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# Argon

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

Keith Taylor  
John Brunner  
Nancy Springer



81





# Argos

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

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*Cover illustration for The Harvest of Malice by David Plummer*

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# EDITORIAL

*While my editorial in the Winter '88 issue was designed to provide some clue as to what course we have planned for Argos, it was also meant to provoke. Several letters arrived in response, some complimentary, some critical, and all were appreciated. One stands out, however, and I'd like to reproduce it here in total*

...

To say that fantasy and science fiction are basically the same is a tautological argument, like saying that because all humans perambulate, talk, eat, excrete, and produce progeny we are the same. It is a true statement, as far as it goes, but it is far from educational and ignores content, intent, and context. By a similar argument one can suggest that contemporary romance and hardcore pornography are the same. You argue that the difference is only one of degree, and while I might accept that on the surface, detailed analysis of the two texts reveals that they are alien to each other in significant ways.

The argument usually runs like this: both sf and fantasy are elaborate creations involving things that do not—and possibly never have or never will—exist. The adventures of the characters are therefore “fantastic” and essentially removed from our everyday lives, providing a similar escapist fare. Sf relies on technological and scientific extrapolation to produce its milieu, fantasy relies solely on the imaginings of the writer. Somewhere along the line the notion that the sf writer “limits” his/her creation to comply with “known” scientific parameters, and that such limitation therefore limits the sf writer’s ability to create, crept in to bolster the implication that, because the fantasy writer knows no such limitations, fantasy is a somewhat superior—or, perhaps, purer—art form. I suggest first that if we were simply writing about the contexts of our stories, the background world, then perhaps this might have some validity, but since we’re not then it has little except as a means of determining relevancy. The sf writer has certain guidelines to use by choice. Since the fantasy writer has no guidelines of this sort, then he/she also has no reliable context into which the story may relate. There is a “formlessness” about it, much as a human being would experience without a skeleton.

I believe that the basis for many attitudes regarding the distinctions between sf and fantasy—and there are essential distinctions as I will show—is a singularly myopic view of mythology. When we view classical mythology from a contemporary standpoint and

try to analyze it in this light, more often than not we fail miserably. An evolved misconception of writers (as opposed to archaeologists and other such specialists) is that mythology emerged from the culture to which it related—only. While this is a true statement, it is only a half-truth, and at the least misleading, at worst destructive, as all such half-truths are. We do not recognize that mythologies—or the mythologizers—also shaped their cultures, directly. Sophocles took for a subject a real family and dramatized them—satire, irony, and tragedy emerged, but also an archetype so pertinent that it has come down to us today as the Oedipal Complex.

We can now see mythologizers—Homer, Hesiod, Apollonius, Callimachus, Agathon, all the rest—as both interpreters and reconstructionists within their own culture. Their work was pertinent to their times, in ways which contemporary science fiction at its best is pertinent to our times, and in ways which contemporary fantasy is not.

When we make reductionist statements like “basically, all fiction is a form of fantasy” we do nothing to delineate the applicability of a given form, understand its inherent significance as art and cultural artifact, or spur education in the uses and benefits of one form over another. As such, we perform a kind of cultural sabotage. It is exactly the differences that make art forms viable and valid, in relation to each other and to the culture.

I must contend, since definitions, as opposed to categories, are useful critical tools, that sf and fantasy as essentially different forms, for distinctly different purposes. I refer to the purpose of the artist more than to the purpose for which a given reader might use the form. They are substantially different from the outset, before word one is placed on paper.

The true distinction lies in motive and intent. Context then follows. The fantasy context is pleasant enough for an escapist tale, but the stories developed within it tend to simplify things. (I am not saying that fantasy is incapable of complexity, but that the genre as a whole allows, almost as a virtue, the oversimplification of issues and tensions which, in science fiction, these very complexities lend textural significance and thematic purpose. Science fiction, as a discipline, as a body of work, as a milieu, does not permit such ethical reductionism.) The fantasy writer has options about which problems to write about, but usually—and I stress usually—he/she reduces those problems to basic black and white components, more often than not selecting them out of mythology—classical mythology, or one of our contemporary ones. We have a variety from the present: the mythology of might, the mythology of justice, the mythology of love, of luxury, of morality, and so on. (The sf writer uses these mythologies, too, but the approach is usually 180 degrees aboutface. The sf approach is agonistic and antagonistic, using them to shove against, to compare, to remake, while the fantasy writer tends simply to accept and re-present.) All these mythologies relate to easily accessed sympathies in the reader. In a way, they are all mythologies of the common man, reaching a lowest common denominator. The frustrations of daily

life, of overly complex moral dilemmas, of ethical grey areas and political paradoxes are totally subsumed by the mythological “heroic” approach of fantasy. (A perfect example is the “Rambo” mythology. The political realities and moral arguments are totally reshaped, or, worse yet, ignored completely, into a Might Makes Right ethos that bears little or no relationship to reality. “Rambo” is actually remaking the war in Vietnam, reducing its complexities to a comforting, satisfying, ego-soothing balm that allows for the “justice” of primal revenge. This is fantasy.)

The fantasy writer attempts to write solutions. This is more clearly visible in the simpler form of fantasy, the parable. Science fiction is different in that it is about process. In this way, science fiction is inextricably linked to the real world in a way in which fantasy is not.

The entire *weltanschauung* of the character in science fiction is totally different from that of the character in fantasy. The fantasy character works toward some ultimate Truth, a worldview that will be universally applicable. In sf, the character works toward a truth, one of many, but his/her actions are shaped by the certain knowledge that this truth may or may not be applicable since the world will definitely change in the course of his search.

I am continually baffled by accusations from people—usually people who do not read sf, but sometimes by sf readers—who say that science fiction is not believable because it isn’t Real. This is largely due to a misunderstanding of the purpose of science fiction. Science fiction is not technological fiction or fiction about science. Rather, it is Naturalistic fiction distorted through the lens of a technologically or scientifically oriented viewpoint. Because of this, sf does something very aggressively that fantasy does only passively if at all—sf mutates.

Those who might respond to this with a list of exceptions to my criteria, please understand that I accept that there are exceptions—but they are just that: exceptions. Those who might claim a “noble history of fantasy reaching back to Apollonius of Rhodes and Homer”, accusing sf of being an upstart, granted. But you are admitting, perhaps only on a gut level, that severe distinctions exist.

In summation, I would like to assert that science fiction is very definitely distinct from fantasy, and that of the two it is the more pertinent, relevant, and viable. Fantasy largely denies the validity of our culture and paints tapestries of pleasant escapist worlds wherein the complexities of our reality do not exist. Science fiction grapples with those very complexities and, as a body of work, attempts to respond, to shape, to change, to affect. The sf writer in effect assumes a responsibility denied by the fantasy writer.

Mark W. Tiedemann  
St. Louis, Missouri

*A fine letter; thought-provoking and aggressive!*

*I did not mean to imply that science fiction is in any way inferior to fantasy. I will, however, stand by the suggestion that the two are merely different forms of literature, much in the way Beethoven's Ninth may be performed on a synthesizer or with a full symphony orchestra. Which is better? The answer is subjective at best, fundamentally beyond the ken of argument.*

*I personally—and subjectively—do not believe it is the purpose of art to inform; that is the function of the sciences. It is the purpose of art to entertain—to revel in the beauty of existence, to celebrate humankind's incredible imagination, to provide solace amidst the complexities of everyday life.*

*If we read purely for enlightenment, in quest of some pertinent, relevant grail, we would be reading textbooks exclusively. Regardless of the form—fantasy or science fiction—and regardless of however noble the intent of the author, most of us read for escape. I know I do.*

*I think I'll read 2001: A Space Odyssey again.*

-CRE

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*Many of us have had empathic experiences which seem to be out of the ordinary, a reflection of our concern for those around us. Nancy Springer takes such an experience one step further . . .*

## Crib Death

*written by Nancy Springer*

**M**aybe we should get one of those alarms that goes off if he stops breathing," she said, holding her baby boy in her arms. She stood in the holy shrine of the house, the nursery, just home from the hospital and afraid to put the newborn in the crib.

"You've been reading too many magazine articles," he said, the newly-proved-man, the father-of-a-son, her husband. "Did the doctor say anything about crib death?"

"No. He said the little package looks fine."

"Then what are you worrying about?" He put his arm around her. There was something so tender and tired about her, especially since she had given birth, that he felt protective of her. First baby, first house, first love. They were old-fashioned enough to believe they would be married forever.

She did not know how to tell him about the awareness she carried, the new sense of mortality, pulling her shoulders down with more than the weight of the infant in her arms. She only said in a wondering

way, "It could happen, you know. Bad things can happen any time."

"Right. The roof could fall in." His embrace tightened on her, juggling her gently; he wanted her for himself. "Put the little critter down and let's go sit."

She did, she put the infant down in the crib, between the padded bumpers protecting his head from the hard slats, on the bunny-print sheet, where he stirred and wailed and then settled into sleep again, making a warm, compact peach-fuzz-and-terrycloth bundle of himself, not much bigger than a bread loaf. But instead of leaving the room, the young woman stood staring at him.

She said, "I'm going to get one of those alarms."

"No, don't." He knew how he'd hated it as a child, that his mother was always hovering. *Don't touch the dog, you'll get germs. Don't take off your jacket, you'll catch cold. Don't climb so high, you'll fall . . .* He had sworn that his children would be raised to be joyous and free, to run barefoot and romp with mongrel puppies, to climb high and not be fussed at.

He said, "I thought we agreed we're not going to make a neurotic out of this kid."

"It won't make him a neurotic. He won't even know about it."

"That doesn't matter. It's the idea. You know what I mean." He took her hand, tugging at her. "You've got to let him grow up—natural." He struggled for words. "Like a—like a bird learning to fly."

It was a fine thought. She nodded and came with him. But she came back a few moments later and checked to make sure the baby was breathing.

When the baby cried that night, she was awake within a heartbeat and on her feet. The newborn's faint, kittenish wail buzzed through her like an electric shock, as effective as any conceivable alarm. She went and fed him at the breast almost before he could wail again, warming him in her arms but herself cold, sitting in the rocking chair in her thin nightgown. In the morning, talking with her husband, she learned that he had not heard the baby cry, though he slept beside her in the same bed.

He said, "Wake me up, next time. I'll go get him for you, and you can feed him in the bed and stay warm."

But when she tried to do so, the next night, the man was so slow to wake that she could not stand it. The sound of the crying baby rang through her like the phone bell of hell, jangling every nerve. She jumped up and ran to pick up the infant herself, and fed him in the rocking chair again, strangely disturbed. Like a raw nerve awareness throbbed in her of how helpless the baby was, how utterly he depended on her, how utterly helpless

were all babies everywhere.

And . . . in the silences, between the crying, death stalked. Crib death, the killer cat on padded paws, soundlessly taking infants as they slept.

Motherhood laid her open like a honeyed wound. She felt herself listening even in her dreams, not for a baby's cry but for a silent alarm. In her dreams she made a connection between herself and the sleeping of babies as surely as if electric wires ran to her heart. She willed herself to hear the threat of intruding, silent death as surely as she would hear a baby's wail.

The man, the protector, slept lumpishly. She, only she, felt the mortal peril.

Day after day, night by passing night, she willed herself to hear soundless danger. Her husband felt the change in her. In the warm marriage bed, even in their lovemaking, she was not entirely with him; she was listening for something he could not hear. In the night she went to the baby when he heard nothing. "Let him cry a minute or two," he complained. "Maybe he'll go back to sleep. It's time he started sleeping through." All day every day the baby busied her; he wanted her to himself again, if only for the nights.

The baby grew quickly, changed quickly, a butterfly creature. He stopped wailing for food at night and began waking at dawn instead, cooing rather than crying. He rattled the crib rails and made small babbling noises. His father nicknamed him The Gugs, for the noises. The baby took after the man, who was happy in the morning, one of those people who annoyed others with his cheeriness before

breakfast.

The man hoped his wife would sleep deeply through the nights now that her baby no longer cried for her in the dark. But she did not. Even though the baby no longer woke her, he still felt her listening. Sleeping, she lay rigid with listening, though he did not know for what. It baffled and annoyed him, this unspoken aloofness of hers, this sense that motherhood had given her a mission apart from him. As if having a baby around the house had not turned his life crazy enough. . . .

His life went truly insane with a scream in the night.

The woman screamed in her sleep, awoke panting and screaming; the screams roused her husband to a groggy awareness. He blinked, struggling up to see what was wrong. She had turned on the light, she was sitting on the edge of the bed and jabbing at the pushbuttons on the phone. In his nursery across the hallway, The Gugs was silent. Stumbling only slightly, the father went over there, examined the small, fleecy-warm, softly breathing body in the dim white glow of the lambie-shaped night light. The Gugs was sleeping. Nothing wrong there.

He heard his wife moan in the bedroom and went back to her. She was listening to the buzzing signal in the receiver, her face damp and grey with fear. "C'mon," she whispered. Then the click, the muted voice, and she shouted, "Check the baby! Don't ask questions, just do it! Go check the baby right away!"

She waited a moment, looking breathless, and then softly replaced the receiver in the cradle. Her face had gone slack,

but she was shaking so hard that she shook the bed.

"They hung up," she said, staring straight ahead. "I don't know if the baby's all right."

Having just checked The Gugs, he did not understand. "Who hung up?"

She did not answer. Or perhaps she thought she was answering when she said, "The baby had its head caught between the crib rails. It was choking itself."

Bewildered, the man went back to bed and took refuge in sleep. When he awoke in the morning he treated his memory of the night much as he would a disturbing dream, pushing it away as far as he could, to a shadowy distance where it skulked, worrying at the underbelly of his mind.

Within a few nights his wife's shriek woke him again. More alert this time, he listened to the frantic chittering of the phone. Ten, eleven numbers. Long distance. He didn't think it had been long distance before. Different people this time. He did not get up to look into the crib, because he could hear a faint yowl of protest from the nursery, quickly subsiding into sleepy murmuring sounds. The mother's scream had disturbed The Gugs.

And she was moaning as before, and desperate, and crying into the phone as before, "Check the baby! RIght now!" A brief pause. "Never mind who I am! Check the baby!" She hung up hard, tears in her eyes. "Idiots!" she said to her bare feet on the floor.

Her husband looked at her quivering back and said, "Who?"

"I don't know. I don't know if the baby's all right."

"The baby's fine!"

"Their baby."

He couldn't push it away any longer. "You called up somebody you don't know in the middle of the night and told them to check their baby?"

She said, "It was strangling in one of those elastic crib mobiles they had strung too low. Morons!"

Her tone, passionate yet matter-of-fact, made him feel cold. She really believed what she was saying. She thought she knew—

"How do you know?"

"I saw."

"What do you mean, you saw?"

"I—" For the first time, her voice faltered. "I saw! In my sleep!"

"You dreamed it, you mean."

She shouted at him, "I saw! I saw the baby with its face all swollen and the cord around its neck. . . ." Her voice broke. He slid over and sat next to her, put one arm around her, and she sobbed against his shoulder. "Probably dead already before they got there," she mumbled.

"It was just a dream," he told her gently.

"It was not!" She pulled back from him, glaring, her tears gone. "I saw, I tell you! I knew the number to call."

"Whatever," he said, because he did not like what he was thinking: that she was losing it, going off the deep end, over the edge, soft in the head, call it all the wry old names: crazy. He did not like to think it, but he had to, because he knew the things she thought were hap-

pening didn't happen. He knew that better than anything. There was a difference between dreams and what was real. He knew that; if he didn't know that he would be crazy too. He went back to bed and felt cold, even under the covers. He did not touch his wife again, nor did he sleep. He suspected she was not sleeping either, but they didn't talk until morning, when the gurgling and babbling of their baby signaled them that it was time to get up. Then they carefully acted as if what happened in the night had not happened.

She tried to be funny and cheerful and loving around him, then and in the days that followed. She smiled a great deal, she made a point of doing things for him and fixing his favorite foods. Though he said nothing, she could see in his eyes what he thought and feared, that she was going "mental." She clipped money-saving coupons, hoping he would notice she was a good wife. Knowing he was thinking doubtful thoughts about her made her bright and lively with terror. She could scarcely bear the fear that he would leave her. Before the coming of the baby she had lived to be with him; she had no personhood except that of his wife, mother of his child. She needed him nearly as much as her baby needed her.

Each night when she went to bed she felt dread that the alarm in her mind would awaken her again. She was not accustomed to having anything matter to her but her husband. She wanted only to please him. He was her life. Or had been, until recently.

Yet, when once again she awoke shrieking in the night, she reached for the

phone and punched the numbers and sat waiting in agony for the answer at the other end, all before she looked at him.

Somewhere, in a distant, unseen house, a phone ringing, a man or woman reaching grumpily to answer it, a baby . . . dying. . . .

"Crib death," she whispered between clenched teeth.

"Put that down!" the man on the other side of the bed ordered—or begged.

Staring tautly at the wall, counting the ring signals—too many!—she did not answer him. He got to his feet, came around the bed and tried to take the receiver away from her. She pushed his hand away with surprising strength. "No, wait!" she shouted, and then she was crying her alarm to the sleepy woman on the other end of the line, and hearing the peevish wail of her own baby, awakened by her yell, and hearing—

"They're doing CPR," she reported tensely to her husband. "They're going to call the ambulance." There was a click as the line went dead at her ear, and limply she set the receiver down.

Her husband stood staring at her as if something had just scuttled out from under the baseboard of her mind. "You're crazy," he said, not responding to the rising plaint of the baby in the next room.

She started to cry. He sat down next to her. "I didn't mean it like that," he said. "I—I'm just scared they'll take you away. You can't go calling people like you do. They'll come looking for you."

"But—but you heard," she offered. "There really was a baby—"

"I don't care!" he shouted before she

could say what scared him worst. "I can't live like this! Hon, you've got to quit!"

She looked straight at him with the tears running down her face. "I can't just let them die," she whispered.

"I tell you, I can't take it!" The way she talked panicked him, and his mind, sinking into quicksand madness, grabbed for solid ground, pulled itself out onto an ultimatum. "You've got to choose," he said grimly, "between them and me."

And he went and lay down again, leaving her to go quiet the baby's crying and her own.

In the morning they went silently about the business of dressing and eating and tending The Gugs. The man gave his wife the routine peck, Dagwood-style, and disappeared into the outer world, going to work. The woman began a frenzy of housework, as if clean floors could somehow make things right. Going to the store, later that day, she purchased numerous newspapers along with ammonia. She spent the evening silently searching them as her husband just as silently ignored her searching. It seemed to her that if she could only find a news item about a baby saved from crib death by an unaccountable phone call in the night, she would somehow be proved, made right, justified, instead of being all wrong. . . . There was nothing of babies, alive or otherwise, in any of the newspapers. And in spite of her searching, she knew gut-deep that a news story would not have made any difference. No more difference than a clean floor made.

She had been given a choice. What her husband had said—she knew he meant it. Better than he knew himself, she knew

that. She had babied him too long for him to change.

She went to bed, her marriage bed, in terror, not yet knowing how she would choose.

No soundless threat of infant death woke her that night, or the next, or the next. She awoke full of nervous energy each morning and made omelettes and hash browns and other good things for breakfast. The man, an optimistic person by nature, grew hopeful that the crisis had passed, and talked kindly with her over the hot food, and kissed her with more than routine feeling when he left for work and again when he came home to a good dinner. In the evenings, in front of the TV, he put his arm around her, and she pressed close to his side. The closeness seemed to help her, a little, with the aching struggle going on inside her.

In the dark of the fourth night, at that cat-stalking-quiet, pulseless time after midnight when traffic had stopped on the residential streets and paperboys were not yet making their rounds, the woman woke sobbing and lay on her back in the bed, staring up into darkness as the tears ran down her temples and into the fine, perm-frizzed hair in front of her ears. She did not move except to sob. Her husband slept soundly, as always, and her weeping did not awaken him, and after a while she wept herself back to sleep.

The man awoke in the morning, refreshed as always from his sound slumber, to a room awash in dawn light and dawn hush and the peace that passeth understanding. He stretched and yawned loudly to awaken his wife, and smiled for no good reason, and glanced over at her.

But she turned her face away from him.

"It happened again," she said.

"What?" He propped himself up on an elbow to look at her. "I didn't hear anything."

"You wouldn't," she said.

"I did before."

"It wasn't like that. There wasn't a number to call. I didn't do anything." She started to cry, silently, like someone who has mourned for a long time, like a war victim, as if she was already worn out with crying. The tears ran, but her face did not move.

"A baby died," she said to the bed-sheets. "I just lay here and let it die."

The man put his hand on her shoulder and shook her, eagerly, excitedly. "No, no, Honey, don't you see? It's starting to go away. You did fine! What you did was good!" His chest heaved with relief. "Wow. For a while there I was afraid we were going to have to send you to the hospital or something." He leaned over and kissed her on the side of her face, near her weeping eye, and she lay and accepted the kiss, and felt it warm her, and knew her husband would not leave her, and felt her own deep relief. She had chosen. She could not risk losing him. Nothing worse than that could happen to her. . . .

Silence. Dawn-golden silence. The morning lay, a vast hand of benediction, hushed and holy on them both.

The man glanced at the bedside clock, and his smile lit his face like sunrise. "All right!" he said. "Nearly seven o'clock, and no noises from The Gugs yet! The little guy sure is sleeping late today."

*Australia's Keith Taylor, author of the Bard series (Ace Fantasy) sent along this wonderful tale set in early Britain during the twilight of the Druids . . .*

# The Harvest of Malice

*written by Keith Taylor*

**T**he summer country deserved its name. Even in winter its weather was generally mild, and in its titular season the sun-goddess flamed from a sky like a bower of flax-blossoms. Crops grew green in the fields. Walking through the land with a heavy, tireless tread, Pendor the hedge-wizard found it good. There was pleasure in moving, adventure in going somewhere after so long in one place, and he felt a sense of restored youth. Fine things could lie beyond the next patch of woodland for all he knew.

Pausing a moment, he leaned on his staff and considered the gorse-grown slope before him. This had been farming country since time out of mind. Unknown men had grazed their cattle there before the first Celt with lime stiffening his hair had entered Britain. Later the Romans had come to plant their villas, and the forests had consequently grown less. Pendor saw a stand of ash on the

low hill-crest, nevertheless, and decided to pass through it. There would be shade and concealment while he scanned the way ahead from the highest ground that was close to him.

He plodded up the slope, a broad, heavy man of deliberate movements and evident great strength. Behind him followed a laden basket, like a shallow boat or a shield made for a giant, though a shield of mere naked wicker, lacking a covering of leather or metal. It floated a foot above the ground, drifting in Pendor's footsteps as though carried on a stream unseen. Jars, pots, packets, implements and bedding made a high, haphazard mound within it. Flung on top like a wreath on cellar-scourings was a coil of excellent rope.

Kev pointed excitedly to the trees. His skinny arm quivered with delight. Ill at ease in the open, he had lagged behind the wizard on this journey from the time they set out. Several times Pendor had

thought himself deserted, and waited for the boy with a mixture of exasperation and regret. He would have felt relieved in a way had Kev departed, never to return, but Kev showed no inclination to do so, and Pendor had made himself responsible for the creature.

Now Kev uttered a stream of wordless chatter, like a squirrel, pouncing up and down. Then he scurried for the trees. His long-toed feet gripped and spurned the earth. Once he looked back, his eyes bright in the filthy tangle of his hair, before racing on to the shade. Pendor kept going at the same steady pace.

The boy vanished between slender, grey-barked trunks. If anything inimical hid within the trees, his barks and squeals would give Pendor ample warning, but as the magician approached there was only silence. That indicated that Kev was wedged in the fork of a large branch, hard to reach from the ground and canopied against the sky, the only situation in which he felt secure. Maybe, at last, he would stay there and refuse to go further, at least until nightfall. By then Pendor would have travelled for miles.

Within the stand of trees, Pendor waited while his vision adapted to the comparative gloom. The basket drifted after him. As the magician walked through the growth of nettles, willow herbs and grass clothing the ground, sudden rustlings came from overhead as Kev bounded through the branches. A final impact and fall of leaves marked his arrival at the northern side of the hill-crest. He scuttled to the end of the branch, which bent considerably beneath him, light though he was. Peering down, he

saw Pendor's hand and bald scalp directly below.

The magician looked northward. There, towards the sea, lay the expanse of marsh and lake surrounding the Isle of Apples, shrine of the sacred cauldron. If he journeyed that way and bore east a little, he knew he would come to Camlodd, the guardian fortress of the Summer Country, but he had no intention of going there. Long ago he had chosen to avoid centers of power and intrigue like that. Turning his head upon his short, powerful neck, Pendor studied the west, and beheld inhabited country.

Sheep grazed on upland pasture, while fields of grain patched the low country. The roof of a chieftain's hall rose above a surrounding log stockade in the distance, and smaller houses stood round about. An outlying one with hens scolding in a coop of withies rose less than two miles from Pendor's toes.

He discovered trepidation in himself, to his disgust. A man who could brew potions to cure any minor ill could be sure of a decent welcome. He'd been too long apart from normal company, that was certain, and he could become like Kev if he let it continue. Lifting his head, he stepped from the ash tree's shadow and descended the western side of the hill in the sunlight, walking. His basket drifted above the ground like a low cloud, following him.

Kev chattered in protest from his perch, then whimpered as his master passed from sight. After a moment, he descended the tree. Crouching by its roots, he gathered the courage to move into the sunlight and follow Pendor, only



to lose his resolution at the sound of dogs barking. Huddling where he was, he looked towards the house. There he would find Pendor, if he wanted to. Meanwhile he was hungry. Withdrawing into ash-wood, he found a stick he liked and began probing the earth for worms. In moments Pendor had passed from his mind.

The magician also heard the dogs bark, and by then he was much closer to the house. Supposing that their clamor was for him, he did not slow or quicken his pace, until the noise became a frenzied uproar and a human scream of anguish rose through it. Pendor stopped in his tracks for a moment, thought, snapped the single word "Rope!" and ran towards the racket.

The coiled rope unwound itself, slid into the grass and moved through it like a determined snake. Pendor's big feet pounded the earth like hammers as he rushed towards the house. He wasn't graceful, and it took him a while to attain his best speed, but once he had reached it he was as difficult to stop as a tumbling boulder. He entered the yard with his staff held ready for battle, and nearly tripped over the bludgeoned corpse of a dog. The other, still wholly alive, was fighting to reach the throat of a struggling rascal in a wolf skin. Three more robbers menaced a man and a woman standing back to back in defence of their home. Two carried cudgels and knives, while the leader held a serviceable spear. His laughter as he jabbed at the pair before the doorway was not pleasant.

The magician was not always pleasant himself. He chose his man and swung the

staff in a tremendous two-handed blow across the spine and kidneys. The robber fell, his agony so total, so shattering that he could not even kick his legs or groan. The leader saw it from the corner of his eye and swiftly moved aside, leaving the householders with one adversary to menace them.

Pendor looked once, quickly, at the leader. He was formidable, a tall brute with heavy shoulders and long arms roped with muscle, baring his teeth through a dirty beard. His handling of the spear showed that he knew how to use it. He awarded Pendor's grotesque appearance the recognition of a startled glance before attacking him.

Pendor shifted his quarterstaff to the guarding position. He countered three lethal thrusts in succession, with a sharp tocking of oak upon ash, forcing his enemy to keep his back against the wall of woven osiers. Denied free movement by the solid wall Pendor's staff seemed to become, he braced his feet and rammed the spear point hard at the magician's belly, a target wide enough for a blind man to hit at close quarters. Pendor averted the blow with a swift quarter turn of his staff, knocking the spear aside so that it tore a shallow path through the pad of fat above his hip. Reversing the staff quickly, he drove the end of it into the robber's throat. The spear fell, clattering against the wall, and in a moment the chief robber fell the other way, in a choking, convulsing sprawl.

Pendor didn't watch him. The feel of cartilage breaking under the tip of his staff told him beyond doubt what he had done, and one marauder yet remained on

his feet. Even as Pendor stepped back from the leader, the thief seized his victim around the waist and stabbed his side. The last thing he saw was the man slumping over; the last thing he heard was the potent whirring of timber travelling too fast to be seen through the summer air. A giant's blow laid a groove in the side of his head like the impression of a finger in clay, snapped his neck and hurled him a dozen yards. Before he had rolled to a halt against the fence, his leader had joined him in death, kicking his heels furiously on the ground and venting a nasty rattle from his throat.

Pendor, shaken even though he had done similar things once or twice before, lumbered to the side of the man struggling with the second dog and drove the animal away. Blood dripped from the robber's lacerated fingers, and his forearm had been torn. Still, he remained fitter than any of his companions. At a safe distance, the dog faced both strangers, growling hatefully. A word from the man or woman would send it leaping at their throats again. While Pendor could defend himself with a staff against any dog whelped, he didn't wish to arouse the ill will of those he'd aided by slaying their guard. Red eyed and snarling, it measured the distance to his windpipe.

"I'm a friend," Pendor said urgently. "Bid your dog lie, will you? I've nothing against him."

The woman didn't answer. Kneeling beside the man, she worked to stop the flow of blood from his side, and in time succeeded. Pendor stood where he was. The robber at his feet lurched upright, swearing, and Pendor knocked him down

again with the staff, which provoked the dog to spring. Pendor fended it off with his staff's end, while the last robber took the opportunity to scramble from the yard.

Glancing over his shoulder, Pendor shouted "Rope! Bind!" Then he gave his attention to the dog whose fixed ambition seemed to be his dismemberment. The fangs shone as the brute darted and lunged. Keeping it from his flesh with shrewd whacks of the staff, Pendor bawled, "Woman, call off your hound! I'm a friend, though if you do not leash this thing I won't be friendly long! Call him in!"

The woman stared his way, distracted, then urged her dog to the attack! Pendor played a drumroll of blows on its ribs and skull until it shrank back, glaring, to stand before its mistress. Pendor, who bled from a wound of his own and felt angry, thought that loyalty misplaced. He wished he had thrashed the woman; none of this was the dog's fault.

"I said I was a friend," he said harshly. "Who do you think killed those two thieves if I did not? Now I'm bleeding and your man is hurt. Tie your dog...then maybe I can do something. I'm a mediciner."

The woman paid no attention. Few would have done. Pendor hardly looked like his claim, and he was a man people met with doubtful looks even in the quietest circumstances. Massive, strong and remarkably ugly, he wasn't improved by the state of his robe or his anger-reddened face.

"Didn't you hear me?" he demanded. "I'm not with these marauders; I never

saw them before. I'm a mediciner and I can help your man. Now tie the dog!"

The woman's mouth closed and grew firm. She said, "The dog stays free, stranger, but I'll hold him. Prove that you're a mediciner by helping my man. If you do something to harm him I will turn the dog loose on you again. I say that's fair."

"All right," Pendor said shortly. "Basket! Hither!"

The long, intricately woven basket drifted through the gateway; Pendor rummaged through its contents for the things he needed, laid them out on a linen cloth which might have been cleaner, and set to work.

"Touched in the lung," he muttered. That wasn't good. Although he had said the truth when he claimed to be a mediciner, he could not work miracles. Still, he did his best and set about it briskly, for lack of confidence could doom him. At least the man didn't seem to be bleeding heavily within, and there was no red froth on his lips.

He recovered his senses before Pendor had finished, looked into the magician's face and promptly tried to throttle him. Bunching the muscles of his neck, Pendor held him down as gently as possible, while bearing no nonsense.

"I'm a friend," he said. "You're wounded, you fool! Lie still!"

"Yes, lie still, Trem," the woman pleaded. "It's over, the robbers are gone. This one is no foe."

The man Trem choked and lay back. Pendor, investigating his side, said sourly, "You've undone some of my work. Now I'm going to lift you inside

and lay you on your own bed and then sew that wound shut—unless there's a better physician than I hereabouts who can come and see you. Here, now."

With care, he lifted the man and carried him within, to place him in the straw filled box that served as a bed. Pouring a shallow bowl full of oil, he added some herbal brew of his own concocting and soaked flax thread in the mixture.

"In a little while I'll sew that wound shut," he said. "Have you a lamp I can work by? It's dim here."

"A lamp!" the woman repeated. "Do we seem so rich to you? I doubt there's one in the chieftain's house."

"I'll use my own," Pendor said. "You stay with him and call me if he coughs red."

Grasping his staff, he returned to the yard. He spared a moment to glance at the last robber, who was helpless in the coils of Pendor's enchanted rope. Although he struggled and glared, he could not move more than a few inches, and Rope tightened warningly on his limbs each time he tried. The fellow would wait for their attention.

Someone hailed him from the direction of the chieftain's dun. Pendor looked that way, and saw a bareheaded warrior on a pony leading three men who trotted afoot. He shrugged. They were late to the feast. Had they arrived sooner, he would have been glad to share it with them. They were warriors; it was more their sort of work.

With the lamp and a flask of oil, he returned to the hut. The woman had not moved. As he kindled the wick with a coal from the hearth and a clear, smoke-

less flame rose, he saw her and took notice for the first time.

She carried Mediterranean blood. Her olive skin and dark eyes attested to that. She looked strong. He didn't know whether to consider her handsome or plain, and remembering what he looked like himself he supposed it scarcely mattered. Still, he liked the steady way she looked at him, puzzled yet assessing.

"You spoke of the chieftain's house," he said, threading a needle. "Some men are coming here now to see what the trouble is. Best you go out to receive them. If they see a stranger they may think the same thing you did."

"Then shouldn't you...leave?"

"Why? I've committed no fault. Even if I had, it's too late to show my heels. They would catch me before I went a furlong. Go, go. I can manage this."

He bent his head over his task. While he salved the wound to help growth and healing, sewed it shut and covered it to prevent sucking, he heard the woman talking outside and male voices questioning her. One seemed to Pendor a voice he could dislike, though he did not listen intently enough to hear words. Loud, rough and hectoring, it demanded rather than spoke. Pendor finished his work and frugally blew out the lamp.

"You in there!" bawled the voice he did not like. "Come out and let us see you! You're in Airell's territory, and that means you explain your presence to his kinsmen. Show yourself!"

Pendor emerged from the hut. Four men confronted him, all armed, but only one seemed aggressive, a smallish, well-muscled redhead wearing a sword. He

lifted his eyebrows in exaggerated shock when he saw the magician.

"So! What a hillock of ugliness you are, stranger, and dirty besides! It's clear enough you were one of these thieves. You even smell like them."

"But I'm not lean like them," Pendor answered. "That is because I haven't been living in their company. Besides, if I'm of their gang, we were five against two, so how did we come to lose so badly? You can see that quarter-staff work laid low these three, and the only staff in sight is mine. The rope tangling that rogue beyond the gate is mine too."

"You did it all?" The redhead shook his head. "Then you surprised them by sudden treachery, I think. You're a stranger; so are they. It hangs together, as you shall. Eh?"

He laughed, pleased with his own wit. Pendor did not grow angry quickly, or show his feelings much, but he had begun to seethe.

"Before you talk of hanging, tell me why I should have turned on these men if they were my companions, and we had come here to loot. You, woman, can't you speak? Was I with these wolves when they first appeared, or did I come later?"

"I didn't see him, Inir," she admitted, "and he helped Trem."

"Then what is your tale?" Inir demanded, rounding upon Pendor with the abrupt, quick motion Pendor now recognized as characteristic of him. "You happened to be passing. Is that it?"

"That is it," Pendor agreed. "Now, since your friends have fast hold of that trussed bird there—Rope! Hither to me!"

The rope's implacable coils loosened, and it slithered to Pendor's side to be gathered in pliant, passive coils and tossed into the basket which floated so inexplicably above the ground. Inir paused, looked at it thoughtfully for a moment, then shot a glance of interrogation like a dart at Pendor.

"Then you're a magician?" he barked. "Not a great one, if your tunic's a true sign."

It was dirty, with tiny twigs lodged in it and snail-tracks glittering upon it. Only cobwebs were missing, Pendor thought glumly. But did this strutting kestrel have to be so discourteous as to mention it?

"Ask Trem his opinion, when I've healed him," he said. "I'm Pendor of Hamo, herb-doctor, apothecary, oculist, salver, mediciner, and magician of earth powers. Does your chieftain suffer headaches or boils? He won't thank you for harming me if he does."

"Earth magician?" Inir grinned. "I will say you look it. Ah. Then Airell will want to see you, after all. You can come to the dun with us."

"Surely I can, but I've work unfinished here," Pendor answered. "If your chieftain wants me, he may come and find me himself. I'll be here."

"You woodland poultice-brewer!" Inir said. "Do you think I can't drag you by the heels?"

Pendor raised his staff an inch from the ground. "Not alone," he said.

"Easy," one of the warriors in the background said to Inir, his tone urgent. "We want his help. If Gwylfai is willing, he may as well bide where he is—and I'll stay to be sure he's harmless."

"Harmless!" the redhead snorted. "Look around you!"

"Oh, he'll have to lay aside his staff first," the warrior said. "Are you prepared to do that, stranger?"

"On condition that, whatever else you decide, you take these dead thieves out of sight," Pendor answered. "They are disturbing."

He leaned his staff against the long basket and reentered the hut. He had escaped being dealt with summarily as a bandit, and even learned that these men needed something from him. That was good. Now, if they would leave him in peace while they conferred with their chief, the woman Gwylfai might tell him more. Pendor's heart hammered as he knelt beside his patient once again. It wasn't the brawl or the confrontation with robbers which filled him with foreboding, but the interest he had aroused in the local chieftain's men. There had been nothing to do but face it out and seem confident, no matter where that might lead.

"They often die with lung stabs like that, don't they?" Gwylfai asked. She was matter-of-fact about it. Women did not expect their men to live long in the Britain of Cerdic and Vortigern. Whether she loved him or hated him, though, he was her bread winner, and she must fear a future without him.

"Often," Pendor confirmed. "This one's chances are good, though. He wasn't stabbed deeply, and I've filled the hole with a kind of glue I devised myself. It will melt and seep out through this tube as the wound heals. In the meantime it will seal the wound. All I can do now is

drug him from time to time so that he won't cough or roll about. Time will do the rest."

"I never heard of anything like that before." She sounded interested rather than fearful. "Is it sorcery?"

"There's sorcery in brewing the mixtures, to guard against infection. The rest is just common sense. Who is that man Inir?"

"Airell's half-brother. Airell is our chief in this land."

"And Inir thinks he will want to see me. Why?"

"Now I shouldn't know," she said with a flirtatious droop of her eyelids which was the first sign of evasiveness he had seen in her yet. He knew she was lying. "You must ask him that."

"It's you I ask. Gwylfai, I have done you a favor at some risk to my neck. You can help me by giving me knowledge which may keep that neck in one piece. What are this man Airell's troubles that he thinks he needs a magician?"

"I tell you, you must ask him!" Gwylfai's hands began to tremble. She pressed them against her skirt. Pendor wondered if that was fear of the subject being broached or reaction to what had happened. "We don't live in his house."

"It's not as distant as the Moon, either." Pendor sighed like a leaking bellows. "I may have lived in the savage forest for years, but I know places like this one. You take refuge in the dun when there is trouble. No doubt you have kindred there, and you speak to Airell when you meet him. You hear gossip from the children, the women and the starlings themselves. Sit by your man and think

about it while I talk to the warrior outside. What is his name?"

"Kiernan."

Pendor left without comment. Kiernan, a young man with freckles and an upper lip which scarcely had space for the moustache which grew upon it, greeted him with that assessing reserve most folk showed to Pendor. He was accustomed to it.

"He should mend," Pendor said briefly. "You are unfortunate to be my guardian for tonight. The fires of the chief's house are a better place to be. Is he your kinsman?"

"By fosterage. No, I'd as soon be here. Why else did I offer? And hear me! If you try to leave before this business is settled, I will stop you. With point and edge, if need be."

"Then you think with Inir that I was one of the robbers? That belief is a hard one to combat. It's boring, too."

"No. That's Inir's notion, and when he takes one he's stubborn to hold it, but I think otherwise. Whence came you?"

"From the Forest of Andred. I've been living there since the sea-wolves conquered Hamo, and it seemed time to venture into the world of men once more."

"The Forest of Andred!" Kiernan stared, for that ancient wilderness had a reputation as magical, eerie, and forbidden to normal men. Not that Pendor looked like a normal man. "By the nine waves of Sabra, you must have been there for years!"

"Five, or thereby."

Kiernan seemed impressed—probably by the thought that Pendor had survived so long with no company but trees and

mandrakes. The magician had known other creatures, among them a band of robbers not unlike the ones he had just fought, and shared the forest with them in a truce of enforced respect until they had grown too greedy.

*And I too treacherous*, he reminded himself.

"Then what brings you back to the world now?"

"A magician's concerns," Pendor said, with a look that did not encourage further questions. "Now, friend Kiernan, I will be sleeping out here. It suits me better and you will find it simpler to watch me. Also, I have a companion who may appear at any time. He's timid and half-witted, but loyal to me, and I would not like you or the dog to frighten him away. It would not be good for you either. He's a changeling child, and can award good luck or bad, depending on how he is treated."

That lie might spare Kev some trouble if they remained in Airell's land. People would leave him bowls of milk as they did for other spirits of the house and field.

"We can do with some good luck in this land," Kiernan said. "I'll treat your changeling tenderly if I see him, and so will others. The chief will accept him as a son-in-law if he can improve the yield of the crops. That's why he wishes to see you."

"To improve the crops? They look bountiful to me."

Kiernan leaned forward. "This is the third year they have looked good! Twice they grew green and tall, as they are doing now, and twice when it came to

harvest the heads of grain were puny on the stalks. If there's a third failure we will all be starving thieves like those you met today."

"Does it happen to your neighbors?"

"It does not! Their land produces as it should! Ours is under a curse, and nobody has been able to lift it thus far."

"Who has tried?" Pendor asked. He had known people to begin crying of curses and ruination for smaller reasons than two crop failures in a row. Curses like that often ended by themselves. If the grain should grow fat and rich this year, and he could contrive to take the credit, he'd be welcome among Airell's clan for as long as he wished to stay. But before he made firm plans he wanted to know who his rivals were.

Kiernan was young and ingenuous. He lit from within at the prospect of talking about local affairs with someone to whom they were new. Sitting on his heels, his spear held across his thighs, he answered at once.

"There's the clan mother, Revorna. She's supposed to know a lot about such things, and she's the nearest we have to a priestess of the earth. Then we had a Christian priest come and bless the fields in the spring. We cannot tell how much good that has done yet."

"It couldn't do any harm," Pendor said. "Is the priest still about?"

"No, he returned to the Isle."

Too bad, Pendor thought. The priest had sounded like a possible ally; Revorna was more like a potential enemy. A powerful one, in this tiny community. She would want to keep whatever power and mystery hung about her. It wouldn't

please her to share it with a stranger.

"And what do you think of all this?"

"It's a curse," Kiernan answered. "What else? Two harvests in two years turning out badly, after growing with such promise, can't be chance."

"This is the third year. What happened three years ago? Curses don't fall without a reason."

"If anyone knows what the reason might be, they are not saying."

"Maybe there is none that stems from any deed of a mortal. The powers of earth are not as concerned with what men do as men think. It would take an outstandingly dark deed and an offence to the living earth to have this effect. It would be remembered."

Pendor watched the young warrior's face for a reaction. He simply laughed and shook his head.

"We're not much for terrible deeds in our family. We leave that to kings. All that happened three years ago was a big cattle raid from the west, with about a score of riders. We pursued them, slew one and took some of our cattle back, and we're still talking about it."

"Nothing in that to bring the wrath of the goddess on the fields," Pendor admitted.

"There was something, though. Airell's daughter, my cousin, vanished at about the time of the raid. Some of the clan's best jewelry went with her. Revorna thought she had taken it for a dowry and gone off with the leader of the raid, but that makes no sense to me. We've heard nothing of her since, and a girl who elopes doesn't just vanish! I reckon myself she was stolen by the Fair

Ones."

*Or murdered for the jewels by someone a deal more earthly than that, and buried in a faraway ditch, Pendor thought. Either way, the powers of earth would not care. Tomorrow I will conjure one of the lesser ones and learn from him what the matter is.*

"The Fair Ones may take infants, sometimes, but rarely grown folk. Was your cousin beautiful?"

"Yes, and childlike, too. The sort they would take."

He sounded as though he had found his cousin tiresome, though he wished to speak no ill of her. He went on to talk of the rest of his family, and Pendor listened with interest. This clan might be significant to his own fate. Besides, it had been long since he heard talk of human family matters. Births, quarrels and marriages were the real stuff of living, from which a magician was estranged.

Kiernan paused in his chatter. "Have you a family anywhere, stranger? You take a rare interest in mine."

"I've none, that is why. They were slaughtered at Anderida when I was away in distant parts learning enchantment. You're fortunate, Kiernan."

"That I know." The youth's gaze focussed with understanding on Pendor's grotesque face, and he reflected that he was lucky in more ways than one. "We will both sleep in the yard tonight, then. I've offered to watch you, and I must be leal to my word. Not that I believe there is cause to worry. You look like a man who is ready to stay in one place for a time."

"I am. Any place which is quiet, and



where the sound of wool growing on a sheep's back is cause for excitement. I can be useful, Kiernan. It's possible I can even do something about your present troubles. If your chief allows it I will try."

He wondered if he was being too humble. A stranger should extol his own powers if he wanted to be respected in a new country. The properties of his rope and basket would do to impress these folk at the beginning, and he would talk big before Airell if he judged it appropriate. That he would have to rehearse in his mind. Whatever happened, none must know the real nature, extent and limitations of his power.

Rolled in his bedding that night, he looked at the sky and felt the weight of his past. The hermit years in the Forest of Andred were only a part of it. He had been born with a conspicuous appearance, and a feeling for the earth of Britain which made him a natural magician. Luckily he had also been born strong. It had been necessary to show some of his playmates that he wasn't safe to bully or mock. For a time he had become a harsh bully himself, and stopped of his own will when he realized at last that it would never make his eyes a whit closer together.

Training in magic had changed his life. It had not, however, made him a different man. He had hoped at one time that it would make him something other than a man, but it never worked that way. Pendor had gained the ability to transform dead matter of any kind. He could make delicious food out of rubbish and offal, or reverse the process. He was one man who

could make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, provided the sow's ear was cut from the animal and most thoroughly dead. His magic had no direct power over living flesh—not even his own, or he would have made himself comely long before. Nor could he do anything with substances which had never been alive, like metal or stone.

That left a great deal. He never had to go hungry when he could turn dead leaves into grain. He might have dressed himself in linens and furs of the rarest dye had he wished, but an ugly man looked foolish in such garb. Besides, it attracted thieves. Pendor had learned early not to invite trouble.

Once, recently, he had ignored that lesson. Strangers from the world outside had ended his solitude in the forest—pleasant strangers, for a wonder. Pendor had allowed their company to go to his head and given a secret or two away. Afraid, he had tried to take back his secrets by destroying his guests. Instead, they had beaten him, and he had saved his life by fleeing his forest retreat. While that outcome had been a better one than he deserved, still it had returned him to the world of feuding princes and kinglets, all of whom would lick their lips at news of a man who could create precious spices out of sawdust. Such a man would be certain, in the end, to suffer the fate of the goose which laid golden eggs. The lords of Britain must never know; nobody must know. It followed that Pendor must learn to live in the world without giving himself away. Seclusion was no answer; he had tried it.

Living in the world presented other

problems besides the greed of kings, though. There was a woman in the house only yards from him. Pendor found he could not stop thinking about her. That was foolish, since she had a man lying injured in that same house and would never desire Pendor the hedge-wizard, but like every male creature's, Pendor's cravings lived their own life. His hand twitched as he remembered the texture of her skin, nor was that the only part of him which moved. Grinding his teeth a little, he watched the stars revolve in their ancient round.

Nearby, Kiernan snored, wrapped in his cloak. He would awaken swiftly enough if Pendor should move. Pendor ordered himself to cease picturing the woman nearby, and squirming like a concupiscent boy. He commanded himself to sleep.

Something rustled ever so lightly in the dark. Pendor opened his eyes, turning his head sideways, hearing a tiny scrape on the dry-stone wall around the yard. Briefly, he saw a shaggy head and thin shoulders against the sky.

"Kiernan, I know you are awake," he said quietly. "Do nothing, for this is the one I told you of, the changeling boy. Lie still and let him come. Make no sound; he frightens easily. Ha, Kev, I am here."

The feral boy descended the wall on its inner side, his fingers and toes finding crevices as if they were spreading ivy. Like a ferret, he crossed the yard, aware of Kiernan's position by scent and the noise of his breathing. If the man had moved, Kev would have gone back over the wall too swiftly for glimpsing.

Pendor opened his own cloak. Filthy

and weathered, the skin of his feet like tree bark, Kev squirmed close to his master. Pendor hugged him, not minding the smell, for he was no rose himself.

"I feed you the best viands I can cook and your ribs still show," he muttered. "You would rather run wild and browse on snails and acorns. Well, the fault's not yours. Sleep."

Kev said contentedly, "Sleep." That and about five other words were the whole of his speech. He snuggled against Pendor, scratching him with his toenails, and clung like an ant. Pendor threw a heavy arm about the boy and closed his eyes, feeling less lonely.

*My single friend is a half-wit who roosts in trees, he thought dourly. I've fallen low, indeed. Well, here is where I begin to rise again.*

In the morning, he washed thoroughly and donned fresher garments. While plain and rough, they were at least not crusted with filth. Clapping a badger skin hat on his head, Pendor took a staff—not the simple oak stave he used for walking, but a slimmer length of rowan carved in interweaving patterns. So equipped, he made breakfast for all and received compliments for his cooking.

"You should go to the Count of Britain and become his field cook," Kiernan laughed. "His men would be happier with their rations."

"I thought of it once," Pendor said. "For the sake of Britain, I decided not. His men are angry with terrible food in their bellies, and fight like devils. With me at the kettle they would all become sluggards."

"Then you could always go and cook

for the invaders, at a high, high wage," Gwylfai suggested. Her tongue came out to remove a fleck of breadcrust from her lip. "You would grow rich, and within a year they would all be too fat to fight."

"I'd rather wait for one huge feast and poison them all," Pendor said savagely. "But the Count, God strengthen him, has already given them more than they can stomach. They are broken now and Britain saved."

"This little portion of it still has troubles," Gwylfai said. "Thank you for coming to help. Trem is resting easily, lord. Your potion did wonders."

Kiernan lifted his eyebrows upon hearing her call the wayfarer lord, but made no comment. Pendor nodded in acknowledgement and finished his meal.

"He's not out of danger yet. I'll stay to help you nurse him if you like. You must bear with Kev hanging around, though."

"The changeling? There will be milk for him while I have a cow and fingers, for your sake. Where is he now? He comes and goes like smoke."

"Folk frighten him—all but me. Don't think him witless, for he can smell danger and evil where most of us would be oblivious. He sees the things dogs howl after in the night, and when he doesn't wish to go by a certain path, I humor him. Many a time it's just his silly whim, but often it is more. A time or two it has saved my life." Pendor scowled. "The man who harms him will displease me."

"He's safe as far as I am concerned," Kiernan replied, wolfing bacon. "You had better ask Airell if you want broader protection for him, and the chief is com-

ing now, so you will have your chance."

Standing, Pendor looked over the low stone wall. A party of half a dozen had set forth from the chief's dun. Two riders led, and behind them rumbled a heavy, creaking chariot.

"It's the chief indeed," Kiernan said, "and that's Inir beside him. The chariot means that Revorna is coming too. Edan's one of the pair riding behind, so the other must be Mordach, his shadow . . . yes."

Airell, the chief of this tiny clan, proved a more substantial person than Pendor had expected to find. Big-bellied, wide-shouldered and balding, he sat in the saddle of his sturdy pony and looked at Pendor with no surprise or open distaste. Inir must have held forth at considerable length anent the stranger's bizarre looks. The red cockerel was smiling beside his chief, and Pendor did not care for the smile.

"So you are the stranger who is too good to come to my house," Airell said, "even though he travels with thieving trash."

"I travel with nobody, chieftain, but a changeling boy who frightens easily. That was why I did not come. If your man Inir said anything of my friendship with thieves, he's a fool with space in his head for just one notion. A magician does not trouble with such."

"You'll trouble to keep that thick tongue polite when I've finished with you, tattered man!" Inir yelled, and rode forward.

Pendor lifted the rowan staff. Before Inir could reach him, he had spoken three words. The linen tunic on Inir's back

became rotting sackcloth, his breeches horsehair which rasped his skin, his shoes dung. He yelled again, in consternation this time. His companions gaped, Airell among them, but then the chieftain sucked air into his mouth and blew it out in roars of laughter. Inir turned crimson.

"If you lift that sword," Pendor warned him, "worse may happen to you. It has been childish insult and jesting between us until now. Let's leave it so, and talk like men."

"A fine suggestion," Airell said. His chestnut whiskers moved as though muffling further laughter. "Best you find some decent clothes, Inir, before you do anything else. I'll talk with this one. What do you think, Mother?" he inquired of the woman in the chariot.

"That's Revorna," Kiernan said quietly to Pendor. "Be careful with her. She isn't one to play with."

Pendor had formed that impression with his first look. Tall and straight despite her years, she wore her yellow hair piled high on her head, and it was yellow all the way to the roots, which only meant that she colored it with skill. Pendor, who could brew dyes and cosmetics as well as medicines, knew about such things. She was still a handsome woman, but her eyes were hard. Their gaze softened not at all for her son.

"Think?" she repeated. "That this fellow is a petty trickster, and ill-mannered with it. He claims to be a magician. Let him prove it. If he can achieve something where I have failed, I will believe him, and we will all be in his debt. If he does nothing, we will all know he has lied. What do you say to that, stranger?"

"I'll attempt it," Pendor said as brusquely as she had spoken. "Now I require some questions answered first. The crops have failed twice in succession. True?"

"True."

"Do they fail only here, or do your neighbors share your bad luck? Is the entire Summer Country troubled by bad harvests?"

"What has that to do with anything?" Revorna snapped.

Pendor looked at her. Since his protuberant eyes were spaced so far apart that they almost sat at the sides of his head, his stare could be disconcerting too. He let his heavy lids fall a little.

"If the trouble is only here, lady, then the cause is likely to be here, or with someone who dislikes your clan. If it extends throughout the kingdom, the cause will be harder to find."

"It's here only," Airell told him, "and we cannot afford a third bad crop. We had little enough seed corn in the spring. Do you think it is a curse?"

"Maybe," Pendor said. "If someone in your clan has done an evil deed which violates the earth herself, she could be taking revenge. A mortal witch could be your enemy. The powers of the earth may be weak for reasons which are nothing to do with any of you. I can conjure some of them, the lesser ones, and find out. I shall."

"And then what will you do?"

"What seems to me best," Pendor answered shortly. "What have you done?"

"Lit the sacred fires twice yearly, and honored the goddess with all the rites of

passion." Revorna smiled, so that Pendor wished he could have been present at those rites. "We sacrificed two white bulls at Samhain. A priest came from the Isle of Apples to bless the fields last Easter. We have done all we can. Now it is for you to try."

"I shall, lady, this hour." Pendor understood her very well. If he failed, she would make life unhappy for him. "With your leave, chieftain, I'll go to that field yonder and prepare."

Airell acceded. "Is there anything you need?"

"Only that none approach me until I have finished. Kev! Basket!"

The boy loped behind him into the field of green wheat. Basket followed in their wake, a foot above the earth, dividing the grain like a boat parting the waters of a lake. As he walked, Pendor broke off a stalk and crushed it. After sniffing it and tasting the juices, he let it fall without comment. Reaching the center of the field, he stood still, his senses open to the cultivated earth. Kev squatted, his arms spread wide, pressing his palms to the ground.

"Bad," he whimpered. "Bad."

More primitive than Pendor, he was more aware of the world's naked elements. The magician heeded him. *Bad* meant that something was indeed wrong in this field, and probably in all the others tilled by Airell's clan. Pendor sensed something amiss himself. He dropped a reassuring hand on Kev's skinny shoulder, squeezed, and sought among the gear his basket contained for the proper instruments.

With an antler horn pick, Pendor dug

an outline of a strange, partly human form in the earth. He uttered a wordless, rhythmic *cronan* as he worked. Driving the pick upright into the soil at the head of the figure he had made, he plowed the grain growing upon it into the soil with the shoulder blade of an ox, and placed the shoulder blade at the figure's feet. Walking around the outline three times in the direction of the sun, he halted upon its left side and ceased the deep hum of the *cronan*. Kev crouched on the right side of the figure. Pendor looked at him gravely, bared his arm, stretched it towards his friend and snapped his teeth loudly to show what he required.

Kev sank his own teeth into the magician's brawny forearm. Ropes of muscle contracted between his jaws. Blood filled his mouth. Drawing back, he watched Pendor shake red drops from his lacerated arm over the head, loins and feet of the form he had imposed on the ground.

"Goddess!" he said loudly. "Let your child whom I have given a shape rise into the light and speak with me. Let the guardian of these fields, the companion of farmers, rise to speak with me. Now!"

Kev shrank, his tangle of hair bristling. The earth between them quivered like seething porridge, rising into a mound which broke open. Out of it sprang a creature little bigger than Kev, its black eyes crackling with vitality. Ram's horns curled beside its peaked brow. Its skin was a lurid green, a strong color, yet with something unhealthy about it.

"Welcome, comrade of men, Dunlea," the magician said. "As I called you into the daylight, let you answer me with

truth; why are you constrained? What hinders growth in Airell's fields?"

"They are cursed," Dunlea replied, "and nine times cursed by one I may not name."

"God, demon or man most mortal? What is his nature? Discuss."

"Man born to die," the field spirit answered, "and while he lives no grain can grow here. Nor may I return to the earth, until he is dead, now that you have raised me. I will help you to find him."

"Can you do that, fearing him so?"

The field spirit threw up its head. "You should fear him. He's greater than you. Still, I'll help you to know him. This too I will tell you. As you seek him out you must beware of others who have nothing to do with him."

"Why?" Pendor demanded.

"They fear, they are greedy, they would bury the truth. Take care that they do not bury you in their desperation. These fields will not grow again as they ought if that happens."

"I'd be grieved on my own account, too," Pendor said dryly. "You must tell me more than you have if I am to succeed, oh Dunlea. These fields are cursed, you say, by one greater than I. A mortal man. Did he lay the curse knowingly and with malice? If he did, why? These lands are not great, and Airell's clan is not strong. I wouldn't trouble to curse them, so why should a greater magician?"

"Not being mortal, I cannot say." The Dunlea grinned mockingly. "I was here in this ground before it was ever tilled. When the Flint Men grazed their cattle, I rode them in the moonlight and drank their milk. When the first barley was

planted, I learned to love it, to nourish it, and then to treasure the different ways of wheat. I knew Dumnonii farmers, then Romans in their villas. One after the other they made this land the goodly place it is, leaving it to their sons and their bones to my soil. Now these fields are barred from producing. *Someone in Airell's clan knows why*, but more I may not disclose. It's a matter for men."

"You will have to take some part in it, if you wish your bonds loosened, and I have a scheme in mind." Pendor rubbed his thick nose. "If a man of Airell's clan knows the cause, and keeps silent, he has a guilty conscience. Let him believe we are sniffing him out, and he will betray himself."

The Dunlea rubbed its hands together. "How will you convince him?"

"I will not. You must do that. Say that the fields cannot produce a harvest while the guilt of hidden crime lies upon Airell's clan, and be as flagrant about it as you will. I'll do the rest." Pendor nodded to himself. "Having seen me produce you, they will believe I can do anything. Our man will grow frightened."

"I won't live within the walls," the Dunlea said. "I won't enter Airell's house."

"That's good, oh Dunlea, because neither will Kev, and neither will I. Here I stay, to help Gwylfai nurse her man. I'm not at home in large houses. You must bide nearby, though. I may have need of you at any time."

"I'll wait in the fields. None shall see me among the grain unless I wish them to."

"Good," Pendor said. "For the present,

come to Airell with me."

The group by Gwylfai's house watched dumbfounded as the strange procession returned. Kev, with his skinny child's body and wizened old man's face, was eerie enough, but the Dunlea made him seem ordinary. Even Airell and Revorna were taken aback at the sight. Airell swore a loud, uneasy oath, then made a respectful sign of greeting to the being, while Revorna bowed with a stiff, unrevealing face. Kiernan simply gaped. Inir looked at the hedge-magician with new respect.

"Is this the one who shrivels the harvest on the stalks?" Airell asked. "Why? What offence have we given?"

"I am the one who makes the fields produce," answered the Dunlea. "Now I no longer can, chieftain. The deeds of one in your own household have placed me in bonds. Until that one owns his action and amends it, your land and your clan will suffer, and I who am the land. The curse's origin lies with one of your own. That only can I tell you."

"That only? Not his name?" Inir burst out.

"Nothing else."

"If it's one of our own, and he hasn't spoken yet—" Airell began.

"Or she," Revorna said.

"Or she. Then how can we find the one?"

"That will not be hard, Airell," Pendor said in a deep, confident voice. "I'll begin tonight to lay an enchantment on yon field. To complete it will take a nine-night, but when it is done, let all your clan make a sunwise round of the field in the harvest dance, and then enter it. The

green wheat will wither brown wherever the one responsible treads. Am I lying, oh Dunlea?"

"You are not," the guardian of the fields replied. "He speaks the truth, chieftain. He's able to do what he says, or I would not stand here."

Little else was said. No desire of Pendor's was questioned, and his decision to remain with Gwylfai and her husband never raised an eyebrow. He promised to go to the chief's house the next day to discuss his progress. Airell seemed in haste to return, and Pendor did nothing to delay him. He felt sure the chief would gather his family together at once, and question its members. That would be a stormy clan meeting.

Watching them go, Pendor saw one of the silent men who had remained in the background turn in his pony's saddle to look at him. It wasn't a friendly look. What was his name again? Kiernan had mentioned it. *Edan, and Mordach his shadow*, that was it. Pendor had a retentive memory.

Revorna did not look back. To the chieftain she said, "Son of mine, that stranger may know a few tricks and have power to summon a field sprite, but he is still a fraud if I have ever seen one. You are right to let him try; we can lose nothing. What should we do with him, though, if he fails?"

"Beat him out of the country with a horse harness," Airell answered cheerfully, "but here I disagree with you, mother. There is something about that hill of ugliness I like. It's in my mind that he won't fail. *Whew!* Take the stink of your rotting clothes further from me, Inir

my cockerel. No, mother, I think our new friend will perform. A coral necklace upon it, the next time the trader comes through these parts."

"Taken!" Revorna said instantly. "Against my bitch Clydno, or if you don't want the dog, name another stake. But you are soft, Airell. If that man is exploiting our trouble when he has no real knowledge of what to do, then it's more than a beating he deserves."

"It's more he will get, too," Inir muttered under his breath. A borrowed cloak now covered the ruin of his garments, though they smelled ill and felt worse, but it could not cover the injury to his pride. Revorna heard him, and cast a thoughtful look in his direction.

Edan, the silent, sullen man at the rear, heard it too, and responded. "Aye," he said. "A spear in the liver." The hard viciousness in his tone made Inir sound merely petulant. If Revorna had been about to speak with Inir, Edan's utterance changed her mind. She beckoned him to the side of her jolting chariot while Inir drew further off, sulking in his smelly tatters. Airell looked ahead, bellowing a hunting song. The meeting with Pendor had brightened his mood, whatever it had done for others.

Edan leaned towards the chief's mother from his pony's back. A flax-haired man who would have been handsome if his face had been less narrow, he was known in the clan for his evil temper. Revorna didn't ask why he had taken a sudden, savage dislike to Pendor. The man was a stranger, and a peculiar one. For Edan that would be enough.

"My daughter's son, I told the stranger

we had done everything to lift this curse," she said. "That is not true. One measure we haven't taken; we have not offered the goddess a man in sacrifice. It's a dire thing, but if Pendor fails it is all that's left. Are you game for the deed? Will you help me if it should come to that?"

"Airell won't like it, grandmother."

"Airell will not know until afterwards. I'll handle him. You need only help me handle this Pendor fellow and his half-wit boy. It would be no kindness to leave him alive without a protector . . . what do you say?"

"I'm for you, grandmother." Edan even smiled a little as bloodthirsty anticipation filled him. Then his smile departed. "What if even this does no good, though? He said it is not the goddess, but some mortal man who placed the curse."

"Bah! He'd say anything for a little safety and shelter. What is his source? A tiny field spirit more ignorant than he! It's the goddess who is angry, and it's she we must placate. No more of this for now. Are you with me?"

"I've said so. Yes, I'm with you. That hedge-wizard has undertaken to help us, and one way or another, he shall."

"Now that's my daughter's son."

"Huh! I've promised, grandmother. You need not pretend to be over-fond of me. This is for the clan."

The rebuff did not hurt Revorna. She had never been deeply fond of Edan, as he said. Yet a little frown of puzzlement came over her face as he urged his pony away. *This is for the clan.* Of course it was. Why say it? Something seemed false and inappropriate there, less in the



words themselves than in the manner. She shrugged. Edan had always been strange. There had been nothing spurious in his promise to help her slay Pendor.

The burly hedge-wizard himself felt satisfaction as he watched Airell's party go. The clan chief seemed a genial, decent man, better than Pendor had hoped. Revorna clearly did not like or trust him, and as the clan mother her opinion counted. A couple of the others followed her example, but Pendor didn't intend to bother his head about them. He'd gained a measure of respect, and chance to help these folk, which meant a chance to stay somewhere rather than drifting with the wind like dandelion seed. He was determined to use it.

"That didn't go ill," Kiernan said. "Mark this! You have said the words now, and you will have to make them good. Do you believe what the Dunlea said, that someone in the clan knows why our fields are stricken, and has said nothing?"

"Yes, I believe that," Pendor said slowly. "He cannot be more particular than that because he does not know. He's an elemental of the earth, but of the tilled earth your clan has helped make, generation after generation, laying its bones in the soil as each one dies to make way for his children. The Dunlea is aware of the clan entire, not of it's individual members. A pity. But give me nine days and we will know."

"You are sure of yourself!"

"I'm not one to boast of things I cannot do, Kiernan. I wonder, though. The Dunlea says this curse was laid by a mortal man, and a greater magician than I."

Pendor ran a finger into one of his hairy ears, poking a little before he continued. "Why would such a one be so bitter an enemy of yours?"

"Do you think we're too little for his notice?"

"Goddess!" Pendor said, exasperated. "Never in my life have I encountered so touchy a clan! I'm asking what you might have done to anger a magician, not denigrating your worth. Can you tell me or not?"

"There was the robber Beni," Kiernan said, after a moment's thought. "There was a man who made the ones you killed seem like sucking babies! The story has it that his father was an oak tree, and it's only truth that an oak sapling has grown out of his grave since my clan took his life. He was no magician, though, and the Dunlea says this curse is the work of a *living* mortal man."

"So he does. We will have to be patient, then. The sorceries of earth work slowly. What about the girl who disappeared at the time of that raid by your enemies?"

"That was a grief to us all." Kiernan's voice grew husky. "None of them are magicians, though, any more than we are."

"What about Revorna?"

"Ah, well—it's never safe to pry too deeply into what sorceries the women may weave," Kiernan said, pretending to great experience. "Every goddess's daughter in the house of our foes may be a witch able to summon the Moon from the sky, for all I know. But I think not. If they had any, Revorna would surely know."

"She would at that. Gwylfai! How is it with your man?"

The woman had emerged from the hut with a troubled face. "He's hot, oh magician, red and hot. He tosses but doesn't wake. Is that a bad sign? You had better look at him."

"I agree." Pendor lumbered into the hut and bent over the ailing man. As his vision adapted to the dimness, he noted Trem's flushed cheeks and restless turning. No wonder, with his body fighting infection and seeking to mend a wound in the lung.

"Can you take the sickness away?" Gwylfai asked. "Lord—"

"Don't call me lord," Pendor said, irked. "Do I look like one? No, all I can do now is give him a draught to keep him still, and maybe a mild purgative later, to bring some of the poisons out through his bowels. Above all, keep him warm. The wound's best left alone for now. I'll look at it again tomorrow."

Infection in the wound and fluid in Trem's lungs were the two things which troubled Pendor most. If they happened, Trem was apt to die, but Pendor had done all he could to guard against them. He wished his powers of transformation could work upon living flesh. Then, indeed, he could simply have taken Trem's sickness away. However, that was like wishing for the Moon in his fingers. He went outside to brew the sleeping draught.

"How long has he been your man?" Pendor asked later, when Trem was sleeping quietly. He felt awkward with this brown eyed woman whom he found attractive—whom he desired, he

amended to himself, being honest. He'd been a hermit in the forest far too long.

"For years," Gwylfai said. "He's a good man. How much chance has he? Tell me truly, Pendor."

"A good one, if I can keep infection out of that lung, and I'll know better tomorrow how I am succeeding. That's all I can say. So let's talk of something else. What is it like to live here?"

"That's a strange question," Gwylfai gave him a steady brown gaze. "You would know the answer better than I, for you've seen more places than one. I was born here, and never but once have I been even a league away from here. That was after the great battle of Badon, when the entire clan went to Camlodd to honor the Count of Britain for his victory, because he saved the island. I never saw so many folk; they covered the fields. The king was there, with his war-band, and strangers from as far as Caer Lluel and London. It wasn't the bright clothes and the pavilions that made the day, though. The knowing did that—knowing the sea-wolves had been broken for all time, and we could plant in safety, expecting to live till the harvest. And Count Artorius did that for us."

She might have spoken of Michael, the warrior angel, in such a tone, and she did not strike Pendor as a woman given to dreamy adoration. All she said of Count Artorius was the truth. Pendor, who had seen the wild sea-wolves strike at Anderida and Hamo, was the first to praise the man who had broken them.

"Aye, we may thank the God for him," he agreed. "Now I'll deserve the gift by making the harvests in these parts good

again.”

“Can you?”

“I believe so. It will take some time to uncover the cause, but when that is done, a curse can be removed. I’ll begin tonight. You must stay in your house, not watching, not looking out, between sunset and dawn. Swear to me you will do that, Gwylfai. I don’t anticipate much danger, but there can always be the unexpected. I’m going to give Kiernan the same warning.”

“On my oath, I’ll obey you,” Gwylfai said. “Why should you do this, though? If there is danger, why shouldn’t you travel on with your basket, your rope and your changeling boy? We’re nothing to you.”

“For one thing,” Pendor answered, “if I don’t prove my good intentions, I may not be allowed to travel on, as you say. That spurred rooster Inir would love to detain me with a rope of his own—especially after I sent him home in decaying rags.” He gave one of his mirthful laughs. “He provoked me, though. O-ho-ho, his face was worth it!”

Gwylfai laughed too, in a roguish way Pendor found appealing. Much of the time she was as sober as he. Then she said, “Have you no other reasons?”

He had. A lonely man with the guilt of treachery upon him, he wanted these people to think well of him. Gwylfai, Kiernan, Airell the chief—they all seemed decent. It would be pleasant to do something good. Not to mention the way Gwylfai’s company went to his head.

Pendor dropped his gaze to his hand. Wide, thick, strong and graceless, it reminded him of his appearance in time to

prevent his making a fool of himself. Short webs of skin stretched between the nailless fingers, and the rest of his body conformed to their plan.

“None come to mind,” he said.

Gwylfai made no reply to that. Pendor wondered if she knew. Of course she did. Any woman who had outgrown childhood knew when a man desired her. She wasn’t the sort, though, to cavort with a stranger while her husband lay possibly dying, not if Pendor had any perception at all. He thought he did, and he regretted it.

Ah, well. It was time for work.

That night the fields lay dark under a clouded sky. A thin drizzle of rain fell as Pendor left the house. He had covered himself with a cloak and clapped the old, disgusting badger skin hat on his head. It had accompanied him through many vicissitudes and he liked it. In one hand he carried his magician’s staff, in the other a number of stakes. Kev slouched at his heels, while the Dunlea moved beside him with a sprightly, bouncing tread.

“If you cannot send me back there in the allotted time, you know what will happen,” he said.

“The curse that is on these fields will fall on me instead,” Pendor answered. “I know. And you cannot return to your proper place unless I do lift the curse. Be quiet, then, little spirit, and let me begin.”

Pendor clasped both his hands full of earth from the hole. The substance which nourished and devoured all things tingled in his fists. Standing there, he addressed the earth-goddess by her many names and



asked for her blessing. The soil in his hands grew warm, as though fermenting. He felt its power very strongly. It seeped upward from the ground beneath his feet, filling the marrow of his bones.

“Who has done this?” he asked.

Bringing his hands together, he opened them. The soil merged, taking a shape as though kneaded by unseen fingers. A fur of moss sprouted from the half-formed image.

Kev squealed a warning. Even the

Dunlea had sensed nothing amiss, but the boy’s wild faculties recognized danger. Pendor turned about, lifting his head. The image which had formed in his palms came apart in moist crumbs of earth. Rage seethed in him. This interruption had cost dearly. He would know who had done it and get an accounting from them.

Out of the misty night they came, two men on ponies with muffled hooves. The point of a saddle javelin glistened, and



someone vented a dirty, gloating laugh. Pendor did not wait for further clues to their intentions. He had seen metal shine like that, and heard such laughter before.

Letting useless earth fall from his hands, he roared a cantrip. The green wheat wove itself into a tight, inextricable net around the feet of the cantering ponies, slowing them to a halt. One of them crashed to its knees with a whinny, sending its rider toppling into the field. He landed on his shoulder. His compan-

ion swore foully and dismounted, advancing upon the burly hedge-wizard.

His height, build and something in his movements were familiar. Pendor did not wait for recognition to become complete. His deep, booming voice sent the words of another spell rolling across the field. The earth bubbled under the shoes of his attacker and sucked him in to the hips. The other man, lying dazed, was drawn in to his chest. Only his head, one shoulder and one arm remained in the

free air. He hooted with fright.

"If you cling to your weapons," Pendor warned, his heavy voice making the mist swirl, "the earth will swallow you whole."

The man facing him dropped his spear, after a moment's hesitation. Pendor trod forward to look into his face. It was narrow, beneath lank flaxen hair. One of the ponies neighed loudly in fear.

"Edan, and your shadow Mordach," Pendor said. "Here to murder me! So you are the ones who brought this curse on the clan's fields. The silent pair. You had better talk now."

"Not to a stranger," Edan said, defiant even though afraid. "Take me to Airell. You're his guest. You can't give justice on our clan's land."

"We're not talking of justice, you and I," Pendor said. "You tried to kill me. You fear what I might uncover if I lived. Well, you can tell me what you are hiding . . . or not."

He renewed his chant. The earth flowed about Edan's chest like thick mud, and he sank deeper, struggle as he would. He raved, threatened, promised gifts, cursed as men seldom curse, evaded and lied. He was too desperate to fashion convincing lies, though, and Pendor believed none of them. When the living earth clutched his throat, Edan croaked the truth at last.

"It was my cousin! Airell's daughter! Brenna!"

"Airell's daughter?" Pendor had to think who was meant by that. "The one who vanished at the time of the cattle raid three years since? That one?"

"That one."

"You killed her." Pendor was suddenly certain of it.

"It wasn't meant!" Edan said fiercely. "It wasn't! I'd hungered for her. When our foes raided us, and we were out tracking them, it was a chance to be alone with her. I came back, broke in upon her . . . she fought, struck me . . . I struck back, harder than I meant, and her neck broke. Then I had to take and bury her, but the fields stopped giving us crops."

Pendor drew a long breath, feeling queasy. "You buried her here, in these fields?"

"No! Far away, in the forest, wrapped in her coverlet. Now you know it all. Kill me and be done!"

"Kill you?" Pendor's mind turned slowly, milling the question like a quern. At last he said, "No. You're not mine to slay. Your own clan can judge you—and before I ask the earth to spew you out, I'll bring Kiernan to hear you repeat what you have just confessed. Your chief might not believe me."

Standing there in the dark night with the power of his magic like an aura about him, he was more than a grotesque vagabond with grass seed in his garments. The furious insults Edan had been about to hurl never left his dry throat. He bent his head in anguish as Pendor plodded away.

As the magician reached the edge of the fields, he stopped to think further. He had never been the quickest-witted man alive, but his mind worked methodically and he usually reached the right answer. He had been thinking that the curse on the fields was solved, and could now be lifted. That was not necessarily true.

The Dunlea said that a stronger magician than Pendor had placed the curse, and that *someone* in Airell's clan knew why. Edan did not give the impression of knowing much. He believed the curse had fallen because he had murdered his cousin, and perhaps raped her, too, though he admitted only to trying. He had attempted to kill Pendor because he feared exposure through the stranger's magic, and all he had achieved was to betray himself. It didn't follow that his guilt *was* the cause of the failed crops. The longer Pendor considered the matter, the less likely it seemed.

At last he took his magician's knife and stakes. On the first piece of wood he cut the symbol for the half moon, riding somewhere in the sky beyond the rain clouds. Driving it into the ground on the periphery of the field, he called upon the earth and the moon to witness the rite. He summoned powers without names, binding them to congregate in that place over the next eight nights, and circled the field as he chanted the summons. They moved slowly, ominously in the deep black soil in response. He felt it. Eight nights from this night they would be ready.

Another person felt it, too. On a rocky moor, a man whose hands, feet and face were like the bark of a tree and whose body was covered with moss, grew aware of the earth magic practiced leagues away. His eyes opened for the first time in days.

"Someone wishes to undo my curse," he said to himself. "He has power of a sort, yet he does not know whom he flouts. I will go to him."

Taking an hour about it, he rose to his

feet. Little rootlets tore out of the soil as he moved. He creaked like an ancient tree in a gale as he stretched, then placed one foot in front of the other.

By morning he had accustomed himself to moving like a human being again, and was tramping east at a steady if arthritic pace.

Pendor knew nothing of this, nor did Kiernan. In the grey dawn, the young warrior stared in disbelief at his kinsmen, whose night in the cold ground had leached them of all defiance. Through clicking teeth, Edan repeated his confession, his narrow, rain-wet face pale as a boiled egg. Mordach, who had been with him, supported it. With many a sideways glance at Pendor, he helped him dig the culprits from their living graves. They could barely move.

The magician had to present himself at Airell's house then. It couldn't be avoided. Under the yellow thatch, with pigs squealing in the yard outside and small children tumbling on the floor, Pendor told his story before the clan. Kiernan testified that he spoke the truth.

"I was there, Airell," he said, his young face troubled, "I heard them say it that they were guilty of her life."

"He's mad!" Edan blustered, trying in a late hour to face it out. "The stranger had bewitched him, just as he bewitched us. He threatened to have the earth swallow me whole, and listen, my kinsmen, I did not have far to go! I'd have confessed to murdering a bishop!"

"And what were you doing down in the fields at that time of night, with your ponies and weapons?" Airell demanded.

"It was our thought to move the

stranger along. He shouldn't be here, meddling in clan matters."

The sullen, defiant words did not go far with Airell. His face contorted with still raw grief which these events had brought back to him, he shook his head like a bull tormented by flies.

"It's thin. A coward strikes in the dark, or a man with too much to hide. You wolf, you cannibal wolf, and she was so young!" Airell rose from his seat. A tear ran from his eye. Others followed. "I can't judge this. The clan must do it."

"I say they are guilty of our kinswoman's blood," Kiernan said, standing straight. "They confessed before me, and it wasn't from terror alone. We know now how she disappeared that night, don't we? Edan and Mordach have shown themselves good at sneaking about the dun unseen."

"Yes." Revorna shot the two culprits a bitter glance. "This has a true feel. I reckon you guilty, and it would be my judgement that you burn together in a wicker basket." Edan flinched. "That I'll mitigate, so long as you show us where she is buried, so that we may bring her back to lie among her kindred."

The clan voiced general agreement, men and women together. Airell nodded. Although husky, his voice had regained firmness.

"The mother's judgement is good. Do the right thing by our girl's bones, Edan and Mordach, or else burn. I myself will kindle the fire! Don't open your mouths to ask for mercy if you do. There's nothing to promise. But the flames will surely be yours if you don't do this."

Airell drew a fold of his cloak over his

head.

The guilty men looked at Revorna's face, then around the hall at their kindred. They found no comfort there. It was Mordach, the silent shadow who had always waited for Edan's leadership, who moistened his lips at last and said low: "All right. I'll take you there."

In a nearby forest, they uncovered the pitiful bones of the young woman murdered by those who should have been her first protectors. The men who had known her wept harshly at the sight. Even Pendor, who had not known her at all, felt his throat contract. They lifted Brenna's bones from the hole and wrapped them in a shroud. Then they turned their faces toward the killers.

What happened next, Pendor would have preferred to forget. He never did. The grave was closed again, this time over two corpses, and they returned to clan land to give Brenna a proper funeral. Her wake and internment lasted three days.

Each night of that time, Pendor carried out his rituals in the field. Each night he added a new stake to its edge, carved with a sign of the prevailing phase of the moon, spacing them equal distances apart. Each night, too, he felt the powers without names concentrate their presence more closely in the local earth. None knew he was doing it except Gwylfai. She noticed, and asked why.

"Because everyone thinks her burial will mean the end of the curse and a good harvest at last—except me," Pendor said gloomily. "It wasn't her murder which began it. So now I must find the real cause and undo it, or everyone will blame



me when the crops fail again.”

“But Edan confessed!”

“He did the thing, yes. That pair carried the guilt for two years and believed the harvest was failing because of them. Conceited fools. They thought nothing in the world but their deed was capable of blighting grain. They thought the powers of earth were angry with them. It doesn’t work so.”

“Yes!” Gwylfai said, forceful and distressed. “Yes, it does! Why are you saying this? Nothing arouses the powers like kin-murder. A daughter of the chief murdered, two of our own the slayers, now killed in their turn, and you are saying that it was all *for no purpose*? The bad harvests wil continue?”

“You see, you do not want to believe it either.” Pendor shrugged. “I don’t blame you. Listen, Gwylfai. If those two had hidden Brenna’s body in their home earth, it would be different. If her blood had even stained the ground, the powers—like the Dunlea—would have been aware. The very bones in your clan’s graveyard would have rattled in protest. But they buried her miles from here, in a forest never cultivated, where the powers are not familiar with men. Your little spirits of the field and barn knew nothing about it. They are afraid, Gwylfai, afraid of someone much stronger.” He rubbed his nose. “How I am going to tell Airell this I do not know. He won’t like it any more than you.”

“When did you know?”

“The same night Edan and Mordach attacked me—and in the very field where they knew I was working magic, the idiots. I worked it out then, after I’d

made them safe.”

“Why didn’t you tell the chief at once?”

“With him looking at his daughter’s bones and losing two kinsmen? It wasn’t the time to gibber of unknown magicians and the earth powers. Now that the burial is over, he’ll listen.”

“And maybe you have left it too late.” Gwylfai shook her head. “Better to have told him at once, whether he was ready to hear or not. Pendor, he believes now that the mystery of his daughter’s vanishing is solved—sadly, but solved—and the curse is off our harvests. I believed that, too! I know how it makes me feel to be told it isn’t so! You go to Airell now! Tell him this entire black business of Edan and Mordach was only a side path, and that the curse remains. See where you land.”

Her intensity delighted Pendor. He crushed an impulse to take her in his arms; she wouldn’t like it, and he had trouble enough. She was probably right about Airell’s reaction.

“Still, he will have to be told,” Pendor said. “He’s bound to wonder what it means when he sees that I am still preparing magic here. He’ll contain any anger he feels, though. He knows by now that I have power to reckon with. Even more than a release for his grief, he wants these fields to bear again.”

Gwylfai’s thoughtful gaze held a glimmer of suspicion. “For a stranger, you care deeply about us.”

“I’m tired of roving,” he said simply. “Somewhere I must stop, and this is as good a place as I have found. If the ears are heavy with wheat in August, this clan

will accept me as a neighbor and even tolerate a changeling like Kev.”

“Suppose it will not?”

“Then I’ll have to move on,” Pendor said uncompromisingly. “Kev depends on me now—for a full belly, and to treat his injuries when he has them. I doubt he can live above a few more years anyhow, but while he does I will not discard him. Yet before I do any moving I will settle this business here.”

“You are stubborn,” Gwylfai said, and laughed, not unkindly. “It’s a good thing. Well, whom do you suspect?”

“None, and all. The Dunlea assures me that someone in your clan knows the truth, but more he cannot tell. Therefore I shall find out who. Afterwards, I’ll do what else seems needful.”

“Take care this ‘other’ does not try to split your head too,” Gwylfai warned. “Your magic can’t always save you. I would like to see you carry that oak staff of yours more and your magician’s wand less.”

It was pleasant to be nagged a little by a comely woman who felt concern for him, even if that solicitude was indirectly for her husband, whose wound had to be treated. Pendor admitted to himself that he felt happy. He tried to remember when that had last been true.

“When I’ve finished my work,” he said. “Trem is doing well. Soon you can feed him things other than soup and curds. Hello there.”

He was addressing Gwylfai’s children, who had peeped shyly into the yard and now approached him. They treated him rather as they would treat a bear which seemed friendly and was surely fascinat-

ing, but which, it must always be remembered, possessed claws and teeth. Gwylfai shooed them away.

She proved right about Airell. He belowered like a stung ox when Pendor told him the curse had not yet passed from his family’s fields. He raged and thundered while Pendor waited out the storm with the patience of a rock. He ordered the magician to go from his lands, to take his shadow from the house of Airell for all time, and other bits of bluster. At last he ran out of words.

“If I go,” Pendor said, “I’ll leave the curse behind me. If I stay, I may still rid you of it.”

Airell’s big shoulders fell somewhat. His scalp gleamed pink in the sunlight. With less force, he asked, “What can you do?”

“Just what I planned to do from the beginning. When my preparations are finished, the one among your clan who knows the source of the curse will turn the green wheat black and dry when he walks through it. In the meantime, oh chief, I’d like it if you knew what each one of your clan is doing at all times. When I first came here, some robbers failed to slay me, and lately Edan also failed, but if there is a third time, someone might succeed.”

“Like Revorna herself. She doesn’t care for you.” Airell’s fingers beat a restless rhythm on the nearest surface. “Myself, I do not care to have you searching further and making things more miserable than they are. But I am the chief and these are my folk. I give you leave. If you are wrong, though, Revorna may get her way.”

The pain of the final, bitter knowledge that his daughter was dead spoke through Airell's mouth. Pendor understood that. He didn't think that Airell would truly give that formidable, appalling woman free rein to do what she willed, but even the possibility meant that he dared not fail. Yes, and according to the Dunlea, somewhere in this matter a greater magician than Pendor was concerned.

"Wait five days, cattle-chief, and tell me that," Pendor said.

Thereafter he sought out the Dunlea. His interview with Airell had left him feeling sour towards the human species, and the company of the horned field spirit pleased him better.

"Tell me, friend, how do you endure these folk?" he asked morosely.

The Dunlea capered. "They are none so bad. Fools, yes, but all men are. They take better care of my fields than you have done, with your digging and trampling and luring murderers to ride across them. Now, in a few days, you will bid the entire clan walk through that one particular field whence you raised me! Hah! It will never be the same again."

"But it will bear good crops again, small one. You are crippled and gelded until it does. Once I know what must be done, I'll restore the fields and you. Meanwhile, tell me what happens in the half-world hereabouts. You knew that no fairies had carried away Airell's daughter, didn't you?"

The Dunlea blew through his cheeks noisily. "Surely I knew. You never thought to ask me."

"I hadn't a notion what to ask! Now they are blaming me instead of Edan for

causing them pain. Maybe there are other things I should know that I am not thinking to ask. Airell threatened me with his mother. Has Revorna ever made the blood sacrifice of a man in your fields? How bad a witch is she?"

"No, mortal man. She never has. Yet. That is not to say she never could. Is it in your mind to vanish? I heard you telling the woman of this house how you would bravely complete what you had begun, oh yes, oh yes—but what a man tells a woman and what he does are sometimes different things, are they not?"

"Would you know, little one?"

"None would know better! They come into my fields two by two, down all the generations. Like the hares and the larks, they love upon the earth. If you knew how often, you would wonder how any wheat is ever left standing. I hear the words, the panted promises, and many's the time I feel the footsteps of a girl coming back alone, taste her tears as they fall on the earth. Why, man, even Revorna would surprise you. If it's gossip you want—"

"Not where she's concerned." *You might tell me all you wish about Gwylfai, but I won't ask.* "Is she the one who knows why the crops are cursed?"

"I cannot say. It might be she, it might be Airell, it might even be Airell's favorite dog. All I know is what I have told you. Someone in that clan is aware. Do not fret, you will find him—or her."

"My concern is that he'll find me first! Edan set the example, and I don't doubt that everyone in this place has some little thing he doesn't want known, which he fears in his heart has brought punish-

ment. Half of them will be unwilling to face my test when the time comes, and the rest will get drunk to do it. You know, getting drunk seems a mighty pleasant thing to me this day.”

“Do it, then! I’ll drink with you. You can change a vat filled with rotten apples into strong liquor if you like.”

Pendor stiffened. That was his deepest secret, which he had lied and betrayed and attempted guest-murder once to keep. If the Dunlea should give it away, to that harsh, predatory old hawk Revorna, say, then Pendor might as well hang himself.

*So, magician! You can make wine from stale urine, ivory from bones, fodder from dry leaves. From this day you will do such things for me, for me alone, and to ensure that you never leave I will have the tendons of your legs cut. You are too valuable to lose!*

Pendor’s stomach writhed. He wanted to cast up his last meal. Not only Revorna was capable of that. The good-natured Airell would be tempted beyond his power to resist, if he knew; anybody would. And the demands would never end. Greed would increase as it was fed. Finally they would demand something impossible—*change this clay into gold!*—and refuse to believe that Pendor couldn’t comply. He would have to poison the whole clan to escape, and even that would not help if he allowed it to go so far in the first place . . .

Run, his instincts clamored. Run. Let them think you were only a liar and fraud after all. It’s nothing to you what they think. Or if they starve, or if Trem dies of his wound. You didn’t even know they

were alive a nine-night ago.

It was tempting, save that he couldn’t do it. All the pragmatic reasons in the world, such as his inability to run fast enough, were only afterthoughts to that prime, compelling geas. He’d begun this thing and was committed to finish it.

The days passed, and the green wheat flourished in the fields. It had grown with the same lushness twice before, to wither on the stalk before the harvest. *Not this time*, Pendor promised himself. *Not this time. Soon I should know how to stop it.*

Airell’s clan had begun to trust him. Even Revorna and Inir were civil. There was a growing expectancy among them, and anticipation, as the time grew near. Kiernan remained by Pendor’s side, not to watch him any longer, but to guard him against further attacks.

“Whom would you favor to be the person we are looking for?” he asked once.

“Ah, now you are asking me to inform on my kin.” The freckled young face grew mock earnest. “Besides, I’d know no better than you would. Inir, maybe. He’s the kind of headstrong fellow who could start something greater than he intended—but I cannot see him keeping quiet about it. The other likely ones are dead. It just could be Revorna, for she works her hands in magic too much for our comfort.”

“You are telling me nothing I hadn’t wondered myself, more than once,” Pendor said. “For lack of knowledge, we must wait, that’s all.” He waved a thick hand. “The grain in yon field will tell the story.”

The appointed day dawned grey and dim. The clan turned out for the test from

its oldest to its youngest member, a baby who could not walk. Even Trem was carried from his hut on a litter.

"All here come of good folk," Pendor said. "The powers of earth themselves have told me there is one who knows why the fields do not bear, and keeps the secret for his own. We'll know who he is when he walks across this field. The clan mother has claimed the honor of going first as an example, I'll go in her footsteps to show my own good faith. After that, we'll take turns by lot. Who says no?"

Silence gave unanimous consent. Revorna descended from her cart and trod a haughty path through the high grain, from one side of the field to the other. Not one stalk so much as turned brown. Even though it would have been too simple a solution, Pendor felt a pang of disappointment. He didn't like Revorna.

He followed in her track as he had promised, and the high stalks remained green. Four warriors, including Inir, went next. Then they carried Trem through the field, and again nothing happened. Women, children, old men and youths took the testing walk. As they were shown innocent of knowledge one by one, Kiernan began to frown.

"We're growing fewer," he said. "Are you sure that your magic is true magic, Pendor?"

"I'm sure," the hedge-wizard answered. "You might as well ask me if I truly know when my stomach rumbles. The earth magic is to be depended on. It's water which is many-formed and unstable."

Three more men and women walked the field with no result. Then it was Kiernan's turn. With a shrug and quip, he strode to the edge of the wheat, marked by stones, and stepped over them. He never looked back as he moved. It was the rising cry of astonishment from behind him which caused him to turn before he had gone a dozen paces, and stare in disbelief.

The standing grain had blackened wherever his body had touched it.

Pendor was as amazed as he. Seeing the young warrior's face whiten until each individual freckle showed plainly, he knew that Kiernan was innocent both in intent and knowledge, whatever his actions might have been. Still, he knew.

Within five heartbeats, he grew as red as he had been pale before. His lip twisted in wrath, threatening to shed the moustache which clung so precariously to that brief shelving. He rushed at Pendor.

"What lie is this to save your skin?" he yelled. "What? I showed you friendship! This is how you return it!"

He laid hands on the magician's brawny shoulders. Pendor seized his arms. The two swayed back and forth, struggling like bears.

"No lie," Pendor choked as he fought. "No mistake, either. You know the cause."

"I know nothing, you fool!" Kiernan said. "Take it back!"

"Then you aren't . . . aware . . . that you know. Stand still. This must be scanned. I haven't slandered you. Stand!"

Pendor threw all his strength into his grip. Since he was a noted wrestler in his

own parts, Kiernan sank to one knee, resisting all the way. He had barely heard what the magician said.

Grasping the situation at last, though by its wrong end, the clan responded. They saw a man revealed as guilty, while the sickening guilt of Edan and Mordach remained fresh in their minds. They saw him attacking the man who had exposed him. It was enough. Howling like wolves, they converged upon the pair.

“Hang him!”

“Kin betrayer!”

“Stand back, you leprous idiots!” Pendor shouted, the sheer volume of the sound thundering above the surf roar of the mob. “Am I nobody? Leave this man to Airell and to me!”

Airell by then had forced his way through the excited mass of his clan to stand beside Pendor.

“Yes!” he thundered. “Stand back! Are we children of Laodegan or wildcats? Kiernan is not accused! He won’t be, either, if there is no cause! You will hang me out of hand before you do it with him.”

“And me,” Pendor said flatly, in a voice which carried.

The clan drew back like an ebbing wave, leaving the three alone. Pendor turned to the young warrior.

“It’s best we be quick about this, lad. Your kin are impatient. I’ve no deep wish to swing from a rope beside you. Somehow this curse in its third year centers upon Kiernan. You know its source even if you are not aware that you know, so search your mind.”

“Madness!” Kiernan spat. “Don’t feign friendship now, you hypocrite! I’d

know if I had offended the powers. Why, three years since—”

He stopped.

Pendor said, “What little thought passed across your mind then, Kiernan? Was there something you did after all?”

“One thing,” Kiernan said, “and that’s no secret. Why, I even told you about it one night! Remember, Airell, how I slew Beni the marauder? The one whose father was an oak tree, it is said?”

“I remember, but who’d curse us for that? Beni had no kin.”

“No human kin that we know about. Yet he wasn’t canny. Hewing into him was a deal like cutting down a tree. His blood didn’t flow as a man’s ought to, either. You saw.”

Kiernan spilled forth the words in a swift rattle. He’d been suitably impressed with the need for haste. Airell, thus appealed to, shot a look at Pendor.

“It’s true enough. I thought little of it then or since, and certain it is that Beni uttered no dying spells or maledictions, but he was not like other men. Maybe he was akin to the trees. Once he found a man cutting down a mistletoe oak, and severed his legs with his own axe. That’s no mere tale. But who’d mourn him like this?”

“If no mortal knows, the beings of the wild forest do,” Pendor said. “Your Beni was a wild man. I lived in the Forest of Andred for years, and Kev grew up there. We have the affinities to trace the robber’s kin, but it will take time.”

“How much time?” Airell demanded. “We cannot bear a third bad harvest. We cannot, magician.”

“My grief for you. I’ve done what I

promised, and found you the man who knows. You ended Beni's outrages, and someone cursed you for it instead of blessing you, like most. Now, it's a matter of tracing that one. Will you show me where the thief is buried?"

"Light of the sun!" Airell burst out. "Twist after hidden twist! First it was Edan, then it was Kiernan here, now it's some dead man's avenger who must be found through the grave—how long before you find the root of the curse and break it? What are we to do in the meantime? Turn red thieves ourselves or starve?"

"You wouldn't be the first one to face that choice since the legions left," Pendor said dryly. "I'm trying to spare you the need. The grave is my next step."

"So be it," Airell said resignedly. "I'll take you there. Kiernan had better come too, for his protection. But I've other things to do first."

The "things" all had to do with calming his clan and leaving them in the control of his mother. That achieved, he kept his word, and before sunset Pendor gazed at a grave on a harsh, rocky hillside. Its only marker was a young tree growing out of it, curiously twisted, its form suggestive of defiant rage. Pendor laid his hand on the bark and removed it at once, scowling with distaste.

"Better dead and buried," he said. "I'd cut down this abomination as he cut down other lives, but it would do no good. It's the live magician who mourns him that we want."

"Speak for yourself," Airell said. "I do not want him."

"Unless he lifts his curse or dies, you

are left with it, so it appears you must want him. Kev and I will seek him out tonight, for I know time is short. Kiernan, you may stand with your spear and guard our backs, if it pleases you."

"I'll do it."

Airell returned to his house, and that night Pendor sat by the twisted tree beneath a moon that was almost full. Kev, skinny and huge eyed, crouched facing him. The shadow cast by the grave-tree in the moonlight looked almost human. Pendor fancied it might rise and spring upon his back at any moment—Pendor, who was usually the least fanciful of men. He felt grateful for Kiernan's armed presence.

Kev's limbs began to shake. His mouth stretched wide. Pendor, who knew the signs, did not know whether to be glad or sorry. He hadn't had to call upon this mysterious wizard, because the man's attention was turned towards them already. Kev uttered a low groan, and then his posture changed. He sat erect, filled with a malign dignity, and his eyes held the gleam of understanding. He spoke in a voice as resonant as a drum.

"You trouble my brother's grave with your presence."

"Who speaks?" Pendor asked.

"The brother of Beni, one who will see your little clan uprooted from the land and thorns growing where your grain sprouts now! Your legend that our father was an oak hides a more fearful truth. You should pray never to learn it, and it is not too late to hide. Go from this grave and forget what you have seen, lest worse than hunger find you."

Pendor looked at the young-old face of



his only friend, animated by a mind not its own. Anger expanded within him, and it was all the stronger because he himself had used Kev in such a way. He cursed the unknown wizard in his heart, knowing where his curses truly belonged.

"You should pray that we don't find you," he answered harshly. "With this grave to work from, I can do it now, and every man in Airell's clan will ride on your track."

"I tremble," Kev's mouth said. "With your meager powers, you were able to confound two armed mounted men who came seeking your life. I with mine am secure against twenty, but test me if you wish. I will do little more than laugh. Touch my brother's grave, though, and such terror will come against you as you have never seen."

Pendor, who had seen a sack by sea-wolves, doubted that. As for Kiernan, he

had passed his limits of patience and silence. Ripping a heavy knife from its sheath, he sprang over the grave to confront Kev, who sat unmoved before him. Directed by his own soul, the changeling boy would have fled into the night.

Pendor readied himself to move. If Kiernan attacked Kev in his fury, Pendor was wholly prepared to break his arm. It didn't happen. The warrior remembered that Kev was merely the vessel for whatever was speaking.

"What is his grave to us? Rubbish! We buried a kinswoman the day past; we can dig a thief out of his bed. Here is what I think of your brother's grave, wizard!"

Kiernan struck at the tree with his knife. Pendor heard the sound, saw the leaves shake at the impact, and then felt sick, for while the tree remained rooted and still, its shadow convulsed as though in pain. The shadow was a man's. It



threw its arms wide. The head tilted back in a silent scream.

Something dark dripped from Kiernan's knife.

"For that you will pay." The voice which hissed from Kev's throat was nothing human. "You will not have an unmarked grave, because none shall bury you. There is no need to divine my place from Beni's grave. I tell you now that I am close at hand and shall be closer tomorrow. And the woe I shall bring you then will be as nothing to the harm I'll do should I find the grave of the tree further disturbed. Await my coming."

The voice ceased. The foreign intelligence passed from Kev's face. He whimpered, lunged forward and buried his shaggy head on Pendor's shoulder. The magician held him, rocking him like an infant.

"He appears tomorrow!" Kiernan said. "What can we do to stop him? What powers has he?"

"Greater ones than mine," Pendor answered tersely. "He'll appear in daylight, for that is when the trees are most alive, and he'll pass by this grave. After that he will come seeking you and I, since we are the ones he wants most. By Cernunnos, but this has happened quickly! We had better be ready for him if we want to live."

"I want that indeed." Kiernan's dryness matched that of the magician a moment before. "Who is he?"

"Less who than *what*." Pendor remembered a half-formed image of earth that had crumbled in his fingers, sprouting a coat of moss before it disintegrated. "He gave himself away, more than he in-

tended. He's a tree-wizard, which is a rare and dreadful thing, but with its weaknesses. His brother wasn't so great, though he did have his powers, and it came naturally to him to lair in the forest. Come, let's move away from here. What we say in this place may be repeated."

When they were once again within sight of Airell's dun, Kiernan halted. "What is a tree-wizard?"

"Call it the forest's revenge, or a Druid's rebirth. You know that the Druids of old revered oak trees, and sacrificed men in their sacred groves? When the Romans conquered Britain, they slaughtered the Druids, cut down the groves, and thought that was the end of it—but it wasn't, not while one slaughter-tree left an acorn behind and one priest still knew the secret of transmigration. That is how the line of the tree-wizards began, Kiernan. They can exist for a long lifetime as men, then sprout roots and become trees for a century, or send their spirits into a tree which is already growing. Either way, they nourish the roots with the flesh and bones of men buried alive."

"How do you know all these horrors?"

"The green growth and the engulfing dark, they are both of the earth," Pendor said. "You cannot separate them. Here, though, we deal with a thing which is more of the dark. I am going to meet it in that field where I raised the Dunlea, and I'll need you beside me. Kev, poor fearful beast, won't go within a mile of it now; he will scuttle away until this is over. I won't hold him."

"All right," Kiernan said, after a time. "I trust you. Why that particular field,

though?"

"It is where I summoned a group of earth elementals to make my spell on the wheat secure. They are still there, in the earth and the rock. They require days to gather and days to disperse. With their help, we can prevail over him."

*If they decide to help me and not this tree-wizard.*

"Trem and Gwylfai must leave their house," Kiernan said. "They'll be too close for safety."

London itself might be too close for safety when their enemy arrived, Pendor thought. Kiernan was right, though. The family which had sheltered him must go to Airell's dun.

Gwylfai heard the news with a white face, but she roused her children at once. The two men transferred her husband from his straw pallet to a nest of blankets in Pendor's enchanted basket, and it followed the woman through the night to the gates of the dun. Before departing, she embraced them both and wished them victory. The astonished Pendor felt wetness on his face where her cheek had touched him. A pleasant little memory to hold against what impended.

As a rule he did not use his powers of transformation in such small matters, lest he should betray their exact nature, but if this was to be their last meal he considered that he and Kiernan deserved a good one. Bannocks, fresh butter, and fish steamed in clay with honey, herbs and cream made their miraculous appearance within the hour. The pair wolfed it down. Kiernan didn't question it; he ascribed it to magic and troubled his mind no more about it. Pendor felt

pleased that his comrade wasn't a closely reasoning man, but he too had no time for his usual ingrained fears of discovery. He'd less than a day until he faced something worse.

Sunrise found him in the midst of the field he knew so well by then, surrounded by his magical adjuncts and instruments. A mixture of herbs and sawdust smouldered in a clay pot at his feet. With a surge of irritation he saw the chief and Revorna emerge from the gates of the dun, coming down to question him.

"There is no time to discuss or argue," he thundered at them. "Your enemy is coming! If Kiernan and I fail to stop him, why, it's only our two lives he seems to require—today! He's part man, part tree, all sorcerer, and the brother of Beni the robber whom Kiernan slew. Go back to the dun, chieftain, and wait. It's all you can do."

"Where is your changeling, and the little Dunlea?" Revorna demanded. Her color had heightened at Pendor's words.

"They are hiding," he said, "because they are wiser than all of us. Lady, go back to the dun and make certain none leaves it, for this is the day I'm to end your hot imaginings of sacrificing me. You must wait while another much stronger than you tries his hand."

"Who?" she said skeptically.

"Stay and meet him if you wish." Pendor looked at Airell. "I'm not inviting you to do that, chieftain, for I have nothing against you and some cause for gratitude. Believe I'm in earnest. Go back to your dun and take the lady with you."

Airell listened, and believed. Within moments he was gone, his mother with

him, almost dragging her chariot at his horse's tail. His farewell was a parting salute with his hand; it was no time for speeches. Pendor threw his hat to the ground and wiped perspiration from his head.

"It's a blessing that your chief is a man of sense," he said.

"He's easy going," Kiernan admitted, "but if nothing happens after this, we will both wish your tree-wizard had splintered our bones."

Pendor grunted, not liking the other's choice of phrase. He was like Airell and Revorna; he simply did not know what was coming.

Beneath his feet, he sensed the earth beating with power like a heart. The mighty elementals were there, waiting. It was a wonder the field did not burst into green wild growth of thorn, briar and sapling on the instant.

"What's yonder?" Kiernan asked tensely.

Pendor looked at the hilltop where a huge figure stood.

"Our guest is here."

The tree-wizard finished scanning the land and came onward. He had been walking for days, and grown used to it again. His arthritic stumbling had become a normal gait as his joints loosened. Hard travel had worn away the roots which had sprouted from his feet. He left deep footprints. Flowers grew in the track of the right, while blight and decay marked the left. The solid earth quivered in ripples around him.

Kiernan signed himself for protection.

"Trust your knife," Pendor muttered. "If spells aren't effective, your only hope

is to drive it into his brain before he makes ferns grow from your liver."

As the great figure drew closer, neither man was inclined to make even grim jokes any longer. The knotted, mossy limbs were capable of supporting a house, while the red eyes which looked from a mask of inhuman skin might have been a devil's. It stopped at the edge of the field.

"I was content to curse your crops with barrenness," it said. "You should have suffered your punishment."

"No," Kiernan said, dry lipped. "The land is ours."

"Then be one with it." The tree-wizard placed a great foot on the stone marking the field's edge. Plants of grotesque form grew out of it, cracking it apart with their roots. The being entered the field. Pausing a moment, savoring the rich presence of the elemental powers beneath its feet, it then advanced upon the two men. They stood fast. Kiernan, at least, would have had difficulty in making his legs move.

With a desperate war cry, he hurled his spear at the creature's chest. A mossy arm struck it aside. The iron head was thick with rust before it buried itself in the earth, and the shaft sprouted twigs and leaves in a moment.

Pendor slowly raised his rowan staff in both hands. "You challenge the law of the goddess," he said with portentous quiet. "Beast with beast, man with woman, tree with tree. You have become together. How do you explain that?"

"I do not, little man—not to you. As for the goddess, if she objects, let her say so. You have spoken your last."

Pendor had not, quite. Gripping his

staff hard, he roared, "Children of the goddess! Lords of the earth! *Manifest!*"

Such a torrent of strength and sensuous power burst through his body then as Pendor had never experienced. He screamed in the flow of sensation, as though leaves were bursting from his nerve ends. The staff cracked between his hands. Within a seething brain, he saw forests of birch and willow march across the isle of Britain behind the retreating glaciers, with the oak, ash and elm following after them. The forests were undisputed masters of the land until men came, first with bronze, later with the iron axe and plow, to gnaw the trees level with the ground across wide tracts of country. But Pendor also saw the forests return in a mad, wild burgeoning, hiding the doorsteps and rooftrees of man from sight. The vision, intense, undeniable, blotted out the field and the tree-wizard from his view, though they lay directly before him. He staggered. Kiernan's little mewling sound went unheard.

Somehow Pendor remained standing.

Little orange orbs passed behind his eyes. Before him, a great, misshapen figure struggled. He heard its limbs creaking. The head swelled like a bulb, its skull softening, until the distorted cranium was wider than the hips. There in Pendor's blurred, appalled gaze, it burst open, to hang down in strips of bark. Packed green shoots thrust out of it, expanding into young branches, while the raised arms stiffened into crooked, older limbs. The fingers had lengthened like the nights of winter.

Pendor helped his young companion to

stand. They struggled from the field through thickets of blackberry, hazel and thorn. It was Kiernan's dazed impression that the bushes bent aside for them here and there, although he could never say that with certainty later. Holding each other for support, they reached the stone enclosure beside Trem's house and sagged against it.

"Fire of the Sun!" Kiernan swore. "F-fire, Fire of the Sun! Is it over at last?"

Pendor too had some trouble crediting it. Looking at the madly overgrown field to be sure, he saw the contorted tree that had been their enemy. Its leaves stirred in the wind, but otherwise it never moved. Pendor drew a deep, steadying breath lest his limbs shake.

"It's over," he said, "at last."

"All over?" Kiernan insisted. "The curse is lifted?"

"Yes. It's lifted. I'll stay until harvest time so that you may be sure of that. He was the one."

"I don't understand." Kiernan sounded like a puzzled child. "Your test of enchantment said that I knew, but I didn't know this. Not any of it. I'm baffled yet."

"You slew Beni the robber, and that was the key to the business. You knew without being aware that you knew. The Devil take conundrums! Man, we have *won!*" Pendor, the stolid and deliberate, let the knowledge exhilarate him. With a whoop of delight he seized Kiernan in a hug, lifted him from his feet and whirled him around. The young warrior laughed, pounded his friend's massive shoulders, and played a drumbeat with his palms on

Pendor's bald head. As one man they shouted again, "We've won!" Laughing for joy, for release, for triumph, they capered around the empty house to which Gwylfai and her brood could now return without fear.

"Wait until Airell hears!" Kiernan exulted. "There will be such a feast in the dun as even kings rarely give. Every cauldron, every vat will be employed, and every fatted pig will finish in them no matter how they run squealing for cover. The liquor will flow in rivers, and there won't be a woman of the clan who will not fight to serve you, while sitting on your lap at that!" For a moment the youngster stopped his flow of exuberance. He said quietly, "You deserve it, friend. It's the least you deserve. This was no trouble of yours, and you got neither welcome nor thanks at the beginning."

"Bah. Forget that." Pendor felt uncomfortable with the praise. He'd had many selfish reasons for his actions. He might have been killed if he had tried to depart, for one. He'd suffered the loneliness of a hermit too long, for another. Decent human company and respect was worth anything, even fearful danger. He grinned a little, remembering the sudden, incongruous surges of happiness he had felt from time to time, even while his stomach twisted in dread of what he was facing.

Now the dread was removed. He could enjoy the happiness for as long as it lasted.

Airell received him just as Kiernan had said he would. Alternating shrewd questions with ejaculations of wonder, the

chief found time to give orders of the preparation of a memorable feast. Even Revorna, more suspicious than her son, came to accept the truth of what Pendor was saying.

"How did you defeat him?" she asked. "The Dunlea here said that he was more powerful than you."

"And so he was!" Pendor said emphatically. "Far stronger in magic. His weakness, lady, was that he'd abandoned being human to become so powerful, and he was still changing. He hadn't grown accustomed to his new state as yet. He didn't know the full extent of his own powers. Still less did he appreciate the vulnerabilities and dangers that went with 'em. Else he would never have entered a field where such mighty earth elementals had gathered."

"He was a fool!" the Dunlea guffawed.

Airell shook his head. "I don't understand," he said.

"Whoever would be a complete tree-wizard must take the shape of a tree, and live the full life of one before he transmigrates to human form again," Pendor explained. "It's unavoidable, as a caterpillar must enter a cocoon before it becomes a butterfly. This one had begun the change, but no more than begun it, and when he entered a field so charged with the forces of green wild growth—why, it overwhelmed him, and he performed the full transformation willy-nilly."

"You didn't know any of this before you saw him, Pendor. How could you take such a risk?"

"But I did know. At any rate, I could guess." The ugly magician chuckled,

pleased with himself. "Our friend the Dunlea had told me our foe was a mortal man—and so he still was, though barely. He hadn't begun the life of a tree. Then there was his brother, killed in the way of mortal men only three years since. Even if the wizard was decades older than Beni, that still did not allow him time to have gone through the long slow life span of an oak, from seedling to patriarch. Above all, there was the way he spoke to me through the mouth of Kev—whom I see yonder. He was too arrogant, too bitter with vengeance for his brother, too hasty, too...human. Thus I thought it worth the risk that he'd stride in rashly as no seasoned tree-wizard would do."

"But he *has* transformed to a tree now, and it is growing in the midst of our fields," Gwylfai objected. "What are we to do about that?"

"Aye," the Dunlea said. "Never will I return to the earth while *his* roots spread through it."

"Wait a while," Pendor said. "Wait while the elementals I called disperse afar, and once that has happened—cut down yon evil tree. Cut it down, grub out the stump and roots to the nethermost tip, and do the same with the tree that has grown from Beni's grave. Then heap them together for a bonfire and burn them wholly to ashes. Thus you may be sure those fell brothers will not plague you again, or return in any form."

"Let it be so." Airell sighed deeply with relief. "Pendor, you shall be as my brother for this, and in need you may call upon any descendant of Laodegan as you would upon me."

"And you must stay until after the

harvest," Revorna purred, "as our honored guest."

"It will be my pleasure," Pendor said gravely, "to help you gather it in."

Kev interrupted with a squeal as Gwylfai reached out to catch him by the shoulder. He promptly turned to a clawing, biting fury of gristle and sinew, but in Gwylfai he found his match. She subdued him with the hold she used on her eldest daughter when needful.

Panting, she said, "In the meantime you can help me scrub this creature clean, oh magician. If he's going to hang about my house any longer I demand it—and you must help me comb him free of lice too, before he endows us all."

"Woman, you are too prosaic to be real," Pendor told her. "This is my moment as a hero, and I doubt that it will come again. *Let Kev go!* He can be curried at an opportune time. Not now."

"Well—as you wish." Gwylfai released the boy, who scurried to Pendor's side, yelping. Pendor received him with a comforting hand on his wealed, weathered shoulder. He became quiet.

"This one did his part," Pendor said. "If indeed I'm a hero, then so is he."

"He's free of our clan as you are," Airell promised expansively, "lice or not."

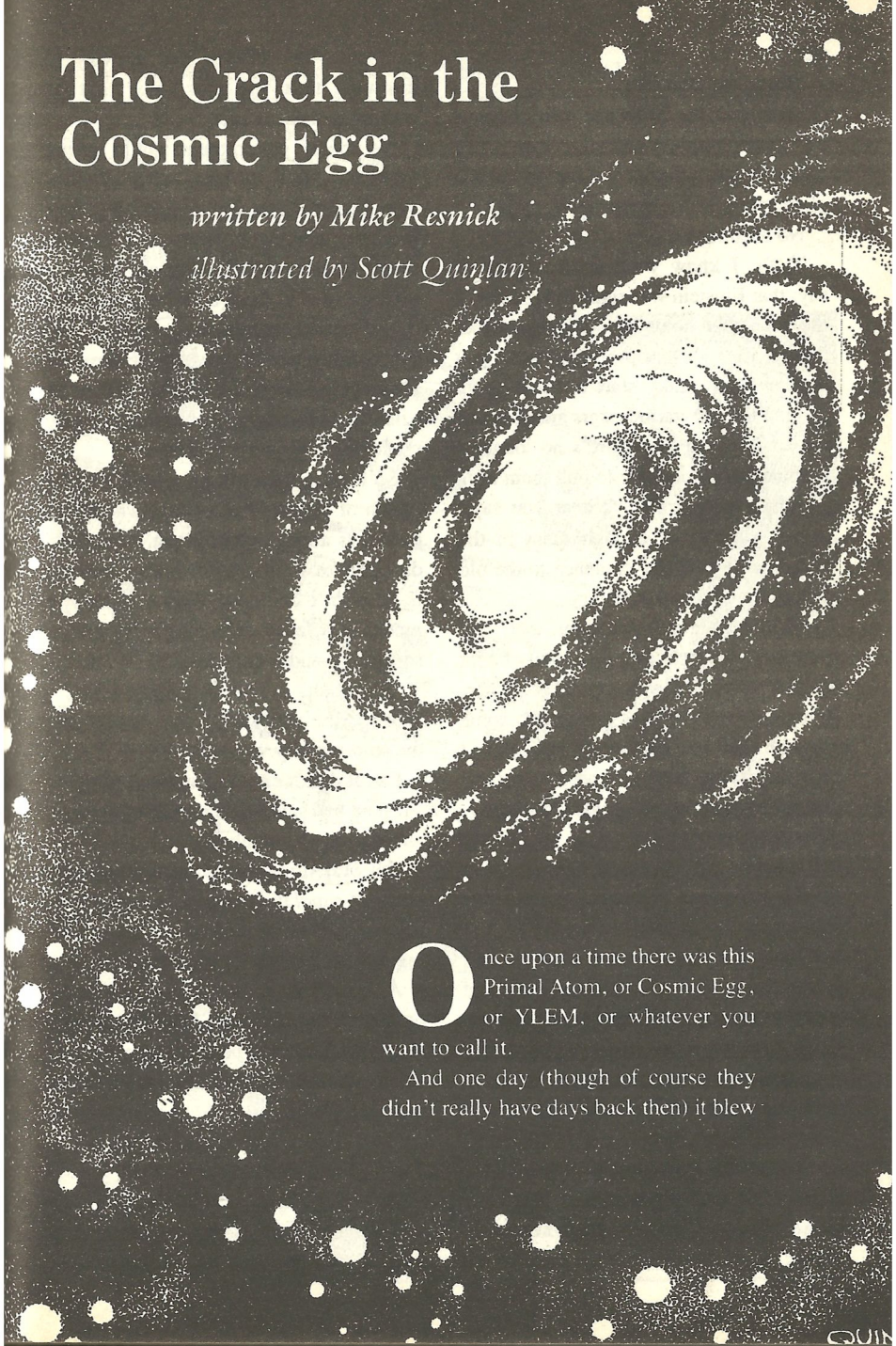
It happened as they had said. Pendor stayed to see a rich, healthy yield of grain reaped in the autumn, and Kev romped among the sheaves with Gwylfai's children, his body clean of vermin, clothed in a smock he had learned to endure.

Gwylfai, too, could effect transformations.

# The Crack in the Cosmic Egg

*written by Mike Resnick*

*illustrated by Scott Quinlan*



Once upon a time there was this Primal Atom, or Cosmic Egg, or YLEM, or whatever you want to call it.

And one day (though of course they didn't really have days back then) it blew

up.

Hence the Universe.

And since the Universe will continue to expand for all eternity, that's just about all she wrote in the way of cosmic phenomena on the grand scale, right?

No such luck.

Yeah, I know what you're going to say: that Einstein was right and gravity is the glue that holds everything together (which isn't all that profound when you sit down and really start to think about it), and that the various stars and galaxies are so far-flung that there's no longer a sufficient gravitic force to pull them back together. Furthermore (I hear you say), there's simply not enough mass in the Universe to give any credence to the old expansion-contraction theory.

Well, let me tell you about that. Old Albert E. was right about one hell of a lot of things—and he wasn't the first, either. In point of fact, he was the 63rd to come up with a Special Theory of Relativity. I just keep mentioning him because he was the most recent to be proven, tragically, terminally right.

Of course, in old Albert's case, he was just the theorist. The real culprit was Hector Apollo Throop.

Now, Throop wasn't really all that much of a theoretical mathematician, and as philosophers go he was pretty second-rate. It's doubtful that he ever truly understood Einstein, though it probably wouldn't have made much difference if he had.

What Throop set out to do was create a faster-than-light drive. Oh, it had been done before, here and elsewhere—62 times, in fact, many of them quite by

accident—but Throop had no way of knowing that. He just knew that he wanted to make a buck.

No major government would spring loose any funds for him—after all, Einstein had said that you couldn't go faster than the speed of light—but Throop found himself a little oil-rich Arab republic and sold them a bill of goods. He talked about international prestige, and full employment for a veritable army of semi-skilled workers, and the purity of science, and just about everything else he could think of except Einstein.

So he raised the funds, and he hired a bunch of scientific charlatans who knew even less about Einstein than he himself did, and he went to work—and damned if he didn't come up with a prototype model of a faster-than-light spaceship in something under three years.

Wild, huh?

Well, the really wild part came next: the ship actually worked.

Oh, it didn't exceed the speed of light. Einstein had said that it couldn't be done, and he was absolutely right.

But old Albert never did say that you couldn't *equal* the speed of light. He simply pointed out the consequences of doing so.

And that was the kicker, the little bombshell buried deep inside good old Emc: You know the part: as you approach the speed of light, your mass approaches infinity.

Well, when you *reach* the speed of light, your mass *reaches* infinity.

Now, just pause for a second and pretend you're Hector Apollo Throop and think about what that means, other than



the fact that your cakes won't rise and your souffles will fall flat.

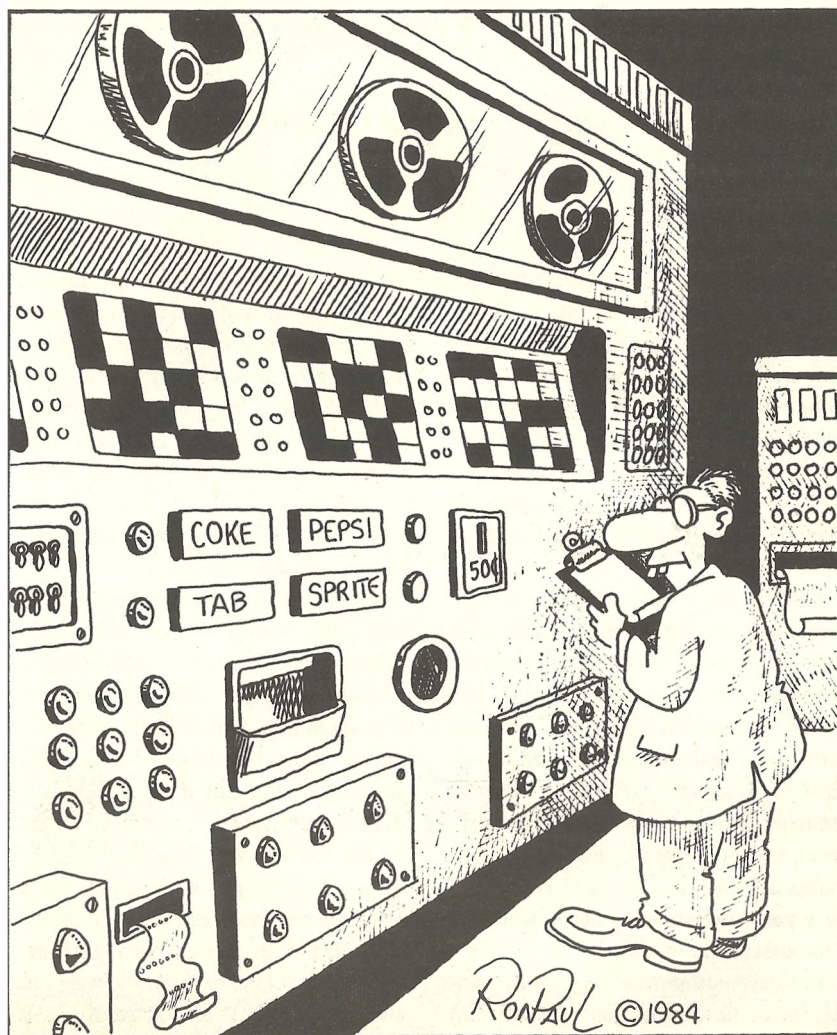
Gravity is an inherent property of mass. And, in the instant or two of cogency that remained to him just before he equaled the speed of light, Throop finally realized what effect the sudden creation of an infinite mass would have

on an expanding Universe.

Except that it wasn't expanding any more. All of its various parts were racing for Throop's ship as if Judgement Day was just around the corner.

Which indeed it was.

For the 63rd time.



*Janet and Chris Morris' stories in the shared world of Hell have proven to be popular and enduring. Here, then, is another—albeit disturbing—installment in the series . . .*

## Battle for the Plain of Just Desserts

*written by Janet and Chris Morris*

**T**he armchair generals were gathering their troops on the plain below. As Altos, Hell's only volunteer angel, watched from his lofty precipice, fools in bright uniforms gathered, parade-ready; men who dreamed dreams of irrational power strutted like peacocks, each dressed in the manner of a real soldier he'd idolized in life.

If there was a sillier spectacle in Hell than these fat, pale men with their arrogance and pride worn like badges of courage, Altos had never seen it. He swung his sandaled feet slowly, back and forth, back and forth, and stared down, between his sandals, at all the dupes who thought that war was the test of manhood, a solution for disagreement, a way to distinguish yourself in bravery, to impose your superior view of the world on your lesser fellows.

Beside Altos sat the very Devil himself, and the conjunction of these two

above the battle plain on the jutting spur of rock they shared was in itself a singular event. Their meeting was a clue, if any had been present to deliberate upon its significance, that more than a conflict between weekend warriors and sky-diving wimps was about to be joined here.

For the Devil and the angel had made a wager, and that wager was this: The Devil had insisted that modern men in Hell—the New Dead, as they were called—were so vicious, self-centered, hubristic and bereft of moral fiber that they would punish themselves, if given a chance, more horribly and thoroughly than Hell's beleaguered bureaucracy could contrive to do.

Altos had leaped at the chance to prove the New Dead worthy of salvation—or at least leniency; to show them to be no worse than their predecessors, and told the Devil to set the terms of the wager.

The Devil had looked at Altos out of



his glowing, slitted eyes and said, "This, then, if you agree: the Americans of the latter twentieth century, against the Americans of the mid twentieth century: a war, fought exclusively by volunteers, its armies manned by the nerds who found vicarious thrills reading of heroes who never were, fighting villains who never could be. If we hold this war and nobody comes, then, Altos, you have won, and I will soften my heart unto the New Dead, and forestall the purge you know I am readying."

The purge of which the Devil had spoken was something Altos would do anything to avoid. Hell was Hell, and the damned must suffer, but the Devil had been infuriated by the Dissident movement, created by the New Dead, which had reached into the very bureaucracy of Hell itself in its attempt to defy Satan.

The bureaucracy, at every level, had been disciplined, but the Devil was still angry. And the bureaucracy was still paralyzed. And the Devil had said, steam issuing from his angriest manifestation's every orifice: "If they want war, they will have it. Have it until the Dissident movement is an object lesson of nightmare proportions, until their thirst for blood is quenched, until the Sea of Sighs is cluttered with their corpses. And their resurrection will be slow, and painful, and the Hell they return to will be one where no man can ameliorate his plight."

Altos did not doubt that the Devil could do all he said. Destroy the precarious peace in New Hell, the Roman West with all its entrenched resiliency, the Iranian Fundment where Muslims were at home, Mao's Celestial Kingdom,

even the Nether Hells—all could be razed, their people scattered, no man ever finding a single countryman until the Last Trump. Between now and the Final Judgement, there was time enough for Hell to be whatever sort of place the Devil chose. He had modernized, along with his subjects. He had become the Chief Executive Officer of a holding facility for those who were awaiting a final disposition of their cases. He had, in short, become socialized, civilized . . . modern.

But Altos had been in Hell when Hell was the manifestation of every nightmare of every primitive culture Earth had ever spawned; when monsters roamed dusty streets and half-human creatures tortured quivering wrecks of humanity without a moment's respite. Part of Hell's nature was that it metamorphosed to suit those it hosted.

All societies created the Hell they deserved, if left to their own devices. And the Devil moderated the creation of those societies, so that no one group took power, preserving the balance that made Hell an equally uneasy resting place for history's manifold damned.

In all of time, Altos had never seen Satan so angry. Even today, when the Devil had come to the precipice to view the sporting event upon which the two had wagered, his fury was palpable.

Satan had taken on human aspect. He was paunchy, pimply, pale, and goateed. His soft rosebud mouth was twisted into a sneer. His pasty hands were locked in his pillowy lap. He sat a long time in silence beside Altos as the ranks trudged onto the plain. And they were a multitude.

Their bayonets shone. Their helmets gleamed. Their battle standards were held high. Their aircraft buzzed the field, spewing red-white-and-blue smoke, piloted by men who'd never before piloted more than a computer simulation.

Beyond the armies lining up to face each other across a steaming chasm that would accept the myriad dead, bands played the marching songs of the various forces. Off to the right, where the Sea of Sighs met the plain, huge battleships test-fired tracer rounds.

Between the shore and the armies, the Press Corps was gathered under UN tents with bright red crosses and white flags flown high.

Altos wanted to weep. To forestall the Devil's vengeance, he had agreed to this test of the fiber of a certain type of man, and now he regretted it. He should have said to the Devil that the sampling types would skew the result, but he had not. He should have demanded that such a war must have a preponderance of combat veterans to be valid.

But the Devil never would have agreed, and even Altos knew that war was made as much by men like those anxiously gathering on the plain as by men who should know better.

Altos had already lost. Worse, the New Dead had lost. When the first shot was fired, more than a battle for the Plain of Just Desserts would be set in motion. The Devil would himself begin a war against the denizens of Hell which could have only one winner: chaos.

To avoid catastrophe, Altos knew, was impossible. Yet he had to try to salvage something. So he said to the Devil,

"Satan, let me go down among the soldiers and make sure the men know what it is they do here. Surely putting up posters, offering the 'Spoils of War to the Victors' wasn't quite fair. Surely I deserve an equal chance, if not equal time, to remind these men they are about to slaughter their own countrymen."

"Go ahead, Altos," grinned the Devil. "Go ahead. Go among the troops. Speak your mind. It won't change anything. These are not the fighters; these are the proselytizers: these are the writers of war novels, movies, TV shows, and commercials. These are the lame and halt who couldn't make it through basic training. These are the privileged and the spoiled and the willfully underinformed. Among them, you will find Soviophobes and racists of all sorts, men who do not like men whose eyes or skins are a different color, or whose ideology or religion, or even brand of Christianity, is different from their own. These are not men fighting over matters of import. These are men fighting because they think it will be like watching a war movie, not like being in a war. Men who wish to force others to their will for the sheer feeling of power it gives them. Men who mistake power for morality; might for right—who came here because war is sexy. What you see before you, Altos, is the pornography of violence."

"Surely they were lured here under false pretenses," Altos argued. "Posters saying 'Real men fight for their rights' weren't any part of our agreement."

"Our agreement—our wager—said nothing about means. And no poster makes a man a fool. It is in them. These

are the filth of modern times. These are men who have never truly suffered enough. And they are proof that I must tighten my grasp there, else you would have won, because no man with the wisdom of a dumb animal lines up in a mass to risk being slaughtered for the joy of doing murder and mayhem upon his fellows. Or exhorts his fellows to do so."

The angel hung his golden head and a tear welled in his eye. He blinked it back. "I will go among them. I will talk to the generals, and tell them what is at stake. Otherwise, the wager is just a wager—it proves nothing. These men don't realize that the future of all Hell is at stake here."

The Devil stuck out his neck and made a face, aping Altos' obvious concern. "You are stupid. You depress me. You should learn a lesson here, angel—all mankind is not worth saving. Some, yes. But the filth? These?" He spread his pasty hand. "Go on, they won't listen. All these men want is the thud of their hearts beating fast, the excitement of battle, and to be able to curl up afterwards with a beer and tell exaggerated stories of their prowess to men who don't tell such stories because they have real prowess. Remember, these are the noncombatants, the men with the medical discharges, or the wrong birthdates, the rear echelon warriors who are nonentities compared to the fabled heroes they meet here. For every one of these, the risk seems worth taking—now." The Devil smirked, showing small, modern teeth.

"Then," said the angel morosely, "with your leave, I'm on my way." And he stood up on the precipice, let his wings unfurl, and pushed off into the

calm air over the battlefield before the Devil could respond.

That air was full of martial strains, and through them the angel heard the Devil call out after him: "Just hurry, Altos, if you don't want to miss the opening salvos. You have less than an hour before the battle cry is sounded and the carnage begins." The Devil was absolutely chortling.

Over the massed ranks Altos flew, until the wind had dried his tears. There was no arguing with the Devil's evil, for it was the tired, cynical evil of intimate knowledge, gained from millenia of congress with the worst of mankind's souls. There might be a chance, though a slim one, of arguing with the thoughtless, self-satisfied, posturing evil of these short-sighted fools about to maim one another. Altos had to try it.

Although the angel's first priority in Hell was the Devil's own rehabilitation, Altos could work as he willed among the damned. It was part of God's plan that eternity always provide hope. At its end, hope, like time, would be no more.

But while there was time in Hell, the angel made the most of it. He circled over the ranks of the World War I and II armies, with their horses and jeeps and lorries, and found himself repelled by the silence in their midst that no military band could drown out. He could find no spark there, from his vantage, that was an indicator of the sort of man he sought.

So he flew further, while men looked up and some took potshots at the high-flying dot that he was. He flew until he reached the ranks of the latter twentieth century, where those who had not fought

in Viet Nam or Beirut or Afghanistan or Africa calibrated the Electronic Warfare gear in their helicopters and booted their hand-held computers and shrugged into Alice packs as heavy as small women while others taped banana clips together and checked their phosphorous and fragmentation grenades.

Down among these men, many of whom were still reading inch-thick manuals and trying to accustom themselves to the complexities of their tanks and APCs and drones and ECCM—electronic counter-countermeasures—the angel descended, until he was at command headquarters, far to the rear of the incipient fighting.

Here Altos learned the awful truth of the Devil's clever plan and bold prognostication. The New Dead's rear echelon was composed of such men as had never risked their persons in the field: movie producers and TV stars, comic book artists and book publishers and toy makers, "veterans" of wars who had never been incountry but fought from their desks. And reporters busy scribbling it all down for Hell's posterity.

None of the men that Altos saw were familiar to him. There were no men who'd won Purple Hearts carrying their fellows out of fire zones; there were no souls whom Altos had been told to watch because they had done nearly as much good as evil in their lives; in fact, there was no one at all but fat men who misremembered the wars they'd fought from behind the lines, and fat boys who'd never fought any wars at all that they couldn't end with a phone call or desert by sliding into their Chryslers and going

home for the evening.

There were no men here who had ever distinguished themselves in any mortal combat. There were men here who were sure they knew exactly how the war—and the world they now inhabited—should be run, and were busy telling everyone else about it. There were men here who spoke in capital letters about Honor, Bravery, Duty, and the American Way.

There was not a man here, behind the lines, so far from harm, who was concerned that the enemy was no different from himself. And that, to Altos, was the saddest thing of all. The Devil knew his damned. These New Dead Americans were willing to slaughter their fellows in a multitude—were looking forward to it, in fact, back here where it was doubtful that harm could reach.

But Altos knew that harm *would* reach here: that this was what the *New Jersey* and her sister ships were for. The shells would fall short of their purported targets, inaccurate as ever, and land upon these fools who were so puffed up with the excitement of their picnic table war.

It was to the picnic table before him that the angel strode, as angry as an angel can get, and pounded his fist upon it. Three men looked up, each paler and fatter and rosier-cheeked and more artfully coiffed of head and facial hair than the last.

Altos said, "Who's in charge here? There's still time to stop this."

A rolypoly fellow got up from his picnic chair—a fellow who looked remarkably like the Devil Altos had left on the precipice, and this man strode over to

Altos and looked him in the eye.

The man pointed to his chest. "I'm one of the generals." The ribbons were real, bought in Hell's pawn shops. On his shoulders, rusty stars gleamed. "What can I do for you, lady?"

Altos was shocked. His hair was long, but he looked nothing, to his mind, like a woman. Of course, he was wearing a long flowing white robe. "I'm an angel," he said.

"Of course you are, honey," said the general. "And I'm a famous newspaper publisher." He gave his name, which Altos did not recognize, and continued: "But there's no room for women around here. Not yet." He leered suggestively. "When we've kicked the shit out of those low-tech grunts over there, there'll be plenty we men can do for you ladies. So go wait in my trailer, why don't you?"

The general summoned his aides with a snap of his fingers.

Altos looked at the two big, blank-faced men who didn't know enough to be worried. Each one had a button mike in his ear and neither had bothered to put his weapon on safe.

The angel said, "Sir, general. I've come to warn you: do not engage this enemy. If you do, the result will resound over all of Hell. The Devil has decreed that, if this battle takes place, all in Hell will suffer more than they've ever suffered before."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said the general.

"Please," said the angel, becoming desperate and rushing on as he realized other generals were listening. "What is the reason that you fight your fellows?"

Why, in Hell, must you war upon your fellows—the New Dead, so many of them other Americans?"

"Why?" said the general, his face turning red. "Because it's got to be settled, that's why."

"What?" Altos demanded. "What has to be settled?"

"Whether the Americans of Woo Woo Two can kick our butts for us, that's what. Whether the modern American fighting man has any balls, that's what."

"Then why not go yourself," Altos said, "to the front line, and call out the commanding officer of the so-called enemy, and decide this matter in single combat, or with the toss of a coin, or through some other means?" pleaded the angel.

"Honey, this is men's work. Women never understand war games. Now go away, sweetcakes, until I've got some stories to tell you."

"But there's no reason for this, not when you're risking Hell's very stability!" The aides had huge hands on Altos' shoulders.

"There isn't? First this li'l wargame, then, with a standing army that's proved itself, we can take on the Ivans, and the rag-heads, and then the Chinese . . ." The general's eyes were gleaming. "The American Way, honey. That's what we're protecting. The perception of America and Americans as the biggest baddest superpower—we can't have it any other way."

"In Hell?" said the angel as the aides began forcing him away from the general.

"I'm an American, honey. Hell,



schmell—wherever I am, it's America.”

And it was, as soon as the big guns from the ships started booming and the front line troops surged into each others' lines—although it was also Hell.

When the shelling of the command post began, Altos was able to slip out of the trailer where the aides had told him to stay, since the guards had run away.

He walked through the camp, where men writhed on the ground screaming, or clawed after blown-off limbs, or tried to hold their guts in their skins, and wept. He could not even give comfort, not to these, not when they'd knowingly done this to themselves, and worse to others.

Through the smoke from the fires and the muddy, bloody camp the angel wandered, dazed and mourning, and nowhere did he hear a single man call upon God, but only one another.

Eventually, sick at the sight of eyes splattered upon cheeks and bones protruding from skin and portions of men crawling over the ground to nowhere, from nowhere, Altos took wing.

He flew to the other side of the battle plain, hoping to find some mitigating factor among the rear echelon of the World War II contingent. But there was no difference in the quality of those men, or the fate they had bought for themselves.

So at last the angel flew back to the precipice, weeping as he soared above the pitched battle. Wherever his tears fell, men were healed, but there were too many men and not enough tears. For these men, selfishly and unreasonably, for egotistical reasons of their own, had volunteered to be the proof the Devil needed to make Hell even a worse place

for a soul to bide.

When Altos reached the outcropping of rock, the Devil had changed from human form into his rufous-winged, formidable aspect and was sitting pecking at a lap-computer with one long, black claw. His cat/bat familiar was rubbing around his legs, purring. And the Devil himself was humming as he computed the ongoing bodycount.

When Altos landed beside him, the Devil showed his teeth. “Welcome back, Angel. Good job, I'd say. Let's work together again some time.”

But Altos hadn't the strength to even frame a retort. Hell was going to need him, its single angel, very badly, for a while. He sat down beside the Devil, his mortal enemy, who had tricked the angel into participating in—or at least not actively obstructing—the beginnings of a war in Hell such as had never been seen since the beginning of time, and he watched the fools on the plain below.

The battle didn't end until every weekend warrior, every armchair general, and every pornographer of violence had gotten a taste of the real thing. And by then, there was nothing left moving on the Plain of Just Desserts but the demons who'd come to clean up the mess.



Ad Council

**It brings out the best  
in all of us.**

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# THE MOST INTERESTING THINGS ABOUT...

a column by **Keith Laumer**

When I meet or hear of someone who is bored, has nothing to do, finds life meaningless, et cetera, I reflect on the fact that each of us has between his or her ears a mechanism far more astounding than anything we're likely to find in the discount electronics place, or even on Zoob 92. Our minds are packed with bits and pieces of information of many kinds: things experienced, read, heard, seen on the tube, or imagined. What a fascinating attic to go rummaging in! You can turn up all sorts of curious artifacts, and by the cut-and-fit method, discover amazing relationships and startling conclusions.

Arithmetic was never my favorite subject, but one day I fell to ruminating on the fact that everyone has precisely two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, sixteen two-greats, and so on; and incidentally, unless you're heir to an ancient title, or genealogy is your hobby, you probably couldn't name even one of your great-grandparents, to say very little of their ma's and pa's and grandpa's. As far as I know, all my ancestors had already arrived in the US of A at that time (1875); but if yours were all or in part still in Europe, Africa, or Asia, or were Amerinds, the following calculations apply equally to everyone.

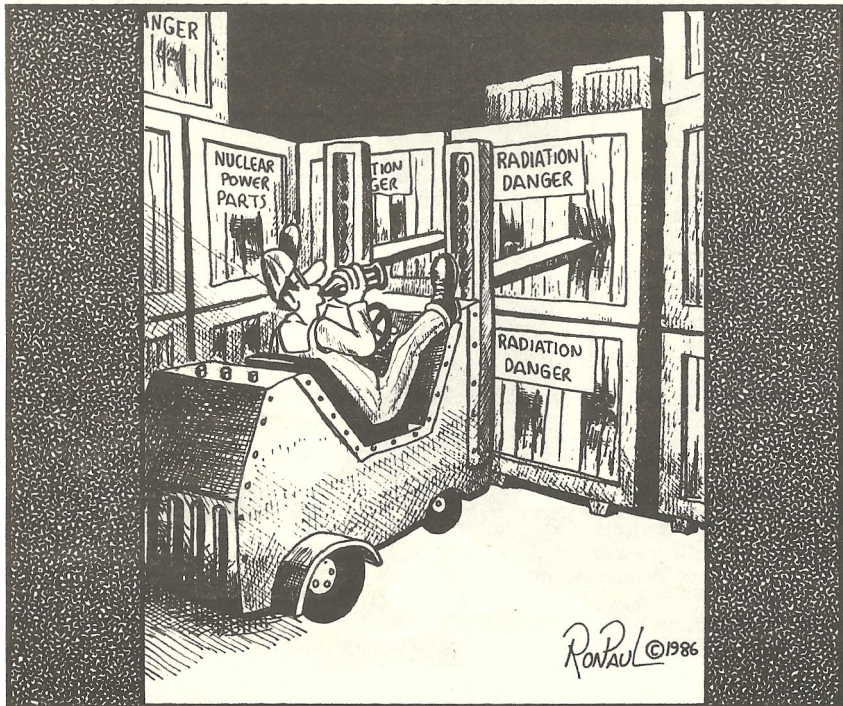
Allowing twenty-five years in a generation, I am led inescapably to the conclusion that a mere century ago, about when my four grandparents were born, there were no less than eight horny devils around who were my anonymous great-grand's, and probably a few doddering old coots remained of the sixteen who were my two-greats. Not even counting my baby grandfolks, that's twenty-four adults, alive or dead, in 1875; and remember we're talking about direct ancestors, not cousins, et cetera.

The population of the United States a century ago was only about fifty million, so only one in about a half-million was of the family. Not an impressive figure, to be sure, but if we extend the arithmetic back a thousand years, with the number doubling every twenty-five years—which is equivalent to multiplying by sixteen every hundred years we reach a total of three thousand, eight hundred and forty people alive in AD 985 who were in the direct line. Go back two thousand years, which means squaring 3840, and we have the surprising total of 14,745,600 people ancestral to any individual alive today. The population of Europe at the beginning of the Christian Era has been estimated at fifty million (the

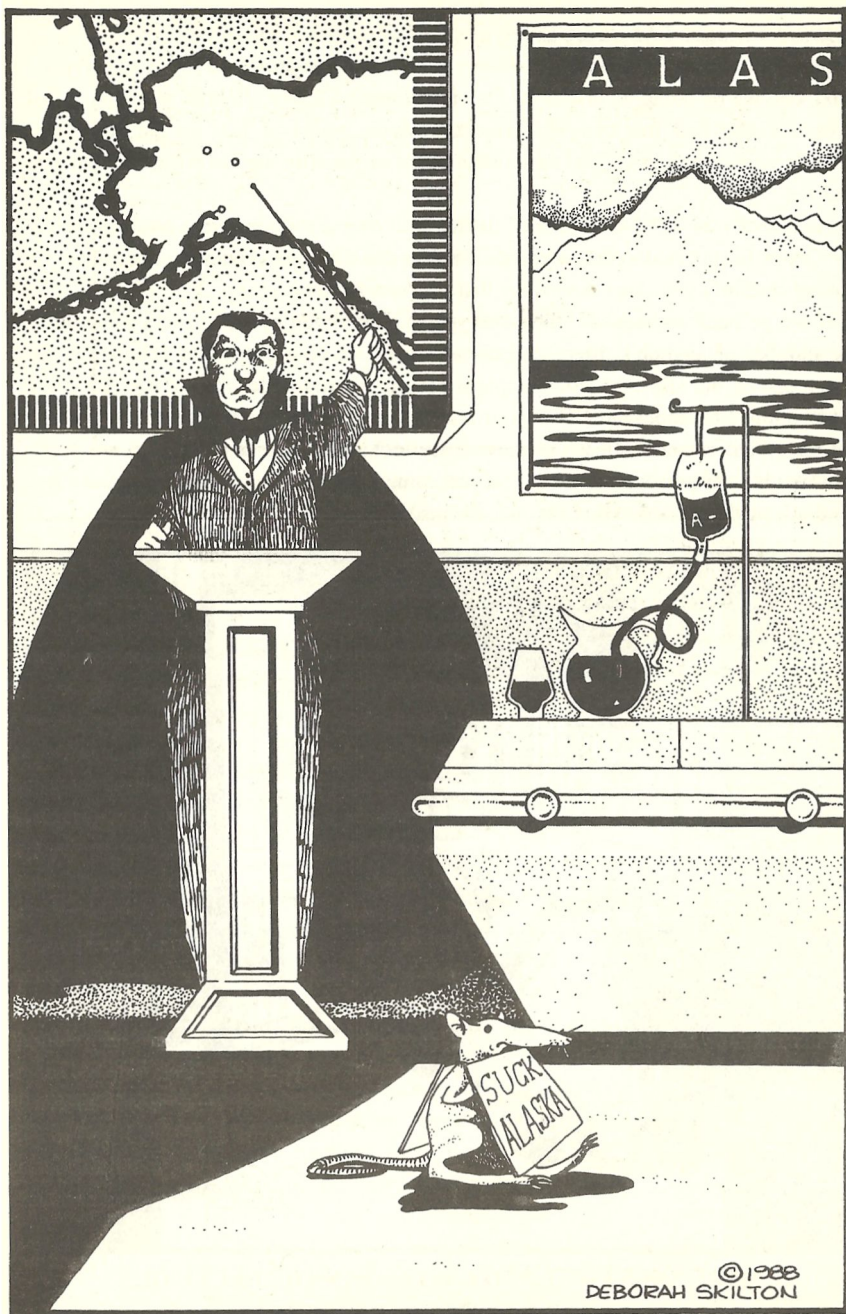
figures for Asia and Africa are about the same), so fourteen and three quarters of every fifty people are your personal ancestors. No doubt there are easier ways to calculate this, but we're doing it in our heads, remember? Clearly, if both you and I and everyone else had fourteen-plus kinfolk in every group of fifty in the year One, considerable doubling-up was necessary. Most of the fifty are ancestors of both you and me.

As recently as AD 1425, each of us has well over a million direct ancestors, so if you are of European descent, everyone portrayed in a Medieval painting or sculpture is almost certainly your ancestor. After that it gets ridiculous.

If we go back another few thousand years, multiplying by 3840 every millenium, the number of anyone's direct ancestors soon far exceeds the world population. So every one of the still-rare Homo sapiens rooting around under rotting logs for juicy grubs about fifty thousand BC is your ancestor and mine through billions of lines of descent. That means that each of those scary-looking early-man skulls you see in the museum is your personal ancestor, not just some sort of vague precursor of humanity. So don't neglect to say, Hi, Grandpa, the next time you see one.



**MILTON'S FIRST AND LAST DAY IN THE NUCLEAR  
POWER PLANT WAREHOUSE**



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DEBORAH SKILTON

Speech from Representative of Fictitious Alaska  
Visitor's Bureau to the Equally Fictitious Exalted  
Assembly of Ancient Transylvania Nobility With  
Sanguinary Tastes.

*by Elizabeth Scarborough*

I. Use Alternative 5 for introduction and ask: Ladies and Gentlemen of the Night, are you tired of being hunted by torch-bearing enraged peasants who ignorantly villify you for your dietary proclivities? Then we of the Alaska Tourism Bureau would like to invite you to come and take the longest, liveliest, and most satisfying vacations in your legendary careers. In Alaska, far from being a hated outcast, you will fit right in and find the people, the wildlife, the rhythm of life, and the environment exactly suited to your specialized needs.

II. Are you tired, for instance, of having to hire expensive and possibly untrustworthy servants to conduct your business because the rest of your community is out of step with your nocturnal lifestyle? In Alaska, the midnight sun, or any sun at all, shines only a few months out of the year. For as long as four full months, except for a little romantic twilight around noon, the day, the night, the week, and the season, are YOURS. Businesses, schools, banks, shops, garages, stables, and social events will all be open when YOU are awake. You will be able to conduct your business without a

middleman and more importantly, can move around the community like any other tourist, taking in the sights and going about your daily—or should I say nightly?—business without fear of suspicion or discrimination.

III. Furthermore, your loneliness will be ended in Alaska. People up here are friendly and hospitable. The advantages of this sociability for you, the Sanguinary Transylvanian, are plain.

A. A greater variety of victims available right there on the street. No more hangovers from winos or risk of hepatitis from drug addicts, or venereal diseases from so-called ladies of the night.

B. In making new friends, you will facilitate more invitations into homes where you can then enter at night, once daylight hours have recommenced. In this way, you will have a chance to snack upon perhaps  $\frac{3}{4}$ ths of our populace without having to resort to total drainage of any party.

C. Your long centuries of loneliness will be ended, as you enjoy the conversation and companionship of your fellow creatures before nourishing yourself with their substance.

1. Alaskans have many fascinating stories to tell and are warm human beings.

2. Alaskans in the winter are grateful for any entertainment, and stories from your long past are apt to be tremendous favorites. You may become more popular and sought after than you were when you ruled your domain as one of the breathing!

IV. You will feel right at home in Alaska, where we have a strong Russian heritage, and a large percentage of people from Germany, Scandinavia, the Balkans, and Minnesota, who carry that mild Nordic blood to which you've become accustomed. And should you be homesick, your old stomping grounds are just a short hop, as the bat flies, across the Bering Straits.

V. When you want to fit in with your new friends, and travel speedily without turning into a mist, which might freeze, or a bat, rare enough to excite comment, you might consider the

picturesque native mode of travel by dog, or in your case, wolf sled.

A. A thrilling new hobby.

B. The Children of the Night flourish in great proliferation in Alaska as they do nowhere else in the world now and will be eager for your guidance.

VI. The blood supply, fresh or frozen, is rich and abundant.

A. A hearty lifestyle and a low body temperature most of

the year keeps blood thrillingly fresh and tasty.

B. The mosquitoes in the summer keep Alaskans used to producing extra quantities of blood all winter to replenish that lost in the summer. After a summer of Alaskan mosquitoes, your modest sanguinary needs will hardly be noticeable to even your most frequently favored hosts.

C. Alaskan blood is extra thick for warmth in the winter.

D. Keeping reserve supplies fresh in an ice cave or a snowdrift is simple and unobtrusive, thanks to our consis-

tently below freezing temperatures, constant permafrost conditions (our unique Alaskan permafrost caves also offer ideal conditions for your summer resting place, should you desire to stay with us year round), and predictable ground cover of attractive, concealing snow.

VII. Furthermore, Alaska is a carefree place to spend your ancient wealth, bringing it forth as sporadically as you like.

A. Our boom-and-bust economy makes spending large

sums of money in very short time the norm up here. No more being questioned by flint eyed policemen about recent bank robberies. You can enjoy your wealth as often, and as lavishly as you wish among people who will see your spending patterns as perfectly acceptable, as long as you stand them a drink.

B. The opportunities for long-term investment are also excellent. Gold mines, oil, and other mineral resources will be offering high returns to investors for generations to come.

VIII. And last but not least is our wonderful environment.

A. High, jagged, lonely mountains.

B. Vast, untouched bogs and tundra.

C. Constant fog and drizzle in Southeastern or white-out conditions in the Interior provide perfect privacy for stalking and feeding activities. Ice fog in Fairbanks has the advantage of being not only obscuring, but toxic, so you may be doing your hosts a favor to induce shallow breathing due to loss of blood.



D. When you want high visibility, Alaska can offer that too without the damaging rays of the sun. The brilliant reflective snow cover and the flashing Northern lights provide ample light for even the darkest treks, and the Big Dipper and the North Star are your friendly guides during clear weather.

IX. Conclusion: As you can see, ladies and gentlemen, Alaska offers a uniquely hospitable winter vacation spot or even year-round home. We welcome you not only for your

wealth, but for your company and the benefit your long life experience can give us, as well as the elan your noble birth will impart to our democratic society. And the benefits to you, not only in cold-and-mosquito enriched blood, but in terms of mobility, ease and novelty of travel arrangements, companionship, concealment, variety in the membership of your menu, personal autonomy, compatible wildlife and terrain, natural ice caves for storage and summer repose, leisure and investment opportunities are unparalleled on the

planet! Not only that but you will find you share a cultural heritage with many of your many new friends and neighbors. You'll feel right at home because you'll be in at home in the best place for vampires since before the communists took over Transylvania. So come to Alaska, to visit or to stay, and use your wealth and leadership abilities to help us build the future. If you do, you'll find the centuries flying by as you become engrossed in a fuller, richer life than you've had since you died.

*Given the opportunity, would you like to know what your life might have been if you had chosen a different path? Of course, it depends on who is setting out the road signs.*

## The Mark and the Card

*written by John Brunner*

*illustrated by Dresden Moss*

**T**he Chrysanthemum Card is the most envied in the world. It is neither a credit card nor a charge card. It is unique. It is a purchase card, whose issue is contingent upon deposition of not less than one hundred thousand New Yen (or the equivalent in internationally-traded currencies) in a member bank of the sponsoring consortium.

But not everyone, even given the means, may obtain it. Think of its acquisition in terms of joining an exclusive club. Do not such clubs reserve the right to select their members? Please consider its granting to be a privilege, and do nothing to cause review of your entitlement. In other words, when using it do not overstep the mark.

Specifically, in Great Britain possession of the Card is limited to one thousand persons. In no way, however, are the faculties it makes available inferior to those in other countries. Indeed, in one

respect they match those otherwise available only in Japan: in certain designated areas the bearer's whereabouts and well-being are constantly monitored—it goes without saying, in the strictest confidence—in order to ensure the security of both the card and the holder.

This facility is offered in the following cities. . . .

“Pardon me, sir.”

Mild and intersexual, the voice appeared to emanate from a point inside Barry Cole's skull, like a mono record heard on stereo headphones. Startled, he realised he had no idea where he was. He had been wandering at random through London's deserted early-morning streets, registering little save that in the ten years since he moved to the country landmark after familiar landmark had disappeared or been disguised. . . or shut away behind steel barricades.

But before he could gather his wits, the

voice returned.

"There is a conversation in progress among three young people nearby. It may well interest you, insofar as it concerns yourself."

What young people?

He rubbed his bleary eyes. And it wasn't only his eyes that were bleary; his brain felt full of fog. Besides, there was a filthy taste in his mouth and an awful sourness in his belly, and into the bargain he ached so much he half-expected to hear his joints creak every time he took a pace.

*So reaching forty is even worse than I expected. . . .*

Angrily he slapped that thought aside, and finally managed to bring his surroundings into focus. Under a canopy of greyish cloud he had reached the intersection of one fairly wide street and one very wide—by London standards, at any rate. Behind him lay the mess and beggars of the Oxford Street area; from that direction a chilly breeze was brooming along uncountable scraps of paper and plastic, that snagged on empty cans and broken bottles. Several dustbins stood nearby, but they were overflowing, long past due for clearance. Darting from the shelter of one to the next like enormous rats, ragged children of five to ten—mostly brown, some grimy-white—were searching for anything that could be salvaged and reused or sold.

They were supposed to be talking about him?

The voice resumed with well-feigned impatience.

"Signify if you wish further data. This is a service provided by Shinjuku Super-

ior exclusively for possessors of the Chrysanthemum Card. You are of course at liberty to decline the offer."

Whereupon he realised what the automatic message was referring to, and why it had operated at this spot.

Almost as though a USA/Mexico style frontier had been drawn along the middle of the roadway, the shabbiness of Central London came to an abrupt end a few paces ahead. It was not so much that the buildings beyond were new—indeed, several must be a century old, or even more. No, it was that they were all in flawless repair. Moreover, there was no but no rubbish in the gutters; a shiny, almost silent machine was crawling along the opposite kerb to confirm the fact, pausing to suck up the contents of the litter bins hung to every lamppost; while the signs on shop fronts and office buildings were in two scripts. A few of them still gleamed, but even as he digested the prospect photo-switches cut off their power and they reverted to daytime status, luminous but not illuminated.

Logically, then, he had reached Baker Street, around which over the past decade, with the desperate encouragement of Britain's bankrupt government—as bankrupt of ideas as of money—the Japanese had bought up enough land to extend their holdings from the sixties and seventies into an enclave where *gaijin* were admitted only on sufferance.

*Well, we did it to them, particularly at Nagasaki—and think what became of Nagasaki!*

So this district was now known as

Shinjuku Superior: ShinSu for short. And, thanks to the ambiguity that always attended any translation into English from Japanese by Japanese (they having excessive respect for dictionaries, even when in error), it was impossible to deduce whether they had intended to imply that it was an improved version of the original Shinjuku—that quarter of Tokyo which, in comparison with, say, the hey-day of Swinging London, combined Soho-equivalent with King's Road-equivalent and outdid them both—or whether they had simply chosen "Superior" as being more resonant than "Super", regardless of its meaning.

Or neither. Perhaps the "superior" was literal, and had reference to rest of London.

All this had happened since Louise had persuaded him to move to Berkshire instead of taking up that university post in Kyoto, but he had read about ShinSu and seen much TV coverage. He knew, for instance, that the owners maintained a police force of their own—disguised, of course, behind the milder name "security patrol", but reputedly holding their counterparts at New Scotland Yard in vast contempt, given the dreadful incidence of street robbery and violent crime elsewhere in this decaying city.

Indeed, was that not a pair of patrolmen ahead, in jet-black uniforms with bright white helmets? They were not allowed to carry guns, as yet, but he saw that at the side of each—as they paused to question a woman with a sad bruised face, no doubt a prostitute lately turned out by her client—there hung, not a truncheon, but a sword.

He caught sight of himself, reflected in a shop window. Perhaps it was owing to the proximity of the Japanese sector, but it seemed to be the first such window he had seen on this visit to London that wasn't criss-crossed with reinforcing tape, or covered with a metal grill. At any rate it gave back an image that he found detestable: unshaven, red-eyed, with smears of grime on chin and forehead. Also it was obvious that he had slept in his clothes.

*What did I do last night? I . . . Oh my God. I'm reaching the end of my tether. I can't remember. Except bits.*

And that thought too ground to an abrupt halt.

Gazing at him, sizing him up, there were the three "young persons" he had been warned about: two muscular young men of twenty or so, wearing the sort of mock-Samurai garb, with overlapping metal shoulder-plates, that their kind—stupidly—hoped might serve to ingratiate them with the Yakuza bosses, and a teenage girl in an outfit copied from the heroine's wardrobe in a popular TV series about the annexation of Korea, adopted no doubt for a similar reason. One of the boys had his arm around the girl, but the other was scrutinising the dials of some kind of electronic detector.

And all three had the wide and staring eyes of noxers. They might not have been to sleep for a week. Certainly they would have been up all night. Beyond doubt they would be deranged. . . .

All of a sudden he felt as cold as the grey cloud overhead.

"Signify if—" the voice repeated.

He cut it short with a fierce whisper:

"Yes, let me hear!"

This had never happened to him before, but he had read that it was possible. He waited. A second later, it was as though a TV commentary from an adjacent room invaded his head, so blurred he could make out only the stress-pattern, the rise and fall of what was being said.

The original voice said, "Please move one half meter to the left. This sound signal is reflected off the window and the pattern where you stand is inexact."

Mechanically he made his legs obey him. All of a sudden the words grew clear. The boy with the detector was saying: "—shows he decked with cards!"

By reflex his hand started to clap itself to the hip pocket of his soiled but stylish breeches. By main force he prevented it, turning to seek a reflection of the trio in the shop window. By a twist of his neck he contrived one. He saw them bend their heads together over the detector—whatever it was, but especially since the late Small Wars there was a plethora of surplus military gear in London, cheap enough to be bought even by those surviving on the dole. Its nature was irrelevant, though. Now he knew its purpose, perhaps not one it had been designed for, but no matter. It was being used to pick up the incredibly faint signals from smart credit and charge cards.

With which, as the boy had said, he was well provided.

He felt like an animal at auction being appraised by the slaughterers. The cold in his belly grew fiercer than the former sourness. He had come close to winding up like these three when he was their age,

and had been told repeatedly—by radio, by newspapers, by television—that he belonged to the last lucky generation. If when he was twenty the odds against finding work that paid enough to live on had been two to one, he'd more than beaten them. Now he was forty (and how he hated the thought of it!) the odds for a twenty-year-old were at least ten times as bad. People like those didn't earn a living; they scraped it or stole it or begged it or. . . .

From the outside it might seem romantic. Some were foolish enough to call it the ultimate expression of individual liberty. He himself had sometimes talked in such terms.

Until now, though, he had never found himself being assessed as a target.

He heard the coarse street argot, barely making sense of it, wishing it were as unreal as it seemed.

The girl: "Forget cards, think rags. Two thou for rinsing out the dirt! I don't mean he paid two thou, more like ten. We get two or more!"

The boy with the detector: "This mother can't unlayer the cards sticking to his bum. He got something there I never saw before! But for beat-by-an-innings sure he got a side-on *stack* of all good stuff."

The other boy, doubtfully: "If we lift it what we do? How long we use and get away?"

"Shit, man!"—ironical, old fashioned: your dad might talk to you this way. "One—two block from here they got this roofo game arcade, pay you practic'ly to eat a breakfast on them so long you got the creddie. Wait an hour to check up on

a card 'cos they so gree-ee-eddy!" He prolonged the "ee" until his breath ran out. "Gramps over there is food and fun for all of this fresh ayem. And sink the banks, not us! That's who the debbie hits!"

"Yeah," said the second boy after a pause, and they began to close on him.

"It would be advisable—" murmured the machine.

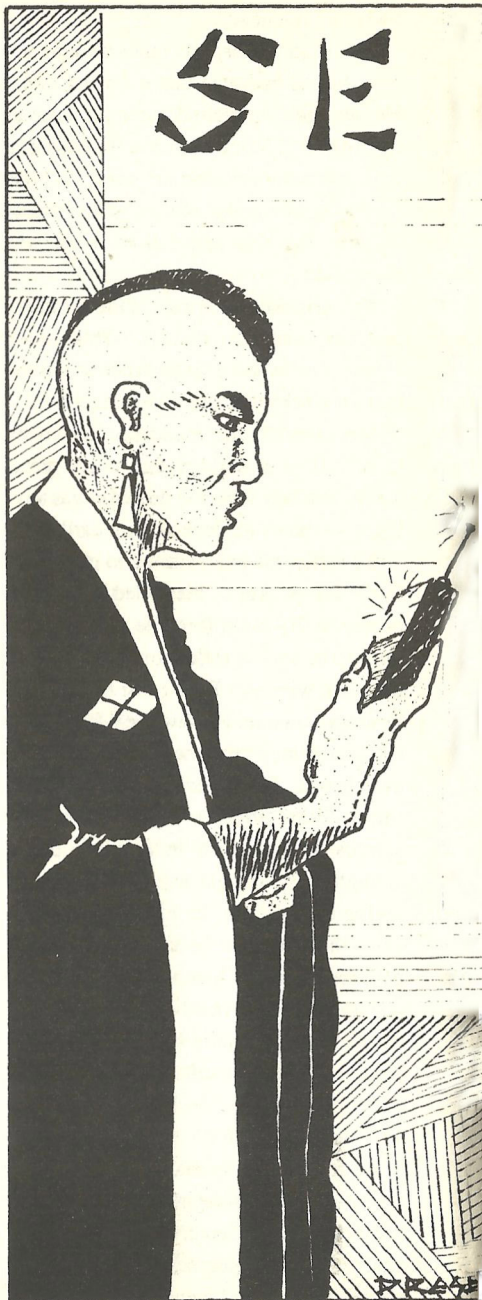
But he was already stumbling across the street.

Dismissing the prostitute, the patrolmen gazed at him from behind their blank visors. He was reminded again of the spectacle he presented: dirty, untidy, such a *gaijin* would scarcely be welcome. But, presumably having received reassurance over the radios built into their helmets, they did no more than watch.

He walked up one block and turned a corner, until he had done so not daring to turn around and see whether the trio had pursued him. It was unlikely; they would not risk confronting the patrolmen, who were not so susceptible to being bribed with a share of the take as the ordinary London bobbies.

But he was shaking now, and not just from cold. Fatigue played a greater part, and so did his vicious hangover. He glanced about him, realising that this area was already awake and active at—what time was it? For one horrible moment he thought he might have lost his watch, having forgotten to set the theft alarm on its strap, but a glance at his wrist confirmed that it was still there, showing 0632.

Toyotas, Nissans, Mazdas were on the move despite the hour. People were up



冷人川

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and about. *gaijin* office cleaners, grateful even for a job that obliged them to report at four a.m. and was over before seven, were leaving the nearby buildings as their daytime occupants arrived. Official business hours did not begin for another half hour, but. . . .

*Keen types*, he said inside his head. *No wonder they've conquered the world.*

He wondered whether he should expect another message from the invisible machine, or whether the system only operated at the frontier of the zone. He also wondered, vaguely, how much it had cost him to be protected from the would-be muggers. Well, it didn't matter. Not to the bearer of a Chrysanthemum Card, secured by the principal and interest of at least a million pounds. It had been two hundred thousand when such cards were first made available to British citizens, but sterling had fallen so far, so fast. . . .

At least he could comfort himself with the reflection that he was one in a thousand. Consolation of that order was pretty well the only benefit he had ever derived from the card. Over the past few years he had made less and less use of it, having a dozen more conventional ones. It was so exclusive, he had more than once known shopkeepers assume it to be a fake because they'd never heard of it. Of course, there were plenty of expensive stores, hotels, restaurants, what-have-you, where it was very well known indeed, but he had little taste for that sort of free-spending, high-living existence. This was a permanent source of friction between him and his wife Louise, who had been used to riches all her life. It had

only been her pestering that had persuaded him to buy the suit he was wearing; he would have been happier in an anorak and jeans. He did not, in sum, behave as a holder of the card was expected to, and often wondered why he had bothered to acquire it, except to impress people, especially Louise. . . .

However, this morning it had definitely proved its worth. Now, what more could it do to help him out of this mess?

Just across the street a succession of male office workers was emerging from the side entrance to an underground car park. Almost all of them were heading for an adjacent shop. . . .shop? No, those weren't goods in its window. They were full color holograms of the kind that had replaced the painted plastic models traditionally displayed outside Japanese eating-houses. So it must be a restaurant or snack bar.

Breakfast. Yes. A good idea. Also there would be a chance to clean up.

Brazenly pretending that he was as neatly turned out as those he was intruding on—who could, after all, only be employees of minor corporations, for the major ones had staff canteens—he marched into the restaurant. It had a slightly old-fashioned air, as though it might have been one of the pioneering ventures of its kind, dating back to the period when the Japanese were first moving into the district. As he crossed the threshold, thirty pairs of eyes turned to fix on him, the most hostile belonging to the manager or proprietor who sat beside the master credit register.

Dismayed against his will, he hesitated. And then, from the corner of his



eye, caught sight of something hanging on the the wall to his left. He turned to look at it.

*Oh. A hologram of the young Emperor.*

And he had almost slighted it. . . .

Reluctantly, but with proper ceremony, he bowed. At once the customers, some seated at tables and some at a long counter, and even the proprietor, relaxed.

Scarcely anyone, he noticed, was talking. Well, perhaps even for the Japanese it was too early in the day.

Helping himself from the tea dispenser—tea was free—and feeling the hot liquid rinse away the foulness from his tongue and throat, he glanced around. Where was the men's room? All the signs in here were in *hiragana-katakana*, with the usual sprinkling of Chinese ideograms; there was not a Roman letter in sight. And it had been a long time since he last visited Japan. For a moment he thought he had it spotted, but the door at the far end of the restaurant which he was making for swung open as he approached and emitted two young men looking tired but cheerful. Addressing his companion, one of them said it had been a good *worakootu*—workout, in plain English, not that they would have admitted the term to be a borrowing. Presumably that way led to some sort of gym, and the guess was confirmed by the glimpse he had had of what lay beyond the door: a carpeted stairway, more appropriate than a lift for those intent on keeping fit, its walls hung with pictures of sumo wrestlers and baseball teams. So, where. . . .

One of the breakfasters divined his

problem and, with a condescending smile, pointed him in the right direction. Seething, he muttered a half-audible *arigato* and hurried by.

The washroom brought to mind a couplet his children had picked up at school, part of a satirical rhyme about Japanese restaurants: "Tea is free and pee is free, the rest you have to pay for, see?" This place bore it out to—well, to a pee, as it were. Having emptied his bladder, he found that if he wanted to use more of the facilities than simply rinse his hands in a strong-smelling antiseptic spray, he must insert a card into a credit register mounted on the wall. Labels indicating the acceptability of nearly a dozen charge and credit cards adhered to its shiny aluminum front, alongside characters and—blessedly—isotype symbols showing what he could select, from hot water to hot towels, from disposable razors and prepasteed toothbrushes to a choice of exotic after shave lotions, mostly French and hideously expensive.

Naturally, a minature printer at the bottom issued timed and dated receipts, so that one's outlay could be reclaimed from one's employers.

But he had no employer. Except himself. Bar possibly Louise, who was as bad a boss as—.

He cancelled the thought. He hadn't definitely made up his mind to leave her. He had only come to London in order to think things over, hadn't he?

Not that he had done much thinking so far, and what little he had achieved had been unclear. . . .

Automatically he had been fumbling out one of the cards whose symbols ap-

peared on the register. Just as he was about to insert it, however, he was overtaken by a pang of annoyance at the contemptuous way that man had directed him to the toilets. Granted, if it hadn't been for the bloody Nips, who had paid him enormous quantities of yen, he might not—in fact certainly he would not—ever have become rich enough to acquire the world's most envied card.

But he might have been honored for his talent, rather than his facility. He might have had a reputation as an artist, not an illustrator. He might have retained his self-respect and the respect of his wife. . . .

?

No, not very likely. But of his children, probably. At thirteen and fourteen they were old enough to make adult-style judgements, and some of what he had read lately in their eyes, discerned from remarks not intended to be overheard. . . .

*Stop!*

In a fit of disgust at himself and the world, he thrust into the credit register his Chrysanthemum Card, shimmering in all the glory of its internally-powered holographic imagery. It was no thicker than any other; it was no heavier than any other; but the circuitry packed inside was by no means merely state-of-the-art. After seven years competitors were still trying to catch up with it, and failing.

He waited for it to be returned, its rating duly diminished by a fraction of a fraction of a percent.

Which happened to the accompaniment of a voice that positively purred at him from everywhere and nowhere, far

more clearly than the one that had warned him about the muggers.

"Cole-san, it is an honor that you patronise these premises. Be so kind as to make free use of the facilities."

*Not, of course, that it will be free. The automatics will keep very careful track. . . .*

Still, the chance to refresh himself was welcome. The door of the shower room at the far end yielded to his touch, and thick towels, pre-warmed, were dispensed within reach of his arm. Just as he was removing his jacket two Japanese came in, and on catching sight of him the face of one darkened with anger. Barely in time his companion tapped him on the arm and whispered, pointing to the status lights on the credit register. This did little to calm the first one, but he was obliged to turn away, grumbling, to the urinal.

Clean, shaved, delicately scented, he returned to the restaurant. One of the human staff—a Japanese girl in *kimono* and *obi*, visibly unhappy about waiting on a *gaijin*—attempted to guide him to the attended service section. He waved her aside and made for the self service bar. The proprietor looked daggers. Why was not a holder of the Chrysanthemum Card making use of the restaurant's more expensive—and more profitable—options.

*Too bad!*

Sliding his card into the appropriate slot, he made his choice. Mercifully each of the touch pads bore a picture of what it delivered, as well as a Japanese inscription. First, four or five *umeboshi*, and a glass of hot water to soak them in. Then,

of course, a steaming bowl of *miso shiru*. Plus sheets of black seaweed, *nori*, a plastic bag of dark soy sauce to moisten it, a dish of hot rice, a raw egg, some pickled vegetables for *kazu*. . . . A few years ago, in any similar restaurant, half the selections would have been European or American dishes: fried and scrambled eggs, bacon rashers, hash-brown potatoes. Now it was entirely Japanese, western affectations being frowned on since the accession of the new emperor.

But that suited him fine. He had long maintained that the Japanese breakfast was the finest in the world.

Covertly he glanced around, wondering whether the other customers had noticed what he was choosing. But they were ostentatiously disregarding him, as to say: "Here's another round-eye trying to ingratiate himself by showing how well he understands our food!"

He had his eye on a table at the far corner of the room, momentarily unoccupied. But even as he headed for it what he now mentally termed "the door from the gym" swung open again and a group of three more young businessmen came in and sat down together. They had a markedly different air from the ones who had entered earlier: tired also, but not nearly so vivacious and showing not a trace of satisfaction.

Clearly they hadn't had a *worakootu* in the gym. Perhaps they had simply spent the night upstairs after a heavy evening on the town that left them too drunk to make for home. If they were married, which in this foreign country men of their age might well not be, their wives would scarcely dare complain.

*Some of those insults Louise levelled at the women she would have had to live among if I'd taken that teaching post in Kyoto. . . I never knew she could be so vicious!*

But he didn't want to remember that miserable episode right now. Glancing around, resigned to sitting at the counter—which at noon, of course, would turn into a *sushi* and *sashimi* bar—he suddenly caught sight of another Brit. Improbably, it was a woman, thinner and taller than himself, wearing a black linen trouser-suit with a mandarin collar that must have cost almost as much as his own grey velvet. Plainly she had just arrived, for she was sipping the hot water from her *umeboshi* glass prior to picking out the small but violent pickled plums. Becoming aware there was another *gaijin* present, with a tilt of her head she indicated a vacant stool adjacent.

"Thank you"—from the side of his mouth as he sat down with alacrity.

"Not at all."

For a while they ate in silence. He noticed with vague amusement—and wondered whether she had also—that they were both showing off, competing with one another in the dexterity with which they wielded their chopsticks. The woman was using a bronze pair, presumably her own; the standard issue was plastic, the world's supply of wood having run too low for it to be treated as disposable. Last year the firm that formerly shipped used wooden chopsticks from Japan to India as firewood had gone bankrupt.

Seven o'clock approached. The room emptied almost magically. The average

customer could have taken no more than eight or nine minutes over his meal. Did the restaurant close now? There would be few patrons for the next several hours. . . .

The gym door opened again, and four more men emerged, overweight and with bags beneath their eyes. They slumped at a table and called harshly for service. These were not nearly as young as those who had now quit for work, but middle-aged, fortyish to fiftyish. Two waitresses darted to attend them.

The woman in black slipped agile from her stool and bowed as formally as though she were a man. The four acknowledged her with curt nods before seizing the tea-bowls set before them.

"Your. . . ah. . . employers?" he suggested, hoping for an explanation of her presence.

"Scarcely!" She sat at the counter again and gave him a wry smile. She had a long face framed by dark straight nape-length hair and a mouthful of prominent teeth. "No, just lackeys, but my. . . ah. . . immediate superiors. The people who actually own ShinSu would never be seen dead in a place like this—or if they were they would be. I mean dead. The Yaks are good at making themselves hated. That's why the people who work for them make so much use of the facility up there."

"Up there?"

"Where they just came from. By the way, I'm Martha Debenham."

After momentary hesitation: "I'm Barry Cole."

"I thought so. I saw you interviewed on telly once. I seem to have rather a

good memory for faces. You're an artist, right?"

*Would I could lay honest claim to being so!*

But he stifled the bitter words before they reached his tongue. Forcing a smile—feeling infinitely better now he had broken fast—he said, "More sort of illustrator." And, not wanting to pursue that subject at the moment, he went on quickly, "You said 'the facility up there.' A gym, is it?"

"There is a gym there, yes. But that's not the important part of the operation."

"What, then?"

"Oh!" with a wave. "It's one of these places where people work off aggression and frustration. You know."

He frowned. "You mean like beating up an effigy of your boss with a baseball bat? I thought the big corporations did all that kind of thing in-house."

"They do in Japan, certainly. Overseas it's not regarded as quite kosher. After all, one of your own countrymen. . . . So they take it out on the—ah—lower orders."

His mind flashed back to the woman with the sad bruised face.

"You mean they use real people?"

"Oh, they get well paid," with a sour smile. "There's even a waiting list of would-be volunteers."

"How on earth do you know?" He drew back, imagining her a procuress, supplying the victims.

"They advertise. In the papers, on notice boards, all over the place. Haven't you seen?"

Relaxing slowly, he muttered something about not having lived in London

for many years. For a while he sat digesting the information. At length he said, "Well, that blows one idea I just had."

"Such as?"

"Oh," groping in the air. "I have a good deal of aggression and frustration to get rid of myself. For a moment I thought I might. . . But I don't fancy taking it out on some poor tart or other, no matter how much she's being paid."

Before replying she glanced around cautiously, but no one was paying them attention. Even the proprietor had left his post to inquire whether the fat middle-aged men were satisfied with the service.

"I'm on your side," she murmured. "Wouldn't you expect me to be?"

"I was wondering," he began. She cut him short.

"Wondering how it is that they have an English woman working for them?" The division English/woman was perfectly audible. "I'm a sort of psychological counsellor. I cushion the landfall of newly-arrived junior executives, explain the local mores, warn them about certain kinds of behaviour acceptable at home but offensive here. . . . Why me and not a man? Because they have trouble with the fact that Britain is ruled by a queen. Very likely when the old girl finally turns up her toes I'll be out of a job, but meantime they apparently think it's appropriate for an independent woman to perform the—ah—introductions. Also my Japanese is pretty good."

Her cynical tone, he found, appealed to him. He gave a reluctant smile.

"So tell me about yourself," she went on. "How come a holder of the Chrysanthemum Card has such a load of stored

aggression and frustration to work off? I'd have thought—"

"How did you know?" he interrupted.

She gazed at him levelly. "That TV interview. Have you forgotten you were news because you'd just been granted it?"

He snapped his fingers. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking. But then, I'm not thinking clearly at all these days."

"My question still stands."

"Well, you see. . . ."

It didn't all pour out, exactly. In particular he made no reference to a woman called Eileen, for whom he was thinking of leaving his wife, only he couldn't make his mind up one way or the other. But the essentials were there, all the other reasons why he had got so drunk last night: the erosion of his ambition to be a "real" artist rather than someone designing book jackets, record sleeves, posters, prints for infinite multiplication on Japanese walls; the way his marriage had gone awry stage by stage, starting perhaps with Louise's refusal to accompany him when he was invited to teach in Kyoto, her insistence on moving to a wealthy community in Berkshire "for the sake of the children"—only of course it wasn't, it was so she could lead the leisured and glamorous life she thought appropriate to the wife of a holder of the. . . .

"Bloody card!" he finished.

But used it again anyway, this time to buy a jug of hot sake. Obviously in ShinSu they took small account of British laws concerning the hours when liquor might be sold. He offered Martha a cup

of it, which she refused with a headshake and a faint frown of disapproval—but he was long past caring what strangers thought about his all-day drinking—and slurped up a generous mouthful. Meantime, she continued as though there had been no interruption.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have let people know you held the card,” she suggested. “There is that option, isn’t there? I read about it somewhere.”

“Oh, sure.” He glanced around. The staff still stood by attentively, but otherwise the restaurant was now empty bar themselves. The middle-aged men had left without his noticing. “It was my wife who pressured me into it . . . no, that’s not fair. I didn’t argue very hard, I must admit. Because—well, you see, I thought that my having earned it would make people take me more seriously. I mean, there’s more than one kind of professional achievement, isn’t there?”

“Of course. But you feel you’ve got the wrong kind.”

“That’s it in a nutshell!” He stared at her with vast respect. “Hmm! No wonder they hired you for your job! You have insight.”

“Do you want some?”

“What?”

“Do you want some insight?” she repeated patiently.

“Come off it. It’s not something you can buy in a can, is it?”

“You can come pretty close these days. That is, if you have enough credit. Right upstairs.”

Confused, he shook his head while pouring more sake.

“Goodness, I wouldn’t have thought

that moving to Berkshire would have left you so completely out of touch! Don’t you know where you are?”

“I thought I’d made it clear that I wandered in here by accident,” he muttered.

“Maybe it was foreordained. The only Alternator in the whole of Britain is on the top floor of this very building. It employs sixth-generation computers, so using it costs the proverbial arm and leg, which is why I’ve never had a chance to try it out. But with a Chrysanthemum Card. . . .”

For a long moment he sat stunned. Eventually he forced out, “You mean that’s what those men over there . . . ?”

“The flabby four? Heavens, no! Can you imagine people like that being sufficiently insecure to waste good money on finding out what else they could and should be doing with their lives? For one thing, they don’t have enough imagination; for another, they enjoy the way they live. They like power—they like giving orders and having people jump when they say jump. It compensates them for having to do the same for people even higher up the totem pole. On the other hand, the three younger men who were in here before them—the ones who took the table you were heading for—they might very well have consulted the Alternator.”

“At company expense, I suppose?”

She shook her head vigorously; her black hair swooped and settled.

“What makes you think the major corporations like it? Quite the opposite! That’s why there’s so much talk of Alternators being banned in Japan—why the firm that makes and markets them is

working so hard to place them in poorer countries like our own. It's bad news in Tokyo when an ambitious young executive is told, on impersonal machine authority, that he is working for the wrong company and ought to shrug off his loyalties and move to another, or strike out on his own. Almost anywhere else, of course, people regard it as a godsend. In Germany, for instance, head-hunters offer an Alternator session with up to three programs in order to convince their . . . ah . . . prey that they ought to break their existing contracts.

She regarded him quizzically. "How come you don't know all this already? In my experience, it's people like you who are most fascinated by the concept—creative people, who'd like to be able to rearrange their lives the way they do paint or clay or words and graphics on a VDU.

She leaned towards him. "Ah! But even so, have you never been tantalised by that infuriating question 'what if?' I won't believe you if you say you haven't! Goodness, it's obvious you must have! You want to know what would have happened if you'd taken that post in Japan and left your wife behind. You want to know what would have happened if—"

He checked her, raising the hand that did not hold his sake cup. "I didn't realise an Alternator could do that! I thought it could only advise on what to do next: project possible courses of action for you."

"It can work forward from a hypothetical situation in the past just as easily as from the real situation in the here and now, if not more so. In fact, it's an inte-

gral part of the process. But you're being evasive. You would like to know what the outcome would have been if you had made a different decision, wouldn't you?"

"Of course! But what use would it be? It's all computerised speculation, not reality. So what's the point?"

"The point, as I understand it, is to reveal unrealized potential. The people most in need of an Alternator's services are those who are at a crisis in their lives. By analyzing what might have become of them had they chosen differently in the past, it's possible to offer guidance as to what they ought to choose right now."

"You sound as though you're putting over a sales pitch!" he exclaimed.

"Sorry." She drew back, smiling faintly. "It's just that I once made a terrible mistake—came close to being fatal—and I don't want it to happen again. I don't like working for the Nips, but it pays better than anything else on offer, and in a year or so, maybe less, I should be able to afford an Alternator session. That's what I'm waiting for. That's what keeps me going nowadays. Please don't ask what my mistake was. I'm far from proud of being such a fool."

He intended to reply, perhaps apologise, for he had clearly tapped a reservoir of deep feeling, but she forestalled him.

"It shows, doesn't it? I'm jealous of people like you! Because you could use the Alternator and have the means to pay for it, and you don't! Want to stake me to a session instead?"

All of a sudden she sounded like a whining tart, calling after him from a street corner. (He had ignored several

such last night; fragments of images stole back from drink-hazed memory.) He shrugged, drained the last of the sake, and headed for the door with an insincere word of farewell.

But while they were talking it had begun to rain. He hadn't noticed. Perhaps it was no more than that which tipped the balance of decision in his mind—or maybe it was the impact of the sake. However that might be, he found himself turning back from the exit and saying from a dry stiff throat, "How do I get to use this Alternator? Do I have to apply in advance? Is there a waiting list?"

"Not," she said composedly as she slid from her stool, "for someone who can pay with the Chrysanthemum Card."

The voice that bade him welcome, by name, as he emerged from the lift on the top floor was, he realised, the same that had warned him about the muggers, only the sound quality was better. He advanced uncertainly into the room whose door his card had opened. It looked like a conventional, if exceptionally large, sensory environment, with a chair in the center surrounded by screens that formed its walls and ceiling. He had designed graphics for a dozen such, and been well recompensed. At present this one was disguised as an art gallery, and on every side he saw, actual size in the bulky gilt frames the Japanese favored, reproductions of his own paintings, with those that had gained him the greatest commercial success in prominent positions. Well, that was flattering, albeit in poor taste. . . .

In the background, faintly, music

could be heard. For a second he failed to place it; then he remembered it was a record by a pop group managed by his Tokyo agent, who had organised three full-scale gallery exhibitions for him. He had refused to fly over to attend the fourth, so it had been cancelled. That had been—hmm—just about one year ago.

Well, at least the guy was prompt with his payments. A credit transfer was made twice a year on the due dates, so he had gone on being rich.

The question "for how long?" seemed totally irrelevant.

"Please sit down," the voice said. "It is known who you are and, in broad terms, why you are here. Kindly bear in mind that in-depth research was conducted before you were granted the Chrysanthemum Card, with your full and legal consent."

*Oh, yes. Of course. They stripped my past naked as well as my then-present. . . .*

But he might as well enjoy the benefit of it. He slumped into the chair. "What am I supposed to do?" he grunted.

"In each arm of the chair there are credit register slots. Be so kind as to place your Chrysanthemum Card in one of them."

Complying, he essayed a joke, regardless of how foolish it might seem to a machine: "I could scarcely put it in both, could I?"

And was taken aback to hear a chuckle of amusement.

"Among the data stored in respect of you, Cole-san, it is recorded that you possess a wry sense of humor. No further identification checks are called for. Be so



kind as to state your requirements."

"I'd find that easier if I knew precisely what you can do." Addressing the machine as "you" came naturally; he had had voice-activated computers at home for four or five years. Louise had insisted on their installation. She always loved the newest and latest.

*Home. Hmm!*

The Alternator had begun an automatic description of its capabilities, broadly to the effect that it could generate images and events based on his present situation or on versions of his past which had not in fact come to pass. So much he was already of. He had not inquired about the full potential of such devices, given that—as Martha had said—they were under threat of banning in Japan and rare as yet in any other country. But the implications of the concept "home" made him interrupt.

"All right! First I want to know what would have become of me if I'd held out against Louise—that's my wife—"

"This is to distinguish her from another Louise who is not your wife?" the machine interposed.

"What?" For a moment he was confused; then he caught on. He felt like saying, "No, the other woman in my life is called Eileen," but if the fact was already on file there was nothing he could do about it and if it wasn't he felt it better that it shouldn't be.

*Of course, in the scenario I plan to ask about, I would never have met Eileen. . . .*

For a moment he came close to convincing himself that such a prospect was too terrible to bear. He had been trying to

persuade Eileen that he was hopelessly in love with her; more, he had been trying to persuade himself. But she was as remote and self-possessed as she was beautiful. Only in the tumult of lovemaking did she ever seem to lose her poise, her control . . . and maybe that was what had so attracted him. Resignedly he came to the conclusion: *what the hell? The way Louise has been behaving, I'd probably have met someone else. In any case, I'm ninety percent certain she's having an affair with that smarmy bastard Hugh Lupton. . . .*

Licking his lips, he said, "Let's boil it down to this, then: where would I be now if I hadn't let Louise drag me away from London?"

"You wish only to know *where* you would be at this moment?" The emphasis was slight but noticeable.

"No!" He sat up, fishing a handkerchief from his pocket and mopping his face. "When I say 'where' I mean to imply: what sort of situation and condition would I be in?"

Thinking the while: *I've got to come to some sort of positive decision! I'm forty, dammit! If I can't make up my mind to break with Louise now, I certainly won't be able to when I'm fifty!*

"Computing," said the machine, and the art gallery projection slowly blurred. For a while there was coolness and silence, during which a faint but pleasant perfume pervaded the room, and he found himself starting to doze. Then, very suddenly, everything changed.

(Meantime, about one percent of the computer capacity available to the Alter-

nator was engaged. This kept its demands well within local limits. The rate of interest on the deposit which secured Barry Cole's Chrysanthemum Card was likewise more than sufficient to cope, inasmuch as the principal was automatically shifted by electronic credit transfer to wherever in the world at present offered the best rates. Not infrequently, moreover, it was converted into other currencies, those that appeared most likely to provide a short-term gain.

(There was, of course, a charge for this service. But most of the bank-consortium's clients regarded it as splendid value.)

He had had only a vague idea of what to expect: perhaps projections on the screens around him, accompanied by a commentary, perhaps the equivalent of subtitles justifying the chosen images, the guesstimated situation.

What actually happened was infinitely more impressive—and infinitely subtler.

His present-time awareness seemed to recede inside his head, until he was hovering above an internal landscape different from the one he was accustomed to. He retained his own memories, but he was also aware of an unfamiliar, yet for the time being more vivid, set of recollections. The first major difference he noticed was that his—or rather Louise's—insistence on moving away from London became an unrealised suggestion, never followed through.

Excitement tautened his muscles, dried his mouth.

That brought the second stage of altered awareness. He knew with remote

detachment that he was still sitting in the Alternator room, but it required great effort to make himself accept the fact. Perceptions belonging to the other version of himself crowded in, dominated his consciousness. He was—he was. . . .

He was sitting at a breakfast counter in a small flat. He knew it as well as his real home: its three cramped rooms, bedroom, living room, and the one with a skylight that he called a studio, stacked with unsold pictures; outside, the steep and narrow stairs that made it so hard to bring in furniture. Without turning his head he could picture the drab view over rooftops from the window at his back, above a sink cluttered with unwashed dishes. He was in pajamas, drinking a cup of tasteless instant coffee with powdered milk substitute, smoking a harsh French cigarette. . . .

*Wait a second. I gave up smoking years ago!*

But that was in another life. In this one he had tried more than once, but each time some new stress had weakened his resolution, and in the end he'd shrugged and gone right ahead. Now he was up to forty a day.

To match his age, as he had taken to saying. In this life that was what passed for a joke.

A clock on the wall told him it was half past seven. Rain was rattling on the panes. He was unshaven, hadn't even cleaned his teeth. His belly was grumbling but he had no appetite. His head ached. Beside the counter stood a waste basket; its lid was propped open by a whiskey bottle, empty, upside down.

*Last night I. . . .*

Before he could complete the thought, a key clicked in the flat's front door. He turned. A woman entered whom he didn't recognise: fair, chubby, wearing a wet raincoat and pulling a wet plastic snood from her curly hair. On seeing him she checked as though surprised to find him up and about, then closed the door slowly and approached him.

He heard himself say in a rasping tone, "And where the hell have you been all night?"

Now he did know who she was. This was Susan, for whom he'd left Louise, and the children, when her infidelities became too brazen to bear. This was the place to which he'd moved with her, the best he could afford on the pittance that his "serious" painting earned. This was the woman who at first had been so supportive and encouraging, and lately had turned into a shrill termagant, furious that so much of his income went to Louise and the kids, insisting that he turn back to his old commercial style, try and renew his links with publishers and record packagers. . . .

"You couldn't bloody expect me to stick around when you were threatening to beat me up!" she snapped. "The way you always do when you get drunk! I told you I was going to Maria's, and that's where I went! Though I don't see what business it is of yours. If you drive me out with your boozy threats and insults—"

"Maria's!" he broke in, rising to his feet, swaying a little as though the coffee had made him drunk all over again. "Why does it always have to be Maria's? What's going on between you two? Or is

it you *three*?"

She turned perfectly white, then red with fury. She was carrying a handbag; she made to strike him across the face with it. He avoided the blow, but when he tried to catch her arm she dodged in turn and backed against the wall, holding the bag before her like a shield, eyes wide and wary.

"I go to Maria's because it's near enough to walk!" she hissed. "How much longer are you going to carry on with this lunatic fantasy about my trying to seduce my best friend's husband? I've told you over and over—"

"You told me you were going to help me while I got back to *real* painting! Christ, look at the state of this place! Look at that sink—look at the floor—look at the muck in the fridge!"

"And a fat lot you've done about it!" she countered contemptuously. "You don't want a wife, you want a bloody slave! No wonder Louise was glad to give you up."

"She was a faithless bitch!"

"Then why in hell did you marry her? Because you thought you were winning some kind of trophy—beautiful woman from upper-crust family, the right sort of ornament to show off in an artist's home?"

He clenched his fists. "It was more that she wanted me for a trophy! 'Looky, looky, I didn't settle for one of your boring stockbrokers or lawyers!'"

"Oh, shut up," she said, suddenly weary. "I'm going to take off these wet things. You do as you like."

Breathing hard, he stood back as she headed for the bedroom. The moment the

door slammed, he reached into a cupboard and produced another bottle, twin to the one he had drained last night. Now bothering to find a glass, he slopped three fingers of whiskey into his coffee cup and swigged the liquor down, half choking.

*Christ, how did I ever get myself into this mess? God, I was a fool not to do as Louise suggested, and move the hell away from London. All the bloody commercial pressure—the cost of housing—the rates and taxes—when I could have been . . . could have been. . . .*

Abruptly it was over. He was back in the chair, back in the imaginary gallery with his paintings on the wall. He was sweating and trembling.

"It can't be true!" he forced out.

"Cole-san is correct," said the machine. "It was not literally 'true', only the most accurate projection that could be furnished on the basis of available information. It is regrettable that you found it unpleasant. This program is now concluded, at all events. Good morning."

The screens blanked to luminescent pearly-grey, as though he were adrift in fog. His card emerged from the slot in the chair arm and gently prodded at his wrist.

About to rise, he cancelled the motion.

"No!" he exclaimed with violence. "Maybe leaving London was a good idea, but we didn't have to move to that sleek expensive town with its golf club and its tennis club and its pony club, and live surrounded by people with too damn' much money for their own good, so that I had to keep right on doing what I'd started to hate, just to meet the bills!"

"You wish a further session?" the

machine inquired.

"Don't I have enough credit?"

"Certainly."

"Then—yes, I do!" He settled in the chair again and returned his card to the slot. "Same question: my present situation if Louise and I had left London but instead of moving to Berkshire we'd bought that cottage in the West Country, the one with sandstone walls around a garden run to seed. Near—what was the place called? —Totnes!"

*Of course, in that version of my life I'd never have met Eileen either. But I certainly wouldn't have met anyone as nasty as that Susan . . . would I?*

"Computing," the machine acknowledged. Tense, he waited. When the change came, it was even more abrupt, but less shocking, the first session having taught him what to expect.

(This time more than one percent of the capacity available to the Alternator was engaged. Normally the increase would have been insignificant. However, currency markets around the world were showing a radical downturn this morning, and despite rapid transfer of funds away from those worst affected to those that promised slightly greater stability, the interest on the principal that secured his card was barely adequate to fund the more elaborate analysis involved in projecting his life in a place where—unlike London—he had never actually lived.)

"Brandy! Brandy! Where the hell can that damned dog have got to?"

*Dog? I never owned a dog in my life! Oh. Of course. In the country, with kids,*

*it's to be expected. Well, at least it can't be as expensive as their bloody horses.*

But that was his last detached thought before the intensity of the experience claimed him, and he remembered that the kids who had insisted on a dog no longer lived with him. . . .

He was trudging through long grass in rubber boots. It must have rained here only an hour or two ago; at knee-level his trousers were growing sodden.

This had been a lawn. Now it was wilderness. There had been flowerbeds, but they too had reverted to weeds. There were trees—some of them had blossoms but he had no idea whether they were apple or cherry—and there were indeed stone walls, but they were sprouting grass and elder from the chinks between the layers.

Dismayed at what he saw, he turned back towards the house. It was a rambling thatched cottage, two old farm-laborers' dwellings knocked into one, with its windows at different levels. A garage of incongruous breezeblock had been erected a short distance away. A half-hearted attempt had been made to disguise it by erecting wooden trellis and planting ivy, but part of the trellis had come away from its nails and the ivy was no more than waist high. The door was off its hinges and had been thrust forcibly aside to reveal a second hand Morris patched with rust.

*This is the mess I'm living in?*

But before he could think any further, noises from behind the house sent him striding towards the kitchen door. Beside it were piles of rubbish, spilling out of black plastic sacks. Once a week he was

supposed to carry them to the front gate for the trash collector. He knew perfectly well that they called on Wednesdays, but somehow he kept forgetting when Wednesday was. . . .

*In any case, that bloody Brandy!*

Yes, there he was, tearing open yet another bag, gobbling the half-rotted muck that it contained. Yelling, he rushed towards the dog, who fled with something nauseating in his greedy jaws.

"I hope it makes you bloody sick!" he shouted.

There was no point in pursuit. Brandy would be back in the evening, at his regular feeding time—unless one of the local farmers shot him first for chasing sheep. Until then. . . .

Well, he had the whole day before him. His watch said it was not much past eight o'clock. And there were no other distractions.

None. Zero. Zilch. He was alone, and had been for a year, ever since Louise precipitated the final row and stormed off with the children in the Land Rover. She must have been planning her departure for weeks. The divorce was due to go through any day now; he had said bitterly he would not oppose it. At least—with bravado—he'd have the chance to get some proper work done!

Mechanically he made himself tea and toast, staring into nowhere.

Then, with effort, he walked to the shed he had converted into a studio, and drew the cloth from the picture he had last been working on. How long since he added to or altered it? Two weeks? Three?

He spent a while staring at it; more

than an hour. In the end, though, he returned to the kitchen and poured himself a mugful of the rough local cider. The mug held a pint; he drained it gratefully, and before returning to the studio he filled it again. He came back for more three times before midday, when he decided he had better make a sandwich by way of lunch. He'd bought some ham.

But instead of preparing the food he leaned his head on his arms, crossed on the dirty kitchen table, and dozed off. He did not wake until Brandy came scratching at the back door for his evening meal.

*Christ! Another day wasted! The light's failing! I can't go on like this! I—*

He was back, shaking from head to foot and sweating a river. It couldn't be true! It *couldn't!* The sense of loneliness, helplessness, futility that had filled his mind as absolutely as the fumes of all that cider. . . .

Yet, somewhere in a distant corner of his brain, he seemed to hear a cynical chuckle, as to say: *Yes, Barry Cole. You know damned well you never had the talent to be anything more than what you were: a facile illustrator. You couldn't be a proper artist in a million years.*

The machine was reciting its automatic commentary about this program being at an end. He interrupted, furious.

"It's not good enough! I demand another go!"

"There is no need to *demand* one, Cole-san," the machine said with a hint of reproach. "So long as you have sufficient credit."

"And don't I?"

"Yes."

"Then go ahead. This time, though. . . ."

He hesitated. Obviously, leaving London had been a good idea but staying in Britain hadn't. Suppose he had told Louise he was going to accept that teaching post in Kyoto, regardless of whether she came with him or not. Apart from the money, which was excellent, it would expose him to a different artistic environment, give him a chance to experience another and very influential culture at first hand over an extended period instead of being flown in for a week or two at a time, mainly devoted to exchanging hollow politenesses and eating and drinking at horribly expensive restaurants.

*Still no Eileen in that world—but what the hell? For all I know she might turn out like Susan, mightn't she? And a Japanese woman. . . .*

He defined his requirements. The machine said dutifully, "Computing."

(This time over three percent of the Alternator's capability was engaged. Not only did the analysis have to take into account his spending an entire year in an environment he had but briefly visited; it had to consider his probable interaction with the host culture. Most demanding of all was the need to project the influence a year in Japan might have on the painter's style and later output.

(The hiccup in the currency markets, fortunately, ended before the session did, and the bank-consortium's computers were able to report that losses overall had been held to an acceptable level. However, the cost of this program was more than treble the former, and interest rates

in general were forecast as poor for at least several days to come.)

No possible mistake! He was at one of London's most prestigious galleries, that of Moberly & Jones. (He had expected to find himself in Japan, but memory was at once supplied: he had of course completed his year there and come home.) The occasion was a crowded private view to mark the opening of a major exhibition of works by—he did not need to look—Barry Cole. Twenty critics were lining up to offer phony congratulations; Louise was at his side wearing a stunning silk gown and a necklace of emeralds and diamonds; at least four TV crews had turned up; and there were tables ranked with sake and champagne, *sushi* and *sashimi* and canapés of smoked salmon sprinkled with Beluga caviar. Among the attendance he recognised buyers for several major foreign collections and a generous sprinkling of wealthy Arabs. This was bound to be his most successful show so far.

Yet, even as he relished smiles and compliments, he began to be plagued by self-doubt.

Was this not, in fact, no more than a bone tossed, faithful dog fashion, to a profitable employee by those to whom he had devoted the most productive years of his life—the people who had seduced him time after time into giving full rein to his damnable *facility*, so that he kept on churning out those meticulous, popular but ultimately superficial paintings for book jackets, record sleeves, mass-market prints, posters, calenders, television fantasy serials, and all the rest?

He controlled his disgust for as long as it took to sweat out the period of formal welcomes. As soon as they were over Louise sidled away to chat—and flirt—with two handsome well-dressed men who had been standing by for just that opportunity. (A question from his other self, his onlooker self, slipped into awareness: what was she doing here? And he remembered that on his return from Japan she had come back to him after all—but, in his view, not from any genuine sense of attachment, only because of his financial success. Had it not gained him possession of the coveted *Chrysanthemum Card*?)

Draining glass after glass of champagne, waving aside the waiters and waitresses who circulated trays of food, he stood in a corner hoping to be ignored. He watched the critics exchanging comments as they passed from one picture to another, and could imagine what he was likely to read or hear tomorrow: “Cole displays his usual—and unquestioned—technical skill, but there is little here that is neither derivative nor academic. However, at the Hole-in-Corner Gallery, Snob Row. . . .”

*And who's to say they're wrong?*

Growing more and more morose, he brushed aside strangers and even friends who said how much they had enjoyed the show and were sorry they had to dash away; journalists too naive to realize they had been sent to interview a failure; even the partners who owned the gallery, behind whose sleek good manners he detected scorn. Seizing yet another drink, he set off on a tour of inspection.

Yes, it was exactly as he had feared.

He could see it now—see it with ghastly clarity. There were over twenty pictures on show, the fruit of three years’ “real painting” in time stolen from his so-successful commercial work. And there wasn’t a single one (not one? No, not a single bloody one!) that was better than a facile derivation. He might not be a slavish imitator, for he was too fluent to need to copy anyone directly, but it was plain that he had never found a personal, individual, unique touch. Indeed, he could define what spell he had been under in the case of each separate group: these echoed traditional, those modern, Japanese art; that lot was sub-Nolan, the eight-strong series based on Hereward the Wake (and had he really imagined he could use them to convey a comment about the present plight of Britain?); whereas the last four, the items he had meant to be erotic—why, they were about as sexy as a plateful of leftover fish and chips!

Brooding, he contemplated this miserable truth. Glancing around for Louise, thinking they had better leave before he lost patience with himself and did something disgraceful, he realised she was no longer to be seen.

Nor was the man he suspected of being her current lover.

Fury, alcohol and self-disgust reacted together like water flooding into magma at the base of a volcano. He erupted. Seizing a knife from the buffet, he staggered drunkenly towards the nearest of his pictures, intending to slash it from its frame—

It was over. He was stunned. Worse,

he felt as though he had been beaten up—as it were, by this morning’s would-be muggers, but bruised on a level deeper than mere flesh. The machine was repeating its statement about the program having ended, but even as his card was ejected from the slot he was thrusting it back, fiercely insisting, “I won’t have it! You can’t just go on telling me I’d have wound up as a miserable failure regardless of what choices I made!”

“Cole-san,” the machine said with convincing reproachfulness, “an Alternator can only compute on the basis of available evidence.”

“You mean”—calming a little—“because I came here after a row with my wife, after walking out on her, after having too much to drink last night, you can only project other versions of the same outcome? Don’t you make any allowances? If not, your service is pretty bloody fraudulent, isn’t it?”

He had been about to add, “Don’t answer that!” But the machine, returned to ground state by his reinsertion of the card, merely waited in silence.

He rose and paced the floor, glad that the screens had reverted to grey. At length he said, “You can project forward as well, can’t you? I mean, starting from a hypothetical decision that I give you now? A decision that I haven’t reached yet?”

“That is the commonest mode of operation for an Alternator,” the machine said. “Fewer than one in five of our clients request assessment of the consequences of changing past decisions.”

“Now you tell me!” he crowed, and slumped back into the chair. “Very well!



Let's have something really useful out of you! I know a woman called Eileen Atkins. I'm seriously considering leaving my wife to live with her, and I think if I asked her she'd agree. If it hadn't been for the children" —he was aware that he risked sounding sanctimonious, but he liked to believe this was the truth— "I'd probably have done it by now. What will have happened to me, say a year from now, if I do?"

"More data are required," said the machine.

"Yes, I suppose they are. . . ." He cast around in his mind for some way of unambiguously identifying a person who most likely had never come to the attention of the computers on which the Alternator relied.

As though sensing his uncertainty, the machine prompted: "If you can recall her date of birth, the number of any credit card she uses, the number of her car?"

"She doesn't own a car," he said gruffly. Eileen's apparent lack of concern for worldly possessions had drawn him to her almost as much as her astonishing good looks. She could have made any normal man come running with half a smile and a tilt of one dark eyebrow. Instead of surrounding herself with adorers, though, she kept aloof. He had never quite understood why she had let him bed her, unless it truly was that she discerned in him a talent being stifled by commercial pressures, and wanted it to escape into the open.

*Or perhaps she senses that I have as little taste as she for braggadocious wealth. . . .*

"Have you ever entertained her at an

establishment where you used the Chrysanthemum Card?"

"Yes," he grunted. And repressed the comment: *Once, when I was still foolish enough to try and impress her with my money.*

"Do you remember where?"

"At a restaurant overlooking the Thames, in Berkshire—no, in Oxfordshire. It was called The Watermill."

"Computing," said the machine. There was a long pause. Then he heard his name spoken, not in the machine's voice.

"Barry? Barry!"

He had let his eyelids drift down; he had far too little sleep last night. Abruptly he jolted awake. Eileen was looking at him: lips a little parted, dark hair untidy, dark eyes wide and seeming vaguely frightened—just as he remembered her from their first meeting.

He was on the verge of starting up from the chair when he realized: this was only her image, proffered to confirm the machine's identification.

"That's her!" he burst out. "Come on, come on!"

The image disappeared. "Computing," the machine said again. "There may be some delay."

(This time the computing capacity the Alternator was obliged to employ was several times as great as before, and correspondingly more expensive. In addition, a fair proportion of the process was illegal—not that that normally handicapped the possessor of a Chrysanthemum Card—inasmuch as Eileen Hermione Atkins had gone to considerable lengths to avoid involvement with contemporary

data storage systems. It was necessary to explore the Inland Revenue's files, those maintained by the rump of the Health Service, her bank's, and numerous other supposedly private records before a credible projection was achieved.

(The interest currently being generated by the deposit securing Barry Cole's Chrysanthemum Card was insufficient; however, over the past few years a substantial unexpended balance had been added to the principal, and that sufficed—just barely—to prevent erosion of the original sum.

The wait seemed interminable; once again he had begun to drowse, when—

His heart leapt. Bright light! Warm air! Whitewashed walls, wide-open windows, the sound of the sea plashing against rocks!

Oh, so *exactly* the environment he had pictured years ago, before he met Louise! A house on a—Greek? His eye fell on a half-empty ouzo bottle; yes, Greek (though in fact he was aware of that as soon as he locked into his alternative self)—a house on a Greek island, purchased impulsively with a flash of his Chrysanthemum Card: the last time he had used it, the only time for something that he really wanted. This was not a fancy modern villa, but an honest-to-goodness *house* that real people had built and lived in, crowning a promontory with a scrap of beach below, the rough track leading to it just passable by car, a few pines and cypresses affording shade, alongside it what once had been a cowshed converted to a studio with north light reflected by an inland cliff, a south-

facing terrace which allowed Eileen to sunbathe all day long, when she wasn't plunging joyously in the calm and crystal water. . . .

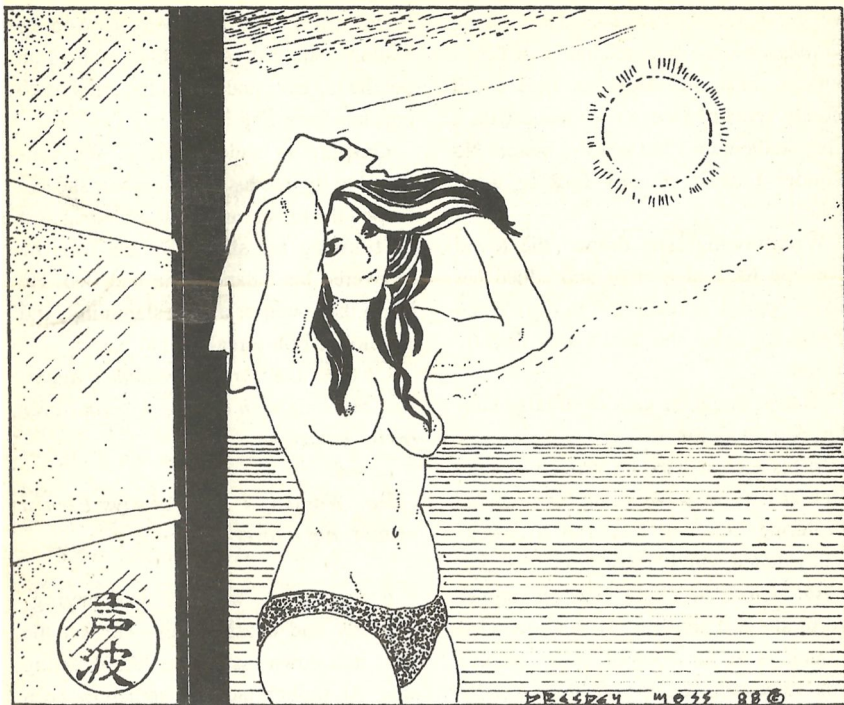
Here everything was marvellous. Everything was exactly as he had always dreamed of!

Wasn't it?

He was in his studio. Before him on an easel was a freshly primed canvas. He had left behind in Britain all his high tech tools except a camera. He had been famous for his skill with an airbrush; here, he had decided to revert to basics, learn oils and maybe later fresco and tempera. He had even started to grind and mix his own pigments.

And this morning had done so. But the brushes still stood waiting in their serried rows; the canvas was as blank as yesterday; and by the shadows it was nearly noon.

Without thinking he spilled more ouzo into the greasy stumpy glass, smeared with his fingernails, that rested on the table at his studio. Only when he had gulped the liquor did he consider rinsing it. And start to wonder how long had passed since he had bothered. Surely that was a trace of the blue he had used for his last petty commission, when a rich tourist landing from a handsome yacht had professed himself as admirer of Barry Cole since the days of the posters and the calenders, and asked for a painting of the island's harbor, offering a thousand pounds—worth maybe a hundred compared with ten years ago, but money nonetheless. He had produced it in an afternoon, as though by reflex, and the buyer had been overjoyed.



So why was he standing here like a dummy, filling and refilling a dirty glass? “Darling, I’m back!”

Eileen’s voice, calling from the main part of the house. Guiltily he tossed down another slug of ouzo, thought about washing his hands only to find them innocent of paint (and that hurt), and went to join her.

Gloriously naked but for the skimpiest possible bikini bottom, spectacularly tanned, vigorously towelling black hair wet from her latest swim, this woman whose beauty still had power to freeze his heart between beats, who to his continuing disbelief had consented to share his life, blew him a cheerful kiss.

“Lunch in just a moment, love! I found some red mullet, and I brought fresh

bread and more of those olives that you like so much, and. . .oh, now what’s wrong?”

She let the towel fall. Unbrushed, her hair was like a tumbled bunch of seaweed cast ashore after a storm.

*So why don’t I paint it like one? Why don’t I paint her? Why do I feel so lost and miserable?*

“Honey, I left you alone, all morning like I promised! Didn’t you—”

He interrupted.

“You know what’s wrong with me? I’m *bored*, that’s what! I’m bored with bloody grilled fish every day for lunch, I’m bored with bloody *souvlakia* every night for dinner! How many fucking times have I had to eat *taramosalata* and *moussaka* and tomato bloody salad since

we got here? And gallons and fucking gallons of ouzo and retsina! I'm bored with it, hear me? Bored until I could bloody scream! Doesn't someone with a Chrysanthemum Card deserve better? No wonder I can't get any fucking work done!"

Withdrawing, she draped the towel over the back of a chair and added her bikini bottom, spreading it to dry. When she spoke again she didn't look directly at him.

"Barry, that's the gallons of ouzo talking, and you know it!"

In his mental haze he wanted to snap back at her, snap her beautiful head off for luring him into this trap so ingeniously baited with his worn-out dreams.

But before he could find the proper words she had gone on: "You know what I think is at the root of your trouble? You've never made up your mind exactly what you *do* want. All you know is that it's never what you've got! Of course someone with the Chrysanthemum Card can have better! You could own a Rolls-Royce or a Cadillac—you could spend your time jetting first-class from one smart resort to another—you could live in a mansion with acres of garden and a tennis court and a swimming pool! But when you *had* all that, not to mention a wife who liked to go to Paris every year for the spring collections *and* a couple of bright children, you said it wasn't what you wanted and would I help you get the hell away from it? And I did. Are you telling me I was a fool to take you literally? I'm not a mind-reader, you know!"

She was facing him directly, eyes bright, voice hard. She was uttering the

literal truth, and he knew it. And he couldn't stand it. A red mist loomed up behind his eyes and he felt his arms reach out, hands curling into claws.

Gasping in sudden terror, she contrived to tip into his path the chair she had draped the towel on. He stumbled against it, bruising his shins. By the time he recovered his balance, she had fled. He heard the sound of a door slamming, and an uncoiled bolt screamed into place.

*Oh God. Oh Christ. I've done it again. And this time with the one woman I ever really wanted—*

*Loved?*

*No. Wanted. I have always been a wanter, not a lover.*

It was over, and he was crying, blatantly and unashamedly. He felt the tears itch down his cheeks like crawling ants. As though tact had somehow been programmed into the machine it forbore to comment until he had recovered.

Eventually he found his handkerchief, blew his nose and wiped his eyes.

"I don't want to believe what you just showed me, but it was too bloody convincing for me not to. I do go around spoiling exactly what I had the highest hopes of . . . So I must have made a fundamental mistake when I decided to earn my living as a painter. No need to answer; you've already said you can only compute with the available evidence."

He drew a deep breath and thrust his Chrysanthemum Card back in the slot.

"So tell me what else I should have done with my life! Go on!"

The machine said with excellently imitated diffidence. "Cole-san, at this point the

it is obligatory to remind you of the advice you were given upon receiving your card. Its holders are warned not to overstep the mark—”

“I always seem to, don’t I? Why should now be any different?”

“A projection as extensive as the one you have just requested will considerably diminish the funds upon which your card is secured.”

“The hell with that!” he roared, slamming his fist on the chair arm. “I don’t make much bloody use of my money, do I? And if the worst comes to the worst I have credit on lots of other cards! Give me my money’s worth! That’s an order!”

“Your instruction has been recorded under seal,” said the machine in a tone that sounded like a sigh of resignation. “Computing.”

(As all those granted the privilege of using it were unambiguously advised—though some of them might fail to register the point—the Chrysanthemum Card was unique.

(It was *not* a credit card; it was *not* a charge card. It was, as the issuing bank-consortium called it in English—in Japanese the terminology was perhaps subtler but probably clearer—a purchase card. Or, putting it another way, it was a guaranteed expenditure card. What it bought was paid for at once: No exceptions, no reservations. If at any time a holder incurred an outlay so large as to reduce the funds it was secured on below the prescribed minimum, even down to zero—which was his or her inalienable right, inasmuch as the money belonged to the customer, not the banks—he or she

had twenty-four hours, local time, in which to transfer credit from elsewhere to make good the deficiency. It was taken for granted that any holder would possess more than sufficient extra assets, or could immediately arrange an appropriate loan. If the deficit were relatively small, the holder might simply elect to cease using the card until accrued interest restored the minimum; otherwise, if required, the consortium of banks could exercise a power of attorney in order to replenish the principal: for instance, by authorising the sale of stocks and shares owned by the cardholder. Most of them, Barry Cole included, acquiesced in this arrangement, never dreaming that the day would dawn when they might outstrip the card’s vaunted capacity to purchase anything.

(And indeed it was unlikely. The banks’ efficient management of twenty percent per annum and often as much as twenty-five, so that even at the current minimum of one million pounds sterling, and even after allowing for tax, a cardholder could affordably spend about three thousand pounds a week. Barry Cole had never quite understood how people could rid themselves of that much money in so short a time, though Louise had given him numerous examples.

(He had finally found a way, unwitting. The computer capacity the Alternator was obliged to draw on in order to analyze and evaluate all the careers he might have adopted approached the available limit. Financially, its cost not only approached but exceeded the amount securing his card. Because he had not countermanded his standing order the bank-consortium’s computers automatic-

ally proceeded to dispose of his other assets, barring those held jointly in his and Louise's name, or, for tax avoidance purposes, entailed to their children.)

The machine said suddenly: "Eighteen professions have been identified and evaluated, upon which you might have entered rather than become a painter. The analyses, in alphabetic sequence, will necessarily be brief."

He had fallen prey to despondency. Abruptly he was excited again, even tentatively optimistic. That scenario with Eileen had been so hideously convincing that he had privately renounced all intention of asking her to run away with him. Equally, though, he could not continue with Louise. The time had come for a break, and it needed to be complete. He must be able to earn *some* other kind of living! Now he was going to be shown what it might be.

The machine said baldly, "If you had become an accountant, your present situation would approximate to this."

He was waiting in his office for a tax inspector coming to inquire how he had let one of his clients get away with fraud for seven years. Suspected of being an accomplice, he was reaching into his desk drawer for a flask of gin.

He was an alcoholic with a broken marriage.

"If you had become a barrister. . . ."

He was sweating in front of a judge, who had summoned him into his chambers to tongue-lash him about the way he had let his client down by arriving in court so drunk he lost track of the evidence.

He was an alcoholic with a broken marriage.

"If you had become a doctor. . . ."

He was weeping in a pub near a hospital because he had gone on giving tranquilizers to a patient who turned out to have a brain tumor and had died this morning on the operating table.

He was an alcoholic with a broken marriage.

"If you had become—"

"Stop!" he screamed. "Stop! For God's sake, *stop!*"

He leaped wildly to his feet as the screens obediently blanked to grey.

"I'm not putting up with any more of this!" he blasted. "I didn't come here to be endlessly insulted!"

The machine did not respond, but he fancied he could hear its mechanical thoughts: *The Alternator can only compute on the basis of available evidence. . . .*

"Let me out!" he shouted, and a concealed door obligingly slid open. He was on the verge of striding through it when he remembered abruptly that his card had not been returned from the slot in the chair arm.

"Give me back my card!" he ordered.

"It has been discontinued," the machine said silkily.

"What?"

A great and dreadful sense of sinking overtook him, as though he had volunteered for a parachute jump while so drunk he did not know what he was letting himself in for.

"All assets available to Cole-san were exhausted by the analysis of eighteen alternative life patterns. Should you so

wish, you may remain and view the rest. But whether or not you choose to do so, they still have to be paid for."

He stood rock-rigid, aware only of how deep his nails were driving into his palms. He half expected to feel the blood run.

He said at last, through teeth clenched as tightly as his fists, "You've blown all my money on telling me I'm a lousy stinking failure? That I'm doomed no matter what the hell I try to do?"

"Cole-san," the machine said with regret, "it was on your direct instruction that the analyses were made."

He endured for one more second. Then, with a scream of fury, he charged shoulder-first at the blank screen in front of him, intending to smash through it even though there might be ten stories' worth of empty air beyond.

Accustomed to this kind of reaction, the Alternator released a jet of knockout gas. He fell before he reached his goal. Two patrolmen entered, wearing respirators. Hours later he awoke, far beyond the perimeter of ShinSu, in full possession of his faculties, and of all his belongings, save one.

Or perhaps two. His self-confidence turned out to have vanished as far beyond recall as his Chrysanthemum Card.

Discontinued, such a card looked like nothing in particular: just an oblong of drab plastic. The man of power who would now inherit the right to use one of the thousand allotted to Great Britain was turning it over and over as Martha nervously entered his sanctum.

One could never have guessed that this

room was at penthouse level in London. Everything in view was Japanese. The man of power sat on a low stool, attired in a kimono; two swords and a dagger reposed on a wooden stand beside him; his attendants knelt in ranks between him and the entrance whose threshold Martha Debenham now braved after slipping off her shoes; through a sliding window behind him, the view was of a sand-garden set with *bonsai* and surrounded by a stone wall, from which resounded faintly the sound of wind-struck bells.

The only decoration in the room was a single scroll bearing a vertical line of exquisite calligraphy. It would of course be his own work.

She bowed deeply, then dropped to her knees and waited. When he invited her to share tea, she was indescribably relieved.

Tucking the dead card into one of his sleeve-pouches, he said with unexpected affability, "You did well."

The unspoken qualification—"For a woman"—did not hurt nearly as much as she had expected. After all, had she not achieved something which only a woman, and a *gaijin* woman at that, could have accomplished? There had been other attempts, all failures, to separate Barry Cole from his card. It was she who suggested exposing him to the temptations of the Alternator. They could scarcely deny her that much credit—could they?

Noticing the way her envious eyes followed the disappearance of the Chrysanthemum Card into his sleeve, the man of power said, "It was wasted on him. He never made proper use of it. He treated it purely as a status symbol. He must be as

devoid of ambition as of taste. To think that the possessor of one of these"— a flick of his arm—"would voluntarily eat in the self service section of a cheap restaurant!"

His English was superb, but that was to be expected; he was a very proud man.

"In any case," he went on, for he was also a very vain man, "when a thousand *gaijin* have been accorded the privilege how could I bear to be refused my rightful entitlement to such a card purely because my chosen base of operations is in a country we have—?" He hesitated for a moment, and concluded with a Japanese term that did not exactly mean "conquered". In the 1930's it had been applied to Korea and Manchukuo, and had customarily been rendered into English as "annexed".

But Martha had no attention to spare for such thoughts.

She had of course lied to Barry Cole. She had had much experience of the Alternator; she was one of those to whom its use had become an addiction. Now she was waiting, in fear and trembling, to be told whether she had earned her next reward. The hand with which she held her tea bowl shook, and shook. . . .

Perhaps maliciously, the man of power delayed until she had drunk a second cup before setting down his own and making an imperious sidelong gesture to one of his attendants, who produced, like a conjurer, a folded sheet of paper.

"Present this," Martha heard, "and you may have not one but two sessions with the Alternator. Think carefully, though, before you commit yourself to another of its programs. Bear in mind that they may

well be a delusion and a snare. You are far too useful to fall into the same trap as did Barry Cole."

Mustering all her self control, she accepted the paper and bowed to the floor.

She wanted desperately to ask: *Was there truly no hope for him? Was there really no future for so talented an artist except to wind up as a drunken fool?*

But she dared not utter the words. She feared she might receive an honest answer; as well as being proud and vain, this man was also cruel. And the greatest cruelty of all, for her, would be to be told that the Alternator could be and had been tampered with. . . .

He inclined his head to indicate that she had permission to withdraw. Murmuring thanks, she did so, concentrating with all her might on the blessed fact that, once again, she had the chance to live—if only for a little while—in a better world than the one she had created for herself.

Those remaining in the room, who were already living in a world that suited them, could be heard joking loudly about her, and Barry Cole, as—once out of sight—she fled towards her meeting with a futile dream.

No penalties, as such, attach to misuse of the Card. For those who have grown accustomed to its possibilities it is penalty enough to lose it when they overstep the mark. We hope and trust you will not do so.

Welcome to the club of its distinguished holders!

**YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.**



*A Seattle native, psychobiologist Dean R. Lambe slipped into southeastern Ohio where he experimented with college students before writing science fact and science fiction. While he owns apartments, he insists that the following story is fiction.*

## Notice to Leave

*written by Dean R. Lambe*

*illustrated by Scott Quinlan*

**W**hen the phone chirped for the third time, it was apparent that the computer was not going to handle it. I cleared the text-book that I was editing from the screen and answered the damn thing, knowing what it must be. There were times when I secretly hoped for a call from the Fire Department, or maybe notice from some Statehouse flunky that the building stood in the way of progress. But no, I did have a vacancy and the ad was running in the *Statesman*.

"Uh, yeah, I'm calling about the apartment in the paper, uh, is it still, you know, for rent?"

I suppressed a sigh. My six-unit building wasn't in the newspaper, but on Deerfield off Sunset Drive. After eight years at Boise State University Press, I tended to fuss that way about the English language, but I merely said: "Yes, it's still available."

The woman's voice continued as if she

hadn't yet begun to listen. "Well, ah, where is it and is there anybody there who can show it now? I mean, I really need a bigger place so the kids . . . uh, how many bedrooms?"

I stared at the blank screen in front of me and allowed my fingers to tap a thoroughly impolite word on the keys, amused at the thought of what would happen should I not remember to delete that obscenity from the file. No doubt the author of this rather dry treatise on the geological history of Idaho would not be pleased. I punched BACKSPACE four times, and politely answered the illiterate on the other end of the glass fiber. "It's a one-bedroom apartment, m'am." As is clearly stated in the ad, I felt like adding.

"Oh, just one bedroom . . . ah, well I got three kids who need . . ."

"Yes, m'am, I'm afraid it wouldn't be suitable." I leaned my chair back from the keyboard and let the next sigh become audible. Sure, I thought, three

kids, two cats, a million fleas, and a job any day now; just move right in.

"Ah, you got anything bigger?"

Scowling at the little holes that released her voice into my ear, I tried to recall how patient my father had been with this type of call. "Sorry, no, nothing else. Thank you for calling."

The receiver landed in its cradle with a practised backhand toss as I headed for the kitchen. A beer seemed in order and I was in little mood to return to the granite formations of the Salmon River Mountains. Chinook, my aging elkhound, raised his grey head to see whether anything of canine interest would be forthcoming from the refrigerator. I scratched behind his ear as he moved beside my hip, while my free hand fumbled for the bottle opener. "Ah, Chinook, a landlord's lot is not a happy life," I muttered to my only audience. "Just look at all the bad press we've had over the years . . . tossing widows and orphans out into the snow . . . ignoring pleas for hot water . . . forever raising the rent." Savoring a long swallow, I settled into my favorite leather chair and tried to think good thoughts about the damn apartment house I inherited when that icy highway took my parents on the ultimate ride.

Not that the extra income was unwelcome; hell's bats, it was hardly an extra. University press associate editors didn't rate the expense-account lunches and other perks of their editorial brothers and sisters in the Big Rotten Apple. Besides, higher education hadn't been a growth industry for years, and the Idaho legislature had been slashing the university budgets ever since I signed on in the early

'80s. But running an apartment house was often more grief than money. Unfortunately, trying to sell an apartment building made even less economic sense.

Halfway through my beer break—just one of the joys of a job that lets me do most of my work via my home terminal, and it was going on five in the afternoon, after all—Mr. Bell's Miracle let me have it again. "No, I can't wait a couple of weeks for the security deposit," I said, in anticipation of Standard Query Number Three. I vowed for the hundredth time to tinker with the audio output chip in that damn phone.

"Mr. Walcott, this is Wanda Bannock. You know the lawn ain't been mowed for two weeks here?"

I was wrong. Not a prospective tenant, but one of long standing. Mrs. Bannock and her daughter had held down the south corner, 1-C, almost as long as I'd been back in Boise, certainly longer than I'd been sole owner of the roof over her head. And she wasn't adverse to reminding me of my father's sainthood. Of course, old-fashioned GPs were notorious about letting bills slide, and Dr. Bingham Walcott was no exception.

"I spoke to Quint about that on Tuesday, Mrs. Bannock, I'm sure he'll take care of . . ."

"Honestly, Mr. Walcott, don't know why you put up with that no-'count Indian, or your father neither, he just . . ."

I rubbed an itch beside my nose and shook my head at Endless Tape Number Six. "Quint gets the job done, Mrs. Bannock. I'll get him right over there."

"Huh!" I could picture her double

chins bouncing. "Well, long as I gotcha, you know them trees is dying on the north side. One a them's liable to fall on the Jeromes come winter. And speaking of the Jeromes, Alice was telling me t'other day that there's a funny smell a coming from Mr. Skyler's apartment. Don't surprise me none; he's sure an odd duck, that Skyler . . . and hey, everybody's TV been acting funny and the folks at the cable office say it ain't their problem so . . ."

"Thank you for letting me know, Mrs. Bannock. I'll take care of it." Whatever it may be, I thought, as I cut her off quickly lest she put my ear to sleep. From long experience I knew that the lonely widow could go on for hours, given half an encouraging "uh-huh." And what could be the problem with Skyler, I wondered, as I keyed Quint's number from the phone memory. Odd looking character, Skyler, and for the life of me I couldn't recall what it was he did, some type of survey thing? But an ideal tenant as far as I was concerned. Skyler had paid his rent promptly for the four months he'd been in 2-B, and I hadn't heard a word from him since he'd moved in. Idly watching a drop of condensation run down the side of the archaic glass beer bottle, I waited for Quintin Chubbuck to answer his phone.

"Quint, this is Bing. Meet me over at the Deerfield place will you, and bring your damn lawnmower," I said as soon as his gruff "Yo" answered.

"Sheeat, Junior, I was just fixin' to call you for a spot of fishin'. Creek's down below the Reservoir and they say them trout are just jumpin' onto the bank.

Lawn can wait a bit."

I winced and polished off the beer. I always felt a little guilty giving orders to a man who had changed my diapers. It helped somewhat to have my mother's thin, willowy frame, which stood me a good 15 centimeters over the contrary one-legged Blackfoot. And try as I might, I would always be "Junior," not Bing or anything else I'd been called since my voice changed, even though Quint always called my father "Doc." But I'd inherited Quint along with the apartments. Perhaps it was the other way around, for when that semi skidded into my parents' car, "Uncle" Quint was there with a firm hand on my shoulder and a fine eye for the distinction between necessity and depression as measured in Scotch.

"Now, Quint. The trout'll have to wait. You've put this off too long already. Besides, Wanda Bannock said something about the poplar trees dying . . ."

"Mighta known that old bat would be bitchin' about somethin'. Okay, Junior, be there in half an hour or so."

As usual, Quint left me with a dead phone and I chucked the empty bottle in the recycle bag as I headed for the hall closet. When I reached for my old University of Oregon warmup jacket, its letters faded to a uniform grey, Chinook moved to the front door with his narrow head high and tail in lazy motion as if the old hound planned to run down a deer before supper. "All right, boy, you can come along, but leave Mrs. Rodino's cat alone this time."

I stood in front of the place, taking my usual survey. The white aluminum siding would need a coat of paint one of these days, and the downspout on the front porch could stand some attention. Chinook snorted around the yard, checking for evidence of trespassers on his sovereign territory. In the curtained window of 1-B, Mrs. Rodino's big silver and black tom hissed, but Chinook didn't bother to reply as he circled around back. I was rubbing the back of my neck in puzzlement, reminded that I was past due for a haircut, when Quint's weathered GMC diesel flatbed pulled into the driveway.

"How they hangin', Junior," he shouted to the neighbors as he limped around to unload his mower, an ancient gasoline model with more handmade replacement parts than original.

"Can't complain." I studied his flat, creased face and almost grinned at the disreputable fishing hat that covered his lank, ragged black hair. That hat looked like it had been through a dam spillway—because it had, at least once that I knew about. Not for the first time I wondered just how old he was. He must have been about 18 when my father's M.A.S.H. unit saved his life in Korea, and amputated his left leg. But Quint never offered and I never asked. Most of his biography came from my father. I shrugged and pointed to the line of poplars. "Say, you haven't been spraying those trees with anything?"

Quint slowly squinted in the direction of my extended arm, and spat a wad of tobacco at the base of a rhododendron. "Sheat, Junior, you know I don't use no

chemicals. And who the hell'd be spraying that high anyway? That middle one do look bad though. Ain't been but a week that they all was spring green."

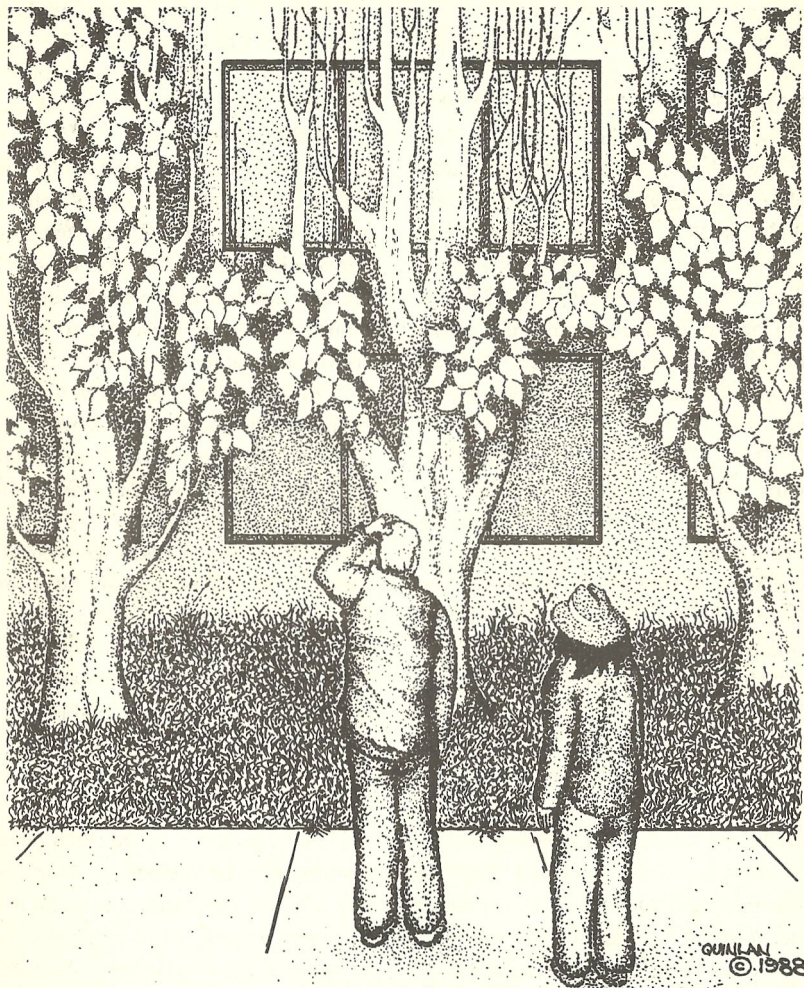
I nodded and nervously wiped my palms on my pants pockets as we moved closer to the sick poplar. The middle one in the stand of five was yellow-brown for about the top nine meters. The two on either side had dead-looking branches as well. "Hate to have to take them down, must be over 60 years old. I'll have to check with the Ag School people . . . may be some poplar blight."

Backing up about a dozen paces, Quint sighted along his hat brim. "Sure to hell looks like it's been sprayed; dead part makes almost a diagonal line with the roof." This time the flowering crab apple by the sidewalk caught his tobacco juice. "Don't suppose some crop duster got careless flyin' home?"

"Hope not or we could lose them all. Well, it's not going to fall down today, despite worry-wart Wanda." I dropped my voice in case the building's unofficial house-mother was listening. "Keep an eye on that middle one, maybe just topping it will . . ."

The door to 1-A opened and Gordon Shea called out: "See you a minute, Mr. Walcott?"

Shea, a thin blond in his late twenties, was a driver for one of the few mobile home manufacturers in the area that still had business. Shea was often laid off for weeks at a time. I was as understanding as I could be about the rent. He always paid when he could, so I figured he was about to apologize again for being late this month. He handed me the cash in-



stead, which beats an excuse any day, then beckoned me inside 1-A. "You know I mind my own business, Mr. Walcott. Live 'n let live, that's me, but I need my sleep when I'm going on the road and that guy upstairs in 2-B . . . well, it's not just me that thinks he's weird, and those noises in the middle of the night . . ."

Typical, I thought, I never hear any

complaints until something has been going on for months, then the whole building gets up in arms. Now this was an independent gripe about Skyler, because Shea and Mrs. Bannock had little to do with each other ever since that episode last summer. Not that Wanda had been dumb enough to blame Shea entirely, what with her 15-year-old

daughter's decision to worship the sun evenly, completely, in the back yard. While it may be standard beach wear on both coasts these days, buck naked in Boise still lacks a certain *comme il faut*.

I was about to ask for clarification about Skyler when Chinook let out a howl the likes of which I'd heard only once—when he tangled with a porcupine. I twisted in the doorway just as the old hound streaked around the corner, turned and pointed back the way he'd come, with his grey fur bristled and his ears back.

"Nook! What the hell's the matter with you?" Quint, who was mowing around the other side of the building, even heard Chinook over his noisy machine and he started to walk over. As I came down the steps, a squat grey form emerged from beside the poplars.

"Ah, it is you, Mr. Walcott. I was disposing of some refuse in the containers behind, when that beast distressed me. Are you the master of this animal? I do not relate well to such apparently."

Chinook snarled and I grabbed his collar. He obeyed the command "Sit," but remained rigid. Quint, now almost beside me, took off his battered hat and ran a calloused hand through sweat-soaked hair, as amazed as I was at Chinook's reaction to Skyler. Obviously the two weren't compatible. I motioned to Quint to take the dog out to my car. This was the first time that the two had met, I now recalled, as I rarely took Chinook with me to interview prospective tenants. Not only was his size intimidating to some—the Norwegians bred elkhounds to pull carts, after all—but it was a little difficult

to insist on no dogs in the apartments with my own monster at my side. Normally Chinook was very well-mannered, however, and accepted everybody that I found acceptable.

Not one to miss any action in the building, Wanda Bannock's ample frame filled the doorway of 1-C, her cotton shirt and denims strained at the waist. She merely nodded and closed her door, though I was sure she could follow any conversation at ten meters.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Skyler, I don't know what could have gotten into Chinook. No harm done, I trust, and if we might step into your apartment, there are a few things I'd like to . . ."

The short rotund character seemed to shrink even further and his black eyes glinted through his old-fashioned glasses. "I would prefer that we have our discussion here, Mr. Walcott. My lodgings are not suitable for visitation at this time. I have posted rental payments properly, have I not? Is not our agreement that notice is given before visitation?"

I have a good ear, but his high-pitched accent continued to elude me. And I was torn between anger and amusement at his statement. No tenant had ever refused me admittance before. Granted, the Statehouse pencil pushers and keyboard clowns insist that I give 24-hour notice prior to inspection of an occupied apartment. That's what my rental agreement states, but nobody ever called me on that detail before. Besides, I hadn't intended a formal inspection, just a reasonably private conversation. The more I thought about it, what with the complaints and Chinook's reaction, maybe an inspection

would be in order. Yet, tenants who pay on time are hard to get, especially in this low-rent neighborhood behind the old V.A. Hospital. So I didn't press the issue. I drew Skyler aside, or tried to indicate that we might move a little ways off the front stoop. He seemed to flinch at my gesture. "It's just this, Mr. Skyler," I finally said. "Some of the other tenants have been bothered by noise from your apartment. I'm sure that you can keep it down from now on."

Skyler seemed to shake like a retriever returning with a duck. "I was not aware that my . . . that I was perceived by others, Mr. Walcott. It will not occur again. I coexist here as best possible. Others could be more circumspect with vibrations and emissions as well."

While I puzzled that one out, Skyler shuffled into the stairway. I sighed and metaphorically pulled up my socks for a meeting with Mrs. Bannock. It wouldn't do to stop by the building without checking with her; Wanda Bannock was self-appointed concierge to Deerfield Apartments. Mercifully I escaped the overweight widow and her nubile daughter in less than half an hour, with the sure knowledge that television reception had been terrible after 10 PM for the last three weeks, and the possibility that Alice Jerome was stepping out while her husband was off on a construction job for M-K. I'd tried to appear fascinated by these revelations.

I caught up with Quint as he loaded the rusty mower back onto his rustier truck. The lawn wasn't as large as Quint's ability to procrastinate. "Thanks for taking Chinook. Don't know what got into the

old boy."

He moved the wad of tobacco around his gum and a look came over his leathery face that reminded me of the few times I'd heard disparaging remarks about Indians said in his presence. "That's one crazy white man, Junior. You're gonna have trouble from that one, bye and bye."

Although the remark was unusual for Quint, somehow it came as no surprise. I clapped him on the shoulder and nodded. "Hope not, he pays his rent. Hey, how about we try for those trout tomorrow?"

The left front tire caught his juicy salute this time. "Not in the mood tomorrow. Maybe Sunday."

Over the next couple of weeks, I managed to miss Wanda Bannock the few times I was by to show 2-C. Workfare deadbeats or we'll-call-yous, every one, and I still had a vacancy. This time she caught me on campus—my home phone was only sophisticated enough to transfer calls by category and I couldn't program DISCONNECT for a specific individual. I abandoned Professor Glaubert's fascination with Idaho's rocks and rifts and stared at the scenic backside of Bronco Stadium (university press offices always had the best of campus locations), as the Deerfield Apartments Gestapo filled my ear with the gladdest of tidings.

"I tell you, Mr. Walcott, we's had just about as much as we can take. Even old lady Rodino was bothered last night, and Alice just couldn't put up with no more. I told Alice, I did, that she shoulda called the cops long before, and last night she

did . . .”

Had to be loud to get through to Liz Rodino, I thought, as I let the Bannock woman ramble on. Mrs. Rodino is 70 if she's a day, and near deaf. Fortunately Mr. Rodino bought the maximum pre-flight insurance before that 767 dropped him three clicks short of the LAX runway years ago, so his widow could afford the most modern of receiver-hearing aids. Otherwise, that Mormon religious channel that she and her cat spent their days with would've blasted the walls out of the building. I tuned back in, sure that I'd missed nothing important: “. . . told them cops it was the worst thing I ever did hear, like a cat being cut in two in a sawmill. Of course he'd stopped by the time those useless bastards got here, took 'em 45 minutes, I tell you, and at that time those cops didn't even go in to see what he was killing in there, just talked to Skyler out in the hallway and let him be, nice as you please . . .”

Boise's reincarnation of Louella Parsons finally paused for breath, or more likely a short snack to keep up her strength, and I cut in. “I'll be by this evening, Mrs. Bannock. Thanks for letting me know.” In a pig's eye, I thought, as I clicked off. The back of my neck hurt and I could feel the onset of a tension headache. Naturally the office bottle of acetaminophen was empty, but I shook it anyway and keyed a reminder to pick up more into the memo file. If I hustled across the river ahead of the rush hour, and no other tenants waylaid me, I could give Skyler his last warning, and make it home and back in time to meet Karen at the restaurant beside Morrison Park by

seven. Be damned if I'd be late for Karen now that the slightly-mad biologist and I seemed well on our way toward synchronized wavelengths.

My fingers recalled Professor Glaubert's geology text to the screen, but it took several minutes for the rest of me to stop alternating between pleasant daydreams about Karen and murderous thoughts about that irritating foreigner, Skyler.

Skyler still didn't want to let me in. I was already running late and not in the best of moods, and the odor that drifted out as Skyler stepped into the hallway—not really unpleasant, sort of vanilla and new-mown grass—was the last straw. I pointed out that if I had to come back the next day, I'd have a Notice to Leave Premises with me. Not that such bits of officialese were much help. Wendell Davis had laid a stack of forms on me when he finished probate of the folks' wills, sure that I'd need them eventually for some unruly tenant. Mercifully I'd needed only one so far. As the family lawyer had warned, when the bastards want to be difficult, it can still take over 60 days to get rid of them.

Finally, Skyler acquiesced, still shaking in that all-over wet dog fashion. When my right foot touched the floor of 2-B for the first time in over four months, I knew that it wasn't the apartment I'd rented him. Had there been any flying insects, my mouth would've made a fine gaping trap for several minutes. Not only was the floor covered with a carpet that would bring tears to the eyes of a golf course greenskeeper, but the walls were



flocked with something like maidenhair ferns. The lighting was more than a bit strange too. “Skkk . . . Skyler,” my tongue managed at last, “what the hell did you do to my . . . holy shit, this stuff’s alive!”

“Yes, Mr. Walcott. Necessary. Most sorry if new comforts displease; rental agreement allows for tenant to redecorate.”

“With my permission!” I shouted, although I began to feel a little sheepish. The rooms were rather interesting, certainly relaxing, and much better than the color scheme the homosexual couple painted in 1-A a couple of years back. I took a step toward the bedroom and Skyler blocked my way, shaking even more violently. “You might as well let me see it all, Mr. Skyler, it can’t get any worse.”

I was wrong about that, wrong about the *Mister Skyler* too. The four large grubs that crawled around the resilient floorcovering of what was once a normal bedroom were a lot worse—at first. They did make some strange sounds too, especially when pulling at each other with those vestigial tentacles around their mid-sections. Actually they were kind of cute, but I was glad when she said that she and the kids would be leaving very soon. Somehow, I missed my date with Karen.

Quint just grunted and fixed another egg to the hook, then flicked his line back into the water, as I finished the story. I watched the eddies swirl around a branch stub of a dead fir that created the upper boundary of the pool where we’d found more than a few cooperative trout over

the years. The slab of water-smoothed granite was warm on my back. “Well, hell, wouldn’t be the first unwed mother we had in the building. She was just caught short, that’s all, far from home. Though as I understand her society, it’ll be a long time before she’s allowed on another unsupervised field survey.”

“Talkative, weren’t she? You tell your ladyfriend Karen yet?” Quint spat, careful to keep the tobacco juice out of the water.

“Oh, ‘Skyler’ understands us well enough; she wasn’t worried that my discovery would be believed once she and her litter left. And I’m not sure whether I should tell Karen, at least not yet. That nutty red-head is still miffed at me, and if Karen accepts the story, she’ll want a scientific team to tear the place apart.” I gave my line a few tugs to make sure it was still drifting off the bottom. We let the water talk to the rocks for a while.

“So what do you think, Quint?” I finally asked as I reeled in. “Should we refinish the walls and floors in 2-B, or should I try to find somebody who likes it as is? That alien did pay quite adequately for any damages, including the poplar that lost its top to the radiation from her emergency transmissions. Wonder who’s giving the best price for gold in town?”

A model of Native American stoicism, Quint stuffed another wad of tobacco into his cheek and gazed upstream. “Sheeat, Junior, it’s kinda nice. Wouldn’t mind living there myself, weren’t for that Bannock woman downstairs. But mind, I ain’t a goin’ to mow the lawn and that funny carpet too! Think you can find a renter with a goat?”



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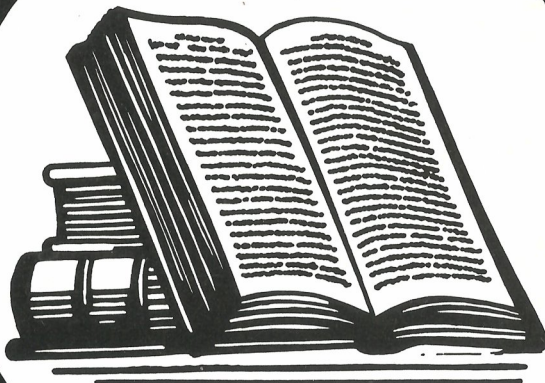
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