

THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY STORIES

12



EDITED BY ARTHUR W. SAHA

WELCOME TO *UNFERNO*

where an unrepentant sinner can find his true calling—whether he wants to or not!

MAKE YOUR RESERVATION FOR *DINNER IN AUDOGHAST*

and meet the prophet who can foresee your future glory—or your doom!

TRAVEL TO *THE CASTLE AT WORLD'S END*

and on to the unknown realms that lie beyond—or into an abyss of nothingness from which no adventurer has yet returned. . . .

MEET THE *PALADIN OF THE LOST HOUR*

but beware, for the price of his friendship may be eternal vigilance!

These are just a few of the exciting stops you'll make, and the traveling companions you'll meet, on this magnificent tour through—

**THE YEAR'S
BEST FANTASY
STORIES: 12**

Look for these other exciting DAW Anthologies:

THE ANNUAL WORLD'S BEST SF

Edited by Donald A. Wollheim with Arthur W. Saha

THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES

Edited by Karl Edward Wagner

THE GREAT SF STORIES

Edited by Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg

THE "FRIENDS OF DARKOVER" VOLUMES

Edited by Marion Zimmer Bradley

SWORD AND SORCERESS

Edited by Marion Zimmer Bradley

the YEAR'S BEST
FANTASY
STORIES
12

Edited by
Arthur W. Saha

DAW BOOKS, INC.
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, PUBLISHER

1633 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

Copyright © 1986 by DAW Books, Inc.

All Rights Reserved.

Cover art by Julek Heller.

DAW Collectors Book No. 690.

DEDICATION

For Betsy and Peter
With highest regard

First Printing, November 1986

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Printed in the U.S.A.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"Unferno" by George Alec Effinger originally appeared in ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE, July 1985. Copyright © 1985 by Davis Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Dinner in Audoghast" by Bruce Sterling originally appeared in ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE, May 1985. Copyright © 1985 by Davis Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Fortunes of a Fool" by Nicholas Yermakov originally appeared in DRAGON, February 1985. Copyright © 1985 by Nicholas Yermakov. Reprinted by permission of the author's agent, The Adele Leone Agency, Inc.

"Preliminary Notes on the Jang" by Lisa Goldstein originally appeared in ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE, May 1985. Copyright © 1985 by Davis Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"The Red House" by Robert R. McCammon originally appeared in GREYSTONE BAY. Copyright © 1985 by Robert R. McCammon. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Flight" by Peter Dickinson originally appeared in IMAGINARY LANDS. Copyright © 1985 by Peter Dickinson. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agent, Georges Borchardt, Inc.

"The Castle at World's End" by Chris Naylor originally appeared in FANTASY TALES, Summer 1985. Copyright © 1985 by Fantasy Tales. Reprinted by arrangement with Urduja Luserke, Ltd., lit. and artists' agency.

"The Persistence of Memory" by Gael Baudino originally appeared in THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION, November 1985. Copyright © 1985 by Mercury Press, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author's agent, Cherry Weiner Literary Agency.

"The Face in the Cloth" by Jane Yolen originally appeared in THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION, February 1985. Copyright © 1985 by Jane Yolen. Reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.

"The Last Dragon Master" by A.A. Attanasio. Copyright © 1984 by A.A. Attanasio. From the story collection BEASTMARKS published by Ziesing Press, PO Box 806, Willimantic, CT 06226. Reprinted by permission of the author's agent, Virginia Barber Literary Agency, Inc.

"Paladin of the Lost Hour" by Harlan Ellison originally appeared simultaneously in UNIVERSE 15 (edited by Terry Carr) and THE TWILIGHT ZONE magazine. Copyright © 1985 by The Kilimanjaro Corporation. Revised version © 1986 by The Kilimanjaro Corporation. Reprinted with the permission of, and by arrangement with, the Author and the Author's agent, Richard Curtis Associates, Inc., New York. All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
UNFERNO <i>by George Alec Effinger</i>	1
DINNER IN AUDOGHAST <i>by Bruce Sterling</i>	27
FORTUNES OF A FOOL <i>by Nicholas Yermakov</i>	43
PRELIMINARY NOTES ON THE JANG <i>by Lisa Goldstein</i>	61
THE RED HOUSE <i>by Robert R. McCammon</i>	79
FLIGHT <i>by Peter Dickinson</i>	101
THE CASTLE AT WORLD'S END <i>by Chris Naylor</i>	135
THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY <i>by Gael Baudino</i>	147
THE FACE IN THE CLOTH <i>by Jane Yolen</i>	171

THE LAST DRAGON MASTER
by A. A. Attanasio

185

PALADIN OF THE LOST HOUR
by Harlan Ellison

199

INTRODUCTION

At one time certain stories were labeled “different” or “off-trail,” and most of these stories were fantasy or science fiction. This was during the first two decades or so of this century, and they appeared in the general fiction magazines, commonly known as pulps, which were then being published.

With the advent of pulp magazines specifically devoted to fantasy and science fiction, these terms have fallen into disuse. I believe, however, that the continuing popularity of literature of the imagination is due to the fact that it does deal with worlds that are different from our everyday world and can, indeed, lead us on trails that are off the beaten path. Perhaps for those of us who have been avid devotees for a longer time, these trails may not be as unfamiliar as they are for those who are just discovering the genre, but even for us there is always the joy of discovering something different.

The stories presented in the current volume of *THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY STORIES* bear this out, and I'm confident that all lovers of the fantastic will find a variety of tales that are truly different.

Although paperback, and even hardcover, books have re-

placed the magazines as major sources of fantasy and science fiction, most of the original short fiction is still being published in the genre magazines. The majority of the books published are novels, and many of the anthologies and collections are reprinted material wholly or partially. Fantasy fiction also continues to appear elsewhere, viz. men's magazines and gaming magazines as well as in the so-called semi-professional magazines, etc.

Among the collections published in 1985 of particular merit are two by a pair of remarkable modern day storytellers, and co-Guests of Honor at the 1984 World Fantasy Convention: *THE GORGON* by Tanith Lee and *DRAGON-FIELD AND OTHER STORIES* by Jane Yolen. Another outstanding book was Samuel R. Delaney's *FLIGHT FROM NEVERYON*, a series of interconnected short stories.

Several important anthologies were published during the year. Among them were *FAERY!* edited by Terri Windling and Mark Arnold; *IMAGINARY LANDS*, Robin McKinley, editor; and *SWORD AND SORCERESS II*, edited by Marion Zimmer Bradley. The popularity of the *THIEVES' WORLD* anthologies has given rise to other shared world anthologies. Beside *THIEVES' WORLD 7: THE DEAD OF WINTER*, Robert Lynn Asprin and Lynn Abbey, editors, two volumes of *MAGIC IN ITHKAR* edited by Andre Norton and Robert Adams and *LIAVEK* edited by Will Shetterly and Emma Bull also appeared.

As usual, many fine fantasy novels were published during the year. Among them were *IN YANA, THE TOUCH OF DYING* by former World Fantasy Award winner, Michael Shea; Lisa Goldstein's surreal novel, *THE DREAM YEARS*; the third book of Parke Godwin's triad about ancient Britain, *THE LAST RAINBOW*; veteran writer Jack Vance's new novel about Lyonesse: *THE GREEN PEARL*; R.A. McAvoy's *BOOK OF KELLS*; Guy Gavriel Kay's high fantasy, *THE SUMMER TREE*; the second volume of Raymond E. Feist's

Riftwar Saga, SILVERTHORN; THE KING'S JUSTICE, the latest Deryni novel, by Katherine Kurtz; Roger Zelazny's new Amber novel, TRUMPS OF DOOM; and Judith Tarr's medieval fantasy, ISLE OF GLASS.

As fantasy fiction has become more respectable, nonfiction books about it have become more frequent. Particularly noteworthy in 1985 were the massive two-volume SUPERNATURAL FICTION WRITERS: FANTASY AND HORROR edited by E. F. Bleiler and MONTHLY TERRORS: AN INDEX TO THE WEIRD FANTASY MAGAZINES PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES AND GREAT BRITAIN by Frank H. Parnell with Mike Ashley. Both titles are especially useful to bibliophiles and collectors. Also of interest is A. MERRITT: REFLECTIONS IN THE MOON POOL by science fiction historian Sam Moskowitz, a study of and with some material by an early writer of fantastic adventure.

The World Fantasy Convention was held in Tucson, Arizona over the traditional Halloween weekend. Among the awards presented was the Lifetime Achievement Award to Theodore Sturgeon, a highly deserved but unfortunately posthumous presentation.

Other deaths of important fantasists during 1985 were those of Italo Calvino, a previous Lifetime Achievement Award winner; Robert Nathan, author of gentle fantasies and probably best known for his PORTRAIT OF JENNIE; and artist Jack Gaughan.

As usual, the world of the cinema presented the viewing audience with a number of fantasy films. Among them were the animated feature, THE BLACK CAULDRON, and RETURN TO OZ, LADYHAWKE, and THE EMERALD FOREST.

What 1986 will bring is something to which we all look forward. Now, however, please join me on a walk along some trails that were first trod in 1985.

ARTHUR W. SAHA

UNFERNÖ

by George Alec Effinger

It's often been said that people make their own Hells. Mr. Morton Rosenthal, after being cast down to the lower depths without due process, didn't exactly make his own Hell, but he did make Hell his own.

Morton Rosenthal was a small, mousy man who, in another story, had murdered his wife and ground her into hamburger. We'd better get a good look at him here while he's still vaguely connected to his earthly form; he'd just died, you see, and he was standing before a battered wooden desk, understandably dazed and bewildered. If they were still producing new episodes of "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," Morton Rosenthal would be played by John Fiedler. If you know who John Fiedler is, you have an immediate and rather complete image of Morton Rosenthal; if you don't know, John Fiedler played one of Dr. Hartley's patients on "The Bob Newhart Show," the henpecked Mr. Peterson. But they're not making "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" anymore, or that "Bob Newhart Show," either; and Morton Rosenthal himself

was dead, too. He hadn't adjusted to it yet—he had never been a brilliant person. For thirty-five years he'd been a butcher, a competent, honest, and hardworking butcher; but he'd been pretty much of a washout as a human being. He would have made a terrific porcupine, and he had the stuff to have been a truly first-rate weasel. But you get the idea.

"You got that?" asked the angel with the deep voice.

Rosenthal just blinked. The angel drummed his fingers on the desk, looking virtuous but as nearly impatient as an angel can look. "No," said Rosenthal at last.

"Fill out the card. We got a whole crowd of people waiting behind you."

"Sorry," muttered Rosenthal. He really hated causing any inconvenience.

"'S all right," said the angel. "Number thirty-four?" A fat black woman raised her hand timidly and walked slowly and painfully to the desk. Rosenthal looked at the card he held in one hand, the pencil he held in the other. He didn't remember receiving either. He didn't even remember coming here. He didn't remember—

—dying. His eyes opened wide. He was dead, really *dead*. "Oh, my God," he said to himself. He knew what being dead meant; it meant that everyone who ever lived would know every little humiliating thing about him. They were all waiting for him here, especially Rose, his USDA prime-cut wife. He was in for it now. His mouth got very dry and his ears started to ring. He had never felt so guilty in his life, and he knew that this was absolutely the worst place he could be to be guilty. They had their coldly methodical ways of adding up your score, he figured; and he sensed, too, that it was just about half an hour too late to try to get by on charm. He didn't yet have any idea how closely this Afterlife matched the various versions he'd heard about or imagined on Earth, but it didn't make much difference: there weren't many of them that welcomed uxoricides with open arms.

The card. Rosenthal looked down at the card. The first question on it was: *How long has it been since your last confession?*

Talk about shocked! Rosenthal just stared at it uncomprehendingly. Slowly, like sewage backing up in the pipes of his old Brooklyn apartment, meaning attached itself to the separate letters, then to entire words, and at last to the question as a whole. They wanted to know how long it had been since he'd "been to confession." Rosenthal knew he was really getting off on the wrong foot here, and there didn't seem to be any way to make himself more acceptable. He went up to the desk and waited until the angel finished giving the same set of instructions to a freckled little boy. The angel glanced up. "You're not number forty-six, are you?"

"No," admitted Rosenthal, "I was number thirty-three. You want to know how long it's been since my last confession, and I'm not even Catholic."

The angel sighed. "Sorry about that, mate," he said. "Give me back that card, then go over to desk R. Tell the angel your name and she'll punch you up on her terminal. Actually, you've saved yourself some time this way."

"Is that good?" asked Rosenthal.

"Probably not," said the angel.

"Look, I'm really sorry." Rosenthal was now banking heavily on the forgiveness-and-mercy angle.

The angel smiled sadly. "You people *always* try that one. Well, we'll see how sorry you can be. Go over to desk R."

None of that sounded good to Rosenthal. He was about ready to throw up by the time he found desk R. There was a crowd there, too, and he took a number and waited. His feet and legs were getting tired. He didn't know where he was, exactly—it was like God's equivalent of the Atlanta airport, where everybody had to go before they could go where they were *supposed* to go—but they didn't have chairs for the transients, only for the employees. There was no way to tell

how long he'd been waiting, either. Nobody wanted to get into a conversation; everyone just stood around and stared at the ground or at the card or form he was holding. Everyone looked guilty. Everyone *was* guilty. So when his number was called, Rosenthal went quickly to the desk, faced an angel with green eyes, and put on a pleasant expression. His stomach was knotted tighter than when the IRS had called him in for audits. Rosenthal suspected that everyone here was in the same boat with him, so if he looked even a little more co-operative by comparison, it couldn't hurt. He forced himself to smile. "Hello," he said, "they sent me over here because I'm not a Catholic and—"

"Name?" asked the angel.

"Rosenthal, Morton M."

"M or N?" she asked.

"M," said Rosenthal. "As in 'Mary.'" He tried to smile winningly again.

"Your middle name is Mary?" she said dubiously.

"No," said Rosenthal, feeling like he was trapped in a Kafka story, "my middle initial is M as in 'Mary.' My middle name is Mendel."

"Social Security Number?"

It took some thought to remember it in this context, but he told her. "Just a moment," said the angel, entering the data.

"The other angel said this would be quicker, but he didn't explain what that meant. I mean, do you *have* to be Catholic to get into Heaven? That sounds a little, forgive me, unfair, if you know what I mean. I always thought if you just did your best, you know, lived a good life—"

Suddenly, as Rosenthal's luck would have it, there was a great uproar, a raising of voices in song and cheers, a tumult never heard on Earth, a celebration that gladdened the heart and elevated the spirit. Rosenthal turned to stare in wonder and glimpsed, far in the heavenly distance, what appeared to be troops of angels, legions of angels, great armies of angels

marching, while all around yet more angels greeted them and welcomed them with an immeasurable outpouring of joy. The angel with the green eyes at desk R rose from her seat and put a hand to her throat. "My goodness," she whispered.

"What is it?" asked Rosenthal. As they drew nearer, the columns of angels seemed ragged and dirty, their wings ruffled, their pennons torn, their lances bent. What place were they returning from, and what great battle had they fought? "What is it?" asked Rosenthal again.

"I'm not sure," said the angel. She looked at him briefly, then back at the astonishing sight, then at her computer terminal. "I really want to join the jubilation, but my duty is to deal with you first."

"I'm really sorry about that," said Rosenthal. "I hope it won't—"

"Hey, mister," said the angel in an outraged voice, "you don't *have* to be Catholic to get into Heaven. You were just given the wrong card; but this says you murdered your wife! So what are you giving me a song-and-dance for?" She raised one angelic hand, slowly closing all the fingers but the index, and jabbed down at a button on her desk. "You go straight to Hell, buster," she said, evidently glad to get rid of him.

Everything went black, and Rosenthal felt as if he were moving in every direction at once. There was a kind of loud, thunderish noise, like at the beginning of *Finnegans Wake*. He realized that now he'd probably never find out what was going on in Heaven just before he left; it hadn't yet occurred to him that very soon he'd have more immediate problems to occupy his attention.

Well, not *very* soon. Travel-time Heaven to Hell, including recovery period, is nine days and nights (according to legend); that's how long it takes for the first coherent thoughts to begin to work their way into the mind, thoughts of lost bliss and eternal pain. After Rosenthal had lain nine days and nights confounded, he began to get his senses back; it was

like supernatural jet lag. Hell was hot; but, of course, that came as no surprise. He'd expected fire and brimstone, though he had no clear idea what brimstone was. He thought brimstone was a tool of some kind, maybe used in the hat business to flatten out brims. He thought brimstone was a kind of inconvenience, as in "she weighted him down like a brimstone around the neck." As it turned out, he was wrong. Brimstone is an old word for sulfur and, when combined with fire, is very unpleasant to have to lie around in. Rosenthal climbed out of the fire and brimstone as soon as he could, and sat down on a hot rock to think and clear his head.

His first realization was that he was now naked. He hadn't felt naked in Heaven; he'd simply been unaware. Now he *was* aware, and he didn't like being naked. It made him feel very vulnerable. Hell does that to you: it breaks down your confidence, it makes you feel vulnerable. And there certainly are a great number of things to be vulnerable to in Hell, as well. It's a very carefully planned place, like a gigantic anti-amusement park. Rosenthal sat on the rock, feeling it scorching his skin, and looked out across the burning lake of sulfur. Noxious clouds of gas wafted through the gloom; the heat was intolerable; and however Rosenthal shifted position, he found no relief from the torment. He shrugged. That was the idea, he supposed, but he didn't have to like it. He stood up again on one foot until he couldn't bear it any longer, then hopped to the other foot, then sat down, then stood up again—this was going to be a hell of a way to spend eternity. At least there were no devils with pitchforks poking at him—

—no devils at all in sight. There *should* have been, Rosenthal thought. Devils would have made a nice symmetry with the angels he'd seen in Heaven. As a matter of fact, search as he might, Rosenthal neither saw nor heard another being of any sort, anywhere. No damned souls, no gleeful demons—he appeared to be all alone. Maybe that was his punishment, maybe he was supposed to wander around this immense and

awful place alone forever. He shrugged again; he thought he could handle that, if that was the worst of it. He decided to take the measure of his prison, because that was the appropriate thing to do at this point in an adventure. You pace your cell, you catalogue whatever objects your jailer permits you to have, you seek weaknesses where you know there are none, you tap on walls to try to communicate.

Rosenthal skipped from one foot to the other, wanting to see what was in the direction opposite the lake of burning sulfur.

He came to a plain that seemed to burn with solid fire, as the lake had burned with liquid fire. This was the very same plain to which Satan swam, where he and Beelzebub first realized their miserable fate, according to Milton. Of course, Rosenthal didn't know anything about that; he'd never heard of *Paradise Lost*, and the only Milton he knew was his dead wife's brother, supposedly a bigshot in the *schmatte* trade who always had a million reasons why his mother should stay with Rosenthal and his wife because this *macher-schmacher* Milton had all his money tied up in his spring collection or he was too busy wheeling and dealing to worry about the old lady or something. Rosenthal made a wry face; Milton would learn a thing or two when he died. There was something in there about honoring your father and mother, Rosenthal recalled. He wished he could be there when some angel asked Milton about *his* last confession.

Rosenthal, just as others before him, began slowly to comprehend the immensity of his punishment. It was hot. It was gloomy—all the flames cast "no light, but rather darkness visible" (as Milton put it). It stank. It reminded Rosenthal very much of the apartment on Second Avenue he'd lived in as a child, where his own parents had stayed until they'd succumbed to old age. He had never been able to persuade them to move—uptown, to Florida, anywhere but Second Avenue. His father had once waved an arm that took in all of

that small, cabbage-reeking apartment and said, "There's nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Rosenthal didn't know what the hell the old man had meant. He just knew his mother and father wouldn't leave that apartment if Eddie Cantor himself came back from the dead to talk to them about it.

Rosenthal hopped from one foot to the other. "Goddamn it," he shouted in agony. "I wish my goddamn feet would stop burning!" And just like that his feet stopped burning.

"Hey," said Rosenthal. He took a couple of steps around the fiery plain, testing. He was surprised, a little puzzled. The soles of his feet had cooled, or rather they had toughened so that it no longer tortured him quite so much to stand in one place. He looked down at himself and was not pleased by what he saw: his skin had become tough and leathery and the color of old, scuffed shoes. He was as ugly as—pardon the expression—homemade sin. After a moment's thought, however, he shrugged. "So nu," he said, "if I have to look like the outside of a football, I'll look like the outside of a football. At least I won't die from hopping around." He learned that he could walk anywhere, sit anywhere, even lie down and rest for short periods without too much discomfort. There was always *some* pain after a while; but, naturally, this was Hell. You couldn't expect miracles.

He pushed his luck—what could he lose? "I don't like being naked, either," he said. "What if somebody should come by?" And just like that, he was wearing some kind of scratchy, rough, ill-fitting, foul-smelling robe. "Feh," he said, but at least he had clothes.

He headed across the murky plain, hoping that moving around a little would air out his robe. He chewed his lip and thought. "How about something to drink?" he said. And just like that, he had a mug filled with something that tasted exactly like his Uncle Sammy's homemade wine. Once his Uncle Sammy had tipped over ten gallons of that wine in his

basement, and he never had a roach problem down there again. It was the worst stuff in the world. Rosenthal swallowed it, grimacing; hell, what could you expect, Manischewitz Concord Grape?

His eyes opened wider as he realized that life in Hell might not be so terrible, if he had some kind of unseen delivery service to take care of his wants. As a matter of fact, as he considered one thing and another, it was almost comfortable. It wasn't so bad as he had imagined; it wasn't much worse than getting stuck on the subway at rush hour, except here he didn't have all those sweaty, obnoxious people jammed in his face. He had privacy and leisure and, if it hadn't been Hell and if he hadn't still suffered every moment, he would have had peace. He heard his mother's voice saying, a million times, "You can't have everything, Morty. You can't have everything."

After he accepted the tolerable nature of his situation, he grew bewildered. After all, he had been cast out of Heaven (or, at least, Heaven's front office). He had been sent to Hell: he shouldn't be in such a good mood. Sure, the darkness and the stench and the scorching still unsettled him. Let's be truthful—if he paid any close attention to the panorama of desolation around him, he began to quake with dread and despair. Still, he shouldn't have it so good. He shouldn't have been able to wish up his tough, blackened hide and clothes and his Uncle Sammy's godawful wine. He should have been denied everything. But he wasn't about to bring that to anybody's attention.

Rosenthal shuffled across the incandescent plain until he thought he saw a wall in the distance, looming ominously through the smoky dimness. "Then there's an end to Hell," he said. That notion cheered him a little. He had no way of knowing how much time had passed as he walked; he became neither hungry nor tired, and his surroundings did not change a single detail from eon to eon. He may have walked hours or

days or years—he could not say. At last, however, he came to the blackfaced cliff that bordered the plain. It rose up straight and formidable like the shaft of a great well. Rosenthal guessed that this barrier surrounded the whole of the plain with the burning lake in the center. Although the cliff slanted slightly away from the true vertical, it was still too steep and sheer for Rosenthal to climb. He stood gazing upward into the hazy heights, lost in thought, until he was startled by the sound of a voice behind him. The voice was terrified. “*Mama!*” it screamed.

Rosenthal turned and saw a young, fat, pimply girl with straggly, brown hair and broad, coarse features. She was the kind of unhappy girl Rosenthal always used to see in the company of a tall, lithe blond beauty who knew better how to fit into a sweater. Here was the drab companion sundered from her attractive friend, helpless now and alone. She was bent over, trying vainly to hide her flabby nakedness. It was an impossible task; it would have been an impossible task with the aid of an army-surplus canvas tent, and all she had to cover herself with were her hands and forearms. Perhaps out of pity, perhaps out of something less generous, Rosenthal turned his back on her.

“I’m freezing!” she cried.

Rosenthal didn’t turn around. “Freezing? This is Hell, stupid. It’s hot as hell around here.”

“I’m *freezing!* I’ve *been* freezing ever since I fell into that lake of ice.”

Lake of ice. Rosenthal had to think about that, now: *what* lake of ice? A lake like that didn’t have a snowball’s chance of lasting a minute in this place. “You’re cold?” he asked. He still hadn’t turned around; remembering what that girl looked like, he was prepared to spend the rest of eternity like that.

“Of *course* I’m cold! Aren’t you?”

“I haven’t been this hot since I was in Phoenix in 1950,”

said Rosenthal. "And at least in Phoenix a person can sit down inside a little without having to worry about getting heat stroke."

"I don't understand," said the girl, frightened. "I'm so cold and you're complaining of the heat."

"I came out of a lake of fire and you came out of a lake of ice," said Rosenthal, shrugging. "This is Hell. If you wanted things easy to understand, you shouldn't have died."

"Listen—" she began.

Rosenthal got tired of carrying on a conversation with his face to the rocky wall. He turned around and the girl dropped to her dimpled knees. "Jesus!" she cried, startled by his appearance.

"You'll forgive me," said Rosenthal, "you've got the wrong boy."

"You . . . you . . ." She couldn't get her mouth to form more words.

"What, girl? You're wasting my time."

She tried covering herself again, doing no better on the second attempt. She looked like she was on the verge of fainting. "You must be the devil? You're all . . . all leathery and awful and . . ." Her voice trailed away and she *did* faint.

Rosenthal rolled his eyes upward. "She thinks I'm the devil," he muttered. He watched her plop on the ground and lie there for a little while; then she started to wake up.

Her eyelids fluttered, and then she opened them. "Oh, my God," she whispered.

"Wrong again."

"Satan."

Rosenthal had a flash of inspiration. If she thought he was the devil, what the hell? "So what's wrong?" he asked solicitously.

She gave him a horrified look. "What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

"Not a damn thing. I'm busy."

"I fell for nine days and landed in that lake of ice, pulled myself out and walked all the way here, but you're not going to *do* anything?"

He gave her a trial leer. "Are you disappointed? You have any suggestions?"

She shuddered. "No, Your Majesty," she said weakly.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, sweetheart. Why are you here?"

"You don't know, Your Majesty?"

"And if it's all the same, you can stop with that Your Majesty business, too. No, I *don't* know. What do you think I am, all-knowing or something?"

It was her turn to be confused. "They said I broke the First Commandment."

"Uh huh. Which one is that? I forget."

"Listen," said the plump girl, "Can I have something to wear? I'm still freezing."

"You're still naked," said Rosenthal, leering again. He was getting the hang of it.

"Well, yeah, that too."

"Wish for it. Just wish for some clothes."

The girl looked dubious, but did as she was told. "I wish I had something nice to wear," she said in a quavery voice.

Nothing happened. No nice outfit appeared, not even a cruddy poodle skirt and blouse with a Peter Pan collar. "How about that," marveled Rosenthal.

"What's the joke?" asked the girl.

"Nothing," he said. "I want a robe for this girl here," he said in a loud voice. And just like that, she had a robe. It was every bit as disgusting as his.

"Thank you, O Satan," she said meekly. She slipped, somewhat disconsolately, into the filthy garment.

"Okay," said Rosenthal, "we still got business. You were telling me about your commandment."

The girl nodded. "It's the one about worshipping false

idols. They said I was paying too much attention to this graven image. They said I was the first one to get busted on that rap in a couple of hundred years." She added that with a defiant touch of pride. "They asked me if I wanted to repent my words and deeds. I said no. They hit the button, and I ended up here."

Rosenthal shook his head. "I would have gone along with them. They never gave me a chance to repent. Bing bang, here I am."

"Yes, sir."

"So what kind of graven image were you worshipping?"

"I had this kind of shrine set up in my locker at school—I went to Ste. Nitouche's Academy in Arbier, Louisiana—pictures of Dick, you know?"

"Dick?" He said it differently; apparently he misunderstood her.

"The lead singer for Tuffy and the Tectonics. Up in Heaven they said I had crossed the fine line between music appreciation and idolatry. I said they could never make me deny my love. They gave me until the count of ten, but I was loyal; then it was *look out for that first step*."

"You picked Hell over Heaven on account of somebody called Tuffy and the Tectonics? I wouldn't have done that for Martha Tilton with the Andrew Sisters thrown in."

For the first time, she looked a little doubtful about it. "Maybe it was a mistake," she said.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" asked Rosenthal.

"Rosalyn."

He smiled wanly. "Nu, my wife's name was Rose," he said.

"Your wife, O Prince of Darkness?"

"Never mind, Well, you're here for some punishment, right?" She nodded fearfully. "Give me twenty pushups, right now," he said.

"Twenty pushups?" It was doubtful that she could manage

even one. Getting down, with the aid of gravity, would probably be simple enough; getting back up was another matter.

"Twenty, *shiksa*, or I'll think up something even worse."

She got down in pushup position and tried her best, but she failed to do one decent pushup. "The nuns said Hell would be unimaginably terrible. I'd rather have little ugly devils with pitchforks," she said, gasping for breath.

"Very sad, very sad," said Rosenthal, clucking his tongue. "The kids of today."

Where *are* the devils and everybody?" Rosalyn asked.

"What, you think you're special or something? You think all of Hell is going to turn out to welcome you? This is a big operation, sweetheart. I can't spare any more demons to shape you up. We have our hands full as it is."

"How do I rate your individual attention?"

Rosenthal laughed. "I haven't heard of anybody breaking Number One in a long time, either," he said. He'd always been a good liar; he'd been a lousy murderer, but he'd always been a terrific liar.

"And the penalty for breaking the First Commandment is twenty pushups?"

"Hey, you and I are just getting started here. We have all the rest of forever to kill. Who knows that I'll think up next?" He looked around at the base of the cliff and kicked together a little pile of black pebbles. "Here, pull up your robe and kneel on these for a while. See how you like *that*."

"The nuns used to make us do this," said Rosalyn. "It's not so bad."

"Try it for a couple of hundred million years, *then* we'll talk."

Rosalyn gave him a sideways glance. "Why are you being so easy on me?" she asked.

"I like you. Can I help it? I like you is all."

"I'm not that kind of girl. You *know* I'm not that kind of girl."

"Listen, Rosalyn, sweetheart, you're in *Hell* now, grow up. What, you think if you do something wrong, God won't like it? God isn't *watching* anymore, Rosalyn, you've paid in advance. I'm not saying I'm entertaining ideas like that, I'm just saying you're not in some fancy Catholic girls' school in Louisiana anymore."

"You're the Arch-Enemy, the Great Tempter," she said.

Rosenthal was losing patience with this thick-skulled, fat-faced *zhlub*. "*Tempter-schmempter!*" he cried. "What do I have to tempt for, you're *already* in goddamn Hell!"

"It could be worse," she offered.

"You tell me how."

She shifted uneasily on the sharp pebbles. "I could have bat-winged things with horns pouring molten lead down my throat. I could have scaly fiends flaying the flesh off my bones while spiders crawled all over me and snakes and lizards chewed at my eyeball. Lots of things."

"You got some good ideas, *bubeleh*," said Rosenthal. He genuinely admired her imagination; of course, a lot of the credit had to go to her Catholic school upbringing. Still, he saw that she might be valuable to have around. "There's always a place in the organization for somebody with ideas."

"You mean—"

He raised a hand, admonishing her. "I'm not promising anything, you can't hold me to it. I'm just saying that sometimes there's an opening every quintillion years or so, and I like to surround myself with bright people. You could work your way out of the class of *torturees* and into the *torturers*. It's still unpleasant; but unless you have a crazy thing for pain, you'll find I'm sure that it's better all the way around to be on the staff."

"What do I have to do?"

Rosenthal shrugged airily. "Well, you have to flatter me a

lot and praise me and tell me how wonderful I am and generally carry on as if I was the hottest thing going down here. I like that kind of thing; the nuns probably told you about that. And you have to do everything I tell you."

"We're back to that again." She made a face.

"So what's so terrible? You were saving yourself for this Tuffy or something?"

"For Dick. There wasn't really any Tuffy. It was just the name of the group."

"Why don't you try some situps? I think I'm getting an idea." He watched her puff and wheeze her way through fifteen or twenty situps, he wasn't really paying close attention. She gave him a pleading look; he was feeling satanic, so he said, "Come on, come on, do a few more. I'm being generous, you know. You could end up back in the ice, frozen up to your *pupik* until, well, until Hell freezes over." He gave a good, demonic laugh and watched her pitiful eyes grow even bigger.

His idea was that he had to learn what she expected from the devil, if he hoped to pull off this impersonation. Eternity is a long time to bluff your way through any role, and Rosenthal suspected that he couldn't keep handing out mere rise-and-shine exercises. For the first time in his life—existence, rather—he felt his lack of imagination. Plaguing Rosalyn with the gruesome punishments she expected would have the additional benefit of entertaining him. The long haul was going to be pretty dull for him otherwise.

"Isn't that enough?" she whined.

"Huh? Oh, sure, knock it off for now. Listen, Rosalyn, I'll tell you what: because I'm giving you my personal supervision and because I *like* you, I'm going to do something I shouldn't do: I'm going to take it easy on you. *Wait* a minute, let me explain. I really shouldn't do this—you wouldn't believe it, but they keep an eye on me, too. They don't like that I should take it easy on somebody. After all, you're here

for hard labor, not for two weeks in the Catskills. I get a little leeway, so I'm going to make you this offer. I want you to flatter me and treat me nice and tell me I'm wonderful and whatever else crosses your mind. In return, I'll just inflict the kind of tortures you expected with no awful *shticklech* that you'd be afraid to tell your mother about."

"Just the regular tortures? Like in the paintings?"

Rosenthal didn't have any idea what she had in mind, but he'd find out. "Like in the paintings," he said.

"You promise?"

"If you'll take my word for it."

"You're the devil. You want me to worship you," she said with some distaste.

"Oy, is that so bad? You were ready to worship this hoo-ha of a juvenile delinquent—"

"Don't you talk about my Dick that way?" She was furious. "*He* could sing. *He* could play the guitar *and* the tambourine"

"*He's* not here—yet. In the meantime, you could do worse than worship me, lots worse. Believe me."

She started to say something, then decided against it. "I'll give it a try," she said.

"Good girl. I don't expect anything fancy, no slaughtered oxen or anything. Sincerity counts with me."

"Okay, I'll wait then, until I really feel it."

"You do that. In the meantime, I wish I had some molten lead." And just like that, he had molten lead. He also had an awful inspiration for what to do with it. He laughed satanically the whole time he did it; he was growing into the part.

Just before all the molten lead was used up, a thin baritone voice called out to him. The man didn't sound so fearful as Rosalyn had. "Try tilting her upper body back a little more," the man said.

"So fine, that's just what I need now, a *kibitzer*," said Rosenthal. "You're not here to help. Your puny *aroysege-*

vorfineh soul's here to get its own share of the hot lead, smartie. Take a number, I'll be right with you."

"*Grüss Gott!* A Jew!"

Rosenthal gave the man a long, chilly, intimidating stare. "Watch it, *bubie*, remember who you're dealing with. I can appear a million different ways and I can speak a million different languages. So what are you, some kind of Nazi?"

"Yes," said the man. He was tall and skinny and young, with a sloppily trimmed beard; he looked more like the devil than Rosenthal did. He seemed perfectly unconcerned about being naked.

"Ai-yi-yi." Rosenthal wondered if *he* was torturing these people, or if they'd been sent to torture *him*. "And stop *grüssing Gott* around here, you're too late for that. And it gives me a pain, too."

"Sorry," said the man.

"Name?"

"Friedman, Lamar S."

"Friedman? Aha."

"My family's Lutheran."

"Of course it is. Offense?"

"Generally good, but I could have used more depth up the middle."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Sorry." Friedman said, "I did some high school football coaching. Want to know why I'm here? I committed an unforgivable sin."

"Mmneh," said Rosenthal noncommittally. "Why? Your team choke in the big game?"

Friedman laughed dryly. "Hardly. I was jilted by my fiancée."

Rosenthal thought about the twenty-nine years of wedded horror he had escaped from.

"You're a fool, Friedman," he said.

"You're saying she wasn't worth it. You never even *met* her. She was some dish."

"Dishes get filthy, they crack, they break, or else they sit in the cupboard and cockroaches crawl all over them. They're not worth having your *kishkas* pumped full of boiling lead."

Friedman blanched. "Maybe you're right," he said, staring at Rosalyn, who was loudly, raucously, and unashamedly writhing, blaspheming, imploring, and hemorrhaging. It was already getting tedious, Rosenthal thought.

"You were telling me about your sin," said Rosenthal. "To be honest, you never got close to telling me about your sin, but let's pretend that you did."

Friedman couldn't take his eyes off the hideous sight of young Rosalyn in agony. "I broke the Second Commandment," he said, all his cockiness now gone. "That's what they told me in Heaven."

"The Second Commandment," said Rosenthal. "Which one's that?"

Friedman glanced at him briefly, but quickly looked back at Rosalyn. Her shrieks filled the silence of the empty hell. Friedman acted as if he hadn't heard Rosenthal's question.

"So which one is Number Two?" asked Rosenthal again.

Friedman looked very queasy. "That's the one about blasphemy and cursing. I took the name of the Lord in vain."

"That's what they sent you to Hell for? Did they give you a chance to repent?"

"Well, yeah."

"So what happened?"

Friedman's eyes squeezed shut. "I thought they were making a big deal over nothing. I didn't think they'd nail me for something like that. And I guess I was trying to act tough."

"You didn't repent?"

"I told them I didn't have anything to repent for; I never killed nobody, I never stole anything."

Rosenthal shook his head in disbelief. "You let them trip you on Number Two. They *are* worse than the IRS."

"At least the IRS will take a check, you can halfway dicker with them. Now I'm in Hell." He looked again at Rosalyn; made the connection that the same thing or something similar would soon be happening to him, too; and passed out.

"Some Nazi," muttered Rosenthal, looking down at Friedman. "I wish Rosalyn would stop suffering. I wish she'd be healed, too, and completely forget the whole molten-lead incident." And just like that, she was standing beside him in the same bewildered but untortured shape in which she'd arrived.

"What happened?" she asked. "Who's that?"

"Some Nazi."

"What are we going to do with him?"

"We?" asked Rosenthal. "We?"

Rosalyn scratched her oily scalp for a few seconds. "Weren't you offering me some kind of partnership or something?"

"*Bubkes!*" said Rosenthal. "Nobody's partners with me. I take on help now and then, but I *own* this place. I don't need *partners*, I need *servants*. Period."

"Whatever. What do you want me to do?"

Rosenthal smiled. "I want you should work on the new arrivals."

"I don't know if I can do that."

"Sure you can. You've got *great* ideas. You've got all those plaid-skirted Ste. Nitouche's Academy horror stories you can use; and when you use all those up, you can make up brand-new ones of your very own. You can have complete freedom to express yourself. You can develop your creativity. Who knows? You may find a God-given gift you never even knew you had."

"I didn't expect such a nice reception in Hell," she said. She was still dubious.

Rosenthal was glad she didn't remember anything at all about her own recent anguish. "I want you to start on Mr. Friedman here."

“How will I do it?”

Rosenthal klopped his forehead with the heel of one hand. “I’m a fool,” he said. “I wish Rosalyn had enough power to wish up torments for Mr. Friedman and whoever else comes along, but not enough power to hinder or harm me in any way.” And just like that, Rosalyn became second-in-command in Hell. She woke Friedman up and took him off across the plain. Rosenthal was once again alone.

Some time later, as Rosenthal was wandering along the base of the obsidian cliff looking for an end to his boredom, he saw a growing spark of light high up above his head. It looked like a bright star, but it quickly became a burning moon, then a blazing sun. The light was too intense for Rosenthal to watch directly. He muttered a curse and averted his eyes, wondering what was happening now. Even in Hell you couldn’t get any peace and quiet. It was always something.

The light, whatever its source, flared brighter and spread further and further through the gloom. Something was approaching Rosenthal that was going to be awfully impressive when it got there. “I wish I could look at it without feeling like I got jabbed in the eye.” And just like that, he had a pair of polarized sunglasses in his hand. He put them on.

He saw a gigantic callused hand. The hand, at least as big as Shea Stadium, was ill-formed and badly manicured. It was attached to an arm so huge that it rose up into the shadows out of sight. Rosenthal shuddered, imagining how vast the entire body must be, judging by the size of this grotesque hand. He didn’t want to know whose hand it was. It was reaching down into the very pit of Hell like you’d reach down into the garbage disposal to retrieve a spoon; and in the hand was the brilliant passenger.

It was an angel—an angel with a flaming sword, yet. “Ai-yi-yi,” muttered Rosenthal. He felt an intense fear, although he was sure that there was nothing more Heaven could do to him. He was already in Hell, what could be

worse? He had the paralyzing suspicion that very soon he was going to find out, God forbid.

The hand set the angel down on the floor of Hell and lifted itself back up into the gloom overhead. The angel looked up and waved. "Thanks, Antaeus," he called, "I'll let you know when I'm finished here."

Rosenthal just stood where he was. The sight of an angel in full glory, evidently on official business, was awesome. It made the clerk-angels he'd seen soon after his death seem almost drab. The angel of the flaming sword sighted Rosenthal and raised a hand. "Peace be with you" called the angel.

"So nu? That's why you brought a flaming sword?"

The angel smiled. "Never mind that, it just goes with the job. Personally, I think a badge or a nice cap would be better than shlepping this thing around, but it does make some impression."

"And to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I am Orahmiel, an angel of the order of Virtues, which is a few orders above Archangel. Virtues are the bestowers of grace, and we're also those angels men refer to as 'guardian angels.' "

"That's nice," said Rosenthal. "Well, I have work to do, so if you need anything—"

"Mr. Rosenthal," said Orahmiel sternly, "we must talk."

His own name sounded odd in Rosenthal's ears. He had long since forgotten that he had ever been Morton Rosenthal; he had assumed the role of the devil, and he was brought up short by this recollection of his earthly existence. "How do I come to have this little chat with my *opstairsiker*?"

"There seems to have been a minor mistake made in the handling of your case, Mr. Rosenthal. I've been sent to correct it."

Rosenthal looked down at his tough, blackened skin that even yet did not fully protect him from the incendiary fury of Hell. He gave a humorless laugh. "You people take your time," he said.

Orahamiel pretended to study his flaming sword. "Errors do not often happen in Heaven," he said. "As a matter of fact, your damnation was the very first such error in memory. We're all sorry as h—I mean, sorry as we could be about it. I know that hardly makes up for the misery you've suffered here; but I hope you'll listen to the remarkable story I have to tell, and then accept our apology."

Rosenthal was more bitter now than he'd even been, because it had all been "a mistake." Pain and suffering were inevitable, he supposed; but nothing in the world is as hard to bear as *unnecessary* pain. "You must miss being in Heaven," he said. "You must sure be on somebody's list, to get stuck with a lousy job like this, coming down to Hell when everybody else is still up there hymning and everything."

Orahamiel looked surprised. "Why, this is Heaven," he said, "nor am I out of it. I mean, it doesn't make any difference where I am—if I have to carry a message to Hotzeplotz and back—I'm still in the presence of God."

"You're in Hell now, not Hotzeplotz."

"Look," said the Virtue, spreading wide his wings, "not so much as a singed feather."

"Mmneh," admitted Rosenthal. "So you were saying?"

"Do you mind if I lean this sword against the rocks and we sit down? This is a longish story."

"Sitting hurts," said Rosenthal.

"I can relieve your pain while we sit," said Orahamiel.

"Then we'll sit."

They made themselves comfortable at the foot of the towering rocks; miraculously, Rosenthal didn't feel the slightest discomfort. It was like the sun coming out after a long, grim, and dreary day. The angel began his story. "You see, there was an interruption while your case was being processed—"

"I remember some big *tummel*. The angel who was looking at my records got up and wanted to see what was happening."

Orahamiel nodded. "Well, you'll never guess what it was all about!"

"Probably not," agreed Rosenthal.

"You just had the unbelievably *shlimm mazel* to appear in Heaven at the *precise moment* when Satan and all his fallen angels decided to repent and ask God's forgiveness. That's what all the fuss was about. They were being welcomed back into Heaven."

Rosenthal stared at the angel, then looked around the vast, frightening solitude of Hell. "That's why I was all by myself? I thought maybe being alone was my punishment, but—"

"There was always a tradition—an unofficial tradition, sometimes labeled heresy, but that was just your human theologians limiting the grace of God—in the three Middle Eastern religions that someday the devil would get fed up with Hell. All that kept him here was his pride. If he asked for mercy, God in His infinite benevolence would grant it. Satan was once a seraph, you know, and he's been given back his old rank and privileges, and nobody in all the choirs sings praises more loudly now than he."

"While Morton Rosenthal, poor shmuck of a butcher, sits on his *tuchis* and takes his place."

"You were supposed to be asked if you repented your crimes," said Orahamiel. "Even at that last minute, if you repented, you'd have been welcomed into Heaven, too. Your angel was distracted a little by the sudden reappearance of the fallen ones. You weren't given due process."

Rosenthal shrugged. "To err is human," he said.

"But not angelic. Now, Mr. Rosenthal, I ask you: do you repent?"

Rosenthal started to respond, but closed his mouth and thought for a moment. At last he said, "Do I get a little something in the way of reparation?"

The Virtue frowned. "We're not in the reparation game, Mr. Rosenthal."

"You're telling me you don't pay for your mistakes?"

"We're making you quite a generous offer. I've come all the way to Hell to take you back to Heaven with me."

"But you won't give me anything for the physical and mental distress you've caused me. I get a better deal than that from some *momzer* who sideswipes my car. I'm sorry, but it's true."

"It isn't smart to try to bargain with Heaven, Mr. Rosenthal."

"Ha! I've got you over a barrel and you know it. You just won't admit you're wrong."

Orahamiel looked stern again. "We could see who has whom over a barrel very easily. I'll just leave you here in the darkness and wait for you to come to your senses."

"You just do that. You can't push people around like this. There's such a thing as justice, you know."

"Your choice is between Heaven and Hell. Now you must choose."

When put that baldly, the proposition made Rosenthal hesitate. "If I stay here—"

Orahamiel was astonished. "How could anyone even *consider* staying here, in preference to returning to Heaven?"

"You forget, I was never really *in* Heaven. I don't know what I'm missing."

The angel thought that over. "Yes, Satan's punishment was the denial of the beatific vision, and his memory of the bliss he'd lost."

I never had it to lose in the first place. This Hell isn't much worse than what I was used to when I was still alive."

"And I suppose you'd rather reign in Hell than serve in Heaven, that old business again?"

Rosenthal really didn't want to commit himself, but he'd come too far to back down. "I guess so," he said.

"Your answer was anticipated. Now I must learn if you plan to pursue a course of subversion against the human race, as Satan did before you."

Rosenthal's shoulders slumped. "What do you think I am?" he asked hotly, insulted.

"Well," said Orahaniel, "if this is what you wish, I'll leave you to your new kingdom, such as it is."

"You do that, see if I care," said Rosenthal. He was bluffing, although his mind was telling him to fall to his knees and beg for another chance. He thought about his wife, Rose, whom he'd murdered, waiting to greet him in Heaven. He shuddered and hardened his heart, determined that he would make the best of it in Hell, instead. Especially if he was the new *gontser macher* around here.

"That kind of reasoning is just Satan's error of pride, all over again," said the angel, reading Rosenthal's thoughts. He just shook his head, got to his feet, and gathered up his flaming sword. "Last chance," he said.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

Orahaniel shrugged. "Go figure," he said sadly. He called to Antaeus. As the gigantic hand cut through the darkness lower and lower, Rosenthal looked away. Across the great plain he saw six more sinners approaching, probably Commandments Three through Eight. They'd all been given the opportunity to repent, and they'd all in their foolishness refused. He turned his back so that he wouldn't have to watch Orahaniel rising up toward Heaven. "Home is where the heart is," said the devil, disgusted by the reeking, foul place he'd chosen, disgusted by the newly-arriving lost souls, disgusted by his own stubbornness. The terrified damned inched nearer, accompanied, he now saw, by Rosalyn. "Oy," he murmured.

DINNER IN AUDOGHAST

by Bruce Sterling

During the course of human history man has built any number of magnificent cities, many of which have totally disappeared. Among these was the city of Audoghast whose very location is a matter of conjecture, although it is known to have been someplace in West Africa, perhaps in the area of the modern countries of Mali or Mauritania. Here is a tale about an evening's repast in that city and of a seer who prophesied its destruction.

"Then one arrives at Audoghast, a large and very populous city built in a sandy plain. . . . The inhabitants live in ease and possess great riches. The market is always crowded; the mob is so huge and the chattering so loud that you can scarcely hear your own words. . . . The city contains beautiful buildings and very elegant homes." DESCRIPTION OF NORTHERN AFRICA, Abu Ubayd al-Bakri (1040-1094 A.D.)

Delightful Audoghast! Renowned through the civilized world,

from Cordova to Baghdad, the city spread in splendor beneath a twilit Saharan sky. The setting sun threw pink and amber across adobe domes, masonry mansions, tall, mud-brick mosques, and open plazas thick with bristling date-palms. The melodious calls of market vendors mixed with the remote and amiable chuckling of Saharan hyenas.

Four gentlemen sat on carpets in a tiled and whitewashed portico, sipping coffee in the evening breeze. The host was the genial and accomplished slave-dealer, Manimenesh. His three guests were Ibn Watunan, the caravan master; Khayali, the poet and musician; and Bagayoko, a physician and court assassin.

The home of Manimenesh stood upon the hillside in the aristocratic quarter, where it gazed down on an open marketplace and the mud-brick homes of the lowly. The prevailing breeze swept away the city reek, and brought from within the mansion the palate-sharpening aromas of lamb in tarragon and roast partridge in lemons and eggplant. The four men lounged comfortably around a low inlaid table, sipping spiced coffee from Chinese cups, and watching the ebb and flow of market life.

The scene below them encouraged a lofty philosophical detachment. Manimenesh, who owned no less than fifteen books, was a well-known patron of learning. Jewels gleamed on his dark, plump hands, which lay cozily folded over his paunch. He wore a long tunic of crushed red velvet, and a gold-threaded skullcap.

Khayali, the young poet, had studied architecture and verse in the schools of Timbaktu. He lived in the household of Manimenesh as his poet and praisemaker, and his sonnets, ghazals, and odes were recited throughout the city. He propped one elbow against the full belly of his two-string *guimbri* guitar, of inlaid ebony, strung with leopard gut.

Ibn Watunan had an eagle's hooded gaze and hands callused by camel-reins. He wore an indigo turban and a long

striped djellaba. In thirty years as a sailor and caravaneer, he had bought and sold Zanzibar ivory, Sumatran pepper, Ferghana silk, and Cordovan leather. Now a taste for refined gold had brought him to Audoghast, for Audoghast's African bullion was known throughout Islam as the standard of quality.

Doctor Bagayoko's ebony skin was ridged with an initiate's scars, and his long, clay-smeared hair was festooned with knobs of chiselled bone. He wore a tunic of white Egyptian cotton, hung with gris-gris necklaces, and his baggy sleeves bulged with herbs and charms. He was a native Audoghastian of the animist persuasion, the personal physician of the city's Prince.

Bagayoko's skill with powders, potions, and unguents made him an intimate of Death. He often undertook diplomatic missions to the neighboring Empire of Ghana. During his last visit there, the anti-Audoghast faction had conveniently suffered a lethal outbreak of pox.

Between the four men was the air of camaraderie common to gentlemen and scholars.

They finished the coffee and a slave took the empty pot away. A second slave, a girl from the kitchen staff, arrived with a wicker tray loaded with olives, goat-cheese, and hard-boiled eggs sprinkled with vermillion. At that moment, a muezzin yodelled the evening call to prayer.

"Ah," said Ibn Watunan, hesitating. "Just as we were getting started."

"Never mind," said Manimenesh, helping himself to a handful of olives. "We'll pray twice next time."

"Why was there was no noon prayer today?" said Watunan.

"Our muezzin forgot," the poet said.

Watunan lifted his shaggy brows. "That seems rather lax."

Doctor Bagayoko said, "This is a new muezzin. The last was more punctual, but, well, he fell ill." Bagayoko smiled urbanely and nibbled his cheese.

"We Audoghastians like our new muezzin better," said

the poet, Khayali. "He's one of our own, not like that other fellow, who was from Fez. *Our* muezzin is sleeping with a Christian's wife. It's very entertaining."

"You have Christians here?" Watunan said.

"A clan of Ethiopian Copts," said Manimenesh. "And a couple of Nestorians."

"Oh," said Watunan, relaxing. "For a moment I thought you meant real *feringhee* Christians, from Europe."

"From where?" Manimenesh was puzzled.

"Very far away," said Ibn Watunan, smiling. "Ugly little countries, with no profit."

"There were empires in Europe once," said Khayali knowledgeably. "The Empire of Rome was almost as big as the modern civilized world."

Watunan nodded. "I have seen the New Rome, called Byzantium. They have armored horsemen, like your neighbors in Ghana. Savage fighters."

Bagayoko nodded, salting an egg. "Christians eat children."

Watunan smiled. "I can assure you that the Byzantines do no such thing."

"Really?" said Bagayoko. "Well, our Christians do."

"That's just the doctor's little joke," said Manimenesh. "Sometimes strange rumors spread about us, because we raid our slaves from the Nyam-Nyam cannibal tribes on the coast. But we watch their diet closely, I assure you."

Watunan smiled uncomfortably. "There is always something new out of Africa. One hears the oddest stories. Hairy men, for instance."

"Ah," said Manimenesh. "You mean gorillas, from the jungles to the south. I'm sorry to spoil the story for you, but they are nothing better than beasts."

"I see," said Watunan. "That's a pity."

"My grandfather owned a gorilla once," Manimenesh said. "Even after ten years, it could barely speak Arabic."

They finished the appetizers. Slaves cleared the table and brought in a platter of fattened partridges, stuffed with lemons and eggplants, on a bed of mint and lettuce. The four diners leaned in closer and dexterously ripped off legs and wings.

Watunan sucked meat from a drumstick and belched politely. "Audoghast is famous for its cooks," he said. "I'm pleased to see that this legend, at least, is confirmed."

"We Audoghastians pride ourselves on the pleasures of table and bed," said Manimenesh, pleased. "I have asked Elfelilet, one of our premiere courtesans, to honor us with a visit tonight. She will bring her troupe of dancers."

Watunan smiled. "That would be splendid. One tires of boys on the trail. Your women are remarkable. I've noticed that they go without the veil."

Khayali lifted his voice in song. "When a woman of Audoghast appears/
The girls of Fez bite their lips./
The dames of Tripoli hide in closets,/ And Ghana's women hang themselves."

"We take pride in the exalted status of our women," said Manimenesh. "It's not for nothing that they command a premium market price!"

In the marketplace, downhill, vendors lit tiny oil lamps, which cast a flickering glow across the walls of tents and the watering troughs. A troop of the Prince's men, with iron spears, shields, and chain-mail, marched across the plaza to take the night watch at the Eastern Gate. Slaves with heavy water-jars gossiped beside the well.

"There's quite a crowd around one of the stalls," said Bagayoko.

"So I see," said Watunan. "What is it? Some news that might affect the market?"

Bagayoko sopped up gravy with a wad of mint and lettuce. "Rumor says there's a new fortune-teller in town. New prophets always go through a vogue."

"Ah yes," said Khayali, sitting up, "They call him 'the

Sufferer.' He is said to tell the most outlandish and entertaining fortunes."

"I wouldn't trust any fortune-teller's market tips," said Manimenesh. "If you want to know the market, you have to know the hearts of the people, and for that you need a good poet."

Khayali bowed his head. "Sir," he said, "live forever."

It was growing dark. Household slaves arrived with pottery lamps of sesame oil, which they hung from the rafters of the portico. Others took the bones of the partridges and brought in a haunch and head of lamb with a side-dish of cinnamon tripes.

As a gesture of esteem, the host offered Watunan the eyeballs, and after three ritual refusals the caravan-master dug in with relish. "I put great stock in fortune-tellers, myself," he said, munching. "They are often privy to strange secrets. Not the occult kind, but the blabbing of the superstitious. Slave-girls anxious about some household scandal, or minor officials worried over promotions—inside news from those who consult them. It can be useful."

"If that's the case," said Manimenesh, "perhaps we should call him up here."

"They say he is grotesquely ugly," said Khayali. "He is called 'the Sufferer' because he is outlandishly afflicted by disease."

Bagayoko wiped his chin elegantly on his sleeve. "Now you begin to interest me!"

"It's settled, then." Manimenesh clapped his hands. "Bring young Sidi, my errand runner!"

Sidi arrived at once, dusting flour from his hands. He was the cook's teenage son, a tall young black in a dyed woollen djellaba. His cheeks were stylishly scarred and he had bits of brass wire interwoven with his dense black locks. Manimenesh gave him his orders; Sidi leapt from the portico, ran downhill through the garden, and vanished through the gates.

The slave-dealer sighed. "This is one of the problems of my business. When I bought my cook she was a slim and lithesome wench, and I enjoyed her freely. Now years of dedication to her craft have increased her market value by twenty times, and also made her as fat as a hippopotamus, though that is beside the point. She has always claimed that Sidi is my child, and since I don't wish to sell her, I must make allowance. I have made him a freeman; I have spoiled him, I'm afraid. On my death, my legitimate sons will deal with him cruelly."

The caravan-master, having caught the implications of this speech, smiled politely, "Can he ride? Can he bargain? Can he do sums?"

"Oh," said Manimenesh with false nonchalance, "he can manage that newfangled stuff with the zeroes well enough."

"You know I am bound for China," said Watunan. "It is a hard road that brings either riches or death."

"He runs the risk in any case," the slave-dealer said philosophically. "The riches are Allah's decision."

"This is truth," said the caravan-master. He made a secret gesture, beneath the table, where the others could not see. His host returned it, and Sidi was proposed, and accepted, for the Brotherhood.

With the night's business over, Manimenesh relaxed, and broke open the lamb's steamed skull with a silver mallet. They spooned out the brains, then attacked the tripes, which were stuffed with onion, cabbage, cinnamon, rue, coriander, cloves, ginger, pepper, and lightly dusted with ambergris. They ran out of mustard dip and called for more, eating a bit more slowly now, for they were approaching the limit of human capacity.

They then sat back, pushing away platters of congealing grease, and enjoying a profound satisfaction with the state of the world. Down in the marketplace, bats from an abandoned mosque chased moths around the vendors' lanterns.

The poet belched suavely and picked up his two-stringed guitar. "Dear God," he said, "this is a splendid place. See, caravan-master, how the stars smile down on our beloved Southwest." He drew a singing note from the leopard-gut strings. "I feel at one with Eternity."

Watunan smiled. "When I find a man like that, I have to bury him."

"There speaks the man of business," the doctor said. He unobtrusively dusted a tiny pinch of venom on the last chunk of tripe, and ate it. He accustomed himself to poison. It was a professional precaution.

From the street beyond the wall, they heard the approaching jingle of brass rings. The guard at the gate called out. "The Lady Elfelilet and her escorts, lord!"

"Make them welcome," said Manimenesh. Slaves took the platters away, and brought a velvet couch onto the spacious portico. The diners extended their hands; slaves scrubbed and towelled them clean.

Elfelilet's party came forward through the fig-clustered garden: two escorts with gold-topped staffs heavy with jingling brass rings; three dancing-girls, apprentice courtesans in blue woollen cloaks over gauzy cotton trousers and embroidered blouses; and four palanquin bearers, beefy male slaves with oiled torsos and callused shoulders. The bearers set the palanquin down with stifled grunts of relief and opened the cloth-of-gold hangings.

Elfelilet emerged, a tawny-skinned woman, her eyes dusted in kohl and collyrium, her hennaed hair threaded with gold wire. Her palms and nails were stained pink; she wore an embroidered blue cloak over an intricate, sleeveless vest and ankle-tied silk trousers starched and polished with myrobolan lacquer. A light freckling of smallpox scars along one cheek delightfully accented her broad, moonlike face.

"Elfelilet, my dear," said Manimenesh, "you are just in time for dessert."

Elfelilet stepped gracefully across the tiled floor and reclined face-first along the velvet couch, where the well-known loveliness of her posterior could be displayed to its best advantage. "I thank my friend and patron, the noble Manimenesh. Live forever! Learned doctor Bagayoko, I am your servant. Hello, poet."

"Hello, darling," said Khayali, smiling with the natural camaraderie of poets and courtesans. "You are the moon and your troupe of lovelies are comets across our vision."

The host said, "This is our esteemed guest, the caravan master, Abou Bekr Ahmed Ibn Watunan."

Watunan, who had been gaping in enraptured amazement, came to himself with a start. "I am a simple desert man," he said, "I haven't a poet's gift of words. But I am your ladyship's servant."

Elfelilet smiled and tossed her head; her distended earlobes clattered with heavy chunks of gold filigree. "Welcome to Audoghast."

Dessert arrived. "Well," said Manimenesh. "Our earlier dishes were rough and simple fare, but this is where we shine. Let me tempt you with these *djouzinkat* nutcakes. And do sample our honey macaroons—I believe there's enough for everyone."

Everyone, except of course for the slaves, enjoyed the light and flakey *cataif* macaroons, liberally dusted with Kairwan sugar. The nutcakes were simply beyond compare: painstakingly milled from hand-watered wheat, lovingly buttered and sugared, and artistically studded with raisins, dates, and almonds.

"We eat *djouzinkat* nutcakes during droughts," the poet said, "because the angels weep with envy when we taste them."

Manimenesh belched heroically and readjusted his skull-cap. "Now," he said, "we will enjoy a little bit of grape wine. Just a small tot, mind you, so that the sin of drinking is

a minor one, and we can do penance with the minimum of alms. After that, our friend the poet will recite an ode he has composed for the occasion."

Khayali began to tune his two-string guitar. "I will also, on demand, extemporize twelve-line *ghazals* in the lyric mode, upon suggested topics."

"And after our digestion has been soothed with epigrams," said their host, "we will enjoy the justly famed dancing of her ladyship's troupe. After that we will retire within the mansion and enjoy their other, equally lauded skills."

The gate-guard shouted. "Your errand-runner, Lord! He awaits your pleasure, with the fortune-teller!"

"Ah," said Manimenesh. "I had forgotten."

"No matter, sir," said Watunan, whose imagination had been fired by the night's agenda.

Bagayoko spoke up. "Let's have a look at him. His ugliness, by contrast, will heighten the beauty of these women."

"Which would otherwise be impossible," said the poet.

"Very well," said Manimenesh. "Bring him forward."

Sidi, the errand boy, came through the garden, followed with ghastly slowness by the crutch-wielding fortune-teller.

The man inched into the lamplight like a crippled insect. His voluminous, dust-gray cloak was stained with sweat, and nameless exudations. He was an albino. His pink eyes were shrouded with cataracts, and he had lost a foot, and several fingers, to leprosy. One shoulder was much lower than the other, suggesting a hunchback, and the stub of his shin was scarred by the gnawing of canal-worms.

"Prophet's beard!" said the poet. "He is truly of surpassing ghastliness."

Elfelilet wrinkled her nose. "He reeks of pestilence!"

Sidi spoke up. "We came as fast as we could, Lord!"

"Go inside, boy," said Manimenesh, "soak ten sticks of cinnamon in a bucket of water, then come back and throw it over him."

Sidi left at once.

Watunan stared at the hideous man, who stood, quivering on one leg, at the edge of the light. "How is it, man, that you still live?"

"I have turned my sight from the world," said the Sufferer. "I turned my sight to God, and He poured knowledge copiously upon me. I have inherited a knowledge which no mortal body can support."

"But God is merciful," said Watunan. "How can you claim this to be His doing?"

"If you do not fear God," said the fortune-teller, "fear Him after seeing me." The hideous albino lowered himself, with arthritic, aching slowness, to the dirt outside the portico. He spoke again. "You are right, caravan-master, to think that death would be a mercy to me. But death comes in its own time, as it will to all of you."

Manimenesh cleared his throat. "Can you see our destinies, then?"

"I see the world," said the Sufferer. "To see the fate of one man is to follow a single ant in a hill."

Sidi reemerged and poured the scented water over the cripple. The fortune-teller cupped his maimed hands and drank. "Thank you, boy," he said. He turned his clouded eyes on the youth. "Your children will be yellow."

Sidi laughed, startled. "Yellow? Why?"

"Your wives will be yellow."

The dancing-girls, who had moved to the far side of the table, giggled in unison. Bagayoko pulled a gold coin from within his sleeve. "I will give you this gold dirham if you will show me your body."

Elfelilet frowned prettily and blinked her kohl-smeared lashes. "Oh, learned doctor, please spare us."

"You will see my body, sir, if you have patience," said the Sufferer. "As yet, the people of Audoghast laugh at my prophecies. I am doomed to tell the truth, which is harsh and

cruel, and therefore absurd. As my fame grows, however, it will reach the ears of your Prince, who will then order you to remove me as a threat to public order. You will then sprinkle your favorite poison, powdered asp venom, into a bowl of chickpea soup I will receive from a customer. I bear you no grudge for this, as it will be your civic duty, and will relieve me of pain."

"What an odd notion," said Bagayoko, frowning. "I see no need for the Prince to call on my services. One of his spearmen could puncture you like a water-skin."

"By then," the prophet said, "my occult powers will have roused so much uneasiness that it will seem best to take extreme measures."

"Well," said Bagayoko, "that's convenient, if exceedingly grotesque."

"Unlike other prophets," said the Sufferer, "I see the future not as one might wish it to be, but in all its cataclysmic and blind futility. That is why I have come here, to your delightful city. My numerous and totally accurate prophecies will vanish when this city does. This will spare the world any troublesome conflicts of predestination and free will."

"He is a theologian!" the poet said. "A leper theologian—it's a shame my professors in Timbuktu aren't here to debate him!"

"You prophesy doom for our city?" said Manimenesh.

"Yes. I will be specific. This is the year 406 of the Prophet's Hejira, and one thousand and fourteen years since the birth of Christ. In forty years, a puritan and fanatical cult of Moslems will arise, known as the Almoravids. At that time, Audoghash will be an ally of the Ghana Empire, who are idol-worshippers. Ibn Yasin, the warrior saint of the Almoravids, will condemn Audoghash as a nest of pagans. He will set his horde of desert marauders against the city; they will be enflamed by righteousness and greed. They will slaughter the men, and rape and enslave the women. Audoghash will

be sacked, the wells will be poisoned, and cropland will wither and blow away. In a hundred years, sand dunes will bury the ruins. In five hundred years, Audoghast will survive only as a few dozen lines of narrative in the travel books of Arab scholars."

Khayali shifted his guitar. "But the libraries of Timbuktu are full of books on Audoghast, including, if I may say so, our immortal tradition of poetry."

"I have not yet mentioned Timbuktu," said the prophet, "which will be sacked by Moorish invaders led by a blond Spanish eunuch. They will feed the books to goats."

The company burst into incredulous laughter. Unperturbed, the prophet said, "The ruin will be so general, so thorough, and so all-encompassing, that in future centuries it will be stated, and believed, that West Africa was always a land of savages."

"Who in the world could make such a slander?" said the poet.

"They will be Europeans, who will emerge from their current squalid decline, and arm themselves with mighty sciences."

"What happens then?" said Bagayoko, smiling.

"I can look at those future ages," said the prophet, "but I prefer not to do so, as it makes my head hurt."

"You prophesy, then" said Manimenesh, "that our far-famed metropolis, with its towering mosques and armed militia, will be reduced to utter desolation."

"Such is the truth, regrettable as it may be. You, and all you love, will leave no trace in this world, except a few lines in the writing of strangers."

"And our city will fall to savage tribesmen?"

The Sufferer said, "No one here will witness the disaster to come. You will live out your lives, year after year, enjoying ease and luxury, not because you deserve it, but simply because of blind fate. In time you will forget this night; you

will forget all I have said, just as the world will forget you and your city. When Audoghast falls, this boy Sidi, this son of a slave, will be the only survivor of this night's gathering. By then he too will have forgotten Audoghast, which he has no cause to love. He will be a rich old merchant in Ch'ang-an, which is a Chinese city of such fantastic wealth that it could buy ten Audoghasts, and which will not be sacked and annihilated until a considerably later date."

"This is madness," said Watunan.

Bagayoko twirled a crusted lock of mud-smeared hair in his supple fingers. "Your gate guard is a husky lad, friend Manimenesh. What say we have him bash this storm-crow's head in, and haul him out to be hyena food?"

"For that, doctor," said the Sufferer, "I will tell you the manner of your death. You will be killed by the Ghanaian royal guard, while attempting to kill the crown prince by blowing a subtle poison into his anus with a hollow reed."

Bagayoko started. "You idiot, there is no crown prince."

"He was conceived yesterday."

Bagayoko turned impatiently to the host. "Let us rid ourselves of this prodigy!"

Manimenesh nodded sternly. "Sufferer, you have insulted my guests and my city. You are lucky to leave my home alive."

The Sufferer hauled himself with agonizing slowness to his single foot. "Your boy spoke to me of your generosity."

"What! Not one copper for your drivelling."

"Give me one of the gold dirhams from your purse. Otherwise I shall be forced to continue prophesying, and in a more intimate vein."

Manimenesh considered this. "Perhaps it's best." He threw Sidi a coin. "Give this to the madman and escort him back to his raving-booth."

They waited in tormented patience as the fortune-teller creaked and crutched, with painful slowness, into the darkness.

Manimenesh, brusquely, threw out his red velvet sleeves and clapped for wine. "Give us a song, Khayali."

The poet pulled the cowl of his cloak over his head. "My head rings with an awful silence," he said. "I see all waymarks effaced, the joyous pleasantries converted into barren wilderness. Jackals resort here, ghosts frolic, and demons sport; the gracious halls, and rich boudoirs, that once shone like the sun, now, overwhelmed by desolation, seem like the gaping mouths of savage beasts!" He looked at the dancing-girls, his eyes brimming with tears. "I picture these maidens, lying beneath the dust, or dispersed to distant parts and far regions, scattered by the hand of exile, torn to pieces by the fingers of expatriation."

Manimenesh smiled on him kindly. "My boy," he said, "if others cannot hear your songs, or embrace these women, or drink this wine, the loss is not ours, but theirs. Let us, then, enjoy all three, and let those unborn do the regretting."

"Your patron is wise," said Ibn Watunan, patting the poet on the shoulder. "You see him here, favored by Allah with every luxury; and you saw that filthy madman, bedevilled by plague. That lunatic, who pretends to great wisdom, only croaks of ruin; while our industrious friend makes the world a better place, by fostering nobility and learning. Could God forsake a city like this, with all its charms, to bring about that fool's disgusting prophecies?" He lifted his cup to Elfelilet, and drank deeply.

"But delightful Audoghast," said the poet, weeping. "All our loveliness, lost to the sands."

"The world is wide," said Bagayoko, "and the years are long. It is not for us to claim immortality, not even if we are poets. But take comfort, my friend. Even if these walls and buildings crumble, there will always be a place like Audoghast, as long as men love profit! The mines are inexhaustible, and elephants are thick as fleas. Mother Africa will always give us gold and ivory."

"Always?" said the poet hopefully, dabbing at his eyes.

"Well, surely there are always slaves," said Manimenesh, and smiled, and winked. The others laughed with him, and there was joy again.

FORTUNES OF A FOOL

by Nicholas Yermakov

It wasn't exactly a marriage made in Heaven, what with a groom who was a simpleton and a bride who looked like a frog, which isn't surprising because that's what she was. Yet with the guidance of his clever little wife, Ivan, who had been a pauper, became a very rich man. There is an old saying, however, about a fool and his money, and although it wasn't Ivan's fault, but because of something his wife had failed to mention, the effect was the same.

Ivan the simpleton had never spoken with a frog before. But it did not seem strange to him that a frog knew how to speak; Ivan believed that any animal would talk, if given provocation. The way they sometimes looked at you, it seemed to Ivan that they were just about to speak, only for some reason chose not to at the last minute. He had shared this insight with his Uncle Vanya in the tavern one night, and Uncle Vanya had agreed with him.

"Just so, Ivanushka," he said. "Why, only just this morning, I went into the barn to milk the cow, and I was in a hurry

so I forgot to warm my hands before the milking. The moment that I touched her teats, she turned a reproachful look upon me and said, 'Vanya, your hands are cold.' And I said, 'So they are. I'm sorry, I forgot to warm them first.' At which the cow nodded understandingly and said, 'I forgive you, Vanya, but see that you do not forget again.' And, just to remind me not to forget, she gave less milk than she does usually."

And the men in the tavern had laughed uproariously, and Ivan had laughed with them, though he did not quite see why the story was so funny. But ever since then, he always made sure to warm his hands before helping Uncle Vanya with the milking. And it seemed to him that the cows always looked at him with gratitude. Yet, they never spoke to him. But this did not surprise Ivan. After all, he was a simpleton. Everybody said so, even Uncle Vanya. And if animals only speak to people when it is important, why should they speak to him? He was not important. Everybody said so. Whenever he wanted to discuss something with someone, they smiled at him and said, "Ivanushka, that's not important."

So Ivan had taken to discussing matters with himself. Not too far behind the little farm where he lived with Uncle Vanya and Aunt Sonya, there was a stream fed by the snow that melted from the mountains. A large willow tree grew on the bank of the little stream, and its roots were thick and protruded from the ground. The way the roots protruded and the tree trunk angled away slightly from the stream, it made a nice place to sit, almost like a comfortable chair, and Ivan would go there every day when his chores were done to nibble on some stale bread, toss pebbles in the water, and discuss things with himself. He always paid very close attention when he spoke, even if the things he said were not important.

During a pause in his conversation with himself, Ivan

noticed a little frog sitting on a rock in the middle of the stream. The frog was watching him intently.

"Are you hungry?" asked Ivan.

The little green frog seemed to nod.

"I can offer you some bread," Ivan said, breaking off a frog-sized piece and tossing it carefully so that it landed on a large flat rock. "I'm sorry that it's a little stale, but it's all I have."

The frog didn't seem to mind. It greedily gobbled up the little piece of bread, and Ivan tossed it another.

"Now there's the life," Ivan said. "Nothing to do but lie upon a rock all day and sun yourself. You can take a swim anytime you want, you don't have chores to do, and if you're hungry, all you need to do is lie very still and wait for a nice big juicy fly to happen by. And at night you can sing to your heart's content, and no one yells at you to be quiet. Oh, to be a frog!"

"You wouldn't like it very much," the frog said quietly.

Ivan sat up. "What did you say?"

"I said, you wouldn't like it very much, being a frog," the frog said, more distinctly.

"Oh? Why not?"

"Being a frog is vastly overrated," said the frog with a sigh. "It's not as easy as you think. You always have to be on guard against a hungry fox or a ravenous raccoon. If you lie down upon a rock to close your eyes and sun yourself, some sadistic child tries to smash you with a stick. The water's very cold, and flies taste awful. Try eating one and find out for yourself. And as for the singing, all frogs ever sing about is how tough life is when you're a frog. I just can't stand it."

"But you're a frog," Ivan said. "It's what your lot in life is. My lot in life is to get up at dawn and work 'til dusk, doing my chores."

"And to sleep in a warm bed—"

"I sleep on a straw mattress in the barn," Ivan said.

"Whatever. It's a vast improvement over a cold rock."

"That's true," Ivan admitted.

"And you get to eat warm, fresh baked bread—"

"Aunt Sonya sells the bread," said Ivan. "I only get the stale stuff that's left over."

The frog shot out its long tongue and scored a direct hit on a passing fly.

"There you are," the frog said. "A nice big juicy fly. And it's freshly killed, not stale. Which would you rather have, the fly or your stale bread?"

"I'll take the bread, I think," Ivan said.

"There, you see? Just as I expected. You're not quite ready to trade places with me yet, whereas *I* would trade places with you in an instant. A warm straw mattress and a loaf of stale bread—now there's the stuff of paradise!"

"I never thought of it that way," Ivan said. "I suppose that's because I'm simple. I never realized that I was so well off."

"That's just the trouble with most people," said the frog. "They don't know when they've got it good."

Ivan thought about it for a moment, and he decided that the frog was right. He really had the best of it. And, realizing that, Ivan felt sorry for the frog.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "Why don't you come home with me?"

"And get eaten by your dog?" the frog said. "No thank you."

"We don't have a dog," Ivan said. "Aunt Sonya has a cat, but he's old and fat and lazy. He never leaves the house, and if he sees a mouse, all he does is look at it. You would be in no danger."

"Where would I sleep?" the frog asked.

"In the barn with me. You don't take up much room. And I could share my meals with you, since you don't eat very

much. After all, it's only fair, since I'm so much more fortunate than you."

"You'd do that for me?" the frog asked.

"Why not?" replied Ivan. "It would cost me nothing, and with you around, I'd have someone to talk to. I'd like that, wouldn't you?"

So Ivan took the little frog and placed it gently in his pocket. And that night they slept together in the barn on a mattress of warm straw.

The next day, the frog said, "Ivan, I think we should get married."

"*Married?*" said Ivan, astonished.

"Yes, married," said the frog. "After all, it's only right. I am a female, and we slept together on the same straw mattress. What will people say?"

"I didn't know you were a female," said Ivan.

"That changes nothing," said the frog. "People will talk."

"Why should they?" asked Ivan. "No one knows you spent the night with me."

"I know," said the frog. "After all, I have my principles. What sort of frog do you think I am?"

"But . . . I don't *want* to get married," Ivan protested.

"Why not?"

Ivan thought hard. "I can't afford a wife," he replied triumphantly.

"What's to afford?" said the frog. "You yourself said that having me live with you would cost you nothing. I eat only crumbs of stale bread and the occasional icky fly, and I don't take up much room on your straw mattress. Besides, you don't have to buy me clothes, and I don't wear any jewelry. It would weigh me down. And you do admit that it's nice to have someone to talk to who doesn't dismiss everything you say as being unimportant."

Ivan pursed his lips and grudgingly conceded that the frog

had a point. Then he brightened. "Suppose you give birth to tadpoles?"

"That takes two, you know," the frog answered wryly. "I can hardly do that without your cooperation, and under the circumstances, I'm not too excited by the idea. Sleeping with you is challenging enough. I have to watch out in case you should roll over, and besides, you snore."

Ivan was having a hard time trying to follow the frog's logic, but then Ivan had a hard time trying to follow any kind of logic at all. He frowned, thinking hard and trying to come up with a convenient excuse to maintain his bachelor status.

"I would marry you," he said at last, "only no priest would marry us. What priest in his right mind would marry a human to a frog?"

"If I can find a priest to marry us," said the frog, "then will you do it?"

"If you can find a priest willing to perform the ceremony, then I'll marry you," said Ivan, confident that no priest would ever be so hare-brained as to marry a person to a frog. *I might be simple*, Ivan thought, *but I'm not stupid*.

Unfortunately, the frog did find such a priest. Father Dmitri was very old and very deaf. He was also blind. But he was not dumb, and he could say the words. The ceremony was tasteful and, well, simple.

When Uncle Vanya and Aunt Sonya found out what Ivan had done, they were so shocked and outraged that they turned him out of the house. Actually, they turned him out of the barn, but it amounted to the same thing. Ivan was driven out of town and forced to flee into the forest.

"Now what am I going to do?" Ivan said miserably. "I have no home and I have no money and no one will even take me on to work for my room and board. And it's all your fault."

"It is *not* my fault," said the frog, "but the fault of the ignorant and prejudiced peasants of your town. Can I help it if they're racists?"

Ivan did not know what a racist was, but he was not up to arguing with his little green wife. He only knew that he was homeless and he had no place to go. And all because he had taken pity on a frog.

"Don't fret, Ivan," his gangly-legged wife said. "I won't leave you in the lurch. You did the right thing by me, and I'll do the right thing by you. I know where you can get your hands on lots of money, and it'll only take a little elbow grease."

And the frog directed Ivan to a special place deep in the impenetrable forest (which they only just barely managed to penetrate), and she showed Ivan a giant oak tree that was hundreds of years old.

"Just dig at the base of that oak tree there," she said, indicating the spot with her froggy digit, "and you'll be rich beyond your wildest dreams."

Ivan did as he was told, and after about an hour's worth of vigorous digging, he unearthed a chest. It took him about another hour to break the chest open, but when he did he saw that it was filled with treasure. Rubies as large as his fists, diamonds the size of his eyes, emeralds the size of meadow muffins, and pearls so large that they would trip swine if they were cast before them. It all took Ivan's breath away.

"As soon as you're able to breathe again," said the frog, "we'll go pawn some of those jewels, and then I'll tell you how to make some smart investments. And then we can see about shopping for a house."

It wasn't long before Ivan was settled in a palatial home in St. Petersburg. He had a whole closet full of richly embroidered clothes and fancy leather boots, he had a staff of servants and a silver coach with liveried coachmen, and no one thought the things he said were not important any more. He was still a simpleton, but, while being simple is a disadvantage to a hard-working peasant, it's considered a virtue in

an aristocrat. The frog had her own room with a built-in swimming pond and a very fancy rock.

With the money from his investments, Ivan had a comfortable income, and he started a profitable loan sharking operation that simply raked in dough. Uncle Vanya had come to Ivan with hat in hand, humbly begging forgiveness and a loan. Ivan gave him the loan, but when he didn't pay it back on time, Ivan had his enforcers beat the living daylight out of Uncle Vanya, tar and feather him, and send him home. Aunt Sonya was so upset at seeing her husband return in such a state that she hit him with an iron ladle, cracked his skull, and killed him. Ivan then gave her a job washing floors in his palatial mansion.

"Never let it be said," he told her, "that Ivan does not look after his own." He gave her a warm straw mattress on which to sleep, and he made sure that she got plenty of stale bread every day.

One night, while he was sitting in his room, drinking the finest wine from Italy and munching on dates imported from Arabia, Ivan noticed a roiling blackness hovering just below the very ornately painted ceiling. At first, there was a dimness in his room, a seemingly momentary failing of the light as though a cloud had passed across the sun—only it was night outside and it was dark. All of a sudden, the atmosphere inside his room became even darker than the night outside. Ivan looked to his candles, which were burning, but for some reason weren't producing any light. Gradually, the blackening effect grew worse, and Ivan couldn't even see across the room. Then the thunder started. It was then that Ivan started to become nervous, for the thunder was coming from *inside* his room. Following the thunder were jagged bolts of lightning that lanced across his bed, and then the whole house began to shake. Truly frightened now, Ivan crawled beneath the covers of his bed and pulled the blankets over his head.

The blackness seemed to throb and pulse, like a giant heart, until it gathered itself at the foot of Ivan's bed and, with a deafening clap of thunder, resolved into the terrifying form of Kastchei the Immortal, the most feared and evil sorcerer in all the land. Kastchei the Immortal stood at the foot of Ivan's bed, dressed from head to toe in blackest black, his long beard buffeted by the howling wind that suddenly shrieked through Ivan's bedchamber. Ivan shivered underneath his covers, mesmerized by the unholy fire of the two red glowing eyes that seemed to pierce him to his very soul.

"I am *not* in a good mood," said Kastchei the Immortal.

Ivan knew who was addressing him, of course. Every mother's son in Russia, at one time or another, was threatened with the name of the greatest bogeyman that ever lived, the evil wizard who could never die, Kastchei the Immortal. This amused Kastchei. He liked making an impression.

"What . . . what did I do, Your Fearsomeness?" Ivan stammered, quaking underneath his bedclothes.

"Have you seen my treasure?" Kastchei asked in a tone of ominous foreboding.

"Your . . . treasure?" said Ivan.

"That's right, my treasure," said Kastchei. "You know, rubies as large as your fists, diamonds the size of your eyes, emeralds the size of meadow muffins, and pearls so large that they would trip swine if they were cast before them."

"Oh. *That* treasure," said Ivan.

"I don't suppose you know anything about it," said Kastchei, to an accompanying clap of thunder. The wizard loved dramatic sound effects.

"Well . . . uh, suppose I do?" said Ivan, trying to disappear beneath his bedclothes.

"It seems to be missing," said Kastchei, glowering at Ivan. "When next the moon is full, I will once again seek out the ancient oak tree where I buried it, and I expect to find my treasure still intact, just the way I left it."

"Uh, suppose it isn't there?" Ivan said, trembling mightily.

"Well, let's not be pessimistic," said the sorcerer. "I always like to look on the bright side. The next time I check, I fully expect my treasure to be right where I left it. If, however, by some chance, some poor *simpleton* was fool enough to dig it up, why, that would make me very angry. I don't like being angry. I fear I do not possess the temperament to handle being angry very well. I devastate the countryside, turn people to stone, call forth plagues of demons, take people's souls away, and make them burn in eternal torment. Things can get quite out of hand. No, let's just hope I find my treasure where I left it. Then I'd be happy, you'd be happy, and there would be no need for me to run amok with all sorts of nasty necromancy. That would be much more pleasant, don't you think?"

"Just swell," Ivan said, all the color draining from his face.

"Somehow I thought you would agree," Kastchei said.

And with another clap of thunder and an impressive display of pyrotechnics, Kastchei the Immortal disappeared, leaving a wide fissure in the floor of Ivan's bedchamber and a tang of brimstone in the air. Ivan lay absolutely still for a long time, waiting for his heart to start again. When he finally stopped shivering and found his voice, he took a long, deep breath and called his wife.

"Honey, would you come in here for a minute?"

His wife came hopping into the bedroom.

"Yes, Ivan? What is it?"

"You didn't notice anything just now? Like a thunderstorm, a mild earthquake, perhaps?"

"No, Ivan. What are you talking about?" asked the frog.

"Guess who just paid me a visit?"

"I don't know, dear. Who?"

"Kastchei the Immortal."

"Ooops," the frog said.

“Ooops? What do you mean, *ooops*? Is that all you have to say, *ooops*?”

“Now, Ivan, don’t get excited,” said the frog.

“Don’t get excited? *Don’t get excited*? You get me to steal the treasure cache of the most feared sorcerer in all the world, and all you have to say is don’t get excited?”

“Now, don’t exaggerate, Ivan,” the frog said. “He’s not *that* feared. I’ll admit he can be pretty nasty, but the most feared sorcerer in all the world? I’d say that point was open to debate.”

“Well, he scares *me* plenty!” shouted Ivan. “What in God’s name were you thinking of?”

“Look, don’t go blaming it all on me,” said the frog. “I didn’t hear you asking where the treasure came from or whose it was when you dug it up. I must admit that I knew there was some risk involved, but I didn’t know Father would miss it quite so soon.”

Ivan wasn’t sure he had heard that right. “*Father*?” he said, weakly.

“Well, you may as well know the truth,” the frog said. “I’m no ordinary frog. My name is Vasilissa the Wise, and I’m Kastchei’s daughter. Father turned me into a frog because I was born smarter than he is. If there’s one thing he can’t stand, it’s losing an argument at the dinner table. He has a very nasty temper, and he turned me into a frog one night. My curse is that I must remain a frog until I can get a man to fall in love with me. And what man in his right mind could love a frog? I had just about resigned myself to being a frog forever when you came along. You were simple and no great catch, but you were a man and that was close enough. I thought that I could trick you into marrying me and then make you feel gratitude. In time, I thought that you would grow to love me and the curse would then be broken. But I didn’t think Kastchei would miss his treasure quite so soon.

I really should have known he'd check his hoard. He's so possessive."

"Well, that's just great," Ivan said miserably. "Now what am I supposed to do? How can I return his treasure when I've already spent it? I'm doomed. It serves me right for being simple."

"If you weren't so simple, you'd know that you're not doomed. Not yet," said Vasilissa. "How long did he give you to return the treasure?"

"Until the next full moon," Ivan said.

"We've got time," she said. "The first thing you must do is liquefy your assets. Sell the house, sell all the serfs, sell your coach and clothes and all the furniture. Tell your enforcers to make sure that all outstanding debts are paid in full. Take all the money that you've made from your investments and everything you'll get from disposing of the house and all your worldly goods, and convert it into gold. Then sell the loan sharking operation."

"But that will leave me with nothing!" cried Ivan.

"You'd rather face my father's wrath?"

"I'll sell, I'll sell," Ivan said hastily.

And he did just as she said. Amazingly enough, by the time that he was finished with all of his transactions, he found that he had quite a bit more money than the original treasure had been worth. But then there wasn't enough time to track down all the jewels that he had sold so he could buy them back. And Kastchei the Immortal said that he wanted to find his treasure just as he had left it.

"What am I going to *do*?" Ivan cried. "There isn't enough time?"

"Control yourself," the frog said. "They don't call me Vasilissa the Wise for nothing. We still have just one chance to restore my father's treasure, but it isn't going to be easy."

"I'll do anything you say," Ivan said, feeling desperate.

"Fine," said Vasilissa. "Pack all the gold into a sack and

pack some provisions, too. Put it all into a wheelbarrow and then put on your peasant clothes, if that's all you have left,"

"Where are we going?" asked Ivan.

"To see Baba Yaga."

"On second thought, being turned to stone doesn't sound so bad," Ivan said.

"Suit yourself," she said. "I'm only trying to help."

Help? She got me into this mess to begin with, thought Ivan. It was bad enough that he had stolen a treasure cache belonging to Kastchei the Immortal, but now she meant to have him seek out Baba Yaga, an ageless witch who, it was said, was so frighteningly hideous that just one look at her was enough to put you off your feed. It was claimed that she lived in a hut surrounded by a fence of human bones and that she traveled the countryside by flying seated in a giant mortar, steering it with her witch's broom. *And all I ever wanted,* thought Ivan, *was to do my chores and eat my stale bread and sit by the stream, throwing pebbles into the water. And now I'm all mixed up with sorcerers and witches. And all because I took pity on a frog!*

Nevertheless, having no other choice, he did as Vasilissa had instructed, and soon they were once more deep within the impenetrable forest, having penetrated it with a great deal of difficulty. It was almost the time of the full moon when they reached the clearing where Baba Yaga's hut hobbled incessantly about in a circle. Inside a fence made of human bones, the wooden hut swayed about on chicken feet, turning in a constant circle, giving the entire clearing an air of magical foreboding. There were no doors or windows in the hut, and Ivan did not see how they would manage to gain entrance even if the hut stood still long enough. With a whimper of resignation, Ivan trundled his wheelbarrow containing his gold, his provisions, and his wife through the gate of human bones and up to the shiftless hut.

"Baba Yaga, you have some visitors," croaked Vasilissa.

"Let us in so we can show you all the gold we've brought!"

It was well known that Baba Yaga was fond of gold, both because she liked its color and because it was very magical, to one who knew how to use it properly.

"What's to prevent her from taking all our gold and turning us into toadstools?" asked Ivan.

"There is that possibility," said Vasilissa.

"That wasn't what I wanted to hear," he said.

Even as he spoke, the hut stopped turning and a door appeared inside what had been a solid wall moments before. The hut settled on the ground, folding its chicken feet beneath it, and from within they heard a wheezing sound, an emphysemic cackling that made Ivan's blood run cold.

"Come in, my children, do come in," said Baba Yaga.

"Come in and show me all the lovely gold you've brought."

"Yes, being turned to stone definitely doesn't sound so bad," Ivan said.

"Oh, come on, Ivan," said Vasilissa. "Be a man! Besides, it's much too late to turn back now."

With a sinking feeling, Ivan pushed the wheelbarrow through the door.

It was dark inside the hut, but there was some light coming from a giant cauldron—an eerie, hellish glow that seemed to shift from red to blue to green. The hut was filled with the sickening sound of burbling as the cauldron bubbled, filling the tiny single chamber with a smell unlike anything Ivan had ever known. It smelled even worse than Uncle Vanya.

Hunched over the cauldron was the most vile creature Ivan had ever seen. Baba Yaga was old and withered, an evil-smelling crone with wrinkles in her wrinkles and with ugly, disgusting warts. Her nose was hooked and so gargantuan that Ivan first thought it was the weight of it that made her assume her bent-over posture, but then he saw that Baba Yaga was hunchbacked. Perched upon her hump was a cat as black as pitch and with eyes that shone a brilliant emerald

green. The cat arched its back as Ivan and Vasilissa entered, and spat at them, digging its claws into Baba Yaga's hump.

"Stop that!" cried Baba Yaga, flailing at the cat with her spindly arms and hopping about. Ivan saw that one of her legs was paralyzed. He also saw why the cat chose her hump to perch upon. No matter how she moved, it was the one place Baba Yaga could not reach. "You miserable cat!" she shouted. "If I get my hands on you, I'll boil you for supper!"

But the cat paid her no mind. Instead, it decided to make itself comfortable. It sat down on her hump and did the thing that all cats do when they decide to make themselves comfortable: alternately raising one paw and then the other, digging its claws into her hump and purring all the while.

"*Aaah! Oooh! Ouch!*" cried Baba Yaga, and then, in desperation, she threw herself against the wall in an effort to dislodge the cat. But the cat was not dislodged, and all Baba Yaga succeeded in doing was stunning herself. She sat upon the floor, waiting for her eyes to focus and breathing heavily.

"She doesn't look so mean to me," whispered Ivan. "She does put me off my feed, though."

"Sssh!" said Vasilissa. "You want her to hear?"

"I heard, I heard," said Baba Yaga. "That's the trouble with young people today, no respect for their elders. Well, I'll teach you some respect!"

And with that, she raised her palsied hand in a threatening gesture of wizardry.

"No, wait, Baba Yaga!" the frog cried. "He's just a simpleton. He didn't mean it."

Baba Yaga squinted at the frog. "Vasilissa? Is that you?"

"It's me, Baba Yaga."

"Been fresh with your father, I see," said Baba Yaga, cackling gleefully. "You're lucky I'm more even-tempered than that oaf. And speaking of second-rate sorcerers, how is the old charlatan?"

"As mean and nasty as he ever was," said Vasilissa.

"Pah! Kastchei isn't mean, he's simply arrogant," said Baba Yaga with a sneer. "Well, what do you want from me? To change you back? Can't do that, dearie. Mind you now, I could, if I had a mind to, but I don't believe in interfering when a father disciplines his child."

"No, that's not it, Baba Yaga." And the frog told the old witch all about how they had dug up Kastchei's treasure and how they had until the next full moon to put it back exactly as it was, or else.

"Or else?" asked Baba Yaga. "Or else what?"

"He didn't specify," said Vasilissa.

"He spoke of devastating the countryside, turning people into stone, calling forth plagues of demons, and taking people's souls away to make them burn in eternal torment," said Ivan, trying hard to keep from trembling.

"Tsk, ts," said Baba Yaga. "It all sounds quite dramatic, but an apprentice sorcerer could weave those spells without a bit of trouble. So what am I supposed to do? Restore the treasure? For this you brought gold?"

"That's more or less what we had in mind," Ivan said hesitantly.

"Hmmm, I could use a little gold," said Baba Yaga. "I think I'll just relieve you of that wheelbarrow and turn you into a toadstool."

Ivan was on the verge of tears.

"Now, don't be hasty, Baba Yaga," said Vasilissa.

"What? You're worried about *him*? He's just a simpleton. Any fool can see that. He'd make a better toadstool."

"Oh, I wasn't all that worried about him," said Vasilissa, "but I was only thinking that Father would be very much annoyed if he found the treasure just the way he left it. Then he'd have no excuse to run amok with nasty necromancy. And he'd *have* to know where the treasure came from. He'd know I went to you. It would be a small way of getting back

at him for making me a frog, and it would be yet another opportunity to show who is the greater sorcerer."

"Kastchei would be annoyed, eh?" said Baba Yaga, scratching her giant nose. "I wouldn't mind tweaking Kastchei's nose for him. All those claps of thunder and jagged bolts of lightning—no finesse, none whatsoever. All right, I'll do it. I won't need all the gold to restore the treasure, but I will keep whatever is left over."

"That's only fair," the frog said.

"All right, then. Let's get to it. I'm a busy woman."

And with a few spare gestures, Baba Yaga turned slightly less than half of the gold inside the wheelbarrow back into the treasure. Everything was there, just as it had been originally. Rubies as big as Ivan's fists, diamonds the size of his eyes, emeralds the size of meadow muffins, and pearls so large that they would trip swine if they were cast before them.

"Child's play," said Baba Yaga. Then she made another pass with her wrinkled hands and the treasure disappeared, to reappear buried at the base of the ancient oak deep in the impenetrable forest, and in a chest just like the one Kastchei had buried it in. Only this chest had Baba Yaga's initials on it, just to rub it in. "The rest of the gold is mine," she said. "Now I have work to do, so the two of you can disappear."

Ivan and Vasilissa disappeared in a puff of smoke, to reappear on the edge of the impenetrable forest, by a road that led to the settlement from which Ivan had come. When he realized that he had escaped with his skin and soul intact, Ivan was overjoyed.

"You did it, Vasilissa! You saved my life! I love you!"

And no sooner had he said those final words than the frog disappeared, and in its place stood the most stunningly beautiful woman Ivan had ever seen. Her hair was the color of spun gold and it reached down to her waist, which was slim and saucily curvaceous. Her skin was soft and flawless, and her eyes were a sparkling azure blue. Her legs were long and

slender, shaped to sheer perfection. She was the kind of woman men would kill for, the kind that caused poets to be at a loss for words. She was incredibly desirable and Ivan, overcome with love, reached out for her.

"Just *what* do you think you're doing?" asked Vasilissa, placing a restraining hand upon his chest.

"But . . . but you're my wife!" Ivan protested, amazed that she should ask.

"Don't be silly, darling. You were married to a frog."

"But . . . but . . ."

"Now that my father's spell is broken, all my powers have returned," she said. "What do I need with a husband?"

And with that, she turned into a graceful swan and flew away. Ivan burst into tears. Not only had he lost the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but he had nothing left. No treasure, no gold, no house, no coach, no serfs, not even his loan sharking operation. Once again, he was just plain Ivan the simpleton.

He returned in shame to his little village and moved back in with his Aunt Sonya, who paid him back for making her wash floors by making him work ten times as hard as he ever had before and by making his life miserable beyond belief. Ivan was so broken-hearted, he no longer bothered having discussions with himself, so now there was truly no one for him to talk to. Late in the evening, when his chores were finally done, he would go back to his favorite place beside the stream, where he would sit, resting his weary bones and throwing pebbles morosely into the water. One evening, as he was sitting by the stream and eating a few crumbs of stale bread, he noticed a little green frog watching him intently.

Ivan smashed it with a stick.

PRELIMINARY NOTES ON THE JANG

by Lisa Goldstein

Simon Montclair had been a graduate student in anthropology for four years but as yet had not found a topic for his thesis. Then he "accidentally" met a hitherto unknown tribe who called themselves the Jang and whose customs were, to say the least, strange. Actually, they were even stranger than he at first thought.

Simon stood in front of the door, panting a little from the climb up three flights of stairs, wondering if he had come to the right place. He checked the piece of paper in his hand again—3460C, the same as the address painted in cracking numbers over the peephole. The sound of an instrument—a sitar?—could be heard faintly through the door and the hallway smelled like ginger. Why would his advisor want to live here? He shrugged and knocked. There didn't seem to be any bell.

The door opened—the sound of the instrument grew louder—and a man with an enormous black moustache stood in front

of him. "Yes?" the man said. A threadbare Oriental rug lay on the floor of the hallway behind him.

"I—I'm sorry," Simon said, stepping back. The man was standing too close, he felt his space being violated. "I have the wrong—that is, I'm looking for—I don't suppose Dr. Glass lives here."

"No, no doctors here," the man said. He wore loose green trousers and a yellow tunic. Simon couldn't place his accent. "You are sick?" He studied Simon intensely from under jet-black eyebrows. Eyes and eyebrows were the same color.

"No, he's not—not a medical doctor—" Simon said. "Never mind. Thanks anyway."

"No one here but my family," the man said. "We celebrate. My wife, my second wife, her husband, my cousins and their children, my wife's cousin, you have no word for it in English. . . ."

Simon had started to draw kinship diagrams in his mind. The smell of spices was making him a little dizzy. He thought he could hear feet stamping beyond the hallway, bells shaking. His second wife's *husband*?

"Where—Where are you from?" Simon said, unable not to ask. He had probably transgressed somehow, broken some taboo, at the very least irritated his informant. His informant? Who was he kidding? But his textbooks had never mentioned how to deal with a situation like this.

"We are the Jang," the man said. He bowed courteously and began to close the door. "Good day." Simon turned away, aware that he had been dismissed. His mind was humming by the time he reached the street.

"Dr. Glass?" Simon said, running into his advisor's office.

"Hello, Simon," Dr. Glass said, looking up from his desk. "You missed a good party Saturday."

"I—Listen, I tried to find it, I ended up in this place—"

"Place?" Dr. Glass said. "Sit down, I've never seen you so excited. What do you mean?"

"I went to your house," Simon said. He fished out the scrap of paper from his pocket. "Here—3460, right? Only the guy who answered the door—"

"Twenty-four sixty," Dr. Glass said.

"What?"

"You went to the wrong place," Dr. Glass said. "You missed a great party."

"Oh," Simon said. "Well, listen. This guy who answered the door—he was foreign, right?—he said he was—his people were—the Jang. And then I went to the anthro library, and I did some research, and, well, I couldn't find them. Anywhere. And so I thought—So I'm going to do my thesis on them." He was out of breath when he finished.

Dr. Glass watched with amusement, one eyebrow lifted. For the past year Simon had led discussion groups and graded papers and kept office hours and done research when it was required and not done much of anything else. He had been a graduate student for four years, time enough to find a thesis topic and move on. Only nothing seemed to interest him—everything was either boring or had already been researched to death. Some days he had just given up and gone to the beach.

"How do you know this is what you want to work on?" Dr. Glass said. "What do you know about these people anyway?"

Simon sighed, running his hand through his already unruly hair. "Well, their kinship system—their kinship system is incredibly complex," he said. The door of the office opened and he looked up, grateful for the interruption.

"Hello, Dr. Glass," Linda said, coming in. Linda was another of Dr. Glass's students. "Hello, Simon. You missed a great party Saturday."

"I know," Simon said.

"All right," Dr. Glass said. "Write up some notes and bring them to me. I'll let you know what I think."

Simon stood again in front of the door of 3460, a briefcase in his hand and a tape recorder draped over his shoulder. His heart pounded loudly as he knocked. The same man—he looked to be about fifty, Simon thought, athletic for his age—opened the door. This time the hallway smelled strongly of garlic.

"Yes?" the man said. "You find your doctor?"

Simon was surprised the man remembered. "Look, I'd like to ask you a favor. I'd like to—to ask you a few questions. You and your family."

The man was unperturbed. "You are a cop, yes?" he said.

"No!" Simon said. "No, I'm—I'm a student. From UCLA. The university." He brought out his wallet and showed the man his registration card.

"Very nice," the man said drily. "And if you were a cop you would have one of these cards also, yes?"

"No, listen," Simon said. "I'm a student. I study different cultures, people. I'd like to know more about you. About the Jang."

The man hesitated, then seemed to come to a decision. "All right," he said. "Come in. But we don't talk about our criminal pasts, all right?" In the dim light of the hallway he seemed to wink.

The room the man led him into had no furniture except four or five fat pillows arranged in a half circle. Rugs covered the old wood floor and hung from the walls, their colors mostly dark red, black or yellow. Portraits and yellow photographs of dark people stood over the fireplace and candles in glass cups were placed in front of them. Simon could smell cooking coming from another part of the apartment.

The man sat on one of the pillows and took out a pipe from

his trousers. Simon sat next to him, sinking into the pillow with difficulty. He moved to turn his tape recorder on, but the man stopped him with an upraised hand. "No," he said. "Not that. We think it steals our souls."

"Okay," Simon said. He took a pen and notebook out of his briefcase and wrote *Recorder steals souls*. "To begin with, what is your name?"

"What is yours?" the man said.

Simon blinked. "What?" he said.

"A custom among the Jang," the man said. "The stranger among us gives us his name first."

"Oh," Simon said. "Simon Montclair."

"I am called Mustafa," the man said. He bowed a little, from the waist.

"And your last name?" Simon said.

Mustafa shrugged. "What is a good last name in your country?" he said. "Smith. I am called Mustafa Smith."

Simon looked up sharply but Mustafa had not smiled. "And the rest of your family—are they called Smith as well?"

"If you like," Mustafa said.

"But you—what do you call yourselves?"

"Oh, you know," Mustafa said. "This and that. It depends on the country."

"Well, then what—" Simon began.

Mustafa said, interrupting him, "I will introduce you to the rest of the family. Would you like?"

"Of course," Simon said. Mustafa clapped his hands. Immediately the room seemed full of people. "My second wife, Francesca. And her husband, Tibor. And these are my cousins, these her brothers." Simon soon stopped trying to make sense of the names. "And my daughter, Clara."

Simon was looking at a young woman with long black hair and deep black eyes and skin that looked like silk. She wore an embroidered blouse and a flowing red skirt, and chains of

coins fell from her earlobes, "Hello," Simon said weakly.

"Hello," she said.

There was an awkward silence. Then Simon recalled his purpose and took up his pen and notebook once more. "Your names," he said. "They're from different parts of the world, aren't they? I mean how—"

"We take the names of the country we are born in," Mustafa said. He dismissed the family with a wave of his hand. Simon watched Clara as she left the room.

"But where are you from?" Simon asked. "I mean originally."

Mustafa shrugged. "Who knows?" he said. "We are from all over. The Jang are from every country on earth. There are Chinese Jang and New Guinea Jang. We are the travelers."

The session was a long one, and very satisfying for Simon. He made three charts of kinship before he got it right and saw Mustafa nodding in approval. These people seemed to marry whenever and wherever they liked: once Mustafa surprised Simon by mentioning his wife in Spain. Simon learned that Mustafa had been a horse trader, a carpenter, a guitar player. He learned that the festival he had interrupted last week celebrated the birth of a saint and lasted three days, that Mustafa believed the king of Hungary could cure any illness, that white was the color of mourning and red the color of marriage.

At the end of the session, after they had agreed to meet every week, Mustafa said, "You go home and tell the police now, yes?" This time Simon definitely saw him wink.

"I'm going home and writing all this up," Simon said.

"Ah," Mustafa said. "and then what will you do with it?"

"I'm writing a—a dissertation," Simon said. "When I'm finished I'll be able to graduate. To leave school. Finally."

"And then?" Mustafa said. "What will you do?"

"Get a job," Simon said. He shrugged. "Probably teach somewhere."

"So this dissertation," Mustafa said thoughtfully. "It is important to you, yes?"

"Oh, yeah," Simon said fervently. "Listen, you guys saved my life."

Mustafa drew on his pipe and leaned back on the pillows, looking satisfied.

"Hi, Linda," Simon said, coming into Dr. Glass's office. "Where's Glass?"

Linda shrugged. "Don't know," she said. "I've been waiting an hour."

Simon looked at papers on Dr. Glass's desk, walked to the window and looked out. "I hear you've found a thesis topic," Linda said.

"Oh, yeah," Simon said. He laughed. "Finally." He turned to face her.

"Sounds exciting," Linda said. "Imagine stumbling on a tribe here in Los Angeles." Linda was going to the Australian outback in the summer. "What are they—gypsies?"

"No," Simon said. His caution about revealing his information fought with his need to tell someone and lost. "They call themselves the Jang. Means the People, of course. They know the gypsies, they've traveled with them, but they don't consider the gypsies part of the People."

"That's great," Linda said. "I wonder why no one's ever heard of them. You couldn't find anything in the library?"

Simon shook his head.

"What does Dr. Glass say?" Linda said. "Hey, it's too bad you missed his party Saturday. It was lots of fun."

"I know," Simon said. "And it doesn't look good for me to miss my advisor's party. I got lost."

"Don't worry," Linda said. "There'll be another one."

"I still don't know where the man lives," Simon said.

"Well, next time I'll show you," Linda said. "We can go together."

"Okay," Simon said. Linda smiled at him and he realized that somehow the idea of the two of them going to a party together had turned into a date in her eyes. What have I gotten myself into? he thought. She wasn't bad looking, shoulder-length hair, face too thin, chin maybe a little too pointed. Unbidden, the face of Clara rose in his mind.

"Listen, I'm tired of waiting," Linda said. "Do you want to go to Westwood for a cup of coffee?"

"Sure," Simon said.

Once at the coffee shop it seemed the most natural thing for Simon to offer to pay for the coffee and for Linda to accept. Mating rituals of North American peoples, Simon thought. But when he took out his wallet he found he had no money. He remembered getting twenty dollars from an automatic teller just that morning, and remembered too Mustafa's face, eyes gleaming, white teeth showing in a smile.

"You stole from me," Simon said.

"What?" Mustafa said. He lit his pipe and offered it to Simon.

Simon refused, too angry to care about the significance of the ritual. "Listen, you people stole from me. When I got here last week I had twenty dollars. And when I left it was gone. I don't like that. There has to be trust between us, Mustafa."

Surprisingly, Mustafa laughed, showing clean white teeth. "Of course," he said. "And I will tell you what it is. We had to learn if you were from the cops, yes? And so Luis, my first wife's cousin's boy, looked in your wallet. It is hard work, stealing a man's wallet and then replacing it so that he suspects nothing. And so Luis probably thought he deserved something for his trouble. That's the way it is in your country, is it not, hard work is rewarded?"

"Yes, and stealing money is rewarded by jail," Simon said, still angry.

Mustafa laughed again. "But now," he said. "We know now that you are not from the cops, we know that we can trust you. Surely that was worth twenty dollars?"

Despite himself Simon began to laugh too. What was twenty dollars, after all? Hundreds of ethnologists paid their informants. And now, as Mustafa said, these people knew they could trust him. He would just keep a closer watch on his wallet from now on.

"I will tell you what," Mustafa said. "In exchange for the twenty dollars I will read your palm. All right? All right!"

Bemused, carried away by Mustafa's enthusiasm, Simon held out his palm. "Ah!" Mustafa said. "I see—I see a woman. Hair to her shoulders, blond hair or brown. A beautiful woman." Linda? Simon thought. He would never have called Linda beautiful. "You know her, yes? She will be important to you, very important. I see you leaving school; you and her together. You are finished with school. And you are ready to start a new life." Mustafa looked up. "That is all I can see today," he said. "Is it helpful to you?"

Simon shrugged. "I don't know," he said.

"Maybe it will be helpful later," Mustafa said. "And maybe I can be helpful today. Today is a feast day. And you, since you are now worthy of trust and not a cop, are invited along. We celebrate."

"A feast day?" Simon said, beginning to get excited, not quite believing his luck. "For what?"

"Our saint," Mustafa said. "Ana, the mother of all the Jang. It is her birthday today." He offered his pipe to Simon and this time Simon took it. "You will stay for dinner, of course."

Simon coughed. "I'd be honored," he said, wiping his eyes. He followed Mustafa into the dining room.

Simon tried to take notes during the meal but his pen and notebook got in the way and he gave up. Everything was

delicious. "What is this?" he asked, having noticed that the Jang talked with their mouths full.

"Hedgehog," someone said, one of the brothers or cousins or husbands.

Simon nearly stopped eating. And yet it was good. Everything was good. He took a second helping and washed it down with wine.

Everyone was talking loudly. Simon thought he heard bells again, and someone dancing, but when he looked around all he saw were the people at the table. The room was growing dim, the candleflames spiraling up to the ceiling. His notebook fell off his lap to the floor and he realized he had dozed off for a minute. Clara's face shone across the table and he smiled at her.

Then it seemed as if they had gone outside and into brightly-painted caravans smelling of hay. The horses (Horses? Simon thought. In Los Angeles? But he was too tired to look outside.) brought them to a grassy field surrounded by tall trees standing like sentinels. A stream splashed somewhere in the distance. The men got out their guitars and began to play. Men and women danced, feet stamping. Bells jangled.

The full moon was rising. In the empty space above the meadow the sky looked like a banner filled with stars. Simon looked from the moon to Clara's face and to the moon again. I should be taking notes, he thought, and struggled to rise. "Hush," Clara said. "Rest. Everything is all right." He trusted her voice. The music wove through his dreams.

He woke the next day in his room, though he did not remember coming home. He groaned and rolled over. The notebook lay open beside his bed. "Preliminary Notes on the Jang," the notebook said in his handwriting.

He sat up carefully. His head seemed heavy, about to fall off. There were pages and pages of notes, most of them illegible, citing almost every anthropologist he had studied or heard of. "Trickster god—see Amer. Indian myth," one of

the notes said. Then a scrawl, then "Mercea Eliade," then a page and a half of scrawls, and then what looked like "cf. Jim Henson's muppets." He squinted, hoping the words would say something else, but they stayed the same.

Pieces of the night before were coming back to him. He remembered dreaming, remembered that they had all dreamed, that they had all had the same dream. It was the dream of the tribe's origins, how Ana, mother of the Jang, had disobeyed her mother the moon and was sent out to wander the world forever.

His headache was gone. He was trembling with excitement now. *They had all had the same dream.* What had he discovered? This was bigger than he had thought. He would be the next Carlos Casteneda, legend of the UCLA anthro department. Best sellers, lecture tours, his paper on "The Collective Unconscious of the Jang" considered seminal in the field. . . . He dressed slowly, organizing his notes in his mind.

He dreamed of the feast in the meadow nearly every night that week. Clara was there, bending over him in the moonlight, kissing him. Sometimes it was Linda instead of Clara, and then he would wake dissatisfied, feeling that something had been taken from him. He began to avoid Linda, stopping by Dr. Glass's office only when he knew Linda would not be there. He visited Dr. Glass every day now, excited, hardly able to wait for the next session with Mustafa, but he said nothing about the feast night. He wanted to save that for later.

Clara, not Mustafa, answered his knock at the next session. "Where—where's your father?" Simon said.

"I don't know," Clara said.

"I was supposed to meet him today," Simon said, a little impatient. "At—" He looked at his watch. "At three o'clock."

Clara laughed. "And you expected him to be here?" she

said. "You don't know much about the way we figure time."

"Well," Simon said. "Can I wait for him? Or could you—would you answer some questions?" He wouldn't mind getting to know Clara better. And her answers would give him insight into the customs of the women of the tribe.

Clara shrugged. "All right," she said.

"Great," Simon said. She led him into the room with the pillows and sat down.

Simon sat and took out his notebook. "To begin with—" he said.

"Why don't you use a tape recorder?" Clara asked.

"I—" Simon stopped, confused. "Your father told me you think it steals your souls."

"He told you that?" Clara said.

"Here," Simon said, showing her the page in the notebook as if that would prove something. Was she laughing at him? "My first entry. 'Recorder steals souls.' You mean he wasn't telling me the truth?"

Clara leaned back in the pillows. "Everything we say is a lie," she said. Simon sat upright and started to say something, but she wasn't finished. "Our native tongue is quite different from yours. Everything we say must be translated, put in sounds foreign to us. What would be pure truth in my language comes out muddy and unclear in yours. We cannot help but lie, you see. We are exiles, and all exiles lie."

What was she telling him? How many of his notes were wrong? He chose a question at random. "Why did your father tell me the recorder would steal his soul?"

"I don't know," Clara said. "You'd have to take that up with him."

Simon paged nervously through his notes. "Trickster god—see Amer. Indian myth," he read. He wondered what he had gotten himself into. "Where did you learn to speak English?" he asked, to gain time. "You speak very well."

"I was at the university," Clara said. She tucked her legs inside her long skirt. "Same as you."

"The university?" Simon asked. Clara looked at him impassively. "I—well, I'm surprised. It doesn't seem like the Jang would send their children to the university. Especially the daughters."

"Why not?" Clara said. Simon winced a little under her even gaze. "It's the daughters, the women, who have to make a living, after all."

"You do?"

"Well, of course," Clara said. "The men's status depends on how well their women support them. The more money his wives make, the more prestige the man has. Men aren't expected to work."

"They aren't?" Simon asked. He was aware he sounded stupid, unprofessional. "But Mustafa told me—" He looked through his notes. "Mustafa was a horse trader, a carpenter, a guitar player."

Clara laughed. "He plays the guitar, certainly," she said. Then, aware that something more was being asked of her, she said, "I don't know why he told you that. You'd have to ask him."

The session went a little better after that. Clara told him about burial customs, superstitions, the organization of the tribe. Toward the end Simon put away his notebook and they talked a little about UCLA. Clara had even had a beginning anthropology class with Dr. Glass and she did an excellent imitation of him raising one eyebrow and looking out at his students. Simon was so charmed by her he forgot to ask about the dreams, about what really happened in the meadow the night of the feast of Ana. He wondered how he could ask about courtship rituals without offending her.

Finally he looked at his watch. "It's getting late," he said. "I've got to go. Listen, when I come back next week could

we pick up where we left off? I've still got a few questions to ask you."

"Sure," Clara said. "I don't see why not." She walked him to the door. "Good night," she said, and added a phrase in her language. She had told him it meant "Luck travel with you."

Simon stopped at a fast food place on the way home and got a burger. Then he went straight to his room to look through his notes. He felt as if he were glowing, as if people on the street could see him radiate light. His thesis was turning out far better than he'd expected and he'd met a dark exotic woman who seemed to like him. Maybe that's why I got interested in anthropology, he thought, remembering whole afternoons spent looking through his parents' copies of *National Geographic*. I wanted to meet dark exotic women.

A half an hour later he had to stop, aware that something was wrong. Mustafa had told him the Jang believed in an afterlife but Clara had mentioned reincarnation. Mustafa had said the Jang didn't eat beef but Clara had given him a recipe with beef in it. Mustafa had told him about a long and beautiful wedding ceremony but Clara had said two people were considered married if they'd simply shared a meal and a bed.

Could there be two sets of customs, one for men and one for women? No, not with this much disparity between them. His agitation grew the more he compared Clara's and Mustafa's sessions. He knew he couldn't wait until next week. Angry now and a little frightened, he got into his car and drove to Mustafa's apartment.

He could hear voices raised in argument as he climbed the stairs. A man and a woman were shouting in the Jang's dark rolling language, exchanging insults like thunder. Simon hesitated a little before the door, but his anger overcame everything else and he knocked loudly.

The argument stopped in mid-sentence. Mustafa opened

the door, his face flushed, his eyebrows lowered. Clara stood behind him in the hallway.

Simon had never seen Mustafa so angry. It terrified him, made him want to turn around and leave. Then he remembered his thesis, his future, and summoned up the courage to stay. "You lied to me," he said to Mustafa.

"Did we?" Mustafa said. His voice was dangerously low.

"Your information is totally different from Clara's," Simon said. "It's like two different cultures. One of you lied."

Abruptly Mustafa's expression changed. "Well, come in," he said. "Our guests do not stand out in the hall. Perhaps we can discuss this, yes?"

Simon followed them into the room with the pillows. A fire was lit in the fireplace and candles glowed in front of the dark portraits on the mantelpiece. Clara sat down and looked at her nails, almost bored. She would not look at him.

"We would not like to mislead you," Mustafa said. "This thing you write, it is very important to you, yes?"

Simon nodded, still too angry to speak.

"Well then, perhaps we can come to an agreement," Mustafa said genially. "Is it worth, say, a thousand dollars? A thousand dollars for the correct information, for the truth about the Jang?"

"What?" Simon said weakly. He felt as if he'd been hit. He looked at Clara for reassurance but she did not look up. At least, he thought, she has the decency to be embarrassed.

"Come now, a thousand dollars," Mustafa said. "That's not so much. And then your future is secure, you have a teaching job, you are all set."

"Don't be ridiculous," Simon said. "I don't have a thousand dollars. And anyway I don't have to do my thesis on the Jang. There are millions of topics, millions of cultures."

"Yes, but are you willing to spend another four years waiting for one of them?" Mustafa said. How did he know that? Simon thought. "Another four years at the university,

waiting for a topic of interest? Come, we will be reasonable. Eight hundred dollars. In a few months it will be time for the Jang to travel again, maybe to cross the water. Think of your notes, your work, all wasted. We can finish our sessions before we leave, and then you can teach, you can settle down, you can marry Linda—”

“Marry Linda?” Simon said, shocked. “Why?”

For the first time Simon saw Mustafa look confused. “Why? You are in love with her,” Mustafa said. He sounded uncertain.

Simon laughed. He felt as if he were pressing his advantage, but he had no idea what his advantage was. “What gives you that idea?”

“Because of the dreams,” Clara said suddenly. Mustafa said something to her in the language of the Jang but she ignored him. “Because of the dreams we gave you.”

“You gave me dreams?” Simon said. “Those dreams about Linda? And about Clara?”

Clara looked at Simon for the first time. He found it impossible to translate her expression. Surprise? Gratitude?

“You—you dreamed about Clara?” Mustafa said. It was easy to recognize Mustafa’s expression, not so easy to find an explanation for it. It was defeat.

“Yes, I did,” Simon said. “Now will someone please tell me what’s going on?”

Mustafa was silent. “We are the Jang,” Clara said finally. “We worship Ahitot, son of the moon, brother of Ana, our brother. The trickster god, you would call him. He tells us to defy authority and to aid lovers. He teaches us to dream together, and we dream the stories of the tribe. Like the story of Ana, that you dreamed with us. And he tells us to aid lovers. We were to help you and Liinda.”

“Me and—and Linda?” Simon said. “But what gave you the idea we were lovers?”

“Ahitot told us in our dreams,” Clara said. “But then you

met me. My father wanted to meet you. He called you and you came to learn about us. My father wanted to make money." She looked at her father accusingly, as if to say, You see where your scheming gets you?

"Your father—called me?" Simon asked.

"Yes," Clara said. "That is another thing Ahitot has taught us to do. We can change reality by our dreams."

This was too much. This was worse than the conflicting information he had been given earlier. They were laughing at him, mocking him. "You can stop it now," he said. "I give up, all right? I'm going home, I'm not going to listen to any more. This is crazy."

"You do not believe me?" Clara said. Once again she looked at him impassively, incapable of being contradicted. Her eyes shone in the firelight. "Who do you think it was who changed the address on your piece of paper so that you would come here and not to your advisor's? It changed because we dreamed it."

Simon could not move. He felt he was being called upon to assimilate too much, to believe too many impossible things at once. Mustafa spoke into the silence. "My daughter would like to share a meal with you," he said.

Clara looked at her father, horrified. He had wanted to embarrass her, that much was clear, but Simon understood nothing else of what was happening. "A meal and a bed," Mustafa said, clarifying.

Had Clara told him the truth about the significance of sharing a meal and a bed? "You want—you want to marry me?" he asked, and as he asked it it did not seem so absurd.

Clara looked into the fire. "That is what we were arguing about, my father and I, when you came," she said. "It is rare—very rare—for a Jang to marry someone from outside the tribe."

Simon thought of the wild music, the dancing in the moonlight. He thought of his years as a graduate student, four

years of sterility, with more to come. Clara was asking him to live with the Jang, to share their dreams, travel to far countries with them and become involved in the weave of the tribe in a way impossible for any anthropologist. He walked over to the fireplace and looked at Mustafa. "I'm sorry if it disturbs you, sir," Simon said. The blaze consumed his notebook. "But I would like very much to accept your daughter's offer."

THE RED HOUSE

by Robert R. McCammon

The new man at the Greystone Bay cog and gear factory was, to use a pair of common metaphors, blazing fast; he was, indeed, a veritable ball of fire. In Virgil Sikes' case, however, those phrases may not have been metaphors at all.

I've got a story to tell, like everybody else in the world. Because that's what makes up life, isn't it? Sure. Everybody's got a story—about somebody they met, or something that's happened to them, something they've done, something they want to do, something they'll never do. In the life of everybody on this old spinning ball there's a story about a road not taken, or a love that went bad, or a ghost of some kind. You know what I mean. You've got one too.

Well, I want to tell you a story. Trouble is, there are so *many* things I remember about Greystone Bay. I could tell you about what Joey Hammers and I found in the wreck of an old Chevy, down where the blind man lives amid the junked cars. I could tell you about the time the snakes started coming

out of old lady Farrow's faucets, and what she did with them. I could tell you about that Elvis Presley impersonator who came to town and went crazy when he couldn't get his makeup off. Oh yeah, I know a lot about what goes on in the Bay. Some things I wouldn't want to tell you after the sun goes down, but I want to tell you a story about *me*. You decide if it's worth the telling.

My name's Bob Deaken. Once upon a time, I was Bobby Deaken, and I lived with my mom and dad in one of the clapboard houses on Accardo Street, up near South Hill. There are a lot of clapboard houses up there, all the same shape and size and color—kind of a slate grey. A tombstone color. All of them have identical windows, front porches, and concrete steps leading up from the street. I swear to God, I think all of them have the same cracks in those steps too! I mean, it's like they built one of those houses and took a black and white picture of it and said, "This is the ideal house for Accardo Street," and they put every one together just the same right down to the warped doors that stick in the summer and hang when it's cold. I guess Mr. Lindquist figured those houses were good enough for the Greeks and Portuguese, Italians and Poles who live in them and work at his factory. Of course, a lot of plain old Americans live on Accardo Street too, and they work for Mr. Lindquist like my dad does.

Everybody up on Accardo pays rent to Mr. Lindquist, see. He owns all those houses. He's one of the richest men in Greystone Bay, and his factory churns out cogs, gears, and wheels for heavy machinery. I worked as a "quality controller" there during summer break from high school. Dad got me the job, and I stood at a conveyor belt with a few other teenage guys and all we did day after day was make sure a certain size of gear fit into a perfect mold. If it was one hair off, we flipped it into a box and all the rejects were sent back to be melted down and stamped all over again. Sounds simple, I guess, but the conveyor belt pushed thousands of gears

past us every hour and our supervisor, Mr. Gallagher, was a real bastard with an eagle eye for bad gears that slipped past. Whenever I had a complaint about the factory, Dad said I ought to be thankful I could get a job there at all, times being so bad and all; and Mom just shrugged her shoulders and said that Mr. Lindquist probably started out counting and checking gears somewhere too.

But you ask my dad what kind of machines all those gears, cogs, and wheels went into, and he couldn't tell you. He'd worked there since he was nineteen years old, but he still didn't know. He wasn't interested in what they did, or where they went when the crates left the loading docks; all he did was make them, and that's the only thing that mattered to him—millions and millions of gears, bound for unknown machines in faraway cities, a long way off from Greystone Bay.

South Hill's okay. I mean, it's not the greatest place, but it's not a slum either. I guess the worst thing about living on Accardo Street is that there are so many houses, and all of them the same. A lot of people are born in the houses on Accardo Street, maybe move two or three doors away when they get married, and they have kids who go to work at Mr. Lindquist's factory, and then their kids move two or three doors away and it just goes on and on. Even Mr. Lindquist used to be Mr. Lindquist, Junior, and he lives in the same big white house that his grandfather built.

But sometimes, when my dad started drinking and yelling and Mom locked herself in the bathroom to get away from him, I used to go up to the end of the street. The hulk of what used to be a Catholic church stands up there; it caught on fire in the late seventies, right in the middle of one of the worst snowstorms the Bay ever saw. It was a hell of a mess, but the church wasn't completely destroyed. The firemen never found Father Marion's body. I don't know the whole story, but I've heard things I shouldn't repeat. Anyway, I found a way to

climp up to what was left of the old bell tower and the thing creaked and moaned like it was about to topple off but the risk was worth it. Up there you could see the whole of Greystone Bay, the way the land curved to touch the sea, and you got a sense of where you were in the world. And out there on the ocean you could see yachts, workboats, and ships of all kinds passing by, heading for different harbors. At night their lights were especially pretty, and sometimes you could hear a distant whistle blow, like a voice that whispered, *Follow me*.

And sometimes I wanted to. Oh yeah, I did. But Dad said the world beyond Greystone Bay wasn't worth a shit, and a bull should roam his own pasture. That was his favorite saying, and why everybody called him "Bull." Mom said I was too young to know my own mind; she was always on my case to go out with "that nice Donna Raphaelli," because the Raphaellis lived at the end of the block and Mr. Raphaelli was Dad's immediate supervisor in the factory. Nobody listens to a kid until he screams, and by then it's too late.

Don't let anybody tell you the summers aren't hot in Greystone Bay. Come mid-July, the streets start to sizzle and the air is a stagnant haze. I swear I've seen sea gulls have heat strokes and fall right out of the sky. Well, it was on one of those hot, steamy July mornings—a Saturday, because Dad and I didn't have to work—when the painters pulled up in a white truck.

The house right across the street from ours had been vacant for about three weeks. Old Mr. Pappados had a heart attack in the middle of the night, and at his funeral Mr. Lindquist gave a little speech because the old man had worked at the factory for almost forty years. Mrs. Pappados went west to live with a relative. I wished her luck on the day she left, but Mom just closed the curtains and Dad turned the TV up louder.

But on this particular morning in July, all of us were on the

front porch trying to catch a breeze. We were sweltering and sweating, and Dad was telling me how this was the year the Yankees were going to the World Series—and then the painters pulled up. They started setting up their ladders and getting ready to work.

“Going to have a new neighbor,” Mom said, fanning herself with a handkerchief. She turned her chair as if to accept a breeze, but actually it was to watch the house across the street.

“I hope they’re *American*,” Dad said, putting aside the newspaper. “God knows we’ve got enough foreigners living up here already.”

“I wonder what job Mr. Lindquist has given our new neighbor.” Mom’s glance flickered toward Dad and then away as fast as a fly can escape a swatter.

“The line. Mr. Lindquist always starts out new people on the line. I just hope to God whoever it is knows something about baseball, because your son sure don’t!”

“Come on, Dad,” I said weakly. It seems like my voice was always weak around him. I had graduated from high school in May, was working full-time at the factory, but Dad had a way of making me feel twelve years old and stupid as a stone.

“Well, you don’t!” he shot back. “Thinkin’ the *Cubs* are gonna take the Series? Crap! The Cubs ain’t never gonna get to the—”

“I wonder if they have a daughter,” Mom said.

“Hey, don’t you talk when I’m talkin’. What do you think I am, a wall?”

The painters were prying their paint cans open. One of them dipped his brush in.

“Oh, my God,” Mom whispered, her eyes widening. “Would you *look* at that?”

We did, and we were stunned speechless.

The paint was not the bland grey of all the other clapboard

houses on Accardo Street. Oh, no—that paint was as scarlet as a robin’s breast. Redder than that: as red as the neon signs down where the bars stand on Harbor Road, crimson as the warning lights out on the Bay where the breakers crash and boom on jagged rocks. Red as the party dress of a girl I saw at a dance but didn’t have enough nerve to meet.

Red as a cape swirled before the eyes of a bull.

As the painters began to cover the door of that house with screaming-scarlet, Dad came out of his chair with a grunt as if he’d been kicked in the rear. If there was anything he hated in the world, it was the color red. It was a Communist color, he’d always said. *Red China. The Reds. Red Square. The Red Army.* He thought the Cincinnati Reds was the lousiest team in baseball, and even the sight of a red shirt drove him to ranting fits. I don’t know what it was, maybe something in his mind or his chemistry, maybe. He just went into a screaming rage when he saw the color red.

“Hey!” he yelled across the street. The painters stopped working and looked up, because his shout had been loud enough to rattle the windows in their frames. “What do you think you’re doing over there?”

“Ice skatin’,” came the reply. “What does it look like we’re doin’?”

“Get it off!” Dad roared, his eyes about to explode from his head. “Get that shit off right *now!*” He started down the concrete steps with Mom yelling at him not to lose his temper, and I knew somebody was going to get hurt if he got his hands on those painters. But he stopped at the edge of the street, and by this time people were coming out of their houses all around, to see what the noise was all about. It was no big deal though; there was always some kind of yelling and commotion on the street, especially when the weather turned hot and the walls of those clapboard houses closed in like cages. Dad hollered, “Mr. Lindquist owns these houses,

you idiots! Look around! You see any of the others painted Commie red?"

"Nope," one of them replied while the other kept on painting.

"Then what the hell are you doin'?"

"Followin' Mr. Lindquist's direct orders," the painter said. "He told us to come up here to 311 Accardo Street and paint the whole place firehouse red." He tapped one of the cans with his foot. "This is firehouse red, and that's 311 Accardo." He pointed to the little metal numbers up above the front door. "Any more questions, Einstein?"

"These houses are *grey*!" Dad shouted, his face blotching with color. "They've been gray for a hundred years! You gonna paint every house on this street Commie red?"

"Nope. Firehouse red. And we're just painting this place right here. Inside and outside. But that's the only house we're supposed to touch."

"It's right in front of my *door*! I'll have to look at it! My God, a color like that *screams* to be looked at! I can't stand that color!"

"Tough. Take it up with Mr. Lindquist." And then he joined the other painter in the work, and when Dad returned to the house he started throwing around furniture and cursing like a madman. Mom locked herself in the bathroom with a magazine, and I went up to the church to watch the boats go by.

As it turned out, on Monday Dad gathered his courage to go see Mr. Lindquist on his lunch break. He got only as far as Mr. Lindquist's secretary, who said she'd been the one to call Greystone Painters and convey the orders. That was all she knew about it. On the drive home Dad was so mad he almost wrecked the car. And there was the red house, right across the street from our own grey, dismal-looking clapboard house, the paint still so fresh that it smelled up the whole block. "He's trying to get to me," Dad said in a

nervous voice at dinner. "Yeah. Sure. Mr. Lindquist wants to get rid of me, but he don't have the guts of his father. He's afraid of me, so he paints a house Commie red and sticks it in my face. Sure. That's what it's got to be!" He called Mr. Raphaelli up the street to find out what was going on, but learned only that a new man had been hired and would be reporting to work in a week.

I tell you, that was a crazy week. Like I say, I don't know why the color red bothered my dad so much: maybe there's a story in that too, but all I know is that he started climbing the walls. It took everything he had to open the front door in the morning and go to work, because the morning sunlight would lie on the walls of that red house and make it look like a four-alarm fire. And in the evening the setting sun set it aflame from another direction. People started driving along Accardo Street—*tourists*, yet!—just to take a look at the gaudy thing! Dad double-locked the doors and pulled the shades as if he thought the red house might rip itself off its foundations at night and come rattling across the street after him. Dad said he couldn't breathe when he looked at that house, the awful red color stole the breath right out of his lungs, and he started going to bed early at night with the radio tuned to a baseball game and blaring right beside his head.

But in the dark, when there was no more noise from the room where Mom and Dad slept in their separate beds, I sometimes unlocked the front door and went out on the porch to stand in the steamy night. I wouldn't dare tell them, but I *liked* the red house. I mean, it looked like an island of life in a grey sea. For a hundred years there had been only grey houses here, all of them exactly the same, not a nail or a joint different. And now *this*. I didn't know why, but I was about to find out in a big way.

Our new neighbors came to the red house exactly one week after the house had been painted. They made enough noise to

wake the rich folks in their mansions up on North Hill, hollering and laughing on an ordinarily silent Saturday morning, and when I went out on the porch to see, my folks were already out there. Dad's face was almost purple, and there was a mixture of rage and terror in his eyes. Mom was stunned, and she kept rubbing his arm and holding him to keep him from flinging himself down the steps.

The man had crew-cut hair the color of fire. He wore a red checked shirt and trousers the shade of Italian wine. On his feet were red cowboy boots, and he was unloading a U-Haul trailer hooked to the back of a beat-up old red station wagon. The woman wore a pink blouse and crimson jeans, and her shoulder-length hair glinted strawberry-blond in the strong morning light. A little boy and a little girl, about six and seven, were scampering around underfoot, and both of them had hair that was almost the same color of the house they'd come to inhabit.

Well, suddenly the man in red looked up, saw us on the porch, and waved. "Howdy!" he called in a twanging voice that sounded like a cat being kicked. He put aside the crimson box he'd been carrying, strode across the street in his red cowboy boots and right up the steps onto our porch, and stood there grinning. His complexion looked as if he'd been weaned on ketchup.

"Hello," Mom said breathlessly, her hand digging into Dad's arm. He was about to snort steam.

"Name's Virgil Sikes," the man announced. He had thick red eyebrows, an open, friendly face, and light brown eyes that were almost orange. He held a hand out toward Dad. "Pleased to meet you, I'm sure."

Dad was trembling; he looked at Virgil Sikes' hand like it was a cowflop in a bull's pasture.

I don't know why. I guess I was nervous. I didn't think. I just reached out and shook the man's hand. It was hot, like he was running a high fever. "Hi," I said. "I'm Bobby Deaken."

"Howdy, Bobby!" He looked over his shoulder at the woman and two kids. "Evie, bring Rory and Garnett up here and meet the Deakenses!" His accent sounded foreign, slurred and drawled, and then I realized it was Deep South. He grinned wide and proud as the woman and two children came up the steps. "This is my wife and kids," Virgil said. "We're from Alabama. Long ways from here. I reckon we're gonna be neighbors."

All that red had just about paralyzed my dad. He made a croaking sound, and then he got the words out, "Get off my porch."

"Pardon?" Virgil asked, still smiling.

"Get off," Dad repeated. His voice was rising. "Get off my porch, you damned redneck hick!"

Virgil kept his smile, but his eyes narrowed just a fraction. I could see the hurt in them. He looked at me again. "Good to meet you, Bobby," he said in a quieter voice. "Come on over and visit sometime, hear?"

"He will *not*!" Dad told him.

"Ya'll have a good day," Virgil said, and he put his arm around Evie. They walked down the steps together, the kids right at their heels.

Dad pulled free from my mother. "Nobody around here lives in a red house!" he shouted at their backs. They didn't stop. "Nobody with any sense *wants* to! Who do you think you are, comin' around here dressed like that? You a Com-mie or somethin'? You hick! Why don't you go back where you belong, you damned—" And then he stopped suddenly, because I think he could feel me staring at him. He turned his head, and we stared at each other in silence.

I love my dad. When I was a kid, I used to think he hung the moon. I remember him letting me ride on his shoulders. He was a good man, and he tried to be a good father—but at that moment, on that hot July Saturday morning, I saw that there were things in him that he couldn't help, things that had

been stamped in the gears of his soul by the hands of ancestors he never even knew. Everybody has those things in them—little quirks, meannesses, and petty things that don't get much light; that's part of being human. But when you love somebody and you catch a glimpse of those things you've never seen before, it kind of makes your heart pound a little harder. I also saw, as if for the first time, that my dad had exactly the same shade of blue eyes as my own.

"What're *you* lookin' at?" Dad asked, his face all screwed up and painful.

He looked so old. There was grey in his hair, and deep lines on his face. So old, and tired and very much afraid.

I dropped my gaze like a dog about to be kicked, because Dad always made me feel weak. I shook my head and got back inside the house quick.

I heard Mom and Dad talking out there. His voice was loud, but I couldn't make out what he was saying; then, gradually, his voice settled down. I lay on my bed and stared at a crack in the ceiling that I'd seen a million times. And I wondered why I'd never tried to patch it up in all those years. I wasn't a kid anymore; I was right on the edge of being a man. No, I hadn't patched that crack because I was waiting for somebody else to do it, and it was never going to get done that way.

He knocked on the door after a while, but he didn't wait for me to invite him in. That wasn't his way. He stood in the doorway, and finally he shrugged his big heavy shoulders and said, "Sorry. I blew my top, huh? Well, do you blame me? It's that damned red house, Bobby! It's makin' me crazy! I can't even think about nothin' else! You understand that, don't you?"

"It's just a red house" I said. "That's all it is. Just a house with red paint."

"It's *different!*" he replied sharply, and I flinched. "Accardo Street has been just fine for a hundred years the way it used to be! Why the hell does it have to change?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Damned right you don't know! 'Cause you don't know about *life*! You get ahead in this world by puttin' your nose to the wheel and sayin' yes sir and no sir and toein' the line!"

"Whose line?"

"The line of anybody who pays you money! Now, don't you get smart with me either! You're not man enough yet that I can't tear you up if I want to!"

I looked at him, and something in my face made him wince. "I love you, Dad," I said. "I'm not your enemy."

He put a hand to his forehead for a minute, and leaned against the door frame. "You don't see it, do you?" he asked quietly. "One red house it all it takes. Then everything starts to change. They paint the houses, and the rent goes up. Then somebody thinks Accardo Street would be a nice place to put condos that overlook the Bay. They bring machines in to do the work of the men at the factory—and don't you think they don't have machines like that! One red house and everything starts to change. God knows I don't understand why Mr. Lindquist painted it. He's not like his old man was, not by a long shot."

"Maybe things need to change," I said. "Maybe they *should* change."

"Yeah. Right. And where would *I* be? Where else am I going to find work at my age? Want me to start collectin' garbage the tourists leave down at the beach? And where would *you* be? The factory's your future, too, y'know,"

I took a step then, over the line into forbidden territory. "I'd still like to go to college, Dad. My grades are good enough. The school counsellor said—"

"I've told you we'll talk about that later," Dad said firmly. "Right now we need the extra money. Times are tough, Bobby! You've got to pull your weight and toe the line! Remember, a bull should roam his own pasture. Right?"

I guess I agreed. I don't remember. Anyway, he left my

room and I lay there for a long time, just thinking. I think I remember hearing a boat's whistle blow, way off in the distance, and then I fell asleep.

On Monday morning we found out where Virgil Sikes was assigned. Not the line. Not the loading dock. He came right into the big room where my dad worked on one of the machines that smoothed and polished the gears until they were all exactly the same, and he started working on a machine about twenty feet away. I didn't see him, because I worked on the loading dock that summer, but my dad was a nervous wreck at the end of the day. Seems Virgil Sikes was wearing all red again; and, as we were to learn, that's the only color he *would* wear, crimson right down to his socks.

It began to drive Dad crazy. But I know one thing: The first week Virgil Sikes worked at the factory, I carted about twenty more crates than usual off that loading dock. The second week, the factory's quota was up by at least thirty crates. I know, because my sore muscles took count.

The story finally came from Mr. Raphaelli: Virgil Sikes had hands as fast as fire, and he worked like no man Mr. Raphaelli had ever seen before. Rumor was circulating around the factory that Sikes had labored in a lot of different factories along the coast, and in every one of them he'd boosted production by from twenty to thirty percent. The man was never still, never slowed down or even took a water break. And somehow Mr. Lindquist had found out about him and hired him away from a factory down South; but to come to Greystone Bay Virgil Sikes had asked one thing: that the house he live in be painted as bright a red—inside and out—as the painters could find.

"That redneck's a lot younger than me," Dad said at dinner. "I could do that much work when I was his age!" But all of us knew that wasn't true, all of us knew nobody at the factory could work like that. "He keeps on like this, he's gonna blow up his damn machine! Then we'll see what Lindquist thinks about him!"

But about a week after that word came down to assign Virgil Sikes to *two* polishers at the same time. He handled them both with ease, his own speed gearing up to match the machines.

The red house began to haunt Dad's dreams. Some nights he woke up in a cold sweat, yelling and thrashing around. When he got drunk, he ranted about painting our house bright blue or yellow—but all of us knew Mr. Lindquist wouldn't let him do that. No, Virgil Sikes was special. He was different, and that's why Mr. Lindquist let him live in a red house amid the grey ones.

And one night when Dad was drunk he said something that I knew had been on his mind for a long time. "Bobby boy," he said, placing his hand on my shoulder and squeezing, "what if somethin' *bad* was to happen to that damn Commie red house over there? What if somebody was to light a little bitty fire, and that red house was to go up like a—"

"Are you *crazy*?" Mom interrupted. "You don't know what you're saying!"

"Shut up!" he bellowed. "We're talkin' man to man!" And that started another yelling match. I got out of the house pretty quick, and went up the church to be alone.

I didn't go back home until one or two in the morning. It was quiet on Accardo, and all the houses were dark.

But I saw a flicker of light on the red house's porch. A match. Somebody was sitting on the porch, lighting a cigarette.

"Howdy, Bobby," Virgil Sikes' voice said quietly in its thick southern drawl.

I stopped, wondering how he could see it was me. "Hi," I said, and then I started to go up the steps to my own house, because I wasn't supposed to be talking to him and he was kind of spooky anyway.

"Hold on," he said. I stopped again. "Why don't you come on over and sit a spell?"

"I can't. It's way too late."

He laughed softly. "Oh, it's *never* too late. Come on up. Let's have a talk."

I hesitated, thought of my room with the cracked ceiling. In that grey house Dad would be snoring, and Mom might be muttering in her sleep. I turned around, walked across the street and up to the red house's porch.

"Have a seat, Bobby," Virgil offered, and I sat down in a chair, next to him. I couldn't see very much in the dark, but I knew the chair was painted red. The tip of his cigarette glowed bright orange, and Virgil's eyes seemed to shine like circles of flame.

We talked for a while about the factory. He asked me how I liked it, and I said it was okay. Oh, he asked me all sorts of questions about myself—what I liked, what I didn't like, how I felt about Greystone Bay. Before long, I guess I was telling him everything about myself—things I suppose I'd never even told my folks. I don't know why; but while I was talking to him, I felt as comfortable as if I were sitting in front of a warm, reassuring fireplace on a cold, uncertain night.

"Look at those stars!" Virgil said suddenly. "Did you ever see the like?"

Well, I hadn't noticed them before, but now I looked. The sky was full of glittering dots, thousands and thousands of them strewn over Greystone Bay like diamonds on black velvet.

"Know what most of those are?" he asked me. "Worlds of fire. Oh, yes! They're created out of fire, and they burn so bright before they go out—so very bright. You know, fire creates and it destroys too, and sometimes it can do both at the same time." He looked at me, his orange eyes catching the light from his cigarette. "Your father doesn't think too highly of me, does he?"

"No, I guess not. But part of it's the house. He can't stand the color red."

"And I can't stand to live *without* it," he answered. "It's the color of fire. I like that color. It's the color of newness, and energy . . . and change. To me it's the color of life itself."

"So that's why you wanted the house changed from grey to red?"

"That's right. I couldn't live in a grey house. Neither could Evie or the kids. See, I figure house are a lot like the people who live in them. You look around here at all these grey houses, and you know the people who live there have got grey souls. Maybe it's not their choice, maybe it is. But what I'm sayin' is that *everybody* can choose if he has the courage."

"Mr. Lindquist wouldn't let anybody else paint their house a different color. You're different because you work so good."

"I work so good because I live in a red house," Virgil said. "I won't go to any town where I can't live in one. I spell that out good and proper before I take a man's money. See, I've made my choice. Oh, maybe I won't ever be a millionaire and I won't live in a mansion—but in my own way, I'm rich. What more does a man need than to be able to make his own choices?"

"Easy for you to say."

"Bobby," Virgil said quietly, "everybody can choose what color to paint their own house. It don't matter who you are, or how rich or poor—you're the one who lives inside the walls. Some folks long to be red houses amid the grey, but they let somebody else do the paintin'." He stared at me in the dark. His cigarette had gone out, and he lit another with a thin red flame. "Greystone Bay's got a lot of grey houses in it," he said. "Lots of old ones, and ones yet to be."

He was talking in riddles. Like I say, he was kind of spooky. We sat for a while in silence, and then I stood up and said I'd better be getting to bed because work came early the next morning. He said good night, and I started across the street.

It wasn't until I was in my room that I realized I hadn't seen any matches or a lighter when Virgil had lit that second cigarette.

Lots of old ones, Virgil had said. *And ones yet to be.*

I went to sleep with that on my mind.

And it seemed like I'd just closed my eyes when I heard my dad say, "Up and at 'em, Bobby! Factory whistle's about to blow!"

The next week the loading dock moved at least thirty-five more crates over quota. We could hardly keep up with them as they came out of the packing room. Dad couldn't believe how fast Virgil Sikes worked; he said that man moved so fast between those two machines that the air got hot and Virgil's red clothes seemed to smoke.

One evening we came home and Mom was all shook up. It seems she got a telephone call from Mrs. Avery from two houses up. Mrs. Avery had gone nosing around the red house, and had looked into the kitchen window to see Evie Sikes standing over the range. Evie Sikes had turned all the burners on, and was holding her face above them like an ordinary person would accept a breeze from a fan. And Mrs. Avery swore she'd seen the other woman bend down and press her forehead to one of the burners as if it were a block of ice.

"My God," Dad whispered. "They're not *human*. I knew something was wrong with them the first time I saw them! Somebody ought to run them out! Somebody ought to burn that damned red house to the ground!"

And this time Mom didn't say anything.

God forgive me, I didn't say anything either.

Lots of old ones. And ones yet to be.

Rumor got around the factory: Virgil Sikes was going to be in charge of three polishing machines. And somebody in that department was going to get a pink slip.

You know how rumors are. Sometimes they hold a kernel of truth, most times they're just nervous air. Whatever the case, Dad started making a detour to the liquor store on the way home from work three nights a week. He broke out in a

sweat when we turned onto Accardo and had to approach the red house. He could hardly sleep at night, and sometimes he sat in the front room with his head in his hands, and if either Mom or I spoke a word he blew up like a firecracker.

And finally, on a hot August night, his face covered with sweat, he said quietly, "I can't breathe anymore. It's that red house. It's stealin' life right out of me. God almighty, I can't *take* it anymore!" He rose from his chair, looked at me, and said, "Come on, Bobby."

"Where are we going?" I asked him as we walked down the steps to the car. Across the street the lights of the red house were blazing.

"You don't ask questions. You just do as I say. Get in, now. We've got places to go."

I did as he said. And as we pulled away from the curb I looked over at the red house and thought I saw a figure standing at the window, peering out.

Dad drove out into the sticks and found a hardware store still open. He bought two three-gallon gasoline cans. He already had a third in the back. Then he drove to a gas station where nobody knew us and he filled up all three cans at the pumps. On the way home the smell of gasoline almost made me sick. "It has to be done, Bobby," Dad said, his eyes glittering and his face blotched with color. "You and me have to do it. Us men have to stick together, right? It's for the good of both of us, Bobby. Those Sikes people aren't *human*."

"They're different, you mean," I said. My heart was hammering, and I couldn't think straight.

"Yes. Different. They don't belong here. We don't need any red houses on our street. Things have been fine for a hundred years, and we're going to make them fine again, aren't we?"

"You're . . . going to kill them," I whispered.

"No. Hell, no! I wouldn't kill anybody! I'm gonna set the

fire and then start yellin'. They'll wake up and run out the back door! Nobody'll get hurt!"

"They'll know it was you."

"You'll say we were watchin' a movie on TV. So will your mom. We'll figure out what to say. Damn it, Bobby—are you with me or against me?"

I didn't answer, because I didn't know what to say. What's wrong and what's right when you love somebody?

Dad waited until all the lights had gone out on Accardo Street. Mom sat with us in the front room; she didn't say anything, and she wouldn't look at either of us. We waited until the Johnny Carson show was over. Then Dad put his lighter into his pocket, picked up two of the gas cans, and told me to get the third. He had to tell me twice, but I did it. With all the lights off but the glow of the TV, I followed my father out of the room across the street, and quickly up to the red house's porch. Everything was silent and dark. My palms were sweating, and I almost dropped my gas can going up the steps.

Dad started pouring gas over the red-painted boards, just sloshing it everywhere. He poured all the gas out from two cans, and then he looked at me standing there. "Pour yours out!" he whispered. "Go on, Bobby!"

"Dad," I said weakly. "Please . . . don't do this."

"Christ almighty!" He jerked the can from my hand and sloshed it over the porch too.

"Dad . . . please. They don't mean any harm. Just because they're different . . . just because they live in a house that's a different *color*—"

"They shouldn't be different!" Dad told me. His voice was strained, and I knew he was right at the end of his rope. "We don't like different people here? We don't *need* different people!" He started fumbling for his lighter, took from his pocket a rag he'd brought from the kitchen.

"Please . . . don't. They haven't hurt us. Let's just forget it, okay. We can just walk away—"

His lighter flared. He started to touch the flame to the rag. *Lots of old ones*, I thought. *And ones yet to be*. Me. Virgil Sikes had been talking about *me*.

I thought about gears at that instant. Millions and millions of gears going down a conveyor belt, and all of them exactly the same. I thought about the concrete walls of the factory. I thought about the machines and the constant, pounding, damning rhythm. I thought about a cage of grey clapboard, and I looked at my dad's scared face in the orange light and realized he was terrified of what lay outside the grey clapboards—opportunity, choices, chance, *life*. He was scared to death, and I knew right then that I could not be my father's son.

I reached out and grabbed his wrist. He looked at me like he'd never seen me before.

And I heard my voice—stronger now, the voice of a stranger—say, “*No.*”

Before Dad could react, the red-painted front door opened.

And there was Virgil Sikes, his orange eyes glittering. He was smoking a cigarette. Behind him stood his wife and two kids—three more pairs of orange, glowing eyes like campfires in the night.

“Howdy,” Virgil said in his soft southern drawl. “Ya’ll havin’ fun?”

My dad started sputtering. I still had hold of his wrist.

Virgil smiled in the dark. “One less grey house in Greystone Bay, Bobby.”

And then he dropped the cigarette onto the gas-soaked boards at his feet.

The flames caught, burst up high. I tried to grab Virgil, but he pulled back. Then Dad was pulling me off the porch as the boards began to explode into flame. We ran down into the street, and both of us were yelling for the Sikeses to get out the back door before the whole house caught.

But they didn’t. Oh, no. Virgil took one of the children in

his arms and sat down in a red chair, and his wife took the other and sat down beside him in the midst of the flames. The porch caught, hot and bright, and as we watched in fascinated horror we saw all four of the Sikeses burst into flame; but their fire-figures were just sitting there in the chairs, as if they were enjoying a nice day at the beach. I saw Virgil's head nod. I saw Evie smile before fire filled up her face. The children became forms of flame—happy fires, bouncing and kicking joyfully in the laps of the parents.

I thought something then. Something I shouldn't think about too much.

I thought, *They were always made of fire. And now they're going back to what they were.*

Cinders spun into the air, flew up and glittered like stars, worlds on fire. The four figures began to disintegrate. There were no screams, no cries of pain—but I thought I heard Virgil Sikes laugh like the happiest man in the world.

Or something that had *appeared* to be a man.

Lights were coming on all up and down the block. The flames were shooting up high, and the red house was almost engulfed. I watched the sparks of what had been the Sikes family fly up high, so very high—and then they drifted off together over Greystone Bay, and whether they winked out or just kept going I don't know. I heard the siren of a firetruck coming. I looked at my dad, looked long and hard, because I wanted to remember his face. He looked so small. So small.

And then I turned and started walking along Accardo Street, away from the burning house. Dad grabbed at my arm, but I pulled free as easily as if I were being held by a shadow. I kept walking right to the end of Accardo—and then I just kept walking.

I love my mom and dad. I called them when the workboat I signed onto got to a port up the coast about thirty miles. They were okay. The red house was gone, but of course the firemen never found any bodies. All that was left was the red

station wagon. I figured they'd haul that off to where the junked cars are, and the blind old man who lives there would have a new place to sleep.

Dad got into some trouble, but he pleaded temporary insanity. Everybody on Accardo knew Bull was half-crazy, that he'd been under a lot of pressure and drank a lot. Mr. Lindquist, I heard later, was puzzled by the whole thing, like everybody else, but the clapboard houses were cheap and he decided to build a white brick house across from my folks. Mr. Lindquist had wanted to get rid of those clapboard things and put up stronger houses for the factory workers anyway. This just started the ball rolling.

My folks asked me to come back, of course. Promised me everything. Said I could go to college whenever I wanted. All that stuff.

But their voices sounded weak. I heard the terror in those voices, and I felt so sorry for them, because they knew the walls of their cage were painted grey. Oh, I'll go back to Greystone Bay sometime—but not until later. Not until I've found out who I am, and what I am. I'm Bob Deaken now.

I still can't figure it out. Was it planned? Was it happenstance? Did those creatures that loved fire just fit me into their lives by accident or on purpose? You know, they say the devil craves fire. But whatever the Sikeses were, they unlocked me from a cage. They weren't evil. Like Virgil Sikes said, fire creates as well as it destroys.

They're not dead. Oh, no. They're just . . . somewhere else. Maybe I'll meet them again sometime. Anything's possible.

I may not be a red house. I may be a blue one, or a green one, or some other color I haven't even seen yet. But I know I'm not a grey house. I know that for sure.

FLIGHT

by Peter Dickinson

The Empire of Obana was founded, as are most empires, by the conquest and subjugation of numerous weaker and more primitive peoples. One tribe, however, remained not only unconquerable, but also unreachable. The following is a history of what transpired—or did not—between Obanah and the White Rock Tribe.

(Notes on the transactions between the Empire of Obanah—latterly the People's Obate of Obanah—and the White Rock Tribe.)

The Empire of Obanah is normally dated as having been founded at the Battle of Festulu when the First Ob, known as the World Elephant, overcame the army of the Nineteen Nations and thus finally subjugated the vast and varied tract of land between the Dead Lakes and the northern desert.*

*No apology is made for including facts which are theoretically "known to every schoolboy." The ideological struggle of the last few decades has meant so much rewriting of history on both sides of the ocean that even the events of A.O. 1 cannot be taken for granted. The present writer feels he can afford objectivity only because it seems unlikely that these words will be published.

Details of the battle are familiar from *The Glory of the Elephant* and need not be repeated here.

Immediately after the battle the Ob symbolically asserted his authority by issuing his first Sublime Decree, to the effect that all his people might henceforth continue to practice their own religions and customs and use their ancient laws, with two additions. First, they must incorporate worship of the Ob as the ultimate truth of their faiths. Second, that they must pay taxes to the Ob according to no less than their capacity. His officials were instructed to carry out the Decree with tact, followed by firmness.

The instruction was interpreted in this manner: The priests of each tribe were approached and the Decree and instruction were explained to them. They were then told that the question of taxes would be settled first, and the degree of firmness needed for that would be assumed also to apply when it came to the question of religion. A tribe which showed itself obstinate over taxes would be likely to be as obstinate over religion, and few priests would survive the ensuing application of firmness. The priests of the tribes which proved reasonable over tax matters would be allowed to decide in what manner Ob-worship should be incorporated in their rituals.

Two examples of how the system worked in practice will suffice. The prosperous trading tribes of the Mud River Basin already worshiped a God-king, whom they kept unseen for five years, and then had ritually drowned by priestesses who had been blinded at birth so that even they should not break the tabu while performing their sacred function. The longer the king took to die, the better would trade be in the next five-year cycle. Here an apparent problem was overcome by incorporating into the chant of the priestesses a few lines proclaiming that not even a God-king was an adequate substitute for the Ob, and the fact of his dying showed this to be

so. In view of the level of taxes raised in the Mud River Basin this was considered acceptable.

The farmers who cultivated the rich volcanic soil on the slopes of the then-dormant ranges of West Parue worshiped a twenty-four-breasted goddess with most of the ordinary fertility rituals in a somewhat exaggerated form, including the duty of each head of household to copulate publicly with the goddess at the full moon. Obvious difficulties arose, but the Parue economy was just as obviously capable of supporting a high tax burden. There seemed likely to be an impasse until an official asked how the farmers got the strength to perform their holy feat, and it was tentatively suggested that like so much else in farming it probably came from the sun. The Ob then allowed it to be known that he was already the Sun on Earth and when, if ever he died, it would be in order to become the Sun in Heaven. Honor was thus saved, religion confirmed, and finance put on a serious footing.

Inevitably certain tribes proved obstinate. The most tragic of these were the bean-eating people of an island in Kala Lake called Tenu-Tenu. They had the misfortune not to believe in any God at all, maintaining that life was purposeless, that there was no after-life, and the only sensible course was to pass the time agreeably. For the Tenui this chiefly meant perfecting the techniques of the nose-flute, on which they performed with a skill never since approached. One might think there was no problem in such a people adopting some undemonstrative form of Ob-worship. The Ob himself appreciated music and maintained a band of nose-flautists. But the Tenui were convinced that the smallest departure from their faith in the pointlessness of life would impair the purity of their music. In view of their intransigence and the general indigence of bean-eaters the Ob confirmed the dictates of his Decree and the Tenui ceased to exist. The order was carried out, even to the court musicians.

These, and hundreds of other dealings with the tribes, are detailed in the long and seldom-read central section of *The*

Glory. It may be thought that a work which existed only in the oral tradition for eight hundred years must be of little historical value, but this is not the case. When the World Elephant ordered the composition of *The Glory* his main object was not self-aggrandizement but the creation of a permanent record of the administrative details of his empire, especially those concerning taxation. Every means was used to make the verse both memorable and difficult to alter. Systems of patterning were invented so that any change would show up in a lack of symmetry with lines and items elsewhere. It is also possible to see when any section is missing.

One such section concerns this paper. It is the only one of which it is possible to say with certainty was missing from the very beginning. The poets left the oral equivalent of a blank in their great work, expecting to fill it in when the Ob had finally brought to heel the one recalcitrant tribe in all his dominions, usually referred to as the White Rock Tribe.*

He never did, and nor did any of his successors.

The first chapter of the story is found in the document wrongly known as *The Secret Glory*. This was composed on orders from the Ob and contains details of his reign which he did not choose to be publicly known. While it remained in the oral tradition it was chanted only once in the reign of each Ob, the night after his return from the funeral ceremonies of the Obo.**

*The name by which they called themselves is unknown.

**Old Obango had usually few true verbs, but nouns had temporal suffixes (cf ex-wife, emeritus professor). Ob was an archaic word for elephant. When the 12th Ob died in the manner which will be described he became the Obo, or was-elephant; when the 13th died he took over that title and the 12th became the Obolo, or exceedingly-was-elephant. The Algabio, or State Council, which confirmed the succession of the 15th Ob, chose as part of its duties on that blood-soaked occasion the sobriquet by the 12th would henceforth be referred to, the Idiot. The gap between death and choice of sobriquet accounts for the fact that many Obi are known by names they would not have chosen for themselves.

With the invention of writing one manuscript was made to be read once to each succeeding Ob. It has to this day never been published, but Professor Duninga, while in power during the brief interregnum before the inauguration of the People's Obate, insisted on inspecting it. He was convinced of its authenticity, and told the present writer that it contains interesting facts about the rise of the World Elephant to supreme power, including details of the deaths of his nine elder brothers. This account of the meeting between the World Elephant and white Rock Tribe derives from conversations with the late professor during his exile.

In the ninth year of his reign the World Elephant was on tour in the Pargalate of Quassa, bordering the desert in the far northeast of his dominions. On his way he received homage and worship both from his own officials, including the Pargal, and the tribes he ruled through them. He listened to intertribal disputes and other complaints and settled them according to his conceptions of justice and mercy. At one such session a wizened little aboriginal wormed his way between the legs of officials and began to screech in an incomprehensible language. The officials tried to hustle him away, but the Ob, discerning from their demeanor that they were not simply embarrassed by the savage's lack of court manners, insisted on an interpreter being found.

It turned out a simple-seeming case. The man belonged to a tribe of baboon-eaters. Being too old to snare food for himself he depended on his son, who had recently been killed by men of a neighboring tribe dropping stones on the young man's head.

"In that case," said the Ob, "let the chief of this other tribe stand before us and say his say."

The officials shuffled. By Sublime Decree all parties to any intertribal dispute must be available to stand before the Ob and receive his mercy or justice. Again the Ob discerned that

here was more than a matter of his officials' shame at their incompetence or terror of the Decree.

"What is the name of this tribe?" he asked.

The officials did not know, through hitherto they had conducted the tour with exemplary attention to such details.

"Where do they live?" asked the Ob, in what *The Secret Glory* describes as his dangerous small voice.

Nobody knew even that until the old man was asked and pointed northeast.

"Perhaps there is good hawking in that direction," said the Ob. "Let preparations be made."

So, after two-and-a-half-days' riding through scrub and then desert, the World Elephant set eyes for the first and last time upon White Cliff, a broad pillar of limestone rising from the plain for several hundred feet, with almost vertical sides. It was the only feature of its kind between horizon and horizon. As they rode nearer, the old baboon-eater who had been their guide tried to refuse to go on.

"Have him bound and carried," said the Ob. "Those are big vultures."

"Eagles, perhaps, your brightness," said a courtier.

The Ob reined in to study the black shapes that spiraled in the updraught round the pillar, sharp against the blue of sky or the white of stone.

"Neither," he said. "My Lord Pargal, why did you not tell me you had birds of such size in your territory?"

Since the court hearing, the Pargal of Quassa must have felt that his limbs were hanging very loose in their sockets. Even the Mailed Fist families, the nucleus of the army with which the Ob had won his empire, were not immune from the penalties of breaking a Sublime Decree.

"I have never seen them, your brightness," he stammered.

A little later, when four of the creatures came swooping toward the riders, the old baboon-eater shrieked with fear.

The Ob told his retinue to halt and rode forward with Pargal at his side.

"Those are not birds, my lord," he said.

The creatures swooped extremely fast, black triangles against the glare of the noon sky. It was only in the last few seconds of their flight that the Ob was able to make out that each was in fact an enormous kite which carried a naked man in a harness fastened to its struts. A round object the size of two clenched fists dangled from the mouth of each man. The Ob raised an arm in salute. Two kites swooped directly over him, the kite-riders opening their mouths to drop their loads. One grazed the Pargal's knee. The other smashed into the neck of the Ob's mare and broke it.

The Pargal leaped down, seized the dazed Ob by the shoulder and in spite of his majestic weight heaved him onto his own saddle, slashing his glove across the horse's haunches to send it galloping out of danger. He himself ran back, zigzagging and covering his head with his shield. The two kite-riders who had dropped their loads were already gliding toward the cliff but the others had circled for a second strike. Both missed the Pargal, but narrowly. He found the Ob sitting placidly among his retinue, watching the cliff.

The Ob spoke as follows.

"The Lord Pargal of Quassa owes us many lives. For the breaking of our Sublime Decree arms and legs were destined to quit their sockets. We have been led unwarned into peril of our life. Hands have been laid on our divine person. Most heinously we have been kept in ignorance of a people that has not welcomed our rule, paid our taxes, worshiped our brightness. How many sons and brothers and cousins should die for these crimes? A thousand? Ten thousand? Let someone else count. In return we owe the Pargal a horse. Hear then our decree. The Pargal is deposed from his Pargalate of Quassa. We create this White Rock and the desert for a hundred thousand paces around it a separate Pargalate, the White Rock

Pargalate. Of this the deposed Pargal of Quassa shall be Pargal, with the additional title of Watcher of the Rock. He and his sons hereafter. And if any set foot outside the boundaries of their Pargalate before I or one of my sons set foot on the summit of White Rock, all those lives shall be at once forfeit. The Decree is Sublime."

The Pargal* kissed the earth and began to grovel for the customary nine hours. Meanwhile the Ob and his retinue rode a circuit round White Rock, testing the kite-riders' range by keeping a series of scouts between themselves and the cliff. Two courtiers had the honor to die thus protecting their sovereign, three had broken bones and some horses were lost.

The Ob studied the nature of the cliff. It was all nearly vertical, but wherever there was a hint of a slope terraces had been built. Groups of stone huts clung to the cliff like the combs of wild bees. On ledges too small to terrace grazed dark brown sheep herded by children, who swooped from cranny to cranny on their own small kites, like housemartins. All the while the Ob rode kite-riders came swooping out, starting from a height well above the cliff-top, slanting toward their target, dropping their missiles (round stones carried in cradles of thongs) whether they reached it or not, and gliding back toward the cliff. They knew their range to within a few paces and would be almost at ground level before the updraft caught them and they could spiral again for height. The updraft seemed constant, though not equal on all sides of the pillar. Nowhere was there any sign of a place where the lower parts of the cliff could be climbed.

The Ob said nothing all this while, and nothing when he rode away that evening, leaving the Watcher to begin his

*The meagerness of their province's resources meant that the Pargali of White Rock were unable to keep up the state due to that title, and were thus normally referred to by their secondary title as Watchers. The custom continued even after their sudden access of wealth in the 29th Obate.

duties when his nine hours' groveling was over. Only one further comment by him on the White Rock problem is recorded.*

Such was the first contact between the Empire and the White Rock Tribe. The reader must not think that because this paper is concerned with such contacts they were in any way central to the history of Obanah. Apart from two or three episodes they were to the highest degree marginal. To take a century at random, the sixth was a period of grand events, ranging from the revolt of Asku and the consequent Year of Three Obi to the discovery of the continent of Kastu by Admiral Nang and the disastrous currency collapse that followed the importation of fleetloads of cheap ivory. We have written records for the sixth century, besides the two epics of Sridan Sridan. Neither in the dry official documents nor in the apparently world-embracing vision of the literary genius is there one mention of White Rock. Many Obi must have lived out their reigns and not given the problem a moment's thought, hearing the name mentioned only once, during the ritual chanting of *The Secret Glory*.

And yet, despite immense lapses, the problem can be said to have nagged. The last words of the World Elephant provide a metaphor for this continuous if subliminal irritation. During his forty-eight year reign he was entirely occupied with other matters, but as he lay dying, surrounded by his Algai, he was heard to sigh. The Algangha was then a certain Chinak Chinuka, renowned for the subtlety of his counsel. He made a sign to silence the chanter who was relating the list of the conquests of the World Elephant.

"What ails the brightness?" asked Chinak.

*Few Obi can have paid much attention to the details of this document, as by tradition the chanting accompanied the ritual in which the new Ob demonstrated his right to six selected wives of his predecessor.

"We have not conquered all," whispered the dying Ob.

"Between the Dead Lakes and the Desert ten thousand tribes quail before the brightness," said Chanak.

"But not the White Rock Tribe," said the Ob.

"Hear my poor counsel," said Chinak. "By Sublime Decree all tribes in the Empire pay tribute to the Ob and worship his brightness, or they cease to exist. A Sublime Decree is all-powerful. It follows that a tribe that does not so worship and pay tribute does not exist."

The Ob lay silent. Then he was seen to smile.

"In the next hour," he said, "we propose to return to heaven and become the sun. We shall no doubt be in need of subtle counsel. Let the Algangha Chinak Chinuka precede us. The Decree is Sublime."

The Chinak Doctrine, despite inauspicious beginnings, may be said to have prevailed during the reigns of the next ten Obi, during which no information is recorded concerning the White Rock Tribe. The one possible exception is a ballad known as "The Wild Bird." Professor Duninga left notes among his papers arguing that this dealt with an incident concerning White Rock, though the few other scholars who have studied it have usually done so only in order to demonstrate how its boring and repetitive obscurities prove the decline in the poetic art since the composition of *The Glory*. Professor Duninga's reading of the event behind the ballad is as follows.

In a freak desert storm a child of the White Rock Tribe was blown from the cliffs on his kite and captured by termite-gatherers, who took him to their overlord, the Watcher. The Watcher gave orders that the child should be tamed and educated. For a long while he fought his captors with the blank frenzy of a bird, but at length he forgot his wildness, accepted his fate and learnt Obango. He then told the Watcher that his accident had befallen him because he had been given

his first kite on the eve of his fifth birthday, on which day, by custom, he was to have made his first solo flight and ceased to be a baby. Because of the coming storm the ceremony was postponed, but in his disappointment he had stolen out and tried to fly alone and thus been swept beyond help. The Watcher then asked if he could build himself a new kite and he replied that he thought he could. The wreckage of his old one was there for a model, and he had not only watched his father build and repair kites, but had flown with him to learn the skill. At any rate he succeeded well enough in his task. He was then ornamented with silver bracelets and leg-rings, taught messages of peace and taken by night to the foot of the rock. From a safe distance the Watcher saw the kite catch the dawn updraft and spiral upwards beside the cliff to land by some huts. Some hours later four kites came gliding out. Seeing that the men bore in their teeth what seemed to be the usual missiles the Watcher kept beyond their known range. They dropped their burdens perfunctorily and swung back toward their eyrie. Riding forward the Watcher saw that the answer to his messages consisted of two forearms and two lower legs, still wearing their silver rings and bracelets.*

With the death of the 12th Ob, the Idiot, we are on surer ground. The evidence comes partly from the Annals (transcribed three centuries after the event from the oral record) and partly from a more extensive boast-ballad composed in honor of the important Mailed Fist family of Shohu-Ga.

Though there can be no doubt that the 12th Ob came from the true lineage of the World Elephant, he was a sport, displaying features uncharacteristic of his race. He seems to

*The reader should remember that the ballad is very obscure and Professor Duninga's reading of it both speculative and controversial. Other scholars believe that it refers to a different incident involving some other tribe.

have been an idealist and dreamer. He shocked his contemporaries by his practice of monogamy, and it is plausible to suppose that owing to this aberration he was actually listening when *The Secret Glory* was chanted to him. At any rate on his first tour of the Northeast he insisted on visiting the Pargalate of White Rock, normally omitted from the itinerary on account of its remoteness and poverty, besides its being a standing insult to the ruler, a blotch on the brightness of the Ob.

The Watcher received his sovereign with gratification, and was able to explain the difficulties of carrying out military operations against a natural fortress when the supposedly taxable populace of the Pargalate consisted of a few baboon-eaters and termite-gatherers. The Ob listened, and then gravely suggested that against an obstacle impervious to assault by force the greater and more beautiful power of love should be tried.

Next morning, against vehement advice, he left his retinue beyond the limits of flight and went forward alone, unarmed, wearing his ceremonial sun-robe and gold-plumed headdress. When the kite-riders swooped out toward him he raised both arms in greeting and walked on. To the relief of his courtiers and the astonishment of the Watcher, the kite-riders made no attempt to harm him, but swirled out in increasing numbers from the cliff and escorted him as he strode on. Only when the retinue rode in to join their lord were they driven off with showers of boulders.

The Ob reached the foot of the cliff. Ropes were let down and he was hauled to the lowest group of huts. From there, sometimes carried shoulder high, sometimes swung from point to point on rope cradles, he was seen to climb through increasing antlike swarms of the White Rock people toward the summit of the cliff. With deep emotion his followers saw him stand at last on that precipitous brink. They waved and cheered. The White Rock folk also appeared highly excited,

though they soon withdrew reverently clear of his brightness. He himself did not move and gave no sign. He was still standing there when the kite-riders left him, sudden as a flight of flock-birds, gliding down to their homes. The sunset glinted off his robe and headdress. Then came the rapid desert dusk and he could be seen no more.

It was possible, the retinue told themselves, that the Ob, who had his own methods of worship, had chosen this majestic spot for a solitary vigil. They maintained the thesis with lessening conviction next day, and next night. On the third morning they discerned by the sag of his body that he was held upright by being bound to some kind of post. Also his attendants were now vultures.

The Shohu-Ga boast-ballad, already referred to, does not deal directly with these events. It describes the confirmation ceremony of the 15th Ob, one part of which was the choice of a sobriquet for the 12th Ob, a matter over which there turned out to be unusual controversy. The representatives of the Dalalithi family argued that the Sublime Decree of the World Elephant was now satisfied, in that one of his descendants had stood on the summit of White Rock and its people had worshiped him according to their custom. Dalalithi therefore proposed the sobriquet of the Saint, because by his self-sacrifice the 12th Ob had redeemed his race from lasting dishonor. An unstated corollary of this argument was that the Pargal of White Rock, the Watcher, who though poor came from a bloodline that tended to breed very beautiful men and women and was for this reason related to Dalalithi through several marriages, would now be free to leave his barren Pargalate, resume his ancestral lands and honors, and at last pay a number of remitted dowries.

The representative of Shohu-Ga moved a counter-resolution, that the 12th Ob should henceforth be known as the Idiot, for reasons the speaker considered too obvious to be worth stating. One of these reasons was no doubt that Shohu-Ga now

held the Pargalate of Quassa. Numbers on either side of the motion were roughly equal, but Shohu-Ga and their allies had smuggled more swords into the Algabio. The outcome is, of course, history.

No real attempt seems to have been made to avenge the death of the Idiot. In his brief reign he had offended powerful interests, in particular his brother the 13th Ob, by failing to leave the six wives necessary to complete the ritual inaugurating the next reign. To heap insult on insult, the Idiot's single wife hanged herself rather than participate in the ceremony. For this and other reasons White Rock was left with none but the Watcher to watch it for five more reigns. Then the terrible interregnum usually referred to as the Qualabba swept the Empire.

Because the Qualabba is claimed by the People's Obate as a precursor of their own revolution, no event in Obango history has been subject to so much rewriting and reinterpretation on both sides of the Great Ocean. For this reason a brief and objective account will be given here. The Qualabba was in essence a religious crusade of peculiar ferocity. It began with the eruption of Mount Parue and the chain of sister-volcanoes in the southwest. This great natural disaster smothered farmlands over a wide area with a deep layer of barren ash, but its effects were not merely local. There were unprecedented rains and floods elsewhere, as well as several earthquakes. Such upheavals are bound to occur in a great and varied empire, but this time they were compounded by the arrival on the scene of a prophet—a prophet who, despite the strangeness and fervor of his beliefs, turned out to be a military and administrative genius.

This man whose name was Agbag, seems genuinely to have foreseen the Parue eruptions and to have warned his fellow farmers against them in explicit terms. He had already gathered a small band of followers, and naturally the fulfill-

ment of his prophecy added immensely to his prestige, and the widespread ruin, misery and discontent resulting from the eruptions provided him with a horde of fresh recruits. Ploughshares were beaten into swords and the Qualabba began.

The details of Agbag's creed were straightforward. He had been shown in a dream that the world was a great yam, whose destiny was to be eaten by the Celestial Hog. But the yam was infested with maggots in the shape of humans. Not until the yam was cleansed of the maggots would the Celestial Hog consent to eat it and thus inaugurate the true, spiritual life of the universe. Therefore it was the duty of all believers to further this process. Their only excuse for not beginning with themselves was that this would leave the world still infested by unbelievers. The unbelievers had to be slaughtered first, and then the beatified Army of the Hog could unite in a glorious mass suicide.

The Empire was ripe for such a movement. The Algabio was split into feuding actions and had virtually ceased to function since the bloodletting at the confirmation of the 15th Ob, and had been replaced by inefficient, corrupt and frivolous coteries of court favorites. Recent Obs had taken little interest in the duties of government, being preoccupied with a doctrine of Ob-worship started under the 13th Ob, the Fruitful, in an endeavor to compensate for the deficiencies of the 12th. Under this doctrine the prime ritual function of the Ob was to beget at least one son upon a woman from every distinct tribe in the Empire. The woman, once pregnant, was sent back to her tribe to bring forth the Sun-begotten among her own people. Had modern statistical techniques been available it would have been possible to demonstrate that the Obi had, in the Parue proverb, bought more fields than their oxen could plough.

But even allowing for social breakdown in the provinces and collapse of government at the center it must have been hard for contemporaries not to feel that the Qualabba was

somehow divinely ordained and directed. Every decision Agbag made, until the closing stages of his campaign, must have seemed inspired. His first move took him not toward the apparently easy cattle-plains of eastern Parue, but south into the red hill country into which the great range degenerates. Here he converted isolated tribes of metal-workers, sweeping their smith-priests into his army to provide weapons. Moving on southwestward into the rain forests—a direction no serious military analyst would have contemplated—he erupted onto the banks of the Ulu River at the exact season at which the Ului held the remarkable firework oracle by which they had long maintained dominance over the network of lesser tribes surrounding them.

It is typical of Agbag's intuitive genius, his eclectic but synthetic approach to the problem of slaughtering all mankind, that he should have at once ordered his converted smith-priests to cooperate with those of the Ului in producing new weapons. Many of both died ("were cleansed" in the jargon of the Qualabba) during what would now be called the crash program of experimentation, but when four months later Agbag faced at Dalikiliki the first serious army sent south by the Ob to suppress his revolt, he did so with nine cannon. After their brief bombardment the wild charge of the fanatics was enough to overwhelm an army ten times the size of Agbag's.

Only after Dalikiliki does Agbag seem to have grasped the scale of the problem his vision had set him. Hitherto his method had been the crude one of slaughtering everybody but those capable of bearing weapons and willing to be converted, but confronted with the mass of the Empire he perceived that he would need an administrative structure with which to command and control its obliteration. In two years, out of nothing, he contrived the most efficient and least corruptible bureaucracy Obanah was ever to know. In order to control it, direct his armies, and supervise the elaborate supply system needed to maintain those armies in the field, Agbag expanded

and adapted the old crop notation system of Parue into the form of writing which is fundamentally that we still use today. He chose generals and officials without regard for lineage, tribe or wealth, but solely for the combination of ability with fanaticism.*

But however remarkable the total edifice, it was all built with a single purpose, that every human within the borders of the Empire (to Agbag every human in the known world) should submit in one way or another to the Qualabba, and then the final cleansing would begin.

Like the World Elephant, he succeeded in his aim, with the exception of a single tribe.

The Qualabba came late to White Rock, but it would be untrue to say that its energies were spent. It was still at the height of its power. The first reports sent back to Agbag evidently did not make the nature of the problem clear. He gave orders that the rock must be stormed and its people converted or massacred, then turned his mind to larger campaigns. Only six years later, when these were successfully completed, did the Prophet set eyes on White Rock. It must not be thought that the local leaders of the Qualabba had pursued their campaign with the same ineffectualness that the original Watcher had shown in response to the orders of the World Elephant. Far from it. What seems to have caught Agbag's attention was the disproportionate expenditure of resources, mainly in the shape of human lives, which this remote and minor campaign had cost the Qualabba. So he came to see for himself.

For once the fervor of Agbag's inner vision blinded him to

*E.g. the leper-general Zaaxa, who was so wasted with his disease that his arms and legs were stumps and he had to be strapped into his saddle and led to the battlefield. His campaigns are still thought relevant in the military academies of both Obanah and Kastu.

outer realities. Perhaps it was difficult even for a soldier of genius, to grasp the idea that a small and primitive tribe was accidentally equipped to resist the armies that had conquered an empire. Be that as it may, his vision told him that here was the final obstacle to his crusade. He publicly pronounced that the Qualabba would end at White Rock. When that had fallen all Obamah would have fallen and the great and longed-for self-slaughter would begin. The summit of the rock was the destined place for the death of the last man on Earth, the prophet himself. All the armies of the Qualabba were summoned to fulfill this destiny.

As with many a great soldier before and since, the nature of Agbag's genius had changed. The dash and audacity of his early campaigns had given way to skill in maneuvering enormous masses of men and material. Efficiency had replaced intuition, force daring. So now skill, efficiency and force were deployed. The photographs of Kastuan spy-planes show clearly the three most astonishing relics of the siege, the vast and uncompleted ramp, the pit from which were dug the materials to build it, and the sixty kilometers of paved causeway along which were dragged the supplies to feed and equip the army of laborers and soldiers. At the height of the effort Professor Duninga claimed that the actual besiegers may have numbered just under two hundred thousand men. Let it be remembered that the nearest river is 140 kilometers away and that the scattered waterholes in the desert can mostly be drunk dry by a train of ten camels. These figures may suggest the cost in human energy needed to sustain an army that size on so inaccessible a front. The whole strength of the Qualabba was sucked into the final effort, so that elsewhere in the Empire the first faint stirrings of recovery were able to begin.

The effort was not enough. As the photographs show, the ramp stopped short about eighty meters from its destination. Agbag's plan foundered upon the laws of mass and gravitation. When the work began, five hundred meters out across

the desert, he was able to protect his laborers from the stone-dropping tactics of the kite-riders by working at night and building shelters which moved forward as the ramp progressed. But the closer the work moved to the cliff the greater the weight of missile a kite could carry, and could drop, what's more, from a greater height. No material available to Agbag would withstand the impact of a stone weighing twenty kilograms and dropped from a hundred meters. The effectiveness of the kite-riders' bombing may still seem improbable, but there are innumerable records, first in the old annals of the hereditary Watchers, then in the library of White Rock University, and latest of all in the reports of the White Rock Observation Project, of the custom of the kite-riders (whether as ritual or game is not known) of choosing targets on the plain below and dropping stones on them with great accuracy. Another measure of their primitive skill is the recorded fact that when Agbag restricted work on the ramp to the hours of darkness, even on moonless nights the kite-riders were able to prevent its advance by bombing the target, as it were, by memory. Though there is probably little or no updraft from the cliff by night, the ramp by now was close enough for a kite-rider to leap from the cliff summit, glide down until he was over the slope up which the laborers toiled with their loads, and glide back to some perch well above the level of the plain. Any structure erected to protect the slope was destroyed at leisure by daytime bombing.

The ramp was only the main prong of the assault. Continual attempts were made by scaling parties with ladders and grappling irons, and occasional footholds were gained during the nights, but could never be sustained by day. Where one of the lower clusters of huts was captured, no advance could be made from it because of the lack of communication between cluster and cluster, except by flight.

By now Agbag's army had muskets, but the state of the art was too primitive for accurate aim at a flying man, where one

came within range. Agbag ordered the construction of mortars, the largest of which had a caliber just over a meter and was known as Dongalongu, or the Voice of the Hog. The trajectory of the missiles hurled by these weapons was high enough to attack the huts of the kite-riders, but only when they were fired from within range of counterattack by the kite-riders. Agbag could afford the loss of innumerable ordinary soldiers, but not of the skilled artillerymen of the Ului.

Another normal technique of siege, starvation, did not apply. In fact the besiegers were in worse condition than the besieged.* Several attempts at tunneling were made, starting with a nighttime push to hack far enough into the cliff to be under its protection by daybreak, but as soon as the entrances to these tunnels were apparent it became possible for the kite-riders to block them with boulders tumbled from the cliff top and by the same means to prevent attempts to shift the

*The mystery of the White Rock water supply was not solved until the spy-plane photographs, already referred to, were available for study. They show that the upper surface of the great pillar is saucer-shaped, the outer slopes being covered by terraces, but the main basin being bare rock pocked with several hundred pits, man-made or man-enlarged. There is no rainy season in the desert, only rare and violent thunderstorms, but the tremendous updraft from the rock interrupts the flow of air that carries these rainclouds. The resulting downpours, though still not frequent, must have been sufficient to keep the water-pits supplied through dry spells. For instance, no rain is believed to have fallen on the rock during the Great Drought of A.D.1087-9, but the White Rock Observation Project, of which Professor Duninga was then Director, could detect no alteration in the behavior of the inhabitants. Some surfaces of the cliff display signs of water erosion, but the aerial photographs show that the gullies cut into the rim by these overflows have been painstakingly blocked. Limestone is porous, so it is thought that the pits must have been lined with some impermeable material, but enough moisture seeps through elsewhere to sustain the vegetation on the ledges used for grazing livestock. More elaborate systems of irrigation must have been used for the larger terracings, but how these worked is not known.

blockage. A tunnel begun from further out, approaching the cliff below the desert surface, was still uncompleted after several cave-ins when the Qualabba came to its abrupt end.

Catastrophe theory might explain the suddenness of the event. At one moment, despite immense losses, the siege was being maintained at full pressure, and the next it had melted away. The whole crusade had been powered by the infallibility of Agbag's vision. He had announced that the Qualabba would end when White Rock fell and could not go back from that. His word was as unquestionable as the Sublime Decree of an Ob. But his armies, as they toiled and died, must have steadily discovered the reality of the problem he had set them. Each setback, each failure, was a seed of doubt, and at last one of these seeds germinated.

Agbag was inspecting the Dongalongu. He was dissatisfied with its effect at extreme range and insisted on its being dragged toward the cliff, telling the gunners they were under the protection of the Celestial Hog. At first it seemed as if he spoke the truth, for the gun was hauled toward the cliff and set up without interference, but while the loading process was underway a flight of kite-riders swooped out toward it. The Dongalongu presented a large target with its train of oxen and their drivers and other laborers and attendants, but in the first rock-shower the four men who died were all Ului gunners.

The Ului are a famously unexcitable people, greeting even the explosion of a firework factory with a shrug and a proverb. The remaining gunners muttered for a moment in Ulu, then seized the prophet, stuffed him into the mouth of the Dongalongu and fired the touchhole. His guards, apparently, watched without interfering. So, as Agbag had prophesied, the Qualabba ended with his own dead body on the summit of White Rock.

The tide of the crusade retreated over an empire in chaos. Such tribes as remained struggled back into being, but of the 416 languages which are reported from before the slaughter,

fewer than two hundred have since been spoken. The bloodshed did not immediately cease. Regiments of fanatics roamed the land "cleansing all they met." Two such bodies met by accident at Qus-qus and without discussion embarked on a process of mutual slaughter so intensive that within an hour only three men out of four thousand were left alive. The revival of the Obate in such circumstances might well be considered a miracle, and was certainly regarded as such by orthodox believers for centuries to come. Stripped of supernatural trimmings this is what seems to have happened:

The priestesses of Mud River had been engaged on the cinquennial drowning of the God-king when the warriors of the Qualabba burst onto the scene and slaughtered everyone in sight. The one person not in sight was the God-king himself, being under water. A priestess had just inserted a reed in his mouth to revive him, so he was able to breathe. It took him time to realize that the ritual had gone amiss, and then to free himself from the bonds and emerge. By then the Qualabba had swept on. The drowning pool being set in dense scrub typical of the Mud River terrain, other members of the tribe had escaped slaughter. To them the return of their God-king—his successor being among those "cleansed"—must at first have seemed no more than a sign of hope, but as they continued to survive through occasional "after-cleansings" it became more than that. From the first the God-king's apparent death and resurrection were accepted as evidence of his divinity, without theological superstructure, but as the years of hiding went on a new mythology, adapted from the old, came into being. As has been mentioned, the Mud River priesthood had long ago accepted for political reasons the concept that their God-king was drowned for being an inadequate substitute for the Ob, but this had remained no more than peripheral to the ritual. Now it moved to the center. A God-king who had miraculously survived drowning must have done so as a sign that he was not an inadequate

substitute. It followed that he must be the true Ob, and should be worshiped as such. It was even possible that the man was in a line of descent from the World Elephant, thanks to the activities of the 13th Ob and his successors in disseminating that line among the tribes. Among the orthodox such descent became dogma and genealogies were produced to support it.

Be that as it may, by the time a semblance of peace had settled on the old empire the legitimacy of the Mud River Ob was accepted over a wide area. This acceptance was partly due to the innate ability of the Mud River tribe to see opportunities for profitable trading, and thus to bring a standard of living above subsistence level to the areas with which they came in contact. Their recovery of the rest of the old empire was not achieved without military engagements, but the armies that fought for them were almost wholly composed of mercenaries. The Obi of the period after the Qualabba, known as the Middle Obate, ruled what was essentially a commercial empire. Though Mud River drains the furthest corner of the Empire from the desert where White Rock towers, the destiny of the kite-riders was deeply influenced by this fact, though they themselves can never have known it.

After the collapse of the Qualabba, White Rock was left alone. The termite-gatherers and baboon-eaters, who had survived the crusade by retreating yet further into the dry lands, returned to their old territory but kept well clear of the flight-limits. The heir of the hereditary Watcher had been sent with them for safety and now returned to take up his family's undemanding duties. Not until the reign of the 23rd Ob, the Golden, fourth of the Middle Obate, did a Watcher (who, it will be remembered, was forbidden by Sublime Decree to leave his Pargalate) pay homage to his sovereign. The Ob spent ten minutes just within the border, judged the place devoid both of threat to the Empire and of taxable resources, confirmed the Watcher in office and left.

Four generations later rubies were discovered in the sacred

gorge of the termite-gatherers. In fact both aboriginal tribes had long known of the existence—probably since before the time of the World Elephant—and had used them for ritual purposes.* It is possible that the Watchers had also known, at least since the sojourn of one of that line with the termite-gatherers during the Qualabba. For some generations they may have tried to protect their primitive subjects from the iron laws of commerce that now governed the Empire, but in the end those laws proved too strong. There were huge profits to be made, and the ethos of the times declared that to refuse to make them was not merely foolish and indolent, but actively sinful. One cannot but sympathize with the Watchers, looking across the frontiers of their Pargalate at the stupendous wealth of families who were not socially their superiors, but who were able to run their fiefs as prosperous trading concerns.

By this period Obangan economic theory had assimilated the lesson of the disastrous ivory inflation of the 27th Obate. There could be no question of allowing a Ruby Rush. By Sublime Decree the White Rock Pargalate was declared an aboriginal preserve with strictly controlled access. The borders were strongly policed and the activities of illicit ruby dealers suppressed with the very considerable degree of severity that had been a feature of the Obangan legal system since its inception. As cover for mining activities the University of White Rock was founded, its ostensible function being the study of the three desert tribes. It is a sad irony that by the

*It now seems probable that both tribes were branches of a single culture. The rubies were used to send as peace-tokens between groups of both tribes, the messenger being a young girl who was then retained as a bride. This system, combined with the strict division of males into baboon-eaters and termite-gatherers, allowed a small and scattered population to minimize the dangers of interbreeding.

time the soon immensely wealthy university began to take that part of its duties seriously, the termite-gatherers and baboon-eaters, deprived of their source of rubies in the sacred gorge and thus of their system of bride-exchange, were no longer there to be studied. But the total isolation of the White Rock Tribe was now reinforced by a further ring of defenses, and no serious attempt to intrude was made during the next two centuries.

There was one episode, however, which though hardly serious in itself, turned out to have enormous consequences. It has been mentioned as a peculiarity of the hereditary Watchers that their family tended to produce children of outstanding physical beauty. Since the discovery of the ruby seam, and the consequently more frequent visits of reigning Obi to that remote Pargalate, daughters of the house had been numbered among the royal wives with great regularity. The visit of the 33rd Ob, The Earthbound, for his installation as Chancellor of the University was not expected to produce any such result, as the monarch was known to cross with reluctance the threshold of the Queens' Palace. But his eye lit on the eldest son of the then Watcher and his passion was at once inflamed. "We came for rubies," he is said to have announced, "but we will take hence a jewel beyond jewels." Concealing his dismay the Watcher pointed out that by sublime Decree his son was forbidden to cross the border of the Pargalate, under pain of dismemberment. (It was for this reason, no doubt, that he had risked his monarch setting eyes on the boy in the first place.) The Ob responded by countermanding the Decree. His accompanying Algai tried to argue that this was an unconstitutional maneuver, undermining for the whim of a moment the Sublimity of all other decrees. So shocked were they that they appear to have gone beyond the limits of prudence, and the Ob is said to have led the boy to

his couch that night up a staircase composed of headless bodies.*

The boy left the Pargalate next morning, the first male of his line to cross the border for over twenty generations. He seems to have been a lively and athletic lad and to have appreciated the opportunities presented by his royal lover's restless journeyings round his dominions. He was physically hardy, a daring horseman and sportsman, always eager for adventure.

Next spring the royal cortege was passing through the magnificent mountain of North Parue and the boy saw the great pink buzzards soaring among their native cliffs. Their mode of flight reminded him of the kite-riders of White Rock, and he perceived that here were updrafts in which he might himself learn to fly. It will be remembered that the University of White Rock had been set up ostensibly to study the tribes of the desert, but by the time it started on the task only the White Rock tribe was left to study, and that at a distance precluding normal anthropological methods. The work was thus channeled into what could be done, and this included theoretical study of modes of flight. The absence of a similar outcrop in the desert and the travel restrictions imposed by the need to control ruby-smuggling had precluded practical experiments. The boy, it will also be remembered, was the child of generations of Watchers of the Rock. He could not casually have noticed the flight of the kite-riders. He would have studied it keenly and, that being his nature, yearned to emulate it.

The Ob refused his favorite nothing. The Professor of Aerodynamics was summoned from the University and or-

*This anecdote must be treated with caution. It first occurs in pamphlets published by the Kastuan Independence Movement, as a typical example of the tyranny of the Obate.

dered to convert theory to practice, which he soon did, at the cost of no more than a dozen lives. The Ob kept his lover chained to his person during these early experiments, but once the major problems were solved the boy was permitted to make the attempt himself. Soon he was reveling in the freedom of air, and the sport became popular in court circles. Refinements were quickly made in apparatus and technique and a considerable degree of skill was attained.

From the first, no doubt, the boy had the idea of making contact with the White Rock people, but for some years the lack of a takeoff point—the Rock itself not being available—made this impossible. The difficulty was overcome by Otokoko's invention of the high-pressure steam winch.* Six years after their first meeting the Ob and his favorite returned to White Rock Pargalate. The royal cortege, always immense, now included a corps of laborers and the materials to construct a track, plus trolleys and a winch.

Presumably the young man had minimized the danger of the enterprise. Perhaps after long adulation he had come to believe that there was no peril from which his lover's power could not protect him. Or perhaps, weary of endless protection, he deliberately sought a danger beyond the reach of that power. One must remember that by the heredity of centuries he was, as it were, programmed to watch the Rock for the

*The history of the early industrial revolution lies largely outside the scope of this paper, but there is no doubt that the rapid development of the big beam-engines of the mining magnates into much lighter high-pressure engines capable of hauling railway wagons and so of transforming communication within the Empire stems from Otokoko's invention. Hitherto he had only designed and built elaborate stage machinery for court spectacles, but seized the opportunity to ingratiate himself by enabling the royal favorite to ride his kite in areas devoid of natural takeoff points.

day when one of his family could make contact with the kite-riders.*

Be that as it may, the Ob seems to have watched without apprehension as the winch chugged and gathered power, the gears were engaged and the trolley rattled at increasing speed along the track until the gold and purple kite soared upward, the young man clinging to the cable and not releasing it until he was high enough to glide all the way to the rock and catch the updraft from its surface. The kite-riders let him spiral halfway to the summit before, swooping out of huts and caves and down from the tower of air, they closed round him like starlings round an owl. He carried pistols and daggers. Several dark kites tumbled to earth before the mob broke up. Tatters of gold and purple cloth floated in the wind as some of the kite-riders swooped out toward the Watchers and dropped their bloody burdens on the sand.

Professor Duninga told the present writer that he had long ago abandoned the effort to explain to his Kastuan hosts the genuine power held by ancient authority over even the most educated Obangan intellect, and the ritualistic thought structures that have persisted through the revolution and still pervade the People's Obate, both rulers and ruled. The effects, both short-term and long, of the death of the royal favorite provide examples of this. What seems to have impressed contemporaries even more than the grief of the mon-

*It must not be thought that no other attempts had been made. Time and again the Watchers, and later the scholars of the University, had tried the obvious approaches, such as bringing lures of food or trinkets by night to the foot of the cliff. These were invariably smashed with dropped stones. Professor Duninga speculated that the kite-riders had a tabu against human contact with the plain or anything emanating from it. This would account for the ferocity of their reactions when creatures of the plain attempted to approach them, especially by flying up. Their treatment of the 12th Ob remains unexplained.

arch, emphatically though this was manifested, was the dramatic vindication of the original Sublime Decree of the World Elephant, issued nearly seven hundred years earlier. The heir of that first Watcher had left the Pargalate, and as a direct result had been torn limb from limb.

The Ob himself felt this. It was his own countermanding of the Decree that had caused his lover's death. The blood was on his head. Always a man of extreme gestures he retired into a period of mourning which lasted until his death twenty years later, but before doing so issued a Sublime Decree forbidding all forms of flying and all theoretical studies of manned flight. Such prohibitions were not unusual, witness the well-known decree against the eating of parrots' eggs—also issued on the death of a royal favorite though this time from indigestion—which provided the spark setting off the Kastu revolt of A.O.812, the severity of whose repression was responsible for the Kastu War of Independence and thus for the political map of the world as we see it today.

There were from the first both economic and geographic reasons reinforcing the Decree, chiefly those involving the dynamic expansion of the rail system, but it would be a mistake to ignore psychological factors. To this day senior members of the People's Algabio do not like it to be publicly known that they have engaged in air travel, and the hysterical reaction of the Obangan press to any increase in the Kastuan Air Force bears witness to the strength of this ancient phobia, and to the massive continuity of Obangan thought processes.*

*A characteristic of political discussion in the People's Obate is that it is entirely carried out in historical terms. The more contentious the issue, the further back in time is the historical parallel chosen for discussion. Indeed the affairs of White Rock, never mentioned as a contemporary phenomenon, surfaced recently in the official media with a detailed if tendentious account of the death of the 12th Ob, not out of any interest in the tragedy itself, but as a warning against a faction in the People's Algabio which was arguing for the making of peaceful overtures toward Kastu.

Perhaps but for the thirty-six year leadership of Chairman Abafang this phobia might have been overcome. The child of Paruan farmers, his peasantlike suspicion of strangers deepened into paranoia over the decades, his rule becoming a ferocious autocracy paralleled only in the reigns of the most blood-thirsty of the ancient Obi. In the light of the effectiveness of Kastuan air power during the Continental War, another leader might have decided to sanction the development of an Obangan Air Force. Instead, resources were poured into the field of rocketry, firstly as a defense against aerial attack but later, with that uncontrollable expansiveness which seems to be inherent in military establishments, into all possible fields of warfare. With chairman Abafang's backing the research establishment at Ulu was able to survive the ludicrous series of failures and disasters of their early years. These also had the effect of lulling the Kastuan military into a false security, resulting in a sudden reversal in the balance of striking power between the continents from which Kastu is still striving to recover. The "accidental" arrival of a transoceanic missile at the 1113 Diggipuk Air Show signaled the change. It is the imbalance that is so dangerous. If both sides possessed matched and equal strength, the prospect of a Second Continental War would be no more than a nightmare, instead of an imminent event. This is the most serious consequence of the apparently trivial tale of the death of one young man in a remote province nearly four centuries ago.

We have run ahead of ourselves, because other consequences flowed from the event. The one which chiefly concerns us is the deliberate isolation of the White Rock Pargalate by the downgrading of the University to a merely ritual statue, without pupils or faculty. All revenue from the ruby mine was sequestered and remained so until the seam was exhausted some eighty years later. The Pargalate reverted to being the most backward province of the Empire, of no interest at all to central government.

So it remained through the upheavals of the Kastu War of Independence, the social transformation, of the later industrial revolution, and the Continental War. Even the terrible eruption of the Civil War and the triumph of the People's Obate at first barely touched it, beyond Professor Duninga's decision during his brief period of power to set up the White Rock Observation Project, and his retirement there as Director after his fall. Later the remnants of the royal armies took refuge in the desert and with erratic support from Kastu began the long and futile campaign of resistance whose only result has been to deepen the suspicions of the leadership of the People's Obate of all Kastuan overtures, and at the same time, if subliminally and through the medium of innumerable "Resistance" films, to inculcate in the ordinary Kastuan a belief that any fight between the Obate and pro-Kastuan forces is going to end, against all the odds, with the good guys winning. (In none of these films incidentally, does a natural feature remotely resembling White Rock occur, though much trouble is taken to film them in locations resembling the northeastern desert.)

Nine years ago the White Rock people ceased to exist, except as a problem for historians and anthropologists. The minds of the People's Algabio, though less twisted than that of Chairman Abafang in his later years, remain opaque to Kastuan observers. It was natural for them to choose the almost uninhabited desert as the site for the first atomic explosion tests, natural too to adapt Professor Duninga's Observation Project and the buildings of the ancient university as the research base for the project, but it is impossible to tell whether it was by accident or design that the first devices were detonated immediately upwind of the great limestone pillar. No attempt was made to reduce fallout; indeed Professor Duninga told the present writer that he had reason to believe that the devices were deliberately made as "dirty"

as possible, with the object of studying the effect on a human population.

At a point in history when it seems inevitable that both Kastu and Obanah will shortly succumb to the "cleansing" so earnestly desired by the fanatics of the Qualabba, it may appear perverse to regret the vanishing of one small tribe, with nothing known about its language, customs, beliefs, or economic and social structure. We have lost a remarkable opportunity to study a community unchanged since our remote ancestors learned to make their first weapons by chipping one flint with another. It is possible that the files of the People's Algalbio contain a few lifeless details—some study does seem to have been carried out. In his last conversation with the present writer Professor Duninga said that his cousin (who would, but for the upheavals of the present century, have become hereditary Watcher of the Rock) was among those sent, apparently with protective clothing, into the deserted huts and caves. The Professor's cousin was not a physicist or biologist but an ethnologist. Naturally, communications between Obanah and Kastu being what they are, no detailed report has been made available this side of the ocean, but occasional brief messages still sometimes reach the network of Obangans in exile. The agent who tricked the Professor into keeping this fatal appointment carried such a message as his credentials. It purported to come from the Professor's cousin, who had been interned immediately after the completion of the report on fallout effects at White Rock, but had later been released when he himself developed radiation-induced leukemia. As he lay dying he asked a friend to carry a message to the Professor. In his conversation with the present writer, just referred to, the Professor appeared highly excited by the news.* He had no doubt about its authenticity,

*It may be worth mentioning that the present writer first came to know Professor Duninga while gathering material for his own book.

despite two previous attempts on his life by agents of the People's Obate, and was expecting to learn more later that evening. In view of what we now know of the untrustworthiness of the messenger, his trust in the message may seem misplaced, though its very peculiarity to some extent authenticates it. It was, in the Professor's words, as follows: "Their main crop was beans, and there was a nose-flute in every dwelling."

The Last Lost Chance, which argues that it was Professor Duninga's over-attention to peripheral matters, such as the affairs of White Rock, which led to the overthrow of his Liberal Alliance and thus to the eventual triumph of the People's Obate. The Professor, while disputing the thesis with characteristic courtesy, admitted a life-long if minor obsession. "My mother's brother was the last Watcher," he said. "I spent many school holidays at White Rock. My eyes have seen what the World Elephant also saw, the kite-riders circling in their citadel of air."

THE CASTLE AT WORLD'S END

by Chris Naylor

Some writers of the fantastic have been so outstanding that their names have become descriptive adjectives for certain kinds of writing, e.g. Dunsanian and Lovecraftian. As a matter of fact, Lovecraft, early in his career, wrote Dunsanian fantasies. The following tale will certainly remind aficionados of Dunsany.

At the edge of the world, they say, there is neither endless sea nor bottomless cliff, nor yet an infinity of wasteland under a limbo twilight, such as some have described, but only a green hill, smooth as glass, that rises a little above the lands of men as if to shield from their eyes the beyond which it is not their business to know, and then slopes steeply down, farther than the eye can see, to a dubious and unknown end, or to no end at all. And on the summit of this hill stands a castle, which is called the Castle at World's End.

Now to this castle, with its four slender, many-windowed towers and its little cobbled courtyard, there came riding one evening a knight on horseback, in full armor, bearing a lance

and shield, and wearing the arms of the Duchy of Sarseny. He was graciously received, though he seemed a surly man, who spoke little and scowled much; and after he had eaten, and sat supping wine in the guest hall and staring moodily into the fire, the Lord of that castle came down from his chamber and took a seat on the opposite side of the hearth, and looked searchingly at his visitor for a while, and then began to engage him in conversation: Asking him what sort of man he was, and what was his adventure, riding out of peaceful lands with sword and shield, on a road that led nowhere. And at this the knight stirred as if troubled by an old wound, and seemed to throw off his taciturnity as a man throws off a heavy cloak; and he launched into a long reply, which ran thus:

“Sir (he said), you hit exactly upon the source of my restlessness, and the reason of my coming here, when you remark that I ride in warlike fashion ‘out of peaceful lands.’ I am, as you may easily see, a man of Sarseny; and when I was a boy, from my earliest years until my coming of age at sixteen, never a month passed but our Duchy had some skirmish with one of her neighbors: Whether it was Irlaunt to the south, or the Burg of Muncanton to the north, or the Guild Towns in their prosperous valleys to the east; while to the west, as you may know (for you have the look of a man of learning, as it seems to me), for a long time the Horse-Thief Tribes kept unruly independence, until we quelled them finally in the battle of Weasenburg, at which I was one of the youngest of the free knights. At that time, you see, Sarseny was a nation of warriors; and I was trained in all the noble arts of war, and thought of nothing else but to be a leader of men on the battlefield when I attained my maturity.

“Well, it was not to be. After the Horse-Thieves were defeated, it seemed that no-one wished to cross swords with Sarseny; And treaties were concluded with the Guild, and with the Three Princes Regnant of Irlaunt, and with Muncanton,

so that there was nothing for a fighting man to do but go home and hang up his shield, and take to trade or some other foolery. But I had no mind for that, though others urged me to it. So I left my estate in the hands of my servants, and put on armor, took my best horse, and set out to find battle in the world beyond the borders of Sarseny."

Here the knight fell silent awhile; and his host, noting the dark look in his eyes, thought to speak a cheering word, but refrained out of courtesy; and after a moment the knight lifted his head and resumed the story.

"I wandered (he continued) all the lands of the world; I journeyed to snowbound Zemoye in the far north, and spoke with the Fur-wearers with their wizened yellow faces and slanting eyes; I roamed as far as Efra in the south, where the sun is named God's Cauldron, and the people run naked with skins scalded the color of charcoal. I saw old women haggling in market-places, children tumbling about the streets in mock-fights, men brawling in taverns; but nowhere did I find one nation, one city, one town, at war with another: And where there was no war, there was no employment for such as I.

"Then, one day, as I sat in a tavern in a small village a thousand miles from my homeland, I heard an old man speak of the Lands Beyond World's End. I questioned him eagerly concerning these lands, but he would only say that he had heard tell of them from his grandfather, who was long dead, and knew naught of them save a few idle tales, such as might issue from the fanciful brain of any yarn-spinning poet in his cups; in short, the old man himself dismissed the tale of such lands as pure imagining. And since none else in that place could say they had heard even the name of these lands, I put the matter out of my mind, for 'twas only a fretfulness of an idle brain that had roused my interest in them in the first place.

"But then it happened that, several weeks later, in another

tavern some hundreds of miles from the first, I heard another speak of the Lands Beyond World's End. And then the thought came to me that perhaps in those lands there might be wars, and employment for a man of battle; so again I questioned the teller, and was no better rewarded. All dismissed the places as being some Green-Ginger-land, a fable or fiction merely.

"But one said to me, after my spirits had sunk lower than the sun at midnight, that there was indeed a place men spoke of as World's End, and that he had heard of a castle that stood there, where a Lord dwelt that had the reputation of being a wise man. So I determined to seek out the castle, and ask if there was any truth in the rumor of Lands Beyond World's End. And there, good sir, you have my tale; and I thank you for your hospitality, and for your patience in listening to the rambling words of an ill sort of raconteur, and I ask you as a boon to tell me aught you can concerning these lands of which I have heard on my travels."

His host smiled, and stroked his white beard a little perplexedly. "Certes, my friend," quoth he, "this is the Castle at World's End, and I am his keeper; but I know ill how I can help you in this matter, for I also have heard nothing of the Lands Beyond World's End save the name only. Often I have stood upon the grass of the hill on which this castle stands and gazed down its unfathomed slope, and conjectured what might lie at the bottom of it, where all is blue haze and a wavering of the air; but I have never adventured to find out, nor do I know of any that have done so. However, there is in the highest tower of this castle a great library of rare books, wherein much is writ concerning the lands of this world, both of countries that presently thrive and of those that have sunk under sea or are now desert and waste; and mayhap in those volumes there is some word of the lands Beyond World's End."

At this the knight frowned, and said, "How then—do you not know what is in your own library?"

The old man smiled gently. "Friend, it would take more lifetimes than I have years to read every book that is in that library, for it occupies twenty rooms, each as great in extent as this hall, and in each room the shelves close-packed with tomes rise from floor to ceiling on every wall. And this is but a fragment, a tiny residue, of the vast library of Araxos, that city whose ruins now lie deserted on the quiet shore of the Aethian Sea. The rest of that library is lost—destroyed, some say, in the fire that ravaged Araxos and brought her splendor to an end."

As this speech progressed the knight began to be irritable, biting his nails and seeming impatient to speak. At length he burst out, "This talk of books only fills me with an angry desire to cast off thought and speech for action. I was never a bookish man, and the notion of twenty rooms filled with the paper ghosts of dead men oppresses me with horror. I fear books; for I have heard it said, and I think it true, that a man who spends long enough in their company grows at last unmindful of the world outside their covers, and lives finally in a twilight world of fantastic things and places as insubstantial as dreams."

"That may be," returned his host, "even so you are welcome to seek in my books the truth concerning those lands you asked me of."

"I thank you," the knight replied swiftly, "but I would rather trust my own eyes and ears, and venture myself and my horse down yonder slope, to find a speedier and surer answer to my questions."

"If the hill has an end," said the other.

"Failing that I can always turn back," answered the knight.

The old Lord pursed his lips, but said nothing; and seeing the conversation was at an end, the knight rose from his chair

and, thanking his host, bade him goodnight, and retired to the chamber which had been prepared for him.

So it befell that early next morning the knight, provisioned for several days' riding from his host's pantries, mounted his horse and rode out of the castle courtyard and down the smooth green slope of the last of the hills. And from a high window in the castle library the old white-haired Lord watched him, until the time came when the glint of his armor was only one of a million golden motes dancing in the warm air; and then he turned from the window, and taking up from a table a heavy tome writ in faded uncials and bound in a chimaera's hide, he began to read.

So our traveler left the Castle at World's End; and throughout the first day the riding was easy, and the weather fair, and the blue haze toward which he descended shimmered luxuriously; and the knight's surly mood soon lifted, and he sat lightly in the saddle, and after a while began to sing.

Thus he rode all day, and the blueness before and below him and the greenness of the slope, and withal the smooth angle of the descent, changed not a whit. And when the sun set he dismounted and let his horse graze freely, while he himself pitched his small pavilion; and while he was doing this night fell suddenly and the stars came out. There was no moon; but looking up to the zenith, the knight saw one yellow star that seemed brighter and larger than the rest, which seemed like to be a lamp burning in some high window of the Castle at World's End, by which an old man read among ancient books.

Thus the knight rode for four days; and during all that time the hill, and the blue haze at its bottom, changed not at all; and at night a yellow star glimmered still near the zenith, but ever more faint and distant.

On the fifth day he rode until noon, and his spirits sank lower by the hour; and in the afternoon he rode not at all, but

sat disconsolate on the green turf and let his horse graze while he debated with himself whether to turn back; yet by the time night fell he had not decided, and in the darkness he sat and brooded still, while the stars came out and gathered round to watch him with remote, incurious eyes.

So sunk in his own thoughts was he that for some time he did not notice a strange phenomenon; and when, looking about him distractedly, his gaze chanced at length to fall in the right quarter, he could at first make nothing of what he saw. It seemed that he saw stars where on previous nights there had been none; and all gathered in one place, strangely low in the sky, in a bright cluster at the conjectured foot of the long steep hill. Warm and yellow were these stars, and grouped seemingly at less than random, for many formed small constellations here and there of a roughly cross-shaped or otherwise linear form.

The knight puzzled over these stars awhile; and then it came to him suddenly that they were not stars at all, but the lights of many lamps shining in house-windows, and that the dark surface over which they lay scattered was not the night sky, but a great plain that opened out some hundreds of feet below him. And as for the cross-shapes and linear forms, what were they but the lines of village streets, along which the houses lay?

At this realization the knight's hope leapt up anew like the waters of a fountain, and he would have mounted up there and then and ridden off down the slope; but the consideration that his horse might stumble in the dark withheld him: And so he turned in, but in truth did not sleep well, his mind being alive with anticipation and excitement.

Dawn found him already in the saddle and proceeding at a gentle pace down the green slope, whose higher reaches now stretched up behind him beyond sight, a veritable mountain. Below, the plain he had guessed at in the darkness was veiled from sight by the shimmering of the air; but as he rode on he

seemed to see here and there among the blue, tricks and flashes of green and brown, that grew steadily more solid and definite. And by late afternoon the thing could no longer be doubted, for there it lay, spread out before him like a many-hued carpet, all dotted with farms and villages and towns: The plain of the Lands Beyond World's End.

With joyful haste now did the knight spur his steed on, and soon he was riding not upon the smooth turf of the long slope but across wild, heathery country, and before him rose the low curving shapes of downland and pastured hills. And shortly he was passing among grazing flocks of sheep, and rustic figures seated upon the ground with crooks resting across their knees watched him ride by; and in the end he came to a village. Whereupon, dismounting, he went to the door of a cottage and knocked, and was answered by the goodwife, who offered him food and a bed for the night. And so another day ended, but this time the knight fell asleep contentedly; and when morning came he was about early, whistling softly to himself and assiduously polishing his armor.

He was well fed there, and started on the road before the sun was halfway to noon; but in answer to his eager questions the goodwife and her husband could only say that they knew of no wars or battles in the neighborhood, though indeed there might be such things farther afield among more barbarous folk.

This answer did not much please the knight, but he was not yet over his delight at discovering these new and marvelous lands, and so was not greatly disillusioned.

As the day went by, however, and villages came into view before him and dropped away behind, and the sun first rose and then began to decline, the knight grew a little tired of the shaking heads in answer to his questioning: And it came to his mind that seldom had he seen so peaceful and contented a land, occupied by a people seeming without fear of upset or invasion, or indeed of anything worse than a spot of ill

weather. And so the knight grew sorely discontented, and three days went by in this fashion, and each morning he polished his armor with a little less zeal.

Then, coming to a town on a busy crossroads between two rivers, he saw two barns that looked to have been burned, and a farmhouse that stood empty and broken-down: And an old man leaning over a wall told him that two armies had come one day and fought a violent and bloody battle in a field nearby, and then the victors had ridden off, taking captives in chains and leaving the dead behind. When the knight asked eagerly how long ago this had occurred the old man at first scratched his head, and squinted up at the sky, and for a few moments looked puzzled; and finally said that he thought he had been about five years old at the time.

Now the knight rode on in anger, and when evening came he did not stop, but traveled through the night. But the following day he was weary, and, stopping at an inn, he drank sullenly in a corner until the landlord approached him and courteously asked his business.

The knight gave him a black look. "I ride in search of adventure," he said, in the manner of one who recites an old and tedious rhyme. "Can you tell me of anywhere that my sword and I might find employment?"

The landlord pursed his lips and looked doubtful; but then he said, "Yonder, on the hillside above this village, is a house where for many years a noble family of warriors lived; and mayhap there they might answer your question, though to speak sooth I know of no war that has been fought these thirty years, unless it be in foreign lands where folk are savage and cruel."

The knight thanked his host with barely adequate courtesy, and left the inn for the house in question. But as he rode toward it, an odd feeling stole over him, as though the sight of that building in some way disturbed him: And he shivered unaccountably, and drew his cloak tighter around him. Yet he

came to the door without incident, and upon knocking was admitted, and led to a great hall where he was bidden to sit and eat; but all the time that he sat there, he looked about him as if in a daze, and the strange feeling persisted, though he could not tell why, or what the feeling was.

Then, as he was concluding his repast, the butler of the house came in, bringing him wine; and as he was about to pour it their eyes met, and the butler started, so that the wine was spilt. When the knight, wiping himself with a napkin, asked irritably for an explanation, the butler said querulously, "My lord, I hope you will forgive both my clumsiness and my presumption; but it seems to me that you have a look very like the master of this house, as I remember him, though he was a young man, not in his later years as you are, my lord."

At this the knight was seized with a sudden dread; and he asked fiercely what had become of the master of the house.

"My lord," said the butler, "he rode away more than thirty years ago, to seek war and battle in foreign parts, and none of us has ever seen or heard of him since."

The knight trembled, and a deadly pallor came to his face. "For pity's sake," he cried harshly, "what country is this?" The butler looked startled, but answered readily enough, "Why, my lord, it is the land of Sarseny."

Then the dread that was upon the knight became black as doom, and he sprang from his chair with a cry and rushed out of the hall and out of the house; and finding his horse, he mounted with a leap, and rode off down the road full-pelt like a madman.

And now years fled by, during which the knight roamed haphazardly through many lands; and in far-flung places the tale took root of a strange man, his face lined with age and a hidden anguish, who wore tarnished armor with an old device upon it and sat muttering to himself in tavern corners concerning an old-fashioned thing called war; but the knight him-

self took little note of his surroundings, for one place seemed to him now much like another, and the people he moved among wore the same uncomprehending smile; and always a nameless demon inside him forced him to travel on. Then one day he came to a place where there were no more towns and villages, and ahead of him he saw a hill reared up against the sky, upon whose summit stood a four-towered castle. It was dusk; and in a high window of the castle, a yellow light gleamed like a star.

Then he rode apace to the castle, and was graciously received; and when he had eaten, the Lord came down from the library and sat beside the fire, and questioned him concerning his adventures, asking whether he had indeed found the Lands Beyond World's End. And the knight stirred, and with hesitant speech began to tell his tale, and the Lord listened in silence. When the tale was done, the knight sat for a while gazing into the fire; then, slowly, he unbuckled his scabbard and laid it across his knees.

"I shall not be needing this any more," he said. "You had best hang it up somewhere in the castle. It was a famous sword once, and did many great deeds in battle." Then, putting his hand to the hilt, he drew the sword out of the scabbard: And lo! the sword had crumbled away, and only a thin rime of rust clung to the crosspiece where the blade had been. With a sigh the knight let fall his hand, so that the hilt rested in his lap; and his head drooped sideways, and his eyes closed, and he slept.

And the Lord, rising softly to his feet, looked down at the old, wrinkled face and the white hair about it, and the thin hand that held the ruin of a sword; and he smiled a gentle smile. And going softly out of the hall, he went up the stairs to the library, where, closing the door, he took up from the table a heavy book bound in a chimaera's hide, and began once more to read.

THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

by Gael Baudino

Children often have a variety of creatures for companions, creatures that are quite obviously imaginary. Suppose, however, that they aren't imaginary at all. It's just that adults have completely forgotten their existence along with so many other lost memories.

Barbara knew before she opened the kitchen drawer that the plane tickets would not be there. The moment her hand touched the pull, she felt the sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach that had nothing to do with her pregnancy. Nonetheless, phone against one ear and *Sesame Street* dining in the other, she rummaged among the balls of string, out-of-date catalogs, paper clips, thumb tacks, and miscellaneous odds and ends.

"Honey," she said into the phone, "I can't find them."

"Barb, I gave them to you the other day after I got home from work. I asked you to put them away."

"I did," she said, still rummaging. "I put them in the drawer."

She knew what he was thinking. Forgetting again. Always forgetting everything. If it was not plane tickets, it was phone bills, purses, groceries, or, perish the thought, Stacie.

In the other room, Stacie shrieked at something her imaginary playmate did. No, she thought, never Stacie at least.

"I've got to be on the Houston plane this afternoon, Barb. I can't miss it. We're discussing the Shuttle crash."

"Frank," she said, "I'm sorry. I put them in the drawer. You watched me put them there." She was trying not to be plaintive, but it was not working. She sounded like a whiney housewife even to her own ears, and she did not like it.

"Yeah, I watched. And when I wasn't watching you probably put them somewhere else that you thought was safer. Now, where?"

The sinking feeling persisted. "I don't remember."

The silence on the other end of the line lengthened. She could visualize him at his desk, shirt sleeves rolled up and, she fancied, pencil behind his ear. He would be half buried in computer printout, and his glasses would be off his face and in one hand. He would be waving them about in exasperation.

"Can you get the company to get you another ticket, honey?" she said in a small voice.

"I hope so. Just . . . forget it. I'll get down to Houston somehow." He forced a laugh. "I suppose I should have thought about them before I left for work. It'll make the day exciting."

"You'll be back—"

"Tomorrow evening. Call you tonight."

"Dylbok!" Stacie shrieked. "Put that down!"

"Six," declaimed the television. "*Six huge wagon wheels!*"

"I . . . I love you, Frank."

"Love you too . . . my dear forgetful wife." He said the words without anger and even with a bit of a laugh, but she

hung up with her eyes slightly moist. Was she stupid? She did not think so. She had graduated high school near the top of her class, and surely settling down and having a family did not automatically condemn one to idiocy, regardless of what the libbers said.

She ran a hand back through her blond hair and then let it come to rest on her belly. Maybe she was getting complacent, fat and happy with one kid and another on the way. It was her sixth month, far enough along to be comfortable with the pregnancy but not so far that she felt like a blimp. It could have been an idyllic existence . . . if she did not forget everything.

Staring at the phone, she mumbled: "I'll have to write myself a note to remind myself to remember to appreciate all of this some day. Unless I forget to write the note."

Stacie came in. "Mommy . . . where is my Strawberry Shortcake doll?"

"Uh . . ."

"Dylbok says you put it away for me."

"Yeah, I did. I guess I forgot where I put it."

Three year olds were not as understanding about such things as husbands.

She did not forget to fix something special for dinner the following night, nor did Frank forget to comment on her thoughtfulness. He sat at the table, his empty plate and his glasses both pushed back and Stacie crawling all over him. "So, as far as the techs could tell," he said, "the *Columbia* crashed because someone forgot to take a ten-cent metal retaining clamp off a wire."

Barbara rose and began clearing the table. "It's hard to believe that anything costs only ten cents these days."

"Well, it probably *was* a little more than ten cents, but you get the idea. Thank God no one was hurt."

She turned on the water and scraped the plates before

loading the dishwasher. "Honey, I thought they had checklists for things like that."

"Put it down, Stacie, it's full." Frank pried a glass out of his daughter's tiny hand. "Checklists," he answered, "are only going to work if people remember to use them. Someone forgot. That's all. Just forgot."

Barbara stopped scraping. "Forgot?"

"Yeah. Of all the stupid things to do. Billions of dollars turned into bent beer cans because some idiot—" He looked up and saw that she was crying. "Honey . . . Barb . . ." He set Stacie down. "Why don't you play with Dylbok, Stacie?"

Tears were streaking down her face by the time he was at her side, and he put his arms around her. "Honey, I'm sorry. Space Shuttles are one thing . . . tickets are another. You've got your hands full here, and I shouldn't expect—"

"Why the hell not?" she sobbed. "You should expect your wife to act like an intelligent adult instead of a stupid brood sow that can't remember her own name." She choked. She could not even wipe her eyes: her hands were greasy, and she felt ridiculous and helpless as Frank tore off a paper towel and dried her face, then cleaned up her streaked mascara.

"My wife," he said seriously, "is not a brood sow. She's doing the most important work in the world. It's called making people. It takes time . . . and effort. And . . . and I'm sorry about my words."

"Yeah." She rinsed her hands and dried them. "I'll be okay. I just feel like an idiot. I've never had a good memory, and it's been getting worse these days. I feel like I'm wandering around in a fog all the time."

Frank was concerned. "Are you eating okay? Have you seen the midwife?"

"I'm fine. Laura agreed. My mind's just going, that's all."

"If your memory were better, would you feel better?"

"A lot. And you wouldn't miss your planes, either."

"Come on. I want to show you something."

He took her up into the bedroom where he had left his briefcase. "This is really interesting. Turns out that about a year ago, Houston hired the Rand Corporation to do a study regarding disasters of various kinds. We got the report two days before the *Columbia* crashed. Turns out that a sizable percentage of problems are caused by memory lapses. And the people that have lapsed report the same thing that you do: a foggy feeling."

She sat down on the bed and worked her fingers in the folds of her apron. This was supposed to make her feel better?

He noticed her look. "Hear me out. Rand didn't stop at finding the problem: they found a partial cure. Look." He sat down beside her and opened a folder of typewritten pages. "You've heard of learning disabilities? The people who deal with that kind of thing have found that certain parts of the brain can affect certain other parts in really bizarre ways. For instance, doing particular physical exercises can overcome reading problems. It's true."

The loose papers were threatening to spill all over the floor, but she managed to hold onto them. "Frank, I can read fine."

"Ah! But this applies to more than reading. This isn't classified, so I don't see any reason you can't benefit from it. We're going to teach everyone in the Space Program to have really super fantastic memories. Presto! No more disasters!"

The program that Rand had developed was a very simple one, a series of exercises involving printed symbols and arm movements that one did before bed each night. Frank showed her an eight by ten card with a red square, a green rectangle, and a white line on a black background. The arrangement was quite asymmetrical, and made Barbara dizzy when she stared at it. "You're sure this will help?"

"It's worth a try, isn't it?"

She pondered, and in the silence she heard dripping. Letting the pages fall to the floor, she raced downstairs to the kitchen where she had forgotten to turn off the water in the sink.

For the first three weeks of the exercises, she noticed nothing. She slept more soundly, that was all, and she awoke refreshed and alert, but since she lost two lipsticks and her checkbook during the third week, she could not see that the Rand Corporation was helping her much.

She told Frank as much that weekend while she was fixing dinner and he was repairing the toaster.

"Give it time," he said. "We're getting about the same results from the test group down in Houston."

"What about you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm not doing them. I don't have any trouble with my memory." He poked into the toaster with a screwdriver. "There it is. Spade lug broke. Have to call the store and see if they have this size." He went to the telephone and began leafing through the yellow pages.

"It's 344-5707," said Barbara without looking up from the cutting board.

"Huh? Did you just look?"

"Nah. You looked it up for the door hinges, remember?"

He dialed the number and found that the part was in stock. When he hung up, he was grinning. "I think it's working, Barb. The door hinges were two weeks ago."

She paused with the knife half through a tomato. "I . . . I guess so. I just . . . remembered it."

"It's totally natural, see? In a little while you'll be remembering all sorts of things."

Stacie ran in, laughing. Frank swung her up into his arms. "My little girl want to go to the hardware store with me?"

"Can Dylbok come too?"

"Dylbok? Oh! Sure he can come." He laughed and hugged her.

Barbara started in on the lettuce. "She takes him pretty seriously," she said.

"I think we all have invisible playmates at her age," said Frank. "I think we forget to believe in them as we get older. It's kind of sad."

He pulled on his coat and left with Stacie. They would be back in plenty of time for dinner. Barbara turned off the television and enjoyed the silence left behind.

As she was walking back to the kitchen, though, she noticed something on the carpet. Bending over, she plucked at it, came up with a handful of what looked like feathers. They were attractive, fairly large, and shot with gold. Bright, metallic gold.

"Odd," she murmured. "What's she been playing with?"

The back door slammed, and she poked her head into the kitchen. But there was no one there.

She was going to show the feathers to Frank when he came home, but she misplaced them. No, not exactly misplaced. She remembered precisely where she had put them, but they were no longer there. Not wanting to call attention to her fallibility, she did not mention them at all.

Then, Wednesday morning, everything changed.

She woke up that morning clear and alert, as though never before in her life had she been truly awake. She swung open the bedroom window and took a deep lungful of air. The scent of the flowers on the sill was intoxicating. The colors were wonderful.

Smiling softly, she got Frank off to work right on schedule, even remembering the precise location of his wallet—which he had forgotten—and reminding him that the gas tank needed filling. When she turned away from waving good-bye, she noticed the feathers on the counter, exactly where she remembered putting them.

She shook her head to clear it, but it was already clear. Wonderfully clear. Once again she picked up the feathers, and once again she noticed their beauty and the oddity of the gold threads that wove through them.

In the other room, above the sound of *Nickelodeon*, came Stacie's laughter and a noise not unlike a sock filled with custard hitting the carpeted floor. Barbara dropped the feathers and ran into the living room.

"Stacie?"

The child was sitting in front of the television, and the room did not seem to be disturbed in the slightest. "Hi, Mommy."

"What was that sound?"

"Dylbok."

"Come on, honey . . . what was it?"

Stacie looked offended in the manner that only three year olds can achieve. "That," she said, "was Dylbok."

"Okay." The room seemed undisturbed, but she gave it another look. Her eyes were on the sofa just in time to see something about the size of a large cat scurry behind it. She pounced as quickly as seven months would let her, but she found nothing behind the sofa, and it was too low to the ground for the animal to have hidden beneath it.

"Stacie, did you see something by the sofa?"

"Yes," she said. "That was Dylbok."

She sat down on the floor beside her daughter and put her arms about her. "Dylbok?"

"Dylbok."

"Are you sure the neighbor's cat didn't get in?"

Stacie looked even more offended. "That was Dylbok."

Barbara glanced around the room once more. Nothing. "Okay, honey. I'll be in the kitchen."

The feathers were still there and she took them over to the table to look at them while she had her coffee. They were lovely things, mixtures of gold and green and brown and

blue, and they glittered prismatically in the morning sun. They were like nothing she had ever seen before. She was about to take them to Stacie and ask if they belonged to Dylbok when the sock filled with custard struck again, immediately behind her.

She jumped and turned around. There on the floor in front of the dishwasher was a creature about the size of a large cat, but, like the feathers, it was nothing she had ever seen before, save in story books—or maybe in dreams. The body was unmistakably that of a miniature lion, and just as definitely the front feet, head, and wings rightly belonged on an eagle.

The creature was sprawled half on one side, and as she watched, he cleared his throat and picked himself up. "Good morning." He sounded embarrassed.

Barbara stared blankly for a moment. Her head was clear. Too clear. It would have been preferable had it been fuzzy. She could have put the creature down to hallucination. "Who . . . who are you?" she blurted.

"I am called Dylbok." He clacked his beak and arranged several feathers on a mussed wing. "I am a Gryphon."

There did not seem to be much room for disagreement.

Barbara stared. Dylbok cleared his throat again, a small noise like a file on sheet metal, and leaped into the air, coming to rest after a moment on the kitchen table in front of her. He landed precisely. "Better," he said, preening at a wing. "Stacie pulled out a number of my feathers the other day, and I have been somewhat clumsy since then. Of course she meant no harm."

His voice was matter of fact, and though it was raspy, it seemed kind enough. Barbara was uncertain whether she should be afraid or not. Golden eyes sparkled at her. "What . . . what are you doing here?" she asked.

"I live here."

"You certainly do not."

"Oh, but I certainly do. I am Stacie's imaginary playmate. Do you not *remember*?" The Gryphon waggled large bushy eyebrows at her on the last word.

"Remember? Remember what?"

He sat back and regarded her. "A great deal, now. You have seen me a thousand times in your house, but you forgot me even as you saw . . . because I willed it so. The Rand exercises you have been doing are blocking my best efforts. You remember me now. I cannot send you to oblivion as I used to do." There was a piece of toast left in the rack, and he eyed it. "May I?"

"Uh . . . sure. Do you want butter?"

"No, thank you. Butter disagrees with me." He picked up the toast in a front claw and began nibbling at it daintily. "Actually," he said between bites, "I am not the first of my kind to become known. It will be more difficult for you, though—especially when you can see the others."

"What others?" Barbara laid a protective hand on her belly, looked around the room as though she might suddenly be inundated by Gryphons.

Dylbok took another bite, swallowed. "Do you think that I am the only mythical creature in the world? Nay, not so. Unicorns. Sprites. Gnomes. Knocky-Bohs. Hippogriffs. Dragons . . ."

"I'm supposed to see *them* too?" she said fearfully.

"Given time, my lady. If you keep up with the Rand exercises. Some use more power than I to make you forget, but you will win in the end." He finished the toast. "May I please have some coffee?"

"Sure." She got up automatically and went to the carafe. "I'm not sure at all about this, Dylbok. Maybe I'm losing my mind. Cream or sugar?"

"Black," he said, and added softly: "And you are not losing your mind. It is more that you are finding it."

She brought him a cup and he nodded his thanks.

"Am . . . am I supposed to be afraid of you?" she asked. "Are you dangerous?"

The golden eyes sparkled at her again. Dylbok drank, dipping his beak and throwing his head back to let the liquid run down his throat. "Would I be allowed to touch a child if I were a threat?"

"It works that way with human beings."

"We follow more binding rules."

"What about Frank? Can he see you too?"

Dylbok made a *kit-kit* sound through his nostrils that Barbara interpreted as laughter. "Not unless he does the exercises." He drank again. "But, of course, Frank does not have any trouble with his memory. *Kit-kit*."

So it began. Dylbok became—or rather, continued to be—a part of the household. Many of Stacie's strange games now became totally intelligible to Barbara as she, in a sense, entered her daughter's world.

On the way to the market, Dylbok would be sprawled on the dashboard, lounging lazily in the sun, occasionally warning Barbara about some pending idiotic maneuver on the part of another driver. He told curious stories that made her laugh although she did not understand why, and he joined her in laughter, his *kit-kit* chattering like a small pneumatic drill. On Tuesday afternoons, the three of them played Monopoly according to Stacie's curious rules by which no one ever lost. Still, Barbara suspected Dylbok of influencing the girl's dice rolls so that, if no one lost, Stacie won the most.

And, true to the Gryphon's words, Barbara saw more. There were Unicorns in the park, fleet-footed creatures of moonlight and frost that cavorted in the fountains and chased one another through the flower beds without marring a petal. Dylbok introduced her to the Gnome that lived at the base of the large oak, a genial old fellow with a big plumed hat that he doffed thereafter whenever he saw her. There was the

Nixie that lived in the lake. And the Dragon that inhabited the forest outside of town. And the Pegasus that sometimes flew over the downtown skyline at sunset, the reddening light glinting off her wings like coruscating fire.

It was hard, sometimes, to come back from her outings and settle down to making a pot roast for Frank. She did not begrudge him his dinner, but the fact that she could not talk to him about Dylbok or the others was a frustration. He would tell her about his work, about the programs he was writing, about what the office gossip was, and her mind would be racing with the Pegasus across the sky, or talking with the Dragon, or remembering the cheery words of the Gnome. She had seen the playmates of other children, too, had talked to them, and she knew her eyes were shining as bright as a three year old's. But she said nothing. Once, she ventured an observation about remembering imaginary playmates: wouldn't it be interesting?

Frank regarded her as though she had spouted gibberish. "Honey," he said calmly. "Memory only works when there's something to remember. Imagination is imagination. Are you still doing those exercises?"

"Of course." She went back to slicing onions. Dylbok looked at her from the top of the refrigerator and shook his head. Barbara shrugged.

"I'm wondering if you shouldn't stop," Frank continued. "We're having some problems with the test group in Houston. They're getting a little daft. The psychologists are trying to figure it out."

"I don't feel daft," said Barbara. In truth, she felt joyous. Ecstatic. But she had said nothing about that.

"Still," said Frank, "better quit."

Barbara changed the subject. Dylbok shook his head in despair. That night, as she was soaking in the bathtub, her inhabited belly protruding above the water like a warm mountain, Dylbok squeezed through the half open door and perched

on the toilet seat. Barbara's glance flicked to the door, and the Gryphon merely looked at it and it closed. "Are you going to stop the exercises?" he said.

"What would happen if I did? Would I lose you?"

"To be honest, my lady, I do not know. This sort of thing has not happened before. Your ability may be permanently altered. And then again . . ."

She dried her hand, reached out and touched him lightly. "I don't want to lose you, Dylbok. I don't want to lose anyone."

The golden eyes glittered. "We have also become rather fond of you," he said. "And I have spoken with acquaintances in Houston. They enjoy their human friends."

A shimmer appeared between her feet and resolved itself into a silver-haired head with deep brown eyes. Barbara jumped.

"Your child is well, lady," said the head. "A bonny girl she'll be."

"What do you want, Nix?" Dylbok demanded.

"Just a visit, master." The head smiled. "No mischief for our friends. We all care for the mother." It winked. "Will you crack the drain for a moment, lady?"

Chuckling, Barbara lifted the lever with her toe, and the Nix dived for the drain. When they were alone again, the Gryphon preened a wing. "I daresay this could become tedious for you."

"Not at all." Barbara leaned back. "I'm keeping on with the exercises."

The Gryphon sprang to the edge of the tub and laid his head softly against hers. "Thank you," he whispered.

That night, she could not find the eight by ten card. She wondered if she mislaid it, but she smiled and shook her head ruefully as she got down on her hands and knees and searched

under the night stand. No, she remembered exactly where she had left it.

"Lose something, honey?" said Frank as he donned his pajamas.

"Uh, the Rand card," she said.

He looked at her patiently. "I told you I didn't want you doing those exercises any more. The group down in Houston is getting pretty weird."

Dylbok spoke up from the bed. "Some have been indiscreet."

"Idiots," said Barbara without thinking.

"Well, maybe so," said Frank, who had not heard the Gryphon, "but we're calling in all the materials so we can get a handle on this. Don't do the exercises. I don't need my wife flipping out on me."

Barbara got slowly to her feet, eight months of baby making her less than graceful. "I'm not flipping out on you, Frank. I just want to keep up with the exercises. I like the results. When was the last time I lost your plane tickets?"

He glared at her, exasperated. "I know: you know exactly where everything is now. I think you're making *me* daft."

"You're just jealous. Why don't you do the exercises? You can take notes and submit them to Rand."

"I don't have problems with my memory."

"Then *you* can be a nice control group of one and just concern yourself with the bizarre effects."

"What bizarre effects?"

Barbara colored, realizing her tongue had slipped. "Uh . . . nothing."

"Nothing? Bull! What's going on?"

"I said: nothing." She turned away from him and sat down heavily on the bed, nearly squashing Dylbok. The Gryphon scurried to the foot and sighed.

Frank stood, hands on hips, sizing her up. After a minute, he dropped his shoulders. "All right. I'll find out about the

bizarre effects myself." He went to his briefcase, took out the card, and went through the exercises slowly, as one unpracticed. When he was through, he shook his head and crawled into bed. "Those things make you sleepy," he murmured. "Stay away from them, Barb." With that, he was asleep.

He had locked the card in his briefcase when he had finished the exercises, and Barbara did not know the combination. She looked helplessly at Dylbok. "What do I do now?"

"You remember the exercises, do you not?"

"But the card . . ."

"You remember the card, do you not?"

For a moment, she sat on the bed, frozen with the realization. Of course she did. Every detail of the card was etched in her memory. She simply closed her eyes and imagined that she held it in her hand as she moved. When she finished, she felt a familiar tingling in the back of her mind, and she was sleepy.

"Dylbok," she murmured, crawling into bed. "Thanks. Thanks a lot. I love you."

Frank stirred. "Mmmph. Love you too, Barb."

Dylbok eyed him, then shifted his golden gaze to Barbara. "And I, you. Dear lady."

Frank was in no better a mood the next morning. He sulked through breakfast. His pancakes and eggs were mostly untouched when he got up from the table.

"Will you just level with me?" he demanded.

"I don't have anything to say, Frank," she said. "Do the exercises and find out for yourself."

"We're going to be talking about this in Houston this afternoon," he said as he felt through his pockets. "Damn . . . Where are those tickets?"

"In your briefcase," Barbara said softly.

His mouth tightened and he opened the case, pulled out the

tickets and stuffed them in his coat. "See what I mean? You're making me crazy. I preferred you when you forgot everything." He left without kissing her, slamming the door behind him.

Barbara looked after him a moment. "I didn't." She lifted her cup of coffee to her lips, but her hand was shaking.

Dylbok landed carefully on the table beside her. "Doubtless all will be well when he can see us. In a month."

"Dylbok, I'm due in a month. I don't want it to be like this."

The Gryphon was silent.

Frank returned from Houston the following evening with very little to talk about regarding the Rand exercises. It appeared to Barbara that if some among the test group had been indiscreet, they had now regained their tact and were saying nothing about their preternatural friends. Frank could offer no more than some vagaries about changed behavior and odd senses of humor. It sounded like an accusation to Barbara.

The last month was the hardest. She was thoroughly tired of being pregnant, and she snapped at him more than she might have. In response, Frank said nothing more about the exercises, but continued to do them before bed, locking the card in his briefcase before sleep took him. Barbara continued to do the exercises herself . . . with the imaginary card. Her perceptions continued undiminished: in fact, she suspected that they were continuing to develop. In the morning, she could look out the kitchen and see Nymphs and Devas singing in the maple trees along the street, and one evening she thought she saw the great Dragon in flight, taking a lazy turn around Civic Center and through the airport traffic pattern.

Her time drew closer, and her midwife was pleased. "You're fine. You're perfect," she said as Barbara was putting on her shoes. "I'd say next Tuesday. Can't be sure, of course, but I'd bet on it. And I'd say it's a boy."

"It's a girl," Barbara said softly, and Dylbok nodded from the counter.

"What tells you that?" said the midwife, smiling.

"A Nixie told me."

"Oh, to be sure," said the midwife. But she was Irish, and so Barbara caught her staring after her as she and Dylbok went down the corridor to the front desk.

The weather turned the next week, the last of the autumn yielding finally to winter. It snowed lightly on Friday, just enough to snarl traffic and put Frank in a foul mood when he got home.

They ate dinner in silence. Frank was still doing the exercises, Barbara knew, but they did not seem to be having any effect. Maybe he was doing them wrong. The baby was stirring within her, and kicked hard, making Barbara jump. Dylbok glanced at her from where he was playing with Stacie. "I'm okay," she said, half to Frank, half to the Gryphon. "She's a kicker."

"You saw Laura?"

"She says Tuesday. I hope the weather holds."

"I hope it's not Tuesday," said Frank as he half rose and peered out the window at the falling snow. "I'm going to be in Houston until Wednesday. This memory thing. The test group is still acting oddly. We're wondering if the effects are reversible. We're tending toward junking the whole thing."

"Have you . . . noticed anything?"

He turned to her, his mouth tight. "Nothing. I think I'm too stable to go freaking out. How are you? I haven't noticed too much recently."

"You haven't spoken much to me recently." Barbara kept a hand on her belly, feeling the movements of the infant. *Hush*, she thought. *Be easy. You'll be out soon.*

"I thought it was the other way around," said Frank.

The Gryphon spoke. "Actually," he said, "you're both acting like fools. Be easy yourself, Barbara."

"Hmmm." She glanced at Dylbok, then at her husband.
"I'm sorry, Frank."

"You going to tell me what's going on now?"

"I don't have anything to tell."

The weekend went by. Barbara tried to be conciliatory, but had no success, and the weather reports were making her uneasy. A large storm was sledgehammering Washington and Oregon, and it was due in her part of the country in a few days. She was mostly worried about Frank flying in such weather, but a part of her was concerned with traveling to the birth center in the teeth of a blizzard.

Frank left Sunday, with the weather cold but clear. Barbara noticed that he knew where his tickets were this time, and she took it for a good omen.

But the weather turned around, and by Monday afternoon, snow was falling thick and fast, and the weather reports were talking about emergencies and twenty-four inches in twenty-four hours. Barbara put Stacie to bed that night and sat up for a cup of tea with Dylbok. "Are you well?" said the Gryphon.

"How are you at home births, Dylbok?"

"Of my own kind, my lady, I am very good. But humans . . ."

She did her exercises before bed and tried to believe that what her instincts told her was not true. Dylbok watched, golden eyed.

She awoke. The clock said three in the morning and her belly said *now*. "Oh, Dylbok!" she cried. "It's happening!"

"Call the birth center," said the Gryphon calmly. "Breathe evenly. You'll be fine."

Barbara was looking out the window, dismayed. The snow had built up quickly: she estimated that there was a foot and a half on the ground, and large flakes, driven by a bitter north wind, were adding to it.

"Call the birth center," said Dylbok. "If there's anyone there, tell them you are coming in."

"How? I don't have a four by four."

"Just tell them. I have things to attend to." He left the room and she heard the front door slam a moment after.

Hands shaking, she dialed the number. The answering service told her it was impossible to reach the birth rooms, that she should call the fire department to see if a paramedic could get to her.

"Is there anyone at the birth rooms?"

"Laura is there, snowed in."

"Tell her I'm on my way."

"But you can't—"

"I have it on good authority. Just tell her." She hung up wishing she felt more sure of herself than she did.

While she waited for Dylbok to return, she timed contractions. Good and regular. She still had some hours of labor before her, but when she flicked on the weather radio she learned that the blizzard was not going to abate in less than half a day. She tried to call Frank. The lines were down.

"Oh, God . . ." She was starting to dial the number for the paramedics when suddenly the Gryphon was there in a flurry of wings and gold.

"Hurry!" he commanded. "Wake Stacie and bundle the both of you up. We must leave. Now!"

She stared at him for a moment, then waddled down the hall. "Stacie! The baby's coming, dear! We have to go see Laura!"

They were dressed in a few minutes, and Barbara was still zipping one of Frank's coats over her belly as Dylbok led them downstairs to the kitchen.

"How are we getting there, Dylbok?" she was saying. "There's a blizzard outside . . . haven't you noticed? And—oh!"

She stood in the kitchen doorway, stricken immobile by the

sight of the Pegasus standing on the linoleum tile, her great wings folded gracefully at her sides, snow melting from her and dripping in small puddles at her feet.

"Blessings upon you this day, mother," said the Pegasus. "I am Amarantha. If you would, I will bear you and your daughters." Her voice was like moonbeams, soft and silvery, and violet eyes held Barbara's own. Stacie ran to Amarantha and reached up to her. The Pegasus nuzzled her, then looked at Barbara meaningfully.

"I" She looked at Dylbok, then at the Pegasus. "Yes . . . I'll come. Thank you."

They went outside, into the driving wind. Amarantha lifted her wings, and the storm seemed to abate around her. She knelt, and Barbara scrambled onto her back and took Stacie up before her. Then, with a bound, Amarantha was aloft, wings beating powerfully against the storm, head thrown back in the ecstasy of flight. She sang, and the song was one of birth and beginnings, of sunrise and good weather.

They broke through the clouds a few minutes later, and the full moon turned the storm below them to fantasy and light. Amarantha went forward mightily, and Stacie laughed, and Barbara found that she also was laughing with sheer delight. Ahead, guiding them, was Dylbok, his feathers and fur ashimmer in the moonlight.

And Barbara realized that they had been joined by others. Other Gryphons were there, and Devas and Sprites, and tiny Dragons with emerald scales and breath like rubies in sunlight. They clustered close around Barbara and Stacie, and on those faces that could she saw smiles.

Together, they swept down into the clouds again, Dylbok still guiding. The wind came, but Amarantha stilled it around her. Below, the birth center parking lot came into view, buried and almost unrecognizable. Amarantha landed just by the big double doors in the shelter of a brick wall. "Peace to

you, Barbara," she said. "Enter, and may your time be quick and easy."

Barbara kissed the white neck and Dylbok hustled her inside.

"If only Frank were here," she murmured. "We've always wanted to be together for these. He was here for Stacie . . ."

"Barbara!" cried the midwife. "How the hell did you get here?"

She let her coat fall to the floor. "You wouldn't believe me, Laura. Just get me ready. I'm going to have my second daughter." Stacie clapped her hands.

If the midwife heard the chorus of silvery cheers from outside the doors, she gave no sign. But she smiled.

The hours passed, her contractions came more swiftly. An hour or two past dawn, Laura shook her head. "It's amazing. This is going to take no time at all. Another hour maybe."

"I've had the blessing of a Pegasus," Barbara murmured. The birth was easier than her first, and perhaps it was indeed going to take no time at all, but it still hurt, and she was trying to keep track of breathing, pushing, and bracing herself. She was getting fuddled. "I should have called Frank before I left. Where is Dylbok?"

"Dylbok?" Laura looked at her. "Stacie is in the nursery, sleeping. Who's Dylbok?"

"Oh . . . a friend of the family . . ." Another contraction. the pain increased. Not intolerable. Not quite.

Laura's eyes widened. "You're in transition. Only twenty more contractions."

"It hurts," said Barbara between clenched teeth.

"Only twenty contractions," Laura said soothingly. "You can stand *anything* for twenty contractions."

"That's what you said three years ago for Stacie."

"I was right, wasn't I?"

"I wish Frank were here."

"Honey, I'm surprised that *you're* here what with this blizzard."

"Where is Dylbok?"

"Who's Dylbok?"

Even through the haze of pain, Barbara felt a change, as though there was something outside the birth room window. The blinds were drawn, and she could not see, but she felt it. It was big, and powerful, and undaunted by the blizzard.

Another contraction. "Push," said Laura.

"Roger, wilco," she gritted.

Footsteps in the hall outside. The door suddenly swung open and Frank exploded into the room. "Barbara!"

Laura looked blank. "How . . . ?"

"Never mind how. How is Barbara?"

"Transition, Frank," she said with some pride. "Hold me. Like you did with Stacie."

Then he was on the bed behind her, his arms about her, and she smiled in spite of the pain. She looked back at him and saw that his eyes were shining like a three year old's.

"How, Frank?" she whispered.

He glanced at the window. "Open the blinds, Laura."

They were electric, and Laura hit the foot switch. On the other side of the glass Barbara saw it. Big. Immense. The snowflakes seemed to stay away from it, and the emerald scales glinted in the spill of light from the room. Large eyes that seemed to reach back into infinity watched her calmly.

"Dragon express," he whispered. "Direct from Houston." He laughed, his eyes still shining. "Dylbok showed up and warned me, but I didn't have much time. I didn't even check out of the hotel. I don't argue with Dragons."

Another contraction. "So you can see them?"

He kissed her. "All of them. And you know . . . oddly enough . . . I don't feel a bit daft."

The baby came quickly after that, nearly catching the mid-

wife off guard. "I thought you said twenty," said Barbara.

The child was in her arms, then, and matters of number, of twenty or ten or even one or two, were forgotten. She held her daughter close, letting her nurse, and looked toward the window where faces of various kinds and sizes pressed against the glass. One with deep violet eyes caught her gaze. She heard in her mind: *Blessings upon you this day.*

"We'll call her . . ." She looked at Frank. "We'll call her Amarantha."

"Better that than Dylbok," said the Gryphon from the counter.

And once again there was a chorus of silvery cheers in the air. And the midwife smiled.

THE FACE IN THE CLOTH

by Jane Yolen

It is believed that the Three Fates of Greek mythology may originally have been birth spirits. Perhaps the three witch-sisters in this story are kin to those ancient beings. They were very definitely responsible for the birth of a princess, and her life did remain interwoven with theirs.

There was once a king and queen so in love with one another that they could not bear to be parted, even for a day. To seal their bond, they desperately wanted a child. The king had even made a cradle of oak for the babe with his own hands and placed it by their great canopied bed. But year in and year out, the cradle stood empty.

At last one night, when the king was fast asleep, the queen left their bed. She cast one long, lingering glance at her husband, then, disguising herself with a shawl around her head, she crept out of the castle, for the first time alone. She was bound for a nearby forest where she had heard that three witch-sisters lived. The queen had been told that they might

give her what she most desired by taking from her what she least desired to give.

"But I have so much," she thought as she ran through the woods. "Gold and jewels beyond counting. Even the diamond that the king himself put on my hand and from which I would hate to be parted. But though it is probably what I would least desire to give, I would give it gladly to have a child."

The witches' hut squatted in the middle of the wood, and through its window the queen saw the three old sisters sitting by the fire, chanting a spell as soft as a cradle song:

*Needle and scissors,
Scissors and pins,
Where one life ends,
Another begins.*

And suiting their actions to the words, the three snipped and sewed, snipped and sewed with the invisible thread over and over and over again.

The night was so dark and the three slouching sisters so strange that the queen was quite terrified. But her need was even greater than her fear. She scratched upon the window, and the three looked up from their work.

"Come in," they called out in a single voice.

So she had to go, pulled into the hut by that invisible thread.

"What do you want, my dear?" said the first old sister to the queen through the pins she held in her mouth.

"I want a child," said the queen.

"When do you want it?" asked the second sister, who held a needle high above her head.

"As soon as I can get it," said the queen, more boldly now.

"And what will you give for it?" asked the third, snipping her scissors ominously.

"Whatever is needed," replied the queen. Nervously she turned the ring with the diamond around her finger.

The three witches smiled at one another. Then they each held up a hand with the thumb and forefinger touching in a circle.

"Go," they said. "It is done. All we ask is to be at the birthing to sew the swaddling clothes."

The queen stood still as stone, a river of feeling washing around her. She had been prepared to gift them a fortune. What they asked was so simple, she agreed at once. Then she turned and ran out of the hut all the way to the castle. She never looked back.

Less than a year later, the queen was brought to childbed. But in her great joy, she forgot to mention to the king her promise to the witches. And then in great pain, and because it had been such a small promise after all, she forgot it altogether.

As the queen lay in labor in her canopied bed, there came a knock on the castle door. When the guards opened it, who should be standing there but three slouching old women.

"We have come to be with the queen," said the one with pins in her mouth.

The guards shook their heads.

"The queen promised we could make the swaddling cloth," said the second, holding her needle high over her head.

"We must be by her side," said the third, snapping her scissors.

One guard was sent to tell the king.

The king came to the castle door, his face red with anger, his brow wreathed with sweat.

"The queen told me of no such promise," he said. "And she tells me everything. What possesses you to bother a man

at a time like this? Begone." He dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

But before the guards could shut the door upon the ancient sisters, the one with the scissors called out: "Beware, oh King, of promises given." Then all three chanted:

*Needle and scissors,
Scissors and pins,
Where one life ends,
Another begins.*

The second old woman put her hands above her head and made a circle with her forefinger and thumb. But the one with the pins in her mouth thrust a piece of cloth into the king's hand.

"It is for the babe," she said. "Because of the queen's desire."

Then the three left the castle and were not seen there again.

The king started to look down at the cloth, but there came a loud cry from the bedchamber. He ran back along the corridors, and when he entered the bedroom door, the doctor turned around, a newborn child, still red with birth blood, in his hands.

"It is a girl, Sire," he said.

There was a murmur of praise from the attending women.

The king put out his hands to receive the child and, for the first time, really noticed the cloth he was holding. It was pure white, edged with lace. As he looked at it, his wife's likeness began to appear on it slowly, as if being stitched in with a crimson thread. First the eyes he so loved; then the elegant nose; the soft, full mouth; the dimpled chin.

The king was about to remark on it when the midwife cried out, "It is the queen, Sire. She is dead." And at the same moment, the doctor put the child into his hands.

The royal funeral and the royal christening were held on the same day, and no one in the kingdom knew whether to laugh or cry except the babe, who did both.

Since the king could not bear to part with his wife entirely, he had the lace-edged cloth with her likeness sewed into the baby's cloak so that wherever she went, the princess carried her mother's face.

As she outgrew one cloak, the white lace cloth was cut away from the old and sewn into the new. And in this way the princess was never without the panel bearing her mother's portrait, nor was she ever allowed to wander far from her father's watchful eyes. Her life was measured by the size of the cloaks which were cut bigger each year, and the likeness of her mother, which seemed to get bigger as well.

The princess grew taller, but she did not grow stronger. She was like a pale copy of her mother. There was never a time that the bloom of health sat on her cheeks. She remained the color of skimmed milk, the color of ocean foam, the color of second-day snow. She was always cold, sitting huddled for warmth inside her picture cloak even on the hottest days, and nothing could part her from it.

The king despaired of his daughter's health, but neither the royal physicians nor philosophers could help. He turned to necromancers and stargazers, to herbalists and diviners. They pushed and prodded and prayed over the princess. They examined the soles of her feet and the movement of her stars. But still she sat cold and whey-colored, wrapped in her cloak.

At last one night, when everyone was fast asleep, the king left his bed and crept out of the castle alone. He had heard that there were three witch sisters who lived nearby who might give him what he most desired by taking from him what he least desired to give. Having lost his queen, he knew there was nothing else he would hate losing—not his fortune, his kingdom, or his throne. He would give it all up gladly to

see his daughter, who was his wife's pale reflection, sing and dance and run.

The witches' hut squatted in the middle of the wood, and through its window the king saw the three old sisters. He did not recognize them, but they knew him at once.

"Come in, come in," they called out, though he had not knocked. And he was drawn into the hut as if pulled by an invisible thread.

"We know what you want," said the first.

"We can give you what you desire," said the second.

"By taking what you least wish to give," said the third.

"I have already lost my queen," he said. "So anything else I have is yours so long as my daughter is granted a measure of health." And he started to twist off the ring he wore on his third finger, the ring his wife had been pledged with, to give to the three sisters to seal his part of the bargain.

"Then you must give us—your daughter," said the three.

The king was stunned. For a moment the only sound in the hut was the crackle of fire in the hearth.

"*Never!*" he thundered at last. "What you ask is impossible."

"What *you* ask is impossible," said the first old woman. "Nonetheless, we promise it will be so." She stood. "But if your daughter does not come to us, her life will be worth no more than this." She took a pin from her mouth and held it up. It caught the firelight for a moment. Only a moment.

The king stared. "I know you," he said slowly. "I have seen you before."

The second sister nodded. "Our lives have been sewn together by a queen's desire," she said. She pulled the needle through a piece of cloth she was holding and drew the thread through in a slow, measured stitch.

The third sister began to chant, and at each beat her scissors snapped together:

*Needle and scissors,
Scissors and pins,
Where one life ends,
Another begins.*

The king cursed them thoroughly, his words hoarse as a rote of war, and left. But partway through the forest, he thought of his daughter like a waning moon asleep in her bed, and wept.

For days he raged in the palace, and his courtiers felt his tongue as painfully as if it were a whip. Even his daughter, usually silent in her shroudlike cloak, cried out.

"Father," she said, "your anger unravels the kingdom, pulling at its loosest threads. What is it? What can I do?" As she spoke, she pulled the cloak more firmly about her shoulders, and the king could swear that the portrait of his wife moved, the lips opening and closing as if the image spoke as well.

The king shook his head and put his hands to his face. "You are all I have left of her," he mumbled. "And now I must let you go."

The princess did not understand, but she put her small faded hands on his. "You must do what you must do, my father," she said.

And though he did not quite understand the why of it, the king brought his daughter into the wood the next night after dark. Setting her on his horse and holding the bridle himself, he led her along the path to the hut of the three crones.

At the door he kissed her once on each cheek and then tenderly kissed the image on her cloak. Then, mounting his horse, he galloped away without once looking back.

Behind him the briars closed over the path, and the forest was still.

Once her father had left, the princess looked around the dark clearing. When no one came to fetch her, she knocked upon the door of the little hut. Getting no answer, she pushed the door open and went in.

The hut was empty, though a fire burned merrily in the hearth. The table was set, and beside the wooden plate were three objects: a needle, a scissors, and a pin. On the hearth wall, engraved in the stone, was a poem. The princess went over to the fire to read it:

*Needle and scissors,
Scissors and pins,
Where one life ends,
Another begins.*

"How strange," thought the princess, shivering inside her cloak.

She looked around the little hut, found a bed with a wooden headboard shaped like a loom, lay down upon the bed and, pulling the cloak around her even more tightly, slept.

In the morning when the princess woke, she was still alone, but there was food on the table, steaming hot. She rose and made a feeble toilette, for there were no mirrors on the wall, and ate the food. All the while she toyed with the needle, scissors, and pin by her plate. She longed for her father and the familiarity of the court, but her father had left her at the hut, and being an obedient child, she stayed.

As she finished her meal, the hearthfire went out, and soon the hut grew chilly. So the princess went outside and sat on a wooden bench by the door. Sunlight illuminated the clearing and wrapped around her shoulders like a golden cloak. Alternately she dozed and woke and dozed again until it grew dark.

When she went inside the hut, the table was once more set with food, and this time she ate eagerly, then went to sleep, dreaming of the needle and scissors and pin. In her dream they danced away from her, refusing to bow when she bade them. She woke to a cold dawn.

The meal was ready, and the smell of it, threading through the hut, got her up. She wondered briefly what hands had done all the work, but, being a princess and used to being served, she did not wonder about it very long.

When she went outside to sit in the sun, she sang snatches of old songs to keep herself company. The sound of her own voice, tentative and slightly off-key, was like an old friend. The tune kept running around and around in her head, and though she did not know where she had heard it before, it fitted perfectly the words carved over the hearth:

*Needle and scissors,
Scissors and pins,
Where one life ends,
Another begins.*

"This is certainly true," she told herself, "for my life here in the forest is different from my life in the castle, though I myself do not feel changed." And she shivered and pulled the cloak around her.

Several times she stood and walked about the clearing, looking for the path that led out. But it was gone. The brambles were laced firmly together like stitches on a quilt, and when she put a hand to them, a thorn pierced her palm and the blood dripped down onto her cloak, spotting the portrait of her mother and making it look as if she were crying red tears.

It was then the princess knew that she had been abandoned to the magic in the forest. She wondered that she was not more afraid, and tried out different emotions: first fear, then

bewilderment, then loneliness; but none of them seemed quite real to her. What she felt, she decided at last, was a kind of lightness, a giddiness, as if she had lost her center, as if she were a balloon, untethered and ready—at last—to let go.

“What a goose I have become,” she said aloud. “One or two days without the prattle of courtiers, and I am talking to myself.”

But her own voice was a comfort, and she smiled. Then, settling her cloak more firmly about her shoulders, she went back to the hut.

She counted the meager furnishings of the hut as if she were telling beads on a string: door, window, hearth, table, chair, bed. “I wish there were something to *do*,” she thought to herself. And as she turned around, the needle on the table was glowing as if a bit of fire had caught in its eye.

She went over to the table and picked up the needle, scissors, and pin and carried them to the hearth. Spreading her cloak on the stones, though careful to keep her mother’s image facing up, she sat.

“If I just had some thread,” she thought.

Just then she noticed the panel with her mother’s portrait. For the first time it seemed small and crowded, spotted from the years. The curls were old-fashioned and overwrought, the mouth a little slack, the chin a touch weak.

“Perhaps if I could borrow a bit of thread from this embroidery,” she whispered, “just a bit where it will not be noticed. As I am alone, no one will know but me.”

Slowly she began to pick out the crimson thread along one of the tiny curls. She heard a deep sigh as she started, as if it came from the cloak, then realized it had been her own breath that had made the sound. She wound up the thread around the pin until she had quite a lot of it. Then she snipped off the end, knotted it, threaded the needle—and stopped.

“What am I to sew upon?” she wondered. All she had was what she wore. Still, as she had a great need to keep herself

busy and nothing else to do, she decided to embroider designs along the edges of her cloak. So she began with what she knew. On the gray panels she sewed a picture of her own castle. It was so real, it seemed as if its banners fluttered in a westerly wind. And as it grew, turret by turret, she began to feel a little warmer, a little more at home.

She worked until it was time to eat, but as she had been in the hut all the while, no magical servants had set the table. So she hunted around the cupboards herself until she found bread and cheese and a pitcher of milk. Making herself a scanty meal, she cleaned away the dishes, then lay down on the bed and was soon asleep.

In the morning she was up with the dawn. She cut herself some bread, poured some milk, and took the meal outside, where she continued to sew. She gave the castle lancet windows, a Lady chapel, cows grazing in the outlying fields, and a moat in which golden carp swam about, their fins stroking the water and making little waves that moved beneath her hand.

When the first bit of thread was used up, she picked out another section of the portrait, all of the curls and a part of the chin. With that thread she embroidered a forest around the castle, where brachet hounds, noses to the ground, sought a scent; a deer started; and a fox lay hidden in a rambling thicket, its ears twitching as the dogs coursed by. She could almost remark their baying, now near, now far away. Then, in the middle of the forest—with a third piece of thread—the princess sewed the hut. Beneath the hut, as she sewed, letters appeared though she did not touch them.

*Needle and scissors,
Scissors and pins,
Where one life ends,
Another begins.*

She said the words aloud, and as she spoke, puffs of smoke appeared above the embroidered chimney in the hut. It reminded her that it was time to eat.

Stretching, she stood and went into the little house. The bread was gone. She searched the cupboards and could find no more, but there was flour and salt, and so she made herself some flat cakes that she baked in an oven set into the stone of the fireplace. She knew that the smoke from her baking was sending soft clouds above the hut.

While the bread baked and the sweet smell embroidered the air, the princess went back outside. She unraveled more threads from her mother's image: the nose, the mouth, the startled eyes. And with that thread she traced a winding path from the crimson castle with the fluttering banners to the crimson hut with the crown of smoke.

As she sewed, it seemed to her that she could hear the sound of birds—the rapid flutings of a thrush and the jug-jug-jug of a nightingale—and that they came not from the real forest around her but from the cloak. Then she heard, from the very heart of her lap work, the deep, brassy voice of a hunting horn summoning her home.

Looking up from her work, she saw that the brambles around the hut were beginning to part and there was a path heading north toward the castle.

She jumped up, tumbling needle and scissors and pin to the ground, and took a step toward the beckoning path. Then she stopped. The smell of fresh bread stayed her. The embroidery was not yet done. She knew that she had to sew her own portrait onto the white laced panel of the cloak: a girl with crimson cheeks and hair tumbled to her shoulders, walking the path alone. She had to use up the rest of her mother's thread before she was free.

Turning back toward the hut, she saw three old women standing in the doorway, their faces familiar. They smiled and nodded to her, holding out their hands.

The first old woman had the needle and pin nestled in her palm. The second held the scissors by the blades, handles offered. The third old woman shook out the cloak, and as she did so, a breeze stirred the trees in the clearing.

The princess smiled back at them. She held out her hands to receive their gifts. When she was done with the embroidery, though it was hard to part with it, she would give them the cloak. She knew that once it was given, she could go.

THE LAST DRAGON MASTER

by A. A. Attanasio

Whatever happened to the dragons of China? A.A. Attanasio offers one explanation in this tale about a young man and his encounter with one of the last of that species.

Twenty-five centuries ago in the wilderness provinces of western China, Yu Ching became the last of the dragon masters. Ironically, Yu Ching was the least likely man alive to even know a dragon, since his physical senses were so sharp and his imagination so dull that he could believe only in what he physically perceived. And in his day, dragons were getting to be as hard to perceive as they are now.

About five thousand years before the time of this story, dragons had complied with the compulsion of cosmic change, the *tao*, and had begun to coneresce with the landscape. Their blue, shadowy bodies had melled into the rocky fastness of mountains and tectite deserts. Their throat gills became the wind-bright cliffs, slowly exhaling twisted trees, inhaling the earth's cold halo. And their smoldering eyes gazed up into the space-dark as calderas or lidded over with basalt and

contemplated the magnetic trance of the planet's core. The world over, dragons shed their effluous bodies to become terrain, their old iridescent shapes becoming wholly invisible, subtle, and enormously powerful.

Sixty-five million years before this transformation, dragons had been a species of dinosaurs that had evolved beyond their physical forms into fulgent astral shapes. By the time of this story, only a few dragons still had their visible ethereal forms and resisted molting into the landscape. Those were the demonic dragons, the two-toed, stub-tailed fugitives of the Void who stirred the malevolent winds and who loved nothing more than to devour *chi*, human effluvia, and the lives that went with it. It was Yu Ching's stupendous fortune to stumble into such a dragon.

Yu Ching grew up on a small farm of sunk rocks and scrubby woods, in a pockmark of a valley, among purple-crowned mountains. He was the fifth of five brothers. And though his senses were the keenest of all and he could hear an egg hatch in the dry grass of the far fields and he could see the rock-doves nesting in the cliff-cracks of the distant mountains, his dull mind could not be taught tasks more complex than the sheerest drudgery. Had his senses been less sharp, perhaps he would have been satisfied stooped over in the rocky fields all day, for he was fed well and, despite his brothers' competition for the little land they had to share, there was no maliciousness in his family. Yet, as soft-brained as he was thought to be, he was sensible enough to recognize that he was suited for more than hard labor. So when he approached manhood, he left his family's farm and went to join the army, convinced that his remarkably acute senses would earn him a useful position and eventually a high rank.

Typical of Yu Ching's luck, he had been born into an ideal age for a military career. This was the time in the history of China when iron weapons were first introduced and the coun-

tryside was divided among belligerent warlords. It was known as the *Chan Kuo*, the Period of Warring States.

Wise Fool was swiftly enlisted in the first army he encountered, and after displaying his uncannily alert senses he was assigned work as a sentry. Guard duty satisfied him, for he enjoyed dressing in uniform and marching importantly along his post, scanning the broad distances for the enemy. His weapon, though it was just a fire-hardened stave of whittled bamboo, hummed in his grip for the wounds it was seeking. And the sodality he felt in the company of the other soldiers was gladder than anything he had experienced with his brothers. Yu Ching was happy in the army, until the grim day that he gazed across the breastbone of the world and spotted the fires of the approaching enemy. The trails of their smoke jagged across the sky like clawtracks, and the rhythm of their war drums was a loud gnawing.

The battle was terrible. War cries resounded like torn metal, arrows whistled through the air like a cold wind, and the armies swung together and meshed like furiously mismatched gears. Their iron swords clapped with metallic applause as lives were gouged, hacked, and dropped into the chewed mud.

Yu Ching gaped with astonished horror from the vantage of his watchtower: His impeccable longsight took in everything as the clanging iron cleaved maniacally through lacquered bamboo armor: Ribcages splayed open like red butterfly wings, bowels slithered through fingers like giggling serpents, skulls shattered like hives of startled bees, and everywhere faces were locking into knots of pain not even death could unravel.

Yu Ching looked away, but his hearing was manacled by screams. The howls were a bulging and flowing lava, filling him with hot terror. He darted about, looking for escape, but already the battle swarmed below him. The scaffolding he was on swayed under the impact of the riot, and Yu Ching wept

as his tower toppled and he was flung into the human maelstrom.

Hours later Yu Ching woke to a goblin of a headache and a scab-matted bump big as a radish at the back of his head. The battle was long over, he could tell at once from the smolder of groans and the stink of souring flesh. He sat up and found himself in a field of dead and wounded under a sky of ruffling stars. The campfires of the victorious gloamed in the distance, miserly as glowworms in the smoke-numbered darkness.

Yu Ching crawled through the slum of death in the opposite direction. As soon as he was off the battlefield, he pushed to his feet and ran. By dawn he was in sight of his village's valley. But he didn't return to his family's farm. Instead, he continued west until he came to a monastery high in the snowtoothed mountains, and there he sought admission to the priesthood. As a child he had often seen the priests in their bright prisoner-humble garb walking the high trails and occasionally entering the valley to beg food and share their enigmatic teaching: "Form and formlessness are the same. All is nothing. Nothing is all."

How could that be? he had often asked himself. He could plainly see the sun, touch the earth, and hear the wind. Hunger had the form of a thorned branch inside him. Even the emptiness of sleep writhed with dreams. Yet, since witnessing how war transforms vigorous lives into manure, Yu Ching was prepared to reconsider the Teaching. And, since he was so obviously unencumbered by any practical aptitude, skill, or academic learning, he thought that he was closer to the emptiness the priests spoke of than most and therefore an ideal recipient for the Teaching.

Unfortunately for his expectations, he found monastery life little different from farm life. He worked a full day on the terraced slopes beneath the wind-clapping mountains and still could learn no complex task. Five times a day, before each meal, before sleep, and at the center of night, the priests sat

in meditation in the vast icy-aired sitting hall, and monks and apprentices had to join them. Yu Ching loathed the meditations, for his body chattered with hunger and cold, and he could not still his mind. Spring was more comfortable, but his perceptions stumbled over each other as the birdsongs and monkey cries from the green-grown cliffs frenzied with the approach of summer. In the autumn, he left the monastery and headed back toward his valley.

Where else could he go? He had expected one of the priests or monks to ask him why he was leaving or to at least explain once more their notion of everything floating in nothing. But his departure occurred without comment. Guilt then rage tormented him as he made his way down the steep, wilderness trails. Several times he turned back toward the monastery only to stop and circle down again when he remembered the tedious meditations.

After a while, he realized he was lost. The steep terrain had become so overgrown with bamboo and thornberry shrubs that he had to proceed hunched over, cursing at the tricky footing and the clawing bramble.

The brush ended abruptly, and Yu Ching found himself tottering on a cliff edge that muttered with falling pebbles. A vista of crags, wind-dwarfed trees, and mists loomed beneath his feet, and for a long moment he was enraptured by the fluorescent indigo of the world's edge. He gulped a breath and stepped back.

He turned upslope and frantically pulled himself into the thorny shrub. Then, he saw the dragon. Its taut red eyes gazed into him from a glare of shadows only ten paces away. The iridescence of its scales wavered among the tangled bushes like a skirl of hot air, and its hammer-hooked head was poised to strike.

Yu Ching whined, but no sound came from his mouth. With reflex speed, he bolted through the thornberries, ignoring the tearing bramble shredding his garments and lacerating

his flesh. He burst through the cutting scrub, and his straw-sandaled feet slapped a rock-cobbled path. Behind him, the shrubs battled loudly, and a sibilance of steam scalded his hearing. He dared not glance back, dared not surrender even an instant for anything but flight. The demonic visage he had seen in the shadows was imprinted on his sight like the afterimage of the sun, multiple and malefic.

The rasp of scales on the rocks sang like a stropped sword, and Yu Ching's breath went cold in his lungs. He willed his legs faster over the rough, slanting path and tripped. He sprawled with bruising impact on the rocks, and his terror bounced him back to his feet, heedless of his battered knees and scraped hands. A roar, more like a rôle of thunder, swooped over him with the stench of soured flesh, and its gust propelled him over a granite outcropping.

On the far side, the entire valley opened before him green as the sea and blue with mists. To his left the boulder-strewn path goat-stepped down toward the village and his family's farm. He dared not dash that way, for he knew his family would be attracted to his cries, and they too would be devoured by the beast. To his right another path tufted with whispers of buffalo grass curved among bamboo brakes to the blackstone monastery on the slopes of the snowfire mountains. He dashed in that direction but had only gone a few desperate steps when it occurred to him that he could not lead the dragon there. The monks were defenseless, sworn to nonviolence, and would be easy prey. With a whimper, he lunged straight ahead.

The cold stink of the dragon's breath frosted his back and the scuttle of its claws on the shale rang louder with its eagerness. Ahead, the path ended at a cliff's edge. Already in his juddering vision, Yu Ching could see the stunted, tormented pines clawing at the friable rock where the emptiness began. He could count the hurried steps to the brink—and beyond, his excellent vision discerned ravines of clouds com-

plex as another land. And beneath them, the plunge, the rockslides, the planet's broken wall.

Above, birds wheeled with the rings of wind. Below, ponds and streams scrawled their secret alphabet. And among the big-boled oaks and mist-streaming grasses were skeletons—the remnants of all those who had fled the dragon before him, their flesh and tendons picked clean by the birds and rodents, their *chi* sucked from their broken husks by the dragon.

Yu Ching howled with the terror of his inevitable doom, and the dragon roared once more behind him with a deep sea majesty, its echoes booming like collapsing waves. And all at once, reality clarified for the fleeing man. The short distance ahead was clearly all the space left of his life, and every pebble, every stone-pock and twisted weed glowed with a visionary luminosity. He was alive, and with each step there was less time for him to possess, to be—yet, the world did not diminish in the slightest. The world remained absolutely complete, in all its refulgent details, though he was only paces away from oblivion.

Then and there, the meaning of the priests' teaching became lucid. *All is nothing—nothing all*. The realization seized him like an orgasm. And the joy of that unraveled secret stopped him at the crest of the cliff. He turned about and faced the dragon. Why not? Death itself was life.

The dragon was a huge slithering mass of blackgold scales iridescent with the tempo of its breathing, its lurid eyes glaring from behind browhairs as long and writhing as centipedes. Its maw widened as it swept closer, revealing a bramble of black teeth and razor-honed tusks translucent as ice. Like an avalanche of black mica, it bellowed forward, unable to stop though it would have, for it had never before confronted a human that had not veered left or right or had not leaped into doom to avoid its ferocious presence.

Yu Ching spread wide his arms, smiling, and the dragon collided with him. Calm as a drunk, Yu Ching surrendered to

the blow, and the dragon hurtled with him over the cliff and into the sky. Its gray, batskin wings flashed open, caught the updraft, and they soared.

Yu Ching was in a reverie, his breath kicked out of him, his brain shocked, veering toward blackout. In that rapture beyond breathing, his awareness zoomed into a meditative zero, resisting nothing, encompassing all. The flow of his *chi*, which, like the life force of all humans, was tenuously linked with the planetary fields of force, was now unhindered by the restrictions of anger, fear, and identity. A flush of power flashed through him, jolting the breath back into his lungs, deeper than he had ever breathed.

The abrupt linkage of the man with the planetary power field resonated inside the harmonics of the dragon's auric field and began a sequence of intensifying amplifications. The dragon screamed as its life force melled with the planetary field, and Yu Ching, who had been draped over the beast's squamous upper lip, was flung free. He would have fallen to his death then, but the dragon had been altered by their contact. Its consciousness, bonded now with the planet's magnetic trance, was blurring swiftly into the karstic landscape. Within moments, it would join all of its breed who had gone ahead of it—unless it cleaved to the mereling that had initiated this reaction. The cosmic focus, the leverage of the *tao's* molting force, was on that man, and so long as the dragon were in his presence, its physical integrity was assured.

Yu Ching, gleefully embracing his freefall, knew all this. The amplified power of the dragon's propinquity had endowed him with a god's understanding. The dragon swooped him up in its fearsome jaws, and, with a hand on each tusk and his feet planted firmly on its scaly lower lip, he laughed aloud to feel its strength bolster him. "Yu Ching!" he cried to the wind. "Dragon master!"

Yu Ching used his telepathic bond with the dragon to guide it over the toppling clouds to the small farm nestled at the

spur of the mountains where his family lived. With his excellent vision, he saw his brothers hunched over their plows, their wives on their knees in the fields, his parents toiling beside them. He brought the dragon down among them, and when they saw it, they cowered and ran howling for their wattle house.

Effortlessly, the dragon strolled beside them, and Yu Ching called out from his perch in its mouth until one of his brothers recognized him. At first, they thought he was being eaten by the dragon, and their horror steepened. Fearing that the shock would kill his parents, Yu Ching leaped down from the dragon's mouth and approached them, his rags snapping wildly in the beast's breath. The foul odor of the creature had changed as its energy had begun to harmonize with the planet, and a fragrance like jasmine and tropical twilights smoked around it and Yu Ching. He explained to his family what had happened, and gradually their fear dissipated and wonder volted through them—a speculative wonder in his father's case, since he wanted to know of what usefulness was the mastery of a dragon.

Yu Ching grinned with a crafty sapience none of them had ever seen in him before. He mounted his awesome steed, this time seating himself between the horn stubs big as tree stumps that sprouted above the being's evil eyes, and, with a rush of wind that knocked his family to the ground, they ascended. The dragon master and his beast circled the small farm once, sensing the telluric presences in the braes and hummocks, and when they had found what they were seeking, they descended, and the two-toed claws of the dragon dug earth with the fury of a rockblasting meteor. In moments the earth had been gouged open to reveal an immense vein of gold.

For the next few months Yu Ching resided with his dragon in the surrounding hills, communing with the older dragons that had gone ahead into the earth, learning the mysteries of change, and relishing the marvelous fortune he had bestowed

on his family. He had declined their ecstatic offers to share their wealth with him, as what he had attained was greater than anything gold could buy, and besides, now he belonged, like his beast, to the wild spaces and could not go where the dragon could not. But he was pleased to witness from afar his family's pleasure as their village was transformed into a palatial kingdom.

Naturally, where there was an abundance of gold, there was trouble: His parents were content with a life of leisure, but his brothers became lords, ostentatiously displaying their power, rewarding friends and banishing enemies. And it was only a matter of time before the armies that Yu Ching had fought with and against as a soldier heard of these new lords and arrived to challenge them for their gold. Yu Ching, by now as elemental as his beast consort, was far removed from quotidian affairs, and he had no intention of interfering further in his family's fortune. But one day his mother, dressed in the finest silk with white jade bracelets on her arms and tears sparking in her eyes, prostrated herself in the mud on a desolate hillside and cried for him to save them from the advancing hordes. Yu Ching, at one with the natural flow, was loathe to rouse himself from the hoary glade where he was hidden, and his mother left despondent, believing herself unheard. Only days later, when she was on the brink of forfeiting her life rather than witness the destruction of her new-won luxury, did her youngest son appear. He came soaring out of the rising sun as the advancing armies had begun their final assault on the young valley kingdom.

Yu Ching, hesitant from his one experience of war to shed blood, brought his dragon down in the middle of the attacking warlord's camp and within a very short time had convinced the great warrior of the wisdom and true succor of retreat. By the time of this appearance, Yu Ching's physical form had altered remarkably. He was still the robust farmboy he had been, but his eyes had acquired the fulgent luminosity of his

dragon associate, his voice had the timbre of a volcano, and the pondy fragrance of moss and ferns that hazed about him was soporific. The warlord indeed retreated and spent the rest of his days composing flower and stream poetry, his generals became monks and wandering scholars, and his armies disbanded.

Fearful of his family's gratitude and the strong likelihood of his continuing indenture to them as a guardian, Yu Ching left his home in the hills and headed for the mountain monastery where he had once sought enlightenment and where, now, he hoped to share with the priests all he had so fortuitously learned in his tenure as a dragon master.

The priests were absorbed in meditation when Yu Ching and the dragon glided over the glass-sharp mountains and circled the monastery three times. At the sound of the creature's thrashing wings and stentorian roar, all the priests looked up and saw the dragon with sunlight whirling on its tusks and blue fire sparking from its wingtips. The dragon came down in the main courtyard in a billow of red dust, and the priests dashed out of the sitting hall to see it, except for the head priest who stayed where he was and lit another incense stick.

The priests gawked at the dragon and its tatterdemalion master, laughing giddily in its deciduous atmosphere. Warily, the bravest of them approached, and Yu Ching, in his softest, least intimidating voice, began speaking to them about his vantage of reality as a dragon lord. He told them about the mind of the beast, the spiral sequence of time, the creeping evolution of global consciousness in which humanity was a single thought, and the spectrum of being that ranged from inert matter through organic form to spirit without any gaps. He spoke about spirit: the nothing that enables everything. An hour later, the head priest emerged and, ignoring the dragon and Yu Ching, went directly into the fields beside the cook-

ing shed where he urinated and began to select the squash, cabbage, and mushrooms for that evening's meal.

Yu Ching followed, the behemoth shambling behind him. He waited patiently while the priest, hunched over, gathered his vegetables. And when the old man stood up, Yu Ching bowed reverentially. Immediately, the head priest seized Yu Ching's head with his left hand and with his right drove his pruning knife into the man's heart. Yu Ching bucked backwards, stared in amazement at the knife strumming between his ribs, and died.

That instant, the dragon, deprived of its terrestrial anchor, burst into a fog and jasmine wind, whirling in a vortex of scales like dried leaves. When the fragrant mist had gusted away, all that was left was Yu Ching's corpse, which the master ordered burned after removing his pruning knife and cleaning it in the soil. The other priests hurried to obey, though a few were hesitant, and one protested aloud, inquiring why the head priest had murdered Yu Ching. The head priest responded that Yu Ching was no longer a man but a dragon master who was poisoning their humanity with knowledge no man could attain for himself. Who was to say if what he had told them were true? The protester mumbled that such a unique being had at least merited the benefit of the doubt. At which the head priest allowed himself a quiet smile. He gazed up at the ice-flashing mountains where the old dragons were watching and declared that he had done better. He had given the dragon master the benefit of the *tao*.

EPILOG

That night the head priest had a dream from which he could not wake himself up. He was in a space outside the cascade of time, a still place yet filled with the noise of the world, like the hollow behind a waterfall. Yu Ching was there, with bees glittering around him, a sunset streaking his hair, and living agates for eyes. He was with his dragon. The beast was silvery as mist without its scales, the firedark of its mad eyes gone round and blinding as sun mirrors.

The head priest trembled—but, with a smell like ferns, Yu Ching approached and reassured him that liberating the dragon from its atavistic form had been wise, even though the priest's style had been somewhat gauche: At least here, above the avenues of the wind, where everything was itself, and animals arrived flame-woven and unthinkably happy, molted free of their desires, thoughts were clear. And the meditations Yu Ching had intuited on the slopes of time were clarified. The only problem was he had no way to communicate his insights to the people inside their world-walking lives who could really use his counsel. So, sitting down in the grasslands aura of the dragon, the head priest listened to Yu Ching's findings: the carnal simplicities of the will, the stillness in the death-wish, the dream-gap between choice and chance, and the meanings transmuting with the passage of half-lives and lifetimes inside stars as matter dissolves into light and the light fuses matter to the heavier elements that are already building the kingdoms of the future.

The head priest woke changed. He left the monastery that day and walked into the world, heading east, for the populous lowlands and the myths of the heart.

PALADIN OF THE LOST HOUR

by Harlan Ellison

Probably because he once wrote a story in which a dog made a meal of a young woman, and another that ended with a man who had no mouth but had to scream, Harlan Ellison has borne the reputation of being a writer of violent fiction. But those who have followed his turbulent, award-winning career more closely make an important distinction between violent and passionate. In this story of two men who meet in a graveyard—a strange, spunky old man named Gaspar and Billy Kinetta, pursued by a tragedy from the Vietnam night—a story that has been chosen as a finalist for the Nebula, the Hugo, and the Humanitas Prize—we can see the true concerns that have dominated Harlan Ellison's work for more than thirty years: the nature of friendship and loneliness, the demands of courage and ethics, the sometimes sad song of the human heart in conflict with itself.

This was an old man. Not an incredibly old man; obsolete, spavined; not as worn as the sway-backed stone steps ascending the Pyramid of the Sun to an ancient temple; not yet a

relic. But even so, a *very* old man, this old man perched on an antique shooting stick, its handles open to form a seat, its spike thrust at an angle into the soft ground and trimmed grass of the cemetery. Gray, thin rain misted down at almost the same angle as that at which the spike pierced the ground. The winter-barren trees lay flat and black against an aluminum sky, unmoving in the chill wind. An old man sitting at the foot of a grave mound whose headstone had tilted slightly when the earth had settled; sitting in the rain and speaking to someone below.

"They tore it down, Minna.

"I tell you, they must have bought off a councilman.

"Came in with bulldozers at six o'clock in the morning, and you *know* that's not legal. There's a Municipal Code. Supposed to hold off till at least seven on weekdays, eight on the weekend; but there they were at six, even *before* six, barely light for godsakes. Thought they'd sneak in and do it before the neighborhood got wind of it and called the landmarks committee. Sneaks: they come on *holidays*, can you imagine!

"But I was out there waiting for them, and I told them, 'You can't do it, that's Code number 91.3002, sub-section E,' and they lied and said they had special permission, so I said to the big muckymuck in charge, 'Let's see your waiver permit,' and he said the Code didn't apply in this case because it was supposed to be only for grading, and since they were demolishing and not grading, they could start whenever they felt like it. So I told him I'd call the police, then, because it came under the heading of Disturbing the Peace, and he said . . . well, I know you hate that kind of language, old girl, so I won't tell you what he said, but you can imagine.

"So I called the police, and gave them my name, and of course they didn't get there till almost quarter after seven (which is what makes me think they bought off a councilman), and by then those 'dozers had leveled most of it. Doesn't take long, you know that.

“And I don’t suppose it’s as great a loss as, maybe, say, the Great Library of Alexandria, but it was the last of the authentic Deco design drive-ins, and the carhops still served you on roller skates, and it was a landmark, and just about the only place left in the city where you could still get a decent grilled cheese sandwich pressed very flat on the grill by one of those weights they used to use, made with real cheese, and not that rancid plastic they cut into squares and call it ‘cheese food.’

“Gone, old dear, gone and mourned. And I understand they plan to put up another one of those mini-malls on the site, just ten blocks away from one that’s already there, and you know what’s going to happen: this new one will drain off the traffic from the older one, and then that one will fail the way they all do when the next one gets built, you’d think they’d see some history in it; but no, they never learn. And you should have seen the crowd by seven-thirty. All ages, even some of those kids painted like aborigines, with torn leather clothing. Even they came to protest. Terrible language, but at least they were concerned. And nothing could stop it. They just whammed it, and down it went.

“I do so miss you today, Minna. No more good grilled cheese.” Said the *very* old man to the ground. And now he was crying softly, and now the wind rose, and the mist rain stippled his overcoat.

Nearby, yet at a distance, Billy Kinetta stared down at another grave. He could see the old man over there off to his left, but he took no further notice. The wind whipped the vent of his trenchcoat. His collar was up but rain trickled down his neck. This was a younger man, not yet thirty-five. Unlike the old man, Billy Kinetta neither cried nor spoke to memories of someone who had once listened. He might have been a geomancer, so silently did he stand, eyes toward the ground.

One of these men was black; the other was white.

Beyond the high, spiked-iron fence surrounding the cemetery two boys crouched, staring through the bars, through the rain; at the men absorbed by grave matters, by matters of graves. These were not really boys. They were legally young men. One was nineteen, the other two months beyond twenty. Both were legally old enough to vote, to drink alcoholic beverages, to drive a car. Neither would reach the age of Billy Kinetta.

One of them said, "Let's take the old man."

The other responded, "You think the guy in the trenchcoat'll get in the way?"

The first one smiled; and a mean little laugh. "I sure as shit hope so." He wore, on his right hand, a leather carnaby glove with the fingers cut off, small round metal studs in a pattern along the line of his knuckles. He made a fist, flexed, did it again.

They went under the spiked fence at a point where erosion had created a shallow gully. "Sonofabitch!" one of them said, as he slid through on his stomach. It was muddy. The front of his sateen roadie jacket was filthy. "Sonofabitch!" He was speaking in general of the fence, the sliding under, the muddy ground, the universe in total. And the old man, who would now *really* get the crap kicked out of him for making this fine sateen roadie jacket filthy.

They sneaked up on him from the left, as far from the young guy in the trenchcoat as they could. The first one kicked out the shooting stick with a short, sharp, downward movement he had learned in his Tae-Kwon Do class. It was called the *yup-chagi*. The old man went over backward.

Then they were on him, the one with the filthy sonofabitch sateen roadie jacket punching at the old man's neck and the side of his face as he dragged him around by the collar of the overcoat. The other one began ransacking the coat pockets, ripping the fabric to get his hand inside.

The old man commenced to scream. "Protect me! You've got to protect me . . . it's necessary to protect me!"

The one pillaging pockets froze momentarily. What the

hell kind of thing is that for this old fucker to be saying? Who the hell does he think'll protect him? Is he asking *us* to protect him? I'll protect you, scumbag! I'll kick in your fuckin' lung! "Shut 'im up!" he whispered urgently to his friend. "Stick a fist in his mouth!" Then his hand, wedged in an inside jacket pocket, closed over something. He tried to get his hand loose, but the jacket and coat and the old man's body had wound around his wrist. "C'mon loose, mother-fuckah!" he said to the very old man, who was still screaming for protection. The other young man was making huffing sounds, as dark as mud, as he slapped at the rain-soaked hair of his victim. "I can't . . . he's all twisted 'round . . . getcher hand outta there so's I can . . ." Screaming, the old man had doubled under, locking their hands on his person.

And then the pillager's fist came loose, and he was clutching—for an instant—a gorgeous pocket watch.

What used to be called a turnip watch.

The dial face was *cloisonné*, exquisite beyond the telling.

The case was of silver, so bright it seemed blue.

The hands, cast as arrows of time, were gold. They formed a shallow V at precisely eleven o'clock. This was happening at 3:45 in the afternoon, with rain and wind.

The timepiece made no sound, no sound at all.

Then: there was space all around the watch, and in that space in the palm of the hand, there was heat. Intense heat for just a moment, just long enough for the hand to open.

The watch glided out of the boy's palm and levitated.

"Help me! You *must* protect me!"

Billy Kinetta heard the shrieking, but did not see the pocket watch floating in the air above the astonished young man. It was silver, and it was end-on toward him, and the rain was silver and slanting; and he did not see the watch hanging free in the air, even when the furious young man disentangled himself and leaped for it. Billy did not see the watch rise just so much, out of reach of the mugger.

Billy Kinetta saw two boys, two young men of ratpack age, beating someone much older; and he went for them. Pow, like that!

Thrashing his legs, the old man twisted around—over, under—as the boy holding him by the collar tried to land a punch to put him away. Who would have thought the old man to have had so much battle in him?

A flapping shape, screaming something unintelligible, hit the center of the group at full speed. The carnaby-gloved hand reaching for the watch grasped at empty air one moment, and the next was buried under its owner as the boy was struck a crackback block that threw him face-first into the soggy ground. He tried to rise, but something stomped him at the base of his spine; something kicked him twice in the kidneys; something rolled over him like a flash flood.

Twisting, twisting, the very old man put his thumb in the right eye of the boy clutching his collar.

The great trenchcoated maelstrom that was Billy Kinetta whirled into the boy as he let loose of the old man on the ground and, howling, slapped a palm against his stinging eye. Billy locked his fingers and delivered a roundhouse wallop that sent the boy reeling backward to fall over Minna's tilted headstone.

Billy's back was to the old man. He did not see the miraculous pocket watch smoothly descend through rain that did not touch it, to hover in front of the old man. He did not see the old man reach up, did not see the timepiece snuggle into an arthritic hand, did not see the old man return the turnip to an inside jacket pocket.

Wind, rain and Billy Kinetta pummeled two young men of a legal age that made them accountable for their actions. There was no thought of the knife stuck down in one boot, no chance to reach it, no moment when the wild thing let them rise. So they crawled. They scrabbled across the muddy ground, the slippery grass, over graves and out of his reach. They ran; falling, rising, falling again; away, without looking back.

Billy Kinetta, breathing heavily, knees trembling, turned to help the old man to his feet; and found him standing, brushing dirt from his overcoat, snorting in anger and mumbling to himself.

"Are you all right?"

For a moment the old man's recitation of annoyance continued, then he snapped his chin down sharply as if marking end to the situation, and looked at his cavalry to the rescue. "That was very good, young fella. Considerable style you've got there."

Billy Kinetta stared at him wide-eyed. "Are you sure you're okay?" He reached over and flicked several blades of wet grass from the shoulder of the old man's overcoat.

"I'm fine. I'm fine but I'm wet and I'm cranky. Let's go somewhere and have a nice cup of Earl Grey."

There had been a look on Billy Kinetta's face as he stood with lowered eyes, staring at the grave he had come to visit. The emergency had removed that look. Now it returned.

"No, thanks. If you're okay, I've got to do some things."

The old man felt himself all over, meticulously, as he replied, "I'm only superficially bruised. Now if I were an old woman, instead of a spunky old man, same age though, I'd have lost considerable of the calcium in my bones, and those two would have done me some mischief. Did you know that women lose a considerable part of their calcium when they reach my age? I read a report." Then he paused, and said shyly, "Come on, why don't you and I sit and chew the fat over a nice cup of tea?"

Billy shook his head with bemusement, smiling despite himself. "You're something else, Dad. I don't even know you."

"I like that."

"What: that I don't know you?"

"No, that you called me 'Dad' and not 'Pop.' I *hate* 'Pop.' Always makes me think the wise-apple wants to snap off my cap with a bottle opener. Now *Dad* has a ring of respect to it.

I like that right down to the ground. Yes, I believe we should find someplace warm and quiet to sit and get to know each other. After all, you saved my life. And you know what that means in the Orient."

Billy was smiling continuously now. "In the first place, I doubt very much I saved your life. Your wallet, maybe. And in the second place, I don't even know your name; what would we have to talk about?"

"Gaspar," he said, extending his hand. "That's a first name. Gaspar. Know what it means?"

Billy shook his head.

"See, already we have something to talk about."

So Billy, still smiling, began walking Gaspar out of the cemetery. "Where do you live? I'll take you home."

They were on the street, approaching Billy Kinetta's 1979 Cutlass. "Where I live is too far for now. I'm beginning to feel a bit peaky. I'd like to lie down for a minute. We can just go on over to your place, if that doesn't bother you. For a few minutes. A cup of tea. Is that all right?"

He was standing beside the Cutlass, looking at Billy with an old man's expectant smile, waiting for him to unlock the door and hold it for him till he'd placed his still-calcium-rich but nonetheless old bones in the passenger seat. Billy stared at him, trying to figure out what was at risk if he unlocked that door. Then he snorted a tiny laugh, unlocked the door, held it for Gaspar as he seated himself, slammed it and went around to unlock the other side and get in. Gaspar reached across and thumbed up the door lock knob. And they drove off together in the rain.

Through all of this the timepiece made no sound, no sound at all.

Like Gaspar, Billy Kinetta was alone in the world.

His three-room apartment was the vacuum in which he existed. It was furnished, but if one stepped out into the

hallway and, for all the money in all the unnumbered accounts in all the banks in Switzerland, one were asked to describe those furnishings, one would come away no richer than before. The apartment was charisma poor. It was a place to come when all other possibilities had been expended. Nothing green, nothing alive, existed in those boxes. No eyes looked back from the walls. Neither warmth nor chill marked those spaces. It was a place to wait.

Gaspar leaned his closed shooting stick, now a walking stick with handles, against the bookcase. He studied the titles of the paperbacks stacked haphazardly on the shelves.

From the kitchenette came the sound of water running into a metal pan. Then tin on cast iron. Then the hiss of gas and the flaring of a match as it was struck; and the pop of the gas being lit.

"Many years ago," Gaspar said, taking out a copy of Moravia's *The Adolescents* and thumbing it as he spoke, "I had a library of books, oh, thousands of books—never could bear to toss one out, not even the bad ones—and when folks would come to the house to visit they'd look around at all the nooks and crannies stuffed with books; and if they were the sort of folks who don't snuggle with books, they'd always ask the same dumb question." He waited a moment for a response and when none was forthcoming (the sound of china cups on sink tile), he said, "Guess what the question was."

From the kitchen, without much interest: "No idea."

"They'd always ask it with the kind of voice people use in the presence of large sculptures in museums. They'd ask me, 'Have you read all these books?'" He waited again, but Billy Kinetta was not playing the game. "Well, young fella, after a while the same dumb question gets asked a million times, you get sorta snappish about it. And it came to annoy me more than a little bit. Till I finally figured out the right answer.

"And you know what that answer was? Go ahead, take a guess."

Billy appeared in the kitchenette doorway. "I suppose you told them you'd read a lot of them but not all of them."

Gaspar waved the guess away with a flapping hand. "Now what good would that have done? They wouldn't know they'd asked a dumb question, but I didn't want to insult them, either. So when they'd ask if I'd read all those books, I'd say, 'Hell no. Who wants a library full of books you've already read?' "

Billy laughed despite himself. He scratched at his hair with idle pleasure, and shook his head at the old man's verve. "Gaspar, you are a wild old man. You retired?"

The old man walked carefully to the most comfortable chair in the room, an overstuffed Thirties-style lounge that had been reupholstered many times before Billy Kinetta had purchased it at the American Cancer Society Thrift Shop. He sank into it with a sigh. "No sir, I am not by any means retired. Still very active."

"Doing what, if I'm not prying?"

"Doing ombudsman."

"You mean, like a consumer advocate? Like Ralph Nader?"

"Exactly. I watch out for things. I listen, I pay some attention; and if I do it right, sometimes I can even make a little difference. Yes, like Mr. Nader. A very fine man."

"And you were at the cemetery to see a relative?"

Gaspar's face settled into an expression of loss. "My dear old girl. My wife, Minna. She's been gone, well, it was twenty years in January." He sat silently staring inward for a while, then: "She was everything to me. The nice part was that I knew how important we were to each other; we discussed, well, just *everything*. I miss that the most, telling her what's going on.

"I go to see her every other day.

"I used to go every day. But. It. Hurt. Too much."

They had tea. Gaspar sipped and said it was very nice, but had Billy ever tried Earl Grey? Billy said he didn't know

what that was, and Gaspar said he would bring him a tin, that it was splendid. And they chatted. Finally, Gaspar asked, "And who were you visiting?"

Billy pressed his lips together. "Just a friend." And would say no more. Then he sighed and said, "Well, listen, I have to go to work."

"Oh? What do you do?"

The answer came slowly. As if Billy Kinetta wanted to be able to say that he was in computers, or owned his own business, or held a position of import. "I'm night manager at a 7-Eleven."

"I'll bet you meet some fascinating people coming in late for milk or one of those slushies," Gaspar said gently. He seemed to understand.

Billy smiled. He took the kindness as it was intended. "Yeah, the cream of high society. That is, when they're not threatening to shoot me through the head if I don't open the safe."

"Let me ask you a favor," Gaspar said. "I'd like a little sanctuary, if you think it's all right. Just a little rest. I could lie down on the sofa for a bit. Would that be all right? You trust me to stay here while you're gone, young fella?"

Billy hesitated only a moment. The very old man seemed okay, not a crazy, certainly not a thief. And what was there to steal? Some tea that wasn't even Earl Grey?

"Sure. That'll be okay. But I won't be coming back till two A.M. So just close the door behind you when you go; it'll lock automatically."

They shook hands, Billy shrugged into his still-wet trenchcoat, and he went to the door. He paused to look back at Gaspar sitting in the lengthening shadows as evening came on. "It was nice getting to know you, Gaspar."

"You can make that a mutual pleasure, Billy. You're a nice young fella."

And Billy went to work, alone as always.

* * *

When he came home, prepared to open a can of Hormel chili, he found the table set for dinner, with the scent of an elegant beef stew enriching the apartment. There were new potatoes and stir-fried carrots and zucchini that had been lightly battered to delicate crispness. And cupcakes. White cake with chocolate frosting. From a bakery.

And in that way, as gently as that, Gaspar insinuated himself into Billy Kinetta's apartment and his life.

As they sat with tea and cupcakes, Billy said, "You don't have anyplace to go, do you?"

The old man smiled and made one of those deprecating movements of the head. "Well, I'm not the sort of fella who can bear to be homeless, but at the moment I'm what vaudevillians used to call 'at liberty.' "

"If you want to stay on a time, that would be okay," Billy said. "It's not very roomy here, but we seem to get on all right."

"That's strongly kind of you, Billy. Yes, I'd like to be your roommate for a while. Won't be too long, though. My doctor tells me I'm not long for this world." He paused, looked into the teacup and said softly, "I have to confess . . . I'm a little frightened. To go. Having someone to talk to would be a great comfort."

And Billy said, without preparation, "I was visiting the grave of a man who was in my rifle company in Vietnam. I go there sometimes." But there was such pain in his words that Gaspar did not press him for details.

So the hours passed, as they will with or without permission, and when Gaspar asked Billy if they could watch the television, to catch an early newscast, and Billy tuned in the old set just in time to pick up dire reports of another aborted disarmament talk, and Billy shook his head and observed that it wasn't only Gaspar who was frightened of something like death, Gaspar chuckled, patted Billy on the knee and said,

with unassailable assurance, "Take my word for it, Billy . . . it isn't going to happen. No nuclear holocaust. Trust me, when I tell you this: it'll never happen. Never, never, not ever."

Billy smiled wanly. "And why not? What makes *you* so sure . . . got some special inside information?"

And Gaspar pulled out the magnificent timepiece, which Billy was seeing for the first time, and he said, "It's not going to happen because it's only eleven o'clock."

Billy stared at the watch, which read 11:00 precisely. He consulted his wristwatch. "Hate to tell you this, but your watch has stopped. It's almost five-thirty."

Gaspar smiled his own certain smile. "No, it's eleven."

And they made up the sofa for the very old man, who placed his pocket change and his fountain pen and the sumptuous turnip watch on the now-silent television set, and they went to sleep.

One day Billy went off while Gaspar was washing the lunch dishes, and when he came back, he had a large paper bag from Toys "R" Us.

Gaspar came out of the kitchenette rubbing a plate with a souvenir dish towel from Niagara Falls, New York. He stared at Billy and the bag. "What's in the bag?" Billy inclined his head, and indicated the very old man should join him in the middle of the room. Then he sat down crosslegged on the floor, and dumped the contents of the bag. Gaspar stared with startlement, and sat down beside him.

So for two hours they played with tiny cars that turned into robots when the sections were unfolded.

Gaspar was excellent at figuring out all the permutations of the Transformers, Starriors and GoBots. He played well.

Then they went for a walk. "I'll treat you to a matinee," Gaspar said. "But no films with Karen Black, Sandy Dennis

or Meryl Streep. They're always crying. Their noses are always red. I can't stand that."

They started to cross the avenue. Stopped at the light was this year's Cadillac Brougham, vanity license plates, ten coats of acrylic lacquer and two coats of clear (with a little retarder in the final "color coat" for a slow dry) of a magenta hue so rich that it approximated the shade of light shining through a decanter filled with Chateau Lafite-Rothschild 1945.

The man driving the Cadillac had no neck. His head sat thumped down hard on the shoulders. He stared straight ahead, took one last deep pull on the cigar, and threw it out the window. The still-smoking butt landed directly in front of Gaspar as he passed the car. The old man stopped, stared down at this coprolitic metaphor, and then stared at the driver. The eyes behind the wheel, the eyes of a macaque, did not waver from the stoplight's red circle. Just outside the window, someone was looking in, but the eyes of the rhesus were on the red circle.

A line of cars stopped behind the Brougham.

Gaspar continued to stare at the man in the Cadillac for a moment, and then, with creaking difficulty, he bent and picked up the smoldering butt of stogie.

The old man walked the two steps to the car—as Billy watched in confusion—thrust his face forward till it was mere inches from the driver's profile, and said with extreme sweetness, "I think you dropped this in our living room."

And as the glazed simian eyes turned to stare directly into the pedestrian's face, nearly nose-to-nose, Gaspar casually flipped the butt with its red glowing tip, into the back seat of the Cadillac, where it began to burn a hole in the fine Corinthian leather.

Three things happened simultaneously:

The driver let out a howl, tried to see the butt in his rear-view mirror, could not get the angle, tried to look over his shoulder into the back seat but without a neck could not

perform that feat of agility, put the car into neutral, opened his door and stormed into the street trying to grab Gaspar. "You fuckin' bastid, whaddaya think you're doin' tuh my car you asshole bastid, I'll kill ya . . ."

Billy's hair stood on end as he saw what Gaspar was doing; he rushed back the short distance in the crosswalk to grab the old man: Gaspar would not be dragged away, stood smiling with unconcealed pleasure at the mad bull rampaging and screaming of the hysterical driver. Billy yanked as hard as he could and Gaspar began to move away, around the front of the Cadillac, toward the curb. Still grinning with octogeneric charm.

The light changed.

These three things happened in the space of five seconds, abetted by the impatient honking of the cars behind the Brougham; as the light turned green.

Screaming, dragging, honking, as the driver found he could not do three things at once: he could not go after Gaspar while the traffic was clanging at him; could not let go of the car door to crawl into the back seat from which now came the stench of charring leather that could not be rectified by an inexpensive Tijuana tuck-'n-roll; could not save his back seat and at the same time stave off the hostility of a dozen drivers cursing and honking. He trembled there, torn three ways, doing nothing.

Billy dragged Gaspar.

Out of the crosswalk. Out of the street. Onto the curb. Up the side street. Into the alley. Through a backyard. To the next street from the avenue.

Puffing with exertion, Billy stopped at last, five houses up the street. Gaspar was still grinning, chuckling softly with unconcealed pleasure at his puckish ways. Billy turned on him with wild gesticulations and babble.

"You're *nuts!*"

"How about that?" the old man said, giving Billy an affectionate poke in the bicep.

"Nuts! Looney! That guy would've torn off your head! What the hell's wrong with you, old man? Are you out of your boots?"

"I'm not crazy. I'm responsible."

"Responsible!?! Responsible, fer chrissakes? For what? For all the butts every yotz throws into the street?"

The old man nodded. "For butts, and trash, and pollution, and toxic waste dumping in the dead of night; for bushes, and cactus, and the baobab tree; for pippin apples and even lima beans, which I despise. You show me someone who'll eat lima beans without being at gunpoint, I'll show you a pervert!"

Billy was screaming. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm also responsible for dogs and cats and guppies and cockroaches and the President of the United States and Jonas Salk and your mother and the entire chorus line at the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas. Also their choreographer."

"Who do you think you are? God?"

"Don't be sacrilegious. I'm too old to wash your mouth out with laundry soap. Of course I'm not God. I'm just an old man. *But I'm responsible.*"

Gaspar started to walk away, toward the corner and the avenue, and a resumption of their route. Billy stood where the old man's words had pinned him.

"Come on, young fella," Gaspar said, walking backward to speak to him, "we'll miss the beginning of the movie. I hate that."

Billy had finished eating, and they were sitting in the dimness of the apartment, only the lamp in the corner lit. The old man had gone to the County Art Museum and had bought inexpensive prints—Max Ernst, Gêrome, Richard Dadd, a subtle Feininger—which he had mounted in Insta-Frames.

They sat in silence for a time, relaxing; then murmuring trivialities in a pleasant undertone.

Finally, Gaspar said, "I've been thinking a lot about my dying. I like what Woody Allen said."

Billy slid to a more comfortable position in the lounge. "What was that?"

"He said: I don't mind dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Billy snickered.

"I feel something like that, Billy. I'm not afraid to go, but I don't want to leave Minna entirely. The times I spend with her, talking to her, well, it gives me the feeling we're still in touch. When I go, that's the end of Minna. She'll be well and truly dead. We never had any children, almost everyone who knew us is gone, no relatives. And we never did anything important that anyone would put in a record book, so that's the end of us. For me, I don't mind; but I wish there was someone who knew about Minna . . . she was a remarkable person."

So Billy said, "Tell me. I'll remember for you."

Memories in no particular order. Some as strong as ropes that could pull the ocean ashore. Some that shimmered and swayed in the faintest breeze like spiderwebs. The entire person, all the little movements, that dimple that appeared when she was amused at something foolish he had said. Their youth together, their love, their procession of their days toward middle age. The small cheers and the pain of dreams never realized. So much about him, as he spoke of her. His voice soft and warm and filled with a longing so deep and true that he had to stop frequently because the words broke and would not come out till he had thought away some of the passion. He thought of her and was glad. He had gathered her together, all her dowry of love and taking care of him, her clothes and the way she wore them, her favorite knickknacks,

a few clever remarks: and he packed it all up and delivered it to a new repository.

The very old man gave Minna to Billy Kinetta for safekeeping.

Dawn had come. The light filtering in through the blinds was saffron. "Thank you, Dad," Billy said. He could not name the feeling that had taken him hours earlier. But he said this: "I've never had to be responsible for anything, or anyone, in my whole life. I never belonged to anybody . . . I don't know why. It didn't bother me, because I didn't know any other way to be."

Then his position changed, there in the lounge. He sat up in a way that Gaspar thought was important. As if Billy were about to open the secret box buried at his center. And Billy spoke so softly the old man had to strain to hear him.

"I didn't even know him.

"We were defending the airfield at Danang. Did I tell you we were 1st Battalion, 9th Marines? Charlie was massing for a big push out of Quang Ngai province, south of us. Looked as if they were going to try to take the provincial capital. My rifle company was assigned to protect the perimeter. They kept sending in patrols to bite us. Every day we'd lose some poor bastard who scratched his head when he shouldn't of. It was June, late in June, cold and a lot of rain. The foxholes were hip-deep in water.

"Flares first. Our howitzers started firing. Then the sky was full of tracers, and I started to turn toward the bushes when I heard something coming, and these two main-force regulars in dark blue uniforms came toward me. I could see them so clearly. Long black hair. All crouched over. And they started firing. And that goddam carbine seized up, wouldn't fire; and I pulled out the banana clip, tried to slap in another, but they saw me and just turned a couple of AK-47's on me . . . God, I remember everything slowed

down . . . I looked at those things, seven-point-six two millimeter assault rifles they were . . . I got crazy for a second, tried to figure out in my own mind if they were Russian-made, or Chinese, or Czech, or North Korean. And it was so bright from the flares I could see them starting to squeeze off the rounds, and then from out of nowhere this lance corporal jumped out at them and yelled somedamnthing like, 'Hey, you VC fucks, looka here!' except it wasn't that . . . I never could recall what he said actually . . . and they turned to brace him . . . and they opened him up like a baggie full of blood . . . and he was all over me, and the bushes, and oh god there was pieces of him floating on the water I was standing in . . ."

Billy was heaving breath with impossible weight. His hands moved in the air before his face without pattern or goal. He kept looking into far corners of the dawn-lit room as if special facts might present themselves to fill out the reasons behind what he was saying.

"Aw, geezus, he was *floating* on the water . . . aw, christ, *he got in my boots!*" Then a wail of pain so loud it blotted out the sound of traffic beyond the apartment; and he began to moan, but not cry; and the moaning kept on; and Gaspar came from the sofa and held him and said such words as *it's all right*, but they might not have been those words, or *any* words.

And pressed against the old man's shoulder, Billy Kinetta ran on only half sane: "He wasn't my friend, I never knew him, I'd never talked to him, but I'd seen him, he was just this guy, and there wasn't any reason to do that, he didn't know whether I was a good guy or a shit or anything, so why did he do that? He didn't need to do that. They wouldn't of seen him. He was dead before I killed them. He was gone already. I never got to say thank you or thank you or . . . *anything!*"

"Now he's in that grave, so I came here to live, so I can

go there, but I try and try to say thank you, and he's dead, and he can't hear me, he can't hear anything, he's just down there, down in the ground, and I can't say thank you . . . oh, geezus, geezus, why don't he hear me, I just want to say thanks . . ."

Billy Kinetta wanted to assume the responsibility for saying thanks, but that was possible only on a night that would never come again; and this was the day.

Gaspar took him to the bedroom and put him down to sleep in exactly the same way one would soothe an old, sick dog.

Then he went to his sofa, and because it was the only thing he could imagine saying, he murmured, "He'll be all right, Minna. Really he will."

When Billy left for the 7-Eleven the next evening, Gaspar was gone. It was an alternate day, and that meant he was out at the cemetery. Billy fretted that he shouldn't be there alone, but the old man had a way of taking care of himself. Billy was not smiling as he thought of his friend, and the word *friend* echoed as he realized that, yes, this was his friend, truly and really his friend. He wondered how old Gaspar was, and how soon Billy Kinetta would be once again what he had always been: alone.

When he returned to the apartment at two-thirty, Gaspar was asleep, cocooned in his blanket on the sofa. Billy went in and tried to sleep, but hours later, when sleep would not come, when thoughts of murky water and calcium night light on dark foliage kept him staring at the bedroom ceiling, he came out of the room for a drink of water. He wandered around the living room, not wanting to be by himself even if the only companionship in this sleepless night was breathing heavily, himself in sleep.

He stared out the window. Clouds lay in chiffon strips across the sky. The squealing of tires from the street.

Sighing, idle in his movement around the room, he saw the

old man's pocket watch lying on the coffee table beside the sofa. He walked to the table. If the watch was still stopped at eleven o'clock, perhaps he would borrow it and have it repaired. It would be a nice thing to do for Gaspar. He loved that beautiful timepiece.

Billy bent to pick it up.

The watch, stopped at the V of eleven precisely, levitated at an angle, floating away from him.

Billy Kinetta felt a shiver travel down his back to burrow in at the base of his spine. He reached for the watch hanging in air before him. It floated away just enough that his fingers massaged empty space. He tried to catch it. The watch eluded him, lazily turning away like an opponent who knows he is in no danger of being struck from behind.

Then Billy realized Gaspar was awake. Turned away from the sofa, nonetheless he knew the old man was observing him. And the blissful floating watch.

He looked at Gaspar.

They did not speak for a long time.

Then: "I'm going back to sleep," Billy said. Quietly.

"I think you have some questions," Gaspar replied.

"Questions? No, of course not, Dad. Why in the world would I have questions? I'm still asleep." But that was not the truth, because he had not been asleep that night.

"Do you know what 'Gaspar' means? Do you remember the three wise men of the Bible, the Magi?"

"I don't want any frankincense and myrrh. I'm going back to bed. I'm going now. You see, I'm going right now."

"'Gaspar' means master of the treasure, keeper of the secrets, paladin of the palace." Billy was staring at him, not walking into the bedroom; just staring at him. As the elegant timepiece floated to the old man, who extended his hand palm-up to receive it. The watch nestled in his hand, unmoving, and it made no sound, no sound at all.

"You go back to bed. But will you go out to the cemetery with me tomorrow? It's important."

"Why?"

"Because I believe I'll be dying tomorrow."

It was a nice day, cool and clear. Not at all a day for dying, but neither had been many such days in Southeast Asia, and death had not been deterred.

They stood at Minna's gravesite, and Gaspar opened his shooting stick to form a seat, and he thrust the spike into the ground, and he settled onto it, and sighed, and said to Billy Kinetta, "I'm growing cold as that stone."

"Do you want my jacket?"

"No. I'm cold inside." He looked around at the sky, at the grass, at the rows of markers. "I've been responsible, for all of this, and more."

"You've said that before."

"Young fella, are you by any chance familiar, in your reading, with an old novel by James Hilton called *Lost Horizon*? Perhaps you saw the movie. It was a wonderful movie, actually much better than the book. Mr. Capra's greatest achievement. A human testament. Ronald Colman was superb. Do you know the story?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the High Lama, played by Sam Jaffe? His name was Father Perrault?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember how he passed on the caretakership of that magical hidden world, Shangri-La, to Ronald Coleman?"

"Yes, I remember that." Billy paused. "Then he died. He was very old, and he died."

Gaspar smiled up at Billy. "Very good, Billy. I knew you were a good boy. So now, if you remember all that, may I tell you a story? It's not a very long story."

Billy nodded, smiling at his friend.

"In 1582 Pope Gregory XIII decreed that the civilized world would no longer observe the Julian calendar. October 4th, 1582 was followed, the next day, by October 15th. Eleven days vanished from the world. One hundred and seventy years later, the British Parliament followed suit, and September 2nd, 1752 was followed, the next day, by September 14th. Why did he do that, the Pope?"

Billy was bewildered by the conversation. "Because he was bringing it into synch with the real world. The solstices and equinoxes. When to plant, when to harvest."

Gaspar wagged a finger at him with pleasure. "Excellent, young fella. And you're correct when you say Gregory abolished the Julian calendar because its error of one day in every one hundred and twenty-eight years had moved the vernal equinox to March 11th. That's what the history books say. It's what *every* history books says. But what if?"

"What if *what*? I don't know what you're talking about."

"What if: Pope Gregory had the knowledge revealed to him that he *must* readjust time in the minds of men? What if: the excess time in 1582 was eleven days and one hour? What if: he accounted for those eleven days, vanished those eleven days, but the one hour slipped free, was left loose to bounce through eternity? A very special hour . . . an hour that must *never* be used . . . an hour that must never toll. What if?"

Billy spread his hands. "What if, what if, what if! It's all just philosophy. It doesn't mean anything. Hours aren't real, time isn't something that you can bottle up. So what if there is an hour out there somewhere that . . ."

And he stopped.

He grew tense, and leaned down to the old man. "The watch. Your watch. It doesn't work. It's stopped."

Gaspar nodded. "At eleven o'clock. My watch works; it keeps very special time, for one very special hour."

Billy touched Gaspar's shoulder. Carefully he asked, "Who are you, Dad?"

The old man did not smile as he said, "Gaspar. Keeper. Paladin. Guardian."

"Father Perrault was hundreds of years old."

Gaspar shook his head with a wistful expression on his old face. "I'm eighty-six years old, Billy. You asked me if I thought I was God. Not God, not Father Perrault, not an immortal, just an old man who will die too soon. Are you Ronald Colman?"

Billy nervously touched his lower lip with a finger. He looked at Gaspar as long as he could, then turned away. He walked off a few paces, stared at the barren trees. It seemed suddenly much chillier here in this place of entombed remembrances. From a distance he said, "But it's only . . . what? A chronological convenience. Like daylight saving time; Spring forward, Fall back. We don't actually *lose* an hour; we get it back."

Gaspar stared at Minna's grave. "At the end of April I lost an hour. If I die now, I'll die an hour short in my life. I'll have been cheated out of one hour I want, Billy." He swayed toward all he had left of Minna. "One last hour I could have with my old girl. That's what I'm afraid of, Billy. I have that hour in my possession. I'm afraid I'll use it, god help me, I want so much to use it."

Billy came to him. Tense, and chilled, he said, "Why must that hour never toll?"

Gaspar drew a deep breath and tore his eyes away from the grave. His gaze locked with Billy's. And he told him.

The years, all the days and hours, exist. As solid and as real as mountains and oceans and men and women and the baobab tree. Look, he said, at the lines in my face and deny that time is real. Consider these dead weeds that were once alive and try to believe it's all just vapor or the mutual agreement of Popes and Caesars and young men like you.

"The lost hour must never come, Billy, for in that hour it all ends. The light, the wind, the stars, this magnificent open

place we call the universe. It all ends, and in its place—waiting, always waiting—is eternal darkness. No new beginnings, no world without end, just the infinite emptiness.”

And he opened his hand, which had been lying in his lap, and there, in his palm, rested the watch, making no sound at all, and stopped dead at eleven o'clock. “Should it strike twelve, Billy, eternal night falls; from which there is no recall.”

There he sat, this very old man, just a perfectly normal old man. The most recent in the endless chain of keepers of the lost hour, descended in possession from Caesar and Pope Gregory XIII, down through the centuries of men and women who had served as caretakers of the excellent timepiece. And now he was dying, and now he wanted to cling to life as every man and woman clings to life no matter how awful or painful or empty, even if it is for one more hour. The suicide, falling from the bridge, at the final instant, tries to fly, tries to climb back up the sky. This weary old man, who only wanted to stay one brief hour more with Minna. Who was afraid that his love would cost the universe.

He looked at Billy, and he extended his hand with the watch waiting for its next paladin. So softly Billy could barely hear him, knowing that he was denying himself what he most wanted at this last place in his life, he whispered, “If I die without passing it on . . . it will begin to tick.”

“Not me,” Billy said. “Why did you pick me? I’m no one special. I’m not someone like you. I run an all-night service mart. There’s nothing special about me the way there is about you! I’m *not* Ronald Colman! I don’t want to be responsible, I’ve *never* been responsible!”

Gaspar smiled gently. “You’ve been responsible for me.”

Billy’s rage vanished. He looked wounded.

“Look at us, Billy. Look at what color you are; and look at what color I am. You took me in as a friend. I think of you as worthy, Billy. Worthy.”

They remained there that way, in silence, as the wind rose. And finally, in a timeless time, Billy nodded.

Then the young man said, "You won't be losing Minna, Dad. Now you'll go to the place where she's been waiting for you, just as she was when you first met her. There's a place where we find everything we've ever lost through the years."

"That's good, Billy, that you tell me that. I'd like to believe it, too. But I'm a pragmatist. I believe what exists . . . like rain and Minna's grave and the hours that pass that we can't see, but they *are*. I'm afraid, Billy. I'm afraid this will be the last time I can speak to her. So I ask a favor. As payment, in return for my life spent protecting the watch.

"I ask for one minute of the hour, Billy. One minute to call her back, so we can stand face-to-face and I can touch her and say goodbye. You'll be the new protector of this watch, Billy, so I ask you please, just let me steal one minute."

Billy could not speak. The look on Gaspar's face was without horizon, empty as tundra, bottomless. The child left alone in darkness; the pain of eternal waiting. He knew he could never deny this old man, no matter what he asked, and in the silence he heard a voice say: "*No!*" And it was his own.

He had spoken without conscious volition. Strong and determined, and without the slightest room for reversal. If a part of his heart had been swayed by compassion, that part had been instantly overridden. No. A final, unshakeable no.

For an instant Gaspar looked crestfallen. His eyes clouded with tears; and Billy felt something twist and break within himself at the sight. He knew he had hurt the old man. Quickly, but softly, he said urgently, "You know that would be wrong, Dad. We mustn't . . ."

Gaspar said nothing. Then he reached out with his free hand and took Billy's. It was an affectionate touch. "That was the last test, young fella. Oh, you know I've been test-

ing you don't you? This important item couldn't go to just anyone.

"And you passed the test, my friend: my last, best friend. When I said I could bring her back from where she's gone, here in this place we've both come to so often, to talk to someone lost to us, I knew you would understand that *anyone* could be brought back in that stolen minute. I knew you wouldn't use it for yourself, no matter how much you wanted it; but I wasn't sure that as much as you like me, it might not sway you. But you wouldn't even give it to *me*, Billy."

He smiled up at him, his eyes now clear and steady.

"I'm content, Billy. You needn't have worried. Minna and I don't need that minute. But if you're to carry on for me, I think you *do* need it. You're in pain, and that's no good for someone who carries this watch. You've got to heal, Billy.

"So I give you something you would never take for yourself. I give you a going-away present . . ."

And he started the watch, whose ticking was as loud and as clear as a baby's first sound; and the sweep-second hand began to move away from eleven o'clock.

Then the wind rose, and the sky seemed to cloud over, and it grew colder, with a remarkable silver-blue mist that rolled across the cemetery; and though he did not see it emerge from that grave at a distance far to the right, Billy Kinetta saw a shape move toward him. A soldier in the uniform of a day past, and his rank was Lance Corporal. He came toward Billy Kinetta, and Billy went to meet him as Gaspar watched.

They stood together and Billy spoke to him. And the man whose name Billy had never known when he was alive, answered. And then he faded, as the seconds ticked away. Faded, and faded, and was gone. And the silver-blue mist rolled through them, and past them, and was gone; and the soldier was gone.

Billy stood alone.

When he turned back to look across the grounds to his

friend, he saw that Gaspar had fallen from the shooting-stick. He lay on the ground. Billy rushed to him, and fell to his knees and lifted him onto his lap. Gaspar was still.

"Oh, god, Dad, you should have heard what he said. Oh, geez, he let me go. He let me go so I didn't even have to say I was sorry. He told me he didn't even *see* me in that fox-hole. He never knew he'd saved my life. I said thank you and he said no, thank *you*, that he hadn't died for nothing. Oh, please, Dad, please don't be dead yet. I want to tell you . . ."

And the old man, the very old man, opened his eyes.

"May I remember you to my old girl, Billy?" And his eyes closed and his caretakership was at an end, as his hand opened and the most excellent timepiece, now stopped again, at one minute past eleven, floated from his palm and waited till Billy Kinetta extended his hand, and then it floated down and lay there silently. Safe. Protected.

There in the place where all lost things returned, the young man sat on the cold ground, rocking the body of his friend. And he was in no hurry to leave. There was time.

The Author gratefully acknowledges the importance of a discussion with Ms. Ellie Grossman in the creation of this work of fiction.



DAW

Don't miss these exciting DAW anthologies

THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES: XIV

Karl Edward Wagner, editor (UE2156—\$3.50)

THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 10

Arthur W. Saha, editor (UE1963—\$2.75)

THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 11

Arthur W. Saha, editor (UE2097—\$2.95)

THE 1986 ANNUAL WORLD'S BEST SF

Donald A. Wollheim, editor (UE2136—\$3.50)

ISAAC ASIMOV PRESENTS

THE GREAT SF STORIES: 14

Isaac Asimov and Martin Greenberg, editors
(UE2106—\$3.50)

SWORD AND SORCERESS II

Marion Zimmer Bradley, editor (UE2041—\$2.95)

SWORD AND SORCERESS III

Marion Zimmer Bradley, editor (UE2141—\$3.50)

NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY

P.O. Box 999, Bergenfield, New Jersey 07621

Please send me the DAW BOOKS I have checked above. I am enclosing \$_____ (check or money order—no currency or C O D 's) Please include the list price plus \$1.00 per order to cover handling costs. Prices and numbers are subject to change without notice.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.



DON'T MISS DAW'S RUNAWAY BESTSELLER

TAILCHASER'S SONG

By Tad Williams

"For anyone who loves and understands cats . . . a fantasy of epic proportions in the vein of *Watership Down* . . ."—*San Diego Union*

Meet Fritti Tailchaser, a ginger tomcat of rare courage and curiosity, a born survivor in a world of heroes and villains, of powerful gods and whiskery legends about those strange, furless, erect creatures called M'an. Join Tailchaser on his magical quest to rescue his catfriend Hushpad—a quest that takes him all the way to cat hell and beyond. . . .

"A felicitous felinic fantasy without the coyness that sometimes characterizes such yarns. The reader can totally believe the cat personalities and be quite worried over their fates. My compliments to Mr. Williams . . . a fantastic talent."—Anne McCaffrey, best-selling author of *Moreta*, *Dragon Lady of Pern* and *The White Dragon*

IN HARDCOVER

(0-8099-0002-5 \$15.50)

NOW IN PAPERBACK

(UE2162—\$3.95)

NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY

P.O. Box 999, Bergenfield, New Jersey 07621

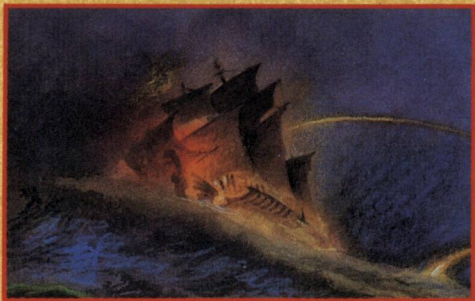
Please send me the DAW BOOKS I have checked above. I am enclosing \$_____ (check or money order—no currency or C.O.D.'s). Please include the list price plus \$1.00 per order to cover handling costs. Prices and numbers subject to change without notice.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.



FROM DRAGON'S FLIGHT TO SPELLBINDER'S MIGHT....

From a knight wandering on his endless quest for battle...to an "imaginary" playmate of truly mythical proportions...to a forgotten Empire of legendary glory...here are your magical keys to the many treasure chests of fantasy. This delightful collection includes rare gems from such master storytellers as Harlan Ellison, Jane Yolen, A. A. Attanasio, and Nicholas Yermakov, as well as enchanting tales from golden new talents.

Whether you long to walk the winding streets of exotic, long-lost cities, yearn to soar the skies on pegasus' wings, or want to bring some of that special magic into our modern-day world, you'll find your dreams of enchantment more than fulfilled in this latest collection of—

THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY STORIES

