

36N5  
\$2-

This selection of the best science fiction stories of 1970 was chosen by ballot by the members of the Science Fiction Writers of America. Each of these stories is something special. But taken together, they comprise what has been aptly called the folk literature of the mocking age, as they examine the basic elements of man's nature in terms of the expansion of science and human awareness.

**Nebula Award Stories Six**  
was originally published by  
Doubleday & Company, Inc.

**Also in the Nebula Award Series:**

Nebula Award Stories  
Nebula Award Stories Two  
Nebula Award Stories Three  
Nebula Award Stories Four  
Nebula Award Stories Five

Published by **POCKET BOOKS**



*Are there paperbound books you want  
but cannot find in your retail stores?*

---

You can get any title in print in **POCKET BOOK** editions. Simply send retail price, local sales tax, if any, plus 25¢ to cover mailing and handling costs to:

**MAIL SERVICE DEPARTMENT**

**POCKET BOOKS • A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.**  
**1 West 39th Street • New York, New York 10018**

Please send check or money order. We cannot be responsible for cash.

***Catalogue sent free on request.***

---

Titles in this series are also available at discounts in quantity lots for industrial or sales-promotional use. For details write our Special Projects Agency: The Benjamin Company, Inc., 485 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022.

**NEBULA  
AWARD  
STORIES  
SIX**

Edited by CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

PUBLISHED BY POCKET  BOOKS NEW YORK

"Slow Sculpture" by Theodore Sturgeon. Copyright © 1970 by Universal Publishing & Distributing Corporation. First published in *Galaxy Magazine*, February 1970.

"In the Queue" by Keith Laumer. Copyright © 1970 by Damon Knight. Originally published in *Orbit 7*, G. P. Putnam's Sons.

"The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories" by Gene Wolfe. Copyright © 1970 by Damon Knight. Originally published in *Orbit 7*, G. P. Putnam's Sons.

"Ill Met in Lankhmar" by Fritz Leiber. Copyright © 1970 by Mercury Press, Inc. Originally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, April 1970.

"Continued on Next Rock" by R. A. Lafferty. Copyright © 1970 by Damon Knight. Originally published in *Orbit 7*, G. P. Putnam's Sons.

"By the Falls" by Harry Harrison. Copyright © 1969 by Universal Publishing & Distributing Corporation. First Published in *IF Magazine*, January 1970.

"The Second Inquisition" by Joanna Russ. Copyright © 1970 by Damon Knight. Originally published in *Orbit 6*, G. P. Putnam's Sons.

## NEBULA AWARD STORIES SIX

Doubleday edition published December, 1971

POCKET BOOK edition published July, 1972



This POCKET BOOK edition includes every word contained in the original, higher-priced edition. It is printed from brand-new plates made from completely reset, clear, easy-to-read type. POCKET BOOK editions are published by POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 630 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10020. Trademarks registered in the United States and other countries.

L

Standard Book Number: 671-77542-1.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 66-20974.

Copyright, ©, 1971, by Science Fiction Writers of America.

All rights reserved. This POCKET BOOK edition is published by arrangement with Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Printed in the U.S.A.



In Memoriam

CARROLL M. CAPPS (C. C. MACAPP)

GUY ENDORE

VIRGIL FINLAY

FRANK GRUBER

THEODORE PRATT

SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT



# CONTENTS

---

INTRODUCTION 9

ESSAY 11



SLOW SCULPTURE 25

*Theodore Sturgeon*

IN THE QUEUE 48

*Keith Laumer*

THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR DEATH  
AND OTHER STORIES 57

*Gene Wolfe*



ILL MET IN LANKHMAR 75

*Fritz Leiber*

CONTINUED ON NEXT ROCK 125

*R. A. Lafferty*

BY THE FALLS 150

*Harry Harrison*

THE SECOND INQUISITION 158

*Joanna Russ*



## INTRODUCTION

---

This is the sixth year that the membership of the Science Fiction Writers of America has voted Nebula awards to authors who are considered to have written the best science fiction (or fantasy) stories published in the previous year. Ordinarily the award-winning short story, novelette, and novella are published in the annual anthology, with the rest of the book made up of outstanding stories that were nominated, but failed to win awards. This year there are only two award-winning stories in the book, the membership having voted to make no award in the short story category.

It is unfortunate that the economics of book publishing does not allow all the nominated shorter stories to be published here. Nomination in itself is a signal honor, the allmark of approval put upon an author's work by his, or her, fellow writers. Those nominated works that are left out of this volume for lack of space undoubtedly will be published in other collections. In the case of the nominated novels, all have been published as books in their own right.

The editor of this book will exercise his option of saying as little as possible, not on the premise that an editor should remain fairly invisible, but in the belief that I can do little of consequence. The critical essay by Dr. Thomas D. Clareson says everything that I possibly could say and more authoritatively and better.

I hope that I will be pardoned an expression of great pride in the work herein presented. I have seen the literary form grow, during the last forty years, from the barely tolerated position of pulp fiction to a body of writing

that commands attention and respect. Much devotion and a great deal of work went into this transformation. It is my feeling that a writing tradition so happily established can safely rest in the hands of writers such as the ones who gained nomination for this year's awards and for those of previous years.

There is one thing more that needs to be said. No book is edited without encouragement and assistance, and for these I must thank Gordon R. Dickson, president of SFWA; Lloyd Biggle, Jr., chairman of the Nebula award trustees; Poul Anderson, an earlier editor and an old friend who guided me around many pitfalls; Diane Cleaver and Lawrence Ashmead of Doubleday; Howard DeVore, who unearthed magazines I did not have; Damon Knight, editor of *Orbit*; Thomas A. Dardis of Berkley Publishing Corporation; Edward L. Ferman of Mercury Publications, and Ejler Jakobsson, editor of *Galaxy* and *If*.

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

# SCIENCE FICTION AND LITERARY TRADITION

---

by Thomas D. Claeson

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, THE COLLEGE OF WOOSTER,  
WOOSTER, OHIO

Although Edwin B. Burgum makes only incidental mention of science fiction in his 1965 article, "Freud and Fantasy in Contemporary Fiction," he does underscore what may well be the primary cause for the ever-growing interest in the genre. "The rise of the novel of fantasy," he writes, "is the most noteworthy innovation in present-day fiction throughout the Western world."<sup>1</sup> Until recently, he continues, novelists accepted "the objective existence of society as a common point of reference with their readers, differing only in the technique for the use of valid detail in its presentation." In short, what he calls the "predominant tradition" in modern fiction has sought to achieve a close verisimilitude to everyday life.

From its beginnings in the eighteenth century, modern fiction has remained socially conscious. It has confronted society in an effort to dramatize the problems of its times. To do this, whether emphasizing the external world, as did Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Dos Passos, or the internal world—"inner space"—as did Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Faulkner, its writers have attempted to reproduce in minute detail the quality of experience of the man-down-the-street in every-town, the world. The result has been to increase concentration upon the analysis of character, creating the convention of psychological realism and producing those critics who would define the novel solely in terms of character analysis.

---

<sup>1</sup> Edwin B. Burgum, "Freud and Fantasy in Contemporary Fiction," *Science and Society*, 29 (Spring 1965), p. 224.

Until recently, writes Burgum. For two patterns have emerged in contemporary fiction. On the one hand, citing both Heller's *Catch 22* and Kafka's *The Trial* as successful examples, Burgum points to those writers who have used "the preposterous" to convey more clearly "a tenable interpretation of the social reality external to the subjectivity of the individual." The word *interpretation* is the key, for it both denies that an objective, external "reality" has been captured, and implies that the novelist has intentionally created a symbolic construct having value only as it reveals something of the human condition. On the other hand, as in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, some writers have abandoned all "social referent" and thus have blurred "the distinction between the real and the plausible and the distorted and implausible, to leave the reader in a troubled state of ambiguity about fact and fancy whatever his conception of reality may be." He refers, in part at least, to what other critics have called the "grotesque" or "black humor."

What Burgum is saying may be said in another way. Whatever its devotion to verisimilitude, at its best modern fiction has transcended the literal and striven for symbolic statement. Increasingly writers have consciously abandoned "our ordinary world of reality" and intentionally created a spectrum of worlds that make easier symbolic statement. For example, in *The Inheritors* William Golding pictures a prehistoric world in which Neanderthal man encounters the "New People"; in *Giles Goat-Boy* John Barth blends together traditional myth and a vision of a computerized future to come up with the world of WESCAC; in a very different manner Ira Levin explores another computerized world in *This Perfect Day*; and Anthony Burgess summons up a nightmarish Britain of the near-future in both *A Clock-work Orange* and *The Wanting Seed*. (Because of their materials and manner, if these novels are not fantasies, what are they? If they are not science fiction, what are they?)

One cannot question Burgum's general assertion; however, his lack of perspective is disturbing. In *Yesterday and After*, Professor Lionel Stevenson includes the chapter, "Purveyors of Myth and Magic," in which he writes, "It is frequently forgotten that the predominance



of realism in both the theory and practice of novelists during the early years of the twentieth century did not preclude the active survival of fantasy."<sup>2</sup> He focuses upon such writers as Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, M. P. Shiel, and E. R. Eddison, to name only those writers most familiar to enthusiasts of science fiction. After discussing their works, Stevenson explains that he has wanted to "demonstrate the vitality with which symbolism and the supernatural survived during the decades while realism was nominally in the ascendant." By mid-century, he concludes, the two modes—fantasy and realism—had become "thoroughly reconciled."

What Burgum names as a current phenomenon, Stevenson identifies as a continuing tradition. Together, then, they provide a context and a perspective within which to examine the increasing interest, both academic and popular, in science fiction.

Futurologists have seized upon the genre as a vehicle with which to build and analyze alternative futures. The above-named titles provide but a few of the many examples of novels in which so-called "mainstream" writers have made use of sf materials. Jack Williamson has compiled a list of seventy college and university courses dealing in some fashion with science fiction during the academic year 1970–71,<sup>3</sup> but suggests that that number very probably represents less than half the courses actually offered. During the 1960s the volume of scholarly and critical works devoted to some aspect of sf has steadily increased. The Modern Language Association has devoted a special forum to "Science Fiction: The New Mythology," and since 1958 has held an annual seminar devoted to the field. Some critics call for the creation of a new aesthetic with which to evaluate the field because of its uniqueness; others, like Samuel R. Delany, Alexei Panshin, and James Blish, have called for the "re-assimilation" of sf into the mainstream, where, as Blish points

<sup>2</sup> Lionel Stevenson, "Purveyors of Myth and Magic," *Yesterday and After: The History of the English Novel* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> Jack Williamson, "Science Fiction Comes to College," *Extrapolation*, 12 (May 1971), pp. 67–68.

out, "it started out, with such figures as Wells and Conan Doyle."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most significant indication of the interest in, and vitality of, science fiction at the present time may be found among the editors and writers themselves. Many of them are producing experimental stories, and, seemingly, at one time or another all of them have either celebrated or denounced the "New Wave" of the 1960s, although sometimes one cannot be certain which wave they refer to. As Theodore Sturgeon has said, the field is "yeasting" as never before.<sup>5</sup>

Why? No one answer will satisfy everyone. Certainly the rapprochement made possible between the essentially anti-scientific stance of the twentieth-century literary establishment and science fiction because of the genre's increasingly dystopian tone since World War II is partly responsible. One should not forget that the same science which evoked some of the early forms of sf in the nineteenth century also deprived the literary imagination of the security of its traditional, ordered universe in which the laws of nature paralleled the moral laws of a benevolent deity who had special regard for man. The vision of a mechanized, "alien" universe sent writers and critics scurrying to find a new center which would give authority to their art. Nor should one forget that much of the theory behind literary realism and naturalism sought to find a scientific basis for the art of fiction, as evidenced, for example, by Zola's *Le Roman Experimental* (1882).

But the most telling suggestions lie with Burgum and Stevenson. For whatever reasons, writers have increasingly turned from a "realistic" portrayal of everyday circumstances to the creation of imaginary worlds which can be more easily manipulated. One recalls at once achievements ranging from the constructs of Donald Barthelme and Jorge Luis Borges to J. R. R. Tolkien's "Middle Earth" and the "strange country" of Anthony Burgess's latest novel *M/F*.

In addition, whether one insists, parochially, that sci-

<sup>4</sup> James Blish, "Science Fiction as a Movement," *More Issues at Hand* (Chicago: Advent, 1970), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Sturgeon, "I List in Numbers," *National Review*, 10 March 1970, pp. 266-267.

ence fiction "began" with Gernsback, Wells, Verne, Poe, or elsewhere, he must acknowledge that *by now* at least several generations of authors have written it. If one defines the genre as that type of fiction which results from and reflects, often topically, the impact of scientific theory and speculation upon the literary imagination—and, therefore, the effect of science upon people—he must recognize that each of those generations will write in its own idiom and manner of the visions and nightmares which beset it. Literary form and content never remain static.

For example, much has been written of science fiction as a literature of prophecy. Arthur C. Clarke is one of those who has called its tone essentially optimistic. Despite the skepticism with which such men as Wells regarded the concept of progress, science fiction assumed its identity as a separate genre among those writers who had a clear vision of the millennium that science—technology—would lead man to. They celebrated the inventions of the late nineteenth century and extrapolated new developments from them; they sought the "ultimate metal," the "ultimate energy," and, ironically, the "ultimate weapon" which would be so terrible as to make all war impossible. Seventy, eighty years later such a central vision is largely untenable. If one doubts this, let him see the film shown at the New York World's Fair in 1939 predicting what the city of 1960 would be like. If he is young enough, he may laugh at such mistaken visions; if he is older . . . Other examples, such as the evolution of the motive power and destination of space flight in the stories, could be cited.

The result has been an ever-increasing diversity within the genre. What past writers have done is never lost or forgotten; it is re-combined, given different emphasis, fused with new materials as current writers shape it to express their own visions and nightmares. Instead of lamenting the appearance of "different" stories or bemoaning the demise of science fiction because one's favorite kind(s) of story no longer dominate the genre, one should realize that the "yeasting" now going on gives science fiction a fresh complexity, a fresh vitality.

Perhaps nowhere is the present diversity more vividly

shown than in the fiction nominated for the 1970 Nebula Awards. It shows how variously long-established motifs can be handled, and it shows how differently individual authors can use the same materials.

The nominations for the best novel are as follows:

Compton, D. G. *The Steel Crocodile* (Ace Special).

Lafferty, R. A. *Fourth Mansions* (Ace Special).

Niven, Larry. *Ringworld* (Ballantine Books).

Russ, Joanna. *And Chaos Died* (Ace Special).

Silverberg, Robert. *Tower of Glass* (Galaxy, Scribners).

Tucker, Wilson. *Year of the Quiet Sun* (Ace Special).

Of the six Larry Niven's *Ringworld* best represents the "classic" science fiction story in that it is structured around a space flight and the exploration of a hitherto unknown world. While the motifs of impending catastrophe and association with alien races inform the narrative, once the protagonist and his companions crash upon the "planet," the novel focuses upon their efforts to explore and to escape from it. Niven has created one of the most unique worlds within the genre. An unknown race has engineered an "artifact": a solid ribbon of matter ninety million miles in radius, some six hundred million miles in length, a million miles wide, circling its own sun. (One speculates that he has extrapolated from the concept of a space platform.) Its civilization has fallen into barbarism. *Ringworld* is, finally, an adventure story, potentially epic in scope. Surely he cannot abandon it after a single novel; it begs for sequels that portray its creation and the rise and fall of its civilization.

Wilson Tucker's *Year of the Quiet Sun* exemplifies the dystopian motif, gaining its terror from a projection of today's headlines. Its protagonist, a black demographer—though his race is not clarified until near the end of the book—is recruited by a government agency to be one of three using a Time Displacement Vessel to enter the near future in order to gain needed data. The project is directly responsible to the president; politics misuses science when he insists the three learn if he is to be re-elected in 1980. Thus begins a series of time-hops, finally placing the protagonist on the other side of the millennial year

2000, which reveal an America torn by racial conflict and atomic holocaust, reduced to barbarism in part because twenty million men were "lost or abandoned" on diverse battlefields throughout the world. The story is told against the backdrop of a book written by the protagonist: *From the Qumran Caves: Past, Present, and Future*, in which he has given apocalyptic interpretation to a scroll which he calls *Eschatos*, "The End of Things."

D. G. Compton's *The Steel Crocodile* also centers upon a government agency, the Institute, a computer center analyzing and synthesizing data from, seemingly, all walks of life. But if one had not identified him with sf from previous titles, one would compare *The Steel Crocodile* to the novels of such men as C. P. Snow and Nigel Balchin, for it is much like their works in tone and manner. In its concentration upon character and familiar setting, it approaches the tradition of verisimilitude more closely than does any of the other nominees. It is timeless: it could occur in the future—or tomorrow. For it explores the theme of the responsibility of the scientist. Although mystery, murder, and conspiracy are present, they are played down. Only gradually does one learn the extent to which the Institute indulges in social engineering, always implying that it keeps before it such ideals as stability and peace. The climactic action occurs after the Director reveals that his special project seeks to "determine the precise quality of spiritual teaching that would satisfy our present day ethos" so that the computers can create a "relevant Messiah" (p. 171). This leads Compton to a final irony which is a commentary perhaps applicable to both revolution and order.

What he gains by portraying a familiar society and setting closely resembling "our ordinary world of reality," Joanna Russ gains by emphasizing the subjectivity of her protagonist, though he is far from an everyman. Telepathy and teleportation have long been standard devices in science fiction, but in *And Chaos Died*, Miss Russ concentrates upon the quality of her character's feelings as he learns and masters those arts. She uses his experience as a means of criticizing society. He gains these abilities while marooned on a seemingly idyllic planet, and then returns to wander an over-populated, chaotic earth made

more meaningless because he can enter the brutal, moronic mindlessness of its inhabitants.

More fully and more obviously than any of these four titles Robert Silverberg's *The Glass Tower* illustrates how well traditional science fiction materials can be adapted to symbolic statement. To frame the central action, he relies upon the theme of communication with aliens; in this case monitored radio signals cause the protagonist to begin construction of a glass tower in the Arctic, from which he can more easily reply to the far-distant aliens. He is also the scientist-industrialist who mastered the synthesis of DNA, thereby creating a race of androids to provide the world's labor force. His son is the lover of an android woman, an affair to be regarded as an obscenity, a lowering of standards, if known about. Here it provides the narrative device to penetrate the public image assigned to the androids. On the one hand, the Android Equality Party strives to gain seats in the World Congress, thereby obtaining at least a token of equal rights. Thus does he dramatize the racial struggle of contemporary America, as he did in his fine short story, *Sundance* (*F&SF*, June). On the other hand, the son learns that the androids have formed a religion in which his father is god. They pray and wait for the day when he will redeem them so that the "Children of the Vat" are equal to the "Children of the Womb." Politics and religion oppose one another, but the dream of the androids is shattered when one of their leaders learns—through a brief exchange of minds—that the protagonist refuses the role of God, refuses his responsibility as creator. To him, the androids are things to be used. Revolution follows. When the protagonist surrenders his powers to his son and flees by spaceship toward the distant galaxy in order to fulfill his obsessive desire to communicate with the aliens, another symbolic level is completed. One must read it as the statement that god is dead, that god has fled from his creatures, leaving them to their own devices and those of their masters.

Like Russ and Silverberg, R. A. Lafferty employs the idea of penetrating another's mind in *Fourth Mansions*. In this instance a group indulges in "mind-weaving"—the amplifying and projecting of psychic power. They

wish to induce a new human evolution, to cause their own mutation into supermen, so that man can attain a higher spiritual level. The old motif of alternate, co-existent worlds is also introduced. But these merely give Lafferty a point of departure as he weaves a tapestry of symbolism that draws finally more upon myth than upon science to dramatize the eternal struggle between good and evil. The core of the story retells the Parsifal legend, that of the fool—the innocent one—who resists temptation, gains wisdom through suffering, and thus may assume guardianship of the Grail. Lafferty creates four groups: the mind-weavers misuse their science (their leader is a biologist); a group, long-lived if not immortal, evokes the sense of demons who intrude evilly into the affairs of men; a nascent dictator, protesting that he works for the good of man, would reduce them to automata if successful; and a preternatural Christian brotherhood plays the part of the Knights of the Grail. Lafferty employs an elaborate system of animal imagery to identify the groups and evokes a general feeling for medieval myth in particular. Withdraw any part of his tapestry and the work collapses. He has achieved a richly textured fantasy.

Such, then, are the nominees for best novel. From the quiet realism of Compton through the potentially epic adventure of Niven to the symbolic statement of Silverberg and the fantasy of Lafferty—they serve as an index to the diversity of the field and show how deliberately writers are now experimenting with traditional sf materials. They are trying to escape the literal story.

The same diversity and experimentation may be seen in the other nominations for the Nebula Award. These are as follows:

*Novella:*

Anderson, Poul. "The Fatal Fulfillment" (*F&SF*, March).

Blish, James. "A Style in Treason" (*Anywhen*).

Ellison, Harlan. "The Region Between" (*Galaxy*, March).

Leiber, Fritz. "Ill Met in Lankhmar" (*F&SF*, April).

Simak, Clifford. "The Thing in Stone" (*If*, March).

Wilhelm, Kate. "April Fool's Day Forever" (*Orbit 7*, edited by Damon Knight).

*Novelette:*

Disch, Thomas. "The Asian Shore" (*Orbit 6*, edited by Knight).

Eklund, Gordon. "Dear Aunt Annie" (*Fantastic*, April).

Jones, Gerald. "The Shaker Revival" (*Galaxy*, Feb.).

Lafferty, R. A. "Continued on Next Rock" (*Orbit 7*).

Russ, Joanna. "The Second Inquisition" (*Orbit 6*).

Sturgeon, Theodore. "Slow Sculpture" (*Galaxy*, Feb.).

*Short Story:*

Dozois, Gardner R. "A Dream at Noonday" (*Orbit 7*).

Harrison, Harry. "By the Falls" (*Galaxy*, Jan.).

Lafferty, R. A. "Entire and Perfect Chrysolite" (*Orbit 6*).

Laumer, Keith. "In the Queue" (*Orbit 7*).

Sallis, James. "The Creation of Bennie Good" (*Orbit 6*).

Wilhelm, Kate. "A Cold Dark Night with Snow" (*Orbit 6*).

Wolfe, Gene. "Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories" (*Orbit 6*).

As with the novels, so the shorter pieces run the gamut of tone and narrative technique. Gardner Dozois's "A Dream at Noonday" is basically "realistic" in tone as it presents the memories of a young man at the moment of (or after?) his death in Vietnam. James Blish's "A Style in Treason" has all the trappings of a "classical" tale of interplanetary intrigue but becomes a character study. Kate Wilhelm's "A Cold Dark Night with Snow" distorts chronological order to gain its effect. James Sallis's "The Creation of Bennie Good" makes use of interior monologue to provide a glimpse of madness. Several of the writers employ an unexpected point of view in dealing with very familiar materials. For example, although Kate Wilhelm splits the narrative focus between a husband



and wife, the entire movement of the story is controlled by the woman who is obsessed with the loss of her two babies. Without her it could become just another story dealing with the struggle for the means to attain immortality; with her it moves from seeming madness and hallucination to the discovery of the doctor's plot. Such movement adds to the horror of the "reality" because it keeps before the reader the murder of the babies—that is, the degree to which the plotters will go to gain their ends.

Joanna Russ's "The Second Inquisition" also succeeds primarily because of its point of view. The narrator, using the first person to gain immediacy and authority, recalls "our visitor"—a boarder—whom she knew as a child, and leads the reader from the familiar to the moment when, from the future, the Morlocks who are rebels against the Trans-Temporal Military Authority confront that visitor. But the reader has learned that the young girl does "get mixed up, yes?"—and that she is an avid reader of fantasy. Did the events truly occur, or are they the product of her imagination? Miss Russ assures the uncertainty with her last line: "No more stories." In addition, the story is rich in literary associations, from the mirror as doorway (recalling Lewis Carroll's Alice) to the employment of Wells's Eloi and Morlocks. Those names take on new dimensions, however, for the Eloi seem to refer to the present-day world, while the Morlocks are very unlike Wells's creatures of a demonic underworld, at least in appearance.

In "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories," Gene Wolfe also centers upon a child who reads fantasy. But whereas Miss Russ chooses to end "The Second Inquisition" on a note of ambiguity, calling into question the reliability of the narrator, Wolfe moves in an opposite direction. Stressing the here-and-now to gain a sense of the immediate, he blends together three elements: the text of the fantasy that the boy is reading (there was, incidentally, a pulp magazine called *Dr. Death*), the boy's easy identification of the characters in that story with people around him, and the events in the "real" world which the boy sees but does not comprehend. Wolfe's early emphasis upon the isolated setting and the private world of the boy blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality, but the movement of the story underscores

how mannered and innocent the horror of the fantasy is in comparison with the horror in the real world.

Lafferty, too, distorts time and space in "Continued on Next Rock," as he does even more noticeably in "Entire and Perfect Chrysolite." The two stories, however, which free themselves most completely from any chance of a literal reading are Keith Laumer's "In the Queue" and Harry Harrison's "By the Falls." Indeterminate time and indeterminate place, as Rudolph Schmerl has pointed out,<sup>6</sup> are two essential ingredients of fantasy. Both Laumer and Harrison achieve a timelessness and, despite Harrison's attention to mood-creating physical detail, a placelessness. Freed from the need to construct or duplicate a world, both stories may concentrate upon the action—upon *what happens*. So grotesque is the situation in "In the Queue" that one realizes at once it must be read as a symbolic statement. In contrast, though the situation is unfamiliar, not until the characters in "By the Falls" cannot read the message does one realize fully that the story exists only as symbolic statement. Both, then, find their significance as metaphors of the human predicament.

When such diversity of subject matter and treatment is compressed into the small number of stories nominated for the Nebula Awards, one realizes what a state of flux the genre is in. It is not the first time, nor will it be the last. Taken in the larger context of Burgum and Stevenson, the variety suggests that writers are deliberately exploring the parameters of science fiction perhaps in an attempt—such as James Blish called for—to rejoin sf to the main literary tradition. In the United States in this century a number of problems have beset science fiction, among them the academic and critical attitude toward popular literature, the mode of publication at least during the 1930s and 1940s, and, unlike Europe, the critical refusal to accept fantasy as a literary tradition equal to that of realism. As a result of such problems as these, often forced upon the genre by external circumstances such as the anti-scientific stance of the literary establishment early in the century in particular, science fiction has fiercely

<sup>6</sup> Rudolph B. Schmerl, "Fantasy as Technique," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 43 (Autumn 1967). pp. 644-656.

asserted its own identity. Many of its popular critics have concentrated upon those characteristics which would make it distinct and separate from other forms of fiction. For example, plausibility and extrapolation along probable lines of development have been set up as governing principles in an effort to keep it apart from traditional fantasy with its reliance upon the supernatural. Something of these problems *may* be reflected in the selection of the Nebula winners. Those winners are as follows:

NOVEL: Larry Niven, *Ringworld*.

NOVELLA: Fritz Leiber, *Ill Met in Lankhmar*.

NOVELETTE: Theodore Sturgeon, *Slow Sculpture*.

SHORT STORY: No award.

At first glance these selections might seem an attempt to reassert and recognize "classic" parameters for science fiction. If this were so, it could be interpreted as a conservative reaction against the experimentation taking place in the genre. But a closer examination of the winners should show anyone with this idea in mind that it is simply not true. Niven's *Ringworld* incorporates familiar themes and holds the potential of adventure on an epic scale, yet what makes it noteworthy is his creation of one of the most unique worlds portrayed within the genre. The *Ringworld*, that ribbon of transmuted matter, whether accomplished by engineers or medieval magicians, is not plausible, nor is it probable that in searching the galaxies man will encounter such an artifact. Thus it may be judged one of the most fantastic worlds ever imagined.

Theodore Sturgeon's "Slow Sculpture" deals with the familiar image of the scientist-in-advance-of-his-times, but with a difference, for Sturgeon's protagonist is disillusioned with, self-exiled from, a world that will disregard or misuse what science can do for it. Into this revelation he weaves the image of the bonsai tree, whose slow sculpture may be read in reference both to the character and the world which he loathes. Fritz Leiber's "Ill Met in Lankhmar" provides a crucial episode in a long-continuing series dealing with the potentially mythic world

of Nehwon. It reminds one of Dumas *père* or *fils*; it is fantasy.

Even among the newly growing community of academic critics, there will be those who will object strenuously to this emphasis upon the close relationship of fantasy and science fiction. Some do so upon ideological grounds; others call for some new aesthetic with which to evaluate a literary form which they insist is uniquely contemporary. If these attitudes prevail, then science fiction will remain fragmented from the literary tradition, and many of the same problems which have dogged it for so long will continue to do so. What is needed is the perspective to recognize it simultaneously as a distinctly separate genre having a literary history at least a century old and as a peculiarly modern form of that broad, various tradition of fantasy which is as old as humanity. With non-specialist writers turning increasingly to the novel of fantasy, with science fiction writers expanding the limits of the genre, and with the new academic concern for popular literature, conditions seem ripe for the end of an unnecessary exile. Science fiction may well possess the manner and idiom—perhaps one should speak of these in the plural—to give the most telling symbolic illumination to the complexities and absurdities of the present-day, technologically oriented society, as Verne and Wells, Huxley and Orwell, Zamiatin and Capek did, for example, when they gave literary form to their visions of the effects of science upon humanity. What else besides visions and nightmares is literature about?

THE COLLEGE OF WOOSTER  
APRIL 1971

## SLOW SCULPTURE

---

Theodore Sturgeon

He didn't know who he was when she met him—well, not many people did. He was in the high orchard doing something under a pear tree. The land smelled of late summer and wind—bronze, it smelled bronze.

He looked up at a compact girl in her mid-twenties, at a fearless face and eyes the same color as her hair, which was extraordinary because her hair was red-gold. She looked down at a leather-skinned man in his forties, at a gold-leaf electroscope in his hand, and felt she was an intruder.

She said, "Oh—" in what was apparently the right way.

Because he nodded once and said, "Hold this—" and there could then be no thought of intrusion.

She kneeled down beside him and took the instrument, holding it exactly where he positioned her hand. He moved away a little and struck a tuning fork against his kneecap.

"What's it doing?"

He had a good voice, the kind of voice strangers notice and listen to.

She looked at the delicate leaves of gold in the glass shield of the electroscope.

"They're moving apart."

He struck the tuning fork again and the leaves pressed away from one another.

"Much?"

"About forty-five degrees when you hit the fork."



Nebula Award, Best Novelette 1970

"Good—that's about the most we'll get." From a pocket of his bush jacket he drew a sack of chalk dust and dropped a small handful on the ground. "I'll move now. You stay right there and tell me how much the leaves separate."

He traveled around the pear tree in a zigzag course, striking his tuning fork while she called out numbers—ten degrees, thirty, five, twenty, nothing. Whenever the gold foil pressed apart to maximum—forty degrees or more—he dropped more chalk. When he was finished the tree was surrounded by a rough oval of white dots. He took out a notebook and diagramed them and the tree, put away the book and took the electroscope out of her hands.

"Were you looking for something?" he asked her.

"No," she said. "Yes."

He could smile. Though it did not last long she found the expression surprising in a face like his.

"That's not what is called, in a court of law, a responsive answer."

She glanced across the hillside, metallic in that late light. There wasn't much on it—rocks, weeds the summer was done with, a tree or so, the orchard. Anyone present had come a long way to get here.

"It wasn't a simple question," she said, tried to smile and burst into tears.

She was sorry and said so.

"Why?" he asked.

This was the first time she was to experience this ask-the-next-question thing of his. It was unsettling. It always would be—never less, sometimes a great deal more.

"Well—one doesn't have emotional explosions in public."

"You do. I don't know this 'one' you're talking about."

"I—guess I don't either, now that you mention it."

"Tell the truth then. No sense in going around and around about it: *He'll think that I . . .* and the like. I'll think what I think, whatever you say. Or—go down the mountain and just don't say any more." She did not turn to go, so he added: "Try the truth, then. If it's important, it's simple. And if it's simple it's easy to say."

"I'm going to die!" she cried.

"So am I."

"I have a lump in my breast."

"Come up to the house and I'll fix it."

Without another word he turned away and started through the orchard. Startled half out of her wits, indignant and full of insane hope, experiencing, even, a quick curl of astonished laughter, she stood for a moment watching him go and then found herself (at what point did I decide?) running after him.

She caught up with him on the uphill margin of the orchard.

"Are you a doctor?"

He appeared not to notice that she had waited, had run.

"No," he said and, walking on, appeared not to see her stand again pulling at her lower lip, then run again to catch up.

"I must be out of my mind," she said, joining him on a garden path.

She said it to herself. He must have known because he did not answer. The garden was alive with defiant chrysanthemums and a pond in which she saw the flicker of a pair of redcap imperials—silver, not gold fish—the largest she had ever seen. Then—the house.

First it was part of the garden with its colonnaded terrace—and then, with its rock walls (too massive to be called fieldstone) part of the mountain. It was on and in the hillside. Its roof paralleled the skylines, front and sides, and part of it was backed against an out-jutting cliff face. The door, beamed and studded and featuring two archers' slits, was opened for them (but there was no one there) and when it closed it was silent, a far more solid exclusion of things outside than any click or clang of latch or bolt.

She stood with her back against it watching him cross what seemed to be the central well of the house, or at least this part of it. It was a kind of small court in the center of which was an atrium, glazed on all of its five sides and open to the sky at the top. In it was a tree, a cypress or juniper, gnarled and twisted and with the

turned back, paralleled, sculptured appearance of what the Japanese call bonsai.

"Aren't you coming?" he called, holding open a door behind the atrium.

"Bonsai just aren't fifteen feet tall," she said.

"This one is."

She walked past it slowly, looking.

"How long have you had it?"

His tone of voice said he was immensely pleased. It is a clumsiness to ask the owner of a bonsai how old it is—you are then demanding to know if it is his work or if he has acquired and continued the concept of another; you are tempting him to claim for his own the concept and the meticulous labor of someone else and it becomes rude to tell a man he is being tested. Hence, *How long have you had it?* is polite, forbearing, profoundly courteous.

He answered, "Half my life."

She looked at the tree. Trees can be found, sometimes, not quite discarded, not quite forgotten, potted in rusty gallon cans in not quite successful nurseries, unsold because they are shaped oddly or have dead branches here and there, or because they have grown too slowly in whole or part. These are the ones which develop interesting trunks and a resistance to misfortune that makes them flourish if given the least excuse for living. This one was far older than half this man's life, or all of it. Looking at it, she was terrified by the unbidden thought that a fire, a family of squirrels, some subterranean worm or termite could end this beauty—something working outside any concept of rightness or justice or—of respect.

She looked at the tree. She looked at the man.

"Coming?"

"Yes," she said and went with him into his laboratory.

"Sit down over there and relax," he told her. "This might take a little while."

"Over there" was a big leather chair by the bookcase. The books were right across the spectrum—reference works in medicine and engineering, nuclear physics, chemistry, biology, psychiatry. Also tennis, gymnastics, chess, the oriental war game Go, and golf. And then drama, the techniques of fiction, *Modern English Usage*,



*The American Language* and supplement. Wood's and Walker's *Rhyming Dictionaries* and an array of other dictionaries and encyclopedias. A whole long shelf of biographies.

"You have quite a library."

He answered her rather shortly—clearly he did not want to talk just now, for he was very busy.

He said only, "Yes I have—perhaps you'll see it some time—" which left her to pick away at his words to find out what on earth he meant by them.

He could only have meant, she decided, that the books beside her chair were what he kept handy for his work—that his real library was elsewhere. She looked at him with a certain awe.

And she watched him. She liked the way he moved—swiftly, decisively. Clearly he knew what he was doing. He used some equipment that she recognized—a glass still, titration equipment, a centrifuge. There were two refrigerators, one of which was not a refrigerator at all, for she could see the large indicator on the door. It stood at 70° F. It came to her that a modern refrigerator is perfectly adaptable to the demand for controlled environment, even a warm one.

But all that—and the equipment she did not recognize—was only furniture. It was the man who was worth watching, the man who kept her occupied so that not once in all the long time she sat there was she tempted toward the bookshelves.

At last he finished a long sequence at the bench, threw some switches, picked up a tall stool and came over to her. He perched on the stool, hung his heels on the cross-spoke and lay a pair of long brown hands over his knees.

"Scared."

He made it a statement.

"I suppose I am."

"You don't have to stay."

"Considering the alternative—" she began bravely but the courage-sound somehow oozed out. "It can't matter much."

"Very sound," he said almost cheerfully. "I remember when I was a kid there was a fire scare in the apartment

house where we lived. It was a wild scramble to get out and my ten-year-old brother found himself outside in the street with an alarm clock in his hand. It was an old one and it didn't work—but of all the things in the place he might have snatched up at a time like that, it turned out to be the clock. He's never been able to figure out why."

"Have you?"

"Not why he picked that particular thing—no. But I think I know why he did something obviously irrational. You see, panic is a very special state. Like fear and flight, or fury and attack, it's a pretty primitive reaction to extreme danger. It's one of the expressions of the will to survive. What makes it so special is that it's irrational. Now, why would the abandonment of reason be a survival mechanism?"

She thought about this seriously. There was that about this man which made serious thought imperative.

"I can't imagine," she said finally. "Unless it's because, in some situations, reason just doesn't work."

"You can't imagine," he said, again radiating that huge approval, making her glow. "And you just did. If you are in danger and you try reason and reason doesn't work—you abandon it. You can't say it's unintelligent to abandon what doesn't work, right? So then you are in panic. You start to perform random acts. Most of them—far and away most—will be useless. Some might even be dangerous. But that doesn't matter—you're in danger already. Where the survival factor comes in is that away down deep you know that one chance in a million is better than no chance at all. So—here you sit—you're scared and you could run. Something says you should run but you won't."

She nodded.

He went on: "You found a lump. You went to a doctor and he made some tests and gave you the bad news. Maybe you went to another doctor and he confirmed it. You then did some research and found out what was to happen next—the exploratory, the radical, the questionable recovery, the whole long agonizing procedure of being what they call a terminal case. You then flipped out. Did some things you hope I won't ask you about. Took a trip somewhere, anywhere, wound up in my or-

chard for no reason." He spread the good hands and let them go back to their kind of sleep. "Panic. The reason for little boys in their pajamas standing at midnight with a broken alarm clock in their arms—and for the existence of quacks." Something chimed over on the bench and he gave her a quick smile and went back to work, saying over his shoulder, "I'm not a quack, by the way. To qualify as a quack you have to claim to be a doctor. I don't."

She watched him switch off, switch on, stir, measure and calculate. A little orchestra of equipment chorused and soloed around him as he conducted, whirring, hissing, clicking, flickering. She wanted to laugh, to cry and to scream. She did not one of these things for fear of not stopping, ever.

When he came over again, the conflict was not raging within her but was exerting steady and opposed tensions. The result was a terrible stasis and all she could do when she saw the instrument in his hand was to widen her eyes. She quite forgot to breathe.

"Yes, it's a needle," he said, his tone almost bantering. "A long shiny sharp needle. Don't tell me you are one of those needle-shy people." He flipped the long power cord that trailed from the black housing around the hypodermic to get some slack, straddled the stool. "Want something to steady your nerves?"

She was afraid to speak. The membrane containing her sane self was very thin, stretched very tight.

He said, "I'd rather you didn't, because this pharmaceutical stew is complex enough as it is. But if you need it—"

She managed to shake her head a little and again felt the wave of approval from him. There were a thousand questions she wanted to ask—had meant to ask—needed to ask. What was in the needle? How many treatments must she have? What would they be like? How long must she stay and where? And most of all—oh, could she live, could she live?

## II

He seemed concerned with the answer to only one of these.

"It's mostly built around an isotope of potassium. If I told you all I know about it and how I came on it in the first place it would take—well, more time than we've got. But here's the general idea. Theoretically, every atom is electrically balanced—never mind ordinary exceptions. Likewise all electrical charges in the molecule are supposed to be balanced—so much plus, so much minus, total zero. I happened on the fact that the balance of charges in a wild cell is not zero—not quite. It's as if there were a submicroscopic thunderstorm going on at the molecular level, with little lightning bolts flashing back and forth and changing the signs. Interfering with communications—static—and that," he said, gesturing with the shielded hypo in his hand, "is what this is all about. When something interferes with communications—especially the RNA mechanism that says, *Read this blueprint, build accordingly and stop when it's done*—when that message gets garbled lopsided things get built. Off balance things. Things that do almost what they should, do it almost right—they're wild cells and the messages they pass on are even worse.

"Okay. Whether these thunderstorms are caused by viruses or chemicals or radiation or physical trauma or even anxiety—and don't think anxiety can't do it—is secondary. The important thing is to fix it so the thunderstorm can't happen. If you can do that the cells have plenty of ability all by themselves to repair and replace what's gone wrong. And biological systems aren't like ping-pong balls with static charges waiting for the charge to leak away or to discharge into a grounded wire. They have a kind of resilience—I call it forgiveness—that enables them to take on a little more charge, or a little less, and do all right. Well, then—say a certain clump of cells is wild and say it carries an aggregate of a hundred units extra on the positive side. Cells immediately around it are affected—but not the next layer or the next.

"If they could be opened to the extra charge—if they could help to drain it off—they would, well, *cure* the wild cells of the surplus. You see what I mean? And they would be able to handle that little overage themselves or pass it on to other cells and still others who could deal

with it. In other words, if I can flood your body with a medium that can drain off and distribute a concentration of this unbalanced charge, the ordinary bodily processes will be free to move in and clear up the wild-cell damage. And that's what I have here."

He held the shielded needle between his knees and from a side pocket of his lab coat he took a plastic box, opened it and drew out an alcohol swab. Still cheerfully talking, he took her terror-numbed arm and scrubbed at the inside of her elbow.

"I am not for one second implying that nuclear charges in the atom are the same thing as static electricity. They're in a different league altogether. But the analogy holds. I could use another analogy. I could liken the charge in the wild cells to accumulations of fat. And this gunk of mine to a detergent that would break it up and spread it so far it couldn't be detected any more. But I'm led to the static analogy by an odd side effect—organisms injected with this stuff do build up one hell of a static charge. It's a byproduct and, for reasons I can only theorize about at the moment, it seems to be keyed to the audio spectrum. Tuning forks and the like. That's what I was playing with when I met you. That tree is drenched with this stuff. It used to have a whorl of wild-cell growth. It hasn't any more."

He gave her the quick, surprising smile and let it flicker away as he held the needle point upward and squirted it. With his other hand wrapped around her left bicep he squeezed gently and firmly. The needle was lowered and placed and slid into the big vein so deftly that she gasped—not because it hurt but because it did not. Attentively he watched the bit of glass barrel protruding from the black housing as he withdrew the plunger a fraction and saw the puff of red into the colorless fluid inside.

Then he bore steadily on the plunger again.

"Please don't move. I'm sorry, this will take a little time. I have to get quite a lot of this into you. Which is fine, you know," he said, resuming the tone of his previous remarks about audio spectra, "because side

effect or no, it's consistent. Healthy bio systems develop a strong electrostatic field, unhealthy ones a weak one or none at all. With an instrument as primitive and simple as that little electroscope you can tell if any part of the organism has a community of wild cells and if so, where it is and how big and how wild." Deftly he shifted his grip on the encased hypodermic without moving the point or varying the plunger pressure. It was beginning to be uncomfortable—an ache turning into a bruise. "And if you're wondering why this mosquito has a housing on it with a wire attached (although I'll bet you're not and that you know as well as I do that I'm doing all this talking just to keep your mind occupied) I'll tell you. It's nothing but a coil carrying a high-frequency alternating current. The alternating field sees to it that the fluid is magnetically and electrostatically neutral right from the start."

He withdrew the needle suddenly and smoothly, bent an arm and trapped in the inside of her elbow a cotton swab.

"Nobody ever told me that after a treatment," she said. "What?"

"No charge," she said.

Again that wave of approval, this time with words: "I like your style. How do you feel?"

She cast about for accurate phrases.

"Like the owner of a large sleeping hysteria begging someone not to wake it up."

He laughed.

"In a little while you are going to feel so weird you won't have time for hysteria."

He got up and returned the needle to the bench, looping up the cable as he went. He turned off the AC field and returned with a large glass bowl and a square of plywood. He inverted the bowl on the floor near her and placed the wood on its broad base.

"I remember something like that," she said. "When I was in—in junior high school. They were generating artificial lightning with a—let me see—well, it had a long endless belt running over pulleys and some little wire scraping on it and a big copper ball on top."

"Van de Graaf generator."

"Right. And they did all sorts of things with it. But what I specially remember is standing on a piece of wood on a bowl like that and they charged me up with the generator. I didn't feel much of anything except all my hair stood out from my head. Everyone laughed. I looked like a golliwog. They said I was carrying forty thousand volts."

"Good. I'm glad you remember that. This'll be a little different, though. By roughly another forty thousand."

"Oh!"

"Don't worry. As long as you're insulated and as long as grounded or comparatively grounded objects—me, for example—stay well away from you, there won't be any fireworks."

"Are you going to use a generator like that?"

"Not like that—and I already did. You're the generator."

"I'm—oh!" She had raised her hand from the upholstered chair arm and there was a crackle of sparks and the faint smell of ozone.

"You sure are and more than I thought—and quicker. Get up."

She started up slowly. She finished the maneuver with speed. As her body separated from the chair she was, for a fractional second, seated in a tangle of spitting blue-white threads. They, or she, propelled her a yard and a half away, standing. Literally shocked half out of her wits, she almost fell.

"Stay on your feet," he snapped and she recovered, gasping. He stepped back a pace. "Get up on the board. Quickly now."

She did as she was told, leaving, for the two paces she traveled, two brief footprints of fire. She teetered on the board. Visibly, her hair began to stir.

"What's happening to me?" she cried.

"You're getting charged after all," he said jovially but at this point she failed to appreciate the extension of even her own witticism.

She cried again, "What's happening to me?"

"It's all right," he said consolingly.

He went to the bench and turned on a tone generator. It moaned deep in the one to three hundred cycle range. He increased the volume and turned the pitch control. It howled upward and, as it did so, her red-gold hair shivered and swept up and out, each hair attempting frantically to get away from all the others. He ran the tone up above ten thousand cycles and all the way back to a belly-bumping inaudible eleven. At the extremes her hair slumped but at around eleven hundred it stood out in, as she had described it, golliwog style. She could feel it.

He turned down the gain to a more or less bearable level and picked up the electroscope. He came toward her, smiling.

"You are an electroscope, you know that? And a living Van de Graaf generator as well. And a golliwog."

"Let me down," was all she could say.

"Not yet. Please hang tight. The differential between you and everything else here is so high that if you got near any of it you'd discharge into it. It wouldn't harm you—it isn't current electricity—but you might get a burn and a nervous shock out of it." He held out the electroscope. Even at that distance—and in her distress—she could see the gold leaves writhe apart. He circled her, watching the leaves attentively, moving the instrument forward and back and from side to side. Once he went to the tone generator and turned it down some more. "You're sending such a strong field I can't pick up the variations," he explained and returned to her, coming closer now.

"I can't—much more—I can't," she murmured.

He did not hear or he did not care. He moved the electroscope near her abdomen, up and from side to side.

"Yup. There you are," he said cheerfully, moving the instrument close to her right breast.

"What?" she whimpered.

"Your cancer. Right breast, low, around toward the armpit." He whistled. "A mean one, too. Malignant as hell."

She swayed and then collapsed forward and down. A sick blackness swept down on her, receded explosively in



a glare of agonizing blue-white and then crashed down on her like a mountain falling.

*Place where wall meets ceiling. Another wall, another ceiling. Hadn't seen it before. Didn't matter. Don't care. Sleep.*

*Place where wall meets ceiling. Something in the way. His face, close, drawn, tired—eyes awake, though, and penetrating. Doesn't matter. Don't care.*

*Sleep.*

*Place where wall meets ceiling. Down a bit, late sunlight. Over a little, rusty-gold chrysanthemums in a gold-green glass cornucopia. Something in the way again—his face.*

*"Can you hear me?"*

*Yes, but don't answer. Don't move. Don't speak.*

*Sleep.*

*It's a room, a wall, a table, a man pacing—a nighttime window and mums you'd think were alive but don't you know they're cut right off and dying?*

*Do they know that?*

*"How are you?"*

*Urgent, urgent.*

*"Thirsty."*

*Cold and a bite to it that aches the hinges of the jaws. Grapefruit juice. Lying back on his arm while he holds the glass in the other hand.*

*Oh, no, that's not . . .*

*"Thank you. Thanks very—"*

*Try to sit up. The sheet—my clothes!*

*"Sorry about that," he said, the mindreader-almost. "Some things that have to be done just aren't consistent with pantyhose and a minidress. All washed and dried and ready for you, though—any time. Over there."*

*The brown wool and the pantyhose and the shoes, on the chair.*

*He's respectful, standing back, putting the glass next to an insulated carafe on the night table.*

*"What things?"*

*"Throwing up. Bedpans," he said candidly.*

Protective with the sheet, which can hide bodies but—oh—not embarrassment.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Oh. I must have—"

*Shake head and he slides back and forth in the vision.*

"You went into shock and then you just didn't come out of it."

He hesitated. It was the first time she had ever seen him hesitate over anything. She became for a moment an almost-mindreader.

*Should I tell her what's in my mind?*

Sure, he should. And he did.

"You didn't want to come out of it."

"It's all gone out of my head."

"The pear tree, the electroscope. The injection, the electrostatic response."

"No," she said, not knowing. Then, knowing: "No!"

"Hang on," he rapped and next thing she knew he was by the bed, over her, his two hands hard on her cheeks. "Don't slip off again. You can handle it. You can handle it because it's all right now, do you understand that? You're all right."

"You told me I had cancer."

She sounded pouty, accusing.

He laughed at her, actually laughed.

"You told me you had it."

"Oh, but I didn't know."

"That explains it, then," he said in a load-off-my-back tone. "There wasn't anything in what I did that could cause a three-day withdrawal like that. It had to be something in you."

"Three days!"

He simply nodded and went on with what he was saying.

"I get a little pompous once in awhile," he said engagingly. "Comes from being right so much of the time. Took a bit more for granted than I should have, didn't I? When I assumed you'd been to a doctor, maybe even had a biopsy? You hadn't, had you?"

"I was afraid," she admitted. She looked at him. "My mother died of it—and my aunt—and my sister had a radical mastectomy. I couldn't bear it. And when you—"

"When I told you what you already knew and what

you never wanted to hear—you couldn't take it. You blacked right out, you know. Fainted away. And it had nothing to do with the seventy-odd thousand volts of static you were carrying. I caught you." He put out his arms where they were, on display, until she looked at them and saw the angry red scorch marks on his forearms and heavy biceps, as much of them as she could see from under his short-sleeved shirt. "About nine-tenths knocked me out too," he said. "But at least you didn't crack your head or anything."

"Thank you," she said reflexively and then began to cry. "What am I going to do?"

"Do? Go back home, wherever that is—pick up your life again, whatever that might mean."

"But you said—"

"When are you going to get it into your head that what I did was not a diagnostic?"

"Are you—did you—you mean you cured it?"

"I mean you're curing it right now. I explained it all to you before. You remember that now, don't you?"

"Not altogether but—yes." Surreptitiously (but not enough, because he saw her) she felt under the sheet for the lump. "It's still there."

"If I bopped you over the head with a bat," he said with slightly exaggerated simplicity, "there would be a lump on it. It would be there tomorrow and the next day. The day after that it might be smaller. In a week you'd still be able to feel it but it would be gone. Same thing here."

At last she let the enormity of it touch her. "A one-shot cure for cancer—"

"Oh, God," he said harshly. "I can tell by looking at you that I am going to have to listen to that speech again. Well, I won't."

Startled, she asked, "What speech?"

"The one about my duty to humanity. It comes in two phases and many textures. Phase one has to do with my duty to humanity and really means we could make a classic buck with it. Phase two deals solely with my duty to humanity and I don't hear that one very often. Phase two utterly overlooks the reluctance humanity has to ac-

cept good things unless they arrive from accepted and respectable sources. Phase one is fully aware of this but gets rat shrewd in figuring ways around it."

She said, "I don't—" but could get no farther.

"The textures," he overrode her, "are accompanied by the light of revelation, with or without religion and/or mysticism. Or they are cast sternly in the ethical-philosophy mold and aim to force me to surrender through guilt mixed—to some degree all the way up to total—with compassion."

"But I only—"

"You," he said, aiming a long index finger at her, "have robbed yourself of the choicest example of everything I have just said. If my assumptions had been right and you had gone to your friendly local sawbones—and he had diagnosed cancer and referred you to a specialist and he had done likewise and sent you to a colleague for consultation and, in random panic, you had fallen into my hands and been cured—and had gone back to your various doctors to report a miracle, do you know what you'd have gotten from them? 'Spontaneous remission,' that's what you'd have gotten. And it wouldn't be only doctors," he went on with a sudden renewal of passion, under which she quailed in her bed. "Everybody has his own commercial. Your nutritionist would have nodded over his wheat germ or his macrobiotic rice cakes, your priest would have dropped to his knees and looked at the sky, your geneticist would have a pet theory about generation-skipping and would assure you that your grandparents probably had spontaneous remissions, too, and never knew it."

"Please!" she cried but he shouted at her.

"Do you know what I am? I am an engineer twice over, mechanical and electrical—and I have a law degree. If you were foolish enough to tell anyone about what has happened here (which I hope you aren't—but if you are I know how to protect myself) I could be jailed for practicing medicine without a license. You could have me up for assault because I stuck a needle into you and even for kidnaping if you could prove I carried you in here from the lab. Nobody would give a damn that I had cured your cancer. You don't know who I am, do you?"

"No. I don't even know your name."

"And I won't tell you. I don't know your name either—"

"Oh! It's—"

"Don't tell me! Don't tell me! I don't want to hear it. I wanted to be involved with your lump and I was. I want it and you to be gone as soon as you're both up to it. Have I made myself absolutely clear?"

"Just let me get dressed," she said tightly, "and I'll leave right now."

"Without making a speech?"

"Without making a speech." And in a flash her anger turned to misery and she added: "I was going to say I was grateful. Would that have been all right, sir!"

And his anger underwent a change too, for he came close to the bed and sat down on his heel, bringing their faces to a level, and said quite gently, "That would be fine. Although—you won't really be grateful for another ten days, when you get your 'spontaneous remission' reports—or maybe for six months or a year or two or five, when examinations keep on testing out negative."

She detected such a wealth of sadness behind this that she found herself reaching for the hand with which he steadied himself against the edge of the bed. He did not recoil but he didn't seem to welcome her touch either.

"Why can't I be grateful right now?"

"That would be an act of faith," he said bitterly, "and that just doesn't happen any more—if it ever did." He rose and went toward the door. "Please don't go tonight," he said. "It's dark and you don't know the way. I'll see you in the morning."

When he came back in the morning the door was open. The bed was made and the sheets were folded neatly on the chair, together with the pillow slips and the towels she had used. She wasn't there.

He came out into the entrance court and contemplated his bonsai.

Early sun gold-frosted the horizontal upper foliage of the old tree and brought its gnarled limbs into sharp relief, tough brown-gray creviced in velvet. Only the companion of a bonsai (there are owners of bonsai but they

are a lesser breed) fully understands the relationship. There is an exclusive and individual treeness to the tree because it is a living thing and living things change—and there are definite ways in which the tree desires to change. A man sees the tree and in his mind makes certain extensions and extrapolations of what he sees and sets about making them happen. The tree in turn will do only what a tree can do, will resist to the death any attempt to do what it cannot do or to do in less time than it needs. The shaping of a bonsai is therefore always a compromise and always a cooperation. A man cannot create bonsai, nor can a tree. It takes both and they must understand one another. It takes a long time to do that. One memorizes one's bonsai, every twig, the angle of every crevice and needle and, lying awake at night or in a pause a thousand miles away, one recalls this or that line or mass, one makes one's plans. With wire and water and light, with tilting and with the planting of water-robbing weeds or heavy, root-shading ground cover, one explains to the tree what one wants. And if the explanation is well enough made and there is great enough understanding the tree will respond and obey—almost.

Always there will be its own self-respecting highly individual variation. *Very well, I shall do what you want, but I will do it my way.* And for these variations the tree is always willing to present a clear and logical explanation and, more often than not (almost smiling), it will make clear to the man that he could have avoided it if his understanding had been better.

It is the slowest sculpture in the world, and there is, at times, doubt as to which is being sculpted, man or tree.

So he stood for perhaps ten minutes, watching the flow of gold over the upper branches, and then went to a carved wooden chest, opened it, shook out a length of disreputable cotton duck. He opened the hinged glass at one side of the atrium and spread the canvas over the roots and all the earth to one side of the trunk, leaving the rest open to wind and water. Perhaps in a while—a month or two—a certain shoot in the topmost branch would take the hint and the uneven flow of moisture up through the cambium layer would nudge it away from

that upward reach and persuade it to continue the horizontal passage. And perhaps not—and it would need the harsher language of binding and wire. But then it might have something to say, too, about the rightness of an upward trend and would perhaps say it persuasively enough to convince the man—altogether, a patient, meaningful, and rewarding dialogue.

“Good morning.”

“Oh, goddam!” he barked. “You made me bite my tongue. I thought you’d gone.”

“I had.” She kneeled in the shadows, her back against the inner wall, facing the atrium. “But then I stopped to be with the tree for a while.”

“Then what?”

“I thought a lot.”

“What about?”

“You.”

“Did you now?”

“Look,” she said firmly. “I’m not going to any doctor to get this thing checked out. I didn’t want to leave until I had told you that and until I was sure you believed me.”

“Come on in and we’ll get something to eat.”

Foolishly, she giggled.

“I can’t. My feet are asleep.”

Without hesitation he scooped her up in his arms and carried her around the atrium.

She asked, her arm around his shoulders and their faces close, “Do you believe me?”

He continued around until they reached the wooden chest, then stopped and looked into her eyes.

“I believe you. I don’t know why you decided as you did but I’m willing to believe you.”

He sat her down on the chest and stood back.

“It’s that act of faith you mentioned,” she said gravely. “I thought you ought to have it at least once in your life—so you can never say again what you said.” She tapped her heels gingerly against the slate floor. “Ow!” She made a pained smile. “Pins and needles.”

“You must have been thinking for a long time.”

“Yes. Want more?”

“Sure.”

“You are an angry, frightened man.”

He seemed delighted.

"Tell me about all that!"

"No," she said quietly. "You tell me. I'm very serious about this. Why are you angry?"

"I'm not."

"Why are you so angry?"

"I tell you I'm not. Although," he added good-naturedly, "you're pushing me in that direction."

"Well then, why?"

He gazed at her for what to her seemed a very long time indeed.

"You really want to know, don't you?"

She nodded.

He waved a sudden hand, up and out.

"Where do you suppose all this came from—the house, the land, the equipment?"

She waited.

"An exhaust system," he said, with a thickening of his voice she was coming to know. "A way of guiding exhaust gases out of internal combustion engines in such a way that they are given a spin. Unburned solids are embedded in the walls of the muffler in a glasswool liner that slips out in one piece and can be replaced by a clean one every couple of thousand miles. The rest of the exhaust is fired by its own spark plug and what will burn, burns. The heat is used to preheat the fuel. The rest is spun again through a five-thousand-mile cartridge. What finally gets out is, by today's standards at least, pretty clean. And because of the preheating it actually gets better mileage out of the engine."

"So you've made a lot of money."

"I made a lot of money," he echoed. "But not because the thing is being used to cut down air pollution. I got the money because an automobile company bought it and buried it in a vault. They don't like it because it costs something to install in new cars. Some friends of theirs in the refining business don't like it because it gets high performance out of crude fuels. Well, all right—I didn't know any better and I won't make the same mistake again. But yes—I'm angry. I was angry when I was a kid on a tankship and we were set to washing down a bulk-



head with chipped brown soap and canvas. I went ashore and bought a detergent and tried it and it was better, faster and cheaper, so I took it to the bos'n, who gave me a punch in the mouth for pretending to know his job better than he did. Well, he was drunk at the time but the rough part came when the old shellbacks in the crew ganged up on me for being what they called a 'company man'—that's a dirty name in a ship. I just couldn't understand why people got in the way of something better.

"I've been up against that all my life. I have something in my head that just won't quit. It's a way I have of asking the next question: why is so-and-so the way it is? Why can't it be such-and-such instead? There is always another question to be asked about anything or any situation—especially you shouldn't quit when you like an answer because there's always another one after it. And we live in a world where people just don't want to ask the next question!

"I've been paid all my stomach will take for things people won't use and if I'm mad all the time, it's really my fault—I admit it—because I just can't stop asking that next question and coming up with answers. There are a half-dozen real block-busters in that lab that nobody will ever see and half a hundred more in my head. But what can you do in a world where people would rather kill each other in a desert, even when they're shown it can turn green and bloom—where they'll fall all over themselves to pour billions into developing a new oil strike when it's been proved over and over again that the fossil fuels will kill us all? Yes, I'm angry. Shouldn't I be?"

She let the echoes of his voice swirl around the court and out through the hole in the top of the atrium and waited a little longer to let him know he was here with her and not beside himself and his fury. He grinned at her sheepishly when he came to this.

And she said, "Maybe you're asking the next question instead of asking the right question. I think people who live by wise old sayings are trying not to think—but I know one worth paying some attention to. It's this. If you ask a question the right way, you've just given the answer." She went on, "I mean, if you put your hand on a hot stove you might ask yourself, how can I stop my hand

from burning? And the answer is pretty clear, isn't it? If the world keeps rejecting what you have to give—there's some way of asking why that contains the answer."

"It's a simple answer," he said shortly. "People are stupid."

"That isn't the answer and you know it," she said.

"What is?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that! All I know is that the way you do something, where people are concerned, is more important than what you do. If you want results, I mean—you already know how to get what you want with the tree, don't you?"

"I'll be damned."

"People are living, growing things, too. I don't know a hundredth part of what you do about bonsai but I do know this—when you start one, it isn't often the strong straight healthy ones you take. It's the twisted sick ones that can be made the most beautiful. When you get to shaping humanity, you might remember that."

"Of all the—I don't know whether to laugh in your face or punch you right in the mouth!"

She rose. He hadn't realized she was quite this tall.

"I'd better go."

"Come on now. You know a figure of speech when you hear one."

"Oh, I didn't feel threatened. But—I'd better go, all the same."

Shrewdly he asked her, "Are you afraid to ask the next question?"

"Terrified."

"Ask it anyway."

"No."

"Then I'll do it for you. You said I was angry—and afraid. You want to know what I'm afraid of."

"Yes."

"You. I am scared to death of you."

"Are you really?"

"You have a way of provoking honesty," he said with some difficulty. "I'll say what I know you're thinking: I'm afraid of any close human relationship. I'm afraid of something I can't take apart with a screwdriver or a mass spec-

troscope or a table of cosines and tangents. I don't know how to handle it."

His voice was jocular but his hands were shaking.

"You do it by watering one side," she said softly, "or by turning it just so in the sun. You handle it as if it were a living thing, like a species or a woman or a bonsai. It will be what you want it to be if you let it be itself and take the time and the care."

"I think," he said, "that you are making me some kind of offer. Why?"

"Sitting there most of the night," she said, "I had a crazy kind of image. Do you think two sick twisted trees ever made bonsai out of one another?"

"What's your name?" he asked her.

## IN THE QUEUE

---

Keith Laumer

The old man fell just as Farn Hestler's power wheel was passing his place in line, on his way back from the comfort station. Hestler, braking, stared down at the twisted face, a mask of soft, pale leather in which the mouth writhed as if trying to tear itself free of the dying body. Then he jumped from the wheel, bent over the victim. Quick as he was, a lean woman with fingers like gnarled roots was before him, clutching at the old man's fleshless shoulders.

"Tell them *me*, Millicent Dredgewicke Crump," she was shrilling into the vacant face. "Oh, if you only knew what I've been through, how I *deserve* the help—"

Hestler sent her reeling with a deft shove of his foot. He knelt beside the old man, lifted his head.

"Vultures," he said. "Greedy, snapping at a man. Now, I *care*. And you were getting so close to the head of the line. The tales you could tell, I'll bet. An old-timer. Not like these line, er, jumpers," he diverted the obscenity. "I say a man deserves a little dignity at a moment like this—"

"Wasting your time, Jack," a meaty voice said. Hestler glanced up into the hippopotamine features of the man he always thought of as Twentieth Back. "The old coot's dead."

Hestler shook the corpse. "Tell them Argall Y. Hestler!" he yelled into the dead ear. "Argall, that's A-R-G-A-L-L—"

"Break it up," the brassy voice of a line policeman sliced through the babble. "You, get back." A sharp prod lent urgency to the command. Hestler rose reluctantly,

his eyes on the waxy face slackening into an expression of horrified astonishment.

"Ghoul," the lean woman snarled. "Line—!" She mouthed the unmentionable word.

"I wasn't thinking of myself," Hestler countered hotly. "But my boy Argall, through no fault of his own—"

"All right, quiet!" the cop snarled. He jerked a thumb at the dead man. "This guy make any disposition?"

"Yes!" the lean woman cried. "He said, to Millicent Dredgewicke Crump, that's M, I, L—"

"She's lying," Hestler cut in. "I happened to catch the name Argall Hestler—right, sir?" He looked brightly at a slack-jawed lad who was staring down at the corpse.

The boy swallowed and looked Hestler in the face.

"Hell, he never said a word," he said, and spat, just missing Hestler's shoe.

"Died intestate," the cop intoned, and wrote a note in his book. He gestured and a cleanup squad moved in, lifted the corpse onto a cart, covered it, trundled it away.

"Close it up," the cop ordered.

"Intestate," somebody grumbled. "Crap!"

"A rotten shame. The slot goes back to the government. Nobody profits. Goddam!" The fat man who had spoken looked around at the others. "In a case like this we ought to get together, have some equitable plan worked out and agreed to in advance—"

"Hey," the slack-jawed boy said. "That's conspiracy!"

"I meant to suggest nothing illegal." The fat man faded back to his place in line. As if by common consent, the small crowd dissipated, sliding into their places with deft footwork. Hestler shrugged and remounted his wheel, putt-putted forward, aware of the envious eyes that followed him. He passed the same backs he always passed, some standing, some sitting on canvas camp stools under sun-faded umbrellas, here and there a nylon queuebana, high and square, some shabby, some, owned by the more fortunate, ornate. He was a lucky man; he had never been a standee, sweating the line exposed to the sun and prying eyes.

It was a bright afternoon. The sun shone down on the vast concrete ramp across which the line snaked from a

point lost in distance across the plain. Ahead—not far ahead now, and getting closer every day—was the blank white wall perforated only by the window, the terminal point of the line. Hestler slowed as he approached the Hestler queuebana; his mouth went dry as he saw how close it was to the head of the line now. One, two, three, four slots back! Ye Gods, that meant six people had been processed in the past twelve hours—an unprecedented number. And it meant—Hestler caught his breath—he might reach the window himself, this shift. For a moment, he felt a panicky urge to flee, to trade places with First Back, and then with Second, work his way back to a safe distance again, give himself a chance to think about it, get ready . . .

“Say, Farn.” The head of his Cousin Galpert poked from the curtains of the nylon-walled queuebana. “Guess what? I moved up a spot while you were gone.”

Hestler folded the wheel and leaned it against the weathered cloth. He waited until Galpert had emerged, then surreptitiously twitched the curtains wide open. The place always smelled fudgy and stale after his cousin had spent half an hour in it while he was away for his comfort break.

“We’re getting close to the head,” Galpert said excitedly, handing over the lockbox that contained the papers. “I have a feeling—” He broke off as sharp voices were suddenly raised a few spaces behind. A small, pale-haired man with bulging blue eyes was attempting to force himself into line between Third Back and Fifth Back.

“Say, isn’t that Four Back?” Hestler asked.

“You don’t understand,” the little man was whimpering. “I had to go answer an unscheduled call of nature . . .” His weak eyes fixed on Fifth Back, a large, coarse-featured man in a loud shirt and sunglasses. “You said you’d watch my place . . . !”

“So whatta ya think ya got a comfort break for, ya bum? Beat it!”

Lots of people were shouting at the little man now:

“Line-ine-ucker-bucker-line bucker, line bucker . . .”

The little man fell back, covering his ears. The obscene chant gained in volume as other voices took it up.

"But it's my *place*," the evictee wailed. "Father left it to me when he died, you all remember him . . ." His voice was drowned in the uproar.

"Serves him right," Galpert said, embarrassed by the chant. "A man with no more regard for his inheritance than to walk off and leave it . . ."

They watched the former Fourth Back turn and flee, his hands still over his ears.

After Galpert left on the wheel, Hestler aired the queuebana for another ten minutes, standing stony-faced, arms folded, staring at the back of One Up. His father had told him some stories about One Up, back in the old days, when they'd both been young fellows, near the end of the line. Seemed he'd been quite a cut-up in those days, always joking around with the women close to him in line, offering to trade places for a certain consideration. You didn't see many signs of that now: just a dumpy old man in burst-out shoe-leather, sweating out the line. But he himself was lucky, Hestler reflected. He'd taken over from Father when the latter had had his stroke, a twenty-one thousand two hundred and ninety-four slot jump. Not many young fellows did that well. Not that he was all that young, he'd put in his time in the line; it wasn't as if he didn't deserve the break.

And now, in a few hours maybe, he'd hit the head of the line. He touched the lockbox that contained the old man's papers—and of course his own, and Cluster's and the kids'—everything. In a few hours, if the line kept moving, he could relax, retire, let the kids, with their own places in line, carry on. Let them do as well as their dad had done, making head of the line at under forty-five!

Inside the queuebana it was hot, airless. Hestler pulled off his coat and squatted in the crouch-hammock—not the most comfortable position in the world, maybe, but in full compliance with the Q-law requirement that at least one foot be on the ground at all times, and the head higher than the waist. Hestler remembered an incident years before, when some poor devil without a queuebana had gone to sleep standing up. He'd stood with his eyes closed and his knees bent, and slowly sunk down to a squat; then bobbed slowly up and blinked and gone back to sleep. Up and down, they'd watched him for an hour before he

finally let his head drop lower than his belt. They'd pitched him out of line then, and closed ranks. Ah, there'd been some wild times in the queue in the old days, not like now. There was too much at stake now, this near the head. No time for horseplay.

Just before dusk, the line moved up. Three to go! Hestler's heart thumped.

It was dark when he heard the voice whisper: "*Four Up!*"

Hestler jerked wide awake. He blinked, wondering if he'd dreamed the urgent tone.

"Four Up!" the voice hissed again. Hestler twitched the curtain open, saw nothing, pulled his head back in. Then he saw the pale, pinched face, the bulging eyes of Four Back, peering through the vent slot at the rear of the tent.

"You have to help me," the little man said. "You saw what happened; you can make a deposition that I was cheated, that—"

"Look here, what are you doing out of line?" Hestler cut in. "I know you're on-shift, why aren't you holding down a new slot?"

"I . . . I couldn't face it," Four Back said brokenly. "My wife, my children—they're all counting on me."

"You should have thought of that sooner."

"I swear I couldn't help it. It just hit me so suddenly. And—"

"You lost your place. There's nothing I can do."

"If I have to start over now—I'll be seventy when I get to the window!"

"That's not my lookout—"

". . . but if you'll just tell the line police what happened, explain about my special case—"

"You're crazy, I can't do that!"

"But you . . . I always thought you looked like a decent sort—"

"You'd better go. Suppose someone sees me talking to you?"

"I had to speak to you here, I don't know your name, but after all we've been four spaces apart in line for nine years—"

"Go away! Before I call a line cop!"



Hestler had a hard time getting comfortable again after Four Back left. There was a fly inside the queuebana. It was a hot night. The line moved up again, and Hestler had to emerge and roll the queuebana forward. Two spaces to go! The feeling of excitement was so intense that it made Hestler feel a little sick. Two more moves up, and he'd be at the window. He'd open the lockbox, and present the papers, taking his time, getting it all correct, all in order. With a sudden pang he wondered if anyone had goofed, anywhere back along the line, failed to sign anything, missed a notary's seal, or a witness's signature. But they couldn't have. Nothing as dumb as that. For that you could get bounced out of line, lose your place, have to go all the way back—

Hestler shook off the morbid fancies. He was just nervous, that was all. Well, who wouldn't be? After tonight, his whole life would be different; his days of standing in line would be over. He'd have time—all the time in the world to do all the things he hadn't been able to think about all these years . . .

Someone shouted, near at hand. Hestler stumbled out of the queuebana to see Two Up—at the head of the line now—raise his fist and shake it under the nose of the small, black-mustached face in the green eyeshade framed in the window, bathed in harsh white light.

"Idiot! Dumbbell! Jackass!" Two Up yelled. "What do you mean take it back home and have my wife spell out her middle name!"

Two burly line police appeared, shone lights in Two Up's wild face, grabbed his arms, took him away. Hestler trembled as he pushed the queuebana forward a space on its roller-skate wheels. Only one man ahead of him now. He'd be next. But no reason to get all upset; the line had been moving like greased lightning, but it would take a few hours to process the man ahead. He had time to relax, get his nerves soothed down, get ready to answer questions . . .

"I don't understand, sir," the reedy voice of One Up was saying to the small black mustache behind in the window. "My papers are all in order, I swear it—"

"You said yourself your father is dead," the small, dry voice of Black Mustache said. "That means you'll have to

reexecute Form 56839847565342-B in sextuplicate with an endorsement from the medical doctor, the residential police, and waivers from Department A, B, C, and so on. You'll find it all, right in the regulations."

"But—but he only died two hours ago: I just received word—"

"Two hours, two years—he's just as dead."

"But—I'll lose my place! If I hadn't mentioned it to you—"

"Then I wouldn't have known about it. But you *did* mention it, quite right, too."

"Couldn't you just pretend I didn't say anything? That the messenger never reached me?"

"Are you suggesting I commit fraud?"

"No . . . no . . ." One Up turned and tottered away, his invalidated papers clutched in his hand. Hestler swallowed hard.

"Next," Black Mustache said.

Hestler's fingers shook visibly as he opened the box. He laid out the salmon-colored papers (twelve copies), the puce papers (nine copies), the lemon-yellow papers (fourteen copies), the lime papers (five copies . . . only five? Could that be right? Had he lost one?). Panic clutched at his chest.

"Salmon-colored: twelve copies." The clerk was frowning ominously.

"Y-yes. Isn't that right?" Hestler stammered.

"Of course." The clerk went on counting papers, making obscure notations in the corners.

It was almost dawn six hours later when the clerk stamped the last paper, licked the last stamp, thrust the stack of processed documents into a slot and looked past Hestler at the next man in line.

Hestler hesitated, holding the empty lockbox in nerveless fingers. It felt abnormally light.

"That's all," the clerk said. "Next."

One Down jostled Hestler getting to the window. He was a small, bandy-legged standee with large, loose lips and long ears. Hestler had never really looked at him before. He felt an urge to tell him all about how it had been, give him a few friendly tips, as an old window

veteran to a newcomer. But the man didn't give him a glance.

Moving off, Hestler noticed the queuebana. It looked abandoned, functionless. He thought of all the hours, the days, the years he had spent in it, crouched in the sling . . .

"You can have it," he said on impulse to Two Down, a woman, dumpy, slack-jowled. He gestured toward the queuebana. She made a snorting sound and ignored him. He wandered off down the line, staring curiously at the people in it, at the varied faces and figures, tall, wide, narrow, old, young—not so many of those—dressed in used clothing with hair combed or uncombed, some with facial hair, some with paint on their lips, all unattractive in their own individual ways.

He encountered Galpert whizzing toward him on the power wheel. Galpert slowed, gaping, came to a halt. Hestler noticed that his cousin had thin, bony ankles in maroon socks, one of which suffered from perished elastic so that the sock drooped, exposing clay-white skin.

"Farn—what . . . ?"

"All done." Hestler held up the empty lockbox.

"All done . . . ?" Galpert looked across toward the distant window in a bewildered way.

"All done. Not much to it, really."

"Then . . . I . . . I guess I don't need to . . ." Galpert's voice died away.

"No, no need, never again, Galpert."

"Yes, but what . . . ?" Galpert looked at Hestler, looked at the line, back at Hestler. "You coming, Farn?"

"I . . . I think I'll just take a walk for a while. Savor it, you know."

"Well," Galpert said. He started up the wheel and rode slowly off across the ramp.

Suddenly, Hestler was thinking about time—all that time stretching ahead, like an abyss. What would he do with it? He almost called after Galpert, but instead turned and continued his walk along the line. Faces stared past him, over him, through him.

Noon came and went. Hestler obtained a dry hot dog and a paper cup of warm milk from a vendor on a three-

wheeler with a big umbrella and a pet chicken perched on the back. He walked on, searching the faces. They were all so ugly. He pitied them, so far from the window. Once he saw Argall and waved; but Argall was looking the other way. He looked back; the window was barely visible, a tiny dark point toward which the line dwindled. What did they think about, standing in line? How they must envy him!

But no one seemed to notice him. Toward sunset he began to feel lonely. He wanted to talk to someone; but none of the faces he passed seemed sympathetic.

It was almost dark when he reached the end of the line. Beyond, the empty plain stretched toward the dark horizon. It looked cold out there, lonely.

"It looks cold out there," he heard himself say to the oatmeal-faced lad who huddled at the tail of the line, hands in pockets. "And lonely."

"You in line, or what?" the boy asked.

Hestler looked again at the bleak horizon. He came over and stood behind the youth.

"Certainly," he said.

# THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR DEATH AND OTHER STORIES

---

Gene Wolfe

Winter comes to water as well as land, though there are no leaves to fall. The waves that were a bright, hard blue yesterday under a fading sky today are green, opaque, and cold. If you are a boy not wanted in the house you walk the beach for hours, feeling the winter that has come in the night; sand blowing across your shoes, spray wetting the legs of your corduroys. You turn your back to the sea, and with the sharp end of a stick found half buried write in the wet sand *Tackman Babcock*.

Then you go home, knowing that behind you the Atlantic is destroying your work.

Home is the big house on Settlers Island, but Settlers Island, so called, is not really an island and for that reason is not named or accurately delineated on maps. Smash a barnacle with a stone and you will see inside the shape from which the beautiful barnacle goose takes its name. There is a thin and flaccid organ which is the goose's neck and the mollusc's siphon, and a shapeless body with tiny wings. Settlers Island is like that.

The goose neck is a strip of land down which a county road runs. By whim, the mapmakers usually exaggerate the width of this and give no information to indicate that it is scarcely above the high tide. Thus Settlers Island appears to be a mere protuberance on the coast, not requiring a name—and since the village of eight or ten houses has none, nothing shows on the map but the spider line of road terminating at the sea.

The village has no name, but home has two: a near and a far designation. On the island, and on the mainland

nearby, it is called the Seaview place because in the earliest years of the century it was operated as a resort hotel. Mama calls it The House of 31 February; and that is on her stationery and is presumably used by her friends in New York and Philadelphia when they do not simply say, "Mrs. Babcock's." Home is four floors high in some places, less in others, and is completely surrounded by a veranda; it was once painted yellow, but the paint—outside—is mostly gone now and The House of 31 February is grey.

Jason comes out the front door with the little curly hairs on his chin trembling in the wind and his thumbs hooked in the waistband of his Levi's. "Come on, you're going into town with me. Your mother wants to rest."

"Hey tough!" Into Jason's Jaguar, feeling the leather upholstery soft and smelly; you fall asleep.

Awake in town, bright lights flashing in the car windows. Jason is gone and the car is growing cold; you wait for what seems a long time, looking out at the shop windows, the big gun on the hip of the policeman who walks past, the lost dog who is afraid of everyone, even you when you tap the glass and call to him.

Then Jason is back with packages to put behind the seat. "Are we going home now?"

He nods without looking at you, arranging his bundles so they won't topple over, fastening his seatbelt.

"I want to get out of the car."

He looks at you.

"I want to go in a store. Come on, Jason."

Jason sighs. "All right, the drugstore over there, okay? Just for a minute."

The drugstore is as big as a supermarket, with long, bright aisles of glassware and notions and paper goods. Jason buys fluid for his lighter at the cigarette counter, and you bring him a book from a revolving wire rack. "Please, Jason?"

He takes it from you and replaces it in the rack, then when you are in the car again takes it from under his jacket and gives it to you.

It is a wonderful book, thick and heavy, with the edges of the pages tinted yellow. The covers are glossy stiff cardboard, and on the front is a picture of a man in rags

fighting a thing partly like an ape and partly like a man, but much worse than either. The picture is in color, and there is real blood on the ape-thing; the man is muscular and handsome, with tawny hair lighter than Jason's and no beard.

"You like that?"

You are out of town already, and without the street lights it's too dark in the car, almost, to see the picture. You nod.

Jason laughs. "That's camp. Did you know that?"

You shrug, riffling the pages under your thumb, thinking of reading, alone, in your room tonight!

"You going to tell your mom how nice I was to you?"

"Uh-huh, sure. You want me to?"

"Tomorrow, not tonight. I think she'll be asleep when we get back. Don't you wake her up." Jason's voice says he will be angry if you do.

"Okay."

"Don't come in her room."

"Okay."

The Jaguar says '*Hutntntaca . . .*' down the road, and you can see the whitecaps in the moonlight now, and the driftwood pushed just off the asphalt.

"You got a nice, soft mommy, you know that? When I climb on her it's just like being on a big pillow."

You nod, remembering the times when, lonely and frightened by dreams, you have crawled into her bed and snuggled against her soft warmth—but at the same time angry, knowing Jason is somehow deriding you both.

Home is silent and dark, and you leave Jason as soon as you can, bounding off down the hall and up the stairs ahead of him, up a second, narrow, twisted flight to your own room in the turret.

I had this story from a man who was breaking his word in telling it. How much it has suffered in his hands—I should say in his mouth, rather—I cannot say. In essentials it is true, and I give it to you as it was given to me. This is the story he told.

Captain Phillip Ransom had been adrift, alone, for nine days when he saw the island. It was already late evening when it appeared like a thin line of purple on

the horizon, but Ransom did not sleep that night. There was no feeble questioning in his wakeful mind concerning the reality of what he had seen; he had been given that one glimpse and he knew. Instead his brain teemed with facts and speculations. He knew he must be somewhere near New Guinea, and he reviewed mentally what he knew of the currents in these waters and what he had learned in the past nine days of the behavior of his raft. The island when he reached it—he did not allow himself to *if*—would in all probability be solid jungle a few feet back from the water's edge. There might or might not be natives, but he brought to mind all he could of the Bazaar Malay and Tagalog he had acquired in his years as a pilot, plantation manager, white hunter, and professional fighting man in the Pacific.

In the morning he saw that purple shadow on the horizon again, a little nearer this time and almost precisely where his mental calculations had told him to expect it. For nine days there had been no reason to employ the inadequate paddles provided with the raft, but now he had something to row for. Ransom drank the last of his water and began stroking with a steady and powerful beat which was not interrupted until the prow of his rubber craft ground into the beach sand.

Morning. You are slowly awake. Your eyes feel gummy, and the light over your bed is still on. Downstairs there is no one, so you get a bowl and milk and puffed, sugary cereal out for yourself and light the oven with a kitchen match so that you can eat and read by its open door. When the cereal is gone you drink the sweet milk and crumbs in the bottom of the bowl and start a pot of coffee, knowing that will please Mother. Jason comes down, dressed but not wanting to talk; drinks coffee and makes one piece of cinnamon toast in the oven. You listen to him leave, the stretched buzzing of the car on the road, then go up to Mother's room.

She is awake, her eyes open looking at the ceiling, but you know she isn't ready to get up yet. Very politely, be-



cause that minimizes the chance of being shouted at, you say, "How are you feeling this morning, Mama?"

She rolls her head to look. "Strung out. What time is it, Tackie?"

You look at the little folding clock on her dresser. "Seventeen minutes after eight."

"Jason go?"

"Yes, just now, Mama."

She is looking at the ceiling again. "You go back downstairs now, Tackie. I'll get you something when I feel better."

Downstairs you put on your sheepskin coat and go out on the veranda to look at the sea. There are gulls riding the icy wind, and very far off something orange bobbing in the waves, always closer.

A life raft. You run to the beach, jump up and down and wave your cap. "Over here. Over here."

The man from the raft has no shirt but the cold doesn't seem to bother him. He holds out his hand and says, "Captain Ransom," and you take it and are suddenly taller and older; not as tall as he is or as old as he is, but taller and older than yourself. "Tackman Babcock, Captain."

"Pleased to meet you. You were a friend in need there a minute ago."

"I guess I didn't do anything but welcome you ashore."

"The sound of your voice gave me something to steer for while my eyes were too busy watching that surf. Now you can tell me where I've landed and who you are."

You are walking back up to the house now, and you explain to Ransom about you and Mother, and how she doesn't want to enroll you in the school here because she is trying to get you into the private school your father went to once. And after a time there is nothing more to say, and you show Ransom one of the empty rooms on the third floor where he can rest and do whatever he wants. Then you go back to your own room to read.

"Do you mean that you *made* these monsters?"

"Made them?" Dr. Death leaned forward, a cruel smile playing about his lips. "Did God *make* Eve, Captain, when he took her from Adam's rib? Or did

Adam make the bone and God *alter* it to become what he wished? Look at it this way, Captain. I am God and Nature is Adam."

Ransom looked at the thing who grasped his right arm with hands that might have circled a utility pole as easily. "Do you mean that this thing is an animal?"

"Not an animal," the monster said, wrenching his arm cruelly. "Man."

Dr. Death's smile broadened. "Yes, Captain, man. The question is, what are you? When I'm finished with you we'll see. Dulling your mind will be less of a problem than upgrading these poor brutes; but what about increasing the efficacy of your sense of smell? Not to mention rendering it impossible for you to walk erect."

"*Not* to walk all-four-on-ground," the beast-man holding Ransom muttered, "*that* is the law."

Dr. Death turned and called to the shambling hunchback Ransom had seen earlier, "Golo, see to it that Captain Ransom is securely put away; then prepare the surgery."

A car. Not Jason's noisy Jaguar, but a quiet, large-sounding car. By heaving up the narrow, tight little window at the corner of the turret and sticking your head out into the cold wind you can see it: Dr. Black's big one, with the roof and hood all shiny with new wax.

Downstairs Dr. Black is hanging up an overcoat with a collar of fur, and you smell the old cigar smoke in his clothing before you see him; then Aunt May and Aunt Julie are there to keep you occupied so that he won't be reminded too vividly that marrying Mama means getting you as well. They talk to you: "How have you been, Tackie? What do you find to do out here all day?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Don't you ever go looking for shells on the beach?"

"I guess so."

"You're a handsome boy, do you know that?" Aunt May touches your nose with a scarlet-tipped finger and holds it there.

Aunt May is Mother's sister, but older and not as pretty. Aunt Julie is Papa's sister, a tall lady with a pulled-out, unhappy face, and makes you think of him even when you know she only wants Mama to get married again so Papa won't have to send her any more money.

Mama herself is downstairs now in a clean new dress with long sleeves. She laughs at Dr. Black's jokes and holds onto his arm, and you think how nice her hair looks and that you will tell her so when you are alone. Dr. Black says, "How about it, Barbara, are you ready for the party?" and Mother, "Heavens no. You know what this place is like—yesterday I spent all day cleaning and today you can't even see what I did. But Julie and May will help me."

Dr. Black laughs. "After lunch."

You get into his big car with the others and go to a restaurant on the edge of a cliff, with a picture window to see the ocean. Dr. Black orders a sandwich for you that has turkey and bacon and three pieces of bread, but you are finished before the grown-ups have started, and when you try to talk to Mother, Aunt May sends you out to where there is a railing with wire to fill in the spaces like chicken wire only heavier, to look at the view.

It is really not much higher than the top window at home. Maybe a little higher. You put the toes of your shoes in the wire and bend out with your stomach against the rail to look down, but a grown-up pulls you down and tells you not to do it, then goes away. You do it again, and there are rocks at the bottom which the waves wash over in a neat way, covering them up and then pulling back. Someone touches your elbow, but you pay no attention for a minute, watching the water.

Then you get down, and the man standing beside you is Dr. Death.

He has a white scarf and black leather gloves and his hair is shiny black. His face is not tanned like Captain Ransom's but white, and handsome in a different way like the statue of a head that used to be in Papa's library when you and Mother used to live in town with him, and you think: Mama would say after he was gone how good looking he was. He smiles at you, but you are no older.

"Hi." What else can you say?

"Good afternoon, Mr. Babcock. I'm afraid I startled you."

You shrug. "A little bit. I didn't expect you to be here, I guess."

Dr. Death turns his back to the wind to light a cigarette he takes from a gold case. It is longer even than a 101 and has a red tip, and a gold dragon on the paper. "While you were looking down, I slipped from between the pages of the excellent novel you have in your coat pocket."

"I didn't know you could do that."

"Oh, yes. I'll be around from time to time."

"Captain Ransom is here already. He'll kill you."

Dr. Death smiles and shakes his head. "Hardly. You see, Tackman, Ransom and I are a bit like wrestlers; under various guises we put on our show again and again—but only under the spotlight." He flicks his cigarette over the rail and for a moment your eyes follow the bright spark out and down and see it vanish in the water. When you look back, Dr. Death is gone, and you are getting cold. You go back into the restaurant and get a free mint candy where the cash register is and then go to sit beside Aunt May again in time to have coconut cream pie and hot chocolate.

Aunt May drops out of the conversation long enough to ask, "Who was that man you were talking to, Tackie?"

"A man."

In the car Mama sits close to Dr. Black, with Aunt Julie on the other side of her so she will have to, and Aunt May sits way up on the edge of her seat with her head in between theirs so they can all talk. It is grey and cold outside; you think of how long it will be before you are home again, and take the book out.

Ransom heard them coming and flattened himself against the wall beside the door of his cell. There was no way out, he knew, save through that iron portal.

For the past four hours he had been testing every surface of the room for a possible exit, and there was none. Floor, walls, and ceiling were of

cyclopean stone blocks; the windowless door of solid metal locked outside.

Nearer. He tensed every muscle and knotted his fists.

Nearer. The shambling steps halted. There was a rattle and the door swung back. Like a thunderbolt of purpose he dove through the opening. A hideous face loomed above him and he sent his right fist crashing into it, knocking the lumbering beast-man to his knees. Two hairy arms pinioned him from behind, but he fought free and the monster reeled under his blows. The corridor stretched ahead of him with a dim glow of daylight at the end and he sprinted for it. Then—darkness!

When he recovered consciousness he found himself already erect, strapped to the wall of a brilliantly lit room which seemed to share the characters of a surgical theater and a chemical laboratory. Directly before his eyes stood a bulky object which he knew must be an operating table, and upon it, covered with a sheet, lay the unmistakable form of a human being.

He had hardly had time to comprehend the situation when Dr. Death entered, no longer in the elegant evening dress in which Ransom had beheld him last, but wearing white surgical clothing. Behind him limped the hideous Golo, carrying a tray of implements.

"Ah!" Seeing that his prisoner was conscious, Dr. Death strolled across the room and raised a hand as though to strike him in the face, but, when Ransom did not flinch, dropped it, smiling. "My dear Captain! You are with us again, I see."

"I hoped for a minute there," Ransom said levelly, "that I was away from you. Mind telling me what got me?"

"A thrown club, or so my slaves report. My baboonman is quite good at it. But aren't you going to ask about this charming little tableau I've staged for you?"

"I wouldn't give you the pleasure."

"But you are curious," Dr. Death smiled his

crooked smile. "I shall not keep you in suspense. Your own time, Captain, has not come yet; and before it does I am going to demonstrate my technique to you. It is so seldom that I have a really appreciative audience." With a calculated gesture he whipped away the sheet which had covered the prone form on the operating table.

Ransom could scarcely believe his eyes. Before him lay the unconscious body of a girl, a girl with skin as white as milk and hair like the sun seen through mist.

"You are interested now, I see," Dr. Death remarked drily, "and you consider her beautiful. Believe me, when I have completed my work you will flee screaming if she so much as turns what will no longer be a face toward you. This woman has been my implacable enemy since I came to this island, and the time has come for me to"—he halted in mid-sentence and looked at Ransom with an expression of mingled slyness and gloating—"for me to illustrate something of your own fate, shall we say."

While Dr. Death had been talking his deformed assistant had prepared a hypodermic. Ransom watched as the needle plunged into the girl's almost translucent flesh, and the liquid in the syringe—a fluid which by its very color suggested the vile perversion of medical technique—entered her bloodstream. Though still unconscious the girl sighed, and it seemed to Ransom that a cloud passed over her sleeping face as though she had already begun an evil dream. Roughly the hideous Golo turned her on her back and fastened in place straps of the same kind as those that held Ransom himself pinned to the wall.

"What are you reading, Tackie?" Aunt May asked.

"Nothing." He shut the book.

"Well, you shouldn't read in the car. It's bad for your eyes."

Dr. Black looked back at them for a moment, then asked Mama, "Have you gotten a costume for the little fellow yet?"

"For Tackie?" Mama shook her head, making her beautiful hair shine even in the dim light of the car. "No, nothing. It will be past his bedtime."

"Well, you'll have to let him see the guests anyway, Barbara; no boy should miss that."

And then the car was racing along the road out to Settlers Island. And then you were home.

Ransom watched as the loathsome creature edged toward him. Though not as large as some of the others its great teeth looked formidable indeed, and in one hand it grasped a heavy jungle knife with a razor edge.

For a moment he thought it would molest the unconscious girl, but it circled around her to stand before Ransom himself, never meeting his eyes.

Then, with a gesture as unexpected as it was frightening, it bent suddenly to press its hideous face against his pinioned right hand, and a great, shuddering gasp ran through the creature's twisted body.

Ransom waited, tense.

Again that deep inhalation, seeming almost a sob. Then the beast-man straightened up, looking into Ransom's face but avoiding his gaze. A thin, strangely familiar whine came from the monster's throat.

"Cut me loose," Ransom ordered.

"Yes. This I came to. Yes, Master." The huge head, wider than it was high, bobbed up and down. Then the sharp blade of the machete bit into the straps holding Ransom. As soon as he was free he took the blade from the willing hand of the beast-man and freed the limbs of the girl on the operating table. She was light in his arms, and for an instant he stood looking down at her tranquil face.

"Come, Master." The beast-man pulled at his sleeve. "Bruno knows a way out. Follow Bruno."

A hidden flight of steps led to a long and narrow corridor, almost pitch dark. "No one use this way," the beast-man said in his harsh voice. "They not find us here."

"Why did you free me?" Ransom asked.

There was a pause, then almost with an air of

shame the great, twisted form replied, "You smell good. And Bruno does not like Dr. Death."

Ransom's conjectures were confirmed. Gently he asked, "You were a dog before Dr. Death worked on you, weren't you, Bruno?"

"Yes." The beast-man's voice held a sort of pride. "A St. Bernard. I have seen pictures."

"Dr. Death should have known better than to employ his foul skills on such a noble animal," Ransom reflected aloud. "Dogs are too shrewd in judging character; but then the evil are always foolish in the final analysis."

Unexpectedly the dog-man halted in front of him, forcing Ransom to stop too. For a moment the massive head bent over the unconscious girl. Then there was a barely audible growl. "You say, Master, that I can judge. Then I tell you Bruno does not like this female Dr. Death calls Talar of the Long Eyes."

You put the open book face-down on the pillow and jump up, hugging yourself and skipping bare heels around the room. Marvelous! Wonderful!

But no more reading tonight. Save it, save it. Turn the light off, and in the delicious dark put the book reverently away under the bed, pushing aside pieces of the Tinker Toy set and the box with the filling station game cards. Tomorrow there will be more, and you can hardly wait for tomorrow. You lie on your back, hands under head, covers up to chin and when you close your eyes, you can see it all: the island, with jungle trees swaying in the sea wind; Dr. Death's castle lifting its big, cold greyness against the hot sky.

The whole house is still, only the wind and the Atlantic are out, the familiar sounds. Downstairs Mother is talking to Aunt May and Aunt Julie and you fall asleep.

You are awake! Listen! Late, it's very late, a strange time you have almost forgotten. Listen!

So quiet it hurts. Something. Something. Listen! On the steps.

You get out of bed and find your flashlight. Not because you are brave, but because you cannot wait there in the dark.



There is nothing in the narrow, cold little stairwell outside your door. Nothing in the big hallway of the second floor. You shine your light quickly from end to end. Aunt Julie is breathing through her nose, but there is nothing frightening about that sound, you know what it is: only Aunt Julie, asleep, breathing loud through her nose.

Nothing on the stairs coming up.

You go back to your room, turn off your flashlight, and get into bed. When you are almost sleeping there is the scrabbling sound of hard claws on the floorboards and a rough tongue touching your fingertips. "Don't be afraid, Master, it is only Bruno." And you feel him, warm with his own warm and smelling of his own smell, lying beside your bed.

Then it is morning. The bedroom is cold, and there is no one in it but yourself. You go into the bathroom where there is a thing like a fan but with hot electric wires to dress.

Downstairs Mother is up already with a cloth thing tied over her hair, and so are Aunt May and Aunt Julie, sitting at the table with coffee and milk and big slices of fried ham. Aunt Julie says, "Hello, Tackie," and Mother smiles at you. There is a plate out for you already and you have ham and toast.

All day the three women are cleaning and putting up decorations—red and gold paper masks Aunt Julie made to hang on the wall, and funny lights that change color and go around—and you try to stay out of the way, and bring in wood for a fire in the big fireplace that almost never gets used. Jason comes, and Aunt May and Aunt Julie don't like him, but he helps some and goes into town in his car for things he forgot to buy before. He won't take you, this time. The wind comes in around the window, but they let you alone in your room and it's even quiet up there because they're all downstairs.

Ransom looked at the enigmatic girl incredulously.

"You do not believe me," she said. It was a simple statement of fact, without anger or accusation.

"You'll have to admit it's pretty hard to believe," he temporized. "A city older than civilization, buried in the jungle here on this little island."

Talar said tonelessly, "When you were as he"—she pointed at the dog-man—"is now, Lemuria was queen of this sea. All that is gone, except my city. Is not that enough to satisfy even Time?"

Bruno plucked at Ransom's sleeve. "Do not go, Master! Beast-men go sometimes, beast-men Dr. Death does not want, few come back. They are very evil at that place."

"You see?" A slight smile played about Talar's ripe lips. "Even your slave testifies for me. My city exists."

"How far?" Ransom asked curtly.

"Perhaps half a day's travel through the jungle." The girl paused, as though afraid to say more.

"What is it?" Ransom asked.

"You will lead us against Dr. Death? We wish to cleanse this island which is our home."

"Sure. I don't like him any more than your people do. Maybe less."

"Even if you do not like my people you will lead them?"

"If they'll have me. But you're hiding something. What is it?"

"You see me, and I might be a woman of your own people. Is that not so?" They were moving through the jungle again now, the dog-man reluctantly acting as rear guard.

"Very few girls of my people are as beautiful as you are, but otherwise yes."

"And for that reason I am high priestess to my people, for in me the ancient blood runs pure and sweet. But it is not so with all." Her voice sunk to a whisper. "When a tree is very old, and yet still lives, sometimes the limbs are strangely twisted. Do you understand?"

"Tackie? Tackie are you in there?"

"Uh-huh." You put the book inside your sweater.

"Well, come and open this door. Little boys ought not to lock their doors. Don't you want to see the company?" You open, and Aunt May's a gypsy with long hair that

isn't hers around her face and a mask that is only at her eyes.

Downstairs cars are stopping in front of the house and Mother is standing at the door dressed in Day-Glo robes that open way down the front but cover her arms almost to the ends of her fingers. She is talking to everyone as they come in, and you see her eyes are bright and strange the way they are sometimes when she dances by herself and talks when no one is listening.

A woman with a fish for a head and a shiny, silver dress is Aunt Julie. A doctor with a doctor's coat and listening thing and a shiny thing on his head to look through is Dr. Black, and a soldier in a black uniform with a pirate thing on his hat and a whip is Jason. The big table has a punch-bowl and cakes and little sandwiches and hot bean dip. You pull away when the gypsy is talking to someone and take some cakes and sit under the table watching legs.

There is music and some of the legs dance, and you stay under there a long time.

Then a man's and a girl's legs dance close to the table and there is suddenly a laughing face in front of you—Captain Ransom's. "What are you doing under there, Tack? Come out and join the party." And you crawl out, feeling very small instead of older, but older when you stand up. Captain Ransom is dressed like a castaway in a ragged shirt and pants torn off at the knees, but all clean and starched. His love beads are seeds and sea shells, and he has his arm around a girl with no clothes at all, just jewelry.

"Tack, this is Talar of the Long Eyes."

You smile and bow and kiss her hand, and are nearly as tall as she. All around people are dancing or talking, and no one seems to notice you. With Captain Ransom on one side of Talar and you on the other you thread your way through the room, avoiding the dancers and the little groups of people with drinks. In the room you and Mother use as a living room when there's no company, two men and two girls are making love with the television on, and in the little room past that a girl is sitting on the floor with her back to the wall, and men are standing in the corners. "Hello," the girl says. "Hello to you all." She is the first one to have noticed you, and you stop.

"Hello."

"I'm going to pretend you're real. Do you mind?"

"No." You look around for Ransom and Talar, but they are gone and you think that they are probably in the living room, kissing with the others.

"This is my third trip. Not a good trip, but not a bad trip. But I should have had a monitor—you know, someone to stay with me. Who are those men?"

The men in the corners stir, and you can hear the clinking of their armor and see light glinting on it and you look away. "I think they're from the City. They probably came to watch out for Talar," and somehow you know that this is the truth.

"Make them come out where I can see them."

Before you can answer, Dr. Death says, "I don't really think you would want to," and you turn and find him standing just behind you wearing full evening dress and a cloak. He takes your arm. "Come on, Tackie, there's something I think you should see." You follow him to the back stairs and then up, and along the hall to the door of Mother's room.

Mother is inside on the bed, and Dr. Black is standing over her filling a hypodermic. As you watch, he pushes up her sleeve so that all the other injection marks show ugly and red on her arm, and all you can think of is Dr. Death bending over Talar on the operating table. You run downstairs looking for Ransom, but he is gone and there is nobody at the party at all except the real people and, in the cold shadows of the back stoop, Dr. Death's assistant Golo, who will not speak, but only stares at you in the moonlight with pale eyes.

The next house down the beach belongs to a woman you have seen sometimes cutting down the dry fall remnant of her asparagus or hilling up her roses while you played. You pound at her door and try to explain, and after a while she calls the police.

... across the sky. The flames were licking at the roof timbers now. Ransom made a megaphone of his hands and shouted, "Give up! You'll all be burned to death if you stay in there!" but the only reply was a shot and he was not certain they had heard him. The

Lemurian bowmen discharged another flight of arrows at the windows.

Talar grasped his arm: "Come back before they kill you."

Numbly he retreated with her, stepping across the massive body of the bull-man, which lay pierced by twenty or more shafts.

You fold back the corner of a page and put the book down. The waiting room is cold and bare, and although sometimes the people hurrying through smile at you, you feel lonely. After a long time a big man with grey hair and a woman in a blue uniform want to talk to you.

The woman's voice is friendly, but only the way teachers' voices are sometimes. "I'll bet you're sleepy, Tackman. Can you talk to us a little still before you go to bed?"

"Yes."

The grey-haired man says, "Do you know who gave your mother drugs?"

"I don't know. Dr. Black was going to do something to her."

He waves that aside. "Not that. You know, medicine. Your mother took a lot of medicine. Who gave it to her? Jason?"

"I don't know."

The woman says, "Your mother is going to be well, Tackman, but it will be a while—do you understand? For now you're going to have to live for a while in a big house with some other boys."

"All right."

The man: "Amphetamines. Does that mean anything to you? Did you ever hear that word?"

You shake your head.

The woman: "Dr. Black was only trying to help your mother, Tackman. I know you don't understand, but she used several medicines at once, mixed them, and that can be very bad."

They go away and you pick up the book and riffle the pages, but you do not read. At your elbow Dr. Death says, "What's the matter, Tackie?" He smells of scorched cloth and there is a streak of blood across his forehead, but he smiles and lights one of his cigarettes.

You hold up the book. "I don't want it to end. You'll be killed at the end."

"And you don't want to lose me? That's touching."

"You will, won't you? You'll burn up in the fire and Captain Ransom will go away and leave Talar."

Dr. Death smiles. "But if you start the book again we'll all be back. Even Golo and the bull-man."

"Honest?"

"Certainly." He stands up and tousles your hair. "It's the same with you, Tackie. You're too young to realize it yet, but it's the same with you."

## ILL MET IN LANKHMAR

---

Fritz Leiber

Silent as specters, the tall and the fat thief edged past the dead, noose-strangled watch-leopard, out the thick, lock-picked door of Jengao the Gem Merchant, and strolled east on Cash Street through the thin black night-smog of Lankhmar.

East on Cash it had to be, for west at Cash and Silver was a police post with unbribed guardsmen restlessly grounding and rattling their pikes.

But tall, tight-lipped Slevyas, master thief candidate, and fat, darting-eyed Fissif, thief second class, with a rating of talented in double-dealing, were not in the least worried. Everything was proceeding according to plan. Each carried thonged in his pouch a smaller pouch of jewels of the first water only, for Jengao, now breathing stertorously inside and senseless from the slugging he'd suffered, must be allowed, nay, nursed and encouraged to build his business again and so ripen it for another plucking. Almost the first law of the Thieves' Guild was never to kill the hen that laid eggs with a ruby in the yolk.

The two thieves also had the relief of knowing that they were going straight home now, not to a wife, Arath forbid!—or to parents and children, all gods forbend!—but to Thieves' House, headquarters and barracks of the almighty Guild, which was father to them both and mother too, though no woman was allowed inside its ever-open portal on Cheap Street.

In addition there was the comforting knowledge that



Nebula Award, Best Novella 1970

although each was armed only with his regulation silver-hilted thief's knife, they were nevertheless most strongly convoyed by three reliable and lethal bravoës hired for the evening from the Slayers' Brotherhood, one moving well ahead of them as point, the other two well behind as rear guard and chief striking force.

And if all that were not enough to make Slevyas and Fissif feel safe and serene, there danced along soundlessly beside them in the shadow of the north curb a small, malformed or at any rate somewhat large-headed shape that might have been a very small dog, a somewhat undersized cat, or a very big rat.

True, this last guard was not an absolutely unalloyed reassurance. Fissif strained upward to whisper softly in Slevyas' long-lobed ear, "Damned if I like being dogged by that familiar of Hristomilo, no matter what security he's supposed to afford us. Bad enough that Krovas did employ or let himself be cowed into employing a sorcerer of most dubious, if dire, reputation and aspect, but that—"

"Shut your trap!" Slevyas hissed still more softly.

Fissif obeyed with a shrug and employed himself in darting his gaze this way and that, but chiefly ahead.

Some distance in that direction, in fact just short of Gold Street, Cash was bridged by an enclosed second-story passageway connecting the two buildings which made up the premises of the famous stone-masons and sculptors Rokkermas and Slaarg. The firm's buildings themselves were fronted by very shallow porticoes supported by unnecessarily large pillars of varied shape and decoration, advertisements more than structural members.

From just beyond the bridge came two low, brief whistles, a signal from the point bravo that he had inspected that area for ambushes and discovered nothing suspicious and that Gold Street was clear.

Fissif was by no means entirely satisfied by the safety signal. To tell the truth, the fat thief rather enjoyed being apprehensive and even fearful, at least up to a point. So he scanned most closely through the thin, sooty smog the frontages and overhangs of Rokkermas and Slaarg.

On this side the bridge was pierced by four small windows, between which were three large niches in which stood—another advertisement—three life-size plaster stat-



ues, somewhat eroded by years of weather and dyed varying tones of dark gray by as many years of smog. Approaching Jengao's before the burglary, Fissif had noted them. Now it seemed to him that the statue to the right had indefinitely changed. It was that of a man of medium height wearing cloak and hood, who gazed down with crossed arms and brooding aspect. No, not indefinitely quite—the statue was a more uniform dark gray now, he fancied, cloak, hood, and face; it seemed somewhat sharper featured, less eroded; and he would almost swear it had grown shorter!

Just below the niches, moreover, there was a scattering of gray and raw white rubble which he didn't recall having been there earlier. He strained to remember if during the excitement of the burglary, the unsleeping watch-corner of his mind had recorded a distant crash, and now he believed it had. His quick imagination pictured the possibility of a hole behind each statue, through which it might be given a strong push and so tumbled onto passers-by, himself and Slevyas specifically, the right-hand statue having been crashed to test the device and then replaced with a near twin.

He would keep close watch on all the statues as he and Slevyas walked under. It would be easy to dodge if he saw one start to over-balance. Should he yank Slevyas out of harm's way when that happened? It was something to think about.

His restless attention fixed next on the porticoes and pillars. The latter, thick and almost three yards tall, were placed at irregular intervals as well as being irregularly shaped and fluted, for Rokkermas and Slaarg were most modern and emphasized the unfinished look, randomness, and the unexpected.

Nevertheless it seemed to Fissif, that there was an intensification of unexpectedness, specifically that there was one more pillar under the porticoes than when he had last passed by. He couldn't be sure which pillar was the newcomer, but he was almost certain there was one.

The enclosed bridge was close now. Fissif glanced up at the right-hand statue and noted other differences from the one he'd recalled. Although shorter, it seemed to hold itself more strainingly erect, while the frown carved in its

dark gray face was not so much one of philosophic brooding as sneering contempt, self-conscious cleverness, and conceit.

Still, none of the three statues toppled forward as he and Slevyas walked under the bridge. However, something else happened to Fissif at that moment.

One of the pillars winked at him.

The Gray Mouser turned round in the right-hand niche, leaped up and caught hold of the cornice, silently vaulted to the flat roof, and crossed it precisely in time to see the two thieves emerge below.

Without hesitation he leaped forward and down, his body straight as a crossbow bolt, the soles of his ratskin boots aimed at the shorter thief's fat-buried shoulder blades, though leading him a little to allow for the yard he'd walk while the Mouser hurtled toward him.

In the instant that he leaped, the tall thief glanced up over-shoulder and whipped out a knife, though making no move to push or pull Fissif out of the way of the human projectile speeding toward him.

More swiftly than one would have thought he could manage, Fissif whirled round then and thinly screamed, "Slivikin!"

The ratskin boots took him high in the belly. It was like landing on a big cushion. Writhing aside from Slevyas' thrust, the Mouser somersaulted forward, and as the fat thief's skull hit a cobble with a dull *bong* he came to his feet with dirk in hand, ready to take on the tall one.

But there was no need. Slevyas, his eyes glazed, was toppling too.

One of the pillars had sprung forward, trailing a voluminous robe. A big hood had fallen back from a youthful face and long-haired head. Brawny arms had emerged from the long, loose sleeves that had been the pillar's topmost section. While the big fist ending one of the arms had dealt Slevyas a shrewd knockout punch on the chin.

Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser faced each other across the two thieves sprawled senseless. They were poised for attack, yet for the moment neither moved.

Fafhrd said, "Our motives for being here seem identical."

"Seem? Surely must be!" the Mouser answered curtly,

fiercely eyeing this potential new foe, who was taller by a head than the tall thief.

"You said?"

"I said, 'Seem? Surely must be!'"

"How civilized of you!" Fafhrd commented in pleased tones.

"Civilized?" the Mouser demanded suspiciously, gripping his dirk tighter.

"To care, in the eye of action, exactly what's said," Fafhrd explained. Without letting the Mouser out of his vision, he glanced down. His gaze traveled from the pouch of one fallen thief to that of the other. Then he looked up at the Mouser with a broad, ingenuous smile.

"Fifty-fifty?" he suggested.

The Mouser hesitated, sheathed his dirk, and rapped out, "A deal!" He knelt abruptly, his fingers on the drawstrings of Fissif's pouch. "Loot you Slivikin," he directed.

It was natural to suppose that the fat thief had been crying his companion's name at the end.

Without looking up from where he knelt, Fafhrd remarked, "That . . . ferret they had with them. Where did it go?"

"Ferret?" the Mouser answered briefly. "It was a marmoset!"

"Marmoset," Fafhrd mused. "That's a small tropical monkey, isn't it? Well, might have been—I've never been south—but I got the impression that—"

The silent, two-pronged rush which almost overwhelmed them at that instant really surprised neither of them. Each had unconsciously been expecting it.

The three braves racing down upon them in concerted attack, all with swords poised to thrust, had assumed that the two highjackers would be armed at most with knives and as timid in weapons-combat as the general run of thieves and counter-thieves. So it was they who were thrown into confusion when with the lightning speed of youth the Mouser and Fafhrd sprang up, whipped out fearsomely long swords, and faced them back to back.

The Mouser made a very small parry in *carte* so that the thrust of the bravo from the east went past his left side by only a hair's breadth. He instantly riposted. His adversary, desperately springing back, parried in turn in

carte. Hardly slowing, the tip of the Mouser's long, slim sword dropped under that parry with the delicacy of a princess curtsying and then leaped forward and a little upward and went between two scales of the bravo's armored jerkin and between his ribs and through his heart and out his back as if all were angel food cake.

Meanwhile Fafhrd, facing the two bravoos from the west, swept aside their low thrusts with somewhat larger, down-sweeping parries in seconde and low prime, then flipped up his sword, as long as the Mouser's but heavier, so that it slashed through the neck of his right-hand adversary, half decapitating him. Then dropping back a swift step, he readied a thrust for the other.

But there was no need. A narrow ribbon of bloodied steel, followed by a gray glove and arm, flashed past him from behind and transfixd the last bravo with the identical thrust the Mouser had used on the first.

The two young men wiped their swords. Fafhrd brushed the palm of his open right hand down his robe and held it out. The Mouser pulled off his right-hand gray glove and shook it. Without word exchanged, they knelt and finished looting the two unconscious thieves, securing the small bags of jewels. With an oily towel and then a dry one, the Mouser sketchily wiped from his face the greasy ash-soot mixture which had darkened it.

Then, after only a questioning eye-twitch east on the Mouser's part and a nod from Fafhrd, they swiftly walked on in the direction Slevyas and Fissif and their escort had been going.

After reconnoitering Gold Street, they crossed it and continued east on Cash at Fafhrd's gestured proposal.

"My woman's at the Golden Lamprey," he explained.

"Let's pick her up and take her home to meet my girl," the Mouser suggested.

"Home?" Fafhrd inquired politely.

"Dim Lane," the Mouser volunteered.

"Silver Eel?"

"Behind it. We'll have some drinks."

"I'll pick up a jug. Never have too much juice."

"True. I'll let you."

Fafhrd stopped, again wiped right hand on robe, and held it out. "Name's Fafhrd."

Again the Mouser shook it. "Gray Mouser," he said a touch defiantly, as if challenging anyone to laugh at the sobriquet.

"Gray Mouser, eh?" Fafhrd remarked. "Well, you killed yourself a couple of rats tonight."

"That I did." The Mouser's chest swelled and he threw back his head. Then with a comic twitch of his nose and a sidewise half-grin he admitted, "You'd have got your second man easily enough. I stole him from you to demonstrate my speed. Besides, I was excited."

Fafhrd chuckled. "You're telling me? How do you suppose I was feeling?"

Once more the Mouser found himself grinning. What the deuce did this big fellow have that kept him from putting on his usual sneers?

Fafhrd was asking himself a similar question. All his life he'd mistrusted small men, knowing his height awakened their instant jealousy. But this clever little chap was somehow an exception. He prayed to Kos that Vlana would like him.

On the northeast corner of Cash and Whore a slow-burning torch shaded by a broad, gilded spiral cast a cone of light up into the thickening black night-smog and another cone down on the cobbles before the tavern door. Out of the shadows into the second cone stepped Vlana, handsome in a narrow black velvet dress and red stockings, her only ornaments a silver-hilted dagger in a silver sheath and a silver-worked black pouch, both on a plain black belt.

Fafhrd introduced the Gray Mouser, who behaved with an almost fawning courtesy. Vlana studied him boldly, then gave him a tentative smile.

Fafhrd opened under the torch the small pouch he'd taken off the tall thief. Vlana looked down into it. She put her arms around Fafhrd, hugged him tight and kissed him soundly. Then she thrust the jewels into the pouch on her belt.

When that was done, he said, "Look, I'm going to buy a jug. You tell her what happened, Mouser."

When he came out of the Golden Lamprey he was carrying four jugs in the crook of his left arm and wiping his lips on the back of his right hand. Vlana frowned. He

grinned at her. The Mouser smacked his lips at the jugs. They continued east on Cash. Fafhrd realized that the frown was for more than the jugs and the prospect of stupidly drunken male revelry. The Mouser tactfully walked ahead.

When his figure was little more than a blob in the thickening smog, Vlana whispered harshly, "You had two members of the Thieves' Guild knocked out cold and you didn't cut their throats?"

"We slew three braves," Fafhrd protested by way of excuse.

"My quarrel is not with the Slayers' Brotherhood, but that abominable guild. You swore to me that whenever you had the chance—"

"Vlana! I couldn't have the Gray Mouser thinking I was an amateur counter-thief consumed by hysteria and blood lust."

"Well, he told me that *he'd* have slit their throats in a wink, if he'd known I wanted it that way."

"He was only playing up to you from courtesy."

"Perhaps and perhaps not. But you knew and you didn't—"

"Vlana, shut up!"

Her frown became a rageful glare, then suddenly she laughed widely, smiled twitchingly as if she were about to cry, mastered herself and smiled more lovingly. "Pardon me, darling," she said. "Sometimes you must think I'm going mad and sometimes I believe I am."

"Well, don't," he told her shortly. "Think of the jewels we've won instead. And behave yourself with our new friends. Get some wine inside you and relax. I mean to enjoy myself tonight. I've earned it."

She nodded and clutched his arm in agreement and for comfort and sanity. They hurried to catch up with the dim figure ahead.

The Mouser, turning left, led them a half square north on Cheap Street to where a narrower way went east again. The black mist in it looked solid.

"Dim Lane," the Mouser explained.

Vlana said, "Dim's too weak—too *transparent* a word for it tonight," with an uneven laugh in which there were

still traces of hysteria and which ended in a fit of strangled coughing.

She gasped out, "Damn Lankhmar's night-smog! What a hell of a city!"

"It's the nearness here of the Great Salt Marsh," Fafhrd explained.

And he did indeed have part of the answer. Lying low betwixt the Marsh, the Inner Sea, the River Hlal, and the southern grain fields watered by canals fed by the Hlal, Lankhmar with its innumerable smokes was the prey of fogs and sooty smogs.

About halfway to Carter Street, a tavern on the north side of the lane emerged from the murk. A gape-jawed serpentine shape of pale metal crested with soot hung high for a sign. Beneath it they passed a door curtained with begrimed leather, the slit in which spilled out noise, pulsing torchlight, and the reek of liquor.

Just beyond the Silver Eel the Mouser led them through an inky passageway outside the tavern's east wall. They had to go single file, feeling their way along rough, slimily bemisted brick.

"Mind the puddle," the Mouser warned. "It's deep as the Outer Sea."

The passageway widened. Reflected torchlight filtering down through the dark mist allowed them to make out only the most general shape of their surroundings. Crowding close to the back of the Silver Eel rose a dismal, rickety building of darkened brick and blackened, ancient wood. From the fourth story attic under the ragged-guttered roof, faint lines of yellow light shone around and through three tightly latticed windows. Beyond was a narrow alley.

"Bones Alley," the Mouser told them.

By now Vlana and Fafhrd could see a long, narrow wooden outside stairway, steep yet sagging and without a rail, leading up to the lighted attic. The Mouser relieved Fafhrd of the jugs and went up it quite swiftly.

"Follow me when I've reached the top," he called back. "I think it'll take your weight, Fafhrd, but best one of you at a time."

Fafhrd gently pushed Vlana ahead. She mounted to the Mouser where he now stood in an open doorway, from

which streamed yellow light that died swiftly in the night-smog. He was lightly resting a hand on a big, empty, wrought-iron lamp-hook firmly set in a stone section of the outside wall. He bowed aside, and she went in.

Fafhrd followed, placing his feet as close as he could to the wall, his hands ready to grab for support. The whole stairs creaked ominously and each step gave a little as he shifted his weight onto it. Near the top, one step gave way with the muted crack of half-rotted wood. Gently as he could, he sprawled himself hand and knee on as many steps as he could get, to distribute his weight, and cursed sulphurously.

"Don't fret, the jugs are safe," the Mouser called down gayly.

Fafhrd crawled the rest of the way and did not get to his feet until he was inside the doorway. When he had done so, he almost gasped with surprise.

It was like rubbing the verdigris from a cheap brass ring and revealing a rainbow-fired diamond of the first water. Rich drapes, some twinkling with embroidery of silver and gold, covered the walls except where the shuttered windows were—and the shutters of those were gilded. Similar but darker fabrics hid the low ceiling, making a gorgeous canopy in which the flecks of gold and silver were like stars. Scattered about were plump cushions and low tables, on which burned a multitude of candles. On shelves against the walls were neatly stacked like small logs a vast reserve of candles, numerous scrolls, jugs, bottles, and enameled boxes. In a large fireplace was set a small metal stove, neatly blacked, with an ornate firepot. Also set beside the stove was a tidy pyramid of thin, resinous torches with frayed ends—fire-kindlers and other pyramids of small, short logs and gleamingly black coal.

On a low dais by the fireplace was a couch covered with cloth of gold. On it sat a thin, pale-faced, delicately handsome girl clad in a dress of thick violet silk worked with silver and belted with a silver chain. Silver pins headed with amethysts held in place her high-piled black hair. Round her shoulders was drawn a wrap of snow-white serpent fur. She was leaning forward with uneasy-seeming graciousness and extending a narrow white hand



which shook a little to Vlana, who knelt before her and now gently took the proffered hand and bowed her head over it, her own glossy, straight, dark-brown hair making a canopy, and pressed its back to her lips.

Fafhrd was happy to see his woman playing up properly to this definitely odd, though delightful situation. Then looking at Vlana's long, red-stockinged leg stretched far behind her as she knelt on the other, he noted that the floor was everywhere strewn—to the point of double, treble, and quadruple overlaps—with thick-piled, close-woven, many-hued rugs of the finest quality imported from the Eastern Lands. Before he knew it, his thumb had shot toward the Gray Mouser.

"You're the Rug Robber!" he proclaimed. "You're the Carpet Crimp!—and the Candle Corsair too!" he continued, referring to two series of unsolved thefts which had been on the lips of all Lankhmar when he and Vlana had arrived a moon ago.

The Mouser shrugged impassive-faced at Fafhrd, then suddenly grinned, his slitted eyes a-twinkle, and broke into an impromptu dance which carried him whirling and jigging around the room and left him behind Fafhrd, where he deftly reached down the hooded and long-sleeved huge robe from the latter's stooping shoulders, shook it out, carefully folded it, and set it on a pillow.

The girl in violet nervously patted with her free hand the cloth of gold beside her, and Vlana seated herself there, carefully not too close, and the two women spoke together in low voices, Vlana taking the lead.

The Mouser took off his own gray, hooded cloak and laid it beside Fafhrd's. Then they unbelted their swords, and the Mouser set them atop folded robes and cloak.

Without those weapons and bulking garments, the two men looked suddenly like youths, both with clear, close-shaven faces, both slender despite the swelling muscles of Fafhrd's arms and calves, he with long red-gold hair falling down his back and about his shoulders, the Mouser with dark hair cut in bangs, the one in brown leather tunic worked with copper wire, the other in jerkin of coarsely woven gray silk.

They smiled at each other. The feeling each had of having turned boy all at once made their smiles embar-

rassed. The Mouser cleared his throat and, bowing a little, but looking still at Fafhrd, extended a loosely spread-fingered arm toward the golden couch and said with a preliminary stammer, though otherwise smoothly enough, "Fafhrd, my good friend, permit me to introduce you to my princess. Ivrian, my dear, receive Fafhrd graciously if you please, for tonight he and I fought back to back against three and we conquered."

Fafhrd advanced, stooping a little, the crown of his red-gold hair brushing the be-starred canopy, and knelt before Ivrian exactly as Vlana had. The slender hand extended to him looked steady now, but was still quiveringly a-tremble, he discovered as soon as he touched it. He handled it as if it were silk woven of the white spider's gossamer, barely brushing it with his lips, and still felt nervous as he mumbled some compliments.

He did not sense that the Mouser was quite as nervous as he, if not more so, praying hard that Ivrian would not overdo her princess part and snub their guests, or collapse in trembling or tears, for Fafhrd and Vlana were literally the first beings that he had brought into the luxurious nest he had created for his aristocratic beloved—save the two love birds that twittered in a silver cage hanging to the other side of the fireplace from the dais.

Despite his shrewdness and cynicism, it never occurred to the Mouser that it was chiefly his charming but preposterous coddling of Ivrian that was making her doll-like.

But now as Ivrian smiled at last, the Mouser relaxed with relief, fetched two silver cups and two silver mugs, carefully selected a bottle of violet wine, then with a grin at Fafhrd uncorked instead one of the jugs the Northerner had brought, and near-brimmed the four gleaming vessels and served them all four.

With no trace of stammer this time, he toasted, "To my greatest theft to date in Lankhmar, which willy-nilly I must share fifty-fifty with"—He couldn't resist the sudden impulse—"with this great, long-haired, barbarian lout here!" And he downed a quarter of his mug of pleasantly burning wine fortified with brandy.

Fafhrd quaffed off half of his, then toasted back, "To the most boastful and finical little civilized chap I've ever deigned to share loot with," quaffed off the rest, and

with a great smile that showed white teeth, held out his empty mug.

The Mouser gave him a refill, topped off his own, then set that down to go to Ivrian and pour into her lap from their small pouch the gems he'd filched from Fissif. They gleamed in their new, enviable location like a small puddle of rainbow-hued quicksilver.

Ivrian jerked back a-tremble, almost spilling them, but Vlane gently caught her arm, steadying it. At Ivrian's direction, Vlane fetched a blue-enameled box inlaid with silver, and the two of them transferred the jewels from Ivrian's lap into its blue velvet interior. Then they chatted on.

As he worked through his second mug in smaller gulps, Fafhrd relaxed and began to get a deeper feeling of his surroundings. The dazzling wonder of the first glimpse of this throne room in a slum faded, and he began to note the ricketiness and rot under the grand overlay.

Black, rotten wood showed here and there between the drapes and loosed its sick, ancient stinks. The whole floor sagged under the rugs, as much as a span at the center of the room. Threads of night-smog were coming through the shutters, making evanescent black arabesques against the gilt. The stones of the large fireplace had been scrubbed and varnished, yet most of the mortar was gone from between them; some sagged, others were missing altogether.

The Mouser had been building a fire there in the stove. Now he pushed in all the way the yellow-flaring kindler he'd lit from the fire-pot, hooked the little black door shut over the mounting flames, and turned back into the room. As if he'd read Fafhrd's mind, he took up several cones of incense, set their peaks a-smolder at the fire-pot, and placed them about the room in gleaming, shallow brass bowls. Then he stuffed silken rags in the widest shutter-cracks, took up his silver mug again, and for a moment gave Fafhrd a very hard look.

Next moment he was smiling and lifting his mug to Fafhrd, who was doing the same. Need of refills brought them close together. Hardly moving his lips, the Mouser explained, "Ivrian's father was a duke. I slew him. A most cruel man, cruel to his daughter too, yet a duke, so that

Ivrian is wholly unused to fending for herself. I pride myself that I maintain her in grander state than her father did with all his servants."

Fafhrd nodded and said amiably, "Surely you've thieved together a charming little place."

From the couch Viana called in her husky contralto, "Gray Mouser, your Princess would hear an account of tonight's adventure. And might we have more wine?"

Ivrian called, "Yes, please, Mouser."

The Mouser looked to Fafhrd for the go-ahead, got the nod, and launched into his story. But first he served the girls wine. There wasn't enough for their cups, so he opened another jug and after a moment of thought uncorked all three, setting one by the couch, one by Fafhrd where he sprawled now on the pillowy carpet, and reserving one for himself. Ivrian looked apprehensive at this signal of heavy drinking ahead, Viana cynical.

The Mouser told the tale of counter-thievery well, acting it out in part, and with only the most artistic of embellishments—the ferret-marmoset before escaping ran up his body and tried to scratch out his eyes—and he was interrupted only twice.

When he said, "And so with a whish and a snick I bared Scalpel—" Fafhrd remarked, "Oh, so you've nick-named your sword as well as yourself?"

The Mouser drew himself up. "Yes, and I call my dirk Cat's Claw. Any objections? Seem childish to you?"

"Not at all. I call my own sword Graywand. Pray continue."

And when he mentioned the beastie of uncertain nature that had gamboled along with the thieves (and attacked his eyes!), Ivrian paled and said with a shudder, "Mouser! That sounds like a witch's familiar!"

"Wizard's," Viana corrected. "Those gutless Guild-villains have no truck with women, except as fee'd or forced vehicles for their lust. But Krovas, their current king, is noted for taking *all* precautions, and might well have a warlock in his service."

"That seems most likely; it harrows me with dread," the Mouser agreed with ominous gaze and sinister voice, eagerly accepting any and all atmospheric enhancements of his performance.

When he was done, the girls, eyes flashing and fond, toasted him and Fafhrd for their cunning and bravery. The Mouser bowed and eye-twinklingly smiled about, then sprawled him down with a weary sigh, wiping his forehead with a silken cloth and downing a large drink.

After asking Vlana's leave, Fafhrd told the adventurous tale of their escape from Cold Corner—he from his clan, she from an acting troupe—and of their progress to Lankhmar, where they lodged now in an actors' tenement near the Plaza of Dark Delights. Ivrian hugged herself to Vlana and shivered large-eyed at the witchy parts of his tale.

The only proper matter he omitted from his account was Vlana's fixed intent to get a monstrous revenge on the Thieves' Guild for torturing to death her accomplices and harrying her out of Lankhmar when she'd tried free-lance thieving in the city before they met. Nor of course did he mention his own promise—foolish, he thought now—to help her in this bloody business.

After he'd done and got his applause, he found his throat dry despite his skald's training, but when he sought to wet it, he discovered that his mug was empty and his jug too, though he didn't feel in the least drunk—he had talked all the liquor out of him, he told himself, a little of the stuff escaping in each glowing word he'd spoken.

The Mouser was in like plight and not drunk either—though inclined to pause mysteriously and peer toward infinity before answering question or making remark. This time he suggested, after a particularly long infinity-gaze, that Fafhrd accompany him to the Eel while he purchased a fresh supply.

"But we've a lot of wine left in *our* jug," Ivrian protested. "Or at least a little," she amended. It did sound empty when Vlana shook it. "Besides, you've wine of all sorts here."

"Not this sort, dearest, and first rule is never mix 'em," the Mouser explained, wagging a finger. "That way lies unhealth, aye, and madness."

"My dear," Vlana said, sympathetically patting her wrist, "at some time in any good party all the men who are really men simply have to go out. It's extremely stupid, but it's their nature and can't be dodged, believe me."

"But, Mouser, I'm scared. Fafhrd's tale frightened me. So did yours—I'll hear that familiar a-scratch at the shutters when you're gone, I know I will!"

"Darlingest," the Mouser said with a small hiccup, "there is all the Inner Sea, all the Land of the Eight Cities, and to boot all the Trollstep Mountains in their sky-scraping grandeur between you and Fafhrd's Cold Corner and its silly sorcerers. As for familiars, pish!—they've never in the world been anything but the loathy, all-too-natural pets of stinking old women and womanish old men."

Vlana said merrily, "Let the sillies go, my dear. 'Twill give us chance for a private chat, during which we'll take 'em apart from wine-fumey head to restless foot."

So Ivrian let herself be persuaded, and the Mouser and Fafhrd slipped off, quickly shutting the door behind them to keep out the night-smog, and the girls heard their light steps down the stairs.

Waiting for the four jugs to be brought up from the Eel's cellar, the two newly met comrades ordered a mug each of the same fortified wine, or one near enough, and ensconced themselves at the least noisy end of the long serving counter in the tumultuous tavern. The Mouser deftly kicked a rat that thrust black head and shoulders from his hole.

After each had enthusiastically complimented the other on his girl, Fafhrd said diffidently, "Just between ourselves, do you think there might be anything to your sweet Ivrian's notion that the small dark creature with Slivikin and the other Guild-thief was a wizard's familiar, or at any rate the cunning pet of a sorcerer, trained to act as go-between and report disasters to his master or to Krovas?"

The Mouser laughed lightly. "You're building bugbears—formless baby ones unlicked by logic—out of nothing, dear barbarian brother, if I may say so. How could that vermin make useful report? I don't believe in animals that talk—except for parrots and such birds, which only . . . parrot."

"Ho, there, you back of the counter! Where are my jugs? Rats eaten the boy who went for them days ago?

Or he simply starved to death while on his cellar quest? Well, tell him to get a swifter move on and brim us again!

"No, Fafhrd, even granting the beastie to be directly or indirectly a creature of Krovas, and that it raced back to Thieves' House after our affray, what would that tell them there? Only that something had gone wrong with the burglary at Jengao's."

Fafhrd frowned and muttered stubbornly, "The furry slinker might, nevertheless, somehow convey our appearances to the Guild masters, and they might recognize us and come after us and attack us in our homes."

"My dear friend," the Mouser said condolingly, "once more begging your indulgence, I fear this potent wine is addling your wits. If the Guild knew our looks or where we lodged, they'd have been nastily on our necks days, weeks, nay, months ago. Or conceivably you don't know that their penalty for freelance thieving within the walls of Lankhmar is nothing less than death, after torture, if happily that can be acheived."

"I know all about that, and my plight is worse even than yours," Fafhrd retorted, and after pledging the Mouser to secrecy, told him the tale of Vlana's vendetta against the Guild and her deadly serious dreams of an all-encompassing revenge.

During his story the four jugs came up from the cellar, but the Mouser only ordered that their earthenware mugs be refilled.

Fafhrd finished, "And so, in consequence of a promise given by an infatuated and unschooled boy in a southern angle of the Cold Waste, I find myself now as a sober—well, at other times—man being constantly asked to make war on a power as great as that of Lankhmar's overlord, for as you may know the Guild has locals in all other cities and major towns of this land. I love Vlana dearly and she is an experienced thief herself, but on this one topic she has a kink in her brains, a hard knot neither logic nor persuasion can even begin to loosen."

"Certes t'would be insanity to assault the Guild direct, your wisdom's perfect there," the Mouser commented. "If you cannot break your most handsome girl of this mad notion, or coax her from it, then you must stoutly refuse e'en her least request in that direction."

"Certes I must," Fafhrd agreed with great emphasis and conviction. "I'd be an idiot taking on the Guild. Of course, if they should catch me, they'd kill me in any case for freelancing and highjacking. But wantonly to assault the Guild direct, kill one Guild-thief needlessly—lunacy entire!"

"You'd not only be a drunken, drooling idiot, you'd questionless be stinking in three nights at most from that emperor of diseases, Death. Malicious attacks on her person, blows directed at the organization, the Guild requites tenfold what she does other rule-breaking, freelancing included. So, no least giving-in to Vlana in this one matter."

"Agreed!" Fafhrd said loudly, shaking the Mouser's iron-thewed hand in a near crusher grip.

"And now we should be getting back to the girls," the Mouser said.

"After one more drink while we settle the score. Ho, boy!"

"Suits."

Vlana and Ivrian, deep in excited talk, both started at the pounding rush of footsteps up the stairs. Racing behemoths could hardly have made more noise. The creaking and groaning were prodigious, and there were the crashes of two treads breaking. The door flew open and their two men rushed in through a great mushroom top of night-smog which was neatly sliced off its black stem by the slam of the door.

"I told you we'd be back in a wink," the Mouser cried gayly to Ivrian, while Fafhrd strode forward, unmindful of the creaking floor, crying, "Dearest heart, I've missed you sorely," and caught up Vlana despite her voiced protests and pushing-off and kissed and hugged her soundly before setting her back on the couch again.

Oddly, it was Ivrian who appeared to be angry at Fafhrd then, rather than Vlana, who was smiling fondly if somewhat dazedly.

"Fafhrd, sir," she said boldly, her little fists set on her narrow hips, her tapered chin held high, her dark eyes blazing, "my beloved Vlana has been telling me about the unspeakably atrocious things the Thieves' Guild did to her and to her dearest friends. Pardon my



frank speaking to one I've only met, but I think it quite unmanly of you to refuse her the just revenge she desires and fully deserves. And that goes for you too, Mouser, who boasted to Vlana of what you would have done had you but known, all the while intending only empty ingratiation. You who in like case did not scruple to slay my very own father!"

It was clear to Fafhrd that while he and the Gray Mouser had idly boozed in the Eel, Vlana had been giving Ivrian a doubtless empurpled account of her grievances against the Guild and playing mercilessly on the naive girl's bookish, romantic sympathies and high concept of knightly honor. It was also clear to him that Ivrian was more than a little drunk. A three-quarters empty flask of violet wine of far Kiraay sat on the low table next the couch.

Yet he could think of nothing to do but spread his big hands helplessly and bow his head, more than the low ceiling made necessary, under Ivrian's glare, now reinforced by that of Vlana. After all, they *were* in the right. He *had* promised.

So it was the Mouser who first tried to rebut.

"Come now, pet," he cried lightly as he danced about the room, silk-stuffing more cracks against the thickening night-smog and stirring up and feeding the fire in the stove, "and you too, beauteous Lady Vlana. For the past month Fafhrd has by his highjackings been hitting the Guild-thieves where it hurts them most—in their purses a-dangle between their legs. Come, drink we up all." Under his handling, one of the new jugs came uncorked with a pop, and he darted about brimming silver cups and mugs.

"A merchant's revenge!" Ivrian retorted with scorn, not one whit appeased, but rather enangered anew. "At the least you and Fafhrd must bring Vlana the head of Krovas!"

"What would she *do* with it? What *good* would it be except to spot the carpets?" the Mouser plaintively inquired, while Fafhrd, gathering his wits at last and going down on one knee, said slowly, "Most respected Lady Ivrian, it is true I solemnly promised my beloved Vlana I would help her in her revenge, but if Mouser and

I should bring Vlane the head of Krovas, she and I would have to flee Lankhmar on the instant, every man's hand against us. While you infallibly would lose this fairyland Mouser has created for love of you and be forced to do likewise, be with him a beggar on the run for the rest of your natural lives."

While Fafhrd spoke, Ivrian snatched up her new-filled cup and drained it. Now she stood up straight as a soldier, her pale face flushed, and said scathingly, "*You count the cost!* You speak to me of *things*—" She waved at the many-hued splendor around her, "—of mere property, however costly—when *honor* is at stake. You gave Vlane *your word*. Oh, is knighthood wholly dead?"

Fafhrd could only shrug again and writhe inside and gulp a little easement from his silver mug.

In a master stroke, Vlane tried gently to draw Ivrian down to her golden seat again. "Softly, dearest," she pled. "You have spoken nobly for me and my cause, and believe me, I am most grateful. Your words revived in me great, fine feelings dead these many years. But of us here, only you are truly an aristocrat attuned to the highest proprieties. We other three are naught but thieves. Is it any wonder some of us put safety above honor and word-keeping, and most prudently avoid risking our lives? Yes, we are three thieves and I am outvoted. So please speak no more of honor and rash, dauntless bravery, but sit you down and—"

"You mean, they're both *afraid* to challenge the Thieves' Guild, don't you?" Ivrian said, eyes wide and face twisted by loathing. "I always thought my Mouser was a nobleman first and a thief second. Thieving's nothing. My father lived by cruel thievery done on rich wayfarers and neighbors less powerful than he, yet he was an aristocrat. Oh, you're *cowards*, both of you! *Poltroons!*" she finished, turning her eyes flashing with cold scorn first on the Mouser, then on Fafhrd.

The latter could stand it no longer. He sprang to his feet, face flushed, fists clenched at his sides, quite unmindful of his down-clattered mug and the ominous creak his sudden action drew from the sagging floor.

"*I am not a coward!*" he cried. "I'll dare Thieves' House and fetch you Krovas' head and toss it with blood

a-drip at Vlana's feet. I swear that by my sword Graywand here at my side!"

He slapped his left hip, found nothing there but his tunic, and had to content himself with pointing tremblingly at his belt and scabbarded sword where they lay atop his neatly folded robe—and then picking up, refilling splashily, and draining his mug.

The Gray Mouser began to laugh in high, delighted, tuneful peals. All stared at him. He came dancing up beside Fafhrd, and still smiling widely, asked, "*Why not?* Who speaks of fearing the Guild-thieves? Who becomes upset at the prospect of this ridiculously easy exploit, when all of us know that all of them, even Krovas and his ruling clique, are but pygmies in mind and skill compared to me or Fafhrd here? A wondrously simple, foolproof scheme has just occurred to me for penetrating Thieves' House, every closet and cranny. Stout Fafhrd and I will put it into effect at once. Are you with me, Northerner?"

"Of course I am," Fafhrd responded gruffly, at the same time frantically wondering what madness had gripped the little fellow.

"Give me a few heartbeats to gather needed props, and we're off!" the Mouser cried. He snatched from shelf and unfolded a stout sack, then raced about, thrusting into it coiled ropes, bandage rolls, rags, jars of ointment and unction and unguent, and other oddments.

"But you can't go *tonight*," Ivrian protested, suddenly grown pale and uncertain-voiced. "You're both . . . in no condition to."

"You're both *drunk*," Vlana said harshly. "Silly drunk—and that way you'll get naught in Thieves' House but your deaths. Fafhrd! Control yourself!"

"Oh, no," Fafhrd told her as he buckled on his sword. "You wanted the head of Krovas heaved at your feet in a great splatter of blood, and that's what you're going to get, like it or not!"

"Softly, Fafhrd," the Mouser interjected, coming to a sudden stop and drawing tight the sack's mouth by its strings. "And softly you too, Lady Vlana, and my dear princess. Tonight I intend but a scouting expedition. No risks run, only the information gained needful for planning our murderous strike tomorrow or the day after. So no

head-choppings whatsoever tonight. Fafhrd, you hear me? Whatever may hap, hist's the word. And don your hooded robe."

Fafhrd shrugged, nodded, and obeyed.

Ivrian seemed somewhat relieved. Vlana too, though she said, "Just the same you're both drunk."

"All to the good!" the Mouser assured her with a mad smile. "Drink may slow a man's sword-arm and soften his blows a bit, but it sets his wits ablaze and fires his imagination, and those are the qualities we'll need tonight."

Vlana eyed him dubiously.

Under cover of this confab Fafhrd made quietly yet swiftly to fill once more his and the Mouser's mugs, but Vlana noted it and gave him such a glare that he set down mugs and uncorked jug so swiftly his robe swirled.

The Mouser shouldered his sack and drew open the door. With a casual wave at the girls, but no word spoken, Fafhrd stepped out on the tiny porch. The night-smog had grown so thick he was almost lost to view. The Mouser waved four fingers at Ivrian, then followed Fafhrd.

"Good fortune go with you," Vlana called heartily.

"Oh, be careful, Mouser," Ivrian gasped.

The Mouser, his figure slight against the loom of Fafhrd's, silently drew shut the door.

Their arms automatically gone around each other, the girls waited for the inevitable creaking and groaning of the stairs. It delayed and delayed. The night-smog that had entered the room dissipated and still the silence was unbroken.

"What can they be doing out there?" Ivrian whispered. "Plotting their course?"

Vlana impatiently shook her head, then disentangled herself, tiptoed to the door, opened it, descended softly a few steps, which creaked most dolefully, then returned, shutting the door behind her.

"They're gone," she said in wonder.

"I'm frightened!" Ivrian breathed and sped across the room to embrace the taller girl.

Vlana hugged her tight, then disengaged an arm to shoot the door's three heavy bolts.

In Bones Alley the Mouser returned to his pouch the knotted line by which they'd descended from the lamp hook. He suggested, "How about stopping at the Silver Eel?"

"You mean and just *tell* the girls we've been to Thieves' House?" Fafhrd asked.

"Oh, no," the Mouser protested. "But you missed your stirrup cup upstairs—and so did I."

With a crafty smile Fafhrd drew from his robe two full jugs.

"Palmed 'em, as 'twere, when I set down the mugs. Vlana sees a lot, but not all."

"You're a prudent, far-sighted fellow," the Mouser said admiringly. "I'm proud to call you comrade."

Each uncorked and drank a hearty slug. Then the Mouser led them west, they veering and stumbling only a little, and then north into an even narrower and more noisome alley.

"Plague Court," the Mouser said.

After several preliminary peepings and peerings, they staggered swiftly across wide, empty Crafts Street and into Plague Court again. For a wonder it was growing a little lighter. Looking upward, they saw stars. Yet there was no wind blowing from the north. The air was deathly still.

In their drunken preoccupation with the project at hand and mere locomotion, they did not look behind them. There the night-smog was thicker than ever. A high-circling nighthawk would have seen the stuff converging from all sections of Lankhmar in swift-moving black rivers and rivulets, heaping, eddying, swirling, dark and reeking essence of Lankhmar from its branding irons, braziers, bonfires, kitchen fires and warmth fires, kilns, forges, breweries, distilleries, junk and garbage fires innumerable, sweating alchemist's and sorcerers' dens, crematoriums, charcoal burners' turfed mounds, all those and many more . . . converging purposefully on Dim Lane and particularly on the Silver Eel and the rickety house behind it. The closer to that center it got, the more substantial the smog became, eddy-strands and swirl-tatters tearing off and clinging like black cobwebs to rough stone corners and scraggly surfaced brick.

But the Mouser and Fafhrd merely exclaimed in mild, muted amazement at the stars and cautiously zigzagging across the Street of the Thinkers, called Atheist Avenue by moralists, continued up Plague Court until it forked.

The Mouser chose the left branch, which trended northwest.

"Death Alley."

After a curve and recurve, Cheap Street swung into sight about thirty paces ahead. The Mouser stopped at once and lightly threw his arm against Fafhrd's chest.

Clearly in view across Cheap Street was the wide, low, open doorway of Thieves' House, framed by grimy stone blocks. There led up to it two steps hollowed by the treading of centuries. Orange-yellow light spilled out from bracketed torches inside. There was no porter or guard in sight, not even a watchdog on a chain. The effect was ominous.

"Now how do we get into the damn place?" Fafhrd demanded in a hoarse whisper. "That doorway stinks of traps."

The Mouser answered, scornful at last, "Why, we'll walk straight through that doorway you fear." He frowned. "Tap and hobble, rather. Come on, while I prepare us."

As he drew the skeptically grimacing Fafhrd back down Death Alley until all Cheap Street was again cut off from view, he explained, "We'll pretend to be beggars, members of *their* guild, which is but a branch of the Thieves' Guild and reports in to the Beggarmasters at Thieves' House. We'll be new members, who've gone out by day, so it'll not be expected that the Night Beggarmaster will know our looks."

"But we don't look like beggars," Fafhrd protested. "Beggars have awful sores and limbs all a-twist or lacking altogether."

"That's just what I'm going to take care of now," the Mouser chuckled, drawing Scalpel. Ignoring Fafhrd's backward step and wary glance, the Mouser gazed puzzledly at the long tapering strip of steel he'd bared, then with a happy nod unclipped from his belt Scalpel's scabbard furbished with ratskin, sheathed the sword and swiftly wrapped it up, hilt and all, spirally, with the wide ribbon of a bandage roll dug from his sack.

"There!" he said, knotting the bandage ends. "Now I've a tapping cane."

"What's that? Fafhrd demanded. "And why?"

The Mouser laid a flimsy black rag across his own eyes and tied it fast behind his head.

"Because I'll be blind, that's why." He took a few shuffling steps, tapping the cobbles ahead with wrapped sword—gripping it by the quillons, or cross guard, so that the grip and pommel were up his sleeve—and groping ahead with his other hand. "That look all right to you?" he asked Fafhrd as he turned back. "Feels perfect to me. Bat-blind!—eh? Oh, don't fret, Fafhrd—the rag's but gauze. I can see through it—fairly well. Besides, I don't have to convince anyone inside Thieves' House I'm actually blind. Most Guild-beggars fake it, as you must know. Now what to do with you? Can't have you blind also—too obvious, might wake suspicion." He uncorked his jug and sucked inspiration. Fafhrd copied this action, on principle.

The Mouser smacked his lips and said, "I've got it! Fafhrd, stand on your right leg and double up your left behind you at the knee. Hold!—don't fall on me! Avaunt! But steady yourself by my shoulder. That's right. Now get that left foot higher. We'll disguise your sword like mine, for a crutch cane—it's thicker and'll look just right. You can also steady yourself with your other hand on my shoulder as you hop—the halt leading the blind. But higher with that left foot! No, it just doesn't come off—I'll have to rope it. But first unclip your scabbard."

Soon the Mouser had Graywand and its scabbard in the same state as Scalpel and was tying Fafhrd's left ankle to his thigh, drawing the rope cruelly tight, though Fafhrd's wine-numbed nerves hardly registered it. Balancing himself with his steel-cored crutch cane as the Mouser worked, he swigged from his jug and pondered deeply.

Brilliant as the Mouser's plan undoubtedly was, there did seem to be drawbacks to it.

"Mouser," he said, "I don't know as I like having our swords tied up, so we can't draw 'em in emergency."

"We can still use 'em as clubs," the Mouser countered, his breath hissing between his teeth as he drew the last knot hard. "Besides, we'll have our knives. Say, pull your

belt around until your knife is behind your back, so your robe will hide it sure. I'll do the same with Cat's Claw. Beggars don't carry weapons, at least in view. Stop drinking now, you've had enough. I myself need only a couple swallows more to reach my finest pitch."

"And I don't know as I like going hobbled into that den of cutthroats. I can hop amazingly fast, it's true, but not as fast as I can run. Is it really wise, think you?"

"You can slash yourself loose in an instant," the Mouser hissed with a touch of impatience and anger. "Aren't you willing to make the least sacrifice for art's sake?"

"Oh, very well," Fafhrd said, draining his jug and tossing it aside. "Yes, of course I am."

"Your complexion's too hale," the Mouser said, inspecting him critically. He touched up Fafhrd's features and hands with pale gray grease paint, then added wrinkles with dark. "And your garb's too tidy." He scooped dirt from between the cobbles and smeared it on Fafhrd's robe, then tried to put a rip in it, but the material resisted. He shrugged and tucked his lightened sack under his belt.

"So's yours," Fafhrd observed, and crouching on his right leg got a good handful of muck himself. Heaving himself up with a mighty effort, he wiped the stuff off on the Mouser's cloak and gray silken jerkin too.

The small man cursed, but, "Dramatic consistency," Fafhrd reminded him. "Now come on, while our fires and our stinks are still high." And grasping hold of the Mouser's shoulder, he propelled himself rapidly toward Cheap Street, setting his bandaged sword between cobbles well ahead and taking mighty hops.

"Slow down, idiot," the Mouser cried softly, shuffling along with the speed almost of a skater to keep up, while tapping his (sword) cane like mad. "A cripple's supposed to be *feeble*—that's what draws the sympathy."

Fafhrd nodded wisely and slowed somewhat. The ominous empty doorway slid again into view. The Mouser tilted his jug to get the last of his wine, swallowed awhile, then choked sputteringly. Fafhrd snatched and drained the jug, then tossed it over shoulder to shatter noisily.

They hop-shuffled across Cheap Street and without pause up the two worn steps and through the doorway,



past the exceptionally thick wall. Ahead was a long, straight, high-ceilinged corridor ending in a stairs and with doors spilling light at intervals and wall-set torches adding their flare, but empty all its length.

They had just got through the doorway when cold steel chilled the neck and pricked a shoulder of each of them. From just above, two voices commanded in unison, "Halt!"

Although fired—and fuddled—by fortified wine, they each had wit enough to freeze and then very cautiously look upward.

Two gaunt, scarred, exceptionally ugly faces, each topped by a gaudy scarf binding back hair, looked down at them from a big, deep niche just above the doorway. Two bent, gnarly arms thrust down the swords that still pricked them.

"Gone out with the noon beggar-batch, eh?" one of them observed. "Well, you'd better have a high take to justify your tardy return. The Night Beggarmaster's on a Whore Street furlough. Report above to Krovas. Gods, you stink! Better clean up first, or Krovas will have you bathed in live steam. Begone!"

The Mouser and Fafhrd shuffled and hobbled forward at their most authentic. One niche-guard cried after them, "Relax, boys! You don't have to put it on here."

"Practice makes perfect," the Mouser called back in a quavering voice. Fafhrd's fingerends dug his shoulder warningly. They moved along somewhat more naturally, so far as Fafhrd's tied-up leg allowed. Truly, thought Fafhrd, Kos of the Dooms seemed to be leading him direct to Krovas and perhaps head-chopping *would* be the order of the night. And now he and the Mouser began to hear voices, mostly curt and clipped ones, and other noises.

They passed some doorways they'd liked to have paused at, yet the most they dared do was slow down a bit more.

Very interesting were some of those activities. In one room young boys were being trained to pick pouches and slit purses. They'd approach from behind an instructor, and if he heard scuff of bare foot or felt touch of dipping hand—or, worst, heard *clunk* of dropped leaden mockcoin—that boy would be thwacked.

In a second room, older student thieves were doing laboratory work in lock picking. One group was being lectured by a grimy-handed graybeard, who was taking apart a most complex lock piece by weighty piece.

In a third, thieves were eating at long tables. The odors were tempting, even to men full of booze. The Guild did well by its members.

In a fourth, the floor was padded in part and instruction was going on in slipping, dodging, ducking, tumbling, tripping, and otherwise foiling pursuit. A voice like a sergeant-major's rasped, "Nah, nah, nah! You couldn't give your crippled grandmother the slip. I said duck, not genuflect to holy Arth. Now this time—"

By that time the Mouser and Fafhrd were halfway up the end stairs, Fafhrd vaulting somewhat laboriously as he grasped curving banister and swaddled sword.

The second floor duplicated the first, but was as luxurious as the other had been bare. Down the long corridor lamps and filagreed incense pots pendent from the ceiling alternated, diffusing a mild light and spicy smell. The walls were richly draped, the floor thick-carpeted. Yet this corridor was empty too and, moreover, *completely* silent. After a glance at each other, they started off boldly.

The first door, wide open, showed an untenanted room full of racks of garments, rich and plain, spotless and filthy, also wig stands, shelves of beards and such. A disguising room, clearly.

The Mouser darted in and out to snatch up a large green flask from the nearest table. He unstopped and sniffed it. A rotten-sweet gardenia-reek contended with the nose-sting of spirits of wine. The Mouser sloshed his and Fafhrd's fronts with this dubious perfume.

"Antidote to muck," he explained with the pomp of a physician, stoppering the flask. "Don't want to be par-boiled by Krovas. No, no, no."

Two figures appeared at the far end of the corridor and came toward them. The Mouser hid the flask under his cloak, holding it between elbow and side, and he and Fafhrd continued boldly onward.

The next three doorways they passed were shut by heavy doors. As they neared the fifth, the two approaching figures, coming on arm-in-arm, became distinct. Their

clothing was that of noblemen, but their faces those of thieves. They were frowning with indignation and suspicion, too, at the Mouser and Fafhrd.

Just then, from somewhere between the two man-pairs, a voice began to speak words in a strange tongue, using the rapid monotone priests employ in a routine service, or some sorcerers in their incantations.

The two richly clad thieves slowed at the seventh doorway and looked in. Their progress ceased altogether. Their necks strained, their eyes widened. They paled. Then of a sudden they hastened onward, almost running, and by-passed Fafhrd and the Mouser as if they were furniture. The incantatory voice drummed on without missing a beat.

The fifth doorway was shut, but the sixth was open. The Mouser peeked in with one eye, his nose brushing the jamb. Then he stepped forward and gazed inside with entranced expression, pushing the black rag onto his forehead for better vision. Fafhrd joined him.

It was a large room, empty so far as could be told of human and animal life, but filled with most interesting things. From knee-high up, the entire far wall was a map of the city of Lankhmar. Every building and street seemed depicted, down to the meanest hovel and narrowest court. There were signs of recent erasure and redrawing at many spots, and here and there little colored hieroglyphs of mysterious import.

The floor was marble, the ceiling blue as lapis lazuli. The side walls were thickly hung, the one with all manner of thieves' tools, from a huge, thick, pry-bar that looked as if it could unseat the universe, to a rod so slim it might be an elf-queen's wand and seemingly designed to telescope out and fish from a distance for precious gauds on milady's spindle-legged, ivory-topped vanity table. The other wall had padlocked to it all sorts of quaint, gold-gleaming and jewel-flashing objects, evidently mementos chosen for their oddity from the spoils of memorable burglaries, from a female mask of thin gold, breathlessly beautiful in its features and contours but thickly set with rubies simulating the spots of the pox in its fever stage, to a knife whose blade was wedged-

shaped diamonds set side by side and this diamond cutting-edge looking razor-sharp.

In the center of the room was a bare round table of ebony and ivory squares. About it were set seven straight-backed but well-padded chairs, the one facing the map and away from the Mouser and Fafhrd being higher backed and wider armed than the others—a chief's chair, likely that of Krovas.

The Mouser tiptoed forward, irresistibly drawn, but Fafhrd's left hand clamped down on his shoulder.

Scowling his disapproval, the Northerner brushed down the black rag over the Mouser's eyes again and with his crutch-hand thumbed ahead, then set off in that direction in most carefully calculated, silent hops. With a shrug of disappointment the Mouser followed.

As soon as they had turned away from the doorway, a neatly black-bearded, crop-haired head came like a serpent's around the side of the highest-backed chair and gazed after them from deep-sunken yet glinting eyes. Next a snake-supple, long hand followed the head out, crossed thin lips with ophidian forefinger for silence, and then finger-beckoned the two pairs of dark-tunicked men who were standing to either side of the doorway, their backs to the corridor wall, each of the four gripping a curvy knife in one hand and a dark leather, lead-weighted bludgeon in the other.

When Fafhrd was halfway to the seventh doorway, from which the monotonous yet sinister recitation continued to well, there shot out through it a slender, whey-faced youth, his narrow hands clapped over his mouth, under terror-wide eyes, as if to shut in screams or vomit, and with a broom clamped in an armpit, so that he seemed a bit like a young warlock about to take to the air. He dashed past Fafhrd and the Mouser and away, his racing footsteps sounding rapid-dull on the carpeting and hollow-sharp on the stairs before dying away.

Fafhrd gazed back at the Mouser with a grimace and shrug, then squatting one-legged until the knee of his bound-up leg touched the floor, advanced half his face past the doorjamb. After a bit, without otherwise changing position, he beckoned the Mouser to approach. The

latter slowly thrust half his face past the jamb, just above Fafhrd's.

What they saw was a room somewhat smaller than that of the great map and lit by central lamps that burnt blue-white instead of customary yellow. The floor was marble, darkly colorful and complexly whorled. The dark walls were hung with astrological and anthropomantic charts and instruments of magic and shelved with cryptically labeled porcelain jars and also with vitreous flasks and glass pipes of the oddest shapes, some filled with colored fluids, but many gleamingly empty. At the foot of the walls, where the shadows were thickest, broken and discarded stuff was irregularly heaped, as if swept out of the way and forgot, and here and there opened a large rathole.

In the center of the room and brightly illuminated by contrast was a long table with thick top and many stout legs. The Mouser thought fleetingly of a centipede and then of the bar at the Eel, for the table top was densely stained and scarred by many a spilt elixir and many a deep black burn by fire or acid or both.

In the midst of the table an alembic was working. The lamp's flame—deep blue, this one—kept a-boil in the large crystal cucurbit a dark, viscid fluid with here and there diamond glints. From out of the thick, seething stuff, strands of a darker vapor streamed upward to crowd through the cucurbit's narrow mouth and stain—oddly, with bright scarlet—the transparent head and then, dead black now, flow down the narrow pipe from the head into a spherical crystal receiver, larger even than the cucurbit, and there curl and weave about like so many coils of living black cord—an endless, skinny, ebon serpent.

Behind the left end of the table stood a tall, yet hunch-backed man in black robe and hood, which shadowed more than hid a face of which the most prominent features were a long, thick, pointed nose with out-jutting, almost chinless mouth. His complexion was sallow-gray like sandy clay. A short-haired, bristly, gray beard grew high on his wide cheeks. From under a receding forehead and bushy gray brows, wide-set eyes looked intently down at an age-trowned scroll, which his disgustingly small club-hands, knuckles big, short backs gray-bristled, ceaselessly

unrolled and rolled up again. The only move his eyes ever made, besides the short side-to-side one as he read the lines he was rapidly intoning, was an occasional glance at the alembic.

On the other end of the table, beady eyes darting from the sorcerer to the alembic and back again, crouched a small black beast, the first glimpse of which made Fafhrd dig fingers painfully into the Mouser's shoulder and the latter almost gasp, but not from the pain. It was most like a rat, yet it had a higher forehead and closer-set eyes, while its forepaws, which it constantly rubbed together in what seemed restless glee, looked like tiny copies of the sorcerer's clubhands.

Simultaneously yet independently, Fafhrd and the Mouser each became certain it was the beast which had gutter-escorted Slivikin and his mate, then fled, and each recalled what Ivrian had said about a witch's familiar and Vlana about the likelihood of Krovas employing a warlock.

The tempo of the incantation quickened; the blue-white flames brightened and hissed audibly; the fluid in the cucurbit grew thick as lava; great bubbles formed and loudly broke; the black rope in the receiver writhed like a nest of snakes; there was an increasing sense of invisible presences; the supernatural tension grew almost unendurable, and Fafhrd and the Mouser were hard put to keep silent the open-mouthed gapes by which they now breathed, and each feared his heartbeat could be heard yards away.

Abruptly the incantation peaked and broke off, like a drum struck very hard, then instantly silenced by palm and fingers outspread against the head. With a bright flash and dull explosion, cracks innumerable appeared in the cucurbit; its crystal became white and opaque, yet it did not shatter or drip. The head lifted a span, hung there, fell back. While two black nooses appeared among the coils in the receiver and suddenly narrowed until they were only two big black knots.

The sorcerer grinned, let the end of the parchment roll up with a snap, and shifted his gaze from the receiver to his familiar, while the latter chattered shrilly and bounded up and down in rapture.

"Silence, Slivikin! Comes now *your* time to race and strain and sweat," the sorcerer cried, speaking pidgin Lankhmarese now, but so rapidly and in so squeakingly high-pitched a voice that Fafhrd and the Mouser could barely follow him. They did, however, both realize they had been completely mistaken as to the identity of Slivikin. In moment of disaster, the fat thief had called to the witch-beast for help rather than to his human comrade.

"Yes, master," Slivikin squeaked back no less clearly, in an instant revising the Mouser's opinions about talking animals. He continued in the same fife-like, fawning tones, "Harkening in obedience, Hristomilo."

Hristomilo ordered in whiplash pipings, "To your appointed work! See to it you summon an ample sufficiency of feasters!—I want the bodies stripped to skeletons, so the bruises of the enchanted smog and all evidence of death by suffocation will be vanished utterly. But forget not the loot! On your mission, now—depart!"

Slivikin, who at every command had bobbed his head in manner reminiscent of his bouncing, now squealed, "I'll see it done!" and gray lightning-like, leaped a long leap to the floor and down an inky rathole.

Hristomilo, rubbing together his disgusting clubhands much as Slivikin had his, cried chucklingly, "What Slevyas lost, my magic has re-won!"

Fafhrd and the Mouser drew back out of the doorway, partly for fear of being seen, partly in revulsion from what they had seen and heard, and in poignant if useless pity for Slevyas, whoever he might be, and for the other unknown victims of the rat-like and conceivably rat-related sorcerer's deathspells, poor strangers already dead and due to have their flesh eaten from their bones.

Fafhrd wrested the green bottle from the Mouser and, though almost-gagging on the rotten-flowery reek, gulped a large, stinging mouthful. The Mouser couldn't quite bring himself to do the same, but was comforted by the spirits of wine he inhaled.

Then he saw, beyond Fafhrd, standing before the doorway to the map room, a richly clad man with gold-hilted knife jewel-scabbarded at his side. His sunken-eyed face was prematurely wrinkled by responsibility, overwork, and

authority, and framed by neatly cropped black hair and beard. Smiling, he silently beckoned them with a serpentine gesture.

The Mouser and Fafhrd obeyed, the latter returning the green bottle to the former, who recapped it and thrust it under his left elbow with well-concealed irritation.

Each guessed their summoner was Krovas, the Guild's Grandmaster. Once again Fafhrd marveled, as he hobbled along, reeling and belching, how Kos or the Fates were guiding him to his target tonight. The Mouser, more alert and more apprehensive too, was reminding himself that they had been directed by the niche-guards to report to Krovas, so that the situation, if not developing quite in accord with his own misty plans, was still not deviating disastrously.

Yet not even his alertness, nor Fafhrd's primeval instincts, gave them forewarning as they followed Krovas into the map room.

Two steps inside, each of them was shoulder-grabbed and bludgeon-menaced by a pair of ruffians further armed with knives tucked in their belts.

"All secure, Grandmaster," one of the ruffians rapped out.

Krovas swung the highest-backed chair around and sat down, eyeing them coolly.

"What brings two stinking, drunken beggar-guildsmen into the top-restricted precincts of the masters?" he asked quietly.

The Mouser felt the sweat of relief bead his forehead. The disguises he had brilliantly conceived were still working, taking in even the head man, though he had spotted Fafhrd's tipsiness. Resuming his blind-man manner, he quavered, "We were directed by the guard above the Cheap Street door to report to you in person, great Krovas, the Night Beggarmaster being on furlough for reasons of sexual hygiene. Tonight we've made good haul!" And fumbling in his purse, ignoring as far as possible the tightened grip on his shoulders, he brought out a golden coin and displayed it tremble-handed.

"Spare me your inexpert acting," Krovas said sharply. "I'm not one of your marks. And take that rag off your eyes."



The Mouser obeyed and stood to attention again insofar as his pinioning would permit, and smiling the more seeming carefree because of his reawakening uncertainties. Conceivably he wasn't doing quite as brilliantly as he'd thought.

Krovas leaned forward and said placidly yet piercingly, "Granted you were so ordered, why were you spying into a room beyond this one when I spotted you?"

"We saw brave thieves flee from that room," the Mouser answered pat. "Fearing that some danger threatened the Guild, my comrade and I investigated, ready to scotch it."

"But what we saw and heard only perplexed us, great sir," Fafhrd appended quite smoothly.

"I didn't ask you, sot. Speak when you're spoken to," Krovas snapped at him. Then, to the Mouser, "You're an overweening rogue, most presumptuous for your rank. Beggars claim to protect thieves indeed! I'm of a mind to have you both flogged for your spying, and again for your drunkenness, aye, and once more for your lies."

In a flash the Mouser decided that further insolence—and lying, too—rather than fawning, was what the situation required. "I am a most presumptuous rogue indeed, sir," he said smugly. Then he set his face solemn. "But now I see the time has come when I must speak darkest truth entire. The Day Beggarmaster suspects a plot against your own life, sir, by one of your highest and closest lieutenants—one you trust so well you'd not believe it, sir. He told us that! So he set me and my comrade secretly to guard you and sniff out the verminous villain."

"More and clumsier lies!" Krovas snarled, but the Mouser saw his face grow pale. The Grandmaster half rose from his seat. "Which lieutenant?"

The Mouser grinned and relaxed. His two captors gazed sideways at him curiously, losing their grip a little. Fafhrd's pair seemed likewise intrigued.

The Mouser then asked coolly, "Are you questioning me as a trusty spy or a pinioned liar? If the latter, I'll not insult you with one more word."

Krovas' face darkened. "Boy!" he called. Through the curtains of an inner doorway, a youth with the dark complexion of a Kleshite and clad only in a black loincloth

sprang to kneel before Krovas, who ordered, "Summon first my sorcerer, next the thieves Slevyas and Fissif," whereupon the dark youth dashed into the corridor.

Krovas hesitated a moment in thought, then shot a hand toward Fafhrd. "What do you know of this, drunkard? Do you support your mate's crazy tale?"

Fafhrd merely sneered his face and folded his arms, the still-slack grip of his captors permitting it, his sword-crutch hanging against his body from his lightly gripping hand. Then he scowled as there came a sudden shooting pain in his numbed, bound-up left leg, which he had forgotten.

Krovas raised a clenched fist and himself wholly from his chair, in prelude to some fearsome command—likely that Fafhrd and the Mouser be tortured, but at that moment Hristomilo came gliding into the room, his feet presumably taking swift, but very short steps—at any rate his black robe hung undisturbed to the marble floor despite his slithering speed.

There was a shock at his entrance. All eyes in the map room followed him, breaths were held, and the Mouser and Fafhrd felt the horny hands that gripped them shake just a little. Even Krovas' tense expression became also guardedly uneasy.

Outwardly oblivious to this reaction to his appearance, Hristomilo, smiling thin-lipped, halted close to one side of Krovas' chair and inclined his hood-shadowed rodent face in the ghost of a bow.

Krovas asked sharply yet nervously, gesturing toward the Mouser and Fafhrd, "Do you know these two?"

Hristomilo nodded decisively. "They just now peered a befuddled eye each at me," he said, "whilst I was about that business we spoke of. I'd have shooed them off, reported them, save such action would have broken my spell, put my words out of time with the alembic's workings. The one's a Northerner, the other's features have a southern cast—from Tovilyis or near, most like. Both younger than their now-looks. Freelance bravoos, I'd judge 'em, the sort the Brotherhood hires as extras when they get at once several big guard and escort jobs. Clumsily disguised now, of course, as beggars."

Fafhrd by yawning, the Mouser by pitying headshake

tried to convey that all this was so much poor guesswork. The Mouser even added a warning glare, brief as lightning, to suggest to Krovas that the conspiring lieutenant might be the Grandmaster's own sorcerer.

"That's all I can tell you without reading their minds," Hristomilo concluded. "Shall I fetch my lights and mirrors?"

"Not yet." Krovas faced the Mouser and said, "Now speak truth, or have it magicked from you and then be whipped to death. Which of my lieutenants were you set to spy on by the Day Beggarmaster? But you're lying about that commission, I believe?"

"Oh, no," the Mouser denied it guilelessly. "We reported our every act to the Day Beggarmaster and he approved them, told us to spy our best and gather every scrap of fact and rumor we could about the conspiracy."

"And he told me not a word about it!" Krovas rapped out. "If true, I'll have Bannat's head for this! But you're lying, aren't you?"

As the Mouser gazed with wounded eyes at Krovas, a portly man limped past the doorway with help of a gilded staff. He moved with silence and aplomb.

But Krovas saw him. "Night Beggarmaster!" he called sharply. The limping man stopped, turned, came crippling majestically through the door. Krovas stabbed a finger at the Mouser, then Fafhrd. "Do you know these two, Flim?"

The Night Beggarmaster unhurriedly studied each for a space, then shook his head with its turban of cloth of gold. "Never seen either before. What are they? Fink beggars?"

"But Flim wouldn't know us," the Mouser explained desperately, feeling everything collapsing in on him and Fafhrd. "All our contacts were with Bannat alone."

Flim said quietly, "Bannat's been abed with the swamp ague this past ten-day. Meanwhile I have been Day Beggarmaster as well as Night."

At that moment Slevyas and Fissif came hurrying in behind Flim. The tall thief bore on his jaw a bluish lump. The fat thief's head was bandaged above his darting eyes. He pointed quickly at Fafhrd and the Mouser and cried,

"There are the two that slugged us, took our Jengao loot, and slew our escort."

The Mouser lifted his elbow and the green bottle crashed to shards at his feet on the hard marble. Gardenia-reek sprang swiftly through the air.

But more swiftly still the Mouser, shaking off the careless hold of his startled guards, sprang toward Krovas, clubbing his wrapped-up sword.

With startling speed Flim thrust out his gilded staff, tripping the Mouser, who went heels over head, midway seeking to change his involuntary somersault into a voluntary one.

Meanwhile Fafhrd lurched heavily against his left-hand captor, at the same time swinging bandaged Graywand strongly upward to strike his right-hand captor under the jaw. Regaining his one-legged balance with a mighty contortion, he hopped for the loot-wall behind him.

Slevyas made for the wall of thieves' tools, and with a muscle-cracking effort wrenched the great pry-bar from its padlocked ring.

Scrambling to his feet after a poor landing in front of Krovas' chair, the Mouser found it empty and the Thief King in a half-crouch behind it, gold-hilted dagger drawn, deep-sunk eyes coldly battle-wild. Spinning around, he saw Fafhrd's guards on the floor, the one sprawled senseless, the other starting to scramble up, while the great Northerner, his back against the wall of weird jewelry, menaced the whole room with wrapped-up Graywand and with his long knife, jerked from its scabbard behind him.

Likewise drawing Cat's Claw, the Mouser cried in trumpet-voice of battle, "Stand aside, all! He's gone mad! I'll hamstring his good leg for you!" And racing through the press and between his own two guards, who still appeared to hold him in some awe, he launched himself with flashing dirk at Fafhrd, praying that the Northerner, drunk now with battle as well as wine and poisonous perfume, would recognize him and guess his stratagem.

Graywand slashed well above his ducking head. His new friend not only guessed, but was playing up—and not just missing by accident, the Mouser hoped. Stoop-

ing low by the wall, he cut the lashings on Fafhrd's left leg. Graywand and Fafhrd's long knife continued to spare him. Springing up, he headed for the corridor, crying overshouldered to Fafhrd, "Come on!"

Hristomilo stood well out of his way, quietly observing. Fissif scuttled toward safety. Krovas stayed behind his chair, shouting, "Stop them! Head them off!"

The three remaining ruffian guards, at last beginning to recover their fighting-wits, gathered to oppose the Mouser. But menacing them with swift feints of his dirk, he slowed them and darted between—and then just in the nick of time knocked aside with a downsweep of wrapped-up Scalpel Flim's gilded staff, thrust once again to trip him.

All this gave Slevyas time to return from the tools-wall and aim at the Mouser a great swinging blow with the massive pry-bar. But even as that blow started, a very long, bandaged and scabbarded sword on a very long arm thrust over the Mouser's shoulder and solidly and heavily poked Slevyas high on the chest, jolting him backwards, so that the pry-bar's swing was short and sang past harmlessly.

Then the Mouser found himself in the corridor and Fafhrd beside him, though for some weird reason still only hopping. The Mouser pointed toward the stairs. Fafhrd nodded, but delayed to reach high, still on one leg only, and rip off the nearest wall a dozen yards of heavy drapes, which he threw across the corridor to baffle pursuit.

They reached the stairs and started up the next flight, the Mouser in advance. There were cries behind, some muffled.

"Stop hopping, Fafhrd!" the Mouser ordered querulously. "You've got two legs again."

"Yes, and the other's still dead," Fafhrd complained. "Ahh! Now feeling begins to return to it."

A thrown knife whished between them and dully clinked as it hit the wall point-first and stone powder flew. Then they were around the bend.

Two more empty corridors, two more curving flights, and then they saw above them on the last landing a stout ladder mounting to a dark, square hole in the

roof. A thief with hair bound back by a colorful handkerchief—it appeared to be the door guards' identification—menaced the Mouser with drawn sword, but when he saw there were two of them, both charging him determinedly with shining knives and strange staves or clubs, he turned and ran down the last empty corridor.

The Mouser, followed closely by Fafhrd, rapidly mounted the ladder and vaulted up through the hatch into the star-crusted night.

He found himself near the unrailed edge of a slate roof which slanted enough to have made it look most fearsome to a novice roof-walker, but safe as houses to a veteran.

Turning back at a bumping sound, he saw Fafhrd prudently hoisting the ladder. Just as he got it free, a knife flashed up close past him out of the hatch.

It clattered down near them and slid off the roof. The Mouser loped south across the slates and was halfway from the hatch to that end of the roof when the faint chink came of the knife striking the cobbles of Murder Alley.

Fafhrd followed more slowly, in part perhaps from a lesser experience of roofs, in part because he still limped a bit to favor his left leg, and in part because he was carrying the heavy ladder balanced on his right shoulder.

"We won't need that," the Mouser called back.

Without hesitation Fafhrd heaved it joyously over the edge. By the time it crashed in Murder Alley, the Mouser was leaping down two yards and across a gap of one to the next roof, of opposite and lesser pitch. Fafhrd landed beside him.

The Mouser led them at almost a run through a sooty forest of chimneys, chimney pots, ventilators with tails that made them always face the wind, black-legged cisterns, hatch covers, bird houses, and pigeon traps across five roofs, until they reached the Street of the Thinkers at a point where it was crossed by a roofed passageway much like the one at Rokkermas and Slaarg's.

While they crossed it at a crouching lope, something hissed close past them and clattered ahead. As they leaped down from the roof of the bridge, three more somethings hissed over their heads to clatter beyond. One rebounded

from a square chimney almost to the Mouser's feet. He picked it up, expecting a stone, and was surprised by the greater weight of a leaden ball big as two doubled-up fingers.

"They," he said, jerking thumb overshoulder, "lost no time in getting slingers on the roof. When roused, they're good."

Southeast then through another black chimney-forest toward a point on Cheap Street where upper stories overhung the street so much on either side that it would be easy to leap the gap. During this roof-traverse, an advancing front of night-smog, dense enough to make them cough and wheeze, engulfed them and for perhaps sixty heartbeats the Mouser had to slow to a shuffle and feel his way, Fafhrd's hand on his shoulder. Just short of Cheap Street they came abruptly and completely out of the smog and saw the stars again, while the black front rolled off northward behind them.

"Now what the devil was that?" Fafhrd asked and the Mouser shrugged.

A nighthawk would have seen a vast thick hoop of black night-smog blowing out in all directions from a center near the Silver Eel.

East of Cheap Street the two comrades soon made their way to the ground, landing back in Plague Court.

Then at last they looked at each other and their trammelled swords and their filthy faces and clothing made dirtier still by roof-soot, and they laughed and laughed and laughed, Fafhrd roaring still as he bent over to massage his left leg above and below knee. This hooting self-mockery continued while they unwrapped their swords—the Mouser as if his were a surprise package—and clipped their scabbards once more to their belts. Their exertions had burnt out of them the last mote and atomy of strong wine and even stronger stenchful perfume, but they felt no desire whatever for more drink, only the urge to get home and eat hugely and guzzle hot, bitter gahveh, and tell their lovely girls at length the tale of their mad adventure.

They loped on side by side.

Free of night-smog and drizzled with starlight, their cramped surroundings seemed much less stinking and

oppressive than when they had set out. Even Bones Alley had a freshness to it.

They hastened up the long, creaking, broken-treaded stairs with an easy carefulness, and when they were both on the porch, the Mouser shoved at the door to open it with surprise-swiftness.

It did not budge.

"Bolted," he said to Fafhrd shortly. He noted now there was hardly any light at all coming through the cracks around the door, nor had any been noticeable through the lattices—at most, a faint orange-red glow. Then with sentimental grin and in fond voice in which only the ghost of uneasiness lurked, he said, "They've gone to sleep, the unworrying wenches!" He knocked loudly thrice and then cupping his lips called softly at the door crack, "Hola, Ivrian! I'm home safe. Hail, Vlana! Your man's done you proud, felling Guild-thieves innumerable with one foot tied behind his back!"

There was no sound whatever from inside—that is, if one discounted a rustling so faint it was impossible to be sure of it.

Fafhrd was wrinkling his nostrils. "I smell vermin."

The Mouser banged on the door again. Still no response.

Fafhrd motioned him out of the way, hunching his big shoulder to crash the portal.

The Mouser shook his head and with a deft tap, slide, and a tug removed a brick that a moment before had looked to be a firm-set part of the wall beside the door. He reached in all his arm. There was the scrape of a bolt being withdrawn, then another, then a third. He swiftly recovered his arm and the door swung fully inward at touch.

But neither he nor Fafhrd rushed in at once, as both had intended to, for the indefinable scent of danger and the unknown came puffing out along with an increased reek of filthy beast and a slight, sickening sweet scent that though female was no decent female perfume.

They could see the room faintly by the orange glow coming from the small oblong of the open door of the little, well-blackened stove. Yet the oblong did not sit properly upright but was unnaturally a-tilt—clearly the stove had been half overset and now leaned against a side



wall of the fireplace, its small door fallen open in that direction.

By itself alone, that unnatural angle conveyed the entire impact of a universe overturned.

The orange glow showed the carpets oddly rucked up with here and there ragged black circles a palm's breadth across, the neatly stacked candles scattered about below their shelves along with some of the jars and enameled boxes, and—above all—two black, low, irregular, longish heaps, the one by the fireplace, the other half on the golden couch, half at its foot.

From each heap there stared at the Mouser and Fafhrd innumerable pairs of tiny, rather widely set, furnace-red eyes.

On the thickly carpeted floor on the other side of the fireplace was a silver cobweb—a fallen silver cage, but no lovebirds sang from it.

There was the faint scrape of metal as Fafhrd made sure Graywand was loose in his scabbard.

As if that tiny sound had beforehand been chosen as the signal for attack, each instantly whipped out sword and they advanced side by side into the room, warily at first, testing the floor with each step.

At the screech of the swords being drawn, the tiny furnace-red eyes had winked and shifted restlessly, and now with the two men's approach they swiftly scattered pattering, pair by red pair, each pair at the forward end of a small, low, slender, hairless-tailed black body, and each making for one of the black circles in the rugs, where they vanished.

Indubitably the black circles were ratholes newly gnawed up through the floor and rugs, while the red-eyed creatures were black rats.

Fafhrd and the Mouser sprang forward, slashing and chopping at them in a frenzy, cursing and human-snarling besides.

They sundered few. The rats fled with preternatural swiftness, most of them disappearing down holes near the walls and the fireplace.

Also Fafhrd's first frantic chop went through the floor and on his third step, with an ominous crack and splinter-

ing, his leg plunged through the floor to his hip. The Mouser darted past him, unmindful of further crackings.

Fafhrd heaved out his trapped leg, not even noting the splinter-scratches it got and as unmindful as the Mouser of the continuing creakings. The rats were gone. He lunged after his comrade, who had thrust a bunch of kindlers into the stove, to make more light.

The horror was that, although the rats were all gone, the two longish heaps remained, although considerably diminished and, as now shown clearly by the yellow flames leaping from the tilted black door, changed in hue—no longer were the heaps red-beaded black, but a mixture of gleaming black and dark brown, a sickening purple-blue, violet and velvet black and snow-serpent white, and the reds of stockings and blood and bloody flesh and bone.

Although hands and feet had been gnawed bone-naked, and bodies tunneled heart-deep, the two faces had been spared. But that was not good, for they were purple-blue from death by strangulation, lips drawn back, eyes bulging, all features contorted in agony. Only the black and very dark brown hair gleamed unchanged—that and the white, white teeth.

As each man stared down at his love, unable to look away despite the waves of horror and grief and rage washing higher and higher in him, each saw a tiny black strand uncurl from the black depression ringing each throat and drift off, dissipating, toward the open door behind them—two strands of night-smog.

With a crescendo of crackings the floor sagged three spans more in the center before arriving at a new temporary stability.

Edges of centrally tortured minds noted details: That Vlana's silver-hilted dagger skewered to the floor a rat, which, likely enough, overeager had approached too closely before the night-smog had done its magic work. That her belt and pouch were gone. That the blue-enameled box inlaid with silver, in which Ivrian had put the Mouser's share of the highjacked jewels, was gone too.

The Mouser and Fafhrd lifted to each other white, drawn faces, which were quite mad, yet completely joined in understanding and purpose. No need for Fafhrd to

explain why he stripped off his robe and hood, or why he jerked up Vlana's dagger, snapped the rat off it with a wrist-flick, and thrust it in his belt. No need for the Mouser to tell why he searched out a half dozen jars of oil and after smashing three of them in front of the flaming stove, paused, thought, and stuck the other three in the sack at his waist, adding to them the remaining kindlers and the fire-pot, brimmed with red coals, its top lashed down tight.

Then, still without word exchanged, the Mouser reached into the fireplace and without a wince at the burning metal's touch, deliberately tipped the flaming stove forward, so that it fell door-down on oil-soaked rugs. Yellow flames sprang up around him.

They turned and raced for the door. With louder crackings than any before, the floor collapsed. They desperately scrambled their way up a steep hill of sliding carpets and reached door and porch just before all behind them gave way and the flaming rugs and stove and all the firewood and candles and the golden couch and all the little tables and boxes and jars—and the unthinkably mutilated bodies of their first loves—cascaded into the dry, dusty, cobweb-choked room below, and the great flames of a cleansing or at least obliterating cremation began to flare upward.

They plunged down the stairs, which tore away from the wall and collapsed in the dark as they reached the ground. They had to fight their way over the wreckage to get to Bones Alley.

By then the flames were darting their bright lizard-tongues out of the shuttered attic windows and the boarded-up ones in the story just below. By the time they reached Plague Court, running side by side at top speed, the Silver Eel's fire alarm was clanging cacophonously behind them.

They were still sprinting when they took the Death Alley fork. Then the Mouser grappled Fafhrd and forced him to a halt. The big man struck out, cursing insanely, and only desisted—his white face still a lunatic's—when the Mouser cried panting, "Only ten heartbeats to arm us!"

He pulled the sack from his belt and keeping tight

hold of its neck, crashed it on the cobbles—hard enough to smash not only the bottles of oil, but also the fire-pot, for the sack was soon flaming at its base.

Then he drew gleaming Scalpel and Fafhrd Graywand, and they raced on, the Mouser swinging his sack in a great circle beside him to fan its flames. It was a veritable ball of fire burning his left hand as they dashed across Cheap Street and into Thieves' House, and the Mouser, leaping high, swung it up into the great niche above the doorway and let go of it.

The niche-guards screeched in surprise and pain at the fiery invader of their hidey-hole.

Student thieves poured out of the door ahead at the screeching and foot-pounding, and then poured back as they saw the fierce point of flames and the two demon-faced on-comers brandishing their long, shining swords.

One skinny little apprentice—he could hardly have been ten years old—lingered too long. Graywand thrust him pitilessly through, as his big eyes bulged and his small mouth gaped in horror and plea to Fafhrd for mercy.

Now from ahead of them there came a weird, wailing call, hollow and hair-raising, and doors began to thud shut instead of spewing forth the armed guards Fafhrd and the Mouser prayed would appear to be slewed by their swords. Also, despite the long, bracketed torches looking newly renewed, the corridor was darkening.

The reason for this last became clear as they plunged up the stairs. Strands of night-smog appeared in the stairwell, materializing from nothing, or the air.

The strands grew longer and more tangible. They touched and clung nastily. In the corridor ahead they were forming from wall to wall and from ceiling to floor, like a gigantic cobweb, and were becoming so substantial that the Mouser and Fafhrd had to slash them to get through, or so their two maniac minds believed. The black web muffled a little a repetition of the eerie, wailing call, which came from the seventh door ahead and this time ended in a gleeful chittering and cackling as insane as the emotions of the two attackers.

Here, too, doors were thudding shut. In an ephemeral flash of rationality, it occurred to the Mouser that it was

not he and Fafhrd the thieves feared, for they had not been seen yet, but rather Hristomilo and his magic, even though working in defense of Thieves' House.

Even the map room, whence counterattack would most likely erupt, was closed off by a huge oaken, iron-studded door.

They were now twice slashing the black, clinging, rope-thick spiderweb for every single step they drove themselves forward. While midway between the map and magic rooms, there was forming on the inky web, ghostly at first but swiftly growing more substantial, a black spider as big as a wolf.

The Mouser slashed heavy cobweb before it, dropped back two steps, then hurled himself at it in a high leap. Scalpel thrust through it, striking amidst its eight new-formed jet eyes, and it collapsed like a daggered bladder, loosing a vile stink.

Then he and Fafhrd were looking into the magic room, the alchemist's chamber. It was much as they had seen it before, except some things were doubled, or multiplied even further.

On the long table two blue-boiled cucurbits bubbled and roiled, their heads shooting out a solid, writhing rope more swiftly than moves the black swamp-cobra, which can run down a man—and not into twin receivers, but into the open air of the room (if any of the air in Thieves' House could have been called open then) to weave a barrier between their swords and Hristomilo, who once more stood tall though hunch-backed over his sorcerous, brown parchment, though this time his exultant gaze was chiefly fixed on Fafhrd and the Mouser, with only an occasional downward glance at the text of the spell he drummingly intoned.

While at the other end of the table, in web-free space, there bounced not only Slivikin, but also a huge rat matching him in size in all members except the head.

From the ratholes at the foot of the walls, red eyes glittered and gleamed in pairs.

With a bellow of rage Fafhrd began slashing at the black barrier, but the ropes were replaced from the cucurbit heads as swiftly as he sliced them, while the cut ends, instead of drooping slackly, now began to strain

hungrily toward him like constrictive snakes or stranglevines.

He suddenly shifted Graywand to his left hand, drew his long knife and hurled it at the sorcerer. Flashing toward its mark, it cut through three strands, was deflected and slowed by a fourth and fifth, almost halted by a sixth, and ended hanging futilely in the curled grip of a seventh.

Hristomilo laughed cacklingly and grinned, showing his huge upper incisors, while Slivikin chittered in ecstasy and bounded the higher.

The Mouser hurled Cat's Claw with no better result—worse, indeed, since his action gave two darting smog-strands time to curl hamperingly around his sword-hand and stranglingly around his neck. Black rats came racing out of the big holes at the cluttered base of the walls.

Meanwhile other strands snaked around Fafhrd's ankles, knees and left arm, almost toppling him. But even as he fought for balance, he jerked Vlana's dagger from his belt and raised it over his shoulder, its silver hilt glowing, its blade brown with dried rat's-blood.

The grin left Hristomilo's face as he saw it. The sorcerer screamed strangely and importuningly then, and drew back from his parchment and the table, and raised clawed clubhands to ward off doom.

Vlana's dagger sped unimpeded through the black web—its strands even seemed to part for it—and betwixt the sorcerer's warding hands, to bury itself to the hilt in his right eye.

He screamed thinly in dire agony and clawed at his face.

The black web writhed as if in death spasm.

The cucurbits shattered as one, spilling their lava on the scarred table, putting out the blue flames even as the thick wood of the table began to smoke a little at the lava's edge. Lava dropped with *plops* on the dark marble floor.

With a faint, final scream Hristomilo pitched forward, hands clutched to his eyes above his jutting nose, silver dagger-hilt protruding between his fingers.

The web grew faint, like wet ink washed with a gush of clear water.

The Mouser raced forward and transfixed Slivikin and the huge rat with one thrust of Scalpel before the beasts knew what was happening. They too died swiftly with thin screams, while all the other rats turned tail and fled back down their holes swift almost as black lightning.

Then the last trace of night-smog or sorcery-smoke vanished, and Fafhrd and the Mouser found themselves standing alone with three dead bodies amidst a profound silence that seemed to fill not only this room but all Thieves' House. Even the cucurbit-lava had ceased to move, was hardening, and the wood of the table no longer smoked.

Their madness was gone and all their rage, too—vented to the last red atomy and glutted to more than satiety. They had no more urge to kill Krovas or any other thieves than to swat flies. With horrified inner-eye Fafhrd saw the pitiful face of the child-thief he'd skewered in his lunatic anger.

Only their grief remained with them, diminished not one whit, but rather growing greater—that and an ever more swiftly growing revulsion from all that was around them: the dead, the disordered magic room, all Thieves' House, all of the city of Lankhmar to its last stinking alleyway.

With a hiss of disgust the Mouser jerked Scalpel from the rodent cadavers, wiped it on the nearest cloth, and returned it to its scabbard. Fafhrd likewise sketchily cleansed and sheathed Graywand. Then the two men picked up their knife and dirk from where they'd dropped to the floor when the web had dematerialized, though neither glanced at Vlana's dagger where it was buried. But on the sorcerer's table they did notice Vlana's black velvet, silver-worked pouch and belt, and Ivrian's blue-enameled box inlaid with silver. These they took.

With no more word than they had exchanged back at the Mouser's burnt nest behind the Eel, but with a continuing sense of their unity of purpose, their identity of intent, and of their comradeship, they made their way with shoulders bowed and with slow, weary steps which only very gradually quickened out of the magic room and down the thick-carpeted corridor, past the map room's wide door now barred with oak and iron, and past all the

other shut, silent doors, down the echoing stairs, their footsteps speeding a little; down the bare-floored lower corridor past its closed, quiet doors, their footsteps resounding loudly no matter how softly they sought to tread; under the deserted, black-scorched guard-niche, and so out into Cheap Street, turning left and north because that was the nearest way to the Street of the Gods, and there turning right and east—not a waking soul in the wide street except for one skinny, bent-backed apprentice lad unhappily swabbing the flagstones in front of a wine shop in the dim pink light beginning to seep from the east, although there were many forms asleep, a-snore and a-dream in the gutters and under the dark porticoes—yes, turning right and east down the Street of the Gods, for that way was the Marsh Gate, leading to Causey Road across the Great Salt Marsh; and the Marsh Gate was the nearest way out of the great and glamorous city that was now loathsome to them, a city of beloved, unfaceable ghosts—indeed, not to be endured for one more stabbing, leaden heartbeat than was necessary.



## CONTINUED ON NEXT ROCK

---

R. A. Lafferty

Up in the Big Lime country there is an upthrust, a chimney rock that is half fallen against a newer hill. It is formed of what is sometimes called Dawson Sandstone and is interlaced with tough shell. It was formed during the glacial and recent ages in the bottomlands of Crow Creek and Green River when these streams (at least five times) were mighty rivers.

The chimney rock is only a little older than mankind, only a little younger than grass. Its formation had been upthrust and then eroded away again, all but such harder parts as itself and other chimneys and blocks.

A party of five persons came to this place where the chimney rock had fallen against a newer hill. The people of the party did not care about the deep limestone below: they were not geologists. They *did* care about the newer hill (it was man-made) and they did care a little about the rock chimney; they were archeologists.

Here was time heaped up, bulging out in casing and accumulation, and not in line sequence. And here also was striated and banded time, grown tall, and then shattered and broken.

The five party members came to the site early in the afternoon, bringing the working trailer down a dry creek bed. They unloaded many things and made a camp there. It wasn't really necessary to make a camp on the ground. There was a good motel two miles away on the highway; there was a road along the ridge above. They could have lived in comfort and made the trip to the site in five minutes every morning. Terrence Burdock, however, be-

lieved that one could not get the feel of a digging unless he lived on the ground with it day and night.

The five persons were Terrence Burdock, his wife Ethyl, Robert Derby, and Howard Steinleser: four beautiful and balanced people. And Magdalen Mobley who was neither beautiful nor balanced. But she was electric; she was special. They roused around in the formations a little after they had made camp and while there was still light. All of them had seen the formations before and had guessed that there was promise in them.

"That peculiar fluting in the broken chimney is almost like a core sample," Terrence said, "and it differs from the rest of it. It's like a lightning bolt through the whole length. It's already exposed for us. I believe we will remove the chimney entirely. It covers the perfect access for the slash in the mound, and it is the mound in which we are really interested. But we'll study the chimney first. It is so available for study."

"Oh, I can tell you everything that's in the chimney," Magdalen said crossly. "I can tell you everything that's in the mound too."

"I wonder why we take the trouble to dig if you already know what we will find," Ethyl sounded archly.

"I wonder too," Magdalen grumbled. "But we will need the evidence and the artifacts to show. You can't get appropriations without evidence and artifacts. Robert, go kill that deer in the brush about forty yards northeast of the chimney. We may as well have deer meat if we're living primitive."

"This isn't deer season," Robert Derby objected. "And there isn't any deer there. Or, if there is, it's down in the draw where you couldn't see it. And if there's one there, it's probably a doe."

"No, Robert, it is a two-year-old buck and a very big one. Of course it's in the draw where I can't see it. Forty yards northeast of the chimney would have to be in the draw. If I could see it, the rest of you could see it too. Now go kill it! Are you a man or a *mus microtus*? Howard, cut poles and set up a tripod to string and dress the deer on."

"You had better try the thing, Robert," Ethyl Burdock said, "or we'll have no peace this evening."

Robert Derby took a carbine and went northeastward of the chimney, descending into the draw at forty yards. There was the high ping of the carbine shot. And after some moments, Robert returned with a curious grin.

"You didn't miss him, Robert, you killed him," Magdalen called loudly. "You got him with a good shot through the throat and up into the brain when he tossed his head high like they do. Why didn't you bring him? Go back and get him!"

"Get him? I couldn't even lift the thing. Terrence and Howard, come with me and we'll slash it to a pole and get it here somehow."

"Oh Robert, you're out of your beautiful mind," Magdalen chided. "It only weighs a hundred and ninety pounds. Oh, I'll get it."

Magdalen Mobley went and got the big buck. She brought it back, carrying it listlessly across her shoulders and getting herself bloodied, stopping sometimes to examine rocks and kick them with her foot, coming on easily with her load. It looked as if it might weigh two hundred and fifty pounds; but if Magdalen said it weighed a hundred and ninety, that is what it weighed.

Howard Steinleser had cut poles and made a tripod. He knew better than not to. They strung the buck up, skinned it off, ripped up its belly, drew it, and worked it over in an almost professional manner.

"Cook it, Ethyl," Magdalen said.

Later, as they sat on the ground around the fire and it had turned dark, Ethyl brought the buck's brains to Magdalen, messy and not half cooked, believing that she was playing an evil trick. And Magdalen ate them avidly. They were her due. She had discovered the buck.

If you wonder how Magdalen knew what invisible things were where, so did the other members of the party always wonder.

"It bedevils me sometimes why I am the only one to notice the analogy between historical geology and depth psychology," Terrence Burdock mused as they grew lightly profound around the campfire. "The isostatic principle applies to the mind and the under-mind as well as it does to the surface and undersurface of the earth. The

mind has its erosions and weatherings going on along with its deposits and accumulations. It also has its upthrusts and its stresses. It floats on a similar magma. In extreme cases it has its volcanic eruptions and its mountain building."

"And it has its glaciations," Ethyl Burdock said, and perhaps she was looking at her husband in the dark.

"The mind has its hard sandstone, sometimes transmuted to quartz, or half transmuted into flint, from the drifting and floating sand of daily events. It has its shale from the old mud of daily ineptitudes and inertias. It has limestone out of its more vivid experiences, for lime is the remnant of what was once animate: and this limestone may be true marble if it is the deposit of rich enough emotion, or even travertine if it has bubbled sufficiently through agonized and evocative rivers of the under-mind. The mind has its sulphur and its gemstones—" Terrence bubbled on sufficiently, and Magdalen cut him off.

"Say simply that we have rocks in our heads," she said. "But they're random rocks, I tell you, and the same ones keep coming back. It *isn't* the same with us as it is with the earth. The world gets new rocks all the time. But it's the same people who keep turning up, and the same minds. Damn, one of the samest of them just turned up again! I wish he'd leave me alone. The answer is still no."

Very often Magdalen said things that made no sense. Ethyl Burdock assured herself that neither her husband, nor Robert, nor Howard, had slipped over to Magdalen in the dark. Ethyl was jealous of the chunky and surly girl.

"I am hoping that this will be as rich as Spiro Mound," Howard Steinleser hoped. "It could be, you know. I'm told that there was never a less prepossessing site than that, or a trickier one. I wish we had someone who had dug at Spiro."

"Oh, he dug at Spiro," Magdalen said with contempt.

"He? Who?" Terrence Burdock asked. "No one of us was at Spiro. Magdalen, you weren't even born yet when that mound was opened. What could you know about it?"

"Yeah, I remember him at Spiro," Magdalen said, "always turning up his own things and pointing them out."

"Were you at Spiro?" Terrence suddenly asked a piece

of the darkness. For some time, they had all been vaguely aware that there were six, and not five, persons around the fire.

"Yeah, I was at Spiro," the man said. "I dig there. I dig at a lot of the digs. I dig real well, and I always know when we come to something that will be important. You give me a job."

"Who are you?" Terrence asked him. The man was pretty visible now. The flame of the fire seemed to lean toward him as if he compelled it.

"Oh, I'm just a rich old poor man who keeps following and hoping and asking. There is *one* who is worth it all forever, so I solicit that one forever. And sometimes I am other things. Two hours ago I was the deer in the draw. It is an odd thing to munch one's own flesh." And the man was munching a joint of the deer, unasked.

"Him and his damn cheap poetry!" Magdalen cried angrily.

"What's your name?" Terrence asked him.

"Manypenny. Anteros Manypenny is my name forever."

"What are you?"

"Oh, just Indian. Shawnee. Choc, Creek, Anadarko, Caddo and pre-Caddo. Lots of things."

"How could anyone be pre-Caddo?"

"Like me. I am."

"Is Anteros a Creek name?"

"No. Greek. Man, I am a going Jessie, I am one digging man! I show you tomorrow."

Man, he was one digging man! He showed them tomorrow. With a short-handled rose hoe he began the gash in the bottom of the mound, working too swiftly to be believed.

"He will smash anything that is there. He will not know what he comes to," Ethyl Burdock complained.

"Woman, I will *not* smash whatever is there," Anteros said. "You can hide a wren's egg in one cubic meter of sand. I will move all the sand in one minute. I will uncover the egg wherever it is. And I will not crack the egg. I sense these things. I come now to a small pot of the proto-Plano period. It is broken, of course, but I do not

break it. It is in six pieces and they will fit together perfectly. I tell you this beforehand. Now I reveal it."

And Anteros revealed it. There was something wrong about it even before he uncovered it. But it was surely a find, and perhaps it *was* of the proto-Plano period. The six shards came out. They were roughly cleaned and set. It was apparent that they would fit wonderfully.

"Why, it is perfect!" Ethyl exclaimed.

"It is too perfect!" Howard Steinleser protested. "It was a turned pot, and who had turned pots in America without the potter's wheel? But the glyphs pressed into it do correspond to proto-Plano glyphs. It is fishy." Steinleser was in a twitchy humor today and his face was livid.

"Yes, it is the ripple and the spinosity, the fish-glyph," Anteros pointed out. "And the sun-sign is riding upon it. It is fish-god."

"It's fishy in another way," Steinleser insisted. "Nobody finds a thing like that in the first sixty seconds of a dig. And there *could not be* such a pot. I wouldn't believe it was proto-Plano unless points were found in the exact site with it."

"Oh here," Anteros said. "One can smell the very shape of the flint points already. Two large points, one small one. Surely you get the whiff of them already? Four more hoe cuts and I come to them."

Four more hoe cuts, and Anteros *did* come to them. He uncovered two large points and one small one, spearheads and arrowhead. Lanceolate they were, with ribbon flaking. They were late Folsom, or they were proto-Plano; they were what you will.

"This cannot be," Steinleser groaned. "They're the missing chips, the transition pieces. They fill the missing place too well. I won't believe it. I'd hardly believe it if mastodon bones were found on the same level here."

"In a moment," said Anteros, beginning to use the hoe again. "Hey, those old beasts *did smell funny!* An elephant isn't in it with them. And a lot of it still clings to their bones. Will a sixth thoracic bone do? I'm pretty sure that's what it is. I don't know where the rest of the animal is. Probably somebody gnawed the thoracic here. Nine hoe cuts, and then very careful."

Nine hoe cuts—and then Anteros, using a mason's

trowel, unearthed the old gnawed bone very carefully. Yes, Howard said almost angrily, it was a sixth thoracic of a mastodon. Robert Derby said it was a fifth or a sixth; it is not easy to tell.

"Leave the digging for a while, Anteros," Steinleser said. "I want to record and photograph and take a few measurements here."

Terrence Burdock and Magdalen Mobley were working at the bottom of the chimney rock, at the bottom of the fluting that ran the whole height of it like a core sample.

"Get Anteros over here and see what he can uncover in sixty seconds," Terrence offered.

"Oh, him! He'll just uncover some of his own things."

"What do you mean, his own things? Nobody could have made an intrusion here. It's hard sandstone."

"And harder flint here," Magdalen said. "I might have known it. Pass the damned thing up. I know just about what it says anyhow."

"What it says? What do you mean? But it is marked! And it's large and dressed rough. Who'd carve in flint?"

"Somebody real stubborn, just like flint," Magdalen said. "All right then, let's have it out. Anteros! Get this out in one piece. And do it without shattering it or tumbling the whole thing down on us. He can do it, you know, Terrence. He can do things like that."

"What do you know about his doings, Magdalen? You never saw or heard about the poor man till last night."

"Oh well, I know that it'll turn out to be the same damned stuff."

Anteros did get it out without shattering it or bringing down the chimney column. A cleft with a digging bar, three sticks of the stuff and a cap, and he touched the leads to the battery when he was almost on top of the charge. The blast, it sounded as if the whole sky were falling down on them, and some of those sky-blocks were quite large stones. The ancients wondered why fallen pieces of the sky should always be dark rock-stuff and never sky-blue clear stuff. The answer is that it is only pieces of the night sky that ever fall, even though they may sometimes be most of the daytime in falling, such is the distance.

And the blast that Anteros set off did bring down rocky hunks of the night sky even though it was broad daylight. They brought down darker rocks than any of which the chimney was composed.

Still, it was a small blast. The chimney tottered but did not collapse. It settled back uneasily on its base. And the flint block was out in the clear.

"A thousand spearheads and arrowheads could be shattered and chipped out of that hunk," Terrence marveled. "That flint block would have been a primitive fortune for a primitive man."

"I had several such fortunes," Anteros said dully, "and this one I preserved and dedicated."

They had all gathered around it.

"Oh the poor man!" Ethyl suddenly exclaimed. But she was not looking at any of the men. She was looking at the stone.

"I wish he'd get off that kick," Magdalen sputtered angrily. "I don't care *how* rich he is. I can pick up better stuff than him in the alleys."

"What are the women chirping about?" Terrence asked. "But those do look like true glyphs. Almost like Aztec, are they not, Steinleser?"

"Nahuat-Tanoan, cousins-german to the Aztec, or should I say cousins-yaqui?"

"Call it anything, but can you read it?"

"Probably. Give me eight or ten hours on it and I should come up with a contingent reading of many of the glyphs. We can hardly expect a rational rendering of the message, however. All Nahuat-Tanoan translations so far have been gibberish."

"And remember, Terrence, that Steinleser is a slow reader," Magdalen said spitefully. "And he isn't very good at interpreting *other* signs either."

Steinleser was sullen and silent. How had his face come to bear those deep livid claw-marks today?

They moved a lot of rock and rubble that morning, took quite a few pictures, wrote up bulky notes. There were constant finds as the divided party worked up the shag-slash in the mound and the core-flute of the chimney. There were no more really startling discoveries; no



more turned pots of the proto-Plano period; how could there be? There were no more predicted and perfect points of the late Folsom, but there were broken and unpredictable points. No other mastodon thoracic was found, but bones were uncovered of *bison latifrons*, of dire wolf, of coyote, of man. There were some anomalies in the relationships of the things discovered, but it was not as fishy as it had been in the early morning, not as fishy as when Anteros had announced and then dug out the shards of the pot, the three points, the mastodon bone. The things now were as authentic as they were expected, and yet their very profusion had still the smell of a small fish.

And that Anteros was one digging man. He moved the sand, he moved the stone, he missed nothing. And at noon he disappeared.

An hour later he reappeared in a glossy station wagon, coming out of a thicketed ravine where no one would have expected a way. He had been to town. He brought a variety of cold cuts, cheeses, relishes, and pastries, a couple cases of cold beer, and some V.O.

"I thought you were a poor man, Anteros," Terrence chided.

"I told you that I was a rich old poor man. I have nine thousand acres of grassland, I have three thousand head of cattle, I have alfalfa land and clover land and corn land and hay-grazer land—"

"Oh, knock it off!" Magdalen snapped.

"I have other things," Anteros finished sullenly.

They ate, they rested, they worked the afternoon. Magdalen worked as swiftly and solidly as did Anteros. She was young, she was stocky, she was light-burned-dark. She was not at all beautiful. (Ethyl was.) She could have any man there any time she wanted to. (Ethyl couldn't.) She was Magdalen, the often unpleasant, the mostly casual, the suddenly intense one. She was the tension of the party, the string of the bow.

"Anteros!" she called sharply just at sundown.

"The turtle?" he asked. "The turtle that is under the ledge out of the current where the backwater curls in reverse? But he is fat and happy and he has never harmed anything except for food or fun. I know you do not want me to get that turtle."

"I do! There's eighteen pounds of him. He's fat. He'll be good. Only eighty yards, where the bank crumbles down to Green River, under the lower ledge that's shale that looks like slate, two feet deep—"

"I know where he is. I will go get the fat turtle," Anteros said. "I myself am the fat turtle. I am the Green River." He went to get it.

"Oh that damned poetry of his!" Magdalen spat when he was gone.

Anteros brought back the fat turtle. He looked as if he'd weigh twenty-five pounds, but if Magdalen said he weighed eighteen pounds, then it was eighteen.

"Start cooking, Ethyl," Magdalen said. Magdalen was a mere undergraduate girl permitted on the digging by sheer good fortune. The others of the party were all archeologists of moment. Magdalen had no right to give orders to anyone, except her born right.

"I don't know how to cook a turtle," Ethyl complained.

"Anteros will show you how."

"The late evening smell of newly exposed excavation!" Terrence Burdock burred as they lounged around the campfire a little later, full of turtle and V.O. and feeling rakishly wise. "The exposed age can be guessed by the very timbre of the smell, I believe."

"Timbre of the smell! What is your nose wired up to?" from Magdalen.

And, indeed, there was something time-evocative about the smell of the diggings: cool, at the same time musty and musky, ripe with old stratified water and compressed death. Stratified time.

"It helps if you really know what the exposed age is," said Howard Steinleser. "Here there is an anomaly. The chimney sometimes acts as if it were younger than the mound. The chimney cannot be young enough to include written rock, but it is."

"Archeology is made up entirely of anomalies," said Terrence, "rearranged to make them fit in a fluky pattern. There'd be no system to it otherwise."

"Every science is made up entirely of anomalies rearranged to fit," said Robert Derby. "Have you unriddled the glyph-stone, Howard?"

"Yes, pretty well. Better than I expected. Charles August can verify it, of course, when we get it back to the university. It is a non-royal, non-tribal, non-warfare, non-hunt declaration. It does not come under any of the usual radical signs, any of the categories. It can only be categorized as uncategorized or personal. The translation will be rough."

"Rocky is the word," said Magdalen.

"On with it, Howard," Ethyl cried.

"You are the freedom of wild pigs in the sour-grass, and the nobility of badgers. You are the brightness of serpents and the soaring of vultures. You are passion on mesquite bushes on fire with lightning. You are serenity of toads."

"You've got to admit he's got a different line," said Ethyl. "Your own love notes were less acrid, Terrence."

"What kind of thing is it, Steinleser?" Terrence questioned. "It must have a category."

"I believe Ethyl is right. It's a love poem. 'You are the water in rock cisterns and the secret spiders in that water. You are the dead coyote lying half in the stream, and you are the old entrapped dreams of the coyote's brains oozing liquid through the broken eyesocket. You are the happy ravening flies about that broken socket.'"

"Oh, hold it, Steinleser," Robert Derby cried. "You can't have gotten all that from scratches on flint. What is 'entrapped dreams' in Nahuat-Tanoan glyph-writing?"

"The solid-person sign next to the hollow-person sign, both enclosed in the night sign—that has always been interpreted as the dream glyph. And here the dream glyph is enclosed in the glyph of the deadfall trap. Yes, I believe it means entrapped dreams. To continue: 'You are the corn-worm in the dark heart of the corn, the naked small bird in the nest. You are the pustules on the sick rabbit, devouring life and flesh and turning it into your own serum. You are stars compressed into charcoal. But you cannot give, you cannot take. Once again you will be broken at the foot of the cliff, and the word will remain unsaid in your swollen and purpled tongue.'"

"A love poem, perhaps, but with a difference," said Robert Derby.

"I never was able to go his stuff, and I tried, I really tried," Magdalen moaned.

"Here is the change of person-subject shown by the canted-eye glyph linked with the self-glyph," Steinleser explained. "It is now a first-person talk. 'I own ten thousand back-loads of corn. I own gold and beans and nine buffalo horns full of watermelon seeds. I own the loin-cloth that the sun wore on his fourth journey across the sky. Only three loincloths in the world are older and more valued than this. I cry out to you in a big voice like the hammering of herons' (that sound-verb-particle is badly translated, the hammer being not a modern pounding hammer but a rock angling, chipping hammer) 'and the belching of buffalos. My love is sinewy as entwined snakes, it is steadfast as the sloth, it is like a feathered arrow shot into your abdomen—such is my love. Why is my love unrequited?' "

"I challenge you, Steinleser," Terrence Burdock cut in. "What is the glyph for 'unrequited'?"

"The glyph of the extended hand—with all the fingers bent backwards. It goes on, 'I roar to you. Do not throw yourself down. You believe you are on the hanging sky bridge, but you are on the terminal cliff. I grovel before you. I am no more than dog-droppings.' "

"You'll notice he said that and not me," Magdalen burst out. There was always a fundamental incoherence about Magdalen.

"Ah—continue, Steinleser," said Terrence. "The girl is daft, or she dreams out loud."

"That is all of the inscription, Terrence, except for a final glyph which I don't understand. Glyph writing takes a lot of room. That's all the stone would hold."

"What is the glyph that you don't understand, Howard?"

"It's the spear-thrower glyph entwined with the time glyph. It sometimes means 'flung forward or beyond.' But what does it mean here?"

"It means 'continued,' dummy, 'continued,'" Magdalen said. "Do not fear. There'll be more stones."

"I think it's beautiful," said Ethyl Burdock, "in its own context, of course."

"Then why don't you take him on, Ethyl, in his own

context, of course?" Magdalen asked. "Myself, I don't care how many back-loads of corn he owns. I've had it."

"Take whom on, dear?" Ethyl asked. "Howard Steinleser can interpret the stones, but who can interpret our Magdalen?"

"Oh, I can read her like a rock," Terrence Burdock smiled. But he couldn't.

But it fastened on them. It was all about them and through them: the brightness of serpents and the serenity of toads, the secret spiders in the water, the entrapped dreams oozing through the broken eyesocket, the pustules of the sick rabbit, the belching of buffalo, and the arrow shot into the abdomen. And around it all was the night smell of flint and turned earth and chuckling streams, the mustiness, and the special muskiness which bears the name Nobility of Badgers.

They talked archeology and myth talk. Then it was steep night, and the morning of the third day.

Oh, the sample digging went well. This was already a richer mound than Spiro, though the gash in it was but a small promise of things to come. And the curious twin of the mound, the broken chimney, confirmed and confounded and contradicted. There was time gone wrong in the chimney, or at least in the curious fluted core of it; the rest of it was normal enough, and sterile enough.

Anteros worked that day with a soft sullenness, and Magdalen brooded with a sort of lightning about her.

"Beads, glass beads!" Terrence Burdock exploded angrily. "All right! Who is the hoaxter in our midst? I will not tolerate this at all." Terrence had been angry of face all day. He was clawed deeply, as Steinleser had been the day before, and he was sour on the world.

"There have been glass-bead caches before, Terrence, hundreds of them," Robert Derby said softly.

"There have been hoaxers before, hundreds of them," Terrence howled. "These have 'Hong Kong Contemporary' written all over them, damned cheap glass beads sold by the pound. They have no business in a stratum of around the year seven hundred. All right, who is guilty?"

"I don't believe that any one of us is guilty, Terrence," Ethyl put in mildly. "They are found four feet in from

the slant surface of the mound. Why, we've cut through three hundred years of vegetable loam to get to them, and certainly the surface was eroded beyond that."

"We are scientists," said Steinleser. "We find these. Others have found such. Let us consider the improbabilities of it."

It was noon, so they ate and rested and considered the improbabilities. Anteros had brought them a great joint of white pork, and they made sandwiches and drank beer and ate pickles.

"You know," said Robert Derby, "that beyond the rank impossibility of glass beads found so many times where they *could not be found*, there is a real mystery about *all* early Indian beads, whether of bone, stone, or antler. There are millions and millions of these fine beads with pierced holes finer than any piercer ever found. There are residues, there are centers of every other Indian industry, and there is evolution of every other tool. Why have there been these millions of pierced beads, and never one piercer? There was no technique to make so fine a piercer. How were they done?"

Magdalen giggled. "Bead-spitter," she said.

"Bead-spitter! You're out of your fuzzy mind," Terrence erupted. "That's the silliest and least sophisticated of all Indian legends."

"But it *is* the legend," said Robert Derby, "the legend of more than thirty separate tribes. The Carib Indians of Cuba said that they got their beads from Bead-spitters. The Indians of Panama told Balboa the same thing. The Indians of the pueblos told the same story to Coronado. Every Indian community had an Indian who was its Bead-spitter. There are Creek and Alabama and Koasati stories of Bead-spitter; see Swanton's collections. And his stories were taken down within living memory.

"More than that, when European trade-beads were first introduced, there is one account of an Indian receiving some and saying, 'I will take some to Bead-spitter. If he sees them, he can spit them too.' And that Bead-spitter did then spit them by the bushel. There was never any other Indian account of the origin of their beads. *All* were spit by a Bead-spitter."

"Really, this is very unreal," Ethyl said. Really it was.

"Hog hockey! A Bead-spitter of around the year seven hundred could not spit future beads, he could not spit cheap Hong Kong glass beads of the present time!" Terrence was very angry.

"Pardon me, yes sir, he could," said Anteros. "A Bead-spitter can spit future beads, if he faces North when he spits. That has always been known."

Terrence was angry, he fumed and poisoned the day for them, and the claw marks on his face stood out livid purple. He was angrier yet when he said that the curious dark capping rock on top of the chimney was dangerous, that it would fall and kill someone; and Anteros said that there was no such capping rock on the chimney, that Terrence's eyes were deceiving him, that Terrence should go sit in the shade and rest.

And Terrence became excessively angry when he discovered that Magdalen was trying to hide something that she had discovered in the fluted core of the chimney. It was a large and heavy shale-stone, too heavy even for Magdalen's puzzling strength. She had dragged it out of the chimney flute, tumbled it down to the bottom, and was trying to cover it with rocks and scarp.

"Robert, mark the extraction point!" Terrence called loudly. "It's quite plain yet. Magdalen, stop that! Whatever it is, it must be examined now."

"Oh, it's just more of the damned same thing! I wish he'd let me alone. With his kind of money he can get plenty girls. Besides, it's private, Terrence. You don't have any business reading it."

"You are hysterical, Magdalen, and you may have to leave the digging site."

"I wish I could leave. I can't. I wish I could love. I can't. Why isn't it enough that I die?"

"Howard, spend the afternoon on this," Terrence ordered. "It has writing of a sort on it. If it's what I think it is, it scares me. It's too recent to be in any eroded chimney rock formation, Howard, and it comes from far below the top. Read it."

"A few hours on it and I may come up with something. I never saw anything like it either. What did you think it was, Terrence?"

"What do you think I think it is? It's much later than

the other, and that one was impossible. I'll not be the one to confess myself crazy first."

Howard Steinleser went to work on the incised stone; and two hours before sundown they brought him another one, a gray soapstone block from higher up. Whatever this was covered with, it was not at all the same thing that covered the shale-stone.

And elsewhere things went well, too well. The old fishiness was back on it. No series of finds could be so perfect, no petrification could be so well ordered.

"Robert," Magdalen called down to Robert Derby just at sunset, "in the high meadow above the shore, about four hundred yards down, just past the old fence line—"

"—there is a badger hole, Magdalen. Now you have me doing it, seeing invisible things at a distance. And if I take a carbine and stroll down there quietly, the badger will stick his head out just as I get there (I being strongly downwind of him), and I'll blam him between the eyes. He'll be a big one, fifty pounds."

"Thirty. Bring him, Robert. You're showing a little understanding at last."

"But, Magdalen, badger is rampant meat. It's seldom eaten."

"May not the condemned girl have what she wishes for her last meal? Go get it, Robert."

Robert went. The voice of the little carbine was barely heard at that distance. Soon, Robert brought back the dead badger.

"Cook it Ethyl," Magdalen ordered.

"Yes, I know. And if I don't know how, Anteros will show me." But Anteros was gone. Robert found him on a sundown knoll with his shoulders hunched. The odd man was sobbing silently and his face seemed to be made out of dull pumice stone. But he came back to aid Ethyl in preparing the badger.

"If the first of today's stones scared you, the second should have lifted the hair right off your head, Terrence," Howard Steinleser said.

"It does, it does. All the stones are too recent to be in a chimney formation, but this last one is an insult. It isn't



two hundred years old, but there's a thousand years of strata above it. What time is deposited there?"

They had eaten rampant badger meat and drunk inferior whisky (which Anteros, who had given it to them, didn't know was inferior), and the muskiness was both inside them and around them. The campfire sometimes spit angrily with small explosions, and its glare reached high when it did so. By one such leaping glare, Terrence Burdock saw that the curious dark capping rock was once more on the top of the chimney. He thought he had seen it there in the daytime; but it had not been there after he had sat in the shade and rested, and it had absolutely not been there when he climbed the chimney itself to be sure.

"Let's have the second chapter and then the third, Howard," Ethyl said. "It's neater that way."

"Yes. Well, the second chapter (the first and lowest and apparently the earliest rock we came on today) is written in a language that no one ever saw written before; and yet it's no great trouble to read it. Even Terrence guessed what it was and it scared him. It is Anadarko-Caddo hand-talk graven in stone. It is what is called the sign language of the Plains Indians copied down in formalized pictograms. And it *has* to be very recent, within the last three hundred years. Hand-talk was fragmentary at the first coming of the Spanish, and well developed at the first coming of the French. It was an explosive development, as such things go, worked out within a hundred years. This rock has to be younger than its *situs*, but it was absolutely found in place."

"Read it, Howard, read it," Robert Derby called. Robert was feeling fine and the rest of them were gloomy tonight.

"'I own three hundred ponies,'" Steinleser read the rock out of his memory. 'I own two days' ride north and east and south, and one day's ride west. I give you all. I blast out with a big voice like fire in tall trees, like the explosion of crowning pine trees. I cry like closing-in wolves, like the high voice of the lion, like the hoarse scream of torn calves. Do you not destroy yourself again! You are the dew on crazy-weed in the morning. You are the swift crooked wings of the night-hawk, the dainty

feet of the skunk, you are the juice of the sour squash. Why can you not take or give? I am the humpbacked bull of the high plains, I am the river itself and the stagnant pools left by the river, I am the raw earth and the rocks. Come to me, but do not come so violently as to destroy yourself.'

"Ah, that was the text of the first rock of the day, the Anadarko-Caddo hand-talk graven in stone. And final pictograms which I don't understand: a shot-arrow sign, and a boulder beyond."

"'Continued on next rock,' of course," said Robert Derby. "Well, why *wasn't* hand-talk ever written down? The signs are simple and easily stylized and they were understood by many different tribes. It would have been natural to write it."

"Alphabetical writing was in the region *before* hand-talk was well developed," Terrence Burdock said. "In fact, it was the coming of the Spanish that gave the impetus to hand-talk. It was really developed for communication between Spanish and Indian, not between Indian and Indian. And yet, I believe, hand-talk *was* written down once; it was the beginning of the Chinese pictographs. And there also it had its beginning as communication between differing peoples. Depend on it, if all mankind had always been of a single language, there would never have been any written language developed at all. Writing always began as a bridge, and there had to be some chasm for it to bridge."

"We have one bridge here," said Steinleser. "That whole chimney is full of rotten smoke. The highest part of it should be older than the lowest part of the mound, since the mound was built on a base eroded away from the chimney formation. But in many ways they seem to be contemporary. We must all be under a spell here. We've worked two days on this, parts of three days, and the total impossibility of the situation hasn't struck us yet."

"The old Nahuatlan glyphs for Time are the chimney glyphs. Present time is a lower part of a chimney and fire burning at the base. Past time is black smoke from a chimney, and future time is white smoke from a chimney. There was a signature glyph running through our yester-

day's stone which I didn't and don't understand. It seemed to indicate something coming down out of the chimney rather than going up it."

"It really doesn't look much like a chimney," Magdalen said.

"And a maiden doesn't look much like dew on crazy-weed in the morning, Magdalen," Robert Derby said, "but we recognize these identities."

They talked a while about the impossibility of the whole business.

"There are scales on our eyes," Steinleser said. "The fluted core of the chimney is wrong. I'm not even sure the rest of the chimney is right."

"No, it isn't," said Robert Derby. "We can identify most of the strata of the chimney with known periods of the river and stream. I was above and below today. There is one stretch where the sandstone was not eroded at all, where it stands three hundred yards back from the shifted river and is overlaid with a hundred years of loam and sod. There are other sections where the stone is cut away variously. We can tell when most of the chimney was laid down, we can find its correspondences up to a few hundred years ago. But when were the top ten feet of it laid down? There were no correspondences anywhere to that. The centuries represented by the strata of the top of the chimney, people, those centuries haven't happened yet."

"And when was the dark capping rock on top of it all formed—?" Terrence began. "Ah, I'm out of my mind. It isn't there. I'm demented."

"No more than the rest of us," said Steinleser. "I saw it too, I thought, today. And then I didn't see it again."

"The rock-writing, it's like an old novel that I only half remember," said Ethyl.

"Oh, that's what it is, yes," Magdalen murmured.

"But I don't remember what happened to the girl in it."

"I remember what happened to her, Ethyl," Magdalen said.

"Give us the third chapter, Howard," Ethyl asked. "I want to see how it comes out."

"First you should all have whisky for those colds," Anteros suggested humbly.

"But none of us have colds," Ethyl objected.

"You take your own medical advice, Ethyl, and I'll take mine." Terrence said. "I will have whisky. My cold is not rheum but fear-chill."

They all had whisky. They talked a while, and some of them dozed.

"It's late, Howard," Ethyl said after a while. "Let's have the next chapter. Is it the last chapter? Then we'll sleep. We have honest digging to do tomorrow."

"Our third stone, our second stone of the day just past, is another and even later form of writing and it has never been seen in stone before. It is Kiowa picture writing. The Kiowas did their out-turning spiral writing on buffalo skins dressed almost as fine as vellum. In its more sophisticated form (and this is a copy of that) it is quite late. The Kiowa picture writing probably did not arrive at its excellence until influenced by white artists."

"How late, Steinleser?" Robert Derby asked.

"Not more than a hundred and fifty years old. But I have never seen it copied in stone before. It simply isn't stone-styled. There's a lot of things around here lately that I haven't seen before.

"Well then, to the text, or should I say the pictography? 'You fear the earth, you fear rough ground and rocks, you fear moister earth and rotting flesh, you fear the flesh itself, all flesh is rotting flesh. If you love not rotting flesh, you love not at all. You believe the bridge hanging in the sky, the bridge hung by tendrils and woody vines that diminish as they go up and up till they are no thicker than hairs. There is no sky-bridge, you cannot go upon it. Did you believe that the roots of love grow upside down? They come out of deep earth that is old flesh and brains and hearts and entrails, that is old buffalo bowels and snakes' pizzles, that is black blood and rot and moaning underground. This is old and worn-out and bloody time, and the roots of love grow out of its gore.'"

"You seem to give remarkable detailed translations of

the simple spiral pictures, Steinleser, but I begin to get in the mood of it," Terrence said.

"Ah, perhaps I cheat a little," said Steinleser.

"You lie a lot," Magdalen challenged.

"No, I do not. There is some basis for every phrase I've used. It goes on: 'I own twenty-two trade rifles. I own ponies. I own Mexico silver, eight-bit pieces. I am rich in all ways. I give all to you. I cry out with big voice like a bear full of mad-weed, like a bullfrog in love, like a stallion rearing against a puma. It is the earth that calls you. I am the earth, woollier than wolves and rougher than rocks. I am the bog earth that sucks you in. You cannot give, you cannot take, you cannot love, you think there is something else, you think there is a sky-bridge you may loiter on without crashing down. I am bristled-boar earth, there is no other. You will come to me in the morning. You will come to me easy and with grace. Or you will come to me reluctant and you be shattered in every bone and member of you. You be broken by our encounter. You be shattered as by a lightning bolt striking up from the earth. I am the red calf which is in the writings. I am the rotting red earth. Live in the morning or die in the morning, but remember that love in death is better than no love at all.'"

"Oh brother! Nobody gets that stuff from such kid pictures, Steinleser," Robert Derby moaned.

"Ah well, that's the end of the spiral picture. And a Kiowa spiral pictograph ends with either an in-sweep or an out-sweep line. This ends with an out-sweep, which means—"

"'Continued on next rock,' that's what it means," Terrence cried roughly.

"You won't find the next rocks," Magdalen said. "They're hidden, and most of the time they're not there yet, but they will go on and on. But for all that, you'll read it in the rocks tomorrow morning. I want it to be over with. Oh, I don't know what I want!"

"I believe I know what you want tonight, Magdalen," Robert Derby said.

But he didn't.

The talk trailed off, the fire burned down, they went to their sleeping sacks.

Then it was long jagged night, and the morning of the fourth day. But wait! In Nahuat-Tanoan legend, the world ends on the fourth morning. All the lives we lived or thought we lived had been but dreams of third night. The loincloth that the sun wore on the fourth day's journey was not so valuable as one has made out. It was worn for no more than an hour or so.

And, in fact, there was something terminal about fourth morning. Anteros had disappeared. Magdalen had disappeared. The chimney rock looked greatly diminished in its bulk (something had gone out of it) and much crazier in its broken height. The sun had come up a garish gray-orange color through fog. The signature-glyph of the first stone dominated the ambient. It was as if something were coming down from the chimney, a horrifying smoke; but it was only noisome morning fog.

No it wasn't. There was something else coming down from the chimney, or from the hidden sky: pebbles, stones, indescribable bits of foul ooziings, the less fastidious pieces of the sky; a light nightmare rain had begun to fall there; the chimney was apparently beginning to crumble.

"It's the damndest thing I ever heard about," Robert Derby growled. "Do you think that Magdalen really went off with Anteros?" Derby was bitter and fumatory this morning and his face was badly clawed.

"Who is Magdalen? Who is Anteros?" Ethyl Burdock asked.

Terrence Burdock was hooting from high on the mound. "All come up," he called. "Here is a find that will make it all worthwhile. We'll have to photo and sketch and measure and record and witness. It's the finest basalt head I've ever seen, man-sized, and I suspect that there's a man-sized body attached to it. We'll soon clean it and clear it. Gah! What a weird fellow he was!"

But Howard Steinleser was studying a brightly colored something that he held in his two hands.

"What is it, Howard? What are you doing?" Derby demanded.

"Ah, I believe this is the next stone in sequence. The writing is alphabetical but deformed, there is an element

missing. I believe it is in modern English, and I will solve the deformity and see it true in a minute. The text of it seems to be—”

Rocks and stones were coming down from the chimney, and fog, amnesic and wit-stealing fog.

“Steinleser, are you all right?” Robert Derby asked with compassion. “That isn’t a stone that you hold in your hand.”

“It isn’t a stone. I thought it was. What is it then?”

“It is the fruit of the Osage orange tree, the American Meraceous. It isn’t a stone, Howard.” And the thing was a tough, woody, wrinkled mock-orange, as big as a small melon.

“You have to admit that the wrinkles look a little bit like writing, Robert.”

“Yes, they look a little like writing, Howard. Let us go up where Terrence is bawling for us. You’ve read too many stones. And it isn’t safe here.”

“Why go up, Howard? The other thing is coming down.”

It was the bristled-boar earth reaching up with a rumble. It was a lightning bolt struck upward out of the earth, and it got its prey. There was explosion and roar. The dark capping rock was jerked from the top of the chimney and slammed with terrible force to the earth, shattering with a great shock. And something else that had been on that capping rock. And the whole chimney collapsed about them.

She was broken by the encounter. She was shattered in every bone and member of her. And she was dead.

“Who—who is she?” Howard Steinleser stuttered.

“Oh God! Magdalen, of course!” Robert Derby cried.

“I remember her a little bit. Didn’t understand her. She put out like an evoking moth but she wouldn’t be had. Near clawed the face off me the other night when I misunderstood the signals. She believed there was a sky-bridge. It’s in a lot of the mythologies. But there isn’t one, you know. Oh well.”

“The girl is dead! Damnation! What are you doing grubbing in those stones?”

“Maybe she isn’t dead in them yet, Robert. I’m going to read what’s here before something happens to them. This capping rock that fell and broke, it’s impossible, of

course. It's a stratum that hasn't been laid down yet. I always did want to read the future and I may never get another chance."

"You fool! The girl's dead! Does nobody care? Terrence, stop bellowing about your find. Come down. The girl's dead."

"Come up, Robert and Howard," Terrence insisted. "Leave that broken stuff down there. It's worthless. But nobody ever saw anything like this."

"Do come up, men," Ethyl sang. "Oh, it's a wonderful piece! I never saw anything like it in my life."

"Ethyl, is the whole morning mad?" Robert Derby demanded as he came up to her. "She's dead. Don't you really remember her? Don't you remember Magdalen?"

"I'm not sure. Is she the girl down there? Isn't she the same girl who's been hanging around here a couple days? She shouldn't have been playing on that high rock. I'm sorry she's dead. But just look what we're uncovering here!"

"Terrence. Don't *you* remember Magdalen?"

"The girl down there? She's a little bit like the girl that clawed the hell out of me the other night. Next time someone goes to town they might mention to the sheriff that there's a dead girl here. Robert, did you ever see a face like this one? And it digs away to reveal the shoulders. I believe there's a whole man-sized figure here. Wonderful, wonderful!"

"Terrence, you're off your head. Well, do you remember Anteros?"

"Certainly, the twin of Eros, but nobody ever made much of the symbol of unsuccessful love. Thunder! That's the name for him! It fits him perfectly. We'll call him Anteros."

Well, it *was* Anteros, lifelike in basalt stone. His face was contorted. He was sobbing soundlessly and frozenly and his shoulders were hunched with emotion. The carving was fascinating in its miserable passion, his stony love unrequited. Perhaps he was more impressive now than he would be when he was cleaned. He was earth, he was earth itself. Whatever period the carving belonged to, it was outstanding in its power.



"The live Anteros, Terrence. Don't you remember our digging man, Anteros Manypenny?"

"Sure. He didn't show up for work this morning, did he? Tell him he's fired."

"Magdalen is dead! She was one of us! Damnit, she was the main one of us!" Robert Derby cried. Terrence and Ethyl Burdock were earless to his outburst. They were busy uncovering the rest of the carving.

And down below, Howard Steinleser was studying dark broken rocks before they would disappear, studying a stratum that hadn't been laid down yet, reading a foggy future.

## BY THE FALLS

---

### Harry Harrison

It was the rich damp grass, slippery as soap, covering the path, that caused Carter to keep slipping and falling, not the steepness of the hill. The front of his raincoat was wet and his knees were muddy long before he reached the summit. And with each step forward and upward the continuous roar of sound grew louder. He was hot and tired by the time he reached the top of the ridge—yet he instantly forgot his discomfort as he looked out across the wide bay.

Like everyone else he had heard about The Falls since childhood and had seen countless photographs and films of them on television. All this preparation had not readied him for the impact of reality.

He saw a falling ocean, a vertical river—how many millions of gallons a second did people say came down? The Falls stretched out across the bay, their farthest reaches obscured by the clouds of floating spray. The bay seethed and boiled with the impact of that falling weight, raising foam-capped waves that crashed against the rocks below. Carter could feel the impact of the water on the solid stone as a vibration in the ground but all sound was swallowed up in the greater roar of The Falls. This was a reverberation so outrageous and overpowering that his ears could not become accustomed to it. They soon felt numbed from the ceaseless impact but the very bones of the skull carried the sound to his brain, shivering and battering it. When he put his hands over his ears he was horrified to discover that The Falls were still as loud as ever. As he stood swaying and wide-eyed one of the constantly changing air currents that formed about the base

of The Falls shifted suddenly and swept a wall of spray down upon him. The inundation lasted scant seconds but was heavier than any rainfall he had ever experienced, had ever believed possible. When it passed he was gasping for air, so dense had been the falling water.

Quivering with sensations he had never before experienced, Carter turned and looked along the ridge toward the gray and water-blackened granite of the cliff and the house that huddled at its base like a stony blister. It was built of the same granite as the cliff and appeared no less solid. Running and slipping, his hands still over his ears, Carter hurried toward the house.

For a short time the spray was blown across the bay and out to sea, so that golden afternoon sunlight poured down on the house, starting streamers of vapor from its sharply sloping roof. It was a no-nonsense building, as solid as the rock against which it pressed. Only two windows penetrated the blankness of the front that faced The Falls—tiny and deep, they were like little suspicious eyes. No door existed here but Carter saw that a path of stone flags led around the corner.

He followed it and found—set into the wall on the far side, away from The Falls—a small and deep-set entry. It had no arch but was shielded by a great stone lintel a good two feet in diameter. Carter stepped into the opening that framed the door and looked in vain for a knocker on the heavy, iron-bolted timbers. The unceasing, world-filling, thunder of The Falls made thinking almost impossible and it was only after he had pressed uselessly against the sealed portal that he realized that no knocker, even one as loud as cannon, could be heard within these walls above that sound. He lowered his hands and tried to force his mind to coherence.

There had to be some way of announcing his presence. When he stepped back out of the alcove he noticed that a rusty iron knob was set into the wall a few feet away. He seized and twisted it but it would not turn. However, when he pulled on it, although it resisted, he was able to draw it slowly away from the wall to disclose a length of chain. The chain was heavily greased and in good condition—a fair omen. He continued to pull until a yard of chain emerged from the opening and then, no matter

how hard he pulled, no more would come. He released the handle and it bounced against the rough stone of the wall. For some instants it hung there. Then with a jerky mechanical motion, the chain was drawn back into the wall until the knob once more rested in place.

Whatever device this odd mechanism activated seemed to perform its desired function. In less than a minute the heavy door swung open and a man appeared in the opening. He examined his visitor wordlessly.

The man was much like the building and the cliffs behind it—solid, no-nonsense, worn, lined and graying. But he had resisted the years even as he showed their marks upon him. His back was as straight as any young man's and his knob-knuckled hands had a look of determined strength. Blue were his eyes and very much the color of the water falling endlessly, thunderously, on the far side of the building. He wore knee-high fisherman's boots, plain corduroy pants and a soiled gray sweater. His face did not change expression as he waved Carter into the building.

When the thick door had been swung shut and the many sealing bars shoved back into place the silence in the house took on a quality of its own. Carter had known absence of sound elsewhere—here was a positive statement of no-sound, a bubble of peace pushed right up against the very base of the all-sound of The Falls. He was momentarily deafened and he knew it. But he was not so deaf that he did not know that the hammering thunder of The Falls had been shut outside. The other man must have sensed how his visitor felt. He nodded in a reassuring manner as he took Carter's coat, then pointed to a comfortable chair set by the deal table near the fire. Carter sank gratefully into the cushions. His host turned away and vanished, to return a moment later with a tray bearing a decanter and two glasses. He poured a measure of wine into each glass and set one down before Carter, who nodded and seized it in both hands to steady their shaking. After a first large gulp he sipped at it while the tremors died and his hearing slowly returned. His host moved about the room on various tasks and presently Carter found himself much recovered. He looked up.

"I must thank you for your hospitality. When I came in I was—shaken."

"How are you now? Has the wine helped?" the man said loudly, almost shouting, and Carter realized that his own words had not been heard. Of course, the man must be hard of hearing. It was a wonder he was not stone deaf.

"Very good, thank you," Carter shouted back. "Very kind of you indeed. My name is Carter, I'm a reporter, which is why I have come to see you."

The man nodded, smiling slightly.

"My name is Bodum. You must know that if you have come here to talk to me. You write for the newspaper?"

"I was sent here." Carter coughed—the shouting was irritating his throat. "And I of course know you, Mr. Bodum—that is I know you by reputation. You're the Man by The Falls."

"Forty-three years now," Bodum said with solid pride, "I've lived here and have never been away for a single night. Not that it has been easy. When the wind is wrong the spray is blown over the house for days and it is hard to breathe—even the fire goes out. I built the chimney myself—there is a bend part way up with baffles and doors. The smoke goes up—but if water comes down the baffles stop it and its weight opens the doors and it drains away through a pipe to the outside. I can show you where it drains—black with soot the wall is there."

While Bodum talked Carter looked around the room at the dim furniture shapes barely seen in the wavering light from the fire and at the two windows set into the wall.

"Those windows," he said. "You put them in yourself? May I look out?"

"Took a year apiece, each one. Stand on that bench. It will bring you to the right level. They're armored glass, specially made, solid as the wall around them now that I have them anchored well. Don't be afraid. Go right up to it. The window's safe. Look how the glass is anchored."

Carter was not looking at the glass but at The Falls outside. He had not realized how close the building was to the falling water. It was perched on the very edge of the cliff and nothing was to be seen from this vantage point except the wall of blackened wet granite to his right

and the foaming maelstrom of the bay far below. And before him, above him, filling space, The Falls. All the thickness of wall and glass could not cut out their sound completely and when he touched the heavy pane with his fingertips he could feel the vibration of the water's impact.

The window did not lessen the effect The Falls had upon him but it enabled him to stand and watch and think, as he had been unable to do on the outside. It was very much like a peephole into a holocaust of water—a window into a cold hell. He could watch without being destroyed—but the fear of what was on the other side did not lessen. Something black flickered in the falling water and was gone.

"There—did you see that," he called out. "Something came down The Falls. What could it possibly be?"

Bodum nodded wisely. "Over forty years I have been here and I can show you what comes down The Falls." He thrust a splint into the fire and lit a lamp from it. Then, picking up the lamp, he waved Carter after him. They crossed the room and he held the light to a large glass bell jar.

"Must be twenty years ago it washed up on the shore. Every bone in its body broke too. Stuffed and mounted it myself."

Carter pressed close, looking at the staring shoe-button eyes and the gaping jaws and pointed teeth. The limbs were stiff and unnatural, the body under the fur bulging in the wrong places. Bodum was by no means a skillful taxidermist. Yet, perhaps by accident, he had captured a look of terror in the animal's expression and stance.

"It's a dog," Carter said. "Very much like other dogs."

Bodum was offended, his voice as cold as shout can be. "Like them, perhaps, but not of them. Every bone broken I told you. How else could a dog have appeared here in this bay?"

"I'm sorry, I did not mean to suggest for an instant—Down The Falls, of course. I just meant it is so much like the dogs we have that perhaps there is a whole new world up there. Dogs and everything, just like ours."

"I never speculate," Bodum said, mollified. "I'll make some coffee."

He took the lamp to the stove and Carter, left alone in

the partial darkness went back to the window. It drew him. "I must ask you some questions for my article," he said but did not speak loudly enough for Bodum to hear. Everything he had meant to do here seemed irrelevant as he looked out at The Falls. The wind shifted. The spray was briefly blown clear and The Falls were once more a mighty river coming down from the sky. When he canted his head he saw exactly as if he were looking across a river.

And there, upstream, a ship appeared, a large liner with rows of portholes. It sailed the surface of the river faster than ship had ever sailed before and he had to jerk his head to follow its motion. When it passed, no more than a few hundred yards away, for one instant he could see it clearly. The people aboard it were hanging to the rails, some with their mouths open as though shouting in fear. Then it was gone and there was only the water, rushing endlessly by.

"Did you see it?" Carter shouted, spinning about.

"The coffee will be ready soon."

"There, out there," Carter cried, taking Bodum by the arm. "In The Falls. It was a ship, I swear it was, falling from up above. With people on it. There must be a whole world up there that we know nothing about."

Bodum reached up to the shelf for a cup, breaking Carter's grip with the powerful movement of his arm.

"My dog came down The Falls. I found it and stuffed it myself."

"Your dog, of course, I'll not deny that. But there were people on that ship and I'll swear—I'm not mad—that their skins were a different color from ours."

"Skin is skin, just skin color."

"I know. That is what we have. But it must be possible for skins to be other colors, even if we don't know about it."

"Sugar?"

"Yes, please. Two."

Carter sipped at the coffee—it was strong and warm. In spite of himself he was drawn back to the window. He looked out and sipped at the coffee—and started when something black and formless came down. And other

things. He could not tell what they were because the spray was blowing toward the house again. He tasted grounds at the bottom of his cup and left the last sips. He put the cup carefully aside.

Again the eddying wind currents shifted the screen of spray to one side just in time for him to see another of the objects go by.

"That was a house! I saw it as clearly as I see this one. But wood perhaps, not stone, and smaller. And black as though it had been partially burned. Come look, there may be more."

Bodum banged the pot as he rinsed it out in the sink. "What do your newspapers want to know about me? Over forty years here—there are a lot of things I can tell you about."

"What is up there above The Falls—on top of the cliff? Do people live up there? Can there be a whole world up there of which we live in total ignorance?"

Bodum hesitated, frowned in thought before he answered.

"I believe they have dogs up there."

"Yes," Carter answered, hammering his fist on the window ledge, not knowing whether to smile or cry. The water fell by; the floor and walls shook with the power of it.

"There—more and more things going by." He spoke quietly, to himself. "I can't tell what they are. That—that could have been a tree and that a bit of fence. The smaller ones may be bodies—animals, logs, anything. There is a different world above The Falls and in that world something terrible is happening. And we don't even know about it. We don't even know that world is there."

He struck again and again on the stone until his fist hurt.

The sun shone on the water and he saw the change, just here and there at first, an altering and shifting.

"Why—the water seems to be changing color. Pink it is—no, red. More and more of it. There, for an instant, it was all red. The color of blood."

He spun about to face the dim room and tried to smile but his lips were drawn back hard from his teeth when he did.



"Blood? Impossible. There can't be that much blood in the whole world. What is happening up there? What is happening?"

His scream did not disturb Bodum, who only nodded his head in agreement.

"I'll show you something," he said. "But only if you promise not to write about it. People might laugh at me. I've been here over forty years and that is nothing to laugh about."

"My word of honor, not a word. Just show me. Perhaps it has something to do with what is happening."

Bodum took down a heavy bible and opened it on the table next to the lamp. It was set in very black type, serious and impressive. He turned pages until he came to a piece of very ordinary paper.

"I found this on the shore. During the winter. No one had been here for months. It may have come over The Falls. Now I'm not saying it did—but it is possible. You will agree it is possible?"

"Oh, yes—quite possible. How else could it have come here?" Carter reached out and touched it. "I agree, ordinary paper. Torn on one edge, wrinkled where it was wet and then dried." He turned it over. "There is lettering on the other side."

"Yes. But it is meaningless. It is no word I know."

"Nor I, and I speak four languages. Could it have a meaning?"

"Impossible. A word like that."

"No human language." He shaped his lips and spoke the letters aloud. "Aich—Eee—Ell—Pea."

"What could HELP mean," Bodum shouted, louder than ever. "A child scribbled it. Meaningless." He seized the paper and crumpled it and threw it into the fire.

"You'll want to write a story about me," he said proudly. "I have been here over forty years, and if there is one man in the entire world who is an authority on The Falls it is me."

"I know everything that there is to know about them."

## THE SECOND INQUISITION

---

Joanna Russ

If a man can resist the influences of his townsfolk, if he can cut free from the tyranny of neighborhood gossip, the world has no terrors for him; there is no second inquisition.

—John Jay Chapman

I often watched our visitor reading in the living room, sitting under the floor lamp near the new, standing Philco radio, with her long, long legs stretched out in front of her and the pool of light on her book revealing so little of her face: brownish, coppery features so marked that she seemed to be a kind of freak and hair that was reddish black but so rough that it looked like the things my mother used for scouring pots and pans. She read a great deal, that summer. If I ventured out of the archway, where I was not exactly hiding but only keeping in the shadow to watch her read, she would often raise her face and smile silently at me before beginning to read again, and her skin would take on an abrupt, surprising pallor as it moved into the light. When she got up and went into the kitchen with the gracefulness of a stork, for something to eat, she was almost too tall for the doorways; she went on legs like a spider's, with long swinging arms and a little body in the middle, the strange proportions of the very tall. She looked down at my mother's plates and dishes from a great, gentle height, remarkably absorbed; and asking me a few odd questions, she would bend down over whatever she was going to eat, meditate on it for a few moments like a giraffe, and then straightening up back into the stratosphere, she would pick up the plate in one thin hand, curling around

it fingers like legs, and go back gracefully into the living room. She would lower herself into the chair that was always too small, curl her legs around it, become dissatisfied, settle herself, stretch them out again—I remember so well those long, hard, unladylike legs—and begin again to read.

She used to ask, "What is that? What is that? And what is this?" but that was only at first.

My mother, who disliked her, said she was from the circus and we ought to try to understand and be kind. My father made jokes. He did not like big women or short hair—which was still new in places like ours—or women who read, although she was interested in his carpentry and he liked that.

But she was six feet four inches tall; this was in 1925.

My father was an accountant who built furniture as a hobby; we had a gas stove which he actually fixed once when it broke down and some outdoor tables and chairs he had built in the back yard. Before our visitor came on the train for her vacation with us, I used to spend all my time in the back yard, being underfoot, but once we had met her at the station and she shook hands with my father—I think she hurt him when she shook hands—I would watch her read and wish that she might talk to me.

She said: "You are finishing high school?"

I was in the archway, as usual; I answered yes.

She looked up at me again, then down at her book. She said, "This is a very bad book." I said nothing. Without looking up, she tapped one finger on the shabby hassock on which she had put her feet. Then she looked up and smiled at me. I stepped tentatively from the floor to the rug, as reluctantly as if I were crossing the Sahara; she swung her feet away and I sat down. At close view her face looked as if every race in the world had been mixed and only the worst of each kept; an American Indian might look like that, or Ikhnaton from the encyclopedia, or a Swedish African, a Maori princess with the jaw of a Slav. It occurred to me suddenly that she might be a Negro, but no one else had ever seemed to think so, possibly because nobody in our town had ever seen a Negro. We had none. They were "colored people."

She said, "You are not pretty, yes?"

I got up. I said, "My father think's you're a freak."

"You are sixteen," she said, "sit down," and I sat down. I crossed my arms over my breasts because they were too big, like balloons. Then she said, "I am reading a very stupid book. You will take it away from me, yes?"

"No," I said.

"You must," she said, "or it will poison me, sure as God," and from her lap she plucked up *The Green Hat: A Romance*, gold letters on green binding, last year's best-seller which I had had to swear never to read, and she held it out to me, leaning back in her chair with that long arm doing all the work, the book enclosed in a cage of fingers wrapped completely around it. I think she could have put those fingers around a basketball. I did not take it.

"Go on," she said, "read it, go on, go away," and I found myself at the archway, by the foot of the stairs with *The Green Hat: A Romance* in my hand. I turned it so the title was hidden. She was smiling at me and had her arms folded back under her head. "Don't worry," she said. "Your body will be in fashion by the time of the next war." I met my mother at the top of the stairs and had to hide the book from her; my mother said, "Oh, the poor woman!" She was carrying some sheets. I went to my room and read through almost the whole night, hiding the book in the bedclothes when I was through. When I slept, I dreamed of Hispano-Suizas, of shingled hair and tragic eyes; of women with painted lips who had Affairs, who went night after night with Jews to low dives, who lived as they pleased, who had miscarriages in expensive Swiss clinics; of midnight swims, of desperation, of money, of illicit love, of a beautiful Englishman and getting into a taxi with him while wearing a cloth-of-silver cloak and a silver turban like the ones shown in the society pages of the New York City newspapers.

Unfortunately our guest's face kept recurring in my dream, and because I could not make out whether she was amused or bitter or very much of both, it really spoiled everything.

My mother discovered the book the next morning. I found it next to my plate at breakfast. Neither my mother

nor my father made any remark about it; only my mother kept putting out the breakfast things with a kind of tender, reluctant smile. We all sat down, finally, when she had put out everything, and my father helped me to rolls and eggs and ham. Then he took off his glasses and folded them next to his plate. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. Then he looked at the book and said in a tone of mock surprise, "Well! What's this?"

I didn't say anything. I only looked at my plate.

"I believe I've seen this before," he said. "Yes, I believe I have." Then he asked my mother, "Have you seen this before?" My mother made a kind of vague movement with her head. She had begun to butter some toast and was putting it on my plate. I knew she was not supposed to discipline me; only my father was. "Eat your egg," she said. My father, who had continued to look at *The Green Hat: A Romance* with the same expression of unvarying surprise, finally said:

"Well! This isn't a very pleasant thing to find on a Saturday morning, is it?"

I still didn't say anything, only looked at my food. I heard my mother say worriedly, "She's not eating, Ben," and my father put his hand on the back of my chair so I couldn't push it away from the table, as I was trying to do.

"Of course you have an explanation for this," he said. "Don't you?"

I said nothing.

"Of course she does," he said, "doesn't she, Bess? You wouldn't hurt your mother like this. You wouldn't hurt your mother by stealing a book that you knew you weren't supposed to read and for very good reason, too. You know we don't punish you. We talk things over with you. We try to explain. Don't we?"

I nodded.

"Good," he said. "Then where did this book come from?"

I muttered something; I don't know what.

"Is my daughter angry?" said my father. "Is my daughter *being rebellious*?"

"She told you all about it!" I blurted out. My father's face turned red.

"Don't you dare talk about your mother that way!" he

shouted, standing up. "Don't you *dare* refer to your mother in that way!"

"Now, Ben—" said my mother.

"Your mother is the soul of unselfishness," said my father, "and don't you forget it, missy; your mother has worried about you since the day you were born and if you don't appreciate that, you can damn well—"

"Ben!" said my mother, shocked.

"I'm sorry," I said, and then I said, "I'm very sorry, Mother." My father sat down. My father had a mustache and his hair was parted in the middle and slicked down; now one lock fell over the part in front and his whole face was gray and quivering. He was staring fixedly at his coffee cup. My mother came over and poured coffee for him; then she took the coffeepot into the kitchen and when she came back she had milk for me. She put the glass of milk on the table near my plate. Then she sat down again. She smiled tremblingly at my father; then she put her hand over mine on the table and said:

"Darling, why did you read that book?"

"Well?" said my father from across the table.

There was a moment's silence. Then:

"Good morning!"

and

"Good morning!"

and

"Good morning!"

said our guest cheerfully, crossing the dining room in two strides, and folding herself carefully down into her breakfast chair, from where her knees stuck out, she reached across the table, picked up *The Green Hat*, propped it up next to her plate and began to read it with great absorption. Then she looked up. "You have a very progressive library," she said. "I took the liberty of recommending this exciting book to your daughter. You told me it was your favorite. You sent all the way to New York City on purpose for it, yes?"

"I don't—I quite—" said my mother, pushing back her chair from the table. My mother was trembling from head to foot and her face was set in an expression of fixed distaste. Our visitor regarded first my mother and then my

father, bending over then tenderly and with exquisite interest. She said:

"I hope you do not mind my using your library."

"No no no," muttered my father.

"I eat almost for two," said our visitor modestly, "because of my height. I hope you do not mind that?"

"No, of course not," said my father, regaining control of himself.

"Good. It is all considered in the bill," said the visitor, and looking about at my shrunken parents, each hurried, each spooning in the food and avoiding her gaze, she added deliberately:

"I took also another liberty. I removed from the endpapers certain—ah—drawings that I did not think bore any relation to the text. You do not mind?"

And as my father and mother looked in shocked surprise and utter consternation—at each other—she said to me in a low voice, "Don't eat. You'll make yourself sick," and then smiled warmly at the two of them when my mother went off into the kitchen and my father remembered he was late for work. She waved at them. I jumped up as soon as they were out of the room.

"There were no drawings in that book!" I whispered.

"Then we must make some," said she, and taking a pencil off the whatnot, she drew in the endpapers of the book a series of sketches: the heroine sipping a soda in an ice-cream parlor, showing her legs and very chic; in a sloppy bathing suit and big grin, holding up a large fish; driving her Hispano-Suiza into a tree only to be catapulted straight up into the air; and in the last sketch landing demure and coy in the arms of the hero, who looked violently surprised. Then she drew a white mouse putting on lipstick, getting married to another white mouse in a church, the two entangled in some manner I thought I should not look at, the lady mouse with a big belly and two little mice inside (who were playing chess), then the little mice coming out in separate envelopes and finally the whole family having a picnic, with some things around the picnic basket that I did not recognize and underneath in capital letters "I did not bring up my children to test cigarettes." This left me blank. She laughed and rubbed it out, saying that it was out of date. Then she drew a white

mouse with a rolled-up umbrella chasing my mother. I picked that up and looked at it for a while; then I tore it into pieces, and tore the others into pieces as well. I said, "I don't think you have the slightest right to—" and stopped. She was looking at me with—not anger exactly—not warning exactly—I found I had to sit down. I began to cry.

"Ah! The results of practical psychology," she said dryly, gathering up the pieces of her sketches. She took matches off the whatnot and set fire to the pieces in a saucer. She held up the smoking match between her thumb and forefinger, saying, "You see? The finger is—shall we say, perception?—but the thumb is money. The thumb is hard."

"You oughtn't to treat my parents that way!" I said, crying.

"You ought not to tear up my sketches," she said calmly.

"Why not! Why not!" I shouted.

"Because they are worth money," she said, "in some quarters. I won't draw you any more," and indifferently taking the saucer with the ashes in it in one palm, she went into the kitchen. I heard her voice and then my mother's and then my mother's again, and then our visitor's in a tone that would've made a rock weep, but I never found out what they said.

I passed our guest's room many times at night that summer, going in by the hall past her rented room where the second-floor windows gave out onto the dark garden. The electric lights were always on brilliantly. My mother had sewn the white curtains because she did everything like that and had bought the furniture at a sale: marble-topped bureau, the wardrobe, the iron bedstead, an old Victrola against the wall. There was usually an open book on the bed. I would stand in the shadow of the open doorway and look across the bare wood floor, too much of it and all as slippery as the sea, bare wood waxed and shining in the electric light. A black dress hung on the front of the wardrobe and a pair of shoes like my mother's, T-strap shoes with thick heels. I used to wonder if she had silver evening slippers inside the wardrobe.



Sometimes the open book on the bed was Wells's *The Time Machine* and then I would talk to the black glass of the window, I would say to the transparent reflections and the black branches of trees that moved beyond it:

"I'm only sixteen."

"You look eighteen," she would say.

"I know," I would say. "I'd like to be eighteen. I'd like to go away to college. To Radcliffe, I think."

She would say nothing, out of surprise.

"Are you reading Wells?" I would say then, leaning against the door jamb. "I think that's funny. Nobody in this town reads anything; they just think about social life. I read a lot, however. I would like to learn a great deal."

She would smile then, across the room.

"I did something funny once," I would go on. "I mean funny ha-ha, not funny peculiar." It was a real line, very popular. "I read *The Time Machine* and then I went around asking people were they Eloi or were they Morlocks; everyone liked it. The point is which you would be if you could, like being an optimist or a pessimist or do you like bobbed hair." Then I would add, "Which are you?" and she would only shrug and smile a little more. She would prop her chin on one long, long hand and look into my eyes with her black Egyptian eyes and then she would say in her curious hoarse voice:

"It is you who must say it first."

"I think," I would say, "that you are a Morlock," and sitting on the bed in my mother's rented room with *The Time Machine* open beside her, she would say:

"You are exactly right. I am a Morlock. I am a Morlock on vacation. I have come from the last Morlock meeting, which is held out between the stars in a big goldfish bowl, so all the Morlocks have to cling to the inside walls like a flock of black bats, some right side up, some upside down, for there is no up and down there, clinging like a flock of black crows, like a chestnut burr turned inside out. There are half a thousand Morlocks and we rule the worlds. My black uniform is in the wardrobe."

"I knew I was right," I would say.

"You are always right," she would say, "and you know the rest of it, too. You know what murderers we are and how terribly we live. We are waiting for the big bang

when everything falls over and even the Morlocks will be destroyed; meanwhile I stay here waiting for the signal and I have messages clipped to the frame of your mother's amateur oil painting of Main Street because it will be in a museum some day and my friends can find it; meanwhile I read *The Time Machine*."

Then I would say, "Can I come with you?" leaning against the door.

"Without you," she would say gravely, "all is lost," and taking out from the wardrobe a black dress glittering with stars and a pair of silver sandals with high heels, she would say, "These are yours. They were my great-grandmother's, who founded the Order. In the name of Trans-Temporal Military Authority." And I would put them on.

It was almost a pity she was not really there.

Every year in the middle of August the Country Club gave a dance, not just for the rich families who were members but also for the "nice" people who lived in frame houses in town and even for some of the smart, economical young couples who lived in apartments, just as if they had been in the city. There was one new, red-brick apartment building downtown, four stories high, with a courtyard. We were supposed to go, because I was old enough that year, but the day before the dance my father became ill with pains in his left side and my mother had to stay home to take care of him. He was propped up on pillows on the living-room daybed, which we had pulled out into the room so he could watch what my mother was doing with the garden out back and call to her once in a while through the windows. He could also see the walk leading up to the front door. He kept insisting that she was doing things all wrong. I did not even ask if I could go to the dance alone. My father said:

"Why don't you go out and help your mother?"

"She doesn't want me to," I said. "I'm supposed to stay here," and then he shouted angrily, "Bess! Bess!" and began to give her instructions through the window. I saw another pair of hands appear in the window next to my mother's and then our guest—squatting back on her heels and smoking a cigarette—pulling up weeds. She was working quickly and efficiently, the cigarette between her teeth.

"No, not that way!" shouted my father, pulling on the blanket that my mother had put over him. "Don't you know what you're doing! Bess, you're ruining everything! Stop it! Do it right!" My mother looked bewildered and upset; she passed out of the window and our visitor took her place; she waved to my father and he subsided, pulling the blanket up around his neck. "I don't like women who smoke," he muttered irritably. I slipped out through the kitchen.

My father's toolshed and working space took up the farther half of the back yard; the garden was spread over the nearer half, part kitchen garden, part flowers, and then extended down either side of the house where we had fifteen feet or so of space before a white slat fence and the next people's side yard. It was an on-and-offish garden, and the house was beginning to need paint. My mother was working in the kitchen garden, kneeling. Our guest was standing, pruning the lilac trees, still smoking. I said:

"Mother, can't I go, can't I *go*!" in a low voice.

My mother passed her hand over her forehead and called "Yes, Ben!" to my father.

"Why *can't* I go!" I whispered. "Ruth's mother and Betty's mother will be there. Why couldn't you call Ruth's mother and Betty's mother?"

"*Not that way!*" came a blast from the living-room window. My mother sighed briefly and then smiled a cheerful smile. "Yes, Ben!" she called brightly. "I'm listening." My father began to give some more instructions.

"Mother," I said desperately, "why couldn't you—"

"Your father wouldn't approve," she said, and again she produced a bright smile and called encouragingly to my father. I wandered over to the lilac trees where our visitor, in her usual nondescript black dress, was piling the dead wood under the tree. She took a last puff on her cigarette, holding it between thumb and forefinger, then ground it out in the grass and picked up in both arms the entire lot of dead wood. She carried it over to the fence and dumped it.

"My father says you shouldn't prune trees in August," I blurted suddenly.

"Oh?" she said.

"It hurts them," I whispered.

"Oh," she said. She had on gardening gloves, though much too small; she picked up the pruning shears and began snipping again through inch-thick trunks and dead branches that snapped explosively when they broke and whipped out at your face. She was efficient and very quick.

I said nothing at all, only watched her face.

She shook her head decisively.

"But Ruth's mother and Betty's mother—" I began, faltering.

"I never go out," she said.

"You needn't stay," I said, placating.

"Never," she said. "Never at all," and snapping free a particularly large, dead, silvery branch from the lilac tree, she put it in my arms. She stood there looking at me and her look was suddenly very severe, very unpleasant, something foreign, like the look of somebody who had seen people go off to battle to die, the "movies" look but hard, hard as nails. I knew I wouldn't get to go anywhere. I thought she might have seen battle in the Great War, maybe even been in some of it. I said, although I could barely speak:

"Were you in the Great War?"

"Which great war?" said our visitor. Then she said, "No, I never go out," and returned to scissoring the trees.

On the night of the dance my mother told me to get dressed, and I did. There was a mirror on the back of my door, but the window was better; it softened everything; it hung me out in the middle of a black space and made my eyes into mysterious shadows. I was wearing pink organdy and a bunch of daisies from the garden, not the wild kind. I came downstairs and found our visitor waiting for me at the bottom: tall, bare-armed, almost beautiful, for she'd done something to her impossible hair and the rusty reddish black curled slickly like the best photographs. Then she moved and I thought she was altogether beautiful, all black and rippling silver like a Paris dress or better still a New York dress, with a silver band around her forehead like an Indian princess's and silver shoes with the chunky heels and the one strap over the instep.

She said, "Ah! don't you look nice," and then in a

whisper, taking my arm and looking down at me with curious gentleness, "I'm going to be a bad chaperone. I'm going to disappear."

"Well!" said I, inwardly shaking, "I hope I can take care of myself, I should think." But I hoped she wouldn't leave me alone and I hoped that no one would laugh at her. She was really incredibly tall.

"Your father's going to sleep at ten," said my mother. "Be back by eleven. Be happy." And she kissed me.

But Ruth's father, who drove Ruth and I and Ruth's mother and our guest to the Country Club, did not laugh. And neither did anyone else. Our visitor seemed to have put on a strange gracefulness with her dress, and a strange sort of kindness, too, so that Ruth, who had never seen her but had only heard rumors about her, cried out, "Your friend's lovely!" and Ruth's father, who taught mathematics at high school, said (clearing his throat), "It must be lonely staying in," and our visitor said only, "Yes. Oh yes. It is," resting one immensely long, thin, elegant hand on his shoulder like some kind of unwinking spider, while his words and hers went echoing out into the night, back and forth, back and forth, losing themselves in the trees that rushed past the headlights and massed blackly to each side.

"Ruth wants to join a circus!" cried Ruth's mother, laughing.

"I do *not*!" said Ruth.

"You *will* not," said her father.

"I'll do exactly as I please," said Ruth with her nose in the air, and she took a chocolate cream out of her hand-bag and put it in her mouth.

"You will *not*!" said Ruth's father, scandalized.

"Daddy, you know I will too," said Ruth, serenely though somewhat muffled, and under cover of the dark she wormed over to me in the back seat and passed, from her hot hand to mine, another chocolate cream. I ate it; it was unpleasantly and piercingly sweet.

"Isn't it *glorious*?" said Ruth.

The Country Club was much more bare than I had expected, really only a big frame building with a veranda three-quarters of the way around it and not much lawn, but there was a path down front to two stone pillars that

made a kind of gate and somebody had strung the gate and the whole path with colored Chinese lanterns. That part was lovely. Inside, the whole first storey was one room, with a varnished floor like the high school gym, and a punch table at one end and the ribbons and Chinese lanterns hung all over the ceiling. It did not look quite like the movies but everything was beautifully painted. I had noticed that there were wicker armchairs scattered on the veranda. I decided it was "nice." Behind the punch table was a flight of stairs that led to a gallery full of tables where the grown-ups could go and drink (Ruth insisted they would be bringing real liquor for "mixes," although of course the Country Club had to pretend not to know about that) and on both sides of the big room French windows that opened onto the veranda and the Chinese lanterns, swinging a little in the breeze. Ruth was wearing a better dress than mine. We went over to the punch table and drank punch while she asked me about our visitor and I made up a lot of lies. "You don't know anything," said Ruth. She waved across the room to some friends of hers; then I could see her start dancing with a boy in front of the band, which was at the other end of the room. Older people were dancing and people's parents, some older boys and girls. I stayed by the punch table. People who knew my parents came over and talked to me; they asked me how I was and I said I was fine; then they asked me how my father was and I said he was fine. Someone offered to introduce me to someone but I said I knew him. I hoped somebody would come over. I thought I would skirt around the dance floor and try to talk to some of the girls I knew, but then I thought I wouldn't; I imagined myself going up the stairs with Iris March's lover from *The Green Hat* to sit at a table and smoke a cigarette or drink something. I stepped behind the punch table and went out through the French windows. Our guest was a few chairs away with her feet stretched out, resting on the lowest rung of the veranda. She was reading a magazine with the aid of a small flashlight. The flowers planted around the veranda showed up a little in the light from the Chinese lanterns: shadowy clumps and masses of petunias, a few of the white ones springing into life as she turned the

page of her book and the beam of the flashlight moved in her hand. I decided I would have my cigarette in a long holder. The moon was coming up over the woods past the Country Club lawns, but it was a cloudy night and all I could see was a vague lightening of the sky in that direction. It was rather warm. I remembered something about *an ivory cigarette holder flaunting at the moon*. Our visitor turned another page. I thought that she must have been aware of me. I thought again of Iris March's lover, coming out to get me on the "terrace" when somebody tapped me on the shoulder; it was Ruth's father. He took me by the wrist and led me to our visitor, who looked up and smiled vaguely, dreamily, in the dark under the colored lanterns. Then Ruth's father said:

"What do you know? There's a relative of yours inside!" She continued to smile but her face stopped moving; she smiled gently and with tenderness at the space next to her head for the barely perceptible part of a moment. Then she completed the swing of her head and looked at him, still smiling, but everything had gone out of it.

"How lovely," she said. Then she said, "Who is it?"

"I don't know," said Ruth's father, "but he's tall, looks just like you—beg pardon. He says he's your cousin."

"*Por nada*," said our guest absently, and getting up, she shook hands with Ruth's father. The three of us went back inside. She left the magazine and flashlight on the chair; they seemed to belong to the Club. Inside, Ruth's father took us up the steps to the gallery and there, at the end of it, sitting at one of the tables, was a man even taller than our visitor, tall even sitting down. He was in evening dress while half the men at the dance were in business suits. He did not really look like her in the face; he was a little darker and a little flatter of feature; but as we approached him, he stood up. He almost reached the ceiling. He was a giant. He and our visitor did not shake hands. The both of them looked at Ruth's father, smiling formally, and Ruth's father left us; then the stranger looked quizzically at me but our guest had already sunk into a nearby seat, all willowness, all grace. They made a handsome couple. The stranger brought a silver-inlaid flask out of his hip pocket; he took the pitcher

of water that stood on the table and poured some into a clean glass. Then he added whisky from the flask, but our visitor did not take it. She only turned it aside, amused, with one finger, and said to me, "Sit down, child." which I did. Then she said:

"Cousin, how did you find me?"

"*Par chance*, cousin," said the stranger. "By luck." He screwed the top back on the flask very deliberately and put the whole thing back in his pocket. He began to stir the drink he had made with a wooden muddler provided by the Country Club.

"I have endured much annoyance," he said, "from that man to whom you spoke. There is not a single specialized here; they are all half-brained: scattered and stupid."

"He is a kind and clever man," said she. "He teaches mathematics."

"The more fool he," said the stranger, "for the mathematics he thinks he teaches!" and he drank his own drink. Then he said, "I think we will go home now."

"Eh! This person?" said my friend, drawing up the ends of her lips scornfully, half amused. "Not this person!"

"Why not this person, who knows me?" said the strange man.

"Because," said our visitor, and turning deliberately away from me, she put her face next to his and began to whisper mischievously in his ear. She was watching the dancers on the floor below, half the men in business suits, half the couples middle-aged. Ruth and Betty and some of their friends, and some vacationing college boys. The band was playing the fox-trot. The strange man's face altered just a little; it darkened; he finished his drink, put it down, and then swung massively in his seat to face me.

"Does she go out?" he said sharply.

"Well?" said our visitor idly.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, she goes out. Every day."

"By car or on foot?" I looked at her but she was doing nothing. Her thumb and finger formed a circle on the table.

"I don't know," I said.

"Does she go on foot?" he said.

"No," I blurted suddenly, "no, by car. Always by car!" He sat back in his seat.



"You would do anything," he said conversationally. "The lot of you."

"I?" she said. "I'm not dedicated. I can be reasoned with."

After a moment of silence he said, "We'll talk."

She shrugged. "Why not?"

"This girl's home," he said. "I'll leave fifteen minutes after you. Give me your hand."

"Why?" she said. "You know where I live. I am not going to hide in the woods like an animal."

"Give me your hand," he repeated. "For old time's sake." She reached across the table. They clasped hands and she winced momentarily. Then they both rose. She smiled dazzlingly. She took me by the wrist and led me down the stairs while the strange man called after us, as if the phrase pleased him, "For old time's sake!" and then "Good health, cousin! Long life!" while the band struck up a march in ragtime. She stopped to talk to five or six people, including Ruth's father who taught mathematics in the high school, and the band leader, and Betty, who was drinking punch with a boy from our class. Betty said to me under her breath, "Your daisies are coming loose. They're gonna fall off." We walked through the parked cars until we reached one that she seemed to like; they were all open and some owners left the keys in them; she got in behind the wheel and started up.

"But this *isn't* your car!" I said. "You can't just—"

"Get in!" I slid in next to her.

"It's after ten o'clock," I said. "You'll wake up my father. Who—"

"Shut up!"

I did. She drove very fast and very badly. Halfway home she began to slow down. Then suddenly she laughed out loud and said very confidentially, not to me but as if to somebody else:

"I told him I had planted a Neilsen loop around here that would put half of Greene County out of phase. A dead man's control. I had to go out and stop it every week."

"What's a Neilsen loop?" I said.

"Jam yesterday, jam tomorrow, but never jam today," she quoted.

"What," said I emphatically, "is a—"

"I've told you, baby," she said, "and you'll never know more, God willing," and pulling into our driveway with a screech that would have wakened the dead, she vaulted out of the car and through the back door into the kitchen, just as if my mother and father had both been asleep or in a cataleptic trance, like those in the works of E. A. Poe. Then she told me to get the iron poker from the garbage burner in the back yard and find out if the end was still hot; when I brought the thing in, she laid the hot end over one of the flames of the stove. Then she rummaged around under the sink and came up with a bottle of my mother's Clear Household Ammonia.

"That stuff's awful," I said. "If you let that get in your eyes—"

"Pour some in the water glass," she said, handing it to me. "Two-thirds full. Cover it with a saucer. Get another glass and another saucer and put all of them on the kitchen table. Fill your mother's water pitcher, cover that, and put that on the table."

"Are you going to *drink* that?" I cried, horrified, half-way to the table with the covered glass. She merely pushed me. I got everything set up, and also pulled three chairs up to the kitchen table; I then went to turn off the gas flame, but she took me by the hand and placed me so that I hid the stove from the window and the door. She said, "Baby, what is the specific heat of iron?"

"What?" I said.

"You know it, baby," she said. "What is it?"

I only stared at her.

"But you know it, baby," she said. "You know it better than I. You know that your mother was burning garbage today and the poker would still be hot. And you know better than to touch the iron pots when they come fresh from the oven, even though the flame is off, because iron takes a long time to heat up and a long time to cool off, isn't that so?"

I nodded.

"And you don't know," she added, "how long it takes for aluminum pots to become cold because nobody uses aluminum for pots yet. And if I told you how scarce the heavy metals are, and what a radionic oven is, and how

the heat can go *through* the glass and the plastic and even the ceramic lattice, you wouldn't know what I was talking about, would you?"

"No," I said, suddenly frightened, "no, no, no."

"Then you know more than some," she said. "You know more than me. Remember how I used to burn myself, fiddling with your mother's things?" She looked at her palm and made a face. "He's coming," she said. "Stand in front of the stove. When he asks you to turn off the gas, turn it off. When I say 'Now,' hit him with the poker."

"I can't," I whispered. "He's too big."

"He can't hurt you," she said. "He doesn't dare; that would be an anachronism. Just do as I say."

"What are you going to *do*?" I cried.

"When I say 'Now,'" she repeated serenely, "hit him with the poker," and sitting down by the table, she reached into a jam-jar of odds and ends my mother kept on the windowsill and began to buff her nails with a Lady Marlene emery stick. Two minutes passed by the kitchen clock. Nothing happened. I stood there with my hand on the cold end of the poker, doing nothing until I felt I had to speak, so I said, "Why are you making a face? Does something hurt?"

"The splinter in my palm," she said calmly. "The bastard."

"Why don't you take it out?"

"It will blow up the house."

He stepped in through the open kitchen door.

Without a word she put both arms palm upward on the kitchen table and without a word he took off the black cummerbund of his formal dress and flicked it at her. It settled over both her arms and then began to draw tight, molding itself over her arms and the table like a piece of black adhesive, pulling her almost down onto it and whipping one end around the table edge until the wood almost cracked. It seemed to paralyze her arms. He put his finger to his tongue and then to her palm, where there was a small black spot. The spot disappeared. He laughed and told me to turn off the flame, so I did.

"Take it off," she said then.

He said, "Too bad you are in hiding or you too could

carry weapons," and then, as the edge of the table let out a startling sound like a pistol shot, he flicked the black tape off her arms, returning it to himself, where it disappeared into his evening clothes.

"Now that I have used this, everyone knows where we are," he said, and he sat down in a kitchen chair that was much too small for him and lounged back in it, his knees sticking up into the air.

Then she said something I could not understand. She took the saucer off the empty glass and poured water into it; she said something unintelligible again and held it out to him, but he motioned it away. She shrugged and drank the water herself. "Flies," she said, and put the saucer back on. They sat in silence for several minutes. I did not know what to do; I knew I was supposed to wait for the word "Now" and then hit him with the poker, but no one seemed to be saying or doing anything. The kitchen clock, which I had forgotten to wind that morning, was running down at ten minutes to eleven. There was a cricket making noise close outside the window and I was afraid the ammonia smell would get out somehow; then, just as I was getting a cramp in my legs from standing still, our visitor nodded. She sighed, too, regretfully. The strange man got to his feet, moved his chair carefully out of the way and pronounced:

"Good. I'll call them."

"Now?" said she.

I couldn't do it. I brought the poker in front of me and stood there with it, holding it in both hands. The stranger—who almost had to stoop to avoid our ceiling—wasted only a glance on me, as if I were hardly worth looking at, and then concentrated his attention on her. She had her chin in her hands. Then she closed her eyes.

"Put that down, please," she said tiredly.

I did not know what to do. She opened her eyes and took the saucer off the other glass on the table.

"Put that down right now," she said, and raised the glass of ammonia to her lips.

I swung at him clumsily with the poker. I was not sure what happened next, but I think he laughed and seized the end—the hot end—and then threw me off balance just as he screamed, because the next thing I knew I was

down on all fours watching her trip him as he threw himself at her, his eyes screwed horribly shut, choking and coughing and just missing her. The ammonia glass was lying empty and broken on the floor; a brown stain showed where it had rolled off the white tablecloth on the kitchen table. When he fell, she kicked him in the side of the head. Then she stepped carefully away from him and held out her hand to me; I gave her the poker, which she took with the folded edge of the tablecloth, and reversing it so that she held the cold end, she brought it down with immense force—not on his head, as I had expected, but on his windpipe. When he was still, she touched the hot end of the poker to several places on his jacket, passed it across where his belt would be, and to two places on both of his shoes. Then she said to me, "Get out."

I did, but not before I saw her finishing the job on his throat, not with the poker but with the thick heel of her silver shoe.

When I came back in, there was nobody there. There was a clean, rinsed glass on the drainboard next to the wooden sink and the poker was propped up in one corner of the sink with cold water running on it. Our visitor was at the stove, brewing tea in my mother's brown teapot. She was standing under the Dutch cloth calendar my mother, who was very modern, kept hanging on the wall. My mother pinned messages on it; one of them read "Be Careful. Except for the Bathroom, More Accidents Occur in the Kitchen Than in Any Other Part of the House."

"Where—" I said, "where is—is—"

"Sit down," she said. "Sit down here," and she put me into *his* seat at the kitchen table. But there was no *he* anywhere. She said, "Don't think too much." Then she went back to the tea and just as it was ready to pour, my mother came in from the living room, with a blanket around her shoulders, smiling foolishly and saying, "Goodness, I've been asleep, haven't I?"

"Tea?" said our visitor.

"I fell asleep just like that," said my mother, sitting down.

"I forgot," said our visitor. "I borrowed a car. I felt ill. I must call them on the telephone," and she went out onto the hall, for we had been among the first to have a tele-

phone. She came back a few minutes later. "Is it all right?" said my mother. We drank our tea in silence.

"Tell me," said our visitor at length. "How is your radio reception?"

"It's perfectly fine," said my mother, a bit offended.

"That's fine," said our visitor, and then, as if she couldn't control herself, "because you live in a dead area, you know, thank God, a dead area!"

My mother said, alarmed, "I beg your par—"

"Excuse me," said our visitor, "I'm ill," and she put her cup into her saucer with a clatter, got up and went out of the kitchen. My mother put one hand caressingly over mine.

"Did anyone . . . insult her at the dance?" said my mother, softly.

"Oh no," I said.

"Are you sure?" my mother insisted. "Are you perfectly sure? Did anyone comment? Did anyone say anything about her appearance? About her height? Anything that was not nice?"

"Ruth did," I said. "Ruth said she looked like a giraffe." My mother's hand slid off mine; gratified, she got up and began to gather up the tea things. She put them into the sink. She clucked her tongue over the poker and put it away in the kitchen closet. Then she began to dry the glass that our visitor had previously rinsed and put on the drainboard, the glass that had held ammonia.

"The poor woman," said my mother, drying it. "Oh, the poor woman."

Nothing much happened after that. I began to get my books ready for high school. Blue cornflowers sprang up along the sides of the house and my father, who was better now, cut them down with a scythe. My mother was growing hybrid ones in the back flower garden, twice as tall and twice as big as any of the wild ones; she explained to me about hybrids and why they were bigger, but I forgot it. Our visitor took up with a man, not a nice man, really, because he worked in the town garage and was Polish. She didn't go out but used to see him in the kitchen at night. He was a thickset, stocky man, very blond, with a real Polish name, but everyone called him

Bogalusa Joe because he had spent fifteen years in Bogalusa, Louisiana (he called it "Loosiana") and he talked about it all the time. He had a theory, that the colored people were just like us and that in a hundred years everybody would be all mixed up, you couldn't tell them apart. My mother was very advanced in her views but she wouldn't ever let me talk to him. He was very respectful; he called her "Ma'am," and didn't use any bad language, but he never came into the living room. He would always meet our visitor in the kitchen or sometimes on the swing in the back garden. They would drink coffee; they would play cards. Sometimes she would say to him, "Tell me a story, Joe. I love a good story," and he would talk about hiding out in Loosiana; he had had to hide out from somebody or something for three years in the middle of the Negroes and they had let him in and let him work and took care of him. He said, "The coloreds are like anybody." Then he said, "The nigras are smarter. They got to be. They ain't nobody's fool. I had a black girl for two years once was the smartest woman in the world. Beautiful woman. Not beautiful like a white, though, not the same.

"Give us a hundred years," he added, "and it'll all be mixed."

"Two hundred?" said our visitor, pouring coffee. He put a lot of sugar in his; then he remarked that he had learned that in Bogalusa. She sat down. She was leaning her elbows on the table, smiling at him. She was stirring her own coffee with a spoon. He looked at her a moment, and then he said softly:

"A black woman, smartest woman in the world. You're black, woman, ain't you?"

"Part," she said.

"Beautiful woman," he said. "Nobody knows?"

"They know in the circus," she said. "But there they don't care. Shall I tell you what we circus people think of you?"

"Of who?" he said, looking surprised.

"Of all of you," she said. "All who aren't in the circus. All who can't do what we can do, who aren't the biggest or the best, who can't kill a man barehanded or learn a new language in six weeks or slit a man's jugular at fifteen

yards with nothing but a pocketknife or climb the Greene County National Bank from the first storey to the sixth with no equipment. I can do all that."

"I'll be damned," said Bogalusa Joe softly.

"We despise you," she said. "That's what we do. We think you're slob. The scum of the earth! The world's fertilizer, Joe, that's what you are."

"Baby, you're blue," he said. "You're blue tonight," and then he took her hand across the table, but not the way they did it in the movies, not the way they did it in the books; there was a look on his face I had never seen on anyone's before, not the high school boys when they put a line over on a girl, not on grown-ups, not even on the brides and grooms because all that was romantic or showing off or "lust" and he only looked infinitely kind, infinitely concerned. She pulled her hand out of his. With the same faint, detached smile she had had all night, she pushed back her chair and stood up. She said flatly:

"All I can do! What good is it?" She shrugged. She added, "I've got to leave tomorrow." He got up and put his arm around her shoulders. I thought that looked bad because he was actually a couple of inches shorter than she was.

He said, "Baby, you don't have to go." She was staring out into the back garden, as if looking miles away, miles out, far away into our vegetable patch or our swing or my mother's hybrids, into something nobody could see. He said urgently, "Honey, look—" and then, when she continued to stare, pulling her face around so she had to look at him, both his broad, mechanic's hands under her chin, "Baby, you can stay with me." He brought his face closer to hers. "Marry me," he said suddenly. She began to laugh. I had never heard her laugh like that before. Then she began to choke. He put his arms around her and she leaned against him, choking, making funny noises like someone with asthma, finally clapping her hands over her face, then biting her palm, heaving up and down as if she were sick. It took me several seconds to realize that she was crying. He looked very troubled. They stood there: she cried, he, distressed—and I hiding, watching all of it. They began to walk slowly toward the kitchen door. When they had gone out and put out the light, I followed



them out into the back garden, to the swing my father had rigged up under the one big tree: cushions and springs to the ground like a piece of furniture, big enough to hold four people. Bushes screened it. There was a kerosene lantern my father had mounted on a post, but it was out. I could just about see them. They sat for a few minutes, saying nothing, looking up through the tree into the darkness. The swing creaked a little as our visitor crossed and uncrossed her long legs. She took out a cigarette and lit it, obscuring their faces with even that little glow: an orange spot that wavered up and down as she smoked, making the darkness more black. Then it disappeared. She had ground it out underfoot in the grass. I could see them again. Bogalusa Joe, the garage mechanic, said:

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," she said. Then they kissed each other. I liked that; it was all right; I had seen it before. She leaned back against the cushions of the swing and seemed to spread her feet in the invisible grass; she let her head and arms fall back onto the cushion. Without saying a word, he lifted her skirt far above her knees and put his hand between her legs. There was a great deal more of the same business and I watched it all, from the first twisting to the stabbings, the noises, the life-and-death battle in the dark. The word *Epilepsy* kept repeating itself in my head. They got dressed and again began to smoke, talking in tones I could not hear. I crouched in the bushes, my heart beating violently.

She did not leave the next day, or the next or the next; and she even took a dress to my mother and asked if she could have it altered somewhere in town. My school clothes were out, being aired in the back yard to get the mothball smell out of them. I put covers on all my books. I came down one morning to ask my mother whether I couldn't have a jumper taken up at the hem because the magazines said it was all right for young girls. I expected a fight over it. I couldn't find my mother in the hall or the kitchen so I tried the living room, but before I had got halfway through the living-room arch, someone said, "Stop there," and I saw both my parents sitting on two

chairs near the front door, both with their hands in their laps, both staring straight ahead, motionless as zombies.

I said, "Oh for heaven's sake, what're you—"

"Stop there," said the same voice. My parents did not move. My mother was smiling her social smile. There was no one else in the room. I waited for a little while, my parents continuing to be dead, and then from some corner on my left, near the new Philco, our visitor came gliding out, wrapped in my mother's spring coat, stepping softly across the rug and looking carefully at all the living-room windows. She grinned when she saw me. She tapped the top of the Philco radio and motioned me in. Then she took off the coat and draped it over the radio.

She was in black from head to foot.

I thought *black*, but black was not the word; the word was *blackness*, dark beyond dark, dark that drained the eyesight, something I could never have imagined even in my dreams, a black in which there was no detail, no sight, no nothing, only an awful, desperate dizziness, for her body—the thing was skintight, like a diver's costume or an acrobat's—had actually disappeared, completely blotted out except for its outline. Her head and bare hand floated in the air. She said, "Pretty, yes?" Then she sat cross-legged on our radio. She said, "Please pull the curtains," and I did, going from one to the other and drawing them shut, circling my frozen parents and then stopping in the middle of the quaking floor. I said, "I'm going to faint." She was off the radio and into my mother's coat in an instant; holding me by the arm, she got me onto the living-room couch and put her arm around me, massaging my back. She said, "Your parents are asleep." Then she said, "You have known some of this. You are a wonderful little pickup but you get mixed up, yes? All about the Morlocks? The Trans-Temporal Military Authority?"

I began to say "Oh oh oh oh—" and she massaged my back again.

"Nothing will hurt you," she said. "Nothing will hurt your parents. Think how exciting it is! Think! The rebel Morlocks, the revolution in the Trans-Temporal Military Authority."

"But I—I—" I said.

"We are friends," she continued gravely, taking my

hands. "We are real friends. You helped me. We will not forget that," and slinging my mother's coat off onto the couch, she went and stood in front of the archway. She put her hands on her hips, then began rubbing the back of her neck nervously and clearing her throat. She turned around to give me one last look.

"Are you calm?" she said. I nodded. She smiled at me. "Be calm," she said softly. "*Sois tranquille*. We're friends," and then she put herself to watching the archway. She said once, almost sadly, "Friends," and then stepped back and smiled again at me.

The archway was turning into a mirror. It got misty, then bright, like a cloud of bright dust, then almost like a curtain; and then it was a mirror, although all I could see in it was our visitor and myself, not my parents, not the furniture, not the living room.

Then the first Morlock stepped through.

And the second.

And the third.

And the others.

Oh, the living room was filled with giants! They were like her, like her in the face, like her in the bodies of the very tall, like her in the black uniforms, men and women of all the races of the earth, everything mixed and huge as my mother's hybrid flowers but a foot taller than our visitor, a flock of black ravens, black bats, black wolves, the professionals of the future world, perched on our furniture, on the Philco radio, some on the very walls and drapes of the windows as if they could fly, hovering in the air as if they were out in space where the Morlocks meet, half a thousand in a bubble between the stars.

Who rule the worlds.

Two came through the mirror who crawled on the rug, both in diving suits and goldfish-bowl helmets, a man and a woman, fat and shaped like seals. They lay on the rug breathing water (for I saw the specks flowing in it, in and out of strange frills around their necks, the way dust moves in air) and looking up at the rest with tallowy faces. Their suits bulged. One of the Morlocks said something to one of the seals and one of seals answered, fingering a thing attached to the barrels on its back, gurgling.

Then they all began to talk.

Even if I'd known what language it was, I think it would have been too fast for me; it was very fast, very hard-sounding, very urgent, like the numbers pilots call in to the ground or something like that, like a code that everybody knows, to get things done as fast as you can. Only the seal-people talked slowly, and they gurgled and stank like a dirty beach. They did not even move their faces except to make little round mouths, like fish. I think I was put to sleep for a while (or maybe I just fell asleep) and then it was something about the seal-people, with the Morlock who was seated on the radio joining in—and then general enough—and then something going round the whole room—and then that fast, hard urgent talk between one of the Morlocks and my friend. It was still business, but they looked at *me*; it was awful to be looked at and yet I felt numb; I wished I were asleep; I wanted to cry because I could not understand a word they were saying. Then my friend suddenly shouted; she stepped back and threw both arms out, hands extended and fingers spread, shaking violently. She was shouting instead of talking, shouting desperately about something, pounding one fist into her palm, her face contorted, just as if it was not business. The other Morlock was breathing quickly and had gone pale with rage. He whispered something, something very venomous. He took from his black uniform, which could have hidden anything, a silver dime, and holding it up between thumb and forefinger, he said in perfectly clear English, while looking at me:

"In the name of the war against the Trans-Tempor—"

She had jumped him in an instant. I scrambled up; I saw her close his fist about the dime with her own; then it was all a blur on the floor until the two of them stood up again, as far as they could get from each other, because it was perfectly clear that they hated each other. She said very distinctly, "*I do insist.*" He shrugged. He said something short and sharp. She took out of her own darkness a knife—only a knife—and looked slowly about the room at each person in it. Nobody moved. She raised her eyebrows.

"*Tchal grozny?*"

The seal-woman hissed on the floor, like steam coming out of a leaky radiator. She did not get up but lay on her back, eyes blinking, a woman encased in fat.

"You?" said my friend insultingly. "You will stain the carpet."

The seal-woman hissed again. Slowly my friend walked toward her, the others watching. She did not bend down, as I had expected, but dove down abruptly with a kind of sidewise roll, driving herself into the seal-woman's side. She had planted one heel on the stomach of the woman's diving suit; she seemed to be trying to tear it. The seal-woman caught my friend's knife-hand with one glove and was trying to turn it on my friend while she wrapped the other gloved arm around my friend's neck. She was trying to strangle her. My friend's free arm was extended on the rug; it seemed to me that she was either leaning on the floor or trying to pull herself free. Then again everything went into a sudden blur. There was a gasp, a loud, mechanical click; my friend vaulted up and backward, dropping her knife and clapping one hand to her left eye. The seal-woman was turning from side to side on the floor, a kind of shudder running from her feet to her head, an expressionless flexing of her body and face. Bubbles were forming in the goldfish-bowl helmet. The other seal-person did not move. As I watched, the water began falling in the seal-woman's helmet and then it was all air. I supposed she was dead. My friend, our visitor, was standing in the middle of the room, blood welling from under her hand; she was bent over with pain and her face was horribly distorted but not one person in that room moved to touch her.

"Life—" she gasped, "for life. Yours," and then she crashed to the rug. The seal-woman had slashed open her eye. Two of the Morlocks rushed to her then and picked up her and her knife; they were dragging her toward the mirror in the archway when she began muttering something.

"Damn your sketches!" shouted the Morlock she had fought with, completely losing control of himself. "We are at war; Trans-Temp is at our heels; do you think we have time for dilettantism? You presume on being that woman's granddaughter! We are fighting for the freedom

of fifty billions of people, not for your scribbles!" and motioning to the others, who immediately dragged the body of the seal-woman through the mirror and began to follow it themselves, he turned to me.

"You!" he snapped. "You will speak to nobody of this. Nobody!"

I put my arms around myself.

"Do not try to impress anyone with stories," he added contemptuously. "You are lucky to live," and without another look he followed the last of the Morlocks through the mirror, which promptly disappeared. There was blood on the rug, a few inches from my feet. I bent down and put my fingertips in it, and then with no clear reason, I put my fingers to my face.

"—come back," said my mother. I turned to face them, the wax manikins who had seen nothing.

"Who the devil drew the curtains!" shouted my father. "I've told you" (to me) "that I don't like tricks, young lady, and if it weren't for your mother's—"

"Oh, Ben, Ben! She's had a nosebleed!" cried my mother.

They told me later that I fainted.

I was in bed a few days, because of the nosebleed, but then they let me up. My parents said I probably had had anemia. They also said they had seen our visitor off at the railroad station that morning, and that she had boarded the train as they watched her; tall, frizzy-haired, freakish, dressed in black down to between the knees and ankles, legged like a stork and carrying all her belongings in a small valise. "Gone to the circus," said my mother. There was nothing in the room that had been hers, nothing in the attic, no reflection in the window at which she had stood, brilliantly lit against the black night, nothing in the kitchen and nothing at the Country Club but tennis courts overgrown with weeds. Joe never came back to our house. The week before school I looked through all my books, starting with *The Time Machine* and ending with *The Green Hat*; then I went downstairs and looked through every book in the house. There was nothing. I was invited to a party; my mother would not let me go. Cornflowers grew around the house. Betty came over once and was

bored. One afternoon at the end of summer, with the wind blowing through the empty house from top to bottom and everybody away, nobody next door, my parents in the back yard, the people on the other side of us gone swimming, everybody silent or sleeping or off somewhere—except for someone down the block whom I could hear mowing the lawn—I decided to sort and try on all my shoes. I did this in front of a full-length mirror fastened to the inside of my closet door. I had been taking off and putting on various of my winter dresses, too, and I was putting one particular one away in a box on the floor of the closet when I chanced to look up at the inside of the closet door.

She was standing in the mirror. It was all black behind her, like velvet. She was wearing something black and silver, half-draped, half-nude, and there were lines on her face that made it look sectioned off, or like a cobweb; she had one eye. The dead eye radiated spinning white light, like a Catherine wheel. She said:

“Did you ever think to go back and take care of yourself when you are little? Give yourself advice?”

I couldn't say anything.

“I am not you,” she said, “but I have had the same thought and now I have come back four hundred and fifty years. Only there is nothing to say. There is never anything to say. It is a pity, but natural, no doubt.”

“Oh, please!” I whispered. “Stay!” She put one foot up on the edge of the mirror as if it were the threshold of a door. The silver sandal she had worn at the Country Club dance almost came into my bedroom: thick-heeled, squat, flaking, as ugly as sin; new lines formed on her face and all over her bare skin, ornamenting her all over. Then she stepped back; she shook her head, amused; the dead eye waned, filled again, exploded in sparks and went out, showing the naked socket, ugly, shocking and horrible.

“Tcha!” she said, “my grandma thought she would bring something hard to a world that was soft and silly but nice, and now it's silly and not so nice and the hard has got too hard and the soft too soft and my great-grandma—it is she who founded the order—is dead. Not that it matters. Nothing ends, you see. Just keeps going on and on.”

"But you can't *see*!" I managed. She poked herself in the temple and the eye went on again.

"Bizarre," she said. "Interesting. Attractive. Stone blind is twice as good. I'll tell you my sketches."

"But you don't—you can't—" I said.

"The first," she said, lines crawling all over her, "is an Eloi having the Go-Jollies, and that is a bald, fat man in a toga, a frilled bib, a sunbonnet and shoes you would not believe, who has a crystal ball in his lap and from it wires plugged into his eyes and his nose and his ears and his tongue and his head, just like your lamps. That is an Eloi having the Go-Jollies."

I began to cry.

"The second," she went on, "is a Morlock working; and that is myself holding a skull, like *Hamlet*, only if you look closely at the skull you will see it is the world, with funny things sticking out of the seas and the polar ice caps, and that it is full of people. Much too full. There are too many of the worlds, too."

"If you'll *stop*—" I cried.

"They are all pushing each other off," she continued, "and some are falling into the sea, which is a pity, no doubt, but quite natural, and if you will look closely at all these Eloi you will see that each one is holding his crystal ball, or running after an animated machine which runs faster than he, or watching another Eloi on a screen who is cleverer and looks fascinating, and you will see that under the fat the man or woman is screaming, screaming and dying.

"And my third sketch," she said, "which is a very little one, shows a goldfish bowl full of people in black. Behind that is a smaller goldfish bowl full of people in black, which is going after the first goldfish bowl, and behind the second is a third, which is going after the second, and so on, or perhaps they alternate; that would be more economical. Or perhaps I am only bitter because I lost my eye. It's a personal problem."

I got to my feet. I was so close I could have touched her. She crossed her arms across her breast and looked down at me; she then said softly, "My dear, I wished to take you with me, but that's impossible. I'm very sorry,"



and looking for the first time both serious and tender, she disappeared behind a swarm of sparks.

I was looking at myself. I had recently made, passionately and in secret, the uniform of the Trans-Temporal Military Authority as I thought it ought to look: a black tunic over black sleeves and black tights. The tights were from a high school play I had been in the year before and the rest was cut out of the lining of an old winter coat. That was what I was wearing that afternoon. I had also fastened a silver curling-iron to my waist with a piece of cord. I put one foot up in the air, as if on the threshold of the mirror, and a girl in ragged black stared back at me. She turned and frantically searched the entire room, looking for sketches, for notes, for specks of silver paint, for anything at all. Then she sat down on my bed. She did not cry. She said to me, "You look idiotic." Someone was still mowing the lawn outside, probably my father. My mother would be clipping, patching, rooting up weeds; she never stopped. Someday I would join the circus, travel to the moon, write a book; after all, I had helped kill a man. I had been somebody. It was all nonsense. I took off the curling-iron and laid it on the bed. Then I undressed and got into my middy-blouse and skirt and I put the costume on the bed in a heap. As I walked toward the door of the room, I turned to take one last look at myself in the mirror and at my strange collection of old clothes. For a moment something else moved in the mirror, or I thought it did, something behind me or to one side, something menacing, something half-blind, something heaving slowly like a shadow, leaving perhaps behind it faint silver flakes like the shadow of a shadow or some carelessly dropped coins, something glittering, something somebody had left on the edge of vision, dropped by accident in the dust and cobwebs of an attic. I wished for it violently; I stood and clenched my fists; I almost cried; I wanted something to come out of the mirror and strike me dead. If I could not have a protector, I wanted a monster, a mutation, a horror, a murderous disease, anything at all to accompany me downstairs so that I would not have to go down alone.

Nothing came. Nothing good, nothing bad. I heard the lawnmower going on. I would have to face by myself

father's red face, his heart disease, his temper, his nasty insistencies. I would have to face my mother's sick smile, looking up from the flowerbed she was weeding, always on her knees somehow, saying before she was ever asked, "Oh the poor woman. Oh the poor woman."

And quite alone.

No more stories.

## NEBULA AWARDS 1965

- BEST NOVEL: *Dune* by Frank Herbert.  
BEST NOVELLA: (tie) "The Saliva Tree" by Brian W. Aldiss; "He Who Shapes" by Roger Zelazny.  
BEST NOVELETTE: "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth" by Roger Zelazny.  
BEST SHORT STORY: "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Tick-tockman" by Harlan Ellison.

## NEBULA AWARDS 1966

- BEST NOVEL: (tie) *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes; *Babel-17* by Samuel R. Delany.  
BEST NOVELLA: "The Last Castle" by Jack Vance.  
BEST NOVELETTE: "Call Him Lord" by Gordon R. Dickson.  
BEST SHORT STORY: "The Secret Place" by Richard McKenna.

## NEBULA AWARDS 1967

- BEST NOVEL: *The Einstein Intersection* by Samuel R. Delany.  
BEST NOVELLA: "Behold the Man" by Michael Moorcock.  
BEST SHORT STORY: "Aye, and Gomorrah" by Samuel R. Delany.

## NEBULA AWARDS 1968

- BEST NOVEL: *Rite of Passage* by Alexei Panshin.  
BEST NOVELLA: "Dragonrider" by Anne McCaffrey.  
BEST NOVELETTE: "Mother to the World" by Richard Wilson.  
BEST SHORT STORY: "The Planners" by Kate Wilhelm.

## NEBULA AWARDS 1969

BEST NOVEL: *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin.

BEST NOVELLA: "A Boy and His Dog" by Harlan Ellison.

BEST NOVELETTE: "Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones" by Samuel R. Delany.

BEST SHORT STORY: "Passengers" by Robert Silverberg.

## NEBULA AWARDS 1970

BEST NOVEL: *Ringworld* by Larry Niven.

BEST NOVELLA: "Ill Met in Lankhmar" by Fritz Leiber.

BEST NOVELETTE: "Slow Sculpture" by Theodore Sturgeon.

BEST SHORT STORY: No award.