, pushed by the black batwing sails, moved across its angle and turned upon its curve and cut the dappled surface of the water. A bridge pushed by a breeze.

Only . . . was there a breeze?

And all this while the man watching upon the summit of the hill seemed to hear the sound of a strange music, cymbals and serpents and sackbuts, great gongs and shawms and trumpets and drums and pipes and horns: now swelling, now receding.

And then the end of the bridge touched against the piles of the jetty. It was not a perfect fit, and no doubt

was not intended to be: the bridge was just that longer that the jetty prevented its passing any farther. And so it stopped. There was no manfigure upon it. Then there were two. The batwings luffed and flapped. Then they filled. Slowly the end of the bridge swung away from the wharf and slowly the merchant and his mute walked along the floating bridge that walked upon the water. The wind which had sent it was now the wind that fetched it. Or was it another wind? Or was there any wind at all? The walls of the castellated fortress-building-city marched along the hill and swarmed down almost to the lip of the lake. The walls were of gray stone bordered and patterned with red stone. And great black pines trooped down to the water.

"This may have been unwise," the merchant said, musingly, as much to himself as to his mute. "But I had such a yearning to hear that exceedingly strange music that—" He stopped. He compressed his face. "Strange," he said. "Strange. Strange. I do not hear it now. How strange."

The bridge ground against the piles and bumped and butted. Merchant Lo started to step ashore. The mute took his arm, the mute shook his head, he hissed, he beckoned, he held back. But Lo said, "There is no other choice, my mute. The bridge, I am quite sure, will not return with us, without we step ashore and do what is expected of us . . . whatever that may be . . . whatever time it takes.

"And therefore we may as well begin to do it now."

They stepped ashore. The air was filled with cleanly pinesmell and a fainter scent of woodsmoke and the odor of the clean lake (if lake it was) itself.

"So, spies," said a voice behind them. They turned in an instant to see six men armed with swordpikes held at

the ready, and a seventh who had no arms. "So, spies," said this one. And for the moment said no more. His gray hair was cropped thin, and lay like a helmet upon his head. The six soldiers or guardsmen might have been of another race altogether: dull of color and of eye, tall, somewhat stooping, long of arm and leg and slack of belly and pendulous of lip, ears huge and protruding, with fleshy and sagging lobes; and their teeth were long and crooked and yellow.

"Golemeem!" exclaimed Tabnath Lo. Then, blinking: "We are no spies."

The graypoll said, "That were a new thing, if spies were to declare that they were spies. Spies deny, ever, that they are spies—you deny that you are spies—therefore it follows that you are spies. Besides which, you were seen standing on the opposite side and looking at this side, which is spying. Furthermore, you crossed over to this side, where you have no legitimate business, and whither you were not invited. Moreover, he who listens distinctly heard a voice saying, *Espy out the land—*"

"It was not I. It was not I."

"Ah, so. Was it he?"—indicating the mute.

"No, he—"

"Well, then. It was not he, therefore it was you. A voice is heard demanding, Espy out the land, and you appear and do it. And also a voice had been heard saying something else. It was heard saying, *Allitu . . . Allitu . . . Allitu . . .* Ahah. Yes. Just so." For Tabnath Lo had changed color. The graypoll looked at him with keen, derisive interest. "Just so, spy. Your occupation, you see, is known. And so, for that matter, is your purpose. *You* know it, *I* know it, but in order that you may know for sure that I know it, I shall declare it to you."

He paused, smiled thinly. "You are an agent and a forerunner of that Prime Deceiver which deluded and deluders term *The Cap of Grace.*"

Despair turned Lo's heart heavy as the golem-guards bound his hands with thongs of white leather. But he reflected that a forerunner implies an aftercomer, and his heart grew lighter.

That long, dark cold afternoon in Shindar's Port (was it as far away in time as in space? or did it only seem so?) had really begun with the pouch-eyed stranger sitting across the sluttered table at the hot-wine shop. He smelled of the sea and his worn clothes had salt-spray dried upon them, but mariner clearly he was not. Perhaps he was that rare thing, an augur both learned and sincere, or perhaps a marred merchant over-given to metaphysic or similar arcane speculation. "You look, Stranger, as though you'd seen Leviathan," Stag said, half-wondering why he bothered to speak.

The other man looked up. His face twitched. "Let us not open Rahab's mouth," he said, voice low.

Stag grunted. "Well, then, and as we have opened our own," he said, "let's put something hot in them: Wine-boiler, two here—"

Scrips and scraps of this and that had they talked, and nudged sundry subjects and passed on to and passed on through others. Now and then a gleam and a sparkle lit up eyes, but not for long. Stag's mind wandered, the other talked, some noise sounded, not loud enough to jar the speaker, it yet snapped Stag back into an awareness of what was being spoken.

"This world of ours, seemingly so self-contained," the man with the pouched eyes was saying, "is actually noth-

ing of the sort. Our island-globe, seemingly so stable and perpetual, is actually poised forever on the brink of dissolution and destruction. At every time and from every direction—including directions of which you cannot conceive—blows are aimed at our world, and each blow is warded off by an interposing and invisible shield. Should that shield slip, would an intrusion upon the natural order of things occur? It might seem so. But suppose the natural order of things requires and contains a provision that this shield *must* sometimes slip?—For sometimes slip it does: first occurs starflux to warn us; next is what is called earthflux—"

"That is what it is called," Stag, now totally attentive, broke in upon the man's words; "but what *is* it, truly?"

The man with the pouched eyes sighed and was a while silent. Then he said, in a low, low voice, "In truth, only those, perhaps, who have lived through it can say. It has not come to pass in your time nor mine—*yet*. Pray it never does."

He repeated, "Pray it never does. . . ." Presently he went away, and Stag did not see him again.

Shindar's Port is perhaps not really at the world's end, but it does well enough. South of it lies a sea so studded with rocks like great black teeth that no vessel larger than a ship's boat could possibly pass: and no ship's boat could live an instant in those angry seas whose waves roar and

dash themselves upon the rocks in incessant endeavor. Perhaps, indeed, they are engaged in rushing for the Rim of the World in order to lose themselves over the side; or, indeed, perhaps their agitation comes from another cause and they themselves from another direction, if that contrary legend be true, that their source sees them rushing down *upon* the Rim of the World . . . which, says that same legend, they must eventually wear away. . . .

But the soft, damp airs of the Great Valley which inclines like some vast scoop from Shindar's Mountains to Shindar's Port produce fleeces of unequalled texture—or perhaps the merit lies in the sweet grasses on which the sheep crop—or perhaps it is after all the softness and dampness of the air which gives the grasses their special qualities; who knows? From the often snowbound forests which lie the other side of the mountains are brought, year after year, bales of furpelts whose thickness and sleekness are unequalled.

Shindar's Lands have neither lord nor king nor syndics nor bailiffs, but the clansmen, both sheepherds and trappers, elect their own Courts; these courts distribute and redistribute, lustrum by lustrum, the rights of grazing and trapping; they hold the Great Sales and they direct the affairs of Shindar's Port, whither and whence the ships proceed with grain and wine and oil, or with the wool or skins gotten in trade. It is astonishing how many ships can be fitted neatly and without crowding within the stone breakwaters of Shindar's Port, and it is astonishing how quietly the roughest seamasters submit to the direction of the portwardens. It was not always so. Brawling and violence was once common enough, and one year a coalition of foreign mariners seized the Port and held it for that year and for the next.

And then the Shindari from both sides of the mountains came down, came down with deliberate speed, traveling by night and in the daylight concealing themselves in the innumerable sheepfolds of the Great Valley. They took the Port and, sparing but one out of every five, they burned the foreign ships: and on each fifth vessel they placed, disarmed, its own crew and the crews of the four others; and they sent them off, forbidding that they ever return. The following season there were fewer ships, the year after there were more than ever before. But only one of the attainted vessels ever dared come back, and it was promptly sunk. Since then there had been little trouble at Shindar's Port, there in the chill southern end of the world.

Many tales are told there, rumors and reports slide back and forth across the wet tables as swiftly as the mugs of hot wine; stories of wars between the sheydeem and the men-beneath-the-sea, of the corsairs and the wreckers, of cities sacked and loot as cheap as stockfish, of syndicates and partnerships formed (or formable) to adventure upon strange errands—or, upon common—stories of the deaths of kings, of great hoards of gold found here and there, of vessels plucked apart by dragons and by were-whales. They lie about ordinary things and are suspected of lying, they give true account of extraordinary things and are often believed, sometimes they are secretive and sometimes they sketch rough maps for all to see. Often they talk about the Cap of Grace. Oftener they talk about women. There are not many available to them there, at that rough harbor at the world's end, and though long voyages do sharpen appetites not even appetite can bring for more than a moment forgetfulness that the worn trulls who have plied their abrasive trade

in every port upon the coast are anything other than what they are—that is, worn trulls. A man often emerges from their cribs hungrier than he went in.

Stag sat at a table crowded with fellow-captains, sullen for no reasons good enough that he could think of, gulping now and then at the hot, honeyed wine; hating all the hairy, smelly, loud-lipped shipsmasters whom, and not so long ago, he had envied. It had been a bad time coming down, his vessel had met with unseasonable bad winds, with the result that he would be the last to be loaded: with the further and inevitable result that he would certainly meet with seasonably bad winds upon his return. Enough to put any man in a temper. But. Still. Bad winds were tangible things. He had fought them, complied with them, beaten them, won away from them before. It was not this alone that weighed him down, caused him to keep his mouth pressed shut except when letting wine into it. It was his ancient, well-remembered enemy, the black hag which could ride him by either day or night, be he gaunt-bellied or full. It was a bad thing, bad enough it would have been had he known a reason for it. But he knew none. He had worked and fought his way up from ship's boy to ship's master. Endured hungers and thirsts and submitted to outrage, pain, and fear. Had agreed and not just once to do three men's work for two men's pay. Gone days without sleep and more days than that without food or water or even the black comfort of soon and certain death. Had known sure hopes to be proven false and true friends to prove themselves falser. No longer depended on anything except his own strength. Knew it to be his one sure friend. By it and by nothing else, not by comeraderie, not by fortune, but by his own mind and power and steadfastness,

had achieved what he was now: any man's equal and no man's subordinate: the master of the ship which he owned.

And a fine, good ship she was, too.

He had won her hulk in a wrestling-match which had left him stiff and bruised for months. He had spent a full year in selecting planks to replace the bad old ones, appearing in every woodyard for hundreds of leagues about, paying unheard of prices to get what he wanted even if they had been promised to and paid for by others. He had rebuilt her, plank by plank himself, caulked her and pitched her, stood over the ropemakers and the sailmakers, hired augurs to select the best day for cutting her mast-tree and cutting it himself and floating it down two lakes and a river to the sea; shaped the spar and smoothed it and stepped it in. He had accepted no charter until, having sailed her back and forth, in good weather and in bad, for months, he had observed her needs and supplied them; had learned her faults and corrected them. And he had already refused offers to purchase and to trade her, more than he could remember how many. He had put into her all his wealth and all his strength and all his knowledge. And now, thinking about her, how good she was, how much men envied him for her, her beauty and her skill, he slowly felt the black hag depart from him.

"What do *you* know about it?" someone shouted, almost in his ear. He blinked, slid his mug across to the servitor who had come round again with the ladle and the steaming pot.

"More than *you* do, sonny!"

"I'm not that young nor you so old—"

"—earned my ship, didn't inherit her, so—"

A drunken old fool and a drunken young one—so Stag,

with a half-indifferent glance, summed up the sorry quarrel. But the others were egging them on.

"I've sailed rings around Leviathan, I've—"

"What do *you* know about—"

"I've seen Rahab's vent and—"

Time to be getting on, Stag thought. But the wine was so hot, there was so little to do until his turn came to load. He shrugged, sipped.

"What do *you* know about the shoals—"

"—seen more shoals than—"

"—graven bones—"

"—had a rich uncle, so he thinks that—"

"—made *your* money selling pretty boys to—"

The quarrel then descended into personalities, somehow the quarrel spread, some master mariners supporting the graynosed senior and some the redbearded junior. Who nonetheless continued to shout and curse at each other: when the wine is in, the wit is out. Like children they hurled names, like children they exchanged boasts. Graynose thrust his hand into his tunic and pulled out a tiny pouch on a thong and shouted, "Got a stone here that was robbed from the dragon-hoard of Smarasderagd himself, could buy you and *sell* you, thousand times—" And so of course what must redbeard do but copy the gesture and improve upon the boast and in went his hand and out came his hand and he waved his own bitty pouch and shouted, "I've got a stone here from the border of the Cap of Grace and it's—" His mouth moved but his words were lost in the roar of laughter which went up all around, but mostly and most loudly and most loathsomely from graynose himself.

Redbeard spat in his face. The table went over. The benches went down. The benches swung up. The benches

started to crash down. Everyone was struggling, fighting, stamping, shouting. Redbeard lay in a corner with his mouth opening and closing like a fish's mouth and his hands struggling to push himself up but his hands kept slipping because of the blood all around him and in a moment he had stopped trying. Because it was his blood.

By that time everyone on his feet was out the door or going out the door, Stag among them, not the first and not the last. The wineboiler was shrilling for the portwardens. The wind was cold from the grayblack sea. The wind was sharp from the sharp black rocks. Not the wind and not the rocks were as sharp as the knife which had given redbeard a second mouth in his throat and stained his beard a redder shade by far. Stag had caught him as he staggered and held him as he slumped and Stag's hands had made futile movements, useless gestures. He knew that redbeard was as good as in the Cool Gray Realm as though the man were already in it. He let him slide, he even may have (may have: it was all so swift, so sudden, and so swift) may have eased him a bit as he slid—what difference? no difference—and he turned to go, turned and ran as all the others were running, but with this difference between him and them: that most of them had nothing in their hands and one man may still have had a knife in his hands but Stag had a tiny leather pouch in his one hand and he clenched it and his other hand as he turned down a stonewalled alley and behind him the *oo-oo-oo*-ing of the portwardens' convoluted trumpet-shells.

He slowed to a walk, thrust his hands deep into the folds of his cloak. The alley was strange to him but it had a downward slope, and so, unless it was a cul-de-sac, led down to the Inner Hole, where his ship was, in Shindar's

Port. And if it should prove to be a cul-de-sac, then he would calmly turn and walk slowly back. He was no longer part of any murderous scene.

The alley did prove to be a cul-de-sac. The last building had, hanging in front of it, a small sack stuffed with wool, and it danced in the wind that now and then swept in gusts down the narrow way. A pillow: a lodginghouse: he rapped on the door. It opened so suddenly that he stood back, alarmed. Then, observing that the latchstring was inordinately long and stretched out of his sight, he entered.

"Close it behind ye," a thin voice said. She was old and looked ill and sat by the fire. The door closed and she let the cord drop to the side of the chair it was fastened to. "Common-room, or sole?" Almost automatically, she cocked her head and simpered at him. The look passed in a moment, but it told him enough. "Sole," he said, and fished her a bit of copper and tossed it in her lap. She gestured, she turned her head back to the fire. What did she see in it? The faces of men beyond count? the dreams she might have dreamed before beginning the slow descent to whatever shabby whorehouse at the world's end had seen her last days of pretended desirability?

He turned the door of the tiny room on its pivot and swung the bar in place. A thin spear of light lit the chamber, lit on the dirty pile of fleeces and the thin pillow, its floc pounded into lumps, lit the waterjug and the two pots. He opened his still-clenched fist. He opened the tiny pouch with his teeth, tearing and sawing at the sinews which sewed it, ripping the rag which concealed a wad of flax and . . .

. . . something else . . .

. . . *for around its border were set those which shone*

like gleamwood in the daytime and like the sun at night . . .

It was only a fragment, and it was not a stone. Impossible to tell what it was, or what it might be. But now, here, in a dim, dim, dimness halfway between daylight and dark, it gave off a visible light, and it seemed to him that this light was indeed halfway between that of gleamwood and sunshine. And yet was neither. And yet was something else. It felt well, lying in his hand. It felt comfortable. Was it indeed what that fool redbeard had said? Was there indeed truth to all that legendry? How much of it could be true? That he now held something in his hand which was so strange, in itself was no proof.

But, what was proof? Few would deny that there was a Cap of Grace, though none whom he had met had ever claimed to have seen it. Few, indeed, would be bold enough to define it and to stand firm in defense of such a definition. It was a crown of dazzling glory—said one relation—it was as subtle as the wind which gently ruffled the hair and only the pure in heart could see it—was another; it lay coiled like a serpent upon the branch of a tree in a dragon-guarded woods, and might drop upon the head of any who passed beneath—if any could manage to pass beneath; it lay buried deep beneath a thousand slabs of adamantine stone in an island in a lake of boiling blood; it quested to and fro, awaiting its hour; it might be had by any man or woman or child who had the gift to recognize it; it hid itself within a thousand disguises and only the sagest of the sage might unravel them all; it bestowed the heart's desire; it gave riches beyond price or meed or count; it—

Many things were said of it.

And among the things which were said of it, or sung

of it, or chanted about it, was that it might indeed be known for what it was: *for around its border were set those which shone like gleamwood in the daytime and like the sun at night.* Yet, despite all this, and despite what he now held in his hand, who had ever seen gleamwood shine in the daytime? and who had ever seen the sun shine at night? Stag was not naturally given either to piety or to credulity, he lived in a pragmatic world, and the thought stayed in his mind, as firm as flint between the teeth, that it was at least as likely that the ancient and oft-quoted lines had been inspired by something perhaps much like or even identical to that which he held in his hand, and engrafted onto the legend of the other wonder, as that the other wonder was true and that the Cap of Grace was indeed bordered about by things of which he held a single fragment. Still, and yet, and still. He did hold a wonder. It did feel well. . . . It was curious how it felt. . . .

Was it grace he felt? What did grace feel like? Was it something strong enough to benefit all the world? Would it not be wonder enough if it benefited any single person in the world? Conceive the relationship of this fragment to the whole, and then imagine this fragment to be itself entire . . . imagine an unknown but certainly a large number of them, enough to border about a cap . . . if such was but the border, what must the rest be like? . . . and then try to conjecture what it must be like to wear that rest . . . to have the Cap of Grace upon one's own head! If he were an object of envy and respect because of the ownership of one boat, imagine how men would look upon him if he owned the Cap of Grace: imagine . . . imagine . . . imagine. . . .

And if he were to imagine, what purpose would there

be in merely imagining that whatever the rest of this not-quite-stone might be or where it might be or where its other fragments might be, that it be unique and sole . . . a curiosity of value, no doubt . . . but merely a curiosity: what of it then? Not so much, then. The master of the sea's best ship of its size had no time to spend on thinking of or pursuing after the merely curious or the merely good. But suppose that, somehow, somehow, that witless wittold redbeard was for once in his fool's life correct? All men did agree that there was a something called the Cap of Grace. One might doubt, deny, or question this aspect or that facet of the stories told about it: but to deny the whole existence of it would be to assume either that all mankind was duped or that all mankind was conspired to dupe him, Stag, so—

So, then, what did he know about this thing in his hand which felt so well, with its slow and singular shine and beam and glow? Redbeard had had it. What did he know about redbeard? His name would be easily enough brought back to mind. Where he had been or might have been could be doubtless learned, to an extent at least, in the wake of all the babble and gossip sure to follow on his sudden death. Clearly he hadn't talked before about his tiny treasure, judging by the astonished and totally unbelieving laughter which came upon his declaration. No one else had heard, then, or even suspected— A fool the man had been, without many qualities or virtues, but one might at any rate respect the successful—until then—effort (and for him it must have been a great effort) which it must have taken for him never before to have given open boast about it. So: there were things he could, with luck, learn later. But what had he already learned?

Standing in that dark and dim and dirty sliver of a

room, almost as cold as the street outside, he sent his mind back to that scene in the winehouse . . . pity that he'd been so slumped in his own black bile that he hadn't listened with full attention. Still . . .

What had been said?

". . . stone . . . robbed from the dragon-hoard of Smarasderagd himself . . ." No, that— *Smarasderagd,* the emerauld-loving dragon— No, that had been said by the graynosed older captain: and very imprudently, too; but that was his own problem. A cavern full of emeraulds: tempting . . . dragon-guard . . . not so tempting . . . another matter . . . forget that. What had been said before? His black eyebrows contracted and formed one black bar across his face. So—

"What do you *know about the shoals—"*

"—seen more shoals than—"

"—graven bones—"

"—had a rich uncle . . ."

He grunted. Could that be it? Could the fragment in the pouch have been a heritage from redbeard's uncle, whoever he was? In which case *graven bones* in which case the trail must *graven bones* the trail must go back at least another generation and *graven bones,* be damned! Be damned to graven bones! Why did the phrase keep tripping him up? Graven *bones?* And *graven* bones? Who had ever heard of such things? What could it mean? To be sure, where there were shoals there'd be likely bones, bones of those whose ships had foundered, but who would engrave them and why? Not redbeard, surely. He saw the weak and angered face before his mind's eye, saw the rather loose lips moving, moving, little droplets of wine, heard the lips saying, saying. *What do* you *know about the shoals' graven bones?* No. Not that. There was a gap,

a word lost. The shoals and graven bones? The shoals or graven bones . . . ?

His mouth fell open and he took a faltering step. It was as though something had struck him a blow inside his head. Of course! Oh, and ah, of course; of course! *Of course!*

"What do you know of The Shoals of Brazen Stones?"

They were fortunate on the voyage up the coast from Shindar's Port; the seasonally bad winds were rather only mildly bad. Once, indeed, they heard the faint and rolling thunderous echo which—it seemed certainly to come from further off to sea and not at all from land—which could only have been Rahab, roaring forth her love and desire and ceaseless quest for Leviathan: but her they did not see. Stag had thus time to spare for thought and conjecture and for the rolling and unrolling of his charts.

The Shoals of Brazen Stones. . . . Their approximate location was known, their extent and limitations a matter for surmise, and likely enough these changed in breadth and they certainly did in depth. At certain or rather at uncertain times they lay deep enough below the surface so as to give (at least in sundry areas) no hint of their presence, and to allow ships to pass over, unknowing. In other areas or at other times it was easy enough to see them, or to see and hear the waters breaking over them. It was the inbetweens which were the dif-

ficulties. Tales were told of vessels sailing on unvexed and innocent, only and suddenly to hear a noise like a hundred thousand boiling caldrons, to see the seas erupt before, behind, around, and under them, to feel the shock not alone of the angry and unsettled waters but of the stones themselves as they struck against the hull . . . pounded against the hull . . . like the stones of massed and hidden ballasters and catapults . . . broke in upon the bottoms and the sides of the ships . . .

Sometimes these things had happened. Sometimes the nomad parts of the shoals rose slowly, slowly. Sometimes a ship was cradled from beneath so gently and yet so firmly that the sails still strained whilst all around the waters had ebbed away and the gleam and the glisten was not that of waves but of the glittering sheeny smooth-stones themselves. Sometimes it had been possible to move the ship's company off in the ship's boat, dragged and portaged to open water. Sometimes vessels had been released without harm, the shoals subsiding as safely as they had ascended. Sometimes starvation, fugitives sometimes caught by onrushing and inrushing waters as they straggled and struggled impatiently afoot, sometimes rapinage by boarders. Sometimes rescue by knowledgeable islanders.

But these tales had accumulated over the course of centuries. It was known that south of Cape Sand and north of Fleet River and east of the Isles of Doves, the Shoals of Brazen Stones were never seen—never, ever, never. Wise mariners accordingly made shift to keep without this triangle. Within lay a few islands whose trade was left to the hands and skill of their own inhabitants. Or—

—had been.

Or—putting the matter another way—a new trade had been growing, or an old trade had found new headquarters. "I've pirated in my time," said Stag's bosun, a man perhaps two years older than his captain and the cultivator of long moustachioes but no beard; "but gave it up because I couldn't stand the waste of it all. It could be done as neat and systematic as any other trade, but . . . somehow . . . it isn't. Fight and take, or fight and flee, or fight and be killed or sold—that's fair enough. Killing a man for the pleasure of, I can see that, too, though it's not to my general taste. But—killing a man just because he's around to be killed, what's the sense to that? I can see that it might be fun to spread the ground with spices just to walk upon, if you'd made your choice you'd rather do that than sell it or use it. But those clods would walk around on a hold full of spices simply because they'd ripped the sacks open and it had spilled out. Why had they ripped the sacks open? Because they'd been ripping. And they went on ripping. Not all are like that. Most are. I'm not. Fell into the way of it by accident, one voyage. Gave it up by choice. Silly sort of game. No wonder they all end up badly."

He had as much to say on the subject as might be reasonable to ask. Could tell, and did, about the year the Yellow Fleet took Buri-Ad, and wore itself out in one uninterrupted debauch which lasted four full months; till the remnant of the inhabitants arose one dawnlight and attacked the remnant of the Fleet: only one escaping: a ship's boy who disguised himself as a girl, put on a dirty shift and smeared his face with grease and ashes and affected a limp. Related the attack of the corsair-vessel *Kraken's Egg* upon the honest trader *Meteor Lamp,* out of Silverstrand, with a humdrum cargo; by who-knows-

for-what-reason, the *Lamp* had captured the *Egg,* and the victorious crew, bedazzled at the sight of the richness in the hold, determined on the spot to go a-pirating themselves. Told of the thieves' villages on the miserable and marshy stretch of Mainland coast which had in the course of time worked themselves up to the possession of a robbers' fleet and transferred their headquarters to an island in or around the Shoals of Brazen Stones, where they were safe forever—or at least for now—from the intermittent attentions of the Syndics of the Sea.

"Island," said Stag, tapping his fingers on the bit of shipsbread and the wad of pressed raisins which lay, half-gnawed, on the bench beside him. "What island's that?"

"Allitu, it's called."

"Hard to reach, I suppose. Goes without saying."

"There are pilots."

Deep-dug fingers, released, had left white marks on the Captain's ruddy cheek. "Oh, ah, there are pilots. I didn't say, Hard to find. I said, Hard to reach. Let out the reefs," he said, with no pause at all. "Aye," said the bosun, calling out the order even as he bounded up to see it was carried out.

The sail slapped once, then leaned, unhindered, full away from the wind. The ship's clean hull slid more swiftly over the yielding sea. A slate-colored porpoise tore its surface, once, twice, thrice, sank slowly, vanished. Perhaps it had found the bit of bread Stag had tossed it. Without the need to give that order just then he might have found it awkward to change the conversation. Sooner or later the bosun would have to know. *Someone* else would have to know. It could hardly be done by a man alone.

Wasteful? It need not be wasteful. Once, in the mazy

passageways of the Secret Gardens in Rysathian Wace, he had sought the woman for whom he had paid—for the privilege of seeking whom in those close-kept mazeways he had paid. All the ways looked alike to him. Now and then he thought he scented a hint of a perfume, or heard the shadow of a breath or the ghost of a light tread. Then he saw the merest wisp of cloth caught upon a rose-thorn at one entering-way: thence he had departed down that flowery lane, had found her, caught her, possessed her (unprotesting) on the yielding turf.

So now he found himself, so to speak, wandering down another and quite different mazeway. Could the fragment now concealed upon his own person, as it had once been on the murdered redbeard's, could not this fragment be compared to the fragment of cloth? And on what mazeway was it indicated? if not the one which led to Allitu?

There he was determined to follow, going in his own good ship, the goodliest ship he had ever seen on any sea. But between resolution and resolve, between resolve and resolution, between commencement and conclusion, what changes may there not be: what rocks, what shoals, what shifting winds, what captivities, and what escapes. And, most and most-inclusive of all: what changes. Between Shindar's Port and Allitu he had met his present woman. And in that instant, marked by no visible reefs, torn by no tangible winds, all had been changed forever.

And now he found himself in a strange land following a strange and sixlimbed creature down a strange trail, probably no nearer to the Cap of Grace than ever he had been, perhaps no nearer than he would ever be. But he lived, he was aware of the running sap in the trees and the pulsing blood in all his veins, he felt the breeze cooling the small sweat upon his back and riffling the small

hairs upon his head. Things were not as he had wanted them, nor was he content with them the way they were right then; but he lived, he was alive, he did not despair, he did not even show astonishment when he saw the two children sitting upon a rock and regarding their dirty toes as they swung their feet to and fro and to and fro.

He turned his head to say something, he knew not exactly what he would have said, to the silvery old sixy whose sniffing and whose spooring had led them here—but once more the ancient centaur had led them and left them, and was not to be seen in all that wild, wild wood.

"Trenny and Darda," he said. "Darda and Trenny."

Gortecas the Augur paused in his belaboring of the tree. Had he heard the dwarf say anything? "What?" he called. *"What?"* Out of the corner of his eye, did he see a shadow? If so, it was not there now. He gave a swift glance upward. Had he just now gotten a glimpse of something flying? Not really the right shape for a bird, far too large for a bat? If so, it was not there now. "What," he said to himself, with a grim chuckle, "has that hangman dwarf grown wings?"—Did his mirth echo back to him, grim . . . and ghostly? Was there that shadow again? Was there another . . .

He took the treebranch up again and with deliberate speed circumscribed an almost entire circle around the trunk of the tree. Then he hiked up his robe and un-

fastened from his waist-gardle a bagget which showed signs here and there of having once been rich and red and costly cloth, but was for the most part now quite darkened by sweat and dirt. He reached his hand into it and drew out a small net of fine meshing. Next, and without lifting up his head, he searched about, espied a low bush near his feet, and broke off a withe, which he stripped of leaves with his fingers and thrust it and pushed it into and through the hemming till its end protruded out of one opening next to the opening out of which its end stuck. Then he squatted and then he held out his hand.

"I would ask your kindness, friend," he said, in an abstracted voice, "to take this sieve and to fill it with a handful or two of soft earth or sand, if there be any hereabouts; in order that I may perform an augury, or auspication."

A second passed, and then another. Then a hand touched the sieve, then the hand took the sieve, then the hand withdrew. A smile lifted one corner of the augur's thin mouth, and he rubbed the somewhat flattened tip of his nose, and he sang a wordless song in his nose and he gently shook and rattled the bagget. Then the hand thrust the sieve back at him. "I do thank you, friend," said Gortecas, in an absent manner. He cleared a patch of ground with a sweep of his hand's edge and then shook the sieve and shook it and sifted the contents as a housewife sifts meal, till at last and at length only a few small clods and twigs and pebbles were left: these he tossed aside with a deft gesture not unlike that of a goldwasher.

"Gortecas, Gortecas, Gortecas," he murmured, taking a quick reading on the skies, informing the Elements and Potencies who he was, so they would take no offense.

Clearing his throat, with his finger he drew a quick square . . . or four lines which would do for a square . . . another look upward . . . he shifted his position slightly . . . again . . . a tiny bit more . . . Then he looked up. The other was staring at the patterns, openmouthed, white teeth and wet red lips gleaming. Wet red eyes staring. Gortecas glanced down again. Murmured, "Friend, do me the further kindness of stepping back somewhat out of the way. . . ." He gestured. The other moved back.

Calmly and without haste Gortecas reached out his finger and completed the circle around the tree. Then he took up his medicine-bagget and shook it briskly, then put it down to draw another series of lines, these set within the square: arcs, waves, intersecting angles, stars, ox-horns . . . Then he opened the end of his medicine-bagget and sent its contents sprawling onto the soft-sifted earth. He leaned and looked. The figure behind him licked his lips and lifted his two hands in a clawing gesture towards the augur. Then blinked. Then scowled. Then put his hands down again. Filthy, he was. Dirt grained his skin and mottled his pores. But his fingernails were immaculate. They were also pared to points. His reddened eyes seemed to focus on the figure in front of him, then upon the diagram: half-concerned and half-confused. A growl rose in his throat, but, with an alarmed look, he stifled it. Tried, with an effort, to look unconcerned.

"Mmmm . . ." The augur pursed his thin lips. "Pebble within shell . . . something contained in something else . . . yes . . . to be sure . . . What's this? What's *this? What's this?* Confusion twice takes the throne of order?" He frowned. Muttered angrily. Again the figure behind raised his both hands and this time brought them down.

And stared at them, astonished. Then reached out a single hand. Withdrew it. Completely baffled, dug his hands into his tangled hair. Then got to his feet, put his back against the bole of the tree, leaped forward. Fell sidewise. The noise of his fall caused the augur's head to turn. For a moment the two regarded each other. "You must be more careful, sir friend," the soothsayer cautioned. "Not only might these exertions occasion you an injury, but the clamor of them bids fair to interrupt my scanning of the configurations." He returned his gaze to the ground.

Presently the other man got to his feet, and next he commenced doing something rather odd: he proceeded in a circular manner all around the trunk of the tree, with his hands thrust out and his back always to the trunk. Then, coming back where he had started, and with an expression on his unkempt face which mingled anguish and anger in equal proportions, he gave a great leap upwards and forwards.

And fell crashing down once more.

Again and again he repeated his movements, till the soil about the trunk was quite scuffled and torn. Then he squatted and he wept. Then he opened his mouth. At first only inarticulate and uncouth sounds proceeded from him. Then he cleared his throat with a sound of *augh!* "Aug!" he said. "Aug– Aug– Aug-*gur!*"

Gortecas sighed, looked up, said nothing.

"Aug..ur... Can...t...geh...t...ou...t..."

"Not at all?"

"No...t...a...t...all..."

"In that case," said the augur, wiping out his configurations and placing his medicine things in the sieve and shaking them; "in *that* case, you clearly require my help.

And I," he said, "shall give it to you." He shook the sieve once more. He rose. "You must strive," he said, "to cultivate an attitude of philosophical detachment."

The creature wailed. "F...ood!" he cried. "N...o... f...ood! S...tar...ve...t...o...d...eath...!"

"Nonsense," said Gortecas, briskly. "There is food. You have only to know where to look for it. And I hope," he added, as he prepared to depart, "that this will be a lesson to both of you." He walked away with swift strides. Behind him, the homophage, squatting on his haunches, lifted up his head and howled. Once. Twice. Then no more. Then, his red eyes glaring like those of a beast in a cage, he watched the dwindling figure. His red lips moved. "G...or...t...eca...s..." he clicked and hissed. "S...o... S...o... G...or...t...eca...s... S...o... G...or...t...eca...s..."

The man in the first hall had no particular personal feature which impressed itself on Tabnath Lo's mind. His manner was dreamy and abstract, and he barely seemed to notice them as they approached. But in his left hand he held a huge and convoluted shell and he had it close to his ear. Said the warder to him, "Repeat what you last heard."

And he who listened said, "*'Espy out the land . . .'*"

"Good. What else?"

And he who listened said, "*'Allitu . . . Allitu . . . Allitu . . .'*"

The grayhaired warder turned a look of mild triumph and a look of mild scorn and mild amusement on Lo. It was as it was all too obvious for any greater emotion. Lo felt his gaze faltering, his head sinking. The beginnings of a great uncertainty, a great confusion, oppressed him. Had he, after all, said those words?—lately enough for them to be heard here? Was there, after all, anything unreasonable in his perhaps having said them? A spy in any classical sense he certainly was not, but would it not have been logical for him to want to know what the land was like? And yet and even so, in such a case, why should he feel even faintly guilty?

"Nor is that all," said grayhair; "but it is all for now. —Of *that,* that is." He uttered one or two raw syllables to his golemmeem, he and they moved forward, Lo and his mute perforce followed. "Or perhaps you have been here before?" the warder said, slightly inclining his head over his shoulder, gazed unwinking, raised his eyebrows, then turned full-face forward once more.

And, indeed, there did seem . . . did there? . . . did there not? . . . something familiar? Or was he yielding to mere suggestion? Lo drew himself up and cast a sharper look about the corridors and the chambers opening onto it, whereof some were shut and some not. His mute seemed no longer in any degree disturbed or perturbed. Surely it was a very various sort of place, now richly and smoothly finished and now rough-hewed and coarse; here adorned with carvings and fixtures and there showing the primal brick and stone. Yet, for all of this diversity, if the place did not seem precisely familiar, yet the impression it gave was in no wise strange.

Now the corridors dipped up, and now they descended. From time to time, though he was not able to pause, he could observe people in the various rooms; and sometimes—though brief, brief was his glance—sometimes they seemed to be engaged in noble activities, and sometimes in things ineffably sly and nasty. The warder stopped and turned and beckoned to his prisoner, and he pressed his lips together a bit and nodded rapidly . . . half as though in amusement and half as though in warning. Then he gestured for silence and then he beckoned his charges through a door. And although Lo had no idea what was to be found therein, and although he was fully sensible of the element of warning, he felt eager to enter, and he did so as quickly as he could. Well it was that the grayhaired warder put a cautioning hand out then, else Lo would certainly have cried aloud.

It was not clear to him if they were inside the building or outside of it, but, whichever, the natural contours of the ground were still preserved. He looked over a rocky ledge and there in an open space he saw two men and two beasts and once again he had that haunting sense of the familiar and then he saw that the two beasts were one onager and one centaur and next he recognized—and recognized, too, his foreknowledge—the two men as Captain Stag and his bosun. Part inadvertently, and part purposefully enough to whisper: "So you've got them, too," he said.

"Not quite yet," the warder said, low.

The merchant took a step nearer, rocks gave way beneath his feet, bounded down the side of the hill or clift, he felt his own balance tottering, moved, waved his arms, there was a staff in his hand, it was not a staff, it was a spear, he took a step back onto solid ground and cast the

spear with all his might, and took two steps back. He trembled. His guide murmured, "Careful, careful . . ." but it was not clear in regard to which action his words were meant.

"Oh . . ." said Lo. "Why . . ."

He peered carefully over the paved brink, but there was no longer hill or cliff, there was no onager, no centaur, no Stag, no bosun; there was no landscape: only a sort of squared pit, and not very deep. He said, "But . . ."

The grayhead gave a faintly impatient sigh, and they moved on, through long halls, and came at last to a mighty door. The grayhead said, "Proceed."

Tabnath Lo said, after pressing upon it, first tentatively, then forcefully, "It is locked."

"Perhaps you have the key."

"I? No . . . *Oh* . . ."

For he did have the key, and it looked greatly familiar. Again the eagerness possessed him, and without waiting for a further direction he turned it in the lock, and they all entered. It was a sort of mercantile storeroom, and seemed to contain, for all the world, every item or every sort of item which he knew to be contained in his own storerooms in his own warehouse at home. Item for item, bale for bale, box for box, and sack for sack, the contents seemed identical. And yet, with what a difference. How numerous these same articles had appeared when filling his own premises. And how scant they now appeared, lodged within this great chamber which could have contained a hundred times as much, with room to spare besides. Lo said nothing. They moved on.

They moved on into another chamber, which Lo's key opened with equal ease, and here there were no sacks of barley, no bolts of cloth or bales of stockfish. Here was

a hoard of treasure, jewels gleamed, gold glistered on moon-colored bars of silver; rings, necklaces, armills, rich goblets galore. Lo's astonished voice broke into a sob before it could form one clear word. Here it was, here it all was, so much risked, so little gained, and now all of it, all of it, rapted and ravined away, and brought here to the hidden treasury of others.

"Allitu, Allitu, Allitu," mocked the warder.

Tabnath Lo blinked, wiped his blurring eyes. Plunder plundered? No . . . No, surely not . . . Were these not the selfsame walls within which he and Stag had mutually hid the plundered riches of the isle? The plundered plunder of the plunderers. . . . Secreted and secured, walled within walls, deep in the forgotten labyrinth beneath the Old Queen's Tower, locked inside of ways whose access was locked with double-locks to which only he and Stag had the keys: and there, within the penultimate chamber, where only he and his partner could conjointly go, was the key to the last lock—

The key which he now held within his hand!

Rage took hold of him. He twitched and trembled. Had the grim golem-guards with their massy limbs and sword-pikes not surrounded the grayhaired warder, Lo would have leapt at him. "He has betrayed me . . . betrayed me . . ." His voice broke.

"O*h*?"—on a rising note. And—"Does that surprise you?"

"No!" the merchant cried. "It surprises me not at all! I always knew that he would! Always!"

"And rightly," murmured the warder. "And rightly. What is he up to, wandering around the countryside? Conspiring with centaurs, doing who knows what?"

Tabnath Lo's anger was transmuted by the other's note

of sympathy into a determination which as yet had no fixed form of purpose. He followed, feeding upon his wrath, enjoying its warmth. He was led through room after room. In one lay more treasure, and he felt that it was his . . . could be his . . . ought to be his. . . . In another lay great store of arms and armor. In others were richly wrought robes of state and office: provosts and syndics and bailees might wear these robes—and, curious and yet significantly, all the robes seemed to be his own size. He desired much to touch all these things, the treasures and the armamentures and the robes—and, in rooms after them, the costly furnitures and the house-trappings worthy of a palace—but all were guarded from his touch by walls of crystal secured with what seemed replicas of the same sort of lock-hole. And, much though he tried, he could not make his key to fit in any.

At last, in a muffled, wearied, panting voice, forgetting that he was a prisoner, he asked, "Who has the key?"

In part quizzically but in more part sorrowfully, the warder replied, "Can it be that you do not know?"

They were at a turning in the corridor now, and, as Lo looked back in anguish and perplexity, he saw, as though reflected in a vast box of mirrors, a familiar enough figure in each and every treasure-room, seen clearly through every open door, an immediately familiar figure with a key in his hand. And the figure simultaneously opened each and every lock in every crystal door in every crystal wall. At once the same strange music began to play, but no longer in the least softly or sweetly: it broke into one great clamor of sound. And broke off—

The figure at the doors turned and looked at him.

"Stag!" he cried. *"Stag! Stag! Stag!"*

He clenched his fists and raised his hands and, face

convulsed and muscles tensed, had taken but the first step of implicit attack, when quite silently but quite effectively a crystal wall slid from ceiling to floor and blocked his way. The warder said, as though he had said it a many times before and as though he expected to say it a many times more, "Not here. Not here. It cannot be done here. Not yet. Not quite yet. Not here—"

Beyond the walls of crystal clear the figure that was so many figures continued to look at him, frozen still. "Then where?" cried Lo. "Where? Where? *Where?*"

"Outside—"

The merchant took a great shuddering breath. "Then let me be outside!"

Treasure chambers and treasures and walls and halls and doors and floors, guardian and golem-guards, site and building and bridge and lake, all in that moment vanished away. And yet somehow seemed to be still with him. And yet he stood alone in the wilderness, and only his mute stood with him.

Trebandóndos and Chevantirósos had been berrying by the burn below the pool, and afterwards they had gone and bathed and frolicked. Now they just lay, each under his own tree, doing nothing, pleasantly. They had been so engaged for some while when a certain vibration, first from the ground, and next along the air, caused each to lift head, then ears.

"Coming very fast," they agreed.

A certain quality in the steps brought them at once to their feet. "A she! A mare! A young one—" Eyes gleamed and teeth glistened in beard-thickets. "Aye. . . . Twill soon be season-time . . . if tisn't already." Chevantirósos preened his shag breast and flanks, Trebandóndos kicked his legs.

And then they saw her running by the burn, all gleaming golden in the sun. Trebandóndos without hesitating beat upon his bosom with his palms and, hueing and hallooing, started off after her. Chevantirósos leaped the hillside and cut them both off. She eyed them both with her golden eyes and she toyed uncertainly with her golden mane: seemed both relieved and fearful.

Trebandóndos reared up and turned upon his fellow, now beating his black breast with his fists. "Get thee gone!" he bellowed. "I followed first! Get th' gone!"

At once Chevantirósos scooped up a rock. "Tis Ananarusa, maiden-mare— 'Maiden,' dost hear me? Unstopple thy burry lugs, or I'll mash them and do't for thee, then may be thou'lt hear!"

The other centaur-stallion whirled about and surveyed her, then turned back. "If I mayn't mount she without she will, then I'll persuade she to will," he declared. "Get thee gone, I say, an' I'll court she—"

But Ananarusa, maiden-mare, cantered somewhat forward and waved her hands, palms down. "Nay, brothers," she said, her husky voice somewhat trembulous; "this is no place nor time for courtships and such. Me wouldst we were at the High Far Glades, that ye might court and contend for me—soon enough twill be—"

Trebandóndos growled, flung out his arm. "Then get thine uncoupled cunny thanderwards," he directed, "an'

I'll follow thee an' save it from this one's twisted pizzle-swipe, fitter to ope an onager than a sweet Sixlimb she like thee, Ananarusa, maid—"

"Ass-tupper thyself, rogue roan!"

"Soot-eater!"

"Thy sire were a foury and thy dam—"

Closer and closer had they gotten. Ananarusa stepped between them and seized each one by the beard. "Brothers, brothers, be ye still and hear to me. Me's come a long way and ha' run uncommon swift the way, besides, so hear to me, now! Else I'll mash both your muzzles together! So— Brothers, there are Fourlimbs loose into our land, dostye hear? Me's lost their count, by one here, by two there, and a three in nother place . . . it crawls wi' them, like ants, brothers! My breath's spent, so tis for ye both to make at all full speed an' rouse the herd—and yet wait one bit more—a wonder me did see today, for all me tarried not for he: Drogorógos did me see!"

Confusion, anger, alarm—now incredulity between the two males.

"Drogorógos? Drogorógos does be dead!"

"Maid, thee couldn't know Drogorógos, were he to bite thee in the fetlock—"

"Twas he, twas he, twas Drogorógos!—with his pelt all silvery and with his scars a-here and a-here and a-here—and his voice all so—" She forced her own down to a note it could not long carry, and she imitated.

This seemed to strike the males amazed more than the other news. Drogorógos! Still he lived? Drogorógos! Where had he been? The fierce, the canny, the clever and the brave, the mighty, the ancient: Drogorógos domineering, Drogorógos overbearing, Drogorógos—

"Enough for now. Drogorógos alive and Fourlimbs in the land? Follow as thee can, maid Ananarusa, an' we go to rouse the herd!"

The next thing that Castegor did after delivering to Rary a good day's supplies of food, gathered at no small labor, from around the mesial vicinity of the house, was to retire with his excuses and ascend to that same small chamber under the eaves of Stonehouse Hobar. He had no wine, but he had his thoughts and he had his view. A bough of the great lilac tree which a wife of Hennan Hobar had planted as a shrub waved close outside; the air in the tiny room was gratefully heavy with its scent. Past the full blossoms he could see for many a league of dark green and light green, and the gray line which marked the gaunt escarpment of a nameless ridge; slate-blue riverine system snaked and forked like veins, and the distance was the color of smoke. He scanned, watched, saw nothing to cause an alarm of either joy or terror or of uncertainty, which is the major portion of man.

Down below the two women had heated water and bathed. Rary let out her breath and drew it in, a slow-then-swift sighing sound, her fingers tracing but not touching the marks on Spahana's white skin. Then, "It was never him that did this to you. . . ."

"No. . . . Oh, no. . . ." Her face moved briefly. "It was before. It was not just once." She took up a dry cloth. She shook her hair. "He has never hurt me," she said.

Rary had to speak. "You have had children, dear, haven't you?"

For a moment, Spahana was not only silent, she was immobile, black hair glistening, breasts bare, arm arrested. "I have had a husband," she said, "and a child. They are dead." She stood up, held out her arms. Rary helped her into her robe. Spahana went over to a bench by a window. The scene she saw was almost the same as the one Gortecas was seeing. But her thoughts were not his. She watched yellow walls and yellow towers burning on a nearby hill and scanned empty casements for faces she knew she would never see again, heard voices she could only hope never to hear again. Voices, noises, faces, flames. Hands, fists, shackles, whips. Caryavas destroyed. Captivity. One word. How many hells embraced in a single word. Captured, sold, lost, taken, beaten, bartered, gambled. The jealous fury of a purchaser's wife. Scenes as though graven upon the rim of a platter which turned slowly, slowly, slowly, red, black, yellow, red, image, picture, posture, scene, turn, turn, red—

They had given her a red robe to wear that last time she was sold. Then they had stripped it from her. They had fastened it by cunning ways so that one tug at the hem as she stood on the block had brought it tumbling in a heap at her feet. It was a common trick. Some girls would shriek and stoop and clutch and some would simply step out of the folds and others with a jest and a cackle would kick it into the audience. Spahana had done none of these. She had not even flinched. She was not a girl. It had happened to her times before. Worse by far than this and that had happened to her.

Eager faces, leering faces, bored faces, faces old and young, fresh and jaded, evil, indifferent, there below all

and all around her. "Never mind the marks," the auctioneer said, as he pointed. It would have been useless for him to have ignored them. "They'll fade. Not her fault, you can see she knows how to behave herself. These things happen . . . people can't control themselves . . . Well. You can all see she's of a good age and in good shape and holds herself well." They could all see. They did all see. Clear eyes and bloodshot eyes and cold eyes and hot eyes. Smooth faces and rough faces and bearded faces. Gray beards and black beards, dandy beards and careless beards. Pale cheeks and veined cheeks and ruddy cheeks. Here and there rings glinted on a finger or in an ear. "You don't often see such a fine woman," the auctioneer said, even-voiced. No need for a song and a dance; he had a prime article here and one which needed no trickery—the bit with the dress was the only piece of showmanship he bothered with. "Neither free nor bound, you don't. What's your name, dear? *'Spahana'*—has a pleasant voice. 's had at least one child, so not like to shame your manhood by being barren. *Now*—let's not diddle around with any low bids, very well? This is not a scullion we're offering, and anybody who tries any jokes, he can kindly stay away from the next sale. What'll you give, Master Craftsman Drinnid?"

Drinnid stroked his snowy beard and shook his head. "My begetting days are past. I came to find a seamstress. Can be old, can be ugly, long's she comes cheap and sews a seam."

There was a slight chuckle, a slight movement in the crowd. Real bidding would begin any moment. Any moment, the pimps with their hair curled and scented would begin to hold up their fingers. Any moment, the satyrs who had tired of the women bought at the last sale

would begin to loosen their pouches. Any moment . . . She had said to herself that she would not look. That she would just stand. To look would be either to hope or to lose hope. She had, between the destruction of her city and this present sale, she had wept and she had begged, had escaped and been caught, had hanged herself and been cut down, had . . . Nothing mattered (she told herself). She had endured everything, she would endure anything. She would not look.

She looked.

There was nothing in the way he was looking at her. It was not cruel, it was not kind, it was not desirous, it was not rejecting. It was not even, for all the way his eyes slid up and down her naked length and pausing here and there, it was not even with calculated appraisal. He seemed to be in the same decade of age as she was, he had a thick blacktangled beard. His cheeks were ruddy and he had a gold ring in one ear. Their eyes met. The auctioneer said, for his eyes saw everything, "What will *you* give, Captain Stag?"

The man said, "I'll give my ship."

The roar of laughter broke upon the tenseness of the moment, ebbed away. The auctioneer said, "We'll take it." There was a hush, then a babble, then swift protests here and there. The auctioneer said, "Silver buys gold and gold buys silver, but neither silver nor gold has been able to buy Captain Stag's boat. Women come and women go, but a boat like that doesn't come once in a lifetime. Hand up her tiller, Captain Stag." He had it under his arm, as most ship's captains had theirs; not that no other tiller could steer her, but it was a symbol, a symbol of ownership and control. He handed it over. The auctioneer stooped and drew up the red robe with his other hand.

"Go down, now, woman," he said. "She's yours now," he said. He turned and gestured. "Bring up the next one," he said.

Since then he had never said, "You're mine." He had not said, "I gave my ship for you." He hadn't said, "You're worth it," nor had he said, "You aren't worth it." Not once had he referred to the ship or to the manner of their coming together. He'd asked her no questions about her past. Nor had she ever said anything like, "Are you sorry?" or "You are not sorry, are you?" or "I am glad that you did." Indeed, they spoke but little to each other. He gave her orders as he gave the bosun orders, though he gave her fewer; she never refused them; almost never did she speak unless she was spoken to. In her unhaughty pride, in her dignity of carriage, her anticipation of his words and her silent fulfilment of them, in her beauty, her graces, in her mere silent presence in the day times, in the admiration and the often envy of all the world, he seemed (insofar as he seemed anything, insofar as it might be possible to know him) to derive at least sufficient satisfaction to keep him from complaint, to restrain him from abuse, or from excess of tempers. As for what passed between them in the night times, it passed quickly; his needs were simple, his complaints nil. *Women, waves, and lands . . .*

From that moment when the gates of Caryavas were breached and its walls were scaled, there had been for her no times as undemanding as this present time, here in old Stonehouse Hobar. Time had wracked and raved, time had tormented, time had gone taut and tense, time had quivered, had threatened, had hid its face. Now time stood still. Time had not changed the face of the

landscape she looked out on. Insofar as it was possible, she was at rest.

"They'll soon be back," Rary said. "All of them."

The other woman did not say anything. She refused to consider anything but the unchanging moment.

And, at that moment, everything changed.

Spahana's litter had been battered to bits in the mad stampede of the onagers that first day, and only a few pieces of harness survived to tell it had ever existed. The two children rode quietly along on the back of the oldest, stoutest, and staidest beast, with Stag and Bosun on either side. The children had insisted that they hadn't been lost at all, that they were just around the next hill from home, that they had only been gone a few moments or so. Although hill succeeded hill and still no home, they were quiet, clearly enjoying their ride. After all, the men had known their name and had known their mother's name; they didn't know why their mother was somewhere else, but the absence of any familiar landscape gave no cause for a desire to leave. The men had come to an explanation of what had happened, though they were not equally content with the explanation.

"If they were, well, moved—transferred, you might say—by the gathering up of the way and the day, as we were . . . when we were . . . how did it happen that we

met their mother before it happened, not after?" This was Bosun's question.

Stag had been thinking the same thing, and his answer was immediate. "When something like this happens," he said, "it connects a day with the day before. We think, *It happened today.* That's right. But it didn't only happen today. *It happened yesterday as well.* It doesn't only go from *Now* to *Then,* from *Here* to *There.* It goes at the same time from *There* to *Here* and from *Then* to *Now,* don't you see?"

"Well . . ."

Stag glanced up, as though to find help along the overhanging branches of the massy forest trees, glanced away and tried again. "Every day is a today, isn't it? And at the same time, every day is a yesterday, isn't it? And every day is also a tomorrow, isn't it? We weren't with Rary when it first happened. We don't know how much time or how much space that gathering up affected. Suppose it struck what was her *Today* and knocked her children back in time so that . . . or . . . no . . . and then we . . ."

Bosun gave his head a rapid shake and struck himself upon each cheek alternately. The children giggled. He said, "Leave it be, Master. I see enough of a glimmer. If I try harder, I'll be perhaps dazzled, and not able to see at all."

They went along in what seemed like a long, long quietness. Stag spoke only twice, and his man was not certain afterwards which it was that he had heard first; Stag had spoken in a low voice as though speaking to himself, and he had said, "I will be glad to see her," and he had said, "I wish that I had never gone there." But which had he said first? And did it matter?

They went on, and they went on, and they met the woman crying for her children.

The children, certainly, could not have been as startled as the men were, for the men heard the voice a second before they recognized it, but the children recognized it the second they heard it. "There's Mam, her," said the girl, Darda, and she slipped off the onager. "It's Mam, her," the boy said. He lifted out his arms. "Help us a-down, Dardy," he said. To the children it seemed the most natural thing in the world. But to the men it meant something else, but what that something was—

"What is she doing *here?*"

In another moment there she was, almost as they had first seen her, coming not so fast this time, coming with more uncertainty and less resolution this time. Her voice seemed now not so much demented as disorganized. *"Trenny . . . ? Darda . . . ?"*

"Mam, Mam, here's us here!" the children called, running up to her. "What's up, woman?" Bosun shouted. "Where are the others?"

Stag said nothing, but he walked very fast. Her clothes were dirty and her hair half-loose, and she looked at them so very anxiously, and she waved her hands as though to attract their attention and to keep them from passing by her.

"Have you seen my children?" she quavered. "Have you seen two young children, a boy and a girl—"

"Here's us here, Mam!" the children called, running up and putting their arms around her and laying their heads against her. She looked at them, at first astonished, then she said, half with a sort of assumed amusement and half in a kind of restrained reproach, "Oh . . . now . . . *no* . . . children . . . Why . . . *you* are great big things . . . and mine are but bitty bairns, you know . . . Have you seen them?"

The bosun looked at her, and went close to her, and he looked from her to Stag and he touched the side of his head and he inclined his head towards her. On her forehead near the temple was an ugly bruise and clotted blood. He looked at his master as though prepared for an outburst, his muscles tensed as though prepared to resist a blow or to start off on a run. But Stag nodded, he only nodded. He said, "You'd better come with us, Rary. Up you go, on this beast here—up you go, children. Hold on to them, now."

She made some feeble protest. She looked at him, confused. She wondered aloud how he knew her name. She mounted. She held the children. She mumbled, sometimes to herself, and sometimes to them. She looked from side to side. She said two names, over and over. The boy babbled on: he and Dardy had gone for a walk and they had done this and done that and seen that and seen this, "Us's has, Mam"—but his sister, who was older, looked at the men in bepuzzlement and alarm.

"We'd go dozens faster without them," the bosun suggested.

"We're going that fast as will be fast enough," said Stag. "I don't suppose that minutes matter." He nodded

at the girl Darda and he gave her shoulder a few pats. She seemed to relax, rather. She held the woman's hand, but her eyes did not part from Stag.

They were quite near the house when the onagers seemed to grow restless and uneasy. Rary's crooning had come to a sudden stop, she looked about as though in her perplexity she shared the beasts' unease. Stag's hand on the bridle of the leader-ass tightened, and the whole stride of them came to a halt. "Now, mother," he said, in conversational tone, "we're going to tether the animals here just a short time whilst I and this fellow go on ahead to have a look. You must stay here with the children, you know, for there's none other to."

She frowned, slightly. "Why, wherever is their mother?" she murmured. But it was concern, not complaint. In a moment she had them picking flowers, which her fingers deftly wove into chains. As the men moved out they heard the boy say, "What's that called, up there, Mam?" and her abstracted answer, that it was just the island, just part of the sky; and him saying, contented, "That's what Dardy, she says, too." Automatically, the men looked up. There seemed the beginnings of an overcast. The wind seemed damp. Then it shifted. The wind reeked.

"Sixies!" they exclaimed. "Sixies!"

Wordlessly, they left the trail and began, furtively, to proceed towards the house through the thicket and the wood. They saw the door half-open. They saw the window-shutters swinging ponderously. They abode a good while in concealment, before they finally came out. Signs of the sixlimbs were all about, on the hoof-scarred turf, in the piles of dung, the wads of part-chewed herbiage, the still-flattened places where they had lain them down. The bosun pointed. The door must have been at least

partly opened at the moment of the attack, for an arrow had scored the wood of the post as it could not have done had the door been closed. And the bosun pointed again. Glints of blue in the grass. Stag bent and picked at them. Beads. One by one he picked them up, one larger than the other, placed them in his scrip.

There had not been much in the house which could have been disturbed. Remnants of a meal. Heavy furniture all in place. Rags hung up to dry. Nothing to tell them anything. And nothing on the upper floor, and nothing in the tiny room under the eave. Stag said, low, "I thought this would have to be the best place for a look-out. They'd have to pass by in view, because of the hill. Thought I, 'I'll see you at least as soon as you see me.'

"Not knowing I'd not be here to see. . . ."

He looked at his bosun, asked, "Wouldn't you say that we've had enough troubles? And that the sensible thing would be to cut our losses, head back to town, and make other arrangements?"

The man rubbed his bristled cheeks. "I would, I would. It's too bad, she was a well-behaved and well-moving woman; for that matter, that was a well-behaved and well-moving ship you traded off. But you can build and find. There'll be, I expect, others just as good—"

Stag gripped his wrist. "But I don't want another just as good. I want that one. I want her. I want her so much I'd give everything I have for her." He moved so swiftly that he was gone before the bosun could blink.

He was in the yard, striding fast, before the bosun could catch up with him. "You're daft, Master," he said. "These troubles have turned your mind. You'd best come back quick to town and seek a healer or a priest—" He stopped, aghast. Stag was smiling at him.

"If I'm mad, that's the way I want to be! What will you say when I tell you that I'm glad she was taken? If she'd not been taken I'd mayhap never have learned how much I want her! I'd begun missing her since we turned back, I believe, but it wasn't till just now that I realized how much— Now—" He stopped and frowned, but it was in thought alone. "Somehow I'm confident that the sixies won't hurt her. Don't know why they did take her, or that doctor-priest—yes, I know the old wife's been hurt, but who knows how? My thought is that they'll ask a ransom for her. Well, they shall have it. Every sixy in the world could swim in the wine I'd give for her. But it may not come to that. Meanwhile— Ah. Ay yes. . . ." His voice sank. "I'd forgotten. The old wife and her twain children. What's to be done about them?"

"Leave them here," the bosun promptly said.

To this his captain prompt agreed. "It's safest. Lightning may not strike so soon again here. There's food enough and gear enough. Yes . . . that's best."

Even in the short time they had left the woman she had changed. She seemed now to know who her children were but she evidently had no recollection of ever having seen either of the men before. "And it's about to rain, and who knows how many leagues we are from home," she said, distractedly. She returned to the house peacefully enough, with never a sign that ever she had seen it before; and they unloaded the onagers. While they were so engaged Stag paused, scowled in his usual manner of deep thought, then shook his head. "What's amiss?" his man asked. But Stag couldn't say. A vagrant thought had tickled the corner of his mind, was gone without being identified.

They untied the beasts, hobbled them, put some food

in their scrips, said farewell to the woman and her children, and were off. Once again they had an easy trail to follow, and even the rain did not wash it out entirely—a few moments' downpour from which they sheltered themselves not at all, but pressed on ahead. Such a thing as a centaur who attempted to cover his trail is a wonder which no world has ever seen. The rain stopped abruptly, but it drizzled intermittently throughout the remainder of the afternoon and dimlight; by dimlight, however, they had already paused and taken up shelter in a hole in a hill—one which conveniently slanted slightly up from its entrance before leveling out into a space long enough and wide enough and dry enough for them to stretch out.

During that night they both awoke. Each sensed that the other was no longer sleeping, neither said a word, both moved to the mouth of the cave. Nothing was visible. The sky was completely overcast. Nothing stirred. Now and then a slight breeze shook a leaf or a few leaves, and then the *tip tip tip* of the delayed raindrops was heard. Yet all did not seem right, and still they stared and strained their eyes and ears. Stag was about to back up and retreat into the burrow and to sleep again when it seemed as though a breeze so high he could not feel it stirred for one swift second a cloud so high he could not see it. And it seemed as though for that fleet shaveling of a second he could perceive a light burning brightly, briefly, in the dull night sky. Then it was gone. The bosun cleared his throat. Then he slid backward. Then he began to snore.

And still Stag stayed there. He had no word to explain how he had felt a few moments before. Things had seemed somehow out of place and order, yet it was nothing like the gathering-up of the day or way. . . . Wild

suggestions, arcane speculations, took hold of his mind. Then another thought took hold of his mind. Spahana. He had hardly known her, really. He had almost forgotten that that was her name until he had heard her tell it to Rary. He smiled, wondering to himself, wondering at himself. It was an odd way to feel about a woman . . . odd . . . odd. . . . Odd how light things were. . . . He realized that the night had passed and that it was now dawn.

The trail was not so easily followed that first part of the new day, after they had made a quick, small breakfast. The light was dim, and it did not so soon grow much lighter, the weather continuing overcast. The bosun grumbled that things "still felt odd." But the trail was never lost for long, and when they left the region of rocks and gravel and descended into one of softer earth and low and rolling hillocks, it became much easier. And then Stag saw something which brought him to a dead halt.

"What's happened, Captain?" Bosun asked, uneasily.

"It's a folly. . . . We've been two fools, haven't we, then?"

"How do you—?"

"Well, just stop and think. We've seen only hoof prints, haven't we? Were they both of them, the augur Castegor, and my lady, *riding* the Sixies?"

The bosun blinked. He wet his lips, tried to think. "Uhh . . ." was all that came out.

Stag said, "Have we been following the right trail?" He pointed. The prints of human feet were in front of them in the wet soil, not very clear, but unmistakable. They followed them a short distance, followed the opposite way that the feet had been going, saw that they

had come down out of the higher land and into the main path. "We have . . . We have . . . Following the wrong trail. Following the obvious one. It's all come right, it seems, but if it hadn't? —I suppose, though, it had to. The Fourlimbs weren't with the sixies at all. The sixies must have known that the track they took—the track we hadn't noticed—would come out here eventually. The sixies weren't exactly following them . . . but yet they were. That means that the sixies hadn't captured them at all. That—"

A wrathful notion swept the confusion from the bosun's face and mind. "You don't mean that they ran off together?" Almost immediately he said, "No . . . the arrow . . ."

"Exactly, the arrow. And now I've remembered that idea which flitted through my mind like a bat yesterday whilst we were unloading the onagers. Recollect how you told me that line was fastened to them, when the old silverhair sixy stole them back for us? You said there were no knots at all in the line—only loops, you said. *Why?* Still don't see it? Forgotten what the augur told us, what he reminded us of that we'd seen but hadn't thought of? Their hands, man! Their hands! A little finger on each side of each hand, but no thumbs, man! A sixy can't tie a knot! A sixy can't cast a spear! And so it follows as one Flux follows another, *A sixy can't draw a bow nor shoot an arrow!* Sixies didn't attack Stonehouse and sixies didn't rape away those that were in it. Men did. Men. . . ."

His hand pointed to the footprints before they were obliterated by the mass of hoofprints. Here and there was the slender mark of a woman's foot. But mostly there were the heavier prints of men. Of how many men? Of what men? "Who—"

Stag's face was fixed in a wild grimace. He dug his hand into his scrip, clenched, dug, pulled it out. "Look. Look. Ah— Here it is." His breath came hard and fast. His palm held several small stones.

"Beads. . . . Beads. . . . So—"

"Beads? *All* beads? Ah, no. *This* is a bead and *this* is a bead, and *this*— But not *this:* it's too big. It's got no hole through it. It isn't a bead. It's a talley-pebble. Isn't it? And who uses talley-pebbles? Answer! I've asked no riddle."

The bosun half-groaned. He nodded. He knew who, and only who, used talley-pebbles. "Merchants," he said.

"Yes. . . ." Stag swung round and all but ran. Over his shoulder came one word.

"Merchant!"

For the most part it had been dry enough at the base of the tree where crouched the hapless homophage, but the water had collected in a depression on the old harpy's nest far above, and presently the pool burst through. It spilled onto the limbs and leaves below and ran onto one huge branch which acted as a sort of open funnel. The spillage came roaring down and cascaded at last onto the ground not far from where the mad and miserable creature lay huddled, and woke him with its splatterings. There had been lines and marks scratched into the earth nearby, but the brief inundation washed them quite

away. Hence, awakened by the short storm, the homophage began automatically to crawl and grope around the confined area within which the soothsayer's magic circumscription had confined him. And in another moment found that he was free. He howled once. He lurched forward.

He sniffed the air. He put his face to the earth and sniffled and snuffled. He moved on. He moved ahead. There was a familiar scent. Familiar, hated. There was hunger in it and there was trickery and treachery and there was wrath. Nothing like a detailed remembrance persisted in the warped and twisted wreckage of the homophage's mind. He trotted forward in the darkness. He lost the scent. He dropped to all fours and passed his nose and mouth back and forth across the ground. He passed to the right. He passed to the left. He moved ahead at an angle. The memory of the scent and its hate did not leave him. Then he picked it up. With a grunt and a howl he leaped up and ran on.

The hate-scent. The scent-hate. It drew him on through the blackness and the damp. It had a name . . . dimly, dimly, he knew it had a name. Sounds growled in his throat and clicked in his mouth and rattled between his teeth and his tongue. Ug. Ugh-urr. Gar. Grr. Rish. Rrr. Tick. Ksh. Kss. Hrr. He shook his troubled head as though to punish or to clear it. He hawked up phlegms and spat them out. Then he opened his mouth and bayed at the cold and the hunger and the dampness and the dark. He lunged, hating and hungering, through the blackness. *"Gore . . . !"* he cried. *"Take . . . !"* he cried. He cried, *"Crush . . . !"* He cried, *"Crash . . . !"*

But these long-forgotten syllables did not seem to be the right ones. Once more he howled and he beat shaggy

head with his hands. And suddenly it came to him. The name. The name of the hate-he-could-smell. *"G'or't'ec'as!"* It felt right. It felt . . . almost . . . right. Once more—

"Gortecas!"

The very repetition of its name seemed to bring it more strongly to him. He knew it now. He would not forget it. He would not lose it. He would find it. He followed on in the darkness and the damp.

Dellatindílla scowled at his winecup. Atom mimicked him and, drawing back into a shadow, thrust out his tongue. "And my best jewels gone, too," muttered Dellatindílla. *"His* jewels," muttered the mite. "Had that scoundrel Lo to do with that, as well? It wouldn't surprise me . . ." ("It wouldn't surprise *him* . . .")

The comprador clenched his teeth. The dwarf clenched his. His large eyes rolled around the room. Then he shook his tiny fist. "To recapitulate," said the eunuch, smacking his thin lips after a sip of wine. Atom looked into his own winecup. It was empty. He held it up. Dellatindílla lifted the jug, refilled his own cup, set the jug back in its place. After a moment the mite withdrew his hand. "To recapitulate. Plainly, this Captain Stag raided Allitu with Lo's backing. Plainly, they must have gotten great store of treasure. But was this plainly their only motive? Was there not this babble about the Cap of Grace? Hints it was, or at least had been, on Allitu? Was it found? Was

anything at any rate learned about it? This I must know. I must know this. Why did Stag leave first? Did Lo not depart for some secret rendezvous with him? And for what purpose? Do they trust one another? *Can* they trust one another? Can I trust that augur whom I engaged to follow and to spy? Certainly not. But I can trust the mite dwarf I sent with him. . . ." He gurgled at the cup again. Atom threw him an ugly look. "Eventually he must return with information. And if he does not? Ay well, I have another dwarf. . . ." The other dwarf approached the eunuch's ankle and bared his teeth. The foot moved, the dwarf scuttled off into the shadows. ". . . another dwarf," the voice above repeated. "And to speak of the which, where is it? Come forth, there. . . . Come forth. . . ." The voice died away into a mutter and another gurgle.

The eunuch's thin lips went pendulous, began to quiver. "And what of earthflux, too," he beggingly inquired. "Will grace save us therefrom? Or wealth? power? wisdom? Will," his voice going high and cricket-shrill, "will *any*thing? *Can* anything? If the weight of sin and grief and guilt becomes too much for the world to bear, and it topples off into chaos and flux, of what use then will be all my acquisitions and desires, either selfish or unselfish—what? *what?*"

Eyes rolled, eyes gleamed, a smaller voice murmured, *"What."*

The eunuch's lips pursed, curved, set into a frightful lear. "Long ago I heard it read, 'Thus say the geographers: Justice and equity are the sole sure foundations of the world.' Do you hear? Do you *hear?* Is it *true?* Then the world has no sure foundations—!"

("*No* sure foun*da*tions . . .")

"This being so, what prevents it from falling constantly

into flux and from remaining in constant flux? Only grace, grace, grace . . ."

("Only *grace?*")

". . . only grace . . ."

Atom tiptoed under the table and thence to the far corner of the wall. He lifted the bottom of the hanging, and was gone. A few minutes later he emerged on the rooftop, and drew a deep breath. "I don't like it," he said. "He shouldn't have sent my brother. My brother shouldn't have gone. I don't believe it was the same augur. I believe it was a different augur. I don't like it here anymore. All he does is drink, drink, drink, and he never gives me hardly any. I'm tired of being cooped up. Nothing is any fun anymore. And—"

He stopped. He had been vaguely aware of something droning not far off. Now he became less vaguely aware that its evident source was an oddly shaped figure standing in front of and apparently addressing one of the chimney-pots. He moved closer, cautiously, to assess this curiosity.

"Speak up, speak up," the oddity said, addressing the chimneypot. "Tom Korp, that's for whom I'm in search of, has a brother name of Mope Korp, little boy, what's the matter that you can't reply to a civil harpy, 'Eat something,' I keep telling him, 'There's some nice carrion in the corner, or have a piece fruit on the other hand,' does he say yes, does he say no, he reiterates he wants his brother by the name of Tom or Tum or Thumb, who can pronounce these names, 'Well,' I said to him, because it's a funny thing about me, that's the way I am, 'if Aunty Ghreck can't get your brother for you after the way your mommyharp just walked off and bereft you, or flew, as

the case might be, then who else will do it, answer me that, just kindly answer the question,' " and she fell into a fit of coughing. The mite, who had gradually slipped up behind her, slapped her on the back.

"Thanks very much for the kindness," she said, and, "Who are you, other little boy?"

"I'm Atom," he said, "and I'm not a little boy, I'm a dwarf."

The harpy gave a squawk of excitement, flew up in a flutter of feathers, seized hold of him, fell off the roof, coasted, in another moment was aloft, her wings beating steadily upon the soft night air. "Fleet, fleet," she muttered. "Later we'll walk."

In theory, the two great bullroarers were supposed to be kept at a prescribed distance from a fire of a prescribed size and turned regularly, and regularly "fed" with bread and milk and wine. In fact, the fire had gone out long ago and no one had known how to relight it nor had anyone done anything to implement the intermittent plan of capturing a Fourlimbs to make and tend the fire. Neither bread nor milk had been available for ages. Nevertheless the two objects were sounded regularly—to announce the beginning of courting and mating at the High Far Glades—and irregularly—to herald the start of a raid, to inspire the raiders, and to terrorize the raided.

Each one had a name, or had had a name, but these

had been forgotten; it was remembered only that one was male and one was female, and no one who heard them was likely to forget which was which. They had, for a wonder, been given a little wine after the last raid which yielded wine, but it had been given grudgingly, and it was felt that damp had effected their tones. As to who had made them or when they were made or where or why—there were not only no histories, there were not even myths: here was *He* and here was *She,* it was for gladsome things that they were sounded, for exciting things that they were sounded, and the sounds themselves were in themselves exciting.

The male roarer was supposed to be that bit more prestigious to justify fighting for the chance to sound it. Trebondóndos reached it first, but Chevantirósos decided to take up the other rather than dispute; and, since it was somewhat lighter and since Trebondóndos stood, halting and scowling defiance, it was the female which was first swung round on its halter, up and around and around, the long slit wood whirling faster and faster and faster, until at first there came a thin squeak and then a treble squeal and then a trembling shrill sound which went on and on and on and by this time Trebandóndos had the male roarer going and there came forth a small hum and then a loud drone and then an increasing bellow and finally the full volume of the sound which gave the devices their name of bullroarer. Loud and earsplitting and terrible, and terribly, terribly exciting, the shrill and the deep, male and female, the noise roused the Sixlimbs from their slumbers and diverted them from their play. *Stallion and yearlion and colt and crone and cob, matron-mare and maiden-mare . . .*

And one among the latter, trotting back and forth, un-

able to make her own voice heard above the two-fold clamor of the chanter and the drone, held out her two hands, two fingers up, two fingers down, one finger held in: the ancient sign which all well knew: Fourlimbs. Fourlimbs! *Fourlimbs!* Usurpers of the True Folk's land, stealers of the Sixlimbs' fields and forests, thicketlurkers, ambushslayers, the stinking, the malformed, the cunning, cruel, corrupt, coupling (shameless) face to face . . . Fourlimbs, filthy . . .

It was easy to rouse the centaurs, easy, once the shree-shreeing and the broo-brooing had died away, save for its interminable echoes; easy to rouse them to agree to gather and attack in force and destroy the invaders. All of them howled and beat upon their bosoms and dashed backwards and forwards. Quite a number of them actually started down in the general direction hinted by the maiden-mare Ananarusa. Interest slackened when it was realized that neither Trebandóndos nor Chevantirósos intended to leave her side for an instant, and quite a number of the fiercest dropped out of the troop. Other reasons, as, for instant, hunger or thirst, the chance for a good and an immediate fight, resulted in the loss of others. And a good few put their heads together and muttered of certain matters and stealthily slid away in order to return and see what could be done about commencing a movement of both sexes to the High Far Glades. . . .

Still, there were quite a few who persisted. Ananarusa had mentioned certain known areas and landmarks, and there was a common opinion that they would certainly scout them all out. And yet none protested when the foremost sixies took the trail which went by Stonehouse Hobar. Ananarusa had not indeed mentioned it, but it seemed logical that they should go there; they had all of

them been there, at one time or another, sniffing and peering, hatefully-hopefully: the den of ancient enemies, takers of the land and yet providers of bounty. None doubted Ananarusa's sightings, yet the old stone house was, as far as Fourlimbs were concerned, the landmark of all landmarks. Actual human presence there was rare and long ago; this did not matter. Stonehouse equaled Hobar equaled Fourlimbed Folk. None of them explained it so, none of them even so clearly and coherently thought it so.

Nevertheless it was so.

And it was with no surprise but with thrill and relish and even with somewhat of fear but certainly with no diminuition of desire that they heard Trebandóndos, lifting up his head and dilating his nostrils, declare as they approached, "It is smoke which I smell, and also I smell that they have been burning food— Wittolds, cuckolds, drum upon your ticky chests and rouse and warn them all? Be still. Be quiet and be sly. And so we shall catch them in the open. . . ."

Gortecas did not choose that what afterwards happened should happen, afterwards or otherwise. Much as he feared brute-simple, human force, much as he preferred the single subtility of his own way and the protection of his augurial science, there came a point when he had no choice. It was of course upsetting, and a lesser man

would have been dismayed; but Gortecas was not a lesser man: lesser men so often fall prey to vices such as loyalty, love, pity, kindliness, generosity, and other disgusting impulses and totally degrading practices. It was hardly the resolution of a second, before, with an inner and an outer shrug, he came to terms with the situation and determined to sail with the winds.

Several issues and items were involved; for one thing, he had become aware, as the first faint twinge in a tooth —not yet pain, not yet even discomfort—gives warning and advice . . . he had become aware that if he proceeded on his present path he would meet the other moiety: and he desired few happenings less than that he should at present happen to meet the other moiety. For another, in one form or another, he had traveled enough upon the sea and along its coasts to know all sorts of sailingmen, to appreciate the differences between raiders and wreckers, corsairs and pirates: he did not too much care for any of them, but being able to distinguish and to appreciate the ever-fluid distinctions could be a great help. And, lastly, but certainly first in ultimate importance, he was aware that he was being followed, and he was almost entirely certain by whom (or by what) and what for.

Wreckers by definition must know well the coast on which they ply their uncertain trade—and a hard trade it is, too: when the stay-at-home craftsman or farmer sits warm by his fire, the wrecker must be out in the snow and the sleet and the hard-driving rains, with his false lights—and anyone who knew this coast well knew that in wrecking weather all mariners either put into cove or stood so far out to sea that no lights could be seen at all. Furthermore, it was much too far inland: hence they were not wreckers. As for raiders, who would raid an empty

land? and who would raid a forest?—As for pirates, and as for corsairs, were not the same objections levelable?

But the augur tired, in an instant, of these quibbles and trifles. There was really only one reason why any crew or group of this general nature would be in this vicinage at all. It was too annoying, it was damnably vexatious, it meant almost certainly a long and rough sea journey at best, it meant an end to any chance of profit from the codless Dellatindílla, it meant . . . It meant, of course, protection. These grim-faced men in their metal doublets, with their short bows and their swords and javelins, would be more than a match for that nameless (except generically) thing which howled and prowled and hunted and pursued after him. How had it escaped the confining circulum which he had so careful drawn about the tree after carefully and cunningly luring it inside? Ah, well: a riddle and a speculation for other hours.

He stepped forward upon a ledge so that they could not fail to see him as they came up the hill; this would give a good enough time before they came within bow-shot for them to decide he was not dangerous. Of course they stopped short and of course the bowmen nocked arrows and of course they talked and muttered and, then, finally (of course) they gestured him to come down and to approach. They wore no trousers, wore no robes, only a short tunic down to the hips, and breech-clouts; they were barefooted. Marshies, or at least of marshy decent. Yes, yes, it all fitted in, it was almost tiresome how easily it all fitted in; there was no zest or problematical about it at all.

"Greetings, greetings, men of Allitu," he said.

It was with difficulty that he stifled a yawn.

Aunty Ghreck spoke in a steady stream of words which reached his ears as a sort of soughing murmur, mutter, or mumble; the wind suddenly shifted, and, as she coasted down upon it, he heard her saying, ". . . troubles, who doesn't have troubles, do *I* speak of *my* troubles? no, because that's not my nature, I don't say a word, never mind what I suffer, pay no attention to it, what a lovely nest I used to have in the old days, southern exposure, the finest quality carrion nearby, *blam!* comes an earthflux, and right away: no nest, overnight the whole neighborhood was changed, 'So who told you to build here?' this one says and that one says, did I say a word, no I didn't say a single word, what, they didn't complain to me, the whole clutch of them, 'We thought we had a nice nest to come home to and this is what we find'. . . .

"Listen, you think I didn't tell them what was on my mind, because it's a funny thing about me, I have to speak the truth, wasn't I saying, oh, just the other aeon, to my daughter Aabba, my daughter Aacca, my daughter Aadda . . . Aeea, Affa, Agga, Ahha, Aiia, Ajja, Akka . . .

". . . my daughter Zabba, Zacca, Zadda . . .

". . . my daughter Zazza, 'Listen,' I was saying, 'Don't blame *me*,' I told them, 'for all your troublements and woes: blame the island! —look at me while I'm talking to you—blame the *island!*"

But her sole present listener, by reason of their present positions, could not look at her at all.

Tabnath Lo had been twice to Stonehouse Hobar, as well as having heard the way thither discussed at his wife's family's table more than once; indeed, it had seemed to him that the whole house of Hobar was a great deal fonder of talking about going there than of actually

going there. . . . Not that any of that mattered. Already, it seemed to belong to another world, the world of cords knotted to indicate measures of meal and bales of stockfish: in short, the world of barley-puddings. It was good to realize that he never need have any more thing to do with barley-puddings. People would laugh, to think that a Syndic of the Sea had ever concerned himself with barley-pudding.

The price of a syndicship was legally set: no matter how little a syndic might care to part with his position, if anyone of qualifying status came before the Council and produced one-quarter more than the last price paid for a syndicship, then the eldest syndic in office had no choice but to descend from his dais, embrace the one making the offer, and accept. To be sure, more often than otherwise, positions went from father to son . . . or son-in-law . . . or grandson. . . . But that was merely the way things usually had *gone*. It was *not* the way things had to go. Lo's original share of the loot of Allitu would cover the purchase price quite nicely, thank you. And the other share, the share which was also rightfully his, though withheld by the cunning and unscrupulous Stag, that should serve as working capital.

For a man of vision and capacity wouldn't simply be content to regard the office as a sinecure, resting at home and letting the bailiffs bring in his set fees and statutory commissions; no, no. A man of vision—

His mute hissed. Lo blinked. Ah so. Ay yes. Here they were almost there. He composed his mind to deal with the present. Stag was shrewd, Stag was cunning, Stag had almost, almost put him off with all that sly talk of going to the Lonelands. Stag would be on his guard. The best thing, then, would be simply to walk right in, calm and

canny, accept the hospitality, and await the best occasion. Stag would *not* be expecting *that.* Lo smiled all on one side of his face, and, becoming aware of it, wondered aloud to his mute. "I wonder what Stag's face will look like when I walk up to the house," he said.

"Ssss . . ." said the mute.

But of course Stag was not there. It was all a letdown and an anticlimax. Stag's woman didn't say very much, but then, she never did say much. There was a countrywoman whom Lo had never seen before; she asked him if he had seen her children. That was all she asked him. The only one who really seemed to have anything to say was the augur—the augur who seemed slightly familiar, but then, one augur does for all augurs. "It was in your mind, you know," the augur said.

"What?" Lo was puzzled.

"It was all inside your own mind."

"Augurial riddles? I shan't bother trying to find the answer; that sort of thing doesn't interest me," Lo said. But his mute hissed in a sad sort of manner and slowly nodded his head. And at that moment the arrow thudded into the doorpost, and even if anyone had been prepared to do anything, it was too late. For in a moment men whelmed through Stonehouse Hobar, shouting and growling and a-grumbling; and with them slipped in their lately met companion: Gortecas.

"Well, goody moiety," said the augur Gortecas.

"Well, wicked moiety," said the augur Castegor.

"Can't live with you and can't live without you," said the augur Gortecas, moving close to him.

"Confusion take you," said the augur Castegor.

"It will, it will."

They faced each other. They sighed. They removed both of them their clothes. They walked into each other, fused, swelled. A different person stood there, and, observing everyone's astonished look, hastily donned clothes at random from either heap. "Troscegac, Troscegac, Troscegac," he muttered. And, "It's so difficult, you see," he said, "keeping body and soul together. . . ."

The corsairs who had run upstairs came running down. "Nobody there," they said. There was hasty talk. To Lo they said, "Almost we did miss you—we'd turned back had we not found that monsterkin as mumbled *Allitu* betimes it sucked air, so that we knew our trail and spoor was right—*where is he, then?* Where is he, him whom you hired to rob us, eh, where?"

Lo was paralyzed with terror. His feet, hands and mouth trembled. The corsairs made mention, some of them, of such things as feet held to fires, of sharpened sticks, knotted cords used not to measure merchandise but to twist around temples as aids to memory. However, the one who seemed the most in authority discountenanced the notion. "The woman, we have," he said; "and the partner we have, too. The lever, we have; and the fulcrum we have, too. So let us now be getten back to boat and shore and oar."

There was some dissident clamor at this. What! Were they not to wait for Stag and all this way they had come—what? The senior was firm. No, they were not to wait for Stag; it was likely enough that Stag would come after them; if he did not, they could command information . . . ransom . . . satisfaction—his cold eyes turned to Lo's cold-sweaty face and limp figure—without Stag. "Meanwhile," the senior said, "in a place where sixies have been

or are likely to be, I care not to linger. Up, then, and down—"

He had struck the necessary note. Little enough they knew of sixies, sons of marshdwellers, themselves islanders; but the little was larded with legend and braised with fear and fantasy. Sixies! Ah ho, ay well, yes . . .

Only Rary resisted, and they struck her down and left her.

So, when at last the sixies did come, they found the house empty, and great was their disappointment: nor was there so much as a bit of bread, a sop of milk or a drain of wine to comfort them. "They have taken yander narrow trail," said Chevantiróros, "thinking perhaps to pass thus unseen." He threw back his head and guffawed. "Ah ha. . . . Well, let them, tis uncomfortable for all us to crowd upon it, let us go by the broader way, let us go slow and easy, the wee path falls adown into the broad main. We shall go, brothers, slow and easy, easy and slow, brothers. And when we have gotten them between the half-hills and the sea, brothers: *Ah* ha! And, *oh* ho!"

Troscegac the augur spoke often to himself, for he was not yet used to being *one* again. "There is an oddness in the air, is there not?" he asked. "And has been, somehow, since the rainy night. Odd . . . odd . . . indefinable, indescribable . . . had that night not been so overcast, we

might have seen a thing or two to shed as it were light upon the subject." He issued a brief titter. "Eh, not so? To be sure. Or unsure, as the case may equally be. Or be not. Perhaps we unnecessarily perturb ourselves, awaiting upon starflux, upon earthflux. We say that they are yet to come. Perhaps. This is but assumption, this is but uncertainty. What is certain and what alone is certain is that they have already been. That they have already been, all men must agree. That they are yet to be again, all men need not necessarily agree. One cries out and declares, 'He is coming!' and at the selfsame moment another declares and cries out, 'He has already gone!' Which is a-right? May not both be right? Certainly. It all depends on where each one is standing at the time. . . .

"For the whole is contained within each of its parts. That is to say, all events are contained within each event, as Gortecas and Castegor are contained within Troscegac, as elements of every part of a quickworm are contained within any part of a quickworm: cut it into never so many pieces, will not each piece and part regenerate itself into an whole? Assuredly." He coughed and spet and waggled his head. "Many philosophers," he said, "have disputed the question, Does the future indeed follow the past? or does it perhaps precede it? If time is cyclical in nature like a turning wheel, need the wheel and does the wheel turn ever in only one direction? and what, if anything, precludes the wheel from reversing itself? before, during, after any full turn is made—in which case might not the past in a very actual sense come before the future? Hence, need there truly be sequences? may there not be simultaneity?

"Is not the present a cross-section of eternity?"

And so he babbled on. The corsairs said nothing; they nothing understood. Lo said nothing; he was still from fear. Spahana said nothing; what should she say? The rim of the plate turned round and round and round, the scenes seemed but all phases of the same one scene: captivity. The mute said nothing, for no word could he say, and for the moment he forebore even to hiss.

In between the half-hills and the sea is a wide, wide area, rather like a vast dish, and here certain things took place. Someone looking down from dead above might regard them indeed as scenes painted upon the rim of a platter. Someone might see these scenes alive and not be aware of which came first to life and being. It might not matter in the least. The matter might well be unanswerable. But, as with a circle, one measures its circumference by beginning at any point, there being neither proper beginning nor proper end, so imagine the observer to begin by descrying a group of armed men standing off a group of attacking centaurs. And next would be a scene showing a few unarmed men turning here and there in confusion and alarm. And going further round the rim is seen a woman standing by herself. And now comes a single centaur from off the scene entirely, swift at the gallop, hair and beard and mane and pelt all silvery. And next appear two further armed men and one sees the woman and cries out something, so: *"Spahana! Spahana!"* The woman turns and sees him, the woman begins to raise her arms towards him, the woman throws one arm across her face quite suddenly, the woman cries to anyone who might listen something which might be, "Oh, tell him I am not yet ready—" and throws up both her

arms and reaches out to and is caught up by the silvery centaur and vaulted over his back and gone, and gone, and gone, dwindling, dwindling—

And now, suddenly, every ear is bent and every face changes tenor and there comes a strident shrillness and there comes a dull and heavy, heavy humming. Now, suddenly and all is terribly changed. There comes a noise like the bellowing of great bulls—hundreds and thousands and myriads of great bulls; there comes a noise like the shrilling of endless swarms of great bats; a noise like gigant bull-roarers; men stop and look up and around, centaurs stop and look around and up, from every throat a cry of terror comes before terror stills every throat—

For that perpetual obscurity in the corner of the sky has begun to brighten and to clear, that fixed and immovable tangent has come unfixed and has begun to move, and even had its starry warning not gone unperceived, what could either four limbs or six have done or do now either to prepare or to resist or flee?—it gathers speed, and, shield dropped and disregarded, it tears itself loose from its eternal corner of the firmament and now appears for a sole second as a gigant disk all strangely marked and then with its rumblethunder-rumblethunder it slides into a thin bright line and expands into a spindle stretching from horizon to horizon and spins across the sky: earthquake, skyquake, seaquake, rain, thunder, waterspouts, earthspouts, going up, coming down, lightning, hail, showers of burning stones, brightness, darkness, heaven become hell—

The centaurs stoop and squat and piddle in fear, the men let drop their arms and fall face down upon the shaking ground: *"Earthflux! Earthflux! Earthflux!"* is the

one common cry. Only the augur, half-thrown, half-resisting, dares to point a trembling hand, dares to cry out, *"There is the source of all our woe!—that accursed Island above the earth!"*

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