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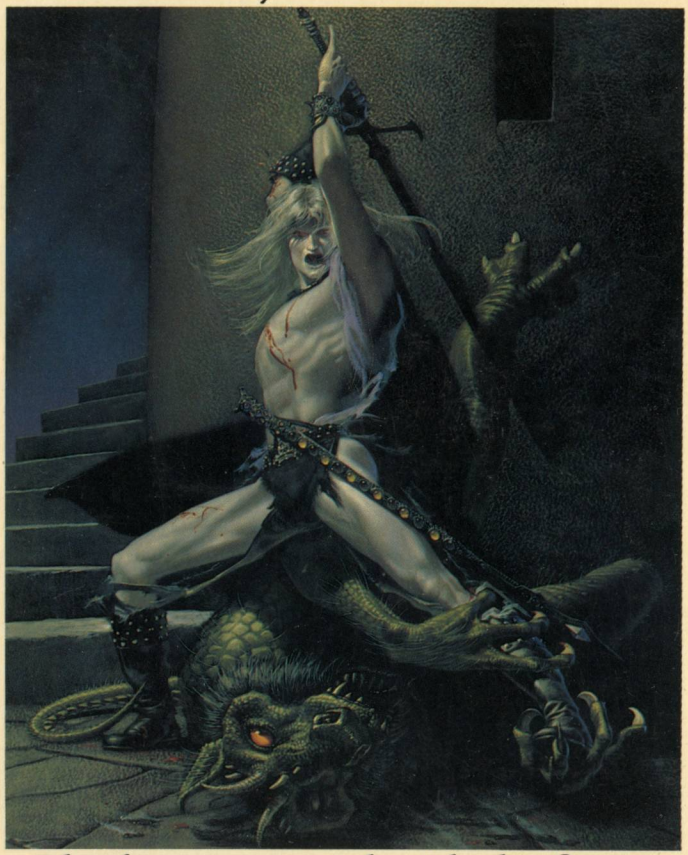
The Year's Best Fantasy Stories: 7

Edited by Arthur W. Saha



The fantasy annual with the finest

This, the first and leading selection of the best fantasy stories of the year, has become an institution in the world of imaginative reading. Founded by Lin Carter, this seventh volume initiates a new editor, Arthur W. Saha. "Art" Saha is best known as the associate editor of the *Annual World's Best SF*. He is a fantasy fiction buff of over thirty years' activity, a leader of the New York fan organization and their famed Lunacon, a collector of note, a former Futurian, and one of this year's judges for the World Fantasy Awards. He brings to his selections the care and selectivity that mark the true connoisseur. Here are eleven of the finest and most fantastic....


H.R. VAN DONGEN

THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 7

Edited by

Arthur W. Saha

DAW Books, Inc.
Donald A. Wollheim, Publisher
1633 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10019

PUBLISHED BY
THE NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY
OF CANADA LIMITED

Cover art, *Elric,* by Michael Whelan.

DEDICATION

This is for Heidi
With a father's love.

FIRST PRINTING, OCTOBER 1981

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

DAW BOOKS

DAW TRADEMARK REGISTERED
U.S. PAT. OFF. MARCA
REGISTRADA. HECHO EN U.S.A.

PRINTED IN CANADA
COVER PRINTED IN U.S.A.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

At a recent science fiction convention I was one of the participants on a panel on fantasy which became a lively discussion attempting to answer the question of why fantasy fiction is experiencing such a resurgence of popularity. The opinion surfaced that many no longer found science fiction satisfying because science has been unable to solve all of our problems, causing people to turn to fantasy for answers. If this is really so, it is unfortunate. Science, after all, is a continuing search for truth, and if, as we probe more deeply into the nature of the universe, we find it necessary to alter or even discard some hypotheses, the scientific method is in no way impeached. The universe, itself, has in no way changed; only our knowledge of it is continually deepening and becoming more complete. Let's not forget that the word science comes from the Latin *scientia:* knowledge. Perhaps we can and should at times criticize some of the uses society makes of science but certainly not science itself.

I'd rather think that fantasy is, as it always has been, a highly satisfying form of entertainment; something which appeals to our emotions; sometimes speaks to our joys and, yes, to our fears and doubts; even occasionally might make us examine our perception of reality; but most importantly an extremely pleasant and gratifying way to spend a few hours. At any rate, I'll not dwell further on the subject, for the present volume is intended to present for the reader's enjoyment and pleasure some of the best tales in the genre published in 1980.

These stories have been selected from a variety of sources: *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction,* the only newsstand magazine still at least partially devoted to fantasy, and it has published many excellent stories in its over thirty-year existence; various original anthologies; gaming magazines; and small press magazines which have recently become an increasingly important source for tales of the imagination.

Nineteen eighty was another fascinating year for devotees of fantasy, with the publication of any number of excellent novels, anthologies and collections. I have the honor of being

one of the judges this year for the World Fantasy Awards. This is an experience which promises to be as enjoyable as has been reading and selecting stories for this anthology.

Undoubtedly, the most exciting event of the year was the publication of *Unfinished Tales* by J. R. R. Tolkien, edited with commentary by his son Christopher Tolkien: a real bonanza for lovers of Middle Earth and Numenor.

Regrettably, as is so often the case, some sad news must also be reported: we lost two of the giants of the field. John Collier, author of many outstanding short stories, most of them collected in *Fancies and Goodnights* and *The John Collier Reader,* died in April 1980. He won the International Fantasy Award in 1952. Anyone who has ever read a "Collieryarn" will not soon forget him. H. Warner Munn died in January 1981. He started writing for *Weird Tales* in 1925 and is best known for his *Tales of the Werewolf Clan* and for *Merlin's Godson* and *Merlin's Ring*. Anyone who had the pleasure of meeting him at a World Fantasy Convention will long remember him as a lively and extremely personable gentleman. Both authors will be missed.

We also witnessed the demise of *Fantastic* after a long period of moribundity. It has been combined with *Amazing Stories,* and presumably some fantasy will appear in that magazine. As far as magazines are concerned, 1981 promises to be better. We've seen the revival of *Weird Tales* as a book magazine and the appearance of a brand new title, *Rod Serling's The Twilight Zone Magazine.*

Elsewhere in the Fantasy World, the 1980 World Science Fiction Convention was held in Boston over the Labor Day Weekend. The J. R. R. Tolkien Memorial Award for Achievement in Fantasy, The Gandalf, was awarded to Ray Bradbury.

The World Fantasy Convention was held in Baltimore, appropriately enough, over the Hallowe'en Weekend. Guests of Honor were Jack Vance, author, and Boris Vallejo, artist. A featured attraction of the convention was a visit to Edgar Allan Poe's house and gravesite. It is Poe, after all, who is generally considered to have been the father of the modern short story, and, of course, most of his short stories were fantasy.

Join me now on journeys to several different worlds of fantasy.

Arthur W. Saha

Roger Zelazny

THE GEORGE BUSINESS

St. George, the patron saint of England, Portugal and Aragon, somehow acquired a reputation for slaying dragons and thereby rescuing damsels in distress. How he gained this reputation is not clear, although it has been speculated that the legend might be based on the Greek myth in which Perseus slays a sea monster to rescue Andromeda; not the first time, of course, that pagan myth and legend became part of Christian story and practice. Be that as it may, Roger Zelazny, in this delightful fantasy, offers a different explanation of how St. George became renowned for such exploits.

Deep in his lair, Dart twisted his green and golden length about his small hoard, his sleep troubled by dreams of a series of identical armored assailants. Since dragons' dreams are always prophetic, he woke with a shudder, cleared his throat to the point of sufficient illumination to check on the state of his treasure, stretched, yawned and set forth up the tunnel to consider the strength of the opposition. If it was too great, he would simply flee, he decided. The hell with the hoard, it wouldn't be the first time.

As he peered from the cavemouth, he beheld a single knight in mismatched armor atop a tired-looking gray horse, just rounding the bend. His lance was not even couched, but still pointing skyward.

Assuring himself that the man was unaccompanied, he roared and slithered forth.

"Halt," he bellowed, "you who are about to fry!"

The knight obliged.

"You're the one I came to see," the man said. "I have—"

"Why," Dart asked, "do you wish to start this business up again? Do you realize how long it has been since a knight and dragon have done battle?"

"Yes, I do. Quite awhile. But I—"

"It is almost invariably fatal to one of the parties concerned. Usually your side."

"Don't I know it. Look, you've got me wrong—"

"I dreamt a dragon-dream of a young man named George with whom I must do battle. You bear him an extremely close resemblance."

"I can explain. It's not as bad as it looks. You see—"

"*Is* your name George?"

"Well, yes. But don't let that bother you—"

"It *does* bother me. You want my pitiful hoard? It wouldn't keep you in beer money for the season. Hardly worth the risk."

"I'm not after your hoard—"

"I haven't grabbed off a virgin in centuries. They're usually old and tough, anyhow, not to mention hard to find."

"No one's accusing—"

"As for cattle, I always go a great distance. I've gone out of my way, you might say, to avoid getting a bad name in my own territory."

"I know you're no real threat here. I've researched it quite carefully—"

"And do you think that armor will really protect you when I exhale my deepest, hottest flames?"

"Hell, no! So don't do it, huh? If you'd please—"

"And that lance... You're not even holding it properly."

George lowered the lance.

"On that you are correct," he said, "but it happens to be tipped with one of the deadliest poisons known to Herman the Apothecary."

"I say! That's hardly sporting!"

"I know. But even if you incinerate me, I'll bet I can scratch you before I go."

"Now that would be rather silly—both of us dying like that—wouldn't it?" Dart observed, edging away. "It would serve no useful purpose that I can see."

"I feel precisely the same way about it."

"Then why are we getting ready to fight?"

"I have no desire whatsoever to fight with you!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand. You said your name is George, and I had this dream—"

"I can explain it."

"But the poisoned lance—"

"Self-protection, to hold you off long enough to put a proposition to you."

Dart's eyelids lowered slightly.

"What sort of proposition?"

"I want to hire you."

"Hire me? Whatever for? And what are you paying?"

"Mind if I rest this lance a minute? No tricks?"

"Go ahead. If you're talking gold your life is safe."

George rested his lance and undid a pouch at his belt. He dipped his hand into it and withdrew a fistful of shining coins. He tossed them gently, so that they clinked and shone in the morning light.

"You have my full attention. That's a good piece of change there."

"My life's savings. All yours—in return for a bit of business."

"What's the deal?"

George replaced the coins in his pouch and gestured.

"See that castle in the distance—two hills away?"

"I've flown over it many times."

"In the tower to the west are the chambers of Rosalind, daughter of the Baron Maurice. She is very dear to his heart, and I wish to wed her."

"There's a problem?"

"Yes. She's attracted to big, brawny barbarian types, into which category I, alas, do not fall. In short, she doesn't like me."

"That *is* a problem."

"So, if I could pay you to crash in there and abduct her, to bear her off to some convenient and isolated place and wait for me, I'll come along, we'll fake a battle, I'll vanquish you, you fly away and I'll take her home. I am certain I will then appear sufficiently heroic in her eyes to rise from sixth to first position on her list of suitors. How does that sound to you?"

Dart sighed a long column of smoke.

"Human, I bear your kind no special fondness—particu-

larly the armored variety with lances—so I don't know why I'm telling you this... Well, I do know, actually... But never mind. I could manage it, all right. But, if you win the hand of that maid, do you know what's going to happen? The novelty of your deed will wear off after a time—and you know that there will be no encore. Give her a year, I'd say, and you'll catch her fooling around with one of those brawny barbarians she finds so attractive. Then you must either fight him and be slaughtered or wear horns, as they say."

George laughed.

"It's nothing to me how she spends her spare time. I've a girlfriend in town myself."

Dart's eyes widened.

"I'm afraid I don't understand..."

"She's the old baron's only offspring, and he's on his last legs. Why else do you think an uncomely wench like that would have six suitors? Why else would I gamble my life's savings to win her?"

"I see," said Dart. "Yes, I can understand greed."

"I call it a desire for security."

"Quite. In that case, forget my simple-minded advice. All right, give me the gold and I'll do it." Dart gestured with one gleaming vane. "The first valley in those western mountains seems far enough from my home for our confrontation."

"I'll pay you half now and half on delivery."

"Agreed. Be sure to have the balance with you, though, and drop it during the scuffle. I'll return for it after you two have departed. Cheat me and I'll repeat the performance, with a different ending."

"The thought had already occurred to me. —Now, we'd better practice a bit, to make it look realistic. I'll rush at you with the lance, and whatever side she's standing on I'll aim for it to pass you on the other. You raise that wing, grab the lance and scream like hell. Blow a few flames around, too."

"I'm going to see you scour the tip of that lance before we rehearse this."

"Right. —I'll release the lance while you're holding it next to you and rolling around. Then I'll dismount and rush toward you with my blade. I'll whack you with the flat of it—again, on the far side—a few times. Then you bellow again and fly away."

"Just how sharp is that thing, anyway?"

"Damned dull. It was my grandfather's. Hasn't been honed since he was a boy."

"And you drop the money during the fight?"

"Certainly. —How does that sound?"

"Not bad. I can have a few clusters of red berries under my wing, too. I'll squash them once the action gets going."

"Nice touch. Yes, do that. Let's give it a quick rehearsal now and then get on with the real thing."

"And don't whack too hard..."

That afternoon, Rosalind of Maurice Manor was abducted by a green and gold dragon who crashed through the wall of her chamber and bore her off in the direction of the western mountains.

"Never fear!" shouted her sixth-ranked suitor—who just happened to be riding by—to her aged father who stood wringing his hands on a nearby balcony. "I'll rescue her!" and he rode off to the west.

Coming into the valley where Rosalind stood backed into a rocky cleft, guarded by the fuming beast of gold and green, George couched his lance.

"Release that maiden and face your doom!" he cried.

Dart bellowed, George rushed. The lance fell from his hands and the dragon rolled upon the ground, spewing gouts of fire into the air. A red substance dribbled from beneath the thundering creature's left wing. Before Rosalind's wide eyes, George advanced and swung his blade several times.

"...and that!" he cried, as the monster stumbled to its feet and sprang into the air, dripping more red.

It circled once and beat its way off toward the top of the mountain, then over it and away.

"Oh George!" Rosalind cried, and she was in his arms. "Oh, George..."

He pressed her to him for a moment.

"I'll take you home now," he said.

That evening as he was counting his gold, Dart heard the sound of two horses approaching his cave. He rushed up the tunnel and peered out.

George, now mounted on a proud white stallion and leading the gray, wore a matched suit of bright armor. He was not smiling, however.

"Good evening," he said.

"Good evening. What brings you back so soon?"

"Things didn't turn out exactly as I'd anticipated."

"You seem far better accoutered. I'd say your fortunes had taken a turn."

"Oh, I recovered my expenses and came out a bit ahead. But that's all. I'm on my way out of town. Thought I'd stop by and tell you the end of the story. —Good show you put on, by the way. It probably would have done the trick—"

"But—?"

"She was married to one of the brawny barbarians this morning, in their family chapel. They were just getting ready for a wedding trip when you happened by."

"I'm awfully sorry."

"Well, it's the breaks. To add insult, though, her father dropped dead of a heart attack during your performance. My former competitor is now the new baron. He rewarded me with a new horse and armor, a gratuity and a scroll from the local scribe lauding me as a dragon-slayer. Then he hinted rather strongly that the horse and my new reputation could take me far. Didn't like the way Rosalind was looking at me now I'm a hero."

"That is a shame. Well, we tried."

"Yes. So I just stopped by to thank you and let you know how it all turned out. It would have been a good idea—if it had worked."

"You could hardly have foreseen such abrupt nuptials. —You know, I've spent the entire day thinking about the affair. We *did* manage it awfully well."

"Oh, no doubt about that. It went beautifully."

"I was thinking... How'd you like a chance to get your money back?"

"What have you got in mind?"

"Uh— When I was advising you earlier that you might not be happy with the lady, I was trying to think about the situation in human terms. Your desire was entirely understandable to me otherwise. In fact, you think quite a bit like a dragon."

"Really?"

"Yes. It's rather amazing, actually. Now—realizing that it only failed because of a fluke, your idea still has considerable merit."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"There is—ah—a lovely lady of my own species whom I have been singularly unsuccessful in impressing for a long

while now. Actually, there are an unusual number of parallels in our situations."

"She has a large hoard, huh?"

"Extremely so."

"Older woman?"

"Among dragons, a few centuries this way or that are not so important. But she, too, has other admirers and seems attracted by the more brash variety."

"Uh-huh. I begin to get the drift. You gave me some advice once. I'll return the favor. Some things are more important than hoards."

"Name one."

"My life. If I were to threaten her she might do me in all by herself, before you could come to her rescue."

"No, she's a demure little thing. Anyway, it's all a matter of timing. I'll perch on a hilltop nearby—I'll show you where—and signal you when to begin your approach. Now, this time I have to win, of course. Here's how we'll work it..."

George sat on the white charger and divided his attention between the distant cavemouth and the crest of a high hill off to his left. After a time, a shining winged form flashed through the air and settled upon the hill. Moments later, it raised one bright wing.

He lowered his visor, couched his lance and started forward. When he came within hailing distance of the cave he cried out:

"I know you're in there, Megtag! I've come to destroy you and make off with your hoard! You godless beast! Eater of children! This is your last day on earth!"

An enormous burnished head with cold green eyes emerged from the cave. Twenty feet of flame shot from its huge mouth and scorched the rock before it. George halted hastily. The beast looked twice the size of Dart and did not seem in the least retiring. Its scales rattled like metal as it began to move forward.

"Perhaps I exaggerated..." George began, and he heard the frantic flapping of giant vanes overhead.

As the creature advanced, he felt himself seized by the shoulders. He was borne aloft so rapidly that the scene below dwindled to toy-size in a matter of moments. He saw his new steed bolt and flee rapidly back along the route they had followed.

"What the hell happened?" he cried.

"I hadn't been around for awhile," Dart replied. "Didn't know one of the others had moved in with her. You're lucky I'm fast. That's Pelladon. He's a mean one."

"Great. Don't you think you should have checked first?"

"Sorry. I thought she'd take decades to make up her mind—without prompting. Oh, what a hoard! You should have seen it!"

"Follow that horse. I want him back."

They sat before Dart's cave, drinking.

"Where'd you ever get a whole barrel of wine?"

"Lifted it from a barge, up the river. I do that every now and then. I keep a pretty good cellar, if I do say so."

"Indeed. Well, we're none the poorer, really. We can drink to that."

"True, but I've been thinking again. You know, you're a very good actor."

"Thanks. You're not so bad yourself."

"Now supposing—just supposing—you were to travel about. Good distances from here each time. Scout out villages, on the continent and in the isles. Find out which ones are well off and lacking in local heroes..."

"Yes?"

"...And let them see that dragon-slaying certificate of yours. Brag a bit. Then come back with a list of towns. Maps, too."

"Go ahead."

"Find the best spots for a little harmless predation and choose a good battle site—"

"Refill?"

"Please."

"Here."

"Thanks. Then you show up, and for a fee—"

"Sixty-forty."

"That's what I was thinking, but I'll bet you've got the figures transposed."

"Maybe fifty-five and forty-five then."

"Down the middle, and let's drink on it."

"Fair enough. Why haggle?"

"Now I know why I dreamed of fighting a great number of knights, all of them looking like you. You're going to make a name for yourself, George."

Orson Scott Card

THE PRINCESS AND THE BEAR

The meaning of love all too frequently eludes us. We so often mistake the illusion for the reality. Here, in a tale full of charm and beauty and enchantment, Orson Scott Card examines the nature of love and of its partner, hate, and, most importantly, offers for our enjoyment a bewitching piece of storytelling.

I know you've seen the lions. All over the place: beside the doors, flanking the throne, roaring out of the plates in the pantry, spouting water from under the eaves.

Haven't you ever wondered why the statue atop the city gates is a bear?

Many years ago in this very city, in the very palace that you can see rising granite and gray behind the old crumbly walls of the king's garden, there lived a princess. It was so long ago that who can ever remember her name? She was just the princess. These days it isn't in fashion to think that princesses are beautiful, and in fact they tend to be a bit horse-faced and gangling. But in those days it was an absolute requirement that a princess look fetching, at least when wearing the most expensive clothes available.

This princess, however, would have been beautiful dressed like a slum child or a shepherd girl. She was beautiful the moment she was born. She only got more beautiful as she grew up.

And there was also a prince. He was not her brother,

though. He was the son of a king in a far-off land, and his father was the thirteenth cousin twice removed of the princess' father. The boy had been sent here to our land to get an education—because the princess' father, King Ethelred, was known far and wide as a wise man and a good king.

And if the princess was marvelously beautiful, so was the prince. He was the kind of boy that every mother wants to hug, the kind of boy who gets his hair tousled by every man that meets him.

He and the princess grew up together. They took lessons together from the teachers in the palace, and when the princess was slow, the prince would help her, and when the prince was slow, the princess would help him. They had no secrets from each other, but they had a million secrets that they two kept from the rest of the world. Secrets like where the bluebirds' nest was this year, and what color underwear the cook wore, and that if you duck under the stairway to the armory there's a little underground path that comes up in the wine cellar. They speculated endlessly about which of the princess' ancestors had used that path for surreptitious imbibing.

After not too many years the princess stopped being just a little girl and the prince stopped being just a little boy, and then they fell in love. All at once all their million secrets became just one secret, and they told that secret every time they looked at each other, and everyone who saw them said, "Ah, if I were only young again." That is because so many people think that love belongs to the young: sometime during their lives they stopped loving people, and they think it was just because they got old.

The prince and the princess decided one day to get married.

But the very next morning, the prince got a letter from the faroff country where his father lived. The letter told him that his father no longer lived at all, and that the boy was now a man; and not just a man, but a king.

So the prince got up the next morning, and the servants put his favorite books in a parcel, and his favorite clothes were packed in a trunk, and the trunk, and the parcel, and the prince were all put on a coach with bright red wheels and gold tassels at the corner and the prince was taken away.

The princess did not cry until after he was out of sight. Then she went into her room and cried for a long time, and only her nurse could come in with food and chatter and cheerfulness. At last the chatter brought smiles to the princess,

and she went into her father's study where he sat by the fire at night and said, "He promised he would write, every day, and I must write every day as well."

She did, and the prince did, and once a month a parcel of thirty letters would arrive for her, and the postrider would take away a parcel of thirty letters (heavily perfumed) from her.

And one day the Bear came to the palace. Now he wasn't a bear, of course, he was *the* Bear, with a capital B. He was probably only thirty-five or so, because his hair was still golden brown and his face was only lined around the eyes. But he was massive and grizzly, with great thick arms that looked like he could lift a horse, and great thick legs that looked like he could carry that horse a hundred miles. His eyes were deep, and they looked brightly out from under his bushy eyebrows, and the first time the nurse saw him she squealed and said, "Oh, my, he looks like a *bear*."

He came to the door of the palace and the doorman refused to let him in, because he didn't have an appointment. But he scribbled a note on a piece of paper that looked like it had held a sandwich for a few days, and the doorman—with grave misgivings—carried the paper to the king.

The paper said, "If Boris and 5,000 stood on the highway from Rimperdell, would you like to know which way they were going?"

King Ethelred wanted to know.

The doorman let the stranger into the palace, and the king brought him into his study and they talked for many hours.

In the morning the king arose early and went to his captains of cavalry and captains of infantry, and he sent a lord to the knights and their squires, and by dawn all of Ethelred's little army was gathered on the highway, the one that leads to Rimperdell. They marched for three hours that morning, and then they came to a place and the stranger with golden brown hair spoke to the king and King Ethelred commanded the army to stop. They stopped, and the infantry was sent into the forest on one side of the road, and the cavalry was sent into the tall cornfields on the other side of the road, where they dismounted. Then the king, and the stranger, and the knights waited in the road.

Soon they saw a dust cloud in the distance, and then the dust cloud grew near, and they saw that it was an army

coming down the road. And at the head of the army was King Boris of Rimperdell. And behind him the army seemed to be five thousand men.

"Hail," King Ethelred said, looking more than a little irritated, since King Boris' army was well inside our country's boundaries.

"Hail," King Boris said, looking more than a little irritated, since no one was supposed to know that he was coming.

"What do you think you're doing?" asked King Ethelred.

"You're blocking the road," said King Boris.

"It's my road," said King Ethelred.

"Not any more," said King Boris.

"I and my knights say that this road belongs to me," said King Ethelred.

King Boris looked at Ethelred's fifty knights, and then he looked back at his own five thousand men, and he said, "I say you and your knights are dead men unless you move aside."

"Then you want to be at war with me?" asked King Ethelred.

"War?" said King Boris. "Can we really call it a war? It will be like stepping on a nasty cockroach."

"I wouldn't know," said King Ethelred, "because we haven't ever had cockroaches in our kingdom."

Then he added, "Until now, of course."

Then King Ethelred lifted his arm, and the infantry shot arrows and threw lances from the wood, and many of Boris' men were slain. And the moment all of his troops were ready to fight the army in the forest, the cavalry came from the field and attacked from the rear, and soon Boris' army, what was left of it, surrendered, and Boris himself lay mortally wounded in the road.

"If you had won this battle," King Ethelred said, "what would you have done to me?"

King Boris gasped for breath and said, "I would have had you beheaded."

"Ah," said King Ethelred. "We are very different men. For I will let you live."

But the stranger stood beside King Ethelred, and he said, "No, King Ethelred, that is not in your power, for Boris is about to die. And if he were not, I would have killed him myself, for as long as a man like him is alive, no one is safe in all the world."

Then Boris died, and he was buried in the road with no marker, and his men were sent home without their swords.

And King Ethelred came back home to crowds of people cheering the great victory, and shouting, "Long live King Ethelred the conqueror."

King Ethelred only smiled at them. Then he took the stranger into the palace, and gave him a room where he could sleep, and made him the chief counselor to the king, because the stranger had proved that he was wise, and that he was loyal, and that he loved the king better than the king loved himself, for the king would have let Boris live.

No one knew what to call the man, because when a few brave souls asked him his name, he only frowned and said, "I will wear the name you pick for me."

Many names were tried, like George, and Fred, and even Rocky and Todd. But none of the names seemed right. For a long time, everyone called him Sir, because when somebody is that big and that strong and that wise and that quiet, you feel like calling him sir and offering him your chair when he comes in the room.

And then after a while everyone called him the name the nurse had chosen for him just by accident: they called him the Bear. At first they only called him that behind his back, but eventually someone slipped and called him that at the dinner table, and he smiled, and answered to the name, and so everyone called him that.

Except the princess. She didn't call him anything, because she didn't speak to him if she could help it, and when she talked about him, she stuck out her lower lip and called him That Man.

This is because the princess hated the Bear.

She didn't hate him because he had done anything bad to her. In fact, she was pretty sure that he didn't even notice she was living in the palace. He never turned and stared when she walked into the room, like all the other men did. But that isn't why she hated him, either.

She hated him because she thought he was making her father weak.

King Ethelred was a great king, and his people loved him. He always stood very tall at ceremonies, and he sat for hours making judgments with great wisdom. He always spoke softly when softness was needed, and shouted at the times when only shouting would be heard.

In all he was a stately man, and so the princess was shocked with the way he was around the Bear.

King Ethelred and the Bear would sit for hours in the king's study, every night when there wasn't a great banquet or an ambassador. They would both drink from huge mugs of ale—but instead of having a servant refill the mugs, the princess was shocked that her own father stood up and poured from the pitcher! A king, doing the work of a servant, and then giving the mug to a commoner, a man whose name no one knew.

The princess saw this because she sat in the king's study with them, listening and watching without saying a word as they talked. Sometimes she would spend the whole time combing her father's long white hair. Sometimes she would knit long woolen stockings for her father for the winter. Sometimes she would read—for her father believed that even women should learn to read. But all the time she listened, and became angry, and hated the Bear more and more.

King Ethelred and the Bear didn't talk much about affairs of state. They talked about hunting rabbits in the forest. They told jokes about lords and ladies in the kingdom—and some of the jokes weren't even nice, the princess told herself bitterly. They talked about what they should do about the ugly carpet in the courtroom—as if the Bear had a perfect right to have an opinion about what the new carpet should be.

And when they did talk about affairs of state, the Bear treated King Ethelred like an *equal*. When he disagreed with the king, he would leap to his feet saying, "No, no, no, no, you just don't see at all." When he thought the king had said something right, he clapped him on the shoulder and said, "You'll make a great king yet, Ethelred."

And sometimes King Ethelred would sigh and stare into the fire, and whisper a few words, and a dark and tired look would steal across his face. Then the Bear would put his arm around the king's shoulder, and stare into the fire with him, until finally the king would sigh again, and then lift himself, groaning, out of his chair, and say, "It's time that this old man put his corpse between the sheets."

The next day the princess would talk furiously to her nurse, who never told a soul what the princess said. The princess would say, "That Man is out to make my father a weakling! He's out to make my father look stupid. That Man

is making my father forget that he is a king." Then she would wrinkle her forehead and say, "That Man is a traitor."

She never said a word about this to her father, however. If she had, he would have patted her head and said, "Oh, yes, he does indeed make me forget that I am a king." But he would also have said, "He makes me remember what a king should be." And Ethelred would not have called him a traitor. He would have called the Bear his friend.

As if it wasn't bad enough that her father was forgetting himself around a commoner, that was the very time that things started going bad with the prince. She suddenly noticed that the last several packets of mail had not held thirty letters each—they only held twenty, and then fifteen, and then ten. And the letters weren't five pages long any more. They were only three, and then two, and then one.

He's just busy, she thought.

Then she noticed that he no longer began her letters with, "My dearest darling sweetheart pickle-eating princess." (The pickle-eating part was an old joke from something that happened when they were both nine.) Now he started them, "My dear lady," or "Dear princess." Once she said to her nurse, "He might as well address them to Occupant."

He's just tired, she thought.

And then she realized that he never told her he loved her any more, and she went out on the balcony and cried where only the garden could hear, and where only the birds in the trees could see.

She began to keep to her rooms, because the world didn't seem like a very nice place anymore. Why should she have anything to do with the world, when it was a nasty place where fathers turned into mere men, and lovers forgot they were in love?

And she cried herself to sleep every night that she slept. And some nights she didn't sleep at all, just stared at the ceiling trying to forget the prince. And you know that if you want to remember something, the best way is to try very, very hard to forget it.

Then one day, as she went to the door of her room, she found a basket of autumn leaves just inside her door. There was no note on them, but they were very brightly colored, and they rustled loudly when she touched the basket, and she said to herself, "It must be autumn."

She went to the window and looked, and it was autumn,

and it was beautiful. She had already seen the leaves a hundred times a day, but she hadn't remembered to notice.

And then a few weeks later she woke up and it was cold in her room. Shivering, she went to her door to call for a servant to build her fire up higher—and just inside the door was a large pan, and on the pan there stood a little snowman, which was grinning a grin made of little chunks of coal, and his eyes were big pieces of coal, and all in all it was so comical the princess had to laugh. That day she forgot her misery for a while and went outside and threw snowballs at the knights, who of course let her hit them and who never managed to hit her, but of course that's all part of being a princess—no one would ever put snow down your back or dump you in the canal or anything.

She asked her nurse who brought these things, but the nurse just shook her head and smiled. "It wasn't me," she said. "Of course it was," the princess answered, and gave her a hug, and thanked her. The nurse smiled and said, "Thanks for your thanks, but it wasn't me." But the princess knew better, and loved her nurse all the more.

Then the letters stopped coming altogether. And the princess stopped writing letters. And she began taking walks in the woods.

At first she only took walks in the garden, which is where princesses are supposed to take walks. But in a few days of walking and walking and walking she knew every brick of the garden path by heart, and she kept coming to the garden wall and wishing she were outside it.

So one day she walked to the gate and went out of the garden and wandered into the forest. The forest was not at all like the garden. Where the garden was neatly tended and didn't have a weed in it, the forest was all weeds, all untrimmed and loose, with animals that ran from her, and birds that scurried to lead her away from their young, and best of all, only grass or soft brown earth under her feet. Out in the forest she could forget the garden where every tree reminded her of talks she had had with the prince while sitting in the branches. Out in the forest she could forget the palace where every room had held its own joke or its own secret or its own promise that had been broken.

That was why she was in the forest the day the wolf came out of the hills.

She was already heading back to the palace, because it

was getting on toward dark, when she caught a glimpse of something moving. She looked, and realized that it was a huge gray wolf, walking along beside her not fifteen yards off. When she stopped, the wolf stopped. When she moved, the wolf moved. And the farther she walked, the closer the wolf came.

She turned and walked away from the wolf.

After a few moments she looked behind her, and saw the wolf only a dozen feet away, its mouth open, its tongue hanging out, its teeth shining white in the gloom of the late afternoon forest.

She began to run. But not even a princess can hope to outrun a wolf. She ran and ran until she could hardly breathe, and the wolf was still right behind her, panting a little but hardly tired. She ran and ran some more until her legs refused to obey her and she fell to the ground. She looked back, and realized that this was what the wolf had been waiting for—for her to be tired enough to fall, for her to be easy prey, for her to be a dinner he didn't have to work for.

And so the wolf got a gleam in its eye, and sprang forward.

Just as the wolf leaped, a huge brown shape lumbered out of the forest and stepped over the princess. She screamed. It was a huge brown bear, with heavy fur and vicious teeth. The bear swung its great hairy arm at the wolf, and struck it in the head. The wolf flew back a dozen yards, and from the way its head bobbed about as it flew, the princess realized its neck had been broken.

And then the huge bear turned toward her, and she saw with despair that she had only traded one monstrous animal for another.

And she fainted. Which is about all that a person can do when a bear that is standing five feet away looks at you. And looks hungry.

She woke up in bed at the palace and figured it had all been a dream. But then she felt a terrible pain in her legs, and felt her face stinging with scratches from the branches. It had not been a dream—she really had run through the forest.

"What happened?" she asked feebly. "Am I dead?" Which wasn't all that silly a question, because she really had expected to be.

"No," said her father, who was sitting by the bed.

"No," said the nurse. "And why in the world, why should you be dead?"

"I was in the forest," said the princess, "and there was a wolf, and I ran and ran but he was still there. And then a bear came and killed the wolf, and it came toward me like it was going to eat me, and I guess I fainted."

"Ah," said the nurse, as if that explained everything.

"Ah," said her father, King Ethelred. "Now I understand. We were taking turns watching you after we found you unconscious and scratched up by the garden gate. You kept crying out in your sleep, 'Make the bear go away! Make the bear leave me alone!' Of course, we thought you meant *the* Bear, our Bear, and we had to ask the poor man not to take his turn any more, as we thought it might make you upset. We all thought you hated him, for a while there." And King Ethelred chuckled. "I'll have to tell him it was all a mistake."

Then the king left. Great, thought the princess, he's going to tell the Bear it was all a mistake, and I really do hate him to pieces.

The nurse walked over to the bed and knelt beside it. "There's another part to the story. They made me promise not to tell you," the nurse said, "but you know and I know that I'll always tell you everything. It seems that it was two guards that found you, and they both said that they saw something running away. Or not running, exactly, galloping. Or something. They said it looked like a bear, running on all fours."

"Oh no," said the princess. "How horrible!"

"No," said the nurse. "It was their opinion, and Robbo Knockle swears it's true, that the bear they saw had brought you to the gate and set you down gentle as you please. Whoever brought you there smoothed your skirt, you know, and put a pile of leaves under your head like a pillow, and you were surely in no state to do all that yourself."

"Don't be silly," said the princess. "How could a bear do all that?"

"I know," said the nurse, "so it must not have been an ordinary bear. It must have been a magic bear." She said this last in a whisper, because the nurse believed that magic should be talked about quietly, lest something awful should hear and come calling.

"Nonsense," said the princess. "I've had an education, and

I don't believe in magic bears or magic brews or any kind of magic at all. It's just old-lady foolishness."

The nurse stood up and her mouth wrinkled all up. "Well, then, this foolish old lady will take her foolish stories to somebody foolish, who wants to listen."

"Oh, there, there," the princess said, for she didn't like to hurt anyone's feelings, especially not Nurse's. And they were friends again. But the princess still didn't believe about the bear. However, she hadn't been eaten, after all, so the bear must not have been hungry.

It was only two days later, when the princess was up and around again—though there were nasty scabs all over her face from the scratches, that the prince came back to the palace.

He came riding up on a lathered horse that dropped to the ground and died right in front of the palace door. He looked exhausted, and there were great purple circles under his eyes. He had no baggage. He had no cloak. Just the clothes on his back and a dead horse.

"I've come home," he said to the doorman, and fainted into his arms. (By the way, it's perfectly all right for a man to faint, as long as he has ridden on horseback for five days, without a bite to eat, and with hundreds of soldiers chasing him.)

"It's treason," he said when he woke up and ate and bathed and dressed. "My allies turned against me, even my own subjects. They drove me out of my kingdom. I'm lucky to be alive."

"Why?" asked King Ethelred.

"Because they would have killed me. If they had caught me."

"No, no, no, no, don't be stupid," said the Bear, who was listening from a chair a few feet away. "Why did they turn against you?"

The prince turned toward the Bear and sneered. It was an ugly sneer, and it twisted up the prince's face in a way it had never twisted when he lived with King Ethelred and was in love with the princess.

"I wasn't aware that I was being stupid," he said archly. "And I certainly wasn't aware that *you* had been invited into the conversation."

The Bear didn't say anything after that, just nodded an unspoken apology and watched.

And the prince never did explain why the people had turned against him. Just something vague about power-hungry demagogues and mob rule.

The princess came to see the prince that very morning.

"You look exhausted," she said.

"You look beautiful," he said.

"I have scabs all over my face and I haven't done my hair in days," she said.

"I love you," he said.

"You stopped writing," she said.

"I guess I lost my pen," he said. "No, I remember now. I lost my mind. I forgot how beautiful you are. A man would have to be mad to forget."

Then he kissed her, and she kissed him back, and she forgave him for all the sorrow he had caused her and it was as if he had never been away.

For about three days.

Because in three days she began to realize that he was different somehow.

She would open her eyes after kissing him (princesses always close their eyes when they kiss someone) and she would notice that he was looking off somewhere with a distant expression on his face. As if he barely noticed that he was kissing her. That does not make any woman, even a princess, feel very good.

She noticed that sometimes he seemed to forget she was even there. She passed him in a corridor and he wouldn't speak, and unless she touched his arm and said good morning he might have walked on by without a word.

And then sometimes, for no reason, he would feel slighted or offended, or a servant would make a noise or spill something and he would fly into a rage and throw things against the wall. He had never even raised his voice in anger when he was a boy.

He often said cruel things to the princess, and she wondered why she loved him, and what was wrong, but then he would come to her and apologize, and she would forgive him because after all he had lost a kingdom because of traitors, and he couldn't be expected to always feel sweet and nice. She decided, though, that if it was up to her, and it was, he would never feel unsweet and unnice again.

Then one night the Bear and her father went into the study and locked the door behind them. The princess had never been locked out of her father's study before, and she became angry at the Bear because he was taking her father away from her, and so she listened at the door. She figured that if the Bear wanted to keep her out, she would see to it that she heard everything anyway.

This is what she heard.

"I have the information," the Bear said.

"It must be bad, or you wouldn't have asked to speak to me alone," said King Ethelred. Aha, thought the princess, the Bear *did* plot to keep me out.

The Bear stood by the fire, leaning on the mantel, while King Ethelred sat down.

"Well?" asked King Ethelred.

"I know how much the boy means to you. And to the princess. I'm sorry to bring such a tale."

The boy! thought the princess. They couldn't possibly be calling her prince a boy, could they? Why, he had been a king, except for treason, and here a commoner was calling him a boy.

"He means much to us," said King Ethelred, "which is all the more reason for me to know the truth, be it good or bad."

"Well, then," said the Bear, "I must tell you that he was a very bad king."

The princess went white with rage.

"I think he was just too young. Or something," said the Bear. "Perhaps there was a side to him that you never saw, because the moment he had power it went to his head. He thought his kingdom was too small; he began to make war with little neighboring counties and duchies and took their lands and made them part of his kingdom. He plotted against other kings who had been good and true friends of his father. And he kept raising taxes on his people to support huge armies. He kept starting wars and mothers kept weeping because their sons had fallen in battle.

"And finally," said the Bear, "the people had had enough, and so had the other kings, and there was a revolution and a war all at the same time. The only part of the boy's tale that is true is that he was lucky to escape with his life, because every person that I talked to spoke of him with hatred, as if he were the most evil person they had ever seen."

King Ethelred shook his head. "Could you be wrong? I can't believe this of a boy I practically raised myself."

"I wish it were not true," said the Bear, "for I know that the princess loves him dearly. But it seems obvious to me that the boy doesn't love her—he is here because he knew he would be safe here, and because he knows that if he married her, he would be able to rule when you are dead."

"Well," said King Ethelred, "that will never happen. My daughter will never marry a man who would destroy the kingdom."

"Not even if she loves him very much?" asked the Bear.

"It is the price of being a princess," said the king. "She must think first of the kingdom, or she will never be fit to be queen."

At that moment, however, being queen was the last thing the princess cared about. All she knew was that she hated the Bear for taking away her father, and now the same man had persuaded her father to keep her from marrying the man she loved.

She beat on the door, crying out, "Liar! Liar!" King Ethelred and the Bear both leaped for the door. King Ethelred opened it, and the princess burst into the room and started hitting the Bear as hard as she could. Of course the blows fell very lightly, because she was not all that strong, and he was very large and sturdy and the blows could have caused him no pain. But as she struck at him his face looked as if he were being stabbed through the heart at every blow.

"Daughter, daughter," said King Ethelred. "What is this? Why did you listen at the door?"

But she didn't answer; she only beat at the Bear until she was crying too hard to hit him anymore. And then, between sobs, she began to yell at him. And because she didn't usually yell her voice became harsh and hoarse and she whispered. But yelling or whispering, her words were clear, and every word said hatred.

She accused the Bear of making her father little, nothing, worse than nothing, a weakling king who had to turn to a filthy commoner to make any decision at all. She accused the Bear of hating her and trying to ruin her life by keeping her from marrying the only man she could ever love. She accused the Bear of being a traitor, who was plotting to be king himself and rule the kingdom. She accused the Bear of making up vile lies about the prince because she knew that he would

be a better king than her weakling father, and that if she married the prince all the Bear's plans for ruling the kingdom would come to nothing.

And finally she accused the Bear of having such a filthy mind that he imagined that he could eventually marry her himself, and so become king.

But that would never happen, she whispered bitterly, at the end. "That will never happen," she said, "never, never, never, because I hate you and I loathe you and if you don't get out of this kingdom and never come back I'll kill myself, I swear it."

And then she grabbed a sword from the mantel and tried to slash her wrists, and the Bear reached out and stopped her by holding her arms in his huge hands that gripped like iron. Then she spit at him and tried to bite his fingers and beat her head against his chest until King Ethelred took her hands and the Bear let go and backed away.

"I'm sorry," King Ethelred kept saying, though he himself wasn't certain who he was apologizing to or what he was apologizing for. "I'm sorry." And then he realized that he was apologizing for himself, because somehow he knew that his kingdom was ruined right then.

If he listened to the Bear and sent the prince away, the princess would never forgive him, would hate him, in fact, and he couldn't bear that. But if he didn't listen to the Bear, then the princess would surely marry the prince, and the prince would surely ruin his kingdom. And he couldn't endure that.

But worst of all, he couldn't stand the terrible look on the Bear's face.

The princess stood sobbing in her father's arms.

The king stood wishing there were something he could do or undo.

And the Bear simply stood.

Finally the Bear nodded, and said, "I understand. Goodbye."

And then the Bear walked out of the room, and out of the palace, and out of the garden walls, and out of the city, and out of any land that the king had heard of.

He took nothing with him—no food, no horse, no extra clothing. He just wore his clothing and carried his sword. He left as he came.

And the princess cried with relief. The Bear was gone. Life

could go on, just as it was before ever the prince left and before ever the Bear came.

So she thought.

She didn't really realize how her father felt until he died only four months later, suddenly very old and very tired and very lonely and despairing for his kingdom.

She didn't realize that the prince was not the same man she loved before until she married him three months after her father died.

On the day of their wedding she proudly crowned him king herself, and led him to the throne, where he sat.

"I love you," she said proudly, "and you look like a king."

"I am a king," he said. "I am King Edward the first."

"Edward?" she said. "Why Edward? That's not your name."

"That's a king's name," he said, "and I am a king. Do I not have power to change my name?"

"Of course," she said. "But I liked your own name better."

"But you will call me Edward," he said, and she did.

When she saw him. For he didn't come to her very often. As soon as he wore the crown he began to keep her out of the court, and conducted the business of the kingdom where she couldn't hear. She didn't understand this, because her father had always let her attend everything and hear everything in the government, so she could be a good queen.

"A good queen," said King Edward, her husband, "is a quiet woman who has babies, one of whom will be king."

And so the princess, who was now the queen, had babies, and one of them was a boy, and she tried to help him grow up to be a king.

But as the years passed by she realized that King Edward was not the lovely boy she had loved in the garden. He was a cruel and greedy man. And she didn't like him very much.

He raised the taxes, and the people became poor.

He built up the army, so it became very strong.

He used the army to take over the land of Count Edred, who had been her godfather.

He also took over the land of Duke Adlow, who had once let her pet one of his tame swans.

He also took over the land of Earl Thlaffway, who had wept openly at her father's funeral, and said that her father was the only man he had ever worshipped, because he was such a good king.

And Edred and Adlow and Thlaffway all disappeared, and were never heard of again.

"He's even against the common people," the nurse grumbled one day as she did up the queen's hair. "Some shepherds came to court yesterday to tell him a marvel, which is their duty, isn't it, to tell the king of anything strange that happens in the land?"

"Yes," said the queen, remembering how as a child she and the prince had run to their father often to tell him a marvel—how grass springs up all at once in the spring, how water just disappeared on a hot day, how a butterfly comes all awkward from the cocoon.

"Well," said the nurse, "they told him that there was a bear along the edge of the forest, a bear that doesn't eat meat, but only berries and roots. And this bear, they said, killed wolves. Every year they lose dozens of sheep to the wolves, but this year they had lost not one lamb, because the bear killed the wolves. Now that's a marvel, I'd say," said the nurse.

"Oh yes," said the princess who was now a queen.

"But what did the king do," said the nurse, "but order his knights to hunt down that bear and kill it. Kill it!"

"Why?" asked the queen.

"Why, why, why?" asked the nurse. "The best question in the world. The shepherds asked it, and the king said, 'Can't have a bear loose around here. He might kill children.'

"'Oh no,' says the shepherds, 'the bear don't eat meat.'

"'Then, it'll wind up stealing grain,' the king says in reply, and there it is, my lady—the hunters are out after a perfectly harmless bear! You can bet the shepherds don't like it. A perfectly harmless bear!"

The queen nodded. "A magic bear."

"Why, yes," said the nurse. "Now you mention it, it does seem like the bear that saved you that day—"

"Nurse," said the queen, "there was no bear that day. I was dreaming I was mad with despair. There wasn't a wolf chasing me. And there was definitely no magic bear."

The nurse bit her lip. Of course there had been a bear, she thought. And a wolf. But the queen, her princess, was determined not to believe in any kind of thing.

"Sure there was a bear," said the nurse.

"No, there was no bear," said the queen, "and now I know who put the idea of a magic bear into the children's head."

"They've heard of him?"

"They came to me with a silly tale of a bear that climbs over the wall into the garden when no one else is around, and who plays with them and lets him ride on his back. Obviously you told them your silly tale about the magic bear who supposedly saved me. So I told them that magic bears were a full tall-tale and that even grownups liked to tell them, but that they must be careful to remember the difference between truth and falsehood, and they should wink if they're fibbing."

"What did they say?" the nurse said.

"I made them all wink about the bear," said the queen, "of course. But I would appreciate it if you wouldn't fill their heads with silly stories. You did tell them your stupid story, didn't you?"

"Yes," said the nurse sadly.

"What a trouble your wagging tongue can cause," said the queen, and the nurse burst into tears and left the room.

They made it up later but there was no talk of bears. The nurse understood well enough, though. The thought of bears reminded the queen of *the* Bear, and everyone knew that she was the one who drove that wise counselor away. If only the Bear were still here, thought the nurse—and hundreds of other people in the kingdom—if he were still here we wouldn't have these troubles in the kingdom.

And there were troubles. The soldiers patrolled the streets of the cities and locked people up for saying things about King Edward. And when a servant in the palace did anything wrong he would bellow and storm, and even throw things and beat them with a rod.

One day when King Edward didn't like the soup he threw the whole tureen at the cook. The cook promptly took his leave, saying for anyone to hear, "I've served kings and queens, lords and ladies, soldiers, and servants, and in all that time this is the first time I've ever been called upon to serve a pig."

The day after he left he was back, at swordpoint—not cooking in the kitchen, of course, since cooks are too close to the king's food. No, the cook was sweeping the stables. And the servants were told in no uncertain terms that none of them was free to leave. If they didn't like their jobs, they could be given another one to do. And they all looked at the work the cook was doing, and kept their tongues.

Except the nurse, who talked to the queen about everything.

"We might as well be slaves," said the nurse. "Right down to the wages. He's cut us all in half, some even more, and we've got barely enough to feed ourselves. I'm all right, mind you, my lady, for I have no one but me to feed, but there's some who's hard put to get a stick of wood for the fire and a morsel of bread for a hungry mouth or six."

The queen thought of pleading with her husband, but then she realized that King Edward would only punish the servants for complaining. So she began giving her nurse jewels to sell. Then the nurse quietly gave the money to the servants who had the least, or who had the largest families, and whispered to them, even though the queen had told her not to give a hint, "This money's from the queen, you know. *She* remembers us servants, even if her husband's a lout and a pimple." And the servants remembered that the queen was kind.

The people didn't hate King Edward quite as much as the servants did, of course, because even though taxes were high, there are always silly people who are proud fit to bust when their army has a victory. And of course King Edward had quite a few victories at first. He would pick a fight with a neighboring king or lord and then march in and take over. People had thought old King Boris' army of five thousand was bad, back in the old days. But because of his high taxes, King Edward was able to hire an army of fifty thousand men, and war was a different thing then. They lived off the land in enemy country, and killed and plundered where they liked. Most of the soldiers weren't local men, anyway—they were the riffraff of the highways, men who begged or stole, and now were being paid for stealing.

But King Edward tripled the size of the kingdom, and there were a good many citizens who followed the war news and cheered whenever King Edward rode through the streets.

They cheered the queen, too, of course, but they didn't see her very much, about once a year or so. She was still beautiful, of course, more beautiful than ever before. No one particuarly noticed that her eyes were sad these days, or else those who noticed said nothing and soon forgot it.

But King Edward's victories had been won against weak, and peaceful, and unprepared men. And at last the neigh-

boring kings got together, and the rebels from conquered lands got together, and they planned King Edward's doom.

When next King Edward went a-conquering, they were ready, and on the very battlefield where King Ethelred had defeated Boris they ambushed King Edward's army. Edward's fifty thousand hired men faced a hundred thousand where before they had never faced more than half their number. Their bought courage melted away, and those who lived through the first of the battle ran for their lives.

King Edward was captured and brought back to the city in a cage, which was hung above the city gate, right where the statue of the bear is today.

The queen came out to the leaders of the army that had defeated King Edward and knelt before them in the dust and wept, pleading for her husband. And because she was beautiful, and good, and because they themselves were only good men trying to protect their own lives and property, they granted him his life. For her sake they even let him remain king, but they imposed a huge tribute on him. To save his own life, he agreed.

So taxes were raised even higher, in order to pay the tribute, and King Edward could only keep enough soldiers to police his kingdom, and the tribute went to paying for soldiers of the victorious kings to stay on the borders to keep watch on our land. For they figured, and rightly so, that if they let up their vigilance for a minute, King Edward would raise an army and stab them in the back.

But they didn't let up their vigilance, you see. And King Edward was trapped.

A dark evil fell upon him then, for a greedy man craves all the more the thing he can't have. And King Edward craved power. Because he couldn't have power over other kings, he began to use more power over his own kingdom, and his own household, and his own family.

He began to have prisoners tortured until they confessed to conspiracies that didn't exist, and until they denounced people who were innocent. And people in this kingdom began to lock their doors at night, and hide when someone knocked. There was fear in the kingdom, and people began to move away, until King Edward took to hunting down and beheading anyone who tried to leave the kingdom.

And it was bad in the palace, too. For the servants were beaten savagely for the slightest things, and King Edward

even yelled at his own son and daughters whenever he saw them, so that the queen kept them hidden away with her most of the time.

Everyone was afraid of King Edward. And people almost always hate anyone they fear.

Except the queen. For though she feared him she remembered his youth, and she said to herself, or sometimes to the nurse, "Somewhere in that sad and ugly man there is the beautiful boy I love. Somehow I must help him find that beautiful boy and bring him out again."

But neither the nurse nor the queen could think how such a thing could possibly happen.

Until the queen discovered that she was going to have a baby. Of course, she thought. With a new baby he will remember his family and remember to love us.

So she told him. And he railed at her about how stupid she was to bring another child to see their humiliation, a royal family with enemy troops perched on the border, with no real power in the world.

And then he took her roughly by the arm into the court, where the lords and ladies were gathered, and there he told them that his wife was going to have a baby to mock him, for she still had the power of a woman, even if he didn't have the power of a man. She cried out that it wasn't true. He hit her, and she fell to the ground.

And the problem was solved, for she lost the baby before it was born and lay on her bed for days, delirious and fevered and at the point of death. No one knew that King Edward hated himself for what he had done, that he tore at his face and his hair at the thought that the queen might die because of his fury. They only saw that he was drunk all through the queen's illness, and that he never came to her bedside.

While the queen was delirious, she dreamed many times and many things. But one dream that kept coming back to her was of a wolf following her in the forest, and she ran and ran until she fell, but just as the wolf was about to eat her, a huge brown Bear came and killed the wolf and flung him away, and then picked her up gently and laid her down at her father's door, carefully arranging her dress and putting leaves under her head as a pillow.

When she finally woke up, though, she only remembered that there was no magic bear that would come out of the forest to save her. Magic was for the common people—brews

to cure gout and plague and to make a lady love you, spells said in the night to keep dark things from the door. Foolishness, the queen told herself. For she had an education, and knew better. There is nothing to keep the dark things from the door, there is no cure for gout and plague, and there is no brew that will make your husband love you. She told this to herself and despaired.

King Edward soon forgot his grief at the thought his wife might die. As soon as she was up and about he was as surly as ever, and he didn't stop drinking, either, even when the reason for it was gone. He just remembered that he had hurt her badly and he felt guilty, and so whenever he saw her he felt bad, and because he felt bad he treated her badly, as if it were her fault.

Things were about as bad as they could get. There were rebellions here and there all over the kingdom, and rebels were being beheaded every week. Some soldiers had even mutinied and got away over the border with the people they were supposed to stop. And so one morning King Edward was in the foulest, blackest mood he had ever been in.

The queen walked into the dining room for breakfast looking as beautiful as ever, for grief had only deepened her beauty, and made you want to cry for the pain of her exquisite face and for the suffering in her proud, straight bearing. King Edward saw that pain and suffering but even more he saw that beauty, and for a moment he remembered the girl who had grown up without a care or a sorrow or an evil thought. And he knew that he had caused every bit of the pain she bore.

So he began to find fault with her, and before he knew it he was ordering her into the kitchen to cook.

"I can't," she said.

"If a servant can, you can," he snarled in reply.

She began to cry. "I've never cooked. I've never started a fire. I'm a queen."

"You're not a queen," the king said savagely, hating himself as he said it. "You're not a queen and I'm not a king, because we're a bunch of powerless lackeys taking orders from those scum across the border! Well, if I've got to live like a servant in my own palace, so have you!"

And so he took her roughly into the kitchen and ordered her to come back in with a breakfast she had cooked herself.

The queen was shattered, but not so shattered that she

could forget her pride. She spoke to the cooks cowering in the corner. "You heard the king. I must cook him breakfast with my own hands. But I don't know how. You must tell me what to do."

So they told her, and she tried her best to do what they said, but her untrained hands made a botch of everything. She burned herself at the fire and scalded herself with the porridge. She put too much salt on the bacon and there were shells left in the eggs. She also burned the muffins. And then she carried it all in to her husband and he began to eat.

And of course it was awful.

And at that moment he realized finally that the queen was a queen and could be nothing else, just as a cook had no hope of being a queen. Just so he looked at himself and realized that he could never be anything but a king. The queen, however, was a good queen—while he was a terrible king. He would always be a king but he would never be good at it. And as he chewed up the eggshells he reached the lowest despair.

Another man, hating himself as King Edward did, might have taken his own life. But that was not King Edward's way. Instead he picked up his rod and began to beat the queen. He struck her again and again, and her back bled, and she fell to the ground, screaming.

The servants came in and so did the guards, and the servants, seeing the queen treated so, tried to stop the king. But the king ordered the guards to kill anyone who tried to interfere. Even so, the chief steward, a cook, and the butler were dead before the others stopped trying.

And the king kept beating and beating the queen until everyone was sure he would beat her to death.

And in her heart as she lay on the stone floor, numb to the pain of her body because of the pain of her heart, she wished that the bear would come again, stepping over her to kill the wolf that was running forward to devour her.

At that moment the door broke in pieces and a terrible roar filled the dining hall. The king stopped beating the queen, and the guards and the servants looked at the door, for there stood a huge brown bear on its hind legs, towering over them all, and roaring in fury.

The servants ran from the room.

"Kill him," the king bellowed at the guards.

The guards drew their swords and advanced on the bear.

The bear disarmed them all, though there were so many

that some drew blood before their swords were slapped out of their hands. Some of them might even have tried to fight the bear without weapons, because they were brave men, but the bear struck them on the head, and the rest fled away.

Yet the queen, dazed though she was, thought that for some reason the Bear had not struck yet with all his force, that the huge animal was saving his strength for another battle.

And that battle was with King Edward, who stood with his sharp sword in his hand, eager for battle, hoping to die, with the desperation and self-hatred in him that would make him a terrible opponent, even for a bear.

A bear, thought the queen. I wished for a bear and he is here.

Then she lay, weak and helpless and bleeding on the stone floor as her husband, her prince, fought the bear. She did not know who she hoped would win. For even now, she did not hate her husband. And yet she knew that her life and the lives of her subjects would be unendurable as long as he lived.

They circled around the room, the bear moving clumsily yet quickly, King Edward moving faster still, his blade whipping steel circles through the air. Three times the blade landed hard and deep on the bear, before the animal seized the blade between his paws. King Edward tried to draw back the sword, and as he did it bit deeply into the animal's paws. But it was a battle of strength, and the bear was sure to win it in the end. He pulled the sword out of Edward's hand, and then grasped the king in a mighty embrace and carried him screaming from the room.

And at that last moment, as Edward tugged hopelessly at his sword and blood poured from the bear's paws, the queen found herself hoping that the bear would hold on, would take away the sword, that the bear would win out and free the kingdom—her kingdom—and her family and even herself, from the man who had been devouring them all.

Yet when King Edward screamed in the bear's grip, she heard only the voice of the boy in the garden in the eternal and too-quick summer of her childhood. She fainted with a dim memory of his smile dancing crazily before her eyes.

She awoke as she had awakened once before, thinking that it had been a dream, and then remembering the truth of it when the pain where her husband had beaten her nearly

made her fall unconscious again. But she fought the faintness and stayed awake, and asked for water.

The nurse brought water, and then several lords of high rank and the captain of the army and the chief servants came in and asked her what they should do.

"Why do you ask me?" she said.

"Because," the nurse answered her, "the king is dead."

The queen waited.

"The Bear left him at the gate," the captain of the army said.

"His neck was broken," the chief said.

"And now," one of the lords said, "now we must know what to do. We haven't even told the people, and no one has been allowed inside or outside the palace."

The queen thought, and closed her eyes as she did so. But what she saw when she closed her eyes was the body of her beautiful prince with his head loose as the wolf's had been that day in the forest. She did not want to see that, so she opened her eyes.

"You must proclaim that the king is dead throughout the land," she said.

To the captain of the army she said, "There will be no more beheading for treason. Anyone who is in prison for treason is to be set free, now. And any other prisoners whose terms are soon to expire should be set free at once."

The captain of the army bowed and left. He did not smile until he was out the door, but then he smiled until tears ran down his cheeks.

To the chief cook she said, "All the servants in the palace are free to leave now, if they want. But please ask them, in my name, to stay. I will restore them as they were, if they'll stay."

The cook started a heartfelt speech of thanks, but then thought better of it and left the room to tell the others.

To the lords she said, "Go to the kings whose armies guard our borders, and tell them that King Edward is dead and they can go home now. Tell them that if I need their help I will call on them, but that until I do I will govern my kingdom alone."

And the lords came and kissed her hands tenderly, and left the room.

And she was alone with the nurse.

"I'm so sorry," said the nurse, when enough silence had passed.

"For what?" asked the queen.

"For the death of your husband."

"Ah, that," said the queen. "Ah, yes, my husband."

And then the queen wept with all her heart. Not for the cruel and greedy man who had warred and killed and savaged everywhere he could. But for the boy who had somehow turned into that man, the boy whose gentle hand had comforted her childhood hurts, the boy whose frightened voice had cried out to her at the end of his life, as if he wondered why he had gotten lost inside himself, as if he realized that it was too, too late to get out again.

When she had done weeping that day, she never cried for him again.

In three days she was up again, though she had to wear loose clothing because of the pain. She held court anyway, and it was then that the shepherds brought her the Bear. Not the bear, the animal, that had killed the king, but *the* Bear, the counselor, who had left the kingdom so many years before.

"We found him on the hillside, with our sheep nosing him and lapping his face," the oldest of the shepherds told her. "Looks like he's been set on by robbers, he's cut and battered so. Miracle he's alive," he said.

"What is that he's wearing?" asked the queen, standing by the bed where she had had the servants lay him.

"Oh," said one of the other shepherds. "That's me cloak. They left him nekkid, but we didn't think it right to bring him before you in such a state."

She thanked the shepherds and offered to pay them a reward, but they said no thanks, explaining, "We remember him, we do, and it wouldn't be right to take money for helping him, don't you see, because he was a good man back in your father's day."

The queen had the servants—who had all stayed on, by the way—clean his wounds and bind them and tend to his wants. And because he was a strong man, he lived, though the wounds might have killed a smaller, weaker man. Even so, he never got back the use of his right hand, and had to learn to write with his left; and he limped ever after. But he often said he was lucky to be alive and wasn't ashamed of his infirmities, though he sometimes said that something ought to be done about the robbers who run loose in the hills.

As soon as he was able, the queen had him attend court, where he listened to the ambassadors from other lands and to the cases she heard and judged.

Then at night she had him come to King Ethelred's study, and there she asked him about the questions of that day and what he would have done differently, and he told her what he thought she did well, too. And so she learned from him as her father had learned.

One day she even said to him, "I have never asked forgiveness of any man in my life. But I ask for yours."

"For what?" he said, surprised.

"For hating you, and thinking you served me and my father badly, and driving you from this kingdom. If we had listened to you," she said, "none of this would have happened."

"Oh," he said, "all that's past. You were young, and in love, and that's as inevitable as fate itself."

"I know," she said, "and for love I'd probably do it again, but now that I'm wiser I can still ask for forgiveness for my youth."

The Bear smiled at her. "You were forgiven before you asked. But since you ask I gladly forgive you again."

"Is there any reward I can give you for your service so many years ago, when you left unthanked?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "If you could let me stay and serve you as I served your father, that would be reward enough."

"How can that be a reward?" she asked. "I was going to ask you to do that for *me*. And now you ask it for yourself."

"Let us say," said the Bear, "that I loved your father like my brother, and you like my niece, and I long to stay with the only family that I have."

Then the queen took the pitcher and poured him a mug of ale, and they sat by the fire and talked far into the night.

Because the queen was a widow, because despite the problems of the past the kingdom was large and rich, many suitors came asking for her hand. Some were dukes, some were earls, and some were kings or sons of kings. And she was as beautiful as ever, only in her thirties, a prize herself even if there had been no kingdom to covet.

But though she considered long and hard over some of them, and even liked several men who came, she turned them all down and sent them all away.

And she reigned alone, as queen, with the Bear to advise her.

She also did what her husband had told her a queen should do—she raised her son to be king and her daughters to be worthy to be queens. And the Bear helped her with that, too, teaching her son to hunt, and teaching him how to see beyond men's words into their hearts, and teaching him to love peace and serve the people.

And the boy grew up as beautiful as his father and as wise as the Bear, and the people knew he would be a great king, perhaps even greater than King Ethelred had been.

The queen grew old, and turned much of the matter of the kingdom over to her son, who was now a man. The prince married the daughter of a neighboring king. She was a good woman, and the queen saw her grandchildren growing up.

She knew perfectly well that she was old, because she was sagging and no longer beautiful as she had been in her youth—though there were many who said that she was far more lovely as an old lady than any mere girl could hope to be.

But somehow it never occurred to her that the Bear, too, was growing old. Didn't he still stride through the garden with one of her grandchildren on each shoulder? Didn't he still come into the study with her and her son and teach them statecraft and tell them, yes, that's good, yes, that's right, yes, you'll make a great queen yet, yes, you'll be a fine king, worthy of your grandfather's kingdom—didn't he?

Yet one day he didn't get up from his bed, and a servant came to her with a whispered message, "Please come."

She went to him and found him gray-faced and shaking in his bed.

"Thirty years ago," he said, "I would have said it's nothing but a fever and I would have ignored it and gone riding. But now, my lady, I know I'm going to die."

"Nonsense," she said, "you'll never die," knowing as well as he did that he was dying, and knowing that he knew that she knew it.

"I have a confession to make," he said to her.

"I know it already," she said.

"Do you?"

"Yes," she said softly, "and much to my surprise, I find that I love you too. Even an old lady like me," she said, laughing.

"Oh," he said, "that was not my confession. I already knew that you knew I loved you. Why else would I have come back when you called?"

And then she felt a chill in the room and remembered the only time she had ever called for help.

"Yes," he said, "you remember. How I laughed when they named me. If they only knew, I thought at the time."

She shook her head. "How could it be?"

"I wondered myself," he said. "But it is. I met a wise old man in the woods when I was but a lad. An orphan, too, so that there was no one to ask about me when I stayed with him. I stayed until he died five years later, and I learned all his magic."

"There's no magic," she said as if by rote, and he laughed.

"If you mean brews and spells and curses, then you're right," he said. "But there is magic of another sort. The magic of becoming what most you are. My old man in the woods, his magic was to be an owl, and to fly by night seeing the world and coming to understand it. The owlness was in him, and the magic was letting that part of himself that was most himself come forward. And he taught me."

The Bear had stopped shaking because his body had given up trying to overcome the illness.

"So I looked inside me and wondered who I was. And then I found it out. Your nurse found it, too. One glance and she knew I was a bear."

"You killed my husband," she said to him.

"No," he said. "I fought your husband and carried him from the palace, but as he stared death in the face he discovered, too, what he was and who he was, and his real self came out."

The Bear shook his head.

"I killed a wolf at the palace gate, and left a wolf with a broken neck behind when I went away into the hills."

"A wolf both times," she said. "But he was such a beautiful boy."

"A puppy is cute enough whatever he plans to grow up to be," said the Bear.

"And what am I?" asked the queen.

"You?" asked the Bear. "Don't you know?"

"No," she answered. "Am I a swan? A porcupine? These days I walk like a crippled, old biddy hen. Who am I, after all these years? What animal should I turn into by night?"

"You're laughing," said the Bear, "and I would laugh too, but I have to be stingy with my breath. I don't know what animal you are, if you don't know yourself, but I think—"

And he stopped talking and his body shook in a great heave.

"No!" cried the queen.

"All right," said the Bear. "I'm not dead yet. I think that deep down inside you, you are a woman, and so you have been wearing your real self out in the open all your life. And you are beautiful."

"What an old fool you are after all," said the queen. "Why didn't I ever marry you?"

"Your judgment was too good," said the Bear.

But the queen called the priest and her children and married the Bear on his deathbed, and her son who had learned kingship from him called him father, and then they remembered the bear who had come to play with them in their childhood and the queen's daughters called him father; and the queen called him husband, and the Bear laughed and allowed as how he wasn't an orphan any more. Then he died.

And that's why there's a statue of a bear over the gate of the city.

Paul H. Cook

PROTEUS

Proteus in Greek mythology was a sea demon with a very special talent: he was able to change shape. The modern Proteus in the following story shares that talent with his ancient counterpart, but whether he's human, demon or something else is not clear. What is clear is the fact that Paul H. Cook has produced a startlingly different piece of fiction.

I think I am in trouble. A big wind followed me from the office this afternoon, threading its way through the rabble of weary commuters at the subway station, running up and down the crowded aisle of the subway car like an ill-mannered child. Then, it burst out onto the platform where it danced around me when I got off at what I thought was my destination.

But it wasn't my station at all.

I was very confused and embarrassed, though everyone around me was thinking *how like November, the wind, the leaves*. They blamed poor ventilation of the train; or, outside, they blamed the strong sea winds. I was safe, but followed. I had to do something.

Today I was Harold Bliss, traveling salesman, now going home. And I had neatly adjusted myself to his wan temperaments, his neurotic wheezing; filled out the flesh where it needed it. The pounds of fat. The weak chin. His moustache was ever so trim and efficient. I was even accurate down to the nicotine stains on the fingers of my right hand, fingers I made stubby and somewhat crude. Four coffee and bourbons

kept me cozy all day. Until the wind. It had never been like this before.

Now it affectionately rubbed at my trouser cuffs like a wayward tomcat come home. The station was completely empty of everything and everyone but this *wind* and myself. And trouble. I could feel it. The bones jerked like stanchions. The muscles and skin rediscovered themselves in tremors of elastic urgency. My wife, Cora Wright, waited beyond the glass doors. This was not Harold Bliss's time or station. It was Melvin Wright's stop. Melvin Wright, traveling salesman, not due home for two more days.

Cora! She had come to meet me. Cora Wright, not Francine Bliss who waited at home three long stops away. Beyond was the station wagon of Melvin Wright, and the daughter, impatient as she always seemed to be, of Melvin Wright. Dixie was a beautiful three-year-old. But Cora!

She slowly turned, searching. The wind ceased, disappeared entirely, its prank temporarily set aside. Perhaps it had gotten bored.

A convenient shadow found me bending for a drink of sparkling water from a miraculously handy fountain. And like bathing in the waters of life, I straightened to the world of Melvin Wright.

And the wind had vanished. Gone. Cold and crisp the air was, but no wind.

"Honey," she greeted me in the parking lot. "You're sweating. Dear, are you all right?"

Cora had these spectacularly intense blue eyes that somehow were possessed of the ability to glitter in the dark. Perhaps it was her smile. I loved these women. Harold Bliss would have been duly appreciative.

I mopped my brow with a monogrammed handkerchief: *M.W.* I breathed a little easier. The adjustment from Harold Bliss to Melvin Wright was complete. Suit, shoes, and all.

"I'm O.K. Just the crowd in the subway. It's always a little stifling in there, you know."

How to explain? Would I even *dare* to explain?

She linked arms with me: her delicate perfume could bring an ordinary mortal to his knees. Lucky man, Melvin Wright. Dixie bobbed in the back seat of the station wagon, restless and eager.

Cora chatted excitedly, but I had stopped listening after a certain point, that point being *dinner at Mother's*. God.

Something was wrong. I had forgotten. Or had I? Harold Bliss was very busy today. And exhausted. No wonder he forgot. What was left of him—some disenchanted noumenon hovering inside me like a guilty conscience—still felt the urge to wait around for the 7:55. Get back on track. Those four coffees and bourbons were, after all, still around waiting their own turn at Harold Bliss.

But Harold Bliss wouldn't be coming home tonight. Not tonight. Sweat blossomed above my lip that had withdrawn its Tuesday moustache. Across the street from the subway entrance, beyond the huddle of parked cars, stands a large elm still cast in a few holdover autumn leaves. Slowly, like a woman waving from the distance of a dangerous shoal, it moved. It rustled its limbs as if breathing, its branches fanning up into the X-ray portrait of a real lung's capillaries. *The wind!*

The wind then leaped the street and rushed at the seat of my pants. A swift kick to the keester.

"What?" Cora asked, looking up, as she was about to enter the driver's side of the car.

"Oh, nothing." I slid in quickly. Quietly.

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!" Two little arms cuddled my neck from behind. "Daddy!"

"Stop," I gasped. I had to be firm about this. I loved Dixie tremendously. She was a consumate heartbreaker.

I nervously reached for a cigarette.

"What?" Cora stared ahead, intent on traffic, but sharply aware of my every move. Those eyes again.

I had forgotten. Slipped. Melvin Wright quit smoking four months ago. Doctor's advice. Wife's badgering. Harold Bliss could use some of it.

"Nothing. Just an itch."

Cora watched the road. "They called from the office," she began, "and said you came back early today. I told Mother. She'll be glad to see us tonight."

They called?

A cold feather of wind tickled my ear. *The wind.* The window itself was sealed tight, cranked up as far as it would go. But the wind; I swallowed hard. The trees in the suburbs weren't twitching an iota. No newspaper swept in desolation down the street. No leaf pirouetted to either gutter. Yet, the wind had crept inside. Here.

I shivered. Half of my face felt nearly frozen. This just

wasn't an ordinary breeze from the car in motion. I tugged at the window crank, but it was as tight as it could get. A low whistling mocked me.

"Damn thing," I muttered.

Cora whispered harshly, "Don't swear in front of the baby. Just leave it alone. There's nothing wrong with it."

I sat back, resigned. I loosened my tie. What else to do?

"Anyway," she continued. "Mother is having a few of her club friends over tonight, and Aunt Bessie. You always liked Aunt Bessie."

"But I thought . . ."

"It shouldn't last too long. We'll put Dixie down in Father's room after dinner."

"Telebision!" Dixie chimed.

"Maybe," her mother countered.

"So try to be civil tonight. You know how important Mother is to us, and her friends. And try not to mention anything about Father tonight. Not even to Aunt Bessie."

Her instructions lasted the journey. I had either listened to them too intently, or perhaps in some obscure Taoist non-reflective way ignored them, but whatever transpired in the interim, it had put an end to the breeze coming in at the cracks in the window. I hadn't noticed it as I lost myself to Cora's prescriptions for the evening.

We pulled into Mother's driveway and Dixie wormed over into the front seat. I got a small sneaker in the mouth for my assistance in the maneuver.

Dixie followed her mother out her side of the station wagon, and Grandmother stood illuminated in the great doorway of her home like Beatrice in Heaven.

Closing the door I realigned my tie. But the gesture only disguised my real intent. I gazed carefully about the darkened neighborhood, and listened. Aside from the sounds of the women filling the doorway with their brittle voices, no other natural sound could be heard in the suburban stillness.

I stepped onto the flagstones of the walkway.

"Whoop!" The wind jumped from the bushes with incredible acrobatics and ran up my pant legs. "Christ!" My pants ballooned and I suddenly remembered the boxer shorts Melvin Wright wore that Harold Bliss did not.

"Mel! Come on in out of the cold!" Mother outreached with her withered pink palm, her face haloed in the yellow light behind her.

Gladly, I thought, and was escorted to the huge double doors by the wind itself.

Mother beamed. Her eyes almost buried in crow's feet. Eyes like tiny lead bullets.

"Sure is nasty out there," she announced, pulling the doors closed behind us. And suddenly all was calm.

Dixie and Cora were already winding through the gathering of Mother's "club." Aunt Bessie billowed out of nowhere.

"Goodness me!" she exclaimed, surrounding me with arms and affection. "Why, Melvin, it's *so* good to see you tonight. And what a surprise! We were just talking about you, weren't we, Helen?"

Mother affirmed this, smiling grandly. Aunt Bessie kissed my cheek.

She then stood back and, with a great, wholesome laugh, said, "Cora dear, how on earth did you get this man to shave after work?" She patted my chin and I immediately reddened. "Smooth as a baby's behind."

That remark should have been laughed at and glossed over. But no. Not tonight. Leave it to Aunt Bessie to find the one detail that would escape me: my changes aren't nearly so recognizable as this one. But I was under pressure back at the station. An emergency situation. Harold Bliss had coffees and bourbons *and* the wind with which to contend. Being away five days a week does leave a few gaps in my act.

Cora lifted her eyebrows, struck with curiosity.

"Now, Aunt Bessie," I hastily explained, drawing a hand over my jaw that realistically should have grated with a five-o'clock shadow. But didn't. "I just fixed myself up at the office before coming out in public. Wouldn't want to be a slob in front of the family, now would I?"

I tried to dance through the crossfire of their looks.

But Mother was flattered by my smiles, and Cora properly diverted, when five chubby fingers punched on "Star Trek" in the midst of the gathering of the "club." All heads, mercifully, swiveled toward the color TV and Dixie's ruffled panties showing as she crouched in front of it. The little angel.

Cora gently pounced on her. "You can watch TV after dinner."

I began to sweat again, realizing the inquisition could go on and on as the evening progressed. I was, after all, the only male in the bunch.

The "club" rattled over the buffet they had prepared for

themselves. I slipped into the bathroom down the hall to double-check myself in the mirror. Dixie, meanwhile, thudded down the hall past me and entered my father-in-law's old room. The TV set in the bookshelf returned to "Star Trek."

In the mirror I looked at my eyes. Slightly bloodshot, they added to the tired look, though I rarely found Melvin Wright tiring at all lately. The smile was wide and friendly; no trace of Harold Bliss's clipped moustache or the pursed little mouth that always seemed too anal. But that was Harold Bliss. I patted my cheeks for flush, dipping my hands into the cold, invigorating water of the basin. It had been a trying day. I had better look it, even though it was now too late for the five-o'clock beard.

Suddenly the window snapped open. The turquoise plastic shower curtain fluttered in the shower stall like the wings of an angry bat. *The wind.* I stepped into the stall and clasped the window shut. The curtains sighed back into place. The water on my face stung with cold. I leaned back against the tile.

I could hear the wind moan against the sides of the house. The trees out back shuddered and sighed. Even the telephone lines clapped against each other.

I swallowed hard again. My hands shook visibly.

"Bafroom, Daddy!"

"What?" I spun around. "Oh," I said, climbing out of the shower stall.

Dixie burst in, and as if I was not at all present, climbed onto the stool and planted herself, her yellow dress spread out like a flower. A perfect little lady.

"Yes, well." And I left. Dixie lost herself to her concentration.

"Where were you?" Cora greeted me in the hall. "Dinner's underway. Now remember, be nice and we can be out of here in a couple of hours."

The wind slid a metal lawn chair impatiently across the back porch. *A couple of hours . . .*

The "club" was all over the living room, the dining room, and the enormous kitchen, with plates in their laps and drinks in their hands. There must have been a hundred of them. Their voices filled the house with such an astounding clangor that there could very well have been many more than that. Thousands. An island of harpies.

Aunt Bessie found me mooning indecisively over a casserole of baked beans.

"Melvin, you should really try those. Mrs. Cowley made them from her special recipe." She tapped my flat stomach playfully with a soft, gentle hand. "You can afford to make room."

She laughed. Cora laughed coming up behind me.

"He's so hard to put meat on his bones." Harold Bliss should be so lucky.

While the women laughed, I could hear the wind tugging irritably at the awning over the kitchen window.

Mother materialized out of nowhere. "What a blow we're getting up outside. My, my..." She puttered about the table.

"Come." Aunt Bessie grabbed my arm. "Let's have a sit. I haven't seen you in ages. Cora's told me so much about your firm. It's just a shame that you have to be away most of the time."

The living room was hot, like the inside of a hot-air balloon. The house could have easily floated away. She dropped me onto the couch with my plate in the middle of the "club." Then silence reigned. All eyes turned politely on me, and I suddenly began wondering what Harold Bliss would have been doing by now. Had not the wind interrupted things.

"Well." Aunt Bessie slapped a friendly hand on my leg. "Tell us how your division has been doing. As if we didn't know." She winked, and the ladies clucked.

I dove into Mrs. Cowley's famous beans; this *was* an inquisition.

Suddenly, in one great jolt, the wind beat the walls of Mother's house.

"Oh, my! That sounds just like the winds we used to get in Iowa," Aunt Bessie said with a touch of glee.

The women began talking among themselves, not so much because the wind was so unusually loud, but because it gave them something to chatter about. Like trading baseball cards. Or perhaps even more like veterans exchanging war stories.

Then, very gently, a small breeze flitted at my neck sending chills down my spine. I looked around. Nowhere was there an open window. The room was too hot and stuffy for that.

Aunt Bessie was speaking about something or other to do with last month's yachting finals, when I stood up. I had to leave. Get out. A vein of ivy scratched at the sumptuous picture window, and a rope or a loose wire was dangling and

cracking at the side of the garage in the wind. This was no autumn storm. *It waited for me.*

"Cora, could I talk with you for a minute, please?" I excused myself from Mother and Aunt Bessie.

We backed off into the hallway where I scooped up my coat.

"What is it, Mel?" She seemed genuinely concerned. The wind mysteriously abated.

"Honey," I began with a look of earnestness, "I left my briefcase back at the station."

"What?"

"I know, I know," I slid into my coat. "I'd better go and get it before it gets too late. I'm sure it's still there. I'll come straight back."

I hurriedly kissed her, taking the keys. I smiled. "Tell Mother I'll only be a few minutes. Tell her it's been a long day."

"OK, but be careful." Harold Bliss would sell his soul for those eyes of Cora's.

I made the station wagon in nothing flat, not looking back, knowing Cora was watching me. I didn't dare look to the trees or the sky for some sign of the wind.

The engine whined to life. I made sure all the windows were rolled up, then turned into the street. I drove hastily away.

Once around the corner and out of sight, I pulled over and stopped. The trees were absolutely still this November night as if in a dream. Or a nightmare; across the street on the porch of a small, tidy house, a white cat rested peacefully in the yellow glare of the overhead porchlight. I should be so relaxed.

It only took ten minutes to make the station. I checked my watch. Eight-fourteen. One train remained tonight and I could barely catch it. Harold Bliss stirred. I had to get him back on the right track. Despite the wind.

The parking lot was completely empty. So was the station.

In the middle of the station not one breath of air drifted. The autumn quiet was eternally refreshing. Harold Bliss made a slow, easy return in the shadows after a redeeming drink from the fountain. The rumpled clothes, the four coffees and bourbons also came back. I staggered slightly. I rubbed my upper lip and felt the regrown steelbrush of his moustache. *My* moustache. I coughed, looked around nervously.

The train pulled up to the station. It would be three more stops down the line before I would get off again and be home. *Home*. It did sound funny. It meant so many different things.

Inside the car there was no one but me. All the commuters had finally gotten home. The train was locked in silence. I reached for a cigarette.

As I smoked, I listened for the wind outside.

It seemed to have left me alone. Good. I closed my eyes. Tomorrow would be Jake Ramsey's turn and I had better be up to it. But tonight, *tonight* I'll be where I should, at home with Francine and the girls. Melvin Wright will phone in an excuse tomorrow: *Something came up; be home in a couple of days. The car's back at the station.* Cora will understand.

The train just then pulled away. The doors closed and the train moved out with the ease of a ship at sea borne on the wind. *The wind!*

Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. The cars of the subway train didn't jerk one after another as they would when the engine pulls out building up momentum. The train, its cars *in unison,* moved out slowly, smoothly. As if urged from behind.

I looked back down the car. Nothing. Silence. We moved as if cradled in a large hand. *We?* The wind, sitting in the seat behind me, chose this moment to waft across my face ever so slightly. Like a lover's kiss. I should have known. The train was now being pushed by the big wind. Quietly. Effortlessly. Efficiently. No sound at all but the oiled wheels on the steel rails beneath.

I leaned back in the breeze that tousled Harold Bliss's thinning gray hair. Tomorrow would be Jake Ramsey, or should be. And Melvin Wright would be a day later. But I wonder. I think the jig is up.

Susan C. Petrey

SPIDERSONG

Spiders are frequently present in fantasy tales. They are usually dreadful malevolent creatures that do horrible things to people. It's extremely rare to find a spider such as the heroine of the following story who chooses to make her home in a young woman's lute, and whose very existence augments and enhances that woman's life. If Brenneker weaves any web at all, it's a web in which the reader is willingly entrapped. Sadly, Susan C. Petrey's promising career was cut short by her death in December 1980. She did leave behind a few unpublished stories.

Brenneker, the lyre spider, lived inside a lute, a medieval instrument resembling a pear-shaped guitar. The lute was an inexpensive copy of one made by an old master and had rosewood walls and a spruce sounding board. Her home was sparcely furnished, a vast expanse of unfinished wood, a few sound pegs reaching from floor to ceiling like Greek columns, and in one corner, near the small F-shape sound holes, the fantasy of iron-silk thread that was Brenneker's web. Brenneker's home was an unusual one for a lyre spider. Most of them spin their webs in hollow tawba stalks, which echo the music of these tiny fairy harps seldom heard by ears of men. Lyre spiders play duets with each other, sometimes harmonizing, sometimes bouncing counterpoint melodies back and forth across the glades between the tall bamboo-like tawba. They play their webs to attract prey, to win a mate, or for the sheer joy of music. They live alone except for the few

weeks in mother's silken egg case and one day of spiderlings climbing up the tawba to cast their threads into the wind and fly away. When they mate, the embrace lasts but a few moments. Then the female eats the male, who gives himself gladly to this deepest union of two souls.

Originally, Brenneker had lived in the forest, surrounded by the music of her own kind. Although she lived alone, she was never lonely, for she could always hear the mandolin-like plucking of Twinklebright, her nearest neighbor, the deep, droning chords of old Birdslayer, and occasionally the harpsichord tones of Klavier, carried on the breeze.

One hot afternoon as Brenneker experimented with augmented fifths, she noticed that some of her neighbors had stopped midsong. She suddenly realized she was the only one still playing and she stopped abruptly, leaving a leading tone hanging on the air like an unfinished sentence.

"These ones should do," she heard a man's voice say. An angry blow struck the base of her tawba stalk. She felt herself falling as the tawba that was her home broke at the base, tumbling her to the floor of the glade below. Bruised and frightened, she scampered quickly back inside her home and clung to her silent, broken web. She felt herself lifted up and then dropped with a jar as her tawba was tossed into a wagon.

Over many hours of jolting and rattling, she fell asleep, and when she awoke, all was quiet and dark. She climbed out of her stalk and began to explore her new surroundings, a work-bench with many hollow wooden objects lying about. Although she had never seen a musical instrument such as men make, she recognized with the eye of a musician that their shape was intended to give sound. She chose a lute and squeezed her plump body through one of the sound holes, saying, "Certainly this will give greater tone than my old home." She began to string her web.

At night there was no music in the instrument maker's shop, and she was lonely without the songs of her friends to cheer her. Since she was also hungry, she played her hunger song, and a fat, stupid moth came; aching to be devoured. When she'd finished with him, she tossed his powdery wings out the sound hole.

In the morning, the old instrument maker, Sanger, came to open up his shop. He paused in the shop doorway rattling his keys and then turned on the overhead light. Brenneker watched him from the sound holes of her new home as he ran

a wrinkled hand through his sparse, gray hair, stuffed his keys back into a deep pocket, and picked a viola from the wall. Carefully, he adjusted the tuning of the strings, and then, picking up the bow, he played a short, lilting tune and then replaced the instrument on its peg on the wall. He made his way along the wall, pausing at each instrument to check the tuning. When he came to Brenneker's lute, he did the same, tightening the strings briefly and then playing a few bars of melody. Brenneker felt her whole surroundings vibrate with the tone and her web pulsed in sympathetic vibration. Timidly, she picked out a few notes of the song.

"Odd," said Mr. Sanger, "I'd never noticed that it had such lovely overtones. Too bad I had to use such cheap materials in its construction." He placed the lute back on the wall and was about to pick up a zither, when the shop bell rang to announce that someone had come in from the street.

A young girl and her father came through the door and paused to look at violins.

"But I don't want to play violin," said the girl, who was about ten years old. "Everyone plays violin. I want something different."

"Well, what about a guitar," said her father. "Your friend Marabeth plays one quite well. It seems like a proper instrument for a young lady."

"But that's just it," said the girl, whose name Brenneker later found out was Laurel. "I don't want to copycat someone else. I want an instrument that isn't played by just anyone. I want something special."

Sanger interrupted this conversation to say, "Have you considered the lute?" He removed Brenneker's home from the wall and strummed a chord. The vibration in the web tickled Brenneker's feet as she strummed the same chord an octave higher.

"What a lovely tone it has!" said Laurel, touching the strings and plucking them one by one.

"Be careful," said her father. "That's an antique."

"Not so," said Sanger, "it's a copy. Made it myself. And I intended it to be played, not just looked at like a dusty old museum piece."

"May I try?" asked the girl. Sanger gave the instrument to her and she sat down on a stool, placing the lute across her lap. She strummed a discord which caused Brenneker to flinch and grip her strings tightly so they wouldn't sound.

"Let me show you how," said the instrument maker. "Put your first finger in that fret and your middle finger there, like so." He indicated where the fingers should fret the strings to make a chord. Laurel plucked the strings one by one. The tone was tinny but true. The second time she plucked, Brenneker plucked inside, on her own instrument. Rich, golden tones emanated from the lute.

"Oh, Father, this is the instrument for me," said Laurel.

"But who will teach you to play such an antiquated instrument?"

"I would be glad to," said Sanger. "I have studied medieval and Renaissance music and I would like to share it with an interested pupil."

"Please, Father?"

"Well, perhaps . . . there is the question of cost. I can't afford a very expensive instrument," said her father.

"This lute, although made with loving care and much skill," said Sanger, "is unfortunately made of inexpensive wood, and for that reason it is very reasonably priced."

Mr. Sanger and Laurel's father were able to make agreeable terms for the lute and the cost of lessons. That morning Laurel took the lute, Brenneker and all, home with her.

The first few weeks of lessons were torture for Brenneker, who sat huddled, clenching her strings to her body to damp them. But as Laurel improved, Brenneker rewarded her by playing in unison. This was great incentive to Laurel, who did not realize that she was only partial author of the lovely music. Mr. Sanger was himself at a loss to explain how such beautiful tones came from such a cheaply built instrument. He did not credit his workmanship, although this was in some measure responsible, but told Laurel that the lute was haunted by a fairy harpist, and he advised her to leave a window open at night and put out a bowl of milk and honey before she went to bed. Perhaps he had been the beneficiary of such a fairy in the past, for Brenneker found that the milk and the open window provided her with a bountiful supply of flies and insects, which she tempted by song through the sound holes of the lute to make her supper.

Sanger valued highly the virtue of two playing in harmony. "For the ability to blend with another in duet is a mark of maturity in a true musician," he would say. "Harmony between two players recaptures for us briefly that time

when the universe was young, untainted by evil, and the morning stars sang together."

Brenneker never played by herself unless she was sure that she was alone. She played when Laurel played or at night when everyone was sleeping. When spring came that year, she played the mating song and waited, but no lover came. The next night she tried again, this time varying the tune and adding trills, but still no one came. Brenneker tried for several nights before she finally admitted to herself that there was no fault in her song, but that none of her folk dwelt in this faraway land and so there was no one to answer. But this reasoning made her feel unhappy, and she preferred to think that it might be some imperfection in her song, which could be righted by practice.

As Laurel grew older, Brenneker noticed that the quality of their music changed. Whereas she had formerly been a lover of sprightly dance tunes, Laurel became more interested in old ballads and would sing as she accompanied herself on the lute. One of her favorites was "Barbara Allen," another, "The Wife of Ushers Well."

She was often asked to perform at weddings and parties. She met other lovers of medieval music and even other lute players. Laurel would sometimes allow others to play her instrument, which drew a mixed response. If Brenneker knew the tune of the strange artist, she would pick along. If not, she held her strings silent, leaving the others to wonder how Laurel got such rounded tones where they only strummed dull, tinny notes.

One summer evening Laurel took a blanket, the lute and Brenneker to a woodsy place and sat down alone to play. She sang many of the old ballads and then she would stop for a while and listen. Then she would play another song. Brenneker wondered at this until she heard answering notes from a recorder in a grove nearby. The two instruments played a duet, with occasional counterpoint melody, and then the recorder player drew near, and Brenneker saw that it was a young man.

"Aha," she thought, "Laurel plays to attract a mate."

The young man sat down beside Laurel on the grass.

"I knew you'd come," he said to her.

She moved over toward him and he put an arm around her waist and kissed her.

This went on for quite some time. After a while the two

said good-bye, and Laurel picked up her blanket and trudged homeward, while her love went in the other direction.

"Strange," thought Brenneker. "She did not eat him." This bothered the lyre spider until she stopped to reflect; "Birds do not eat their mates. Perhaps the humans are like birds, but I had always thought them more intelligent than that."

A few nights later, Laurel took her blanket and went to the grove again. The young man, whose name was Thomas, was there waiting for her. They played a few songs and then they made love. As she walked home, Laurel sang "Barbara Allen."

"And still she does not eat him," thought Brenneker. "Their way of being together is different from ours. Yet I'm sure it must mean as much to them as ours does to us. Yet it seems so incomplete. Impermanent."

The presence of the human lovers made Brenneker more aware of her own loneliness. "If I could mate," she thought. "I would make the most beautiful egg-sack all of silk, and my eggs would sway to the music of the lute until they hatched. Then they would fly to neighboring trees and build their own lyres and play to me and I wouldn't be alone anymore." But when she played her love songs, softly on the night air, no lover came. She was used to it by now, but she never gave up hope.

One evening the two lovers had a quarrel.

"You must marry me this fall," Thomas insisted.

"But we have no money," Laurel objected. "You are only an apprentice at your trade, and it will be a long time before you bring home a journeyman's wage. I would not be able to go to the university to study music."

"We would get by somehow," said Thomas. "You could take in music students and teach the lute. We could pick up a little extra money playing for gatherings."

"But I do so much want to go to the university," said Laurel. "We could go to the city and both take jobs. That way we could be together and I could study for my degree."

"I can't get as good a job in the city as here," said Thomas, "and besides, you could not earn enough to support yourself and pay tuition. So you might as well settle here with me."

"There has to be a way for me to continue my study of music," said Laurel, "and I intend to find it."

When Thomas left, he did not kiss Laurel good-bye.

Laurel, thoughtful and concerned, put her lute aside and

went to bed early. She did not forget to leave a window open, however, or set out milk to feed the fairy. Brenneker pondered their dilemma and could see no solution. While she was brooding over this, she heard the unmistakable sound of a lyre spider tuning up its instrument, and this caused her to listen intently. It was a curious song, having a haunting quality, a shadowing of minor key but not quite. This was no spider song, Brenneker was sure, but it was definitely played by one of her own kind. She strummed an answering chord and the other player stopped in midphrase as if startled. Brenneker played part of an old song she'd played many times at home. The other answered her with the refrain of the song, and so they played back and forth for a while until the other stopped. Brenneker was somewhat disappointed that the song had ended, but a few moments later she discovered why. A gentle tapping on the sounding board roused her attention and she went to the F holes to peer out. The other spider, a male, had followed her music and had come to investigate. He clambered up the side of the instrument to her vantage point.

"How lovely," he said, "to hear the songs of home in a strange land. Tell me, Lady, how did you come here?"

"By accident," said Brenneker. "The humans picked my tawba stalk for a flute and brought me here. But I have never seen another of our kind here until now."

"I came in similar fashion," said the male. "My name is Wisterness, and, until now, I had thought I was the only one of our kind that had ranged so widely."

"What was that strange tune you played? Is it in a minor key? I have heard none like it before," said Brenneker.

"It's neither major or minor," said Wisterness. "It is based on a modal scale like some of the Renaissance music I've heard you play. I've noticed that you sometimes play in the Dorian mode, which is somewhat similar. Actually, I was playing a southern mountain tune called 'June Apple.' The tuning is called 'mountain minor,' or 'A to G' tuning among them, but it is actually the older double-tonic scale, based on the highland bagpipe tuning, or, according to some sources, the Irish Harp."

"My goodness," said Brenneker, "you certainly know a lot about music. I haven't heard half of those words. I do remember playing 'Scarborough Fair' in the Dorian mode, but that's about the extent of my music theory."

"I may know more theory, but you are the better musician, Lady. I am always barely learning one tune and then going on to something new. Consequently my playing lacks polish. I have listened to your songs for several nights before summoning the courage to answer."

"I certainly have no complaint against your playing," said Brenneker. "I thought it was quite beautiful. I am curious about one thing, though, and that is your age. I never knew male spiders lived much more than a few years, yet you seem quite mature and well-read. Have you never mated?"

Wisterness shuffled his pedipalps and appeared slightly embarrassed.

"No, I never have," he said. "There was one once in my youth that I cared for, but she chose to devour another. Then one day I followed a woodsman to listen to his song, and I was carried off in a load of wood and eventually came to this place. Since then I have devoted myself to the study of humans and their music, but it has been lonely at times."

Since it was not the mating time, Wisterness left after awhile and went back to his lyre, which was strung in a hollow tree not far from the window, and he and Brenneker played duets most of the night. But sometimes she paused to listen to the piercing modal sweetness of Wisterness, as he experimented with different tunings from the lonely southern mountains.

The next morning, Laurel did not sit down to her music at the usual time, but instead put on her coat and went out with a purposeful look in her eyes. The next day, at the practice hour, a younger girl came to Laurel's door carrying a lute under her arm, and Laurel taught her a lesson. It was "Greensleeves," a favorite of Brenneker's, and she played along at first, but the student had troubles, and they kept stopping midverse and starting over until Brenneker decided it was more pain than pleasure and gave it up. Before the student left, she counted out a small sum of money which Laurel put in a large jar on her dresser. This money, Brenneker learned, was to go toward Laurel's university tuition.

As the weeks passed, more students came, until Laurel had five beginners to teach. One student came twice a week from a distant township. Sanger, the old instrument maker, still came by once in a while to teach Laurel a song, but she had long ago surpassed him in musical skill, and he never

charged for his "lessons" anymore. His fingers had grown arthritic and he could not play as well as he had in the past. He no longer took students, which made Laurel one of the few teachers of the lute in her part of the country. The money piled up slowly in the jar, but it was nowhere near enough, and sometimes Brenneker would overhear Laurel arguing with her father at night about her plans to go to the university.

"Even if you get a degree in music," he would say, "that doesn't guarantee that you'll be able to support yourself. Why not study something practical that you can find a good job in."

Laurel agreed to take courses in handicrafts and midwifery to pacify her father, whom she still depended upon for support, but her heart belonged to music, and she refused to give up her plans for further study.

When she saw Thomas now, they both avoided talking about future plans, as this always provoked a fight, and he did not come to see her as often. Brenneker fretted about this, as she saw Laurel suffering in silence. When Laurel played, Brenneker sometimes wove her mating song into the web of sound hoping that Thomas would hear and return to renew his love. But he did not hear, or if he did, he didn't come.

One warm spring night, Brenneker alone played her mating song hopefully to the open window, and after a short time Wisterness came, tapping shyly on her sound box to announce his presence.

"You must come out," he said, "for the sound holes are too small for me to get in."

Brenneker had failed to recognize her predicament. As a young spider, she had entered through the holes with ease, but now she was bigger, and therefore trapped within the lute. She forced her legs out the F holes, and she could feel the tantalizing closeness of his belly fur, but try as they might, they could not negotiate across the wooden barrier.

Finally he said, "Brenneker, I fear our love must go unconsummated, for you can't get out and I can't get in. But then perhaps it's better that way, for even if we could somehow manage to mate, we could not partake of the deeper sharing, with you in there and me out here."

And so he left sadly. She did not hear his song for several days, and then one day the wind carried the distant strains of "Billy in the Lowground" to her window. The sad Irish

mode echoing in the lonely Appalachian melody, told her that he had moved his harp farther away to avoid the pain of their unsatisfied need. He was too far to answer any of her musical questions or play the counterpoint games.

One day Laurel invited Thomas over to her home. She was very anxious to share a piece of news with him.

"The university is offering a music scholarship," she said. "There will be a contest and I intend to participate. If I win, my tuition would be paid, and if we both found jobs, we could be together while I go to school in the city."

Thomas thought about this before answering and then said, "It's not the money that really bothers me, it's your attitude. I get the feeling that I am not as important to you as your music. I want you to be happy, but I don't wish to play second fiddle to a lute."

"But my work is as important to me as yours is to you," said Laurel. "The truth is that neither of us wishes to make the sacrifice of our career goals to be with the other."

"I had hoped our love meant more to you than your music," said Thomas, "but I see I was wrong."

"It means equally as much to me," said Laurel, "I just don't think I should be the one to have to make the sacrifice of my career. There is no reason you couldn't get a job in the city. It would not be forever, only a few years. Then we could come back here and you could take up where you left off."

"I don't see it that way," he said. "In a few years I would be behind everyone in my training and I'd be competing with younger men whom they don't have to pay as much. If I stay, I have opportunity for advancement in a few years."

"Well, I suppose we will part, then when the summer's over," said Laurel. "I shall miss you terribly, but that's the way things work out sometimes. There is one last request I want to make of you, and that is, will you accompany my playing when I go to the contest?"

"I'm afraid I can't do that," said Thomas. "It would be adding insult to injury if I participated in the very thing that takes you away from me."

After Thomas left, Laurel cried. She went to bed early and even forgot about the milk for the fairy. This did not disturb Brenneker very much, for she had lost her appetite listening to their argument. She was pondering Laurel's problem in her mind (it seemed strange that humans could have barriers to love more complex than her wooden cage) when she heard

a strange grinding noise as of a small drill emanating from one corner of the lute. She scampered to the source of the sound and stood watching the smooth surface of the unfinished wood as the sound come nearer. Suddenly a little bump appeared in the surface, and then the bump dissolved in a small pile of sawdust, and an ugly bulbish head poked out of the newly formed hole. Brenneker pounced at the woodworm but missed as it pulled back into its tunnel. Frustrated, she stood tapping at the hole with her forelegs, as the worm withdrew and burrowed in a different direction.

"You must leave," said Brenneker to the worm. "You are destroying my home and Laurel's lute."

"There is plenty of wood here for both of us," came the muffled reply of the woodworm. "You may have the rosewood, and I'll eat only the spruce."

"But I don't eat wood," said Brenneker, "and you shouldn't eat this lute. There is plenty of other wood that you can eat. Leave my home alone. You are destroying a musical instrument. Have you no appreciation for music?"

"Hmm, yes, music," said the worm, whose name was Turkawee. "I've never cared for that funny-sounding stuff. Leave it to the birds, I always say."

"You ignorant barbarian!" exclaimed Brenneker.

"I think spiders are more barbaric than our kind," said Turkawee, "for spiders eat their cousins the insects, and even their own mates. You should take care whom you go calling a barbarian."

"Philistine, then!" snorted Brenneker. "You obviously have no concept of a higher culture than your own."

"Culture, you say?" said Turkawee. "That's a term my snooty Aunt Beetle used to use. She was always admiring the wings of butterflies. She knew an artist who made pictures of the wings. She ended up stuck with a pin to a cork board because all her interest in culture led her to follow a butterfly too closely into a collector's net. Culture is also for the birds, I say."

Brenneker, having no answer for this, retreated to her web and played the angriest song she could think of, which was a military march. The worm ignored her and continued gnawing at the wood of the lute.

Two days later, Brenneker was surveying the damage done by Turkawee. She was dismayed to find one part of the sounding board completely riddled with holes. She set about to

mend it, binding the remaining wood with the steely white thread that she extruded from her spinnerets. The patch was actually quite strong, perhaps more so than the surrounding wood, but the discrepancy in the surface weakened the instrument structurally. The tension of the lute strings could cause the instrument to break, if the patch didn't hold.

Brenneker returned to her web by the sound posts and fell asleep. She wasn't used to making so much new thread, and the effort had drained her strength. In the night when she awoke, she called many insects to her supper with song, for she was ravenously hungry due to her exertion. The next day when Laurel tuned up the lute to play for a wedding, Brenneker noted with satisfaction that the patch held. But the ravages of the woodworm continued.

Old Sanger, the instrument maker, when he heard that Laurel intended to enter the scholarship contest, came by the house to offer his advice. He had played in competition in the past, and he knew what sort of artistry was apt to attract the notice of the judges and what displays of skill might sway their opinion.

"It is always a good idea to include in your repertoire a few songs that are not well known and played by everyone. And in the songs that are better known, try to display some different interpretation or more rare harmony. A few classical pieces in your presentation are in order, and playing a duet, or having someone accompany you is essential; so be sure to play your arrangement of 'The Ash Grove' with that youngman friend of yours. Your counterpoint harmony mixes very well with his recorder, and such a presentation will be sure to impress the judges. They will be looking for that particular blending of tones that displays your sense of harmony not only with your partner but with yourself and the universe."

"Poor Laurel," thought Brenneker. "What will she do without Thomas' accompaniment?"

Laurel said nothing to Sanger about her falling out with Thomas, and after he left she practiced "The Ash Grove" unaccompanied and tried to develop some new variations on the old theme. Brenneker was tempted to play the recorder part, but since to do so would reveal her presence, she contented herself with her usual practice of playing in unison or one octave higher than the melody.

That night Brenneker made a tour of the inside of her home and found that the woodworm had damaged the bond

where the neck of the lute joins the body. She set about to repair the damage as best she could, plugging the holes with spidersilk and binding the weakened seam with long, tough strands. It was hard work and took much of her strength. She could barely stay awake long enough to eat the cricket that came chirping to hear her music.

Finally the greatly anticipated day came and Laurel took the coach to the big city where the contest was to be held. She refused to surrender her lute to the baggage rack and carried it in her lap, where it provoked much comment among the other passengers.

"What is that strange instrument?" they would ask. Or, "Please play us a tune."

Laurel consented and filled the coach with dulcet tones as her clear voice transported all the listeners to "Scarborough Fair."

When they arrived in the city, Laurel spent some of her hard-earned lesson money on a room at the inn. That night when Laurel was asleep, Brenneker found more holes to fill. Turkawee had almost destroyed one of the interior braces of the frame. And not only that, but also he had eaten away most of the surface below the bridge. If this were to give way, the strings would go slack and the instrument would be unplayable. Brenneker worked far into the night, binding the lute with her webbing. So far her spider silk, being stronger in tensile strength than steel wire of its same proportions, had held the lute together. But Brenneker was worried that the damage was too extensive. The inside of the lute was completely webbed and re-webbed in silk and she knew it would not hold forever. She ate sparsely that night of the few insects that inhabit an inn and then forced her body to make more thread to continue the repairs. By daybreak she was nearly exhausted. She tried to get some sleep but Laurel woke early, concerned about the contest, and practiced her pieces, causing Brenneker to get no sleep at all.

Brenneker dozed on the carriage trip across town to the university but awoke in time to restring and tune her musical web before the contest began.

Both Brenneker and Laurel fidgeted nervously as they awaited their turn to play. There were many contestants, including a few lutists. One young man held the very antique instrument of which Laurel's was a copy. He allowed Laurel to stroke the strings once to demonstrate the superiority of

its sound. But he was quite impressed when Laurel strummed a few bars on her own instrument with Brenneker's lute in tandem. "I don't understand it," he said. "Your cheaply made modern instrument sounds almost as good as mine."

"Better," thought Brenneker, smugly, but then she remembered the damaged bridge and hoped it would stand the strain. She roused herself wearily and went to find a few more holes which she hastily filled with silk.

When Laurel's time came to play, she mounted a stool on the edge of the stage. Brenneker peered out through the sound holes and saw a sea of faces watching. As Laurel tuned up, Brenneker heard an unnerving creak as the wood near the bridge shifted slightly. To her horror she saw daylight between the bridge and the body of the lute. She jumped to the ceiling of her home, bound the gap quickly, and prayed that the mend would hold. Her spinnerets ached with the strain of making so much silk, and she was very tired, but forced herself to pick the strings nimbly as Laurel began with a lively dance tune. Apparently the lovely tone impressed the judges, for Laurel was selected from a large field of competition to enter the finals.

The young man with the antique instrument was also one of the finalists, and he stopped to wish Laurel good luck. Laurel asked him if he would accompany her on "The Ash Grove," but he excused himself, saying that time would be too short for him to learn the intricate counterpart melody. He also assured her that without a duet piece, she didn't have a chance in the competition.

This point was emphasized by the lovely duet played by the young man and a woman who accompanied him on the psaltry. They received a standing ovation from the audience and high marks from the judges.

"Mercy," thought Brenneker. "Now Laurel won't be able to win the scholarship," and spider tears dampened the silk of her web.

"Hey! It's raining on my picnic," said a small voice near her.

She looked over and saw Turkawee calmly munching a chunk of spruce.

Without thinking, Brenneker pounced and bit with just enough venom to cause the woodworm to fall into a swoon.

"That should keep you from doing more damage!" she snapped. But the damage had already been done. One of the

sounding pegs looked as if it were ready to crumble into dust. Brenneker could feel, through her feet, the ominous vibrations as the tension of the strings pulled against the ravaged wood.

Finally Laurel's turn came again. She played a few classical pieces, a rondo, and sang "The Wife of Ushers Well," accompanying herself beautifully with an intricate rhythm she had worked out. For her last song, she began "The Ash Grove." Her first variation was neatly composed, but Brenneker thought it lacked the clever harmony of the previous duet. The second variations sounded very lonely without accompaniment, and this provoked Brenneker to try something she'd never done before. On the third verse she began to play her web in the counterpoint harmony as she had heard Thomas play so many times on the recorder. Laurel paused abruptly, but then, true performer that she was, began to play the melody in clear, bold tones which complemented Brenneker's descant. Laurel played every variation, and Brenneker knew them all and answered back. The people in the audience were amazed that someone could play two-part harmony on one instrument. This was the most lovely duet arrangement of "The Ash Grove" that the judges had ever heard.

"That's the first time I ever heard anyone play a duet alone," said the young man with the lute as she came down from the stage. "Your harmony was better than any duet I've ever heard. How did you ever do that?"

Flustered, Laurel answered, "I don't know. I guess sometimes one must be alone to truly be in harmony with one's self."

A few more contestants got up to play, but they seemed half-hearted. The contest went of course to Laurel, who was almost as bewildered at her music as was everyone else. When she ascended the stage to accept the scholarship, the audience cheered and whistled for an encore.

Laurel sat down and prepared to play again, but just then there came a terrible wrenching sound and a loud snap. Brenneker saw the roof fly off her home, pulling a tangle of cobwebs after it. She cowered by the sound pegs, weak and frightened, and saw the face of Laurel staring down at her. Raising one timorous leg, she strummed a chord on her music web and thought she saw recognition in Laurel's eyes.

One of the judges came onstage to help pick up the debris.

When he saw the large spider, he said, "How ugly! Let me kill it for you."

"No," said Laurel. "It's the fairy harpist that Sanger told me about. See how she plays her web like a harp. She's been my secret friend all these years."

Because Brenneker appeared to be in a very weakened state and near death, Laurel kept her in a bottle for a few days and fed her all the crickets she could catch. Then, when it appeared that the spider would live, she took her back to the small town and turned her loose in the woods.

It was not the woods of home, but Brenneker found a hollow tree in which to string her harp and was quite content to play her songs alone for a while, although she missed Laurel's music. When spring came that next year, she played her love song to the open air, and it was Wisterness who came, tapping shyly on her web strings to attract her attention.

"I have always loved your songs," she said. "I had hoped you would come."

"Now you shall play my songs," he said, and he sacrificed himself to their mutual need.

Weeks later, she watched her young spiderlings float away on their kiteless strings, and she knew she would not play alone anymore. Then, feeling the deep harmony of the universe in her soul, she returned her web to the Dorian mode and played the gentle, lilting sadness that was now Wisterness.

Phillip C. Heath

THE NARROW HOUSE

The following story originally appeared in Gothic, *a small press magazine specializing in fiction (and articles) in the Gothic vein. "The Narrow House" is an absolutely stunning tale in that tradition, although the discerning reader will observe that it also owes something to Goethe as well. It is indeed a pleasure to present this story to a wider audience.*

I still recall quite clearly that crisp autumn morning when I arrived in Baltimore, my first sojourn away from home since 189–, four years earlier. And why should I not recollect the event, a mere three months ago? Yet three months can seem so long. I had only a fortnight before my journey been employed at a local newspaper in Randallstown, where I then resided with my only living relative—an elderly aunt who had taken me into her care as an orphaned child. I was not entirely content working for the paper, but for the time being was obliged to continue my present employ in order to supplement my good aunt's dwindling pittance. This was a duty I could not shirk. However, come night I would always turn to pen and paper, and my one true aspiration: to become a published author of mysteries and imaginative fiction, playing upon man's universal fascination for terror and the supernatural as the major field of my subject matter. Eventually my perseverance was in fact rewarded, for a few of my more mature efforts met with favor, and I was greatly heartened at the prospects of a new future.

It happened quite suddenly that my aunt fell seriously ill,

and died only a short time later. Her passing was truly a period of profound sorrow, though by the same token left me not only what remained in the family coffers and the revenue from the sale of the property, but many new opportunities as well. Now I was free to travel inasmuch as there were no responsibilities to further hinder me here. I realized well enough that until I became more accomplished as a writer my livelihood would prove a rather meagre one, but being eager to start fresh, on my own, I thus set out on that long, precarious road to fame and fortune.

I found Baltimore a lovely old city, much indeed to my liking. Upon arriving by way of coach I obtained lodging at a crowded inn on the outskirts of the business district, a temporary arrangement until I could locate more suitable, permanent quarters.

By day I wandered the cobblestone thoroughfares and byways, both on foot and by carriage, past quaint little shops that seldom failed to whet my curiosity and made my quest all the more pleasantly prolonged. I was also immensely intrigued by the many sights to be marvelled hereabout: the countless public and historic buildings, museums and monuments, parks and squares. The beautiful, imposing residences along quiet Mt. Vernon Place conveyed an architecture of a century past, and contrasted colorfully to the noisy confusion of fisheries, railway yards, and smelting factories; and from a vantage point high atop Federal Hill to the south one could best view the peninsula on which stands famous Fort McHenry, bordered by both branches of the Patapsco, and beyond, the wide blue Chesapeake Bay where magnificent old clipper ships once found safe harbor. On one occasion I was even tempted into impetuously partaking of an exquisite repast of fresh halibut and succulent shrimp in one of the numerous eating houses scattered along these vast waterfronts.

After several days of such excursions I was reluctantly forced to curtail my outings and again return to the more pressing matters at hand. The rent on my room could not be endured for too long a period, and I still had made no progress toward locating a place of residence which adequately met my needs, or my fancy. Naturally my tastes favored the more spacious, picturesque neighborhoods, where quiet and seclusion would be much more conducive to the labors of my writing, but these I quickly found were well above the liberties

afforded by my pocketbook. No, it seemed I would have to resign myself to the older part of the city with its busy boulevards and clamorous avenues, congested with every manner of conveyance clattering down the way, dangerously dodging the annoying cart vendors who peddled their wares at the wayside.

My search continued, and finally, one evening when I was downstairs in the lobby of the inn relaxing at a table by myself, sipping a plum brandy and enjoying the relative tranquility of the late hour, I received a bit of information which, although welcome news at the time, was soon to cast a dark shadow over the next weeks of my life.

Being a stranger to the city, I had earlier made mention to the innkeeper of my need for a place to live, and, while several suggestions were readily offered, these I unfortunately found not to my liking. But evidently word of my situation reached other ears, for now the serving woman approached me with new tidings that she hoped might be of some help. There was a building not far from here, she said, where her mother very recently resided. She had moved out about a week ago, but to her knowledge the place was still vacant. It was only a tenement, actually, though the rent was certainly reasonable, and there was a fair amount of quiet, too, since it was just a short walk from Westminster Churchyard. I was of course most pleased to learn of this, and so thanked her sincerely for her kind assistance.

Early the next morning I eagerly engaged a hansom and set out for the address given me.

The ride was a comfortably short one, meandering me down the old narrow, crooked streets not far from the river. Here artisan shops, more tenements, and long lines of identical row houses crowded together like old women at a disaster. Some of the doorways were cracked and dirty, but of a rare craftsmanship none the less; here and there I glimpsed beautiful ironwork, rusted as it was, and the characteristic white stone steps were attractive in their number, despite a wanting of paint. In the distance myriad steeples and bell towers jutted up into the gray skyline.

I was dropped off at 302 Amity Street, and there found myself before an ancient edifice of brownstone and brick, drab in color and somewhat cheerless to view. It was a three-story affair, tall and narrow, with certain elements of style I could not entirely distinguish as either Georgian or Victorian

Gothic, though on the whole it was less pretentious than that typical of many other dwellings in the area. It was bordered on one side by what appeared to be an abandoned building, boarded up tight, and on the other by a little lane that extended betwixt it and a small shoemaker's shop. This joined with a dark, cluttered alleyway which ran the length behind all three.

I walked up to the front stoop and on into the cramped receiving hall where five numbered boxes hung on the wall for distribution of the post to the various tenants. A large, unswept staircase wound upwards, but a single door at the end of the hall suggested the landlord's quarters, so I went and rang the bell. When no one appeared I knocked loudly several times, yet still there was no answer. I had turned to leave when I heard a door open somewhere above me, and, looking up, observed a middle-aged woman peering down at me from over the banister of the second floor landing.

"T'ain't home," she called down. "Ought to be back directly, though. Went to get hisself a paper or somethin'. Who might you be?"

I imparted to her the nature of my calling, and was told that yes, the upstairs flat was indeed vacant. In fact, there were two untenanted at present, as someone on the third floor had only recently passed away, and another moved out. I thanked her and departed, resolving to take a stroll about the immediate neighborhood and return within the hour.

As I was walking away down the street, I approached a man along the walk, headed in the general direction from whence I came. He was perhaps in his late forties, with dark gray hair brushed back from his high forehead and a neatly trimmed beard to match. His face was gaunt and austere, his nose aggressive, and his brows so thick as to almost run together into one. His attire was simple yet smart: a light, lapelled jacket, cardigan, and neckcloth of dark color. He carried under one arm a small parcel of some sort. But of course such detail and scrutiny was not given to a mere, passing glance—no, it was only when his eyes fell full upon my person, when he stopped dead in his tracks and simply stared at *me,* that I truly took notice.

His eyes were deep, large, and luminous, and fixed themselves upon me in a piercing gaze as I drew near and passed. I shot what must have been a disconcerted glance over my shoulder, and even a good many paces later when I rounded

the corner of a building at the end of the street, I could see him still standing there, still staring, a most curious look on his face of disbelief or bewilderment.

Needless to say, such an experience left me quite unnerved. I was taken wholly by surprise at the peculiar behavior of this stranger, and wondered vaguely who he might be. But, at length, I shrugged the whole thing off and went on my way, as my thoughts were drawn toward other matters. Still, I was unable to rid myself of an uncomfortable feeling that I was being followed somehow, or watched. Such a notion was obviously unwarranted, however, for on several occasions when I turned to look about I saw no suspicious person at all, neither near nor afar.

When I returned to the narrow house approximately three-quarters of an hour later I noticed straightaway something was different, something that had not been there previously. And then I saw it: a hastily prepared sign which now hung in the windowpane of the front door.

ROOMS TO LET, it said in fresh black letters.

I did not ponder its sudden appearance, but rather was only too pleased to learn that accommodations were still being openly solicited. I went in and knocked on the door as before.

Scarcely had I taken my hand away when the door glided open and a solemn-looking figure appeared before me.

It was the same man I had earlier encountered along the walk.

For a few awkward moments I simply stood there, too taken aback for speech. He, also, stared at me strangely, until at last he broke the spell that seemed to hold us both.

"Yes?" he offered, still looking me over. "May I be of assistance?"

"I—was by earlier," I answered. "I am in need of a room, and was told of this place. . . ."

"Ah, you wish to see what is available?" He smiled faintly. "Fine, fine. I am certain you will find the arrangements most agreeable. This way, if you please." Here he gestured toward the staircase and followed me up.

There was an apartment on each side of the stairwell, making four identical flats in all, with the exception of the landlord's quarters which occupied the whole of the ground floor. The dark walnut interior contributed to the dreariness of the place, which had an empty, echoing aspect about it. As

we made our way to the top floor the fellow was quick to kindle further conversation.

"I do hope you won't mind these bothersome stairs," he said. "Most of my tenants of late have been the aged or ill, so naturally I have to allow them the convenience of the more accessible rooms."

"That's quite all right," I told him. "I am a writer by profession, and since the better part of my time shall be spent at a desk, I doubt I will be in and out very much."

At this the tone of his voice changed a little, and he said: "A writer, eh? Very—interesting. Perchance I have read some of your work.... What is your name?"

"I am doubtful that anything of mine has found its way into your hands, sir," I confessed earnestly. "Truth to tell, as of yet I have not been widely published."

"Do not belittle yourself so," said he. "One day countless readers might tremble, thrill to the masterpieces of... of—?"

"Nicholas Haggerd," I replied. It did not really occur to me at the time the particular implication of his words with regard to the nature of my writing.

All at once he fell silent, as if lost in deep thought. The whole time, however, his pale eyes never left me, and soon this started to prey upon my nerves. His speech conveyed a certain intelligence and alertness, though his courtly manner and general cordiality I felt were a bit overdone. There also seemed to be something about him that was remotely familiar, something in his physical appearance, possibly, but I could not begin to guess what that might be.

Suddenly we were at the head of the stair, and in front of a door. At its threshold he hesitated, turning away from me for the first time. Even then it was as if he were watching me out of the corner of his eye.

"Pray tell, are you...new to Baltimore? Alone, mayhap?"

For an instant I was somehow nettled by the vein of his questions, but quickly passed this off as only an idle curiosity. "Yes," I said, "I am a stranger to the city—from Randallstown and, indeed, am alone."

He nodded slowly, and his eyes again took on that same faraway look. Then without further ado he inserted a key into the lock and pushed the door open.

The apartment consisted of three connecting rooms: a sort of parlor, a bedchamber with an adjoining bath, and a small

kitchen or dining area. Each was adequately furnished with old, heavy pieces which very much suited my tastes. There were two rather sizeable fireplaces. But what immediately caught my fancy was the big bay window, diamond-paned and shuttered, wherefrom one could easily discern the southwest corner of Westminster Churchyard in the distance.

He must have detected my mounting satisfaction for he began to goad me gently with assurances that the neighborhood was a peaceful one, promising also he would see to it my work was not disturbed. It was the best-kept flat in the building, he went on, whereas the other three had been abused and admittedly were in need of repair. But when he offered a monthly rent so low as to almost turn my head, I simply could not afford but to sign the lease.

My new landlord, Mr. Fearing as he introduced himself, was most pleased.

I returned early the following morning after I had checked out of the inn, bringing with me my scant amount of baggage and other personal effects, most of which were books. In short order I was comfortably settled into what was to be my new home.

However, not long thereafter I began to experience a certain unaccountable reservation about renting the place. Although I could not really say why, I think it may have had something to do with the little sign that now was missing from the window, vanishing as suddenly as it first appeared, for were there not two empty flats, one remaining still? And I didn't know what to make of the landlord, either. It was as if he himself might have stepped from the pages of one of my own ghostly tales. Too, there was something about the atmosphere of the premises that was singularly depressing—though I was somewhat surprised such a thing should trouble the likes of me.

But aside from all this, the place did, after all, offer everything I could reasonably hope for, and I knew I should feel quite fortunate to have found it. And so it was that my vague uneasiness was soon lost in the course of the many beautiful autumn days yet to come, and the long hours of work which were to lure me from all other affairs outside my own little world, high in the upper chambers of the narrow house.

The next week or so passed quickly. Because I did not forseee having to entertain many visitors, I moved the brass

bed from the bedchamber to the parlor so I would not have to utilize both fireplaces unnecessarily, and also since it would be nearer the window. Next to this I placed a second-hand writing desk I had purchased from a local cabinetmaker. With such arrangements, simple as they might seem, I was very pleased with the considerable progress made toward my current endeavor, a rather long drama.

Whenever I grew weary I had only to open the window and throw back the shutters to lift my spirits, for the fresh, crisp air was always invigorating, driving away the dreary mustiness of the place. At other times, in the mid-evening, I would enjoy a walk through the various sections of the neighborhood, most frequently down Oxford and Fayette Streets, then over to the Westminster Churchyard which lay only a few blocks away. After a time this became accustomed routine, and I usually left at approximately the same hour each night.

Though the city was pleasant enough by day, it did, however, have its share of undesirables—vagabonds who crept from out their dark lairs occasionally to prowl the nighted streets. I was not aware of this until I had read in the local paper of a wealthy merchant who had been recently murdered by brigands and robbed of his purse. I myself was never harassed by the likes of such, no doubt because I had no look of excessive property. However, I took the simple precaution of purchasing a small pistol, which I carried within my cloak.

It was on one of these evening ventures that I met with an alarming discovery upon my return.

I left the house at about the usual time, and had come back shortly after ten. The place was dark and quiet as I climbed the stairs to my room, but here found my door unlocked. It was my habit to always lock up whenever leaving the building, and I felt quite certain I remembered to do so this evening.

I went inside, and immediately sensed that something seemed different. A hasty investigation of the room did indeed reveal something was amiss—for a sheaf of manuscript paper on my desk had been shuffled about, and as several of the drawers were slightly open, it appeared they had been rifled through also. Nothing seemed to be missing, though, nor did anything else look disturbed. But who would be interested in an unfinished manuscript and a few rough story drafts? Certainly there could be nothing here of such great literary

value. I was puzzled, too, as to how the prowler gained entrance, since the only feasible ingress was the door, and if it had in fact been locked, showed no evidence of having been forced.

I intended to inform Mr. Fearing of this incident, but the next morning decided against it. After all, nothing was taken, nor could he have done anything, regardless. None the less, I purchased a large metal bolt for the door, and installed it forthwith. At least now I felt some sense of security.

Two days later I met for the first time the tenant who lived directly below me, a spinster whom I observed on occasion either coming or going, but hitherto had not the opportunity to properly present myself to. There was one other occupant in the building, an old man, or so our landlord had told me—but apparently he seldom ventured out of his flat because of ill health.

I encountered the woman on the stair as she was carrying a small box of groceries to her room. I readily recognized her as the person who had called down to me from the second floor when I first came here to inquire of a vacancy. She looked a bit bedraggled, what with her dirty red hair in disheveled wisps, and her garments in every disorder. The dark circles under her eyes, the jaundiced complexion, and the unmistakable odor of liquor on her breath suggested she was one much given to drink.

I introduced myself and she told me her name was Miss Tidwell. At once she struck me as somewhat of a garrulous individual, and within the passing of a few mere minutes was confiding with me as though we were old acquaintances. But there was something in particular on her mind that morning.

"Yessir," she went on, "ol' Mister Fearing ain't quite been the same since you come along. Been broodin' a lot he has, like there's somethin' deep-dark heavy on his mind. Always did think he was a mite queer, but I never seen him so moody as he been lately. Do you know just the other day he evicted poor ol' Mister Corbett across the hall? Threw him right out on the street he did!—a sick old man with nowheres to go, and all 'cause he got a month b'hind on his rent. Mister Corbett ain't got no one, like me, 'cept for a stepson in Annapolis who sends him enough money now'n then to get by. Course Mister Fearing knew all that, but you think he so much as batted an eye?—not on your life he didn't. And it just ain't like him, either.

"Why, do you know he even tried to toss *me* out? Somethin's got into that man's head, I tell you. When my brother sold him this place four year ago before he passed away it was with the condition that I got to stay on so long as I might want to...and here he has the nerve to try'n push me out like he had ever' right to. Humph! Well he'll not be a-treatin' me like I was dirt underfoot, you can be assured of that!"

I thought this rather peculiar also, and could not comprehend the justification for such harsh actions. Obviously neither did Miss Tidwell.

Almost a week slipped by when suddenly I came down ill. No doubt too many walks in the damp night air had greatly contributed to my condition, that and perhaps the lack of a sufficient amount of sleep. Soon a slight fever set in, and I was forced to take to bed.

On the second night of my worsening condition something occurred which beset me with new apprehensions. I had been able to consume some bullion and wafers earlier, but immediately afterwards a kind of weakness came over me, and ere long I fell into a deep slumber.

What awoke me at first I cannot say—some scarce-heard sound drifting through the darkness to touch ever so lightly on my ears and slowly lift the heavy shroud of sleep that weighed me down. Through the veil I fancied I heard a sound of movement at the door. I struggled awake enough to peer at a nearby clock partially in the shadows. It was nigh half-past nine—the time when I usually would have just left for my evening stroll. There was a new sound now, as though the lock were being tried, carefully, cautiously—with a key.

I lay still and did nothing but listen. There was a faint rattling of the doorknob, gentle at first, then a bit more forcibly. This went on for only a short while, and as the bolt of course held firm, there was at length the furtive receding of footsteps back down the hall.

So strange was this experience that the next morning I had my doubts as to whether or not I didn't actually dream it all. Certainly my faculties were not entirely to be trusted under the circumstances—indeed, the whole thing might well have been attributable to a lapse of delirium brought about by my illness. But, I had not forgotten the fact that my chambers had already been once visited by some unknown intruder, and so could not dismiss the incident altogether. If, however, it was truly a dream, it was far surpassed in fright-

fulness by the nightmare which was to lay hold of me the following night.

Amid a tangle of sweltering bedclothes I tossed and turned, until somewhere in the farmost recesses of my feverish brain a haunting scene began to form.

I saw myself in a desolate-looking graveyard, alone, at night. The few trees about were naked and gnarled and together with the tilted tombstones created a most melancholy landscape. An awful, oppressive silence, like a pall, hung everywhere. I felt an uncontrollable impulse to leave quickly, but knew not which way to turn. Just then an unspeakable fear touched me like a wind from the abyss, for a cold breeze now began to blow eerily at my back, and when I turned to glance over my shoulder I glimpsed an obscure silhouette in the distance, moving through the shadows toward me.

I steadily quickened my pace. The sinister shape did also. I started to run. A figure emerged from a pool of darkness in definite pursuit. I choked a scream and in my frantic haste tripped over an exposed tree root. When I raised my head I observed that I had fallen at the foot of a grave. A single ray of moonlight ghosted down to touch upon the bleak, crumbling headstone, and in horror I saw that it read:

—Here Lies—

NICHOLAS HAGGERD

Dead in Life

Alive in Death

A shrill cry escaped my lips and I lurched away, only to run blindly into another just like it, and still another—with the same dreadful epitaph. I whirled and discovered that every grave was my own, and astir behind each stone I imagined phantom shapes watching me balefully as though lying in wait.

The ominous pursuer was drawing close and so I turned once more and fled in panic, but immediately tumbled headlong into an open grave.

I rolled over and lay on my back, looking up as if through a haze. I was hard put for breath and my head reeled, the blood pounding in my temples. Dead leaves blew in upon my face. Then, a tall, dark figure was suddenly standing at the

edge of the hole leering down at me. Another head quickly appeared, followed by one, two, three more. And my terror abruptly culminated into utter madness when I beheld—the goatlike horns of the tall one, the fiendish grin, the yellowed fangs, the red, pupilless eyes... and as he slowly raised the horrible trident about to hurl it down, I saw also the identical, rotting faces of the others—*my face*!

Then there was only the wild, hellish laughter, and the searing pain—

I broke through the bonds of sleep and burst with a shriek into wakefulness, clutching at my chest, all alone in the darkness of my room. I did not welcome sleep the rest of that night.

With the gray coming of dawn I found my fever had for the most part broken, and I felt well enough to get about a little. Yet even though I rapidly regained my health, it was a long while before I fully recovered from the psychological percussion of so bizarre and terrifyingly vivid a nightmare. True, it was several nights before even I could turn to sleep without at least some degree of reluctance.

Two weeks came and went with little to account for them, inasmuch as the wonderful progress I had made with my writing in weeks past now slowed almost to a standstill. I began to feel somehow that my creativity, curious though it may be, stemmed from more than just the unfettered fabrications of an overly acute imagination. There seemed to be something else, something both familiar and especial—a stirring, a restlessness if you will, deep in my bosom, and it coursed through my very blood as if to comprise some hidden and unalterable essence of my being. It was something I scarce could fathom, but it plagued me sorely, and I found it increasingly difficult to keep my mind entirely upon my work.

Oft times I had to force myself to take up pen and paper, for then and only then was I really able to accomplish anything at all. One night in particular I was up until a late hour writing steadily, though at so slow a pace as to prove quite frustrating. It was nearing a quarter after one when eventually I decided I had best retire.

The fire was burning low, a hush settling throughout the household; even the street outside appeared void of all life. I undressed, blew out the lamp, and slipped into bed.

I had only just drawn the coverlet about me when I thought I heard the soft creak of a floorboard out in the corridor. I

froze and lay listening. It had been barely audible, and I wanted to imagine it was only the settling of the old building—when all at once my eye caught a flicker of subdued light from the thin slit beneath the door. I strained to see, hoping it only a reflection of the fireplace. It came unmistakably from without the room.

I gathered up enough courage to break the silence. "Who—Who's there?" I ventured.

I felt my flesh creep when suddenly the light was extinguished.

Very quietly I eased over to my desk and withdrew from one of its drawers my loaded pistol. Then I sat on the edge of the bed facing the door, scarcely breathing. Every faint noise seemed magnified by the surrounding stillness. Somewhere off in the distance a dog barked.

A long, agonizing interval of quiet lapsed, and the whole time I heard or saw no more evidence of a presence lurking outside my door. Finally, after what must have been at least half an hour, fatigue prompted in me enough bravado to go to the door and open it a crack, very slowly, very cautiously.

The dim light from my own room shone out in the hallway to reveal . . . no one. The entire corridor, and the stairs, were empty. My would-be visitor had stealthily retreated from whence he came, obviously taken unawares by my still having been fully awake.

An unsufferable gloom once more fell over the place, and soon I had a sizeable fire roaring in the grate, driving the chill and darkness back into the night.

A multitude of thoughts crowded in upon me. Just who was this persistent prowler, and for what reason was I the object of his design? My fears were not so unsubstantiated now, nor so nebulous. For this much was certain: whoever it might be seemed to get about the building with disturbing sureness and familiarity, and presumably had access to some sort of passkey. There was only one person I knew of with such a key.

Early the following morning I went down to see Miss Tidwell. I felt the need to talk to someone, and hoped she might supply a few answers to the many questions still milling around inside my head. I think she had taken a liking to me, what with the old man across the hall gone now, and no one to talk to anymore save me. At times I could not help but feel a little sorry for her, and so when on occasion she called on

me I greeted her affably, welcoming in truth the opportunity to indulge in a bit of idle conversation and take leisure from the labors of my writing.

So it was that I went downstairs and rapped upon her door, only to find she was out at the time. When I returned later that afternoon, however, I again raised no answer, then remembered I had not seen her in the last day or two. Fearing she might be seriously ill, and since the landlord was not to be found, I decided to force the door. It gave easily to my efforts.

Once inside, I quickly discovered she was nowhere about. This struck me as a trifle odd, because she was very seldom away for any prolonged period of time.

For some reason I sensed a sort of urgency in the situation, and so went down later to query Mr. Fearing.

His curt, evasive behavior only served to cast more doubt on what was already a fast growing uneasiness. I was told only that the woman had departed yesterday to journey by rail to visit an ailing sister elsewhere in the country. That was all he knew, he said, though I was not at all satisfied with his story. There was too much an air of secrecy about him, something which vexed me since first I met him, and now I harbored a definite distrust toward the man.

Miss Tidwell did not return, and unpleasant possibilities turned suspicion into a creeping fear.

The whole of the next day I formulated what seemed the best course of action, fully aware of what I must do—whatever turn matters may take—in order to confirm my speculations. The morning sky looked sullen, and by late afternoon it was mean and black with cloud. A fitful wind blew among the many chimneys.

I had kept a close watch by the window all day long, waiting. I was about to give up hope until the morrow when shortly after dusk I heard the sound of the front door open and close. Hastening again to the window, I espied for an instant a darkly clad figure vanishing off down the dim-lit street. My mysterious landlord was gone. But I would have to act swiftly; I knew not when he might return.

I tried his door, but it was securely locked and much stronger than Miss Tidwell's. I was rather at a loss as to what to do next, until finally I struck on the idea of inspecting the windows. I went outside and around the corner of the building.

Windows on the ground floor were scarce, I discovered, and those there proved tightly shuttered. Frustrated now near to the point of abandoning my plan, I tested one last window—and found to my surprise that one of the shutters was partially open, enabling me to break the main latch, raise the window, and enter.

It was dark inside. I located a candelabrum nearby, and hurriedly began to make an investigation of the premises. Everything certainly looked normal enough, though, and I wondered if I would really be so fortunate as to happen upon some worthwhile clue. Just about that time I opened up what I thought to be a closet door, and disclosed not a closet at all, but the narrow, wooden staircase of what was obviously a cellar of sorts. Never had I imagined there was anything below the ground floor.

Lifting the candelabrum higher, I carefully descended the creaking stairs into a small, darksome recess. The air was exceedingly damp and stale, and the guttering candles let play grotesque shadows over the moldering masonry and the dirty, disarrayed shapes of crates, cartons, and other clutter piled in the corners. But in the very center of the room, situated atop a huge table, lay an empty, crudely fashioned coffin. The overall lack of dust hinted that both had been recently placed here. My curiosity was gradually to overcome my trepidations, and I began to ferret about.

There were numerous boxes of old books; here a trunk filled with the tattered, mildewed remains of long-outdated clothing; near it a black leather valise containing several articles of relative unimportance. I uncovered a number of olden paintings and portraits of various nature, all festooned with cobwebs. None of these in particular arrested my attention, save for one. It was the large portraiture of a young man, perhaps in his late twenties. He was depicted standing beside a baroque writing desk, one hand propped gallantly on his hip, the other clasping a book to his bosom. His dress was of a style some time before the turn of the century; and, admitting that the artist had somewhat exaggerated the features in an attempt to capture the grandiose air of the renaissance period, and even though the subject sported a rather concealing periwig, I could nevertheless detect some haunting familiarity about that clean, gentleman's face. Moving the light a little closer, I was quite startled upon seeing that this stranger's countenance, caught by the brush and

palette long before ever I came to know this world, was of a likeness so vividly similar to my own, as to be just that.

The uncanny resemblance, the cryptic coffin, and the dismal atmosphere of the place combined to make me increasingly nervous, and I was quick to recall the potential peril of my position, thus the need for haste. I replaced the portrait amongst the others and continued to rummage around.

I came across nothing else of apparent significance, and so was about to head back upstairs when my eye fell upon several sheafs of manuscript paper carelessly stacked atop a decrepit washstand. I picked up the topmost bundle, yellowed and brittle with age, and blew away the fine gray film of dust which obscured the title.

When I saw what was written there I must have surely gasped. It was a piece entitled "Cloven Hoof or Angel Wing," the identical name of my own most recent work, a lengthy, seven-act tragedy. But what was most bewildering was that after skimming over the first few pages I learned that, while not verbatim, it was precisely the same story, with the same characters, and penned by the selfsame hand!

My brain reeled in appalled disbelief. Anxiously I searched for the author's signature but found it had been partially burnt away, as were the edges of many of the pages. Nonetheless, I was able to make out what looked to be the name Hugo D—?.

Countless questions assailed me and lent to my vague, inner disquiet a new and indeed more sinister suggestion. How could this be? And yet, was it not true the entire story came to me in the form of a dream, long ago?—or was it merely that my subconscious plucked it from out some dark, hidden corner in the back of my mind, something I had once read but seemingly forgotten? Who was this Hugo D—? And who in the painting? Yes, and who—

Suddenly I detected a movement directly behind me, and as I started to turn something hard smashed against the back of my neck. Then darkness devoured me....

When I began to regain consciousness I slowly unclosed my eyes and above the dull, painful throbbing in my head saw before me only the dark ceiling of the cellar. I attempted to move but discovered I had been tightly bound at the ankles and wrists, and gagged with a dirty rag. I was free to turn my head a little to the side, however, and saw to my horror

that I had been placed in the coffin which still rested on the table. I was unable to suppress a violent shudder.

Evidently my stirrings were discernible from elsewhere in the room, for abruptly I recognized the voice of Mr. Fearing slipping through the silence.

"Good evening, my young friend," he intoned. "I hope you are not too uncomfortable. You were looking for something, perhaps?—some trace of the woman's whereabouts? Do not fret yourself over her; she was a definite hindrance to my plan, and unlike the old man, would not leave so easily. But I have seen to that. You know, I should never have thought you would make so bold as to force entrance into my quarters, or even go to such lengths to solve a simple mystery. Fortunately, though, you have saved me a good deal of trouble, and for your impetuous prying I must thank you."

Here he fell quiet for a moment. I could not see him, but from the faint creakings of a chair and the odor of tobacco from his pipe I could tell he was sitting down close to my right.

"Doubtless you are wondering what this is all about, and I think it only befitting I tell you. Let me begin, then, with a story....

"Many and many a year ago there lived a young man who was a very special sort of dreamer. Yes, he dreamed of one day becoming a distinguished writer, recognized and appreciated. He wanted to write great works of literature, to explore the supernatural and the unknown, and to delve into the dark, hidden workings of the mind. After a few years he managed to have published several minor efforts, but these were available in very limited editions, and of no particular merit anyway. Yet he was proud, romantic, adventurous and inquiring, and so remained steadfast in his determination to fulfill his aspirations. The dream became an obsession. But alas, it seemed this was not to be. I shan't go into the many reasons for his ultimate undoing—suffice it to say the traumas and hardships of his youth, the lack of funds, the early loss of his family, and untold other tragedies struck him down and there left him to his misfortune. Indeed, as if this were not enough, he fell victim to consumption at the mere age of twenty-four. It was then he came to fully realize he would never attain his goal. Always he had written under the pseudonym of Hugo D'hel, with the intention of using his own name only after he gained the skill and mastery worthy of it. Now

it appeared he would never see that name in print, and would follow the path of so many other great masters who unjustly perished in poverty and despair. His would be a nameless death."

He paused to relight his pipe and there came the deep, distant rolling and rumbling of an approaching storm. In the interlude of silence which followed I could hear him puffing methodically on his pipe. He continued.

"It was in the shadow of this darkest hour, at the height of all his disappointment, bitterness, and desperation, that he sought yet another way. He took a sudden, profound interest in mysticism and the occult. Systematically but indiscreetly he began to seek out isolated seers, alchemists, conjurers, charmers, secret cults—anyone who in one degree or another was alleged to entertain a familiarity with sorcery or the black arts. But evidently the prying of strangers was not welcome, for at every step of the way he encountered avoidance, rejection, and even hostility.

"Finally, when he was about to resign his efforts, he came to hear of a reputed wizard who dwelled somewhere in the Carpathian wilderness. Without delay he gathered up the last of his savings and journeyed there, and after considerable difficulty located this man who might hold for him the only answer left.

"The withered old hermit did indeed have an answer, though the price was high. Through certain dark powers and forbidden knowledge time and death could be defeated—in return for the young man's soul to be offered as homage to the other's master. 'Twas agreed, and done.

"The young man returned home and was gradually restored to health. Although he continued to write, he turned to other means of livelihood, and ceased allowing his works to come under public scrutiny—for now he had all the time he desired to perfect his achievements, and only when he was ready would the world learn of his genius. That was the way he wanted it, and for the first time in his life he was truly content.

"Three days before what would have been his fifty-second birthday, however, the unexpected crept up to take him. At about midnight he went down to his wine cellar to fetch a bottle of Bordeaux. The house was a very old one, and the floor of this cellar laid with coarse flagstone. In an obscure corner some of these stones gave way beneath his feet and

he fell into a narrow but deep well or pit of some sort, riddled with the tunnels and nests of vermin. His leg was badly broken in the fall, and with every least struggle the loose earth of the sides would slowly crumble down upon him. His terror in that dark, filthy place can scarcely be described. There was no one to aid him, and in the end the rats discovered him days before anyone else did.

"But amidst all this a most incredible thing happened. A day or two after his death he suddenly found himself alive again, in another place many, many miles away. His memory was still his own, as was his remembrance of his own grisly death. What had happened, he asked himself. His first look in a mirror made him recoil in disbelief. He had assumed, or possessed, if you will, a separate but identical twenty-five-year-old body of *himself,* apparently born a quarter of a century ago when he first turned twenty-six—three days after visiting the old man in the wood!

"The following day he enjoyed for the second time his twenty-sixth birthday. He could not explain it, but it was a kind of immortality, and that was all he wanted.

"The years marched by, until at last he had locked away in his desk enough masterpieces to bring him immediate recognition in the higher circles of literary esteem. Then one cold, wintry evening as he drowsed in his chair before the fireplace he had a nightmare, and from this nightmare he learned a most horrible truth. You see, it never really occurred to him how the adversary would gain his soul, and now he understood too late. That was the nightmare; that was the truth. And it was this realization which led him to put away pen and paper forevermore, and take up drink instead. In those later years he tried to relocate the old man, but it was a miserably futile hope. He considered repenting his sin, but knew in his heart he was unworthy, and had gone too far. Quite true, for one night three days before his fifty-second birthday he met with another sinister 'mishap' which caused him to be buried alive.

"The memory of that dreadful death was still with him a day or two later when he found himself among the living. And, as before, a day later he saw once more his twenty-sixth birthday. This time there could be no doubt, the truth of his nightmares. Thus he lived in perpetual fear of that most hideous of all deaths, a living entombment. Many precautions were taken to see it would not happen again. He moved to

the country, employed a manservant to whom he gave explicit instructions in the event of his apparent demise, and had constructed a specially designed vault to allow easy escape from within. But it was all for naught...he was one of the first to fall in what was the beginning of the cholera epidemic of 184_. The servant panicked, left his master for dead, and set fire to the house. Concerned but ignorant neighbors saw the flames and rescued the body, unaware of either the special crypt or the specific nature of the disease, and mistook the symptoms for certain death. A scream filled his throat when later he regained consciousness and found himself buried alive in a common coffin.

"As he had done in the past, he returned to the scene after having been reborn, assuming the identity of a distant relative and claiming what remained of his possessions not destroyed by the fire—which was not much. Shortly thereafter he moved to the East Coast and resumed his wretched life, awaiting that same ghastly, inevitable death when the Archfiend would snatch away his just due. For in truth, thrice now the evil one had ensnared that soul which previously dwelled in the new body—and he would continue to do so, again, and again, and again, dragging down not one, but many, each a little part of the young man who was not so young any more."

As I lay there quite helpless, wondering what insidious thoughts were creeping through this madman's skull, he suddenly appeared above me. He stood looking down at me as though I were the one to be pitied, and sighed deeply. In the feeble light his face was cadaverously wan, and his intent, steady gaze seemed to lay bare every filament in my being. I confess that I was genuinely afraid.

"A sad story, is it not?" he asked in the same thick voice. "But it is more than a fabrication, one of your nighted fantasies put to paper. 'Tis the truth. I can well imagine how you must suspect my sanity, and in all honesty I cannot blame you. For the foolish young man in this story was none other than...*Nicholas Haggerd.*

"Surprised, my friend?—young Nicholas Haggerd? If so, I think you should be more shocked when I tell you my real name is not Fearing at all, but also, Nicholas Haggerd. Yes, our Faust—you—me—we are all one and the same. But whether and what you believe or disbelieve is of no real consequence. The fact remains that you were born as a child in

1869 on the same day when for the fourth time I turned twenty-six years of age. Now you are twenty-five, and I am fifty-one. In little over an hour it will be twelve o'clock, the dawn of the third day before my fifty-second birthday.

"Do you not see? Fate has crossed our paths for a purpose. 'Tis *you,* not I who will be buried alive this night, you who will be joined with the dead before your time—and in so doing Nicholas Haggerd shall not be 'born' again. It will stop here. Around me are the last relics of my past; I will destroy them, and can live out the rest of my days knowing this accursed existence has finally come to an end. You shall see to that."

He briefly hesitated, and his dark whisper chilled my soul.

"Good-bye, Nicholas Haggerd . . . good-bye."

Then the lid of the coffin was put in place and fastened down tight, and the blackness of a hundred midnights embraced me.

I fought to free myself with the energy of a demon, but it was to no avail; my bonds were too tight. There was, however, a small gap between the side and lid due to a warped spot in the lumber, and I was able to draw in a sufficient amount of air.

I felt the coffin being borne up the steps and out of the basement. He must have had much difficulty in struggling with its bulk, as I was painfully bumped and banged about. At length I could tell we were outside, probably in the dark alleyway to the rear of the house, for rain pattered solemnly upon the lid. Then I was being raised into something—a carriage, most likely, and I knew this true when I heard the whinney of a horse put into motion, the conveyance rocking and softly clattering off down the cobblestone street.

I know not how long we traveled, but it could not have been more than ten or fifteen minutes, when all at once the horse was drawn to a halt and the coffin lifted out. I was dragged a short distance and laid down. It was rather quiet now, for the storm had nearly abated and the wind had died down. There was nary a sound but that of a lone spade digging hurriedly in the ground.

After a time, the sound ceased and I felt the coffin being lowered into the hole. It came to rest, and in the ensuing silence I heard above me the muffled voice of Mr. Fearing quoting Rossetti in a sad, mournful tone.

"The lost days of my life until to-day,
What were they, could I see them on the street
Lie as they fell?

I do not see them here; but after death
God knows the faces I shall see,
Each one a murdered self, with low last breath.
'I am thyself—what hast thou done to me?'
'And I—and I—thyself', (lo! each one saith,)
And thou thyself to all eternity!'"

His voice faded away as if in a dream, the words echoing like the splash of a cold stone dropped down a deep well, and I knew it was to be my only epitaph.

The first shovelful of muddy sod fell upon the lid of the coffin with a hollow, soul-sickening sound. As more and more clumps struck the coffin I was startled out of my horrified daze. I could feel the awful chill of darkness absolute, smell the odor of the damp, moldy earth, sense the unseen presence of the graveyard worm—and in mindless terror began to struggle anew in a vain effort to escape this torture, this agony, this unbearable, ghoulish imprisonment . . . this living death.

The weight of the soil was heavy upon me now, and little rivulets of moisture seeped through the tiny crack of the lid to trickle down my face and into my hair. My furious energies had robbed me of precious air that was fast becoming thin and noxious. An unendurable oppression of my lungs set in to render my mind unclear, and spectral shapes and colors danced in the blackness before my eyes. Time has no meaning in such a place, and what was likened to hours were but fleeting minutes as I lay there, exhausted, with death slowly surging over me like a dark tide.

Then I became vaguely aware that something was happening. What, I did not know. To my ears came a sound, so seemingly far away, which gradually grew louder, closer. It was like—digging? I had begun to think I was already dead when a hard object struck the lid of the coffin. There was faint scratching, strange, detached voices, and the coffin was apparently being borne upward.

I could make out the voices: "Why, it ain't no chest, it's a coffin! What d'you reckon he put— No, you don't think. . . ."

"I dunno, but let's us hurry'n find out."

Of a sudden the lid was being pried open and I stared out

of what seemed centuries of darkness. As it fell away I glimpsed two faces and heard a short shriek, followed by a flurry of footsteps, and then silence. I managed to twist the gag loose and lay there drawing in great mouthfuls of air. Finally I regained enough strength to sit up, and recognized my surroundings as a secluded, partially wooded corner of Westminster Churchyard. I was all alone.

A heavy fog had settled in after the storm, and through the mists I detected the quick approach of footsteps behind me. My relief was almost ecstatic when abruptly a police officer appeared, deciding to investigate after having heard the scream whilst out on his rounds. He took me away at once from that terrible place.

Early the next morning I related my incredible story to the authorities, from beginning to end. What I did not know, they were able to piece together. Evidently my murderer had been spied burying something by two thieves, who took him by surprise long before he could finish his gruesome task and slip away. Mistaking the object for some sort of prize, probably already stolen, they instead disinterred the coffin and upon opening it were immediately frightened away by the sight of a "living" corpse within.

Mr. Fearing's body was located in the bottom of a nearby grave the church sexton had freshly dug the day before, hastily covered over with less than a foot of dirt. A post-mortem examination revealed he had been merely rendered unconscious when placed there by his attackers, this verified by the staring eyes and the large quantities of black earth found in his mouth and throat....

That was yesterday. He was buried to-day, beneath a simple headstone in the churchyard. His ravings linger in the dark pockets of my mind, and somehow I am frightened still. After all, there are certain things which cannot be so easily explained away. But I try not to dwell on these. I dare say it shall be a long while before I ever fully recover from my harrowing ordeal.

As for him, he has been laid to rest as I have said, along with the sickness that drove him to this. And whatever ironic peace there is in death perhaps he will find it down there, in that other narrow house, silent, deep, and so very dark.

At rest? No, my friend, not at rest, nor at peace. Never shall we be so fortunate. Never.

And now as I turn to look in the mirror, I see your sad young face—no, our *face—and a tear comes to my eye. I did not really want to harm you, but I was desperate. If you were still here I think you would understand. My only regret is that I failed. Yet this time I will not, cannot fail. I should have thought of it long ago; should have realized that by using you as a pawn to alter my destiny I was but using myself to fulfill it. I do this for all our sakes. Nicholas Haggerd shall not be born to suffer again, because to-morrow I will not see my twenty-sixth birthday.*

When I came across this manuscript in your desk, I also found your pistol....

Tanith Lee

WOLFLAND

Recently, Tanith Lee has published several stories which are variations on famous fairy/folk tales. Here is her latest. Readers will no doubt recognize its origins in one of the very best-known of Charles Perrault's contes. *The present story, however, has a much happier ending than that classic tale, which was itself retold from French folklore.*

1.

When the summons arrived from Anna the Matriarch, Lisel did not wish to obey. The twilit winter had already come, and the great snows were down, spreading their aprons of shining ice, turning the trees to crystal candelabra. Lisel wanted to stay in the city, skating fur-clad on the frozen river beneath the torches, dancing till four in the morning, a vivid blonde in the flame-bright ballrooms, breaking hearts and not minding, lying late next day like a cat in her warm, soft bed. She did not want to go traveling several hours into the north to visit Anna the Matriarch.

Lisel's mother had been dead sixteen years, all Lisel's life. Her father had let her have her own way in almost everything for about the same length of time. But Anna the Matriarch, Lisel's maternal grandmother, was exceedingly rich. She lived thirty miles from the city, in a great wild château in the great wild forest.

A portrait of Anna as a young widow hung in the gallery of Lisel's father's house, a wicked-looking bone-pale person

in a black dress, with rubies and diamonds at her throat, and in her ivory yellow hair. Even in her absence, Anna had always had a say in things. A recluse, she had still manipulated like a puppet-master from behind the curtain of the forest. Periodic instructions had been sent, pertaining to Lisel. The girl must be educated by this or that method. She must gain this or that accomplishment, read this or that book, favor this or that cologne or color or jewel. The latter orders were always uncannily apposite and were often complemented by applicable—and sumptuous—gifts. The summons came in company with such. A swirling cloak of scarlet velvet leapt like a fire from its box to Lisel's hands. It was lined with albino fur, all but the hood, which was lined with the finest and heaviest red brocade. A clasp of gold joined the garment at the throat, the two portions, when closed, forming Anna's personal device, a many-petaled flower. Lisel had exclaimed with pleasure, embracing the cloak, picturing herself flying in it across the solid white river like a dangerous blood-red rose. Then the letter fell from its folds.

Lisel had never seen her grandmother, at least, not intelligently, for Anna had been in her proximity on one occasion only: the hour of her birth. Then, one glimpse had apparently sufficed. Anna had snatched it, and sped away from her son-in-law's house and the salubrious city in a demented black carriage. Now, as peremptory as then, she demanded that Lisel come to visit her before the week was out. Over thirty miles, into the uncivilized northern forest, to the strange mansion in the snow.

"Preposterous," said Lisel's father. "The woman is mad, as I've always suspected."

"I shan't go," said Lisel.

They both knew quite well that she would.

One day, every considerable thing her grandmother possessed would pass to Lisel, providing Lisel did not incur Anna's displeasure.

Half a week later, Lisel was on the northern road.

She sat amid cushions and rugs, in a high sled strung with silver bells, and drawn by a single black-satin horse. Before Lisel perched her driver, the whip in his hand, and a pistol at his belt, for the way north was not without its risks. There were, besides, three outriders, also equipped with whips, pistols and knives, and muffled to the brows in fur. No female

companion was in evidence. Anna had stipulated that it would be unnecessary and superfluous for her grandchild to burden herself with a maid.

But the whips had cracked, the horses had started off. The runners of the sled had smoothly hissed, sending up lace-like sprays of ice. Once clear of the city, the north road opened like a perfect skating floor of milky glass, dim-lit by the fragile winter sun smoking low on the horizon. The silver bells sang, and the fierce still air through which the horses dashed, broke on Lisel's cheeks like the coldest champagne. Ablaze in her scarlet cloak, she was exhilarated and began to forget she had not wanted to come.

After about an hour, the forest marched up out of the ground and swiftly enveloped the road on all sides.

There was presently an insidious, but generally perceptible change. Between the walls of the forest there gathered a new silence, a silence which was, if anything, *alive,* a personality which attended any humanly noisy passage with a cruel and resentful interest. Lisel stared up into the narrow lane of sky above. They might have been moving along the channel of a deep and partly frozen stream. When the drowned sun flashed through, splinters of light scattered and went out as if in water.

The tall pines in their pelts of snow seemed posed to lurch across the road.

The sled had been driving through the forest for perhaps another hour, when a wolf wailed somewhere amid the trees. Rather than break the silence of the place, the cry seemed born of the silence, a natural expression of the landscape's cold solitude and immensity.

The outriders touched the pistols in their belts, almost religiously, and the nearest of the three leaned to Lisel.

"Madame Anna's house isn't so far from here. In any case we have our guns, and these horses could race the wind."

"I'm not afraid," Lisel said haughtily. She glanced at the trees. "I've never seen a wolf. I should be interested to see one."

Made sullen by Lisel's pert reply, the outrider switched tactics. From trying to reassure her, he now ominously said: "Pray you don't, m'mselle. One wolf generally means a pack, and once the snow comes, they're hungry."

"As my father's servant, I would expect you to sacrifice yourself for me, of course," said Lisel. "A fine strong man like

you should keep a pack of wolves busy long enough for the rest of us to escape."

The man scowled and spurred away from her.

Lisel smiled to herself. She was not at all afraid, not of the problematical wolves, not even of the eccentric grandmother she had never before seen. In a way, Lisel was looking forward to the meeting, now that her annoyance at vacating the city had left her. There had been so many bizarre tales, so much hearsay. Lisel had even caught gossip concerning Anna's husband. He had been a handsome princely man, whose inclinations had not matched his appearance. Lisel's mother had been sent to the city to live with relations to avoid this monster's outbursts of perverse lust and savagery. He had allegedly died one night, mysteriously and luridly murdered on one of the forest tracks. This was not the history Lisel had got from her father, to be sure, but she had always partly credited the more extravagant version. After all, Anna the Matriarch was scarcely commonplace in her mode of life on her attitude to her granddaughter.

Yes, indeed, rather than apprehension, Lisel was beginning to entertain a faintly unholy glee in respect of the visit and the insights it might afford her.

A few minutes after the wolf had howled, the road took a sharp bend, and emerging around it, the party beheld an unexpected obstacle in the way. The driver of the sled cursed softy and drew hard on the reins, bringing the horse to a standsill. The outriders similarly halted. Each peered ahead to where, about twenty yards along the road, a great black carriage blotted the white snow.

A coachman sat immobile on the box of the black carriage, muffled in coal-black furs and almost indistinguishable from them. In forceful contrast, the carriage horses were blonds, and restless, tossing their necks, lifting their feet. A single creature stood on the track between the carriage and the sled. It was too small to be a man, too curiously proportioned to be simply a child.

"What's this?" demanded the third of Lisel's outriders, he who had spoken earlier of the wolves. It was an empty question, but had been a long time in finding a voice for all that.

"I think it is my grandmother's carriage come to meet me," declared Lisel brightly, though, for the first, she had felt a pang of apprehension.

This was not lessened, when the dwarf came loping toward

them, like a small, misshapen, furry dog and, reaching the sled, spoke to her, ignoring the others.

"You may leave your escort here and come with us."

Lisel was struck at once by the musical quality of his voice, while out of the shadow of his hood emerged the face of a fair and melancholy angel. As she stared at him, the men about her raised their objections.

"We're to go with m'mselle to her grandmother's house."

"You are not necessary," announced the beautiful dwarf, glancing at them with interest. "You are already on the Lady Anna's lands. The coachman and I are all the protection your mistress needs. The Lady Anna does not wish to receive you on her estate."

"What proof," snarled the third outrider, "that you're from Madame's château? Or that she told you to say such a thing. You could have come from any place, from hell itself most likely, and they crushed you in the door as you were coming out."

The riders and the driver laughed brutishly. The dwarf paid no attention to the insult. He drew from his glove one delicate, perfectly formed hand, and in it a folded letter. It was easy to recognize the Matriarch's sanguine wax and the imprint of the petaled flower. The riders brooded, and the dwarf held the letter toward Lisel. She accepted it with an uncanny but pronounced reluctance.

Chère, it said in its familiar, indeed its unmistakable, characters, *Why are you delaying the moment when I may look at you? Beautiful has already told you, I think, that your escort may go home. Anna is giving you her own escort, to guide you on the last laps of the journey. Come! Send the men away and step into the carriage.*

Lisel, reaching the word, or rather the name, Beautiful, had glanced involuntarily at the dwarf, oddly frightened at its horrid contrariness and its peculiar truth. A foreboding had clenched around her young heart, and, for a second, inexplicable terror. It was certainly a dreadful dilemma. She could refuse, and refuse thereby the goodwill, the gifts, the ultimate fortune her grandmother could bestow. Or she could brush aside her silly childish fears and walk boldly from the sled to the carriage. Surely, she had always known Madame Anna was an eccentric. Had it not been a source of intrigued curiosity but a few moments ago?

Lisel made her decision.

"Go home," she said regally to her father's servants. "My grandmother is wise and would hardly put me in danger."

The men grumbled, glaring at her, and as they did so, she got out of the sled and moved along the road toward the stationary and funereal carriage. As she came closer, she made out the flower device stamped in gilt on the door. Then the dwarf had darted ahead of her, seized the door, and was holding it wide, bowing to his knees, thus almost into the snow. A lock of pure golden hair spilled across his forehead.

Lisel entered the carriage and sat on the somber cushions. Courageous prudence (or greed) had triumphed.

The door was shut. She felt the slight tremor as Beautiful leapt on the box beside the driver.

Morose and indecisive, the men her father had sent with her were still lingering on the ice between the trees, as she was driven away.

She must have slept, dazed by the continuous rocking of the carriage, but all at once she was wide awake, clutching in alarm at the upholstery. What had roused her was a unique and awful choir. The cries of wolves.

Quite irresistibly she pressed against the window and stared out, impelled to look for what she did not, after all, wish to see. And what she saw was not reassuring.

A horde of wolves were running, not merely in pursuit, but actually alongside the carriage. Pale they were, a pale almost luminous brownish shade, which made them seem phantasmal against the snow. Their small but jewel-like eyes glinted, glowed and burned. As they ran, their tongues lolling sideways from their mouths like those of huge hunting dogs, they seemed to smile up at her, and her heart turned over.

Why was it, she wondered, with panic-stricken anger, that the coach did not go faster and so outrun the pack? Why was it the brutes had been permitted to gain as much distance as they had? Could it be they had already plucked the coachman and the dwarf from the box and devoured them—she tried to recollect if, in her dozing, she had registered masculine shrieks of fear and agony—and that the horses plunged on in imagination, grown detailed and pessimistic, soon dispensed with these images, replacing them with that of great pepper-colored paws scratching on the frame of the coach, the grisly talons ripping at the door, at last a wolf's savage mask thrust through it, and her own frantic and pointless scream-

ing, in the instants before her throat was silenced by the meeting of narrow yellow fangs.

Having run the gamut of her own premonition, Lisel sank back on the seat and yearned for a pistol, or at least a knife. A malicious streak in her lent her the extraordinary bravery of desiring to inflict as many hurts on her killers as she was able before they finished her. She also took space to curse Anna the Matriarch. How the wretched old woman would grieve and complain when the story reached her. The clean-picked bones of her granddaughter had been found a mere mile or so from her château, in the rags of a blood-red cloak; by the body a golden clasp, rejected as inedible....

A heavy thud caused Lisel to leap to her feet, even in the galloping, bouncing carriage. There at the door, grinning in on her, the huge face of a wolf, which did not fall away. Dimly she realized it must impossibly be balancing itself on the running board of the carriage, its front paws raised and somehow keeping purchase on the door. With one sharp determined effort of its head, it might conceivably smash in the pane of the window. The glass would lacerate, and the scent of its own blood further inflame its starvation. The eyes of it, doused by the carriage's gloom, flared up in two sudden pupilless ovals of fire, like two little portholes into hell.

With a shrill howl, scarcely knowing what she did, Lisel flung herself at the closed door and the wolf the far side of it. Her eyes also blazed, her teeth also were bared, and her nails raised as if to claw. Her horror was such that she appeared ready to attack the wolf in its own primeval mode, and as her hands struck the glass against its face, the wolf shied and dropped away.

In that moment, Lisel heard the musical voice of the dwarf call out from the box, some wordless whoop, and a tall gatepost sprang by.

Lisel understood they had entered the grounds of the Matriarch's château. And, a moment later, learned, though did not understand, that the wolves had not followed them beyond the gateway.

2

The Matriarch sat at the head of the long table. Her chair, like the table, was slender, carved and intensely polished. The rest of the chairs, though similarly high-backed and an-

gular, were plain and dull, including the chair to which Lisel had been conducted. Which increased Lisel's annoyance, the petty annoyance to which her more eloquent emotions of fright and rage had given way, on entering the domestic, if curious, atmosphere of the house. And Lisel must strive to conceal her ill-temper. It was difficult.

The Château, ornate and swarthy under its pointings of snow, retained an air of decadent magnificence, which was increased within. Twin stairs flared from an immense great hall. A hearth, large as a room, and crow-hooded by its enormous mantel, roared with muffled firelight. There was scarcely a furnishing that was not at least two hundred years old, and many were much older. The very air seemed tinged by the somber wood, the treacle darkness of the draperies, the old-gold gleams of picture frames, gilding and tableware.

At the center of it all sat Madame Anna, in her eighty-first year, a weird apparition of improbable glamor. She appeared, from no more than a yard or so away, to be little over fifty. Her skin, though very dry, had scarcely any lines in it, and none of the pleatings and collapses Lisel generally associated with the elderly. Anna's hair had remained blonde, a fact Lisel was inclined to attribute to some preparation out of a bottle, yet she was not sure. The lady wore black as she had done in the portrait of her youth, a black starred over with astonishing jewels. But her nails were very long and discolored, as were her teeth. These two incontrovertible proofs of old age gave Lisel a perverse satisfaction. Grandmother's eyes, on the other hand, were not so reassuring. Brilliant eyes, clear and very likely sharp-sighted, of a pallid silvery brown. Unnerving eyes, but Lisel did her best to stare them out, though when Anna spoke to her, Lisel now answered softly, ingratiatingly.

There had not, however, been much conversation, after the first clamor at the doorway:

"We were chased by wolves!" Lisel had cried. "Scores of them! Your coachman is a dolt who doesn't know enough to carry a pistol. I might have been killed."

"You were not," said Anna, imperiously standing in silhouette against the giant window of the hall, a stained glass of what appeared to be a hunting scene, done in murky reds and staring white.

"No thanks to your servants. You promised me an escort—the only reason I sent my father's men away."

"You had your escort."

Lisel had choked back another flood of sentences; she did not want to get on the wrong side of this strange relative. Nor had she liked the slight emphasis on the word "escort."

The handsome ghastly dwarf had gone forward into the hall, lifted the hem of Anna's long mantle, and kissed it. Anna had smoothed off his hood and caressed the bright hair beneath.

"Beautiful wasn't afraid," said Anna decidedly. "But, then, my people know the wolves will not harm them."

An ancient tale came back to Lisel in that moment. It concerned certain human denizens of the forests, who had power over wild beasts. It occurred to Lisel that mad old Anna liked to fancy herself a sorceress, and Lisel said fawningly: "I should have known I'd be safe. I'm sorry for my outburst, but I don't know the forest as you do. I was afraid."

In her allotted bedroom, a silver ewer and basin stood on a table. The embroideries on the canopied bed were faded but priceless. Antique books stood in a case, catching the firelight, a vast yet random selection of the poetry and prose of many lands. From the bedchamber window, Lisel could look out across the clearing of the park, the white sweep of it occasionally broken by trees in their winter foliage of snow, or by the slash of the track which broke through the high wall. Beyond the wall, the forest pressed close under the heavy twilight of the sky. Lisel pondered with a grim irritation the open gateway. Wolves running, and the way to the château left wide at all times. She visualized mad Anna throwing chunks of raw meat to the wolves as another woman would toss bread to swans.

This unprepossessing notion returned to Lisel during the unusually early dinner, when she realized that Anna was receiving from her silent gliding servants various dishes of raw meats.

"I hope," said Anna, catching Lisel's eye, "my repast won't offend a delicate stomach. I have learned that the best way to keep my health is to eat the fruits of the earth in their intended state—so much goodness is wasted in cooking and garnishing."

Despite the reference to fruit, Anna touched none of the fruit or vegetables on the table. Nor did she drink any wine.

Lisel began again to be amused, if rather dubiously. Her own fare was excellent, and she ate it hungrily, admiring as

she did so the crystal goblets and gold-handled knives which one day would be hers.

Presently a celebrated liqueur was served—to Lisel alone—and Anna rose on the black wings of her dress, waving her granddaughter to the fire. Beautiful, meanwhile, had crawled onto the stool of the tall piano and begun to play wildly despairing romances there, his elegant fingers darting over discolored keys so like Anna's strong yet senile teeth.

"Well," said Anna, reseating herself in another carven throne before the cave of the hearth. "What do you think of us?"

"Think, Grandmère? Should I presume?"

"No. But you do."

"I think," said Lisel cautiously, "everything is very fine."

"And you are keenly aware, of course, the finery will eventually belong to you."

"Oh, Grandmère!" exclaimed Lisel, quite genuinely shocked by such frankness.

"Don't trouble yourself," said Anna. Her eyes caught the fire and became like the eyes of the wolf at the carriage window. "You expect to be my heiress. It's quite normal you should be making an inventory. I shan't last forever. Once I'm gone, presumably everything will be yours."

Despite herself, Lisel gave an involuntary shiver. A sudden plan of selling the château to be rid of it flitted through her thoughts, but she quickly put it aside, in case the Matriarch somehow read her mind.

"Don't speak like that, Grandmère. This is the first time I've met you, and you talk of dying."

"Did I! No, I did not. I spoke of *departure.* Nothing dies, it simply transmogrifies." Lisel watched politely this display of apparent piety. "As for my mansion," Anna went on, "you mustn't consider sale, you know." Lisel blanched—as she had feared, her mind had been read, or could it merely be that Anna found her predictable? "The château has stood on this land for many centuries. The old name for the spot, do you know that?"

"No, Grandmère."

"This, like the whole of the forest, was called the Wolfland. Because it was the wolves' country before ever men set foot on it with their piffling little roads and tracks, their carriages and foolish frightened walls. Wolfland. Their country then, and when the winter comes, their country once more."

"As I saw, Grandmère," said Lisel tartly.

"As you saw. You'll see and hear more of them while you're in my house. Their voices come and go like the wind, as they do. When that little idiot of a sun slips away and the night rises, you may hear scratching on the lower floor windows. I needn't tell you to stay indoors, need I?"

"Why do you let animals run in your park?" demanded Lisel.

"Because," said Anna, "the land is theirs by right."

The dwarf began to strike a polonaise from the piano. Anna clapped her hands, and the music ended. Anna beckoned, and Beautiful slid off the stool like a precocious child caught stickying the keys. He came to Anna, and she played with his hair. His face remained unreadable, yet his pellucid eyes swam dreamily to Lisel's face. She felt embarrassed by the scene, and at his glance was angered to find herself blushing.

"There was a time," said Anna, "when I did not rule this house. When a man ruled here."

"Grandpère," said Lisel, looking resolutely at the fire.

"Grandpère, yes. *Grandpère."* Her voice held the most awful scorn. "Grandpère believed it was a man's pleasure to beat his wife. You're young, but you should know, should be told. Every night, if I was not already sick from a beating, and sometimes when I was, I would hear his heavy drunken feet come stumbling to my door. At first I locked it, but I learned not to. What stood in his way he could always break. He was a strong man. A great legend of strength. I carry scars on my shoulders to this hour. One day I may show you."

Lisel gazed at Anna, caught between fascination and revulsion. "Why do I tell you?" Anna smiled. She had twisted Beautiful's gorgeous hair into a painful knot. Clearly it hurt him, but he made no sound, staring blindly at the ceiling. "I tell you, Lisel, because very soon your father will suggest to you that it is time you were wed. And however handsome or gracious the young man may seem to you that you choose, or that is chosen for you, however noble or marvelous or even docile he may seem, you have no way of being certain he will not turn out to be like your beloved Grandpère. Do you know, he brought me peaches on our wedding night, all the way from the hothouses of the city. Then he showed me the whip he had been hiding under the fruit. You see what it is to be a woman, Lisel. Is that what you want? The irrevocable mar-

riage vow that binds you forever to a monster? And even if he is a good man, which is a rare beast indeed, you may die an agonizing death in childbed, just as your mother did."

Lisel swallowed. A number of things went through her head now. A vague acknowledgment that, though she envisaged admiration, she had never wished to marry and therefore never considered it, and a starker awareness that she was being told improper things. She desired to learn more and dreaded to learn it. As she was struggling to find a rejoinder, Anna seemed to notice her own grip on the hair of the dwarf.

"Ah," she said, "forgive me. I did not mean to hurt you."

The words had an oddly sinister ring to them. Lisel suddenly guessed their origin, the brutish man rising from his act of depravity, of necessity still merely sketched by Lisel's innocence, whispering, gloatingly muttering: Forgive me. I did not mean to hurt.

"Beautiful," said Anna, "is the only man of any worth I've ever met. And my servants, of course, but I don't count them as men. Drink your liqueur."

"Yes, Grandmère," said Lisel, sipped, and slightly choked.

"Tomorrow," said Anna, "we must serve you something better. A vintage indigenous to the château, made from a flower which grows here in the spring. For now," again she rose on her raven's wings; a hundred gems caught the light and went out, "for now, we keep early hours here, in the country."

"But, Grandmère," said Lisel, astounded, "it's scarcely sunset."

"In my house," said Anna, gently, "you will do as you are told, m'mselle."

And for once, Lisel did as she was told.

At first, of course, Lisel did not entertain a dream of sleep. She was used to staying awake till the early hours of the morning, rising at noon. She entered her bedroom, cast one scathing glance at the bed, and settled herself to read in a chair bedside the bedroom fire. Luckily she had found a lurid novel amid the choice of books. By skimming over all passages of meditation, description or philosophy, confining her attention to those portions which contained duels, rapes, black magic and the firing squad, she had soon made great inroads on the work. Occasionally, she would pause, and add another

piece of wood to the fire. At such times she knew a medley of doubts concerning her grandmother. That the Matriarch could leave such a novel lying about openly where Lisel could get at it, outraged the girl's propriety.

Eventually, two or three hours after the sun had gone and the windows blackened entirely behind the drapes, Lisel did fall asleep. The excitements of the journey and her medley of reactions to Madame Anna had worn her out.

She woke, as she had in the carriage, with a start of alarm. Her reason was the same one. Out in the winter forest of night sounded the awesome choir of the wolves. Their voices rose and fell, swelling, diminishing, resurging, like great icy waves of wind or water, breaking on the silence of the château.

Partly nude, a lovely maiden had been bound to a stake and the first torch applied, but Lisel no longer cared very much for her fate. Setting the book aside, she rose from the chair. The flames were low on the candles and the fire almost out. There was no clock, but it had the feel of midnight. Lisel went to the window and opened the drapes. Stepping through and pulling them fast closed again behind her, she gazed out into the glowing darkness of snow and night.

The wolf cries went on and on, thrilling her with a horrible disquiet, so she wondered how even mad Anna could ever have grown accustomed to them? Was this what had driven grandfather to brutishness and beatings? And, colder thought, the mysterious violent death he was supposed to have suffered—what more violent than to be torn apart by long pointed teeth under the pine trees?

Lisel quartered the night scene with her eyes, looking for shapes to fit the noises, and, as before, hoping not to find them.

There was decidedly something about wolves. Something beyond their reputation and the stories of the half-eaten bodies of little children with which nurses regularly scared their charges. Something to do with actual appearance, movement: the lean shadow manifesting from between the trunks of trees—the stuff of nightmare. And their howlings—! Yet, as it went on and on, Lisel became aware of a bizarre exhilaration, an almost-pleasure in the awful sounds which made the hair lift on her scalp and gooseflesh creep along her arms—the same sort of sensation as biting into a slice of lemon—

And then she saw it, a great pale wolf. It loped by directly beneath the window, and suddenly, to Lisel's horror, it raised its long head, and two fireworks flashed, which were its eyes meeting with hers. A primordial fear, worse even than in the carriage, turned Lisel's bones to liquid. She sank on her knees, and as she knelt there foolishly, as if in prayer, her chin on the sill, she beheld the wolf moving away across the park, seeming to dissolve into the gloom.

Gradually, then, the voices of the other wolves began to dull, eventually falling quiet.

Lisel got up, came back into the room, threw more wood on the fire and crouched there. It seemed odd to her that the wolf had run *away* from the château, but she was not sure why. Presumably it had ventured near in hopes of food, then, disappointed, withdrawn. That it had come from the spot directly by the hall's doors did not, could not, mean anything in particular. Then Lisel realized what had been so strange. She had seen the wolf in a faint radiance of light—but from where? The moon was almost full, but obscured behind the house. The drapes had been drawn across behind her, the light could not have fallen down from her own window. She was turning back unhappily to the window to investigate when she heard the unmistakable soft thud of a large door being carefully shut below her, in the château.

The wolf had been in the house. Anna's guest.

Lisel was petrified for a few moments, then a sort of fury came to her rescue. How dared the old woman be so mad as all this and expect her civilized granddaughter to endure it? Brought to the wilds, told improper tales, left improper literature to read, made unwilling party to the entertainment of savage beasts. Perhaps as a result of the reading matter, Lisel saw her only course abruptly, and it was escape. (She had already assumed Anna would not allow her grandchild to depart until whatever lunatic game the old beldame was playing was completed.) But if escape, then how? Though there were carriage, horses, even coachmen, all were Anna's. Lisel did not have to ponder long, however. Her fathers' cynicism on the lower classes had convinced her that anyone had his price, She would bribe the coachman—her gold bracelets and her ruby eardrops—both previous gifts of Anna's, in fact. She could assure the man of her father's protection and further valuables when they reached the city. A vile thought came to her at that, that her father might, after all,

prove unsympathetic. Was she being stupid? Should she turn a blind eye to Anna's wolfish foibles? If Anna should disinherit her, as surely she would on Lisel's flight—

Assailed by doubts, Lisel paced the room. Soon she had added to them. The coachman might snatch her bribe and still refuse to help her. Or worse, drive her into the forest and violate her. Or—

The night slowed and flowed into the black valleys of early morning. The moon crested the château and sank into the forest. Lisel sat on the edge of the canopied bed, pleating and repleating the folds of the scarlet cloak between her fingers. Her face was pale, her blonde hair untidy and her eyes enlarged. She looked every bit as crazy as her grandmother.

Her decision was sudden, made with an awareness that she had wasted much time. She flung the cloak round herself and started up. She hurried to the bedroom door and softly, softly, opened it a tiny crack.

All was black in the house, neither lamp nor candle visible anywhere. The sight, or rather lack of it, caused Lisel's heart to sink. At the same instant, it indicated that the whole house was abed. Lisel's plan was a simple one. A passage led away from the great hall to the kitchens and servants' quarters and ultimately to a courtyard containing coachhouse and stables. Here the grooms and the coachman would sleep, and here too another gateway opened on the park. These details she had either seen for herself as the carriage was driven off on her arrival or deduced from the apparent structure of the château. Unsure of the hour, yet she felt dawn was approaching. If she could but reach the servants' quarters, she should be able to locate the courtyard. If the coachman proved a villain, she would have to use her wits. Threaten him or cajole him. Knowing very little of physical communion, it seemed better to Lisel in those moments, to lie down with a hairy peasant than to remain the Matriarch's captive. It was that time of night when humans are often prey to ominous or extravagant ideas of all sorts. She took up one of the low-burning candles. Closing the bedroom door behind her, Lisel stole forward into the black nothingness of unfamiliarity.

Even with the feeble light, she could barely see ten inches before her, and felt cautiously about with her free hand, dreading to collide with ornament or furniture and thereby rouse her enemies. The stray gleams, shot back at her from a mirror or a picture frame, misled rather than aided her. At

first her total concentration was taken up with her safe progress and her quest to find the head of the double stair. Presently, however, as she pressed on without mishap, secondary considerations began to steal in on her.

If it was difficult to proceed, how much more difficult it might be should she desire to retreat. Hopefully, there would be nothing to retreat from. But the ambience of the château, inspired by night and the limited candle, was growing more sinister by the second. Arches opened on drapes of black from which anything might spring. All about, the shadow furled, and she was one small target moving in it, lit as if on a stage.

She turned the passage and perceived the curve of the stair ahead and the dim hall below. The great stained window provided a gray illumination which elsewhere was absent. The stars bled on the snow outside and pierced the white panes. Or could it be the initial tinge of dawn?

Lisel paused, confronting once again the silliness of her simple plan of escape. Instinctively, she turned to look the way she had come, and the swiftness of the motion, or some complementary draught, quenched her candle. She stood marooned by this cliché, the phosphorescently discernible space before her, pitch-dark behind, and chose the path into the half-light as preferable.

She went down the stair delicately, as if descending into a ballroom. When she was some twenty steps from the bottom, something moved in the thick drapes beside the outer doors. Lisel froze, feeling a shock like an electric volt passing through her vitals. In another second she knew from the uncanny littleness of the shape that it was Anna's dwarf who scuttled there. But before she divined what it was at, one leaf of the door began to swing heavily inwards.

Lisel felt no second shock of fear. She felt instead as if her soul drifted upward from her flesh.

Through the open door soaked the pale ghost-light that heralded sunrise, and with that, a scattering of fresh white snow. Lastly through the door, its long feet crushing both light and snow, glided the wolf she had seen beneath her window. It did not look real, it seemed to waver and to shine, yet, for any who had ever heard the name of wolf, or a single story of them, or the song of their voices, here stood that word, that story, that voice, personified.

The wolf raised its supernatural head and once more it looked at the young girl.

The moment held no reason, no pity, and certainly no longer any hope of escape.

As the wolf began to pad noiselessly towards Lisel up the stair, she fled by the only route now possible to her. Into unconsciousness.

3

She came to herself to find the face of a prince from a romance poised over hers. He was handsome enough to have kissed her awake, except that she knew immediately it was the dwarf.

"Get away from me!" she shrieked, and he moved aside.

She was in the bedchamber, lying on the canopied bed. She was not dead, she had not been eaten or had her throat torn out.

As if in response to her thoughts, the dwarf said musically to her: "You have had a nightmare, m'mselle." But she could tell from a faint expression somewhere between his eyes, that he did not truly expect her to believe such a feeble equivocation.

"There was a wolf," said Lisel, pulling herself into a sitting position, noting that she was still gowned and wearing the scarlet cloak. "A wolf which *you* let into the house."

"I?" The dwarf elegantly raised an eyebrow.

"You, you frog. Where is my grandmother? I demand to see her at once."

"The Lady Anna is resting. She sleeps late in the mornings."

"Wake her."

"Your pardon, m'mselle, but I take my orders from Madame." The dwarf bowed. "If you are recovered and hungry, a maid will bring *petit déjeuner* at once to your room, and hot water for bathing, when you are ready."

Lisel frowned. Her ordeal past, her anger paramount, she was still very hungry. An absurd notion came to her—*had* it all been a dream? No, she would not so doubt herself. Even though the wolf had not harmed her, it had been real. A household pet, then? She had heard of deranged monarchs who kept lions or tigers like cats. Why not a wolf kept like a dog?

"Bring me my breakfast," she snapped, and the dwarf bowed himself goldenly out.

All avenues of escape seemed closed, yet by day (for it was day, the tawny gloaming of winter) the phenomena of the darkness seemed far removed. Most of their terror had gone with them. With instinctive immature good sense, Lisel acknowledged that no hurt had come to her, that she was indeed being cherished.

She wished she had thought to reprimand the dwarf for his mention of intimate hot water and his presence in her bedroom. Recollections of unseemly novelettes led her to a swift examination of her apparel—unscathed. She rose and stood morosely by the fire, waiting for her breakfast, tapping her foot.

By the hour of noon, Lisel's impatience had reached its zenith with the sun. Of the two, only the sun's zenith was insignificant.

Lisel left the bedroom, flounced along the corridor and came to the stairhead. Eerie memories of the previous night had trouble in remaining with her. Everything seemed to have become rather absurd, but this served only to increase her annoyance. Lisel went down the stair boldly. The fire was lit in the enormous hearth and blazing cheerfully. Lisel prowled about, gazing at the dubious stained glass, which she now saw did not portray a hunting scene at all, but some pagan subject of men metamorphosing into wolves.

At length a maid appeared. Lisel marched up to her.

"Kindly inform my grandmother that I am awaiting her in the hall."

The maid seemed struggling to repress a laugh, but she bobbed a curtsey and darted off. She did not come back, and neither did grandmother.

When a man entered bearing logs for the fire, Lisel said to him, "Put those down and take me at once to the coachman."

The man nodded and gestured her to follow him without a word of acquiescence or disagreement. Lisel, as she let herself be led through the back corridors and by the hub-bub of the huge stone kitchen, was struck by the incongruousness of her actions. No longer afraid, she felt foolish. She was carrying out her "plan" of the night before from sheer pique, nor did she have any greater hope of success. It was more as if some deeply hidden part of herself prompted her to flight, in spite of all resolutions, rationality and desire. But it was

rather like trying to walk on a numbed foot. She could manage to do it, but without feeling.

The coaching-house and stables bulked gloomily about the courtyard, where the snow had renewed itself in dazzling white drifts. The coachman stood in his black furs beside an iron brazier. One of the blond horses was being shod in an old-fashioned manner, the coachman overseeing the exercise. Seeking to ingratiate herself, Lisel spoke to the coachman in a silky voice.

"I remarked yesterday, how well you controlled the horses when the wolves came after the carriage."

The coachman did not answer, but hearing her voice, the horse sidled a little, rolling its eye at her.

"Suppose," said Lisel to the coachman, "I were to ask you if you would take me back to the city. What would you say?"

Nothing, apparently.

The stove sizzled and the hammer of the blacksmithing groom smacked the nails home into the horse's hoof. Lisel found the process disconcerting.

"You must understand," she said to the coachman, "my father would give you a great deal of money. He's unwell and wishes me to return. I received word this morning."

The coachman hulked there like a big black bear, and Lisel had the urge to bite him viciously.

"My grandmother," she announced, "would order you to obey me, but she is presently in bed."

"No, she is not," said the Matriarch at Lisel's back, and Lisel almost screamed. She shot around, and stared at the old woman, who stood about a foot away, imperious in her furs, jewels frostily blistering on her wrists.

"I wish," said Lisel, taking umbrage as her shield, "to go home at once."

"So I gather. But you can't, I regret."

"You mean to keep me prisoner?" blurted Lisel.

Grandmother laughed. The laugh was like fresh ice crackling under a steel skate. "Not at all. The road is snowed under and won't be clear for several days. I'm afraid you'll have to put up with us a while longer."

Lisel, in a turmoil she could not herself altogether fathom, had her attention diverted by the behavior of the horse. It was bristling like a cat, tossing its head, dancing against the rope by which the second groom was holding it.

Anna walked at once out into the yard and began to ap-

proach the horse from the front. The horse instantly grew more agitated, kicking up its heels, and neighing croupily. Lisel almost cried an automatic warning, but restrained herself. Let the beldame get a kicking, she deserved it. Rather to Lisel's chagrin, Anna reached the horse without actually having her brains dashed out. She showed not a moment's hesitation or doubt, placing her hand on its long nose, eyeing it with an amused tenderness. She looked very cruel and very indomitable.

"There now," said Anna to the horse, which, fallen quiet and still, yet trembled feverishly. "You know you are used to me. You know you were trained to endure me since you were a foal, as your brothers are sometimes trained to endure fire."

The horse hung its head and shivered, cowed but noble.

Anna left it and strolled back through the snow. She came to Lisel and took her arm.

"I'm afraid," said Anna, guiding them toward the château door, "that they're never entirely at peace when I'm in the vicinity, though they are good horses, and well-trained. They have borne me long distances in the carriage."

"Do they fear you because you ill-treat them?" Lisel asked impetuously.

"Oh, not at all. They fear me because to them I smell of wolf."

Lisel bridled.

"Then do you think it wise to keep such a pet in the house?" she flared.

Anna chuckled. It was not necessarily a merry sound.

"That's what you think, is it? What a little dunce you are, Lisel. *I* am the beast you saw last night, and you had better get accustomed to it. Grandmère is a werewolf."

The return walk through the domestic corridors into the hall was notable for its silence. The dreadful Anna, her grip on the girl's arm unabated, smiled thoughtfully to herself. Lisel was obviously also deliberating inwardly. Her conclusions, however, continued to lean to the deranged rather than the occult. Propitiation suggested itself, as formerly, to be the answer. So, as they entered the hall, casting their cloaks to a servant, Lisel brightly exclaimed:

"A werewolf, Grandmère. How interesting!"

"Dear me," said Anna, "what a child." She seated herself

by the fire in one of her tall thrones. Beautiful had appeared. "Bring the liqueur and some biscuits," said Anna. "It's past the hour, but why should we be the slaves of custom?"

Lisel perched on a chair across the hearth, watching Anna guardedly.

"You are the interesting one," Anna now declared. "You look sulky rather than intimidated at being mured up here with one whom you wrongly suppose is a dangerous insane. No, *ma chère,* verily I'm not mad, but a transmogrifite. Every evening, once the sun sets, I become a wolf, and duly comport myself as a wolf does."

"You're going to eat me, then," snarled Lisel, irritated out of all attempts to placate.

"Eat you? Hardly necessary. The forest is bursting with game. I won't say I never tasted human meat, but I wouldn't stoop to devouring a blood relation. Enough is enough. Besides, I had the opportunity last night, don't you think, when you swooned away on the stairs not fifty feet from me. Of course, it was almost dawn, and I *had* dined, but to rip out your throat would have been the work only of a moment. Thereafter we might have stored you in the cold larder against a lean winter."

"How dare you try to frighten me in this way!" screamed Lisel in a paroxysm of rage.

Beautiful was coming back with a silver tray. On the tray rested a plate of biscuits and a decanter of the finest cut glass containing a golden drink.

"You note, Beautiful," said Madame Anna, "I like this wretched granddaughter of mine. She's very like me."

"Does that dwarf know you are a *werewolf?"* demanded Lisel, with baleful irony.

"Who else lets me in and out at night? But all my servants know, just as my other folk know, in the forest."

"You're disgusting," said Lisel.

"Tut, I shall disinherit you. Don't you want my fortune any more?"

Beautiful set down the tray on a small table between them and began to pour the liqueur, smooth as honey, into two tiny crystal goblets.

Lisel watched. She remembered the nasty dishes of raw meat—part of Anna's game of werewolfery—and the drinking of water, but no wine. Lisel smirked, thinking she had caught the Matriarch out. She kept still and accepted the

glass from Beautiful, who, while she remained seated, was a mere inch taller than she.

"I toast you," said Anna, raising her glass to Lisel. "Your health and your joy." She sipped. A strange look came into her strange eyes. "We have," she said, "a brief winter afternoon before us. There is just the time to tell you what you should be told."

"Why bother with me. I'm disinherited."

"Hardly. Taste the liqueur. You will enjoy it."

"I'm surprised that you did, Grandmère."

"Don't be," said Anna with asperity. "This wine is special to this place. We make it from a flower which grows here. A little yellow flower that comes in the spring, or sometimes, even in the winter. There is a difference then, of course. Do you recall the flower of my escutcheon? It is the self-same one."

Lisel sipped the liqueur. She had had a fleeting fancy it might be drugged or tampered with in some way, but both drinks had come from the decanter. Besides, what would be the point? The Matriarch valued an audience. The wine was pleasing, fragrant and, rather than sweet as Lisel had anticipated, tart. The flower which grew in winter was plainly another demented tale.

Relaxed, Lisel leaned back in her chair. She gazed at the flames in the wide hearth. Her mad grandmother began to speak to her in a quiet, floating voice, and Lisel saw pictures form in the fire. Pictures of Anna, and of the château, and of darkness itself....

4

How young Anna looked. She was in her twenties. She wore a scarlet gown and a scarlet cloak lined with pale fur and heavy brocade. It resembled Lisel's cloak but had a different clasp. Snow melted on the shoulders of the cloak, and Anna held her slender hands to the fire on the hearth. Free of the hood, her hair, like marvelously tarnished ivory, was piled on her head, and there was a yellow flower in it. She wore ruby eardrops. She looked just like Lisel, or Lisel as she would become in six years or seven.

Someone called. It was more a roar than a call, as if a great beast came trampling into the château. He was a big man, dark, all darkness, his features hidden in a black beard,

black hair—more, in a sort of swirling miasmic cloud, a kind of psychic smoke: Anna's hatred and fear. He bellowed for liquor and a servant came running with a jug and cup. The man, Anna's husband, cuffed the servant aside, grabbing the jug as he did so. He strode to Anna, spun her about, grabbed her face in his hand as he had grabbed the jug. He leaned to her as if to kiss her, but he did not kiss, he merely stared. She had steeled herself not to shrink from him, so much was evident. His eyes, roving over her to find some overt trace of distaste or fright, suddenly found instead the yellow flower. He vented a powerful oath. His paw flung up and wrenched the flower free. He slung it in the fire and spat after it.

"You stupid bitch," he growled at her. "Where did you come on that?"

"It's only a flower."

"Not only a flower. Answer me, where? Or do I strike you?"

"Several of them are growing near the gate, beside the wall; and in the forest. I saw them when I was riding."

The man shouted again for his servant. He told him to take a fellow and go out. They must locate the flowers and burn them.

"Another superstition?" Anna asked. Her husband hit her across the head so she staggered and caught the mantel to steady herself.

"*Yes,*" he sneered, "another one. Now come upstairs."

Anna said, "Please excuse me, sir. I am not well today."

He said in a low and smiling voice:

"Do as I say, or you'll be worse."

The fire flared on the swirl of her bloody cloak as she moved to obey him.

And the image changed. There was a bedroom, fluttering with lamplight. Anna was perhaps thirty-five or six, but she looked older. She lay in bed, soaked in sweat, uttering hoarse low cries or sometimes preventing herself from crying. She was in labor. The child was difficult. There were other women about the bed. One muttered to her neighbor that it was beyond her how the master had ever come to sire a child, since he got his pleasure another way, and the poor lady's body gave evidence of how. Then Anna screamed. Someone bent over her. There was a peculiar muttering among the women, as if they attended at some holy ceremony.

And another image came. Anna was seated in a shawl of gilded hair. She held a baby on her lap and was playing with

it in an intense, quite silent way. As her hair shifted, traceries became momently visible over her bare shoulders, and arms, horrible traceries left by a lash.

"Let me take the child," said a voice, and one of the women from the former scene appeared. She lifted the baby from Anna's lap, and Anna let the baby go, only holding her arms and hands in such a way that she touched it to the last second. The other woman was older than Anna, a peasant dressed smartly for service in the château. "You mustn't fret yourself," she said.

"But I can't suckle her," said Anna. "I wanted to."

"There's another can do that," said the woman. "Rest yourself. Rest while he is away." When she said "he" there could be no doubt of the one to whom she referred.

"Then, I'll rest," said Anna. She reclined on pillows, wincing slightly as her back made contact with the fine soft silk. "Tell me about the flowers again. The yellow flowers."

The woman showed her teeth as she rocked the baby. For an instant her face was just like a wolf's.

"You're not afraid," she said. "*He* is. But it's always been here, the wolf-magic. It's part of the Wolfland. Wherever wolves have been, you can find the wolf-magic. Somewhere. In a stream or a cave, or in a patch of ground. The château has it. That's why the flowers grow here. Yes, I'll tell you, then. It's simple. If any eat the flowers, then they receive the gift. It comes from the spirit, the wolfwoman, or maybe she's a goddess, an old goddess left over from the beginning of things, before Christ came to save us all. She has the head of a wolf and yellow hair. You swallow the flowers, and you call her, and she comes, and she gives it you. And then it's yours, till you die."

"And then what? Payment?" said Anna dreamily. "Hell?"

"Maybe."

The image faded gently. Suddenly there was another which was not gentle, a parody of the scene before. Staring light showed the bedchamber. The man, his shadow-face smoldering, clutched Anna's baby in his hands. The baby shrieked; he swung it to and fro as if to smash it on some handy piece of furniture. Anna stood in her nightdress. She held a whip out to him.

"Beat me," she said. "Please beat me. I want you to. Put down the child and beat me. It would be so easy to hurt her, and so soon over, she's so small. But I'm stronger. You can

hurt me much more. See how vulnerable and afraid I am. Beat *me.*"

Then, with a snarl he tossed the child onto the bed where it lay wailing. He took the whip and caught Anna by her pale hair—

There was snow blowing like torn paper, everywhere. In the midst of it a servant woman, and a child perhaps a year old with soft dark hair, were seated in a carriage. Anna looked at them, then stepped away. A door slammed, horses broke into a gallop. Anna remained standing in the snow storm.

No picture came. A man's voice thundered: "Where? Where did you send the thing? It's mine, I sired it. My property. *Where?*"

But the only reply he got were moans of pain. She would not tell him, and did not. He nearly killed her that time.

Now it is night, but a black night bleached with whiteness, for a full moon is up above the tops of the winter pines.

Anna is poised, motionless, in a glade of the wild northern forest. She wears the scarlet cloak, but the moon has drained its color. The snow sparkles, the trees are umbrellas of diamond, somber only at their undersides. The moon slaps the world with light. Anna has been singing, or chanting something, and though it can no longer be heard, the dew of it lies heavy over the ground. Something is drawn there, too, in the snow, a circle, and another shape inside it. A fire has been kindled nearby, but now it has burned low, and has a curious bluish tinge to it. All at once a wind begins to come through the forest. But it is not wind, not even storm. It is the soul of the forest, the spirit of the Wolfland.

Anna goes to her knees. She is afraid, but it is a new fear, an exulting fear. The stalks of the flowers whose heads she has eaten lie under her knees, and she raises her face like a dish to the moonlight.

The pines groan. They bend. Branches snap and snow showers down from them. The creature of the forest is coming, nearer and nearer. It is a huge single wing, or an enormous engine. Everything breaks and sways before it, even the moonlight, and darkness fills the glade. And out of the darkness Something whirls. It is difficult to see, to be sure—a glimpse of gold, two eyes like dots of lava seven feet in the air, a grey jaw, hung breasts which have hair growing on them, the long hand which is not a hand, lifting—And then

every wolf in the forest seems to give tongue, and the darkness ebbs away.

Anna lies on her face. She is weeping. With terror. With—It is night again, and the man of the house is coming home.

He swaggers, full of local beer, and eager to get to his wife. He was angry, a short while since, because his carriage, which was to have waited for him outside the inn, had mysteriously vanished. There will be men to curse and brutalize in the courtyard before he goes up to his beloved Anna, a prelude to his final acts with her. He finds her a challenge, his wife. She seems able to withstand so much, looking at him proudly with horror in her eyes. It would bore him to break her. He likes the fact he cannot, or thinks he does. And tonight he has some good news. One of the paid men has brought word of their child. She is discovered at last. She can be brought home to the château to her father's care. She is two years old now. Strong and healthy. Yes, good news indeed.

They had known better in the village than to tell him he should beware on the forest track. He is not anxious about wolves, the distance being less than a mile, and he has his pistol. Besides, he organized a wolf hunt last month and cleared quite a few of the brutes off his land. The area about the château has been silent for many nights. Even Anna went walking without a servant—though he had not approved of that and had taught her a lesson. (Sometimes it occurs to him that she enjoys his lessons as much as he enjoys delivering them, for she seems constantly to seek out new ways to vex him.)

He is about a quarter of a mile from the château now, and here a small clearing opens off on both sides of the track. It is the night after the full moon, and her disc, an almost perfect round, glares down on the clearing from the pine tops. Anna's husband dislikes the clearing. He had forgotten he would have to go through it, for generally he is mounted or in the carriage when he passes the spot. There is some old superstition about the place. He hates it, just as he hates the stinking yellow flowers that grew in it before he burned them out. Why does he hate them? The woman who nursed him told him something and it frightened him, long ago. Well, no matter. He walks more quickly.

How quiet it is, how still. The whole night like a pane of black-white silence. He can hardly hear his own noisy foot-

falls. There is a disturbance in the snow, over there, a mark like a circle.

Then he realizes something is behind him. He is not sure how he realizes, for it is quite soundless. He stops, and turns, and sees a great and ghostly wolf a few feet from him on the track.

In a way, it is almost a relief to see the wolf. It is alone, and it is a natural thing. Somehow he had half expected something unnatural. He draws his pistol, readies it, points it at the wolf. He is a fine shot. He already visualizes lugging the bloody carcass, a trophy, into the house. He pulls the trigger.

A barren click. He is surprised. He tries again. Another click. It comes to him that his servant has emptied the chamber of bullets. He sees a vision of the park gates a quarter of a mile away, and he turns immediately and runs toward them.

Ten seconds later a warm and living weight crashes against his back, and he falls screaming, screaming, before the pain even begins. When the pain does begin, he is unable to scream for very long, but he does his best. The final thing he sees through the haze of his own blood, which has splashed up into his eyes, and the tears of agony and the inclosing of a most atrocious death, are the eyes of the wolf, gleaming coolly back at him. He knows they are the eyes of Anna. And that it is Anna who then tears out his throat.

The small crystal goblet slipped out of Lisel's hand, empty, and broke on the floor. Lisel started. Dazed, she looked away from the fire, to Anna the Matriarch.

Had Lisel been asleep and dreaming? What an unpleasant dream. Or had it been so unpleasant? Lisel became aware her teeth were clenched in spiteful gladness, as if on a bone. If Anna had told her the truth, that man—that *thing*—had deserved it all. To be betrayed by his servants, and by his wife, and to perish in the fangs of a wolf. A werewolf.

Grandmother and granddaughter confronted each other a second, with identical expressions of smiling and abstracted malice. Lisel suddenly flushed, smoothed her face, and looked down. There had been something in the drink after all.

"I don't think this at all nice," said Lisel.

"Nice isn't the word," Anna agreed. Beautiful reclined at her feet, and she stroked his hair. Across the big room, the

stained-glass window was thickening richly to opacity. The sun must be near to going down.

"*If* it's the truth," said Lisel primly, "you will go to hell."

"Oh? Don't you think me justified? He'd have killed your mother at the very least. *You* would never have been born."

Lisel reviewed this hypothetical omission. It carried some weight.

"You should have appealed for help."

"To whom? The marriage vow is a chain that may not be broken. If I had left him, he would have traced me, as he did the child. No law supports a wife. I could only kill him."

"I don't believe you killed him as you say you did."

"Don't you, m'mselle. Well never mind. Once the sun has set, you'll see it happen before your eyes." Lisel stared and opened her mouth to remonstrate. Anna added gently: "And, I am afraid, not to myself alone."

Aside from all reasoning and the training of a short lifetime, Lisel felt the stranglehold of pure terror fasten on her. She rose and squealed: "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Anna, "that the liqueur you drank is made from the same yellow flowers I ate to give me the power of transmogrification. I mean that the wolf-magic, once invoked, becomes hereditary, yet dormant. I mean that what the goddess of the Wolfland conveys must indeed be paid for at the hour of death—unless another will take up the gift."

Lisel, not properly understanding, not properly believing, began to shriek wildly. Anna came to her feet. She crossed to Lisel and shook the shrieks out of her, and when she was dumb, thrust her back in the chair.

"Now sit, fool, and be quiet. I've put nothing on you that was not already yours. Look in the mirror. Look at your hair and your eyes and your beautiful teeth. Haven't you always preferred the night to the day, staying up till the morning, lying abed till noon? Don't you love the cold forest? Doesn't the howl of the wolf thrill you through with fearful delight? And why else should the Wolfland accord you an escort, a pack of wolves running by you on the road. Do you think you'd have survived if you'd not been one of their kind, too?"

Lisel wept, stamping her foot. She could not have said at all what she felt. She tried to think of her father and the ballrooms of the city. She tried to consider if she credited magic.

"Now listen to me," snapped Anna, and Lisel muted her

sobs just enough to catch the words. "Tonight is full moon, and the anniversary of that night, years ago, when I made my pact with the wolf goddess of the north. I have good cause to suspect I shan't live out this year. Therefore, tonight is the last chance I have to render you in my place into her charge. That frees me from her, do you see? Once you have swallowed the flowers, once she has acknowledged you, you belong to her. At death, I escape her sovereignty, which would otherwise bind me forever to the earth in wolf-form, phantom-form. A bargain: You save me. But you too can make your escape, when the time comes. Bear a child. You will be mistress here. You can command any man to serve you, and you're tolerable enough the service won't be unwilling. My own child, your mother, was not like me at all. I could not bring her to live with me, once I had the power. I was troubled as to how I should wean her to it. But she died, and in you I saw the mark from the first hour. You are fit to take my place. Your child can take yours."

"You're hateful!" shrieked Lisel. She had the wish to laugh.

But someone was flinging open the doors of the hall. The cinnamon light streamed through and fell into the fire and faded it. Another fire, like antique bronze, was quenching itself among the pines. The dying of the sun.

Anna moved toward the doors and straight out onto the snow. She stood a moment, tall and amazing on the peculiar sky. She seemed a figment of the land itself, and maybe she was.

"Come!" she barked. Then turned and walked away across the park.

All the servants seemed to have gathered like bats in the hall. They were silent, but they looked at Lisel. Her heart struck her over and over. She did not know what she felt or if she believed. Then a wolf sang in the forest. She lifted her head. She suddenly knew frost and running and black stillness, and a platinum moon, red feasts and wild hymnings, lovers with quicksilver eyes and the race of the ice wind and stars smashed under the hard soles of her four feet. A huge white ballroom opened before her, and the champagne of the air filled her mouth.

Beautiful had knelt and was kissing the hem of her red cloak. She patted his head absently, and the gathering of the servants sighed.

Presumably, as Anna's heiress, she might be expected to live on in the forest, in the château which would be hers. She could even visit the city, providing she was home by sunset. In summer, she could stay for months at a time—

The wolf howled again, filling her veins with lights, raising the hair along her scalp.

Lisel tossed her head. Of course, it was all a lot of nonsense.

She hastened out through the doors and over the winter park and followed her grandmother away into the Wolfland.

Nicholas Yermakov

MELPOMENE, CALLIOPE . . . AND FRED

Fantasy of the humorous, if not downright wacky, type frequently found its way into the pages of the hallowed Unknown/Unknown Worlds. *The following story would easily have found a home in its pages. This tale of an author and his muse is more than amusing. It's hilarious.*

My Muse was a raving lunatic.

You'll hear artists forever suffering aloud, whining and complaining, crying in their beer about the cruel and insensitive vagaries of their respective Muses, but let me tell you something, *they don't know*. You think it's tough, agonizing over the creative process, waiting for your Muse to smile upon you? Try having one that literally *attacks* you. With a meat cleaver. That was the day before yesterday. I managed to save myself from a grisly fate by beating the bejeezus out of it with a broomstick. Left it huddled on the floor, cowering and whimpering and sucking its thumb. You think *you* got it tough? Brother, you don't know the *half* of it!

It all started innocuously enough. I placed an ad in the paper.

You see, I was in what you might call a slump. I was in what *anyone* would call a slump. I had sold a half dozen stories and written one book, which was received well but didn't make me rich overnight, if you know what I mean. However, enough critics called me a "promising young writer" that my

editor was willing to risk another advance against my second book. Doesn't sound like a slump to you? Wait.

I cheerily went out and blew all the money. Then I sat down to write the book. And . . . nothing. *Nada.* Zip. The Great Fizzoo. Seemed that "promising" was going to be as far as I was ever going to get. Nobody ever told me that I was going to burn myself out after one book. Of course, I didn't come to this conclusion right away. I naturally assumed that I was merely having a temporary writer's block which was going to clear up of its own accord eventually. So I went out and partied. Then I sat down and tried to work again. And nothing happened again. So I went out and got drunk. Things went on much in the same fashion for about eight months.

Meanwhile, my editor wanted to know how I was doing. What was I working on? What kind of book was it going to be? What was the plot? Could he see a couple of chapters? Why don't we get together Monday and have lunch?

I kept putting him off, acting mysteriously preoccupied and moody, but I realized that I was going to have to do something about the situation pretty soon. See, I was broke and there was no way in hell that I'd be able to pay back that advance. And who the hell wants to go out and actually *work* for a living? Yeeesh! So I came up with this idea. Actually, it wasn't even a very original idea. You've read *The Chapman Report?* Studs Terkel? Tom Wolfe? Lots of writers have gotten a great deal of mileage out of interviewing people and letting them tell their own stories and then putting everything together into a book. All it requires is a little creative editing and a catchy title, and you've got it made. A cinch. So I called *The Village Voice* and placed an ad.

You've seen *The Village Voice?* You've seen the kind of ads they run? Gay White Female, 25, chubbette, into astrology, kino and grouse hunting wants to meet successful Carnivorous Plant with similar interests. No phonies, please. Reply VV Box number xxx. There were pages and pages of stuff like that. How could I miss?

Boy, did I ever miss!

The first person to answer my ad was anxious to relate his experiences in the waterfront S&M bars. Don't ask, you wouldn't want to know. The next person was a confused transsexual who had an operation to go from being a man to being a woman, decided she didn't like it, went back to being a he again, only they botched the operation. I don't really want

to talk about it. The next one was a nice young Jewish girl from Great Neck who assuaged her racial guilt by seducing every Aryan she met and then *nuhdzing* them to death. I wasn't particularly anxious to tell her story, but we did have dinner.

You get the general idea. This wasn't going to be as easy as I thought. After a couple of weeks of this nonsense, I *still* had nothing to go with, even if my social life had improved. Then, one night, actually, it was the morning, about four a.m. or so, my buzzer buzzed. I tried to ignore it, but whoever it was wouldn't go away. I lurched out of bed, staggered over to the damn thing and pushed the button.

"Do you know what *time* it is?" I slurred.

"I came about the ad."

Now, I wasn't so dead to the world that I didn't realize that something wasn't exactly *kosher*. I hadn't put my address in the ad. They were supposed to reply to a box number.

"How did you find out where I live?"

"I asked around."

"You did, huh? Look, write me a letter and send it to the box number, okay? Go home and let me sleep."

"Are you going to let me in?" The voice sounded male and slightly plaintive.

"No. Go away."

"I can't. I don't have cab fare."

"So walk."

"In *this* neighborhood?"

"It's safe, believe me, at this hour, even the muggers are asleep."

"Can't we at least talk about it? Why don't I just come up for a quick cup of coffee?"

"I don't have any coffee."

"We can share a joint, then. I've got some dynamite Colombian. . . ."

"Go . . . away!"

I crawled back into bed. He kept buzzing, but I buried my head in the pillow, determined to wait him out. Eventually, the buzzing stopped. I smiled and began to sink back into dreamland. The phone rang.

"Christ," I muttered, picking up the phone. *"Who is it?"*

"I really think you should reconsider. . . ."

"Jesus!" I slammed the phone down. It started ringing again almost immediately. I yanked it from the wall. I was

just beginning to doze off when there was a knocking at my window. I groaned. I was afraid to look. The son of a bitch was outside, on the fire escape.

"Look, God damn it, if you don't leave me alone, I'm going to call the police!"

"Your phone seems to be out of order...."

"I'll scream rape."

"You're not being very reasonable...."

"It's almost five a.m. and you want reasonable?" I began rummaging through my closet, remembering that I had stuck a can of Mace in there, once. Ah! There—no, that was the air freshener....

"You're really being very difficult about this, you know."

I froze. The voice came from right *behind* me. I grabbed one of my Frye boots and turned around, brandishing it over my head.

"Oh, wow, man. Bad vibes. I really can't take this on just three Valiums." He sat down on my bed and buried his head in his hands.

He didn't really look all that dangerous. He was just a little guy in Sasson jeans, running shoes, a Notre Dame sweatshirt and a black leather jacket. His hair was longish and jagged-looking, cut in one of those punk styles. He had a crucifix earring in his right ear and an Elvis Costello button pinned to his jacket. He must have weighed all of one hundred pounds.

"How did you get in here?" The window was still closed and locked.

"It was cold outside. Look at me, I'm shivering. Can I hit you up for a cup of tea or something? Hot cocoa, man, anything, Sterno, I'm not proud."

"I don't believe this."

I lowered the boot. What the hell, there was nothing to him. You could have knocked him over with a feather, and, besides, he did look so pathetic...I put some coffee on and dashed some water in my face.

"You got any Darvon? Percodan? I've got a migraine."

I threw him a bottle of Darvon and he promptly downed about fifteen of them.

"Hey, you crazy? Those aren't M&M's, you know."

"I can handle it. I *needed* 'em."

Just what I needed. A junkie strung out in my bedroom at five o'clock in the morning. Well, he'd get his coffee, which

would go just great with the pills, I'd listen to his story and out he'd go. And I'd get a new lock on my window. And change my phone listing. Maybe even move.

I poured us coffee.

"You advertised for a Muse," he said.

"What?"

"A Muse, a Muse, whatsamatter, you never went to college? A Muse, like in Greek mythology? You know, Bullfinch?"

"Take it easy, drink your coffee. It's almost five-thirty. Don't get intense on me or I'll get cranky. Now what the hell are you babbling about? I advertised for people with interesting and unusual stories to tell."

"You're a writer, right?" He gulped his coffee and shakily lit a cigarette. "You ran dry, right? You're looking for inspiration, right? You need a Muse."

"And that's what you are, a Muse?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a Muse."

"Which one?"

"Huh?"

"Well, according to legend, the Muses were nine Greek goddesses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne. Calliope was the Muse of eloquence; Euterpe was the Muse of music, Erato of love, Polyhymnia of oratory; Clio was the Muse of history, Melopomene of tragedy, Thalia, comedy, Terpsichore of song and dance, and Urania of astronomy."

"So you read a book once. Congratulations." The Muse sniffed.

"Granted, you don't look much like a Greek goddess, but this is New York and given the tenor of the times, you never know. Which of the nine are you?"

"I'm a Fred."

"*Fred* the Muse?"

"It's my name, man. You want to make something of it?"

"There is no Muse named Fred. Not the last time I checked, anyway."

"Look, my name is Fred, I'm descended from Urania and I'm the Muse of dissociation and hebephrenia."

"I don't believe it."

"I don't believe it, either, but I'm stuck with it."

"Excuse me a second, will you?" I had to get my tape recorder. This was too good to miss. The man was a stone looney.

"Don't bother with the Sony. You can't record a demigod. It's like taking a vampire's picture. Just doesn't work."

I sat down, deciding to humor him.

"And don't humor me, either, I can't stand that. Ahh, those pills are starting to kick in." He settled back in the chair and closed his eyes.

"A punk demigod, huh?"

"So what do you want me to do, run around the Village in a toga and sandals with a laurel wreath on my head? Give me a break, man. These days, you gotta blend in with the environment. In Colorado, I wore Levis and a flannel shirt, complete with cowboy boots and Stetson. Ohhh, boy, what a scene that was."

"What were you doing in Colorado, if I might ask?"

"Hanging out with Hunter Thompson. How do you suppose he ever got *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* written? He was all right, you know, he always had good dope, but I had to split. It got too intense, it just didn't work. He could never understand that at least one of us had to remain straight. I got a little blitzed one night and got a little crazed, you know? We wound up stalking each other all night. He had a forty-four magnum and I swiped one of his forty-five automatics. We must have gone through several cases of ammunition. Good thing we were both stoned out of our minds, or we might have really done some damage. As it was, when I left, the house was so riddled with bullet holes it looked like a Swiss cheese. That man's a walking argument for gun control, you know that?"

"I find that a little hard to believe."

"Yeah, so do I. These days, I'm never sure what's real and what's hallucination. But I'll do okay with you, seems like you've got both feet on the ground, not like that nut Castenada."

"You worked with Castenada? You were his Muse?"

"Hell, *I* was Don Juan. Only problem was, he was even stranger than me. I still get flashbacks from that guy."

"You don't say. This is fascinating. Who else? What other writers have you, uh, inspired?"

"Joe Heller. Some of the science fiction crowd, Phil Dick, especially. He was fun. I tried working with Ellison, but he threw me out of the house. I always forgot to fold the hand towels in his bathroom, drove him crazy. Besides, he didn't really need me. Man's never taken drugs in his life, he's just

a natural speed freak. I couldn't keep up with him. If you want some real heavy references, I was with Will Blake and Sammy Coleridge. Edgar Allan Poe. Crazy Eddie, they used to call him. Ohhhhh, I think I'm going to crash."

"I think you're nutty as a fruitcake. Finish your coffee and split, friend. Here, here's twenty bucks. That ought to tide you over for a while. I gotta get some sleep."

"You think it's all a shuck, don't you? Apollo, save me from these cynics. . . ."

"That does it. Out."

"Hey, don't be a drag. You haven't written a word in months, you need me."

I had lost all my patience. At another time, perhaps, when it was a more reasonable hour and I was feeling screwloose, I might have been in the mood to listen to the ravings of this looney, but it was six in the morning and I was tired and I was going to get rid of him if I had to throw him down the elevator shaft. I got up and moved towards him.

"Man, such hostility! You're a real hardcase, aren't you? Okay, you want to write? *Poof!* Write."

I froze in my tracks. Of all the nutty coincidences, an incredible idea had hit me. Struck me out of nowhere. I ran to the typewriter to get it down before I lost it. I figured I'd just set it down in a couple of quick sentences, but it just started coming, magically, incredibly, it flowed forth as if someone was standing over my shoulder and whispering the words in my ear. The next thing I knew, it was ten a.m. and I had finished an entire chapter. Talk about irony. . . .

Now I could take care of Fred the Muse. I turned around . . . and he was gone. But his leather jacket was draped over the back of my chair. He was nowhere in the apartment. He could have left without my noticing it, I had been so involved with the work, but I wasn't taking any chances. I checked in the closets, under the bed, everywhere. When I was certain he was gone, I picked up his leather and tossed it in the hall. Then I went back to bed.

I was awakened at three p.m. by a call from my editor. This time, I had something to tell him, I didn't have to shuck and jive him anymore. I gave him a brief rundown of the first chapter, described my main characters, read a couple of pages to him over the phone; and he agreed with me that it was a breakthrough for me, that I was moving in an entirely new direction, experimenting with a madcap stream of conscious-

ness style reminiscent of Tom Wolfe. We made a date for lunch early the next week, and I promised him that I'd have an additional three chapters to give him. He wondered, why did I only have one chapter after all this time, and I explained to him, lying through my teeth, that this was the final rewrite, that it was all finished in draft but I didn't want to show him any of it until I had it perfect, etc., etc.

I hung up the phone, had a quick breakfast and ran over to the typewriter. In the next two hours, I managed to write only three paragraphs. I had no idea where to take it. I felt sick. What had gone wrong? It was flowing so well, so effortlessly....

"Stuck again, huh?"

He was sitting on the kitchen table, his pupils dilated, smoking a joint.

"How the hell did you get in?"

"Are you going to start that again? Man, who do you think I am? I'm not just anybody, you know." He had smoked the joint down to a nub, and he took an alligator clip out of his pocket and stuck the roach in it. *"Ssssst! Sssssssst!* You want a hit off this?" he asked, his voice constricted from holding his breath.

"What I need is a drink," I said, holding my head, wearily.

"Good idea." He held out his hands and an ice-cold glass of Jack Daniels appeared in each one. I stared. Then blinked. Then rubbed my eyes and stared again.

"I take mine neat," I mumbled.

"Sorry." He blew on one of the glasses and the ice disappeared. The Old Fashioned glass also turned into a shot glass. He held it out to me. I took it.

"I'm having the damnedest dream," I said, downing the whiskey in one gulp.

"That's what they all say." My shot glass was full again. I drank it down. And it was still full.

"Hey, that's a neat trick," I said. "How's it done?"

"With mirrors. C'mon, siddown, you've got work to do. You promised that yo-yo another three chapters."

And that was how it started.

It took me about a week before I was fully able to accept that Fred was exactly what he said he was. "It" was. The Muse explained to me that it transcended sex. I asked if it could become a foxy little blonde, but Fred put the kibbosh on that idea immediately. The muse had tried that once with

the Marquis de Sade and the results had been disastrous. I promised not to make any unreasonable demands on Fred, and the book progressed rapidly. I was blissfully happy with the arrangement until I became more familiar with my Muse.

It was, after all, the Muse of dissociation and hebephrenia. It showed in the writing. Not that this was a bad thing, because most of the time, it fit the character, who was a jaded New York advertising executive, slowly losing touch with reality and experiencing the disintegration of his marriage and his relationships with those around him. But I couldn't control it. I was completely at the mercy of Fred's mood, at any given time. While he was deep in the throes of an amphetamine haze, I wrote feverishly for three days straight, without a wink of sleep. When Fred crashed, *I* crashed. And then there was the time that the book took off on a tangent for about one hundred and thirteen pages. Nothing whatsoever to do with the plot, just meaningless rambling, but *I* couldn't do anything about it, and when it was over, I had to tear up all that work and try to pick up the thread where we had lost it. It was a ridiculous way to work, but the few times I tried doing it without the Muse, nothing came out but drivel.

And do you have any idea what it's like, trying to write while your Muse is luded out? Try this on for size: while Fred was burbling aimlessly, trying to find a connection between mouth and beer can, it took me two hours to type out the word "Intermittent." It was intolerable. You have to understand that *I* never took any drugs. Every once in a while, I'd smoke a joint just to be sociable, but I didn't care for it much. French cigarettes were about as heavy as I ever got. If you've ever been to a party where everyone is stoned and you're not, then you have some idea of what it's like, trying to relate to a bunch of people sitting around, giggling at a ficus plant. You don't see what's so damn funny, you don't share the mood, and you can't follow the conversation. Imagine what it's like trying to write while your Muse is drugged senseless and you're straight. You *see* it happening, but you don't believe it.

I had almost learned to accept even that when Fred decided to start getting into the heavy stuff. The first time it happened, I had no idea what Fred was on, but the damn thing was jousting with its own reflection in my full-length mirror, using my reading lamp as a lance. It took me two hours just

to clean up the mess. Then Fred saw fit to uproot all my house plants and slice them up to make a health salad. I wouldn't have minded that so much, if he hadn't cut up five of my favorite neckties to "add some color" to it. And I came home one night from a conference over dinner with my editor to find a punk rock band set up in the apartment and playing at mind-shattering decibel levels while various creepies undulated and pogoed on the floor, grinding ashes from cigarettes and hash pipes into the rug. I had to go to a friend's apartment to use the bathroom, because seven of the night-crawlers had locked themselves up in mine and I didn't even want to speculate as to what they were doing in there. Fortunately, my friend was sympathetic and didn't ask too many questions. Writers are allowed a certain amount of leeway with their moods and eccentricities; it's one of the very few benefits of the profession.

When I returned, a full three days later, the party had broken up. In fact, some of the guests were still there, in no condition to leave or do much of anything else. And that was when Fred went after me with the meat cleaver. Seemed someone had slipped him some devilish substance, and he had gone completely off the deep end. After subduing him and tying him up with several lengths of speaker wire, I put some coffee on and did my best to get rid of Fred's comatose friends. The ones that wouldn't or couldn't move, I simply dumped into the elevator and sent them to the lobby. When I came back, I discovered that Fred had really and truly dissociated. Physically, even. The punk aspect had disappeared, all save the spiky hairstyle. In its place, there was a half-clad wisp of a girl wearing a clinging garment that looked rather like a diaphanous negligeé and golden sandals. She had acne.

"Holy shit."

"You can say that again," she moaned. "Gods, I think I'm going to be sick."

I pushed the wastebasket over to her and she grasped its sides with both hands and retched.

"Yuk," she whispered, "I should have stayed in Pieria. You would have loved it there. Sort of a Greek suburb. Nice. Weekends on Olympus, an occasional junket to Rhodes....*Now* what've I got? An evening at The Bottom Line or Friday night on Fire Island. Some choice."

"Why did you leave?"

"Times change. Too many tourists. Besides, you go to where the work is."

"Fred, old bo—uh, ole girl?"

"Just Fred, don't get hung up about it."

"Fred, we've got to do something about you, this has gone too far. Have you ever tried methadone?"

"Are you kidding? I've tried *everything*. I've even done some stuff that hasn't been invented yet. Pan turned me on to something once he called Ambrosia Dust. Gods, what a rush!"

"What's it do?"

"Where do you think typhoons come from? The disco crowd would kill to get their hands on that stuff."

"You can't go on like this, Fred. You'll burn yourself out."

"Forget it. I'm perpetually burnt out. It's my job. I've been like this for centuries. It does kind of wear you down, though." Fred started retching once again.

"Aw, *look* at you! It's disgusting."

"You're telling me? I can hardly move. Hey, look around, maybe somebody left a few reds lying around."

"No, this has got to stop. I don't know about you, but I can't take it anymore. I'm going off my rocker. I'm afraid to go to sleep at night, for fear you'll carve me up while I'm in bed. And I can't work like this. It simply isn't worth it. At this point, I'd just as soon go out and get a job in advertising."

"So. This is the kiss-off, is that it?"

"No, I can't just turn my back on you like this. Muse or no Muse, Fred, you're about to get dried out."

"You mean go straight? The reality trip? I don't think I could handle that. I need chemicals to help me cope, I couldn't face the world without them."

"Sure you could. It's not so bad."

"It's not so bad? you mean the Energy Crisis, Mork and Mindy, Jerry Brown, the IRT, and Barry Manilow? No, thanks. I'd rather face blue meanies."

"You're exaggerating."

"Have you ever *seen* Mork and Mindy?"

"C'mon, Fred, I'm putting you to bed. We'll talk again after you've slept it off."

"You talk, I'll just lie here and die quietly."

It wasn't easy.

Ever try to live with a Muse going through withdrawal? Fred kept back-sliding. After all, a Muse can pop in and out

at will. In a weak moment, I tricked Fred into swearing an oath to Zeus that she'd stay put. And that was when the rough stuff started. One afternoon, she turned into a Hell's Angel and wrecked half the apartment before she passed out. Another time, she made it rain and thunder for three days and nights and ruined my rugs and all my furniture, not to mention the complaints from the neighbors about the noise and water leaking through the ceiling.

It took about a month before the turning point. After all, a drug habit that's several centuries old, at least, is kind of hard to break. Eventually, Freddi quieted down and even started eating regularly. She filled out quite nicely, as a matter of fact, and her skin cleared up. And she became a firm advocate of health foods, stocking my refrigerator with Perrier and fruit and boxes of granola. We began to spend our mornings jogging around the reservoir, and she enrolled in a Tai Chi class.

Amazingly enough, I managed to finish my book in time for the deadline. My editor was crazy about it, and not only did it become a bestseller, but it made the Book of the Month Club, and my agent is currently negotiating the sale of screen rights.

The money started coming in, and I could finally afford all the things I ever wanted. I got a six-figure advance for my next novel, and Freddi and I got married and moved to a split-level home in Levittown. Freddi's writing gothic novels and, as it turned out, she's got quite a flair for it. Only one thing worries me.

Last night, she told me she was pregnant.

Gene Wolfe

KEVIN MALONE

Fantasy is a very broad category, encompassing, as it does, tales based on myths, faerie, tales of the supernatural and occult, and tales of realms "far beyond the fields we know." Then there are those stories which exist just off the very edge of reality. "Kevin Malone" is just such a story of the almost real. We know it couldn't happen in the world as we know it. Or could it?

Marcella and I were married in April. I lost my position with Ketterly, Bruce & Drake in June, and by August we were desperate. We kept the apartment—I think we both felt that if we lowered our standards there would be no chance to raise them again—but the rent tore at our small savings. All during July I had tried to get a job at another brokerage firm, and by August I was calling fraternity brothers I had not seen since graduation, and expressing an entire willingness to work in whatever businesses their fathers owned. One of them, I think, must have mailed us the advertisement.

> Attractive young couple, well educated and well connected, will receive free housing, generous living allowance for minimal services.

There was a telephone number, which I omit for reasons that will become clear.

I showed the clipping to Marcella, who was lying with her

cocktail shaker on the chaise-longue. She said, "Why not," and I dialed the number.

The telephone buzzed in my ear, paused, and buzzed again. I allowed myself to go limp in my chair. It seemed absurd to call at all; for the advertisement to have reached us that day, it must have appeared no later than yesterday morning. If the position were worth having—

"The Pines."

I pulled myself together. "You placed a classified ad. For an attractive couple, well educated and the rest of it."

"I did not, sir. However, I believe my master did. I am Priest, the butler."

I looked at Marcella, but her eyes were closed. "Do you know, Priest, if the opening has been filled?"

"I think not, sir. May I ask your age?"

I told him. At his request, I also told him Marcella's (she was two years younger than I), and gave him the names of the schools we had attended, described our appearance, and mentioned that my grandfather had been a governor of Virginia, and that Marcella's uncle had been ambassador to France. I did not tell him that my father had shot himself rather than face bankruptcy, or that Marcella's family had disowned her—but I suspect he guessed well enough what our situation was.

"You will forgive me, sir, for asking so many questions. We are almost a half day's drive, and I would not wish you to be disappointed."

I told him that I appreciated that, and we set a date—Tuesday of the next week—on which Marcella and I were to come out for an interview with "the master." Priest had hung up before I realized that I had failed to learn his employer's name.

During the teens and twenties some very wealthy people had designed estates in imitation of the palaces of the Italian Renaissance. The Pines was one of them, and better preserved than most—the fountain in the courtyard still played; the marbles were clean and unyellowed, and if no red-robed cardinal descended the steps to a carriage blazoned with the Borgia arms, one felt that he had only just gone. No doubt the place had originally been called *La Capana* or *Il Eremitaggio*.

A serious-looking man in dark livery opened the door for

us. For a moment he stared at us across the threshold. "Very well..." he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said that you are looking very well." He nodded to each of us in turn, and stood aside. "Sir. Madame. I am Priest."

"Will your master be able to see us?"

For a moment some exiled expression—it might have been amusement—seemed to tug at his solemn face. "The music room, perhaps, sir?"

I said I was sure that would be satisfactory, and followed him. The music room held a Steinway, a harp, and a dozen or so comfortable chairs; it overlooked a rose garden in which old remontant varieties were beginning that second season that is more opulent though less generous than the first. A kneeling gardener was weeding one of the beds.

"This is a wonderful house," Marcella said. "I really didn't think there was anything like it left. I told him you'd have a john collins—all right? You were looking at the roses."

"Perhaps we ought to get the job first."

"I can't call him back now, and if we don't get it, at least we'll have had the drinks."

I nodded to that. In five minutes they arrived, and we drank them and smoked cigarettes we found in a humidor—English cigarettes of strong Turkish tobacco. A maid came, and said that Mr. Priest would be much obliged if we would let him know when we would dine. I told her that we would eat whenever it was convenient, and she dropped a little curtsy and withdrew.

"At least," Marcella commented, "he's making us comfortable while we wait."

Dinner was lamb in aspic, and a salad, with a maid—another maid—and footman to serve while Priest stood by to see that it was done properly. We ate at either side of a small table on a terrace overlooking another garden, where antique statues faded to white glimmerings as the sun set.

Priest came forward to light the candles. "Will you require me after dinner, sir?"

"Will your employer require us; that's the question."

"Bateman can show you to your room, sir, when you are ready to retire. Julia will see to madame."

I looked at the footman, who was carrying in fruit on a tray.

"No, sir. That is Carter. Bateman is your man."

"And Julia," Marcella put in, "is my maid, I suppose?"

"Precisely." Priest gave an almost inaudible cough. "Perhaps, sir—and madame—you might find this useful." He drew a photograph from an inner pocket and handed it to me.

It was a black and white snapshot, somewhat dogeared. Two dozen people, most of them in livery of one kind or another, stood in brilliant sunshine on the steps at the front of the house, men behind women. There were names in India ink across the bottom of the picture: James Sutton, Edna DeBuck, Lloyd Bateman...

"Our staff, sir."

I said, "Thank you, Priest. No, you needn't stay tonight."

The next morning Bateman shaved me in bed. He did it very well, using a straight razor and scented soap applied with a brush. I had heard of such things—I think my grandfather's valet may have shaved him like that before the First World War—but I had never guessed that anyone kept up the tradition. Bateman did, and I found I enjoyed it. When he had dressed me, he asked if I would breakfast in my room.

"I doubt it," I said. "Do you know my wife's plans?"

"I think it likely she will be on the South Terrace, sir. Julia said something to that effect as I was bringing in your water."

"I'll join her then."

"Of course, sir." He hesitated.

"I don't think I'll require a guide, but you might tell my wife I'll be with her in ten minutes or so."

Bateman repeated his, "Of course, sir," and went out. The truth was that I wanted to assure myself that everything I had carried in the pockets of my old suit—car keys, wallet, and so on—had been transferred to the new one he had laid out for me; and I did not want to insult him, if I could prevent it, by doing it in front of him.

Everything was where it should be, and I had a clean handkerchief in place of my own only slightly soiled one. I pulled it out to look at (Irish linen) and a flutter of green came with it—two bills, both fifties.

Over eggs Benedict I complimented Marcella on her new dress, and asked if she had noticed where it had been made.

"Rowe's. It's a little shop on Fifth Avenue."

"You know it, then. Nothing unusual?"

She answered, "No, nothing unusual," more quickly than

she should have, and I knew that there had been money in her new clothes too, and that she did not intend to tell me about it.

"We'll be going home after this. I wonder if they'll want me to give this jacket back."

"Going home?" She did not look up from her plate. "Why? And who are 'they'?"

"Whoever owns this house."

"Yesterday you called him *he*. You said Priest talked about *the master*, so that seemed logical enough. Today you're afraid to deal with even presumptive masculinity."

I said nothing.

"You think he spent the night in my room—they separated us, and you thought that was why, and you just waited there—was it under a sheet?—for me to scream or something. And I didn't."

"I was hoping you had, and I hadn't heard you."

"Nothing happened, dammit! I went to bed and went to sleep; but as for going home, you're out of your mind. Can't you see we've got the job? Whoever he is—wherever he is—he likes us. We're going to stay here and live like human beings, at least for a while."

And so we did. That day we stayed on from hour to hour. After that, from day to day; and at last from week to week. I felt like Klipspringer, the man who was Jay Gatsby's guest for so long that he had no other home—except that Klipspringer, presumably, saw Gatsby from time to time, and no doubt made agreeable conversation, and perhaps even played the piano for him. Our Gatsby was absent. I do not mean that we avoided him, or that he avoided us; there were no rooms we were forbidden to enter, and no times when the servants seemed eager that we should play golf or swim or go riding. Before the good weather ended, we had two couples up for a weekend; and when Bette Windgassen asked if Marcella had inherited the place, and then if we were renting it, Marcella said, "Oh, do you like it?" in such a way that they left, I think, convinced that it was ours, or as good as ours.

And so it was. We went away when we chose, which was seldom, and returned when we chose, quickly. We ate on the various terraces and balconies, and in the big, formal dining room, and in our own bedrooms. We rode the horses, and drove the Mercedes and the cranky, appealing old Jaguar as

though they were our own. We did everything, in fact, except buy the groceries and pay the taxes and the servants; but someone else was doing that; and every morning I found one hundred dollars in the pockets of my clean clothes. If summer had lasted for ever, perhaps I would still be there.

The poplars lost their leaves in one October week; at the end of it I fell asleep listening to the hum of the pump that emptied the swimming pool. When the rain came, Marcella turned sour and drank too much. One evening I made the mistake of putting my arm about her shoulders as we sat before the fire in the trophy room.

"Get your filthy hands off me," she said. "I don't belong to you."

"Priest, look here. He hasn't said an intelligent word to me all day or done a decent thing, and now he wants to paw me all night."

Priest pretended, of course, that he had not heard her.

"Look over here! Damn it, you're a human being, aren't you?"

He did not ignore that. "Yes, madame, I am a human being."

"I'll say you are. You're more a man than he is. This is your place, and you're keeping us for pets—is it me you want? Or him? You sent us the ad, didn't you. He thinks you go into my room at night, or he says he does. Maybe you really come to his—is that it?"

Priest did not answer. I said, "For God's sake, Marcella."

"Even if you're old, Priest, I think you're too much of a man for that." She stood up, tottering on her long legs and holding onto the stonework of the fireplace. "If you want me, take me. If this house is yours, you can have me. We'll send him to Vegas—or throw him on the dump."

In a much softer tone than he usually used, Priest said, "I don't want either of you, madame."

I stood up then, and caught him by the shoulders. I had been drinking too, though only half or a quarter as much as Marcella; but I think it was more than that—it was the accumulated frustration of all the days since Jim Bruce told me I was finished. I outweighed Priest by at least forty pounds, and I was twenty years younger. I said: "I want to know."

"Release me, sir, please."

"I want to know who it is; I want to know now. Do you see that fire? Tell me, Priest, or I swear I'll throw you in it."

His face tightened at that. "Yes," he whispered, and I let go of his shoulders. "It was not the lady, sir. It was you I want that understood this time."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm not doing this because of what she said."

"You aren't the master, are you? For God's sake tell the truth."

"I have always told the truth, sir. No, I am not the master. Do you remember the picture I gave you?"

I nodded.

"You discarded it. I took the liberty, sir, of rescuing it from the wastecan in your bedroom. I have it here." He reached into his coat and pulled it out, just as he had on the first day, and handed it to me.

"It's one of these? One of the servants?"

Priest nodded and pointed with an impeccably manicured forefinger to the figure at the extreme right of the second row. The name beneath it was *Kevin Malone*

"Him?"

Silently, Priest nodded again.

I had examined the picture on the night he had given it to me, but I had never paid special attention to that particular half-inch-high image. The person it represented might have been a gardener, a man of middle age, short and perhaps stocky. A soft, sweat-stained hat cast a shadow on his face.

"I want to see him." I looked toward Marcella, still leaning against the stonework of the mantel. "We want to see him."

"Are you certain, sir?"

"Damn you, get him!"

Priest remained where he was, staring at me; I was so furious that I think I might have seized him as I had threatened and pushed him into the fire.

Then the French windows opened, and there came a gust of wind. For an instant I think I expected a ghost, or some turbulent elemental spirit. I felt that pricking at the neck that comes when one reads Poe alone at night.

The man I had seen in the picture stepped into the room. He was a small and very ordinary man in worn khaki, but he left the windows wide behind him, so that the night entered with him, and remained in the room for as long as we talked.

"You own this house," I said. "You're Kevin Malone."

He shook his head. "I am Kevin Malone—this house owns me."

Marcella was standing straighter now, drunk, yet still at that stage of drunkenness in which she was conscious of her condition and could compensate for it. "It owns me too," she said, and walking almost normally she crossed the room to the baronial chair Malone had chosen, and managed to sit down at his feet.

"My father was the man-of-all-work here. My mother was the parlor maid. I grew up here, washing the cars and raking leaves out of the fountains. Do you follow me? Where did you grow up?"

I shrugged. "Various places. Richmond, New York, three years in Paris. Until I was sent off to school we lived in hotels, mostly."

"You see, then. You can understand." Malone smiled for a moment. "You're still recreating the life you had as a child, or trying to. Isn't that right? None of us can be happy any other way, and few of us even want to try."

"Thomas Wolfe said you can't go home again," I ventured.

"That's right, you can't go home. There's one place where we can never go—haven't you thought of that? We can dive to the bottom of the sea and some day NASA will fly us to the stars, and I have known men to plunge into the past—or the future—and drown. But there's one place where we can't go. We can't go where we are already. We can't go home, because our minds, and our hearts, and our immortal souls are already there."

Not knowing what to say, I nodded, and that seemed to satisfy him. Priest looked as calm as ever, but he made no move to shut the windows, and I sensed that he was somehow afraid.

"I was put into an orphanage when I was twelve, but I never forgot The Pines. I used to tell the other kids about it, and it got bigger and better every year; but I knew what I said could never equal the reality."

He shifted in his seat, and the slight movement of his legs sent Marcella sprawling, passed out. She retained a certain grace still; I have always understood that it is the reward of studying ballet as a child.

Malone continued to talk. "They'll tell you it's no longer possible for a poor boy with a second rate education to make

a fortune. Well, it takes luck; but I had it. It also takes the willingness to risk it all. I had that too, because I knew that for me anything under a fortune was nothing. I had to be able to buy this place—to come back and buy The Pines, and staff it and maintain it. That's what I wanted, and nothing less would make any difference."

"You're to be congratulated," I said. "But why..."

He laughed. It was a deep laugh, but there was no humor in it. "Why don't I wear a tie and eat my supper at the end of the big table? I tried it. I tried it for nearly a year, and every night I dreamed of home. That wasn't home, you see, wasn't The Pines. Home is three rooms above the stables. I live there now. I live at home, as a man should."

"It seems to me that it would have been a great deal simpler for you to have applied for the job you fill now."

Malone shook his head impatiently. "That wouldn't have done it at all. I had to have control. That's something I learned in business—to have control. Another owner would have wanted to change things, and maybe he would even have sold out to a subdivider. No. Besides, when I was a boy this estate belonged to a fashionable young couple. Suppose a man of my age had bought it? Or a young woman, some whore." His mouth tightened, then relaxed. "You and your wife were ideal. Now I'll have to get somebody else, that's all. You can stay the night, if you like. I'll have you driven into the city tomorrow morning."

I ventured, "You needed us as stage properties, then. I'd be willing to stay on those terms."

Malone shook his head again. "That's out of the question. I don't need props, I need actors. In business I've put on little shows for the competition, if you know what I mean, and sometimes even for my own people. And I've learned that the only actors who can really do justice to their parts are the ones who don't know what they are."

"Really—" I began.

He cut me off with a look, and for a few seconds we stared at one another. Something terrible lived behind those eyes.

Frightened despite all reason could tell me, I said, "I understand," and stood up. There seemed to be nothing else to do. "I'm glad, at least, that you don't hate us. With your childhood it would be quite natural if you did. Will you explain things to Marcella in the morning? She'll throw herself at you, no matter what I say."

He nodded absently.

"May I ask one question more? I wondered why you had to leave and go into the orphanage. Did your parents die or lose their places?"

Malone said, "Didn't you tell him, Priest? It's the local legend. I thought everyone knew."

The butler cleared his throat. "The elder Mr. Malone—he was the stableman here, sir, though it was before my time. He murdered Betty Malone, who was one of the maids. Or at least he was thought to have, sir. They never found the body, and it's possible he was accused falsely."

"Buried her on the estate," Malone said. "They found bloody rags and the hammer, and he hanged himself in the stable."

"I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to pry."

The wind whipped the drapes like wine-red flags. They knocked over a vase and Priest winced, but Malone did not seem to notice. "She was twenty years younger and a tramp," he said. "Those things happen."

I said, "Yes, I know they do," and went up to bed.

I do not know where Marcella slept. Perhaps there on the carpet, perhaps in the room that had been hers, perhaps even in Malone's servants' flat over the stables. I breakfasted alone on the terrace, then—without Bateman's assistance—packed my bags.

I saw her only once more. She was wearing a black silk dress; there were circles under her eyes and her head must have been throbbing, but her hand was steady. As I walked out of the house, she was going over the Sévres with a peacock-feather duster. We did not speak.

I have sometimes wondered if I was wholly wrong in anticipating a ghost when the French windows opened. How did Malone know the time had come for him to appear?

Of course I have looked up the newspaper reports of the murder. All the old papers are on microfilm at the library, and I have a great deal of time.

There is no mention of a child. In fact, I get the impression that the identical surnames of the murderer and his victim were coincidental. *Malone* is a common enough one, and there were a good many Irish servants then.

Sometimes I wonder if it is possible for a man—even a rich man—to be possessed, and not to know it.

M. Lucie Chin

LAN LUNG

A dragonslayer, as previously noted, is the patron saint of several European lands; the dragon was at one time the national symbol of China. Those two statements probably say as much as any long dissertation could about the differences between the West and the East as to their attitudes toward dragons. Come now to a very strange land as seen through the eyes of a twenty-first-century Chinese-American who somehow finds himself in the ancient homeland of his ancestors. His journey, as he travels across that country as the companion of an itinerant Taoist monk and accompanied by—yes—a dragon, provides us with a fascinating glimpse of a world almost totally unknown to most of us.

Hsu Yuen Pao was a Taoist monk; an eccentric wanderer, an educated man, a poet and a magician. To me he was mentor, protector, companion and friend. He was sometimes called by the peasants we encountered The Man Who Walks With Ghosts.

I am the ghost.

Or so I have been told. So often in fact that after all the time I have been here that alone might be enough, but there is more. I remember dying. That is, I remember the event; the time, the place, the circumstances, the stupidity... but not the moment itself. Sometimes I think I am still falling; it was a long way from the top of the Wall, and all my life since that asinine mistake is just a dream, one long last

thought between living and dying. But only sometimes. It is hard to believe when the night is cold enough to freeze dragon fire. It is hard to believe when drought turns rivers to muddy washes and rice fields to wastelands and a poor traveler must become a thief to eat. At such times it is easier to believe I have always been here, following Hsu Yuen Pao across the land, that the first thirty years of my life as I recall them are the dream.

But in the end that too is utterly unbelievable. I know too much of another place and time. In my childhood mankind reached for the stars. The Sons of Han have yet to reach across the sea.

I do not know the date by any measure of time I was ever taught. I can not translate the lunar calendar into the Gregorian of my memory. It is ancient China, the women have not yet begun to bind their feet, and no man in this land has ever seen a European. That is what I know of now. What of then?

I was born in Boston, Massachusetts on the 12th of June 2010, a fourth generation American of Chinese descent. My name was Daniel Wing and my ethnic education was limited to the salutations exchanged on Chinese New Year and the names of my favorite edibles. Barefoot on the road I stand five feet nine and a half inches, and at the time of the accident atop the Great Wall of China I was as much a tourist as any of the obvious Caucasians who made up my group, following the polite guide who filled our heads with images of the past.

It was early April atop the Wall. Somewhere on the way down, as I exchanged one reality for another, it became warm and balmy late spring and I became *gwai*... the ghost. Towering above that diminutive ancient population, dressed strangely, babbling incomprehensibly, understanding nothing and no one, I was a perfect candidate for ghosthood; a non-person, inhuman. *Gwai*. It is the only word the Chinese have for those who are not of the Sons of Han, the True People, the Chinese themselves. It expresses, more than a lack of life, a lack of *reality*. It suits perfectly, these days, my own concept of myself.

It is said that a ghost grows faint when touched by the breath of a living man. To spit upon him robs him of his powers to change form and vanish. I was spit upon often in the days before Hsu Yuen Pao found me. He was a wise man. He understood about ghosts far better than the peasants who

harried and chased me from their villages and fields. I did not trust him particularly, but he was quiet and patient and fed me and talked for me until I learned enough to speak for myself.

He was a small man, even among his own people, and he wore his garments oddly and in a most casual manner. He was young in appearance, though generally travel-worn, but his obsidian eyes seemed old as time, deep as wells, seeming to hold yet conceal the knowledge of great age. Villagers sometimes whispered that he had found the secret of eternal life, the personal immortality the ancient Taoist monks sought relentlessly. His hair was very black and carefully braided into the longest queue I have ever seen, which he wore looped through his sash in back for convenience. There hung about his person and around his neck an array of bags, pouches and containers of many types and sizes, and across his back was slung a long, narrow sheath. It was curved, seemingly to better fit the line of his body, and nearly a yard long, black and slim enough to house only the most needle thin of blades. A most unusual and impractical weapon I felt, but surely one of great value, for the hilt was the purest and clearest of pale pink crystal, and in gossamer script of gold upon the scabbard were the two characters *yü* and *yu,* one the ideograph for abundance, the other the symbol for fish.

He was afraid of nothing. Brave, in my opinion, to the edge of foolishness, mischievous as a child when the mood struck him, and we were frequently in trouble of one sort or another.

There was not a dialect we encountered which he did not speak with fluency and command, and he wrote poems I have never gained the skill to appreciate. I loved them though I could not read them.

In the quiet of night or as we walked the endless land, migrating more or less with the seasons, he would tell me of ghosts, and he would tell me of dragons.

"The face of the earth is covered with the endless, invisible trails of the dragon Lung Mei. To build a house or bury the dead upon such a spot is a great fortune."

He often said he felt that he and I had met upon such a spot.

In the second summer of my new existence we made a leisurely journey toward the western mountains. At the con-

vergence of certain mountain streams there is a cataract called The Dragon Gate. The great carp of the rivers migrate yearly to this spot to make the valiant but usually futile attempt to leap the falls. Those fish who succeed and gain the higher waters are immediately rewarded and transformed into dragons. They then climb to the highest peaks, mount the passing clouds and are borne off into the heavens.

The Dragon Gate and the slopes around it are also the site of rare dragon bones of the finest quality, and Hsu Yuen Pao had made this journey often to collect them for geomancy and medical uses. Among the bags and pouches he wore were several in which he carried such things in small shards or ground into powders. I had seen him use them on occasion in the villages we passed through, sometimes to good effect, sometimes not. I think that if there is *any*thing to be said for the power of belief to heal, those bones have worked miracles.

I had my suspicions about them; not that I could positively identify them. That was the point. They could have been anything. They were not abundant except at the foot of the falls (where the implications to me were obvious) but Yuen Pao picked through such as we found with selective care.

In the evenings as we sorted our small hoard, setting some to dry by the fire and grinding the more fragile ones into fine powders, he would instruct me as best he could, considering the still simple state of my vocabulary.

"Small bones marked with wide lines are female," he said. "Rough bones with narrow lines are male. The variegated colors are most esteemed, while yellow and white are of medium value, and black are inferior. The light, yellow, flesh-colored, white and black are efficacious in curing diseases of the internal organs having their respective colors. If bones are impure or gathered by women, they should not be used.

"Dragons occasionally change their bones, regularly shed their skins and horns. The lofty peaks of mountains, cloud-shrouded or misty, contain the bones of great and venerable dragons which attract moisture and passing clouds.

"Remember, Little Brother, Lung is the god of all waters and the lord of all scaled creatures. When Lung is small, all fish are small. When he is of great size and well pleased with himself, there is abundance in all the land."

He was patronizing and often condescending. But he was also totally fascinating; no less so for believing himself everything he told me. And I learned. Sifting through the convo-

luted speech patterns the Chinese love, the multiple meanings and implications, carefully sorting fact from myth and tradition, anecdote from parable, I slowly built a body of knowledge I could rely on . . . in one way or another. My preconceptions and skeptical nature frequently got in the way, however, and my memories of another place and time. The first severe blow to these notions came at the end of a month on the slopes around the falls.

There had been a great display of heat lightning far off on the eastern plain during the night, and I had been amused by Yuen Pao's suggestion that it was an omen of some sort, by the seriousness with which he sat up much of the night watching the patterns of light and the scanty film of clouds hovering above the mountain tops looking for interpretations. He found none, though.

We spent the morning descending to lower slopes through forests of hardwood and conifers and rhododendrons. Farther north and west the giant panda roamed these mountain ranges. Below on the plain bamboo and catalpa and a great diversity of flora had not yet been obliterated by the demands of cultivation. It had been a lush world we passed through on our way up to the Dragon Gate. On our way down we became increasingly aware that the character of the vegetation had changed.

In the afternoon we passed a village nestled where three mountain streams converged. In spite of this the crops which had earlier promised abundant yields were now only mediocre and that at the cost of great labor to irrigate. At the next village we spent the night.

Their situation was much the same but there was word that the central flatlands were suffering badly. What had been scanty rain upon the mountain slopes and valley in the past month had not reached the plains at all. Even here there was fear that the harvest would be disastrously poor if, indeed, the crop would be harvestable before the monsoon. Every morning the women and girls offered sweet rice steamed with sausages and nuts, bound in leaves, to the rain god, tossing them into the streams by the dozens. Beside the fields and in the bamboo groves braces of swallows hung from poles with long banners of red paper inscribed with respectful prayers.

Hsu Yuen Pao looked about nodding sagely as we walked and did not bother to explain. But I got the gist of things

pretty well by that time. The Chinese system of education by osmosis was quite workable... if it was the only thing you had to *do* with your life, which in my case was literally true.

He marked our course southeast as we continued toward the plain. It was his contention that we must reach the coastal lands before the monsoon season. For transients such as we the semitropical climate of the southern coast was a necessity of life. That had not occured to me the year before. Then I had simply followed. The journey would take weeks on foot, and in a rarely used corner of my mind I wondered how long it would have taken by car.

Things were not yet so bad in the lowlands as we had expected to find on that first day, and at noon we stopped in a bamboo grove, still delicately lovely in the motionless air. No breeze rattled the stalks or stroked the leaves, but there is something inherently cooling about bamboo groves, especially the fresh yellowgreen shoots which we collected to boil with a little rice for our meal. I took the pack, which I had become accustomed to carrying, from my back and went about collecting the youngest shoots. When I returned with my pockets full I found Yuen Pao standing across the grove looking at me so oddly it stopped me in my tracks.

"Brother Gwai," he said somberly. "The night of the lightning was indeed an omen. But it was not for me to understand."

I have never been an endlessly patient man. Occasionally the obliqueness of his technique exasperated me. "Brother Pao," I said. "I do not understand. I am not a prophet. I know nothing of dreams or omens. I am ignorant. Please speak more plainly." I had learned to talk humbly in this land.

"Lan Lung," he said in a low tone.

The lazy deaf one? I was perplexed. Colloquialisms are confusing in any language. Particularly so in Chinese. But lung is also the word for dragon. Being unable to hear, the dragon came to be known by the word for its only handicap. Lan Lung, then, was also a lazy dragon. I had heard the term as an epithet hurled at street beggars. It made utterly no sense in a bamboo grove. I did not understand and said so.

Yuen Pao instructed me to stay exactly where I was till he returned; then he seemed literally to vanish. When he returned there was a brace of swallows in his hand, and the odd look was still on his face.

I went to my pack as he told me, folded back the flap,

stepped aside and waited. Yuen Pao approached the pack cautiously, slowly swinging the dead birds by their feet, wings trussed with red cord.

At first I watched Yuen Pao. Then I watched what he watched. There was the smallest ripple of movement within my bag. Hsu Yuen Pao said one word.

The creature that emerged was tiny, palm-sized. It seemed, as the young of many reptiles may, exquisitely perfect in miniature.

"This," I said, my smile broad with delight, "is a *dragon?"*

"Do not deceive yourself, Little Brother, Lan Lung is dragon enough for any man."

Gesturing for me to move farther aside, he offered the swallows before him and backed slowly away. Within the shadow of the pack tiny eyes flashed incandescently orange, bobbed up and down and were extinguished by daylight as it crept from cover.

It was not as tiny as I had at first thought, though still small and precious. A large handful then, perhaps a foot long head to tail. It had a vaguely bovine head with a long, broad-nostrilled snout. Scalloped plates of scale—white rimmed in blue, green and orange—lay flat against the head, three rows deep behind the eyes and below the jaw. Its muzzle bristled with catlike lavender whiskers, and upon its crown were short, blunt, double branching horns.

Eyeing the birds greedily, the little lizard arched his sinuous, serpentine body and rose upon his haunches stroking the air with four clawed paws. The sleek body was covered with lacelike scales, white edged in pale blue, and the curved claws were deep cobalt. There were flat plates of scale similar to those about his head at each shoulder and hip. It had no wings nor was the spine serrated, but there played about the body a vague bright aura.

As the little dragon's muscles bunched and he sank down upon his haunches, tail braced, he opened his mouth, but instead of a hiss there was a sound like the chiming of small brass bells. Hsu Yuen Pao swung the birds in a gentle arc, tossing them several feet into the grove. The dragon sprang, covering incredible distance in a single leap, as though gravity had no meaning for him. And as he moved he seemed to grow. He was cat-sized when he landed upon the swallows and began to devour them quickly.

With the dragon thus occupied, Yuen Pao, moving care-

fully, collected our few belongings and steered me with deliberate lack of hurry from the grove.

We shortly came upon a road and followed it for a couple of hours in silence before stopping to prepare the bamboo shoots still in my pockets. Yuen Pao was deeply contemplative, but for the first time in my admittedly limited experience he also seemed burdened by a weight of uncertainty. As we ate he told me a story.

Lung is the greatest of all creatures living in the world besides man himself. But as there are lazy men, so too are there lazy dragons. They do not like to exert themselves in the task of directing rain clouds about the sky. So they make themselves small and drop to earth where they hide in trees, under the roofs of houses and even in the clothing of unsuspecting men. Lung Wang, the dragon king, learning of their desertion from duty, sends messengers into the world to search for them. Lung may also make himself invisible, as is usually the case when man is present. These messengers are seldom seen, but when Lan Lung is found the Lung Wang, in fury, raises a great storm, killing the deserter with lightning bolts. This explains what might often seem a wanton destruction of life and property during such storms.

The convenient logic with which these stories usually ended invariably amused me, and I made the mistake of smiling. Hsu Yuen Pao became indignant and proceeded to tell me more about dragons in the next hour than I truthfully cared to know.

"It is a great puzzle," he said as we finally walked the road again. "It is rare that Lung allows himself to be seen by the eyes of mortal man. Such sightings are auspicious occasions and would normally be related directly to the emperor. But this is Lan Lung. It is not clear to me what this could mean."

I squinted up at the bright, cloudless sky. What did *any*thing mean in this place? My whole existence was a mystery. Alice down the rabbit hole. But as for the dragon, I had to admit the little fellow was fascinating. He had displayed an interesting degree of mutability, and he *did* look strikingly like the creatures I had seen in Chinese artworks. Hardly the beast of legend—but a little dragon and a lot of imagination, persistently applied, can leave behind legends larger than life. Hsu Yuen Pao *believed* this was a dragon capable of all he claimed for it.

When I looked back Yuen Pao was also contemplating the sky.

"Yes," he said, "this must be so, though I am still unsure what it means."

I pleaded ignorance.

"Lung is territorial," he said in an uncharacteristically straightforward manner, still looking into the sky. "Each is responsible for the rainfall upon his own lands." The rest was obvious enough. This time I managed not to smile.

The next two days on the road provided clear enough evidence that the tales we had heard in the hills were true. The drought extended severely as we entered the central plain and it promised to worsen. It was said that the rice crop was already unsalvageable, it being too late to plant again even if rain came soon, and despair was growing over the other, less fragile sorts of produce. And everywhere the people shook their heads and wondered what they had done to offend such a powerful dragon, for the area of the drought was wide.

In the villages we passed Hsu Yuen Pao bartered geomancy and spells and prayers for roots and dried preserves and goat bladder water bags (which were lighter to carry when full), and we amended our course to follow the streams and rivers more closely. He had seen Lan Lung and did not expect rain soon.

On the evening of the fourth day we camped on the bank of a muddy stream. Yuen Peo dug for roots. He would forage as long as possible to save our stores of dried goods for harder times. Those he found were pulpy and shriveled, but we boiled them in the water I had spent over an hour straining again and again. It made a bitter, unpleasant broth. The tubers were nearly tasteless but edible, and we supplemented the meal with a small handful of dried plums.

The fire was to have been extinguished as soon as the meal was prepared. Everything around us was dry as tinder, and a fire of any size was perilous in the open. Yet when I moved to put it out, Yuen Pao stopped me with a silent gesture. As I peered intently into the dark, it was several seconds before I saw what he saw. At first I thought it was a shadow by my pack, but when it moved, two iridescent orange eyes flashed in the firelight, and it had my complete attention.

Yuen Pao took up his small copper bowl and his chopsticks and began to eat with the same deliberate, unhurried movements with which he had steered me from the bamboo grove.

I did the same, dividing my attention between Yuen Pao and the flickering eyes. Eventually the creature moved into the light, and I saw that this "dragon" too was white and roughly the same size as the other. This, Yuen Pao insisted, was because it was the same dragon.

We finished our meal and sat watching the little lizard prowl about our belongings while Yuen Pao recited poetry (ostensibly to keep the two of *us* tranquil, since the dragon could not hear them) till the fire went out on its own. He told me to lie down and sleep, which I eventually managed to do, but for a long time I could see his silhouette against the stars as he sat in contemplation of his dragon.

In the morning the little creature was gone, but Yuen Pao continued to conduct himself with the same care as the night before. It was his belief that lung had been with us all along. He had simply been invisible as he may well have been at that very moment.

I tried to take the matter seriously. For him this was an important event, and he had been allowed to participate, if only he could understand in what way. Personally, I envisioned the little fellow either sleeping quietly beneath a rock or curled up among our foodstuffs out of the heat of the sun. The notion that he might be happily feasting on dried mushrooms and plums which we would later need bothered me a great deal, but Yuen Pao would not let me sort the contents of my pack before we set out.

In the evening as I laid our small fire the dragon appeared again. I could not tell from where. He was simply there, sitting on my pack on the ground in the smothering, breezelesss heat. Again he was white. I, too, was beginning to believe it was the same dragon.

The next morning he was nowhere to be seen. This time, however, I sorted my pack. All our belongings were in order, and no food had been disturbed. Perhaps he ate bugs, or a pair of swallows would last him a week. I did not bring the subject up with Yuen Pao.

Again the night and morning were the same. We were getting used to him. Yuen Pao was no longer quite so careful in his movements, and he had decided that the key to the riddle was to wait for the ending. This day, however, at our noon meal (little more than mushrooms and lotus root soaked in stale water) our companion showed himself. I caught Yuen Pao staring at me and, looking down, found Lan Lung curled

up in the shadow of my left knee. When we finally stood to go, the little dragon scampered to my pack and vanished beneath the flap.

From that time on I seemed to take on a different dimension in Yuen Pao's eyes. But since I was never quite sure how he regarded my ghosthood, the new status was equally unclear.

In the following weeks the dragon established himself as a permanent member of our party and my own special companion. It was impossible to say what attracted him to me. Perhaps my smell. Perhaps it was my ghosthood. He and I were both fantasies, Lung and *gwai;* dragons and ghosts; stories to frighten children into obedience. It seemed appropriate that the myths of our existence should keep each other company.

He developed a habit of riding upon whatever part of my body shaded him from the sun, taking to my pack less and less frequently. Sometimes he would ride in one of the pockets of my loose, sleeveless coat or slither down my chest beneath my shirt and curl up next to my belly, a small bulge above my belt. He was smooth and dry to the touch and the strange aura rippling over his body (Yuen Pao called it dragon fire) was almost like a cool breeze against my skin. When he climbed a leg or arm or scampered across my shoulders, his tiny claws prickled and his whiskers tickled. He seemed to absorb the moisture of my sweat, leaving a trail of dry skin in his wake. He was virtually weightless.

From time to time he would vanish but rarely for more than a day or two. Hsu Yuen Pao said he was simply invisible, but I believed he was hunting since he left our dwindling supply of food strictly alone. Our water was the only thing we shared with him. In proportion to his size, in fact, he received a greater share than we did, and even that little was nearly enough to undo us.

The hardships of the summer were incredible. The people were ravaged as badly as the land and during the passage of the weeks became increasingly hostile to transients, guarding their stores of food and water jealously. Gaunt water buffalo stood about in the shade of tinder dry houses, and the mortality rate among the very old and the very young grew steadily. It became impossible to barter *any*thing we possessed for the things we needed, especially water. And to find a village with a good, deep, spring-fed well was a great for-

tune. Obtaining fresh water, however, even from *these* places, became an exercise in stealth.

For the most part I was unaware of the methods of pilferage employed. I was the decoy on most occasions, playing my ghostly role to the fullest. Sometimes I was convinced he actually did procure our ill-gotten gains by magic. He was able to come and go in the blink of an eye, sometimes seeming literally to vanish, and his skill at sleight of hand was astounding. In another place and time he would have been a masterful pickpocket.

At such rare times as we passed other travelers or stopped at a town or village, Lan Lung would disappear from sight. A bit addled by the heat, perhaps, I actually began to think of him as invisible myself.

We made progress slowly. The heat became a weighty burden, requiring us to stop often for rest. The rivers were reduced to muddy sludge, and many streams had vanished entirely. For a time we took to traveling by night. Not that it was noticeably cooler, but it spared us the direct assault of the sun.

I lost count of the weeks; could not make out even the slightest progress toward our goal. The mountains of the southern coast looked as far away as ever. Yet there came a time when Yuen Pao changed our course away from the last river, and we struck out directly for the hazy blue and gray peaks shimmering and dancing on the horizon. We crossed few roads on the last leg of our trek and passed no more villages. Our rate of travel by then could have been little more than ten miles per day, and Yuen Pao guessed we had another five or six days to go. We had been on diminishing rations for a long time, and foraging had long ago become useless. Two days out from the river there was so little food left that any attempt to ration it further was a useless illusion, and we finished it off without further pretense. The water was in no better shape, but that illusion we maintained as long as we could.

Lan Lung had settled into my right pocket and for over a week had barely stirred. When Yuen Pao and I shared our small bowl of water, a bit was always left for the little dragon who would crawl into the bowl and curl up into a ball rolling over and over in an attempt to bathe himself as best he could. On the evening our food ran out I found it was necessary to help him. I carefully lifted him from my pocket with both

hands, placing him in the bowl. He moved a bit, tucking his tail feebly but did not roll over. When Hsu Yuen Pao was not looking, I wet my palm from the last goat bladder bag and stroked his dry body. He felt brittle to my touch, and it seemed days since I had seen his aura about him.

Looking up from the bowl, I found Yuen Pao watching me and realized he had seen what I had done. He did not disapprove. Days before, when I had mentioned that Lan Lung seemed to be suffering from thirst even more than we, he had explained that it was not thirst. It is the *presence* of moisture which preserves his powers of motion and mutability. Without this, Lung becomes powerless and dies.

The following evening there was not enough water to preserve that illusion either.

The next two days became an exercise in placing one foot before the other. We moved when we could move and stopped when we could do nothing else. I believed I had begun to hallucinate when we at last reached the foothills where we at least found shade and the vaguest hint of motion in the air. The leaves on the trees were not shriveled here, and farther up the slopes the grass was almost green. We rested there, digging up a half decent root or two and locating a few edible berries. In my pocket Lan Lung was very still.

The next morning we made our way slowly into the foothills. The heat was still oppressive and the going even slower since we now had to climb and frequently had to help each other, but the world seemed fresher around us, and things were making a reasonably successful attempt to grow. There was hope of water here, if only we could find it. Yuen Pao crushed leaves and grasses and put the broken vegetation into my pocket with the little dragon in the vain hope that there might be enough moisture to preserve him.

I wondered what would preserve *us,* but Yuen Pao felt if there was any great import to this dragon it was our duty to do all that was possible. I think it kept him going far longer than even the need to save his own life. As for me, I could only reflect that dying the first time had been far easier than than the second seemed destined to be.

On the afternoon of the third day, amid green grass and cool shady trees, we came upon a swiftly flowing stream, very deep and clear. Snow-fed, I realized, raising my cupped hands, aching from the frigid water. The long-prayed-for moisture

was more pain than comfort in my mouth and throat and transformed my stomach into a clutch of knots.

Yuen Pao filled our two copper cooking bowls from the stream and set them on a warm rock in the sun. Then he set about filling our water bags before drinking himself. As he did these things and I tried to contain my eagerness for the water, I felt a feeble stirring in my pocket. I reached in and carefully removed Lan Lung with both hands, but Yuen Pao would not let me place him in one of the bowls. The water was still too cold for his enfeebled condition. So I put the limp little lizard back into my pocket and removed the garment, hanging it on a tree branch in the shade. When the water was warmed, Yuen Pao dribbled some of it into the pocket, and he and I shared the rest, refilling the bowl before starting the next. By the time we had drunk two bowls each and given as many to my pocket, the activity within had increased and it began to swell even as the water soaked through and ran off.

"It is enough," Yuen Pao said. "The belly is better filled with food."

"If we *had* any," I agreed.

"Look in the stream," he said.

There were fish in the deep swiftness of the current. Brown and white and golden orange carp, large and sleek, flashed by too rapidly for my weary eyes to follow. There was an abundance of food within reach but how to obtain it? I had neither the strength for speed nor the courage against the bone-biting cold to consider seriously trying to catch fish by hand.

Pointing out a far tree, Yuen Pao sent me to hang my dripping garment there, dragon and all, which I did while he took our water bags from the stream. As I watched, he raised both hands, gripping the crystal hilt above his right shoulder. Murmuring in low tones, eyes closed, he uttered an incantation I could not properly hear and slowly moved his hands up and forward. What he drew forth was not a sword. I was surprised to realized that in the time I had known him I had never actually seen this object before.

Amazingly flexible, too long to be withdrawn straight, the shaft whispered from its sheath and sprang free, whipping back and forth in supple, diminishing strokes. A yard long, it was less thick at the hilt than the stem of a flower, tapering away to nothing. It shone in the sun, lustrous and brilliantly

purple. Yuen Pao's face was set and serious as he gazed up and down the length of the shaft, his voice hushed and reverent as he said, "Dragon whisker."

I thought of Lan Lung, his tiny whiskers tickling my neck or hand and was dumbfounded.

Yuen Pao stepped to the bank, the crystal hilt in his right hand and murmured a few more barely audible words. Slipping the dragon whisker into deep water, he and I knelt upon the brink and watched.

"Come, brother Yu," he said. "Come seek your master, Lung Wang."

The fish and eels came from all directions, massing about the purple wand till it was no longer visible among the bodies. Even from downstream they came, fighting the current to reach the dragon, master of all scaled things upon the earth. They crushed together from bank to bank till there was barely room to move, and those closest to the surface could be picked up by hand, barely wetting the fingers.

That night we feasted on eel and fish roasted upon flat rocks about a large fire. Others were prepared for drying to be carried with us for future meals. Finally, fed and watered and rested, I began to feel human again as we slowly climbed the foothills, following the course of the water upstream. Then there was a road and villages again, nestled in the mountain valley. The people in this land had not suffered drought at all. The crop here was good, though it could not begin to make up for the devastation upon the plains, and the people were willing to barter for Yuen Pao's skills. There were many dialects here, and they seemed to vary from valley to valley. Travelers were few, especially in the higher villages and, after an initial period of suspicion, for which my own appearance was no great help, the stories of our journey and the news of the lowlands were as much in demand as spells or medications.

It would have been nice to linger in a village here or there. Our strength returned to us slowly, and we tired sooner than we would have liked; the increasing altitude was no doubt a factor, but Yuen Pao would not permit delays. Inquiring after particular roads and passes he plotted our course, explaining that it would still require many days to cross the mountains and be safely on the southern slopes before the monsoon stopped all travel and we had not much time now.

Lan Lung once again took to riding upon my shoulder or

occasionally on top of my head. As we reached the highest passes, however, he once again took to my pocket or to nestling beneath my shirt. It was cold here, but Hsu Yuen Pao, in his infinite wisdom, proclaimed that was not the reason. We were too close to heaven here. The clouds were thickening on the southern horizon, and puffy white ships sailed close over our heads. The messengers of the Lung Wang would be watching. During the last days of our crossing Lan Lung rarely betrayed his presence even to me. Only when he rode in my pocket was I truly aware of him.

Then we were climbing down. Though we were still high on the slopes, I was jubilant. It was almost like coming home.

Yuen Pao was known in many of the villages we passed, a fact I had come to realize was not particularly unusual. But one pleasant, near autumn afternoon as we passed a mile or so from the outer wall of a large town Yuen Pao stopped short in the road, nearly causing me to run him over. In my pocket, Lan Lung squirmed unhappily for a moment. Then we abruptly changed course, away from the wall and the town. He would not tell me why. At dusk, when we stopped to lay our fire, he told me a story from his seemingly inexhaustible fund.

There was once a Taoist monk (I wondered who) traveling through the mountain passes where he came upon six men bearing baskets of oranges northward, bound for a high official in the emperor's court. The baskets were very heavy and in return for the protection of their company the monk agreed to help bear the loads.

He took a basket and carried it for an hour, then another till all the loads had been shared and the monk took his leave.

Some time later, at a lavish feast in honor of the emperor, the court official presented the fat oranges; a rare and expensive delicacy from the south. But when the emperor lifted one it seemed oddly light, and when the skin was broken . . . it was empty. Another was opened and another, but they were all the same.

The bearers were sent for and charged upon pain of death to explain the mystery; whereupon they told the tale of the Taoist monk and exclaimed that he had surely tricked them by magic. Since the peasants were too stupid to have conceived of such a skillful theft, the emperor was inclined to believe them. But rather than gaining favor, as the official had hoped, he found himself rewarded with a reduced income

and the government of a poor province in the south, far from the court and power.

Yuen Pao claimed to have been told the story by one of the bearers only a year or two before he found me, implying that all travelers in this land were suspect and monks most especially. Sometimes I wondered exactly how gullible he thought I *was*.

It was not yet mid-morning of the next day when they caught up with us, even though we had been prudent enough to stay off the road. There were eight armed men on horseback. Any argument would have been utter stupidity and, though we proceeded at a fast forced march, it was dusk before we reached the great gate of the town wall. Our belongings were confiscated and we spent the night in a hovel on the edge of town. By the smell and the consistency of the floor, I judged it was a structure frequently used to house swine, which was a clear statement of what the magistrate thought of us.

Lan Lung, who had been in my pocket that morning, was gone. He had vanished, as was his habit when strangers were about. But this time, Yuen Pao said, he would not return. Lung has no love for men and their communities. When I naively suggested he might join us again on the road, Yuen Pao did not reply.

In the end, even I was acute enough to realize what a man seeking status would consider proper satisfaction for the affronted dignity of his emperor, though I still did not believe the business about the oranges. The fact that I had had nothing to do with anything was unimportant. By now the magistrate had heard all he required from the nearby villages. In his mind I would be an integral part of Hsu Yuen Pao and his Taoist magic.

There was no sleep that night. This time it was I who stood in the dark watching the lightning far to the south as the monsoons gathered at the coast, wondering about omens and dragons.

At dawn we were ushered out and made to stand waiting like penned sheep in the town square throughout the dismal gray morning and on into afternoon. Awaiting Pei Tae Kwan's pleasure. Waiting to die at his leisure.

It was unclear to everyone, including myself, whether a ghost could be killed, though I had a pretty good notion by

now. But as there was no answer, Pei Tae Kwan had willingly accepted for himself the honor of discovering the facts.

The executioner arrived well before noon and stood like a statue among his swords. A dozen guards, stoic and heavily armed, encircled us. Beyond them, curious villagers and bold little boys eyed us carefully, pointing and talking loudly. Old women peered between the shoulders of the guards and railed at us. Yuen Pao was unmoved by the abuse. I simply did not understand the dialect.

From time to time he would send a child or old woman scurrying away with an upraised hand and a few words. It seemed to occur to none of them that if his magic were really so potent we would not have remained the captives we were.

The murky overcast had grown dense and slate gray by early afternoon. The air was a sullen broth of humidity, and water droplets occasionally fell out of suspension creating a fine mist. Though they threatened heavily, hanging low and pregnant overhead, the clouds did not open and drown us.

Pei Tae Kwan showed his face at last about midafternoon, making his way slowly down the street from the ornate monumental gate. The men in the drum towers signaled his approach, and a wave of silence fell upon the villagers as he passed. He took his time quite deliberately, and I had to admit it was finally beginning to get on my nerves.

Entering the armed circle he walked around slowly, looking us over with obvious contempt. When he spoke the tone of his voice was unmistakable; insulting, berating, humiliating. Two servants who had followed him into the guarded circle now began rummaging through our belongings which had been dumped on the ground several feet away. They smashed our rice bowls under foot and broke our chopsticks, throwing the pieces in our faces. They opened Yuen Pao's boxes and containers at the magistrate's command, spilling the dust to show his contempt for us. We could not buy him. We had hardly expected to.

The boys opened the black lacquered container and spilled out the shards of variegated bone we had collected at the Dragon Gate. They broke the lid from the carved box of red cinnabar and emptied the pale yellow dust of ground dragon bones into the dirt, shouting and picking out small round rubies (petrified dragon blood Hsu Yuen Pao had called them).

Alarmed, the magistrate left us and took the gems from

the boys, sending them out among the villagers. He laughed at Yuen Pao, placing the stones in a pocket of his gown, and called out mockingly as he kicked our belongings about. He spied the black scabbard and drew out the shining purple whisker which quivered in his hand like a stiff whip. There was silence for a moment, then more loud chatter. He bellowed, holding the prize aloft for all to see and looked at Hsu Yuen Pao, his eyes alight with greedy triumph. He brandished it like a sword and advanced upon us, kicking my pack out of his way. I saw it moved aside by his foot with an odd jerk which seemed more like a lurch to my eye, and it suddenly began to writhe and swell on the ground.

At the collective cry from the crowd Pei Tae Kwan turned and, seeing the churning form within the cloth, beat at it with the dragon whisker, then backed away and fled beyond the line of his guards as the bag swelled again.

Weapons drawn, the soldiers formed rank around the magistrate and one man sprang forward, striking a blow to the bag with his sword. There was a muffled sound like the distant toll of a bell and the pack split to shreds as Lung burst forth, growing to immense size in an instant. His serpentine body writhed, his tail lashing about, massive cowlike head high, four clawed forepaws slashing air. He was an explosion of silver and blue in the darkness of afternoon, fifty feet long. His voice was the booming of a gong. In the damp air his breath shone bright. Dragon fire played over his body. Beneath his chin was the great blue pearl of the sea, and upon his left shoulder was a long, ragged wound of red.

So rapidly did Lung grow to his full, terrible size, that the soldier who had struck the blow was crushed beneath the scaled belly without even the time to scream. Then Lung leapt, much as I had seen him do that first day in the bamboo grove, but now his body blotted out the sky. When he landed among the terrified screams of the people, men died beneath his huge feet and thrashing tail. The living fled in panic—villagers, soldiers and dignitaries—but the magistrate Pei Tae Kwan, the dragon whisker still clutched in his hand, lay beneath the right fore foot of the great saurian, a foot long claw imbedded in his chest.

The gong of his voice beat again, and Lung moved around the tree dragging the body of Pei a step or two before it dropped from his claw. I watched, numb but fascinated, only slowly becoming aware of a persistent tugging at my arm.

messengers to seek him and, when found, would destroy him with lightning bolts.

The two dragons confronted each other, rearing on their hind legs, their breath at last turning to fire as the rain came. Their voices beat upon the ear, and when they leapt to each other the ground shook beneath their bodies. They changed size rapidly and often, looking for advantage. Scales as big as a man's hand littered the street like fallen leaves as the dragons, red-clawed, red-fanged, rolled about in each other's embrace. Lightning struck twice more, gouging the road and shattering the wall. The rain poured down in dark sheets till all that could be seen was the firey glow of their bodies and breath. They could no longer be told apart.

Then, as Yuen Pao and I sheltered in the doorway of the house, the quaking earth stilled, the brightness diminished, and there came a great quiet beneath the beating of the rain.

Slowly, as the torrent thinned, a mountainous form could be seen lying in the street, motionless, fireless, and beyond it, burning faintly, another dragon stood, its head waving slowly in the air, upturned to the clouds.

I wiped rain from my eyes, straining for a glimpse of color through the sheets of gray. I could not help but care. I had been his refuge till the end, even after I believed he had left me, and, in spite of all I had just seen, if he had scampered, mouse-sized, toward the door where I hid, I would have sheltered him again, foolish as it doubtless would have been. But in the thinning rain I could identify neither the dead dragon nor the live one.

Then the final bolt of lightning struck.

Hours later, when the rain stopped, there was not so much as a splintered bone in the muddy, cratered street. But beneath the blasted tree Yuen Pao found one large round scale of silver scalloped in blue. I wear it on a braided cord about my neck like an amulet. It marks me, though that is hardly necessary these days. Word of mouth travels swiftly in this land. The villagers saw from whence the dragon came. They knew whose pack it was. It was never established whether or not a ghost could die a second death (and I am still not sure about the oranges) but no one questioned the power of ghostly magic. It has been mainly to my advantage, I suppose;

only occasionally have I resented it. I wear the reputation as I wear my "amulet" and the name the people gave me.

I am called Lung Gwai.

The Dragon Ghost.

Caradoc A. Cador

KEEPER OF THE WOOD

Many a legend tells us that in a time when the world was younger beings more akin to nature than we humans still existed in secret places unknown to most of mankind. Here is an exquisite and poignant tale about the love between one of those nonhumans and a young woman.

Mellanike clung to her lover, sobbing out her fear, his strong slim hand stroking her hair.

"Why should you fear? This is a thing that should be of joy, that you will bear my child." His great dark eyes that should have glowed with ageless innocence were clouded over with a hurt puzzlement at the ways of humankind.

"But what if the child is... like you?" she asked, brushing a lock of his tousled hair back over the goatlike horns that sprouted above the great vee of his brows.

Kolias shook his head in wonderment. This he had not foreseen. He longed to speak the words that would banish fear, to speak to her of what he sought to do, but, knowing he could not, said only, "And would it matter so? You live alone here, and none but an occasional shepherd troubles you."

The truth of that calmed her. Her home deep in the forested hills was far from the coasts, where men dwelt pressed against each other like sheep at the manger. She shared her valley with none save animals, tending them and the garden that yielded vegetables and fruit and the healing herbs whose use she had learnt from her mother.

She let the tension flow from her then, and relaxed into her lover's arms. "What shall we call it then?"

"Is it not soon to be seeking a name?" And Kolias laughed, and in his laughter was the music of a swift-flowing mountain stream, and the shadow was gone from his face. She laughed with him; together they lay, wrapped in the last hazy warmth of a fall afternoon.

When the spring was on the earth, and the sun shone upon the quiet sea, and the anemones were heavy with their purple bloom and the meadows were white with the little star flowers that sprang from the tears of the god Lyksios, weeping over the body of the boy Dion, who had loved him, and been slain, Mellanike was delivered of a boy child, with but little of strangeness about him, and her heart was full of joy.

And the boy they called Niko, after his grandfather who slept with his wife beside the great fig tree that sheltered Mellanike's cabin.

It was a pleasant place, her valley, nestled among the hills, with a creek running through its center. Close by the house lay the little garden, and beyond it the fenced pasture of the goats. Behind the house was a chicken coop, and a few fruit trees.

Often and often, in the dusk or the dawn, Kolias would come there and watch for a time from the edge of the forest; and sometimes he would see only the little cabin, built snugly, with maybe a wisp of smoke coming from its stone chimney, and maybe hear the baby's squealing, or Mellanike singing over the clucking and the maa-ing and the soft humming of her bees.

After a time, he would whistle in their special way, and she would hear and come to him. When they walked together in the woods, the timid creatures of the forest had no more fear of her than of him, who was one of them, though greater, and the deer would come and take salt from her hands.

Often Kolias would play upon his pipes, or take up her father's many-stringed santur from its place upon the wall, and sing in a high clear voice songs older than the children of man.

Then there were his pranks; he had a way with animals of making them do what he wished. Once he set a sheep to thinking it was a chicken, and they laughed together at the sight of it trying to fly into a tree to roost at sunset.

He had seen Mellanike one day as she walked through the woods, and his heart had gone out to her. He was young; the young were few among his people, and the old many, and old beyond the counting of men.

In his own ways he learned what there was to know of her; how her parents had come fleeing some turmoil in the world of men; how her father had died when she was but five; how her mother had lain down to sleep when she was thirteen, and had risen no more.

After that she had lived alone, wrapping herself in her gardening and spinning and the hills in which she lived to hide from the aching void of her own loneliness. In time she had come to walk in a world that few men glimpsed, and some among the shepherds called her mad. Others gave her a name of the old days, calling her Dreamer, and spoke of her with reverence.

One day, he had crept from the sheltering trees and seated himself behind her as she sat on a hillside watching her sheep; nor had she noted his presence until he played a few notes on his pipe. At that she had whirled, and there had been fear in her eyes and heart. For at first she had seen only his strangeness, the horns growing from his forehead, the long pointed ears, the eyes and brows set in a broad vee, the high protruding cheekbones.

But he had held her with the music of the pipes, and in his eyes had been a quiet joy, and when he spoke, his voice had been full of his love for her and his gentleness, and her fear had faded, and her heart had answered his own.

Strange he always was to her, with his wisdom which was as the wisdom of children, too innocent and simple for the hearts of men, his gentleness that knew no anger, but she loved him the more therefore; and no more did she walk the hills alone.

Sometimes there came to her one of the shepherd folk, with a hurt to be mended, or a sick lamb to be cared for, and she would do with her herbs as her mother had taught her. Slowly, with the passing of years, word of her skill in curing all manner of illness spread, and those who had named her Dreamer nodded their heads sagely and said, "You see? Does she not have the hands of a healer?"

And one day there came to her door a fisherman from the

coast, near the town of Achos, and said he had heard of her skill, and asked her to heal his young wife, and gave her a fine string of salted fish.

There soon came a time when she told the hill-folk that no more would she have strangers come to her valley, but they must stay with a family of shepherds nearby. And scarce a fortnight passed but she must be walking to the house of Xanthos to heal someone. But those who came to seek for some charm or magic, she sent away unsatisfied, for such was not her skill.

Mellanike was filled with wonderment that so many came to her for help, for she whose world was bounded by her valley and the love that was between her and Kolias and the boy had not known that there was so much of illness and pain.

But where Mellanike was amazed, Kolias was troubled. Of the shepherds he had little fear, knowing them for simple, quiet folk who troubled none. But he liked it not that she had so many dealings with the folk of the coast, and cared not for the thought of loose tongues and prying eyes, nor did he trust the folk of the plains, who feared what they did not comprehend, and hated where they feared.

But all his trouble was nothing beside the joy he had in his son. It was the grief of his clan, who loved children above all else, that they bore them seldom. They were few, and dwindled, and would someday be no more.

He had known that the child would show no outward signs of his parentage, for so he had willed it. But he knew, too, that Niko carried within him the mark of his ancestry, a seed that would bloom in time. For the People Who Watch over Woods, Those Who Care for Flowers, are bound to their homes by ties that may not be broken, and those of Pirineia were slowly failing; and when they were gone, no others would take their place, and the wilds would mourn their passing, and something would be gone from the land, so that there would be a deadness to it, its clear streams turn muddy and its flowers lose the clarity of their hues; the woods would turn dark and musty, and the hearts of the trees, perhaps, grow rotten with bitterness and long sorrow, and wasps be more often seen than bees. Nor would the land be near so fertile, and at the last dark things from Outside would make it their home.

So it would be, once the Zaidochoi were gone; but it was

in Kolias's heart that there might be others, who were at once their children and the children of men, to take their place. So did he dream, that from this child of his love, there might stem a tribe who would have the gifts of his people, that they might not be forever lost, and the land plunged in gloom. His elders were dubious, but their warnings went unheard and unheeded, for he was young, and loved.

Much time he spent with Niko, walking alone in the hills, for a few hours at a time, when Mellanike must be about her work, showing his son the secret ways of hill and wood.

The boy sat beside a tree till he could feel the slow rising of sap, the breathing of the leaves, as if he were the tree, and then to touch its slow strange mind. He learned to hear the myriad voices around him, grass and flowers and shrubs and trees, birds and squirrels and deer and even the red voice of the weasel, knowing and loving them all, eater and eaten alike.

Kolias knew that someday Niko would, as he did, hear them all, always, as must a Keeper of the Wood, ever guarding and healing. The time too would come when Niko would learn the many Words and Songs of Power.

And then, when his son was eight, the hand of the Gods was heavy on the land of Pirineia, and the nets of the fisherfolk came too often empty from the sea, and the farmers on the narrow coastal plain cursed as they saw their crops wither in the field, and there was fear in their cursing. Few starved, but many were weak with hunger. Then Agyieos, the Hunter of the Sky, turned his bow against the folk of the coast, and many fell ill and died.

Then the people of the cities flocked to the temples and there was a great burning of incense on the altars of the Gods, and many an animal gasped out its life beneath the knife of the priests, and many a prayer was borne aloft on the clouds of smoke that mingled the sweet smell of frankincense with the stench of burning flesh.

Yet the Gods turned an ear of stone against the clamour, and the more ignorant talked of dragging them from their temples and hacking them apart or tossing them into the sea, but the wise would not have it so.

And those who dwelt in the cities waited for it to pass, and the cities fed their people a dole, brought from over the sea in ships, and the grain seized from merchant hoards.

The country folk, who were less wise—or perhaps merely

less well cared for—revived the old rite of the pharmakoi, choosing some unfortunate to bear their sins, driving them out with stones, and many perished, with such a will to be rid of troubles were the stones thrown. But still were things no better.

And it chanced in the district of Achos that some thought on Mellanike, and many said that she was a witch and must die, for putting plagues on their children and blighting their fields, chasing the fish from the net and causing sheep and goat alike to sicken. Others spoke of her kindness and gentleness, and how she often healed their sick, but they were overborne, for all agreed that one who had power to heal must likewise have power to harm. And so a party of men was sent to the hills to deal her a witch's death.

Mellanike was walking through the woods with Niko when one of the sons of Xanthos the shepherd found her. He gasped for air as one who has run a long way.

"There are men . . . many men . . . come up from Achos seeking you. They call you witch, and would kill you . . . you must run and hide. They are not far behind me . . . my father sent me when they passed."

Mellanike stood perplexed, wondering at such talk—but only for a moment. For to her ears there came the sound of rough voices called, and men crashing through the woods.

She turned then, and ran; but soon she could see them behind her and to her left, and hear their laughter as they hunted her like the deer. She ran, beyond reason or hope, carrying her son, until they caught her in her own valley. She pressed her son's face against her side, and begged them to let him at least live.

They laughed then, too, and there was anger in their laughter, and they asked her how much mercy she had shown them, and called her a witch who cursed them and roused the gods to anger. When she tried to ask how many times she had healed them, one took up a stone and flung it at her. Suddenly the air was full of stones, and her son screamed and screamed and tried to run at the men, but a stone struck him full in the face and he fell.

Mellanike crumpled across him to shelter him with her body, whispering an urgent command to be still.

When she had ceased to move or moan, the men grew tired

of their sport and went their ways, taking her animals with them. That night there was feasting in Achos.

But in the lengthening shadow of the great fig tree a tall, unhuman, beautiful figure stood weeping, for the first time in all his long, long years. He looked at the still forms of his love and their child, in his eyes all the uncomprehending hurt of a pet lamb when he feels the knife at his throat.

Even as he stood and wept, he felt his son's body stir with life, faint and fluttering. At once, grief was set aside.

He sent a wordless beam of thanks after Mellanike's spirit as he pulled her off Niko and straightened him on the ground.

Kolias began to work, entering the boy as he had taught the boy to enter trees and plants. He sang a song of healing as he felt within the boy's body for damage. Where he found it, he focused the power through his hands, speeding the boy's already more-than-human recuperative powers as much as he dared.

It was dawn before Kolias was done; his last act was to touch the boy's mind so that he would sleep for at least a day. Only the boy's left eye, pulped by a stone, could not be healed.

With the end of his work came not rest but the renewal of pain. Kolias dug a hole in the ground and laid Mellanike in it, on a bed of grass and herbs. He covered her body with leaves from the fig tree and then piled earth upon it until the hole was filled.

Upon the new-made grave he sat, his face damp with tears and creased with weariness. After a time came the ebbing of grief, and in its place grew anger and bitterness, feelings to him new and strange; feelings he feared. Of them, he spun a Word, trying it in his mind, weighing the terror of it against his torment.

He arose, and looked to the coast in anger, and spoke the Word, and the wind carried it to Achos. The trees heard, and the vines, the fields and pastures, all echoed with it, and for an instant all things that lived in Achos save only man trembled at the Word's import.

The Keeper of the Woods took his son in his arms, and set out upon the long road to his home. His tears fell on the ground as he walked.

The next year, when the snows had melted, the shepherds saw little red flowers in the meadows that none had seen before.

In Achos, though, the vines did not grow, and the blossoms

fell from such trees as bear fruit, leaving only empty branches. The mares did not foal, nor did sheep or goats bear young or give milk, and no seed planted by the hand of man would sprout. For one who can bless can also curse, and one who can make grow, blight.

Jane Yolen

THE SLEEP OF TREES

Certain areas of ancient Greece could still be sacred to one or another of the older gods. At any rate, it might be judicious not to profane these areas, even unknowingly, as this story of an egotistical American classic actor makes painfully clear.

"Never invoke the gods unless
you really want them to appear.
It annoys them very much."
—Chesterton

It had been a long winter. Arrhiza had counted every line and blister on the inside of the bark. Even the terrible binding power of the heartwood rings could not contain her longings. She desperately wanted spring to come so she could dance free, once again, of her tree. At night she looked up and through the spiky winter branches counted the shadows of early birds crossing the moon. She listened to the mewling of buds making their slow, painful passage to the light. She felt the sap veins pulse sluggishly around her. All the signs were there, spring was coming, spring was near, yet still there was no spring.

She knew that one morning, without warning, the rings would loosen and she would burst through the bark into her glade. It had happened every year of her life. But the painful wait, as winter slouched toward its dismal close, was becoming harder and harder to bear.

When Arrhiza had been younger, she had always slept the

peaceful, uncaring sleep of trees. She would tumble, half-awake, through the bark and onto the soft, fuzzy green earth with the other young dryads, their arms and legs tangling in that first sleepy release. She had wondered then that the older trees released their burdens with such stately grace, the dryads and the meliade sending slow green praises into the air before the real Dance began. But she wondered no longer. Younglings simply slept the whole winter dreaming of what they knew best: roots and bark and the untroubling dark. But aging conferred knowledge, dreams change. Arrhiza now slept little and her waking, as her sleep, was filled with sky.

She even found herself dreaming of birds. Knowing trees were the honored daughters of the All Mother, allowed to root themselves deep into her flesh, knowing trees were the treasured sisters of the Huntress, allowed to unburden themselves into her sacred groves, Arrhiza envied birds. She wondered what it would be like to live apart from the land, to travel at will beyond the confines of the glade. Silly creatures though birds were, going from egg to earth without a thought, singing the same messages to one another throughout their short lives, Arrhiza longed to fly with one, passengered within its breast. A bird lived but a moment, but what a moment that must be.

Suddenly realizing her heresy, Arrhiza closed down her mind lest she share thoughts with her tree. She concentrated on the blessings to the All Mother and Huntress, turning her mind from sky to soil, from flight to the solidity of roots.

And in the middle of her prayer, Arrhiza fell out into spring, as surprised as if she were still young. She tumbled against one of the birch, her nearest neighbor, Phyla of the white face. Their legs touched, their hands brushing one another's thighs.

Arrhiza turned toward Phyla. "Spring comes late," she sighed, her breath caressing Phyla's budlike ear.

Phyla rolled away from her, pouting. "You make Spring Greeting sound like a complaint. It is the same every year." She sat up with her back to Arrhiza and stretched her arms. Her hands were outlined against the evening sky, the second and third fingers slotted together like a leaf. Then she turned slowly toward Arrhiza, her woodsgreen eyes unfocused. In the soft, filtered light her body gleamed whitely and the darker patches were mottled beauty marks on her breasts

and sides. She was up to her feet in a single fluid movement and into the Dance.

Arrhiza watched, still full length on the ground, as one after another the dryads and meliades rose and stepped into position, circling, touching, embracing, moving apart. The cleft of their legs flashed pale signals around the glade.

Rooted to their trees, the hama-dryads could only lean out into the Dance. They swayed to the lascivious pipings of spring. Their silver-green hair, thick as vines, eddied around their bodies like water.

Arrhiza watched it all but still did not move. How long she had waited for this moment, the whole of the deep winter, and yet she did not move. What she wanted was more than this, this entering into the Dance on command. She wanted to touch, to walk, to run, even to dance when she alone desired it. But then her blood was singing, her body pulsating; her limbs stretched upward answering the call. She was drawn toward the others and, even without willing it, Arrhiza was into the Dance.

Silver and green, green and gold, the grove was a smear of color and wind as she whirled around and around with her sisters. Who was touched and who the toucher; whose arm, whose thigh was pressed in the Dance, it did not matter. The Dance was all. Drops of perspiration, sticky as sap, bedewed their backs and ran slow rivulets to the ground. The Dance *was* the glade, *was* the grove. There was no stopping, no starting, for a circle has no beginning or end.

Then suddenly a hunter's horn knifed across the meadow. It was both discordant and sweet, sharp and caressing at once. The Dance did not stop but it dissolved. The Huntress was coming, the Huntress was here.

And then She was in the middle of them all, straddling a moon-beam, the red hem of Her saffron hunting tunic pulled up to expose muscled thighs. Seven hounds lay growling at Her feet. She reached up to Her hair and in one swift, savage movement, pulled at the golden cords that bound it up. Her hair cascaded like silver and gold leaves onto Her shoulders and crept in tendrils across Her small, perfect breasts. Her heart-shaped face, with its crescent smile, was both innocent and corrupt; Her eyes as dark blue as a storm-coming sky. She dismounted the moon shaft and turned around slowly, as if displaying Herself to them all, but She was the Huntress, and She was doing the hunting. She looked into their faces

one at a time, and the younger ones looked back, both eager and afraid.

Arrhiza was neither eager nor afraid. Twice already she had been the chosen one, torn laughing and screaming from the glade, brought for a night to the moon's dark side. The pattern of the Huntress' mouth was burned into her throat's hollow, Her mark, like Her words, were still in Arrhiza's ears. "You are mine. Forever. If you leave me, I will kill you, so fierce is my love." It had been spoken each time with a kind of passion, in between kisses, but the words, like the kisses, were as cold and distant and pitiless as the moon.

The Huntress walked around the circle once again, pausing longest before a young meliade, Pyrena of the appleblossoms. Under that gaze Pyrena seemed both to wither and to bloom. But the Huntress shook Her head and Her mouth formed the slightest moue of disdain. Her tongue flicked out and was caught momentarily between flawless teeth. Then She clicked to the hounds who sprang up. Mounting the moonbeam again, She squeezed it with Her thighs and was gone, riding to another grove.

The moment She disappeared, the glade was filled with breathy gossip.

"Did you see . . ." began Dryope. Trembling with projected pleasure, she turned to Pyrena. "The Huntress looked at you. Truly looked. Next time it *will* be you. I *know* it will."

Pyrena wound her fingers through her hair, letting fall a cascade of blossoms that perfumed the air. She shrugged but smiled a secret, satisfied smile.

Arrhiza turned abruptly and left the circle. She went back to her tree. Sluggishly the softened heartwood rings admitted her and she leaned into them, closed her eyes, and tried to sleep though she knew that in spring no true sleep would come.

She half-dreamed of clouds and birds, forcing them into her mind, but really she was hearing a buzzing. Sky, she murmured to herself, remember sky.

> "Oh trees, fair and flourishing,
> on the high hills They stand,
> lofty. The Deathless sacred
> grove . . ."

Jeansen practiced his Homeric supplication, intoning carefully through his nose. The words as they buzzed through his

nasal passages tickled. He sneezed several times rapidly, a light punctuation to the verses. Then he continued:

> "...The Deathless sacred grove
> Men call them, and with iron
> never cut."

He could say the words perfectly now, his sounds rounded and full. The newly learned Greek rolled off his tongue. He had always been a fast study. Greek was his fifth language, if he counted Esperanto. He could even, on occasion, feel the meanings that hid behind the ancient poetry, but as often the meanings slid away, slippery little fish and he the incompetent angler.

He had come to Greece because he wanted to be known as the American Olivier, the greatest classical actor the States had ever produced. He told interviewers he planned to learn Greek—classic Greek, not the Greek of the streets—to show them Oedipus from the amphitheaters where it had first been played. He would stand in the groves of Artemis, he had said, and call the Goddess to him in her own tongue. One columnist even suggested that with his looks and voice and reputation she would be crazy not to come. If she did, Jeansen thought to himself, smiling, I wouldn't treat her with any great distance. The goddesses like to play at shopgirls; the shopgirls, goddesses. And they all, he knew only too well, liked grand gestures.

And so he had traveled to Greece, not the storied isles of Homer but the fume-clogged port of Pyreus, where a teacher with a mouthful of broken teeth and a breath only a harpy could love had taught him. But mouth and breath aside, he was a fine teacher and Jeansen a fine learner. Now he was ready. Artemis first, a special for PBS, and then the big movie. Oedipus starring *the* Jeansen Forbes.

Only right now all he could feel was the buzz of air, diaphragm against lungs, lungs to larynx, larynx to vocal chords, a mechanical vibration. Buzz, buzz, buzz.

He shook his head as if to clear it, and the well-cut blond hair fell perfectly back in place. He reached a hand up to check it, then looked around the grove slowly, admiringly. The grass was long, uncut, but trampled down. The trees—he had not noticed it at first—were a strange mixture: birch

and poplar, apple and oak. He was not a botanist, but it seemed highly unlikely that such a mix would have simply sprung up. Perhaps they had been planted years and years ago. *Note to himself, check on that.*

This particular grove was far up on Mount Cynthus, away from any roads and paths. He had stumbled on it by accident. Happy accident. But it was perfect, open enough for re-enacting some of the supplicatory dances and songs, but the trees thick enough to add mystery. The guide book said that Cynthus had once been sacred to the Huntress, virgin Artemis, Diana of the moon. He liked that touch of authenticity. Perhaps her ancient worshippers had first seeded the glade. Even if he could not find the documentation, he could suggest it in such a way as to make it sound true enough.

Jeansen walked over to one birch, a young tree, slim and gracefully bending. He ran his hands down its white trunk. He rubbed a leaf between his fingers and considered the camera focusing on the action. He slowed the movement to a sensuous stroking. *Close up of hand and leaf, full frame.*

Next to the birch was an apple, so full of blossoms there was a small fall of petals puddling the ground. He pushed them about tentatively with his boot. Even without wind, more petals drifted from the tree to the ground. *Long tracking shot as narrator kicks through the pile of white flowers, lap dissolve to a single blossom.*

Standing back from the birch and the apple tree, tall and unbending, was a mature oak. It looked as if it were trying to keep the others from getting close. Its reluctance to enter the circle of trees made Jeansen move over to it. Then he smiled at his own fancies. He was often, he knew, too fanciful, yet such invention was also one of his great strengths as an actor. He took off his knapsack and set it down at the foot of the oak like an offering. Then he turned and leaned against the tree, scratching between his shoulder blades with the rough bark. *Long shot of man in grove, move in slowly for tight close-up. Voice over.*

> "But when the fate of death is drawing near, First wither on the earth the beauteous trees, The bark around them wastes, the branches fall, And the Nymph's soul, at the same moment, leaves The sun's fair light."

He let two tears funnel down his cheeks. Crying was easy. He could call upon tears whenever he wanted to, even before a word was spoken in a scene. They meant nothing anymore. *Extremely tight shot on tear, then slow dissolve to...*

A hand touched his face, reaching around him from behind. Startled, Jeansen grabbed at the arm, held, and turned.

"Why do you water your face?"

He stared. It was a girl, scarcely in her teens, with the clearest complexion he had ever seen and flawless features, except for a crescent scar at her throat which somehow made the rest more perfect. His experienced eyes traveled quickly down her body. She was naked under a light green chiffon shift. He wondered where they had gotten her, what she wanted. A part in the special?

"Why do you water your face?" she asked again. Then this time she added, "You are a man." It was almost a question. She moved around before him and knelt unself-consciously.

Jeansen suddenly realized she was speaking ancient Greek. He had thought her English with that skin. But the hair was black with blue-green highlights. Perhaps she *was* Greek.

He held her face in his hands and tilted it up so that she met him eye to eye. The green of her eyes was unbelievable. He thought they might be lenses, but saw no telltale double impression in the eye.

Jeansen chose his words with care, but first he smiled, the famous slow smile printed on posters and magazine covers. "You," he said, pronouncing the Greek with gentle precision, his voice carefully low and tremulous, "you are a goddess."

She leaped up and drew back, holding her hands before her. "No, no," she cried, her voice and body registering such fear that Jeansen rejected it at once. This was to be a classic play, not a horror flick.

But even if she couldn't act, she was damned beautiful. He closed his eyes for a moment, imprinting her face on his memory. And he thought for a moment of her pose, the hands held up. There had been something strange about them. She had too many—or too few—fingers. He opened his eyes to check them, and she was gone.

"Damned bit players," he muttered at last, angry to have wasted so much time on her. He took the light tent from his pack and set it up. Then he went to gather sticks for a fire.

It could get pretty cold in the mountains in early spring, or so he had been warned.

From the shelter of the tree, Arrhiza watched the man. He moved gracefully, turning, gesturing, stooping. His voice was low and full of music and he spoke the prayers with great force. Why had she been warned that men were coarse, unfeeling creatures? He was far more beautiful then any of the worshippers who came cautiously at dawn in their black-beetle dresses, creeping down the paths like great nicophorus from the hidden chambers of earth, to lift their year-scarred faces to the sky. They brought only jars of milk, honey, and oil, but he came bringing a kind of springy joy. And had he not wept when speaking of the death of trees, the streams from his eyes as crystal as any that ran near the grove? Clearly this man was neither coarse nor unfeeling.

A small breeze stirred the top branches, and Arrhiza glanced up for a moment, but even the sky could not hold her interest today. She looked back at the stranger, who was pulling oddments from his pack. He pounded small nails into the earth, wounding it with every blow, yet did not fear its cries.

Arrhiza was shocked. What could he be doing? Then she realized he was erecting a dwelling of some kind. It was unthinkable—yet this stranger had thought it. No votary would dare stay in a sacred grove past sunfall, dare carve up the soil on which the trees of the Huntress grew. To even think of being near when the Dance began was a desecration. And to see the Huntress, should She visit this glade at moonrise was to invite death. Arrhiza shivered. She was well-schooled in the history of Acteon, torn by his own dogs for the crime of spying upon Her.

Yet this man was unafraid. As he worked, he raised his voice—speaking, laughing, weeping, singing. He touched the trees with bold, unshaking hands. It was the trees, not the man, who trembled at his touch. Arrhiza shivered again, remembering the feel of him against the bark, the muscles hard under the fabric of his shirt. Not even the Huntress had such a back.

Then perhaps, she considered, this fearless votary was not a man at all. Perhaps he was a god come down to tease her, test her, take her by guile or by force. Suddenly, she longed to be wooed.

"You are a goddess," he had said. And it had frightened

her. Yet only a god would dare such a statement. Only a god, such as Eros, might take time to woo. She would wait and let the night reveal him. If he remained untouched by the Huntress and unafraid, she would know.

Jeansen stood in front of the tent and watched the sun go down. It seemed to drown itself in blood, the sky bathed in an elemental red that was only slowly leached out. Evening, however, was an uninteresting entre-act. He stirred the coals on his campfire and climbed into the tent. *Lap dissolve*...

Lying in the dark, an hour later, still sleepless, he thought about the night. He often went camping by himself in the California mountains, away from the telephone and his fans. *Intercut other campsites.* He knew enough to carry a weapon against marauding mountain lions or curious bears. But the silence of this Greek night was more disturbing than all the snufflings and howlings in the American dark. He had never heard anything so complete before—no crickets, no wind, no creaking of trees.

He turned restlessly and was surprised to see that the tent side facing the grove was backlit by some kind of diffused lighting. Perhaps it was the moon. It had become a screen, and shadow women seemed to dance across it in patterned friezes. It had to be a trick of his imagination, trees casting silhouettes. Yet without wind, how did they move?

As he watched, the figures came more and more into focus, clearly women. This was no trick of imagination, but of human proposing. If it was one of the columnists or some of his erstwhile friends... Try to frighten him, would they? He would give them a good scare instead.

He slipped into his khaki shorts and found the pistol in his pack. Moving stealthily, he stuck his head out of the tent. And froze.

Instead of the expected projector, he saw real women dancing, silently beating out a strange exotic rhythm. They touched, stepped, circled. There was no music that he could hear, yet not one of them misstepped. And each was as lovely as the girl he had met in the grove.

Jeansen wondered briefly if they were local girls hired for an evening's work. But they were each so incredibly beautiful, it seemed unlikely they could all be from any one area. Then suddenly realizing it didn't matter, that he could simply watch and enjoy it, Jeansen chuckled to himself. It was the

only sound in the clearing. He settled back on his haunches and smiled.

The moon rose slowly as if reluctant to gain the sky. Arrhiza watched it silver the landscape. Tied to its rising, she was pulled into the Dance.

Yet as she danced a part of her rested still within the tree, watching. And she wondered. Always before, without willing it, she was wholly a part of the Dance. Whirling, stepping along with the other dryads, their arms, her arms; their legs, her legs. But now she felt as cleft as a tree struck by a bolt. The watching part of her trembled in anticipation.

Would the man emerge from his hasty dwelling? Would he prove himself a god? She watched and yet she dared not watch, each turn begun and ended with the thought, the fear.

And then his head appeared between the two curtains of his house, his bare shoulders, his bronzed and muscled chest. His face registered first a kind of surprise, then a kind of wonder, and at last delight. There was no fear. He laughed and his laugh was more powerful than the moon. It drew her to him and she danced slowly before her god.

Setting: moon-lit glade. 30–35 girls dancing. No Busby Berkley kicklines, please. Try for a frenzied yet sensuous native dance. Robbins? Sharp? Ailey? Absolutely no dirndles. Light makeup. No spots. Diffused light. Music: an insistent pounding, feet on grass. Maybe a wild piping. Wide shot of entire dance then lap dissolve to single dancer. She begins to slow down, dizzy with anticipation, dread. Her god has chosen her...

Jeansen stood up as one girl turned slowly around in front of him and held out her arms. He leaned forward and caught her up, drew her to him.

A god is different, thought Arrhiza, as she fell into his arms. They tumbled onto the fragrant grass.

He was soft where the Huntress was hard, hard where She was soft. His smell was sharp, of earth and mold; Hers was musk and air.

"Don't leave," he whispered, though Arrhiza had made no movement to go. "I swear I'll kill myself if you leave." He pulled her gently into the canvas dwelling.

She went willingly though she knew that a god would say

no such thing. Yet knowing he was but a man, she stayed and opened herself under him, drew him in, felt him shudder above her, then heavily fall. There was thunder outside the dwelling and the sound of dogs growling. Arrhiza heard it all and, hearing, did not care. The Dance outside had ended abruptly. She breathed gently in his ear, "It is done."

He grunted his acceptance and rolled over onto his side, staring at nothing but a hero's smile playing across his face. Arrhiza put her hand over his mouth to silence him and he brought up his hand to hers. He counted the fingers with his own and sighed. It was then that the lightning struck, breaking her tree, her home, her heart, her life.

She was easy, Jeansen thought. Beautiful and silent and easy, the best sort of woman. He smiled into the dark. He was still smiling when the tree fell across the tent, bringing the canvas down around them and crushing three of his ribs. A spiky branch pierced his neck, ripping the larynx. He pulled it out frantically and tried to scream, tried to breath. A ragged hissing of air through the hole was all that came out. He reached for the girl and fainted.

Three old women in black dresses found him in the morning. They pushed the tree off the tent, off Jeansen, and half carried, half dragged him down the mountainside. They found no girl.

He would live, the doctor said through gold and plaster teeth, smiling proudly.

Live. Jeansen turned the word over in his mind, bitterer than any tears. In Greek or in English, the word meant little to him now. *Live.* His handsome face unmarred by the fallen tree seemed to crack apart with the effort to keep from crying. He shaped the word with his lips but no sound passed them. Those beautiful, melodious words would never come again. His voice had leaked out of his neck with his blood.

Camera moves in silently for a tight close-up. Only sounds are routine hospital noises; and mounting over them to an overpowering cacophony is a steady, harsh, rasping breathing, as credits roll.

FANTASY: 7

Continuing the tradition established by Lin Carter, this latest selection of the best fantasy tales of the year again presents a superb anthology for those who revel in the higher realms of the imagination. Edited this time by Arthur W. Saha, a long-time devotee of the high fantastic and a judge for the World Fantasy Awards, readers will relish the flights of fancy by:

ORSON SCOTT CARD
ROGER ZELAZNY
TANITH LEE
GENE WOLFE
JANE YOLEN
NICHOLAS YERMAKOV
and others.

Come with us east of the sun and west of the moon to the land where the rainbow ends...

—A DAW BOOKS ORIGINAL—
NEVER BEFORE IN PAPERBACK

Our tenth year
leading the sf field.