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EDITORIAL
With nearly a two-year hiatus since the previous issue, I've had to look back over past issues just to recall to mind what they were like — so I could re-learn, as it were, how to do another one. And I've noticed that my editorials continually harp on two main themes: (1) apologies for the long time interval since the previous issue, with assertions that I intend to do better in future, and (2) a discussion of the other items I've published which I would like you to buy. How dull and boring for you. How banal. How inevitable.

So let's get on with it all.

Yes, I am overcome with contrition. Perhaps the terrific strain of doing a double-issue last time was too much for my poor, feeble brain. (My mother would have used the word "lazy.") In any case, there is an issue #23, and I do indeed plan more. I have never stopped planning to do two issues a year. Perhaps, in spite of the lessons of history, this will now happen, starting in 1991. A new decade; a new leaf! And I hope that you will be with me in that decade, so check your address label for the number at which your subscription expires, please, and keep it up to date.

WEIRDBOOK has two companion magazines, also irregularly produced: AMANITA BRANDY, a poetry magazine, and THE WEIRDBOOK ENCORES (formerly EERIE COUNTRY), now in its eleventh issue. My catalog gives more information if you are interested.

Now to the new books! JOHN COLLIER & FREDRIC BROWN WENT QUARRELLING THROUGH MY HEAD, by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, is a collection of stories by Jessica, illustrated by Tony Patrick, available in a trade paper edition ($7.95) and a hard cover edition ($22.50), though the slipcased edition is out of print by now. And ELYSIA: THE COMING OF CTHULHU is Brian Lumley's conclusion to the "Titus Crow" novels of the Cthulhu mythos, exquisitely embellished by the art of Stephen E. Fabian. ELYSIA is also available in trade paper ($8.50) and in hard cover ($25), and since I have only 3 deluxe copies remaining, it too will be out of print in the slipcased edition. THE TRANSITION OF TITUS CROW has not yet appeared in the hard cover edition planned, but it should be ready in 1991, and the very first novel in the "Titus Crow" series is still in print in the deluxe edition ($37.50) as well as the first hard cover edition ($22.50). I speak, of course, of THE BURROWERS BENEATH (illustrated by Mark Bell). In fact, it's the only book I still have available in the deluxe edition. Planned for the near future is the first of two "Tarra Khash" books known together as THE COMPLEAT KHASH, illustrated by Jim Pitts (hard cover, $25, deluxe, $40) which I expect to have available in late 1990. And a new collection, this one by John Betancourt, should also be ready in 1990. Please add $1.60 for postage and handling on one book, 35¢ each additional book, if ordering by mail. If all this activity intrigues you, I have a catalog plus innumerable advertising flyers that I know you will find fascinating!

Seriously, the subscribers already know about these things, since I bombard them yearly with junk mail, but other readers may not. If I can't hawk my wares (or weirds) in my own magazine, where can I hope to do so? All inquiries are welcome, by mail or telephone, from dealers, from individual readers, and even from curious bystanders.

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TIME ENOUGH FOR LUNACY
by Darrell Schweitzer

In a hurry! Back soon!
— inscription on the pedestal of the ruined statue of Ozymandias
(Never before correctly translated.)

"Tom! Tom!" said Nick the Lunatic, raving in finest form.

"Mmfindith!" said Tom O'Bedlam. "Mnggh!
Mmmfull, mnggh, mmmfull-nummmfull."

Crowds of people gathered around them like foam on the tide, in the narrow London street, on that spring day, in the year Fifteen Hundred and — well, old King Harry was planning to chop yet another queen's head off, though he hadn't gotten on to doing it yet.

"Tom!" said Nick, who had once been a gaoler in Bedlam, but had been magnificently mad for years now and therefore free. He danced over the cobbles. He rattled his tambourine. He beat on it like a drum with little bones. He blew on horns, one, two, three, and dropped them with a clatter then pinged on the strings of a tiny harp. He shook his head and the bells on his three-pointed jester's cap tinkled in time.

And Tom O'Bedlam juggled eggs, little blue ones, a huge white globe the size of a man's head (it had a bearded face painted on it), common goose eggs (but some of them striped) — and in an instant a pigeon landed in his outstretched hand and laid another.

Ladies leaned out of windows to watch the spectacle, leaned too far out of the tops of their own dresses; but the sun blinded any distracted gallants who looked up, so no one saw the plummeting Bird of Fire until it whirled around Tom's head like a taming lightning bolt, its long golden feathers streaming.

Tom stuck out his tongue, and the bird laid a golden egg there. Then the bird was gone, nothing more than drifting smoke and a sprinkle of ash, and no one was sure it had ever truly been there at all.

"Tom!" said Nick.

The egg sizzled on Tom O'Bedlam's tongue; he held it in his mouth like a hot morsel one might get at a high lord's dinner and be too polite to spit out. His cheeks bulged. Once more he replied, carefully, in measured tones, "Mm-fil, mm-mm-mm!

"Tom! It's wonderful! I must tell you, Tom!"

"Mmm-mmfil?"

"Tom, I'm in love!"

Tom swallowed. He gaped wide-eyed. He hurled all the eggs he juggled straight up. None of them came down again; they hatched in the air every one; a tumbling thousand thousand birds fluttered, caught the air, rose up, their wings like thunder; and the sky was dark with their passage.

When the birds were gone it was somehow evening. People drifted away in the dusk. Lanterns glowed, like sleepy eyes opening. Shutters slammed overhead. Only the mad could remember what they had seen.

*   *   *

Nick the Lunatic walked on his hands, feet in the air, crying, "A penny, A penny. Who hath a penny for a poor lunatic mad with love?"

Tom followed behind, mumbling.

Nick wriggled dirty toes in the air. His bottomless shoes dangled around his ankles. The belled tips of his cap jangled over the cobbles.

He nearly collided with a fat, ermine-robed noble, whose burly servants grabbed him by the ankles, flipped him onto his feet, and held him by either arm.

"Release him, quick!" said the nobleman. They did. The noble stood regarding the cowering Nick. "Faith, sirrah, you have no wits at all!"

"Alas, great Lord, I have none, for I lost them walking thus upside down. In time all my wits spilled out of my ears and went rolling and ringing over the stones, till I am as you see me, wholly witless."

The lord drew back. "God save you!"

"Further, I am addled by love —"

"Alack! Is there no hope, then?"

"Faith, my Lord, a poor madman may hope for charity from the great ones, who gather all virtue to themselves; and a few pennies scattered upon the ground will send me scrambling, and perhaps I shall find some of my lost wits in the course of the chasing. Or at least it will be good practice."

The nobleman laughed and flung a handful of coins across the pavement. Nick scrambled on all fours, catching each penny, until once more he stood on his hands, a penny between each of his toes, clinking in time as he sang:

"I burn, my brain consumes to ashes!
Each eyeball too like lightning flashes!
Within my breast there glows a solid fire,
Which a thousand ages can't expire!"

Tom opened his mouth. Smoke poured out.

Then, with a burst of blinding light, the Bird of Fire emerged, whirled around his head three times, and shot away into the sky, vanishing over the rooftops like a streaking meteor.

"Tom —"

"Mmfil."

"Still that, Tom?"

Tom nodded, opened his mouth again, and three doves emerged, one white, one red, and one black. They hopped onto his shoulders and sat, preening their feathers. Then each whispered something into his ears and took flight, circling about one another, gone.

Tom coughed. Nick looked at him askance.

"Thirsty work," said Tom.

"Come along then."

Nick dragged him by the arm, down an alley, over a wall, across a yard, to the back door of a tavern where a boy was dumping slops. Nick jangled his bells. Tom breathed a little smoke, and the boy dropped his bucket, wide-eyed, and ran into the tavern. He emerged a minute later with
two mugs of ale.
Tom drank greedily, while Nick spoke of his love, how it burned him, how it wounded him to the heart, how the thorns of love crowned him, how the lantern of love blinded him on dark nights, how the madness of love made all his words a jumble —
Only Tom didn't seem to be listening.
"Tom?"
Tom drank.
Nick scratched his head, paused, and thought he understood. He sipped a little of his own ale, then said, "Mmmpft, mmpflft, m'ffft —"
"Something stuck in your throat, Nicholas?" Tom asked.

* * *
"Tom, were you ever in love yourself?"
They sat on a ruined wall behind the tavern, their empty mugs dangling from their hands. When someone chanced by, one or both of them would roll his eyes, wag his tongue, babble, and fall off the wall. It was an old tradition. Then they would climb back up and the conversation would resume.
"Aye, I still am, in a way," said Tom. "I loved a moonstruck maid, truly mad she was, truly moonstruck. It hit her on the head in the end."
"What did, Tom?"
"The Moon. She was a common lass at first, fair and mad, and she spoke madly —"
"Mmpflft-mmpflft?"
"Like that. She saw things truly, saw the magic of the world clearly, so of course she had to be mad. There is no other way. And her glance and her smile would turn the wit of any man who still languished in sanity. But, alas, by some strange magic of love itself, every time I kissed her she grew great with it, huger and higher, till I kissed her atop walls, from rooftops while standing on tiptoe — until she knew clouds in her hair, until she could reach up into the night and brush the clouds with her hand. That was when she got careless. A full Moon rose behind her, nearer and nearer, and the Man in the Moon shouted a warning any lunatic could hear. His dog barked. He waved his lantern. But she did not heed him. Alas! Alack! Thwack! The Moon struck her on the back of her head and sent her tumbling over the edge of the world. I ran to the world's rim, looked down, but only saw her once, far below, when a star blinked as she went by."
"Woe, then," said Nick, suddenly melancholy.
"I sigh with woe for lost love."
"No, I think she's enjoying the journey. I know she'll be back one day. I hear huge footsteps in my dreams, thump, thump, thumping nearer and nearer —"
"I sigh with woe —"
"Nicholas?"
"Tom?"
"You have spoken much of love, Nicholas, how it pangs you, how it pains you, but you have omitted one detail —"
"My wit's diseased, Tom, and I am mad with love besides —"
"Certainly you are mad, certifiably, and I have certainly certified it. But you cannot love the air, Nicholas. Not even a madman can do that.

Love must have an object, the beloved. With whom are you in love, my dear friend?"
"Nick seemed puzzled. He sat silently for a moment.
"Tom waited.
Then six or seven roisterers came out of the tavern, into the back yard to pass. They saw Tom and Nick and raised their cups. The two lunatics raised theirs. Tom took off his broad, floppy hat and waved it. Nick fell off the wall. When the roisterers had gone back inside, he climbed back up, and said, out of breath, "With a lady."
"Good."
"Tis more than good, Tom. She is an angel, a miracle. When I heard her voice, I knew she sang mad songs for me alone."
"There was more —?"
"There was more, Tom! A glimpse of a face, like the pale sun burning through morning mist, and her golden hair flowing between the bars of her window —"
"Alas, for confined, caged love!"
"Alas! Tom, I climbed the wall of a rich man's garden, here, in London. I stood in the boughs of an apple tree. But I could not reach my love, who is confined, caged in a tower. I shall long for her always, and woo her till the very stones of that prison tower crumble —"
"Then woo her, Nicholas. Go! Now! Get started! Woo her grandly, madly, roaringly. Woo her meekly, quietly, unceasingly."
"Oh, I shall! I shall!"
"But hark! Take warning! If you let this moment pass, if you let the madness of love grow cold, then you're in terrible peril of mind, of the muddy sluggishness of the mental humours — you might even go sane!"

Nick fell off the wall. Tom looked around for more roisterers, but saw no one else. Below, Nick got up and started running. His footsteps echoed back for a while, then faded.
"Tom listened for something more, heard nothing but the sounds of the night-time city, and said to the risen Moon, "I can only await my Giantess." He slept on the wall.

* * *

Tom saw the Dream clearly when it came to him, a black, shrouded figure gliding serenely down the roadway of the sky, leaning over him where he lay on the wall. Pale hands emerged from beneath the dark cloak, holding out to him what seemed to be a huge, gnarled human foot, of stone but also somehow of flesh, sere and still alive, its toes wriggling, blue flames flickering from beneath the toenails.

The foot seemed to be running, for miles and days, for leagues and weeks, yet it stayed where it was, floating up and down gently above the outstretched hands of the Dream.

From the distance came other sounds: a thump, a scrape, a thump, a scrape.
Tom thought of his giantess wandering through the darkness beyond the world's rim. He thought of poor Nick, wooing his caged love from atop an apple tree.

He sat up.
"What can I do for Nicholas, and he for himself, and himself for Love —?"
But the Dream, who surely knew, merely faded with the dawn.

And Tom awoke, seated on the wall, brushing dead leaves and snow from his clothes. Where it had been springtime that evening, it was now winter. He climbed down from the wall stiffly, rummaged around in the back of the tavern yard, and found some rags to wrap himself with. He pounded on the door and the boy came out again, as amazed as ever, but taller now, and bearded.

The youth ran back inside, and returned anon with meat and drink.

There was no sign of Nick. Tom wondered where the garden and the tower might be.

He wandered the streets that day, slowly, still wondering, only half-heartedly singing and jangling the bells on his own, floppy hat to the passersby.

On a broad avenue he saw a horseman at full gallop. (Yet no one was trampled. One ducked and scurried from the horseman’s path.) The rider’s face was pink as a babe’s, his armor pale blue, gleaming with the light of dawn. He bore an hourglass under one arm, and a long, pale sword, like a huge icicle, jangled from his side.

“Halloo!” shouted Tom.

“Can’t talk! Must hurry. Time is!”

And the horseman was gone.

Tom wandered through the day that was not a day. It was more, and less.

He met a poet, who stood staring at a piece of parchment, scrutinizing it again and again. Seeing Tom, the poet solemnly read aloud, “My love is like a brown, brown cow.”

Tom shook his head. “Needs work. Revise it! Revise it! Take the word of a poor madman, who is the best critic of all.”

The poet gave Tom a coin. “God’s blood, there is wisdom in your madness —- aye, and more. But I did revise it. I remember doing so quite clearly. I labored long and hard, till my lines grew like rows of corn. But, come the harvest — this! I know not. I understand not! I fail to find more than two lines. Do you think I am going mad?”

“No,” said Tom. “But all good luck to ye.”

By noon Tom met a horseman galloping down an alley. (Yet never a pot overturned.) The rider’s face was red with the sun; his armor gleamed golden. He bore an hourglass.


But the horseman shouted only, “Wait I cannot. Time was!” and galloped on.

Tom came to a courtyard. Guardsmen with pikes shrugged and let him pass.

Within, executioners sat around a chopping block, twirling their axes idly. They ignored Tom.

“Alas,” said one black-hooded fellow, burly, hairy, with tattoos of skulls on his arms. “I was to chop off the new queen’s head. ’Tis the ornament of our profession, the climax of a hard-worked career, and I remember doing it in one lovely, fine, clean swipe ———

“And I remember you doing it,” said an apprentice, “and it was truly the finest, cleanest swipe ever ———”

“Ye were but a babe then,” said a third man.

“But where is the queen’s head?” wailed the first. “And behold mine axe, its blade fresh and smooth and unnickled, never used for the chopping of queens.”

“It’s as if,” said a fourth gravely, “the very days of your life have been stolen away, and still you remember them, even as the rich man remembers his gold after it’s been robbed from him ———

“I’ll have the damned thief’s head!”

• • •

By nightfall — a chill autumn again, the intervening summer somehow skipped over —— Tom encountered a horseman on London Bridge itself, hoofbeats clattering, thundering; and the rider’s face was white as the snow in the fading sunlight, almost grey, and his armor flickered silver, then a chilly blue, then black as he rode. His gauntlet exposed a wrist of naked bone. This horseman, too, bore an hourglass, and cried out when Tom addressed him. “Time is past!”

And in the darkness of that night (snow-mothered, winter), Tom found Nick at last, or at least he thought he did. He wasn’t certain at first, for the Nicholas who came to him then could have been the great-grandfather of the ex-gaoler, so white-haired was he, so bent, so withered. He stood before Tom in the moonlight (a full Moon of spring, breaking through clouds and blossoms), leaning on a stick, trembling, his speech sometimes hard to follow because most of his teeth were gone.

But the madness was still there. Nick the Aged was still Nick the Lunatic. That, at least, was reassuring.

Nick seemed more exhausted than mad, however, and afraid.

“Tom, Tom, Tom. I stood in the tree, and watched the leaves growing and falling and growing again, flapping like wings of frenzied butterflies. I ate a lot of apples. I sang to my beloved. She sang in reply. I remember so much, a long life of love and madness, many adventures, but, but, where are all those years? I’m like a man who’s ate and drunk hugely, but his belly’s still empty. I’m cheated. I’m robbed——

“I met someone else who felt the same way, just recently,” said Tom.

“Can you help me? What will you do, Tom?”

“I shall sleep, Nicholas. I shall sleep.”

“Only that? Sleep?”

“Aye. Waking, I might be inclined to think, to reason in search of an answer, which is what a sane man would do.”

“God forbid, Tom. God forbid.”

“But the sleep of reason, Nicholas, produces——”

“Monsters?”

“Answers.”

• • •

Tom led Nick gently, patiently through the darkened streets. Once a troop of the watch came upon them, their armor and pikes gleaming in the pale moonlight. The two lunatics smiled, clapped, rang their bells. Tom did a handstand. Nick just stood there, leaning on his stick, swaying.
The watchmen marched by without pause.
Tom tumbled, trying to right himself, but somehow his limbs were stiff. His body was too heavy. His joints hurt. He found himself sitting on cold pavement, and his rump hurt too.

Nick stared at him sadly.
"What has happened to us, Tom? Are we both old before we were hardly young?"

Tom put his hand to his face and felt a bristly beard, which he could see was silver in the moonlight.

"Does even madness grow feeble, Tom?"
"No!" said Tom, leaping up, but stiffly, staggering with the effort.

At last they came to that same yard behind the ale-house. They stood by the wall. The back door opened and a thick-set man came out to dump the slops. He looked vaguely familiar, but only vaguely.

Tom and Nick sat against a tree which grew at the base of the wall — a tree where before had been bare ground — and slept.

Tom began to dream once more. Almost at once he saw the Bird of Fire in his dream, sizzling, streaking around his head, crying, "Awake! Awake! For lo! the rosy-fingered dawn hath touched the breasted hills; besides which you are late for your appointment with me —"

"So soon?" said Tom. "I've barely begun —"

"Go, go, go," said the bird. "No time! No time!
As it spoke, it crumbled into dust and ash, pouring like sand from the upper chamber of an hourglass into Tom's stomach as he snored.

Tom choked, but did not wake. He felt as if the awful beast Nightmare itself crouched on his chest, filling his dreaming mind with horrors. He saw churchyards yawn, truly yawn, as men and women scurried frantically through their lives, mere blurs down the avenues of the years, whizzing in and out of houses; and night followed day like the flapping of a dark wing; in the end the earth opened too quickly for Tom to see anyone dig the graves; it opened like a mouth, yawning, and swallowed the living before they had hardly begun to live.

He saw, too, that same apparition from his previous dream, the huge, burning foot trampling down the byways of the world, crushing forests and fields and towns in its path. Still the foot lacked a leg. Tom wondered who its owner was.

Then his madness stirred. Memories came together. Perhaps the burning worm in his stomach, the larval Firebird in his stomach, told him at last. He wasn't sure.

"Glory!" said he, still asleep.

The sun rose abruptly, rosy-fingered and all, but before Tom's eyelids could even flutter, the moon followed, and the darkness of another night. The moon hurled across the sky like a cannon shot — so fast that the Man in The Moon lost his seat and tumbled to Earth with a thud.

Then Tom awoke in the half-light of dawn, and the Man in The Moon sat up before him, somewhat embarrassed, muttering to himself. He looked a little like the still sleeping Nick, thin and silvery-bearded. He retained his lantern in his hand, and his thorn bush, but his dog was nowhere to be seen. His face glowed gently, brighter than the lantern.

"Oh my," the Man said, mostly to himself. "I never —"

Tom coughed. His tongue tasted of ash. He sat up beneath the tree and brushed ashes off himself. The band of bells around his cap jingled slightly. At the sound, the Man Formerly in The Moon looked up.

"Ah, a madman. Thy tribe is well known to me."

"Honored Master," said Tom, "I have howled to thee many the night."

"But, we have no time for such formalities," said the Man.

"Or much else, methinks, anymore."

"Verily, for it is our time which has been stolen away. Thus the hurry. Thus the thing over before it is begun. Thus the work left undone."

Suddenly all was clear to Tom, explained as it was from such an unimpeachable source.

"Verily, verily, ye and verily — if all our time is stolen away, then who took it?"

"And where?" said the Man. "Aye, there's the key."

But before Tom could answer, hoovesbeats thundered through the narrow street behind the wall, beneath the leaning eaves, over the cobbles, echoing, echoing through the ale-house yard. He looked up and saw a pale horseman within the yard now, bearing down on them, that same rider he had met before, whose face was baby pink, whose armor gleamed with the first light of day, whose jangling sword resembled nothing more than a huge icicle.

"Hold! You're not rosy-fingered Dawn," the Man From The Moon cried.

"No, but she's a relative" shouted the horseman, drawing his sword, raising it for a long, sweeping stroke.

Then Tom, with all the clarity of madness, with the inspiration of lunacy, knew what to do. He grabbed Nick by the hand and yanked him away just as the sword swished through the air where he had been.

The horseman clattered past.
Just as quickly, Tom grabbed the horse's tail with his free hand and he and Nick were whisked away like dry leaves in a gale.

"Time is," said the rider.

"Time was," said Tom.

Nick awoke, danging in the roaring wind, twisting to catch hold of Tom's wrist, then climbing up until both of them grasped the tail firmly.

"What time is it?" he said, puzzled.

"All time and every time, and no time at all," said Tom.

* * *

Still the two of them dangled and flapped in the hurricane of years, while around them London grew and shifted, towers rising like great beasts rearing up out of the earth, then the city burned, rose again, burned again; while the people on the streets were but blurred trails of motion, like wriggling serpents glimpsed through the periphery of the eye. Dark and light, day and night blended into a barely flickering grey. It seemed, once instants, that everyone churchbell in the city clanged, every voice cried out. Next, utter silence. Next, thunder.

"Where are we going?" Nick shouted.
And clamor, and clangor.
"To the bottom. To the end. To the very depths of mystery!"
And thunder.
"But Tom, you'd have to be mad to ———"
And clamor.
"But Nick, we are mad ———"
The horseman turned about in the saddle, regarding them without surprise. In the echoless silence he spoke, his voice like light, rattling gravel.
"We travel... to the Castle of Time... where my master dwells. There... all things... shall be accounted for... even... you."
"Where?" Nick asked, his voice weak and faltering.
"Not... where... When! HERE! NOW!"
And thunder.
And silence.
And the Castle of Time loomed before them. They were out of London now, clearly, out of England entirely. They had come to the world's rim, where stars swirled in them below in infinite depths. (Tom looked down, hoping for a glimpse of his giantess.) The sky before them was a deep, rich blue, then black as the Earth fell away behind them. The horseman galloped over the abyss as if on a dark, velvet road.

The Castle of Time rose up, darker than the sky, the stars its windows, the aurora gleaming from its battlements. Silently, like a yawning mouth, like a darkly gleaming jaw rising, the portcullis opened. The horse's hooves shot sparks from the pavement within.
"Tom," Nick whispered. "Where have we come to?"
"No time to explain ———

* * *

Lights whirled and bounded around them, like coals poured from a bucket in the night. Then, somehow, Tom's eyes adjusted, not so much to the darkness, but to the altered time, a changed rate of motion; and the lights resolved themselves into torches and lanterns in the hands of scurrying, hopping little men clad in black robes, their faces hidden behind black metal masks shaped like sundials. They reminded Tom of a flock of desperately pecking chickens, the gnomons of the sundials their restless beaks.

The horseman drew rein and sat still, while the little men bobbed around him, no taller than the horse's knee. He raised his face like a visor, and there was another face beneath, a thing of pale, carven ice. He smiled. His teeth gleamed like silver needles.

"Little ones..." His voice whistled like a winter wind beneath creaking eaves. "I have brought you... sststolen daysss... the timesss... and livesss of men ———"
One claw reached into a saddlebag and scattered forth a shower of ——— something. Tom's eyes could not follow. For a glimpsed instant, the falling objects were autumn leaves, then playing cards, then black, thin tiles.

Tom and Nick crouched in the shadows beneath the horse's rear, One of the tiles landed on Tom's head, caught in his hair. He slipped it into a pocket, then took hold of Nick again with his free hand, still clinging to the horse's tail.

All around, the little men scrambled, fought, cursed one another, in voices like the yip-yip-yip of tiny dogs.

Then the horseman moved forward again, steadily, ducking beneath a doorway but never dismounting, while Tom and Nick ran along pillared corridors filled with fire, with ice, with gentle sprinkling rain; through empty, howlingly frigid rooms where figures of bare bone and frozen earth moved in creaking slowness to complete some great dance.

Nick lost hold of the tail, but Tom held him firmly. He staggered and slipped and was dragged, merely bewildered by all around him.

In his old age, Nick was light as a babe. When the horseman once more sped to a gallop, Nick flipped in the wind like a huge, tangled ragthaing.

They came to a room where living, glowing arms floated in the darkness; and as the horseman passed the hands unfolded, revealing worlds in the palm of each hand.

In another room, harlequin faces whirled in the air like leaves in an autumn storm, shouting, weeping, crying one word over and over: 'Remember, remember ———'

At last motion ceased, and for an instant, before Tom's eyes adjusted again to the time of it, they seemed to hang in roseate space, the pale light flickering pink, then white, then deep red. But when he could see clearly, he made out intricately shaped glass pillars, a huge, curved and groined ceiling like a cathedral's, and all around him, fading into gray-blue distance in every direction, desks and cubbyholes and stools, and men and women of every shape and kind and color working furiously, filling the little black cards, stamping bundles with seals; while little, black-robed men scurried among them bearing baskets on their heads marked IN and OUT and COMING and GOING, and nearly as often as any of these, OVERLOOKED.

Everywhere, clocks stood on pedestals, ticking, chiming; waterclocks dripping, hourglasses dribbling their sand.

But it was the seated figure before him who held Tom's attention, and the horseman's. The rider did not dismount, but the horse bowed low, then quickly stood up again, and the man nodded his head.

A hugely fat person, like a beached whale of flesh clad in silver robes, was gathered in a throne top a short flight of steps. He couldn't be said to be sitting. Tom could not make out any legs, or shoulders. The face seemed to float above the great mass of the body, its cheeks reddish and wrinkled, its beard a grizzled silvery-grey and somehow ill-fitting. In one hand the creature held a scythe as a king would a sceptre. The other hand reached continuously into an open, silver cof- fer and took out handfuls of the black tablets of time, and popped them into the monster's mouth one by one.

"Dread Lord," said the horseman. "I bring... unto you... more of the sststolen daysss of men."
"Not exactly stolen," the fat one mused, its voice high and loud, like giggling thunder. "After all, I am Grandfather Time and all timely things belong to me anyway. Let us call them suddenly
appropriated."

"Yes, Lord."
The horseman unslung his saddlebags and offered them. Grandfather Time did not rise, but waved the hand that held the scythe, and his small servants poured some of the loot into the open coffee, the rest into their various baskets. They returned the empty saddlebags, then vanished with the baskets among the labyrinth of workers.

"How goes it on Earth under my new regime?"

"Hurriedly... my Lord. No one has much time to get his day's work done..."

"Truly a terrible shortage," said Grandfather Time; and his laugh was the voice of a somewhat high-pitched earthquake. His great body rippled as he laughed, and all the clocks in the huge room stopped ticking, then resumed again, unsteadily. "A terrible shortage, but still I must reap my harvest. It's my right..."

"Yes, Dread Lord."
Tom sensed an uneasiness in the horseman's reply, as if it were the obsequious muttering of one compelled by a greater power.

"Oh, by the way, there are a pair of thistles-burr in your horse's tail, shaped, I think, like..."

Nick let out a yelp. The horseman turned and glared down at them, his needle-toothed mouth more terrible than ever.

"Ah... my little... travelling... companions..."

Tom took off his hat and bowed low, sweepingly, his joints creaking and sore. He staggered to get up, then gasped, "Why Lord, we are nought but two wayfarers, faring on the way, out for the pleasure of the morning air, or evening. Or night. 'Tis wearisome hard to tell anymore, because..."

"Because time flies," Nick said feebly.

Again the enthroned one laughed, and his breath was a frigid gale which blew Tom and Nick off their feet and sent them spinning across the smooth, cold floor until they crashed into a desk. Papers and tiles spilled over them. An ancient woman who looked — and smelled — as if she had been dead for months, her fingers worked to the bone, scrambled on hands and knees, gathering things up.

"Oh, messy, messy, messy. Look at the nasty mess."

"Approach my dread throne."
The woman continued her work unheeding, for the voice did not command her. But Tom rose, almost by compulsion, and he helped Nick to his feet. Hand in hand, the two of them walked gingerly toward the throne, past the horseman, up the thirteen steps — then Tom let go of Nick and kept on walking, past throne and around behind it. He glanced back once and saw Nick before the throne, his knees trembling.

Grandfather Time sputtered in rage and rolled in the great masses of himself.

"You must excuse my friend and mentor, noble Sir," Nick said, "for he is quite mad, as am I, and it is the true nature of the madman to be indirect, and curious, and amusing of curiosity, and curiously odd, and oddly curious, and in general, I say, to be brief, distracted from the main straightway path of things, the journey of this life, for he has wandered from the road of that journey and become entangled in the thorns and brambles of his madness..."

Tom, behind the throne, heard this discourse and thought to himself, Good old Nick, who is truly mad at last, but he beheld something else entirely.

In the shadows, half hidden by curtains, a huge hourglass full twenty feet in length tumbled slowly over and over, telling no time at all, as the sand within poured first one way, then another.

A bony hand pressed outspread against the inside of the glass, then vanished into rolling sand; once again, a wizened face, shouting something before it was gone. Then a foot. Then two knees.

Tom stood by the side of the hourglass, leaning close to the glass chamber as it swung past, listening as the one trapped inside choked on sand and tried to speak.

"Mngghhh! Mmmmbill! Ghhkkk!"

Tom perked up. The accent was strange, and he did not know some of the vocabulary, but the meaning was clear enough.

He replied, "Mnfiff! Mngggule-manfiff! Mngghhhhh!"

"Mnnfiff! said the man inside the hourglass."

"Mnfiff! Ghhmmf!"


But then an iron hand hauled him off his feet and banged him against an iron breast, and he swung like a child's toy whirled in the air. His hat slid over his face for a moment, then was gone. He saw that he dangled from one hand, Nick from the other, of a gigantic clockwork knight, whose armor and body were all of springs and gears and ratchets, a million tiny parts moving like a swarm of angry ants. The knight's visor was open. Inside his hollow head, the top of an hourglass slowly dribbled sand down into his body.

The knight held the two madmen before the throne.

"Do you not know me and fear me?" thundered the red-faced, quivering mass.

"Aye, we know you," said Tom, "but we do not fear you, for we are both mad and fear naught but sanity; besides which we have already met and battled your kind before, in the persons of Grandfather Death, and the Grim Reaper, and Cousin Snip, as hath been raved and ranted in some detail previously..."

"Haa!" said the other, head and face seeming to float across the great expanse of himself, toward Tom. "Mere Death? The Reaper? Cousin Snip with those bashed-up shears of his? Haa! Haa! The competition, and hardly that, an inferior, unworthy, petty rival of an organization and nothing more. For, know ye both, I am the great and terrible Chronos, Grandfather Time, who have devoured all my children and grown great by doing so."

He leaned forward more, his belly rolling like a tide.

"Truly great," said Tom.

"But look all around you, madman, at my vast Bureau of Time, at the organization of days, whereby the lives of men are measured and their pitiful duration is doled out, then collected again when it is expended. That requires control. That requires organization. That requires a staff of many, many workers — and once I had eaten all my children, I considered eating my grandchildren too, but wisely restrained myself, because I need
them to run the place. Every minute, every hour
must be distributed fairly."

"Except when you eat them," said Tom.

"Aye, for eating all my children required a
huge appetite, which must still be satisfied. Even
I cannot control it. I begin with small things, a
morsel here and there. But the days of men are
sweet. Inevitably, I take more and more. So if
you recall some wonderful, pleasant moment which
seemed over too fast, some fleeting happiness you
can never recover — that's because I ate the
other half. Or more."

"Mostly more, for things have speeded up
fantastically."

"It has, little one. My appetite has caused,
I admit, a slight shortage, which necessitates in-
creased collections, exactions — a tax, you might
call it, on the very hours and days of your life.
But, sirrah, madness gives thee a clarity of mind
lacking in most men. Have we dreamt —?"

"Of a foot, just a foot, with flames from the
toes?"

"That same. You have, wiser of mortals.
So wise are you, that even when your time runs out
utterly, I shall not turn you over to the refuse-
collecting competition, to Death. No, I think I'll
keep you here forever, to work for me —"

"Concerning this foot —."

"'Tis the Foot of Glory," said Grandfather
Time. "The Hand of Glory is known to most mor-
tals, aye, to petty burglars even, a shrivelled
hand with a candle in it. What is the verse you're
supposed to recite when you light it? Let all within
stay fast asleep/ while I into this house shall
creep. The Hand of Glory slows down time and
aids the thief, but is of no use to me. Now the
Foot of Glory, on the other hand, if you'll excuse
the expression, goes clapping throughout the days,
skipping hours, skipping great expanses of time,
until morning and evening flash by with no day in
between. When it has been skipped over, the day
is still fresh and tasty and unused when I get hold
of it."

"Oh, Mighty One, what will become of us?"

wailed Nick, the bells on his cap jangling pathet-
ically.

Grandfather Time shifted again within the
glacial expanse of himself and regarded poor,
wizened Nick.

"Ha! Old man, I think you are older than
me, and I am as old as time itself." Once more he
laughed at the wonder of his own wit, and the hall
shook. "But, behold, your fate is that of your
wiser friend. Look about you." A huge hand and
arm rose out of a mountainside of flesh, like a fal-
len tree righting itself. The clockwork knight
turned around, back to its master, giving Tom and
Nick a broad view of the vast room, of the un-
countable slaves toiling there. "What will become
of you both? Why, why — we can always use
more help around here."

Then the knight strode forward, down the
thirteen steps and away from the throne, clicking
and creaking, dangling Tom and Nick inches above
the floor. It waded deep among the desks and ebb-
byholes, among the army of clerks.

"Welcome to eternity," someone said bit-
terly.

The metal giant paused at an empty desk,
then dropped its two burdens roughly into a pair of
chairs. It loomed over them as they labored, fil-
ing hours and checking off weeks, sliding little
cards of time into ebbbyholes and drawers, down
chutes; while, endlessly, endlessly the little
sundial-masked folk arrived with more baskets of
unspilled material.

It seemed to Tom that eternity did pass,
slowly, miserably, for he was infinitely weary, in-
finity hungry and thirsty, yet he could not rest or
eat or drink.

Even when the clockwork knight went away,
he could not stop, for some kind of magic was on
him. He was a slave, bound by an incomprehensi-
ble compulsion. There was always more to do,
more to straighten up, more to sort and put in or-
der and file away —

"We're doomed!" wailed Nick. "Doomed!"

"No, we are mad. Think on that. We are
mad, and in madness there is still hope."

Another eternity passed in furious agony.
Tom could not even dream. He hardly remembered
his days on Earth, the manifold riches of his mad
life. For just an instant he despaired, and thought
that Nick might be right after all.

"Doomed!" said Nick.

But then a withered hand pushed over Tom's
workbasket, and rattling days and weeks tumbled
into his lap, over the edge of the desk, onto the
floor.

And he could stop. Sighing, he sat back,
luxuriating for an instant in the sheer glory of
doing nothing, but only for an instant. Beside him,
Nick still worked furiously, tears streaming down
his deeply lined face, his slender hand bashing his
eyes. He hadn't even the time to brush it away.

Tom knocked over Nick's basket.

"Ah, look at all the mess. You'll have to
clean it up, but that's no worse than ordinary
work. And somehow, until you do, you get, ah,
time off...

Tom looked up at his benefactor and beheld
an aged seafaring man, his clothes all in tatters,
his face weathered and garbled as driftwood, some
tangle of bones and feathers around his neck.

"You must excuse me, I pray —."

"Excuse you! I thank you!"

"Tis an old habit of mine. I stoppeth one of
three —."

"But we're only two," said Nick.

The old sailor blinked and shook his head.

"Oh, really? Under the circumstances I can hardly
be choosy —."

And he launched into a vast and complex
tale, having to do with voyagings and aimless
driftings and horrors, and always something about
an albatross. Tom understood very little, but it
was a relief merely to listen. The sound of the
sailor's voice soothed him like the gentle lapping
of waves against the side of a boat.

Others came by to listen. There was a tall,
thin, somewhat decrepit Spaniard, knight who ex-
plained, when the sailor paused to swell some song
he somehow produced, that he had battled many a
windmill in his time, until finally one of them
battled back, and hit him squarely, which somehow
placed him in the present predicament. And there
was an ancient warrior — some kind of Moor, Tom
thought — whose tale was even more confounding:
a quest in darkness, a tree or bush or flower of im-
ortality, and a serpent who stole it away while
he slept by a stream.
"Damn'd sloppy of ye, man," said the sailor.
Before the warrior could reply, Nick broke in. "I remember! Ah, my brain fills up with sweet memory like ale poured into a cup! I remember a tree, an apple tree wherein I stood —"

Another man, naked but for a fig leaf, said, "I remember that tree too. How I wish I didn't."

"Nay! It was a sweet apple tree, in the garden —"

"Exactly. That's where it was."
"In London," said Nick.
"Never heard of London," said the naked man.
"I remember," said Nick slowly and deliberately, "standing in the apple tree in London beholding a bush of golden hair leaning between the bars of a high window, for the lady there was the very flower of love —"

"Gentles all," said the Spanish knight, "I fear this respite shall soon end." He turned his head. The others followed his gaze. The clockwork giant was lumbering toward them among the desks, scattering workers and masked dwarves as it came.

"We're doomed!" said Nick.
The others seemed to think so too.
"Only until our next meeting," said the old sailor. "This goes on and on, like the tale of my adventures, for all eternity."

Tom was certain he'd tire of the sailor's story long before then. There was but one thing left to do. His madness stirred his mind; his thoughts took on new shape, and he thought he understood what would follow.

"We're doomed," said Nick.
"No," said Tom. "Look at this. 'Tis of some, methinks."

"Doomed!"
The naked man, the warrior, the Spanish knight, and the rest all drifted away. The clockwork giant was nearly upon them.

Tom removed something from his pocket, one of the time-tablets, a polished rectangle as long as a finger, the one which had fallen into his hair out in the courtyard.

He studied it. Nick leaned over to see. The thing opened like a book. Within was written:

XXXI Februarius, Anno MDXXI

"Oh, I remember that day!" said Nick. "That was the first day I met — Oh, sweet, wonderful day, over far too soon!"

"Probably because someone stole part of it," said Tom. "Here, have the rest back."

He turned the page. The giant was standing over them now, clanking furiously, waving its arms, shouting, "Overdone! Undone! Never done! Clean up this mess!" But the voice was no louder than the trembling of a cracked, ugly-sounding bell when the wind touches it, and the giant, and the whole great Hall of Time shimmered like things of smoke. Then Tom was falling. He reached out, caught hold of Nick, and tumbled.

He saw London below, spreading out between parting clouds. He drifted down, gently as a feather, and landed with a thump on some old, damp leaves beneath a gnarled tree.

He looked around. Nick sat up beside him, bewildered, but young again. Tom's youth, too, had been restored to him.

"Ah!" said Nick. "Ah!"

"Ah?"

"I must hurry. For this is the one day, the true day, when first I met my beloved, the day which was wickedly foreshortened —"

"Aye, hurry, my friend," said Tom. "We have not truly escaped, but are merely on, as 'tis said, borrowed time."

So they ran through the streets of London on that damp, late-winter day, while the sun peered down through fogs, then vanished again. Nick was the first to reach the rich man's garden, to enter the apple orchard where bare trees stood against the grey sky and the air was sweet with the smell of rotting leaves and fallen, old apples.

Nick climbed a tree by the base of an old tower. Tom watched from below.

There was a lady at the window above them. Tom could see her pale face, her distracted gaze, her hair like spun gold hanging between the bars.

She sang:

"I am a maid that's mad with love,
and yet I can't complain —"

Bonk! Something struck her on the forehead, then flashed out of view.

Tom recognized this ancient ritual of lunacy, and he knew then that the lovers were a perfect match. He ran to the far side of the garden, tore a board from a fence, and brought it back to Nick, who sang in reply to the lady, swatting himself on the head between verses:

"I am a man that's mad with love" (Bonk)
"In love I feel no pain —" (Bonk)

On end on they crouched to one another, all through the day, while Tom sat contentedly, moved to tears by this touching, romantic scene. He wept too, happily at the memory of his giantess. Above him, after a while, Nick swayed unsteadily.

When the sun set and the day had ended, Tom had all but forgotten his other troubles. But as the shadows lengthened a voice came to him, as if in a waking dream, shouting from the depths of his own mind, "Undone! Overdone! Never done! Clean up this mess!"

He felt an iron hand on his collar.

Nick finally fell from the tree, smiling, sobbing, delirious with love, but something invisible grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and jerked him upright, and his face was suddenly slack with fear.

London rippled like a reflection in a pool disturbed by a pebble, then faded, as if swallowed in fog.

"Alas, the day is gone forever," said Nick.

"it is, but expended fairly," said Tom.

"Undone! Overdone! Work to be done!" said the huge, clockwork knight.

The giant lifted them up, but in that instant before London was utterly vanished, Tom gave a shout and called a secret name, and the gnomes suddenly parted in an explosion of light. The Bird of Fire whirled around Tom's head, streaming orange and white and golden.

"So there you are, Thomas of Bedlam! You're late! My schedule is off! The whole chronology of the seasons is amiss. Late! Late!"

"The day of our particular appointment was filched —"

"Never mind! I'm late —" cried the bird, and Tom opened his mouth. Fire poured down his
throat. Smoke wispéd from his nose, from his ears. Then the darkness returned and the bird was gone, its ashes settling within Tom.

Once more he felt the tiny, burning worm stirring in his stomach.

Once more he felt, too, that his joints were sore and stiff, that his youth was gone as the day vanished.

The clockwork monster held Tom and Nick above the smooth floor now, wading through overturned baskets and tumbled desks, kicking dwarves aside as it mounted the stairs and approached the throne of Grandfather Time.

"Shirkers, Your Hugeness, lazybones these are——"

Silver-bearded Chronos rolled on his throne like an avalanche.

"Then they shall have to work twice as hard to make it up," he said, "for, let's see, at least two eternities apiece——"

As the fat one scratched himself speculatively under his beard, which nearly came off and did slip onto one of his copious lower chins before he hastily put it back where it belonged——just then Tom was certain of everything he had learned, everything his madness had told him. It was all completely clear.

"Mmmmmnfullift!" he shouted. "Mmmmmnghgh!"

From the darkness behind the throne came an answer.

"Mnghgh! Vmmnaal!"

"Why, of course," said Tom.

"Stop that!" cried the fat one. "I, Grandfather Time, command you——"

Tom belched out fire. He replied with thunder. Smoke poured from his mouth and the Bird of Fire shot forth, renewed, all-powerful in its furious glory.

And in that glare, that sunburst, everything in the vast room stopped, even the trembling of the hourglass behind the throne. In his astonishment, the clockwork knight let go of Tom and Nick, but they merely hung suspended in the air inches below the iron hands.

Only the Phoenix, the Bird of Fire moved. It soared through the room trailing fire, weaving between pillars, exulting in its new life——

Tom coughed and managed to wheeze, "Go! Be free! But find a large hobbled gentleman known to me, who might wish to know what impostor has stolen that thing he has so sorely missed—"

In the afterflash of lightning, the bird was gone. The flow of time resumed. Tom and Nick hit the throne platform and scrambled away. The clockwork giant turned this way and that, unsteadily. Tom rushed at the metal knees and pushed with all his strength. The great automaton tumbled back down the stairs, crashing among the desks and shelves and cubbyholes, spilling baskets of time. Workers and dwarves scattered.

"Undone! Needs to be done!" cried the metal thing. Tom lit its back struggling to rise, but quickly the Spanish knight plucked it with a lance and the other warrior (some kind of Moor?) smote it with a sword. Gears and wheels spun across the floor.

Tom turned back to the figure on the throne.

"Imposter!"

"How dare you? You shall spend a million eternities in pain for this——"

"You are not Grandfather Time! You are a fake!"

The monstrosity roared, waving its scythe furiously. It coozéd off its seat at alarming speed. Tom jumped back, down several steps. The breath of the thing was like a hurricane as it screamed in rage.

"Tom!" Nick shouted, barely audible over that terrible wind. "Run away! Quick! Run!"

But Tom ran toward the thing, not away from it, back up the steps as the wall of quivering flesh rushed upon him. With a great leap he landed on a mound of fat, right below the astonished creature's face. He caught hold of a robe to steady himself, then a lapel, then a necklace, then a grey beard——

Which came off in his hand. He tumbled backwards, as if down a mountainside, onto the floor with a thump. He sat up, holding the beard, while the huge, baby-faced monster sat still above him, trying to cover its face with its hands.

It dropped its scythe down in front of Tom.

The whole Hall of Time was silent and still. Even the three horsemen, who had arrived from somewhere, remained absolutely motionless in their astonishment.

Once more Tom leapt up, the scythe in his hands. He ran around the creature, up the steps, around behind the throne, and with a single stroke of the scythe, smashed the great hourglass.

Glass flew. Sand poured out, and an old, bent man tumbled against the back of the throne. Everyone and every thing in the room gasped as this figure stood up straight. A thin fellow in grey tatters, his beard now short to silvery stubble, and a terrible gleam in his eye.

"I am Chronos, Grandfather Time," he said, clutching the side of the throne, swaying unsteadily. "I am the true King of Years. I am he who devoured his children."

"Except one," said Tom softly.

"Aye, except one. That one!" The old man pointed a bony finger at the impostor. "No damn good, the lot of them. Eating them was the smartest thing I ever did——"

"Then why, Great Sir, did you not eat them all?" Tom asked.

"Look at him! Behold! He is Gluttonous Maximus, the Eater of Time. He's so huge! Always has been, even when he was a child. Always, always, I caught him with his hand in the sweeties jar, until his hand got so big it wouldn't fit! Know ye, when I devoured all my other children, as has been famously reported, I came upon this one last, and I contemplated his bigness; but I was so full that I couldn't even think of eating another bite. So I spared him. The more fool I——"

"Yes, fool!" said Chronos the Younger, the Glutton, turning on the stairs, sliding slowly back up toward the throne. "I overwhelmed you once. I confound you in that hourglass. I stole your beard and your scythe and your throne. What makes you think I can't do it again?"

"Upstart whelp!"

Grandfather Time rushed upon the Glutton, but froze in mid-stride, for a huge, fat hand held up a single, gigantic foot, severed but alive, toes wiggling, blue flames flickering from beneath the toenails.
Once more, nothing moved. Even smoke hung in the air like a solid thing.
"You recognize this, Papa? It slows down time. It stops the hours so I can have my pick of them. It is the fabled and famous Foot of Glory."

"And it belongs to me, Glory O'Grady!" The new voice thundered louder than any before. The wind of its breath knocked over every desk in the hall. Tiles and broken vases flew. Plaster and stones rained down from the ceiling. In a kind of blasting silence beyond all comprehension of sound, the hall shook. The great pillars swayed like saplings in a storm. Tom felt himself buffeted about like a leaf in a hurricane.

When the thundering faded, from pain to sound to silence, Tom found himself sitting distractedly among a pile of ruined desks, amid spilled days and weeks, and even a few long, simmering years. The ruined head of the clockwork knight chattered in his lap.

"Clean up this mess. Clean up. Clean up."

Tom threw the head aside and struggled to his feet, then beheld that large, hobbed gentleman known to him, whom the Firebird had summoned, a naked blue giant as tall as a medium-sized mountain, with spiked hair and mustache like streaks of pale lightning.

Hobbled, yes. The giant lacked a left foot and stood on a stump. Its left hand was missing too. But its right hand and foot were all the more remarkable for their uniqueness: the hand writhing with golden, snake-like fingers, each longer than a man is tall; the foot encrust with precious gems, itself carven of living stone, with a hundred mouths between the gems, gaping, each shouting in its own voice, in a babble of different tongues as the giant walked. With each footfall the floor cracked. Fragments flew.

"Yes! I am Glory O'Grady, the last of the Giants of Albion! Know me! Hear me! When Brutus the Trojan was the first human come into our British Isles, he cast all the giants into the sea. He caught me at an awkward moment, for my feet were having an argument, and, carven as they were from the very stones of the Tower of Babel, they didn't make themselves understood very well. They didn't agree. So one stepped forward, the other back, and I was all a-tangle, defenseless when the Trojan mauled me and tossed me, too, into the briny deep. But hear me! Fear me when I am complete once more!"

The giant reached down and snatched its missing foot out of the Time Glutton's limp hands.

"When I am whole, the whole world will shake!"

Glory O'Grady replaced its missing foot on its left ankle, then crouched down, laughing with joy and with triumph, and leapt upward with the full strength of both feet; with a roar, with a rush of wind, the giant was gone and the entire roof of the Castle of Time had vanished with its passage.

Tom, Nick, and the rest stood in the returning silence, in the roofless ruin of the castle, beneath brilliant stars.

"Ah, dearest Father," said the fat one. "I can explain. I didn't mean to be wicked --"

"I am so hungry!" said Grandfather Time, the true, lean, devouring King Chronos. "My long exile has given me a terrific appetite!"

"No! I pray you! No! Help! Murder! Cannibalism! infanticide!"

"But delicious!" said Grandfather Time.

The Glutton oozed away into the darkness like an animate river, vanishing in the distance amid ruined walls and gaping tunnels, his famished elder relative in close pursuit.

"... this mess..." said the clockwork head.

* * *

The Phoenix returned briefly, flickering around Tom's head for an instant, whispering,

"So I have delivered the hobbled gentleman. But I met another in my travels, a huge lady, who sends her regrets, who remembers you fondly and will someday return..."

And gone.

"Ah, the glories and delights of love," said Tom, sighing.

"Also!" said Nick, regarding himself. "I am too old and too bent for my true love..."

"Nicholas, fear not. As I love you with a friend's love, I promise that you shall have all your stolen days returned."

"Deliverer, we bow to you."

The three horses kneeled, then rose. The three riders nodded. They spoke with one voice.

"For you have rescued our true master from his prison. Now may we ride forth again to gather the expended days of mankind, but fairly, taking only such as are truly passed, as have been lived."

Tom bowed low in return.

"Then a boon from you I ask, as my reward."

The horseman were silent.

"Take my friend Nicholas here," said Tom, "and return him to London, but in his youth. Give him back his stolen days."

"It shall be so."

Straining, hoisted by Tom, Nick climbed up behind the pink-faced horseman, whose name was Sunrise. Tom smiled at Nick briefly, and Nick raised a hand. Tom would have replied, but in an instant faster than his eye could follow, the pink-faced horseman was gone.

He spent what must have been a morning gathering up scattered days in baskets. Some of the dwarves helped, desperate for something to do. He led a whole army of them onto the broken terraces of the Castle of Time. The Earth turned slowly below, blue and white and brilliant, and all of them poured the black tiles, the stolen days, into space, down onto the world.

Then the second horseman, whose name was Noon, came to him and said, "Ride with me."

Tom rode, clinging to the golden shoulders of the horseman's armor, down the black velvet highway of the sky, down through the stars, below the Moon again — the Man In The Moon had regained his seat there; he smiled as Tom passed — and into the bright sky of day. For an instant he was among the clouds, surrounded by honking geese. Then the streets of London rushed up at him, and he was tumbling across the cobblestones, but alone. He fell face-down into a rain puddle and lay still. Sputtering, he sat up and looked around. The horseman was gone.

Then he leaned over, and regarded his reflection in the puddle, and saw that he was young
again. His stolen days had been returned, except for those the Glutton of Time had actually eaten. These lingered in memory, as gaps in his life, but they were few.

He wandered through the city that day, telling people of his adventures, singing mad songs, falling off walls, walking on his hands to make people laugh.

In the courtyard of the executioners, men still sat twirling their axes.

"Alas," said one. "I had hoped to chop off the new Queen's head a fortnight since, but in the fulness and leisure of his days, the King ever hesitates. 'We can always do it tomorrow,' is all he says."

"Alas," said another.

"Patience," said an old man. "You too have tomorrow. You can wait."

The first regarded Tom. "We could always chop his head off, just to pass the time."

"Not my poor head," said Tom gently, "for I am mad and my head is empty. It would make a poor trophy." He fell down and spun on the ground, madly. Then he sat up and told them of the Castle of Time and of Glory O'Grady, assuring them that there would indeed be a tomorrow, and a next day to wait for the Queen.

"You are the most entertaining rogue I've ever met!" said the first headman. "That I didn't kill, anyway."

"Aye!" said the second. "Here. Take this token. You can have a place in the front row whenever we get to do it."

"Tis a tale told by a lunatic," mused the third, "full of sound and fury, signifying sound and fury."

"Being mad is thirsty work," said Tom. His throat still tasted of ashes.

All of them adjourned to a tavern Tom knew, where the boy who let them in was indeed a beardless boy again. They made merry and told more tales, of time and automatons and particularly picturesque decapitations, until long after the third horseman, whose name is Nightfall, had ridden through the streets of London trailing darkness like a cloak.

At last Tom retired to the wall in back, but he did not sleep. He met Nick there, young Nick, who was too excited to sleep either. The two of them walked the streets, intermittently howling at the Moon, while Nick explained what had befallen him.

"I have borrowed a saw from a lazy ironmonger — who says he won't miss it since he can always do his work tomorrow or the next day — and I shall climb to my lady's window and cling to the bars, and while clinging saw through them, until she is free. Then we shall be wed —"

"But if you cut through the bars while you yet hold them, you shall surely tumble —"

"Nick tumbled, from hands to feet, to hands, cartwheeling.

"Love has its tumbles," he said. "That is the way of it!"

* * *

Much, much later they came upon a burgler who had just placed a mummified hand in a windowsill and lit the candle set in the middle of the palm. He recited a rhyme.

"Excuse me," said Tom, tapping him on the shoulder, "but I know a large gentleman who's looking for that."

Thunder spoke in the distance. (Was it only a storm?)

SHROUDED LAKE

Under skies like tarnished slate,
through the wraith-haunted forest of Weir,
I seek my own far lake of Auber
beckoning now through mists of fear.

I shudder down the leaf-strewn aisles,
dreading the place where they may lead.
Silence grips the gleaming pools,
the blackened limb and fallen reed.

Searching for what I dread to find,
I see a dim, untrodden trace
which takes me deep inside the wood
to a forgotten yet familiar place.

Across a lake's unmoving waters,
blurred by late October's haze,
gravestones loom like sudden ghosts.
I stop abruptly, stand and gaze.

I remember, now, this shrouded lake,
this graveyard — and on the hill above
the ivy-spread and forlorn vault
which holds my first and only love.
OUT, OUT, OUT

by Peter C. Smith

Quite how the subject of our conversation got to be exorcism I was never sure, certainly it was the last thing on our minds when we entered the bar of the Lamb in Lambs Conduit Street one rainy lunchtime. There was the usual crush that got progressively worse but we were early arrivals and availed ourselves of one of the few tables along the bar wall, although Brian, obstinate to the end, stood throughout. But it was something of a fetish with him; he hated sitting down and drinking. Outside, the rain lashed down in cold torrents and the newcomers, who gradually filled the limited space of the horseshoe-shaped bar, were wringing wet and moaning, while the atmosphere, when the crush heated up, was fuggy in the extreme. Still we six were snug enough and Raymond kept serving our pints with the dexterity and precision that marked an expert, so we had no worries.

It was probably Colin who first raised the subject. A voracious reader of the more lurid types of popular paperbacks, he frequently regaled us with his own edited versions and criticisms of his latest finds and library acquisitions. As we were all in the print game as book salesmen, printers and paper merchants, much of our normal conversation usually centered on various aspects of the Book Trade, but Colin preferred talking about the end-product which we all found less boring than shop-talk about what went into making them, and we were duly grateful for small mercies.

Colin was bemoaning Ben's ear about a book he had just finished for some while before I listened to him with any attention, being more concerned with arguing with Trevor on some aspects of hardback prices and the futility of the Frankfurt Book Fair (which I always regarded as a circus and a sham, whereas Trevor enjoyed it immensely for it enabled him to stock up with the current pornographic literature "on the house" as it were!), so the discussion had become heated in our corner. When we eventually agreed to call it quits and looked around from our empty glasses in the hope of somebody getting another round in, Colin was already summing up.

"As I say," he was shouting above the crowd in Ben's left ear, "the plot was quite good, for him, but the whole thing fell down at the end when the bloody ghost had scared the pants off everybody and he had to bring in that old chestnut, the exorcist, to get rid of it and finish the book. I mean to say, after the novel and film of the same name, anything to do with that old ploy is really played out and I felt cheated."

"I agree," replied Ben. "That Bell, Book and Candle stuff went out with Walter Scott, although when things get a bit slack one of the Sunday Dreadfuls usually takes it all up again to fill some pages."

"What always puzzles me with that sort of thing," interrupted Brian, turning back from the bar after catching Raymond's eye and ordering, "is what happens to the unquiet spirit when it has been exorcised. If it's really evil then where does it go to? To Hell, where it should have gone in the first place, or up above as a redeemed newstart?"

"Haven't a clue," said Colin. "Tell Ray not to talk about it. I want a drink, not a bloody bubble-bath!"

"I think that perhaps some of them, I mean the truly earth-bound spirits, would have to find another home or abode," said Peter. He had been sitting quietly drinking and smoking, mainly listening as was his invariable custom at these get-togethers. He lived out of Town, down in the far depths of rural Cambridgeshire somewhere, and his bi-monthly trips back to civilization were usually the signal for these assemblies of the former workmates and friends. Although he never had a great deal to say he always had ideas which the others took over and discussed as their own while he patiently heard them out and made his own judgments, but this time he seemed particularly keen to make his point, which was unusual.

"You may be right there, Peter," burst in Colin, "but where and how? They couldn't just pick on someplace or someone at random surely, spoils the whole concept of spooks and haunted houses if they can take their custom anywhere they choose, willy-nilly!"

"I don't pretend to know, or even pretend it's practicable, if anything to do with spectres is practicable or rational at all. But I would have thought that the choice who took it upon himself to uproot a domiciled ghost would have to be damn careful that he didn't assume responsibility for the victim of his eviction, as it were."

"Yes, I can imagine any vengeful ghost, in the true tradition, would be hopping-mad at getting cast out of his favourite haunt, no pun intended. And the chap he would be maddest at would be the Johnny who did it to him."

"It's all a load of rubbish anyway," chipped in Trevor. "I've never heard of anyone who had to have a house exorcised, have you?"

"I think that perhaps Peter has," said Brian, looking thoughtfully at the sober, bespectacled form in the corner who was staring at the table and toying with his beer. Brian had known Peter longer than the others and knew his moods better.

"Well, haven't you, Peter?"

"Well, not exactly known them. But I ran into an interesting example of what we have been discussing not more than a month ago. Of course the original thing all happened a very long time ago and the evidence is fragmentary really. A lot of it may be just pure guesswork, coupled with some rich embellishments over the years. Still, it makes one think a bit."

"All right then, Peter," said Trevor. "It's my round and it's still raining. I don't think any of my customers are going to see me any more today, so let's make an afternoon of it. Out with it."

"Well..." said Peter dubiously, "it is a bit involved and rather rambling. Are you sure you have the time?"

"We will make time," grinned Colin. "I'm here for the day now anyway."

"The thing really started with some research
I was doing out in Suffolk," Peter began. "You know we are doing that endless series on British Country Houses, been going donkey-years now but the punters keep buying and so we update and bring out new editions from time to time. A bit dusty really but it's a living and sometimes you find things that are interesting. Mainly we have to check out the houses and mansions described in the old editions, just to see if they are still standing mainly, or are still inhabited. It's surprising how many have gone in the last twenty years or so. Still, that part of the job is routine. Then we have to check out if the facts in the old editions are correct, or if there is anything new or interesting to add on to the end so we can call it 'New and Revised' on the title page. As I say, boring."

"But right up your street, eh, Peter?" chuckled Brian, nudging Trevor. Peter ignored the jibe, as he always did, and stolidly ploughed on with his yarn.

"It's not a job to suit most tastes, that's for sure," he continued, "but it's steady work and you have to admit they keep selling the stuff and making profits, and how many publishers in the more fashionable parts of the business can say that much? When you consider that the average novel only sells about 600 copies, can you believe that, 600 copies, before it is pulped, then our steady 2,000 copies per edition, year-in, year-out, with little overheads for trendy writers with greedy agents to take a slice out of the profits, begins to make sense surely. At any rate it keeps my bosoms in Volvot and Golf Club Memberships and me in suits that are only two years out of fashion so it must have something to commend it."

"You can imagine that, with a book on such subjects, there is a uniformity about each entry that, unless it can be laced with something or someone rather out of the ordinary, makes the whole thing read like an elaborate Gazetteer. In truth of course that is what they are, but we cannot admit that of course! And so, when one has given the reader all the facts of the history and the architecture of the house, the history, exploits and lineage of the families who built it or presently own it, throw in how many cannon-balls hit it during the Civil War and what landscape expert laid out the grounds in the Eighteenth Century, one has more or less shot one's bolt."

"You can readily understand that any mention then of a family ghost or some particular haunting associated over the years with the house is a godsend. So much so in fact that I doubt whether there is any great house, in our endless series of great houses, that has not been credited with at least one visitation of the supernatural."

Peter took a long swig of his beer and continued.

"There again you see, ghosts themselves have now become rather part-and-parcel of the whole grisly ensemble along with the family chapel, the folly on the hill and the nameless mausoleum. But they remain pretty good copy but our Chief Editor, wanting some excuse to excuse his position, had dug out an old boxfile of criticisms of our series dating back for a quarter of a century and these he had waded through diligently. 'Looking for a pattern of failure' was how he termed it. The old boy used to be a Colonel in the Catering Corps or something and knows nothing at all about publishing, but 'patterns of failure' he thought was a good ploy with which to show he was doing something, and, finally, he found one. Or rather he found a few letters on the same subject which fitted his brainwave. Apparently at least five people from the thousands of readers of the previous twenty-five years had written in with evidence that, in houses we had claimed ghosts for, none in fact existed, or ever had. Five might not seem many, but stapled together and thrown at me across his desk one Monday morning, they seemed to be sufficient to make that line of attack the company policy for the new series."

"I want you to vet every entry on this point," ordered the Colonel with his unblinking stare. 'Go into it and do your homework. I want no such letters on the Suffolk book. Understood!"

"I had long ago given up arguing that it was all a waste of time, and, although I didn't exactly salute, I let him know that I would employ myself diligently in tracing all those I could in the time allowed to me."

"He seemed satisfied with this; after all if I missed any I would get it in the neck, not he. I decided that my method would be of the simplest. First I got hold of every detailed book I could lay my hands on in the local library on ghosts and sightings, and plodded through, looking for those that resided in Suffolk. From the various volumes I was then able to put a red tick against my typed list of the houses we were going to include and consider them sufficiently 'written-up' to pass muster. At least I would have a list of distinguished sources to quote back if anyone complained. This left one with a hundred or about ten which were not mentioned in any book."

"I disposed of most of these by the simple process of ringing up the local paper in each area and chatting to the journalist or editor on duty. Most would start quoting from old stories in their files and those I ticked. Only one failed to come through, not because he had nothing but because he was in a foul mood, said he hated all damned book publishers and had no intention of doing my bloody job for me! This was fair enough of course; I was thankful that it was only one who had taken this line. I had only this one, from my whole list, that needed work, so I resolved that name, which happened to be Rundlewicks Manor beyond Woodbridge and made that my target for research. I had done well for, with one day's work, I had eliminated all save one and the old man had allowed me a week to complete the job. Accordingly, I told him that I would be conducting a series of searches in Suffolk, obtained petrol vouchers, hotel fees and a goodly sum from the accountant, and buzzed off for a week's holiday with pay in Suffolk."

"Christ!" said Colin in awe, "and you are supposed to be the country cousin, Peter. Remind me to have a little chat with you on expenses some time, will you."

"Ah, but I really planned to dig into Rundlewicks Manor before settling back on my illicit days on the beach. And I did. The local library was helpful when I got down there and had several pamphlets on the Manor itself, and one or two books I had not seen as sources in our original volume were also made available to me. But, although I spent a day diligently plodding through them and other such documents as were available
on the family itself, nothing positive came up other than the fact that, for a period in the late 1700's, a ghost was reputed to have been in evidence at the Manor. But the family had refused to talk about it and consequently it was only rumour that had been the basis for our original entry to that effect, and not hard evidence. Perhaps rumour would have been enough, there was certainly nothing on this haunting after about 1810, but I determined to follow through as far as I could. After all, I needed one at least to eliminate from the book to keep the Colonel happy that his hunch had been right!

So I turned to the Parish Records, again with result. Eventually I tackled the newspaper editor again, this time over a drink in his local. He proved to be far more amenable after a few pints and gave me the run of his own archives, but as they only went back to around 1830 they contained nothing at all to prove or deny the rumours were anything other than just that, rumours. I confessed myself beaten, but he sympathised and recommended a step which I should have thought of myself, and that was to examine the Church Archives. I was introduced to the local vicar the next day and he was kindness itself. He confessed that his own knowledge of the history of the village and the Manor was confined to those volumes (our original among them) of the more popular nature that I had already had access to. But he did show me to the attic of his large rambling rectory where, he said, there were stacks of dusty shelves lined with books he had inherited from the former occupant. And so it proved, shelves indeed and a few old trunks also, all in state of extreme dilapidation and clearly ignored for many decades.

"He left me to it. His wife kindly brought me sandwiches and cups of lukewarm tea from time to time and I waded slowly through the books in methodical diligence. It was wearisome work; the light was not good up in the attic, coming only through the narrow windows and up high in an embryo dormer, and the solitary electric light bulb might have been one of Edison's originals for all the help it was.

"Outside it was a lovely July day, blistering hot, and every so often I stopped work and peered longingly out onto the vicarage lawn where my host and his wife, along with a few of the local W. L., were partaking of a bring-and-buy sale in the sunshine. But, although my heart was away on the beach, I gritted my teeth and determined to sacrifice the rest of that day to work, no matter what the cost. After all, I told myself, I still had Thursday and Friday to sunbathe before I had to go back to work and it was now far too late to reach the nearest seashore at Aldeburgh before evening. So I got on with it, getting hotter and dustier by the minute.

"As the afternoon wore on in this tiring way, the combination of the heat and the grey dust I was breathing brought on the start of what I knew, from past bitter experience, was going to be the mother-and-father of all migraines. I knew it was coming but knew nothing I did would stop it now, and so resigned myself to it. I did take three aspirins with one of the cups of hot water which the Vicar's lady brought me once, but I swear I had nothing else at all that afternoon, and certainly no alcohol was offered to me, much though it would have been welcomed.

"Unfortunately the books on the shelves proved to be in no sort of order whatsoever, but just thrown together in random fashion, as if, and I imagine this was the case, someone many years ago had decided to tidy up the attic and had contented themselves with merely that. No attempt to place them in any sort of date or alphabetical order had been made.

"I knew from my research by date, that anything dating after 1810 would not help me at all, so that narrowed my field somewhat, but the trouble was that many of these books had no indications on their spines as to what period they might belong to, some indeed had no titles blocked thereon at all. So I had, perforce, in most cases to drag each volume from its place on the shelf and open it at the title page to gain a clue as to whether I should place it on the instant-reject pile, a very large one, or the to-be-examined-further pile, also considerable.

"Eventually, after what must have been two or more hours, I completed the first stage of my task and set about stacking all the books I had rejected back on the shelves. I must confess by this time my head ache abnormally and my eyes to began to show how low I had been kept. So I was no more particular of what order I replaced them than my unknown predecessor had been. This task completed, I took another rest at the window before setting about closer examination of the smaller pile of older books.

"It was then that I first started to get the strangest sensation that I was not alone. It's difficult to pin it down, though I have thought about it often enough since. It was just a feeling, nothing more, that one gets sometimes when one has been alone for a considerable time, that one is being watched. I was gazing out of the window at the time across the busy lawn and out over the shimmering trees and irises baking in the glare of the afternoon sun. It must have been about four o'clock, but, if anything, the heat was greater than at midday and I was sweating from my exertions.

"All at once I seemed to sense two eyes boring into the back of my neck. It was like a real shock, I could almost feel a presence behind me, so much so that I thought the vicar or his wife had come with yet another installment of liquid refreshment. Indeed I turned around with a smile on my face to welcome them and thank them for their thoughtfulness. I think I had my mouth open ready to form the conventional words of gratitude. But the attic was absolutely empty, nor was there any noise on the stairs to indicate that anyone had peeped in on me from below.

"It was a few moments before I recovered from this shock and set about the second stage of my self-appointed task. I was more determined than ever to get it over-and-done-with this day and get away for the rest of the week, whether I split my head in the process or not; at least it would be finished.

"I had worked my way through more than half the bulky old books left on the floor before I found anything of interest at all. It proved to be some poorly bound copies of a Coronet's Reports on the death of one of the former inhabitants of the Vicarage, one Revd. Nathaniel Greenley of St. Bartholomew's, the village church of Rundleswick-
son Magna. This was of no use to me and I was about to throw it aside with the others when the date of the report caught my eye. It was November 17th, 1811. This was past the date I had set myself for a datum, but as it was the closest yet I had come to it I idly leafed through it.

"It appeared that the vicar's demise was something of a local mystery at the time and the verdict was recorded as being 'Death by some Person or Persons Unknown.' In other words, murder! This was an eye-opener. A village person murdered in such a sleepy hamlet was indeed news, although of course I would not be able to use it in the book. Nonetheless I felt interested enough to go into it further, taking the book with me over to the window to get the light better on the yellowing pages. The report was handwritten in crabby script and was very difficult to make out, so badly had the black ink faded over the course of a century-and-a-half.

"Within a short while I was congratulating myself more than somewhat, for of course the dead vicar was no less than the man who had rid Rundleswickson Manor of its Haunter! This was confirmed in the text of the evidence given, apparently, behind closed doors. Still it was authentic enough and proved that the rumours had the firm basis of fact behind them. That should have been sufficient for my purposes but I determined to read more of such a strange event.

"It was clear from the transcript that the hushing-up of the haunting of the Manor House was the work of the owner, Sir Cedric Hardshaw. He was then something of a force in the county and the country, being a rising politician, and although the hauntings had been persistent for many years, he had always sought to keep it quiet lest it jeopardize his standing in the House and in the land. In short, he, as with many other self-important personages before and since, feared ridicule above all else. In the aftermath of the death of the Revd. Greenly the whole tale had to come out, but, even so, by common agreement as it was held to have no direct bearing on the case eventually, it was still not made public generally.

"It seemed that when Sir Cedric's ancestors had built their Great Manor in the mid-19th's, they had appropriated vast tracts of land that had hitherto been held by local peasants and farmers. These were duly compensated, liberally so in the light of the custom of the day, and none had protested over much save one, a Richard Saunders, a somewhat reclusive-like figure about whom little was known. He flatly refused to leave his home, which was situated exactly where the main hall of the present manor now stands, no matter what inducements were made to him. Finally Court Orders were issued and the man was forcibly ejected, his house razed and the Manor rose on its foundations.

"But even so Saunders had refused to accept defeat and took to hanging around the place at all hours, muttering threats and curses on the Hardshaws for taking away his one true home. He appeared to have become a confounded nuisance, but no more than that, until one evening he waylaid the second Earl and attacked him with a cudgel. Forced to defend himself the Earl had struck him down and the man had died of his wounds despite every aid. But before he passed away he uttered a last curse, to the effect that:

"'He who usurps me from this land shall henceforth never walk alone!'

"It would appear that he kept his word after death, for his bent and shapeless figure would often be reported hovering around the grounds for many years. He was only seen, apparently, by members of the Hardshaw family themselves, never
by their retainers or visitors. As the years passed his shade was seen in the Manor itself on many occasions and finally Sir Cedric, having himself sworn sightings on many moonless nights of a hunched figure with a cudgel in the corridors, called in the clergy and warned them to secrecy. In fact the Revd. Greenley performed the exorcism on the night of November 17th, 1810 and after that date the ghost was never seen again in the Manor house.

"That would appear to have been the end of the problem, and of my search, but I was much struck by the coincidence of the dates, within an exact year of each other, of the expulsion of the Saunders and the death of Greenley. So I read on. It seemed that the vicar was found dead in his living-room that evening by his maid. He had been bludgeoned to death, much like poor Saunders, but the perpetrators of this dastardly deed were never brought to justice. It was indeed a senseless crime for nothing had been stolen, the theory being that the intruders had been scared off by the arrival of the servant before they could take anything. The only evidence as to the possible identity of the criminal, and this merely confirmed that it was probably a man or men, was the word of the maid herself. She stated that she had heard Greenley shouting in a loud voice as she came up the drive. 'Out-Out-Out!' appeared to be his only cry, as if he had come upon the intruders in his house and ordered them to leave.

"She stated further that, just before she entered the room where the murder was done, she heard another voice, a strange kind of voice, weak and so soft but still audible enough through the door and full of menace, replying to the vicar's demands. 'Cast out I have been, but to you I transfer my company. And so it shall always be.' This of course made no sense at all, unless it indicated that the interloper was a homeless vagrant, but under cross-examination the maid admitted that the words were not that clear and she could not be certain she had reported them correctly.

"All this was fascinating stuff all right but time was drawing on. I had the proof I needed and my head was really getting impossible. I turned from the window a second time and was immediately struck by the same feeling of watching that had affected me earlier, and it was just as intense. I must admit that I was frightened, so much so that I dropped the book I was reading. But, again, there was nothing there at all. Although the light was poor beyond the range of the window, and the single bulb glowing but feebly, it was sufficient to leave no overt shadows or dark mysterious corners where a demon could have lurked unseen. The whole room was no more than twelve feet long by eight feet wide. Apart from the shelves of books that lined all the far side opposite the entrance door, a number of old and mouldering cassocks or cloaks hung in one corner with a walking stick, two faded prints and about six large brass-bound trunks, the room was completely empty. There was no hiding place whatsoever in that room. Moreover the door was slightly ajar. I had left it so, to let in a little more air into that stuffy place, and I could see a little way down the stairs. There was nobody there. It was all very weird.

"I decided that I had had enough. The place was obviously getting on my nerves so I finally decided it was time to quit. I therefore crossed to the remaining pile of books and replaced these with careless and somewhat nervous haste. Then I tucked the Court Reports under my arm and turned to leave.

"By the time I reached the door my nerves must have begun to go bad, for, as I stepped through and put out my hand to close it behind me, my tired mind started playing tricks on me in no uncertain manner and, for a heart-stopping moment, it appeared to me that the pile of old clothing hanging in the corner suddenly moved and rippled with a semblance of life! Out of the corner of my eye I imagined I saw the walking-stick, which was more in fact like an old gnarled piece of tree branch, raise itself into the air as if brandished in rage, or triumph.

"Such was my state that I tarried not an instant longer but slammed the door shut fast behind me and turned the key in the lock. Then I threw myself down the stairs in a frantic rush, taking them two at a time and almost knocked over the vicar at the bottom such was my rate of descent. As I clattered down the wooden steps in my panic I thought I heard a crash up above, as if something bulky had thudded into the floor, but I imagine that it was merely a section of the books I had so hastily stuffed onto the shelves at the finish, which had been dislodged by my frantic departure and had fallen off onto the attic floor. In all events I did not feel inclined to go back and investigate.

"I must confess that the vicar looked at me with some alarm and when I caught sight of myself in the mirror I could see that I cut a sorry picture. My clothes were covered in a liberal coating of dust, as was my face and hands. My hair was somewhat awry and my face white. My eyes staring. I apologised for my condition and explained that my head felt as though it was bursting open and that I could not stay up in the attic any longer. About my illusion I remained silent of course. I asked him if I might borrow the book for a while and return it by post later, and he seemed quite happy about that. After I had again thanked my host and his wife once more I duly went on my way.

"I did not enjoy my illicit two days by the sea. I put up at the Grand at Orfordness and the weather was nice enough but somehow I could not relax and enjoy it. The pleasure of it was marred also for me by the fact that the vicar's book was stolen during my stay. I had to write a letter of apology for my carelessness, which he was generous enough to accept, but that it made me feel any guilt at all in repaying his hospitality. I informed the police of its loss of course but their enquiries revealed nothing, save for the fact that during the period of my stay a scruffy and unkempt tramp had been seen hanging around in the vicinity of the hotel, once he had been thrown out of the foyer. But despite efforts to find him again they failed to unearth this individual. I doubt whether such a derelict would have taken the book, however, even had he gained access to my room, for it had no immediate money value.

"Still, as I say that was four weeks ago now and I have completed the book on Suffolk entirely to the Colonel's satisfaction. The story of Greenley is interesting though, don't you think, espe-
cially in view of your earlier question."

"Yes, the old boy seems to have been most unlucky," said Brian. "'Fancy getting lumpered in that manner, a bit ironical the whole thing."

"Perhaps he got the service wrong," grinned Trevor. "If he had done his job properly he wouldn't have inherited the Manor spook."

"The damned Earl got the best of the deal," sniffed Colin, who was also our ardent Socialist. "Trust the gentry to come off on the right side and leave others to carry the can back for their evil doings."

"I feel a bit sorry for poor Saunders also," said Ben thoughtfully. "After all the poor old fellow was chucked off his own land, and even the Man of God gave him the cold-shoulder when he tried to move in with him for a bit of rest."

Peter shivered in his corner.

"Ugh. You didn't feel how I felt about him. I found the whole thing horrible. Thank God he finally got shown the door anyway."

He gulped down some more of his pint.

"Still, that's passed a quick hour and if I don't hurry I'll miss the 1915 from King's Cross. You can stay till chucking-out time if you like but I'm off now. Tell you what, I'll get one last round in for you all before I go."

Eventually they all bade him their farewells and turned to other topics of conversation after he had departed, but it was not long before Raymundo was shouting "Time gents, please," and they had to drain their glasses. They had started to say their own goodbyes in the doorway before going in their separate ways but were interrupted by Ray shouting at them over the bar and grinning.

"Never known any of you lot to give a pint the elbow. Whose one is this then? Come on, get it down so I can shut up shop and get my head down for five minutes."

"Well I've had mine," said Ben and the others all agreed that they had drunk up.

"It's got to be one of your party," sniffed Raymundo, peeved. "You are the last round I served."

"You can see for yourself, Ray," said Brian. "Look. Six glasses and that's that, 'cos it includes Peter's last pint. All empty. That seventh pint must belong to someone else, old son."

"No. It's one of yours, I'm telling you. Peter said a pint for everyone and there was seven of you. Where's the old boy in the dirty coat who was sitting behind Peter all lunch time. He was with you, wasn't he? Friend of Peter's surely; kept looking over his shoulder and nodding his head while Peter was rabbeting away earlier, though I couldn't see much of his face."

"How many have you had, Ray?" laughed Colin nervously. "There was nobody like that sitting in our corner."

"And I say there was. I saw him plain as day. He must have followed Peter out. Raymundo sniffed again. "I'm not bleedin' blind you know, and he was the one with the white stick, or at any rate, a stick of some sort... ."

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**THE SHADOW**

He sat in his chair
Smoking his pipe
Long into the night, he sat
He was so involved
With his thoughts
That he hadn't noticed
The shadows shifting on the walls
They became so large
So ominous
That from my perch in the tree
I couldn't see a thing
And when the air cleared
I looked again
And his chair was empty
The pipe lay smoldering
On the velvet seat
Strange

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BRENDA CAMPBELL
Klaus August Scharme was born in a tiny village called Paradise close to Köl in the middle of the year 1949. The name of his birthplace has nothing to do with Scharme's story; the village was anything but paradisaical, being a collection or huddle of farm buildings, some middling private dwellings and a grubby gasworks, all reached along unmetalled roads which for at least four months of the year were little more than ruts around the perimeters of boggy fields.

Therefore, neither the date nor location of his origin was especially auspicious. The best we can say of them is that they were uninspired... drab beginnings for a man whose longevity would make him a legend of godlike proportions, not only in his own lifetime but also in every one of the countless millions of lives which would come and be lived and go — often in unseemly haste — before Scharme himself was yet fifty years old.

But here the paradox: he achieved that age not as might be expected in 1990, but in the summer of 2007. And the following story includes the facts of how that came about.

***

Aged sixteen years and three months, Scharme left Paradise and became an apprentice signwriter. He took up lodgings in Köl at the house of his master, where for the next five years he learned how to paint those intricate Kreise signs which signify with heraldic sigils the boundaries of the many and various districts of Germany. At that time such signs could be found on all major roads where they approached any specific district, and where for many years they had been the prey of avid "art collectors" from England, France, the USA — the troops of NATO in general — energetically maneuvering and war-gaming across the long-since conquered German countryside. But this too is a mere detail and should not be allowed to detract... except that it also served as Scharme's launching point on his trajectory of four hundred years' duration.

It started as a dream: Scharme dreamed that he was growing old at an unprecedented rate. He aged a day for every hour, then a week for every minute, finally a year for every second, at which point he collapsed in upon himself, died, crumbled into dust and blew away.

He woke up screaming, and it was the morning of his twenty-first birthday. Perhaps the dream had come about through a subconscious awareness of his proximity to the age of manhood; perhaps it had dawned on him that the first part of his life was done, ended like a chapter closed. But that same day, as Scharme replaced a purloined sign upon its post, he saw speeding by him a military Landrover... and reclining in the open back of the vehicle a good half-dozen of these very signs over which he laboured so long and hard! The driver of this vehicle, a young Corporal in British uniform, laughed and waved as he sped into the distance; Scharme, wide-eyed in anger where he gazed after him, thought: "Damn you... you should age a year for every sign you've stolen!"

At which he was horrified to see the Landrover swerve violently from the road to strike a tree!

Leaping onto his bicycle, Scharme raced to the scene of the accident. The Corporal, alas, was dead; also, he was old; moreover (and as Scharme would later work it out), it was probably the instantaneous aging which had caused him to swerve — making Klaus August Scharme a murderer! And he knew it was so, for at the moment of his wish — that the Corporal should age commensurate with his theiving — he had felt himself the beneficiary of those years, some thirty-five in number. The Corporal had been twenty-five years of age; he was now sixty. Scharme had been twenty-one and still looked it, but some strange temporal instinct within told him that he would be fifty-six before he began to age again. Somehow — in a monstrous and inexplicable fashion — he had stolen all the young soldier's years!

And so for the next thirty-five years Scharme aged not at all but remained twenty-one; but — and most monstrously — in the twelve-month after that he aged altogether too many years, so that while by rights (?) he should only be twenty-two, his internal hourglass told him that in fact he had spilled the sands of ten whole years! It was the summer of 1997; K. A. Scharme had lived for fifty-seven years, should have aged by only twenty-two of them, and yet knew that physically he had aged thirty-two of them. In short, he knew that he was now getting old at ten times the normal rate, and that therefore he had started to pay the world back for the time he owed it. In just two and a half more years he'd be pushing sixty, and all the pleasures of an apparently eternal youth would be behind him and senility just around the corner. It was all grossly unfair and Scharme was very bitter about it.

So bitter, indeed, that the guilt he had felt over the past thirty-five years quite melted away. He determined to do something about his predicament, and of course it must be done quickly; when one is aging an entire year for every five weeks, time grows very short. But still Scharme was not a cruel man, and so chose his next victim (the very word left an unpleasant echo in his mind) with a deal of care and attention.

He chose, in fact, a crippled gryppate who suffered incessant arthritic pains, stealing his last four years with the merest glance. The old man never knew what hit him but simply crumpled up in the street on his way to collect his pension. And Scharme was pleased that (a) the old boy would know no more pain, and (b) that the state was plainly a benefactor, likewise every taxpayer, and (c) that he himself, K. A. Scharme, would now live for a further four years at the constant age of only thirty-two and some few months. Which would surely be sufficient time to work out some sort of humane strategy.

Except... no sooner had his mental meter clocked up the defunct dodderer's four years, then
it inexplicably halved them, allotting Scharme only two! Alarmed, he returned home and collapsed before his TV, where at that very moment they were showing an interview with a prisoner on Death Row. It was reckoned that this one could stave off his execution by a maximum of only two years, and that only at great expense. Scharme decided to save him and the state both money and trouble, and snatched his two remaining years right through the screen! The prisoner died right there in full millons (good riddance, the majority said) but Scharme only gasped as the stolen time registered within him at a mere fraction of the time perceived: namely, six months!

It didn't take much of a mathematician to work out the implications. Complete this sequence: if thirty-five equals thirty-five, and four equals two, and two equals one-half...

Patently Scharme was only going to get one-eighth of his next victim's span of years; and after that one-sixteenth; then only one small thirty-second part, and so oneter.

Which was precisely the way it was to work out.

But... life is not so simple. Scharme now had two years, a half years of other people's time in which to think about it and plan for his vastly extended future. Which, diligently, he now set about to do. Nor did it take him thirty months by any means but only one day. You'll see why if you apply yourself to his problem:

he seventh victim would yield only one sixty-fourth of his remaining span, his eighth perhaps four or five months... good God... By the time the vampire Scharme had taken his tenth victim — and even were that tenth a newborn infant — he would only be gaining a matter of weeks!

Twenty victims later and he'd be down to seconds!

Then half-seconds, microseconds, nanoseconds! By which time, quite obviously, he'd have arrived at the point where he was taking multiples of lives, perhaps even entire races at a gulp. Was that his destiny, then: to be a mass murderer?

To be guilty of invisible genocide? To be the man who murdered an entire planet just to save his own miserable life?

Well, miserable it might be, but it was the only one he had. And life was cheap, as he above all other men was only too well aware. And so now he must use his two and a half year advantage to its fullest, and work out the real way it was going to be.

Scharme's grandfather had once told him:

"It takes hard work to earn a sum of money, but after that all it takes is time. Money in the bank doubles every ten years or so. That's something you should remember, Klaus August Scharme..."

And Scharme had remembered.

And so for now he lived as frugally as possible, saving every pfennig he could get his hands on, bailed his wages and watched the interest grow month by month, year by year. And while his money was growing, so he experimented.

For instance: he knew he could steal the lives of men, but what about animals? Scharme had read somewhere that no man knows the true age of sharks; so little is known about them that their span of years is beyond our science. And he'd also read that baring accidents or the intervention of man, a shark might live for as long as two or three hundred years! Likewise certain species of tortoise, lizard, crocodile. Testing out the sharks, crocodiles and such, Scharme gained himself a good many years. But at the same time he lost some, too. The problem was that he couldn't in advance know how long these creatures were destined to live! A hammerhead off the Great Barrier Reef earned him three whole years (miraculous!), but another, taken the same day, was worth only an hour or two. Obviously that one had been set to meet its fate anyway. As for crocodiles: he ensured that several of those would never make it to the handbag stage!

And so eventually, without for the moment doing any further damage (to the human race, anyway) Scharme clocked up one hundred years on his mental chronometer and was able to give it a rest. He was more or less happy now that he could take it easy for a full century and still come out the other end only thirty-two years and some few months old. But rich? Oh, be certain he'd come out rich!

Except... what then, he wondered? What if — in the summer of 2007 when he'd used up all his stolen time — what if he then began to age too fast again? And just how fast would he age? Would it be ten years for every ordinary year, as before — or a hundred — or, a thousand? Or would he simply wither and die before he even knew it, before he had time to steal any more life? Obviously he should not allow that to happen. But at least with an entire century to give it a deal of considered thought, he wasn't going to let the knowledge of it spoil what he already had. Or what he was going to have...

The spring of 2007 eventually came around, and Scharme was a multi-millionaire. Back in the Year 2000 he had had only 23,360 Deutsch Marks in his Koln bank; in 2010 it had been 75,000; in 2050 the sum was 3,000,100; and now he was worth close on one hundred millions. (Not in any bank in Koln, no, but in several numbered accounts in Switzerland.) And Scharme was still only thirty-two years old.

But as the spring of that year turned to summer the thief immortal was prepared and waiting, and he sat in his Hamburg mansion and listened to the clocks in his head and in his very atoms ticking off the seconds to his fate. And he knew he was taking a great chance but took it anyway, simply because he had to know!

And so the time narrowed down to zero and Scharme's internal time clock — the register of his years — recommenced the sweep which he had temporarily stilled back in 1997. And so horrified was Scharme, so petrified at what transpired, that he let the thing run for a full three seconds before he was able to do anything about it. And then, on the count of three and when he was capable again, he pointed a trembling but deadly finger at a picture of Japan in his Atlas and absorbed the lives of all its millions — yes, every one of them — at a stroke! And saw that he had only clocked up five extra years!

He killed off Indonesia for another ten before his fortune subsided — and then took half the fish in the Mediterranean just to be absolutely sure. Then, when he saw that he'd clocked up thirty-eight and a half years, he was satisfied — for a brief moment. Until as an afterthought (perhaps on a point of simple economy or ecology), he also
took half of the fishermen in the Med and so evened up the balance.

And he knew that he must never let time creep up on him again, because if he did then it was certainly the end. For during the span of those three monstrous, uncontrolled seconds Klaus August Scharme had aged almost a half-billion such units and was now fifty years old!

Ah, but he would never get any older... not until the very last second, anyway...

* * *

There had been no one left to bury the dead in the Japanese and Indonesian Islands; for fifty years they were pestholes; mercifully, being islands, their plagues were contained. That lesser ravage (men called it The Ravage) which had slain so many in and around the Mediterranean was guessed to have had the same origin as the Japan/Indonesian Plagues, but science had never tracked it to its source. It was generally assumed that Mother Nature had simply bridled at one of Man's nuclear, ecological or chemical indiscretions. No one ever had cause to relate the horror to the being of Klaus August Scharme. No, not even when his strange longevity finally became known.

That was the fault of his doctor; rather, it came about through that doctor's diligence. Scharme had gone through a phase of worrying about diseases. He had reasoned that if, in a normal lifetime, a man will suffer several affictions of mind and body, how then a man with many lifetimes? What fatal cancers were blossoming in him even now? What tumors? What micro-biological mutations, even as he was a mutation, were killing him? And when he had submitted himself for the most minute examination, he'd also submitted his medical records...

The news broke: the world had taken unto its bosom, or created, what appeared to be an immortal? The Second Coming? It could be. A miracle to last for peace and tranquility? Possibly. And Klaus August Scharme became the most feted man in the history of the world. Churchmen, at first sceptical, eventually applauded; world leaders looked to him for his friendship and favours; wealth as great and even greater than his own billions was heaped at his feet.

And when the Maltese Plague struck in the Year 2183, Klaus August Scharme bought that island and sent in a million men to burn the bodies, cleanse the streets and build him his palace there. And still no one suspected that the GreatBenefactor Scharme was in fact the Great Monster Scharme, a vampire who was drinking up the lives of men. But why should they?

Scharme gave work to the millions; he lavished billions of dollars, pounds, yen, lire, on charity across the face of the world; countless fortunes were spent in the search for the ultimate secret — that of eternal youth — which Scharme declared was fitting for all mankind and not just himself. He built hospitals, laboratories, schools, houses. He opened up the potential of the poorer countries; dug wells in the Sahara, repopulated ravaged islands (such as Japan, Indonesia), built dams and barriers to stem the floods in the Nile and Ganges; wiped out the locust (at a stroke, and without ever hinting at the miracle he employed); deliberately and systematically did all he could to provide the monies and the science requisite to prolonging the lives of men. Ah, of course he did! The longer men lived, the longer he would live. It was a question of careful culling, that was all...

In 2247 the whales died... but of no discernible disorder. Those largest of all Earth's creatures — protected, revered and preserved by man since the turn of the 21st Century — switched off like a light, wasted, erased to provide Scharme with life. And the thief immortal gaining only a moment or two from each huge, placid creature. Not all of them died; perhaps a dozen of each species were left to repopulate the oceans — naturally. Scharme was not an unreasonable man, and he was learning.

In the North Sea and the waters around England, across the Atlantic to the American coastline, there came the sudden and inexplicable decline of the cod; that was in 2287. But in the ensuing four years the rest of the food fishes surged and man did not go short. At the end of that period, in the spring of 2291, all the world's longest lived trees became firewood overnight. It was Nature, the Top Men said; it was Evolution, an ecological balancing act; it was the Survival of the Fittest... And in that last, at least, they were right; the survival of Klaus August Scharme.

But there were no more wars. World President Scharme in his impregnable Malta fortress, rearing two miles high from the sea, would not allow wars; they were destructive and cost him too many lives. Nor would he allow pollution or disease, and wherever possible he took all steps to avoid natural disasters. The world had become a very wonderful place in which to live — if one could live long enough and avoid those unpredictable places wherein an apparently outraged Nature was wont to strike so pitilessly and without warning.

Scharme had long ago discovered that it was not the number of lives he took which determined the ever-shortening half-life of his obscene talent but the number of times he used that talent. Whether he took the life of a single man or an entire species of toad made no difference: always the sum of the span of stolen time was halved. And by the year 2309 he was already well down into the micro-seconds. Patently it was wasteful — what? It was sheer madness! — to take single lives and he would never do that again; indeed he had not done so since the late 20th Century.

Towards the end of 2309 he took seven-eighths of all the world's corals and earned himself only nine weeks! And that same night, after worriedly pacing the floors of his incredible palace, Scharme eventually retired to dream his second inspirational dream. An inspiration, and a warning:

He saw a word: NECROMETER.

That single word above an instrument with one hundred little glass windows all in a row. Behind each window, on a black background, the same white digital number (or negative) gleamed like a long line of open mouths: one hundred "0"s, a century of zeroes.

Scharme was in a dark room, seated at some sort of console. He was strapped into a sturdy metal chair-like frame, held upright and immobile as
a man in an electric chair. Behind the NECROMETER a massive wall reached way out of sight both vertically and horizontally. The wall was made up of trillions of tiny lights no bigger than pinheads, each one like a minuscule firefly, lending the wall a soft haze of light.

Scharmé looked at the word again: NECROMETER. Ash at the digital counter beneath it. Even as he watched, the number 1 clicked into place in the window on the far right, in the next moment became a 2, a 3, 4, 5...

The numbers began to flutter, reaching 1,000 in a moment, 10,000 in seconds. On the wall the tiny lights, singly, in small clusters, in masses, were blinking out, whole sections snuffing themselves before his eyes. On the NECROMETER the figure was into millions, tens of millions, billions; and a hideous fear, a soul-shrinking terror descended upon Scharmé as he watched, strapped in his sturdy metal chair. If only he could break these straps he knew he could smash the counter, stop the lights from winking out, put an end to the wonton destruction of life, the death.

The death, yes. NECROMETER.

An instrument for measuring death!

But whose instrument? Obviously it belonged to Death himself. The entire — control room? — was Death!

Now the number on the counter was into the trillions, tens of trillions, hundreds of trillions, and entire sections of the wall were darkening like lights switched off in a skyscraper. In as little time as it takes to tell the quintillions were breached, the counter whirring and blurring and humming now in a mechanical frenzy of death-dealing activity. The wall was going out, Life itself was being extinguished.

Scharmé struggled frantically, uselessly with his straps, straining against them, clawing at them with trapped, spastic hands. The counters were slowing down, the wall dimming, the NECROMETER had almost completed its task. The world — perhaps even the Universe — was almost empty of life.

Only two tiny lights remained on the dark wall: two faintly glowing pinheads. Close together, almost touching, they seemed to swell enormous in the eye of Scharmé's mind, blooming into beacons that riveted his attention.

Two lights. He — his life — must be one of them. And the other?

The Conqueror Worm!
The Old Man!
The Grim Reaper!
The Nine of Spades!
The black lumpish machine bank atop the console above the NECROMETER split open like a hatching egg, its metal casing cracking and flaking away in chunks.

An eye, crimson with blood, stared out; a mouth, dripping the blood of nameless, numberless lives, smiled a monstrous smile, opening up into an awesome, gaping maw.

Scharmé's straps snapped open. His chair tilted forward and flexed itself, ejecting him screaming down Death's endlessly echoing throat...
lit from within, taking the place of the wall of lights; and this was Scharme's single improvement over his dream.

The computer contained details of every species that flew in the sky, walked or swam upon the ground, crawled beneath it or swam in the depths of the seas. It kept as accurate as possible a record of births (and deaths, of course) and updated Scharme's precious seconds of vampiric life in a never-ending cycle of self-appointed self-servicing sacrifice. It specified the region of the planet to be exploited, told Scharme whom or what to kill and when to do it, programmed his culling of life until it was the finest (and foulest) of fine arts.

And suddenly, with all the weight and worry of calculation and of decision-making taken from his shoulders, and with all of his long years of existence stretching out behind him and apparently before him, Scharme began to feel the inevitable ennui of his immortality. And until now, he had not once thought of taking a wife.

There were three main reasons for this.

First, despite all the years he had stolen, there had never seemed to be enough time for it.

Second, he had feared to father children who might carry forward and spread his own mutation throughout the world, so robbing him of his future. Last, he knew how great was his power and mighty his position, and so would never be certain that a woman—any woman—would love him for himself and not for the glory of knowing him. All of which seemed valid arguments indeed... until the day he met Orrys.

Orrys was young, innocent and very beautiful: long-legged, firm-bodied, green-eyed and lightly tanned. And courting her, Scharme also discovered her to be without greed. Indeed, he was astonished that she turned him down on those very grounds: she could not marry him because people would say it was only his power and position which she loved. But while she visited him in his hut, he discovered there occurred one of those unimaginable disasters with which, paradoxically, the world was now all too well acquainted. Her island, the island of Crete, was stricken with plague.

There were no survivors save Orrys; she could not go home to what was now a rotting pest-hole; she became Scharme's wife and thus Queen of the World...

The years passed. She wanted children and he refused. Soon she was thirty-five and he was still fifty. But in three more years, when he saw how time was creeping up on her, Scharme began to despair. So that one day he called her to his most private place, the hall of the NECROMETER, and explained to her that machine's purpose. Except it had no purpose unless he also explained his talent, which he did. At first she was astonished, awed, frightened. And then she was quiet. Very quiet.

"What are you thinking?" he eventually asked her.

"Of Crete," she told him.

"The great whales have proliferated during the last hundred years," he told her then. "I would like to experiment, see if I can give you some of their time. I can't bear to see another wrinkle come into your face."

"They were only laughter lines," she said, sadly, as if she thought she might never laugh again.

"Here, hold my hands," said Scharme. And there in the hall of the NECROMETER he willed half the whales dead and their time transferred to Orrys. And here the most astonishing thing of all: he discovered that his internal chronometer worked not only for him but also for his wife— and that she had gained several millions of years!

And he saw that because she was new to his art, it was for her as it had been at first for him: just as he had gained all of that almost forgotten Corpse's years, so had Orrys gained all of the years of the many whales. "It could have been me!" he told himself then. "If I had known at the beginning... it could have been me..."

And while he clapped a hand to his forehead and reeled, and thought those things—things which he had always known, but which never before had been brought home so forcefully—so Orrys fainted at his feet.

He at once carried her to her bed, called his physicians, sat stroking her hand until the medical men were finished with their examination. And: "What is it?" he whispered to them then, afraid that they would tell him the worst.

"Nothing, mere fatigue," they shrugged. But Scharme suspected it was much more than that. He felt it in his bones, a cold such as he had never known before, not even as a barefoot boy in Paradise in the winter. And mazed and mortally afraid he once more turned his eyes inwards and gazed upon the life-clock ticking in his being. Ah, and he saw how quickly the pendulum swung, how fast his time was running down! Too fast; the weight of Orrys' million years had tipped the scales; he had a month and then must take life again. Oh, a great many lives...

It was too much for him. Even for the Great Vampire Klaus August Scharme. To extend his life a single hour beyond the twenty-eight days remaining to him he must devour a hundred lifetimes, and for the next hour ten thousand, and for the next one hundred million! The figure would simply multiply itself each time he used his talent. Quickly he returned to the hall of the NECROMETER, fed the computer with these new figures, impatiently waited out the few seconds the machine stole from him to perform its task. And while he stood there trembling and waiting, so the NECROMETER balanced all the planet's teeming life against the single life of Klaus August Scharme, and finally delivered its verdict. He had only twenty-eight days, six hours, three minutes and forty-three seconds left—and not a second longer. Neither Scharme, nor any other living thing upon the face of the planet!

Gasping his horror, he fed new figures into the computer. What if he took all the Earth's life at a single stroke—with the exception, of course, of life in the air and on the land and in the waters around Malta? And the computer gave him back exactly the same result, for it had assumed that this was his question in the first instance!

At which, Scharme too fainted away...

But before he woke up he dreamed his third inspirational dream, whose essence was simplicity itself. He saw gigantic scales weighted on the one side with Orrys, and on the other with the
planet Earth and all it contained. But for all that she was a single creature, still those cosmic scales were tilted in her favour. And between the pans of the scales, holding them aloft on arms which formed the pivot, stood Klaus August Scharme himself.

He awoke, and Oruss stood there close by, looking at the NECROMETER.

Upon its screen were those terrible calculations which had caused her husband's faint. And from the look on her face Scharme supposed she understood them. And from the look on his face, she also understood that he had reached a decision.

"So," she said then, "it is ended."

He climbed tiredly to his feet, burst into tears. "It is the only way," he said, folding her to his heart. "But not yet, my love, not yet. I can wait... a day? Perhaps even a day and a night. But you must understand that what was mine to give is also mine to take away."

"Not so," she clasped him coldly. "For when you gave me my millions of years, you also gave me your talent. I feel it within me, ticking like a clock."

He gasped and thrust her away, but she was pointing at him and had already commenced to say: "You should age one second for every man, woman and child, every beast, fish, fowl and creeping thing which you destroyed in the island of Crete."

Which was the end of him, for he had something a deal less than two and a half millions of seconds left, and of creeping things alone, that would have sufficed to kill him. But Oruss had loved her island dearly.

Long ago, Scharme had conceived of a time when someone might see his NECROMETER, understand its purpose and meaning, and attempt to kill him. And he had determined that if that time should ever come, then that his executioner must die with him. Now, even as he crumbled to dust, he fell upon a certain lever.

The console of the NECROMETER cracked open into a gaping mouth and the floor of the hall lashed like a crippled snake. A convulsion which hurled the beautiful Oruss and the vile vampiric debris of Klaus August Scharme into eternity within in the clashing cogs and wheels and electrical daggers of the great machine. Scharme's fortress blew apart from its roots upwards, and the island of Malta collapsed inwards, and great tidal waves washed outwards to the furthest corners of the world.

And Time Itself felt a wrenching and a reckoning, and Invincible Life — so long held upon Scharme's monstrous leash — rebelled and added to the space-time confusion. So that for a split second all was chaos until the vast Engine which is the Universe backfired...!

* * *

Laughing and waving, the Corporal sped away in his Landrover. Scharme's short ladder shuddered for a moment beneath the post to which he'd nailed his Kreise sign, then stood still and empty. The Kreise sign swung all askew upon a single nail, the job unfinished. And at the foot of the ladder lay a small pile of rags and a handful of grey dust, which the winds of time quickly blew away...

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STARWOMB

for Emil Petaja

... And Phaniol paused, and lingered upon the ashden shore; and dreamt awhile of that sea whose name is Oblivion.

—Clark Ashton Smith

I.

BENDING toward the sands and smells of evening lost in everlasting folds of faery blue — whose stillness saffirs sleep embracing shadows like a shroud of dreams beyond the sea where cosmic Galleys wait... and guard...

II.

WHOSE veil QueenMother wraps upon the years as cold and minds that skirt plutonean thought — whose voice plays concertina on the wind...

III.

REMEMBERING —onyx dragons and saffron woven into dreams. stanchchild forever of the night and womb which feed the night forever... down the river's bend Negarean kingdoms furrowed in the mist like waves that bellow never finding shores — and cursing pass the tomb of Koph.

IV.

DAWNS in oblivion — her eyes bled tears of legend, the kind Lamean feared and mocked — ebbing and waning remnant of a stranger, elder dream fawned and left dying on illiaron's shore...

V.

TRAMONTANE — the saga of lost seas — whose orbs of candle-corpse blaze trails across the veil of remoter galaxies smelling of dust and dying...

VI.

TUONELA — the river's edge. fragments of eldritch campites and wayworn shadows howling at the sky... the sun rises. Lemmenkainen returns.

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KARL AND THE SHADOW BOX
by Michael Bracken

The shop was cluttered with half-finished doll houses, each filled with miniature furniture and fixtures. Shadow boxes lining the walls were crammed with tiny beds, dressers, sofas, chairs, lamps, throw rugs, desks, sinks, record albums, coat racks, paintings, and all manner of household goods.

Karl stood at the front counter which, save for the chair behind it, was the only full-sized furniture in the shop. He looked at the young woman behind the counter. She was shorter than he, with dark hair cascading down her shoulders.

"Do you have a miniature ice cream cone?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "We have everything.

"Fantastic." He'd been in four different doll shops that afternoon before crossing the river into southern Illinois to visit a shop he'd never been to.

"What flavor?" she asked.

"Mint chocolate chip," he thought she was kidding, and answered with his favorite flavor. "In a sugar cone."

She led him through the shop. Dust motes hung in the damp air and tickled his nostrils when he inhaled. Tall stacks of unopened doll house kits threatened to topple over as he brushed past them. She stopped in a store room. It, like the displays, was a cluttered collection of things.

"We haven't put these out yet," she said. She reached into a half-open cardboard box. A moment later she pulled her hand free. In her fingers she clutched a tiny ice cream cone: mint chocolate chip in a sugar cone. It was a perfect reproduction — exactly what Karl needed to finish his latest shadow box.

They returned to the front of the shop. She stood behind the counter, turned slightly to watch two boys playing outside.

The setting sun shone through the flimsy material of her white blouse and Karl could see her breasts silhouetted against the light. They were sagging slightly under their own weight: she wasn't wearing a bra.

Karl cleared his throat. "How much?"

"What?" The girl returned his attention to him.

He held up the ice cream cone. "How much?"

"Take it," she said with a smile. "We've got more."

"But..." Karl started. Then he shrugged and dropped the tiny cone into his shirt pocket. He shook his head slightly in wonder.

Before he closed the door on his way out, she said, "Remember us next time. We have everything."

It took Karl more than an hour to drive back to his St. Louis apartment. He sat at his kitchen table and carefully mounted the ice cream cone to the plate on the table in his shadow box. Then he sat back and looked at it.

Although Karl had never captured people in his shadow boxes, they all evoked a feeling of having just been deserted by various members of the families he imagined living within his tiny rooms. The old-fashioned kitchen captured in the shadow box before him had been host to a small child who'd been momentarily called out of the room, but who would return quickly to finish his ice cream cone.

It had taken months to collect and assemble all the tiny pieces of furniture necessary to construct the kitchen in his shadow box, but within a few hours, Karl placed the shadow box in the closet with all the others he'd assembled. He'd shown them to no one, and no one but the manager ever visited his grubby second floor apartment.

"I need a box of Quaker Oats."

"Instant?" she asked.

"No," Karl said. "The old-fashioned round box."

He had been to all the St. Louis shops. As before, none had carried just what he was looking for. He'd lived in St. Louis all his life, but until he'd come searching for the more off-beat accouterments necessary for constructing his shadow boxes, Karl had never crossed the river into Illinois.

She led him back through the towering displays of stoves, refrigerators, and kitchen tables. She led him past the disorganized displays of toilets, bathtubs, and sinks. Finally, she stopped before a dusty display case. She climbed on an old crate, lightly steadying herself with her fingertips on his shoulders, and reached into a small crevice between a Victorian living room and a Pop Art bedroom.

She handed him the Quaker Oats box and climbed down. "Is that all you need?"

He nodded. "But I'd like to look around for a while."

"Sure," she returned to the chair between the counter and the front window. Karl watched her adjust the chair before sitting. Then he walked slowly around the shop, peering into the display cases, carefully avoiding the unstable stacks of boxes littering the floor. He looked at the shelves stretching ten feet up to the water-stained ceiling of the old building. And every so often, Karl stole a glance at the young woman, still sitting on her chair.

Her slender figure was clad in a pair of tight-fitting jeans, slightly worn, but not worn out, and a loose, diaphanous blouse. She wore no make-up, and didn't need any. Her dark skin hinted at a Mediterranean influence, but her other features were less revealing — there was no Roman nose or English chin to belie her heritage.

Karl wandered back to the counter. "You're not in the phone book."

She turned to him. "We don't need to be.

People who need us, find us." He held up the tiny Quaker Oats box. "It's yours," she said. "We have others."

"I can't do that," Karl pulled a dollar from his wallet. She didn't reach for the bill, so he let it drop to the counter top.
She smiled at him as he left.

It was hot in Karl's apartment. His window air-conditioner had broken again and he couldn't afford to replace it. Angry that he was unable to repair it this time, Karl stalked down the street to the tavern on the corner. It was a dismal place, like most of the neighborhood, but it was cool inside and the hamburgers were as greasy as the fries were plentiful. He ordered dinner and a beer.

When he'd finished the burger and fries, Karl ordered a second beer. He dropped a pinch of salt into the glass mug and sipped at the cheap off-brand. An incomplete shadow box was waiting for him on his kitchen table, the oak paneling and the dark shag carpet waiting for the hand-built shelves to be attached to the back wall. Store-purchased furniture waited on the kitchen table.

It was his third visit in as many months. This time Karl didn't bother stopping at the other shops first.

"How about a quill pen and a jar of ink for a roll-top desk?"

This time she didn't answer him, but walked a few steps from her counter, reached into a dusty shadow box, and pulled out just what he'd been imagining.

Karl was sorry she didn't have to search through the back of the shop to find his trinket. He liked following her through the dank and dusty doll shop. He liked the delicate smell of her perfume as it wafted behind her.

Today her hair was tied back in a loose ponytail. Otherwise she looked the same as she had before.

It was warm in the shop, and the heat and his sweat were causing him to itch under his closely cropped beard. He scratched lightly at his cheeks. He didn't want to leave.

"How long have you worked here?" he asked.

"Forever." She laughed. "It sure seems that way."

"Do many people come in here?" He'd never run into other customers.

"A few. They keep me going." She brushed a loose strand of dark hair away from her face.

Karl had run out of conversation and felt himself beginning to flush. He pulled a five dollar bill from his wallet and dropped it on the glass counter top. She didn't pick it up and she didn't offer change. Karl didn't expect any.

It was dark when Karl returned home. He flipped on the living room light as he entered the little apartment, placed the pen and ink set carefully on the end table, and flopped onto the couch. A light cloud of dust billowed from the cushions.

He was tired. The drive home had taken much longer than he had expected: the Cardinals were playing a home game, and traffic on the Poplar Street Bridge had been backed up into East St. Louis, Illinois.

Karl fell asleep on the couch, dreams of the girl in the doll shop causing him to toss and turn. His last girlfriend had dumped him while they were still in high school, and he'd never dated anyone twice since then. The employees at most doll shops were pimply-faced teenagers, so Karl never had the opportunity to become acquainted with anyone at his usual haunts.

When he awoke, sunlight was streaming into his dark eyes. He groaned as he sat up. He hadn't expected to spend the night on the couch. He pulled off his tattered tennis shoes and sweat-soaked socks. He dug his toes into the dirty carpeting, stretched, and made his way to the shower.

The cool water relaxed his cramped muscles and tickled the hair on his chest. The shampoo lathered into great gobs of foam as he scrubbed his hair.

It had been three days since his last shower. He had to take better care of himself.

Each month a check from a trust fund arrived at his apartment. If he was willing to live frugally, Karl had no need to hold down a job. Karl was careful with his monthly allotment, allowing only the joys of assembling shadow boxes to dip into his savings.

A week had passed since his last visit to the doll shop and, with the most recent check padding his checking account and vague ideas about his next shadow box already forming in the back of his mind, he headed across the river.

She was sitting behind the counter when he drove up. He stopped his battered Chevy in front of the doll shop, climbed out, and strode slowly up the two concrete steps to the door. He smiled at her when he stepped through the doorway. She returned his greeting.

"What can I do for you today?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he said. "I'm not sure what I want to do next."

"Look around. Get some ideas."

Karl had planned on doing just that. He wandered through the stacks of furniture and displays. Ultimately, though, he wound his way back to the front counter.

"Do you live near here?" he asked.

"I have a few rooms upstairs," she said. "It isn't much, but I'm happy. How about you?"

"St. Louis."

"It's a long drive, isn't it?"

"It's not bad," he said. "After all, you have..."

"... everything," she finished.

"Everything," he agreed.

She smiled at him, lips parting slightly to re-
veal just the tips of her teeth. She hadn't noticed, but a button had come undone on her blouse, and when she turned just so Karl could peek in and see the white mounds of her breasts and the rosy red of her nipples as they rubbed against her blouse.

"Have you found anything yet?"

"A shadow box." It was long and narrow, an odd shape for a shadow box, and he'd found it deep in the bowels of the doll shop.

She looked at it as he placed it on the counter. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Five or six years. I started with model cars when I was a kid and changed over when I grew older. I think I'm trying to recapture a piece of my past."

She nodded.

"What are you asking for this?" He was reaching for his wallet.

"Make me something pretty in it," she said.

Karl nodded and let his wallet slide back into place.

"Maybe next time you come over, you could bring me one of your finished boxes..."

Karl brightened. "Maybe I will."

He stood at the counter a few moments, realized he had nothing else to say, and made his way to the door. Just before he stepped outside, he turned back to her and said, "By the way, my name's Karl."

He sat at his kitchen table, a half-eaten tuna sandwich on the plate beside him, a now-warm glass of cola by his right elbow. Carefully he painted the interior of the shadow box. Mixing the proper color had been difficult — he'd wanted just the right shade of brown.

He coughed into his fist and leaned back against the yellow plastic kitchen chair. This would be the ultimate test of his abilities: he was trying to duplicate an existing room.

"I brought you this," Karl said to the girl a few days later. He placed a shadow box on the counter. It was the kitchen that had brought him to the shop the first time.

She examined it carefully. "It's beautifully done," she said. "It's better than the other shadow boxes people bring in here."

"Thank you," Karl's blush was hidden behind his neatly trimmed beard. He'd never shown a completed shadow box to anyone before.

She picked it up, turned, and placed it in the front window. Outside, dark clouds gathered for a storm. "I want everybody to see what can be done," she said.

Karl watched her. She didn't seem to change much; her style of dress hadn't altered since he'd first visited the shop.

"Need anything special today?" She brushed her hair away from her face.

Karl listed a few items and she led him to them. He needed more paint, a new brush, some faded wallpaper, and miscellaneous supplies. The miniature miniatures he'd have to make himself — or so he thought until he led him past a display he'd never seen before. He paused to stare at the miniature dollhouse and the extra-tiny accessories designed to accompany it. He picked a few items from the display.

As they returned to the front counter, the storm broke loose. The street lights blinked on in the darkness, then winked off when lightning streaked across the sky. Hail pelted the window, rattling against the glass.

"Looks nasty, doesn't it?"

Karl nodded. "I'll have to get home before it gets any worse. The weatherman's predicted high winds and severe thunderstorms."

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" She paused for a heartbeat. "It looks too nasty to drive."

He looked out the window, then at her. "If it's okay..."

She locked the front door and led him to a stairway in back.

A divider separated her one large room into two. She fixed cold cut sandwiches at the kitchen counter and they ate them sitting cross-legged on her four-poster bed watching old reruns.

"Turn around, Karl," she said after he'd turned the TV off. She had unbuttoned her blouse. Slowly, tentatively, Karl reached out to touch one of her hardening nipples.

"It's okay," she whispered. She took his hand and held it against her breast, then pulled him slowly across her as she lay back against the pillows.

Determined to finish the shadow box before he returned to the doll shop, Karl worked long hours during the next few days. It would be a gift for her, and it was as perfect as Karl could make it.

He drove slowly into the small town and parked his car in its usual place. Then he realized: the doll shop was gone. A few scraggly patches of grass covered the lot where the shop had been.

He stood up and down the street, counting the buildings, reading the signs, convincing himself that the empty lot before him had been the site of the doll shop.

Then he hurried into the store next door: a leathercraft shop tended by a leftover from the sixties.

"Where's the doll shop?" Karl asked.

The long-haired man behind the counter looked up at him. "The what?"

"What happened to the doll shop next door?"

"That ain't a doll shop, man, that's a real estate office."

"No. On the other side."

The man laughed at him. "That's been an empty lot as long as I've been here," he said.

"You feel okay?"

"Yeah. Sure." Karl stumbled out the door to his car. He pulled the new shadow box from the front seat to convince himself of what the shop looked like. There it was, just as his memory had pictured it: perfect in every detail.

He stared at the empty lot for a long time before he realized. Perfect in every detail.

Karl looked at the shadow box again. There was the girl, seated behind the counter, wearing her tight jeans and loose white blouse, all just the way he remembered.

"We have everything," she'd told him.

Now Karl held everything in his hands.
RICHARD WAGNER'S CLOSET

by Christopher Gilbert

At the onset of World War II, few physical traces of Wagner's closet at 27 Wolfsbrunner Weg remained in Leipzig. No one at that time, of course, realized the importance of the charred wooden fragments to historians of the occult and otherwise. After the closet's fateful fire, a few of the less damaged boards were used in a garden structure outdoors; they weathered quickly. The building itself was demolished in 1890 and the rubble was incinerated. But among Wagner's mementoes kept in trust by his wife Cosima was a lump of crumbly burnt wood, wrapped in red velvet and stored in a box made of waxed goatskin.

We know that Wagner at times spoke of odors, metaphorically, when describing his creative process, and he reportedly saved this fragment because of its strong, peculiar scent. Cosima suspected its origin, but had no way of knowing.

I have smelled it. Even now, 150 years later, it emits a unique fragrance which is immediately compelling, yet ultimately repellent. That relic is now the only known physical link to an ominous episode which took place in 1890, during Wagner's seventeenth year.

At that time young Richard was a music student in Leipzig's St. Nicholas Academy, and was not excelling at all in spite of (or perhaps because of) high family expectations and support. His sisters were quite talented, and the whole family was immersed in music and theater. Somehow a first public performance had been arranged for his B-flat Major Overture, on Christmas Eve. His loyal sister Ottilie was already seated in her brother-in-law's box when Richard entered, late, and sat alone as if seeking anonymity. He was short, with an odd-shaped head; ordinarily he dressed with flamboyance but on this night he was subdued, perhaps anticipating the worst.

His composition was quite odd and contrived, based on far-fetched mystical relationships between sounds and colors. Shortly after the orchestra began, the kettle-drum's solitary thud every fifth measure became so predictable that instead of engaging the audience in somber reflection, it engaged instead their sense of mirth. The sparse group became united in their snickering and finally laughter at each succeeding thud. When the wretched piece concluded there was no applause; all seemed stunned by what they'd just heard.

Humiliated, Richard slunk out. He had not foreseen this at all. Unable to endure any overheard remarks, he wandered in despair through the chilly streets. He feared above all that word of his disastrous artistic debut would reach his mother and the remaining sisters. His family's grace and charity were already wearing thin because of his erratic studies.

At the family gathering that evening Ottilie mercifully refrained from mentioning the concert to anyone. Richard left early and sought refuge in a student tavern, and began to drink without tasting.

Later, pink-faced from shame and alcohol but sober enough to work the latch, he returned to his lodgings. In that condition, so unrecorded sources
reveal, Richard curled into a ball on the bed and began desperately to wish for an unnatural advantage. This wish turned soon enough to a direct request which could not be termed praying. Daringly he called to a shadowy world to which his Catholic upbringing had inadvertently introduced him. He wanted musical success, whatever the price.

Pleading in this manner for outside aid, he was alarmed by the sudden whoosh of his double closet doors being blown outward. Warm, damp air filled the room and the dim yellow lamp light fluttered. Richard jerked upright and stared at the closet. He had hung his coat there in minutes before, and had seen nothing.

Inside sat a slight figure clad in a dull black robe, hooded so that its face was in shadow. The figure's eyes, barely visible, looked straight out at Richard.

"You are Richard Wagner?" it said, in a strange voice which separated each word, oddly accented (in German of course). The face looked scarred and wrinkled; its eyes were large and the lips were dark purple, giving the overall impression of a person who had been hanged. The gender was not determinable.

Richard nodded and said, with a stammer, "Who are you?" as he scrambled to his feet.

"I am who you called, with the help you requested." As the figure spoke, Richard's neck pricked with instinctive fear. He was sober enough to recognize something alien and very powerful.

"You wish to influence audiences with your dramas and your music? You desire power?"

Richard's legs weakened; he had to sit suddenly back on his bed, but he said, "Yes."

"Alcohol may summon me but you yourself must make the decision. We will continue in the morning. Go to sleep now." With that, the figure bent forward so that its face was covered by the hood. After a minute, Richard approached tentatively, like a curious cat. No motion was visible, no breathing and no sound, and the being did not respond to further questions.

Awoke and frightened, he retreated to his bed in the corner, removed his shoes, and quickly fell asleep, his face mashed into the goose-down pillow.

Richard had long ago accepted a shadowy side of himself which at times produced night terrors, waking him screaming in the dark. He had hallucinated since childhood; in younger years he had feared to remain alone in a room for long because chairs and plants seemed to move. His family's theatrical costumes stimulated endless fantasies. This background allowed him the next morning to accept the figure in the closet more easily than another man might. A few moments after awakening he remembered the closet, looked over, and saw the figure staring at him. In the morning light its eyes glittered like a snake's.

Richard stood, fingered his greasy black hair into place, and listened as the figure said, "You have summoned me. You wish to become a great musician." Only its lips moved; its voice was flat and sexless.

Richard said slowly, "I do wish that. I must..."

"Your present situation is unstable, Wagner. Listen to me. It is within you to create the music you desire, but alone you will become lost on false paths and fail."

Richard lowered his eyes. "I try. I've tried. I can almost hear it, but something isn't working. I can't get it out."

"Then you were correct to ask for help. If you choose, I can remove all obstacles between you and that music, to make you a great man." The voice now grew more intense, more insinuating: "Would you like that, Richard? Would you like your sisters swelling with pride at their brother's success? Imagine choruses of singers, large orchestras following your direction, making audiences sigh and shout, moving them to tears?"

"Yes! That's what I want!" Richard cried. "I am meant for it!" His lips trembled a bit. "But what is the price?"

"I ask only that you be at my service after you die."

"At your service? To do what?"

"Whatever I wish you to do, without limit. I am required to answer your questions regarding my terms. You would carry out certain deeds of persuasion, of warning, or sabotage; you would aid individuals who in turn agree to follow my wishes, and eventually yours. That is the natural order of things; surely you know that."

Richard became very cautious now. He said, "I thought — I expected I would suffer somehow, endure a punishment —"

"I am not concerned with your torture or your punishment. What would I gain? You will simply be utilized. That is how I began. In return you will achieve your desire in this present life."

Richard backed away. Grimly he said, "I could accept my own suffering, but to participate in what you must do... no."

The demon leaned forward. "Is aiding you so bad? You now introduce morals. There are many like me, all independent, all rivals. There is no leader, as you believe; we would not trust each other. Only power counts, Richard, and true power is never shared. But that is not your affair now. The terms are clear enough; you must decide now whether you truly want to succeed with your music. You cannot achieve it alone."

Now Richard was pale, and he spoke nervously, "You want to make me like you are? A demon? I can't... I won't commit my afterlife to that!"

"So you wish to withdraw your request?" No answer came. "You will not have another chance."

"I lost my confidence last night, but I have talent, I know it! I have been working at composition —"

"The audience laughed last night! Without my aid your audiences will continue to laugh until no more performances are left for you. Your seed of genius is buried very far underground. Weilnig cannot teach you even elementary harmony! At this point your future is extremely ordinary: a minor attachment to the musical world, an assistant copyist perhaps."

Alarmed, Richard was now breathing fast. "No! I've always been lucky! Things turn out well for me!"

Then the demon laughed, long and scornfully, its first strong expression. "Luck! Angels protect
you, is that it? You offer your duels at the university, perhaps, as evidence?"

"Yes! I do! All my opponents —"

"I know. In the space of three weeks you challenged Degelow to duel — with broadswords. What do you know of the iron blade? Then you challenged Wohlfart. Then Steilzer and Tischer. But Degelow died in another duel. Wohlfart severed the artery in his right arm, didn't he? All your opponents somehow melted away, and you did not have to fight anyone. Does luck run so generously? Think, Wagner!"

The room was becoming uncomfortably warm to Richard. Nervously he pulled on his beard as the demon continued: "Or perhaps you refer to your childish gambling, losing your funds and risking your mother's pension? You staked all on that last thaler, risking family disgrace and ruin. The demon extended its hand from within the folds of the gray robe and deftly flipped something through the air to land at Richard's feet. It was a playing card, face up: the queen of diamonds.

"You remember that one, don't you? The card that reversed everything. You won, and the cards continued to favor you. You could not lose that night, Richard, because I was your luck, and always have been."

Shaken, Richard stared at the card as his feet but would not touch it. He tried to smooth his clothes, ruffled and beery from the night before. Trying to ignore his spinal shivers, thinking hard, he backed up and sat on his mattress. The rope supports creaked. He needed distance for a moment. Staring from across the room, he spoke: "Why? Why would you protect me?"

"You might call me a music lover. Few men have your potential, Richard."

He waited; no further answer came. Finally Richard said, "I don't understand, but my answer is the same: I will not suffer your cause. It's going too far. I will try to succeed on my own as other men have."

"Oh? Are you so sure they have? You are not the first artist to ask for help. Your future could be splendid. Would you like a special theater built and financed by a king, simply to display your dramatics? Would you like the leaders of other countries — France, England — discussing your works? Or will you give all that up to protect your smug morality? Refuse a third time and you will not see me again."

Richard hesitated, confused. "Please — let me think. I must also attend to my needs."

The demon nodded and lowered its head.

Richard walked out and down the hall to the toilet, realizing that his face and shoulders ached from tension. He pulled his fingers across the rough plaster walls to reassure himself of reality. No one knew how little confidence he had; during his solitary weeks of copying Beethoven's scores, note by note, he'd strained to understand how the music was created. He could not. The mystery persisted, and last night's performance had chilled his last hope, leaving him with no hint of how to reach his ambition.

His sister Rosalie had once complimented his showiness in negotiating. Coveting his future, he searched desperately now for a way past his better judgment.

Back in his room, Richard breathed deeply and stood before the closet's inhabitant, and said, "You know how much I crave the life you describe. Yet I feel blocked. I cannot reach my music! Without that success I cannot imagine my life being worthwhile. Is there perhaps something I can suffer or sacrifice in my present life which would satisfy you?"

The demon was silent for a moment, then its eyebrows rose slowly and it said, "You are proposing to bargain with me?"

"If my dreams are released as you say, nothing could crush me!"

"Don't be so certain."

Richard spoke carefully, sensing a chance. "I do not understand your value to you, but I think it lies less in my services than in my music. Therefore, don't we share the same goal? You offered me a choice, so now I offer you one: let me suffer in my present life."

The demon gave a tight smile. "You are a clever man, Richard. For the sake of your music, perhaps I can compromise. Here is an alternative that you will succeed with. But it is only. You must glean your pleasure from that. Your 'luck' will appear only when necessary to advance your music. Your disappointments will be as large as your successes. You yourself must remain in certain ways exactly as you are now, and you will learn very little from life."

"But my music would develop? My creativity? That is all I want."

"And all you will get. Through it all you will cling to particular ideas which will offend and anger your fellows."

"But I am satisfied with my ideas now."

"I'm sure you are. They will harden and stay with you to the grave. Qualities in your productions will not enrich you personally; you will be like a goldsmith living in poverty."

After a pause, the demon added, "There is one other little thing which cannot even be termed suffering: in time you will come across a novel, Rienzi: the Last of the Tribunes, by Bulwer-Lytton. He is an English novelist who has a certain agreement with me also. You will find his book very interesting."

Richard frowned, especially cautious because the terms seemed lenient, but he felt his excitement rising. He began to pace. "If I agree, you must make me extraordinary, demon! I am not meant for a common life. I must surpass my friends, my sisters, my teachers even! To have great men consider my music, think my thoughts — only then will I be satisfied!"

As the demon smiled and nodded, Richard suddenly felt cold. His moral and religious education, though sparse, was tripping alarms as he sensed his agreement approaching. He stopped and stared at the bare floor while he searched what had been said for flaws, for tricks.

"I am tempted, I admit," he said finally. "Your terms seem tolerable. But the very fact that you favor my music... I would not want to write works which are... evil..."

The demon shook its head from side to side and the robe rustled faintly. With distaste it pronounced, "Evil? That pathetic word, invented by weaklings huddled together in the altruistic porridge you call society... No, you do not need to worry, little one. Music has no morals. Music is neutral. Men respond to it out of their own
needs."

"But will this really be my music, or yours?"

"You, not I, are the musician, Richard. It will all come from you. I simply offer you access to your full potential."

Richard moved closer, all but committed now, and so all the more suspicious. "You say you're required to answer my questions about your terms. I must know, first: why do you want my music to succeed?"

"Oh, you doubt my aesthetic motives? This answer is not required, but I will tell you that it is a little project of mine, a historical chain of events, so to speak. Just as you could become a great musician, there is a certain man with potential to become a great leader. He will come to a critical choice point himself and will need to be nudged. Your work can inspire him."

Richard thought that over. "A leader of many people, do you mean? Is he German? I will not betray my country."

"Absolutely, a magnificent German, bold and strong, a man of the people."

"Why are you involved?" Richard asked, frowning. Again he saw the tight smile, unreadable.

"Moral labels are very relative, Richard. He who favors one nation is naturally condemned by its enemy. I have my reasons. Be content that your music and your ideas will help to unite your homeland. But this is all far in the future, in a time which cannot possibly affect you."

Richard sighed; his hands unclenched, and clenched again. "I do live in the present; the future can take care of itself. All right. Knowing my music will proceed will bear me up against all other misfortune. I accept your terms."

The robed head again moved, slowly, from side to side. "No. You will not know what is ahead of you. You will remember nothing of our meeting or our agreement."

"But—if I must! Yes! I will need the confidence!"

"No memory. It is the law. Many people have made agreements; they do not remember until perhaps the moment of death. You will not remember either."

Richard paced again, uneasy now. He rubbed his neck. "But the book you mentioned—I have already forgotten—"

"You will be drawn to it when the time comes. Don't trifle, Richard. You have all the information you need. Do you understand and agree to the terms now, of your own free will?"

Richard swallowed hard and thought over what had been said, questioning, confirming, until his mind finally relaxed and his shoulders slumped. He could find no flaws; he felt he had bargained well. He said then, "I agree to the terms, of my own free will."

"Say it again. And then again."

As Richard obeyed, the demon maintained its bland expression but its eyes enlarged to an extent which frightened Richard.

"Now come closer, kneel, very close." Leaning to within a foot of the demon's face now, off balance, Richard stared at the weathered, scarred face before him. It did not seem healthy, or even alive.

"Without prelude the demon reached out a hand from somewhere and held Richard's shoulder with a grip meant to restrain and hold. "You have made a wise choice. Stay very still now. You have seen me. You have heard me. Now... smell me!"

With those words the demon began to smolder. Expression fixed in a tight grin, eyes locked on Richard's, its face started to redder. Richard smelled a peculiar odor, something like rotten cinnamon, and saw wisps of smoke seeping through the demon's hood. It spoke emphatically, hammering words past Richard's alarm: "This you will remember. There is no need to change your ideas, ever. Let no one try to influence you. Because you are a great artist you are a great man also. You are correct about art, about politics and your country, and about your fellow man. Do you understand?"

Stunned but obedient, Richard nodded in agreement. Yellow sparks meanwhile appeared beneath the demon's hood. In another moment, pungent smoke seeped into the air, yellowish, acrid; the odor penetrated Richard as he breathed in short, tight gasps.

"Breathe deeply, Wagner! Receive your inspiration!" The iron-like hand began to relax its grip, and now the coarsened voice thundered through the smoke and spitting sparks: "You're right about everything... especially about the Jews..." Intense orange flames burst onto its scalp now, igniting the hood's fabric. Fire spouted from the demon's face and fumes radiated from its chest and neck. Its expression never changed.

In seconds more its body was ignited. The intense heat stung Richard's face and the greaseladen smoke billowed into the room, but not bearing the odor one would expect. Contained in the closet, the fire roared furiously, forcing Richard coughing to the opposite wall.

And then, above the hissing and crackling, came a different sound. Gaping and panicky, Richard still listened, and then listened more closely: music. Thin harmonic tones grew and strengthened into broader chords, modulating into voluptuous convolutions, each leisurely chord coming louder and fuller, resonating in his head and filling him with incongruous serenity.

He was transfixed. The music was glorious, magnificent, and wonderfully familiar to him: the same chords he had struggled to discern from his murky inner mind. Huddled against the wall, he smiled and listened, heedless of the frenzied shouting and pounding on the door outside.

Time expanded like an opening flower. In the space of five sizzling breaths he absorbed a dozen works yet unwritten: Lohengrin, Tannhauser, Meistersangers, Valkyries, Tristan und Isolde, Parsifal. Oblivious to the smoke and the clamor, Wagner glimpsed his life's work and faded.

A minute later his horrified landlady burst the latch and found him unconscious, with the fire already out. The closet was terribly charred inside and filled with heavy, lumpy ashes. Long after the windows were opened, the strange sweetish smoke hung in the air. Richard would not talk to her; he could not explain. All had vanished from his consciousness.

But the matter was not finished. Without
knowing why, Richard was careful to take along a chunk of the burned wood when he moved out three days later. In his new room four streets away, 29 Stumpergasse, he acquired a new sheaf of music manuscript paper and with new confidence began to sketch out passages of musical ideas. To the surprise of his family, he accepted the disciplined tutelage of Theodor Weinlig, a renowned teacher of harmony in Leipzig. He continued to compose; people began to listen.

Years passed. Although he changed residences frequently, he somehow always managed to tuck the fragment of odorous charcoal into some corner of his luggage. He became a successful but not quite happy man; though many people loved his music they found it difficult to love him. His bigotry embarrassed those around him; his suspicious pettiness dismayed those who marveled at his music.

At the moment of his death he remembered his agreement, and shuddered, realizing the extent to which his life had been bent with hidden purpose.

He died. Even then, the matter was not yet finished.

Often in the study of a man's life, various decisions and actions seem haphazard until one particular event occurs which, in retrospect, makes the preceding pathway seem quite obvious, as if guided by an unseen hand. So it was with Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who for years accumulated the fragments of myth and history that would eventually constitute his novel, so perfectly suited to Richard Wagner's mind that he composed music and wrote a libretto for it.

So it was also with Richard himself: his fixed ideas and his works seemed fashioned for a future era which began in the winter of 1905, precisely on a Wednesday evening, in the Linz Opera House in Austria.

Rienzi. That was the link.

On that evening a tense, fantasy-ridden adolescent stood in the promenade section watching Wagner's opera Rienzi, and was profoundly moved by its depiction of a tragic leader, a Roman tribune, reflecting on his calling to lead other men. Identifying to the point of obsession, the youth spent that night in an agitated daze. He abandoned his companion Kubizek, who would later become one of his many biographers, and climbed to the top of Mt. Freinberg nearby. There he paced and he planned with ferocious ambition.

On that night it started; on that very night certain dread elements combined, moving the intense young man to put aside his dreams of becoming an artist for goals infinitely more disturbing.

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HAGGARDLY BETH AND THE BLACK HOUR

by Jessica Amanda Salmonson

"The Black Hour," said my aged informant, "was an event that you or I should know for a common eclipse 'twere happening today. To folk in 1432, Year of Our Lord, 'twas an hour when all hope was lost and sure doom was expected for all who lived in plague-ravaged Scotland.

"You promised a tale of the supernatural," I said, placing my tape recorder just so. "Not a tale of superstition."

"Ah, leddie," said the old woman. "I doubts they are separate things! Today we can understand an eclipse or the ravages of a disease; but much else there is unkenned. 'Tis a supernatural yarn I have to spare, I assure you; one which took place during that hour of horror and darkness when all Scotland waited for God's fist to flatten out the links and sweep away the whole of the dear land. 'Tis a tale without explanation. I can tell ye; but who is to say it wouldna be explained in a wise-like future time? For ye, 'twill be mere legend, an auld story jumbled-up and added-to by distance of time. But on times 'tis a thinkin' a folk-memory can be clearer as regards auld times, more so than this mornin' paper catches the import of yesterien's events. What I shall tell ye is God's truth, no less; as true in its unkenned portions as about the eclipse. That much can be checked with astronomers if you'dna trust the tale of common people."

"I'm eager to hear the story," I said, enthused by its introduction.

"It goes like this. Well, not all the Scotch waited passively and despaired as the sky went black in broad day of light. Many set out to save the world by finding and burning witches left and right. I fancy I myself mighta burned that day, had I lived then; often times I dream I perished indeed, but am reborn now to tell the tale. Any thrawart gal with a gobber tooth, a crooked back, and a dog luckless named Dick or Peck or Sam — names for Auld Cootly his evil self — were fair game to horrified Christians. So much the worse if the puir auld soul couldna make much sense when speakin' and is apt to agree to all sorts of improbable ideas, or thinks up some impossible deed with her crippled mind and wonders sure if she didna do it.

"More terrible still if she practised simple medicine of the auld kind. She might've had neebors knockin' up from time to time, men and women needful of an herb or potum, and in good times this is fine. Whether the remedy worked or nay; whether the folk be friendly or fearful of her knowledge — in times of trouble, 'tis easy to change one's thinkin' for the worse as regards a crone like this. And what if she disliked the kirk and the kirkyard save at night, with no one about to give her a hard look? Might she be gathering grave soil for her bitter herbs? She might. Or people might only think she might. And what else? What if she did worship some auld god from before the time of Christians? Who does not, in the guise of Saint or Fairy?

"Well, and well, Haggardly Beth fitted all these degrees. She kept a dog named Peck, as toothless as she. He was always fetching things home to her, useless things he found lying about; and didn't make him seem a witch's familiar running errands? Did he attract the hands of children who liked to stroke his back? A thing like that was Power. Auld Beth had a mole on her thigh as big as a twenty penny; wouldna that be like that kuckle an auld dog?

"She gathered herbs and grew others and mixed 'em in secret recipes that'd stop or start anybody's shattin' just as she desired; and more than once a young leddie come about for a special tea that done away with an unexpected pregnancy by a laird she could never hope to marry.

"And didna she talk to fairies? She believed she did. Who knows? And when she was right angry, she could cuss up a storm, and always made a terrible oath on the head of the horse-goddess. If she were denied a crust of bread off a rich baker, she could screech such a horrid promise of his being trampled in his bed by ten black stalags. He might throw water on her from his piss-pot to get her to go away, and think no more about curses. But if such a man as this were to die of the plague, as a fourth the country died that year, someone had to wonder if it weren't the horses after all.

"Then came the day that fell darker than a black night; and those who looked to see the sun gobbled up by some monster went blind and never saw light again. 'Twere an awful wailing, people fallin' in the street and beseeching the Trinity. And men with swords and thick staves set forth well before the sun was full blotted out, intending to reverse the process by doing harm to all imagined witches in the burgh.

"The Black Hour became well-lit with fires. In every blaze wrathed and shrieked some auld hag. And lo! the sun began by stages to recover itself; so the witchhunters felt they had done well.

"Haggardly Beth was dragged toward such a pyre, her dog Peck gimmin' at the heels of the persecutors, yowling and yawning to small effect, except to get his neck broke by a big man's booted heel. Beth yawned worse than the dog, for love of the tike that was kickin' in the throes of a painful death. Beth feared the fire, but lamented her dog the most. She set to cursin' better than ever before; callin' them pack of bullyraggin' libbet-limners; and she yawned with a vehemency that made the men lay off a bit, for they was afraid of her fancies.
hole! I curse ye and curse ye well! If there be justice from God and Epona and the Fair Folk, too, I call them all to trample ye 'neath hoofs of steel! Ye wish me burnt in yonder pyre? No need to haul me to it! I go myself on my own bent legs!

"And so she hobbled to the flames and climbed right in, screaming, 'The horses! The horses! Oh, the beautiful horses of the Black Hour!"

"And sure to be told, there were horses raging blindly through the street of the burgh! There were ten of them, or more. They were black and sleek and their eyes were wild. The persecutors were frozen to their spots, shakin' in their trews. They were knocked about like nine-pins, then the pounding hoofs went on and the horses disappeared.

"Haggardly Beth stood in the blazes cackling without pain and without surprise. Then she collapsed, sacrifice to her own magic. Even so, she raised herself up, charred black and oozy-like. She rose to arms and knees, flames all about her. She gazed out from the blazes at a trampled man who was crawling toward her though all his limbs were broken and his cheek shorn off. They looked into each others' eyes, and Haggardly Beth told him, 'Is it justice after all? Indeed it is. So I will let the sun return upon the links for now.'"

"The trampled man lived long enough to tell the story. It was repeated across the countryside. It was widely believed that the Black Hour would never have ended but for a witch forgiving her persecutors. Such is the tale of Haggardly Beth and the Black Hour; such is the truth to be told."

I said, "It's a fine story to be sure, but too easily explained. The witch was credited for causing, then delivering from a darkness you and I know was of natural source. Is that a supernatural tale? As for the horses, mightn't they have broken from some barn and raced through that street in fright and confusion?"

"A natural horse wouldn'a run by night," said the old woman. "But believe as ye require. Ye asked for a tale to put in that tape-machine, and now ye have it. If it won't do, it won't do. Only, 'ware of insultin' an auld witch." She laughed with teasing, false menace. "It grows dark as we talk; and you must walk the length of the village alone. Listen as you go! Listen for the clop of hoof!"

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JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON

THE FELON AT THE FAERIE TROD

I
His Sol had fled the Clay before it should.  
Apollo sped His daylight o'er the wood,  
A warm wind churned and sougheid.  
Abroad since dawn,  
The storm returned to shroud the trod whereon  
A gallows-cheat his stolen mare now led  
Through pallid, fleet-winged gloaming ere it fled.

II
A maiden nigh her cottage where she'd fled  
The laden sky, took thought what prayer she should  
Bespeak this man. At length, she more was led  
By weakness than by strength before the wood:  
"Be careful. Stay, if still you might go on,  
Beware that way until the light of dawn."

III
The outlaw wanted wings to bide the dawn.
No doubt he'd flaunt the King's men, widely fled,  
Good track to chase by light. He bled him on,  
Then slackeden pace, not quite decided. Should  
He hide and wait? Or dare this heathen wood  
And ride where fate apparently had led?

IV
"You're wrong, lass. Nay, such prating will have led  
Me long astray. Why wait until the dawn?  
I'll fetch my sanctuary down yon wood  
A stretch. I thank you, ere the town I've fled  
Detect my crime and flight. I trust they should  
Suspect some time tonight. I must go on."

V
"I'm right, sir. None that path may venture on  
Tonight and shun Their wrath. You've been ill-led,  
Pray rest with me. My lock's secure. You should  
Stay, lest this equinox endure through dawn.  
The Druids to the Old Ones' Dance are fled;  
If you would rue your boldness, chance Their wood."

VI
The thunder grew. They kissed. He chose the wood...  
And blundered through Their tryst  
a crow's league on:  
A bier; stone rings; blood-stained decay. He fled,  
But fearsome Things restrained him. Fey, They led  
Him, shrieking; left him, dead... The maid at dawn  
Came seeking, reft with dread, afraid he should...  
From Their wood, mindless, streaming gore, it led  
Its mare on—blind. Her screaming shore the dawn.  
His soul had fled the clay before it should.
NEW RECRUITS

by Kevin J. Anderson

April 28, 1825

My dearest Tania,

In the military colonies of our beloved Tsar Alexander I, circumstances do not often grant me an opportunity to write you a personal letter — a truly personal letter which none of them have read beforehand. Things are still in a state of confusion and shock here after the tragedy — some of the buildings are still smoldering, and Lieutenant Goliepin has assumed temporary command but he has not had much to do for two days now — and I am taking these precious moments of solitude to write you what I fear will be a rather lengthy letter.

Perhaps you may understand the reason for my prolonged silence once you realize the daily routine we undergo here. General Ursow, who was our commanding officer, believed that perfect discipline is the highest achievement any man can hope to accomplish in his lifetime. Thus we spend three days a week in intense military drill — from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m., and then again from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. But then, Tania, you are not accustomed to the slavery of clocks, so these numbers probably mean nothing to you. On alternate days we erect new buildings since Ursow insists that "building is the best means of ensuring that one's name will be remembered after one is dead." — we also drain the land, dig ditches and clear the stumps and stones... and we attempt to reclaim the swamp near which our colony is situated, which turns into a deathtrap mere every spring when the snow melts.

I believe the peasants, though, have it even worse than we soldiers do. They must rise two hours before us to care for the cattle, wash down the sidewalks, sweep the streets, sand the paths, or clean the latrines. And they must also drill with us in the morning, before going out into the fields to till the soil, in uniform. Even their six-year-old boys are required to drill. If only the Tsar knew what it was like — surely he'd change things.

Tsar Alexander said that he wanted these colonies to be places where we soldiers could settle down in times of peace, grow our own food, and live with our families. All I know is that I have been here almost a year — and you, dear sister, and the rest of my family are still not with me. It almost brings tears to my eyes when I think of the day I was conscripted. How you and Mother wept, how the rest of the village already mourned me as dead. Twenty-five years of military service! I might as well be dead. I remember how Father and I drank too much vodka, for it was expected that I overindulge on the last night of my freedom. And then the next morning, riding in the lumbering wagon along the muddy, pitted road, my head throbbing and my insides churning, and adding my own groans to those of the other new recruits riding in the crowded back of the wagon. I remember it rained that day — a light, misty rain... a gray rain... That was over a year ago.

I am writing this letter myself, Tania, for I have perfected my knowledge of how to read and write here. I am hoping you will know to take this to Father Paniskii — how is he? Is he still alive? — and he will read it to you. Father Paniskii always liked me — he was always so kind. I first learned from him how to read, remember? He was going to send me to one of the church schools, but I was taken into the army before I had finished my lessons from him — barely enough time for me to learn to manage by myself. Old Endovik says that I am lucky to have a priest that I love, for he says the only priest he remembers from his village was a mean, unfriendly man. Endovik has been in the army so long.

Endovik is the man I live with — lived with; I still cannot believe he is dead. But his death was the means for me to get this letter to you — you shall see. I must tell all this in order, lest I lose my sanity by going off on too many tangents. You know me, Tania, as does Father Paniskii, so you know I am not a liar or a storyteller. And I sincerely hope that you will show this letter to no one else, for they will surely not believe me — especially after the "official statement" of what happened here is released. You must believe me — you will see.

It was spring, and wet, and miserable — perfect for the outbreak of cholera which struck our camp. Over one quarter of our population died from the disease, in throes of vomit and diarrhea which brought about the exhaustion which killed them. The peasants suffered worse than the soldiers did — and while both Endovik and I escaped the sickness, both of our peasant hosts died within hours of each other. They were a childless peasant man and wife, who had been kind to us and looked on their two soldier "lodgers" as the children they had never been blessed with. When we weren't drilling, Endovik and I helped them with their chores. They died, with the last words of each asking how the other had fared. "Regaining strength," we had said, "Coming along nicely."

We were taken to new, hastily-erected barracks which were crowded with all the refugees from other cholera-stricken households. Every home which had encountered cholera was abandoned, and due to the strict, almost-vicious measures of General Ursow, the epidemic was contained within one section of buildings.

No one can say what Ursow intended to do with the abandoned buildings. In all sensibility he should have burned them to the ground — every thing a cholera victim has touched or even gazed upon should be destroyed as a precaution against further spread of the disease. But the General's stubborn... one could almost call it worship of the things he had accomplished, would not allow him to destroy the buildings he had erected under his command.

The houses are symmetrically arranged along the main road — a watchtower stands for observing the fields; the chapel and the fire station are in the center of the village, surrounded by the officers' quarters and other administrative buildings. One entire block of houses along the road
stood empty, waiting for new occupants.

General Ursov had ordered new recruits from the Tsar in St. Petersburg, and he worked the survivors harder to make up for the loss of workers — and still he did not relax our military training. "Discipline is more important than rest," Ursov had said. I'll add my curse to all those others who have cursed him at one time or another, for one reason or another.

Even before it seemed possible — only four days after Ursov had sent his request to Tsar Alexander — the new recruits arrived. It was not possible that a message could have reached St. Petersburg, that the Tsar could have arranged for new troops and sent them to our colony, in only four days. Yet they were here, and we looked on them as a blessing. A blessing! At the time we did see them as such. I think of them differently now.

The rain had stopped in order to make way for the heavy fog which had rolled in, wet and gray. The soldiers were standing in ranks for our military drill which had already gone on for several hours. We were wet and cold and exhausted — but if we had let any of it show we would have been given an extra part of an hour of practice. Endovik doesn't have to drill much with us — he's a veteran; he had survived his 25 years of military service. Endovik was a tough old man. He had been conscripted in 1798, before Tsar Paul I was assassinated, then served under our Tsar Alexander. He had fought against Napoleon at Borodino in 1812, and he helped erect this military colony in 1818, almost exactly seven years ago to the date. He had survived his term of service — one of the few, for 25 years of discipline like Ursov's is not easy to survive — and now the army, by its own promises, was forced to take care of him, begrudgingly. Tsar Alexander doesn't know how bad things are — I am sure of it.

But, I promised I would not digress. We were standing in the fog, drilling monotonously, when we saw someone marching down the main road, spectral figures silhouetted in the fog. Now, these military colonies are isolated, and no one is allowed in — not government officials, not police — without the express permission of the commanding officer. We didn't know what to think of the strange figures in the fog, until they emerged.

A young corporal, dressed in an old, dusty uniform, marched at the head of a column of twenty peasants, all thin and covered with scantly, tattered garments in the cold and wet. Their skin was pale, and their eyes were blank and staring as if they had had their very souls wrenched from them. They made no sound — no speaking, no shuffling of feet, simply quietly stepping as they marched past the troops standing at attention in the midst of our drilling.

Ursov watched as the corporal marched up to him. The General frowned, as if he vaguely recognized the other man but could not place him. Ursov seemed troubled.

The corporal halted in front of the General, saluted, and presented himself and his column of peasants. "General Ursov," he said, "I am Corporal Belidaev. I have brought you these new recruits, as you requested, to replace some of the colonists who fell in your tragic epidemic." Belidaev gestured to the vacant-faced peasants, allowing his words to sink in. Then he spoke again. "They are from the village of Vendeevna."

Ursov's eyebrows shot up, and it seemed to me that he paled rapidly. The General fidgeted, and the expression on his face seemed not to be able to decide which final form to take, as if he could not enforce the discipline on his own emotions which he demanded of his troops.

Belidaev stood placidly, matching his stare with those of the peasants. Ursov endured it uncomfortably until he turned to Lieutenant Gollepin. Gollepin is Ursov's little servant who does everything the General tells him to. Gollepin isn't very bright and that's why the General likes him. In fact, I think I have a sharper mind than the Lieutenant — and it is very shocking, believe me, the first time you realize that you are truly more intelligent than your superiors are!

Ursov snapped to Gollepin, "Lieutenant, see to it that these new recruits are placed in the empty buildings."

"The empty buildings, sir?"

"You are standing right next to me, Gollepin — has the fog gotten into your ears?"

Gollepin dug a finger into his left ear, seeming to take his question seriously. "No, sir. But the empty buildings are —"

Ursov's temper was rising. "I know full well which buildings I am talking about! If I didn't know about them I could hardly suggest them, now could I?"

"But —"

"GOLIEPIN!" Ursov roared, his face livid, all traces of his former pallor gone. "Am I not the commanding officer here? Do I not give the orders? And are you not to follow them? Without question! I leave this matter in your hands — I trust the new recruits will be settled adequately."

Ursov turned and stormed away toward his private quarters. He was very upset and did not look at Gollepin standing confused in his wake, or Belidaev and his peasants. We soldiers were all very mystified. Belidaev was grinning to himself.

* * *

The atmosphere of the barracks in the evening always contains a mixture of different emotions. After a long session of drilling which encompasses most of the afternoon and all of the evening, the prevailing mood is exhaustion. And the next day we would have to labor in the fields, or out in the swamp trying to "reclaim" it.

We were crowded in the hastily-erected barracks, and the noises of many men drifted through the air, mingled with the odors of sweat and dirt. Some of the newer soldiers could be heard whimpering in their sleep, dreaming of wives or families or villages left behind for the next 25 years. Endovik says that the ones who whimper never survive the term of service. I wonder if I whimper in my sleep. A dim lantern stood in the center of a small wooden table, surrounded by four soldiers attempting to play a game from which no one could remember the rules precisely, but that didn't seem to bother them much. They couldn't cheat if no one knew the rules anyway.

Endovik's bunk was next to mine — technically he was a farmer-colonist now that he had retired, free to till his land and be self-sufficient.
But many things had been changed in the crisis of the epidemic. Many of the men lay wide-awake in their bunks, staring and trying to find whatever they wished for. That's the funny thing about exhaustion—it is harder to sleep if you're completely exhausted than it is if you aren't tired at all. By the time your muscles and nerves relax enough to permit sleep, it is time to wake up anyway. Oh well, not even the Tsar can change that.

Endovik usually stayed awake to talk with me, since he knew I wouldn't be able to sleep for some time. Those were the times when I missed you the most, and also the times when life in the military colonies was the most bearable. Endovik and I became great friends during those quiet conversations. Poor Endovik.

I told him about the new recruits, and Corporal Belpliev, and Ursov's reaction to the name of Vendeéva. "Vendeéva?" Endovik said, and I looked at him to see that he was frowning, searching his memories. "Vendeéva was the name of the village that was here before the colony. General Ursov had us tear it down to erect the colony."

"Why would Belpliev say his peasants were from Vendeéva then? Could there be another village with that name near here?"

Endovik pursed his lips and scratched his cheek by the mole under his ear. "Maybe you should know more about our General Ursov, Alexis," he said to me. I lay on my back and listened—Endovik was good at telling stories.

"Ursov was the fifth son of a nobleman, and entered the army in the hope that his family name might bring him more success than the family fortunes would have. He fought against Napoleon at Borodino under Field-Marshal Kutuzov—he was the only survivor of his company because he hid in the dark corner of a ruined peasant home as soon as the heavy shooting started. Instead of being hung for cowardice as he should have been, he was promoted. Ursov had noble blood in his veins. I fought at Borodino too—I was even shot in the arm."

Endovik fumbled with his shirt, but it was dark, and I had seen the scar before anyway. "If only the Tsar knew...." we both sighed. Endovik continued.

"That was the time when I was half-finished with my term of service. The memories of my family were just numb spots in my mind, and the anticipation of getting out of the army was a dream, endlessly far away."

"After the wars, Ursov was given a soft ministerial position in the military, right where he could embezzle money which was supposed to buy better food and uniforms for the soldiers. Then the Tsar started his program of military colonies, and transferred Ursov out of his easy desk job and dropped him here in the wilderness to establish a new colony!" Endovik allowed himself a small chuckle. I was beginning to suspect that he was making much of this up, but I didn't know how much; nor did I really care.

"Tsar Alexander had selected this piece of land to be the site of Ursov's colony—out in a muddy swamp—where stood a generations-old peasant village named Vendeéva. It was common practice in erecting a military colony to raze the existing village, level it to the ground, and build a new military colony on the site, each building constructed according to a master plan. However, the peasants of Vendeéva had lived in their traditional village for as far as their memories stretched into the past—and they realized that Ursov was a lazy desk-man who had gone to fat in the previous few years.

"The peasants of Vendeéva rose up and refused to allow the construction of the colony, saying that the document of authorization from the Tsar had been forged—even though none of them could read—because the Tsar would never do such a thing."

"Then Ursov changed into a completely different person. He was like a raving, bloodthirsty..."
But peace doesn't last very long in the colony. I heard a horse coming, and looked up to see Goliepin galloping down the street toward the General's headquarters. Goliepin looked agitated, and his horse, covered up to its belly with globs of mud, looked angry at him for being so stupid as to bring a horse into the treacherous swamp. I watched the lumps of mud the horse left in its wake to mark its hoofprints, standing out in a bold trail down the center of the street I had just spent five hours sweeping.

"General! General!" Goliepin cried as he charged up the walk. I had to leap out of the way or be trampled. "There's been an accident!"

Ursov burst out of his office, a half-crumped piece of paper in his hand. Goliepin tried to catch his breath, but Ursov would have none of it. "Well, what's happened? Have you —"

"One of the peasants is drowned! He fell into a deep pool of mud in the swamp and sank under! We tried to get him out, but... the mud must be softer than I thought — we couldn't find him! Not even his body! And the other peasants just... just stood there!"

Ursov reacted strangely to the news of the death. He appeared almost happy for a moment, or relieved may be a better word. Then he suddenly turned angry and snapped at Goliepin. "You shouldn't have left them alone out in the swamp just to tell me about the death of a peasant, you fool! They're in your command! You aren't a messenger boy, Goliepin! Now make the rest of them work harder for their carelessness!"

Goliepin looked confused for a moment, then seemed to think better of being confused; he saluted, turned his horse and rode back down the clean street, laying down another set of hoofprints. I looked at the mud and sighed. One doesn't complain.

Three days a week we practiced our military drill. On alternate days we worked. Hard. Since it was springtime, most of the soldiers and peasants were out working in the fields, plowing and planting. It. Goliepin had taken Corporal Belidaev and his twenty peasants out into the swamp to try to "drain" it. Nobody really knew what they were doing out in the swamp — Goliepin least of all — but they were kept busy sloshing in the mud, skirting the deep and treacherous muddy pools, and digging random trenches which led nowhere.

I had been assigned to sweep the streets and sidewalks, due to the cholera-inflicted shortage of peasants. This was the first time I had done this job, but I found it much more tolerable than working in the swamp, or even in the fields. Ursov is very imaginative, I must admit, for he can find tasks which absolutely must be done that no one else would even think of doing. Such as sweeping the trunks of trees... It was midmorning, and I had been working for five hours. I had swept most of the main street clean, and I was working on the walk in front of General Ursov's headquarters. I was tired, but I dared not rest so close to the General's watchful eye. I kept working, and it was very quiet.

We stood rigidly in our ranks, enforcing absolute discipline on ourselves. Our faces betrayed no emotion, our bodies allowed no motion whatsoever, not even a shuffle in the cold night. It was time for the final roll-call before retiring to our barracks; Ursov seemed to find it helpful to our sleep that we each get a good chill before turning in. Our uniforms were old and thin, and did little to keep out the cold wind.

All the colonists stood in neat lines, facing the General who stalked back and forth in front of the ranks, hands clasped behind his back. Goliepin went carefully down each column, counting with his fingers, and losing track more than once so that we had to stand in the cold longer while the Lieutenant corrected his error.

Goliepin went to the single line of the twenty silent peasants under the supervision of Corporal Belidaev. Belidaev stood serenely as Goliepin counted his charges. Once again, the Lieutenant's voice broke out in a half-whine of surprise. "General!"

Ursov had been watching Belidaev intently, and strode over as Goliepin shouted again, abruptly lowering his voice as he realized the General had stepped closer. "The new peasants are all here!"

Ursov frowned, "And should they not be? They were under your command,"

general. He resented being here even more than the soldiers did and decided to make things even more miserable for the rest of us. Perhaps he saw a chance to make up for his cowardice at Borodino — although he would probably make me run the gauntlet if he knew I had suggested he has a conscience — maybe there were other reasons. The General had us soldiers take out our weapons, fit the bayonets. We were to put the peasants in their places by violence.

"I remember one of our soldiers... I can't remember his name... was originally from Vendeéva, and he refused to fight against his own townspeople. Ursov shot him dead right in front of all of us and ordered the rest of us to attack — our muskets and bayonets against sticks and pitchforks... we... we had seen what would have happened... had we disobeyed the General's orders. What could we do? The soldiers had been worn thin from Ursov's discipline — and he unleashed them to burn and pillage. I don't know how many peasants were killed before Vendeéva surrendered. Ursov sent the survivors out into the steppe, without provisions, with orders to travel to the nearest military colony, which was about a hundred versts away — with no villages in between." Endovik sighed, "We never received word if any of them reached their destination..."

The old man drew a heavy breath. Many of the other soldiers had already gone to sleep. I was startled by the sudden darkness as the gameplayers extinguished their lantern and got up from their table, groping in shadows to find their bunks. "But why would anyone claim to be from Vendeéva seven years after that village was leveled?"

Endovik was silent for a short while, then spoke. "I just tell the stories — don't ask me to explain them."

...
"No, sir, General! I mean they're all here! Even the one who drowned! Well, he didn't drown if he's here — I mean the one we thought had drowned! The one I thought —"

Ursow pushed past the babbling Lieutenant and moved slowly down the column of peasants, glaring at each one of them. He came to the man, an old man, caked with mud, his clothes, his hair — mud dried even on his eyes and lips, in his mouth and teeth. He stared at the General with unblinking eyes, and made no sign that he saw anything.

It took a supreme effort for the rest of us soldiers not to break discipline and turn our heads to watch the silent conflict. We could feel the tension crawling in the air, and we were certain that much more was here than we were aware of.

"Excuse me, General." The voice startled Ursow in the silence, and he snapped his head up. Belidaev had spoken. "I did not mention this before, but I believe you knew my sister?"

It appeared as if someone had physically struck General Ursow, for Ursow started up to Belidaev, and his face was terrible to see, yet he also appeared helpless at the same time. "Surely you must remember her, General?" Belidaev continued, his voice mildly taunting. "She had long brown hair in braids. And a mole on her left cheek?"

Ursow seethed, and Belidaev raised his voice, almost shouting into the General's face. "A mole on her left cheek!"

Something snapped in Ursow, and he let out a cry of rage as he struck Belidaev a blow across the face which would have toppled a horse. Belidaev stood firmly.

"Tomorrow morning you shall endure the knout!" Ursow roared, and he stormed off to his private quarters, but it seemed almost as if he fled.

Belidaev smiled.

* * *

When we finally retired to the barracks, generally with more noise than was necessary but then we needed some release from the amount of control Ursow's discipline forced on us, I found Endovik already in his bunk. I spoke to him, but he didn't answer. I frowned, knowing he couldn't be asleep with all the comotion the soldiers were causing, and upon bending closer to him I saw that he had a strange pallor. He was shivering.

"Endovik?"

His face had a tight expression of pain and discomfort, and when I touched him, his skin had a clammy feeling. Tears swam in front of my vision.

"Endovik?" I asked again.

He opened his eyes and sighed heavily. "I know..."

We both had seen enough of the epidemic in the past weeks that neither of us could have any doubt. We had watched the same thing happen to our peasant hosts. I wanted to run away, but I couldn't. Not from Endovik.

"Could you help me to the infirmary, please, Alexis?" Endovik looked up at me; and I helped him out of his bed.

"That was the bravest thing I have ever done in my life — it required more courage than any battlefield would have. I remember stumbling across the compound, together in the darkness, Endovik leaning heavily on me, his steps uncertain. At any moment I waited for the fatal germ to cling to my clothes, to be inhaled in each breath, wondering if I had already contracted cholera, if I was already doomed. Endovik was shivering all the way, or was it me? When I finally returned to my own bed, I lay shaking for a long time, listening to the silence which Endovik's breathing normally filled. . . .

* * *

A heavy feeling of tension, uneasiness, filled the air as we were filled out of the barracks early the next morning to witness the punishment of Belidaev. The sun had just risen, and the air was still chill as we marched to the plaza where we normally drilled at the center of the colony.

Ursow sent a group of soldiers with bayonets to the cholera houses to bring forth Belidaev and the peasants. The General's face was bright and smiling in anticipation of the event. Ursow seemed to feel that since he was in a position of importance he was required to strike back viciously at anyone who questioned his authority, to fight back at anyone who fought against him. He knew he had not earned his rank — especially after his cowardice at the battle of Borodino — and perhaps he felt he had to struggle harder to keep it, as he had showed against the insurrection of the original peasants of Vendeëvna. And now Belidaev and his peasants were frustrating the General because they seemed to be taking care to do nothing Ursow could fight against. They were like ghosts from his past who had come — not to haunt the General — but to let him haunt himself.

Two of the soldiers reappeared, stiffly resting their guns on their shoulders, flanking Belidaev as he marched toward the General. Behind them came the column of twenty peasants, also closely-guarded — I could see no reason for this and I am certain I wasn't the only one mystified, since neither the peasants nor Corporal Belidaev had ever shown any form of resistance whatsoever.

Belidaev, however, did not seem to be disturbed in the least when he walked up to Ursow, even pulling slightly ahead of his guards (which we found to be one of his strangest actions yet, since each of the other colonists lives in mortal terror of the knout).

"Good morning, General!" he said.

Ursow's face went livid with rage, and he angrily barked orders for Belidaev's two escorts to strip the Corporal of his shirt and to bind him to a sloped wooden post sticking out of the ground at an angle. Dried blood stained the post and the ground around it, for we were forbidden to scrub this reminder of past punishments while we were forced to keep the rest of the colony so meticulously clean.

Belidaev rested against the post and did not struggle as the soldiers lashed his wrists together — more tightly than they had to, but they had no wish to incur the General's rage. The peasants of Vendeëvna stood silently, looking on with their staring eyes.

Ursow removed a long rawhide lash from his belt, holding the sweat-polished handle in one
hand and caressing the braided leather thongs with his other. For the occasion he had added several sharp metal bars to the end — I had not seen him do this for any other's punishment.

"Before you whip me, General, aren't you going to announce my crime?" Belidaev called, his voice pitched to draw the greatest irritation from Ursov. "You do remember my crime, don't you, General?"

This evoked a brief murmur from the onlookers, almost a murmur, before they caught themselves and remained silent. Indeed, none of us understood exactly what Belidaev was being punished for.

Ursov responded with a violent crack of the whip, striking across the Corporal's back. Belidaev didn't wince, or show any outward sign of pain; but a thin red line of blood appeared on his back.

"Hah! So you do bleed?" the General cried out, as if this were some odd sort of victory.

"You sound as if you expected otherwise, General?" Belidaev spoke calmly. Ursov whipped him again, and again.

And again, for a full hour. The pattern of interlaced red lines on Belidaev's back had been obliterated by the flow of blood — but still the Corporal showed no pain, nor did he ask for any release from his punishment. He seemed to be drawing strength from the very ground his feet were touching, from the air he breathed, from the place that was Vendeëva.

The General was drawing strength from his own reservoir of anger and bitterness, from some wellspring within himself which poured forth hatred for this Belidaev with a greater intensity than I have ever before seen, in any man!

At last Ursov, exhausted, had to pause for a moment. He wiped sweat off his forehead and his upper lip, reaching inside his coat for a silver flask of vodka. He filled the capful, took a small sip, then downed the rest in a gulp. The General replaced the flask and wiped his sweaty palm on his pant leg before gripping the whip handle again.

Ursov continued the beating for another hour, leaving us to wait and watch when we would normally be practicing military drill. The peasants' eyes in Vendeënva stood silently, looking on with their staring eyes. The General was trembling and seemed incapable of continuing. Belidaev himself finally looked weakened; his eyes were closed, his back was shredded and the flesh hung in bloody strips. As Ursov watched, the Corporal slowly slid down the post slippery with his own blood, and fell on his knees.

Ursov seemed to draw strength from this and shouted for the doctor to bring smelling salts. The doctor seemed to have been waiting for this, and passed the smelling salts in front of Belidaev's face, reviving him. The doctor was a particularly uncaring man, with rough patches of stubble always scattered on his chin, as if he never shaved but could not grow a beard. His eyes were dull and tired. As Belidaev struggled to get to his feet, Ursov continued the beating again until the Corporal collapsed once more.

Like a wolf pouncing on his fallen prey, the General removed some small metal spikes from his pocket and savagely branded Belidaev on the forehead and both cheeks, leaving ugly, raw wounds. Smiling, he rubbed gunpowder into the bleeding facial wounds so that the scabs would be permanent; then Ursov stepped back to inspect his work.

Belidaev was silent, huddled against the post; Ursov turned smartly to glare at the peasants, as if to find some signs of despair or compassion for the Corporal. The General seemed furious when he failed to find any. Ursov strode up to the peasants, glaring at them, slowly pacing before each one of them, gloating.

"You see, filth, I command here. My word is power in this colony, and your resistance has no effect. Belidaev is weak — you are all nothing! My command comes directly from the Tsar." The General stopped before the old man who had vanished into the swamp mire; the peasant was still eaked with dried mud which clung to his hair, his lips, his eyes. "And my every action is sanctioned by him!"

Abruptly, the mud-covered peasant spat full in Ursov's face. The General looked as if his throat would burst as his roar tried to charge out of his mouth.

"SOLDIERS! I want every person in this colony to form two columns! GOLIEPIN! See that every man has a rod or whip! Every one of these accursed peasants will run the gauntlet! With a full thousand men on a side! I will see their blood run on the ground!"

" Haven't you seen that already, General?" A hoarse voice — Belidaev struggling against the ropes that bound him to the post. Ursov stormed over to him and kicked him savagely in the left kidney.

"You seem not to care about your own pain, Belidaev; I hope you find the punishment of your peasants more enjoyable!"

The gauntlet was formed rapidly. Ursov clapped his hand on certain soldiers as he passed, indicating that they were to lead the peasants between the two lines of soldiers armed with sticks and whips. Each soldier, when chosen, went up to a peasant, bare the peasant's back, and pointed the bayonet of his musket at the other's chest, lashing the peasant's hands to the barrel of the gun. The peasants offered no resistance whatsoever.

A long stick like a broom handle was thrust into my hands, and I knew what I had to do. I stood uneasily in line, waiting for the peasants to be led past. I saw the doctor kneeling by Belidaev, and I was angry for a moment, wondering why he had left Endovik. And then the peasants began to march between the two columns of soldiers.

It is a strange thing to have to beat someone you hold nothing against, someone you don't even know. Yet with Ursov watching us, we had to strike the peasants with all the strength we could manage — or we would end up the gauntlet ourselves. As the peasants filed by, the soldiers holding their muskets were crouched and wary, lest they be struck themselves as they moved slowly backwards.

The blows fell, and the peasants didn't seem to mind. They uttered not one sound, and I struck with all my might, for Ursov stood near me. An old peasant woman was led past me, but she did not flinch when I tried to crack her skull with my wooden rod. My arm was numb from the force of the blow, yet an old woman did not feel it!

The peasants were taken through the gauntlet,
and none of them fell. Not one, not even the oldest and frailest among them. They waited at the end, and Urslov was livid. He stormed forward and grabbed the man who stood next to me. "You! You weren't striking hard enough! Send them through the gauntlet again!" the General shouted. "And you will follow them through as punishment for your laxness!"

Then Urslov pointed at me, and my blood froze in my veins as I thought I would be forced to run the gauntlet myself. But then I realized I was to lead my companion through. His hands were stiff and trembling as I lashed them to my musket, pointing the bayonet at his chest. His eyes were wide, and I could not tell if he hated me for doing this. I didn't even know his name — that made things easier.

We followed the peasants of Vendeevna through the two columns of thrashing sticks and whips. The man I led winced and cried out and stumbled as each blow fell — but the peasants made no sound. About halfway through the long column, my companion collapsed and would not get up again as his blood oozed through bruises and smashed skin. Urslov ordered for a flat sled to be brought, then made me slide the almost-unconscious man on it. I then continued to drag the man through the lines as the other soldiers beat his motionless form.

I was drenched with sweat, both from exertion and anxiety, as I emerged from the end of the lines; the other soldiers who had led the peasants looked in a similar condition, far more distressed than the peasants themselves were. The peasants were unscathed. The doctor nonchalantly shuffled forward to look at the bloody man on the sled as Urslov bellowed for the peasants to run the gauntlet again.

The soldiers all groaned — not aloud of course: they were too afraid of the General for that — but I could sense their dismay. "Not this one, General," the doctor said, indicating the man I had led. "He won't survive it."

Urslov scowled. "Take him to the infirmary, then." He glared at the peasants, as if to say: "How dare you emerge without a scratch while one of my men undergoes half what you have and almost dies?" That look was so filled with hatred that I know I have shriveled up right there if it had been directed at me.

"Belidaev, too?" the doctor mumbled, breaking Urslov's silent anger.

"No! He can lay in the barracks!" Then the General, at the peak of his frustration, dismissed the troops. He turned his back to all of us and strode off toward his office, looking for all the world like a mighty man who had just had his own impotence held out before him.

* * *

It was dark and silent in the barracks; most of us were asleep, and even the sounds of the men were muted as they went deeper into their dreams, or their nightmares, or the day's strange events. I was thinking about Endovik.

The door burst open, striking the wall to which it was hinged with a flat crack, waking us in an instant. Urslov stood alone, framed in the doorway, silhouetting himself with the glow from the lantern he held in his left hand. The General entered the barracks, his boots making his footsteps loud on the wooden floor. He was fully uniformed, carrying a pistol in his belt and his whip in his right hand.

"Up! Up!" he shouted hoarsely. Urslov strode among the bunks, rapping them with the wooden handle of his whip as the soldiers struggled to their feet. "Up, scum! You have a task to perform! Dress yourselves as quickly as you can! Hurry!"

We did so, at first muttering among ourselves in our weariness; and then remembering our fear of the General, we placed our clothes on in silence, hastily buttoning enough buttons to make us look dressed. Then Urslov ordered us out of the barracks and into three lines.

We were marched across the compound to the three buildings where Belidaev and the peasants of Vendeevna were housed, standing next to the other cholera-emptied buildings.

"Another case of the cholera sickness has been reported," the General spoke to us. "To prevent another epidemic, the doctor has placed the victim in the strictest isolation, and will not allow even the medical staff to tend him, lest they pass along the disease." Rage filled me, and I almost flung myself at Urslov. Endovik! They weren't even tending him!

"We must burn these plague buildings and everything in them to prevent another epidemic!"

Urslov ordered us to gather straw and pile it up around the buildings, so that we could set them on fire. We worked uneasily, and the General became increasingly impatient.

Finally, one of the soldiers spoke up. "General, sir, shouldn't we... shouldn't we get the peasants out first?"

Urslov snarled and cracked his whip across the soldier's back. "You will follow my orders! Without question! I command! Do I not control this colony and everything in it? By the order of the Tsar!" The soldier was cowed and went back to work; the General turned and muttered quietly, almost to himself, "We will see if they are demons or not."

Next we were ordered to gather up hammers, nails, and pieces of wood with which to board up the doors and windows of the three occupied buildings. Each of us worked rapidly, afraid, and the three buildings were quickly secured. The strangest thing, to me, about the entire business was that the occupants of the buildings never stirred, never shouted, never tried to break out, not with all our sounds of hammering, and Urslov's shouting. An eerie, unnatural sensation filled all of us. Perhaps the General was right — maybe the peasants of Vendeevna were unholy demons. Enough had happened since the new recruits had arrived that none of us was certain what to think any more.

Urslov's voice was laced with fear as he ordered the straw set on fire, as if he knew he finally had to confront Belidaev in an unearthly duel, but did not know what the outcome would be. The fires were set on first one of the buildings, then the next, and finally at the third building where the bleeding form of Belidaev had been taken earlier that day.

The wood burned quickly, as if eager to
The time has come, General — the splinter will be removed."

Ursov turned to us with a strange, wild expression in his eyes. "Lies! They are not true!"

The building roared in flames behind Belidaev, but he didn't seem bothered by the heat. He beckoned to Ursov. "Would you care to enter the fires of Hell a few moments sooner, General?"

Ursov grabbed the pistol from his belt and pointed it at Belidaev. "You will die, demon!"

"Yes!" Belidaev hissed. "The demon will die!"

The General fired — and fell to the ground with a bullet-hole in his chest, and shook on his face. His blood soaked into the soil of Vendeévna to mingle with the peasant blood he had spilled there so many years ago.

Belidaev laughed and turned to step inside the burning building, vanishing in the flames.

* * *

Just this morning, when some of the soldiers ventured into the still-smoldering wreckage of the cholera buildings — under direct orders, since no one had willingly ventured into them since the night of the fires — they found no bones or any other remains of Belidaev or the peasants of Vendeévna. Somehow I wasn't surprised.

I went to visit Endovik this morning, but he had already died. The doctor wouldn't even let me say goodbye to the body of my friend. It was too risky, he said. However, Endovik's death is allowing me to send you this letter. Lieutenant Goliepin has the command now, and he is very confused with all the new duties thrust upon him. I have told him that Endovik had a sister, and I asked him if I could write her a letter of consolation. Goliepin was happy to have one small duty taken from him and he quickly waved me away. He won't have time to read this letter either, and so I will trust that it reaches you uncensored.

I believe that the "official" story states something to the effect that Ursov died of cholera, and the buildings were routinely burned to remove the threat of pestilence. Officially, we never received any new recruits from Vendeévna.

Give my love and greetings to Father, and I will write you again if I can, but it may not be possible for a while. Know that you are with me and that you are my strength to endure twenty-five years of military service. I love you all, and God's blessing upon you.

Alexis

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MANNEQUINS

by Diane Mapes

Yeah, it is a nice evening. Go on, go on, have a seat. Take a load off. You look a little stiff in the knees.

What's that? Smoke? No, I don't mind if ya smoke. Go ahead. Used to smoke myself, but can't hold 'em any more. See? Yeah, I don't blame ya for flinchin', it is pretty pathetic. But I'm used to 'em now. Knew they was comin' too. My dad had rheumatoid. Ended up with worse claws than these. Body all hunched over, legs all twisted up underneath him. Couldn't even take a leak by himself, much less get around in a chair like I do. Yeah, I knew it was comin' since I was twenty-eight. Just a matter of time.

Smoke smells damn good. What is that, Canadian? I can always tell. Canadian. Tobacco's cleaner. Doesn't have all the shit they put in it down here. Preservatives, huh? What? Why sure.

Thanks, mister. Tastes good, too. Hit me again, would ya? Yeaah. You're all right, mister.

Suppose you're here about the mannequin. What? No, no more, thank you. Ashtray's over there by the TV. No, under that pile of clippings. Yeah, there it is. Got that in Reno. Me and the missus used to go there before she died. Damn California drivers, just as soon you see you as pass you on the street.

What's that? Oh yeah, I heard about 'em all right. No. Drunk driver got her. Yeah, a shame. Never did catch the son of a bitch. Big black car. Saw it through the window here. Bessie was crossin' the street to get the mail. Lookin' for the check. Late again, like always. Big black car. Musta been goin' ninety. Couldn't see the license plate or the driver. Windows all smoozy, you know. Some city councilman, probably. Hell, who knows, probably just some kid out with his daddy's car. Bessie damn near did a three sixty.

Bitter? No, not no more. I was. But Bessie's been a long time now and there's plenty others out there who die a lot worse ways. She died instantly, they said. Instantly.

Sure, have another one. Nice to have somebody around, somebody... alive.

The mannequin? Yeah, she's here. Knew that's why you... Damn! Neighbor's watchin' me again, that old Fleming bat. Look at that face. All screwed up like somebody twisted a corkscrew into her nose. Damn busybody!

What's the matter with you, woman? Can't ya just leave well enough alone? Can't ya just let a man enjoy a little company, even if it is half made up?

Damn, there they go again. That's okay, just let me rest a minute, they'll be fine. Yeah, maybe I better take another seat there. Thanks, mister. That helps. That really helps.

What were we talkin' about? Oh yeah, the mannequi... I'm sorry, I can't call her that. Her name's Geneva. Like the peace talks. She's back in the bedroom.

Now don't go lookin' at me like that. I just put her in there 'cause that old Fleming bat keeps sneaking around, peering in at me, pretending to take her clothes off the line. Bedroom windows face the other way, towards the ocean. I'll get her for ya, if you want.

No, I suppose there ain't no hurry. TV too loud for ya? I can turn it down. Remote control. Will wonders never cease. Chair's electric too. See?

Oops, damn near got your toe. Gotta be quick to keep up with Jeb. I used to be real quick. Used to play ball, for Ed's Refrigerator Repair. Stole eighteen bases in one season. My dad came out and saw me a few times, that was before he got crippled up like he did. Sat there in the stands and put away damn near two cases of beer. Him and old Charlie Wilcox. Hot July days, they'd sweat out most of it. Puke out the rest on the way home. Good ole dad. No wonder mom...

You a drinking man, mister? I got me a few cans of Rainier in the fridge. You can help yourself if you like. No? That's okay, I'm not much of a drinker myself. Keep those in there for Geneva mostly. She likes...

Caught me, didn't ya? Yeah, I know she's just a mannequin, a stolen one at that. But sometimes...

What was that they said just now? Did you hear? Sounded like more of those freeway killings. Oh, same one? Yeah, they'll just keep harpin' on it and harpin' on it and pretty soon they'll have seventeen others just like it. Just like those damn Tylenol poisonings and those stupid manicures that go around shooting up grade schools and burger stands. Damn TV news, sometimes I wish they'd just close up shop and move away. When Bessie got it, they was out here with their video cameras and their big black microphones buzzing around like a damn swarm of bees. I kept the door locked just like now, wouldn't talk to none of 'em. Bessie was shy, you know? I knew she wouldn't want them TV people spreadin' her guts all over the six o'clock news.

Geneva, she's shy, too. When I first met her she wouldn't hardly talk at all. Had to coax her out of her shell, you know?

Yeah, you know, don't you? Crazy old coot, talking to people that don't exist. Well, let me tell you something, young feller. Geneva's a hell of a lot more human than most folks now days. She never hurt a single damn soul in her life, I'll tell you that. And she's always had a kind word for me, even when I get cranky and yell and even when I knocked her down that time. Nothing but a kind word for...

Shit, didn't mean to let that slip out. I never meant to hit her, I was just upset, that's all. Kids comin' round, yellin' at me and throwin' things at the place. And there's Geneva at the window, enticin' 'em. I mean, she ought to know better, pretty girl like that standin' there in the window half dressed. Old habits, I guess. Hell, I admit it, she's probably lonely living out here in the middle of nowhere with some crazy old coot. I just pushed her back, that's all. Just pushed her away from the window and she fell down. I was
worried the kids would throw something and hit her, and my hands were botherin' me so bad that day. . . . I didn't want her to get hurt, I told her that. I told her I'd make it up to her. I will, too, you'll see.

What? No, they're all in school now. Haven't seen 'em around for quite a while. They come back every now and then. When they're bored. That's the time you gotta be careful, when kids get bored. Last year, some kids got hold of my cat and set him on fire. Bored, you know.

Who me? No, I ain't got no kids. Oh, do I ever get bored? No, not around here. I got all kindsa projects. Yeah, right there. Well, sure, they don't look like much to you. Bunch of old wrinkled up fish wrap is what the lady from chore service calls 'em, but look a little closer. Why sure, that's right. It's a collection. See? A catalog. Been building it ever since Bessie died. She was the first. Damn right it's organized! Violent crimes go over there by the TV. Suicides and freak deaths by the couch. Funerals by the woodstove.

What's that? Lottery winners? Well, I suppose I could start clippin' out the winners. I started keeping weddings for Geneva. That's the little pile, over there by the window. She's been after me to start keeping births, too. That kid. What a romantic. Sometimes I'll pick up those books down at the Safeway, you know, the ones with the men and woman on the cover, those purple ones, and I'll read to her. Oh, she just eats those romances up. They all sound the same to me, but Geneva just sits there like she's hypnotized.

What? Adventure stories? Yeah, I like a good adventure story myself. Matter of fact, I just picked up a couple of Mack Bolans down at the Safeway and been tryin' to figure out how I could slip one past Geneva. They got a second hand rack down there, that's where I get all of my books so they don't cost so much. Every now and then I come across a page that's half gone or all marked up, some damn bored kid with a felt pen, but I'll just make something up and Geneva don't mind. I have to do that sometimes anyway, when my hands get to hurtin' so bad I can't turn pages. I don't even think she notices; she never says nothin'. Maybe she won't notice if I crack open one of those Mack Bolans tonight.

There I go talkin' about her like she's . . . What's that? No, Geneva's never been married. She came close, once, I guess. Her and this law student, but he died. Scarlet fever, she said. Yeah, it was tragic. She went right to work after that. Trying to forget, I guess.

Where? Oh . . . uh, Saks, downtown.

Damn right, it's impressive. Nothing but the best for my Geneva. But she wasn't happy there. You probably wouldn't be either. Too much politeknin', I guess. Found her out behind the place one day, all broken up about something. She told me, but I don't remember exactly what it was. I could tell she was unhappy, though. That's why I brought her here.

What? Is she happy here? Well, of course she's happy here! Maybe a little lonely now and then, but aren't we all? Aren't we . . .

Well, you'd be happy here, wouldn't ya? I mean, I know it ain't the Ritz, but I got a couch and hot plate and a pretty damn good TV. Gets four channels, five when there's a storm. I got me an electric blanket, too. Almost brand new. The lady from chore service gave it to me last Christmas. Now don't get the wrong idea, I don't go around accepting no charity, I was just doin' her a favor. Her nephew gave it to her and she already had two. She didn't want to hurt his feelings by returning it, he bought it at the store where he worked, she asked me to take it off her hands. I let Geneva use it mostly. It gets pretty cold in here at night. Not that she ever complains about it. She never complains about nothing.

You're happy here, aren't you, Geneva? Geneva? Excuse me a moment, there. . . . Say, I didn't catch your name. Jake? Oh, excuse me a moment there, Jake. I'm just gonna see what's keepin' her. Like I said, she's just a little. . . . Watch your toe now. I told ya, ya gotta be quick. . . .

Geneva? Geneva? Why don't you come out on it, honey? That's right. Don't be shy. There's a young feller I'd like you to meet. Name's Jake. He seems awful nice, not bad lookin' either. And he's sure askin' a lotta questions about you. Seems real interested.

Where'd I meet him? Oh, town. He was just gettin' off work and I asked him if he needed a ride and . . .

Where's he work? Oh, downtown, you know.

Now don't go lookin' at me that way. So he don't work at Saks Fifth Avenue, so he works at JC Penneys, you can still come out and say hello. That's my girl. Come on out and be polite. I told you I'd make it up to you, didn't I, darling?

There you go, Geneva. Now just get settled and while you two get acquainted, I'll go rustle us up some beers. Jake here likes adventure stories, Geneva. Whadya think about that? Been a while since I heard a good adventure story. Long while. You two relax now, and I'll be right back.

Sure is nice to have company in the house again. Sure is nice.

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LONG AGO
(to a little girl who loves bears)

***************

Sweet Mary Eng

They write poetry, the bears
With blue-button eyes.
Their bright faces are yellow—
And brown, a colour of flowers
And mid-summer honey.
They often walk in the bent-shine of clover.
And they fish in the sea, I suppose.
I once saw them there
On a beautiful day long ago.

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POSESSION
By Ardath Mayhar

I hope that I'm losing my mind. The alternative would be too terrible to contemplate.

Already I can feel the puzzled disapproval of my supervisors, and even my peers are looking at me with distaste, though I have been able, so far, to quell the urge to impede my appetites that are besetting me. If, and I shudder to think it, the problem progresses to the point at which the Ultimate Manager has it called to his attention, my fate will be horrible beyond imagining.

It is becoming impossible for me to go to meals with my fellows. The stuff they put into our trays gage me with its odor alone, and to taste it would make me retch, though it is the same food that I have eaten all my life. The decor of the room itself, though heretofore it has seemed cheerful and lively, sends me reeling out as if I were seasick.

And the games! Though they have been carefully devised by the U.M., under the supervision of the Absolute Authority, to benefit our health and our characters, as well as to serve a beneficial tertiary purpose, I find them repulsive in the extreme. The steams and the stenches, the shrieks and the moans are more than I can stomach, in my present condition.

Altogether, my life is becoming impossible, and I cannot imagine how I can possibly contrive to conceal my problem on any long-term basis. Even now, I find myself falling behind in my duties. Before this, the long columns of names to be checked off against the quota roster filled me with quiet pleasure. Seeing so many fall into their appointed places fulfilled a need for order that has been basic to my character. And now even that is denied to me. I find myself weeping internally for them.

Insanity must be the answer. The other possibility, while not totally unheard-of, is so weird, so infinitely unsettling, that I refuse to think about it when it creeps into my mind.

Worse than anything has been the change in my appearance. In the steel of the shower-door (we are not issued mirrors here) I can see that my face has altered in shape. Instead of the graceful curves I was born with, my snout has thinned to an aquiline straightness. My eyes are becoming larger, lighter, and seem to be emerging from beneath my heavy brows. My mouth has lost its fetching fullness and is thin-lipped and austere—how have my co-workers kept themselves from shuddering when they look at me?

I am gazing down at my left hand. It is slender, fine-boned, long-fingered. Where is the gnarled and twisted claw that I have used all my life? Or is this all in my imagination? Do I still look the same to all except myself? Are the strange glances I catch from time to time solely concerned with my strange behavior?

Surely, in so well-organized and tightly run a place there must be help for me! I shall ask my supervisors tomorrow.

NOTE IN JOURNAL: Appointment tomorrow, 1316 hours, Staff Psychiatrist, Chamber 6, Warren 2. Permission form to be filled in triplicate and signed by Supervisors #8, 7, 13, and 27.

Regular entry: I don't wonder that few of my fellow workers, no matter how severe their depressions or other problems, ever attempt to see the Staff Psychiatrist. The permission forms alone require an inordinate amount of time and effort. And for the loss of time from work, I am required to work overtime for double the amount of time lost. Not terribly fair, it seems to me.

However, I cleared all the obstacles, placed my free time in hock for a week, and this secondary work-period I visited Kregg. It was an interesting experience, though not one I would repeat voluntarily. He was, actually, not interested at all in finding out what is bothering me. It seems that he is writing a monograph on the influence of sulphur-baths at an early age upon the middle-adult enjoyment of the Garamyns. I can see absolutely no connection, myself, and disappointed him terribly by saying that an infant allergy had prevented my ever having sulphur-baths at the prescribed age.

Then I was able to fix his attention for a short time on my own needs. However, he poo-pooed any idea that I might be going bonkers. He made test after test, and, while my results could not be said to be standard, the end decision, after consultation with Rogg, was that I was sane as any and saner than most.

There goes my last hope. If I am not insane, I am possessed. Not only is the concept frightening, it is also shameful. This is not something that happens to my kind. The other way about, surely, but not this!

NOTE IN JOURNAL: Get Library Permission from Supervisors #8, 15, and 21. Find substitute to fill in at my desk for required time. Ask about hardship allowance to reduce my extra work-time.

Regular entry: My visit to the Library was depressing in the extreme. There was only one thin volume dealing with the subject I needed to research. That in itself says much about its rarity. Worse yet, there was no recorded instance, in all the case-histories, of successful reversal or exorcism. Am I doomed to be totally overwhelmed by this?

Later: I am losing ground very quickly. This evening I was assigned to the Lower Game Room, which was at one time my favorite enjoyment. I disgraced myself completely by fainting and falling into the pool I was attending. Only the toughness of my hide saved me from bad burns. To make the situation infinitely worse, the victims in the pool forgot their sufferings and saved me, thrusting me up and over the curbing to safety. That alone shows that I have been guilty of mercy. Luckily, I recovered my wits before a Games-Master arrived on the regular check-schedule.

I have spent the rest of the evening, since being relieved on schedule at Games, considering everything. I find that I have been, almost unconsciously, falsifying the lists! There has never been a case of this in all the history of the Business! Examining my conscience closely, I have ar-
rived at the figure of 7,395 souls lost to the inventory through my erratic behavior. How much labor on the part of my fellows who work UP THERE this wasted is obvious. And I don't feel at all guilty!

Now I have studied history as well as the next demon. Without question, when the dichotomy was set up, the Absolute Authority put the Ultimate Manager in total charge of this end of things. Mercy, virtue, sweetness and light were expressly forbidden in our operation.

Which brings me to the paradox: I can only be possessed by one Power, for only one is powerful enough to take over one of the U. M.'s subordinates. If the A. A. still holds his ban on virtue here, why has he allowed one of his minions to infiltrate?

And why me?

Unless, of course, it had something to do with my lack of those sulphur-baths? An allergy would be easy for even an angel third-class to arrange. In which case, I might well be a secret weapon...a sleeper of sorts...planted here long ago as a part of some plot or plan to ease conditions in Hell.

Strange as it may seem, I have always known that I'd jump at any opportunity to change Employers. So would many, if not most, of my fellows. No matter how we all jeer and shortle while we punch those poor fools down into the brimstone, deep down we feel sorry for them. Even demons have sensibilities.

So I am giving up the struggle. My Possessor, whoever it may be, can take over from here. Not that I've been a bad sort, in my own field; I just know that Whoever will be better able to cope with the suspicions that I may have aroused in my awkward attempts to find out the truth. I have a feeling that even the U. M. might have a hard time wrestling this one to a finish.

NOTE TO WHOMEVER: You really should drop this journal into the first pool of flaming brimstone. I wouldn't want it to get you into hot water...

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THE JOURNEY

I met a man of fiery eye
Astride a massive steed,
And in his hands a leather purse;
The sky grew dark indeed.
They towered like rough monuments;
The foaming charger stamped.
The man bent down to talk with me;
The beast impatient champed.
A wind blew up and spread their hair
In clouds upon the gale,
And by their eyes as the beast was black
That's how much I grew pale.

"Please tell me, sir," I called to him,
"Which way you may be bound,
And which road is it I must take
To reach home safe and sound."

His brow grew darker than the clouds
That choked the raging sky,
And as he bent to answer me,
Darker still his eye.

He seemed to shiver as he spoke;
"My way is long," he said,
"And those that travel on with me
Had better they were dead."

There seemed a moaning in his voice,
His mount was tense to start,
And so I bade him blessings' speed;
I said, and crossed my heart,
"Christ bless you rider, by His blood,
As for our sins He died."

"Far more for mine than e'er for yours,"
He said, and turned to ride.

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BERNADETTE LYNN BOSKY
THE MONGFIND

by Peter Tremayne

"It's a very unique house," commented the fat man from the Building Preservation Society, gesturing round the tiny parlor of the 17th Century farmhouse.

"Ireland is full of historic buildings," I replied with feigned boredom. "What precisely is it about this one which has necessitated me driving all the way from Dublin? My chief didn't exactly make the situation clear."

I was not going to tell this red-faced enthusiast that my position in the Manuscripts Department of the National Library of Ireland was so lowly that the director had simply ordered me to drive down to Ballyporeen in County Tipperary and meet the representative of the Building Preservation Society on a matter which might interest the department but without feeling the necessity of explaining what that matter was.

The fat man, Doherty by name, had conducted me from the hotel at Ballyporeen — an imposing little village known only as the birthplace of the grand-great-grandfather of American president Ronald Reagan — up to the foothills of the Knockmealdown Mountains where he showed me the ruins of the old farmstead.

"It hasn't been occupied in centuries," he confided, as if the crumbling nature of the edifice needed explanation. "It has a reputation locally."

"A reputation?" I smiled patronisingly.

"Indeed so. The locals say that it is haunted."

He quivered in ecstatic pleasure but I responded to his theatrics with a chuckle.

"I never knew an old house which wasn't said to be haunted," I replied with heavy sarcasm. "Why should this one interest me?"

"As I have said, the house seems to have been deserted for a long time. There is no record of anyone attempting to live here since the mid-18th Century after the Whiteboys attempted to burn it down. They were a sort of guerrilla resistance to the excessive exactions of rents and tithes from absentee English landlords, a sort of secret peasant organisation who...,"

"I know my Irish history, Mister Doherty," I interrupted.

"Well, after 1762 it was not occupied. The place is marked on the old maps as Te-na-Greyouth which is obviously English phonetics for an Irish name."

I frowned and asked him to write it down. He did so, but the name became no clearer. He was watching my puzzlement with obvious enjoyment.

"I think I might be able to clarify it," he said, writing down alongside the phonetics the Irish: Teach na Gráinneacht.

"Ah, Teach na Gráinneacht," I said. "The House of Ugliness?"

"That's one translation," he confirmed. "I would prefer, however, The House of Detestable Horror."

"Confirming your theory that the place is haunted," I smiled.

"It's no theory. It's local folklore," he protested. "People from these parts talk about the Mongfind."

I pursed my lips cynically.

"And who, or what, might the Mongfind be?"

"One of the banshees... a supernatural creature who lives on blood," replied the fat man, closing his eyes in shivering pleasure. "There are references to such a creature in pre-Christian Irish mythology though nothing is known of its origins or what it looks like... unless one takes the name as a description."

"The name?"

"Mong, as you know, means 'hair' or 'mane' while the word find is probably a corruption of the word fionn meaning 'white'. So we have the name 'White Hair' or 'White Mane.'"

I gave a sigh of exasperation.

"None of which brings me any closer to the reason as to why I have come all this way from Dublin."

The fat man apologised nervously.

"Because of the historic value of the house," he began pompously, "the Building Preservation Society for the county, of which I am secretary, raised enough money to purchase it. Our purpose is to restore it and open it as a folk museum. As you can see from the excavations, we have been hard at work all summer."

There were certainly signs of enthusiasts at work about the place and in the small parlour there were a camp table, storm lanterns and pieces of camping equipment.

I waited patiently. The man would obviously get to the point in his own good time.

Doherty turned and pointed to the large stone fireplace.

"That is the original; we have managed to date it back to late Tudor."

The fireplace was certainly worthy of preservation. Its grey flagstones were in good condition and the rusting iron hooks for hanging pots and the roasting spit would need very little treatment to bring them into excellent order. The great chimney breast also had a fascinating feature with what was obviously the original cupboards, with their wood dark and warping, still in place on either side of it.

"It was while we were working on the fireplace that we came to a loose flagstone, took it up to check and found a small iron box beneath it."

He turned to the table with the air of a conjuror about to produce a rabbit and removed a dustsheet.

The iron box was rusty and obviously quite old.

"One of the archaeology students from Cork who was helping us at the time opened it. The box was fairly airtight and inside was a decaying leather pouch. Inside this were several sheets of paper in a remarkable state of preservation. The text was written in English and dated at the top of the first folio to 1658. Well, 17th Century English is not our provenance which is why I telephoned the National Library to ask them to send down an
Everything made sense now. My master's degree was in 17th Century manuscripts.

I went to the table and opened the box carefully. Sure enough, inside was a worn leather pouch, a typical container for its day. Inside this were several folios of tough rag-paper. The old hand-made paper had certainly survived extremely well and the writing, while fading, was still legible. I glanced at the opening paragraphs. They looked promising. I looked round and dropped into a chair at the table.

Doherty coughed.

"Are you proposing to read the manuscript now?" he asked in surprise.

"If you've no objection."

"Well, if you don't mind, I must get back to Ballyporeen to transact some business. I should be back in an hour or so."

I nodded absentmindedly, keen to get into the fascinating manuscript.

"That's no problem. I'll just sit here and read this and then I'll be able to give you a brief report on its value when you return."

At the door he hesitated and came fussing back.

"It's a grey day and dark in here. You'd best have this storm lantern alight."

So saying, he struck a match, trimmed the wick, and left me to the sudden pungent odour of burning kerosene.

I hardly noticed his going as I carefully spread the sheets of paper on the table before me. Whoever had written the manuscript had been able to afford good material. The rag paper was hardly decayed. However, a quick observation showed that the hand that wrote it was not that of a learned man; the letters were often ill-formed and quite child-like. In some places the letters were open and curiously looped, in other places they were close together and congested. I smiled; a psychiatrist would be greatly entertained trying to make an analysis of this handwriting. Even lacking in mind the lack of conformity in spelling in 17th Century English, the words were often spelled in a bizarre fashion. Noting these preliminary observations, I sat back to read.

* * *

Writ at Te-na-Groyought, near Ballyporeen, May 20, in the Year of Our Lord 1658.

I have taken up the quill to recount the strange and confounding experiences which befell me in the barony of Ballyporeen, in the troublesome country of Ireland, only with the utmost reluctance. I have set about this awesome task not from vanity in my own abilities but 'tis the only means wherein I may confess all to record, for I must tell someone, if only this inanimate paper, or go mad.

I am but a poor soldier whose rough tongue has, by good fortune, received a brief instruction in lettering from the charity of the local dominus of my native village of Sizewell, in the county of Suffolk, England. I know well that my hand is not sufficiently tutored nor skilled to attempt to narrate my experiences in a way which would commend them to any of literary disposition. Nor do I have theological understanding by which to discourse on the significance of the events which befell me. I will content myself only in a rough soldier's report. Perhaps the finder of my transcriptions might, for charity's sake, forward them to the learned editor of the Public Intelligence and he, in kindness, might render my unsightly scribble to an essay more worthy of public knowledge.

Tom Sindercombe is my name and I be formerly a private soldier in the regiment of Colonel Lawrence, the governor of the town of Wexford. I was twenty years of age when I left my master's farm at Sizewell and volunteered to bear arms for Parliament. I was four-and-twenty years of age when I sailed on the famous Revenge and disembarked General Fleetwood to be commander-in-chief of the English Army in Ireland. That was in September, in the year 1652, when we landed at the port of Wexford where I did find myself enlisted in Colonel Lawrence's dragoons.

Ireland was then but recently conquered but do not think that life was easy for the soldiery. There were many skirmishes and engagements still to be fought with the stubborn remnants of the Irish armies. Entire tribes of Irish had taken to their bogs and mountain fastnesses to ride forth and do battle in unsoldierly ways. We honest Englishmen knew not from which dark valley, or from behind which bush, the Irish leers would descend on us with pistol and sword. Yet God and the Lord Protector was on our side. At the very time I landed in Ireland the Physician-General of the Army, Sir William Petty, had computed that we had already wasted some 504,000 Irish by sword, banishment and pestilence during our campaign.

Not long after I arrived in Ireland there came the order that the Popish natives were to be driven out of the country almost entirely, pushed back beyond the vast reaches of the River Shannon into the wild province of Connaught and the county of Clare. Fortresses were to be erected to hold the Irish barbarians in these confines and here they, men, women, and children, would have to remain themselves and those who had left them from the rest of the country before May 1, 1654. If, after that date, they were found on the eastern side of the Shannon, they would suffer death. Their lands, farms, their towns and villages, thus confiscated, would be given to the English soldiery in the stead of their army pay. Thus a new England would arise in Ireland and thus would that rebellious nation be placed so that it would never again be burdensome to English rule.

Naturally, the announcement of this great plan for settling the country was greeted with signs of ferocity by the natives. Ambushes and murders of English officers and settlers, the Tories, as we called the Irish bandits, deriving the word from a native source toirish, universally applied to cut-throats, grew many.

To facilitate the scheme of transplanting the Irish from those areas designated to be settled by the English, the Government decided to round up entire villages and place the populace on board ship for trans-shipment to the American colonies for use as labour on the plantations. Barbados was a favoured destination as well as other islands of the West Indies. My Lord Broghill, a prominent Government leader at Dublin, was very much concerned in such schemes and I recall in one week alone we seized and transported 1,000 Irish
wenches to provide wives for a like number of English soldiers who were thus encouraged to take ship for the New World to sustain the population of the colonies. At the same time we seized 2,000 Irish boys of ages varying from twelve to fourteen years for shipment to the colonies to be brought up in English habits.

For the rest of the native breed, the army paid £5 for the head of any Irish rebel brought in to the local commander. For the most part the soldiery regarded 'Irish' and 'rebels' as synonymous and a head can make no plea of defence once severed from a body. I have seen many soldiers grow rich on such bounty. A favourite sport of the soldiery was hunting out Popish priests, some we hung and some we burnt for the idol worshipping barbarians that they were. Sometimes, though seldom, our officers would intervene and the priests would be marked for transportation where their Popery would be sweated out of them by labour in the plantations. The authorities tried to encourage this later course by announcing a bounty for each priest killed.

To make the situation plain, any Englishman encountering an Irish man, woman or child east of the River Shannon, unless they could produce a written form of protection from the Government, became the absolute arbiter of their fate: immediate death, transportation or simple arrest until the authorities determined their future. Yet, even under these conditions, there remained many who persistently refused to transplant westward into Connacht and County Clare. The highways were littered with entire families of Irish hanged on every available gibbet and tree as a warning and encouragement to their fellows. In every hedgerow one would find decapitated corpses, for the soldiery preferred to claim the £5 bounty on rebels rather than apprehend them. Even so, the task of removing the Irish from the land was like trying to remove lice from one's body after a hard campaign in the boglands.

I have digressed a little from my main narrative only to provide some consideration of the conditions appertaining in the country lest a future generation misunderstand the reasons for my subsequent actions.

The Spring of the year 1655 witnessed several companies of our regiment scouring the Galtee Mountains, just south of the town of Tipperyar, in search of a band of Tories who had recently attacked our garrison at Cahire. Our captain had detached a sergeant and two troopers, myself being one of that band, and ordered us to scour the valleys to the south where the Knockmealdon Mountains began to climb skywards. It was as breath-taking a countryside as one would wish to see with high granite peaks covered with green and purple, here and there speckled softly yellow with gorse. I recall that I was fondly contemplating the fact that my term of service would be up within a few weeks and that I, too, would be appor tioned a farmstead as pay and a farmstead in such a countryside as this could be a profitable venture. Yet, I supposed, by the time the officers and the non-commissioned officers claimed their shares, the land left for poor privates such as I would be barren and infecundous indeed. Such were my thoughts when we neared the hamlet of Ballyspeeren where great forests skirted the lower reaches of the mountains.

The first indication of danger I had was the bang of a musket so close that I smelt the acrid stench of powder. Our sergeant flung up his hands, gave but a single groan and fell to the ground. I turned my horse, drawing my sword at the same time and saw our enemies behind some trees. Another musket exploded and the ball came dangerously near my face. My companion had also drawn his sword, for our pistols were holsterd and unloaded. Together we rode down on those skulking cowards. There were four of them, Tories, I supposed. Even now I see their images. They were dressed in an assortment of rags and goatskins, so I presumed the animal skin to be. They were brutish fellows with matted, flattened hair, so long that it seemed to naturally join the hair of the goatskin and conceal so entirely their faces that one might easily have taken the skin as their own and confound those vicious villains at first sight with the animals whose spoil served as their clothing. There was no disavowing the hatred and malice which gleamed from their wild eyes through the mat of their hair. They were animals intent on the kill.

One sprang forward and levelled his pistol at my companion. The ball took him in the face just as I cut the man down. His companions, crying wildly in their Irish gibberish, ran towards me, one of them gripping my bridle while another, striking up at my swordarm with a great wooden cudgel, caused my fingers to be rendered nerveless and, in horror, I saw my sword fall useless to the ground. Then I was being dragged from my mount and fell heavily among them. The man with the cudgel raised it once again and a deep blackness overtook my entire sensibilities.

I have a vague recollection that I came to some while later. I recall intense cold and darkness. I lay shivering with a fierce pain splitting my skull. I only recall feeling that death would be a merciful end to my predicament. Then I was plunged into blackness again.

The second time I recovered consciousness I could register that I had been stripped and left for dead, my head caked in my own blood from the cudgel's blow. It was night now and the moon was full and standing high beyond the tall whispering trees, in the distance I heard the plaintive cry of a wolf. I tried to move but all feeling had deserted me. Then I sought to call to my companions, lest they, too, had survived, but my tongue cleaved to the roof of my mouth, so dry was my throat. I could only groan softly in my pain and coldness.

I heard the snapping of a twig. I could not turn my head in the direction of the sound and could only lay like a helpless babe, trying to still my rasping breath in case it be one of the Tories returning to make sure of the deed. A dark shadow appeared above me: a face, whose features were indistinguishable in the gloom, bent down to mine and I felt a hand on my breast, feeling for my heart beat. The hand then touched my head, causing a thousand spear points to dig deep in my brain. I groaned aloud. If I could have screamed with the pain I would have done so.

The figure gave a long shivering sigh just as the distant wolf howled again. A man's voice spoke sharply: "Mudra! Go socair leat!"
I write as I afterwards learnt the words for, in truth, at that time I knew nothing of the babbling verbiage which passed among the Irish.

I confess that at the sound of the voice my hopes sank and I resigned me to death. I had fallen once more into the hands of my enemies.

The figure bent over me again and I felt strong and sturdy hands under my back and legs. As easy as you might lift a new born infant, the man had raised me from the ground and placed me in the back of a cart. I could not see much but discovered afterwards that it was a small cart drawn by an ass, which the natives here use as a beast of all work. I remember the jerk and creak as the cart lurched forward and then I descended into my black pit of insensibility once more.

I awoke in the warmth of comfort of a bed, lying under coverlets of duck down that made me recall my childhood on a farm in my native Suffolk. I recall the smell that greeted me as I awoke, the smoky smell of burning peat. There was a silence broken only by the sharp crackle of a fire.

I groaned and tried to clear my constricted throat. Then into my line of vision came a woman's concerned face. It was a homely face, well into middle age; a pale face surrounded by hair the colour of jet, partially covered by the folds of a red shawl. Large grey eyes twinkled at me as the woman smiled.

I coughed again and said: "Am I still alive?"

At this a shadow passed across the woman's face and she glanced over her shoulder as if to address someone who stood behind her and whom I could not see.

"Tá sé Sasannaí!" she whispered.

At the sound of her Irish remembrance came back to me and with it the horror of my predicament. It was obvious that I had been rescued by natives who had mistimed me for one of their own and once my identity was discovered I would be despatched without a moment's thought. I tried to struggle up but I was weak. The woman leant across and pressed me firmly back into the bed as if I had been a child.

"Bíst! Bíst!" she hesitated for the right words and to my surprise began to speak an English of sorts. "No harm to you... no harm. I worked at a big house in Dublin. There I learnt your tongue. That was before I married my man."

"Are you going to kill me?" I demanded suddenly.

The image of a tall, dour man, appeared behind the woman and stared down at me.

"Céard dúirt sé?" he demanded.

The woman turned and spoke rapidly to him at which he laughed and shook his head.

"An tó an t-aighdhir?"

"My man asks, are you a soldier?" interpreted the woman.

I sighed and resigned myself.

"Aye. Attacked and nearly murdered by Tory vermin. My companions are already dead."

The woman repeated my words as the man gazed down at me. There seemed no hate nor malice in his face. His delivery was rapid.

"My man says that he is Donal O'Derrick. He is a farmer, not a soldier. All he asks is to be left alone to farm his land as his father, his father's father and the generations gone, farmed it before him. What is the war to him? He had no part with its making, no part with its continuance. No harm to you. You are welcome to remain until you recover from your hurt and then you may depart in peace."

With that I must have passed out again for I remember no more.

The days passed and my strength began to return to me. O'Derrick and his wife, Finuala, as I learnt her name, nursed and fed me until I was able to place my feet over the edge of my bed and try a few faltering steps. I could not fault their hospitality and kindness. They called me a friend in the simple belief that they had heard all English soldiers were named so, or, as they pronounced it, Ráif.

O'Derrick's farmstead was on the edge of the vast forests which covered the lower slopes of the Knockmealdon Mountains, far enough away from the village of Ballyporeen to discourage visitors; indeed, far enough away for our troops to have missed it when rounding up those recalcitrants who refused to transplanted. Neither Irish Tories nor English troopers came this way. Yet it was a pleasant farmstead, the sort of land that I dreamt of some day owning ever since I was a young boy labouring on the squire's farm at Sizewell. There were several barns in addition to the farmhouse and O'Derrick kept herds of shaggy Irish cattle on the upper slopes of the mountain while his lower fields produced a goodly abundance of maize and grain. His goats supplied him with additional milk and cheese; hens gave eggs and there were rabbits in plenty. A man might live out his life on such a farm in freedom from the poverty that I had witnessed in other parts of this Godforsaken country.

One day, when O'Derrick was in the fields and I was resting before the fire, I asked Finuala O'Derrick if they knew of the Transplantation Order. She shrugged and said that she had heard of it vaguely but knew nothing of it directly. It did not apply to her husband and herself. They were farmers and knew nothing of war; they had no part in the troubles and kept themselves to themselves. When I asserted that it applied to all the Irish Nation, she frowned in disbelief and asked me what great sin the Irish had committed against the English to be treated in such a manner.

I explained that the Irish had rebelled against lawful English rule and caused a great effusion of English blood which the Lord Protector Cromwell, with God's aid, sought revenge for, scattering the wretched Irish armies.

"But why should Englishmen rule in Ireland in the first place?" she asked, puzzled.

I laughed at this piece of colossal ignorance and patted her gently on the hand.

"We have come to bring you civilization, the English language and the true religion of Christ."

She shook her head in bewilderment.

"Poor, poor Ráif," she replied, speaking as if it were I who was the ignorant one. "The Irish stand in need of no such instruction. We are an old and proud people. It was our monarchs and scholars who first took the word of Christ to the English and turned them from their pagan gods. Our saints and scholars spread the Gospel throughout Europe when the tribes of Angles, Saxons, Goths,
Huns and Vandals had all but extinguished it. Our scholarship and literature were eagerly patronised by the monarch of the world."

I stood up in my disgust. How could an Englishman learn anything from such ignorance?

The next day, my argument forgotten, I was feeling better and therefore eager to be out in the warm sunshine, feeling the gentle fragrant breeze on my pale body. I was now all but healed from my experience.

I went for a walk among O'Derrick's lower fields and came upon the farmer busily at work. All my childhood memories came tumbling back. Soon I, too, was hard at work alongside the Irishman; working and weeding, digging and hoeing at the crop, as eager as he was to wrest the wealth from the fertile soil. At the end of the day both O'Derrick and I bathed in the cold mountain stream near the farm. Common work had made us momentarily brethren. So it continued for a week or two. I gave myself willingly to working the farm alongside O'Derrick. And in my day dreams, I dreamt that the farmstead was mine. Then I grew depressed at the thought that someday soon, when the O'Derricks were transplanted to Connacht, a thin-faced officer or heavy-jowled sergeant, would move into this beautiful spot and reclaim the land as their own. It greatly troubled me. The very thought of it began to gnaw like a maggot at the back of my mind.

One evening, as I sat outside the farmhouse watching the sun lowering itself in the western gap between the Knockmeal Down Mountains on one side and the Galtee Mountains on the other, Finuala O'Derrick came to call me for the evening meal.

"You know you will have to leave this land soon," I told her.

"Never," she replied vehemently.

God, how the Irish clung leech-like to their soil!

"It is the law," I replied. "The Lord Protector has ordained it so."

"Is treise tuath no tighearnaí?" she shot back at me in her own tongue, then, hesitating, she sought translation. "A people is stronger than a lord."

"Strong or no, you will still have to go."

"Son Ráif," she said softly, "for in these days you have been with us you have somehow taken the place of the son we were never blessed with; son, I would have you know this, this land is in our blood, for thousands upon thousands of years, our ancestors have worked these fields. From the mists of time when the De Dananns wrested the land from the dark gods of the Pómar, this land has been ours. For countless generations we have lived here, close to nature, part of nature; watching the seasons come and go; seeing nature and supernatural co-exist as one. The land is ours, we are the land. We cannot be separated. The land holds the bones and the breath of the countless beings we once were; it holds the breath of life of the countless beings we will become. Listen, Ráif! Listen!"

I found myself fascinated by the strange animation in her face. Found myself unwillingly listening to the gentle sigh of the breeze down the mountain, the sibilant whispering of a million tongues among the leaves of the tall dark forest around us.

"Do you not hear them, Ráif? Do you not hear the voices of our ancestors and our children unborn? We will never give this land up; we may die on it, but our rich warm blood will only fertilise its soil. The heart of this land is us; is timeless. It is from this soil that the old gods first drew breath. Lugh the Mighty, Bel the Creator and the ever present Morríg, the goddess of death and battle. The land is filled with a countless host, spirits of the earth, trees, springs and streams; all of these are our allies and when you seek to destroy us, and drive us from the land, you must also destroy them. How can you destroy what is eternal?"

I stared at her a little with open mouth. In my native Suffolk, such meandering protestations would have resulted in the woman being hauled before the Witchfinder-General and a fire would have consumed her black soul before another sun rose. It was true, I meditated, that these idol-worshipping Papists were every bit as heathen as our army chaplains had told us.

It was O'Derrick who interrupted my reverie by calling from inside.

"Tá mé stilteach thúis an ocras!" The woman shrugged.

"My man is hungry," she said and made to rise.

It was at that moment that the most unearthly wail split the evening gloom. Never had I heard a cry like it. It was a shrilling inhuman shriek of despair. Once, twice and a third time its blood-curdling tones cleaved through the quiet dusk and then subsided.

Finuala O'Derrick had half risen, her face ashen, her mouth working silently. Slowly she raised a trembling hand and genuflected. I still had not accustomed myself to open displays of Papsyry.

O'Derrick appeared at the doorway, his face troubled. He gave a nervous cough and muttered: "Madal Madal!" This was one of the few words I had learnt and knew its meaning to be 'wolf' for there are countless wolves among these forests and anyone bringing the head of such a beast to the stockades could claim a bounty. O'Derrick's woman shook her head.

"An bhean sídhle!" she whispered.

O'Derrick snorted and spoke in rapid tones.

"What is it?" I demanded.

Finuala O'Derrick gazed fearfully at me.

"What is it?" I repeated again.

"It is the bean-sidhe." "Baithin?" I tried to repeat the word as she had said it. "What animal is that?"

"The bean-sidhe is the woman of the fairies whose shrieks and moans portend a death."

I tried hard to keep my face from splitting into a grin of derision.

Abruptly there came a rustling sound in a nearby tree and a large black bird went winging up into the heavens and was lost to sight. The effect of this simple occurrence was marked. Both man and woman let out a low moan and peered affrighted at each other. I gathered that it symbolized some black omen in their superstitious minds.

"Be warned, son Ráif," whispered Finuala O'Derrick. "Before another sun has set there will be death in this house."
She turned abruptly and followed her husband inside the house.

For a while I sat outside, laughing to myself about the simple ignorance of these nates. God be praised for making England a Protestant Nation if Popery bred such ignorance. Then I paused and frowned. The woman had gazed on me with a curious expression as she pronounced her prophecy. "Before another sun has set there will be death in this house." Was it a warning? A warning for me? Were they planning to kill me after all and, in her own way, the woman was giving me a chance to escape? I thought about this prospect for some time. Then the thought of that pleasant farmstead began to fill my mind, displacing my fears. It was not right that the farm which I so coveted should be given to some rude mechanic from the crowded streets of London when I was country born and bred and best suited to working the rich land. Yet how could I claim it as mine?

I retired to bed that night and found myself tossing in sleepless agitation. I had decided to sleep lightly in case the woman's words had been a warning and her husband meant to kill me. In that I was quite prepared and secreted a knife about my person for my defence. My wounds were now healed and I was recovered and strong. But, above all, the worm of envy gnawed inside my mind. At dawn I finally dosed, dozed and dreamed the farmstead was mine and mine alone.

I came to with a start, cursing myself for my lack of vigilance. Yet I need not have been afeared. Although the sun was well up, nothing seemed amiss. O'Derrick was chopping wood outside while the woman was busy cutting freshly baked bread in the parlour.

I rose and went out to bathe in the icy waters of the mountain stream.

I had bathed and was about to dress myself, for I preferred to plunge my entire body naked into the waters, when the resolution came upon me. All my anxieties suddenly clarified and I knew what had to be done. Perhaps it was the sight of O'Derrick gathering wood, his back towards me, a little distance from the stream. Something seemed to take possession of my actions, ordering my limbs to obey and quietening the nervous beat of my heart. I slipped quietly from the water and trod, with naked feet, over the ground towards the farmer. My eyes had caught sight of the billhook which hung on a nearby fence, sharpened ready for the morning's work, its silver thin blade sparkling in the cold morning sun. My hand reached out. My lips were set firmly. I came up behind him, quite close.

"O'Derrick," I whispered.

He rose, arms filled with wood, and started to turn.

My hand holding the billhook was flung back. I saw his eyes dart towards it, glazing with surprise and fear.

With one powerful motion, I struck. He had no time to cry out as the billhook cleaved the air. I felt the slightest resistance to my downward sweep. He staggered forward a step, wood spilling from his hands. His head left his body cleanly from the blow I had dealt. Blood gushed in all directions like a fountain. The head, the eyes still wide with surprise, dropped against a pile of wood. The headless body seemed to hesitate, move a few steps, and then it collapsed in a bloodied heap.

I stood there a moment, chest heaving. I had seen too many Irish fall in similar fashion to the sharpened swords of my comrades in arms to spare a thought for remorse or regret. What matter that O'Derrick had rescued me from the perils of the forest after I had been attacked? He was still a mere Irishman and therefore his death was of no consequence.

Aware of my situation, I turned swiftly for the house, the billhook still in my hand.

I lifted the latch slowly and eased into the parlour. Finuala O'Derrick was bending over the fire, stirring the contents of a large iron pot which simmered on the flames.

Something made her feel my presence for she glanced up with a startled expression, her eyes grew round with horror as she saw my naked body splashed bright with the red blood of her man. They travelled slowly to the weapon in my hand.

"Ah, Réif! Réif! So was it you that the bean súilte warned of?"

I made no reply but moved forward, the billhook raised.

She backed a pace as if to elude me. Her eyes blazed with a bright hatred.

"Be warned, Réif! The land is us, we are the
land. You cannot separate us. The land encompasses the blood and bones of the countless beings we once were; it holds the breath of life of the countless beings we will become. Listen, Ráif! Listen! The land is filled with a countless host. Do you not hear them whispering? Spirits of the earth, the trees, the springs and the streams, all of these are our allies and when you seek to destroy us, you must also destroy them! How will you destroy what is eternal?"

Anger in me, I swung back the billhook.

She opened her mouth and started a piercing shriek.

The billhook descended, driving as a knife through butter. Perhaps it was my frenzied imagination but, as the head flew from the body, I fancied that the woman's shrieking wall of terror continued, continued for a full half minute after it lay in a pool of red blood on the wooden floor of the parlour. It took a while before I could collect my shattered nerves and gaze down on it.

The head lay resting on the floor, mouth still agape, the lips twisted back over the gums with the teeth showing long and yellow. The tongue twisted obscenely between them. Still the eyes were open, they gazed at me with bright grey malevolence. But it was not those awful features that caused my bile to rise and my blood to run ice-cold. It was the hair. The hair... at my very moment of striking, that black, black hair of Finuala O'Derrick's had turned snow white, standing straight out from its roots by some impulse I cannot explain. The face of the homely woman had been transformed into that of a harridan.

For a time I stood there staring from head to body, from body to head, and then I turned, in a desire to cleanse myself of the deed, I ran out of the farmhouse to the mountain stream and plunged myself into the cold waters.

It was half an hour later when I dressed myself, put on a pair of O'Derrick's stout leather boots, and went outside to the edge of the forest. There I dug a hole. Returning to the house I dragged the headless body of the woman to the forest's edge and deposited it into the ground. Then I made a similar journey with O'Derrick's body, before felling in the earth.

I gathered O'Derrick's head and stuffed it into a sack which I placed on the cart. I then went into the parlour to collect the woman's head, picking it up by that long straight white hair. I was about to take it to the cart when I heard a noise. Was someone coming through the forest? Now, of all the times to choose, was someone approaching the farmhouse? I hesitated, turned and thrust the head into a cupboard which stood on the right side of the old fireplace and closed the doors upon it.

Agitated, I peered around for a weapon and to my delight espied an old fowling piece. Yet there was no powder nor ball to load the ancient weapon with. I prayed that whoever was approaching would not be able to tell that I had no means of firing the weapon. Cocking the piece, and resting it in the crook of my arm, I went out to the porch.

I heard the sound of someone thrusting their way through the bushes and raised the weapon offensively.

Just as I was about to cry out a command, the bushes swayed back and the intruder emerged.

It was O'Derrick's untethered ass.

I wept for the relief I felt. This was the very beast I wanted. Putting aside the flintlock, I caught the little creature by the bridle and soon had him harnessed to the cart. When it was done I took the bloodied sack, returned to the parlour and opened the door of the cupboard.

There stood that frightful white maned head, standing upright as if still on its body. It was staring straight at me. Then, even as I looked, its eyes narrowed and its mouth distended, splitting into a malicious smile.

I started back, the cry of terror sprang from my lips.

The head remained in position with the new expression graven on its bloodless features.

It was some time before I reasoned that there must have chanced some strange muscular contraction at the very moment I opened the cupboard. This muscular change had caused the expression on the face to change as if it had still been alive. I have heard many such tales from my comrades wandering a battlefield after the slaughter. Indeed, I can vouch myself that I heard a dead man belch a good two days after he was killed. I cursed my delicate sensibilities. With firm resolve, I reached forward, seized the white maned head and thrust it into the sack.

I was firm in the resolution of my plan.

It took me nearly all day to reach Clonmel in O'Derrick's aging cart and, God be praised, I saw no antagonists on the lonely road to that town. Clonmel was the nearest garrison town and I had nearly reached its protective walls when I was accosted by a troop of horse, the sergeant initially believing me to be Irish, for such my apparel proclaimed me. I soon convinced him to the contrary and had him bring me to the satirine major in command.

"Two weeks you have been missing, Sindercombe," he admonished. "What have you to offer in defence? The penalty for desertion is death."

"I did not desert, sir!" I protested, flushing in indignation. And I fell to telling him about the attack of the Tories on the slopes of Knockmealdon. Then I said that I, badly wounded as my sears bore mute testimony, was taken by the Tories to a farmhouse and kept captive by one of their number. This Tory and his wife had kept me in virtual slavery until that very morning when I managed to pry loose my shackles, kill them both, and return straightway to the army.

The major grunted with scepticism.

"You can offer proof of this tale?"

I thrust out the sack.

"Behold, sir, I have brought in the heads of the Irish rebels who held me captive."

At that moment I became aware of a man standing in the shadows of the room behind me. He came forward now and peered over my shoulder into the bag. I recognized him immediately as General Fleetwood, our commander-in-chief.

"You know me, soldier?" he asked with a smile, observing my face betrayed recognition.

"I came to this country on the Revenge at the same time that you were brought hither."

He nodded absently.

"You have done well, soldier. This was a deed of bravery. We must reward you well."
"Lord General," murmured the major in protest, "the reward is already fixed; five pounds for the head of each Irish rebel."

Fleetwood gestured him to silence.

"This is a deed of great gallantry. Alone and unaided, the soldier overcame these Irish rebels in their own lair. What reward would you consider worthy, soldier?"

I hesitated, hardly daring to believe my luck.

"Lord General," I ventured, "I leave the army in one month and am to be allocated a tract of land for payment for eight years' service under the colours."

General Fleetwood gazed at me in question.

"Lord General," I hurried on, stumbling over my words in my eagerness. "Let the farmstead that I am given be that of these Irish rebels wherein I was made to act as slave these last weeks."

Fleetwood chuckled.

"A just retribution on these barbarians! A good reward. What say you, major?"

The major frowned.

"But we have no survey nor valuation to guide us to whether the property is too valuable to award to a simple private," he protested.

Fleetwood frowned.

"Do you think Irish rebels would have hold of some grand mansion, major? I have made up my mind. Make out the deeds immediately, so I may sign them. This man deserves his reward."

The major shrugged indifferently.

"As my lord general wills it."

Thus it was that I, Tom Sindercombe, was discharged from the army one month later at Clonmel and presented with the title deed of the O'Derrick farmstead.

As soon as I was able, I rode swiftly back to the slopes of Knockmealdon. The farmstead was just as I had left it and I began work immediately to tidy things up. One of the first things I noticed was that the tall grasses and gorse had grown swiftly over the graves of the O'Derricks. Already it was difficult to discern that there had been any commotion of the earth.

The fields were right for the harvesting and I was able to call upon the help of a former corporal of mine, Fletcher Hopkins, who farmed a few miles across the mountain. The earth was dark and fruitful; the livestock of the O'Derricks, having survived a month of wild living, provided me with an excellent basis for my farm stock. Two whole years sped by and each year the harvest was more bountiful than before; the cows came into calf, the chickens produced wondrously well, even the nanny-goat gave birth and, by selling surplus stock, I soon had three horses, a stallion and a mare and one good plough-horse, a shire brought specially from England. The fruit of my toil gave me money to save and I became respected by my fellow settlers in the barony of Ballyporeen. Indeed, by my second year, Reverend John Smith, the pastor of our community, invited me to serve on the parish council of elders. From lowly state I had risen to become a gentleman.

In the spring of that second year, I took ship from Wexford and arrived in Bristol one fine, pleasant morning. I arranged with a local merchant for certain purchases to be made and shipped back to Ireland. Then I took a stagecoach to London and thence on towards my native Suffolk. Never had I thought to see the like. As I rode into my native Sizewell, former neighbours who had never given me time of day, touched their caps respectfully and out came the squire and parson both to greet me as if I were their equal. I boasted of my deeds, embroidering them not a little and told of my newfound wealth, my lands and possessions. I had a purpose to my visit which was to find me a comely wife to share my toils and provide me with an heir to my wealth. She I soon found in the pretty person of Miss Lucy Hawkins, the daughter of Japheth Hawkins who farmed ten acres outside the village. I made my overtures and within three months was shipping back to Wexford with my lovely bride.

All that ever I had wanted in life was now mine.

It was mid-afternoon when my wife first caught sight of her future home. The day was an unhappy one for it had been raining most of the time on our journey from Clonmel. We had an escort for part of the way because the Tory cutthroats still managed to conceal themselves in the shadows of the mountains and ride out to attack our settlers and burn our farmsteads and raid our garrison towns. We had left our escorting troop of horse at the crossroads where the track divides towards Ballyporeen on the one hand and up to the farmstead on the other. Our wagon creaked up the mountain path, through the dark forests until it came to the brow of the hill which looked down upon the fields and farm. I was quite relieved to see it once again, standing as I had left it, and praised God for the solitude and kindness of my neighbors who had been watchful on my behalf. As chance would have it, at the moment we reached the brow of the hill and looked down upon it, a cloud chased across the sky causing a dark shadow to flit over the farmstead.

Poor Lucy shivered.

"Oh Tom!" she cried in her dismay, "it looks such a dismal place."

"Nonsense!" I replied with spirit. "Tis not at its best in this gloomy light. Wait for the sun to return and you'll see it be a beautiful spot."

I was about to stir the horses into motion when suddenly heard the sound of horses' hooves galloping at a rapid rate on the road behind. Lucy heard them too for she turned and looked back with a frown.

"Who can it be who rides so hard, Tom?"

"One of the soldiers, perhaps," I hazarded.

"Or...?"

A Tory? I left my second thought unspoken but I reached for the pistol in my belt and checked its charge and powder.

We waited for some moments listening to the sound of approaching hooves thundering on the roadway, expecting any minute to see horse and rider appear. Then, just when the stead must surely come into view, the sound ceased abruptly. We looked at each other in uncertainty.

"Where has he gone?" Lucy asked perplexed.

I climbed down and trotted back to the point in the road where I could command a view of the other side of the hill. The road rolled down before me. There was no sign of a horse or rider in sight, nothing as far as I could see back across the broad slope of the hills. I tugged at my lip and
shrugged. The rider must have left the roadway and gone off over the shoulder of the hill toward Fletcher Hopkins' farmstead. I ventured the explanation as I climbed back into the wagon. Neither of us gave the matter any more thought.

That evening, after the fire had been set and was roaring up the parlour chimney and food had been set on the table, Lucy expressed herself to be far happier with her new home and bade me forgive her for her early misgivings. The sun had come out briefly, dispelling the gloom and now it was low behind the house and the evening and twilight was swiftly creeping over the mountains.

"Hark!" smiled Lucy happily. "Listen to the birds calling to one another. Why, if I close my eyes I might imagine myself back in the marshes of Sizewell in our own county of Suffolk. I can almost feel the cool sea breezes."

I smiled indulgently. "We are not near the sea here, Lucy."

She frowned abruptly. "Yet those are sea birds that I hear right enough," she insisted.

I went to the door, bathed red in the glowing evening sun, and stood listening.

Lucy was right. Once brought up in the low marshes on the coast of Suffolk, one can never forget the knowledge acquired. I could hear the cry of a curlew very clearly while, as if in answer, came the fretful call of a golden plover. I gazed in astonishment at the surrounding woods. Then to confound me further there was a third cry... that of the solitary whimbrel. All three were sea birds and when not haunting the coastline would seek out mud flats or large lakes where they could use their webbed feet and bills to gather food. Such birds did not frequent wooded mountains. They sought open country such as provided by low lying bogs and lakes. While one such bird losing its course was an interesting phenomenon, three differing species doing so and joining together was astounding. Here was the curlew who usually flew in large flocks; here was the whimbrel who seldom flocked and was a solitary creature and then came the golden plover who also preferred to flock with its own kind. Here they were; wheeling all together around the top of the farmstead, crying to each other in weird, plaintive sorrow. As I stood and watched them, they flew three times around the chimney stack and then, with an abruptness, flew upwards into the twilight and disappeared.

The following Sunday, after services at pastor John Smith's stone church, we invited our neighbours back to eat and drink with us so that all might get to know Lucy. Here it was that Lucy mischievously astounded me by announcing that she was with child and would present Tom Sindercombe with an heir before next Spring. I was delighted, as were my neighbours, and we celebrated well into that night, even though parson Smith had cause to rebuke us for it was Sunday. But Smith was not an austere preacher and he eventually condescended our celebration of the new life by joining us in more than one flagon of home-made beer.

It was on the following morning that an incident occurred which greatly upset Lucy.

She went to open a window to drain the odour of smoke and ale from the parlour and stopped, hand to mouth, with a gasp.

On the sill of the window was the bloodied body of a black bird.

Lucy's gasp drew me to her side and I bent down to pick up the creature. It was a crow, the type most people refer to as a raven. It seemed to have flown against the window pane and dashed out its life on the thick glass.

"Tis a bad omen, Tom," frowned Lucy on recovering her wits. "That's what 'tis said among our folk. For a bird to dash itself to death against one's window is a portent of ill."

"Nonsense!" I chided. "Besides, you are in Ireland now, a land where we colonists will forget our own customs. We will leave aside the old superstitions."

It was some days before the depression left Lucy for she was still steeped in her native folklore whereas I, Tom Sindercombe, had seen service in the army for eight years and learnt enough to reject signs and omens as delusions and fables. Eventually she became her old self and grew to help me as I busied myself with the early summer chores about the farm.

One day I was working on the lower meadow where I had a goodly crop of corn growing. It was the very field in which I had first worked with O'Derrick, though I only bring this memory up in retrospect for now I scarcely remembered those Irish vermin. I had not thought of them since I claimed the farm as my own three years ago. I was working very hard now to prepare the land and contemplating expansion for I had heard that Fletcher Hopkins was thinking of selling out and returning to England. I did not glance up from my work until I saw the sun sinking below the far mountain tops.

I hurried through the copse which separated the lower fields from the open meadows around the farmstead and, bursting through the wood, halted abruptly in surprise. In the evening light I saw a tall white column of smoke rising from the chimney. I halted, mouth agape and rubbed my eyes. The smoke did not continue up into the heavens, dispersing in the wind, but it curved like a bow, a curious arc, which returned to a spot on the ground near the old woodpile, close by the mountain stream.

What witchery was this? How could smoke curl in such a fashion and return to earth in the same columned shape as when it left the chimney? My pulse suddenly quickened as I perceived a figure bestirrign itself within the smoke. A dark shadow moved as the smoke billowed around it. My blood turned to ice as it moved forward. I could see by its skirts and outline that it was a female figure. As my eyes grew wide, the figure suddenly stepped away from the smoke.

Imagine my relief; imagine the palliation to my nervous as, laughingly, my own gentle Lucy stepped out of that peculiar smoke column and waved up towards me.

With a cry, I hurried down the hill, across the rough ground towards the farmhouse. My frenzied mind was imagining all sorts of possibilities. Lucy might have had some accident with a cooking pan and taken the burning pain out of it, wherever the smoke from it had risen to meet the smoke from the chimney, thus causing the smoke to cojoin so that I observed this bizarre optical effect.
Yet when I reached the yard, both smoke and
Lucy had disappeared.

Frowning, I pushed into the parlour.
Lucy gazed up at me in astonishment.
"What ails you, Tom?" she asked, carrying a
platter of meat to the table.
I stared at her.
"Twas the very question I was about to ask
you," said I. "What was the smoke out in the
yard?"
She looked bewildered.
"Smoke in the yard? I know nothing of
that." She went to the window and peered out. "I
can see no smoke."
"It's gone now," I replied lamely. "You
must have seen it. You were standing in it."
Her eyes widened: "Standing in it? What
do you mean?"
I sensed an awesome feeling of unease.
"Were you not out in the yard just now as I
came over the hill?" I asked softly.
"Not I, Tom. I have not ventured from the
parlour these last few hours. I was too busy with
the cooking."
Her voice was clear and adamant.

Something made me decide not to press the
matter and I extricated myself from the situation
by saying that the chimney must have been moment-
arily blocked and that I must have imagined I saw
her shadow there. How could I say that I had seen
her as clearly as I was seeing her now? It worried
me. Was she lying or was I seeing hallucinations?

It was the following day as we sat outside
watching the sun go down and drinking a glass of
ale, an event which had become a custom with us,
that Lucy turned to me with a frown.
"Tom, what were the people like who lived
here before we came?"
I stared at her for a moment, a coldness in
me wondering what had prompted that question.

"How should I know?" I shrugged defen-
sively.

She sighed. "I just wondered what the na-
tives were like in general. Do you know that I
have been in this country for some time and never
seen a native Irish man, woman or child? Where
have they all gone?"

Here I felt on safer ground.

"By order of the Lord Protector, they have
all gone to hell or to Connacht. They have been
moved west of the River Shannon to allow honest
English settlers to take over the towns and farms
and civilise this God-forsaken country."

"It must be hard for them, hard to be driven
from the land they and their ancestors worked. Is
it right that we do this thing to them, Tom? How
would we feel if the French came and drove us all
into the shire of York and gave our farms and
holdings to French folk?"

I chuckled at her gentle logic.

"It is not the same thing at all, Lucy. The
Irish cannot count as people. They are uncultured
savages. I have seen enough of them to know that
they are murderous cut-throats, every one. An
Englishman cannot move through the country un-
armed."

Lucy, gentle soul, was not convinced.

"Yet isn't that how we would behave to-
towards anyone who invaded England?"

"It is not the same," I insisted. "We tried
to bring them civilization, tried to teach them our
language, our religion and values, yet they prefer
to hang onto their barbarian gibberish and Papish
customs. They are animals and must be treated as
such."

"All the same, Tom," insisted Lucy, "as we sit
here in the evenings, sipping our ale before going
to bed, I cannot help but wonder whether an Irish
girl and her husband also sat in this spot, watching
the sun, sipping their ale, and wondering about
those who worked the land before them."

"You cannot be sentimental over savages,
Lucy," I admonished. "Just because this is a land
close to England, do not think its inhabitants have
risen above the wild savagery of those natures our
New World colonists have encountered. Your Irish
native lives the life of the savage and retains the
idol worshipping superstitions and practices of an-
cient times. They live in utter ignorance of our
just laws, our manners, our customs and our lan-
guage. They are incredibly ferocious, brutally ob-
stant but crafty and unforgiving of strangers. Better
our Lord Protector's plan to utterly obliterate
them from the earth than feel them worthy of
sentiment."

We fell silent for a while and then Lucy
asked: "Is your cut healed, Tom? You should have
told me that you had cut yourself. You must be
more careful."

"I don't understand. I have not cut myself."
She sighed prettily with exasperation.

"There was blood on the parlour floor this
morning. Did you cut yourself shaving?"

"I have not cut myself," I repeated disdain-
fully. "Perhaps it was spilt blood from the beef I
butchered last night."

She bit her lip, hesitated and then nodded and
stood up. "I think I will turn in now, the sun is
already down... oh!"

I glanced up. She was staring towards the
woodpile.

"What is it?"

"I saw an old woman across the yard by the
woodpile, Tom. She had bright snow white hair
standing out all over her head."

I leapt to my feet and grabbed for my pistol
which I always kept in readiness.

"Tories, mayhap?" the words were snatched
from my lips. "Where is she?"

"Gone now," replied Lucy, anxiety in her
voice. "But she was there, I swear it."

"I'll check. Get inside the house and bar the
door."

She obeyed me without a word while I set off
at a run towards the woodpile. I searched the area
for a full quarter of an hour without finding a sign
of any intruders, let alone an old woman with a
shock of white hair. Finally I returned to the
farm and called softly for Lucy to unbar the door.

"There is no one about," I reassured her. "I
will keep vigil tonight just in case there are
bands of cut-throats on the prowl."

I did not mention that I had recently heard
that old Parson Dicks' homestead near Mitchells-
town had been raided by the ground by a pack of
Tories who had escaped up into the Galtee Moun-
tains. Some of their raids were getting more auda-
cious. Within the last week a Popish priest, about
to be hung in the square at Clonmel, was rescued
in broad daylight by a group of Tories and carried
off in triumph to their mountain lair. I had determined to follow the example of my fellow farmers in purchasing and training a pack of Wolf Hounds, a local breed of fierce dogs, to act as sentinels.

I was still standing in the doorway when the most unearthly wail split the evening gloom, a shrieking cry which rose in crescendo.

Once, twice and a third time came that blood-chilling screech.

Lucy cried out and grasped my hand.

"What is it, Tom?" she demanded fearfully.

I had heard that cry before; I tried to dredge the memory from my mind. Indeed, I had heard that self-same cry at this very door three years before.

"It's only a wolf," I said. "It will not harm us if we bar the door."

So saying, I proceeded to fasten the bolts and send Lucy off to bed.

For some time I sat awake, my pistol at the ready. In my mind the words of Finuala O'Derrick began to echo. "The bean-sidhe, the woman of the fairies whose shrieks and moans portend a death!"

What superstitious nonsense was this? Yet her words echoed loudly. "Be warned, son Réif. Before another sun has set there will be death in this house."

It was broad daylight when I started awake and found Lucy already stirring in the parlour. I had fallen asleep in my chair with my pistol in my lap.

"Before another sun has set there will be death in this house."

The words of Finuala O'Derrick were the first I seemed to hear.

I started up and peered wildly around me.

"Poor Tom," Lucy came forward smiling.

"You have spent an uncomfortable night for nothing. No bandits attacked. It is morning and all is well."

She kissed me on the forehead and turned to prepare breakfast.

I tried to drive the wraith of Finuala O'Derrick from my mind's eye. I had done so successfully for three years. Why had her fiendish image come back to haunt me now? I could see that awful staring head with its shock of white hair, hair smitten white as I had severed it from her body with one blow of the curved bladed axe.

It was than I realized what I was preying on my mind. Lucy claimed that the old woman she saw on the previous evening had bright snow white hair. It held its own over her head; just as, just as. . . . I cursed myself for a superstitious fool. I was becoming as bad as the natives!

I shook the image savagely from my mind and turned to where Lucy was standing before the fireplace.

"I have to cut the shrubs and weeds in the middle meadow today," I said, trying to sound bright and cheerful. "Will you bring me down a flagon of ale and some bread at midday?"

She smiled gaily.

"Of course but do you have some breakfast now. I'll . . ." She turned towards the cupboard by the fireplace, which acted as our larder and her mouth became a round O! "Tom, look!"

I followed her gaze. Oh dear! was my companion against evil! The blood froze in my veins. Never after that moment would it resume its regular ebb and flow, for my heart beat like a thousand drums rumbling in discord.

Blood was seeping from the cupboard. Blood, rich and red, was dribbling down its wooden doors and oozing softly, drop by drop onto the floor beneath.

"What on earth could it be?" frowned Lucy, making towards the cupboard with a hand outstretched.

At that moment I knew. I knew! It was the cupboard wherein I had placed the freshly severed head of Finuala O'Derrick; that terrible head whose hair had turned white before my eyes. It waited for me now; waited in that dark cupboard behind those closed doors, its blood still oozing... still dropping steadily, blood drop by blood drop. . . .

"No!" my voice was a scream. "Don't open the cupboard, Lucy!"

It was too late.

Lucy had reached forward and swung open the cupboard door.

She turned with amazement to my white, strained face.

"Whatever is the matter, Tom?" she demanded.

"Tis only the leg of beef we placed in here last evening. I foolishly did not provide a dish deep enough to hold the seeping blood and 'tis spilt. That's all it is."

I collapsed onto a chair. Concerned, Lucy fetched me a tankard of cool ale and watched me drain it like a man dying of thirst. At last I felt my heart resume pumping as near normal as it could and I was able to look up and meet her worried gaze.

"I am not feeling too well," I said foolishly. "I must be working too hard."

She nodded. "In that I would agree. Why not rest for a few days?"

I half-nodded but I did not want to remain in the gloom of the house. I wanted to get out among the fields and bathe in the sun.

"I shall finish the clearing of the scrub and weeds from the middle meadow," I resolved. "I'll be finished in a day. Tomorrow we will take the cart into Clonmel and see the town. Perhaps you can make a few purchases?"

She smiled happily.

"I would like that, Tom."

Feeling a little more cheerful, I went outside and honed my billhook to sharpen its rusty blade. Then I wandered down to the middle meadow in which I hoped to plant a crop of root vegetables. The potato plant from the New World was becoming a favourite food and fetched good prices. The morning swiftly passed as I progressed across the field, my axe scything the tough scrub and bushes before me, hand flashing to and fro in easy rhythms.

"Tom!" I heard Lucy's happy call behind me. "Tom, 'tis lunch time."

There was just one clump of bushes to finish. "A moment, dear!" I cried, sweeping back my hand for the stroke.

My arm went suddenly light. There was a terrible scream.

I stood there, my eyes going first to my hand. I still grasped the wooden handle of the billhook but of the sharpened metal axe-head, there was no sign. It had parted company from the handle. Slowly, fearfully, I turned.
Lucy stood a little way behind me, unsteady on her feet, still clasping the tray with ale and bread and cheese before her. There was a smile of uncertainty on her pretty features.

The wickedly shining axe-head lay at her feet.

In relief I returned my gaze to her face. Oh God! The horror of it! Even as I watched her head seemed to wobble and fall forward onto the tray she held. That terrible headless body staggered forward a few paces towards me as if it were offering me the severed member. Then the body crumpled up and collapsed to the ground.

I do not know how long I stood there gazing down. I only know that some time later I found myself unwillingly listening to the gentle sighing breeze from across the mountain, the sibilant whispering of a million tongues among the leaves of the tall dark forest which hemmed the field in its embrace. Then I heard her voice.

"Do you not hear them, Raff? Do you not hear the voices of our ancestors and our children yet unborn? We will never give this land up; we may die upon it, but our rich warm blood but fertilises the soil... Listen, Raff! Listen! The land is filled with a countless host. Do you not hear them whispering? Spirits of the earth, the trees, the springs and the streams, all of these are our allies and when you seek to destroy us, you must also destroy them! How will you destroy what is eternal?"

Hands to my ears to stop that frightful voice, to drown the sounds of the screams which rose in my throat, I ran headlong for the house.

I reached the parlour and paused, my breath rasping. Then I found my eyes being drawn unwillingly towards the cupboard. The stains of blood were still there and as I looked dark red liquid began to ooze slowly through the seams of the wood, drip-dropping on the floor below.

Her voice was quite clear now; clear and cold.

"Be warned, Raff! The land is us, we are the land. You cannot separate us. The land encompasses the blood and bones of the countless beings we once were; it holds the breath of life of the countless beings we will become. Listen, Raff! Listen! Do you not hear the voices of our ancestors and our children yet unborn? We will never give this land up; we may die upon it, but our rich warm blood but fertilises the soil... Listen, Raff! Listen! The land is filled with a countless host. Do you not hear them whispering? Spirits of the earth, the trees, the springs and the streams, all of these are our allies and when you seek to destroy us, you must also destroy them! How will you destroy what is eternal?"

In some odd way her voice calmed me. I knew what it was that I must do.

I cannot fight the unnumbered generations of the dead nor those that are yet to be born. I cannot fight the ancient gods of these people. They demand sacrifice for my crime, for all the crimes against these people whom they jealously protect. I must ameliorate them.

So it is that I have taken the quill, though I be unused to book learning, and placed before me the paper which I had been saving to record the births of our children, Lucy and mine, and sought to set down this sorry and terrible history that others might learn from my blindness, my avarice and stupidity. When 'tis done, I shall place these papers in a box underneath the hearth stone where our few treasures are kept. Here, some time, I trust some sympathetic soul will find them and pray for me in purgatory.

Aye, for what of me? Lucy's innocent blood will not placate the nameless gods that beset me seeking vengeance. Only my blood will erase my deed. There is a strong tree which stands by pot. Lucy's shattered body; a strong tree with a stout branch. I have a new hemp rope. It is their due. My atonement. God of this world and the next, pray be merciful to me.

Tom Sindercombe

* * *

I must have sat there for some time in the old farmhouse parlour engrossed in that fascinating manuscript whose contents moved me so deeply.

Tom Sindercombe, sometime soldier in Cromwell's army in Ireland, had clearly been a prisoner of his time and its prejudice. The English soldier had been taught to treat the Irish as less than human. Sindercombe had found an Irish couple who had shown him human kindness and yet his prejudice and avarice had made him slaughter them like animals. Deep within him, Tom Sindercombe had known that his deed was vile and wrong. The realisation began to grow slowly in his mind. He began to imagine all manner of signs and omens. Then came the appalling tragedy in which his young wife had been accidentally killed in a manner which Sindercombe saw as similar to the way he had murdered the O'Derricks. Now his mind was completely turned. In desperation he wrote down his wild fantasy and then... then presumably he went out and hanged himself.

I sighed; it would be quite a task to check the records to see if there was a reference to the suicide of Tom Sindercombe in these parts in 1658.

Only one thing slightly puzzled me, as I sat staring at those yellowing sheets. Sindercombe must have gleaned quite a knowledge of Irish folkloric customs and beliefs for each omen he had put into his narrative, without comment, were accurate superstitions. The sound of galloping hooves, the dead bird, the curious smoke, the 'doppelganger' of his wife, Lucy, and the wall of the bawn-side are all well known portents of death in Irish country places. Yet how did Sindercombe gain such know-
ledge in the place and time in which he lived?
I sat a while puzzling over the problem.
At sometime during this contemplation I became aware of a soft drip-dripping, like water oozing from a tap. Frowning, I turned to seek for its source. -
I do not know what it was that prompted my eyes to turn towards the old warped cupboard by the fireplace. It was shadowy in that corner and at first I dismissed it as my imagination, set afire by what I had recently read; yet, peering closely, I saw a dark stain on the old wooden doors.
I rose from my chair and moved forward in curiosity.
Yes, the wood was much darker around the seams of that ancient cupboard. I reached out a tentative finger and drew it over the stain. It felt wet and sticky. I stared at my finger in disbelief. It was stained red, as if with blood.
I jerked back, my heart thundering a frenzied tattoo.
Then I laughed. How stupid people were to allow their imaginations to be fed by some long dead hand. There was a logical explanation to everything.
I abruptly reached forward and threw open the cupboard.
There stood a frightful corpseless head, standing upright as if still attached to its body. It was surrounded by a thick white mane of hair, hair which stood out stiff and snowy white all around it. The eyes were wide and staring malevolently at me. Then, even as I looked, the eyes abruptly narrowed and its mouth distended, splitting into a malicious smile. An evil, throaty chuckle filled the air. I swear it! I swear that the sound came from that terrible head.
With a cry of animal fear, I turned, knocking the storm-lantern from the table so that it smashed and the burning oil began to roar with eager tongues at the wooden floor. Screaming insanely, I pushed my way to the door and ran out into the daylight, out towards the green fields . . . .

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NORTH
hunting sea otters thru
the ice at breathing
holes shivering numb
all life connected to
animals whose souls
could be charmed
with ivory dolls
the red blessing
but if you
kill more animals
than you need
the sun goes away

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AND WHAT OF "ANTI-ALICE?"
When the mirror-world opened for Alice,
Items were documented:
Like Jabjub Birds, and Borogoves,
Quite harmless, though demented.
But what of the "anti-Alice," when she
Emerged from the looking glass?—
For if one Alice entered, another must leave
(By the Conservation of Mass!)
The mirror-world Alice could hardly believe
That a world like ours was real—
No Humpty—dump!—no Twedledee!—
How else was she to feel!
No Bandersnatch!—no Slithy Toves!
Alas! and (yes) Alack!
No Jabberwock! Preposterous!
You can see why she went back.

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